

ADAM-TROY CASTRO

## THE FUNERAL MARCH OF THE MARIONETTES

1.

It was in the third year of my indentured servitude that I rescued Isadora from the death-dance of the Marionettes.

This happened on Vlhan, a temperate world of no strategic importance to either the Terran Confederacy or any of the great off world republics. An unremarkable place with soft rolling hills, swampy lowlands, and seasons that came and went too gently for anybody to notice the change, it was indistinguishable from a million similar worlds throughout the known universe, and it would have been charted, abandoned, and forgotten were it not for the Vlhani themselves; they were so different from every other sentience in the universe that seven separate republics and confederacies maintained outposts there just to study them. Because the Vlhani had been declared sentient, we called our outposts embassies instead of research stations, and ourselves diplomats instead of scientists, but almost nothing we did involved matters of state; we were so removed from real power that the idea of a genuine diplomatic incident -- let alone a war -- seemed a universe away.

My name was Alex Gordon then. On Vlhan, I was a twenty-two-year old exolinguist, born and raised in the wheelworld known as New Kansas; the kind of bookish young man who insists he dreams of visiting the real Kansas someday even after being told how long it's been uninhabitable. Like the three dozen other indentures who made up the rest of our delegation, I'd bartered five years of service in exchange for a lifetime of free travel throughout the Confederacy; but I'd been so captivated by the mysteries of the Vlhani people that I seriously considered devoting my entire life to finding the choreographic Rosetta Stone that would finally make sense of their dance. For it was the Ballet that, once every sixteen standard lunars, made them the center of attention on a thousand worlds. It was simultaneously tragedy, art form, suicide, orgasm, biological imperative and mob insanity. The first time I saw it I was shattered; the second time I wept; the third. ...

But this story's about the third.

The one that belonged to Isadora.

2.

It was a warm, sunny day, with almost no breeze. We'd erected a viewing stand overlooking the great natural amphitheater, and installed the usual holo and neurec remotes to record the festivities for future distribution. As was customary, we gathered on the north rim, the assembled Vlhani spectators on the south. I sat among the mingled human and alien diplomats, along with ambassador

Hal Dhiju, and my fellow indentures. Kathy Ng was there, making her usual sardonic comments about everything; as was our quartermaster Rory Metcalf, who talked gossip and politics and literature and everything but the spectacle unfolding before us; and Dhiju's sycophantic assistant Oskar Levine, who waxed maudlin on his own personal interpretation of the dance. We were all excited by the magic we were about to witness, but also bored, in the way that audiences tend to be in the last few minutes before any show; and as we murmured among ourselves, catching up on gossip and politics and the latest news from our respective worlds, few of us dwelled on the knowledge that all of the one hundred thousand Vlhani in the bowl itself were here to die.

Hurrr'poth did. He was my counterpart from the Riirgaan delegation: a master exolinguist among a reptilian race that prided itself on its exolinguists. He usually liked to sit among the other delegations rather than sequester himself among his own people; and this year he'd chosen to sit beside me, which had a chilling effect on my conversations with anybody else. Like all Riirgaans, he had a blank, inexpressive face, impossible to read (a probable reason why they'd had to develop such uncanny verbal communication skills), and when he said, "We are all criminals," I was uncertain just how to take it.

"Why? Because we sit back and let it happen?"

"Of course not. The Vlhani perform this ritual because they feel they have to; it would be immensely arrogant of us to stop it. We are correct in allowing their orgy of self-destruction. No, we are criminal because we enjoy it; because we find beauty in it; because we openly look forward to the day when they gather here to die. We are not innocent bystanders. We are accomplices."

I indicated the neurecs focused on the amphitheater, for the benefit of future vicarious spectators. "And pornographers."

Hurrr'poth trilled, in his race's musical equivalent of laughter. "Exactly."

"If you disapprove of it so much, then why do you watch?"

He trilled again. "Because I am as great a criminal as any one of you. Because the Vlhani are masterpieces of form following function, and because I find them magnificent, and because I believe the Ballet to be one of the most beautiful sights in a universe that is already not lacking for beauty. Indeed, I believe that much of the Ballet's seductive power lies in how it indicts us, as spectators...and if I must be indicted for the Ballet to be a complete work, then I happily accept my guilt as one of the prices of admission. What about you? Why do you watch?"

I spoke cautiously, as lower-echelon diplomats must whenever posed sufficiently uncomfortable questions. "To understand."

"Ahhhh. And what do you want to understand? Yourself, or the Vlhani?"

"Both," I said -- glibly, but accurately -- and then hurriedly peered through my rangeviewers as a quick way of escaping the conversation. It wasn't that I

disliked Hurr'poth; it was that his manner of cutting to the heart had always made me uncomfortable. Riirgaans had a way of knowing the people they spoke to better than they knew themselves, which may have been one reason they were so far ahead of us in decoding the danced language of the Vlhani. We could only ask childlike questions and understand simple answers. The Riirgaans had progressed to discussing intangibles. Even now, much of our research on the Vlhani had to be conducted with Riirgaan aid, and usually succeeded only in uncovering details they'd known for years.

This rankled those of us who liked to be first in everything; me, I just thought we'd accomplish more by cooperating. Maybe the Riirgaans just enjoyed watching others figure things out for themselves. Who knows? If the thriving market in Vlhani Ballet recordings means anything at all, it's that sentient creatures are subject to strange, unpredictable passions...and that the Vlhani are plugged into all of them.

A wind whipped up the loose dirt around the periphery of the amphitheater. The Vlhani spectators on the far rim stirred in anticipation. The one hundred thousand Vlhani in the amphitheater mingled about, in that seemingly random manner that we knew to be carefully choreographed. Our instruments recorded the movements of each and every Vlhani, to determine the many subtle ways in which tonight's performance differed from last year's. I merely panned my rangeviewer from one end of the amphitheater to the other, content to be awed by the numbers.

Vlhani have been compared to giant spiders, mostly by people with an Earthbound vocabulary, and I suppose that's fair enough, if you want a description that completely robs the Vlhani of everything that renders them unique. Personally, I much prefer to think of them as Marionettes. Imagine a shiny black sphere roughly one meter across, so smooth it looks metallic, so flawless it looks manufactured, its only concession to the messy biological requirements of ingestion, elimination, copulation and procreation a series of almost-invisible slits cut along one side. That's the Vlhani head. Now imagine anywhere between eight and twenty-four shiny black tentacles attached to various places around that head. Those are Vlhani whips, which can grow up to thirty meters long and which for both dexterity and versatility put humanity's poor opposable thumb to shame. A busy Vlhani can simultaneously a) stick one whip in the dirt, and render it rigid as a flagpole, to anchor itself while occupied with other things; b) use another four whips to carve itself a shelter out of the local raw materials; c) use another three whips to spear the underbrush for the rodentlike creatures it likes to eat; d) flail the rest of its whips in the air above its head, in the sophisticated wave-form sign language that Vlhani can use to conduct as many as six separate conversations at once. Even a single Vlhani, going about its everyday business, is a beautiful thing; one hundred thousand Vlhani, gathered together to perform the carefully choreographed Ballet that is both their holiest rite and most revered art form, are too much spectacle for any human mind to absorb properly at one time.

And too much tragedy too. For the one hundred thousand Vlhani gathered in that great amphitheater would soon dance without rest, without restraint, without nourishment or sleep; they'd dance until their self-control failed, and their

whips carved slices from each other's flesh; they'd dance until their hearts burst and the amphitheater was left filled with corpses. The ritual took place once each revolution of their world around their sun, and no offworlder claimed to understand it, not even the Riirgaans. But we knew it was some kind of art form, and that it possessed a tragic beauty that transcended the bounds of species.

Hurr'poth said, "They are starting late, this year. I wonder if --"

I took a single, sharp, horrified intake of breath. "Oh, God. No."

"What?"

I zoomed in, saw it again, and shouted: "AMBASSADOR!"

Hai Dhiju, who was seated two rows away, whirled in astonishment; we may have been an informal group on Vlhan, but my shout was still an incredible breach of protocol. He might have taken it a little better if he weren't intoxicated from the mild hallucinogens he took every day --they left him able to function, but always a little slow. As it was, his eyes narrowed for the second it took him to remember my name. "Alex. What's wrong?"

"There's a woman down there! With the Vlhani!"

It wasn't a good idea to yell it in a crowd. Cries of "What?" and "Where?" erupted all around us. The alien reactions ranged from stunned silence, on the part of my friend Hurr'poth, to high-pitched, ear-piercing hoots, on the part of the high-strung Ialos and K'cenhowten. A few of the aliens actually got up and rushed the transparent barriers, as if inspired by one insane, suicidal Terran to join the unknown woman in that bowl where soon nothing would be left alive.

Dhiju demanded, "Where?"

I handed him my rangeviewer. "It's marked."

He followed the blinking arrows on the interior screen to the flagged location. All around us, spectators slaved their own rangeviewers to the same signal. When they spotted her, their gasps were in close concert with his.

I wasn't looking through a rangeviewer at that moment; I didn't see the same thing the others saw. My own glimpse had been of a lithe and beautiful young woman in a black leotard, with short-cropped black hair and unfamiliar striped markings on both cheeks. Her eyes had burned bright with some emotion that I would have mistaken for fear, were it not for the impossibly level grace with which she walked. She couldn't have been older than her early twenties. Just about everybody who saw her the same moment the ambassador did now claims to have noticed more: an odd resonance to the way she moved her arms...

Maybe. Neither the ambassador nor anybody else around us commented on it at the time. Dhiju was just shocked enough to find the core of sobriety somewhere

inside him. "Oh, God. Who the hell -- Alex, you saw her first, you get to man the skimmer that plucks her the hell out of there. Hurry!"

"But what if --"

"If the Ballet starts, you're to abort immediately and let the universe exact the usual fine for idiocy. Until then -- run!"

I could have hesitated, even refused. Instead, I whirled, and began to fight my way through the crowd, an act that was taken by most of those watching as either a testament to my natural courage under fire, or a demonstration of Dhiju's natural ability to command. The more I look back, and remember my first glimpse of Isadora, the more I think that it might have been her that drew me.

Maybe part of me was in love with her even then.

3.

I was free of the crowd and halfway to the skimmer before I noticed Hurr'poth running alongside me, his triple-segmented legs easily keeping up with my less-than-athletic gait. He boarded the vehicle even as I did. He anticipated the inevitable question: "You need me. Take off."

My official answer should have been that this was a human matter and that I was not authorized to take any liberties with his safety. But he was right. He had years more experience with the Vlhani; he possessed more understanding of their language. If nothing else, he was my best chance for getting out alive myself.

So I just said, "All right," and took off, circling around the rear of the viewing platform and then coming in as low over the amphitheater as I dared. Once I was over the Vlhani I slaved the skimmer to my rangeviewer and had it home in on the woman. Thousands of shiny spherical black heads rotated to follow our progress; though a few recoiled, many more merely snapped their whips our way, as if attempting to seize us in flight. The average whip-span of a grown Marionette being what it was, they came close.

He peered over the side as we flew. "We don't have much time, Alex; they're all initiating their Primary Ascension."

I was clipping on a Riirgaani-patented whip harness. "I don't know what that means, Hurr'poth."

"It's what we call one of the earliest parts of the dance, where they gather their energies and synchronize their movements. You would probably call it a rehearsal, or a tune-up, but it's apparently as fraught with meaning as anything that follows; unfortunately, it doesn't last very long, and it tends to be marked by sudden, unpredictable activity." After a pause, he said: "Your flyby is causing some interesting...I would say clumsy and perhaps even...desperate variations."

"Wonderful." The last thing I needed was to be known all my life as the man who

disrupted the Vlhani Ballet. "Do you see her yet?"

"I've never lost sight of her," Hurr'poth said calmly.

A few seconds later I spotted her myself. She was...well, the best possible word for her walk is, undulating...down the slope on the far side of the amphitheater, into the deepest concentrations of Vlhani. She was waving both of her long slender arms over her head, in a gesture that initially struck me as an attempt to catch my attention but almost immediately made itself clear as an attempt to duplicate the movements of the Vlhani. She moved like a woman fluent in the language, who not only knew precisely what she was saying but also had the physical equipment she needed to say it: all four limbs were so limber that they could have been Vlhani whips and not human arms and legs. One of the first things I saw her do was loop each of her arms all the way around her other one, not just once but half a dozen times, forming a double helix.

"Jesus," I said, as we descended toward her. "She's been enhanced."

"At the very least," agreed Hurr'poth.

Her arms untangled, became jagged cartoon-lightning, then rose over her head again, wagging almost comically as little parentheses-shapes moved from wrist to shoulder in waves. As we came to a hovering stop three meters ahead of her, she scowled, an expression that made the scarlet chevrons tattooed on each cheek move closer to her dark penetrating eyes. Then she lowered her gaze and retreated.

"Leave her be," said Hurr'poth.

I stared at him. "She'll die."

"So will all these others. It's why they're here, and why she's here. If you save her, you'll be disturbing the Ballet for no good reason, and demonstrating to the Vlhani that you consider her life more valuable than any of theirs. No: leave her be. She's a pilgrim. It's her privilege to die if she wants."

Hurr'poth was probably right; being right was his way. But he did not know human beings, or me, anywhere near as well as he knew Vlhani, and could not understand that what he advised was unacceptable. I set the skimmer to land, and hopped out almost a full second before it was strictly safe to jump, hitting the slope with an impact that sent jabs of pain through both knees.

The Vlhani loomed above me on all sides: great black spheres wobbling about on liquid flailing whips. One stepped daintily over both me and the skimmer, disappearing without any visible concern into the roiling mob further down the slope; another half-dozen seemed to freeze solid at the sight of me, as if unsure what improvisations I might require of them. None seemed angry or aggressive, which didn't make me feel any better. Vlhani didn't have to be aggressive to be extraordinarily dangerous. Their whips had a tensile strength approaching steel and moved at speeds that had been known to exceed sound. And though we'd all walked among Vlhani without being harmed -- I'd even been picked

up and examined by curious ones -- those had been calm, peaceful Vlhani, Vlhani at rest, Vlhani who still possessed their race's equivalent of sanity. These were driven pilgrims here to dance themselves into a frenzy until they dropped; they could slash me, the woman, Hurrr'poth and the skimmer into slices without even being fully aware they were doing it...

Fifteen meters away, the woman twisted and arched her back and flailed arms as soft and supple as ribbons. "Go 'way!" she shouted, in an unidentifiably-accented Human-Standard. "Don't dang yeselves! Le' me alone!"

I switched on my harness, activating the pair of artificial whips that immediately rose from my shoulders and snaked above my head, undulating a continuous clumsy approximation of the Vlhani dance for Friend. Our delegation had borrowed the technology and much of the basic vocabulary from the Riirgaans; with its built-in vocabulary of fifty basic memes, it was sufficient to allow us clumsy four-limb humanoids to communicate with the Vlhani at the level of baby talk. Which by itself wouldn't be enough to get me and the girl out of the amphitheater alive...

...broadcasting Friend in all directions, I ran to her side, stopping only to evade a huge towering Marionette passing between us. When I got close enough to grab her, she didn't run, or fight me; she didn't even stop dancing. She just said, "Le' me go. Save yeself."

"No," I said. "I can't let you do this."

She twisted her arm in a way wholly inconsistent with human anatomy, and twisted out of my grip without any effort at all. "Ye cannae stop me," she said, flitting away in a pirouette graceful enough to hurt my eyes. I hadn't even succeeded in slowing her down. I turned around, shot a quick Why-the-Hell-Aren't-You-Helping-Me look at the impassive Hurrr'poth, then ran after her again.

I found her dancing beneath, and in perfect sync with, a Marionette five times her height; the eight whips it held aloft all undulating to the same unheard music as her own arms. It had anchored four of its whips in the ground, one on each side of her; turning itself into an enclosed set for her solo performance. The effect was sheltering, almost maternal, which didn't make me feel any safer scurrying past those whips to join her at the center. Again, she made no attempt to evade me, merely faced straight ahead, looking past me, past the Vlhani, and past the eyes of all the sentients who'd be watching the recordings of this scene for more years than any of us would be alive...past everything but the movements her dance required her to make next.

The harness piped a thousand contradictory translations in my ear. Danger. Life. Night. Cold. Hungry. Storm. Dance. I had no idea whether it translated her or the Vlhani.

"All right," I said, lamely. "You want to play it like this, go ahead. But tell me why. Give me some idea what you think you're trying to accomplish!"

Her head rotated a perfect 360 degrees on her long and slender neck, matching a similar revolution performed by the featureless Marionette head directly above us. Her eyes remained focused on mine as long as her face remained in view; then sought me out again, the instant her features came around the other side. Her expression was serious, but unintimidated. "I tryin' to waltz Vlhani. What are ye trying to accomplish? Kill yeself bein' a gilgamesh?"

"I'd rather not. I just want you to come with me before you get hurt."

"Ye're in a lot hotter stew than I be. Leastin' I ken the steps."

The Vlhani didn't stop dancing; they didn't slow down or speed up or in any visible way react to anything either Isadora or I said. If anything, they took no visible notice of us at all. But I was there, in the middle of it, and though my understanding of Vlhani sign language was as minimal as any human's, I did...feel...something, like a great communal gasp, coming from all sides. And I found myself suddenly, instinctively, thoroughly certain that every Vlahni in the entire amphitheater was following every nuance of every word that passed between this strange young woman and me. Even if they were not close enough to see or hear us, they were still being informed by those around them, who were in turn breathlessly passing on the news from those farther up the line. We were the center of their attention, the focus of their obsessions. And they wanted me to know it.

It wasn't telepathy, which would have shown up on our instruments. Whatever it was couldn't be measured, didn't translate to the neurecs, wasn't observed by any of the delegations. I personally think I was only making an impossible cognitive leap in the stress of the moment and for just one heartbeat understood Vlhani dance the way it was meant to be understood. Whatever the reason, I knew at once that this impasse was the single most important thing taking place in the entire valley...

Love, my harness squeaked. Safety. Dance. Food.

Sad.

She'd gone pale. "What are ye plannin' to do?"

What I did was either the bravest or most insane or most perceptive thing I've ever done.

Reversing our positions, placing my life in her hands, I simply turned my back on her and walked away...not toward Hurr'poth, the skimmer, and safety, but farther down the slope, into the densest concentrations of Vlhani. It was impossible to see very far into that maze of flailing black whips, but I approached a particularly thick part of the mob, where I might be lilled and sectioned in the time it took to draw a breath, as quickly as I could without actually breaking into a run. It was far easier than it should have been. All I had to do was disengage my terror from the muscles that drove my legs ....

She cried out: "Hey! HEY!"



Four Vlhani whips stabbed the earth half a meter in front of me. I flinched, but didn't stop walking. The Vlhani moved out of my way with another seven-league step. I stepped over the stab wounds in the earth, continued on my way...

...and found her circling around in front of me. "Just what the crot do ye ken ye're doin'?"

My first answer was obliterated by stammering: a sign of the terror I was trying so hard not to feel. I swallowed, concentrated on forming the words and speaking them understandably, and said: "Taking a walk. It seems like a nice day for it."

"Ye keep waltzin' this direction, ye won't last two minutes."

"Then you've got yourself a moral decision," I said, with a confidence that was a million kilometers away. "You can bring me back to my skimmer and hold my hand while I pilot us both back to safety. Or you can stay here and dance, and let me die with you. But the only way to avoid putting you on my conscience is to put myself on yours."

Danger. Dance. Danger.

Hot wind fanned my back, a razor-sharp whiff following in its wake: the kind of near-miss so close that you feel the pain anyway. I stiffened, held on to my last remaining shreds of self-control, and walked past her.

She muttered a curse in some language I didn't know and wrapped her arms around my chest. I mean that literally. Each arm went serpentine and encircled me twice before joining in a handclasp at my collarbone. They felt like human flesh; they were even warm and moist from exertion. But there was something other than muscle and bone at work beneath that too-flexible skin.

Her heart beat in sync with mine.

"I ought to let ye do it," she breathed. "I ought to let ye waltz in there and get torn to gobs."

I managed to turn my head enough to see her. "That's your decision."

"And ye really think ye ken what that's goin' to be, don't you? Ye think ye ken me well enough to guess how much I'm willin' to toss for some mungie catard tryin' to play martyr. Ye...think...ye...ken."

Sometimes, in crisis situations, you find yourself saying things so stupid they come back to haunt you. "I'm a good judge of people."

"Ye're a good judge of vacuum. Ye sit on that mungie viewing stand and ye coo at the spectacle and ye shed a brave tear for all the buggies tearin' each other to gobs for yet ball-tinglies. And ye wear those ridiculous things," indicating my artificial whips, "and ye write mungie treatises on how beautiful it all be and ye pretend ye're tryin' to understand it while all the while ye see nothing, ye

ken nothing, ye understand nothing. Ye don't even appreciate that they been goin' out of their way to avoid gobbing ye. They been concentratin' on ye instead of the show, usin' all the leeway their script gives them, steppin' a little faster here and a little slower there, just for ye, me mungie good judge of people. But if ye keep waltzin' this direction, they won't be able to watch out for ye without turning the whole show to crot, and they gob ye to spatters before yer next gasp!"

If she paused for breath at all during her speech, I didn't notice. There were no hesitations, no false starts, no fleeting "uh"s to indicate blind groping for the phrase she needed; just a swift, impassioned, angry torrent of words, exploding outward like wild animals desperate to be free. Her eyes brimmed with an anguished, pleading desperation, begging me to leave her with the death she had chosen: the look of a woman who knew that what she asked was bigger than any of us; and she desperately needed me to believe that.

Danger. Dance. Birth.

I almost gave in.

Instead, I spoke softly: "I'm not interested in the moral decisions of the Vlhani. I'm interested in yours. Are you coming with me or not?"

Her grip loosened enough for me to wonder if my bluff had been called. Then she shuddered, and the beginnings of a sob caught in her throat. "Crod it. CROD it! How the hell did ye ken?"

At the time, I didn't know her nearly well enough to understand what she meant.

But already, it was impossible not to hate myself, a little, for defying her.

4.

The trip back to the skimmer wasn't nearly as nerve-wracking as the trip out, with her providing us a serpentine but safe path directly through the heart of the Ballet. She told me when to speed up, when to slow down, when to proceed straight ahead, and when to take the long way around a spot that inevitably, seconds later, became a sea of furiously dancing Vlhani. I followed her directions not because I considered her infallible, but because she seemed to believe she knew what she was doing, and I was completely lost.

Before we even got near the spot where I'd left the skimmer, I heard the hum of its drive burning the air directly above us: Hurrr'poth, piloting it to a landing beside us. Which was itself not the least of the day's surprises, since the skimmer was set for a human gene pattern, and Hurrr'poth had no business being able to control it at all. Even as he lowered it to boarding altitude, I called, "What the hell --"

He waved. "Hurry up and get in. I don't know how much time we have to do this."

She trembled, not with fear, but with the utter heartbreak of a woman being

forced to give up that which she wanted above all else. Getting her this far had shattered her; forcing her onto the skimmer would carve wounds that might not ever heal. But at least she'd have a chance to survive them...something I couldn't say for her chances dancing among the Vlhani. I said, "You first."

She took Hurr'poth's outstretched hand, and climbed aboard. I followed her, taking a seat directly beside her in case she decided to try something. Hurr'poth took off, set the controls for the return flight, then turned around in his seat, so he could gently trill at us. "I hope you don't consider me impolite, Alex."

His manners were the very last thing on my mind. "For what?"

"For taking such liberties with your vehicle. But there were a number of very large Vlhani determined to pass through the spot where we'd landed -- and I thought it best for the purposes of our safe escape that I argue with your genetic reader instead. It saw reason a lot faster than I thought it would."

"Think nothing of it."

He turned toward the girl. "My name is Viliissin Hurr'poth. I am a third-level wave-form linguist for the Riirgaan delegation, and whatever else happens now, I must state my professional opinion that you are an astonishingly talented dancer for one of your species; you did not appear to be at all out of place among the Vlhani. It is a grand pleasure indeed to make your acquaintance. And you are --"

"Isadora," she said, sullenly. It was a good thing he'd asked; I'd been too preoccupied by matters of survival to get around to it myself.

"Is-a-do-ra," he repeated, slowly, testing each syllable, committing it to memory. "Interesting. I do not believe I've encountered that one before. Is there an adjunct to that name? A family or clan designation?"

She looked away: the gesture of a woman who no longer had the energy or the inclination to answer questions. "No. Just Isadora."

I saw the silence coming and ached for the wit to come up with the words that would break it. I wanted to come up with a great, stirring speech about the sanctity of life and the inevitability of second chances: about the foolishness of suicide in a universe filled with millions of choices. I wanted to tell her that I was glad that she'd chosen to come with me and live, for I'd sensed something special about her -- a strength of will and purity of purpose that would have rendered her special even without the enhancements that had made flexible whips of her limbs. I wanted to tell her that there were better places to apply those attributes than here, on this planet, in this amphitheater, among thousands of doomed Vlhani. I wanted to say all of that, and more, for I suddenly needed to understand her more than I'd ever needed to understand the creatures who danced below. But Hurr'poth was right: she'd been perfectly at home among the Vlhani, and was just a trembling, devastated young woman beside us.

Below us, the Vlhani writhed: a sea of gleaming black flesh and snapping black whips, their spherical heads all turning to watch us as we passed.

"They look like they're slowing down," noted Hurr'poth.

I couldn't tell. To me, their Ballet looked every bit as frenetic now as it had five minutes ago. It all seemed perfectly graceful, perfectly fascinating, and perfectly alien: an ocean of fluid, undifferentiated movement, diminished not at all by the deletion of one strange young woman with chevrons on both cheeks. Why not? They'd always danced without her; they could just go ahead and dance without her again. If anything they were probably relieved not to have her getting underfoot anymore...

I tried very hard to believe that, and failed. Hurr'poth knew more about their dance than I. Not, it seemed, as much as Isadora--he wouldn't have been able to stride into the middle of the Ballet and expect to keep his skin intact -- but enough to read the essence of what he saw. If he said they were slowing down, they were slowing down.

And it could only be because I'd taken away Isadora.

They were as devastated as she was.

Why?

5.

We landed the skimmer in the open field behind the viewing stand. Dhiju led a small mob of humans and aliens from their seats to meet us. They all wanted to know who Isadora was, where she'd come from, and why she was here; I don't honestly think anybody actually stayed behind to watch the Ballet. They crowded around us so densely that we didn't even attempt to leave the skimmer: an ironic, unintended parody of the dance we'd all come here to witness.

Dhiju's face was flushed and perspiring heavily -- a condition owing as much to his intoxication as his concern -- but he retained enough self-control to speak with me first. "Astonishing work, Alex. I'll see to it that you get some time taken off your contract for this."

"Thank you, sir."

He next directed his attention to Hurr'poth. "And you too, sir -- you didn't have to risk yourself for one of ours, but you did anyway, and I want to express my thanks for that."

Hurr'poth bowed slightly, a gesture that surprised me a little, since I would have expected much more than that from a sentient who so prized the sound of his own voice. Maybe he was too impatient for the part that we all knew would have to come next: Dhiju as disciplinarian. And Dhiju complied, with the fiercest, angriest, most forbidding expression he knew how to muster: "And as for you, young lady: do you have any idea just how many laws you've broken? Just what the

hell was going through your mind, anyway? Did you really wake up this morning and think it would be a good day for being torn to pieces? Is that what you wanted out of your afternoon today?"

Isadora stared at him. "The buggies invited me."

"To what? Die? Are you really that blind?"

Whereupon Hurr'poth returned to form: "Forgive me, Mr. Dhiju, but I don't believe you've thought this out adequately."

Dhiju didn't like the interruption, but protocol forced him to be polite. "Why not? What mistake am I making?"

"I daresay it should be obvious. What do we know about this young lady so far? She's obviously had herself altered to approximate Vlhani movement; she's evidently learned more about their dance than either your people or mine have ever been able to learn; she's made her way here from wherever it was she started, apparently without any of your people finding out about her; and she's snuck herself into what may be the most thoroughly studied native ritual in recorded history, without hundreds of observers from seven separate confederacies spotting her until she was in the middle of it. No, Mr. Dhiju, whatever else you might say about her wisdom in trying to join the Vlhani Ballet, I don't think you can fairly accuse her of coming here on a foolish spur-of-the-moment whim. What she's done would have required many years of conscious preparation, a fair amount of cooperation from people with the resources to give her these enhancements, and a degree of personal dedication that I can only characterize as an obsession."

Dhiju digested that for so long that I thought for a moment the hallucinogens had prevented him from understanding it at all. Then he nodded, regarded Isadora with a new expression that was closer to pity, and met my eyes. He didn't have to actually insult me by giving the orders.

Find out.

I nodded. He turned and strode off, not in the direction of the viewing stand, but toward his own skimmer, which was parked with the rest of the embassy vehicles. A half-dozen indentures, including Rory and Kathy and Oskar, scurried along behind him, knowing that they'd be required for the investigation to follow.

I looked at Isadora. "You can save us all a lot of trouble by just telling us everything we need to know now."

She glared at me insolently, the dark alien fires burning behind her eyes: still unwilling to forgive me for saving her life, or herself for saving mine. "Will it get me back to the show?"

"No. I'm sorry. I can't imagine Dhiju ever allowing that."

Her look was as clear as Dhiju's: Then go ahead. Find out what you can. But I'm not going to make things easier for you.

Fair enough. If she could learn to understand the Vlhani, then I could sure learn to understand her. I turned to Hurr'poth: "Are you coming along?"

He considered it, then bobbed his head no. "Thank you, Alex, but no. I think I can be of better use conducting my own investigation using other avenues. I will, however, be in touch as soon as I have anything relevant to contribute."

"See you, you old criminal," I told him.

It was a personal experiment, to see how he'd react to a joke, and he made me proud: "See you soon...pornographer."

6.

It may have been the only time in the history of the human presence on Vlhani that the delegation was actually expected to deal with a Major Diplomatic Incident. Oh, we'd had minor crises over the years (uneventful rescue missions to pick up linguists and anthropologists who'd gotten themselves stranded in the field, tiffs and disagreements with the representatives of the other delegations), but never anything of life-and-death import; never anything designed to test us as representatives of the Confederacy, never a dozen separate mysteries all wrapped up in the form of one close-mouthed, steadfastly silent young woman.

And so we worked through the night, accomplishing absolutely nothing.

We took DNA samples, voice-prints, and retinal scans, sending them via hynet to the databases of a thousand planets; nobody admitted to having any idea who she was. We went through our library for record of human cultures with ritual facial tattooing. We found several, but none still extant that would have marked a young woman with chevrons on both cheeks. We seized on the slang phrases she'd used, hoping they'd lead us back to a world where they happened to be in current usage, and found nothing -- though that meant little, since language is fluid and slang can go in and out of style at weekly intervals.

She silently cooperated with a medical examination which elaborated upon that which we already knew: that her entire skeleton, most of her musculature, and much of her skin had been replaced by enhanced substitutes. Her arms alone were minor miracles of engineering, with over ten thousand flexible joints in just the distance between shoulder and wrist. Her nervous system was also only partially her own, which made sense, since the human brain isn't set up to work a limb that bends in that many places. She had a complex system of micro-controllers up and down her arms, to translate the nerve impulses on their way to and from the brain. She just had to decide the moves she wanted to make; the micro-controllers let her limbs know how to go about making them. There were also special chemical filters in her lungs, to maximize the efficiency with which she processed oxygen, several major improvements made to her internal connective tissue, and uncounted other changes, only some of which made

immediate sense.

There weren't many human agencies capable of this kind of work, and most of them operated at the level of governments and major corporations. We contacted just about all of those, from Transtellar Securities to the Bettelhine Munitions Corporation; they all denied any knowledge of her. Of course, they could have been lying, since some of her enhancements were illegal; but then they operated in the realm of profit, and there was no possible profit in turning a young woman into a sort of quasi-Vlhani, geared only toward her own self-destruction.

That left nonhuman agencies, some of which could be expected to harbor motives that made no human sense. But we couldn't contact many of them by hytex, and the few we could were a waste of time, since they had a relaxed attitude toward the truth anyway. Kathy Ng, who was in charge of that aspect of the investigation, got fed up enough to grouse, "How am I supposed to know who's telling the truth? None of them have ever been consistent liars!" Everybody sympathized; nobody had any better suggestions.

As for me, I spent four hours at the hytex poring through the passenger manifests of civilian vessels passing anywhere within a twenty light-year distance of Vlhan, finding nobody fitting her general description who couldn't be accounted for. Then I stole a few minutes to check on Isadora, who we'd locked up in our biological containment chamber. It was the closest thing we had to a prison facility, though we'd never expected to use it that way. Hai Dhiju sat in the observation room, glaring at the sullen-faced Isadora through the one-way screen. Oskar Levine sat beside him, alternately gaping at Isadora and feeding Dhiju's ego. When Dhiju noticed me, something flared in his bloodshot, heavy-lidded eyes: something that could have been merely the footprint of the hallucinogens still being flushed from his system, or could have been something worse, like despair. Either way, he didn't yell at me to go back to work, but instead gestured for me to sit down beside him.

I did. And for a long time neither of us said anything, preferring to watch Isadora. She was exercising (though performing was more like it; since even though the room on her side of the shield was just four soft featureless walls, she had to know that there would be observers lurking behind one of them). Her form of exercise involved testing the flexibility of her limbs, turning them into spirals, arcs, and jagged lightning-shapes; a thousand changes each instant. It was several different species of beautiful -- from its impossible inhuman grace, to the sheer passion that informed every move.

The translation device squeaked out a word every thirty seconds or so. Death. Vlhani. World. Sad. Dance. Food. Life. Sad.

Human.

None of it meant anything to me. But my eyes burned, just looking at her. I wanted to look at her forever.

Dhiju took a hit of a blue liquid in a crystalline cylinder. "Anything?"

It took me several seconds to realize he'd spoken to me. "No, sir. I don't think she left a trail for us to find."

Cold.

"It makes no sense," he said, with a frustration that must have burned him to the marrow. "Everything leaves a trail. In less than one day I could find out what you had for breakfast the day you turned five, check your psych profile and find out which year of your adolescence featured the most vivid erotic dreams; get a full folio on the past fifteen generations of your family and still have time to get a full list of the dangerous recessive genes carried by the second cousins of all the children you went to school with. But everybody's drawing a blank with her. I wouldn't be surprised to find out she was some kind of mutant Vlhani."

"It would certainly make her a lot easier to deal with," said Oskar. "Just send her back to the Ballet, and let nature take its course."

I would have snapped at the bastard had Dhiju not beaten me to it. "Not an option."

"Then ship her off-planet," Oskar shrugged. "Or keep her in detention until the Ballet's over."

"I can't. It's become bigger than her." Dhiju looked at me. "In case you haven't heard, the Ballet's off."

I felt no surprise. "They stopped, then?"

"Cold. We weren't really sure until about an hour ago -- it took them that long to wind down -- but then they just planted their center whips in the dirt and began to wait. They've already sent a message through the Riirgaans that they need her back in order to continue. I've been fending off messages from all the other delegations saying I ought to let her, as the Vlhani have jurisdiction here."

I thought of our superiors back home, who'd no doubt want the Vlhani appeased to preserve future relations. "That kind of pressure's only going to get worse."

He emitted a sound midway between a sob and a laugh. "I don't care how bad it gets. I have a serious problem with suicide. I think anybody foolish enough to choose it as an option is by definition not competent to be trusted with the decision."

Storm. World.

I thought of all the Vlhani who made that decision every year -- who came, as honored pilgrims, to the place where they were destined to dance until their hearts burst. We'd always found a terrible kind of beauty in that ritual...but we'd never thought of them as incompetent, or mad, or too foolish to be trusted with the choice. Was that only because we considered them nothing more than



giant spiders, not worth saving?

Fire. Love. Danger.

Disturbed, I said, "I was with her, sir. She was one of the most competent people I've ever met."

Dance.

"Not on that issue. It's still suicide. And I don't believe in it and I'm not going to let her do it."

I faced the shield, and watched Isadora. She was running in circles now, so swiftly that she blurred. When she suddenly stopped, placed a palm against one wall, and hung her head, I couldn't believe it was fatigue. She wasn't sweating or breathing heavily; she'd just gotten to the point where it made Marionette sense to stop. After a moment, I said, "Has anybody actually tried talking to her directly?"

"That's all I've been doing. I had people in there asking questions until their breath gave out. It's no good. She just keeps telling us to, uh, crod ourselves."

World. Dance.

"With all due respect, sir, interrogating her is one thing. Talking to her is another."

Dhiju came close to reprimanding me, but thought better of it. "Might as well. You're the only one here who's ever demonstrated the slightest clue of how to deal with her. Go ahead."

So I went in.

The containment chamber was equipped with a one-way field, permeable as air from one side but hard as anything in existence on the other. It was invaluable for imprisoning anything too dangerous to be allowed out, which up until now had meant bacteria and small predators. The controls for reversing the polarity were outside the chamber, on a platform within easy reach of Oskar and Dhiju. The second I passed through the silvery sheen at the doorway, I was, effectively, as much a prisoner as she was. But it didn't feel that way; at the moment, I didn't want to be anywhere else but with her.

She had her back to me, but she knew who I was even as I entered; I could tell that just by the special way she froze at the sound of my step. She turned, saw me, and with a resignation that hurt more than any words could, leaned back against the opposite wall.

I did not go to her. Instead, I found a nice neutral spot on the wall and faced her from across the width of the chamber. "Hello."

Her expression would have been strictly neutral were it not for the anger behind those dark, penetrating eyes. Facing those eyes was like being opened up and examined, piece by piece. It should have been unsettling; against my will, I found I liked it.

"I've got to hand it to you," I said, conversationally. "The Vlhani are on strike, the other delegations are going crazy, nobody here has the slightest clue who you are, and I'm supposed to come in here and get the information that everybody else can't. Who you are. Where you come from, where you got those augmentations, and how you got here."

Impatience. Establishing that she'd already been through this -- that she hadn't answered the questions before and wouldn't be answering them now. Wondering just what I thought I was accomplishing by throwing good effort after bad.

And then I folded my arms and said, "The thing is, I really don't care about any of that. Wherever you come from, it's just a place. How you got here is just transportation. And as for who put in those augmentations? That's just a brand name. None of that makes any difference to me at all."

She rolled her eyes incredulously. "What does?"

"Why."

"In twenty-five words or less?"

"Counting those? Sure. You have nineteen left."

She blinked several times, back-counting, then flashed an appreciative smile. "Only if ye ken twenty-five as two words instead of one. Ye shouldn't."

"All right. But that still brings you down to...uh..."

"Seven," she said, simply. And then: "I'm madly in love with their show."

Damned if she hadn't done it, on the dot. We grinned at each other--both of us understanding that she hadn't told me anything I couldn't have guessed already, but enjoying the little game anyway. I said: "So am I. So's everybody on Vlhani, and half the known universe. That doesn't explain how you came to understand it so well...and why you're so determined to risk your life dancing among them."

She waggled a finger at me. "Uh-uh, boyo. It's yet turn. Twenty-five words or less, how can ye say ye love the Show when ye don't ken it one bit?"

It didn't come off as rude, the way she asked it -- it was a sincere question, expressing sincere bafflement. I measured my response very carefully, needing to both be truthful and match the precision of her answer. "I suppose...that if I only loved things I understood perfectly, I'd be living a pretty loveless existence. Sometimes, love is just...needing to understand."

"That's not love, boyo. That's just curiosity. Give yerself an extension and

riddle me this: What do ye feel when ye watch their show? Do you ken their heart? Their creativity? Their need to do this, even at the edge of dyin'?"

"Maybe," I said. "Some of it."

"And how do ye ken ye're not croddin' the whole thing to bloody gobs? How do ye ken ye're not seeing tears when the buggies mean laughs? Or that it's really a big show and not a mungie prayer?"

It was hard to keep my voice level. "Is that what you're saying, Isadora? That it's not an art form?"

She shook her head sadly, and dared me with eyes like miniature starscapes. There was pain, there: entire lifetimes of pain. But there was arrogance, too: the kind that comes from being able to understand what so many others cannot. And both were tempered by the distant, but genuine hope that maybe I'd get it after all.

After a moment, I said, "All right. How about I tell you what we think we know, and you tell me how and where we're sadly mistaken?"

She shrugged. "Ye're free to toss."

"All right. The Marionette dance isn't a conventional symbolic language, like speech, but a holographic imaging system, like whalesong. The waveforms rippling up those whips aren't transmitting words or concepts, but detailed three-dimensional images. They must be tremendously sophisticated pictures, too, since the amount of information being passed back and forth is huge. And if a Marionette can paint a detailed map of the immediate environment in about ten seconds of strenuous dance, then the Ballet may have enough detail for a complete scale model of this solar system. The problem is, we haven't been able to translate more than a few simple movements -- and even then we think they're talking down to us."

Isadora nodded. "Ye're right. That they be."

I had made that part up. Excited now, certain she had the key that the rest of us had missed, I leaned forward and said, "But they weren't talking down to you, were you? They respected you. They made a place for you. How is that? Who are you to them?"

"Someone who kens them."

"And how is it you understand the dance when we can't?"

"Because I ken it's a show, not a mungie code." When I reacted to that with a mere uncomprehending blink, she just shook her head tiredly, appeared to reconsider silence as an option, and said: "Peer this. There's a species out in space, known by a name I can't make me lips say. They're pitifully boring folks...born filing-systems, really...but they're totally tingled to crot by the idea of the human pun. The idea of ringin' two chimes with one phrase seems as

sparkledusty to them as the buggie dance be to us. And their greatest brains been wastin' years of sweat just tryin' to ken. Ye can buy the whole libraries they've penned about it."

I seemed to recall reading or hearing about the race in question, at some point in the distant past. "So?"

"So they crod up the whole sorry mess. They don't ken humor and they don't ken that a pun's supposed to be funny. They think it's zen-time instead...a, how-ye-put-it, ironic human commentary on the interconnectedness of all things. Once upon a time, I peered a pair of the dingheads pickin' apart a old terran comedy about professional athletes with wack names -- names that were questions like Who and What and Why. It didn't seem all that laugh-time, to me, but I could ken it was supposed to be silly -- and they didn't. I vow to ye, Alex, it was like peering a couple of mathematicians dustin' up over an equation. Like ye folks, they peered the mechanism, and missed the context."

Dammit, she did know something. I pushed myself off the wall, and went to her. "So tell me the context. You don't have to give me all of it, if you don't want to, but something. A clue."

And she smiled at me. Smiled, with eyes that knew far more than I ever would. "Will it get me back in the show?"

Against my will, I glanced at the featureless wall that concealed the outer lab; I didn't need to be able to see through it to know what Ambassador Dhiju was doing on the other side. He was leaning forward in his seat, resting his chin on a cradle of locked hands, his eyes narrowing as he waited to see if I'd make any promises he couldn't allow me to keep. He was probably silently urging me to go ahead; like all career diplomats, he'd spent a lifetime sculpting the truth into the shapes that best suited the needs of the moment, and would see nothing wrong with doing the same now. But he hadn't been with her in the amphitheater, as I'd been; he hadn't bartered his life for hers, and been the beneficiary of the sacrifice she made in return; he couldn't know that it would have been unthinkable for me to even attempt to lie to her. So I came as close to being honest with her as I dared. I said nothing.

She understood, of course. It was inevitable that she would. And though she must have known the answer even before asking the question, it still hit her just as hard; she lowered her face, and looked away, unwilling to let me see what was in her eyes. "Then the deal's bloody gobbed. I don't speak one crot more 'less I get back to the show."

"But --"

"That's final."

After a moment, I understood that it was. It was all she cared about, all she had to negotiate with. Any attempt to pretend otherwise would be an insult. And so I nodded, and went to the door, waiting for Oskar to reverse the field so I could leave.

Except that I was wrong. It wasn't final, after all; there was still business between us, still something she couldn't say goodbye to me without saying.

She said: "Alex?"

I looked at her. "What?"

She didn't meet my eyes: just stared at her feet, as if peering past the floor and past the ground to face a scene now half a day in our past. "Were ye just blowin' dust, back at the show? Were ye...really goin' to waltz with the buggies and me...if I'd not ridden that skimmer out with ye?"

"Absolutely. I wasn't about to leave there without you."

She nodded to herself, as if confirming the answer to a question that nobody had bothered to ask out loud...then shook her head, flashed a dazzling smile, and, in perfectly proper Human-standard, said: "Then you deserve this much. The Ballet doesn't end, each year, just because the last dancer dies. Think...the persistence of vision."

7.

We didn't find out about it until the postmortems, but first blood was shed on a swampy peninsula over a thousand kilometers from our embassy: a place equally inhospitable to both Vlhani and Men, with terrain soft enough to swallow wanderers of either race.

Dr. Kevin McDaniel wasn't officially attached to the embassy. In truth, he was an exobotanist, on Vlhani as part of an unrelated commercial project having something to do with a certain smelly reed native to the swamps. It may have been important work, but to the rest of us it was nowhere near as compelling as the mysteries of the Vlhani, which interested him not at all. Usually, we only remembered he was on-planet at all because he was a clumsy oaf, and one of us always had to keep him company lest some absentminded misstep leave him drowning in the ooze with nobody to pull him out. It was an annoying detail that everybody lower than Dhiuu had pulled at least once. We made jokes about it.

Today, McDaniel's babysitter was a plump young kinetic pattern analyst by the name of Li-Hsin Chang, who had entered her servitude one year behind me. Li-Hsin had bitterly complained about the duty rotation that had obliged her, and not anybody else, to miss the spectacle of the Ballet in favor of a week spent trudging through muck in the company of the single most boring sentient on the planet. And the strange developments at the amphitheater only made matters worse: even as she sat in the skimmer hovering five meters up and watched McDaniel perform his usual arcane measurements among the reeds, she was deeply plugged into the hynet, absorbing all the latest bulletins about me and Isadora and the Vlhani crisis.

Under the circumstances, Li-Hsin can be forgiven for failing to spot the Vlhani until it was almost upon him.

Vlhani can weigh up to a thousand kilos, but they have a controlled way of running that amounts to keeping most of that weight in the air, and even at full speed they can make significantly less sound than a running man. It's not deliberate stealth, but tremendous inherent grace. And while even they're not quite as quiet splashing through muddy swampland as they are galloping over dry, densely packed earth, they still never stumble, never make a misstep, never release one decibel of sound that they don't absolutely have to. This one's approach was drowned out until the very last minute by the hum of the skimmer's drive and the clumsy splashing-about of Dr. McDaniel. When Li-Hsin heard a particularly violent splash, she peered over the railing, saw that McDaniel had wandered only a few meters from where he was supposed to be, then heard another, louder, splash from the north.

It was a ten-whip mature Vlhani approaching at top speed. It ran the way Vlhani always run when they push themselves to their limits -- spinning its whips like the spokes of a wheel, with the shiny black head at the center. It ran so fast that the whips blurred together in great gray streaks. It ran so fast that it seemed to be flying. And it was coming their way.

Li-Hsin can also be forgiven for not immediately realizing that it was hostile. For one thing, it wasn't wholly unheard-of for a huge adult Vlhani to be running around in the middle of the swamp. It was unusual, but they did sometimes wander far from their usual habitat. She'd seen a mating pair just the other day. For another thing, Vlhani simply weren't hostile. They may have been too dangerous to approach during their Ballet, but that was a function of the Ballet, not of the Vlhani. In their everyday existence, they were extraordinarily gentle; Li-Hsin had walked among them without protection for two years, and had developed an easy familiarity with those she saw most frequently. She even considered one or two of them friends -- at least, as much as she could when the best our harnesses could do was pipe the meme Friend back and forth. That was enough for her. As it was for me. And the rest of us.

So even when she saw that Dr. McDaniel was directly in its path, it still didn't occur to her that it might be deliberately attacking him. She did nothing more drastic than just flip on the amps and cry out: "Mac! Get out of the way!"

McDaniel, who'd been too absorbed in his measurements to see or hear the big Vlhani's approach, glanced up at the skimmer, annoyance creasing his pale, sweaty features. He spotted the Vlhani a second later, stood there dumbfounded, wholly unwilling to believe that this was actually happening to him, then saw that he was about to be run over and leaped to one side, belly-flopping in the middle of a pool of stagnant water. He sank beneath the surface and did not come up for air. Vlhani whips sank deep into the ooze where he had been, with a force that would have pulped him. The Vlhani didn't even slow down. It was ten meters past him before Li-Hsin even had time to yell, "MAC!"

She grabbed the controls and swooped low over the water where McDaniel had disappeared. He came to the surface choking and spitting, but waving that he was all right. She was about to descend further to pick him up when he spotted the Vlhani, fifty meters away and circling around for another go. Unlike Li-Hsin, he

was totally ignorant about the Vlhani, and therefore had no preconceptions to shed; he knew immediately that the attack was real, and that the Vlhan would be on him again long before Li-Hsin managed to pick him up. He frantically waved her off: "Go away! It's circling back!"

Li-Hsin looked up, and saw that McDaniel was right. If she still had any doubts about its intentions, the speed of its approach would have banished them: were this an accident, it would have slowed down and returned with exaggerated caution, hanging its head at the angle that we'd all come to recognize as mimed remorse. She glanced at McDaniel and shouted: "STAY DOWN!"

McDaniel yelled back: "DON'T--" But it was too late for Li-Hsin to hear him. In one smooth movement, she'd turned the skimmer around, aimed it toward the approaching Vlhani, and instructed it to accelerate. She did this without thinking, and without hesitation, seized by the kind of desperate inventiveness that takes over only when there are no other options available. A direct collision with a skimmer, moving at those speeds, would splatter even the largest Marionette; Li-Hsin had to know that such a crash would certainly kill her too. She probably hoped it would be intimidated enough to duck and run.

Except that it didn't happen. Just before the moment of collision, the Marionette leaped, and came down on top of the skimmer. Two of its whips were broken at the moment of impact: another one was cleanly amputated by the lift coils. The rest cushioned its landing. The neurec connections, which had so clearly captured all of Li-Hsin's actions and sensations up until now, now documented her helpless astonishment as she suddenly found herself surrounded by a cage of undulating whips. The Marionette's head loomed close behind her for an instant, then disappeared out of frame. A whip slashed across the frame, blurred, and then disappeared, leaving her without a right arm.

The horizon behind them spun like a dial.

Then the skimmer crash-landed into the swamp, and both Li-Hsin and the Marionette were decapitated instantly.

It took McDaniel four hours to dig out the hytex and call for help. By then, those of us still left alive were way too busy to hear him...

8.

The only question anybody really managed to answer before everything fell to pieces was the precise manner of Isadora's secret arrival on Vlhan. It was Rory Metcalf who made the connection with a supply transport that, about eight months ago, had entered Vlhan's atmosphere half a world away from its assigned landing position, come within a hair's breadth of a landing before seeming to realize that it was in the wrong place, then risen back to 50,000 meters to travel the rest of the way. This might have seemed suspicious at the time, but the bickering pilots had struck everybody as just a couple of incompetents with no real talent for the work. When Rory looked up their courier license, she found that they'd subsequently been arrested on several charges of carrying unregistered passengers. It was a mildly impressive piece of deduction, which

probably solved one minor part of the mystery, but still explained absolutely nothing.

And even if we could put together the parts that mattered, we were running out of time.

We'd placed our embassy on an isolated plateau that was both higher and colder than the Vlhani found comfortable -- a location we'd chosen not out of fear for our own safety, but common courtesy and respect for their privacy. After all, we could reach any place on their planet within three hours; we could walk among the Vlhani as frequently as they cared to let us, without obtrusively cluttering up any land they were already using. So, like the Riirgaans and the K'cenhowten and the Cid and all the other embassies, we'd placed our cluster of buildings far outside their normal migration patterns, and normally didn't entertain Vlhani guests more than once or twice a year. Usually, we could stand outside the collection of prefabricated buildings that made up our compound, look down upon the rolling gray hills that surrounded us, and feel completely alone, as if we were the only sentients on the entire planet.

But not today. Today, when a few of us took a break to face the Vlhani sunset, we found a landscape dotted with thousands of spiders. The ones we could see were all approaching from the west; the other embassies reported many more approaching us from every direction, but the herds in the west had been closer, and were first to show up. They didn't approach in formation, like an army, but in randomly spaced groups of one or two or three, like strangers all heading the same way by coincidence. They moved so quickly that every time they crested the top of a hill their momentum sent them flying in great coltish leaps. The sun behind them turned their elongated shadows into surrealistic tangles. The few that had reached the base of the plateau seemed content to mill about there, looking up at us, their trademark flailing whips now reminding me of nothing so much as fists shaken in anger.

Kathy Ng intoned, "The natives are restless."

She gave it the special emphasis she used whenever she lifted a quote from the archaic adventure fiction she enjoyed so much; I'd never heard it before. "Do you think we're going to have to fight them?"

"They certainly look like they're trying to give us the impression, don't they?" She bit her lower lip hard enough to turn it white. "I just hope it's just their ancestral scare-the-shit-out-of-the-bipeds dance, or something."

"Ancestral or not, it's working."

Our chief exopsychologist, Dr. Simmons, tasked paternally. "You're being ethnocentric, people. We can't say they're acting hostile just because, to our eyes, it happens to look that way. Especially since, in all the years we've been here, nobody's ever seen the Vlhani react to any conflict in an aggressive or violent fashion."

"What about the Ballet?"



"That's violent, all right...but it's not conflict. It's a highly stylized, intricately planned annual ritual, choreographed down to the very last step. Which means that it's about as relevant to typical Vlhani behavior as your birthday party is to the remaining four-hundred-and-ninety-nine days of the year."

"Which would make me feel a lot better," said Rory Metcalf, "if not for one thing."

"What's that?"

"This Ballet hasn't been typical at all."

That started everybody arguing at once. I missed most of what got said because Oskar Levine chose that moment to scurry out of the main building and summon me to Dhiju's quarters. I hesitated just long enough to spare one more look at the army of Marionettes gathering down below, contemplate how long we'd be able to hold them off if we had to, and realize that if it came to that, we wouldn't even be able to slow them down. We were a peaceful embassy on a peaceful world; we had nothing to fight them with beyond a few inadequate hand-weapons. We might as well start stockpiling sticks and stones...and if it came to that, we were all dead.

I shuddered and went to see Dhiju.

A funny thing. Desks, as practical pieces of office furniture, have been obsolete for over one thousand years. They were helpful enough when most work was done on paper, or on computer screens that needed to be supported at approximately eye-level...but since none of that's true anymore, desks no longer serve functions important enough to merit all the space they take up. They're still used only because they're such effective psychological tools. There's something about the distancing effect of that great smooth expanse that inherently magnifies the authority figure seated on the other side. And men like Dhiju know it. When I ran into his office, he was in position behind his, glowering as if from Olympus.

He gestured at the hytex projection floating in the air beside his desk. There were four main images fighting for supremacy there: a panoramic view of the amphitheater, where the participants in the Vlhani Ballet still stood motionless, patiently waiting for the show to go on; another view of the Vlhani gathering at the base of our plateau; the surveillance image of Isadora, serenely doing multijointed leg lifts in the Isolation Lab; and finally, a head shot of Hurr'poth, looking as grave as his inexpressive Riirgaani face ever allowed him. I was unsure which image I was supposed to look at until Hurr'poth swelled to fill my entire field of vision. The giant head turned to face me. "Alex," he said. "The pornographer."

"Hurr'poth," I said. "The criminal."

He trilled, but it struck me as the Riirgaani equivalent of forced laughter: it

went on a little too long and failed to convey any amusement at all. "I thank you for coming Alex. This is a very important communication, and since you were with Isadora in the Ballet, I felt that you might possess the keen perspective that your Ambassador Dhiju seems to lack. -- Have I disturbed you in any way?"

I glanced at Dhiju, saw only anger, and remained mystified. "Uh...no. How can I help you?"

"You can listen," said Hurr'poth. "I was telling your Ambassador, here, that I speak not only as the chosen interpreter of the Vlhani people, but as the elected representatives of all the other embassies stationed on Vlhani. The Vlhani have spent the past several hours communicating their wishes on this matter, and we are at their request lodging an official protest against your embassy's continuing interference with the indigenous culture of this planet."

Dhiju made an appalled noise. "This is like something out of Kafka."

"I am unfamiliar with that term, ambassador, but the Vlhani are trying to be fair about this. They understand that, armed with insufficient information, you and Alex acted to preserve the life of a fellow member of your species. They know that this was only natural, under the circumstances, and they bear you no ill will for doing what seemed to make sense at the time. Indeed, they respect you for it. But they also believe that they've shown you they consider the woman Isadora an integral part of this year's Ballet...and that, by irresponsibly prohibiting her return to the amphitheater, you are inflicting irrevocable damage upon the most sacred ritual of their entire culture. They demand that you surrender her at once, so the Ballet can continue."

"Will she die in the Ballet, like they do?"

"Of course," said Hurr'poth.

"Then the answer's No," said Dhiju.

"You are interfering with a tradition that has lasted hundreds of generations."

"I am deeply sorry about that, Mr. Hurr'poth. But Isadora's not a member of Vlhani tradition. She's a human being, and as such part of a tradition that abhors suicide. Nobody authorized her presence here, and I'm not about to authorize her participation in any ceremony that ends with her death. The Vlhani will just have to understand that."

Then Hurr'poth did trill: but it was a grim, bitter form of amusement...one I never would have expected from a sentient I'd imagined a harmless eccentric. "Sir: you are an idiot."

Dhiju's natural impulse to show anger crashed head-on with his professional duty to be totally courteous to all the other members of every alien delegation at all times. "Pray tell. Why?"

"Her presence here is not up to you to authorize. It is up to the Vlhani. It is

their law and their judgment that applies on this world, and they have clearly recognized her and welcomed her and honored her with an integral position in their Ballet. When you behave as if you are the sole arbiter of who is and who is not supposed to be here, you demonstrate that you understand even less about this species than you understand about your own -- which, if you still think the young lady doesn't know what she's doing, is saying a lot. If you persist in this course of action, you will only get the Vlhani more angry at you than they already are. And everything that happens from this moment on will be on your head."

I broke protocol by interrupting: "Are you saying they'll attack?"

Hurr'poth faced me directly. "Yes."

We had no way of knowing that the first skirmish had already taken place; neither Dhiju or I even happened to think of Kevin McDaniel or Li-Hsin Chang who were half a world away, and well outside the usual Vlhani habitat. After a moment, Dhiju just said, "Understood. I'll be back in touch with you as soon as I confer with my people."

"You are making a terrible mistake! The Vlhani --"

Dhiju thumbed a pad beside him. The hytex projection folded up, shrank into a mote of blackness the size of a pea, then faded. Dhiju stuck out his lower lip, made a "t-t-t-t" sound from somewhere deep in his throat, and aside from that, remained in place, apparently finding volumes of meaning in the way his hands sat on the smooth desk before him. Eventually, he just said, "Susan." And a new hytex projection took the place of the one he'd taken away: this one the static image of a girl in her early teens. She was fresh-faced, but wan, and she smiled in the patently artificial way that's been common to all portraits, captured by any recording media, since the beginning of time.

"My daughter," he said.

I had no idea what to say. So I lied. "She's pretty."

"You think so? -- The truth is, I barely even saw her after she turned nine. Her mother and I became just too much of a bad mistake together, and I found it easier to stay away, on one off-world assignment after another. I got letters and recordings, but saw her in person maybe for a couple of months out of every year. And then, one day, when she was fifteen, a friend at a party introduced her to the latest fashionable import from off-world: a sort of...vibrating jewel...capable of directly stimulating the pleasure centers of the brain. ... "He shuddered. "It took six months, Alex. Six months of killing herself a little bit more every day. Six months I didn't even get to hear about until I was rotated home and found her gone."

He sat there, thinking about that a while, letting Susan's enlarged, joylessly smiling face accuse him at length.

And then he said: "Every once in a while, some poor bastard gets saddled with

the kind of impossible decision that destroys his career and makes his name a curse for the next hundred years. -- Go tell the others we're evacuating. Deadline one hour. After that we're taking the little gatecrasher with us and leaving everything we haven't packed behind. Then we'll take the transports into orbit and wait there until we can summon a ride home."

My heart pounding past the threshold of pain, I stepped toward him, faced his gray, deceptively watery eyes, and choked out what he already knew: "They'll never let us back. You'll be throwing away all our relations with the Vlhani, and everybody at home will blame you. You know that."

"Yes. I do." He looked past me, past the hytex projection, past the wall, and past the entire worsening crisis, and said: "But at least this time I'll be here to save her."

9.

The Vlhani were a black horde, covering the hills like flies; and though there were far, far more of them than anybody had ever documented in one place before, it was still impossible to look at them without sensing deliberate choreography at work. Even when threatening war, everything they did was still a dance, albeit a different kind of dance, with nothing graceful or balletic about it. This time, it was more like a march of death, their normally fluid gait reduced to something joyless and rigid that seemed as forced and unnatural coming from them as a goose-step coming from Man. They were packed most densely in the rocky terrain at the foot of our plateau, more crowded by far than anything I'd seen in the amphitheater, but never advancing beyond the rocks, even when the competition for space flattened them like creatures being crushed against an invisible wall. If that wall crumbled, the wave of Vlhani swarming up the slope would be upon us in seconds.

There weren't many people visible; everybody was too busy performing the frantic business of a last-minute evacuation. That mostly meant clearing out the food stores, the infirmary, the records, and the tool lab; but everybody was human enough to spend a few precious seconds in their own quarters sweeping them clear of anything so personal we couldn't bear to leave it behind. There wasn't much of that, though; indentured diplomats don't get much space for clutter. All I had was a pocket hytex and a length of severed Vlhani whip I'd salvaged from the amphitheater after last year's Ballet; I irradiated it regularly to discourage decomposition, but time had taken its toll anyway and the chitin that had once been harder than steel was now soft and spongy and cracked at the edges. Only a few days ago, an unworthy part of me had looked forward to the mass carnage at the Ballet so I could later search the amphitheater for a new coil to seal in permaglass. I remembered that, shuddered, and left the old one untouched on the shelf beside my bed. It was Vlhani, and if we were truly leaving, it belonged to Vlhani.

With twenty minutes to go, it fell to me, as the closest thing we had to an expert on the Isadora problem, to figure out a way to get her onto a transport safely. After all, her enhancements made her physically more than a match for any of us; if she decided to resist, she could easily be as formidable as a

Vlhani. Drugs were out, since so much of her was artificial that nobody had any idea how to even begin to figure out what dosages would be safe or even effective on those portions of her anatomy that remained, and the embassy didn't stock anything that could restrain her or be legitimately used as a weapon.

In the end, I snagged Oskar Levine--who, as I've said, I'd never liked much, but who happened to be the only person not doing anything -- and armed him with two tanks of compressed cryofoam from the infirmary, one hose strapped to each arm. We kept the stuff on our skimmers in case of injuries in the field; we hadn't used any at the embassy itself since last year, when Cecilia Lansky came down with a rare form of cancer we couldn't cure on-site and had to be stored on ice until we could send her home for treatment. There was enough in those two tanks to wrap up a single full-grown Vlhani. If Isadora tried to break, Oskar would foam her.

He tried to talk me out of going in. "Use the intercom. Turn off the field, tell her to come out, I'll get her in the doorway. It'll be fast and easy."

"I know. But I still think I can turn this thing around. I want to talk to her first."

He gave me the kind of look most people reserve for irredeemable idiots. "If you walk out together, and I see no reason to trust her, I'll foam both of you."

"That's reasonable enough. Long as you get me on a transport."

"Fine," he said. "Give me more work to do."

"Oskar... !"

"It's a joke, jerkoff. Don't worry about it, I'll take care of you either way."

She'd pulled out the folding cot built into the rear wall of the chamber, and curled up to sleep there; a reasonable enough thing to do, given the circumstances, but still one that surprised me, as it was the first genuinely human gesture I'd ever seen from her. Somehow, without my ever realizing it, I had come to think of her as far beyond such considerations as any other perfectly designed machine. But she didn't look like a machine now: she didn't even look adult. With her eyes closed, and her knees hugging her belly, and her hands tightly clasped beside her chin, she resembled nothing so much as a little girl dreaming of the magic kingdoms that existed only inside her head. The tattoos on her cheeks could have been make-believe war paint, from a game played by a child...

Something stirred in me. A connection, with something. But whatever it was, was too unformed for me to make any sense of it yet.

I knelt down beside her and said: "Isadora."

The illusion of normalcy was broken as both her arms and legs uncoiled, like liquid things that had never been restricted by bones. When her eyes opened they

were already focused on me: wholly unsurprised by my presence, wholly unintimidated by anything I might have to say. The shadow of a smile played about her lips, revealing a warmth that surprised me. She did not get up: merely faced me from that position, and said. "Alex."

"I thought you'd like a progress report."

She refused to blink. "That's fuzzy-pink of ye."

"The Vlhani have surrounded us. Dhiju's practically thrown away his career by giving the order to evacuate. We're packing up, getting out, and taking you with us."

She hugged her coiled arms a little closer to her chest. "I don't want to go."

"Like hell," I said softly. "Whatever else you are, Isadora, you're far from stupid. You knew we were watching the Ballet, you knew we would spot you, you knew we'd be honor-bound to try to stop you, and you knew how the Vlhani would react if we succeeded. You could have avoided this whole crisis by explaining everything in advance, or by enhancing yourself so much we couldn't distinguish you from a Vlhani. Instead, you just made a surprise appearance -- and got exactly the response you expected."

Her eyes closed. "I didn't ken what ye could do to get me out. Had no idea I'd waltz into a boyo gallant enough to hold himself hostage for me."

Her tone put the word gallant in little quotes, deranging it, making it a joke...but not a bitter one. Encouraged, I pushed on: "And that's the real reason you're withholding the explanations, isn't it? Even why you're using that ridiculous dialect of yours, when you've already proven you can abandon it when you want to. Not because you're trying to negotiate your way back to the dance. But because you're trying to put off going back. You don't really want to die. You're looking for a way out. Any way out."

"There is no way out."

"Just refuse to participate!"

"I can't do that. It will ruin the show."

"So one year's Ballet gets ruined, and the Vlhani are traumatized. But there's another Ballet next year. So what? What's really at stake here, Isadora? Why are they so determined to get you back."

"Ye wouldn't ken."

"I...ken...enough to know when they're angry, and when they're afraid, and when they're so desperate they don't know what to do...but most importantly, enough to know when they're holding back. They could have overrun us a couple of hours ago, and they haven't. Because they don't want to hurt us. They don't want to hurt anybody...but they're still ready to march all over us to get you back. Why

is that, Isadora? What's so special about you that they can't just replace you with one of their own? And what's so special about them that you can't say no?"

In the silence that followed, I could almost hear Oskar fidgeting, outside the door...maybe even Dhiju himself checking his timetables and demanding to know just where the hell I was...but it was worth it. Her eyes glistened, and she faced her delicately tooled fingers. "Alex...have you ever dreamed of something so much, for so long, that you had to have it...even though you still weren't certain it was what you wanted."

I just waited.

She still didn't look at me. "If I tell you, will it get me back to the Ballet?"

"Maybe yes and maybe no...but either way it might stop a whole lot of good people from getting hurt."

She sat up then -- a wholly unremarkable act rendered remarkable by the graceful precision with which she performed it. When a normal person rises from a prone position, their center of gravity shifts. Their muscles come into play, and there's a subliminal moment of danger when they're momentarily off-balance. It's not something you notice in the way normal people move...unless you've seen Isadora, simply gliding, from one position to the other. She rubbed the bridge of her nose, smiled ruefully, and once again spoke in a voice free of the thick accent she'd used to define herself for me. "Have to hand it to you, Alex...you know what strings to pull."

I rose from my kneeling position and sat down beside her. "I better. We're on a planet of Marionettes."

She snorted. "Should I go for twenty-five words or less?"

"Let's not limit ourselves."

"When I was eight years old, I was living in my Uncle's house, as his provisional ward pending...well, where I came from, there was a whole legal lexicon for such things, and I don't really have to go into it. The Steinhoff recordings of the '57 Ballet had just come out; I had myself plugged into the neurec, with the feed down low so I could still pay attention to everybody else in the house...not full gain, because I always had this need to know everything that's going on around me. And my Uncle and his husband were plugged in too, also low because they were the kind of people who couldn't ever stop talking about everything they saw, and my Uncle recited something straight off the hytex about how dark and mysterious the Vlhani were, and how their minds were so dark and alien that no human would ever understand them.

"It was the sort of platitude-laden gibberish that people learn to repeat so they can imagine themselves clever without ever bothering to think an original thought themselves. And I was eight years old...mesmerized by what I was watching...and I knew that what my uncle was saying was gibberish. Because it

was the third recording I'd seen, over the past few months...and I was beginning to have some idea what the Vlhani were getting at."

I swallowed. "How?"

"Crod it, I don't know. Maybe it's just some quirk in me that visualizes things differently, something in my perceptions that's a little more Vlhani than human being...and maybe I was just young and impressionable enough to let the message seep through. Maybe it's even a question of talent...something that transcended species and gave me the ability to understand when you and Dhiju and my Uncle just saw dancing buggies. But put that aside. What matters is that I saw one tiny aspect of the Ballet clearer than the Vlhani. I saw a critical flaw in their performance, something they didn't even see themselves...something that made their Ballet a lie, and that only I knew how to correct." She groped for my hand, found it, and gave me a tight squeeze. "I can't describe what it was like, Alex. It was like...hearing a single discordant note in the greatest symphony ever written...and knowing that only I knew how to correct it. And that night I slipped out the window and ran away from home, determined to make it to Vlhan."

I squeezed her hand right back. It felt human enough: nothing at all like the intricate arrangement of circuitry and plastics I knew it to be. "You were eight years old. How far could you get?"

"As far as I had to. You don't understand: I wasn't really eight years old anymore. The part of me that had been a child was dead. In its place was just this hungry, needful thing, with...with a responsibility .... "She sighed. "I don't want to tell you all the risks I took, all the laws I broke, all the ways I...indentured myself...to get where I needed to go...but I had a primitive version of these enhancements within two years...and I was on Vlhan, communicating with the spiders, within four. They saw I was right, and let me know that when the time came for them to incorporate my ideas, I would have to be the one to dance them. As I always knew."

"But you're not a Vlhani. You can't move like a Vlhani, no matter what crazy modifications you've made to yourself."

Her nose wrinkled. "Maybe so. But don't you see? That doesn't matter. Art isn't just technique, in any culture...it's also Content. It's understanding not just How, but also What, to express. And while I may not know everything the Vlhani do...the Vlhani still saw that I had something to offer them. Something they hadn't even known they needed. And I've spent all the years since then preparing for that."

"For Death."

"You think I don't have doubts? That I genuinely, honestly want to die? I want to have a life. I want to have all the things other people have. But I have no choice. It's my responsibility. I have to do this."

"No you don't! What if I said that the Vlhani have no right to ask this of you? What if I said that you matter more than the Ballet? What if I said that the



Vlhani will just have to muddle along without you, and try again next time?"

"You'd be demonstrating that you understand nothing," she said. "Remember the Persistence of Vision --"

And maybe it was the sheer madness of everything that had happened between us, and maybe it was the memory of that one moment in the amphitheater when I sensed some small part of how much the Marionettes counted on her, and maybe it was a single moment of perfect telepathy...but all of a sudden the bottom dropped out of the universe, and I understood exactly what she'd been getting at. She saw the light dawn, and the most tragic thing happened to her eyes: they filled up with fresh hope she did not necessarily want.

Her hand squeezed mine again, this time with enough pressure to cross the threshold of pain. I didn't particularly mind.

I said, "Maybe --"

And that was really all I had a chance to say.

10.

She could have told us we were running out of time. She could have let us know that the Vlhani have a calendar, of sorts -- not a written one, since they have no writing but one they continually calculate themselves, using the passing of the seasons and the movement of the stars across the sky. She could have let us know that they placed an almost astrological importance on such things, especially where the Ballet is concerned; and that while, by their lights, it's all right to put off the Ballet for maybe one or two of their days, everything was lost if they permitted us to delay the festivities much more than that. I'm certain she knew all that: she understood more about the Vlhani than any other human being who had ever lived.

Some of the people who later arrived to pick up the pieces said that Isadora as good as murdered everybody who died. They're wrong. Because Isadora also understood about us, and she knew that we wouldn't have listened, any more than we'd listened to Hurr'poth, who'd advised me to leave her alone in the first place. And I think that even she never expected the attack to come as soon as it did. If she had, she might have tried to warn us harder...

In any event, we didn't need to see outside to know that something very bad was happening. The walls and floor shook hard enough to make me think of charging cavalry, trying but failing to keep out the sounds of the invasion in progress outside: shouting, skimmers flying low overhead, wounds being ripped in buildings, and the thunderous drumbeat of thousands upon thousands of heavy metallic whips pounding holes in the ground. I shouted out the stupidest question imaginable: "Oskar! What's going on out there?"

The voice that emerged from the intercom was sweaty and driven by panic. "I don't know -- I'm hearing --"

I found the wherewithal to ask the question properly. "Oskar! Are the spiders attacking?"

A siren wailed. Our emergency warning system. Installed as a matter of policy, not because anybody had ever expected it to be used. Against that, Oskar's voice was tinny and distant: "Yeah. Yeah, Alex, I think they are,"

"Shit," I said, with feeling.

Isadora said, "We have to let them know I'm going back to the Ballet."

"To hell with that," I said. I patched in to Oskar again: "All right, stay close. Let us out in two minutes. And keep your hose ready; you might have to use the foam."

Somewhere not very far away, something metallic -- a skimmer, probably -- smashed into pieces with enough force to drown out every other sound in the universe. The silence that followed was one of those completely soundless intervals that happen randomly even in the midst of totally uncontrolled destruction -- that don't signal the end of the destruction, but merely serve to punctuate it, putting everything that follows in parentheses. By the time Oskar spoke again, the pounding had resumed, and I had to strain to make out his voice. He said: "Take your time. I'm sure as hell not going out there alone."

I turned to Isadora. "You guided us past the Vlhani before. You're going to have to do it again."

She was stunned. "It's two completely different situations, Alex. The Ballet was choreographed. I knew every move, I could predict where the Vlhani were going to be. This is chaos: a thousand individuals rioting in panic. I'm not going to have much more of a clue out there than you do. If I don't let them know you're taking me back to the Ballet --"

"Lie to them."

"Their language can't be lied in. It's...like you said, a holographic imaging system, painting a perception of the world. To lie, I'd have to --"

"Then at least get them to back off while we make our way past them."

"I don't know they'll all listen. Some of them have got to be half-insane with grief. Some of them are going to want to drag me back to the Ballet by force, others are going to hate me so much that they'll fall all over themselves trying to kill me. I don't know if --"

I grabbed her by the upper arm. "Isadora. Enough of Cant's. Can you at least get us to a skimmer and into the air?"

She stared at me, stunned. "Just us?"

"And Oskar. And anybody else we can save. Can you do that?"

For one horrible second there, I thought she was going to offer the condition that I allow her to return to the Ballet. I thought that she truly wouldn't care about all our lives, or for anything beyond going back to this destiny she'd selected for herself; that she would seize upon the opportunity to blackmail us into giving her what she wanted. I expected it. I waited for it.

Her eyes narrowed. And she said: "Yeah. I can try."

I had Oskar reverse the field, and we ran for it.

11.

Neither Oskar nor I had the time to find and don a whip harness, but by the time we got outside, we saw that they would have been superfluous anyway.

The compound had been overrun by Vlhani.

A dozen had attacked the dormitory building. Four were on the roof, punching holes in the building with repeated blows from their long flailing whips. The rest had staked out the windows, and were busily using their whips to probe inside. One gave a sharp tug, and pulled something scarlet and ragged and human out the window.

One of the spiders towered over Foster Simmons and Kathy Ng, rotating in place so quickly that its whips strobed, becoming a transparent gray blur, behind which Foster and Kathy knelt bloody and imprisoned and screaming. The spider didn't seem particularly inclined to tighten its grip and slice them to ribbons -- but they must have tried to get past it, because Foster's severed hand lay by itself only a few feet away. His whip harness whined Hurt Help Hurt Help, to no avail. I couldn't see enough to tell if Kathy was hurt too.

Rory Metcalf and a bunch of others had gotten to one of the skimmers. They'd managed to take off, but a group of three Vlhani anchored to the ground had reached up and wrapped their whips around the housing. The skimmer strained in mid-air, veering from one side to the other in a vain attempt to break free. Rory pounded at one of the whips with her bare hands. As I watched, the skimmer lurched in a random direction and was promptly reined back in, but not before a burly figure I recognized as Wesley Harris flipped over the side and hit the ground hard.

Ambassador Dhiju staggered through the midst of the carnage, clearly moved by it without ever being touched by it; beyond the fresh bruise on his forehead and a shallow cut on his upper arm, he wasn't hurt at all. He walked blindly, without making any special attempt to avoid the Marionettes striding back and forth across the compound; and though they made no special attempt to avoid him either, their long sinuous whips stabbed the ground to the right and the left and the rear of him without once hitting him. When I got close enough to grab him by the hand I took a close look at his eyes and recognized his secret as the luck of the intoxicated: in trying to dull the pain of what had to be the greatest defeat of his life, he'd pumped himself up with so many recreationals

that he simply didn't see anything unusual about the chaos around him. I had to shout his name three times before he recognized it and followed us.

A ten-whip Marionette slashed at me. A cold wave knocked me back; I hit the ground with patches of cryofoam stealing pieces of sensation from my upper arms. The Marionette lay on the ground, four of its whips paralyzed, the others still flailing. Oskar stared, unwilling to believe that he was the one who'd brought it down. I caught a momentary glimpse of the dormitory building collapsing in on itself, saw Isadora frantically signing something in the air above her head, then spotted the silver glint of parked skimmers behind the commissary. There were several Vlhani blocking the way between us and that holy grail, but it was as good a direction as any. I yanked the mumbling Dhiju out of the nearest Marionette's reach, and yelled "There!" We ran for it.

On our way there, the Marionette tethering Rory's skimmer succeeded in upending it and tossing her out. Half a dozen indentures, some already wounded, fell too far to the ground. I turned, and caught a glimpse of Rory getting batted to one side by a flailing whip. She got up limping and with one hand clutched to her side. The three Vlhani released the now unoccupied skimmer (which rocketed over the edge of the plateau and plowed at full speed into a fresh assault wave of Vlhani), then converged upon her. I heard her shout as three of the newer indentures, who'd somehow avoided getting hurt or killed or trapped so far, overcame their panic enough to dart in her direction. One went down. I didn't get to see what happened to Rory or the others, because that's when the big bull Vlhani got me.

It wasn't the first time I'd been lifted into the air by a Marionette. They were peaceful, playful people most of the time, and some of them liked to hoist humans in their whips as a way of saying hello. They'd always indicated their intentions before doing so, and always shown a keen and gentle understanding of the fragility of human flesh. Not so now. This one looped its whip around me from behind and yanked me into the air with a force that realigned my vertebrae. I didn't know I'd been grabbed until I was already off the ground, being spun around and around so fast that the compound and the people and the rampaging Marionettes were reduced to undifferentiated streaks of color. As its whip tightened around my belly, the air whuffed from my open mouth, and I realized that this was the moment I was going to die.

And then the world stopped spinning and about thirty seconds later my head stopped spinning with it and I stared dazed and confused at a sky dominated by the sun, which abruptly up-ended and was replaced by the ground as the whip holding me circled around and showed me the reason I wasn't dead.

Isadora.

Face flushed, eyes desperate.

Forehead covered with a sheen of fear.

Arms in the air, twisting into impossible wrought-iron loops and curves, circling around each other in ways that hurt the mind to imagine.

The Marionette lowered me gently to the ground, placing me in a standing position, though I was so dizzy that I almost immediately tumbled to my knees. Then it not only stood guard over us, as Oskar and Isadora helped me to my feet; but also silently escorted us, as they helped Dhiju and me stumble drunkenly toward the skimmers.

There were five of the vehicles parked behind the commissary. None were intact. The Vlhani had pounded three into unrecognizable masses of twisted metal and plastic; torn out the hyltex and propulsion systems of the fourth; turned the fifth into a collection of dents and broken instrumentation that may have looked like hell, but seemed capable of wobbly flight. The seats had been ripped out, leaving only the metal housings. We got in anyway. The Vlhani protecting us merely looked down at us impassively, flailing its whips in a manner that could have meant anything at all.

I managed to ask Isadora one question as Oskar lifted off: "Did you tell it you were going back to the Ballet?"

She refused to look at me. "I told you: it's next to impossible to lie to them. I don't know enough of the future to promise that." "Then...what did you tell it?"

"That you were my friend. And that, whatever happened, I wouldn't dance if you died."

Oskar flew low over the embattled compound, looking for other people to save. Everybody we saw was either dead or too tightly surrounded by Vlhani to go after. I saw several indentures running zigzags through the wreckage, clumsily dodging the whips that herded them from one near miss to the next. I saw a few others who through exhaustion or despair had simply given up running; they knelt in the middle of the carnage, hostages to the mercy of the spiders. About half the people I saw were wearing whip harnesses, their little windup cables seeming a pathetic joke in light of all the real whips raining destruction all around them.

The one time Oskar saw an opportunity to save somebody, and tried to go in, about twenty Marionettes went after us, with great springing leaps that drove them thirty meters straight up. We hadn't expected that at all; none of us, with the possible exception of Isadora, even had any idea they could jump. One collided with the skimmer so hard we almost flipped, then grabbed at us in a clumsy attempt to grab hold before falling back down to earth. Oskar took us a hundred meters higher up, circled away from the plateau to put us even further out of their reach, then wiped fresh blood from a gash in his forehead and said: "So! Is there even anyplace to go?"

Dhiju murmured something incomprehensible. Isadora and I glanced at each other. We held the look a little longer than we had to, exchanging recriminations, apologies, thanks, regrets...and more. Neither one of us wanted to break the silence.

In the end, I spared her that much, at least.

I said, "The amphitheater."

12.

We were damaged too badly to make top speed, but the wind-bubble did curl over us when we asked it to, so we were able to go supersonic. At that, it would take us three hours instead of the usual forty minutes to reach the amphitheater...which simultaneously seemed too long and not long enough.

I called the Riirgaans. They patched me through to Hurrr'poth, who was -- unsurprisingly -- already in the air taking a rescue squad to our plateau. He'd started prepping the mission when I pulled Isadora from the Ballet. He'd suspected what was coming, too; had even tried to warn me, more than once. Even so, I had trouble seeing his help as magnanimous. When he jokingly called me pornographer, I disconnected him.

Less than two hours passed before Oskar and I used up our store of conversation, and Isadora crawled off into the rear screen to stare wordlessly at the landscape racing by down below. Under the circumstances, I was almost grateful when awareness limped back into Dhiju's eyes. He croaked: "Y-you're not taking her back..."

I spoke in a tightly controlled whisper, because I didn't want Isadora to hear. "I'm sorry, sir. But yes, we are."

He tried to muster up enough strength to be indignant. "I...specifically ordered..."

"I know. And I'm still hoping to work out a way where it doesn't have to happen. But we have to do this. We have no choice." "They're killers," he said, almost petulantly. "We owe them nothing."

Now that they've murdered everybody, they don't even have anything left to threaten us with. We don't have to throw good blood after bad. We can still get her off-world. We can still save her. We can still..."

"The persistence of vision," I murmured, hearing not my own voice, but hers.

"What?"

"The persistence of vision." When Dhiju showed no signs of comprehension, I shook my head, as if sheer denial could erase everything I knew. Oskar must have sensed something wrong, just about then, because he left the controls and took a seat between us, looking haggard and grim and desperate to understand. I didn't acknowledge him, or even Dhiju; at the moment, I was too lost in the size of it, too unable to fit other people into a universe which had suddenly changed all shape and form. "You can't even blame them," I said, distantly. "They thought they were going to lose everything. They had to go mad."

"You're not making any sense," crabbed Dhiju.

Isadora didn't turn around even then; but then she didn't have to. I knew she was listening. I shook my head to fight off the shock, and spoke as earnestly as I could, in words meant for all of us. "It's not something I'm comfortable knowing, sir. But with all the things she's said, and all the things that have happened, I've begun to understand, a little. And I've learned...that we never had the slightest idea how big this was, for them. We knew their language was holographic. We knew they were drawing pictures for each other. We knew that whatever they were making with the Ballet was more important to them than their lives. And we were right about all that. But we also thought that a new Ballet began and ended every year...and in that we were wrong. The picture they paint, sir...it's just a single frame. And it blends together, in their minds, with the picture they painted last year...and the one they're going to paint one year from now. All arranged in sequence, and merged by the persistence of vision..."

"A motion picture," Oskar said hoarsely.

Dhiju's eyes flickered in his direction, then bored in on mine. "S o ?"

"So that's why she can't quit. For the same reason she surrendered when I threatened my own life. Because she's driven by responsibility. And she knows that if she quit it wouldn't just ruin one Ballet m which would traumatize the whole species but still leave them room to rebuild. No. It would shatter a single evolving work of art that they've been creating for the better part of their history. It would destroy everything they've ever been, everything they've ever dreamed about, and everything they've ever tried to accomplish. It would leave them with nothing to live for. And that's why she can't quit. Because it's either her life...or the lives of every Vlhani that ever lived."

Oskar breathed, "Holy," utterly forgetting to specify a Holy What.

Dhiju remained silent. He just looked at me, and then at Oskar, and then at Isadora, who still sat staring out the screen, giving no indication that she heard any one of us. And then he turned back to me, and said, "I'm sorry, Alex. But even if this theory bears any relation to reality, which I doubt, it changes nothing. I'm still ordering you to stop her."

Dammit, he had to understand. "Like I said, sir...I intend to try. I don't want her to die any more than you do. But the Vlhani --"

He drowned me out. "The Vlhani are not my problem! It's not my fault they've dedicated themselves to this thing! Their insanity is not my responsibility -- and hers is! I won't let her kill herself! And I'm ordering you to turn this crate around and demand asylum at one of the other embassies!"

"I can't. I have to leave our options open...in case there's no other

Dhiju stared, unwilling to believe that a third-year indenture would risk everything by daring to defy him. He wrested control of his voice, and spoke with the kind of controlled quiet that can be heard in the middle of an

explosion. "Alex. If you don't do what I say within the next five seconds, I'll consider it a gross act of insubordination and extend your contract fifty years."

Oskar said: "Then you'll have to extend mine too."

I glanced at Oskar, astonished. I hadn't expected him to join in my mutiny; I'd been counting on Isadora to help me overcome the two of them. But he faced Dhiju with the stoic intractability of a brick wall, and he gathered up the cryofoam harness, and he held it in his hand, to demonstrate what awaited if Dhiju tried to interfere in any way. It was funny. I'd never liked him, not even the slightest bit; he'd never been anything more to me than just somebody I had to deal with in order to do my job, I found myself hard-pressed to remember exactly what that was.

As for Dhiju, he nodded, unsurprised, all the strength going out of him all at once. And he reached into the pocket of his tunic and look out of his vials of blue liquid and swallowed it down in a gulp. He closed his eyes before we got to see them to go fuzzy and delated again, and murmured, "You're both throwing away the rest of your lives."

I began to protest, but Oskar rode me out. "No, Alex ... that's fair. Get out of the way and I'll foam him, so he doesn't have to watch."

After a moment, I complied. Why not? Had I been in Dhiju's position, I wouldn't have to be conscious either. And the ambient temperature in the skimmer dropped thirty degrees as the liquid bubbling sound filled the air around us.

13.

I sat beside Isadora for much of the hour remained of our flight, not speaking, just making my presence known. Not that she spent all of that remaining hour or just looking out the screen. All it showed was a non-discript series of hills and valleys and plains and lakes, none of which were particularly different from the those hat puckered the landscape of ten million other worlds. Sometimes we passed over small herds of Vlhani, who were visible only as block dots against brown fields; if they heard the hum of our drive and looked up, to gatch a glimpse of the vehicle's this years most honored dancer, it wasn't was she needed to see. And so she spent most of the last hour just quietly sitting with me, not speaking much, but not remaining entirely quiet either: just sharing the space, and the wait, for that place which we both knew we'd reach all too soon.

Near the end of that hour, I asked her about the markings on her cheeks, already suspected what she'd tell me. And I was right: they merely desperate affectations left over from her first few days on her own --the legacy of an eight-year-old girl struggling to re-invent herself as she finangled her way from one world to another. Both they, and her made up slang, were remnants of a past she'd created for herself -- the kind of past that only could have been created by a frightened child forced to become adult before her time. I thought about the long hours Rory had spent searching her databases for a society that used those ritual markings, and those idioms...and wondered whether she'd still be



alive to laugh about it when I told her.

Not long after that, I began to spot landmarks -- the otherwise nondescript rock formations and dried riverbeds that my previous journeys to this place had taught me to recognize as the vicinity of the amphitheater. When Oskar pointed out a cratered plain pockmarked by the tracks of the one hundred thousand Vlhani dancers who had passed this way on their journey to the place where they were scheduled to die, my stomach seized up. And when we saw the Ballet...

...it had always been a magnificent sight. It still was. But today was the first time it filled me with dread.

Seen from a distance, with or without rangeviewers: a sliver cut into the face of the planet, filled with a gleaming black sea that swelled and surged like an intelligent amoeba. With the reflective Vlhani skin glowing red in the light of the rising sun, it looked like a lake of fire. An unworthy part of me wished for plasma cannons so I could make it one.

As we drew closer, we saw that not all of the Vlhani were in the amphitheater itself -- there were several hundred gathered above the northern rim, arranged in two semicircular mobs with a single wide pathway between them. The pathway led straight to the heart of the Ballet. An invitation, set out for Isadora.

As for the viewing stand on the opposite rim: it was packed again. Not quite to capacity -- since this time, there were no humans and only a few Riirgaans in the seats -- but close enough to let me know that all of the alien delegations had returned to their places, eager to see the Ballet resume as scheduled. From this side of the amphitheater, it was easy to hate them, for their eagerness to see that which I would have given anything to stop. Would any of them mourn the Vlhani who died? Would any mourn Isadora?

Oskar told the skimmer to hover, then came over and knelt beside us. His eyes were tearing. "I was...going over this in my head. About what we're doing...what we're about to let her do. I kept...thinking...that there had to be some other way. And I think I have one."

Isadora's smile was grateful, but without much hope. "Oh?"

"Participate via hytex."

It hit me like an electric current wired right into the spine. "What?"

"You heard me," said Oskar. He turned to her. "You can dance your part somewhere safe; we'll rig up a micro-remote to hover over the amphitheater and broadcast your image wherever you have to be. You can do everything you have to do without being anywhere near the Vlhani when they start losing muscle control."

My heart pounded in my chest. "Isadora! Would that work?"

She shook her head sadly. "If the Vlhani were human, maybe. But they don't see on the same wavelengths."

"We can recalibrate! Project something they can see! Even sound, if we need to! Dammit, Isadora, we know so much more than you think! Give us a couple of hours to arrange it, and you'll live!"

"But don't you see what an insult that would be? All those Vlhani dying, and their most honored guest staying alive by remote control? Showing herself above them, by continuing to walk and breathe while everybody who waited for her dies? I can't mock them that way. I won't."

"The spiders killed a lot of good people today," Oskar pleaded. "They can use a little mockery."

"I'm sorry," she said, and leaned forward to kiss him. "But, please. I have to do this. If that means anything to you, please land so I can get it over with."

He lowered his head, shuddered, and went off to the controls.

For me, it was not like we were sinking. It was like the ground was rising to meet us like the entire planet was a single predator, and the horizons were razor-studded jaws inexorably closing shut. It was hard to remember that neither Oscar nor Dhiju nor I were in the same danger Isadora was: if we just stayed in the skimmer, let her disembark and then took off, the only person being swallowed whole today was the strange, beautiful, terrified but unwavering woman who knelt beside me. It didn't make me feel any safer. If she died, it would still be too much like dying myself.

We were still some distance from the ground when I said: "Isadora."

She abandoned the view and looked at me. "Alex."

"Was everything you told the Vlhani true? Back at the compound?"

She smiled sadly. "I told you. It's impossible to lie to them."

"Then please. Listen. You don't have to do this. There are alternatives. You can make them understand --"

She hugged me. "Thank you. But no. I have to do this."

...and then she tightened her arms on the edge of the Skimmer and lightly jumped to the ground.

We were still about twenty meters up, so both Oskar and I yelped, instinctively certain that she'd just leaped to her death. But no: when I leaned over the edge I saw her lightly touch ground, wave at me, and run toward the amphitheater. She was as fast as one of them; before I even had time to react she had disappeared among the Vlhani.

I wasn't enhanced. There was no way I'd ever be able to catch her. But catching her was not part of the plan. I'd always known that she had to do what she had

to do.

Now it was my turn.

I shouted at Oskar. "For Christ's sake! Land this thing! I have to go out there and talk to them!"

"Talk to --" Oskar started. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Just do it! Now!"

He aimed for a spot fifty meters from the Vlhani spectators. As we landed, I said, "Don't wait for me, I'll be okay! Just get back to the embassy and see if you can help any of the others!"

"B-but...what are you talking about, you can't--"

I leaped over the side and hit the ground running.

All my instincts rebelled against the idea of charging creatures whom I'd so recently seen on the rampage. But the part of my mind still capable of remaining rational knew that I'd be in no danger from them at all; they no longer had any need to hurt me. They already had Isadora. If I had any fear at all it was that they would be able to recognize me as the one who'd rescued her once before; that for fear of me doing it again they'd bar my way and refuse to allow me into the amphitheater.

They didn't. The ones on the rim just stood passively by as I ran among them, using the same path they'd cleared for Isadora. Their heads did swivel to watch me as I passed; expressionless globes that could have been registering annoyance, or disgust, or pity, or nothing at all. I like to think that they recognized compulsion when they saw it: that they didn't stop me because they knew stopping me would do no good.

Maybe, in that, I reminded them of Isadora.

I made it over the edge of the bowl and began to half-run, half-fall, down the slope. It was not a gentle grade, like the place where I'd found her the first time, but a dirt slide that with a few more degrees of pitch would have begun to qualify as a cliff. I couldn't remain upright and stay out of the way of the dancing Vlhani at the same time; I allowed myself to fall on my rear end and slide. I caught a glimpse of the viewing stand on the southern rim and wondered if anybody there could see me; if any of them were feeling little twinges of horror at the thought of the great spectacle being delayed yet again. Not that I cared; all I cared about, all I worried about, was Isadora. And she was nowhere in sight.

I came to rest in a sea of slashing whips. There was blood in my mouth and on the backs of my hands. The Vlhani around me were so densely packed that I couldn't see more than twenty yards in any direction. Their whips, waving in the air above their heads, spun so passionately that the whirrs of their passage

drowned out everything, even the ragged rasp of my breath.

Isadora wasn't around to lead me out, this time.

That didn't matter. What mattered was being here.

Because though I didn't understand Vlhani dance land didn't even have the harness that would have physically equipped me to dance it), the language barrier has always been a poor excuse for not making the attempt to communicate.

And as Isadora herself had said: Art isn't just technique, in any culture...it's also Content. It's understanding not just How, but also What to express.

So I stood up, and took a deep breath, and appealed to them in the only way I knew how. With words. I spoke to them in sounds they couldn't possibly understand, hoping that the feelings would come through. I painted a word-picture that not only apologized for never truly understanding them before, but also mourned and celebrated the differences between us. It was a picture that flashed upon my friends lying dead or wounded at the embassy, and of just how many light-years they'd traveled to meet such an end; it was a picture that talked about how they'd deserved more, then came back to Isadora and how she deserved more too. It was a picture of a young woman who'd already given up everything -- her home, her childhood, her normality, and now, probably, her life-- for the Vlhani. I let them know that, however they measured such things, it was a sacrifice: and that it was a sacrifice only they were empowered to stop. And finally, I let them know how beautiful she was: as beautiful, in her own way, as their Ballet, and how much it mattered to me that she still be alive when the last dancing Vlhani fell to the trampled earth.

I never spoke at such length, or with such eloquence, in my entire life.

Had they understood the language, I would have broken their hearts.

But even as I poured everything I had into my words, I knew that I was nothing to them but a yapping little creature making noise. They surrounded me without reacting to me, their great spherical heads bobbing like toys.

And when I finally ran down, exhausted, unable to plead any more, unable to think of anything else that I hadn't already said a dozen times, a Vlhani moved toward me, so gracefully that its whips barely seemed to brush the ground. One of its whips came down, gently curled around my waist, and lifted me up to the head. I had the distinct impression of eyes studying me, even though Vlhani don't have eyes; the head merely rotated first one way, then the other, in no way conveying any expression at all. Out of reflex I reached out and placed a palm against its cool, polished surface, thinking of the alien brain that sat pulsing beneath. What did it think of me? Did it think me strange? Ungraceful? Ugly or beautiful?

It passed me to another Vlhani further up the slope. Which passed me to another one, and then to another one after that; until I was handed over to the ones standing up on the northern rim, who gently put me down and encircled me to

ensure I wouldn't dash into the amphitheater again.

They needn't have bothered. I was done.

There was nothing left.

14.

Many hours later, the Riirgaan aircruiser flew in from the south, circled above me, and came to a rest on packed dirt a short distance away. The Vlhani who'd come to watch the Ballet milled around us, taking special care not to step on me or inconvenience the aircraft in any way. Rory and Oskar were both aboard, looking tearful and exhausted. They gave me weak little waves as Hurrr'poth hopped over the side, approached me, and then, folding his limbs in a manner that must have been painfully uncomfortable for a Riirgaan, knelt by my side. His face was as expressionless as always, but there was a tentative, concerned, uncharacteristically deferential manner to the way he regarded me. I mistook it for simple respect for my grief, and said nothing.

At length he said, "Alex."

I asked him: "How many dead?"

"Vlhani or humans?"

I was in no mood to care about Vlhani. "You know I meant humans!"

"Seventeen. About half your delegation. Foster Simmons, Li-Hsin Chang, Kathy Ng..." When he saw how every name made me wince, he trailed off. "It could have been much worse. Almost half your number survived."

"And Isadora? Did she?"

He placed a reptilian hand on my shoulder. "No."

So I hadn't pulled off the impossible miracle after all. For all these hours, I'd dared to persuade myself that I might have. I thought of her eyes, and the way she moved, and how I'd been the one to deliver her to the moment of her death, and I just knelt there, my shoulders shaking and my mind spinning between the rustle of the wind and the beating of my triphammer heart.

And then, once again, Hurrr'poth said, "Alex."

I refused to look at him. "What."

"I do not know if this will make a difference to you...but everybody among the spectators saw what you tried to do for her. What you did do for her. Everybody witnessed it: all the delegations and, soon, thanks to the holos and neurecs, all their worlds."

I closed my eyes more tightly. Yes, that was all I needed. To have the single

greatest failure of my life played endlessly throughout the universe. "And?"

"And," he said, "it was not just Isadora and the Vlhani who danced magnificently today."

Whereupon he stood, and returned to the aircruiser, leaving me alone with that.

Neither Hurr'poth nor Rory nor Oskar came out to hurry me.

Eventually, I got off my knees, and went to them. Not because I'd accepted what he'd had to say. But because the show was done, and it was time for all the performers to go home.

15.

The Riirgaans offered Oskar and me citizenship and diplomatic immunity. Oskar took the deal, I didn't. Oskar went home, legally nonhuman; I was court-martialed, got twenty years added to my contract, and went to the rancid, half-molten hellhole known as New Pylthothus, where I would be rotting still had I not smuggled myself AWOL two years later. Since then, I've been officially a fugitive. I have no intention of telling you where I am, how. I changed my appearance, or what name I use now. I found a world acceptable for spending the rest of my life in hiding; I changed my face and my name and found a life for myself. I have friends, family. It's happiness, of a sort. I'm not complaining.

The Confederacy attempted to suppress the holos and neurecs of that year's Ballet, but when the anger over the violence against our people faded, the recordings still became the biggest thing to hit popular entertainment in centuries. They succeeded in making the long-time interest in the Vlhani an obsession for trillions; even the vast majority who still didn't understand just what the Marionettes were getting at had to agree that, in some indefinable way easier felt than understood, Isadora had just brought their Ballet to an entirely new level. There was some half-hearted talk of reprisals and the "permanent" withdrawal of the installation -- but within five standard years the triple-threat combination of a new administration, humanity's notoriously short memory, and the ravenous demand for the new recordings still being made by the other embassies and distributed to human space on the black market, got a new embassy established on the ruins of the old. This one, I understand, is considerably better armed than ours was, though the indentures there haven't yet been forced to prove it.

People love to speculate on who Isadora was, and where she came from a hundred separate worlds have laid claim to being the place where she was born. Most of them don't put forth very persuasive cases for themselves. All I know for sure is that if I ever did find out the name of the place she came from, I wouldn't feel any pressing need to go there. It has nothing to do with her.

Close to three thousand young people have tried to do what Isadora did. The vast majority of those never made it off their own home-worlds they were dreamers, yearning to be special and willing to do anything to emulate somebody who was. They either destroyed themselves or found somebody else to imitate. Of those who

remained, a few actually succeeded in picking up enhancements somewhere: usually, pale imitations of Isadora's that took away their humanity without giving nearly enough in return. A very small number -- four women and two men -- made it to Vlhan and into the Ballet, where they died. They'd understood little pieces of the show, too. But their names faded. Nobody remembers them the way people remember her.

I don't know. Whatever the Vlhani are relating with this great fatal Ballet of theirs, I'm told it's beautiful and profound and meaningful and worth dying for. But the other side of the story is that it's not worth seeing the people you care about die...and I've personally lost all desire to decode that message for myself.

As a result, I have never seen Isadora's Ballet. I refused to watch it on Vlhan, and I've refused to view the holos or neurecs. I would not be able to stand obsessively watching and re-watching either my own famously doomed appeal or the equally famous, inspirational moment when she fell.

Instead, I live with my memory of that moment at the compound, when she danced to save my life. Unlike the Ballet, which has been picked to pieces by experts all over the known universe, that performance was not recorded. There are no holos, no neurecs, no hytex analysis breaking it down into the tiniest millisecond fragments. Oskar was half-blind from the blood in his eyes; Dhiju, who lay on his back dazzled and open-jawed, was so much under the influence that no amount of artificial memory enhancement would ever succeed in separating the real from that which his mind created. As for me, I caught only the last ten seconds.

But I understood it all. Every single nuance.

When she later spoke to me in human words, she did not tell me the full truth about everything that dance had meant.

And what she really told the Vlhani keeps me warm, in a universe that would otherwise now seem dark and empty and cold.