

JOELY SUE BURKHART

LADY DOCTOR
WYRE

A JANE AUSTEN SPACE OPERA

 SAMHAIN

A dangerous technology could conquer the universe. Love could set it free.

Jane Austen Space Opera, Book 1

Charlotte, Duchess of Wyre, once held the Queen's highest confidence—and the technological secret that keeps the royal heart beating. Fearful of what atrocities that Britannia might commit with her research, Charlotte turned to the galaxy's most infamous assassin, Lord Sigmund Regret, to stage her own death.

Even without the simplest of luxuries, seven years hiding in the Americus colony is preferable to one day in the Tower of Londinium. Until a bounty hunter's bullet forces her to revive her research. Now the same nanobots that keep the Queen alive also run rampant in Lord Regret's body. Making his yearly Solstice visits increasingly...intimate...and complicating her courtship with the safe and honorable Sheriff Gilead Masters.

When the Americus colony declares independence, and her humble sheriff makes a shocking confession, Charlotte has had enough. Weary of running, tired of living without tea and silks, she fires a warning shot across Britannia's bow: cease hunting Lady Wyre, or lose the technological power the crown holds so dear.

Her next task isn't so simple. Somehow she must keep the two men she loves alive—and prevent them from killing each other.

Warning: Ladies in positions of power, stylish spaceships, BDSM. A ménage a trois featuring a duchess on the run, a gentlemanly assassin, and a rough-and-tumble sheriff willing to gun down anyone who gets between him and his lady.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Lady Doctor Wyre
Copyright © 2011 by Joely Sue Burkhart
ISBN: 978-1-60928-390-2
Edited by Tera Kleinfelter
Cover by Kanaxa

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: March 2011
www.samhainpublishing.com

Lady Doctor Wyre

Joely Sue Burkhart

Dedication

For my beloved sister.

A special thank you to Sherri Myers, Shannon Collins, and Sharon Muha for helping me make this story as perfect as possible before submission to editor extraordinaire, Tera.

Lastly, to Lynn Viehl, I took your advice and wrote a world of everything I love. Thank you for *StarDoc* and your daily inspirations at Paperback Writer.

Chapter One

“I cannot marry you.” Charlotte Wilder struggled to take a deep breath through the heartache banding her chest, made even more difficult by her corset. A lady could have some luxuries even on a backwater colony planet. “I’m sorry, truly.”

“I mean no disrespect, my lady.” Sheriff Gilead Masters stiffened but kept his voice mild. “I know it’s customary on Britannia for the lady to make the proposal but we don’t hold to such rigid tradition here.”

“I’m not offended, Sheriff, but my answer is still no.”

He made no hasty retort, but the tightening of his eyes and the flexing of his jaws betrayed him. Once a colonel in what the Americus colonists called the Revolutionary War—where they’d managed to take over the small Imperial space port and cut communication with Britannia—he rarely showed any emotion. Only someone who knew him very well indeed would recognize his silent growl of frustrated agony, and Charlotte had come to know him very well indeed in the past months.

Oh, how she knew—and appreciated—him. Broad shoulders to block the miserable heat of the fiercest summer sun, powerful chest and arms to hold a woman through the long blizzards, and a big, rough body strong enough to separate a foolish man from his gun without drawing his own weapon. Although she bemoaned the provincial cut and cloth of his coat, he’d never looked at her with scorn like the grand ladies and their lords at Court, or worse, fear at what she had wrought.

Because I haven’t dared tell him the truth, she thought with a wince.

“I thought,” he rasped out in a graveled voice as he twisted the brim of his old cavalry hat in both big hands, “that you...that we...”

“I do,” she whispered, blinking the tears from her eyes. “I never meant to mislead you in any way.”

He gathered his tattered pride about him, looking anywhere but her face. He jammed his now lopsided hat on his head and whirled to leave. Spurs jingled, a merry sound punctuated by the heavy thud of his boots as he retreated. “I’m sorry to have inconvenienced you in any way, my lady.”

It would be better, safer, for him to leave. Even after the spectacular incident in which she’d presumably died seven years ago, she couldn’t count on safety from Her Majesty’s Guards. Eventually even this insignificant colony would fail to provide sanctuary. She’d be forced to run and hide again, no matter how much it galled her pride.

The heavy outer door beeped at his approach and automatically slid open, letting in blowing snow. Winds moaned and howled, an endless, agonizing wail in the dead of winter. Her first winter on Americus

had almost succeeded where the Queen's torturers would have failed. She would have babbled every last research secret she knew in order to escape the endless winter. Others looked forward to the Solstice, but she dreaded it more and more each year. A holiday of renewal and hope had come to mean only one thing to her: Loss.

And if the Solstice had come to represent loss, then the Solstice Eclipse every seven years was even worse. She'd died on the last holiday. Now, she faced losing her only friend on Americus. Another holiday, another loss.

Befriending Masters had provided a charming outlet to pretend that she was simply a lady he fancied and not the feared Duchess of Wyre, the traitorous doctor whose experiments had worked entirely too well. Her harmless flirtation had become something dreadfully more important to her, no matter how hard she tried to pretend otherwise. *I can't bear to lose him too.*

She rushed after him. "Wait, Sheriff Masters. Don't go yet!"

"You have made your affections—or rather the lack thereof—perfectly clear, my lady. I won't bother you again."

She laid her hand on his straining back and he quivered beneath her palm. "Gil, please. Let me explain."

Slowly, he allowed the door to whoosh shut against the blowing snow and howling winds, but he didn't turn around.

"Don't you want to know why I can't marry you when I love you so very much?"

"You love me?" He whirled around so quickly he knocked her off balance. "Then why can't you marry me, Miss Charlotte?"

Seizing both of her arms above her elbows, he hauled her close so her skirts tumbled against his thighs. At least her gown was sensible, warm homegrown wool and not fine, crushable linen. Or silk. How she longed to wear silk again! Every night she pored over cycles-old transmissions of the *Royal Gazette*, though she knew she'd never again have cause to wear such wondrously frivolous clothes.

She let him hold her for a moment, enjoying the feel of his warmth, protection, and yes, his respect. He'd been so courteous these past months that she'd never allowed herself to contemplate a physical relationship with him. With his arms around her and his heart pounding beneath her cheek, she suddenly ached to take him to her bed.

He smelled of wool, tobacco and some sort of sweet oil she suspected he used to polish his pistol. The antique weapon gleamed from his exceptional care, even if he chose not to use it unless forced by necessity.

I wonder if he'd let me modify it slightly...

No.

She pushed out of his arms as she pushed that traitorous thought away. She couldn't indulge in her hobby for it would bring the Raven Guards flocking upon her like a fresh corpse, for that was exactly what she'd be.

A corpse.

Years of running and constantly being on guard, jerking awake at the slightest noise, denying her intellectual and scientific gifts that burned to be used... It all weighed upon her shoulders like the massive Tower of Londonium, which would no doubt be her future home if Queen Majel found her.

"Sit down," Charlotte sighed. "I'll tell you everything."

Or at least not enough to get you killed.

In her tidy kitchen, the tall, muscular soldier turned lawman sat down at her table and folded his rugged, scarred hands together. She'd reluctantly fallen in love with him and those hands, so incredibly gentle in their ruthlessly slow attack against her every resistance without ever once touching her intimately. Slow, careful and deliberate, he'd groomed his horse until the animal drooped with sheer bliss, polished his silver star and glossy boots until they blinded her, and gently wiped a child's tears who'd lost her mother to influenza. Yet she'd also seen him plow a meaty fist into a miscreant's jaw and haul him off to jail and, yes, she'd seen him shoot and kill a criminal in the act of robbing the town's only bank.

Gentle but strong and unwavering when the town—and I—need him the most. How could I not love him?

She'd known scores of men, from Court dandies to sheepherders, princes to highwaymen, and none had ever touched her heart like Gil. Not even *him*, the dark outlaw standing in her memories between her and this honorable man.

Lightly, she touched the locket hanging around her throat, the gold glowing hotter than her skin. The delicate filigreed heart made a beautiful piece of jewelry, but costly metals didn't make the simple heart so irreplaceable. Inside, the last of her most skillful technology resided, keeping a violent, wounded man alive and providing a tie to her that would never be broken.

Silently, Gil watched her stir the coals, add a few sticks of wood to the stove, and set a small coffee pot on the hottest spot. She'd nearly starved and frozen to death before she'd learned how to work the medieval stove, so she was quite proud of the skills she'd learned without the shining technology to which she was used. After rumors began trickling in from other conquered planets, she was extremely thankful for that lack which she'd once sorely rued, for once the Empire had ultimate control of one's food, drink and housing, then they could do whatever they wished. Including the injection of experimental "enhancements" into meals, water, even the air.

The thought made her stomach twist painfully. If Gil knew that her research as Lady Doctor Wyre had made all these Imperial abominations possible, would he turn from her in horror? Or be the first to lynch her?

He cleared his throat, but his voice was still ragged as he asked, “Is it another man?”

Pouring a vile brew the colonists called coffee, she let her mind whirl through possibilities. Indeed, he’d given her a way out without having to tell him the full sordid story of her past. It would hurt him, but it was the truth as far as she could tell him.

“Yes.” She straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin, and turned to face him holding two cups of steaming brew. “In fact, there is another man.”

The look on his face would have made her laugh if her heart wasn’t weeping at the hurt she caused him. His dark eyes flared with shock, his mouth slackened, and the wooden table groaned beneath his fierce grip. To keep his hands from trembling, or from drawing his ancient six-barreled pistol? Was he the kind of man who’d hunt down his competition?

She paled at the thought, for that would be far from an even match. Gil might be a respectable shot, but he didn’t have a prayer against a man rumored to have killed over a thousand men throughout the galaxy and beyond, sometimes for little more than an insult regarding the tie of his cravat.

Fearing she’d caused Gil to leap from one threat to an even more dangerous situation, she quickly went on. “I met him my first Winter Solstice here on Americus and we have a standing arrangement to share each holiday.” She forced her voice to brighten, although the accompanying smile practically shattered her face. “Why, he should be arriving in the next few days at the latest.”

“You haven’t mentioned him before.”

She had to applaud the evenness of his voice, though he still gripped the table as though his life depended on it. “He’s not a very...pleasant man.” *A perfect match for me.* “I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Do you love him very much?”

So even and hard his voice, cutting her heart like the finest trillium blade. *How can anyone love a murdering assassin?* She took a drink from her cup, trying to buy a few moments for her to gather her thoughts, but the swill made her mouth twist. “It’s complicated.”

Gil leaned across the table and she suddenly realized that he could be a very large and intimidating man when he chose. “Explain it for me. Please. Do you love him more than me?”

Her heart thudded, blood pounding hot and frantic through her veins, her skin burning hotter to match the unnaturally warm locket. It seemed an eternity since she’d held a man and felt his heat and solid presence in her bed. She couldn’t count the man who came to her but once a year and almost always left the very next day. He needed much more—and less—than simple lovemaking.

In the beginning of her exile, she’d been too consumed by survival to even think about selecting a lover. Then she hadn’t dared let anyone too close for fear she’d unconsciously betray her breeding and heritage no matter how hard she tried to pretend to be just a common colonist.

When Gil had come into her life, she'd enjoyed his gentle but insistent courting. It'd been nice to pretend for just a while that she was of no importance, that she had no duty to her House or dread threat from the Queen.

The locket weighed very heavy on her chest, a fiery brimstone reminder of the man who'd be coming to her in less than a fortnight. He wouldn't care if she took a lover and she'd never required fidelity from him. In fact, he'd likely find the very notion of her pining away for him laughable. Their relationship was founded on need—base, raw and primal. Not romance.

Never love.

Her mind wanted to probe that tender, sore spot in her heart, but she refused to dwell on what she could not have. Especially when a most pleasing male stood before her, jealousy pumping, muscles bunching for battle, and she knew very well that this one she *could* have, at least for awhile.

She planted her hands on the table and rose up, leaning in so they were eye to eye. "I'll explain it to you," she said, letting her voice drop to a husky purr that darkened his eyes. "In my bedchamber."

Chapter Two

He threw the table aside, ignoring the tumbled cutlery and the crash of wood against the hull of her cabin. His arms came around her, and Charlotte let a low appreciate moan roll from her throat. All the polite flirtations this past year combusted inside her. As he swept her up against his chest, she buried her face in his coat, breathing in his scent. She couldn't wait to feel the velvet heat of his skin against hers. He smelled feral, prowling like a beast toward his cave, and her pulse ramped up another notch.

There could be no doubt where her bedchamber was in this tiny cabin, but he hesitated a moment in the doorway, no doubt shocked by the finery she'd hidden away in her private chambers. She'd painstakingly ripped apart several of her old ballgowns and used the silk to cover the ugly gray metallic walls. It had taken months to finish the coverlet upon her bed made from the scraps of sleeves and ruffles from those gowns, but in the long miserable winter, she'd had nothing else to do. To describe the coverlet as *colorful* would be as great an understatement as stating that Queen Majel was simply a powerful leader.

Charlotte was so proud of that coverlet that she had become quite attached to it. It felt wonderful and luxurious, so alien on this forsaken colony. The secret finery amused her, for not even the ladies in York would easily possess so much silk, thanks to the blockade. But it also served as a grim reminder of all that she'd lost. Once upon a time as a young woman heading her House, she'd ruled the *ton* as Queen Majel ruled the Empire. She'd set the fashion for the Season. She'd determined who would succeed at Court and who would fail miserably, signaled by Lady Wyre's cut sublime.

Yet with all those delightful distractions, she'd been unable to keep her curiosity contained. What had started as a hobby began to consume her interests until she rarely made an appearance in Town, and the few times she did, everyone had stared and whispered about her oddity. They reviled her more than the lowly medical doctor, for she, Duchess and Lady of House Wyre, dared to dabble in technology, the realm of the Military Intelligence & Galaxy Sciences division, not the lauded aristocracy.

Certainly no proper lady of her station would stoop to soil her hands in *sciences*. The horror!

Even the loss of her position in society hadn't deterred her foolishness, until in the end, she'd created the very technology that allowed the Empire to devastate world after world after world. Stupid, arrogant, risky, yes, but every cell in her body burned to return to that dangerous research.

So many regrets, not the least would be losing this honorable man who viewed her with such respect. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she tugged the queue out of Gil's hair and combed her fingers through

the heavy dark mass that hung to his shoulders. Now the respectable sheriff resembled a wild beast, and the way he looked at her with those dark, intent eyes made her feel like a very luscious meal indeed.

“Why now?”

Which she knew he’d wished to ask, *Why me?* She cupped his face, forcing her fingers to gentleness not raging hunger. “I’ve wanted you for a very long time, Gil.”

“You have a very odd way of showing your affection,” he grumbled. “I meant every word, Charlotte. I’d be a good husband to you. I want to protect you.” His eyes darkened, narrowed and intense. “From everything and everyone.”

Despite her refusal, desire smoldered, licking her flesh with hunger. She wanted to strip him bare and survey every magnificent inch. “I know.”

Since there were no ladies maids to be had on the colony, the women had adopted simple gowns that were easy to remove. A few buttons, a twist of her hips, and she stood before him clad in her last treasured luxuries. She had mended her stockings a time...or ten...but she loved the delicate pink shade and prayed they’d last forever. Of course, she also wore a corset, which had to be one of the most ridiculously fantastic things Gil Masters had ever seen by the way he ogled her.

She couldn’t help but chuckle as she sauntered toward her silk-clad bed. “Haven’t you ever seen proper underclothes before, Sheriff?”

“But where...how...” He swallowed so hard she heard the gulp, as though he’d swallowed his own tongue. “I didn’t think the ladies wore such...*unmentionables*...here.”

“There are many things in this galaxy that I’ve been forced to live without, but I will always at least have proper, pretty underclothes, even if I must pay an exorbitant amount to the tailor to have him construct a corset which I can tighten myself.”

She sat on the edge of her bed. Holding his gaze, she lifted an arched foot to best show off the rare stockings. Slowly, she loosened the pink ribbon holding the silk at her knees and inch by inch rolled the stocking down her calf.

He made a low, ragged sound, whether growl or curse she didn’t know, but he attacked his own clothes, shucking the ugly brown coat and equally coarse breeches in record time. By the time he pushed down his drawers and jerked the linen shirt over his head, she had a most unladylike moisture in her mouth and, yes, between her thighs.

Sheriff Gil Masters was a fine male specimen. Not even the greatest scientific advances she’d ever dared dream in this galaxy could possibly improve on his musculature. His skin fit as tight as a fine glove, gliding over muscle and sinew and bone. He was thicker, more muscular and taller than most men on Britannia, his spirit and energy burning with a healthy glow. She’d long argued that Society’s ridiculous rules had inbred the Great Houses for so long that they were destroying themselves with their own rigid bloodlines.

This was a man who'd worked all his adult life scraping a living out of nothing but dirt. She had no idea why he'd chosen to become a colonist, but he'd been successful, even if this colony had earned the wrath of Britannia by revolting. Colonel and Sheriff of Queenstown, he was respected and well-liked. They had only modest crime in this pastoral town, nothing like York or Bostonia.

He had no need of a blooded House to protect him or a useless title to gain him a decent wife.

No, he chose me, she reminded herself sadly. She averted her gaze, overwhelmed by shame. *It's not right for me to dally with this honorable man when I know I cannot give him a future that won't cause his death.*

He touched her, his fingers gliding under her chin to tilt her face back to him. The calluses on his palms made her quiver, her inner thighs slick with longing. How his hands could be so rough yet gentle she had no idea.

Eyes solemn, he repeated, "Why?"

Her throat was so constricted that she could barely get the words out. "Because I would regret never loving you when I die, even though I know it's despicable for me to use you like this."

His eyes flared. "Use me, my lady, I beg you. Love me, and then allow me to serve at your side."

Automatically, his shoulders tensed into a protective stance, which only served to break her heart all over again. No one could protect her from the wrath of Queen Majel. No one but herself. But oh, it was so sweet to have him care enough that he wished he could help her.

She pressed her mouth to his, lingering over the fullness of his lips and the slightly bitter taste of coffee on his tongue. For once, she actually found herself craving that foul brew, for it tasted like magic from his mouth. Or maybe it was those big hands gliding down her bare arms. She shivered and pushed against him, shifting anxiously, begging for more of his touch while her fingers flew down the front laces of her corset.

She threw the last of her finery aside without heed, too hungry for the warmth of his skin. Sliding her palms over the wide expanse of his chest, she found a puckered scar low on his left shoulder. Further investigation revealed a matching scar on his back. Sobered, she pushed him flat on his back in her bed and began a thorough investigation of his body for other injuries.

"It's merely an old Indian wound." Unconcerned, he reached up to pull her down atop him, but she shook her head while she probed the scar. He had no discernable loss of use of the limb. No blackened marks surrounded the skin about the wound, so it hadn't been a lazor. The cutting burn from such a weapon would have likely cost him his entire arm.

The colonials had used antique powder-shot pistols in their revolt, but a wound created by such a weapon would have left a scattered pocked pattern of burns. This wound was clean. Using her fingers, she estimated the width of the projectile, prodding the underlying muscle hard enough he grunted.

Whatever had struck him had been fired with enough force to penetrate his body completely, but the back wound was as neat and tidy as the front. So not a manufactured piercing bullet from Bei-Jing, or the exit hole would have been as large as her fist. “What manner of weapon made this wound?”

“An Iroquax arrow.”

She cocked her head and let her fingers tap restlessly against his chest as she tried to remember details about Indian uprisings. Most had occurred when the colonists first arrived, because the natives had naturally protected their land. However, backed by Britannia’s might and fueled by their own determination, the colonists had easily driven back the Indians into the forests and mountains from which they’d come. She hadn’t heard of an Indian uprising in ages, and she had no idea what their weapons looked like exactly, but she must respect them if they left such a wound.

“They use long, smooth sticks of wood capped by a sharp stone tip and shoot them from hand-hewn bows,” Gil explained. “My squad found a bow after a skirmish and it was a hard draw, even for me.”

“Weren’t you wearing any body armor?”

“Not yet. But you may wager we started wearing it soon after.”

Intrigued, she couldn’t help but picture such a weapon. While primitive, it had managed to pierce a man. Stone could be very sharp, and since it wasn’t metallic, it would be impervious to certain technological invasions, like her nanobot dissemblers that loved to eat metal or simply broke down any compound into its various parts. A dissembler would have a difficult time chewing on stone.

Wood would be easily destroyed though, and from great distances...

A sharp sting on her neck jerked her attention back to him.

Gil had sat up enough to nip her neck. “Are you honestly more interested in primitive warfare than a man lying naked and ready beneath you?”

Smiling down at him with a deliberately wicked light in her eyes, she took him inside her without a single preliminary warning. This first time, she had no need of preparation, for once her mind had decided to take Gil to her bed, her body had been more than eager to attack.

His gasp made her hesitate. She’d assumed a man of his age, living the life of a colonist far from the strict morals of Britannia’s Court, would have plenty of sexual experience, but perhaps she’d been mistaken. If she’d ruined a first experience for him...

“Don’t stop,” he groaned. “It’s been too long. I can’t...wait!”

Urgency tightened his body beneath her, so she rode him hard, giving him the frantic need that bubbled inside her. Gritting his teeth, he clutched her hips and fought back his own release, but his hands were not where she wanted them. She pried his right hand off her hip and pressed that big, rough palm to her breast. Covering his hand with hers, she massaged and kneaded, dragging that rough skin over her nipple until her head fell back on a low moan of bliss.

A quick study, he cupped her other breast, rubbing and squeezing and torturing her nipples until she shuddered. Shifting her weight forward slightly, she ground against him, twisting and shaking as climax swept through her. His big frame flexed beneath her, his hips arching on his own cry of release, but he never ceased rubbing her breasts.

Stretching out atop of him, she smiled down at the glazed look in his eyes. “Now, dear sir, I want you to rub those incredible hands all over my body.”

His dark eyes gleamed and he curled his sensual lips into a lazy smile. “T’would be my great honor, my lady, as long as I may start...” his palm slid down her back to cup her backside firmly, “...here.”

Lying with her head pillowed on Gil’s chest, Charlotte tried to be fully at ease, but her mind refused to cooperate. Hours of lovemaking should have left her replete and limp with pleasure, for her lover had been most diligent and vigorous. However, the more he moved her heart with his fervent gentleness, the more she longed to tell him of her past, no matter how dangerous it would be for them both. *I ought to explain a bit, if only to help him understand why I can’t have him for forever.*

Gathering her courage, she whispered, “I left Britannia seven years ago and I can never go back.”

“It matters not to me, as long as you allow me to protect you.” He kissed the top of her head and tightened his arms about her so she could barely breathe.

As though he seeks to keep me at his side forever. Silly man. Her throat tightened and her eyes burned with emotion. *He’s the one who needs protection.*

“As your husband, I would do anything to keep you safe. We can sail far from here. Hell, we can find an uncharted planet and start our own colony.”

Most untitled men would give their first born son to marry into a prestigious House, while Gil was ready to leave even the modest comforts of this colony behind. Of course, he didn’t know exactly how titled she was, although he surely suspected she was of noble blood. He didn’t even sound shocked that she never intended to go back to Britannia.

Certainly the parties and dances of the Season were in full swing, building with desperate gaiety at the Solstice’s approach. The longer the nights became, the more frantically the Houses would party, as though they could ignore the insidious creep of the blackness that would soon settle over the center of the galaxy.

How ironic that Americus—an insignificant hunk of rock barely more than a moon—could cause an eclipse that darkened the most advanced civilization in the galaxy. The colony planet was a fraction of the size of Britannia, but when the planets aligned on the seventh Solstice, tiny Americus was exactly the right size and distance from their great sun to cause a total solar eclipse, casting the capital of Londonium into full shadow for nearly an hour.

Since the rebellion, the eclipse had taken on new meaning, both to Britannia and the colonists, for if one small colony could revolt and declare their independence, then why not others? Many of the planets

conquered by Britannia were assimilated into the Empire because of their weaponry or technology. When they conquered a planet, they took what they wanted, killed any of the natives which dared to object, and if necessary, infected them with biological and technological weapons.

Many that I enabled them to create.

Charlotte squeezed her eyes shut to hold the tears inside. “They think I’m dead and I must stay that way. You’ll never be safe with me, Gil. Never.”

Loosening his fierce grip, he let his fingers roam up and down her spine, a soothing waltz that melted her shame and made words clog her throat. It was all she could do to hold back the wretched truth. But if she told him the secrets still buried deep in her mind, he’d become a target of the Crown. Already, he knew too much. If anyone came to Queenstown asking for information about a woman who fit her description... The Guards would drag him off to the Tower and peel back every layer of skin while they scoured his mind.

“What about this other man?”

He surprised her by not pushing for more specific details of her past. He was a lawman. Surely he knew that if she’d gone to the trouble of faking her death, then she must be a wanted criminal. If Americus had not rebelled, then it would be his solemn duty to drag her in for a quick DNA scan, and once her identity popped up on the Londonium grid, the galaxy would empty to chase her down no matter the cost and drag her back to Queen Majel.

She pushed up on his chest and searched his face with narrowed gaze. “Why aren’t you determined to uphold your duty, Sheriff?”

He laughed, trying to make a joke of it, but his eyes were entirely too serious. “As if I’d ever turn my most beloved in to Britannia.”

Perhaps that’s why he’d proposed. As her husband, his duty would be to her, not the law. But he knew nothing of her past. He couldn’t have known that she was so desperately wanted on Britannia until she’d told him. *If he knew the truth, he’d scoop me up in his arms and run for the nearest shuttle to the deepest, darkest corner of space he could find.*

“Tell me about your other man,” he repeated, carefully polite but firm. “I have a right to know.”

“He helped me escape Britannia undetected.”

Gil made a low sound of grudging acknowledgement. “Then I suppose I must thank him for his assistance.”

She snorted at the thought. “In the flight, he was seriously injured when our ship was attacked. It was all I could do to land his small craft in the wilderness here on Americus. The hull had taken so much damage that life support failed and the guidance system shorted out. I had no idea where we were, and I thought he would die in my cause. I couldn’t bear another burden on my conscience, so I saved him.”

“How?”

Such a simple question. It made her breath hitch in her throat and ice trickled down her spine. Her stomach quivered at dread of his reaction. “I...I healed him.” In a rush to avoid his questions, she went on. “Later, I learned the attack had nothing to do with me. Bounty hunters had word that Lord Regret was on board and...”

Gil shot up out of her bed and had the antique pistol in his hand before she even sat up. “*Lord Sigmund Regret?* That’s the man you choose over me?”

Lord Regret, gunslinger assassin famed across the universe—although gunslinger wasn’t entirely correct for he would use any weapon at his disposal. He would even kill according to detailed specifications in his contract if the patron was determined to exact revenge in a particularly memorable manner.

Stories abounded of his outrageous killings. He could drop a man without the victim even knowing he’d taken an injury. Sometimes the target would arrive at home only to fall down dead at her doorstep without ever once realizing she’d left behind a trail of blood. But one thing he’d never used was technology like hers, until she’d used her latest experiments to save his life.

Of course Regret wasn’t his real name, and she had absolutely no desire to learn the truth of his heritage, for she feared it was just as dreadfully respectable and as morally repulsive as hers.

Gil paced back and forth in the tiny expanse between her bed and the outer hull. “Good God, Charlotte, that man is wanted on every planet in the galaxy. The price on his head would buy this entire Queen-forsaken planet! Hell, we could buy an entire luxury cruiser and simply live in space for the rest of our lives if we turned him in.”

It shamed her to admit that she’d thought of it more than once in that first dreadful year of exile. Regret had helped her, of course, but he was also a very dangerous man. They had a business relationship that had ultimately led to a more personal exchange, but she’d never be foolish enough to think that he cared for her.

To complicate matters, her supposed miraculous existence despite her very public “death” had become a galaxy legend. Lady Doctor Wyre sightings were gossiped about and reported from York to Parisii and beyond. In fact, she was sure he’d been offered a contract on her head at least once or twice in the years since they’d crashed on Americus. He alone of everyone who’d known Lady Doctor Wyre now knew that she was not only still alive but also exactly where she hid.

The first rule of assassination: assassinate the assassin. *Especially when he knows your most dreadful secrets.*

At first, she’d waited in dread for the day he’d come to her door with that wide, easy smile and genteel manners that had earned him the nickname of Lord while he shot her dead, strangled her, poisoned her food, or a thousand gruesome ways he could end her life and take her head to Britannia.

Surely the only thing that had possibly stayed his hand this entire time was that the Queen wanted her *alive* so they could pry every last secret from her brain. If Queen Majel ever wanted her dead, then she was terribly afraid that he'd be unable to refuse the exorbitant price.

"Tell me," Gil demanded. "I want to know everything."

Charlotte climbed out of bed and slipped into a wrapper, but he made no move to cover himself. Irritated that the sight of him in all his masculine nudity seemed to loosen her tongue even more, she knelt by the bed and pulled out a small ornate chest. This conversation required *tea*.

She unlocked the chest with a key that she wore on her locket's chain and lifted out a small bag of golden-tipped assum, her last most precious souvenir of Britannia. "For this conversation, I need something more palatable than the swill you call coffee."

As she swept past him to the kitchen, he took the hint and pulled his linen shirt back over his head. At least his incredible body wouldn't distract her from this tale. By the time she sat down with the pot of freshly steeped tea, her mouth was watering and her stomach grumbled with longing. Gil had righted her table and procured cups—the ugly heavy ceramics for coffee. She hadn't bothered to purchase decent china since no one had tea to sell. She poured them each a cup, unable to suppress her sniff of disdain when he liberally dropped sugar cubes into his cup.

For long, blissful moments, she simply held the cup beneath her nose and inhaled. So good. She took a sip and her entire body trembled with ecstasy.

"I do believe I'm insulted," Gil commented with a wry smile on his face that took away the lines of hard life here on the colony. "I don't think you shivered that much when you came."

She tipped her head slightly in acknowledgement, which made him chuckle. "Lord Regret—"

The smile slipped off his face and the hard-jawed determination of the lawman replaced it.

"—owes his life to me," she continued, "and mine is owed to him for his assistance in fleeing Britannia. I shan't turn him in after saving him."

"I understand your attachment," Gil said carefully, cupping his big palms around the cup but not drinking her precious treasure of tea. "However, I must insist that he be arrested and executed as quickly as possible. He's a violent man, Charlotte. He'll kill me, you, anyone, if the price is right."

She nodded. "Yes, he will. But I won't turn him in."

"You love him so very much, then?"

She cocked her head, letting the memory of the last Solstice play through her mind. Regret had many needs, most of them savage and dark compared to what she'd just done with Gil, but love had not been part of their relationship. Or had it? Because surely a man wouldn't trust just anyone with that secret side of himself. "I don't know that I'd ever use the word *love* to describe my feelings for him, but I need him, and he needs me."

Gil's jaw tightened even more but he made no response.

“We’re connected, you see. Our lives hang in the balance together.” His eyes narrowed with consideration, and she took a moment to sip her tea, trying to think of a way to tell him somewhat of that connection without revealing her past. “I told you he was injured in the crash, and I was able to save him. I suppose you could say that I’m keeping him alive.”

“Is that why he comes every Solstice?”

“Yes and no. I always do check the connection between us to ensure he’s still strong and hale, but we’ve become friends over the years. Companions.” Gil’s face darkened and he averted his gaze, silent hurt and jealousy radiating from him. Softening her voice, she added, “You have to understand, Gil. When I came here, I was alone for the first time in my life, far from all the luxuries and powerful contemporaries with which I’d once mingled. I needed a *friend*, someone to talk to who knew enough of my past life that I felt...”

Abruptly, Gil slammed his hat on his head and stood. Throwing his coat over his arm, he stomped toward the door. “I understand, my lady. Lord Regret is your equal in a way no backwater colonist ever could be.”

Chapter Three

When a man killed for money—and was damned good at his trade—his price eventually went so high that few could afford him. Luckily for Sigmund Regret, there were plenty of millionaires as long as he was willing to traverse the universe. In his one-of-a-kind mega catamaran built to cut through space like a hot knife through butter, he lived a life of luxury purchased by the blood of others.

But no luxury in this galaxy could satisfy the abominable ache of loneliness or erase the scars of his childhood. Nothing could ease that ache...except one Lady Doctor Wyre, who literally held his heart in the palm of her dainty little hand.

The miserable run-down nag he'd leased from the livery stable in this equally miserable hovel of a town snorted and gave one last weak jerk on the reins, trying to go back home to its dank stable. Finally the beast surrendered to its duty with a jerky pace that jarred Sig's teeth. With the Solstice a fortnight away, the hours of darkness seemed eternal, so the few precious hours of thin, cold sunlight would be welcomed by most. Not him. He did his best work at night, and as the sun began to peek over the horizon, he urged the horse to a shambling trot.

In the cold and dark just minutes from her home, it was easy to let fantasies fill his mind. He imagined slipping the silver and ivory-handled pistols into a chest and locking them in a dusty, forgotten place or better yet, throwing them into an Imperial bin. Removing the slim, wicked little blades he hid all over his body one by one and tossing them out into endless space. Waking up to her each morning. Watching her wide smile of pleasure when he surprised her with little gifts like tea and ribbons and the frivolous silk stockings she adored so much.

Sig had many regrets from his sordid past, but he couldn't bring himself to regret leaving her each Solstice. Not when it meant keeping her clean of the blood on his hands or protecting her from the dozens of agents and bounty hunters constantly seeking Lord Regret. God knew she had enough danger of her own. The last thing he needed to do was drag a man into her vicinity who'd sell his own mother to the Ravens for a fraction of the coin Britannia would pay to get the great scientist back.

In the narrow alleys, darkness still cloaked the rutted, snowy path. Shadows might hide some fool thinking he'd be the one to snag Lord Regret, but he didn't deviate from the shortest path toward her. This close, he could feel a frisson of energy zinging through his body to which he was normally oblivious. Fire ants crawled through his veins, driving him closer to his target. Absently, he slipped a hand beneath his

coat, rubbing his breastbone, but he'd never been able to feel her treatment. Just the scar where his heart had been.

He'd never been able to decide if the tiny machines living inside him were responding to their Creator with joy, or simply feeding off his own spike of emotion as he neared her. Energy rose in his blood, as though lightning would begin arcing about him. He was tempted to simply spread his arms out wide and see if he could soar into space, riding the pulsing waves of energy.

She'd not only saved him, she'd managed to increase his very normal human gifts until he felt invincible.

Yet no matter how arrogant he might be, he was not stupid. A lifetime of protecting his own skin drove him to ride past her snug cabin on the edge of town. He hadn't been followed. This time. If anyone ever noticed that he always fell off the grid around the holiday season...and decided to put a few eyes and ears at the most likely locations...the last thing he wanted to do was kill a man in her house.

She'd never forgive him if the blood splattered onto her fine silks.

Shaking his head with an amused smirk twisting his lips, he dismounted in a grove of trees. Snow blanketed their branches and the ground. A great hush hung over the town, an expectant silence in the absence of the prevalent winds, a drawn breath held without release. He listened for any sound out of the ordinary, stretching his ultra-sensitive senses for any sign of pursuit or a hidden trap.

The front door of her cabin slid open and a man stomped out. Tugging on his coat while he muttered beneath his breath, he headed downtown, casting a wary glance about him. Of course he didn't even think to look at the grove of trees on the outskirts of town; he was too worried about gossipers seeing an unwed man leaving a lady's house in the dead of night.

Sigmund did not fail to note the state of the man's dishabille, nor did he miss the silver star on the lapel of the man's rebel coat. A sharp pain in his thumb made him look down at his hand. Dumfounded, he stared at the slender blade in his palm. He didn't remember drawing one of his throwing knives.

He jerked his gaze back up to the back of the retreating man. Such a throw would be child's play for Lord Regret and he certainly had no compunction against killing an unaware target. Lord Regret had no scruples. He had no heart, no mercy, no regret that he couldn't laugh off or at least drink into oblivion.

So why do you wish to murder this stranger without a single coin to show for it? a sly voice whispered, mocking such a supposedly immoral and cold, unfeeling heart.

With a self-deprecating grimace, he slipped the knife back into its leather brace beneath his coat sleeve, tilted his bowler at a jauntier angle, and led his poor mount to the small shed that served as a stable when he arrived. Usually she'd prepared a spot for his horse with fresh hay and feed, for her locket warned her of his nearing vicinity, yet this time, the makeshift stall was bare. Another sign that she hadn't any notion of his impending arrival.

Shrugging, he tossed straw down for the horse while his mind gnawed like a rat trying to escape its cage. He was much earlier than usual, thanks to the engines he'd upgraded just last month, enabling a faster, more direct jump through the galaxy. If anything could lure Lady Wyre to the dark side—touring the universe with him—he'd thought it would be the most expensive and advanced technology, which had been founded on none other than Lady Doctor Wyre's original experiments.

If that doesn't work, he reminded himself wryly, I have a dozen pair of pink silk stockings in the hold.

Sliding from shadow to shadow was second nature, as was slipping inside her back door without knocking. He had to know the truth. Perhaps she'd been forced to remove the locket for some reason. It had to be working, or he'd be gasping on the frozen ground, waiting for the rest of his body to die.

She sat at a plain wooden table sipping from a heavy cup much too big for her delicate hands. Candlelight glowed upon her face, soft yet regal and so damned beautiful she might have been a queen herself despite the plain, standard-issue furnishings which surrounded her. She couldn't live lavishly and expect to avoid the gossipers, even though he knew she had enough coin to buy anything she wanted in York. She could buy the entire colony if she'd tap the funds he'd set aside for her. He knew she would have no qualms about using his blood money; no, it was her pride that objected.

Even stripped of her title and House and position in Society, every fiber of her being screamed *Her Grace*. How she'd been able to keep her secret on Americus this long escaped him entirely, for he could see nothing but the grand Duchess sitting among peasants.

"It's no use," he said in a low, deliberately Britannian drawl. "I see through your disguise."

She stiffened but didn't jump from her chair or whirl to face him. Recognizing his voice did not eliminate the dire threat of his presence. That he'd managed to sneak up on her without any warning had shaken her, even though she tried to hide it by coolly reaching for the kettle. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

As she refilled her cup, he noted that her hand trembled. In a way, it pained him that she could still fear him after all these years, but he had to admit that he appreciated that respectful alertness in her manner. It made them equals far beyond Society's mores. But he couldn't help but long for a welcoming smile or a heart-felt sigh of relief that he'd come at last—instead of narrowed suspicion that he'd simply decided it was past time to kill her.

He sat across from her, the spot the other man had just vacated, and dipped a finger into the still-full cup of lukewarm tea. Slipping his finger into his mouth, he watched her reaction through veiled lashes. "Your guest likes a little tea with his sugar."

Her eyes flared wide and her hand fluttered up to wrap her fingers about the locket—*his* locket, the key to his heart and life. She flinched at the energy she must feel sparking inside that metal heart, yet until she'd touched it, she hadn't noticed his approach. That told him more than any words that she'd already made her choice before he could ask the question. She'd been too distracted by this other man to notice the metallic firestorm brewing on her breast.

She'll never sail space with me.

"You're early, sir." Her words rang in the small room and her nose tipped to a haughty angle. Lady Wyre made no excuses or pretended regrets, which was one of the reasons he admired her so much. That steely pride and determination would help her succeed in any endeavor, whether in surviving a reduced situation on a colony or the Queen's wrath if she were dragged back to Londonium. "Is the device malfunctioning?"

He, too, could play the privileged lord, although that would ill serve his intentions with her, for ladies of Britannia held all the power. Such an act would immediately put him in an inferior position. He chose instead to slip on the role of the gentlemanly assassin, the man who both repelled and attracted her.

With a flick of his wrist, the slender blade hidden in his coat fell down into his palm. He cut a slice of bread from the untouched loaf between them. "Would you like a piece, Charlie?"

Shaking her head, she eyed the blade like a poisonous serpent had uncoiled on her table, but she made no objection to the familiarity of her nickname.

He smirked and kicked back in his chair, nibbling on the coarse bread. Without looking away from her face, he rolled the blade from finger to finger on his left hand as though he didn't have a care in the world. "So what's his name?"

"Who?" The word came out as a croak, so she cleared her throat. Narrowing her gaze, she hardened her voice. "Oh, I presume you saw Sheriff Masters as he left."

Sig deliberately let his gaze roam down her body, noting the filmy lace robe and her obvious nakedness beneath. "Was he as good as me?"

As soon as the words came out of his mouth, he knew he'd made a grave error. One did not push Lady Wyre and think to sway her affection or decision. A push would simply cause her to push back harder or charge in an entirely different direction than which he'd intended.

With a lazy smile to match his, she leaned back in her chair, all her tension and haughtiness traded for indolence. "Actually, he was very good, and I did not have to tie him up first to have my way with him."

Sipping her tea, Charlotte fought to contain the emotions tearing her apart.

Lord Regret might be famed throughout the universe as the deadliest, most successful assassin, but he had a dread secret, one she was positive he'd allowed no one other than herself to know...and live. Why he was so averse to anyone knowing was beyond her. In today's Society, men were expected to have a few foibles. Ladies found those quirks charming. Back in her heyday as the ruling queen of the *ton*, Lady Wyre could have used such a secret to make Sigmund the most-wanted bachelor in Londonium. He would have had ladies swarming him at every fete and ball, begging to be allowed the chance to see if she could "break" him.

His pulse throbbed so hard she could see the fluttering beneath the skin at his temples. Paling, he slipped the knife back into his sleeve. "I did not know my proclivities were so heavy a burden, Your Grace. I shan't trouble you again."

She reached across the table and snagged his hand before he could withdraw completely, squeezing firmly until he met her gaze. "I apologize, Sig. My response was most uncalled for. Please do disregard my unforgivable comment with the excuse that I'm extremely worried and stretched to breaking."

Softly, he asked, "Stretched between me and him?"

Sighing, she relaxed her grip enough to thread her fingers through his. Such long, graceful fingers should belong to an artist, not a killer. "He asked me to marry him tonight."

"You should."

She jerked her gaze back to his face, searching for any sign of duplicity. She'd have fallen out of her chair laughing if Sig had asked her to marry him, but hearing him tell her to marry another man had nearly the same startling effect.

Smiling with that trademark arrogant ease, he lifted his shoulder in a careless shrug. "A sheriff is a respected man with more power on this colony than many of the lords back home."

"And when Queen Majel decides she's had enough of this colony's pitiful little revolution, she'll simply blow us all from the galaxy and complain about the debris inhibiting her view of the heavens."

"She won't destroy Americus."

"Whyever not? The rebellion has sparked discontent from Kali Kata to Zijin, forcing her to simply assimilate entire planets first instead of attempting to colonize as Britannia did in the past. Eventually she'll have to make an example of Americus. One colony blown to bits will silence the others."

"Queen Majel will infect an entire planet with the latest engineered virus and feel only impatience that it takes so terribly long for enough of them to die before they surrender their planet. She cares even less about Americus."

All true, Charlotte knew. So why was he so assured that Americus would be spared? She tapped her finger against the cup while her mind raced through alternatives. Americus had no crucial resources that Britannia wanted, and if they did, it would only quicken the colony's demise. The rebels weren't organized or well-armed; in fact, many of them had ridden horses against the downed Imperial cruiser, waving antique shotguns and pitchforks against armor-plated soldiers with lazors.

They'd still won.

Why?

She slumped in her chair and thumped the cup on the table with a clatter, spilling some of her precious tea. "She knows I'm here."

Sig tipped his head. "She suspects."

“How?” Nerves made her surge to her feet and she began pacing the tiny kitchen feverishly, her wrap swooshing about her legs. “I’ve been so careful! I haven’t touched my stash the entire time I’ve hidden here. Do you know how I’ve ached to bring out my last experiment and improve on the design? I’ve had nothing but time. Wasted time I could have been creating something wonderful instead of cowering here on this hateful colony! Oh, how I’ve been tempted to do something, anything. Improve Gil’s pistol. Create a replicator to restock my tea. Modify the Imperial port to create a shield at least over York. But I’ve done nothing. Nothing! What evidence does she possibly have to suggest I’m still alive?”

“Me.” Charlotte whirled around to face him, her mouth opening to protest, but he pressed on. “She knows I was injured yet I miraculously recovered only to be even stronger and better a shot than ever.”

“She can’t possibly know that I used my technology to save you. Not unless you’ve been in an Imperial facility where they could scan your entire body.”

“Of course she doesn’t have proof, and the legends of my supposed demise and resurrection are greatly exaggerated. But there’s enough truth in the tales for anyone who knows what your technology is capable of to put one and one together and come up with a plausible reason that surely only Lady Doctor Wyre could have fixed me.”

“But there’s nothing to connect you and I together!”

“Unless she questioned every single dockhand that night to find out which ships left Londonium and who might have received a larger tip than usual to let a tiny ship squeak out of the shield behind an Imperial cruiser.”

Chills crept down her arms. Thousands of people worked in that port and she’d paid dozens of bribes all over town to mislead the Ravens. If they’d managed to find the proverbial needle in the haystack...

At the doubt still evident on her face, he said gravely, “I know for a fact that the man I paid to allow us to leave port is dead. He was taken from his home by Imperial guards and never seen again. I compensated his family accordingly but I suspect he told Queen Majel enough that she at least assumes Lord Regret helped her great enemy off Britannia. The bounty hunter who shot us down naturally reported the destruction of my ship in order to receive compensation for my demise. He would have reported the location where he suspected I crashed, and the only known port in this sector is...”

Charlotte’s stomach pitched uneasily. “Americus.”

Chapter Four

One of the things Sig most admired about Lady Wyre was her composure. Her hands trembled only slightly as she tightened her wrap about her, but she didn't panic, wail or scream with fury. In fact, she didn't even pace any longer, choosing instead to stare blindly at the gray walls. Deep in thought, she fingered her—*his*—locket, and it felt as though she had cracked open his ribcage to massage his heart into beating once more.

"If she sends the fleet against Americus, we'll have warning," she mused aloud. "What about a single cruiser? If they hide on the other side of the smallest moon, we won't be able to raise the alarm until it's too late, and there are only so many cities on Americus. They'll find me eventually."

"That's why you should sail with me." She whipped her head around to pin him with her steely gaze, so he proceeded very carefully. "If you're nowhere to be found on Americus, then she'll have to rethink the legend that you're still alive."

"So I live in hiding with you the rest of my life, afraid to show my face while you set course for your next contract, jumping from galaxy to galaxy. All it'll take is one shot of me with you, and Lady Doctor Wyre and her gunslinger will be the first-line transmissions across the universe. At least now the only people who may spot me are the Americus colonists, and so far, they've been oblivious."

He'd known she would have numerous and valid reasons for refusing. Lady Wyre was a woman used to driving her own chariot and setting her own course. She would despise hiding away on his ship while he charted the next jump.

"Besides," she continued, "if I'm not here, then there's no reason to stay Britannia's hand against Americus. They'll be blown from the sky."

A surge of ugliness that he could only call jealousy swelled within him. He turned away so she wouldn't see the unwanted emotion flaring in his eyes and threw back the sickeningly sweet tea to wet his throat that had gone as dry as the desert at the thought of losing her. "So warn your sheriff before we leave. If he has any sense in that thick skull of his, he'll leave Americus anyway. It's a dead-end colony with nothing of value to offer anyone but farmers and sheep."

"I have a better idea," she purred in his ear.

Sig Regret's reflexes were usually lightning quick, but he found himself unable to object as she bound his hands behind him to the wooden slats of the chair. His repaired heart pounded so hard that he knew a moment of fear. Whether she bound him or he resisted, she possessed the power of life and death over him.

Which is exactly why I want her so much.

He tested the binding to see how tightly she'd secured him. Silk slid against his skin, telling him that she'd used the tie off her wrap. His tongue felt thick and clumsy in his mouth and he was already painfully hard. He only indulged in this need once a year. The need to be forced to compliance, taken against his will, although he'd never wanted anything more.

Swallowing to work some moisture back into his mouth, he drawled, "Are you going to fuck me after you just fucked another man?"

Trailing her fingers up his arm, she tapped his shoulder thoughtfully as though he were just a cup, a table for her to drum away while in thought. With a slow, wide smile that made cold sweat trickle down his spine, she swung a thigh over his and sat on his lap, facing him. Her robe hung open, revealing the sweet curves of her body that he was forbidden to touch.

"Yes." She leaned down, deliberately letting the cursed locket hang inches above his chest. In response, his heart tried to crawl out of his ribcage. "I believe I am."

For a man like Sigmund Regret, every experience was about life and death. She alone had the ability to give him life...and take it away...which he found so irresistible that he came back for a taste of death each and every Solstice. They'd taken a holiday that was meant to be about rebirth and hope for spring, and warped it into an act of depraved release.

Once, she might have been horrified that she found pleasure in such a thing. Her conscience might quibble over semantics all it wanted, but in the end, she was torturing—even killing—him while she had intercourse with him. That he found great pleasure in it, too, didn't make it any less unforgivable but a whole lot more pleasurable.

As though she were in no hurry whatsoever, she calmly pulled the tail of his fine lawn shirt out of his trousers. Pushing his shirt up, she stroked her hands up the planes of his abdomen, already damp and hot with his rising need. When her fingers stroked over the scar on his chest, he dropped his head back against the chair and let out a low, deep groan that vibrated his body against hers.

To prevent herself from jerking open his trousers in haste, she forced herself to remember that horrible day when he'd almost died. In the explosion, shrapnel had flown off the hull to lodge in his chest, an ugly jagged piece of metal that had sliced his heart and punctured his lungs. Blood had sprayed from his mouth with each exhale, yet he'd managed to head the ship toward Americus while she'd raced to seal the breach.

Lurching and rolling through the atmosphere of the colony planet, the skiff had barely held together, even with her care. Before she'd ever set her risky escape plan in motion, she'd researched every last detail, including a full schematic of Regret's ship and its technical capabilities. A shield generator spawned by a device she could hold in her hand was the only thing that had kept the ship from disintegrating before they

ever reached the ground, and even then, the crash had broken the tattered force shield, sending her and her wounded pilot tumbling about the cabin.

She planted her palm firmly over the old scar, as she'd done that day to stem the fountain of blood. "I can save you," she whispered, hovering above his mouth so her breath fanned his face, repeating the words from that horrible day. "If you want to live."

"Too many regrets," he gasped, just as he had at the crash site. "Let me die."

She swayed slightly, letting the locket swing between them. The metal burned, casting off enough heat to cause her to hiss out a breath. She knew the agony that awaited him if she touched it to his body. If she recalled her assemblers...

"Do it," he ground out. "Please."

Guilt tightened her throat. She could give him what they both wanted without the full transfer, but he always insisted. If she'd had her laboratory, she could have done a better job of refueling the assemblers that first time, and he wouldn't think it necessary. "They don't truly need to be recharged. The last time I checked, they had evolved enough to draw energy from your body to subsist on your life without any additional energy from me."

"I like knowing that they give my life to you while I'm inside you, and carry part of you back to me." His deep blue eyes pleaded, dark like the midnight sky as the Solstice approached. "Only you can give my life back to me."

Dreading the pain the transfer would bring him—yet relishing his response—she unbuttoned his trousers. His cock sprang free, long and graceful like his fingers, artistry and grace in the sleek curve. She lingered, running her fingers up and down his length, wrapping her palm around him. She knew what he wanted, knew he ached for it, but still she hesitated.

"Please," he panted. "The wait is intolerable."

"I despise hurting you."

He laughed roughly. "No, you don't. You merely hate that you find pleasure in it, as do I. Please, Charlie, I need this. I need you."

Sig was right, and she hated him for it. But she hated herself more. *Maybe I've always had the arrogance to believe I could take and give life as I chose. Why else did I dabble in my experiments, if not to improve on what God had already done?*

Fisting her hand in the sleek golden hair falling about his face, she took him into her body on a hard lunge that drove her breath out on low groan of bliss. She rocked her hips, driving their need higher, but she carefully kept the locket from him. He wrestled against his bonds, the tendons standing out in his neck as he fought to bring her closer, to take the pain and death he craved so very much. The chair creaked ominously but held.

Good, solid workmanship; she couldn't help but be amused.

Beads of sweat dripping down his face, he gazed up at her with death hovering in his eyes. His muscles gathered, his breath growling in his throat. It was time. God help her.

She leaned down and allowed the locket to lie upon his scarred chest. His back bowed and he shuddered so hard she feared even the finely crafted chair would never hold, let alone the fragile silk belt of his bonds. To keep him from alerting every colonist in Queenstown, she planted her mouth over his and inhaled his scream, drinking his cries as she drank his life.

As her creations returned to their origin, the locket seemed to catch fire between them, molten metal searing her breast. Too tiny for her human eyes to see, her assemblers crawled out of his pores and cells. All year long, she wore the locket against her skin, allowing her body heat and life energy to infuse the battery cells within, so that if he ever needed a jolt, all he had to do was reach her. She'd also programmed her assemblers to emit alarms if his life energy ever ran too low, so even if he were too injured or weakened, she'd always be able to find him.

While she would mourn his death, she had an ulterior motive for such a detail—the tiny nanobots could never be allowed to fall into enemy hands.

He ripped his hands free, seized her hips, and slammed her down, holding her tight against him while he ground his pelvis against hers. Shuddering, she came, giving him her cries through their joined mouths, riding him until he slumped beneath her.

Gasping for breath, she pressed her fingers against his neck. Rapid but stuttering, his pulse began to slip away because his heart was too damaged to beat on its own. Only her assemblers were able to piece together the damaged organ and force it to beat. His face was ashen, his skin cold and clammy.

Worried, she flicked open the locket and examined the readings on the small display. So many. They'd managed to self-replicate as well as self-energize. Elated, but terrified of what she'd wrought at the same time, she tapped out a quick command to download the readings to her personal datapad and then keyed the nanobots to return to their host, freshly energized and carrying her commands.

She pressed the metal to his heart. With shaking fingers, she brushed his sweat-darkened hair off his forehead, nibbling on her lip while she waited. His breath rasped loud and uneven in the silence, the painful wheeze of someone dying, their cells starved of oxygen. "Why do you insist on coming so close to death?"

He made no answer, couldn't, because he'd slipped into a temporary coma. She knew it was his body's way of protecting itself from the invaders creeping into his bloodstream, but it still made her worry. What if he failed to awaken? What if her nanobots someday refused to return to their host? They weren't sentient creatures, but they were evolving at a frightening rate.

They've likely invaded more of his body than his heart.

Her mind buzzed with possibilities. Had her research made him harder to kill? Given him faster reflexes? Sharpened his human senses? If she left Americus with him, she could study his responses at will.

And leave Gil behind to die in Queen Majel's wrath.

Irritated at the tears leaking from her eyes, she dashed the dampness from her cheeks. Once she'd been trapped in Londonium, the honored yet imprisoned Queen's Physician. She'd had no hope of rescue, even if her House had thought to defend her. She'd learned long ago that the only person she could ever count on was herself, and her mind was more than fearsome enough to plot its way out of anything.

Including the Tower of Londonium, a crashed ship, banishment on a poor colony, and years of isolation for fear of being found by the Queen's Ravens. She would find a way off Americus without detection and without jeopardizing the few very precious friends she'd made.

Surely she could plot her way out of a love triangle without one of her men ending up dead.

"Charlie." Sig moaned softly, his breathing returning to ease. "I need to go. Not safe for you."

His words made her heart throb in sympathy with his. So that's why he always left her in a hurry; he feared another bounty hunter would track him down and thus find her.

She hugged his head to her breast and he draped his arms around her, too weak to return her squeeze. "Come lie down for awhile. I want to hold you."

She helped him stumble the short distance to her bedroom. He was too weak to even protest the mussed bed where she'd made love to Gil. Cradling Sig in her arms with his head over her heart, she stared up at the cold metal of her tiny cabin. She'd run out of silk before she could cover the ceiling. Besides, she needed a reminder now and then of where she was, and the danger that awaited her.

Here through the long, impossible winter months, she'd often laid awake through the darkest hours while winds howled about her cabin until they both shuddered with terror. She'd allowed a very dangerous fantasy play out in her mind.

Britannia's global shields were the finest in the universe and always locked down tight. It would be no easy feat to breach the mighty shield. Lord Regret had managed to flit in and out of Londonium port before Charlotte's planned death event, but since, he'd never dared attempt re-entry.

Even if one managed to slip inside the shield, Londonium now possessed an even tighter second shield, keyed, she suspected, to automatically scan DNA upon entry of every living creature. Once inside that shield, Raven Guards numbered in the thousands, and Queen Majel was rarely sighted outside Winsor, the most technologically advanced castle in the galaxy.

Sig breathed deeply and rhythmically, surely asleep so his body could recover the trauma of their annual exchange. So she dared whisper a question she didn't really expect him to answer. "If I asked you to kill Queen Majel..."

"Yes." His whisper was almost too low to hear, but she felt the word vibrate against her chest. "For you, I'd find a way."

Chapter Five

One of the benefits of being a famous and well-paid assassin was definitely the toys...er...*equipment*. Back at his ship, Sig settled into a much smaller yet luxuriously appointed skiff to make a quick trip to York. Of course, one of the negatives of said fame meant he had to disguise himself to avoid bounty hunters and fans alike.

He needed information to confirm his hypotheses. Did Queen Majel truly suspect—or worse, know—that Lady Wyre hid on Americus? Despite the revolution, bustling York was more than big enough to house Royalists still loyal to the Queen, and as such, might be providing information to her. That river could flow both ways if enough pressure was applied, and he was an expert at finding points of weakness and pain.

Of course he might have been able to find such an informant in Queenstown, but that might have taken him longer to find a Royalist with high enough clearance. He was not merely flying to York to avoid the sheriff.

Sig grimaced at himself in the mirror one last time and called himself a fool. *Not at all*.

The easiest solution, of course, would be to simply kill the competition. But then Charlie would probably never forgive him. On principle, she certainly wouldn't then jump onto his catamaran and sail away with him to live happily ever after as he killed his way through the universe. So, cowardly avoidance it was, because he couldn't afford to lose his temper and drop the bloody bastard with a bullet or blade to the groin.

Although he'd hidden his trademark golden hair, he dressed the part of Lord Regret, which meant nothing but the finest attire in the galaxy. No Royalist would ever stoop to confide in a man not dressed like a gentleman. Of course he needed to speak to the ladies, not the menfolk on this colony, for Queen Majel would have picked her top spies very carefully indeed. The colonists might have relaxed the rigid rules of Society Britannia had placed upon her citizens, but the aristocracy would never forget, and it was exactly a blooded House that he needed in order to get close to the Queen.

He especially needed a lady so desperate to return to Her Majesty's good graces that she'd sell her own soul.

In the late hours of the morning, well-bred ladies could be counted upon to be browsing at the finest shops. As though he owned the entire district, Lord Regret flew directly to the East End where he paid a boy to wipe down his skiff and keep vandals and thieves at bay while he strolled the streets.

Within thirty minutes he was too disgusted to keep the curl of distaste from his lip. For a colony so determined to break free of Britannia's tyranny, they had certainly casted themselves wholeheartedly into the role of the hated aristocracy. Not that Sig had anything directly against the blueblood of Britannia; how could he when his own parents had both been of powerful Houses? Even Lady Wyre carried herself with the same lofty pride and haughty airs that should have repelled him, but with her, he knew she possessed a lightning quick mind beneath the flimsy layers of artifice. She didn't expect people to fall down and kiss her feet simply because she was the Duchess of Wyre.

No, Sig would kiss her feet for entirely different reasons, as he slipped her favorite stockings up her calves.

These York ladies were nothing but artifice and sneering gaiety, exactly like his exalted lady mother. Granted, she'd been a crazy bitch, but that same manic, desperate light burned in these women's eyes. Any sign of weakness from one of them would have the others descending upon the hapless one with vicious single-minded joy.

Chest tight, he ducked into a side alley and leaned back against the brick wall, heedless of the stains that might streak his greatcoat. His heart was fine, he knew; no, this was an old and most despised panic. The helpless fear of a child.

So many times, he'd looked upon his mother and burned to do something, anything, to stop her. He'd thrown himself in front of her path to keep others safe, but then she'd simply beaten him, too and worsened her rage upon the one he'd tried to protect, usually his father. Raised to honor and respect any lady, he knew no recourse. No one cared if she beat his father. What happened behind their fine townhouse's closed door made no difference to her social standing. As long as his mother upheld her social duties outside the home, he and his father had no protection from her rages.

Absently, he rubbed his knuckles against his breastbone, trying to ease the muscle spasms which made it difficult to breathe. *I am not a helpless child any longer. I am more than capable and willing to kill anyone who threatens those I love, and this time, no one shall die to protect me. No one.*

Except perhaps him. Sig watched a familiar tall figure with dark hair and shabby coat fit for the stable step out of a shop with a deep flush on his angular cheekbones. He whirled and strode down the street as though he were extremely late. *What the bloody hell is her sheriff doing here?*

Curious, Sig followed him, keeping to the shadowed storefronts and alleys as much as possible. Masters kept up the rapid pace, making it easy to trail him to the docks. Sleek cruisers from Francia fast enough to slip past the blockade chugged in and out of port, which must gall Queen Majel to no end. Every crate that came directly to Americus was coinage stolen straight from her pocket.

Again, Sig had to wonder why she stayed her hand against the rebellious colony, and came back to the only conclusion possible. She had to have solid evidence that Charlie hid on Americus, and so couldn't risk damaging her in any way.

Not until she's dragged back to Londonium.

When the sheriff continued to a less reputable section of the wharf, Sig's internal alarms blared louder. Now pausing to look behind him warily, Masters spoke to a man even more ill-clad, their eyes furtive, voices low, but not too low for Lord Regret's enhanced senses to catch the gist of their conversation.

Time to approach Lady Wyre.

Cold burned in Sig's veins at the sound of her name. No one on Americus knew Charlotte was the Duchess of Wyre. She'd deliberately chosen a new surname that had no ties to any of the Great Houses of Britannia.

Traitor.

The man she loved, who would prevent her from sailing to safety and a life of ease with Lord Regret, had betrayed her.

The first knife sank into the scruffy man's throat. Blood bloomed and Masters crouched, his hand sliding to his gun. "Don't do it, Regret."

"Why shouldn't I?" Sig sauntered closer twirling the slim knife between his fingers, but since the sheriff didn't draw his gun, he didn't throw his blade. "She'll ask me to do it once she hears how you've been selling her out all this time."

"It's not what you think."

Nodding, Sig smiled wider. Should he use the knife so he could take a trophy to her? Or would she rather not see the evidence of his work? "So who are you working for if not Queen Majel? The Military Intelligence and Galaxy Sciences?"

He'd heard rumors that the powerful sciences division had been using their royal clearance to pursue their own designs, not precisely Her Majesty's wishes. Queen Majel couldn't crush them, not if she wanted their latest and greatest technologies, so she was increasingly trapped by the privilege she'd bestowed upon them.

He watched Masters's face for any flicker but saw nothing that would betray his association with MIGS. "So it's the rebels, then." Ah, there was the faint tightness about the man's eyes and slight flattening of his mouth. "Here's your mistake, Sheriff. Rebels don't have enough money to buy someone like me."

The other man's nostrils flared, his upper lip pulling back in a snarl. "You mean a murdering scavenger who'll kill anything and anyone for money? You have no idea what we're trying to do. With *her* help..."

"You're not fit to wipe her boots," Sig drawled with disgust. "You can't protect her from anyone, least of all Queen Majel, without massive amounts of money, weapons and extremely powerful friends. You stupid colonists think you can blow up one port, disable one Imperial cruiser and throw its cargo into space as your great rebellion, and Queen Majel will simply flinch back in terror? You know nothing!"

“I know she’s in danger!” Masters retorted. “This man was supposed to tell me when...”

“To take her?” Sig slammed the blade up into his sleeve. Anger pounded in his veins, demanding that he slake his rage with fists and boots, pummeling this adversary into a pulp. The knife was too easy and quick a death for this bastard, even if he had the time to skin him alive. “Don’t you know your rebels will sell her to the highest bidder?”

Taking note of his aggressive stance and lack of weapon, Masters stood and moved away from the body, raising his fists up. He jabbed toward Sig’s jaw, which he easily ducked. “That’s why I needed to question him, but it’s too late now, since you killed my informant!”

Sig released a volley of punches, calling upon his enhanced strength to pound the sheriff over and over, driving him back until he stumbled over his downed confederate. Scrambling back, Masters managed to land a kick to Sig’s solar plexus, giving him a jolt to his damaged heart. Wheezing, he tackled the man and they rolled, slamming fists, arms windmilling.

When he landed the occasional blow, the sheriff’s fist almost made Sig wonder if she’d managed to enhance him too. Surely not. She’d said she hadn’t tampered with her experiments at all on Americus. But damn, the man had an iron fist. Even with the tiny machines crawling through his body, he knew he was going to have a hard time seeing out of his left eye.

Killing Masters would be too easy; beating the crap out of him might take some doing. Then I’ll kill him.

What Sig had in agility, Masters had in sheer force. Heavier and taller, he managed to pin Sig by sitting on his chest. One big fist wrapped in his hair, the other hovered above his face. “Will she love you so much when I smash your pretty face?”

Slipping a blade into his palm, Sig was startled enough to pause and search the other man’s face. Grim lines framed the man’s mouth, his brow furrowed, and his eyes glittered with malice, the same as Sig’s. But he also thought he saw the same jealousy and grief in the other man’s eyes that had been gnawing his own heart to ribbons. Against his will, he found himself in the other man’s boots.

Masters had proposed to her...and been rejected. If he truly cared for her and hadn’t merely been trying to gain her confidence only to betray her...

A shrill whistle sounded just feet away. Masters scrambled to his feet, only then noticing the silver blade in Sig’s hand before he could palm the knife. Shaking his head, the sheriff turned to face the newcomers.

Uniformed guards surrounded them. At least four, Sig noted, with reinforcements likely.

The one with the most stripes on his shoulders barked, “What’s the problem here?”

Sig weighed his options. He could still kill his way out of this, easily, but it would cause an unpleasant scene and draw too much notice. Lord Regret couldn’t be on Americus right now. He couldn’t be fingerprinted, scanned or logged. He couldn’t even exist. Not here and not now.

Smoothing his torn coat that looked even more like a rag, Masters drew himself to his full height, easily topping the others. "I'm Sheriff Masters from over at Queenstown. This footpad attacked me."

The guard looked down at Sig—who hadn't bothered to get up until he'd decided which one to kill first—and frowned. Sig knew what he saw—a dandy, or at least a gentleman much more finely dressed than the sheriff.

Playing along, he ran trembling hands over his chest and put a quiver in his voice. "Am I wounded? Thank God you came along, sir!"

Masters's jaws worked like he was chewing on rocks. "Not him. *Him*." He squatted down beside the dead man's body and studied him as though he'd never seen him before. "I saw this thief trailing the...gentleman—"He swallowed hard; that word must have pained him. Sig almost laughed out loud, "—and immediately moved to intercept. The poor man thought I was an accomplice and fought me too, but I was merely trying to help him." Giving Sig a hard glare, he added, "He'd probably be dead now if it wasn't for me."

Their explanation didn't diffuse the guards' scrutiny. If anything, they tightened their hands on their weapons. Sig cursed his lack of information on the colonies themselves. He'd assumed that the Royalists were in the minority, but based on the way these soldiers were eyeing a supposedly respectable lawman from a neighboring town—with admittedly rebellious contacts—then perhaps the little independence party was not so welcome after all.

Muscles burning with the need to fight, kill and run, Sig fought to keep his manner casual as he climbed to his feet. *Play the part*, he reminded himself. "I say, old chap, thank you so much for your help. If I hadn't gotten turned around in this mousetrap of a wharf, I never would have fallen into such malicious company. It's bloody inconvenient to have these thieves skulking around every dark corner. If I don't find my mistress's shipment and fetch it back to her rooms at the Westchester, she'll leave me here when she manages to find passage back to Britannia. Please, kind sirs, can you help me?"

He even managed an award-winning sniff of distress, which almost turned to choked laughter at the distaste on Masters's face. Sig's ploy was working, though, because the lead guard's attitude was shifting toward deferment and respect toward him. "She a grand one, your mistress?"

"Only when she's here," Sig whispered in a low voice, casting his gaze around as though he feared she might overhear him even here. "Back home..." He let his voice fall off and shrugged his shoulders. The higher the title, the more importance the family garnered, and everyone naturally fought and scrapped to win the lowest of low titles, for even a Baroness was better than nothing at all. In Britannia, a Baroness was little more than a merchant, but on Americus, she could act as grand as the queen. "Are you going to arrest me for the crime of getting robbed?"

The guard blinked and glanced back at Masters. "You said you were from Queenstown. What are you doing in York?"

He turned beet red and shot a dark, ugly glare at Sig, who had to fight back his amusement. Didn't the dolt understand he was trying to get them both out of this scrape?

Muttering, Masters pulled a packet out from beneath his coat. The guards bristled, guns snapping to the ready. With a breathy gasp, Sig backed away, maneuvering for position. He shook his left arm, dropping another blade into his palm, mentally choreographing the kills. *The first two guards, here, quick and silent slice to the spine. They'll drop like sacks of potatoes. Kick the man behind me, whirl and spear his jugular. Throw—*

The guards were laughing, slapping each other on the back. "Go on with you, then. We've got work to do."

Sig looked at the opened brown paper package in the other man's hands and staggered slightly, as though the colony planet had been knocked off its axis by a mighty Britannian missile. He'd planned to slit Masters's throat and leave him stashed behind a few crates, while he raced to Queenstown and got Charlie off planet. But that packet changed everything.

Pink silk stockings glistened like soft pearls on the sheriff's meaty palm.

"Bloody hell."

"We'll take over from here," a new man spoke directly behind Sig. Metal prodded him in the back and he suppressed a curse. Too slender to be one of the antique weapons the rebels had used; this weapon was a Britannia-made lazor. With a switch of a button, a tight, focused shield would line the short prod, forming an edge sharp enough to cut him in half before he could even turn around.

More men flowed past him on either side, carefully surrounding the sheriff, too, as the guards ducked their heads and retreated faster than they'd appeared. No wonder—even Sig recognized their plain but elegant black suits. Silently cursing in three different languages, he called himself the fool twice over, because Masters wasn't worried at all. He even went over and shook the marshal's hand.

Because he's a marshal too. He must have been working undercover for them all along.

"I'm glad you came along, Agent Smith," Masters said. "I didn't want any trouble with the York police."

"You won't be glad for long, Masters," Smith replied, shaking his head. "I'm afraid you're under arrest."

Sig had to applaud the man's composure. He drew himself up but didn't look surprised that men he obviously worked with had now decided to arrest him. "What's the charge?"

The man behind Sig jabbed him into walking with the butt of his lazor. "You're charged with aiding and abetting the dangerous personage known on Britannia as Lady Doctor Wyre."

Keep them talking, Sig silently urged the man beside him. I need to know how much they know about her.

As if he heard the request, Masters said, “Surely there’s been some mistake. I was assigned to her case by the director to gather information and win her confidence. We need her assistance for Americus’s defenses. Has that changed?”

“None of yours or my business, Masters.”

Someone shoved Sig up against the wall while another put handcuffs on him, cold, antique metal and not the newer living organism restraints. He couldn’t help but smile. Good.

“Circumstances have changed. I’m sorry, but I have my orders.”

The man did seem to be sincere, which Masters was smart enough to play upon. “I had orders too, Smith. What’s going on? If the director has a problem with me…”

Smith jerked his head and the other agents backed off slightly. Masters moved closer, obligingly angling his body so that the watching men couldn’t see Sig. For once, he was grateful the sheriff dwarfed him. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the cold metal caging his wrists.

The mechanical creatures Lady Wyre had used to save his life could do other things. He’d learned accidentally through trial and error since he couldn’t communicate with them directly, not with language, but they’d worked out a sort of tacit cooperation over the years.

His little saviors especially loved to devour metal.

He thought about that metal, cold bands dark with age and rusted corrosion. How those microscopic bits of metal must be barely held together by tiny, fragile strands too small for his human eyes to see, but extremely easy for his small friends to dissolve.

“The director had a visitor today,” Smith whispered, keeping his face angled between his men and their prisoners. “Orders changed afterward. You’re out of time, Masters. This whole jaunt to York was deliberate.”

“To get me out of Queenstown. Son of a bitch.” Masters slammed his fist into a crate and splintered wood exploded. “They’re going to tell her I’m working for them—”

“Which is true,” Sig added helpfully, earning a scowl.

“And she’ll cooperate with them. Damn it all to hell, they’re going to take her into custody, aren’t they? Who?” He grabbed a handful of Smith’s black coat and jerked him up on his toes. “Who changed the orders?”

“It’s for her own good, Masters.” Smith waved a hand at his men to keep them at bay. “She’ll have our protection against Britannia.”

“Bullshit,” Sig said in his most pleasant voice. “Do you honestly think your troops armed with six-barrel pistols, scythes and sheep shears are going to be able to stand against the might of Britannia? How many lazors do you have altogether? Maybe one hundred? I bet you don’t know that all it takes is a single signal from a cruiser in orbit around your planet to totally disable every weapon in your arsenal. They’ll be as useful as a fire poker.”

“Who changed the order?” Masters roared, giving the man a shake.

This time, Smith slammed Masters back into the wall and slapped handcuffs on his wrists, but he leaned close enough to whisper, “President Jaxson. Give it up, man. I’ll do my best to protect her for you.”

Masters met Sig’s gaze and he was reminded of a massive tiger he’d once seen in Kali Kata. Eyes burning with hatred, the sheriff was going to tear people apart with his bare hands once he had the chance.

Sig pushed away from the wall and shook his hair back out of his eyes. Walking with a delicate, mincing step, he followed the guards demurely, thus saving himself from the marshals’ attention. The last thing he wanted was a hard shove to send him sprawling. They might notice that the bands on his wrists were thinning and misshapen.

Yes, my friends, feast on the tasty metal. Lord Regret has work to do.

Chapter Six

Charlotte rubbed her eyes and stood to stretch, arching her back and rolling her shoulders. She had most definitely missed her research, but a few hours hunched over her ancient datapad had taken a toll on her, despite all the muscles she'd gained fighting to survive on this colony.

The first thing I'm obtaining in York is a brand-new datapad.

After refusing the temptation of her work all these years, it was pure bliss to pore over the vast figures she'd downloaded in Sig's energy exchange last night. If Queen Majel truly suspected she hid on Americus, then, she reasoned, there was absolutely no reason to hide her research any longer. In fact, her research might prove to be the only possible way she could preserve her freedom. To that end, she had to understand what she'd accomplished with Sig, so she could build upon it.

If her suppositions were correct, her assemblers had become entirely self-sufficient. They would work indefinitely in their host's body, perfecting its performance and shielding him from harm to the best of their programming, while finding new and exciting ways to fuel themselves without any noticeable side effects.

Had Queen Majel's treatment evolved similarly? If so, she could be nigh impossible to assassinate, even if Charlotte sent her own unstoppable assassin.

Even more curious, her nanobots had managed to replicate themselves, and some of them had remained in the locket instead of returning to their host. She needed time to confirm her suspicions, but she was sure they weren't her original assemblers, because their programming had immediately sent them back to their job.

So what job do these little ones believe themselves to possess?

A buzz at her door shot her heart rate to the moon. She'd programmed the door for Gil, and Sig would have just waltzed right in as though he owned the place. She didn't have any other friends in town.

Scooping up her datapad and journal, she locked them in the tea chest and pushed it back beneath her bed. The locket and several tubes remained on her table, but she didn't have enough time to hide them. Instead, she dumped several cosmetics to disguise the items.

She checked her reflection in the mirror. Her drab wool made her frown, despite the creases to her forehead, and her hair was loose, tumbled about her shoulders because she hadn't bothered to even brush it out this morning in her excitement to get to work. She couldn't pull off sleepy doe-eyed innocence, so she settled for sultry and tugged the bodice of her gown lower. Lifting her chin, she marched over to answer the door, every inch a Duchess despite the lack of good help to handle such trivial household duties.

“Hello?”

Without her approval, the door whooshed open, confirming her fear that this was no social visit. A team of black-suited men stood on her porch wearing long, sweeping dusters and black toppers. “Forgive the intrusion, ma’am, but—”

“Indeed, I shan’t,” she broke in, taking another step forward to block her door. “This might be Americus, free and independent colony of Britannia, but a lady still has her rights. Who are you and what do you want?”

“My name is Gatlin, and this is my associate, Colt.” The man who’d first spoken inclined his head. “Forgive my impertinence, Your Grace.”

Her stomach churned like she’d swallowed an entire pot of bitter coffee. That suddenly, all her plans and contingencies crashed, leaving a glowing tail of debris like a comet. Seven years of hiding had been destroyed in a heartbeat.

I refuse to run again.

She took a deep breath and forced her voice to the calm, deliberate accent of one of the highest ladies of Britannia. “On whose behalf do you call upon me, Mr. Gatlin?”

“President Jaxson of Americus. We’re marshals, Your Grace, sworn to uphold the laws of Americus and protect our citizens from harm.”

“And you believe me to intend harm to your colonists?” She let out a trilling laugh and waved her hand dismissively. “I’ve had seven years to harm, sir. I assure you that harm is the last thing on my itinerary.”

The other man stepped forward. “You misunderstand our purpose, Your Grace. President Jaxson extends the warmest of invitations for the Solstice celebration in the Capital.”

If they want to lure me with a party, then let me prepare for a full celebration. Charlotte let a warm smile brighten her face and she clapped her hands with delight. “Oh, excellent! I haven’t enjoyed a decent soiree in ages. Do come in, gentlemen, while I pack for the trip.”

The marshals exchanged glances and conferred briefly to decide which of their party should come inside with her, while the rest, she presumed, encircled her cabin to make sure she didn’t attempt escape. As though she’d managed to turn her entire brain into an army of lightning quick assemblers, her mind blazed from plan to plan, thought to thought. Someone had figured out who she was. It didn’t take a nanobot to figure out who that might have been.

Worry made her drum her fingers on her crossed arms. Gil might have secrets he hadn’t shared yet, but she knew that man’s heart. He would be devastated that his confidence had been compromised. Had these men injured or arrested him? Tortured him for information? Or simply misled him in some way? Perhaps some interrogation of her own was in order. If nothing else, an aggressive stance would keep them off balance.

“Forgive my lack of hospitality, gentlemen. After your little demonstration at the Bostonia port, you know how pricy tea has become.” She watched their faces for any flicker that might betray them as they glanced about her sparse living quarters. She knew they must be second-guessing their supposition, for no aristocrat of a royal House would surely live in such conditions willingly for seven years. “Will Mr. Masters be a part of my escort?”

Mr. Gatlin’s eyes widened and his rose-bud mouth fell open into an O.

Mr. Colt was slightly more in control of his emotions, but he slipped his right hand beneath his coat. She detected none of the usual bulge of the antique six-barrel pistol, so she had to assume it was a slim stick of the lazor. “Pardon me, Your Grace?”

“Mr. Masters,” she said slowly and loudly as though the man had gone deaf or lost his wits. “The sheriff of this provincial town and obviously a marshal in his own right.”

“How...” Mr. Colt swallowed. “There’s no way you could know that Masters is...was...a Marshal.”

She arched a brow at the man, peering down her nose at him despite their height difference. “An imbecile would have figured it out, sir, considering my only contact this past year has been Masters. If you’d known where I was last Solstice then I’m sure President Jaxson would have extended her polite invitation then. Masters is not the sort of man to sell information to the highest bidder; he’s too honorable for that. So he must have trusted you in some way to give you any information at all, which implies he must also be a marshal. Now please follow me, sirs. I have need of your assistance.”

She swept into her bedroom as though she wore the finest ballgown and jewels to dazzle the highest Court in the universe. From the dusty depths of the wardrobe, she dragged out a hefty traveling trunk, threw open the lid like a child opening her Solstice gifts, and began rifling through the last few gowns she’d been unable to bring herself to destroy, not even to make her bedroom more habitable.

“We don’t have much time...” Mr. Colt began.

She waved him off. “Nonsense. There’s always time to look one’s best and I simply cannot be introduced to the equivalent of the Americus queen if I’m not properly clothed. Mr. Gatlin, could you please fetch that hatbox on top of the wardrobe? I’m afraid I can’t reach it without a chair. And, Mr. Colt, if you would be so kind as to drag out my tea chest from beneath my bed. I daren’t leave it behind for someone to throw out into deepest space in order to make a political statement.”

From the depths of the trunk, she dragged out a deep red gown that made her fingers twitch with excitement and her stomach clench with remembered foreboding. *This is the gown I wore when I died to Britannia.* “Excuse me, gentlemen, while I change into something more presentable for Madame President.”

She stepped behind the screen and hummed beneath her breath as she stripped off the ugly gown. She deliberately tossed it over the top as evidence of her nudity. Peeking through a small hole, she verified her tactic of distraction had been effective. Scattered and off balance by her commands, they whispered among

themselves couldn't even bring themselves to glance at the screen. Satisfied, she slipped the scarlet silk over her head and realized she had a problem. This gown had been crafted by the finest modeste in Londonium at the height of her social status. As such, it had a much tighter, slimmer silhouette than she was used to wearing on Americus.

She tugged the gown back off. Her feminine finery had certainly made an impression on Gil, and she'd use whatever weapon at her disposal to make sure she came out of this alive. Fluffing her bosom and shaking her head so her hair hung disheveled and tumbled about her, she stepped out from behind the screen.

Mr. Gatlin snapped to attention like Madame President had just bellowed an order at him. Mr. Colt had been snooping through some papers on her desk. Blushing at her notice, he turned an alarming shade of puce when he noticed her dishabille.

She marched toward him and presented her bodice like a prize. "Do make yourself useful, Mr. Colt, and tighten my corset for me."

He made a choked sound as though he'd swallowed his own tongue. "Ma'am, I mean, Your Grace, I can't possibly..."

"If you do not tighten my corset for me," she said in a cold, measured voice, "then I cannot wear my best gown. And if I cannot wear my best gown, I shan't go with you at all." She gave him a tight, glittering smile. "I would regret your dismissal from the service at Madame President's disapproval because of your failure to bring me to her soiree simply because you were too modest to assist a lady's toilette."

"For heaven's sake, man, it's not that difficult." Mr. Gatlin surprised her by stepping over and grabbing the laces at her waist, although his hands were trembling. He tugged firmly, while Charlotte used her hands to shape her waist and bosom to her satisfaction. "There. Will that satisfy, Your Grace?"

She slipped the red silk gown back over her head, slimming and smoothing the dress over her hips. "Not bad, sir. Do you have a lady wife whom you assist at home?"

Mr. Gatlin blushed and gave her a small bow. "A sister, Your Grace. She had a modest season in York and would sacrifice her first-born child to go to Londonium and be presented to the Queen."

"Indeed, that might be required nowadays," she muttered beneath her breath. She took note of Mr. Colt swaying slightly and sharpened her voice. "Breathe, Marshal, before you pass out in my house and your associates are forced to drag you out by your boots."

Chapter Seven

Prowling his cell like a cage, Masters was practically frothing at the mouth.

Seated on the floor as though he were a pasha, Sig chuckled. "I suppose you haven't had many opportunities to survey this side of a cell, have you, Sheriff?"

Masters gave each bar an experimental shake to see if he could bust out. "Where are they transporting us?"

"The jail in York wasn't secure enough for desperate criminals like us." Sig laughed at the disgruntled look on the man's face. "Why, you've fallen into the company of a hardened criminal. Your reputation will never be the same."

"You're the famed assassin, so why the hell don't you kill your way out of here?"

"I will." Sig dropped his head back against the metal hull. It hummed against his skull, but he could tell neither how fast they traveled nor the direction, but he suspected they were flying in the opposite direction they were taking Charlie. The buzzing joy he felt in his body decreased with every passing moment, confirming that fear. "When it's time." At the other man's frustrated curse, he continued, "We have no idea how many marshals they assigned to us. There's no need to go on a killing spree until I know whether I must eliminate five or five hundred. The technique is different."

Masters turned his head and pinned Sig in a hard glare. "Are you telling me you'd kill five hundred men? At once?"

"If I had to get through them to her, most definitely. I'd rip them apart one by one with my bare hands."

The sheriff grunted and threw himself down against Sig with a disgusted sigh. "Truth be told, I would too."

"And that is why we have a problem." Sig closed his eyes. "I told her she ought to marry you."

The man beside him twitched with surprise. "I thought you came to take her off Americus."

"I did." He twisted his mouth into something he hoped was wry self-depreciation and not misery. "She won't go."

"Did you ask her?"

"Not in so many words. I didn't have to."

"I'm not one to beat around the bush, so I'm just going to come right out and ask you. What's between you two? Don't tell me that she saved your life, or that you saved her life by getting her out of Londonium. I already know that."

"She knows my deepest secret shame," Sig whispered. With his eyes closed, he saw the ugliness that had twisted his mother's beautiful face. Hatred, rage, he wasn't sure that it was a singular emotion but rather an animalistic need to maim and hurt and destroy. "A mark once managed to ask me a question before I completed the deed, and since I was feeling magnanimous, I answered. She asked why I'd chosen the name Regret, when I obviously had no regrets about killing another person."

"And?" Masters asked in a low voice. "Why Regret? Why not Blackmore or Devilshire or some other atrociously evil name?"

"Have you ever had someone else die for you, Sheriff? Truly die for you, save you with their own life, while you escape unscathed? Only later, years later, do you realize that they didn't really save you at all. That you died on that day, at least a little, and that you'll never be whole again."

"People die in war all the time. Even as a marshal, I lost my partner two years ago, and they assigned me to Smith. I just never had that same connection with him. My fault, I suppose, because I kept expecting him to die on me too."

"I wasn't in war, Sheriff. In fact, I was just a boy."

"Who was hurting you?"

The vibration stopped. Opening his eyes, Sig jerked his hands apart, and the brittle, thinned handcuffs crumbled into dust. If only his crippled heart would simply dissolve the same way and put him out of this misery. "We've arrived. Be ready."

"I'm not even going to ask how the hell you did that, if you'll tell me why you chose the name Regret."

"Distract them as much as possible while I pretend to be the dandy again, and for God's sake, find out what hellhole they've brought us too. I smell swamp, so I'm betting on Orleans."

Masters grumbled but made no more questions as footsteps echoed in the hold. Keeping his hands together and close to his body, Sig drew up his knees and shook his hair forward to conceal his eyes. Masters jumped up and barked at the two guards. "Where are we? I'm an Americus Federal Marshal and you have no right to hold me! I demand to speak to the director immediately."

Grim and scowling, the big sheriff made a formidable opponent, even handcuffed and behind bars, but the two guards didn't act intimidated at all. Eyes narrowed, Sig watched them carefully, trying to tell what fueled their confidence.

"Your director is the one who signed your warrant, fool." The guard's key jingled against the bars. With a loud click, the ancient lock fell open and the door swung inside. Stepping back obligingly, Masters lowered his head, preparing to charge the guards. With a smug smile of amusement, the second guard

aimed a short wand no longer than his hand at the big man. A pulse of energy slammed into Masters and slung him back against the hull.

Wincing in sympathy at the helpless twitching of the man's muscles, Sig flopped to his feet and babbled out entreaties for mercy in his shrillest voice. One guard took a stance over him with a similar stick in his hand, but his attention was wholly on Masters. "What has the poor man done to warrant a jolt from a tazor?"

"According to the warrant, he's a traitor," the guard closest to Masters replied. "He's been working with rebels against our new government."

"Not...exactly...true," Masters wheezed. "Against Britannia. Rebels across the galaxy have to unite if we want to survive."

Now that's an idea. Sig had assumed Masters was just a marshal sent to spy on a contact, who'd then made the mistake of falling in love with her. But if the man really was a rebel—with plans of a galaxy-wide attack against Britannia—then he might actually have some hope of keeping Charlie alive. Staying on Americus indefinitely was impossible if they hoped to keep her alive and free.

Of course Americus wouldn't like that idea at all. They'd want all of Lady Doctor Wyre's dangerous research all to themselves.

"Why did you have to bring us to Orleans?" Sig asked in his most plaintive voice. Then he released an explosive sneeze. "I'm allergic to mold."

The guard gaped at him. "I guess they wanted the worst prison on Americus for you two. You'll be headed upriver within the hour."

"Assuming that damnable pirate leaves us alone," the other guard muttered. "Too bad Britannia can't aim for Laffite's arse and save us all the trouble of hanging her."

Masters managed to laugh even though his arms and legs were still twitching helplessly. "You'd have to catch Laffite first. She doesn't take too kindly to Britannia or Americus alike."

"Pirates." The guard spat on the floor. "They're even worse than rebels like you."

Sig reached out, snapped the nearest guard's neck, and jerked his hands back behind him as though he were still handcuffed. The guard toppled like a rag doll.

"What the..." The other guard turned, lifting the tazor threateningly, but wavered when he saw no threat or violence. "Will, are you sick? Will?"

Sneezing again and again, Sig moaned and wrung his hands. "I told you the mold here is wretched. I've heard of people dying out here because of the brain fever it causes. They don't even know they're sick, and then bam—" He threw out a hand with fingers stiffened into blades and crushed the guard's larynx. Choking, the guard fell to his knees, digging at his throat. A nudge from Sig's boot knocked him over to topple on top of his partner. "They drop dead."

Rifling through each guard's pockets, Sig found the shackles key and tossed it over to Masters. He also confiscated both communicators and tazors. "Dare I hope that your acquaintance with the dread pirate Laffite might be more than as sheriff and wanted criminal?"

"You may," Masters replied, taking the offered equipment. "She hates Britannia as much as we do, but she's not too keen about President Jaxson's exorbitant tariff on everything from Francia. If they wanted to get us as far away from Lady Wyre as possible, then they couldn't have brought us to a better spot to find an ally."

"Marshal, sheriff, and now pirate." Sig laughed and slapped the man on the back. "You're a man of many talents, Masters."

Madame President Jaxson possessed the stature of a mighty tree and unfortunately, a complexion to match. Ruddy and sun-tanned, her skin looked as rough as weathered, mossy bark. It was all Charlotte could do not to sit the poor woman down and slather her face with skin cream.

"Lady Wyre, we meet at last," the President intoned in a voice more appropriate for the battlefield than a private interview. "Welcome to the Capital of Americus. I trust your trip was uneventful."

"Quite," Charlotte replied faintly. Dear, dear, no wonder Britannia had absolutely no regard for the fledgling government struggling to bring peace and prosperity to this planet. Queen Majel would look at Jaxson and see nothing but a horse-faced soldier in a dress, and a very ugly one at that.

"I trust the marshals were courteous?"

The woman beside Charlotte bristled. "Of course my marshals were courteous and most discreet in—"

Arresting? Acquiring my cooperation against my will? Charlotte smothered her amusement as Director Howitzer floundered for an inoffensive term.

"—escorting Lady Wyre to join you for the Solstice celebration."

"Indeed. Mr. Gatlin even helped me tighten my corset." Charlotte gave the marshal a warm smile, earning a blush from him and a stifled growl from his director, who, if possible, wore an even more hideous gown of chartreuse ruffles. She was of such stocky blood that no corset could possibly create a curvature in her midsection. "However, I must declare that I would have been more pleased to accompany Sheriff Masters to the Capital instead of these marshals who were utter strangers, albeit extremely polite."

"Ah. You mean Marshal Wesson." Jaxson offered a cut-crystal snifter of brandy, which Charlotte took eagerly. Director Howitzer sniffed with disapproval, so Charlotte threw back the dark amber liquor and held out her glass for more. "A woman after my own heart." The President smiled with approval, and Charlotte noted the genuine amusement in the woman's eyes. When she smiled, the President was quite attractive if still rather masculine in features, but then she frowned and a canyon tore across her forehead. "Regrettably, it has come to my attention that he's a traitor."

Charlotte spluttered on her brandy. Director Howitzer took the opportunity to pound her so hard on the back that she nearly knocked out her teeth. "Impossible, Madame President. I assure you, Gilead Masters, or Wesson, whatever his name, is as true and loyal a man as I have ever had the pleasure to meet."

Abruptly, President Jaxson said, "That will be all, Director," in a voice that invited no commentary.

Ignoring that steely tone, Director Howitzer protested, confirming exactly who had provided whatever damning evidence to warrant for Gil's arrest. "But, ma'am, if you're going to speak to this...woman...about my marshals, I have a right to know what accusations she might bring against us!"

"I promise no accusations," Charlotte said with her most frigid smile. "Except those I lodge against you. That dress you're wearing is a crime against silk and you really shouldn't wear so many ruffles, dear. It does dreadful things to your thick waist."

Turning her back on the protesting woman, Jaxson simply stared into the roaring fireplace without another word. Charlotte sat daintily in one of the high-backed wing chairs thoughtfully positioned before the fireplace and sipped her brandy. She couldn't help the Cheshire cat smile curving her lips as she traded amused stares for the ugly glare from the insulted Director Howitzer.

With a loud rustle of tortured silk, the woman whirled and stomped toward the door. In a mean voice pitched to carry, she commanded her marshals. "Strike Wesson's name from the roll and make sure the traitor is heavily guarded. I don't want any accidents before the man can be brought before the firing squad."

Charlotte bit back her response until the director had slammed the door behind her men. "President Jaxson, surely you don't believe that woman's accusations. Gil is the most honorable man I know."

President Jaxson sat in the matching chair. "You say this when he mislead you about his true intentions?"

"I do," Charlotte replied with fervor. "He never lied to me. He was a good and caring sheriff, which is a subset of his duties as marshal. Instead of protecting all of Americus, he was protecting Queenstown, and me, indirectly. I realize he must have been assigned to watch me and to gain my confidence, which I gave most reluctantly, I assure you. I would not be sitting here this day chatting so amiably with you, Madame, if not for his friendship and influence."

"I see." President Jaxson stared down at her drink and smiled ruefully. "Then I suppose I must recall the warrant sending him to Angola Prison."

Charlotte shuddered at the thought of Gil trapped in that dreadful swamp prison full of poisonous snakes and vicious crocodiles...and she didn't mean the creatures living in the murky waters.

"What of the second man arrested with Marshal Wesson?"

Staring into the fire, Charlotte schooled her features and allowed her mind to race. She dearly hoped that second man was Sig, because then Gil would have a much better chance of surviving or even escaping

from his captors. But was any sort of cooperation too much to hope after last night? What if Sig had hunted the sheriff down to kill him and eliminate the competition, only to be arrested as an accomplice?

“If it makes any difference,” President Jaxson continued in an even, careful voice, “I just had a transmission from Orleans—to which Director Howitzer is not yet privy—that the two men arrested in York have escaped from their prison transport.”

Relaxing enough to sip her brandy, Charlotte suppressed the smile of joy threatening to give her secrets away. Then the second man *had* to be Sig; no one but Lord Regret would have been able to escape a prison transport headed for Angola, guarded by Americus’s best marshals.

Fortuitous, indeed, that he’d escaped, for Lord Regret in hand would have made almost as powerful a bargaining chip. Desperate to win more allies against Britannia, President Jaxson could have simply bequeathed him to Francia and started another Hundred Year War.

“My marshal must be very smitten with you, Lady Wyre,” Jaxson said wryly. “Not only is he a wanted man for failing to bring you to heel quickly enough to suit Director Howitzer, but the governor suspects the fugitives have joined Jean Laffite’s pirate fleet on Barataria.”

The small port of Orleans made for a challenging landing because of an asteroid barrier. A few brave souls had settled on the three largest asteroids, a precarious existence of constant shielding and determined, foolhardy stubbornness to live on a barren hunk of rock without even a stable atmosphere. Charlotte had always wondered why people would attempt to carve out life in such inhospitable conditions, but she supposed a pirate would adore the challenge of creating her own kingdom where no one else could.

Mind buzzing, she settled more comfortably in her chair and gave the President a dazzling smile of challenge. She hadn’t enjoyed a good verbal spar in entirely too long. *’Tis time to see what manner of lady Jaxson may be.*

“I couldn’t say who might be with my marshal.” She gave a slight emphasis to *my* and let a small smile quirk the corner of her mouth. “I also couldn’t say how they may have escaped a prison transport, unless the guards weren’t well equipped.” Nothing flickered on the President’s face, so Charlotte assumed the guards had indeed been well armed. Sig must have outdone himself, then, and she had to assume that her two men were now well armed themselves. Although how Sig and Gil had decided to work together without killing each other she couldn’t quite imagine. “Or, sadly, your ship was lacking the most current technology.”

A tiny flicker of Jaxson’s eyebrow confirmed that weakness. “Two guards were killed in their escape. I dread communicating their loss to the men’s families.”

Nodding sympathetically, Charlotte made a low sound of regret. “Their families should be well compensated.” But she didn’t volunteer an amount or service in order to put the other woman at as great a disadvantage as possible. No one liked to ask for assistance, and she had a feeling that President Jaxson liked such weakness even less than most.

“Alas, our new government doesn’t possess many riches. Despite our declared independence, we’re still forced to sell and trade our goods to Britannia for coin, or deal with privateers like Laffite.”

A subtle threat, Charlotte noted, well aimed without being obvious, for she knew Queen Majel would empty her extremely well-supplied royal treasury to get Lady Wyre back into the Tower of Londonium. *Jaxson will do well, if only she dressed the part more appropriately. Perhaps I can throw in a little shopping into our negotiation.* “Surely Britannia is not the only powerful planet with which you have contact.”

“Indeed, I’m sure Francia could be interested in a substantial trade, but for this particular item, I think the Military Intelligence and Galactic Sciences may be more interested.”

Charlotte allowed a shudder to shake her shoulders and she dropped her left hand over the locket. Only a very faint buzz tingled her palm, warning how far away Sig must be. *I have to find a way to keep us all safe. Even from Britannia.* “I’ve heard such dreadful stories about the technology they’ve developed in the past years.” *Founded upon my own dreadful experiments, God forgive me.*

“Which Britannia then unleashes on the next unsuspecting planet so Queen Majel can raze them to the ground and claim whatever resource she desires.” President Jaxson gripped the arms of the chair fiercely, as though she yearned to rip someone apart with her bare hands. “Such will be our fate eventually, I’m afraid.”

And here was the opening Charlotte needed. “Perhaps not, Madame President. Dare I hope that you might have salvaged an Imperial cruiser during the revolution?”

“You may.” President Jaxson nodded. “We’ve stripped and modified the largest to suit our needs, including a heavy lining of iron to fortify his armament, but he’s ponderous in the sky and we’ve had a bit of trouble with the engines.”

“If he’s as large as you say, he’d make a wonderful primary defense for the Capital.” Charlotte took a sip of her brandy and frowned thoughtfully. “Of course you’ll need a city shield too.”

President Jaxson blew out her breath in a loud huff. “I’m afraid we don’t have enough power to fuel such a shield. As you know, most of our colonists subsist on natural, primitive resources. It would be impossible to burn enough wood, for instance, in order to spawn a shield of such magnitude, and we possess none of Britannia’s technology.”

“I might...perhaps...” Charlotte tapped her finger against her glass, dragging out her response until Jaxson looked like she was going to reach over and shake her. “Yes. I do believe I might be able to show your engineers a few modest enhancements. Of course I would need my equipment, most of which I hid beneath my cabin in Queenstown.”

President Jaxson pressed a small button on the inside arm of her chair, and the entry immediately whooshed open. Marshals Gatlin and Colt carried a heavy steamer trunk between them. With a groan, they set it on the floor in front of the two ladies, and President Jaxson smiled sheepishly. “I suspected you might

be agreeable in assisting us so I took the liberty of procuring your equipment. We don't have much time, Your Grace. I know for a fact that Runners have been sighted in York. It's only a matter of time before they find you."

Now came the most delicate negotiation of all. Charlotte kept her face and voice as smooth and silky as fine chocolate as she stood, mirrored by the President. "When they do, I shall be long gone. With my marshal and his accomplice, of course."

President Jaxson shook her hand warmly. "Whoever that man may be, yes, of course. Indeed, we shall be in debt to you, Your Grace. Utilize whatever manpower you need. Gatlin and Colt have requested that they be your intermediaries until Marshal Wesson can be found and returned to you."

Smiling, Charlotte leaned in close. "I do have one additional request, Madame President, of a rather personal nature."

Jaxson sobered and squared her shoulders. "Ask and it shall be done, Lady Wyre."

When Charlotte whooped in a most unladylike manner and clapped her hands excitedly, the other woman jumped and the marshals reached for their tazors. Ignoring them, she tucked her arm through Jaxson's and pulled her toward the door. "Then we have a shopping date! Can you spare a quick trip to York's East End?"

"What, now?" President Jaxson sputtered. "I need new engines in my warship, not a gown. I must protest, Lady Wyre. Surely—"

"Now," she replied firmly. "I have something very special in mind for the Solstice, and you simply must have a new gown when Queen Majel receives my gift. It's going to be a Solstice Eclipse that she won't soon forget."

Chapter Eight

The pirate frigate was one large party boat and Jean Laffite seemed determined to show that nobody could party as hard—and fly as fast—as her. Without heed, she flew them straight toward the Capital, weaving in and out of the guarded zones with the casual ease of a slippery, talented rake avoiding the most desperate mamas at a debutante ball, while personally draining at least half a keg of rum.

Her crew wore a motley mix of high fashion and colonial garb. Half her age, her cabin boy wore a long white linen shirt that brushed the tops of his bare thighs...and little else while he did a jig on top of the built-in bar. Laffite wore sapphire blue breeches and her linen shirt hung open, baring her breasts for anyone who dared look. A dashing cavalier hat perched upon her scarlet hair, complete with a curling purple feather.

When the famed pirate seized a handful of Sig's arse, he suddenly realized that Masters had smartly already departed. Involuntarily, he touched a finger to one of his knives that had been so thoughtfully packaged for transport along with him toward prison. "Pardon me, Laffite, but I am most certainly taken."

She gripped him harder with a strong hand used to command and taking whatever she wanted. "I don't see a ring on your finger, Dandy. I've always fancied having a gentleman in my bed. I want to see if the saying is true: the finer the clothing, the more they squeal when they come."

Masters will pay in blood for giving me such a ridiculous false name. "My lady is a jealous woman, though regretfully not of the marrying kind."

"Neither am I," Laffite breathed in his ear as she began sliding her other hand down his chest. "What she doesn't know—"

Sig pressed the thin blade against the pirate's wrist. One deep cut and he'd slice every tendon and major vein in her arm. "Will kill you."

Hesitating, Laffite didn't back away immediately. She wouldn't have earned such a reputation if she gave up a prize without a fight. Sig pressed the knife hard enough to draw blood, and she finally realized he meant every word. Laughing heartily, she released him, lifting her bloody arm up for everyone to see, although her crew was so drunk he doubted they'd remember it on the morrow. "Mr. Dandy is a virgin!"

Everyone roared and Sig found himself blushing so hotly that his ears felt crisped. Gathering his dignity, he strode toward the door while the crew cheered. *I can only pray they have absolutely no idea that I'm Lord Regret or I may have to kill every single person on this ship.*

It took nearly half an hour to find Masters on the observation deck, staring morosely out at the night sky. The lights of York winked below, so they'd be able to land near the Capital in an hour, assuming Laffite wasn't too offended to let them escape unscathed. By morning, they could conceivably have located Lady Wyre, rescued her, and...

Suddenly, Sig felt as depressed as Masters looked. Because once they found her and fought their way free, she'd have to make several crucial decisions that would affect the rest of their lives. *All of us.*

"Your pirate friend nearly lost an arm for groping me," Sig said, trying to lighten their mood.

Masters grunted. "Now you know why I disappeared as soon as they opened the keg. Laffite's appetites are...impressive. She would have had us both if we were willing."

Sig leaned forward, propping his elbows on the railing and dropping his chin into his palms. He couldn't bring himself to say what they both feared, but unspoken, that dread thickened the air and hung heavy on his chest until he found it difficult to breathe.

Would Charlie consider taking us both? Will she let us help protect her, or merely reject us both and sail off to some new colony to begin again?

Even if she decided she wanted to keep them both, there was no guarantee at all that he and Masters could tolerate one another long enough to keep her happy. In all his forbidden daydreams of sailing away with Lady Wyre at his side, he'd never thought she might take another man with them.

"Do you think she's all right?" Masters asked in a voice as raspy as sandpaper.

Sig heard the emotion in the man's voice and knew he'd wanted to ask: *do you think she'll ever believe that I never meant to betray her?* "I know she's alive and well."

But he couldn't say she'd forgive Masters for misleading her all these months. Charlie pretended to be all lady, consumed with pink silk stockings, tea and parties. She did truly love such finery, but underneath her frivolity, a steely spine and ice cold heart worked hand in hand with her lightning quick mind to earn her the fearful respect of an entire Society of formidable ladies. Part of the reason Sig loved her so much was that he never could guess which way she'd go, whether left or right.

Him or me. Fury or love. Life or death.

Masters nodded and cleared his throat. "I can't bear the thought that she's afraid and in danger because of me."

Sig snorted. "Her, afraid? She lived in the mouth of the lion's den, Sheriff. She can certainly handle one President and a couple of marshals. If I know her at all, she's already managed to figure out why a shopping trip is in order."

"You know her well."

Better than me, hung between them. Masters gripped the railing so tightly Sig wondered if it would bend beneath those massive hands. He tried to make himself see the man as a rival, a mark that needed to

be eliminated, but all he could see were those precious pink stockings in that big, gruff paw, and the dark stain of embarrassment on the man's cheeks when exposed.

"I know her well enough to comprehend that we'll never understand her. Not fully. Oh, parties and clothes and such, yes, she's entirely predictable. But as soon as I spend a queen's ransom on the finest engines in the galaxy to tempt her onto my ship, she'll throw me out on my face because she selected a colonial sheriff instead."

"I still want to know the answer to my question."

Sig appreciated the man's care not to mention his chosen name where a certain drunken, amorous pirate may overhear. Silence deepened between them while he tried to find the courage to tell him. Even Charlotte didn't know the entire story, although if he gave her his House name, she'd know exactly what had happened. She hadn't asked, and that was another reason he loved her.

"My lady mother was from a well-known blooded House, as was my father. Everyone applauded their match and their wedding was *the* union of the Season. They were the most invited couple in Londonium and no party was complete without their presence. Yet every night behind closed doors, she beat my father, the servants, anyone who happened to get in her way. She only struck me a few times because my father would always manage to draw her rage toward him instead."

After so many years, he could speak almost conversationally about his past, but only because he'd killed enough people to give him other nightmares. "People whispered about her temper of course, but no one ever helped us. She threw the best parties, even if our servants cringed anytime she looked at them. They were the most handsome couple, even if my father occasionally sported bruises or winced when he walked. As long as she kept her darker activities behind closed doors, Society didn't care one whit about my father or me."

Sig straightened, gripping the railing too. Only his hands were shaking. "She got it into her head that part of my upbringing should be watching these sessions with my father, so that I might see how a *real* man dealt with his lady wife. When I ran away, she tied me to the chair and forced me to watch as she beat my father. She forced me to watch her break him down until he wept, destroying his pride and self-worth, made even worse by my witness. As I grew older, she became more violent against me. One night, I screamed at her to stop, and she turned on me.

"My father rose up to protect me. He picked up a shard of some priceless vase she'd destroyed in her rampage and slit her throat with it. Then he killed himself out of shame."

Sig paused for breath. His damaged heart thumped painfully in his chest, his breathing loud and labored, but Masters didn't make a sound. "I've done many things I regret, Sheriff, but my greatest regret is that I didn't kill my mother in order to save my father. He died to save me, and nobody will die to save me ever again."

Stirring, Masters turned slightly, as though he meant to say something, but Sig couldn't bear the man's compassion. He still had things to say that were too important to brush away, especially if they were ever to work out an arrangement with Charlie. "I don't know how many years I was forced to watch, helpless and bound, but eventually, I came to enjoy it. I needed those ropes to hold me back from murdering my own mother. I could hate her, rage at her in my mind, but I couldn't do anything about it, and that wasn't my fault, because I was tied up. It took away my choice...and my responsibility.

"I couldn't help my father because I was bound, which made me helpless but also blameless. When he killed her, I felt such...relief. I couldn't have stopped him. I couldn't have helped him. I had no choice but to sit there and let it happen, and it felt so...wonderful. I was free of her, but also free of the guilt of her death. Until my father took his own life too. When I kill now, it's *my* choice. It's my guilt and my regret. When Charlie takes me..."

Masters went rigid, every sense suddenly on full alert.

"I need her to take away my choice and responsibility. Whatever happens is *her* responsibility, *her* choice. I need it that way, and I've only ever allowed *her* to take that choice from me."

"Are you telling me that she ties you up when you...when she..."

She usually nearly kills me too. But he didn't think Masters was quite ready to hear that little tidbit, so he simply replied, "Yes."

"I see." Masters rolled his palms back and forth on the railing without releasing the metal or turning to see whatever expression might be on his face. "She didn't reveal any need like that with me."

Sig shrugged. "I don't know that *she* needs it, although she enjoys it well enough for my sake." The other man lowered his shoulders, as though a great weight bore down upon him, restlessly twisting his hands on that metal, turmoil twisting his face into a grimace. Carefully, he tried to add an explanation without insulting or offending the man. "She must have needed you, too, or she wouldn't have taken you to her bed. In all the years I've known her, she's never taken another lover."

"But what did she *need* from me, then?" Masters jerked upright to pace the deck. "I didn't give her anything out of the ordinary, certainly nothing like what you must share with her."

Sig remembered his first glimpse of her that night as he'd quietly stolen into her house through the back door. The sheriff had just left, and she stared into space, her mouth soft and luscious, her skin glowing with warmth. "Perhaps she simply needed to be...held. With gentleness and tenderness. That's hard for me to give when I'm tied up. I saw her right after you left, and she looked...*happy*. I knew, then, that'd she'd never leave with me."

Masters made a noncommittal sound. "You're forgetting one very important thing, Dandy."

Sig arched an eyebrow and pulled out a knife to dance across his fingers. "Hmmm?"

"She'd made a pot of tea that night."

His mouth twitched. He tried not to laugh, but the more he thought about her sipping that damned cup of tea throughout their discussion, the louder he chuckled. He finally ended up bracing himself on the railing while the two of them laughed until his stomach hurt. Finally, he straightened and wiped his eyes. “That’s the secret to our success, Masters. I’ll ask her to tie me up, and you make the tea.”

Masters shook his hand so hard it made him wince. “It’s a deal.”

Chapter Nine

Straightening, Lady Wyre slipped off the now-greasy gloves she'd worn to protect her manicure. For the past week, she'd been tinkering with every engine and electronic device in the employ of Americus defenses, and had managed to coax the space port shield originally installed by Britannia to cover most of the Capital. Of course, the problem of *powering* the shield still remained, but she had provided them with some interesting possibilities.

Off to the west lay a gigantic bubbling pot of magma forming a supervolcano that boiled the region's lakes and streams into magnificent geysers. President Jaxson had dispatched her most intrepid inventors to see if they could tap that natural resource. By Charlotte's calculations, enough steam and boiling water was contained in Yellowstone to power the entire planet.

She'd welcomed the work as well as the distraction, for Sig's locket weighed heavier and heavier against her heart. She knew he was close, but he and Masters had managed to evade authorities, so they had no way of knowing that the President had pardoned them of all wrongdoing. As each hour passed and they didn't come to her side, she became terribly afraid she might have accidentally locked them out of the city.

The engineer stared doubtfully at his precious engine. "Are you sure this will help?"

"You've added so much armor that you might as well call him *Ironsides*, but neglected to add enough power to the engines in order to compensate for that extra load. In addition, an engine of this size requires a great deal of fuel, which again, you don't have. Until I can send you a modified engine based on my nanotechnology, the best way to increase your speed is to reduce friction and increase fuel efficiency." Noting President Jaxson's arrival in her new gown, Charlotte smiled and added, "Always make the most of what you have, whether in clothing or in warships."

Since Jaxson possessed a tall and stately posture, Charlotte had helped her pick a simple high-waisted gown that highlighted those long lines without a single ruffle, bringing more to mind a willow than a stark, rough tree. An emerald-colored velvet ribbon about the bodice emphasized her brilliant eyes while adding color to the simple white linen shot with delicate silver threads. Tiny pearls lined the neck, small puff sleeves, and more heavily, the hem of the gown. Liberal skin cream and face powder had softened that rough skin and smoothed her complexion.

When she returned Charlotte's smile hesitantly, President Jaxson turned into a stately, beautiful woman. "Are you sure white is the best choice?"

“You rose to power through the military ranks, did you not, Madame?” At the President’s nod, Charlotte continued. “When one goes to battle, there are many nuances that can help decide the outcome long before a single weapon is fired. For instance, if an army advances with ragged lines in shoddy uniforms, then you can only assume their weaponry is just as ill-kept. Similarly, if you’re outmanned or outgunned, then you find a way to draw the enemy in closer, at a site of your choosing that puts them at a disadvantage.”

“But of course,” Jaxson said as they paced down the teaming docks. Workers scaled the towering heights of the large cruiser, polishing his hull and fine-tuning his sensors. An artist was busy at work painting the finishing touches of a new symbol on the prow: a white-headed eagle gripping lightning bolts that ran down the sides of the ship. “Yet I fail to see how a white gown will put Americus in an advantageous light for tonight’s address.”

Every Solstice, Queen Majel transmitted a speech to all the known worlds of the galaxy with enough technology to receive her signal. On the assimilated worlds of the Empire, the broadcast of her speech to all conquered peoples was required, aired by every technological beacon and ship remaining behind to ensure the peace. It had become a tradition for the more technologically advanced planets to transmit images of their royals preparing their corresponding Solstice party, and for the leaders to converse however briefly with the Queen, if she were so inclined.

Even before their revolution, the Americus colony had never dared respond in kind.

“What do debutantes wear to their first ball, Madame President?”

Jaxson immediately answered, “White, which is my point. I don’t want to appear weak or innocent before Her Majesty.”

“Oh, but you do.” Charlotte quirked her mouth at the sound of disgruntled alarm from the other woman. “Americus is a debutante in this Imperial ball. By wearing white, you are subtly honoring that age-old tradition, showing that you are cultured and seasoned enough in the ways of Society to be clothed properly for a lady of your station. Majel always wears black and gold, her trademark colors. White is fresh and original, and definitely more innocent against the black feathers of the Queen’s Ravens.”

“While I have the fierce eagle to defend against her crows,” President Jaxson said with a satisfied gleam in her eyes.

Charlotte preened. “Exactly. The eagle will tear her crows apart.”

“And will your gift for Queen Majel arrive in time?”

Now that had been some fine work if Charlotte did say so herself. “Why don’t we take a look?” It’d been challenging to find a reticule that was large enough for her new and improved datapad without looking like a sad sack of potatoes against her silk—this one sapphire blue to match Sig’s eyes—but the powerful datapad fit inside the peacock beaded bag perfectly. She tracked the schooner headed for Londonium. “It docked at Thames in the past half hour and is currently moving through customs. Not to

worry, I'm sure many other gifts for Queen Majel are arriving and they'll make sure to have everything available for the presentation."

President Jaxson stared down at the image of a large gilded birdcage and the eagle trapped within. "Are you sure the bird will be unharmed? I'd hate to see it injured or killed just to provide a subtle but telling message to Queen Majel."

Charlotte touched her locket and the sharp surge of energy made her suck in a deep breath. Sig had to be close, surely within the city. The constant buzzing from the locket nearly drove her insane. *Where the hell are you?*

"I used some very advanced technology on that bird, Madame President. The last of it, truth be told, until I have time to set up a new laboratory. But I promise that this eagle is going to be very difficult to kill. As soon as it delivers its message, the eagle should soar out of Londonium, return to your schooner, and be headed back toward Americus before the Queen even knows what has happened."

Meanwhile, if everything went according to plan, Charlotte would be setting sail in the opposite direction as quickly as possible. She wrapped her hand around the locket, a subtle message to her men if they were watching somewhere. Power zinged to her elbow and her fingers burned. *Please, be safe. Come back to me. Both of you.*

Concealed behind a stack of crates, Sig watched the two ladies walk amicably through the space port. By all accounts, Lady Wyre had made a most winning impression on the President of Americus. *And Masters thought she might be afraid.*

Masters had been right to worry that she might be in danger. Sig noted two men dressed in the nondescript clothes of the working class peel away from the shadowed hull of the nearby schooner and quietly trail the two ladies. Too busy flirting with Lady Wyre, the black-clad marshals were oblivious, Sig noted with disgust.

He caught Masters's attention—who slouched drunkenly over his ale just inside the nearby tavern—and by the scowl on the man's face, he knew the marshals would have been on the receiving end of those big fists if Masters were in charge of them. Sig made his way over to the table but didn't sit down.

"Runners?" Masters whispered into his ale. "Or bounty hunters?"

"No way to know," Sig replied. "They're dressed like the man you met in York. What was he?"

"A rebel from Kali Kata."

"Could they be part of this alliance you're trying to build against Britannia?"

Masters shook his head slightly and pushed to his feet, wavering and blearily rubbing his eyes. "I've never seen them before. Could be, I suppose, but my gut says they're Runners. If so, the Ravens won't be far behind."

"See if Laffite has any word of an Imperial cruiser nearby. I have a very bad feeling about this."

Masters gave a jerky nod and wavered out into the main thoroughfare. "Meet you at the ball."

Sig waited until Masters stumbled in the opposite direction, and then he followed Charlie, using the shadows and crates to stay out of sight of the four men trailing the ladies. Security at the Solstice Masquerade would be tight, but with masks and costumes, it would be nigh impossible for anyone to identify Lord Regret and the wanted traitor Sheriff Masters.

Hopefully these Runners would have as difficult a time procuring an invitation as Sig. He'd finally begged Laffite's counterfeiter to make a passable match, and now, even the pirate was coming to the masquerade ball.

The second marshal suddenly disappeared. If Sig hadn't been watching carefully, he wouldn't have even seen the flash of black as the man fell back into a darkened alley. Charlotte heard something, for she turned her head, a frown on her lovely face. "Mr. Colt? Where'd he go?"

On the move, Sig slipped closer while keeping undercover. He needed to be as close as possible in case they were Runners. They'd be armed with tazors, lazors, and God only knew what other weapons Queen Majel might have sent to ensure her doctor was recovered.

The plain-dressed man stepped out into the main thoroughfare with a long, black cane in his hand, topped with a raven with outstretched wings.

Bloody hell, Sig growled beneath his breath. Runner. They've found her.

Homing to the black cane, soldiers advanced on Lady Wyre in a wide arc. Men and women alike, dressed in black body-armor emblazoned with the golden insignia of Britannia. Screams erupted through the space port as dock workers fled or were killed for being in the way.

Worse, they were between her and Sig, a noose slipping around her neck.

In a loud booming voice, the Runner said, "Lady Wyre, Her Supreme Royal Majesty Queen Majel of Britannia decrees your immediate presence in Londonium."

Lifting her chin to a haughty angle that made pride burn in Sig's chest, Charlotte faced her accuser. The docks behind her had emptied; she could flee in that direction. But flight had not occurred to Lady Wyre.

To the remaining marshal, she said, "Take the President to safety."

"Absolutely not!" President Jaxson retorted, but her marshal was already tugging her away, using his body to protect her as much as possible. "Your Grace!"

"Get out of here! They've come for me, not you. I'll never forgive myself if you're injured in the crossfire." Still the woman hesitated, until Charlotte turned her fierce stare on her. "Your duty is to Americus. Remember the eagle. Don't let the ravens tear her apart as they destroyed my dove."

President Jaxson struggled to contain her emotion as she allowed her marshal to drag her away from the fight. Eyes red, she whispered, "Who'll protect you?"

Joely Sue Burkhart

Turning back to the Runner, Charlotte threw up her hand and pointed straight at Sig's hiding spot.
"He shall."

Chapter Ten

Her heart was beating so frantically that Charlotte could feel the rapid thrum of her pulse in the top of her head. The firestorm crashing and sparking in the locket had to mean Sig was close, yet when he stood and sauntered out from behind a stack of crates with the lethal grace of Lord Regret, she very nearly had to dig around in her reticule for smelling salts.

Her lips quivered in a tremulous smile, but she didn't try to hide that emotion. She was too thankful to see him alive and well. Touching his locket, she watched his blue eyes flare with wicked flame, promising death to anyone who dared stand in his way. Silver knives popped into his hands, and Lord Regret began to dance. He glided from Raven to Raven as gracefully as though he waltzed at the Solstice ball, but the soldiers screamed and bled in his wake.

A lazar arced toward his head, but he simply dropped to the floor, hamstringed the nearest soldier, and rolled smoothly to his feet. Blood splattered his face and the impeccable white of his shirt. His coat had torn, which worried her that he'd taken an injury—how could he not, so outnumbered?—but he never stopped smiling.

Because he's coming for me. He'll always come for me.

Charlotte fumbled the drawstring open and pulled her datapad out of her reticule. Her fingers flew over the screen as she strengthened the shields over the Capital, even if it burned up every bit of their reserves. Americus might lose this port, but they wouldn't lose their independence, not if she could help it. A roaring blast confirmed the newly refitted cruiser had fired his engines. Hopefully Marshal Gatlin had managed to get the President aboard.

Not all of the Ravens flocked toward Lord Regret, choosing instead to ensnare her and drag her to their waiting ship. *Not if I can help it.*

She pulled out what might have appeared to be a compact of rouge. Clutching it in her right palm, she squared her shoulders and waited. They would not see her afraid. They would not touch her. Someone shouted behind her, a deep bellow of alarm that made her heart try to crawl up in her throat again. Gil. He bellowed and cursed, screaming at her to run, but she ignored him. *I'll never run again.*

As the Ravens closed in upon her, she made herself count them. Five. No seven. Then she counted the paces separating her from them. *Not before they're three paces away. Bring them in, as many as possible.*

Three more Ravens joined the net, surrounding her. The clash of metal sounded close, and she knew Sig must have seen her peril and redoubled his efforts. She couldn't warn him to stay back, not without

alerting the ones nearby, but she gripped his locket in her left hand, ignoring the lightning shooting down her arm. *Stay back!*

Ducking her head and gripping her arms tight to her body to make herself as small as possible, she pressed her thumb to the compact. An energy field detonated about her. Her hair rose up on her arms, her fantastic coiffure ruined. Ears ringing, she blinked and forced her watering eyes to focus. The Ravens had been blown down and torn apart as a cyclone destroys a forest. Bodies tumbled together, twisted and broken. Stomach churning, she sought out Sig, but she couldn't find him.

Dear God, if I've killed him...

"No! Charlotte!"

The roar came from behind her. Her thumb automatically pressed the button again, but the device hadn't yet recharged. Something slammed into her, knocking the wind out of her, although she didn't fall. She tried to cry out, but she couldn't seem to catch her breath.

She looked down. A lazer protruded from her stomach, and the energized blade smoldered her lovely silk gown. *Think of what it's doing to my intestines.*

An arm wrapped around her, holding her up. "Americus doesn't need your filthy technology, *Doctor.*" It took her a moment to recognize Director Howitzer's voice. "Runner, here's your prize! Come and get her!"

The director gave her a shove forward and she fell. The burning blade slid through her body and a cry tore out of her mouth. At least the hateful woman didn't drag the lazer up to fry her heart and lungs.

Unable to get her arms to cooperate, she fell hard, knocking the last bit of air from her lungs. Pain intruded, her abdomen catching fire as though millions of fireflies blazed in her stomach.

"Charlie." Sig's voice forced her to open her eyes. He leaned over her, battered and bloody, his eyes wild like she'd never seen before.

Gil dropped down on her other side, his big hands trembling against her stomach. He pressed hard, too hard, and she gasped with the pain of it, but she knew it should have hurt *more*. She ought to be shrieking her pain, but it didn't feel as badly as she expected.

Which told her that she was dying.

"We must stop the bleeding!"

A calm lassitude fogged her mind and slowed her thoughts. She smiled up at her two men and tried to tell them how much they meant to her, but she couldn't get the words to come out of her mouth. She couldn't keep her eyes open.

She felt lips on her forehead, her cheek. The locket was crushing her, so heavy on her chest like a cold, dead stone. Sig gathered her into his arms and stretched out on top of her. Not to be denied, Gil pressed closer, too, sharing his body heat and offering his protection. Moisture dripped on her face. The

floor rocked beneath her, explosions sounded far too close for comfort, but wrapped in their arms, she couldn't bring herself to care.

She closed her eyes and waited to die.

Closing his eyes, Sig willed the tiny creatures living inside him to flow into the dying woman in his arms. *Save her, even if it takes every last one of you. Save her!*

To make it as easy for the transfer as possible, he pressed his heart to her abdomen, ignoring Masters's futile attempt to stem the blood cascading from the horrible wound. Her skin looked paper thin, faint blue lines tracing delicate rivers beneath the fine porcelain. Her chest barely moved, and her arm fell from his neck, lifeless and limp.

"No!" He pressed his body tighter to hers, pouring his life into her, but he couldn't tell if it was working until his own heart stuttered. Pain banded his chest in a vise, squeezing his lungs, but he didn't draw back. His bracing arm trembled, forcing him to drop more of his weight upon her.

Masters grabbed his shoulders, as though he were going to toss him aside like kindling. "Don't," Sig gasped through the pain. "Healing her."

"Whatever you're doing is killing you." But he steadied Sig instead of hauling him off her. Raising his voice, Masters shouted, "Medic!"

"Don't care."

Her eyes flew open and she sucked in a deep breath. "Sig."

His face felt frozen and stiff, but he forced his lips to curve into a smile. "Charlie."

"No." Her eyes flared wide, with pain or panic, he couldn't tell. "Don't die. Not for me."

"Always. For you."

A dour-faced woman dropped down beside them. Masters lifted Sig up enough for her to see the wound in Lady Wyre's stomach, and the doctor paled. "Dear God. I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do."

"Bio-band," Sig wheezed out.

"The infection—"

"Do what he says," Masters retorted, his voice ringing with command.

Grumbling, the doctor flipped open her metal case and took out a slim canister. "The bio-bandage will seal whatever debris and filth she's picked up from the dock, air, and the weapon used to deliver the wound. Her body will make the perfect breeding ground for bacteria. Trust me, son, you don't want to see a loved one eaten alive by gangrene."

"Do it." Sig gritted his teeth. "I'll take care of the infection."

The doctor narrowed her eyes with disbelief, but unscrewed the cap. "I need her clothing—and you!—out of the way."

Masters rolled him to the side and fisted his hands in the silk of her gown. Trying to lighten the mood, he looked up into her face. “Sorry about the silk, sweetheart,” and then he ripped the gown open. Her corset was in the way, too, so he picked up the director’s lazor still dark with Charlotte’s burnt blood and used it to cut the laces.

While all Sig could do was lie there and gasp like a beached whale.

The doctor tipped the canister over Charlotte’s stomach, and a clear gel oozed out to cover the horrible wound. “I need to get some on her back too.”

Masters helped roll her over, his face ravaged with guilt at every sound of pain she made while he wrestled her around. “Hang on, Charlie.”

Sig closed his eyes to block out the tenderness on the sheriff’s face, the way those big, ragged paws moved her so tenderly. *He’ll take good care of her*, he tried to console himself, but the thought only made him feel worse. His heart ceased beating, but his mind—and worse, his poor damaged heart—refused to die.

Charlie threw out her hand and threaded her fingers into his hair, tugging his face up. “Come. Here.”

He wanted to refuse. He wanted to simply lie there and die with what small honor and dignity he’d managed to win by protecting the famous Lady Doctor Wyre from the Queen’s Ravens. He wanted to be bigger than the jealous rage burning in his breast that yearned to bury his longest blade in Masters’s gut.

But her eyes gripped him as firmly as Britannia held her conquered planets in Queen Majel’s grasp. He couldn’t *not* obey her command; every cell in his body, both organic and lady-made, demanded he move to her side. He could only hope that the emotion darkening her eyes might be love and not pity.

Fighting against the darkness closing in, he dragged himself to her. Her strength had returned enough that she helped pull his upper body up onto her. She released him to pick up the locket, lifting it toward his chest. “You gave your life to me.”

Sig ducked his head and planted his mouth on the metal. He’d expected enough power to blow off the back of his skull, but the locket felt cold, reflecting how low her life energy had ebbed. Tiredly, he dropped his head against her breast, pinning the locket between them, and his heart found the will to beat once more.

Chapter Eleven

Seated high above the most powerful nobles of the galaxy, Queen Majel tried very hard not to rip anyone's head off in impatience. At least not yet.

At last, Seneschal Murray made his way to her side bearing a golden tray. Without a word, she took the offered datapad and scanned the latest report from Americus.

Lady Wyre had evaded capture once more. At least one hundred Ravens were dead or imprisoned. Only one Runner had managed to make his report before disappearing among the commoners as he'd been trained.

Fury beat wings of desperation inside her. She took a moment to close her eyes and steady her breath, so that when she spoke, her voice was even without betraying any emotion. "Our Solstice celebration will not include the arrival of Lady Wyre after all."

Seneschal Murray clicked his heels together and bowed. "My regrets, Your Majesty."

"Regrets," she whispered softly. "I regret ever letting that woman into my confidence. I wish..." Her voice fell off, her throat tight. She'd had no alternative. Without Lady Wyre, she would have died. Her House would have lost the throne. *But now that accursed woman knows my most dreadful secrets.*

"Your wish is my command, Your Majesty."

Gathering her pride about her like a protective cloak, she settled more comfortably in her throne. Wishes were for starry-eyed fools who dreamed of a perfect, happy existence while those with a will of iron created her own reality. "I wish the gift presentation to begin."

"At once, Your Majesty."

Gifts from all over the galaxy were brought before her throne: caskets of tea from Kali Kata, raw silk from Zijin, even some sort of beast so heavily manacled that she couldn't tell how many legs it possessed. In comparison, the gift from Americus seemed rather drab and plain: a gilded cage containing an ugly brown bird.

Granted, the bird was rather large, making her House's chosen symbol of the raven look like a fledgling. "What sort of bird is that, Murray?"

He scanned the datapad for the gift registry. "It's an eagle, Your Majesty, and a personal gift from Jaxson of Americus."

The self-declared ruler of *her* colony. Murray had wisely given the woman neither title nor courtesy.

Majel tipped her head to the side, studying the bird. Her first instinct was to reject the gift as unacceptable, but the eagle stared back at her, tilting its regal white head too.

It's mocking me.

Eyes narrowed, she rose and stepped closer to the bird. Had the rebels trained it to speak? Did it have some concocted message of rebellion to give her? It fluttered its wings softly, a subtle invitation to draw near. Or a warning?

A strange, unexpected sound emitted from its beak. Not the shrill scream of a predatory bird nor even the raucous cry of a raven, but a soft, fragile coo.

Wyre's symbol had long been a dove.

Her skin prickled along her spine, hot and cold needles digging into her skin. She jerked to a halt several paces from the creature. Her heart beat unnaturally fast and her face felt flushed. The eagle? Or her own desperation? She couldn't decide, and now that she'd moved closer, her nobles watched her as diligently as the caged eagle.

Who's caged and who's free, she thought bitterly, unable to send the bird away now that her adoring throng—who would fall upon her like a pack of starving wolves as soon as she showed a single sign of weakness—had noticed her interest.

The bird cried out again and her muscles turned to water. Her knees trembled. Sweat broke out on her forehead yet her teeth yearned to chatter. She tightened her jaws and locked her knees, refusing to show any weakness or fear, even if her heart thundered.

Voices rose in alarm. Murray snapped to her side and cupped her elbow, discreetly supporting her. "Electronic devices are failing," he whispered urgently. "It's a cascading outage getting worse by the moment. Your Majesty, the shields! I think it's an attack!"

She couldn't answer. The eagle stared at her, golden eyes as sharp as a blade. Razored talons twisted in her stomach, churning her organs until she couldn't stop the small gasp of pain.

"Dear God, your skin is so hot. What's wrong, Your Majesty?"

Oh, Americus had attacked all right. Whatever technology Lady Wyre had used to save Britannia's Queen had suddenly decided to cease operation. *I'm dying. She has assassinated me without ever setting foot on Britannian soil.*

The gilded cage collapsed and the mighty eagle sprang into the air, still crying that odd coo that was shutting down the Londonium grid. On the one day that Americus managed to cast Britannia in shadow, Lady Wyre had managed to push the heart of the most powerful Empire in the galaxy into darkest terror. Automatic lights failed, the datapad in Murray's hand went blank, and everywhere, people shrilled with terror at all they'd lost.

Her threat was clear: *I have created a weapon that is so simple and small that an ordinary bird can carry it, but so powerful that I can obliterate all you hold dear.*

However, as the bird flew away, spreading mayhem with its cries, Majel felt incrementally better. The pain faded, her breathing eased, and the debilitating fever that had nearly killed her as a newly crowned Queen disappeared. The tiny mechanical creatures that marched throughout her body must have returned to their primary directive: keeping her alive.

She jerked her arm free from Murray's grasp, turned, and strode back to her throne. Sitting in the grand golden chair with the crown of Britannia on her brow, she gazed out at the destruction Americus and Lady Wyre had wrought. Shadows darkened the cavernous room that hadn't been blacked out since Majel had taken the throne. The might and majesty of Londonium had fallen deathly silent, dead in the water like a ship without wind to fill its sail.

Something fell into her lap. A feather. She held it up to the sliver of sun shining down through the glass ceiling as the hunk of rock called Americus moved past in its accursed orbit. When she smiled, Murray ducked his head and went to his knees before her. "Americus will regret this little display."

"Shall I check on the shields, Your Majesty? Rebels could have slipped inside Londonium while we were disabled."

She gave him a regal nod, though she didn't think it likely. No, this entire stunt was simply a message. Lady Wyre had joined forces with that revolting little colony which had dared declare their independence, and while she'd been in hiding, she'd been very busy indeed crafting new weapons to destroy her rightful ruler.

No, that wasn't right at all. She'd been building weapons to protect *herself*. She'd had the power to kill Majel, but at the last moment, had withdrawn. Her message: *stay away from me or die*.

She'll regret leaving me alive. Majel ran the feather through her fingers. *I'll allow her to fly free for a time, let her believe her threat has worked. I must bring MIGS back beneath my authority first, else they'll steal every scrap of knowledge Wyre gives me and use it to destroy the entire universe with their greed.*

Studying the feather, she frowned slightly. *How curious. I thought the eagle had been brown, not black.*

"Murray," she called after him, "did one of the ravens nesting on top of the Tower fly inside?"

"Not that I'm aware of, Your Majesty."

Her scalp itched. She reached up behind her ear, and froze when her fingers encountered something not hair. Another feather. Cold sweat trickled down her spine. Shaking, she tucked the fallen feather into her hair behind her ear, hopefully disguising the odd growth until she could examine it at leisure.

Oh, Lady Doctor Wyre, what have you done to me?

Chapter Twelve

“And...goodbye, Americus.” Sig leaned back in his captain’s chair but didn’t look up to gauge Charlotte’s reaction as her home for the past seven years grew ever smaller behind his sleek catamaran. “Any regrets?”

She dropped her hand onto his shoulder and squeezed. “Not a one. Except perhaps...” She felt his muscles tense beneath her fingers, so she relented. “I could do without that ugly scar on my stomach.”

He turned to her, then, and wrapped his arms around her waist. “There’s not an ugly spot on your luscious body and you know it.”

Quirking her lips, she tugged lightly on the golden hair falling about his face. “I do regret the silk, then, that Gil so casually destroyed. That was a lovely dress, bought and paid for by the President of Americus.”

“She stuffed my hold full of every scrap of silk she could get her hands on in payment for your services. Ladies all over Americus are bemoaning their sadly lacking wardrobes and hating you most dreadfully for stealing all their dress goods.”

She leaned down and brushed her lips against his. “What now?”

The tension increased in his body, although he laughed and tried to pretend as though he wasn’t worried. “Anything you wish, Your Grace.”

“I’m not going to ask you to put Lord Regret to rest.”

He tipped his head back, eyes narrowed as he searched her face. “Lord Regret is a killer.”

“And a damned good one,” she replied easily. “I’m not going to change who you are, Sig. If you weren’t a killer, I wouldn’t be alive today. Just don’t accept an assignment to eliminate anyone I care about, like President Jaxson.”

“Or a certain Sheriff Masters.”

Now it was her turn to try and play off her nerves. She arched a brow at Sig. “Would you kill my marshal, Lord Regret?”

Speaking of the devil, the door whooshed open. Masters hovered in the doorway, looking from Sig to her and taking note of the compromising position. Gil’s jaws worked but he didn’t say anything; he simply turned around to leave.

“Where are you going?” She released Sig and marched toward Gil. Halting, she planted her hands on her hips and gave him a firm look. “Well?”

Gil cleared his throat, staring down at the battered hat in his hands as he slowly twirled it. “You looked busy, Your Grace. I didn’t wish to interrupt you.”

“You’re not interrupting, Gil.” She reached out and took his big gruff hand in hers. The feel of his calloused palm against hers made the muscles in her tummy quiver. “We were just talking about you.”

“We were?” Sig kicked back in his chair like a negligent lord. “I don’t recall inviting any passengers on *my* ship.”

“He’s my passenger and my guest.” Charlotte lifted her chin and shot a dark look at Sig. “You don’t have to make this so bloody difficult.”

“If I’m not welcome,” Gil began.

“You’re welcome,” she retorted, and then whirled to point a finger at Sig. “He asked me to marry him, remember? All you ever asked me to do was fly on your ship.”

A knife suddenly gleamed in Sig’s hand, and he used the tip to clean his fingernails. “Oh, yes, I’ve been meaning to ask why an undercover marshal sent to spy on you would ask for your hand in marriage.”

“I never *spied* on her.” Gil took a menacing step toward the other man without regard for the blade in his hand. “I love her. I thought I could protect her better if we were married, and I was fully prepared to sneak her off Americus myself.”

“We’ve been over this before,” she said as calmly as possible. Gil advanced despite her hand on his chest, pushing her closer to Sig. “Gentlemen, please. Remember when I was recovering in the Capital and you both visited to swear your undying love for me?”

“That was before he thought to stowaway on my ship.”

Gil growled beneath his breath. “She invited me! Besides, why would she want an assassin in her bed?”

“Why would she want a traitor?” Sig threw back, rising slowly to his feet. “Or worse, a rebel? You can’t even claim Americus as your home planet—you want to fly around the universe trying to incite all colonies and conquered species to rebellion! How safe will she be with you, hmmm?”

“Enough!” She raised her voice, determined to keep them from coming to blows. Both men glared at each other toe-to-toe, ignoring the woman between them as though she were a speck of fluff too inconsequential to require their notice. Which infuriated her to no end. “I love you both and I *will* have you both, so you’ll just have to figure out how to get along without killing each other!”

Sig smirked. “Who said anything about killing each other?”

She punched him in the stomach. When Gil chuckled, she stomped on his foot. Neither of which earned a grunt let alone an ouch from either man. Sig took a step closer, pushing her against the big man behind her, who dropped his head and nuzzled her neck. “Is this better, Charlie?”

"You're intolerable." Her voice only quivered slightly, but she did tilt her head to give Gil better access, while wrapping her arms around Sig to keep him close. "Both of you. How far were you going to go with your little ruse?"

"I was fully prepared to cut off your gown to reveal your skin inch by inch so I could kiss it," Sig whispered against her lips.

Gil lifted his head and breathed heavily in her ear. "And I was fully prepared to use those strips of silk to tie him up for you."

She sighed dramatically. "Well, it's just too bad that I care so very much about this gown that I can't indulge in such an intriguing fantasy."

"We'll buy you a new gown." Laughing, Gil swept her up into his arms. "This thing can fly itself, can't it?"

"Of course." Sig led the way toward his—their—bedchamber. "The finest technology in the galaxy at our lady's fingertips."

He'd already equipped the room with a bed large enough for an orgy. *Which is exactly what I intend to have*, she decided with a wicked little laugh. Sig had even fetched her silk coverlet, her lone luxury for so many years. Teasing helped keep her sentimental tears at bay, so she used her most prudish voice to demand, "Do set me down, Sheriff Masters."

Always one to do as his lady asked, he obliged, even though he cast a yearning look at that bed.

"Sit down, gentlemen. We need to resolve a few things between us."

Sig and Gil shared a long-suffering look of masculine terror and both sat on the edge of the bed. She looked at them, so different in temperament and looks, but with the same soul-deep look in their eyes, and it was all she could do not to pounce on the bed and push them both beneath her.

"I want to make sure both of you are comfortable with our...arrangement."

Arching a brow, Sig began untying his cravat. "As long as you don't ask us to make love to each other, then I'm fine with whatever you both want."

Gil blanched and shifted further away from the other man. "Absolutely. I don't mind you loving us both, but I have no interest in the same sex."

"Oh for heaven's sake! That's not what I meant at all." Bending down, she grabbed Gil's ankle and began tugging on his boot. Once she got both of his removed, she turned to Sig's. His required much unladylike grunting to get that tight, shiny leather stripped off. "What I meant to say, is that if you'd rather we take turns, that's acceptable to me. One night I sleep with you, Sig, and the next night, I ask Gil. That might be easier to arrange."

"Don't you want us at the same time, Charlie?" The raw need roughening Gil's voice brought her attention back to him. She stripped off his stockings and then reached for his much simpler cravat. "Both of

us kissing you, touching you, holding you all through the night? Every night? Because I'd rather not be parted from you for a single hour, even if I must share that hour with him."

In her haste, she accidentally tightened the knot in the linen, which made her bottom lip tremble with frustration. With a worried glance at the other man, Gil caught her frantic hands between his palms and just held her still.

"We'll do whatever you wish, my lady."

"Stop it," she ground out, impatiently using her shoulder to wipe her tears away. "No formality. Don't you know what it does to me when you use his nickname?"

Gil dropped her hands like they caught on fire. "Forgive me. I didn't mean—"

Charlotte launched herself at him, actually at both of them, but it was Gil she kissed first. "You stupid, stupid man. I love you. I love that you are willing to accept Sig, and him, you. When either of you call me Charlie, my tummy feels all warm and rich and sweet, like I just drank my favorite cup of tea." She pulled back a moment and gave Sig a mock glare. "Speaking of which, you did stock golden-tipped assum, didn't you?"

Sig made himself useful by helping her remove her gown. "Nothing but the best for our dear Lady Wyre."

All pretense of intellectual discussion fled her mind as Gil kissed her and Sig worked at getting her corset off. "The strings are knotted," he finally growled. "Let me get a knife."

"No! Don't you dare." Kneeling astride Gil, she sat back and forced her fingers to carefully untangle the strings. "Now the stockings—"

"No," both men retorted just as firmly.

"Leave them on." Panting, Gil ran his big palms up and down her legs, stroking the bare flesh of her upper thighs and the silken length of stocking down her calves. "So beautiful."

Sig pulled the chemise over her head and then removed the last of his clothing. He came to her, rising up on his knees so he could kiss her while Gil slid into her body. Groaning, she pushed down on his magnificent length, while he stroked those rough hands up the full length of her body, rasping against her breasts and neck only to begin the journey south again. In a matter of moments, they both cried out and he shuddered beneath her.

"Forgive me," he panted. "I wanted to make you come a dozen times."

"Don't be ridiculous," she purred, grinding herself against him one last time before rising toward Sig. "We have days, weeks, months all alone on this luxury liner to fully enjoy ourselves."

Cupping Sig's face in her hands, she hesitated, searching his eyes. She wasn't sure how much of his darker need he'd care to reveal before the other man, if he'd be ashamed or embarrassed in any way. "Do you need...?"

“Not this time.” Sig tumbled her on her back and lowered his mouth to her breasts. “After you came so close to death on Americus, I don’t think I shall ever be able to flirt with death again. However, I wouldn’t be offended if your sheriff happened to keep his shackles handy.”

The other man left the bed momentarily, and then she heard the clank of metal. Sig lifted his head, letting her see his reaction as the other man handcuffed his wrists behind his back. His eyes were dark, his mouth soft and lush.

“Tighter?” Gil asked, giving his arm a jerk.

“Yes,” Sig said in a thick voice that she well recognized. The other man tightened the restraints until Sig made a small sound of pain.

Wriggling lower on her body, he laid his cheek against the scar on her stomach. Her heartbeat quickened, her blood rushing and singing in her veins as though the assemblers he’d shared with her after her injury had suddenly zipped into high gear. Sig’s rapid breathing fanned across her skin, and the locket heated on her chest like a brand. He felt the magic too, the answering pulse of electronic signals that their human ears couldn’t recognize.

“Does it bother you to be like me now?”

“No.” She ran her hands through his golden hair. “Why should it? I created them. They fascinate me. I wouldn’t be alive here and now, holding and loving you both, without them.”

Stretching out beside her, Gil nibbled on her lips and trailed soft, gentle kisses down her neck. But he had had his turn; this was about Sig and meeting his needs.

She tangled her fingers in his hair and pushed him back on his haunches. His skin gleamed, darkened ivory gilded like his hair. Sweat glistened on his chest, his shoulders tight and straining against his bonds, while his erection curved invitingly. Leaning down, she reached back and released her hair to tumble across his groin and thighs. He shuddered and groaned at the pain in his shoulders, which she knew would only fuel his desire.

Dragging her head back and forth, she tormented him with the silken caress of her hair and the faint brush of her mouth until he shook and groaned and cursed beneath his breath, but she didn’t make him beg. Not Lord Regret. Although they both knew she could bring him that low if she chose.

She rose up to take him inside her. Bound with his legs bent beneath him, he couldn’t lie backward or thrust effectively, but that was fine. She rode him, taking him like he needed, claiming the pleasure from his body until he sagged in her arms and dropped his head against her shoulder.

Gil helped her get the handcuffs off and then she gathered Sig into her arms with the other man behind her. “That was...interesting.”

She arched her back slightly so that her backside pressed more fully into Gil’s groin. He was definitely interested in round two already, which didn’t surprise her in the least. “Would you like to be handcuffed, Sheriff?”

“If you torment me like that...and keep those pink stockings on...sure.” He thought a moment, and then added, “Perhaps. Well, I...perhaps...”

Sig laughed and nuzzled his face deeper into her breasts. “You’d best cuff his arms in front of him, Charlie. Take pity on him; he’s a beginner.”

She rolled over a bit and rose up on her elbows so she could look down at her men. Her throat tightened with emotion, and her eyes burned, but she had only joy in her heart. “Happy Solstice, Lord Regret and Marshal Wesson.”

Gil leaned up and kissed her, his big hand cupping the back of her head. “I like Masters better. I never gave you anything but my real name.”

“Then Happy Solstice, Gilead Masters. Will you do me the great honor of becoming my husband?”

He kissed her again, his mouth urgent, his fingers tight in her hair. “Absolutely, Lady Wyre. It would be my honor.”

“And you, Sigmund Regret, will you marry me?”

“Hmmm,” he drawled, letting the worry that had tightened his eyes fade away at her proposal. Her heart broke just a little all over again, because he’d been afraid that she’d tie him up, make love to him, but refuse to marry him in favor of Gil. “That depends, Lady Wyre, on where we’re going. We’ll have to find a planet that doesn’t object to polygamy.”

“By the way,” Gil said, “where are we going?”

“For now, our coordinates are simply the opposite direction of Britannia, with a restocking—”

“Shopping!” Charlotte added.

“Trip to the Bei-Jing port of Zijin. After that, wherever Lady Wyre wishes to go.”

“Zijin certainly has no love for Britannia, but it’s still rather too close to Majel for comfort. Imperial cruisers are in and out of Bei-Jing all the time. I don’t know, Sig.”

“They have tea,” he replied, his blue eyes twinkling.

“And silk,” Gil added, trailing his fingers along the edge of silk above her knee. “Lots of silk. Pink silk and white and blue and...”

“All right,” she retorted with laughter. “The Golden Dragon Kingdom it is.”

Sig kissed her knuckles and nibbled on her fingers.

Gil nipped her neck.

And she’d never been happier in her entire life.

“Happy Solstice, Lady Wyre.”

About the Author

Joely always has her nose buried in a book, especially one with mythology, fairy tales and romance. She, her husband and their three monsters live in Missouri. By day, she's a computer programmer with a Masters of Science degree in Mathematics. When night falls, she bespells the monsters so she can write. Read more about her current projects on her website, <http://joelysueburkhart.com>. Lady Doctor Wyre is Joely's ninth published title.

Look for these titles by Joely Sue Burkhart

Now Available:

The Connaghers
Dear Sir, I'm Yours
Hurt Me So Good

One sub to please the Master...in any way he wishes.

Hurt Me So Good

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Victor Connagher is no stranger to the Dallas BDSM scene. As CEO of a risqué cable channel that caters to adventurous adults, he ensures the lifestyle is portrayed in a positive light. He even supports a local bondage club. Yet behind the cool, confident mask, Victor lives in fear.

Once, and only once, he lost control of his inner Dom—and it cost him his fiancée. Now, no one knows how hard he works to keep his darker appetite for pain buried. No matter how much his saucy, confident associate producer makes his fingers itch to once again take up his riding crop.

Shiloh Holmes is a sub, but she's no doormat. She's always suspected Victor has the skills to feed her insatiable need for pain, and now she's found the perfect way to crack his formidable control. Develop a new reality show, America's Next Top sub...and dare him to compete.

Week after week, as Shiloh fearlessly challenges the real Victor to come out of hiding, he realizes his past mistake was only a blow to his pride. If he loses Shiloh, he could lose his heart.

Warning: Explicit sex, BDSM, reality television, a very reluctant Dom, an audacious sub willing to do anything to win for him, and one very wicked riding crop.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Hurt Me So Good:

Shiloh didn't stop to think about what she was doing. While he was off balance—mentally and physically—she knelt and pulled his foot into her lap so she could exam his knee. He only wore a pair of black sport shorts and his hair was still wet. Shirtless, hair loose about his shoulders, and his muscular body practically bare, he didn't seem as intimidating...just drop dead gorgeous.

It was much easier to concentrate on the surgical scars than soak in his bare chest. Gently, she probed his knee with her fingers, noting the swelling and soreness each time he tensed. She risked a glance up at his face.

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "Mal, I'll talk to you later." He hung up and set the phone on the bench beside him.

Before he could interrogate her, she asked in her most professional voice, "ACL and MCL tears, right? How many surgeries did you have?"

"Two, with a third on the horizon if things don't improve."

She wrapped her hands around his upper thigh and firmly drew his leg through her fingers, over his knee and down his calf.

On a low groan, he dropped his head back against the wall.

"Too much?"

“Hell, no. I can stand it harder if your hands are up to it.”

She repeated the long strokes, concentrating on the deep tissues above and below his knee to work out all the knots that had built up over time. *Think of him as a patient, not as a man you’ve dreamed about for months.*

After a good fifteen minutes, he asked, “Where did you learn how to do this?”

His voice sounded thick and mellow, his muscles melting beneath her hands. What she wouldn’t give to give him a full body massage. “I took a sports injury class at a highly recommended massage school.”

“My knee has never hurt this good before. You’ve got magic hands, baby. I don’t remember anything on your resume about certification.”

She felt her cheeks heating, so she concentrated on her work. “I never worked as a massage therapist. Just a hobby, I guess.”

He leaned forward and grabbed her chin, tilting her face up to his. His fingers were gentler than when he’d touched earlier. Even his eyes were softer, and hot enough to melt her into a puddle. “You took that class for me.”

“A hunch,” she admitted. “If you lie down I can do a better job.”

He studied her for long seconds while her heart lodged somewhere in her throat. With a wide, startling smile, he set his phone on the floor and stretched out on the bench, shifting to get his long frame comfortable. She didn’t fail to note that he kept the towel he’d used on his hair strategically placed across his lap. “Well, then, I’d better think real hard about the best way to thank you.”

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she stood and moved to the foot of the bench. “Getting my hands on your body is reward enough, sir.”

“V,” he replied in an easy voice. “Or Victor, I don’t care which. I might be a Master, but I really don’t care for all the formalities. I’m not interested in a slave relationship.”

With firm, deep strokes, she rubbed her thumbs down the top of his knee to the back on both sides, using cross friction against those sore tendons. “What are you interested in?”

“You, whatever that means.”

Ducking her head a little, she concentrated on his knee. After meeting his ex-girlfriend, she had her doubts.

As though he read her mind, he said, “I apologize for not telling you about Kimberly. She means nothing to me.”

She worked her hands up higher, kneading his quadriceps. “She wants to be on the show with us, along with Ryan.”

“I couldn’t care less. If you don’t want her there, tell them both to forget it with my blessing.”

“Why me?” She bit her lip and flicked her gaze up to his face to check his reaction. He had closed his eyes and his mouth was soft, his lips barely parted. She’d never seen his face so fully relaxed before. He could almost be asleep. *Good, maybe he didn’t hear my insecurities blurted out like a teenager.*

“Did you see my picture at Silken?”

She shuddered at the memory. Not asleep, then. “Yes.”

“I should have demanded they give it to me instead of letting them keep it in their office like some sort of holy display.” He blew out a disgusted breath that made her lips twitch. “Which Victor was in that picture: the CEO of a sexy cable channel or the sadist?”

His thigh was heavily muscled from the years of physical therapy he’d invested to rehabilitate his knee. Dark hair sprinkled across his skin, matching the thin line of hair that led up his ridged abs to the darker patch on his chest. She licked her lips and thought about pressing her face between his pectorals. Would he allow her to breathe in his scent and rub her face on him? “You were all Master V.”

Softly, he whispered, “What did you see in my eyes?”

She clenched her thighs, trying to calm the need burning through her body. She ached, desire humming in her so loudly she was surprised he didn’t hear it like a siren call luring a ship to its doom. “Hunger.”

“That’s why you’re here with me now. Ryan and Kimberly think that picture is just a sexy photograph done as an old-time Western. They don’t see the real me in that picture.” He paused, waiting until she looked back into his face. His eyes bored into her. Even lying flat on his back with a swelling knee, he possessed the commanding presence of an emperor. “They don’t see the man who aches to use that crop on you until you beg me to stop.”

“I won’t,” she choked.

His eyes narrowed and he tensed beneath her hands. His breathing rasped loud in the silence. Blistering coldness flooded over her, along with a sense of his withdrawal.

Quickly, she explained. “I won’t beg you to stop.”

The tension bled out of him, but he closed his eyes, and his voice was gruff. “You will, baby. You will.”

“You don’t know me well enough to make that judgment.” Leaving his knee, she moved to the opposite end of the bench. She sank trembling fingers into his hair, seeking his scalp. He made a low purring sound and tipped his head back into her caress, so she swirled her fingertips along his temples. She drew her fingers back in firm strokes, as though she could pull out every last bit of tension and pain that lingered in his magnificent body.

“Every time I go home, Mama threatens to have my brother hogtie me so they can give me a proper hair cut.”

“Don’t you dare,” she growled out.

He arched a brow at her but didn't open his eyes. Afraid she'd overstepped her bounds with him, she changed the subject. "You should ice your knee tonight to keep the swelling down."

"Hand me my cell. I'm lucky I didn't fumble it when you tackled me."

Blushing furiously, she handed him his phone. "I did not tackle you. I pushed you to get you off your knee. You'd already strained it enough."

He leaned up on his right elbow and typed in a text message. "I'll ask Léon to bring up some ice packs and bandages, if you'll be so kind as to help me wrap it."

"Of course."

He set the phone aside and stretched back out on the bench. His eyes smoldered, but a faint smile played about his lips. "Now you have approximately five minutes to kiss me before we're interrupted. This is your chance to taste me without me trying to bite a hunk out of you."

Love, science, death. She is all three.

Bluebeard's Machine

© 2010 Mari Fee

A Silk, Steel and Steam Story

Determined to discover what new experiment is stealing her husband's attentions, Annette Parker ventures into forbidden territory—his study—only to discover a secret he would kill to keep. She is his fifth attempt to clone the original Annette and, according to his journal, he's planning a sixth...after he dissects her dead body.

Unsure of who or *what* she is, she assumes a new identity and flees to the Orkney Islands and her last hope. The man she once rejected.

Isaac Ward's first instinct is to get this mysterious "Miss Ada" out of his undersea laboratory—and out of his life—before he repeats the mistakes that drove him there in the first place. Her wild stories and stubborn insistence that they're true wear his patience thin, but it doesn't matter. She is as irresistible as the tide.

Then the truth appears right outside the portholes of his lab, stripping away her dubious disguise. Exposing a secret that could kill them both...unless Isaac abandons the science he knows for a second chance with the woman who broke his heart.

Warning: contains mad scientists, wanton murder, identity crises, and boiling hot underwater sex. Submersible instructions not included.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Bluebeard's Machine:

The top of the column was pushed open by a large male hand, followed by a white shirtsleeve stained with ink, and then by the head and shoulders of Isaac Ward himself. The naturalist's long face was clean-shaven, and he had fiercely intelligent green eyes beneath a tangle of brown hair badly in need of a trim, or at least a bit of grease. The beginnings of crow's feet radiated from the corners of his eyes, which grew wide when he spotted Ada.

"Mr. Ward?" Ada's cheeks grew warm as he stared. Dragging her gaze from his was one of the hardest things she'd ever done, but looking at the sea was so much easier than looking at Mr. Ward. He wore his years well. Too well.

She cleared her throat and started again. "Mr. Ward, I hate to intrude, but I'm Miss Ada Powell. I..."

"Miss Powell?" The sound of his voice doubled the butterflies in her stomach. "Have we met?"

"Only briefly. Many years ago." She forced a smile. "I, uh... I have a request, but this isn't the best place to discuss it."

“A request.” When she glanced at him, he was staring at her intently enough to make her squirm. “I don’t often receive visitors, Miss Powell.”

“I hoped you would make an exception for me.” Ada resisted the urge to look away as he studied her. This was not the man she remembered. Time had ground the softness from him, and perhaps running to him for help wasn’t as good of an idea as she’d first thought. He was a man of science, after all. Like her husband.

“Fine. You and Mr...?” Ward pointed at the *Whitemaa*’s captain.

“I hired Mr. Marwick to bring me here. He will return when I send for him. You do have a way to contact the—surface?”

“I have a telegraph.” Ward ascended the rest of the way up the ladder inside the column and stepped onto the platform next to Ada. Her heart thumped painfully at his nearness, and she stepped back without thinking about it. He grabbed her elbow to steady her as her heels hit the edge of the platform. “Careful—you almost walked into the sea.”

“Thank you.” Ada put a hand to her throat and took a deep, calming breath as the ocean lapped at her feet. His hand radiated heat through the sleeve of her tweed jacket, and he waited another heartbeat before releasing her. He was taller than she remembered, and smelled faintly of brine and Indian tobacco.

“Perhaps you and I ought to talk aboard Mr. Marwick’s fine salvage vessel. I’m sure it will be much more comfortable for a lady. My observatory is quite cramped—”

Ada shook her head. “I wish to speak with you privately, Mr. Ward. If you fit down that hole, I am quite sure I will as well.”

“I’m not sure I agree. Climbing a ladder in skirts—”

Picking up her carpetbag, Ada thrust it at Ward. “I am perfectly able to climb down a ladder as long as my hands are free. Mr. Marwick, I will have Mr. Ward send for you when I wish to leave. Thank you for your services thus far.”

“Any day, Miss.” Marwick tipped his hat to her even as he rolled his eyes at Ward, who growled something inaudible in return. The masculine exchange clearly said *women!* and it raised Ada’s hackles, then depressed her. *If they only knew the truth of it*, she thought dismally, then hiked her tweed skirt over her knees, sat on the edge of the ladder column and swung her legs into the hole. A ladder was welded onto the side of the round column, and the air coming up the shaft smelled of tobacco and salt.

Ada looked at Ward, who sighed and stuck her carpetbag beneath his arm. “We still have time to go to the ship.”

“Good day, Mr. Marwick.” Ada gathered her skirts in one hand and threw the majority of the fabric over her arm, then slowly descended beneath the waves. Her shoes rang against the metal rungs of the ladder as the light filtering through the portholes in the column walls became dimmer and dyed blue-grey the deeper she went.

The hatch closed with a *clang* that made her wince. Ada gripped the rungs a little tighter. “I’m not at the bottom yet.”

“Then keep climbing.” Ward sounded annoyed, so she took a deep breath of stale air and resumed her descent. There were thirty-four rungs in total before Ada’s groping feet found the floor.

Ward’s undersea observatory was a living room, kitchen and study combined. A leather couch and a black wingback chair bisected the room, and behind the seating was an electric range with a huge black hood. Copper pans and iron skillets hung against the wood-paneled wall above a massive wooden chest—presumably a pantry—and two heavy bookshelves loomed to her right. To her left stood a lamp with a stained-glass shade on a desk overflowing with papers.

Most wondrous of all were the windows.

There were four, two on each side wall, and behind the wavy glass was the sea. Ada gasped and crossed the room to press her face to the window. The water was slightly murky and she couldn’t see more than twenty feet, but beds of green-grey kelp danced in the current. Darting silver fish with bulging eyes swam in the seaweed, and purple starfish splayed across the rocks. Above the observatory was the dark belly of the *Whitemaa*. The *Whitemaa*’s hull was pierced with rows of portholes, perhaps because of the salvage operation Ward had mentioned. The ship seemed like a fishing vessel to her, but what did she know?

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Ward spoke from just behind her, and Ada jumped. Her heart fluttered as he reached over her shoulder to tap the glass. “Most people never see past tide pools and the fish that grace their dinner plates, let alone *Ascophyllum nodosum* in its natural habitat.”

“What?”

“Kelp. The forests of the deep, and largely taken for granted.” He turned on his heel and strode across the room, depositing her carpetbag and umbrella on the couch as he passed. “Why are you here, Miss Powell?”

The plan: Kidnap H.G. Wells. Definitely not part of the plan: Falling in love.

Stealing Utopia

© 2010 Tilda Booth

A Silk, Steel and Steam Story

The year is 1897, the place, a Britain that could have been, but never was. H. George Wells is helping lead Britain into a new Golden Age, driven by technological advances and discoveries of the human brain. Then one night a beautiful woman abducts him at gunpoint, and she seems to despise everything he's worked for. Despite his outrage, he can't help but be intrigued by this adventuress and her passion for her cause.

Jane Robbins, agent provocateur, has reason to fear her country's march towards a new world order. Using her wits and her arsenal of spy gadgets to infiltrate Wells' house, she delivers him to her employer, who plans to use him as leverage to halt the coming Utopia. But when Wells' life is threatened, she must choose between saving him or sacrificing him to the cause.

Scientist and spy, they are irresistibly drawn to each other even as the future pushes them apart.

Warning: This book contains gadgets, guns, death rays, dirigibles, sexy scientists and a smoking hot Victorian spy who's as much steam as she is punk. Don't blame us if it makes you want to slip a pistol into your garter and abduct the man of your dreams.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Stealing Utopia:

Damn and blast. What to do? What to do? She retrieved her special sal volatile, the one that had put the Scotland Yard man to sleep so effectively outside of Wells' house, and took a deep breath and screamed, "A mouse! A mouse!"

In a flash, Mary was at her door, barging in without even knocking.

Jane stepped behind the maid and waved the vial under Mary's nose, causing her to collapse backward straight into Jane's arms.

"Oh Lord, help! Jack, come quick. Mary's fainted."

When Jack came into the room, he rushed to Mary's prostrate form. With a silent plea for forgiveness, Jane whacked him on the back of his head with the bedwarmer. It wasn't enough to render him unconscious, but a strong whiff of the ether from her doctored sal volatile was enough to finish the job. She searched through his pockets until she found his keys, then left, careful to lock her door behind her. On cat feet, she ran down the hall, unlocked Wells' door and opened it.

For the second time that night, Jane walked in on a man in a dressing gown, but on this occasion she had no time for embarrassment. "Get dressed, quickly," she hissed.

Wells looked up from the book in his lap and stared at her in astonishment. "I beg your pardon?"

She almost burst into nervous tears. "For God's Sake, George, we have no time. Get dressed and come with me, if you want to live."

Something in her voice must have made him understand that this was no trick, for he jumped up and grabbed his trousers, putting them on under his robe without even asking her to turn around. She looked behind her up and down the hall to make sure that no one was coming, and by the time she'd finished checking, he was already at her side, pulling on his shirt, jacket in one hand, feet stuffed haphazardly into his shoes.

She led him down the back stairs, to the entrance to the garden, but then she stopped, at a loss where to go next. There were guards all around the house, and she had no idea how she would get George past them.

George grabbed a raincoat off a peg by the door, a voluminous affair made to cover a much more massive man than him. He put it on, shrouding himself, then turned down the gaslight next to the door, leaving the entryway in darkness. "Now what?"

She spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. Through the glass panel of the door she could see the shadowy outline of one of the guards, just yards from them, standing like a stone under one of the eaves, out of the rain. "I don't know. Easton has men at all the exits."

"Easton?"

"You know him as Mr. Smith."

"Ah." He pondered for a moment. "We'll need a distraction."

She nodded, hands clenched tight. "I'll go to the front, call to the guards, and you can escape out the back."

"What will they do to you when they realize that you've helped me escape?"

Images of Flewellyn as she'd last seen him, giving his wife a kiss before they'd all piled into the coach the night of the kidnapping, entered her head. "Nothing. I'll be all right."

"You're lying."

She opened her mouth to argue, but he put his finger on her lips. "We'll leave together. Where's Easton? Perhaps we can use him as a hostage for our escape."

"Too dangerous. Last I saw, he was sleeping in his study, three sheets to the wind. Overpowering him should be easy, but in his state he'll be a liability."

George cocked his head. "Inebriated, eh? Can we get to his study without being seen?"

"I think so. But we don't have much time."

Twice on the way to Easton's study they'd had to hide to avoid being seen by servants or guards. The first time they'd ducked into a dark alcove, and George, pressed against her, had said, "I know you carry a pistol. Do you have any bullets? Two or three of them? Yes, that will do very well."

When at last they slipped into Easton's study, Wells had loosened the casings on the three bullets she'd given him.

His actions made no sense to her. "What are you going to do?"

Ignoring her, Wells stared at Robert Easton, still snoring in his armchair. "I think I know him. But from where?"

"We don't have time for this."

George shook himself and grinned at her. She felt an unfamiliar flutter in her stomach at that grin. "Right, I just need... Ah, here it is." To her astonishment, he pulled out a silver teaspoon from his pocket and walked over to the large brass clock on the mantelpiece.

"Where did you get that?"

"Stole it the second night I was here. Easton was kind enough to point out that Mary only watches the knives." He turned the clock around and quickly opened it using the spoon to loosen the screws. "One never knows when a spoon might come in handy. Have you got a pound note?"

Jane couldn't quite see what he did with the note but after no more than two minutes he announced, "Done. We'd best get out of here and hide. We have..." he turned the hands of the clock to read 11:55, "...five minutes."

They hurried back the way they came, waiting at the foot of the back stairs. They didn't wait long. Just a couple of minutes after they reached their hiding place, a faint chime followed by a muffled boom and the sound of Robert Easton yelling in panic came to their ears.

Throwing open the back door, Jane called out, "Something's happened in the study. Hurry, I think there's trouble."

The guard from the back came to life, running through the rain and into the house. He barely glanced at George, who looked like just another guard in his purloined rain slicker. "You stay here and watch the door." The guard took off for the interior of the house.

As soon as the guard was out of sight, Jane and George ran out into the garden. They could see the other guard by the garden entrance drifting away from his post, trying to see what the commotion was at the front of the house. When his back was turned, the two of them slipped past, their sounds and movement masked by the fortuitous rain.



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