

Thorne

by
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Thorne shifted uneasily from foot to foot as she hid herself in the heavy velveteen curtains at the rear of the stage, her massive bare feet keeping time as the renowned Ivan Petranov hurled himself across the silent dance floor. Claspings a pair of tattered pink toe shoes in his outstretched hands, the young man twirled and leapt through the eerie half dark theater, oblivious to the presence which stalked him with psychic eyes.

Intrigued by the way his silent rhythm lured her, Thorne reached out a tentative psychic tendril, creeping ever closer to her dark haired prey. As she moved to grasp him, to reel him in, a young, angry ballerina rushed onto the stage.

“Ivan!” the dancer shouted, clenched fists jammed against her tiny waist. “Give me my shoes!”

Ivan whirled past her, lost in his reverie, until she threw herself at him in rage and pulled him to the floor.

“Tasha?” The dream-like quality of his face slowly faded into recognition. “What’s wrong, little sister?” he asked, as they disentangled themselves from the pile of sprawling bodies they had become.

“My shoes!” she shrieked at him. “Always you steal my shoes.” She snatched them from him and clutched them to her breast as though he might try to snatch them back. “I bought you a pair for your own. Why do you keep taking mine?”

“New shoes are just shoes,” he whispered sadly. “They aren’t alive.”

“Oh, Ivan,” she sighed, her voice softening as she knelt beside him. “You are such a dreamer. Is there anything in this thick head of yours besides dance?” She ruffled his dark curls, drawing her hand down to rest gently on his cheek.

“Should there be?” he asked, looking up at her with wide-eyed innocence. His reply was more serious than Tasha could understand, for even she, his only living kin, did not know of the haunting music in his soul which drove him to dance.

“I suppose not,” she laughed gently, “at least not for you.” She hugged him quickly and darted back to her dressing room, the offending shoes tucked safely under her arm.

Ivan stared at his empty hands, then rose slowly and majestically as the music caught him once more and thrust him again onto the empty stage. As he whirled past the heavy curtains at the rear of the stage, an invisible force reached out and drew him away.

Minutes later, Thorne waddled carefully back to the stage door, Ivan’s clothes wadded into her massive hands, then thrust her psimind back to the dreary room she knew as home. Her grotesque body followed more slowly, the newly ingested Russian dancer trapped within its hideous shell.

Thorne smiled smugly as she felt Ivan begin to struggle. This was the beginning of her real pleasure, when she felt that revenge was sweetest. It was not that she didn’t enjoy the hunt. That too was exciting. But the feel of the victim struggling within her felt like the purest form of vengeance. The first man had entered her by force, causing Thorne tremendous pain and anguish, but now she took them in her own way, inflicting pain while enjoying the pleasure of

her victims' suffering. There was no pain for Thorne now, for she had learned to enlarge herself within, completely enveloping her victim, leaving him only nostrils aligned with her own, lest he suffocate before she was through devouring his essence. Now she savored the struggle as the man inside her sought to free himself from the confines of her massive body.

Thorne paused in her ruminations as she noticed a subtle difference in the movement of Ivan's body inside her own. The rhythm of his struggle was not unlike the movement of his dance. His muscles flowed beneath hers, keeping time with an eerie music that floated just out of range, but which grew audible as she drank in the essence of his life force.

* * *

Ivan floated in a dream, dancing against a tide that pulled him deeper and deeper into the undercurrent, pulling him down to where the ocean depth pressed against his limbs, reducing movement to a subtle ripple of muscles that would not give up the rhythm.

Caught in a whirlpool of pain and darkness, he writhed and twisted in despair. His body cried out for the leaps and pirouettes that his music demanded, but the weight that pressed in on him allowed no movement. He felt entombed, paralyzed but for the muscles that strained and trembled. Cold sweat broke out and faded at once, having no place to go. Ivan struggled to open his eyes, but even that was prevented. There was a moment of panic as he struggled to get control of the music as he did for performances, and then suddenly it was gone.

The silence permeated his being with a stillness so complete it frightened him. Always there had been music. Even when he had it under control, Ivan could still hear the faintest thread of his silent music buried deep within. His earliest memory was the discovery that the tunes he danced to were for his ears alone. But now there was silence, a silence so vast and deep that it frightened him more than the entrapment of his body. In the face of that eerie silence Ivan found the clearest thoughts he had ever experienced. It was as if all his life he had been asleep, living in a dream, and now he was awake for the first time. He was startled and amazed. His mind thrust eagerly forward, pursuing not the lost music but the silence. "I have been drugged," he decided, "living in a disconnected haze. I must learn how to make this permanent."

But at the thought of permanence, he balked. What if the loss of his music meant the loss of his ability to dance as well? Surely it wasn't just his talent as a dancer that made him the reigning star of the ballet—it was also the gift of unaccompanied dancing that the critics so loved—his after-the-performance performance which served as encore and teaser, for he never danced the same encore twice.

Reporters had pursued him relentlessly on this tour, expounding for the media all sorts of curious theories that his government had always discounted. Tasha had read the accounts to him during his pre-sleep periods when exhaustion overruled the music in his head and he functioned as near to normal as he could. The press, unmindful of the pain he suffered from being so driven, had drawn Ivan as a mysterious and romantic figure, and their stories had brought curiosity seekers to the ballet in droves.

But now he was trapped in a frightening silence that left his mind so clear he very nearly remembered the gruesome creature he had glimpsed backstage before he had been overcome and trapped in this strange dark tomb. As he focused his mind and tried to see from within, the music suddenly returned. After a few moments of confusion, Ivan fell into his music once again.

* * *

From her close distance Thorne watched as her newest captive strove to throw off the spell she had cast upon him. His body, laying there in the flowing world of her inner being, tried to move. Like a cat he seemed to stretch without really moving, his back muscles rippling and churning, threatening to cast off the spell of endless sleep with which Thorne had clothed his naked beauty.

And being there with him, trapped as he was inside her very body, Thorne too heard the music which flowed through Ivan's soul. The tune hummed and churned, tantalizing her as it swirled about within her private world, daring her, taunting her, begging her not to kill its source. She had pulled it away from him, taking it completely into herself, and then watched in horror as Ivan came fully awake and began to remember how she had captured him. She had given it back to him hurriedly, knowing that her pleasure would be greater if he was not fully aware of where he was. Thorne drew back from herself and watched her captive more closely.

His eyes were open now, but the vacant stare assured her that he was barely there. Only his body and his music fully shared her space, that space of her private inner world in which no one had ever dared to rebel against her fearsome power.

* * *

Ivan's pain was nearly unbearable, for it was the pain of unfulfillment, the pain of muscles unable to move in their accustomed manner. His body cried out to him, demanding that he rise up and dance in time to the relentless music in his head. But the barrier about him prevented him from moving, and a gradual weakness overcame him as his immobile body struggled with his mind.

In utter frustration, Ivan swayed almost imperceptibly from side to side, the rhythm consuming him and shouting for him to rise and dance. Gradually his head cleared a bit and he found himself to be trussed up tightly. His nakedness startled him, for though he was accustomed to being scantily clad, as dancers usually were, he had always maintained a degree of modesty about his genitalia. Even through the fog in his mind, he felt shocked and unclean.

The gadget to which Ivan was tied was convex, like a great wheel, perhaps, forcing his back to arch into a familiar, almost comfortable bend, his head thrust back to gaze at the wall behind him. If in fact it was a wall. Even from this absurd upside down perspective, it had a hazy, unreal appearance, as though it had been created only to give the appearance of a wall.

The colors were equally nebulous, offering the sense of a dreamscape through which one could run at any pace, however slow or fast, and through which Ivan knew he would dance the ultimate dance if he could but loose himself from the bounds which held him fast.

It was then that Ivan discovered he was not alone. Although he could see no other person, his head thrust back as it was, he felt the unmistakable caress of a hand on his inner thigh. He froze momentarily, filled with extreme embarrassment at the thought of being touched in so familiar a manner in so private a place. In all his years of pursuing the dance dictated by his inner music, Ivan had barely contemplated the sexual side of his life. He knew, of course, that the other dancers in his troupe engaged in sexual relationships, and that those between two males were often frowned upon. But somehow the sound of his own music had kept him from the desire to pursue the sexual fulfillment that most men he knew seemed to need so desperately.

As a youth he had had very little sex drive, finding that even wet dreams were not much of a concern because he had no desire other than to chase his music with flying arms and leaping legs. The years of working daily to strengthen his muscles and to perfect the dance steps set before him by the Master Choreographer had left his body as drained and fulfilled as sexual encounters. Of this he was sure, for whenever the inconvenience of an erection pursued him, he found that he had only to strain harder against the weights or move through the dance steps more forcefully in order to achieve the physical bliss that came at the end of a workout. And always the erection was gone after such strenuous activity.

Ivan considered his virginity briefly. Originally it had not been premeditated so much as it was a natural expression of what he was. What need was there for a sex partner when listening to the inner choreographer was so much more satisfying? As he had grown older, Ivan had developed an irrational fear that losing his virginity might mean losing his music. He was uncertain of the origins of this fear, but it had been the strongest advocate of retaining his virginity.

Besides, Ivan had frequently told himself, it was socially acceptable, and there were no awkward emotional relationships to complicate matters. “Why can’t you be like Ivan?” he could hear the Master Teacher bellowing at the two gay boys who had recently joined the troupe. “Ivan doesn’t need to stick his prick anywhere, or feel one in his behind. All Ivan needs is to dance!”

Ivan had been embarrassed by the shouting, by the reference to his sexuality—or perhaps lack of it, by being held up as an example to the younger dancers. It was true that all he needed was to dance, but Ivan could not help feeling as though he had somehow been exposed to the rest of the troupe as some kind of freak.

Outwardly he knew he was beautiful. The ignored fan mail that piled up in his dressing room attested to that knowledge. Even though he never read the letters, he could not ignore the articles in the press about the combination of his striking physical beauty with his inborn gift to dance.

Only once had he tried to talk about it. When he was barely 5, already chosen for the Dance Academy because of his obvious innate talent, he had tried to tell Master Jiblikov about the music in his head. But the Master had ridiculed Ivan and severely disciplined him for “creating outrageous lies to distract from lessons,” and never again had Ivan whispered a word to anyone about his music.

Ivan was brought back from his reminiscing by the feel of something smooth and hard stroking his loins, gently at first and then with more vigor, until finally the object left and returned with such dreadful force that Ivan realized it was a whip. Again and again it lashed out at him, raising painful welts on his chest, abdomen and thighs. It was being carefully placed, he realized, because it did not touch his genitals. The pain befuddled him even as the inability to move had, and he moaned in frustration. Now there were hands caressing him, gently rubbing a balm over his wounded flesh, perhaps repentant for the damage the whip had done.

Ivan considered whether there was more than one person here with him. He had heard nothing yet but the sound of his own flesh being beaten, had felt only two hands upon his body. He struggled to lift his head but found that he could not. Even though no bonds held his head, he had grown so weak that he could not raise it.

The hands moved at last to his privates and Ivan was shocked to find his body responding with an erection. He had not thought his body was capable of such a reaction in the midst of pain. But there it was, like a flag flying above his immobile body. Ivan could not see it, but he

knew what it looked like, having walked in on the gay boys more than once in the dormitory room they all shared.

The hands were replaced now by something soft and wet, causing Ivan to shudder with pleasure. He cried out, unable to stop the sound before it left his throat, and the startled pleasure-giver vanished without warning.

In the next moment Ivan's confusion increased greatly, for he was suddenly free from the contraption. He lay curled in on himself, struggling to rise from the fetal position in order to make his muscles answer the ongoing command to dance.

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Thorne watched with great curiosity as the creature she had captured struggled to move within the confines of the space she had forced him into. There was simply no room to move, and yet he tried. The muscles of his body rippled and flowed as though he danced in place. The motion reminded her of the mime she had seen at the fair on Vega. The fellow had walked in place, giving the appearance of moving without actually leaving the space in which he walked. Thorne considered the man for a moment, trying to recall if he had been one of her victims. But no. The black hair had only been a curly wig, she remembered, and though the pale eyes had cried out with vulnerability, the red hair and freckles beneath the white makeup had revolted her. That one she had left alone.

Black hair, she mused. What was significant about black hair? She thought of her own black hair, which curled delightfully on the rare occasions it was clean, and wondered if it was necessary to the deception that her victims match her own coloring. Had she ever tried a blonde? Thorne couldn't recall. She knew only that the deception had gone on for so long that she had lost the beginning of it, the very reason for it, and that realization frustrated her nearly as much as the immobility was frustrating Ivan. That much she knew, for she had tapped into the fiber of his being when he had cried out.

This one was so unlike the others. There was a sexual innocence about him that tantalized her, tugged at her desires like none of the others had. Surprisingly, Thorne found herself reluctant to complete the process, as though in destroying the innocence she would also destroy this tantalizing music which soothed her like no feasting ever had. This one was different. This one she would savor like a fine wine, only a sip at a time until at last the vessel was empty and ready to be cast away. This one would last much longer than the usual four days.

Thorne moved through the milky substance of her inner being toward Ivan's rippling body. As she neared him the music pulsed louder, demanding release. Placing her psihand gently on the small of his back, Thorne felt the music pulsing through his body into her own, causing her to sway about, the gentle undulations sweeping through her ethereal form into her actual physical body, causing it to slowly rise from its usual catatonic state to leap and caper across the floor.

Shuddering with laughter and exhilaration, Thorne cast a shield between them, rearranged her body into its usual comfortable position, and pulled Ivan's sleeping form into her mental lap where she could listen to his music through the shield but not be controlled by it.

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Eric Jordan pressed the switch to open the viewing window. The room beyond was dark. “She’s tampered with the lights again,” he commented dryly to Dr. Hudson.

“You let her?” asked the surprised doctor.

“Nothing we can do about it,” remarked Jordan casually. “She has no physical tools with which to work. The switches are all in here, but as you can see,” he said, pointing to the console before them, “they’ve all been switched off.”

“And you keep the control room locked?”

“All the time,” Jordan replied. “I am the only one with a key.”

“You’re sure you’re not turning them off yourself?” asked Hudson skeptically.

“Absolutely,” chuckled Eric. “I’ve had myself screened a dozen times with that in mind.”

“Then perhaps your theory is correct. Though I doubt it is. If she can switch off the lights, she can escape, and I understand she’s never even tried.”

“No, Doctor, she seems to be quite content here, for whatever the reason. She changes things she doesn’t like, but most of the changes are minor. The lights in her room are the biggest, and it took me weeks to catch on to that.”

“But you haven’t tested her.”

“Yes, I have, but the results are so aberrant that I needed an expert. I don’t know what to do at this point. I have to leave that up to you and hope she’ll cooperate.”

“All right, then, let’s go in.”

Eric reached for the switches in front of him. Light flooded the room beyond the window, but the embryonic figure on the floor did not respond. Hudson studied the catatonic creature in the padded cell during the several minutes Jordan waited before speaking into the com.

“Thorne.”

The figure did not move. After a moment, he spoke again.

“Thorne. It’s Eric.” Hudson cast a sideways glance at his colleague upon hearing the doctor use his first name with his patient.

Still there was no response. Hudson stared intently at the spectacle on the floor, then turned to watch Jordan concentrate intensely on trying to elicit a response from Thorne.

“Thorne. I want to come in.”

Nothing. Several minutes passed before Eric spoke again.

“Thorne. I’ve brought someone to see you.”

The figure on the floor moved slightly, as if waking from a trance. In the minutes that followed, she seemed to come slowly to consciousness, then rose. Dr. Hudson watched in fascination.

Jordan switched off the com so they could speak.

“Amazing!” said Hudson. “It’s almost like a ritual.”

“It is a ritual,” replied Eric. “It took weeks for her to train me into it.”

Hudson looked at Eric skeptically. “That doesn’t sound terribly professional, Dr. Jordan.”

“I know. But there didn’t appear to be an alternative. It seemed imperative that I learn to communicate with her, and she wouldn’t allow it except on her own terms.”

“So the patient manipulates the doctor. Is that what the score is here?”

“Yes, Doctor, and I’m hoping that with your help we can change the score.” The two men watched the young woman who now stood facing the viewing window. Hudson made a

mental note that she was appropriately named as they moved toward the locked door of her room.

Thorne turned to face them as Jordan and Hudson came through her door. She was an ugly creature, curly black hair lying in matted tangles on a head too small for the immense, strangely misshapen body beneath it. Her gross fat was clad in a shapeless white smock to denote her patient status, but her dirty feet were bare, and Hudson wondered if it was because there were no shoes in the hospital large enough. Her seven-foot frame towered over them, yet she looked quite harmless in spite of her size.

“This is Dr. Hudson,” said Eric when they had stopped inside the door. “I would appreciate it very much if you would . . . ah . . . cooperate with him.”

Thorne eyed Hudson suspiciously. “And what will you give me if I do?” she asked in a surprisingly melodious voice. “My freedom?”

“Is that what you want?” Hudson asked quietly.

Thorne sat abruptly on the floor and wrapped her arms around her huge knees. She looked at him thoughtfully. “No,” she said after a moment. “I’m quite happy here.”

“Are you?” asked Hudson as he sat down facing her, trying not to show his distaste for sitting on the floor. “How can you be happy here? This place can’t possibly meet your needs.”

“Needs? I have no needs,” Thorne replied. “Besides eating and sleeping, what is there?” Then laughing slightly she added, “you know, nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

“On whose part?” asked Hudson, on guard for what might be beneath the cliché. “Yours, or ours?”

“Get involved fast, don’t you Doc?” Thorne asked, glaring at him.

“What do you mean?” asked Hudson, knowing he had ruined his first chance to gain her trust.

“You said ‘ours.’ That implies self-involvement. You aren’t connected with this institution and that means you’re a specialist. Which means I’ve gotten to be too hot for Eric to handle.” She smiled as Eric winced noticeably.

“How do you know about me?” Hudson cried indignantly. “That’s privileged information!”

“I know what I know,” Thorne said quietly. “Now leave! I don’t cooperate with paranoid specialists!”

“But Thorne . . .” Eric began.

“No! Leave me to my dreams. I’m of no use to you, cured or not.”

There was a barrier suddenly. It was as though she was no longer there, but they could both see her, folding in on herself until she was a shapeless bundle of white. The barrier moved, pushing them toward the door until they wanted to scream and run. Eric motioned to Hudson and they hurried from the room, locking the door carefully behind them.

“Let’s go get some coffee,” said Hudson. “I need to mull this over.”

“Sure,” said Jordan. “This way.”

They moved quickly out of the ward, as though something was driving them out. Hudson glanced at the other Staff they passed, but no one else gave any indication of feeling the eerie force with which Thorne had pushed them away.

“I think we had a small taste of insanity back there,” remarked Hudson as they sat down in the lounge with their coffee.

“She’s done that to me before,” Eric said quietly. “I have no control over her whatsoever.”

“I’m beginning to understand now, Dr. Jordan. I think I can see why you consider her to be special.”

“Special!” Eric laughed bitterly. “She’s special all right. Sometimes she’s a monster!”

“Hush!” warned Hudson. “Talk like that will serve only to get you relieved of your duties. You know how the Board feels about becoming emotionally involved with the patients.”

“I know, I know,” replied Jordan despondently. “It’s just that I never had a case like this before.”

“Okay, let’s go back to the beginning and see if we left something out. Give me the facts again, anything you can think of, relative or not. There has to be an answer.”

“Right,” said Eric. “Okay, now, she’s been here two years. During that time she’s been coerced into bathing about once a month; she eats six meals a day; she’s either asleep or in a trace whenever she’s not eating.”

“Or conversing,” added Hudson.

“That isn’t frequent. Only once or twice a week, actually. She won’t talk to me again for at least a week—if she’ll talk then. She clams up for a long time after I bring someone new in. She spots specialists immediately. That’s another reason I think she’s a telepath.”

“Come on, Jordan. It’s out of the question. It defies all the laws of nature for a telepath to be insane. It’s like sprouting wings and flying. It’s biologically impossible.”

“I know,” said Eric. “That’s why it’s such a problem.”

“Well, go on with the details. Remind me of her vitals.”

“Right. She’s 7 foot 2, weighs about 500 pounds—though we’ve never been able to get her onto a scale—she’s apparently single and has no medical disorders that we can determine . . . ah . . . she’s 19 years old . . . “

”What!?” Hudson calculated quickly. “You mean she’s been here since she was 17? You know that’s illegal! Why didn’t you tell me that in your request for my assistance?”

“I’m sorry,” said Eric quietly. “I didn’t want to put it in writing. We try to keep it under wraps.”

“How did she get here if she was under age?” Hudson asked suspiciously. He lived in fear of the Board and assumed that the rest of the Staff did too.

“Murder.”

“What? How? Who?”

“There was an incident on a shuttle about three years back, involving a Titan who laughed at her because of her size. A scuffle broke out. According to witnesses, she never actually touched the man, but in the end he died screaming and she was considered dangerous. The autopsy showed that his brain was burned from the inside. Only telepaths can do that. I think she was finally put here out of fear.”

“Umm,” sighed Hudson. “I see the problem.”

“What do you suggest, Dr. Hudson?” Jordan asked earnestly. “Where do we go from here?”

“I don’t know. If she truly is a telepath, we’ll need the help of another telepath. But to get one legitimately we’d have to go through the Service.” Hudson looked uneasy.

“That’s bad?”

“Well, it would be admitting that we were wrong, that empirical laws of nature can be broken, and the Board would break us before they’d ever stand still for that. For two hundred years they’ve stood firm on the theory that telepaths can’t be insane. Their reputation, as well as

that of the Service, would be shattered in minutes.”

“But what about Thorne?” asked Eric anxiously. “Those trances she goes into. Where is her mind then? We have no concept of the damage she may be doing. And it could never even be traced to her . . . ”

* * *

Let’s approach it from the standpoint that she’s not a telepath,” began Hudson. They were sitting in the control room watching the black viewing screen.

“All right,” said Eric, “let’s. Maybe you can come up with something I’ve overlooked.”

“First,” said Hudson as he switched on the lights in Thorne’s room, “there is her appearance.”

“She’s a freak,” remarked Eric.

“Indeed. And freaks tend toward instability. One solution would be to alter her appearance so that she’s no longer a freak.”

“Sounds good on paper, Hudson, but try getting close enough to her to do it.”

“You could change her weight without going near her. You told me yourself she eats six times a day.”

“You mean withhold food,” said Eric.

Hudson nodded.

“I’ve tried it. It doesn’t work.”

“You mean she doesn’t lose weight?”

“Lose weight!” laughed Jordan cynically. “She conjures up food out of nothing and gets fatter instead.”

“Conjures? You mean she’s more than just a telepath?”

“So it appears. That’s why I want her tested.”

“I can’t do anything if I can’t get near her, Jordan. Surely you realize that.”

“Yes, yes. I know I’m fighting a losing battle. I guess I just need to be reassured that it’s not my fault.”

“Why don’t you get a transfer, Dr. Jordan? Or at least take a vacation.”

“What would happen to Thorne? I am the only one she will interact with on any level, and she seems to require some amount of interaction in order to survive. She had been totally noncommunicative for months when they turned her over to me, and by then she appears to have been dying.”

“Dying?” Hudson turned to look at Eric. “Maybe that’s the solution to your problems, Dr Jor . . . ” The look of horror on Eric’s face made Hudson turn around in time to see Thorne’s immense form hurtling toward the viewing screen. From the look on her face, Hudson knew he was dead.

“Thorne, no!” Eric cried as he watched the spectacle before him. Although the screen miraculously held when Thorne’s enormous body hit it, Hudson flew from his chair and smashed into the wall behind them, crumpling into a broken heap on the floor.

Thorne fell too, lying just barely in view at the bottom of the screen.

Neither one moved, and Eric pondered momentarily whether they both were dead. Steeling himself, Eric knelt beside Hudson’s inert form and sought for a pulse. He was both startled and relieved when he found the sign of life he had been sure would not be there.

Perhaps Thorne is not quite so mad as I thought, he mused as he rose to call the Medical Team, noting with interest the apparent marks of electrical burns on both the console and Hudson's hands. He knew that transfer of energy was within her power, but he did not quite understand why Thorne had spared the specialist whom she seemed to despise nor how she had contrived of such an elaborate ruse to cover her attack. He must be certain not to let on that he, too, had had his hands on the console when Thorne attacked.

Having satisfied himself that Hudson would survive until the medics arrived, Eric turned his attention to Thorne once more, daring to enter her room unannounced. She did not move, did not respond in any way to his approach, nor to his touch when he knelt beside her and once more sought a pulse. The pulse he found was slow and faint, causing Eric to consider the possibility that Thorne had done more damage to herself than to Hudson.

The medics were slow in coming, so Eric took advantage of the time to examine Thorne more carefully than he had ever been able to before. He was amazed at how soft and cool her skin felt, but horrified to find that her bones were all wrong as he probed here and there for possible breakage. Her weight was mainly bone, he realized, and where there should have been gross fat, he found instead surprisingly well-developed muscle, the kind that most people worked hard to attain.

Coming back to the bones once more, Eric found through careful examination that there seemed to be duplicity in many places, as though Thorne's flesh contained two skeletal structures rather than one. It was most obvious in her hands, where there seemed to be a larger set of finger bones lying over a smaller set, the pudgy fingers strangely thick. If I could x-ray her, Eric speculated, I bet I would find two complete bodies instead of one. That accounts for her unnatural size. I wonder if it is the source of her madness as well.

Almost as if his thought of x-raying Thorne was somehow threatening to her, she stirred under Eric's hands, forcing her way up from unconsciousness with suppressed fury. Eric jerked his hands back involuntarily when Thorne's eyes opened suddenly and showered him with rage. *I must not fear her*, he reminded himself inwardly. *How can she trust me if I am afraid?*

"Thorne," he said softly, his voice full of compassion, "are you hurt?" He stayed on his knees beside her, his hands pressed against his thighs, the compassion in his voice filling his face as well.

Thorne studied the compassion Eric manifested towards her. Her eyes could read it in his face as easily as she could read it in his mind. She was startled by this, knowing that although she had trusted Eric more than anyone else, she had never considered the possibility that compassion might be included in their relationship. She probed deeper, aware that Eric knew what she was doing, knew that she was searching his soul for the honesty of his concern for her.

Of course I care, he told her silently. *How could I spend two years trying to help you and not care? You are very special, and even though I have a scientific interest in you, I have a human interest too. Beneath this exterior you manifest there is something very beautiful. It is merely confused.*

Thorne was struck by his knowledge that her exterior was a guise, by his instinctive understanding of what she was even though he had not been able to prove it scientifically. She studied his face, studied the women in the viewing room who had come to collect the specialist she had almost destroyed in a moment of utter fury. She allowed them to turn on the com link, but put a mental lock on the door.

"Dr. Jordan," the medic began, "we have Dr. Hudson ready for transport to the

infirmary. Do you need assistance with your patient as well?"

Eric looked at Thorne, saw the negativity on her face.

"No," he responded, "I'll call you if I need assistance. Let me know how Dr. Hudson is as soon as you have a prognosis."

"Yes, sir," the woman replied.

When the medics had gone, Thorne sealed off the observation room as well, reinforcing it with a mental lock that she alone could open. *Would good Dr. Eric's compassion renege when he found himself locked in with her?* She focused on him once again, finding that he had not moved, that his compassion had not yet abated. *Never mind.*

"You touched me," she said accusingly from where she still lay on the floor. "I told you never to touch me."

"I was concerned for your life," Eric replied. "I feared you might be dead."

"You did more than find my pulse," Thorne continued, watching closely at his inner responses as well as listening to what came out of his mouth.

"I was looking for broken bones," Eric's voice told her, while his thoughts whispered how soft and cool her skin was and how many bones he had found. "But you still have not moved."

His voice continued to be full of concern. "Are you injured in some way?"

Not myself, but that which is in me, Thorne mused to herself. *Now I must separate it from myself, lest its pain overwhelm me. What shall I do with Eric while I proceed?*

"How far can I trust you?" Thorne asked, staring intently into Eric's eyes. "What will you do with my secrets when you find them?"

His startled expression told her much, but his carefully chosen words, interwoven with the thoughts she read in his mind told her more.

"You are not an experimental animal," he stated with conviction, though his scientific curiosity threatened to be overwhelmed by the realization that he might at last be able to crack this case which had frustrated him for so long. "What I learn from you may be helpful to others, but you are my primary concern." *I care about you,* whispered his emotions. "I cannot believe that you have chosen to exist the way you do, that you truly desire to be malformed and unloved, even though every indication you give is that you are this way by choice." His mind burned with the pain of how she looked to him, for he seemed to be able to see more than her gross body, and the contrast screamed in agony in his heart. "I want to help you because there is a thread of something very beautiful in you," he said earnestly. "I want to bring it into the light and weave it into something wonderful and whole."

So I am not whole, Thorne mused. *No, I am more than whole. You've no idea.* She started to confront him, then thought better of it.

"How can I help you?" he asked, the pain of his compassion burning behind his eyes.

"If I allow you to help," Thorne began tentatively, "then I must take you into myself in a way which you cannot understand until after it has occurred." She watched him carefully, but found only a passionate desire to aid her. "Once I have taken you in, you will know me for what I really am." Again she watched, but he seemed unable to see anything but good in her.

"But in knowing me, I will know you, and if I find I cannot trust you, I will destroy you."

From his reaction, Thorne judged that Eric did not really comprehend what she had said. The thoughts he attached to her use of the word "destroy" were associated with his career rather than his life, and she saw that he had long since given up hope of having a successful career. She

saw too that she was the cause of his loss of hope. Perhaps she was also the cause of his reckless desire to put aside logic in favor of the compassion that drove him.

“Are you willing?” Thorne asked, wanting to hear it from his lips as well as read it in his heart.

“Anything,” Eric whispered. “I will do whatever is necessary to help you.” With that the room suddenly became quite dark, and Eric felt an intense moment of fear.

“Give me your hand,” Thorne whispered from the darkness near him. Eric extended his hands toward where she lay, but she took only the left one and began to draw him into herself. He could feel the strange sensation of being gradually engulfed, first his hand, then slowly up his arm to the shoulder and beyond. It was like being pulled through warm foam. Fighting down a terrible sense of panic, he waited while the foam covered first his mouth, then his nose, afraid to breathe but afraid not to.

In the seconds before he took his first breath and discovered that Thorne had left him his nostrils, he wondered if she could be trusted or if he had just signed his own death warrant. The thought was met with a burst of bitter laughter which assaulted his left ear from within the foam, his right ear from without. “I trust you, Thorne,” his mouth told the foam, “but still I am afraid.”

The fear alternately subsided and grew more intense as the process continued. Like being swallowed by a giant amoeba, Eric realized that he was being consumed; the digestive process had not yet begun, but if it did, then he had no chance of escape. Thorne left him to his fears and concentrated on expelling the previous body, the one whose bones she had shattered when she had thrown herself against the viewing screen. She had damaged it more than she usually did, and because she loathed losing the internal music which had been so soothing, she needed Eric’s expertise to heal the broken body. She would meld with his mind once he was fully engulfed, and together they would set the bones of the broken dancer.

* * *

Now that she had broken his body, Thorne herself was faced with Ivan’s compulsion to dance.

She was so huge with her lumbering 2-in-1 body that she had to find a secret place where she could dance and leap with her clumsy 300 pounds. She had lost all of her excess fat so that she could move more easily while carrying around Ivan’s damaged body. And she had even achieved some grace at the movements.

What she and Eric had learned from their melding was that she could not heal Ivan quickly, and if she did not keep him inside her body where she could answer the demands of his music with her own limbs, then he would slowly die. And for some reason, she could not bring herself to kill this time.

Thorne surely did not understand this transformation in herself. Since Eric had melded with her and she had seen as deeply into him as he had seen into her, she was constantly struck anew with the amazement she had felt when she first saw how Eric felt about her. He saw her as a beautiful woman who was just twisted in on herself, someone who needed a little gentleness and love to help her find the way back from self-loathing to self-esteem. It told her something about why this man Eric Jordan had chosen to become a psychiatrist.

She struggled continually with his desire to heal her, with his belief that whatever was broken inside of her COULD be fixed, and as she wandered down the paths in her mind provided

by Eric's thoughts, Thorne listened quietly to Ivan's inner music and struggled with the pain it caused him that he could not dance.

She saw Ivan there inside of her, his eyes closed, his poor broken limbs so wracked with pain that he could not even begin to move them, let alone answer the Siren in his soul. He looked so pathetic, so dejected, that it sparked something deep inside of her psyche, and Thorne held him close inside her, hugging him to her while her limbs molded around his to serve as casts and splints to support the healing bones.

She carried him gently, moving as softly and slowly as she could, so as not to increase his pain. Still, he whimpered, sometimes, deep within her, and Thorne felt such a rush of confused compassion, that she continued to cradle him in her inner arms.

She felt it so keenly, the knowledge that Ivan would die if his body did not move to the inner music. And the delicious sensations of music and emotion so captured Thorne that she did not want Ivan to die. She sent rushes of healing energy to him every chance she had, but his bones healed so very slowly.

Several times she had tried taking him out right there in her cell, laying him gently on the soft floor, so he could rest. Sometimes he slept for a while, and while he was sleeping, Thorne would funnel the music into her own inner ears and enjoy the thrilling cascades of notes that riveted her hand to his forehead for hours at a time.

But too soon it would be necessary to engulf him once again, because the fragilely knitting bones would begin to weaken and ache without the support provided by Thorne's body around his. The music flowing up her arm would be accompanied by throbs of pain, and soon, if she did not take him back into her first, Ivan would wake and begin to weep uncontrollably as the pain and the music combined would drive him mad.

Once she had him safely aboard, Thorne would teleport out of the room she called home and into the great empty mausoleum on the hill overlooking the hospital. There she would dance, leaping and twirling down the silent halls, a lumbering ghost in her white hospital garb, names of the dead echoing down the corridors after her as Ivan's mind deciphered for her the letters her eyes saw.

At last she collapsed with exhaustion and lay panting on the musty marble floor while she waited for Ivan to relax and sleep within. Then she would teleport back to her room and sleep, curled on the bare padded floor.

Sometimes she wished for a blanket to hold herself as close as she held Ivan. But usually she was too tired to fetch one. The room was not cold, but there was a great secure feeling in being wrapped in a blanket when she slept. Perhaps Eric would bring her one, she would think sleepily, and often he did, as though he read her thoughts before she drifted completely into the realm of dreams.

Even there within her dreams she mulled over Eric's images of her, and she studied Ivan's dreamselves as they merged with her own. She watched his dream images dance with a grace she could not fathom, saw him cower with a shame she could not comprehend, felt him weep from a grief so deep it was impossible for her to understand. The ranges of emotions that washed over her from Ivan's thoughts and dreams kept her moving more for him than for herself. She had never encountered such a fascinating and myriad range of emotions.

* * *

As Eric had learned, Thorne was emotionally immature. Born to an angry, abusive mother, and a step-father who raped her when she was 7, Thorne had turned in on herself so early in life that she continued to function emotionally as a child. Her mind was shrewd, as she had already demonstrated on numerous occasions, but her heart was stuck at a very young age.

What struck Eric the strongest when she had merged with him was not her extraordinary memories, but the extent and simplicity of her powers. Eric studied the intricate way the channels in her psimind were connected, and the simplicity with which they were directed. Thorne had only to think of what she wanted or where she wanted to be and it was accomplished. She was incredibly powerful and hence, equally dangerous.

Thorne had watched Eric register this thought, had watched him evaluate it and had sighed with relief when he set it aside with the rest of the information he'd gained. From him she had extracted medical knowledge, and together they had tried to help Ivan, who had lain in an abandoned heap in the corner after Thorne had expelled him. With a common mind they had explored his broken limbs, Thorne's large hands superimposed over Eric's smaller ones. Thorne had wanted to set the bones immediately, but Eric had pointed out that it would do no good since there was nothing with which to bind the bones in place.

At last they arrived at what became their solution. Thorne released Eric, then lay down on the floor where Eric gently lifted Ivan onto Thorne's soft body. As Eric set each bone, she extended that area of her body over Ivan's damaged flesh to hold the bones in place.

Thus she became Ivan's human cast. When they were finished, only Ivan's head remained outside her body, his neck protruding from her right shoulder at a slight angle. Eric suggested that she leave his head free to bring his separate consciousness to the healing process, but Thorne quickly discovered that she could not hear the music in this position and overruled. She took him completely in and wiled away the hours listening to the gentle strains of his broken heart.

Eric was profoundly moved by the devastations Thorne had survived in her short life. Her mother's beatings had turned to murder one day when Thorne was 12. Her newly wakened psimind had turned angrily against the strap, yanked it from her mother's hands, and then slashed it fiercely back in the woman's face.

Thorne's mother had screamed and cursed her now very tall daughter, but the girl was blind with pent up rage, and when at last she dropped the weapon in exhaustion, the mutilated body of her mother was beyond recognition.

Newly filled with her own power, Thorne went seeking the step-father and clawed from him the final hours of his life by drawing him into herself and then slowly sucking the life force out of his helpless body. Leaving those two bodies behind for the authorities to spend months pondering about, Thorne crept away from her childhood home on Viragos 5 and ran to the gutters of planet after planet, eking out a meager existence as a petty thief while learning the full extent of her powers, until the incident on the shuttle when, despite no physical evidence, Thorne was detained for extended questioning in the sudden and painful death of the fool who had insulted her.

The Service had not been able to confine her. She had slipped away from them on several occasions before an astute sergeant had suggested that she be hospitalized. There, drugged for months to keep her docile, Eric had finally discovered her and discontinued the drugs. But even after the long weaning period, Thorne had remained listless and silent. She rarely moved from whatever chair or bed the aids set her upon. Then one day for no apparent reason, she had turned

on one of the orderlies, crushing his chest with her powerful arms. The man had barely survived, and Thorne had been in the padded cell ever since.

It was true she needed nothing from the hospital, Eric discovered. The room was sufficient, it's huge soft floor more comfortable to sleep on than any of the too-small hospital beds. And since at night she teleported out of the hospital completely in order to roam the city in search of unsuspecting males to feast upon, all her immediate needs were fulfilled. Whenever it became apparent that Eric wanted to move her to another, more conventional room, Thorne would provide him with just enough incentive to doubt his decision, and then he would leave her there for another week or month while he pondered her lack of progress.

All the while she was perfectly sane—at least in her own mind. She was merely turned inward where she contemplated the nearly orgasmic sensations of devouring the psyche and life force of men who, though she never suspected it, matched the description of the unfortunate fellow who had unknowingly sired her, whose battered photograph Thorne had seen only once, but whose image was firmly imprinted on her mind. Her childlike emotions had failed to inform her that this man she sought was now 45 instead of 25. Her victims were more likely to be her siblings than her sire.

Eric had marveled at all these revelations, and Thorne likewise marveled at his musings. Watching him unravel her deepest mysteries with such ease unsettled Thorne, and she avoided Eric for some time after that. She had her hands full with Ivan, and Eric had his hands full with Dr. Hudson who, now that he was out of intensive care, was raving about destroying Thorne before the Board got wind of anything. Eric found himself sneaking into Hudson's room to sedate the man when his ravings got too loud about Eric's special project. He shook his head sadly as he injected yet another sleeping potion into his colleague's arm.

"You can't hide her forever," Hudson slurred before the drug took affect.

"I know," Eric whispered back to the unhearing man in the bed before him. "But I'm going to try as long as I can."

For Eric had seen the news late that same night after Thorne had released him. He rarely watched the vid news, but for some reason he was drawn into the lobby to stare in fascination as the Mystery of the Missing Dancer was played out on the screen before him. Thorne had to be protected until Ivan healed, or they would be giving back a broken, dying man, and the Government of Russia would immediately terminate all treaties with the Board at least. He dreaded thinking what their worst action might be.

He had been particularly shaken by the spectacle of the weeping Tasha, pleading for the life of her brother. The tiny dancer fascinated Eric to the point of erection before he caught himself and punched out for the night.

* * *

Tasha could not be budged once it was discovered that Ivan was missing. A shrewd young woman who missed little, she was fully aware of the barely suppressed news that a menacing killer was stalking young men of Ivan's description. Using her youthful appearance as an ally, Tasha refused to leave the theater from which Ivan had vanished. She had heard some of the reports that the Troupe's handlers had not managed to hide from her, her small lithe body enabling her to slip silently into shadows from which to eavesdrop.

She knew that in the other cases the victim had been returned to the same spot from

which he had disappeared. She also knew that some were found alive, and that some of those had survived. What she did not know was that none who survived were truly alive, but rather were comatose shells that had been transferred to the Trauma center where their organs would be harvested for transplant until there was nothing useful left, or until the body died from removal of critical parts.

Tasha refused to be moved from the stage where Ivan had been practicing when he'd disappeared, because she knew in three or four days he would be returned, and she wanted to be there to insure that, if he were alive, he would be kept alive and receive only the best care.

She used every ploy she could manage to put off the theater's attempt to evict the Troupe, and when her threats no longer stood on their own, she called the Russian Consulate, whose dignitaries promised a full scale political disaster if Ivan was not found unharmed. The theater ceased to hassle the Troupe into moving on. Future bookings were canceled indefinitely, and after a few days of worried pacing, the public fascination with the case urged the troupe back into performance. Ticket prices skyrocketed as rumors spread suggesting that Ivan might be returned in mid-performance.

Along with these, other rumors popped up: that Ivan was being held a political prisoner; that he had actually defected (though Tasha knew that one was farthest from the truth); and that he'd been injured accidentally by his captor, who wanted to avoid political incidents, and he would be returned as soon as he healed. This final rumor, though the most implausible, was also the most pervasive. Eric had been keeping his ear to the news, and restarted the rumor whenever it threatened to die out. He wanted to be sure the Russians were prepared for a less-than-perfect Ivan when they finally got him back.

So the Troupe kept dancing, the Russians kept raking in the proceeds, and Tasha continued to spend every waking hour she wasn't dancing pacing the empty stage awaiting Ivan's return.

* * *

It had been nearly two months since Ivan's disappearance. Enthusiasm for the dancer's reappearance was waning. Ticket sales were off, enthusiasm among the Troupe members was down, rumors in the press were turning ugly. Tasha's pacing had begun to wear a thin groove in the stage floor. She had taken to ranting and raving, sometimes in Pashian, sometimes in Common. She had lost her little girl appearance and had gained the look of an angry young woman instead.

She was storming across the stage in such fury one afternoon, that she very nearly stepped on Ivan's inert body when it appeared suddenly in the shadows. She shrieked in amazement and dropped quickly to her knees beside him.

"Bahzel, Bahzel," she cried, alerting the Troupe doctor that their long wait was finally over. She pushed the now quite-long curls out of Ivan's face. He lay curled in fetal position on the cool wood floor. Touching his cheek, she felt that he was warm, but she had known that he would be. She had listened carefully to Eric's rumors, and she was certain of the truth in them. The political situation was growing out of proportion, and the Board was doing everything in its power to make amends. If Ivan was alive anywhere, she knew that he would be returned alive. And the passage of time reinforced the idea that he needed time to heal from something.

But as soon as she saw him in fetal position, she knew that he had not healed completely.

Her brother flailed about in his sleep and always sprawled whenever he lay down. She had never seen him tightly curled before, and she was certain it was not a good sign. Although she sensed he was unconscious rather than sleeping, she knew either way the posture was highly disturbing.

Bending her face close to his, she whispered little secrets from their childhood to him, chiding him gently toward consciousness, for he had not moved a muscle since she'd found him here a few moments ago. She felt his warm breath on her cheek, but she could not quite detect the rise and fall of his chest, his breath was so shallow.

Bahzel knelt beside them and attached a scanning device to Ivan's neck to monitor his vital signs. After a few moments he was able to determine that Ivan had indeed returned in better condition than the other victims. Though his breathing was shallow and his pulse slow, it was clear that the dancer's life force was intact.

A bit more gentle probing on Tasha's part, and Ivan began to respond faintly to her voice. He moaned and vaguely appeared to be attempting to uncurl. As he moved toward consciousness, his pulse and respiration also increased, Bahzel noted favorably. By the time Bahzel's assistant had arrived with the pallet they would move him to, Ivan was beginning to mumble incoherently. He found the process of attempting to move both extremely painful and extremely difficult. He cried out in agony, and Tasha caught him up in her arms, to comfort him as much as to comfort herself.

She marveled at the delicious, secure feel of her brother's body against her. He had held her so often in his own comforting arms, pressed against the security of his throbbing chest. Perhaps her own beating heart would comfort Ivan now, she mused, glad to be able to hold him as she had been held.

He relaxed into her lap and startled her with his sudden dead weight. But at least she was prepared to help when Bahzel and Tinnan were ready to lift him onto the wheeled pallet. Ivan seemed to have lost consciousness again, for he was nothing but a helpless dead weight as they maneuvered him onto the padded surface.

Once they had him situated on his back, Tinnan began to cut away the same dirty tights Ivan had been wearing when he'd disappeared. Bahzel examined with his hands, pressing lightly here and there on the prone dancer, whose lids fluttered briefly then opened with unseeing eyes. His head lolled to the side where Tasha was directly in his line of vision. But if he saw her, he gave no indication.

"Ivan, Ivan," Tasha called, "wake up brother. Do not abandon me again now that you are at last returned." She ran her fingers across his cheeks and mouth, tickling him gently as she talked. Up into his hair went her fingers, combing out the weeks of untended growth, while she spoke quietly to him of her fears and her painful loneliness during his long absence.

Bahzel meanwhile was puzzling over what his fingers found as he gently squeezed up and down Ivan's arms and legs. What he felt he considered astounding, and he directed Tinnan to prepare for x-rays immediately.

And so it was that they quickly learned what had been done to Ivan during his captivity. The breaks were all very clearly knitted, but with over 40 breaks throughout his body, he would be in great pain whenever the weather changed, and very likely he would never be able to dance again. Bahzel shook his head sadly as Ivan woke once again, his moans punctuating the doctor's knowledge of just how great was the dancer's pain.

Ivan shook his head slowly, rolling it side to side.

"Uhhnnh," he moaned. "Pain . . . so much . . . so bad . . ."

“Shh, shh,” Tasha whispered, petting his face. “Bahzel will do something to make it better.” She looked expectantly at the old doctor whose eyes were filled with sorrow. He was not going to lose this patient, the old man knew. But the poor fellow would probably live with excruciating pain or mindnumbing drugs for the rest of his life.

Tasha read the diagnosis in Bahzel’s eyes, understood the gravity of her brother not being able to dance, and drew in a sharp breath. Their life was forever changed from this moment on, she realized, and she was going to have to be much stronger if she wanted to hold up under what was to come. She clung to Ivan’s hands as Bahzel administered the sedative that took Ivan back down below the level of the pain.

“Are those the only choices?” she asked Bahzel when it was clear that Ivan was out cold again, “pain or unconscious?”

“For now,” the doctor replied. “We will have to study the situation and see what other alternatives can be found. Meanwhile, let’s get him off the stage before the next performance begins. They don’t need to know that he’s already returned.”

Tasha nodded thoughtfully as they rolled the gurney away into the secret infirmary they had created for this very deception.

* * *

The paradox of Ivan’s situation struck Bahzel as patently unfair as time went on. Through physical therapy they had discovered that Ivan’s pain was greatly lessened by the movement of his limbs, but to move them himself was so incredibly painful that he could not bear it. Sometimes he actually passed out from trying. Not only was he trapped in pain, but he was effectively paralyzed by it too.

Bahzel had been experimenting for weeks with various dosages of sedatives, learning for himself why Eric and Thorne had opted to take the hard way instead of granting Ivan pain relief through drugs. Morphine was the only drug that truly seemed to work, but it was severely regulated and restricted because of the side effects. In their secret infirmary, getting morphine without being discovered was so near to impossible that they dared not even try before the Troupe closed up shop and moved to greener pastures.

At that time, they would stage the grande finale in which Ivan would be “returned” and the public fascination would be taken for one great final hit in the pocket. The Russians had picked up where Eric left off with the rumors, suggesting that contact had been made by the kidnapper and a deadline for return had been agreed upon.

Meanwhile Tasha continued to nurse Ivan as much as he would tolerate. He allowed her to brush his hair, which by now had grown quite long. And he would eat from her hands only, so great was his shame at being unable to feed himself. Beyond that she could not touch him, for he harbored some undefinable fear that set him to shivering and raving whenever she stepped over his bounds. Tinnan was allowed to bathe him, and both men could help him with his bodily functions, but Tasha was allowed to touch him only in comforting hugs and stroked hands and cheeks.

They decided among them that Ivan’s hair should stay long at least until the forthcoming time of his “return.” Beyond that, they would let Tasha decide if Ivan was not able to decide for himself.

That seemed to remain an unrelenting possibility, for though her brother had returned

often to full consciousness, he was never completely himself. He was often confused and sometimes didn't even know his sister. Other times he clearly recognized and interacted with her, but his time reference was always in the past. Sometimes he thought they were still young, at home in the orphanage they'd been moved to after Nana had died, that dreadful time when Ivan had not yet been accepted permanently with the Troupe, and they lived in fear of being separated. During those memories, Ivan would cling to Tasha, muttering fearfully that his baby sister would be taken from him, that he couldn't bear to be left alone.

Tasha had been oblivious to Ivan's dread of losing her, for she was so young at the time, she barely remembered what had been her brother's greatest nightmare. She remembered clinging to him in the great hall every night when the nurses came to take her back to the girls' wing, but she also remembered being reunited with him each morning at breakfast, so for her the memory of fear was tempered with joy.

Tasha's childhood memories centered mostly on her life with the troupe, where she was the baby ballerina and eventually the child star of some of their holiday performances. Ivan had refused to accept the Troupe's offer unless Tasha was included in the deal, so when she was barely 4, they'd joined *The Great Touring Russians*, and for a time Ivan had been the child star. Now he was the *danseur* and she was understudy to the *prima ballerina*. But he was lost in an earlier time, perhaps to hide from the terrible fear of not being able to move.

He was clearly frustrated by it. Though he could not seem to place himself in this time frame, still he demanded that his sister take him to the baths whenever he was awake. There, in the buoyancy of the water, he could move about unaided. Nightly they slipped into the great bathing pool in the sub-basement of the old theater, testament to an earlier time, where Ivan could move and flow with the inner music and release the tension in his soul. When Tasha saw him trying to dance there in the deepest part of the pool, she felt a great rush of hope. Perhaps if he could no longer dance on the stage, he would at least be able to dance for himself, which he seemed so desperately to need.

This unplanned therapy seemed better than anything Tinnan could devise, so they began using the pool during the day as well, the whole troupe on guard against the occasional roving journalists who still frequented the place. As Ivan continued to regain the use of his body—in the water, at least—his mind woke more and more to his actual surroundings, and his sister began to truly believe that her beloved brother was going to get well.

He would not talk about the ordeal that had destroyed his dancer's body, but there were thoughtful moments when Tasha caught him staring deeply into an inward place. Tasha wanted badly to ask him what had occurred, but Bahzel advised her against it. He was so newly recovered, the doctor worried, that questions might cause him to regress. It was dreadful to have to do so, but Tasha held her tongue.

They were moving into the fourth month after Ivan's initial disappearance, and everyone in the Troupe was sensing that their windfall was coming to an end. They choreographed a new dance that would include Ivan whether he could dance on his own or not. From all the help the various dancers had provided with therapy, they had learned to move Ivan's body in all the elegant moves that he had previously made himself. If he could not dance himself, they would dance him, each dancer moving an arm or leg as though he were a stringless marionette.

Daily they practiced the new routine while nightly they performed the old one. When it was time for Ivan to appear, they would be ready. They chose the final day of the fourth month, hoping the media would take the bait and correlate four months with four days. It seemed to fit

the current cycle of rumors. They wanted to make sure the Troupe remained free of any speculation, if possible.

When the great performance finally arrived, it was a spectacular success. Ivan appeared suddenly on the dance floor as some well-placed stage fog dissipated, and his fellow dancers acted their parts on perfect cue. As the four who'd been chosen to dance Ivan's limbs lifted him to his feet, the energy of the moment caught him up and he took a few faltering steps on his own. The movement worked perfectly with the choreographed moves, and Ivan fell back into his handlers' arms as though on cue. The audience was entranced, the critics stunned. The four whirled around the stage in precision, Ivan held high above their heads. They swept him down and he appeared to leap out from their grip, as he whirled in the air on the way back down to their arms. No one could tell whether he had been thrown or whether he had spun on his own. It was a masterpiece of choreographic drama, and when the four carried him off to put him into the arms of the waiting medical team, the audience went wild. The troupe went on with their performance, and only the most shrewd in the audience realized that Ivan had been on stage a paltry three minutes for all their 75 credits a ticket.

The Troupe was going to cut and run at the end of this performance, hopefully before it was noted critically that Ivan did not appear for the bow, for in fact Ivan had immediately gone from the hands of his doctors to the mobile medical unit that was, at the closing *allegro brillante*, already a good hour along on the journey to the next hiding place.

Tasha was adamant that Ivan would not be probed and prodded by the media after his ordeal. It was a happy accident that they had found water to be so healing for Ivan's wounded body, and since regular medical facilities had limited water therapy, the troupe headed instead for a mineral springs deep in the mountains where they hoped Ivan would finish healing, and where hopefully the press would not find them.

The Press Didn't Find Them. But Thorne Did.

To preserve their anonymity, Tasha did not push the Hot Springs resort to limit their other clientele. She simply discretely bought up the vacancies as they appeared, until finally no one was left but the Troupe and an unlikely pair that seemed to be together yet staying in separate rooms.

The man was rather nondescript, probably in his 30s, certainly too studious looking to be with the youngish Amazon. Yet they seemed to spend hours together, talking, only talking. The woman made frequent use of the pools, much to Tasha's consternation, but the man seemed disinclined to imitate his companion. He seemed much more keen on simply observing her.

When it became apparent that the woman was going to be in the pools no matter how hard they tried to avoid her, Tasha let down her guard and had Ivan brought to the water. Tasha herself was not much of a swimmer, but she encouraged Ivan to swim as much as he could. She waded about in the shallow water, being rather afraid to get in too deep, while occasionally eying the tall woman across the pool in the deep end. The woman seemed more interested in concealing her height than in Ivan and Tasha, but Tasha mistrusted her all the same.

So she was quite stunned when Ivan swam across the pool to the strange woman and put out a hand to caress her cheek in a familiar and intimate way. Tasha had not seen the longing in her brother's eyes when he had first spotted Thorne standing there in the deep water, calling to him with her eyes while trying not to intimidate Tasha who, even at 17, was still under 5 feet tall.

But Ivan felt the longing deep in his bones, and he could not stay away from Thorne no matter what Tasha might do. Thorne reached out and embraced him as he moved his body down into the water and pressed it against hers, wrapping his legs about her torso.

They clung together like long lost lovers. Having shared their flesh so intimately during the first two months of Ivan's healing, they had become intertwined in dangerous and unrelenting ways, which only the thrill of pressing their bodies against each other satisfied. The urge that thundered through their veins consumed them.

Tasha was aghast when she watched her brother cling to this tall, thin, black haired creature. As she saw their bodies meld together, she gripped the edge of the pool in shock. She watched as the spectacle moved to the lawn where a now much larger version of Thorne, with vague Ivan-like facial features, cavorted and spun in time to what could only be Ivan's inner music.

Tasha knew, for although neither of them had ever spoken of it, when he held her close, she could hear the faint strains of music drifting on the rhythm of his heart.

* * THE END * *