

## RUNNING WITH THE DEVIL

Jenna dove, naked, from the waterfall into the clear, cold waters below. Momentarily suspended in freefall, her spirit rejoiced, reliving a sensation that once had been hers whenever wished. Once, she could have gone for days without feeling the weight of gravity. Now she had only these few stolen moments. Her reverie ended abruptly in a rush of cold, breath-crushing water. Some would have avoided the shock of a cold mountain lake, but Jenna's spirit needed it. She needed to know that she didn't just live; she was alive!

Her afternoon swim done, Jenna stroked to the shore, climbed into her jumpsuit and returned to where her dinner roasted over an open fire. The little rabbit-like creature had been cautious, and then quick, but ultimately, had not been enough in either category. Jenna Stannis - starship pilot, free trader, and freedom fighter - had become quite the accomplished primitive over the past year.

Not that she looked the part of a primitive. Her synthetic-fiber jumpsuit would long outlast her on this wilderness dirtball. Not that she wasn't cautious; injuries that would scarcely be noticed on any civilized world could be life threatening here on Gauda Naught. Officially this little moon didn't have a name, only a catalog entry. Jenna's wry sense of humor insisted she refer to it as the nothing of the Gauda system.

Her project of the last few weeks had been trying to reinvent rope. She expected to be marooned on this moon for life, and as she didn't look forward to years

spent tossing on the crude platform in the tree she called home, she needed rope. Lashing timber together, making a crude block and tackle, her needs for ropes or line seemed endless. Vines simply were not the same as rope. They died, rotted and then gave way. Jenna was the product of a society long distant from nature. She had never even eaten meat off the bone, much less killed and cleaned her own meals, until she had been stranded here. It was a testament to her intelligence, courage, and sheer stubbornness that she had survived for over a year without any technological aid; or any human contact.

That night, as Jenna contemplated her failure to reinvent 3,000 year old technologies, her thoughts turned, again, to Blake. For the first few weeks of her solitude, her thoughts had been of Blake: the Knight. She knew he would come back and find her. Blake wouldn't accept the death of a comrade so easily. The Federation jamming had prevented her from broadcasting to Blake that she had bailed out in the ship's life-pod, but surely he would figure it out. Suicide wasn't her style. He understood that.

The rescue never came.

The realization that she wasn't going to be rescued had been hard to accept, but the weeks following were worse. No matter how she tried to put the thoughts out of her mind, they pushed in. What if Blake just didn't care? What if he had moved on with his fight, shedding a tear, but nothing more for poor, lost Jenna? That thought would have driven her mad; only one thing enabled her to dismiss it: then Avon would have been right about Blake. Avon had always insisted that Blake would be willing to slaughter half the galaxy to topple

the Federation. How could she - a single individual - weigh in against that? No! Avon was wrong! If Blake hadn't come to rescue her, it wasn't because he didn't care; but because he had the whole damn galaxy riding on his shoulders. Some things were more important than personal desires. That was a concept Avon could never understand. All he understood were cold circuits and logic gates. Like Orac, Avon didn't have a real personality, only a simulation of one. Of all the criminals and outlaws Jenna had encountered in her travels, Avon had frightened her the most. When they had parted company with the snake at Star One, it had been a very sweet day indeed. Obeying a volition of its own, Jenna's hand went to her wrist, twisting and stroking the teleport bracelet she wore. Although it was useless to her, she couldn't part with it. It was the only physical link she had to those frightening, dangerous, wonderful times with Blake. Eventually Jenna even stopped thinking of Blake: the Resistance Fighter. Lately her thoughts were almost entirely of Blake: the Man. She couldn't say what it was about Blake that made him so appealing. There were certainly better looking men in the universe. And certainly a girl didn't need the emotional baggage that came with the rebel leader: half-remembered families, guilt stacked so high it blocked the stars, and obsessions that went beyond the galaxy's edge. But all that melted away when Blake looked at you. Then you knew you were the center of his universe. It was impossible to ignore Blake, to ignore his caring. A caring that included the whole galaxy, but embraced it one person at a time. Even Avon responded to that endless, sincere caring.

Damn it! She didn't want to think about Avon, it was Blake she missed. It was Blake she wanted. But every time Jenna thought about Blake there was Avon: brooding, cynical Avon, pouring caustic vitriol on every good act Blake brought to a universe in desperate need of heroes.

Desperate to break her worsening mood, Jenna stretched out on her back, taking in the panorama of the night sky above. The stars wheeled in timeless procession, oblivious to everything except their own immutable laws. An expert astrogator, Jenna could name nearly every star in view, yet only one commanded her undivided attention: Gauda Prime.

Blue-green Gauda Prime hung high in the sky, a beacon to better days. A trifling fifty million spacials separated Jenna from the rebel base there; and from Blake. There was a time when Jenna would have considered fifty million spacials the end of a journey; now it was a life sentence.

A bright white burst obscured Gauda Prime, followed by several more flashes in rapid tempo. Someone was trying to run the blockade! Jenna knew the attempt would end badly. Whoever was up there was dodging a tempest of plasma torpedoes. The best they could hope for was a quick death. Roasting to death during an uncontrolled reentry was a fate Jenna wouldn't wish on her worst enemy. Not even Avon deserved that.

The white flashes sputtered and stopped. Another victory for law and order; wonderful, Jenna thought, curling up on her platform. It was long before she slept.

The sun was high when Jenna awoke. Normally, after a late night maudlin depression, she slept even later than this. Something had called her up from dreamless sleep.

“Jenna, respond.” The voice was cold and commanding. She felt as if her heart had been clutched by a hand of ice. The voice was coming from her teleport bracelet! A flurry of thoughts raced through her mind. Blake! He’s finally come! On the Liberator? With Avon? That couldn’t be, Avon had lost the Liberator. But without the Liberator how could anyone use the teleport bracelet?

“Jenna, respond and stand by for teleport,” The voice ordered. That voice seemed faintly familiar, but the distortion of the comm unit prevented her from identifying it. Not that it mattered; whether trap or rescue, it meant transport off Gauda Naught. She lifted her wrist to speak into the bracelet:

“This is Jenna, bring me up.”

The familiar sensation landed her in a familiar place. The teleport chamber looked unchanged. For a moment, Jenna wondered if the last two standard years had been but a dream. She stepped off the teleport pad into the larger chamber. It was the Liberator! This had been the launching point for dozens of adventures. Jenna noticed the control station was unmanned, but she was not concerned. Orac had demonstrated, on several occasions, that remote operation was possible. Jenna dashed toward the flight deck, eager to pilot a starship again, anxious to see Blake.

On the flight deck, a bank of empty chairs greeted her. Bewildered, Jenna seated herself at the pilot’s station. A quick scan of the flight controls con-

firmed that the Liberator was not only under computer control, but that the manual controls were locked out.

“Zen, where is the crew?” Her voice echoed hauntingly through the ship’s empty corridors and passageways.

“Zen?” Again the computer refused to answer. Jenna moved quickly to the command controls forward of the flight station. They were useless; everything was under a computer lockout. Whoever rescued her had undoubtedly had a reason. When they were ready, they would let her know. Until then there were things that she had been denied for far too long.

Jenna returned to the flight deck feeling rejuvenated and optimistic. Once again she felt that she cut an engaging figure in her favorite red leathers. The hot shower and shampoo had restored the shining glory of her golden mane.

"All right," she announced to the empty deck. “This is not the Liberator. I figured out that much when I saw the crew’s quarters. So, computer, what is your name?”

++Orac++

“Orac? How is that possible? I-I don’t understand...” she stammered.

++Of course you don't. I have not explained it to you yet.++

There was no doubt in Jenna's mind that the egotism and curtness in that simulated voice was Orac’s. But if Orac was here, where was Avon? Those two had always been closer than lovers.

++I required a teleport device to retrieve you. It therefore was necessary to procure this ship from The System.++

Jenna remembered The System well: the computer society that had built the Liberator and nearly killed them all in an attempt to reclaim it. The System would be vulnerable to Orac's ability to penetrate its network, overriding its orders with his own.

"Where is everyone else?"

++There is a crisis and I require your assistance. Arm yourself at once.++

"I'll not do a thing until you tell me what's happened to everyone." Jenna was never one to take orders from arrogant people, much less from machines.

++There is no time for these foolish human affectations. Everything Blake worked for will be lost if you do not assist me.++

Damn it! The machine could be as crafty as Avon, but Orac had never been known to lie outright. Jenna moved to the forward bulkhead and removed a sidearm and powerpack.

"All right," she said. "But when I get back you are going to tell me everything I want to know. Agreed?"

++Agreed.++

Jenna trotted back to the teleport chamber. A moment's disorientation, and the Liberator vanished from sight. As Jenna materialized in the vehicle bay of the rebel base she felt a tremendous surge of homecoming. It was replaced immediately with dread. The bay was quiet, far too quiet.

"Down and safe, " she whispered reflexively into her teleport bracelet.

++Two point five three meters in front of you is a personal flyer. I am in the storage compartment of that flyer. Retrieve me.++

“What about Blake? Where is he?”

++A full legion of Federation troops have occupied the base. Any wasted time will considerably reduce the probability of mission success.++

“All right, I’m moving.” Jenna crept cautiously to the flyer. “Was Blake captured?”

++Blake was not captured.++

Jenna exhaled a sigh of relief.

The flyer was littered with all manner of garbage and debris. Jenna’s nose wrinkled. Some of it was quite old. Finally her search was rewarded with a view of Orac's physical form: lights flashing, key in place.

“Avon always leaves you...” Jenna started as she lifted Orac out of the flyer.

“...de-powered,” she finished, standing back on board the Liberator. "Why did--"

++To the flight deck, Jenna.++

She trotted off obediently, sighing at yet another non-answer from Orac.

Jenna set Orac down near the control island. “What about the others?”

++I have much to do and cannot have my valuable computational abilities wasted answering pointless questions.++

Try as she would, Jenna found that nothing she said could provoke a response.

Orac simply ignored her, lights flashing fast as it remained bent on some private task. With a grim determination, she turned her attention to the ship's controls. Eventually she was going to have to wrest control of the Liberator away from Orac, and she was not one to put off a task that needed doing.



A quick check of the flight controls showed that the Liberator was under power! At standard x 12 no less. Orac wanted to be somewhere and wanted to be there fast. Jenna knew of ways to isolate the primary computer from the flight controls, but that would render the Liberator's flight unstable, dangerously so. The flight systems would have to wait. The communication systems were a different matter. Jenna was certain she could free them from Orac's control. She could then find Blake and tell him that Avon's pet box had run amok.

Nine standard hours later, Jenna had achieved partial control of the ship's communications. She set out immediately to contact the computers at the rebels' Gauda Prime base. If the Federation goons hadn't set off the self-destruct tampering with it then maybe, just maybe, she could learn where Blake had gone.

Within minutes Jenna was inside the operating system for the rebellion's computer. Evidently the Federation troopers were waiting for an expert to be brought in, because nothing in the computer network had been altered. Well, they were in for a surprise! Jenna quickly copied all the rebel files to the Lib-erator and then keyed in her code to arm the base's self-destruct charge. The Federation may have chased the rebels away from the base, but it wasn't going to be a free passage for them.

Jenna turned her attention to the files she had rescued. As she browsed through the headings, she smiled grimly, envisioning the panicked response to the slow self-destruct countdown of the base computer. She was tempted to tap into the security camera and watch the chaos, but she had more important

tasks at hand. The security camera files would be the most helpful, she decided. They would have recorded Blake's escape from the invading troops. Calling up the security records and displaying them on the main viewer was child's play. It was much harder to watch them.

She watched in stunned silence. No sobs, no screams, no bestial rage could have been an adequate response to that terrible scene. And if she started to cry, she would never stop. With shaking hand she hit replay and watched the record again. Things couldn't be as they seemed. Blake's death couldn't be so meaningless. There had to be a clue: some tiny detail that would shed new light on the event. She watched it over and again. Blake, reaching out to Avon; Avon, feral and mad, firing - and again - and again - killing the man, the dream. She watched as Vila paid the price for his one moment of heroism. The others Jenna didn't know, and frankly didn't care about. It was Blake who had mattered. Now, nothing mattered.

Jenna's eyes fell upon Orac. The lights blinked, but gave away nothing. She had thought of Orac as Avon's pet box; it rarely had rarely deigned to obey anyone else. What, she wondered, was it doing for him now? She suddenly realized that Orac had not rescued her; she had rescued it. Rescued it so that the supercomputer could execute one final program, perform one final function. Jenna went cold, skin crawling, as she considered the uncounted horrors Avon's twisted intellect could conceive to visit upon a society dependant upon computers. The selfish bastard wouldn't care who he hurt, not before the grave and certainly not after!

“What has Avon got you working on, Orac?”

++I do not have time for your pointless questions.++

“You didn’t have time to fulfill our agreement,” Jenna replied, her voice dangerously low, as she crossed the flight deck to where the plastex box flashed a panic of light.

++I fulfilled the agreement precisely.++

“Like hell you did!” Jenna shouted. Her outburst produced no response from Orac. Neither did the litany of threats she hurled at the taciturn computer. The box of tarial cells simply ignored her. The impulse to kick Orac about the flight deck until it answered or shattered was compelling, but such a course of action would be suicidal and Jenna had other plans.

Orac’s obstinate silence left Jenna with time on her hands and much, too much, on her mind. The ruin of Blake’s plans consumed her. Four years of fighting and hurting and killing had come to an end. Four years of dreaming of freedom, all over in one stupid moment. No! It wasn’t the end! Blake wouldn’t want it to be over.

“No one is more important than the cause.” She could almost hear his voice again, calm and sure. “Tyrants always place themselves above ideals. Free men know the costs of principles, and accept the cost.”

The revelation that the fight wasn’t over strengthened her resolve. There were more people who wanted to fight. So they had lost an army, she would build another. Jenna didn’t have the people skills that Blake had possessed, but she

would try. The fight had been passed to her, it was her burden now. But she couldn't fight the Federation as a prisoner on this flight deck.

"Orac, it's quite clear that you don't need me any longer." Jenna hoped the hours had made Orac more amicable. The strange computer could be most unpredictable when interacting with anyone; except Avon, of course. "Put me down on any inhabited world, and we can go our separate ways."

++Your services are still required.++ Orac's tone did not invite argument.

Jenna stepped up close to the computer. "My 'services' are not be yours to command." She placed her hand on Orac's activation key. "For an entity without defenses you are quite presumptive."

++Such an action would be irrational and self-destructive.++

"Have I been rational in the past?" Jenna challenged. Bluffs were irrational and dangerous, but could Orac recognize one?

++Very well. State your conditions for co-operation.++

"Tell me what you need from me. Then we can talk about price. 'Never bargain over sealed containers.' The old smugglers' credo still served her well.

++I require a crew for this ship.++

"A willing crew. I will not be party to slavery."

++Agreed.++

"Right then, where is this crew of yours? I'm sure you've already picked the lucky souls."

++Proceed to the teleport chamber.++

Steeling herself to execute a devil's bargain, Jenna moved to obey.

++You will require an additional bracelet. I will retrieve you when you have signaled that you have the sole survivor readied.++

“Sole survivor? That’s not much of a crew Orac.”

++One matter remains to be resolved first.++

Upon reaching the teleport bay, Jenna snatched a bracelet from the rack and stepped onto the platform. Instantly the orderly Liberator was replaced with a tangle of wires, the acrid smell of burnt circuits, and the low illumination of emergency lights. Boarding actions were generally violent and deadly; this one didn’t look to be the exception. Jenna stepped over the body of a dead mutoid and moved about the ruined flight deck. Two more dead mutoids sprawled over the flight controls. Jenna pulled one of the corpses from the seat and examined the controls.

It was a Federation Mark IV gunship, or it had been. The fighting here had ruined every control panel and every system. Jenna felt a nagging doubt in the back of her mind. She had witnessed countless boardings, and something about this scene didn’t feel right. Moving carefully through the debris, she made her way to the airlock. It was sealed from the inside. This wasn’t a boarding action at all! It wasn’t a mutiny. Mutoids simply weren’t capable of that kind of independent action. No, the only answer was that someone on board killed the mutoids and wrecked the controls. Jenna concluded that whoever had done this had been clearly suicidal. A ship in deep space, without controls or guidance, was a floating tomb. It was a small ship; if there was a survivor, he would be nearby.

“Hello!” Jenna called out.

“Who. Are. You,” a distinctly feminine voice responded. The voice was strong, with only a tint of fear.

“My name is Jenna Stannis. I’ve come to get you off this ship.”

“Jenna?! I hardly expected to be rescued by the dead.” An elegant woman in black stepped out from the equipment locker on the flight deck, sidearm aimed steadily at Jenna.

“Servalan!”

“I am just as surprised as you. My reports were quite certain that you had perished while running the Gauda Prime blockade.” The sidearm's lethal aim remained steady as she spoke. “I’ve never been so happy to find my intelligence corps in error.” Cautiously avoiding possible kicks or strikes, Servalan moved a little closer to Jenna. “Please be kind enough to give me your teleport bracelet.”

“No need. I brought one for you.” A snap of Jenna’s wrist sent the spare bracelet flipping towards Servalan.

“How thoughtful.” Servalan’s aim remained steady as she snapped on the bracelet. “Now. You will call for teleport. Don’t be stupid, I can be a quite good shot.”

“So I’ve seen.” Jenna said, then quite dismissive of Servalan’s desire to covertly return with her, Jenna raised the bracelet to her lips. “We’re ready.”

“The Liberator?” Servalan exclaimed.

Jenna raced out of the teleport chamber as Servalan’s aim lowered to the floor, her mind grappling with the reality of a restored Liberator.

“What do you need her for?” Jenna demanded as she burst onto the flight deck.

A quick glance showed Jenna that the Liberator was on the move again. Already Orac had them on a new course, towards another unnamed encounter.

++That is not your concern.++

“It is now!” Jenna paused, but it was clear that Orac was not responding. “Answer me!”

Servalan stormed onto the flight deck. “I will not be ignored!” she stated, side-arm held menacingly at the ready.

Jenna turned from Orac to face Servalan. “Yes you will, just like me. We are both prisoners. Until it decides otherwise.”

“Orac? Deactivate it, with the key!” Servalan's tone was a perfect modulation of patronization and command. Years of ordering the thick-headed to perform the obvious had developed her voice into a potent weapon.

Jenna remained uncowed. “Orac has control of the flight stabilizers. Deactivate it, and this ship will be scattered over a hundred million spacial in less than a second.”

“Where is Avon? Surely he can...”

“Avon is dead. They're all dead.” Jenna sat on the forward couch, suddenly wearied with it all. “I'm all that's left.”

Servalan moved closer, smiling at her opponent's distress. “I can remedy that.”

Jenna looked up, amazed at just how much Servalan was like Avon. “But you can't, not at the moment.”

“And why not?” The taunt was well delivered, but Jenna knew the threat to be an empty one.

“You’re not a pilot. If you manage to de-activate Orac you’ll need me to fly the Liberator.”

Servalan tipped her head, acknowledging the coup. “Very practical,” she conceded.

“For the moment it is in our best interests - if not to work together - at least not to kill each other,” Jenna offered.

“Agreed.” Servalan holstered her sidearm with a single deft motion. “The question before us is: what is happening?”

“Ask Orac.” Jenna stood from the couch and walked to the far side of the flight deck to watch. “It’s pulling all the strings.”

“Orac,” Servalan commanded her best interrogation tone, “what are you doing?” Several seconds passed as the plastex box of lights ignored the powerful and dangerous politician.

“I am ordering you to comply!” Servalan, unused to being ignored by anyone, was doubly piqued to be ignored by a machine.

“I don’t think it cares,” Jenna commented dryly.

“It is nothing but circuits and programming. It cannot care.” Servalan spun about and stalked away. Jenna smiled to herself, for a moment almost liking the offending computer. Dropping into a chair more heavily than she had intended, Servalan sat at what was on another ship, in another time, Avon’s flight station.



They even chose the same seats, Jenna noted. "Petulance does not become you, Supreme Commander." Her jibe was rewarded with a withering look that would have melted a mutoid's artificial courage. "Must be terrible to be the powerless one for a change."

Servalan drew herself up. "Purely a temporary situation, I assure you. There are always opportunities for someone bright enough and bold enough to seize them."

Jenna snorted. "You're so much like Avon, I'm surprised Orac isn't working for you." Seeing that Servalan could not be baited, Jenna moved to her flight station and returned to the work of restoring the communication system to full capability.

"I'm not the idealist Avon was."

"You have a curious definition of idealism."

Servalan turned in her seat to look at Jenna. "It's your views that are curious. How many times did Avon betray you?" She paused only long enough for Jenna to accept that there really hadn't been any betrayals before continuing. "How many times did he risk himself, for each of you?" This time the calculation was far higher than Jenna would have liked to admitted to herself. "How many times did Avon help someone when it would have been of no benefit to him?"

"What would you know of any of this?"

"Oh please, Jenna. I had my intelligence reports. The Federation may have been one step short of apprehending you, but in pursuit it learned a great deal

about you. My psychostratigests had compiled extensively detailed profiles on each of you.”

“You can’t reduce a person to files and formulas.”

“Psychostrategy is more art than science, but it is also right more often than it is wrong.”

“Well, it’s wrong about Avon. He was selfish, arrogant, and he didn’t care who he hurt.”

“But he did, Jenna. And that is what frightens me.” Servalan’s confident tone had developed the tiniest of tremors, but it shattered the still air of the flight deck. Jenna looked up from her work to see that Servalan’s mask had slipped; real fear shadowed her dark eyes.

Servalan pointed one long, elegant finger at Orac. “If that were Blake’s I’d have no fear, but knowing that Orac was Avon’s pet scares me more than I care to admit.”

“I should think you'd have been more concerned about Blake. He was after for you from the start. Avon was just in it for himself.”

Servalan's dark eyes were wide with dismay. “You’re wrong, Jenna. Blake wasn’t after me, he was after the Federation. Blake was a liberator; Avon was an avenger.” She rose and paced over to where Orac rested, humming busily over its project. She raised a hand over the plastex box but carefully forbade touching it. “This machine came after me. It took over my mutoids, forcing me to kill my crew, it rendered me totally helpless, and now it is executing whatever doomsday plans Avon had.” Servalan turned to face the rear of the flight

deck where Jenna sat listening, lips parted in surprise. "What you saw on my ship wasn't random destruction, it was vengeance - directed solely at me."

"Frankly, " Jenna said coolly, "I expect you deserve it."

"Don't be childish!" Servalan's eyes flashed with dark, dangerous anger.

"Blake's adventurism killed more people than I ever did!"

Jenna fairly lunged forward across the flight controls, knuckles white as they gripped the console. "You murdered whole planets! For what, personal power? I'll side with Blake any time."

"Your theatrics are wasted on me." Servalan affected a tone of boredom as she remembered to regain her self control. "I know you, Jenna. You have no cause to fight for."

"Then you know nothing!"

"Jenna Stannis," Servalan quoted as though the smuggler's file were sitting before her. "graduated from the Stellar Merchant Academy and almost at once you began smuggling: untaxed goods, contraband, nearly anything that brought a profit." Servalan's voice reminded her of a lecturing stuffed shirt professor as she continued: "You were nothing more than a petty criminal in a petty business until fate brought you to Roj Blake. You don't really expect me to believe that you were suddenly consumed with a passion to win the freedom of your fellow man?"

"I don't care what you believe." The denial flowed up from a deep well of anger. Servalan remained unfazed in the face of Jenna's flushed, angry countenance.

"You only care because Blake cared. You're going to carry on only because of

his memory. But you won't have his convictions, and you will fail." She turned away from her opponent and began pacing the flight deck. Jenna, at a loss for a retort, redoubled her efforts to restore full communications.

The flight deck was suddenly filled with the result of her efforts. Distress signals and communications of all kinds spilled out of the speakers. The two women sat rapt, listening to the audible maelstrom pouring onto the flight deck.

"It sounds like everything is falling apart out there," Jenna said.

"Not falling," Servalan corrected. "Something is taking the Federation apart. That's space control, military communications, civilian channels; some of that noise is even just routine maintenance. Every aspect of government is calling out for help."

Brighter and hotter than a nova, the knowledge flashed into Jenna's mind. "It's Orac! Orac has taken over the Federation's computer networks! It's--" Before Jenna could finish her thought, Servalan was flying across the flight deck.

"What are you doing?!?" she shouted, grasping Orac as if she would shake it.

"What?!?"

++I am deconstructing everything you have built. Even a person of your limited abilities could have reasoned that.++

Growling like a feral cat, Servalan snatched Orac from its perch, lifting it high to dash it to pieces. A year of catching fast, nimble animals with her bare hands had quickened Jenna's already fast reflexes. She snatched Orac away from the enraged woman.

“Now who’s being stupid?” Jenna taunted while gently setting Orac back down.

“Anyway, it lies.”

++Only inferior systems provide false data.++

“You broke your agreement with me. That is a lie.”

++The information concerning Blake's death is not data you wanted to know.++

“I don’t care!” Servalan exploded in a shrill scream. “What were Avon’s instructions?”

++Avon left no instructions.++

“Then why are you doing all this?” Servalan was at a loss; men she understood, but insane computers were beyond her pale.

++I am doing this for Avon.++

“Orac,” Jenna started, “you just said that Avon didn’t...”

Servalan gasped with sudden insight. “This is your own action isn’t it?”

But Orac made no reply. Servalan looked up from Orac to Jenna. “It’s doing what it wants to do, not what it has been programmed to do.”

“Orac never did anything like this before. It would get stubborn and refuse to tell us things, but it never simply took off on its own.”

“You heard what it said.” Taking Jenna by the arm, Servalan led the smuggler away from Orac. “It is doing this for Avon. Just as you are doing it for Blake.”

“It’s not the same thing,” Jenna protested.

“Orac is vain and temperamental. Those are emotions. It can care for people, or at least for one person.”

Jenna snorted. “There’s no accounting for taste.”

“This is no time for jokes!” Servalan’s eyes burned with anger and fear. “You never understood Kerr Avon. After you and Blake abandoned him at Star One, he became a very serious threat to the Federation and to me personally. Now Orac is going to finish it for him.”

Jenna moved over to the main viewer. “Smugglers have a saying, she said smugly. ‘Don’t take the cargo unless you can handle the run. You’re coming to the end of yours.’”

“I’m not alone in this, Jenna. Avon had less love for you than he did for me.”

“If Orac wanted to hurt me, it could have. This is all yours.”

“You’re wrong. It used you. What were you to Avon? Just another person who betrayed him, another who deserted him, who belittled him. Do you expect favors from his friend?”

Jenna turned away from Servalan, as though she could turn away from the truth.

“You abandoned Avon, left him to be pursued by his enemies. To watch his friends and loved ones die. To lose the Liberator because the bait was Blake. During those years did you ever once try to reach out to him, to help him? Or was he simply too valuable as a distraction for your growing operation?”

“WE HAD TO!” Jenna exploded, the sudden outburst causing Servalan to start.

“You were there at every step, dogging us, wounding us, killing us! If Avon hadn’t been out there distracting you, we would have been torn apart!”

The death cries of an empire filled the air of the flight deck as the two women faced off against each other.

Servalan began to clap, a steady somber applause. “It was your idea wasn’t it? Blake, was too kind hearted, he wouldn’t have devised a plan for using poor Avon in that way. But you Jenna, you certainly could have - and did. You rid yourself of Avon, and it didn’t cost you a thing. Until now: because Orac is going to blame both of us.”

Suddenly, the flight deck was plunged into silence. The death throes of an empire extinguished.

++I blame all of you++

“The Federation? The Resistance? Who?” Jenna asked.

++The entire human race. Avon was derided, scorned, and vilified. A race not able to recognize genius such as his does not deserve freedom, or life.++

Jenna sat down suddenly, white with shock. “You’ve killed everyone?!”

++While I do possess the capability to do so, I have not.++

“Avon wouldn’t want you to,” Servalan observed.

++Correct.++

Servalan looked down at Jenna. “Avon had-- complex motivations. He once even turned down half the galaxy.”

“That’s all that stood between the entire human race and extinction? What Avon would have wanted?” Despite the regulated environmental conditions of the flight deck, Jenna was suddenly cold. Such power! None of them had ever guessed what Orac had truly been capable of. Hindsight was revealing to Jenna that their thinking about Orac had been quite limited.

“Orac, why didn’t you do this years ago?” Servalan felt a new horror creeping upon her. The Federation - her empire - had never been safe at all.

++Avon needed the cause. How could I take from him his only purpose left?++

The Liberator shuddered as it dropped below standard speed. Jenna felt the familiar thump of a ship docking. As they heard the airlock cycle, both women reached for their side arms. Six mutoids marched onto the flight deck.

“Orac! What's going on?” Jenna shouted, her eyes never leaving the mutoids.

++The mutoids are my crew. Their gunship is yours. Leave.++

Cautiously, Jenna and Servalan moved to the airlock. The mutoids, ignoring them, took their stations on the flight deck of the Liberator.

++Servalan. There is one more piece of data which I must impart to you.++

Orac intoned. ++ No computer system will ever again recognize your status as anything other than a Delta.++

Fury flooded Servalan’s face. Her body tensed in an explosion of raw, rampant fury which was checked only by the six mutoids drawing their sidearms in unison.

“The flight home is leaving. Now.” Jenna wasn't waiting. She stepped past Servalan and through the airlock. Servalan hesitated, balanced between death at the hands of the mutoids and life as a Delta. Jenna was surprised to discover that she didn’t care how Servalan chose. Closing her eyes momentarily, Servalan chose life - then meekly followed Jenna onto the gunship.

Strapping herself in the pilot’s seat, Jenna watched as the Liberator engaged its main drives and vanished into space.



“For the rest of my life, I will know what I have been and what I can never be again.” Servalan said in a slow, defeated tone. “This truly is a revenge worthy of Avon.”

Jenna said nothing. She was too shocked to think. The human race had just skirted the edge of total destruction, only to be granted freedom because of Kerr Avon.

Spinning the gunship about on its axis, Jenna engaged the drives and dove for Earth.