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Judas Unchained

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Extract

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Prologue

Right from the start, there was something about the investigation which made Lieutenant Renne Kempasa uneasy. The first little qualm came sliding up out of her subconscious when she saw the victim's loft apartment. She'd been inside loft apartments just like it a hundred times before. It was the kind of plush metropolitan pad that a group of funky TSI soap characters usually lived in; beautiful single people with well-paying jobs that gave them most of the day off so they could enjoy a floor space of around 500 square metres as they lounged around in an extravagant décor provided by overpriced interior designers. The kind of scenario completely divorced from real life but full of dramatic or comic potential for the scriptwriters.

Yet here she was, a day after the Guardians' shotgun message that denounced President Elaine Doi as a Starflyer agent, being shown in to just such an apartment on the top floor of a refurbished factory block in Daroca, the capital city of Arevalo. The massive open plan lounge had a wide sunny balcony which looked out over the Caspe River that flowed through the heart of the city. Like all the capitals of successful phase one space planets, Daroca was a rich montage of parks, elegant buildings, and broad streets stretching away to the horizon. Under the planet's bronze-shaded morning sunlight it glimmered with a sharp coronal hue, adding to the panorama's graceful appeal.

Renne shook her head in mild disbelief at the fabulous view. Even with the decent salary the navy paid her, she could never afford the rent on this. And it was currently being paid by three first-life girls, all under twenty-five.

One of them, Catriona Saleeb, was showing Renne and Tarlo in; a small twenty-two-year-old, with long curly black hair, wearing a simple green dress with strong geometric lilac strips – except Renne knew the dress was a Fon, which put its price tag over a thousand Earth dollars, and the girl was using it as a casual house dress. Renne's e-butler printed up Saleeb's file in her virtual vision; she was a junior member of the Morishi Grand Family, working at a bank in Daroca's large financial district.

Her two friends were Trisha Marina Halgarth, who had a product placement job at Veccdale, a Halgarth subsidiary that designed chic domestic systems, and Isabella Halgarth who'd taken a job at a contemporary art gallery in town. They fitted the whole profile; three bachelorettes sharing a place in the city, having fun together while they waited for their true careers to launch, or husbands of equal wealth and status to materialize and carry them off to a merged trust fund mansion to produce their contracted quota of children.

'This is one great place you've got here,' Tarlo said as they made their way into the lounge.

Catriona turned and gave him a smile that was a lot more than simple politeness. 'Thanks, it's a family place so we get it cheap.'

'Plenty of wild parties, huh.'

Her smile became teasing. 'Maybe.'

Renne shot him an exasperated look. They were supposed to be on duty, not hitting on potential witnesses. He just grinned back, perfect white teeth gleaming out of his handsome tanned face. She'd seen for herself just how successful that grin could be in the clubs and bars around Paris.

Catriona took them over to the kitchen section, which was

separated from the lounge by a broad marble-topped breakfast bar. The kitchen was ultramodern, equipped with every convenience gadget possible, all built in to swan-white egg-shaped wall modules. Somehow, Renne couldn't imagine it being used for much actual cooking, not even by the complicated-looking chefbots.

The two other girls were sitting on stools at the bar.

'Trisha Marina Halgarth?' Renne asked.

'That's me.' One of the girls got to her feet. She had a heart-shaped face and light olive skin with small dark-green butterfly wing OCtattoos flowing back from each hazel eye. An oversize white towelling robe was worn like defensive armour, she kept clutching at the fluffy fabric, pulling it tighter around her. Her bare feet had silver rings round each toe.

'We're from Navy Intelligence,' Tarlo said. 'Lieutenant Kempasa and I are investigating what happened to you.'

'You mean, how gullible I was,' she snapped.

'Easy, babe,' Isabella Halgarth said. Her arm went round Trisha's shoulders. 'These are the good guys.' She stood to face the investigators.

Renne found herself having to look up slightly as Isabella was several centimetres taller than her, almost Tarlo's height. She was dressed in very tight jeans showing off her legs. Her long blond hair had been gathered into a single tail which reached down to her hips. It was an image of casual elegance.

Tarlo's grin had broadened. Renne wanted to push him against a wall and shout a warning about professional conduct, wagging her finger in his face for emphasis. Instead, she did her best to ignore the mating dance appraisals going on all around her, and said: 'I've investigated several similar cases, Ms Halgarth. In my experience, the victim is rarely gullible. The Guardians have developed a very sophisticated operation over the years.'

'Years!' Catriona snorted. 'And you haven't caught them yet?'

Renne kept her polite expression in place. 'We believe we are close to a resolution.'

The three girls exchanged doubtful looks. Trisha sat down again, gripping at her robe.

'I know it's unpleasant for you,' Tarlo said. 'But if you could start by telling me the man's name.' His grin mellowed to sympathetic encouragement.

Trisha gave a reluctant nod. 'Sure. Howard Liang.' She smiled feebly. 'I don't suppose that's his real name?'

'No,' Tarlo said. 'But that identity will have created a lot of data within Daroca's cybersphere. Our forensic software teams will pull out a great many assocated files. We can check on the false identity information, where it was inserted, possibly who was involved forging it. Every little helps.'

'How did you meet?' Renne asked.

'Party. We get to quite a lot of them.' She glanced at her two girl friends for support.

'This is a great city,' Isabella said. 'Daroca is a wealthy planet; people here have the money and time to play.' Her eyes gave Tarlo an amused glance. 'Trish and I are Dynasty, Catriona is a Grandee. What can I say? We're highly desirable.'

'Was Howard Liang wealthy?' Renne asked.

'He didn't have a trust fund,' Trisha said, then coloured. 'Well, he said he didn't. His family was supposed to come from Velaines. He said he was a couple of years out of his first rejuve. I liked him.'

'Where did he work?'

'On the commodities desk at Ridgeon Financial. God, I don't even know if that's true.' She pressed her free hand against her forehead, rubbing hard. 'I don't know how old he really was. I know nothing about him at all. That's what I hate most about this. Not that he stole my author certificate, not that he gave me a memory wipe. Just . . . being taken in like

that. It's so stupid. Our family security office sends us enough warnings. I never thought they applied to me.'

'Please,' Tarlo said. 'Don't blame yourself. These guys are very professional. Hell, I'd probably get taken in by them. Now, when did you last see him?'

'Three days ago. We went out for the evening. I'd been invited to the Bourne Club, there was some event, a new drama series launch. We had a meal afterwards, then I came home. I think. The apartment domestic array says I got in at five in the morning. I don't remember anything after dinner. Is that when they did it?'

'Possibly,' Renne said. 'Did Mr Liang share his flat with anyone?'

'No. He lived by himself. I met a couple of his friends; I think they were from Ridgeon. We only went out for a couple of weeks. Enough for me to drop my guard, I guess.' She shook her head angrily. 'I hate this. The whole Commonwealth thinks I believe the President is an alien. I'll never be able to face anyone at work again. I'll have to go back to Solidade and get my face changed and use another name.'

'That would probably help,' Tarlo said gently. 'But before that we need to run some tests on you. There's a medical forensic team waiting down in the lobby. They can do this in a clinic, or here, whichever you're comfortable with.'

'Do it here,' Trisha said. 'Just get it over with.'

'Of course. Another team will sweep his flat.'

'What do you expect to find there?' Isabella asked.

'We'll pin down his DNA, of course,' Renne told her. 'Who knows what else we'll uncover, especially if they used it as their base. And we'll pull his files from Ridgeon Financial's personnel records, which I'd like you to verify. It would help to have a picture of him.'

'Won't he have had reprofiling by now?' Catriona asked.

'Yes. But it's his background we'll be focusing our investigation

on, his past. That's where the clues to his origin are. You must understand, we have to crack the whole Guardians organization open, it's the only way to bring Liang to justice. We're not pursuing him singularly.'

They spent another twenty minutes in the loft apartment, taking statements from the girls, then handed over to the medical forensic team. Renne was halfway to the door when she stopped and gave the big lounge a thoughtful examination. Trisha was going into her bedroom with two of the forensic team.

'What?' Tarlo asked.

'Nothing.' She gave Catriona and Isabella a last look before leaving.

'Come on,' he said in the lift back down to the lobby. 'I know you. Something's bugging you.'

'*Déjà vu.*'

'What?'

'I've seen this crime scene before.'

'Me, too. Every time the Guardians shotgun the unisphere the boss sends us out to have a look round.'

'Yeah, so you should have recognized it, too. Remember Minilya?'

Tarlo frowned as the doors opened. They walked out into the lobby. 'Just about, it was four years ago. But that was a bunch of guys sharing a flat.'

'Oh, so, what? You're going sexist on me? It's different because it's girls?'

'Hey!'

'It was exactly the same set up, Tarlo. And we've seen the all-girls group before as well.'

'On Nzega, April Gallar Halgarth. She was part of a holiday group.'

'Buwangwa, too, don't forget.'

'Okay, so what's your point?'

'I don't like repetition. And the Guardians know we'll catch them a whole lot easier if they stick to the same pattern.'

'I don't see a pattern.'

'It's not a pattern, exactly.'

'What then?'

'I'm not sure. They're repeating their procedure. That's not like them.'

Tarlo led the way out through the lobby's revolving doors and used his e-butler to call a city taxi over. 'The Guardians don't have a lot of choice in this. Admittedly, the number of dumb young Halgarths in the galaxy is pretty huge, but their living and social arrangements only have a finite number of permutations. It's not the Guardians who are repeating, it's the Halgarths.'

Renne frowned as the taxi pulled up in front of them; he was right, though that wasn't the line she'd been thinking along. 'Do you think the Halgarth security is running an entrapment operation? They could have hung Trisha out as bait?'

'No,' he said heatedly. 'That's wrong. If it was an entrapment they would have caught Liang the first night he met Trisha. His identity history data might have stood up to a review by Ridgeon Financial, but a specific entrapment operation run by the Halgarths . . . No way.'

'They must be running entrapment operations. If I was the senior Halgarths I'd be goddamn furious the family was constantly targeted by the Guardians.'

Tarlo settled back into the taxi's leather seat. 'They do tend to put a fair amount of pressure on the boss.'

'I don't think that's right, either. If they were running an entrapment they'd tell us.'

'Would they?'

'All right, maybe not,' she said, 'But as this wasn't an entrapment, it's irrelevant anyway.'

'We don't know it wasn't an entrapment.'

'They didn't catch Liang, and they haven't told us, which they would do at this stage.'

'Alternatively, they're busy tracking Liang, and don't want to spook him by telling us.'

'That's not it,' she was having trouble even looking at Tarlo. 'Something is just *wrong*. It was too neat.'

'Too neat?'

The tone of disbelief in his voice made her wince. 'Yeah, I know, I know. But something bothers me. That loft apartment, those girls, it all shouted out, "*Here are dumb rich kids, come and rip them off*".'

'I don't get this, who's in the wrong here, the Guardians or the Halgarths?'

'Well ... Okay, I don't suppose it could have been the Halgarths, unless that really was an entrapment operation.'

He grinned at her. 'You're getting as bad as the boss when it comes to conspiracies. You'll be blaming the Starflyer next.'

'Could do,' she gave him a weak smile. 'But I'm still going to tell her I think something's odd about this one.'

'Career suicide.'

'Come on! What kind of a detective are you? We're supposed to act on intuitive hunches. Don't you watch any cop soaps?'

'Unisphere shows are for people without lives. Me, I'm busy in the evenings.'

'Yeah,' she said snidely. 'Still putting on your navy uniform when you go round the clubs?'

'I'm a naval officer. Why shouldn't I?'

Renne laughed. 'God! Does that really work?'

'It does if you can find girls like those three.'

She sighed.

'Listen,' he said. 'I'm serious. What can you tell Myo? You had a feeling? She'll just ball you out big time. And don't look to me to back you up. There was nothing wrong with it.'

■

'The boss appreciates the way we consider cases. You know she's always saying we have to take a more holistic approach to crime.'

'Holistic, yeah, not psychic.'

*

They were still arguing about it forty minutes later when they arrived back at the Paris office. Five uniformed navy officers were standing in a group outside Paula Myo's office.

'What's happening?' Tarlo asked Alic Hogan.

'Columbia's in there with her,' the commander said. He looked very uncomfortable.

'Christ,' Renne muttered. 'It'll be the LA fiasco. I was supposed to be chasing the leads from that operation this morning.'

'We all were,' Hogan said. He forced his gaze away from the closed door. 'Did you find anything in Daroca?'

Renne was trying to think what to say; Hogan was very by-the-book.

'It was a standard Guardians' operation,' Tarlo said quickly. He was staring hard at Renne. 'We left forensic working through the scene.'

'Good. Keep me updated.'

'Yes sir.'

'Standard operation,' Renne said scathingly as they walked back to their desks.

'I just saved your ass back there,' Tarlo said. 'You can say all that kind of intuition stuff to the boss, but not Hogan. All that little prick is interested in is ticks in the box.'

'Okay, okay,' she grumbled.

Paula Myo walked out of her office, carrying her shoulder bag and the little rabbakas plant she kept on the windowsill. A red-faced Rafael Columbia was standing behind her, dressed in his full admiral's uniform.

Renne had never seen Myo look so shocked. It sent a cold shiver down her own spine; nothing ever ruffled the boss.

'Goodbye,' Myo told the office at large. 'And thank you for all the hard work you did for me.'

'Paula?' Tarlo gasped.

She gave him a small shake of her head, and he fell silent. Renne watched Paula Myo walk out; it was like seeing a funeral procession.

'Commander Hogan,' Columbia said. 'A word please.' He vanished back into Myo's office. Alic Hogan almost ran in after him. The door closed.

Renne sat down hard. 'That didn't happen,' she mumbled incredulously. 'They can't get rid of her. She *is* the goddamn Directorate.'

'But we're not the Directorate,' Tarlo said quietly. 'Not any more.'