

THE WAREHOUSE *by Virgil Thompson*



Medics with *City of Sidonia* orange public safety patches slapped on electric blue shirts bounced Nicky on a stretcher up concrete steps and away into the white glare of police spotlights.

Umeko watched them go, wide-eyed.

For the final time tonight the club's overhead light panels came up, revealing a human leg shingled with dried blood. The limb protruded from the corner of a teak island bar amid broken glass, blood spatter, and splintered wood. It was an awful place to stand but this was where the homeland security officer got in Umeko's path. With his gorilla fist on her arm, the officer prevented her from chasing Nicky's stretcher, Nicky's bodyguard Henri, and the public safety medics. When she moved he tightened his grip and his sneer.

Umeko became still. The corpse behind the bar no longer registered. The interminable span between the life she knew and this moment had

ground to a halt inside her mind. Nicky her lover had gone with his bodyguard and the medics, limp as the dead man behind the bar. What did it matter if she was in the Warehouse another second or another hour? Where was she going?



"You're naïve, Miss Pryce," Henri kids Umeko. It is close to midnight.

Umeko uh-hums and gazes with parted lips through the Escalade's tinted backseat window at the concert hall crowd. The Escalade is moving. Onlookers at the curb are on the balls of their feet, waving. Umeko wants to wave back but she does not understand why the people are waving at her. So many people, a cross-section of humanity shrouded eerily in the sooty darkness that attends inner city side streets behind large theaters. She knows none of them. Strangers. Should she mind that they are strangers?

"You're A-list now, Miss Pryce," Henri suggests from the front passenger seat of the Escalade. "You should be careful."

Umeko is not A-list, although she adores Henri's heavy and uninformed brand of optimism. Smiling ruefully, she angles a glance at the Balisarda Concert Hall. The Escalade has taken the corner onto Olympia. She enjoys the gala strobes and the massive marquee grandly flashing *The Balisarda Welcomes The Sidonia International Film Festival*. Her chest clenches, unexpectedly. It's not like her to become unsettled. Taking all in stride, she has welcomed the press, photographers, and red carpet interviewers. Umeko is a former runway queen, six-even with straight black hair, slightly canted blue eyes, and legs that go on forever. She was sixteen the first time she strolled under the lights to applause. At twenty-six, she is quite addicted. She admits to Henri she is infatuated with the crowd, always has been. But Henri won't let her play anymore with strangers. Henri, Nicky's security marshal, says it is not safe.