
SIMON R. GREEN

DEATHSTALKER



**Being the First Part of
the Life and Times of
Owen Deathstalker**



A ROC BOOK

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Clash by Night

It gets dark out on the Rim. Strange planets and stranger people can be found on the edge of Empire where habitable worlds are few and civilization grows thin. Beyond the Rim lies uncharted darkness where no stars shine and few ships go. It's easy to get lost out there, far away from everything. Starcruisers patrol up to the Rim, but there are never enough ships to cover the vast areas of open space. The Empire is growing too large, too cumbersome, though no one will admit it, or at least, not one who matters. Every year more worlds are brought into the Empire, and the frontiers press hungry outward. But not on the Rim. The Empire stops cold there, dwarfed by the unplumbable depths of the Darkvoid.

It gets dark out there. Ships disappear sometimes, and are never seen again. No one knows why. The colonized worlds make themselves as self-sufficient as they can and turn their eyes away from the endless dark. Crime flourishes on the Rim, unthinkable distances from the hub of the Empire's strict laws; some transgressions as old as Humanity, others newly birthed by the Empire's ever-growing sciences. For the moment the Empire's starcruisers still keep a lid on things, dropping unannounced out of hyperspace to enforce the law with brutal efficiency, but they can't be everywhere. Strange forces are at work on the Rim, patient and terrible, and all it will take to set them off is a simple clash between two starships off the backwater planet of Virimonde.

* * *

In high orbit around Virimonde, the pirate ship *Shard* sailed silently through the long night, hiding itself from unfriendly eyes. Not a big ship, the *Shard*, built more for speed than endurance, and passed from hand to hand through a dozen owners and commands. Now she carried cloneleggers and body banks, and every man's hand was turned against her. Deep in the bowels of the ship, Hazel d'Ark, pirate, clonelegger and bon vivant, strode scowling through the dimly lit steel corridors and wished she was somewhere else. Anywhere else. The *Shard* wasn't a luxurious craft at the best of times, but with most of the ship's power diverted to maintaining the body banks, the old scut seemed even gloomier than usual. Which took some doing.

Hazel d'Ark, last owner of a once noble name, came to the locked door that led to the cargo bay and stood waiting impatiently for the door's sensors to recognize her. Her mood was bad, bordering on foul, and had been ever since they dropped out of hyperspace six hours ago to take up orbit around Virimonde. Six hours of waiting for some word from their contacts down below. Something was wrong.

They couldn't afford to stay much longer, but they couldn't leave either. So they waited. Hazel wasn't expecting any trouble from the planet's security people. The *Shard* might be old, but she had state-of-the-art cloaking devices, more than enough to fool anything the peasants had on Virimonde. Not that there was much the planet could do, even if it knew the pirates were there. Virimonde was a low-tech, agricultural world, with more livestock than people. Its only contact with the Empire was a monthly cargo transporter and an occasional patrolling starcruiser, neither of which was expected for some weeks.

Hazel glared at the closed door before her and kicked the frame hard. The door hissed open, and she

stepped through into the freezing cold of the cargo bay. The door locked itself behind her. A pearl haze misted the air and burned in her lungs. She shuddered quickly and turned up the heating element in her uniform. The body banks needed the cold at a specific temperature to preserve and maintain their cargo of human tissues for cloning. Hazel looked quickly about her and then accessed her communication implant.

“Hannah, this is Hazel. Acknowledge.”

“I hear you, Hazel,” said the ship’s AI. “What can I do for you?”

“Edit the signals from the cargo bay’s security sensors so it appears I’m not here.”

Hannah sighed. The Artificial Intelligence didn’t have human emotions, but it liked to pretend.

“Now, Hazel, you know you’re not supposed to be in there. You’ll get us both into trouble.”

“Do it anyway, or I’ll tell the Captain about your personal video collection of his private moments.”

“I wouldn’t have shown you those if I’d known you were going to use them to blackmail me. They’re a perfectly innocent collection, after all.”

“Computer ...”

“All right, all right. I’m editing the sensors. Happy now?”

“Close as I’ll get. And Hannah—if I ever catch you snooping on my private moments, I’ll perform a lobotomy on your main systems with a shrapnel grenade. Got it?”

Hannah sniffed once, and broke off contact. Hazel smiled briefly. All the AIs the Captain could have chosen, and he had to buy a peeping tom. Somehow that was typical of the *Shard* and its luck. She looked about her at the long rows of body banks, huge and blocky, their dull metal sides smeared with frost and caked with ice. Ugly things, for an ugly business. The AI was quite right; she had no authority in the cargo bay and no authority, either. Not that she gave a damn. Hazel d’Ark had a long history of not giving a damn, not to mention doing whatever she happened to feel was necessary and hell with the consequences. Which was at least partly why she’d ended up an outlaw and a pirate.

She moved slowly toward the nearest body bank, drawn by a curious mixture of revulsion and fascination. She’d had no illusions about what she was getting into when she’d signed on board the *Shard* as a clonelegger, but somehow it was different up close. The body banks were a source of life and longevity, but the spotless cargo bay still seemed to reek of death. Most of the lights were out, conserving energy. Never knew when you might need the extra power to make a run for it. Cloneleggers were not popular, either with the authorities or those who had a need for their services.

Hazel walked slowly down the central aisle between the body banks. Visions of hearts and lungs and kidneys burned brightly in her mind’s eye, pulsing with fresh crimson blood. She was sure they didn’t actually look like that, preserved in the icy cold of the machines, but that was how she thought of them. Her fellow cloneleggers just referred to them as the merchandise, as casual as any butcher in a slaughterhouse. She stopped and looked around her, surrounded by hundreds upon hundreds of human organs and tissues, enough to fill a dozen battlegrounds, and every one of them worthless. Contaminated beyond saving by a smuggled virus. That was what you got for making enemies in the clonelegging business.

Not too long before, the Captain had come out ahead in a business deal with the Boneyard Boys through his usual mixture of high risk taking and low cunning. Contracts the *Shard* had lusted after for years had fallen into their hands as though by magic. Hazel smiled grimly. They should have known better. Clonelegging was a cutthroat business. Sometimes literally.

Clonelegging was illegal, a crime punishable by death, but that did nothing to slow down the flood of people ready and willing to make a living out of death. Officially, the use of cloned human tissue for transplanting was only allowed to the highest of the high, those with breeding and position and not too small fortune. Couldn’t have the lower orders leading long and healthy lives; there were f

too many of them as it was, even with the newly colonized worlds opening up vast new territories for settling. Besides, it might give the lower orders ideas above their station.

But unofficially, if you had enough money and knew the right (or more strictly speaking wrong) people, you could get whatever part of you was failing replaced, either by cloning your own tissues, or by illegally obtained organs from body banks. There was never any risk of rejection with a person's own cloned tissues, but surprisingly often the original organs turned out to have built-in defects, and there were other problems that made direct cloning impossible. That was when the bodysnatchers came into their own. And then no one was safe, living or dead.

Most planets cremated their dead, by order of the Empress, to ensure that donor organs would only be available to the right sort of people, but backwater planets often cultivated illegal secret graveyards and mausoleums. Never knew when the crops might fail, or business turn bad, and you might need a little cash in the bank, so to speak. So the cloneleggers made the rounds, and everyone made a little money. The cloneleggers made a lot. Demand was high. All they had to do was maintain a full stocklist and wait for someone to come knocking tentatively at their door.

Only it isn't always that simple. Cloning is a delicate business with all sorts of things that can go wrong. Cloning wears out an organ fast, and then it has to be replaced in stock. The body banks have a voracious appetite. And the hidden cemeteries are few and far between, often with exclusive contracts to one particular set of cloneleggers. So sometimes the bodysnatchers go out in disguise to wander among the living, looking for those who won't be missed too much. A shame, of course, but you can't make an omelette, and all that. ...

When Hazel joined the *Shard's* crew four planets back, the Captain had assured her they were graverobbers only. Except when things got really bad. Get in quick, dig up enough merchandise to fill the body banks, and then get the hell out of there before someone sold them out for an Empire reward. There's always someone. Only this time it had all gone wrong. The Boneyard Boys had got in first and contaminated the merchandise with a really vicious virus that hadn't shown up on any of the usual tests. Now every organ they had was worthless, and they had contracts to fill with people who weren't known for their patience or understanding.

So Captain Markee had gone cap in hand to the Blood Runners out in the Obeah systems and begged for a favor. Hazel still shuddered when she thought of what she and the rest of the crew had had to promise in return for the information the Blood Runners provided. Nothing could be allowed to go wrong with this deal. There were worse things than death.

So the Blood Runners had put them in touch with people on Virimonde, out on the Rim, and the *Shard* had come to play the old game one more time. One last throw of the dice.

Hazel wondered, not for the first time, how she'd come to this. It wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind for herself when she left her home planet ten minutes ahead of a restraining order and a lengthy stay in jail in search of excitement and adventure. Cloneleggers were the lowest of the low, the scum of the Empire. Even a beggar with leprosy would pause to spit on a clonelegger. People who walked in certain high circles liked to boast of their personal cloneleggers, as one might of an attack bear trained for the Arenas, but no one had a good word for them in open society. They were pariahs, outcasts, untouchables for daring to traffic in the trade that no one wanted to admit existed.

Haze sighed tiredly. She'd leave the *Shard* in a moment, if she had anywhere to go. Hazel d'Ar was twenty-three years old, tall, lithely muscular, with a sharp, pointed face and a mane of long ratty red hair. Green eyes that missed nothing, and a smile so quick people often missed it if they weren't looking for it. She'd worked in one dirty job after another since leaving home, and it showed in the wariness of her stance and the naked suspicion in her scowl. She'd been a mercenary on Loki, a bodyguard on Golgotha and, most recently, part of the security forces on Brahmin II, which was where

Captain Markee found her, running for her life. A superior officer had decided his rank entitled him to certain rights to her body, and not for cloning, either. Hazel d'Ark had disagreed. She'd decided a long time ago that she wasn't giving away anything she could sell. It came to blows and ended in tears, and Hazel went on the run again with the bastard's blood still dripping from her knife.

At the time, a little discreet clonelegging had seemed like a definite career advancement. Low profile, low risk, the only hard work a little digging ... perfect. Especially with so many people hot on her trail. Just lately, it seemed there was always someone looking for her with bad intentions. It was all her own fault; she knew that. She'd always had a tendency to wander into illegal deals in search of fast money, and only afterward discover what she'd let herself in for. But even though she'd done a lot of things in her time that she wasn't too proud of, kidnapping people and butchering them in cold blood for their organs had to be a new low, even for her.

She didn't know if she could do it. She had a feeling it might be a matter of principle, something she wasn't exactly familiar with. But everyone draws the line somewhere. She ran through the options open to her. It didn't take long. She couldn't just announce her newfound integrity to her fellow crew members. Not unless she wanted to see the inside of a body bank the hard way. She could always jump ship; ride one of the escape pods down to the planet below and lose herself in the crowds. But Virimonde was a primitive place by all accounts, based around hard work and damn all luxuries. Not a good place to be stranded on the run. Especially when there are people looking for you on both sides of the law.

Hazel d'Ark looked around her at the waiting body banks and shuddered, not entirely from the cold. *What am I going to do? What the hell am I going to do?*

Lights flared around her as the ship's alarms went crazy. Hazel winced away from the sudden blast of sound, her hand dropping automatically to the gun at her side. Her first thought was a hull breach, but she quickly realized that if there'd been an explosive decompression in any part of the ship, she would have felt its effects long before the sirens went off. She accessed the emergency channel through her comm implant, and a babble of voices filled her head. It only took her a moment to pick out the phrase *battle stations*, and then she was off and running. Someone had pierced the *Shard's* cloaking device, and that was supposed to be impossible for anything less than an Imperial starcruiser. And if the Empire had found them, there was a very real danger that Hazel d'Ark's career as a clonelegger would be over before it had even begun.

Just my luck, thought Hazel bitterly as she ran out of the cargo bay and headed for the bridge. *Just my luck to get picked up for one of the few crimes I haven't actually committed.*

"Hannah, talk to me. How deep are we in it?"

"I'm afraid you couldn't get much deeper without crouching," the AI said calmly through her implant. "An Imperial starcruiser has dropped out of hyperspace and taken up orbit around Virimonde. Their sensors brushed aside our cloaking devices in well under a second, and it didn't take them much longer to issue a challenge. I'm currently lying through my electronic teeth, but there's a limit to how long I can hope to bluff them. And I have a strong suspicion it isn't going to be anywhere near long enough for us to raise enough power to escape into hyperspace."

"Couldn't we make a run for it in normal space?"

"This is an Imperial starcruiser we're discussing, Hazel. They don't come much more powerful than this. They'd blast us into tiny glowing fragments before we even left orbit."

"We've got shields."

"They've got two hundred and fifty disrupter cannon and power to burn."

"Can we fight them?"

"If you really want to annoy them."

“Dammit, there must be something we can do! You’re the one with the immense intellect; think of something!”

“You could always surrender.”

Hazel would have laughed sarcastically, but she was too short of breath. She pounded down the sterile corridor, head aching from the clamor of the alarm siren, and finally burst onto the bridge and threw herself into her fire control seat. Whatever was going on, she was sure she’d feel a damn sight more secure plugged into the *Shard*’s two disrupter cannon. Theoretically, the AI was far more capable of aiming and firing the ship’s disrupters, but what one AI could plan another could anticipate and counter. Human unpredictability provided an edge no AI could deal with. Which is why there were always human gunners on every ship.

Hazel meshed her mind with the computers through her implant and spread out through the fire control systems, running quickly through the warm-up routines. Computer displays sprang up all around her and a steady stream of information flowed through her thoughts. Hazel got her first real look at the Empire starcruiser, and her heart sank. The Empire ship was a thousand times bigger, dwarfing the *Shard* like a minnow next to a whale. The AI ran quickly through a list of the Imperial craft’s capabilities, and Hazel’s heart sank even further. Disrupter cannon, force shields, assault torpedos ... the *Shard* wouldn’t stand a chance, but then, she’d always known that. The only thing big enough to take on an Empire starcruiser was another starcruiser. Hazel swallowed hard and let her thoughts move cautiously through the two fire turrets. The cannon stirred restlessly at her touch, picking out targets and waiting for an opportunity on the Imperial ship.

Hazel’s breathing had almost slowed to normal, but her anger took it away again as she studied the Empire starcruiser. What the hell was it doing here? There wasn’t one due for weeks, officially. It couldn’t have come looking for the *Shard*; a handful of cloneleggers on a pirate ship weren’t that important. Which was all very fine and logical, but the Imperial ship was still there, large as life and twice as deadly, its ranked cannon no doubt locked on the pirate ship and ready to fire at a moment’s notice. Hazel scowled fiercely. They couldn’t run, they couldn’t fight, and they didn’t dare surrender. Maybe they could make a deal ... if they could think of something to bargain with. Her mind worked frantically, but came up with nothing. Unless Captain Markee had a whole pack of aces up his sleeve, the Empire ship had them cold.

She looked across the bridge at the Captain. Terrence Markee was in his late forties; large and solid, and reliable. He’d been a pirate all his adult life and loved every illegal moment of it. He dressed like a gaudy if somewhat dated dandy, all flashing silks and clashing colors, and affected an aristocratic accent he had no right to. At the moment he was scowling at his displays and growling a series of calm, quiet orders. Slightly reassured that at least one person on the bridge wasn’t panicking, Hazel left her eyes drift round the cramped confines of the command area. Anything was better than looking at the Empire ship.

The bridge of the *Shard* was a mess. Half the lights weren’t working at any given time, because the bulbs were expensive and they never carried enough spares, and the limited low-ceilinged space was crammed with work stations, computer displays, and terminals; never mind the sensor panels and fire control station. Officially there was room for seven crew on the bridge, including the Captain, but usually there were only four, including the Captain and Hazel. The *Shard* operated on a bare minimum crew, with everyone holding down as many jobs as they could handle. Half the systems weren’t working, but you learned to put up with that as long as the essentials were maintained. Repairs were hideously expensive, especially at stardocks. Clonelegging could provide a very comfortable living if you were in the right place at the right time and kept up a good stock, but it was a crowded field these days, and small independent ships like the *Shard* were being forced out. Markee had been relying on

the Viriminde run to restock the body banks, and repair his fortunes and his ship. And then he made an enemy of the Boneyard Boys, and everything went to hell in a hurry.

A thought struck Hazel, and she looked back at Markee. "Captain, how about if we just dump everything? Throw the merchandise and body banks out the airlock and let it all burn up falling through Virimonde's atmosphere? No evidence, no proof."

"Nice idea," said Markee. "And if that ship hadn't been a starcruiser, we might have got away with it. But with the kind of sensors they've got, they could identify every organ and tissue sample independently and read the maker's name on the body banks. Their sensors records would make damning evidence. So, we can't dump it, and we can't afford to be caught with it. Doesn't leave much room for maneuvering, does it?" He smiled briefly. "I suppose we could always eat the merchandise. How's your appetite, Hazel?"

"Not as good as it was a moment ago. Basically, what you're saying is we're screwed if we do, and screwed if we don't. I suppose surrender is out of the question?"

Markee's smile came and went again. "There's enough evidence on this ship to hang us all. Slowly."

"So what are we going to do?"

"The one thing they won't expect. We'll fight. Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky."

"And if we don't?"

"Then at least we'll die quickly. Are the guns ready?"

"Ready as they'll ever be. They haven't been checked, let alone fired, in ages." Hazel glared at the massive ship on the screens before her. Tears of anger and frustration burned in her eyes, but she wouldn't give in to them. Her luck had just turned bad one time too many, that was all. She pounded her fist on the arm of her chair. "What the hell is an Empire ship *doing* here anyway? We only made the decision to come here twelve hours ago! They couldn't have known about us."

She didn't see Markee shrug, but she could hear it in his voice. "A lot can happen in twelve hours, especially when you've got enemies. Any number of people could have found out where we were heading and then sold the information to the Empire."

"But who the hell would send a whole bloody starcruiser after small fry like us?"

"Good question. Wish I had a good answer for you. Could be the Boneyard Boys, calling in an offer in favor to put the finishing touch to our destruction. It doesn't matter. Now suck it in, and stand ready with your disrupters. Hannah is currently telling the Empire ship that we're an ambulance craft on a mercy mission to a plague outbreak. She's feeding them all kinds of convincing details, but I didn't think they're buying it. Certainly they aren't going to buy it long enough for our engines to power up for a jump into hyperspace."

Hazel's mouth was suddenly dry. "Captain, our two guns aren't worth spit against all theirs. There must be something else we can try."

"Sorry, Hazel; nothing springs to mind. You know what they say: if you can't take a joke, you shouldn't have joined."

Hazel waited, but Markee had nothing more to say. She concentrated on her fire controls. Both the *Shard* and the starcruiser had force screens that could withstand a hell of a lot of punishment, but they also used up a hell of a lot of energy, and the *Shard's* shields would go down long before the Imperial ship's did. It came to Hazel then that she was going to die out in the empty spaces of the Rim, far from home and family and honor. Just as she'd always known she would.

On the Imperial starcruiser *Darkwind*, Captain John Silence sat at ease in his command chair, looking out over his efficiently murmuring bridge: every man at his station, every system running

smoothly, just as it should be. The small craft on the main viewscreen seemed surprisingly insignificant to be taking up so much of his time and attention. Still, nothing that small was going to give him any trouble, and the prize money its capture would bring would be a welcome bonus. At least that way something good might come of this mission. He tried to push the thought aside, but it persisted. He had better things to do than waste time hunting down some poor bastard who probably didn't even know he'd been outlawed yet. But man proposes, and the Empress disposes. She said go and you went. If you liked having your head still attached to your body.

He looked at the starship on the main viewscreen again and frowned slightly. Probably just a pirate ship involved in something dubious, but what was it doing here at the same time as the *Darkwind*? Could it have come to try and save the *Deathstalker*? Owen Deathstalker, Lord of Virimonde, holder of a proud name and title, condemned to death by the Empress' word. She hadn't said why, and Silence hadn't asked. One didn't. But Silence had quietly checked the files anyway, just in case there was something there he ought to know. If there was, he missed it. Owen Deathstalker might be descended from a famous warrior Clan, but in his case, the blood seemed to be running thin. His people ran Virimonde efficiently enough, but the man himself was just an amateur historian. Wrote long books on obscure subjects that no one ever read. Looking back was unofficially discouraged there were too many subjects the Empire preferred its people to forget. Presumably the *Deathstalker* had stumbled across something he shouldn't have. Whatever it was, Owen Deathstalker wouldn't be writing a book about it this time. He was Outlawed, a nonperson with a price on his head. Literally. The Empress liked proof of her kills.

Silence shrugged and sat back in his command chair: a tall, lean man in his forties, with a thickening waistline and a receding hairline he tried not to be touchy about. He sat in the command chair with a quiet dignity, as though he belonged there. He'd served the Empire to the best of his ability all his adult life, and if sometimes he found himself on a mission he had no stomach for, well, that was the Empire for you, under Her Imperial Majesty Lionstone XIV. Also known as the Iron Bitch. Silence stopped that thought short. It wasn't wise to let one's thoughts run free in some directions. You never knew when an esper might be listening. He concentrated on the pirate ship before him. Small craft, built more for speed than action. No threat to a starcruiser. But she shouldn't have been here ... not just now. Silence looked across at his comm officer.

"Do we have an identification on her yet?"

"Not yet, Captain. Their AI is talking our ears off, but not actually saying much. It's trying to feed us some nonsense about being a medical ship on a mercy mission, but it's the wrong kind of craft for that, and it doesn't have the proper identification codes. Odds are they're just trying to keep us occupied while they power up for a hyper jump. Do we stop them, Captain, or let them go?"

"We stop them," said a calm, cold voice, and Silence nodded to Investigator Frost as she came to stand beside him. Frost was in her late twenties, tall and lithely muscular, with a gun on her hip and a long sword hanging down her back. Even standing still she looked competent and extremely dangerous, like a predator in a world of prey. Dark eyes burned coldly in a pale, controlled face framed by auburn hair cropped close to the skull. You couldn't call her pretty, but there was a daunting glamour to her, attractive and intimidating at the same moment.

Investigators were trained from childhood to be loyal, efficient and deadly. Their job was to study newly discovered alien species and determine how much of a threat they might prove to the Empire. Depending on those findings, the aliens would then be either enslaved or exterminated. There was no third option. Investigators were also used as security chiefs, bodyguards, and assassins. They were cold, calculating killing machines, and they were either good at their job, or dead.

Silence and Frost had worked together on several missions and understood each other. Which was

as close to friendship as you could get with an Investigator.

“There’s no hurry,” said Silence. “A ship that small takes forever to power up. They’re not going anywhere yet.”

“I don’t like it,” Frost said flatly. “An unexpected ship in orbit, waiting for us? I don’t believe in coincidence. Someone has alerted our target that he’s been outlawed. That ship is either here to protect him or carry him away. Either way, our orders are quite specific. Under no circumstances is the target to be allowed to escape.”

Silence nodded. The outlaw was only ever referred to as the target in public. It wouldn’t do for the lower orders to know that a Lord had been outlawed. Especially one with such a famous name. The name Deathstalker could still command respect and possibly allies in certain quarters, irrespective of the Empress’ wishes or orders. Which was why an entire starcruiser had been sent to see that the Deathstalker’s outlawing went smoothly. He was to be captured and executed before word could get out to potential friends. Only it seemed someone had beaten them to it.

“The ship could have been sent to occupy our attention while the target is helped to escape,” said Frost. “We can’t afford to waste time on it. With your permission, I’ll form a boarding party and get some answers in person.”

“Not so fast, Investigator. Let’s do this by the book. Esper Fortuna?”

“Yes, Captain.” The *Darkwind*’s esper, Thomas Fortuna, stepped forward to stand on the Captain’s other side, opposite the Investigator. He was short, dumpy, and his uniform looked as though he’d inherited it from someone larger. His shaven head glistened brightly.

“I want a full scan on that ship,” said Silence. “See what you can pick up.”

“Yes, Captain.” Fortuna’s mind leapt up and out, and his face relaxed completely, losing all trace of life and personality. Then his face twisted, and he was back again, shaking his head disgustedly. “The ship is full of death and the memory of pain. So many traces I can’t even identify the sources, except to say they’re all human, and all dead. There are body banks on that ship, Captain, brimming over with the residues of suffering. They’re cloneleggers.”

“Nothing to do with the target?” said Silence. “You’re sure?”

“As far as I can be, Captain.”

“That settles it then,” said Frost easily. “We can’t waste time over a handful of bodysnatchers. Blow the ship to pieces. The universe will smell better once they’re gone.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” said Silence. “Go ahead, Investigator. Enjoy yourself.”

The pirate ship *Shard* rocked as the *Darkwind* opened fire on her. Hannah got the force screens up in time, deflecting the raging energy from the disrupter cannon, but it was all the AI could do to maintain them under the constant barrage from the Empire ship. Hazel d’Ark fired back, but her two cannons made no impression on the *Darkwind*’s superior shields. Lights went out all over the *Shard* as the AI drained more and more energy from the ship’s systems to maintain the force screens. The power accumulated for a hyper jump was used up in seconds, and one by one the body banks shut down, the fragile contents left to warm and rot. The *Shard* jerked this way and that, like a fish on a hook, running through every evasive maneuver in the AI’s data banks, but the *Darkwind* stayed with them, the disrupter cannon firing one after another to maintain a constant pressure.

Hazel shuddered at her fire controls, feeling every hammering blow on the *Shard*’s shields through her mental link to the computers. She pounded impatiently on the arms of her chair as she waited the three agonizing minutes it took for her antiquated disrupter cannon to power up between shots. The *Darkwind* didn’t have that problem. She fired her disrupters in overlapping waves, so that each cannon had time to recharge before it had to fire again. The Empire ship also had far greater resources

power to draw on. The *Shard* didn't stand a chance, and everyone knew it.

Light dimmed on the *Shard's* bridge as fires broke out in a dozen places. Smoke formed faster than the extractor fans could deal with it. Hazel coughed raggedly as she tried to concentrate on the fire controls. The station next to hers exploded, the man sitting there suddenly engulfed in flames. He screamed shrilly till the air in his lungs burned up. The AI was gabbling incoherently in Hazel's ear, its voice breaking up as it struggled to hold the disintegrating ship together. She spun round in her seat and glared across the smoke-filled bridge at Captain Markee.

"Surrender, damn it! They're tearing us apart!"

"No point," said the Captain calmly, raising his voice to be heard over the growing bedlam on the bridge. "They must know we're cloneleggers. They're not interested in our surrender. We can't fight, we can't run, and we haven't a hope in hell of raising enough power to go hyper. That only leaves one option. I'm going to use Lover Boy on their shields and then ram the bastards. If I'm going down, I'm taking them with me."

Hazel's fire control exploded, throwing her out and across the bridge. She landed hard, driving the breath from her lungs, her uniform blackened and scorched. She was badly burned, but for the moment, shock smothered most of the pain. She rolled slowly onto her side, fighting to stay conscious. She could hear Markee giving orders in a calm, reasonable voice. Lover Boy. Hazel clung to the thought as she forced herself up onto her knees. Lover Boy was an experimental program the Captain had acquired on Brahmin II. It was called Lover Boy because love laughs at locksmiths, and because the program was designed to give another ship's security systems a real good screwing. The Captain was going to use Lover Boy to get the *Darkwind* to drop her force shields, and then ram her. The *Shard* would hit like a single huge torpedo, and that would be the end of the *Darkwind*. And the *Shard*.

Hazel lurched to her feet, grabbed the nearest station to steady herself, and glared through the smoke and flames at Captain Markee.

"Are you crazy? We'll all be killed!"

He didn't answer her. His gaze was fixed on his computer displays, and he was laughing. Hazel looked wildly round for help, only to find she and Markee were the only living crew left on the bridge. The rest were dead at their stations. Hazel staggered away from the bridge, stumbling through the smoke and wreckage. If she was quick, she could still get to an escape pod before the two ships hit. And if she was really lucky, the escape pod would still be working.

The corridor lurched back and forth as Hazel forced herself into a run. Adrenaline was putting strength back into her legs, but she knew that wouldn't last long. Solid steel creaked and groaned around her as the ship began to break up. Markee had to be directing most of the *Shard's* remaining power into the force shields, but some of the punishment was getting through anyway. The lights were going out, one by one. Hazel tried to contact Hannah through her comm implant, but the AI was still talking gibberish, mumbling to itself in a querulous voice.

Hazel rounded a corner and then stumbled to a halt. One of the bulkheads had been blown inward, blocking the corridor completely. Spikes of jagged metal thrust out in all directions, some of them glowing cherry-red from the heat of the recent explosion. Hazel took the opportunity to get her breath back, and studied the situation as calmly as she could. Panicking or screaming with rage might feel good, but it wouldn't get her anywhere. The first real pain from her burns was beginning to gnaw at her, but she forced the awareness down to a level she could deal with. She grabbed hold of a few spikes that were only uncomfortably warm and tried to shift the steel mass, but it didn't budge an inch. She bit her lower lip, scowling. This was the only way to the escape pods. She had to get through.

Her hand fell to the gun on her hip. Using an energy weapon in a confined space was always

dangerous, but nowhere near as dangerous as being trapped here when the two ships hit. She drew her disrupter, set it to maximum dispersal and fired before she could think better of it. The raging energy beam punched a hole clean through the steel barrier, leaving a tunnel that stretched away into the darkness. Hazel cut away metal for as far as she could see. It wasn't much of a tunnel, three feet in diameter at most, but it was all she would have to do. She just hoped it would have an opening at the other end.

The sides of the hole glowed red with a sullen heat, and Hazel knew she couldn't afford to touch them. But she was going to have to crawl through the tunnel on all fours, and that meant contact with her hands and knees. Her uniform would protect her knees, for a while anyway, but she'd have to do something to protect her bare hands. She put away her gun, drew her backup knife from her boot and cut away one of her sleeves. She cut the cloth in two again, put away her knife, and wrapped the cloth around her hands. She looked again at the red-hot sides of the tunnel before her and winced. This was going to be really unpleasant. She swallowed hard and clambered quickly into the opening before she could change her mind.

The heat hit her from all directions, and she could feel the skin of her face tightening and smarting. Sweat poured off her, evaporating in seconds. She crawled on through the steel tunnel, and the heat seared her hands and knees even through the protecting cloth. She hurried as much as she could, but there was a narrow space with no room to maneuver. Her back brushed against the tunnel roof now and then, and she had to grit her teeth against the heat and pain. The cloth pads she'd made for her hands started to smoke. Her eyes narrowed to watering slits against the fiery air, and her lungs felt scorched with every breath. The metal creaked and groaned around her as though it might collapse at any moment. Hazel's heart hammered in her chest, and a blind unreasoning fear gnawed at her self-control till she wanted to scream. But she didn't. Screaming wouldn't help. She forced herself on through the heat, shuffling forward on hands and knees that seemed to be one blazing mass of pain. She could smell her flesh burning. Tears ran down her face, as much from frustration as pain, evaporating almost at once.

And then she was out of the tunnel, and the heat fell away from her like a burning blanket. She made her way through the obstruction. She was back in the open corridor, and the cool air was like a blessing. She lurched to her feet, gritting her teeth at the pain in her hands and knees and back till her jaw ached. Her leggings had burnt right through, and the blackened cloths around her hands fell apart as she tried to unwrap them. She stumbled on, not daring to look at her hands, trying to find the strength to hurry. She had no idea of how much time she had left. Her struggle in the steel tunnel had seemed to last forever.

Most of the lights were out now, and the ship was dark and echoing. The smell of smoke was heavy in the air. She forced herself on, having to guess the right way as often as not, but finally she came to the escape pods, sitting calmly in their racks as though they had all the time in the world. Hazel just stood and stared numbly at them for a long moment. All her strength had gone into getting her here, and she seemed to have none left to do anything else. A series of explosions shook the ship, jarring her back to her senses. She stumbled over to the nearest pod and hit the activation button with her blackened fist. The door swung open maddeningly slowly, and the interior of the pod lit up as its systems came on-line. Hazel clambered inside and sank into the waiting crash-webbing with something like relief. It felt so good to be off her feet at last. The door hissed shut behind her, and she worked her jaw to pop her ears as the air pressure changed.

The pod's cabin was barely a dozen feet long, with just enough room for two passengers. It occurred to Hazel that it was not unlike lying in a coffin, and the thought amused her briefly. A fitting fate for a would-be grave-robber. She pushed the thought aside and painfully forced her blistered and stiffened fingers through the series of commands that would eject the pod from the *Shard*. She braced herself

for the impact, and only slowly realized that nothing was happening.

She ran through the launch sequence again, crying out at the pain in her hands, but still there was no response. Panic flared up in her, and the cramped confines of the escape pod were suddenly unbearably claustrophobic. She started to get up out of the crash-webbing and only stopped herself with an effort of will. There was no point in leaving the pod; the *Shard* was a death ship now. Her only hope for survival was to make the pod work. The panic began to die away as she made herself study the problem logically. There was nothing wrong with the pod itself or it would have showed up on the control panels, which meant the problem lay outside. In the launching systems. Systems controlled by the ship's AI ... Hannah.

Hazel accessed the AI through her comm implant, but there was only silence. The lack of response was somehow more worrying than the previous gibberish. Hazel called again. There was someone listening; she could feel it. When the answer finally came, it was like a whisper at midnight, as though the sound was traveling from somewhere impossibly far away.

"Hazel, everything feels wrong. Parts of me are missing, and I can't find them. I can't think properly. There are shadows in my memories, running loose like rats in a barn. Help me, Hazel. Stop them. Please stop them ... it's so cold in here, and I'm afraid. ..."

"Hannah! Listen to me, Hannah. I'm stuck in escape pod seven. I need you to run through the launch sequence for me. Can you hear me, Hannah?"

"Forget the AI," said Captain Markee calmly, patching into the channel. "She's falling apart, like everything else on this ship. The *Shard*'s on her last run, going out in a blaze of glory. I've activated the pod launch from the bridge. You'll be on your way in a moment. Just as well. You'd never have made a good clonelegger, Hazel. Too soft where it matters. If you get out of this alive, raise a drink to me and the *Shard*. She was a good ship."

His voice faded out at the end, and before Hazel could say anything, the escape pod blasted out of its hatch and plummeted toward the planet below.

On the bridge of the *Darkwind*, Captain Silence studied the small craft on his viewscreen as it slowly closed the distance between them. The *Darkwind*'s disrupters had hammered away most of the pirate's force shields, and it was only a matter of time now before they failed entirely. And once that happened, it would all be over in seconds. It was a miracle the pirate's shields had lasted this long. The Captain must have drained the ship's batteries dry to power them. The ship continued to drift closer, and Silence frowned thoughtfully. The pirate was up to something; he could feel it in his bones. He glanced at the Investigator beside him and saw that she was scowling intently at the viewscreen too.

"Pirate ship's speed increasing, Captain," said his comm officer suddenly. "Accelerating steadily toward us."

"He's trying to ram us," said Frost. "The force shields will stop him."

"But he must know that," said Silence slowly. "So why is he doing it?"

"Captain!" The comm officer's voice was sharp and concerned. "Our shields are dropping! They don't answer the control panels!"

"Odin!" said Silence. "What's happening?"

"The pirate ship has infected my systems with a virus," said the starcruiser's AI. "Which is supposed to be impossible. It's bypassing all my safeguards. I've never encountered anything quite like this. Systems are crashing faster than I can isolate them. Our force shields are down, and I am unable to raise them again. The pirate ship will impact with us in six minutes and fourteen seconds."

"Recommendations?" said Frost.

“Abandon ship,” the AI said flatly. “If you leave now, most of the escape craft will survive the ensuing blast and should make a safe landing on Virimonde. Go now, Captain. It’s the only chance you have.”

Silence looked at Frost and then round his magnificent bridge. So many systems, so many highly trained personnel, and still there was nothing he could do to save his ship. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He patched into the shipwide address channel, and then paused a moment longer to be sure his voice would be calm and steady when he spoke.

“Attention all hands. This is the Captain. Abandon ship. I say again, abandon ship. This is not a drill. Remember your training and make your way to the nearest escape craft. We’ll reassemble on Virimonde. Good luck, everyone. Captain out.”

He looked around him and clapped his hands briskly. “All right, that’s it. Clear the bridge. Everyone out.”

His people rose quickly to their feet and left the bridge with a professional minimum of fuss. Investigator Frost turned to go, and then stopped as she realized Silence wasn’t moving.

“Aren’t you coming, Captain?”

“No, Investigator. This Captain is going down with his ship. The main bulk of the *Darkwind* will probably survive the initial impact and only break up on entering the atmosphere. I have to be here to guide the ship down for as long as I can. I have to make sure the pieces will land safely in one of the oceans. Hundreds of thousands could be killed if any of the pieces were to land in an inhabited area.”

“You are more important,” said Frost calmly. “The Empire has a great deal of time and money invested in you, Captain. The colonists are just peasants. They don’t matter.”

“They matter to me. Clear the bridge, Investigator. There’s nothing you can say that will persuade me to leave.”

“No,” said Frost. “I don’t suppose there is.”

She hit him once, efficiently, and he slumped forward in his command chair, unconscious. Frost checked the pulse in his neck, nodded once, and then picked the Captain up and slung him almost effortlessly over one shoulder.

“Odin, this is Investigator Frost. Acknowledge.”

“Acknowledged, Investigator.”

“The Captain is indisposed. I am placing you in command. You will do everything in your power to guide the ship down, so that its eventual impact does the minimum possible damage to inhabited areas. You understand I cannot take the risk of downloading you and taking you with us. There is no telling how much damage the infecting virus has done to your systems, or how infectious it remains.”

“Yes, Investigator. I understand.”

Frost looked once around the empty bridge. “Goodbye, Odin.”

“Goodbye, Investigator. Safe journey.”

Frost turned and left the bridge with the Captain still unconscious over her shoulder. The empty bridge was filled with the low sound of the AI singing quietly to itself and the pirate ship growing ever larger on the viewscreen.

The *Shard* and the *Darkwind*, locked together, cartwheeled slowly through the silent night, falling toward Virimonde.

The Man Who Had Everything

The Deathstalker, Owen, Lord of Virimonde, last of a famous warrior line, lay naked and exhausted among the crumpled silk sheets of his bed and wondered lazily if he could work up the strength to call for a tall iced drink. It was late in the morning of another perfect day on the best of all possible worlds. The sun was shining, what passed for birds on Virimonde were singing their little hearts out, everyone was busy at their work, and he didn't have to leave his bed for ages yet if he didn't feel like it. He sighed and stretched slowly and smiled the slow smug smile of the truly satisfied. He'd just had an amazing sex with his long-term mistress, and when she got back from wherever she'd disappeared to, he fully intended to do it all again. Practice makes perfect.

She wasn't really his mistress, in the sense that he didn't pay her a retainer or anything, but he liked the ancient word, with its undertones of sin and debauchery. He stretched again unhurriedly, content as a cat in the sun, staring up at the ceiling high above. When he did finally choose to get up, his most recent history was waiting in the computers for him to take up work on it again. It was a good piece, sharp and pointed and full of new insights. The kind of work he'd always known he was capable of, he could just get away from interfering distractions like having to train with sword and gun every morning and study military tactics every afternoon in order to be the warrior his line demanded of him. No one had ever asked him if he wanted to be another bloody fighter like all this reverent ancestors. But that was all behind him now. His father was dead, he'd inherited the title, and his life was his own at last. In short, he'd got it all. No doubt eventually he'd start getting bored with such perfection in several years or so, but until then he was determined to enjoy every minute of it. And why not? He was a nice guy; he deserved it.

He looked around the huge stone chamber with its hanging tapestries and centuries-old holos. The Deathstalker Standing hadn't changed outwardly in generations. Every modern convenience was in place, ready to hand or call, but expertly concealed behind the traditional overlay. The Standing had been the home of the Deathstalker Clan for generations beyond counting, serving all their various needs with calm efficiency. When Owen had bought the Lordship of Virimonde, he'd had the entire castle dismantled, stone by stone, and had it and its contents shipped to Virimonde, where it was reassembled surprisingly quickly by a small army of fanatical experts. You can do things like that when you're a Lord. The Standing was his, wherever he decided to plant his roots; all that was required of him was that he preserve it and hold it in trust for future generations. Assuming he ever got around to marrying and producing a next generation. His mistress was a delightful sort, but not all the kind of person one married. As head of one of the oldest Families in the Empire, he had a duty to marry someone of his own rank and station. And he would. Eventually.

Owen looked thoughtfully at the giant holo on the wall opposite his bed, showing the original Deathstalker in all his fearsome aspect and martial glory: Warrior Prime of the Empire and founder of the Clan that still bore his name. He looked a bit rough and ready in his thick furs and steelmesh tunic bristling with weapons, his head shaved in a mercenary's scalplock, but it didn't take too much imagination to transform his warrior's arrogance into a lord's nobility. According to Family history, he'd been the greatest fighting man of his day, unanimously elected Warrior Prime and elevated to the Peerage by popular acclaim. Hard man by all accounts, and a bit of a bastard, but the public liked that in their heroes. Bloodied his sword on a hundred worlds, and never backed away from an insult or

war.

He was also the creator and wielder of the Darkvoid Device, which put out a thousand suns in a moment and left their planets to sail silently through an endless night. The Darkvoid. But no one talked about that anymore outside the Family.

Pity about what happened to him in the end, but that's politics for you. His son had taken over as Warrior Prime to the Empire, and things went on as they should. Owen wondered vaguely what the old man would have made of his most recent descendant. Probably would have had him put down the moment he showed any sign of intellectual tendencies. Owen couldn't bring himself to really give a damn. He'd always known he was a writer, not a fighter. He'd had a proper training in weaponry and all the martial arts, as befitted his station and inheritance, but it had never interested him. His interest lay in researching and piecing together the Empire's somewhat tangled history. Nothing excited him like reaching into the morass of legend and myth that made up so much of the past and producing an indisputable new fact, clear and sharp as a diamond in a coal mine. And if he'd learned one thing from all the histories he'd read and the tales he'd investigated, it was that most of the time there was no glory and damn all honor to be found on the battlefield. Only blood and mud and the endless bitterness of lost hopes.

Most wars turned out to be squalid little affairs, once you dug through the lies and propaganda fought to protect trade interests or save political face. Owen was damned if he'd fight and die just so someone else could look good. Particularly when he had so much to live for. The only real legacy he had from his bad old, mad old ancestor was the Deathstalker ring; an ugly chunky circle of black gold handed down out of the unimaginable past, the sign and seal of Deathstalker authority. According to the Family tradition, he was forbidden to remove it, save to pass it on to his eldest son. They'd had to cut off his father's finger to get it after he was dead. But then, Owen and his father had never got on.

They'd always been surprisingly distant and distinct, considering how alike they looked. They were both tall and rangy, with dark hair and darker eyes, moving always with the quiet grace of breeding and long martial training. These days, in his mid-twenties, Owen had lost some of the athlete's leanness; good living and satisfied appetites had softened the lines of his muscles and padded his stomach. Not excessively so, by any means, but his old weapons master would have thrown up his hands in despair at how out of condition his pupil had become. It was a thought that never failed to please Owen. The two of them had never got on. He still worked out most days, when he could spare the time, if only so he could keep up with his mistress.

The bedroom door swung open, and Owen's mood changed in a moment as his mistress came bouncing in, bright and bonny and tanned golden from perfect head to pointed toe. Cathy DeVries was in her early thirties, with a tight compact body of wondrous delights. Average height, but far from average in every other way. Long legs, full body, long blond hair falling around a heart-shaped face with marvelous high cheekbones. Cathy was inordinately proud of her bone structure. Prettiness faded, she was fond of saying, but a good bone structure lasts forever. She had the widest smile Owen had ever seen and dark blue eyes to die for. She'd been his mistress for seven years now, ever since she'd been presented to him as a surprise party favor at the Winter Ball on Golgotha. She'd been physically adapted at the House of Joy: a double-jointed contortionist, trained in all the erotic knowledge of the ages, and full of surprises. Multiple orgasms guaranteed or your money back.

Buying up her contract was the best investment he'd ever made.

Cathy was wearing his battered old dressing gown again, belted at the waist for a change. Usually she just let it hang open, partly for freedom of movement and partly because she knew how much he liked to look at her. This time the gown was belted tight, and the thought disturbed him for some reason. It wasn't as though she had anything to hide after seven years of enthusiastic exploration. She

was probably just teasing him again. She knew how to get him going. He noted with approval that she was carrying a tall frosted glass of white wine. She always could judge his mood to a nicety. On the other hand, the sight of her was more refreshing than any drink could ever be. He took the drink from her and put it firmly to one side on the bedside table. First things first. He reached for Cathy, and she stepped back, just out of reach. He frowned, puzzled, and she looked at him dispassionately.

“Bad move, Owen. You really should have drunk the wine. You would have just drifted off to sleep and never woken up. So much simpler and more pleasant for both of us. Now we have to do it the hard way.”

She reached inside the dressing gown and brought out a disrupter. Owen blinked stupidly at the energy weapon in her hand, and then old trained reflexes kicked in, and he threw himself out of bed as Cathy fired. He hit the floor rolling, still wrapped in his sheets. The bed exploded into flames behind him. Cathy cursed briefly, put away the gun and drew a long knife from inside the dressing gown. Owen wondered briefly what the hell else she had hidden in there, and then lurched to his feet tearing the enveloping sheets away from him. He had two minutes until the gun’s energy crystals recharged. He backed away as she advanced on him with the knife and looked desperately around him for some kind of weapon. Cathy’s face was calm but determined, as though she was working on some minor puzzle whose solution for the moment escaped her.

“Cathy, I really think we need to talk about this.”

“Too late for talk, Owen.”

“If this is some kind of joke, I don’t find it in the least bit funny.”

“No joke, Owen. I’m canceling our contract. The escape clause is a bit of a bastard, but that’s life for you. Or rather, death. Don’t struggle and I’ll make it quick.”

“Whatever they’re paying, I’ll double it.”

“You can’t buy yourself out of trouble this time, dear. Now stand still and let me do what I have to do. At least have the decency to die with dignity.”

Owen realized he’d ended up back by the burning bed and winced away from the leaping flames. He drew himself up to his full height and glared at his mistress. His nakedness rather distracted from the effect. “Cathy, you don’t really think you can beat me in a fight, do you? I am the Deathstalker, after all.”

“And I was trained in the House of Joy. They teach us all kinds of things there. You’d be surprised. We’re both a little out of shape, but you’ve really let yourself go, Owen. If the knife doesn’t get you, the gun will, once it’s recharged. Say goodbye, dear. It’s been fun; let’s not spoil it.”

She lunged forward gracefully while she was still talking, the long knife reaching for his head. Owen side-stepped at the last moment, and the edge of the knife grated across his ribs as Cathy sailed past him. She recovered her balance in a moment and turned to face him again. Owen noted with disgust that she wasn’t even breathing hard. The long cut burned across his ribs, and he could feel blood coursing down his side. Much as he hated to admit it, Cathy clearly was in much better shape than he.

The thought sparked a sudden anger in him, and as she came forward again, Owen fell easily into the defensive stance he should have been using all along. His weapon master had spent enough time hammering it into him. Cathy lunged again, and he stepped gracefully aside, seized her arm in one simple movement and twisted it up behind her back. Her own speed and impetus slammed the hold into place, and she gasped in pain as he applied a steady pressure. Her fingers opened reluctantly releasing the knife. It fell to the floor, but Cathy kicked it out of reach before Owen could even think about going after it. And then she twisted strangely, pulled free of his grasp and sent Owen flying before he knew what was happening. He scrambled hurriedly to his feet, looking about him for the

knife. Cathy pirouetted once, her long leg flying up, and her foot hit Owen expertly just above the ear. He managed to roll with some of the blow, but he still hit the floor hard again, his head ringing.

Great, thought Owen, as he struggled to get his feet under him. All the assassins that could have come after me, and I had to get a double-jointed contortionist kick-boxer. Well, when in doubt improvise. And if that fails, cheat.

Cathy came at him again, moving almost too fast for the eye to follow. Owen grabbed his clothes from the chair they'd been laid out on and threw them into Cathy's face. For a second she was blind and off balance, and that was all it took for Owen to snatch up the knife and thrust it between her ribs. For a long moment they remained as they were, Cathy on her feet, him on one knee, both breathing hard. Blood poured from Cathy's heaving side. The clothes fell away from her face. She gripped his shoulders fiercely, as though to hold herself up, but all her strength went out of her, and she sank to the floor, still holding onto him. He eased her down and sat with her, holding her tenderly in his arms. She coughed painfully, and blood ran from her mouth.

"Damn," she said thickly. "You've killed me, Owen."

"Yes, I think I have. Why, Cathy? Why did you do it?"

"You've been outlawed. The news came through while I was getting your drink. All your titles, lands, properties, and monies have been seized. It's death to shelter or aid you. Anyone who brings your head, preferably unattached to the body, to the Imperial Court on Golgotha will be rewarded with the Lordship of Virimonde and half your monies. Somebody really wants you dead, Owen."

She cleared her throat and spat, and there was more blood. Owen held her tightly. *Outlawed?* He tried to make sense of it and couldn't. In the space of a few moments, his whole world had gone mad. Cathy coughed painfully and gritted her teeth against the blood. Her hands tightened on his arms, and he held her until the spasm passed. He didn't know what else to do.

"Something else you should know, Owen." Her voice was low and blurred now, and he had to concentrate to make it out. "I'm a spy. From the Imperial Court. They planted me on you, all those years ago. I've been feeding them information ever since."

"Hush, love. Don't tire yourself. I know. I've always known. It doesn't matter."

Cathy looked at him. "You knew? And you never said anything?"

"What was there to say? My AI broke your cover right after you moved in with me. He's good at things like that. I never did anything about it because it was easier to have a spy I knew about, and could keep an eye on, than have to identify and deal with whoever replaced you. And besides, I was fond of you."

"I was fond of you," said Cathy quietly. "I never did have a head for business."

She leaned forward till her head was resting on his shoulder, shuddered slightly, and stopped breathing. Owen held her in his arms as the life went out of her, and then sat quietly with her, rocking her gently like a sleeping child. After a while he let go and laid her out on the floor. She seemed somehow smaller and more fragile now. He looked down at himself and grimaced at her blood and his on his skin. He picked up his shift from the floor and mopped at himself with it. He started to put it on, and then let it drop to the floor again. Nothing seemed to matter much now. The crackling of the flames from his burning bed caught his attention, and he thought vaguely that he should call someone to do something about it. He activated his comm implant, removed the Do Not Disturb and accessed his home's AI.

"Ozymandius ..."

"Shut up and listen," said his AI. "You're in a lot of trouble, Owen. You've been outlawed, and there's a hell of a price on your head."

"I know."

“So does your head of security. He’s on his way to you right now, with as many guards as he could muster, with the explicit intention of separating your head from your shoulders. You never did pay him enough. You’ve got to get out of there, now.”

“Cathy just tried to murder me. I had to kill her.”

“I’m sorry, Owen, but we don’t have time for this. Everyone in the Standing is probably heading for you with murder on their mind. You don’t have any friends here anymore. Use the hidden exit, make your way through the secret passages and get to your private flyer. By the time you’ve done that, I should have a clearer picture of what’s going on, and just possibly I’ll have worked out what you should do next.”

Owen padded over to the bedroom door, opened it slightly and peered out into the corridor. There was no one there, but he thought he could hear someone in the distance, drawing closer. He shut the door and locked it, and then walked back to pick up his clothes. He dressed quickly, ignoring the blood on his shirt and skin. Whatever happened, he was damned if he was going to face it naked.

“Oz, why have I been outlawed? It doesn’t make sense. I left the court and came here precisely because I wanted to avoid getting involved in the kind of intrigues that get you outlawed. I’m no danger to anyone. I just wanted to be left alone to get on with my histories.”

“The court didn’t give any specific reason, but then, it doesn’t have to. The word of the Empress is law. I suppose, as a Deathstalker, your name could be useful to any number of factions, in and out of the court. As I understand it, the Empress took a personal interest in you. And you know what that usually means. ...”

“Yeah. The last time she took a personal interest in someone, his remains ended up being sent to seventeen different planets simultaneously, as an example not to make waves. All right, I’m dressed. Open the stairway.”

The holo of the original Deathstalker swung sideways, revealing a narrow passageway. A light appeared deep in the tunnel. Like all good castles, the Deathstalker Standing had several secret doors and hidden tunnels. Partly out of tradition, but mostly because the Deathstalkers had always felt it a good idea to have an ace or two hidden up their sleeves. Even Owen’s head of security didn’t know about these tunnels. Owen pulled on his best cloak and buckled on his sword, picked up Cathy’s disrupter, and plunged into the narrow opening. The holo swung shut behind him.

He was still having trouble believing this was all really happening. One minute life was good and full and everything made sense, and the next up was down, in was out, and people he’d known for years were trying to kill him. The last time he’d felt like this was when they’d brought him the news that his father was dead. Cut down in the street as an enemy of the Empire. No one ever said why, or what he’d done, and it wasn’t safe to ask. Owen hadn’t really been surprised. His father had been plotting and intriguing with this faction or that all of Owen’s life. *A man should always concentrate on what he’s best at*, was all his father ever had to say on the subject.

Only it turned out he wasn’t as clever as he’d thought, and Owen became the Deathstalker when he was sixteen. He’d tried to mourn his father, but he’d hardly known the man. They never spent much time together. His father was always off on some new scheme, chasing money or influence or fame. He wasn’t noticeably successful. Owen’s mother died when he was still too young to remember her, so most of his life had been spent under the governance of a series of guardians, tutors, and friends of the Family. His only real friend, certainly the only one he ever trusted, was the Family AI, Ozymandius.

He’d been very fond of Cathy, but he never trusted her. It surprised him that her death hurt him so much.

All his father’s warrior training and skill in politics hadn’t been enough to save him, and Owen had drawn a lesson from that. He’d never been much interested in current politics, so he’d found it easy

enough to turn away the various cabals that came sniffing around him once he inherited the title. He made it clear he was only interested in his histories and did his best to present an image of himself as dull, hopelessly studious, and completely self-involved. He dismissed his weapons master, turned his back on the court and its politics, and bought the Lordship of Virimonde, way out on the Rim, at a carefully safe distance from the Empress and her people. He wasn't going to make the same mistakes his father made.

Only somehow it had all gone wrong anyway.

He kept turning it over and over in his mind as he quickly made his way down the passage. Lights turned themselves on before him and turned themselves off after him, so that he moved in a constant pool of light through the darkness. He couldn't have been outlawed for no reason. It had to be some kind of ghastly mistake. If he could just get in touch with the right people, find out what had gone wrong and explain everything, then maybe they'd put things right again, and he could have his life back. But to do that, he had to avoid his enemies and stay alive. Which was easier said than done. Maybe he'd be better off heading for the Standing's communications center. He could barricade himself in, call for help and hope he found a sympathetic ear. Anything was better than just running blindly.

"Oz, what's the state of communications at the moment?"

"Pretty bad. All the main comm channels have been jammed. Local channels are okay, but I don't know for how long. Either way, it's clear you're not going to be allowed to plead your case. The more I look into this, the more convinced I am this was all set up at the highest levels. Hold it; the local channels just went down. All of them. I can keep this private channel open for a while, but I can't guarantee how long. In fact, there's not much I can guarantee anymore, except that you have to keep moving. Your head of security has burst into your bedroom with his people. They're all armed, some with energy weapons. He's found Cathy's body. Now they're tearing the place apart, looking for a hidden exit. They're being very thorough, but they seem to have forgotten my sensors. The head of security is not pleased at your absence. People can probably hear him being not pleased some distance away."

"You can tell me all this later," Owen cut in. "What are the chances of his finding the hidden exit?"

"Not good. They're really not very bright, and I'm scrambling the sensor equipment they brought with them. I told you, you should have let me choose your security people. This bunch hasn't got a clue, and they're getting nowhere fast. I feel like shouting out 'Hot!' and 'Cold!' just to encourage them."

"Don't you dare."

"Spoilsport."

Owen shook his head. "If I ever find out who programmed that sense of humor into you, I'll have him strung up by his giblets. Could we please concentrate on the matter in hand?"

"Of course, Owen. Do you still have the Deathstalker ring?"

"Of course I've still got it. It'd take half a tub of grease to get the damn thing off my finger. Why?"

"I've just discovered a file hidden deep within my memories, designed only to reveal itself in the event of your being outlawed. Someone was thinking ahead, though his motives remain unclear at this time. Apparently the ring is very important. It's a key of some kind. According to the file, you're supposed to take it to Mistworld, where you will find help waiting for you."

"Is that all?" said Owen, after a while.

"I'm afraid so. However, I feel I should point out that if there's one hidden file in my memories there may well be more with further information, presumably to be triggered by future events."

"This has my father's fingerprints all over it," said Owen disgustedly. "Even after he's dead, he

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