

Prima Belladonna

I first met Jane Ciracylides during the Recess, that world slump of boredom, lethargy and high summer which carried us all so blissfully through ten unforgettable years, and I suppose that may have had a lot to do with what went on between us. Certainly I can't believe I could make myself as ridiculous now, but then again, it might have been just Jane herself.

Whatever else they said about her, everyone had to agree she was a beautiful girl, even if her genetic background was a little mixed. The gossips at Vermilion Sands soon decided there was a good deal of mutant in her, because she had a rich patina-golden skin and what looked like insects for eyes, but that didn't bother either myself or any of my friends, one or two of whom, like Tony Miles and Harry Devine, have never since been quite the same to their wives.

We spent most of our time in those days on the balcony of my apartment off Beach Drive, drinking beer – we always kept a useful supply stacked in the refrigerator of my music shop on the street level – yarning in a desultory way and playing i-Go, a sort of decelerated chess which was popular then. None of the others ever did any work; Harry was an architect and Tony Miles sometimes sold a few ceramics to the tourists, but I usually put a couple of hours in at the shop each morning, getting off the foreign orders and turning the beer.

One particularly hot lazy day I'd just finished wrapping up a delicate soprano mimosa wanted by the Hamburg Oratorio Society when Harry phoned down from the balcony.

'Parker's Choro-Flora?' he said. 'You're guilty of overproduction. Come up here. Tony and I have something beautiful to show you.'

When I went up I found them grinning happily like two dogs who had just discovered an interesting tree.

'Well?' I asked. 'Where is it?'

Tony tilted his head slightly. 'Over there.'

I looked up and down the street, and across the face of the apartment house opposite.

'Careful,' he warned me. 'Don't gape at her.'

I slid into one of the wicker chairs and craned my head round cautiously.

'Fourth floor,' Harry elaborated slowly, out of the side of his mouth. 'One left from the balcony opposite. Happy now?'

'Dreaming,' I told him, taking a long slow focus on her. 'I wonder what else she can do?'

Harry and Tony sighed thankfully. 'Well?' Tony asked.

'She's out of my league,' I said. 'But you two shouldn't have any trouble. Go over and tell her how much she needs you.'

Harry groaned. 'Don't you realize, this one is poetic, emergent, something straight out of the primal apocalyptic sea. She's probably divine.'

The woman was strolling around the lounge, rearranging the furniture, wearing almost nothing except a large metallic hat. Even in shadow the sinuous lines of her thighs and shoulders gleamed gold and burning. She was a walking galaxy of light. Vermilion Sands had never seen anything like her.

'The approach has got to be equivocal,' Harry continued, gazing into his beer. 'Shy, almost mystical. Nothing urgent or grabbing.'

The woman stooped down to unpack a suitcase and the metal vanes of her hat fluttered over her face. She saw us staring at her, looked around for a moment and lowered the blinds.

We sat back and looked thoughtfully at each other, like three triumvirs deciding how to divide an empire, not saying too much, and one eye watching for any chance of a double-deal.

Five minutes later the singing started.

At first I thought it was one of the azalea trios in trouble with an alkaline pH, but the frequencies were too high. They were almost out of the audible range, a thin tremolo quaver which came out of nowhere and rose up the back of the skull.

Harry and Tony frowned at me.

'Your livestock's unhappy about something,' Tony told me. 'Can you quieten it down?'

'It's not the plants,' I told him. 'Can't be.'

The sound mounted in intensity, scraping the edges off my occipital bones. I was about to go down to the shop when Harry and Tony leapt out of their chairs and dived back against the wall.

'Steve, look out!' Tony yelled at me. He pointed wildly at the table I was leaning on, picked up a chair and smashed it down on the glass top.

I stood up and brushed the fragments out of my hair.

'What the hell's the matter?'

Tony was looking down at the tangle of wickerwork tied round the metal struts of the table. Harry came forward and took my arm gingerly.

'That was close. You all right?'

'It's gone,' Tony said flatly. He looked carefully over the balcony floor and down over the rail into the street.

'What was it?' I asked.

Harry peered at me closely. 'Didn't you see it? It was about three inches from you. Emperor scorpion, big as a lobster.' He sat down weakly on a beer crate. 'Must have been a sonic one. The noise has gone now.'

After they'd left I cleared up the mess and had a quiet beer to myself. I could have sworn nothing had got on to the table.

On the balcony opposite, wearing a gown of ionized fibre, the golden woman was watching me.

I found out who she was the next morning. Tony and Harry were down at the beach with their wives, probably enlarging on the scorpion, and I was in the shop tuning up a Khan-Arachnid orchid with the UV lamp. It was a difficult bloom, with a normal full range of twenty-four octaves, but unless it got a lot of exercise it tended to relapse into neurotic minor-key transpositions which were the devil to break. And as the senior bloom in the shop it naturally affected all the others. Invariably when I opened the shop in the mornings, it sounded like a madhouse, but as soon as I'd fed the Arachnid and straightened out one or two pH gradients the rest promptly took their cues from it and dimmed down quietly in their control tanks, two-time, three-four, the multi-tones, all in perfect harmony.

There were only about a dozen true Arachnids in captivity; most of the others were either mutes or grafts from dicot stems, and I was lucky to have mine at all. I'd bought the place five years earlier from an old half-deaf man called Sayers, and the day before he left he moved a lot of rogue stock out to the garbage disposal scoop behind the apartment block. Reclaiming some of the tanks I'd come across the Arachnid, thriving on a diet of algae and perished rubber tubing.

Why Sayers had wanted to throw it away I had never discovered. Before he came to Vermilion Sands he'd been a curator at the Kew Conservatoire where the first choro-flora had been bred, and had worked under the Director, Dr Mandel. As a young botanist of twenty-five Mandel had discovered the prime Arachnid in the Guiana forest. The orchid took its name from the Khan-Arachnid spider which pollinated the flower, simultaneously laying its own eggs in the fleshy ovule, guided, or as Mandel always insisted, actually mesmerized to it by the vibrations which the orchid's calyx emitted at pollination time. The first Arachnid orchids beamed out only a few random frequencies, but by cross-breeding and maintaining them

artificially at the pollination stage Mandel had produced a strain that spanned a maximum of twenty-four octaves.

Not that he had ever been able to hear them. At the climax of his life's work Mandel, like Beethoven, was stone deaf, but apparently by merely looking at a blossom he could listen to its music. Strangely though, after he went deaf he never looked at an Arachnid.

That morning I could almost understand why. The orchid was in a vicious mood. First it refused to feed, and I had to coax it along in a fluoraldehyde flush, and then it started going ultra-sonic, which meant complaints from all the dog owners in the area. Finally it tried to fracture the tank by resonating.

The whole place was in uproar, and I was almost resigned to shutting them down and waking them all by hand individually – a backbreaking job with eighty tanks in the shop – when everything suddenly died away to a murmur.

I looked round and saw the golden-skinned woman walk in.

'Good morning,' I said. 'They must like you.'

She laughed pleasantly. 'Hello. Weren't they behaving?'

Under the black beach robe her skin was a softer, more mellow gold, and it was her eyes that held me. I could just see them under the wide-brimmed hat. Insect legs wavered delicately round two points of purple light.

She walked over to a bank of mixed ferns and stood looking at them. The ferns reached out towards her and trebled eagerly in their liquid fluted voices.

'Aren't they sweet?' she said, stroking the fronds gently. 'They need so much affection.'

Her voice was low in the register, a breath of cool sand pouring, with a lilt that gave it music.

'I've just come to Vermilion Sands,' she said, 'and my apartment seems awfully quiet. Perhaps if I had a flower, one would be enough, I shouldn't feel so lonely.'

I couldn't take my eyes off her.

'Yes,' I agreed, brisk and businesslike. 'What about something colourful? This Sumatra Samphire, say? It's a pedigree mezzo-soprano from the same follicle as the Bayreuth Festival Prima Belladonna.'

'No,' she said. 'It looks rather cruel.'

'Or this Louisiana Lute Lily? If you thin out its SO₂, it'll play some beautiful madrigals. I'll show you how to do it.'

She wasn't listening to me. Slowly, her hands raised in front of her breasts so that she almost seemed to be praying, she moved towards the display counter on which the Arachnid stood.

'How beautiful it is,' she said, gazing at the rich yellow and purple leaves hanging from the scarlet-ribbed vibrocalyx.

I followed her across the floor and switched on the Arachnid's audio so that she could hear it. Immediately the plant came to life. The leaves stiffened and filled with colour and the calyx inflated, its ribs sprung tautly. A few sharp disconnected notes spat out.

'Beautiful, but evil,' I said.

'Evil?' she repeated. 'No, proud.' She stepped closer to the orchid and looked down into its malevolent head. The Arachnid quivered and the spines on its stem arched and flexed menacingly.

'Careful,' I warned her. 'It's sensitive to the faintest respiratory sounds.'

'Quiet,' she said, waving me back. 'I think it wants to sing.'

'Those are only key fragments,' I told her. 'It doesn't perform. I use it as a frequency -'

'Listen!' She held my arm and squeezed it tightly.

A low, rhythmic fusion of melody had been coming from the plants around the shop, and mounting above them I heard a single stronger voice calling out, at first a thin high-pitched reed of sound that began to pulse and deepen and finally

swelled into full baritone, raising the other plants in chorus about itself.

I had never heard the Arachnid sing before. I was listening to it open-eared when I felt a glow of heat burn against my arm. I turned and saw the woman staring intently at the plant, her skin aflame, the insects in her eyes writhing insanely. The Arachnid stretched out towards her, calyx erect, leaves like blood-red sabres.

I stepped round her quickly and switched off the argon feed. The Arachnid sank to a whimper, and around us there was a nightmarish babel of broken notes and voices toppling from high C's and L's into discord. A faint whispering of leaves moved over the silence.

The woman gripped the edge of the tank and gathered herself. Her skin dimmed and the insects in her eyes slowed to a delicate wavering.

'Why did you turn it off?' she asked heavily.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'But I've got ten thousand dollars' worth of stock here and that sort of twelve-tone emotional storm can blow a lot of valves. Most of these plants aren't equipped for grand opera.'

She watched the Arachnid as the gas drained out of its calyx. One by one its leaves buckled and lost their colour.

'How much is it?' she asked me, opening her bag.

'It's not for sale,' I said. 'Frankly I've no idea how it picked up those bars -'

'Will a thousand dollars be enough?' she asked, her eyes fixed on me steadily.

'I can't,' I told her. 'I'd never be able to tune the others without it. Anyway,' I added, trying to smile, 'that Arachnid would be dead in ten minutes if you took it out of its vivarium. All these cylinders and leads would look a little odd inside your lounge.'

'Yes, of course,' she agreed, suddenly smiling back at me. 'I was stupid.' She gave the orchid a last backward glance and

strolled away across the floor to the long Tchaikovsky section popular with the tourists.

'*Pathétique*,' she read off a label at random. 'I'll take this.'

I wrapped up the scabia and slipped the instructional booklet into the crate, keeping my eye on her all the time.

'Don't look so alarmed,' she said with amusement. 'I've never heard anything like that before.'

I wasn't alarmed. It was that thirty years at Vermilion Sands had narrowed my horizons.

'How long are you staying at Vermilion Sands?' I asked her.

'I open at the Casino tonight,' she said. She told me her name was Jane Ciracylides and that she was a speciality singer.

'Why don't you look in?' she asked, her eyes fluttering mischievously. 'I come on at eleven. You may find it interesting.'

I did. The next morning Vermilion Sands hummed. Jane created a sensation. After her performance three hundred people swore they'd seen everything from a choir of angels taking the vocal in the music of the spheres to Alexander's Ragtime Band. As for myself, perhaps I'd listened to too many flowers, but at least I knew where the scorpion on the balcony had come from.

Tony Miles had heard Sophie Tucker singing the 'St Louis Blues', and Harry, the elder Bach conducting the B Minor Mass.

They came round to the shop and argued over their respective performances while I wrestled with the flowers.

'Amazing,' Tony exclaimed. 'How does she do it? Tell me.'

'The Heidelberg score,' Harry ecstasied. 'Sublime, absolute.' He looked irritably at the flowers. 'Can't you keep these things quiet? They're making one hell of a row.'

They were, and I had a shrewd idea why. The Arachnid was

completely out of control, and by the time I'd clamped it down in a weak saline it had blown out over three hundred dollars' worth of shrubs.

'The performance at the Casino last night was nothing on the one she gave here yesterday,' I told them. '*The Ring of the Nibelungs* played by Stan Kenton. That Arachnid went insane. I'm sure it wanted to kill her.'

Harry watched the plant convulsing its leaves in rigid spasmodic movements.

'If you ask me it's in an advanced state of rut. Why should it want to kill her?'

'Her voice must have overtones that irritate its calyx. None of the other plants minded. They cooed like turtle doves when she touched them.'

Tony shivered happily.

Light dazzled in the street outside.

I handed Tony the broom. 'Here, lover, brace yourself on that. Miss Ciracylides is dying to meet you.'

Jane came into the shop, wearing a flame yellow cocktail skirt and another of her hats.

I introduced her to Harry and Tony.

'The flowers seem very quiet this morning,' she said. 'What's the matter with them?'

'I'm cleaning out the tanks,' I told her. 'By the way, we all want to congratulate you on last night. How does it feel to be able to name your fiftieth city?'

She smiled shyly and sauntered away round the shop. As I knew she would, she stopped by the Arachnid and levelled her eyes at it.

I wanted to see what she'd say, but Harry and Tony were all around her, and soon got her up to my apartment, where they had a hilarious morning playing the fool and raiding my Scotch.

'What about coming out with us after the show tonight?' Tony asked her. 'We can go dancing at the Flamingo.'

'But you're both married,' Jane protested. 'Aren't you worried about your reputations?'

'Oh, we'll bring the girls,' Harry said airily. 'And Steve here can come along and hold your coat.'

We played i-Go together. Jane said she'd never played the game before, but she had no difficulty picking up the rules, and when she started sweeping the board with us I knew she was cheating. Admittedly it isn't every day that you get a chance to play i-Go with a golden-skinned woman with insects for eyes, but never the less I was annoyed. Harry and Tony, of course, didn't mind.

'She's charming,' Harry said, after she'd left. 'Who cares? It's a stupid game anyway.'

'I care,' I said. 'She cheats.'

The next three or four days at the shop were an audio-vegetative armageddon. Jane came in every morning to look at the Arachnid, and her presence was more than the flower could bear. Unfortunately I couldn't starve the plants below their thresholds. They needed exercise and they had to have the Arachnid to lead them. But instead of running through its harmonic scales the orchid only screeched and whined. It wasn't the noise, which only a couple of dozen people complained about, but the damage being done to their vibratory chords that worried me. Those in the seventeenth century catalogues stood up well to the strain, and the moderns were immune, but the Romantics burst their calyxes by the score. By the third day after Jane's arrival I'd lost two hundred dollars' worth of Beethoven and more Mendelssohn and Schubert than I could bear to think about.

Jane seemed oblivious to the trouble she was causing me.

'What's wrong with them all?' she asked, surveying the chaos of gas cylinders and drip feeds spread across the floor.

'I don't think they like you,' I told her. 'At least the Arach-

nid doesn't. Your voice may move men to strange and wonderful visions, but it throws that orchid into acute melancholia.'

'Nonsense,' she said, laughing at me. 'Give it to me and I'll show you how to look after it.'

'Are Tony and Harry keeping you happy?' I asked her. I was annoyed that I couldn't go down to the beach with them and instead had to spend my time draining tanks and titrating up norm solutions, none of which ever worked.

'They're very amusing,' she said. 'We play i-Go and I sing for them. But I wish you could come out more often.'

After another two weeks I had to give up. I decided to close the plants down until Jane had left Vermilion Sands. I knew it would take me three months to rescore the stock, but I had no alternative.

The next day I received a large order for mixed coloratura herbaceous from the Santiago Garden Choir. They wanted delivery in three weeks.

'I'm sorry,' Jane said, when she heard I wouldn't be able to fill the order. 'You must wish that I'd never come to Vermilion Sands.'

She stared thoughtfully into one of the darkened tanks.

'Couldn't I score them for you?' she suggested.

'No thanks,' I said, laughing. 'I've had enough of that already.'

'Don't be silly, of course I could.'

I shook my head.

Tony and Harry told me I was crazy.

'Her voice has a wide enough range,' Tony said. 'You admit it yourself.'

'What have you got against her?' Harry asked. 'That she cheats at i-Go?'

'It's nothing to do with that,' I said. 'And her voice has a wider range than you think.'

We played i-Go at Jane's apartment. Jane won ten dollars from each of us.

'I am lucky,' she said, very pleased with herself. 'I never seem to lose.' She counted up the bills and put them away carefully in her bag, her golden skin glowing.

Then Santiago sent me a repeat query.

I found Jane down among the cafés, holding off a siege of admirers.

'Have you given in yet?' she asked me, smiling at the young men.

'I don't know what you're doing to me,' I said, 'but anything is worth trying.'

Back at the shop I raised a bank of perennials past their thresholds. Jane helped me attach the gas and fluid lines.

'We'll try these first,' I said. 'Frequencies 543-785. Here's the score.'

Jane took off her hat and began to ascend the scale, her voice clear and pure. At first the Columbine hesitated and Jane went down again and drew them along with her. They went up a couple of octaves together and then the plants stumbled and went off at a tangent of stepped chords.

'Try K sharp,' I said. I fed a little chlorous acid into the tank and the Columbine followed her up eagerly, the infra-calyxes warbling delicate variations on the treble clef.

'Perfect,' I said.

It took us only four hours to fill the order.

'You're better than the Arachnid,' I congratulated her. 'How would you like a job? I'll fit you out with a large cool tank and all the chlorine you can breathe.'

'Careful,' she told me. 'I may say yes. Why don't we rescore a few more of them while we're about it?'

'You're tired,' I said. 'Let's go and have a drink.'

'Let me try the Arachnid,' she suggested. 'That would be more of a challenge.'

Her eyes never left the flower. I wondered what they'd do if I left them together. Try to sing each other to death?

'No,' I said. 'Tomorrow perhaps.'

We sat on the balcony together, glasses at our elbows, and talked the afternoon away.

She told me little about herself, but I gathered that her father had been a mining engineer in Peru and her mother a dancer at a Lima vu-tavern. They'd wandered from deposit to deposit, the father digging his concessions, the mother signing on at the nearest bordello to pay the rent.

'She only sang, of course,' Jane added. 'Until my father came.' She blew bubbles into her glass. 'So you think I give them what they want at the Casino. By the way, what do you see?'

'I'm afraid I'm your one failure,' I said. 'Nothing. Except you.'

She dropped her eyes. 'That sometimes happens,' she said. 'I'm glad this time.'

A million suns pounded inside me. Until then I'd been reserving judgment on myself.

Harry and Tony were polite, if disappointed.

'I can't believe it,' Harry said sadly. 'I won't. How did you do it?'

'That mystical left-handed approach, of course,' I told him. 'All ancient seas and dark wells.'

'What's she like?' Tony asked eagerly. 'I mean, does she burn or just tingle?'

Jane sang at the Casino every night from eleven to three, but apart from that I suppose we were always together. Sometimes in the late afternoons we'd drive out along the beach to the Scented Desert and sit alone by one of the pools, watching the sun fall away behind the reefs and hills, lulling ourselves on the rose-sick air. When the wind began to blow cool across

the sand we'd slip down into the water, bathe ourselves and drive back to town, filling the streets and café terraces with jasmine and musk-rose and helianthemum.

On other evenings we'd go down to one of the quiet bars at Lagoon West, and have supper out on the flats, and Jane would tease the waiters and sing honeybirds and angelcakes to the children who came in across the sand to watch her.

I realize now that I must have achieved a certain notoriety along the beach, but I didn't mind giving the old women – and beside Jane they all seemed to be old women – something to talk about. During the Recess no one cared very much about anything, and for that reason I never questioned myself too closely over my affair with Jane Ciracylides. As I sat on the balcony with her looking out over the cool early evenings or felt her body glowing beside me in the darkness I allowed myself few anxieties.

Absurdly, the only disagreement I ever had with her was over her cheating.

I remember that I once taxed her with it.

'Do you know you've taken over five hundred dollars from me, Jane? You're still doing it. Even now!'

She laughed impishly. 'Do I cheat? I'll let you win one day.'

'But why do you?' I insisted.

'It's more fun to cheat,' she said. 'Otherwise it's so boring.'

'Where will you go when you leave Vermilion Sands?' I asked her.

She looked at me in surprise. 'Why do you say that? I don't think I shall ever leave.'

'Don't tease me, Jane. You're a child of another world than this.'

'My father came from Peru,' she reminded me.

'But you didn't get your voice from him,' I said. 'I wish I could have heard your mother sing. Had she a better voice than yours, Jane?'

'She thought so. My father couldn't stand either of us.'

That was the evening I last saw Jane. We'd changed, and in the half an hour before she left for the Casino we sat on the balcony and I listened to her voice, like a spectral fountain, pour its luminous notes into the air. The music remained with me even after she'd gone, hanging faintly in the darkness around her chair.

I felt curiously sleepy, almost sick on the air she'd left behind, and at 11.30, when I knew she'd be appearing on stage at the Casino, I went out for a walk along the beach.

As I left the elevator I heard music coming from the shop.

At first I thought I'd left one of the audio switches on, but I knew the voice only too well.

The windows of the shop had been shuttered, so I got in through the passage which led from the garage courtyard round at the back of the apartment house.

The lights had been turned out, but a brilliant glow filled the shop, throwing a golden fire on to the tanks along the counters. Across the ceiling liquid colours danced in reflection.

The music I had heard before, but only in overture.

The Arachnid had grown to three times its size. It towered nine feet high out of the shattered lid of the control tank, leaves tumid and inflamed, its calyx as large as a bucket, raging insanely.

Arched forwards into it, her head thrown back, was Jane.

I ran over to her, my eyes filling with light, and grabbed her arm, trying to pull her away from it.

'Jane!' I shouted over the noise. 'Get down!'

She flung my hand away. In her eyes, fleetingly, was a look of shame.

While I was sitting on the stairs in the entrance Tony and Harry drove up.

'Where's Jane?' Harry asked. 'Has anything happened to her? We were down at the Casino.' They both turned towards the music. 'What the hell's going on?'

Tony peered at me suspiciously. 'Steve, anything wrong?'

Harry dropped the bouquet he was carrying and started towards the rear entrance.

'Harry!' I shouted after him. 'Get back!'

Tony held my shoulder. 'Is Jane in there?'

I caught them as they opened the door into the shop.

'Good God!' Harry yelled. 'Let go of me, you fool!' He struggled to get away from me. 'Steve, it's trying to kill her!'

I jammed the door shut and held them back.

I never saw Jane again. The three of us waited in my apartment. When the music died away we went down and found the shop in darkness. The Arachnid had shrunk to its normal size.

The next day it died.

Where Jane went to I don't know. Not long afterwards the Recess ended, and the big government schemes came along and started up all the clocks and kept us too busy working off the lost time to worry about a few bruised petals. Harry told me that Jane had been seen on her way through Red Beach, and I heard recently that someone very like her was doing the nightclubs this side out of Pernambuco.

So if any of you around here keep a choro-florist's, and have a Khan-Arachnid orchid, look out for a golden-skinned woman with insects for eyes. Perhaps she'll play i-Go with you, and I'm sorry to have to say it, but she'll always cheat.