

LADY WYRE'S REGRET

By Joely Sue Burkhart

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Lady Doctor Wyre

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Adult Reading Material

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ONE

Usually only poorly brewed tea managed to shake her composure, but as Charlotte stared at the carnage, she wanted to weep. A large screen ten paces high and wide covered the wall, rendering disfigured, charred bodies in gruesome detail. Alien, yes, but no less disturbing.

As long as I live, I shall never forget the sight of those poor people catching on fire, exploding and torn apart.

Evidently Queen Majel wasn't encumbered with such trivial emotions as she sued for a brutal peace with the Razari. "We won't permanently station a peacekeeping force on your planet as long as half of your surviving able-bodied males agree to serve a ten-year period of indenture to Britannia."

The Matriarch of the Razari hissed at the screen, revealing razor-sharp fangs. A mix of browns and greens, her skin tone spoke of the mostly swampy condition of her home planet. "You leave only a remnant of my people alive and then you take half of those? We'll starve or be overrun by the neighboring planet. The Shee have always coveted our crystals."

As do we. Charlotte hid a wince of recrimination. It wouldn't do at all to show any weakness, regret, or hesitation. *Let alone disgust at what my own mighty nation has wrought.*

The Matriarch wore a crude necklace bearing one of the coveted crystals. Approximately the length and breadth of an index finger, the crystal was powerful enough to fuel a Razari ship's engines for a month. If the small twin-engine prop hadn't crashed so conveniently close to a Britannian outpost, and if the border guards hadn't done such an admirable job and sent the crystal straight through to Queen Majel's personal scientist...

Then millions of Razari would still be alive and free.

Charlotte's throat ached from holding back her rage. She'd researched that damnable crystal, yes, and had found it fascinating. Who wouldn't? But she'd never intended for this to happen. Dear God, an entire planet practically wiped out, and for what? A few chunks of rock?

The Matriarch glared with righteous fury. "One quarter of our males and only seven years."

Without replying, Queen Majel stretched out her graceful hand toward the electronic panel. One large red button drew the alien's attention, her eyes slitting with alarm. The poor creature probably thought that button would send the final blast through their planet, and it was all Charlotte could do not to blurt out the truth. Although the button would merely end the transmission, nothing would stop Queen Majel from ordering the destruction with any of the other brutal weapons at her command.

Or perhaps she'd use more subtlety to conquer the Razari. If she released Charlotte's latest creation of hungry dissemblers, within a fortnight there wouldn't be a trace of metallic technology or structure left on the entire planet.

She pressed a hand to her stomach, fighting not to be ill. *I never intended for this atrocity to happen. Forgive me.*

Gripping the intriguing crystal with one scaly paw, the Matriarch gritted out, "Agreed. On one condition."

Queen Majel arched a brow at the alien but gave a slight nod for her to continue with her request.

"Any male who signs a contract of indenture must be allowed to keep his deathright, or crystals, as you call them. They possess a religious meaning for us, Your Majesty. Taking away a Razari's crystal is akin to damning his soul but leaving him alive, which is why so many of us are dead instead of surrendering." Obviously a respected and powerful leader in her own right, the Matriarch bowed her head, still gripping her crystal. "Please, Queen. We'll abide by your terms, as long as we're allowed to keep our deathright."

"As long as you have no reluctance in allowing us to mine your crystals for less holy use."

"No objection as long as we may keep ours along with our traditions."

Queen Majel smiled more kindly. "Then we've reached an agreement, Matriarch. Expect the treaty to be transmitted within the hour. Welcome to Britannia's fold."

Welcome to hell. Charlotte held her tongue, waiting until the communication channel was closed. As Duchess of Wyre and Queen's Physician, she had more leeway than most nobles when it came to handling their liege, but one must never question Her Majesty's orders before others, most especially their enemies. If she'd dared to press Queen Majel's feet to the fire in front of the alien, Charlotte's head would have rolled, no matter how justified her argument.

On a whim, Queen Majel left the viewscreen up, displaying the torn, burned bodies on the wall.

She turned to face Charlotte. "Don't even begin, Wyre."

Most Brittanians would only see her regal manner, the proud tilt of her head, the centuries of breeding, wealth, and command bred into every bone of her body. However, Charlotte knew the queen better than anyone except possibly Murray, her personal assistant and seneschal of the empire. Queen Majel revealed a slight tremor in her hand as she absently tucked a wayward strand of spun-gold hair behind her ear.

"There are certain outcomes of this situation that I regret, but I had no a choice."

"No choice!" Charlotte paced the floor before the formidable royal desk. "We could have bartered for the crystals. We could have bribed officials to allow us an outpost in order to mine our own. We never tried a peaceful solution at all, Your Majesty!"

"There are reasons and explanations to which you're not privy." Queen Majel sat behind her desk, trying to pretend that the most powerful ruler of the most technologically-advanced nation in the universe wasn't shaken to her core. That faintly trembling hand checked her hair again, needlessly smoothing her perfect coiffure. "Assuredly, I'll pursue recourse, but I chose to allow the assimilation rather than cause this nation any embarrassment."

If someone had acted without Queen Majel's approval... With narrowed eyes, Charlotte planted her palms on the desk and leaned down, searching the queen's face for the truth, but her classically beautiful visage revealed nothing. Changing tactics, she lightly laid her fingers against Queen Majel's throat. "Are you well? Have you experienced any new side effects from my treatment, Your Majesty?"

Queen Majel jerked back violently, but then tried to disguise her unease. “I’m quite well. Thank you for your concern. Oh, did you notice? We owe the success of this assimilation to your wonderful technology.”

Ice trickled down Charlotte’s spine and her stomach flopped in a very uncomfortable roll. She turned back to the screen, forcing herself to examine the bodies as a scientist and not a horrified humanitarian. The scene looked like a bomb had torn through the village, tossing bodies and charred limbs about like kindling. *A flash of molten fire, raging to the heavens, and then the explosions, over and over, tearing the Razari apart.*

Gingerly, she stepped closer to the screen. It couldn’t be her dissemblers—she’d engineered them to attack only metal, and the discarded weapons lay unaffected on the hard-packed earth. “I never created any weapon, Your Majesty, certainly no bomb capable of tearing those poor people apart.”

“I’m afraid the fire and explosions were their own creation,” Queen Majel replied in a light voice entirely inappropriate in the face of such carnage, as though she merely shared the latest *on dit*. “If you’d shown more interest in cracking open the crystal instead of merely utilizing its power, you’d have experienced the nasty side effect of releasing that glorious energy first hand.” *Which would have saved me the trouble of having you killed myself.*

Of course, the queen didn’t utter those last words, but Charlotte sensed the threat in that deceptively pleasant voice. Danger tightened like a noose about her neck. *Don’t be silly*, she chided, stifling a desperately ragged laugh. *Majel cleans up her messes with assassins, not public executions.*

“Evidently, this is the religious power the Matriarch spoke of,” Queen Majel continued. “They’d rather die in a blaze of glory than bend knee to another nation.”

Charlotte only half listened. One of the limbs looked rather odd, even for a Razari. She was quite sure that *scales* covered the flesh instead of swamp-colored skin. Had some other hapless animal been included in the carnage? Surely not in the middle of their village, however rural compared to Londonium. More, the limb possessed disturbingly humanoid fingers. Perhaps a genetic mutation? Caused by...

Her heart thudded slow and heavy, struggling to pump chilled blood through her veins. If not her latest invention, then the weapon must have been crafted from her older research.

The research which saved the queen’s life by attacking a virus at its molecular level.

No one knew how closely Majel had walked with death, nor how she’d been saved. Charlotte’s earliest research had been wondrous, truly, but also frightening. She’d only just begun to experiment with her tiny nanobots, certainly never daring to test on a person. However, Britannia’s next queen had lain on her deathbed, her mother had tottered on the edge of insanity, and every traditional treatment had failed to stop the merciless march of the engineered virus. Sent by Francia in one last desperate attempt to end the Hundred Year War, the Black Death had killed millions across their planet and very nearly managed to decimate House Krowe’s royal line.

Charlotte had had no choice but to inject Majel with the warrior-bots and pray they managed to save her. They’d battled the nasty biotech weapon effortlessly, but instead of ceasing operation as Charlotte had intended, those tiny units still functioned inside the queen. *To this very day.*

Majel hadn’t been sick in years, not even the most minor snuffle. Basic physical examinations proved she possessed increased strength and mental acuity. Wonderful side

effects, assuredly, but undeniably mutations. The queen wasn't exactly—merely—human any longer.

Charlotte couldn't help but wonder and dread what consequences they might one day pay for meddling with the delicate balance of life, especially once a princess and prince were born. Could Majel's children carry a trace of lady-made technology? Had House Krowe been permanently altered?

Unfortunately, Majel had come to the same dreadful conclusion. Every time the queen looked at Charlotte, she saw an increased wariness and cold reserve edging away the lingering gratitude. Someday, Majel would decide to silence the one person who knew her secret.

"I hear it was a trivial matter to reprogram your nanobots to attack alien cells instead of viral as you intended." Majel gave a careless little laugh that chilled Charlotte's blood. "Your creatures managed to make the Razari even more repulsive! Before they ever knew a Britannian warship had entered their airspace, they began detonating their crystals to save themselves. From *you*, dear Wyre."

It took a lifetime of manners and breeding to keep her face smooth, but Charlotte's stomach heaved. They'd twisted her desire to help and heal into a tool for murder unlike any nightmare she could have ever conceived.

Worse, Majel's secret couldn't be so very secure if a third party had used and warped that technology. Charlotte possessed only one last prototype and she kept it under lock and key even from herself.

Moment by moment, the truth became glaringly obvious. Only one group was close enough to Britannia and Queen Majel to somehow acquire this secret technology, and also possess enough advanced equipment to alter the nanobot's programming and replicate it into this sort of weapon. Of course. No wonder Majel had been shaken yet so determined to pretend this had been her intent all along.

Only the Military Intelligence and Galactic Sciences division would dare challenge Majel's authority in this way. Instrumental in the war against Francia, MIGS had gained considerable power over the years. Lately, they'd been overstepping their bounds—in the queen's opinion—by keeping their research secret from the Crown. If such blatant disregard for her authority became public knowledge, her supreme right as ruler of this great nation would be cast into jeopardy.

Charlotte gazed back at Majel and knew the knowledge must gleam in her eyes. As the queen had surely intended, else why had she dropped that little fact about Charlotte's own technology being used? She'd never have taken a closer look at the body parts otherwise. Watching the cold political mask harden on the other woman's face, Charlotte could almost sense the shifting of the ground beneath her feet, the glide of one pawn to another spot on the board.

I've always been a threat to her because I knew her weaknesses. Now, I'm a liability. With my backing, MIGS could denounce House Krowe and set their own queen on the throne.

Majel turned her attention to the stack of official documents and datapads waiting for her attention. "That'll be all, Wyre."

After a decade and more in service, Charlotte had been dismissed. Perhaps not publicly, not yet, but Queen Majel had made her decision. For all Charlotte knew, her death sentence had already been drafted, awaiting the queen's final stamp of approval in that very stack of documents. Thousands of Queen's Ravens were stationed in House Krowe's stronghold as well as throughout Londonium.

I might not even make it out of Winsor alive.

Still studying the awaiting missives, Queen Majel said, “You will of course be attending our Solstice Eclipse ball in a fortnight.”

The strangely absent tone of the queen’s voice sent chills of foreboding creeping up Charlotte’s arms. Since every House’s attendance at the queen’s ball was required by tradition more binding than any law, she had no reason to emphasize the invitation. *Unless it’s a deliberate message. A warning, perhaps, that it’ll be the last party I ever attend?*

Charlotte drew herself up, tipping her chin to a haughty angle. If the queen thought to intimidate her with subtle threats, then she would be gravely mistaken. However, a volley of blatant desperately-cast threats in return simply wasn’t Charlotte’s style. Instead, she put on the role of the bored, privileged lady of Society.

“Oh, I honestly don’t know, Your Majesty. The endless rounds of balls and parties are so tiring. I still haven’t recovered from the horrors of Lady Marlborough’s distasteful gown last week. Besides, so many desperate mamas will be there casting their precious little sons at my feet hoping to catch a rich Duchy. I think I’d rather retire to Wyreton and hunt instead.”

Majel raised her head, eyes narrowed to dangerous slits.

At least she’s looking at me now instead of pretending I’m invisible.

“If I must order you to attend, then you’ll pick one of those adorable dandies to dangle on your knee for the entire evening.”

Charlotte let out a husky laugh and glided toward the door. “Might as well order me leg-shackled while you’re at it.” She paused, looking back over her shoulder with a saucy wink designed to infuriate the queen as much as a slap to the face. “Just because you’ve endured matrimony doesn’t mean I won’t kick and scream all the way to the altar.”

She shut the door behind her and summoned every inch of pride and confidence she possessed to stride down the hall as the Duchess of Wyre and Queen’s most trusted Physician. Not someone fearing for her life, especially after she’d drawn such a line in the sand.

Years ago, Majel had selected the purest and most venerable House from which to marry and had produced two heirs on her much younger noble husband. Although she’d taken great pains to project a fairytale image of love and happiness, there’d been no love on her part, merely the grim duty to secure her royal line with a man no one in the realm could dispute as a handsome, well-bred Britannian.

Unfortunately, said well-bred young man had conducted himself most poorly. First, he’d dallied with every maid and servant in the castle, which Majel probably would have allowed as long as he’d kept his escapades at least somewhat discreet. But the young man had made the dreadful mistake of allowing a Francian ambassador a little too close. Majel had caught him red-handed, trying to steal documents from her office.

That very evening, an assassin’s blade found its mark in his lithe young body. So regrettable, so sad, the nation had mourned his sweet face, while Majel had played the part of the grieving yet regal widow perfectly. The Francian ambassador found a ship that very night and departed for her homeland, only to be blasted from the sky by pirates.

Whose ship, I’ll wager, was hired at none other than the Thames port.

Charlotte passed the last row of Queen’s Ravens standing guard at the South Wing exit and began the trek down the Long Walk to her carriage. She allowed herself a deep breath of relief to relax the stiffness in her shoulders, but the battle had only just begun. *Who shall be hired to assassinate me?*

Then she had a thought that made her lips curve into a smile so wickedly pleased that a petitioner disembarking from an unmarked carriage stumbled and nearly tumbled on her nose in the gutter. Swathed in gray veils that hid her face but did little to disguise her finely tailored gown, the woman recovered her balance and rushed past, but Charlotte recognized her as the Royal Duchess of Lizbonne, Majel's cousin and heir if anything ever happened to her own children.

Ridiculous woman. Does she honestly think a little gauze will keep people from recognizing that red-gold hair that Majel always coveted?

Smoothing her face, Charlotte took her footman's hand and allowed him to help her into her carriage. Open carriages were all the rage this Season with the driver seated high above the engine and the poor footman clinging to the tiny rail installed at the rear, whisking through Town at speeds that would threaten to tear both men off their precarious perches.

Charlotte preferred the older enclosed model that lent her some privacy and included a built-in keyboard and uplink to her home network. Of course she'd worked on the engines long ago. Without a doubt, she could outrace any carriage which dared challenge her. The latest engines were based on her design, but she hadn't released *all* her secrets.

She'd been concerned for too long about what the queen—or her subjects—would do with that knowledge.

“St. James Square, Your Grace?”

Settling her skirts, she pressed a button and a keyboard slid out. “I need to go home to Wyreton.”

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

If I'm going to be assassinated, I'll go out in style.

TWO

If people thought the hardest part of an assassin's job was the killing, they'd be dead wrong. For Sig, it was the endless waiting for his next contract.

Wallowing in grim regrets, he tossed back another shot. As the years went by, he'd discovered that his memories became harder to dull with mere alcohol. His numerous killings didn't torment him. No, a more dreadful guilt weighed upon his chest, suffocating him more and more each day. Only killing managed to blot that darkness out for a short while, and not even the most famed assassin in the universe could kill every single day, not if he wanted to be well paid for his work.

So he found himself alone and desperately drunk in the Black Stump Saloon at the edge of what the locals called the Outback, a wasteland of barren, torn ground already raped of its resources to supply the planet's main port and only—but mega—city, Sydney. Absolutely nothing on the surface of Terra Australis made the planet worth inhabiting, but the deep, rich veins of gold, diamonds, and ore certainly did. The wealth of natural resources combined with the depth of those veins and the harsh living conditions made for a most excellent penal colony.

Every port had a place so dark and disreputable that its own inhabitants were afraid they'd get their throats slit if they ever stepped foot in side. Thieves, rebels, and wanted criminals

somehow managed to find their way to these hellholes as effortlessly as homing pigeons flew home to their coop. On a planet of convicts, their harsh keepers, and a handful of men so desperate to make a pound or two that they'd work side by side with the worst murderers and thieves in the galaxy, the Black Stump Saloon was especially dangerous.

Alien-made rotgut burned like acid down his throat. Flames crackled through his veins, cramping his muscles, but he still gave a jerk of his head to the shaggy, unkempt barkeeper for another round. His body might be feeling the nasty affects, but his mind remained wretchedly clear.

If even the foulest whiskey in the most vermin-filled bar in the universe can't help deaden the memories any longer, then I'd better get busy finding the best way to stop my breathing for good.

"Be wary, my friend."

The stranger's voice drew his attention to his left. A man slid up to the bar beside him, so silently that even the barkeeper—who carefully kept the entire bar in his line of vision at all times—involuntarily jerked back.

Dark, gleaming eyes met Sig's and not even a sardonic wink could disguise the man's silent threat. Instantly, every cell in his body went on high alert, causing another firestorm of agony to tear through his burning muscles. That kind of lethal grace and unflinching stare meant only one thing.

This man is as good a killer as I am.

"Dying by Shee ale is a hard way to go. I've seen men tearing their own skin off, trying to make the burning sensation end. If you really want to die, there are much easier ways to accomplish it."

The implication that *he* would certainly be able to accommodate a death wish gave his words a cold, heavy weight. Sig didn't allow his body to tense with alarm, but he mentally took a quick inventory of the weapons he had on his person.

Perfect for throwing, thin silver blades were strapped to each wrist beneath his coat. He had a longer, heavier dirk tucked down his spine in a back harness, and two more throwing blades in each boot. Not to mention the lazer surely stashed beneath the bar.

Of course an assassin's body was his best weapon. While Sig took great pride in his agility and quick-handed strikes, he wouldn't be able to surprise this man, who undoubtedly outweighed him by at least thirty stone. The man was solid muscle and topped him by another foot, yet moved with the silent glide of a predator on the hunt.

Why haven't I ever heard of him before?

Using his best high Society voice which had made him famous, Sig drawled, "If you can recommend another way to dull painful memories, sirrah, then I would love to hear it."

The stranger's dark gaze flickered over him, so sharp and deep that Sig unconsciously held his breath. "Ah, you have my sympathies. I know what it's like to be haunted by a living nightmare."

He gave the barkeeper a short nod and the man brought two steaming mugs. Sig smelled the mug suspiciously. No alcohol. He took a hesitant sip and shuddered at the dark, bitter taste. "What is this, witch's brew?"

The stranger laughed as though he'd made a fine joke. "Merely a drink to help combat the Shee ale. If we decide to test each other's knives, I want you to be at your best instead of dulled by drink."

Since this man obviously cared little for polite Society, Sig forgot niceties. “Who the hell are you?”

“No one you’ve heard of. No one you would or should know.”

“But you know who I am?”

“Of course. Everyone in the galaxy has heard the tales of your marks.”

At least the man hadn’t said his name aloud. Sig wouldn’t mind a drunken brawl or a nice, juicy contract so impossible no other assassin would attempt the mark, but he’d rather not have to kill his way out of the Australis prisons because this fool talked too much.

I’m the bloody fool who decided to risk a drink at the Black Stump when there are countless dives where I could have indulged without a super-secure prison only paces away.

Pain banded his tight chest. It hurt to breathe. Hurt to think. Killing helped dull the pain and keep the nightmares at bay, but he couldn’t...

A loud thwack jerked his head up. The stranger had slammed the tip of his knife into the top of the bar. In size, the blade wasn’t that impressive, only as long as his hand, but that edge gleamed in the light, wicked sharp. The hilt was smooth, aged ivory, darkened over the years by sweat.

Or perhaps blood.

“A word of advice, my friend.” The man’s eyes flickered in the dimness like flames licking red-hot coals. Sig glanced about quickly but didn’t see any fire that would have reflected in the man’s eyes like that. “Never accept a contract on the woman you love.”

Sig couldn’t help the smirk twisting his mouth. “That is something I’ll never have to fret about, for I’ve never met a woman I could ever love more than my work.”

Giving him an equally arrogant grin, the man tugged his blade loose and let the knife roll across his palm, back and forth, effortlessly controlling the knife without even looking at it. “So I thought.”

A vibration in Sig’s pocket made him inhale a quick, hopeful breath. He drew the device out and scanned the incoming message. “Excellent. A new job. I’ve got to go.”

The man nodded and sheathed the blade on his hip. “Another time, then. I’d enjoy testing your blade.”

“You never told me your name,” Sig called after the man, trying to memorize his face and appearance so he could search for history on him later. *Long dark hair, dark eyes, and nasty blade. That’s all I really know. His accent is strange, but I can’t place it.*

“My name doesn’t matter.” The man paused at the door and glanced back, giving him another wink. “I’m Shadow and Death, a killer, like you. We can’t help but find each other again someday.”

“Thank you,” Sig whispered, but the man was gone.

Shaking his head, he stepped out of the main room, searching along the dark hallway until he found a secluded, quiet spot. A supply closet. A quick scan confirmed there were no listening or monitoring devices inside the room.

The sender’s message only included a House sign: the white dove of Wyre. Was that his contact...or the mark? Slipping into Britannia would definitely prove a worthy challenge. Their shields were tighter and more secure than the Australis prisons, keeping the unwashed masses out instead of locking them into their punishment.

He opened a secure channel to the sender. Since he’d just received the offer, hopefully his contact would still be waiting. His curiosity burned, a much better feeling than shortness of breath and desperate panic.

A woman's face appeared on the screen, and not even the small monitor could diminish her classical grace. The tilted angle of her chin declared her pride and royal breeding. He'd never been introduced to the Duchess of Wyre, but he recognized her. Smooth dark hair, chocolate eyes, in many ways a sister to the man who'd just left. *Impossible. If that man was from Britannia then I'm a Razari lizard.*

"Lord Regret, I presume. Your reputation precedes you."

Her voice matched those dark, chocolate eyes. He inclined his head and allowed his own ancient bloodlines to deepen the pride in his voice. "Your Grace, it's my great honor to offer my blade in service to you. Who's your target?"

She smiled. Sig's eyes flared, his chest aching as though that stranger had buried his blade directly into his heart. "I am."

THREE

There were a million and one details to planning one's own assassination and Charlotte daren't miss a single one, else find herself locked in the Tower of Londonium for the rest of her long and miserable life. While planting bribes all over Town to keep the Queen's Ravens busy for months if not years attempting to track down her so-called assassin, she endured countless fittings on what would surely be the gown of the century. *My death will be a remarkable spectacle, so naturally my gown must be as memorable.*

With a critical eye, she examined her reflection in the tall mirrors, twirling slowly so she might see the fall of fabric from all angles. She'd chosen an eye-popping scarlet silk that would be scandalous in its own right. Combined with the severely tight corset and plunging neckline, she'd catch everyone's attention from the moment she stepped outside her door.

The white feather accents were a touch too eccentric and ostentatious for her personal taste, but she intended to make a statement. If red represented the Razari blood, then white would remind the queen of House Wyre's dove. The Queen's Ravens might...would...tear Wyre apart, but Britannia would only see snowy pure white splattered with blood.

I'm far from innocent. My technology made all this possible. She forced herself to keep staring at her reflection, even though the sight made her throat burn with bile. *I have to find a way to make this right. To stop Majel once and for all. But how?*

Something jabbed into her side hard enough she stiffened.

"Lady Wyre, I presume?"

She recognized the man's smooth, cultured voice and her heart beat ramped into deep-space full throttle. Since she intended to give Britannia a solstice eclipse celebration they'd not soon forget, she'd chosen the flashiest, most well-known assassin she could find.

Lord Sigmund Regret was renowned throughout the galaxy as much for his impeccable manners and taste in clothing as for his murdering ability. Even more importantly, he specialized in accepting detailed requirements in his contract for how the death should occur. Supposedly, he'd once killed a lady with her very own corset at her disgruntled lover's request.

She stiffened her spine and stared coolly back at his reflection solidifying behind her. *If he tries to kill me with my corset, he'll be sorely surprised.*

“You’re early, sir.”

As if she’d managed to surprise him, a small smile hovered on his lips but the pressure didn’t lessen against her ribcage. “Indeed, since this is a challenging assignment, I thought I’d best slip inside the Britannian grid early. I’m still not sure whether we’ll be able to slip out entirely undetected.”

She arched a brow at him. “That’s your concern, for which I’m paying you most handsomely.”

“You’re paying me to make it look like you’re dead, Your Grace.” He matched her arrogant, high-bred tone perfectly. “Sneaking you out of Britannia under Queen Majel’s nose isn’t my usual sort of job.”

“Well, it’s a very good thing you’re the best assassin for hire, then, yes?”

He chuckled, his bright blue eyes gleaming in the mirror with amusement, but his left hand casually wrapped around her throat. He didn’t apply pressure to her windpipe, but he made it very clear he could snuff her life out before she could open her mouth to scream.

Little does he know that screaming for help is not my forte.

“Perhaps I’m thinking the queen might pay me even more if I take care of her problem instead of helping you escape her wrath. It would certainly make it easier for me to escape Britannia intact.”

“If *escape*,” she said with a deliberate curl of distaste on her lips, “is your only concern, then perhaps you shouldn’t have been so foolish as to accept my payment, which enabled my sniffer to locate your private bank account.”

He opened his mouth, no doubt to retort that he had numerous such bank accounts, so she pushed on without giving him the chance.

“If you’d done your research on me beforehand, then you would know that I have a penchant for being extremely nosy and plotting with deliberate forethought to ensure *my* desired outcome. Of course, my sniffer has been busy backtracking to your other personal accounts as well. I’ve already located six such accounts scattered throughout the galaxy. If I don’t transmit the all-clear signal to my sniffer within twenty four hours, every single account you possess will suddenly be flagged for Britannian investigation. No doubt news of Lord Regret’s cowardly failure to uphold his contract as promised will be the talk of the galaxy for years to come.”

His jaws worked, his face darkened, and his eyes glittered with malice. “Maybe I’d simply enjoy killing you.”

She let a careless—if slightly breathy—laugh escape. “You’re welcome to try, sir, but I think you’ll find that you chose a most unlikely entrance for your knife.” He poked hard enough she grunted, but the blade couldn’t penetrate her corset. “Again, even modest research would have confirmed that I also enjoy experiments and inventions, especially ones that might save my life. Since our little event will be risky in the extreme, I reinforced my corset with steel plating to protect my vital organs.”

He stepped close enough behind her that his heat penetrated the thin silk of her gown. His breath caressed her bared neck and ear. “Aren’t you afraid of me at all?”

“Yes, I am.” A frisson of awareness zinged down her spine. Danger, excitement, she wasn’t sure. As finely dressed as any Britannian lord, this man could be her contemporary in Society. If they’d met a few years ago, he might have been the one to convince her to surrender to matrimony. He certainly intrigued her like no one else she’d ever known. “But I’m more afraid of Queen Majel. I shan’t allow her to win. Fear makes me sharper, smarter, and all the more dangerous, Lord Regret.”

“Sigmund,” he sighed against her ear. His grip on her throat turned to a caress, a gentle glide of fingers that made her skin tingle. “You’re one hell of a woman, Your Grace.”

“Please call me Charlotte.” Holding his gaze in the mirror, she gave him a slow, sensuous smile that made his brilliant eyes flare. “I regret so many things. Saving Queen Majel’s life. The wretched things for which she’s allowing my research to be used. The millions of deaths on Razar. I don’t know how I’ll ever sleep again, worrying how many more planets will suffer the same demise. Once I’m free of Britannia, I’ll never be the Duchess of Wyre again, which I won’t regret in the slightest.”

“Call me Sig, and I’ll call you Charlie.” Winking at her in the mirror, he settled his palm lower on the creamy expanse of skin bared by her gown. “Your invention has a most regrettable design flaw. This corset fails to protect your heart.”

She laughed and stepped out of his embrace. “My heart needs no such protection. Come, then, Sig, allow me to share the plans I’ve made thus far. I agree wholeheartedly that escape from Britannia will be the most challenging contract you’ve ever accepted. You won’t regret taking my case, will you?”

“I’ll have no regrets with you.”

Waving regally, Charlotte paused on the front steps of Wyreton and awaited her public assassination. Her heartbeat ramped to supersonic speeds, but she managed to smile for the millions of Britanniains watching the Solstice Eclipse festivities. Cameras flashed, broadcasting her departure for the royal ball. As the Duchess of Wyre, she’d be fashionably late.

Eternally late, if Lord Regret manages to pull off this charade.

She heard the shocked whispers and gasps before the assassin’s blade dug into her neck. This time he didn’t spare any pressure, deliberately drawing enough blood to leave DNA evidence on her spotless white marble.

It must look authentic beyond any reasonable doubt.

Drawing in a deep breath, she let a shrill scream echo across the plaza. She clawed at his arm locked about her throat so tightly she couldn’t breathe. Combined with the rigid corset, she was afraid she might actually pass out.

Pain burned across her throat and she tried to scream again, but she didn’t have enough air. She hadn’t counted on being so terrified. Her orders had been explicit. He must rough her up enough to make it look real. He must draw her blood, obviously wounding her severely enough that the general public would believe her dead.

Yet she couldn’t help that niggling doubt. What if Majel had gotten to him? What if someone had upped her price, making the amount on her head too attractive for the famous assassin to resist? *Every man has a price. What is Lord Regret’s?*

He picked her up, manhandling her down the impressive stairs to her gleaming carriage. Her shoe fell off and she had the inane urge to laugh. Cinderella would be late to the ball. Would Prince Charming find her shoe and come to her rescue?

Lord Regret slung her inside the carriage so hard she fell face first against the floor. Her head rebounded off the wall and for a moment, everything went black. Outside, screams and chaos did nothing to help her regain her senses. She tasted blood and her head throbbed.

The flash of heat stirred her numb limbs to life. Fire exploded about the carriage, created by the Razari crystal she’d studied. A deliberate message to Majel, as well as a plausible source for

the execution to which she could claim ignorance. Someone had to want Charlotte dead other than the Queen, enough to make her doubt Charlotte's hand in her own execution.

Of anyone, the Razari would most want her dead for what she'd accidentally done to their planet.

Smoke choked her, making it impossible to see. She ran her hands over the floor of the carriage, trying to find the escape hatch. *I have to get out before it starts moving. Damnation, where's the latch?*

Panic made her hands tremble. Sweat trickled down her face, the heat scalding her skin. The stench of scorched silk and melting metal burned her throat. Finally, she found the latch, hefted the small door open, and jumped through to blissfully cool darkness. She pulled the hatch shut after her and nearly collapsed into a heap of smoldering skirts.

Too close. Too real. Her mind shrieked, her nerves raw with fear, but she forced her body to move. She had to get off Wyreton lands as soon as possible. Majel wouldn't delay the search long, even if they managed to extinguish the blaze.

Her greatest fear was that someone would put out the fire before it managed to destroy the carriage. The Razari crystals were powerful, flashing so hot that metal began melting almost immediately. Definitely hot enough to combust a body into nothing but ashes, indistinguishable from the remains of the carriage.

I hope.

No one outside of Wyreton knew there were extensive tunnels beneath the estate, and her own people would never betray her House, not even to the Queen. Yet she dared not leave any trace behind, just in case.

From her reticule, she pulled out a thin canister of bio-bandage to seal shut the assassin's wound. She yearned for a mirror to see how badly she'd scar, resisting her vanity that insisted she cover the ugly cut with a scarf. She didn't feel much damage. Sig knew very well what he was about.

She had no lady's maid to help her strip off the gown, so she heaved her skirts up about her waist, picked up her remaining slipper, and ran down the corridor in her stockings with nothing but a hand on the wall to guide her. No light, in case someone was watching. No sound. No trail for Majel to follow.

Once well away from the house, she exited the tunnel in a dim, empty stable. No horses lived in these stalls, but Charlotte—and her mother before her—had always been careful and suspicious with private caches and safehouses throughout Londonium. With ruthless House Krowe in control of Britannia, a lady never knew when she'd have to make a run for it, and a Wyre always went in style.

Donning a full-length cape, she hopped on a motorized scooter—her own invention, of course—and headed for their meeting place at the Thames dock. She checked her timepiece and pressed the accelerator. Regret had been adamant about the time. Once the accident happened, the docks would close down within minutes just to make sure no one escaped. Majel would claim she wanted to capture the assassin who'd dared harm her physician, but she'd also want to ensure Charlotte wasn't escaping the net at the same time. Five to ten minutes would be all they had to get out of the Britannian airlocks.

She skidded to a halt at the dock, Pier 371 as he'd ordered. The motor started in a rumbling roar of smoke. *Oh, dear, the Captain could surely use my assistance in fine-tuning his engines. Perhaps he'll allow me to make a few modifications as we sail...*

The ship lifted off and she stared at it a moment, dumbfounded. She opened her mouth to shout, but it would do no good. No one would hear over the engines, and she daren't draw attention to herself. How ironic that she'd been betrayed by her own assassin. "Dead" wouldn't matter if she couldn't get off Britannia. There was only so long she could hide, so many favors she could claim, so many bribes...before the Queen's Ravens found her.

She squeezed her eyes shut and fought for calm. *Think, Wyre. Think!*

A hand closed around her arm and she nearly shrieked like a fishmonger in Cheapside. Her eyes flew open and met Regret's knowing smirk.

"Doubting the trustworthiness of your assassin, Lady Wyre? Surely not."

He guided her further down the dock to a much smaller ship. Fighting back shock and relief, she stared doubtfully at the tiny boat. Would it even be large enough for the two of them? Then an overwhelming sense of loss washed over her, weakening her knees. *My research. Lost. What if it falls into hands worse than Majel's?* Her voice trembled as badly as her hands. "My trunks?"

Inclining his head, he waved her aboard, smiling at her torn stockings and slightly scorched silk. "Already aboard, Your Grace. I thought it best to have my own red herrings. Lord Regret would make almost as an attractive lure as Lady Wyre for the footpads and pirates lurking about the docks. Shall we be away?"

Charlotte spared one last glance at the glorious city stretched out along the Thames. The Tower of Londonium rose like a gloomy dark sentinel against the brightly-lit night. Even at this late hour, crows flew about the tower, their eerie caws echoing like ghosts in the nearly silent city. Britannians everywhere were pausing in their chores and celebrations to watch with awe and not a little dread as the small distant planet, Americus, began to slide in front of the silvered moon. For almost an hour, the moon would be completely hidden in the dark of that planet.

While I slip far, far away.

"I'll not regret it if I never see Londonium again."

FOUR

"So you're a pilot as well as an assassin." Lady Wyre had traded in the slightly scorched gown for a high-waisted spotlessly delicate linen that made Sig shake his head. "What other talents do you possess?"

The linen was so fine and thin he could see the darker hint of her thighs despite the petticoats she wore. The hem and bodice were thickly covered with silver embroidery and pearls. On Britannia, she'd be the perfect picture of a genteel lady heading to her country house. *She's got a lot to learn about living on the run.*

They slipped through the heavily armed Britannia shields using a tiny backdoor loophole he'd paid a small fortune to open. Breathing a little easier, he initiated the illegal contraband engine he'd acquired from a desperate Razari. It'd need a bit to warm up, but once charged, they'd hit Kali Kata in a matter of hours.

If one of Her Majesty's ships happened to board him, they'd take one glance at that tiny crystal powering the ship to unheard-of speeds and throw him into the Tower before finding his female partner aboard. *Luckily they won't be able to catch us once we hit Razari speed.* "Do you have any gowns a little less conspicuous?"

Up went her nose and she gave him that delightfully regal stare that somehow made him appear shorter than her slight five foot height. "A Duchess has a duty to always look her absolute best."

As gently as possible, he pointed out the obvious. "You can't be the Duchess of Wyre any longer, sweetheart."

She sniffed and a sudden bolt of terror struck his heart at the thought that she might burst into tears. He hated crying. He'd actually botched a few marks in the past because he hurried up to silence all the moaning and messy sobbing. If she was a crier, it'd be damned tempting to slit her pretty throat and toss her into deep space.

"I hope you stocked tea on this miserable little boat. I need a cup. Badly."

Suspicious, he risked a glance at her and thankfully found her eyes completely dry. "I've got a nice black from Zijin. Just whirl your chair around one eighty degrees and hit the replicator."

She didn't fuss about having to make her own tea or complain that a replicator's brew wasn't as good as the real thing, a pleasant surprise. After leading a life of privilege, she couldn't be faulted for snobbish ways, as long as she wasn't a bloody prig at the same time. That he couldn't abide.

She surprised him yet again by handing him a cup, too and also asking—instead of ordering. "Where are we going?"

"It's going to be hard to disappear off the grid, unless you leave Britannian space entirely. We'll have to fuel up somewhere, so I planned to stop at the Colony. Then beyond, wherever you want to go."

"Britannia space grows wider day by day. The Razari certainly didn't expect a warship to show up on their front door." She sipped her tea in silence for a few moments. "I'm not afraid of correcting my mistakes, Sig. As long as you're not afraid to point them out to me." She chuckled at whatever she saw on his face. "Besides, now I have a reason to go shopping again. What do you recommend?"

"Dark colors, simple utilitarian materials. No embellishments."

When she pouted, he couldn't help but laugh. "No silk?"

"Absolutely not. Only a woman of a blooded House would wear silk outside of Britannia. If you look like a lady, there will be questions."

She blew out a long breath. "This is going to be harder than I imagined. I expected to live without servants, high fashion, and the tedium of Society. In fact, I relished the opportunity to live on my own for once in my life. But no silk? Oh dear. That might..." She sniffed and damned if her bottom lip didn't quiver. "Break me."

Dread chilled Sig's stomach. *Don't cry. Please don't cry.* "Don't make me toss you out the airlock, Charlie."

She burst into laughter. "You should see the look on your face. Why, Lord Regret, I do believe you're queasy. Are you by chance air sick?"

An alarm blared, cutting through her teasing. Instantly calm and alert, she set the cup of tea aside and took up position beside him.

He scanned the readings. "Unknown ship."

“Her Majesty’s?”

Sig shook his head. “Not a warship. I’m also not detecting a merchant signal. Not good, not good at all. Someone was waiting for us to lift out of port, probably a bounty hunter. I need another five minutes before the Razari crystal is fully powered.”

“What kind of cannon do we have?”

He flashed a smile of appreciation at her. No questions, no panic. She leaped straight to the heart of the issue and prepared to blow them out of the sky. “Henry might be little, but our ship is loaded for bear.” He reached over and pulled up the armament program on her display. “Fire at will. We have plenty of ammunition.”

Concentrating on the controls, she still managed to quip. “You named your ship Henry?”

“Be nice to him,” Sig warned as he programmed in a zig-zag flight pattern with a little more zig than zag to hopefully buy them time. “He’s your ticket out of the Tower of Londonium.”

“Good boy.” She patted the dashboard and winked at Sig. “Fly faster, dear Henry.”

Taking return fire as quickly as she managed to get off a shot, the ship shimmied. Sig kept a wary eye on the shields, which were dropping at an alarming rate. Another hit and they might lose their port engine. *Come on, Henry. Fire up that blasted engine so we can get out of here!*

Lady Wyre whirled her seat around. “Where are my trunks?”

“You don’t have time to change your gown,” he gritted out. “I’m pushing the engines as hard as I dare to get us some breathing room, but I need you to keep them off my tail as long as possible!”

“Oh for goodness sakes.” She left her chair, stumbling against the panel when they took another shot that rocked the ship sideways. Fortunately, the panel she accidentally knocked open contained her precious trunk. She rummaged in it and quickly returned to her seat. “I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve, so to speak, Lord Regret. I can help with the shields and possibly...”

She plugged a slim stick into the panel and her dainty hands flew over the keyboard. “There. I can’t wait to get my hands on Henry’s nether regions to fully explore that Razari engine. All they brought to me to study was the crystal.”

Amazingly, the shields increased back to eighty percent capacity.

“You should have a bit more horses under the hood, too.”

Shaking his head, he increased the throttle and Henry leaped ahead like a charger taking the next fence. “My dear Lady Wyre, if we weren’t getting chased by a bounty hunter, I’m afraid I might have to kiss you.”

“Bloody hell,” she muttered, slamming her fist down on the panel.

Taken aback, Sig kept his gaze straight ahead. *Stupid tongue. Too familiar by half and me out of Society for years. No wonder she’s offended.*

“Oh don’t be a mamby-pamby. If you dare to steal a kiss, give me your very best effort and I may reward you with a bedding you’ll not soon forget. I’m frustrated because evidently I’m a wretched shot. If we survive, I want your solemn word of honor that you’ll see to it that I receive proper training on marksmanship.”

“Done and done.” Another blast rocked the ship, and this time poor Henry didn’t recover. He wallowed to the port side. Cursing beneath his breath, Sig hauled on the controls but the ship was sluggish to respond. “Damnation, we’re sitting ducks here. Don’t do this to me, Henry!”

“Incoming.” Her voice was tight and low but not panicked. “I’m trying to intercept. Hold on...”

The explosion sent the ship rolling back to starboard. Shrapnel splintered off the hull, jabbing into his left side and chest. He fought to bring the ship out of the roll, but pain choked him.

No. That was blood.

“The hull is compromised.” If anything, Lady Wyre’s voice became even more measured and calm as their situation worsened. “Redirecting shields with my device. Hold on, Henry...”

Sig glanced down. A long piece of twisted metal protruded from his chest. Once he pulled it out, he’d probably die in minutes. *I have to find a place to land and fast. A place where we won’t fall into Britannian hands as soon as we try to dock.*

There was only one blip on the radar that was settled but not firmly in Britannian control. Whatever she’d done with the shields had settled the ship’s roll, but the controls were still sluggish. He tried to plot the new course, but his fingers were numb. His hands felt like blocks of ice.

“Tell me what to do.”

“New course.” He tried to breathe shallowly to ease the pain. “Americus.” She said something, but pain blanketed him in a gray daze that words couldn’t penetrate. He couldn’t help but laugh, even though it sent shards of agony through his heart. *I never thought I’d die in a shipwreck at the hands of a bounty hunter.*

As Queen’s Physician, Charlotte had enjoyed every luxury Londonium had to offer as well as full backing for every scientific exploration she’d ever wanted to undertake. Yet she’d never crashed a ship on an unknown planet before.

“Another thing I need to learn,” she muttered, pushing up out of the cupboard into which she’d tumbled.

Sig was sprawled on the floor and half buried by rubble. From the brief look she’d gotten at his chest before the crash, she didn’t hesitate to grab the small black case containing her most prized research. Tossing the broken panel and twisted hull aside, she called out to him. “Sig? Are you still with me?”

“Charlie.” He tried to laugh but his chest wheezed like a ghastly broken pipe organ. “Did we make it?”

She dug into her case and pulled out a pair of sharp scissors to cut open his lawn shirt. A pity, because the fine linen and delicate hand-woven lace looked like it’d come straight from Parisii. “A bit worse for wear, I’m afraid. I hope you weren’t terribly fond of Henry for I’ve broken him beyond repair.” She kept her voice light and cheerful, despite the severity of his wound. Any other physician would merely make him comfortable until his final moments. *But not I.* “What manner of planet have you sent me to, Lord Regret?”

“A colony.”

“A rebellious colony.” Not good. The shard had pierced his heart, possibly beyond even her repair. “It won’t surprise me if Majel simply blows the entire planet out of the sky for their audacity.”

“Safest I could find on such short notice.” His voice weakened, breathy with pain. His pulse fluttered in his throat, frantic and uneven. “Don’t bother, Charlie. I know it’s bad.”

As if to illustrate his words, he wrapped his hand around the shard and yanked it out of his chest. Blood spurted immediately, his life draining away in an alarming fountain.

Planting her right hand over the wound, she laid the precious glass tube out on his heaving chest. Inside, tiny bits of silver metal glinted in the emergency lights. She leaned down over him so he could see her face despite his weakened senses. "I can save you, if you want to live."

"Too many regrets," he whispered, his words stumbling together until she could barely understand him. "Let me die."

She hesitated, searching his face. The lines of pain eased about his eyes, smoothing into acceptance. He'd risked his reputation as the galaxy's most famous assassin to help her. He could have left her at Dock 371. He could have tossed her to the bounty hunter and escaped unscathed.

But he didn't.

How can I stand by and watch him die without at least trying?

She flipped the cork out of the tube. She removed her hand from his chest, braced for spraying blood, but he'd already lost too much. In the open wound, she could see the torn remains of his heart and the white of broken bone. Into that cavity, she sprinkled the metal bits from the tube.

All of them. The more assemblers in his body, the more likely they can repair the damage before he dies.

She pulled out the datapad and typed in simple commands. *Heart. Infection. Blood loss.* Her assemblers weren't sentient, so without programming, they'd simply be bits of debris in his wound. While they worked their magic, she gave him a shot for pain. At least he'd be comfortable if they failed. Then she spilled a bio-bandage over the wound and hoped for the best.

Settling back on her heels, she closed her eyes and allowed emotion to wash through her for one brief, luxurious moment. Relief, joy, terror, heart-pumping adrenaline. Her hands trembled, and with no one to see her moment of weakness, she even allowed a few tears to fall. She was so close to freedom! So close to losing the man who'd helped make it all possible. So close to death herself. *But at least I'll die fighting for my freedom, not trapped in the Tower while Majel scribbles down every secret her torturers yank out of me.*

With that out of her system, she forced herself up and moving. She couldn't assume the bounty hunter had given up on them so quickly. They were down in strange territory, helpless, unable to flee, and one of their party severely wounded. If they had to make a run for it, she needed to gather the most crucial supplies. There was nothing else she could do for Sig at the moment, although she couldn't help stealing glances at him to see if he were still breathing.

Packets of food. Every weapon she could find. Anything she might be able to sell or trade for information or protection. She had a tidy pile by Sig when she heard the first rustling and cracks of undergrowth outside the ship. Arming herself with a lazer he'd thoughtfully installed beneath Henry's main dash, she wiped all emotion from her face, hit the button to open the hatch, and walked outside with all the regal confidence of the Duchess of Wyre.

"Hello, there!" She called in her most imperious voice as though summoning the butler for her afternoon tea. "We need assistance immediately."

A man stepped out of the shadows, crossing the torn earth and smoldering tracks of their crashing descent. He approached with hands palm up and empty, his manner hesitant despite his lumbering giant-like size. She kept the lazer hidden against her skirts, ready to slice his head off if he even thought about attacking them. His much larger bulk wouldn't matter one iota against the razor-sharp weapon. Dressed in a strange mishmash of furs and leathers with the skin of

some small rodent wrapped around his head, he appeared to be a colonist, not the bounty hunter who'd shot them down.

"Are you hurt, my lady?"

English, at least. She could thank her lucky stars a Britannian colony had been close, although she hoped the colonists weren't too sympathetic to Her Majesty's command. Americus had been the first colony to attempt to cast off Majel's yoke. *If she hadn't been busy wiping out the Razari, she might have already destroyed Americus's pitiful little rebellion.*

"No, but my companion is. Do you have shelter nearby?"

"Only my cabin, my lady. I'm afraid we're several clicks from any real civilization."

Perfect. She stepped aside to allow him to peek inside the ship at Sig. "That'll do. What's your name, sir?"

"Gage, my lady. I'm no bloodletter, but your friend doesn't look well at all."

Briskly, she gathered up her research equipment and as much of their provisions as she could carry. "Bloodletting is for ignorant fools who know nothing better. Now make yourself useful and help me get my friend to safety."

The man easily scooped Sig into his arms like a child, emphasizing his bear-like size. *I have no contacts in this place. My title and House cannot help me here. All I have are my research—which I daren't use too openly else Majel will catch wind of it—my feminine wiles, and my wits.*

Putting as much seductive sway as possible into her hips, she stepped out of the wreck and cast a flirtatious glance back at Gage. The poor bumbling man gaped at her like she'd sprouted another head and almost dropped Sig.

It's a damned good thing I've been blessed with a brain.

FIVE

Sig was awake enough to know that he shouldn't be alive, but he couldn't seem to make his body work. His eyes refused to cooperate and his head weighed like a ton of bricks. He fought harder, swimming laboriously through layers of gray fog.

"Shhh." A gentle hand touched his face, but that only made him struggle harder.

Charlie. I have to get her to safety.

It took all his strength, but he finally worked his eyes open. She hovered over him, her dark hair smooth and tidy. How could she look so elegant after crashing on a barely-populated colony? He tried to sit up, or at least lift his head, but nothing responded. He couldn't feel his fingers or toes, couldn't sense whether he was cold or hot, dressed or nude, on a bed of feathers...or nails.

She leaned down and pressed her mouth to his ear. He felt that much at least. "We're safe, for now. A colonist named Gage has taken us in. As best as I can tell, he's living in the wilderness between Bostonia and York."

"Henry."

She sat back up and raised her voice slightly. "Yes, your name is Henry, and my name is Charlotte Wilder. Do you remember now?"

A man loomed into Sig's vision, a large, broad shadow that dwarfed her. Danger sent shards of ice through his body. No, that was his heart pounding harder. His heart. Hadn't it been cut all to hell? *What did she do to me?*

"Well, I'll be, he's awake," Gage said with a huge smile. "I didn't think he was going to make it."

"He's not out of the woods yet." Charlie pulled at something on his chest. From the sting and tug, it must be a bio-bandage. He welcomed any sensation, even pulled chest hairs. "But he's doing much better. How do you feel, Henry?"

"Danger." His lips fumbled the word, but he was sure she understood.

Humming as though they hadn't crashed, he wasn't on death's door, and a huge wild man didn't loom behind her with God only knew what kind of weapon, she prodded his chest with gentle but sure fingers. "Yes, you're still in danger, but the wound is healing nicely."

He gritted his teeth, silently screaming at the stranger to go away so he could talk to her. *There's so much we need to do. If the bounty hunter tracks us down, while I'm sick and weak...*

"Everything's taken care of." She leaned down, her gaze heavy with significance as though she knew he was desperate to gain information. "All you need to do is heal. Right, Gage?"

"Aye, Miss Wilder. I wiped away our tracks and fetched the other things you asked for. Not much I could do about the debris other than toss some branches on the hull to disguise it. The winter snows have even York piled up to their ears. No one's going to be coming out here any time soon to look for you."

He knows too much. Sig tried to convey the urgency with only his eyes. *Don't trust him. Don't trust anyone.*

Maybe all this concentrating was doing his frozen limbs some good, because he managed to shift his head enough to look down at himself. Pale pink skin covered his chest, not a gruesome gaping wound. Dread tightened like a fist in the pit of his stomach. *How long have I been unconscious to heal like this?*

Terror pounded in his skull and he struggled harder, thrashing his entire body. *We have to get away from here!*

Charlie pressed against him, using her slender body to try and still his struggles. His strength ran out quickly, leaving him shaking and so sick with worry he wanted to weep. *I've failed her. Snows or no, the Queen's Ravens won't be far behind.*

"Trust me, Henry." She kissed his cheek and rubbed her palms on his shoulder in a soothing circular motion. Bare skin. He felt that much. "I've got everything in hand."

"I can't move," he whispered, his voice more broken than he cared to admit. "I don't even feel my arms."

"I'm so sorry, but I had to tie you down. You thrashed too much with fever and I was afraid you were going to harm yourself even worse. Let me loosen the ties and see if you feel better."

Tied. Thank God his eyes were closed, so she wouldn't see the horrible darkness that knowledge must be spreading in his eyes. He hadn't been tied up in a very long time.

Dark memories threatened from his childhood. Memories he'd killed a long time ago. He'd always thought those feelings of helplessness would stir him into a murderous rage, but all he felt...

Whatever bound his wrists loosened. His fingers tingled, cramped muscles stretched, and a surge of enormous relief washed over him. Peace. That's what this feeling was. After all the suffering he'd survived as a child and the countless executions he'd committed in effort to blot out those memories, he'd never felt this completely at peace.

He flexed his fingers and turned his head to see his arm stretched out on a pillow. A strip of white cotton still tied his left wrist to the simple wooden headboard. His other arm sagged, too, still bound but looser and more comfortable.

Sensation coursed through his body, tingling like fire ants nibbling his extremities. Charlie finished loosening the tie and turned back, leaning down over his chest. "Better?"

He closed his eyes and nodded. So much better. Impossibly better. He'd hated the last woman who made him helpless. Every time he accepted a contract on a female mark, it was her face he saw when he terminated the target. He often made wry jokes about all his regrets, but in truth, his only true regret was that he hadn't killed her himself.

So why don't I hate Charlie?

Sig healed so rapidly that it scared her. Before Charlotte's eyes, his skin seemed to knit together. Within a matter of hours, the fever had raged in him so hotly she'd feared the chills would break his bones, but suddenly broke into a sweat and left him sleeping like a baby.

My assemblers not only repaired the damage to his heart, but compressed the normal healing time into hours, not weeks.

After just forty eight hours, she was having a hard time keeping him in bed. Which was why she'd left him tied up.

"I have to see if the bounty hunter tracked us down!"

He'd given up on a reasonable tone of voice, but his increased volume only made her arch a brow at him. No one had ever been able to intimidate her by yelling. "We've already scavenged everything useable from the wreckage and I went over it with a fine-toothed comb to make sure nothing was broadcasting any sort of electronic signal. I'd use the Razari crystal to destroy the entire ship but I'm afraid that hot of a fire would draw unwanted attention. If the bounty hunter was able to track our crash, he'll still have to brave blizzards and snow drifts to get here, and I'm assured by Gage that no one is foolish enough to brave these woods until spring."

"That information is only good if you trust Gage and I trust no one."

Obviously not even me.

The flat tone of his voice combined with the blank empty-eyed stare finally made her lose her temper. She slammed the datapad down on the bedside table and poked him in the stomach hard enough he grunted. "That man has done everything possible to help us. You'd better not even think about killing him."

"He's a loose end. If the Queen's Ravens find him, he will talk, eventually. I don't care how much you like him."

Mild irritation flamed into full-fledged fury, fed by anxiety and stress of the last few days. Where his volume went up, she pitched her voice low and vicious. "Do you honestly think I'm nothing but a fluff-brained chit out on her first Season?"

She poked him again for good measure. "Gage has agreed to go on an expedition with some of his aboriginal friends far to the west as soon as the snows begin to thaw. He'd already planned to join them—we just moved up his timetable. He won't be here for anyone to torture. We won't be here either, even if I have to keep you tied up and drag you by your hair!"

Now it was his turn to arch a brow at her with surprise.

Shame churned in her stomach. Here she'd pinned him down, trapped him against his will after everything he'd done to help her, and then she abused him when he was hurt and unable to defend himself.

"I can't help being suspicious of everyone," he said slowly, eyes narrowing in on her reaction. Because he was watching so carefully, she refrained from wincing or dropping her gaze. "Besides, you could drag me around by much more willing body parts than my hair. And if you don't know that I trust you after you saved me during the crash and healed me, I don't know what else I can say to convince you. So what's really bothering you?"

She put on a clinical air and picked up the datapad, even though the numbers on it made her heart go cold and heavy in her chest. "You're recovering rapidly."

"So I see," he said dryly. "Considering I was knocking on death's door, I hardly see why that's a problem."

She'd run scan after scan, trying to make sense of what was happening inside his body. Staring down at the numbers, her eyes burned hot and dry. *I learned nothing from my mistake with Majel. I shouldn't have risked another human experiment. It's too risky. Dear God, what have I done to him?*

She dragged her gaze up to his face and made herself tell him every gory detail. "I injected you with an invention I call my assemblers, which are extremely tiny nanobots that work inside the body. I'm afraid they're working a little too... well."

He didn't appear alarmed that microscopic robots were roaming around inside his body. "I'm not complaining, Charlie. I'm thankful to be alive, whatever you've done."

She sighed heavily. "I made the mistake of leaving them inside my first subject indefinitely. They integrated themselves into her biological systems to the point where they couldn't be safely extracted. I thought to counteract that risk with you by recalling the assemblers as soon as they'd repaired your heart, but I can't, Sig. I'm sorry. Your heart was too damaged to beat on its own without them."

He gave a brief jerk on the rope binding his right hand to the bed, as though he reflexively reached to touch his chest. "It's still beating, though. I feel it."

"They're reinforcing your heart, forcing it to pump, but..." She hesitated, her mouth dried with decaying dust. "They won't stop there. You've already received miraculous healing. Your strength has returned, if not increased from even before the accident."

"What else?"

His voice remained even and calm, as though they talked about a fine new carriage equipped with the latest racing technology, not his life. "I don't know! I don't know what else they're capable of. I'm going to need to extract a few and download as much data as possible so I can figure out the best way to proceed."

"So they'll still respond to your programming."

She nodded, relieved that he wasn't horrified at what she'd done, and yet also crippled with her own guilt. "I don't know how long they'll run, Sig, let alone what they'll do now that you're out of danger."

"Your other *subject*," he said with emphasis, confirming he knew exactly who her first test subject had been, "is still living. I'm not concerned, but if we have a problem, the famous and dashing Lord Regret has the most talented and brilliant Lady Doctor Wyre at his disposal."

"I'm terribly sorry," she said each word low but vehement. "You asked me to let you to die, but I couldn't. Not after you'd risked so much to save me."

"No regrets, Charlie" he whispered, twisting his body toward hers.

He curled his lower body around hers and her determined guilt was shaken by his very evident interest. *Oh dear. He very well can't be that incapacitated if he's aroused, yet here I've kept him trapped for days in bed.*

She reached up to untie his hands.

"Leave it," he said in a husky voice that fired her blood. "I like being bound for you."

Sliding her palm over his bare chest, she watched the darkness spread in his eyes. "This is all very new to me, but I admit, the idea has merit."

He nudged harder against her back and let out a soft groan that tightened her body. *I wonder what sort of sounds I can draw from him if I stripped him nude and stroked every inch of him with my mouth.*

As if he heard her thoughts, he groaned louder. "Charlie."

She leaned down and rubbed her mouth against his, letting her breath become a caress. "Sig?"

"When we're away from here and you're safe, I hope very much that you'll experiment on me some more."

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