Stolen Hearts
Part Four: The Darker Side of Day

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Stolen Hearts

The Darker Side of Day

When I last left off from this narrative, a Wildcat by the name of Lenneth had been reported missing. Kit, Kalsa, and myself returned to our investigation into the murder of Kara Simm. The case of Lenneth's disappearance was under the purview of the Royal Guard and did not concern us. There is no need to write down how we chased our tails, developing conjecture rather than new leads. With no new forensic evidence, no new witnesses, no new *anything*, we were coming no closer to identifying this pseudo-Thief of Hearts. Our frustration grew with the knowledge that what we needed would likely come from another victim.

Nothing about police work is ever easy, aside from directing traffic and writing parking citations and even those came with their own perils. Chasing a serial killer required massive reserves of patience and intestinal fortitude. Even with the Royal Guard's manpower and resources, even with the blank check Lord Lion-O had cut us to catch this monster, I couldn't change the fact that serials were never caught with the first victim.

It still didn't make the call from Sir Bengali any easier to take.

"We got the call before first light," a Sabertooth Guardsman who had identified himself as Garras said as he led us into the shadow-cast alley. Patrol cars had been parked at the entrance to the dead-end (excuse the term) passage between two office buildings whose purpose I had no interest in. "Commander Bengali ordered us to give you our full cooperation."

"Thank you," I replied as Kalsa and Kit walked to my left and right. The alley was relatively clean, very little garbage dotted the paved surface and no graffitti was evident. We weren't close enough to the outlying areas of New Thundera City to see any of that.

Surrounding an open dumpster were several members of the Royal Guard's crime scene investigators, CSIs. Each held a recording deivce, taking still shots of the dumpster and

surrounding area. The shrouded form atop the heap of bagged trash drew our eyes, and we steeled ourselves to behold what lay beneath the cover.

"We've found no evidence other than... well, that," a CSI said, pointing to the covered victim. "Do you..."

"Yes," I said, accepting a pair of gloves and easing them on. After Kit and Kalsa donned pairs of their own, I grasped the corner of the slate-gray sheet and gently pulled it back.

"Jaga..." Kit gasped in abject horror. The eyes were still open, already becoming milky and clouded. Her once-lovely face was bruised, lined with fine cuts and dried blood and frozen in a rictus of the purest agony. The ruin of her torso bore numerous wounds and lesions.

Aside from the gaping hole just under her left breast.

"Didn't even wait two whole days," Kalsa breathed. "Bastard's impatient." I said nothing. Kalsa and I both knew that would work in our favor. This also gave further evidence to the obvious. This killer was not the original Thief as he'd have us believe. The real Thief never moved this quickly. I replaced the cover, knowing that we'd see her again soon enough, when I spotted the contour of the lower half. He hadn't even given her the dignity of closing her damn legs. He wanted us to see every aspect of how he had used Lenneth before disposing of her like so much detritus. Bastard.

"The one who found her's over there," Garras said, motioning to a lanky Cheetah who sat in the open driver's compartment of the large and boxy garbage truck. His head hung nearly between his knees, wide eyes staring blankly at the pavement. "I don't envy him, either."

"Sir?" As we approached, I could smell the sickly-sour aroma of fresh vomit. I couldn't fault the man.

"Yeah?" His voice was thick and heavy, as though he could blow chunks again at a moment's notice.

"We're told you found the victim," Kalsa began. Though we knew the body had once been Lenneth, it wouldn't be official until a positive ID was made.

"Y...yeah..."

"Just take a deep breath," Kit advised gently as we each took a half-step back. The day had begun badly enough without getting puked on.

"Ugh... oh, man..."

"Let's start with your name."

"Ezrix," he replied looking up at us for the first time. His face was pale beneath the usual facial markings of Cheetahs, his spotted blonde mane cut short. "A ThunderCat?!" he exclaimed on seeing the insignia between Kit's breasts.

"I'm assisting with the investigation," she replied. "My name is WilyKit. This is Kalsa Morgan and Kayzin."

"Mister Ezrix, did you notice anything out of the ordinary..."

"What, aside from a dead girl with a fucking *hole* in her chest?!" Ezrix nearly screamed, cutting Kalsa off before bowing his head and gagging.

"Did you see anyone enter or leave the alley?" I asked. "Or spot any vehicles leaving the area?"

"No," he replied at length, having managed not to coat his shoes. "I pulled in about a half hour ago, just my normal route, like. When I got to the dumpster and... and saw that... I called dispatch and they called the Guard."

"I see. Mister Ezrix, if you think of anything please don't hesitate to call us," I said, handing him out contact information.

"Hate to disappoint ya, chief, but I'm gonna do all I can *not* to think about this." Again, I couldn't fault him.

The CSIs had just bagged Lenneth's body when we walked back to the dumpster. On finding the coroner, I asked about a time of death.

"The body certainly hasn't been here long," the Puma said, "and there was no rigor. I'd have to estimate time of death to be between midnight and, say, two." The first rays of the sun were now bathing the street beyond our gloomy corridor of horrors.

"Ezrix must've just missed him," Kalsa spat in disgust. "If he'd been a few minutes earlier..."

"Fuck-all we can do about that," I said with a hand on my friend's shoulder.

"Yes." We turned to see Kit speaking into her communicator, right arm cocked to keep it firmly to her ear. "Yes. I understand. I'll tell them." The conversation apparently over, she folded the communicator shut and placed it in the holster on her belt before fixing us with a stony expression.

"Problem?" Kalsa asked.

"Commander Bengali wants us to attend the autopsy."

"We were planning to, anyway."

"Hell of a way to start the morning, that's for sure."

"Afterward, he wants us to report to him."

"I hate to break it to you," I said, "but we probably won't have very much to tell him."

"I'm aware of that."

"Hey, you okay, Kit?" Kalsa asked, puzzled.

"I'm fine. Really."

"If you want to sit the autopsy out..."

"No, Kayzin. I'm in this all the way." The look on her face, though, told me the truth. "And I won't get sick this time," she added with a forced grin.

"We'll hold you to that," Kalsa replied as we made for the car.

Fifteen minutes into the autopsy, and Kit was keeping her word.

"Blood samples collected and will be sent for Toxicology and Serology scans," Lady Pumyra said as she continued her examination of what had once been a healthy young woman. "Striations about the limbs and torso show a braided pattern. Subject had been bound with rope."

Which, again, told us nothing. Rope could be procured in any one of a hundred places just within New Thundera City alone. Rock climbing had always been a pastime of our people but even with our agility and strength, sometimes we needed a little help reaching the highest heights.

"Why ropes?" Kit asked in a surprisingly steady voice. She had applied extra menthol to her upper lip, I noticed. "I mean, wouldn't chains be better for restraining someone?"

"Rope's cheap and easy to get," Kalsa explained. "And plenty strong enough to keep someone from going anywhere. Besides, how many places on New Thundera can you walk in and buy shackles?"

"You'd be surprised," Lady Pumyra said in all seriousness.

"And the original Thief used it exclusively," I added. "Kalsa, isn't that one of the details we kept from the press?"

"I think so. I'd have to check."

"Wait a sec... Pumyra?" Kit stared at her as though she'd never seen her before.

"My husband *is* the commander of the Royal Guard. I've heard stories."

"Oh...kay..."

I merely shrugged. Different strokes for different folks, as they say.

As Lady Pumyra examined Lenneth's sex for signs of abuse, of which there were plenty, I kept as tight a reign on my anger as I could. Even on Thardus III, with all the displays of depravity and lunacy Kalsa and I'd dealt with, neither of us ever truly understood what could drive anyone to such acts of barbarism. Mutants were one thing; bloodshed and destruction was in their genes, but even they wouldn't take the time to savage someone like this. Wounds like Lady Pumyra was catalogueing were inflicted with precision, even a perverse form of care. Even Ratar-O, one of the most sadistic Mutant warlords in recent history, wouldn't do something like this.

"Bruising and tearing evident in vaginal and rectal cavities, severe bruising of the genital area. Blood found, again no semen."

I found myself recalling, then, the one tiny event which led to the downfall of the Thief of Hearts. His twentieth victim, not much different from poor Lenneth, had been his last due to semen found inside her from - of all things - a torn condom. From that, our labs had been able to generate a genetic profile, which put a face to what had long been in the public's and the media's eyes a formless terror. An identification soon followed, then the arrest, and everything else fell right into place.

"We can't wait for the rubber to break on this one," Kalsa muttered. I nodded my head in agreement.

"Say what?" Kit asked, puzzled. I explained to the two ThunderCats.

"I agree." Lady Pumyra's voice was flat, detached. "A faulty prophylactic won't come soon enough." Not that it would matter overmuch. We had only been on the threshold of genetic science when Old Thundera had exploded, and the research was only recently coming up to speed. We wouldn't be able to extrapolate a face with what technology we had, and there was no guarantee the parliament on Thardus III would allow us the aid of their labs. Even so, there was no telling how long it would take to receive the results if they did.

"It appears that the genital area, as with the previous victim, is the target of the most abuse. Our resident psychologist has some theories on that. It will be in my report to Commander Bengali. Rotating the body."

Jaga's beard...

As before, her back had been mutilated, this time with welts from what had to have been a barbed whip. Across the lower part, however, were words that siezed my heart in a fist of ice:

"THE RULES HAVE CHANGED. THE GAME BEGINS. WELCOME TO THE NEXT LEVEL."

"Oh, hell..." Kalsa's voice was a hoarse whisper.

The brilliant shaft of sunlight was a counterpoint to the bleak mood in Commander Bengali's office that morning. Each of us sat in soft chairs opposite Bengali's position behind his desk. A look at the clock hung on the wall to my left showed nine-fifteen AM. Not even noon and the day had already gone to shit.

"According to Dr. Ocellis," Sir Bengali began, staring at his data pad, "the savage injuries to the genital area are possible indicators of jealousy and envy."

"And here I thought he was just crazy," Kit snapped. "Why the hell would he be envious?"

"It's possible," Kalsa said. "There were men like that on Thardus III. Thought they were supposed to have been women."

"You have got to be kidding me."

"'Fraid not, Kit," I added. "Some of them undergo surgery to become female."

"Pumyra never told me about any such surgery," Bengali said, his disbelief palpable.

"Well, the thing is, it ain't easy to get," Kalsa explained. "I don't know the details, but I know there's a certain psych test you gotta take. The operation's irreversable, so guys who go through it have to be totally prepared. A lot don't qualify."

"Anyway," Bengali replied, quickly getting the meeting back on track. "Dr. Ocellis believes that the subject tortures his victims this way to vent his frustration over not being able to possess what he truly wants. Thoughts?"

"He's a psycho," Kit said at once.

"I don't think so," I said back.

"Oh, really?" The expression on her face was a mixture of scathing and incredulous. "Tell me, what kind of *sane* person would do something like this?!"

"Yes, do tell," Sir Bengali added. I had to remind myself that neither ThunderCat had any experience with serials. Fortunately, Kalsa went first.

"This fucker's out of his head, no question. What you have to keep in mind is that there's more than one type of lunatic."

"Huh?" both replied in unison.

"Kit called him a "psycho". Psychopaths are people who can't deal with reality, so they create their own. Their actions are in accordance with the rules they make for themselves. There's a lot of outward signs of psychosis, as I'm sure you know."

"Most serials," Kalsa said, picking up the thread again, "are what shrinks on Thardus III called sociopaths. They *can* deal with reality, and know how to blend in. They know the rules, but they just don't give a shit."

"What makes a serial so hard to catch is that they can function in ordinary society. They can pass themselves off as average, every day people. Good people, very nice and polite. They show the proper emotions for the occaision, even though they don't really feel them. The only time these bastards really feel anything is when they're with their victims."

"Great Jaga..." Bengali breathed after a span of moments.

"Who do you trust?" Kit said next, a tremor of fear in her voice. "Just like you said earlier, Kara went willingly. I bet Lenneth did, too."

"No doubt," Kalsa replied.

"If this gets out..."

"We'll probably have to let the media leak some of it," I said. "But, if they're allowed to run wild with this..."

"You don't need to finish that."

One beauty of living in a monarchy; Lord Lion-O could easily gag the media. Again, freedom of the press is a fine thing, but it can be a real double-edged sword. Kalsa and I learned that back on Thardus III.

"Okay. Given what you know about the original killer, what conclusions can you draw from this?"

"First thing, Sir Bengali, he's financially well-off. Secure, at the very least."

"How can you tell?" Kit asked.

"Both victims lived in different parts of the city," Kalsa explained. "Kara Simm in South District, Lenneth in East. I haven't been here long, but I checked a map and the two dump sites are a good distance apart."

"Which means he has personal transportaion," I said next. Most residents of the NTC worked in the same district in which they lived. Given the expenses of owning and operating a vehicle, many chose public transports. Those who had a little money to burn and didn't want to share a bus with twenty or so others would use a taxi. "Which means a pretty good career. Hence, financial stability."

"That makes sense," Kit replied. "After all, you can't really call a cab with a..." Her eyes widened in realization. "That might be it!"

"What?"

"What if the killer's a taxi driver?"

"That's... possible."

"There's something to that," Kalsa agreed.

"Yeah!" I could almost feel the excitement in her voice, like a live wire connecting us. "It'd be perfect for kidnapping his victims!"

"And transporting the bodies after," I chipped in. Maybe we were on to something. Sir Bengali, however, put paid to it.

"But what about scouting and stalking his victims?" he asked. "I know a thing or two about tailing someone. You have to stay on them until you learn their patterns. Driving a taxi, you're constantly on the move."

"He could be tailing them in his off hours," I argued, unwilling to let this potential lead slip through my fingers. "Someone who fits the profile gets in his cab, he drives her home..."

"All he has to do is remember the address and follow her when he's off duty!" Kit finished.

"Sir Bengali does have a good point, though," Kalsa chimed in. "Even if he's tailing them in his off hours, this mutt's gotta sleep sometime. And, I don't think he'd be dumb enough to use his cab to follow a victim around. Too many markings on it."

"Come on," Kit replied. "Who notices a taxi? There's lots of them."

"All taxis have locater modules installed, per royal decree," Bengali said, "so the individual companies can keep track of their vehicles. There are three taxi companies in South District, and two in East. I'll ask around, see if any have been used when off duty. I'll check North and West as well, just in case."

"If you would, Sir Bengali, find out how much their drivers pull down. If our boy's a driver, we need to know if he makes enough to afford his own ride."

A lot of detective work is speculation and theory. The only problem is that people don't fit theories very well.

"Kayzin?"

"Yeah, Kit?"

"The original Thief had a job?"

"Driver for a delivery service," I replied with a chill. "We don't know if our boy's a cab driver for sure, though."

"I read that the first killer used a defunct storage facility for his crimes," Bengali said. "I assume this one will use the same method."

"Maybe someplace within easy driving distance of the dump sites," Kit mused, her chin cupped in her hand. "Could he have more than one?"

"Most killers don't operate like that," Kalsa said. "More kill sites means more chance for us to stumble across one."

"But, if his kill site is based mainly in the East and South Districts, then how about the North and West?" I asked. "Let's face it, the NTC is the largest city on New Thundera. When he gets a woman subdued, he'll want to get her somewhere for the... ritual... as soon as possible. If he limits himself just to two districts, that'll only make it easier for us to box him in. He has to know that."

"There aren't any viable places I can think of in West or North Districts," Kit said. "There's no way he could be operating out of Central, either. Not with all the security." Naturally, I thought.

"Even if this one is limiting himself to only two districts, that still leaves a larger area to hunt than the first killer had."

"Explain?" Sir Bengali asked Kalsa.

"Most of the refugees in our convoy," I began, "resided in one area of Thardus Prime. We called it the Thunderian Quarter." Other people, of course, had a less savory name for it. "The total area was maybe a little larger than Central District."

"That small?" Kit asked. Central District, due to security concerns, was also the smallest.

"Real estate was at a premium," I replied. "Besides, it beat living on the streets."

"We can't rule out the possibility that he'll target women in North and West," Sir Bengali said with a shake of his head. "The only district we can safely rule out for a hunting ground is

Central. Kit, Lenneth's father is your concern. Talk to him, find out who his daughter's friends were."

"Yes."

"I guess that leaves Royal Mark to us, then," Kalsa spoke, rising from his seat. "You drive, Kayzin."

With that said, and new ideas forming in my head, the three of us were dismissed from Sir Bengali's office.

"Kayzin!" I turned about at Kit's call just after we left the secretary's office. "Can I talk to you for a second?"

"Sure." I caught the slightly embarrassed look in her eyes, and wondered what the matter could be.

"Listen, I want to apologize. For snapping at you earlier."

"Don't worry about it. I understand."

"It's just that... all of this... It's a lot to take in, that there are people like this out there. It's not like dealing with Mutants, or Lunataks, or even Mumm-Ra. I know what to expect there."

Except that Mumm-Ra hadn't been seen in over a decade, his pyramid having been encased in a radically designed force field which converted any power used in any escape attempt to energy to strengthen the walls. Sir Panthro had really outdone himself with that one. As for Mutants and Lunataks, well, Lord Lion-O didn't establish and arm a military just for aesthetic value, that's for certain.

"It's fine, Kit," I told her, looking directly into her eyes. Rather lovely eyes, I must admit. Even as I spoke, I felt my blood begin to heat. I squelched any thoughts I had in that direction as hard as I could. To this day, I wonder if she saw anything of what I was thinking while our eyes met. "Some people, I don't know, get off on the suffering of others I guess."

"I know that," she replied. "But the thought that someone's using this city, *our* city, as a hunting ground... And the idea that it might even be another Thunderian doing all this."

For her, I think, that was the most disturbing thing of all.

"What's important now is to not let this get to us. The sooner we get this bastard off the streets, the better."

"Lady WilyKit!" we both looked right as he came jogging up to us. He was thin, wiry really, with an angular face and a mane that was of no distinguishable shade of brown. His one piece

suit was blue on the left and right, with a swath of black in the middle. His face bore no markings indicative of clan. Seriously mixed blood, I thought.

"Baz! What's the rush?" She asked when he came to a skidding halt.

"I brought the list you wanted from the Population Bureau," he explained, slightly breathless, as Kit took the small pad from his outstretched hand.

"Thanks, but you didn't have to bring it to me."

"I was nearby, and I had an update for Commander Bengali on a few cases our section's running. I was going to deliver it to him, but I saw you and..."

I found myself thinking that Baz should lay off the coffee a little.

"It's fine, really," Kit replied with a small smile. "Anything I need to know about?"

"Oh, no no, nothing we need to pull you off your assignment for. By the way," Baz glanced around as though searching for an eavesdropper, "is it that killer? Can I help?"

"Don't worry yourself about it. Oh! Baz, this is Kayzin."

"Pleasure," I said, extending my hand.

"You new here?" he asked, siezing my hand and shaking it.

"You could say that. Listen, Kit, I gotta run."

"Okay. See you tonight, then."

If you're not Thunderian, hell even if you are, you might think I'm painting my people and their leaders as babes in the wood. In some ways, I suppose I am. In all our history, our main concern had always been the Mutants of Plun-Darr. No one living knows why their kind and ours have always been at eachother's throats. Truth be told, I don't rightly care, either. The fact of the matter is that we're more than able to handle invasions, armies intent on conquest, even ancient demons dedicated to wiping us out of existence. When faced with enemies like that, a society tends to band tightly together. Our old ways and traditions became sacred to us all, and our civilization became about as homogenized as it could get.

All that changed when Thundera had been destroyed.

As I've written earlier, our people were exposed to countless new things after we'd scattered. Some good, some bad. Some wonderful. Some appalling. Some of us held fast to the old ways,

as I tried to. Others of us adapted, as I ended up doing. This, of course, meant new forms of evil insinuating our hearts.

When Thundera re-formed, our people returned bringing all manner of new ideas and ways of life. This is how our criminal underworld was formed. This also brought with it various neuroses, psychoses, diseases... You get the idea.

Not everything that came with reuniting was so terrible, though. New sciences and technologies made us a little less dependent on Thundrillium. Herbal remedies which had been discovered on Third Earth meant fewer chemical medicines, thence fewer side effects.

However, our return to Thundera had also brought with it a new breed of murderer. The Royal Guard at the time had no idea how to catch one of these. Kalsa and I did. I'm not trying to make us look more important in this narrative. I'm only trying to exorcise the demons that haunt me about those days.

So, draw whatever conclusions you want. They're *my* memories, after all.

The interior of Royal Mark Financial's main branch was typical of most offices the universe over. Situated on the third and fourth floors of the Lynx-O Memorial Square's main office block, it was a collection of offices surrounding a rat's maze of cubicles.

As Kalsa and I strode up to the reception desk, I noted the Leopard male manning the phones as though Lenneth had never even held a position in this place. As though she never existed. He replaced the phone in its cradle soon after we arrived at the desk.

"Hello, my name is Riil," he said with little inflection. "How may I help you genltemen today?"

"We're here to see your personnel manager. Is he in?"

"Why yes mister..."

"Kalsa Morgan," he replied, showing his Royal Guard ID. I followed suit.

"Kayzin. He should be expecting us."

"Oh!" His eyes widened in surprise. "You're here about what happened to Lenneth?"

"Yes."

"Poor thing," the receptionist said. "I'll tell him you've arrived. His office is in the back, next to the coffee maker."

"Thanks," I said as we entered the door to the offices beyond. Immediately we were in corporate hell. Calls, both video and simple voice, were the main source of the buzz of communication. I found myself strangely reminded of the preceint Kalsa and I worked while we were still

detectives. At least this was quieter, and there wasn't much chance of a ruckus from beat cops having to deal with a suddenly enraged drunk who didn't much fancy a night in the tank. We garnered few stares as we trod the thin carpet to the back of the office space, the majority of the employees of Royal Mark appearing far too busy to be bothered. I wondered who, if any, of the harried workers had known Lenneth. None of them seemed to be affected by her death.

"How you wanna play this?" Kalsa asked before opening the door to the personnel office, mostly to break up the monotonous noise of a busy office.

"Same as usual," I replied. Which meant we'd start off with smiles, and show fangs if the prick behind the door started getting uncooperative.

"Hope your claws are still sharp."

"Hone 'em every day."

The personnel manager, a Tyger whose midsection and thinning hair were showing the results of office life, greeted us with handshakes as we entered his office. The space was long though narrow, filing cabinets linging one short wall with two long tables in the middle space. Chairs along the length of the tables each faced a monitor screen, likely for the purpose of new employee orientation. His desk sat in the corner farthest from the door, populated by a simple workstation and framed photographs which were turned away from us.

"Have a seat," Silabrin said as we neared his desk, indicating two plastic chairs facing his little office kingdom.

"Mr. Silabrin," I began, "I'm sorry for the loss of Lenneth."

"Yes, it's such a shame." There was sadness there, I noticed, and maybe it was even genuine. "Lenneth will be deeply missed by us all."

"Was Lenneth close to anyone here in particular?" Kalsa asked.

"Well, no, not to my knowledge. Mainly she kept to herself while on breaks. Personally, I thought she seemed a little down about something." Her arranged engagement, I thought.

"She didn't complain about anyone harrassing her?" I asked. "Here or at home, anything like that?"

"All employees at Royal Mark are encouraged to report any such situations to upper management," Silabrin said, practically by rote. "Lenneth didn't. No one else had any complaints concerning her, either." Silabrin let out a weary sigh. "Do you think her killer... might work here?"

"It's not likely," I replied, and I saw Silabrin's shoulders immediately relax. I couldn't blame him, yet I couldn't help but feel a twinge of disgust. Jaga forbid the company's reputation take a hit

like that and, oh, too bad about that young woman whose life was brutally ended, but what can ya do, right? I had seen that attitude on Thardus III more than once, and seeing it here disheartened me a little.

Then again, it had been present on Old Thundera as well. I'd just been too young and naieve then to see it.

"How was she around here?"

"She was a good worker," Silabrin, unable to entirely hide a startled expression, replied. "Never late, always friendly. Lenneth was an asset to Royal Mark Financial." Kalsa's phrasing - done deliberately - had shaken something loose. Was Lenneth boffing the boss? As the interview continued, Silabrin became more and more evasive, particularly in the area of management/employee relations. The relief he felt was palpable when we rose and thanked him for his time. He was hiding something, likely unrelated to the fake Thief of Hearts, but we had to check. The toughest cases were often broken by the most trivial things. Kalsa and I remained silent as we crossed the market-value warzone of Royal Mark, both of us thinking along the same lines, and made for the elevator banks when Riil's voice stopped us.

"Guardsmen?" We paused as the receptionist jogged closer. A Puma female had taken his place at the desk. "I..." He took a furtive look about, even though the lobby was empty. "I wonder if I can have a word with you?"

"Sure," Kalsa replied. "What's up?"

"Could we... talk in the elevator?"

"You got it," I said as the doors opened and we stepped inside. To Royal Mark's credit, no chintzy elevator music polluted the space which three men made quite cramped.

"Lately," Riil began, holding my gaze and Kalsa's in turn, "Lenneth seemed down about something, even depressed some days."

"Silabrin said the same thing," Kalsa confirmed. "What about?"

"Well," Riil said, somewhat hesitant, "She always said it was personal, but I notice things around here. I've got a pretty sharp nose, too. I'd notice the look on her face each time Silabrin would call her to his office."

"Which was?" I prompted, though I had a feeling I already knew the answer.

"Resigned, I think is the best word. Like she didn't want to, but there was no getting around it. I knew it wasn't about her perfomance, the poor dear was like clockwork with her reports."

"You think she was being called in for some extra credit-type thing?" Kalsa asked. Riil turned away for a moment, clearly embarrassed about something. With a sudden movement, he jabbed

the hold button on the elevator car. The detective instincts were kicking in high gear at this point, telling me that we were onto something maybe juicy.

"I know she was," Riil said, anger burning in his eyes. "I think he had her killed if he didn't have enough of a pair to do it himself." The pronouncement didn't startle me as much as the instant change in Riil's demeanor.

"Heavy accusation," Kalsa replied. "How about some evidence to back that up?"

"I don't have any. I did tumble onto something about the two of them a few weeks ago.

"Silabrin called her into his office, and she got that look on her face. Just for a second, she'd gotten better at hiding it, but I noticed. She was in there for only a few minutes, but when she came out she had tears in her eyes. Lenneth was composed for the most part, but I saw it."

"What then?" I asked, all business. Murder, as my partner said, was a heavy accusation to throw at someone.

"After we closed up, I followed her. She didn't go home, but to Karraya Arms. It's an apartment complex on Upper Twenty-Eighth, and Silabrin lives there."

"You make a habit of tailing co-workers off hours?" Kalsa asked with just a hint of suspicion in his voice.

"No, but something about her was bothering me. I waited outside the Karraya Arms, must have been five hours or so, and when she came out she was shaking like a leaf. Her clothes were a little mussed too. She was crying when she walked out of that place, this time she didn't hold it back."

"So, what did you do?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I pulled up, offered her a ride home since the public transports had stopped by then and I didn't see any taxis around. She got in after a few feet, and I could just feel the shame coming off her."

"Did she say anything? Like maybe what he did to her?"

"Mister..."

"Just Kalsa."

"Kalsa, she didn't have to. I saw the results. She had marks on her wrists, like something had been tied around them. Real tight, like Silabrin was into some freaky shit."

My partner's eyes met mine, and I could practically hear the DING DING DING!! of red flags popping up in his mind. They were leaping like frogs on a skillet in mine.

"She did say one thing, and that answered how he got his hooks into her," Riil went on. "She said something about wishing she'd never done a video."

"Video?" I asked, connections being made.

"All she said was 'I wish I'd never done that damn video'. She didn't say a word after that."

"And, you just dropped her off at home?"

"I couldn't get another word out of her. I let her out on her block, she said she'd walk the rest of the way. The next day, it was as if it never happened. She never spoke of it to me, or anyone that I know of." Riil seemed to deflate a little, his anger having burned down. "What if I could've stopped this? I should never have left it alone."

"Riil," I said, "thank you for coming forward with this." I unpaused the elevator and continued our trip to the ground floor.

"I hope it helps," he replied, shaking his head. "I couldn't do anything for the poor dear, but I hope the two of you can. At least see that her killer pays for what he's done."

"Here," Kalsa said, handing Riil our contact information. "If you think of anything else, don't hesitate to call."

"I will, thank you." The ride over, we exited into the main lobby and proceeded to the doors. "I was just going to lunch," Rill offered, more to Kalsa than myself. "If you two are hungry?"

"We just ate," Kalsa answered as the noonday sun warmed my skin. "Thanks anyway."

"I see. Maybe next time, then." We parted company and after a few dozen steps, Kalsa asked,

"Is he still checking me out?"

"Just finished," I said after a glance back. "You'd make a cute couple."

"You're the only man for me, sugar-claws," Kalsa replied. "I ever tell you how good a dick you suck?"

Resisting the urge to bray out loud, Kalsa and I were very secure in our manhood, I activated my communicator just as the light moment between my friend and I ended.

"WilyKit," her voice said in my ear.

"Kayzin. Any luck on your end?"

"Are we counting bad?"

"I'll take what I can get."

"The family didn't know anything, other than some nights she worked late. Did you find anything about that?"

"You could say that," I answered. "Kit, dig up as much dirt on a Tyger named Silabrin as you can. He's the personnell manager at Royal Mark Financial."

"What've you found?" The excitement in her voice was like an electric current.

"Not sure yet, but we've gotten a lead. We're headed back to the apartment now."

"I'll meet you there!" She clicked off just as we reached the red groundcar the Guard had loaned us.

Contrary to what Kalsa had told Riil, we hadn't managed to eat since the unholy hour of four in the morning and on arrival at our rather posh digs we were greeted by the smells of Meatfruit stir-fry along with grilled spearfish fillets and steamed vegetables.

I could have kissed her feet for that.

"I didn't know what you two liked, so I guessed," she said from her place on the couch, the containers of take-out spread on the table.

"WilyKit," Kalsa began, nearly drooling, "don't take this the wrong way, but will you marry me?"

"My, how forward!" she hooted, a hand over her chest and her eyes widening. "I didn't know you felt that way, sir!"

"The shortest way to a man's heart," I replied, taking a seat on the floor and helping myself to the fish, "is through his stomach. In Kalsa's case, it's the express lane." We wasted no time, tucking in with abandon. Our stomachs had been running on fumes and bad coffee for hours, and mine was threatening to leap up my esophagus and throttle my brain if the lack of solid nutrition continued.

"Silabrin," Kit said after swallowing some stir-fry, "age forty-one, personell manager for Royal Mark Financial. Lives in Karraya Arms, apartment 4-E. He emigrated to New Thundera from, get this, Thardus III some five years ago."

"Hel-lo," Kalsa said. "The plot sickens."

"No criminal record for him on New Thundera, and I've put in a request from the magistrate in Thardus Prime. Still waiting on that. Do you two remember him from Thardus?"

"No, he never popped up on our sensors," I replied, "then again, we were homicide."

"I wonder if vice picked him up?"

"Kalsa?" Kit looked at him, an eyebrow arched in curiosity.

"Seems the last victim had a liason with Silabrin," he explained. "More than one, and she wasn't too thrilled about it."

"Using his position to force himself on her," she snarled, putting down the carton of stir-fry and sipping some water from a fluted glass.

"Not quite. We had an interesting little conversation with a receptionist by the name of Riil."

"He works there?"

"Know him?"

"We went out a few times. Nice enough, but I wasn't his type. He asked me to introduce him to my brother, though."

Not really wondering where that would have led, I continued.

"Says he followed Lenneth one night to Silabrin's apartment. Some hours later, she came out looking like she'd seen better days. Seems our boy likes it rough."

"He's blackmailing her from the sound of it," Kalsa went on after finishing off the last of the spearfish. "Riil told us she said something about a video she was suddenly regretting."

"Smut," Kit spat in disgust. "Something the Reunion could have kept to itself."

"Hey," I said, catching Kalsa's attention, "You remember that guy back on Thardus we shook down while we were investigating that botched robbery?"

"Huh? Wait, you mean the jack-head who thought the old man's place he broke into had a stash of credits?"

"Yeah, he was running cameras for that assbag Kyrone."

"If you wanted naked flesh of any flavor, he was the scum to see."

"Thunderian?" Kit asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "Looking to make a fast credit by filming women..."

"Don't finish that," she said, picking up the list of eligible immigrants from Thardus. "He's on here, alright, came over three years ago. You're thinking he's set up another business venture?"

"I'd bet on it," I answered. My stomach was full, yet the new leads were threatening to sour the contents. "Address?"

"He lives in South District. He's a... get this, a taxi driver." Kit looked up at us, a gleam in her eye that shouted connection.

"Kyrone's a lot of things, but a killer he ain't," Kalsa said. "But, even if Silabrin is..."

"And Lenneth's performance isn't the only one he has..." Kit added.

"Then maybe this is how our killer is spotting his victims," I finished. "Using porn to scout them." It worked on the surface.

"I'll get Commander Bengali to check with Ocellot Cabs to get Kyrone's work schedule. If I remember right, the owner owes him one."

Ocellot Cabs, on the surface, was a bit on the shabby side. Situated between an import business and a currently vacant structure, it was a one-story building with faded gray paint on the concrete and several roll-up doors lining the wall with an employee entrance at the far right corner.

Our boy didn't start work for fully thirty minutes and, thanks to Sir Bengali, we learned that he likes to show up early for work. A real eager one, we'd been told, a credit to the company.

Somebody had been fudging his resume a little.

On Thardus III, Kyrone had discovered the allure of fast money by filming and distributing pornography. Disgusting, yes, but not technically illegal. While the vice squad kept its eye on him, he made sure his little nuggets of shit never strayed too far from the beaten path. Kyrone had also been an amateur fence, re-selling stolen goods he'd buy from various hoods and drug addicts.

Kalsa and I hadn't stumbled across him until investigating the murder of one Tavrot Kreeg, an elderly Caurian who had been spending his golden years on Thardus III after a career as a freighter captain. Word had gotten around that the former captain had amassed a sizeable amount of loot; gems, treasures and the like, and had stored it within a small hidden safe in his apartment.

If you've ever been to Thardus III, or even read up on it, then you would know that rich retirees would find better places to spend their retirement. Somewhere with beaches, or forests, either way there would be wine, women and song. The best one could hope for in Thardus Prime's urban sprawl was beer, the old lady and TV.

To Kyrone's sometime-cameraman, a Tyrallan named Olun Zwin, this did not occur. High on boostjuice (an addictive stimulant illegal on Thardus III but easily come by if one knew where to look) and low on supply, he had taken it upon himself to liberate said storied treasures in the hopes of keeping the good times rolling for the foreseeable future. He hadn't expected Kreeg to put up as much resistance as he had, and as such had beaten the man to death in a drug-induced rage. Having found nothing and with his so-called reason reasserting itself, Zwin had decided to lay low with what nicknacks he had managed to get.

Kalsa and I had no trouble identifying the perp, and his then-girlfriend had pointed us to Kyrone. Having starred in a few of the pimp's videos, she knew where he hung out. Vice had, at the time, a tail on him as part of a sting. Kyrone was small-time, but some serious players in the stolen goods markets were beginning to notice him. With their warning well in mind, we had confronted him in his "studio" and laid it down for him. Under Thardian law, if he did anything whatsoever to cover for his buddy, we'd charge him with being an accessory after the fact to Tavrot Kreeg's murder. The approach was simple; someone hooked on boostjuice would not go long without a fix. We made clear to Kyrone that if Zwin approached him with something to fence, or anyone else he knew in those circles, we would get a heads-up and in return we would be so kind as to overlook his half-assed operation. Kyrone had agreed only too happily. Three days later (a record for an addict), we got the call that Zwin was coming for some fast cash. From there, the arrest had been a piece of cake and Kyrone remained on our map.

I found myself amazed that Kyrone would revert back to his old ways on New Thundera. I drove, while Kalsa regaled Kit about our shared history with the smut-peddler. I had thought him somewhat smarter than that. Before pornography could flourish on our restored homeworld, Lord Lion-O had decreed it unlawful to distribute video files or images of sexual acts for profit. Images of plain nudity, given our cultural history for going about as nature intended, were excluded. Also, any nude or sexual images of people under the Age of Ascension, nineteen, were banned outright. The thinking, I'm told, was that if there was no profit to be made from smut, then no one would be interested in making it. With free enterprise becoming the new model for our economy, it seemed to make sense.

In large part, it was successful. However, sex sells and there are always those who look for a fast credit and those who can't resist the appeal of forbidden fruit. As such, porn became an underground business on New Thundera.

After parking, the three of us walked into the small lobby of Ocellot Cabs and were greeted by a bored-looking dispatcher behind a worn desk and the smell of machine lubricants mingled with stale sweat. The Puma male behind the counter glanced at us, Kit's ThunderCat insignia, and our raised Royal Guard badges and suddenly his day seemed filled with excitement. We made brief introductions before walking through the door behind the dispatcher and into the maintenance bays. Several taxis sat polished and waiting, others in various states of repair while a few were missing. Following the directions provided by the owner via Sir Bengali, we made for the third door on the right-hand wall and entered the locker room where drivers changed into uniforms and stored their off-hours clothing. Immediately upon entering we heard someone whistling an aimless tune who proved to be Kyrone himself. He was kneeling, lacing up his boots, unaware

that we were in the room. On cue, WilyKit sauntered up to him from the front while Kalsa and I veered around a row of lockers to blindside him from behind.

"Well, hi!" we heard him say in greeting. We rounded the lockers to see Kit glaring at him.

"Yes, that's a ThunderCat insignia," she snapped, glaring daggers into him, "and just so you know, my eyes are up here."

"Wh-what c-can I do for you?" he stammered, and I knew our hunch was right.

"Kyrone!" I boomed, keeping my voice jovial.

"How's it hangin', buddy?" Kalsa said next, his voice as falsely cheery as mine.

"WHAT?!" he shouted on seeing us and, more importantly, the Royal Guard IDs we were flashing. "You gotta be fuckin' kidding me," he said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Aw, c'mon, don't be like that," Kalsa said, clapping a friendly hand on Kyrone's black-attired shoulder. "We can't check up on an old friend, see how he's doing?"

"Not when he's gotta get to work." I knew why he wanted to get away from us. "'Sides, there's no off-worlders in the Guard."

"Times change," I snarled. "And to answer your next question, it would have to be Kalsa who was first."

"By the way," Kit said, "this ThunderCat insignia and those IDs say they can talk to you whether you have to work or not."

I watched his body language; tense and guarded. He was nervous as hell. I could, as we said back on the force, smell blood in the water. Kyrone was a Wildcat by lineage, lean and rangy. His mane was black, streaked with orange. He looked at us, from Kit to Kalsa, then to me, and fell onto the bench between the two rows of lockers.

"So," Kalsa began, the more amiable of us, "tell us about yourself, Kyrone? Enjoy the job?"

"I drive a taxi eight hours a night," he retorted. "Never a dull moment, let me tell ya."

"Not like being a producer, huh?" I asked, leaning in and invading his space a little. Just enough to be intimidating.

"I... I don't wanna talk about those days," he said, not quite looking me in the eye. I've known people who could look their own mothers in the eye and lie through their teeth, but Kyrone wasn't one of them.

"Then how about these days?" Kit asked, her arms cross severely over her breasts and a look on her face that would send lesser men running.

"You accusin' me of somethin'?"

"Just compiling facts," Kit retorted, revealing the data padd she had palmed. "On our way here, we did some digging into your bank accounts."

"You came here pretty well off," Kalsa said. "Took a while to piss it all away, even with all the eating out in West District. Man," he laughed, "some of those places cost what I used to make in a week!"

"And, I note," Kit went on. I could hear her anger and disgust in her archly formal tone. "You purchased with the last of the funds you came here with two handheld image recorders and some used video editing equipment."

"Nothing illegal about making home movies." I heard the quaver in his voice, just beneath the surface. We had him, and he knew it.

"Home movies," I repeated, planting a foot on the bench next to his thigh. "Is that what people are calling your smut these days?"

"You nuts?! I'm flyin' straight!"

"Aren't we the law-abiding citizen?" I sneered, getting in his face. "I know you, Kyrone. A cabbie's pay won't even get you an appetizer in the places you like to eat, it wouldn't even get you through the door in the nightclubs. If you can turn a fast credit to live the high life, what's a little thing like the law?!" He looked at me, then, and I saw him break.

"Okay... Oh, Jaga, it wasn't supposed to blow up like this..." His shoulders began to shake, and I backed off a little. Better to let Kalsa handle this part.

"Look, man, we're here to cut you a deal. Cuz we like ya."

I ignored the incredulous look WilyKit shot him, then me. Kyrone, thankfully, missed it entirely.

"You own up about your operation, give us your buyers, answer our questions, and we'll leave here without your ass for a pair of shoes."

"I... I tried to leave all that behind me," he began. Part of being a cop, particularly a good one, was learning to emphasize a little with your perp. They all had stories, and you had to at least pretend you cared about their wrong choices and errors in judgment. "I got to New Thundera, I thought I could land a gig shooting legit. I wound up with nothin', man. Nothin'! I end up haulin' drunks an' assholes around, livin' like a nobody."

"Your point?" Kit asked sharply.

"It started off small. Some people from the old days referred some couples to me, people who wanted to spice up the bedroom a little. Like I said, nothin' illegal about home movies, dig?"

"So, you made some quick cred and circumvented the law. You piece of shit." I meant that, too, every word.

"Wasn't long, man, I found some people who wanted me to tape solo action. For profit, like. I was just the recorder, man, that's all."

"Kyrone, level," Kalsa urged.

"I started recruiting from their crews, girls who wanted to turn some quick cred on the side. Some others came to me, too. Same stories if they bothered to tell 'em. Some wanted a walk on the wild side, some needed money."

"How'd you spread?" I asked, meaning his distribution method.

"Face-to-face, no names, credit-in-hand," Kyrone replied. "Real simple, like." I nodded to Kit, who seemed to have overcome her surprise at us being willing to deal, for her data padd. I called up Kara Simm's image first.

"How many you make?" Kalsa asked.

"Twenty, twenty-five maybe."

"Was she one of the girls?" I showed him Kara's image and, to Kyrone's credit, he actually studied it.

"Nah," he replied, shaking his head. "She's that dead girl, right?"

"That's right."

"Hey hey HEY!"

"Stow it," I snapped. "If we wanted you for her murder, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"We know you're no killer," Kalsa added. "You weren't last time when you gave us Zwin."

"Yeah, yeah that's right," Kyrone said, his voice gaining some confidence.

"How about her?" I showed him Lenneth's image, and I saw the recognition in Kyrone's eyes. "Own up."

"Yeah. She came to me 'bout a month ago. Real skittish type, never done nothin' like this before. Said she needed money. I didn't ask what for."

"How much did you pay her?"

"Five hundred, standard rate. She did a solo job, and I can't do nothin' tamer than that. Won't sell." I saw Kit close her eyes and heard her growl low in her throat. A woman's pride, her dignity, her sense of self-worth and possibly her life. All for five hundred credits.

I still don't know how that can be worth the price, and I don't want to.