

Shattered Phoenix

by Emma L. Abraham

PROLOGUE

She stood unmoving as the sirens died into silence, her exquisite features betraying her uncertainty. For a moment, the only sound was of computers, clearly audible through the open doorway beside which she hesitated. The man observing from the shadows saw her take a resolute breath and step suddenly forward. He admired the way the light issuing from the entrance outlined the voluptuous figure in the clinging black gown.

Creeping up behind her, the watcher caught a glimpse over her shoulder of a black-clad man, similarly unmoving, surrounded by armed men in Federation uniform. The floor of the room was littered with bodies. The man in black slowly smiled and brought his gun to bear on the motionless woman, seeming to see only her. At this, the momentary suspension of time snapped. The watcher sprang into action, bringing up his own weapon and firing all in one smooth action. His shot hit the woman squarely in the back; she crumpled soundlessly to the floor as the black clad man's shot whizzed harmlessly through the space which she had so recently occupied. This was the signal for a renewal of the gunfire.

When the last echoes died away, the watcher stepped into the room and surveyed his handiwork. He stood looking down at the woman for several seconds, his face registering emotion for the first time -- in fact, a whole range of emotions that finally resolved into a kind of amused disbelief. Then he shook his head, smiling bitterly, and bent down to gently lift her body from the floor, oblivious to how the soldiers in the room pointedly paid him no attention as he carried the woman away.

* * * * *

Servalan returned to consciousness slowly and unwillingly. Her head throbbed, her throat was parched, and her whole body was on fire. Ignoring her protesting muscles, she sat painfully upright and tried to assess the situation. It was difficult as she didn't know where she was, or how she had gotten there. She was in what appeared to be a small interrogation room, empty except for the couch on which she sat. Levering herself gingerly to her feet, she tried the door, but was not surprised to find it locked. With a conscious effort of will, she resisted the impulse to slam her hands against the unyielding door and scream her demand for release. Instead taking a deep breath and reseating herself on the couch, she began to closely examine the room, her formidable mind already attempting to determine what had happened.

B7 Complex

Arlen's message two days before, confirming Blake's presence on Gauda Prime, had been timely. Servalan had been glad to leave the local headquarters and her disapproving superiors. After the disastrous failure of the Zukan affair, a truly spectacular success was needed if she were ever to get out from under the narrow-minded petty bureaucrats who were the bane of her present existence. They were shallow little men, small in both thought and action, and she yearned for the day she would be free of them. But until then, she continued to dissemble, to smile and flatter, to appear cooperative and loyal in public, and listen submissively to their reproaches and accusations. She had erred in using Zukan, and her misjudgment had cost her dearly. But she didn't intend to make the same mistake with Arlen.

The girl was quite promising, but untried. She had been brought in as a prisoner, a fanatic thought to have political motivations. It had taken little time for Servalan to realize that this one was a loner, an outcast, and filled with hate against those she considered her oppressors. Her type was so easy to handle: given some authority, a new cause, and Commissioner Sleer as both benefactor and mentor, she'd make a useful tool with her new allegiances clearly defined.

Servalan had seen Arlen given a thorough briefing appropriate to her new status as an undercover Security agent (answerable only to the Commissioner herself), adjusted the girl's criminal record slightly and engineered her escape and flight to Gauda Prime. She'd been quite hopeful of this new, easily-manipulated officer, and had not been disappointed. But whatever she'd expected to find when she landed so stealthily with only her pilot accompanying, it hadn't been ... what she'd found. The picture was engraved in her memory, and would probably haunt her dreams -- assuming that she lived long enough to dream. All those bodies: Arlen, Soolin, Vila, Dayna, Tarrant ... and Avon, standing over Blake's bloodied figure, firing at her with that ghastly smile on his face. Her eyes had been locked with his when the world went dark. She should be dead -- but obviously she wasn't.

Servalan stood up suddenly in frustration, and almost fell as her ankles still refused to be entirely trustworthy. Removing her shoes and throwing them across the room, her mind returned to the same questions: Who? Why?

* * *

The watcher looked up from the surveillance monitor when he heard the door swish open. The newcomer, a slender, fair-haired man in his mid-thirties, sauntered in casually. His air of lazy arrogance was heightened by the self-satisfied expression on his handsome face. The watcher acknowledged him with a nod before going back to his viewing. Carnell moved to where he could see the viewing screen; his eyebrows rose in amused surprise.

"Well, Ramon, I must admit I'm impressed. I assume this is Commissioner Sleer, the most important piece in our puzzle. I've been manipulating her quite successfully for almost a year now, and I never suspected that she was Servalan. You knew, of course."

The seated man continued to watch his captive. "I had no idea."

"And it changes things." Carnell's curiosity was piqued by the other's tone.

Ramon didn't turn around. "I've put too much into this to make changes now. Too much time, too much money, and too much of myself."

Carnell sat down beside the other man. "And?"

"When I planned this, Sleer's ultimate fate was completely unimportant. Her career would be finished, and whether she was simply dismissed, imprisoned or killed was irrelevant."

When Ramon seemed disinclined to continue, Carnell spoke, his voice carefully neutral. "It is unimportant. You have at one stroke removed the obstacle from your path to the Supreme Commandership and, in capturing Blake and his rebels, you've made yourself the obvious candidate for the position. Whatever happens to her, you will be secure. She's finished, Ramon. Servalan may have a cat's ability to land on her feet, but I think she's just used up her ninth life."

"A cat ... I've been sitting here watching her. She's like a caged panther, beautiful and deadly. Such a waste ..." Ramon's tone was bemused, thoughtful.

"So that's it. Cold feet at this late date -- how extraordinary." His voice remained affected, almost foppish, but his cold, pale eyes were focused on the younger man. "These scruples weren't apparent before, with Blake."

"Blake was just a means to an end. He wanted so much to believe me, and with his judgment impaired by his illness, there was only the ever-suspicious Deva to neutralize. Even that wasn't hard, with your help. Your psychological profiles have been amazingly accurate, and very helpful. If things had only run to schedule ..."

Carnell relaxed further back into his chair, laced his fingers across his chest and put his booted feet on the console in front of him. "It's nothing we can't handle. We double-check that no traces remain of your involvement with Blake, then make it look as though you discovered Sler plotting with Blake when you captured the hebel base. What do you plan to do with Servalan?" Carnell's tone sharpened with the change of subject. He waited for a reply, but receiving none, continued more mildly, "I really do need to know."

"You mean you don't know already?"

"Not enough information. I'm very good, but I'm not a mind-reader. I know almost nothing about you. We hadn't even met until last week, and my contact has been singularly uninformative. I have nothing to go on." Ramon's small smile goaded the puppeteer into a further answer. "Well, almost nothing. For instance, from the little I've seen, I would have expected revenge to be important to you, and Servalan is the perfect instrument for it. But apparently I'm wrong."

Ramon laughed humorlessly. "No, as always you're quite correct. I do hate Servalan, but I can't kill her. Isn't that absurd?"

"Not to you, obviously."

"No."

Carnell sat up in his chair and leaned toward the other man. "If it's going to affect our plans, I think you'd better tell me about it, don't you?"

Ramon continued to look at the monitor for some time, then began speaking, as if to himself.

"She was an up-and-coming young officer, temporarily posted at Academy, when I entered. Her coterie was very exclusive, and very influential. Everyone knew her and sought her favor. But for some reason I was singled out. There were plenty of others smarter, richer, more powerful. Maybe she saw that I was capable of absolute loyalty, and wanted that loyalty for herself. She certainly got it. That and so much more. We became lovers shortly after she was promoted to Space Command Headquarters. I was very much in love with her."

Carnell smiled. "Weren't we all?"

"Ah, but I thought she loved me too."

"You must have been young."

Ramon looked up at the older man for the first time. "It wasn't all one-sided. She helped promote my career quite openly, and her feelings for me seemed genuine enough. Things went well between us for several years, both personally and professionally. But I thought that I could serve both her and the Federation, and I ignored the warning signs of trouble that only worsened when she was made Supreme Commander. She always put her own interests first, of course, and I was summarily dismissed after our first major disagreement -- both from Headquarters, and eventually, from her life. Oh, we made up briefly, but by then the blinders had been removed and I really saw Servalan for the first time. I couldn't deal with my feelings. In my mind, Servalan and Space Command were one and the same, and they had both betrayed me. I eventually made the mistake that cost me my commission.

"Then I finally grew up. I became hard and cold and ambitious, like the woman I had loved. And I thought I had learned to forget her. Then there she was, nearly five years after our last meeting, standing in front of me. I had hoped she was dead. But I couldn't kill her."

* * *

Servalan had once again seated herself on the interrogation couch. It was not that she had grown weary with pacing, rather that she was trying to remember her early lessons in patience, in controlling her emotions and subduing her frustration so that she would be prepared to take advantage of any opportunity that presented itself. How angry Don Keller would be if he could see how soon she'd forgotten his training. And Palen, who'd been her

mentor, who had seen the potential in the bitter young girl Keller had left, and had turned her into the woman who was respected and feared throughout the Federation -- he wouldn't even recognize the woman she'd become in recent years. To be honest, the woman she'd let herself become. Where now was her once-legendary composure? Of late, she had increasingly relied on force alone. Now that it seemed she might again be powerless, a radical change of attitude was called for. She hoped that she was still capable of it.

She thought over the conclusions she'd reached in the past hour. Apparently there had been some sort of rebel base here on Gauda Prime, and she'd witnessed its discovery -- or betrayal. That would jibe with Arlen's information; she'd sent the girl to follow up rumors concerning the disappearance of petty criminals and minor rebels; Blake's hand there, probably. She wondered if Avon had been involved for long. There'd been no hint of his presence in any of the reports from her "sources." But those reports ... the one sending her to Helotrix could have cost her her life, or her freedom. The one from Zerok had made her rich, but had given her enemies more ammunition. Just enough of the reports had paid off to ensure that she continued to act on them. And then, just before Arlen's message, a report that Gauda Prime was expecting a Federation Observer, giving her an opportunity to visit the planet while providing a cover story should she be seen. A carefully researched, very effective plot to discredit her? To what end?

Servalan began pacing around the room again. Idle speculation would get her nowhere, nor would self pity solve any problems. She had to admit that she'd been at fault. What had happened to the powers of perception that had kept her alive all these years? Surely she'd seen that everything was out of sync, that she was always in the wrong place at the wrong time, that her sources had all but dried up, that her influence was waning? And the singlemindedness of purpose that saw her through the difficult early years to the post of Supreme Commander, President and eventually Empress, where had it gone? She'd been split between two obsessions: regaining her lost power and capturing Avon and his friends. She'd acted as if the two were linked; she'd believed it somewhere deep inside her, in fact. Avon had become her talisman; his submission to her a symbol that she was still the one to be reckoned with, the most powerful woman -- no, the most powerful person in the galaxy. Just as earlier, Blake's capture had meant security and consolidation of her power to the Supreme Commander.

But now things had changed. The two obsessions were mutually exclusive, and she'd reached neither goal. Instead of realizing her mistake, she'd pushed even harder, running off at tangents, unable to devote her energy to any one task. And even though she'd had many successes with the pacification program, her inconsistency had been noted by her superiors and staff. Once, she had known everything that went on in the Federation. Now, her errors in judgment, fear of discovery, and loss of power relegated her to political backwaters, without a reliable spy network to keep her informed. Thanks to her own obsessive behavior, it seemed that she was now at the mercy of an unknown antagonist, whose purpose she couldn't begin to fathom. She was truly helpless, without even the knowledge to begin to formulate a plan, and that was the bitterest pill of all.

* * *

As Ramon finished, Carnell continued to watch the woman in the small cubicle. "It seems we have something in common. I have a score to settle with the lady, too. It would be a shame to waste such a perfect opportunity."

Ramon looked directly at the older man. "I said that I couldn't kill her. I didn't say I'd let her go. I'll leave her to her superiors."

"And if I had a way for both of us to get a little of our own back, first?"

"What do you have in mind?"

Carnell's intended response was cut off as a soldier burst into the office.

"Sir, the prisoners have escaped!"

Ramon rose from his chair. "They can't have escaped, they were unconscious!" Carnell merely looked interested.

"Well, they're gone anyway, sir. The two men we left on duty were attacked from behind, and can't tell us anything further about their attackers. They've only been on duty an hour, sir, so it can't have happened too long ago. Shall I send a squad after the prisoners?"

"Certainly. Wait," Ramon's call halted the soldier in the doorway. "These people

B7 Complex

who attacked the base and rescued the prisoners -- they must have had transport of some kind. The prisoners were definitely still under the effects of the stun bolts, weren't they?"

"They were when we last changed the guard."

"All right. Take five men and search the immediate area. Report back to me as soon as you know anything." As the soldier left, Ramon turned back to the puppeteer and slammed his fist on the console. "Damn."

"My, my, it certainly has been an eventful day. Oh well, as they say, the best laid plans ..."

"Stop being facetious and tell me what to do."

"I should think that would be obvious," Carnell drawled lazily. "Continue on as you had planned, with one little change. You had nothing to do with this. Sleer was so eager to regain favor after the Zukan fiasco that she raided this base without proper support or authority, and allowed the rebels to escape. No one knows you were here, and no one can connect you with the mysterious Ramon, I assume. So it isn't a great victory -- so what? You're sure to be appointed Supreme Commander -- with your sponsor's help."

Ramon's head snapped up at the other's emphasis on the word "sponsor," but he didn't refer to it. "It may work. There's only her pilot; she won't have told anyone what she was up to, if I know her. It's a simple matter to alter her flight tapes ..." His voice was cautiously optimistic.

"That's my boy. Your soldiers are privately hired; silence them as you see fit. Then there'll be no one left to connect you with this affair."

"Except you."

Carnell smiled as he got up and walked to the door. "Exactly. And I can be trusted. Oh, by the way," he commented as he turned back in the doorway, "What about my plan for Servalan?"

Ramon was already back at his monitor. "Do as you wish. We'll discuss it later."

"Yes, later." It was unclear whether Carnell's answer was for Ramon, or himself.

* * *

Servalan's train of thought was interrupted by the soft thunk of the door lock. She schooled herself to calmness and turned slowly to face the door, but no one entered. After several moments, she tried the door and found that it was indeed unlocked. A quick look out into the hall revealed nothing. She wondered what sort of trap it was, and briefly considered remaining in the interrogation room. But curiosity, as well as incipient claustrophobia, made her venture out into the base.

The base was of standard design, and she easily found her way to the large gallery where she had confronted Avon. It was empty of bodies, although there were still traces of blood in the center of the floor, and the equipment was now silent. As she was about to go in for a closer look, she heard the sound of voices and stepped quickly back into the shadows.

"I'm sorry we had to bother you, sir, but we thought you should know what we found on that last one." The speaker was a dark, well-built young man in Federation black. Servalan couldn't see whom he was addressing. "Commander Ramon indicated that her name was Arlen, and that she was one of Blake's newer recruits, but she had a Federation-type recorder/communicator. We might not have found it, but it fell out of her hand when we lifted the body. She must have been transmitting when she was shot."

The other man now stepped out from behind the console and took the device from the soldier, but kept his back to Servalan. "Have you checked to see if there's anything on the tape?"

"No sir. I was told to report this directly to Commander Ramon, but since he's not available ..."

"Quite correct, Corporal." The voice was supercilious, almost effeminate. "I'll see that he gets it. That will be all." He continued to himself as the young officer left,

"And let's hope that there's something I can use on this tape. Heaven knows I could use a little help."

He was about to leave the room when a communicator beeped. "Yes?" he must have received an answer, for he continued. "I have a couple of things to attend to first. I'll be there in a few minutes." He listened for a moment. "Right. Out."

As the man turned to walk out the door, Servalan's curiosity vied for control with her instinct for self-preservation. Finally she managed to peek around a pillar and see enough to realize why the voice was so familiar. Carnell. It explained so many things. Keeping to the shadows and constantly on her guard, she followed him from the room.

* * *

After a brief stop at his room, Carnell, carrying several files, made his way to the chamber that Ramon was using as an office. Ramon himself was sitting at the surveillance monitor, calling up and studying a number of reports. He paused at the other man's entrance, but didn't speak. Carnell sat down and pushed a tape into the playback device on one of the consoles, then waited for the recording to end. When Ramon still remained silent, he gave in. "Well?"

"I've already heard your final report on Sleer."

"But you still don't see its relevance."

"Frankly no, and I'm very busy."

Carnell slapped a file folder down on the desk. "Ramon, you're still thinking of the Servalan you remember, the old Servalan. If my information is correct -- and I've no reason to suppose it isn't, since by using it we have been getting results -- this is a different woman. Not entirely, of course, but substantially. Do you really think even I could have manipulated Madame President with this degree of accuracy?"

"I never thought about it."

"Well, think about it now." The puppeteer sat back in his chair and crossed his arms, his pale eyes focused on the other man. "I doubt she's ever even suspected that she was being used. She's losing her grip. She had the same obsession she's always had, that of holding ultimate power, but she no longer has the abilities needed to achieve it. And that obsession, without those abilities, could very well be fatal. I don't know what's happened to her, but I do know an opportunity when I see one."

"Go on."

"How would you like to have her at your mercy, helpless, begging for you to save her?"

"Is that possible?"

"I don't know yet." The older man smiled. "But I will soon. I've let her go." Ramon looked questioningly at him. "She won't get far, I think. She works through people, not objects, so she'll look for a weak link to bend. I intend to be that link." The psychostrategist raised one eyebrow. "If you would warn your people ..."

Ramon made a note. "Anyone seeing her will report it to you."

"Thank you." Carnell stood up. "I should be able to know shortly if the plan will work. But I have very few doubts." He paused for a moment in the doorway. "She's developed several chinks in that armor of hers, and I intend to make use of all of them."

* * *

Servalan entered the sleeping cubicle cautiously. Carnell had stopped there briefly, and risking a momentary pause outside his door she'd heard voices, one of them Arlen's. He must have been listening to the tape. After a few minutes the sound stopped and Carnell left. His room seemed as good a place as any to start looking for answers, and the door was unlocked. Inside, there were no alterations or additions to the room's standard fixtures, aside from the few articles of clothing lying across a chair and the papers on the desk. Remembering the psychostrategist's penchant for luxurious surroundings, Servalan assumed that he hadn't been here long and didn't plan to stay.

Then she spotted the recorder/communicator, lying on the bed. Crossing the room quickly, she picked up the machine and, turning the volume very low, played the tape.

First there was a great deal of static, then Arlen's voice, very low. "This is Lieutenant Arlen reporting to Commissioner Smeer, classified. Due to the developing situation, I can't risk transmitting at present, so I'll record now for later transmission, per your instructions. Please send me some back-up as soon as possible, Commissioner, all hell's broken loose here." Arlen sounded breathless, and there were several gaps in her transmission. "Blake's latest capture, one he called Tarrant, has escaped. Apparently some friends of his have arrived and are somewhere on the base. I've been assigned to the security patrol to find them." There was a pause, Servalan heard the sound of alarms in the background. "I haven't got much time. They're in the main tracking gallery. I have to go there."

There was the sound of the recorder being clicked off, then on. Arlen's voice became even more rushed. "Commissioner, they're here. I'll leave the recorder on."

Servalan's eyes widened as the mumble in the background resolved to the sound of Tarrant's voice. "He's sold us, Avon. All of us. Even you."

"Is it true?" She almost gasped at Avon's voice, so uncharacteristic was its horror and disbelief.

"Avon, it's me! Blake!"

"Stand still!" There was a slight pause. "Have you betrayed us? Have you betrayed me?"

"Tarrant doesn't understand."

"Neither do I ..."

"I set all this up."

"Yes!"

"Avon, I was waiting for you!"

She flinched at the sound of the first shot, even though by now she knew what must have happened. Arlen had reported her suspicions of the bounty-hunting operation. It was a good cover -- a little too good. Servalan heard as though from a great distance the other two shots, and pictured Blake's death. Why hadn't she sent a more experienced agent? Why had she delayed, and then come alone? It shouldn't have ended like that. She was jerked back to reality at the sound of Arlen's voice, strong and arrogant, and then Vila's, growing increasingly louder, until the recording abruptly terminated.

Servalan sat unmoving, too stunned to think. Then, refusing to analyze the sense of unbearable loss that felt like a stone in her chest, she rewound the tape and placed the device where she'd found it. When her further search of the closets and drawers turned up nothing further, she turned her attention to the desk. The important papers would be locked up, of course, but in her state of total ignorance almost anything would help. She sat down to read, fighting to keep her mind on the words she was reading and off the despondency that threatened constantly to engulf her.

Her weariness must have been greater than she realized, for she didn't hear Carnell's returning footsteps until he was almost at the door. She quickly hid herself in the washing cubicle, trying to control the pounding of her heart. He couldn't have seen her, since he locked the door and proceeded, judging from the sounds, to undress and go to bed. After half an hour had passed, Servalan tried to peer further around the slightly open door to determine if he had gone to sleep. Her painfully slow, creeping motion was arrested by his amused voice. "I can wait as long as you can, Servalan, but you can't be comfortable there." He was answered only by silence. "You are here by my invitation, you know. I don't always leave the door unlocked. Why don't you join me?"

Servalan couldn't help it -- she laughed. The situation was just too absurd. She was cramped, she was humiliated, she was even a little frightened, but she was amused. Pushing the door open, she saw Carnell leaning against the headboard of the bed, smiling, long legs stretched out in front of him, fingers laced behind his head. She sat at the end of the bed and smiled back. "Carnell."

He inclined his head. "Madame President, or should I say Commissioner Smeer?"



©1987 D. M. W. H.

"Why so formal? You never were before. Servalan will do."

"I'm glad to see you've kept your sense of humor. Along with your figure." He evaluated every inch slowly.

She pouted prettily. "But not the presidency. And now, apparently, not even my present humble position with Security -- or my life."

"There are many things I would have of you, madame, but your life isn't one of them."

She looked at him appraisingly. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

He moved to sit next to her. "We can help each other, Servalan."

"I've heard that before. Often. Why should I believe you?"

"You have to. You've always been the user, my darling, always the one with the most to gain, whereas your victim always found out what he stood to lose -- the hard way. I can't say I blame you for not trusting me, considering your record. But you're alive and free -- well, relatively free, thanks to me. And while you most assuredly need me, I don't necessarily need you. That puts you in a very delicate position."

"I can see that. Tell me this: If what you say is true, why would you help me?"

"I want to."

She arched one beautiful eyebrow. "You want to what?"

"We'll get to that later. First let me explain the situation to you. I was contacted by a gentleman, very highly placed in the Federation, that we'll call ... Mister X. I was to draw up a series of psychological profiles of people whose dossiers were given to me, and plot a course of action using these people to achieve the desired result."

"Which was?"

"The infiltration and eventual capture of a rebel base."

"Blake's base."

"Exactly. Blake's been ill for some months now, as you are aware. The exact nature of his illness isn't known, but he's definitely been less active, weaker -- both physically and mentally. Using this, and his already known proclivity to trust his associates, it was child's play -- for someone of my ability, of course -- to draw up an almost foolproof plan. Following my instructions, my employer's protege -- who calls himself Ramon, by the way -- easily gained Blake's confidence, and was waiting for the optimum moment to turn in the whole operation. It was a brilliant scheme, brilliantly executed. He would most certainly have succeeded and been named supreme commander, with his sponsor's help. But there were a couple of unforeseen problems."

"Named Tarrant and Avon?" At his inquiring look, she explained, "I heard the tape."

"They certainly turned up at a most inopportune time. We were several weeks short of ready for the final maneuver; Ramon moved his troops in immediately, of course, but when Avon's people began shooting ..."

"Your guards must have done a pretty thorough job themselves, judging from the number of bodies," she interrupted.

"They were armed with stun guns, set on maximum. My associate wanted a splashy arrest with lots of prisoners. We think the only one killed was Blake."

Servalan's eyes widened, and she quickly rose to sit next to Carnell. "What do you mean, you think? What have you done with them?"

"I'm afraid they're gone." He awaited a further outburst, but she was silent. "Some of Blake's people might have come back. I don't know. At any rate, the guards were taken by surprise, and the bodies of the rebels removed."

"All of them?"

"All the ones we're interested in, certainly. By the way, your agent was apparently

killed by one of our men after the fighting was over. He saw her trying to escape and fired at her. Unluckily for her, he was holding one of the rebels' guns at the time. I can't imagine what either of them was thinking of."

"How disappointing. I'd rather hoped to be able to kill her myself. She certainly made a mess of it."

"As did we all, unfortunately. The current plan is to get out, leaving you to take the blame for the failure. With your recent record, no one will be surprised at one more mistake by Commissioner Sleer. You're finished." His tone was matter of fact.

She replied in the same fashion. "So it appears. Why aren't I dead?"

"Ramon likes things complicated, apparently."

"I, on the other hand, like things simple." At his disbelieving look, she continued. "Really. I would simply like to know what you want of me."

His smile was predatory. "There is no simple answer to that. But to begin, I want my life. Neither Ramon nor my employer will want me around to connect them with this. I could be kept silent for a nominal sum and an advantageous appointment, but I doubt they'll see it that way. Life is so unfair."

Servalan had been listening attentively, ignoring the hand that now rested on her thigh. "Why don't you just get out now? You don't seem to be guarded."

"I'm not. But I thought you'd understand. When I left your staff, I was forced to live anonymously for several years. I managed to get along -- I'm very good at what I do -- but it wasn't quite the standard of living I'd grown used to, and I don't want to return to it. I want the kind of life to which my talent entitles me. I thought our Mister X could give it to me, but if he won't, I'll have to look elsewhere."

"And this is where I come into the picture."

"Exactly." The hand was now stroking her leg. "We can work out the details later, if you agree."

"You never miss an opportunity, do you?" It was unclear to which of his propositions -- the explicit or the implicit -- she was responding. "I'll think about it."

"As you like." He got up and started toward the washing cubicle. "But don't take too long. Once I finish my work here, I'm expendable -- and so are you. Think about it. I'm going to take a shower."

Servalan briefly considered her options, but she was tired and her thoughts were jumbled. It had to be nearly morning, and she'd had little sleep for the past few days, and none at all for nearly forty-eight hours. She doubted she could escape now. Her best bet seemed to be to play along, at least temporarily, until she could think of a better plan.

She slowly rose and entered the bathroom, opening the door to the shower. Carnell looked at her coolly, and asked, "Well?"

"You're still very plausible." Letting the gown fall from her shoulders, she added a question of her own. "Is there room in there for one more?"

* * *

Servalan woke gradually, slightly disoriented, but warm and comfortable. As she remember where she was, and what had happened, she smiled. Noting that she was alone in the bed, she stretched gratefully, ruefully thinking of her previous painful awakening. The old adage about things looking better in the morning certainly applied here -- although she wondered if it were indeed morning. The complex had no windows, and she had lost track of time completely. Arbitrarily deciding that it must be early afternoon, she rose, showered, and dressed in the nondescript uniform that Carnell had left for her, "protective coloration" he had called it. Grimacing at her reflection in the full-length mirror, she reminded herself that she was in no situation to be choosy about her wardrobe, and wondered what Carnell might be up to.

She didn't really trust the psychostrategist, of course, any more than he trusted her, but his story had the ring of truth. Now that she had both the leisure and the presence

of mind to consider his offer, she was inclined to go along with it. The best she could get out of the present situation was a courtmartial -- if she lived to face trial. Even if she somehow managed to escape, she didn't rate her chances of survival very highly; as Sleer she hadn't been able to set up the contingency plans that had enabled her to so quickly bounce back after Servalan's "death." If she escaped her enemies on both sides of the rebellion, how would she then live? Like Carnell had, in hiding, precariously, having to do without those luxuries which to her were necessities? No, Carnell's offer, while somewhat distasteful, was her only option at present. Like so many others before him, he proposed a partnership, but unlike the others, he had the intelligence to carry through. And their mutual survival depended on their working together. Once the immediate situation was resolved, he could no doubt be persuaded, by whatever means she then possessed, to let her go. He was, after all, a rational man. To him, her person was of purely secondary importance, if not merely a passing whim. He liked a life of ease, above all things. In time, she'd work out how best to promise him this in return for her freedom.

But would she ever be free of Avon? It wasn't a time for vain regrets, but Servalan had grown used to indulging herself. It seemed so inevitable now that she should come to this. The last year now seemed like a nightmare, horrible but somehow unreal. Her encounters with Avon had gone from being a stimulating game to a passion, the only fixed point in her life. Even her ambition had taken second place to it, blinding her to what was going on around her, warping her judgment until her mistakes had become more numerous than her successes. Oh yes, Carnell's hand was evident there, but there had been a time when it would have been beyond even his great skill to manipulate her. She had allowed it. She couldn't give up Avon, and sometimes when the obstacles in her path had seemed almost insurmountable, an encounter with him brought her back to life again. Even now.

Servalan smiled. Avon was alive somewhere, and free. And she was alive, and would soon be free. They would meet again. She had the strength to do whatever she must to ensure that.

* * *

Carnell had had to wait while Ramon finished briefing the soldiers who were to plant the doctored tapes aboard Sleer's ship. He did not like being summoned; he was sure Ramon knew this and did it periodically to remind his subordinate of who was in charge. Finally, the others left the office and Ramon motioned Carnell to a chair. "Well, puppeteer?"

"Debriefing of your troops is almost complete. I'll have the rest of the profiles you wanted by tomorrow afternoon. I trust that's satisfactory?"

"Quite. But that wasn't the question. What about Servalan?"

Carnell smiled a little to himself. "Confused, more than a little frightened -- but not admitting it, of course. She's in an impossible situation, and looking for a way out."

"Which you offered."

"Of course. She's very near the edge. She has nothing left, Ramon, no position, no allies, no resources at all that she can call on. I did my job more thoroughly than I'd thought -- there must be another factor at work here. I'll be interested to find out what. In the meantime, I'll make her totally dependent on me. I'll be her safety net -- and then I'll let her fall."

"That sounds intriguing. But how much time will it take? We're scheduled to leave tomorrow night."

"Not to worry. I'll take Madame Commissioner with me. If that's all right with you, of course."

Ramon's hesitation was momentary, but perceptible. "As you please. Just don't involve me."

"Don't worry. Servalan is beautiful, imperious, brilliant, desirable -- and expendable. I enjoy my life, such as it is, far too much to throw it away for her. Now, if you don't mind, I have work to do."

Ramon impassively watched the puppeteer leave. Then he turned back to his desk and smiled.

* * *

B7 Complex

Servalan had long since finished the adequate if unexciting meal that Carnell had left her, and had ascertained that the room contained no further possibilities for enlightenment. Trying to bring her impatience under control, she mentally replayed the scene several hours previously when the puppeteer had briefly returned to the room. His smug, uncommunicative attitude had strained her assumed cool to its limits.

"Well?" She had decided not to question him, to match his nonchalance, but he seemed totally prepared to ignore her as he calmly sorted through some papers at his desk.

"Well what?"

He didn't even look up, as if she were some menial and beneath his notice. It was obviously a plot of some sort, she thought. "You've kept me locked in here for hours. I think I'm due some sort of explanation. Am I your partner, or your prisoner?"

"My dear, the locked door was for your own protection."

"I can take care of myself."

"Apparently not, or you wouldn't be here." He had gotten up, and now moved in very close to her, pressing two fingers against her lips to still her retort. "Be sensible. You were asleep when I left, and I hadn't the heart to wake you. You looked so wonderfully dishevelled and helpless in your sleep, my beautiful ex-Supreme Commander." He traced the outline of her jaw lightly, caressingly. "I was only looking out for both of us."

"Carnell --"

This time he silenced her with a kiss. "Trust me, my dear."

"I don't have much choice, do I?" Her tone was more than a little bitter, as she searched for an answer in his eyes.

He only smiled his ingenuous smile, inscrutable as ever, and pulled her tightly to him. This time the kiss was both long and deep, but more possessive than passionate.

And then he had finally let her go and she had stood, silent and powerless, as he left the room. And he had yet to return. But this time he'd left the door unlocked, a sop to her purported independence.

She looked at it for what seemed the thousandth time, sighed, and returned to reading the papers he'd left on the desk. Nothing vital, of course, just routine reports on the failure of the search parties to find the missing rebels, the questioning of some of the locals and legitimate bounty hunters, no conclusions reached. An abandoned speeder had been found in a silo, presumably used by Avon. A brief transcript was appended showing that the speeder had apparently found the base quite easily, despite the fact that all incoming traffic followed one of several quite difficult evasion courses, had then bypassed the entry codes with no hesitation and docked. All routine ...

Servalan sat abruptly upright, letting the papers fall from her hands. Avon was good, but beating an intricate, computer-designed evasion program, then breaking a seemingly perfect computer-generated random entry code -- ORAC! They'd had ORAC with them. But she'd neither heard nor read of its being found. Could they not realize its value, or just possibly ... would Avon have risked carrying it in, not knowing the situation? Knowing Avon's habits, she guessed he would have hidden it somewhere on the base, most likely in or near the silo. If only she wasn't too late!

* * *

Ramon looked up as the security monitor for the silo area beeped its warning of an unauthorized entry. A slight figure in Federation black could be seen briefly, before it ducked behind a cargo loader. A smile crossed the watcher's handsome features as he pressed the comm button. "Carnell."

"What is it, Ramon? I'm busy."

"Why do you think Servalan will stay with you?"

"She has nowhere else to go."

"Maybe you'd better tell her that. She's in the silo area."

"Does that matter?"

"Not to me. When will you be finished there?"

"Another hour or so."

"Come to my office when you're done?"

"I have a few items to clear up. Later this evening?"

"Fine." Ramon cut the link, then sat back in his chair meditatively, tented his fingers, and smiled.

* * *

Servalan reentered the cabin quickly, closing the door behind her, and sank gratefully onto a nearby chair. Her relief was short-lived, as Carnell rose from his seat in the opposite corner. "Where have you been?"

"Be reasonable, Carnell. I couldn't stay in here forever. I went on a small tour of the base." She smiled at him engagingly, reassuringly.

"That was very stupid." His voice, for once unaffected, was cold.

"I only wanted to ..."

"To escape." He grabbed her wrist and pulled her sharply to him.

"And go where? As you so rightly pointed out last night, I need your help." She looked up, all wide-eyed and sincere, into his stern face. "Really, Carnell, you're becoming quite paranoid. I'm here, aren't I? I haven't run away, or been caught. If it bothers you that much, I'll stay right here." She pulled away from him and dropped onto the bed to underline the statement.

"You will indeed. I'm locking you in."

She sighed resignedly. "Do you really think that's necessary? What do I have to do to convince you that I'm on your side?" Her manner and movements as she lay back among the cushions were deliberately provocative.

Kneeling on the bed beside her, Carnell jerked her partially upright and kissed her fiercely. Then he let her go, and moved to the door. "We'll discuss it when I get back."

"Carnell, wait!" He stopped in the doorway, but didn't turn. The desperation in her voice made him smile, and he didn't want her to see. "I'd like to buy my freedom."

"What could you possibly offer me?" He opened the door.

"How about ORAC?" He turned around. "So you do know about ORAC."

Carnell reentered the room and closed the door. "ORAC was destroyed with the Scorpio."

"ORAC is on this base."

"Then I'll find it."

"I know how to make ORAC work -- you don't. Besides, you're probably being watched. I can find ORAC while you keep the others occupied. Then we could steal a ship and have ORAC jam the pursuit and communication frequencies."

Carnell was smiling openly now, as he considered the possibilities. "We'd be gone before they realized what was happening."

"Then you could leave me on some suitable planet, and let ORAC make your fortune for you. You won't need me." Her smile was meant to be confident and reassuring, but an astute observer could see the relief.

Carnell was nothing if not astute. "My dear, there are some things that a computer, no matter how advanced, just can't do as well as a human." He caressed her shoulder in explanation.

"But ..."

"Perhaps you need a more practical demonstration." Carnell remembered a quotation from a long-forgotten texbook. Give them what they want, but not when they ask for it, nor in the manner they expect it. That way the subjects can't be sure whether or not you're on their side, whether or not you're responding to their demands. She thought to use her body to persuade him, so ... "Don't fight it, Servalan. You're with me now. I'll take care of you." He pushed her back on the bed, and proceeded to put the theory into practice with a thoroughness that would have delighted its author.

* * *

Servalan crouched in the shadows of the docking area, hidden from the activity around the personnel carriers by a small planet hopper. It looked like Ramon and his soldiers were vacating the area in a hurry, from the speed at which men and equipment were being loaded. She briefly admired the efficiency with which the lieutenants in charge were directing the procedure, before turning her thoughts back to her own predicament.

She had thought to be able to slip unnoticed into the docking bay and "borrow" this small craft before Carnell missed her. This would be manifestly impossible in the immediate future due to the amount of activity in the area. And since Carnell would presumably be leaving when his employer, the mysterious Ramon, did, it would seem that she'd have to scratch that plan.

Servalan drew a long calming breath. Her hands still had a tendency to shake when she thought about the scene so recently played in Carnell's quarters. Did the man know what he was proposing? Was this some subtle form of torture, or did he truly not realize that he had painted her a totally unacceptable future? She could not, now, live in someone else's power, no matter how elegant the cage. To regain her sense of self, she had to regain control of her life. Her destiny must be her own to shape, of that point she was certain. Imprisonment, of any sort, would mean her death -- mentally, if not physically.

She looked around the large area again. Yes, if she was careful, she could make it to the silo area where she was now sure she would find ORAC. Once she had ORAC, she had bargaining power -- with whomever she needed to bargain. She could hide somewhere in or near the base; they'd surely not search for her for very long judging by the hurry they seemed to be in. Then she could steal some transport and ... take it from there. She didn't allow herself to think too far ahead. One step at a time. The important thing was retaining her autonomy.

Servalan made her way to the silo area, using whatever cover she could find from transport vehicles and abandoned cargo. ORAC was easy to acquire; she'd already noted where it was hidden and how to remove it from the small cargo hold Avon had secreted it in. The next step was to find a place to wait until the soldiers had gone ...

Her cover was abruptly gone as the piece of cargo loading equipment she was hiding behind moved. A shout went up from several soldiers in the area as Servalan ran for the nearest exit. Slowed by the computer, she barely cleared the door as shots rang out behind her. Running as she never had before, Servalan managed to reach the nearest group of trees without being hit by her pursuers. She sped off into the forest with the sound of voices and gunfire pursuing her.

* * *

Avon was within a couple of miles of the base when he heard it. Somebody was crashing through the underbrush, noisily, apparently more concerned with speed than stealth. Stepping into the deeper shadow, he prepared to wait for the disturbance to pass, obviously annoyed at this interruption to his plans.

His vigilance was rewarded by the sight of Servalan running through the trees, looking near exhaustion. She glanced behind her worriedly, then stopped and leaned against a tree, breathing hard and pressing one now-free hand to her chest. The other hand held ORAC.

"Going somewhere?"

Servalan started, then smiled ruefully as Avon stepped from his place of concealment. "Avon." Knowing her face was flushed and her clothing disordered, she automatically tried to straighten her uniform.

"Exercise becomes you, Servalan. But as for the uniform ..."

"Avon, I must talk to you."

"I believe that's what you're doing."

A little of the old asperity returned. "Avon!" He rewarded her with a suitably serious gaze. "How did you get here?"

"I walked."

"From where?" He raised one eyebrow. "Avon, I have to get out of here! Will you help me?"

"Why should I?"

"For old time's sake?" Her tone should have been mocking, but wasn't. "Avon, they're going to kill me ... or worse. Please help me! I'll give you ORAC."

If he was shocked by the frantic appeal, it didn't show as he calmly trained his weapon on her. "I already have ORAC," he stated, as he stepped forward and took it from her unresisting grasp.

He started to walk away, but the woman grabbed his arm. "Avon, you must listen to me!" She seemed on the edge of hysteria.

The computer expert stopped and shook over her hand, then turned to her. "All right, but make it fast, Servalan. I've left Tarrant in charge, and who knows what foolhardy stunts he'll be up to in my absence."

"I've lost, Avon. We've both lost. Surely I'm no threat to you now?" Upon getting no response from the man but an obvious look at his chronometer, she continued. "Avon, I can't go back there. They want to use me, and I won't be used!" At his smile, she again took his arm. "Please, Avon, you're my only hope. I'll do anything, promise anything you like. And I never forget a favor."

He stood, silently looking at her, for several heartbeats. Just as it seemed he might answer, a new voice sounded from several paces behind Avon. "Well, Avon, what do you say?" As Avon whirled around to face the new threat, Servalan snatched his gun from him and stepped quickly back.

Avon now stood quietly where he was, hands lowered to his sides, ORAC at his feet, and looked at the newcomer. Carnell moved forward, gun in hand, to smile serenely at him. "So, the illustrious Kerr Avon is captured at last. There'll be no mistakes this time." He looked past the figure in black to where Servalan stood. "Good job, madame. I wondered what you were up to, for a while. I should have known you better. Does he have the key?" Servalan stepped forward, and reached into Avon's jacket pocket, from which she pulled the small block of plastic and held it up for Carnell to see. Her gaze was wild-eyed, unfocused.

The psychostrategist walked a little nearer to his prisoner. "Yes, I shouldn't have been worried. What, after all, would the former Supreme Commander see in a mere criminal -- albeit a famous and clever one? I have so much more to offer. I can rule the galaxy, Servalan, with you by my side. You'll never be alone again. And you'll never need to worry about dissidents like this one."

Servalan stood motionless as Carnell pointed his weapon at Avon. As he was about to fire, something in her seemed to snap. He was going to kill Avon ... she'd be with him forever ... never alone ... with a strangled cry, she raised her gun and shot the puppeteer, whose face barely had time to register surprise before he died. As she fell to her knees in exhaustion and shock, Avon walked over to her and picked up the key from where she had dropped it. She looked up in despair, in time to see him retrieve ORAC and walk quickly away. Then the world just drifted away from her, and she saw nothing further.

* * *

EPILOGUE

Ramon listened to the sounds of the retreating footsteps for several moments, then walked over to the body of the puppeteer. He was dead, beyond doubt. That was one problem solved. But for the other ... he stood over the unconscious figure for several moments, with a feeling of *deja vu*. Then he crouched down to take her in his arms. "Servalan ..."

Her eyes opened. "Rai! How ... please ..."

He laid a gentle hand against her mouth. "Not now, we've got to get you out of here, quickly, before the Federation forces arrive. Can you walk?" At her nod, he helped her to her feet. As they made their way to his hidden speeder, he found time to meet her upturned eyes. For now, they reflected mostly anguish, and puzzlement. But he remembered Carnell's report, and the way to gain mastery over this new Servalan. He'd keep her off balance, be her only friend and support. The gratitude, and finally trust, possibly even love, would follow. And then he'd have his revenge.

B7 Complex