

Any Given Shadow

By

Justin Stanchfield

Music pulsed in waves, balanced upon crystal points embedded in the walls. Light refracted in rainbow spears that spilled across the floor. Dancers swayed to the undulating bass. They were locked as tightly to the rhythm as the tiny moon upon which the ballroom stood was locked to the cold, dead world far below. Jon Coffin struggled to keep up with the rest of the band. The ragga was unlike anything he had played before, and his guitar sounded a discordant counterpoint to the other players. It had been too long, ages since he had felt the tipsy euphoria of playing with other musicians. As the drums neared another zenith, he played a descending series of arpeggios, C into A minor into open G, and then let the strings feedback until the music became a wall of force.

On the floor, the dancers circled each other, duelists daring each other to touch, each pressing to reveal their partner without unmasking themselves. The optic fields around their bodies flared. The mad auroras caressed their torsos as they spun in ever tighter circles. As the dancers swung past the low stage, only sweat-soaked musk of aroused bodies and stale alcohol confirmed they were flesh and blood and not a company of gods. A tall, blonde woman pirouetted so close to Jon that he felt the breeze from her hair as she swung her head in exaggerated arcs. Out of habit, he tipped his head down and tried to catch a glimpse of the person beneath the computer-enhanced facade.

“It won’t work.”

Startled, Jon stepped back from the edge of the stage.

Kimmy Torneau, the violinist, grinned, her black eyes bright with amusement. She leaned close to his ear. “If you’re trying to see through their cute suits, forget it. This ain’t no high school prom. There’s enough processor power out there to keep this station alive for years.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Jon said.

Unlike the cheap field generators sold by the millions in every city and habitat across the solar system, the equipment on the floor tonight was seamless, the illusion complete. The music shifted again, modulating from C into B flat before it collapsed into a frenetic congregation of single note runs.

Again, Kimmy leaned close. “Watch the guy next to the column out of the corner of your eye.”

She drew her bow down the G string and pushed it up into a long double stop. Her foot tapped a pedal and the note dropped so low the floor hummed. Jon turned his head until he could just see the figure dancing with abandon in front of the speaker column. The man’s field broke apart like drops of paint spilled on a pool of wind-spun

water. The dark, chiseled features vanished, replaced by a paunchy, balding man with hair so thick on his shoulders Jon could see it beneath the gossamer body-suit. Blissfully unaware, the man moved away from the speaker and once again became a portrait of computer-generated perfection.

Jon turned toward Kimmy and raised an eyebrow. She grinned and threw her bow into a storm of notes so fast they blurred into a single, winding stream. The song reached a final peak and broke apart. The drums felt like explosions. Jon struck a final chord. He was glad simply to end in the same key.

"We shall take a brief pause," the singer, Nikos, said into the microphone in a deliberately exaggerated Trans-Martian accent. The dancers slipped into the shadowed alcoves and private rooms. Exhausted, Jon leaned his guitar against a stand and followed the rest of the band out a side door.

"How did you do that?" John asked Kimmy.

"Magic." She smiled with elfin glee. "Hold a D five octaves below middle C and the optic generators pick it up as a sympathetic vibration. It distorts the field. You'd be amazed at what you see under the cute suits around here."

"Just don't let them see you looking," Nikos said without a trace of humor. "The patrons in this club take their privacy seriously."

"So I've noticed." Jon rubbed the small, half-moon nick on his wrist where the glowering, tuxedoed giant guarding the door had pressed a sampler against his skin. The unspoken warning was plain: *We know who you are. Talk, and we will find you.*

The corridor opened into a small lounge dominated by an enormous window that looked down on the featureless face of Uranus. The room was tastefully furnished. The chairs and low tables, like most things on Miranda, were spun from the clouds of hydrocarbon thousands of kilometers below. Jon stepped to the window. His face was a pale ghost in the thick glass, superimposed on the softly glowing planet. The effect was dizzying.

"Impressive, isn't it?" A second ghost appeared in the glass. Nikos's sharp features were framed by a tangle of dark ringlets that spilled down his shoulders. He stared at the faint bands of gas. "I like what you did with the distortion on the last set."

"Thanks." Jon doubted the singer's sincerity. More than once, Jon had stumbled because the music was unfamiliar and demanding. "Been a while since I played."

"I'll send you a disc of some old shows so you can catch up." Nikos paused. "Maybe you should wear a dot until you've had a chance to get familiar with our playlist."

Jon recoiled. The very idea that he should use a prompter was a slap to his pride. Children at their first recitals wore dots, not seasoned players. Never mind that he had set music aside to pursue his wanderlust. The hum of a ship's engine was almost as satisfying as a song. "That's okay," he said, not bothering to hide his annoyance. "I'll keep up."

"Suit yourself." Nikos shrugged, his eyes still locked on the cloudscape below. "Can I give you a little piece of advice? Don't pry into what happens off the dance floor. The management relies on our discretion as much as our music. Maybe more so. These people pay us very well for our silence. I'm sure you appreciate how important it is to them that their identities never be revealed?"

"I'm beginning to," Jon said.

"Good." Nikos wandered toward a buffet spread with fruit and bottled drinks

chilling in buckets of ice.

Jon glared. Though he had only known Nikos a few days, he already nursed a heavy resentment. He didn't like being lectured to, especially by an effete. Still seething, Jon left the window and slumped onto a nearby couch. He leaned his head against the back and closed his eyes.

"Don't let the little shit get to you," Kimmy whispered.

Jon's eyes opened in time to see her wink. She sank down beside him, a glass in hand. Her breath smelled faintly of sweet wine as she leaned closer. "Nikos thinks those rich bastards out there actually notice us. We're just background music to them. All they want is to pair off in the back rooms."

"Yeah." Jon smiled ruefully. "I don't see what the big thing about privacy is anyhow. Once they take off their clothes, it's kind of hard to hide what's underneath."

"Oh, don't get your hopes up. The suits never come off in this place. I don't know what goes on when the doors close, but you can bet it's not good, old-fashioned slippery-slippery. Sex is too tame for this lot. They're way past that." She gave his leg a gentle squeeze suggesting *she* might not be against a bit of recreational sex. "Come on, it's time we got back on stage."

A warm mist, scented with a hint of pine, filled the dance floor. The lights dimmed until the room became a moonlit glade torn from an Elysium vision. The music, so driven in the last set, now wove a sense of awe. John struggled to anticipate the changes until, in frustration, he pulled a glass slide from his pocket and slipped the small tube over his ring finger. He shut his eyes and ran the slide down the strings. A swell of pain and longing leapt above the rest of the music. Jon let the music carry him. The scream in his guitar was a primal thing, a cry of despair that chilled the blood, so pure he almost doubted he had created it.

The music dipped. The others now followed him. Jon tore into the solo. His guitar was a razor, a scalpel to part the veil. He let the note fade and opened his eyes. Kimmy stared at him, her eyes wide as if the solo had rocked her to the core. She tipped her head in acknowledgment, threw her violin under her chin, and tried to recapture what he had done. Exhausted, he let his attention wander across the room. Gone were the wild gyrations, replaced by a stately procession of couples marching in time down an ever tightening spiral toward the center of the floor. They met and formed a circle. He tried to identify the faces, but most of the dancers had changed during the break into new ideals of loveliness, draped in dark robes that flowed like ink down their bodies.

A cold glow built in the center of the room, as if a full moon poked through October clouds to bathe Earth. Dim holograms framed the chamber. Slim marble columns capped by an intricate lattice of vines swayed on untouched breezes. A low hum rose above the music as the dancers chanted in unison.

"What the hell is going on?" he whispered.

Kimmy shook her head, a warning to remain silent. On the other side of the stage, Nikos approached the ornate microphone and picked up the chant, his voice diamond clear. Jon hated to admit it, but the man could sing. He filled every phrase with emotion as he held a perfect fifth above the tonic. The rest of the band fell silent as the chanting deepened. Jon tried to identify the language, but the words were unlike any he

had ever heard. As one, the dancers turned and faced the center of the room, arms above their heads. They bowed, knelt to the floor, pressed their foreheads against the polished surface, and rose again. Inward they drew, so close to one another the glow from their fields lit the thickening mist, and then they bounded outward once more. The chant became a drone, an insect buzz. Only Nikos's voice carried as the tempo rose.

Without cue, Kimmy tipped her head to the side and slipped the violin beneath her chin. She drew the bow down the strings. As she had done earlier, she tapped the pedal and let the note drop so low and loud the air pulsed with vibrato. Lost in the strangeness, Jon watched the dancers near the stage. A slender woman, her cowl thrown back to reveal a cap of short blonde curls, stood near the speaker column. As the computer-enhanced note dropped further, her cloak seemed to melt, revealing the person behind the screen. Jon stepped back, shocked. She turned toward him and smiled before the illusion reformed. He felt sick.

The face he had seen was not human.

Time hung on a pinhead, balanced against chaos. Jon, his equilibrium shattered, stumbled away from the edge of the stage. Even Miranda's weak gravity felt as if it might pull him through the floor. He shut his eyes, but the face waited for him, burned into his memory. The skin was hairless and smooth as polished mahogany. Only a tiny pair of blunted horns broke the skull's narrow, androgynous symmetry. But the eyes burned the deepest. They were cobalt blue, the centers so black they seemed to suck the light from the room. Jon sensed the creature's presence in his head like a rush of ice-strewn wind.

He opened his eyes, but the creature was gone.

Cowled figures retreated to the alcoves beyond the dance floor. Something brushed his arm. He jumped.

"Come on," she said. "Set's over."

"We just got up," Jon replied, his voice thick.

"Don't argue, okay?" She tried to take his hand, but he pulled away.

"What the hell was that thing?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Kimmy glanced over her shoulder at Nikos and grabbed Jon's sleeve. "For God's sake, come on."

She lead him offstage and back into the lounge. Only after he heard the door sigh shut behind him did he realize he was still clutching his guitar by the neck. Kimmy hurried to the table, found a dark green bottle among the ice buckets and opened it. Jon leaned his guitar against the couch, but before he could speak, she pressed the bottle into his hand.

"Have a drink," she said. "Take a breath."

His hand shook as he raised the bottle and took a long swallow. The wine was sweet, slightly effervescent, and it warmed him as it spread down his throat. Calmer, he asked again. "What in the hell was that? And don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about. You showed it to me on purpose."

"Not now." Again, she shot a look at Nikos. "Ask me later, all right?"

"Bullshit." Jon stomped across the room to Nikos. "Mind telling me what's going on around here?"

“How should I know,” Nikos said. “It’s a private club. What they do behind closed doors is their business, not mine.” He turned away, but Jon grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around.

“What were you chanting? What language was that?”

“I have no idea.” Nikos drew himself taller, a vain attempt to reclaim his dignity. He swept his long hair away from his left temple and gently pried a small black dot off his skin. He placed the micro-transducer in a padded case and tucked the prompter in the inside pocket of his jacket. “I sing what they ask me to sing. I don’t need to know what it means.”

“This is insane. I don’t know what kind of freak show you’re running, but you can count me out.” Jon snatched his guitar and marched to the door, but it refused to open. He pounded against the thick plastic slab. “Hey, out there! Open this God damned door!”

“You might as well quit acting like a child,” Nikos said, his arrogance once more firmly in place. “The door will open when it’s time to leave, not before.”

Jon stared at the people around him, but they all turned away. Only Kimmy paid him any heed. She took his hand and wrapped her fingers in his. “Sit down with me.”

“But—”

“Shhh.” She placed her index finger against his lips and smiled shyly. “Nothing bad is going to happen. I promise.” She led him to the couch and eased him down beside her. Her hand remained in his, warm and trembling. “Some questions are just better left alone.”

“You don’t believe that anymore than I do.” Jon shuddered as the face rose once more through his memory. He had thought himself lucky when he had found this gig, a profitable sideline during a long layover while the ship’s engines were overhauled. Now he wanted to roll back the hours and pretend none of what he had seen tonight was real. “You made sure I saw that thing. You wanted me to find out, and now you tell me to pretend it didn’t happen?”

“Please....” Her dark eyes were glazed with fear. She cast a swift glance at Nikos, then lowered her voice. “It’s more complicated than you realize.”

“Complicated?” He began to laugh as he stood up and walked toward a small corridor.

“Where are you going?” Kimmy asked.

“I’m going to take a leak. Or is that off limits, too?”

A dim antechamber led to the lavatory. Jon stepped inside the bathroom and locked the door behind him. The scent of lavender was strong in the gently circulating air. Like everything else he had seen inside the suite, the bathroom was plush, almost gaudy. A shallow sink lay beneath a gilt-framed mirror. He cupped water in his hand and splashed it across his face. The droplets clung to his skin in the weak gravity and sparkled jewel-like in the mirror, as if his skin had broken out in diamonds. The thought made him smile as he wiped his face dry with a soft towel.

Jon paused to check himself in the mirror and opened the door. Kimmy stood in the antechamber.

“Feeling better?” she asked.

He nodded, but before he could say more she placed her finger to her lips. She closed the antechamber door, sealing them off from the lounge. The violinist took his

hands in hers. Gone was her fear, replaced by a confidence he hadn't suspected, as if she had been acting a part earlier and only now let her true self poke through the veneer.

"I like what you did with the music tonight." She leaned closer, so near he felt her body heat raging as if she was fevered. A faint cinnamon scent whispered off her skin. "You're not like the others. You have an artist's soul."

The change in topic caught him by surprise. He tried to step away, but she held tight. Her supple fingers were stronger than they looked. Slowly, deliberately, she drew his right hand to her mouth and brushed her lips across the back of his fingers, then guided them down to the front of her dress. Despite everything that had happened, he was aroused. His breath shortened as she pressed his palm to her body. He let his hand slide over her as he searched for the soft swell of her breast and the expected hardness of her nipples. Hunger turned to horror. The flesh beneath the dark fabric was unfamiliar and strange. No breasts, only hard ribs that curved in exaggerated arcs toward a bony ridge where her sternum should be.

Kimmy's face smiled at him even as her voice modulated into something alien. A trace of the chant he had heard earlier was buried in her accent. "Not quite what you expected?"

"Leave me alone." He barely managed to get the words out. Terrified, he tried to pull his hand free, but her grip was too strong.

"We're not so different. We all want the same things. Good food, good music, the company of like minds. A few centuries ago, you would have worshiped me, but now we can sit together like grown-ups." She whispered in his ear, her breath hot against his cheek. "I like this way much better, don't you?"

"Where did you come from?" Jon asked.

"Come from? We've always been here."

The optic field around the woman shimmered and faded. Kimmy's heart-shaped face dissolved into the narrow, vulpine features he had glimpsed on the dance floor. Too frightened to move, Jon gaped as the creature raised her face and covered his mouth with hers. The kiss was brief, and she broke it with a laugh. When the field around her engaged once more, the statuesque blond he had seen in front of the speaker column appeared where the creature had been. Then, even that was gone, with nothing left behind but the fading scent of cinnamon.

He returned to the lounge. The rest of the band glanced at him but quickly looked away. Only Kimmy, and, to Jon's surprise, Nikos, met his eyes.

"Would you have believed us if we had told you earlier?" the singer asked.

Jon felt sick, the revulsion ready to overcome him. "You knew?"

"We've been playing here a long time." Nikos wandered away.

Kimmy drifted closer but made no attempt to touch him. She had been crying. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "It's hardest the first time."

"How...?"

"How did I find out? Sometimes, a patron asks to sit in. We're not supposed to know, but you can always tell when it's one of them." Her smile returned. "They really are good musicians."

Jon closed his eyes. The stark truth was more than he wanted to bear. Confused, he walked to the broad window and stared at the placid clouds of Uranus. His tension leached away as he leaned his forehead against the thick glass. It pressed cool against his skin, a reminder of how cold the universe could be. Small wonder a band of wanderers might flock to an oasis like this. The plastic confines of the club were a sanctuary against the emptiness beyond. He straightened and caught a glimpse of his reflection. To his amazement, he smiled.

Kimmy's reflection joined his, and for a long while they stood side by side. "What now?" she asked.

"We finish the gig." Jon shrugged. "I've never walked out in the middle of a job before. Guess I won't do it tonight, either."

"And tomorrow night?"

Her fingers slipped inside his. He didn't pull away. "Tomorrow's a long way off." He caught a faint whiff of cinnamon. Jon squeezed Kimmy's fingers, grateful for their warmth. Then, he laughed softly. "I'll be here. Who am I to stop the music?"

A slight change in pressure swept through the lounge as the door opened. Together, they started back to the stage, stopping only to grab his guitar. He strummed a chord and noticed the B string had gone flat. Better tune up, he reminded himself. It was still an hour until closing time.