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Dancers Like Children  
by Kristine Kathryn Rusch  
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I

I lie in this cool bed on Lina Base, my body coated with burn creams and wrapped in light bandages in the areas where the skin grafts have yet to take. I told my counselor that every time I wake up, I remember something else. I told her that I wanted to make notes, to organize my thoughts before the second round of questions begin. This morning she brought me the small, voice-activated computer that hangs on the side of my bed rail. I don't know if someone else can access what I write; I suspect anyone can. I don't care. I do need to get organized, for myself. I need to write down the entire story my way before too many questions taint it. I used to counsel my own patients to do that -- fifteen years ago, when I was Justin Schafer, Ph.D., instead of Dr. Schafer, the man whose name is spoken in a cool, dismissive tone.

Fifteen years ago. When I had friends, respect, and a future, when people believed in me, even more than I believed in myself.

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II

They brought me in after the fifth murder.

The shuttle dropped me on the landing site at the salt cliffs, overlooking the golden waters of the Singing Sea. Apparently, something in the shuttle fuel harmed the vegetation near the small colony, so they developed a landing strip on the barren cliff tops at the beginning of the desert. Winds and salt had destroyed the plastic shelter, so I wore the required body scarf and some specially developed reflective cream. Before he left, the shuttle pilot pointed out the domed city in the distance. He said he had radioed them to send someone for me. I clutched my water bottle tightly, refusing to drink until I was parched.

A hot, dry breeze rustled the scarf around my face. The breeze smelled of daffodils, or so it seemed. It had been so long since I had been to Earth, I was no longer sure what daffodils smelled like.

The desert spanned between me and the domed city. I wasn't sure if the reflections I saw were dome lights or a mirage. To my left, salt continually eroded down the cliff face, little crystals rolling and tumbling to the white beach below. The Singing Sea devoured the crystals, leaving a salt scum that reflected the harsh light of the sun. I wondered if this was where, decades ago, the miners had begun their slaughter of the Dancers. The Dancers were a protected species now, perhaps one one-hundredth of their original numbers.

This place had a number of protected species, but most lived far away from the colony. The only known Dancer habitat was at the edge of the domed

city. All the materials sent to me on Minar Base pointed to the Dancers as the cause of the murders. The colonists wanted me to make a recommendation that would be used in a preliminary injunction, a recommendation on whether the Dancers had acted with malicious intent. That idea left me queasy and brought the dreams back.

I glanced back at the barren brown land leading to the dome. The colonists called this Bountiful. Colonists who escaped the planet called it the Gateway to Hell. I could understand why, with the endless heat, the oxygen-poor air, and the salt-polluted water. Just before I left the base, I spoke with an old man who had spent his childhood on this planet. The old man's skin was shriveled and dried from too many hours in an unkind sun. He ate no salt, and he filled his quarters with fresh, cool water. He said he was so relieved to become an adult, because then he could legally escape the planet. He had warned me to stay away. And if I had had a choice, I would never have come.

"Justin Schafer?"

I turned. A woman stood at the edge of the trail leading back to the dome. Her body-length white sand scarf fluttered with the breeze.

"I'm Netta Goldin. I'm to take you to the colony."

"We're walking?"

She smiled. "The ecology here is fragile. We have learned to accept a number of inconveniences." The reflective white cream gathered in the lines on her face, making her appear creased. "I hear they brought you in from the base near Minar. Minar is supposed to be lovely."

"They closed the planet almost a decade ago." A shiver went through me. Minar was lovely, and I hated it. "Your name is familiar."

"I'm the head of the colony."

I remembered now. The scratchy female voice over the telecorder. "Then you're the one who had me brought in."

She adjusted my scarf hood. The heat seemed to increase, but the prickling on my scalp stopped. "You're the best person for the job."

"I deal in human aberration. You need a specialist."

"No." She threaded her arm through mine and walked down the trail. The salt crunched beneath our feet. "I need someone who knows human and xeno psychology. You seem to be the only one left on either nearby base."

"I thought you were convinced the natives are doing this."

"I think the deaths have happened because of interaction between our people and the Dancers. It's clear that the Dancers killed the children, but we don't know why. I want you to investigate those dynamics. I also want this done fast. I want to do something about the Dancers, protect my people better than I am now. But I understand that you need to investigate the natives in their own environment, so we have taken no action."

The wind played with my sand scarf. A runnel of sweat trickled down my back. "I'm not licensed to practice xenopsychology."

"That's a lie, Dr. Schafer. I researched you rather heavily before I went to the expense of bringing you here. The Ethics Committee suspended your license for one year as a formality. That was nine years ago. You are still licensed, and still interested in the field."

I pulled my arm from hers. I had sat by the sea that first morning on Minar, too. I had been thirty years old and so sure I could understand everyone, human or alien. And I did understand, finally, too late.

"I don't want to do this job," I said.

"You're the only one who can do it." She had clasped her hands behind her back. "All the other xenopsychologists in the quadrant have specialized in one species or refuse to do forensic work. Besides, no one is better at this than you."

"They charged me with inciting genocide on Minar."

"And acquitted you. Your actions were logical, given the evidence."

Logical. I should have seen how the land encroached, poisoned, ate away human skin. We learned later that Minaran skin oils were also acidic, but

didn't cause the same kind of damage. The original colonists had died first because of land poisoning, not because the Minarans were acting on an old vendetta. All the work the natives had done, they had done to save the colonists. I had ascribed a human motive -- the wrong human motive -- and had decimated a sentient race. "I don't want to make the same mistake again."

"Good," she said. The wind blew her scarf across her face. She brushed the cloth away with a cream-covered hand. "Because then you won't."

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### III

The cool air in the meeting room smelled of metallic processing. I shifted in my chair. Despite the reflective cream and clothing, my skin had turned a blotchy red. My scalp itched. Little raised bumps had formed underneath my hair. I was afraid to touch them, afraid they might burst.

I glanced at the others. Davis, a thin, wiry man from Lina Base, headed the laboratory team. Sanders, head of the medical unit, had hands half the size of mine. I found myself staring at her, wondering how someone so petite could spend her time sifting through the clues left in a dead body. And of course, Netta. Her hair was dark, her skin bronzed by the planet's sun. Netta had brought them all in to brief me. The only person missing was the head of the city's security.

The artificial lighting seemed pale after the brightness of the sun. The building was made of old white terraplastic -- the kind colonists brought with them to form temporary structures until they could build from the planet's natural materials. Wood and stone were not scarce commodities here, yet it was almost as if the original colonists had been afraid to use anything native.

Finally a small man, his hair greased back and his face darkened by the sun, entered. He dumped papers and holotubes on the desk in front of Netta. "Thank you," she said. She pushed her chair back and caught the small man by the arm. "Justin, this is D. Marvin Tanner. He heads the security forces for this area. If you have any questions about the investigative work prior to this time, you should direct those questions to him."

Tanner's gaze darted around the room, touching everyone but settling on no one. I wondered what made Tanner so nervous. He had worked with the others. I was the only new person in the room.

"Most of what I will tell you is in your packet, for your own personal review later," Netta said. "But let me give you a general briefing now before we show the holos." She let go of Tanner's arm. He sat down next to me. He smelled of sweat and cologne. "They found the first victim three Earth months ago. Linette Bisson was eleven years old. She had been propped against the front door of her home like a rag doll. Someone had removed her hands, heart, and lungs.

"The next victim, David Tomlinson, appeared three weeks later. Same M.O. Three more children -- Katie Dengler, Andrew Liser, and Henry Illn -- were found two weeks apart. Again, same M.O. These children all played together. They were the same age. And, according to their parents, none of the last three seemed too terribly frightened by the deaths of their friends."

She paused, glanced at me. Children often had no concept of death, and the things they feared were not the things adults feared. That the children were not frightened had less significance for me than it seemed to have for Netta

"The Dancers mature differently than we do," Sanders said. Her voice was soft and as delicate as she was. "They do grow, a little, but their heart, lungs, and hands work like our teeth. The old ones must be removed before the new ones can grow into place. They have developed an elaborate rite of passage that ends with the ceremonial removal of the adolescent's organs."

I turned to Netta. "You said the Dancers interacted with the colonists."

She nodded. "For decades we've had an informal relationship. They develop the herbs we use in our exports. We haven't had any trouble, until

now."

"And the Dancers were allowed inside the dome?"

"We restricted them when the killings started, and now they're not allowed at all."

"We also set up dome guards," Tanner said. "The dome doors have no locks and can be operated from the inside or the outside. We had done that as a precaution so no colonist would die trapped outside the dome."

Colonists, colony. Fascinating the way that language had not evolved here. The "colony" had been settled for nearly a century. Gradually, it should have eased into "settlement" or "city." The domed area had no name, and even people like Tanner, who had lived on the planet their entire lives, felt no sense of permanence.

"We have some holos we'd like to show you," Tanner said. He had set up the equipment at the edge of the table. He moved chairs and a garbage can away from the wall, leaving a wide, blank space. He flicked on the switch, and a holo leaped into being before us.

Laughter filled the room, children's laughter. Twelve children huddled on the floor, playing a game I did not recognize. The children all appeared the same age, except for one, who sat off to one side and watched. He appeared to be about eight. The older children would pound their fists on the ground three times, then touch hands. One child would moan or roll away. The others would laugh.

Tanner froze the image. "These are the children," he said. He moved near the images, stopping by a slim, blonde girl whose face was bright with laughter. "Linette Bisson," he said. Then he moved to a solid boy with rugged features who was leaning forward, his hand in a small fist. "David Tomlinson."

Tanner moved to the next child, his body visible through the holos in front of him. I shivered. Seeing the living Tanner move through the projected bodies of dead children raised hackles on the back of my neck. Superstition. Racial memory. My ancestors believed in ghosts.

He looked at a dark-haired girl who frowned at the little boy who sat alone. "Katie Dengler. Beside her, Andrew Liser and Henry Illn." The boys were rolling on the ground, holding their stomachs. Their mirth would have been catching if I hadn't known the circumstances of their deaths.

Tanner went back to the holoprojecter.

"Who are the other children?" I asked. At least eight were not accounted for.

"You'll meet them," Netta said. "They still run together."

I nodded and watched. Tanner switched images, and the projection moved again. The children's clothing changed. They wore scarves and reflective cream. A middle-aged woman with sun-black skin stood beside them. "Do as I say," she said. "Nothing more." They turned their backs on me and walked past trees and houses until the dome appeared. The woman flicked a switch, and the dome rose. The children waved, and the dome closed behind them. The younger boy ran into the picture, but an adult suddenly appeared and stopped him.

Tanner froze the image. I stared at the boy, seeing the dejection in his shoulders. I had stood like that so many times since Minar, watching my colleagues move to other projects, while I had to stay behind.

"We think this is the first time the Dancers met with the children," Tanner said.

"Who is that boy?" I asked.

"Katie Dengler's brother. Michael."

"And the woman?"

"Latona Etanl. She's a member of the Extra-Species Alliance." Netta answered that question. Her voice dripped with bitterness. "She believed that having the children learn about the Dancers would ease relations between us."

I glanced at her. "There have been problems?"

"No. The Alliance believes that we are abusing the Dancers because we do not understand their culture." Netta leaned back in her chair, but her body remained tense. "I thought we had a strong cooperative relationship until she

tried to change things."

I frowned. The Alliance was a small, independent group with bases on all settled planets. Theoretically, the Alliance was supposed to promote understanding between the colonists and the natives. In some areas, Alliance members spent so much time with the natives that they absorbed and practiced native beliefs. On those lands the Alliance became a champion for the downtrodden native. In other lands the group assisted the colonists in systematically destroying native culture. And sometimes the group actually fulfilled its mission. The Alliance representatives I had met were as varied as the planets they worked on.

"How long ago was this holo taken?" I asked.

"Almost a year," Tanner said. "But the children weren't as taken with the Dancers as Latona thought they would be. I believe that was the only visit."

"What has changed since then? What has provoked the Dancers?"

Netta glanced at Tanner. She sighed. "We want to take control of the xaredon, leredon, and ededon plants."

The basis of Salt Juice, the colonists' chief export. Salt Juice was one of the most exhilarating intoxicants the galaxy had ever known. It mixed quickly with the bloodstream, left the user euphoric, and had no known side effects: no hangovers, no hallucinations, no addictions, and no dangerous physical responses. That export alone brought in a small fortune. "I didn't know the Dancers controlled the herbs," I said.

"They grow the herbs and give us the adult plants. We've been trying to get them to teach us to grow the plants, but they refuse." Netta shook her head. "I don't know why, either. We don't pay them. We don't give them anything for their help."

"And the negotiations broke off?"

"About a week before the first death." The deep voice surprised me. It belonged to Davis. I had forgotten he was there.

Another fact that I would have to investigate. I was developing quite a mental checklist.

"Let me show you the final image," Tanner said. "It's of the first death. You can see the others if you want in the viewing library. This one begins the pattern carried through on the rest."

He clicked the image. The scene in front of me was grim. Linette, her hair longer and sun-blond, her skin darker than it had been in the first projection, leaned against one of the terraformed doors. Her feet stretched out in front of her; her arms rested at her sides. Her chest was open, dark, and matted with blood. Tanner froze the projection, and this time I got up, examining the halo from all sides. The stumps at the ends of her arms were blood-covered. Her clothing was also bloodstained, but that could have been caused by her bleeding arms. Blood did coat the chest cavity, though. Whoever had killed her had acted quickly. The girl's eyes were wide and had an inquisitive expression. Her mouth was drawn in a slight O of surprise or pain.

"The wounds match the wounds made by Dancer ceremonial tools," Davis said. "I can show you more down in the lab later if you want."

I nodded, feeling sick. "Please shut that off," I said. Turner flicked a switch, and the image disappeared. Five children, dead and mutilated. I had to get out of the room. I had received too much information, and seen too much. My stomach threatened to betray me. The others stared at me.

"This packet and the information you've given so far should be enough for me to get started," I said. I stood up and clutched the chair for support. "I'm sure that I will return with questions." I let myself out of the room and took a deep breath. The image of the child remained at the edge of my brain, mingling with that of other dead colonists on a world ten years away.

I heard rustling inside the conference room, and knew I had to be gone before they emerged. I hurried through the dimly lit corridor. Sunlight glared through the cracks around the outside door. I stopped and examined the almost

inch-wide space between the door and its frame, forcing myself to think about things other than holographic images. Clearly, the people who lived inside the dome had no fear of the elements or of each other. Anyone, or anything, could open that door by wedging something inside the crack.

I felt better outside the room. The people inside made me feel uncomfortable. They had discovered what they could through instruments and measures and other "scientific" things. I had to crawl inside alien minds and see what had caused such murders. If the colonists had suspected a human killer, they would have brought any one of half a dozen other specialists to the planet. Instead they had brought me.

I had to see the Dancers clearly, without dead Minarans clouding my vision. If the Dancers killed with malicious intent, the colony had to be protected or moved. I would simply approach things differently this time. Instead of going to the leaders of the colony, I would go to Galactic Security. That might prevent slaughter. The Dancers, with their small population, were easier prey than the Minarans.

I stepped outside and blinked at the blue-tinted light. The dome filtered the sunlight, deflecting the dangerous ultraviolet rays and allowing only a modicum of heat inside. Roses grew beside the door, and young maples lined the walks. Patches of grass peeked through, hidden by bushes and other flowering plants. The care that the colonists had not placed in their homes, they had placed in making the interior of the dome look like Earth. It felt odd to stand here, among familiar trees and lush vegetation, and to know that just outside the dome, a different alien world waited.

I crouched beside the roses and put my hand in the soil. Perhaps it was less alkaline than the salt cliffs had led me to believe. Or perhaps the colonists had imported the soil, as they had imported everything else. I saw no reason to live in a new place if I were going to try so hard to make it look like the place I had left. That attitude was a difference between me and the colonists. I would collect thousands of differences before I was through. The problem was whether thousands were enough or if they meant anything at all. The differences I had to concentrate on were the differences between human and Dancer thought. Something that should have taken a lifetime to study, I would have to discover in a matter of weeks.

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#### IV

That night I dreamed of the Minarans. Their sleek sealbodies dripped with water. They hovered around me, oversized eyes reproachful, as if they were trying to warn me of something I would never understand. They reached out to touch me, and I slapped their fingered fins away. Shudders ran through my body. They had caused the murders. But I knew if I told the colonists, they would slaughter the Minarans -- the fat mothers, the tiny males, and the white pups that, not that much earlier, the children had watched as if they were pets. Minaran blood was colorless but thick. It still coated my hands, leaving them sticky and useless.

I blinked myself awake. A fan whirred in the darkness. The blanket covering me was scratchy and too hot. I coughed, and tasted metallic air in the back of my throat. The apartment Netta had given me seemed small and close.

I had done nothing right since the Minaran trial. I should have resigned from psychology, let my licenses lapse, and bought back my contract. I had had the money then. I hadn't had to serve out my time on Minar Base, the planet hovering in my viewscreen like an ugly reminder. Instead I stayed, wrote abstracts and papers, conducted studies, and worked with an intensity that I hadn't known I had. My colleagues ignored me, and I tried to ignore myself. Just before she left me, Carol accused me of idolizing the Minarans. She said that I had buried my emotions in the search for the cause of my own flaws. Perhaps I did idolize the Minarans, and I knew that I had stored my emotions far away from myself. But I thought I knew the cause of my own flaws. I didn't hide in my work. I liked to think that I was atoning.

I rolled over. The sheets were cool on the far side of the bed. Maybe my sense of guilt allowed me to let my contract safeguards lapse so that someone like Netta could buy my services for the next Earth year. The darkness seemed to close around me, press on me. When I closed my eyes, I saw the Minarans.

I could, I supposed, cancel the contract and head to Lina Base for reeducation, never to practice psychology again. But the work was all I had. Perhaps I was atoning. Or perhaps I hadn't learned.

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V

I rose early and drank my coffee outside, watching the colony wake up. I sat on the stoop of the apartment building, looking over some sort of evergreen bush at the street beyond. The apartments were clearly for guests of the colony. I had heard no one in the building during the night, and no one passed me on the way to work.

The streets were full, however. Adults carrying satchels and briefcases walked by, chatting. Others wore grubby clothes and carried nothing. A few wore sand scarves and helped each other apply reflective cream. Work seemed to start at the same time. I would have wagered that the workday ended at the same time, too.

In my wanderings I had noticed no taverns and no restaurants, no place for the colonists to gather and socialize after the workday had ended. I wondered what the colonists did for recreation besides garden.

I got up, went inside, and put my mug into the washer. Then I went back outside. The last of the stragglers had gone up the street, and in the near silence, I heard a squeal of laughter, followed by a child's voice. I followed the sound. It didn't seem too far away. The laughter came again, and again, guiding me to it. I walked the opposite direction of the workers, past terraplastic homes with no windows, large gardens that passed for lawns, and fences dividing property. The laughter grew closer. I turned and saw a small corner park, marked off by three weeping willows. Flowers grew like a fence along the walkway, and inside, on the grass, about ten children sat in a circle, playing the game I had seen them play on the hologram.

One child stood back, leaning on the gate. He was tall for his age, but the longing expression on his face made him seem even younger than he was. I wondered if my face used to look like that on nights after the Minar trial, when I used to pass my colleagues in the middle of heated roundtable discussions. I suppressed a sigh and stood beside the boy. It took a moment for me to recall his name. Michael Dengler.

"What are they playing?"

He glanced over at me, seemingly surprised that someone would talk to him. "Race."

The children pounded their fists on the ground three times, then made different hand gestures. They laughed. I watched the muscles bulge in their arms, wondering what kind of exercise program they were on. One girl rolled away, stood up, arched her back, and growled. "Limabog!" "Arachni!" "Cat!" "Illnea!" the children called. At each name the girl shook her head. Finally someone yelled, "Bear!" She nodded, joined the circle again, and the fist pounding started all over.

"How do you play?" I asked.

His frown grew until his entire face turned blood-red. "I don't," he said.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled, and for a moment I heard the hushed whispers of former friends gossiping about my failures. I swallowed, determined to distance myself from the boy. "Don't you play with friends your own age?"

Michael stopped leaning on the fence. "You're one of the strangers here for the Salt Juice, aren't you?"

I gave a half-nod, not bothering to correct his misconception.

"You got kids?"

"No," I said.

He shrugged. "Then it stays the same. I'm the only kid my age. My mom and dad didn't follow the rules."

The children burst into laughter, and another child rolled away, this time approaching the group on all fours. Apparently, this colony still followed the practice of having children in certain age groups, then spacing the next group at least four years away. It was a survival tactic for many new colonies.

"So you want to play with the older kids," I said.

"Yeah." I could feel the wistfulness in his voice. He watched from the outside; I had written papers about other people's work. Michael glanced over at the children, his hands clenching. "But they won't let me play until I grow and learn to think like a big kid. Mom says they should take me for who I am." He looked at me, his mouth set in a thin line. "What do you think?"

Such an easy question, asked to the wrong person. I had always thought for myself, and it had gained me respect and a following -- until Minar. After that, I stood at the edge of the roundtable discussions instead of leading them, waiting for someone to pull back a chair and let me in. If I had said I was sorry, opened myself up for dissection, perhaps I wouldn't be standing friendless on an unfamiliar planet

"In the ideal world, your mom is right," I said. "But sometimes you have to do what the group wants if you're going to be accepted."

Michael crossed his arms in front of his chest, his fists still clenched. His body language made his thoughts clear: he didn't want to believe what I said. I wouldn't have, either, in his position, but I hoped he would take my advice. Standing outside the group, watching, was much more painful than playing inside.

"Could you explain the game to me?" I asked softly.

"No!" He spun, started down the pathway. "Maybe they will. They talk to grown-ups."

He half-ran away from me. I almost started after him, then let him go. The boy reached me because I saw a similarity between us. He didn't have a lot to do with my investigation.

The children laughed behind me as if they hadn't noticed his outburst. I took Michael's place at the fence and watched, to see if I could learn the game from observation before I tried talking with the children.

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## VI

By midday the dome filter changed, giving the colony a sepia tone. The children had refused to talk to me, running when I approached. I decided that I would get Netta to arrange a time for me talk with them. Then I walked to the office of the Extra-Species Alliance, hoping to talk to Latona Etanl.

The office was clearly marked, one of the few buildings with any identification at all. Tulips and lilies of the valley blossomed across the yard, and two maple trees shaded the pathway. The office building itself was made of terraplastic, but it seemed larger, perhaps because of the windows beside the door

I mounted the stoop and saw, through the window, a woman get up from her desk. The door swung open in front of me, and I found myself staring at the woman from the holos. I recognized her sun-blackened face. It took me a moment to realize she wasn't wearing a sand scarf. Her long black hair went down to her knees and wrapped around her like a second skin.

"Ms. Etanl," I said, "I'm -- "

"You're Dr. Schafer. I've been waiting for you." She stood away from the door, and I stepped inside.

The room had the rich, potent aroma of lilies of the valley. A bunch of flowers was gathered in a vase by the window. Other vases rested on end tables beside the wide couch and easy chairs that filled the rest of the space. A hallway opened beyond the desk, leading to other, smaller rooms. The sepia-colored light shining through the windows made the outdoors muddy and



the interior even brighter than it should have been.

"Your offices are lovely," I said to cover my surprise at her greeting.

"We like to have pleasant surroundings," she said, and I thought I heard a kind of condemnation in her voice. "Care for a seat?"

She moved over to one of the easy chairs and waited for me to follow. I sat on the couch, sinking into the soft cushions. She sat down at the edge of her seat, looking as if she were going to spring up at a moment's notice.

"Ms. Etanl -- "

"Latona."

"Latona. I'm surprised you knew who I was."

"The colony's small. And Netta told us you would come." She adjusted her hair over her legs as if it were a skirt. "She blames me for taking the children out of the colony. She thinks I started the Dancers on this."

Latona hadn't looked at me. "What do you think?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't think the Dancers are capable of such killings."

"From my understanding," I said slowly, "Dancers don't kill their young. They perform the mutilations to help adolescents reach maturity. Could something have happened in that one meeting that would have made the Dancers try to help human children?"

She finally looked at me. Her eyes were wide and black, the color of her hair. "You haven't seen the Dancers yet, have you?"

I shook my head.

"You need to. And then you can ask me questions." She took a deep breath, as if hesitating about what she was about to say. "I'll take you if you like."

"Now?"

She nodded. "We have protective gear in the back."

My heart thudded against my chest. I hadn't expected to see the Dancers yet, but I was ready. A little thrill ran down my spine.

We got up, and she led me down the hall to one of the back offices. As she walked past an open office door, she peeked inside. A man sat behind a desk, his bald head bowed over a small computer screen. "Daniel, I'm taking Dr. Schafer to see the Dancers."

He glanced up, and I realized he was younger than I first thought -- thirty or less. "Would you like a second?"

She shook her head. "Unless he thinks we need one."

She was asking me a question without directing it at me. I shook my head. "If she thinks the two of us will be fine, I'm not going to second-guess."

Daniel smiled, showing a row of very white teeth. "Latona is our best. She's studied the Dancers her entire life."

Latona had already started down the hall. I nodded at Daniel, then followed her. The room she entered was the size of a small closet. She flicked on a light and pulled two sand scarves from pegs. She took out a jar of reflective cream and handed it to me. I applied it. The goo was cold against my face, and smelled faintly sweet. Then I wrapped the sand scarf around me and waited as Latona did the same. She tied a small pack to her waist. Finally she pulled two pairs of sunglasses out of a drawer and handed me one.

"Put these on after we leave the dome," she said.

We left through a door on the back side. The sepia tone of the dome seemed to have grown darker. Latona led me across the yard along an empty pathway until we reached the dome. Two men stood beside the structure, looking bored. Latona nodded at them.

"I'm taking Dr. Schafer to see the Dancers."

"Netta permit this?" one of the men asked.

Latona sighed. "She doesn't have to. Dr. Schafer is off-world."

The man looked as if he were about to say more, but his partner grabbed his arm. He pushed a button, and the dome door slid open. Dry heat seeped in, making the air inside the dome feel as plastic as the buildings. I followed

Latona outside and heard the doors squeak closed behind us.

Sunlight reflected off the white cream on my face, momentarily blinding me. The wind rustled my sand scarf. I already felt overdressed. The air smelled of salt, daffodils, and promises.

Latona tugged her hood over her face and headed into the wind. I bent and followed, wishing that I could see more of the desert. But the wind was strong and blew the sand at a dangerous rate. I put on the glasses, thankful for the way they eased the glare.

"Netta hates it when I visit the Dancers," Latona said, "but she can't stop me. I'm not officially a colony member. Neither are you."

"Why did you bring the children out here?" The sand was deep and thick, and I was having trouble walking.

Latona seemed to follow no trail. "There are a lot of creatures on this planet that the colonists ignore. Little sand devils that burrow tunnels below the surface, birds with helicopter-like wings, and insects. Daniel is studying the birds to see if they're intelligent. Micah, one of my other colleagues, has determined that the sand devils are not. But the Dancers are intelligent, in their own way."

The sand became thin and packed, almost a mud-like surface. I glanced back. The dome was a small bubble in the distance.

"The early miners hated the Dancers and killed them. The killing stopped, though, when the colonists discovered Salt Juice."

"This is history," I said. My voice sounded breathless. "I want to know about now."

"I'm getting to now. The Dancers grow the herbs for Salt Juice, and although the colonists have tried, they can't. So they need the Dancers as another intelligent species. The colonists take the plants without recompense, and the Dancers just grow more. I know some of the colonists think the children's deaths are retaliation."

"And you don't think so."

Latona shook her head. "That's a human reaction. The Dancers are a different species. They have very alien thought processes."

The wind had eased, but my skin felt battered. I brought a hand up to my cheek and felt sand on the cream. Sweat ran down my back, and my throat was dry. "You have water in the pack?" I asked.

Latona stopped, opened the pack, and handed me a small plastic bottle. I saw others lined in rows of six. I put the bottle to my lips and drank. The water was flat and warm, but the wetness felt good. I handed the bottle back to Latona, and she finished the water, putting the empty bottle into her pack.

"We're almost there," she said. "I want you to do what I tell you and nothing else. The Dancers will come when I call them, and will touch you. They're only trying to see what you are. Their fingers are more sensitive than their eyes."

We stepped into a shadowy darkness, and it took me a moment to realize that we had reached trees. They had dark, spindly trunks, wind-whipped and twisted. Sand caught in the ridges, making the trees look scarred. The tops of the trees unfolded like umbrellas, the ropelike leaves entangled and braided to form a canopy. Latona took her hood down, removed her glasses, and whistled.

Dark shapes approached from ahead of us. I let my hood down and pocketed my sunglasses. The creatures weren't walking, although they were upright. They almost glided along the hard-packed sand, their feet barely touching. The creatures had long, twig-thin bodies with shiny black skin, two legs, two arms, and a wide, oblong head with large silver eyes. It was easy to see why the colonists had called them dancers; they moved with a fluid grace, as if they made every step in time to a music that I couldn't hear.

My heart pounded against my chest. The Dancers surrounded us and touched us lightly I clutched my hands into fists, fighting the feeling of being trapped. Latona held her head back, eyes closed, and I did the same. Fingers with skin like soft rubber touched my mouth, my nose, my eyelids. I

didn't move. The Dancers smelled of cinnamon and something tangy, something I couldn't identify. The bumps on my scalp burned as the Dancers touched them. I wanted to move my head away, but I didn't.

I heard whistling and low hums. The sounds seemed to follow a pattern, and felt, after a moment, as familiar as a bird's call. I opened my eyes. Latona had stepped away from the Dancers a little. She was gesturing and churring. One of the Dancers touched her face and then whistled three times, in short bursts.

"He said they would be pleased to have you visit their homes."

I pulled away from the Dancers near me. Even though they were no longer touching me, I could still feel their rubbery fingers against my skin. I glanced at Latona and then at the Dancers again. They had no visible, recognizable sexual characteristics. I wondered how she knew the speaker's gender. "Thank him."

She did. We walked with the single Dancer through the canopied trees. My heartbeat slowed. I could feel myself growing calmer. If the Dancers were going to hurt us, they would have done so when we met them at the edge of the forest. Perhaps. I was assigning human logic. I shook my head and tried to clear my mind.

The vegetation grew thicker and the air cooler as we hit areas without sunlight. My eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I saw cloth-like material stretched around four trees like handmade tents. The Dancer continued talking, touching things as if he were giving us a tour. Latona did not translate.

We followed him inside one of the tents. There the tangy cinnamon scent was stronger. I touched the tent material, and it felt like water-proof canvas. Rugs made from leaves covered the ground, and in the corners sat glass jars that cast a phosphorescent glow around the room.

"He says he would like to welcome us to his home."

"Tell him we're honored."

She responded. I examined the glass jars. They were crude. The glass had bubbles, ripples, and waves. The light inside moved as if it were caused by something living.

Our host whistled and churred. Latona watched me. "What is he saying?" I asked.

She glanced at the Dancer as if she hadn't heard him. Then she smiled. "Right now he's saying that if he were a good host, he would give you a jar, but the jars are valuable, too valuable to give to a guest who will disappear before the day ends."

"Tell him that I plan to return -- "

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter." She slipped out of the tent.

"You need to see the rest of the homes."

I followed her into the shaded darkness of outside. "Shouldn't you thank him?"

"No." She led me toward more of the tent-like structures. Dancers emerged, hands reaching for our faces. Latona ducked this time. I did, too. I was a bit more at ease, but I didn't want them to touch me again.

From appearances, the Dancers seemed to be a hunter-gatherer culture. The entire area lacked permanence. The ground seemed untended and wild. I saw no signs of cultivation. But then, I didn't know what I was looking for. For all I knew, the canopied trees were an edible, renewable resource.

"This is it," Latona said.

I stared at the tents, the scattered possessions, the Dancers huddled around me like shadows in the late-afternoon sunlight. "Which ones are the children?"

"The children live elsewhere. Let me ask permission to see them."

Latona turned to a Dancer beside her and spoke. The Dancer whistled and churred in response, gesturing at me. Latona nodded once, and then the Dancer walked forward. "Come on," Latona said.

I followed. The hard-packed mud curved inward, as if feet had worn a smooth path through the trees. There were no tents here, and the vegetation

had grown lush. I realized then that the land behind us had been tended, that the Dancers did the opposite of the colonists. The Dancers removed vegetation except for the thin, spindly trees.

Sunlight began to break through the overhead canopy. We reached a sun-mottled area where the undergrowth had again been thinned. Here the canvas material had been tied to the trees sideways to form a gate. We approached the gate and stared over the edge. Inside, small, dark creatures scabbled in the dirt, tussling and fighting. Some sat off to the sides, leaning on the gate -- sleeping, perhaps. Toward the back, larger children lay on the ground, their skin gray in the filtered sunlight. Their fingers seemed claw-like, and their eyes were dark, empty, and hollow.

I nodded toward the children. "Are they ill?"

"No," Latona said. "They've hit puberty."

"Do these children ever interact with the adults?"

"Not really. The adults treat them like animals. Education into the life of a Dancer begins after puberty."

I shivered a little, wondering at life that began in a cage under a harsh sun. The gray-skinned children did not move, but lay in the sunlight as if they were dead.

The Dancer churred and hovered over us. I glanced at it. Latona spoke briefly, then said to me, "We have to leave."

The Dancer corralled us, as if pushing us away from the children. Latona took my arm and led me in a different direction. The Dancer watched from behind.

"This is a quicker way back to the dome," Latona said. Some of the cream had melted off her face, making her appear lopsided and slightly alien.

The gray-skinned, sickly-looking creatures with the clawed hands haunted me. "You never told me why you brought the children here."

"I wanted them to learn respect for the Dancers." Latona kept her head down. We moved out of the trees.

"Why? The arrangement seems to be working."

"They're living beings," Latona snapped. "Humans have a history of mistreating beings they don't understand."

"And you think the colonists are mistreating the Dancers."

"Yes." Latona pushed a ropy branch aside and stepped into a patch of sunlight. Her sand scarf glowed white. "But I don't know what the Dancers think."

"That's why the Alliance is here, to find out what the Dancers think?"

"And to negotiate an agreement over the Salt Juice herbs."

I frowned. I stepped into the sun, and the heat prickled along my back. "But there is no agreement."

"You can't negotiate with the Dancers," she said. "They have an instinctual memory, and a memory for patterns that allows them to learn language and establish routines. Past events have no meaning for them, only future events that they hold in their minds. It poses an interesting problem: if we negotiate a treaty with them, the treaty will not exist, because they will have forgotten it. If we plan to negotiate a treaty in the future, as their language and customs allow, the treaty will not exist because the negotiations haven't started yet."

"Their language has no past tense?"

"Not even a subtle past. They speak only in present and future tenses. They also have a very active subjunctive. Their lives are very fluid and very emotional."

"And when one of them dies?"

"He ceases to be." She glanced at me, her lips set in a thin line. "And then they skin the body, eat the flesh, throw the bones to the children, and cure the skin. They stretch it and mount it until it becomes firm. And then they use it to form their tents."

I knew then what was glowing at me through the jars in the tents. Silver eyes. Wide silver eyes that had absorbed the light from the planet's

powerful sun. "Where did the jars come from?"

"The miners made them. The Dancers used to live closer to the salt cliffs."

My mind felt cold and information-heavy. Heat rose in waves from the sand. "What did the children think of the Dancer children?"

Latona shrugged. She took out the cream and reapplied it. "They seemed fascinated. Who knows what would have happened? Netta banned any child contact with the Dancers."

"Before the murders?"

"Yes." Latona handed me the cream. "I am not supposed to bring them back."

I nodded, done asking questions. I drank the water Latona gave me, then looked across the desert. The dome looked small and far away. I wrapped my scarf around my face and followed Latona, too tired to do anything other than walk.

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## VII

Latona promised to show me a time-lapse holo of the Dancers' puberty rite. I eased my way out of the apartment the next morning, unable to comb my hair because some of the bumps had burst, leaking pus on my scalp. My skin, which had been a light red the night before, had eased into an even lighter tan. It would take many hours wearing reflective cream under the sun before my skin color even approached that of Netta or Latona.

I had barely missed the morning work rush. I walked along the pathway, staring at yards and the windowless plastic homes. These people made the most euphoric drug in the galaxy, and they were humorless stay-at-homes who created beautiful yards, but refused to look at their handiwork from inside the house.

The yards had different flowering plants from different climates and different seasons. Roses seemed to be predominant, but some blocks preferred rhododendrons, while others had hyacinths. All of the flowers bloomed, too, the tulips with the pansies, the daisies with the sunflowers. It seemed odd to me that a colony with such botanical expertise could not learn to grow native herbs from seeds.

Children's laughter caught me again, near the same block it had before. I glanced down. The children were playing in their park, sitting in a circle, pounding their fists against the ground. I walked over slowly, hoping that this time they would talk to me. Michael Dengler sat in the middle of the group, smiling as if he had found his own personal heaven. I relaxed a little. Maybe my advice had helped him. Maybe my wasted ten years had helped someone.

One of the boys pointed at me. The children got up and backed away, as if I were an enemy; then, as a group, they turned and ran.

I stopped and watched them go. Only one child glanced back as he ran. Michael Dengler. I waved at him. He didn't wave back.

I continued to the offices of the Extra-Species Alliance. A woman sat at the desk. She was petite, with close-cropped hair and wide eyes. "Latona couldn't be here," she said, "but she told me to show you the holo, and she said she'd answer any of your questions this afternoon."

I nodded, and followed the woman into another closet-sized room with a holoprojecter set up. She flicked on the 'jecter, flicked off the lights, and left me.

Dancers filled the room, less frightening without their tangy cinnamon scent. They circled around a gray-skinned child, huddled on the desert floor. The circling seemed to last forever, then a Dancer grabbed a ceremonial knife and slit open the breastbone, reached and removed something small, blackened, and round. A heart, I assumed. The Dancer handed the black object to another Dancer, who set it in a jar. Then the Dancer slit again, removing two thin, shriveled bits of flesh from the child's interior. The child didn't move. Another Dancer put the flesh into a jar beside the heart. Finally the first Dancer lifted the child's hands by a single finger and sliced once along the wrists. The hands fell off, and the child's arms fell to its side. The Dancers

carried the child to a tree and leaned the child against the tree. They wrapped the child's chest with rope leaves, and as they placed the arms on the child's lap, I could see small fingers peeking out of the hollow wrists like human hands hidden in the sleeves of a jacket one size too big.

The Dancer child did not bleed. Latona's comparison to a human child losing its baby teeth was an apt one.

Then the time-lapse became clear. The child's hands grew; its skin grew dark like that of other Dancers. Gradually, it moved on its own, and the adult Dancers helped it crawl into a nearby tent. Then the holo ended.

I replayed it three times, memorizing each action, and confirming that there was no blood.

Things weren't adding up: things Latona said, things I had seen. I shut off the 'jecter and left the room, thankful that the woman was not at the front desk. I needed to read my briefing packet, to see if the information in there differed from the information Latona had given me about the Dancers.

I hurried back to my apartment and sat in the front room reading. Latona was right. The Dancers showed no ability to remember things from visit to visit or even within visits. During the murders by the miners, the Dancers returned to the sites of the deaths and continued to interact with the miners as if nothing had happened. They never tried retaliation, and they never mutilated any of the miners.

Dancer preadolescents were gray and motionless, looking more dead than alive. The human children Latona had taken to the Dancers were fluid and energetic, as lively as the little creatures I had seen scrabbling in the dirt.

I set aside the packet, not liking what I was thinking. The Dancers were a protected species, so they could not be killed or relocated without interference from Lina Base. The colonists were great botanists and had been trying for years to learn the way to grow the Salt Juice herbs. The Dancers were impossible to negotiate with, and they guarded the seeds jealously. What if a colonist had figured out how to grow an herb from seed? The Dancers were no longer necessary; were, in fact, a hindrance. The murders allowed Lina Base to send in one expert instead of a gaggle of people -- and also put the expert on a strict timetable. Netta had requested an expert with a flawed background, known for his rash judgments. My impetuous decision making had led one colony to spray an alkaline solution in an acidic ocean filled with intelligent life. Perhaps this colony wanted me to make another bad decision, and use that as an excuse to murder the rest of the Dancers.

I leaned my head on the back of the chair. I had no evidence supporting my theory, had only suspicions as I had had with the Minarans. I stood up. I had to go to Communications Central and wire for more help. I could not make my decision alone.

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#### VIII

A knock on the door startled me out of a sound sleep. I was lying on the packet on the couch in the apartment's front room. The knock echoed again. It sounded loud in the nearly empty room. Before I could respond, the door eased open and spread a wide patch of yellow light across the floor.

"Dr. Schafer?"

I squinted, and sat up, reaching for a light. As the lights came on, I closed my eyes, wincing even more. "Yes?"

"We have another one."

I blinked. My eyes finally adjusted to the brightness. D. Marvin Tanner, the head of the dome's security, stood before me. He seemed calm.

"Another one?"

"Yes," he said. "Netta sent me to get you. We have another dead child."

The flat tone he used to deliver those words sent a shiver down my back. The security officer on Minar had come to me in the middle of the night, his hands shaking, his mouth set in a rigid line. His voice would crack as he spoke of the dead and his own feelings of helplessness. Tanner didn't seem to

care. Perhaps that was because this was no longer his investigation. Or perhaps he was one of those borderline psychopaths himself, the kind that went into law enforcement because it provided them with a legal way of abusing others.

I wondered how he was able to get into the apartment so easily. Netta had assured me that I had the only key to the lock.

"What happened?" I rubbed my face, adjusted my clothes.

"You'll be able to see," he said. "No one is allowed to work the scene until the entire team has been assembled."

I got up and followed Tanner outside. The dome filter had changed again, this time to one that left everything looking gray and grainy, probably the colony's equivalent of dawn. Shadows seemed darker, and the dome filter leached the color from the plants. Only the white plastic seemed unchanged, but startling for the contrast against the physical environment.

People had stepped to the edges of their gardens and were watching us pass. The street seemed unusually quiet. I waited for someone to say something or to follow us. No one did. They stared as if we were a two-man funeral procession and they were distant relatives there only for the reading of the will.

We turned the corner and arrived at the murder scene. A dozen people stood in a half-circle on the cultivated lawn. Netta and Saunders crouched near the door. I pushed through the people and walked up the sidewalk.

"Netta?"

She turned, saw me, and moved out of the way. This body was headless. I stared for a moment at the gap where the head should have been, noting as calmly as I could that no blood stained the white plastic door. This child was smaller than the others. Its chest had been opened, and its hands were missing.

"You need to see this, too, Justin." She walked down the steps and rounded the building. I followed. There, in between two spindly rosebushes, the head rested. I stared at it, feeling hollow, noting other details while my stomach turned. Michael Dengler's empty eyes stared back at me. His mouth was caught in a cry of pain. His hands were crossed in front of his chin, but I couldn't see his heart or his lungs.

The last time I had seen him, he was smiling, running with the other children. I crouched down beside him, wanting to touch his face, to soothe him, to offer to take his place. My life was empty. His had just been starting.

"Michael Dengler," Netta said, startling me. I took a deep breath. "His sister, Katie, was one of the earlier victims. His mother is over there."

A woman stood at the very edge of the semicircle, her hands clutched to her chest. The silence was unnerving me. I could hear myself breathe. The rose scent was cloying. I turned back to Michael and thought, for a moment, that I was staring at myself.

"This is the first time we have ever found the missing body parts. We have to confirm, of course, that the hands are his, but they look small enough," Netta said.

I made myself concentrate on Netta's words. Michael Dengler was dead. I was part of the investigative team. I had to remain calm.

"I need a light," I said. Someone came up behind me and handed me a handlight. I cupped my hand around the metal surface and flicked the switch, running the light around the head. The boy was pale, the pale of a human body that had never, ever tanned. "How old was he?"

"Eight."

Eight. Too young for puberty, even on the outside edges of human physiology. If he had been female, maybe. But even that was doubtful. This was a little boy, a child, with no traces of adulthood -- and no possibilities for it. \_Mom says they should take me for who I am,\_ he had said. \_What do you think?\_

Professional, I reminded myself. I had to be professional. I took a

deep breath, stood up, and dusted my knees.

"Someone needs to talk with the mother," Netta said. "I think you're the best choice."

My heart froze. I didn't want to deal with someone else's emotions. I wanted to go back to my apartment, close the door, and cry for the little boy who had lost everything, as I had. I didn't want to talk with his mother, even if I was the best choice because I had been trained in a helping profession. Helping. I made a small, quiet sound. I had never been able to help myself. How could I help a woman who had lost two children by murder in a few months?

"Go on," Netta said. Her words had the effect of a strong push. My movements were jerky as I walked over to Michael's mother.

She was half my height, in her early thirties, her eyes dark and haunted. "Ma'am," I said. "I'm Dr. Schafer."

"He's beyond doctors now." Her voice sounded rusty, as if she hadn't used it for a long time.

"Yes, he is, but you're not. Let me talk with you for a moment."

"Talk?" The word seemed to snap something inside her. "We talked the last time, and talked and talked. I have two more babies, and I want to leave the planet. I wanted to leave before, with those crazy aliens out there, killing and killing. You want my whole family to die!"

Her words echoed in the silence. I didn't want anyone to die, especially her son. She pushed away from me and walked to the edge of the steps, staring at what remained of Michael. I watched her for a moment, and could think of nothing to say to comfort her. I wasn't even sure she needed comforting. There was something reassuringly human about her pain.

I was the one who needed to remain calm. My hands were shaking, and the back of my throat was dry. I had missed something in the shock of Michael's death. Something was not making sense. I went to Davis, who was examining the ground near the rosebushes. "Leave the weapon this time?" I asked. The killer had, each time in the past, removed the body parts and left the weapon, a thin flensing knife chipped from native rock. Davis pointed. The knife sat on the other side of the bush, away from Michael's head.

"It's smaller than I thought," I said.

"But powerful." Davis leaned over toward me. "See the edge? It's firm. Anyone could use this knife. If the victim is unconscious, the killer doesn't need much strength."

"Not even to cut through bone?" I shuddered, thinking of Michael screaming as the knife sliced his skin.

Davis shook his head. "It's a Dancer knife. They do this stuff all the time and have had centuries to perfect it. We've had people cut themselves in the lab, nearly losing fingers, just handling the things."

The feeling still bothered me. I glanced around me. The houses were close together, the lawns well tended. How could a Dancer sneak in here, steal a child, and return it in such a grisly condition without anyone seeing? And how could a Dancer get past the dome guards?

I stood up and took a deep breath. I had to get away from the roses. Their rich scent was making me dizzy. And I hated the silence. I pushed past the semicircle out to the street and glanced once more at the scene in front of me.

Poor little Michael Dengler. He had wanted so much to grow up, to be part of the group. I shook my head. At least he had been able to play with them that one last time. At least he had gotten part of his wish.

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## IX

I leaned against the desk at the office of the Extra-Species Alliance. The cool plastic bit into my palms. Latona stood in front of me, her arms crossed in front of her chest. She had contacted me as soon as she heard about Michael Dengler's death.

"Dancers do not behead their children," she said. "I can show you document after document, holo after holo. It's not part of the ritual. A



beheading would kill the child. Someone is killing them. Someone human."

A chill ran down my back. She had come to the same conclusion I had. "But the other children died. Perhaps the Dancers thought that the beheadings might work?"

Latona shook her head. "They don't learn as we do. They think instinctually, perform rituals. Beings with rituals and no memory would not experiment. That's not within their capability."

"But couldn't they modify -- "

"No." Latona leaned toward me. "Dr. Schafer, they remove the lungs and heart to make way for larger organs. They remove the hands to make way for sexually mature genitals. They mate with their hands. The head remains -- their heads are like ours, the center of their being. They can't live without the head, and the Dancers do not kill each other. They never have, not even mercy killings. They had no concept of it."

\_And when they die, they cease to be.\_ I shivered. "Why would someone kill children like this?"

Latona shook her head. "I don't know. I wish I did. Maybe the children know. Maybe they've seen something strange."

I nodded. The children, of course. If anyone had seen something, the children would have. They were the only ones free during the day. I ducked out of the office. I had to talk to Netta.

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X

Netta's office was a small room in the back of Command Central. I had already been to the building once during the past two days -- to wire for extra help before Michael Dengler's death. Lina Base had promised me assistance within the week; they had to pull people off of other assignments and shuttle them to us. During that visit, though, I hadn't seen Netta's office. I wasn't prepared for it.

The room smelled of roses. Plants hung from the ceiling and crowded under grow lamps attached to shelves on the far wall. Salt Juice ad posters from various nations, bases, and colony planets covered the white wall space.

Netta sat on a large brown chair behind a desk covered with computer equipment and more plants. "You have something to report?"

"No." I had to stand. She had no other chair in her office. "I would like to make a request, though."

She nodded, encouraging me to continue. She looked tired and worn, as if Michael Dengler's death affected her as much as it had affected his mother.

"I would like to interview the older children."

"Why?" Netta sat up, suddenly alert.

"I think they might know something, something the rest of us don't."

She templed her fingers and tapped them against her lips. "You've seen the reports, and the holos, and Latona has taken you to see the Dancers. I'm sure you have enough to make a preliminary recommendation without bothering the children."

"No, actually, I don't." I looked around for a chair or available wall space, anything to lean on to ease my discomfort. "Some things aren't adding up."

"Everything doesn't have to add up for a preliminary ruling," Netta said. "I want quick action on this, Justin. Another child died yesterday. I need to protect my people from these Dancers."

"And what happens if I get an injunction against the Dancers? By intergalactic law, that removes their protected status. Michael Dengler died inside the dome. His killer might not have been native to this planet."

Netta's lips turned white. "I brought you here to make a ruling on the Dancers' motivation, not to solve a crime that has already been solved. Those children died by Dancer methods. I need to know what methods I can use to protect my people from those creatures."

"I want to talk to the children," I said. The office was unusually hot, probably for the plants. "I want office space by tomorrow, and the children

brought to me one by one. I'm doing this investigation by the book, Netta."

Her eyes widened a little, and for a moment I felt my suspicions confirmed. Then she reached over and tapped a few lines into the computer. "You'll have a room and a place, and someone will bring the children to you," she said.

"Thank you," I said. Then I took a deep breath. "You aren't paying the Dancers for the Salt Juice herbs, are you?"

Netta leaned away from the computer, her fingers still touching the screen. "Why?"

"I'm wondering what they'll lose now that you've discovered how to grow your own herbs." My hands were shaking, revealing my nervousness at my guess. I clasped them behind my back.

Netta studied me for a moment, as if she were tempted to find out where I had gotten the information. Her eyes flicked to the left, then down. It seemed as if hundreds of thoughts crossed her mind before she spoke. "We think the seeds have a religious significance for the Dancers. We don't know for sure. We don't know anything about them for certain, despite what the Alliance says."

A curious elation filled me. I had guessed right. The colonists had learned the secret to making Salt Juice. The Dancers were dispensable.

"The Dancers are dangerous, Justin," Netta said. "I don't think you need any more proof of that. I want some action in the next three days on this. I need quick movement."

I nodded, thinking of the team shuttling in. They would arrive soon. Netta would get her movement, although it might not be the kind she wanted.

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## XI

The room she gave me to interview the children was the same one in which we had held our initial briefing. It was almost too big and very cold. A table sat in the middle of the room, my chair on one side, a child-sized chair with booster on the other -- a setup almost guaranteed to make the child uncomfortable. I made sure the computer took meticulous notes, but the first half a dozen interviews ran together in my mind.

"What is the game you play?" I asked.

"Race." The boy was tall with dark hair.

"How do you play it?"

"You pound your fist on the ground three times." This time the speaker was a girl, a redhead with sun-dark skin. "After that you either make a fist, lay your hand flat, or put up two fingers. If you do something different from most of the group, you have to imitate something, and we have to guess. If we can't guess it, you're out."

"Did the Dancers teach you the game?"

"No." Another little girl, this one with black curly hair.

"What did the Dancers teach you?"

"We only saw them once."

"Why didn't you want Michael Dengler to play?"

The fat boy scrunched up his face. "He was too little."

"But he played with you the last time I saw him."

The blonde girl shrugged. "He followed us around."

I didn't get much information from them, and what information I got was the same, except repeated in different words. By midday I was tired and discouraged. I planned to see only a few more children and then quit, ready to let the team take over when they arrived.

The next child who entered was named Beth. She was tiny for an eleven-year-old, with long black hair, dark eyes, and brownish black skin. She sat stiffly on the chair, ignoring the anatomically correct dolls I had placed beside her, after pausing momentarily to examine the doll that had been altered to represent a Dancer.

I poised a hand over the computer screen, to highlight anything of importance. Such a standard gesture usually made people more comfortable. But

nothing seemed to ease these children. And I knew their answers by heart.

"Let's talk a little bit about what's going on," I said.

"I don't know anything," Beth said. Over her soft voice, I heard six other voices murmuring the same thing.

"You'd be surprised what you know."

The others had shrugged. Beth's lower lip trembled. I watched it, trying not to take too much hope from such a small sign.

"I understand you've met the Dancers."

She nodded. "Latona took us."

"What did you think of them?"

"They're kinda spooky, but neat. They grow up fast."

A new response. I tried not to be too eager. "What makes you say that?"

She shrugged. I waited in silence for her to say something. When she did not volunteer any more information, I asked, "How often have you seen the Dancers?"

"Just the once." Back into the rote response. Her eyes were slightly glazed, as if she were concentrating on something else.

"Did you know Michael Dengler?"

She looked at me then. Her eyes were stricken, haunted. I had to work to meet her gaze because pain was so deep. "I always played with him when the others weren't around," she said. I nodded once to let her know I was listening and interested. "John and Katie say we aren't supposed to be nice to him because that means he'll keep following us. I told John that Mikey was too little, and John said that little didn't matter. He said he knew a way to make him grow faster. But he's not going to grow at all, is he, Dr. Schafer?"

"No," I said. Her use of the present tense bothered me.

"The Dancers do," she said. "They grow into adults."

My hands had become cold. "Do you want to be an adult, Beth?"

"Not anymore," she whispered.

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### XIII

My entire body was shaking as I returned to my apartment, a 'jecter under my arm. I no longer trusted myself after the mistakes with the Minarans. I had to double-check every suspicion, every thought. The remaining children that I interviewed said nothing about the Dancers, nothing about growing up. But Beth's soft voice kept echoing in my head.

\_John said that little didn't matter. He said he knew a way to make him grow faster. But he's not going to grow at all, is he, Dr. Schafer?\_

None of them grew, Beth. The experiment failed.

I pulled out the holos and the file. I stared at the 2-D photos, examining the color closely. Then I watched the holos. Katie Dengler's face was as pale as her brother's on the day she left to see the Dancers for the first time. When she died, her skin was as dark as Latona's. All the other children had pale skin in the earlier holo, and dark skin at the time of their death. They had gotten the dark, dark tan from the harsh sun. They had been outside the dome -- a lot. My skin, despite its off-planet weakness, had turned only a light brown. The children's skin was almost black. Black.

The dome guards were new since the death before Michael Dengler's. The dome doors were easy to use and didn't latch. The children were unsupervised except for occasional school days, when workers could be spared to teach. No one watched the children, so the children went off to watch the Dancers.

\_Do you want to be an adult, Beth?\_

\_Not anymore, she whispered.

The Dancers wouldn't remember from time to time, and would show the ritual to the children over and over again. The children could take the knives without the Dancers realizing it. The Dancers' lack of a past probably meant that they lost a lot of things over the years and thought nothing of it.

\_John said that little didn't matter. He said he knew a way to make him grow faster. But he's not going to grow at all, is he, Dr. Schafer?\_

"None of them are," I whispered. The old man I had seen before I left,

the old man who had lived here as a child, had said he could hardly wait to become an adult because then he could legally leave the planet. Shuttle pilots rarely checked IDs. They figured if a person was large enough to work on any of the nearby bases, they would ferry that person off-planet, away from a colony, away from home.

Away from a sterile place with no windows, lots of rules, and no real place to play.

I shut off the 'jecter and hugged my knees to my chest. Then I sat in the darkness and rocked, as the pieces came together in my mind.

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#### XIII

Sometime toward morning I decided to go to Command Central. The building was only a few buildings away from mine. As I walked, I listened to the silence of the community. The dome filter was a thin gray, as it had been the morning of Michael Dengler's death. The colony itself was quiet, with no indication of people waking.

My back muscles were tight, and an ache throbbed in my skull. I lacked the skill, the expertise, and the authority for this case. I had to contact Lina Base, push to get the help here as soon as possible. If my suspicions were right and the children were mutilating each other in an attempt to grow up, then something had to be done, quickly. Some of the children, like Beth, were beginning to realize that the experiment didn't work. The others, though, the ones who answered me by rote, still believed in what they were doing.

The children must have visited the Dancers daily since Latona took them the first time. Young minds were particularly susceptible to new cultures -- and these children must have absorbed the Dancers' beliefs, modified them, and interpreted them a new way. If Dancer children became adults by losing their hands, hearts, and lungs, then human children would, too. Maybe, they must have thought when they carved Michael, human children grew taller if their heads were removed.

\_John said that little didn't matter. He said he knew a way to make him grow faster. But he's not going to grow at all, is he, Dr. Schafer?\_

The children experimented, the adults took the bodies away, and the children never knew if the experiments worked. I remembered seeing the children's muscles bulge in play. Perhaps they had participated in Dancer rituals before trying the same ritual on Linette Bisson.

I walked into Central, spoke briefly to the man who monitored the equipment, and then took a private console. Each console was housed in a booth of white plastic, walls so thin that I could shake them apart. I jacked in my private number, sent a signal to Lina Base, and requested that help arrive immediately.

"Good work, Justin."

I turned. Netta stood behind me, her arms crossed, a half-smile on her face. "The tech let me know that you were here."

"I'm sending a private communication," I said. My hands were shaking. Her attitude disturbed me.

"And it's perfect. When they arrive, I'll tell them that you ran into an emergency, you slapped an injunction against the Dancers, and they rose in a frenzy of slaughter. No one will question the fact that you're gone."

I gripped the console. "You've been killing the children?" It didn't make sense; why would she behead Michael Dengler?

Netta shook her head. Her smile grew. "The children gave me a problem when they started killing each other. I solved it -- and another one, with your help. There won't be any more killing. And there won't be any more Dancers."

My throat was dry. I stood slowly, bowing my head slightly, playing the docile prisoner. "Where are you going to take me?"

"I'm not going to take you anywhere," she said. "I think right here will be -- "

I pushed past her and leaped out into the main room. Two guards stood

behind her, startled at my sudden movement. I ran down the slick plastic floors, past the tech who had betrayed me, and through the open door.

The dome filter was losing its gray. Some of the sunlight peeked through, illuminating the pathway. My heart caught in my throat. I was out of shape, not used to running.

Damn her. Damn her for using me. For using all of us. The children killed each other in a misguided attempt to imitate the Dancers, and she let the deaths occur. Then she discovered me, with my flaws and my history, and the loophole in galactic law that allowed one person to make a decision for an entire species. She manipulated us all, and in that manipulating, she caused the deaths of more children, including Michael Dengler.

Michael Dengler. His wistful face rose in my mind. Netta would act before the shuttle came. I had to stop her.

I ran through the twisting streets until I reached the offices of the Extra-Species Alliance. I pounded on the door. Daniel opened it. He seemed sleep-weary. I pushed past him. The computer screen on the main desk was blinking. "I'm looking for Latona," I said.

She stood at one of the side doors, her long hair flowing around her. "A message about you just came across the net. Netta says you have decided that the children are killing each other in an imitation Dancer ritual, and you believe all of the children under the dome should die."

So Netta knew how close I had been to the truth. She must have been monitoring me. "Netta's trying to figure out a way to stop me. I radioed Lina Base for help."

"I'm not going to help you kill children," Latona said.

"I'm not trying to hurt the children. I'm trying to save your Dancers."

"The Dancers?"

"Listen," I said, "I don't have time. I need someone who can talk with the Dancers. We need to get them out of here."

"Why would Netta want to hurt the Dancers?"

"Salt Juice," I said. "She doesn't need them anymore. You got me on this track when we talked about Michael Dengler. There is a human killer, which means someone is trying to pin this whole thing on the Dancers." I decided the entire truth was too complicated to explain at the moment.

"But Netta -- "

"I don't think Netta is working alone."

"She's not." The voice came from behind me. Daniel still stood in the doorway. He stepped into the front rooms. His hands were empty. "Some of the dome leaders have been trying to cancel our contracts here. The negotiations have grown too cumbersome. They want to harvest their own Salt Juice plants, but the Dancers won't let them near the plant site. And even though the colonists know how to grow from seed, they still need the atmospheric conditions and the special soil of the Dancer lands."

Latona whirled. "You never said anything about canceled contracts."

Daniel shrugged. "I was working with it. So was Lina Base. It would have worried you and interfered with your work."

"Shit." Latona grabbed her sand scarf and a small hand-held heat weapon. "Will you stay here, Daniel, stall them?"

He nodded. "I'll also contact Lina Base and tell them we need emergency personnel now."

"They know," I said. "Netta plans to use that as an excuse to make up some story, something about an emergency that required the colonists to kill the Dancers -- with my permission."

"O.K.," Daniel said. "I'll make my message explicit. Colonists trying to illegally kill Dancers. Need emergency assistance. Good enough?"

"If the assistance arrives in time," Latona said. "Come on, Dr. Schafer."

I followed her outside. "They flashed that message. I won't be able to get out," I said.

"There're other ways out of the dome." Latona hurried to the dome edge

and touched a seam. A small panel slid back, and bright sunshine eased in. If the children had wanted to avoid the doors, they could have used these panels. "You don't have a sand scarf," she said.

"We don't have time to get one. Let's go."

We slid through the dome opening and into the light. The heat was searing. I felt it burn into my skin. Latona threw me her cream, and I rubbed it on as we ran. I wondered if this was the way the children went when they went to study the Dancers. I would ask Latona sometime.

It seemed to take forever to cross the hot sand. Finally we reached the canopied trees. When we did, Latona let out a long, shrill whistle. My skin was crackling and dry. I already saw heat blisters forming beneath the surface.

The Dancers appeared, hurrying through the trees. Latona stepped back as they tried to touch her. She spoke rapidly. One of the Dancers spoke back, gesturing with its hands. She shook her head and tried again. The Dancer repeated the gesture.

"What?" I asked.

"I've told them to leave," she said. "They think it's a ploy to get the plants."

I peered through the canopied trees. I thought I saw air cars shimmering in the distance. Perhaps it was my own overactive imagination. I thought they didn't have air cars here. We had to do something. We had to get the Dancers out of the area, if only for a short time. The shuttles would arrive within a few days. The Dancers needed that much of an advantage. "Give me your weapon," I said.

"Why?"

"Have them show us the plants."

"But -- "

"Now! I think we've been followed out of the dome."

She spoke to the Dancer. The Dancer churred in response, then grabbed Latona and pulled her through the trees. We walked the path we had walked before, the one that led to the children's pen.

"The plants are all around us," Latona said.

"Give me your weapon," I repeated.

"What do you want to do with it?"

"I want to start these plants on fire, to show the Dancers how unimportant they are."

"But the children -- "

"There'll be time to get the children out of the gates."

She bit her lower lip.

"If you're worried, tell him what we're going to do. Have him send people to the children."

She spoke to the Dancer. The Dancer made a whirring sound. Latona reached down and touched a plant with the weapon, searing the leaves. The Dancer whistled shrilly, and others ran down the path.

"Tell him that we're not bluffing. Tell him that we have to destroy the plants, and that they have to leave. I don't care what reasons you give them. Just get them out of here."

Latona spoke quickly. The Dancer listened, then repeated Latona's sounds loudly. My ears felt as if they were being pierced. I grabbed the weapon from Latona, studied it for a moment, saw the finger control on the side and the open mouth along another side. I pointed the mouth at the plants and pushed the control. Heat whooshed out of the mouth, catching the leaves and sending fire along the plants. The Dancer beside us screamed and ran down the path. Other Dancers were running, too, like the shadows of animals running before a forest fire. In the distance I saw the Dancers lifting the children from the gate and tucking them under one arm as they continued to run.

The heat was getting under my skin, making my body ache. The smoke felt faintly sweet. I giggled, feeling giddy; The canopy was keeping the smoke in the forest. We would pass out if we didn't get out. I grabbed Latona's arm and

pulled her with me.

When we reached the desert, I saw no air cars. Hallucination, then, maybe. But I did see a small band of people in sand scarves, walking determinedly across the sand. I remembered watching other colonists walk like that, carrying laser weapons to beaches that lined their island home, and blasting small, seal-like creatures until clear blood coated the sand, while helicopters circled overhead dropping alkaline solution into the acidic ocean. I sank down against a tree. My whole body itched. I didn't want to watch again.

Latona slipped away from my side. The smoke smell had grown cloying, and the giddiness had grown with it. I wondered where I could stay until the ship arrived. I glanced down at my skin. It was black. Large lumps had risen on the surface, with pus bubbles on top. They would be painful when they burst.

"They're gone," Latona said.

I looked at her, then at the colonists. They weren't gone. They were getting closer.

"The Dancers," she said. "They're gone."

I felt the relief run through me like a cool draft of air. I took a deep breath to speak, and toppled face forward into the sunbaked sand.

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#### XIV

Now I lie here in this cool bed on Lina Base, my body coated with burn creams and wrapped in light bandages in the areas where the skin grafts have yet to take.

The rooms here have yellow walls. Green plants hang in the corners, and windows look out onto a wide and vast galaxy. Latona has visited me. She tells me the Dancers have moved to a similar canopied forest, near the Salt Cliffs, the place historians believe was their earlier home. Lina Base is dismantling the colony on Bountiful. Netta and the dome leader are going to stand trial. I will have to testify at that. Latona also says that some chemists here on Lina Base are trying to duplicate the chemical properties of Salt Juice. I hope, if only for the Dancers' sake, that they have some success.

So I lie here in the coolness, my burns itching and rubbing me raw, and think, Dancer-like, about what is ahead. I have regained my stature, atoned for my culpability in the minds of others, I guess. The Minarans no longer visit me in dreams, but the children do, particularly Michael Dengler.

When I am well, I am to work with the children to determine their mental state. The psychologists here share my fear that the children have learned Dancer behavior, that it is normal to them. That presents a sticky point of law. We have to determine if the children are insane or are capable of standing trial. And if they are capable of standing trial, what standards do we use, ours or the Dancers? The irony hasn't missed me, since I had gone to determine if the Dancers were mentally capable of standing trial in our system.

I spent all those years after Minar, trying to regain the respect of my colleagues, trying to regain my own self-respect. And now I think of writing papers about the children, about my experience, as if that ten-year period never happened. My colleagues have become friendly again. They call me "Justin"; they send me cards; they wish me well. I seem to have vindicated myself, to have won acceptance with the group.

But sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and see Michael's face, his mouth forming a startled \_O\_. Michael's group accepted him, and took in payment his head, his heart, his lungs, his hands, and his life.

I smile at my colleagues when they visit. I thank them for their attentiveness and their interest.

And I wait for the flash of a knife, for the bite of an extra-sharp blade against my wrist.

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