

STARDANCE

Spider and Jeanne Robinson

I can't really say that I knew her, certainly not the way Seroff knew Isadora. All I know of her childhood and adolescence are the anecdotes she chanced to relate in my hearing—just enough to make me certain that all three of the contradictory biographies on the current best-seller list are fictional. All I know of her adult life are the hours she spent in my presence and on my monitors—more than enough to tell me that every newspaper account I've seen is fictional. Carrington probably believed he knew her better than I, and in a limited sense he was correct— but he would never have written of it, and now he is dead.

But I was her video man, since the days when you touched the camera with your hands, and I knew her backstage: a type of relationship like no other on Earth or off it. I don't believe it can be described to anyone not of the profession—you might think of it as somewhere between co-workers and combat buddies. I was with her the day she came to Skyfac, terrified and determined, to stake her life upon a dream. I watched her work and worked with her for that whole two months, through endless rehearsals, and I have saved every tape and they are not for sale.

And, of course, I saw the Stardance. I was there; I taped it.

I guess I can tell you some things about her.

To begin with, it was not, as Cahill's *Sham* and Von Derski's *Dance Unbound: The Creation of New Modern* suggest, a lifelong fascination with space and space travel that led her to become the race's first zero-gravity dancer. Space was a means to her, not an end, and its vast empty immensity scared her at first. Nor was it, as Melberg's hardcover tabloid *The Real Shara Drummond* claims, because she lacked the talent to make it as a dancer on Earth. If you think free-fall dancing is easier than conventional dance, you try it. Don't forget your dropsickness bag.

But there is a grain of truth in Melberg's slander, as there is in all the best slanders. She could *not* make it on Earth—but not through lack of talent.

I first saw her in Toronto in July of 1984. I headed Toronto Dance Theater's video department at that time, and I hated every minute of it. I

hated everything in those days. The schedule that day called for spending the entire afternoon taping students, a waste of time and tape which I hated more than anything except the phone company. I hadn't seen the year's new crop yet, and was not eager to. I love to watch dance done well—the efforts of a tyro are usually as pleasing to me as a first-year violin student in the next apartment is to you.

My leg was bothering me even more than usual as I walked into the studio. Norrey saw my face and left a group of young hopefuls to come over. “Charlie... ?”

“I know, I know. They're tender fledglings, Charlie, with egos as fragile as an Easter egg in December. Don't bite them, Charlie. Don't even bark at them if you can help it, Charlie.”

She smiled. “Something like that. Leg?”

“Leg.”

Norrey Drummond is a dancer who gets away with looking like a woman because she's small. There's about a hundred and fifteen pounds of her, and most of it is heart. She stands about five four, and is perfectly capable of seeming to tower over the tallest student. She has more energy than the North American Grid, and uses it as efficiently as a vane pump (have you ever studied the principle of a standard piston-type pump? Go look up the principle of a vane pump. I wonder what the original conception of *that* notion must have been like, as an emotional experience). There's a signaturelike uniqueness to her dance, the only reason I can see why she got so few of the really juicy parts in company productions until Modern gave way to New Modern. I liked her because she didn't pity me.

“It's not only the leg,” I admitted. “I hate to see the tender fledglings butcher your choreography.”

“Then you needn't worry. The piece you're taping today is by... one of the students.”

“Oh, fine. I knew I should have called in sick.” She made a face. “What's the catch?”

“Eh?”

“Why did the funny thing happen to your voice just as you got to ‘one of the students’?”

She blushed. “Dammit, she's my sister.”

Norrey and I are the very oldest and closest of friends, but I'd never

chanced to meet a sister—not unusual these days, I suppose.

My eyebrows rose. “She must be good, then.”

“Why, thank you, Charlie.”

“Bullshit. I give compliments right-handed or not at all—I’m not talking about heredity. I mean that you’re so hopelessly ethical you’d bend over backward to avoid nepotism. For you to give your own sister a feature like that, she must be *terrific*.”

“Charlie, she is,” Norrey said simply.

“We’ll see. What’s her name?”

“Shara.” Norrey pointed her out, and I understood the rest of the catch. Shara Drummond was ten years younger than her sister—and seven inches taller, with thirty or forty more pounds. I noted absently that she was stunningly beautiful, but it didn’t deter my dismay—in her best years, Sophia Loren could never have become a modern dancer. Where Norrey was small, Shara was big, and where Norrey was big, Shara was bigger. If I’d seen her on the street I might have whistled appreciatively—but in the studio I frowned.

“My God, Norrey, she’s enormous.”

“Mother’s second husband was a football player,” she said mournfully. “She’s awfully good.”

“If she is good, that is awful. Poor girl. Well, what do you want me to do?”

“What makes you think I want you to do anything?”

“You’re still standing here.”

“Oh. I guess I am. Well... have lunch with us, Charlie?”

“Why?” I knew perfectly well why, but I expected a polite lie.

Not from Norrey Drummond. “Because you two have something in common, I think.”

I paid her honesty the compliment of not wincing. “I suppose we do.”

“Then you will?”

“Right after the session.”

She twinkled and was gone. In a remarkably short time she had organized the studioful of wandering, chattering young people into something that resembled a dance ensemble if you squinted. They warmed up during the twenty minutes it took me to set up and check out my

equipment. I positioned one camera in front of them, one behind, and kept one in my hands for walk-around close-up work. I never triggered it.

There's a game you play in your mind. Every time someone catches or is brought to your attention, you begin making guesses about them. You try to extrapolate their character and habits from their appearance. Him? Surly, disorganized—leaves the cap off the toothpaste and drinks boileermakers. Her? Art-student type, probably uses a diaphragm and writes letters in a stylized calligraphy of her own invention. Them? They look like schoolteachers from Miami, probably here to see what snow looks like, attend a convention. Sometimes I come pretty close. I don't know how I typecast Shara Drummond in those first twenty minutes. The moment she began to dance, all preconceptions left my mind. She became something elemental, something unknowable, a living bridge between our world and the one the Muses live in.

I know, on an intellectual and academic level, all there is to know about dance, and I could not categorize or classify or even really comprehend the dance she danced that afternoon. I saw it, I even appreciated it, but I was not equipped to understand it. My camera dangled from the end of my arm, next to my jaw. Dancers speak of their "center," the place their motion centers around, often quite near the physical center of gravity. You strive to "dance from your center," and the "contraction and release" idea which underlies much of Modern dance depends on the center for its focus of energy. Shara's center seemed to move about the room under its own power, trailing limbs that attached to it by choice rather than necessity. What's the word for the outermost part of the sun, the part that still shows in an eclipse? Corona? That's what her limbs were: four lengthy tongues of flame that followed the center in its eccentric, whirling orbit, writhing fluidly around its surface. That the lower two frequently contacted the floor seemed coincidental—indeed, the other two touched the floor nearly as regularly.

There were other students dancing. I know this because the two automatic video cameras, unlike me, did their job and recorded the piece as a whole. It was called *Birthing*, and depicted the formation of a galaxy that ended up resembling Andromeda. It was only vaguely accurate, literally, but it wasn't intended to be. Symbolically, it felt like the birth of a galaxy.

In retrospect. At the time I was aware only of the galaxy's heart: Shara. Students occluded her from time to time, and I simply never noticed. It hurt to watch her.

If you know anything about dance, this must all sound horrid to you. A

dance about a *nebula*? I know, I know. It's a ridiculous notion. And it worked. In the most gut-level, cellular way it worked—save only that Shara was too good for those around her. She did not belong in that eager crew of awkward, half-trained apprentices. It was like listening to the late Stephen Wonder trying to work with a pickup band in a Montreal bar.

But that wasn't what hurt.

Le Maintenant was shabby, but the food was good and the house brand of grass was excellent. Show a Diner's Club card in there and they'd show you a galley full of dirty dishes. It's gone now. Norrey and Shara declined a toke, but in my line of work it helps. Besides, I needed a few hits. How to tell a lovely lady her dearest dream is hopeless?

I didn't need to ask Shara to know that her dearest dream was to dance. More: to dance professionally. I have often speculated on the motives of the professional artist. Some seek the narcissistic assurance that others will actually pay cash to watch or hear them. Some are so incompetent or disorganized that they can support themselves in no other way. Some have a message which they feel needs expressing. I suppose most artists combine elements of all three. This is no complaint—what they do for us is necessary. We should be grateful that there *are* motives.

But Shara was one of the rare ones. She danced because she needed to. She needed to say things which could be said in no other way, and she needed to take her meaning and her living from the saying of them. Anything else would have demeaned and devalued the essential statement of her dance. I know this, from watching that one dance.

Between toking up and keeping my mouth full and then toking again (a mild amount to offset the slight down that eating brings), it was over half an hour before I was required to say anything, beyond an occasional grunted response to the luncheon chatter of the ladies. As the coffee arrived, Shara looked me square in the eye and said, "Do you talk, Charlie?"

She was Norrey's sister, all right.

"Only inanities."

"No such thing. Inane people, maybe."

"Do you enjoy dancing, Miss Drummond?"

She answered seriously. "Define 'enjoy.'"

I opened my mouth and closed it, perhaps three times. You try it.

“And for God’s sake tell me why you’re so intent on not talking to me. You’ve got me worried.”

“Shara!” Norrey looked dismayed.

“Hush. I want to know.”

I took a crack at it. “Shara, before he died I had the privilege of meeting Bertram Ross. I had just seen him dance. A producer who knew and liked me took me backstage, the way you take a kid to see Santa Claus. I had expected him to look even older off stage, at rest. He looked younger, as if that incredible motion of his was barely in check. He talked to me. After a while I stopped opening my mouth, because nothing ever came out.”

She waited, expecting more. Only gradually did she comprehend the compliment and its dimension. I had assumed it would be obvious. Most artists *expect* to be complimented. When she did twig, she did not blush or simper. She did not cock her head and say “Oh, come on.” She did not say “You flatter me.” She did not look away.

She nodded slowly and said, “Thank you, Charlie. That’s worth a lot more than idle chatter.” There was a suggestion of sadness in her smile, as if we shared a bitter joke.

“You’re welcome.”

“For heaven’s sake, Norrey, what are you looking so upset about?”

The cat now had Norrey’s tongue.

“She’s disappointed in me,” I said. “I said the wrong thing.”

“That was the wrong thing?”

“It should have been ‘Miss Drummond, I think you ought to give up dancing.’”

“It should have been ‘*Shara*, I think you ought’... *what?*”

“Charlie,” Norrey began.

“I was supposed to tell you that we can’t all be professional dancers, that they also surf who only sand and wade. Shara, I was supposed to tell you to dump the dance—before it dumps you.”

In my need to be honest with her, I had been more brutal than was necessary, I thought. I was to learn that bluntness never dismayed Shara. She demanded it.

“Why you?” was all she said.

“We’re inhabiting the same vessel, you and I. We’ve both got an itch

that our bodies just won't let us scratch."

Her eyes softened. "What's your itch?"

"The same as yours."

"Eh?"

"The man was supposed to come and fix the phone on Thursday. My roommate, Karen, and I had an all-day rehearsal. We left a note. Mister telephone man, we had to go out, and we sure couldn't call you, heh heh. Please get the key from the concierge and come on in; the phone's in the bedroom. The phone man never showed up. They never do." My hands seemed to be shaking. "We came home up the back stairs from the alley. The phone was still dead, but I never thought to take down the note on the front door. I got sick the next morning. Cramps. Vomiting. Karen and I were just friends, but she stayed home to take care of me. I suppose on a Friday night the note seemed even more plausible. He slipped the lock with a piece of plastic, and Karen came out of the kitchen as he was unplugging the stereo. He was so indignant he shot her. Twice. The noise scared him; by the time I got there he was halfway out the door. He just had time to put a slug through my hip joint, and then he was gone. They never got him. They never even came to fix the phone." My hands were under control now. "Karen was a damned good dancer, but I was better. In my head, I still am."

Her eyes were round. "You're not Charlie... Charles *Armstead*."

I nodded.

"Oh my God. So *that's* where you went."

I was shocked by how she looked. It brought me back from the cold and windy border of self-pity. I began a little to pity her. I should have guessed the depth of her empathy. And in the way that really mattered, we were too damned alike—we *did* share the same bitter joke. I wondered why I had wanted to shock her.

"They couldn't repair the joint?" she asked softly.

"I can walk splendidly. Given a strong enough motivation, I can even run short distances. I can't dance worth a damn."

"So you became a video man."

"Three years ago. People who know both video and dance are about as common as garter belts these days. Oh, they've been taping dance since the seventies—with the imagination of a network news cameraman. If you film a stage play with two cameras in the orchestra pit, is it a movie?"

“You do for dance what the movie camera did for drama?”

“Pretty fair analogy. Where it breaks down is that dance is more analogous to music than to drama. You can’t stop and start it, or go back and retake a scene that didn’t go in the can right, or reverse the chronology to get a tidy shooting schedule. The event happens and you record it. What I am is what the record industry pays top dollar for—a mix man with savvy enough to know which ax is wailing at the moment and mike it high—and the sense to have given the heaviest dudes the best mikes. There are a few others like me. I’m the best.”

She took it the way she had the compliment to herself—at face value. Usually when I say things like that I don’t give a damn what reaction I get, or I’m being salty and hoping for outrage. But I was pleased at her acceptance, pleased enough for it to bother me. A faint irritation made me go brutal again, *knowing* it wouldn’t work. “So what all this leads to is that Norrey was hoping I’d suggest some similar form of sublimation for you. Because I’ll make it in dance before you will.”

She stubborned up. “I don’t buy that, Charlie. I know what you’re talking about, I’m not a fool, but I think I can beat it.”

“Sure you will. *You ‘re too damned big, lady.* You’ve got tits like both halves of a prize honeydew melon and an ass that any actress in Hollywood would sell her parents for, and in Modern dance that makes you d-e-d dead, you haven’t got a chance. Beat it? You’ll beat your head in first. How’m I doing, Norrey?”

“For Christ’s sake, Charlie!”

I softened. I can’t work Norrey into a tantrum—I like her too much. “I’m sorry, hon. My leg’s giving me the mischief, and I’m stinkin’ mad. She *ought* to make it—and she won’t. She’s your sister, and so it saddens you. Well, I’m a total stranger, and it enrages me.”

“How do you think it makes me feel?” Shara blazed, startling us both. I hadn’t known she had so much voice. “So you want me to pack it in and rent me a camera, huh, Charlie? Or maybe sell apples outside the studio?” A ripple ran up her jaw. “Well, I will be damned by all the gods in Southern California before I’ll pack it in. God gave me the large economy size, but there is not a surplus pound on it and it fits me like a glove and I can by Jesus *dance* it and I will. You may be right—I may beat my head in first. But I will get it done.” She took a deep breath. “Now I thank you for your kind intentions, Char—Mr. Armst— Oh shit.” The tears came and she left hastily, spilling a quarter cup of cold coffee on Norrey’s lap.

“Charlie,” Norrey said through clenched teeth, “why do I like you so

much?”

“Dancers are dumb.” I gave her my handkerchief.

“Oh.” She patted at her lap a while. “How come you like me?”

“Video men are smart.”

“Oh.”

I spent the afternoon in my apartment, reviewing the footage I’d shot that morning, and the more I watched, the madder I got.

Dance requires intense motivation at an extraordinarily early age—a blind devotion, a gamble on the as-yet-unrealized potentials of heredity and nutrition. You can begin, say, classical ballet training at age six—and at fourteen find yourself broad-shouldered, the years of total effort utterly wasted. Shara had set her sights on Modern dance—and found out too late that God had dealt her the body of a woman.

She was not fat—you have seen her. She was tall, big-boned tall, and on that great frame was built a rich, ripely female body. As I ran and reran the tapes of *Birthing*, the pain grew in me until I even forgot the ever-present aching of my own leg. It was like watching a supremely gifted basketball player who stood four feet tall.

To make it in Modern dance, it is essential to get into a company. You cannot be seen unless you are visible. Norrey had told me, on the walk back to the studio, of Shara’s efforts to get into a company—and I could have predicted nearly every word.

“Merce *Cunningham* saw her dance, Charlie. Martha Graham saw her dance, just before she died. Both of them praised her warmly, for her choreography as much as for her technique. Neither offered her a position. I’m not even sure I blame them—I can sort of understand.”

Norrey could understand all right. It was her own defect magnified a hundredfold: uniqueness. A company member must be capable of excellent solo work—but she must also be able to blend into group effort, in ensemble work. Shara’s very uniqueness made her virtually useless as a company member. She could not help but draw the eye.

And, once drawn, the male eye at least would never leave. Modern dancers must sometimes work nude these days, and it is therefore meet that they have the body of a fourteen-year-old boy. We may have ladies dancing with few or no clothes on up here, but by God it is Art. An actress or a musician or a singer or a painter may be lushly endowed, deliciously

rounded—but a dancer must be nearly as sexless as a high-fashion model. Perhaps God knows why. Shara could not have purged her dance of her sexuality even if she had been interested in trying, and as I watched her dance on my monitor and in my mind’s eye, I knew she was not.

Why did her genius have to lie in the only occupation besides model and nun in which sexiness is a liability? It broke my heart, by empathic analogy.

“It’s no good at all, is it?”

I whirled and barked. “Dammit, you made me bite my tongue.”

“I’m sorry.” She came from the doorway into my living room. “Norrey told me how to find the place. The door was ajar.”

“I forgot to shut it when I came home.”

“You leave it open?”

“I’ve learned the lesson of history. No junkie, no matter how strung out he is, will enter an apartment with the door ajar and the radio on. Obviously there’s someone home. And you’re right, it’s no damn good at all. Sit down.”

She sat on the couch. Her hair was down now, and I liked it better that way. I shut off the monitor and popped the tape, tossing it on a shelf.

“I came to apologize. I shouldn’t have blown up at you at lunch. You were trying to help me.”

“You had it coming. I imagine by now you’ve built up quite a head of steam.”

“Five years’ worth. I figured I’d start in the States instead of Canada. Go farther faster. Now I’m back in Toronto and I don’t think I’m going to make it here either. You’re right, Mr. Armstead—I’m too damned big. Amazons don’t dance.”

“It’s still Charlie. Listen, something I want to ask you. That last gesture, at the end of *Birthing*—what was that? I thought it was a beckoning, Norrey says it was a farewell, and now that I’ve run the tape it looks like a yearning, a reaching out.”

“Then it worked.”

“Pardon?”

“It seemed to me that the birth of a galaxy called for all three. They’re so close together in spirit it seemed silly to give each a separate movement.”

“Mmm.” Worse and worse. Suppose Einstein had had aphasia. “Why

couldn't you have been a rotten dancer? That'd just be irony. This"—I pointed to the tape—"is high tragedy."

"Aren't you going to tell me I can still dance for myself?"

"No. For you that'd be worse than not dancing at all."

"My God, you're perceptive. Or am I that easy to read?"

I shrugged.

"Oh, Charlie," she burst out, "what am I going to do?"

"You'd better not ask me that." My voice sounded funny.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm already two thirds in love with you. And because you're not in love with me and never will be. And so that is the sort of question you shouldn't ask me."

It jolted her a little, but she recovered quickly. Her eyes softened, and she shook her head slowly. "You even know why I'm not, don't you?"

"And why you won't be."

I was terribly afraid she was going to say "Charlie, I'm sorry." But she surprised me again. What she said was "I can count on the fingers of one foot the number of grown-up men I've ever met. I'm grateful for you. I guess ironic tragedies come in pairs?"

"Sometimes."

"Well, now all I have to do is figure out what to do with my life. That should kill the weekend."

"Will you continue your classes?"

"Might as well. It's never a waste of time to study. Norrey's teaching me things."

All of a sudden my mind started to percolate. Man is a rational animal, right? Right? "What if I had a better idea?"

"If you've got another idea, it's better. Speak."

"Do you have to have an audience? I mean, does it have to be *live*?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe there's a back way in. Look, they're building tape facilities into all the TVs nowadays, right? And by now everybody has collected all the old movies and Ernie Kovacs programs and such that they always wanted, and now they're looking for new stuff. Exotic stuff, too esoteric for network

or local broadcast, stuff that—”

“The independent video companies, you’re talking about.”

“Right. TDT is thinking of entering the market, and the Graham company already has.”

“So?”

“So suppose we go freelance? You and me? You dance it and I’ll tape it: a straight business deal. I’ve got a few connections, and maybe I can get more. I could name you ten acts in the music business right now that never go on tour—just record and record. Why don’t you bypass the structure of the dance companies and take a chance on the public? Maybe word of mouth could...”

Her face was beginning to light up like a jack-o’-lantern. “Charlie, do you think it could work? Do you really think so?”

“I don’t think it has a snowball’s chance.” I crossed the room, opened up the beer fridge, took out the snowball I keep there in the summer, and tossed it at her. She caught it, but just barely, and when she realized what it was, she burst out laughing. “I’ve got just enough faith in the idea to quit working for TDT and put my time into it. I’ll invest my time, my tape, my equipment, and my savings. Ante up.”

She tried to get sober, but the snowball froze her fingers and she broke up again. “A snowball in July. You madman. Count me in. I’ve got a little money saved. And... and I guess I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“I guess not.”

The next three years were some of the most exciting years of my life, of both our lives. While I watched and taped, Shara transformed herself from a potentially great dancer into something truly awesome. She did something I’m not sure I can explain.

She became dance’s analogy of the jazzman.

Dance was, for Shara, self-expression, pure and simple, first, last and always. Once she freed herself of the attempt to fit into the world of company dance, she came to regard choreography per se as an *obstacle* to her self-expression, as a preprogrammed rut, inexorable as a script and as limiting. And so she devalued it.

A jazzman may blow *Night in Tunisia* for a dozen consecutive nights, and each evening will be a different experience, as he interprets and reinterprets the melody according to his mood of the moment. Total unity

of artist and his art: spontaneous creation. The melodic starting point distinguishes the result from pure anarchy.

In just this way Shara devalued preperformance choreography to a starting point, a framework on which to build whatever the moment demanded, and then jammed around it. She learned in those three busy years to dismantle the interface between herself and her dance. Dancers have always tended to sneer at improv dancing, even while they practiced it, in the studio, for the looseness it gave. They failed to see that *planned* improv, improv around a theme fully thought out in advance, was the natural next step in dance. Shara took the step. You must be very, very good to get away with that much freedom. She was good enough.

There's no point in detailing the professional fortunes of Drumstead Enterprises over those three years. We worked hard, we made some magnificent tapes, and we couldn't sell them for paperweights. A home video cassette industry indeed existed— and they knew as much about Modern dance as the record industry knew about the blues when *they* started. The big outfits wanted credentials, and the little outfits wanted cheap talent. Finally we even got desperate enough to try the schlock houses— and learned what we already knew. They didn't have the distribution, the prestige, or the technical specs for the critics to pay any attention to them. Word-of-mouth advertising is like a gene pool—if it isn't a certain minimum size to start with, it doesn't get anywhere. “Spider” John Koerner is an incredibly talented musician and songwriter who has been making and selling his own records since 1972. How many of you have ever heard of him?

In May of 1987 I opened my mailbox in the lobby and found the letter from VisuEnt Inc., terminating our option with deepest sorrow and no severance. I went straight over to Shara's apartment, and my leg felt as if the bone marrow had been replaced with thermite and ignited. It was a very long walk.

She was working on *Weight Is a Verb* when I got there. Converting her big living room into a studio had cost time, energy, skull sweat, and a fat bribe to the landlord, but it was cheaper than renting time in a studio, considering the sets we wanted. It looked like high mountain country that day, and I hung my hat on a fake alder when I entered.

She flashed me a smile and kept moving, building up to greater and greater leaps. She looked like the most beautiful mountain goat I ever saw. I was in a foul mood and I wanted to kill the music (McLaughlin and Miles together, leaping some themselves), but I never could interrupt Shara when she was dancing. She built it gradually, with directional

counterpoint, until she seemed to hurl herself into the air, stay there until she was damned good and ready, and then hurl herself down again. Sometimes she rolled when she hit and sometimes she landed on her hands, and always the energy of falling was transmuted into something instead of being absorbed. It was total energy output, and by the time she was done I had calmed down enough to be almost philosophical about our mutual professional ruin.

She ended up collapsed in upon herself, head bowed, exquisitely humbled in her attempt to defy gravity. I couldn't help applauding. It felt corny, but I couldn't help it.

"Thank you, Charlie."

"I'll be damned. Weight *is* a verb. I thought you were crazy when you told me the title."

"It's one of the strongest verbs in dance—and you can make it do *anything*."

"Almost anything."

"Eh?"

"VisuEnt gave us our contract back."

"Oh." Nothing showed in her eyes, but I knew what was behind them. "Well, who's next on the list?"

"There is no one left on the list."

"*Oh*." This time it showed. "Oh."

"We should have remembered. Great artists are never honored in their own lifetime. What we ought to do is drop dead— then we'd be all set."

In my way I was trying to be strong for her, and she knew it and tried to be strong for me.

"Maybe what we should do is go into death insurance, for artists," she said. "We pay the client premiums against a controlling interest in his estate, and we insure that he'll die."

"We can't lose. And if he becomes famous in his lifetime he can buy out."

"Terrific. Let's stop this before I laugh myself to death."

"Yeah."

She was silent for a long time. My own mind was racing efficiently, but the transmission seemed to be blown—it wouldn't *go* anywhere. Finally

she got up and turned off the music machine, which had been whining softly ever since the tape ended. It made a loud *click*.

“Norrey’s got some land in Prince Edward Island,” she said, not meeting my eyes. “There’s a house.”

I tried to head her off with the punch line from the old joke about the kid shoveling out the elephant cage in the circus whose father offers to take him back and set him up with a decent job. “What? And leave show business?”

“Screw show business,” she said softly. “If I went out to PEI now, maybe I could get the land cleared and plowed in time to get a garden in.” Her expression changed. “How about you?”

“Me? I’ll be okay. TDT asked me to come back.”

“That was six months ago.”

“They asked again. Last week.”

“And you said no. Moron.”

“Maybe so, maybe so.”

“The whole damn thing was a waste of time. All that time. All that energy. All that work. I might as well have been farming in PEI—by now the soil’d be starting to bear well. What a waste, Charlie, what a stinking waste.”

“No, I don’t think so, Shara. It sounds glib to say that ‘nothing is wasted,’ but—well, it’s like that dance you just did. Maybe you can’t beat gravity—but it surely is a beautiful thing to *try*.”

“Yeah, I know. Remember the Light Brigade. Remember the Alamo. They tried.” She laughed, a bitter laugh.

“Yes, and so did Jesus of Nazareth. Did you do it for material reward, or because it needed doing? If nothing else, we now have several hundred thousand feet of the most magnificent dance recordings on tape, commercial value zero, real value incalculable, and by me that is no waste. It’s over now, and we’ll both go do the next thing, but it was *not a waste*.” I discovered that I was shouting, and stopped.

She closed her mouth. After a while she tried a smile. “You’re right, Charlie. It wasn’t waste. I’m a better dancer than I ever was.”

“Damn right. You’ve transcended choreography.”

She smiled ruefully. “Yeah. Even Norrey thinks it’s a dead end.”

“It is *not* a dead end. There’s more to poetry than haiku and sonnets.

Dancers don't *have* to be robots, delivering memorized lines with their bodies."

"They do if they want to make a living."

"We'll try again in a few years. Maybe they'll be ready then."

"Sure. Let me get us some drinks."

I slept with her that night, for the first and last time. In the morning I broke down the set in the living room while she packed. I promised to write. I promised to come and visit when I could. I carried her bags down to the car, and stowed them inside. I kissed her and waved goodbye. I went looking for a drink, and at four o'clock the next morning a mugger decided I looked drunk enough and I broke his jaw, his nose, and two ribs, and then sat down on him and cried. On Monday morning I showed up at the studio with my hat in my hand and a mouth like a bus-station ashtray and crawled back into my old job. Norrey didn't ask any questions. What with rising food prices, I gave up eating anything but bourbon, and in six months I was fired. It went like that for a long time.

I never did write to her. I kept getting bogged down after "Dear Shara..."

When I got to the point of selling my video equipment for booze, a relay clicked somewhere and I took stock of myself. The stuff was all the life I had left, and so I went to the local Al-Anon instead of the pawnshop and got sober. After a while my soul got numb, and I stopped flinching when I woke up. A hundred times I began to wipe the tapes I still had of Shara—she had copies of her own—but in the end I could not. From time to time I wondered how *she* was doing, and I could not bear to find out. If Norrey heard anything, she didn't tell me about it. She even tried to get me my job back a third time, but it was hopeless. Reputation can be a terrible thing once you've blown it. I was lucky to land a job with an educational TV station in New Brunswick.

It was a long couple of years.

Vidphones were coming out by 1990, and I had breadboarded one of my own without the knowledge or consent of the phone company, which I still hated more than anything. When the peanut bulb I had replaced the damned bell with started glowing softly on and off one evening in June, I put the receiver on the audio pickup and energized the tube, in case the caller was also equipped. "Hello?"

She was. When Shara's face appeared, I got a cold cube of fear in the pit of my stomach, because I had quit seeing her face everywhere when I quit

drinking, and I had been thinking lately of hitting the sauce again. When I blinked and she was still there, I felt a little better and tried to speak. It didn't work.

"Hello, Charlie. It's been a long time."

The second time it worked. "Seems like yesterday. Somebody else's yesterday."

"Yes, it does. It took me *days* to find you. Norrey's in Paris, and no one else knew where you'd gone."

"Yeah. How's farming?"

"I... I've put that away, Charlie. It's even more creative than dancing, but it's not the same."

"Then what *are* you doing?"

"Working."

"*Dancing?*"

"Yes. Charlie, I need you. I mean, I have a job for you. I need your cameras and your eye."

"Never mind the qualifications. Any kind of need will do. *Where are you?* When's the next plane there? Which cameras do I pack?"

"New York, an hour from now, and none of them. I didn't mean 'your cameras' literally—unless you're using GLX-5000s and a Hamilton Board lately."

I whistled. It hurt my mouth. "Not on my budget. Besides, I'm old-fashioned—I like to hold 'em with my hands."

"For this job you'll use a Hamilton, and it'll be a twenty-input Masterchrome, brand new."

"You grew poppies on that farm? Or just struck diamonds with the rototiller?"

"You'll be getting paid by Bryce Carrington."

I blinked.

"Now will you catch that plane so I can tell you about it? The New Age, ask for the Presidential Suite."

"The hell with the plane, I'll walk. Quicker." I hung up.

According to the *Time* magazine in my dentist's waiting room, Bryce Carrington was the genius who had become a multimillionaire by convincing a number of giants of industry to underwrite Skyfac, the great

orbiting complex that kicked the bottom out of the crystals market. As I recalled the story, some rare polioli-like disease had wasted both his legs and put him in a wheelchair. But the legs had lost strength, not function—in lessened gravity, they worked well enough. So he created Skyfac, establishing mining crews on Luna to supply it with cheap raw materials, and lived in orbit under reduced gravity. His picture made him look like a reasonably successful author (as opposed to writer). Other than that I knew nothing about him. I paid little attention to news and none at all to space news.

The New Age was *the* hotel in New York in those days, built on the ruins of the Sheraton. Ultra-efficient security, bulletproof windows, carpet thicker than the outside air, and a lobby of an architectural persuasion that John D. MacDonald once called “Early Dental Plate.” It stank of money. I was glad I’d made the effort to locate a necktie, and I wished I’d shined my shoes. An incredible man blocked my way as I came in through the air lock. He moved and was built like the toughest, fastest bouncer I ever saw, and he dressed and acted like God’s butler. He said his name was Perry. He asked if he could help me as though he didn’t think so.

“Yes, Perry. Would you mind lifting up one of your feet?”

“Why?”

“I’ll bet twenty dollars you’ve shined your soles.”

Half his mouth smiled, and he didn’t move an inch. “Whom did you wish to see?”

“Shara Drummond.”

“Not registered.”

“The Presidential Suite.”

“Oh.” Light dawned. “Mr. Carrington’s lady. You should have said so. Wait here, please.” While he phoned to verify that I was expected, keeping his eye on me and his hand near his pocket, I swallowed my heart and rearranged my face. It took some time. So that was how it was. All right then. That was how it was.

Perry came back and gave me the little button transmitter that would let me walk the corridors of the New Age without being cut down by automatic laser fire, and explained carefully that it would blow a largish hole in me if I attempted to leave the building without returning it. From his manner I gathered that I had just skipped four grades in social standing. I thanked him, though I’m damned if I knew why.

I followed the green fluorescent arrows that appeared on the bulbless

ceiling, and came after a long and scenic walk to the Presidential Suite. Shara was waiting at the door, in something like an angel's pajamas. It made all that big body look delicate. "Hello, Charlie."

I was jovial and hearty. "Hi, babe. Swell joint. How've you been keeping yourself?"

"I haven't been."

"Well, how's Carrington been keeping you, then?" Steady, boy.

"Come in, Charlie."

I went in. It looked like where the Queen stayed when she was in town, and I'm sure she enjoyed it. You could have landed an airplane in the living room without waking anyone in the bedroom. It had two pianos. Only one fireplace, barely big enough to barbecue a buffalo—you have to scrimp somewhere, I guess. Roger Kellaway was on the quadio, and for a wild moment I thought he was actually in the suite, playing some unseen third piano. So this was how it was.

"Can I get you something, Charlie?"

"Oh, sure. Hash oil, Tangier Supreme. Dom Perignon for the pipe."

Without cracking a smile she went to a cabinet, which looked like a midget cathedral, and produced precisely what I had ordered. I kept my own features impassive and lit up. The bubbles tickled my throat, and the rush was exquisite. I felt myself relaxing, and when we had passed the narghile's mouthpiece a few times I felt her relax. We looked at each other then—really looked at each other—then at the room around us and then at each other again. Simultaneously we roared with laughter, a laughter that blew all the wealth out of the room and let in richness. Her laugh was the same whooping, braying belly laugh I remembered so well, an unselfconscious and lusty laugh, and it reassured me tremendously. I was so relieved I couldn't stop laughing myself, and that kept *her* going, and just as we might have stopped she pursed her lips and blew a stuttered arpeggio. There's an old recording called the *Spike Jones Laughing Record*, where the tuba player tries to play "The Flight of the Bumblebee" and falls down laughing, and the whole band breaks up and horse-laughes for a full two minutes, and every time they run out of air the tuba player tries another flutter and roars and they all break up again, and once when Shara was blue I bet her ten dollars that she couldn't listen to that record without at least giggling and I won. When I understood now that she was quoting it, I shuddered and dissolved into great whoops of new laughter, and a minute later we had reached the stage where we literally laughed ourselves out of our chairs and lay on the floor in agonies of mirth, weakly

pounding the floor and howling. I take that laugh out of my memory now and then and rerun it—but not often, for such records deteriorate drastically with play.

At last we Dopplered back down to panting grins, and I helped her to her feet.

“What a perfectly dreadful place,” I said, still chuckling.

She glanced around and shuddered. “Oh God, it *is*, Charlie. It must be awful to need this much front.”

“For a horrid while I thought *you* did.”

She sobered, and met my eyes. “Charlie, I wish I could resent that. In a way I do need it.”

My eyes narrowed. “Just what do you mean?”

“I need Bryce Carrington.”

“This time you can trot out the qualifiers. *How* do you need him?”

“I need his money,” she cried.

How can you relax and tense up at the same time? “Oh, *damn* it, Shara! Is *that* how you’re going to get to dance? Buy your way in? What does a critic go for these days?”

“Charlie, stop it. I need Carrington to get seen. He’s going to rent me a hall, that’s all.”

“If that’s all, let’s get out of the dump right now. I can bor... get enough cash to rent you any hall in the world, and I’m just as willing to risk my money.”

“Can you get me Skyfac?”

“*Uh?*”

I couldn’t for the life of me imagine why she proposed to go to Skyfac to dance. Why not Antarctica?

“Shara, you know even less about space than I do, but you must know that a satellite broadcast doesn’t have to be made from a satellite?”

“Idiot. It’s the setting I want.”

I thought about it. “Moon’d be better, visually. Mountains. Light. Contrast.”

“The visual aspect is secondary. I don’t want one-sixth g, Charlie. I want zero gravity.”

My mouth hung open.

“And I want you to be my video man.”

God, she was a rare one. What I needed then was to sit there with my mouth open and think for several minutes. She let me do just that, waiting patiently for me to work it all out.

“Weight isn’t a verb anymore, Charlie,” she said finally. “That dance ended on the assertion that you can’t beat gravity—you said so yourself. Well, that statement is incorrect—obsolete. The dance of the twenty-first century will have to acknowledge that.”

“And it’s just what you need to make it. A new kind of dance for a new kind of dancer. Unique. It’ll catch the public eye, and you should have the field entirely to yourself for years. I like it, Shara. I like it. But can you pull it off?”

“I thought about what you said: that you can’t beat gravity but it’s beautiful to try. It stayed in my head for months, and then one day I was visiting a neighbor with a TV and I saw newsreels of the crew working on Skyfac Two. I was up all night thinking, and the next morning I came up to the States and got a job in Skyfac One. I’ve been up there for nearly a year, getting next to Carrington. I can do it, Charlie, I can make it work.” There was a ripple in her jaw that I had seen before—when she told me off in *Le Maintenant*. It was a ripple of determination.

Still I frowned. “With Carrington’s backing.”

Her eyes left mine. “There’s no such thing as a free lunch.”

“What does he charge?”

She failed to answer, for long enough to answer me. In that instant, I began believing in God again, for the first time in years, just to be able to hate Him.

But I kept my mouth shut. She was old enough to manage her own finances. The price of a dream gets higher every year. Hell, I’d half expected it from the moment she’d called me.

But only half.

“Charlie, don’t just sit there with your face all knotted up. Say something. Cuss me out, call me a whore, *something*.”

“Nuts. You be your own conscience, I have trouble enough being my own. You want to dance, you’ve got a patron. So now you’ve got a video man.”

I hadn’t intended to say that last sentence at all.

Strangely, it almost seemed to disappoint her at first. But then she relaxed and smiled. “Thank you, Charlie. Can you get out of whatever you’re doing right away?”

“I’m working for an educational station in Shediac. I even got to shoot some dance footage. A dancing bear from the London Zoo. The amazing thing was how well he danced.” She grinned. “I can get free.”

“I’m glad. I don’t think I could pull this off without you.”

“I’m working for you. Not for Carrington.”

“All right.”

“Where is the great man, anyway? Scuba diving in the bathtub?”

“No,” came a quiet voice from the doorway. “I’ve been sky diving in the lobby.”

His wheelchair was a mobile throne. He wore a four-hundred-dollar suit the color of strawberry ice cream, a powder-blue turtleneck, and one gold earring. The shoes were genuine leather. The watch was that newfangled bandless kind that literally tells you the time. He wasn’t tall enough for her, and his shoulders were absurdly broad, although the suit tried hard to deny both. His eyes were like twin blueberries. His smile was that of a shark wondering which part will taste best. I wanted to crush his head between two boulders.

Shara was on her feet. “Bryce, this is Charles Armstead. I told you...”

“Oh yes. The video chap.” He rolled forward and extended an impeccably manicured hand. “I’m Bryce Carrington, Armstead.”

I remained seated, hands in my lap. “Oh yes. The rich chap.”

One eyebrow rose an urbane quarter inch. “Oh, my. Another rude one. Well, if you’re as good as Shara says you are, you’re entitled.”

“I’m rotten.”

The smile faded. “Let’s stop fencing, Armstead. I don’t expect manners from creative people, but I have far more significant contempt than yours available if I need any. Now I’m tired of this damned gravity and I’ve had a rotten day testifying for a friend and it looks like they’re going to recall me tomorrow. Do you want the job or don’t you?”

He had me there. I did. “Yeah.”

“All right, then. Your room is 2772. We’ll be going up to Skyfac in two days. Be here at eight A.M.”

“I’ll want to talk with you about what you’ll be needing, Charlie,” Shara

said. “Give me a call tomorrow.”

I whirled to face her, and she flinched from my eyes.

Carrington failed to notice. “Yes, make a list of your requirements by tomorrow, so it can go up with us. Don’t scrimp—if you don’t fetch it, you’ll do without. Good night, Armstead.”

I faced him. “Good night, Mr. Carrington.” Suh.

He turned toward the narghile, and Shara hurried to refill the chamber and bowl. I turned away hastily and made for the door. My leg hurt so much I nearly fell on the way, but I set my jaw and made it. When I reached the door I said to myself, You will now open the door and go through it, and then I spun on my heel. “Carrington!”

He blinked, surprised to discover I still existed. “Yes?”

“Are you *aware* that she doesn’t love you in the slightest? Does that matter to you in any way?” My voice was high, and my fists were surely clenched.

“Oh,” he said, and then again, “Oh. So that’s what it is. I didn’t *think* success alone merited that much contempt.” He put down the mouthpiece and folded his fingers together. “Let me tell you something, Armstead. No one has ever loved me, to my knowledge. This suite does not love me.” His voice took on human feeling for the first time. “But it is *mine*. Now get out.”

I opened my mouth to tell him where to put his job, and then I saw Shara’s face, and the pain in it suddenly made me deeply ashamed. I left at once, and when the door closed behind me I vomited on a rug that was worth slightly less than a Hamilton Masterchrome board. I was sorry then that I’d worn a necktie.

The trip to Pike’s Peak Spaceport, at least, was aesthetically pleasurable. I enjoy air travel, gliding among stately clouds, watching the rolling procession of mountains and plains, vast jigsaws of farmland and intricate mosaics of suburbia unfolding below.

But the jump to Skyfac in Carrington’s personal shuttle, *That First Step*, might as well have been an old *Space Commando* rerun. I *know* they can’t put portholes in space ships—but dammit, a shipboard video relay conveys no better resolution, color values, or presence than you get on your living-room tube. The only differences are that the stars don’t “move” to give the illusion of travel, and there’s no director editing the POV to give you dramatically interesting shots.

Aesthetically speaking. The *experiential* difference is that they do not, while you are watching the Space Commando sell hemorrhoid remedies, strap you into a couch, batter you with thunders, make you weigh better than half a ton for an unreasonably long time, and then drop you off the edge of the world into weightlessness. I had been half expecting nausea, but what I got was even more shocking: the sudden, unprecedented, total absence of pain in my leg. At that, Shara was hit worse than I was, barely managing to deploy her dropsickness bag in time. Carrington unstrapped and administered an antinausea injection with sure movements. It seemed to take forever to hit her, but when it did there was an enormous change—color and strength returned rapidly, and she was apparently fully recovered by the time the pilot announced that we were commencing docking and would everyone please strap in and shut up. I half expected Carrington to bark manners into him, but apparently the industrial magnate was not that sort of fool. He shut up and strapped himself down.

My leg didn't hurt in the slightest. Not at all.

The Skyfac complex looked like a disorderly heap of bicycle tires and beach balls of various sizes. The one our pilot made for was more like a tractor tire. We matched course, became its axle, and matched spin, and the damned thing grew a spoke that caught us square in the air lock. The air lock was “overhead” of our couches, but we entered and left it feet first. A few yards into the spoke, the direction we traveled became “down,” and handholds became a ladder. Weight increased with every step, but even when we had emerged in a rather large cubical compartment it was far less than Earth normal. Nonetheless, my leg resumed biting me.

The room tried to be a classic reception room, high-level (“Please be seated. His Majesty will see you shortly”), but the low g and the p-suits racked along two walls spoiled the effect. Unlike the Space Commando's armor, a real pressure suit looks like nothing so much as a people-shaped baggie, and they look particularly silly in repose. A young dark-haired man in tweed rose from behind a splendidly gadgeted desk and smiled. “Good to see you, Mr. Carrington, I hope you had a pleasant jump.”

“Fine, thanks, Tom. You remember Shara, of course. This is Charles Armstead. Tom McGillicuddy.” We both displayed our teeth and said we were delighted to meet each other. I could see that beneath the pleasantries McGillicuddy was upset about something.

“Nils and Mr. Longmire are waiting in your office, sir. There's... there's been another sighting.”

“God *damn* it,” Carrington began, and cut himself off. I stared at him.

The full force of my best sarcasm had failed to anger this man. “All right. Take care of my guests while I go hear what Longmire has to say.” He started for the door, moving like a beach ball in slow motion but under his own power. “Oh yes— the *Step* is loaded to the gun’ls with bulky equipment, Tom. Have her brought around to the cargo bays. Store the equipment in Six.” He left, looking worried. McGillicuddy activated his desk and gave the necessary orders.

“What’s going on, Tom?” Shara asked when he was through.

He looked at me before replying. “Pardon my asking, Mr. Armstead, but—are you a newsman?”

“Charlie. No, I’m not. I am a video man, but I work for Shara.”

“Mmmm. Well, you’ll hear about it sooner or later. About two weeks ago, an object appeared within the orbit of Neptune, just appeared out of nowhere. There were... certain other anomalies. It stayed put for half a day and then vanished again. The Space Command slapped a hush on it, but it’s common knowledge on board Skyfac.”

“And the thing has been sighted again?” Shara asked.

“Just beyond the orbit of Jupiter.”

I was only mildly interested. No doubt there was an explanation for the phenomenon, and since Isaac Asimov wasn’t around I would doubtless never understand a word of it. Most of us gave up on intelligent nonhuman life when the last intelsystem probe came back empty. “Little green men, I suppose. Can you show us the lounge, Tom? I understand it’s just like the one we’ll be working in.”

He seemed to welcome the change of subject. “Sure thing.”

McGillicuddy led us through a p-door opposite the one Carrington had used, through long halls whose floors curved up ahead of and behind us. Each was outfitted differently, each was full of busy, purposeful people, and each reminded me somehow of the lobby of the New Age, or perhaps of the old movie *2001*. Futuristic Opulence, so understated as to fairly shriek. Wall Street lifted bodily into orbit—the *clocks* were on Wall Street time. I tried to make myself believe that cold, empty space lay a short distance away in any direction, but it was impossible. I decided it was a good thing spacecraft didn’t have portholes— once he got used to the low gravity, a man might forget and open one to throw out a cigar.

I studied McGillicuddy as we walked. He was immaculate in every respect, from necktie down to nail polish, and he wore no jewelry at all. His hair was short and black, his beard inhibited, and his eyes

surprisingly warm in a professionally sterile face. I wondered what he had sold his soul for. I hoped he had gotten his price.

We had to descend two levels to get to the lounge. The gravity on the upper level was kept at one-sixth normal, partly for the convenience of the lunar personnel who were Skyfac's only regular commuters, and mostly (of course) for the convenience of Carrington. But descending brought a subtle increase in weight, to perhaps a fifth or a quarter normal. My leg complained bitterly, but I found to my surprise that I preferred the pain to its absence. It's a little scary when an old friend goes away like that.

The lounge was a larger room than I had expected, quite big enough for our purposes. It encompassed all three levels, and one whole wall was an immense video screen, across which stars wheeled dizzily, joined with occasional regularity by a slice of mother Terra. The floor was crowded with chairs and tables in various groupings, but I could see that, stripped, it would provide Shara with entirely adequate room to dance; equally important, my feet told me that it would make a splendid dancing surface. Then I remembered how little use the floor was liable to get.

"Well," Shara said to me with a smile, "this is what home will look like for the next six months. The Ring Two lounge is identical to this one."

"Six?" McGillicuddy said. "Not a chance."

"*What do you mean?*" Shara and I said together.

He blinked at our combined volume. "Well, *you'll* probably be good for that long, Charlie. But Shara's already had over a year of low g, while she was in the typing pool."

"So what?"

"Look, you expect to be in free fall for long periods of time, if I understand this correctly?"

"Twelve hours a day," Shara agreed.

He grimaced. "Shara, I hate to say this... but I'll be surprised if you last a month. A body designed for a one-g environment doesn't work properly in zero g."

"But it will adapt, won't it?"

He laughed mirthlessly. "Sure. That's why we rotate all personnel Earthside every fourteen months. Your body will adapt. One way. No return. Once you've fully adapted, returning to Earth will stop your heart—if some other major systemic failure doesn't occur first. Look, you were just Earthside for three days—did you have any chest pains?"

Dizziness? Bowel trouble? Dropsickness on the way up?”

“All of the above,” she admitted.

“There you go. You were close to the nominal fourteen-month limit when you left. And your body will adapt even faster under no gravity at all. The successful free-fall endurance record of about eight months was set by a Skyfac construction gang with bad deadline problems—and they hadn’t spent a year in one-sixth g first, *and* they weren’t straining their hearts the way you will be. Hell, there are four men on Luna now, from the original dozen in the first mining team, who will never see Earth again. Eight of their teammates tried. Don’t you two know anything about space?”

“But I’ve got to have at least four months. Four months of solid work, every day. I *must*.” She was dismayed, but fighting hard for control.

McGillicuddy started to shake his head, and then thought better of it. His warm eyes were studying Shara’s face. I knew exactly what he was thinking, and I liked him for it.

He was thinking, *How to tell a lovely lady her dearest dream is hopeless?*

He didn’t know the half of it. I *knew* how much Shara had already—irrevocably—invested in this dream, and something in me screamed. And then I saw her jaw ripple and I dared to hope.

Dr. Panzarella was a wiry old man with eyebrows like two fuzzy caterpillars. He wore a tight-fitting jumpsuit which would not foul a p-suit’s seals should he have to get into one in a hurry. His shoulder-length hair, which should have been a mane on that great skull, was clipped securely back against a sudden absence of gravity. A cautious man. To employ an obsolete metaphor, he was a *suspenders-and-belt* type. He looked Shara over, ran tests, and gave her just under a month and a half. Shara said some things. I said some things. McGillicuddy said some things. Panzarella shrugged, made further, very careful tests, and reluctantly cut loose of the suspenders. Two months. Not a day over. Possibly less, depending on subsequent monitoring of her body’s reactions to extended weightlessness. Then a year Earthside before risking it again. Shara seemed satisfied.

I didn’t see how we could do it.

McGillicuddy had assured us that it would take Shara at least a month simply to learn to handle herself competently in zero g, much less dance.

Her familiarity with one-sixth g would, he predicted, be a liability rather than an asset. Then figure three weeks of choreography and rehearsal, a week of taping, and just maybe we could broadcast one dance before Shara had to return to Earth. Not good enough. She and I had calculated that we would need three successive shows, each well received, to make a big enough dent in the dance world for Shara to squeeze into it. A year was far too big a spacing—and *who knew how soon Carrington would tire of her?* So I hollered at Panzarella.

“Mr. Armstead,” he said hotly, “I am specifically contractually forbidden to allow this young lady to commit suicide.” He grimaced sourly. “I’m told it’s terrible public relations.”

“Charlie, it’s okay,” Shara insisted. “I can fit in three dances. We may lose some sleep, but we can do it.”

“I once told a man nothing was impossible. He asked me if I could ski through a revolving door. You haven’t got...”

My brain slammed into hyperdrive, thought about things, kicked itself in the ass a few times, and returned to real time in time to hear my mouth finish without a break: “... much choice, though. Okay, Tom, have that damned Ring Two lounge cleaned out, I want it naked and spotless, and have somebody paint over that damned video wall, the same shade as the other three, and I mean *the same*. Shara, get out of those clothes and into your leotard. Doctor, we’ll be seeing you in twelve hours. Quit gaping and go, Tom—we’ll be going over there at once; *where the hell are my cameras?*”

McGillicuddy sputtered.

“Get me a torch crew—I’ll want holes cut through the walls, cameras behind them, one-way glass, six locations, a room adjacent to the lounge for a mixer console the size of a jetliner cockpit, and bolt a Norelco coffee machine next to the chair. I’ll need another room for editing, complete privacy, and total darkness, size of an efficiency kitchen, another Norelco.”

McGillicuddy finally drowned me out. “Mr. *Armstead*, this is the Main Ring of the Skyfac One complex, the administrative offices of one of the wealthiest corporations in existence. If you think this whole Ring is going to stand on its head for you...”

So we brought the problem to Carrington. He told McGillicuddy that henceforth Ring Two was *ours*, as well as any assistance whatsoever that we requested. He looked rather distracted. McGillicuddy started to tell him by how many weeks all this would put off the opening of the Skyfac Two complex. Carrington replied very quietly that he could add and

subtract quite well, thank you, and McGillicuddy got white and quiet.

I'll give Carrington that much. He gave us a free hand.

Panzarella ferried over to Skyfac Two with us. We were chauffeured by lean-jawed astronaut types, on vehicles looking, for all the world, like pregnant broomsticks. It was as well that we had the doctor with us—Shara fainted on the way over. I nearly did myself, and I'm sure that broomstick has my thigh-prints on it yet —falling through space is a scary experience the first time. Shara responded splendidly once we had her inboard again, and fortunately her dropsickness did not return—nausea can be a nuisance in free fall, a disaster in a p-suit. By the time my cameras and mixer had arrived, she was on her feet and sheepish. And while I browbeat a sweating crew of borrowed techs into installing them faster than was humanly possible, Shara began learning how to move in zero g.

We were ready for the first taping in three weeks.

Living quarters and minimal life support were rigged for us in Ring Two so that we could work around the clock if we chose, but we spent nearly half of our nominal “off-hours” in Skyfac One. Shara was required to spend half of three days a week there with Carrington and spent a sizable portion of her remaining putative sack time out in space, in a p-suit. At first it was a conscious attempt to overcome her gut-level fear of all that emptiness. Soon it became her meditation, her retreat, her artistic reverie, an attempt to gain from contemplation of the cold black depths enough insight into the meaning of extraterrestrial existence to dance of it.

I spent my own time arguing with engineers and electricians and technicians and a damn fool union legate who insisted that the second lounge, finished or not, belonged to the hypothetical future crew and administrative personnel. Securing his permission to work there wore the lining off my throat and the insulation off my nerves. Far too many nights I spent slugging instead of sleeping. Minor example: Every interior wall in the whole damned second Ring was painted the identical shade of turquoise—and they couldn't duplicate it to cover that godforsaken video wall in the lounge. It was McGillicuddy who saved me from gibbering apoplexy—at his suggestion, I washed off the third latex job, unshipped the outboard camera that fed the wall screen, brought it inboard, and fixed it to scan an interior wall in an adjoining room. That made us friends again.

It was all like that: jury-rig, improvise, file to fit and paint to cover. If a

camera broke down, I spent sleep time talking with off-shift engineers, finding out what parts in stock could be adapted. It was simply too expensive to have anything shipped up from Earth's immense gravity well, and Luna didn't have what I needed.

At that, Shara worked harder than I did. A body must totally recoordinate itself to function in the absence of weight—she had to forget literally everything she had ever known or learned about dancing and acquire a whole new set of skills. This turned out to be even harder than we had expected. McGillicuddy had been right: What Shara had learned in her year of one-sixth g was an exaggerated attempt to *retain* terrestrial patterns of coordination—rejecting them altogether was actually easier for *me*.

But I couldn't keep up with her—I had to abandon any thought of handheld camera work and base my plans solely on the six fixed cameras. Fortunately GLX-5000s have a ball-and-socket mount; even behind that damned one-way glass I had about forty degrees of traverse on each one. Learning to coordinate all six simultaneously on the Hamilton Board did a truly extraordinary thing to me—it lifted me that one last step to unity with my art. I found that I could learn to be aware of all six monitors with my mind's eye, to perceive almost spherically, to—not share my attention among the six—to *encompass* them all, seeing like a six-eyed creature from many angles at once. My mind's eye became holographic, my awareness multilayered. I began to really understand, for the first time, three-dimensionality.

It was that fourth dimension that was the kicker. It took Shara two days to decide that she could not possibly become proficient enough in free-fall maneuvering to sustain a half-hour piece in the time required. So she rethought her work plan too, adapting her choreography to the demands of exigency. She put in six hard days under normal Earth weight.

And for her, too, the effort brought her that one last step toward apotheosis.

On Monday of the fourth week we began taping *Liberation*.

Establishing shot:

A great turquoise box, seen from within. Dimensions unknown, but the color somehow lends an impression of immensity, of vast distances. Against the far wall, a swinging pendulum attests that this is a standard-gravity environment; but the pendulum swings so slowly and is so featureless in construction that it is impossible to estimate its size and

so extrapolate that of the room.

Because of this *trompe l'oeil* effect, the room seems rather smaller than it really is when the camera pulls back and we are wrenched into proper perspective by the appearance of Shara, prone, inert, face down on the floor, facing us.

She wears beige leotard and tights. Hair the color of fine mahogany is pulled back into a loose ponytail which fans across one shoulder blade. She does not appear to breathe. She does not appear to be alive.

Music begins. The aging Mahavishnu, on obsolete nylon acoustic, establishes a Minor E in no hurry at all. A pair of small candles in simple brass holders appear inset on either side of the room. They are larger than life, though small beside Shara. Both are unlit.

Her body... there is no word. It does not move, in the sense of motor activity. One might say that a ripple passes through it, save that the motion is clearly all outward from her center. She *swells*, as if the first breath of life were being taken by her whole body at once. She lives.

The twin wicks begin to glow, oh, softly. The music takes on quiet urgency.

Shara raises her head to us. Her eyes focus somewhere beyond the camera yet short of infinity. Her body writhes, undulates, and the glowing wicks are coals (that this brightening takes place in slow motion is not apparent).

A violent contraction raises her to a crouch, spilling the ponytail across her shoulder. Mahavishnu begins a cyclical cascade of runs, in increasing tempo. Long, questing tongues of yellow-orange flame begin to blossom *downward* from the twin wicks, whose coals are turning to blue.

The contraction's release flings her to her feet. The twin skirts of flame about the wicks curl up over themselves, writhing furiously, to become conventional candle flames, flickering now in normal time. Tablas, tambouras, and a bowed string bass join the guitar, and they segue into an energetic interplay around a minor seventh that keeps trying, fruitlessly, to find resolution in the sixth. The candles stay in perspective, but dwindle in size until they vanish.

Shara begins to explore the possibilities of motion. First she moves only perpendicular to the camera's line of sight, exploring that dimension. Every motion of arms or legs or head is clearly seen to be a defiance of gravity, of a force as inexorable as radioactive decay, as entropy itself. The most violent surges of energy succeed only for a time—the outflung leg

falls, the outthrust arm drops. She must struggle or fall. She pauses in thought.

Her hands and arms reach out toward the camera, and at the instant they do we cut to a view from the left-hand wall. Seen from the right side, she reaches out into this new dimension, and soon begins to move in it. (As she moves backward out of the camera's field, its entire image shifts right on our screen, butted out of the way by the incoming image of a second camera, which picks her up as the first loses her without a visible seam.)

The new dimension too fails to fulfill Shara's desire for freedom from gravity. Combining the two, however, presents so many permutations of movement that for a while, intoxicated, she flings herself into experimentation. In the next fifteen minutes, Shara's entire background and history in dance are recapitulated, in a blinding tour de force that incorporates elements of jazz, Modern, and the more graceful aspects of Olympic-level mat gymnastics. Five cameras come into play, singly and in pairs on split screen, as the "bag of tricks" amassed in a lifetime of study and improvisation are rediscovered and performed by a superbly trained and versatile body, in a pyrotechnic display that would shout of joy if her expression did not remain aloof, almost arrogant. *This is the offering, she seems to say, which you would not accept. This, by itself, was not good enough.*

And it is not. Even in its raging energy and total control, her body returns again and again to the final compromise of mere erectness, that last simple refusal to fall.

Clamping her jaw, she works into a series of leaps, ever longer, ever higher. She seems at last to hang suspended for full seconds, straining to fly. When, inevitably, she falls, she falls reluctantly, only at the last possible instant tucking and rolling back onto her feet. The musicians are in a crescendoing frenzy. We see her now only with the single original camera, and the twin candles have returned, small but burning fiercely.

The leaps begin to diminish in intensity and height, and she takes longer to build to each one. She has been dancing flat out for nearly twenty minutes; as the candle flames begin to wane, so does her strength. At last she retreats to a place beneath the indifferent pendulum, gathers herself with a final desperation, and races forward toward us. She reaches incredible speed in a short space, hurls herself into a double roll, and bounds up into the air off one foot, seeming a full second later to push off against empty air for a few more inches of height. Her body goes rigid, her eyes and mouth gape wide, the flames reach maximum brilliance, the

music peaks with the tortured wail of an electric guitar, and—she falls, barely snapping into a roll in time, rising only as far as a crouch. She holds there for a long moment, and gradually her head and shoulders slump, defeated, toward the floor. The candle flames draw in upon themselves in a curious way and appear to go out. The string bass saws on, modulating down to D.

Muscle by muscle, Shara's body gives up the struggle. The air seems to tremble around the wicks of the candles, which have now grown nearly as tall as her crouching form.

Shara lifts her face to the camera with evident effort. Her face is anguished, her eyes nearly shut. A long beat.

All at once she opens her eyes wide, squares her shoulders, and contracts. It is the most exquisite and total contraction ever dreamed of, filmed in real time but seeming almost to be in slow motion. She holds it. Mahavishnu comes back in on guitar, building in increasing tempo from a down-tuned bass string to a D with a flatted fourth. Shara holds.

We shift for the first time to an overhead camera, looking down on her from a great height. As Mahavishnu's picking increases to the point where the chord seems a sustained drone, Shara slowly lifts her head, still holding the contraction, until she is staring directly up at us. She poises there for an eternity, like a spring wound to the bursting point...

... and explodes upward toward us, rising higher and faster than she possibly can in a soaring flight that is slow motion now, coming closer and closer until her hands disappear off either side and her face fills the screen, flanked by two candles which have bloomed into goutts of yellow flame in an instant. The guitar and bass are submerged in an orchestra.

Almost at once she whirls away from us, and the POV switches to the original camera, on which we see her fling herself down ten meters to the floor, reversing her attitude in mid-flight and twisting. She comes out of her roll in an absolutely flat trajectory that takes her the length of the room. She hits the far wall with a crash audible even over the music, shattering the still pendulum. Her thighs soak up the kinetic energy and then release it, and once again she is racing toward us, hair streaming straight out behind her, a broad smile of triumph growing larger in the screen.

In the next five minutes all six cameras vainly try to track her as she caroms around the immense room like a hummingbird trying to batter its way out of a cage, using the walls, floor, and ceiling the way a jai alai master does, *existing in three dimensions*. Gravity is defeated. The basic

assumption of all dance is transcended.

Shara is transformed.

She comes to rest at last at vertical center in the forefront of the turquoise cube, arms-legs-fingers-toes-face straining *outward*, turning gently end over end. All four cameras that bear on her join in a four-way split screen, the orchestra resolves into its final E Major, and—fade-out.

I had neither the time nor the equipment to create the special effects that Shara wanted. So I found ways to warp reality to my need. The first candle segment was a twinned shot of a candle being blown out from above—in ultra-slow-motion, and in reverse. The second segment was a simple recording of reality. I had lit the candle, started taping—and had the Ring's spin killed. A candle behaves oddly in zero g. The low-density combustion gases do not rise up from the flame, allowing air to reach it from beneath. The flame does not go out: It becomes dormant. Restore gravity within a minute or so, and it blooms back to life again. All I did was monkey with speeds a bit to match in with the music and Shara's dance. I got the idea from Harry Stein, Skyfac's construction foreman, who was helping me design the next dance.

I set up a screen in the Ring One lounge, and everyone in Skyfac who could cut work crowded in for the broadcast. They saw exactly what was being sent out over worldwide satellite hookup (Carrington had sufficient pull to arrange twenty-five minutes without commercial interruption) almost a full half second before the world did.

I spent the broadcast in the Communications Room, chewing my fingernails. But it went without a hitch, and I slapped my board dead and made it to the lounge in time to see the last half of the standing ovation. Shara stood before the screen, Carrington sitting beside her, and I found the difference in their expressions instructive. Her face showed no surprise or modesty.

She had had faith in herself throughout, had approved this tape for broadcast—she was aware, with that incredible detachment of which so few artists are capable, that the wild applause was only what she deserved. But her face showed that she was deeply surprised—and deeply grateful—to be given what she deserved.

Carrington, on the other hand, registered a triumph strangely mingled with relief. He too had had faith in Shara, backing it with a large investment—but his faith was that of a businessman in a gamble he believes will pay off, and as I watched his eyes and the glisten of sweat on his forehead, I realized that no businessman ever takes an expensive

gamble without worrying that it may be the fiasco that will begin the loss of his only essential commodity: face.

Seeing his kind of triumph next to hers spoiled the moment for me, and instead of thrilling for Shara I found myself almost hating her. She spotted me, and waved me to join her before the cheering crowd, but I turned and literally flung myself from the room. I borrowed a bottle from Harry Stein and got stinking.

The next morning my head felt like a fifteen-amp fuse on a forty-amp circuit, and I seemed to be held together only by surface tension. Sudden movements frightened me. It's a long fall off that wagon, even at one-sixth g.

The phone chimed—I hadn't had time to rewire it—and a young man I didn't know politely announced that Mr. Carrington wished to see me in his office. At once, I spoke of a barbed-wire suppository and what Mr. Carrington might do with it, at once. Without changing expression, he repeated his message and disconnected.

So I crawled into my clothes, decided to grow a beard, and left. Along the way I wondered what I had traded my independence for, and why.

Carrington's office was oppressively tasteful, but at least the lighting was subdued. Best of all, its filter system would handle smoke—the sweet musk of pot lay on the air. I accepted a macrojoint of "Maoi-Zowie" from Carrington with something approaching gratitude, and began melting my hangover.

Shara sat next to his desk, wearing a leotard and a layer of sweat. She had obviously spent the morning rehearsing for the next dance. I felt ashamed, and consequently snappish, avoiding her eyes and her hello. Panzarella and McGillicuddy came in on my heels, chattering about the latest sighting of the mysterious object from deep space, which had appeared this time in the neighborhood of Mercury. They were arguing over whether it displayed signs of sentience or not, and I wished they'd shut up.

Carrington waited until we had all seated ourselves and lit up, then rested a hip on his desk and smiled. "Well, Tom?"

McGillicuddy beamed. "Better than we expected, sir. All the ratings agree we had about seventy-four percent of the world audience—"

"The hell with the Nielsons," I snapped. "*What did the critics say?*"

McGillicuddy blinked. "Well, the general reaction so far is that Shara was a smash. The *Times*—"

I cut him off again. “What was the less-than-general reaction?”

“Well, nothing is ever unanimous.”

“Specifics. The dance press? Liz Zimmer? Migdalski?”

“Uh. Not as good. Praise, yes—only a blind man could’ve panned that show. But guarded praise. Uh, Zimmer called it a magnificent dance spoiled by a gimmicky ending.”

“And Migdalski?” I insisted.

“He headed his review, ‘But What Do You Do for an Encore?’ ” McGillicuddy admitted. “His basic thesis was that it was a charming one-shot. But the *Times*—”

“Thank you, Tom,” Carrington said quietly. “About what we expected, isn’t it, my dear? A big splash, but no one’s willing to call it a tidal wave yet.”

She nodded. “But they will, Bryce. The next two dances will sew it up.”

Panzarella spoke up. “Ms. Drummond, may I ask why you played it the way you did? Using the null-g interlude only as a brief adjunct to conventional dance—surely you must have expected the critics to call it gimmickry.”

Shara smiled and answered, “To be honest, Doctor, I had no choice. I’m learning to use my body in free fall, but it’s still a conscious effort, almost a pantomime. I need another few weeks to make it second nature, and it *has* to be if I’m to sustain a whole piece in it. So I dug a conventional dance out of the trunk, tacked on a five-minute ending that used every zero-g move I knew, and found to my extreme relief that they made thematic sense together. I told Charlie my notion, and he made it work visually and dramatically—that whole business of the candles was his, and it underlined what I was trying to say better than any set we could have built.”

“So you have not yet completed what you came here to do?” Panzarella asked Shara.

“Oh, no. Not by any means. The next dance will show the world that dance is more than controlled falling. And the third... the third will be what this has all been for.” Her face lit, became animated. “The third dance will be the one I have wanted to dance all my life. I can’t entirely picture it yet—but I know that when I become capable of dancing it, I will create it, and it will be my greatest dance.”

Panzarella cleared his throat. “How long will it take you?”

“Not long,” she said. “I’ll be ready to tape the next dance in two weeks, and I can start on the last one almost at once. With luck, I’ll have it in the can before my month is up.”

“Ms. Drummond,” Panzarella said gravely, “I’m afraid you don’t have another month.”

Shara went white as snow, and I half rose from my seat. Carrington looked intrigued.

“How much time?” Shara asked.

“Your latest tests have not been encouraging. I had assumed that the sustained exercise of rehearsal and practice would tend to slow your system’s adaptation. But most of your work has been in total weightlessness, and I failed to realize the extent to which your body is accustomed to sustained exertion—in a terrestrial environment.”

“How much time?”

“Two weeks. Possibly three, if you spend three separate hours a day at hard exercise in two gravities.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I burst out. “Don’t you understand about dancers’ spines? She could ruin herself in two gees.”

“I’ve got to have four weeks,” Shara said.

“Ms. Drummond, I am sorry.”

“I’ve got to have four weeks.”

Panzarella had that same look of helpless sorrow that McGillicuddy and I had had in our turn, and I was suddenly sick to death of a universe in which people had to keep looking at Shara that way. “Dammit,” I roared, “she needs four weeks.”

Panzarella shook his shaggy head. “If she stays in zero g for four working weeks, she may die.”

Shara sprang from her chair. “Then I’ll die,” she cried. “I’ll take that chance. I *have* to.”

Carrington coughed. “I’m afraid I can’t permit you to, darling.”

She whirled on him furiously.

“This dance of yours is excellent PR for Skyfac,” he said calmly, “but if it were to kill you it might boomerang, don’t you think?”

Her mouth worked, and she fought desperately for control. My own head whirled. Die? Shara?

“Besides,” he added, “I’ve grown quite fond of you.”

“Then I’ll stay up here in space,” she burst out.

“Where? The only areas of sustained weightlessness are factories, and you’re not qualified to work in one.”

“Then for God’s sake give me one of the new pods, the small spheres. Bryce, I’ll give you a higher return on your investment than a factory pod, and I’ll...” Her voice changed. “I’ll be available to you always.”

He smiled lazily. “Yes, but I might not *want* you always, darling. My mother warned me strongly against making irrevocable decisions about women. Especially informal ones. Besides, I find zero-g sex rather too exhausting as a steady diet.”

I had almost found my voice, and now I lost it again. I was glad Carrington was turning her down—but the way he did it made me yearn to drink his blood.

Shara too was speechless for a time. When she spoke, her voice was low, intense, almost pleading. “Bryce, it’s a matter of timing. If I broadcast two more dances in the next four weeks, I’ll have a world to return to. If I have to go Earthside and wait a year or two, that third dance will sink without a trace—no one’ll be looking, and they won’t have the memory of the first two. This is my only option, Bryce—*let me take the chance*. Panzarella can’t guarantee four weeks will kill me.”

“I can’t guarantee your survival,” the doctor said.

“You can’t guarantee that any one of us will live out the day,” she snapped. She whirled back to Carrington, held him with her eyes. “Bryce, *let me risk it*.” Her face underwent a massive effort, produced a smile that put a knife through my heart. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

Carrington savored that smile and the utter surrender in her voice like a man enjoying a fine claret. I wanted to slay him with my hands and teeth, and I prayed that he would add the final cruelty of turning her down. But I had underestimated his true capacity for cruelty.

“Go ahead with your rehearsal, my dear,” he said at last. “We’ll make a final decision when the time comes. I shall have to think about it.”

I don’t think I’ve ever felt so hopeless, so... impotent in my life. Knowing it was futile, I said, “Shara, I can’t let you risk your life—”

“I’m going to do this, Charlie,” she cut me off, “with or without you. No one else knows my work well enough to tape it properly, but if you want out I can’t stop you.” Carrington watched me with detached interest.

“Well?”

I said a filthy word. “You know the answer.”

“Then let’s get to work.”

Tyros are transported on the pregnant broomsticks. Old hands hang outside the air lock, dangling from handholds on the outer surface of the spinning Ring. They face in the direction of the spin, and when their destination comes under the horizon, they just drop off. Thruster units built into gloves and boots supply the necessary course corrections. The distances involved are small. Shara and I, having spent more weightless hours than some technicians who’d been in Skyfac for years, were old hands. We made scant and efficient use of our thrusters, chiefly in canceling the energy imparted to us by the spin of the Ring we left. We had throat mikes and hearing-aid-sized receivers, but there was no conversation on the way across the void. I spent the journey appreciating the starry emptiness through which I fell—I had come, perforce, to understand the attraction of sky diving—and wondering whether I would ever get used to the cessation of pain in my leg. It even seemed to hurt less under spin those days.

We grounded, with much less force than a sky diver does, on the surface of the new studio. It was an enormous steel globe, studded with sunpower screens and heat-losers, tethered to three more spheres in various stages of construction, on which p-suited figures were even now working. McGillicuddy had told me that the complex when completed would be used for “controlled density processing,” and when I said, “How nice,” he added, “Dispersion foaming and variable density casting,” as if that explained everything. Perhaps it did. Right at the moment, it was Shara’s studio.

The air lock led to a rather small working space around a smaller interior sphere some fifty meters in diameter. It too was pressurized, intended to contain a vacuum, but its locks stood open. We removed our p-suits, and Shara unstrapped her thruster bracelets from a bracing strut and put them on, hanging by her ankles from the strut while she did so. The anklets went on next. As jewelry they were a shade bulky—but they had twenty minutes’ continuous use each, and their operation was not visible in normal atmosphere and lighting. Indoor zero-gee dance without them would have been enormously more difficult.

As she was fastening the last strap I drifted over in front of her and grabbed the strut. “Shara...”

“Charlie, I can beat it. I’ll exercise in *three* gravities, and I’ll sleep in two, and I’ll make this body last. I know I can.”

“You could skip *Mass Is a Verb* and go right to the *Stardance*.”

She shook her head. “I’m not ready yet—and neither is the audience. I’ve got to lead myself and them through dance in a sphere first—in a contained space—before I’ll be ready to dance in empty space, or for them to appreciate it. I have to free my mind, and theirs, from just about every preconception of dance, change the postulates. Even two stages is too few—but it’s the irreducible minimum.” Her eyes softened. “Charlie—I must.”

“I know,” I said gruffly, and turned away. Tears are a nuisance in free fall—they don’t *go* anywhere. I began hauling myself around the surface of the inner sphere toward the camera emplacement I was working on, and Shara entered the inner sphere to begin rehearsal.

I prayed as I worked on my equipment, snaking cables among the bracing struts and connecting them to drifting terminals. For the first time in years I prayed, prayed that Shara would make it. That we both would.

The next twelve days were the toughest of my life. Shara worked twice as hard as I did. She spent half of every day working in the studio, half of the rest in exercise under two and a quarter gravities (the most Dr. Panzarella would permit), and half of the rest in Carrington’s bed, trying to make him contented enough to let her stretch her time limit. Perhaps she slept in the few hours left over. I only know that she never looked tired, never lost her composure or her dogged determination. Stubbornly, reluctantly, her body lost its awkwardness, took on grace even in an environment where grace required enormous concentration. Like a child learning to walk, Shara learned how to fly.

I even began to get used to the absence of pain in my leg.

What can I tell you of *Mass*, if you have not seen it? It cannot be described, even badly, in mechanistic terms, the way a symphony could be written out in words. Conventional dance terminology is, by its built-in assumptions, worse than useless, and if you are at all familiar with the new nomenclature you *must* be familiar with *Mass Is a Verb*, from which it draws its built-in assumptions.

Nor is there much I can say about the technical aspects of *Mass*. There were no special effects; not even music. Brindle’s superb score was

composed *from the dance*, and added to the tape with my permission two years later, but it was for the original, silent version that I was given the Emmy. My entire contribution, aside from editing and installing the two trampolines, was to camouflage batteries of wide-dispersion light sources in clusters around each camera eye, and wire them so that they energized only when they were out-of-frame with respect to whichever camera was on at the time—ensuring that Shara was always lit from the front, presenting two (not always congruent) shadows. I made no attempt to employ flashy camera work; I simply recorded what Shara danced, changing POV only as she did.

No. *Mass Is a Verb* can be described only in symbolic terms, and then poorly. I can say that Shara demonstrated that mass and inertia are as able as gravity to supply the dynamic conflict essential to dance. I can tell you that from them she distilled a kind of dance that could have been imagined only by a group-head consisting of an acrobat, a stunt diver, a skywriter, and an underwater ballerina. I can tell you that she dismantled the last interface between herself and utter freedom of motion, subduing her body to her will and space itself to her need.

And still I will have told you next to nothing. For Shara sought more than freedom—she sought meaning. *Mass* was, above all, a spiritual event—its title pun paralleling its thematic ambiguity between the technological and the theological. Shara made the human confrontation with existence a transitive act, literally meeting God halfway. I do not mean to imply that her dance at any time addressed an exterior God, a discrete entity with or without white beard. Her dance addressed reality, gave successive expression to the Three Eternal Questions asked by every human being who ever lived.

Her dance observed her *self*, and asked, *How have I come to be here?*

Her dance observed the universe in which self existed, and asked, *How did all this come to be here with me?*

And at last, observing her self in relation to its universe, *Why am I so alone?*

And, having asked these questions, having earnestly asked them with every muscle and sinew she possessed, she paused, hung suspended in the center of the sphere, her body and soul open to the universe, and when no answer came, she contracted. Not in a dramatic, ceiling-spring sense as she had in *Liberation*, a compressing of energy and tension. This was physically similar, but an utterly different phenomenon. It was a focusing inward, an act of introspection, a turning of the mind's (soul's?) eye in

upon itself, to seek answers that lay nowhere else. Her body too, therefore, seemed to fold in upon itself, compacting her mass, so evenly that her position in space was not disturbed.

And reaching within herself, she closed on emptiness. The camera faded out, leaving her alone, rigid, encapsulated, yearning. The dance ended, leaving her three questions unanswered, the tension of their asking unresolved. Only the expression of patient waiting on her face blunted the shocking edge of the non-ending, made it bearable, a small, blessed sign whispering, "To be continued."

By the eighteenth day we had it in the can, in rough form.

Shara put it immediately out of her mind and began choreographing *Stardance*, but I spent two hard days of editing before I was ready to release the tape for broadcast. I had four days until the half hour of prime time Carrington had purchased—but that wasn't the deadline I felt breathing down the back of my neck.

McGillicuddy came into my workroom while I was editing, and although he saw the tears running down my face he said no word. I let the tape run, and he watched in silence, and soon his face was wet too. When the tape had been over for a long time he said, very softly, "One of these days I'm going to have to quit this stinking job."

I said nothing.

"I used to be a karate instructor. I was pretty good. I could teach again, maybe do exhibition work, make ten percent of what I do now."

I said nothing.

"The whole damned Ring's bugged, Charlie. The desk in my office can activate and tap any vidphone in Skyfac. Four at a time, actually."

I said nothing.

"I saw you both in the air lock when you came back the last time. I saw her collapse. I saw you bringing her around. I heard her make you promise not to tell Dr. Panzarella."

I waited. Hope stirred.

He dried his face. "I came in here to tell you I was going to Panzarella, to tell him what I saw. He'd bully Carrington into sending her home right away."

"And now?" I said.

"I've seen that tape."

“And you know the *Stardance* will probably kill her?”

“Yes.”

“And you know we have to let her do it?”

“Yes.”

Hope died. I nodded. “Then get out of here and let me work.”

He left.

On Wall Street and aboard Skyfac it was late afternoon when I finally had the tape edited to my satisfaction. I called Carrington, told him to expect me in half an hour, showered, shaved, dressed, and left.

A major of the Space Command was there with him when I arrived, but he was not introduced and so I ignored him. Shara was there too, wearing a thing made of orange smoke that left her breasts bare. Carrington had obviously made her wear it, as an urchin writes filthy words on an altar, but she wore it with a perverse and curious dignity that I sensed annoyed him. I looked her in the eye and smiled. “Hi, kid. It’s a good tape.”

“Let’s see,” Carrington said. He and the major took seats behind the desk, and Shara sat beside it.

I fed the tape into the video rig built into the office wall, dimmed the lights, and sat across from Shara. It ran twenty minutes, uninterrupted, no sound track, stark naked.

It was terrific.

“Aghast” is a funny word. To make you aghast, a thing must hit you in a place you haven’t armored over with cynicism yet. I seem to have been born cynical; I have been aghast three times that I can remember. The first was when I learned, at the age of three, that there were people who could deliberately hurt kittens. The second was when I learned, at age seventeen, that there were people who could actually take LSD and then hurt other people for fun. The third was when *Mass Is a Verb* ended and Carrington said in perfectly conversational tones, “Very pleasant; very graceful. I like it,” when I learned, at age forty-five, that there were men, not fools or cretins but intelligent men, who could watch Shara Drummond dance and fail to *see*. We all, even the most cynical of us, always have some illusion which we cherish.

Shara simply let it bounce off her somehow, but I could see that the major was as aghast as I, controlling his features with a visible effort.

Suddenly welcoming a distraction from my horror and dismay, I

studied him more closely, wondering for the first time what he was doing here. He was my age, lean and more hard-bitten than I am, with silver fuzz on top of his skull and an extremely tidy mustache on the front. I'd taken him for a crony of Carrington's, but three things changed my mind. Something indefinable about his eyes told me that he was a military man of long combat experience. Something equally indefinable about his carriage told me that he was on duty at the moment. And something quite definable about the line his mouth made told me that he was disgusted with the duty he had drawn.

When Carrington went on, "What do you think, Major?" in polite tones, the man paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts and choosing his words. When he did speak, it was not to Carrington.

"Ms. Drummond," he said quietly, "I am Major William Cox, commander of *S.C. Champion*, and I am honored to meet you. That was the most profoundly moving thing I have ever seen."

Shara thanked him most gravely. "This is Charles Armstead, Major Cox. He made the tape."

Cox regarded me with new respect. "A magnificent job, Mr. Armstead." He stuck out his hand, and I shook it.

Carrington was beginning to understand that we three shared a thing which excluded him. "I'm glad you enjoyed it, Major," he said with no visible trace of sincerity. "You can see it again on your television tomorrow night, if you chance to be off duty. And eventually, of course, cassettes will be made available. Now perhaps we can get to the matter at hand."

Cox's face closed as if it had been zippered up, became stiffly formal. "As you wish, sir."

Puzzled, I began what I thought was the matter at hand. "I'd like your own Comm Chief to supervise the actual transmission this time, Mr. Carrington. Shara and I will be too busy to—"

"My Comm Chief will supervise the broadcast, Armstead," Carrington interrupted, "but I don't think you'll be particularly busy."

I was groggy from lack of sleep; my uptake was rather slow.

He touched his desk delicately. "McGillicuddy, report at once," he said, and released it. "You see, Armstead, you and Shara are both returning to Earth. At once."

"What?"

"Bryce, you *can't*," Shara cried. "You *promised*."

“I promised I would think about it, my dear,” he corrected.

“The hell you say. That was weeks ago. Last night you *promised*.”

“Did I? My dear, there were no witnesses present last night. Altogether for the best, don’t you agree?”

I was speechless with rage.

McGillicuddy entered. “Hello, Tom,” Carrington said pleasantly. “You’re fired. You’ll be returning to Earth at once, with Ms. Drummond and Mr. Armstead, aboard Major Cox’s vessel. Departure in one hour, and don’t leave anything you’re fond of.” He glanced from McGillicuddy to me. “From Tom’s desk you can tap any vidphone in Skyfac. From my desk you can tap Tom’s desk.”

Shara’s voice was low. “Bryce, two days. God damn you, name your price.”

He smiled slightly. “I’m sorry, darling. When informed of your collapse, Dr. Panzarella became most specific. Not even one more day. Alive you are a distinct plus for Skyfac’s image—you are my gift to the world. Dead you are an albatross around my neck. I cannot allow you to die on my property. I anticipated that you might resist leaving, and so I spoke to a friend in the”—he glanced at Cox—“*higher* echelons of the Space Command, who was good enough to send the Major here to escort you home. You are not under arrest in the legal sense—but I assure you that you have no choice. Something like protective custody applies. Goodbye, Shara.” He reached for a stack of reports on his desk, and I surprised myself considerably.

I cleared the desk entirely, tucked head catching him squarely in the sternum. His chair was belted to the deck and so it snapped clean. I recovered so well that I had time for one glorious right. Do you know how, if you punch a basketball squarely, it will bounce up from the floor? That’s what his head did, in low-g slow motion.

Then Cox had hauled me to my feet and shoved me into the far corner of the room. “Don’t,” he said to me, and his voice must have held a lot of that “habit of command” they talk about, because it stopped me cold. I stood breathing in great gasps while Cox helped Carrington to his feet.

The millionaire felt his smashed nose, examined the blood on his fingers, and looked at me with raw hatred. “You’ll never work in video again, Armstead. You’re through. Finished. Un-employed, you get that?”

Cox tapped him on the shoulder, and Carrington spun on him. “What the hell do you want?” he barked.

Cox smiled. “Carrington, my late father once said, ‘Bill, make your enemies by choice, not by accident.’ Over the years I have found that to be excellent advice. You suck.”

“And not particularly well,” Shara agreed.

Carrington blinked. Then his absurdly broad shoulders swelled and he roared, “Out, all of you! *Off my property at once!*”

By unspoken consent, we waited for McGillicuddy, who knew his cue. “Mr. Carrington, it is a rare privilege and a great honor to have been fired by you. I shall think of it always as a Pyrrhic defeat.” And he half bowed and we left, each buoyed by a juvenile feeling of triumph that must have lasted ten seconds.

The sensation of falling that comes with zero g is literal truth, but your body quickly learns to treat it as an illusion. Now, in zero g for the last time, for the half hour before I would be back in Earth’s own gravitational field, I felt I was falling. Plummeting into some bottomless gravity well, dragged down by the anvil that was my heart, the scraps of a dream that should have held me aloft fluttering overhead.

The *Champion* was three times the size of Carrington’s yacht, which childishly pleased me until I recalled that he had summoned it here without paying for either fuel or crew. A guard at the air lock saluted as we entered. Cox led us to a compartment aft of the air lock where we were to strap in. He noticed along the way that I used only my left hand to pull myself along, and when we stopped he said, “Mr. Armstead, my late father also told me, ‘Hit the soft parts with your hand. Hit the hard parts with a utensil.’ Otherwise I can find no fault with your technique. I wish I could shake your hand.”

I tried to smile, but I didn’t have it in me. “I admire your taste in enemies, Major.”

“A man can’t ask for more. I’m afraid I can’t spare time to have your hand looked at until we’ve grounded. We begin reentry immediately.”

“Forget it.”

He bowed to Shara, did *not* tell her how deeply sorry he was to et cetera, wished us all a comfortable journey, and left. We strapped into our acceleration couches to await ignition. There ensued a long and heavy silence, compounded of a mutual sadness that bravado could only have underlined. We did not look at each other, as though our combined sorrow might achieve some kind of critical mass. Grief struck us dumb, and I believe that remarkably little of it was self-pity.

But then a whole lot of time seemed to have gone by. Quite a bit of intercom chatter came faintly from the next compartment, but ours was not in circuit. At last we began to talk, desultorily, discussing the probable critical reaction to *Mass Is a Verb*, whether analysis was worthwhile or the theater really dead, anything at all except future plans. Eventually there was nothing else to talk about, so we shut up again. I guess I'd say we were in shock.

For some reason I came out of it first. "What in hell is taking them so long?" I barked irritably.

McGillicuddy started to say something soothing, then glanced at his watch and yelped. "You're right. It's been nearly an hour."

I looked at the wall clock, got hopelessly confused until I realized it was on Greenwich time rather than Wall Street, and realized he was correct. "Chrissakes," I shouted, "the whole bloody *point* of this exercise is to protect Shara from overexposure to free fall! I'm going forward."

"Charlie, hold it." McGillicuddy, with two good hands, unstrapped faster than I. "Dammit, stay right there and cool off. I'll go find out what the holdup is."

He was back in a few minutes, and his face was slack. "We're not going anywhere. Cox has orders to sit tight."

"What? Tom, what the *hell* are you talking about?"

His voice was all funny. "Red fireflies. More like bees, actually. In a balloon."

He simply *could not* be joking with me, which meant he flat out *had* to have gone completely round the bend, which meant that somehow I had blundered into my favorite nightmare where everyone but me goes crazy, and begins gibbering at me. So I lowered my head like an enraged bull, and charged out of the room so fast the door barely had time to get out of my way.

It just got worse. When I reached the door to the bridge I was going much too fast to be stopped by anything short of a body block, and the crewmen present were caught flatfooted. There was a brief flurry at the door, and then I was on the bridge, and then I decided that I had gone crazy too, which somehow made everything all right.

The forward wall of the bridge was one enormous video tank— and just enough off center to faintly irritate me, standing out against the black deep as clearly as cigarettes in a darkroom, there truly did swarm a multitude of red fireflies.

The conviction of unreality made it okay. But then Cox snapped me back to reality with a bellowed “*Off this bridge, mister.*” If I’d been in a normal frame of mind it would have blown me out the door and into the farthest corner of the ship; in my current state it managed to jolt me into acceptance of the impossible situation. I shivered like a wet dog and turned to him.

“Major,” I said desperately, “What is going on?”

As a king may be amused by an insolent varlet who refuses to kneel, he was bemused by the phenomenon of someone failing to obey him. It bought me an answer. “We are confronting intelligent alien life,” he said concisely. “I believe them to be sentient plasmoids.”

I had never for a moment believed that the mysterious object which had been leapfrogging around the solar system since I came to Skyfac was *alive*. I tried to take it in, then abandoned the task and went back to my main priority. “I don’t care if they’re eight tiny reindeer; you’ve got to get this can back to Earth *now*.”

“Sir, this vessel is on Emergency Red Alert and on Combat Standby. At this moment the suppers of everyone in North America are getting cold. I will consider myself fortunate if I ever see Earth again. Now get off my bridge.”

“But you don’t *understand*. Sustained free fall might kill Shara. That’s what you came up here to prevent, dammit—”

“*MR. ARMSTEAD!* This is a military vessel. We are facing nearly a dozen intelligent beings who appeared out of hyper-space near here twenty minutes ago, beings who therefore use a drive beyond my conception with no visible parts. If it makes you feel any better, I am aware that I have a passenger aboard of greater intrinsic value to my species than this ship and everyone else on her, and if it is any comfort to you this knowledge already provides a distraction I need like an auxiliary anus, and I can no more leave this orbit than I can grow horns. Now will you get off this bridge or will you be dragged?”

I didn’t get a chance to decide: They dragged me.

On the other hand, by the time I got back to our compartment Cox had put our vidphone screen in circuit with the tank on the bridge. Shara and McGillicuddy were studying it with rapt attention. Having nothing better to do, I did too.

McGillicuddy had been right. They *did* act more like bees, in the

swarming rapidity of their movement. It was a while before I could get an accurate count: ten of them. And they *were* in a balloon—a faint, barely tangible thing on the fine line between transparency and translucency. Though they darted like furious red gnats, it was only within the confines of the spheroid balloon —they never left it or seemed to touch its inner surface.

As I watched, the last of the adrenaline rinsed out of my kidneys, but it left a sense of frustrated urgency. I tried to grapple with the fact that these *Space Commando* special effects represented something that was—more important than Shara. It was a primevally disturbing notion, but I could not reject it.

In my mind were two voices, each hollering questions at the top of their lungs, each ignoring the other's questions. One yelled: *Are those things friendly? Or hostile? Or do they even use those concepts? How big are they? How far away? From where?* The other voice was less ambitious but just as loud: all it said, over and over again, was: *How much longer can Shara remain in free fall without dooming herself?*

Shara's voice was full of wonder. "They're... they're *dancing*."

I looked closer. If there was a pattern to the flies-on-garbage swarm they made, I couldn't detect it. "Looks random to me."

"Charlie, look. All that furious activity, and they never bump into each other or the walls of that envelope they're in. They must be in orbits as carefully choreographed as those of electrons."

"Do atoms dance?"

She gave me an odd look. "Don't they, Charlie?"

"Laser beam," McGillicuddy said.

We looked at him.

"Those things have to be plasmoids—the man I talked to said (they were first spotted on radar. That means they're ionized gases of some kind—the kind of thing that used to cause UFO reports." He giggled, then caught himself. "If you could slice through that envelope with a laser, I'll bet you could deionize them pretty good—besides, that envelope has to hold their life support, whatever it is they metabolize."

I was dizzy. "Then we're not defenseless?"

"You're both talking like soldiers," Shara burst out. "I tell you they're dancing. Dancers aren't fighters."

"Come on, Shara," I barked. "Even if those things happen to be remotely

like us, that's not true. Samurai, karate, kung fu— they're dance." I nodded to the screen. "All we know about these animated embers is that they travel interstellar space. That's enough to scare me."

"Charlie, look at them," she commanded.

I did.

By God, they didn't look threatening. They did, the more I watched, seem to move in a dancelike way, whirling in mad adagios just too fast for the eye to follow. Not like conventional dance—more analogous to what Shara had begun with *Mass Is a Verb*. I found myself wanting to switch to another camera for contrast of perspective, and that made my mind start to wake up at last. Two ideas surfaced, the second one necessary in order to sell Cox the first.

"How far do you suppose we are from Skyfac?" I asked McGillicuddy.

He pursed his lips. "Not far. There hasn't been much more than maneuvering acceleration. The damn things were probably attracted to Skyfac in the first place—it must be the most easily visible sign of intelligent life in this system." He grimaced. "Maybe they don't *use* planets."

I reached forward and punched the audio circuit. "Major Cox."

"Get off this circuit."

"How would you like a closer view of those things?"

"We're staying put. Now stop jiggling my elbow and get off this circuit or I'll—"

"Will you listen to me? I have four mobile cameras in space, remote-control, self-contained power source and light, and better resolution than you've got. They were set up to tape Shara's next dance."

He shifted gears at once. "Can you patch them into my ship?"

"I think so. But I'll have to get back to the master board in Ring One."

"No good, then. I can't tie myself to a top—what if I have to fight or run?"

"Major—how far a walk is it?"

It startled him a bit. "A mile or two, as the crow flies. But you're a groundlubber."

"I've been in free fall for most of two months. Give me a portable radar and I can ground on Phobos."

“Mmmm. You’re a civilian—but dammit, I need better video. Permission granted.”

Now for the first idea. “Wait—one thing more. Shara and Tom must come with me.”

“Nuts. This isn’t a field trip.”

“Major Cox—Shara *must* return to a gravity field as quickly as possible. Ring One’ll do—in fact, it’d be ideal, if we can enter through the ‘spoke’ in the center. She can descend very slowly and acclimatize gradually, the way a diver decompresses in stages, but in reverse. McGillicuddy will have to come along to stay with her—if she passes out and falls down the tube, she could break a leg even in one-sixth g. Besides, he’s better at EVA than either of us.”

He thought it over. “Go.”

We went.

The trip back to Ring One was far longer than any Shara or I had ever made, but under McGillicuddy’s guidance we made it with minimal maneuvering. Ring, *Champion*, and aliens formed an equiangular triangle about a mile and a half on a side. Seen in perspective, the aliens took up about as much volume as Shea Stadium. They did not pause or slacken in their mad gyration, but somehow they seemed to watch us cross the gap to Skyfac. I got an impression of a biologist studying the strange antics of a new species. We kept our suit radios off to avoid distraction, and it made me just a little bit more susceptible to suggestion.

I left McGillicuddy with Shara and dropped down the tube six rings at a time. Carrington was waiting for me in the reception room, with two flunkies. It was plain to see that he was scared silly, and trying to cover it with anger. “Goddammit, Armstead, those are my bloody cameras.”

“Shut up, Carrington. If you put those cameras in the hands of the best technician available—me—and if I put their data in the hands of the best strategic mind in space—Cox—we *might* be able to save your damned factory for you. And the human race for the rest of us.” I moved forward, and he got out of my way. It figured. Putting all humanity in danger might just be bad PR.

After all the practicing I’d done, it wasn’t hard to direct four mobile cameras through space simultaneously by eye. The aliens ignored their approach. The Skyfac comm crew fed my signals to the *Champion* and patched me in to Cox on audio. At his direction I bracketed the balloon

with the cameras, shifting POV at his command. Space Command Headquarters must have recorded the video, but I couldn't hear their conversation with Cox, for which I was grateful. I gave him slow-motion replay, close-ups, split screens—everything at my disposal. The movements of individual fireflies did not appear particularly symmetrical, but patterns began to repeat. In slow motion they looked more than ever as though they were dancing, and although I couldn't be sure, it seemed to me that they were increasing their tempo. Somehow the dramatic tension of their dance seemed to build.

And then I shifted POV to the camera which included Skyfac in the background, and my heart turned to hard vacuum and I screamed in pure primal terror—halfway between Ring One and the swarm of aliens, coming up on them slowly but inexorably, was a p-suited figure that had to be Shara.

With theatrical timing, McGillicuddy appeared in the doorway, leaning heavily on the chief engineer, his face drawn with pain. He stood on one foot, the other leg plainly broken.

“Guess I can't... go back to exhibition work... after all,” he gasped. “Said... ‘I'm sorry, Tom’... knew she was going to swing on me... wiped me out anyhow. Oh, dammit, Charlie, I'm sorry.” He sank into an empty chair.

Cox's voice came urgently. “What the hell is going on? Who is that?”

She *had* to be on our frequency. “Shara!” I screamed. “Get your ass back in here!”

“I can't, Charlie.” Her voice was startlingly loud, and very calm. “Halfway down the tube my chest started to hurt like hell.”

“Ms. Drummond,” Cox rapped, “if you approach any closer to the aliens I will destroy you.”

She laughed, a merry sound that froze my blood. “Bullshit, Major. You aren't about to get gay with laser beams near those things. Besides, you need me as much as you do Charlie.”

“What do you mean?”

“These creatures communicate by dance. It's their equivalent of speech, it has to be a sophisticated kind of sign language, like hula.”

“You can't know that.”

“I *feel* it. I know it. Hell, how else do you communicate in airless space? Major Cox, I am the only qualified interpreter the human race has at the moment. Now will you kindly shut up so I can try to learn their language?”

“I have no authority to—”

I said an extraordinary thing. I should have been gibbering, pleading with Shara to come back, even racing for a p-suit to *bring* her back. Instead I said, “She’s right. Shut up, Cox.”

“What are you trying to do?”

“Damn you, *don’t waste her last effort.*”

He shut up.

Panzarella came in, shot McGillicuddy full of painkiller, and set his leg right there in the room, but I was oblivious. For over an hour I watched Shara watch the aliens. I watched them myself, in the silence of utter despair, and for the life of me I could not follow their dance. I strained my mind, trying to suck meaning from their crazy whirling, and failed. The best I could do to aid Shara was to record everything that happened, for a hypothetical posterity. Several times she cried out softly, small muffled exclamations, and I ached to call out to her in reply, but did not. With the last exclamation, she used her thrusters to bring her closer to the alien swarm, and hung there for a long time.

At last her voice came over the speaker, thick and slurred at first, as though she were talking in her sleep. “God, Charlie. Strange. So strange. I’m beginning to read them.”

“How?”

“Every time I begin to understand a part of the dance, it... it brings us closer. Not telepathy, exactly. I just... know them better. Maybe it is telepathy, I don’t know. By dancing what they feel, they give it enough intensity to make me understand. I’m getting about one concept in three. It’s stronger up close.”

Cox’s voice was gentle but firm. “What have you learned, Shara?”

“That Tom and Charlie were right. They are warlike. At least there’s a flavor of arrogance to them—conviction of superiority. Their dance is a challenging, a dare. Tell Tom they *do* use planets.”

“What?”

“I think at one stage of their development they’re corporeal, planetbound. Then when they have matured sufficiently, they... become these fireflies, like caterpillars becoming butterflies, and head out into space.”

“Why?” from Cox.

“To find spawning grounds. They want Earth.”

There was a silence lasting perhaps ten seconds. Then Cox spoke up quietly. "Back away, Shara. I'm going to see what lasers will do to them."

"No!" she cried, loud enough to make a really first-rate speaker distort.

"Shara, as Charlie pointed out to rne, you are not only expendable, you are for all practical purposes expended."

"No!" This time it was me shouting.

"Major," Shara said urgently, "that's not the way. Believe me, they can dodge or withstand anything you or Earth can throw at them. I *know*."

"Hell and damnation, woman," Cox said, "what do you want me to do? Let them have the first shot? There are vessels from four countries on their way right now."

"Major, wait. Give me time."

He began to swear, then cut off. "How much time?"

She made no direct reply. "If only this telepathy thing works in reverse... it must. I'm no more strange to them than they are to me. Probably less so; I get the idea they've been around. Charlie?"

"Yeah."

"This is a take."

I knew. I had known since I first saw her in open space on my monitor. And I knew what she needed now, from the faint trembling of her voice. It took everything I had, and I was only glad I had it to give. With extremely realistic good cheer, I said, "Break a leg, kid," and killed my mike before she could hear the sob that followed.

And she danced.

It began slowly, the equivalent of one-finger exercises, as she sought to establish a vocabulary of motion that the creatures could comprehend. *Can you see, she seemed to say, that this movement is a reaching, a yearning? Do you see that this is a spurning, this an unfolding, that a graduated elision of energy? Do you feel the ambiguity in the way I distort this arabesque, or that the tension can be resolved so?*

And it seemed that Shara was right, that they had infinitely more experience with disparate cultures than we, for they were superb linguists of motion. It occurred to me later that perhaps they had selected motion for communication because of its very universality. At any rate, as Shara's dance began to build, their own began to slow down perceptibly in speed and intensity, until at last they hung motionless in space, watching her.

Soon after that Shara must have decided that she had sufficiently defined her terms, at least well enough for pidgin communication—for now she began to dance in earnest. Before, she had used only her own muscles and the shifting masses of her limbs. Now she added thrusters, singly and in combination, moving within as well as in space. Her dance became a true dance: more than a collection of motions, a thing of substance and meaning. It was unquestionably the *Stardance*, just as she had choreographed it, as she had always intended to dance it. That it had something to say to utterly alien creatures, of man and his nature, was not at all a coincidence: It was the essential and ultimate statement of the greatest artist of her age, and it had something to say to God himself.

The camera lights struck silver from her p-suit, gold from the twin air tanks on her shoulders. To and fro against the black backdrop of space, she wove the intricacies of her dance, a leisurely movement that seemed somehow to leave echoes behind it. And the meaning of these great loops and whirls slowly became clear, drying my throat and clamping my teeth.

For her dance spoke of nothing more and nothing less than the tragedy of being alive, and being human. It spoke, most eloquently, of pain. It spoke, most knowingly, of despair. It spoke of the cruel humor of limitless ambition yoked to limited ability, of eternal hope invested in an ephemeral lifetime, of the driving need to try and create an inexorably predetermined future. It spoke of fear, and of hunger, and, most clearly, of the basic loneliness and alienation of the human animal. It described the universe through the eyes of man: a hostile environment, the embodiment of entropy, into which we are all thrown alone, forbidden by our nature to touch another mind save secondhand, by proxy. It spoke of the blind perversity which forces man to strive hugely for a peace which, once attained, becomes boredom. And it spoke of folly, of the terrible paradox by which man is simultaneously capable of reason and unreason, forever unable to cooperate even with himself.

It spoke of Shara and her life.

Again and again, cyclical statements of hope began, only to collapse into confusion and ruin. Again and again, cascades of energy strove for resolution, and found only frustration. All at once she launched into a pattern that seemed familiar, and in moments I recognized it: the closing movement of *Mass Is a Verb* recapitulated—not repeated but reprised, echoed, the Three Questions given a more terrible urgency by this new altar on which they were piled. And as before, it segued into that final relentless contraction, that ultimate drawing-inward of all energies. Her body became derelict, abandoned, drifting in space, the essence of her

being withdrawn to her center and invisible.

The quiescent aliens stirred for the first time.

And suddenly she exploded, blossoming from her contraction not as a spring uncoils, but as a flower bursts from a seed. The force of her release flung her through the void as though she were tossed like a gull in a hurricane by galactic winds. Her center appeared to hurl itself through space and time, yanking her body into a new dance.

And the new dance said, *This is what it is to be human: to see the essential existential futility of all action, all striving—and to act, to strive. This is what it is to be human: to reach forever beyond your grasp. This is what it is to be human: to live forever or die trying. This is what it is to be human: to perpetually ask the unanswerable questions, in the hope that the asking of them will somehow hasten the day when they will be answered. This is what it is to be human: to strive in the face of the certainty of failure.*

This is what it is to be human: to persist.

It said all this with a soaring series of cyclical movements that held all the rolling majesty of grand symphony, as uniquely different from each other as snowflakes, and as similar. And the new dance *laughed*, and it laughed as much at tomorrow as it did at yesterday, and it laughed most of all at today.

For this is what it means to be human: to laugh at what another would call tragedy.

The aliens seemed to recoil from the ferocious energy, startled, awed, and faintly terrified by Shara's indomitable spirit. They seemed to wait for her dance to wane, for her to exhaust herself, and her laughter sounded on my speaker as she redoubled her efforts, became a pinwheel, a Catherine wheel. She changed the focus of her dance, began to dance *around* them, in pyrotechnic spatters of motion that came ever closer to the intangible spheroid which contained them. They cringed inward from her, huddling together in the center of the envelope, not so much physically threatened as cowed.

This, said her body, is what it means to be human: to commit hara-kiri, with a smile, if it becomes needful.

And before that terrible assurance, the aliens broke. Without warning fireflies and balloon vanished, gone, *elsewhere*.

I know that Cox and McGillicuddy were still alive, because I saw them

afterward, and that means they were probably saying and doing things in my hearing and presence, but I neither heard nor saw them then; they were as dead to me as everything except Shara. I called out her name, and she approached the camera that was lit, until I could make out her face behind the plastic hood of her p-suit.

“We may be puny, Charlie,” she puffed, gasping for breath. “But by Jesus we’re tough.”

“Shara—come on in now.”

“You know I can’t.”

“Carrington’ll *have* to give you a free-fall place to live now.”

“A life of exile? For what? To dance? Charlie, *I haven’t got anything more to say.*”

“Then I’ll come out there.”

“Don’t be silly. Why? So you can hug a p-suit? Tenderly bump hoods one last time? Balls. It’s a good exit so far—let’s not blow it.”

“*Shara!*” I broke completely, just caved in on myself and collapsed in great racking sobs.

“Charlie, listen now,” she said softly, but with an urgency that reached me even in my despair. “Listen now, for I haven’t much time. I have something to give you. I hoped you’d find it for yourself, but... will you listen?”

“Y—yes.”

“Charlie, zero-g dance is going to get awful popular all of a sudden. I’ve opened the door. But you know how fads are, they’ll bitch it all up unless you move fast. I’m leaving it in your hands.”

“What... what are you talking about?”

“About you, Charlie. You’re going to dance again.”

Oxygen starvation, I thought. But she can’t be that low on air already. “Okay. Sure thing.”

“For God’s sake stop humoring me—I’m straight, I tell you. You’d have seen it yourself if you weren’t so damned stupid. Don’t you understand? *There’s nothing wrong with your leg in free fall!*”

My jaw dropped.

“Do you hear me, Charlie? You can dance again!”

“No,” I said, and searched for a reason why not. “I... you can’t... it’s...

dammit, the leg's not strong enough for inside work."

"Forget for the moment that inside work'll be less than half of what you do. Forget it and remember that smack in the nose you gave Carrington. Charlie, when you leaped over the desk, *you pushed off with your right leg.*"

I sputtered for a while and shut up.

"There you go, Charlie. My farewell gift. You know I've never been in love with you... but you must know that I've always loved you. Still do."

"I love you, Shara."

"So long, Charlie. Do it right."

And all four thrusters went off at once. I watched her go down. A while after she was too far to see, there was a long golden flame that arced above the face of the globe, waned, and then flared again as the air tanks went up.

There's a tired old hack plot about the threat of alien invasion unifying mankind overnight. It's about as realistic as *Love Will Find a Way*—if those damned fireflies ever come back, they'll find us just as disorganized as we were the last time. There you go.

Carrington, of course, tried to grab all the tapes and all the money—but neither Shara nor I had ever signed a contract, and her will was most explicit. So he tried to buy the judge, and he picked the wrong judge, and when it hit the papers and he saw how public and private opinion were going, he left Skyfac in a p-suit with no thrusters. I think he wanted to go the same way she had, but he was unused to EVA and let go too late. He was last seen heading in the general direction of Betelgeuse. The Skyfac board of directors picked a new man who was most anxious to wash off the stains, and he offered me continued use of all facilities.

And so I talked it over with Norrey, and she was free, and that's how the Shara Drummond Company of New Modern Dance was formed. We specialize in good dancers who couldn't cut it on Earth for one reason or another, and there are a surprising hell of a lot of them.

I enjoy dancing with Norrey. Together we're not as good as Shara was alone—but we mesh well. In spite of the obvious contraindications, I think our marriage is going to work.

That's the thing about us humans: We persist.

The End