

DARIA'S DELIGHTFUL DANCING
EMPORIUM

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Jillian Godsil

Daria's Delightful Dancing Emporium
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ABOUT THIS PIECE

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CHAPTER ONE

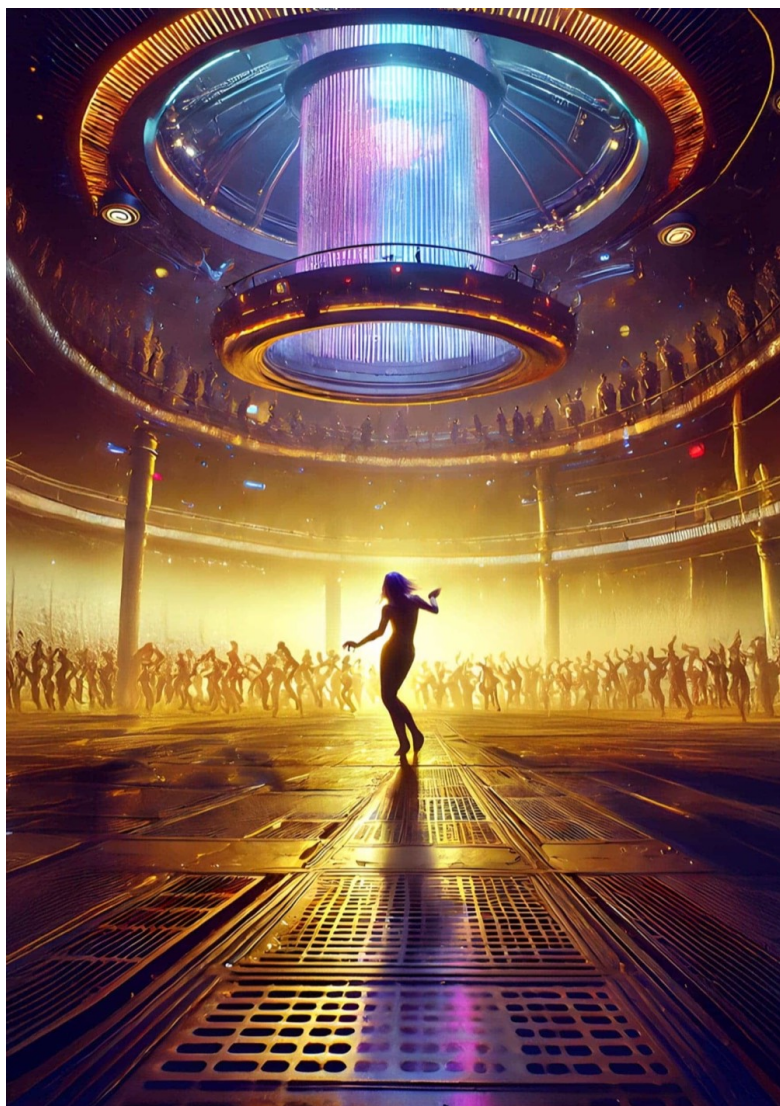
DARIA'S DELIGHTFUL DANCING EMPORIUM

The letter lay on Daria's welcome mat. The fact that the Corporation had sent a physical letter meant they were serious. Paper equated to legal ruling.

Harry had already heard the quiet fall of the envelope; his hearing was far superior to hers. Indeed, when the letter came during the night, he said he could smell the uniform - the stench of the repo-man. On a planet that was already a prison; the only real deterrent was removal of goods.

Daria picked it up and turned it over. Sure enough, there was the black and yellow stamp, the waspish colour of the repo-man's office. It was addressed to Daria's Delightful Dancing Emporium. Even twenty years ago, sarcasm had been in short supply. The name was never questioned and the sign hung over her studio in the recreational section (or 'the wrecks' as it was unpleasantly nicknamed). Twenty years of a Martian atmosphere had buckled the external plates creating a weird, rumpled finish to the walls inside. Obsolescence had a new meaning when living on a planet that did

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not have its own oxygen. The one-way journey, return ticket not optional, and now the dwindling air supplies gave its inmates great clarity. Living in the moment was the only religion in town and when your financial resources were depleted on Earth, it was Mars or nothing. As people were accepted onto Joy they were given a new corporate wallet with a grant of corporate native tokens. It seemed a lot at first but the tokens only had value on Mars and when the 'stuff' had gone there was nothing to buy anyway. A million native tokens with nothing to buy was the same as an empty wallet.

The repo-man was coming on Wednesday morning to collect her music centre. Since everything, the inmates included, was bar-coded, there was no point in trying to hide it. Sensors would pinpoint its new position in seconds. Strangely for the human race, no one had figured out how to create hiding spots on Joy, as the facility was quaintly called. Even when the ships came from other planets bringing a motley range of creatures, there had been no dissention. Maybe twenty years was too short to grow a revolution, or even a critical voice or two. Or maybe it was the introduction of different species that distracted the original human settlement. Hard to devil up a rebellion when living with mutts and even marrying them. Not that marriage existed on Joy, anyone wishing to consciously couple just put in a request for joint quarters.

'Is it from repo?' called Harry from their quarters. Daria nodded. Harry had moved in three years ago when Daria had used up all the available male humans. A free spirit she called herself — a modern Isadora Duncan with her scarves and dancing emporium. When she signed up for her one-way trip, she had been asked her profession. As a high school dropout with a series of minor misdemeanours on her record, she had paused. This question came at

disembarkation, not departure. They would, and did, take anyone for the Joy mission. Daria had used up her personal UBI allocation, used it all up in a year, and there was nothing left for her on Earth. And Mars seemed seductive, an exotic new adventure and a fat wallet of tokens. It was like press-ganging raw recruits into the army. Daria had licked her pencil thoughtfully. She turned her head on one side and a number of possible occupations floated past. She pointed out her left foot. Once, as a child, she had been told she had nice feet. She looked critically again at her foot; it was still elegant, thin and long. It had a matching elegant, thin and long partner in the right. She clicked her heels and wrote dancing instructor.

It had been a surprisingly good choice of occupation at first. What do you do with several hundred humans locked in an airtight facility on a forbidding planet? Dance, of course, dance. Daria had been very popular. Men and women flocked to her dancing school. She called her teaching methods exploratory and her natural rhythm and pert breasts pulled in the men. The women followed by default. It was the Martian Ballroom of Romance.

However, the real success had come once the other ships arrived. Integration of different species in a single facility was fraught with issues, not least the question of socialisation. Dancing was an activity open to all shapes, sizes and species. Even the Plutonians, with their long heavy tails, could shake their booty with the best of them. That was when Daria met Harry. His long heavy tail served as a third leg. He could rest on it while talking or pull it around his body when he danced. Sometimes, if he got very excited, it would stretch upright, taut and quivering. It had taken two years, but Harry pursued Daria. He learnt English, he learnt

how to dance and he learnt how to cook human food. She, in turn, learnt to stop shaving, for Plutonian males like their females hairy. Now at night, curled in his arms, she would feel the heavy weight of his tail on her body, tapping gently as he fell asleep.

‘He is coming on Wednesday,’ Daria said. ‘We’ll have to dance to music in our heads,’ and she chuckled at the absurdity of that thought. Then as suddenly as she had begun laughing, she stopped. There would be no more dancing, it took up too much oxygen.

Rumours had started about five years ago when the emigrant fund stopped arriving. With no reserve currency and faith in the government on Earth at an all time low, there was no one to police the corporations. They ran Earth anyway and if they decided to pack it up, then frankly they did. Word had gotten round that Joy was in difficulty. The Corporation denied it vigorously, but the supply ships had stopped arriving. A one-way ticket was well and good if you could live your life on Mars, but if you thought suffocation might be on your death certificate the chances were you probably wouldn’t apply. No new company engineers, no new oxygen tanks the size of small stars, no new food pods – in fact, no ships at all. The docking terminal was all but closed except for a caretaker staff of worms. The worms, from Uranus, had failed spectacularly to integrate with anyone. They spoke their own language, mixed only with each other and, since they were hermaphrodite, spawned a fast-growing population.

Daria had shrugged her shoulders at Harry’s prediction the worms would outnumber everyone else. Worms kept to themselves, were inherently passive and their only vice, as far as she could see, was their growing consumption of oxygen. No one had

shown any signs of wishing to commit mass genocide for that trait. Wars had been left on Earth; maybe the blame lay with the excessive consumption of oxygen.

Around that time, sensors started displaying how much oxygen was being consumed in each airtight pod. If someone decided to run around the wrecks, lights would flash and alarms would sound. 'Slow down,' intoned the sad voice on the loudspeaker. 'Save the air.' The choir had all but shut up shop; their collective intake of oxygen singing Handel's Messiah that winter had sent the alarms into overdrive. Sometimes they still met to sing Taizé chants: long, slow and whispered. Daria, too, had modified her dance studio. She switched to lullabies, crooning singers and slow country warbles. Her dance students held each other and smooched around the floor in a parody of Hicksville bar, shuffling their way from one sad tune to the next. It was hard to be joyous when oxygen was restricted.

'Do we need music to dance?' Harry was by her shoulder now, looking at the letter in her hand.

Daria smiled at him. 'For all your love of hair you come from a very philosophical race.'

Harry growled and picked her up, but she giggled.

'Which came first,' she squealed. 'The dancer or the dance?'

He set her down laughing too but his face became serious. 'Percussion,' he said. 'That's all you need.'

When the repo-man arrived in his black and yellow uniform, he took the music centre and all her collection of music. Daria looked at him and said nothing. There were also rumours of oxygen tanks secreted away by the repo-men.

Harry had remarked they were welcome to them. 'Imagine living out your final days with only the repo-men for company?' he'd said.

Daria shuddered at the thought. In bed, she looked into his eyes, buried deep in his hairy face. In time, she'd learnt to decipher the emotions solely from his eyes. He did not frown or smile. His face was not made for such superficial demonstrations of emotion — only his eyes. 'If we run out of oxygen,' she said, 'will you kill me before I suffocate?'

'Of course, my love.'

Thursday morning, and Daria's regulars were in her studio. They looked at her blankly at first. They had been told about the repo-man and the removal of music. One couple began dancing anyway. What else was there to do?

Daria put her rucksack on the floor. 'We are going to make our own music,' she said.

'But if the choir can't sing, how can we?' asked Julius, a three-legged emigrant from Jupiter.

'We are going to make rhythm,' said Daria as she handed out the wooden spoons and kitchen implements gathered from her quarters.

'Let's make rhythm,' said Daria. It was messy at first, and even Daria admitted it didn't get much better, but they made a great racket. Some of the couples started dancing in a tribal fashion. They grunted and gyrated to the beat and soon the alarms were sounding. Daria laughed out loud. It would take the Corporation weeks to issue all the correct warnings and even then, she could argue she needed the instruments for her kitchen. Daria's Delightful Dancing Emporium was not dead yet. 'And when they do take

the improvised drumsticks, then we have our hands,' she said with glee.

'And our tails,' said Harry, thumping his loudly on the floor.

'And our feet,' said Julius, doing a quick tap dance with his three feet. He panted, and the alarm nearest to him went off.

'We can dance to the alarms too,' said Daria, rocking in time to their piercing sound.

The weeks passed, and Daria's students still met each morning. Julius had become rather good at palming with minimal oxygen expenditure. Sometimes they got to the end of a morning without the alarms going off, but Daria was getting regular correspondence from the Corporation now. They were closing her studio under Section Twelve of the corporate code. Once they had the final permission from the Secretary General, then the locks would be placed on the doors to the studio and the sign taken down.

'It's not just my studio, is it?' Daria asked Harry. 'It's everything on Joy.'

He held her tight, pulling her closer with his thick tail. They rocked together. Daria could feel the familiar desire rise in her and she kissed him. His tail quivered and went bolt upright. They made love like Plutonians did, standing up and then jumping together. Daria would never go back to human sex after Plutonian. In their little quarters where no cameras were allowed, they jumped and jumped. Moments later the alarms went off. 'Slow down, Save the air,' went the loudspeaker. Daria looked directly into Harry's eyes.

'No,' he said. 'It's the end of everything, my love,' and with one vicious sweep of his tail, struck Daria at the back of the head, killing her instantly.

SOURCE

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