

THE EXPLOSIVE NEW MATADOR NOVEL
BY THE AUTHOR OF THE ALBINO KNIFE

STEVE PERRY

IN THE BATTLE FOR HONOR,
THE WEAPON
OF CHOICE IS...

BLACK STEEL



*"Perry... excels at hard-boiled writing, flashing dialogue
and stripped-down action!" —THE OREGONIAN*

Black Steel

By Steve Perry

Chapter ONE

DEATH CAME FOR him by mistake.

Sleel had left the commercial hopper and was walking in the shade under the protective gamp toward the airport terminal when a woman with a sword stepped out of a darker shadow. There were other people moving under the billowy canopy, but Sleel knew immediately that the swordswoman had come for him.

"Stupid," Sleel said, shaking his head. He was wearing the matador uniform, dark gray orthoskins, spun dotic boots, and bilateral spetsdods. The would-be assassin was a good eight meters away. She wasn't a big woman, but size didn't mean much when it came to this kind of thing; it was ability that counted.

Still, even if he suddenly went blind, Sleel could hit her before she moved a meter. She wasn't flashing a projectile weapon around; she'd have to get close to use that blade, and that was just plain foolish. And because it was so suicidal, it made Sleel think again. Maybe she had a partner? Since she didn't have a prayer of getting to Sleel before she ate a load of shocktox, something was definitely wrong with this picture.

Sleel scanned the people around him, extended his perception to its fullest, searching for another enemy.

Overhead the neosilk gamp fluttered in the tropical afternoon breeze, making tent noises. Some of the other passengers on the flight had taken notice of the fern with the sword and were viewing her with alarm. The smell of hot plastcrete rose and mingled with the hopper's fuel exhaust residue and machine lube from the luggage carrier that rolled past in the Hawaiian sunshine. The air was heavy with humidity and warm even under the canopy. Just another day in paradise, right?

If there were others lining up to attack him, Sleel couldn't spot them. Could it be just the one woman?

Was she really that stupid, to think she could just stroll over and carve one of the galaxy's best bodyguards, just like that? Somebody who outgunned her with two fully loaded spetsdods to her sword?

Apparently so. The swordswoman smiled, a thin-lipped and tight expression. She had chocolate skin and very white teeth, with red-brown hair curled tightly into a cap over her skull. She wore freight handler's coveralls with the sleeves rolled up, and there was a tattoo on her left upper arm a couple of centimeters above her elbow. The sword was about a meter long, slightly curved, thicker than a foil but thinner than a saber. Some kind of shiny handguard protected the grip. The blade was black. Maybe it was stacked carbon or squashed plastic to be that color. Maybe she was wearing body armor under the coverall; maybe she thought that would protect her.

Lotta maybes here. The fem wanted him to see her coming that was obvious. Otherwise she could have just waited until Sleel passed and skewered him from behind. The swordswoman couldn't miss seeing the spetsdods, and yet she was willing to go up against them with nothing more than what was

essentially a real long knife, its use limited to arm's-length range. She had to have a reason to believe she had a chance of making it. What?

Sleel took it all in as he stopped and stood, waiting.

The assassin started to move toward Sleel. She managed half a step before Sleel snapped up his left hand and fired his spetsdod. The little back-of-the-hand dartgun gave a dry cough and spat a missile loaded with shocktox. The tiny dart hit the swordplayer on the forehead directly above the bridge of her nose.

Right between the eyes.

So much for that.

The swordplayer blinked but kept coming.

Sleel frowned.

The bodyguard fired thrice more, one dart for each of the assassin's hands, one for the tattoo.

Nothing. The woman kept coming. She was almost close enough to swing the sword. She was laughing soundlessly now.

Well, shit! Should have gone for the eyes

Sleel dodged, letting his body flow into the Ninety-seven Steps, his feet describing the last dance of Bamboo Pond, his hand lifting for the natural flow into Arc of Air, reacting with the proper patterns to the shape of the attack. It was almost a reflex after so many years of practice.

The assassin twisted, altered her cut, and tried to follow Sleel. She was pretty good with that blade. Sleel ducked as the sword slashed the air over his head. The matador skipped into Neon Chain, and drove his fist into the woman's left kidney with more force than he'd intended. Fear did that to a man and anger at being made afraid added power to the strike.

The swordswoman staggered, and Sleel finished the dance by shifting to Helicopter, spinning and hammering the woman's temple with the edge of his knotted hand.

The assassin fell, the sword clattering onto the plastcrete. The blade rang like metal when it hit.

A man yelled something hoarsely, and a woman cursed.

Sleel spun, looking for more attackers. There were none.

He came up from his defensive crouch. There was a sharp gingery smell in the air, some local pollen, probably, that reminded him of his childhood. All of a moment, he felt like he was nine years old. He shook the feeling. He had other things to worry about. Like: What the fuck was this all about?

The port cools were apologetic as to how the would-be assassin had gotten past them. Sleel showed them his ID cube and his permit for his weapons, but they were more interested in their own loss of face. How'd a fem with a fucking unsecured sword get into the passenger area?

Sleel on the other hand wanted to know why the woman had come at him. And how the still-unconscious woman had taken four shocktox darts and kept coming. That was why the fem had been smiling before she'd moved; she'd known the spetsdods wouldn't stop her. Maybe she hadn't known that matadors were as adept with their bodies as their handguns. Or maybe she'd thought the sword made up for it. Whatever, it made for a nasty surprise. Sleel remembered Dirisha saying something once about some world where people worked with poison fish and had developed a kind of immunity to certain spetsdod chems. Maybe that was it.

Fucking lot of maybes here, Sleel. Best you clear some of them up before they get you killed.

"You Sleel?" came a small voice.

Sleel looked down to see a little girl of about eight standing there. A port rat. He restrained himself from pointing one of his spetsdods at her. "Yeah. So?"

"Got a message for you. Jersey Reason is waiting outside."

Jersey Reason? Here on the Big Island? And how did he know Sleel was here?

Questions, more questions. It was like being back in primary edcom, with the holographic teacher yammering at you. Sleel flipped the little girl a five-stad coin. She snatched it from the air, grinned, and took off.

Outside Sleel spotted the flitter, an armored rig with protected fans. Whoever had built the thing had done a good job of it; somebody less adept than Steel probably wouldn't have immediately spotted the spidersilk plate and denscris windows.

Sleel also recognized Jersey Reason, though he'd only met the man once and that almost a year past. The old geep had suckered them with his defenses, though at the end Sleel had seen through the holoproj. He looked pretty much the same as Sleel remembered, short, almost tiny, with thick white hair and a short beard, also white. Too much light from various suns had damaged his skin and he was wrinkled and tanned, crinkled smile lines framing his pale blue eyes. Reason stood next to the armored flitter, alone.

"Sleek" he said. As it had before, the deepness of his voice came as a surprise.

"Reason."

"You had some trouble inside." Not a question.

"Nothing to speak of. Not a test of yours, was it? You like to play games, I remember right."

"No, she wasn't mine," Reason allowed. "Although I'm surely responsible. She probably thought you were coming to help me and wanted to make a point by killing you."

"Now why would she want to do that?"

Reason smiled, showing perfect teeth. "Want to take a little ride?"

"Sure."

Inside the flitter, Reason said, "Got a place to stay?"

"Not yet. I thought I'd surprise myself."

The flitter lifted in a blast of wind and tilted forward on its cushion of air, moving smoothly out into the traffic.

"I have a house in Old Kona," Reason said. "You can stay there. Plenty of room."

Steel shook his head. "Hey, this is a great song and shuffle routine and all, but why don't you fill in the gaps here?"

"Ever direct, aren't you? When we met the first thing you did was shoot me with a spetsdod."

"No, I shot a holoproj image of you to prove it was a fake."

"That's why I'm here. Your ability to cut through what was an almost perfect illusion intrigued me then and it still does now. I need your help."

"Keep talking."

"Somebody wants to kill me. I'd like for you to keep them from doing it."

Steel nodded. Well. He was a matador; that's what he did. "I don't work cheap."

"I know. Money is not a problem."

"All right."

"Just like that? No questions?"

"Oh, I got lots of questions, but they'll keep. Pull over at that intersection, next to the used flitter lot."

"Why?"

"Since money isn't a problem, we're gonna buy another vehicle. "

"What on Earth for?"

~~"Because I haven't had time to check this one out. The thing with hiring me is, you do what I say when it comes to security; that's the only way I can shade the odds our way."~~

Reason nodded. He guided the flitter to a stop.

"I get out first, you don't until I say it's okay."

Reason nodded again.

Sleel stepped out and looked around. Nobody obvious was following them. The sunshine was warm, the smell of local flora thick, mixed with the more acrid stinks of civilization. He waited for thirty seconds, scanning the surroundings. Nothing. "Okay, let's go," he said.

As the two of them moved into the used flitter lot, Sleel felt an urge to smile. He hadn't worked for almost six months and still had enough stads to go another half a year before he had to find a job, but this was the right thing to do. Reason had helped them when they needed it; fair was fair. Things had been slow since Sleel and the others had helped Emile kill Marcus Wall-again.

"Pick something in a nice color," Sleel said, gesturing at the flitters and ground carts parked around them. "And tell me about the woman with the sword."

Reason drove, Sleel watched for danger. The flitter was a couple of seasons old, low klickage, and while not armored, unlikely to be rigged for a bomb or any electronic listening devices. Somebody could retrieve the other flitter later when Sleel had time to check it out.

"This is the third attacker with a sword," Reason said. "The first one showed up on my island in Puge Sound three weeks ago. He somehow got past all my perimeter defenses and into my house. He didn't see through my holoproj like you did-I've improved the image, by the way-and I had him immobilize for questioning when he came to. I used a mild form of sleeptox, but he didn't wake up, he died."

"Unusual," Sleel said.

"It certainly surprised me. Not as much as the failure of my wards to keep him out. I figured that if one man could get that far it might be a good idea to move until I found the problem in my security systems."

"Good thinking."

"I have several houses on this planet. One of them is in Australia, almost in the middle of nowhere.

Nearest neighbor is ten klicks away. I didn't tell anybody I was going there. One afternoon a week after I arrived, another swordsman showed up. He had bypassed my outer security devices and was busy kicking my door in when I triggered a zap field."

"Real interesting. Lemme guess. This one didn't wake up either."

"Correct."

"Hmm. Can they do a brain squeeze on an unconscious person?"

"The woman?"

"Yeah. "

Reason nodded. "I don't know. But I have some . . . influence with the local authorities. I'll see what can be done." He reached for the flitter's com and waved it on. After a few moments, they were linked with Reason's "influence" in the neighborhood coolshop.

"Ah, M. Reason," the female voice said. The voice was deep, throaty, and had a nice tone to it. Although the flitter was equipped with full com gear, the transmission was nopix from the other end. "I was just about to call you."

"Officer Bligh. You were going to call for . . . ?"

"The woman who tried the matador at the port. It's the strangest thing. She's dead."

Reason glanced at Sleel. He said, "A pity. Find out what you can about her, would you? I would much appreciate it."

"Surely."

The contact was broken.

"Well, well," Sleel said. Then, "This cool on your payroll?"

"No. I did her a favor once and she is grateful."

Sleel didn't pursue that.

"This is your area of expertise," Reason said. They were floating along past a riot of plant life, thick tropical greenery splashed with bright orange and red and blue flowers. To their right lay the ocean, and a thin line of breakers washed up on the rocky shore below the road. "What do we do now?"

"We go to your house, check it out, and wait until your friend the cool gives us something to go on. You have any enemies you want to tell me about?"

Reason laughed. "I was a thief for more than half a century before I got out of the biz," he finally managed. "After the Confed fell, it wasn't as much fun as it had been. If all the people mad at me for what I took were to line up, they'd probably reach to the horizon. And those are just the ones who suspect I had something to do with it. I expect that the ones who are certain, men, women and mues, wouldn't lose a second of sleep if I shuffled off into the final chill."

Sleel nodded. "Okay. So we have to narrow that down a little. It probably isn't a conspiracy of all of them; we just need to find the right ones."

Reason laughed some more. "You're an optimist, Sleel."

"Yeah, well, dead bosses don't pay real well. You have to look on the positive side."

Sleel grinned. So this one might be hard. That was good. No point in doing easy stuff. He always like it better when the odds were against him. You couldn't show anything if a job was going to be a walk in the country.

What was the point in being the best unless people could see it?

Chapter TWO

RIFT, IN THE Delta System, lies dozens of light years away from Earth, normally a six-day trip by Bender drive. It is one of three planets in the system, the other two being Lee and Thompson's Gazell

Rift is also the least civilized of the trio, exports mainly certain technologies involved in waste -

recycling, and has upon it three major land masses, unoriginally called the Greater, the Middle and the Lesser Continents. Upon the Lesser Continent is the old Romantic Enclave, and deep therein a fair-sized hereditary estate known as La Casa del Acera Negro.

The House of Black Steel.

In the main gymnasium Hoja Cierito dodged the simulacrum's cut and V-stepped to his left with his return strike. The lac's parry blocked Cierito's blade with a convincing ring of steel on steel, and the vibration might be ersatz but in the boosted sturz field, Cierito felt it nonetheless. He spun away as the lac stabbed at him with its cutlass. The computer's gain was rigged to illegal standards and turned up to full; should the lac's weapon get through his guard, the pain would be as real as that of an actual sword.

A fatal strike would be just as deadly to Cierito, who wore no protection, and who was in fact naked save for his sword and a groin strap. He danced away from the lac's stab and follow-up four-step attack: head cut, heart stab, back and forth slash, and lunge for the groin. The lac was programmed to the ability of an expert human in superb condition, and would be considered a worthy opponent for a top player in most styles of fencing. The lac used most of the power of a mainframe viral matrix for its moves, and could be adjusted to the rules of classical foil, epee or saber, kendo, the Indo hard-knife, keras pisau, or wojanaz, the Polay war-blade, among others. On open-program as it now was, it was allowed use of any of these techniques. The only requirement was that it alter its appearance if it changed modes, offering a half-second or so of warning.

The lac T-stepped in and shimmered, changing colors, and suddenly it held two blades, one in each hand.

Such was not cheating, since Chinese split-sword was within its programming, but to go from facing an opponent with a cutlass to one with twice the armament was certainly apt to give a man pause. Perhaps fatally so.

Not Cierito. Instantly he dropped to his left side under the lac's whirling figure-eight slicings and whipped his own weapon out in a flat arc ten centimeters above the floor. He felt the muscles of his leg and shoulder burn with the effort. Everything he had went into the cut. So sharp was the zhaverfrayshtol sword's edge that the blade sheared completely through the lac's left ankle. Before the surprised lac could finish its crippled fall, Cierito rolled, came up, and drove the point of his sword up under the lac's sternum, skewering its heart. There was a convincing spurt of blood as the man jerked his weapon free and the lac crumpled to the floor. Were it a man, it would be dead.

The lac shimmered and vanished as Cierta stood. He saluted the fading simulacrum by bringing the flat of his sword to his forehead before snapping the weapon down in the ritual slinging of blood. This was hardly necessary, since the blood disappeared along with the lac, but it was part of the technique. Then he turned to face the fifteen students gathered around the perimeter of the fighting ring. Perspiration rolled down Cierta's muscular body and his heart beat rapidly, but he smiled at his students. The smell of his own sweat was high, and he was tight, especially in the shoulders and arms from swinging the sword, but he was alive.

"Miguel. What have I demonstrated?"

"That you are without peer, Patron."

"This is true, but not the answer I seek. Juanita?"

"You have demonstrated that you can defeat even a man who cheats."

"Also true, senorita, but the wrong answer. Josito?"

"Once the sword is drawn there are no rules."

Cierta nodded. "Ah, at last the correct response. None of the classical styles offer the ankle as a target for the sword; nearly all of the sport styles limit attacks to the upper body. In sport you play by the rules.

In combat to the death, there are no rules. Opponents without feet can hardly chase you around and once down, become lesser threats. They might still kill you if they are adept in ground attacks or defenses, but you will have an advantage if you know how to take it."

He wiped sweat from his eyes. "When I was much younger and less skilled, my own left foot had to be regrown due to this very same strike when I dueled with another who also walked the Masashi Flex. I was fortunate to survive. It was not a lesson to be forgotten."

Josito said, "What of this opponent, Patron?"

Cierta's smile thinned. "I was defeated, but my opponent was weak and so allowed me to live. This was a mistake-someday there will be another match."

Cierta's smile returned to full brightness. "Josito, since you have understood the lesson, you have therefore earned the right to be next misionero. You are now Proyectil Sacro."

The young man flushed with sudden joy and pride. "Patron! You honor me!"

"Si. Do not dishonor our house by failure. As the Holy Missile, you have a great responsibility. Other projectiles before you have failed to reach their target and since we have not heard from Karenita, we must assume that she, too, has been unsuccessful."

"I will not fail, Patron!"

"Such is my hope."

When the students had filed out, Cierta wiped the perspiration from his body with a towel, cleaned the oils of his hand from the grip of the sword, and wiped the blade with a small square of cotton victorian cloth. Again, this was unnecessary, since the blood upon the blade had been but imaginary, a computer-generated falsity without substance. Plus the ebony metal of the sword itself, the unique zhaverfrayshtol, was virtually immune to staining. The blade had been folded over and hand-hammered in a manner similar to the old Damascus and Japanese styles of hot forging; the secret formula for the black steel thus worked had been handed down from Patron to Patron for centuries, not too long after mankind had first left the Earth. The body of the slightly curved blade would bend almost seventy degrees without breaking, it was as the finest spring steel, while the edge was tempered by the use of special ceramic clays that made it hard enough once it had been sharpened to score virtually anything less than diamond.

The secret had belonged to Cierta's house for two hundred and forty-five years.

A wave of emotion as black as the sword he cleaned came over Cierta. No longer was the formula the secret of the House of Black Steel. Fifty-five years earlier the method had been stolen, in the time of Cierta's grandfather. The old man had been only a few years away from his death, and it had fallen to his son, Cierta's father, to find and punish the thieves. He had begun the task but had died before it had been accomplished. It had taken Cierta nearly a decade to finish the search. A score of men and women had been killed to uncover the names of the thieves who had dared trespass upon the House of Black Steel.

There had been five of them. Only one remained alive, and he was resourceful; but with luck, he would soon join the others.

Oddly enough, there had been no mention of any usage of this particular kind of black steel anywhere in the known galaxy. There were many ways to make metal dark, of course, from dyes to heat treating, to the addition of certain minerals, but no other that produced the weapon-grade material used in the casa's swords. Cierta had a computerfax firm searching, and while the material was best suited for the making of perfect swords or knives, there were certainly other uses for such a substance. The reward he offered for information pertaining to this subject was quite large. As far as he had been able to find out, the secret had never come to light elsewhere. That was good. When the last thief met his end, perhaps the secret would once again belong to none other than the House of Black Steel.

He looked at the weapon he held. The metal was indeed black, but not a flat black. There were lighter and darker streaks, wavy lines, where the folding that made the many hammered layers showed. It seemed to make the blade glow in rich, dark shades from point to guard. The hilt was a broad curved band of nickel-stainless steel, mirror bright to contrast with the blade, and the handle was of curlnose tusk, burnished smooth, the ivory gone a buttery yellow with age and use, fastened to the full tang with chrome-blued bolts. The sword had belonged originally to his father's father's father, had cost a month in the life of a master craftsman to produce, and was priceless. Certain wealthy collectors of such weaponry would give nearly everything they owned for such a piece as this, hundreds of

thousands of standards, without a moment's hesitation. And unlike a museum item, this was still an active blade, bathed in the flesh and blood of more than a hundred men and women. A score of those killed had been by Cierito's own hand, weaving a shroud of fatal thickness. Cierito did not think the sword of his great-grandfather had an equal anywhere in the galaxy.

And if he could help it, it never would.

In a small Place of the Way, a dojo on Koji, the Holy World, a woman sat seiza in the middle of a large room. Save for herself, the room was empty of other life; empty too, was the woman's mind as she meditated upon the Void. The floor upon which she knelt was of highly polished zebrawood, the planking chosen and laid in such a way as to create large zigzag patterns. The woman wore hakima, a long split skirt of white silk, and a gi-style black silk shirt with three-quarter sleeves. Next to her on the floor, handle nearly touching her left knee, was a katana-patterned sword, edge outward, point to the rear, nestled inside a wooden sheath with twenty-three coats of white lacquer upon it. The blade of the curved sword was of black steel, hand-hammered in the old method; the handle was of pebbled rawhide, crisscrossed in the traditional manner with the diamond-wrap turnings of black silk cord, enclosed at the butt with a plain cap of stainless steel; the guard, too, was a circle of solid stainless steel the diameter of a small teacup, bearing a simple etching on one side. The weapon was four hundred years old; it had seen much use and it had dealt in both life and death, sparing more often than it had slain. It had come to the woman from her older sister, who had died during the overthrow of the Confed six years past. Before that, it had belonged to their mother, received as a wedding gift from her mother.

The woman meditated upon the Void. Next to her the sword lay waiting. In a moment she would pick up the sheathed weapon and it would be freed in an eyeblink to move through the intricate motions of Kaji-te, the kata called "Fire Hand." In a moment. But for now, the sword waited as its mistress meditated upon her entrance into the Void—a sword which had been made with such precision and care it had hardly an equal in all the galaxy.

Sleel looked around the house owned by Jersey Reason with grudging approval. He'd seen better private security, but not much better and not at many places. The house sat in the middle of a large lot—that had to be very expensive, given real estate prices on Hawaii—with clear views to the property lines in all directions. To the west lay the sea, to the east the road, and other houses bordered the north and south edges of the lot. A line of banana trees and other tropical foliage partially hid an electric come-see-me fence, but there were no trees close enough to offer a way over the three-meter-tall mesh. A locked gate to the front and one to the rear were the only ways through the fence.

"Here's the security console," Reason said.

Sleel nodded and looked at the setup. Overlapping sensor fields from permanent units buried under the ground covered every centimeter of the property, and any one could be disabled without losing a full scan. Zap fields could be triggered to cover the doors and windows; the house itself was hardwired to note circuit interruptions, motion, infrared or high-speed projectiles, any of which detectors could be combined with the others. On full alert, the house would be hard to sneak up on, Sleel knew. Armored photomutable gel cameras mounted in fifteen locations gave views of the house and all approaches to it, including from straight overhead, and the computer was smart enough to know what it was seeing.

"You got missiles on the roof?"

"Yes. Doppler-guided Peel one-oh-threes. Anybody who flies over my house at less than half Republic aircraft minimums is in for a big surprise."

Sleel nodded. He ran through the computer system's other armaments. His checks were permitted only after the security reader had identified Reason's voice, retinal patterns and a code phrase before allowing access. There were robot guns hidden about the grounds, gasbombs, and the house itself was sheathed in armor sufficient to stop small arms fire outright and probably slow down most bigger stuff. Not a cheap job, and one Sleel ordinarily would give passing marks to—except that the Puget Sound house and the one in Australia had similar protections. Whoever had come for Reason before knew some stuff.

Not good.

On the other hand, Sleel was fairly certain that should anybody swinging a big blade come knocking upon the front door, he could handle that. The first thing he'd done when he'd failed to stop the attacker at the airport with shocktox darts was change the loads on his spetsdods to a formulation designed to knock down large wild animals. It hit harder than shocktox, did the animal trunk, but that was too bad.

People trying to chop him into soypro patties didn't rate real high on Sleel's popularity poll. If it took them two hours to wake up from the chem's effect, or if they didn't wake up at all, well, that was too bad, too. They should think about the risks before they pointed a sharp thing at him, that was how Sleel figured it. And if that didn't do the trick, he had some black-market Asp loads tucked away in his ammo case. Emile probably wouldn't approve such things, but he had higher principles than did Sleel. Where Khadaji had knocked down a big chunk of an army with Spasm so they could recover after six months in tetany, Sleel would probably have killed 'em outright. He'd never been much of a big-picture man himself. Dead attackers hardly ever bothered you again, Sleel figured, if you didn't count Marcus Wall, and when they tried to kill you, they lost their rights to keep wasting the communal oxygen.

"Okay," Sleel said. "I want to do a tour of the place on foot to check out things myself. To do this right we probably should have three or four other people rotating duty, but for now, we'll wait and see what your friends in the local cool shop have to say. If we get something, we'll check it out."

"I defer to your expertise."

Sleel shook his head. Funny old geep. Hard to look at him and realize he'd been the best thief in the galaxy, for longer than Sleel had been alive. Well. That didn't matter. What mattered was that he was now Sleel's client, and he couldn't have anybody killing him. That would make Sleel look bad, and that was the worst sin of all.

The com chimed and announced a call. Sleel took it. The woman on the other end of the call gave him a visual, and she was quite attractive in a dark sort of way. She had brown hair chopped short in a

military buzz, even features, and from what he could see, wore some kind of uniform. He kept his own transmission pictureless.

"I'm looking for M. Reason."

"He's not available. I'll take a message."

"I have some information for him."

Sleel recognized the voice from the call in the car earlier. It was the local cool; what was her name?

Bley? Bligh? "I'll download it, you like."

"I'd rather deliver it in person."

"At your convenience, fem."

"I'll be by in an hour."

Fifty-nine minutes later a small flitter arrived at the front gate. Sleel was watching it on the monitors and the resolution on the holoproj was good enough to show him that Officer Bligh or her double was at the controls. He touched a control and the gate slid open. He watched the gate until it closed behind the car. The cool parked the vehicle near the front door. Sleel had one of the cameras zoom in on the flitter's interior tightly enough to show that it was empty save for the woman.

"Company," Sleel called out. "Stay out of sight until I check her in."

Sleel took a couple of deep breaths and shook his shoulders and arms, loosening them. The cool wore street sheets, tight-weave orthoskin pants and tunic, probably with spidersilk armor under them, he would guess, proof against the most common handguns. She carried a military-grade hand wand on her belt in an appendix holster, and a shockstik baton dangling from a crowpatch on her left hip. She also had a dispenser of plastic cufftape anchored to her belt next to the shockstik. Standard police issue all, it looked like. Still, you never knew for sure. Things weren't always what they seemed.

"V. Bligh," the woman said into the doorcom.

Sleel watched as the computer checked the voiceprint with the one Reason had on file. "Match," the computer said. "Vicki Bligh, Kona Police."

"Admit her," Sleel said.

Bligh entered the house and the door slid shut behind her. Sleel stepped into view, watching her.

"You're the guy at the port," she said. "The matador. You working for M. Reason now?"

"Yep. And I know you're a cool and all, but would you mind putting the hardware there on the table?"

Bligh nodded. She put her wand, the shockstik, and a single-charge backup hand wand she'd had tucked into a calf pocket on her left boot onto the table.

Sleel said, "Hard object scan, subject Bligh."

The computer said, "Keycard, left tunic breast pocket. Cosmetic tube, right tunic pocket. ID cube, left pants pocket, infoball, ID cube, three stad and two demistad coins, right pants pocket."

"If you would," Sleel said, waving at the woman.

"M. Reason is being very careful these days."

"A sad necessity," Sleel said.

She put the other items onto the table.

"Poison scan, table," Sleel said.

"Negative known poisons," the computer said.

"Okay. This way, please fem. You can collect your gear."

"Aren't you worried about this?" She hefted the wand.

"No. I can shoot you before you could use it."

"You have a high opinion of your skill."

"Yeah, well, that's how it is."

She holstered the wand and stik, and pocketed the other items.

"Okay, Jersey," Sleel called out.

In the library, Bligh slotted the infoball and extra ID cube into the holoproj's reader. The air lit with a hazy image. It was the face of the woman with the sword, from her ID.

"The name given is Karenita Thompson," Bligh said. "That may be false, given that all the other information seems to be bogus. "

Sleel and Reason watched as the image turned in the air. A young woman, attractive enough, hair dyed a pale blue. Dead now.

Sleel had the comp enhance and enlarge the tattoo. It was odd-looking, a solid black design about the size of stad coin. "What's that?"

"Looks like a silhouette of a little house," Bligh said. "Not in our files. We're running it through Republic Security."

To Reason, Sleel said, "Any of the others wearing one?"

"I didn't notice. The first one is at the bottom of Puget Sound, the second probably feeding the dingoes. I should have kept them, but I didn't realize they were part of a parade at the time. "

"She died from a systemic toxic shock," Bligh said. "She had a chemical nanoimplant in her brain. The ME says it was triggered by a specific combination of delta and theta waves that come only in very deep sleep or unconsciousness."

"Yeah? What did she do at bedtime every night?"

"A manual override."

"Be nasty if you forgot to turn it off," Sleel said. So. The assassin wore a failsafe. Get knocked out and you died. Forget to turn it off, you died. Nobody would get it out of you unless they happened to pick it up on a scan before it triggered. And since you were put into a deep sleep for brain scan, that would pretty much stop anybody poking around in your skull for answers. Cautious.

"Here's the recording of the attack."

Bligh waved at the comp. The air shimmered and a high angle of the underside of the gamp at the port appeared. There he was, Sleel saw, and there was the woman who had called herself Thompson, stepping out with her sword. Sleel watched with a professional eye as the downscaled woman in the recording went for the smaller image of himself. Damn, he looked jerky when he fired that first round.

Sloppy.

"Anything on her of any help?"

"The lab is working on the clothes and sword. We found where she was staying, at one of the big hotels in New Kona. Nothing so far. The sword is interesting."

Sleel saw himself shoot the woman coming at him again without apparent effect. Damned if he didn't dance back a step when that happened! Fuck. You look like you were scared shitless there, Sleel. Bet you thought you had me then, didn't you, lady?

"Why is the sword interesting?"

"The steel in it is unique. Not quite like anything the lab has seen before. Doesn't match any known commercial grade. Got stuff in it they didn't expect, the way it's lined up."

The past-tense Sleel dodged the attack and began the dance of sumito. Looked pretty good . . . well, okay, his foot was off a little there during Air, and maybe he was bent too far during Neon Chain, but

that punch was all right. Too hard, maybe.

"So the sword is funny. Does that help?"

"Not that we can determine. Her ID says she is from Thompson's Gazelle, and the cube has a Delta imprint, but the White Radio squirt from Thompson's Gazelle comes up no record."

"Maybe she lived a long way from town."

The assassin was down, and Sleel was scanning for more trouble. That looked okay.

"Maybe," Bligh said. "You want to tell me what this is all about, M. Reason?"

"Would that I knew," Reason said. "Somebody is sending people with swords after me; other than that I cannot say."

"Well, if you figure it out, do let us know. A body in the port is bad for the tourist business." To Sleel she said, "I've never seen anybody move like that." She nodded at the final freeze-frame of the holoproj.

"Like lube on glass. I don't know anybody who could be that smooth and cool with an assassin coming at them."

Sleel shrugged. Yeah, well, it looked like shit to him, but he didn't say it.

Bligh collected the cube and infoball and headed for the door. There would be a record of both in the security computer, though there didn't seem to be anything useful there. The swordswoman was a pro; she wouldn't have left any obvious clues as to who had sent her, not if she was willing to die if they caught her.

Sleel had the computer open the door. An alarm went off, a keening whoop-whoop at the same instant. Bligh stepped into the doorway. Sleel yelled "Down! On the floor!" as he snapped his hands up, looking for targets. But instead of dropping, Bligh went for her hand wand. She was pretty fast, but not fast enough. The wand cleared the holster but before she could level it, the edge of a black sword cut into her neck from her left side, slicing all the way to the spine. Blood sprayed from the chopped artery and she fell back and away from the weapon. Sleel saw in slow motion the fan of hot crimson from the black steel as it was jerked from the woman's half-severed neck. Red painted a Pollock-spatter pattern on the wall and ceiling. As Bligh dropped, a man leaped into the hallway, screaming. He raised the weapon over his head and charged toward Sleel.

Chapter THREE

ON THE HOLY world of Koji:

The woman came up from seiza, the sword in her right hand as much a part of her as her arm. The ebon blade blurred and fanned horizontally through the air, bisecting the first of her imaginary opponents at the waist.

The flashing dark blade continued its loop, circling behind the woman outward and upward, then down to split the invisible skull of the next ghostly attacker. She stepped to her left and pulled the weapon back, locking her left hand on the hilt behind her right hand, point aimed at the throat of the third attacker. Her thumbs and forefingers were slack, middle fingers neutral, ring and little fingers tight against the silk cord and ray skin. It was not a thing of mind but of feel, it was either correct or it was not, and when it was correct, the sword was as the hand. When it was right, the woman lived in the steel as much as she did her own flesh. Now it was right.

The spectre lunged and was impaled upon the blade's tip, the woman's left hand driving the strike, her right against the stainless steel cap, right hand twisting and turning the weapon so that the cut became a blood-letting gouge, spearing and tearing asunder the unfortunate heart.

The imaginary attacker fell away, and the woman spun, slashing at the fourth and fifth and sixth opponents, driving them back. She leaped, cut, stabbed, ducked, and dodged, the sound of her bare feet squeaking on the wooden floor mingling with the whish of the blade whipping through the cool air of the dojo. She was sharpness itself, dividing upon her razored edges the layers of imagined reality around her.

The Kaji-te burned, covering the Five Attitudes, Upper, Middle, Lower, Left Side and Right, and the dancer danced among the attackers of her mind's eye, twirling, whirling, blocking death and striking down until, all of a timeless moment, she was done.

She looked around the empty room, and her imagination covered the floor with bodies. She exhaled a short breath, inhaled again, and gave the vanquished a short nod of respect. She spun the sword in a circle, all wrist action, and snapped the point at the floor, slinging the blood. She moved to where the white wooden sheath lay. She kneeled next to the sheath, sat on tier heels seiza again and picked up the sheath without looking at it, turning it so that the convex curve was away from her hip. She brought the sword's spine across her belly and touched the metal just above the guard to the mouth of the sheath and slid the back edge of the blade along the opening, left thumb and forefinger pinching the steel lightly to remove any remaining traces of imaginary blood. When the point reached the opening, she pivoted the sword on it and slowly pushed the weapon home, until the catch on the hilt locked it into place. The mating of steel and wood accomplished, she replaced the sheathed sword on the floor, inclined her head in a bow, and was done.

Kildee Wu blinked, as if coming from a trance. She had danced the dance flawlessly, but she did not consciously recall any of the moves. Of a moment, she had reached for her weapon; the next thing she

knew, she was back in seiza, finished. That was how it should be. Thought was too slow when it came to the iai; moves had to be nearly as automatic as reflex. As a meditation it could be no less. Iai was the sword, do the way, and it had been her life for twenty of her thirty-five T.S. years.

She picked up the sword and went to the shower.

With the sword placed carefully into its rack, Wu stripped and tossed her silks into the washer. She padded toward the shower, stopping briefly in front of the mirror. She smiled at her image, a smile that seemed a bit crooked to her. She was hardly an imposing figure. Her black hair was cut short, her features more or less Oriental, and she was barely a hundred and fifty-two centimeters tall. Fifty kilograms tight, hips a bit wider than she would like, breasts small and mostly formed from underlying pectoral muscle. Her arms were developed enough so that the veins showed in her biceps, and she figured her body fat was maybe nine or ten percent. "Sthenic," that's what her ex-lover the medic had called her. He said it meant "healthy-looking," and she could live with that.

Yep, and a good; healthy, sweaty body it was now. Her own smell overcame the barn-straw scent of the dressing room. Best she get cleaned up and into fresh silks before her first kendo class arrived. Sensei Wu needed to look neat for the paying customers. During the dance, she was other, but now, she was simply Kildee Wu, a woman who needed a shower.

Bligh fell and the swordsman dashed past her toward Sleel. At the port, he hadn't been working; here, he had a job to do, a client to protect, and he didn't fuck around this time. He pointed his left spetsdoo at the running man-better angle on that side-and snapped off two shots.

One dart for each eye.

The guy could have been wearing lenses; that was possible, given how prepared the woman at the port had been. But even so, he'd damn well have to blink when the darts got there; that was reflexive, and would take a hell of a lot of specific training to get around that one. At the very least it was going to slow him down considerably.

The swordsman screamed. He jerked his arms up over his face, still maintaining his grip on the black sword, then collapsed as the trunk took him. He slid two meters to an unconscious halt.

Well. Not wearing lenses, Sleel saw.

They could grow him new eyes, assuming he lived that long. Probably not gonna happen, given how the other sword players had been rigged to self-destruct. Too bad.

Sleel moved toward the door, alert for another attacker, but saw none. Somehow that figured.

The matador squatted next to the fallen cool. The floor was awash in blood, the big artery still spewing it out, but slowing the flow as the heart finished the last of it. A few liters of it went a long way when spilled on the floor like that.

"Com the medics," Sleel said to Reason.

Sleel used first aid, putting direct pressure on the throbbing wound, but it was gonna take more than I had to bring her back. If the medical team got here fast enough, they could revive her and stave off the brain damage.

Abruptly the bleeding stopped. Shit. There went the pump.

"And call your vouch," Reason said.

A box the size and shape of a squashed suitcase appeared in the hallway and rolled quickly to where the wounded policewoman lay. The vouch extruded needles and lines and plugged itself into the woman, piercing her armor easily. It began humming loudly as it diagnosed the condition-massive blood loss and shock and cutting trauma to the neck-and began pumping oxygenated plasmoids and coagulants into Bligh. Another line stabbed into the windpipe and began ventilation, while a small pump cycled the administered fluids through the circulatory system. A jointed arm with a surgical stapler began working on the sword damage, first rejoining the cut carotid artery portions and some of the other larger vessels with biostat glue.

Nice toy, the vouch. Expensive, but handy. Sleet' moved back and allowed the machine to work. If the assassin were still alive when the vouch got done with the woman, it would plug him and see could it stop the effects of his suicide device, but Sleel didn't give that much hope. These people were careful whoever they were, and it didn't seem likely they'd leave somebody around to question. That was too bad, too.

"Let's go," Sleel said.

"Go? Where?" Reason asked.

"Away from here. A medical team is gonna be fanning in shortly and a lot of people will be running around. Be easy to sneak somebody who didn't belong in with them. Put spraywhites on somebody, he looks like a medic."

"But-but

"We'll leave the gate open. There's nothing here worth dying for, is there?"

"Hardly."

Sleel paused long enough to check the swordsman, who was still breathing. The man wore a handsized electronic device on his belt, and a smaller one stuck to his right boot top. Sleel didn't recognize the models, but he knew what the things were: confounders, electronic scramblers, and unless he were very much mistaken, real good ones. Sleel would bet a year's salary that the guy had come in hidden somewhere in Bligh's flitter. The luggage compartment, maybe, or wedged under it somehow, between the fans. The security comp had spotted him, sure enough, but not until he'd gotten to the front door-which Sleel had opened to let Bligh leave. Must have tapped into the com when Bligh had called and figured she would be allowed past the gate without too much trouble. Not bad.

The matador picked up the sword. Nice weapon, good balance to it. He touched the edge with one thumb, rubbing lightly across the edge and not lengthways, the way you were supposed to so you didn't cut yourself. The sword was sharp enough, though he knew little about such things. They weren't something you came up against very often in a high-tech society. Maybe in the Musashi Flex, where honor counted big, but not on the street where survival was more important. He nodded at Reason. "Let's move." He kept the sword as he led his client out toward the flitter.

Getting old, Sleel. You almost blew it. What would the other matadors say? They'd never let you live it down, they heard about this. Sloppy, real sloppy.

For a moment, as he and Reason lifted in their flitter, he thought about calling his old comrades. Bor would be through with his honeymoon by now, he and Veate. Dirisha and Geneva were probably looking for something interesting to do and this was sure as shit interesting.

But-no. He didn't want to run crying for help every time he stubbed his toe a little. Best if he figured out what was what first. No point in calling in the troops if it was something he could take care of on his own, was there? A few geeps with swords, how would that look? Man, he could almost Bear Dirisha telling Geneva: Hey, brat, poor decrepit senile old Sleel needs somebody to help him cross the street so he don't get run over by some kid in his daddy's flitter. We'd better go and hold his hand, yo think?

No, definitely not. Emile had taken on a planet's army by himself, and the matadors had knocked the entire Confed on its ass. Sleel could surely keep one old thief alive, couldn't he?

Damned right he could.

Hoja Cierta was most unhappy when Carlotta reported Pedro's failure. Four of his students had died trying to erase the final blot on the family name. True, they had done so with honor, but failure was failure, and now the old thief had but that much more to answer for.

Lying naked upon his bed, Cierta considered the ceiling of his room. He would spend all of his students if need be, but it seemed such a waste of his training to have them stopped. And according to Carlotta's report, the condemned man had gotten himself a bodyguard, one of the matadors of whom so much had been spoken. Cierta had never dealt with these matadors directly, but he knew that some of them had walked the Flex before they learned sumito, taught by the Siblings of the Shroud. Some of them had been ranked quite high, if the stories could be believed, and the fighting art of shrouded priests was second to none when it came to bare hands. Two of the projectiles Cierta had fired had been stopped by this matador, and so he was responsible for their deaths, even though it had been the brainchoke that had actually killed them.

Cierta grinned. In the Old Language, "matador" did not mean "bodyguard." It meant "killer." On Earth, these men had faced beasts in the ring and slain them with swords.

He sat up, the muscles of his belly tightening as he swung his legs over the edge of the bed. Well. We shall see how this matador fares against a beast who also carries a sword. One who is without peer

using his weapon.

The thought of such a battle aroused him. He touched a button on the bedside com.

"Juanita?"

"Si, Patron?"

"Come to my room. I have something for you."

The young woman's voice trembled slightly. "At once, Patron. "

Cierto smiled, hearing the touch of fear in her. There were swords, then there were swords, and a man must be adept in using both kinds, no? Certo usually preferred his sheath to be the tightest of the three a woman had to offer, but this time he felt potent enough want to use them all when Juanita arrived. And he certainly intended to do so.

Chapter FOUR

ABOARD THE STARLINER Pachelbel, Sleel and Jersey Reason enjoyed the comforts of a first-class suite. The ship, completed after the fall of the Confed, was state-of-the-art interstellar travel, a luxury boat for those with stads to burn; it was like being in a resort town that could fly.

"How much are you worth, anyway?" Sleel asked.

They were in one of the restaurants, where the price of a single meal could easily equal a month's rent for a middleclass family. They were both enjoying the special of the day, Green Moon beef. Reason sipped at an expensive blue wine, Mtuan Azure; Sleel, working, didn't usually do strong chem; instead, he drank splash, as mild as beer. The smell of the meat was rich, the taste exquisite, and Sleel savored the texture and flavor.

"I could scrape up perhaps a hundred million standards," Reason said. "Depending on property values around the galaxy at any given time."

Sleel nodded, chewing on a mouthful of the steak. Big money didn't impress him.

"So, where to?" Reason asked. "I assume you have something more specific in mind than the entire Bibi Arusi System?" Yep. ,

"And I must say I was somewhat surprised that you booked passage for us under our own names."

Sleel swallowed the steak and grinned. "No, you weren't."

Reason tilted his head slightly to one side. "Oh'?"

Sleel leaned back in his chair, automatically scanning the dining room again. He had done so a dozen times during the meal and now as then, there was no apparent threat. None of the waiters had offered to cut Sleel's steak for him with a black sword. "You didn't get to be the best thief in the galaxy by being stupid. And you didn't stay out of Confed jails for more than half a century by accident. I think maybe you're being a bit disingenuous here, old man."

Reason chuckled. "Why, Sleel. Where'd you learn a word like that?"

Sleel said, "Where's the best place to hide something?"

Reason didn't ponder that one. "Where nobody will think of looking. I didn't know you were a fan of Poe."

"Mostly the poetry," Sleel said. "But I liked 'The Purloined Letter.' Emile made us read it. Where's the next best place?"

"Where they know where it is but can't get to it."

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