

The Dancer of Chimaera
by Diana L. Paxson

They called her Mariposa, and she danced in a tavern on Chimaera Station. She was scarcely a woman yet, but she was female enough for the men who did their drinking at the High Orbit. They were Space Forcers on shore leave mostly, or techs from the defense project that was the main reason the Station was there. In the evenings they drank, and watched Mariposa, and tried to forget the war.

Johnny Yaleran wavered in the doorway. The heat of the tavern reminded him of the generator room of the Glinka, though the sour smell of spilled beer and the mixed reeks of tobacco and weed were richer than the high ozone air he'd been breathing since he left home. He bent forward, peering through the gloom.

A bunch of big techs from the repair docks heading for the door were enough to make up his mind for him. They drew him in their wake toward the bar. Even then he might have retreated, but there was an empty place, and he slid into it, trying to look as if he belonged there. Beyond the bar was a small bare stage and a musician's stand. But the synthetor's lights were dead and canned music strove unsuccessfully with the patrons' din. The man in the stained coveralls on the next perch slurped noisily at his drink and set it down, turning to the thin fellow beside him. "Well, I say we've nothin' to worry about-" Johnny heard him snort. "The Shifters will never get this far, and if they do, we'll implode 'em." He drank again and wiped his mouth with a beefy hand. "Think so? They've taken the Iberian system, and Lutece, Lord knows how. The project's a prime target..." The thin man stopped, looking at Johnny. There was a loud cough and Johnny flushed, realizing that the barman was waiting, order disk in hand. There was a list on the wall before him, and Johnny chose at random. "... one double Red, straight," the barman repeated, punching the order and waiting impassively while Johnny fumbled in his pouch for his credit chip. "Thank you," Johnny said. The man smiled automatically and went off. "You new here?" the big man asked, and Johnny nodded. "Thought so-" He grinned suddenly and extended a hand. "I'm Hank Mendos, Tonics Tech, and this here's my buddy Duprey." Johnny introduced himself, and the thin man beside Mendos nodded. "Glinka, you say? She hasn't seen combat yet, has she?"

"Neither have I," Johnny confessed. "I signed on when she was commissioned on Soyuz." The barman set a glass of crimson liquid before him. Johnny picked it up, aware of their eyes upon him, but the fluid slid easily down his throat. As he took a second sip, the first exploded in his belly. Their expressions had warned him, but he was still gasping a few moments later when the nova inside him began to die down. Carefully, he drank again. Duprey smiled with approval-or perhaps it was amusement. "I wish you luck. Of course, the Shifters' weapons are no match for ours--not their physical weapons, anyhow-" He leaned forward, lowering his voice so that Johnny had to strain to hear. "I'm in Communications, and I've heard the log of the Tonnerre."

Johnny stared, remembering the hulk whose orbit they had crossed on their way in. Duprey went on.

"They had picked up a bunch of refugees, and they were all having a concert to cheer them up, see, when it began. There's not much on the disc-just ramblings about the music, and then the sound of the explosion when they hit the asteroid." Duprey sighed.

"What was the music like?" Johnny asked.

"There was no music on the discs," said Duprey. "No music at all-"

"You think one of them refugees was a Shifter?" said Mendos.

"Must have been ... they must have forgotten to run the test when they took them on."

Johnny shivered, but Mendos was looking past him to the stage. "Well, now, I guess it's time for the show!" He grinned.

The lights of the synthetor were beginning to glow. The operator, only one in a place like this, hunched over the control board, adjusting the dials. Beside him a sleepy-eyed drummer stroked the plastic of his drumhead. From the signs outside, Johnny gathered they were very proud of having a real drum.

The noise diminished slightly and the synthetor chimed once, projecting a pink glow onto the stage. A fat man in a stained purple tunic waved his arms for silence.

"And now-we bring you the star of the Galaxy-La Mariposa!"

The light intensified from pink to purple, then back to red as the drummer took up a slow beat. Johnny leaned forward as the screen shimmered and a girl slipped through it onto the stage.

"She ain't much," said Mendos, "but it don't seem anyone else wants to come out here so close to the war, and she's kinda cute, after all."

For a moment the girl hesitated, flinching as all the male eyes focused upon her face. The drum boomed again and she stepped forward, stretching out her arms so that the flashers on her cloak glittered red. The synthetor began to burble out a tune and she waved her arms aimlessly, swaying back and forth in time to the music. "You've left me all alone, what can I do? There's no one in the galaxy like you..." she sang in a thin sweet voice, still swaying. Johnny recognized the song. It had been popular just before he left home. The lights changed from red to yellow, to green and blue, while the predictable words trudged on. "... unless you give me all your love I'll die!" She let her arms/drop to her sides. "Come on, honey, take it off-that's a girl!" came a shout from the back of the room. The drum rolled demandingly. The girl stretched her colored lips in a smile and her hands moved to the fastenings at the neck of her cloak. Slowly she undid them. The cloth slithered to the floor and she kicked it aside. Her skinny body was covered mainly by body film, red on one side, silver on the other, with interlocking spirals where the two colors joined. Johnny took an involuntary swallow of his drink. They didn't have anything like this on Soyuz. Mariposa walked around the stage, throwing her hips sharply from side to side so that the orfa feathers on her girdle fluttered, hipbones alternately defined under the colored skin. Her little breasts bobbed and the tiny stars glued to them winked at Johnny as she turned. The barman was asking if he wanted another drink. Johnny pulled out his credit slip without taking his eyes from the stage. The drummer had stepped up the beat. The dancer began to stamp and fling her arms about concluding with a backbend that threw all her ribs into relief. The music slowed. Johnny took his new drink, swallowed part of it, and set the bulb down. The girl straightened and struck a stylized pose. Johnny noted with strange clarity that some of her hair had escaped from its topknot and clung damply to her neck. She made a vague gesture with her slender hands and quavered out another verse of her song. "Poor kid-she don't hardly know what it's all about, does she?" said Mendos. "Now I remember the girls on Bagatelle-you ever go to Madam Sue's, Duprey? There was one bitty there who had breasts like ..." He searched for words and gave up with a lush movement of his hands.

Duprey shook his head, sighing. "No ... but I knew a little girl on Sianna once. She had hair like black silk that reached to her knees ..." He broke off, staring into shadow, remembering.

Johnny scarcely heard them. He was watching Mariposa.

Johnny reached out for the girl's hand as they began to walk. Their footsteps echoed on the permacrete of the pedway, almost deserted at this hour. They turned a corner and the pink blaze of the High Orbit's entrance was hidden. Mariposa breathed deeply.

"Thank you for coming with me, Johnny."

He squeezed her hand, still too astonished at the privilege to reply. For the past month, he had been off-duty two nights a week, and he had spent every one of them at the High Orbit, watching Mariposa dance. It had taken a week for him to get up the courage to speak to her, two weeks more before she would let him buy her a drink when the show was done. And tonight she had asked him if he would like to walk her home.

He knew that Mendos and Duprey thought his passion funny, knew that not a man on the Station would have hurt Mariposa, but he could not help feeling the way he had when he stood watch over the generators of the Glinka alone for the first time. He breathed a little faster and pressed her hand again.

"It is good to be quiet at last," she said. "I wish I could see the stars."

They looked up at the anonymous dusk of the Station's dome.

"I'd like to show them to you," he said. "In deep space the sky's pure carbon black, and the stars burn steady and bright as glowflies." He paused, trying to find words for the glory. "Could you see the stars from your home planet?"

"I-don't know," she replied. "I remember being on ships, and on other Stations under domes, but I think I must have left home when I was very young... I don't remember it at all."

Johnny felt an immediate protective surge and drew her arm within his. "When the war is over I'll show you all the worlds. There are fields of multicolored grasses at home. You run through them and the wind cools your face with the scent of flowers."

"It would be good to run free and see the sky," she said wistfully. "Since you've been here, have you been outside?"

"No," he replied. "I've seen pictures. It doesn't look like a bad world-a little hot maybe. Too bad there's not enough oxygen in the air for men to breathe."

"I think they mean to terraform it, after the war."

"Well, that can't be long now," he said confidently. "It's been going badly lately, I know-the Shifters are in the next system now. But the Project is almost complete. Duprey says the Mindshield they've installed will stop the psychbending the Shifters have been using to get through. Soon all our ships will have it too." She stopped, facing him. Johnny realized with a shock that they had reached the end of the residence complex where the few nonmilitary

personnel on the Station lived. He paused in front of the entry, fighting a shiver of impending loss. "Are you cold?" she asked softly. "Cold? No-

"You sure? You don't look well. Do you want to come up with me? I can fix you some stimo ..." He stared at her. "It's not much of a place, I guess-" she went on. "Not on what the bar pays me. But I brew stimo as well as any autosnacky!"

"Oh! Of course-sure, Mariposa, I'd be honored to come in!" She was right. It was not much of a place-a room about as big as his cubby on the Glinka, with walls the original no-glare green and fold-down furniture. There was one window. Only a poster advertising Mariposa stuck to the wall and some clothing thrown over a chair marked it as her room. Johnny looked about him, his gaze sliding quickly past the curtain that gave nominal privacy to the bedcorner, and came to rest on the girl. She smiled and turned to pull down the kitchen controls. He lifted the clothes from the chair and sat down, searching for something to say. "Mariposa, do you like it here?" he got out at last, "I mean, are the people nice to you?"

"Oh yes-a Station isn't the prettiest place in the universe, but everyone's polite."

He looked at her thin shoulders and the defenseless line of her back.

"All the men?" he asked, his voice hoarse suddenly.

"Why would they bother me?" she said quietly, stirring the brew.

"But you're--a dancer-" The words burst out of him.

"And that's all I am," she flared. "Look at me. I'm not much temptation even on stage with all my fittings on, and without them-" She thrust the bulb into his hands and started to turn away.

He held it without drinking, looking at her. "Mariposa, I think you're beautiful..."

Something flickered behind her eyes. "I'm not... Johnny, you mustn't say that!"

"But lots of men-" he began, and then, when she began to shake her head, felt the betraying blush begin and fade and didn't care. "You mean that no one-that you haven't ever-"

She hugged herself, swaying. Johnny got up and stepped toward her, realized that he was still holding the stirno bulb, and set it down.

"Mariposa," he said. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean ..." She didn't seem to have heard him. Moving with an urgency beyond his analysis, he took her in his arms.

She stood rigid in his embrace, still shaking. But she relaxed suddenly when his mouth touched hers. It was a long kiss, if a little clumsy, and when he released her at last, her eyes had gone unfocused and huge in her pale face.

"What is it?" she asked tonelessly. "What is happening- Oh, Johnny," she cried, seeing him at last. "Let me go! I love you-please go!"

He held her, dismay warring with an exaltation that burned upward from

his belly to his brain. She had said, "I love you..."

The girl quivered suddenly, then sighed. Her eyes were glittering; she watched him with a look he had never seen before. Alarm pulsed along his nerves, but even as he started to release her, she gripped his arms and pulled his head down to hers. His body jerked as their lips touched once more. Mariposa held him now. Her body was hard, her scent sharp and sweet. He wondered vaguely how she had gotten a perfume like the flowers of the faranelle trees at home. Then he stopped thinking at all. Their clothing was stripped off and they stumbled toward the bed. The current was passing through him more violently now, but he could not break away. As they struggled on the bed, his flesh was melded to hers and their bodies convulsed as one. But it was Mariposa who screamed as in a flash of ecstasy his body went beyond his control entirely and he was consumed. Above their heads, the little window brightened as the terrible light of Chimaera's dawn filtered through the Dome. The light in the window had flared and faded once more to dusk when Mariposa rose. Her hair had come undone. She shook it back over her shoulders and then stretched lazily, arching her body in content. She stepped over to the fresher, rotated luxuriously under its needling spray. After a few moments she stepped out, slipped past the motionless body on the bed, and began, with full, sensuous strokes, to brush out her hair. It was not until she had finished dressing and had picked up her cloak to go out that she glanced at the figure on the bed, a last faint sadness momentarily humanizing her face. "Have you seen Johnny tonight?" Duprey gestured toward the empty seat beside Mendos as he sat down. "No, but he'll be here-he never misses Mariposa's show."

"It's getting late ..." Mendos, who was on his third drink already, shook his head. "Don't worry, maybe he's backstage with her now..." Both men laughed, and Duprey ordered a drink. "That's right, Duprey-drink up! You can afford to, now the Shield's up!" Duprey grunted and picked up the bulb, glaring at a technician who had started to take the empty chair.

The manager got up to make his announcement, and the noise level sank to its usual dull roar. The synthetor warbled out the introductory theme. There was a shadow behind the screen.

"Well, here's Mariposa-" said Mendos. "Musta been in a hurry-no color on her face. Wonder if she's got her costume on." He snickered happily.

Mariposa stepped over to the musicians, her robe flowing around her. As she spoke to them, the music faded and for a moment, the drumbeat faltered. The manager glared, but in a few beats they had recovered, and the drum boomed, commanding all eyes to the stage. The synthetor sang out a series "of high notes, monotonous and pure. The drum pounded again and Mariposa whirled, cloak flaring around her like a red nebula. Then, with a flash, it was off.

Mariposa danced.

Her pale body was washed by the changing lights. Her eyes glittered. Her slender feet stamped out an echo to the rhythm of the drum.

"What's come over the girl? Never saw her move that way-" Mendos blinked as if he were having trouble focusing.

Mariposa swayed with the music, her movements sending adrenaline sparking through the bodies of those who watched her, the flutter of her fingers compelling their attention. She circled in front of the musicians; the synthetor faded and she began to sing.

"I am the sweet surge of the tide... I can release the love inside-" was what Duprey heard, and his bulb rolled unheeded from his hand. "Follow me, follow, out from the shallows, into the depths of the sea ..."

Mendos leaned forward, clutching at the edge of the bar.

"I am the scent that stirs the night, I offer measureless delights! Follow me, follow, all here is hollow, and in me ecstasy!"

The drum beat faster now. Mariposa leaped down from the stage and moved among the men. Each one felt the touch of her fingers on his heart, heard her singing to him alone, and they circled her like new-formed planets around a sun. "Sima ..." breathed Duprey, stumbling toward her. "No-it's Honey, my own Honey-lookit those bulbs, just like I told you!" Mendos cried. Mariposa drifted toward the door, singing. She sang the men out into the street and toward the main pedway. The synthetor whispered to silence, but the drummer slipped the strap over his head and continued to play, and his beat pulsed through the artificial air. Mariposa's singing rode that pulse to echo from the walls of the buildings and reflect from the ceiling of the Dome. The Station was not very large. It was not long before the strange procession had circled it, and wherever it passed, men came to their doors, and when they had opened, they saw Mariposa dance, and heard her sing, and when they had seen and heard, they followed her. They came at last to the door that led Outside. "I am your dream and your desire... I am the burning of love's fire... Follow me, follow, out of the window, and we shall be free! I feed your hunger, I bring you home- No more to wander, no more to roam ... Follow me, follow, into tomorrow, oh, follow me..." It took a few moments for the man who knew how to work the handles to make his way through the crowd to the door, and a little longer for another, who had set the pattern of switches that would make them release, to reach the controls. But Mariposa sang. She danced need for her into their blood, she sang her image into their brains. She was golden-haired with breasts like Perelan honey melons ... she was doll-slim, veiled by silken black hair ... or tall and redheaded ... dark-skinned with eyes like coals ... petite . . . luscious ... every man's desire. The door swung open, and one by one they went through. Their eyes focused on the dancer before them; they heard her song. They pursued her even as they fell on the burning sand Outside, clutching at throats that choked on the air that was only a little wrong for men. They embraced her image as they died.

The little window in Mariposa's room grew bright as day rose on Chimaera once more. It gilded that scattered clothing and the ruined bed, and illuminated the face of the man who lay there, still set in the smile of one who had been possessed by his desire.

Mariposa quietly closed the door and walked back through the empty ways until she reached Station Control. She passed through its corridors, ignoring the banks of machines with their futilely flashing lights, until she came at last to the one machine that mattered and touched its controls to impotence. Then she moved onward to the viewroom where she could see the Shifter ships drifting silently down.

They called her Mariposa, and she had danced for the men of Chimaera, but she was not a woman . . . she was not a woman at all.

About Diana L. Paxson and "The Dancer of Chimaera"

Diana and I go back a long way, too; back to when Diana was an

as-yet-little-published writer of a few short stories. She had written a story I liked tremendously; and I told her that if I got a chance to do a non-Darkover anthology, I'd take it right away. Later that year, Don Wollheim gave me a chance to edit Greyhaven, and the first thing I did was to call Diana and ask her if the story had sold yet. It was still available-what were my fellow editors thinking of?-and it was the first story I bought. My faith in Diana has been justified-all of her work since then has been superb. After half a dozen or so of the Westria novels, she began making a name for herself with historicals; the splendid White Raven gave a new look at the Tris-tram-and-Yseult story, and she has just published a new look at the Siegfried and Brunhilde legend. She collaborated with me on my book The Forest House, though the publishers thought it would sell better with my name alone. At this writing it is out in England, but not here till April 1994. We have already contracted for a big historical sequel. This story is probably the nearest to science fiction ever to appear in the pages of my magazine; to me it has a flavor of a story by C. L. Moore, and hence I couldn't resist it. Nor can I resist the temptation to share it with you.