

# The Sword Unswayed

## by Stephen Goldin

The attack by the mad alien robot surprised everyone at the cookbook writers' award banquet.

The official banquet had just broken up; the speeches had all been delivered, the awards had all been presented. People milled about in small groups as the crowd slowly filtered out of the dining hall. Bian Dinh stood beside her chair, her petite figure outlined by the gold silk dress embroidered with red dragons. "Did you hope to make the party rounds tonight, Debs?"

Rabinowitz winced at the college nickname. She'd already told Dinh three times she preferred "De-BOR-ah" these days, but the other woman steadfastly refused to listen. "Actually, I hoped to avoid them. I like writers individually, but in groups . . ." She gave a mock shudder. "As soon as they learn I'm a broker, they swarm on me to sell their books offworld. I hate saying no."

"So I remember."

"Well, I've learned how to say it, now, but I get tired of the way they look when I tell them it's easier to snag the lottery."

"I wasn't looking forward, either, to the parties. These people are all dreskas, they talk of nothing but business. Recipes and book contracts, as though the people who ate the food were less important than the ingredients that go in it. The oppressed people of the world can't even afford most of the spices they write about." She paused. "I hoped we could have a more private reunion. We haven't seen each other in seven years --"

"I'll have to ditch that too, I'm afraid," Rabinowitz said. Then, as she saw Dinh's expression fall, she added, "I have to be sharp for a rehearsal tomorrow."

"Rehearsal?"

"Yes, I direct an amateur theater group these days. We open the Scottish play in two weeks, and tomorrow's our first full run-through."

There was a sudden commotion in the back of the hall. People were pushing and jostling and there were a couple of surprised shouts. Suddenly an alien's rented robot body broke through the crowd and started toward the center of the room.

It was a cheap older model, with a short, thin unisex body and indeterminate facial features. Its clothes were painted on and peeling, while its face was covered with small scratches and dents from users who tried to do unaccustomed things with it.

The current user was also not very adept. The body leaned forward, having a hard time balancing upright, while the arms swung about in front as though the user were unsure whether to use them as legs. The head turned from side to side as though used to scanning its surroundings much more quickly. If it weren't for the path of bruised and fallen people it had pushed aside in its crude rush into the hall, the creature would have been laughable.

"Malfunctioning?" Dinh wondered.

"No, it's turned off the autos," Rabinowitz said. "It couldn't be showing people if they were on."

The robot had cleared a space for itself through the mob that scattered before it. Its gaze reached Dinh and Rabinowitz, and suddenly stopped. With a roar of incoherent syllables, the alien picked up a butter knife from a nearby table, lowered its head and charged straight at them.

Even dressed as they were -- Dinh in her tight silk dress, Rabinowitz in her black strapless formal with the half-high heels -- either woman could have outrun the alien in a footrace. But the surprise of its attack froze them momentarily; the alien was almost upon them before they reacted. Rabinowitz recovered first. Grabbing the chair next to her, she swung it straight into the attacker's path.

A human could have easily avoided the obstacle and kept on coming. Even an inexperienced alien who left the automatic guidance system turned on would have moved casually around it. But this alien had the autos off and didn't have the proper reflexes to deal with sudden changes. Its legs hit the chair and lost what little balance they had. The creature sprawled on the ground and slid across the polished floor three meters past the women who had been its targets. Rabinowitz and Dinh each tossed on a couple more chairs, then together overturned a round banquet table and pinned the hapless robot beneath it.

The alien tried to get back up, flailing its robot limbs madly and looking like a turtle trying to swim across a tile floor. The tension in the room broke and everyone started laughing. The alien, realizing its position was hopeless, suddenly froze in place.

"Show's over," Rabinowitz announced when she could stop laughing long enough. "He's off-teeped and gone home. Somebody call the police."

The police came, in the person of one detective and one uniformed officer. They impounded the rent-a-bod and asked general questions of everyone in the hall. When they learned the alien had homed in specifically on Dinh and Rabinowitz, they asked more pointed questions of them. Both women acknowledged knowing and having business dealings with extraterrestrials, but neither knew of anyone, off Earth or on, who wanted to kill them. Finally, after two hours of taking statements, the police left.

"Well, that was a nice little adrenaline rush," Rabinowitz said, "but now I really do have to be going if I'm to be at all coherent tomorrow."

"I really did want to talk with you," Dinh said, reaching out to grab her arm. "I hoped that we could . . . well, I never get a chance to see you in person, and there's much to tell you."

Rabinowitz looked into Dinh's eyes, sighed, and quickly reviewed her schedule. "Will you still be in the City Monday? Good, why don't we have lunch then? Call me Monday morning and we'll set up a time and place."

As she walked away, Rabinowitz could feel Dinh's eyes following her with a strange intensity. She almost wished she hadn't made the date. Whenever Bian got this intense back in college, trouble usually wasn't far away.

"This could be unpleasant," she muttered. "Please, Bian, I hope you're smart enough to know that some things exist better as memories."

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\_The bare stage was littered with burned timbers, all that remained of the once-proud Globe Theatre. You could almost see little wisps of smoke curling upward from the charred beams that had fallen diagonally across the stage during the fire. You wondered whether there might still be glowing embers about, and how safe it was to even be in the audience. The perfect ambiance for a play in which no one was safe.\_

\_An actor entered stage left and walked to center stage, deep in thought and oblivious to the audience. He wore tights and slippers, but was bare from the waist up. He stood pensively for a moment, until a dresser entered stage right carrying an oddly padded vest. The dresser handed the vest to the actor and exited again stage right. The actor slipped on the vest and fastened it down the front. The padding gave an odd curvature to his back.\_

\_The dresser entered again stage right, this time carrying a brown tunic embroidered with gold and a wig with long, straight hair. He set the wig momentarily on a charred beam as he helped the actor into the tunic, then arranged the wig on the actor's head with professional precision. His tasks now complete, the dresser exited, again stage right.\_

\_The actor watched him depart. As he did so, a transformation came over him. His left shoulder slouched, his right shoulder raised, and his head tilted slightly to the right. He was now a hunchback.\_

\_Alone again on stage, he turned and saw the audience as though for the first time. He smiled then. Not the somber smile of an archvillain contemplating his sinister machinations; no, this was the smile of someone who knows a devilishly funny joke and is about to let you in on it. His tongue was so far in his cheek it practically came out his ear.\_

\_"Now is the winter of our discontent," he began, "Made glorious summer by this sun of York."\_

\_Rabinowitz found herself in two places at once: sitting spellbound in the audience as this improbable impostor outlined the joke he intended to play on all of England, and standing in the wings mouthing the lines along with him. Yet somehow there was a still, small voice saying clearly inside her mind, "No, you're the wrong murderous schemer! The War of the Roses is centuries away. Where are my witches? Where are my secret, black and midnight hags? Clarence, Brakenbury, guards, you're on!"\_

Alarms buzzed insistently. The world whirled around her. She sat up as the burned-out theater melded in surreal counterpoint with her bedroom. The lights rose from darkened to dim, letting her see without immediately blinding her. A small yellow light was flashing in the wall to her left.

"Alarm: status," she said.

"Potential intruder, front porch. No penetration, but testing door and windows. Should I call police?"

"First the alien at the banquet, now this," she muttered. Then, more loudly, "Not yet. Turn on porch light. Intercom, sound only: Hello out there. State your business, quickly."

"Debs, please. I must see you now. There's trouble, and I need your help!"

Bian Dinh! "Be right down. Intercom: off." Rabinowitz rolled out of bed and grabbed a robe from her closet. "I knew this was going to be unpleasant," she muttered. "Why are my instincts always so right?"

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Bian Dinh sat in the middle of Rabinowitz's living room couch, sipping hot chocolate laced with brandy. She was still shaking, though the drink was starting to calm her down. Rabinowitz sat beside her, trying to soothe her old friend while she herself was anything but tranquil.

"I tried to call you, I swear it," Dinh said, "but your p-code was on and I couldn't slice through, so I thought I should come by in person and try to waken you, but I was so nervous and it was so dark that I wasn't sure what to do --"

"Slow down," Rabinowitz advised. She reached out to momentarily stroke Dinh's short, black hair.

"Breathe a little. Don't say anything more until you can figure out where the periods go in your sentences."

Dinh took some deep breaths and a few more sips of her drink. Finally she said, "Where should I begin?"

"Well, what did you do after I left you at the banquet?"

"I returned to my room and teeped to K'tolu'tan." Dinh snapped her fingers twice as she pronounced the alien word. From her own experience, Rabinowitz guessed that was just an approximation of the real sound.

"Is that a planet? I thought I'd heard of almost everyplace, but I'm not familiar with that one. Why'd you go there?"

"I was meeting a publisher. He wants to commission a book from me."

"Is that why you wanted me to stay with you after the banquet?"

"Well, one reason. But I don't think it will do any good now."

"Why not?"

"Because he's . . . he's dead. I discovered him lying on the floor."

"Natural causes?" Rabinowitz asked hopefully.

"There was a knife through his chest."

"Doesn't sound terribly natural. Have you notified any authorities?"

"I didn't know who to call on K'tolu'tan, and you know what I think of our own police. The only person I could think of was you. You're always so . . . organized."

Rabinowitz paused for a moment. "I have no idea who to contact on . . . K'tolu'tan, was it? -- but I think I know a way to get things started. Phone: Voice only. Interpol, San Francisco office, Detective William Hoy."

Dinh's eyes widened. "Interpol? You?"

"Relax. It's not what you think. It's not even what he thinks."

"Detective Hoy is not on duty at this hour," came the voice from the Interpol switchboard. "Will some other detective do, or should I route you to his message area?"

"This is only for Detective Hoy. Route it through his personal code. Tell him Deborah Rabinowitz called on a matter of life and death. Phone: off."

Dinh shook her head. "I don't know whether it's wise to bother an Interpol detective on his time off -- "

"He owes me entirely too many favors. It's time I started collecting on them, anyway."

Dinh sipped on her drink for a moment, absorbed in some thought she didn't know how to voice. Finally she said, "There may be a scandal involved in this matter, you know."

"On Earth, on K'tolu'tan, or both?"

"K'tolu'tan. Perhaps. I don't know."

The phone chimed. It was Hoy. His broad face on the living room screen bore a look of concern, and his hair was ruffled. "Are you all right? What's the trouble?"

"I'm fine. Thank you for asking."

"Your message said life and death."

"Yes, but not mine. A friend of mine seems to have stumbled across a murder on a world called K'tolu'tan."

"Is this something contagious? Do you give it to your friends?"

"She'll need a sympathetic ear, and she's far more attractive than I am."

"Impossible, but I'll be there within an hour. Phone: off."

"What did he mean by `contagious'?" Dinh asked.

"Well, believe it or not, I know exactly how you feel. I stumbled across a murder a couple of months ago myself, and Detective Hoy . . . well, `helped' isn't quite the right word, but he did keep me centered long enough to solve the case. He'll at least know who to contact for you. In the meantime, until he gets here, let's keep our minds on other things."

Dinh sipped some more of her hot chocolate thoughtfully and said nothing.

"I was having a dream when you came onto my porch," Rabinowitz said. "You weren't in it, but I think it was about you, in a way."

"What was it?"

"It was about a production of Richard III I directed in my senior year at UCLA. I'd found the notes for it in the drama department files; it was first staged that way over a hundred years ago, but it sounded like fun and I convinced the department to let me try it. It worked well, we got some nice reviews."

"What has that to do with me? I was not in it. I never even saw it."

"No, but that was the time I met you. While I was directing that play I started taking the orientation sessions for Polycultural. You remember those."

Despite her hot drink, Dinh shivered. "Yes. There were times I was sure I would not survive the orientations, let alone the Institute itself. If you had not helped me, I don't think I would have."

"We helped each other," Rabinowitz said. "I can remember times --"

She broke off in mid thought. She had no desire to get into a reminiscing contest with Dinh. She had all too good an idea where that could lead them.

More silence descended. It was Dinh who broke it this time, though she, too, was avoiding the subject of the murder. "I still have trouble believing where our paths have taken us. Who would have thought you would become a reputable, sedate literary broker?"

"Only the people who'd also predict you'd write cookbooks."

"Please. Treatises on food preparation as sociological phenomena."

"Complete with recipes."

"Complete with recipes." Dinh laughed for the first time since entering the house. "Imagine, us -- the two most rad of the radhumfems -- making our livings so mundanely."

"But times do change and move continually."

"You and your Shakespeare."

"That was Spenser, actually, a contemporary of Will's. But he makes a point. People evolve just as planets do."

"And sometimes we must help them along. Evolution seldom happens without effort, and the birth pangs of change are often violent."

"As time goes by, I wonder how I can even help myself along. All youth's ideals become focused through the lens of experience, as the wise man told us."

"But you still believe in battling injustice."

"Never without my armor, these days. And I scope out the battlefield first."

Dinh tilted her head to look at her college friend. "That does not sound like the Debs I knew. Something has happened to you."

"Many things have happened to me," Rabinowitz said softly. "Most of them named Mikhail."

Dinh looked at her intensely for a few moments, then just as intensely looked away. Yet another long, awkward silence until Dinh finally said, "You mentioned you found a murder victim, too. What was that like?"

Relieved to be on neutral ground, Rabinowitz related the story of her encounter on Jenithar and the subsequent events. She was just finishing the narrative when Detective Hoy rang the front bell.

William Hoy looked more his normal self now, impeccably dressed in an expensive suit, his hair neatly combed, his manner unflappable. Rabinowitz escorted him into the living room and introduced him to Bian Dinh. Hoy seemed definitely on top of himself, alone with two beautiful women.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Dinh," he said. "I hope you don't mind my skipping the small talk, but the hour is unusual. Ms. Rabinowitz tells me you found a murder victim on a planet called K'tolu'tan. Was this someone you knew, or a stranger?"

Dinh sat at an angle to him, not looking at him directly. "His name is . . . was P'tar'houn-Hoc. I had met and talked with him several times before."

"How many is several?"

"Eight or nine, I think. I never counted. Why, is it important?"

"In my business, you never know. We can count later. What was your relationship with him?"

"Business. I am a writer, he was a publisher. He was commissioning a book from me."

Hoy glanced over at Rabinowitz. "Is Ms. Rabinowitz your broker?"

"No," Rabinowitz said quickly. "I didn't even know about it until she came here looking for help."

"I see. How did you happen to find --" His tongue struggled hopelessly with the name. "This person's body?"

"I teeped to K'tolu'tan, then hired an automatic cab to take me to his house."

"Was he expecting you?"

"Yes, I phoned him in advance. He told me to come."

"Was he dead when you got there?"

Dinh closed her eyes and looked away. "Yes."

"Did he live alone?"

"No, he had a wife and children."

"They let you into the house, then?"

Dinh hesitated. "I did not go into the main house. He told me he would be in a small private building behind the main house, where I have met him before. I went there."

"Did anyone see you?"

"I don't know. I made no attempt to hide myself. I had no reason to."

"Who let you into the smaller house?"

"I let myself in. P'tar'houn-Hoc had given me a passcode to get through his security. The door opened and I stepped inside. He was lying on the floor in a pool of blood with a knife stuck in his chest. I was so horrified I could not think of what to do. I off-teeped and shook for several minutes. Then I decided to call Debs. She always has good advice."

"Debs?" Hoy said. He looked at Rabinowitz, the trace of a mischievous smile on his lips.

"An old school nickname," she replied. "If you were old and schooled, you might be allowed to use it."

"Sometimes I feel positively ancient," Hoy said, "particularly when I'm jerked out of bed under false pretenses."

He turned back to Bian Dinh. "You said this was going to be a business meeting. Were you recording it, by any chance?"

"I was going to, but I hadn't yet turned the recorder on. I saw no reason to record my cab ride to his house."

"Why did you teep there instead of just veering?" Rabinowitz asked.

"P'tar'houn-Hoc preferred meeting in person. He thought it was more secure."

"And you say you off-teeped?" Hoy asked. "You just left your rented body standing beside the corpse? Have you gone back to see if it's still there?"

"No, I . . .I've been afraid to."

Hoy shrugged. "Understandable, I guess. Well, you don't have to worry about notifying the authorities. When they find that rent-a-bod and trace it back, they'll come looking for you soon enough."

"Still, someone should be told," Dinh said. "Who knows how long it may be before he is missed."

"An honest, upright citizen," Hoy mused. "What a refreshing change. Yes, I believe I can get in touch with the proper people on . . .on that planet. Why do people insist on giving things such unpronounceable names? Anyway, I'm past my bedtime and since our lovely Ms. Rabinowitz shows little indication of hospitality --"

"The proper word is `pity,'" Rabinowitz cut in.

"-- I must be traveling homewards. May I give you a ride somewhere, Ms. Dinh?"

"She has to get back to her hotel in the City," Rabinowitz said quickly.

Dinh shot her a pleading glance, but Rabinowitz shook her head. "Sorry, Bian, I have that rehearsal in the morning that I just can't miss. There are other people counting on me, too. Tonight has been a big enough distraction. I'll call you as soon as it's over, I promise."

"Ms. Rabinowitz can vouch that you're safe with me," Hoy said. "She knows I don't molest any principals in an ongoing investigation."

"Not physically," Rabinowitz agreed.

Dinh took the last sip of her hot chocolate, then slowly stood up and put on her coat. Hoy escorted her to the door and said, "That's my car over there. If you'll wait a moment, I just need a few words with Ms. Rabinowitz." Dinh nodded and walked down the front steps.

"You know, if this was my case she'd have to be right near the top of the suspect list," Hoy said when Dinh was out of earshot.

"Then I'm sure we're all glad it's not your case," Rabinowitz said.

"One thing more," he added. "On my way over here I flagged the system for your name. Seems you were involved in an incident of an alien going loono earlier this evening."

"Why yes, I still remember that. It was only a few hours ago. But how kind of you to remind me."

"It might amuse you to know that the alien who rented that body also came from K'tolu'tan. Gives one something to think about, doesn't it?" he said as he closed the door behind him.

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Rabinowitz already had too much to think about. The first full run-through of any play was never less than traumatic, and the Scottish play seemed particularly cursed. She had, over the years, assembled as fine a crew as one could hope for in amateur theatricals, but all of these people had other things happening in their lives and could only devote so much attention to the play. Crises were inevitable.

She sat in the audience of the virtual theater watching it all unfold. Kwame Massala, her Mac, was the rock that anchored this production. He was superb, never a blown line or a misplaced cue. The only reason he was still working with an amateur group was that no professional company was willing to pay him more than he made as a stockbroker. Yet.



Her Lady M., Sally Rath, was a talented amateur but unlikely to make the jump to professional. She was decent in her soliloquies -- but standing toe-to-toe with Mac, her deficiencies showed only too well. Rabinowitz was staging this to minimize the inequalities but, to her eyes at least, they were still there.

The rest of the cast ranged from good to unobjectionable. None of them could save a bad show, but none would cause a catastrophe, either. And behind everything was Rabinowitz's true star, Fran Bowd the everywhere-at-once-and-never-in-the-way stage manager, sweeping up all the minor dilemmas before they became full-blown crises. Rabinowitz never wondered what she would do without Fran, any more than she wondered what she'd do without a kidney; she knew she'd cope, but it wasn't worth contemplating.

But as she sat in the audience trying to make notes, another figure intruded: her Gloucester, the ultimate clown in the ultimate black comedy. Twisted, perverted, sporting with the world that belittled him -- Kwame could play him well, and Sally would make a splendid Lady Anne since she wasn't expected to stand up to him well.

"Was ever woman in this humour wooed?" Rabinowitz sighed. "Was ever woman in this humour won? Oh Will, you had such a dismal opinion of us sometimes . . .but your men weren't that much better, come to think of it."

She shook her head and looked back at the stage, where Banquo's ghost was currently spoiling Mac's party. "One royal murderer at a time, shall we? Let yourself be transported, woman."

She got through the rest of the play with only vile shadows of Gloucester intruding here and there, then called the cast around her and gave them her opinions. Even she didn't think the comments were up to her usually inspired insights. She chalked it up to a lack of sleep.

When the rehearsal was finally over and she disengaged the veering set, she found four messages waiting for her. Two were routine business calls, the third was from Bian Dinh asking to meet as soon as she finished rehearsal, and the fourth was from Detective Hoy. "I thought you'd find it amusing that the authorities on K'tolu'tan want to try your friend, Ms. Dinh. Not only for murder, but for 'perversion of common morality,' which seems to be almost as serious there."

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"The problem," Hoy said when she called him back, "is that K'tolu'tan has always kept to itself. It has no 'mutual justice' treaty with us. We can't arrest her or force her to stand trial here. And even if she faces the charges on K'tolu'tan and their court finds her guilty, we're not legally obligated to enforce the sentence. The most they could officially do is bar her from teeping there ever again."

"Then she has nothing to worry about."

"I wouldn't say that. They could teep one of their own people over here to execute her and, by the same laws, we couldn't prosecute him. I'm sure you can see the diplomatic results."

"The reverberations could go on for years, maybe decades."

"That's just what my chief thinks. Interpol can't take this any further. Maybe you could."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Something brilliant."

"Thanks, but my prescription for brilliant pills lapsed last month."

"Nonsense. You've got a background in interstellar diplomacy, you're used to negotiating on other people's behalf, you've even cracked a murder case. I'm sure you'll do almost as good a job as I could."

"You floor me with your confidence."

"I'll keep that in mind," Hoy smiled. "On the floor can be fun. By the way, do you know what sort of company you're keeping? Your Ms. Dinh has a rap sheet longer than a five dollar hooker's."

"All in college, lots of arrests, only a few convictions, all misdemeanors, mostly DTP and resisting, right?"

"You know her pretty well, I see."

"She was one of the firebrand radicals in college, both on Earth and at Polycultural Institute on Pna'Fath. Always agitating for some just cause, the more lost it was, the better."

"And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"I took the liberty of checking your college records, too. Everything except your class transcripts has been sealed shut. Officially, you're absolutely pure."

"That's me. I put driven snow to shame."

"Odd, don't you think, that such an innocent young girl was best friends with a hooligan like Bian Dinh."

"Not so odd, if you think about it. I talk to you, don't I?"

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"If you want my help, Bian," Rabinowitz said, "I'll need facts."

"I have not lied to you," Dinh said, but she refused to meet Rabinowitz's gaze over the phone line.

"Partial truths are more misleading than lies. Or did you forget I grew up hosting diplomatic functions? Tell me everything about your relationship with this guy on K'tolu'tan."

"He was a publisher. He had read some of my works on the politics of food, and they spoke to the rebellious nature within his own soul. He wanted me to write a book specifically about the politics of food on K'tolu'tan."

"Did he reach you through your agent?"

"I'm . . . between agents at the moment. He contacted me directly. He said he would use the proposed book as a call to arms."

"The little bit of research I've had time for says food and eating are taboo subjects on K'tolu'tan."

Dinh nodded. "Totally. That was what was so wonderful. P'tar'houn-Hoc wanted to challenge the established order. Like us, he was a progressive thinker who believed in freedom of speech and ideas."

"Like us," Rabinowitz echoed with a trace of cynicism. "Were you involved with him personally in any way?"

Dinh looked at her, her face a mask of innocence. "What are you implying?"

"You're not the only one who remembers good old college days."

Having attended Polycultural Institute with Dinh for three years, Rabinowitz would have believed nothing could embarrass the other woman. Apparently she was wrong, for Dinh looked flustered as she said, "Do you know what K'tolu'tanou look like?"

"No, but I know what Reticuleans look like, and I remember that one weekend --"

"K'tolu'tanou look like soft-shelled crabs walking erect. If P'tar'houn-Hoc tempted me in any physical way, it was to throw him in a pot of boiling water and melt some butter when he was done. He stimulated me intellectually, yes, but that is all. We had many exciting conversations about the repressive nature of K'tolu'tan society --"

"I'll bet you did. Is that what led to this charge of perversion they've got against you?"

"We never did anything," Dinh protested. "If my book had been written and published, it would certainly have perverted the common morality -- but it never was."

"All you ever did was talk?"

"I prepared a few meals for him. He found that stimulating."

"Oh, I'll bet he did. You indulged his unique and culturally twisted fantasies --"

"They weren't unique. There is a worldwide underground society devoted to public eating. P'tar'houn-Hoc was one of its leading members. So was his assistant, F'tim-Saa."

"The plot thickens. You were involved with the local Hellfire Club."

"You make it sound so childish. There was a time you would have thought it was noble."

"Probably, in some distant epoch."

"Even if all you're thinking is true, I would have no reason to kill him. We held the same values, and he was commissioning a book from me. Surely you don't think I'd kill anyone."

"Not the Bian I knew in college," Rabinowitz admitted. "You might harangue someone to death, but that would be suicide if they stayed to listen. No, I don't think you could take a knife and stab someone. But somebody did kill him, and you're conveniently far enough away to make a wonderful scapegoat. People love to blame aliens when things go wrong."

"That reminds me of our march to protest the treatment of the Kaliwwan. Do you remember -- ?"

"Yes I do, and I'm proud I was part of it, but it has nothing to do with the case at hand. You said the door was locked when you got there. Do you know who else had passcodes?"

"No, I don't. His family probably did, but there could have been other people."

"Other members of his secret society?"

"Possibly. I didn't really meet any of them except his assistant. But the door locked when it closed. The killer could have been invited in there, killed P'tar'houn-Hoc and left, and the door would have closed behind him. He didn't need a passcode."

Rabinowitz decided to try another avenue. "Did he have any enemies?"

"We both spent much time condemning the forces of conservatism and repression, but he only mentioned one specific name, someone who was a bastion of hypocritical public morality."

Dinh closed her eyes and tried to think. "What was the name? It sounded something like `cantaloupe,' but I don't remember exactly. P'tar'houn-Hoc said this person was giving speeches all the time, calling him names and urging his destruction. Sorry, but I don't know any more than that."

"That's fine, it gives us a motive. We'll let it simmer for a moment while we concentrate on something else. The murder scene. You said it was a smaller building behind his main house. What was it, a private office or den or something?"

"Actually, a kitchen and eating area."

"I guess that makes sense. What was it like? Give me as much detail as you can."

"Not very large, sort of like the kitchen and dining area of a small efficiency flat. It was rectangular. The walls were sea green, and there were pictures of food on them. There was a phone built into one wall so he could conduct business while he ate. There was a countertop along one of the long walls with a small sink and several cupboards underneath it for storing dishes and food. Against the opposite wall was a small square table with two chairs. The counter and sink were to the left as you entered the room, the table and chairs on the right. There was only the one door, and no windows. That's basically it. Very simple."

"If it only were," Rabinowitz said with a sigh. "Okay, what normally happened when you visited him there? You said you cooked him some meals."

"Prepared them," Dinh corrected. "I would add spices and things, but the K'tolu'tanou eat their food raw. Bunches of things like kelp and lots of fish and hard-shelled little creatures. I think some of them may have been alive, too. I hadn't had a chance to do much research yet, we were too busy talking about the sinister social repression. Anyway, P'tar'houn-Hoc would sit at the table and eat what I prepared while I stood beside the table and watched him. We would talk about my book, and how it would deal a crushing blow to the enemies of social progress. I asked him questions about --"

"You stood beside the table? I thought you said there were two chairs. Weren't you allowed to sit in his presence?"

"I don't think he would have minded -- but he always sat in the big chair and I couldn't fit in the smaller one."

"A big chair and a small chair? What is this, `Goldilocks'?"

"The second chair was like a child's highchair. My body didn't fit in it. Do you think it's important?"

"I don't know. Did they rent you the wrong size body?"

"They said it was the only size they had, but it wouldn't fit in that chair. I didn't mind, since I was just teeping. I could sit comfortably at home while the rented body was standing."

"Now think hard. Was there anything different about the room when you went there last night?"

"I didn't take much time to look around." Dinh closed her eyes to better visualize the scene. "The counter and sink area looked the same. Both chairs had been tipped over, and P'tar'houn-Hoc was lying beside his with the knife sticking in him. Now that I think of it, it was the same knife I used for cutting up kelp; there were ceremonial engravings on the handle."

She shook her head. "No, other than that everything looked as it normally did." She paused and looked into the phone at her old friend. "I haven't been much help, have I?"

Rabinowitz shrugged. "As Dostoevsky said, God sets us nothing but riddles. Sometimes we're lucky enough to find a few answers." She sighed again. "But sometimes it takes a lot more luck than others."

\* \* \*

The police on K'tolu'tan were not at all helpful. They would not transmit visually and refused point blank to answer Rabinowitz's questions -- and once she explained she was investigating on behalf of Bian Dinh, they became downright rude. Even if she teeped to K'tolu'tan, Rabinowitz would not be allowed to inspect the murder site. She had no authority in this matter, and the police intended to keep it that way.

"Something brilliant, the man says," Rabinowitz muttered as she broke the connection. "I feel about as brilliant as a velvet rhinestone. Bian was always good at digging her own grave. I don't know if I can exhume her this time. I don't even know if I should bother."

Her computer reminded her she had a conference call scheduled, and for the next hour and a half she put her friend's problems aside to deal with her own business. She finished the call and started to make herself some lunch when the phone rang with a call from K'tolu'tan. She didn't recognize the person's name, but she took the call anyway.

"Shallow tides, Deborah Rabinowitz," said the person at the other end of the line. Dinh had been right; the K'tolu'tanou \_did\_ look like soft-shelled crabs. "I am called F'tim-Saa. Your beloved, Bian Dinh, told me I must speak with you."

"My \_what?\_" Despite almost two decades of dealing with approximate translations over interstellar data loops, the term still caught her by surprise.

"`Beloved.' At least, that was how my machine interpreted Bian Dinh's word."

"I'd better have a talk with Bian," Rabinowitz muttered to herself, adding more loudly, "Does your machine have a term for old friend, comrade, buddy?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Well, those terms are probably more accurate these days. I presume your call has some bearing on the death of P'tar'houn-Hoc."

"I believe it does. I was his second-down, in charge of implementing his business."

"Ah yes, now I remember your name. Bian did mention you. You may turn out to be a godsend, someone who can fill me in on local customs and practices. Bian is very intelligent, but she has a tendency to leap into the middle of situations without fully analyzing them. Always with the best of intentions, but . . . well, I'm sure you understand the problem. Any help you can give me in understanding what's happening on K'tolu'tan will be greatly appreciated."

She paused. "Um, for instance, I apologize for my ignorance about your customs, but is there some honorific or title I should address you by?"

"A shortened form of my name, F'tim, will be quite sufficient."

"Thank you. And the same for me. `De-BOR-ah' will do nicely. I'm trying, just as a friend with no official position, to find out what happened to P'tar'houn-Hoc. Having known Bian for many years, I honestly

don't believe she's capable of murdering anyone. Do your police have any special reason for believing she did it?"

"They don't tell their minds to me, but I can guess. She's a stranger, an alien. She was in his private dining room beside the body."

"But no apparent motive whatsoever. Unless your world is vastly different from mine, mentally balanced people don't often kill one another for no reason at all. Did P'tar'houn-Hoc have any enemies?"

F'tim considered this. "As a successful business leader he had competitors, but none I believe who would do such a thing."

"Greed's always a good motive. Who inherits his publishing firm?"

"Since he had no heirs, I do."

"No heirs? Bian told me he had a wife and two children."

"Yes, but the only son is still very young and cannot legally inherit."

"What about the wife and daughter?"

F'tim seemed perplexed. "What about them?"

Rabinowitz paused to absorb that. "Okay, that's the way it slides. I'll bet Bian didn't know about that, or she'd have been trying to reform more than your eating habits. What happens to the family now that P'tar'houn-Hoc's dead?"

"I inherit them as well," F'tim said.

"Indeed?"

"It is a heavy responsibility. I already have a wife and child of my own to care for."

"Do you get P'tar'houn-Hoc's entire estate?"

"I inherit everything that was his."

"I see." She paused for a long moment, then decided to change the subject. "What about the room where P'tar'houn-Hoc was killed? I understand from Bian that it was a combination of dining room and office."

"She would know better than I. I have never been there."

"Would there be any reason for his children to be in there?"

"I don't think so. There is a central room of the house where children are taught to eat, and once they are old enough to eat by themselves they are assigned their own private rooms." F'tim seemed uncomfortable with the subject, so Rabinowitz decided to move on.

"I understand P'tar'houn-Hoc wanted to commission Bian to write a book about the politics of food on K'tolu'tan," she said. "As his successor, do you plan to continue that commission?"

"I think it would be a worthwhile project, yes."

"Is it a matter of personal interest to you?"

One of F'tim's eyes wiggled on its stalk. "I think you are politely asking whether I share his interest in . . . public dining. That's not a question I can answer easily. Yes, I am a member of the Food Society, and yes, I share its goal of removing the stigma of eating in public. But that is where the similarity ends. With P'tar'houn-Hoc, this eating was an obsession, a fetish, a passion to defy the standards of decent society. I believe for him the Food Society was a way to justify his perversions, a rationalization of his sickness."

"I see . . . I think. But this isn't the case for you."

"Deborah, since I became old enough to feed myself, no one has ever seen me eat. I never took part in the Food Society's `dinners.' The very thought fills me with revulsion."

"I'm a little confused. If you don't like public eating, why are you in the Food Society? Was it just to please your boss?"

"No, though that was an additional benefit. I am . . . I don't know, an idealist, a revolutionary, a futurist. I see my world becoming a self-imposed outcast of galactic civilization. K'tolu'tan has little contact and less trade with other worlds, and it is no one's fault but our own. On all other worlds, eating is an everyday occurrence. People pay it little thought. Only on K'tolu'tan is it a monstrous perversion, and so we shut ourselves off. We pretend that if we have nothing to do with those other worlds, we don't have to think about their disgusting habits.

"I believe we are cutting ourselves off from our future. There is much we can learn from other people, and perhaps a few unique things of our own we can share. We don't have to surrender our own ways, but we must desensitize ourselves to the ways of others. I want Bian Dinh's book, not as a piece of personal pornography, but as a manifesto for change."

Rabinowitz laughed out loud. "You and Bian are a match made in heaven. I think you'll enjoy one another thoroughly."

Then she grew serious again. "Bian mentioned someone who gave a lot of speeches against P'tar'houn-Hoc, a conservative spokesman. She couldn't remember his name."

"Ah, yes. There is a prominent lecturer named simply K'anal'orb who has led many meetings against the sin of public mastication."

"A lecturer?"

"I suppose this time I am the victim of poor translation. A social leader without an official position, a public moralist, a person of supposed rectitude. K'anal'orb draws large crowds to his lectures and spurs them to emotional frenzies with his appeals to traditional social values. There are those who would walk through a desert for him. Because our firm has published books about eating, we are one of his special targets. He has lectured many times against us, and mentioned P'tar'houn-Hoc often by name."

"Sounds like an evangelist," Rabinowitz said. "You consider this K'anal'orb a suspect, then?"

"He has called for P'tar'houn-Hoc's destruction many times."

"Which is why I have doubts about him as a suspect. Moralists love having a bad example around to point to. P'tar'houn-Hoc was too valuable to him alive. His death can only be milked for one or two sermons on the wages of sin before it becomes stale and K'anal'orb has to look for a new target."

"Perhaps one of his followers became too enthusiastic."

"Who will free me from this turbulent priest?' Deja vu all over again," Rabinowitz muttered, too quietly

for the computer to pick up. "Can you think of anyone else with a motive?"

"No one to my knowledge."

"Well, keep working on it. Meanwhile we've got a trial to worry about. How does Bian get herself a lawyer?"

F'tim stared silently for a few seconds. "I'm afraid there is yet another translation problem. What should Bian try to get?"

"Someone who is an expert on your legal system, who will represent her interests and defend her at the trial."

"There are scholars who analyze important cases throughout history. We've even published some of their books. I suppose they are experts. But they don't defend anyone."

Rabinowitz started to get a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. "How do your trials operate?" she asked very slowly.

"The accused person is brought to an assembly hall. People who have complaints state them and the accused person tries to explain. When everyone who wants to has spoken, a vote is taken and the decision is rendered."

"Who gets to vote?"

"Anyone who's there."

"Good Lord," Rabinowitz muttered quietly, closing her eyes. "They may look like crabs, but it's going to be a kangaroo court!"

\* \* \*

"So you won't believe I was just in the neighborhood and decided to drop in?" Detective Hoy asked.

"The Bay is a couple of blocks that way," Rabinowitz said. "Drop in there."

"How inhospitable. And just when I came all this way to help you."

"The way you helped me by dumping this problem in my lap?"

"Excuse me? Who dumped what? I seem to remember a late night 'life-or-death' phone call. It's not my old college chum trying to pervert the morals of an entire planet."

"Look, I just learned what trials are like on K'tolu'tan and I'm feeling pretty crabby. I'm staging the Scottish play, I'm dreaming Richard III, and now I've got to go star in The Merchant of Venice. Not to mention any of my real work, which is hanging in midair while I juggle all the other pieces. I don't have time to watch you practice your boyish charm."

"Not even if I brought you something to help you?"

"Like a notarized confession from P'tar'houn-Hoc's killer?"

"Maybe as good." He took a paper from his jacket pocket. "This is the rental slip for the robot that attacked you the night of what's-his-name's murder. It was paid for from the account of someone named K'anal'orb. I understand he's a high-soaring preacher or something."



"Do the authorities on K'tolu'tan know about this?"

"Where do you think I got it? They've even questioned him about it. He claims he was preaching in front of a thousand people at the time of the attack. Some flimsy alibi like that."

"Then how did his account number get attached to the rental?"

"He has a whole staff of adoring followers running his organization. He says there are something like thirty people authorized to use his account. From what I gather, the police haven't checked more thoroughly than that."

"So we've just added thirty suspects. What good does this do me?"

"Maybe you can try to introduce some reasonable doubt. At any rate, it might give you something to zero in on."

"The trial is tomorrow morning. The only thing I'll zero in on is your head if you're not out of here in thirty seconds."

Hoy smiled. "I go, I go; look how I go."

She stared, bemused, as the door closed behind him. "The boy's learning something. I may civilize him yet."

\* \* \*

The recording arrived two hours later. She had asked F'tim to send her a holo of K'anal'orb in action, and F'tim had assured her such recordings were readily available. Although she had no way to know for certain whether K'anal'orb would attend the trial, it seemed a pretty safe bet he'd want to milk this for everything it was worth. And since the verdict was by majority vote, he'd pack the courtroom with as many of his followers as possible to guarantee the outcome he wanted: death to the alien subverter.

Rabinowitz sat behind her desk, lowered the lights in her office, closed her eyes and meditated for a couple of minutes. Finally, as ready as she'd ever be, she started playing the holo to look into the face of the enemy.

The scene was a circular outdoor arena at night. Blazing torches ringed the perimeter, but spotlights lit the stage in the center. It cheered her slightly to note that the crowd was barely half the arena's capacity; K'anal'orb might be popular, but he couldn't automatically pack an entire house. Rabinowitz gauged the attendance at less than a thousand, but was willing to bet they made up in intensity what they lacked in numbers.

Clothing seemed optional, serving mostly to keep out the nighttime chill; some people wore cloaks, some had small bands of cloth on their shells, and other hardier souls had only painted patterns or jewelry. There was no seating and everyone was in constant motion. It was apparently expected that the audience would mill about and talk to their neighbors, at least before the show. It reminded her of the groundlings at the old Globe, except that this audience was above the stage on the sloping sides of the bowl. "I guess this restores the meaning of the word `stands,'" she muttered.

There was a bustle of activity around the stage. Rabinowitz's trained eyes could spot a small army of stagehands moving purposefully in the shadows, tending to the million and one details a live show of this sort required. Each helper was easily identified by an aqua-colored sash worn diagonally across the shell. As she looked more closely, Rabinowitz could see more of the helpers moving through the audience and talking with people, probably encouraging their enthusiasm.

There was a rising sense of anticipation swelling within the crowd, so when loudspeakers blared a six-note fanfare and the lights on the stage dimmed, then rose, the people turned all their attention to the center. On stage stood a K'tolu'tano Rabinowitz would have been unable to tell apart from the others except that his somber gray robes wrapped with dignity around his body. He stood stock still, waiting for the new tension to build. The audience continued to mill about silently, a backhanded tribute to Brownian motion, but they moved much more slowly now, their eyestalks all fixed on the one individual.

Rabinowitz watched K'anal'orb move around the platform. The speaker would turn his attention in different directions as he spoke, managing to face each section of the audience around him at least once every couple of minutes -- classic theater-in-the-round staging. She watched his body rhythm, saw how his movements followed a silent three-beat melody that started slowly and increased gradually to a breathless pace; then, with one dramatic gesture, he would wave an arm and bring the tempo to a flashing halt that left the audience panting before he started slowly to build the pattern again. She listened to his voice, both the modulation and the cadence, perfectly synchronized to his movements around the stage -- again carefully calculated to carry his audience on an emotional roller coaster.

"Too repetitive a pattern," she muttered. "He'd lose a human audience after a while. But if the K'tolu'tanou evolved along a shore with strong wave action, it might hit some primordial instinct. Yeah, it probably works for them."

The show lasted less than an hour; then the spotlights went out briefly and came back on to brighten an empty stage. The audience was screaming its approval, its hunger for more -- a hunger K'anal'orb would not satisfy until his next performance. He knew how to keep his fish on the hook.

Rabinowitz watched the holo the first two times without turning on the translator. She didn't have to know the words K'anal'orb was saying to understand what he meant, any more than she needed to speak German to hear the message of *Triumph of the Will*. When she did finally turn the translator on, she knew she was right; the speech itself was little more than vague generalizations. The delivery was what sold it.

She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. "A consummate performer," she said. "Kwame could match him for eloquence and passion, but he doesn't improvise well and we can't expect K'anal'orb to stick to our script. Besides, I doubt Kwame's ever teeped in his life, certainly not into an alien body. It wouldn't help his performance to be floundering out of control around the stage."

She sighed. "Might as well face it. As an actress, Ms. Rabinowitz, you may only be a mediocre understudy -- but for this one show, you'll have to give the performance of your life."

\* \* \*

*Everything was falling apart, yet still he chose to face the world bravely. Villain though he might be, he had a vestige of manhood and pride.*

*" . . . And now a wood/Comes toward Dunsinane. Arm, arm, and out!/If this which he avouches does appear,/There is nor flying hence nor tarrying here./I 'gin to be aweary of the sun./And wish th' estate o' th' world were now undone./Ring the alarum-bell! Blow, wind! come, wrack!/At least we'll die with harness on our back."*

*Yet even as he mentioned his back, it began to change, to shift, and Mac leaned forward, unable to keep upright. The gray stone battlements vanished, to be replaced by the charred beams of the burned-out Globe Theatre, and she found herself staring into the leering face of Gloucester just as he learned that Richmond had put upon the sea seeking to topple his throne. His eyes burned with passion as they glared unwaveringly into hers.*

\_"Is the chair empty? is the sword unswayed?/Is the king dead? the empire unpossess'd?/What heir of York is there alive but we?/And who is England's king but great York's heir?"\_

The alarm chimed and Rabinowitz woke in a cold sweat, still feeling the glare of those cold, mad eyes. "Why did he look at me like that?" she muttered. "That's not the way I directed it. Was he trying to tell me something?"

She yawned despite her tension and rubbed her eyes. "Yeah, right, I'm getting omens in my dreams. He's probably warning me I'm facing as big a disaster as his. Why couldn't I have gotten Caesar's soothsayer? At least he said exactly what he meant. Of course, not being as evil as Richard may mean I have some justice on my side.

"But," she reminded herself, "in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation. We do pray for mercy -- Oh damn, what's the rest of it? I'd better know that one by heart. And who cares if I'm giving away precious literary assets? It's fair use, and it'll just whet their appetite for more."

She glanced at the clock: 4:31 AM. "Time to go." She went to the bathroom, ran a comb quickly through her short brown hair, donned a warm flannel robe and went downstairs to her office. "Phone: call Bian Dinh. Time to wake her for her appointment with Destiny."

But Dinh wasn't sleeping. She, too, was pondering the trial, though she had an entirely different perspective on it. "This will give us a wonderful platform to expose the weaknesses of K'tolu'tan morality," she bubbled at her friend. "Just like the Scopes evolution case, my innocence will vindicate me and show what hypocrites their moral leaders are."

"But Scopes was guilty," Rabinowitz reminded her. "And he wasn't facing a murder charge with no other suspects available."

"Such details won't matter when I present my case. I will expose the corruption and oppression in their society --"

"You will keep your damn mouth shut is what you will do. The last thing we need is you telling an already biased jury what idiots they are. The cards are stacked against us and I don't know whether we're playing bridge or poker -- but if you still want my help, you'll play by my rules."

Dinh flamed. "I will not be gagged, and especially not by someone who's abandoned all the noble ideals we both once held so sacred."

"Good. I didn't want to go to court today anyway."

She started to switch off the phone when Dinh reached out to the screen and said, "Debs, wait."

Rabinowitz waited, staring at the screen in silence.

"You would really leave me to face the court alone? Debs, I can't do it without you. I never could. Together we can slay dragons, but without you . . ." Her voice broke. "I do need your help."

Rabinowitz softened. "Then let me give it to you the best way I know how. Maybe my tactics have changed since we last rode out against the windmills -- but maybe I've learned a few things, too."

Dinh gave her the telepresence address of the body rental agency she used on K'tolu'tan, and the women each established their connection to the shop. K'tolu'tan didn't have much TP traffic, and their choice of bodies was decidedly limited -- one basic shape, any of three nearly identical shades of beige, fashioned from some lightweight metal alloy. As Rabinowitz joined with the robot she chose, it was as though her

body shifted.

K'tolu'tanou bodies had an odd symmetry. They were bilaterally symmetrical about a horizontal axis drawn across the middle of their shells, with three limbs on each side of the axis. The three limbs at the bottom had evolved into short, powerful legs; the middle one could stretch to make a tripod for balance. For someone who could only use two legs at a time, the center of balance was all wrong; Rabinowitz felt top-heavy, and was positive that leaning forward would prove disastrous. She was only too happy to give herself over to the automatics that translated her two-legged walk into the K'tolu'tanou mode. She moved very slowly in a gait halfway between a drunken lurch and a sailor's rolling swagger, but at least she was in little danger of falling over. Remembering the clumsy alien who'd attacked them at the banquet, she was grateful for small favors.

There were only two eyes, one on either side of the imaginary axis, but they were at the right side of the body, and on long stalks. She felt as though she were looking at the whole world cockeyed -- and the automatics took a long time to learn how to interpret her eye movements to move the eyestalks. "With limited outside contacts, they don't bother investing in good software," she muttered. It was almost easier to turn her entire body around to change her field of vision -- an awkward procedure at best.

Her arms were less of a problem. The one closest to the eyes had a big claw that let her snap at things and hold them steady. Inside the claw was a retractable three-fingered hand. The middle arm had two elbow joints and was long enough to work in concert with the claw; it also had a serviceable three-fingered hand at its end. The third arm could not reach the claw, but had eight long delicate fingers that allowed fine manipulation.

She snapped the claw hard a couple of times and fantasized about a few necks she would like to catch between those pincers. "Almost worth it," she muttered.

The ground was firm but not hard, like densely-packed wet sand, even inside the building. Dinh, who'd had more practice with this type of body, gave her pointers on how to move. Rabinowitz practiced walking around, coordinating her arms with her movements and turning her entire body just to see things at a different angle. "Maybe the jury will take pity on us because we look so crippled," she told her friend over their private phone connection. "Or maybe they'll be too busy laughing to care about the case."

"I've never seen a K'tolu'tano laugh," Dinh said solemnly.

"Not a good sign," Rabinowitz said. She tried to shake her head, but the motion didn't translate to the rented body.

The police were waiting in the agency lobby to escort them to the courtroom. The police car, which looked like a miniature barge and rode on an air cushion just a few centimeters above the ground, set off at an amazingly slow speed. "If this is the way they all drive," Rabinowitz commented to Dinh, "they must not have many serious accidents."

It was daytime here, with a dim red sun giving feeble illumination; it took a few seconds for the computer to render the "false color" imaging best adapted to human sight. This region was not densely populated, nor were the buildings very tall; Rabinowitz saw nothing higher than two stories. She got the unmistakable impression of beach front property. The robot body conveyed odors only for smoke and corrosive chemicals -- scents representing immediate danger -- but Rabinowitz's mind kept imagining the salty tang of an ocean breeze.

The police car pulled into a lot with other parked vehicles, all with the same lack of style and design. The police helped the two women out of the car and led them past a line of other people into a nondescript two-story building. They were instantly noticed; their artificial bodies and clumsy gait obviously

proclaimed them aliens. The crowd went silent around them and parted to let them through, as though no one wanted to be tainted with the touch of alien corruption. Rabinowitz and Dinh walked straight ahead behind their police escort, ignoring the unfriendly stares.

Their destination became obvious as soon as they entered the building: spectators were moving toward one room like a line of ants to a fallen ice cream cone. Again, all movement stopped as they passed, and Rabinowitz had to work hard not to feel self-conscious about her awkward mechanical stagger. Only the fact that she'd done a variation of this so many times on so many different worlds let her keep her perspective.

The courtroom was another arena, a smaller rectangular indoor version of the amphitheater Rabinowitz had seen in the holo. Rabinowitz guessed the house could hold no more than 150 bodies. Again, there were no seats; the entire audience had to stand.

There were no special tables or stands laid out for prosecution or defense, but the police led them down into the pit and then took up positions behind them. Placing the audience around the defendant made for better drama -- and also better aim. Rabinowitz wondered what the local equivalent was for rotten fruit.

A K'tolu'tano standing down on the stage saw them enter and came quickly up the aisle toward them. "I am F'tim," he said, aware that the humans probably couldn't tell one K'tolu'tano from another.

Rabinowitz kept an eye on the rows as they filled with spectators. "There weren't any seats in the amphitheater in the holo you sent me, either," she remarked to F'tim. "Don't you people ever sit down?"

F'tim seemed somewhat embarrassed by the question, but Dinh spoke up immediately. "They only sit while they're eating. Sitting has obscene social connotations."

"Hmm. That's interesting."

"Why?" F'tim asked. "In what way?"

Rabinowitz hesitated. "I'm not sure, really," she replied. "It just sounds like it should be."

"I plan to devote an entire chapter to it," Dinh told her. "It's highly symbolic of the entire culture."

"Perhaps," Rabinowitz said absently. She filed the information away in the back of her mind. There were too many other things to concentrate on at the moment.

The crowd continued to file into the room. Rabinowitz noticed several dozen people wearing the aqua-colored sashes of K'anal'orb's aides. She didn't have enough experience to recognize individuals of this race, yet, but she was sure K'anal'orb himself was somewhere within the audience, waiting for the right dramatic moment to come forward and take the stage.

The doors were closed when the room was filled to capacity, leaving the rest of the bystanders reduced to viewing the trial broadcast. F'tim assured her this was the largest courthouse in the area, but some trials were so notorious that not everyone who wanted to affect the outcome could fit inside.

"That's okay," Rabinowitz said. "I'm sure K'anal'orb has packed enough of his supporters in here to guarantee a guilty verdict."

A clerk with a green ribbon around his shoulders stepped forward and read the charges aloud: that the alien known as Bian Dinh conspired with the deceased, P'tar'houn-Hoc, to subvert the public morality and then, for reasons unknown, murdered him in his private dining chamber.

A policeman next explained that P'tar'houn-Hoc's body was found lying on the floor of his dining chamber with a knife in his chest, and that the alien body Bian Dinh had rented was standing over the corpse. Rental agency and cab records proved that Bian Dinh had indeed rented the body and traveled to P'tar'houn-Hoc's house at about the time the killing occurred.

The policeman withdrew, and a strange silence fell over the courtroom. "Well," Dinh said, prodding her friend over their private phone link. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"I want to let them take the first shot," Rabinowitz replied.

It wasn't long in coming. Rabinowitz had half expected K'anal'orb to let his lieutenants take the first few easy jabs, have her rebut them, and then come out personally to deliver the big blows. But apparently K'anal'orb wanted all the glory for himself, because he strode arrogantly onto the stage amid the worshipful sighs and mutterings of his followers. He made an expansive gesture to acknowledge the crowd, and received a hissing/humming sound that served as applause on K'tolu'tan. Patently ignoring the rented alien bodies, he spoke directly to the audience.

"Too long have we allowed our world to be corrupted by the evil, perverse teachings of disgusting outsiders, who mock our honored customs and lead us into the ways of degradation. They flaunt their perversions in our faces and demand we join them in their decadence. It is the ultimate irony, then, that P'tar'houn-Hoc, a blaspheming convert to their warped and twisted values, became a victim to their sickness and died at the hand of that murdering alien garbage."

"Feel free to defend me any time," Dinh said over their private connection.

"Just a little bit longer," Rabinowitz said. "K'anal'orb works to a specific rhythm in his speech. If I wait till he gets nearly to the peak of an emotional cycle and then interrupt, it'll come crashing down and it'll take him that much more work to build it up again."

She kept her ears carefully tuned, only half-listening to the actual words, until she felt he was nearly ready to smash his point home. Then she stepped awkwardly forward, waved her claw about feebly and shouted, "No, this is wrong!"

K'anal'orb stopped in mid-sentence and seemed lost for a moment. He was obviously unused to interruptions. He turned to glare at Rabinowitz's ungainly rented body. "See how one of these loathsome creatures comes to mock our very system of justice," he sneered.

"I've come here because I respect your system of justice," Rabinowitz replied. "My name is Deborah Rabinowitz, and I am a friend of Bian Dinh who has been accused of this terrible crime. Like yourselves, I seek to unmask falsehood and bring the truth to light."

"And yet you rudely interrupt the speech of an honored man," said someone from the crowd -- someone wearing the aqua sash of K'anal'orb's disciples.

"If my action caused offense, it was merely through ignorance and not disrespect. I spoke as I did because I believe K'anal'orb is a man who also seeks the truth and who would like to be corrected when he himself delivers offense out of what I'm sure is ignorance rather than disrespect."

K'anal'orb had probably expected some kind of rejoinder, but not one with this slant. He hesitated, and Rabinowitz pressed her point.

"It's true, Bian and I are aliens. We were born on another world, our natural bodies take other forms, and we were raised to think in other ways. But that just makes us different, not evil. Don't condemn an

alien just for being alien. Has not an alien eyes? Has not an alien hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed --" She paused abruptly, realizing that line might get her in trouble in a society that considered eating a taboo subject, but recovered quickly.

"Are we not hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by summer and winter as any K'tolu'tano? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"

"We may be different, but we share many values with you -- two of them being a reverence for life and a passion for the truth. We are as shocked as you are by this killing, and we come here, as you do, to search for the truth."

The crowd moved restlessly, not accustomed to having their prejudices upset this way. Rabinowitz wished she was a more dynamic actor, but trusted to the strength of the Bard's material to make its own point.

K'anal'orb, too, could see that some in the audience were starting to think, and that was not part of his plan. "A pretty speech," he said sarcastically, "but it cannot cover the fact that a life was taken. It cannot replace their loving husband and father."

He gestured across the room, and a group of his followers parted to reveal three small bodies standing apart from the crowd. Beside her, Rabinowitz could see F'tim react with surprise. "Who are they?" she asked him.

"P'tar'houn-Hoc's family," he told her. "I thought they were safely at my house. K'anal'orb's followers must have brought them here after I left."

"I thought P'tar'houn-Hoc only had two children."

"He did. The one in the middle is his wife."

Rabinowitz looked at the central figure, who was no larger than the ones flanking her. "He married a midget?"

F'tim sounded confused. "Et'fhan is a full-grown woman."

"But everyone else in the room is --" And then she stopped as the realization hit her. Women on K'tolu'tan could not inherit property; they were themselves property to be inherited. Physically, they were barely half the size of full-grown males. She was dealing with an all-male culture, an all-male audience. Did they know she was a female? If so, would they listen to her? Did they know Bian was a female? If so, did that somehow make her alleged crime even worse?

And as this revelation came to her, she knew there was something else, but she couldn't put her finger on it. It was fluttering around the back of her mind like the little Tinkerbell light fluttering around the Darlings' bedroom. The more she tried to catch it, the more it danced merrily out of reach -- and she couldn't concentrate on it, because too many other things were going on at once.

K'anal'orb was talking again, starting to rebuild his rhythm and his momentum. ". . .all the flowery phrases cannot disguise the fact that the alien was the one plotting with P'tar'houn-Hoc to write the pornographic book, the alien was the one attempting to corrupt the public morals, the alien was the one standing over the body when it was found lying in a pool of blood --"

Dinh started to say something, but Rabinowitz quickly cut her off. "We have never denied that Bian went to the house at about that time. But the murderer had already been there and left. Bian was so shocked

by what she'd seen that she broke the telepresence connection and returned home in a panic.

"But let me tell you all about another event that happened that night, an event most of you are unaware of. Bian and I were together on our world at a . . . public event, when suddenly we were attacked by an alien's rented body. We have many witnesses that this alien attacked us, but we fought it off. According to the records from our police, the alien who rented that body came from right here on K'tolu'tan -- and the charge account used belonged to none other than K'anal'orb himself."

A buzzing went through the audience, but K'anal'orb was well prepared to parry this thrust. "Yes," he said casually, "the police indeed questioned me about this. At the time this attack occurred, I was on stage lecturing before more than five hundred people. I could not possibly have committed such a preposterous act."

"I don't need to believe that K'anal'orb would dirty his own hands with such a deed. He has many assistants, and even more ardent followers, all of whom would be more than happy to do his bidding. His hatred of all things alien has been quite evident here today. He ordered one of the faithful to kill Bian --"

"Lie!" K'anal'orb bellowed.

"-- and when that failed, he ordered the murder of P'tar'houn-Hoc instead."

"Lie!" K'anal'orb repeated, even louder.

"Did you have to offer him money," Rabinowitz continued relentlessly, "or were spiritual rewards enough?"

She tried to wave her claw at K'anal'orb, and nearly unbalanced herself. She resolved not to overdo the dramatic gestures. "There!" she exclaimed. "There is the man ultimately responsible for the murder -- the man who so adamantly insists on placing the blame elsewhere. K'anal'orb. He alone is responsible."

One of the disciples in an aqua sash leaped forward onto the stage. "No, he is innocent," he declared. "It was I, and I alone, who did these things. K'anal'orb is innocent. I am the one you seek!"

\* \* \*

The courtroom was thrown into turmoil at this new and unexpected development. The man, whose name was Ari'stoc, described how K'anal'orb's speeches about the vile alien had so inflamed him that he was determined to silence her. He called Earth and saw the message on Dinh's service -- a holo of her explaining she'd be at a public eating ritual. As a member of K'anal'orb's inner circle he had the use of the charge account; it was an easy enough matter to teep to Earth, rent the alien body and then find Bian Dinh at the ritual. He described the attack in such detail that Rabinowitz was convinced he was indeed the perpetrator.

He grew more vague, though, when he came to the description of P'tar'houn-Hoc's murder. He merely said that he realized P'tar'houn-Hoc was the ultimate culprit and that if he was silenced, the book project would come to an end. He went to the victim's home, had an argument with him about the book, stabbed him and then fled back to K'anal'orb's contingent.

"Well, I've heard enough," Dinh said on the private channel. "The true murderer has been unmasked and I will be cleared of these ridiculous charges."

Rabinowitz was standing still, trying to concentrate. "It's not right," she muttered.

"Of course it's right," Dinh insisted. "P'tar'houn-Hoc was murdered by the conservative forces of



repression, as we've always said. We can go home now."

"Do you want this imbecile to become a martyr? That's what K'anal'orb will turn him into."

"Debs, he \_confessed.\_"

But Rabinowitz ignored her and turned instead to face the crowd. "I would like to ask this man some questions."

K'anal'orb looked outraged. "You have no further interest in this matter."

"As I said, my people have a passion for the truth, which I haven't completely heard here."

"I warn you, Deborah," F'tim whispered beside her, "don't go further with this. Leave well enough alone."

Rabinowitz ignored him, too. "Ari'stoc, can you please describe in detail the room in which the murder took place?"

The self-confessed killer became hesitant and confused. "It was a very ordinary room. There was a table there for eating. The knife was lying on it. We argued, I picked up the knife and stabbed him. I was in a very agitated state, I can't remember more than that."

"How did you know where to find him?"

"His . . .his address was listed in the public directory."

"But you didn't go to the door of his address, which would be the logical place. No one mentioned seeing you. How did you know to go directly to the private dining building behind the house?"

Ari'stoc was silent for a long moment. "Well, where else would he be, a man like him -- ?"

"I'm sure even a man of his proclivities doesn't spend all his waking hours in a dining room. And the door was locked. It had a private passcode. How did you get in?"

"He . . .he let me in."

"Just like that? You, a total stranger in a very agitated state, and he just lets you into the most intimate room of his home?"

"Debs, what are you doing?" Dinh asked, frightened.

"I threatened him," Ari'stoc replied.

"He was safe behind a locked door."

"I mean, I threatened his family. I said I'd hurt them if he didn't let me in."

"He had a phone in the room with him. He could have called the police and stalled for time. But he made no such call."

"He . . .I . . ." Ari'stoc was clearly going into mental vapor lock. Rabinowitz turned her body slightly so she could catch a glimpse of K'anal'orb. He was not at all pleased with her. If he couldn't convict a perverted alien for the crime, the next best thing would be to hold someone up as a martyr, someone who murdered an evil man to keep the world pure. But even that was being taken away from him.

A vision of her Gloucester came unbidden to Rabinowitz's mind. Well, with his crab-like posture, K'anal'orb did sort of look like a hunchback. But at the moment he was the cornered Gloucester, realizing things might not always go his way.

\_Is the chair empty? is the sword unswayed?\_ Gloucester asked.

"The chair," she muttered suddenly. "Of course. The chair."

She turned to F'tim, so abruptly that she almost fell over. "Were there any females in this Food Society of yours?"

F'tim recoiled in horror. "Of course not."

Rabinowitz turned more slowly back to face Ari'stoc. "I am convinced," she announced loudly, "that you did indeed commit the attack against Bian and me on Earth -- but I'm equally convinced you had nothing at all to do with the murder of P'tar'houn-Hoc."

"Debs," Dinh pleaded on their private channel, "if he didn't do it, then I'm back to being the main suspect."

Rabinowitz looked over the crowd until she saw the police officer who'd given the earlier testimony. "Officer, who reported the murder to the police?"

"The victim's wife."

"So she was the one who discovered the body?"

"That's what she told me."

"Could you refresh my memory? How many chairs were in the room of the murder scene?"

"Two, a man's chair and a woman's chair."

"Thank you." She turned around to face a different part of the crowd. "Given what I've been told of your people's beliefs and habits, I find it extremely odd that P'tar'houn-Hoc had two chairs in such an intimate and private part of his home."

K'anal'orb spoke up. "Odd, definitely, but not unexpected. P'tar'houn-Hoc was a notorious pervert."

"But why a woman's chair? There were no women in his Food Society. Why would he keep a smaller chair in that room unless he had a regular need of it?"

She turned again, this time to stare at the widow. "You, madam, discovered the body. That means you knew the passcode."

Et'fhan spoke for the first time, very quietly and hesitantly. "It was part of my house. I was responsible for cleaning it."

"I think you entered that room often to do far more than clean it."

"You are impugning the virtue of an honorable woman," K'anal'orb protested.

Rabinowitz continued on. "I believe you dined in that room, madam. I believe you dined there regularly in the company of your husband."

Et'fhan seemed frozen, unable to speak. Rabinowitz pressed her momentary advantage. "I think you actually enjoyed it. I think you share your husband's perverse eating habits. You ate there with him because it gave you pleasure."

"No, no, he forced me. He made me eat with him in that room. I didn't want to, but I had no choice. I was his wife, I had to do what he told me. It sickened me. I hated it, I hated him!"

"You hated him because he made you perform horrible, disgusting acts."

"Yes!"

"You hated him because he enjoyed degrading you in sick and perverted ways."

"Yes!"

"You hated him so much that eventually you couldn't stand it any longer, so you grabbed the knife and plunged it into his chest to make him stop degrading you, defiling you."

"No, that's not why!" Et'fhan screamed. She dropped to the ground, her body trembling in what Rabinowitz assumed were sobs. "That's not why."

The courtroom was deathly quiet. No one moved or spoke; all attention was focused on the prostrate form of the sobbing woman. After a minute or so she looked up again, regaining some of her composure. "If . . .if it were just me, I could have coped. I know what my duty was to my husband and I would have done it, shameful as it might be. But our son . . .he told me he was going to start bringing our son in there, to teach him those disgusting ways. Our son is so good, so innocent. I couldn't . . ." Her voice broke.

"You couldn't let your son be corrupted that way," Rabinowitz said in a much gentler voice.

"No," Et'fhan said, barely audible.

To his credit, F'tim was the first one to cross the room and comfort the woman he'd inherited as his responsibility.

\* \* \*

Dinh was sulking in the cab they had to take back to the rent-a-bod agency, since the police were no longer escorting them. Rabinowitz could stand the cold treatment only so long, then said, "All right, Bian, out with it. What's your problem?"

"You had no right to do that," Dinh said curtly.

"Do what? I proved you were innocent, just like you asked me to."

"You let them off the hook."

"Them?"

"The forces of repression. We had a full confession. We could have pointed to them and shown how evil they are. Then you have to throw it out and prove the wife did it. What good does that serve? Do you really think she'll be punished?"

"Not after K'anal'orb finishes making her a hero."

"Exactly. We could have used that confession to tear down the villains. Instead, they'll come out of this

even stronger."

"But it just happened to be the truth."

"The truth?" Dinh laughed bitterly. "The truth is that P'tar'houn-Hoc would be alive today if their society wasn't so repressed. After this case, it'll be harder than ever to change that."

Rabinowitz could hold her temper no longer. "Your problem, Bian, is you've got your priorities ass-backward. Your buddy P'tar'houn-Hoc was not just a pervert, he was a spouse abuser -- and his wife killed him to stop him from abusing a child as well. If you want to fight for an underdog, fight for the women of K'tolu'tan who have no rights, who have to suffer whatever abuse their men dole out and get passed from hand to hand like spare change."

"Debs, I --" Dinh started to say something, stopped, and was silent for a moment. "I just can't talk to you any more," she said at last.

The rest of the ride passed in silence. They turned in their rented bodies and switched off their teepers, returning each of them to their individual rooms.

Rabinowitz sat for a long time, breathing slowly and deeply and staring unseeing at the far wall. Finally she gave a deep sigh and clapped her hands together. "When shall we two meet again? When the hurlyburly's done, When the battle's lost and won. Well, Bian, so much for hurlyburly, so much for winning and losing battles."

She stood up and stretched, luxuriating in the feel of her own arms and legs again. She'd been in worse bodies, but not many and not for a very long time. "Phone: messages."

Fran's face filled the screen. "Hi. Kwame and Ricardo decided to practice their swordplay in some virtual gym without telling anyone, and Ricardo tried a Douglas Fairbanks over the banister edge and strained a tendon. I didn't think you'd want a limping Duncan, so I found a software interface that translates the limp into a normal walk, sort of. I think it looks passable, but you're the director so you'll have to take a look. Oh, and Kwame's depressed because he thinks he caused the injury, and he won't listen to me so you'll have to talk him out of it. Maybe the Scottish play wasn't such a sly idea, after all." Beep.

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