

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

FAST-FRIEND

STARLADY

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For many of us, the Ace Double Novels of the '50s and '60s have long been a source both of pleasure and nostalgia. This new double volume from Subterranean Press stands squarely in that distinguished tradition, offering a pair of colorful, fast-paced novelettes from one of the most popular writers currently working in any genre: George R. R. Martin.

[*Starlady*](#) takes place on a planet called Thisrock and depicts a Darwinian society populated by thieves, whores, cutthroats, pimps, and assorted lost souls. It is a tale of love, loss, vengeance, and ambition written with great economy of means, and with a narrative intensity that never, ever lets up.

[*Fast-Friend*](#) takes a fresh new look at an enduring human dream: travel to the stars. With consummate narrative skill, and with a visionary's sensibility, Martin tells an unforgettable story of longing and transcendence, a story suffused with images at once beautiful and terrifying, mysterious and profound.

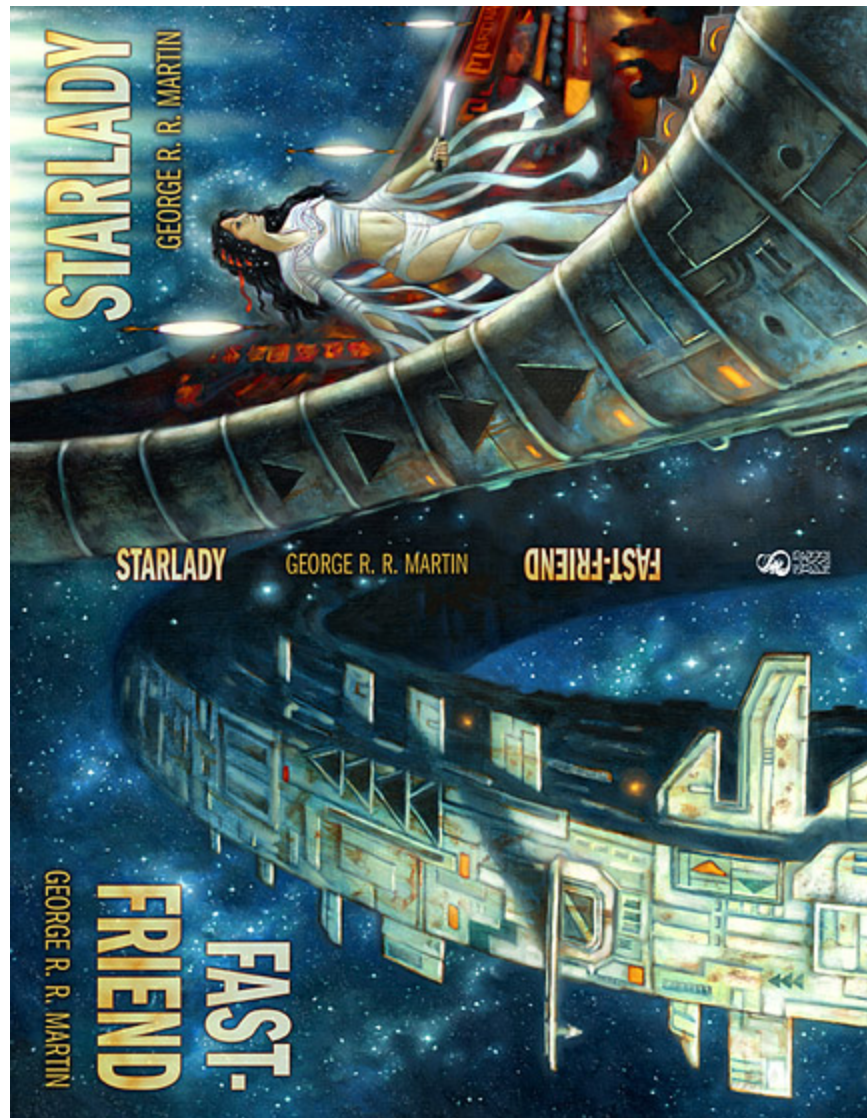
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George R. R. Martin

Starlady & Fast-Friend

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Starlady

THIS story has no hero in it. It's got Hairy Hal in it, and Golden Boy, and Janey Small and Mayliss, and some other people who lived on Thisrock. Plus Crawney and Stumblecat and the Marquis, who'll do well enough as villains. But it hasn't got a hero... well, unless you count Hairy Hal.

On the day it all began, he was out late, wandering far from the Plaza in the dock section near the Upend of the Concourse. It was night-cycle, the big overhead light-panels had faded to black, and here the wall-lights were few and dim. Elsewhere, just down the Concourse, the Silver Plaza was alive with music; multi-colored strobes were Hashing, and joy-smoke was belching from the air ducts. But Hal walked in darkness, through silent halls full of deserted loading trucks, past shadowed stacks of freight. Here, near the docks, Thisrock was much as the Imperials had known it. The corridors near the Plaza were all shops and disfigured plastic; the walls of the Concourse were covered with boasts and slogans and obscenities. But here, here, the only markings on the shining duralloy were the corridor numbers that the men of the Federal Empire had left. Hairy Hal knew the business was elsewhere. But he'd given up on business that night, and he was here.

Which was why he heard the whimper.

Why he followed it is something else again. The starslums were full of whimpers, plus screams and shouts and pleading. Hairy Hal was a child of the starslums, and he knew the rules. But that night he broke them.

In the black of a cross-corridor, up against some crates, he found Crawney and his men, with their victims. One victim was a youth. He stood in shadow, but Hal could make out a slender, graceful body, and his eyes. His eyes

were immense. With him was a young woman, or maybe just a girl. She was backed up against the wall, under a yellow wall-light. Her face was pale, scared. And dark hair fell past her shoulders, so clearly she was off-world.

Crawney confronted them, a short slim man with black and red skull stripes and a mouth full of teeth that stuck out too far. He dressed in soft plastic, and he worked for the Marquis. Hal knew him, of course.

Crawney was unarmed. But the pair with him, the silent giants with the heads painted black, each of them carried a dark baton, and they waved them gracefully in front of them. Stingsticks. They kept the victims cornered.

So Hairy Hal, unnoticed, knelt in darkness and watched it all. It was a bleak episode, but one he'd seen before. There were soft threats from Crawney, delivered in a mild slurring voice. There were pleadings from the woman. There was a lightning pass from a stingstick, and a scream from the boy. Then whimpers, as he lay crumpled on the floor. Then another stingstick pass, a touch to the head, and the whimpering stopped.

Finally there were two rapes; Crawney, amused, just watched. Afterwards they took everything, and left her there crying beside the boy.

Hairy Hal waited until they were long gone, until even the echoes of their passage had faded from the corridor. Then he rose and went to the woman. She was naked and vulnerable. When she saw him, she gave a small cry and struggled to get up.

So he smiled at her. That was another of Hal's trademarks; his smile. "Hey now, starlady," he said. "Easy. Hal won't hurt you. Your friend might need help."

Then, while she watched through wide eyes, he knelt down near the boy and rolled him under the wall-light with one hand. The youth was blacked out from pain, but

otherwise unhurt. But Hal didn't notice that much. He was staring.

The youth was golden.

He was like no boy Hal had ever seen. His skin was soft cream gold; his hair was a shimmery silver-white. The ears were an elf's, pointed and delicate, the nose small and chiseled, the eyes huge. Human? Hal didn't know. But he knew it didn't matter. Beauty was all that mattered, beauty and glowing innocence. Hairy Hal had found his Golden Boy.

The woman had dressed, in what Crawney had left of her clothing. Now she stood. "What can you do?" she said. "I'm Janey Small, from Rhiannon. Our ship...."

Hal looked up at her. "No, starlady," he said. "No ship no more. Crawney got the name tabs, the Marquis'll sell. Some insider will be Janey Small, from Rhiannon. See? Happens, well, every day. Starlady should have stayed on the Concourse."

"But," the woman started. "We have to go to someone. I mean the man with the striped head, he said he'd show us the good stuff. He hired the other two for us, as bodyguards. Can you take us to the police?" Her voice was even, quiet, and the teartracks on her face were dry now. She recovered fast. Hal admired her.

"Starlady landed on Thisrock," he said. "No police here. Nothing. Should've hired a real bodyguard. Crew would give you a steer as usual. Crawney hit, instead. Starlady wasn't Promethean, wasn't insider, wasn't protected, probly four-class passage, right?" He paused, she nodded. "So, right. Crawney wanted tabs, starlady was stupid, easy hit." Hal glanced down at Golden Boy, then up at the woman again. "With you?" he asked.

"Yes. No." She shook her head. "Not precisely. He was on the ship. No one could understand him, and no one seemed to know him, or where he was from. He started

following me around. I don't know much about him, but he's good, kind. What's going to happen to us now?"

Hal shrugged. "Help get Golden Boy over Hal's shoulder. Come with, to home."

* * *

Hairy Hal's home; a four-room compartment on a cross-corridor near the Concourse, just off the Silver Plaza. It was good for trade. The door was heavy duralloy. Inside was a large square chamber, with a low couch along one wall and opposite a built-in kitchen. Above the couch were racks of books and tapes; for a starslummer, Hal was an intellectual. A big plastic table filled most of the room and closed doors led off to the bedrooms and the waste cube. A glowing globe sat in the center of the table, sending pink reflections scuttling across the walls as it pulsed.

Hairy Hal dumped Golden Boy, still out, on the couch, then sat down at the table. He pointed to a second chair, and Janey sat too. And then, before either of them could say anything, a bedroom door opened and Mayliss entered.

Mayliss was very tall, very regal; sleek legs and big breasts and a hard, hard face with small green eyes. She painted her head bright red to let people know what she was. What she was was one of Hal's girls. At the moment, she was his only girl.

She stopped in the door to her bedroom, studied Janey and Golden Boy, then looked at Hal. "Spin," she said.

So Hairy Hal spun it. "Starlady got hit," he told her. "Crawney did a bodyguard grabtab, threw in rip an' rape." He shrugged.

Her face grew harder. "Hairy Hal scoped it all, right? Did nothing?" She sighed. "So?"

“Seal it, Mayliss,” Hal told her. He turned back to Janey Small, smiled his smile. “Starlady know what comes now?” he asked.

Janey wet her lip, hesitated. Finally she spoke. “If there really are no police, I guess we’re stuck here for a while.”

Hal shook his head. “For good. Better face that, or you’ll get hurt. Easy to get hurt on Thisrock, starlady, not like Rhiannon. Look.” With that, his left hand reached across his body, grabbed a corner of his heavy green cape, and flipped it back over his shoulder. Then he took his right arm by the wrist, and lifted it onto the table.

Janey Small did not gasp; she was a tough woman, Janey Small. She just looked. Hairy Hal’s right arm wasn’t really much of an arm. It bent and twisted in a half-dozen places where an arm ought not to bend, and it was matchstick-thin. The skin was a reddish black, the hand a shriveled claw. Hal clenched his fist as it lay there, and the arm trembled violently.

Finally, when she’d looked enough, he reached over again with his left hand, and took it off the table.

Then he smiled at her. “Easy to get hurt,” he repeated.

She chewed her lip. “Can’t you get it replaced?”

He laughed. “Probly, starlady, on Rhiannon. Probly Prometheans could, too. But Hal’s here, and Thisrock forgot a lot during the Collapse. No. Not even if Hal was an insider, an’ Hal is no insider. Hairy Hal is a starslum pimp.”

Janey’s eyes widened. “I don’t care,” she said. “You’re better than those others. You helped us.”

Behind him Mayliss laughed. Hal ignored her. “Hey now, starlady,” he said smiling, “Listen and learn, an’ learn quick. Starslummers don’t help anyone, less they get a slice. Hal is no hero, he didn’t even try to stop that rip an’ rape, right? But Hal is offering you good, and straight, so

listen to him spin. Starlady and Golden Boy can stay here till day-cycle. When the lights come on, they got to pick. One, go out and take their chances, and good luck. Two—" he cocked his head questioningly—"they stay and work for Hal."

He lifted his right arm then, struggling and trembling, without using his left. It hit the table with a thump. Mayliss was laughing again. "Hairy Hal was good with a no-knife," he said, patting his arm with his good hand. "Still, this. Pick."

Well, I told you he wasn't a hero.

Janey's face went baffled at first, as she listened to Hal's words. Then, despite herself, she began to cry. Mayliss kept on laughing, but Hal's smile faded then. He shrugged, and shook his head, and went to bed.

The tears stopped in time and Janey sat alone, watching pink shadows race across the room. After a long time, her gaze wandered to Golden Boy asleep on the couch, and she went to him and curled up on the floor so her face was close to his. She stroked his silvery hair, and smiled at him, and thought.

But, of course, she had no choice. When day-cycle came Janey told Hal what she must.

He gave her a smile. He did not get one back.

"You'll work the Silver Plaza," he told her, as he stood across the table and buckled a plastic belt. "Starlady's fresh, an' young, an' she smells of stars, an' that's all good for trade. Mayliss'll take the Concourse. Hal will take you round today, an' spin out all the rules. Listen."

She looked at the couch. "What about the boy?"

"*Mayliss!*" Hal bellowed. When she came, glaring, he gestured. "Stay an' feed the Golden Boy, spin him soft when he blinks, an' don't let him fly. Hal's got plans for Golden Boy." He went back into his bedroom.

Mayliss watched his door shut with a sullen expression, then turned on Janey. "Why don't you run, ship girl?" she said. "Run back to your ship. You don't click here, and Hairy Hal don't click so good himself. Scope him smart before you root, he isn't all that much. You and Golden Boy will get shoved up an air duct if you believe his wobbly spin."

Hal emerged from the bedroom, dressed in a black swoopshirt and his cape. "Seal it, redhead," he told Mayliss. Then, to Janey: "First lesson, listen flow." He reached across his body, beneath his cape, and his hand came out holding a finger-sized rod of black metal.

"No-knife," he said. He did something with his thumb, and suddenly there was a humming, and a foot-long blue haze that stuck out from his fist. "They make them, well, not here. They come on ships. The force-blade'll cut anything, cept durloy, an' it's clean an' quick. Hal was good once, now not so good, but still he's better than most. This is your protection, starlady. This is why you don't get hit no more. Today Hal's parading you round the Plaza, an' the word gets out. Tomorrow no one touches you."

"Cept Marquis," Mayliss said. Her tone was cutting. "Cept Marquis and Crawney and Stumblecat, and any other blackskull who wants you. They get you free, starlady, and they do anything they want with you, and Hal don't do a thing. Right, Hairy Hal? Spin that at her."

Hairy Hal made a palming motion, the ghost blade blinked out and the black rod vanished beneath his cape. "Dress, starlady," he told Janey. "Take something from Mayliss, anything you like, an' cut it to size."

"Hey now," Mayliss started, but Hal raised his voice and bulled right over her.

"You pick, you get, starlady," he said. "Keep your hair, so they know you work for Hal. But tie something red round your head, so they know you work."

Afterwards, they left Mayliss and Golden Boy alone, and went out into the corridor down to the Concourse, out towards the Plaza. Janey Small wore a red headband and a gossamer yellow dinger and a cool, pale face. She did not talk. Hal did all the talking, Hal in black and green, who smiled and kept his arm around her.

The Concourse, already, was jammed. Hal pulled Janey to a food stall, nodded to the man behind the counter, and they both ate crusty brown breadsticks and cubes of cheese. Janey put her elbows up on the counter. Hal put his arm around her, rubbed her shoulder, and pointed at people with his eyes.

That one's a thief, he told her, and that one pushes dreams, and the other with the wide eyes and the drools, well, he's that buys them. And there's another pimp, but his girls are old and baggy, and there's Bad Tanks who owns a stall out near the plaza. Don't ever eat there, though, cause he laces his sticks with dust to bring in more new dreamers. French is a joy-smoke merchant, he's quick but you can trust him, but Gallis don't sell nothing but a spin.

They started down the Concourse together, past the grimy plastic walls and the countless shops, past fat, half-naked women with shaved red skulls who glared at them resentfully, past swaggering youths with stingsticks who gave Hal a wide berth. All the time Janey Small walked in silence while Hal kept on his lessons.

The place with the blue curtains is Augusty's, he told her, he rents you bodyguards that you can trust. But never, never get a guard from Lorreg, worse than Crawney, only half the brains. That fat man with the green stars on his head? He's a pimp, a straight one if someone gets to me, you go to him. Dark Edward pimps too, yes, but don't go near him, he used to be much bigger than he is. Over there you've got yourself religion, if you're the kind who likes to mumble in the dark. The guy in the silver swoopsuit, he

don't have long to live, he talks too loud and he's going to get a stingstick up his ass.

They reached the Silver Plaza: a huge open place at the end of the Concourse, a ceiling far above that spilled down silver lights, tiers of balconies and shops, welling music all around them, a troupe of dancers whirling in the street. Hal pushed his way toward them; Janey followed. He watched, smiling. One of the women, a blur in scarlet veils, spun up against him, stopped, and grinned. He reached under his cape and pressed something into her palm. She grinned again, and danced away.

"What did you give her?" Janey asked, curious despite herself, after they'd elbowed free.

"A coin," Hal said, shrugging. "The dancing clicks for Hal, starlady. Probly that's another lesson for you. You won't get hit cause you're with Hal, right? But you don't hit no one, see? Hal spins straight, the ship men give steers to pimps who serve up girls without the stingsticks."

Suddenly his arm tightened on her shoulder. "An' there," he said, pointing with his chin "There's two more lessons for starlady, walking right together."

She looked in the direction he'd indicated. A man and a woman were making their way across the Plaza slowly. The man was broad-shouldered and blond, dressed in a dark floor-length cloak with heavy gold embroidering. The woman was brown-skinned, with kinky black hair and a pale green uniform.

Janey was still looking when she heard the voice from behind her. "The man is one of the leading citizens of Thisrock," the voice said, in a mellow, purring tone. "We call his kind insiders. The woman is an officer from a Promethean starship, of course; I expect that you knew that, dear. And your lesson, I'd guess, was to be that both insiders and Prometheans are to be treated with deference. They are powerful people."

They turned. The speaker was wearing a Promethean uniform, too; but unlike the woman's his was thin and patched. He had nothing else in common with the starship officer, or with anyone else in the crowd. Instead of being hairless, his face and hands were both completely covered by a soft gray fur. His ears were pointed, his nose was black, his eyes feline. He was, in fact, a man-cat.

"Hello, Hal," he said, in the oddly gentle voice that mocked the stingstick swinging from his belt. Then he smiled at Janey. "Right now you're full of questions," he said. "I know them all. First, I don't talk like the others because I'm not from Thisrock, and I have an education. I don't look like the others because I was genetically altered. A game they play with the lowborn on Prometheus, you know. My alterations were not satisfactory, though, so I wound up here. Some of them work, however. I heard Hal's last comment from quite a distance. Now, yes, that should cover it." He smiled. His teeth were very sharp.

Hal did not smile back. "Janey Small," he said, pointing. "Stumblecat."

Stumblecat nodded. Janey stood frozen.

"You're clearly a star-born," Stumblecat said in his cultured tones. "How ever did you wind up with Hal?"

"Starlady was passing through," Hairy Hal said sharply. "She hired the wrong bodyguard. Listened to Crawney spin, an' wound up raped and ripped. Now she's with Hal."

"You always were one to take advantage of a ripe situation, Hal," Stumblecat said. He laughed. "Well, I'll keep the starlady in mind the next time I'm looking. She might be an interesting change."

Hairy Hal was not amused, but he kept from showing it. He shrugged. "Yours anytime, Stumblecat," he said slowly.

"For a spin and a smile, Hal?"

Hal's face was dark. "For a spin and a smile, Stumblecat," he said slowly.

Stumblecat laughed, stroked Janey with a soft furred hand, then turned and left.

And Janey, hot eyes glaring, turned on Hairy Hal. "I agreed to work for you because you gave me no choice. I don't like it, but I recognize the situation I'm in. There was nothing said about you giving me to your friends."

Hal frowned hard. "An' nothing done, either. Listen to the biggest rule, starlady. Insiders, Prometheans, you scope them good, an' give them room, an' let them be customers. Nobody gets you free, cept black skulls. Yes, starlady. Like the ones who raped you up, don't look so white. For them, you do anything, be nice, charge nothing less they offer to pay. An' also for the black skull bosses. Like the Marquis, who Hal will tell about. Like Crawney, who hit you. An' Stumblecat.

"Hey now, starlady, you look shocked. Why? Mayliss spun you straight, you knew it. Probly you thought Stumblecat was a good guy, right? Cause he talks like you, only better. Well, starlady just did another stupid. First she hums to Crawney, now to Stumblecat. Next thing you'll be cuddling the Marquis himself; you already got both his leetenants."

His good hand was pinching her shoulder painfully as he spoke, and people in the crowd were throwing quick looks their way. Janey, furious, spun free.

"What about all that *protection*?" she shouted. "If I don't even get *that* much, why should I wear *this*?" She tore off her headband, thrust it at him.

Hairy Hal stood there, looking down at it. When he spoke, his voice was low. "Maybe you shouldn't," he said, shrugging. "Up to you, starlady. Hal doesn't force no one." He smiled. "But he's better than them."

Janey stared at him, saying nothing, holding the red rag out in her hand. Hal looked at the ground and scratched his head. And, in the awkward silence, a third man approached.

He was short, heavy, off-world; his clothes were rich. And his eyes moved constantly in a nervous scramble to see if anyone he knew was around. "Excuse me," he said. Quickly, quickly. "I—that is—the man on my ship told me to look for a man with a green cape and, well, ah, hair." He waited expectantly.

Hairy Hal looked at him, then at Janey. He said nothing.

Her hand fell. She stared at Hal's face, then at the ground, then—finally—at the off-worlder.

"Come on," she said at last.

* * *

Somewhere along the line, her name got lost. Janey Small of Rhiannon was gone, flown away on a ship hardly remembered. She was Starlady, and she did a thriving trade.

It wasn't the off-worlders so much; after the first, they came to her no more than any other. It was the starslammers who gave her business, the kids with the hand-me-down stingsticks and the whooping swoopsuits who caught the scent of the stars. They'd grown up with shaved-skull hard-eyed redheads, and they wanted hair and dreams and maybe innocence. They hummed to Starlady. They came to Starlady.

And she learned, yes yes, she learned.

There was a night-cycle near the docks, when a corridor club got a hold of her. The queen of the club was a blue-skulled dreamer, and the man she hummed to had

gone to Starlady. So she stared and smiled and drooled while her three underboys stripped their catch and started to play with their stingsticks. Ah, but then Hairy Hal was there! Starlady had friends all along the Concourse, and the friends had seen the grab, and they got to Hal, and he knew the dock section where the club called home. Such a short fight. An underboy swung his stingstick, Hal lifted his humming blue ghost blade, the baton sheared neatly in two, and the club ran.

And she learned, yes yes, she learned.

There was an afternoon at Hal's in the third bedroom, the special one with the canceller that wiped out Thisrock's gravity grid. But the customer wanted more than free-fall fun; he had a nervelash, which is like a stingstick, only worse. She screamed, and Hal was there, kicking off and floating fast and graceful, bringing his no-knife up and around. Afterwards they had to turn off the canceller, to ground all the droplets of blood.

And she learned, yes yes, she learned.

There was a conference at Hal's one night, and she met Dark Edward with his hot red eyes and his double stingstick and his plans for being emperor again, plus Fat Mollie who ran a stable of boys. They wanted Hairy Hal to join them. "It's a straight spin, Hal," Dark Edward said in a ponderous voice. "We can hit him good, and I'll make you my leetenant." He talked and talked and talked, but Hal just shook his head and threw them out. Afterwards he and Mayliss fought for hours.

But there came a silver morning two weeks later, when Crawney and Stumblecat dragged Dark Edward screaming to the center of the Plaza. At first Janey just watched Stumblecat, in all his soft-furred clumsiness, and noted the lack of feline grace that Hal had told her of, the curious lack that made him a reject from Prometheus and

gave him his curious name. Then she saw the Marquis, and she knew what was going to happen.

The Marquis had all of Stumblecat's stolen grace. He wore black boots, and the robes of an insider, but he was very silent. His skull was silver; it shone in the Plaza light. Around it, covering his eyes, was a solid ring of tinted blueblack plastic.

While Janey watched, while hundreds watched, he took Dark Edward's double stingstick and turned it on. Crawney and Stumblecat held the victim. The Marquis played for hours.

And she never saw Fat Mollie after that day, either.

Oh yes, she learned, and soon she knew the rules. She was Starlady, and Hairy Hal was her protection and she was safer than most around her. The blackskulls never bothered her. She was beneath them.

"The Marquis is a stupid," Hal told her after Dark Edward's death, when she came home early from the Plaza. "Dark Edward, well, he was worse, but still. Listen, the dreamboss clicks, right? The dust comes in on ships an' his men get it quiet an' sell it quiet an' no one knows the dreamboss an' no one knows how to touch him. Lametta tried, got hit. *Hard!* Probly the dreamboss will buy himself inside someday, the way he clicks. See?

"But Marquis, he doesn't click. Too *loud*. Everybody knows the Marquis, everybody chills to him, only he won't *never* buy his way down inside. The insiders don't want him marching round the Ivory Halls, less he's got an exotic for them and a quick exit-pass.

"He started with exotics, Starlady. Alters like Stumblecat, an' a couple Hrangans, green gushies, Fyndii mindmutes, that kind. Got all the exotics on Thisrock, right? The insiders, well, some of them hum sick, but they want to hum bad, an' they want to hum quiet, an' they pay a lot. Prometheans come too. The Marquis hums sick himself, but

different, he hums to pain, an' power probly, but mostly pain. Good with a stingstick, though, an' he got the exotics. After that he got a lot of other things, joy-smoke and grabtabs and ripping, all his now. Exotics are still a big slice, the Marquis has them all.

"Only, well, he's so loud, an' it'll kill him. Someday he'll try to hit the dreamboss, or squeeze an insider for quiet-money, or *something*. Maybe Stumblecat will take him. Stumblecat spins quieter, Starlady, an' Hal knows he don't like seconds. Hitting Dark Edward in the Plaza was just a *stupid*. The Marquis wants to chill everybody, cept it won't click."

He was sitting at his table eating as he spoke, his cape thrown back, his claw-like right hand clutching the plate as his left cut and speared with a kitchen knife. Janey sat across from him. In the corner of the room, regarding them both with immense blue eyes, Golden Boy sat on the couch.

Golden Boy had an easier time of it than Janey. Hairy Hal had run boys before, he said, but he wasn't running Golden Boy, not yet. He just kept saying that he had plans. The youth sat around the compartment all day, eating and staring at people, never saying a word. Somehow he seemed to know what was required of him, whenever something was. Mayliss, after mothering him for a week, had finally gotten tired of the way he shrank away in fear whenever she came near him. She clawed him badly with sharpened nails, then ignored him after Hairy Hal promised her a taste of no-knife if she did it again. "Golden Boy's got to stay *pretty*," he told her, with his ghost-blade in his good hand. She'd been backed up against her bedroom door, looking terrified but oddly ecstatic. That night she and Hal had slept together, the only time since Janey Small and Golden Boy had arrived.

Most times Hal slept alone. That first night, he'd tried to sleep with Janey, but she'd pulled away and glared at him. "I did it for you all day, and you've got the money," she said. "I'm not going to do it *with* you too."

And he'd let her go and shrugged. "Starlady, you're a strange one," he said. Then he went to his room by himself. Janey sat by Golden Boy on the couch, looking at his eyes and brushing back his silver hair. Finally they'd gone to sleep together in the free-fall chamber, arms wrapped around each other as they nestled in the sleep-web. Golden Boy simply held her and slept. He knew what was required of him.

It was that way every night. Hairy Hal tried once more, after he'd saved her from the corridor club. Back in the compartment, he'd sat by her on the couch and kept his arm around her until she stopped her trembling. Then he got up and went to his bedroom. He paused at the door, favoring her with a smile and one of his cock-the-head questioning looks. "Janey?"

"No," she said. He shrugged, and gave up trying.

After all, he wanted Janey, and Janey was long gone. She was Starlady and she had her Golden Boy.

* * *

Then one day, when Janey came back from the Silver Plaza, Golden Boy was gone. She looked around the compartment frantically; he'd never left before. But there was no one home but Mayliss and a paunchy off-worlder, afloat in the free-fall room. Mayliss glared at her as she stood in the doorway, but the man just chuckled and said, "Well, well, c'mon in."

When he'd left finally, Mayliss put on a sheath and came storming and spewing out at her. "I'll chill you down

good, Starlady, and if Hal don't like it I'll cut off his crottled arm. What's the big spin?"

"Golden Boy is gone."

"So? Hal's out selling him, little girl. Grow up."

Janey blinked. "*What?*"

Mayliss snorted in disgust, and put her hands on her hips. "I spun you straight. Why'd you think Hairy Hal let Golden Boy sit round here all day and powder his ass with dreamdust like he was an insider or something? Cause Hal clicks right, is that what you figured? So, wrong. Hal was waiting for a big sell. He spun it all out to me. With all those fun boys coming through here every day, sooner or later word's probly going to get down inside, that's where Hal wanted it, see? Lots of insiders like little boys, and he knew they'd pay big for a little *golden* boy with pointy ears and big eyes and silver hair. Only Hal couldn't zactly parade round the Ivory Halls giving out handbills, right?"

"He won't do it," Janey said stubbornly. "Golden Boy won't do it!"

Mayliss laughed. "You warm me, Starlady, you're such a *stupid*. Listen good, cause I'm going to spin you right. Golden Boy will do zactly what Hal says. You think you learned a lot, but you don't know *nothing*. Stead of a clear skull, you got a head full of hair and stars. I think you hum to Golden Boy, you know, and that's so warm it's *boiling*."

"I love him," Janey said, with storms flashing across her face. "He's kind and gentle and he's never done anyone any harm, and he's a hell of a lot better than anyone else on Thisrock."

But Mayliss only laughed again "You'll learn, Starlady. Hal don't click, but at least he clicks better'n Golden Boy. Listen, I used to hum to Hal once. I had to learn."

"What? That he uses people? Well, I learned *that* fast enough," Janey said. She turned and went to the couch and sat down.

Mayliss followed her. “No, Starlady, you got it spun up all wobbly and tangled. I thought Hairy Hal was a big hero. He was faster with his no-knife than *anybody*, and he looked good, and he spun big about how he was going to click. Yes, and little Mayliss believed it all. Cept one night, after Hal’d been doing too good, there was this knock on the door, right? Crawney. Back then, Hal had me and two other girls and a couple boys and some exotics plus he had some ’sticks working for him, and he was spinning about a slice of joy-smoke. Well, Crawney came to chill him down. The Marquis wanted joy-smoke, you see, and the Marquis didn’t like Hal having exotics.

“Well, Hairy Hal just laughed at Crawney, and I hummed to that. It was a long time ago, right, and the Marquis wasn’t so big and Hal wasn’t so small, and Lametta was even still round. Hal had plans.

“Cept Crawney didn’t like being laughed at. A couple cycles later, the blackskulls grabbed Hal and me and took us down by the docks. Crawney was there, and Stumblecat, and the Marquis. They made me watch, while the blackskulls broke his arm all up, again and again until he was screaming. Right? Then the Marquis just smiled and said, ‘Hey, Hal’s arm is broken, he needs a splint,’ and they splinted it with a *stingstick*, and just stood there and watched him on the floor.

“Afterward, all the nerves were crottled or something, and Hal wasn’t nothing with his no-knife. Everybody left him; his ’sticks, his girls, everybody. The Marquis took his exotics. Hairy Hal had nothing cept *me*. Little stupid Mayliss, she still hummed to him, and I stayed. I helped him use his other hand, and I thought once he was good again, he’d take his no-knife and go *after* the Marquis, right?

“Well, wrong. That’s where my spin went wobbly on me, and I learned. Hairy Hal was scared and he still is. He’s never dared to get big again cause the Marquis gives him

big chills. Every once in a while one of the blackskulls'll come by to have me, and they never pay, and Hal never does anything. They'll do it to you, too, watch. You'll learn, Starlady. You're a *stupid* if you hum to *anyone*, or buy anybody's spin, or do anything for anyone but *you*!"

Janey waited until the outburst had passed. Then, very quietly, she said, "If you gave up on Hal, then why are you still here?"

Before Mayliss could answer the door opened, and Hairy Hal and Golden Boy were back. Hal was smiling broadly. He reached under his cape, pulled out a packet, and tossed it on the table. Mayliss looked at it, grinned, and whistled.

"Golden Boy clicked *good* down in the Ivory Halls," Hal said. Then, startled, he stopped and looked at Janey. She'd gone to Golden Boy and wrapped her arms around him and now she was fighting not to cry.

* * *

So things began to click.

Down inside, in the Ivory Halls and the Velvet Corridors, in the great cool compartments around the Central Square, the word was loose. And the customers came; sleek blond men in woven robes, matrons in dragon dresses, adventurous girls in soft plastic. Others sent for Golden Boy, and Hairy Hal took him to them, walking the streets inside as if he were born to them. He handled things quiet and smooth, and he sold Golden Boy only for big money. No starslum funboys got their hands on him; Hal had his wide-eyed gold mine reserved for men of taste.

And Golden Boy went, and did what was required of him. He never spoke, but he seemed to understand,

sometimes even without Hal telling him. It was almost like he knew what he was doing.

Sometimes the insiders would buy him for a night, and Janey would float in her sleep-web alone.

On one of those nights, Hal returned from inside by himself, carrying a heavy book under his good arm. He was sitting at the table, poring over the pages, when Janey and a customer returned from the Silver Plaza. He ignored them and kept poring.

When the man had gone, Janey came out and looked at him sullenly. "What's that?" she asked.

Hal glanced up, smiled. "Hey, Starlady. Come an' look. Hal got it for Golden Boy tonight from an insider. It's old, you know, pre-Collapse. Straight spin!"

Janey walked around behind him to peer over his shoulder. The pages were big, glossy, full of closely packed text and bright holostrations of strange creatures in colorful costumes.

"There's something here, look here, about a race that might be Golden Boy's. Look at that picture, Starlady, the same, only the hair is the wrong color. Still. They were a Hrangan slave-race before the war or the Collapse. So, probly Golden Boy is a little Bashii. Unless...." He riffled some more pages. "Here, this part about genetic alteration experiments an' cloning an' that stuff. The Earth Imperials were trying to clone their best pilots an' such, duplicate them. An' you had alters, like Stumblecat cept he's a defect. See starlady, it has this bit about *esthetic* alters on Old Earth, pretty boys, being worked up. So. Maybe he's one of those. From Old Earth, what a spin! Thisrock hasn't heard from that far in, well, long time. It chills you, right Janey?"

His enthusiasm was a flood; Janey felt herself smiling at him. "I don't think he's from Old Earth," she said. "If he were, he could talk to us. He's probably a Bashii. But I really don't care what he is. He's just Golden Boy."

"Just! Janey, you're positively warm. Listen, he's clicking for us, Starlady. They hum to him down there, they hum high an' hot, an' probly they're going to want him down there more, right? But he won't do it right less Hal wants it, *an'* Janey, of course. In a while, Starlady, we can buy down inside, all of us, cause Golden Boy is Golden Boy. An' cause Hairy Hal is quiet, right?"

"Not quiet enough, Hal," the voice said from the doorway. Stumblecat stood there, smiling, his hand on his stingstick. "Not quite quiet enough."

He sauntered in with the clumsy ease that was uniquely his. Crawney followed, pushing Mayliss ahead of him. She stumbled up against the table, reeled, then pulled away towards the bedrooms.

"They want to see you," she said, looking apprehensively at Crawney and Stumblecat. "They found me on the Concourse and took my keyplate."

Hairy Hal closed his book and stood. "Spin it," he said. His face was a guarded blank.

"You know it all already, Hal," Stumblecat said. Such a soft voice he had, such a civilized purr. "You've known it all along. We told you long ago that we bear you no grudge. You can pimp all you like, girls, boys, anything. But exotics, well, you know. The Marquis has a sentimental attachment to exotics. He collects them, you might say."

"You been spinning us wobbly," Crawney put in, grinning at Hal and showing off all his teeth. "But you can straighten out. Just give us your exotic."

"Golden Boy, I believe he's called," said Stumblecat.

"Yes," Hal said. "Only Golden Boy isn't an exotic. Would Hal spin you wobbly, eh? He's just human, an alter, look at the book." He tapped it, offering.

"I'm not interested in any books, Hal," Stumblecat said. "An alter is exotic enough for the Marquis. And even if

you were right, well, the sad fact is we'd still want him. That much inside business is too tempting."

"You want to get your other arm crottled?" Crawney said. "Wrong? Then you'd better hum to us, Hal."

Hal did not move. But Mayliss did. She came around the table, grabbed him, shoved him towards them. "*Hal!*" she shrieked. "Hey, this is your *chance!* Only two of them, and Crawney never carries nothing, and Stumblecat is a clumsy stupid with his stick. *Take them!*" She pushed him again from behind.

And he hesitated, then whirled and slapped her hard. "You want to spin me cold, redhead," he said. "There might be more outside."

Mayliss pulled back, said nothing. Stumblecat and Crawney just watched and smiled. Janey frowned. "Hal," she said. "You can't give Golden Boy to the Marquis. You can't do that, Hal, she's right."

But Hal ignored her. "Golden Boy's gone now," he said, turning back to the two men. "He'll be back, straight spin! You can have him."

"We'll wait," Crawney said.

"Yes," said Stumblecat "And Hal, you haven't treated us very hospitably, you know."

Hal's lip trembled. "I—no, Hal will set you right. Drinks?"

"Later," said Stumblecat. "That wasn't what I had in mind." He walked over to Janey, reached out and stroked her hair. She shivered.

Hal looked at her. "Janey?" he said. "My Starlady? Will you...." But she was already gone, with Stumblecat, to the bedroom.

Crawney, not to be left out, took Mayliss.

* * *

They watched pink shadows run as the globe pulsed.
Two of them.

Alone together.

The insider had brought Golden Boy back at last, and the blackskulls who'd been outside had taken him. Mayliss had left too, packing all her things in silence. Now there was Hairy Hal and Starlady.

She sat there, calm, cold, and watched him and the shadows. This time Hal was crying.

"I can't, Janey," he said, over and over, in a broken voice. "I *can't*. He chills me, Starlady, and I've seen him with his stick. The no-knife, yes, it's a better weapon, quicker, cleaner. But *him*, the Marquis, he's too *good*. Probly Hairy Hal could've taken him, he thought he could've, one on one, no-knife against stingstick. No chance, though. An' now, Hal's all crottled. Marquis'll never face him anyhow."

"You're Hairy Hal," Janey said evenly. "If he could take Marquis once, you can take him now. You can't leave Golden Boy with him. You *can't*. I love Golden Boy."

Hal looked up, wincing. "Hey, Starlady," he said. "I'm spinning you straight. You want Hal cold?"

"If you won't do anything," she said. "Yes."

He shrugged. "I hum to you, Janey," he said suddenly, staring at her with something that was almost fear.

"Wonderful. But you'll never see me again." She stood up. "Give me your no-knife, Hal. If you won't try, I will."

"They'll kill you, Starlady, or worse. Root down an' listen. You won't even find the Marquis."

"Yes I will. And he'll face me one on one, too. You told me how, Hal. The Marquis is loud, remember? Well, me too. I'll stand in the middle of the Silver Plaza and shout for him until he comes. He can hardly have his blackskulls gang up on me then. If he did, who'd ever get chilled again? Will you give me the no-knife?"

"No," he said, stubborn. "You're wobbly."

“All right,” she replied, leaving.

* * *

Night-cycle in the Plaza, and the silver-shining overheads were out. The wall-lights provided a different illumination, winking through their color-phases, alternately dyeing the faces of the revellers blue or red or green or violet. The dancers were out in force, music was everywhere, and the air was thick with the sweet gaiety of joy-smoke.

On the polished stairway that curved up towards the second tier of shops, Starlady took her stand and began to spin.

“Hey,” she called to the throngs below her, to the people pushing by, “Hey, stop and listen to me spin. You won’t soon have the chance. The Marquis is going to kill me.”

Below, the off-worlders paused, curious, admiring. Whispers were exchanged. Prometheans shook their heads and grinned. And the swaggers in their swoopsuits, the redheads out to sell, the drooling dreamers and the men who doled out dreams, the pimps, the bodyguards, the dancers and the thieves—well, they knew what was going on. A show was coming. They stopped to watch.

And Starlady spun, Starlady with the shiny, dark hair, in a suit of milky nightwhite that took the colors of the lights, Starlady with a black rod in her hand.

“Marquis took my lover,” she shouted to the gathering crowd. “He chilled down Hal and stole the Golden Boy, but he hasn’t chilled down me.” And now the no-knife in her hand was alive, its ghost blade flickering strangely in the violet light. And Starlady was sheathed in purple, her face stained grim and somber.

“I’ll kill him if he comes,” she said, as they drew away around her, leaving her alone on the stairs. “Me, Starlady, and I’ve never used a no-knife in my life.” The Plaza was growing quiet, tension spread outward like ripples in a pool. Here the talking stopped, there the dancers ceased to whirl, over in the corner a joyman killed his smoke machine. “But he won’t come, not Marquis, and I’ll tell you why. He’s chilled.”

And now the light clicked over, and Starlady was a vision in green, the ghost blade a writhing bluish shadow. “You’ve seen him kill, starslummers,” she said, with a shake of emerald-dark hair. “And you’ve heard the wobbly spins, right? Marquis, who hums to pain. Marquis, Thisrock’s top ‘stick.” She threw back her head and laughed. Over on the far side of the Plaza, they were muting their music and drifting her way. “Well, think now, have you ever seen him *fight*? Without his blackskulls? Without Crawney—” she pointed, and a man with a shiny striped skull straightened and glared and rushed towards the nearest corridor— “and Stumblecat—” she whirled the other way and picked him out lounging against a food stall, and Stumblecat smiled and lifted his stingstick and waved— “to hold the arms of his victim?”

The light clicked again, and she was bright blue and glowing, and the no-knife was suddenly invisible. Now the Plaza was dead, still, captive to the Starlady. “No,” she shouted, “you haven’t, no one has. Straight spin! Remember what you see tonight, watch when the blackskulls come and take me, watch how they hold my arms when Marquis kills me, and remember how he was too chilled to come alone!”

A murmur went through the throng, and eyes lifted. And Starlady turned and smiled. Two blackskulls were coming down the stairs behind her, their faces hard chalk-blue. “See?” she told the crowd. “I spun you straight!”

Only then someone bounded out of the audience below, a yellow-faced youth with sparkling circles on his head and a glittery gold-flake swoopsuit. He took the stairs three at a time, past her, and a stingstick was in his fist. He waved it at the blackskulls. "No, no," he shouted, grinning. "No grabs, soursticks. I'm humming to a show."

The blackskulls drew their own sticks and prepared to take him. But then another swagger joined him, all aglow in dazzlesilk. And then a third, and a fourth with a wicked white nervelash. And others came running down behind them, sticks drawn.

Out in the plains of the Plaza, a dozen other blackskulls found themselves surrounded. The mob wanted Marquis.

And Starlady, shining crimson, stood and waited, and when she moved the red reflections flashed in her hair like liquid fire. Till another voice challenged hers.

"You spin a wobbly spin, Starlady," Hairy Hal said from the foot of the stairs. They'd gone for him, of course. By now the news had rippled far beyond the Silver Plaza. "Proably little Janey Small of Rhiannon hasn't seen the Marquis kill, but Hairy Hal has. He's *good*, redhead, an' Hal is going to watch while he teaches you how to scream."

Heads turned, people murmured. Hairy Hal, well, wasn't he her lover? No, the answers came, she never hummed to him, so maybe his hum's gone sour.

"There's Hairy Hal," Starlady called from her perch. "Hairy Hal the quiet pimp, but you ought to call him Chilly Hal. Ask Mayliss, and she'll tell you. Ask me, too, about Golden Boy and Hal."

Stumblecat, his stingstick sheathed, pushed his way forward and stood next to Hal. "Hal's just smart, Janey," he said smiling. "You, sadly, are not. Though you *are* pretty. Maybe the Marquis will let you live, and rent you out to nerve lash freaks."

Hal laughed, coarsely. "Yes. Hal could hum to that."

Her eyes flashed at him, as the red light flicked to gold. Then Marquis came.

He walked easily, gracefully, swinging his stingstick and smiling. His eyes were lost behind their dark ring. Crawney scrambled beside him, trying to keep up.

As if on signal, Stumblecat drew his stick and gestured. People pulled back, leaving a clear circle at the base of the stairway. A wall formed to keep onlookers out; blackskulls and Starlady's swaggers, working together.

Starlady descended, golden.

The ring closed around her. Inside was only Crawney, Stumblecat, the Marquis, and Hairy Hal. Plus her, plus Starlady. Or was it Janey Small, from Rhiannon?

The light went violet again. The Marquis smiled darkly, and Janey Small suddenly looked small indeed. She shifted her no-knife nervously from one hand to another, then back again.

As they advanced, Stumblecat sidled up to Hairy Hal. He grinned, and lifted his stingstick, and jabbed Hal very lightly in the chest. Pain sparkwheeled out, and Hal winced.

"Your no-knife, Hal," Stumblecat said. "On the ground."

"Hey, sure, Hal's on your side," he said. His good hand reached under the cape, came out again, and dropped a dead knife to the floor. "Straight spin, Stumblecat! Starlady needs a stinging, she never learned the rules, right?"

Stumblecat just smiled. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe that's what you think." He eyed Hal speculatively. His stingstick wandered under the corner of the cape, began to lift it. Then, suddenly, he glanced over at the Marquis, laughed, and changed his mind. Stumblecat put the stick away.

"They all saw me disarm you, Hal," he said, nodding.

Meanwhile Janey circled, holding her no-knife out clumsily, trying to keep the Marquis at bay. He hadn't moved yet. He just grinned at her and waved his stick, like a snake preparing for the strike.

When the light clicked from purple to green, she jumped, bringing the ghost blade down at his baton. One touch, cut it in half, and he was hers. She'd seen Hal do it oh, so often.

But the Marquis just flicked his stick back, blinking-quick, and her no-knife severed air. Then it whirled forward again, to brush her wrist. Janey screamed and pulled back. The no-knife rang upon the floor.

She backed away. The Marquis followed. "Not over, silly ship girl," he said to her softly, as she clutched her wrist. "I'm going to chill you good, and hurt you, and teach you how things work. Come to me, Starlady."

And he darted at her, his stick brushing one cheek. She screamed again, as an angry flush appeared. The Marquis had his stick set on maximum.

He was cornering her, advancing towards her, herding her toward the ring of stingsticks that kept the crowd away. As he drifted in, oh so slowly, the watchers pushed and shoved for better position, while inside the ring, Crawney and Stumblecat and Hairy Hal followed behind him.

Janey took one step too far backwards, came up against a stick, yelped, jumped forward again. The Marquis stroked her lovingly, down her side, and heard another scream.

She rushed at him then, tried to grab the stick, screamed again as she finally caught it and had to let it go. He gave her another swat as she rushed past, past him and Hal and Stumblecat, towards the fallen no-knife.

Marquis swiveled and started to follow. But Hal stepped beside him, then, and the Marquis shoved up against his cape.

And cried a gurgling cry.
And fell.

It was quite an ordinary kitchen knife sticking through Hal's cape. Beneath, clutching it and trembling, a crottled blackened hand.

By then, Janey had recovered her no-knife. She finished the Marquis as he lay there bleeding.

There were loud noises from the crowd. Stumblecat snarled and gestured, and suddenly the ring broke, the blackskulls began swinging their sticks and people shouted and shrieked and scattered. A few swaggers fought briefly before running. And Crawney was still standing open-mouthed while Stumblecat picked up Hal's no-knife, moved in behind him, and neatly slit his throat. There was only room for one emperor at a time.

In the center of chaos, Hal stood smiling. Janey knelt by the Marquis. "Hey, Starlady," Hal said. "We did it. I did it. Now we can get back an' buy our way down, an'..."

"I still don't have Golden Boy," she said coldly.

Stumblecat walked over and smiled down at her. "Ah, but you do. He doesn't seem to understand us. I think he had some sort of empathic link with you, or Hal, or both. Join us, Starlady, and you'll have him every night."

"*Hey!*" Hal said, angrily.

"All right," said Janey.

He looked at her shocked. "*Janey,*" he said. "You're spinning wobbly. I killed him for you, Starlady, my Starlady. Like you wanted."

"That's what Mayliss wanted, Hal," she said, standing. "I just wanted Golden Boy. And I'm going to have him. He's not like the rest of you. He's still clean, and kind, and I love him." She smiled.

"But," said Hal. "But, Starlady, Hal hums—I *love*, you. What about me?"

"What about you?" Starlady said.

And she went off with Stumblecat, to find her Golden Boy.

* * *

In the end, some of them were dead. The rest survived.

Fast-Friend

BRAND woke in darkness, trembling, and called out. His angel came to him.

She floated above him, smiling, on wings of soft gauze gold. Her face was all innocence, the face of a lovely girl-child, softness and light and wide amber eyes and honeyed hair that moved sinuously in free-fall. But her body was a woman's, smooth and slim and perfect; a toy woman fashioned on a smaller scale.

"Brand," she said, as she hovered above his sleep-web. "Will you show me the fast-friends today?"

He smiled up at her, his dreams fading. "Yes, angel," he said. "Yes, today, I'm sure of it. Now come to me."

But she moved back when he reached for her, coy, teasing. Her blush was a creeping tide of gold, and her hair danced in silken swirls. "Oh, Brand," she said. Then, as he cursed and reached to unsnap his web, she giggled at him and pouted. "You can't have me," she said, in her child's voice. "I'm too little."

Brand laughed, grabbed a nearby handbar to pull himself free of the web, then whipped himself around it toward the angel. He was good in free-fall, Brand; he'd had ten years of practice. But the angel had wings.

They flowed and rippled as she darted to one side, just beyond his reach. He twisted around in midair, so he hit the wall with his legs. Then, immediately, he kicked off again. The angel giggled and brushed him with her wings as he flew by. Brand hit the ceiling with a thump and groaned.

"Ooo," she said. "Brand, are you hurt?" And she was at his side, her wings beating quickly.

He grinned and put his arms around her. "No," he said, "but I've got you. Since when is my angel a tease, eh?"

“Oh, Brand,” she said. “I’m sorry. I was only playing. I was gonna come to you.” She was trying to look hurt, but despite her best efforts, a tiny smile escaped the corner of her mouth.

He pulled her to him, hard, and pressed her strange coolness against his own heat. This time there was no reluctance. Her delicate hands went behind him, to hold him tight while he kissed her.

Floating, nude, they joined, and Brand felt the soft caress of wings.

* * *

When they were finished, Brand went to his locker to dress. The angel hovered nearby, her wings barely moving, her small breasts still flushed with gold.

“You’re so *pretty*,” she told him, as he pulled on a dull black coverall. “Why do you hide, Brand? Why can’t you stay like me, so I can see you?”

“A human thing, angel,” he said, hardly listening to her chatter. He’d heard it all before. His boots made a metallic click as they pulled him to the floor.

“You’re beautiful, Brand,” the angel murmured, but he only nodded at her. Only angels said that of him. Brand was close to thirty, but he looked older; lines on a wide forehead, thin lips set in a too-characteristic frown, dark eyes under heavy eyebrows, and hair that curled tight against his scalp in sculptured ringlets.

When he was dressed, he paused briefly, then opened a lockbox welded to the locker wall. Inside was his pendant. He took it out and stared. The disc filled his hand, a coolness of polished black crystal with a myriad of tiny silver flakes locked within. The pale silver chain it hung from

curled up and away, and floated in the air like a metal snake.

He remembered then how it had been, in the old days, under gravity. The chain was heavy then, and the crystal stone had a solid heft to it. Yet he'd worn it always, as Melissa had worn its twin. And he wanted to wear it now, but it was such a nuisance in free-fall. Without weight, it refused to hang neatly around his neck; instead it bobbed about constantly.

Finally, sighing, he slipped the chain over his head, pulled the crystal tight against his neck, then twisted the chain and doubled it over again and again. When he was finished the stone was secure, now more a choker than a pendant. It was uncomfortable. But it was the best he could do.

The angel watched him in silence, trembling a little. She'd seen him handle the black crystal before. Sometimes he'd sit in his sleep-web for hours, the stone floating above him. He'd stare into its depths, at the frozen dance of the silver flecks, and his face would grow dark, his manner curt. She avoided him then, lest he scold her.

But now he was wearing it.

"Brand," the angel said as he went toward the door panel. "Brand, can I come with you?"

He hesitated. "Later, angel," he said. "When the fast-friends come, I'll call you, as I promised. Right now you stay down here and rest, all right?" He forced a smile.

She pouted. "All right," she said.

Outside was a short corridor of gray metal, brightly lit; the sealed airlock to the engine compartment capped one end, the bridge door the other. A few other closed panels broke the spartan bleakness: cargo holds, screen generators, Robi's room, Brand ignored them, and proceeded straight to the bridge.

Robi was strapped in before the main console, studying the banks of viewscreens and scanners with a bored expression. She was a short, round woman, with high cheekbones and green eyes and brown hair cut space short. Long hair was just trouble in free-fall. The angel had long hair, of course, but she was just an angel.

Robi favored him with a wary smile as he entered. Brand did not return it. He was a solo by nature; only circumstances had forced him to take on a partner, so he could complete the conversion of his ship. Her funds had paid for the new screens he'd installed.

He moved to the second control chair and strapped himself down, his expression businesslike. "I'll take over," he said. Then he paused, and blinked. "The course has been altered," he stated. He looked at her.

"A swarm of blinkies," Robi said, trying her smile again. "I changed the program. They're not far out of our way. A half-hour standard, maybe."

Brand sighed. "Look, Robi," he said, "this isn't a trap run." His hands moved over the controls, putting new patterns on most of the scanners. "We're not bounty hunting, remember? We're going to the stars, and coming back. No detours."

Robi looked annoyed. "Brand, I sold my *Unicorn* to invest in this scheme of yours. A bounty or two would be nice, in case the gimmick doesn't work, you know. And we're going out to the Changling Jungle anyway, so we might as well bring a dark or two with us, if we can trap some. That swarm is right on top of us, nearly. A couple darks have got to be nearby. So what's the harm?"

"No," Brand said, as he wiped off the program she'd fed into the ship's computer. "We're too close to fool around." He checked the console, reprogramming, compensating for the swerve she'd fed in. The newly christened *Chariot* was two weeks out from the orbital docks

on Triton, where she'd been overhauled. A few short hours ahead, out toward the dark, the Changling Jungle swung around the distant sun, a man-made trojan to Pluto.

"You're being stubborn and unreasonable," Robi told him. "What do you have against money, anyway?"

Brand didn't look up. "Nothing. The idea will work. I'll have all the money I need then. So will you. Why don't you just go back to your room, and dream about how rich you're going to be."

She snorted, spun her chair around, unstrapped, and kicked off savagely. If it had been possible to slam a sliding panel door, she would have done that too.

Brand, alone, finished his reprogramming. He hardly thought twice about the argument. Robi and he had been arguing since they'd left Triton; about bounties, about the angel, about him. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered, nothing but his idea, the Jungle ahead, and stars.

A few hours, that was all. They'd find fast-friends near the Jungle. Always there were fast-friends near the Jungle. And somehow, Brand knew he'd find Melissa.

Unconsciously, his hand had gone to his neck. Slowly, slowly, he stroked the cool dark crystal.

* * *

Once they'd dreamed of stars together.

It was a common dream. Earth was teeming, civilized, dull; time and technology had homogenized it. What romance there was left was all in space. Thousands lived under the domes of Luna now. On Mars, terraforming projects were in full swing, and new immigrants flooded Lowelltown and Bradbury and Burroughs City every day. There was a lab on Mercury, toehold colonies on Ceres, Ganymede, Titan. And out at the Komarov Wheel, the third

starship was a-building. The first was twenty years gone, with a crew who knew they'd die on board so their children could walk another world.

Yes, it was a common dream.

But they were most uncommon dreamers.

And they were lucky. They were born at the right time. They were still children when the Hades Expedition, bound for Pluto, came upon the blinkies. Then the darks came upon the Hades Expedition.

Twelve men had died, but Brand felt only a child's thrill, a delicious shiver.

Three years later, he and Melissa had followed the news avidly when the Second Hades Expedition, the lucky one, the one with the first primitive energy screens, made its astonishing discoveries. And a crewman named Chet Adams became immortal.

He remembered a night. They'd walked hand in hand, up a winding outside staircase atop one of the city's tallest towers. The lights, the glaring ceaseless lights, were mostly below. They could see the stars, sort of. Brand, a younger, smooth-faced Brand with long curling hair, wrapped his arm around Melissa and gestured.

Up. At the sky.

"You know what this *means*?" he said. The news had just come back from Hades II; dreamers were everywhere. "We can have the stars now. All of them. We won't have to die on a starship, or settle down on Mars. We're not trapped."

Melissa, whose hair was reddish gold, laughed and kissed him.

"You think they'll find out how it's done? How the darks go ftl?"

Brand just hugged her and kissed her back. "Who cares? I suppose ftl ships would be nice. But hell, we can

have more now. We can be like *him*, like Adams, and the stars can all be ours."

Melissa nodded. "Why fly an airplane, right? If you could be a bird?"

For five long years they loved, and dreamed of stars. While the Changling Jungle swelled, and the fast-friends sailed the void.

* * *

Robi returned to the bridge just as Brand activated the main viewscreen. Surprise flashed across her face. She looked at him and smiled. Above, the picture was alive with a million tiny lights, pinpoints of sparkling green and crimson and blue and yellow and a dozen other colors. Not stars, no; they shifted and danced mindlessly, constantly, blinking on and off like fireflies and making the scanners *ping* whenever they touched the ship.

She floated herself to her chair, strapped down. "You kept my course," she said, pleased. "I'm sorry I got so angry." She put a hand on his arm.

Brand shook it off. "Don't give me any credit. We're dead on. The blinkies came to us."

"Oh," she said. "I might have known."

"They're all around us," he said. "A huge swarm. I'd guess a couple cubic miles, at least."

Robi looked again. The viewscreen was thick with blinkies in constant motion. The stars, those white lights that stood still, could hardly be seen. "We're going right into the swarm," she said.

Brand shrugged. "It's in our way."

Robi leaned forward, spread her hands over the instruments, punched in a few quick orders. Seconds later, a

line of flashing red print began to run across the face of her scanner. She looked up at Brand accusingly. "You didn't even check," she said. "Darks, three of them."

"This is not a trap run," Brand said, unemotionally.

"If they come right up to us and ask to be trapped, I suppose you'll tell them to go away? Besides, they could eat right through us."

"Hardly. The safe-screen is up."

Robi shook her head without comment. The darks would avoid a ship with its safe-screen up. So, naturally, you couldn't trap them that way. But Brand wasn't trapping this time.

"Look," Brand said.

The viewscreen, suddenly, was empty again; just a scattering of stars and two or three lost blinkies winking a lonely message in blue and red. The swarm was gone. Then, with equal speed, it came into sight again. Far off, growing smaller; a fast-receding fog of light.

Brand locked the viewer on it; Robi upped the scopes to max magnification. The fog expanded until it filled the screen.

The blinkies were fleeing, running from their enemies, running faster than the *Chariot* or any man-built ship had ever gone or could ever hope to go, unaided. They were moving at something close to light-speed; after all, they were mostly light themselves, just a single cell and a microscopic aura of energy that gave off short, intense bursts of visible radiation.

Despite the lock, despite the scopes, the viewscreen was deserted less than a second after the blinkies began to run. They'd gone too far, too fast.

Robi started to say something, then stopped. Instead she reached out and touched Brand by the elbow, squeezing sharply. Up in the viewscreen, the stars had begun to dim.

You can't see a dark, not really, but Brand knew how they looked, and he'd seen them often enough in his imagination and his dreams. They were bigger than the blinkies, vastly bigger, almost as big as a man; pulsing globes of dark energy, seldom radiating into the visible spectrum, seen only by the drifting flakes of living matter trapped within their spheres.

But they did things to the light passing through them: they made the stars waver and dim.

As they were dimming now, up on the screen. Brand watched closely. Briefly, oh so briefly, he thought he saw a flash of silver as a flake of darkstuff caught the tired sunlight and lost it again. The old fear woke and clutched at his stomach. But the dark was keeping its distance; their safe-screens were up.

Robi looked over at Brand. "It's begging," she said, "it's practically begging. Let's drop screens and trap it. What's the harm?"

Brand's face was cold. Irrational terror swirled within him. "It knows," he said, hardly thinking. "It didn't go after the blinkies. It senses something different about us. I tell you, it knows."

She gave him a curious stare. "What's wrong with you?" she asked. "It's only a dark. Come on. Let me trap it."

Brand mastered himself, though the fear was alive and walking, the Hades fear, the trapper's companion. Creatures of energy, the darks ate matter. Like the blinkies they swept clean the scattered dust and gas on the fringes of solar space. And they moved through blinkie swarms like scythes, carving tunnels of blackness in those living seas of light. And, when they found a lonely chunk of nickel-iron spinning through the void, that too was food. Matter to energy, converted in a blinding silent flash. An incandescent feast.

A hundred times Brand had faced the fear, when he sat before his computer and prepared to drop his screens. When the ship was naked, when the screens were down, then only the mindless whim of the dark said if a trapper lived or died. If the dark came slow, moving in leisurely towards its sluggish steel meal, then the trapper won. Once the dark was in range, the safe-screens would blink on again, covering the ship like a second skin. And, further out, the trapping screens would form a globe. The dark would be a prisoner.

But if the dark moved *quickly*....

Well, the blinkies ran at light-speed. The darks fed on the blinkies. The darks ran faster.

If the dark moved quickly, there was no way, no defense, no hope that man or woman or computer could raise the screens in time. A lot of trappers died that way. The First Hades Expedition, screenless, had been holed in a dozen places.

"Let me trap it," Robi said again. Brand just looked at her. Like him, she was a trapper. She'd beaten the fear as often as he had, and she had luck. Still, maybe this time that luck would change.

He unstrapped, pulled himself up, and stood looking down on her. "No," he said. "It's not worth the risk. We're too close. Leave the dark alone. And don't change course, you hear, not five feet. I'm going down to angel."

"Brand!" Robi said. "Damn you. And don't bring that thing up here, you understand? And...." But he was gone, silently, ignoring her.

She turned back to the viewscreen and, frustrated, watched the dark.

* * *

Asleep, awake, it never mattered. The vision would come to him all the same. Call it dream, color it memory.

There were four of them, inside Changling Station, on the wheel of rebirth. It was a doughnut, the Station; brightly lit, screened. Around it, in all directions, ships—trapper ships with their catch, bait ships hauled by timid trappers, supply ships out from Triton, couriers from Earth and Mars and Luna with commissions for the fast-friends. And derelicts. Hundreds of ill-fit hulks, holed, abandoned, empty, filling up the Jungle like hunks of cold steel garbage.

Between the ships moved the fast-friends.

The airlock where they donned their spacesuits had had a window in it; it was a large, empty chamber, a good place for long looks and last thoughts. Brand and Melissa and a fat blonde girl named Canada Cooper had stood there together, looking out on the Jungle and the fast-friends. Canada had laughed. “I thought they’d be different,” she said. “They look just like people, silly naked people standing out in space.”

And they did. A few stood on the hulls of derelicts, but most of them were just floating in the void, pale against the starlight, small and stern and awesome. Melissa counted fourteen.

“Hurry up,” the government man had said. Brand hardly remembered what he looked like, but he remembered the voice, the hard flat voice that whipped them all the way out from Earth. They were the candidates, the chosen. They’d held to their dream, they’d passed all the tests, and they were twenty. That was the optimal age for a successful merger, the experts said. Some experts. Adams, the first-merged, had been nearly thirty.

He remembered Melissa as she put on her suit, slim and clean in a white coverall zipped low, with her crystal pendant hanging between her gold-tan breasts in the imitation gravity of the spinning Station. Her hair was tightly

bound. She'd kept it long, her red-blond glory, to wear between the stars.

They kissed just before they put on helmets.

"Love you," she said. "Love you always." And he repeated it back to her.

Then they were outside, them and Canada and the government man, walking on the skin of Changling Station, looking down into the Pit. The arena, the hole in the doughnut, the energy-screened center of the whole thing, the place where dreams came true.

Brand, young Brand, looked down at where he'd have to go, and smiled. There was nothing below but stars. He'd fall forever, but he didn't mind. They'd share the stars together.

"You first," the government man said to Melissa. She radioed a kiss to Brand, and kicked off toward the Pit.

She didn't get far. There were darks in there, three of them, trapped and imprisoned. Once she was beyond the screens, one came for her. The sight was burned deep in Brand's memory. One moment there was only Melissa, suited, floating away from him towards the far side of the Station. Then light.

Sudden, instantaneous, quick-dying. A flash, nothing more. Brand knew that. But his memory had elaborated on the moment. In his dreams, it was more prolonged; first her suit flared and was gone and she threw back her head to scream, then her clothes flamed into brilliance, and lastly, lastly, the chain and its crystal. She was naked, wreathed in fire, adrift among the stars. She no longer breathed.

But she lived.

A symbiote of man and dark, a thing of matter and energy, an alien, a changling, a reborn creature with the mind of a human and the speed of a dark. Melissa no longer.

Fast-friend.

He ached to join her. She was smiling at him, beckoning. There was a dark waiting for him, too. He would join it, merge. Then, together, he and Melissa would run, faster than the starships, faster than light, out, out. The galaxy would be theirs. The universe, perhaps.

But the government man held his arm. "Her next," he said. Fat Canada kicked free of the place where they stood, hardly hesitating. She knew the risks, like them, but she was a dreamer too. They'd tested and traveled with her, and Brand knew her boundless optimism.

She floated towards Melissa, chunky in her oversize suit, and reached out her hand. Her radio was on. Brand remembered her voice. "Hey," she said, "mine's slow. A slow dark, imagine!"

She laughed. "Hey, little darkie, where are you? Hey, come to mama. Come and merge, little..."

Then, loudly, a short scream, cut off before it started.

And Canada exploded.

The flash was first, of course. But this time, afterwards, no fast-friend. She'd been rejected. Three-quarters of all candidates for merger were rejected. They were eaten instead. Except, this time, the dark hadn't enveloped her cleanly. If it had, then, after the instant of conversion, nothing would have been left.

But this dark had just sheared her off above the waist. Her legs spun wildly after the explosion of violent depressurization. Her blood flash-froze.

It was only there for a second, less than a heartbeat, a pause between breaths. Then another flash, and emptiness. Just Melissa again, her smile suddenly gone, still waiting.

"Too bad," the government man had said. "She did well on the tests. You're next."

Brand was looking across at Melissa, and the stars behind her. But his vision was gone. Instead he saw Canada.

“No,” he’d said. For the first time ever, the fear was on him.

Afterwards he went down into the Station and threw up. When he dreamt, he woke up trembling.

* * *

Brand left Robi with her dark, and sought the comfort of his angel.

She was waiting for him, as always, smiling and eager for his company, a soft-winged woman-child. She was playing in the sleep-web when he entered, singing to herself. She flew to him at once.

He kissed her, hard, and she wrapped her wings around him, and they tumbled laughing through the cabin. In her embrace, his fears all faded. She made him feel strong, confident, conquering. She worshiped him, and she was passionate, more passionate even than Melissa.

And she fit. Like the fast-friends, she was a creature of the void. Under gravity, her wings could never function, and she’d die within a month. Even in free-fall, angels were short-lived. She was his third, bred by the bio-engineers of the Jungle who knew what a trapper would pay for company. It didn’t matter.

They were clones, and all alike, more than twins in their delicate sexy inhuman angelic simplicity.

Death was not a threat to their love. Nor fights. Nor desertion. When Brand relaxed within her arms, he knew she’d always be there.

Afterwards, they lay nude and lazy in the sleep-web. The angel nibbled at his ear, and giggled, and stroked him with soft hands and softer wings. “What are you thinking, Brand?” she asked.

“Nothing, angel. Don’t worry yourself.”

“Oh, *Brand*.” She looked very cross.

He couldn’t help smiling. “All right then. I was thinking that we’re still alive, which means Robi left the dark alone.”

The angel shivered and hugged him. “Ooo. You’re scaring me, Brand. Don’t talk of dying.”

He played with her hair, still smiling. “I told you not to worry. I wouldn’t let you die, angel. I promised to show you the fast-friends, remember? And stars, too. We’re going to the stars today, just like the fast-friends do.”

The angel giggled, happy again. She was easy to please. “Tell me about the fast-friends,” she said.

“I’ve told you before.”

“I know. I like to hear you talk, Brand. And they sound so *pretty*.”

“They are, in a way. They’re cold, and they’re not human anymore, but they are pretty sometimes. They move fast. Somehow they can punch through to another kind of space, where the laws of nature are different, a fifth dimension or hyperspace or what-you-will, and...”

But the angel’s face showed no comprehension. Brand laughed, and paused. “No, you wouldn’t understand those terms, of course. Well, call it a fairyland, angel. The fast-friends have a lot of power in them, like the darks do, and they use this power, this magic, for a trick they have, so they can go faster than light. Now, there’s no way we can go faster than light without this trick, you see.”

“Why?” she asked. She smiled an innocent smile.

“Hmmm. Well, that’s a long story. There was a man named Einstein who said we couldn’t, angel, and he was a *very* smart man, and...”

She hugged him. “I bet *you* could go faster than light, Brand, if you wanted.” Her wings beat, and the web rocked gently.

“Well, I want to,” he said. “And that’s just what we’re going to try to do now, angel. You must be smarter than you look.”

She hit him. “I’m *awful* smart,” she said, pouting.

“Yes,” he laughed. “I didn’t mean it. I thought you wanted to hear about the fast-friends?”

Suddenly she was apologetic again. “Yes.”

“All right. Remember, they have this trick, like I said. Now we know they can move matter—that’s, well, solid stuff, angel, like the ship and me and you, but it’s also gas and water, you see. Energy is different. The darks are mostly energy, with only little flakes of matter. But the fast-friends are more balanced. A lot of smart men think that if they could examine a dark they could figure out this trick, and then we could build ships that went fast too. But nobody has been able to figure how to examine a dark, since it is nearly all energy and nearly impossible to hold in one place, you see?”

“Yes,” the angel lied, looking very solemn.

“Anyway, the fast-friends not only move energy and little flakes of matter, they also move what once were the bodies of the human members of the symbiosis. You don’t understand that, do you? Hell, this is... ah, well, just listen. The fast-friends can only move themselves, and whatever else they can fit inside their energy sphere, or aura. Think of it as a baggy cloak, angel. If they can’t stuff it under their cloak, they can’t take it with them.”

She giggled, the idea of a baggy cloak evidently appealing to her.

Brand sighed. “So, the fast-friends are sort of our messengers. They fly out to the stars for us, real fast, and they tell us which suns have planets, and where we can find worlds that are good to live on. And they’ve found ships out there, too, in other systems, from other kinds of beings who aren’t men and aren’t fast-friends either, and they carry

messages so that we can learn from each other. And they keep us in touch with our starships, too, by running back and forth. Our ships are still real slow, angel. We've launched at least twenty by now, but even the first one hasn't gotten where it's going yet."

"The fast-friends caught it, didn't they?" the angel interrupted. "You told me. I remember."

"Yes, angel," he said. "I don't have to tell you how surprised those people were. A lot of them were the sons and daughters of people who'd left Earth, and when their parents left there were no fast-friends, and they hadn't even found out about the blinkies yet, or the darks. But now the fast-friends keep all the ships in touch by running back and forth with messages and even small packages and such. Once we have colonies, they'll link them too."

"But they're crippled," angel prompted.

"For all their speed," Brand continued, smiling, "the fast-friends are strangely crippled. They can't land on any of the planets they sail by; the gravity wells are deadly to them. And they don't even like to go in much further than the orbit of Saturn, or its equivalent, because of the sun. The darks and the blinkies never do, and the fast-friends have to force themselves. So that's one drawback.

"Also, frankly, a lot of men want to travel faster than light themselves. They want to build ships and start colonies. So whoever finds a way to do what the fast-friends do, so that regular men can do it without having to merge and maybe die, well, they'll make a lot of money. And be famous. And have stars."

"You'll do it, Brand," the angel said.

"Yes," he said. His voice was suddenly serious. "That, angel, is why we're here."

* * *

“No.”

The word had haunted him, its echoes rolling through his dreams. He'd thrown away his stars, and his Melissa.

He couldn't force himself to go back to Earth. Melissa was gone, off to the stars on her first commission, but he loved her still. And the dream still gripped him tightly. Yet he would not get another chance. There were more candidates than darks, and he'd failed his final test.

He worked in Changling Station for a while, then signed on a supply run from Triton to the Jungle and learned to run a ship. In two years, he saved a substantial amount. He borrowed the rest, outfitted a derelict drifting in the Jungle, and became a trapper.

The plan was clear then. The government wouldn't give him another chance, but he could make his own. He'd prowl until he found a dark, then trap it. Then he'd go outside and merge. And he'd join Melissa after all. Brand, fast-friend. Yes, he would have his stars.

A good trapper could support himself in fine style on four catches a year. On six he gets rich. Brand was not yet a good trapper, and there were months of fruitless, lonely search. The blackness was brightened only by the far-off lights of distant blinkie swarms, and the firmness of his vision, and Melissa.

She used to come to him, in the early days, when she wasn't out among the stars. He'd be on his tedious prowl when suddenly his scanners would flash red, and she'd be there, floating outside the ship, smiling at him from the main viewscreen. And he'd open the airlock and cycle her in.

But even in the best days after, the very early ones, it wasn't the same. She couldn't drink with him, or eat. She didn't need to; she was a fast-friend now, and she lived on stardust and blinkies and junk, converting them to energy even as a dark did.

She could survive in an atmosphere, and talk and function, but she didn't like it. It was unpleasant. The ship was cramped, and it was a strain to keep her aura in check, to keep from converting the molecules of the air that pressed on her from every side.

The first time, when she'd come to him in Changling Station, Brand had pulled her lithe body hard against him and kissed her. She had not resisted. But her flesh was cold, her tongue a spear of ice when it touched his. Later, stubborn, he'd tried to make love to her. And failed.

Soon they gave up trying. When she came to his ship in those months of hunt, he only held her hard, slick hand, and talked to her.

"It's just as well, Brand," she told him once, in those early days. "I wanted to make love to you, yes, for your sake. I'm *changed*, Brand. You have to understand. Sex is like food, you know. It's a human thing. I'm not really interested in that now. You'll see, after you merge. But don't worry. There are other things out there, things that make it all worthwhile. The stars, love. You should see the stars. I fly between them, and, and... oh, Brand, it's glorious! How could I tell you? You have to feel it. When I fly, when I punch through, everything changes. Space isn't black anymore, it's a sea of color, swirling all around me, splashing against me, and I'm streaking right through it. And the *feeling*! It's like... like an orgasm, Brand, but it goes on and on and on, and your whole body sings and feels it, not just one little part of you. You're *alive*! And there are things out there, things only the fast-friends know. What we tell the humans, that's only a little bit, the bit they can understand. There's so much more. There's music out there, Brand, only it isn't music. And sometimes you can hear something calling, far away, from the core stars. I think the call gets stronger the more you fly. That's where the first-merged went, you know, Adams or whatever his human name was. That's why the

older fast-friends sometimes vanish. They say it's wearying after a while, playing messenger for the humans. Then the fast-friends go away, to the core stars. Oh, Brand, I wish you were with me. It would be the way we dreamed. Hurry, love, catch your dark for me."

And Brand, though strange chills went through him, nodded and said he would.

And finally he did.

For the second time the fear came. Brand watched his scanners as they shrieked of dark proximity. Five times his finger paused over the button that would kill his safe-screens. Five times it moved back. He kept seeing Canada again, her legs a-spin. And he thought of the Hades I.

Finally, his mind on Melissa, he forced the button down. The dark came slowly. No need to hurry, after all. This was no light-fast blinkie swarm; just dead metal creeping through the void.

Brand, relieved, trapped it. But as he put on his spacesuit, the fear hit again.

He fought it. Oh, he fought it. For an hour he stood in the airlock, trembling, trying to put on his helmet and failing. His hands were shaking, and he threw up twice. Finally, slumped and beaten in the fouled lock, he knew the truth. He would never merge.

He took his catch back to the Changling Jungle for a bounty. The Station offered its standard fee, but there was another bidder, a middle-aged man who'd run an old supply ship out here on his own. As dozens did each year. Brand sold the dark to him, to this hopeful, unqualified, test-failing visionary. And Brand watched him die.

Another derelict, abandoned, joined the Jungle, floating in a crowded orbit with all the other hulks, the debris of other dreams.

Brand sold his dark again, to Changling Station. A month later, when Melissa returned, he told her. He'd

expected tears, a storm, a fight. But she just looked at him, strangely unmoved. Then he asked her to come back to him.

"Maybe we can go back to Earth," he said. "We'll stay in orbit, and the scientists can look at you. They might be able to un-merge you, or something. They'll certainly welcome the opportunity. Maybe you can tell them how to build ftl ships. But we'll be together." His words were a child's hopeful gush.

"No," Melissa had said, simply. "You don't understand. I'd die first."

"You said you loved me. Stay with me."

"Oh, Brand. I did love you. But I won't give up the stars. They're my love now, my life, my everything. I'm a fast-friend, Brand, and you're only a human. Things are different now. If you can't merge, go back to Earth. That's the place for men, for you. The stars belong to us now."

"*No!*" He shouted it to keep from weeping. "I'll stay out here then, and trap. I love you, Melissa. I'll stay by you."

Very briefly, she looked sad. "I'll visit you, I guess," she said. "When I have time, if you want me."

And so she did. But as the years went by, the visits came less often. Brand, more and more, hardly knew her. Her gold-tan body turned pale, though it kept the shape of a twenty-year-old while he aged. Her streaming red-blonde hair became a silvered white, and her eyes grew distant. Often, when she was with him in orbit near the Jungle, she wasn't there at all. She talked of things he could not understand, of fast-friends he did not know, of actions beyond his comprehension. And he bored her now, with his news of Earth and men.

Finally the talk stopped. There was nothing left but memories then, for Melissa did not come at all.

* * *

Robi rang him on the intercom, and Brand dressed quickly. "Now," the angel said eagerly. "Can I come now?"

"Yes," he told her, smiling again his fond, indulgent smile. "I'll show you the fast-friends now, angel. And then I'll take you to the stars!"

She flew behind him, through the panel, up the corridor, into the bridge.

Robi looked up as they entered. She did not look happy. "You don't listen, do you? I don't want your pet on the bridge, Brand. Can't you keep your perversions in your cabin?"

The angel quailed at the displeasure in Robi's voice. "She doesn't like me," she said to Brand, scared.

"Don't worry, angel, I'm here," he replied. Then, to Robi, "You're scaring her. Keep quiet. I promised to show her the fast-friends."

Robi glared at him, and hit the viewscreen stud. It flared back to life. "There, then," she said savagely.

The *Chariot* was in the middle of the jungle. Brand, counting quickly, saw a good dozen derelicts nearby. Changling Station was low in one corner of the screen, surrounded by trapper ships and screens. Near the center was a larger wheel, the spoked and spinning supply station Hades IV, with its bars and pleasure havens.

Floating close to Hades, a group of fast-friends were clustered, six at least, still small and white at this distance. There were others visible, but they were closest. They were talking, even in the hard vacuum of the solar fringe; with a simple act of will, the fast-friends could force their dark aura up in the range of the visible spectrum. Their language was one of lights.

Robi already had the *Chariot* headed toward them. Brand nodded toward the angel, and pointed. "Fast-friends," he said.

The angel squealed and flew to the viewscreen, pressing her nose against it. "They're so *little*," she said as she hovered there, her wings beating rapidly.

"Increase the magnification," Brand told Robi. When she ignored him, he strapped down beside her and did it himself. The cluster of fast-friends doubled in size, and the angel beamed.

"We'll be right on top of them in five minutes," Brand said. Robi pretended not to hear.

"I don't know about you, Brand," she said in a low serious voice, so the angel would not hear. "Most of the men who buy sex toys like that are sick, or crippled, or impotent. Why you? You seem normal enough. Why do you need an angel, Brand? What's wrong with a woman?"

"Angels are easier to live with," Brand snapped. "And they do what they're told. Stop prying and get on the signal lights. I want to talk to our friends out there."

Robi scowled. "Talk? Why? Let's just scoop them up, there's enough of them there...."

"No. I want to find one, a special one. Her name was Melissa."

"Hmpf," Robi said. "Angels and fast-friends. You ought to try having a relationship with a human being once in a while, Brand. Just for a change of pace, you understand." But she readied the signal lights as she talked.

And Brand called, out across the void. One of the fast-friends responded. Then vanished. "She'll come," Brand said firmly, as they waited. "Even now, she'll come."

Meanwhile the angel was flitting excitedly around the bridge, touching everything she could reach. Normally she was not allowed up here.

"Calm down," Brand told her. She flew down to him, happy, and curled up in his lap.

"What are the fast-friends doing?" she asked, with her arms around him. "Are they going to tell us their trick, Brand? Are we going to the stars yet?"

"Soon, angel," he said patiently. "Soon."

Then Melissa was there, caught in the viewscreen. Brand felt a chill go through him.

Her skin was milk-white now, her hair a halo of streaming silver. But otherwise she was the same. She had the firm curves of a twenty-year-old, and the face that Brand remembered.

He shooed the angel from his lap, and turned to the console. He hit some buttons.

Outside, the stars began to flicker. The bright dot of the distant sun dimmed. The hulks of the Jungle, the Hades wheel, Changling Station; all darkened slightly. Only Melissa and the other fast-friends were unchanged.

Caught within the globe.

Robi smiled, and started to speak. Brand silenced her with a look. His signal lights called Melissa. When she acknowledged, he cut the safe-screens to let her through.

He met her in the corridor after the airlock had cycled her in. Robi stayed up on the bridge.

They stood ten feet apart. They did not touch or smile.

"Brand," Melissa said at last. She studied him with ice-blue eyes, from a cold and steady face, and her voice had a husky quality he had not remembered. "You... what are you doing? We are not... not darks. To be trapped." Her speech stumbled and halted awkwardly.

"Have you forgotten how to talk, Melissa?" Brand said. As he spoke, the bridge panel slid open behind him. The angel flew out and hovered.

"Oh," she said to Melissa. "You're *pretty*."

The fast-friend's eyes flicked to her quickly, then dismissed her and went back to Brand. "Some, I've forgotten. Ten years, Brand. With stars, the stars. Not... *I'm* not a human now. I'm elder now, an elder fast-friend. My... my call comes soon." She paused. "Why have you screened us?"

"A new kind of screen, Melissa," Brand said, smiling. "Didn't you notice? It's *dark*. A refinement, just developed back on Earth. They've been doing a lot of screen research, and I've been following it. I had an idea, love, but the old screens were no good. This kind, well, it's more sophisticated. And I'm the first one to realize the implications."

"Sophisticated. Implications." The words sounded odd, foreign, alien on Melissa's tongue. Her face looked lost.

"We're going to the stars together, Melissa."

"Brand," she replied. For a moment her voice had an almost-human tremor. "Give it up, Brand. Give up... me. And stars. They... they're old dreams, and they've gone sour on you. See? Can't you see?"

The angel was swooping up and down the corridor, coming closer to Melissa each time, clearly fascinated by the fast-friend, but afraid to come too close. They both ignored her.

Brand was looking at Melissa, at the dim, far-off reflection of a girl who'd loved him once. He shook it away. She was just a fast-friend, and he'd get his stars from her.

"You can take me to the stars, Melissa, and other men after me. It's time you fast-friends shared your universe with us poor humans."

"A drive?" she asked.

"You might..."

But the angel interrupted him. "Oh, let me, Brand. Let me tell her. I know how. You told me. I remember. Let me

talk to the fast-friend.” She’d stopped her wild circles, and was floating eager between them.

Brand grinned. “All right. Tell her.”

The angel spun in the air, smiling. Her wings beat quickly to underscore her words. “It’s like horses,” she told Melissa. “The darks are like horses, Brand said, and the fast-friends are like horses with riders. But he’s got the first chariot, and the fast-friends will pull him.” She giggled. “Brand showed me a picture of a chariot. And a horse too.”

“A star chariot,” Brand said. “I like the image. Oh, it’s a cartoon analogy, of course, but the math is sound. You can transport matter. Enough of you, locked into a dark screen, can transport a ship this size.”

Melissa floated, staring, shaking her head slowly back and forth. Her silver hair shimmered. “Stars,” she said softly. “Brand, the core... the songs. Freedom, Brand. Like we used to talk. Brand, they won’t... no running... they won’t let us go... can’t *chain* us.”

“I have.”

And the angel, emboldened by Melissa’s sudden stillness, flew up beside her. In a childish, tentative way, she reached out to touch, and found the phantom solid. Melissa, her eyes on Brand, put an arm around her. The angel smiled and sighed and moved closer.

Brand shook his head.

And the angel suddenly looked up, childish pique washing across her face. “You fooled me,” she said to Brand. “She’s not a horse. She’s a person.” Then, brightly, she smiled again. “And she’s so *pretty*.”

There was a long, long silence.

* * *

The bridge panel slid shut behind him. Robi was waiting. "Well?" she asked.

Wordlessly Brand kicked himself across the room, strapped down, and looked up at the viewscreen. Out in the darkness, in the screen-dimmed gloom, Melissa had rejoined the other fast-friends. They spoke with staccato bursts of color. Brand watched briefly, then reached up to the console and hit a button.

The stars flared cold and bright, and the flanks of Hades shone.

Before Robi had a chance to speak the fast-friends had vanished, spinning space around them, moving faster than the *Chariot* ever would. Only Melissa lingered, and only for a second. Then emptiness, and the derelicts around them.

"Brand!"

He smiled at her, and shrugged. "I couldn't do it. We would never have been able to let them outside the screens. They'd be animals, draft animals, prisoners." He looked sheepish. "I guess they're not. Not people either, though, not anymore. Well, we always wanted to meet an alien race. How could we guess that we'd create one?"

"Brand," Robi said. "Our investment. We have to go through with it. Maybe we can use darks?"

He shook his head. "No. We couldn't get them to understand what we wanted. No. Fast-friends or... nothing, I guess."

He paused, and looked at her. She was staring up at the viewscreen, with an expression that shrieked disgust and exasperation. "I'll make it up to you," Brand said. He took her hand, gently. "We'll trap. We're well equipped."

Robi looked over. "Where's the angel?" she asked, and her voice sounded a shade less angry.

Brand sighed. "In my cabin," he said. "I gave her a necklace to play with."

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Some typos were fixed:

multi-colored strobes were Hashing — flashing

[He] voice was even, quiet — Her

hand, and took it off the table[.] — added period

He laughed[.] “Probly, starlady, on Rhiannon — added period

Her tone was cutting[.] — added period

Hal did not smile, hack — Hal did not smile back
an’ wound[,] up raped and ripped — deleted comma

joysmoke and grabtabs and rippin — joy-smoke
Janey blinked[.] “*What?*” — added period

boy with pointy ears and big [ears] — eyes

“He won’t do it,” Janey said stubbornly[.] — added period

Mayliss followed her[.] — added period

Everybody left him; his ‘sticks[?] his girls,
everybody — replaced question mark with comma

They found me on the concourse — Concourse

“Later,” said Stumblecat[.] — added period

They’ll kill you[,] Starlady — added comma

And you’ve heard the wobbly spins[,] right? — added comma

“Hey, Starlady,” Hal said — added closing quote

“It’s only a dark. Come on. Let me trap it[,]” — replaced comma with period

She was naked, wreathed in fire, adrift among the stars[,] She no longer breathed — replaced comma with period

“Her next,” he said[,] — replaced comma with period

“The course has been altered,” he stated. He looked at her[,] — replaced comma with period

“We’ll be right on top of them in five minutes,” Brand said. Robi pretended not to hear. // “I don’t know about you, Brand,” she said — added paragraph break

Brand silenced her with a look[,] — replaced comma with period

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