Stolen Hearts
Part Three: Suppositions

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STOLEN HEARTS PART THREE

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The sun was barely visible when I saw Kalsa stumble into the kitchen. I couldn't help but grin at his bleary expression while he made a valiant attempt at finding the coffee maker.

"Little to the left, Needle Ears," I taunted. As with his use of Thunder Cop, I was the only person who could ever say that to him. Kalsa responded by way of a short grunt before finding a mug from the cabinet above the counter.

"Needle Ears?" Kit asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, it's just like it sounds," I said while Kalsa sipped at the steaming joe. "No different than him calling me Thunder Cop."

Kit nearly choked on her coffee. "Thunder... COP?!"

"I'm Thunderian, I was a cop, so... Thunder Cop." Suddenly, I found myself thinking that there were now two people who could call me that and get away with it.

"Rinzians all have pointy ears, so my race got called Needle Ears," Kalsa explained.

"Regained the art of speech, have we?" I teased.

"If there weren't a lady present, that would call for the one-finger salute."

"Wait a second, here," Kit said, bewildered. "You two call each other racial slurs, make rude gestures to one another, and you call yourselves FRIENDS?!"

"Between us, at least, they're not insulting," Kalsa said.

"You two," Kit said, "are completely strange."

"Thank you," we replied in unison.

Breakfast consumed, the three of us retired to the foyer. I ended up with the sofa all to myself, with Kalsa in the overstuffed chair to my right and Kit to my left. On the low table before me rested a computer terminal and on the wall beyond some kind soul had provided a large dry-erase board complete with markers. Traditional police equipment.

"So," Kit said as she crossed her legs, "what do we know?"

"About this serial, not very damn much."

"Since we know jack about this new psycho, let's review what we know about the original."

"Because the killer is aping what the Thief of Hears did," Kit said, "we can look at the original and get the drop on him."

"It won't be that easy," I said as I rose from the couch and crossed to the board. "One thing we've learned from the autopsy," I saw Kit's face pale a little, "Is that he's gotten his hands on some information that no one should've. Question is, how?"

"He couldn't have gotten it from Central Archives," Kalsa said at once. "Files like that have airtight protection."

"Bengali got them without a fuss," Kit offered, "why couldn't the killer?"

"Sir Bengali made a legitimate request to the Thardian Parliament," I explained. "Plus, he didn't actually retrieve the data."

"Y'see," Kalsa continued, "when anyone logs into the Central Archives, the server logs their ID and access time. Since the data on the murders was restricted, one would need special access to get it. You log into that database, someone's watching you in real time."

"On my data pad," I said as I checked the screen on the black device, "I see that no one had accessed the data since storage until yesterday."

"Okay," Kit said, "so that's out. Is there another way the killer could have gotten it?"

"The second that asshole was convicted, all of our personal records from detectives to pathologists were siezed. Once recorded in Central Archives, they were destroyed. And," Kalsa said, guessing her next question, "nobody made extra copies. Punishments for that were... strict."

"And hacking is out as well," I said. "The software protections on Central Archives are impenetrable." Silence hung in the cheerfully lit foyer for several moments. Finally, Kit said,

"You did not catch me then. You will not catch me now. That's a challenge if ever I heard one."

"One aimed at us, man," Kalsa said, locking his eyes with mine.

"The fact that we were the detectives investigating the original murders was public knowledge," I said, feeling the faintest tingle of a connection. "Anyone could have researched that."

"The timing," Kalsa said. "Kit, when was Kara reported missing?"

"Monday, Galactic Standard Calendar," she replied. "Missing Persons cases require that someone be missing for twenty-four hours before an investigation can be made."

"Kalsa, you arrived on New Thundera Monday night," I said. That faint glimmer had grown slightly brighter.

"So... Kit, what time was she reported?"

"Um, let's see..." She consulted her own data pad. "10:40 AM"

"My flight arrived at eleven PM," Kalsa said. I could almost hear the gears in his mind turning. "If I'm doing the math right, that means that she was abducted nearly twenty-four hours before my arrival."

"Day one," I said, suddenly ill.

"Day two," Kalsa went on, "You and I hit the town."

"Day three, Kara is found dead." I found the problem. "Kalsa, this doesn't correlate with the exact pattern."

"Yeah," he conceeded, "She was found at five AM on my third day here, but it still fits."

"You mean, this killer knew you were coming?" Kit said, staring at Kalsa.

"It does make some sense," I allowed. "The challenge he left seemed to indicate both of us."

"But," Kit said, "it might not have."

"That's... possible," Kalsa muttered.

"I agree." I felt the connection slipping away. "For this killer to know that both of us would be here, and timing it just right, it's nearly impossible."

"Kayzin, you mean this challenge might have been only to you?" Kalsa asked.

"Possibly. Shit."

"How about a manifest of all immigrants from Thardus III to New Thundera?" Kit asked. "That might give us some clues."

"Good call," Kalsa said. "So far, the most common thread we have is that planet."

"It may help," I said reluctantly, "But nearly seven thousand Thunderians came here from Thardus III, not to mention non-Thunderians. That's five years worth of names. We'll need to set up some filters."

"Right," Kit said. "Eliminate who's too old, too young, who came here only on business... Jaga, that list is gonna be huge!"

"We should farm it out to the Royal Guard and the Population Bureau," I said. "It's an assload of data to sort through and their computers are better equipped for it."

"So, that brings us to Kara," Kit said. "Why did he choose her?"

"The original chose women who fit a pretty basic profile," Kalsa explained. "All Thunderian, all between the ages of twenty to thrity, and all roughly six feet tall."

"Oh, that's just great," Kit groused, "that's only about eighty percent of the women in this whole city!"

"When we caught the Thief of Hearts, he confessed to every crime but refused to give any details of how he chose his victims," I said. "We'll have to examine every detail of Kara's final days before her abduction. He had to have spotted her somewhere."

"We women aren't exactly shrinking violets," Kit said, "this guy has to be powerfully built."

"Not necessarily," Kalsa replied. "The Thief of Hearts was a little smaller than most of his victims."

"You're joking," Kit replied, dubious.

"This guy didn't drag her kicking and screaming," I said. "She went with him willingly."

"So, this was someone she trusted," Kit said.

"Or at least someone she thought was harmless. That's how a serial manages to get his victims. We're looking for a real boy-next-door type."

"Says here," Kalsa broke in, "that Kara worked at a bar in East District. The Pouncing Tyger. Looks to be an upscale dive bar."

"East District is home to a lot of ore processing plants and machine shops," Kit said. "According to this, The Pouncing Tyger caters more to middle and upper management types than to the average worker."

"Waitress," I mused, "Just someone trying to make a living. That's likely where he found her."

"She had a small apartment in East District too," Kalsa said, examining his own data pad. "Rent on that place was a bit more than the average waitress could manage without a roommate. Any bets on how she made ends meet?" His eyes met mine, and I felt my heart sink. I could think of a few ways, none of them legal.

"There was a case just last year," Kit said. "The Guard had been informed about a prostitution ring operating out of an apartment complex in East District. Kara's name never came up."

"But," I said with a heavy sigh, "that doesn't mean she hasn't turned a trick or two."

"We won't know that until we nose around some," Kalsa replied. "Could be she just made really good tips." I could tell from the tone of his voice that he didn't put much stock in that theory.

"But, it would explain how he got her to go with him," Kit spat. It was clear that the thought of a woman selling her body disgusted her. I felt the same.

"Kit, have any funeral arrangements been made?"

"Kara's body will be released to her family later today. Beyond that, I don't know."

"Let's find out. We really should be there."

"That's generous of you, Kayzin, but why?"

"Some killers will attend the funerals of their victims," Kalsa elaborated. "They thrive on the grief, the knowledge that they can do it again and again."

"I'll have Baz find out for us."

"Who?"

"Baz," Kit explained. "He's my assistant. Baz'll be running my department while I'm on assignment with you."

"Okay. So far, we have two leads to run down. The Pouncing Tyger and Kara's parents. Says here no formal interview's been done yet."

"I'll take the parents," Kit said. "that leaves the Pouncing Tyger to you two. Kayzin,"

"Yes?"

"How long did the Thief of Hearts wait until he took another victim?"

"The first two victims were rehearsals, and they were a month apart. Once he began targeting Thunderians, the intervals shrank to about a week near the end."

"This new killer likely won't let the grass grow under his feet," Kalsa said. "We'd better get a move on."

As I've written before, I do not wish to over-dramatize these events. I do not seek to make myself more heroic, more daring, or more bold. I recall much of the dialogue between us for the simple fact that we were all in that tense situation together. It's possible, even inevitable, that I will mis-quote Kit or Kalsa, or any other we spoke with. I tell these events from my point of view simply because I experienced them from that perspective.

Crime on New Thundera had taken a firmer hold in our cities because of what our people had experienced when scattered abroad. Not all Thunderians are upstanding and honorable, and that was true even before our homeworld had been destroyed. Before, crimes like prostitution and racketeering had been nearly unheard of. But, when we all came back together, those lurid enterprises came along for the ride.

Prostitution, in particular, took hold in the industrial sections of New Thundera City and other metropolitan areas. The lure of fast money is a tempting one and some, male and female, would sell themselves for a night for an easy credit. Others would establish organizations which used people as little more than sexual cattle.

A victimless crime, my striped orange ass.

Kalsa and I had never worked in the Vice Squad, but we knew detectives who investigated those crimes. The stories they told us were in many ways as horrid as the crimes we dealt with.

When Kalsa and I entered the Pouncing Tyger that day, we were prepared for the worst.

"Nice place," Kalsa quipped as we climbed out of the compact two-seater that had been procured for us. "Tacky-posing-as-class at its finest."

I agreed with him. The outer facade consisted of an orange-and-black striped awning stood over the glass revolving door. The brick surface was painted a garish red with potted shrubs lined up like diminutive soldiers. The neon sign, dormant in the daylight hours, depicted a four-legged beast with unmistakeable stripes leaping at nothing in particular. The sign was a cheap shot on the theories that we Thunderians had evolved from primitive, four-legged animals. I don't care to speculate much on the theories of our evolution. The present is enough for me.

The interior was as cheap-showy as the exterior. Cheap wooden tables varnished to resemble more expensive lumbers dotted the over-waxed tile floor. Hanging ferns that had no business in a place of honest drinking dangled on thin wires from the ceiling. From concealed speakers came the sounds of decent Rinzian jazz, which Kalsa had introduced me to early in our friendship. The bartender, a burly Lion in a tight black tunic, stared evenly at us from behind the long bar as we approached.

"Beer-thirty already?" he quipped. "I just opened up for the lunch crowd."

"I'll have a water."

"Same here."

The barman looked at Kalsa and I warily as he left to fill two Pilsner glasses with aqua pura. He set them down on the bar in front of us with a smirk. Kalsa and I exchanged a quick glance, in which an entire conversation passed. Tact was the order of the day here, so Kalsa would take the lead. He played the Good Cop better than I could. On the reverse, though, he'd be hard pressed to find a Bad Cop better than me.

"Thank you, Mister...?"

"Lios."

"Mr. Lios, then," Kalsa said. "My name is Kalsa Morgan, this is my friend, Kayzin."

"Pleasure," Lios said with a practiced grin. "Hungry today? The Meatfruit Pot Pie is today's special."

"Hi, boss!" called a woman's voice from behind. Kalsa and I turned as the Cheetah strode through the door. From markings to spots to lithe frame, she was pureblooded all the way. Her attire - or lack thereof - consisted of a short blue halter which just restrained her breasts and left her toned stomach exposed. A pair of tight blue shorts adorned her hips, and were small enough from first glance to cover only the relevant parts. A pair of toe-less foot sleeves of that same color covered her feet up to just above the ankle.

Suddenly, the theory of tips paying the rent had more credibility.

"Neela!" Lios exclaimed. "Little early, ain'tcha?"

"Oh, I'm covering for Marlha today," Neela said as she jogged up to the bar. She glanced at the two of us before continuing. "She's still pretty broken up."

"Yeah." The sadness in his voice seemed genuine. "Anyway, get clocked in. The lunch rush's about to hit."

"On it." Neela literally bounded around the bar and through the door to the back area.

"Full of energy, that one," Lios said, meeting our stares. "What?"

"Mr. Lios," I said as we produced our Royal Guard ID badges that Kit had provided, "we're investigating the murder of Kara Simm."

"Bullshit," he spat, glaring at Kalsa. "Ain't no Off-worlders in the Guard."

"Mr. Lios, we're not actually members of the Guard," Kalsa explained in his best disarming tone. "We're what you could call 'Specialists'. We were commissioned by the Royal Guard to investigate the murder of Kara Simm."

"You specialize in murder investigations?" Lios asked dubiously.

"If you have any doubt in our authenticity, then I would be glad to contact Sir Bengali for you. I am certain that would clear up any confusion you may have."

"Nah, that won't be necessary," he said, his voice dismissive. His eyes, however, became guarded.

"All my friend and I are interested in is the last time you saw her. Saturday, was it?"

"Yeah. Saturday night. She had the late shift."

"Which was?" I asked.

"Four till one," he replied. Four PM to one AM. "Lunch breaks are on the clock," Lios added.

"Did Kara have anyone special in her life?" Kalsa asked gently. "A boyfriend, girlfriend, confidant? Anything like that?"

"She was real popular among the waitstaff," Lios replied, still guarded.

"How about with your customers," I asked. "Anyone in particular stand out? Someone staring at her..."

"Hey, did you not see Neela?" he asked, incredulous. "The girls who work here get stared at all the time."

"All part of the charm," I said, deadpan.

"Hey, I got a business to run," Lios said, still on the defensive, "And hey, sex sells."

I knew, then, that something a shade less than legal was going on in the Pouncing Tyger.

"My girls get great tips for dressing that way. Business, y'know?"

"I know," Kalsa replied smoothly. "Listen, Lios, we don't give a rat's ass about your waitresses dressing in skimpy outfits. Business is business, right? We just want information on Kara."

"I see bunches of people in here, 'specially at night," Lios explained, "There's no way I can remember all of them. Lights're low, folks're drinkin', noise can get through the roof, 'specially on a Saturday. And no, Kara never mentioned anyone givin' her the creeps."

"Okay, then," I said, my voice calm and reasonable. "So, who's Marlha?"

"Another of my waitresses," Lios replied as he began to absently polish the same glass he'd picked up when the questioning started. He was nervous, but about what I didn't know. For certain, at least. "She and Kara worked the same shifts."

"I take it they were close?" Kalsa asked after a sip of water.

"Like sisters, way I saw it," Lios replied. "Those two were damn near inseperable."

"Would you tell us where we can find Marlha?" I asked.

"Sure. Lemme write it down for ya." I heard a faint note of relief in his tone at the thought of us taking our leave. The barman scribbled an address on the back of a business card. "She'll be there all day, I think."

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Lios," Kalsa said as we rose from the stools. "How much?"

"On the house. Don't charge for nothin' without a kick."

Out in the noontime sun, cars were beginning to steer into the bar's parking lot. Each one disgorged a management-type, most clad in now-traditional Thunderian clothes, who had arrived in search of a meal and a drink. Kalsa and I strode to our own modest ride, silent until we entered.

"Motherfucker was hiding something," Kalsa snarled.

"Sure as hell," I agreed. "Wonder what?"

"One thing comes to mind," he said as four more waitresses walked past our car's window. A Lioness, a Tygress, a Puma female, and one who was a cross between Cougar and Lynx clans. All four were clothed in exactly the same revealing manner as Neela.

"They look a little too happy to be hookers," I said as they vanished into the revolving door. Normally, the sight of such nubile young women would have caused a serious reaction down south. Not this time. None of them seemed overly attractive any more. Somehow, I didn't find that to be odd. "Funny how he tried to make it sound like she had no one special then turns around and said Marlha and Kara were like sisters."

"Sounds kinda special to me," Kalsa said as I fished the key out of my breast pocket. "I would't be surprised if someone inside is on the phone with her right now."

"Fuck-all we can do about that," I said as the engine hummed to life. "Gotta be skin. Narcotics haven't hit New Thundera yet."

"Hate to think about when it does," Kalsa said as I put the car in gear and merged into traffic.

The address Lios had provided was in the lower East District, within blocks of the equipment depots for the mining operations. The walls of the buildings out here were a uniform gray, no color evident anywhere except from above. The residential areas here were not designed with pleasing aesthetics in mind. Each structure was solidly constructed, all brimming with purpose. East District had originally been based entirely on heavy industry, with residences being added later as our population expanded. Newer efforts made stabs at being fresh and contemporary, but the older area in which Marlha lived had seen no such aesthetic renovations. If Thundrillium wasn't such a clean fuel, then this place would look worse by a large order of magnitude.

The door opened a crack after the third knock to reveal a bloodshot eye. Kalsa and I put on our most reassuring faces as we produced our IDs.

"My name is Kayzin," I told the sliver of face I could see. "His is Kalsa. We'd like to talk to you about Kara Simm."

"Come in," Marlha said as she fully opened the door. Her slumped posture and slow steps broadcast the deepest levels pain and sadness. The apartment itself was modestly furnished, light dim due to the drawn shades. From what I saw, tips in a place like Pouncing Tyger could pay for a place like this. At her invitation, we each took a seat in uncomfortably hard chairs in the gloomy space. Marlha, for her part, sat on a spare barstool which stood on the foyer side of the serving window of her kitchenette. In her eyes, her posture, we could both see more than sadness. We saw fear.

"What do you want to know?" she asked, both scared and resigned.

"Was there anyone in Kara's life," I began, "who was special? Someone she considered to be a..."

"No," she replied far too quickly. "Kara didn't have a boyfriend."

"Okay," Kalsa said. This was getting interesting, indeed. "So, you can't think of anyone she'd go out with?"

"No." That one word spoke eloquently to us.

"Marlha," Kalsa began, "how close was the relationship between the two of you?"

"We grew up together," she replied in a voice filled with loss and pain. "We spent every day together. We were like sisters. We didn't have anyone else."

"Pardon me?" Kalsa asked. Unlike him, I could imagine what she was talking about.

"Our parents were killed when our ship crashed on Khasis," Marlha said. "We were raised by some of the others from our convoy, but all we really had was each other."

"Okay," I told her, provisionally believing her. "Then, did she complain about anyone who hung too close around her? Someone who seemed to be constantly watching her? Anything like that?"

"No." I could see fresh tears welling in her eyes.

"Tell me, what's it like working at the Pouncing Tyger?" I asked. Maybe a change of topic could shake something loose.

"Until now, it's been great," Marlha said with a ghost of a smile. "The clothes were a bit much, and the looks from drunk management-types took some getting used to, but the atmosphere... Everyone liked each other. It wasn't so much like work, but like... kind of a family." From the bouquets of flowers and the stack of sympathy cards I spied on the far table and the sincerety in her voice, I believed it. Maybe my suspicions about Lios were wrong.

"What about Lios?" Kalsa asked. "What's he like?"

"Oh, he only acts all gruff. He's a kitten once you get to know him."

"When we talked to him," I said, "he seemed a little spooked by something."

"You mean you don't know?" Marlha asked around a sniffle.

"Kayzin and I were brought in by the Royal Guard to investigate Kara's murder," Kalsa replied. "We have experience with crimes like this. We don't know much about any criminal investigations done by the Guard before now."

"Well," she began as she drew her reddish-black legs upward to rest her chin on her knees. Panther and Lion mix? I mused before she answered. "A year ago, a sex-trade ring got busted up here in East District. The people who ran it often went to the Pouncing Tyger for highballs. They tipped great, but a lot of us didn't like the way they'd stare at us. Anyway, once the Guard broke it up, they investigated Lios every which way. Since then, he's had trouble trusting anyone from the Guard."

She was telling the truth. No one, either on Thardus III or New Thundera, was a skilled enough actress to convey the emotions Marlha was. Damn.

"Lios didn't know what they were," Marlha elaborated. "If he had, he would've been the first to bring in the Guard."

"Hey, nobody's judging him," Kalsa said soothingly. "We're not investigating him."

"Who could do something like this?" Marlha asked, trembling. "We were gonna save up, get careers, have a LIFE!" Kalsa and I remained silent as Marlha began sobbing, undoubtedly not for the first time. She cried for several minutes, the two of us placing comforting hands on her shoulders. It was all we could do.

"Marlha," Kalsa said in his gentlest tone. "You and Kara... you were more than just friends, weren't you?" For several moments, her only reply was silence. Until...

"Yes," she replied in a hoarse whisper.

"I'm so sorry," Kalsa said. "The two of you should have had a life together. You deserved to be happy."

"I know it's not much," I said, "but I promise you, we WILL catch this son of a bitch."

"I'm just... so scared.... what if that's why she was murdered?" I could not mistake the terror in her words. "On... on Khasis, a love like ours... it was forbidden. If... if they thought two... of the same gender were in love... they'd... they'd..."

"You don't have to finish that," I said. "This isn't Khasis. This is New Thundera."

"Marlha," Kalsa said, taking her hands from her tear-filled eyes and enclosing them in his own, "We don't have much information, but I don't think that the love you two shared was why she was murdered."

"Then WHY?!"

"We don't know," I replied, "but what you've told us may help. Promise me," I said, kneeling down and staring into her agony-wracked eyes, "that you'll be careful."

"I... will..."

"Use public transportation," Kalsa explained, "don't go anywhere alone if you can help it. Sexual preference be damned, just be careful."

"Her killer..." Marlha managed, "he'll go for more, won't he?"

"We don't know that," I said, hating myself for the lie. I left our contact information on a business card by her side as Kalsa and I made our exit.

"Her parents didn't know anything," Kit said as we all sat in the late-afternoon light which poured through the patio window along the apartment's west wall. "Aside from the fact that she was adopted, we're still at square one."

"The Pouncing Tyger," Kalsa began, "led us to another waitress. Marlha, her name was."

"They were close?" Kit asked.

"You could say that." I elaborated briefly.

"Oh."

"This may be the start of a pattern," Kalsa mused, striding to the board which bore the beginning of an event timeline. Kara's last known whereabouts at the start, the discovery of the body at the end. Sickening as it was, I knew that line on the white board would grow before all was said and done.

"You mean this killer will only target homosexuals?"

"I don't think so," I replied. "Kalsa, that's a pretty shaky idea."

"Not really," he said in return. "We all know that this can't be the Thief of Hearts. Kara's sexual preference may in fact have something to do with why she was chosen."

"Okay, I'll give it to you." I shrugged. "But I still think that's not the case here."

"The only way we'll know for sure," Kit said with a shudder, "is when the next victim is found." The silence afterward hung in the air, a choking, noxious presence.

"Any word on the funeral" I asked. It wasn't much of a change of topic, but it was something.

"Tomorrow, ten sharp," Kit said.

On Thundera, the passing from one life to the next isn't usually a cause for somber mourning. When one has lived a full and rich life, surrounded by friends and family, death is seen as merely a transition. The deceased merely passes on to the Astral Plane and what has come before, there to await the coming of those who remain behind. Those still on this mortal coil celebrate the life once lived, trading fond memories and warm stories. Even mistakes made seem humorous in such hindsight.

As we entered the home of Kara Simm's adoptive parents, however, we saw none of that. We hadn't expected to. Kara's life, while perhaps full, was cut far too short and in a way that could only politely be described as barbaric. Instead of the buzz of conversation was a palpable aura of

despair and disbelief, mixed with horror and outrage. In place of bright colors, black and muted grays were apparent. How could anyone celebrate a life ended like this?

Kalsa and I cast glances about as we moved between the gathered mourners, searching for anything out of place. Some look that wasn't quite right. The feeling of being out of place was strong that morning, as though all gathered were willing us to leave, telling us we didn't belong. I have to admit, I felt slightly ghoulish prowling Kara's funeral for clues as to why she'd been murdered.

At least we had dressed appropriately, with charcoal-colored pants and jackets over white button-down shirts and dull ties. Kalsa garnered even more glances than I did, naturally. An off-worlder, in thier eyes, really had no business there. Kalsa caught on quickly, I saw, shooting a glance at me before moving off to where Kit stood with Kara's parents.

She had selected a deep black knee-length dress, coupled with a plain white blouse and a jacket to match the dress. Sheer hoseiry adorned her legs, and a pair of dark pumps adorned her feet. Before her stood a Tygress, trembling with grief. Her husband, a humanoid with deep violet hair and golden eyes, kept a comforting arm about his wife's shoulders. In his face I saw a look I'd seen more times than I care to consider. Outwardly strong, poised, yet I knew that to be just a fragile facade.

"If you need anything..."

"Thank you, Lady WilyKit, Kara's mother said. Her father locked eyes with me, seeming for all the world stern and powerful.

"You are aiding in the investigation," he said. It was not a question.

"We are," I said back as Kalsa came to my side.

"Catch this son of a bitch," her father said simply.

"We will," Kalsa replied. With that, the three of us made our exit.

"Well, that was a dry hole," I groused as we exited into the mid-morning sun.

"We both knew it would be," Kalsa added, leading the way to our car. "Still, we had to check."

"We have an appointment with Sir Bengali," Kit said as she motioned Kalsa into the rear seat of the car. "It's best not to keep him waiting."

"What could he want?" Kalsa said as I keyed the engine into life.

"Nothing major," Kit replied. "He just wants to touch base."

"I said..." Sir Begali snarled into the handset as we entered his office. "The Royal Guard wishes you to limit broadcasts of this case to avoid a panic." We said nothing as we entered the obviously agitated Bengali's office. "I know about the Free Press Act... You also know of the Crisis Information Act... Fine. You also know of the Royal Information Act?"

Bengali listened patiently to an argument we couldn't hear.

"Okay, look, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. Easy way, you cooperate with me. Hard way...Yes, Lord Lion-O would get involved, and you... Making program decisions in the backwater of Third Earth. So, what's it gonna be?" Bengali listened for a few moments before his features began to soften. "Good. Huh? What can I tell you? So what? Relax, bend over, and try to enjoy it."

"Umm... Okayyy..." Kit said dubiously.

"The media's getting more uppity by the day," Sir Bengali snarled after replacing the handset. "There was a time when people would've understood what hampering an investigation meant. To think I had to resort to a threat."

I understood that all too well. The press on Thardus III sank to any depth necessary to dig up information on the Thief of Hearts, regardless of whether or not said information was true. Most people never clued into the fact that many of the "confidential sources" were assholes hoping for fifteen minutes of fame or addicts hoping for an easy fix of their favorite mindsoap. It had gotten so out of hand that any hope of using the press as a stalking horse - either to force the Thief to make contact or a mistake - had flown out the window.

Don't get me wrong, a free press is a fine thing. Even though that means uninformed asshats can run tabloid garbage, I have the option of not reading it. New Thundera's press hadn't sank to the lows of Thardus III, but it was slowly getting there.

"Tell me you have something," Sir Bengali said, his voice haggard.

"Not much," Kit replied.

"I thought so," Sir Bengali replied with a weary sigh. "I've been going over your casework on the Thief." His ice chip eyes locked on us. "Pumyra told me of the autopsy. This killer followed the original's method to a tee."

"We don't know how he got that information," Kalsa said. "We're working on it."

"Some enterprising fool in the media put two and two together," Bengali growled. "Found out about Thardus III. I've spent the better part of the morning convincing the news organizations to keep a lid on it. But," he plucked a data pad from the surface of his desk and handed it to Kit as she approached, "that's not all."

"So soon?" she asked incredulously as Kalsa and I examined the information with her. Lenneth... no surname. Twenty-two years old, six-one, weight one-twenty... as I read on, I felt my heart sink even further into my chest. Black hair with streaks of red which hung to her shoulders, bright eyes... Defintely Wildcat.

"This bastard doesn't like to wait," Kalsa snarled. "Cocky son of a bitch."

"Says here she was reported by her fiancee... her *arranged* fiancee." I read the information myself after Kit spoke.

"Cold feet, maybe?" Kalsa asked, hopeful.

"Eloped?" Kit followed.

It was possible. Arranged marriages had long since fallen out of favor, given how few of them ever worked out. Even the ThunderCats, who were notorious throughout history for marriages of convenience to maintain purity of the bloodlines, had shelved the tradition. It certainly cut down on adultery and the scandals that came with.

"I have every available guardsman knocking on doors and forming search parties," Sir Bengali spoke up. "I hope she isn't the next victim. She fits the profile."

"That she does," I said in reply as I scrolled the data down. Lenneth resided in the East District, I found out, where she worked the reception desk for Royal Mark Financial's main branch. "Assuming she's the next victim, I'm beginning to see a pattern."

"Receptionist. Waitress. Low-paying jobs. Pretty anonymous," Kit said with dawning realization. "People you generally don't remember."

"Could be that's how he's scouting his victims," Kalsa offered. "I mean, sure they're background, but they're also the first people you see when you walk into a bar or an office complex."

"Either way," Sir Bengali said as he rose from his chair, "we can't be certain about any of this. We don't even know if she's the next victim."

"You're right," Kit said as she switched off the data pad. "We just have to find her."

And find her, we did.

Three days later.
