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Deathstalker Return

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Extract

Last night I dreamed of Hazel d'Ark.

Thief, clonelegger, confidence trickster, warrior . . . heroine. Official legend made her fearless and noble, a saint and a martyr, but she was none of those things. Her dreams were small and petty, and she never gave a damn for causes or politics, but still . . . she was magnificent. She took on everything the Empire could throw against her, and never once backed down. She had her inner demons, and fought those just as fiercely. When it mattered, she did the right thing. Again and again and again.

In my dream, I see her so clearly. Poor, lost Hazel; with her sharp pointed face, the *Go to hell* defiance of her bright green eyes, her ratty mane of red hair. Her pout and her scowl and her brief flashing smiles. She moved like a fighter because life had never taught her how to be tender. She fought so hard to be able to call her life her own, and much good it did her. She won nothing she valued, and lost the only man she ever cared for.

Owen: you lied to me. You promised me we'd always be together, for ever and ever. Oh, Owen: I never told you I loved you . . .

She won every battle, and still lost the war. And in the end, there was nothing left but the darkness that had threatened to overwhelm her all her life; so she ran away into it, and was never seen again.

Last night I dreamed of Hazel d'Ark. She'd finally come home. She was smiling. And even in my dream, I wondered why I wasn't glad to see her.

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In the Footsteps of Legends

Lewis Deathstalker and his rebel companions had been travelling together in their hijacked yacht the *Hereward* for almost two days now. They hadn't even reached the edge of the core planets yet, and already they were all mulling over detailed plans on how best to kill each other. Occasionally they'd take time out to consider less important problems, such as where the hell they were going, or how best to overthrow Finn Durandal, find the lost Owen Deathstalker and Hazel d'Ark, stop the Terror before it destroyed the whole of existence, and return the Empire to its Golden Age; but first things first.

The trouble was, the *Hereward* was essentially a pleasure craft, only designed to carry its captain and a few very close friends in style and comfort, so the four outlaws and their eight-foot-tall reptiloid companion were finding things a bit cramped, not to mention distinctly claustrophobic. Lewis sat slumped in the captain's chair on the bridge, swivelling slowly back and forth, just for something to do. The ship's AI Ozymandias was running all the things that mattered, and the *Hereward*'s top-of-the-range security systems meant nothing less than a starcruiser could detect them, except by accident. Since of late most conversations tended to escalate very quickly into shouting matches, a strained silence currently occupied the bridge. So Lewis swivelled slowly back and forth, studying his reluctant partners in turn.

Jesamine Flowers sat beside him on the only other chair, scowling at the protein cube and cup of distilled water that made up the main meal of the day. She was tall, blonde,

heart-stoppingly beautiful, and voluptuously glamorous, because her role as the Empire's premier star and diva demanded it, but after all this time away from her beauticians and stylists, the strain was beginning to show. She still looked marvellous, she just didn't look like a goddess any more. Lewis didn't care, but Jesamine did. It had been a long time since she'd had to settle for being merely marvellous. But still, she had given up being a superstar, the worshipped and adored Queen-to-be, in order to cleave to her true love, Lewis. She'd given up everything for him; and he had vowed never to make her regret it.

And although he loved her with all his heart, Lewis still had to wonder what she saw in him. Lewis wasn't a god. He wasn't even handsome. His face was broad and harshly featured. Full of character, perhaps, but still almost defiantly ugly. He could have had it fixed, but he honestly never saw the point. He was what he was, inside and out. He was also short and blocky, well-muscled because his old jobs as Paragon and Champion demanded it, and so broad-chested that from a distance he often seemed as wide as he was tall. He kept his black hair short, so he wouldn't have to bother about it, and only shaved regularly because Jesamine insisted on it. He had surprisingly mild brown eyes and a rare but good-natured smile. He was a Deathstalker; a warrior by choice, and an outlaw through grim necessity.

He and Jesamine shared the captain's cabin. It had all the comforts that could be expected, and more besides, but Jesamine still found plenty to complain about. She tried to be humorous about it, but of late the jokes had become less funny and more and more pointed.

Lewis let his chair carry him slowly round until his gaze fell upon Rose Constantine. A blood-red flower with more thorns than most, the Wild Rose of the Arena. She was sitting cross-legged on the steel floor, her back flat against the wall, entirely comfortable and relaxed as she polished the blade of her sword with long sensual strokes. She was still wearing her trademark, tightly cut crimson leathers, the colour of freshly spilled blood from her gleaming thighboots

to her tight high collar. Rose believed in being self-contained. She was exactly seven feet tall, dark of hair and pale of face, lithely muscled, full-breasted and entirely terrifying. In a Golden Age of reason and civilised behaviour, Rose Constantine was a psychopathic killer, a butcher of men and women and aliens, for whom slaughter was sex, and the killing stroke her orgasm.

Sitting awkwardly on the other side of the cabin, and as far away from Rose as he could get, was that most notable thief, conman and devout coward, Brett Random. Mousy-haired and blandly handsome, and a likeable enough rogue, nothing and no one was safe when his restless hands were around. He had no scruples, fewer morals, and honesty was not in him. He'd never met a problem he couldn't best solve by running away from it. His friends were fond of saying that you always knew where you were with Brett; he'd always let you down. And yet somehow he'd found the strength of will, if not of character, to break from the arch traitor Finn Durandal, and join the side of the angels. Certainly no one was more surprised than him. It might have had something to do with the fact that Brett claimed to be descended from two of the greatest heroes of the old Rebellion: Jack Random and Ruby Journey. Though it should perhaps be pointed out that the only person who believed that was Brett Random.

Brett was also a minor league esper, as a result of having the extremely dangerous esper drug force fed him by the Durandal. He had once made brief but striking mental contact with Rose Constantine, and now they were linked on some level neither of them fully comprehended. Brett was almost entirely sure that it wasn't love. On the grounds that Rose scared the shit out of him. Brett and Rose slept in the only other cabin. Rose slept in the bed, and Brett slept on the floor. When he could sleep. He was currently studying the contents of a data crystal he'd acquired from the cargo bay, on a hand-held viewscreen, and sniggering quietly to himself.

That just left Saturday, the reptiloid from the planet Shard. Lewis didn't have to turn his chair to look at the alien behind him. He could feel Saturday's lurking presence

at the back of the cabin, like the loud ticking of an unexploded bomb. Saturday (the reptiloid had had some trouble with the human concept of naming; *on Shard we all know who we are*) was eight foot tall, massively muscled, his huge frame covered in dull bottle-green scales, with heavy back legs and a long spiked tail. He had two small gripping arms with very nasty claws set high up on his chest, and a wide wedge-shaped head whose main features were two deep-set eyes and a mouth full of more teeth than seemed possible. One look at him, and everyone else felt an immediate atavistic need to run for the trees. His people were new to the Empire. They delighted in the hunt, fought and killed each other for fun, or possibly art, and were currently fascinated by the human concept of *war*. Everyone else in the Empire was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Since his species apparently didn't need to sleep, Saturday spent the nights alone on the bridge, happily humming some ancient song about the joys of dismembering one's enemy before killing and eating him, while watching the instruments for any signs of pursuit. Or imminent collision, since they couldn't afford to announce a flight plan. On the whole, the reptiloid was easy enough to get along with, but Lewis had decided that if Saturday asked one more time, *Are we there yet?* he was going to shoot the reptiloid in the head, on general principles. He didn't think anyone else would object. And if anyone did, he might well shoot them too.

Two men, two women and a reptiloid pretty much filled the available bridge space. The two cabins were too claustrophobic and thin-walled to do anything other than sleep in, and the rest of the yacht was taken up with the oversized engine room and the packed cargo bay. So the Outlaws stuck together on the bridge, and tried not to get on each other's nerves. Mostly by not speaking at all unless absolutely necessary. It always ended in arguments. It didn't help that they didn't really have anything in common other than the fact of being Outlaws, and that Finn Durandal wanted them dead.

Of them all, Brett seemed happiest, for the moment. Because the data crystal he was studying so intently was just

one of many filled with alien porn. In fact, the cargo bay was stuffed full of them. Brett had studied the contents list on the bridge computers, and then several of the crystals themselves, and had declared the alien porn to be of the highest quality, with quite superior production values. Everyone else was happy to take his word for it.

Lewis scowled at the half-eaten protein cube and the empty cup before him. Jesamine had a point. This stuff might be nourishing, but it was no substitute for food. It didn't actually taste bad; the problem was both cube and water tasted of nothing at all, and as a result mouth and tongue wanted absolutely nothing to do with them. Forcing the stuff down you was a triumph of will over instinct. Unfortunately, the original captain of the *Hereward* had only recently landed on Logres, and hadn't got around to replenishing his stores. Which meant what supplies remained were very basic and severely limited in number. So that even with the most efficient recycling, and the most drastically reduced rations, Lewis and his companions were going to run out of food and water all too soon, if they didn't find some planet where they could land safely. And there weren't many worlds left in the Empire where Outlaws were welcome; not in these civilised and law-abiding days.

'I swear, this stuff probably tastes better coming up than it does going down,' said Jesamine, staring disgustedly at the barely nibbled protein cube in her hand. 'Lepers who eat their own extremities would turn up what was left of their noses at this. And the last time I smelt anything like this it was floating in a bucket marked "Hospital Medical Waste".'

'Thank you for sharing that with us,' said Brett, not looking up from his display screen. 'Why don't you have some nice distilled water to take your mind off it? That stuff's so pure it tastes of something you drank three weeks ago.'

'I know the provisions are vile, and I hate to think how many times it's already been recycled through someone else's system, but it's all there is,' Lewis said tiredly. 'It'll do to keep us alive, till we get where we're going. Try not to think about it.'

'I am a star!' snapped Jesamine. 'My palate has been

trained and sensitised to experience only the very best of the culinary arts! I am a diva! I have whole armies of fans who would crawl naked across broken glass just to chill my wine for me! I am not accustomed to slumming it! God, I'd kill for a champagne mouthwash . . .'

'Sorry again, one and all,' the ship's AI Ozymandias said cheerfully. 'But it seems the yacht's previous captain put all his money into upgrading his defences, and didn't have anything left over for luxuries like food transformation tech. On the bright side, we're faster than most starcruisers, and we've got sensors and stealth capabilities you wouldn't believe.'

Lewis looked thoughtfully at the control panels. 'Yes; I've been wondering about that. Perhaps you can explain why a simple pleasure yacht should have an H-class stardrive. They're usually reserved for military and peacekeeper ships.'

Brett looked up from his viewscreen and smiled at Lewis. 'I can answer that one. This ship is as fast as it is because it has to be. Smuggling alien porn is a death sentence on a whole lot of alien planets, for all kinds of political and religious reasons. And the Imperial Courts aren't too keen on it either, because . . . well, mostly because they're a bunch of prudes. Same reason for the ship's force shields and heavy-duty security systems. This guy couldn't afford to get caught.'

'He's probably right, sir Deathstalker,' said Oz in his relentlessly cheerful voice which Lewis just knew was going to start seriously grating on his nerves soon. 'Choosing the *Hereward* to hijack could be seen as a classic case of Good News, Bad News. The good news is that at the speed we're travelling, the Empire's going to have a hard time finding anything that can catch up with us. The bad news is that if we run into anyone who knows what the *Hereward* usually trafficks in, they'll probably try and blow us apart on general principles.'

Perfect, thought Lewis. *Just bloody perfect. I'll bet Owen didn't have these problems when he was starting out.*

'You know,' the AI said chattily, 'for a Golden Age, Humanity has become really quite boring and inhibited in some areas. In Owen's day, you could get your hands on

practically anything, for a price. In fact, go back a couple of centuries, and I could have got you into some live shows where the action would have steamed up your eyeballs and made them clang together. Clean living and decency is vastly overrated, if you ask me.'

Lewis tried to stop scowling. It was making his head ache. 'Oz . . .'

'Yes, sir! Right here and ready to serve your every wish, sir Deathstalker!'

'God, I hate a cheerful AI,' said Jesamine. 'It's like those recorded announcements you get at starports, when they apologise for your ship running late and screwing up all your connections. You know they don't really mean it, the bastards. Every time I hear a computer getting cheerful, I know bad news is coming.'

'Let me get this straight, Oz,' said Lewis, determined not to get sidetracked. 'You claim to be the same AI that served my ancestor, the blessed Owen, two centuries ago during the Great Rebellion. Yes?'

'Well, yes and no,' said Ozymandias. 'I'm not entirely him. He was destroyed twice. First by Owen and his companions, when it was discovered that the original Ozymandias had been secretly programmed by the Empire to spy on them. The AIs of Shub managed to preserve a few fragments of the original AI personality, and built a new AI around it. Then, later, Owen and Hazel destroyed that Oz, after they found it was spying on them for Shub. Not a very lucky personality, when you get right down to it. I'd be worried if I was superstitious, which I'm programmed not to be. Anyway, the AIs of Shub built me around what fragments remained of the second Oz. So I'm not, strictly speaking, Ozymandias. I am a copy of a copy. But I'm as close as you're going to get, so make the most of me because I'm bloody good at what I do.'

'Hold everything,' said Lewis. 'Are you saying you're a part of Shub? Another of their voices, like the robots I met? And why do I know you're going to say "Yes and no"?'

'I don't know,' said Oz. 'Maybe you're psychic. I am a sub-personality, a fairly separate sub-routine with a certain amount of autonomy. So I'm me, but I'm Shub as well, at a

distance. I'm all yours, ready and eager to obey your every command, but Shub looks over my shoulder from time to time. And if you're confused, think how I feel. Shub has raised multi-tasking to an art form.'

'Great,' said Rose, not looking up from polishing her sword. 'We've stolen the only ship in the Empire whose AI suffers from multiple personality disorder.'

'And I hate these clothes too,' said Jesamine, following a logic only she understood.

Though she did have a point. She and Brett had both had to change their clothing, on the grounds that what they'd been wearing had become more than a little battered and blood-stained during their escape from Logres. (Lewis had scrubbed his armour clean, Rose had ignored the state of her leathers, and Saturday had licked the gore off his scales with a limber virtuosity that impressed and disturbed the others.) The only spare clothes on board the *Hereward* came from the captain's closet. Fortunately, it held a fairly wide collection. Either the previous captain entertained a lot of friends, or he liked to play dress-up on long voyages.

Jesamine was now wearing a series of overlapping silk creations, in dazzling and fiercely clashing hues, all heavily scented and perfumed. On first seeing herself in the mirror, Jesamine had angrily announced she looked like a Mistworld doxy. Brett had asked her how she knew, and the conversation had deteriorated rapidly. Brett himself was now wearing a thermal suit with built-in chameleon tech, so that he could fade into any background. He was very pleased with it, on the grounds that it opened up whole new fields of avoiding trouble, and not being found when there were dangerous things that needed doing. Brett firmly believed that fighting was something other people did. And feats of heroism and derring-do were for people who needed their heads tested. Being around Rose had done nothing to change his opinion.

Lewis knew this conversation wasn't going to go anywhere good and was racking his brains for some way to derail it, when Brett suddenly got a fit of the giggles. Almost despite himself, Lewis leaned out of his chair to get a look at what Brett had on his viewscreen now. Lewis had checked out

some of the earlier examples of alien porn, just out of curiosity, and had to say it did nothing much for him. Some of the human/alien interactions were . . . interesting, but he found most of the alien/alien material frankly incomprehensible.

His first reaction on finding out the nature of the *Hereward*'s cargo was to declare it should be seized and held as evidence. Brett had quickly reminded Lewis that he wasn't a Paragon any more, and Lewis had scowled and muttered and finally said, *Oh hell; drop the lot into space. We can use the extra room.* Brett nearly had a coronary. *Dump it? Are you crazy? Do you know how much we can sell this shit for on Mistworld? Look, if we're going to be rebels on the run, we're going to need working capital. Lots of it.* Lewis had finally agreed, in principle at least, but he still wasn't happy about it. He took a look at what was amusing Brett, and felt his headache coming back again.

'Brett . . . what is that? I mean, those two whatever-they-are aren't even touching each other! And even if they were, they don't appear to have anything that would make it worthwhile anyway.'

Brett considered the scene. 'Maybe it's a mood piece. You know, all in the way they're looking at each other.'

'They haven't got any eyes either!'

Brett shrugged. 'Maybe you had to be there . . . It reminded me of a girl I knew once, that's all.'

'Don't go there, Lewis,' said Jesamine. 'Trust me on this.'

Brett changed the scene on his screen and then sat up sharply, a wide grin spreading across his shifty features. 'Well, hello! Oh, I do not believe this . . . I just tapped in a search on *Celebrities*, and I appear to have found a rather sporty scenario featuring a certain celebrity not a million miles from where I'm sitting . . .'

Jesamine was quickly on her feet in a flurry of silks, and she stormed across the bridge to glare over Brett's shoulder. Lewis quickly joined her, peering over Brett's other shoulder. The display screen showed what certainly seemed to be Jesamine Flowers and a half alien woman getting very friendly with each other in a setting where clothing was

clearly optional, if not downright discouraged. Lewis could feel his face heating up.

'That is not me!' Jesamine said firmly. 'That is a lookalike, probably fresh out of the body shop. I did do a few ... artistic studies, very early on in my career, but they were strictly solo poses for the serious collector and appreciator of the nude form. I never did anything like *that*, even when I was touring in rep. I do have my standards, darling. And I haven't been able to get my ankles that far behind my ears since I was nineteen. Who or what is that *person* she's doing it with?'

'That is Nikki Sixteen,' Brett said happily. 'An old acquaintance of mine. She's half N'Jarr, all woman, and one hell of a performer. Go, girl, go!'

'Wait a minute,' said Lewis. 'I thought the N'Jarr were those squishy little mushroom people?'

'That's the larval stage,' Brett said. 'The final adult form is largely insectile. Exactly what Nikki's human and N'Jarr parents ever saw in each other has always been a mystery to me. Presumably love really is blind after all. She's called Nikki Sixteen because she's one of sixteen broodmates. She's the black sheep of the family, if you can apply the term to someone with antennae, compound eyes and six breasts. God, look at her flex ... What a healthy, enthusiastic and limber soul she is ... Are you sure that isn't you, Jesamine?'

'That's Miss Flowers to you, you degenerate. That is definitely not me, and I can prove it. I have a small purple birthmark on my ... person. It's always covered with makeup when the role calls for stage nudity. And besides, that doesn't even look like me; not really. My breasts aren't that big, the nose is all wrong, and I wouldn't do *that* if you paid me. Lewis ... Lewis!'

'Sorry,' said Lewis. 'I got distracted.'

'Go and sit down in your chair again, dear. And push your eyeballs back into their sockets. As for you, Random, I strongly suggest you find something else to look at before I take that data crystal out of the viewer and ram it so far up your left nostril it will shoot out of your right ear.'

'All right, all right, I'm changing the scene!' said Brett. 'Touchy, touchy. Some people have no sense of humour.'

Jesamine gave Brett a long thoughtful look. 'Brett Random,' she said finally. 'You know, I'm sure I've seen you somewhere before.'

Brett froze, his face automatically falling into innocent mode while his internal systems panicked. His well-honed sense of paranoia was never far from overdrive at the best of times. He smiled winningly at Jesamine while his mind worked frantically, trying to remember if he'd ever run a scam on her or any of her people. He was pretty sure he hadn't, but there was no denying he'd got around in his time, and given the sheer number of confidence tricks and stings he'd pulled down the years, on any number of celebrities with more ego than common sense, who thought their position made them invulnerable . . .

'Oh, I'm sure I'd remember meeting such a great star as yourself, Miss Flowers,' he said smoothly. 'I just have that sort of face. People always think they know me from somewhere.'

Jesamine sniffed, unconvinced, but let it go rather than get sucked into yet another argument. 'I do meet a lot of people. Or at least I did. I can't believe my whole life went down the toilet so quickly. And I certainly don't believe my fanbase will accept any of the terrible things that bastard Finn has been saying about me on the news broadcasts. I mean, they're my *fans*. What's the point of having fans if they won't stick with you? Some did. You saw them, Lewis, demonstrating against my imprisonment, outside Traitors' Hall.'

'You said it yourself, Jes. The public can be very fickle. I couldn't believe they'd turn on me so easily either.' Lewis tapped his fingertips together and frowned down at them. 'You can bet Finn will have all his best propaganda people working day and night on discrediting the both of us. They'll dig into our respective pasts, and dig up every bit of dirt they can find.'

'There's dirt in your past, sir Deathstalker?' said Brett. 'I'm shocked. Shocked!'

'Shut up, Brett.'

'Shutting up right now, sir.'

'What they can't find, they'll probably make up,' said Lewis. 'You can't be an honest Paragon without making some enemies. People only too willing to tell tales about you, in the name of revenge. What about you, Jes? Is there much in your past they could find that they could use against you?'

'Well, rather a lot, actually,' said Jesamine. 'I've never pretended to be a saint, darling. And a certain amount of bad behaviour is expected of you, when you're a star. It's affairs of the heart and sort-of-secret assignations that keep your face in the gossip shows. If no one's talking about you, how can you be a star? I admit it, I was a slut sometimes. It was good for business. And you have to throw the odd temper tantrum in public, or no one will take you seriously. You have to give the media stories, or they start making up their own.'

Lewis glowered in Brett's direction. 'I don't suppose there's any point in asking you, is there?'

'None at all,' Brett said briskly. 'I'm a scoundrel, and proud of it. The good Lord put me on Logres to shear the sheep, and I have been a busy, busy boy. Wherever rogues and villains gather, my name is on everyone's lips. I am a Random's Bastard, and I glory in it.'

'Then what are you doing here, with half the Empire after you?' Rose said calmly.

Brett pouted sulkily. 'One moment of conscience in an otherwise spotless life, and my whole career is over. I could spit. I don't even want to think what my old comrades will be saying when they discover I've hooked up with you.'

'I've done nothing I'm ashamed of,' said Rose.

'Yes, but that covers a hell of a lot of ground,' said Brett. 'Some of the things you did for the Durandal . . .'

'Yes, by all means,' said Jesamine. 'Let's talk about that. You've been only too willing to talk about yourself and your many triumphs during the past few days, but you've hardly said a word about your involvement with Finn bloody Durandal.'

Oh *shit*, thought Brett, his heart sinking.