

New Dawn Fades Chapters 1 & 2

KEVIN RATTAN

CHAPTER 1

“The Noyim are a race of perverts, corrupt of body and of mind. You should be happy there.”

Thus did Grandfather Massowic send me forth to live amongst barbarians. I felt more than a little aggrieved – the girl had been of age, after all, and hardly an innocent – but I soon came to accept the truth of my grandfather’s words: the Noyim were indeed perverse, and I was, for a time, very happy amongst them.

– From: My Time on Noyan, Memories of a Youthful Exile, The Rt. Hon. Beynan Hotep na Massowic

Bey yawned, opened his eyes – and instantly regretted it. Bright, white Noyan daylight seared straight through his eyeballs to the back of his aching head. His eyes snapped shut, but the damage was already done. Dazzling red-gold afterimages danced in his vision, keeping time with the painful aftershocks rattling around his skull.

How much had he drunk last night?

Too much, evidently, given the state of his head – and the fact he’d forgotten to tell the house to opaque the windows last night. That only happened when he was seriously drunk.

“House: cut the light, for fuck’s sake.”

He waited a moment, then risked a one-eyed squint. And relaxed; the room was in total darkness. Sensing the

change, the bedsheet made a determined effort to snuggle closer. He shoved it away.

“House: lower the opacity. Slowly... Stop! Take it up a bit. A little bit more... Stop. Perfect.”

The stupid sheet was already nuzzling him again, trying to reclaim its place. He kicked it aside, sat up, and rubbed the grit from his eyes. The bedroom was a mess. His favorite chair was lying on its side, legs kicking feebly. It must have spent the entire night trying to right itself. The fresco on the far wall – a ridiculous extravagance, and still not fully grown-in after two whole months – was badly bruised. He vaguely remembered falling against it last night. How long before the bruising grew out? A week? A month? He hoped it wasn’t permanently damaged. The damn thing cost a fortune.

And as for his clothes... His trousers were draped over the struggling chair. His shirt was dangling from the 3-V stalk, high up where wall curved into ceiling. He watched, baffled, as the shirt cycled from white to bright yellow, and back again. At what point in the evening had he decided that was a good idea? And why was his left shoe all on its own in the middle of the floor? Where was the right? What he wouldn’t give for a cleanerbug nest...

And that, right there, had to be the most depressing fucking thought ever...

Never, before he came to this backwards shithole of a planet, had it ever occurred to him that he’d end up pining for cleanerbugs. They were just something you took for granted. Like running water. Or a house that didn’t have to be told every simple fucking thing like remembering to opaque the windows for you when you were too drunk to do it for yourself.

But not on Noyan. The only thing you could take for granted here was disappointment.

Fuck, but his head hurt. And his belly. Had it ever been this sour before? Or this gassy? He belched, loudly – and the contents of his stomach made a sudden, irresistible

rush for his throat.

He bolted for the bathroom, hand clamped to his mouth. And made it just in time to drop to his knees and vomit copiously into the bowl.

Fuck Sanja Gwahnall! Why hadn't the little bastard shown up at the Mitchesons' gala dinner last night? He was supposed to be there. But no, he'd left Bey to deal with a whole room full of tedious provincials all on his own. No wonder he'd ended up so horribly drunk. And no wonder he was kneeling here now, watching the toilet slowly ingest his vomit.

It was beyond disgusting. The ghastly stuff should have disappeared the moment it touched the surface. Not on Noyan. The sooner this place was brought into the Commonwealth, the better.

Finally – when there couldn't, surely, be anything left inside him – he wobbled to his feet and headed for the sink. Rinsing helped remove some of the foul taste; slipping in the gum-guard and letting it feed did the rest. Teeth nice and clean, it was time for the rest of him to catch up. He wouldn't rush the house through its cleaning cycle today. He needed every bit of pampering he could get. He'd even let it do the full dry cycle for once.

Ten minutes later, he emerged fully restored and ready to face the world... Except for the hangover, which, if anything, was getting worse. He needed serious liquid right now.

He grabbed his trousers, pulled them to his hips and left them to finish sorting themselves out while he retrieved his shirt. And tried to work out what the fuck he'd been thinking with the white-yellow cycle. Then it made sense, but not in a good way. A stream of yellow liquid – not beer, by the look of it, but something that *used* to be beer before someone drank it – was curving down from the left shoulder and slowly, frothily, filling the shirt from the bottom upwards. Then, when the whole thing was urine-colored, it turned back to white, and the process

started again.

Well, that was embarrassing. But at least it meant the shirt wasn't damaged. He'd half wondered if the strain of processing his sweat had given the poor thing alcohol poisoning. That would have been such a waste. His clothes were about the only Homeworld luxury he'd been allowed to bring with him. There was nothing of remotely the same quality anywhere on Noyan. And even if, by some miracle, he managed to find a black market dealer who could replace them, the cost would be far beyond his sadly reduced allowance.

He pulled the shirt on, and hurriedly reset it with a swipe of his hand. It returned to its usual pristine white, with the small, tasteful simulacrum of the family crest once again fluttering over his heart. Time to head downstairs.

First stop was the refrigerator, in search of something to soak up yesterday's excess. Sadly, it contained nothing but moldy cheese and a bottle of native ale. Neither appealed. He wasn't ready for alcohol yet, and the cheese should have been disposed of days ago. The lying bastard of a dealer promised him the fridge was self-cleaning, but the damn thing had been fully grown for months now, and still hadn't integrated with the house's waste-disposal systems.

It was a lesson: don't deal with cut-price dealers. Michael might charge more, but his stuff always worked.

A couple of mouthfuls of water from the kitchen fountain helped a little, but he needed to eat, and soon. And that meant going out. Either that, or settle for house-pap like a damn pauper. And no way was he doing that. He'd never live it down if anyone found out.

He headed back upstairs and played a frustrating game of hunt-the-shoe. It wasn't like there were a lot of places for it to hide. His bedroom was tiny compared to back home. So where was the damn thing? Downstairs? Or worse, had he lost it at the gala dinner? He hoped not. If he'd been drunk enough to leave a shoe behind, there was

no telling what else he might have done.

He gave up, righted the hapless chair... and found the missing shoe squashed beneath it. It wriggled onto his foot, and he was good to go. He turned to head back downstairs, and the house chimed for his attention.

“Yes? What is it?”

“You have a visitor, sir. Regulator Jodan Hyrom wishes to speak with you.”

“Without an appointment? Tell him to go fu—” Bey bit back the rest of the sentence. This wasn’t Homeworld. Regulators didn’t need appointments, not even to see a member of the Massowic family. The house was going to let him in whatever Bey said. In fact, it probably already had. And that really wasn’t good. The last thing he needed was a regulator poking around his place in search of illicit bi-tech.

“House: you’re nothing but a useless vegetable. What are you? Oh, never mind. Tell him I’ll receive him in the living room.”

But the regulator wasn’t waiting for him in the nice, safe, contraband-free living room. He was in the kitchen – home of appliances, and a prime location for an officious busybody on the lookout for black market bi-tech. Which no doubt explained why he was taking such an unhealthy interest in the not-yet-fully-integrated refrigerator. The door was wide open, and all Bey could see of the regulator was his broad orange-uniformed back.

“Can I help you, officer?”

The regulator closed the door and turned around. “Yes. You can tell me where you purchased this refrigerator.”

Bey took an involuntary step backwards. Not only was the man’s expression as hostile as his tone, his skin was disturbingly pink. Not the more common white-pink, like Sanja and his parents, but practically fuchsia. Bey had never seen anything like it. But whatever freakish-pink-people planet the man came from, there was no excuse for such rudeness. Even on Noyan, regulators usually treated

their victims with due deference. Especially when those victims were Homeworlders, and on a first name basis with Ambassador Ashef.

“I beg your pardon?”

The regulator’s scowl deepened. He moved closer, intruding on Bey’s personal space. Bey retreated, acutely aware of the animal warmth of the man, his sheer physical presence. He wasn’t especially tall, but he was deeply intimidating. Whatever colonial hellhole he came from, it hadn’t just left him with weirdly pink skin, but also a nose flattened by violence, and a face scarred with the pockmarks of some hideous childhood disease.

“The refrigerator, Massowic.” The regulator jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Where’d you get it?”

What was this? Possession of an unlicensed refrigerator was hardly a serious crime. Certainly nothing worthy of this level of hostility; especially not directed at someone with his background and family connections. The man had to know he was risking his career, treating a Massowic like this. It made no sense.

Unless he was acting under orders.

Oh shit. What the hell had he done at the gala dinner? Everyone who mattered was there. And he’d been so very drunk... He’d acted up, no question. But how badly? Enough to offend someone senior? Someone who wasn’t impressed by Bey’s connections? Someone like Ambassador Ashef himself.

Oh God, he hoped it wasn’t Ashef. If Ashef was on his case, he was fucked.

He didn’t have any choice. He’d have to play the Massowic card, and pray Ashef wasn’t behind this nasty little visit.

“I really have no idea, officer. I can’t say household furniture has ever been a particular priority of mine.”

“Is that so? Well, maybe those priorities could do with a little readjusting.”

The regulator came even closer. His eyes were cold and

full of menace. Bey took another step backwards. He hadn't faced physical intimidation like this since he was in his teens. It was too much. His head ached, his sour stomach was gurgling, and this crazed colonial was so close Bey could smell him.

He fled to the living room. The regulator came with him. "Breaching the embargo's a serious offence, Massowic. And that particular piece of 'household furniture' isn't on any approved list I've ever seen."

"Really, officer? I wouldn't know. Everything on this planet is so backwards. It's hard to keep track of what's allowed and what's not." This was ridiculous. If he went much further, he'd be through the front door and out on the street. "But tell me, officer, um... I don't think I got your name?"

"Hyrom. Regulator Hyrom. Just like it says on the badge." The man tapped the patch on his chest; his name, picture and credentials conveniently doubled in size.

"Well, Regulator Hyrom, I can't help but feel we've got off on the wrong foot. Why don't you sit down and tell me what brings you here this morning. Surely it can't be a burning desire to inspect my refrigerator? It doesn't even work properly. And if it should happen to breach the embargo, that's only – at worst – a minor technical infringement..."

"A minor technical infringement?" The regulator seemed to savor the words. "And it doesn't even work properly... Well, of course. That makes all the difference. That changes everything. Perhaps you'd like me to help you fix it?"

Bey stopped. He'd reached the front door and had no choice but to make a stand. "No, I'd like you to focus on your real job: catching smugglers. Not harassing Commonwealth citizens in their own homes. What are you going to charge me with? Possession of a dangerous fridge?"

And the regulator finally smiled. He even backed off a

little to give Bey some room. It didn't help. There was a nasty, triumphant edge to the man's smile. And his eyes were as cold as ever.

"Dangerous? Funny you should say that. Why do you think it's 'dangerous', exactly?"

"It was sarcasm, Regulator Hyrom. Or don't they have that where you come from? Now, can we please get this over with? I'd like to get on with the rest of my day. Just tell me why you're here."

"Why I'm here? I'm here because that contraband bi-tech you were talking about – the stuff I shouldn't be bothering people like you about... Well, last night, some of it killed your friend Sanja Gwahnal. So, you and me, we're going on a ride out to his place. And on the way, you can tell me all about why you think your fridge is dangerous. And whether that has anything to do with young Master Gwahnal's death. House: open the door."

Sanja, dead? This couldn't be happening. It was a dream, an alcohol-induced nightmare. Sanja couldn't be dead.

But Regulator Hyrom's official car was real enough. Its carapace glistened with the orange and white livery of the Office of Regulation, and it opened at Hyrom's command. Bey climbed inside, and no sooner had the regulator joined him than the carapace closed and cool air flooded in to displace the heat. The change was welcome, but like the smooth acceleration and perfect one-way transparency of the windows, it was also a reminder that the embassy wasn't subject to the same restrictions as mere citizens.

Hyrom glared at him from the seat opposite. "How old are you, Massowic?"

"Twenty-four. Why?"

"And how old was your friend Sanja?"

"Nineteen."

"A child."

"Not on Noy—"

"A child. And you're an adult. Not just an adult. A

Homeworlder. From an important family. Sanja follow you around like a puppy, did he? Some kind of role model you were. What did you teach him? Possession of unlicensed bi-tech is only a... what was it, 'a minor technical infringement'?"

And – finally – Bey understood. No wonder the man was so hostile. He had everything backwards. He thought Bey was to blame for corrupting the boy. But it hadn't been like that. Not at all.

Sanja had saved him. Bey had been lost, wrenched away from all the comforts of home and cast out of decent society. And then he'd met Sanja. The boy had been sharp, street-smart, and astonishingly independent – nothing like the stereotype of a naïve youngster from a backwater world. He'd shown Bey that what Noyan lacked in comforts, it made up for in forbidden pleasures. Sanja introduced him to meat from real animals, and native girls who were so much less inhibited than their Commonwealth peers, and always keen to earn extra money. And he knew where to get the best illegal bi-tech. No way would Sanja have been killed by dodgy buds. He knew bi-tech. He was a Gwahnal, for fuck's sake. His parents were the largest bi-tech manufacturers on this entire shithole of a planet...

It was a trick! This whole thing was a trick. Sanja wasn't dead. Hyrom was just trying to rattle him, get him to confess to buying off the black market.

But why? Was he jealous of Homeworlders? Did he think convicting a Massowic would be some kind of feather in his cap? Or was this a message from someone higher up? Maybe he really had pissed off the wrong person last night.

Whatever the reason, he was done playing along. He turned his head to stare pointedly at the passing scenery. Not that there was much to look at now they'd left the suburbs for the city. On their left were row after row of ugly native buildings, all yellow stone and brutal right-

angles. On their right was the Spate, the river that gave the city its name. And up ahead, the old stone bridge that had once been the only way to cross to the other side. The car bypassed it, which was a relief, and carried on paralleling the river until they joined the main east-west roadroot.

City gave way to suburb, and suburb to dry brown countryside barely distinguishable from the desert beyond. The regulator was taking this very seriously, for a bluff; they even turned off the roadroot system at the right junction for the Gwahnal estate. He could see the lakeside greenery up ahead. Were they going to veer away at the last minute? But no; the car carried on straight through the open gates and onto the winding roadroot drive.

This was too real. The Gwahnals weren't the kind of people you approached uninspected and unimpeded, even in an official vehicle. Not unless something very bad had happened.

And then he saw it, nestling amidst the lush vegetation beside the lake: the ruins of Sanja's house. Yesterday it had been an elegant spiral tower, tall, green and graceful; a testament to what could be achieved even with the antiquated bi-tech allowed under the embargo. Today it was... different. The delicate tower had crumpled in on itself, like a wax candle placed too close to a roaring fire. Its skin, once a living masterpiece of polished jade, was now a diseased husk, mottled with grey and disfigured by yellow pustules the size of dinner plates. Teams of bi-technicians were crawling over the dying building like flies on rotting fruit.

Houses shouldn't die like this. They were supposed to seize up over decades, slowly transforming into arthritic wooden shells; dignified memorials to their former living selves.

They shouldn't rot.

And they shouldn't kill their masters.

But this one had. Sanja really was dead. Bey couldn't deny it anymore, not faced with this abomination.

Regulator Hyrom had been telling the truth. Somewhere inside that monstrosity were the remains of the only real friend he had on this entire planet.

He peered across the lake at the emerald domes of the Gwahnal mansion. Were Fange and Amaya looking out at the ruins of their son's house? Did they blame themselves for granting him so much independence? How could they not?

The car parked itself among a group of official vehicles close to the tower. The carapace lifted, letting in a rush of hot, humid air, ripe with the stench of decay. Bey hurriedly leaned out to spit the taste from his mouth, only to find himself being unceremoniously dragged out of the vehicle and towards the rotting building.

"Come on, Massowic. Let's take a look at your handiwork, and see what comes of buying black market bi-tech."

Bey shuddered. Against all expectations, the house was still alive. The flesh around the front door was puckered, quivering, as the house resisted the door-muscle's straining efforts to close. He'd never seen, or heard of, anything like it.

"I see it," he said, "But I don't know what it's got to do with me."

"You don't? What if I tell you that I've got men going over your place right now? That they're looking for every last bit of unlicensed bi-tech you've got? And if you and Sanja shared a dealer, well then, your 'minor technical transgression' might just end up as an accessory to manslaughter charge. Your name's not going to save you this time, Massowic. Earlier today I had to tell the Gwahnals their only son and heir was dead. Dead because he used black market bi-tech. Dead because his grown-up friend encouraged him to flout the rules. Dead because of you."

The man's face was just inches away, glaring, hostile. And horribly, horribly confident. But manslaughter? No

way. Everyone used unlicensed bi-tech. Yes, it was illegal. Yes, if you were caught, you had to pay a fine. But no way could they push it as manslaughter. Grandfather wouldn't let it happen.

But grandfather Massowic was a long way away. And the Gwahnals were close by. And rich. And powerful. And if Hyrom convinced them... If they thought Bey was to blame for their son's death...

A group of bi-technicians were huddled nearby, arguing intensely. One of them looked up, saw Hyrom and nodded respectfully. "Sir, the pace of decay is escalating. We don't have much time left."

The regulator's grip relaxed a little. "Do we still need breathing kit?"

"No, sir. The cleared areas are all safe now."

"And the rest of the team's inside?"

"No, sir, I—"

"What about the guard detail? Where are they?"

"Sorry, sir." The bi-technician swallowed nervously. "I thought you knew. The commissioner called. Last night's roadroot attack did even more damage than we thought. It's been escalated to—"

"Damage? You serious?" Bey must have misheard. Damage to the roadroot system? Was that even possible? The damn things were practically indestructible.

"Shut up, Massowic. What did the commissioner say, Mito?"

The bi-technician's eyes flicked to Bey, and straight back to Hyrom. "Just that the attack's now Priority One. They want all hands on deck to stop the fungus spreading past the new growth. The commissioner's reassigned all our guards and half the tech team."

"Of course he has... So, how stable is the house?"

"It's not. We're down to just over ten minutes per treatment."

"That's it, then. We can't risk any more decay. Not till we're done. Secure it."

The bi-technician nodded, and hurried over to a nearby vehicle. He returned moments later with what looked like an outsized pinecone, but had to be a factory-sealed hive. He placed it against the straining door muscle, twist-released the cone, and held it to the wall. Hundreds of tiny insects poured out onto the ravaged surface. For a few frenzied seconds they seemed to be scattering randomly. Then, quite suddenly, they were still – a long, branching line of insects mapping out one of the house's major arteries.

The bi-technician turned to face them. "All done, sir. Two minutes for the catalyst to do its work and you're good to go. Five minutes, and it'll be rock solid."

But Hyrom wasn't willing to wait even two minutes. He dragged Bey through the door and into a familiar world turned strange and nightmarish. This couldn't be Sanja's entrance hall. Where were the beautiful inlays in the walls, the delicate tracteries of miniature glowbulbs? Everything had turned black, and the few glowbulbs that remained had faded to a sickly gleam, illuminating nothing.

Worse: the stench was unbelievable. The sickly-sweet smell of decay filled his nose and throat and made his eyes water. He stumbled against the nearest wall, encountered slime, and recoiled. He tried to flee, desperate to push past Hyrom and escape the appalling stench, the darkness, the stickiness underfoot. But the regulator dragged him deeper inside.

The central atrium was unrecognizable. The skylights had clouded over, shrouding everything in artificial twilight. The only light came from a constellation of temporary glowbulbs set up haphazardly in the middle of the open area. They revealed how completely the space had been transformed. The mosaic floor was deep black. The great spiral of the staircase winding around the atrium walls had buckled with the building. It gave the room a twisted, narrow aspect, where all had been light and airy. How had this happened in one night? This kind of decay

should have taken years, decades of willful neglect.

Hyrom finally let go of his arm, but only to shove him towards the staircase. Bey gazed warily at the twisted stairs, reluctant to climb them. But a glance at the regulator's face was enough to convince him to proceed. He tested the first step. It seemed solid enough, and he carried on upwards, carefully staying close to the wall. The catalyst had solidified the rotting stairs, but each step was at a different angle, and the further out from the wall, the more pronounced the slope.

The landing was even darker than the entrance hall. The only light here was cold, white, institutional. It spilled from an open door further down the hall: the door to Sanja's bedroom.

He would have stopped, then, if Hyrom let him. But the regulator once again grabbed his arm and dragged him onwards and into the room.

Sanja was lying naked on his sleeping pad, staring unblinking at an emergency glowbulb suspended from the ceiling. His body, like that of his house, was twisted out of shape. He'd died gasping for breath, struggling, in pain.

Bey felt nothing. It was too unreal. This strange, rigid pretend-Sanja couldn't be his friend. Sanja would never just lie there like that. It couldn't be him.

A tear rolled slowly down his cheek. He wiped it away, baffled. How could he be crying, when he was numb inside? He turned from the body.

"Why did you bring me here, Hyrom?"

"I told you. To see your handiwork."

"I didn't do this."

"Yes, you did. You – and whoever sold him the junk that killed this place. And I'm going to make you pay for it. I'm going to ruin you. There's only one thing that can save you. I want the name of Sanja's dealer."

CHAPTER 2

Remember, the Nullists who founded Noyan never intended their colony to have a future. We, and our way of life, are an accident of history. Those who remained true to Nullism – inevitably – died out. Those who were less committed chose to beget a new generation, to create life, conscious life, without knowing – because they could not know – whether that consciousness would have wanted to exist. And in order to restore the balance, to make amends for doing what no true Nullist could ever do, they created Choosing.

Choosing is the child's opportunity to pass judgement on their parents – to thank them for the gift of life, or to protest against having been born.

– From: Collected Speeches, Justice Jeremiah of Deep Mine

“Ruth – wait. I need to catch my breath.”

It wasn't true. What Beth really needed was a moment to summon her courage. But Ruth wasn't interested in waiting; she disappeared into the off-comer building. Beth had one last glimpse of her pony-tail, and she was gone

Beth stopped at the entrance. The militia were still scuffling with a few of the off-comer technicians behind her; maybe she should stay outside and supervise... Except Ruth would know she was just making excuses. And laugh at her.

Besides, what was the point of coming here, if she

wasn't going to go inside? Her mistake had been letting Ruth talk her into this little adventure in the first place. It was too late to back out now.

She stepped over the threshold. And recoiled. It wasn't like entering a building; it was like being swallowed by some monstrous animal. There was no grand entrance, just a dark tube-like corridor whose slimy walls were ribbed like the gullet of some huge predator.

How did anyone, even an off-comer, live in a place like this? She didn't belong anywhere near this monstrosity. She belonged back in the Family Court, with four solid stone walls around her.

And the smell! The thick, rotten-egg foulness was so strong she could taste it. Any other time, she'd have turned around and gone straight back outside; but Ruth would never let her hear the end of it if she did. It wasn't worth it. She pressed on.

There was a large open space at the end of the corridor. It was less dark here. The off-comers had set up a handful of green-tinged phosphorescent lights. They illuminated much of the ground floor, but threw the rest into deeper shadow. Ruth was down on one knee, inspecting the sagging remains of a spiral staircase circling the walls. She broke into a huge smile at Beth's approach.

"This place, Beth. It's amazing. I've never seen anything like it. I'm so glad you made me come."

"Me? Make you? You're the one who—"

"This is going to be huge. They never told us a house could rot like this! I'm going to skewer them in the Assembly. I can push for a Committee of Inquiry on the back of this."

"Good. I'm glad you think all this..." Beth waved a hand to indicate the horror of their surroundings. "Was worth it. But why do *I* have to be here?"

Ruth stood up, trouser knees freshly stained with green slime. "You know why. I never could have got in the door without you. The Family Court has the right to investigate.

I don't."

"Fine. I got you in. But I don't see why you still need me."

"Because it's not a Family Court investigation otherwise. Come on, Beth, you can't tell me you're not even a tiny bit curious about what caused all this." She nodded at the distorted stairway. Beth determinedly avoided looking.

"Not in the least."

"Well, if you're really set on being a stick in the mud... The next step has to be at least a token investigation, and then we can open this place to the press. We've got a real opportunity here. Let's show the public what the Commonwealth doesn't want them to see."

"Pity we can't get them to smell it, too." Beth finally broke into a smile of her own. "A few pictures in the Gazette are all very well, but one whiff of this place and they wouldn't be able to give off-comer houses away..."

"Don't kid yourself, Beth. Bi-tech houses are the future."

"The future? This doesn't look like any kind of future to me."

"It's hardly typical, though, is it? Bi-tech housing is cheaper and safer, despite what you see here. We just need to control it ourselves, not let off-comers tell us what--"

"Okay, okay." Beth raised her hands in surrender. It was an old argument, and they weren't going to resolve it today. "I get it. You love off-comer technology. So, make yourself useful and find out what happened to this monstrosity. I'll check out the scene of the crime. We might as well do some actual investigating while we're here. You never know. If we're lucky, they'll have messed with the crime scene, and I'll get to charge them with obstruction..."

Now it was Ruth's turn to grin. Her heart was in the right place, despite her bizarre love of off-comer technology.

“So – where do I look for the body?”

“In his bedroom, I expect. Supposedly, he died in his sleep. The whole house was full of poison gas before the regulators ventilated it.”

“Upstairs, then?” Beth eyed the sagging staircase dubiously.

“Yes, Beth. They usually have their bedrooms upstairs, just like real people. They’re not that different from us, you know. Well, except bi-tech beds are part of the floor, and they call them ‘pads’, but apart from that...”

“Thank you. But I don’t need the details. Just a pair of climbing boots.”

Ruth followed her gaze to the buckled staircase. “Do you want me to come with you? I could help with the trickier parts...”

“Or bring the whole lot crashing down. No, you just focus on your nasty off-comer tech. I’ll manage.”

At least, she hoped so. She could send for a ladder... but that would only encourage Ruth to treat her even more like a fragile old fossil, and she was *scraped* if she was going to let that happen.

The climb wasn’t as bad as she’d feared. The steps might look rotten, but they were solid underfoot. And they were reasonably level, at least close to the wall. The one truly daunting section was at the very top, where the steps had sloughed away from the landing, leaving an uncomfortably large gap.

Ten years ago, she would have stepped across and thought nothing of it. But ten years was the difference between middle-aged, and just aged. Too many years of sitting on her backside through endless Choosing ceremonies had taken their toll on her back.

It wasn’t really the width of the gap that was the problem. She simply couldn’t lift her leg that high, not anymore. Maybe she should swallow her pride and ask Ruth for help. Except, that would take time, and suddenly, against all expectation, she had a reason to hurry. There

were voices, off-comer voices, coming from further along the landing; and light, pouring from an open doorway.

She prodded the landing floor. It felt slick, sweaty. Skin-like. She snatched her hand back, said a silent apology to her skirt, turned around, and sat down on the landing. A quick shuffle backwards, and she was able to swing her legs up and clamber to her knees. It was neither a fast nor a dignified way to climb the final step – but it got her where she needed to be.

One last heave, and she was on her feet. Her back gave a warning twinge, but nothing worse than getting out of bed in the morning. And the voices were clearer now. She headed down the landing, and through the open doorway.

And blinked, dazzled by the bright light hanging from the ceiling. Two men were standing on the far side of the room. One was young and frightened; the other older, pink-skinned, and angry. A third figure on the floor wasn't moving – the body. She filed it away for later consideration.

The off-comers registered her arrival. The older one scowled at her. "What are you doing here? We didn't send for a cleaner. Tell them to keep everybody out until I say otherwise."

"And you are?"

"I told you to leave!"

"Yes," said Beth, stepping further into the room. "I heard you. And I asked who you are."

The man's eyes bulged. A vein pulsed in his neck. "My name is Regulator Jodan Hyrom, and you are intru—"

"Thank you, Regulator Hyrom. I'm Justice Beth of the Family Court. And I'd like you to explain why you're interfering with the scene of a crime."

The off-comer blinked. When he spoke, his voice was tight with controlled anger. "I'm doing nothing of the kind. The Office of Regulation is the competent authority here, not the Family Court."

There were so many responses she could make. She

could explain Custom to this off-comer fool. She could call on Ruth for help; Ruth loved to talk, like all representatives. But Beth was tired. And the direct route was so much simpler.

She reached into her jacket pocket, took out her standard-issue revolver and pointed it directly at the man's head.

"I disagree," she said.

The off-comer stared at her, seemingly too astonished to be afraid. "Do you seriously think that you can frighten me with that?"

Beth cocked the hammer. The click was satisfyingly loud. The off-comer's gaze shifted from her eyes to the gun, and back again.

"Very well," he said. "But my departure is made under protest and in no way constitutes recognition of Family Court jurisdiction. I have authority here under the grant of extraterritoriality. I expect at some point in the future to charge *you* with obstruction of *my* investigation."

He took hold of the younger man's arm and made to leave. Beth shook her head. "No. You leave. He stays."

"He's in my custody!"

"Was, not is. You – what's your name?"

"Beynan Hotep."

"Well, Beynan Hotep," – Interesting, where had she heard that name before? – "I'm placing you in the custody of the Family Court, pursuant to my investigation into the death of Sanja Gwahnal."

"You can't do this!" The regulator's eyes were bulging; a deep red flush spreading through his peculiar pink skin.

"I already have. Now, hadn't you better go and inform your embassy? I'm sure they'll want to know the Family Court has taken over the investigation."

And there it was: the off-comer was finally afraid. He glared at her, let go of his companion, and stalked out of the room. Beth resisted the urge to blow a raspberry after him, and carefully released the cocked hammer instead.

She didn't like guns; never would have drawn it in the first place, if she hadn't seen the body. But the body changed everything. Because the moment she saw it, she knew: Sanja Gwahnal had been murdered.

"You," she said, to the remaining off-comer. "Stand over there, and keep out of my way."

She waited to be sure the young man obeyed. Then she went to examine the body. It was lying on a sleeping pad, frozen forever in a final convulsion: back arched, legs bent, hands clawed. The face was a contorted mask, lips peeled back in a grotesque parody of a smile.

He'd died in pain, unable to breath. And yet he was still in bed. He'd lain there, choking, and hadn't even tried to get to the window or the door and find clean air?

She didn't believe it.

There were small, blue bruises on his upper arms. Fingermarks, maybe, where the killer – or, more likely, killers – held him down while he choked to death. But they'd been careless. No one choked like that without attempting to save themselves. They should have moved the body, placed it by the door. With luck, they'd have made other mistakes, and she'd catch them, and Judge them.

The victim's face was both familiar and unfamiliar. She'd seen it before in countless black and white photographs in the Gazette. But those pictures had been happy, relaxed – and they hadn't conveyed the freakishness of the off-comer's red hair, blue eyes and pale white skin. How to understand someone so alien? She knew so much and so little about him. He was rich. Famous. Nineteen. No longer a child, but still some months short of Choosing...

Now there was a thought. It was the oldest motive on Noyan. But no – the Gwahnals were off-comers, and off-comers didn't hold Choosing ceremonies. And with no ceremony, they'd have no reason to fear the Choice of Death.

So, the body itself told her little; only the fact of murder. What about the room? This was the victim's most private space. What did it tell her about him?

All four walls were covered with fine, velvety hair; red-brown, mottled with dark grey patches. Were those original? A symptom of disease? What about the bald patch on the outer wall? Illness? Or a window? It was hard to imagine that it had ever been transparent.

At least the niches in the walls made sense. They housed a collection of Noyan pottery – and a single, small globeflower. She took a closer look. The thing was no more than six inches across, its tiny petals exquisitely arranged to reproduce continents and oceans in beautiful and exact miniature. Globeflowers were inoffensive as off-comer tech went; there was even a certain charm in the way the petals opened and closed to mimic the ever-moving line between night and day. But this globeflower had died with the house that fed it. Its geography was lost in eternal twilight, continents and seas distinguished only by shades of grey. She made a mental note to have it photographed; no doubt someone could tell her which planet it counterfeited.

So: a pottery collection; a globeflower; a sleeping pad. Nothing else. Was this an aesthete's room? Was the real Sanja very different from his public image? Or was she misreading a place she wasn't equipped to understand? Were there hidden comforts all around, ready to spring from wall and floor at a word of command? Was such a thing even possible? Ruth would know.

It was no use. She was lost. This was Sanja's home, full of the symbols of his inner life – but those symbols were strange to her. Even familiar items – the Noyan pottery, the sparse furnishing of the room – might mean something very different to an off-comer like Sanja Gwahnal.

Everything about this house was alien. And dead. Did Sanja's house tell the same story as it had when it was alive? She had no way of knowing. How, then, to make

sense of Sanja Gwahnal's life? And if she couldn't do that, how to make sense of his death?

Perhaps she should hand this one back to the regulators after all. They understood off-comers in a way she never would.

But they hadn't realized this was murder. And she'd seen that at first glance...

There was a change in the light. Hotep was moving, retreating in the face of a commotion approaching from the corridor. She turned to face the doorway. A group of uniformed off-comers surged into the room. They fanned out protectively, making way for a tall, hawk-faced man with pink-brown skin and graying black hair. More uniformed personnel followed, among them Regulator Hyrom. An unhappy group of militia brought up the rear; Ruth at their head, protesting furiously. "Undersecretary Maitland! This is totally unacceptable! I insist you wait outside until the Justice is ready to see you."

The man's gaze flicked to Beynan Hotep – who shrank away – and then back to Beth. "You're Beth the Justice?"

"I am, and who–?"

"Please explain why you threatened this regulator and obstructed him in the performance of his lawful duties."

"Ruth, who is this clown?"

"His name's Nicholas Maitland. He's undersecretary at the Commonwealth Embassy. And he's ignored repeated instructions not to interfere with your investigation."

Maitland waved a dismissive hand. "Instructions that have no legal force, as you well know, Representative. We're not interfering with the Justice's investigation – she's interfering with ours. So, I ask again, Justice, how do you justify preventing Regulator Hyrom from carrying out his lawful duties?"

Beth put her head on one side. She itched to deal with this arrogant off-comer the same way she dealt with the regulator – at the point of a gun. But the uniformed men surrounding him had a professional air. Would she even

succeed in drawing her revolver? Worse – if she did, would Maitland leave, or would he call her bluff? Things might get very complicated very quickly if she had to shoot him. Maitland was clearly important. Her off-comer prisoner hadn't so much as glanced at anyone else since the Undersecretary entered the room.

"I don't need to justify it," she said. "Regulator Hyrom was attempting to usurp the prerogatives of the Family Court. He committed two *prima facie* breaches of Custom, first in failing to inform the court of a suspicious death, and then in disturbing the scene of a crime. Be grateful I don't intend to Judge him."

Hyrom took a furious step forward. Maitland raised a warning finger – a tiny gesture, but sufficient to stop the regulator in his tracks. "Judge him? I think you overreach yourself, Justice Beth. This is an internal Commonwealth matter, and as such, entirely outside the jurisdiction of the Family Court."

"On the contrary, Undersecretary – all murder comes under the Family Court."

"That may be so, Justice. But this is not a case of murder."

"That remains to be proven."

"Madam, you are being deliberately obstructionist. I shall have no choice but to lodge a formal complaint with the Assembly. The more you delay us, the harder it becomes to discover why this house died. You're putting further lives at risk."

"I'm doing nothing of—"

"Nonsense, Undersecretary." Ruth pushed herself between Beth and the arrogant off-comer. "I'm sure the Justice has no objection to your bi-technicians carrying out their own investigation. Provided they don't interfere with her work. And that she receives a full copy of their findings."

"Out of the question! Don't be absurd, Representative."

Beth put a restraining hand on Ruth's elbow, and

answered for herself. "In which case, you'll be the one putting lives at risk, Undersecretary. Now, if you wish to claim jurisdiction, you can petition the proper authorities. In the meantime, please withdraw and allow me to carry out my duties. There's been a death here, probably a murder. The victim was approaching his twentieth birthday. It's not unknown, even among us, for parents to murder their children for fear of the Choice of Death."

And finally, Maitland's composure slipped. He stepped forward, nostrils flaring, eyes shining with anger. "This is absurd! There was never any question of a Choosing ceremony! The boy was a Commonwealther. The Gwahnals are a respectable family!"

Beth tried to respond, but Ruth got there first. "Undersecretary Maitland, are you suggesting Commonwealth citizens are exempt from Custom?"

Maitland retreated a step. All emotion emptied from his face. "Of course not, dear lady. You misunderstand me. I meant that no Commonwealth child would ever wish to invoke the Choice of Death. Our children are taught to revere their parents."

"How very convenient for their teachers," said Beth. "But this young man grew up on Noyan. Perhaps, unlike you, he understood that he had a perfect right to avail himself of Choosing. And perhaps his parents had reason to be afraid. There's only one way to find out – by investigating. This is unquestionably a matter for the Family Court."

"I disagree. I shall be launching an immediate protest with the Assembly – and expressing the Commonwealth's strong objections to political interference in our investigation."

"If you're referring to me," said Ruth, "I am here solely in my private capacity as a duly levied member of the militia. Justice Beth thought my knowledge of bi-tech might be of service to the community."

"In which case, Representative, I'm sure you'll be

pleased to learn that I've decided to agree to your request for a simultaneous investigation by the Office of Regulation."

"With a full report on their findings to be provided to the Family Court?"

"Subject only to the usual restrictions."

Ruth gave Beth a barely perceptible nod: it was the best they would get. Beth shrugged her acceptance.

"So, my dear Representative..." Maitland gestured grandly towards the door. "Your services will no longer be required. Perhaps I can give you a lift back to the Assembly?"

"I'll make my own way, thank you, Undersecretary. Please don't wait around on my account..."

Maitland departed, uniformed guards folding in around him. Regulator Hyrom trailed miserably along behind. Ruth waited for them to clear the room before turning to face her. "He's right, Beth. I have to go. The longer I'm here, the messier the politics becomes."

Hotep was still present, watching and listening. Beth signaled the militia to take him onto the landing. "That's why I need you, Ruth. Politics is your area, not mine."

Ruth shook her head. "Sorry, but I can't help here. Only in the Assembly. If I'm right, this place busts the embargo wide open. Someone's been smuggling bi-tech that's so far in advance of anything I've ever seen that... that... I can't even... Just trust me – this stuff shouldn't be here."

"I thought you were all in favor of smuggled off-comer tech?"

"I am. That's why I can't be here. Too many blurry lines. You have to be free to investigate without politics complicating everything. There are things that just don't make any sense..." She beckoned to a militia man standing by the door.

"Timothy – the papers. Here, check these out. How come, if our friend Sanja was such a big fan of fancy

contraband bi-tech, he was also hiding these in his house?”

Beth took the papers and flipped through them. They were an eclectic mix: pamphlets, leaflets, manifestos; even some serious publications she had on her own shelves at the Family Court. But they all had one thing in common. Sanja Gwahnal, the spoiled scion of a rich off-comer family, had an entirely unexpected interest in Noyan traditionalism.

“It fits,” she said, slowly. “He collected our pottery, too. It fits. And at the same time – it doesn’t fit at all.”

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