Vila desperately needed a drink.

In fact, he’d never needed one worse than he did now. It had been a long, long time; he hadn’t stopped to think just how long until this moment. Funny, that. He hadn’t touched a drop in over two years -- the two years and an odd number of months since Gauda Prime, though it seemed, for so many reasons, more like an eternity ago.

But now, when he really did need it, there wasn’t a drop to be had anywhere on this miserable excuse for an unsupplied ship, and it depressed him even more to think how very much he’d have to be granted he’d once taken Liberator, with its ample stores of food and wealth and clothing.

All of which he could do with just now.

At the moment, Mirage carried none of those things. She was on course for a planet called Gildar which Avon claimed would be safe, at least long enough to take on supplies, and Vila fervently hoped he was right. Nutrient pills from the medical section were not Vila’s idea of a hardy repast: his stomach had been complaining noisily ever since they’d plucked Tarrant and his Federation lady-friend off that sand-lot prison planet, and then taken her... aboard on that last stop -- he didn’t want to think about that, it had been Avon’s doing, anyway, and oh, he hoped Gildar had a vineyard tucked away somewhere with the rest of its supply stores.

Why was it so quiet in here?

Filtered blue light from Mirage’s forward wall panels lined everything on the flight deck in the same hue. The quiet was suffused only by the hum of the running drives and the periodic tapping of Avon’s fingers on the computer keys of the console behind Vila. He’d been at that for hours now, ever since Tarrant and that Trienn woman had gone off for rest period. Well, to let Avon near a computer and ask him not to reprogram it was like expecting to breathe air in a vacuum. So Mirage was acquiring. a few new tricks, and in his own good time, Avon would show them which ones. That ought to prove diverting.

Vila shuddered.

Trying not to think about it wasn’t helping.

Servalan was down there, in a cell on the lower levels, and she was dead... only she wasn’t. Exactly. They’d brought her back somehow. The thing they had made of her was even more deadly than the original had been, and it wanted Vila, wanted him because he, Delta thief and ‘programmed’ menial, had succeeded where Alphas Blake and Avon had failed. He, Vila, had been the one to kill her. And Servalan wanted to return the favor.

An undefined blue haze teased at the periphery of Vila’s vision, and he started, turning to blink listlessly at the starboard alcove where the ‘ghost' should have been. But there was nothing. He’d thought he’d seen it twice before this, and there had been nothing then, either.

"Jumpy, he told himself. Too jumpy. Got to calm down, Vila. Dead or not, she can’t get out of there. And the only spirits you believe in come in bottles.

But it moved again -- the merest whisper of a shape, lithe and vaguely feminine, ghosting just at the edge of sight and then melting again when he tried to look where it had been.

Something was there. And he was not crazy, and he certainly wasn’t drunk, however much he wished he were.

“Avon...”

Not surprisingly, his treasured entreaty was ignored. The computer keys clicked a soft, rapid rhythm behind him. Vila swiveled his chair to face the technician and pitched his voice a tone higher.

“Avon, there’s something--”

The wall of an alarm cut him off in mid-sentence. Immediately, Mirage’s precise feminine tones announced, ‘Federation pursuit craft on vector zero-nine-zero,’ and the central viewscreen at once came alight with a magnified image of the threatening vessel.
"Oh, wonderful..." Vila sank into his chair as Avon cut the alarm. "We're back to cat-and-mouse games again, are we? How many this time?"

Avon's fingers played over several more keys before he answered. "One. And he came from the system we are passing. Alone and curious, perhaps." He punched a final key. "Mirage, initiate new deception sequence 7-L."

The computer's plex plate shimmered as though in anticipation and replied, TSequence initiated."

As it answered, Tarrent arrived on the flight deck at a run, clad only in what remained of his prison colony trousers, an equally disheveled Trienn beside him, still buckling the belt on her Federation uniform.

Avon ignored them, and Vila didn't have time to speculate on the timing of their mutual arrival. Ghosts forgotten for the moment, he relaxed and leaned back in the chair.

"Have a seat, Tarrent," he invited, and one of Mirage's subscreens lit up with a tactical schematic that Included a very familiar outline. Vila grinned. "I think I'm going to enjoy this..."

* * *

Flight Commander Lynch stood glaring at the pursuit ship's forward viewscreen as though he had just endeavored to bite him, and snapped at his pilot's fumbling efforts to clarify the object drifting there.

"I said magnify, Jordan!"

"Yes sir." The pilot struggled with persuading his controls to comply, but his distraction was apparent and impossible to hide. "Hadn't we ought to call for back-up... sir?"

Lynch snorted. "From where? And for what? Probably just some damned freeranger on his way to --"

The screen image rippled, enlarged, reassembled itself -- and arrested Lynch's comment. Jordan's mouth dropped open. "Sir..."

"Evasive action," Lynch ordered, and the words were barely uttered before a plasma bolt streaked forth from the facing vessel's gun turrets. Stars tilted and spun in dizzying patterns on the screen as Jordan obeyed his command, and when they came about, the enemy ship was circling as well, lining them up...

The weapons officer was half out of his chair. "Shall I return fire, sir?"

Jordan, wide-eyed, interrupted. "Sir, we're outsized, outclassed and outgunned. That thing is --"

"I know what it is, Mr. Jordan. Plot its course projection. Then get us out of here, course five-five-two mark seven -- and I want a channel to Space Command HQ on the double."

"Yes sir."

Lynch sank into his command chair and watched the enormous ship on the screen diminish with his pilot's hasty application of speed. He had never run from an enemy before; it was not a pleasant feeling and he hoped it would not reflect badly on an otherwise spotless career. But damn it, he was only one ship.

"SCNQ is on line, sir," Jordan reported.

Lynch nodded as an annoyed voice came over the circuit. "We're a little busy here, 5897, what is it you wanted?"

"This is Flight Commander Lynch, and what I want is the Supreme Commander. Tell him I am neither deranged nor hallucinating, nor is my crew -- but we have just been fired upon..." He took a breath and forced the words out as evenly as possible. "... by the Liberator."

* * *
A respectful distance from Lynch's altercation with the phantom Liberator, a third ship, following well out of either's sensor range, monitored the transmission to Space Command. The man at the helm smiled with too many teeth and with eyes that were brightly, engagingly blue. His subordinate was a nervous, pale-eyed young woman in the uniform of the Presidential guard who did not like the conversation she was currently overhearing.

"Fools," she muttered. "I could intercept their signal if you --"

"Oh, tut tut, Anyss dear, mustn't impede the progress of our illustrious military!" President Falco reached out to extinguish the incredulous exchange now ensuing between Lynch and the Supreme Commander. "It won't make a difference ... not to our plans, anyway."

Anyss stared at him. "Everyone knows Liberator was destroyed 3 years ago. If word of this gets out --"

"That, my dear, was only Avon matching wits with a new electronic toy. I'd think he'd tire of it soon enough. In fact, I'm sure he will."

The current President of the Terran Federation got up to leave for his cabin, assuring himself first that they were back on heading to continue their stealthy pursuit of Mirage. As long as Avon kept Servalan aboard, the surgically implanted, shielded pulse code would lead the President's ship to her; a risk, it was true, but all gambles involved risk, and Avon, true to his Federation profile, was a gambler. Avon played the odds. He'd been led to believe that Servalan held a trump card, and he would keep her until convinced otherwise. By that time, however, the joke in this mad deck of cards would hopefully have surfaced. It was the wild card all the participants coveted, a gamepiece stolen by a knave named Vaylan and disabled by a thief named Restal, so that at the moment, it was of no use to anyone. But President Falco, better known to the players of this particular game as the one-time puppeteer Carnell, intended to bring all of them together one last time—if only long enough to claim ORAC for his own.

***

Vila's whoop of delight at the pursuit ship's retreat had been chorused by both Tarrant and Trienn. Avon draped a glover of disapproval, but expressed his own satisfaction with a rapid dance of fingers over the computer keys and the ghost of a smile aimed at Mirage's housing.

"Well done," he said approvingly. "Do your aft scanners detect any further pursuit?"

With the briefest of hesitations, the computer answered dully, 'Negative.'

"A 360 scan then," Tarrant broke in. "Is there anything else out there at all?"

Avon noted the exchanged glance between the pilot and Trienn as the question was asked: did they suspect something more? If so, what? Before he could inquire, the metamorphosis of Mirage's usually-toneless voice to an almost fluttering feminine pitch interrupted.

'I have no vessels detectable at optimum scanning range, Tarrant. The name came out more as a sigh than anything else, and what followed heaped more syrup on the already-sweet. Would you like me to run the check again, Tarrant?"

Tarrant flushed and turned pleading eyes on Avon. "I thought you'd fixed that circuit!"

Amused despite himself, Avon indulged a short laugh, not unaware that both Vila and Trienn were chortling indiscrately in the background. "It's next on my list," he promised with mock sincerity. "Perhaps ... you ought to go and get dressed, now."

The flush turned flaming red and travelled quickly over the rest of Tarrant. While Trienn tried unsuccessfully to cover her amusement with her hands, Vila lost all pretense of composure and burst into loud guffaws.

Intersecting the morrisent, Mirage's saccharine but innocent inflection queried, 'May I do something more for you, Tarrant? An unspoken 'please' hung pendent at the end of the sentence. Is something wrong? You sound quite strange. May I assist?"

The absurdity of it all overcame even Tarrant's embarrassment then. He laughed until tears had formed in the corners of his eyes and he was obliged to brush them out before he said, somewhat timorously, "No. I think you've done quite enough for the moment."

Harvesting the remains of his shredded dignity, he picked himself up then and marched
off the flight deck. Avon went back to work on the keyboard with Vila's laughter still ringing in his ears, but it would in truth be some time before he found the inclination to work on Tarrant's 'problem.' Mirage had a number of fascinating vistas to explore; its infatuation with their newfound pilot was, in fact, simply one of a great many items on the aforementioned list.

Immersed in a study of the computer diagrams for the drive propulsion system, he'd failed to notice Vila's approach until the thief had slipped, uninvited, into the accompanying chair. Avon glanced up, wondering how much time had elapsed, and noted that they were once again alone on the deck, Trienn and Tarrant apparently having found, elsewhere, greater amusements than Mirage's lovesick encroachments on Tarrant's decorum.

Vila was still sitting there quietly, as though waiting to be acknowledged. Avon looked at him expectantly, hooded eyes asking the unspoken question, and the thief flinched for several moments before making a stammering start on whatever it was he had to say.

"Avon, a few minutes ago I saw ... well that is I thought I ... it was ..." Vila's hands described indefinite patterns in the air. "Well it was sort of ... you know ..." He trailed off, gazing hopefully at Avon all the while as though his incoherent mumbling had just defined the problem perfectly.

"Vila, if there is one thing I have learned over the years of our dubious association, it is that translating your so-called 'explanations' requires an advanced degree in the inexact and as yet thankfully undefined science of moronic engineering. What are you trying to say?"

The jest failed to trigger Vila's usual good-humored response. Instead, the thief looked truly affronted and scooted back in the chair, folding his arms with an uncharacteristic defiance. "Oh nothing," he said bitterly. "Probably unimportant anyway. Just some little trick she conjured up. Getting back at me, no doubt."

"She?"

The affronted look returned, as though it should have been obvious who Vila had meant.

"Servalan."

"Serv -- Vila, you are not making sense. Servalan is confined to the security cell on the lower deck, and that is where she will remain, for the time being. She can do nothing to harm you from there."

Vila half-concealed a shudder, and shook his head in negation of the statement. "You weren't the one she got her claws into back there. Wasn't you she nearly ... She's dead, Avon. She's not even Servalan any more, just some ... some thing that ... that ..." His voice cracked with the effort of finding a suitable word, and he pushed out of the chair in disgust. "Oh, forget it." He stalked back to his position at the forward console and collapse Tarrant's head in hands and eyes squeezed shut. Anyone else might have dismissed it as a typical Vila mull, but Avon knew better. For whatever reason, the thief was genuinely terrified, and Servalan had something, real or imagined, to do with it.

Servalan ...

Avon checked the console chronometer. Perhaps it was time, come to that, that he pay a call on their unwilling passenger. She would have been awake for some time now. Awake and ... hungry. Which was precisely the way he wanted her.

Avon got up. "As it happens, I have an appointment with our 'guest,'" he said brightly, but the levity fell on deaf ears. "Would you like me to deliver any relevant inquiries on your behalf?"

Vila shot him a jaundiced look. "Forget it I asked," he said, and his head drooped again, reminiscent of a long-ago Vila whose habit it had been to overindulge the adrenaline and sleep off on Liberator's flight deck. Except that Avon knew full well the thief had not had access to anything vaguely alcoholic for some time.

"Gladly," he replied, not meaning it. "Keep an eye on things here. I should be back shortly."

Vila jerked suddenly as though someone had struck him and twisted in his chair to face the starboard alcove. Avon turned back at the movement, one hand gripping the frame of the exit-corridor door. "Vila, what is it?"
At the question the smaller man started again, rather guiltily, Avon thought, as though he had been caught in some emperor's harem before he could lay hands on the 'merchandise.' He'd never seen Vila rattled in quite this way before. But then, this and the Vila he had known on Liberator and Scorpion were not quite the same, either.

"Nothing," the thief muttered, and turned back around in the chair with a dismissive wave toward the alcove. "Well there's nothing there, is there? Y'can see for yourself. Not a thing. I'm hallucinating, that's all, and I wish this miserable crate had a drinks dispenser that wasn't empty, and... oh, go away, Avon."

Brows knitted in a bewildered frown, Avon lingered for only a moment more, then did precisely that.

The force field on the cell door still hummed reassuringly as he approached it. Avon paused in the corridor to listen for any sound of movement from within, but there was none. When he drew even with the door and could see inside, the ostensibly empty cubicle startled him for a moment. With a tight smile, he slowly drew the hand weapon from the holster he had donned on the way here, and hesitated, the gun poised, on one side of the light-rimmed opening.

She was there. He knew it without having to rationalize that she was physically incapable of leaving. It was more than that. He... sensed... her presence; knew of a certainty that she was immediately behind this wall, waiting just inside the doorway. Waiting for him...

In one orchestrated motion, Avon tripped the force field control to 'off' and swung into the room to come up short in firing stance. All in the same sequence of movement, the gun recoiled instantly to a neutral position as he came face to face with his intended foe.

She was standing, barely, though it was clear she'd only done so at the sound of his approach. And she was more than simply wanting now -- in those darkened, hollow eyes he saw a dying thing, and a desolate hopelessness he'd never thought to find in the habitually merciless creature that was -- had been -- Servalan. It regarded him not with threat, but with an empty pleading that expected, all the same, no help from its tormentor.

Avon eased from the gunman's stance but kept the weapon gripped upright in both hands, wary and prepared. He had known Servalan too long to entirely trust so much as the semblance of harmless surrender. Even dying, she remained a danger.

"It seems I have left my visit rather too long," he said, though there was by design neither sympathy nor apology in his tone.

The sultry remnant of a malediction stirred in her eyes, and the bloodless lips formed a nearly-voiceless curse.

"Damn you, Avon."

With a tilted nod and a brief display of teeth, he answered her as he had once answered Tarrant. "It has been tried," he said.

Beyond goading, she merely closed her eyes and seemed to fold herself still further into the featureless corner of the cell. Deathly pale and far too thin, she looked in every aspect like a walking corpse; small wonder her presence here had so terrified Vila. Depivation of either human victims or the drug that controlled her tenuous hold on life had brought her perilously close to a death that would, this time, be all too real.

But Avon did not intend to allow her quite so easy a release as that. Not just yet.

He let the gun drop to his side, a less obvious threat but still firmly in hand, and paced away across the bare floor, observing her with guarded loathing.

His voice, when he spoke, was a quiet monotone devoid of emotion.

"Do you want to live?"

The eyes came open then, the first trace of hope glimmering somewhere deep within. They watched him, and waited.

"Tell me where Pdr Vaylan is," he demanded without further preamble. "And where he's taken ORAC. Tell me that, and I will allow you to live -- a little longer."

B7 Complex
He could not, at first, gauge the reaction to his words, but the pleading gaze took on the aspect of something far older and more familiar. She trembled against a cold that was not there, and the scarcely-concealed curve of her breasts rose and fell in staccato rhythm beneath the torn remnants of gown. Despite his carefully-erected barriers, he found himself drawn by something he could not have named -- a need as strong, in its way, as her own -- and he closed silently in until he stood against her, blocking her body with his. A part of him lost itself, desiring the cool touch of the hand, the lips that sought his, the embrace that had for so many years equally attracted and repelled him. He indulged the passion for the fleeting length of time it took his rational mind to reassert itself, recalling the state in which, not long ago, he had found her with Vila, prepared to feed until the life he harbored had become her own.

The hand with the gun interposed itself between them, gripping her by the throat so that the weapon's muzzle pressed itself cruelly into the tender flesh beneath her ear.

"Oh, no," he said through gritted teeth. "Not that way, Servalan. I'm hardly given to self-sacrifice. And necrophilia has never appealed." The gun bore down still harder, causing her to recoil, though the eyes held more defiance than fear. "Where has Veylan taken ORAC?" he repeated, and the vicious shove he imparted to the gun drove her against the wall with a stifled gasp of pain. "Tell me!"

He watched the gamut of possible consequences weigh and measure themselves in her eyes, pending death, it would seem, no deterrent to her scheming.

"Help me," she whispered under the relentless pressure of his hand, "and I will take you to Veylan."

He knew it for a lie before the words were out, a bluff born of desperation, nothing more. With difficulty, he controlled the urge to pull the trigger then and there; that also would have been too easy. And he had to be absolutely certain.

"You don't know, do you?" His own voice was nearly as desolate as hers had been. She was the last link, the last prayer he had of finding Orac, and if she didn't know...

"I can take you, Avon." The answer came too fast, too insistent to be anything but false.

"Lies." His own hand trembled as he tightened the grip on her throat, a frail pulsing under fear-tensed sinew the only indication that she was not quite dead after all. It could be so very easy now -- with a hair's breadth more pressure the too-slender neck would surely snap, and he would at long last, long last be truly free of her.

With a vehement oath, he snatched the gun away and released her to collapse, shapeless, into the corner. She would suffer a more deserving death if he simply walked out now and left her to the agonies of the poison, the chemical meant for him, that Vila had instead slipped into Serval. It had been slowly consuming her ever since; why she hadn't died of it long before remained a mystery. Stasis, perhaps. That and the fact that someone had seen fit to forestall the inevitable with surgical alterations not unlike those performed on autoloids, enabling her to take life from others to prolong her own -- or to accomplish the same end with the aid of a drug.

Avon wondered who had 'cared' enough to engineer that particularly ghoulish modification.

Someone had wanted her to live just long enough ... for what?

The answer to that, he realized bitterly, might very well be vital to Mirage's survival.

Avon removed the medical pouch, vias and syringes swathed in folds of soft black cloth, from an inner pocket. At the movement, he saw the tormented eyes turn bright with need-filled recognition. In spite of everything, it was difficult to hate this pitiable thing that watched him hopefully from the floor. Harder still, he found to his horror, to simply and efficiently kill it -- though his expedient half knew that killing her was precisely what he ought to do.

Well, that would come soon enough.

Holstering the gun with a curt, expressive shove, he affected an indifferent stride to the door, turning back only long enough to cast her the proper suffusion of superiority and arctic contempt -- before he flung the pouch at her and walked away.
The force field reinstated, he headed aft with no clear intention of a place to go — it was enough just to move in one direction, and to be as far from Servalan as the limited confines of the ship would allow.

The farthest point aft on this level was the observation deck, a semi-circular viewport 'open' to the stars. A glowing swarm, animated by the apparent motion of hyperdrive distortion, they hurtled themselves at the curving plex well only to vanish to some unknown point beyond it, trailing thin, fiery veils across the void in their wake.

Avon lost himself for a time in their welcome anonymity, though it did nothing to alleviate his sense of compounded frustration at the Fates who had dallied Servalan's imagined link with ORAC in front of him, only to snatch it away.

She didn't know. All the power she had once held, yet none remained that would have made her privy to the whereabouts of Vaylan, who despite his status as leader of the galaxy's most widespread revolt, remained more elusive than Blake had ever been.

A caustic smile curled the corners of Avon's lips, and to the shadowy reflection in the viewport wall he said, "The heir to your rebellion may yet win the war, Blake, against the Federation ... and us as well. Its formidable talents aside, Mirago is not Liberator, and with both sides hunting us, we will soon run out of places to hide. Without ORAC to construct a safe haven, as it did for Ennor, our life expectancy is decidedly limited."

Blake's voice, as abrupt if not unexpected intrusion, was a subtle, low-timbered recrimination. "But not as limited, perhaps," he replied, "as your thinking."

Avon pivoted, as he had often done when confronting the Blake of old, but the viewing terrace and couches behind him remained unrelentingly empty.

"My thinking," he echoed, his own voice as rough-edged and hollow as Blake's had been.

"Mirago is more than a capable ship, Avon," the whisper admonished. "Use it."

Avon scowled at the implied derision of his prowess with Mirago's computer. For all its unique properties of exception and camouflage, it remained of a basic enough design — one that still ranked several degrees of magnitude below the sophistication and far-reaching capabilities of ORAC.

"Even I cannot accomplish the impossible," he told Blake's spectre angrily. "For the self-same reasons you once espoused, Far Vaylan does not wish to be found."

"Then stop looking for him," came the equally-dismayant reply. "And use Mirago to trace ORAC."

Perplexed with this seemingly circular logic, Avon snorted and turned back to the viewport wall. "ORAC is switched off," he said with tired abandon. "Vila has the key."

There was silence for a moment, as though Blake might be shaking his head in consternation at his answer. Then the soft-spoken, level tones responded, "ORAC uses a carrier wave to investigate other computers in every corner of the galaxy -- and that carrier wave is traceable, or it should be to the one man who knows its frequency. As you were once so fond of pointing out, ORAC is never truly 'switched off.'"

Avon stared into the passing stars without seeing them, and for the second time in as many hours, damned his own stupidity. He might have stayed, if only to argue the odds against locating one obscure narrow-beam frequency in all the broad expanse of the galaxy — but it would have to wait for another time.

He was already on his way to the flight deck.

* * *

"I said your Avon isn't a particularly likeable fellow."

Gildar's spring-laden breeze had snatched most of Trienn's words away, but Tarrant heard them the second time.

He pulled his head from the close confines of the aft sensor housing to look at her. She stood below him at the base of the ladder, nearly as grease-smudged as he, and held the laser linkage and spare probes to be handed up as he required them. The steel blue arc of
Mirage's hull stretched behind her, a graceful, sleek contrast to Scorpion's angular and battle-scarred configurations. Landing this ship, Tarrant mused, had been child's play in comparison.

He ran a hand through his tangle of curls, then turned back to adjust the installed linkage one last time. "He isn't my Avon," he replied diffidently. "And nobody asked you to like him."

When he'd descended the ladder he found her regarding him with apparent disbelief, the spare instruments trapped now in folded arms. "I don't understand why you stayed with him -- why you still stay with him. The man is unstable, any fool can see that. And after Gauda Prime --"".

"I can skip the history lesson, if you don't mind," Tarrant interrupted hotly, and slapped a control on the ladder's supporting strut that would draw it back into the hull. Trienn didn't let him travel far in the direction of the next sensor plate before she'd gripped his arm, drawing him back to face her with firm-yet-gentle determination.

"My point is we don't have to stay. With a city of eight thousand less than a mile away, there are bound to be other ships, other opportunities."

"Other ships?" Tarrant echoed with a derisive laugh. "Maybe you ought to look again at this one." He swept a hand at it, upward and back. "She may not be Liberator, Trienn, but she outclasses Scorpion and anything that city has to offer, and she's the best chance we have of surviving, just at the moment." He matched her gaze, blue eyes to grey. "I can't speak for you, but I'll be staying. If you want to go ..."

She shook her head, negating the suggestion with a restrained sigh. "I only meant that ... Well that I think you ought to be careful, around Avon. He's ..."

"I know. But thanks for the warning, all the same."

He moved away again. She followed, glancing furtively out across the mesas on which Mirage was grounded. Tarrant couldn't help smiling at that. Old training died hard, if it ever died at all.

"Mirage is monitoring our perimeter," he assured her. "Don't worry. If anything moves out there, we'll know about it."

From speakers set into the hatch above, a silky voice responded to his mention of its name. "There is fortunately no unauthorized activity on my scanners, Tarrant, I'm enthused. Do you desire further maintenance access to the hull sensors?"

Tarrant bit back a sarcastic response, clenched both fists and said levelly. "Yes. Lower the access ladder for sensor housing amidships, starboard side."

"Yes, Tarrant."

For once, Trienn found no amusement in the computer's obsequious doting. She faced him again as Mirage delivered the requested access ladder with the monotone whine of well-oiled gimbals. The burnished metal smelled faintly of propylene and lubricant.

"About Avon," she said.

"What about him?"

"Can he really find this ORAC of yours. with nothing but a carrier frequency to go on?"

Tarrant tested the aluminum rungs with one booted foot. "I imagine the more pressing question is whether Mirage can find it. But if there's anyone in the known worlds who can tell it how, believe me, Avon can." He glanced toward the ship's bow and the curved prominence that defined the flight deck: Avon would still be there, programming search vectors for ORAC's elusive carrier wave. Trienn's next question caught him somewhat off guard.

"You trust him ... that much?"

At a loss to explain or understand this sudden display of insecurity, he took her by the shoulders, responding with simple honesty."Yes."

"And Vila?"
Well now, that he really couldn't answer in quite the same way. "Why do you ask?"

She shrugged. "He just seemed an odd choice to send for supplies, alone and with no money...."

Tarrant laughed, and the look of consternation that crossed her features made it harder for him to stop. "Even if we had money, which we don't," he told her, "Vila wouldn't have needed it."

"Then how is he supposed to acquire —?"

"Acquiring things is Vila's speciality. Trust me. He'll manage."

With the sigh of the not-fully-convinced, she nodded in capitulation. "All right. I'll leave them to their talents, if you trust them so much. And I'll stay, for now."

"Good."

He bent to kiss her, but his lips hadn't quite brushed hers when Mirage's piping voice said urgently, 'Tarrant!!'

Prepared to ignore the interruption, he jumped when the soft wobble of the intruder alarm sounded. Both of them had weapons in hand by the time Mirage announced, 'Unrecognized intruder on forty-six degrees northwest vector."

"Yes, we heard you!" Tarrant snapped. "Kill the alarm!"

Mirage obeyed without comment. Separating, Tarrant and Trienn circled on opposite sides of the mid supporting strut, crossing under the ship to the cover of the identical beam on the port side. From his side of the strut, Tarrant peered cautiously out at the terrain; he saw nothing but wind-swepted grass and the first glimmer of lights from the city below, its jumble of squat, ugly buildings dyed amber by the setting sun.

"I don't see anything," he whispered.

Trienn's gun bobbed once. '"Shh. Listen."

He heard it in the next moment. Footsteps coming up the incline, none-too-quietly, slipping every now and then in the loose rock and soil. It couldn't be Vila. Mirage would have recognized Vila.

He readied the gun and waited.

The footsteps halted, as though somehow aware of the danger, and from just beyond the rim a nervous young voice inquired, "Is Tarrant there? I was told to ask for Tarrant. Don't... don't shoot, please. Mr. Restal sent me."

Tarrant nearly laughed aloud at the use of the archaic title; Vila would undoubtedly fancy such backwater-culture formalities.

"All right," he said loudly, though he kept the gun in place. "Come on up. But keep your hands in sight."

The figure that presently emerged, still slipping on the embankment's unstable soil, was thin, adolescent and female. At least, Tarrant judged it to be female from the lace-rimmed cotton blouse and homespun skirt. The features were otherwise androgynous; mouse-brown, bowl-cut hair and an utter lack of body curvature.

"I'm alone," she announced when she had at last reached the summit. "He... Mr. Restal told me to say that."

"So I see," Tarrant answered patiently, not moving from behind the strut. "Well what did Mister Restal send you out here for? And where is he?"

"Oh well, he's... he sent me with a flyer and your supplies -- they're just at the bottom of the hill there. And then he said to tell you he had an appointment to keep and you shouldn't expect him 'or a little while yet. Maybe not till morning."

Tarrant lowered his gun and aimed a wry smile at Trienn. "There, you see?" he quipped lightly. "You can always trust Vila -- to be Vila."

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He holstered his weapon, and strode confidently out to meet their pleasure-prone thief's nervous messenger.

* * *

It was too soon.

No longer smiling, Carnell paced the deck with ill-disguised impatience. Anyss lingered beside the communications console to his right; the officer stationed there studied the messages on his screen with a concerned frown before turning to address the president.

"Central reports both Kidron and Tanis have now fallen to rebel forces, sir."

Carnell scarcely heard. The red-brown planet on the viewscreen was of greater importance to him just at the moment: somewhere on its surface, Mirage had gone to ground. But it could not be to retrieve ORAC -- it was too soon, surely, for that. Vaylan was hardly likely to be here at any rate; from the reports, he was busy conquering planets elsewhere. So there had to be another reason. Refueling and supply run, perhaps. Yes, that would make sense.

He paced again, aware of Anyss' glare boring into his back. They were running out of time...

"That's the eighth stronghold we've lost in the past week alone," he heard Anyss say behind him. "It's not my place to advise, sir, but shouldn't the President be on Earth to direct our forces against these uprisings?"

Earth. Yes, the President ought to be on Earth. Vaylan's rebellion was proving more troublesome than any of its predecessors. But without ORAC, they had little hope of repressing it for long. He had to obtain ORAC, and to do that he must take Avon. He hadn't intended it to be so soon; he would rather wait and be led to the prize. But his choices were becoming limited.

"You're right," he said to Anyss, and at her surprised look, he flashed a less-than-pleasant smile and added, "It is not your place to advise."

Chastised, Anyss fell silent, and in the welcome calm, Carnell continued pacing. A moment later, he spun on the ship's pilot. "Establish orbit," he ordered. "I want Mirage's location pinpointed and a party on the surface before it can lift off. We're going to take them."

* * *

Vila filled his glass for what might have been the ninth or tenth time -- he'd stopped counting long ago, and he felt far too good to care now anyway. The private inn room was comfortable, though not the cleanest he'd seen, even by Delta standards, and the fact that he shared it only with a tall glass and two bottles of very fine local brew might at any other time have been cause for concern, but at the moment, nothing short of a supernova could have bothered Vila Nestal in the slightest.

He'd spent a thoroughly enjoyable day in the city, lifting wallets, pilfering pockets and then spending the ill-gotten gains. Certainly he deserved a little rest and relaxation after all that work -- not even Avon could deny him that. Not that he'd have the opportunity to try.

Vila slouched at the crude wooden table and rested his head on his hands, content in the first alcoholic euphoria he'd managed since the destruction of Xenon base over two years before. The dreams were pleasant now, not at all the ghostly wakening nightmares he'd been forced to endure of late aboard Mirage. He dreamed of Gan, and of the first days they had spent on the Liberator after Blake had plucked them both from Cygnus Alpha. They'd gone wandering the huge ship together, he and Gan, unable to believe their good fortune, and then having discovered the food and drink dispensers, availed themselves of a hearty feast and more than a few potent libations of alien design.

"You really enjoy stealing?" Gan had asked him in that utterly innocent tone that might, in anyone else, have been thought pretentious.

Vila had given him an open look of mock offense. "Of course. Doesn't everyone?"

Gan laughed. "Well no, not everyone. I mean it's wrong, taking things that aren't yours to begin with."
Vila’s shrug was expansive. “Depends who you steal it from, dunnit?”

They took another drink, leaning back to appreciate Liberator’s clean and particularly spacious surroundings. After the London and the cramped, depressing atmosphere of Cygnus Alpha, this was sheer paradise.

“You never told me how it ended, you know,” Cally said suddenly.

“Eh?” Vila squinted at him through an inebriated haze, reminding himself that he really must find out what this stuff was called and look into cornering the bottling franchise. “How what ended?”

“The limerick,” Cally replied, a large and friendly blur across the table. “The one you started to tell Arco in the landing cell. ‘There once was a lady from Cygnus, or something to that effect.”

“On that,” Vila grinned. “Just something I wrote in my spare time. I had rather a lot of that, you know. In prison they...” The grin faded for a moment, and he shook his head. “Well anyway, it goes, ‘There was a young lady of Cygnus / Who thought it a crime to go wigless / So she oft changed her hair / While the rest went quite bare / Which left the men wide-eyed and wigless.’ Rather brilliant, don’t you think?”

Cally’s expression implied he thought just the opposite, but he nodded and politely refrained from comment. Vila downed another swallow of the potion and contentedly shut his eyes. The feeling of freedom and safety for the first time in many years was overwhelming, and combined with the drink had conspired to make him both drowsy and lethargic.

He blinked, yawned and tried his eyes open to find himself on Liberator’s flight deck. Must have nodded off on watch again. Oh well. What Blake and Avon didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him, and the others never faulted him for napping now and then. Especially not Cally; Cally always understood, had always been kind to him, and when her watch followed his, would always shake him awake with gentle hands and soft admonitions.

“Wake up, Vila!”

She had lovely, slender hands, did Cally. But they were shaking him a bit harder than seemed necessary.

“Vila!”

She sounded strange, far away somehow, and yet she had both hands on his shoulders and had pushed him upright in the chair. Something else was wrong, but he could not quite put a finger on it yet.

“All right, all right, I’m awake,” he insisted, but she shook him again anyhow, as though to make certain. Vila tried valiantly to focus on her but could see only an indistinct image that despite an odd, hazy quality was nevertheless indisputably Cally. Well, her watch did follow his, after all. Of course it was Cally...

“Vila you must listen,” she said, and the urgency in the words made him sit up and hastily blink the sleep from his eyes. “Go back to your ship,” she went on, and while he tried to make sense of that, “You have to warn the others. Your ship was followed here, and they are coming for you.” Go and tell Avon that he must lift off, now. Hurry, Vila!”

He didn’t understand. Lift off from where? And why should he tell Avon rather than Blake? The intensity of her warning had, however, frightened him enough to urge him to his feet. He heard the chair fall behind him, scraping a floor that did not belong to Liberator, and the unfamiliar pattern of a soiled carpet tried to snag his feet as he turned to run for the exit corridor — only the hexagonal opening wasn’t there, and when he wheeled again to ask why, neither was Cally.

The table with its overturned chair, empty glass and bottles all stared back at him accusingly. Vila ran toward them with outstretched hands, a near-sob wrenched from him as he stumbled and caught the table for support.

“Cally!”

He turned circles in the dingy room, crying her name, until he saw... something... move against the back wall: the ghost shape from aboard the ship, except that he could see it now, the after-image of Cally, fading even as it spoke for the last time, a sighing, urgent plea.
"Run, Vila! Now!"

"Cally..."

The smudged, bare wall answered him with mute denial. Cally was gone. But she had said...

Panic already threatening to overcome his efforts, Vila fumbled open the unlocked door and fled into the night.

***

I do not understand the reference, t Mirage complained with the barest hint of petulance. t Please define terminology. "a line through the pattern of infinity."

Avon’s grim smile was as lost on the computer as his reference had been. “Never mind,” he said. “Continue scanning by sector for the programmed carrier wave; report any indication of activity to me immediately.”

tAffirmative.t

A sudden commotion from outside the entryway nearly obliterated Mirage’s response. Tarrant came through the opening first, a pouncing Vila two steps behind him, Trienn bringing up the rear.

“Never mind how I know!” Vila said through gasps for air. “Just get this ship off the ground, will you? I tell you they’re coming!”

Tarrant slid into the pilot’s seat with practiced ease to begin a hasty series of pre-launch checks. Avon decided against a request for explanation and turned instead to the blue-panelled computer wall.

“Mirage, pursuit check.”

tThere is no... t the computer began confidently, and halted in mid-sentence.

Avon glared at it as the whine of starting engines began rising around them. “Well, come on! Is there anything out there or not?”

A single ship has entered sensor range, entering Gildar orbit bearing zero-zero-one.t

“Straight for us,” Tarrant muttered and shot an inquisitive glance in Vila’s direction. “Forward thrusters on line.”

Trienn’s rapid response came from the neighboring console. “Running.”

“After launch control.”

“Check.”

“Flight vector?”

“One-one-nine. Launch window at seven mark five, one minute seven seconds and counting.”

“We can’t wait that long!” Vila cried from the chair he’d strapped into. “Can’t you make it any faster?”

“Not and keep us in one piece!”

Tarrant’s answer was intercut by Mirage’s soft query of his name. t Emergency launch procedure is activating, t she purred, and Tarrant’s board lit up of its own accord, causing the pilot to draw his hands away as though the controls had suddenly burned him.

“What are you --?” he began, and then was promptly obliged to grab the console for support as the ship shuddered violently around them. Avon latched his own launch-belt and held on, though it hardly seemed necessary in the next moment. Mirage lifted with enough G-force acceleration to meld him with the chair, and, engines screaming against the strain of escaping the atmosphere, sliced upward into Gildar’s ionosphere.

Moments later, the G-forces vanished, Mirage’s viewscreen ‘opened’ to the stars, and
the computer's voice reported disinterestedly, 'Unidentified craft matching course and speed.'

"Refractory shielding." Avon said crisply. "Go to mode L-7 and arm the weaponry banks."

'Mirage' seemed to hesitate yet again. 'Pursuing craft dropping to sublight speed, it announced a moment later. 'Now out of sensor range. Do you wish to cancel deception mode command?'

Avon eyed the screen in wordless dismay for a moment. "Yes," he said offhandedly, and then unclipped the launch-belt to rise and turn in Vila's direction. Trienn and Tarrant, he noted, had both done the same. The thief was still glued to his chair, staring at the viewscreen and its rapidly passing array of stars.

It was Tarrant who first moved to tower over him, asking the question Avon himself had been about to voice.

"How, Vila?"

The thief started. "Eh?"

"How did you know, before 'Mirage' had even detected their approach? Who told you?"

"Better still," Avon added before Vila could answer, "who were they?"

Vila blinked at him. "How would I know?"

"That," Tarrant said, "is what we're asking!"

Avon watched hypothetical gears spin behind Vila's expression, and knew that whatever followed would be anything but the truth. What the hell had happened to him down there?

"Sixth sense," Vila said earnestly into Tarrant's incredulous gaze. "I've told you all along I had it -- I always knew when I'm in danger. It's instinctive!"

"Vila..."

The thief reacted to Tarrant's further prodding with an angry un snapping of his launch harness and a wave of the hand as he came out of the chair. "Shut up, Tarrant. Believe me or not, suit yourself, but leave me alone!"

With that, he stormed to the accessway, and just before charging through it, hesitated for the briefest of moments -- to look back at Avon.

It was a look that unnerved the computer tech for reasons he couldn't have fathomed. The hazel eyes were an amalgam of curiosity and an odd sort of sympathy.

Then Vila had pattered away, and the three remaining occupants of the flight deck were left to look at each other with nothing more complex than simple bewilderment.

* * *

The push that deposited Servalan on the medical cot was one Avon felt no need to administer gently. Under the threat of Trienn's gun, he strapped her, hissing imprecations at him that he chose all the while to ignore, tightly to the table and applied the diagnostic sensors to either temple, overcoming her effort to turn her head away by placing his free hand less-than-kindly at her throat. The most poisonous of serpents couldn't have glared its displeasure any more vehemently, but he ignored that as well and began programming touch pads on the medical computer.

"I still don't understand what you're looking for," Trienn said offhandedly.

Servalan shot the woman a mind-your-own-business look from her rather undignified position on the cot. "Neither do I." She spat the words in Avon's direction, but he was intent on the computer and pretended not to hear.

"Something led them to us," he said in answer to Trienn's question. "And the only things we have brought aboard of late were the medical kit, which is clean... and her." The pronoun came out with the intonation of a curse.
"What about the food and clothing supplies from Gildar?" Trienn wondered. "Could they have been a trap somehow?"

"It seems unlikely."

His manipulations brought the medi-scan viewer on line, and within moments he had an answer to his suspicion on the screen. Proof that Servalan’s surgical alterations had included more than just the modifications that had brought her back from the 'dead.'

Trienn eyed the tiny needle-like object embedded in the brain tissue with open disgust.

"What is it?"

"A pulse-code transmitter. One programmed. I would imagine, to bypass our monitors, perhaps by disguising itself as something else. Something... routine."

He spoke the words to Servalan, daring her to deny it, but the look on her face imparted neither denial nor anger any longer — it was something much more akin to horror.

"You didn’t know," he said. It was not a question.

"Damn him." The whispered words were perilously close to a sob. "I’ll kill him for this."

Avon pounced on an unexpected chance. "I may yet grant you the opportunity," he said silkily. "Who is he?"

Her eyes veiled warily at that, but he pressed on, as certain as she must be that he had the advantage now. "Help me to catch the hunter in his own trap, and he is yours. You have my word. Now who is he?"

The name came, at last, through clenched teeth. "Carnell."

Avon blinked. "The puppeteer?"

"His name is Falco now."

"Is it indeed?" Avon’s eyes narrowed. "The same Falco whom all the vicasts have announced ascended to the Presidency not long ago?"

Venom dripped in the reply. "The office has changed hands rather frequently of late."

"So I’ve noticed. It hasn’t done much for so-called party unity. In the absence of a stable leadership, the regionally governed planets have been falling to rebellion forces by the dozen. While President Falco prefers to spend his time stalking us. Why?"

The haunted eyes told him that the answer to this should have been all too obvious.

"Why do you think?"

A bitter laugh like the sound of splintering ice escaped Avon’s lips as he uttered the name. "ORAC."

Servalan’s reply was forestalled by the sudden insistent beeping of the intercom unit. When Trienn had tripped the switch, Tarrant’s anxious tones cut in immediately.

"Avon I think you’d better get back up here."

He cast the intercom an annoyed glance. "What is it?"

"Our 'friend' is still out there, pacing us at two-thousand specials. And he has company."

Without bothering to acknowledge the message, Avon headed for the door, pausing only long enough to snarl a command at Trienn.

"Watch her," he ordered, and walked out before the blonde woman could protest.

When he arrived on the flight deck, he found Tarrant at work with the tactical screen, where two triangles winked on and off at tangent angles from Mirage’s more solid outline. Avon slid into the neighboring chair, ostensibly unnoticed until Tarrant had finished with the sequence of controls he was operating.
"I didn't know we had an extended-range scan until I looked for it," the pilot said absently, pressing a final switch. "That's when I found him." One of the triangles vanished: the other, on a straight-line course behind them, continued to blink. "It's the same one that came after us on Gildar. All the configurations match."

Avon nodded. "According to Sarreden, it belongs to our illustrious new Federation President. What do you know about the other one?"

"Turned up when I asked for a longer range sweep. It's on a different relative trajectory and whoever he is he's good at deceptive flight variations — but he's been turning back to shadow our course every time."

"Sister ship in the president's armada, perhaps?"

At Tarrant's touch, the second triangle came back into play on the screen. "I don't think so. Mirage, repeat the information on pursuing vessel tangent zero-six-one."

Perhaps in response to the serious tone of his voice, the computer's reply, though still far from its customary monotone, was less affectation than usual. 'Vessel is tracking at 2083 sps, intermittent deviation to random course pattern. Configuration indicates Saridian origin.'

"Saridian?" Avon's eyes slitted. There had been something about Sarid on...

"I know," Tarrant was saying. "It didn't make sense to me either."

"Oh but it does. Sarid is one of several twelfth sector planets that fell to rebellion forces in recent weeks."

"Rebel..." Tarrant gaped at the screen for a moment. "You mean we have both sides of the war on our tail?"

"It may be more than that. Mirage, you said the vessel at zero-six-one was tracking us. By what means?" He presumed that President Falco would be disinclined to share his pulse code frequency with a rebel ship. So how had this one found them?


Tarrant stiffened, facing the computer with a look of shock and open betrayal. "What the... ? You sent them a recognition signal?"

"No," *Mirage* said in the semblance of meek tones. "The proper recognition code was transmitted to us."

Avon came abruptly to his feet, moving past a stunned Tarrant to the tactical screen. His voice, when he spoke, was low and rasping. "Transmitted by whom, *Mirage*?"

"That information has been classified."

Grimacing at the flashing indicator, Avon said, "Yes, I'm sure it has."

"Avon, what on earth is she talking about? Who else could know *Mirage*'s recognition signal?"


Tarrant stared at him as blankly as before. "Who the hell is Mohammed?"

"Vaylan!" Avon wheeled and paced toward the console. "It has to be."

"Ah," Tarrant muttered, and visually scanned his board for a moment. "That previous owner you mentioned. Or should I say, previous thief? Give me ten minutes to lay in evasion maneuvers and I'll see we lose them both."

Avon arrested the hand that had been about to start programming buttons. "No... Don't do that. Don't do anything, for the moment." He dropped the pilot's hand and spun away again. He needed time to think, time to devise the trap... and a way to catch both hunters in its net. But more importantly...

"*Mirage*," he said, "scan the ship at zero-six-one for designated carrier frequency ORAC."
The reply was immediate, if not quite satisfying. "I'm negative."

Avon scowled. "Naturally."

The intercom's screech for attention startled them both. Avon had no sooner flipped the toggle switch than Trienn's cry came stridently over the circuit.

"Tarrant!"

There was a muffled sound, impossible to identify, and then, disconcertingly, nothing.

"Trienn? Trienn, what is it? What's happening down there?" Tarrant retorted the switch uselessly. In the next moment, he was on his feet, gun in hand and heading for the exit corridor. Avon followed close behind.

The first thing Avon noticed on their arrival at the medical section was the empty diagnostic bed, its restraints unbuckled and hanging loose. The second thing was Trienn, a limp figure sitting just beneath the intercom. An ugly red stain smeared the wall just above her.

Grey eyes opened at Tarrant's touch, surprising Avon; Servalan did not often leave her victims breathing.

"What happened?" he demanded before Tarrant could say anything at all. The question earned him an irate glare from the pilot, to which Avon was deliberately oblivious. Both of them knew there would be no point in heroic measures: from the look of it, Servalan had used Trienn's own weapon, and Federation paraguns were not designed to encourage survivors.

"Tarrant . . ."

"I'm here. Don't try to talk."

"Something in her eyes," Trienn murmured. "I'd untied her before I knew why . . ."

Gripping his gun tighter, Avon swore softly. In his haste he had forgotten Servalan's newfound talent for hypnotic persuasion.

"Vila . . ." Trienn had a death-hold on Tarrant's hand, and the pilot had gone nearly as pale as she. "Went after Vila."

Avon did not need to hear more. Nor did he expect Tarrant to follow his charge back out into the corridor. The lift was interminably slow, dragging precious seconds into minutes he could ill-afford. He narrowly restrained the urge to blast the sluggish doors when the lift announced its arrival on level two; he did force them open more quickly, prying the doors apart by hand. Vila's cabin was a short, breathless sprint down the lefthand corridor.

His haste proved futile in the end: the room was empty, lacking even the trace of a struggle. He'd barely stepped inside when, shipwide, the intercoms whistled and came to life with a silken, too-familiar voice.

"Avon," it said, and the name reverberated down the corridor and beyond, an echoing litany. "I have your ship, and I have Vila. Make any effort to tamper with the computer, or come near the flight deck, and he will die -- less than pleasantly."

Avon's hand slapped the response control in a release of pent fury. "What do you want, Servalan?"

"We are approaching Edessa. Largely rain forest, and uninhabited, but it should suit my purposes well enough. We are going to land. And then we will wait - for Carnell."

"I already gave you my word that you could kill him," Avon grunted. "Wasn't that enough?"

Apparently it wasn't; he heard the circuit close with a resounding snap and the cabin was suddenly, eerily quiet.

Scowling fiercely, he dropped into a chair -- Vila's chair, he realized with an unwarranted tinge of guilt -- and set his mind to the task of finding some way, any way, to once more outmaneuver Servalan.

...
Vila stared down at the pilot's console and shook his head for the second time in as many minutes.

"I tell you I can't," he insisted, unashamed of the fact that his voice quavered. "I'm not a pilot, I don't know how to land the ship."

The paragon came up to point at him again, a slender and deadly extension of her forearm. "You flew it well enough on Sekros, Vila. And you will pilot it now. Tell the computer to establish orbit."

His ruse having failed, Vila meekly obeyed, making no effort to hide the fact that his hands were shaking as he deactivated Mirage's main drives and keyed the orbital approach. Servel's eyes followed every move.

"You have the key?" she demanded suddenly, and when Vila merely nodded, "Show me."

"Kill her, Vila. Do it now!"

In all his years as a fugitive, aboard Liberator and Scorpio and now Mirage, Vila Restal had only killed twice — in the heated battle to escape Cygnus Alpha, and again when a Federation guard on Mecron had been about to fire on Tarrant and Dayna. And neither time had it been anything like this. Not even Servel as a target could make taking a life easy. Poisoning her had been a simple matter of leaving the baited trap behind, but this...

He tried to think of all the reasons why she ought to die, of the thousands -- millions -- she had murdered on Auron and on other worlds, but in the end he could only think of Cally. Servel had murdered Cally, too...

Vila brought the gun into line for a final time, held it steady, and closed his eyes. He pictured Cally as he had last seen her, before the bombs had gone off in the underground complex on Terminal, smiling at him in that gentle, indulgent way that only Cally could smile.

With one swift, reflexive jerk of his forefinger, Vila pulled the trigger.

The shrill report of the discharge was followed close on by a muted gasp, and then by the clatter of the gun as Vila let it fall into the dirt. When he opened his eyes, it was to see Avon, shaken but still very much alive, kneeling over the limp white form of a thing that had once been Servel.

She was already dead, he told himself fiercely. She died a long time ago, even if she didn't know it yet. Well you've just reminded her -- for Cally!

Tarrant had made his way unsteadily down the ramp to stand at Avon's side. His presence was ignored, but all the unanswered questions were put to rest by the look he sent the thief. It said, It's over, Vila. This time ... this time she really is dead.

A low moan made Vila start, and brought Avon's head up to stare at the nearby patch of ground where Par Vaylan lay. As Vila watched, Avon pried the gun from Servel's fingers, his eyes never leaving Vaylan as the head of the rebellion forces stirred and tried to get his feet underneath him to stand. Avon was beside him before he could quite complete the maneuver. One hand gathered Vaylan's tunic-front into a knot and yanked the man gruffly upright. Avon's voice was a concise, deadly monotone.

"Where is ORAC?"

Vaylan recollected his hauteur with amazing speed, and shook Avon's hands free. "You don't really expect me to answer that?"

In no mood to be trifled with, Avon brought the gun to bear against Vaylan's temple.

"Oh, but I do."

Vaylan's smug expression did not waver. "You'll never get it that way," he parried with all the grace of a seasoned gambler. "I'll make you an offer, though. Give me the key, and I'll see to it your name is cleared of all charges on both sides. Not even the rebellion will want Kerr Avon any more."

Avon's head tilted to one side, a gesture Vila had often seen him use when he'd been about to fley Blake with some new and cutting riposte. "As far as the general public on both sides is concerned," he said icily, "Kerr Avon was executed on Sekros. The gun pressed his point further home. "Now for the last time, where is ORAC?"
Vila saw a movement to the right of the open hatch, and in a moment, Tarrant's head and the muzzle of one of Mirage's hand weapons appeared at the edge of the door. The gun took aim, leveled, and hesitated. Vaylan was in the way.

Shoot, Vila wanted to scream. It doesn't matter about him -- he's already dying!

But Tarrant didn't fire, and something drew Vila's attention back to the frozen tableau of Servalan and Vaylan. Her right hand was moving, drawing the gun up from behind the shield of Vaylan's body.

"Tarrant!!"

Vila's shouted warning came as she pushed Vaylan callously aside, and fired at the hatchway. The shot took Tarrant in the shoulder; he flew backward with a startled cry, and his gun tumbled uselesslly down the ramp toward Servalan. Vila's panicked rush forward launched him painfully onto the rocky soil when something tripped him midway. Can't even die on your feet, he thought bitterly to himself. She's going to kill us, one by one, and there's nothing you can do. Nothing at all.

Servalan's voice made him lift his head from the face-down sprawl in which he'd landed. She had glided to the very foot of the gangway, and was gazing up into the ship.

"Avon," she said, and all the manipulative assurance she had ever commanded was back in that single uttered name. "I know you're there. Throw the gun down and come out. Now, Avon. Or Vila dies."

It shouldn't have worked -- not on Avon, to whom self-preservation had always meant more than anything. Vila couldn't believe he was hearing the sound of a gun falling, or seeing the figure that moved into the doorway from the left side. Avon's hands were partially raised. He took two steps down the ramp and stopped, locking hate-filled gazes with Servalan until Vila was certain he would produce another gun from somewhere and kill her where she stood.

But Avon did nothing. His eyes had changed, and hands dropping abruptly to his sides, he stared at her now with overt desire rather than loathing. Her predatory smile answered.

"Come here," she said.

Incredibly, he obeyed her, walking complacently down the ramp and into her waiting arms. Vila watched in horror, half expecting some trick on Avon's part, a last moment salvation hidden somewhere on his person -- but it was not to be. Whatever resistance he might have had to her lethal charms had been vanquished by the strength she had drawn from Vaylan, and she lured Avon now into the same trap, this time by a slithered embrace and craven kiss, and he responded to both with eager compliance.

"No...." Vila's whisper of protest went unnoticed by either of them. "Avon, no...." He tried to find his feet only to stumble again, landing on something that bruised his ribs and wrenched a cry of pain from him. Rolling back from the offending object, he struck out with one hand to knock it away, and realized almost too late that it was Vaylan's gun he had fallen on. Vila deftly re-oriented his hand and snatched the weapon to him, fumbling to right it, to hold it in a double-fisted grasp as he struggled to his knees.

The barrel came shakily into line with the soft white curvature of Servalan's spine. Vila swallowed, readjusted his finger on the trigger, carefully aligned the gun again....

A faint scraping sound at the top of Mirage's loading ramp resolved itself into Tarrant. Pale and clutching his right shoulder, he leaned on the hatch frame for support and looked past the deathly pair below him to Vila, his eyes entrusting more clearly than words done absolutely nothing to alleviate. He wondered why Servalan had not simply shot him long before now and had done with it, but it was hardly a question he could bring himself to voice.

"Can't we wait inside the ship?" he asked instead. "I mean, you can kill him just as dead in there as out here, can't you? Well, can't you?"

The pleading tone had no overt effect on the frail woman who stood over him, visibly oblivious to the cold, the gun gripped tightly in a death-pallor hand. "Oh, no," she heard him murmur into the shadows. "Avon and Tarrant will remain aboard, and we will wait here. No one is going to interfere."
Quite how that was meant to answer his question Vila had no idea. But he nodded anyway, as though it did, huddled closer to the boulder that formed his only protection from the night wind, and said no more.

Something roused him an indeterminate time later. Servalan had come erect from the rock on which she'd been resting, the gun aimed back toward Mirage. When Vila looked in the same direction, he saw a figure moving cautiously toward the ship. It halted just below the hatch, looking up at the closed portal as though staring alone might be enough to gain entry. Vila heard him say something, words the wind snatched away, and then, incredibly, came the moan of the door sliding back to lower the landing ramp. How could he know...?

"Carnell!"

Servalan had moved into the open to challenge him, but the man who pivoted to face her, gun coming level with her own, was not Carnell. Edging nearer himself, Vila emitted a small gasp of recognition that caused Servalan's eyes to dart briefly his way.

"Par Vaylan," Vila said to no one in particular. The key in his pocket suddenly conspired to bulge conspicuously, and he backed away a step, but neither Vaylan nor Servalan appeared to notice. The latter had turned that... look... of hers on their blond visitor, and already the man's gun had dipped to point harmlessly at the ground.

"Where is Carnell?" she demanded.

Vaylan blinked stupidly. "Who?"

"Falco!" she spat at him. "What have you done with Falco?"

A little of the arrogance Vila remembered crept into the dazed reply. "I've toppled his rather short-lived reign," Vaylan said from behind an insipid grin. "Or I'm about to, as soon as our forces reach Earth."

"You fool. He was here. He was coming here and you've warned him away!" The wrath in her eyes and voice, beyond anything rational, made Vila want to shrink back into the dark—anywhere to be away from what he knew would come next. But his feet refused to oblige him, and he was forced to watch helplessly as Vaylan's gun slipped from nervous fingers, and Servalan closed on him like an animal stalking trapped prey. She still held her own weapon, but instead of employing it, reached with her free hand to Vaylan's throat and seized hold. The man started, but snared by those eyes, could not move away. Vila wanted to shout at him, to run forward and push him, anything at all—only none of it would have helped, and gods, where were Tarrant and Avon, anyway? The hatch had been open for he didn't know how many minutes, and that hatch had been all that confined them, so where were they?

Vaylan's face, the picture of smug confidence only moments ago, had gone ashen. Her spidered fingers clamped his throat, siphoning color, breath, life...

ORAC's plastic activator slid easily from his pocket despite trembling fingers. He lay it on the console, and as he did, met her eyes for the first time. It was all Vila could do not to cringe: those eyes were so desolate... and utterly insane. They strayed to the key only for a moment, then traveled back to Vila.

"Take us down," she ordered.

Anyss spun from the computer console, her thin face a mask of fury. "I will remind the President again," she recited, "of his responsibility. We now have reports of fighting on both Ibusa and Midzon. If they fall, the next logical target of rebel assault will be Earth. We must turn back, and we must do it now."

Watching Edessen 'evolve beneath them, Carnell deliberately turned away from her. "Not," he enunciated slowly, "until I have ORAC."

The sound of a weapon being drawn was somehow the last thing he'd have expected of Anyss, yet when he looked it was there—small, concealable, standard issue of the Presidential guard, though no less deadly for its compact size—and she held it pointed accurately, unmistakably, at him.

"ORAC is not here," she said, and as a reluctant afterthought, added a tight, "sir. In accordance with Council edict four-four-seven, I am hereby commandeering this vessel on the grounds that the President has been deemed mentally unfit to command."
A flippant response had always come easily to Carnell. It so readily hid the less pleasant emotions. "Has he indeed?" he queried softly. "Well the President must say he's certainly never been deemed anything quite so formidable before. Perhaps you would do him the august favor of informing him who has taken it upon himself -- or herself -- to make such a daring, if inaccurate, psychological assessment?"

His answer was a chorus of soft leather uniforms, rasping as their owners rose from chairs around the flight deck and moved into wordless formation beside Anyss, their faces stern and determined, every eye inditing him. How in the seven hells had he failed to see this coming? Surely there must have been indications, warning signs. But he had been far too distracted ... no, obsessed ... with getting his hands on ORAC. Careless. Very careless. They tossed you out of psychostrategist school for overlooking little matters far more trifling than this.

"We have a course back to Earth plotted and laid in," Anyss told him quietly. "We're going to implement it now. I think perhaps the President should go back to his cabin and rest. He'll have a great deal to do when we arrive."

Carnell's gaze swept over the silent array of his crew. "Perhaps you're right," he conceded in falsely pleasant tones. "If you'll excuse me?"

Anyss nodded, but turned with the gun to follow as he passed. Carnell offered no protest, no resistance. A master player knew when to concede the game, and when to re-engage his opponent.

Defeated but not yet out of the war, the checkmated king left the board.

* * *

Vila squinted through the muck at the grey outline of Mirage's fuselage and wrapped his arms tighter around his knees. Moisture dripped constantly from the low-hanging clouds above, and insects whined in his ears, intent on making a meal of him. He was cold, damp, tired and miserable, all conditions that waiting out here in the dark for three hours had

Vaylan looked shaken last, perhaps more by the look in Avon's eyes than by anything else. But whatever he'd been about to say was pre-empted by the word of Mirage's intruder alert.

"Four humanoid readings bearing eight-zero-eight," she announced. "Approaching on foot from ship grounded at eight-zero-zero."

"He didn't come alone," Tarrant said as Vila finally gained his feet and started for the ramp. He tried not to look at the crumpled white thing he had to navigate around in order to get there. Avon hadn't moved though, and still held the gun at Vaylan's head.

"Leave it," Tarrant prompted. "He's not about to tell you, and we've got to get out of here."

"Further information," Mirage said with a distinctly anxious tone. "Retro-course trajectory of ship at eight-zero-zero indicates planet of flight origin Kidron."

Irritated, Tarrant shook his head. "So?"

"Cross-correlation of program prerogatives ensued from this data," she answered as though Tarrant hadn't spoken at all. "Carrier frequency ORAC operating and confirmed planet Kidron."

Avon's eyes went suddenly bright as he snatched the gun back, aiming it instead at Vaylan's chest. With a chilling half-smile, he said, "I think you've just become superfluous."

Confidence flagging, Vaylan raised a pre-emptive hand. "The fact remains," he said, "you'll still never reach it -- without me."

"I'll take that risk."

"I wouldn't if I were you. It's a large planet, and my security is very efficient." "Well whatever you're going to do, get on with it!" Tarrant snapped at Avon. "We're about to have company."
Vila glanced nervously into the gloom, then back at Avon, who seemed on the verge of shooting Vaylan anyhow. Then the gun made a savage gesture toward the ship, and he heard Avon snarl a single word.

"Move."

Vaylan complied, moving past Vila as though he weren't there at all. Avon followed the rebel up the incline, keeping the gun close, and Tarrant, still holding his shoulder, went after. The pilot turned back to give Vila an "aren't you coming?" look from the hatch, and Vila could only stare at him numbly for a moment before something compelled him to turn away, to look at her for what was, at long last, to be the final time. He felt sick, but not even a little remorseful when he saw those eyes, still open and wide with surprise, staring back at him with imagined reproach. Vila's own eyes hardened, formulating a cold and return-glare as he could manage in the flailing moment he had taken to look at her. He presented his back to her then, and hurried up the gangway to the waiting safety of the ship.

* * *

The repressive quiet of his cabin did nothing at all to heighten Vila's mood as, slumped in a chair near the door, he eyed the untouched bottle of Gildoran wine beside him on the table. He had been watching the blank walls and empty corners of the room for the better part of four hours, silently pleading with Cally to come back again, to prove that she had been more than the alcohol-illusion he knew the others would claim her to be. If ever he told them.

Nothing had answered his plea.

Mirage was a full day underway for Kidron with Vaylan locked in the security cell. Tarrant's flying skills and a substantial head start having long ago outmaneuvered the rebel ship's feeble attempt at pursuit. They had slowed only once since then, long enough to launch the life capsule containing Trienn's body into deep space, and then had resumed course full-throttle. Avon intended to lose no more time.

Pulling ORAC's key from its customary pocket, Vila put that on the table, too, and wondered for the nth time if he might not be going quietly insane. After all, Avon had been hearing things for gods-knew how long, conversing with a Blake who wasn't there: perhaps the aberration was catching.

So was it better to be drunk or crazy?

"The least you could do," he said aloud to the empty room, "is prove that I'm neither, Cally?"

More than anything, he wanted her not to be the simple creation of a liquor bottle's whim, with those he had lived all his life, and not one had ever grown substantial enough to touch him. Cally had touched him, spoken to him, shaken him awake. Cally had been all too real.

Vila stood, searching the room again for shadows that refused to be there.

"Don't leave me alone now, Cally. I didn't know it was you, before. If I had ... Please, Cally. Come back!"

She didn't answer. Despairing, Vila knew in that moment that she never would. He reached down to grasp the bottle, hefted it, let his left hand hover for a moment an inch from the sealing cork...

He drew the hand away. The brightly-colored label moved slightly from side to side as his right hand turned the bottle, but something was obscuring his vision, making the print impossible to read.

Vila hurled the bottle at the wall. It struck with the satisfying pop and jangle of shattering glass, and left behind a smear of pale red rivulets streaming busily toward the floor.

There was an immediate buzz and click from Mirage's maintenance sensor, and the door concealing the service robots whisked open. Oblivious to the cabin's occupant, who had flung himself on the bed and pressed both hands to his ears, they glided out to attend to the mess, chortling electronic admonitions to each other all the while.

Vila never heard them.
Blessed Be the Memory
by Thomas N. Beck

The crowd was good-natured, even jovial, but a sudden hush possessed its members as they prepared to enter the main shrine. Mothers quietly rebuked their children for the high spirits that had seemed natural only moments before. Men removed their hats self-consciously. Teenagers worried that they were making too much noise treading on the leaves. All made sure their cameras were working and that their film was fast enough to be used without flash -- or that they had film at all. No one was leaving here without pictures.

Their guide shepherded them all into the roped waiting area outside the entrance. "There's another tour group still in there," she said. "Won't take but a moment. In the meantime, let me tell you what you want to look for inside ..." She droned on and on; her charges tuned out, shuffling their feet in anticipation and impatience. They didn't need her mumblings; they'd all devoured the histories, guidebooks, sensotapes, shared holographic telepathowaves, and drug-induced pseudomemories. What they wanted was to see the real thing, the actual place.

Suddenly, from just inside the tunnel, someone signalled the guide. She turned to the group with an expression on her face that half professional smile, half ecstatic glow of an acolyte about to enter the presence of her idol. "If you'll follow me, I'll take you inside now. Please don't touch anything." She turned and strode purposefully into the sloping entryway.

One could almost see the group's interest rise toward an even keener edge than they'd previously displayed. They stared around them like nervous pigeons, desperate not to miss anything there might be to see, even in the dark, metal-walled passageway. There were a few pictures here and there, just enough to prime them for the holy place a few meters away. As they paused just outside the doorway into the sanctum sanctorum, an almost religious fervor seemed to pass through them like a shockwave. The guide noted this and was very pleased. It was nice to have a full group of believers, for a change.

"You are about to enter the final station of Saint Roj's journey toward martyrdom," she said. "Before you do, please turn to page one of your guidebook and join me in the Prayer to the Liberator." The crowd opened their little books, one or two of them shuffling their feet in embarrassment.

"O Saint Roj," the guide intoned, her eyes closed in her rapture, "Blessed art thou for thy sacrifice, for thy momentous and instructive life, for thy acts of rebellion and leadership, for thy slaying of the evil sorceress Servalan, for thy worthy command of the holy ship Liberator, and for thy showing us the Way of the True Rebel. Blessed by thy followers, who shine in thy reflected light. Cursed be the name of thy Betrayer, Kerr Avon, and cursed be the Federation that pursued thee to thy end. May thy memory live forever in the hearts and minds of all free beings everywhere. Amen."

"Amen," repeated the crowd. "Play ball!" cried one wit, who was instantly silenced by half a dozen worshippers around him. His wife tried to look like she was with someone else. Of all places to make a bad joke! Devo's Chamber on Blakeworld, the whilom Gaudo Prime, was the holiest place in the Blakian Canon; in here even an agnostic should respect the beliefs of the Blakians.

Ahead of them, the door opened up. Slowly, one by one, they passed through into the sacred room. A collective gasp arose from the foremost of them as they had their first view of the place. For here on the floor in front of them, in a roped-off area, was the sight that most of them had travelled half a galaxy to see, the Blakian equivalent of the True Cross, the visible sign of their hero's martyrdom, the Holy Bloodstains.

The guide took up position just outside the ropes, a look of deep passion on her face. Her gaze accompanied each pilgrim as he or she passed by the Stains. She smiled or frowned depending on how much emotion they seemed to show. When the flippant one
who'd spoiled the end of her prayer came by, she glowered at him like she imagined Blake had stared down Avon during their many conflicts. The man hurried past her, and she felt like she had won a victory for her Saint.

All around were the chalk outlines showing where His Acolytes had fallen after him. The crowd gave these minor holy spots the attention they deserved. The first ones in were now becoming impatient, they wanted to get to the final stop on the tour.

A young woman with frizzy blonde hair stopped in front of the Stains. She stared at the crimson splat and shook her head. "Miss," the guide said, "please move on. There are others behind you waiting to see this." The woman stayed put. The guide put her hand on the woman's wrist. The woman shook it off.

"No!" she cried out. "He's not dead! He's not dead! I just know it!" She began to weep, then to sob, louder and louder. The guide was frantically pushing her deeper, summoning guards to take the distraught worshipper away. There was one in every crowd, a Blakan so fervent she couldn't accept the physical evidence of the Martyrdom. The guide wished she could comfort the sufferer; she knew what the woman was feeling, the shock of actually seeing the Stains, being forced to face the fact that Saint Roj was truly dead. She remembered her own crisis of faith the first time she herself saw this place; only her decision to serve here as a novice had kept her from madness.

Guards came and gently led the sobbing woman out. A man said to the guide, "It's a good thing she left now. At least she won't have to look at the Body, you know? What would that do to her?" The guide nodded, distracted, unable to take offense at the man's jocular tone.

Fortunately, no one else took the sight of the Stains as hard, although there were plenty of tears and sobbing hankies. Many were Orthodox Blakians, making the Sign of the Teleport as they saw the final falling place of their Hero. The guide was Reform herself, but she didn't accept all the stories of His exploits as gospel. No one could have put up with Vila for that long, for example. And she didn't for a moment believe that He hadn't sinned against purity with Jenna the Smuggler. Not that she could swallow the heresies of the Slashmengers. Still, all that really mattered was that you recognized Blake as the Great Rebel, the One who showed the Way, the Victim of the Federation, whose followers later destroyed the evil Terran dictatorship. The guide would let the theologians dispute such trivia as how many mutants could dance on the head of a pin.

Good, they were all inside the chamber, and all had had a chance to see the Holy Bloodstains. The guide began her pitch. "Be of good cheer. His body may be meat, but Roj Blake will never die. Though betrayed by His unjust follower Kerr Avon (a few of the crowd made the Sign of the Teleport upon hearing that name), yet He lives amongst us in the memory of His life, and in His Legacy of the destruction of the Federation.

"I will now read from the Book of Roj.

"Roj Blake was born a noble Alpha, yet betrayed His idle class to serve all of Mankind. Tortured and imprisoned by the Federation, He yet never lost hope or heart, but pleased Himself to liberate all men from their bonds. Escaping from captivity by divine intervention, He used the starship Liberator in His Holy Cause. Aided by stout companions, He made war on the Evil Federation and won many victories against its evil leader, Servalan (again, the Sign of the Teleport by some of the worshippers).

"After the destruction of Star One, Roj Blake went into seclusion for meditation. Two years and more He spent in the wilderness, seeking a sign of what to do next. Coming to Gauda Prime, He sought out new followers, before He was foully betrayed by Kerr Avon and slaughtered. Cursed be Kerr Avon," she intoned.

"Cursed be Kerr Avon," responded the crowd, some of them once again making the Sign of the Teleport.

"And yet," the guide went on, "in His death was His salvation. For His martyrdom, and that of His followers, was the spark that set off the conflagration that led to doom for the Federation. From all corners of the galaxy, new rebels came forth to carry on His fight. Within fifty years of His death, the Federation was overthrown, and a new democracy took its place. Roj Blake is dead, but His victory is forever. Blessed be Saint Roj."

"Blessed be Saint Roj," the crowd responded, some of them crying out in ecstasy. There were sobs from a few, but the Celebration of the Victory was supposed to be a
joyous moment in the service, and most of the crowd were happy. The guide could see only
one person not smiling beatifically, a very old woman in a bright red dress. She looked
familiar, somehow.

The guide shook her head. She saw so many pilgrims here, how could she hope to
recognize one person? In any case, she had her duties to fulfill. A few of the mourners
who had entered first were edging toward the exit, eager to move on to the next stage
of the tour. The guide strode toward them, understanding their impatience. Reaching
the door, she turned to address the crowd.

"We will now see the Body," she proclaimed, as if granting them all an enormous
favor. The crowd began to buzz with anticipation. The Body of Saint Roj! The holiest
sight in the entire Refederation! The Body, lovingly preserved for eternity by weeping
disciples, encased in glass so that all could come and experience His calm gaze. His
proud yet dedicated bearing, His stern glance toward the future, even the Scar on His
eye, the sign of His years in exile and suffering after Star One. There were stories
that seeing the Body had caused miracles to happen. No wonder the crowd was impatient
to enter the Viewing Chamber.

Inside, it was dark and cool, perfect for focusing one's attention on the Saint and
on contemplating His Life and Acts. There in a case in the middle of the room, lit by
a few sharp spots, standing upright, was Roj Blake, even in death a commanding figure.
A voice, similar to Vila Restal's, intoned a list of His achievements and sacrifices,
while serene music played in the background. On the walls were pictures of His acolytes
and of the Liberator. There was even a photo of DRAC, the amazing supercomputer
that had never been found after His death.

Even though the guide came through here five times a day, the sight still stirred
her heart. Tears came to her eyes as she examined the Body. It was wearing a dark
brown pirate shirt this morning, she noticed. Yesterday it had been in green. The
most blessed and favored of His acolytes were permitted to dress the Body; she was
willing to wait until it was her turn, years in the future, perhaps.

Suddenly, she felt her sleeve being pulled. It was the old woman in red. Her white
hair was very short, almost a crew-cut. Now why did she seem familiar?

"Forgive me," she said, "But where is Avon's body?" A few in the crowd near her hissed
when they heard the name. She seemed unfazed. "I'd heard that Avon is kept here also."

The guide stared at her. That voice... She shook her head. "You surprise me,
madam. Only a few care to view the case containing Avon's body."

The old woman smiled, her face suddenly rejuvenated. "I've surprised a lot of
people in my time. May I see Avon, please?" She said the last word as though it were
from a language foreign to her.

The guide couldn't refuse, for some reason. She found herself leading the old woman
to a small door in the back of the chamber. "This way, madam. It isn't exactly off
limits, but we don't advertise Avon's presence. I don't know why his body was preserved
at all, or why he's kept so close to the Saint."

The door opened onto a dark, narrow passageway. A few feet later, it led into a
small room carved out of stone. There, against the wall, was a glass case. Inside it
stood Kerr Avon, staring out at a world he'd never understood. He was dressed in a
black outfit mottled with metal studs. His hands were at his side; he looked helpless.
The woman approached the case slowly, as if unable to believe it.

"Avon," she breathed. "Avon, again, after all these years."

The guide settled behind her. "Madam? Did you... know him?"

The old woman exhaled powerfully. "I once thought I did. But I was wrong."

Others from the crowd had followed them in there. One young woman spoke. "I
should hope you didn't know him! Imagine knowing the Great Betrayer! The man who
killed our Redeemer! I only wish Avon hadn't died so soon after shooting Blake, I
wish he'd suffered longer for his crime." The girl's boyfriend nodded.

The old woman turned to look at the young girl. "What do you mean, you wish he
hadn't died?" she asked. "Avon's not dead, you know. Nobody could kill Avon. Even
when they wanted to, they couldn't actually do it."

They all stared at her as if she were mad. "Come on, lady, Avon was killed by the Federation. Everybody knows that!" said a middle-aged man.

"Then everybody's wrong," the old woman said. "I'm telling you that Kerr Avon is still alive."

"But that's his body right there!" the old man shouted, pointing at the case.

"Not at all," the old woman replied.

"Then where is he?" asked the guide.

"In there," said the woman in red.

The middle-aged man sputtered. "But you just said he's alive!"

The woman nodded. "He is."

"What?!!" everyone shouted at once.

"He's alive in that case," said the old woman with the very short white hair.

The noisy crowd suddenly shut up tight, as if they'd all been strangled. Their eyes bugged and their mouths hung open.

The old woman smiled. "I haven't been here for years. But I've always hoped this room would tell me what actually happened here, why Avon killed him. It never does. Nobody knows what happened, you know. Nobody even knows whether Avon betrayed him at all. Nobody will ever know. All your nonsense about Blake's 'holy cause,' you have no idea how foolish that sounds. Blake was no holy martyr, and Avon wasn't an evil tool of the devil, either. Nor was ... Servalan such a viper. The Federation didn't end because Blake's followers rose up after his death and overthrew us ... them."

"Then, how did it happen?" asked the young girl, her eyes filled with tears.

The room was silent. Everyone knew they were hearing the truth, though why they should believe this ancient crone wasn't clear. Her voice came as if from far away, though every syllable could be heard. "The Federation ended because after Blake's death, after Avon's ... incarceration ... I ... it didn't have the energy, the will to go on. The Federation always had a purpose, it wasn't the dictatorship Blake thought it was. Without that purpose, it just fell apart. Blake won, but not the way he thought he would." She fell silent, her eyes downcast. Then she turned to face the growing crowd, drawn by her presence.

"Oh, go ahead, believe in your stuffed saint! I suppose that's your purpose, just as mine ... the Federation's was ... well, who cares now? Go on, read your Book of Roj, recite your Prayer to the Liberator. It might even be true. I ... the Federation never was very good at understanding the common people." With that, the woman strode out of the room, into the great Chamber, and through the exit out onto Gauda Prime.

The crowd behind her was silent, stunned. Could she be telling the truth? Was the mythos of their faith just that, a myth? What would happen to their new lives if she were right? Did it really matter? Whether Blake was a martyr or not, his death had spurred the demise of the Federation, which was surely a good thing. But still ... The guide began to shepherd the crowd out of the small room, leaving a staring Avon to stand lonely vigil behind them.

"Who was that?" the young girl asked as she exited.

"Oh, just some crank," replied the guide. "I've heard about her. She comes here every few years or so, in some disguise, trying to make trouble."

The middle-aged man left the room, too. Before he did so, he turned and said to the guide, "Did you get a load of that outfit?"