

Rhapsody In The Key of Death:

From the Case Files of Dr. Jynx San'Janeiro

by Linnea Sinclair

Psychic Investigator Jynx San'Janeiro lives for the dead. But when the dead stop communicating with her, Jynx faces heartbreak... and her greatest fear. Is it exhaustion, or something far worse, that causes her revenant talents to fail in the midst of a murder investigation at an exclusive resort and casino on the rim world of Lunazula?

This wasn't supposed to happen. The EIIs—Emotionally Intensified Images—were as fresh as the warm blood pooling beneath the dead man's shoulders.

And just as lifeless.

I opened my eyes. In the shadows of the opulent hotel suite, a few feet from where I knelt beside the body, Kieran watched, waited—unofficially, of course. He'd insisted on accompanying me. Said it was because he hated having his best laid plans—he's annoyingly fond of puns—interrupted. We'd been more undressed than dressed in our suite's bedroom, doing what lovers often did after a night in Lunazula's glittering casinos and an excellent bottle of champagne, when every pleasurable sensation had been violently wrenched from my existence. Consciously I'd known I was safe in our suite, in Kieran's arms. Yet all I could feel was a Racker 750 pressed hard against my breastbone. Then an excruciatingly intense flare of pain as my killer sent three discharges of illegal Z-4 ammo tumbling through my body, clawing, raking, stripping my insides as they spun. Whoever I was, I died, slowly it seemed. In truth it had been less than nine minutes.

I know how long it took because I'd stared at the clock when the first sickening chill of fear and psychic pain had flashed through me. And I was staring at the clock now.

Nine minutes. It had taken nine minutes for me to throw on the clothes Kieran had thrust into my hands, shove my feet into my soft boots and secure my stunner into the waistband of my pants. I'd hesitated only long enough to snatch my Intergalactic Conclave-issue I.D. from the dresser. The one with my holo, badge and official title: Dr. Jynx San'Janeiro, PI.

A hotel security officer exited the elevator only seconds after I'd stepped into the corridor. Security had responded promptly to Kieran's call to the front desk because Kieran *was* Lord Kieran Risardas, after all. The wiry, amber skinned man in the dark blue uniform evidently hadn't expected me as well.

"M'Lord." He'd nodded respectfully to Kieran. His dark gaze had lingered a bit on my hastily clothed form. The oversize v-necked sweater and leggings were hardly seduction fare but in his mind I had no other obvious purpose. This was Lunazula and Kieran's name was, these days, synonymous with nobility. It had felt good to thrust my badge in the security officer's face, watch him recoil, choke slightly. *Play-toy*, he'd mentally labeled me. *Rich man's play-toy*. *Hot little redhead*.

Only the last two adjectives—little and redhead—were correct. The first was about as far from fact as you could get. I was anything but hot. I'd been shivering, my skin chilled. Death—fresh, stark, invasive—does that to most Psychic Investigators. As I'd been a mere hotel hallway-width away from the murder, it felt

as if it were doing it double time to me.

The officer's name tag, replete with the casino's blue crescent moon-shaped logo, read: V. Granville, Security Chief. His tone when he'd acknowledged my introduction had been pure skeptic. *Corpse cop*, he'd tagged me, amending his initial observation. I've been called worse.

"You're sure someone's been shot?" He'd already pushed his master keycard in the slot on the suite's double doors as he'd asked the question, so I hadn't bothered to answer him. Hadn't bother telling him, yes, I was sure there was a dead man on the other side of the doors. A man very recently murdered. Which meant V. Granville had a bigger problem than his squeamishness at having a Psychic Investigator at his side.

He had a murderer on the loose in his exclusive hotel.

Now he had that same PI kneeling before the sprawled, bloodied form of the man's body, reliving again and again—through the Emotionally Intensified Images—the spike of fear, the hard feel of the gun, the low ugly growl of a man's voice, then pain. Searing, ripping, clawing pain.

But nothing else.

This wasn't supposed to happen. More than feel, more than hear, I was supposed to be able to *see* what the dead man, one Pavin Truedell according to Granville, had witnessed in his last minutes alive.

I saw nothing. Fear of a different kind gripped my gut.

Granville hovered. "Stand by," he said for the second time into his comm badge. It crackled with questions, information and demands: "*All exits sealed. Security on every floor. We need that damned description!*"

Yes, they did. I couldn't give them one.

I sat back on my haunches, sucked in a long breath. Forced a word, a medical term I never wanted to hear from my mind. Went into the EIs again, listened instead to two male voices that were becoming as familiar to me as my own:

... "*Who's there?*"

A rustle of fabric, a sound in the quiet of my bedroom startled me awake. I leaned up on my elbows, the sheet sliding part way down my chest. I could feel a slight movement of air against my skin; heard a small hush of a sound. But no answer to my question.

How many drinks had I had? More than I'd wanted to, but the music in the bar had been so nice and the song, Blue Moon Rhapsody, my favorite. I hadn't heard someone play the piano like that in years. Musical ability was not one of my talents.

"Why not, you've got good hands?" Dionosio used to tease, then laugh that grinding laugh of his. He knew why.

But he was right. I had good hands. I flexed my fingers against the soft bed sheets. Long ago I'd discovered that a good way to identify the distance of an unknown sound is to make a known sound of your own. The bed sheets were an arm's length from my ears. I heard the scrunch of the fabric clearly.

Not so the soft, smooth noise that woke me. Not so the hush of a sound that had disappeared into the corner of my bedroom. Perhaps I was wrong, and it was only a dream that had awakened me. I tilted my face, listening again...

“The lights were off in his suite when the murderer came in,” I told Granville, then glanced at Kieran. His concern washed over me. He knew I was struggling. And had known me long enough to know that wasn’t routine.

It had been a little more than a year and a half since his first wife had been murdered, and I’d been called in, four days late, on the case. The EII’s had been fading, but they’d been intact enough for me to see Vandora’s murderer through her own eyes.

And see other things, as well. Things I’d picked up telepathically, or by using just plain common sense. Things that had told me Lord Kieran Risardas was someone as out of place in this life as I was, though for different reasons.

His reasons didn’t bother me any more than my being a PI and a revenant bothered him. A duo of the damned, we often joked.

Granville wasn’t as forgiving. “You can’t get a description? I thought you people could tell everything.”

“I can tell you,” I said, running one hand through my hair, snagging a few knots as if that could clear the blankness in my mind, “that the murderer was male, about the same height as the victim.”

...Something hard shoved against my chest as I swung my feet off the edge of the bed. A callused hand grasped my elbow, yanked me up.

“What the—!” I stumbled forward, cracked my forehead against my attacker’s. But the hard cold metal against my skin stopped any further movement.

“Quiet!” a harsh voice rumbled in my ear. Something pungent on the man’s breath reached my nose. It was a smell I couldn’t identify, not yet. I knew it, but...

The gun in my chest was of greater concern. I had more than just good hands. I had good ears, too. I’d heard the low, distinct humming noise of a fully charged Racker 750. Small, easily concealed, very expensive. I’d often thought about carrying one, but my marksmanship skills were worse than my nonexistent musical abilities. Good hands notwithstanding.

“What do you want?” I managed to whisper. Quietly. When a man points a Racker 750 at you and demands quiet, you comply...

The information on the Racker wasn’t new. I’d told Granville about the weapon when we’d first spotted the body lying in front of the living room’s large window. Through the gauzy drapery drawn across it, the lights of the moon’s spaceport twinkled dimly in the distance. Not the commercial spaceport, but the private one for the use of the casino’s privileged guests. Like Pavin Truedell, whose good hands hadn’t been able to prevent his own death.

“The murderer had an odor.” I thought again of Truedell’s sensation of disgust, yet familiarity. “It was unpleasant. Probably from something he ate, or drank. Or perhaps a medical condition.” Though I couldn’t think of what, given the advances in medical science in the past century.

“But what did he look like?”

“I haven’t found that out yet.”

Granville’s lip curled but any further comment was stopped by Kieran’s forward movement—the firmness of his step and the hard set of his shoulders clearly sending a message. Granville blanked his face and I could feel a trickle of

apprehension shoot through him. Whatever high society nobles he'd catered to before hadn't prepared him for Kieran Risardas. But then, unbeknownst to Granville, this wasn't just Lord Kieran who glared down at him. It was *Captain* Risardas, the Butcher of Sinder Station, dead now, as far as Granville was concerned, for over five hundred years. A man vilified by corrupt historians.

Not the noble now lauded for his generosity.

Sometimes I envied his chance at metamorphosis, courtesy of a temporal anomaly that no longer existed. It was the one way we're very different: he'd escaped the past. I lived in it.

The doors of the suite slid open, pulling me back to the present. A silvery med 'droid with the emblem of the coroner's office on its chest-plate glided in. A dark-haired woman in a tailored brown suit hurried behind the 'droid, her wrist comm raised to her mouth. She had the high cheekbones, exotic features of a Chi'ann princess. But her voice and demeanor were one hundred per cent street-cop in command. "Yeah, yeah. I'm on site now. Coroner's here too. Tell Alby he'd better have the report in my files when I return. Or he'll be back in uniform, scrounging for doughnuts by noon tomorrow. Today," she corrected herself, tapped her unit off with her thumb.

Today. It was nearly one o'clock in the morning. I'd been working Truedell's EII's for almost an hour.

"Lieutenant Iago, Homicide." She switched a look from Granville to Kieran to me.

I rose. She extended her hand.

"Dr. San'Janeiro, Psychic Investigation Division 1." I reached for my badge tucked into the waistband of my pants so I could pretend not to see how quickly she'd withdrawn her hand. "I was across the hall when the murder took place."

Granville's name tag proclaimed his identity. Iago thrust her chin towards Kieran. "And you?" Her eyes narrowed slightly but not in a negative way. She'd probably recognize Kieran in a moment from the society vids or the political ones or, if she were really savvy, some very old historicals. Then there'd be the usual offhand comment about family resemblances to a certain infamous pirate captain—a handsome bastard, even if he had been the devil incarnate. And Kieran could charm her with his smile and slightly arched eyebrow, and defer knowledge of his ill-famed ancestor. But for now he was simply unknown male. Tall, dark and gorgeous, but unknown male.

He inclined his head slightly as he answered her question. "Kieran Risardas."

I felt recognition hit her. Tall, dark, gorgeous and incredibly wealthy. A smile played across her mouth. "Acquainted with the deceased, Lord Kieran?"

"I'm Dr. San'Janeiro's husband. Neither one of us knew the deceased. We had the misfortune of being in the room across the hall."

Her smile thinned, turned professional. "What do you have?" she asked me.

I told her. Her professional smile turned to puzzlement, then a frown. "You felt the whole murder happen and you can't give me a description?"

"I'm still working on that."

"You said you're Division 1."

"Yes." Division 1 was the top PI outfit in the Conclave.

“You’re new, then. Who’s your chief?”

“I am.” I’d received two promotions since the Vandora Mar-Risardas murder. Which was why Kieran now felt angry and more than overprotective at Lieutenant Iago’s insinuations, and Lieutenant Iago stared at me in disbelief. Granville, evidently bolstered by Iago’s presence, had returned to smirking.

“The lights were off in the room.” I motioned to the gauzy curtain covering the large window. “Other than the spaceport, there’s nothing but forest out there. No good light source.”

Two ‘droids appeared in the doorway with an anti-grav gurney, a forensic tech in white overalls behind them. The tech holod the suite, then scanned for prints while Iago and the coroner examined the body.

I stepped back, giving them room to work.

Kieran lightly touched my shoulder, his mouth inches from my ear. “I need to check messages. Be back in a few minutes.” Then he was striding for the open doorway. I wondered only briefly how many millions of credits would move at his command in those few minutes. Or was he simply uncomfortable with so much police presence? Old habits...

“Can they take him?” Iago’s question drew my attention back to her.

I nodded. The ‘droids zipped Truedell’s remains in a body bag and headed back to the morgue.

Maybe the autopsy could tell them something. I sure as couldn’t.

Granville however, offered Iago the hotel’s records on Truedell. She’d pick those up on her way downstairs, run his ID through CCIC for priors while the rest of her squad searched the hotel for a man with a Racker 750.

“I want to stay here a bit longer, go through his things,” I told Iago as Kieran returned. She shrugged diffidently, her low opinions of PIs dropping lower due to my lack of usable information, and barked out an order to a uniformed officer in the hallway. She handed Kieran her card. “I’ll be downstairs. Comm me if she gets anything.”

Or comm me, anyway? That was unspoken, but I felt it, heard it. Saw her undressing my husband in her mind.

Which was more than I’d been able to get from Pavin Truedell’s EIIIs.

Why? I sat on the silk-covered sofa after she left, scrubbed at my eyes with the heels of my hands. All the useless platitudes drifted by. I’d been working too hard. Taking too many cases. Kieran had been commenting, no, *complaining* about that for several months now. You need some time off, he’d said. But the usual vacation spots didn’t interest me. I hated crowds, hated the close packed density of humanity that I could never totally shut out of my mind. It was why I’d finally agreed to come to Lunazula. The playground of the mega-wealthy who could afford the rarity of privacy in this overcrowded quadrant of the galaxy. Only four large suites to a floor. Private dining rooms, gaming rooms.

And a murder, for the first time, I couldn’t solve. Might never be able to solve again. Once in a lifetime. Because with something like this, there were no second chances.

There are things worse than death. Being born not only psychic but also a revenant means I exist in both worlds: that of the living and of the dead. It’s why

people don't touch me, why people don't like to talk to me for any longer than necessary. My present existence is constantly tied to other people's pasts. Other people's deaths.

Only Kieran understood. But then Kieran, for all of his forty-six years of life, was technically over five hundred years old. That was one of his secrets his late wife had carried to her grave. One of the many secrets he trusted me with. I understood what it meant to have lived too long, to be weary.

And I was. But my weariness for the first time carried a new and chilling edge.

I was a revenant, but when the revenant abilities fail it inevitably leads to a brutal decaying of the mind, and insanity. It's one of the few maladies the medical labs in the Conclave haven't been able to cure. That and the common cold. All other diseases, all other disabilities and infirmities had disappeared centuries ago.

Except for the sniffles and Revenant Regression Syndrome. RRS.

If that's what this was, this inexplicable block I'd felt when trying to read Truedell's EII's, then I might just go seeking one of those Racker 750s he'd felt were so useful as weapons. The small stunner I carried would hardly do any damage.

"You're tired." Kieran folded his hands over mine with a gentleness that belied his infamous title of the Butcher of Sinder Station. He shrugged off history's misstatement with a casualness I envied. I rarely forgot the responsibilities of my job, what I was, or more importantly, what people believed me to be.

That was another thing Kieran complained about.

I opened my eyes. Tiredness. The cases, the prejudices were wearing me down. That's all it was. Not the first vicious glimmerings of RRS.

His smile was soft. "Get a couple hours rest, go through his things in the morning."

"I need to do this now, to keep the continuity, so I don't make mistakes."

"You already made one. You told Granville the lights were off in Truedell's suite. But they were on when he opened the door. Don't you remember? You didn't even give me your usual warning not to touch the lightpads. Because the lights in the rooms were already on."

The lights had been on. That meant Truedell had seen his murderer. But I couldn't see what Truedell had.

My throat tightened. Something cold churned in my stomach. I shoved myself out of the plush luxury of the silk couch, away from the comforting warmth of Kieran's touch. Because underneath that comfort lay his concern, which suddenly felt smothering.

Stop being your job, he'd said for the past ten months. *Start being just you*.

Other emotions railed at me. The cop on duty in the hallway outside the suite didn't want to be there, didn't want to be guarding a crime scene with a PI on site. A death stalker. A corpse cop.

I wanted nothing more than to go back to Nidus Point, to the vast, verdant acreage surrounding Kieran's house and feel only the small life essences of the birds, the flittermoths, the treecats and the foxes.

But I couldn't let myself. I had a case to solve first. Maybe my last.

I ignored Kieran's soft encouragements and fled into the suite's bedroom.

The lights were on. But the forensic tech had been in there. He might have turned on the lights. Perhaps the darkness I saw through Truedell's eyes had been the darkness of the bedroom. Most people slept with the lights off.

An expensive linen shirt was draped over the back of a padded chair. I touched it, let myself fall into the EII's even though they had to have happened before Truedell was killed. But I needed to keep working, needed someone else's problems. Not my own.

... "Bets, please. Place your bets."

The woman's voice was clear, lilting, with a slight accent I hadn't heard in a long time. It drew me in as I waited on the fringe of the crowd clustered thickly around the hazard table. I didn't want to play, had no interest in betting anymore. Especially when players had to be at least five deep around the table. Yes, there's anonymity in a crowd but there are also watchers. Dionosio taught me that as well.

The crowd shouted across the table in a cacophony of voices. Old, young, nasal, mellow, male, female. A cocktail waitress brushed against me, champagne bubbles pattering against my skin, her voice almost girlish. "Sorry, sir. Busy here tonight."

It was. Yes, it was...

It was also blank, dark. I knew casinos weren't. Another chill wracked through me. An omen of things to come? Is this what insanity would be like, an endless emptiness?

"Jynx." Kieran's large hand brushed my hair out of my face. His gray eyes were storm colored. It had already rained on my cheeks. "You're crying."

"Not really." I dragged the sleeve of Truedell's shirt across my eyes.

"I've never seen you like this."

"Interesting choice of verb." I jerked my face away from his fingers, from his sympathetic tone that said everything would be all right. Everything would not be all right. I was failing, losing what I was. The only thing I knew how to be.

"You're not making sense."

"Actually, I am. Seen. Past tense of the verb, to see. That's what I can't do, Kier. I can't see anymore."

His hands cupped my face, brought it up to his. Worry, compassion tumbled through me along with a long list of doctors who would jump at the chance to be a Risardas' personal physician, now. Doctors who could cure everything but the common cold and RRS.

I shook my head. "Not like that. It's the revenant images I can't see. Not you, or this room." I crumpled Truedell's shirt in my hand then tossed it angrily towards the bed. "He was in the casinos earlier. But I can't even tell you which one."

"The images have faded already?"

"No. They're incomplete." In the past few months, Kieran had watched me work cases, listened as I talked about EII's. But I'd never explained Revenant Regression Syndrome. I never thought I'd have to.

I did now, briefly, trying to keep the emotion, the fear from my voice as I outlined the difference between revenant talents and telepathy. The latter still

functioned, fine, because it represented a live mind link I had. It was the former, the ability to read images from the dead, which was disintegrating. RRS was the only explanation.

He immediately disagreed. "It's stress. You shouldn't be involved in this case. Contact the Division, have them send out another PI."

"Not until I know for sure if it's me, or..." I let my voice trail off. There was nothing else it could be but my own failure. The decaying of my talents, and my mind.

"Come back to the suite. Get some sleep."

"Not yet." There would only be nightmares. Better to work.

"You want some tea, then?"

"Ice water."

He went back to Truedell's large living room. I heard the clanking of glassware and the soft thump of the bar 'fridge door.

Most of Truedell's clothes were still in his suitcase, neatly folded. Shirts on the left, pants on the right. All nice material, but a limited choice of hues. Black, white or gray. I don't know why I even noticed that. Kieran's closet was full of black, white, gray or dark blue.

Only a gray robe hung in the bedroom closet. Granville had said he'd booked the suite for four days, had already been there for two. Why hadn't he unpacked? Had he suspected someone stalked him, and staged his room for a hasty exit?

His discarded clothing was as neatly arranged on a nearby chair. I sipped the ice water Kieran brought, ran my hands over the soft shirts, dark pants. EII's called to me with snatches of sound, a scent of flowers, the tart taste of a glass of expensive red wine. But no faces for the voices in Truedell's memories.

No description of his killer with the Racker 750.

Kieran was dozing on the sofa, his fingers curled around his wrist comm, when I came into the living room to put the empty glass in the sink. Still waiting for those messages, no doubt. I kissed him lightly on the forehead. He stirred but didn't wake, safe in his dreams of financial success while I chased a killer, and a personal nightmare.

I went back to Truedell's bedroom, sat on the edge of the bed, the same way he had when the murderer had grabbed him. Realized I may not have a description, but I did have some usable information about his assailant. Height. Shorter than Kieran, who was well over six feet. Broader in build than Pavin Truedell himself. Large, strong hands, rough textured. And an odd, pungent odor when he spoke.

And he had spoken. Right before he'd killed Truedell. I clutched the edge of the bed as he had and listened.

... *"I don't carry much money," I whispered harshly. "But take what I have. It's in the top drawer of the dresser."*

"I'm not here for the money." He paused, then hissed out my name. "Snake Eyes."

"I don't understand." But I did. His use of my name told me this wasn't a robbery. My visitor was a professional assassin. Question was, who or rather which Syndicate had sent him?

"Liar. You were warned." He shoved me away from the bed. "You freaks

think you're so smart, so special. You're just freaks."...

The EII collapsed at that point, because Truedell had been forced out of the room, into the living room, and shot at point blank range. I knew it all because that was the first EII I'd taken in when I touched his body. He'd been murdered, no, *assassinated*. Because of something he'd been warned about. Because of something he was. A freak. Which meant nothing and everything. It was a common term, ingrained in the vernacular of so many strata, from theater to crime to music to sports. It wasn't the term I listened for again, but the murderer's voice.

If living inside Truedell's memories for the past three hours had taught me anything, it was that each voice had it's own unique intonation, inflection, cadence. It was something I'd known but not paid much attention to before. But Truedell had been fascinated by voices, just as he'd been fascinated by the music of the piano. If he were a freak at all, he was a sound freak, I realized. He'd loved sounds.

With no images to go on, no images to distract me, it was all I had to work with. The sound of his murderer's voice.

I would know it if I heard it again. Revenant Regression Syndrome might try to claim my mind. But I'd solve this case first.

I padded softly into the suite's main room so as not to wake Kieran. I didn't want to hear again how overworked I was, how I needed to refocus, reset my priorities. But stealth was unnecessary. The room was empty, a hastily scrawled note in Kieran's distinctive bold writing on the bar top: *In our room waiting for follow up on some information. See me before you go looking for Iago.*

I shoved the note in my waistband with no intention of complying, and slipped out the door. I didn't want to face the pity in his eyes, again.

The leathery-faced man in the Taythis District Police Department uniform stepped back as I headed for the lifts. "Ma'am. Guests are required to wait in the main dining room."

Iago's detectives were evidently engaged in a room-to-room search, doing what they did best. My field work was usually conducted over a different kind of ground. I no more felt at home in their physical territory than they did in my psychic one. But I didn't know how much time I had to solve this. Plus, if I sat in Truedell's suite any longer, seeing only darkness, I'd lose my mind before RRS had a chance to claim it. I flashed my badge briefly at him as I passed. "Good idea. But I'm not a guest."

At least, not any longer. Lunazula was in my jurisdiction. My vacation, possibly my career, had ended with that first bolt of fear.

The main dining room held about forty people. Their anger, their annoyance and their fear flowed over me like a turbulent tide before I even reached the elegant beveled glass doors, now flanked by two more officers in uniforms. I put up the mental wall I'd learned to erect years ago, living on crowded deep space stations, with four thousand, not merely forty, people thinking, feeling, screaming, crying constantly in my mind.

Their emotions dampered, but didn't completely go silent. I listened to their annoyed, petulant hum. Voices rose and fell. Soft music filled the quieter spaces. I thought of Truedell. He would've been as interested as I was, but for a different reason.

A buffet to tempt every palate lined the far wall. I opted for a cup of hot tea. The cups were a delicate flowered porcelain; my tea brewed through a silver strainer. I could smell a hint of chocolate lacing the coffee nearby. No synjav, here.

No happy faces, either. Guests, some in bathrobes bearing monograms, some still in evening dress, clustered unhappily around tables topped with pale pink tablecloths. Iago's detectives stood out like drab pigeons in a cage full of Keprian peacocks.

"Insulting! Outrageous!" A man's voice, high and strident, cut across the low rumble in the room. No hush followed his outburst. Evidently this kind of thing had been going on for a while, uninfluenced by the soothing piano music in the background.

I ignored the complainer, too. His wasn't the voice I was listening for.

Nor was anyone else's. I wandered, sipping tea, catching threads of conversation. Listening for a distinctive low growl, a barely imperceptible drawing out of the vowels. Heard only the educated and cultured versions of the five most common dialects in the Intergalactic Conclave. And much discontent.

Damn it all! I was sure he'd be here. There hadn't been time for him to travel down ten floors and out of the hotel. Security cameras showed no one exiting the building in the few moments between the time of Truedell's murder and the sealing of the hotel. If I were an assassin, the place I'd want to be was in a crowd, one of the guests. Or one of the staff, but no. Staff were known to each other and in a resort like this, had been security-cleared. A killer needed anonymity. What was it Truedell's mentor, Dionosio, had taught him? There was anonymity in a crowd. But also watchers. I tried to be one of the watchers.

The music changed, more upbeat, a little louder. I turned. A young man, pale hair pulled back at the nape of his neck, ran his hands over the keys of a large black piano in the corner of the dining room. One of the guests, bored, passing the time? He wore a tuxedo, not unlike the ones the casino dealers wore. No, not a guest. The hotel's pianist. I'd seen him earlier, playing in the lounge.

So had Truedell. This must have been the musician he'd so enjoyed. He was young, late twenties at most, with bright blue eyes. I wondered if he'd noticed Truedell with someone, or if Truedell had spoken to him, complimenting him on his skill. I hadn't picked up any conversations like that in his EII's, but I no longer had the faith in those, or in my deteriorating abilities.

The music stopped at the end of the light tune. I put my empty teacup on the tray of a hovering 'droid server. A woman with short, dark curls and a pale blue bathrobe stepped into the aisle as I was halfway to the piano, raised her hand.

"Derek! You said you'd play *Blue Moon Rhapsody* after your break. Don't forget."

So the musician's name was Derek. He nodded slowly, rising. The dark-haired woman turned, almost plowed into me.

"Sorry!" I steadied her. She looked tired, frazzled. I fully understood. "I hope he plays your song."

"He was supposed to before. But he takes a break every twenty minutes of so. Goes into the bar for a smoke. Like now." She wrinkled her nose. "Filthy habit. I didn't think people did that anymore. Must be something artsy."

Archaic was more like it. Few people smoked since nicotine addiction, along with every other malady and affliction, had been eradicated.

But I was less concerned with Derek's habits than his memory. Had he seen or spoken to Truedell? I prayed he had. He was on staff, no doubt knew the regulars, might well have noticed an out-of-place stranger. I needed his eyes.

The bar was deserted except for a 'droid tender stacking glasses, and another wiping down trays near the door.

Derek had hoisted himself onto a stool at the bar and faced the door. He caught my approach when I was a few steps away, a half-smile on his lips.

I matched it with one of my own. "I heard you play in the lounge. So did a colleague of mine. He was very impressed. I don't know if he got a chance to tell you."

"Most people come for the tables, not the music. But thanks. Was there a particular song you liked?"

His voice was deep, somewhat raspy and had a barely perceptible drawing out of the vowels. His breath, I noticed as I leaned on the bar to catch his words, had a pungent, sharp, unusual odor.

An odor Truedell hadn't been able to identify.

Mental warning bells clanged to life in my head. I glanced immediately at his hands. Thick, strong fingers, possibly callused from hours of practice. They toyed with a long cigar case, tapping the metal cylinder against the bar. Derek smoked cigars.

Then I knew. The odor that had puzzled Truedell hadn't been from something his killer had eaten. But something he habitually smoked.

Adrenaline shot up my spine, tingled through my limbs. I froze my smile in place. Straightened. My mind raced. If I could get to my stunner, tucked in the back of my pants, I might be able to take him by surprise.

But I also might not. He was a trained assassin. I was only a lowly corpse cop. I chased the dead, not the living. Better to let him return to his piano, let Iago's people handle him. I'd answer his question, then leave, alert the detectives. "Rhapsody. *Blue Moon Rhapsody*. I... we heard you play it yesterday."

A hand grasped my shoulder from behind. "You Dr. San Jenro?"

It was a uniformed officer, a broad shouldered woman who mangled my name. She stood behind me, a comm unit in her hand. "You're that psychic who saw Truedell's memories, right? Lieutenant Iago's looking for you."

Shock, cold and harsh ripped through me. The tapping noise behind me halted, almost infinitesimally, then started again. Faster. It came from Derek, from the murderer behind me. Hearing what I was: that psychic who saw a dead man's memories. Believing I'd come after him because of what I'd seen through Truedell. Not knowing I'd seen nothing and hadn't suspected, until a few seconds ago, who he was.

His anger flooded into me, layering over my own jolt of fear like fire on ice. Burning, boiling as shock mixed with rage.

And in his rage, a desire to kill. Again.

I grabbed the cop's arm, whipped around, trying to pull her out of the line of fire but Derek was already on his feet, the small dark Racker 750 in his hand. He

fired, the high whine not much more than a hum.

I dropped to the floor as the charge flared by me. He fired again, caught the cop as she reached for the laser pistol on her hip. She spun, flailing, her weapon flying from her hand.

Her pain arced, laced my mind like a jagged saw, ripping. Derek's hatred only made the edges sharper.

I slammed my mental wall into place as I rolled under a table. I needed my mind clear, not savaged by his anger or hazy from the cop's pain. Her pistol... I'd glimpsed it skidding under a nearby chair. I had to reach it, stop him. Heart pounding, I lunged for it just as she gasped out, "Officer down!" into her comm unit.

Derek's boot came down hard on my wrist as my fingers grazed her pistol. Fire raced up my arm. I yelped, tried to ignore the pain, tried to pull my arm free. Twisting awkwardly in my face-down position, I grabbed for his pant leg with my free arm but couldn't get purchase on the slick material, couldn't pull him off balance. He fired again. In the corner of my vision, the cop's body jerked. But her harsh gasp was cut off by a loud wail, a keening death cry. One of the 'droids had activated the security alarm.

"Don't move!" I felt his pistol pressed in the middle of my shoulder blades, then something scrape against the skin of my lower back. My stunner. Derek must have seen it when I dove for the floor.

"Get up!" He grabbed my hair, dragged me to my feet. Tears pricked my eyes. Instinctively, blindly, I swung at him, a backhanded blow, catching him in the arm. He grunted, locked me in a stranglehold, almost crushing my throat. I gasped, choking.

"You're getting me out of here. Now." His voice was that same low growl Truedell had heard.

He shoved me forward, his hand clenched in my hair, his gun jammed hard in my side. I could breathe again, but my scalp felt raw. Tears still blurred my vision. We were halfway to the emergency exit when three uniformed cops filled the doorway to the dining room.

"Hold it!"

"No, you hold it." He yanked me against him, his arm again around my throat. "Or she dies."

He meant it. His physical proximity and intense emotions overrode my mental barriers like a high moon tide raging over the sand. I clearly felt his conviction, his unwavering focus. He absolutely intended to kill me. Even if they let him go.

But I was already dead. Once RRS sets in, it spreads quickly. Six months, maybe eight. Derek or not, Kieran would be a widower twice. With a chilling clarity I suddenly realized that was my only regret. Not my investigative career that I'd clung to, putting it even before my recent marriage. Not my few, close friends in various departments, who I felt understood who and what I was. Only Kieran. I'd never been so happy as I'd been with him.

Kieran. I held onto that thought, his image. Repeated it as Derek backed us quickly towards the exit. One of my people from Division 1 would be here by tomorrow to read my EII's. I would leave them something to work with, and more.

Tell Kieran, tell him. Tell him I love him. Tell him I'm sorry.

Derek stopped just short of the plain metal door. "If you've got anyone in that lobby," he shouted, "she's dead."

The thin detective on the left raised her comm unit to her face, spoke rapidly into it. Then: "It's clear."

He kicked the door open, shoved me through. The large lobby was deserted, its silk and velvet sofas vacant. Crystal chandeliers twinkled. No one, human or 'droid, stood behind the ornate reception desk. Thick, hand woven carpet muffled our hurried footsteps.

My heart pounded, my throat was tight. Anger, mine and Derek's, rushed through my system. I dropped all mental barriers. I would know my killer. I would leave my detectives something to work with.

"Why'd you kill Truedell?" It was a stupid question to ask as he dragged me through the lobby, but that was the point. It was stupid. I didn't expect an answer, not verbally. But it had to elicit some response in his mind. And my telepathy still worked.

"Quiet!" That same harsh tone, same distinct sharp odor.

I latched onto his thoughts, listened. They blazed through his mind in a rush as he tried to push them away. He knew what I was. But I caught some of what I needed.

... "He's been warned. Ignored us. We take action, now. That's your job, Derek."

"Makes no difference to me, Mr. Dionosio, but I thought you said he was the best."

"He was, when he rigged the games in our favor. But he's taking side contracts. Thinks it's owed him."

"Because he's a mutant?"

Silence. An uncomfortable one. "You know about that, then."

"I heard talk. You know how it is."

"Do your job, Mister Valand. That's all I'm asking. Just do your job."...

Dionosio was not only Truedell's mentor, but Derek's boss. And Truedell was a mutant. That's what he'd meant when he'd referred to him as a freak. I'd heard whispers of illegal genetic manipulation in some of the fringe worlds. Wasn't quite sure how it fit here, but my people would find out. They would read my EII's and track Dionosio. Track Derek.

And do one more thing, one last thing for me. *Tell Kieran I love him.*

Four, no six cops trailed us at a distance as Derek crab-walked me towards the main lobby doors. "Stay back," Derek yelled and they hesitated. "If these doors are locked, she dies."

The doors whooshed open as we approached, auto-sensors reactivated. Lunazula's early morning air was cool, mist-filled, smelling of leaves and fields and forests. The pavement of the small parking lot crunched under my boots. Derek jerked me around. I stumbled. He picked up his pace, gun hard in my side. A dozen or so hovercars sat quietly in the lot. He headed for a row on the right.

A black hovercar, a generic rental, was parked in the shadows, middle of the

row. Derek slammed my back against its side, his left hand on my throat, his gun pointed at my face. "Thanks for your help, Doc."

I didn't close my eyes, even though my heart pounded and my ears seemed to ring from fear. I would give my people something I couldn't get from Truedell. The face of a murderer, as seen through the eyes of a dead woman.

Tell Kieran I love him.

I memorized every feature of Derek's young face, his intense blue eyes, the cleft in his chin, the off-center part of his pale gold hair.

The dark hole, small, rounded but flaring outwards from the center of his forehead. The teardrops of blood, bright red.

His head whipped back, his shoulders arcing. His hand on my throat spasmed, flailed. I dropped to the ground. It hadn't been fear ringing in my ears, but the high, searing whine of a ZAL-4. A sniper's rifle, highly sensitive. Few could handle it. I knew of one man who could.

"Jynx!" Footsteps pounding, still distant, coming closer.

I sucked in a deep breath, forced down the bile rising in my throat, held my hands out over Derek's still, lifeless body as the chills started. Felt his EII's gel.

And I saw. I *saw*. Dionsio's craggy face, thinning gray hair, gnarled hands. A gilt-edged desk and behind that, large windows with a panoramic view of Galdaron, a major city on Lunazula. I had a location now for the Syndicate that had killed Truedell. And more.

I had images from the dead. Clear, beautiful, vibrant, detailed images. Notations Derek had made in his own datapad on his last break. Names, sig-data, addresses. Derek was more than an assassin. He was a musician, trained to memorize, trained for detail.

I was shaking, crying when Kieran wrapped his arms around me. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Kier, I can see, I can—"

"You could always see. They did the autopsy on Truedell. He had a spatial-echo implant. You saw nothing from his EII's because he couldn't see anything, not like you and I do." His hand trembled as he gently wiped the tears from my face. "He was blind."

Blind? That was impossible. Blindness in all its forms had been cured centuries ago.

"Mutant," I said as Kieran pulled me, unsteadily, to my feet. "His killer knew Truedell was some kind of mutant. Called him Snake Eyes."

"I had my suspicions, put queries out and had just gotten back confirmation when Iago commed me. She tracked down the same information I had, linked to the name Dionosio. He named Truedell 'Snake Eyes' because his hands, his fingers were receptors. He could feel the design of a card, know what it was without looking. And he could affect the balance of a pair of dice because of a chemical he could secrete through his skin. A chemical that robbed him of his eyesight but gave him something the Syndicate wanted. Dionosio used him for that."

Good hands. I thought of Truedell's self appraisal. One echoed by his mentor. Good hands. And when Truedell started using those good hands for his own gain, Dionosio had ordered his death.

Uniformed officers and plain suited detectives poured through the hotel's main doors as an ambulance and two police hovercars, lights strobing the early morning mists, streamed into the parking lot. Shouts filled the air, voices calling. Doors slammed.

Overhead, the sky brightened; a new day tugging back the night's dark veil.

I wrapped my fingers around the rifle's thin strap on my husband's shoulder. "You always carry this on vacation?"

"I've been hearing rumors of problems with the Syndicate and some casinos. Nothing pointed to Lunazula, but you know what I am, how I think." He regarded me evenly, without shame, without apology. Like Derek, Captain Kieran Risardas was a trained assassin. That much the historians had recorded accurately. "When you didn't come back to our suite, I realized you'd gone looking for the killer, not trusting your own talents. I had to use mine."

"You couldn't have just alerted Iago?"

Something dark flashed across Kieran's face. The man history had labeled the Butcher of Sinder Station pulled me into his arms and threaded his fingers through my hair. His voice in my ear was a low growl. "I take care of my own."

He was still holding me tightly against him when the lieutenant strode up. "You get images, descriptions for me, San'Janeiro?"

I had, but suddenly realized that wasn't the most important thing at all. What I could do, what I could see, what my lifelong profession was mattered little compared to the one thing I'd yet to say. I raised my face and looked into storm-colored gray eyes. "Kieran, I love you," I said softly.

Only when he smiled did I turn to Iago. "I have everything you need to know, lieutenant. Your murderer's name is Derek Valand. He had good eyes."

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*Author's Note: I hope you're intrigued by Jynx and Lord Kieran. Their story began in **Rara Avis**, the first in the Case Files of Dr. Jynx San'Janeiro ...which yes, at some point I will clean up and post.*

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