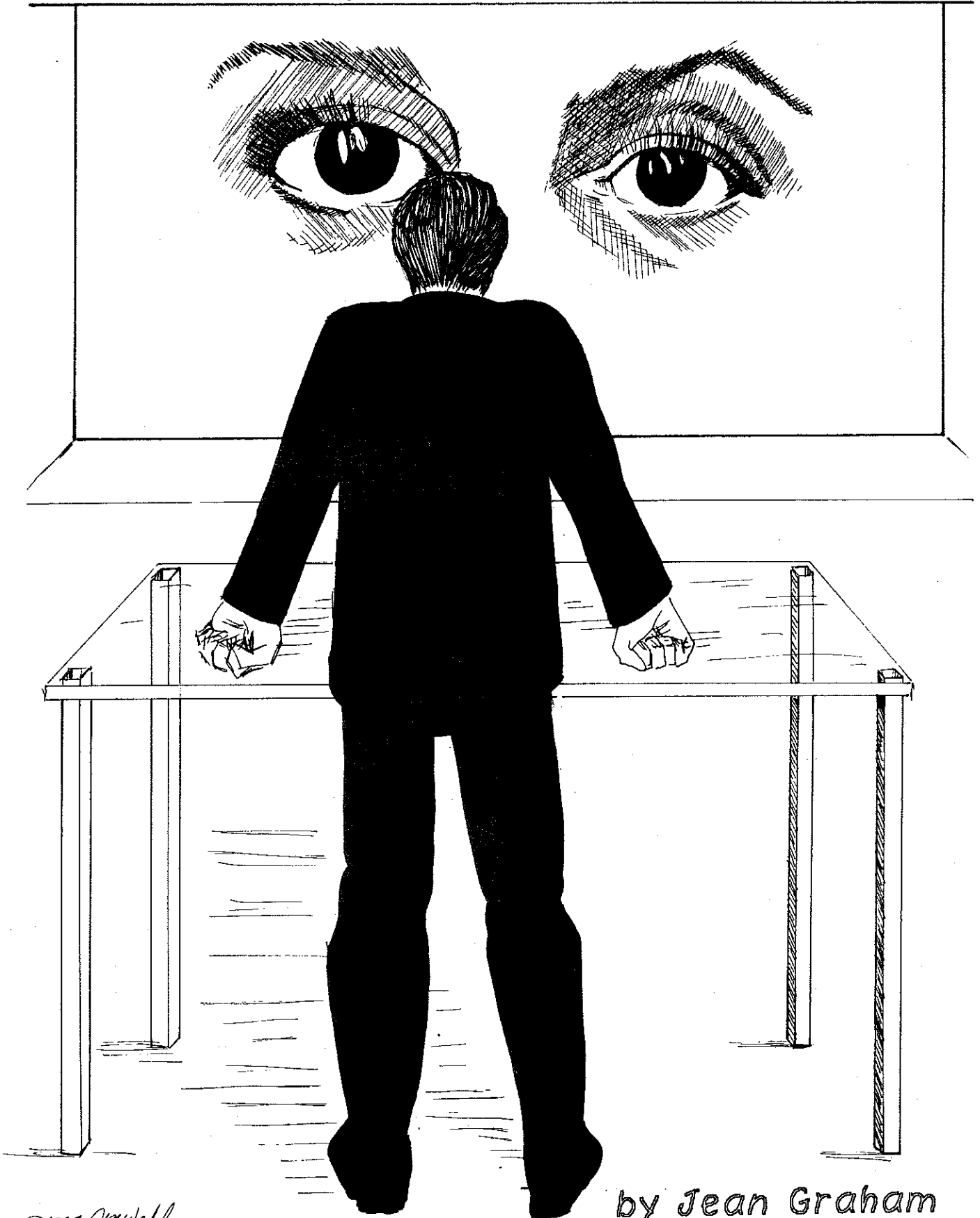


No Safe Harbor



©1988 Amwell

by Jean Graham

Was my death not enough, Avon?

The voice -- Blake's voice -- drifted with him down the corridor.

And the others? You do not even know, after all this time, whether they are alive or dead. You have not wished to know. Instead, you have come here. For what reason, Avon? To die?

No.

Not to die. Survival was and always had been the force that drove Kerr Avon. And if it had flagged in the horrors of this past, lost then he would find a way to make it viable again. He would find another way to survive.

That is why he had come here.

Willing the voice into silence, he passed through a door at the end of the corridor, coming face-to-visor with a severely dressed administrative aide behind an equally severe gray desk. She did not look up at him when she spoke.

"He isn't in," she said.

"I'll wait."

The visor tilted upward, refracting harsh light. Pale eyes regarded him with calm detachment. "It may be some time," she said crisply. "I may be able to locate Director Troas. But I do need a reason. And a name."

"No you don't. You will simply tell him ... that it is imperative I speak with him."

Something in his voice, an odd blend of authority and nerve-thin desperation, unnerved her enough to defeat the rehearsed evasion tactic. She nodded toward the inner-office door, primly stencilled with the name LAN TROAS and the title PLANT DIRECTOR.

"All right," she conceded. "You can wait in there."

Avon gave the surrender no acknowledgement, but strode thorough into the relative safety of the room beyond the sliding door. It was a large and tastefully-decorated office, not opulent, but functional. Beside the computer terminal on the black plex expanse of desk, a pair of holo cubes displayed the images of a graying woman and a boy in his late teens. These Avon studied for a long moment before he turned to move toward the small conference table occupying the opposite end of the room. On the way, he passed the mirrored tiers of an alcoved bar, and hastily averted his eyes. The gaunt stranger reflected there little resembled the man he remembered. Wanted to remember.

The only comfort this image could offer was that it resembled the face on the Federation's circulated holos not at all.

He took a seat at the table, facing the

door. Then, as though the strain of having come this far had suddenly caught up with him, he drew a long and measured breath, and slowly lowered his head onto his folded hands.

Time. That was all he really needed. Time to rest, to recover ... A week, a month, a year. Any amount that could be begged -- or stolen. Any place that could be deemed friendly. Safe harbor. Somewhere there had to be one. There had to be.

Too many years, Blake's voice returned, mocking him. Too many lives lost; too many taken. So long on the edge. So long ...

With no small effort, he quelled the voice again. But the faces ... the memories ... had waited only for his eyes to close before returning, a stark and disarrayed tableau. He was too weary to repel them any longer.

Blake lay on the floor beneath him, dark blood spreading grimly from the ruined tunic. The blood covered Avon's hands ...

Another Blake, worlds removed from the man he had faced at Gauda Prime, stood over the London's computer housing and fervently swore that he would never rest until the Federation's heart had been torn out. Until free men could think and speak.

And with cold, acrid cynicism, that other, long-ago Avon had said to him, "Wealth is the only reality. And the only way to obtain wealth is to take it away from somebody else. Wake up, Blake. You may not be tranquilized any longer, but you are still dreaming ..."

The only reality.

Had he truly been so naive, once?

Reality, in the end, had been the ultimate betrayer, more treacherous than any of the people in his life. And more evasive. He was not even certain that he recognized it any longer.

But Gauda Prime had been real enough.

The ring of black-clad figures, faceless, surrounding him on all sides. Guns poised. Waiting. Alarms shrieking in the red light. A vision, half-seen, of bodies strewn everywhere around him. Faces he knew. Had known. Vila, Soolin, Dayna, Tarrant.

Blake.

He had taken aim at the foremost trooper, slowly squeezed the trigger.

And smiled.

... Somewhere, an eternity later, memory had dredged up a voice. *Her* voice. "We can do it, Avon," it had purred. And his own confident tones had responded, "I know we can."

The same voice, some distant unknown time after the blood and the pain and the dying, had begun to call his name. It summoned him to wake. To answer. And he remembered thinking that she must command some form of power even in hell, to be here at all. It seemed fitting somehow.

He must have told her so.

"But you are not dead, Avon," the velvet tones had gloated. "I would never have allowed that."

He'd found the matter largely academic. What difference, to be breathing and Servalan's captive, or deceased only to find that she also ruled in hell?

"Your friends are dead, I'm afraid." That phrase had become a litany, vengeful and melodic. "You've killed them. Each and every one. All the fools who ever trusted you are dead. Some day you really must tell me how it feels to possess such awesome responsibility."

No.

They could not all be dead. Surely ... He had been shot with those same guns, repeatedly. And each of the others had been hit only once. She was lying. She had to be. Just as she had lied about Blake on Terminal. And about so many other things. Though she would never willingly provide him the opening needed to prove it.

So he had never known the others' fates.

Though in time even that had ceased to matter. Nothing mattered anymore but defeating her, cheating her of the final victory. She may have taken him at last -- he was a prize she had long coveted -- but he would deny her the other triumph. He would not give her ORAC, and nothing her interrogators tried would change that. Servalan's final victory would be an empty one.

How many months of living death had he survived there, locked in her windowless chambers, hounded day and night by the endless barrage of questions ... needles ... probes ... and still more questions? Until the night she'd had him brought to her *private* quarters, and there had been no mistaking what she wanted of him then.

The survivor in him had begun to see her weakness then. There was, after all, a way that he might *make* her vulnerable.

Madness, perhaps. To comply with her wishes ... But his was a madness no less all-consuming than her own.

So there in her quarters, in full view of the humming surveillance cameras, he had given her what she demanded of him; given it without either pleasure or pain or any pretence of feeling. And when it was finished he had closed his hands about her soft, white throat and choked the life from her.

The alarm screamed almost as soon as his hands had encircled her neck. It didn't matter. Though he had no doubt they would kill him this time, his choices had been achingly simple. Servalan here, or Servalan in hell.

He preferred hell.

Gloved hands clamped the silk robe at his shoulders, wrenched him away and threw him against the hard, false marble of her "personal" desk. He lay there, breathing raggedly, and waited for an end to it. But the shots he'd expected had not come. The guns that should have been trained on him sagged instead, all three of their owners intent on the efforts of their comrades to revive the limp thing on the bed. He knew then *why* they would not kill him. They had been ordered not to. By an authority higher than Servalan's.

Whether she lived or died, they still wanted ORAC. And that meant there would be more questions, more living death. He would never escape their questions.

The survivor in him had ... died ... in that moment. Conceded relentless defeat.

He could see only one way in which he could be free.

Unheeded by the inattentive guards, he had slowly drawn the laser probe out from its slot beside the desk's computer terminal.

Not a very easy death, all told, but placed correctly, just above the heart ...

"Gavik! Stop him!"

More gloved hands had jerked the probe away before he could activate the beam. He remembered a flash of light, reflected off the polished butt of the paragon as it was raised and arced savagely down at him. And then ...

* * *

"That was an exceedingly stupid thing to do, Avon."

Her voice again.

So he had not killed her after all.

Or ... was it that they had killed *him* after all?

"I know you're awake. The scanner says you've been conscious for several minutes. Look at me, Avon."

He willed his eyes to open, to absorb the unwelcome sight of her "medical" facility and the hard metal framework to which he was secured, standing upright. She leaned across the diagnostic computer, ugly, purpling bruises

at her throat the only sign of his near-success, and smiled at him with blood-red lips.

"As you can see," she murmured, "you didn't kill me."

"Pity. I shall have to do better next time." That was an echo of something Blake had said once. Aboard the London ...

"Nor," she went on, ignoring his remark, "did you succeed in killing yourself, though I'll admit I was a bit surprised to hear that you had tried. A laser probe, Avon? Crude, surely, even by your standards. You may like to know, however, that I have had them all placed under lock and key." The smile became cat-like. "I fully intend to avoid any repeat performances."

He fixed her with an obsidian gaze, determined and immutable. "I'll find another way." *And I'll take you with me, if I can.*

"I think not," she said, as if in answer to his thought. "You see, I plan to take proper precautions this time. Permanent ones. I'm going to see to it you never kill anyone again."

His puzzlement at that pleased her. She raised a hand, and called to someone Avon had not realized was there.

"Estes."

"Yes, Commissioner?" A stooped, balding man moved into view. He was a "medic," Avon realized. A lanky in white coveralls. One of Servalan's torturers-elite.

"Prepare the surgery," she ordered. "I want him fitted with the limiter implant this afternoon."

"Yes, Commissioner."

Avon's head had snapped up at her mention of the implant. Servalan correctly read a fleeting trace of both surprise and fear in his eyes, and that pleased her, too.

"As you know," she said as Estes hastily departed the room, "a limiter implant is equally effective against suicide. Of course ... unfortunately ... there are other brain functions which may be ... impaired?"

Disbelievingly, he glared at her, recalling a time aboard the Liberator when Gan's limiter had nearly cost all of them their lives.

"Memory, for example," he supplied, forcing a beleaguered smile. "You might never get your hands on ORAC that way."

"I don't have ORAC now." She moved closer to him, expertly laying bait across the verbal trap. "It's a risk I'm willing to take, Avon." The voice became suddenly hard. "And

that frightens you, doesn't it? It may be the only thing in the galaxy that does. To have anyone alter that meticulously well-ordered mind ..."

That horror had granted her the psychological war; a victory won in a single, bloodless moment. She had seen the fear, unsheathed and defenseless, in his eyes.

"Well, Avon?"

Naked loathing edged an already-hoarse voice. "Do you want me to plead with you? You'd enjoy that, wouldn't you?"

"Probably," came the calloused reply. "But I would much rather have ORAC. You will tell me where on Gauda Prime you left him and I will rescind Estes' orders. It's that simple."

Nothing has ever been simple for you, he thought bitterly. But aloud, all trace of the fear now buried under old, familiar arrogance, he said, "You still know how to play the game, don't you, Servalan?"

"I've done with games. Now will you give me ORAC or not?"

He watched her for a prolonged moment, and the survivor began to see the glimmer of a new possibility ...

"Give me half an hour with your primary computers," he said, "and I will isolate ORAC's carrier wave."

"Not good enough." The glint of the predator shone hard in her eyes now. "You will take me to him."

"That," he parried, "is unlikely. Since only ORAC knows where ORAC is."

"What?" The single word was an imperious command to explain.

Pleased at the consternation he'd already evoked, he obliged. "It was programmed to take the flyer deep into Gauda Prime's woods and hide itself. Without tracing the carrier frequency, even I would have no idea where. And only I can trace the frequency."

Scarlet lips twisted slowly into a thinly deprecating smile. "All very clever. But probably untrue. I doubt you would obviate your only means of escape from a potentially hostile base by sending the flyer away. Try again."

"I've already told you --"

"I don't believe you."

The black eyes flashed. "I don't really give a damn *what* you believe."

Suspicion warred with greed across the

glacial perfection of her face, the latter winning. With one manicured nail, she touched a control on the panel. "Estes," she said. "You will cancel that request. Tell Section Leader Talcor I want Triumph prepared for immediate lift off for Gauda Prime. And see that a link to the primary computers is installed aboard."

Avon smiled wanly at her choice of ships. Ironic, but perhaps appropriate. He had never even known what planet this complex of hers had occupied. But now, with a return to Gauda Prime -- and ORAC -- he might begin finding answers of his own. Whether Vila and the others were truly dead, for example ...

* * *

Given the primary link to work with, overriding Triumph's flight computer mid-voyage had been child's play. Once he had crippled the drive systems, disposing of Talcor had proved no more difficult. The man had been exceptionally slow for a Federation officer, and taking his sidearm from him had been deceptively easy.

Too easy, in fact. As though Servalan had planned it that way.

He'd known it to be true when he had gone, with the gun, to her quarters, only to find the rooms empty. She was nowhere aboard, and the flight console had told him a life capsule had been launched. Though the computer refused to confirm his suspicion, he knew there would be another ship to pick her up, to follow him back to Gauda Prime and ORAC.

The survivor, however, had no intention of handing her victory on such an easy platter. If need be, he would leave ORAC buried forever.

It had taken him months to lose them. Months more to at last find safe approach to Gauda Prime and to uncover ORAC -- only to find that there remained no trace of Vila, Tarrant, Soolin, Dayna ... Blake's base had been dismantled and abandoned. Even the bounty hunters had vanished with the planet's reinstatement of Federation status.

Roj Blake, Vila Restal, Dayna Mellanby, Soolin and Del Tarrant were all on record with Federation central computer banks as deceased. Kerr Avon, he'd noted with some amusement, had initially been listed as "missing." The reading had later been revised to "still at large," and the reward for his capture increased to three million credits. Top of the Federation wanted list.

Blake, after all, was gone, the reward for him dutifully collected and divided by a Federation death squad. Why was it that no mention had been made of rewards collected on the others? Curious, that. But ORAC had no clue. The Federation said they were deceased. And yet ...

He'd been granted no time to pursue the question. Three million credits posed far too attractive a lure for the galaxy's bounty hunters to ignore. And that, too, had been Servalan's revenge. Revenge for his having snatched Triumph, literally and figuratively, from her grasp.

He'd been forced to abandon the ship early on, and a dozen others after her. With a battered, nameless ore carrier, and ORAC as a guide, he had eventually made his way to Caphtor, and the Berilium plant wherein lay the offices of one Lan Troas. Long ago, Avon had known him by another name.

Gradually, he became aware of agitated voices just outside the office door. The aide's, and another, deep and distinctly familiar, even after so many years.

Abruptly, the door whisked open. The deeper voice said brusquely, "Look, I don't know who the devil you are, but I don't appreciate --"

Lan Troas, silvered hair offsetting dark, piercing eyes, allowed the sentence to die when he saw the face that looked up from the table. He stared for a moment, the recognition uncertain. Then he tripped the door control to close and lock it. Without turning back around, he said fiercely, "What are you doing here, Kerr?"

The response was tired, lacking all of its old vitality, though the sarcasm remained. "I'm glad to see you too, Tav. I don't even know how many years --"

"The viscasts said you were captured, all of your people killed. Commissioner Sleer had even announced your eventual public execution. You'll forgive my dispensing with pleasantries, but how the hell did you get here?"

Avon searched the deepset eyes for some remnant of sympathy and found none at all. Nor did he see any trace of the slender, quiet boy whose younger brother had once delighted in proving him "intellectually inferior." There was nothing inferior about Tav now ...

"Sleer," Avon began, and then amended the name with rancor. "*Servalan* ... is not at all as proficient as she likes to believe. I took her ship from her. I have taken a number of others since."

Tav took a seat at the opposite end of the table. "More deaths," he said ruefully. "More killing."

Avon's gaze grew distant. "Yes. I suppose there must have been. I ... really don't remember anymore. So many have ... hunted ... me."

"And if one of them -- any *one* -- managed to follow you here ..."

"They didn't."



© 1987 Arnold

"You can't possibly be sure of that!" A nervous hand raked through the silver hair. "You know what I have at stake here. It's taken years to build this. Years."

Avon's answer was subdued. "I did what you wanted. I stayed away."

"Until now."

"Until now." Avon paused to draw a long breath, then began again, appalled when his voice broke on the first word. "I ... need your help, Tav."

Nothing but resentment answered him. "Well now, that's a switch."

"I have no one else to turn to. Nowhere else to go."

Tav's eyes glinted, as hard and cold as Servalan's had been. "Don't play on emotions you know aren't there. You never needed me before. You never needed anyone -- you made that clear enough. It's a little late to begin needing now, don't you think?"

"You have helped others to vanish. New planets, new identities. You've done it for others ..."

"Others! Oh yes -- small time political dissidents. Malcontent scientists on frontier worlds. Writers, artists, all marked one way or another for elimination. All of them *minor* offenders; people with unknown names and unknown faces. Nowhere near the Federation's most-wanted list, let alone on top of it!"

Outburst vented, Tav folded his hands in front of him and stared hard at his interlocked fingers. "There's nothing I can do for you. Understand that. Nothing at all."

Avon studied his own hands, the survivor still unwilling to admit defeat. "A place to rest then. A little time -- a few days. That's all I ask."

The cold eyes pinned him. "You're not hearing me, are you? Every moment you remain here is a threat to me, my family, my livelihood. Why do you think I had to change my name, begin my life all over again? To be connected with you, even remotely, is a death sentence! And I will *not* hang that pall over the people I care for. You have no right to ask that of me." Strained silence hung between them until at last, he said more calmly, "You have a ship. Take it. Leave here, and if you have any semblance of caring left at all, don't come back."

Faintly, Avon felt the barriers of something long-constrained begin to give way. The thought of returning to the ore carrier, of continuing the endless futile scenario of running and hiding across an empty galaxy, alone ... He scarcely knew the voice that framed his next words. They came out in a

choked, half-sob.

"Help me, Tav. Please ..."

The face across the table seemed to soften minutely. The voice did not. "Now that *is* a surprise. You know I never thought I'd hear you plead with anyone. What happened to the survivor, Kerr? You were always so proud of him. You do remember. The one who never needed us?"

"I don't know ... anymore ... I think ... he may be dying."

Shaken, Tav covered his surprise by getting to his feet. "I'll see you safely back to your ship," he said.

The stranger at the table murmured something. All Tav heard was, "no safe harbor."

"No there isn't," he said. "Not here, anyway." He pushed his chair back into place, considered it for a protracted moment, and then added softly, "I wish it could be different, Kerr. I mean that."

Dark eyes snapped up to meet his, imbued with rekindled fire. "Do you? I doubt it. I'm afraid we were neither of us ever much inclined to self-sacrifice."

Tav's eyes wandered to the holo cubes on the desk.

"It isn't only my life I'm protecting," he said tightly. The chair his hands were resting on received a sudden, angry shove, slamming it into the table. "You know damn well what happens to the families of convicted 'collaborators'. They'd be sold into slavery on some outer world penal colony. Or slaughtered outright -- they don't always bother with formalities these days." Pique made the harsh words come faster. "Don't think I'd ever risk condemning them to that, Kerr. I'd turn you over myself first."

Avon looked up sharply then, gaze locked onto nothing at all for a long, terrible moment. When the haunted eyes finally came up to meet his, Tav turned guiltily away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean that."

An ugly note of both betrayal and defeat tainted Avon's answer. "Perhaps you did," he said. "Perhaps it is precisely what you ought to do, in fact."

Tav wheeled, revolted by this new implication. "Don't be an idiot. Do you really believe I could sell my own --"

"Why not? Three million credits can buy a considerable amount of 'good will' from the Federation."

Angry and affronted, Tav paced to the office door and tripped the lock to 'open' once again.

"I really don't think we've anything else to discuss," he said to the door. "I have business elsewhere. You'd better find your own way out."

He was puzzled by something he could not quite place in the sad voice that replied.

"Yes. I think I'd better had."

Why did he have the feeling those words meant something else entirely? Still without turning, Tav dismissed the thought and said curtly, "I won't expect to find you here when I return. Goodbye, Kerr."

It had sounded more final than he'd intended. But then, he considered, they would probably not be seeing one another again.

When no answer came from the end of the conference table, he touched a control to open the sliding door, and went out.

"Tav --"

Avon called out just as the door was closing, but if the other man had heard, he did not turn back. Avon stared at the impassive door for a long, long time before he spoke again.

"I'm sorry," said to the air.

* * *

You said you hadn't come here to die.

"So I did," he told Blake's ghost aloud. "But that was before ..."

The laser probe attached to Tav's office computer was older, broader-scoped than Servalan's had been. More suited to the purpose, really. Even if his aim was poor, it would simply burn a wider path ...

The coward's way? I never would have thought it of you.

Three million credits, he had said, could buy a lot of good will. It didn't matter to the Federation if the prize was delivered warm or cold. Servalan had ceased to care. Perhaps he had ceased to care as well.

The probe turning slow circles in his hands, Avon regarded the smiling faces in the holo cubes. He knew no names to put to them. They were people ... family ... he had never known, and likely never would. But they were Tav's family, in a way that he had never been. They typified a life Avon knew he had negated forever the day he'd chosen to break the banking cartel ...

It had only been six years ago.

But they were six years in which he had perhaps aged twenty, and throughout them, Servalan had never tired of the hunt.

Servalan.

Thought of her made him stare at the holo even harder. The probe ceased turning in his hands.

Think, Avon, Blake's persistent voice chided. Don't you realize that Servalan will wonder how you came to be here? To die here? And how a Beryllium corporate executive just happened to know the notorious Kerr Avon?

It was true. An investigation of Lan Troas's background would inevitably follow. And when that revealed discrepancies ...

With slow deliberation, he slotted the laser probe back into its receptacle.

You can't help them that way. But you can help Vila, and the others.

"If they are alive."

The rewards were uncollected.

Also true. It may or may not be significant. But perhaps, if he could somehow turn the hunted once more into the hunter ... trap Servalan into revealing the truth. Not an easy task, but with ORAC as bait ... A new twist to the game.

A reason to go on.

The holo cubes smiled at him from the desk top. Tentatively, he reached out to trace an index finger across their softly glowing edges.

"You never needed anyone," Tav had said, the words a cruel echo of his own cold proclamation, years before. "The one who never needed us ..."

Against Tav's words there came another echo.

"You care for each other ... You belong to them, Avon, as they belong to you ..."

One of them is wrong, Blake's voice gently challenged. Why don't you prove to me which?

Avon rose from the desk, willing the ghost to be done, but it would not be vanquished.

Prove to me, Avon.

No safe harbor. No place to hide.

So be it. He wouldn't hide then. He would face them, and with ORAC as a trump card, it was possible he might even win. Unlikely, but possible. What had Vila said once? "I plan to live forever ... or die trying."

"A philosophy," Avon murmured, "more profound than even Vila probably knew."

Weariness, defeat and bleak intentions already forgotten, the survivor departed Lan Troas's

office.

We can defeat them. Just as we did before, at Star One.

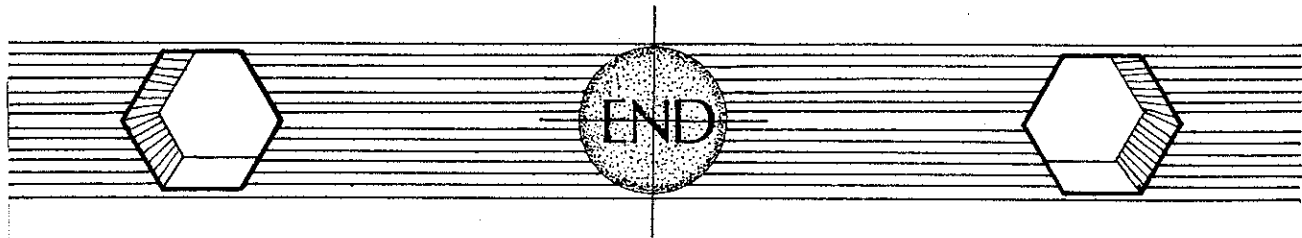
'That,' thought Avon angrily, 'was no defeat at all. It was an illusion. Just as you are an illusion.'

A long and petulant silence followed him

then, toward the waiting ship. The corporeal Blake would have been looking at him, a smile in the eyes and one finger trapped by age-old habit between teeth. An illusion ...

He had reached the airlock before the final whispered words touched his thoughts, still carrying with them a smile.

Am I?



Coming in July from Pursuit Press:

B7 Complex #12

- Fresh Start by Pat Nussman and Jacqueline Taero (first series)
- One Can Make a Difference by Jill Grundfest (second series)
- An Evening Out Can Be a Terrible Thing by Vickie Mc... (series, humor)
- The Wizard Must Die! by Carole Bede (third series for the Faith")
- Bitter Wine by Jean Graham (third series)
- Discoveries by Laura Blunk (fourth series for the Faith")
- Many Happy Returns by Holly Hutchison, Vickie Mc... Kim Wigmore (post-Gauda Prime, humor)
- Twice the Fool by Kathy Hintze (post-...

Plus poetry and short prose by P... Wigmore, and Garrett Fitzgerald, and possibly another Wortham-P... Art by Walsh and others.

B7 Complex #12 can be reserved for \$1.00 deposit plus legal-sized SASE until June 30, 1987. The zine will be available in mid-July, in time for Scorpio V. To reserve a copy, send your SASE to Deb Walsh, 346 Ferry Street #3, Malden, MA 02148 b...

For information on other issues, please send a legal-sized SASE to Deb, and mark on the envelope the issue you want information on. #13 is also in the works for...

B7 Complex #12 is a publication of Pursuit Press.