

BLAKE

by
Peter Anghelides

BLAKES



Based on the original teleplay by Chris Boucher **EW**



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FRONTIER WORLDS
Publications

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PROLOGUE

"Avon," Jenna was saying. "Could you kill someone? Face to face, I mean."

He looked up from the teleport console and stared at her, framed in the doorway which led to the flight deck. "I don't know. Could you?"

"There's one sure way of finding out," she replied.

"I might be able to help you," said a voice in his head, and he peered over the console at a slim girl in red who stood clutching a laser rifle.

"Well, make up your mind," snapped Blake, standing four feet further off, his back to her, and dragging one foot slowly through the sand.

"What do you want to know?" asked the girl.

Blake turned to face her. "Let's start with who you are."

"Cally. My name is Cally." with one swift movement she had whirled to her right, the rifle pointed unerringly at a stooped figure as it appeared over the nearest sand dune.

"No need for belligerence, pretty lady," said Vila, his hands raised. "I'm armless." He looked at Blake. "Quick, isn't she?"

"Is he one of your crew?" Cally held the rifle as steady as a rock.

"One of them," nodded Blake.

"And he's useless, as he said." Avon had stood up from the cover of the teleport console, and now moved over the sand towards the newcomer. "I've had a gun on you the whole time. You were dead as soon as you broke cover. How do you come to be telepathic?"

"My people are the Auronar."

"And they are telepathic?"

"And quick," Cally answered. "I would not have died alone."

"Die?" babbled Vila. "I can't do that."

Avon smiled sardonically. "I'm afraid you can. It's the one talent we all share, Vila. Even you." He looked back at Cally.

"Don't send me back into the dark, Avon," said the creature with Cally's face.

"I want to live."

"Who rescued me?"

At this, Avon looked off to his left and spotted Tarrant lying on the ground. "You were injured trying to rescue Cally." He nodded at Vila. "He rescued you. Suddenly I'm hip deep in heroes."

Tarrant frowned, looking round. "Where is Cally?"

"Cally is dead," said Avon.

"Are you sure?" persisted Tarrant.

"Yes I'm sure."

"He went back in," said Dayna, and put down the laser rifle she was carrying.

"You wanted to be a hero too?"

Avon ignored the deeper question in Tarrant's words, and lifted a familiar box of flashing lights to waist level. "We needed Orac."

"Who designed Orac?" asked Dorian from where he was sitting on the couch behind Avon.

"His name was Ensor."

"I should have known," nodded Dorian. "He was never a gracious man. It reflects his personality."

"Orac was the culmination of his life's work. He bequeathed it to a friend of mine, who bequeathed it to me."

Dorian leaned back in his seat and sailed casually at the group in front of him. "After what you've been through, you couldn't fail to care for each other. Even you Avon."

"Spare me the amateur psychology."

"I wouldn't expect you to admit it. But you belong to them, Avon, just as they belong to you."

Was it his imagination, or was Dorian suddenly looking much older? Avon heard himself muttering, "We stand a better chance as a group," and felt a momentary giddiness, and staggered. When he had regained his clear vision again, he looked up from where he had fallen. Where Dorian had been standing there was now a small girl in black, with high-piled blonde hair. When she spoke, she addressed neither Avon

nor his companions, who were pinioned next to him on the floor. "would you like to have a few words with our friend before he goes?" asked Cancer.

"Oh yes," said a silky voice, and a vision in white moved into his line of sight. "I couldn't let him go without saying goodbye... Avon."

"Servalan."

"I think," she murmured, "I would prefer my slave to address me as 'mistress.'" She leaned over him, frowning teasingly. "Avon, you're not sulking I hope."

"I'm full of admiration for your brilliance. This was all a set-up from the beginning, I take it."

"Oh yes. And you co-operated beautifully."

Servalan's explanation continued no further as a plume of smoke enveloped her and she vanished before Avon's eyes. Dayna struggled free from what remained of her bonds. She holstered her smoking clipgun. "I almost had her," she snapped angrily, freeing Avon from his restraints. "I almost had her!"

"Almost is never good enough."

Tarrant was getting to his feet too. "It was Servalan all right."

"I hope so," said Avon as he rubbed his chafed wrists. "I didn't want her to die like that. I needed to kill her myself."

Dayna's eyes flashed fire. "Get out of my way, Avon."

He looked at her sadly. "I relied on other people."

"Don't you get tired of always being right?" she responded.

"Only with the rest of you always being wrong," was his reply as the teleport effect engulfed them.

They stepped forward from the teleport area and into the SCORPIO flight deck.

"It's a trip I won't forget, Avon."

"Well as you say, Vila - you know you're always safe with me."

"Cheer up, Vila," laughed Dayna as they took their flight positions. "You've got a number of very bright associates."

"Oh yeah?" he sneered. "Name six."

"What are you doing on my ship?" asked Tarrant's voice.

Avon looked across at the pilot's position and saw Nova. The young prisoner's face lit up eagerly. "I want to help."

"Can you fly this ship?" Avon asked, but now he was speaking to Tarrant.

"Well, it's just a Wanderer Class planethopper," replied Tarrant from his place in the pilot's position. "Mark II by the look of it. Obsolete but functional."

"I want it flown, not catalogued," said Avon crisply.

"No problem."

"One problem," said Dorian's voice from behind Avon. "It belongs to me."

"You really are insane, aren't you?" said Avon, turning to look at him.

"That's possible," agreed Blake, standing across the room from him, the LONDON's computer separating them. "They butchered my family and my friends. They murdered my past and gave me tranquillised dreams."

"At least you're still alive," said Jenna softly.

"No!" roared Blake, grasping the computer as though for support. "Not until free men can think and speak. Not until power is back with the honest man."

Avon allowed a smile to flicker on his face. "Have you ever met an honest man?"

"Perhaps," said Jenna, looking to Blake.

Avon was impatient. "Listen to me. Wealth is the only reality. And the only way to obtain wealth is to take it away from somebody else. Wake up, Blake. You may not be tranquillised any more, but you're still dreaming."

"Maybe some dreams are worth having," said Jenna, her quiet voice contrasting with the intensity of Avon's.

"You don't really believe that?"

"No. But I'd like to."

Avon threw his gaze back to Blake. "Don't try and manipulate me, Blake."

"Now why should I try and do that?"

"You need my help."

"Only if you can open the doors."

"I could open every door, blind all the sensors, knock out the security overrides and control the computer. Control the computer and you control the ship."

Blake smiled at him. "Then I do need your help."

"Give me one good reason why I should help you."

"You promised," said a frail voice by his feet. He looked down and saw Nebrox clutching his thin, grubby hands together in supplication. "You promised."

Avon looked up again and towards the yellow-brown globe of flickering lights in the Zen computer. "All this technology has an organic feel about it. It's not just advanced, it's..."

"Conceptually alien?" suggested Blake.

"It didn't answer any of your questions. More than that, it deliberately ignored them. A computer can't have a will of its own."

Jenna gave a small laugh. "You'd better tell Zen that."

Avon threw a look of despair towards her, but saw only Dayna. "Why call a computer Slave?" she asked Blake.

Avon turned to see what his answer would be, but saw Dorian now standing next to the Slave computer. "A joke, I suppose."

"Someone has a very expensive sense of humour," observed Avon.

"Everything has its price, Avon," he smiled back. "You have to decide whether you want to pay or not, that's all." He nodded towards Soolin, who held her clipgun aimed unshakingly at Vila's head. "She was taught by the best."

"The second best, actually," Avon heard the blonde girl say from behind him.

"Of course," said Dorian. "You killed him, didn't you?"

"You know what they say," said Avon, turning round again lazily. "No good deed goes unpunished."

He was looking at Travis, who held his laseron destructor aimed unshakingly at Blake's head. "What do you think I'm going to do?"

"I think you're going to kill me," answered Blake calmly, his face lit eerily by the flickering lights of the LIBERATOR flight deck.

"I've studied that man till I know him better than I know myself," said Travis softly and dangerously. "He has one reliable flaw: loyalty." He moved across to Jenna.

Blake looked up above him at the furthest flight control, and Avon followed his gaze. "They killed my woman," said Gan, and placed his head in his hands.

"Why didn't Zen warn us?" sighed Blake, looking to where Travis held Jenna by both arms in a vice-like grip.

"I think he tried to," she said.

Avon sat down at the front flight console. "You're not counting that machine as a member of the crew?"

"To be completely known," whispered Jenna, suddenly oblivious to the person holding her. "It's like... innocence."

"Welcome, Jenna Stannis," boomed the Zen computer.

Raiker released Jenna's arms and slapped her hard across the face. "You'll come round," he spat at her. "I can be very persuasive." Then he moved off to stand beside the Zen computer's fascia, his arms folded.

Cally had reacted to the blow across her face, and whirled to confront her assailant. "May you die alone and silent."

Avon stared at her, and then smiled. "You look so beautiful when you're angry."

She returned the smile. "He who trusts can never be betrayed, only mistaken."

Servalan's voice filtered down from the top of the flight deck. "I'd have thought you'd be the last person to be taken in by a pretty face."

But Avon was still listening to Anna. "I let you go, my love."

Gan's voice broke into his reverie, and he looked up at the far console: "I'm not worth dying for."

"Run Blake," hissed Travis. Avon watched him as he unfolded his arms and moved round from the Zen computer until he stood beneath the main viewing screen. "Run. As far and as fast as you like. I'll find you. You can't hide from me. I am your death, Blake." His face seemed suddenly to fill the viewing screen, growing larger and larger until the one malevolent eye blotted out the stars.

Avon lunged forwards to the weapons control and cleared the neutron blasters for operation. Then he stabbed down on the activation button, his eyes glaring wildly at the screen: "Fire!"

On the third shot, he awoke screaming, and it was morning in his room on Xenon.

ONE Zukan's last laugh

Responding willingly to the familiar ease with which her crew manipulated the controls, SCORPIO turned slowly on her launch platform amid the brilliance of a myriad flashing lights, and then vanished through the hold's ceiling as the hydraulics powered the ship into launch position. Then, as a cloud of dust heralded her departure, the yellow slab of the ship shot suddenly into the morning air of Xenon through the narrow mountainside exit, powered rapidly into the blue sky as the rear engines belched fire.

"All main drives and boosters running."

But unexpectedly, in the opening in the sheer rock face, a high explosion showered the recently vacated platform with incandescent sparks which rolled and vanished off the side to be replaced themselves by others cascading down. Another burst of flame saw the huge hydraulic platform tip and then, like a wounded animal, keel over and topple into the massive drop to the base itself. The complex emitted its death throes, and a sheet of lightning was thrown from the mountainside.

"All explosive devices have functioned correctly, master," the Slave computer informed Avon, who stood surveying his gloomy companions on SCORPIO's control deck. "The base complex has been totally destroyed."

"Thank you Slave."

Vila looked up from his flight seat at Avon, who didn't seem particularly grateful. "I never really liked that place anyway."

"Especially not when the wine ran out," observed Soolin from behind him.

Dayna unlocked her seat harness and felt for the reassuring bulk of the hefty clipgun at her side. "You know, I still don't think Zukan told the Federation."

Vila saw Tarrant flinch, and tried to cover it. "About the wine?"

Dayna gave an incomprehending hiss of exasperation. "About the location of the base."

"Why not?" snapped Tarrant, slouched low in the pilot's seat. "Wouldn't you expect someone who could betray his own daughter to betray everything else?" He stared plainly at Avon.

Avon declined the challenge. Within hours of Zeeona's death, he had insisted that Tarrant assist with the departure arrangements, and now none of the crew were feeling much refreshed after a fitful night's sleep. "If Zukan didn't betray us," he told Dayna, "one of the others will - sooner or later."

"Sooner, definitely," agreed Soolin, rising from her seat and moving down the flight deck. She couldn't resist niggling Avon. "Your anti-Federation alliance wasn't worth spit without Zukan."

"A slight exaggeration."

"You think so?"

Avon looked at her as though for the first time. "Nobody is indispensable."

Soolin was undeterred. "You needed a figurehead and he was it. Or am I wrong?"

"You are right," said Avon calmly, pacing the room in front of them all and then back towards the pilot's console. "But then, figureheads aren't too difficult to come by. Any idiot can be one."

Dayna gave a short laugh. "On your feet, Vila. This could be your big moment."

"Any idiot within reason, that is."

Tarrant sat up in his seat. "Are you going to tell us what we've got planned, Avon?"

Vila threw up his hands as though in despair. "We know what we've got planned. Running away is what we've got planned."

"A 'strategic withdrawal' is what we've got planned," clucked Dayna disapprovingly.

"There's a difference?"

"Oh yes," said Tarrant with heavy irony. "A strategic withdrawal is running away - but with dignity."

"So lay in a course," Vila shouted back at him, "and let's get the dignified hell out of here." He objected to being questioned as an expert on the topic.

"That isn't the plan any more," Tarrant was saying, but eliciting no response.

"Is it Avon?"

"I think we can do better."

"Does that mean safer?" There was hope momentarily in Vila's face, and he glanced

at Avon.

"In the end, winning is the only safety."

"It doesn't mean safer," decided Vila gloomily. "I didn't think it would."

Tarrant eyed Avon suspiciously. "So what does it mean?"

Avon wasn't divulging everything at once. If it was dangerous to let the enemy know your plans, letting your allies anticipate them could be worse. It wasn't usually his policy to trust. "I think we can find ourselves a figurehead," he said at length. "Someone we can use to unify and expand the rebel factions alliance."

"Just like that," said Soolin with mock conviction.

"More or less." She hadn't survived their fights with the Federation without coming to understand how Avon organised their group; but then, she hadn't won the victories Avon had as a reluctant rebel, only suffering an increasingly discouraging number of defeats or deflections. Avon credited her with enough sense than not to doubt him. When it came to trust, Avon was the exception that proved the rule. Avon flicked a glance towards Vila. Who could he trust himself? "This figurehead," he went on, "is strongly identified with rebels, you see. And very good with rabbles. They will follow him. And he will fight - to the last drop of their blood." He had their full attention, and allowed himself the luxury of a half-mocking smile. "Idealism's a wonderful thing. All you really need is someone rational to put it to proper use."

"Someone like you," said Dayna, as though she weren't really convinced.

Tarrant was still worrying away at Avon, unsettled by his calm mastery of the group. "So where do we find this useable idealist?"

"According to Orac," said Avon, "he is on a frontier planet called Gauda Prime."

Tarrant was not getting the response he wanted, but the effect on Soolin was rather more obvious. "Gauda Prime?" She was tensed like a coil.

"You know it?" asked Tarrant.

"Yes, I know it. It's a bad place to be. No self-respecting idealist would be found dead there."

"I imagine," said Avon in a level voice, "that is what he is trying to avoid. Being found dead anywhere."

"Now look." Tarrant's patience, always on a short rein, had snapped. "Are you going to stop playing games and tell us who it is, Avon?"

But Vila was well ahead of him, having listened with a growing awareness to the conversation going on around him. "It's Blake, isn't it?" he said suddenly. "You think you've found Blake."

Dayna was unsure whether to dismiss this as one of Vila's increasingly frequent bouts of drunken rambling or to worry about Avon's reasoning. "But Servalan told us he was dead."

"And you believed her?"

"She had no reason to lie, Avon."

"She doesn't need one. It comes quite naturally to her. Like breathing."

At last Tarrant thought he had Avon cornered. "Last time you went running after Blake, it was a trap. We were lucky to get out."

"Cally didn't get out," said Vila softly.

"And Blake wasn't even there," declaimed Dayna with finality. "Never had been."

Avon faced them all. "Do you take me for a fool?"

Soolin looked at him as though she was seriously considering the possibility.

"Only a fool would go to Gauda Prime without a very good reason."

Avon whirled to face Orac, who was flickering through sequences of calculations behind him, tied securely to a console. "Orac. What proof do we have that Blake is on Gauda Prime?"

The whining background hum intensified, and the reedy familiarity of Orac's querulous voice answered, "That is where his trail ends."

"What trail?" countered Tarrant, who was a little irritated that the computer usually only gave the straight answers to Avon. "Explain."

"The chain of cause and effects amounts to a trail," said Orac testily. "If you can follow it."

"I can't even follow you," moaned Vila, who had long ago realised that the best way to obtain Orac's help was to pretend to dismiss its abilities.

Orac duly responded. "Everything has an effect on everything else around it. It

is not easy to trace a line through the pattern of infinity. But in this case, I have. Blake," he concluded triumphantly, "is on Gauda Prime."

"How long have you known?"

Avon looked up at Tarrant's question, and stared at a spot on the flight deck wall with disinterest. "Long enough."

Dayna looked wide-eyed. "Before Zukan?"

"Oh yes. And the answer to your next question is yes, I would have left Blake where he was and said nothing if things had gone according to plan."

"Oh, I must try and work that into the conversation when we meet him," said Tarrant acidly.

"If we meet him," said Vila.

Soolin moved across to Vila and leaned on the back of his chair. "Still not convinced?" she asked, nodding her head of golden hair towards Orac.

"You tell me what a line through the pattern of infinity is," replied Vila, "and I'll tell you whether I'm convinced or not."

The figure sat drinking in the wrath of the fire in the clearing between the huge, straight pines, preparing to cook the animal he had recently trapped, killed and skinned. But the sound of a dry twig snapping near at hand made him look up, the firelight in the dying evening reflecting eerily off his curly mop of dirty brown hair and showing up the few days' growth of stubble covering his lower face. But more strangely still, it accentuated the whiteness of the livid scar that half-closed the left eye in its arching progress up the face, showing up lighter amid the brown tan and dirt. The two eyes, nevertheless, were hawk-like and searching.

The wind whistled softly amid the tops of the pines around him, and looking about he could see no-one who could have been making the previous disturbance. Casual outwards, he snapped another branch over his knee and added it to the fire before positioning the animal in a crude wooden spit arrangement over the encouraged flame. This done, he rose slowly and moved over to the nearest tree, his back flattened against it.

"Whoever you are, I'll share the food. So long as you stop skulking about out there." He waited for a reply. "You're not exactly stealthy are you?" he added. "I've heard quieter troop transporters."

"You're looking in the wrong direction," sneered a soft voice nearby, the voice of a woman. A petite, dark-haired girl stepped out of cover from the trees behind him, and moved into view on the other side of the fire. The flickering light showed her to be a young woman, though not without a hint of cruelty in her face.

"I know," said the man. "But at least you're out in the open now - aren't you?" He adopted a faintly mocking tone despite the good view he had of the girl's threatening sidearm, pointed unwaveringly at him despite its weight.

"If this is a trap, you won't live to see it sprung."

"Where did you get that gun?"

The girl was evidently in no mood for counter-questions. "I won it in a lottery. What do you care?"

"I don't. So long as it wasn't issued to you."

"It's Federation," she explained simply.

"That's what I mean." He thrust his hands into his baggy trouser pockets and leaned more casually against the tree.

"Do I look like one of theirs?" The girl's aim followed him as he moved towards the animal cooking over the fire.

"I can't really tell any more," he said distantly. "Are you hungry?"

The girl's eyes betrayed her, and she knew it. "Yes."

"So am I," he said, and took out a knife from his heavy, sleeveless overcoat. Seeing her grip tighten on the Federation weapon's barrel, he held the knife in clear view and sliced off a piece of the tough, stringy meat. The girl moved towards the fire and put down her gun.

Her opponent studied her as she devoured the slices he passed her with a ravenous intensity. "Do you treat all the people you meet with such suspicion?"

"I thought I was being followed by a group of bounty hunters," she mumbled through another mouthful. "Why should I make it easy for them?"

"Are you sure they were bounty hunters?"

She gave a short, harsh laugh. "Well, it's not my irresistible charm that keeps 'em coming."

"How long have they been tracking you?"

She looked at him with suspicion. "You ask a lot of questions."

"Try answering one occasionally," he replied flatly, "and maybe I'll stop."

She set down the bone at which she'd been gnawing, now picked clean of meat, and took out a small handgun. "I've got a better idea." She kicked the larger weapon she had first brandished with her left foot. "Thank you for the food. You can keep the Federation gun as payment."

"There's no charge."

Her eyes flashed anger. "Arlen pays her debts."

The man nodded calmly. "I'll keep the gun."

Arlen nodded, and started away from the fire slowly, backing off and keeping her gun levelled cautiously at the receding figure of the seated man. Reaching what she considered to be a safe distance, she spun round and made to run - but a dark figure was blocking her way. A fur-clad man, grimy and leering unpleasantly, had leapt from the cover of a nearby tree, and was preparing to grab her. With scarcely a blink, Arlen repositioned her handgun and fired. The man was thrown backwards, an unbelieving look frozen on his dead face.

A cry made her turn - two more figures were hurrying between trees and through the undergrowth towards her - two more bounty hunters. As the first one cleared the circle of trees and reached the exposed area where Arlen stood, the dark-haired girl released another shot which took her first attacker squarely in the chest and dumped him unceremoniously on the ground, dead before he hit earth. The second was faster, repositioning himself with practised ease and loosing a shot at her which ripped into her left leg. It had been a precise shot, and it spun her to the ground, her gun bouncing just beyond her reach. As her killer moved in for the attack, Arlen reached in vain for the handgun, tantalisingly just centimetres from her outstretched fingers, but she looked up at the sound of another shot in time to see the bounty hunter falling with a gaping hole in his back. The scar-faced man had moved nearer, his newly-acquired gun still soaking.

"Give me my gun and get down quick!" Arlen hissed at him. "I think there were four of them tracking me."

"There were," said the man, inclining his head. "And then there was one."

Realisation appeared on the girl's face. "You scum."

"Don't bother calling me names, girl," he warned. "Not after the killing you've done." Seeing her renewed efforts to seize the handgun, he extended one foot and kicked the weapon far from her fingers. "There's a premium for bringing you back alive, but I'll kill you if I have to. The price for you dead isn't bad." He levelled the gun again. "I'm not a greedy man."

Within minutes, they were moving off through the trees in the failing light, heading towards where the bounty hunter had left his transport. As it was some distance, he had snapped off a long firm branch from one of the pines, and thrown it to Arlen, along with a short length of rope to bind her bleeding leg. Thus they made limping progress onwards.

Even so, the girl was clutching the branch closer and closer to her, and eventually stopped with an agonised gasp. Her captor halted just behind her, and realigned the Federation gun. "How much further to your flyer?" asked Arlen without turning. There was no reply. "I can't walk any further."

"Yes you can."

"Why don't you just kill me?" she went on wearily.

"I told you," he replied with impatience. "You're worth more alive."

As if provoked, Arlen suddenly whirled round on her right leg and, with a mighty effort, hefted the large branch over her head and towards the man. He had been anticipating such a move, however, and merely stepped aside to allow her to crash heavily on her face on the forest floor, the branch rolling harmlessly aside itself.

Ignoring her wincing of pain, the scar-faced man pointed the stubby gun at her again, clamping his other hand down on his wrist to steady the point blank aim.

"Get up, girl," he said, harshly.

"Arlen," she gasped, rolling off her left side. "My name is Arlen."

"That's the name they're paying for."

"That's right," she spat at him venomously, clutching at the bloody mass of her leg. "I made them pay for it. So use it, scum."

"Blake," said the man suddenly, wondering whether his captive would react. "My name is Roj Blake."

Then he hoisted her to her feet with one heave on her right arm, and she stumbled against him with a gasp. And then they made their way through the pines towards the bounty hunter's flyer.

TWO Sparks fly

Vila rolled the last dregs of his vitazade and spulo around the bottom of his glass before draining them away, and feeling the effervescence linger at the back of his throat. "I can't see Blake doing anything like that," he said.

Orac was rarely willing to break off from his personal considerations to answer tedious questions, but when he did he liked even less to have what information he had deigned to provide subsequently questioned. "My interpretation of the facts leaves little margin for error," he announced huffily.

Vila was still shaking his head. "Hunting people for money? Not him."

"Avon?"

Avon looked right through Tarrant. "why ask me?"

"Because," said Dayna with a long-suffering look, "you and Vila know him. we don't." And with that simple matter cleared up she went on: "Could he be a bounty hunter, d'you think?"

"Does it matter?"

"It might," persisted Tarrant. "There's still a price on our heads from the old days." As a mercenary himself, he thought he could see the sense in that. Why couldn't Avon. Or perhaps more importantly, why didn't Avon.

Soolin was smiling to herself ironically. "You'll find the old days don't seem too important on G.P."

More puzzles, thought Vila. "G.P.?"

"I imagine that is what the locals call Gauda Prime," he heard Avon reply. "Your home planet." He was speaking to Soolin, but it was a statement, not a question.

"I grew up there," said Soolin, and the smile had long since vanished. "But for a home you need a family, and mine were murdered when the Federation declared Gauda Prime an Open Planet."

Avon nodded. "A general suspension of the penal code."

"You mean there's no law at all?" asked Dayna, unsure whether to be delighted or horrified at the prospect.

"It's the fast way to get resources exploited," explained Soolin, her voice soft and faraway. "In this case, mineral resources."

It was perhaps because they were both orphans, or simply just both women in a world still dominated by men, that Soolin and Dayna had spent a lot of time as mutual confidantes. Cally's loss helped Dayna understand the immediate loss of Dorian for Soolin, who knew the trauma Dayna had faced losing Justin. In many ways, they had never had any other true confidences. Their companionship meant a mutual understanding surpassed by few they had ever known. And Dayna knew almost instinctively that Soolin was vulnerable as a visitor to Gauda Prime. "Can you explain?" she asked quietly. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I," called across Vila. "How does junking the law speed up mining?"

Soolin darted him a look, but spotted the empty glass on his console. "Gauda Prime was an agricultural world," she said. "The settlers were sent there to grow crops, raise timber. They were farmers, my family among them. They were given title to the land."

"And then someone discovered there was more profit under the ground than on top of it," continued Avon. "Only the farmers were in the way and the law was on their side. Hence," he ended rather apologetically, "the Open Planet designation."

"What, get rid of the law and you get rid of the problem?" Tarrant was appalled. Then he looked at Avon suspiciously. "You seem to know a lot about it."

"Orac," said Avon quietly, "is an excellent research tool. Do you imagine I would take us in blind?"

"You've done it before."

Dayna had no time for another of their increasingly frequent squabbles. She

touched Soolin's arm gently. "What happened to your family?"

"When the mining corporations moved in, the farmers moved out. Those that didn't were murdered."

"And it wasn't even a crime," said Vila brightly.

"Oh yes, it was a crime all right," said Soolin with unexpected harshness. "It just wasn't illegal."

"That's what I meant."

Soolin looked directly at him. "I hope so."

"The planet must have been a draw for every crook and killer in the quadrant," Tarrant was saying.

"A lot of people made a lot of money," agreed Avon, remembering some of the astonishing statistics Orac had shown him many weeks previously.

"Some even lived to enjoy it," said Soolin, thinking she could see through Avon's mask of words at a hidden meaning.

It was not there. "I imagine they are the ones who now want the planet returned to normal legal status."

Soolin sat up in her seat suddenly. "You're not serious."

"Orac," snapped Avon crisply.

The machine hummed obediently into renewed life. "A formal application was laid before the High Council on Earth within the last thirty days. I can get you an-

"I...I don't wish to interrupt, master," came the deeper tones of Slave from behind the group now gathered round Orac.

"Then kindly don't," retorted Orac.

"I wasn't talking to you," responded Slave in a tone which suggested long-held resentment, and with a surliness that made Avon raise a quizzical eyebrow.

"You were attempting to override a superior system," Orac went on testily. "Be silent..." Behind them, Slave made a few half-hearted rotations and fell into silence. Meanwhile, Orac continued as though the whole incident had not occurred. "Exact date if you wish. But the importance of the application lies not in its exact date but in its general requirements."

"Which are?" said Tarrant.

"That the citizens of Gauda Prime put their house in order. Law must be established before the benefits of law can be restored."

Avon placed his hands on the transparent sides of Orac. "It is the day of the bounty hunter," he announced.

Vila, Dayna, Soolin, Tarrant and Avon stared at Orac.

"Thieves, killers, mercenaries..." Avon smiled. "...and psychopaths - they are all as unwelcome now as the farmers once were."

Vila, Dayna, Soolin and Tarrant looked at Avon. But the moment of contemplation was abruptly shattered by the raucous clatter of the ship's alarm klaxon.

"Slave - what's going on?" shouted Tarrant above the clamouring as the crew scrambled for their control posts. Safety screens were sliding shut over screens displaying nothing but empty space; inner doors were sealing automatically; emergency lighting flickered into readiness. And then, as suddenly as it had started, the crisis seemed to be over, and a strange, uncomfortable normality descended on them all.

"Well, er, nothing is actually wrong sir," admitted Slave rather unhappily. "Yet."

"Explain the alarm, Slave," demanded Avon.

"I had to get your attention, master. And I was forbidden to speak unless spoken to."

Vila rolled his eyes melodramatically, and Dayna couldn't help but laugh. Avon resisted the urge to smile. "All right, you're spoken to. What is it?"

"I beg to advise you, sir, that we are approaching the planet Gauda Prime," said Slave, and then, as an afterthought; "And SCOREPIO is under attack."

The crew barely had time to register their surprise and disbelief when both became rather superfluous as a plume of smoke and sparks flashed out thunderously from the rear of the control room. The ship rocked from side to side and, strapped into their positions as they were, the crew were hurled from every angle like puppets in the hands of an angry child.

"Who the hell are they?" bellowed Vila over the sound of yet another direct hit.

"Who the hell cares?" shouted back Dayna.

"They could be making a mistake," was Vila's hopeful reply.

Soolin wrestled with the scanner control. "It doesn't seem to be affecting their aim."

Tarrant had found a rear image of the attacking force, and recognised the type of craft. There were at least half a dozen short range pursuit vessels, an ideal cross between a battle cruiser capability and a joyrider manoeuvrability. It was said that, but for the G forces on the pilot, this sort of craft was built to withstand a turn in its own length in a planetary atmosphere. He tried to make out the rear coding, but could see only D#45. Then he abandoned the niceties of an informed appraisal as further energy bolts smeared their way through space towards them and, despite himself, Tarrant involuntarily ducked aside from the scanner image.

The bolts struck home, and jarred them all back in their seats. Avon glanced down professionally at his readouts. "Burnout on drive 2. Overall power loss is 32 percent."

"Alignment on 3 and 4 drifting," called out Tarrant despairingly.

"This won't hold for long," Avon told the pilot.

Tarrant nodded, and called forward to Soolin who was co-ordinating the defensive strategy: "Have we shaken any of them off?"

"Not exactly," she said.

"Not remotely," snarled Vila. "There's four more coming on zero two three."

"And two more on the reciprocal bearing," added Dayna apologetically.

The effects of the initial burst of the attack strike fizzled sparks over their heads. Soolin checked the data on the newcomers. "They'll have us in strike range in 25 seconds."

Tarrant looked down at the image on his screen of Gauda Prime, looming hugely beneath the ship. "We're running out of options."

"Power dive into the atmosphere," said Avon suddenly. "Fake it. Make it look as though we're out of control."

Tarrant gave the burnt out console controls in front of him a swift appraisal. "I may not have to fake that."

"Do it!" shouted Avon as another oily rush of fire and smoke billowed noisily from the depths of the ship.

"All right everybody," said Tarrant, punching in a command sequence and taking a firm grip of the manual controls, "stand by for a rather sudden visit to Gauda Prime."

And then they seemed to have vanished down a never ending hole as the bottom dropped out of their perceptual world and SCORPIO powered into a crazy descent through the atmosphere, lurching sickeningly towards the planet.

As the minutes passed the room began to get oppressively hot, and the temperature of the controls made Tarrant's struggle increasingly difficult. After an age, Soolin called back, "They're not following us down."

"They're breaking away," confirmed Dayna, "all of them."

"They're falling for it!" cheered Vila, his face lighting up.

"So are we," came Tarrant's sobering reply.

Avon looked across from where he sat next to Tarrant at the faces of the other three, who were now turned uncomfortably in their restraints to stare back at him.

"It was a calculated risk."

"What's wrong?" demanded Dayna.

"There isn't enough power to take us back out," said Avon with a horrible sense of *deja vu*.

Tarrant confirmed the facts with a curt nod. "Or enough control to land."

Vila's face was full of fear. "You mean we really are going to crash?"

Avon looked towards Soolin, and marvelled, not for the first time, at her self control. "No wonder they were convinced," she said.

"There must- there must be something we can do," babbled Vila, his mind cartwheeling through all the possibilities.

"I'll accept suggestions," said Avon, looking thoughtfully at Orac.

"How does abandon ship grab you?" snapped back Vila.

Tarrant barely had time enough to grin sardonically as he clung to his controls.

"Well, it's a neat trick if you can do it."

"We can use the teleport," said Vila, already starting to unbuckle his restraint as the ship levelled off into its dive.

"He's right!" shouted Avon above the increasing scream of the ship's protests against the velocity of descent.

Dayna looked at him askance. "What, at this speed?"

Avon was already out of his seat. "Do you want to wait around until we hit something soft?" He ushered the three at the front of the flight deck towards the teleport area. "Come on, you're wasting time."

Soolin looked back towards Avon from where she, Vila and Dayna stood in a rough semicircle, clutching each other in an effort to remain standing. "Another calculated risk?"

"Try and get the sums right this time," said Dayna in a half-whisper.

Avon punched in the co-ordinates. "Are you ready?"

"No," shouted back Vila from the centre of the trio's huddle, his eyes screwed tightly shut. "But do it anyway."

Avon flicked home the switching array. "Good luck," he said, looking up to see them shimmer out of existence in a shower of sparkling energy. He paused for the merest fraction of a second, and then turned around, leaning heavily on the front console as he struggled to move up the steadily angling floor. With an effort, he moved level with Orac and unstrapped the restraints on the still-flickering computer. "Orac, on my order I want you to operate the teleport."

"Very well, but the previous co-ordinates can only be matched approximately."

Avon hefted the transparent box in his arms, adjusting his balance carefully and looking across to the back of the flight deck where Tarrant was engaged in his struggle with the controls. "Come on Tarrant."

"I can't."

"What?"

Tarrant had not even looked up, and the sweat was rolling down his forehead and into his eyes. "If I leave the controls for a second, she'll flip over and break up."

Avon was at his side in seconds, leaving Orac propped against the front console. "Slave," he snapped, "take over the flight controls."

"I am most humbly sorry, master," said Slave hesitantly, "but I can find... er... no flight controls."

"It dropped below his tolerance a couple of minutes ago," declared Tarrant impatiently. "It's only a computer, Avon." He bit back a reproach, and twisted the controls as another unco-ordinated power surge flashed up on his readouts and threatened to overturn SCORPIO. "It takes talent to fly a dead ship. Look, there's nothing you can do, you're not a good enough pilot."

Avon was staring at the screen in front of them as though mesmerised, scanning the seemingly countless readouts and wondering quietly at the balance Tarrant was maintaining. "I can see that," he said, wanting to say "Let's get out of here" but knowing that for Tarrant there was no way out.

"So get the hell out of here will you," shouted Tarrant, sparing him one brief glance. "There's no point in us both dying."

Avon seemed to have woken from a trance. He made a sudden move down the flight deck, crashing backbreakingly into the control seats until he reached Orac. Then he took up the computer again, and stumbled into the teleport area, colliding with Slave on the way. "Are you ready, Orac?"

The computer gave a nervous little hum. "Of course I am."

"Then do it." The teleport effect started to sparkle around him, and the familiar tingling disembodiment began to overwhelm him. "Goodbye, Tarrant," he said as he faded from view, but his words were swallowed by the noise of the dematerialisation.

When Tarrant looked up briefly, Avon was gone. He resettled himself in his seat as the G forces balanced momentarily, and then another echoing explosion shook the small room. He glared across at Slave, who seemed to be spinning even more unsteadily. "Slave, any crash systems still functioning, put them on line."

"Am I to understand," quavered the computer with an uncertainty that in other circumstances would have seemed comical, "that you are going to try and ground the ship, sir?"

"I'm going to try and turn it first," grunted Tarrant, ignoring the searing pain in his hands as he battled to keep a grip on the hot, struggling hand controls.

Avon staggered slightly as the teleport effect deposited him rather carelessly on a slight incline. In his arms, Orac hummed and flashed to himself in apparent unconcern. Avon looked up above him, studying the patch of darkening grey sky that showed between the trees with distaste. As SCORPIO hurtled over, the air current tore at his clothes and hair. Placing Orac securely on one of the areas of dry ground, he lay over the top of the computer and buried his head in his arms.

Elsewhere in the forest plantation, Vila was running for his life, finally throwing himself down behind a particularly large tree trunk and cowering fearfully. Not far behind him, Dayna and Soolin were also running to join him in cover, but threw themselves down at a slight distance from him as the dying ship's slipstream whistled around them, threatening to throw them completely off balance.

Above the forest, SCORPIO's engines roared unnaturally loud in the stillness of the gathering evening as Tarrant fought what seemed to be a losing battle to control the ship's improvised approach. The yellow mass began to touch the tallest of the trees with frightening speed.

"The ground is very close, sir," said Slave tremulously.

Tarrant allowed himself a short glare at the computer. "I know that!" Behind him, an even more massive explosion tore at the guts of SCORPIO and brought a huge support beam crashing down in flames from the roof, spewing leads and showering the pilot in hot metal fragments. A shrill whistling of depressurisation accompanied a flurry of loose debris about the room, and Tarrant gasped.

The ship came down. Trees for a large distance around suddenly dropped like falling giants, torn aside as the ship decelerated through the plantation, suddenly hacked in two or uprooted completely as the bulk of the planethopper bore down on them. Pine trees began to force their way through the destroyed ship's underbelly, and Tarrant battled to keep the ship in a straight line and not to allow it to tip and split open completely. He was losing. As if to confirm this, his control console sheared away from its floor moorings and started to slide inexorably forwards.

The ship had stopped its sliding halt, and began to tilt to one side as its weight pressed against the nearest of the trees, deprived of the support of the landing gear which was now strewn over the previous few kilometres. Tarrant could feel the ship's final movements, and clutched the vanishing console desperately. Then the lower end of the control room opened up into a gaping maw as the flooring came away and left only blackness below. The console slid on towards the gap, and Tarrant abandoned the now-useless array of electronics in order to take a grip on the floor, which was now at a crazy angle. But his grip was weakening, and his scalded palms could not grasp the tilting surface of the ever steepening floor. With a last desperate cry, he vanished into the abyss.

Avon studied the plume of black rising from the forest in the distance, and forced himself to look away again. Around him, the forest pressed in on him densely, allowing little light to penetrate through to ground level. Night was now fast drawing in, and the lights he saw were those of Orac's continually changing pattern of diodes and tarial cells, and the yellow eye of the moon staring down through an opening in the treetops. He picked up the flashing computer, and it felt strangely comforting to be able to speak to it.

"All right, Orac. Where is the nearest settlement, and how do I get to it?"

THREE Night moves

Arlen stared into space, making an effort to show nothing in her face. By studiously ignoring the spying eye camera high on the wall opposite the hard bench on which she now sat in the characterless, starkly lit room, she hoped to earn herself the only privacy available in a cell - the privacy of one's own thoughts. For a Federation prisoner, even that would be a luxury.

In an efficiently tidy room of browns and reds, the man with the scar stared at an image of Arlen which filled a whole wall. Behind him, and behind an array of computer screens and piles of meticulously hand-corrected printouts, sat a small figure in a simple white shirt with black trim. This man was giving his attention

to the main readout screen in front of him, occasionally scratching the side of his face thoughtfully or pushing the untamed lick of red-brown hair from over his eyes and back into temporary obedience. "The checks are finished," he said at last in a tone which sounded convinced, but suggested depths of scepticism unspoken. "She is who you say she is."

"I wouldn't have brought her in if I hadn't made sure, Deva."

"Yes," said Deva as though he weren't entirely convinced of his judgement after all. "You're good at this aren't you?"

The bounty hunter turned to look at him. "I'm still alive."

Not for the first time, Deva noticed the intelligent glitter in both eyes, even the left one with the curving disfigurement. He looked away politely. He was a survivor all right, but his methods gave Deva reasons for disquiet. "According to her," he said, nodding at the screen, "three of your erstwhile colleagues no longer share your happy condition."

"Happy condition?" said the other with a spreading smile.

"She says you killed one of them."

"So?"

Deva flicked off the main screen image with impatience. "Was it necessary?"

"Yes, Deva, it was necessary," he responded wearily, as though this wasn't the first time his operations had been questioned.

"One bounty hunter killing another," said Deva with undisguised disapproval.

His tired opponent grasped the computer terminal as though for support. "It's a competitive profession."

"That isn't funny."

"Neither was Tando."

"Tando?" Deva surprised him with a little half laugh. "Oh, it was Tando you killed."

"Does it matter?"

"He was worse than the people he hunted," said Deva, almost apologetically.

The bounty hunter moved around the desk that separated them and looked at the readout in front of Deva. "He didn't have a price on him though," he said, indicating the details of Arlen. "Did he?"

"It was only a matter of time," replied Deva, and cleared the screen for further details with a swift and professional manipulation of the image board.

"Isn't everything?" smiled the larger man. "who's next on the list?"

They both watched the computer run through the data, and Deva referred to the screen, passing across details from a transparent printout sheet as it was issued from the imager. As he took in the new readout, Deva was aware of the soft insistence of the communications interrupt. "Deva."

"It's Klyn," said a tinny female voice filtering through the speaker.

"Yes, Klyn?"

"We've been tracking the ship that tried to run the blockade."

Deva arched an eyebrow. "Did it get through?"

"There was a full squadron of gunships on its tail when it hit the atmosphere," the intercom told him with a touch of professional pride.

"So it didn't get through."

"Bits of it, maybe." A touch of humour too.

Deva looked back across his desk at the man engrossed in the printout. "What was it, Klyn, do you know?"

There was the briefest of pauses as Klyn checked the details. "Planethopper from the scope readings. Might have been wanderer class." Another check. "We estimate it must have crashed somewhere in Plantation 5. Do you want a search patrol sent out?"

Er... no, just log it."

"Right." And the intercom snapped off as Klyn efficiently carried out her instructions.

"Chalk up another one to law and order," Deva heard a voice say.

"Smuggler, d'you think?"

"Something like that," said the other man distantly, and looked up from his readout with a sudden smile. "D'you know, it's getting so you can't earn a dishonest living on this planet any more."

"That," said Deva with a look that discouraged levity, "is the purpose of the

exercise after all."

"Mm." The other man seemed lost in thought again. "I wonder if those gunships challenged him before they opened fire."

"I doubt it." Deva gave a discreet cough.

"Mm? Er..." He tapped the two names at the top of the printout. "These two." He watched as Deva's fingers flickered over the controls as the details were entered, but his attention was still elsewhere. "Plantation 5 did she say?"

"Yes," said Deva without looking up.

"I might just take a swing out in that direction - see if there's anything left."

"You'll be wasting time," chided Deva, watching the computer spit out two small plastic cards with overprinted seals.

"I'll bear that in mind."

Deva slid the cards across the desk. "Last known locations and probable movements for both subjects, and official authorisation to hunt them." He was about to deliver another admonition, but a renewed bleep from the computer made him look back to find another card. "Oh," he said, surprised. "You've been given a temporary appointment as a law enforcement officer."

"That central computer doesn't care who it makes respectable, does it?"

Deva passed over the latest card with a flourish. "It's an inferior model, I'm afraid."

The man with the scar sailed again. "I'll be in touch if I find that ship," he said, heading for the exit.

"Time really is getting short, you know," Deva called after him reprovingly. He flicked the lock of hair out of his eyes again. "The representation from the Federation High Council could come at any moment. We can't afford mistakes."

The bounty hunter was framed in the doorway, and threw Deva a steely glance.

"I wasn't intending to make any." And with that, he was gone.

Deva punched the intercom control. "The bounty hunter's on his way up. Make sure his flyer's fuelled and ready to leave, will you?"

"Right, I'll check it," replied the intercom.

Deva leaned back in his seat, and then reached out for a switch. The main wall screen faded into life again, and the prisoner's impassive face reappeared. Deva could see her again, but she could see only the stark simplicity of the cell. Deva reached for a microphone. "Arlan. Have you anything to say before I decide what to do with you?"

"I have information."

Deva was surprised, as she had not moved her gaze from the unseen spot on the wall below the camera. "What information?"

Arlan could detect interest in what Deva had hoped was a plain question. She looked straight through the camera lens. "For my life."

Deva scratched the side of his head meditatively. "what about him?"

The object of their discussion, meanwhile, had made his way through the twisting corridors of the complex and had entered a large, high-roofed room bustling with activity. His broad, grubby frame contrasted starkly with the technicians who moved ceaselessly about the control area, checking and rechecking instrumentation on the banks of flickering readout which seemed to fill every available area of wall space. He looked down from the raised gallery surrounding the central area, and saw Klyn seated at a semi-circular display bank at the heart of the information complex. Hearing him stride into the room in his heavy boots, Klyn looked up from where she had been examining one readout with puzzlement.

The bounty hunter smiled to himself at the way she smoothed out her beige tunic and patted her neat bun of brown hair unnecessarily into place. "Problem?"

She shook her head. "Someone's operating a distress beacon. It's on the official frequency."

"Nothing in it for me, then," he said, moving down the steps and towards the exit to the launch bay. He paused halfway and looked back at her. "Er... outlaws tend not to use distress beacons," he said.

Klyn returned his smile and watched him leave the room, annoyed with herself for feeling so nervous. Or was it just that she couldn't understand this mysterious signal's origin.

In the forest, meanwhile, Orac was becoming tetchy. "I presume you have given some thought to how you will explain your presence here, not to mention my

impersonation of an official distress beacon."

Avon looked across at the computer from where he was seated, gun in hand, leaning against a pine tree. "Just keep sending, Orac," he said wearily, peering through the gloom again at the trees, wondering exactly how late it was. "I don't particularly want to spend the night out here."

"You may have to," said Orac with evident satisfaction. "There is very little daylight left, and search parties are unlikely to operate in this terrain at night."

"Stick to the distress beacon, Orac," said Avon, standing up and reholstering his clipgun. "When I want your impersonation of a pain, I'll let you know." He stepped up to the box and picked it up, looking around him before allowing Orac to swing in one hand, before taking the gun out again. Then he set off at a trot through the trees, a dark figure only occasionally picked out by the fast-fading light.

The hut was crude, but it was shelter for those who had thrown it together. The evening light filtered through the roughly-barred doorway, witness to the long period of disuse and neglect of the previous occupants, whose hurried departure and temporary security attempts betrayed their utter incomprehension of the forces which had prised them out of their cosy routine. Now the silver shafts of moonlight revealed only dirt and disarray, an ancient stove, simple sleeping materials and the utensils of the forgotten forest dwellers. With a splintering of the planks that covered the doorway, three figures forced their way into the gloomy place and stood ready to take on anyone who might have been concealed in the darkness of the hut. There was no-one, not even ghosts.

Dayna, Soolin and Vila looked around with some distaste at the empty room. Vila moved right into the centre for a better examination, and found it looked no better from this new perspective. "Oh charming," he announced to the world in general. "Really charming!"

Dayna was standing by the stove, and had heard enough grumbles on their journey this far already. "Oh, stop moaning Vila."

"It's better than spending a night in the open," observed Soolin, holstering her clipgun now that the hut had been made safe.

"Are you serious?" asked Vila, outraged. "The state that roof's in, it's the same as spending a night in the open."

Dayna straightened from poking at the stove. "Well, if you'd prefer the trees," she said meaningfully, "feel free to go, don't let us stop you."

"I'd prefer a city," went on Vila, "but I'd accept a town. In fact, I'd settle for some indication we aren't the only people left alive in this miserable tree sanctuary." He peered hopefully towards the end of the hut, but concluded that he hadn't been obliged to stay anywhere quite so inhospitable since he'd been facing up to a life on Cygnus Alpha.

"Look," rapped Dayna. "Why don't you go and collect some firewood, ma?"

Vila cast a fearful glance back towards the door and saw Soolin there, dappled in the shafts of light being cast through the bare rafters above. "Because it's dark out there."

Soolin shot him a withering look from beside the broken doorway. "Surely you're not afraid of the dark."

"Only when it's unilluminated," confessed Vila, and then suddenly held up a finger in warning to the girls. "What's that?" He looked up through the roof.

Dayna's patience snapped. "All right, Vila, you've made your point."

"No, listen," he insisted.

They were slowly aware of a high-pitched hum in the distance, which Vila's alert ears had picked up first. As they listened more attentively, they could hear it coming nearer. Dayna shook her head as though it would make the powered whine vanish. "What is it?" she hissed.

"Flyer," identified Soolin. "Coming fast."

Vila brightened. "As in transport?"

"As in transport," acknowledged Soolin.

Vila moved for the doorway. "Well, let's get out there and attract their attention." He was seized at once by both girls, much to his annoyance and puzzlement.

"Wait a minute Vila," insisted Dayna.

"What d'you mean?" he protested, struggling to free his pinioned arms. "That's the sound of civilisation!"

"Not necessarily," warned Soolin.

Vila was not to be still, and wriggled free, though he stood his ground grumpily. "Vila!" admonished Dayna.

Vila gestured around extravagantly. "well, it's got to be better than this."

"I wouldn't bet my life on it," said Soolin darkly.

Suddenly, it was light, and the screaming whine was directly overhead. Vila fled to the back of the hut, and Dayna and Soolin moved to either side of the heavily-studded doorway and peered out. The searchlights of the flyer knifed through the half-light of the moonlit forest, sweeping out vast areas in search of prey, piercing the remains of the hut, picking out the grassy entrance to the building and leaving only the darkest recesses untouched. Then, as suddenly as they had arrived, the lights were gone again.

The girls turned back to the centre of the room. A sheepish figure appeared from a pile of sacking at the rear of the room and dusted itself down. "They might have been friendly," said Vila defensively.

Dayna put her clipgun away again. "They might have come to apologise for shooting down SCORPIO," she sneered, "but it doesn't seem likely does it?"

"All right," accepted Vila. "So who d'you think they were, Soolin?"

Soolin rolled her eyes wearily. "I've no idea, Vila. But one thing I do know: if you want to survive on this planet, you have to assume that everyone is out to get you."

Vila returned her glare with a self-mocking smile of assurance. "I always assume that, wherever I go."

"The difference is," returned Soolin, watching his smile vanish, "on Cauda Prime you'll be right."

And with that cheery assurance, they set to work preparing makeshift sleeping arrangements in the hut, ignoring the pangs of hunger starting to gnaw at them. Despite his reservations, Vila had been persuaded to scout around the hut's immediate vicinity for small pieces of wood to start the stove. His initial enthusiasm for lighting the fire had to be dampened, however. "I could use the explosive clip in my gun to set it alight," he announced, visibly cheered at the prospect of enlivening the proceedings.

"You could bring every flyer within earshot right down on top of us," agreed Soolin sarcastically.

In the end, it was Vila who rubbed the sticks together to kindle a flame, bringing with it memories of a less adventurous but rather safer childhood in petty crime.

Soon the stove was burning brightly, casting its light beyond the charred black exterior and lighting up the nearer parts of the hut with its gentle orange-red glow. At its base, surrounded by the remaining twigs and small branches, squatted Vila, covered with a rough sacking blanket over his shoulders and dozing off slowly despite the fact that he had been volunteered to stand the first watch.

The broken doorway was now covered with another piece of sacking, rippling in the light night breeze. Vila peered gloomily around himself, and on an impulse got up and went across to the doorway. In the light which filtered through the tallest branches into the clearing where the hut was situated, the grassy area and smaller trees looked deserted, and there was no sign of life other than Vila himself, gazing fearfully into the night from the studded doorframe.

He returned to the stove, casting a glance at the sleeping forms of Dayna and Soolin, and shivering after his brief look outside. He set down his clipgun and took up some of the branches to feed the hungry flames back into more renewed life. Unnoticed by him, two scraggy figures had pulled back the sack doorcloth and were peering in at him cautiously. Vila noticed their footsteps too late, and turned into the punch that laid him unconscious on the floor. The two intruders moved stealthily across to the other two forms at the rear of the room, and prepared to strike them with raised rifle butts.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

They turned towards the doorway to see a figure dressed in black with white trim, and metal studs which glinted in the poor light. Before they could realign their rifles, he had killed one of them with a single, easy shot from a heavy silver handgun. The other heard the two figures behind him rousing, alarmed by the sound of the first explosive gunshot, and he fired instinctively at the figure by the door. The frame burst into spontaneous flames by the dark newcomer's head. But the

return shot was not so inaccurate, and the second assailant keeled over with a dying groan.

Dayna and Soo'in were now suddenly, blinkingly awake, and looked in bemusement first at the two bodies by their feet and then at the figure in the doorway. "What happened?" asked the dark girl. "Avon."

"The fire was stupid," he replied. "Putting Vila on guard was suicidal. What's the matter - is staying alive too complicated for you?"

Soolin eyed the two intruders uneasily. "It's beginning to look that way. How did you get here?"

"I teleported and walked - just like you." Avon turned on his heel and walked out again.

Soolin bent to examine the bodies, and then looked across at Vila. "Is he dead?" Dayna was at Vila's side. "No more than usual. He'll recover. What about them?"

"They're dead all right."

Within a few minutes, Vila was coming to his senses again, his eyes half-closed with pain. "What hit me?" he groaned.

"Don't worry, Vila," said Dayna, all compassion gone now that he was all right. "They went for your least vulnerable spot."

"What?" Vila raised himself up on his elbows, and felt an ominous pounding between his ears. "Oh, my head."

"Exactly," said Dayna, standing up again and dusting herself down with the backs of her hands. Vila looked to see where she had gone, and as his eyes refocused he saw Avon, who had just re-entered after retrieving Orac from the foliage where it had been hidden. Vila's jaw dropped. Then he heard Soolin speaking.

"So who are they?"

"Bounty hunters," said Avon as he moved into the room. "I did warn you there were a lot of them."

Dayna thought back to the last few frightening minutes on SCORPIO. "You didn't say the woods were full of them."

Soolin watched Avon place Orac in the centre of the room. "Do you know how they found us? We had a visit from them earlier, and thought they'd left the area."

"They have heat tracers in some of their flyers," explained Avon. "At night, the equipment is sensitive enough to pick up normal body heat within a radius of two miles." He motioned towards the stove, still blazing away. "You can imagine what they made of that."

"Their inboard computers almost rejected the data as being too gross to be correct," added Orac saugly.

"Did you find out what they were doing in this area, Orac?" asked Soolin, who was in no mood to listen to a self-satisfied computer.

"They came to investigate my distress signal, naturally."

"Naturally," said Dayna sarcastically, facing Avon and studying him closely. "You wouldn't have set us up by any chance, would you Avon?"

Avon's innocent look did nothing to pacify Soolin, who looked in dawning realisation at Dayna and then at Avon again. "Now that is an unattractive idea," she began, moving in on him menacingly. "I really could be quite annoyed if I thought we'd been the bait in a trap you'd laid for them, Avon."

Vila was thinking along similar lines. "Where's Tarrant, Avon?"

Avon looked away from him, and back at the other two. "I had no idea it was you," he said with a silky smile, then stiffened his expression. "And it shouldn't have been. As a matter of interest, you've been walking in the wrong direction if you want to get out of this forest."

"I asked you where Tarrant was," persisted Vila.

"Still," Avon was saying, "that's no longer a problem." He kicked the nearest bounty hunter experimentally. "We've just inherited a flyer."

Vila tried to put on a sterner voice. "Avon, if you're here and Orac's here, how did Tarrant get off the ship?"

Avon merely looked at him in silence.

FOUR "A short trip"

A flame guttered out into a wisp of smoke, leaving an acrid smell of burnt circuitry which nobody could smell. A shower of metallic fragments and destroyed components tumbled from a height, rattling and clattering their way like a small avalanche until they struck the lowest level of the control deck of SCORPIO. Lights unlit glinted in cracked covers beneath thin streams of pale moonlight, filtering in through the wreckage of the planethopper. And miraculously undamaged in the middle of a crazily-angled section of wall was the Slave computer, still whirling in an erratic pattern.

"Sir? Are you still not awake sir?" The computer adjusted its speaker volume as best it could, but stumbled in and out of distortion. "I would be most grateful if you could try to stir yourself and listen to my report. My emergency power cells are virtually... exhausted."

Sprawled awkwardly in the centre of a large flat section of the control deck floor lay the body of Tarrant, lifeless, dead. But the Slave computer knew better, assuming that was that it could trust the readings from its own damaged sensors. Now they were telling it that the lifeless body's head was rolling to one side. "There is a flying vehicle approaching, sir," continued the computer. "I am sorry, but I will have to close down now. Crash damage and power loss make it impossible for me to continue. May I express the humble hope... that the same... is not true... for you... Tarrant." The final word floated out in a ghastly rattle of distortion, an informality of which in other circumstances Slave would have been either incapable or simply ashamed. The swinging motion of the computer slowed to a stop as the lights around the circular mid-section dimmed for the last time. SCORPIO was dead.

Tarrant, however, was stirring again, and his eyes cracked open a slit to take in the surroundings he had thought he would never see again. He was aware of a sudden light lancing in through the shattered shell of the ship, and probing his immediate vicinity on the control deck's broken floor. The light beam found his leg, and a volley of shots speared through the gap in the ceiling. One smashed into the deck alongside his left leg, burning into the material of his trousers, stinging his leg and propelling him into a rapid roll aside. The light pursued him, and when it found him it heralded a renewed series of agonisingly close energy bolts. Tarrant scabbled clumsily aside as the metal of the floor bubbled. At last he seemed to have found an area where the prying light could not penetrate, and lay panting in the dark, listening to the whine of the motors overhead and wondering if he could make himself more secure still.

"Lie still."

Tarrant craned his neck to see where the voice had come from. It sounded as if it came from within the ship itself. "Who's that?" he croaked.

"Let them think you're dead," said the voice, and a broad-shouldered and untidy frame appeared through the shattered remains of one of the control deck doors. Tarrant had the momentary impression that he was seeing an older version of himself, curly-haired and with a casual, self-assured stance. Or was it him reflected now with his injuries, the scratches and dirt on the bared forearms and the curving scar etched over the left eye. The figure looked down at him from where it stood over Tarrant's helpless form. "Be glad that ammunition's scarce," it said. "You're lucky you weren't hit."

Whoever the newcomer was, thought Tarrant, he appeared to be his best hope of survival. "Who are they?" he asked in a half-whisper.

"Gun runners."

"Gun runners?" Tarrant's mind was working overtime. "Why would gun runners be shooting at me?"

"They're not," said the stranger, and withdrew a heavy laser pistol from his thick belt. "They're shooting at me." Then he lay down his heavier rifle next to Tarrant's head, and prepared to move into the area where the searchlight was still dancing in search of prey.

With a swift movement, he leaped into the centre of the remains of the flight deck, avoiding the light as it moved in the opposite direction. Bracing the gun in both hands, he waited until the light had moved away enough to give him some sort

of clear view of the enemy flyer. Then he loosed off three shots in rapid succession, and the probing light vanished almost immediately, and the ship's whining note spiralled higher and higher. Out of control, the little craft struggled to compensate for the damage inflicted by the blasts. But, inevitably, the struggle was lost, and it tumbled from the sky, its fall unimpeded in the rough clearing made by the bigger ship's destructive arrival, and transporter and occupants vanished in a plume of flame and a rapidly thickening pall of black, oily smoke spiralling upwards into the still night sky.

The stranger moved back to where Tarrant had propped himself up against one of the destroyed consoles, and he weakly accepted the offer of a drink from his rescuer's hipflask.

The newcomer had moved across to what had been the teleport area, and was trying on one of the teleport bracelets experimentally with a strange look of recognition. "Are you feeling better?"

"A little," said Tarrant as the drink caught the back of his throat.

"Whose ship is this?"

Tarrant gritted his teeth at the pain in his leg and side. "Why, are you thinking of making an offer for it?"

"Want to tell me your name, then?"

"Not particularly," said Tarrant, setting down the empty flask.

"Hmm," said the stranger, pointing out reasonably, "I just saved your life."

"You just saved your life," smiled Tarrant. "It was you they wanted."

"Actually," said the other man with a shrug, "er... it was these they wanted." With a smooth underarm swing, he lobbed a leather pouch tied with string to Tarrant, who caught it. "They had some quaint idea I was going to pay them in advance," he went on as Tarrant emptied the pouch into his open palm. "I had some quaint idea they were trying to cheat me."

Tarrant looked down at thousands of credits worth of finely cut jewels from many planets, and without comment he tipped them back into the pouch. Then he tapped the rifle next to him. "Yes, well it's difficult to tell who you can trust these days. But as tests go, isn't that and this a bit obvious?" And he tossed the bag of jewels back.

His opponent caught them. "Maybe." Then he looked up appraisingly at the sky. "It's getting light," he observed. "Shall we go?"

He stretched out a hand, and when Tarrant took it he pulled him up sharply, making the injured pilot gasp as he crashed upright into the stranger's arms. Tarrant looked into his eyes, and saw his own enquiries reflected in them.

Dawn was breaking as they reached the stranger's flyer. It was a thin, arrow shaped vehicle with a powerful if, perhaps, unpredictable engine at the rear and a large transparent hood which raised to allow the passengers entry. Tarrant assessed its compactness as he was bundled into the side seat and the other man slid casually into the pilot's position.

They launched at once, and the morning light of Gauda Prime's sun sparkled on the shielding over the front viewing section of glass and filtered onto the two men's faces. Tarrant's initial appraisal of the engine's idiosyncracies seemed to be confirmed as he felt every one of the many course alterations in each of his many injuries. On their journey to the flyer, he had been told that they were heading for a base complex by his rescuer - or was it his captor?

"So how far is this base of yours?" asked Tarrant after an hour's elapsed flight time.

"We'll be there soon enough."

"We'd be there even sooner if your computer kept to direct line of flight," said Tarrant, aware that his discomfort could not be disguised. "Is the constant change of direction for my benefit?"

"No," said the other man, never taking his eyes from the view out of the front window. Tarrant studied him for a moment, and then resettled himself as comfortably as he could in his seat, trying to rest and think at the same time.

Vila had seen the dawn come up too as he and the others made their way towards the bounty hunters' flyer. However, as he puffed and panted in his efforts to keep up with the others as they raced on ahead, he had little time to appreciate the sight of the golden orb glittering in sections through the trees in the plantation.

He rubbed his still aching head. "Why did they land it so far away?"

Soolin looked back at him as he struggled up the last incline to them. "Presumably they thought the noise would alert someone."

"In your case," said Avon without turning round, "they could have put it down on the roof without any trouble."

"Avon," said Orac. Avon stopped and put down the heavy duty rifle he had removed from one of the bounty hunters and swung Orac up from his side to hold it in both hands. "The other flyer has just taken off."

"Other flyer?" said Dayna from behind him, who hadn't liked the way Avon had kept the news of Tarrant's final moments from them at first. "What other flyer, Avon?"

Avon looked ahead at the rough track leading towards where Orac had located their transport. "Our guide," he said, striding forwards again. "Come on, we don't want to lose him."

After what seemed to be an age, they arrived at the flyer, and Vila decided at once that it was an unsafe method of transportation and, no, he wasn't going to risk his neck in it thanks all the same. It didn't take such cajoling from the others, however, to convince him that he either travelled with them or they would leave him behind. He grumbled, but managed to win the concession of travelling in one of the back seats. Soolin joined him in the rear of the craft, and Avon passed Orac over his right shoulder to Vila while Dayna slid in through the opposite door into the front passenger seat. Avon settled himself into the pilot's position and made a rapid examination of the flight controls. The ship took off.

"The other flyer appears to be manoeuvring to conceal its true course," said Orac from where he was held in Vila's lap.

"Because of us?" asked Vila, and peered apprehensively out of his side window as the flyer rose in a cloud of exhaust fumes and started to accelerate upwards at an alarming rate.

"Not unless the pilot is clairvoyant," said Avon, beginning to master the controls.

"Well why then?" asked Dayna, looking across.

"From the programming of the inboard computer," announced Orac, "it appears to be standard procedure."

Avon studied the flyer's tracking computer which Orac was now controlling. "Just keep monitoring," he said to Orac, and launched the flyer forward with a suddenness that made Vila wonder whether he wouldn't have been happier taking his chances alone in the plantation.

"A random program?" asked Tarrant, as the figures on the flyer's monitor started to make a strange sort of sense.

"An old smuggler's trick," said his pilot.

Tarrant looked across, and then back to the screen readout. "Did you learn it from an old smuggler?"

"No, from a young one, actually," came the reply. "Her name was Jenna." He allowed himself a swift sideways glance through what remained of the corner of his left eye, and was satisfied that his passenger had reacted.

"What happened to her?" asked Tarrant, trying not to betray his interest too much.

"She tried to run the blockade once too often," said the other man. "Happens to all of them eventually."

Tarrant was curious about this apparent indifference, and assumed it was professional pride. "You made the capture?"

"No-one made the capture," snapped the stranger with a sudden passion. "She hit the self-destruct." Then he looked across at Tarrant. "And when it blew, she took half a squadron of gunships with her."

Tarrant looked silently into the distance in front of the flyer, struggling with his memories of SCORPIO's final moments and memories of something more. Then his pilot said "Brace yourself," and they were making a rapid descent towards their final destination.

Within minutes they had slid into a parking orbit of the base and then, with the appropriate clearances, swooped into the well-equipped hanger lined with a variety of different flyers. As a team of technicians moved to secure the flyer and run a series of checks on it, Tarrant and his pilot moved swiftly from the

cavernous room and through a variety of corridors which led down through several well-signposted turns to a brightly-lit control gallery, similar in its design of angled supports and red-brown walls to the rest of the complex; except, that was, for the sheer amount of sophisticated tracking equipment lining every available space around the room. In the centre, an attractive if severely groomed woman was operating a complicated array of monitors set in a semi-circular array.

The man with the scar strode down the access steps and into the tracking gallery with an easy assurance, trailing Tarrant behind him. The young pilot was still trying to assimilate all he had seen and heard since meeting the stranger, and felt strangely out of place in his torn tunic and battered face, despite the other man's ragged appearance. All around him, technicians seemed to be assimilating further information and moving on into areas elsewhere in the complex.

The other man had moved to a position in front of the central desk, and was speaking to the woman with the brown hair tied up in a bun. "Are you still on watch?" he said in surprise.

She looked up from where she had been engrossed in her work, and patted an imaginary loose hair back into place. She smiled at the intruder nervously, as it appeared he was the only person allowed within her domain, the tracking gallery, who made the place untidy without being reprimanded by her severely. "I decided to stay on," she admitted, flicking her attention back to the monitor screen which displayed the countour map of the area surrounding the base. A number of flashing points of light indicated the amount of traffic to be detected. "There's too much activity up there somehow."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," she said, her brow furrowed. "It's not something I can pin down precisely. One or two transports have passed without clearance, some flyers that weren't planned for the area, that sort of thing." She glanced across at Tarrant with evident disapproval, and then back at the man in front of her. "Could be the Federation observers finally arriving."

"Yes," he nodded, "that's probably it." He moved off across the room towards the opposite exit, and Klyn resumed her watch.

With a final look around the room, Tarrant followed his guide off down the adjacent corridor. He had reached level with him again around the corner at the end of the long corridor. "Gauda Prime seems to give law and order a certain priority," Tarrant observed aloud.

The other stopped and looked at him carefully. "Yes, I suppose you could say that."

Tarrant jerked a thumb back in the direction of the tracking gallery. "Is that the main control centre?"

The stranger would volunteer no information. "Deva can tell you more about that than I can," he said evasively, and nodded at the nearest door before going through it. Tarrant followed him into the room curiously.

It was a smaller room than the high-roofed tracking gallery, but the equipment here was concentrated in one desk, behind which a thin man with red-brown hair was sitting. He turned round as the two newcomers entered, and flicked his lick of hair from over his eyes.

"Well now, bounty hunter," said Deva. "That was a short trip, even by your standards."

The bounty hunter moved into the centre of the room. "Short," he acknowledged, "but profitable." And in one move he had whirled on Tarrant and was covering him with the small, powerful handgun. "Even by my standards."

Tarrant's hands raised to shoulder level automatically as he eyed the weapon levelled at him. "Was it something I said?"

Deva was looking across his desk at Tarrant with seemingly increased interest. "Who is he?"

"His name is Tarrant," declared the bounty hunter, and saw Tarrant's eyebrows twitch in annoyance and puzzlement. "Your flight computer mentioned it whilst you were unconscious."

"Tarrant..." said Deva, and started to run his fingers swiftly over the computer input panel.

"I wouldn't run it through the computer just yet, Deva," warned Blake with a raised hand, but keeping the gun steady. "You see, this one has a very high Federation price on his head."

Deva cancelled his initial entry. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, give the man credit for knowing his trade," spat Tarrant, "dirty though it is."

The bounty hunter's face split into a wide, greedy grin. "He also has several associates with Federation prices, and one of them is particularly valuable."

"And all of them are particularly dead," responded Tarrant quickly.

"In which case," said the bounty hunter, gesturing with his free hand in the direction they had just come in, "that other flyer was merely a coincidence." His tone hardened. "A coincidence, however, that might just have analysed a random flight program."

Deva looked puzzled. "And the significance of that is...?"

The man with the scar stood facing Tarrant with an easy arrogance. "A very useful device. Called Orac." He studied Tarrant's reaction with amusement. "If it is Avon, we shouldn't have too much longer to wait."

FIVE Blake

Vila had opened one eye cautiously, but the view from the tiny craft's window was just as daunting as ever, despite Avon's increasing proficiency at piloting. Vila turned his gaze back to Soolin, sitting next to him, and tried to strike up conversation nonchalantly. "How does it feel to be home?"

"I wouldn't know," she replied in a level tone.

Vila decided to stay silent, concentrating on the gurgling sounds his stomach was making. The flight continued in an uneasy silence for another half hour, until Orac interrupted their thoughts.

"The target flyer has entered an underground silo."

Avon leaned back a little to address the computer. "Can you pinpoint it exactly?"

"I can do better than that," said Orac loftily.

Dayna smiled. "Can't you always."

"My capacities are frequently underutilised," said Orac, whose strongpoint was evidently not irony.

"Just tell us what you're offering, Orac," said Avon.

"When we reach the appropriate co-ordinates," said Orac, "I can simulate the necessary signals to open the silo and allow this flyer to enter."

"Oh," said Dayna, "sounds good."

Vila gave a little groan. "No it doesn't. One of these days we're going to drop into one of these holes in the ground and never come out."

"Sooner or later," said Avon quietly, "everyone does that, Vila."

Dayna gave a short laugh. "Well, when do we arrive?"

Avon looked at the readouts in front of him. "We'll manoeuvre for a while before following the other flyer. Just in case we were noticed."

And with that, he threw the flyer into a move that made Vila close both eyes again.

The flyer landed without incident, though Dayna felt uneasy that there were so few technicians to be seen in a silo which was part of such a large complex. She looked across at Avon, who was stepping out of his side of the flyer. "How can we be sure that we're not just walking into a trap?"

She noticed with surprise that Avon had removed a powerful laser rifle from beneath his seat. She had thought he had left the bounty hunter's weapon behind when entering the flyer in the forest. "This is not a Federation complex," said Avon. "It seems a logical place to start. If you cannot trust us, you can leave now. But we stand a better chance as a group." He looked across at Vila, who was still carrying Orac. "And remember, we still have some backup and bargaining power." He nodded to Vila, who moved off into the silo.

Soolin was by a wall display. "Good of them to leave directions," she muttered suspiciously. "Do we hurry on into the parlour?"

Avon released the safety catch on the rifle. "We hurry on in," he said. "With caution."

Tarrant had taken a number of deep breaths, and now turned his angry gaze from the bounty hunter and onto the red-haired man. "Doesn't it occur to you to wonder where he's got all his information from?"

Deva looked up and scratched the side of his face thoughtfully. "Give the man credit for knowing his trade," he smiled.

"Oh, surely you're not that naive," retorted Tarrant scornfully.

The bounty hunter sat on the edge of Deva's desk, still aiming his handgun unerringly at his captive's chest. "You're wasting your breath, Tarrant."

A beep from the console made Deva look away from this confrontation. "Yes?"

"There's a flyer just put down in the silos," said Klyn's voice, filtering through the intercom. "It had all the right signals, but it isn't one of ours."

"Let them through," said the man with the scar.

Deva looked back at the intercom microphone. "Let them through," he confirmed. Then he looked up at the other man as though puzzled. "Is that wise?"

The bounty hunter spoke with a menacing conviction. "We don't want them damaged, do we?" he said, looking straight at Tarrant. He waved his free arm at Deva's intercom system. "Get me one security guard, I'll deal with it."

Deva flicked a control. "Send a security guard to my office, will you."

Tarrant slumped his shoulders, and looked despairingly at the half-familiar figure across from him. "What on earth happened to you?"

The scar faced man shook his head solemnly. "Oh, most of it wasn't on Earth, Tarrant. Not what happened to me."

He turned at a sound from the door. A short, dark-haired girl had entered, a handgun holstered on the belt of her black tunic. It was Arlen.

As the bounty hunter stepped back to allow her into the room, Tarrant stepped suddenly sideways and moved behind her. Then with his remaining strength he pushed her into the bounty hunter's gun hand as hard as he could. Deva half rose to stop him leaving the room, but a simple one armed push shoved him aside and Tarrant was out of the door before they could recover.

"D'you want him killed?" shouted Arlen, her gun unholstered, and ready to make after Tarrant.

Tarrant's captor seized her arm. "No, of course not. When he knows as much about this as you do now, he'll join us. Like you did."

Arlen put away her powerful sidearm. "He passed the test, then?"

The other man laughed out loud. "I'm satisfied."

Deva was obviously unhappy, though, and rubbed his arm where he had fallen against the wall during Tarrant's escape. "These stupid games you insist on playing, Blake, will get someone killed eventually." He sat down heavily in his seat.

The man with the scar placed both palms on Deva's desk, as though he were wearily explaining something to him for the hundredth time. "I have to test each one myself."

"No you don't have to," Deva snapped back. "I set up systems for that. I broke the security codes on their central computer. I got us access to official channels, information, everything we could possibly need." He paused from gesturing around his room extravagantly to push the errant lock of hair back into place. "You don't need to be involved at all," he said reproachfully.

"All right, I find it difficult to trust," came the reply. "It's a failing I admit."

"And any one of our people could select the people you've collected," went on Deva, and added with a dismissive wave, "you don't need to do the bounty hunter routine either."

His opponent smiled across the desk. "Indulge me," he said softly, expansively.

"Do I have a choice?"

"Oh, there's always a choice Deva."

"Not for me there isn't." The smaller man leaned back in his seat morosely. "I said I'll follow you, and I will, until the Federation's finally defeated. But if you're killed," he went on in a sharper tone, "where does that leave us?"

"With a base. The beginnings of an army."

"Yes," snapped Deva, "and all of it useless if you're not there to lead it."

The other man reached across to another desk and picked up a second weapon. Then he placed it at the front of the control desk; it was the Federation gun that Arlen had given him. "You worry too much, Deva."

Deva pulled the gun across the desk towards himself nervously. "Somebody has to." Arlen had been standing to one side of the room observing this exchange impassively, but now spoke up in a crisp, clear voice. "It might be an idea for someone to start worrying about the one we just lost."

"Why?" asked the man with the scar. "He isn't armed."

"I didn't notice that slowing him up," said Arlen.

"That's true." He looked across to where the smaller man was fingering the Federation gun apprehensively. "Relax, Deva." He looked at Deva as if for the first time. "Nobody's indispensable."

Tarrant was running. The initial betrayal by the man he had been prepared to trust had stunned him into passivity at first, but the opportunity for escape had sent the adrenalin pumping once again through his system, and only one option lay open to him now - flight. The corridors seemed to be familiar as he ran their length, though they were thankfully empty. Suddenly, pausing for breath as he reached a small flight of steps, he recognised the corridor where he had enquired about the tracking gallery. Choosing the appropriate entrance, he found himself nearing the way out again. As he entered the tracking gallery itself, Klyn had her back to him, engrossed in some unexpected new information. In the absence of any of the other technicians, Tarrant saw his chance for escape. But as he passed the well-like semi-circular control console, Klyn turned and spotted him.

"Hey you, wait a minute..." she began; but Tarrant prevented further protests by seizing her face firmly in one hand, feeling for the nerve points his Federation combat training had taught him to. With a groan, Klyn lost consciousness and fell by the console.

Tarrant eyed the doorway out, but was unable to make his exit as he was seized from behind by a white-suited technician who had appeared as if from nowhere. Tarrant turned to throw him, but was forced back again and had to seize a nearby rail by the stairs in an attempt to break away. The technician moved in to deliver a severe blow, but Tarrant fixed his foot in his opponent's chest and pushed hard. The effort was not strong enough, and the technician had Tarrant thrown to the floor again. Weakened by his earlier ordeals, Tarrant could only watch helplessly as the technician stepped back to kick him... and then dropped to one side as a clipgun exploded into action nearby.

Tarrant peered towards the doorway, and saw Soolin, gun smoking, leading Dayna, Avon and Vila into the room. They moved down the small flight of steps and to his side. Instantly, Dayna was making sure that Tarrant was not too badly injured.

"I'm glad you made it," said Avon, and meant it.

"So am I," acknowledged Tarrant. "Avon, I think he's here."

Further explanation was temporarily cut short as the voice of Klyn filtered across to them faintly from the central console. "Security personnel to main tracking gallery," she gasped into the intercom. "Security personnel to main track-" Her words ended abruptly in a shocked cry as, in one fluid movement, Avon swung round, aimed the bounty hunter's rifle and fired once from the hip. The woman made a futile little movement towards the console, then slumped over it and slid into the gap.

But now two new faces had appeared on the other side of the gallery: a slim, assured girl in black with a small handgun at her waist, and a well-built, untidy man with a mop of dirty, curly brown hair. Despite the scar extending from above the left eye down over the cheek which closed the eye almost completely, and the week's growth of stubble, the face was unmistakable to two in the opposing group.

"Is it him?" Tarrant asked Avon.

"It's him," said Vila quietly.

That was all Tarrant needed to know. "He sold us, Avon. All of us - even you."

The recognition, and then Tarrant's words, seemed to have shocked Avon into silence. In all his rehearsals for this meeting mentally, he had not envisaged this. He moved forwards of the SCORPIO crew as if to see better, narrowing his eyes in disbelief. His outward show of calm had vanished, and the rifle hung uselessly at his side. "Is it true?"

"Avon," said the other, moving down the steps and spreading his arms persuasively. "It's me - Blake."

Avon held up a warning hand. "Stand still," he hissed. "Have you betrayed us? Have you... betrayed me?"

"Tarrant doesn't understand," said Blake angrily.

"Neither do I."

"I set all this up..." went on Blake.

"Yes!" Avon suddenly levelled the rifle again.

Blake moved a step nearer his old comrade. "Avon, I was waiting for you..."

The explosion of the rifle resounded about the gallery, and Blake's grubby white shirt was suddenly red with his own blood. Disbelief registered in his glaring eyes, and he took another unsteady step forward.

The next blast hit him in the chest, and Blake took the blow and tottered forward again, his arms spread in mute appeal.

The rifle spewed fire again. Blake staggered the distance to Avon, catching what breath remained to him. Avon pointed the barrel directly at his head, but it was brushed aside harmlessly as Blake clutched Avon's arms in his trembling hands, desperately holding on as his legs weakened. "Oh Avon," he uttered, choking, his knees buckling... Avon stepped aside numbly, and allowed the body to hit the floor.

As blare in reaction, alarms began to blare in the depths of the complex, and red emergency lighting flickered on in readiness. Alarm lights intermittently patterned the tracking gallery in response to the klaxons. On the other side of the room, the small figure of Deva appeared in a doorway, the Federation gun held tightly to his chest. "Blake! They've found us. The place is under..." His words trailed off as he took in the carnage and the corpse. "Arlen," he said in a strangled voice, the gun now hanging limply at his side, "what happened?"

Arlen indicated Avon with a gesture of her drawn handgun. "He happened." Then she redirected it at Deva, who took the blast in the chest and crashed heavily into the wall behind him before dropping in a lifeless pile against the side of the room.

Arlen turned to the SCORPIO crew, grouped together but for Avon, who was looking at the corpse - or was he looking further still? "Be so kind as to drop your guns. All of you." Avon's rifle hung uselessly at his side, but the others dropped their clipguns in a rough pile in front of them. "You and this nest of rebels are now prisoners of the Federation," continued Arlen. "Your friend Blake said he couldn't tell any more who was Federation and who wasn't. He was right. He couldn't."

Tarrant felt he had to grin. "You're a Federation agent?"

"I'm a Federation officer," she spat back.

Vila pushed forwards of the rest of the group, and started to saunter round Avon and towards Arlen. "Oh now look," he babbled. "No need for belligerence pretty lady. I've never been against the Federation. I mean I've only ever been along for the ride. I'm not even armed," he added, throwing his arms wide in an extravagant gesture. "You can't kill me. I'm completely harmless, and armless..."

Arlen had been momentarily distracted by Vila's meanderings, but spotted Deva making a move to recover her discarded gun. No sooner was it in her hand than Arlen had emotionlessly picked off the black girl, who fell backwards, her eyes rolling upwards as the shot hit her, and Tarrant caught her and lowered her to the floor, appalled.

"We stand a better chance as a group."

Vila hardly had time to think. He instinctively lashed downwards with his elbow onto Arlen's gun arm, and then smashed his forearm into her unprotected face with a savagery he hardly knew he possessed. Arlen toppled, unconscious before she hit the floor, a fresh bruise showing on her face.

Vila stooped to retrieve her fallen gun, and muttered "Sorry" to her supine form. Then he stood up to face his friends as they picked up the fallen clipguns, squaring his shoulders proudly. The shot came from behind him and took him in the back as he straightened. He arched and fell backwards, amazement etched on his face.

"It's the one talent we all share, Vila. Even you."

The others were moving already as guards in the familiar black drillsuits of the Federation forces started to enter the room as though from nowhere. Soolin loosed off a single shot that took the head off the guard who had shot Vila. But she could not turn in time to see another black-visored guard appearing by a different entrance, who missed Tarrant as he fled the room but cut down Soolin.

She fell to the floor, her golden hair spilling out around her as she dropped.

"No good deed goes unpunished."

The guard had time only to see the smoke curl from his gun barrel before Tarrant had re-entered the gallery from a better position, and fired a shot that took out his guts. Then Tarrant turned to the statue figure who remained amid the destruction looking down at the corpse. "Avon!" Another guard had appeared from the other doorway, and fired a shot that took Tarrant almost in mid-word.

"Suddenly I'm hip deep in heroes."

Within seconds, every exit had two guards standing in it. Avon stepped over Blake's body, and looked up for the first time, his rifle still hot in his hand. The guards stepped forwards in their anonymity, aiming their stocky Federation issue weapons at him. Around them, the alarms that Avon had barely time to register finished their blaring cacophony, leaving only the flashing red glare of the lights and the smell in the air to show any signs of the events and deaths in the room.

Avon studied the guard in front of him, and thought of his fallen comrades. The rifle in his hand lifted itself horizontally, and levelled with a finality at the blank mask before him. But he was looking much further away, with a much deeper sense of recognition. The guards tightened their grip on their own guns.

Avon fixed a smile on his face, and fired. He needed to kill her himself.

CAST

Avon PAUL DARROW
Vila MICHAEL KEATING
Tarrant STEVEN PACEY
Dayna JOSETTE SIMON
Orac/Slave PETER TUDDENHAM
Blake GARETH THOMAS
Deva DAVID COLLINGS
Ar'len SASHA MITCHELL
Klyn JANET LEES PRICE

CREW

Production Manager
Production Associate
Production Assistant
Assistant Floor Manager
Film Cameramen

Film Sound
Film Editor
Visual Effects Designers

Properties Buyer
Video Effects
Videotape Editor
Graphic Designer
Technical Manager
Senior Cameraman
Vision Mixer
Studio Lighting
Studio Sound
Special Sound
Costume Designer
Make Up Artist
Music
Series Creator
Script Editor
Designer
Producer
Director
Writer

HENRY FOSTER
FRANK PENDLEBURY
INIFRED HOPKINS
LAURA GILBERT
FINTAN SHEEHAN
Colin Case
DENNIS PANCHEN
SHEILA S. TOMLINSON
JIM FRANCIS
MIKE KELT
FRANCIS SMITH
ROBIN LOBB
MALCOLM BANTHORPE
DICK BAILEY
TERRY BRETT
JAVE WHITE
NIGEL FINNIS
WARWICK FIELDING
TREVOR WEBSTER
ELIZABETH PARKER
NICHOLAS ROCKER
SUZANNE JANSEN
DUDLEY SIMPSON
TERRY NATION
CHRIS BOUCHER
ROGER CANN
VERE LORRIMER
MARY RIDGE
CHRIS BOUCHER

TX

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