

STARDUST

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Maybe it was the heat, the threat of war that drew ever closer, or maybe even the inactivity of the season, but it had been weeks since I'd been able to get a decent night's sleep, and the sleep I did manage to get was fitful at best.

Each night the stars seemed to sing a siren's song to me, drawing me out on the balcony to watch their nightly passage across the sky, taunting me because I'd never be able to reach them.

Then there was that crazy night I decided to take the *Goose* up. I don't know what had gotten into me, maybe it was the heat, I just knew that I had to touch a star. I almost froze to death and nearly cracked up the *Goose* in the process, but it hadn't cured anything. Here I was again, watching the sun rise from the sea as the last morning star was drowned out by its light.

The exhausted young pilot turned his back on the sunrise and leaned heavily against the banister, striking a match to light the ever-present cigar that had burned out during the night's lonely vigil. Another sleepless night. If this kept up he'd be in no shape to make that run to Tagataya for Louie.

He took a long puff on what was left of the cigar and closed his tired eyes. Last night the dreams had been more vivid than ever and this time he remembered the kaleidoscope of pictures that had disturbed his sleep. And somehow he knew it wasn't the first time he had had that dream. A dream from

a far away life -- a life he no longer wanted to remember, a life he would never be a part of again.

A door shut from somewhere below, and Corky lumbered up the stairway, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Hi ya, Jake!" He greeted his friend with a smile and then frowned as he studied Jake's haggard face. "You been up all night again?"

Jake grinned sheepishly. It seemed so silly. A grown man being kept awake at night because he was afraid of his dreams.

"If somethin's bothering you, Jake, you know you can always talk to me."

"I know that, Corky." The one thing of which he could be absolutely sure in this crazy world was Corky's friendship. Corky would always stick by him, no matter what. But there was no way his friend could comprehend what he was going through. No one could.

Corky shoved his hands into the pockets of his dirty coveralls and pushed an imaginary pebble around with his foot. "Ahhh, other than not getting enough sleep, how ya been feeling?"

Jake gave his mechanic a quizzical look. "I'm just fine, why?"

"D...d...do you ever think about going back, Jake?" Corky stammered. "I haven't seen you limping for a long time."

A frown creased Jake's forehead. "Back where?" But he didn't have to ask. Somehow he knew what Corky was getting at; he knew what Corky thought was the cause of his restlessness.

The mechanic turned his attention from the imaginary pebble to meet Jake's steel blue gaze. "Maybe it's time to go back to the Tigers."

"I'm not ready yet, Corky."

"War's going to break out with the Japanese soon, and I know you won't want to be stuck here while the Tigers are in the thick of things."

Jake threw his cigar down and ground out the smoldering butt with his heel. "I said I'm not ready yet. Am I, Jack?"

His question was directed at the spotted terrier that had appeared at his feet. The small dog turned his one good eye on Corky and barked twice.

"See, Jake! Jack agrees with me!"

Jake glared at his one-eyed pet and started down the stairs to the Monkey Bar. Maybe he could get an early breakfast from Louie.

Corky followed Jake down to the veranda. "Are you scared, Jake? 'Cause I can understand that. Anyone'd be scared if they survived a crash like you did."

"I am not scared!" Jake's eyes blazed angrily. Memories he had repressed from that day washed over him. He was scared, but not for the reasons Corky thought.

Corky crumpled his hat in his hands, a hurt expression on his face. "You don't have to get mad, Jake. I'm only trying to help."

"I'm not mad!" It came out louder than he had expected but, damn it, he was mad! Why couldn't Corky just drop the entire subject? Worrying about the Tigers was not what was keeping him up at night. Besides, what was so bad about staying on Boragora? "Let's just forget it, Corky, and get something to eat. Gushie's an early riser...."

Corky was silent for a moment, and then his face brightened as another idea occurred to him. "It's Sarah, isn't it, Jake? You don't want to leave Sarah!"

"It is not Sarah!"

"Did someone call me?" Sarah stepped onto the porch, looking fresh and lovely in her white cotton dress.

"No!" Setting his jaw in a hard line, Jake turned his back on his friends and walked away, passing the docks where the *Goose* bounced lazily in the water and heading toward the beach where he hoped he would be left alone.

"What's the matter with him?" Sarah turned a bewildered look on Corky. Jake had never been so

short tempered with her before.

Corky shrugged, watching Jake's retreating figure disappear behind some distant palms and ferns.

"It's probably just the heat," Sarah suggested. "And I know he hasn't been sleeping well. Maybe I should go talk with him."

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Sarah."

"Why not? What's the matter?"

Corky shook his head. "All I did was mention rejoining the Tigers, and he got really upset."

Sarah was surprised. "But I thought that's what he wanted?"

"I know. But he's been acting real strange again. Like he did right after the crash. Sort of confused."

"That's not unusual after something as traumatic as a plane crash, Corky."

"I know, Sarah, but he even had Jack goin' for a while. Jack wouldn't do anything but growl at him for three weeks afterwards."

Sarah's eyes widened, and she looked down at the small dog who had chosen to sit at her feet rather than follow his master. She smiled and laid a hand on Corky's shoulder to reassure him. "Maybe Jack was mad because he knew if something happened to Jake he'd never get his eye back."

Corky nodded, missing Sarah's attempt at humor. "Yeah. It was a miracle Jake was even alive. The whole ship was burning; it was so hot we couldn't get near it."

Sarah shuddered. "Jake's very lucky."

"You can say that again."

The beach began to narrow, and he found a small alcove sheltered by the trees where he could be alone and think things through. Plopping down on the warm ground, he yanked his boots and socks off and dug his toes into the white sand. The gentle rhythm of the waves lapping along the shore drained away some of his anger, and he was sorry for blowing up at Corky and Sarah. They cared for him, and they deserved some explanation, but he had none to give. They wouldn't understand. He wasn't sure he understood himself.

He slowly rolled up the bottom of his pants and ran his fingers along the heavy tape that covered the wound on his right leg, protecting it from the water and sand of the islands. He wasn't afraid of going back, not the way Corky had suspected. Nothing could hurt him. He knew that now.

And Sarah? What could he possibly offer her? It wouldn't be fair to make any commitments to her, but sometimes he wanted to forget what he was,

wanted to carry her up to his room and make love to her, wanted something to wash away the ache inside for a love he had never known, couldn't remember.

Who was Jake Cutter, anyway? He stared accusingly at his toes and wriggled them into the sand. On the outside he was like anyone else; he felt the same things: pain, joy, anger. So why couldn't they understand? Why had his dreams continued to haunt him?

He lifted his face to the sun and looked up into its white hot light. White light. Beaming, sparkling, sensuous. Holding promises of a union he had long dreamed about. Like a gentle lover the sparks of light had caressed him, and she had come to him. Soft brown eyes eager for the union, hips swaying gently from side to side as she glided forward to join him in the brilliance.

But he had been wrenched from her arms, and her name had died on his lips. Screams of agony washed over him as the light turned to yellow and blue flames leaping into the dark sky from the twisted heap of burning metal. He had felt the pain, the shock of another's life being torn from his soul. Too young to die, not ready yet! Aces didn't die! A silent scream raged through the flames, and it was his own tortured cry that rang in his ears.

That's where it all started -- or ended? It was his last conscious memory -- or was it his

first? The dreams, the surfacing pieces of a memory that was not his. They came from someone else's past, as if he had read it in a book and had adopted it as his own. But he had read two books, and one was at war with the other.

Fumbling, he slowly ripped the surgical tape from his leg, spiral by spiral, knowing too well what he'd find. Knowing that nothing had changed. Memories long repressed unfolded with each layer of tape. He knew, but had tried so hard to bury that knowledge. It was all a bad dream, a nightmare.

Even the smallest body functions are exactly duplicated. It looked real enough all right, and to anyone in this world it was. He pulled off the last piece of tape and stared at the gaping tear in his leg. It hadn't changed. It would always be there. Artificial skin did not heal.

He winced as he pulled back the skin, some memory planted inside still expecting to feel pain. But there was no pain. There were only the wires and circuits of a probe.

Other dimensions, higher levels of being. He tried to shut out the voices within him, voices from another life, another time. He pounded his fist into the sand, tears of anger and frustration stinging his eyes.

This isn't the way it's supposed to happen. Not like this. Not alone. Not without Ilia!

