

Lady Wyre's Regret

A free read prequel to

LADY DOCTOR WYRE

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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, torn apart.

Evidently Queen Majel was not encumbered with any 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 have 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 raven 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 was not shaken to her core. That faintly trembling hand checked her hair again, needlessly smoothing her perfect coiffure. “Assuredly, I shall be pursuing 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?”

“I’m quite well.” Queen Majel jerked back violently, but then tried to disguise her unease. “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, her bones aching and fragile as though they might shatter. 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 felt the threat in that deceptively pleasant voice. Danger tightened like a

noose about her neck. *Don't be silly*, she chided herself, 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 sniffle. 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 could not possibly be so very secure if a third party had used and warped that technology. Even 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 will 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 shall 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 long 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 both 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 and knew without a doubt that 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.”

Majel cleans up her messes most efficiently. Perhaps I can make a larger mess myself before she has the opportunity to wipe me out.

#

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 lazor 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, sir, 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 would 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 draw 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."

#

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 is not 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. I knew this event would be risky and so 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, and 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."

#

Read more about Lady Wyre and Lord Regret in LADY DOCTOR WYRE, available March 29, 2011 from [Samhain Publishing](#). For more free reads, please visit my [website](#).

Joely Sue Burkhart

Dare to peek beneath the mask

Current Series and Upcoming Releases

A Jane Austen Space Opera, SF erotic romance (BDSM) from Samhain Publishing
LADY DOCTOR WYRE, March 29, 2011

The Connaghers, erotic contemporary romance (BDSM) from Samhain Publishing
Conn, DEAR SIR, I'M YOURS, June 2009
Victor, HURT ME SO GOOD, October 2010
Vicki, YOURS TO TAKE, tbd
Mal, MINE TO BREAK, tbd

Historical Fantasy Erotica (BDSM) based on Imperial China from Carina Press
GOLDEN, August 29, 2011

The Maya Bloodgates, paranormal romance from Carina Press
THE BLOODGATE GUARDIAN, June 14, 2010

Blood & Shadows, erotic romantic fantasy (BDSM) from Drollerie Press
THE ROSE OF SHANHASSON, March 2008
THE ROAD TO SHANHASSON, May 2009
RETURN TO SHANHASSON, tbd

SURVIVE MY FIRE, July 2007
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Mythomorphoses, post-apocalyptic science fiction romance from Drollerie Press
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