

The door opened quietly, and Avon slipped into the room like will o' the wisp. Cally looked up apprehensively, eyes darting to make out the figure in the shadow; then her face smoothed to a slight smile. Avon nodded, and moved over to join her at her desk.

"Vila's on the flight deck. We should reach Aristo in 12 hours."

"Blake and Jenna are in the rest room -- I saw them there earlier. Nova's in the gymnasium. What of Gan?"

"Sleeping, I expect. I gave him a lesson on the teleport earlier -- I believe it used up all his resources."

"You underestimate Gan, Avon. Simply because he is not mechanically minded --"

"And what of Nova?" Avon demanded, attempting to head off another of Cally's lectures. "Have you learned his specialty?"

She nodded, sucking her lower lip a moment. "It's very odd. On the surface, he seems so pleasant, so nondescript. The sort of boy you would expect to help little old women and be kind to animals." She paused. "He was arrested for munitions running to the rebels on Earth. I am not sure that it was a philosophical union, either. From what I could gather, he is rather fond of things that go bang."

Avon digested this silently. Then he said, "I rather thought so, he looked quite at home with a gun on Saurian Major. Quite the ruthless little bastard with a gun in his hands."

"Useful, though. At least until we locate Dayna."

Avon made a sour face. He wasn't entirely convinced that tracking down the other players in their Dream was the best course of action. And he doubted Dayna would leave Sarran if her father were still alive -- a state he felt would continue if Servan were diverted from the planet. And that in turn led from preventing the war with the Andromedans, which in turn ... suddenly he unfurled a large rolled-up sheet of paper and spread it out on the desk before Cally.

"What is this?" she inquired, looking from it to him and back again.

"Flow chart. Of various people and events which figured in our Dream. Critical moments -- many of which we should avoid at all costs."

She nodded, her finger tracing down along the lines leading from her heading. She noticed the chart suddenly stopped on Terminal. He still wasn't willing to tell her ... "You realize of course that each step we take away from what happened in the Dream leads us along a new path. One we haven't considered and whose outcome we cannot predict."

"We bend events to our own design -- and that places us in greater control," Avon amended. He leaned over and tapped key points along the chart. "We remove obstacles at every opportunity, take advantage wherever possible -- we stack the odds in our favor."

"We could very well set up a chain of events over which we have no control," she reminded again.

"Are you recommending we follow the course of the Dream as it was laid out?" He pointed to Terminal, printed in bold letters, and shook his head. "Not that long ago you were advocating taking Star One now."

She got up slowly, slipped past him, and stood addressing the wall a moment. "That was before I'd thought it through carefully. I have told you that. We cannot wrest control from the Federation and offer nothing to replace it --"

"And what of 'home rule', eh?"

Cally pivoted and caught his eyes, holding them. "Many of the planets under Federation control rely completely on Star One and the Administration for their continued survival. They must have time to prepare, to set up their own governments. The rebellion needs time to grow. And whenever we take Star One, we must be able to control it -- and we cannot do that without being able to control the people stationed there."

Avon shrugged. "We could work out how to operate the station," he said defensively.

"And how many planets would we destroy while learning how to operate the system? One? Ten? One hundred? One thousand? We cannot play planet roulette, as you call it, Avon, not with so many lives at stake."

He bent over the chart, and pointed to a name he'd circled. "So we make finding Docholli a priority," he announced, tapping the name insistently. "With his help, we may be able to remove the conditioning each of the station personnel have undergone."

"Have you given any thought to how you're going to gain their cooperation even if you can decondition them?"

He smiled enigmatically. "I think that is better left to Blake."

Cally moved up to face him. "Why are you going through with this rebellion, Avon? I would not have credited you with altruism -- and you could have taken this ship without Blake."

"I like the challenge," he said slyly. He stared at her a moment, growing serious, then shook his head. "To be honest, I'm not sure myself. I don't think I could have taken this ship without Blake. Or any of the others. I don't think Zen would have allowed it."

"Zen?" she blinked.

"Yes." A quick, staccato snap. After a pause, he resumed, "Somehow, I think he's involved with the Dream. I think ... I think he might even have been the source of it."

"He?" She smiled. "In the Dream, you always claimed Zen was nothing but a machine."

"In the Dream, I never had total contact with Zen. But when we boarded the Liberator, Zen invaded my mind." He stopped, shuddering slightly. "Zen is more than just a machine -- how much more,

I don't know."

"And he will never tell us, either. Well," she added, nodding toward the chart, "where do we begin?"

"Once we've got ORAC, we run checks on all the people whose names I've circled -- full security profiles, background checks, the lot. We need to find out just how accurate the Dream is."

"Yes, that makes sense. And we will need to check out the locations we visited in the Dream -- Blake was always right about establishing a base," she counseled. Mention of a base always elicited an odd reaction from Avon, and she felt sure it was in some way connected with the Dream after her own death. "This is, of course, dependent on our acquiring ORAC," she added.

"Oh, we'll get ORAC. I checked the strong room -- there's enough valuable material there to meet Ensor's price and more. Far more. We could buy several star systems with the wealth in there."

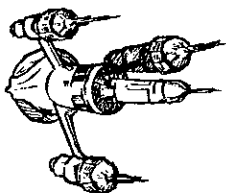
"And the power cells -- can we be certain Ensor will need them so soon? Or at all?"

Avon looked at her curiously. It hadn't occurred to him that that phase of the Dream might not work out in reality. He shook his head, trying to clear away the doubt. "As I said, we'll get ORAC." But suddenly, he wasn't quite so sure. "Once we've got ORAC, we can make a cohesive plan of attack."

"Hmm," Cally murmured doubtfully. "Let's hope ORAC can do all that we remember."

"I'm certain of it. Rumors of ORAC's existence have been circulating for years. Ensor is the greatest computer genius who ever lived. I shall quite enjoy meeting him at last," Avon added with a smile.

"The greatest?" Cally teased. "But I thought you were." Avon favored her with a grimace.



Jenna eased back on the controls slowly, and glanced up at the main screen. "Aristo orbit dead ahead," she announced.

"Good," Avon commented from the seat to the fore of the flight deck. "Any signals coming from Aristo?"

Cally studied her communications screen. "No," she said curiously. "I would have thought by now --"

Just then, a scratchily-cultured voice emanated from Zen's fascia. "You will state your purpose," it commanded flatly.

Avon looked at Cally over his shoulder and she smiled in return. Almost bouncing out of his seat with anticipation, he hurried up the steps to

Cally's station, where she opened the communications channel.

"This is the starcruiser Liberator. We are here to see Professor Ensor. We are carrying replacement power cells for his mechanical heart," Avon added with a glance toward Cally. She nodded approval.

The voice seemed to be considering this, and after a moment of silence answered, "Power cells will not be necessary for at least six months Earth standard. Explain your purpose."

Avon glanced apprehensively at Cally. Neither of them had bargained on refusal by ORAC's defense system. As Avon turned back to look at the screen he noticed that Blake, Jenna, Gan, Nova and Vila were all regarding him with tense, suspicious expressions.

"Yes, Avon," Vila said, folding his arms over his chest and leaning back against his seat, "Explain your purpose."

"Hmm," Jenna agreed, settling back in her chair and eyeing him dangerously.

Cally drew a breath, and said suddenly, "If you will release control of our main computer, I think you will find a satisfactory explanation available to you."

The voice was silent, then, "Very well. You will instruct your main computer to impart the necessary information."

Avon, mystified, stood silently as Cally nodded, stepped down from her position, and stood before Zen's fascia. "Zen, you will relay to the computer on Aristo the events and details leading up to our presence here in orbit, including all simulations and extrapolations at your disposal."

Zen hummed a moment, then, with what was almost a chuckle, replied, "+Confirmed." There was a steady flow of nearly-musical data transmitting from Zen to the main computer on Aristo, then a sudden silence.

Cally waited calmly, poised before Zen, while Avon, still standing at her station, watched tensely. He was no longer aware of the others on the flight deck, only Cally, and the absence of the disembodied voice. Suddenly, Blake cleared his throat.

"Perhaps you might like to take this time to explain to us what's going on," he suggested pointedly.

"Perhaps," Avon replied tightly, still watching Cally carefully. Just then, the voice returned, and Avon held his hand up for silence.

"Fascinating," the voice breathed, then in a more business-like tone, continued, "Very well. I will set the teleport coordinates. The woman, Cally, will teleport down. She will be accompanied by the man called Blake."

"But --" Avon began, but Cally wheeled around, shaking her head once, her eyes issuing a warning.

"That will be fine," she answered as she trotted

back up to her station. "We will be ready to teleport in ten minutes."

"Very well," the voice answered. "Be certain to bring the power cells."

"We will," she answered.

+Teleport controls being altered by main computer on Aristo,+ Zen announced, a note of affronted dignity in his tone. And after a few seconds, +Outside influence has been removed. All Liberator systems are now free of alien control,+ he added almost suggestively.

"Excellent, Zen. Maintain holding orbit," Cally ordered. "Well, Blake, you had better get kitted up," she smiled. "I'll join you on the teleport deck in ten minutes." She nodded toward Avon, who followed as she swept off the flight deck, leaving their fellow crewmembers none the wiser.

"We never should have brought her on board," Jenna announced to no one in particular.

"Jenna's right," Vila observed sourly. "Ever since Cally's been on board, Avon's been ten times worse."

"She's pretty, though," Nova amended with a wink to Vila. Jenna sniffed eloquently. Gan shook his head, a slight smile on his face.

"Cally's right," Blake said neutrally. "I'd better get kitted up."

"You're not really going down there," Jenna protested.

"Why not? If nothing else, it puts me one up on Avon -- you saw his reaction. He wanted to go. I imagine Ensor is one of his childhood heroes -- the greatest computer genius in the galaxy? Besides, I'm curious. I've a feeling I'll learn more by going along with it."

"Marvellous, Blake's curious. I can't think of a better reason for walking into an ambush," Vila countered.

"Oh, I doubt there's any danger, Vila," Blake answered, walking slowly up the steps. He stopped, and leveled Vila with his eyes. "Avon would never knowingly endanger that precious skin of his. No, if he wanted to go down, there's no danger, I'm sure of it." With that, he turned and left the flight deck.

"I don't see how he can be sure of anything Avon does," Jenna commented.

"You don't have much time for Avon anymore, do you, Jenna?" Nova asked, moving away from his station and following Blake's path up the stairs.

"Not really," Jenna answered defensively, settling back even further in her seat. Her chin tilted defiantly. "I see no point in acting as his lap dog."

Nova's eyebrow lifted archly. "No, it's not Avon's lap you want to sit in, is it," he returned with an ingenuous smile.

Jenna surged forward in her seat, spitting, "Why you --"

"Stop it, both of you," Gan insisted, moving between them. "This scrimmaging is pointless. Avon will tell us what he has to say when he's ready. I for one am willing to give him a little rope in the meantime."

"The better to hang himself with," Vila added bleakly.

Gan turned curiously sparkling eyes on Vila. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. He's not done badly so far. We got off the London safely. We hit Saurian Major without a casualty, and the Federation still knows nothing about us. Considering Avon's background, I don't find it that strange that he'd want to visit the universe's best computer man -- this stuff's way ahead of our own technology. Perhaps he wants to consult with Ensor."

Nova nodded, smiling. Vila studied Gan a moment, then leaned back in his seat, nodding sagely. "It's a point. Yes, Gan's right. It does make sense."

Jenna shook her head. "Well, I want some answers. You can wait until Avon graces us with some concrete explanations, but I'm sick of watching him play mystic. Cally seems to know what's going on -- perhaps Blake can find out while they're on Aristo. In the meantime, I intend to corner our resident computer genius." And having said that, she flounced off the flight deck.

"I think Jenna's jealous," Nova observed, still standing on the stairs. "I mean, before Cally came on board, she had the pick of the litter, didn't she?"

"Oh, I don't think Jenna's attracted to Avon. You don't either," Vila added suspiciously. "Here, what are you trying to do -- divide and conquer?"

Nova's smile became sly as he shook his head. "No. No need. I think I've joined the right side. Blake may bristle at Avon's authority, but Avon's a step ahead of him. And Cally's right by his side. And I think that's what really bothers Jenna."

"Hmmpf," Gan replied. "Authority's only what you make of it. If we all mutinied --"

"We wouldn't!" Vila answered squeakily. "Gan, you just got finished saying --"

"I know what I said, Vila," Gan returned. "I'm just saying that the struggle between Blake and Avon doesn't mean a thing if we don't back them up. If we all sided with Blake, Avon wouldn't be able to lead. And vice versa."

"Oh, I see. Yes, well, that's all right then." He got out of his seat. "I'm going down to the teleport deck. Coming?"

Gan and Nova followed, each to his own thoughts.



"What was all that about?" Avon demanded as Cally shrugged into her anorak. They were in her quarters as she prepared to teleport to Aristo.

"What was all what about?" she grinned back at him. The jacket secure, she turned to Avon with a serious expression. "We have suspected Zen knew about the Dream -- you even said he might have initiated it. Well, I think we have just proved that he knows about it anyway. I am sure the data he sent ORAC was the Dream -- 'the simulations and extrapolations'. Remember what happened in the Dream."

"Ensor died because he didn't get the power cells in time."

"Yes. Because he was forced to deal with the Federation. I am not guaranteeing we will get ORAC -- but at least we have the chance now. In any case, the Federation will not get ORAC -- they will never have the opportunity. Ensor's son will never need to contact Servalan." She moved toward the door.

"Why Blake?"

Cally stopped. Turning back to Avon, she replied, "Perhaps ORAC has a sense of humor. Or perhaps ORAC concluded that Blake is more diplomatic. Avon, do not worry. I will look after Blake. You mind the others. You can work on your detector shield while I am on surface. Trust me, Avon," she said with sudden intensity.

He looked directly into her eyes and nodded. "I have no choice."

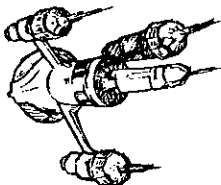
"A man who trusts can never be betrayed --"

"Only mistaken," Avon completed with a slight smile. "A saying on your planet."

"Yes." She laid a hand on his chest, and said earnestly, "Remember my planet. Remember what happened in the Dream. I will never allow that to happen in reality. If you ever begin to doubt me, remember that."

Hesitantly, Avon placed his own hand over Cally's. "I don't doubt you."

"Then do not doubt yourself. The Dream occurred for a reason. We were selected for a reason. We owe something for that -- and we must give only our best." She removed her hand. "It is time for me to go."



"Father, I just don't understand --" Ensor

Junior was saying as he carried flasks of liquid from the storage closet to the laboratory.

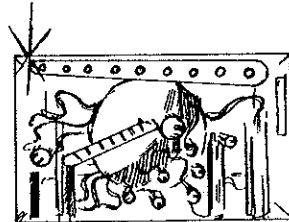
"Of course you don't!" Ensor Senior replied snappishly. "Look, son, you know I've made ORAC more suspicious than even you could be -- if he trusts these people enough to let them through the defenses -- unarmed, of course -- the least we can do is hear them out."

"But how did they find us, how did they know we were here -- the Federation's been looking for you for forty years, near enough -- what if they're right behind?"

Senior shook his head. "I don't think so. I remember hearing about this Blake person in some of the reports ORAC intercepted. Definitely anti-Federation until his arrest a few years ago. I had ORAC do a further check. Arrested and convicted of child molesting -- doubt it's true. More likely a trumped-up charge on the part of the Administration to discredit the rebellion. No, I don't think he'd have brought the Federation with him."

Junior set the flasks down on a littered workbench, dug out a handkerchief from his back pocket, and wiped the sweat off his neck. The temperature in the lab was kept high from all the burners, furnaces and heating elements his father continually used. "That still doesn't answer the questions, Father."

"No, no it doesn't," his father agreed absently. He placed the flasks in a line under a series of valves, and began twisting the stopcocks on each valve in turn. "But they will," he added.



"Do you think it's safe to teleport down to the coordinates they've set?" Jenna asked anxiously as Blake and Cally took up their positions on the teleport pad.

"Quite safe," Avon answered, settling in the seat behind the console. "Ensor has more reason to fear us than we do him. Zen confirmed there are only two human beings on the planet, plus a number of reptilian lifeforms below the surface. And one very powerful electronic power source."

"Why does he need these cells, then," Vila asked, lounging against the console.

Blake hefted the box of power cells, and answered, "These are very special cells, aren't they, Avon? For Ensor's mechanical heart."

"Yes. While you're down on surface, I will prepare the surgical unit. It will be better if the operation takes place as soon as possible."

"Operation? You taken up surgery in your spare time, Avon?" Vila demanded nervously.

"No, Vila, I haven't. But I expect that among you, Cally, and the apparatus I suspect Ensor has,

the operation can be performed safely."

"Me?" Vila squeaked.

"Of course. You always say you've got such a delicate touch," Avon added with a hint of a twinkle in his eyes.

Vila gulped melodramatically. Gan and Nova both hid amused smiles behind their hands, and Jenna just kept looking from one combatant to the other. In the midst of the confusion, the voice they'd heard earlier sounded over the communicator, patched in to the teleport deck.

"Are you ready to teleport down?" the voice demanded.

Cally and Blake nodded to Avon and he leaned across the console, flicking a switch. "Yes," he replied.

The levers began to move as the indicators on the console lit up. The steady hum of the teleport emanated from the pad as Cally and Blake disappeared in a brilliant white haze. His eyebrows raised, Avon sat back in his seat heavily, a strange leaden feeling in his chest.

"I hope you know what you've sent them into," Jenna commented, turning around to face him. Noting the strained look on Avon's face, her own expression became grimmer. "You'll need help in the surgical unit," she said. "We'd better get started."

Avon met her eyes blankly, then shook his head. "Vila can help me in the surgical unit. If you're so nervous, you'd best look after the teleport -- if Blake and Cally need fetching up quickly, you'll be ready. Gan and Nova -- keep watch on the flight deck -- and look after the weapons systems." Jenna glared at him, but kept silent.

"You're not expecting trouble," Nova ventured, pausing before the console on his way out.

"Down and safe," Cally's voice reported over the communicator, and all four of them turned their attention to the speaker. "We have made contact with the outer defense systems, and will be going down into the complex. We will be out of communications range until we return to the surface," she added.

Avon returned his attention to the communicator on the console, and glancing up at Jenna, asked, "Does everything look in order?"

"Perfectly," came Cally's response. "Stand by. This should not take too long. Keep the channel open."

"Right," Avon answered, and closed off the transmission. Looking up at Vila, he said, "Let's go."

Jenna's eyes followed Avon and Vila off the teleport deck, while Nova favored Gan with a curious look. Avon hadn't answered his question, an action that was becoming habit. Like Jenna, he was beginning to feel uncomfortable about Avon's dictatorial decisions. But his sense of loyalty to Avon prevented him from taking any action. Yet.



Blake and Cally entered the lift as instructed, standing silently as it carried them down into Ensor's underground complex. Blake was bursting with questions, Cally knew, and she was impressed at his self-control. He was already different from what she remembered from the Dream, more cautious, more restrained, more tightly-controlled. More mature. Yes, that was the difference. As though a new man were being forged from the internal conflict on the Liberator. Blake's initial acquiescence to Avon's leadership had eroded to frustration over Avon's apparent reluctance in tackling the Federation, and Cally knew that Blake often felt that it was he who should be leading the crew, not Avon. She couldn't guess at the future, but she felt sure that Blake was now learning a great deal that might serve him well later -- things he'd never learned in the Dream.

The compartment hissed to a stop, the door opening soundlessly. The voice directed them down the corridor, a corridor not so very different from Cally's memory of the Dream. Subtle changes here and there, but for the most part, the same. Reaching the end of the corridor, they came to a door which opened on to the living area. Inside, they found Ensor and his son, both alive and whole. She caught her breath, and followed Blake into the room.

Ensor Junior regarded them with open suspicion, but his father watched them through bright birdlike eyes alive with curiosity. He waved at his son, who slipped off into another room. To Blake and Cally, he gestured toward two chairs set opposite him. Wordlessly, they sat down.

"You've convinced ORAC that you bring no harm to my son and me, but you'll have to convince my son," he said sharply.

"ORAC?" Blake asked.

"Yes, ORAC," Ensor chuckled. "You've already encountered ORAC -- he took control of your ship, communicated with your crew, brought you down here -- and even now, he's scanning you constantly."

"ORAC," Blake repeated. "There have been rumors for years --"

"About the super-computer created by Ensor, I know. It's real. And it can do everything the rumors say -- and more," he added proudly. "My crowning achievement," he sighed contentedly.

"For the man who created the tarial cell, that's saying quite a lot," Blake observed with evident respect.

Ensor Junior returned at that moment carrying a tray of drinks, and set them down on the table next to his father's chair. He held two out and Blake rose to accept them, nodding his thanks. Handing a drink to his father, and taking the last one for himself, he positioned himself militantly

behind his father's chair.

Cally sipped at the drink, then set it down. "Our computer has communicated to ORAC the events leading to our coming here. They are, to say the least, fantastic --"

"So ORAC has just told me. How much do you know?" Ensor Senior asked of Blake.

Glancing at Cally, he answered, "Probably less than you do, actually," a note of bitterness in his voice.

"Hmm," Ensor Senior replied, regarding his drink thoughtfully. "So you've brought power cells for my mechanical heart," he said, tapping his chest. "So I won't have to go to the Federation for help, eh?"

Blake sat up at this, but Cally merely nodded. "As enemies of the Federation, it is in our best interest that they not locate you, or ORAC."

"Self-interest. Now, that's a motive I can understand," Ensor Junior said suddenly, nodding.

"And in return, you want ..." Ensor Senior prodded.

"To buy ORAC," Cally answered easily. "With it, we would have access to data that could help coordinate a galaxy-wide rebellion against the Federation." Blake started, regarding Cally critically, but remained silent.

Ensor Senior considered this as he took another sip of his drink. "Yes, that's true." To Blake, he explained, "ORAC is capable of accessing and influencing any computer containing my trarial cells. And, as you know, that includes even the most sophisticated Federation security computers."

Blake nodded, eyes widened. He was obviously impressed. He glanced again at Cally, who answered Ensor.

"Yes. With ORAC's help, we could tap into the Federation's security computers, gain information otherwise impossible to locate or decode. We could anticipate their actions, perhaps even influence them."

"Oh, I think you'd need a brilliant tactician if you were to start tampering with Space Command's strategy computers. If the interference were too obvious, they'd simply take strategy off the computers and put it in the hands of the puppeteers. You'd need to camouflage any action to make it look genuine."

Cally nodded, taking a long gulp of her drink. Had ORAC explained the entire scenario to Ensor? He seemed to be playing along beautifully.

"Like you, I've no love for the Federation. That is why my son and I have remained so long in exile here on Aristo. I've no desire to be exploited and abused by the Administration. But I have come to value ORAC's company -- he's more than just a computer, you know."

"Yes, of course," Cally replied. "We could match almost any price you might want to state ..."

"Yes, I've no doubt you could," he answered thoughtfully. "I prefer not to make any snap decisions, though. You're in no hurry to leave?"

"We can remain in orbit a few days, I would imagine, but we would both like to return to our ship," Cally answered.

"Yes. ORAC tells me your ship is quite amazing. I'd like to see it. Of course, the operation would have to be performed on your ship, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," Blake answered. "We have the most advanced surgical unit I've ever seen, on the Liberator."

"Liberator," Ensor chuckled. "Appropriate name for a rebel ship."

"We think so," Blake replied, almost defensively.

"Yes. I think my son and I will go back to the ship with you. I'd like to see it, and it'll give me an opportunity to more carefully consider your proposal. Shall we?"

"Father --" Ensor Junior protested, but his father waved him off.

"It'll take us a few minutes to pack a few things. You'll stay here --"

"Yes, thank you," Cally answered as Blake rose politely. After they'd gone, he sat back down heavily, and turned a furiously curious look on Cally.

"Will you tell me what in hell is going on?" he demanded.

"You heard what Ensor had to say about ORAC. It is vital to any kind of organized rebellion. It would place us at a definite advantage," she added intently.

"Yes, I understand that. What I don't understand is how you knew about ORAC, where Ensor was, that he needed power cells for his mechanical heart -- even that he had a mechanical heart -- Cally, talk to me, what is going on?"

"You would never believe the full truth. But among my people there are some that are gifted with prescience. Both Avon and I have had ... experiences along that line. This is one of the things that was revealed to us in those experiences. I really cannot explain any more than that. It is very difficult. Some of the experiences have been very ... detailed. Not all have been positive. Those that have not ... well, we have taken steps to prevent them. But you must understand, Blake," she turned to him, grasped his hands in her own, and locked his eyes in an intense, almost burning gaze, "what we have seen is accurate up to a point. The future can be changed by selectively altering the circumstances leading up to events. Some events can be manipulated to our advantage. And so far, the accuracy of our ... predictions has been astonishing."

"You're basing this entire expedition on premonitions, on dreams?" he demanded, incredulous.



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She straightened, releasing his hands. "You forget the planet I call home. On Auron, such things, while not common, are fact. Do not limit the mind simply because your vision is blurred. You must trust me, Blake. A great deal depends on that. Perhaps even your own life," she added softly, her face half-turned away from him. He continued to stare at her, his features slowly softening. He leaned toward her.

"Are you having one of those ... experiences now?" he asked softly.

She looked back at him and shook her head. "Tell me you believe me, Blake," she pleaded.

"Yes, I think I do. It's difficult not to."

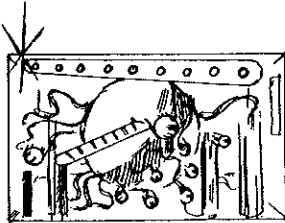
They settled back in silence, Blake digesting the revelation Cally had made, Cally worrying that she'd said too much. Had she jeopardized their position by revealing just how tenuous their superior knowledge was? Her reverie was cut short by Ensor and son returning through the communicating hatchway.

"Well," Ensor Senior exclaimed, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "Shall we go? I'm quite looking forward to this -- I haven't been off Aristo in nearly forty years!"

"Um, yes, ah, how do we return to the surface?" Blake asked, rising.

"We retrace your steps. ORAC will be monitoring us constantly, both here and on the ship. Any funny business, and your ship's a memory," Ensor Junior said threateningly. Grimly, he nodded to the door through which Cally and Blake had entered earlier.

"In that case, the sooner we get this over with, the better for all of us," Blake responded, just as grimly. Cally merely nodded, and followed them out.



"Ah, yes, I see," Ensor Senior was observing as Avon briefly explained Liberator's computer systems. "From what ORAC's been able to glean from your master computer -- Zen, is it? it's a complex of biosilicon circuitry. Not quite cyborg, but fascinatingly close."

"Biosilicon?" Blake asked, moving up to join them before Zen's fascia. "Then you mean Zen's alive?"

"Alive? Alive? No, not in any true sense, not as we understand it. But your computer has consciousness, and within the realms of its programming, something akin to free will. It is, essentially, an entity unto itself. Yes, quite, quite fascinating. And you've no idea who designed it?" Ensor directed to Avon.

Avon considered a moment, then answered, "None. It's obviously an alien design, as a

matter of fact, I'd say not only alien in design, but the theoretical concepts on which it was based began in a totally different direction from our own technology."

"Yes," Ensor breathed appreciatively, poking into the circuitry cabinet before Zen. "Yes, indeed. It would take a lifetime to fully understand the concepts behind this technology. Perhaps more. Fascinating. No wonder ORAC was so keen to let you through," he added, straightening stiffly.

"The surgical unit is ready," Jenna announced from the head of the stairs. Taking a step down, she added, "We can begin surgery whenever you're ready."

Ensor clapped his hands together and nodded once. "Yes, I'll have time to look things over more carefully during my recuperation period. I assume that teleport might be too dangerous until after the surgery is healed ..."

"Yes, that's probably true. Although with the tools at our disposal, recuperation shouldn't take too long," Blake observed.

"Shall we?" Jenna asked impatiently.

Blake allowed himself a small smile as Ensor nodded again and followed Jenna off the flight deck. Alone with Avon, he turned to him, and regarded him seriously. "Cally told me about your premonitions."

Avon started at this, but remained outwardly calm. He leveled an unperturbed gaze on Blake. "Premonitions? How much did she tell you?"

"That you've had predictive experiences, that that's what lead you here to Aristo."

Avon nodded thoughtfully.

"And that there are certain events you've 'seen' that you're taking steps to prevent," Blake prodded.

"Yes."

"You knew about this ship while we were still on the London," Blake added. "That's why you were so keen on irritating Raiker. You knew he'd send you across."

Avon nodded. "And how does that make you feel, Blake?"

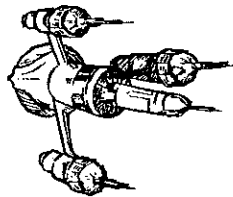
Blake regarded him in silence for a while, then answered quietly, "Uneasy."

Avon's mouth twisted in a bitter smile. "This isn't madness, Blake. But it could just save us from it."

As Avon turned to leave the flight deck, Blake bit his lip, and asked, "Just how much have you seen, Avon?"

Avon turned on his heel, and stared at Blake, his eyes flicking from one emotion to another. Finally, he answered, "Too much." And with that, he left the flight deck.

Blake expelled a long-held breath and stared at Zen. "You know a lot more than you're telling, Zen. And I don't like it." Then he left the flight deck as well.



"Perhaps you should rest," Jenna offered as Ensor Junior paced nervously up and down the rest room floor.

"Rest? How can I rest?" he demanded.

"You're going to wear a hole through the bulkhead at that rate. Your father's in good hands." She got up and poured herself a drink. "If it makes you feel any better, your father patched ORAC directly through to the surgical unit. It's monitoring the operation, and giving instructions as necessary."

Ensor Junior stopped suddenly, and regarded her gratefully. "As a matter of fact, it does. If ORAC's looking in, my father is in the best hands." He accepted the drink Jenna held out to him.

"You've been on Aristo a long time."

"Most of my life. My father defected from the Federation nearly forty years ago while we were on holiday. That's when he got his mechanical heart."

"Quite a holiday," Jenna observed. "And you've never been off the planet since?"

"Oh, a bit in the early days, gathering tools, equipment, supplies. All very low profile. My father's got no love for the Federation." He sat down suddenly, and drank deeply from the glass.

"Neither have we," Jenna said, leaning against the table. "We've all met the wrong end of justice from the Federation."

"And that's why you want ORAC. I heard what Cally had to say. It makes sense, in a way, but I can't imagine my father giving it up. It's like ... well, like another son to him."

"And a brother to you?" Jenna asked with a smile.

Ensor Junior allowed himself a smile in return. "He's no good at cricket, but he's company. Through ORAC, I've had one of the universe's best educations."

"With access to every computer in the Federation, I'm not surprised. The Federation lost a great deal when your father defected."

"Yes. He's a good man. He saw where the Federation was heading, and he couldn't stick it."

"Why didn't he stay, try to change it from within? He must have been very influential in technical circles," Jenna commented suddenly.

Ensor Junior looked up sharply at that. "He's not a coward, if that's what you mean. Look, you've seen him, he's not a diplomat. He doesn't go in for palace intrigues. They'd have killed him, no matter how valuable he was."

"Or used you as a hostage to make him work for them," Jenna added, nodding. "A serious dilemma."

"One he solved quickly and with a minimum of fuss."

"Yes."

"I've got to admit, it's a relief to know his heart's taken care of. I wasn't looking forward to contacting the Federation about power cells. I don't trust them any more than my father does."

"A good thing, too," Jenna replied. "They'd probably have taken ORAC and left you both for dead."

"Yes," Ensor responded, eyeing Jenna with renewed suspicion.



A few hours later, a very tired-looking Cally, a nervous Vila behind her, entered the rest room. Ensor Junior sat up quickly. "Well?"

"The operation was a success," Cally answered, stripping off her surgical gown. "ORAC has confirmed your father is strong and healthy, and that the power cells are taking effect normally. He should be out for a few hours, but he will recover soon."

"I could use a drink," Vila announced, and homed in on the bottle Jenna had left on the table. He took a healthy swig directly from the bottle, then sat down on the edge of the table. "I never want to go through that again," he exclaimed, dragging his gowned wrist across his mouth to wipe away the alcohol.

Cally smiled. "The power cells will last another forty years. I doubt you will have to."

Ensor Junior was pacing again, excitedly. "So he'll be okay. That's marvellous." He wheeled around, and grasped Cally's hand. "That's bloody marvellous!"

Jenna rose from the lounge on which she'd been sitting, and placed a hand on Ensor's shoulder. "Your father will be sleeping it off for a few hours -- why don't you get some rest now?"

"Yes, yes, that's a good idea," he said breathlessly. "Is there somewhere --"

"I'll show you," Jenna replied, and guided him out of the rest room.

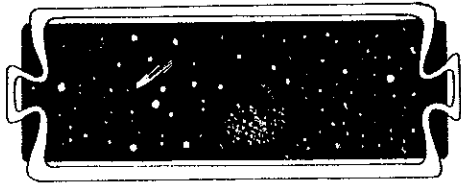
"Well, I'm glad somebody's happy," Vila said morosely, pulling from the bottle again. Cally

turned to him and grinned.

"You'd better get some rest, too, Vila. Thank you for your help -- I could not have done it without you."

Vila beamed. "Doctor Restal, that's me." He put the bottle down, and started to leave the rest room. "You should get some rest, too, Cally. You look knackered."

"Thank you, Vila, I will." And Vila left the rest room, Cally shortly behind.



There was a knock on Avon's cabin door, and the sound roused him from a light sleep. "Avon? Are you in there?" Cally called.

He was on his feet and to the door instantaneously. As the door slid open, he asked anxiously, "How is he?"

"Recovering," Cally nodded. She'd changed out of her surgical outfit, but dark smudges under her eyes spoke of her recent ordeal. "Vila came through beautifully. Ensor's son is resting now. It has all come off very well."

"We still don't have ORAC," Avon observed sourly.

Cally sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. She groaned softly, and leaned back. "We have a chance at it, now," she answered him. "Better than we had before." She stretched tiredly.

"It would have been easier just to take it." He sat down at the desk, watching her.

"No," she snapped, sitting up again. "Even if we could have done, we could not. I would never have allowed you." Her eyes blazed as she spoke, and Avon shrank back a bit.

"No. Sorry. I'm just tired. Tired of waiting."

"It is going to be like this from now on, Avon. We have already changed the course of the Dream sufficiently that things will not happen just as we expect them to." She got up, and laid a hand on his shoulder. "It is not going to be easy. You must be strong."

"You told Blake," he said, laying his head down on his folded arms.

"Yes. I told Blake. Not everything. But enough. For now."

"To get him off our backs."

"Yes. To gain his trust. His cooperation. He will make the others go along. So long as we do not fail."

Avon lifted his head slightly. "Fail?"

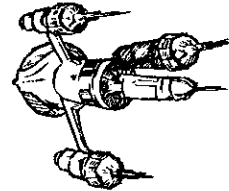
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"There is work to be done. Important work. We cannot lose sight of that."

"Yes. The reason we were chosen. Sometimes, Cally, I wish it hadn't been us."

She considered this a moment, then bent over to put her arms around him. He stiffened, but didn't push her away. Yes, that was a step. In his ear, she whispered, "But it is, Avon. And you are not alone. I will be here. We can do it."

His hand closed over hers an instant, then let go. It was enough. With a slight hug, she let him go, and exited his quarters. Sighing, he got up and went to the bed to lie down.



"Splendid!" Ensor cried, looking over his own charts. "Yes, ORAC confirms it -- the cells are working perfectly, the incision is nearly completely healed."

Blake nodded. "You'll be able to return to Aristo shortly."

"Yes," the old man agreed, almost sadly. "I shall miss you all -- I've always thought myself a misanthrope, but I've enjoyed the company of humans other than my son. Not that I don't value my son's company greatly," he amended quickly.

"Of course not," Blake murmured, taking the chart from Ensor's hand and placing it on the bedside table.

Ensor regarded him seriously for a moment, then broke into a smile. "You're wondering if I've made a decision about selling ORAC."

Blake gave him an embarrassed smile. "Yes, I was. I realize --"

"Now, Blake, it's only natural. You shouldn't feel ashamed. After all, it was the real reason you came here." As Blake opened his mouth to protest, Ensor held up his hand imperiously. "Now, now, it's alright. I understand. You can't expect something for nothing in this universe, Blake. At least, I don't."

"You're very cynical," Blake commented.

Ensor smiled again, smoothing down the sheet drawn over his lower torso and legs. "Yes, I suppose I am," he sighed. "Or is it practical? You don't get as old as I am without learning something about yourself. I suppose I am cynical. I didn't believe the Federation could be changed, so I ran from it." He fell silent.

"You had a son to protect. That's a pretty compelling reason."

"Yes, I suppose it was. I envy you, though -- you just might make the difference. Oh, the Federation's been corrupt for centuries, we all know that. But Cally's right -- with ORAC's help,

you could coordinate a galaxy-wide rebellion that could destroy the Federation."

"Would you return if we did?"

"To Earth? I don't know. I'd never thought about it. I've resigned myself to spending my life on Aristo, I suppose. I don't know how my son would feel ..."

"He'd never leave the planet so long as you're alive, I'm sure of that."

Again, the beaming smile. "And you've extended that life. I'm not so silly as to think it a worthless life. I've accomplished a great deal in my lifetime -- and there's still more I can do. But, in a way, it's all for nothing if no one benefits from it, isn't it?"

"Your tarial cell has made whole new generations of computers possible," Blake suggested.

"And given the Federation even tighter control over its people. Well, scientists must face the possibility of their discoveries being perverted. Universal good isn't the reason people like me push ahead -- it's ego, pure and simple."

Blake stood, and stretched his muscles. "I get the feeling you're trying to make your decision."

"Do you? Well, I suppose I am. A man's life isn't worth much if he has nothing to leave behind him. ORAC's my greatest achievement."

"Yes." Blake attempted to remain neutral.

Suddenly, Ensor chuckled. "Ah, Blake, I'm dangling you on a string, and you're trying to be polite and not wriggle on it. You want ORAC, you need ORAC. Your rebellion could falter and die without the advantages he could give you. Let's not haggle anymore. Cally tells me you've got enough wealth in your strong room to buy whole star systems. So let's settle the price at 100 million credits and be done with it."

"One hundred million credits?" Blake breathed.

"You know ORAC's worth ten times the amount."

"I know. You could ask for it, too --"

"Could you afford the price? With that sort of money, I could reassemble the component parts, and build myself another ORAC. And thanks to the power cells you've supplied, I'll live to do it."

Blake grinned. "Yes, you will, won't you. You're quite sure?"

Ensor nodded vigorously. "Yes, I'm quite sure. I'll need to house the central mechanism of ORAC -- you won't get the whole system, there's no way to reduce it to a portable size, but you'll get the central core."

"The brain of ORAC."

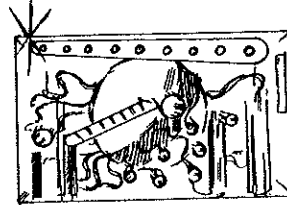
"Yes. The greatest mechanical brain ever devised. Perhaps the greatest brain of any kind, ever."

"Yes," Blake whispered, his heart pounding. With ORAC, the entire universe opened before them. Victory was a possibility.

"When my son comes to visit me, I'll tell him my decision. You can tell the others whenever you're ready."

"Yes, yes, I will," Blake agreed absently.

"Well, why don't you do it now, man?" Ensor demanded petulantly, and as Blake glanced up at him, his face ignited with a grin. Nodding fiercely, Blake left the medical unit, leaving a gently chuckling Ensor behind him.



"You activate ORAC's aural and vocal circuits using this key," Ensor was saying, demonstrating as he spoke. He pushed the clear perspex key, its fine lines of circuitry tracing patterns within the crystalline package, into the slot to one side of ORAC's enclosure. The computer activated with a squeal, and the brilliantly-colored lights inside the enclosure sparked to life.

"Yes, what is it?" asked a voice very like Ensor's.

"ORAC, I want you to meet your new companions," Ensor said gently. "You'll be going with them, to help them."

"Yes, Ensor?" ORAC asked, almost plaintively.

"You will find whole worlds of knowledge opening up for you, ORAC," Ensor continued, a slight tremor to his voice. "You can transmit data of particular interest to me here, on Aristo."

"Yes, Ensor," ORAC replied flatly.

"I shall miss you, old friend," Ensor concluded.

"I ... I, too, Ensor," ORAC said. Ensor removed the activator key, and handed it to Blake.

"You might find him occasionally difficult to deal with, if he's found something that interests him, but for the most part, you'll find him a useful ally. Use his talents well, Blake."

Accepting the key with an element of awe, Blake nodded. "I will. Depend on it."

"I shall be listening for you in the reports. I should have a new prototype completed in a few months, but in the meantime, the basic defense system will be able to protect us here. Take good care of ORAC." He bit his lip, then thrust out his hand to Blake. "Goodbye, Blake."

"I'll come back for you if I'm successful," Blake replied, taking the proffered hand warmly.



Ensor smiled wryly. "I'll be waiting." With that, he released Blake's hand, and snapped ORAC's case shut, sealing the hinges. "Good luck."

"And you," Blake answered, and picking up the case, started to move toward the door. Ensor Junior came out from the connecting room, and thrust out his hand in farewell. Blake took it, pumping it warmly.

"Thank you, Blake. We won't forget you," Junior said.

"Nor I you," Blake replied, and letting go the hand, slipped out into the corridor and onto the lift. Seconds later he was on the surface.

"Ready to come up now," he spoke into his bracelet, and with a final glance at the obelisk housing the lift, he vanished from the surface of Aristo.

Back on the Liberator, he was greeted by the assembled crew.

"You've got ORAC, I see," Avon observed.

"Yes. I rather expected Ensor to cry at

sending ORAC on his way -- he was quite fond of this thing," he said, snapping open the cover.

"At least now he will live to build another," Cally said, glancing at Avon. Avon nodded, and looked over Blake's shoulder as he lifted ORAC out of the case.

"Doesn't look like much," Nova observed to Gan.

"No. But Ensor thought pretty highly of it. Must do something," he answered.

"Ensor thought pretty highly of himself, as well," Avon commented drily.

"With good reason," Blake reproved. "Well, let's get ORAC to the flight deck and see just what he can do."

Glancing at Cally, Avon allowed himself a slight smile. "Let's," he said simply, and the entire crew left the teleport deck.



This next story also appeared in **B7 Complex #8** (Avon's 8 Collected Mark I?). As we had saved Nova for Mary's sake, we also saved Travis for mine — yes, it's true — I was hot for the bad guy. (Fans present at the room party at Lunacon in 1983 might remember my glee at learning you could see Travis's underwear line in "Trial." Yup, I had it bad ... Sigh. We were all very young then ...) However, I have never been a fan of villains, so the challenge in this story was to write a plausible, non-psychotic explanation for the massacre on Zircaster/Auros. (Not to mention introducing continuity to this pivotal event in Travis's career — something lacking in the series!) And having come up with a military explanation that we felt worked, the next step was convincing the crew of the *Liberator* of the value of having a crewmember intimately acquainted with the intricacies of Space Command.

To me, this is the story where we really broke away from *Blake's 7* and into new space all together. We had assembled the crew of the *Liberator* plus one. Our villains were vaguely defined, really little more than question marks — were they like the series, did they even exist? As Travis is radically redefined in this story, so the overall concept of who the enemy is begins to be reshaped. This reshaping process continues to take place through the remaining stories, as characters from the series, and characters from our imaginations take the stage. But read on ...