

For what shall it profit a woman

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For what shall it profit a woman

by [Tanaqui](#)

Summary

As Dutch tries to pick up the pieces after the coup on Qresh and the destruction of Westerly, Khlyen makes her an offer she can't refuse. But that doesn't mean she has to play by his rules.

Notes

Written for SpookMe 2015 and the creature prompt "disease", with one of my [picture prompts](#) encouraging me to increase the body horror aspect. The title is a partial (mis)quote of the Biblical text: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" Thanks to Scribblesinink for helping me iron out the plot and for the beta.

Dutch pushed through the curtain into the rear of Bellus's office, Johnny at her heels. Bellus looked up from her computer screen, one eyebrow cocked.

Dutch nodded in answer to the unspoken question. "We've secured docking privileges for another two weeks. Southside. They weren't happy, but as there's almost no traffic coming in and out at the moment, they're not exactly losing trade by having us tie up the mooring." Between the massacre in the bazaar, Old Town getting flattened, and everyone on Qresh hunkering down in the most defensible spots in their ancestral lands, the Quad might as well have been in lockdown.

Bellus pushed heavily to her feet and gestured for them to join her on the couches. "RAC's got its head out of its arse at last, as well. No one wants to talk about where Turin's disappeared to since your surprise systems security check stunt, but Deen's taken over as Acting Liaison for the Company. They've set up a temporary intake facility on the RAC until they can get the one in Old Town fixed up, or a new one built."

Johnny gave a quiet snort as he settled himself into a seat. "Don't think the Company's gonna be offering us many warrants for a while."

"Maybe not." Bellus smoothed down her waistcoat, before leaning forward to pour tea from an insulated flask standing on the table. "Not as if I want to be sending you off on warrants while your cargo hold's full of civilians, anyway. You managed to offload them yet?"

"Pree's working on it." Dutch accepted a cup. "We offered to take them back, now the bombing's over, but most don't want to go. Can't say I blame them. Might as well dump them in Sugarpoint. We've been trying to find them work on Leith. Not the best time of year for it, but Pree went to one of the labor brokers and pointed out there was going to be a shortage of migrant workers next season, so his clients should secure available workers now. And the visa system's currently messed up, like everything else, but we'll likely have them settled in a few days."

Bellus shook her head. "You're too much of a bleeding heart. Both of you." She flicked a slightly contemptuous glance in Johnny's direction, before turning back to Dutch. "Did you catch the broadcast while you were out?"

"Seyah Kendry?" Dutch made a face. "We did." There'd been a large screen by the entrance to the docks, relaying Delle's satisfied expression clearly and steadily: a sharp contrast to the grimy, flickering screens in Old Town. Delle had announced that she was assuming the Presidency of the Nine "at this difficult time" and that increased numbers of Company security officers on Qresh and Leith would ensure the safety of all Quad residents. She'd ended by reminding all residents of Leith that, despite the tragic events at the Ancestral Hall, the sanguinity rule was still in force.

"Seems like everything's fallen out just the way she wants," Johnny remarked in a cynical tone. "What's this sanguinity rule she was banging on about?"

"Rules of inheritance for the Heads of the Nine families." Bellus drained the rest of her tea. "You can only inherit if one of your grandparents was in the direct line of succession. It's supposed to avoid the blood line becoming too diluted by us common folk. She's pointing out to the Leithians currently squabbling over who gets to be heir that none of them qualify."

"Perfect." Dutch banged her cup down on the table. That meant four families without an heir whose lands on Qresh were ripe for annexation by the remaining five—and no guessing who was likely to get there first.

Johnny smirked at Dutch. "Hey, at least she has the hots for you. Maybe she's in the market for a royal consort...."

Dutch gave him an annoyed grimace. "Ha ha, very funny." She looked back at Bellus. "Did the RAC have any news about what things are like on the ground in Old Town?"

Bellus shook her head. "You've still not heard from your friends?"

"No." Dutch shrugged. "Who knows if Alvis managed to get those bunkers open or what's inside them." She tapped her fingers restlessly on the arm of the couch. "I wish we'd talked Pawter out of going with him. I reckon we're going to need a good doctor with what's coming."

"Yeah." Johnny hesitated and then, a shade too casually, added, "The RAC say anything about any of their other agents who were on Westerley?"

Bellus fixed him with a hard stare. "You mean, any news about your good-for-nothing brother? I take it you two still haven't heard from him, either?"

Dutch shook her head. D'avin had been on her mind, too, but knowing Bellus's low opinion, she hadn't wanted to ask about him.

Bellus shrugged. "Nothing on lover-boy, no. The Rygar brothers were out in their rambler in the Badlands tracking a level five, but they made it back to their ship when the alert sounded. Everyone else was either somewhere else or hightailed it out as soon as the alarm went off."

"Maybe we should go back...?" Johnny looked at Dutch hopefully.

She shook her head. "We don't know that the Company's done." The beep of an incoming call made her fish in her pocket for her communicator. "Could be they'll decide to go full Sugar—" She broke off from what she'd been saying as she saw the name that flashed up. "Shit, it's Khlyen." She hesitated for a moment and then hit the button to answer the call.

"Yala." Khlyen's face filled the screen. "I'm so glad to see you survived what happened to Old Town. Despite doing your best to avoid the measures I put in place to protect you."

"Such kindness." Dutch didn't bother to hide the sneer on her face. "But at least it let me find out what really went down in your little coup. So thank you for that."

Khlyen inclined his head. "You're welcome. Unfortunately, it seems we overlooked one loose end. An heir to Land Hyponia was visiting distant cousins on Leith. I have a level five

Warrant for you to... tie things up for us."

Dutch sniffed derisively. "You mean: assassinate one of the few remaining people who might stand up to you and Seyah Kendry and her cronies? Why would I do that?"

Khlyen bared his teeth in a humorless smile. "Because I have your boyfriend. And though I can't imagine why you'd want him back, I'm willing to return him in exchange for you disposing of the Hyponia heir."

The offer wasn't much of a surprise, but Dutch's heart still began to race. Half of her cried out: take the warrant! Get him back! Who cares about the life of yet another inbred fascist noble? And the other half of her asked coldly: would you deserve him back if you murdered to save him? Could you be happy, knowing what you'd done? Knowing what you'd become? Didn't you spend the last six years trying to run from that? But maybe that's who you really are, after all....

Trying to keep her feelings—the tug-of-war going on inside her—out of her face and her voice, she said, "I want to see him."

Khlyen gave her an indulgent look. "I thought you would." He swung the camera round and down, bringing D'avin into view. From the way his shoulders were braced back, Dutch could tell he had his hands bound behind him and was strapped to the chair. She also didn't miss the Rumari splinterstick carefully placed on the table next to D'avin as the camera panned past it, though D'avin's face only showed purple bruises and scrapes that were already healing.

"Hey, Dutch." He managed a grin.

"D'avin!" Johnny scooted along the couch and leaned against Dutch, peering at the screen and trying to get into shot. "Are you okay?"

"Johnny." D'avin sounded relieved. He hesitated and then, instead of answering Johnny's question, he said carefully, "You remember that conversation we had where you told me you were done fixing things? Well, I want you to remember that. You don't need to fix this." He flicked his eyes sideways, evidently switching his attention back to Dutch on the screen in front of him. "That goes for you, too, Dutch."

Dutch's heart wrenched at how well D'avin understood the two of them. Only Johnny had ever understood her better, and with D'avin she'd had the common bond of soldiers finding out they'd been fighting for the wrong side in the wrong war. More than Johnny, D'avin would have some idea, if imperfect, of what this could cost her.

Pressing down on her emotions, she gave D'avin a stern look. "How many times do I have to tell you? I fight my own battles. And you don't get to tell me what I do with my life."

D'avin pressed his lips together for a moment, his expression turning pained. Then he said, "Don't waste it on me, Dutch. Don't let Khlyen push you around for my sake. I'm not worth it."

Dutch held his gaze. "I'll decide that. Khlyen?" The camera swung away from D'avin and back to Khlyen. "Why me? Why not get one of your other level six pets to do it?" She suspected the answer was because he enjoyed making her jump through hoops for him and because he was, yet again, trying to draw her back in to his world. And he'd been right when he'd said her team made her vulnerable—but she couldn't agree with him that it was a weakness. If you didn't care about the people close to you or what happened to them, you might as well be dead. Taking on a level five warrant, even with her hand forced, though? That was a whole different kettle of fish. How much could she afford to care about anyone else? What would happen to D'avin if she said no? What would happen to her if she said yes?

Khlyen gave a slight shrug. "I need someone with your particular combination of... talents. Our intelligence sources are reporting that the new Seyah Hyponia is very well guarded and no one is being allowed near her who isn't already personally known to her."

"Then how the hell am I supposed to get close enough?" Dutch demanded.

"We have a solution to that. A new technology based on nanites, programmed once they're inside the body to rebuild the outer layers of skin to match the facial appearance and the genetic makeup of a specified subject. It will allow you to pass both a visual inspection and a genetic scan."

"Nanites?" The idea sounded ludicrous, but so did nanites that could selectively torture and fix you, and those had been real enough. Dutch suppressed a shudder at the memory.

At her side, Johnny was quietly protesting, "Dutch, no. You can't." Across from her, Bellus was regarding her sourly and shaking her head, indicating she also disapproved of the plan. Dutch ignored them and concentrated on Khlyen as he continued his explanation.

"We have an aunt who was in Medidas but not at the Ancestral Hall. She sent a secured message to the new Seyah Hyponia a few hours after the attack, indicating that she would be joining her. We picked her up when she tried to board her ship. We can program her specification into the nanites and have you take her ship to Qresh. That will get you close enough to Seyeh Hyponia to plant a genetic bomb and then get clear before you activate it."

"And what happens if the bomb goes off while Dutch is within range?" That was Bellus, raising her voice loud enough for Khlyen to hear.

A flicker of unease crossed Khlyen's face, but he said smoothly, "It would be... unpleasant, but she would survive with medical attention. The genetic transformation is only three or four cells deep."

"And you'll remove the nanites once you're done?" That came from Johnny.

Khlyen took his time answering, but finally his lips shaped into a small smile as he replied, "Dutch will be looking like her old self in no time at all." Dutch took note of the carefully phrased response: definitely not a promise to remove the nanites once they were done. In fact, it sounded very much like Khlyen intended for her to keep the nanites once this mission was over. Part of his plan to transform her into level six?

A glance across at Johnny showed he was frowning, clearly reaching much the same conclusion. He met her gaze and shook his head. Well, if that was Khlyen's scheme, Lucy could put a spike in it. She'd scrubbed the torture nanites from the Aegir out of Dutch and D'avin, and she could do the same this time. Couldn't she?

Dutch mouthed "Lucy?" at Johnny, and he gave her a half-hearted shrug, echoing her own unease.

But if they did have a way to foil Khlyen, Dutch didn't want him to know it. She turned her attention back to the screen. "How do I know I can trust you?"

Khlyen gave her a pained look. "Haven't I always shown you I have your best interests at heart?"

Dutch laughed grimly. "Not really, no." She hesitated and then said, "I need to think about this. I'll call you back."

Khlyen dipped his head. "Very well, Yala. But don't take too long, or I may start asking your boyfriend some... more searching questions. And you—"

Dutch cut the call with a shiver. Khlyen had said quite enough to make his intentions clear and she needed to be able to think without him watching her every twitch and grimace.

"Dutch, you can't. You—" Johnny began to object, as soon as Khlyen's face vanished from the screen, but he didn't get to finish. Bellus leaned forward and smacked Dutch hard around the head.

"Girl, you need to stop thinking with your hoohah," she snarled.

"Ow!" Dutch rubbed her ear and glared back at Bellus. "I'm not. I need D'avin. *We* need D'avin. I hate to admit it, and don't ever tell him I said it, but he's really good at tactical. Maybe the best I've ever met. If we're going to take on Khlyen, I need him on my team."

Bellus snorted, clearly not completely convinced, but sat back and crossed her arms. "I'm not the only one thinks this is stupid." She dipped her head in Johnny's direction.

"She's right, Dutch." Johnny's expression was filled with worry. "I already told you the headline news from the data Carleen decrypted. That it confirms the rumors Bellus heard about gene-splicing and extreme resuscitation techniques. I've had a chance to take a deeper look and I don't like what I see. What if this offer of Khlyen's is a way to draw you in? What if the nanites are the first step to turning you into a level six? I want D'av back, too, but not at any price."

Dutch regarded him thoughtfully, turning his questions over in her mind. Turning over the question of how far she was prepared to go and what she was prepared to do, to get Khlyen off their backs. Then she put a reassuring hand on Johnny's arm. "If Khlyen wanted to force me into becoming level six, he would have done it already. He's had plenty of chances. For some reason, he needs me to *want* to do it. So maybe the nanites are the first step to level six, and he thinks it'll be a way to soften me up, but I reckon he still needs me to say yes."

Johnny narrowed his eyes. "And are you going to keep on saying yes to these little jobs he keeps sending you on?"

Dutch closed her eyes wearily and shook her head. "You don't understand." She'd spent the last six years trying to forget her training and what Khlyen had done to her and exactly how he'd tried to shape her into his perfect little assassin, but she still remembered. "If I say no or ignore him, it'll only make things worse. For everyone, not just D'avin. It always does." She opened her eyes and caught Johnny's gaze and held it. "The only way to beat him is from the inside."

"By carrying out an assassination? What happened to the Dutch who didn't do level fives and kill-work?" That was Bellus, but the look in Johnny's eyes told Dutch he was wondering the same thing.

She was only half paying attention to the question, though, her mind busy with the sudden germ of a plan: *beat him from the inside*. The only way for her to get past Khlyen and buy enough time to have a hope of taking him down—with the added benefit they might get D'avin back as well—was to accept the job.

When Johnny said her name, sharply, she came back to the present. "She's still here." She gave Johnny's arm a reassuring squeeze and smiled across at Bellus. "But I'm going to need your help, and Lucy's, to make this work."

He hesitated, regarding her with an anxious expression, before he gave her a nod. "Okay, I'm in."

Returning the nod, Dutch placed the call to Khlyen.

"I'll do it," she told him when he answered. "I'll take the Warrant. But there are conditions...."

oOo

Dutch slowly walked down Lucy's ramp into the docking bay of the Avignon. She didn't much like putting herself into Khlyen's hands on a Company med ship, but it was the safest location she could find that they would both accept. Better than letting herself be taken into the bowels of the RAC, after all, or landing in Medidas, with Company attack ships patrolling the skies. And, as she'd reminded Johnny several times while they were filling in the nitty-gritty details of their plan together, Khlyen seemed to want—or need—her goodwill.

She glanced over her shoulder at Johnny as he followed her out and closed the ramp. "Lucy's secure?"

"As secure as I can make her, yes." He reached out and lightly touched her arm. "You sure you still want to go through with this?"

Dutch faced forward again, toward where Khlyen was coming to meet her with a couple of assistants in tow. She took a deep breath. "Yes. I have to."

"Yala." Khlyen gave her one of his avuncular smiles. His expression hardened as he looked past her at Johnny. "You really didn't need to bring a protection detail."

"He's here for moral support," Dutch corrected. Her lips twitched as she added in an arch tone, "Doctors scare me."

"There's nothing to be scared of, Yala." Khlyen lifted a hand to caress her cheek and she flinched back. He shrugged and gracefully turned the movement into a gesture that indicated the doors at the end of the hangar. "This way."

A few minutes later, she was sitting on a gurney while Khlyen's assistants moved trolleys with equipment into place.

"So you haven't already programmed the nanites?" Johnny was asking. "You don't do that until they're inside the subject?"

He'd been bugging Khlyen's assistants with questions all the way from the hangar, doing a good impression of an overenthusiastic pet, while Dutch walked stiffly and silently beside Khlyen. He hadn't always gotten direct answers, but Dutch reckoned the small tells from Khlyen's assistants, as they tensed when his questions hit near the mark, or tried to hide their surprise or amusement when he occasionally threw out a question that was deliberately off base, were likely giving him as much insight as plain answers would have done.

And Johnny needed to figure this stuff out. Dutch was relying on him to make the plan work. She'd bought him as much time as she could to study the relevant parts of Khlyen's files, but they were all on a deadline, since the Hyponia woman that Dutch would be impersonating couldn't take too long to reach her niece on Leith. She was just hoping that, once the nanites were inside her, Johnny would be able to cobble together the necessary information and resources.

"What if I can't do it?" Johnny had asked anxiously, when she'd hustled him back to Lucy and—after ordering Pree to take the Westerley refugees still on board somewhere else and quickly—had laid out her scheme.

"Then I'll have to do what Khlyen wants." Dutch bit her lip and then shrugged, not relishing the prospect of carrying out a cold-blooded assassination if all else failed. "But you'll manage. You're the best I've met at tech stuff."

Johnny shook his head. "Carleen's the best you've met. She was way better than me. And Carleen's...." He turned his head away, his face taut with misery and self-reproach.

"I know." Dutch put her hand on his arm. If there was one thing she'd change about their friendship if she could, it was all the guilt Johnny had been forced to take on for all the deaths she'd involved him in simply as a result of by knowing her. She'd learned to live with her own sins, but she didn't think she'd ever be reconciled to her part in his.

He puffed out a sharp breath. "Could do with Pawter here, too," he muttered, already turning away to pull Khlyen's files up on the nearest screen. "Best doctor on that shitty moon...."

Dutch left him to it, knowing that it wouldn't help to have her breathing down his neck. Remembering with a pang how D'avin had dragged her away and distracted her when Johnny had been trying to unlock the secrets of Khlyen's neural link. Today, she'd have to amuse herself.

She'd spent the time until they needed to leave for the rendezvous with the Avignon studying another copy of Khlyen's files for anything she could find on the genetic bomb. Above all else, she needed to know how it was targeted and what range it operated over, but she didn't turn up anything useful before it was time to head out.

Now, as she watched Khlyen's assistants prepare for the procedure and listened to Johnny's babble, she wondered how much information Khlyen would share with her if she asked him. Enough to complete the mission he was giving her, of course, but he'd always seemed pleased during her training as a child when she'd asked questions about techniques or technicalities and wanted a deeper understanding of whatever he was teaching her.

"So will you be injecting the nanites?" Johnny was currently asking.

It was Khlyen who answered, sounding faintly amused at Johnny's constant stream of questions. "Inhalation. We've found it the most effective method for rapid dispersal into the bloodstream." He picked up an inhaler from the instrument tray.

Dutch exchanged a glance with Johnny and caught his nod, even as the assistant who was peering at a screen said curtly, "We're ready."

Dutch reached out her hand for the inhaler and Khlyen passed it to her. She held it for a moment in front of her, and then put the nozzle into her mouth and pressed down sharply on the button, while she breathed in deeply.

For a moment, the inhaler's contents had no effect except to produce a slightly metallic taste on her tongue, and then there was the jolt of blinding pain she remembered from the Aegir: the nanites forcing their way into her blood. She was aware of Khlyen starting forward as she shuddered, and Johnny getting to her first, one arm around her and drawing her close to him, while his other hand filched the inhaler from the hand she'd let drop to her side.

Then the pain was over. She straightened and Johnny stepped back, the inhaler now as invisible as if it had never existed.

Before anyone could wonder where it had gone, Dutch turned her attention to Khlyen and said, "Now what?"

"We reprogram you." Khlyen half turned his head toward the assistant working the screen. "Do it."

For a second or two, Dutch was conscious of Johnny leaning forward to follow the assistant's actions as she obeyed Khlyen's command. Then all awareness of the world around her was obliterated by the agony that spread across her whole body: wave after wave of intense stabbing pain like a thousand needles being jabbed into her skin at random. Inside her mouth and nose, too, everywhere feeling like it was on fire.

She let out a strangled cry, pulling her hands close to her chest and curling them into fists. She looked down, trying to draw in breath through a mouth that stung as if it had been stuffed full of kardra nettles, and saw her skin changing color, taking on a more olive hue. Her face felt as though it was melting in some places and swelling in others; as though glova worms were burrowing under her skin, eating and laying eggs to hatch into more of their kind. She lifted her hands and pressed fingers half-numb with pain to her cheeks and confirmed that yes, everything was shifting and rippling. Her sight dimmed and lost focus, her eyes suddenly feeling stretched and twisted for a long, long minute. Pure panic ripped through her that she was going to go blind permanently. And then everything slowly sharpened and cleared, even as her face settled into its new shape, and the fire that had been lit across her skin subsided to a low-level prickle. She drew in another breath, and it was easier now.

"Dutch? Are you okay?" Johnny had his arm around her still.

"I'm fine." Even her voice sounded different, a little higher. She coughed, trying to ease the rawness in her throat, and let her hands fall into her lap. She knew they were her hands; they moved when she told them to; and yet they looked so unlike their usual color and shape that her brain refused to accept they really were hers. "I want to see," she said, looking up at Khlyen.

He nodded, and one of the assistants scurried across the treatment room and came back with a mirror. Dutch took it, her new fingers clumsy, and held it up to see a stranger's face looking back at her. A few years older, a little flatter and broader across the cheekbones, the nose a touch sharper, the eyelids slightly more hooded.

"Some cosmetics, your hair fixed, the right clothes, and it would be impossible to tell the difference," Khlyen said lightly. He held up a tablet with an image of a woman who, in all the fundamentals, matched Dutch's new appearance. Or, rather, Dutch's new appearance matched the woman's. "Come. My assistants will be able to help—."

"I'll do it myself," Dutch snarled through gritted teeth. She didn't want to be poked and prodded by these people any more than necessary. "You have photographs? And her things are on her ship?"

Khlyen handed her the tablet. "Here. There are a number of images, as well as some background briefings. And almost all her possessions are still aboard." His tone took on a dryly amused note as he added, "She packed quite extensively for someone fleeing for her life."

"Good. I'll make sure I look the part." Dutch slid off the gurney, preparing to fake clumsiness and discovering she didn't have to fake it at all. This body was all wrong: her center of gravity and balance were just enough off that she had to concentrate to move without stumbling. Fending off Johnny's attempt to help, she added, "Besides, I'll need a little time to adjust to... this." She waved to indicate her altered body.

"Don't take too long," Khlyen cautioned. "It's already several hours since we intercepted the aunt."

Dutch rolled her eyes at him. "I'm not going in to a hostile situation barely able to stand and completely incapable of defending myself," she sneered. "You taught me better than that. I can explain the delay easily enough, dodging Company patrols and taking the long way round." Besides, she and Johnny needed to steal as much time as they could before she had to land on Leith, if they were going to make this work.

"Very well." Khlyen crossed to a table on the other side of the room and returned with a box that Dutch recognized as the genetic bomb. He held it out to her. "It's already primed with the Hyponia genetic markers. There's a timer and a remote detonator included, and the range is around two hundred yards. I advise you to make sure you're well outside the perimeter when it goes off."

Dutch put the tablet on top of the box and took both of them, her hands clumsy. Making sure she had everything carefully balanced, she set off slowly back toward the docking bays. The skin on the soles of her feet tingled with each step she took, while the box felt hot against her palms, and her own clothes chafed against her new skin. It would pass, she guessed.

In the docking bay, Khlyen directed her toward a run-of-the-mill planet hopper parked at the opposite end from Lucy. Not quite top of the line, but just the kind of thing you'd expect a lesser member of the Nine or a rich Leithian to own. There'd be a dozen of them in any of the Leithian docks, and it was exactly what Dutch had been hoping for.

She turned and caught the approval in Johnny's expression as he evaluated the ship. Yes, they could work with this. "See you soon," she promised.

He gave her a strained smile. "Travel safe."

Leaving him to head back to Lucy, she walked carefully toward the ship and all the other trappings of her temporary identity that it contained, with the genetic bomb heavy in her hands.

oOo

Dutch made her way along the mobile bridge that Lucy had extended to the emergency airlock on Nieka Seyah Hyponia's ship. In the hour it had taken her to leave the Avignon and rendezvous with Johnny on the edge of Quad space, she'd largely gotten her balance. She didn't fancy testing herself in a fistfight just yet, though, and—as she discovered when she fumbled with the controls that would let her into Lucy's airlock—fine motor skills were still tricky.

Johnny was waiting for her on the far side of the airlock's other door, peering down at a data tablet. He glanced up as she stepped up to the glass window and did a bit of a double take, that was swiftly followed by an embarrassed smile. "Hey, Dutch." He reached out for the keypad on his side, and then hesitated. "That is you, right?"

Dutch rolled her eyes, though she couldn't entirely blame him for doubting her. "Yes, you idiot. And if you don't let me onto my ship right now, I will shoot you. In the crotch."

He winced, but grinned wryly, acknowledging she could have hardly found a better way to prove she really was herself. He began to punch in the airlock code, but he'd only managed to enter two digits when Lucy's voice rang out. "Johnny? Quarantine protocols state—"

"Yeah, we've been over this, Lucy," Johnny interrupted impatiently. "So unless you detect something other than the nanites, we need to let Dutch on to the ship."

There was a slight pause—there were times when Dutch could have sworn Lucy liked messing with her head—before she announced, "I detect no other contamination. Dutch may enter." The door slid open.

"Thank you." Dutch tried to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. As she stepped through, she handed Johnny the transponder from Nieka's ship. "I pulled this for you. Can you work with it?"

Johnny flipped it over and checked the back. "Uh-huh. It's a standard Company model. I've got at least one stashed away in the cargo bay we can switch in." Faking a new id for Nieka's ship was going to be one of the easier steps in their plan. The rest of it....

He looked back up and this time took a slower inventory of Dutch. She could tell from his expression that he was still having a hard time seeing past her new face. "How do you feel?"

"Like someone else." She pushed away from the door and headed for the decontamination unit rigged up in the cargo bay. "Remember, Lucy, you're only to remove half the nanites this time."

"Understood. Johnny has provided me with the device in which they are to be stored."

"Good." Reaching the cargo bay, Dutch began to strip. Her stomach churned as she wondered whether Lucy would be able to get the nanites out this time—were they similar enough to the ones used on the Aegir?—and whether she'd be able to take just half of them out. And whether the ones they extracted would work when inhaled a second time, and how the ones left inside her would respond. So many unknowns, and Khlyen's files hadn't provided the answers. When Johnny had asked, while they were figuring out the details, what they'd do if Dutch's appearance became unstable, she'd shrugged. "Put them back, hope that fixes it, and figure out how the hell we make the rest of the plan work without them?"

By the time she was done with the partial decontamination, which Lucy had assured her had been successful, and had dried off and gotten dressed again, Johnny was hard at work in front of a screen at the other end of the cargo bay. The inhaler he'd filched on the Avignon was standing at his elbow. He glanced up as she approached, this time without any sign of surprise. "You look... like somebody else still. How do you feel?"

"A bit tingly." Dutch rubbed her fingertips across the back of her left hand, which was itching. The itch transferred itself to above her right eyebrow, and then to just below her shoulder blades. She ignored it. "And a bit hot. I think the nanites that are left might be working overtime. I'll be okay." She peered over Johnny's shoulder. "How are you getting on?"

"I've got the frequency the nanites are using and I can see the data they're currently working with. It's simple enough—just your average complete genetic code." He arched a wry eyebrow. "Just a lot. Whether we'll be able to replace it when the time comes...."

"You can't do that here?" Dutch hopped impatiently from one foot to the other, the bottom of her soles prickling now.

He shook his head, still manipulating the data on the screen. "Khlyen's files make it clear the nanites have to be put in empty and colonize the host before they're given the new genetic code. Otherwise the colonization process itself tends to be too violent." He flicked a glance in her direction. "And it looked bad enough...."

"So I won't know if it works until the Hyponia girl's inhaled the nanites?" Dutch wished this wasn't the only part of their plan that was so uncertain. On the other hand, it was one of the less critical parts, since they could change her appearance in other ways. But being able to fool a genetic scanner would make it so much easier for her to stay hidden....

"Sorry, no." Johnny turned his head and gave Dutch a more searching examination. "Still feeling okay?"

"I think so." She was definitely on the hot side now.

"Okay!" Johnny pointed to a small device sitting next to the inhaler that looked a little like a communicator. "You'll use that to program the new genetic code into the nanites once they're inside Seyah Hyponia. I can check it works by using it to wipe the current code they're carrying, but you'd better be on the other ship when I do that, to make sure you're out of range."

Dutch nodded. "I need to change my clothes and put my warpaint on."

"Once I've wiped the nanites, I'll upload the new code into the device. Then she just has to hold the thing and press the screen for five seconds."

Dutch laughed. "Even an inbred dimwit noble should be able to do that. Whose genetic code did you get? Who are you turning her into?"

Johnny smirked to himself. "Bellus. I got her to give me a sample. She was surprisingly quick to agree, even though she still thinks we both belong in the Westerley Central Mental Facility. Said she always wanted a daughter...."

He finished fiddling with what he was doing on the main screen and slipped from his stool. On a nearby crate lay two identical-looking transponders, one of them slotted into some kind of power unit.

"This is the one from Nieka's ship," he explained, picking up the one being powered. "The power unit makes it think it's still installed in the ship, so it goes on broadcasting correctly. You can leave it behind in the Hyponia compound and Khlyen will think the ship is still there. Put the other into the ship when Seyah Hyponia's about to leave."

Dutch nodded to show she understood. She picked up the ID card lying next to the second transponder, her fingertips tingling as she touched it. "And this is for her new identity?"

"Uh-huh. I've programmed in the personal data." He indicated a card reader also lying on the table. "That'll let you capture her biometrics once the nanites have done their work. And it's a genuine Company card, by the way. Belonged to D'avin when he was on that slaver ship we busted him out from, before he got his RAC ID."

"And you just managed to hack it?" Dutch raised her eyebrows admiringly.

"What can I say?" He gave her a fake-modest smile that didn't quite hide the stress he was feeling trying to make all this work. "I'm a talented guy."

"Yes. Yes, you are." She leaned forward and kissed his cheek lightly, once more very glad that he'd chosen her ship to break into all those years ago, and that she'd chosen not to shoot him in a permanent fashion. His skin felt oddly cold under her lips. If the nanites were having a hard time keeping her new genetic identity stable, they needed to do this—or, at least, get her into the new Seyah Hyponia's presence—as quickly as possible. She hurriedly said, "So I think I've figured out how to prime the genetic bomb with a different DNA signature. One of those True Leithians cut himself on it. There's some kind of medical sensor on it that must read the DNA in a sample. I don't know if it'll overwrite any previous samples, but we should be able to add a new one."

"Good." Johnny gave her an encouraging smile. "Now, go scoot while I wipe this lot." He held up the inhaler with the extracted nanites.

Taking the transponders and the ID card and reader, Dutch headed back to Nieka's ship. Once there, she quickly shed her own clothes and made a neat pile of them, and then began layering on the robes she'd found in the ship's sleeping quarters.

Following the exact sequence shown in the pictures on Khlyen's tablet, and ensuring each layer was precisely settled and tied off according to the style preferred by the Hyponia woman, took her back to her days in the harem and her training in the fashions of the royal court. Some things about those days she missed—as she'd told D'avin, she'd enjoyed dancing—and some things... some things she didn't miss at all.

Finishing off with a scarf wrapped around the waist and tied off with the same knot Nieka used, Dutch sat herself down in front a mirror and opened Nieka's cosmetics case.

Examining herself critically under the harsh lights that surrounded the mirror, she reassured herself that her new appearance still seemed intact, though the tingling had spread across her entire skin, and she felt like she was in the middle of a Westerlyn heatwave or suffering from Pleuroxis, with the fever she was running. Still, she could manage.

She was halfway done with applying the makeup when Johnny informed her he was ready with the nanites. She met him in the temporary bridge, bringing her own clothes and exchanging them for the inhaler and the controller. Johnny gave her a sharp look, and caught hold of her wrist, clearly feeling the heat in her skin and her rapid pulse. "You really sure—?"

"Yes." She pulled away from him. "I can do it. Just make sure you're ready to swoop in and pick me up when I'm done."

"We could still leave." He held her gaze. "We don't have to stay here. We can just fly away, and never look back...."

"And D'avin?" She shook her head, not giving him time to answer. "I can't run away, Johnny. Not just for D'avin's sake, but for mine. I have to do this. I have to take the fight to Khlyen. Otherwise—" She held up the hands that were no longer quite her hands. "—I don't know who I'd be, but it wouldn't be me."

oOo

Dutch drew in a deep lungful of fresh Leithian air, rich with the scent of nectar-laden flowers, as she stepped down from Nieka Seyah Hyponia's ship. The area where she'd been directed to land was a grassy pasture stretching away from the outer edge of an estate's formal gardens. Over the tops of the shrubs that lined the twisting paths, she could make out the roofs of the cluster of estate buildings, perhaps half a mile distant.

"Seyah." A stern-faced woman in the livery of a mid-ranking security officer approached her, stopping a few feet away and taking a snapshot of Dutch's face with a handheld device. She peered at the screen for a few moments and then, apparently satisfied with the result, moved forward and held the device out to Dutch so she could provide a skin sample. "Forgive me, but we must be sure."

"No forgiveness required." Dutch tilted her chin up and adopted a haughty expression and tone. "I would be concerned to find it otherwise, after the recent terrible events on Qresh. My niece's safety is paramount." Transferring the traveling case she carried from her right hand to her left, she reached out and briefly placed her right index finger on the device, before drawing back quickly, careful not to let the security officer get too close. She was still burning up, and her skin felt like it was trying to crawl off her body, though it seemed she'd successfully passed the biometric check on her face.

The device beeped softly and the security officer gave Dutch a respectful bow. "Seyah. If you would accompany me, Seyah Hyponia is eager to see you." She gestured in the direction of the estate complex. "We were concerned when you did not arrive at the expected time."

Hiding her relief at having cleared the first hurdle undetected, Dutch paced beside the officer through the gardens. Not hurrying, because members of the Nine never allowed anyone else to dictate their pace—and because she was worried that if she moved too quickly, she might faint. "I had some difficulty leaving Qresh safely," she remarked. "There were disturbances at the docking bays—no doubt more Westerlyn trash—and the authorities had placed restrictions on non-military traffic." She trailed a hand along a clipped evergreen hedge. "How much security do you have in place here?"

"Myself and one other security officer from the Hyponia household. Four estate servants from the household here who can be trusted. The farm workers are presently confined to the outer areas. A number of them are seasonal workers from Westerly and—."

"Quite." Dutch didn't let her finish. She was busy assessing the layout of the estate buildings as they took shape in front of her, and calculating that she should be able to deal with six guards and any resistance from the family—just the cousin and her husband, according to Khlyen's briefing; luckily there were no children to complicate the picture—without too much trouble. Assuming she was on her game....

At last, they reached the main house and stepped into the cool interior. A second guard in Hyponia livery stood in front of a door, but moved aside at his superior's nod. Dutch entered.

"Aunt Nieka!" The cry echoed across the large and tastefully furnished reception room as the new Seyah Hyponia leaped to her feet and hurried across the tiled floor. She looked even younger than her nineteen years.

Dutch put down her case and took the hands stretched out to her, accepting the greeting while trying to fend off closer contact. "Lenara. I'm so glad to see you well." She glanced over Lenara's shoulder at the man and woman, both around ten years older than Lenara, who had also gotten to their feet but were waiting by the chairs. "And that Tallia and Mattus have been taking good care of you, ever since...."

"Oh, isn't it awful?" Lenara's eyes suddenly brimmed with tears. "Mother and Father, Marten and Suraya.... They say they didn't stand a chance, that no one did. Those Westerlyn murderers!"

"Hush." Dutch steered Lenara back toward the chairs, her hand on Lenara's arm.

Lenara moved reluctantly, peering at Dutch in concern. "Aunt Nieka, are you ill? You seem a little feverish."

"Just the walk from the ship." Dutch was grateful that the blazing weather outside provided an excuse, but she wasn't surprised Lenara had noticed how hot she was. "A glass of something cool would be lovely." She directed the remark at the couple, dipping her head and finally acknowledging them directly. "Tallia, Mattus." Khlyen's briefing hadn't given her a complete personality run-down on Nieka, but she knew the woman had been in charge of household management on the Qresh estate—and she knew how the Nine behaved to those even a little lower on the social scale.

"Yes, Seyah." Mattus moved briskly across to a communication screen on a side table and relayed the order.

Guiding Lenara into a chair and taking one herself, Dutch wondered how to get rid of the couple as soon as possible without arousing too much suspicion. Fixing her attention on the girl in front of her, she said, "Now, what's important here, Lenara...." She paused and then carefully amended, "Seyah Hyponia, is that *you* are well and safe. The future of Land Hyponia rests in your hands now. You must be strong for all of us, and do your duty. Your mother and father would expect it."

Lenara drew herself straight and sniffed back her tears. "Yes, Aunt Nieka. But what should I do? You'll help me, won't you?"

"Of course." Dutch smiled with Nieka's features, wondering what the real Nieka would have done. She would have been next in line if anything had happened to Lenara.

Mattus cleared his throat. "Is it true what Seyah Kendry said on the broadcasts? That three of the Nine families have been wiped out? That there are no heirs left under the sanguinity rule?"

"If it's on the broadcasts, I'm sure it's true." Dutch barely turned her head as she answered, making it clear to Mattus that he was almost beneath her notice. She didn't want to antagonize him too deeply, but it would be easier to complete the mission if he wasn't breathing down her neck. "Let us ensure Land Hyponia does not join them."

There was a quiet knock at the door and a servant entered with a tray laden with beakers of lemon tea, drops of water beading on the cold glass. The servant offered the tray first to Lenara, who waved it away, and then to Dutch, who gratefully took a drink and sipped at it.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" The servant had offered the remaining drinks to Tallia and Mattus, before setting the tray down on another side table that stood between two tall glass-paneled doors which stood open, providing access on to the terrace outside.

"Shall I have your case taken to your room, Seyah?" Mattus asked.

Dutch stiffened—the last thing she wanted was the case and its contents disappearing off to who knew where—and then forced herself to relax. "Thank you, no. Bring it to me, please." Not looking at the servant, she imperiously stuck out her hand in the direction of the case and then pointed to a spot by her feet.

When the case had been fetched and the servant dismissed, Dutch turned and gave Mattus a more gracious smile. "Would you excuse us, please, Mattus? Tallia? I would like to speak to my niece in private."

Mattus exchanged a look with his wife but, after a slight hesitation, he bowed his head in confirmation. "I'll make another inspection of our security arrangements. And Tallia will ensure everything has been prepared for your comfort." His tone made it clear he was torn between relief that responsibility for Land Hyponia's future had been taken out of his hands and irritation that he was no longer in charge in his own home.

"Please do." Dutch gave him a cold smile, before softening it by adding, "Land Hyponia is most grateful for your assistance and will remember it once things return to... how they should be. Now, if you please..." She could almost see Mattus reckoning the value of Lenara's eventual gratitude as he hurried his wife out of the room.

Dismissing him from her thoughts for the present, she turned back to Lenara. She eyed the girl thoughtfully, trying to judge her mettle and how well she would react to the news Dutch was about to give her. But there was no time to work up to this; every second increased the chance of Dutch being exposed, either because the nanites failed entirely—fever chills were running up and down her spine even as she sat there—or because she slipped up and said or did something out of character for Nieka.

Taking a deep breath, she spoke slowly, making sure she had Lenara's full attention, "I do bring some news from Qresh. The attack on the Ancestral Hall wasn't the work of Westerlyns. It was a coup that made use of a new genetic weapon designed specifically to eliminate four of the Nine. And now a RAC agent has been sent to finish the job, by assassinating you."

Lenara's eyes opened wide. "How do you know?"

Dutch held her gaze and said quietly, "Because I'm the agent."

Lenara stared at her, clearly struggling to take it in. "You? But you're—."

"Your aunt is already dead." Dutch tilted her head in apology. "I'm sorry. They altered my appearance and genetics so I could pass the security checks and get close to you."

"No. I don't believe it!" Lenara reached out and grabbed Dutch's wrist. "Why are you—?" She abruptly broke off what she'd been saying, staring down at her own hand. It felt icy against Dutch's skin, but Dutch knew that was because she was burning up. She wasn't much surprised when, an instant later, Lenara snatched her hand away and leaped to her feet, making for the door.

Dutch was after her in a flash, catching Lenara around the neck and clamping a hand across her mouth to silence her. "Don't," she hissed in Lenara's ear, as the girl flailed against her, trying to escape. "If I wanted you dead, I wouldn't be telling you all this. And if I don't make the people who sent me think that you are dead, they'll just keep sending more and more agents until someone succeeds."

Lenara went on struggling for a few seconds longer, before she gave up the fight, holding up her hands in submission. Just in time: Dutch was starting to feel distinctly dizzy from the effort of holding on to her. Drawing in a deep breath, Dutch cautiously let go and turned Lenara to face her.

"If everyone thinks I'm dead," Lenara's face had taken on an ashy hue, "then Land Hyponia..."

"...will be annexed by one of the surviving Nine families? Yes. But you'll be alive. And if—no, *when* this coup is exposed and overthrown, you'll be able to return and re-establish your house." Dutch wasn't sure that would be such a great future for the Quad, either, but it beat having Delle Seyah Kendry in charge. And either way, Lenara's blood wouldn't be on her hands and she would have thwarted Khlyen, in a small way.

Lenara worried at her lower lip with her teeth, clearly thinking. At last, she said quietly, "I'd be running away."

"Think of it as a tactical retreat," Dutch suggested. Seeing Lenara still hesitating, she added more urgently. "Look, you'll be dead for sure if you stay. See how close I've been able to get to you. If you run... you may still wind up dead, but there's a much better chance you won't."

Lenara nodded slowly. "But how? They're not just going to let me fly away."

Dutch allowed herself a half smile. The girl was smart; she'd maybe do okay. Aware that she was still feeling a little faint, she gestured for them to sit down again. "I can disguise your aunt's ship. I can disguise you, the same way they disguised me. Or try to, at least." She wasn't sure how well a half dose of nanites would work, or if they'd work at all. "I can certainly give you a new ID card. But you'll need joy, or something you can turn into joy...."

Lenara twisted her hands together in her lap as she perched on the edge of the chair. "I have some jewelry. There are some accounts I can access and transfer—" She stopped abruptly and shook her head. "They'd be able to trace that, wouldn't they?"

Dutch nodded. "You'd have to find a way to support yourself. With the ship, you could do courier work. Or you could sell the ship; it might be simpler." She, of all people, knew how hard it was to disappear completely, when Khlyen and the RAC and whoever was really in charge had their tentacles spread throughout the J Cluster.

"Will you come with me?" Lenara reached out and clutched Dutch's wrist, this time pleading.

Dutch shook her head. "I can't. I have things to do. Here." She rolled a shoulder. "And I need to go back to the man who sent me. Convince him I did what he ordered me to."

Lenara drew her hand away and her head dropped for a moment, before she looked back up at Dutch, her eyes blazing with excitement. "I could ask Tallia. And Mattus to come with me. They must be in danger, too."

Dutch took a deep breath, trying to be patient. Trying to remember that Lenara, while clearly intelligent, was little more than a child—and a terrified child, at that. "Only because they're here with you," she explained carefully. "That's all that's putting them in danger. The people who sent me, the people who want you dead, they don't care who gets killed as long as you're dead. But they won't touch them if they don't get in the way."

Lenara shook her head. "But Tallia's my cousin. She was born on Land Hyponia soil. She's Hyponia blood kin."

"Yes, but not close enough to the main line to inherit." Dutch wiped a trickle of sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, wishing she could hurry this along but knowing that, if she rushed Lenara, she might panic her into doing something stupid that would get them all killed. When Lenara still looked unconvinced, Dutch added, "They've no reason to go after her, or Mattus, unless they have to go through them to get to you. That applies to anyone who's with you. You'll have to leave everyone behind. Even your security officers. If nothing else, they'll mark you out for who you are. You have to go alone. It's the only way. Come to the ship—."

"So that's your game."

Mattus's voice behind Dutch made her start. She'd been so focused on persuading Lenara to leave that she hadn't kept an eye out for anyone eavesdropping out on the terrace.

He advanced through the nearest door. "Get Seyah Hyponia alone on your ship, so you can dispose of her and become Seyah Hyponia yourself? A neat trick, Nieka." The lack of

formality was a deliberate insult.

Dutch and Lenara both leaped to their feet and began to protest, but Mattus didn't give them a chance. He caught Lenara's arm and drew her away from Dutch, stepping between them to shield Lenara. "Don't be foolish, child. Your aunt is looking after her own interests, not yours. If you met with an unfortunate accident, she would be the only member of the Hyponia blood line able to inherit. Isn't that right, Nieka?"

Dutch, still struggling to catch up with this turn of events—dammit, she really was off her game—suddenly understood that Mattus had only heard the tail-end of the conversation. He still thought she was the real Nieka. "I'm not—."

Mattus spoke over her. "Don't bother claiming you're innocent." He gave her a cold smile. "And don't worry. We'll make sure your prison cell has all the home comforts." He took a step toward the door, clearly intending to call the guard.

Dutch didn't need to be her usual self for deeply ingrained instincts to kick in. She moved to intercept him without thinking, her hands reaching for the pressure points that would paralyze him. But unfamiliar fingers and unsteady footing made her clumsy. The two of them went down in a tangle, twisting awkwardly, with her momentum adding force to her already fierce grip. Though there was nothing to mark the moment, other than his body turning to dead weight, she knew immediately that she'd miscalculated. She'd killed him.

Breathing heavily, she pushed his body away from her and got to her feet.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit! Why did everything she touched go wrong? Why did people end up dead even when she tried her damndest not to hurt anyone? Maybe Khlyen was right after all. Maybe this was what she was. Who she was. All she was. Maybe Khlyen knew her better than she knew herself. Maybe—

"Is he... dead?" Lenara had her hands pressed to her mouth, her eyes wide with horror as she looked down at Mattus's body.

Lenara's question jerked Dutch out of her stupor. And maybe she kept screwing up because she kept forgetting the lessons Khlyen had taught her. Not all of them had been bad. Often enough, they'd kept her and her friends alive when things had gone to shit for reasons entirely out of her control. Yes, she might hate what Khlyen had tried to make her, but he'd also made her a survivor. She'd gotten them in this mess, and now she needed to focus and get them out of it.

"Yes." She turned her head as she gave Lenara the answer, straining her ears to see if the guard outside the door had heard the struggle and was coming to investigate. She added absently, "I'm sorry."

"I thought you were here to help me!" Lenara's voice had risen in volume. Dutch snapped her head around, though she still kept half an eye on the door, as Lenara added, half tearfully and half angrily, "I thought you didn't want anyone to get hurt! Mattus was only trying to help me and you killed him!"

Dutch cursed inwardly. She needed to shut Lenara up before she brought the whole household down around their ears. She stepped forward and grabbed Lenara by the shoulders and shook her. "Yes, I killed him. He got in my way and I messed up. And I'm sorry. But what's done is done." She glared at Lenara. "Now you can either yell your head off and bring that guard inside, and make Mattus's death pointless, and eventually find yourself facing another agent who doesn't give a damn about keeping you and Land Hyponia alive, or you can shut up—and let me finish saving you and your pampered inbred bloody arse!"

oOo

Lenara stared back at Dutch with wide eyes for what seemed like an eternity.

Regaining control over her frustration, Dutch thought bitterly: if she screams for help, I'll have to kill her after all, and then this whole charade will have been pointless, and Khlyen and Land Kendry will have won....

Lenara didn't scream. She drew in a deep breath, pulled herself straight and nodded. "What's done is done," she said, echoing Dutch's words and suddenly sounding much older than her nineteen years. She stepped back, shaking Dutch's hands off her shoulders. "What now?"

Dutch took a deep breath of her own, forcing herself to refocus. Killing Mattus was regrettable, but he did solve one problem she'd had to leave entirely to chance: finding a way to provide Khlyen with proof that she'd used the genetic bomb on Lenara. Johnny had convinced her that if she could get hold of a body—an animal carcass would do at a pinch—and use the genetic weapon on it, he could doctor the image record to make it look like Lenara had died. Well, Mattus had provided the body, so all she needed to do was turn him into a heap of ash.

But not here: the last thing they needed was Tallia or one of the servants or security guards stumbling across his remains before they'd made good their escape.

Hurrying across to the doors to the terrace, Dutch quietly closed and locked them, making sure they couldn't be disturbed from that direction. She turned back to Lenara. "Do you have a communicator?"

"Yes." Lenara fumbled in a pocket in her robes. "But why—?"

"Because I'm going to use the genetic weapon on Mattus. Or try to, anyway. I'm sorry I have to do that, but it'll help give me the proof I need to show you're dead. But the weapon might still be keyed to your genetic signature. And Tallia's." And mine, she added silently to herself. "So I need you to find Tallia and get her out of the house. At least two hundred yards from your quarters. I want you both well out of range when I use the weapon, and I need you to signal me when you're a safe distance."

She held out her hand for Lenara's communicator and, after a moment's hesitation, Lenara passed it across. Pulling out the one she was carrying herself—Nieka's—and making sure the devices exchanged details, Dutch added, "Take that security guard outside the door with you. I'm sure his orders are to follow you around. But if he doesn't go with you, insist he comes along."

Lenara took her communicator back from her, her brow furrowed in thought. "I can tell Tallia I want to personally choose a bottle of their best aged hokk for you for dinner," she offered. "The wine store's at the far end of the complex." Without Dutch needing to ask, she pointed to her left and added, "My suite's at the end of the corridor on that side. Third door."

"Got it." Dutch dipped her head, acknowledging her growing respect for the younger woman. "Contact me when you get to the wine store and I'll contact you when it's safe to return. Then get rid of Tallia and come to your room."

"Understood." Lenara began to turn away but paused, taking a last look at Mattus's body. "He was very kind to me, after we heard the news from Qresh. He wanted to help."

"And now he will," Dutch answered softly. She waved Lenara toward the door and watched as the girl threw back her shoulders, opened the door and marched out with all the confidence and command of a true Seyah Hyponia.

While she listened to Lenara drawing the security guard away from the door, their voices fading into the distance, Dutch considered how to shift Mattus's body. Normally she would have been more than equal to the task. Once, when they'd been tracking down a level four warrant and run into some resistance, she'd had to sling an unconscious Johnny over her shoulder and haul ass back to their rambler with him still out cold. But she wasn't her usual self today. And she really couldn't afford to pass out on the way to Lenara's room.

Pulling the strap of her traveling case over her head, she settled the case across her back, before bending over Mattus's body and arranging his arms on his chest. Then, grabbing his legs, she swung him around and began to haul him toward the door. His silk robes slid easily over the polished tile floor, which made the task a little easier, but she was already breathing heavily by the time she reached the door. Cautiously opening it, she checked the hall outside was still empty and, trusting to luck and that the few servants still in the estate complex would be occupied elsewhere, she towed the body as quickly as she could through the door and then along the hallway toward Lenara's suite.

Her luck held: she saw and heard no one during the trip. When she'd finally dragged Mattus over the threshold into Lenara's suite, she dropped his feet and hurried back to close the door behind them and lock it. Then she sank down next to it, gasping for breath. Her clothes were drenched with sweat and shivers were running along her skin. Whether they were the result of the fever she was running or the nanites frantically trying to maintain her outer appearance, she wasn't sure. Either way, she felt like crap.

After a couple of minutes, and with the house still quiet around her, she crawled across the floor until she was kneeling beside Mattus's body. Pulling her case from over her head, she set it down and opened it. She carefully lifted out the genetic bomb and put it down on the floor, before turning and stripping the rings from Mattus's fingers, a chain from around his neck and a jeweled pin stuck through the folds of his robe at the shoulder. She placed the items in the empty compartment in the case and then wearily pushed to her feet and carried the case across to the other side of the room, where a set of glass doors led out to the terrace that ran the whole length of the house. As she placed the bag by the doors, her communicator buzzed. A quick glance showed it was the all-clear from Lenara.

Turning back to survey the room, she decided Mattus was still too close to the door through which she'd entered. Crossing back to his body with heavy steps, she wearily dragged him a few feet nearer to the canopied bed that occupied the center of the room. Finally satisfied with his position, she retrieved the bomb and examined it, trying to recall how the True Leather—Innis, had that been his name?—had been holding it when he'd cut himself. There, she decided: that raised metallic plate must be where the genetic sample was read in.

Lifting Mattus's limp hand, she placed it on the weapon, over what she thought was the right place, and pressed down hard. When she lifted his hand away, she saw a thread of blood across the base of his fingers and a few drops smeared on the weapon.

That would have to be good enough.

Laying Mattus's hand back on his chest, she rested her own palm on his forehead for a brief moment, silently asking his forgiveness, and then carefully set the weapon down a foot or so away from his body. Time for her to retreat to a safe distance herself.

In the end, it didn't prove too hard to sneak out through the door onto the terrace, move undetected past the single guard patrolling the garden below and, by bending low, make her way down through the maze of clipped hedges, flowerbeds and shade trees to the far end of the garden without being seen. Still, she was glad to sink down on a seat shaded from the bright glare of the sun by a trellised jacintha bush.

Once again, she wondered why Khlyen had insisted on her being the one to take the warrant and demanded she use this nanite-induced impersonation to get close enough. A more conventional assassin wouldn't have found it particularly difficult to infiltrate the house and plant the bomb, assuming he made it past the ultrasound perimeter Dutch had spotted circling the estate. And that was surely something any competent assassin would be able to manage. She couldn't help wishing Khlyen and his masters had chosen that route, and kept her out of it entirely, even if it would have meant the end of Land Hyponia.

Dismissing the thought—he'd sent her, and it was up to her to make the best of a bad situation—she extracted the remote for the bomb from the case she'd brought with her. She could have traveled more lightly by bringing just the remote, but losing control of the case would have screwed up the rest of her plan, including her own route out of here, and she hadn't wanted to run that risk. There were enough hazards for her to contend with.

Taking a deep breath, she activated the remote.

From where she sat, there was no sign of success or failure. Sighing heavily, she carefully replaced the remote in the case, pulled out her communicator and signaled Lenara. She allowed herself a few moments longer to catch her breath and then forced herself back to her feet and retraced her steps, pushing herself to remain alert.

She was imaging the pile of ash that was all that remained of Mattus's body—collecting the evidence that, with a little doctoring by Johnny, was going to convince Khlyen she'd carried out mission—when she heard a light tap on the door and Lenara's voice whispering Nieka's name. She finished her image sweep and hurried across the room to let Lenara in.

"Did it—? Oh." Lenara stopped a couple of paces into the room and stared down at what was left of Mattus. As Dutch closed the door and locked it again, she said, in a curiously flat tone, "Is that what happened to my family?"

"Yes." Dutch took a few seconds to capture an image of Lenara as well—Johnny would need her exact genetic signature to work his magic—before moving past her and stowing the communicator she'd used to take the images in the case that now lay open on the bed. "If it's any comfort, it's instantaneous. They wouldn't have known anything about it." She turned back to face Lenara, who still stood frozen near the door, and regarded her critically. "Give me your rings and earrings and that necklace."

Lenara slowly lifted her gaze away from Mattus's remains and fixed her attention on Dutch. "Why?"

"We need to convince your family and your security team that you're dead. I need to make it clear to them that this is you." She gestured at the ash. "That way, they won't come looking for you."

Lenara nodded and slowly lifted her hands to her neck to unclasp the necklace, while Dutch used a beaker from a tray of drinks to transfer some of the ash into a second pile.

Noticing, as she turned away from redistributing the ash, that the girl was watching her with an expression of horrified fascination, Dutch said briskly, "Go fetch the rest of your jewelry. And anything else small and valuable you can carry easily."

Lenara didn't move for a second, and then she swallowed and nodded. Silently handing over the jewelry she'd been wearing, she moved across to a dresser on the far side of the room and opened a drawer.

By the time Dutch was done with arranging Lenara's trinkets on one pile of ash and the items she'd take from Mattus on the other, Lenara was back with a case in her hand.

"Got everything?" When Lenara nodded, Dutch swept up her own case. "Then let's go."

Twenty minutes later, having again eluded the guards, they were on Nieka's ship. Dutch was once more breathing heavily and sweat was beading on her forehead.

"Are you sick?" Lenara asked.

"It's nothing." Dutch flapped a hand to wave away Lenara's concerns, and then hesitated. Best to be honest, if she was going to ask Lenara to use the nanites. She was already sending her out into a dangerous galaxy alone, with all the risks that carried. "It's the nanites," she admitted. "We—my friends and I—had to extract some to give to you. The ones I have left are struggling to keep my appearance stable. That's why I'm so hot." Glancing down, she saw the skin on the back of her hands looked blotchy, bronze patches among the olive. She was glad she hadn't needed to spend longer at the estate house.

"Will that happen to me?" Lenara twisted her hands together.

"I don't know." Dutch set down her case and pulled out the inhaler. "My friend who's the tech whizz thinks it's more likely you'll end up stable but maybe only get a partial transformation." She gave Lenara a grim smile. "And I'm not going to lie to you: this will hurt. A lot. But once you've changed, you'll be fine. I was stable until we started messing with things."

Lenara eyed the inhaler doubtfully. "Do I really need to do this?"

Dutch shrugged. "Maybe not. But I think it will make you a lot safer. Make it easier for you to disappear, for the first few weeks at least." When Lenara still hesitated, Dutch added harshly, "Lenara, we're on a clock here. We need to get us both out of here before they find Mattus. What's left of him."

Lenara nodded, took a deep breath and held out her hand. "I'll do it." She gave Dutch a wry smile. "I should be dead already anyway, right?"

Dutch laughed softly. "Yeah." She handed over the inhaler. "You should sit down," she advised.

It was strange watching someone else suffer through the same experience she'd been through herself. The process seemed to last longer—much longer—from the outside, though it likely took no more time. But it was long enough for Dutch to have time to wonder, as she held Lenara the way Johnny had held her, while the girl shuddered and whimpered with the pain of the nanites entering her bloodstream, why Khlyen's training hadn't been designed to make her callous to the suffering of others. Or maybe it had, and it had simply failed to take.

Then Lenara was straightening, pulling in deep breaths. "I'm all right," she murmured. "And that wasn't so bad."

"That's not the worst bit," Dutch warned her ruefully. Turning back to her case, she pulled out the device that would re-program the nanites, switched it on and handed it to Lenara. "This will complete the process. That's the part that hurts. And I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to leave you while you activate it, because it'll try and re-program my nanites too. And that could get... messy."

"But you'll be back?" Lenara held the device gingerly, as if it might bite her.

Dutch put a reassuring hand on her wrist. "I promise. I've got a job I need to do outside the ship, so wait for a couple of minutes to let me get clear, and then press the button on the screen. I'll be back a couple of minutes after that."

When Lenara nodded to show she'd understood, Dutch grabbed the transponder she'd pulled from Nieka's ship, still slotted into its power unit, and headed outside. Moving as quickly as she could, which wasn't that fast, because God, she really felt like shit now—too hot and as if her skin was trying to crawl off her body of its own accord—she made for the edge of the nearby woodland, looking for a suitable place to plant the transponder. She settled on burying it in a drift of old leaves that had collected in a hollow between two spreading tree roots. That should convince Khlyen that Nieka's ship was still on Leith even after Lenara left—if he was looking. And if he was, she didn't expect him to keep on checking once she'd provided him

with the 'proof' of Lenara's death; the transponder would carry on broadcasting its signal for several days after that, until the power unit ran out.

Turning back toward the ship, Dutch scanned the estate complex half a mile away. To her relief, everything still seemed quiet. Quiet enough that, even from a dozen yards away, she could hear Lenara's stifled screams from inside the ship. Picking up the pace as best she could, Dutch hurried back.

She found Lenara curled up on the floor, her eyes pressed tightly closed, gasping for air, while her skin shifted and flowed into a new shape. Dutch dropped to her knees next to her and reached out and stroked her hair, murmuring soothing words. Her tongue felt awkward in her mouth and her fingers were tingling sharply, an echo of the harsher pain that Lenara was now sharing, as the nanites slowly lost the battle to keep her own transformation stable.

A mercifully short time later—though enough time to make Dutch appreciate what she'd put Johnny through in making him witness *her* suffering—Lenara's sobs subsided and she opened her eyes and looked up at Dutch. "It's over?"

"Yes." Dutch helped her up and took a good look at her. She did now rather resemble Bellus, but more like a daughter than an exact clone. As Johnny had speculated, the nanites, fewer in number, had simply done as much as they could before settling down into a stable configuration. Dutch added, as Lenara tentatively touched her hands to her face, "It'll take you a couple of hours to get used to your new self, but after that, you should be fine."

Swinging away, she took out the last few items in her case: the ID card and the reader that would program it. Setting Lenara in position, she scanned her changed image and new genetic signature, punched the data into the card, and held it out to her. "Your new identity. And a new identity for the ship." She showed Lenara the other transponder. "Both of them should hold good for a while."

Lenara accepted the card and watched as Dutch slotted the transponder into place in the ship's tiny cockpit. "You're leaving now?"

Dutch was now busy checking that everything was back in her case that needed to be and snapping the clasps closed. Not looking at Lenara, she said, "I have to."

"I don't know how to thank you...."

Dutch looked up at her then, and gave her a wry smile. "Stay alive. Stay alive long enough for us to sort this mess out, so you can come home and reclaim your birthright." She hesitated and added, "Good luck."

"You too." Lenara paused and then said, "I don't even know your real name."

Dutch's lips twitched. "I'm not sure I do, any more."

Making her way out of the ship, fighting the dizziness that threatened to overwhelm her, Dutch thought: who am I really? Yalena of the family Yardeen, or Khlyen's Yala, his Little Bird, or Johnny's Dutch? Or someone else entirely?

Making for the woods again, she turned back as she reached the treeline and rested one hand against a tree trunk as she tried to catch her breath. Even as Nieka's ship—Lenara's ship—rose into the air, she heard the alarm sounding from the direction of the estate buildings. Time to make good her own escape. Activating the subcutaneous communicator implanted behind her ear, she hailed Johnny. "Hey, partner. I'm ready for my ride."

oOo

Dutch woke to find herself staring at a familiar sight: the ceiling of her quarters on Lucy. Since the last thing she remembered was slumping against a tree and gasping into her communicator, "Johnny, don't think I'm gonna make it to the rendezvous...", she guessed Johnny must have made it to her.

She cautiously tried to sit up and discovered every muscle in her body felt as if she'd been beaten black and blue.

"Hey, take it easy." Johnny's voice and his hand on her shoulder urged her to lie still. "How do you feel?"

"Like crap." She turned her head toward him. "How do I look?"

"Like Dutch." He grinned at her. "Got Lucy to take those nasty nanites out of you soon as I got you back to the ship. Though this might be a quarter inch longer still." He reached out a finger to touch the tip of her nose.

Dutch swatted his hand away with a growl of impatience that turned into a grunt of pain. "I really look okay?"

"You can still knock 'em dead on three planets." He gave her another smirk.

She snorted, unimpressed, and levered herself up on her elbows. "Did Lenara get clear of Leith?"

"Uh-huh. Lucy says she was well away when she lost track of her transponder. Here." He offered her a beaker of water.

Dutch accepted it and took a sip. "Has Khlyen been in touch?"

Johnny shook his head. "I thought he was going to wait for us to contact him."

"He gets impatient." Dutch took a longer drink, the cool water soothing her battered throat. "Were you able to doctor the files?"

"Uh-huh." He took the beaker as she held it out to him. "I just hope it's good enough to convince Khlyen. But they're reporting the death on the news feeds—blaming it on Westerlyn terrorists again."

Dutch grimaced. "Can't be helped." Drawing in a deep breath and steeling herself against her protesting body, she sat up properly. "Come on. Let's get me moving and then we'll call Khlyen."

Three hours later, Dutch stood in the middle of Lucy's mobile bridge, trying not to show her nerves. She'd insisted on holding the meeting to swap D'avin for the "proof" of Lenara's death on the edge of Quad space. Less chance of them finding themselves cornered or under attack. Lucy, scanning constantly, would warn them of any approaching danger, while Khlyen's ship was scarcely larger than Lucy, so there was only a small risk of them being boarded and overwhelmed. Though that wasn't really Khlyen's style.

The airlock at the far end of the bridge hissed open and Khlyen stepped through, his gaze raking Dutch from head to foot. His impassive expression was broken for an instant by a flicker of emotion: anger, she thought. Looked like she'd been right that he'd had a plan for the nanites beyond this mission. Then he lifted his gaze to meet hers and regarded her coolly. "You have the proof?"

Dutch lifted her hand to show him the data chip she held. "I want to see D'avin."

"Of course." As always, his voice carried both a hint of pride and a touch of mockery: pride that she was applying the lessons he'd taught her and mockery that she thought she could outwit her master.

She masked her irritation as he lifted a hand and signaled to someone on the ship behind him.

D'avin swung into sight, halting on the threshold of the bridge. "Hey, Dutch," he croaked.

"D'avin." Dutch couldn't help smiling at the sight of him. Assuming it really was him....

"The proof?" Khlyen's words dragged her attention back in his direction and Dutch saw he was holding out his hand.

She shook her head. "One moment." Now she'd seen what the nanites could do—how they'd made her look so much like Nieka that she could fool close family—she needed proof herself that this really was D'avin and not one of Khlyen's level six pets dressed up to infiltrate her team. She looked past Khlyen again and caught D'avin's eye. "What was your best memory growing up?"

D'avin regarded her silently for a few seconds and then gave the same wry smile she remembered from the last time he'd answered the question. "The time Dad disappeared for a month and it was quiet."

So far, so good, but Dutch knew Khlyen had the means—the torture nanites—to get D'avin to talk. Time for a harder question. "And what did you trade for... what was it, 'a vigorous handshake'?"

D'avin blinked in surprise, but answered quickly enough, if with a flush on his cheeks, "Johnny's copy of Captain Apex, issue forty one."

"And what did you want to know about me after we had sex?" A question only she and D'avin and Lucy knew the answer to.

D'avin's flush deepened, but his eyes crinkled into a smile. "If I you were a warrior princess. I wanted to know if I was bedding a warrior princess."

Dutch nodded, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. Sleeping with D'avin had been a big mistake, but she couldn't regret it entirely. They'd been good together, that way.

Still looking at D'avin, Dutch held the data chip out to Khlyen. "Here."

He came down the bridge toward her and, taking it, slotted it into a reader and scanned the results. Dutch held her breath, her gaze still fixed on D'avin but every fiber of her body aware of Khlyen, waiting for him to react one way or the other.

He must have either been sending the data on the chip back to his ship's AI or comparing it with something on the reader, because after a few interminable seconds, the device gave a beep. It sounded like a successful beep, but it wasn't until Khlyen said, "Congratulations, Little Bird. Excellent work," that she knew Johnny's fakery had passed muster. Khlyen signaled over his shoulder again and D'avin began to walk along the bridge.

Dutch switched her gaze to Khlyen as D'avin approached, but she held out her left hand as he passed. His fingertips brushed against hers, her skin tingling in recognition, and then he was past her. Behind her, from inside Lucy's airlock, she heard the equal relief in Johnny's voice as he greeted his brother with a laconic, "Hey."

Before Dutch could back away along the bridge toward them, Khlyen reached up and touched her cheek. She jerked her head away, taking a step back, and felt a flash of satisfaction in the hurt that flitted across his face. He dropped his hand. "What happened to the nanites?"

"No idea. Must have been unstable." She shrugged a shoulder. "The effect wore off while I was making my way to the pick-up point."

"Pity." She couldn't tell if Khlyen believed her or not, and she didn't much care. He tilted his head slightly. "I'm sure my team would be very interested in taking a look."

Dutch snorted. "I don't think so." She took another step back. "We're done here. I suggest you go back to your ship before Lucy detaches the bridge from the airlock." She took another two steps backward and then turned and walked steadily away, her shoulders tensed in case he tried to jump her, though she could see Johnny standing inside the airlock with a pistol in his hand.

She only relaxed once she'd stepped inside the airlock and hit the door control. As the door slid closed, she turned and looked back. Khlyen was still standing in the middle of the bridge; when he saw she was watching him, he dipped his head in salute, and then turned and slowly made his way back to his own ship.

She heard the hiss as the airlock completed its cycle and the other door opened, but still she went on watching while Khlyen entered his ship. Behind her, Johnny called her name softly.

"Coming." She swung away at last and followed him out and toward the cockpit. "Lucy, retract the bridge and get us the hell out of here. Keep scanning for hostiles."

"Retracting bridge. Getting the hell out," Lucy responded in her usual cool, deadpan tone. Dutch didn't know who'd programmed Lucy originally, but she appreciated the personality they'd provided, and the way Lucy had molded herself still further to match the personalities of her current crew. "Keeping scanning. Course?"

"Back to Leith Southside." Dutch rubbed a weary hand across her forehead.

Reaching the galley area, she found D'avin waiting for her, leaning against the table with his arms crossed and his shoulders hunched. "Hey. I, uh, appreciate you doing what you did to save my ass."

"I didn't." Dutch began to walk past him, to join Johnny up front—she was too tired for this conversation—but D'avin straightened and reached out a hand to stop her.

"You didn't do it to save me?" His forehead was creased into a frown.

"I didn't do what Khlyen wanted. I helped the Hyponia girl escape." She turned her head and met his gaze. "I've told you before: I don't do kill work."

He gave a slight nod, acknowledging that. "And the proof you gave to Khlyen?" There was an edge of worry to his words.

"Your brother's very good with tech. That's why he's on my team." And suddenly, now was exactly the time to have this conversation. She swung round to face D'avin. "And you're on my team because you're good at tactics and you're good in a firefight. But so help me, if you *ever* ignore my orders again, if you ever make me go through the kind of shit I've been through in the last twenty four hours to rescue your sorry ass, then I will shoot you myself. I don't need to give Khlyen any more leverage than he already has."

D'avin looked back at her for a long moment and then he nodded, spreading his hands out on either side of him to show he wasn't going to argue with her.

Dragging in a deep breath to calm herself, Dutch resumed her journey toward the cockpit. She'd reached the door, meeting Johnny's wry expression as he twisted around in the co-pilot's seat to look back over his shoulder at her, when D'avin spoke again.

"Dutch? When I was with Khlyen, he offered me a place on his team. A chance to become level six."

She swung back to face D'avin, surprised and unsurprised: *what were you playing at, Khlyen?*

D'avin shrugged one shoulder. "I told him I already had a team." His gaze shifted and Dutch became aware that Johnny had left his seat and joined her in the doorway. Then D'avin turned his attention back to Dutch, fumbling for the right words. "I don't know what Khlyen put you through to try and make you be like him, be on his side, and I don't know what you've put yourself through, or who you've had to pretend to be, to get free of him and stay free, but you, the real you.... She doesn't change. She sticks to what's right, even when it's hard on her. She's good people. She's... she's who I want to lead my team."

"Me too." Johnny touched Dutch's shoulder lightly.

Dutch nodded, accepting their tribute. It didn't matter what name she answered to, she realized: she was still herself.

The silence was broken by Lucy. "Incoming message from Alvis Akari."

All three of them automatically turned to look at the screen on the wall, the exchange they'd had not exactly pushed aside, but perhaps pushed down, spread out under their feet. A firm foundation for all of them to stand upon.

"Finally," Dutch murmured, as Alvis's face flickered onto the screen. Time to begin putting the rest of her team back together.

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