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by Jean Graham

the resurrectionist

Wealth agreed with Arnak. Born to it he may not have been, but the trappings came naturally enough to him; the food, the wine, the resplendent clothes. No wonder Madame Servalan had fought so hard to regain the Presidency -- only, he clucked to himself smugly, to lose it again.

The former Commissioner and newly self-appointed President lounged in his oversized office chair, fingering the expensive silk of his new tunic and ignoring the mounting pile of affairs-of-state that littered the desktop. He had a more immediate problem to consider. What to do with a beautiful but decidedly dangerous corpse.

Concealed just behind and to his left, a locked room held her remains in cryo. A fitting end for the ice queen, Arnak mused, running a hand over his bald head. Only it wasn't quite an end yet, was it? They said there was no antidote for the poison. But 'they' said many things, and were no more to be trusted than she had been. She hadn't risen to this high office by trusting -- and neither would he.

Still, disposing of her once and for all was proving more difficult than he'd imagined. He had no idea how to go about it alone, and anyone he recruited for the task was an added risk. There were ways, however. He'd seen to the immediate dispatch of the medical team that had analyzed the poison, and the Delta and Gamma workers who'd installed the cryo unit to begin with. Then, he'd thought he may still need her; a rather grisly but viable insurance. As it had turned out, the story that she'd been lost in the battle at Sekros had proved more expedient -- he had the counterfeit tapes of her orders that he was to act as President in her absence -- and now the 'corpse' had become a liability.

Arnak's ruminations were interrupted by the arrival of an aide, a plump young man with a perpetual squint and the tendency to stutter. The President's ample form shifted upward in the chair, rife with annoyance at the intrusion.

"This had better be important, Worl."

"It is. I mean, I'm sorry Comm-- Mister President, but I ... he ..."

"He?" Arnak growled. "I already told you once, no appointments today. I don't care who it is. Send him away."

Worl looked resolutely miserable. "I tried to, sir, but he ... but it's ..."

"Councillor Falco is the name. And I told him you *would* see me." The blond man who had appeared in the doorway was not tall, but his deportment was one of such authority that few would have dared to question his stature. Worl offered the President a nothing-I-can-do-about-it shrug of the eyebrows before he fled the office. Falco sent a satisfied smirk after him, and when the door had closed, deliberately tripped the lock.

Unintimidated, Arnak merely leaned back in the chair, evoking a protesting creak from the springs.

"And what do you want? I'm a busy man, Falco."

The Councillor's arm, caped in royal blue, gestured to the unattended jumble of paper on the desk. "So I see."

Arnak sniffed, deliberately ignoring the slight. "Well?"

For an uncomfortably long moment, Falco said nothing at all. Too-blue eyes regarded Arnak with such analytical detachment that he felt rather like a steak on a starving man's table, and as though that particular bit of demoralization were not enough, the gaze was promptly chorused by a flash of perfect white teeth.

"I came to offer my congratulations," Falco said.

Arnak blinked, his own confidence rapidly diminishing in the wake of that smile. Something about this man exuded control. More than control. Manipulation.

"Congratulations?" Arnak mustered a feeble smile of his own. "Oh yes. You mean my ascension."

"Not precisely." The blue-clad Councillor strolled to the President's desk, cape flaring behind him, and placed two gloved hands at precise angles on its edge. "I was referring to your resignation."

The chair creaked again with Arnak's sudden return to an upright position. "What?"

"Oh, you heard me correctly." That damned smile again. "The Council has decided that you are to resign the Presidency -- forthwith. You can spare us all that tedious psychomanipulation by cooperating now, or ..." Something in his tone said he would clearly have preferred the 'tedium.' Arnak suppressed a shudder by wrapping it in rage and reached for the alarm switch under the desk.

The only thing that answered his summons was a smug twinkle in Falco's pale eyes.

"That won't work, I'm afraid. You see the coup is already over. The High Council is firmly in control of the computer complex, the staff ..." He paused, adding with a soft, confident laugh, "... and the Federation."

Arnak opened his mouth, closed it again, then repeated the exercise twice before sputtering, "You can't be serious. You'd have to be mad ..."

"No. But I am impatient." With a small but cultivated flourish, Falco produced a primly-folded document from his cloak and opened it on the cluttered desk. "It requires your signature. No more, no less. A legal formality, but then we are a people of law and order, are we not?"

Arnak entertained the momentary fantasy of knocking those disgustingly flawless teeth out, one at a time. If nothing else, it served to bolster his flagging courage.

"No," he said.

Something clicked. Arnak looked up in time to see the tailored sleeve of the Councillor's tunic produce a small but functional laser weapon that slid neatly into the man's gloved palm. Falco leaned over the desk, pushing the resignation letter closer with the muzzle of the gun, and uttered a single, cajoling word.

"Please."

Arnak rooted through the mess on the desktop until he came up with a pen, and summarily signed the document. There was no further point in arguing. Now that it was done, however, Falco looked disappointed.

"Pity," he said as he folded the paper and tucked it away again. "Your predecessor would never have surrendered so easily. I was quite looking forward to unseating her. It was she this coup was *designed* to depose, you see."

The fact that the gun remained trained on him told Arnak more than he wanted to know about Falco's intentions now that the document he wanted was secure. Still, the man's apparent interest in Servalan might be a tool he could use ...

"Did you know her?" Arnak asked, appalled at the quaver in his voice. "Servalan, I mean?"

Falco straightened, drawing the gun away with him, though he still held it ready. "Oh yes. Another time, another name. But I knew her. You might also say I owed her something. Repayment, so to speak, for the loss of my livelihood. Not that I haven't done well for myself since, but at the time it was... distressing." His smile this time was a tight-lipped smirk. "A shame it's a debt I shall never be able to pay."

Arnak paused significantly before playing his trump card. "And if I told you that I could arrange it, what then?"

Immediate interest sparkled in the Councillor's eyes. "Oh, you are more clever than we gave you credit. Do you mean she's alive?"

"Strictly speaking, yes and no. The point is, I have her."

"Where?"

Arms crossed over a protruding stomach, Arnak smiled in his turn. "Oh no. I want safe passage to a neutral planet first. Then I'll leave you word where to find her." He raised a hand. "On my honor."

Falco's laughter echoed in the expansive room. "That, I'm afraid, is worth even less

than she is." The gun came back to dance under Arnak's nose. "But you've overlooked one small matter. These chambers have been under *unauthorized* surveillance for a number of months now. Nothing in the official records, of course -- that would rather tend to spoil a take-over bid, don't you think? Now what say we take a look at this private little anteroom of yours, shall we?"

Arnak paled, but obeyed the impatient gesture of the gun and rose to open the cryo chamber door by pressing his palm to the light-panel lock. Falco swept past him into the room, activating the overheads automatically with his entrance, and strode to the tubular unit to stare in undisguised awe at the face beneath the curve of frosted plex.

"Yes and no," he quoted grimly. "Which is it then? Is she dead or alive?"

Arnak shrugged. "She was alive, barely, when she went into cryo. No point in reviving her though. There's no antidote to the poison."

"Poison?" Falco seemed to have forgotten all about the gun. "You poisoned her? She really must have been slipping, to fall for that."

"No, not me. One of Blake's people did it. The thief, Restal."

Falco's head snapped up at the name. "Oh, now that is poetic justice. From his profile, I'd never have thought it of him." He gazed again at the still form inside the unit, making soft 'tsk' sounds behind pursed lips. "Really, Servalan. Felled by a Delta-grade thief at the height of your return to power? Ignominious, to say the least."

Arnak cast a nervous glance back into the office, tempted but certain that an effort to reach the door would never succeed. By the time he unlocked it...

"There's no point, really." He spun to find Falco pinning him with those unnerving blue eyes. "In running, I mean. Nowhere to go, you see."

Arnak eyed the gun, hanging loosely now at the Councillor's side, and rubbed absently at the headache that had begun pounding in his temples. "What are you going to do?"

"With this?" Falco brought the weapon up, then, unexpectedly, tossed it away to clatter noisily against the chamber wall, making Arnak flinch visibly. "Nothing. I'm afraid it was never charged. Messy things, guns. I've always despised them."

"But ..." Arnak didn't know whether to be relieved or furious. "What ...?"

"There are ... shall we say, subtler means." Falco patted the pocket containing the signed document, and with sudden sick realization, Arnak understood the reason for the headache -- and the gloves Falco wore. Chemically treated paper; fatal within minutes. His stomach rebelled at the thought, and he stumbled back out the chamber door to be violently ill beside the President's desk. The last thing he heard was Falco's deceptively pleasant voice addressing the cryo-unit's occupant.

"I must tell you this," it purred. "You are *still* the sexiest officer I have ever known ..."

* * *

Vila Restal had already begun to wonder if rescuing Tarrant from that prison planet had been such a great idea after all. Not that he'd suggested it -- exactly. But leave it to an Alpha grade space pilot to move in and take over every time. *Mirage* was already responding to him in ways that *Scorpio*, or even *Liberator*, never had. For two days, he'd been the proverbial child with a new toy, barely aware of his shipmates and inclined to short answers when he responded to them at all.

The flight deck was quiet just now, except for the continual hum pulsing behind the cobalt blue plex of the computer's main housing. As had been the case ever since Tarrant's return, Avon was nowhere in evidence, and the only other presence on deck, equally quiet, was Trienn, whom Vila had even less reason to trust, particularly since she still wore her Federation uniform.

An 'old friend' of Tarrant's, she'd said she was. So she'd hijacked *Mirage* -- and Vila and Avon with it -- in order to find the pilot and kill him. Well she'd found him all right, only she hadn't killed him, and now Tarrant had dragged her along and ... just what was it with Tarrant and old girlfriends anyhow?

It had been Vila's sad experience that 'old friends' of either gender tended to be dangerous -- particularly with regard to Avon and Tarrant. Trienn gave Vila no less reason to feel uncomfortable; she still looked at the pilot with a glimmer of murder in her eye.

"Vila?"

The thief jumped, aware for the first time that someone was standing over him, and had placed a hand on his shoulder. Tarrant. Once, it would have been a terse command and a rough shove to rouse him awake, but this voice, unlike the Tarrant he remembered, was far more concerned than demanding.

"Are you all right?"

Vila pulled himself straighter in the chair, shrugging off the pilot's hand. "All right? Of course I'm all right, why wouldn't I be all right? And don't *do* that, would you? I'm getting too old for surprises!"

Tarrant's smile had lost all of its one-time arrogance. "Sorry," he said, and Vila was sure he meant it. "I only asked if you'd seen Avon lately. I can't seem to raise him."

Vila had been dreading that question. He knew well enough where Avon would be. But he had no particular desire to tell Tarrant -- or this stranger -- about it. "Resting," he said rather lamely instead. "He's been ... tired ... lately."

"Not in his cabin," Tarrant said. "Unless he's just not answering the comm?" He studied Vila's closed expression for a moment, then added, "Perhaps I should take a look..."

"No." The word came out sounding sharper than Vila had intended. "That is, you don't have to. Or maybe what I really mean is, I wouldn't, if I were you."

The old Tarrant, he knew, would have taken that as a dare. This one merely looked at him and seemed, somehow, to understand. At least, he nodded knowingly as though he did, and said, "All right. You tell me then. Why are we on course for this Dastram, whatever it is, and why is *Mirage* sending pulse signals to someone named Vaylan?"

Vila cast an uneasy glance at Trienn. "We were on Dastram looking for Vaylan a week ago, before we were ... er ... sidetracked by your friend over there."

"Looking for him for what?" Tarrant had ignored the reference to Trienn entirely. "And why a pre-programmed pulse code? What's this ship to him?"

"His," Vila said simply. "Or it was. That is, he stole it from someone in the Tragal System before the Federation could steal it instead and then we stole it from him and... it's all a bit complicated, really. But what he did get away with was ORAC -- and Avon wants ORAC. No matter what."

Tarrant took a moment to absorb that. "Yes, well, if that's the case, why warn him you're coming? Why send a signal?"

"Because Vaylan thinks Avon is dead -- he had him executed for Blake's murder, only I didn't let him -- I told you it was complicated. Anyway this ship was programmed to go looking for Vaylan. He won't be expecting a crew."

"But you said he had ORAC. Surely he'll know..."

"He *does* have ORAC." Vila fished something out of a pocket and plunked it into Tarrant's hand. "But he can't use ORAC. I saw to that."

Tarrant stared down at the small plex rectangle that housed ORAC's activation mechanism and began to laugh. "Vila, you haven't changed at all."

"Hmph. Lucky for *you* lot. You should be thankful spaceships aren't the only thing I can steal, let me tell you. If it hadn't been for me ..."

"I get the picture, Vila," the pilot interrupted gently. "And believe me, I'm thankful."

Vila didn't know quite how to take that; humility was not a trait he was accustomed to in Tarrant. There weren't all that many people whose personalities he could say had been improved by prison life. But in this case ...

"Are you going to tell me what's wrong with Avon? Or do I have to risk life and limb by asking him myself?"

The mere thought of that made Vila wince. Life and limb might be the least of it. Again, the thief's eyes fell on Trienn, and he wondered what she was waiting for, sitting there like a uniformed statue, grey eyes trained on nothing at all. She hadn't spoken a word since Tarrant had brought her aboard, and Vila was as much in the dark as before about why she'd wanted to kill the pilot. He'd stopped her from shooting Tarrant on Dauban, but by the time he'd got the drop on her, whatever she'd had to say had already come and gone.

"Vila?"

"Eh? Oh, sorry. What did you say?"

"You're not going to tell me."

Vila sobered abruptly, rubbing at his eyes in dimly-realized imitation of a gesture that had once been Blake's. "Can't say as I can, really. But for once in your life, Tarrant, take some advice. Don't ask him."

A little of the old Tarrant surfaced in the pilot's affronted response. "Why not?"

Vila got wearily to his feet. "Because if anyone's going to," he said, "it ought to be me."

Tarrant's rejoinder died aborning when *Mirage's* prim tones announced the need for a manual course correction, calling him back to the pilot's console. Trienn's hollow eyes tracked him, and focused on his hands as they adjusted the controls.

Fast ships and old girlfriends. Leave it to Tarrant.

Vila shrugged inwardly, and did precisely that.

* * *

You should be careful of revenge, Avon. The voice was deep, resonant, in every respect Blake's. *It has a way of coming back on you.*

An air of petulance lingered in the tone, as it always had in those first days off the *London*. And Avon answered much as he might have answered then. "You always were a fool," he said.

Perhaps.

That annoying little smile of Blake's dripped from the single word. You didn't have to see it to know that it was there. Avon lifted a hand to the cold syntheglass of the observation window, fingers splayed as though to touch the mute stars beyond.

"I will kill Vaylan." He spoke the words with complete, unfeeling calm, as though the act would mean no more to him than casting off an old pair of boots. Except that it did mean more. So much more. The idealist -- the *humanitarian* in Blake would never understand what it meant to wreak vengeance on an enemy; to repay one who had tried to murder you in kind. Though murder was possibly an inappropriate word. Vaylan had tried to execute him... for Blake's murder. And the irony of that brought a grimacing smile to Avon's lips. Perhaps Blake understood what it meant after all.

An eye for an eye? the voice chided, and Avon recognized the reference from one of Blake's favorite banned texts.

"You, I suppose, would merely have turned the other cheek?" There was nothing like matching obscure quotation for still-more-obscure quotation.

You ... Blake emphasized the word, might benefit a great deal more from using his movement, and Vaylan -- alive. Or hadn't that occurred to you?

"I will have ORAC," Avon grated, addressing his own reflection in the glass. "The teleport, and our survival, depends upon that."

And then? Blake's tones queried gently.

"And then we will call on the Federation's erstwhile President -- on Vila's behalf, to

check on the efficacy of a certain ... gift ... he left for Servalan."

"No need to bother on my account." If the sight of Vila propped against the doorframe, openly eavesdropping, might once have infuriated him, Avon refused to be baited by it now. Whatever the thief had overheard, he would have to draw his own conclusions.

Avon turned disdainful eyes on him and said, "You're not in the least bit curious, I take it."

"About whether she's dead you mean?" Vila shrugged. "Not really. There's been nothing in the viscasts about it though, has there?"

"I haven't had much time to look. But then, the chances are there wouldn't be. Without ORAC ..."

Blake's warning cut across his thought, blade-sharp, and effectively severed the words.

Take care, Avon, it admonished. Some of the dead are still among the living.

"Avon?"

He brought his head up to meet Vila's eyes, full of guileless concern and a more familiar worry, whether for himself or Avon's state of mind -- or both-- it was impossible to tell.

"What is it, Vila?"

The simple question seemed to rattle the other man, who cast a nervous glance over his shoulder back toward the flight deck. "Nothing really, I just..." He stopped, abandoning one tactic for another in true rabbit-minded Vila fashion. "Tarrant's been looking for you," he finally blurted. Then as though to soften the blow of that startling revelation, he added, "I said I'd try to find you instead. Didn't think you'd mind, not as much as Tarrant looking anyhow, and I sort of figured...well that is I knew you ... I, uh, had an idea you'd be here." The last phrase tumbled out in a rush, delivered like a small child confessing a transgression. "Avon ..."

"Yes?" That one sibillant word drove Vila further into the unyielding metal of the doorframe.

"You shouldn't ..." The thief straightened then, visibly drawing his courage around him. Trembling hands dusted the sides of his tunic. "You hadn't ought to let Tarrant hear you, is all," he said without looking up. "He might think ... Well he might think, period, and you *know* that's dangerous for him."

Avon's answer came without rancor. "I'll bear that in mind."

Vila met his eyes again, clearly lost for anything to add. "Oh," he said meekly. "Fine then. I'll just tell Tarrant you'll meet him on the flight deck in a while, shall I?"

"You do that."

Without further comment, Vila fled the doorway. Avon turned back to the black expanse of the stars and pressed his hand once again to the window. The fingers contracted, spread, contracted again, leaving faint spider patterns on the glass.

"The dead, Blake," he said aloud, "are always with the living."

* * *

Restal would die for this. She would see to it personally.

It had been her last conscious thought and now, waking, became her first. The President of the Terran Federation could under no circumstances allow a menial -- and one supposedly modified at that -- to humiliate her as Restal had done. No. For that he would pay. Dearly. And Arnak ...

Where was Arnak? She remembered well enough his bloated smirk as the deadly gas had risen from Restal's trap and engulfed her. Arnak must be made to pay as well. She had tolerated him more than long enough.

Servalan opened her eyes to a near-total darkness. Faint light from somewhere outlined

unadorned, flat walls rising on four sides quite close to the hard, unfamiliar surface on which she lay. Scarcely the President's bed chamber. Not her medical section either. And why was it so damnably cold in here?

Her left hand reached for the edge of the table, or whatever it was, and incredibly, she found the movement difficult, the effort expended on forcing the fingers to contract far greater than it should be.

Cold. It was so cold.

Her cramped fingers closed awkwardly over the table's sharp edge, and immediately delivered the message that something else was not right: bare metal should maintain the temperature of its surroundings, and this ... this metal was warm to the touch. Her fingers explored beneath the edge and down the supporting struts as far as she could reach, with the same result.

So, it was not the room that had lost adequate heat ...

Cryogenic freeze. That would explain it, of course. Restal's little mixture had done sufficient damage to require life suspension. But ... There was no plex dome above her, no hum of monitoring equipment, no physician. And a patient recuperating from cryo would have no such lingering effects. Or so she had been told. Damn them. What was the meaning of this outrage? Why weren't they here, her advisors and councillors, security guards and servants? Someone ought to be here. There was absolutely no excuse for this affrontery. No excuse at all.

Fury drove her to sit up on the table, aware for the first time that she was clad in something thin and sleeveless that molded itself to her rather like damp gauze, a sensation at once both clammy and oddly sensual. Not her preferred attire, certainly. Someone would pay for this very dearly indeed.

Her feet found the floor. Bare, cold feet. Warm floor. That contradiction still made no sense, but no matter; she would fathom it out later, when she'd found someone to explain this and then had the cretin executed for not being here to explain it when she'd first awakened. Everything in its proper time and place.

Door. Find the door. And a light, damn it. There has to be a light control somewhere ...

The flat hum of an automatic door from the other side of the room made her turn back toward the table. A figure waited in the newly opened passageway, indistinct and limned in pale yellow light from behind. A man, by the outline, and from the way he moved when he came forward, apparently a menial.

"You." She infused the word with all the imperious authority she could summon. "I want an explanation for this, and I want it now."

Her visitor said nothing, did nothing. Having shuffled a few feet into the tiny room, he merely stood there as though waiting for some outside source to give him further commands. Drugged, she realized in disgust. What were they playing at, sending her a menial so overdosed on suppressants he could not even answer a simple question? Fools.

Servalan circled the table in one fluid movement, brushed past the stolid menial and headed for the door. In clear anticipation of her intent, it whisked shut just seconds before she would have reached it, plunging the room back into nebulous grey. The long nails of both hands bit into her palms and she stifled a curse, aware that someone would be listening and unwilling to grant them any satisfaction in this peculiar little game until she had determined what the rules might be. Were they watching as well? Even in this near-lightless murk? Why keep it so dark, when surely surveillance would be easier under normal lighting conditions? And why send this mindless moron to her at all? It made no sense. No sense whatsoever.

The shiver that ran through her came as much from admitted fear as from the still-unexplained cold. Someone, obviously, was enjoying all of this. Surely not Arnak -- he lacked the intelligence to devise something even this unnervingly simple. But then, the list of enemies, ergo possible suspects, was far too long to single any one name from its legion.

The harsh rasp of breathing in the otherwise soundless room took her attention back to the menial, still rooted to the floor where he had entered, still waiting. For what? She drifted toward him, circling, uncertain why his presence suddenly ... attracted ... her. Her fingers closed over strong, loosely-clad shoulders, lingered, then traced twin paths down

arms taut with muscles, straying upward again over a flat stomach and broad chest, exploring the face last of all. A young face, as well-toned as the rest of him; smooth planes angling up into soft, close-cropped hair. He reacted not at all to her attentions, but there was something... a *warmth* that radiated from him, and it fed the cold in her, drew her into itself as a bottle conformed liquid to its shape. Taking unrestrained pleasure from the sensation, she molded herself to him, caressed the fine hair and the hollowed throat, then covered the firm mouth with her own and took more of the warmth unto herself.

She felt him move then, the tiniest spasm of response as though to repel the kiss. But he did not, could not. Warmth, breath, *life* had begun to fill her, flowing in to banish the last of the chill into welcome oblivion, and she abandoned herself to the sweetness of it, to the utterly sensual fulfillment of need and desire and hunger. All that she required, it seemed, was here and hers for the taking.

As had always been her habit, Servalan took.

Sleep, or something akin to it, had overtaken her at an unknown point between satisfaction and surfeit. She awoke on the floor, warm and alive, beside a man who was neither. There was light to see him now, though not a lot of it, and she found him not at all handsome in better illumination. He was, however, unquestionably dead, a matter that bothered her rather less than how he'd come to be that way, and only then because she'd harbored no such intention and could recall no one else having entered the room. Whatever madman had devised this ...

Her head snapped up to the sound of a handclap; it was followed in languid succession by two more, delivered in grinning mockery by a man in blue and grey who leaned against the closed door as though he'd been there for some time, watching and waiting.

"Oh, that was really *most* impressive," a soft voice crooned, and Servalan came to unsteady feet with the certainty that she had heard those lilting tones before. "We'll simply have to repeat the experiment with an unspacified specimen next time. I don't doubt you would enjoy that."

She had to place one hand against the table to bring herself upright -- now the metal *did* feel cold -- but she managed to collect both her authority and her wits and meet the smirking blue eyes straight on.

"Carnell." On her lips, the name was an odd blend of contempt and admiration.

"At your service, Madame President." He chuckled. "Oh, but that isn't quite right, is it? It's really rather the other way round, I'm afraid ... on both counts. You are in *my* service, and as of today, you have the honor of addressing the newly elected-by-council-mandate ... President Falco. At one time known as the brilliant, if discredited, psychostrategist Carnell. We have both been most eager to see you in action again. I must say, we weren't at all disappointed."

President Falco, was it? Well, at least now she knew who the adversary in question was. And the revelation, if not quite pleasing, was not precisely a disappointment either. Carnell had always been ... diverting.

"Where is Nils Arnak?" she demanded. "And Restal." A dozen more questions awaited answers, but she would deal with first things first. "I want them both brought here to me."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk." Carnell shook his head. "You really haven't been listening have you? Restal did a better job than even I suspected possible."

"What are you prattling about?! My ... *your* physicians have undoubtedly administered an antidote. The assassination attempt has failed."

"Not entirely." Carnell strolled toward her, and with no more regard than he might have had for a curled bit of rug, toed the corpse on the floor. "I should have thought *this* would precipitate your first question, but then I should have known better. Waking up beside a dead lover is hardly new to you, after all."

Though he intercepted with ease the blow she had aimed for his cheek, the look in her eyes was, she hoped, still enough to singe. The blond man's only response, however, was to loose her hand and turn away.

"All right," she conceded. "Suppose I indulge you to explain this little game you've so enjoyed. And with that out of the way, we can get down to business."

Her seductive smile had no overt effect; the former psychostrategist merely gazed at her coolly from the doorway, then withdrew something small and rectangular from an inner pocket of his cape.

"Restal's effort didn't entirely fail, I'm afraid." The lid of the small box he held snapped back to reveal twin compartments, one cradling a vial of milky fluid, the other a syringe. "And this, I'm not entirely sorry to say, is not an antidote. It merely prolongs the inevitable, as it were. The dosage will increase daily, but eventually, of course ..." He snapped the lid shut. "I should tell you that the formula is known only to me, and I, naturally, will control the supply."

Servalan accepted his gloating explanation without comment. She glanced down at the menial's stiff form and then, with deliberate calm, back to Carnell. She waited.

"Ah yes." Carnell tucked the syringe container away and made clucking sounds again in the back of his throat. "There were a few ... minor surgical modifications ... necessary in order to expedite your revival. The side effects are a trifle unpleasant, but as you have just ably demonstrated, well within your ability to handle. Some things never change."

She glared at him, waiting out yet another protracted silence. She had no doubt that there was yet another shoe to drop; Carnell would not be standing here still wearing that priggish grin if there were not.

He sobered abruptly, brushing an imaginary speck of lint from his sleeve, and cleared his throat. "Now, as to my terms ..."

So, here it was at last. Servalan lounged against the table and in her finest beguiling purr, said, "There's something you want."

Carnell feigned surprise. "I would dearly love to tell you that I'd gone to all this trouble just to gaze again upon your lovely face, but ..."

She forced back an urge to demand that he come to the point. This endless toying had been engineered to irritate her, and damned if she would let him know it had succeeded. Like many an enemy before him, like all men and the fools they invariably were, Carnell would enjoy this sordid wallowing in his new-found power over her -- but only until she found a way, as she had with all the others, to kill him, too.

"It seems I've inherited a small but irksome galactic rebellion," Carnell said lightly. "Something tangential to the one led by that Blake fellow you were so keen after. This one's led by a deviant named Vaylan -- I do believe it was one of his strongholds on Sekros you'd just suppressed when this little misfortune befell you? What you may not have known was that he escaped the planet -- and he took ORAC with him."

Servalan made a prolonged study of her index finger, curling and uncurling it in lazy arcs. "And you want ORAC," she said at last.

"No one man -- or woman -- will ever successfully cement the Federation without it. And your ... particular ... talents, by fortunate happenstance, are now perfectly suited to helping me retrieve it. Fortuitous, wouldn't you agree?"

The index finger flexed outward, stretching with its fellows toward him. "And what do I get?"

A flash of white teeth preceded the reply. "My word that our search for an antidote will be ongoing, a continuing supply of the prolongation serum... and a chance at Restal. You did say you wanted Restal ...?"

"And Arnak?"

"Met with an unfortunate accident the other day, poor chap. If I'd known he had any bargaining potential, I might have saved him for you. But really, I think my offer's more than generous as it is. Don't you?"

She retracted the outstretched fingers, bringing them dramatically to rest just over the low-cut cleavage of her gown. No man had ever overpowered her for long, but Carnell was admittedly cleverer than most. It would be interesting to see how *this* one played the game.

"Oh yes," she told him in falsely subdued tones. "More than generous."

She sealed the bargain with a prim smile.

* * *

"I don't suppose you could find something else to wear?"

Del Tarrant had begun to lose patience with his silent companion on *Mirage's* flight deck. Trienn looked up from her morose study of the floor, seeming to notice him for the first time, and scowled.

"I doubt if yours would fit," she grated. "Prison grey's not my color, anyhow."

Tarrant glanced from the too-familiar black of her loose-fitting uniform to his own rather threadbare tunic. When this escapade of Avon's was over, they would definitely have to raid a clothing supply somewhere.

"Well, at least I know you can still talk," he said. "I was beginning to think I'd gone deaf."

She looked away again, and another awkward silence stretched between them until almost inaudibly, she said, "Tell me how he died."

Taken aback by the request, Tarrant felt a surge of resentment irrationally tinged with jealousy. It didn't make sense, did it, to be jealous of a dead man? Particularly not when the dead man's wife accused you of his murder and had just tried to kill you.

Sullenly, he replied, "I already told you."

"Then tell me again." The demand was a drill team bark, officious and cutting.

Unintimidated, Tarrant merely shook his head. "There's nothing else to tell. Joram hit the ejection lever himself; he and the bomb he'd planned to destroy the troopship with took a short hike into deep space. I wish I could tell you I was sorry, but at the time ..."

The echoing chime of an alarm sliced across his speech. *Mirage's* dull feminine tones announced, †Ships approaching on epsilon and tau vectors. Hostile intent is apparent.†

Cursing, Tarrant swung back to the pilot's console. "Put them on screen!"

Four moving wedges of light materialized on *Mirage's* forward bulkhead. Simultaneously, the computer stated calmly, †No response on communications frequencies. Automatic defense program has been initiated.†

Tarrant had no idea what it meant by that, but there was no time to ask. Hands flying over the barely-familiar controls, he mapped out an escape route and three alternates, marginally aware that Trienn had melted into the seat beside him and quietly armed the ship's laser weaponry.

"Who are they?" she asked, and before Tarrant could answer, Vila and Avon arrived on deck, both asking the identical question.

"Not Federation ships," Tarrant said, cutting the alarm. "Out here, pirates most likely. Dastram is more or less in their neighborhood."

Avon swung to face the computer housing. "*Mirage* -- are we capable of repelling an attack by four of these vessels?"

†Defense program activated and running.†

"Whatever *that* means!" Vila moaned.

"I think we're about to find out." Tarrant nodded at the screen, where one of the four ships had begun an unmistakable attack run. "Better strap down and hang on."

While Avon and Vila hastily complied, Trienn checked a column of amber telltales and reported, "We have full shields and weapons charge. And something called a refractory, also at full power."

Tarrant caught the ghost of a smile on Avon's face, but turned his attention back to his own console. "Evasion pattern one, stand by."

The approaching ship fired a triple laser burst. Crimson light splayed out toward them. Tarrant shouted, "Activate!" and tripped three controls in rapid succession as their defense shields absorbed the blast and *Mirage* shuddered under the impact. The stars tilted crazily, the only indication of motion, but when they had stopped spinning, their restabilized image included the intrusion of two of the wedge ships.

Trienn shot Tarrant a jaundiced look. "I think they knew that one," she said.

Avon's warning came in two clipped words. "They're closing."

"Get ready to return fire." Tarrant recalibrated his board, keeping one eye on the screen all the while. "Pattern three, stand by."

"Shields," Trienn interjected, "96 percent."

Tarrant nodded. The red beams came at them from two sides now, but he stayed put, instinctively clutching at the console's edge when the deck shook beneath him.

"Shield absorption nine-zero-two," Trienn said crisply. "92 percent power."

Tarrant applied the thrusters to turn *Mirage* back toward her attackers. The four ships were maneuvering into a new -- and familiar -- attack pattern. In his brief career as a mercenary, he had often seen freetraders use it in running freighters to ground.

"Target starboard ships A and B, simultaneous bursts," he ordered. "We know what we can take. Let's see what we can give."

"Ready," Trienn confirmed.

"Fire."

Tight beams of golden light struck both moving targets amidships. Shields absorbing the energy with ease, both rolled and gracefully arced away, clearing a path for their fellows to attack in turn.

"Escape pattern three," Tarrant told the computer. "Execute, now."

Again, the stars performed an acrobatic inversion, and Vila paled and squeezed his eyes shut. Tarrant's smile at that faded promptly when *Mirage* levelled out to face three of the four pirate vessels.

Vila opened his eyes, took one look at the screen and groaned. "They knew *that* one, too."

While the three ships began a new attack run in tandem, *Mirage* stated coolly, "Refractory defense mechanism awaiting vocal authorization."

Tarrant stared at the blue plex housing in confusion. "What?"

"It wants permission --" Trienn started to say.

"Permission granted," Tarrant interrupted. "Whatever the hell it is, do it! And ready evasion pattern two while you're at it."

Three sets of triple red beams streaked toward them. *Mirage* rocked more violently as the shields began to weaken, and their adversaries, now joined by the fourth ship, circled to come in for yet another bombardment. Tarrant had been about to try returning fire yet again when *Mirage* said, "Refractory shields activating. Tactical display on subscreen two."

A brief, piercing power whine climbed up the scale and vanished into ultrasonics as *Mirage's* tacticals appeared below the image of the closing ships. Their own outline showed blue; the four pirates bright green. But as the power hum finished its crescendo, *Mirage's* blue silhouette fluttered and promptly dissolved. On the screen above, the four attacking ships suddenly broke formation, veered off, and reconvened, in obvious confusion, a few spacial away.

Tarrant flipped over one last toggle. "Execute pattern two," he ordered, and when the stars had completed their circuit and settled, for once, on empty space, he turned to address the computer directly. "And just what in the seven hells did you do?"

"Who the hell cares?" Vila put in beseechingly. "Can we just get out of here now -- please?"

Perhaps because Tarrant had failed to preface his question with its name, the computer feigned unawareness that it had been addressed, and merely pulsed blue light, waiting. Avon had risen to stride toward the screen, where a lone ship could now be seen drifting perpendicular to *Mirage's* course, part of an apparent search pattern.

"They've lost us," Tarrant marvelled aloud. "How is that possible? In the midst of a battle, just when they had us cold ... It's as though we'd just ... disappeared."

"Yes," Avon said unhelpfully. "Just as though."

"It's that widget you showed me inside the computer panel, isn't it?" Vila deduced with a touch of pride. "That refractory whatchamacallit ... you said it could cause invisibility."

"Rather a fascinating device," Avon said, musing at the wandering ships on the screen. "It should be interesting to further explore its possibilities."

"And what device is that?" Tarrant didn't try to hide his annoyance. One thing the years had not changed was Avon's tendency to be insufferably smug.

"Theoretical molecular particle refraction," the computer tech replied, making Vila's brows knit together. "Except that apparently, it is no longer theoretical."

"That theory applied to electronic sensor-deception," Trienn said. "These ships were well within visual range."

Avon folded his arms in answer and gazed at the perplexed quartet of ships fruitlessly reconnoitering the sector of space beyond them.

"Sensor and visual camouflage." Tarrant was impressed. "I really have underestimated you all these years, Vila. Just what kind of ship is it you've stolen?"

He had the distinct feeling that Vila's grin came from more than simple appreciation of the compliment. "Appropriated," the thief corrected, exchanging a decidedly cagey look with Avon. "And you've learned as much about her as we've done, up to now."

†Secondary stage prepared for activation,† *Mirage* volunteered, startling all of them.

It was Tarrant who broke the bewildered silence. "And what secondary stage is that, *Mirage*?"

He could have sworn the voice simulator sighed before responding. He must be getting tired. †Deception programming is on line,† she said, a bit less flatly than before, or was he imagining that, too? †Options are available on subscreen three.†

"Curiouser and curiouser," Tarrant quoted. "All right. Show us the options."

Another rectangle below the primary screen lit up with the numbered representations of a dozen ships arranged in three vertical columns. †Options set one of twenty-five,† *Mirage* said, and abruptly, the twelve outlines were replaced with twelve more. †Options set two ... †

"Hold there." Tarrant was on his feet, moving to join a fascinated Avon in front of the screen. "Is it saying what I think it's saying?" he asked of no one in particular.

"Probably." Avon poised an index finger, brought it down beside the image of an 800 kiloton battle cruiser, and said whimsically, "Try asking it for that one."

"*Mirage*," Tarrant said, not at all certain he was ready to believe this, "option thirteen VR-C7. The Maxillian battle cruiser."

Now there was no mistaking the cant in the computer's voice. †Option thirteen,† it breathed with definite inflection. †Program running.†

The power hum began anew, rising steadily.

"Reactivate tactical," Avon requested.

The voice that responded was suddenly flat and mechanical once more. †Tactical on subscreen two.†

Avon's eyes widened at the mercurial change in the computer's vocal circuitry, but he turned his attention, as the power usage whine peaked and dissipated, to the tactical readout, where *Mirage's* original form reappeared and shimmered briefly before reassembling into the tenfold image of the leviathan battleship.

The effect on their erstwhile hijackers was both immediate and satisfying. After an extremely brief period undoubtedly spent confirming that neither sensors nor eyes were deceiving them, all four pirate vessels turned a judicious tail and ran.

Laughter echoed in their wake on *Mirage's* flight deck.

"If I hadn't just seen it," Vila wondered, "I'd never have believed it. *Mirage*, do you really have twenty-five more like that?"

Toneless as before, the computer replied, †Current memory contains 300 options.†

"And what's the capacity for expansion?" Tarrant wanted to know.

The once-flat voice came to life in response to his own. †Our memory banks,† it recited cheerfully, †are expandable to a power of ten.†

Even Avon seemed impressed by that, but Tarrant had the uncomfortable feeling that everyone was looking at him for another reason altogether.

Vila wore a familiar and unmistakably lecherous grin. "I do believe she likes you, Tarrant."

Once, he would have responded with a curt 'Shut up, Vila,' but all he did now was to retake the pilot's seat and deprogram the board. "*Mirage*, deactivate deception circuit and prepare to resume course."

With all the dripping emotion of a vidscreen siren, the computer replied, †Deactivated and ready ... Tarrant.†

Trying valiantly to ignore the titters that answer had evoked from both Vila and Trienn, Tarrant stifled his own grin and set to work reinstating their course for Dastram.

He'd dealt with a number of doting females in his lifetime, but this one was a new twist if ever he'd heard one. He'd have to see about getting the thing reprogrammed.

Then again, after suffering an entire year with Slave insistently calling Avon 'master,' *Mirage* may just prove to be a somewhat refreshing change ...

* * *

"Oh, come now Dynus. Surely you're not *afraid* of Falco."

The cajoling voice accompanying the monitor image made Carnell's eyes glitter. Not even cryo-sleep and modification had changed her. Servalan remained as unswervingly devious, as beautiful -- and as deadly -- as ever she'd been.

"I'm not asking you to disobey orders ... precisely." The hapless crewman Dynus, assigned to deliver meals to her cabin, merely nodded uncomfortably at her assurance and managed a meager smile as she went on. "I'm simply looking for the answers to a few questions. Surely you know how many shuttles this ship carries?"

Carnell suppressed the urge to laugh aloud, though he was alone in the President's cabin. Scarcely one day out and already she was plotting to escape him. Never one for the fine art of gratitude, was Servalan.

Dynus's young voice came over the monitor's speaker, thready and nervous. "We carry two shuttles... ma'am." He'd backed steadily away from her advances until he stood with his back pressed firmly to the inner bulkhead: efficiently trapped prey, he was, with the spider between him and the only exit.

"And Restal..." She stroked his face with one long, slender finger. "What else has Falco said about him?"

Dynus's eyes were closed, his lips trembling. "Restal?"

"Falco knows where he is." She pressed herself closer. "I want to know, too."

He swallowed. Then, in a rush of words: "We're heading for Dastram to recover something called ORAC. That's all I really know -- it's all anyone knows."

She kissed him, and Dynus's stiff back melted a little against the wall.

"Oh but you've *heard* more, haven't you?" she said into his ear. "Tell me what you've heard."

Trembling, Dynus reached to embrace her, only to be rewarded with her coy withdrawal. She hovered a few feet away, patiently alluring.

"Well?"

"I ... I think he said something once about a man by that name. Some ship that was stolen from Sekros."

"*Mirage*."

"Yes, that was it. Restal is supposed to have it."

"And Falco thinks Restal is here, on Dastram?"

"He ... never mentioned ..."

"It could make sense. Coward or no, he might well want to take ORAC back from Vaylan. I *must* know if he is there, Dynus."

"But how ...?"

"You will find out for me." She waltzed away, confident now in her complete control. "And there is one other matter."

His eyes, filled with fear and ardor both at once, wordlessly entreated the rest of the command.

"Concealed somewhere in his cabin, Falco has a surgeon's kit containing a syringe, and a supply of a particular drug. You will obtain that for me as well."

At Dynus's timid nod, Carnell snapped off the monitor and sat back in his chair, hands folded with forefingers extended and drumming against each other. He had adequately covered all the probable contingencies, including the variable of her present ... condition. Yet with Servalan, one could never be entirely certain of a given outcome. The woman was unique, and creatively treacherous, a challenge even to the most adept psychostrategist. And he admired her tremendously.

His musings were interrupted, at length, by a soft knock at the cabin door. When it had opened at his bidding, Dynus sidled into the room to stand sloppily at attention. His eyes were still hazy with the lingering effects of her kiss.

"Sir," he said dully.

"Better than I thought," Carnell replied without preamble. "But commit the error of underestimating her, and it will be your last. She will keep you alive only so long as there is something to gain."

"Something in particular, Mr. President, being Restal?"

"Exactly."

"Is he really on Dastram, sir?"

"Four raiders from the neighboring system had a run-in yesterday with something matching *Mirage's* description. Its course trajectory was for Dastram. So we may conclude that in all probability, Restal is still with the ship and still looking for ORAC. You will proceed with our passenger as instructed. And when you steal the shuttle, Dynus, make it look convincing?"

"Yes, sir."

Carnell's forefingers twined around each other as he regarded the other man clinically. "You're a passable actor, Crewman Dynus. Perhaps you've missed your vocation."

Dynus flushed. "With your permission sir, it ... wasn't all an act, precisely. For a moment there, I think I would have told her anything. Anything at all." He cleared his throat, adding belatedly, "Sir."

The President tilted his head and grinned. "Exhilarating, isn't she?" The humor faded almost as promptly as it had appeared, and Carnell's pale eyes grew serious again. He drew a black medical pouch from a drawer and placed it on the desk in front of Dynus.

"You'll need that," he said. "And be certain the story you give her about it is convincing as well."

Nodding, Dynus quietly pocketed the container.

Carnell nodded in turn. "I think that will be all." But before the other man could turn away, he lifted a forestalling finger. "You do know about the arachnid species once popularly known as the black widow?"

Dynus frowned. Natural history was apparently not his subject. "Sir?"

"I would strongly suggest you read up on the topic." Carnell waved a dismissive hand toward the door. Dynus stiffened in salute, turned on his heel and was gone.

Only after the door had rattled shut did the President allow his smile to escape once again. "Not," he said to the room, "that it is likely to help ..."

* * *

Mirage's viewscreen was filled with Dastram's ocean-green sphere. Under most circumstances, it might have been considered an attractive planet, as ocean worlds went. But the last time they had come here, she'd been ringed with rebel ships in parking orbit. Today she was ship-free and radio silent, a state Vila Restal found equally disquieting.

"I don't much like the look of that." He had spoken those same words a hundred times before, on *Liberator*, on *Scorpio*, on *Xenon*. No one had listened to him then, either.

"I'm not getting any life readings at all," Tarrant said to Avon. "It looks as though this Vaylan fellow may have had some idea you were coming after all."

"Wait a minute ..." Trienn had been monitoring the sensor scan alongside Tarrant, and pointed a finger at one of the indicators. "There's a trace ... There! There it is again."

Avon came to stand beside the console, studying the read-out intently. "So there is someone alive down there."

"Rats, probably," Vila put in. "Look at it, Avon! The place is deserted."

Trienn looked dubious. "How could they evacuate an entire planet?"

"Easily," Avon replied, "if they knew the Federation were coming, and given sufficient time. The population was sparse and limited to a concentrated area of pedestal cities. There were more than enough ships in orbit to evacuate those communities."

"Well if they left because they knew the Federation were coming," Vila added sagely, "then I think we ought to do the same. Stormtroopers aren't what I'd call my favorite kind of people." He cast an afterthought glance at Trienn's uniform and said lamely, "Sorry." He wasn't, really, but there was no use antagonizing her, was there?

"*Mirage*," Tarrant said distinctly, "we're reading two life forms below. Can you specify type?"

Vila knew the pilot was sorry he'd asked the moment *Mirage's* honeyed tones responded, "By all means, Tarrant. The life forms are humanoid; one male with a temperature reading of 98.9°, the other female with interesting deficiencies in temperature reading which do not --"

"Thank you," Tarrant cut it off, and looked again at Avon. "It's unlikely that either of those is Vaylan. Are you sure you want to risk a look around?"

Avon glowered. "There are landing ports throughout the city, but they're equipped for little more than flyer traffic. We'll have to take one of the shuttles down."

"We?" Vila echoed miserably. He had a clear idea what was coming, but he had to ask anyway. "Who's going with you?"

Smiling in a way that had never made him popular with people, Avon clapped a hand on Vila's shoulder, evoking a startled flinch. "You are," the tech said crisply. "How very good of you to volunteer, Vila."

"It is? I mean, I did? Now wait just a minute, Avon, this is all very --"

Vila found his protests muted by the pressure of Avon's hand guiding him firmly toward the exit corridor. Some day he supposed he would learn that arguing with any of these people was a waste of energy and he would stop trying. But he doubted it.

His misgivings over this whole affair were not helped by the fact that the city in which they shortly docked was on the planet's night side. Vila had never been fond of the dark. He was enamored of it even less when the power generators were out and the place was deserted.

Sea wind, tasting of iodine and salt, ruffled their clothing the moment they'd stepped from the shuttle. Shivering, Vila tucked his hands beneath his arms and glanced out at the looming shadows of the landing port buildings. *Quiet as the tomb*, he thought, and then immediately wished that he hadn't. He rubbed his arms against the chill and followed Avon the rest of the way down the landing ramp, where the tech paused to consult a hand-held sensor. In the other hand, his gun kept the shadows at bay.

"I have both readings," he said, "but they are in separate buildings. One due east, the other northwest. I suggest --"

"No!" Vila intervened, already sure what the suggestion would be. "I'd really rather stay together, if it's all the same to you."

Avon turned toward him, a dark shape defined by blue halos from the light of twin half-moons. "It isn't," he said curtly, and his gun pointed toward the due east building. "Take that one. I'll meet you back here in half an hour."

"Avon, can't we --?" But the other man was already gone, heading northwest into the murk.

Vila scowled after him. "Miserable ingrate," he muttered. "See if I rescue you from certain death any time again soon."

Something moaned. Vila started and fumbled with the clumsy Federation blaster at his belt. The loud sigh came again, spurring his feet to action. He was half way across the tarmac before he realized it had only been the shuttle's radio dish, buffeted by the wind.

Hugging the blaster close at his side, he moved on toward the squat, round building Avon had indicated. Inset in its curving walls, a series of porthole windows gazed at him like multiple eyes, reflecting the moonlight. In one of them, the light flickered as though ... Wait a minute ...

Vila halted, squinting at the apparition. Moonlight didn't flicker, did it? A muffled crash made him shrink back against the nearest wall, only to creep closer again when the noise was repeated and identified: someone searching for something, and none too discreetly by the sound of it. The disturbance came, not surprisingly, from behind the window with the flicker. As he watched and waited, the noises ceased and the feeble light vanished to reappear moments later in the next room, where the frenzied search began anew.

He crept lightly into the corridor through an unlocked door, intending only to catch a glimpse of whoever-it-was (some Federation thug, most likely), then go back to tell Avon that it hadn't been Par Vaylan and couldn't they leave now, please? The door to the room under current siege stood ajar. Inside, two guttering candles filled the air with their hot, waxy odor and splashed agitated shadows on the walls. Vila peered around the doorframe at the figure preoccupied with emptying the cabinets in the one-time office. Somehow, he hadn't expected a woman. Then she turned enough to make her face visible in the dim light, and Vila's sharp intake of breath betrayed him.

"Vila." The voice was even crueler than he remembered it, the features more harshly defined. The gun trembled in Vila's hand, but his finger wouldn't squeeze the trigger

despite his mind's entreaty, nor would his feet obey the desire to run. She had straightened, the search forgotten, and was looking at him now the way a bird of prey watched a rabbit. "Or should I say 'Lorn?' That was the name you used when last we met."

Vila went rigid, amazed at the strength in his voice. "The name you used," he said bitterly. "And I should have known no poison could kill you. You've got more borrowed lives than Avon."

She looked puzzled at that, and the filmy bodice of her gown rose and fell with her breathing in a way that made Vila acutely uncomfortable. The heat of the candles seemed excessive all of a sudden, the small room unaccountably stuffy.

"But you tried, didn't you, Vila?" She came three steps toward him, and the black eyes, threatening to swallow him, held him pinned against the door.

Vila tried to breathe and found that, too, becoming difficult. "N... Nothing personal," he finally managed to stammer, only the jest fell on uncaring silence as she glided still nearer. One of the candles hissed and sputtered.

"And Avon lost his borrowed lives on Sekros," she said with confidence, and slipped comfortably into Vila's arms. He scarcely noticed the *thump* of the blaster striking the floor, and after that brief intrusive sound there was nothing at all but the touch, the taste, the smell of her, filling, completing and drawing him into herself. Somewhere far from here, an itinerant voice of reason warned that this was skewed somehow; her lust had always been for others, given men like Jarvik or Avon or Tarrant, Alphas all. For Vila there had never been any regard, save that contempt her class always held for his own. Shortly, though, he lost the thought in the pleasure of her lips, surprised for only an instant at how cold they were. He wondered fleetingly just what she had been searching for when he came in -- surely Vaylan had long since taken ORAC offworld -- but as she deepened the kiss, he promptly forgot that worry, too, and gave himself over to the all-encompassing sensuality of her embrace. There was nothing else to care about.

Nothing else existed.

* * *

The equipment room to which Avon's hand sensor had guided him appeared, upon one sweep of his torch, to be empty. Power generators lined the otherwise nondescript walls; conduit and cable seemed to rise and fall beneath the skittering beam of light, which had nearly returned to its starting point when the bulk of a primary turbine loomed into view, its main power line neatly severed by apparent blaster fire. No wonder the two remaining inhabitants were sequestered in the dark.

A faint scraping alerted him that someone was indeed here; his gun and the torch both swung to face the noise, finding bare wall and an ominous smear of red trailing down toward... a man in Federation uniform. He sat propped against the damaged generator, blood staining the front of his black tunic a grisly magenta. When the light struck him, he moaned and tried to turn away.

Avon aimed the light, though not the gun, away and knelt beside the wounded man. "Where is Vaylan?" he demanded. "Where has he gone? Tell me!"

Blake's spectre bridled at his lack of compassion, but he mentally pushed it away. There was no room for sentiment now, no time for anything but the practicality of locating ORAC before all trace of it was gone.

"... couldn't stop her," the man on the floor said weakly, and his eyes tried unsuccessfully to focus on Avon. "Followed the instructions. Everything you said. I hid the drug in 22B ... flight quarters. She'll be looking for it."

"She?" Understanding none of this, Avon put a hand to the man's shoulder, willing him to rally long enough to answer. "It is vital that you tell me where Vaylan has gone! Do you hear me?"

The dying man drew in a ragged breath. "You never told me what she was," he rasped. "Doesn't want bright light. Not even a torch. Side effect ... She'll be there when he comes. Waiting for him."

The taut muscles under Avon's hand convulsed once and then went slack as the trooper's head fell to one side. With a silent curse, Avon left the body on the floor and went in

search of Vila and the only other hope of ORAC's recovery, whoever she may be.

Three echoes haunted him across the windswept flyer landing.

She'll be there when he comes. Waiting for him.

Mirage had attempted to report an anomaly in the temperature reading of the female humanoid...

And long before that, Blake's soft voice had warned, *Take care, Avon. Some of the dead are still among the living.*

He quickened his pace toward the round building.

The glimmer of light in one of the windows precluded his need of the hand sensor. He hastened through the open door and down a curving corridor, coming quickly abreast of the door from which the feeble light spilled. Care guarded his movement, gun first, into the room, but no amount of caution had prepared him for the macabre scene he found there. Under other circumstances, he might have thought it amusing; *Servalan* in sordid dalliance with a Delta grade thief. But this had far more the look of something ... inhuman ... and deadly.

They lay together on the narrow bed, clothes and sleeping linen both in disarray, and neither had noticed his arrival amidst the feverish pace of their lovemaking, if it could be called lovemaking. To Avon it looked more like vistapes he had seen of certain blood-feeding mammals dining on live prey.

He took careful aim at the wall just beside her and fired.

At the flash of the blaster's nearby impact, she screamed and leaped from the bed, letting a dazed Vila fall away. Avon tracked her with the gun. When she turned back to glare at him, its muzzle was pointed unerringly at her heart.

"Avon."

He acknowledged the vitriolic whisper of his name in like manner. "*Servalan*."

"You're dead." She drew herself up sternly, commanding in spite of her disheveled clothing. "I saw you die on *Sekros*."

"That's odd. I had the same report of you. You're rather remarkably animated, for a corpse."

"Avon..." She started toward him in spite of the gun's threat, eyes deep and pleading and reflecting gold tongues of candle flame. He felt his hold on the weapon slip ever-so-slightly, receding as she advanced, and just as suddenly, it no longer mattered at all.

"Avon..." That voice had not belonged to her. "Avon, no!"

Vila's shout made him bring the gun back into play, but she did not halt her determined advance. Instead, she reached out to him and in hideous parody of Blake's final moments, said, "I've been waiting. But that is over now. Now I will have *both* of you." Her eyes bore into him, and Avon felt his resolve once more begin to weaken.

"Shoot her," Vila's voice pleaded from behind him. "She's going to kill both of us -- damn it, Avon, *pull the trigger!*"

The eyes promised him warmth and passion, slender hands offered the waiting pleasure of their touch...

Some of the dead are still among the living.

Blake had known. Blake had warned him.

He broke contact with the eyes, ignoring her cry of protest. He saw her stumble backward, uncertain now, as he brought the gun up level with her chest.

"Do it, Avon." Vila's voice was hoarse and quavering. "Do it now!"

With an oath, Avon slapped at the setting control on the weapon and fired. *Servalan* tumbled away from him, striking one of the ransacked cabinets as she folded, like a child's doll, into an ungraceful heap on the floor.

Vila found enough courage to leave the bed then, gathering the shreds of both dignity and clothing around him. "Is she ...?"

Avon shoved the gun at him and walked toward the unmoving figure on the floor. Vila noted the blaster's adjusted setting and frowned. "You can't ever do it, can you? In spite of everything you've said, you can't ever really kill her."

Avon shot him a condescending glare. "Don't be an idiot."

"Better a live idiot than a dead genius," Vila fired back. "That's two you owe me, Avon."

"I wasn't aware we were keeping score."

Vila came to stand beside him, sobering abruptly at the sight of the unconscious Servalan. "Why?" he asked quietly.

"She is our only remaining link with ORAC. If anyone knows where Vaylan has gone ..."

"ORAC," Vila snorted. "That pompous little plastic pain-in-the-arse has cost me more--"

"Vila--"

"What?"

"Shut up and help me get her to the shuttle."

"The...? You're going to take her aboard the ship? Aboard *Mirage*? Tarrant isn't going to like that."

"Well now, that's a pity." Avon lifted Servalan's dead weight from the floor and placed her firmly in Vila's arms. "Put her in restraint. I'll be along in a moment."

Vila shuddered under his burden and glowered at him. "And where are you going?"

"To retrieve something from cabin 22B. I won't be long. I'm sure your ... talents ... are more than adequate to handle things until I arrive."

Reclaiming his torch, he turned and walked into the shadows of the hall. Vila's grumbling receded behind him. "Thank you, Avon. Thank you very much ..."

* * *

The President's flagship broke its cover from behind the radio shadow of Dastram's first moon only after *Mirage* had rendezvoused with its shuttle and slipped out of orbit into deep space.

The bridge crew waited for Falco's instructions, watching the viewscreen in anticipation. "Do we follow, sir?" one of the pilots finally queried.

The president leaned back in the captain's chair. "In good time, Garrett, in good time. Give them a sporting head start -- and then stay out of sensor range."

Garrett subsided with a respectful nod, leaving Falco/Carnell to smile at the stars in anticipation. The audio-sensor implanted as part of the modification surgery had done its job well, and would continue to do so. This venture could prove be intriguing as well as profitable.

Carnell accepted a drink from the tray his valet proffered, and sipped the chilled wine contemplatively.

To the unseen and unsuspecting ship fleeing before them he lifted his glass and said, "I do so enjoy a *sporting* game ... Servalan. Don't you?"