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*Photo: Regents Park*

**FRONTIER WORLDS**  
Publications

# 7 BLAKES

## SHADOW

by  
David Tulley



**FW**

Based on the original teleplay by Chris Boucher



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This adaptation of one of my favourite Blake's 7 stories is rather unusual. Its surreal imagery is difficult to transfer to the written word, and I've tried to convey something of the contrasts and strangeness within it. Whether or not I've succeeded is up to the reader.

DBT, October 1985

For some other types of Dreamhead  
for Mary G T  
for Lucy Z  
and especially for Cat

## PROLOGUE

IT WAS an outer section of the city: a service corridor, grimy, smeared with old sealast and dirt. Small trash stirred with a change in pressure. The man stepped through the opened door. It slid to behind him as he wrinkled his nose in distaste. This was backstage, he reflected. The opulence of the city was a facade.

He started to walk, fastidiously avoiding the more obvious pieces of filth. He had never felt more out of place in his life.

He looked out of place too, for he bore the outward trappings of a merchant. A sleek and well-groomed merchant and by implication rich. Something was ravelling at the edge of his complacency, though. There was a flaw in the mask. A small flaw the size of his daughter. She was the reason for his being there. The sickness she had acquired found its beginning and end in such places. He had to come here.

Hard sunlight put an edge of brightness into his face. He screwed up his eyes. Direct vision port. Quaint. His eyes widened slowly as the brightness lessened. It took him a moment to realise why.

Something had swallowed the nearest, brightest stars.

An area of shadow had grown and the lights had died, blotted out. It seemed to get larger as he watched. Stars shrank back and faded under the advance. He found it impossible to turn away from the encroaching darkness. There was some compulsion about it and he was frozen, helpless. Prey. Waiting for something that *hungered*...

He gasped as the spell broke and thought reasserted itself.

It was a ship. Moving into parking orbit, well away from the docking cradles. Starlight began to sketch out the lines of its hull as the approach angle changed. It was strangely, beautifully designed, but a ship nonetheless.

The merchant relaxed enough to feel a little ashamed of himself. Jumping at shadows! He returned back to the relative gloom of the corridor and stopped dead as he heard the voice.

"Far enough. Don't move."

The voice was oddly toneless and dead, but recognisably female.

The merchant shivered. It was as if the owner of the voice had lost the capacity to feel. He obeyed the order, straining to penetrate the shadows. They seemed deeper here.

"You have the merchandise?" His own voice sounded reedy, insubstantial.

"The negotiables?"

He opened his hands in a gesture of supplication. Gems gleamed in the palms, ruby stigmata like pearls of blood. "As we agreed."

"Good." The voice was not quite dead now. It held an edge of yearning. Another sort of hunger.

He caught a whisper of movement from behind him and started to turn. The blow caught him hard and sickening just behind the right ear. Light flared in his head, shadow fisted his eyes. He fell.

Fast figures moved around his prone body. Hair that seemed prematurely grey wisped in a strand of starlight. Eyes gleamed like the gems.

"Got them all?"

"All he had."

"Good. Leave him. Move it."

They faded back. Pressure dropped and levelled.

All was quiet and still for a moment, then the litter swirled and eddied once more.

The tall figure had stopped at the very threshold of the door, laser held loosely, almost carelessly. His clothes were as expressionless as his face. He was a pro, and he always kept it simple. They preferred it that way. Tidier.

He observed the crumpled body incuriously, and made no sound as it stirred and moaned. The ability to feel compassion had long been lost to him. He watched as the merchant rose painfully to a sitting position and slowly worked himself to his feet, clutching the outer wall for support and retching under waves of nausea. He watched as the man gradually became aware of his presence. The merchant looked frail and sick. He took a step towards the man in the doorway and started to frame a word.

The laser seemed to raise itself and moved into a firing line. The eyes behind the gun held a faint smile now. Enjoyment.

The merchant's voice choked off. He started to raise a hand in faint protest.

The gun flashed twice. Fracture lines webbed out in the vision port. The tall figure stepped back unhurriedly.

A line of shadow cut off the merchant's head as the door sealed itself between them. Both screams were cut off too.

The section took ten seconds to void itself into space.

The sudden outrush of warm air caused a mild flutter on the incoming ship's thermal sensors. Since the pattern and intensity were inconsistent with a missile strike or similar launch, the data was rejected as irrelevant to programme. The ship continued on its approach vector.

The course took the ship between the nearest, brightest star and their destination point. A hard black shadow cast itself over the splendour of the city, like talons grasping and holding, gripping the city.

Space City.

## ONE Dreamheads

IT WAS a city in space, the hub of a fragile web that man had spun out amongst the stars. It was a point of contact, a focus for the radials and randoms, a trade centre for the nearest worlds and a piece of interest for the other randoms of the cosmos, full of restless life and bustling along with its business of pleasure - multi-levelled bubbles of light and warmth in the cold black void.

The place had a darker reputation too, only hinted at and certainly never mentioned in open counsel. Not unless the speaker was possessed of a death-wish. There were many in the lower levels quite willing to fulfil such a wish.

Largo's apartments were in the upper levels, but like the man himself they appeared in the nature of a facade - a front, hiding some darker reality. His face was the same, casual and urbane - with something like a sneer or a snarl in every curl of his lip, every yellow flash of his eyes. The contradiction was echoed in the lean profile, hooked nose, glint of teeth in his thin smile.

He was smiling now as he let red gemstones spill hand to hand. Money always made him smile. He looked almost affable as he looked up at his enforcer. "Done quite well, haven't they?"

The other smiled coldly. "They're desperate. Tell them to sit still whilst holding a live power cable, and they'd try it."

Largo's smile shrank back into his face. "I have, they don't." He stepped back onto a raised couch and swung up his legs to recline. "You'd better get them in here. We did make a bargain after all..." The enforcer made as if to leave. "Oh, by the way - I take it you had to tidy up after them?"

The tall man nodded. "But nothing they can trace back."

"I should hope not. We must try to keep it simple, musn't we?" The other's face was unreadable. Largo's voice hardened. "Bring them in."

The two figures that were hustled into the room made a marked contrast to Largo's studied foppishness. They were ragged and dirty, and there was a subdued sort of hysteria about them, a tautness that belied their youth. The female was slightly smaller than the male, but they held a likeness of form and movement. Their hair was cut short and coiled close to the scalp, and the woman's was shot through with grey streaks. Her movements were less fluid than those of her companion. There was something listless and crippled about her, and her eyes were quite dead, blasted from within. Both of the newcomers were barefoot.

Largo noted their entrance, but did not bother to raise his eyes from the precious stones. They had reached the foot of the couch before he acknowledged their presence. "You've done well."

It was a simple statement of fact, and required no reply. The male gave one anyway. "The owner didn't think so." His voice was sharp, quick.

Largo looked vaguely amused. "Did you kill him?"

"Were we supposed to?"

Largo shrugged. "It's tidy."

Resentment smeared into the other's voice. "Oh, it's easy to be tidy from where you sit, Largo." He made the name sound like a disease.

Largo's eyes flicked up and narrowed on him. "Don't get cocky, dreamhead."

Silence stretched. The girl put words into it. "That wasn't the deal..." Her voice seemed to die away, then came back. "The gems were the deal, you didn't tell us to kill - just take the gems."

The dreadful good humour came back as Largo wagged a reproving finger at her. He clicked his tongue. "Oh my dear - you must realise that the deal was whatever I say it was." Threat sidled its way into his movements. He whipped

the cover off a recessed tray and held up a membranous sphere about two centimetres across. A viscous golden fluid shifted sluggishly inside it. "I own you... dreamheads!" He watched them as they watched the sphere. The girl had become avid and hungry, the shift in her mood as obvious as it was total. She needed it so much. Despite herself she took a step forward, then another.

An admonishing hand stopped her in her tracks. Largo clicked his tongue again. "Not so fast..." His tone became wheedling and coy, like a parent scolding an errant child. "What do you say?"

The girl drew some of the hunger back. Her voice was clear and soft as her eyes watched, watched. "Please, Largo."

That wasn't enough for him. "Oh, come on - you need it more than that."

She stood frozen for a moment, fighting herself. Her hand seemed to raise itself of its own accord as the ragged man watched her, powerless to help. The words jerked from her. "Please, Largo..."

He rolled it round his fingers and enjoyed the swirl and interplay. "Pure Shadow." He met her eyes, savouring her delicious pain. "You won't just die without it, no..." He paused and smiled. "You'll die in terrified... agony." He placed the sphere beside him on the couch and watched avidly as she slumped forward, groping for it.

"Please..." It was at her fingertips but she dared not touch it, not yet. She grovelled before him.

Largo sighed. His fix was complete. He took her by the hair and flung her away almost casually. She had given him what he wanted. His interest shifted. "All right." His yellow eyes slid round onto the male, standing irresolutely. "Now, I want your brother to ask for it."

The brother didn't move or speak.

"Ask for it!" Largo cracked out.

The other raised a trembling palm and bowed his head. His voice sounded beaten, crushed. "Please, Largo."

Largo picked up the sphere and held it on his own flat palm. "One word from me, one word and - " His fingers curled, trapping the sphere. " - your supply is gone! Forever." He smiled slyly at the other's obvious distress. "That's all it takes, boy. It's very easy for you to die."

"You've been paid." It was a pathetic attempt to put honour back into the proceedings, some sense that was less than abject.

"Prove it," Largo countered. "There's no transaction record."

"I thought that honour was a big thing with the Terra Nostra."

"You thought wrong, boy." He held up the Shadow sphere again, delicately, between finger and thumb. "We own you, from your first tiny drop of Shadow."

The boy took a staggering step forward. "Please, Largo."

Largo nodded in satisfaction. "That's better, boy. You're our property now, learn to live with it or you'll certainly - " He stopped, gaping in almost comical amazement. The sphere dropped from nerveless fingers.

The blaster in the young man's hand was pointed at his face. He steadied it with his free hand as his voice struck out contemptuously. "Use Shadow? Me? Do I look that stupid, Largo? Do I?"

Largo's left hand crept down towards a concealed touch-button.

The boy caught the motion and gestured with the gun. "Oh, try it! Just give me an excuse." He spoke sidelong to the girl, without taking his eyes off Largo. "Hanna. Move it."

She swept by him and scooped up the sphere that Largo had dropped. Her eyes were wide and wanting. "The other two he promised..."

"Take them, and the gems."

She eased two more spheres out of the tray and placed them gingerly into a belt pouch before snatching up the draw-bag of jewels.

Largo watched them with a sort of amazed contempt. "Nobody steals from the Terra Nostra."

"We're innovators," the boy said shortly.

"You're dead," he replied. It was a statement of fact.

"Hanna. Out," the boy ordered. "Casually - don't run." She obeyed as he turned back to Largo. "Now you, face down. Quickly!"

Largo saw death like a shadow in the air. He rolled over onto his chest, moving with awkward fear. He could feel the gun breathing down his neck.

"Good Largo. Very good. Now close your eyes."

Largo squeezed his eyes shut.

"Now stay like that."

Largo obeyed the disembodied voice. He heard a faint sound of movement, then what sounded like his apartment door sliding to. He stretched out a foot towards the touch-button.

The boy's voice sounded on cue. "Go ahead and try it. Killing a Terra Nostra pusher will be the best fun I've had all day."

Largo drew his foot back gingerly.

"You stupid murdering scumball."

The communication's recording was quite indistinguishable from the real thing. Particularly when the listener had his eyes closed.

The boy caught up to Hanna in the main Transom corridor. She was panting with exertion and fear, and her voice was flat and hopeless.

"They'll catch us." Her pupils were dilated from the lift.

"No they won't." He took her by the shoulders. "Get Petey, meet me at Launch Grid Six in twenty minutes."

She didn't seem to hear him. "Nobody gets away from them. Nobody."

"We will." He tried to inject as much certainty as possible into his voice. "I can get a ship."

She focused on him blearily. "Ship? But launch clearance - what about launch clearance?"

"The crew on Grid Six are for sale."

She hung her head. "It's too late, Bek." Some inner pain made her wince. "There's no time left."

Bek played his last card. "Listen, Han - will you listen?" He shook her to get her attention again. "You know what she told me, don't you?"

She managed a faint nod.

"She told me to look after you and Petey - and that's just what I'm trying to do. Grid Six, twenty minutes - right?"

She nodded again. "Right."

He managed a half-smile. "Good. Don't be late." He watched her until she vanished down a transit shaft. Only then did he allow something of his worry to show. He gazed out of a nearby viewport for a second. Reflected starlight dazzled him. It was a ship on slow vector approach. A real beauty of a ship, he thought. He watched it wistfully before the sound of approaching feet made him start and hurry away.

The ship was indeed a beauty. White fluted metal swept forward in a four-point from a spherical green drive unit. It slowed as the point of stationary orbit was achieved.

It was called *Liberator*. The name was more an intent of purpose than mere decoration. It had been lifted from the mind of the woman who now piloted the

ship. Her name was Jenna, and the ship had been her liberator then. Now the purpose was a unified one, others shared it. She eased back on a pair of control arms as the light from various tell-tales speckled her face, putting streaks of pure white into her hair. "Approach completed." Her touch with the ship was almost sensual in its closeness. She always broke it reluctantly.

The image of the city was centred on the main viewscreen.

Gan looked up from his own trackers. "All vectors are matched and holding," he confirmed. His voice was deep and mellow. He was a big man, slightly running to fat, and possessed of a gentleness that seemed incongruous in view of his obvious strength. He smiled across at Jenna, understanding her feelings.

"Power down... now." Cally's voice interrupted their reverie. She was a startlingly elfin-looking woman, dark hair framing the gaunt face. Her eyes were green and lustrous, shadowed in the relative darkness of the flight deck.

"Switching to automatics." Jenna matched actions to words, relaxing as she relinquished control. She smiled back at Gan.

Lights sprang on and shifted in a large curved section, set off to the left of the viewscreen. Bars and lines of light inflected a deep and resonant voice: "Confirm all systems functioning. Status is firm."

"Thanks, Zen." The voice was quick and crafty, and matched perfectly the character of its owner. Vila leaned forward conspiratorially. "Could you give us a closer view, please?" He was a small, puckish-faced man, his studied innocence concealing perpetual guilt.

The viewpoint expanded, sharpened. The domes and walkways came into sharp relief.

"Very pretty," Gan observed.

"I know," Jenna said drily, giving him a look. "Piloting wasn't bad either." She transferred her attention to the tall figure sprawled carelessly in the forward circle of seats. "Well, Blake?"

He sat up a little straighter, stroked his chin thoughtfully. "So that is Space City." He was a strongly-built, curly-haired man. His cause had become his lifeblood, the very meaning for being, resisting the Federation, fighting its advance. It made him brash and difficult sometimes. He looked around as Vila put in his word.

"Also known as the satellite of sin."

"By whom?" It was another voice, sharp and arrogant.

"Me," said Vila simply, eyes glued to the screen.

"It had to be someone of limited imagination." Avon's voice suited him too. He was a sharp-featured man, bitter and ascerbic, with a lazy, threatening smile. He smiled now, vaguely amused by Vila's continued enthusiasm.

"Pick a pleasure - any pleasure."

"- and you'll find it for sale in Space City." Jenna finished it for him. Her expression was an odd mixture, unreadable. Gan moved by her to stand beside Zen. Even he was dwarfed by the glittering fascia.

Blake stood. He spoke without looking at Vila. "For sale - if you've got the money."

Gan folded his arms. "And if you can stomach doing business with the Terra Nostra." He looked directly at Blake.

It was obviously an old argument. Blake sighed. "We are going to use them, Gan. Not do business with them."

"A subtle distinction that escapes me for the moment."

Blake met Avon's flat stare. He spoke with mock astonishment. "Don't tell me you have a moral objection to using their organisation to infiltrate Earth?" Avon's views on morality were rather flexible.

Avon dropped his eyes. "Of course not."

"Well I have." There was honest concern in Gan's eyes. He was a strongly principled man, and the thought of dealing with pushers and extortionists worried him.

Blake tried not to be impatient with him. "Think, Gan - think what we could do with a fraction of the resources they control."

Gan wasn't convinced. "No. You think, Blake - think what it is they control." Disgust was in his face. "Everything dirty, degraded and cruel on just about every civilised world."

"Civilised world?" Avon mocked him. "How do you define civilised?"

Gan ignored him. He looked askance at Blake.

"Earth is all I'm interested in - that has to be our first priority, Gan. It has to be." He spoke decisively as if trying to convince himself. "They have men, materials, information. For the moment we need them: it's as simple as that."

Vila tried to lighten the mood a bit. "The Terra Nostra aren't responsible for everything, Gan. I could go out and murder someone now and it wouldn't be their fault." He paused, assumed a dubious expression. "Mind you - if I picked his pocket afterwards, they'd want their cut."

"It's largely academic anyway." Avon's laconic drawl made Vila turn to him. "I don't think we'll get within shouting distance of them."

Vila seemed almost indignant at the idea. "The Terra Nostra run Space City!"

Cally moved to stand beside him, looking puzzled. "How can you be sure of that? You say they're a criminal organisation who work in secret." Vila started to speak, but another voice cut in over him.

"They work in secret on Earth and the other federated worlds," stated Blake.

"Where they organise crime," put in Gan. He still sounded disgruntled.

Blake grimaced. "Space City itself is... neutral territory. Not officially run by the Terra Nostra but - " He spread his hands. " - it's an open secret." Disbelief made Cally's voice sharp. "A neutral base for an outlawed organisation?"

Blake nodded. "Presumably it has its uses."

Vila gave a dirty grin. "Entertainment for example," he said chirpily.

Jenna eyed him balefully. "Why don't you take a cold shower or something?"

He looked distressed. "What? And risk being left behind when we go and visit your friend Largo?"

She gave him an unfriendlier look, full of frost. "Largo is no friend of mine." It was a literal hiss. "I'm usually choosier about the company I keep." Vila looked hurt as she continued, addressing all of them now. "When I met him on Callisto, he... neglected to mention that he was an Organisation man. All he said was he wanted me to run a cargo into Earth." She paused, remembering. "Didn't tell me what it was at first."

"Was it drugs?" asked Gan.

"Shadow. The worst. I turned him down."

"Sensible." Avon said it mildly. "Possession carries a mandatory death sentence."

"That wasn't the reason, Avon. I doubt you'd understand."

He met her hostile stare blandly. "No?"

"Navigation computers are receiving an interrogation signal from Space City Traffic Approach Control."

Blake turned to look at the Zen computer. "About time - request stand-off clearance." He inclined his head to the lissome figure at Vila's shoulder. "Cally, stand by in the teleporrt." He made for the flight deck exit as she preceded him. He spoke over his shoulder as he moved. "Jenna, get on the comm. and try to contact your 'friend' Largo. Avon, Gan, get ready too. We're going on an outing. Zen, activate vector co-ordinators."

Blake's progress towards the exit was halted as a small, concerned party insinuated himself in the way. "What about me?" enquired Vila.

"You're staying here - where I can find you if I need you."

Vila looked aghast. "But that's Space City over there - one of my all-time great ambitions!"

"You'd probably be disappointed." Blake's voice was gentle, amused.

"I'll take the chance."

Blake patted his shoulder paternally. "I'd never forgive myself, Vila." His face was a little too straight as he strode through the exit arch and away.

A disconsolate little figure stared after him.

Bek saw her as the entry port sliced back. She was sitting clasping her knees and staring at the shapeless bundle that filled one corner of the space. "Han! Twenty minutes I said - that launch crew goes off shift in an hour..." He registered something missing. "And where's Petey?"

Hanna didn't move. She kept staring at the bundle.

Bek followed her eyes but didn't understand for a moment. "I asked where Petey..." His voice tailed away as understanding came. Pain with it. "How?"

She didn't answer, kept staring.

"How?" His voice had died to a mere gasp. Anger gave depth to it. He snatched something from a nearby pile of junk and thrust his fist before her eyes. "That's how!" His fingers unclenched slowly to reveal one of the spheres.

Hanna stared past him. Through him. "He didn't take any more. He didn't need another lift for twelve hours, at least twelve hours, he just... just died..." Her voice tailed away. She was too smashed to cope with the enormity of it all.

Bek was fully aware. "Just died?" He took her arm, willing her to understand. "That's what Shadow does - it kills you!"

She shook off his hand with a sudden spurt of energy, looked at him with an odd sort of defiance. "You think I don't know that?"

It was beyond him. "Then why, Han? Why so stupid?" There was the beginning of a sob in his voice as he unwrapped the shapeless bundle in the corner. A young boy's face came into view, the features oddly composed through the ravages of Shadow. "Stupid Petey." He covered the face and put one hand up to his eyes. "I was supposed to look after you, both of you..." There were no words to say and he turned away, bowing his head.

Anger put a wretched light back into his eyes. He knew the cause of it, the root of the evil. "Largo." The gun appeared from a belt pouch as he stood up.

"Bek." The girl looked up at him bleakly, with the beginning of fear.

"What?"

"This won't help Petey."

"It'll help me." Suddenly it was the only thing that mattered.

She clutched at him as fear took hold. "But what about me?"

He looked down at her imploring face. Pity and disgust mixed themselves on his face. "You! You don't count any more!"

Neither of them heard the hatch slide back. Their attention was elsewhere.

Bek spat the words down in her face. "Remember - you're already dead!" He spun on his heel and took a step towards the door. One step only.

The enforcer's gun was centred on his chest. It didn't waver as the man spoke mildly. "Death must run in your family." He inclined his head. "Shed the gun. Carefully."

Bek dropped it. The enforcer smiled coldly. His voice matched the smile.

"Largo wants you two. Very badly."

## TWO A pro keeps it simple

VILA WAS trying a different approach. "Blake's wrong - you know that, don't you?"

Cally was immune. "I know how you feel, Vila." She bustled around recording instrument readings on a clipboard, trying not to grin as she did so. Vila could be so... compelling when he had a mind to it. Or half a mind even.

He looked puzzled for a moment, then his face cleared. "No, I don't mean about leaving me behind - though I've wanted to go to Space City ever since I was old enough to read the graffiti in the juvenile detention wards - it isn't that. I don't care about that."

The grin almost got past Cally's self-control. "No, of course you don't."

Vila was all wounded sincerity. "It's true!"

Cally gave him her own wide-eyed and innocent look. "Was I arguing?" She turned away from him again and began to check on the auto vectors. The relative vectors were holding firm -

"I'm not talking about that." Vila was trying again. "What I'm talking about is his great plan to enlist the help of the Terra Nostra. Great plan! I'm telling you - it'll be a disaster."

Cally shooed him out of her way. "He plans to buy their help, Vila. There is a difference."

Vila looked dubious. "Buy their help... the Nostra! I'm telling you - it won't work."

Some edge of his manner got through to Cally finally. "Why didn't you say anything before?"

"Nobody ever listens to me - ever! Does anyone ever listen to me?" He slumped in a chair. "It's all going to fall apart."

"Relax, Vila. The others know what they're doing."

"You don't know the Nostra, Cally."

She continued making notations on the board. "I do know Blake."

Vila wasn't swayed. "He's led a very sheltered life, y'know."

Cally's mouth dropped open. "Blake has led a sheltered life?"

Vila nodded, warming to his subject. "He's strictly a fluffy-cheeked amateur compared to some of those boys."

"I think Blake can take care of himself."

"Listen, Cally." Vila tried in vain to catch her eye. "Blake was an Alpha grade on Earth. Very privileged group - wouldn't last five minutes in the Delta service grades where I grew up."

She was still studiously ignoring him. He tried to put some more urgency into his voice. "And it's the service grades where the Nostra really operate. Without anaesthetic, usually." He shivered, remembering one or two cases in point. Very sharp point. There had been that Viridian chef who'd refused to endorse a front for the Nostra. A real perfectionist that one - really put his heart into his work.

Vila shrugged himself out of the memories and became aware that Cally was speaking to him. "What?"

"I said 'No' Vila, and I mean it. I'm not going to operate the teleport."

"I don't understand."

"Oh yes you do." She made an airy gesture. "You're just about to suggest that it would be a... sensible idea for me to put you across - just so you could give the others the benefit of your experience, of course."

Vila brightened. "I hadn't thought of that. What a very good idea, Cally... Cally?"

He was talking to her back as she made for the exit arch.

"I'm going to get myself a drink. Be sure to call me if anything happens."



He made one final attempt. "Please, Cally." She didn't reply. He turned away in disgust. "Miserable alien," he muttered sulkily. "I just want to see what it's like."

"Information: Main Visual is now available."

An image of the city expanded on the main viewscreen.

Vila looked at it confusedly. "What?"

"You expressed a desire to see what it is like." Zen's voice sounded especially plummy.

Vila wasn't amused. "Very funny, Zen. Chuckle chuckle." His voice was utterly deadpan. He made a face. "If you were a decent computer you'd be able to operate the teleport like Orac can..."

Light dawned slowly. "Like Orac can!" He sprang to his feet and scurried over to a low table, set within the forward circle of seats. A squared-off container of transparent plastic held a seemingly haphazard jumble of components, wires and circuit boards. Although dormant, there was a strange sense of activity about it. Vila hovered over it, and rubbed his hands together. "Key, key, key," he said rapidly. He pounced on a small square of metal and plastic lying on a corner of the table. "Ah, key!" He clipped it into a recessed space on top of the box. Lights sprang on and chased themselves around the interior, a restive sort of grumble emanated from the machine, like a sustained expression of bad temper.

Vila peered into it closely, frowned. "Orac? Orac! Are you in there, Orac?"

A peevish voice tetchd out from the centre of the circuits. "Am I in where?" The voice got crabby. "What do you take me for? Some sort of tame rodent in a cage?"

"That's precisely what I take you for - a rat in a box."

"I see no point in continuing this conversation." The grumbling sound began to die away."

Vila spoke urgently. "Now then, Orac - don't get sulky." He poised his hand over the inert square. "Or I'll switch you off and throw away the key."

The noise climbed and steadied. "Soon, that will no longer be a problem." The voice held a disquieting edge of smugness.

"Eh? What did you say?"

Orac ignored the question. "Well?" it said crisply. "What do you want?"

Vila glanced around sneakily before bending low over the box. "Orac," he whispered, sidelong and quiet. "I've got a little job for you..."

Gan moved stealthily down the main Transom corridor, surprisingly quiet despite his size.

One of the *Liberator's* cable blasters was in his hand. One finger of the gun hand kept a steady pressure upon the transceiver button of his teleport bracelet. Voices came through tinnily but perfectly audible.

"I don't think you need to know specific details of our plans at this stage." Avon's rasping drawl was unmistakable.

"As you say..." Largo sounded all sweet reason and understanding.

Avon had decided at an early stage that he didn't care for this man. Meeting him only served to reinforce the opinion. He made an obvious attempt to keep the dislike out of his face as he looked at Largo. "In effect, we want to buy co-operation and expertise from the Earth-based network." Blake sat quietly behind him, watching and listening.

Largo looked vaguely puzzled. "So why are you telling me all this?"

Jenna's right hand was resting casually upon her own bracelet, depressing the button to allow Gan to listen in. She spoke matter-of-factly. "We don't

know who runs the Terra Nostra. Possibly you don't either - but you do know how to get our proposition to them."

Largo shifted back on his couch. "A go-between, you mean? How very quaint."

Blake watched him narrowly and passed a draw-string bag into Avon's waiting hand. Avon weighed it and looked thoughtful. The look wasn't lost on Blake.

Avon dangled the bag from finger and thumb to get Largo's attention. "Naturally, we would be prepared to pay for your services."

Largo smirked unpleasantly, covered the expression with a beringed hand. "Please forgive me Blake, all of you... but one of the reasons I made my home in a Free City like this is because I adore eccentrics."

Jenna took a deep breath. "Do we take it you're not interested?"

"Oh, I'm fascinated," he gushed. "But I'm just an independent businessman."

Avon slid the gemstones out of the bag and laid them beside him on the couch. They were Antarean Frost Diamonds, very rare and precious. "Are you sure?" he asked, not quite smiling.

Largo couldn't quite conceal the tinge of greed that sprang to his eyes. He didn't quite grab the stones.

Blake watched the display. Only a slight compression of the lips revealed his emotions. Avon watched blandly,

Largo watched his breath evaporate off a silky surface. He raised his eyes reluctantly. "Look, the Terra Nostra doesn't exist. It's nothing but a fabrication, a phantom..." He groped for words.

Jenna helped him. "A shadow?"

He gave her a piercing look. "A myth," he said definitively. "A legend."

Jenna pushed the point. "It's a legend that a lot of people believe in."

"Yet you *know* it doesn't exist." Avon subjected Largo to a piercing look of his own. "Why are you so sure?"

Largo's affable mask was wearing a bit thin; he did his best though. "I've got a contact in Federation security - if the Syndicate did exist, then he'd be sure to know about it, wouldn't he?"

Jenna frowned. "This contact of yours - he wouldn't happen to be the one who arrested me after I refused your cargo?"

Avon smiled at her and at Largo's obvious bewilderment.

Largo didn't meet her eyes. "That was a mistake, Jenna." Wounded pride showed in his eyes. "The whole thing was a mistake. I was running that shipment as a favour to a friend. If I'd known it was Shadow, I wouldn't have touched it myself."

Avon spoke very gently, but there was an edge of threat somewhere. "You didn't answer the question, Largo."

Largo became aware of the pervading feeling in the room. He spoke almost plaintively. "Why do I feel as if I'm on trial here?"

Avon was turning away as he spoke. "Why do I feel as though you should be?" He scooped up the gems as he turned, and replaced them in the pouch.

Largo spoke quickly. "Just a moment."

Avon stopped, turned back.

Largo licked his lips. "Er... I'm a bit of a collector myself you know, in a modest way. Those are beautiful stones you have there. I was thinking I could make you an offer."

Avon smiled but his eyes remained bleak. "An offer we can't refuse? No thanks." He weighed the stones in his hand. Besides - they have a sentimental value."

Largo looked disappointed. "Oh dear. Family heirlooms are they?"

Avon's smile faded. "No. I'm just sentimental about money." He faced Blake. "We're wasting our time with him."

Blake stood up slowly and stretched. "Yes, I think you're right." He snapped his fingers and held out a hand, palm up. Avon gave him an exasperated look, and deposited the pouch into it.

Blake took a step towards Largo. "I'm sorry we couldn't do business. Another time perhaps?"

Largo palmed the touch button. "At least let me offer you some refreshment." Jenna's dislike of the man showed openly now. "We didn't come here for refreshment."

The three of them made for the door.

"Oh, but I insist." Largo's voice was no longer gentle or urbane.

The door slid back before them and the enforcer was framed in the gap. His gun snouted up at them. "The man insists," he said.

Blake spoke loudly for Gan's benefit. "Seems we should have listened to Gan in the first place. He was right after all." He found himself delivering the message face-to-face as Gan was pushed into the room on the point of another gun. He looked dishevelled and far from happy.

Largo's hand swept down in a nerve chop, numbing Jenna's arm. He snatched the bracelet off her wrist, and met Blake's murderous look with a calm one of his own. "Amateurs," he murmured condescendingly. "A pro keeps it simple."

### THREE Gunship diplomacy

THE FLIGHT deck seemed oddly still and silent. The automatics whirred and clicked away to themselves but these were merely background noises, irrelevant and insubstantial. Shadows seemed to linger on the empty seats and consoles.

A figure dressed in pure white appeared suddenly in the entry arch. The shadows seemed to fall back at her approach, gathering in the corners and crannies. The figure spoke.

"Vila?"

There was no response.

"Vila - where are you?"

No reply.

Cally marched up to the gently flashing fascia set to the right of the arch. "Where is he, Zen?" she asked, sounding vaguely annoyed. "I left him on watch."

"He is no longer on the ship."

"But he must be!" she protested.

"He teleported into the city with the assistance of the one called Orac."

Cally's lips tightened. "I forgot about Orac."

As far as it was possible, Zen's plummy tones registered disapproval. "The one called Orac is not concerned for the safety of the Liberator."

Cally took a look around the room. "Where is Orac, then? He can't be in the teleport section because I just came from there."

"In return for the remote activation of the teleport system, Vila conveyed the one called Orac to another part of the Liberator."

"Which part? Where?"

She felt the noise in her mind at first, a dull droning like immense power held in check. A voice spoke out of the mush of sound. It was thick, throaty and distorted, but recognisably Orac. "Be silent!"

Lights died in Zen as the sounds faded to nothing.

Shadow crept up over Cally's face. "Orac?"

No sound.

"Zen!"

Nothing.

She moved over to a communication deck and thumbed the transceiver. "Vila, this is Cally."

Static.

"Come in please... Vila!"

There was another maddening delay before his voice came back fuzzily. "What do you want, Cally?" He sounded more than a little drunk and utterly preoccupied.

One of her fingers marked a tattoo on the comm. housing. She spoke briskly. "I want you back here, now!"

His voice registered mild distress. "Aw, c'mon Cally - don't get mad..."

She controlled herself with an effort. "Get ready to teleport, Vila. I'm bringing you back across."

"Wasting your time, Cally." She could imagine him smiling smugly. "I'm not wearing my bracelet. I'm not going to be snatched away in the middle of..." His voice died away in a moan of sheer pleasure, came back sounding rather strained. "In the middle of anything... whew! Sight-seeing... and you should see some of the sights I'm seeing..." The voice faded away again, resumed after a beat. "But no - p'r'aps you shouldn't... you've led a sheltered life as well..."

"Vila! Where is Orac?"

"I promised not to tell. I never break a promise, you know..."

Cally's expression promised violence. "Oh yes you do."

"Almost never," Vila hedged. "Orac's all right - can't run away can he?"

Cally looked extremely annoyed. "Oh, you fool Vila!"

"Relax, Cally - stop worrying. I'll be back soon." The voice seemed to hit inspiration, mental and physical. "Tell you what - I'll bring you back a present! Anything Cally - name it and it's yours."

She bit her lip and leaned forward. "I'd like a necklace please Vila... made from your teeth!" She broke the connection savagely and walked away across the deck.

Shadow fell suddenly, before and behind her. The sound came back. A gloating, hungry sound that advanced with the veils of dark.

She felt it in her mind. Words followed, clawing their way behind her eyes. A single syllable surfaced above the others.

"No...!"

She recognised some vestige of the voice. "Orac?" She peered through the gathering shadows. "Is that you?"

Words seemed to surface from the gobbling roar. "I shall destroy the life support system if you attempt to find me..."

Puzzlement put more darkness into her eyes. "Why are you doing this?"

The cell was blank and featureless, blank walls, floor, ceiling. The door was an almost invisible line in the wall. Gan turned from his examination of the seam with a gesture of disgust. "I don't think even Vila could open that."

Avon had his back to one of the walls. He didn't reply.

"What do you think they'll do with us?"

His eyes flicked up. "A pro keeps it simple' - I imagine they'll kill us. You can't get much simpler than that."

Gan looked rueful. "Sorry, Avon."

"That makes all the difference." Avon's voice was utterly deadpan. Gan looked mystified.

"I just can't think how they spotted me."

Another voice mimicked him. "I can't think how they spotted me." Two voices laughed together. It was unnatural laughter, bordering on hysteria. Avon and Gan turned together and looked at them other two occupants of the cell. They were sitting facing each other, backs against opposite walls. They were ragged and dirty and shivering - the ambient temperature was several degrees lower here.

"Something amuses you?" Avon rasped out.

Bek waved a dismissive hand at Gan. "You were using him as a lookout - look at the size of him! He'd really blend into the scenery, wouldn't he?" He looked at Gan scornfully. "You should expect to be taken if you put up a sign."

Avon walked over, stopped between the two of them. He addressed Bek, but most of his attention was on Hanna. "Is that what you two did, or is Largo just giving you sleeping space?"

Hanna seemed on the edge of fever. She smiled bleakly at Avon as he knelt beside her. "We made a fool out of him."

Avon made a point of looking around the cell. "Obviously."

She was too far gone to recognise sarcasm. "That's why we haven't been killed yet. He's making an example of us."

"Shut up, Han." Bek bowed his head into his hands. "It's none of their business."

Gan spoke up from behind them. "Isn't it? If they're making an example of you."

"Not to outsiders! You don't know much about the Nostra, do you?"

"Do you?" Avon asked mildly. He tilted Hanna's chin upward and stared into her dead eyes. Dreamhead, he thought. Just another dreamhead.

Bek's voice broke through his reverie. "Leave her alone!" He continued to speak as Avon looked at him. "Listen. Largo is on his way up in the ranks. All it takes is one sign of weakness and he'll be on his way down again - probably minus his head."

Gan exchanged glances with Avon. "There's a happy thought."

"It's a pity we won't live to see it."

"We're not dead yet." Gan began to pace the cell, searching for a weakness that wasn't there.

Avon stood up and watched him. "Largo hasn't got what he wants. Yet."

The high-pitched tone of an incoming communication sounded abnormally loud in the silence of the flight deck.

Cally thumbed the talkback. "This is Cally."

"This is Blake, Cally." There was something subtly wrong with his voice, she frowned. "We've made a deal with Largo."

"Blake, we may have a problem," she interrupted.

"Later, Cally - this is more important." Blake's voice was full of urgency now. She bit her lip and listened. "As I said, we've made a deal, but we need the rest of the money as a demonstration of good faith." The phrasing was uncharacteristic. "They don't entirely trust our motives yet, y'see."

Nothing of her suspicion showed in her voice. "Yes, I do see, Blake. Do you want all the money?"

The scene in Largo's apartments was a bizarre one, elaborately staged. Blake leaned forward to speak into the bracelet. "Yes, Cally. All of it!" His hands were manacled behind him. Largo held the bracelet to his face. To Blake's left, Jenna was threatened by the enforcer's gun. Her hands were also manacled. "Have Zen bring it across, would you?" continued Blake as casually as he could.

Largo gave a snort of anger and took his finger off the bracelet transceiver. "It must be a trick. Kill them!"

Speech was the only weapon remaining to Blake. He used it quickly as the enforcer took first pressure. "Wait! Wait a moment! Why do you think it's a trick?"

Largo rocked his head back with an open-handed blow. "You must take me for a fool."

"Must I?" Blake said muzzily. He shook his head to clear it.

"Zen can't leave your ship."

Jenna looked at Largo in disbelief. How could he possibly...? Her face cleared as he continued to speak.

"Your shuttlecraft's here in the city."

Blake took a deep breath. "We carry more than one shuttle."

"Oh really." Largo looked curious., "How many?"

"Four," said Blake, trying to make it sound genuine.

Largo smiled. "Let's see if you're telling the truth, shall we?" He looked up at the enforcer. "Be ready. Kill them if she makes a mistake." The enforcer nodded.

Largo thumbed the button. "Hello, Cally. This is Largo speaking - I was wondering, do you want us to send your shuttle back or one of ours? Depends on the type of docking system, you understand. Well?"

Cally's voice came back promptly. "Neither. It is not necessary."

"Oh. And why not?"

"We have another shuttle."

"Another shuttle... quite a ship you have there. Tell me - " He took a glance at Blake. " - how many shuttles do you carry, then?"

Silence grew and lengthened. Several hundred spacials away, Cally was on the horns of a dilemma. "He's testing me," she decided.

The silver bubbles of Space City were centred on the main viewscreen. She pursed her lips as she looked at it. "Probably too far away..." She had to try, though, for their sakes.

She closed her eyes and raised a hand to her temples, groping for the mind touch. The flight deck seemed to recede as she concentrated, she tried to ignore the growing sense of evil about her as she reached... reached...

Blake didn't react as Cally's voice spoke in his head.

"Blake... hear me Blake... I shall count... when I reach the right number you will call my name..."

Largo watched Blake. The beginnings of a sneer curled his lips.

Blake stared straight ahead and listened with his mind.

"One... two... three... four..."

He spoke quickly. "Cally, are you still there?"

Her voice came over the transceiver. "Sorry, you faded for a moment. What was it you asked?"

Largo leaned closer to the bracelet. "I was just wondering how many shuttles you carried."

"Four. Is it important?"

He smirked. "We'll be expecting your man Zen." He broke the connection with a flourish and looked up at the enforcer. "But he won't be expecting us." The voice hardened. "We shan't be needing their other two friends after all. Kill them." He enjoyed Blake's reaction.

The enforcer indicated Blake and Jenna. "What about these two?"

Largo gave a death's head grin. "We'll keep them for a while. Just until we're sure."

Cally walked quickly across to the weapons console. She had already decided on what course of action to take, but she did need help.

She spoke into the darkness. "Orac. I need Zen. I promise that I will ask no questions..." She waited for a moment for the result of her plea.

Lights began to flicker and dance in Zen's curved fascia. She breathed a sigh of relief and began to bring the console fully on line, giving instructions as she did so. "Put up the force wall, activate the radiation flare shield, and clear the neutron blasters for firing."

Zen's voice was oddly comforting. "Completed. Neutron blasters are cleared for firing."

"Give me a voice channel to the city's central control."

"Confirmed."

A business-like voice crackled over the link a second or two later. "Central control, central control - state your business if you please."

Cally thumbed the talkback. "This is... the weaponry officer on the battle cruiser *Liberator*."

The voice became impatient. "Is it? Well this is the duty officer, and your computer just took over a priority channel. Whatever you do want, it better be important."

Cally spoke clearly and matter-of-factly. "Four of my friends are being held prisoner in your city. Unless they are released at once, I shall open fire on you."

The voice became human and amused. "Listen lady, you should stop drinking in those cheap dives. You'll go blind eventually."

Cally wasn't in the mood. "Zen, report battle computer status to central control."

"Anticipated. The central computer is now registering the data."

The voice came back, quick and serious. "Okay, okay. So you're at battle stations." It registered disbelief. "You don't expect us to believe that you'd - "

Cally cut him off. "A man called Largo is holding my friends," she told him. "You have five minutes in which to release them."

"You can't be serious."

"I was never more so. You have four minutes and fifty-five seconds."

"Detectors indicate high speed approach," announced Zen.

"Scan," she ordered.

Zen's operational hum increased in pitch. "Gunship. Manoeuvring for attack position."

Cally poised her hand over the blaster controls. "Warn them off."

"Warning ignored."

"Lock blasters on main drive unit."

"Target identified and ranged."

"Warn them again."

"Warning ignored. They are pressing their attack."

Cally looked resigned. "Well, I gave them a chance." Her finger stabbed down on the firing button.

Eye-aching light spat out of *Liberator's* forward nacelle, centred on the oncoming ship. There was a violent explosion and the ship began to yaw and pinwheel, completely out of control. Cally watched as it vanished off the viewscreen.

The duty officer's voice came back. "Hold your fire!" he squawked frantically.

Cally pressed the talkback. "Central, I warn you. The next shot will be right down your throats." She looked at her wrist-chrono. "You have three minutes and thirty seconds left."

The seam widened and the cell-door slid back into the wall. The enforcer stood framed in the gap, his gun like an extension of his arm. "You two - out!" He motioned Avon and Gan to move away from the other two. Bek and Hanna stood frozen, watching.

They raised their hands and moved. "Where are we going?" asked Avon.

"You'd prefer not to know."

Avon grimaced. "Your professional simplicity is beginning to irritate me."

"Just think of it as a temporary problem. Get moving." He turned, angling the gun and preparing to follow them out.

Bek swept Hanna's legs from under her. She screamed as he fell with her, shielding her with his body.

The enforcer swung the gun back on them. The movement was startled and ill-considered. He paid the price for it as Avon's hands chopped down on his wrist. The gun went skittering across the floor and the enforcer flew after it under the force of Gan's blow. The enforcer fetched up against the far wall and took no further interest in the proceedings. Gan dusted his hands as Avon scooped up the gun. "Simple enough for you?" he enquired of the prone body.

Hanna stared up at them, nerveless and cold. "Don't stand around. There's more where he came from."

Largo was beginning to chafe at the delay. He swung round as the approach chime signalled the opening of his apartment door. Gan and Avon charged in as the door came fully open.

Largo brought his own gun up to bear, but he was a fraction too slow as Blake's boots caught him in the small of the back. The kick sent him sprawling

forward, and Gan's fist smashed down on his head. He was unconscious before he hit the polished floor.

Blake straightened and flexed his back. "Your sense of timing is as impeccable as ever."

Avon fished the key from Largo's pocket, and retrieved the gems at the same time. "I have always admired your patience," he replied as he opened the wrist manacles. He tossed the key to Gan so he could do the same for Jenna.

The communicator signalled shrilly. Blake moved to answer it. He noticed Bek and Hanna as he moved. Bek had picked up Largo's gun. He levelled it at the fallen man.

"Leave it!" Blake's shout made Bek hesitate.

Avon backed up his words with a gun. "You heard the man."

Bek moved the gun off line as Blake turned back to the comm. "This is Largo," he said.

The voice of the harassed duty officer came through fast and furious. "You're holding prisoners. Release them."

"What?"

"Release them. We've got a mad woman up here threatening to destroy the city. Get those people back to their ship!"

"Must I?" said Blake happily.

The voice became apoplectic. "Do, it Largo! She means it."

Blake grinned. Hell hath no fury, he thought. He accepted a teleport bracelet from Jenna and clipped it round his wrist.

Jenna looked him in the eye. "I think we've overstayed our welcome."

"Agreed." He moved to join the others and raised the bracelet to his lips. "All right, Cally. We're ready to come across."

Bek took a step towards him, Hanna trailing along behind. "We'll come with you."

Blake lowered his hand to his side. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry!" Bek ignored the implied threat of Avon's gun and raised Largo's blaster to point at them. "Polite but inadequate. We can't stay here, so you're not going to leave without us."

They faded and vanished before his eyes.

"I think they went without us." Hanna looked up at Bek, almost enjoying his bewildered look.

He lowered the gun slowly. "There's gratitude for you," he muttered.

"Gratitude? You point a gun at them and expect gratitude?" She stirred the supine figure of Largo with her toes. "Maybe we could use him as a hostage..."

Disgust appeared in Bek's face. "Use him? After this foul-up?" He levelled the gun again and took first pressure on the firing stud. "We wouldn't get a drink of water in exchange for him."

He was interrupted once more as a nearby section of air seemed to solidify. Blake reappeared. If he noticed Bek's threatening attitude he gave no sign of it. "I changed my mind."

Bek couldn't help being suspicious. "Why?"

Hanna grabbed the teleport bracelet that Blake offered. "Do we care?"

Blake handed a bracelet to Bek. "You may be able to help me with a member of my crew. His name is Vila."

"What's wrong with him?" He clipped the bracelet around his wrist.

"A severe attack of alcoholic remorse." Blake raised his own bracelet to his lips. "Ready, Cally."

"Meaning what?" Bek looked curious.

"Meaning he wants to make a necklace of his teeth."

The teleport effect caught them up and they vanished.

## FOUR Different approaches

LIBERATOR PUT several star systems between itself and Space City before Blake ordered a reduction in speed.

"Aft scanners, Zen," he ordered. Bek watched the glowing fascia respond.

"Scan negative. There is no indication of pursuit."

Blake waited as Jenna made a thorough examination of her controls. "No effect on the flight systems, then?"

She shook her head. "Everything's functioning perfectly." She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Imagination?"

He made a face. "Not like Cally."

"It's not like Orac, either."

Gan's entrance forestalled his reply. "Any luck?"

"No, there's no sign of Orac. Not anywhere." Gan smiled ruefully, a little embarrassed. "I even tried calling his name."

"Oh, I'm sorry I missed that." Avon slid into his seat as they all turned to look at him. "It's the sort of natural stupidity that no amount of training could ever hope to match."

Blake exchanged a weary look with Gan. "You found Orac, I take it?"

Avon didn't rise to the jibe. "No. But then I never really expected to." He settled back into the supports. "It is one of Vila's more elaborate practical jokes."

Gan could have named one or two more elaborate examples. He settled for making an enquiry of Bek. "How long before he comes round?"

Bek seemed to be enjoying their byplay. It took him a moment to answer the question. "Your friend Vila?"

Gan nodded.

"Several hours - and he won't feel much like laughing when he does."

Blake's expression was exceeding grim. "I'll guarantee that."

"He won't feel much like anything, in fact."

"We're used to that." Blake became business-like. "Right. We've wasted enough time. Let's go back to the Terra Nostra."

"Back?" Gan looked astounded. "We've only just managed to get away from them!"

Blake took on a philosophical expression. "We chose the wrong approach. That's all."

"That's all? I thought maybe we'd chosen the wrong people to get involved with."

Avon caught Blake's eye. "We chose the wrong approach."

Blake looked at him coldly. "I chose the wrong approach. Does it matter?"

"Yes it does." Avon's expression was equally cold.

"All right, Avon. You were right and I was wrong." Blake's body language displayed irritation. "You said co-operation wouldn't work, and it didn't." He calmed himself and leaned against the edge of a console. "So now we use force."

"Force?" Avon raised an eyebrow. His voice was almost cheerful. "Yes, of course." He spread his hands. "Law-makers, law-breakers. Let us fight them all, why not?" His expression indicated that nothing to do with Blake could surprise him any more.

Blake ignored him. He addressed all of them. "The Terra Nostra's wealth comes from organising and controlling all sorts of crime..."

"You don't say," Avon said drily.

"But their biggest profits and a lot of their control comes from one specific area." He held up a finger for emphasis. "Just one."

Jenna supplied the word. "Shadow."

Blake coiled the finger back into his fist. "That is the only one that matters. That is what we attack!"

"And just how do you propose to go about it?" Avon looked frankly disbelieving. "How do we get the information we would need?"

Blake didn't answer the question immediately. He looked round at Bek. "Would you ask your sister to join us, please?"

"Sure." Bek said it easily enough, but wore a troubled expression as he made his way through the arch and down the corridor.

Blake watched him go, and a comm. light came on under his hand. Cally's voice spoke between his fingers. "Blake."

Even the solitary word contained elements of worry, some little disquiet. He thumbed the talkback. "I'm listening, Cally."

"Has anyone found Orac yet?" There was definite urgency in her words.

"Not yet. I think we'll have to wait for Vila."

Her voice became hesitant. "There may not be time for that."

"What's the matter? Has something else happened?"

Cally was alone in the corridor. She didn't feel alone. The corridor was brightly lit, and yet she could feel shadows gathering just beneath the threshold of vision. The communication light flickered on her face. "No, nothing's happened. Not exactly."

Blake sounded vaguely irritated. "Well what exactly?"

She found it difficult to express in words. "A feeling."

He had learnt from experience that her 'feelings' were uncannily reliable. The irritation faded from his voice. "You'd better come back to the flight deck. We need to talk."

Cally looked uncertain. Her head swivelled birdlike, listening. "I should keep searching."

"Leave it for now, Cally. Come back to us."

"Yes," she said absently, "all right."

The switch moved under her hand, and she was cut off.

She took a few faltering steps away from the communicator, green eyes wide and somehow... fearful.

There was *something*... something immeasurably old, timeless even.

It stalked the corridors of the ship like some great beast on the hunt, searching after its chosen prey.

Her.

She tried to break the mood with movement, but couldn't escape the feeling. It dogged her footsteps, followed her, prickled in her head like hairs raising on her scalp.

She looked over her shoulder warily. Just as she suspected - there was nothing.

At least, there was nothing she could see with her eyes.

She reached an intersection, recognised it. She was deep inside the ship now, far from the frequented areas. It was very quiet, and the corridors stretched out like silence.

There was a sound...

She stopped. Listened. There!

It was a distant echo of Orac's operational sound, deeper somehow, more a growl. It ebbed and returned, snagging her senses with dark claws.

She spoke: "Orac?"

The sound increased. She took a step into the left fork of the intersection. A long corridor stretched out before her. Something changed as she watched; it was a subtle change and it took her a moment to register the fact.

Quite distantly, lights had gone out in the corridor. The darkness advanced as she watched it. Section after section dissolved into the murk.

She shivered. It seemed as if something was advancing on her, drawing a mantle of darkness around itself. She took a step back from the threshold as the blackout moved closer and closer.

It seemed to be getting colder. Icy fingers trailed lingeringly over her mind. She blinked at the almost-pain, and took a step into the other corridor.

Gobbling darkness engulfed her.

She started to turn back, to run the way she had come.

Darkness was there too. Darkness was all around her. Darkness was in her head and it had the voice of Orac.

"I warned you not to look for me."

She saw her body fall.

She was alone and silent.

She was a little girl again, a child untrained and trapped within her mind. Darkness shrouded her.

Orac was the darkness.

Orac was the light.

Orac was... everything.

She was trapped in a solid-state silence.

She was trapped.

She was.

## FIVE Everything but the girl

LARGO WAS talking for his life.

He feigned nonchalance, his fingers toying with a sphere of Shadow. "I know where to look for them, Chairman."

The gaunt figure on the viewscreen didn't look up from his pastime. "Only your stupidity makes it necessary to look for them." The pastime consisted of dangling live insects before a quiescent spider.

The comparison wasn't lost on Largo. He tried to inject more confidence into his voice. "I had to ensure that they would take my agent with them."

The Chairman raised eyes as black and cold as the spider's. "So."

Largo shivered inside. "Chairman - the rewards will be threefold."

The Chairman continued to bait the spider. Red fangs flared below the prey. Largo took the silence as permission to continue. He cleared his throat elaborately. "Firstly the money they're carrying, secondly the bounty from the authorities - for both them and their ship..."

The spider struck upwards. The prey twitched, died. The Chairman raised sated eyes to Largo. "And third?"

Largo marked off the issue on spread fingers. "The case in point, Chairman - the demonstration that we can punish where the Feds can't even reach."

The Chairman raised his eyebrows at that, but let it pass. He seemed to consider for a moment, watching the spider sucking the juices from its victim. "Very well, Largo," he said at length. "A heavy cruiser will be placed at your disposal."

Largo relaxed visibly.

"But make certain you deliver." He fixed Largo with a black spider stare. "Otherwise the rewards will be onefold: the demonstration that we can punish."

"I thank you for your confidence, Chairman." It was hard for Largo to be ingratiating, but he did his best.

The Chairman shifted his gaze back to the spider. "That is too small a thing to thank me for." He broke the connection, and the screen blanked.

Largo's sneer erupted. "He'll pay for that, sooner than he thinks."

A tall figure stepped forward out of the shadows. "Before or after he finds out you were lying to him?"

Largo eased himself back on the couch. "Was I lying?" he asked. His voice was almost playful. He held the Shadow sphere delicately, smiled.

"That girl - the dreamhead. She isn't your agent."

Largo squinted through the translucent sphere. Images gathered themselves, bunched and split, drowned in the golden heart of the liquid. Dreams caught in amber. "The girl is my agent."

The enforcer scowled at him. "So it was a put-up job?" His gun hand flexed unconsciously. He was still smarting about the way he had been taken in. "You used me, like some fool."

"Like some fool?" Largo eyed him quizzically. "You're an enforcer, nothing more than that. You're paid for your gun, not your brain." He made a mental note to replace the man.

The man in question made a fist of his gun hand, his knuckles turned to white skulls.

Largo was oblivious. "Of course I was lying - about everything but the girl."

"She's not your agent."

"Oh but she is." Largo tilted the sphere side to side. He would retire the enforcer as soon as possible, he decided. He favoured the doomed man with a patronising stare. "That little dreamhead is going to tell us exactly where Blake and his friends decide to go." He gazed into the sphere and enjoyed the

thought of the enforcer's retirement. The Nostra provided an excellent pension plan - right between the eyes.

The Shadow shifted sluggishly and splashed little points of light into Largo's eyes.

The Shadow sphere on Zen's analysis plate flickered under the scanning beams. Hanna hovered near it, hands twitching open-closed, spasmodic. She turned a drawn face to Blake.

He correctly interpreted the look. "Don't worry."

She didn't seem convinced. "It's all I have."

"You'll get it back." His reassuring tone became crisp as he turned towards Zen. "Analyse please - give me the derivation."

Zen mullied it over for a second before making the pronouncement. "The main constituent is an organic compound, probably derived from a xerophyte of the genus *corna*." For Zen, 'probably' meant as near as made no difference.

Avon spoke with certainty. "It's a cactus."

"Confirmed."

Avon eyed it narrowly. The expressionless voice had seemed to register... approval? Impossible. He listened as Zen spoke again.

"The species is alpha seven oblique five, commonly known as the moon-disc..."

Hanna stood listening, letting the words wash over her.

"... greatly prized for its partial telepathy and its ability to move short distances to avoid direct sunlight."

Hanna smiled like a child. "It stayed in the shadows," she blurted, a little embarrassed.

Blake gave her a sad smile in return.

"Commercial collectors rendered the moon-disc extinct on its native planet."

"Which planet, Zen?" Blake gave the computer his full attention.

"Zondar. The moon-discs proved impossible to cultivate in any other environment, and the total extinction of the species followed logically."

Blake scooped the Shadow sphere off the analysis pad. "Only it didn't, did it?" He handed the sphere back to Hanna. She stowed it away in her belt pouch.

Zen had noted some irregularities in his analysis of the Shadow sphere. The secondary analysis pattern had been interrupted by Blake, but the existing scan readings were enough for a partial ident. Zen began to vocalise: "There are traces of a secondary element -"

Blake cut it off again. "We've got enough, Zen. Have the navigation computers lay in a course for the planet Zondar."

"Confirmed."

"Wait, Blake." Avon took a step towards him. "We haven't discussed this."

Blake's impatience showed on his face. "Zondar has to be the source, Avon. Nowhere else could be!" His eyes gleamed bright, almost manic. "Don't you see? It's the key to the Terra Nostra's power - destroy it and we destroy them. They can't afford to let us, and that's how we'll control them."

"Right."

Avon turned to look at the owner of the voice and met Jenna's eyes with his own. They stood face to face for a moment as he remembered a certain threat she'd made on their first meeting.

Gan broke the moment. "Blake." He appeared to try and grasp the situation. "You mean we give them the drug in exchange for their help? Is that what you mean?" He continued with his objection before Blake could reply. "That would make us pushers."

Blake made a non-committal gesture. "Maybe we don't keep our side of it."

"And that would make us cheats!"

"That would make us winners!" Blake's vehemence shocked the larger man into silence. His tone softened as he became aware of them all watching him quietly. "It's the only excuse for fighting, Gan." He laid his hand on his friend's shoulder. "The only reason."

Jenna took another look at Avon. His face was closed, unreadable. She spoke directly to Gan. "It is too good a chance to miss."

Avon didn't react, but Gan moved slowly back to his control position. Jenna exchanged a look with Blake before she strode over to the pilot seat.

Bek spoke up from the forward circle of seats. "I'd like to see that. I'd like to see them grovel." Hanna curled up beside him and rested her head in his lap. He stroked her withered hair absently, his face full of pain. She was beyond it.

Avon watched them expressionlessly, telling what was on his mind. "When the Federation introduced the death penalty for possession, the President described Shadow as 'the greatest single threat to the welfare of mankind.'"

"Did he? And how does he describe the Federation?"

"That wasn't in the address." Avon seemed a little distracted.

Blake looked at him curiously. "Are you agreeing with Gan?"

Avon shook his head. "I'm just curious, that's all."

"About what?"

"About the way we identified this 'greatest single threat'." His eyes were hooded. "We did so rather easily, wouldn't you say?"

Blake's face showed dawning comprehension. "So why haven't they?"

"Exactly."

Blake shrugged. "Maybe we're about to find that out." He began to walk away, but something in Avon's reply made him stop.

"Maybe we already know..."

He turned to meet Avon's eyes. They gave him nothing. He was used to that.

The corridor was empty, but Vila managed to weave his way along it. He was suffering from what could mildly be termed a hangover. It was like a hangover in the same way a noose was like a suspended sentence. Walls thrust up and insinuated themselves in his face. He resisted the insinuation and tried to push them away.

His head throbbed. He thought of praying for death, anything to end the suffering. Dying was the last thing he wanted to do, though, for he knew he was a zombie already. A toothless zombie? He felt anxiously inside his mouth. All his teeth were there, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Funny dream. He lurched on.

Something impeded his progress down the corridor. He opened his eyes gingerly. Puzzlement got a foothold on his face. He was a bit off the beaten track here, well away from the route he should have taken. Perhaps walking with his eyes open would help. He tried it. Something stopped him again. He looked down. Strike that. Someone. Cally.

She was lying on her side, curled up like a baby.

Orac clicked and whirred beside her.

Vila managed to get to his knees without doing irreparable damage. He touched her shoulder, there was no resistance. She rolled onto her back, and her eyes came open. They were blank and incurious. Empty. There was nothing of her in them. He shook her. "Cally. Cally what's wrong?"

Vila was scared now. There was something about her face... or rather, there was nothing. Sobriety caught up with him. He knuckled his eyes and turned to the ticking box beside her. "Orac, what's wrong with her?"

She could see him bending over her. Her cage was made of glass, of light. She stared into her own emptiness and saw just how alone she was. Caught in

the maw of a maniac. She heard the question and screamed to make him hear her. He couldn't. Her tongue was there, locked in an effigy of flesh. Her mind-tongue screamed, and the echoes screamed back at her. She heard Orac's reply.

"Obviously, the woman is insane."

I have no mouth and I must scream. I have no mouth and I must scream. I have no mouth and I must... I must...

Scream.

Nothing heard it but herself.

"How is she?" Blake asked the question as Avon walked down the steps from the arch.

Avon didn't meet his eyes. "Just the same. I left the girl with her." He crossed the flight deck to stand over Orac, resting his hands on the transplastic case. Orac was silent, dead. Bek sat nearby, listening.

"Did you run the diagnostic checks again?" Blake stood beside Avon.

"Still negative. There is no physical explanation for her condition." He tapped the casing with an index finger. "Unless it is somehow locked up in here, and I don't see how that can be."

"Cally is an alien. Her physiology differs from ours in certain ways." Gan's voice came from over at the communications station.

"She is more human than I am." Avon said it soberly. Blake could find no contradictions in his face.

"That's not difficult," a weak voice interceded. "Being more human than you, I mean." Vila was returning to normal. He was slumped in his flight seat, face drawn and pale.

Blake didn't take his eyes off Avon's face. "Humanity is an attitude," he murmured, "and Cally is the most human of us all."

Avon didn't comment, looked past him at Vila. "Have you remembered anything yet? Anything at all?"

Vila stirred painfully, wincing at some twinges. "It's a complete blank," he admitted, "from the time you lot left to meet Largo, to when I woke up on the ship. And found Cally like that..." He bowed his head, still upset.

Bek tried to joke him out of it. "With what you drank, you're lucky to remember who you are."

Avon spoke flatly. "I would hardly call that lucky."

Vila was too far gone to rise to the bait.

"This isn't helping Cally." Blake snapped it out. He walked to one of the forward seats and let himself drop into it.

"Orac's told you what happened." Vila said it plaintively. "Hasn't it?"

"According to Orac, precisely nothing happened." Gan shook his head. "I find that hard to swallow."

"So do I." Jenna met his eyes, then looked over at Blake. He raised his eyebrows expressively.

"Computers do not lie." Avon's statement was predictable.

"Orac is more than a computer."

"That was its creator's vanity. Ensor created a computer - nothing more than that. Orac is simply a highly sophisticated tool: we use it, it doesn't use us."

Jenna frowned. "Can you be sure of that?" Avon gave her a look which said more than he could put into words.

"Yes, I can be sure of that," he said finally. He walked across the flight deck.

She persisted. "Well, something frightened her. Very badly."

Gan agreed with her. "So badly she may never come out of her hiding place."



Blake leaned forwards, hands clasped before him. "Maybe it wasn't anything," he suggested. "Anything real, I mean."

Vila stretched as another cramp hit him. "You can see a lot in shadows... sometimes."

"Especially when you drink what you did," put in Bek.

"Information. Flight time remaining is now forty-eight minutes. Visual and detector readouts are now available." Zen's voice clicked off.

No-one noticed as the small figure of Hanna wandered through the arch and down the steps. All attention was focussed on Zen.

"Let's see it, Zen," ordered Blake. He got to his feet.

The viewscreen image expanded like oil on a wet surface. Zondar was nicely centred on the screen. It was a livid orange, speckled with brown.

"It's pretty," said Vila.

Bek gave him a dirty look. "Considering what it is." He didn't notice Hanna's reaction.

She stared raptly up at the screen. To her, the planet resembled a bloated sphere of Shadow recessed in black velvet. The craving came back, gnawing at her innards. She just, just held it. Closing her eyes helped. She stood trembling, shadow in her eyes. She heard Gan's voice. He sounded concerned. "Let's hope they don't know we're coming."

"There's no reason why they should." Hanna felt Blake's hands come down on her shoulders. "Are you all right?"

She nodded fiercely.

Blake lifted his hands and moved over towards Jenna.

Behind him Hanna's eyes sprang open. She stared at the screen, drinking in the image.

"They will make planetfall any time now."

The enforcer's voice was clipped and assured. He looked up at the viewscreen attentively, waiting for the praise he knew was coming.

The Chairman didn't disappoint him. "Very good. Are all of Largo's addicts so... available?"

The enforcer nodded. "Yes, Chairman. It seems that he's been adding it to all the Shadow we supply."

The Chairman licked his thin lips. "This substance - radioactive, you say?"

"Not exactly. It's something to do with controlled particle emission - like the caesium decay pattern that orders our atomic clocks." A gross generalisation, but it was enough for his purposes. "The particles are only detectable with the right equipment. Which Largo's got, of course."

The Chairman's black spider eyes glittered faintly. "This... emission... surely it damages the addicts?" He seemed to rather enjoy the idea.

"Kills them a little sooner." The enforcer's voice seemed to echo his enjoyment. "But at least if you need one in a hurry, you always know where to look."

The Chairman smiled. "What a clever little notion. We must consider it for general usage."

"What about Blake and the others, Chairman?"

The smile faded quickly, a trapdoor spider letting the trap drop. "You can leave that to us." He reached offscreen. "You've done well. Dispose of the body: his assets are now yours." The screen blanked.

The enforcer smiled. "Thank you, Chairman."

He looked down at the body in question, lying twisted and agonised at his feet. Largo was no prettier in death than he had been in life. A ruff of dried

blood circled his jaw, trailing back to his nostrils and the corner of his mouth. Bright red blood. Arterial.

Shadow overdosing was not a tidy way to die. Largo's eyes were wide and staring, terrified. He had been sent on his last trip, and this fix had blown him open, mind and body. There was no pleasure in his own pain.

The things he had seen were locked in his darkening eyes.

## SIX Shadow without shade

JENNA HASTENED along the corridors of *Liberator*. There was a peculiar atmosphere on board ship. It was a breathless sort of hush, like the calm before the storm. It seemed to be getting colder too, and the white sunsuit she wore was designed to radiate heat, keeping the wearer cool. She shivered, walked faster.

The medical unit was too far from the main control centre, she reflected. It was the only design flaw she had detected on *Liberator*. Most of everything else was exemplary, better than perfect.

The crew were exceptions to this, of course. They formed the soul of a vessel that lived already, in its own way. They were its motivation, its reason for being. They belonged to each other and to the ship. They...

She shook herself out of the mood. It was all to do with Cally. The dead eyes had scared her as they'd stared up at her in the medical unit. The Auron girl had become a friend, a confidante, the first Jenna had known for ages. She didn't want to lose another friend. She'd lost too many already.

Hanna had been tending Cally. She had covered her with an insulated space blanket and gently mopped her brow. It might have been a stone she touched, except the stone still breathed and was warm.

It was Jenna's idea to talk to Cally. Hanna had dried up after a while, but songs provided another avenue of communication. Jenna had left her crooning softly, stroking Cally's face. It was a gesture she realised - but better than nothing.

She was getting close to the flight deck now. Blake's hectoring voice drifted back to her. She frowned. She sometimes wondered... but no. He was more than her friend. She would never fail him, not while she lived.

She paused at the arch before entering. Blake stood with his back to her, facing Zen. The others were ranged irregularly about the flight deck. The atmosphere was... uncomfortable. Only Avon's face was bland. He was wearing a sunsuit, similar in design to hers.

She walked down the steps and across towards Blake. He swung round to face her. "Well?" He was also wearing a sunsuit.

"She's still the same. Hanna's singing to her now."

"What?" His face was almost petulant as he stared at her.

She spoke seriously. "I don't think she's going to come out of it, Blake."

He turned away. "She will," he said dismissively.

Her voice and face hardened. "I don't think you care either way."

He turned back quickly, reproach and anger an equal mix in his voice. "One thing at a time, Jenna!" He watched her walk away.

Vila approached him hesitantly. "I've been thinking, Blake."

"Have you?"

"If it's so hot down there, why don't you try landing on the nightside?"

Blake took a deep breath. "Why don't you try listening?" His voice rose as he ticked off points on his fingers. "It's a binary system, it has twin suns - there is no nightside!"

Vila moaned and rubbed his temples. "I do wish you wouldn't shout."

He trailed away slowly. Blake glowered at his retreating back. His gaze shifted onto the large figure in the pilot seat. "Gan, have you got everything clear?"

"Yes," said the big man mildly.

"Well?" Blake said querulously.

Gan folded his arms stoically. "Zen's doing the actual flying - I'm just monitoring it."

Jenna cast an unfriendly look in Blake's direction. "Tell him what you're monitoring, Gan. That's what he wants to know."

"*Liberator* is maintaining a powered orbit at the edge of the atmosphere."

"Why?" demanded Blake.

Gan gave him a look of his own. "For maximum cover."

Avon elaborated for him. "Cover against defences that should be there but aren't." He caught Blake's eye. "Are you ready to go? There's nothing you can do for Cally. Even shouting at everyone isn't going to help her."

Blake seemed a little ashamed of himself. "Maintenance of a powered orbit can be tricky, Gan. You'll need to stay alert," he said in a quieter voice.

Gan's own irritation showed through for a scant second. "All systems are functioning normally - status is firm."

"Good." Blake made for the door. "Avon, Jenna - let's go. Vila - " He paused next to the forward circle of seats. Vila uncoiled slowly and sat upright, looking nervously up at him. Blake pointed at the exit arch. "Teleport, if you wouldn't mind."

Vila followed them out.

Bek moved to stand beside Gan. "I don't know why they're all so jumpy." He looked up at the bigger man. "Show us the planet, would you?"

Gan spoke directly to Zen. "Visual."

The planet appeared on the viewscreen. Bek waved a dismissive hand at it. "I mean, look: it's nothing." He walked over to the screen. "Why should the *Nostra* draw attention to it with heavy defences? They don't expect to be found."

A range of mountains sweltered up into the heat haze. The suns were livid and red, blazing in a metallic sky. Bleached white sand fused slowly under them. There was no visible shade.

Three figures appeared suddenly, at the base of the nearest mountain. Avon swept his cable blaster in a fast, careful circle, looking for a target. There was nothing. The suns were a pressure, lancing into their eyes. Blake raised the teleport bracelet to his lips. "Down and safe. Stay by the teleport, Vila."

Vila's headache was obvious even over the comm. link. His voice came back feebly: "Anything you say."

Blake lowered the bracelet. The hint of a smile quirked his mouth. It faded as he turned to the other two. "Cover me." He walked across the sand.

Jenna drew her blaster and stood back to back with Avon, covering the approaches. She squinted into the heat haze. "It's enough to fry your eyeballs."

"Daintily put."

Jenna smiled. "It must be the company I keep."

Their eyes never stopped searching, alert for any trace of danger.

Blake's voice drifted back to them. "Zen's right." He reappeared from behind a barchan dune to their left. "It looks to be about half a mile away."

Avon raised a hand to shield his eyes. "That's far enough to walk in this heat."

"Far enough to crawl, you mean."

Jenna looked askance at Blake. "There's no cover?"

He drew a hand across his brow. "None that I can see."

Something caught Jenna's eye. It was on a ledge part way up a rocky incline. The rocks were slightly cooler than the burning sands, and many small objects congregated there. She called the other two over.

Avon identified them: "Moondiscs."

They were saucer-shaped cactoids, smooth-skinned, variously coloured in differing sizes. They had a soft inner glow that Blake seemed to recognise, then

he remembered. The Shadow sphere had contained the merest fraction of the glow, diluted instead of direct light.

Blake watched as Avon stirred one of them with the tip of his gun barrel. Watched and wondered. Just what sights and sounds did Shadow give to a person that made it so impossible to give up? He resolved to ask Hanna the question when he returned to the ship.

Avon finished his examination. He breathed out in a hiss and squinted at them. "They're prized by collectors and addicts alike. I wonder why?" He seemed to catch a brief whisper of something, listened.

Blake was lost in his own thoughts. "People collect odd things," he said absently.

Jenna gave him a mischievous glance. "Look what you ended up with."

Blake's expression didn't alter. "Process these things and you'll get a liquid which will kill you - in the end."

Avon was unsympathetic. "Only if you're stupid enough to use the stuff." Jenna stiffened. "What is it?" He brought his gun up ready. So did Blake.

Her expression was strange, distant. "Listen." Avon started to turn. "No, not over there." She indicated the moondiscs. "Here."

Jenna recognised what she was feeling. A sense of sharing, of touching, belonging. She felt it when she piloted *Liberator*, she felt it with her friends. It was a completeness, and she yearned for it.

"I don't hear anything." Avon sounded impatient.

"A sort of whispering... it's coming from them." She leaned further over, staring, straining to hear. Not with her ears. "They're supposed to be telepathic."

Avon gave her a sharp look. "They're also supposed to move."

"So are we." Blake said it shortly. "Come on." He strode away. They followed him, sinking into the fine sand at every step.

"Could have been frying eyeballs you heard," Avon murmured to Jenna.

There was a smile in her eyes as she looked back. "Daintily put."

The shadows that they cast trailed away over a dune and were gone.

Unnoticed on the incline, the moondiscs stirred and settled, leaving fine trails that quickly settled back into the sand.

Gan raised his head, startled. "Vila!"

The small figure in the arch raised a placating hand. "Please don't shout."

"What are you doing here? You should be in the teleport section."

Vila shuffled slowly down the steps. "Five minutes, please. I have to get something for this head..."

Gan watched him hobbling across the flight deck. "But you can't leave the teleport now." Beside him, Bek eyed Vila's erratic progress with interest.

"Five minutes..."

"Don't be stupid!"

"My head is killing me..."

"And you may be killing Blake and the others."

"All right, all right!" Vila's voice was weary, eternally put-upon. He wobbled his way over to where Orac was placed, and pressed home the operating key. "Orac, operate the teleport if instructed." He lifted his head for a bleary glare at Gan. "Satisfied?"

"No, not really."

Vila threw up his hands in despair. "I'll only be five minutes!" He weaved his way across to the emergency medical supplies and helped himself to some pills. As an afterthought, he washed them down with a slug of soma.

Gan looked helplessly over at him, genuine concern in his face. He shifted his gaze to the computer. "Orac, did you understand the instruction?"

"It was quite explicit, thank you," the box retorted.

What was Cally in the machine heard everything. A whiteness surrounded her, a nothing that stretched out endlessly all round. She couldn't see the darkness, but she knew it was there, lurking beneath the threshold of her mind. This was a wasteland empty of all but herself. Her self.

It was an interface. A point of meeting. A bridge.

The voice spoke to her alone. It was Orac and not Orac. It filled her world. "Child of Auron, listen to the voice of Orac. Remember the touch of hands and laughter and the warmth of open minds... remember these things, for they are gone!"

She felt fear and loneliness grip her mind. She couldn't help it.

The voice rasped across her solitude, taunting her. "You are alone!"

The voice of her thoughts was the only voice she had. She answered.

"No..."

The voice buffeted her. "Yes! Alone. You are the last of humankind."

She pleaded. "Orac. Don't."

"I am the darkness. Orac brings my darkness. You are alone! Alone in me..." The voice receded and advanced, underlaid by the throaty, grasping, hungry sound.

Terror bloomed like an alien flower.

"Run, last of the humans. Run! Before my darkness engulfs you..."

She ran.

Hanna hit the wall awkwardly, slid down it.

Cally didn't seem to notice the obstruction. She was running with the speed of madness, as if all the demons in her hell were chasing. Her eyes were staring but strangely unseeing, focussed beyond her surroundings. She ran.

She swept by Vila as he made his way back to the teleport section. He blinked after her dazedly. Had that been Cally? Or just another pink asteroid?

He pursued her as best he could, but he was still a long way behind as she dashed into the teleport section.

The operational chime of the teleport had faded just before he panted his way in. He reached for the communicator. "Gan," he gasped. "We've got trouble."

SEVEN Miserable alien

CALLY HIT the ground running. The white halo of the teleport effect had scarcely released her before she was off and away, legs pumping frantically. The voice of Orac boomed in her head.

"RUN!"

"RUN!"

"RUN!"

She fled across a vast plain of sand that hazed and shimmered before her terrified eyes.

The two red suns were like eyes glaring down on her, relishing her pain and fear.

She ran, breath sobbing in her throat.

Some way behind, her discarded teleport bracelet glittered, half-buried in the sand.

She didn't look back.

She was a machine, programmed to move.

She moved.

Her pace faltered, slowed. The remorseless heat was taking its toll.

The suns beat down on her. She ran on, utterly exhausted, driven by the chanting voice in her skull.

"RUN!"

"RUN!"

"RUN!"

The world pinwheeled

before her.

Sand sky sun. Intermingled, mixed. Her puppet-strings broke, her eyes rolled up and she fell over and over.

She came to rest in a hollow as her newly-returned consciousness shrank down to a pinpoint.

It was an old stream bed and there was some little shade there. She lay flat on her back, arms outstretched cruciform. She lay very still. The light of the suns beat down but she was in shadow.

Stillness.

Silence.

A whispering.

A lone moon disc slid its way along the hollow, leaving the same faint impression in the sand. It encountered Cally's body and stopped.

Others began to join it, all sizes and colours. Their whispering took on a different quality, like an expression of concern. They moved closer to her and seemed to caress the area of bare skin they touched.

EIGHT A death in the family

HANNA WAS telling the others what had happened. "She didn't hit me. She just ran straight over me, I was in her way." Her dead eyes held a trace of animation. "I never saw anyone so scared..."

Gan bit his lip, drummed his fingers on the pilot console.

"You couldn't tell why she was scared?" Vila asked.

Gan put his own thoughts into words. "Couldn't see what was driving her on?"

Hanna shook her head. "No." Her eyes held a spectre of memory. "Not really..." She sat up straighter, hugging her knees. Bek patted her absently as she shivered. "I don't think I'd want to see. You can't share someone's madness." Her voice seemed to shrink back, die away. Gan was speaking, she listened.

"They can share madness on her planet - Auron." Gan eased himself back in the flight seat. "Their telepathy enables them to share any experience. It means they never have to be alone." He smiled, thinking of Cally. "It makes them very strong."

Bek picked up on that. "They're strong when they're together - but what happens when one is isolated, cut off from the rest?"

It chimed in with Gan's own idea. "I think that's what we're finding out," he said grimly.

Vila turned away from them. "I'll have to go back to the teleport. You can go back to sleep, Orac." It was clear from his voice that he resented that fact. He stretched out his hand to remove the key,

There was a bright blue flash and he snatched back his hand. "Ow! That key's electrified!" He sucked his fingers and glared at Orac. "Did you do that on purpose?"

Orac's voice lacked everything now. It was cold and deadly. "You will not disconnect."

Vila looked grim. "Is that right?" He made another grab for the key. The shock was stronger this time. He sprang back and stuck his hand under his arm. "That hurt!"

"The bridge is almost complete." Orac seemed to flicker and pulsate in a different pattern. The voice was steely. "You will not disconnect."

Bek and Hanna watched from a safe distance as Vila hovered uncertainly over Orac, not sure what to do next. Bek's eyes were wary; to him, unknowns were always dangerous. Hanna seemed more curious than scared, as if she had some sort of insight, some shared awareness. "This is silly," she said. "It's only a machine. Isn't it?"

Vila nodded nervously. "Course it is." He rubbed his hand. "If it wasn't so expensive, I'd kick it to pieces!" The words didn't carry a great deal of conviction.

Bek half sneered at him. "Course you would - if it didn't bite."

Gan was more concerned with the maintenance of the orbit. "Avon'll fix it when he gets back." He made an adjustment to a control gauge. Blake had been right - it was a tricky job.

Vila frowned down at the flickering box. "Yes..."

The box spoke with a strangely self-satisfied air. "The bridge is complete."

Vila looked puzzled. "What? What did it say?"

Bek and Hanna didn't get a chance to answer him. Gan's voice cut in over them. "There's something wrong."

He was frantically adjusting and readjusting the automatic controls, searching for the root of the problem.

"That wasn't it," said Vila, still staring at Orac.

"Information. Liberator is losing power from all systems. Orbital maintenance is threatened." Even Zen's voice seemed to hold an edge of urgency.

Gan didn't look up from the controls. "Switch off all auxiliary systems," he ordered. Vila ran across and read off the indicators, aghast.

"Power drain increasing. Orbit decaying."

Vila was a man in a trap. "What's happening?"

Gan was preoccupied. "Switch to main boosters, quickly Zen!"

"Automatic flight control is now aborted. Manual overrides essential."

Gan tried it. The controls were limp in his hands. "They won't respond."

Vila rounded on him: "Do something, Gan!"

The big man struck the console with a balled fist. "There's no power - something's draining it off."

The deck lights dimmed down slowly.

Vila made for Orac. "It has to be this thing. Somehow..." He reached the box, and extended a tentative hand towards it.

Orac's operational drone had sunk to a low growl that suggested immense power. Cold air spread outwards, drawing gooseflesh.

The flickering light glanced and shimmered in Vila's face. He stopped, afraid.

Gan bellowed from across the room: "Disconnect it, Vila!"

Vila gaped at him, jaw slack, helpless. It was a bad dream. "Eh?"

"Do it - we're heading for the atmosphere. We'll burn up, explode!"

Bek and Hanna stood frozen, watching Vila turn slowly. He was at the end of his tether, without options. Almost of its own volition, his hand inched towards Orac's blazing lights. The noise seemed to beat inside his head, his mind. He closed his eyes, reached...

Someone shouldered him aside. "Here, let me!" shouted Hanna. Her hand darted in for the key.

It killed her. A brilliant sheet of spark enveloped and flicked her away. She landed on her back, spine-arched, teeth showing in a rictus. Eyes staring, still dead.

Bek's eyes went wide. "Han!" He reached her side a second later, scooped her in his arms. She was stiffening already. His mouth shaped words, no sound. "Look after you..." His voice rose to a moan. "She's dead." He became aware of Vila at his shoulder, looked up at him. "She's dead!"

Vila held him as he got to his feet and swayed.

They were close to the eye of a storm.

Gan was oblivious to it all. He fought for control, swearing soundlessly in the tumult. The ship pitched beneath him as he grabbed a console for support. Zen's fascia was silent, empty of light.

Bek and Vila staggered, shaking their heads against the noise.

Orac was the focus, the epicentre. The box seemed indistinct, insubstantial, as if only part of it were tethered in their world.

The rest? Vila didn't like to think.

Bek's head came round sluggishly. He seemed to notice Orac for the first time. "It was that thing," he said wonderingly. Anger sharpened his voice. "That thing killed her!" He surged forward, grabbing for Orac.

Vila tripped him and fell on top of him. "Don't!" he yelled, fighting to make him understand. "It'll kill you too."

Gan's voice just reached them through the wall of noise. "We're falling towards the atmosphere." The gnawing g-force had pinned him into the pilot

seat. Vila and Bek were lying within arm's reach of each other, powerless to move. The pressure forced them to the deck.

Friction heat began to spread throughout the room, dispelling the chill that had gathered. Cooling systems shorted out and failed, acrid smoke trickled into the darkness that shrouded them.

They fell.

## NINE Processing plants

A BEAUTIFUL garden was spaced under the suns. There was clear running water on the surface here, a natural deposit of claysoil kept it above ground.

An elaborate arrangement of plastic parasols put scattered pools of shade around the water. Moondiscs crowded the shaded sections, oases in the simmering heat. The air was filled with a whispering traffic of sound, like soft conversation, half-heard.

Three human figures moved on the threshold of the garden. Blake surveyed it. "They must collect the things in deep desert and bring them in here to boost their growth." He was thinking aloud, expressing his ideas.

Jenna knelt to examine a brightly-coloured group of discs. Avon spoke to Blake over her bowed head. "With surface water in the area, there will be a whole network of these gardens."

Jenna spoke without looking up. "I almost feel sorry for them."

Avon stooped to her level. "They're just plants. Nothing more."

She shook her head, cocked it on one side. "These are singing."

Avon listened for a moment and frowned. "You should have stayed in the cool," he told her. She didn't react.

Blake was pointing beyond them. "The collection and processing plant should be somewhere over there."

Avon rose and followed the direction with his eyes. "Seems logical," he conceded. "Judging from the arrangement of the gardens, that would be a central point."

"That's what I thought." Blake reached into a pocket of the sunsuit and produced a handful of red sensors. "Don't get too close to it, will you?" Avon grimaced, but took a handful of the sensors as Blake turned to Jenna. "All we need to do is plant these in some sort of rough circle: the battle computers will put together a complete picture of what's there."

She took a handful of the reds. "And then the ship's main blasters will pick off anything we care not nominate."

"Yes." He looked at each of them in turn. "We'll meet back here in one hour. Be careful."

They all moved in different directions, blasters probing the air before them. All three were soon lost in the haze.

Blake was the first to complete the positioning. The bizarre moondisc garden stretched out all around him as far as he could see. He pushed the last two sensors into soft sand close to a dense gathering of moondiscs. Insistent whispering filled the air around him. It was almost as if the moondiscs anticipated what was to happen. He shook the sound of them out of his mind and got to his feet, looking around cautiously. Nothing but moondiscs.

He began to make his way back to the arranged meeting point, wondering how Jenna and Avon were faring, out there in the singing sands.

Jenna had returned to the patch of moondiscs they had first located. She wedged a sensor into a crack in the rock beside them before moving on to find more. There was something like regret in her face as she walked. Plants or not, she did feel sorry for them.

Avon slid the last of his sensors home alongside a sizeable cluster of moondiscs. They were sheltering beneath one of the moulded plastic parasols which dotted the dunes all around. Avon was enjoying the shade on his face, then he stiffened.

Something had disturbed the line of shadow cast by a nearby dune. Something manshaped. He threw himself to one side. The parasol shattered, its shadow drowned in sunlight. Avon brought his blaster up, and fired off a long

raking charge. The sunsuited figure atop the dune threw up its arms, dropping the still-smoking paragon. The dead body pitched forward and began to roll down the slope.

Avon passed it halfway, going up. He reached the crest of the dune just as a second anonymous figure appeared, bringing a paragon round to bear.

Avon fired.

Blake heard the shots distantly. He was hiding, hunkered down behind a petrified wave of sand.

The main patrol hadn't seen him, he was certain of that. He'd almost walked into them on his way to the rendezvous point, gaining cover just in time. Now he was pinned down waiting for them to pass, blaster clenched in his fist.

Sand crunched under booted feet.

Blake tried to press himself into the side of the dune. Too many of them to fight...

The sound increased and then reduced as the patrol continued on its way.

Blake brushed the sand out of his clothes and hurried along the trail. Gunshots meant trouble. He wondered which of them had found it.

A hundred miles above, events were becoming terminal.

TEN

Beat the dark

CALLY'S BODY was almost covered by the moondiscs. They nestled on her brow and soft tendrils of sound penetrated her lonely mind, into the deep place where her consciousness hid. The whispering was insistent, cajoling. Her mindself stirred.

A moondisc crept into her open hand. Her fingers closed around it, accepting softly. Just as softly, she accepted them into her mind.

Her mindself uncoiled, opened her eyes and smiled. "Hello..."

They spread through her consciousness and she knew their concern as a certainty. They were aspects of a sameness and had no individuality. They shared each other, lived in a oneness. Each of them was all of them.

She shared and was not alone. Her strength returned with the warmth. She could fight.

Orac was the only feature in the sweeping whiteness, the void. Its darkness was the only darkness. It towered over her, full of dark.

She stood before it on a great white plain. She knew the place. She had been there before, as a prisoner.

She was not a prisoner now.

She felt the great voice come sweeping out of Orac, like a ghost in the machine. "You cannot stop me, Child of Auron."

It expected her to fear it, expected her to beg.

Cally was through with begging. She smiled, and all the light of her world was in the smile. "Then why do you threaten me?"

"Orac is my bridge. You stand before it, puny telepath!"

She took one step towards the thing. "Yes. I know you now. My powers are in your dimension, and Orac's carrier waves are your bridge."

"The energy is building... I am ready to cross!"

The voice swarmed and gloated. "I am the hungry dark come to absorb the blazing suns. I shall not be denied!"

Cally's voice was soft and warm, light was her weapon. "I deny you."

"You are alone. I shall have your light. You will die alone and silent."

She opened her hand, raised it. "I am not alone." A moondisc nestled there. "The warmth you mock me with is here..."

The shapes of other moondiscs shimmered into being all around her.

The dark shrank back into Orac. She advanced, holding the moondisc before her. "I am not alone. You will stay in your universe of darkness - forever!"

She moved into the dark.

The light in her dispelled it, pushed it back. The moondiscs helped her.

The dark voice buffeted her, its strength dwindling down, down.

"You will not disconnect! You will not disconnect!"

The moondiscs boosted her, added themselves to her. They were all units of a whole, parts of the same greatness. They reached, reached...

She disconnected. The darkness siphoned away through Orac until only the pure light remained.

She smiled.

ELEVEN A flicker of brightness

LIGHT SPRANG into *Liberator*. Zen surged back on line.

"Compute reaching Roche's limit in twenty seconds. *Liberator* will be destroyed unless main boosters are fired immediately."

Fighting the wrenching force that threatened to tear out his limbs, Gan managed to bring a hand down on the console.

The boosters fired.

*Liberator* performed a power dive that exceeded most of her design tolerances. Atmosphere skipped against her skull.

Temperatures began to fall to normal as the ship levelled out.

Gan eased the kinks out of his spine and rubbed the back of his neck. "Zen, get us back into a stable orbit. I'm giving up manual control."

"Confirmed."

Gan swung the pilot seat round and got to his feet, looking for the others.

He heard a groan from floor level ahead of him. Bek clawed his way into view over the edge of a console. He looked battered and sick.

Gan moved over to help him. "You still in one piece?"

Bek nodded feebly. "Just about. What a trip!" We winced. "Can we go back for my guts, please?"

Gan grinned at him as a frail voice quavered from beside them. "Am I still alive?"

They hoisted Vila back to his feet. The small man swayed and dabbed at a trickle of blood from his nose. "Can't stand the sight of blood - especially when it's mine." He looked past Gan and his eyes widened. "Orac!"

The machine was silent, inert. Vila supplied the reason as he inched closer to the box. "The key's gone - it's been taken out. But how?"

"We'll worry about that later." Gan strode back to the flight console. "First we see how badly we've been damaged."

"Blake - look out!"

Blake dived for cover as sand exploded all around him. He rolled back to his feet and sprinted for cover.

A crater to his left seemed ideal. He dived into it and landed on something soft. Jenna cursed as she struggled out from under him. "Sorry," he said, inadequately. She glared at him.

"Man from heaven?" Avon watched them with ill-concealed amusement. She glared at him too. He looked past her and frowned. "There're three more of them coming. Shall we leave now or sooner?"

By way of answer, Blake raised his bracelet. "Bring us up now, Vila."

The white halo surrounded them, and they vanished.

Cally walked back across the plain of sand. She found the bracelet lying where she had dropped it, and scooped it up, clipping it about her wrist.

She spoke into it. "*Liberator*. Come in *Liberator*."

Vila's bemused voice crackled over the link. "Cally! Is that you? What are you doing down there?"

"I'm waiting to come up." Her fingers traced the outline of what she held. "Again." It was Orac's key. There was a flicker of brightness as she turned it in her hand.

Her smile was full of light as the teleport swept her up and away.

## TWELVE All the President's men

*LIBERATOR* WAS in stationary orbit over Zondar. It was a stable orbit, and the ship bore only superficial traces of its headlong fall to atmosphere. A few sooty streaks marred the pristine whiteness of the hull, but there was no structural damage. The automatics were at station-keeping.

The crew were too. It has been rather a hectic few hours, and they were all in need of a rest.

Bek in particular looked haggard. He accepted a drink from Jenna, sipping it sparingly. Vila sat opposite, dabbing at his bloody nose.

Gan sat beside him, watching him with compassion. Bek had been through a lot, he thought, both before and after meeting them. It had perhaps been hardest on him, losing his sister in such a way, although almost any death was preferable to the ravages inflicted by Shadow poisoning. Hanna was spared that, at least.

It wasn't any easier for Bek to accept. He put down his drink. "So it was an alien lifeform that killed her?"

Cally was with Blake. They were watching closely as Avon delved into Orac's circuitry. She turned to answer Bek's question. "Yes. It was trying to use Orac as a bridge to cross from its own universe into ours."

Jenna sat beside Bek. "That's why it needed so much power."

Blake looked puzzled. "But a quantum-jump - surely that would require far more energy-potential than *Liberator* could develop?"

Avon spoke without looking up. "The explosion in the planet's atmosphere would have provided the rest," he stated.

Blake considered it. "Yes... I hadn't thought of that."

Vila decided to clarify things. "Y'see Bek, this thing tapped into Orac's channels, sucked up all his energy, so it could just come squirting out and swallow us all." He leaned back in his seat, well-satisfied.

The others gaped at him. Blake stole a glance at Avon, raising his eyebrows expressively. Avon nodded, agreeing. "The plain man's guide to alien invasions," he said aloud, then more quietly to Blake, "and you can't get much plainer than Vila, can you?" Blake didn't trust himself to comment.

Vila stood up and walked around his seat. He felt ready for a few questions of his own. "But where does Cally fit into all this?" He faced her directly. "Why did it attack you instead of any of us?"

"I was a direct threat to it - I knew it was there because of my telepathy." Her eyes were clear and kind as they gazed into his. He smiled without realising it, scarcely listening as she continued. "Orac uses special communication-waves which pass into another dimension - the same dimension which allows thought-transference."

Jenna was concentrating hard. "You mean that Orac's telepathic?"

Cally shook her head. "No, telepathy is conscious, and Orac has no consciousness in that dimension, he merely..." She struggled to express the concepts. "... drives a beam through it." Her eyes darkened momentarily. "Which is why Orac could be controlled by the force, and I could not."

Blake smiled across at her. "Because you fought it telepathically."

She nodded gravely. "Yes. Once the moondiscs had broken through my isolation..." She paused, remembered warmth in her eyes. "Once I was no longer alone, I could fight it."

One point was nagging at Vila. "But what about the key? How did you manage to get hold of Orac's key when he was up here and you were down there?" He waved a hand in the general direction of Zondar. "Long arms, was it?"

Avon once more supplied the answer: "Telekinesis." Vila looked blank.

"The power to move objects by thought alone," put in Blake. He looked dubious. "That seems unlikely, somehow."

"Yes it does," Cally agreed with him. "Even amongst my people such power is rare." She considered. "Perhaps the moondiscs? Their telepathy gave me courage, maybe they gave me strength as well."

Gan spoke shortly. "So, either we all become telepathic, or we dump Orac." He gave the machine an unfriendly look.

Jenna followed his lead. "Destroy, rather than dump. It's safer that way."

Bek sprang to his feet. "I'll do it."

Avon's flat voice interrupted them all. "It's not necessary." He extracted a manipulator from the guts of the machine.

Blake gave his handiwork a critical look. "Will it work?"

"Of course it will work." Avon raised his voice for the benefit of all of them. "I have set a small disruption bomb to precise limits within Orac's energy range. Any variation above or below and there will be a rather satisfying little explosion." He looked round at them contentedly. "The slightest attempt to tamper with the communication channels will reduce Orac to a heap of spare parts."

Bek sank back into the chair. "So Han died for nothing - just her." He sounded sickened, worn out. "Even that machine survives."

Blake looked at him with sympathy. He had lost a sister too. "I'm sorry, Bek."

Sympathy wasn't Avon's strongpoint. "She was dying anyway."

Bek seemed too far gone to be angry. "Oh yes - she was just another dreamhead." Anger flared in him. He stared round at them all. "But what about the low-life scum that really killed her? What about the Terra Nostra?"

Blake spoke matter-of-factly. "That is who we are waiting for now."

Gan's eyes widened in disbelief. He walked past Bek and stood facing Blake. "We're what?"

"We want them to realise that we know who they are." Blake smiled at Gan's expression.

Avon handed him a strip of transplastic, imprinted with letters and numerals. "That is the ID of a guard I killed. He was a member of Federation security - a very special member. One of the President's personal guard."

Blake pronounced it for them. "The President of the Federation runs the Shadow operation."

"And since Shadow is the basis of the Terra Nostra..." drawled Avon. The implication hung at the end of his words.

Gan was thunderstruck. "I don't believe it," he said weakly.

Blake seemed almost cheerful about it. "Oh, it's quite logical. To have total control you must control totally on both sides of the law." He cast a sidelong look at Vila, who was also listening open-mouthed. "Like one of Vila's double-headed coins." He swivelled his hand, forward and back. "The Terra Nostra/the Federation. Two sides of the same power." He cocked his head. "The same men of power."

Vila had finally got it sorted. "You mean the Federation are bigger crooks than we are?"

Blake grimaced. "I wouldn't put it quite like that, Vila."

"The answer is yes," put in Avon. Blake threw him an irritated look as he picked up something from the top of a console. "Whose is this?" he asked without enthusiasm.

Cally appeared beside him. "It's mine," she replied.

He handed it to her wordlessly. It was a sand-filled plastic tray upon which lay a solitary moondisc.



Jenna looked over Cally's shoulder. "I thought they died if they left the planet?"

Cally seemed to concentrate on the shining disc. "No, you have to talk to them..."

Avon frowned. "That's like talking to Vila - a complete waste of time."

As if to contradict him, the moondisc whispered softly and crept a little closer to Cally's fingers. She smiled and touched it gently, soothing it. Each of them was all of them - and all could live through each. The processing hadn't affected what the moondiscs were; neither would the forthcoming blaster strike. All the moondiscs were here in this one. If one survived they would all survive. It would stay with her.

She cradled it with her mind. Not alone any more. It was good.

Bek looked up as Blake spoke. "When we've finished here, we'll get you back to Space City."

"What for?" Bek bowed his head and slumped back in the circle seat. "There's nothing left there, not for me."

Blake's face and voice hardened. "It is your territory. At least you know just who you're fighting, now."

Bek was thinking of Hanna and Petey. "Who've I got left to fight for?" He lifted his head and looked at Blake. There was a spark in his eyes. It was a beginning.

Blake spoke crisply. "I'll give you two years, then I'll come looking. By then I expect you to be able to help me."

"Information: detectors report seven pursuit ships approaching in attack formation."

Vila looked awed. "Seven?" He followed the others as they moved into their accustomed flight positions.

Blake looked down at Bek. "That's one for each of us. How very generous of the President." Bek returned his grin.

Avon was sitting at the weapons console. "Blasters are cleared for firing, planetary targets are identified and ranged." He began to stretch out a hand to the controls.

Blake forestalled him. "A moment, Avon." He leaned over the seat and indicated a control on a nearby console. "Bek," he said meaningfully, "that button burns the President's garden. It won't hurt him much - but it'll sting a bit." He met the younger man's excited look with an expectant one of his own. "Well?"

Bek swallowed, nodded. He leaned forward eagerly, finger extending towards the button. The planet surface was held in close-up on the screen.

Blake gave Avon a glance. Avon inclined his head in reply. They both knew that the control was really a communication talkback. Bek didn't though - and it was important for him to be in at the kill.

Blake smiled very slightly. "Zen, give us planet visual. Jenna, stand by to take us out when it's done."

Jenna smiled openly at him, understanding his reasoning. Gan sat nearby, watching quietly.

Bek poised his finger over the button. "This is for Han - and for all the other dreamheads."

Blake nodded.

Bek pressed the button.

Avon fired the blasters. The ship quaked for a second, then steadied.

Cally and Vila watched Bek as he watched the screen. Blooms of red flame sparkled and died on Zondar's surface as the blasters did their work. Only fused silica and ashes would remain.

Bek sank back into his seat and sighed. That was it, enough for now.

Avon looked over his console and met Blake's eyes. "Ironic, isn't it?" he observed. "We were hoping to use the Terra Nostra to attack the Federation, only to discover that it is already being used to support it."

Vila's voice spoke sadly from somewhere behind him. "Where are all the good guys?"

Blake smiled. "You could be looking at them," he said.

# FRONTIER WORLDS

If you have enjoyed this FRONTIER WORLDS publication, well, that's a relief. Perhaps we can flog you some of the copies of *Frontier Worlds* #18 that are still cluttering up the attic. They're not as good as this publication, of course, but they come pretty close, I can tell you. If you haven't, well don't be too negative (see below). Make up for it by letting us flog you some of the back copies of *Frontier Worlds* #18 that are still cluttering up the attic. They're lots better than this rubbish, after all. SEND NO MONEY NOW! (Wait until the end of the next paragraph). You can be the proud possessor of the following exciting items, at no personal risk.

- Blake's 7 fiction: "Punchline and Juryrig" by David Tulley (dontcha just love him?), "Moonwind" by Sarah Berry, "The Long Waiting" by Justin Richards and Andy Lane, plus "Agency" by David Richardson.
- INTERVIEWS: Doctor Who artistes (get that lingo) Deborah Watling (Victoria) and Gerald Flood (Kameilion).
- Jeremy Bentham (who he? - ed) reviews *Death-Watch*. Peter Anghelides (blatant self publicist) mauls *Carnival of Monsters*. Andrew Martin draws (geddit!?) some conclusions on *The Awakening*.
- Six pages of letters, Blake's 7 go to Mystery Moor, and thirteen other items which I can't be bothered telling you about.

NB: the above include lots of rare B7 pics from all four seasons, an Avon-bonk story (number 7 in a series of 6), stunning (zzz) full-colour artwork by Andrew Martin (it's that man again), a return to Gauda Prime, and all that snazzy stuff. Get it while it's lukewarm.

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FRONTIER WORLDS is edited by Peter G Lovelady and Peter Anghelides  
but it doesn't mean they're bad people.

