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Alien Murders

Deborah Rabinowitz Mysteries

Stephen Goldin

**Parsina
PRESS** 

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The Height of Intrigue

Rabinowitz didn't even open her eyes when the phone chimed. "Someone is damned impolite," she muttered, then said more loudly, "Phone: sound only. Hello?"

An unfamiliar male voice said, "Is this Ms. Debra Rabinowitz?"

"De-**bor**'-ah," she said instinctively. "The late Deborah Rabinowitz. Is there something the matter, Inspector?"

There was a pause. "How did you know...oh, because I sliced through your p-code. Very sly, ma'am."

"Compliments to be delivered only at the servants' entrance. I hope this call is worth overriding an ordinary taxpayer's privacy code."

"Well, I believe it is, ma'am. Would you mind if I dropped by your house?"

"Physically?"

“In person, yes, that’s what I was thinking.”

“Call back in twelve hours. I’m sure the corpse will have risen by then.”

“I had in mind more like five minutes. I’m just now crossing the Bay.”

“Five minutes? Do you have a warrant?”

“Well, you see, I was hoping to avoid an adversarial relationship at this stage of the process.” He paused. “Will I *need* a warrant?”

“Five minutes,” Rabinowitz sighed. “Phone: off.”

She rubbed her eyes to force them open, then turned her head to look at the clock. 2:14 PM. Not an unreasonable time for people who kept to local Earth hours. “The zombie stirs,” she said with another sigh as she rolled her protesting body out of the waterbed.

She staggered naked to the bathroom, peed, then ran a brush through her mercifully short brown hair. She looked at the makeup case and cringed. “No makeup. Zombies don’t wear makeup; against union rules.”

More staggering back to the bedroom. She opened the closet door. She stared blankly into the closet for three minutes without moving. The doorbell rang.

“Punctuality. The hobgoblin of little minds. No, that’s consistency. Intercom: sound only, front door. Just a minute. I’ll be right with you. Intercom: off.”

She grabbed a demure yellow-and-white sun frock and slipped it over her otherwise naked body. Almost nude, she descended the staircase leaning heavily on the banister and muttering, “Here’s a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell gate, he should have old turning the key.” By the time she reached the bottom she presented a fair imitation of

consciousness.

She opened the door to confront an excessively neat man in an expensively tailored suit. He might have been in his early thirties, but it was hard to tell with Orientals. Despite the afternoon breeze, not a hair on his head was out of place.

“Ms. Rabinowitz?” he asked, looking her over with a very appreciative glance.

“Yes. That establishes one of our identities.”

“Sorry, ma’am. I’m Detective William Hoy. May I come in?”

“Would it be déclassé to insist on some formal identification first?”

“Not at all. It was bad manners for me not to offer it in the first place.” His hand slipped with one natural motion into his jacket’s inner pocket and emerged with an ID card and badge. Rabinowitz had to squint to read it in the bright afternoon sun.

“Interpol?” She raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

“That’s right, ma’am. May I come in?”

“Only if you promise not to call me ‘ma’am anymore. I feel ancient enough this mor...afternoon.”

“Fair game.” Detective Hoy stepped inside. “I would very much like to thank you for seeing me on such short notice.”

“You gave the subtle impression I had little choice. Follow me, please. I hope you’ll excuse the state of things. People seldom visit me in person.”

“I’m not from *House Glamorous*. Though your house is pretty trumpy from the outside.”

“Thank you. It’s well over two hundred years old. The elite of Victorian San Francisco liked to build their summer homes here on Alameda.”

She led him into the parlor and offered him a seat. He sat in the left easy chair while she took her position behind the broad antique desk. The desktop, at least, was not too badly cluttered.

He stared appreciatively at the shelves around him. "I don't think I've ever seen this many printed books together in one place."

"Call it an affectation. Listen, ordinarily I'm great at small talk, but fatigue makes me uncharacteristically impatient. I've had just two hours' sleep after veering all over the galaxy for the previous thirty-six. You didn't come here to discuss my house or my library. Neither one is Interpol's business. Please tell me what you're here for."

Hoy smiled. "And they said you'd be difficult. 'She's a diplomat's daughter, full of evasions and half-truths. I like a person who speaks her mind.'"

"I'll speak a lot more of it if you don't get to the point."

"According to the phone company, you've done a lot of veering to the planet Jenithar in the past four months. Particularly to the office of Path-Reynik Levexitor." He shook his head. "Boy, that sure is a mouthful."

He looked at Rabinowitz. "Well, that is true, isn't it?"

"Statesman, yet friend to truth. Far be it from me to dispute the veracity of the phone company. Levexitor and I have been negotiating a multi-party deal for book rights on Jenithar. All perfectly legitimate, I might add. Levexitor is a high-ranking citizen of his world."

"High-ranking citizens have slipped before," Hoy

pointed out.

“That is as may be,” Rabinowitz said. “My dealings with him have been honest ones.”

“You only sell works under copyright?”

“Primarily. I enjoy being my own boss, not a UN employee. I’ve occasionally mediated some deals for the WLO—”

“Your patriotic duty, of course.”

“For a commission—but Earth benefited from each of the deals.”

“Then you don’t like literary pirates?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“Please humor me, Ms. Rabinowitz.”

“The answer is no. Art and ideas are our only currency in interstellar markets. I’d be cutting my own throat to undermine that.”

“That sounds like a highly practical form of patriotism.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, you must have been looking for Deborah Rabinowitz the Idealist. She lives about twelve hours’ sleep from here. I’ll let her know you stopped by.”

Hoy laughed. It was a good laugh, without guile. “You’re fun, you know that? I’m glad I made the trip out here.”

“Then that makes one of us. My ‘practical patriotism’ is wearing a little thin and I’m not having any fun at all.”

“I’ll get right to the point then. I have reason to believe your friend Levektor is trying to buy some world domain material through the black market.”

Rabinowitz leaned forward. “Wouldn’t that put the matter in IPC’s jurisdiction rather than Inter-

pol's?"

"Well, after the fact, yes. We're trying to keep it from getting that far."

"Keep it all in the UN family," Rabinowitz suggested.

"Something like that," Hoy agreed cheerfully. "Have you ever had to deal with the IPC?"

Rabinowitz grimaced. "A couple of times."

"Then you know." He got up from his chair and started perusing the bookshelves. "Say, I think I had to read some of these in school."

"Am I officially considered a suspect, detective?"

He turned around and looked at her. "Oh, I hate to use the word 'suspect' this early in a case. It gives people the wrong idea." He looked back at the bookcase thoughtfully, then took one book from its spot and replaced it two titles to the right. "Sorry, that one was out of order. Knocks the hell out of me. You are arranging these alphabetically, aren't you?"

"Thank you. Feel free to come dust them sometime. If I'm not a suspect—"

"Let's just say you're someone I really wanted to meet and talk to. I'm not disappointed, either. You're as beautiful as you are charming. More beautiful than your file picture, even."

"My day is complete. Now if you'll—"

"Some people can be such a letdown, you know? You think they should be fascinating and they bore you to tears. But not you. You—"

Rabinowitz stood up behind her desk. "If you have no further questions—"

Hoy refused to take the hint. "Well, one or two. Was anyone else from Earth involved in your deal

with Levexitor?"

Rabinowitz sat down again. "No. I was brokering on behalf of the Adler Agency, but I was the only one representing human interests on this deal."

Hoy nodded. "Did Levexitor mention any other names, human contacts?"

"Not that I recall."

"Any other deals he was working on?"

"No, why should he? I'm not his partner. I didn't tell him about any other deals I'm working on, either."

"I understand. Well, that's about all I had for now." Hoy stood up and smiled at her. "It was great meeting you, Ms. Rabinowitz. A distinct pleasure. If you remember anything else, you can reach me through the local office, just across the Bay."

Rabinowitz rose from her chair to show him out. "Of course, if you turn out to be involved in the black market sale," Hoy continued, "rest assured I'll put you inside for a long time. But if you're not the one I'm looking for, would you have dinner with me sometime? After the case is solved, of course."

"Sorry. I never eat," she said as she closed the door behind him.

As the door closed, she turned around, slumped against it, closed her eyes and sighed, "So pestered with a popinjay." The next thing she knew she was jerking awake as her chin hit her chest. She straightened up and deliberately opened her eyes wide. Directly in front of her was the staircase leading up to the bedroom. Beside the staircase, the hall extended to the kitchen at the back of the house.

Hoy's comments about dinner had aroused her stomach's interest. "I need the sleep more," she mumbled, "but there's all those stairs."

She walked slowly to the kitchen, sure that if she moved too fast she would tumble and fall asleep before she hit the floor. She found two starchy slabs that were very probably bread, placed some unidentifiable filler between them and wolfed the conglomeration down before she could examine it too closely. Unfortunately, while this filled her stomach it left her feeling too wide awake to sleep. And there was a trap waiting before she could get back to the stairs.

She stopped beside the open veering room door. She looked inside. "I'll regret this tomorrow," she muttered. "Hell, I regret it right now." So saying she stepped inside. "Veering: Jenithar, office of Path-Reynik Levexitor.

"With any luck," she added to herself, "he won't be in."

She found herself in a vestibule in veer-space just outside Levexitor's office. She faced two large wooden doors bare of any ornamentation. The very fact that she was here meant his veering unit was turned on and her arrival had been announced to him.

"Ms. Rabinowitz," Levexitor's disembodied voice said. "That you should visit again so soon is unexpected."

"If I'm intruding, Highest, I beg forgiveness. I can return at another time."

There was a strangely long pause before he replied. "I see no reason why we should not discuss matters now. It is not as though I were busy with

anything else. You may enter.”

Rabinowitz stepped toward the virtual door in front of her. It swung inward to admit her to the reality Levexitor chose to show his visitors.

Some people were creatures of fancy, creating elaborate virtual habitats of exotic design. The Jenitharp were not among these people. Levexitor's office looked exactly as it had every time she'd come here over the past four months. The walls were maroon with flecks of gold, while the floor was slick and slate gray. There were two doors—the one she'd entered and one at the other end of the room—and no windows. Light diffused from unspecific sources. The room was small; someone that important on Earth would have had a spacious office. It was a somber, cheerless room, almost like a barely furnished cave—but then, Levexitor himself was scarcely Mr. Personality.

Against the back wall was a low workbench where Levexitor's assistant, Chalna, normally stood. Chalna was a clerk of some kind who spent his time scribbling in a pad. Rabinowitz could not remember him ever uttering five consecutive words, and even that was merely to ask clarification of some point. Chalna was not standing there now. He was one of those people you scarcely noticed when he was there, but his absence felt odd.

In the center of the room, at his own work desk, stood Path-Reynik Levexitor. The Jenitharp were bipedal, but humanoid only by a liberal definition of the term. They were shaggy cylinders, covered with a plumage roughly akin to marabou. Their two very long arms connected to the body at what should have

been the waist; they could reach the tops of their slightly bulbous heads and the soles of their broad feet with equal ease. Their eyes were better hidden than a sheepdog's, and their voices seemed to resonate from their entire body.

Levexitor's veer-space projection was very tall, fully a head taller than Rabinowitz. His marabou was tinged with lavender, far more elegant than Chalna's plebeian brown. He was so noble he scarcely needed to move.

There were no chairs in the room. Rabinowitz stood, Levexitor stood, Chalna—when he was there—stood. The act of deliberately making oneself shorter in front of others was obviously unspeakable on Jenithar. If Rabinowitz had not been able to sit comfortably in her lounge at home while "standing" in Levexitor's veer-space, some of her long negotiating sessions might not have gone as well as they did.

"Welcome, Ms. Rabinowitz. I had not expected to stand with you so soon again."

"I do deeply apologize for the intrusion, Highest. There were still a few minuscule details left to settle, and I thought we could lay them to rest once and for all...but if Chalna is not here to record them—"

"It is Chalna's day of relaxation, but I can remember well enough what we say. Please continue."

Rabinowitz spent the next ten minutes discussing the precise definitions of underwater theatrical rights to the three Tenger novels and the exact duration of the options. While this was a meaningless exercise, it gave her a legitimate excuse to be here.

There were uncharacteristically long pauses in Levexitor's responses, and he seemed more ill at

ease. There was obviously some task in his real space that was preoccupying at least part of his mind. When Rabinowitz commented that he might prefer to deal with local matters and get back to her later he dismissed that out of hand and continued the discussion.

When they'd nailed the subject to the wall more thoroughly than it ever needed to be, Rabinowitz said, "Highest, I hesitate to bring up such delicate matters in front of someone so tall, but something has disturbed me so much I feel I must speak to you about it."

"Please feel free to speak openly," Levektor said.

"Very well, Highest," Rabinowitz said. "I've heard rumors on Earth that criminal elements are trying to smuggle some of our literature to outworld markets. I've heard no names, but only the lowliest of our people would stoop to such activity."

"It is curious that you should mention such a subject just now, Ms. Rabinowitz. Please continue."

"I know that you, of course, are above such things. As a friend, though, I worried that you might, however unwittingly, be deceived by these clever criminals into performing acts that would certainly diminish you. I thought also you might know how to spread the word to your shorter colleagues, some of whom might yield to the great temptation. These criminals are unscrupulous, and would diminish anyone they dealt with."

"Indeed," Levektor said. "I can understand only too well how someone, even the tallest among us, could momentarily be tempted by such offers, especially coming from tall sources." There was another

long pause. “Yes,” he finally continued, “and I can also understand the ultimate diminution you mentioned. To speak plainly, Ms. Rabinowitz—”

Levexitor stopped abruptly and turned. His head bent back as he looked upward. Then, uttering a small cry, he leaned forward against his work table and was very, very still.

“Highest? Highest?” The room was utterly quiet. Nothing moved, nothing made a noise. Rabinowitz glanced around. There was no one in the virtual room but Levexitor and her. And Levexitor wasn’t moving.

Rabinowitz stepped forward until she was right beside the large alien. She reached out to touch him. There was solidity, like touching a tree while wearing thick rubber gloves, but no more sensation than that. Levexitor’s projected body was as real as the walls—and no more animated.

She walked slowly around the room. Her footsteps made no sound. Levexitor made no sound. The only thing she heard was her own pulse flowing through her ears and the breathing she was trying to keep regulated.

It would do no good to call out or ask whether anyone was there. In *this* virtual space there was only her projection and Levexitor’s projection. Someone or something may have intruded in Levexitor’s real space, and might in fact still be there, but she could not see it.

Someone should be notified. She looked around the sparsely furnished room for some communications device. There did not seem to be any. Chalnas’s work desk was bare and featureless. There were

some digital controls on Levexitor's table, but he was sprawled across them and she couldn't move him. Even if she could, the controls would not have been intuitive.

Levexitor's body jerked back from the table suddenly. It was not a consciously controlled motion. As Rabinowitz watched, unseen hands played across the control panel on the desktop. Then the alien office suddenly blinked out of existence and she found herself back in her own veering room.

She wrapped her arms tightly around herself and sat down on the lounge, trembling like a leaf. Her teeth actually chattered; she couldn't remember doing that since she first read "The Telltale Heart" at age fourteen. She closed her eyes and tried to regulate her sudden gasps for breath.

Slowly, very slowly, she regained control. She forced her trembling lips to say, "Phone: San Francisco, Interpol, Detective Hoy." In moments the detective's smiling face appeared before her.

"What a pleasant surprise, Ms. Rabinowitz," he said. "I didn't think I'd hear from you this soon."

"Not pleasant," she said. "Not at all. You'll need to contact the authorities on Jenithar. Something just happened to Levexitor. I think he was murdered."

"I feel like such an idiot," Rabinowitz said. "I panicked like a dippy teenager. I was in no danger. He couldn't have touched me—"

"You were present when someone's life ended violently," Hoy said comfortingly from across the parlor desk. "Or at least, telepresent. I think it would be

unnatural if you weren't in shock."

"He was right there with me," Rabinowitz continued. "The murderer. I couldn't see him, I couldn't hear him, I couldn't touch him. But he was there all the same. He was in the real world and I was in a virtual one, but we had a common link—Levexitor. Do you think he saw me?"

Hoy paused. "Well, he might have monitored Levexitor's computer without being in the space himself. Is your projected image true to life?"

"Basically. I'm pretty satisfied with the way I look."

"Then that makes two of us." Hoy gave her a broad smile.

"Thank you, detective. Every time I think you might not be a total grit, you politely disabuse me. I guess it doesn't matter whether he saw me or not. Levexitor mentioned my name often enough. The killer must have been there all along. That explains Levexitor's weird pauses. At least this means I'm off your suspect list."

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but no. You could have killed Levexitor yourself to cover your tracks once you knew I was getting suspicious."

"You have a truly paranoid mind."

"It's a living. You've moved further *down* on the list, though."

"Thank you." Rabinowitz looked him straight in the eyes. "Who else is on that list? What kind of company am I keeping?"

"You needn't worry your pretty little head about it."

"If one of your suspects killed Levexitor and if he

knows who I am, he may try to silence me. I have to protect myself. I'm still a witness, even if I didn't see anything."

Hoy was thoughtful. "Well, if you are guilty this won't be any huge surprise to you. Jivin Rashtapurdi is definitely in the scheme somewhere."

"The gangster?"

"No, the grocer. And we're looking at another broker named Peter Whitefish. Know him?"

"I've had some dealings with him."

"And your opinion of him?"

"He represents his clients in ways he feels are best for their interests."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning there's such a thing as professional courtesy. Anyone else on the list?"

"There are some things I don't choose to tell, either."

"It's a short list."

"Women always say it's the quality that counts, not the length."

"We only do that out of pity. Any names on the outworld side?"

"I don't investigate the outworld side, just ours. I'm Interpol, not IPC, remember?"

Rabinowitz stood up. "Well, it was nice of you to come over and hold my hand during my little panic attack—"

"I wish I really had held your hand. It might have been fun."

"—but I really have had only two hours' sleep in the past forty-two. My cranky-alarm goes off in another seven minutes, and you don't want to be

around when it does. Even my PMS–alarm pales by comparison.”

“Then I’ll try to catch you in a better mood some-time. The door’s this way, right?”

“You’re learning. That’s a hopeful sign.”

This time Rabinowitz got six hours’ sleep before a police official called.

“I just want to rent a body.” Rabinowitz said grumpily, “not get a bank loan.”

“There are strict laws,” the alien said. Jenithar didn’t shrug, but the gesture from his virtual image was one of helplessness in the face of bureaucracy. “If I were mistakenly to give you the wrong size body, I would lose my license. And my government has strict laws against letting convicted felons telepresent themselves to Jenithar. Please answer all the questions.”

“Your police asked me to come. They want me to inspect a murder site.”

“Then it’s best to quickly complete the form.”

“I’m glad I don’t have to do *this* every time I visit Jenithar,” Rabinowitz muttered. “Veering is so much more civilized.”

She handed the clerk her standard bio datastar and checked to make sure the answers entered the proper fields. “Full name: Deborah Esther Rabinowitz. ID number: 5981–5523–5514–2769467–171723. Date of birth: 17/46/3/22/54 interstellar. Education: first–level degree, University of California at Los Angeles, Interstellar Studies; second–and third–level degrees, Polycultural Institute on Pna’Fath, Galactic Commercial Standards and

Crosscultural Dynamics. Progenitors: Daniel Isaac Rabinowitz and Barbara Samuelson Rabinowitz. Father still living, mother deceased. Progenitors' occupation(s): father, diplomat, plenipotentiary level, general assignment; mother, professor of comparative world literature, University of California at Los Angeles. Siblings: none. Offspring: none. Occupation: literary broker. Bank: Takashiro World Savings. Income: ...”

She paused. “This is kept confidential, I presume.”

“Oh yes. We have strict laws against unauthorized disclosure.”

She gave the information requested, about both her personal finances and her business's. But she balked when she read further into the questionnaire. “I'm not putting up with it. Look at this list. Does the subject have any criminal convictions; what was the subject's standing in school, what titles has the subject held, what awards have I won, who are my family members for two generations forward and back and out to third cousins, are any of *them* convicted felons, who are my business associates and clients, what are *their* status ratings...it just goes on and on. You ask everything except whether my clients molest their household pets. Check my father's *Who's Who* listing if you want to know about my family, but I'm not giving out information about my clients.”

“I must calculate your exact rank so I will know what size body you should have. It only needs to be done once. After that your records always will be on file.”

“Stand not upon the order of your going. I don’t give a...look, just give me any size body you want. Or turn me down and I’ll go to one of your competitors.”

“I can probably correlate your data with enough other public information to get what I need,” the rental clerk said. He stared blankly at his computer for several seconds, then continued, “I believe, possibly, I have sufficient to analyze your height equivalent. Wait one moment while I match you to a suitable body.”

Rabinowitz waited considerably longer than a moment. Then the clerk said, “All is ready. Prepare for joining.”

No matter how often she did it—and she’d done it more often than most people on Earth—melding with an alien body was always disorienting. People of every planet constructed mechanical rent-a-bods as much like their own as possible, making them awkward for anyone who was shaped differently. Some races had more than two arms, and a human could only leave some of them dangling limply; some had fewer, and a human felt handicapped. Some saw in wavelengths incomprehensible to Earth people, while others heard in ranges humans couldn’t make out.

Worst of all, though, were the ones that were almost humanoid, like the Jenitharp. They had two arms and two legs, but the arms came out at the waist, halfway down the body, in a strangely jointed arrangement that could by no means be called shoulders. The waldo hands were too far away from the head. It felt like she was living inside a funhouse mirror.

Rabinowitz found herself standing beside the clerk, looking down at him. "I've notified the police," he told her. "They will arrive shortly to escort you. They asked that you wait here."

"Fine. I prefer a little time alone with a new body so I can learn how to work it."

"If you wish it, now that we have your height on file, we can charter you a permanent body for a slight additional charge. A body would be permanently reserved for you and you could visit Jenithar whenever you wished without going through such inconvenience again."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind if I'm ever forced to do more business here."

The clerk departed, leaving her alone. The room was crowded with racks of rental bodies of all different height ranges—many smaller than hers, some considerably taller. Her body felt heavy. Many races built their visitors' bodies out of plastic or other lightweight materials. Some even grew them from living tissue. The Jenitharp made theirs of clanking, cumbersome metal. This body was covered with a fake greenish-brown marabou. Given her size and color, she was apparently of a decent ranking.

Rabinowitz hobbled to a clear area near the center of the room and started moving around. The leg motions weren't too bad if she took lots of tiny steps, as though she were wearing a very tight kimono. The long, thin arms felt useless and dangly; they seemed to flop about like rubber hoses, and she practically had to dislocate her own shoulders to move them. They were more tentacles than arms, no real joints to them. "You have to be a Balinese dancer to make

these things move right," she muttered.

After fifteen minutes, she felt comfortable enough not to embarrass herself too badly. Fortunately, no one expected an alien in a rented body to be graceful. Every race had its own jokes about how clumsy alien visitors were.

A couple of newcomers entered the room, one somewhat taller and paler than the other. There was no immediate way to determine their genders. "Ms. Rabinowitz?" said the taller one, who was still shorter than she was. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Feffeti rab Dellor, third level constable. I am grateful you've agreed to assist our investigations. If you kindly would accompany me, we shall visit the site of the murder." He did not bother to introduce his shorter companion.

"Lay on, MacDuff," Rabinowitz replied.

The constable paused. "I'm sorry. That failed to translate well."

"Never mind. It was a literary allusion. I shouldn't be giving those away for free, anyway."

Constable Dellor and his companion led Rabinowitz through a crowded hallway to an elevator, where they shoved into a large car with many other people. They descended sixteen floors before Dellor indicated they'd reached their level. They got out and walked through still more crowds to a public vehicle stop. The crowds parted for them as they walked; perhaps Dellor had some police insignia Rabinowitz couldn't recognize, or perhaps the people were being respectful of her height, which was greater than almost everyone else around her.

Apparently even the police took public trans-

portation here. They claimed the very next cab in line, jumping ahead of everyone else waiting. Dellor gave the driver, who was considerably shorter, a police override code and a destination, and the cab sped off.

Rabinowitz's only previous experience on Jenithar was in Levexitor's veer-space, so her first "real" looks at it fascinated her. The sky was overcast, and even though her artificial body couldn't discern normal ranges of temperature or humidity the weather felt muggy. The sky was bright despite the clouds; Rabinowitz had read that Jenithar's sun was an F-class, slightly brighter than Earth's. Her rented body's filters cut down the light to manageable levels, but they did strange things to her depth perception and made colors seem washed out and unnatural.

This particular region was a city crammed with enough skyscrapers to make any Manhattanite feel comfortable, but that same New Yorker would have gaped open-mouthed at how clean it all was. Legions of municipal workers were employed solely to keep the buildings and streets immaculately scrubbed and litter-free. Rabinowitz might have thought this stemmed from some sense of civic pride if her previous reading hadn't explained it was part of a full-employment program.

There were people everywhere, constantly in motion. They formed long lines of pedestrians beside the streets, arranged in rows according to height, with each sidewalk dedicated to one-way foot traffic. There was a swirl of colors and shapes, but surprisingly little sound. Being forced to live so closely to-

gether, the Jenitharp developed strict rules about invading someone else's privacy with their own noises.

"You are a literary broker, this is correct?" Dellor asked as they rode along.

"Yes. Jenithar is still a wide-open market for my world's literature."

"Had you been long dealing with Highest Levexitor?"

"Just for the past four months," Rabinowitz replied. "I'd hoped it would be the start of a long business relationship, but now it looks like I'll have to make other contacts."

"You have stated that when he was killed you were visiting Levexitor."

"I was veering only. There were awkward silences in our conversation. I suspect someone else was physically present at the same time, but that person wasn't linked into the veer-space so I don't know who it was."

"About what subject were you speaking when the death occurred?"

Rabinowitz hesitated. "Business," she said. "I had come to talk about the underwater theatrical rights to the works we were negotiating—"

"There is no need to elaborate," Dellor interrupted. "I do not need to know the intimate details of the Highest's business affairs. Did you well know Dahb Chalna?"

"Levexitor's assistant? Not really. He was usually there in the background when the Highest and I met, but he seldom even spoke."

"He was, though, not there this time."

"Not in the veer-space, no. Levexitor told me it

was his day off.”

The cab had reached a different part of the city, far less crowded. The buildings here were smaller and detached from one another, and eventually their vehicle pulled to a stop in front of a two-story house with a low wall around it and a postage-stamp garden in the front yard. Rabinowitz looked at it in wonderment; Levexitor was one of the most important people on Jenithar, and his house was less than two-thirds the size of her own. “Everything’s relative,” she muttered as she got out of the cab with her police escorts.

The constables led her into the house, and she stared with shock as she crossed the threshold. Levexitor’s home made simple squalor look respectable. Piles of detritus covered the floor, making it hard to find a clean path to walk, and she had to step carefully over little rivulets of yellow-green fluid. Greasy globules of some unidentified viscous material oozed down the walls. Rabinowitz was sure the stench would have knocked her unconscious if her artificial body could have transmitted anything more in the way of smell than an alarm about smoke or corrosive chemicals.

“Who’s his decorator?” she asked aloud. “Central Sewage and Reclamation?” This house was such a contrast, both to the cleanliness of the public streets and to the starkness of Levexitor’s veer-space, it was hard to believe they belonged on the same planet. But she knew lots of people on Earth, too, who kept their veer-space looking very different from their real homes and offices.

“He must have had a very incompetent staff,” she

continued.

“Highest Levexitor lived here alone,” Dellor said. “He had no staff except his clerk, Dahb Chalna.”

“All alone? No staff? A man as tall and important as Highest Levexitor?”

“One of the advantages of being so tall,” the constable said, “is that you’re *allowed* to live alone.”

Rabinowitz nodded thoughtfully, or at least tried to; the action made her heavy metallic body bob unsteadily. “I guess so. Well, show me what you wanted me to see so I can get this body back to the agency. They’ll want to give it a good acid bath before it’s used again.”

Dellor led her through several rooms, each more disgusting than the last, until finally he stopped and said, “This is where Highest Levexitor was murdered.”

As far as Rabinowitz could see, the only resemblance this room bore to Levexitor’s veer-space was the tall work table with the computerized desktop, an analog to the one he’d been standing at when he died. “This isn’t really anything like what I saw.”

“I didn’t expect so. Just tell us what you did see.”

“Highest Levexitor was standing at this table, talking to me. There were occasional pauses; he might have been pulling momentarily out of veer-space to talk to someone physically present. In the middle of our conversation he suddenly looked up, gave a small cry and slumped against the table. I looked around, but couldn’t see anyone else in the veer-space. Then the Highest’s body jerked upright—I assume his murderer pulled his physical body up to get at the veering set—and I saw the controls be-

ing worked by invisible hands. Then the connection was broken and I was back in my own home.”

Dellor was silent for a moment, then said, “This confirms our theory. Accept our gratitude for your cooperation. We will take you back to the rental agency now.”

“Wait a minute. This is it? You go to the expense of bringing me here, make me go through all the rigmarole of renting this body, and take me to this festering sewer just so I can spend two minutes looking at a table and tell you the same story I did over the phone?”

“That is correct.”

“Tell me, what is this theory of yours?”

“Really, that is not of your concern.”

“Well, I’m making it my concern.” She stood beside him and drew her body up to its full height, staring down at him with what she hoped was icy imperiousness. “And if you ever hope to be any taller, you’ll make it my concern, too.”

Dellor paused. “It is really too simple to bother you with. There is only one person who could have committed the crime.”

“Humor me.”

“It could only have been his assistant, Dahb Chalna. We have already detained him, and it will be but a short while before he confesses.”

“Right. The butler did it. How did you come to this startling revelation?”

“It is not difficult. Chalna is the only person who had access to the house.”

“Couldn’t the Highest have let someone else in?”

“Like most people of his height, he valued his pri-

vacy too much. He wouldn't have let someone else in physically when he could simply have veered them."

"Unless there was something he didn't want to discuss over the channels," Rabinowitz mused.

Dellor paused. "Do you have evidence of such delicate matters?"

"No. No evidence. But why are you so convinced it's Chalnas? He always seemed so quiet, so meek."

"Ms. Rabinowitz, you are a stranger to Jenithar. You do not know our ways. People as lowly as Chalnas often harbor poisonous envies of their superiors. I have seen it happen far too often, a person killing someone taller than he for no apparent reason but frustration and rage. Perhaps it is a sad commentary on our civilization, but it is a fact we must live with."

"What did he hit him with?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"If Chalnas was that much smaller than Levexitor, his bare hands probably weren't strong enough to kill him. What did he use as a murder weapon?"

The constable was not the least bit phased. "He could easily have used some heavy object in the room and then taken it away to dispose of. As you see, it is impossible to tell whether anything is missing. Please believe me, Chalnas is undoubtedly the culprit."

"Well, if you're that sure...this is your business and your planet, and I have no right telling you how to run it. Next time, though, just talk with me on the phone and don't bring me teeping all over the galaxy just to look at slag heaps."

Rabinowitz tried hard to concentrate when she

returned home. There was a rehearsal in just a couple of days. She had scenes to block out for Mac and Lady M. as they chewed on each other while plotting Duncan's fate. But other visions intruded. When she wasn't seeing the quagmire of Levexitor's home, she was thinking about quiet, servile Chalna in prison for his boss's murder. The chiming of the phone was actually a blessed interruption—especially when she checked the caller ID before accepting the call.

“Nils,” she said, smiling into the phone. “It's been—what, three years? Four?”

Nils Fredericksen, UN Secretary for Interstellar Commerce, smiled back at her. His blond hair had long ago evolved to gray, and his blue eyes twinkled out from a lean face as soft as well-oiled leather and as craggy as his native fjords. “Let's not embarrass either of us by putting a number to it. Let's just say it's been too long and leave it at that. How have you been, my little princess? I hear you've established quite a business for yourself.”

“I'm happy with it. I've brokered works on over seventy different worlds already. Your Undersecretary for Literature can tell you I've done my share to fill Earth's coffers.”

“I never doubted that for a second. I always knew you were the secret behind your father's success. How is he coping with his retirement, by the way?”

“Enjoying his condo in Tel Aviv, going down to the beach every day. As he put it, ‘I have to beat off the women with a stick, and at my age the arm tires easily.’”

Fredericksen laughed. “That's Daniel. He loved your mother so much I don't think any one woman

will ever replace her.”

“Speaking of replacing, I’m sorry about Chien’s appointment. I know you were hoping for the top spot. You certainly earned it.”

“Thank you. I wish the Assembly agreed with you. They probably see me as a dinosaur from a by-gone era and want new directions.”

“So what are your plans, Mr. Dinosaur?”

“I just may decide to retire, myself.”

“That’s hard to imagine. You’ve been plugging away up there longer than I’ve been alive. I was always sure you’d die in harness.”

“I almost did yesterday.”

Rabinowitz sat up straighter. “What happened?”

“I had to attend a Dikwanic opera. Strictly in the line of duty, of course.”

Rabinowitz laughed. “My God, talk about a fate worse than. I attended one in college—or tried to. It’s bad enough you have to sit rigidly at attention for five hours; then they make you listen to music so atonal it drives Chinese crazy. That’s more than humans should have to endure. Thank God I teeped to it; I could slip out of the rented body and come home to eat and use the bathroom.” She paused. “And the Dikwano wonder why they can’t sell the rights here on Earth.”

“So you understand, then, why retirement looks more and more attractive.”

“Well, you should certainly demand hazardous duty pay.”

Fredericksen’s face grew more serious. “I didn’t come here to talk about my troubles, princess. I came to warn you.”

“About what?”

“There is a very fanatical young Interpol detective named Hoy who may be bothering you—”

“Too late. He’s already been here.”

“I’m sorry. I’d hoped I could warn you in time. What did he talk about?”

“About a plot to sell some world domain properties on the black market.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. I’ve talked with his superiors. They tell me he’s something of a loose cannon, always going on about some crackpot conspiracy theories. He just charges out and harasses people, with little or no evidence that any crime has even been committed. Maybe he thinks if he flusters enough people, some guilt will shake loose.”

“Maybe something did shake loose,” Rabinowitz muttered half to herself.

“Excuse me?”

“Did you know Path-Reynik Levexitor from Jenithar?”

“I know *of* him. I’ve been to Jenithar a lot the last year or so, and he’s a very important personage there. In fact—” Fredericksen wrinkled his brow. “I saw his name in a report that crossed my desk this morning, but I haven’t had a chance to read it yet.”

“Let me save you the trouble. He’s dead. I was talking with him in his veer-space when it happened.”

“How horrible! Do the police have any idea who killed him?”

“They’ve arrested his clerk, but I don’t know...It just doesn’t feel right to me somehow.”

“If there’s one thing you should have learned by

now, with all your diplomacy and all your studies, it's to stay out of alien legal problems. They have their own ways of doing things that always seem bizarre to us. If they're happy, let it go."

"I know. I'm being a good little girl, honest."

"I'd expect nothing less from you." His voice grew more somber. "You mentioned Levexitor in connection with Detective Hoy. Was there some link between them?"

"He thought Levexitor was playing a pivotal role in the black market deal, yes."

"There, you see, he loves to go after big names, important people, whether there's any merit in his charges or not. He's very clever at using innuendo. Be wary of him."

"After all those years helping my father, do you think I can be fooled by innuendo?"

"Not the Deborah I know. Did he mention any other names?"

"Another literary broker named Peter Whitefish, and some other man I've never met." She paused. "He didn't mention your name."

Fredericksen looked worried for a moment, then smiled. "You always were a shrewd young lady. Yes, he's been harassing me, too—and he *did* mention your name to me, which was why I was calling to warn you."

"Thanks for thinking of me, but I'm not a little girl any more. Unless Detective Hoy pulls his gun on me, I think I can handle him on my own."

"I know. But I still worry."

After Fredericksen signed off, Rabinowitz continued to stare at the blank screen. "Actually," she mut-

tered, “what Detective Hoy really wants to pull on me isn’t his gun.” She smiled sardonically. “But I can handle that, too.”

Rabinowitz spent most of the next day researching Jenithar’s inheritance laws. She had a deal almost entirely nailed down with Levexitor; now that he was dead, where did that leave her and her client? Did someone else take over the account? Did she have to start from scratch with someone new? Did Levexitor’s superior height mean no one could take his place, or would someone be elevated to fill the vacancy?

Late that afternoon she received a call from Jenithar. She half expected it to be the police again with more useless questions, but it turned out to be a stranger calling himself Raj–Pen Dewahl. “Ms. Rabinowitz, rumors of your fine stature have dazzled my senses,” he said. “If to you it is acceptable, I would beg permission to veer to your office.”

“Is this about the rights to the Tenger books?”

“It indeed is.”

“Then this is a happy coincidence. By all means, veer in.” Even as she spoke she was setting her controls to receive and entertain.

Her veer–space office was almost an exact duplicate of her parlor, complete to the books in the bookcases. She’d even gone to the trouble of loading the books into memory; the virtual books on the virtual shelves exactly matched their real–life counterparts. It was a small vanity, but she reveled in the detail.

Dewahl entered through the double doors. Rabinowitz’s image was seated; this was her home

ground, so she made the rules. She knew better than to offer her guest a seat, however. He could sit or stand, as he chose.

Dewahl chose to stand. He was not nearly as tall as Levexitor and his plumage was still close to plebeian brown, but he certainly had a thick coat of it. He was far more magnificently plumed than Levexitor had been.

“Highest Levexitor’s untimely death brought to all of us a great sense of loss,” he said. “However, it also brought to some an opportunity. While I by no means can match Highest Levexitor in stature, I am in a position to exercise the same rights for which he was negotiating.”

“All three of the books by Maurice Tenger?”

“The very same. How perceptive of you.”

“I presume your credentials are in order.”

From somewhere under all that marabou, Dewahl produced a datastar and handed it to her. Rabinowitz slipped it into the receptacle and quickly scanned the readout. All the licenses from both Jenithar and Earth seemed current; she could check their authenticity later. She made a quick copy and handed the star back to him.

“The situation is highly mobile,” he told her. “You may be contacted as well by others. I assure you, though, no one is better positioned to be more generous than am I.”

“You don’t know how glad I am to hear that.” Rabinowitz went on to list the terms of her agreement with Levexitor, exaggerating each clause slightly in her favor. Dewahl never flinched.

“It sounds highly equitable,” he said when she

finished.

“Good. I’ll have my attorney draw up some contracts. You should have them in a few days.”

“Most excellent.” He looked as though there was more on his mind that he didn’t have the words to express.

“Was there something else?” she asked.

“These dealings have been so fortuitous, I was wondering whether other deals might be made as well.”

“I’d love nothing better. I represent many different clients and agencies. What kind of work did you have in mind?”

Dewahl shimmied uneasily. His marabou shook in an oddly disquieting manner. “It is said that there are some works from your world lacking in contemporary representation.”

“Sounds like an oxymoron to me. I can’t represent work that isn’t represented.”

“Perhaps I misphrased myself. I meant work whose creators are no longer available to represent it.”

“I think you mean world domain. I’m afraid I can’t help you with that except to direct you to the proper United Nations office. By Earth law, I can only handle material that’s still under copyright; the UN takes jurisdiction when it becomes world domain.”

“Perhaps I was misinformed. One hears stories of deals being made outside of normal channels...it is so hard to know the truth when the only one who knows all is Dahb Chalna, and he is scheduled to die in six days for his crime.”

“So soon? I guess Jenitharp really believe that justice delayed is justice denied. Who told you I might deal in world domain material?”

Suddenly the room went red. Dewahl vanished, to be replaced by an image of dark circles inside brighter ones, images of her own eyes. They throbbed and pulsed, then slowly began to circle one another like mad moons. The room faded to navy blue, and a myriad of little stars began sparkling, closing in from the periphery. Her ears filled with a hypnotic humming, constant and yet also in tune with the throbbing eyes.

She could not feel herself. Her limbs, her body, her head—all were gone. Reality was just the blue and the stars and the moon—eyes, receding slowly into the distance like an escaping soap bubble, until it quietly popped and made nothingness out of nullity.

She squinted at the colors trying desperately to coalesce into shapes and she swatted instinctively at the swarm of flies that buzzed around her head. Very intelligent flies, obviously—the buzzing sounded almost like words. “You gave us quite a scare,” the swarm said.

“You’re not my Auntie Em,” Rabinowitz mumbled hazily. She tried to roll over and go back to sleep, but bumped her shoulder on the side rails. The texture of her waterbed was all wrong, too, much too hard and firm.

“Don’t zip out on me just yet,” the flies said, but they were losing some of their buzz. “The doctor said you should stay up for awhile.” Hands grabbed her

and pulled her into a sitting posture. This had the unintended effect of causing the whole universe to wobble. The colors shifted in and out of focus like a drunken kaleidoscope.

“Do you know who you are?” the flies went on.

“Of course I know,” she said. “I know, therefore I am. I think.”

“Ah, even if it wasn’t in your files I could guess you were a college graduate. Do you know who I am?”

“The Lord of the Flies.”

“Close enough for government. Now for the big one: Do you know where you are?”

“In bed,” Rabinowitz said. “You can’t fool me that easy.”

“And they told me you wouldn’t make any sense. Do you know who tried to kill you?”

“Kill me? Kill me?” Rabinowitz put her hands up to hold her head steady, which caused the colors and the flies to merge into the form and voice of Detective Hoy. “Did somebody try to kill me?”

“No fair, I asked you first.”

“Nobody wants to kill me. I’m cute, I’m sweet, I’m bright as a new penny. My Daddy showed me a penny in a museum once, but there haven’t been new ones for fifty years. Doesn’t matter, it’s the principle of the thing. Nobody would kill me. I’m beloved of all. By all. Whatever.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you always wake up like this.”

“Yes. No. I don’t remember. It’s a lady’s prerogative not to remember.”

“Maybe, but it’s not a lady’s prerogative to be found unconscious on her veering room floor.”

“Then, since I’m every inch a lady—however much an inch is—I won’t do it.”

“Oh yes, I quite agree. Once was enough.”

Her mind was circling the idea like a hawk about to stoop. “Somebody tried to kill me?”

“I guess it must take some getting used to. Yes, somebody tried to kill you. Somebody with a lot of resources. How much do you remember?”

“You would ask a trick question. My memory is not plugged in today. The whole rest of the world is at the wrong end of the telescope, and I can only wave at it from the shore.”

“Your veering set was still hooked up and running when they found you. Do you remember that much?”

“I don’t remember going anywhere.”

“Did somebody come to you?”

Rabinowitz started to nod slowly, then reached up quickly to grab her head as it threatened to fall off. “That sounds possible. All things are possible in time.”

“According to phone company records, you got an incoming call from Jenithar.”

“You have an annoying habit of asking questions you already know the answers to.”

“I know *my* answers to them. I don’t necessarily know yours. Besides, the phone company couldn’t verify the party at the other end of the line.”

“Jenithar. Yeah, someone from Jenithar. That sounds about right. I don’t remember his name. It’ll be in my log. I record all calls. Seemed to think I could get him some world domain material. Funny, huh?”

“Hilarious. What did you tell him?”

“Just the Bible, the Koran, and the complete works of Shakespeare.” She let go of her head experimentally, and it seemed to stay precariously balanced atop her neck. “Somebody tried to kill me?”

“Is there an echo in here?”

“You said it was somebody with a lot of resources.”

“For somebody whose memory isn’t plugged in, you’re doing a good job.”

“Virtual memory, an effective simulation. Why did you say that about the resources?”

“As near as we can tell, this person tried to kill you with a sensory overload program. It’s not real common here on Earth—we don’t even tell people it’s possible—but there are some twinklers from Besortix who specialize in it. Their program slices into your veering set on some other carrier wave so it can’t be traced back to them. Once it’s on your system it overloads your senses, particularly sight and sound. It tries to lock your brain into a weird pattern, like certain flashing lights can trigger an epileptic attack or a migraine. Only this program tries to make the condition permanent. If it burns in deep enough, it can even affect the brain functions that keep your heart and lungs working.”

“That’s insid...insid...wicked. How did I survive?”

“A Besortican wouldn’t have. As I said, it isn’t that common here yet and the Besorticans’ AI algorithms for us were just that far off the mark. It just put you out. A lady named Francia Bowd called Emergency Services and said you’d missed a rehearsal of your play and she couldn’t reach you. At

that point we think you were in a coma for at least eight hours. I had a flag out on the nets for anything with your name, so I got to the hospital about the same time you did. Good thing, too—the doctors here had never seen this before.”

Rabinowitz was quiet for a while, then said, “So what’s the prog...prog...prog...” She slammed her fist against the side rail in frustration. “Prognosis,” she finally said. “Am I going to have mental malarial relapses? Facial tics? Will I attack anyone who mentions Niagara Falls?”

“The only permanent side effect we know about is death. You seem to have avoided that. Oh, and none of the surviving victims has ever played the contrabassoon afterwards. Of course, our records on this only go back about seven years. We’ll want to monitor you closely from now on.”

“Does this mean I’m off your suspect list?”

Hoy smiled. “Not at all. A falling out between conspirators could make one try to down the other.”

“Someone with resources, you said. Were you thinking of Jivin Rashta...Rashta...that grocer guy?”

“A distinct possibility. He’s been unofficially linked to several previous Besortican-style attacks.”

“So how can I protect myself in the future?”

“You could keep your veering set permanently turned off. Or you could let us monitor all your sessions.”

“Neither appeals to me.”

“Does death?”

“Did any of them play the contrabassoon *before* they were attacked?”

Hoy stood up and walked to the door. “You know,

I really do hope you're innocent. You're a lot of fun in bed."

"Treasure the memory. It's the most you'll ever get." She turned over, facing away from him, and pretended to sleep. The pretending lasted less than two minutes.