

by Mary D. Bloemker

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"Blake!"

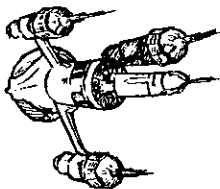
Cally woke with a start, shivering as the cold wind of Terminal blew over her fragmented body ... no, that wasn't right. She drew the heavy blanket closer to her chin, bringing her knees up tight as she huddled in on herself to conserve warmth. She dared not light a fire, else the Federation patrols might detect the heat or light. She could not die before paying her debt.

The cave where she shivered was dimly lit by moonlight and scattered starlight filtering through the wall of bracken she'd drawn across the cave mouth. Here and there, the light glinted off weapons, helmets, metal dishes and paraphernalia strewn haphazardly over the cave floor. Left behind when death fell from the sky, little more than a month before. She was the only one left, spared by the fact of her alien physiognomy.

Yet she wasn't alone. True, the Federation communications complex was full of people -- animals -- but they did not join her in the dark hollow of the cave. In sleep, her companions were from another world, another existence altogether. She wondered if her lonely war against the Federation had not begun a slow decline toward madness, for in the past two weeks, bidden or no (and she sometimes did welcome its release from this interminable silence), the Dream had visited itself upon her each time she'd slept. Always starting here, on Saurian Major, the Dream swept her along into a violent, exciting whirlpool that always ended in shrieking pain on the chill planet Terminal. Inexorably, she became caught up in the unchanging events, like a leaf caught in the slipstream. And she hadn't the will to fight it. All that was left to her was her fight against the Federation that had killed her companions, and the Dream.

They are coming.

The thought came to her suddenly, cold and sharp like a steel knife. *They are coming.* She shook her head, dislodging a cascade of curls that fell into her face. *They will be here soon.* No, it was only a dream, this Dream, not a premonition. But in her heart, she knew. Even among her people, such a gift was rare, and to see it all so clearly, again and again, it could only be absolute truth, beyond question. *They are coming.* And the Dream becomes reality. She could stop it. She could refuse it, deny it. But would she?



Blake eased back on the controls, heaving a sigh of relief. Behind him, Jenna smiled encouragingly. "That proves it, then. As a team, we can fly the ship without the automatics."

At his station at the weapons console, Vila nodded vigorous agreement. Leaning against the console and studying the controls over Vila's

shoulder, Nova grinned. "So, we're really free," he murmured.

"Free to go anywhere in the galaxy," Vila echoed, wondering just where they'd end up.

"Has anyone seen Avon?" Gan asked from his seat, closest to the flight deck arch.

Blake glowered. He and Avon still hadn't reached a point of compromise, and he felt it detrimental to his Cause to allow this selfish, cold computer expert run of a ship as fine as this. The Liberator ought to be used to further the cause of Liberty in the galaxy, not to further Avon's bank account. Still, he wasn't sure what Avon had in mind ...

"What's that?" Gan asked, forgetting his question about Avon. Blake twisted around in his seat to look at him, and Jenna trotted up to stand behind Gan.

"It looks like some sort of distress signal," she answered, watching the series of blips register on the screen. "Blake, change course to --"

"Ignore it," Avon ordered imperiously from the stairs.

"Avon, it's a distress signal," Jenna argued.

"I said, ignore it." She held firm, and he smiled slightly and walked over to Zen. "Zen, what is your recommendation regarding the projectile now registering on the screens?"

+Investigation not recommended. Alien craft may contain unknown hazards.+

"Thank you, Zen," Avon replied, turning to face "his" crew. "Well?" he asked, placing his fists on his hips.

"I don't like ignoring a distress call," Jenna flung back weakly.

"But if Zen recommends against it," Gan began.

"By all means, let us follow the advice of a machine," Blake spat back, glaring at Avon.

"Let us do just that," Avon answered coolly.

"Avon," Blake began, anger coloring his tone.

"Jenna, are we still on course for Saurian Major?" Avon asked over his shoulder, walking over to join Nova.

Jenna stepped down to the pilot's console, where Blake moved aside for her. She regarded the readings and nodded. "Still on course. What's so important about Saurian Major?"

"One of the early self-governing colonies," Blake replied before Avon could speak. "Subsequently annexed by the Federation. When the settlers declared their independence again, the Federation crushed them with typical efficiency."

"How typical?" Jenna wanted to know.

"Half the population were butchered. The other half were rounded up and transported to

frontier planets. A few managed to escape to the hills to form guerilla bands."

"Why are we going there, though?" Vila interjected with more than a little personal concern. "I mean, I feel for them -- but we've got problems of our own."

Avon had listened to the exchange, the blood freezing in his veins as the inevitable wave of deja vu crashed over him, even as Blake continued, "They've built a vast transceiver complex there. All Federation signals and navigation controls are beamed into Saurian Major, boosted, and redirected. It's a vital nerve center in the Federation space control system. Destroy that, and you blind, deafen, and silence them." He turned and addressed Avon. "Is that what we're going to do?"

Avon resisted an odd impulse to burst out laughing. For a moment, the Dream Blake had resurfaced, and had just as suddenly been replaced by the new Blake -- one who was not in total control of the situation. But one who was not above a little psychological hanky-panky in order to turn things his way. He was going to have his hands full parrying Blake's subtle forays against his defenses.

"Is that what we're going to do?" Vila said worriedly.

Gan was nodding. "Yes, of course. Deaf, dumb, and blind -- how could the Federation catch us then, eh?"

+Liberator is now in stationary orbit, 1000 spacial from the surface of Saurian Major.+

"Then it's time we went," Avon said, wincing slightly as he heard the ghost of the Dream Blake intone those same words.

Blake was regarding him strangely. "You're serious, aren't you? You're really going to do it?"

"It doesn't meet with your approval?"

"I would have rather thought that it didn't meet with yours. You were the man who was seriously considering striking a bargain with the prison ship guards rather than side with us in a head-on fight."

"You heard Gan. If we destroy the communications complex on Saurian Major, we will have a fighting chance for survival. At the moment, that's the only thing that's important."

"I wonder," Blake murmured, giving him one last long look before shaking his head and turning away.

Avon rose to his feet. "If we're to make contact with the local resistance group, Blake, I think you're the one to come down with me to the planet's surface. Perhaps the infamy of your name will accord us a warmer welcome than any of us could expect alone. And ... Nova."

But he needed Vila, Vila and his bag of tricks, to gain entry to the complex. No one knew of Vila's peculiar talents yet, though -- no one but Avon. Why Nova? Point of departure, he told himself. Nova was his point of departure, his lucky charm. Keep Nova close and ensure that the Dream would

not start edging in and taking over again. He could teleport Nova back and retrieve Vila when they needed him, when they had reached the communications complex. At this point, Avon stopped, genuinely surprised to realize that he was actually considering going through with the attack on the complex. That was not, after all, the reason he had made haste to this planet. He had time to think about it as they made their way to the teleport area, and by the time he, Blake and Nova were ready, he still hadn't come up with any clear-cut answers.

"How long are you going to stay down there?" Jenna said as she settled herself behind the teleport console.

Expecting Blake to answer, Avon, who was slipping an extra bracelet unobtrusively into his pocket, looked up after a moment's silence to find all eyes on him. Clearing his throat, he said, with more confidence than he felt, "Depends on what we find."



Avon watched as Nova, moments after they had teleported onto the bleak landscape of Saurian Major, timidly approaching one of the few outcroppings of vegetation. He continued to watch as the man reached out to touch one of the plants, only to yelp and snatch his hand back. With a sigh, he strode to Nova's side, just as Blake approached from the other direction.

"It's warm," Nova exclaimed. "Clammy -- a bit like ..."

Avon, unable to bear hearing Nova fall so easily into Vila's role, reached out and snatched back the hand Nova was extending to touch the plant again. "Like flesh?" he said, pointedly guiding Nova's arm back to his side.

Blake was giving them a sidelong look. "Have to be careful with the plant life 'round here. Some of it's carnivorous."

"Some species even have an intelligence rating," Avon finished, unsuccessful in keeping the sharp edge of impatience out of his voice.

Blake's breath caught in his throat and a strange look came into his eyes, both of which served to warn Avon that Blake had caught him again voicing something that Blake had been just about to say. Before Blake had much time to think about it, Avon determined to change the subject. "Now -- how do you intend to make contact with the rebels?"

Blake's expression changed to one of mild surprise. "If they're any good, they'll make contact with us," he said slowly. "We don't make any secret of our presence, just set up camp and wait."

Avon nodded, his eyes scanning the far horizon. "Somehow, I knew you were going to

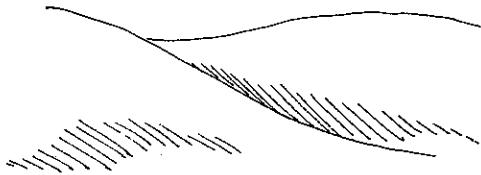
suggest that," he murmured, too low for Blake to hear.

"Unless you have a better idea?" Blake challenged.

"What if the security forces get to us first?" Nova wanted to know.

Avon gave him a dark glare. What was happening to his point of departure? The last thing he needed at this point was Vila's clone. "They won't patrol this far from the complex," he rejoined with an effort that surprised him.

Blake, after a moment, gave a small nod, as though coming to an inner decision not to press home the questions he had just yet. "A small fire first, I think."



Avon, leaning his elbows against the loose gravel, peered over the top of the rise into the small valley below, where Blake was standing beside the campfire. His arm was raised, and even across the distance that separated them, he knew that Blake was checking in with Jenna and Gan on board the *Liberator*. Avon shifted, coming to rest into a sitting position beside Nova, who was fidgeting nervously. "I still think it would have been a better idea for us to go off in different directions," the young man was saying. "I thought we were supposed to look for members of the resistance group."

"Blake was right. If they're any good, they'll find us."

"But I thought you told Blake ..."

"Nova, you could do me a tremendous favor."

"What's that?"

"Don't think. You're not very good at it."

The transceiver in Avon's bracelet crackled. "Blake. Either of you found anything yet?"

"Not a thing," Avon reported. When Nova did not make a move to answer, Avon gave him a curt gesture and a threatening glare.

"Nova? How about you?"

"N-no. Nothing," Nova stammered, looking hopefully at Avon, who rewarded him with a relieved nod when Blake replied, "All right, come on down. We'll try somewhere else."

Avon grimaced, glancing back at the place he would have seen Blake standing were the rise not in the way. "He's starting to get a little overconfident," he murmured to himself. He grabbed Nova's arm as the man started to get to his feet. "Where do you think you're going?"

Nova blinked. "Blake just said ..."

"Never mind what Blake said. Sit. Stay."

Nova hunkered back down, giving Avon a strange look, which he ignored as he edged back up to peer once again over the rise. He'd already scouted out the outcropping of rock that she'd be taking cover behind -- if she was there. She had to be there.



She was there. And she was frightened to her soul. She could have run, she could have stayed away, and she would never have to know, never have to find out if the Dream were just that -- a terrible nightmare -- or, as she feared, a harbinger of doom. But she had to know. And so she had come, and here she was, crouched behind the rocks, waiting. And hoping that he wouldn't come.

But he had come. He was here. Her heart hammered in her throat; more than once she had to wipe her sweating palms to keep a grip on the gun in her hands. The Dream had started, here, on this barren strip of land. He was standing still, as though ... waiting. She gasped slightly as an odd thought struck her. Could it be ... was it possible that he also knew? Was he waiting for contact from the resistance group he still thought active here -- or was he waiting for her, Cally, the lone survivor of the Federation treachery here? She had to know. She had come here because she had to know, and there was no turning back now.

Cally started to break cover, then froze, unable to move as her mind flashed back to the Dream. Flames filled her vision, coming full circle from the end to the beginning, in the person of Roj Blake, standing by the fire ... the fire, all around ...

She shook herself free with a low growl, determined not to let her fears make a captive of her. The Dream was a nightmare, but it was also a gift. She could use it. She could change things. This man standing before her was proof that at least part of the Dream was true, and that it was all starting here and now. The fire of her Dream now became hope, thawing the coldness in her heart. She could change things. But first, she had to find out what he was waiting for.

She rose to her feet, leveling her gun at him. She would not jump him, as she had done in the Dream; if he knew her, there would be no need. But if he did not know her, the readied gun would protect her. He did not turn his head to see her until she had silently approached to stand within five feet of him and had deliberately dislodged some gravel with the heel of her boot. Staring first at her, then at the gun, he glanced back up at her, his mouth open as though to speak.

She didn't give him the chance. *Who are you?*

Her heart sank when she saw him glance sideways, searching for the source of the voice inside his head. He didn't know her. And it was starting.

Determined now to see it through, she steeled herself to ask, "What are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to make contact with the resistance group ..."

He stopped when she lowered her head, overcome by emotion. "Excuse me -- are you all right?"

You may inform your friends that I am aware that they are just over the rises in either direction and that they should ...

She whirled when she heard the sound of feet skidding on loose gravel. Avon, who had been watching Cally's departure from the Dream with growing astonishment, had broken cover, and was making his way down the rise. Blake, with lightning speed, made a grab for Cally's gun, attempting to wrestle it from her. The brief scuffle came to an end when Avon stepped between them, gripping the rifle in the middle. With only the briefest, blackest glare for Blake, Avon turned to meet Cally's gaze, and saw in her eyes what he had suspected all along.

"You know."

Cally searched his face and found understanding. *You, also? A ... Dream?*

He nodded and relief washed over her face. She wasn't alone. *Do they ...?*

"No. I'm the only one."

"Only one what?" Blake wanted to know.

Avon gave a tug that freed the gun from Blake's grasp. As Cally shifted the weapon to spring the safety, she caught sight of Nova sprinting down the rise. *Who is that?*

He allowed himself a slight smile. "My point of departure."

Blake cleared his throat pointedly. "I get the feeling that we're missing something rather important here. Would you mind terribly explaining what's going on?"

Avon sought Cally's eyes again and gave her a reassuring nod. "Perhaps you would like to introduce yourself, Cally."

She hesitated, almost trembling. *I don't want it to start.*

"It's different already. Point of departure, remember?"

Nova joined Blake in giving Avon an open, almost hostile glare at this; their attention returned to the woman as she began to speak. "I am from the planet Auron. I was sent from there to aid the freedom fighters of this planet, but my people are the Aurnae."

"And they are telepathic?" Blake asked.

She nodded.

"And she cannot read our minds because we are not telepathic, but we can receive her thoughts

if she wishes us to," Avon finished impatiently. "Now, if we can get on with the business at hand ..."

"How do we contact the resistance force?" Blake wanted to know.

At this, Avon and Cally exchanged glances, mildly startled. Both had forgotten, in their relief to find they were not alone in shouldering the burden of the precognitive Dream, that Blake and the others were not so burdened. *I suppose I should at least go through the motions,* Cally telepathed to Avon with a mental sigh of resignation. At his nod of agreement, she turned back to Blake. "There is no resistance force. They are all dead."

"All of them?"

"We were getting stronger. The security forces kept hunting us, but we knew the hills and jungles too well. We made an attack on the main generating plant, and for the first time, they saw us as a real threat."

"What happened?" Nova wanted to know.

"They released poison from the sky. All the fighters died, except me -- perhaps because I am alien to this planet."

"You've been working alone ever since," Blake said with genuine sympathy.

She faltered now, seeking out Avon with her eyes. "I ... had planned to raid the complex, to destroy until I am destroyed."

"Well," Blake said carefully. "Our aim's the same, but we weren't planning a suicide mission. If you can get us inside that complex, we'll provide all the destruction you want, and still get out safely."

She nodded, further puzzling Blake with the air of certainty she had, as though she had sudden and inexplicable faith in everything he was telling her. Puzzlement became bafflement when Avon suddenly said, "We don't have to. Point of departure, remember?"

Looking at him, her jaw firmed, and in her eyes he could almost see the images of the friends who had died at the hands of the Federation. *I have to do it.*

He sighed and, nodding, capitulated.

At this, she faced Blake, a proud, quiet smile on her features. "I will guide you, Blake."

They started off, each with their own thoughts. Nova, who was beginning to wonder what he was doing here at all; Blake, who was trying to figure out how she had known his name, and how Avon, in turn, had known her name; and Avon, who determined to have a talk with Cally at the earliest convenient moment and straighten her out as to who was in charge around here.



Following Cally, they made fast work of the distance to the complex perimeter. Avon had followed her lead with ease, gaining Blake's consternation and -- just a touch -- admiration. All the way toward the place they now peered from, Avon had kept up a one-way conversation with Cally, causing Blake and Nova to throw surreptitious and suspicious glances at each other.

Now they were lying in the gravel behind the cover of a large rock outcropping, overlooking the communications base. Black-suited troopers patrolled the catwalks and courtyard, regulation pararifles slung casually over their shoulders.

"The change of watch should occur in thirty minutes," Cally announced softly, glancing up at the position of the sun.

"So. We have thirty minutes to get to the generator, set the charges, and get out," Avon replied, eyes narrowing reflexively as he watched the movements of the troopers. He raised his bracelet to his lips. "Liberator, this is Avon."

"Avon!" came Jenna's voice. "Are you ready to come up --"

"Negative," Avon snapped. "Prepare to teleport Vila down to our location."

Vila fairly leapt on the transmit button. "Teleport? Why me?" he squeaked.

Avon turned an exasperated glance at Cally, who hid a giggle behind her gloved hand. "You're a thief, Vila," Avon began, looking warily at Blake, who waited expectantly. "You're good with your hands ... or so you tell us." He paused, more for effect than anything else. "How do you feel about locks, Vila?"

"There isn't a lock in the galaxy I can't open!" Restal said defensively. Then, reluctantly, "Oh. I see."

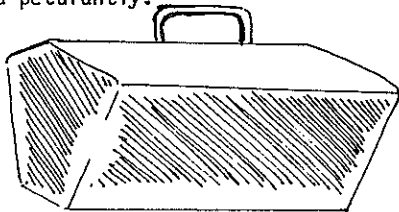
"Prepare to teleport, Vila," Avon said with a trace of a smile. "And bring your bag of tricks."

Blake stared open-mouthed at Avon. "How did you know?"

"Vila is a talented thief. Thieves usually develop some facility in lock-picking."

Blake nodded, agreeing. "Useful," he murmured.

Just then, Vila materialized, armed with a case full of odd-looking implements. "All right, I'm here. Who's she? Where's the lock?" he demanded petulantly.



Their assault on the communications complex proved smoother in reality than in the Dream. Vila wasted no time, and took out the locking mechanism with blurring speed. Cally sprayed the stairwell with gunfire, and Nova leapt down to

retrieve a pararifle from a dead trooper. He hefted the weapon with practiced ease, which Avon noted with considerable surprise. It occurred to him only then that he had never bothered to find out why Nova was being transported to the penal planet of Cygnus Alpha with the rest of them. From the way Nova was handling himself and the pararifle, the answers would prove interesting. And undoubtedly useful.

Nova held the stairway while Avon went to work on the generator; he joined them at Blake's all-clear signal, grinning when he read success on four faces. Avon was passing a teleport bracelet to Cally, who accepted it without a blink and fastened it confidently around her wrist. "Five to come up, Jenna," Avon spoke into the bracelet transceiver on his own wrist. "Now!"

The five terrorists materialized on the teleport pad, and Cally took a wondering, involuntary step forward.

"Who's she?" Jenna demanded, not quite masking the note of jealousy that colored her voice.

"Ask Avon," Vila said as he stepped down from the platform. "He's got all the answers, hasn't he?"

Avon raised an eyebrow, and answered matter-of-factly, "Cally." Jenna continued to glare, but Avon added, "Get us out of here -- somewhere safe and quiet. No Federation traffic."

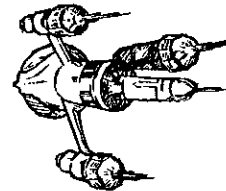
"*Anywhere but Centero,*" Cally telepathed to Avon with a slight smile.

"Right," Jenna answered, somewhat truculently, and exited the teleport deck at a trot.

Cally and Avon glanced at each other and left together.

"Why do I feel I've missed something important?" Vila moaned as he watched the retreating backs of Cally and Avon.

"I don't know, Vila. But you're not alone," Blake replied sullenly.

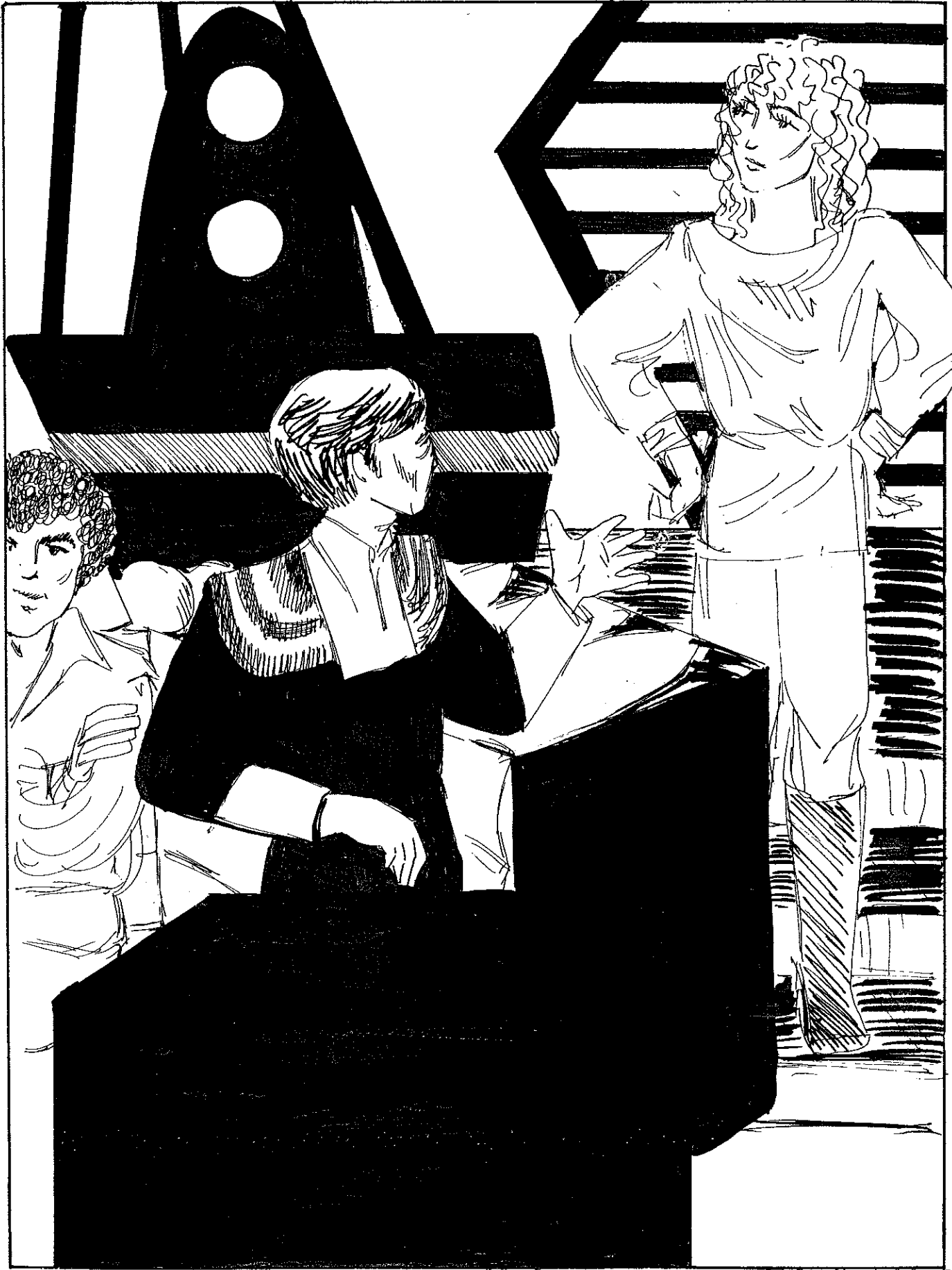


"*And after Terminal?*" Cally asked, prowling around the room she had chosen.

Avon started in surprise. Of course, Cally's Dream would end with her own death.

"*Blake wasn't there. The Liberator has been destroyed. What happened then?*" she pressed, halting and turning to regard him.

He stiffened, then turned and faced her. "We found a ship, Scorpio, and a new crewmember, Soolin.



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We continued to fight the Federation, and Servalan." Bitterly, he added, "Blake would have been proud of us."

And Blake? What of him?

"Oh, we found Blake, too."

His tone of voice told her he would tell her nothing more on the subject, so she elected to let it lie for the moment. Instead, she chose a new tack. *We can change it all. Shape the future --*

"In our own image," he finished distantly, remembering a pale-skinned, dark-haired woman on the planet Sarran. Shaking himself, he nodded. "We don't have to find ourselves trapped by Blake's blindness."

We can take control, subvert the Federation -- Avon we could take Star One today!

His eyes shot toward her at this. "Star One? That's a fantasy."

It's not! What we've dreamed -- it's a possible future. Star One is not a result of the events in the Dream -- the Dream begins long after its construction ...

"And leads to our destruction!" he spat back vehemently. She stood staring at him, and, nonplussed, he turned on his heel and left her quarters.

She followed him, still arguing the point. *With one swift attack, we can take Star One undamaged. We can send our ultimatum to the Federation High Council --*

"And do what if they don't comply? Play target practice with a couple of star systems? Planet roulette?" he fired back over his shoulder.

Deny flight clearance to Federation vessels. Shut down their defense systems, she replied. *The element of surprise is on our side, Avon! The Federation doesn't even know about the Liberator yet.*

"I'd like to keep it that way!"

They entered the flight deck, and in response to Jenna's raised eyebrow, Nova informed her, "She's telepathic. She doesn't have to talk."

"Oh. I thought perhaps Avon had gone completely round the twist," she observed acidly.

"He has," Vila added gloomily.

Blake allowed himself an amused chuckle as Avon continued his one-sided argument.

"There isn't enough popular support to justify the risk. The resistance we'd face is beyond our capacity to control!"

But the benefits, Avon. Eliminate your enemies in one concerted move -- before they even become your enemies!

"There's only one way to settle this," Avon snapped testily. "We'll ask ORAC." As he whirled around, hand poised to insert the super-computer's

key, he froze, suddenly aware of the others' disbelieving scrutiny.

Vila shot a look of triumph at Jenna. "See what I mean?"

Folding his arms over his chest, Blake leaned back in his seat and regarded Avon with a twinkle. "ORAC?"

Avon cast a glance toward Cally, who shrugged guiltily. He pivoted toward Jenna. "Change course for Aristo, standard by seven."

As Cally smiled approvingly, Avon exited the flight deck.

