

Duet for Rebel and Youth

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A story for Ika and Fran's "Sleer as Folk" fanzine.

A few years after Gauda Prime, Sleer is about to become president of the revived Federation.

Dayna is determined to make sure that she doesn't.

Contains same-gender sexual relationships. Is a bit on the angsty side.

Featured fandoms: Blake's 7

Featured pairings: Dayna/Jenna, Dayna/Cally

A.S.S Story codes: ff

Story rating: NC17

Arrival

"Welcome to Medolor, the new capital world of the Terran Federation," the annoyingly perky voice said over the PA system. A fraction of a second later, a bump announced that the deorbiter had reached the ground.

"For your own safety, please remain seated until the aircraft has reached the terminal and come to a complete stop."

Dayna looked with ill-concealed loathing at all those who got out of their seats immediately and queued up by the exit door. Once, she would've been up there among them, adrenaline levels rising as she fretted in vain to get out. She knew better now. She'd learned to force herself to remain calm, to wait for the suitable moment before moving. She remained seated until the door opened, and then she calmly collected her coat and suitcase and exited.

The walls in the immigration hall were covered with huge viewscreens, all of which were showing something or other to do with the upcoming presidential inauguration. The inauguration of President Sleer. A surge of pure hatred welled up in Dayna, but she pushed it down again. Save that for later. At the moment, she must be calm so that immigration security wouldn't get suspicious. In theory, she was still a wanted criminal, and if they did more than a casual check they'd find that out. She took a few deep breaths, and made sure to only think about pleasant things while she waited.

"What's this?" the customs official asked after taking two arm-long strangely shaped pieces of ceramic out of her suitcase.

"They're part of a sculpture I'm working on," she said. "It's nowhere near finished and I may just throw the whole thing away. I brought it along just to see if the trip would give me inspiration."

She wasn't sure if he believed her, but he put them back and slid the suitcase back to her.

"Enjoy your stay on Medolor, Greynor," he said.

She smiled. "I'm sure I will."

The shuttle from the spaceport to the city proper was crowded. Just about everybody looked like tourists, which was annoying but suited her purposes well. Hiding in the crowds wouldn't work so well if there were no crowds. Keeping that in mind, she tried not to let the heat and noise get to her. She failed.

Leaning on the window, she looked out. The landscape was beautiful, in a mournful sort of way. Medolor's sun was dim and reddish, and although her eyes and brain had adapted to see the light as normal it still made her feel downcast. It wasn't even Medolor's sun, if you wanted to be picky, since Medolor wasn't a planet but an unusually large moon orbiting a gas giant. The gas giant, Eye, would rise above the horizon in a couple of hours and stay up for several days.

The ground close to the shuttle tracks had some vegetation on it. It was only lichen and some hardy bush-like things, but it was something. In the distance, she could see the distortion effects from the forcefields protecting the inhabited areas from the violent vulcanism that was Medolor's most prominent feature.

It was a peculiar choice of capital. But then, Servalan wasn't exactly your everyday

run-of-the-mill sort of woman. At the moment. Soon she would be a dead woman, which was about as everyday and run-of-the-mill as you could get these days. The thought made her smile.

The hotel was also full of tourists, so rather than eat there she walked out into the city.

It was packed with people, many more than it had been built for. Level upon level, all stacked with spiderlike buildings designed to withstand high levels of seismic activity. Street by street, most turned into tunnels by levels placed over them, lit by stray light from the shops bars cafés restaurants bordellos crowding their sides. People jostling people, almost pushing her into the stacks of vegetables lying on the ground and hanging from the ceiling in front of a shop. She pushed back, a young man turned to her to yell but fell silent when he saw her eyes.

She tried to get out of the crowds, and found herself heading downwards, to the oldest parts of the city hive. The lighting was no worse, the crowds were thinner and the air was nearly unbreathable before she got used to the smells. She sat down at a hole-in-the-wall selling grilled meat and sauce in bread pockets, had sour hydroponics-grain beer with it. Down here, nobody jostled her. Down here, the people had a near-telepathic sensitivity to violent people, and they felt the aura of death around the dark-skinned short-haired black-clad heavy-booted woman. She put her hand on the palm reader, transferring a pitiful amount of money from the nonexistent Lydia Greynor's -- thanks to Orac inexhaustible -- account to the food-seller's.

A block or two from the hotel she saw a Federation trooper chase somebody into a side alley. Out of curiosity and habit, she followed, carefully keeping out of sight.

The alley was dark, dirty and full of broken things, as alleys tend to be. There were windows facing it, that special sort of window through which the people living inside never see anything unpleasant, no matter what kind of bad things happen just outside.

At the moment, the bad thing was a Federation trooper beating up a civilian. A girl. No, a young woman. Pale and gaunt, like most on this world. Dressed in worn worker's coveralls. The trooper was shouting something at her, but Dayna didn't care enough to try to hear what. She stepped up behind him, and with a swift elbow strike dislocated a vertebra in the neck far enough to sever the spinal cord. He fell like a dropped rag doll.

Some moments passed before the woman dared look up. Her eyes were dark brown, almost black. Under the dirt and bruises, she was probably quite attractive.

"Who are you?" she asked.

Dayna sighed. "A specter from the past. This was a mistake. I shouldn't have done it. Forget you ever saw me."

She walked away, quickly, not looking back.

Back at the hotel, she used one of the publicly available communicators and dialed a local address that led somewhere that wasn't even remotely local.

"Are you there?"

"Of course I am here! Where else would I be?"

"Good. Can you check if there's any alarm out here about a killed trooper?"

"Of course I can."

"Well, *do* that then."

"Very well. Yes, there is."

"Do they seem to be looking for me?"

"No. They are looking for some local rebel woman. The description is entirely unlike yours."

"Good. Anything else?"

"There is much else. You will have to be more precise."

"Anything else relevant to my plans, you annoying machine."

"No. Everything is proceeding well. Servalan is, as always, precisely on schedule."

"Ok. I'll be in touch."

She disconnected and went up to her room to sleep.

The next day the girl was waiting for her outside the hotel. She was trying not to be noticed, and she followed Dayna as she walked down the levels. She wasn't bad, but it soon became obvious that she wasn't used to following people as experienced as Dayna. She let her follow for a while, but made sure to lose her before she got close to the repair bay where she intended to steal a few one-meter lengths of vehicle spring ceramic.

The day after that, when Dayna went out to shop for a quite specific set of fairly uncommon household chemicals, the dark-eyed girl was there again. Again, she followed Dayna through the crowds, through the claustrophobic streets, through the narrow stairways. After she'd made the girl lose track, she reversed their roles and followed her for a while, to see what she would do. All she did was keep looking for Dayna, which seemed strange. No policeman hunting a wanted criminal, no agent chasing a terrorist would do that. But this girl did.

The third day, Dayna had been planning to get some mechanical toys, but changed her mind a few blocks away from the hotel and instead switched places so that she followed the girl.

The girl looked quite frustrated and ran around more or less at random trying to find her quarry again. Definitely not a professional, or even an experienced amateur. Dayna stepped out of the shadows just behind her and waited. When the girl turned and saw her, she gasped and suddenly looked afraid.

"Who are you?" Dayna asked.

"You're a rebel, aren't you?" the girl said.

"Maybe. And that's not an answer to my question."

She looked a little less scared now. "My name is Tey," she said.

"Why are you following me?"

Fear turned to defiance. "I want you to teach me."

"What?!"

"Teach me to be a rebel. Show me how to fight the Federation."

Dayna laughed, a short and dry laugh. "You're crazy. Go home. Grow up, have a life."

"You're Dayna Mellanby," the girl said. "You used to be with Blake's gang. I've read about you in the history files."

The history files, Dayna thought. I'm not yet thirty years old, and I'm known from the *history files*. "Then you should know how much fun it isn't to be a rebel," she said.

The girl's face shone up. "You really *are* her? Oh wow! I thought maybe you were just someone who looked a lot like her because the files says that you died on Gauda

Prime with Kerr Avon and the rest. Are they alive too?"

Flashback. Pain. *Have you betrayed us? Have you betrayed me?* The street with its many smells, its jostling people, chattering crowds suddenly felt alien, so very alien. "No, they're quite dead," she said. "We shouldn't be talking about this out here. You shouldn't be talking about this at all."

"I know a place," the girl said, took her hand and pulled her into a side alley that wasn't much more than a crack between two drug-houses.

Her name was Teyneira which just about everybody shortened to Tey, Dayna was told over a large mug of algae tea.

She was nineteen years old, and small for her age. Malnourishment, she claimed. Medolor had never been an easy place to live, and she, her mother and her brother had been poor. Her mother had been a somewhat educated woman, though, and made sure to give her children the protein their brains needed to develop. Eating less but better, Tey and her younger brother grew up to be smaller and smarter than their playmates who lived on a diet of cheap Federation rations. When Tey was fifteen, her mother died in an accident in the mine where she had worked all her life. In theory, they should've gone into a Federation orphanage, but nobody ever got around to trying to take them there. Tey got a job as a delivery girl, her brother fell in with a gang of thieves who claimed to be freedom fighters. The first time they actually tried to do any freedom fighting, Tey's brother got shot.

Tey wanted to do better.

So far, she had, but only in that she hadn't been killed yet. She had been stealing things from the trooper's compound for a while, and the other day a trooper had seen her. Why he didn't just shoot her, she didn't know, but she guessed that he wanted to rape her first. He never got to do either, since Dayna killed him.

Tey had decided that Dayna showing up just there and just then was a sign that they were fated to fight together, that Tey was to carry on the tradition from her who carried it on from Avon who had been with Blake.

Her whole story made Dayna feel sick.

She didn't need this. She was here to make one last futile gesture, fulfill one last promise. She had neither time nor desire to take on an apprentice rebel.

The strange thing was that she found herself actually wanting to take care of this girl. Tey reminded her of her adopted sister Lauren in the way she had tried to rise above her origins, to fight against an unfriendly universe.

Lauren had ended up hanging from a wooden frame, killed by her own relatives.

"If you come with me, you'll probably die," she said.

"That's a step up. If I stay here, I'll certainly die," Tey said.

After a public bath, a medtech and a few clothing stores Dayna had Tey looking like the sort of prostitute who catered to rich offworld tourists. As Dayna had guessed, she was quite attractive without the dirt and bruises. She tried not to think about that, this was getting complicated enough without adding her own desires to the mix.

As they entered the lift tube in the hotel, she could feel the looks from the hotel staff burning into her back. So she's *that* sort of tourist, she could almost hear them thinking. Part of her wanted to tell them that, no, she wasn't *that* sort of tourist. Another, more sensible and less sensitive, part of her thought it perfect that they think that of her. *That* sort of tourist usually wanted to avoid contact with the authorities at any cost, so if something wrong happened they'd go to her for bribes rather than the

troopers for arrests.

The universe, Dayna thought, stinks.

Jenna

"What is that thing?" Tey asked.

She was sitting on the bed in Dayna's hotel room, watching Dayna work at a t-shaped contraption. Two more lay at the floor beside her.

"It's called a crossbow," Dayna said. "It's a weapon that was first invented several thousand years ago."

"So why are you building them now? There must be more efficient weapons available today."

Dayna tightened a couple of screws and tested the trigger mechanism a couple of times before she answered. "At the inauguration, the Council Hall will be crawling with security people. They will have scanners, scanners that were built to detect modern weapons. They are very good, the security scanners. They can detect many kinds of energy sources, from plain old chemical ones up to state of the art force crystals."

Satisfied that the trigger was working, she started oiling and inspecting a number of gears and pulleys on top of the stock. She attached an external device to a slot on the top of the crossbow, turned it on and watched while it slowly pulled the string back.

"In a crossbow, energy is stored as *tension*. With modern materials, I can put the crosspiece under very much more tension than the ancients could with wood or iron, and therefore my crossbows here can propel arrows very much faster than theirs could. Fast enough to punch through the president's personal force screen. And while the security scanners look for many sources of energy, physical tension isn't one of them. These things still take over a minute to reload, so I will only get one shot at her. But one shot will be enough."

Tey looked doubtful. "How can you be so sure about that? Sleer's got the best medicos there is, they can fix almost any kind of damage. Certainly anything one plain arrow could do."

Dayna smiled. "That's why the arrow won't be plain. It'll be filled with an explosive. A very mild one, to avoid the scanners, but it will be enough since it's going to explode *inside* Sleer's head. The medicos can heal almost everything, but not a pureed brain."

"Clever. Do you really think it'll work?"

"If I can make the first half of the plan work, yes."

"And what's the first half of the plan?"

"Getting to where I have a clear shot at Sleer."

Getting into the Council Hall at inauguration day was going to take cooperation from local people. Which could be had, it was just a matter of finding the right local people to buy cooperation from. To this purpose, Dayna had gone out and bought clothes of the kind worn by the wealthy and influential, the rich and the powerful. She had dressed in the rich, dark, complicated fabrics, helped by an admiring, beautiful, lovely Tey -- think not such thoughts about her, strike them from your mind, she is not for you, *love* is not for you -- and she had gone up the levels, up to where the small red sun and huge manycoloured planet spread their gentle light over beautiful people and erupting volcanos could be seen beating at the forcefields surrounding the city. A nightmare scene, but a strangely esthetic kind of nightmare.

She ate in the right restaurants, she drank in the right bars, she smoked in the right clubs, she inhaled in the right dens, searching for the right person to talk to. Orac had found several possibilities for her, now all she had to do was find them. In time, she would, but her time was limited. So she spent days scanning the crowds, looking at faces, looking for one she knew. Days full of crowds and noise, smoke and fragrances, days she was alone among thousands of people while Tey waited back at the hotel, reading books Dayna had downloaded for her. Bathed in planetlight, she day-dreamed dreams of vengeance, dreams of love past and dreams of love never to be.

When she finally did see a face she knew, it almost made her heart stop.

Dayna took a seat just behind the blonde woman, gestured to the bartender for something to drink and got something milky green. Halfways through it, she spoke in a fairly loud voice.

"I once travelled on a ship called more or less *Bringer of Freedom*," she said. "One of the crew had a picture of you in her cabin."

For a short while she thought she had made a mistake, that the woman wasn't who she thought she was.

"Well," said the woman. "Were you by any chance brought aboard this ship by a hard and bitter man, who later spent a lot of time looking for an idealist?"

Relief. "Yes. Is there somewhere we can talk in private?"

"Maybe. If I head for the door by the end of the bar in a little while, follow me. Otherwise, let's meet here again tomorrow night."

She nodded, then remembered that the other woman couldn't see her and said yes. She watched her, as discreetly as she could bear, watched her talk to the bartender and then walk towards the door she had mentioned. Dayna followed.

Dayna studied the blonde. She was older than she was, maybe by as much as a decade. She was well dressed, in a shiny white blouse and long white skirt, but muscles and scars revealed that her life hadn't always been one of riches and pleasure.

"You're Dayna Mellanby, aren't you?" Jenna asked while Dayna sat down. The room was small, six people would have crowded it, but lavishly furnished and intricately decorated. Much could be hidden in the decorations.

"Are you sure we can talk here?" she asked.

"Yes," Jenna said. "This is a negotiations room. The local branch of the Terra Nostra makes sure nobody listens to what goes on in here. Even they need some neutral ground, occasionally."

Dayna chose to accept the argument. Jenna had just as much to hide as she had, so why would she lie?

"Yes, I am Dayna Mellanby. And you are Jenna Stannis, who I heard was dead."

"I heard the same about you. Apparently both our sources were wrong."

That said, Dayna ran out of words. She had thought it would be easy to talk to her, there were so many things that they and only they had in common. Things that were so very easy to think about, but, she now found, so very hard to voice.

"So, what are you doing these days?" she asked, as if they knew each other, as if they had ever met before, the only words she could force through the sudden tension that filled the room.

"Same old, same old," Jenna said. "Smuggling things that are not legal, but not illegal enough that they really care about it."

"Then I guess opposing the Federation is not something you do any more?"

Straight to business, the safe course. Best to avoid all the unsaid things, all the emotional questions and answers.

Jenna was silent for a time, sipping on the clear blue drink she'd brought with her into the room. "I'm a businesswoman," she said after a while. "Opposing a government is rarely a good investment. The danger is considerable, and the rewards mostly small. However, I still don't like them, so if someone gave me a proposal that made even a small amount of business sense, I would be inclined to accept it."

Not a yes, but not a no either. Not as good as she had hoped, not as bad as she had feared.

"I'm not a businesswoman," she said. "All my life I've been a fugitive or a prisoner. But I do believe that if someone knew that there was going to be a great upheaval in a government, that someone could make a great deal of money from the ensuing disorder."

Jenna's eyes narrowed. Very little, but enough for Dayna to catch.

"How much disorder are we talking about here?" Jenna asked.

"A sudden emptiness at the very top."

"You're going to kill Sleer." A statement, not a question.

"We both know who she really is. And, yes, I am. It's a matter of revenge."

"If I go along with this, what would you need me to do?"

"Get me in. Just get me into the inauguration hall. That is all."

One of Jenna's eyebrows rose. "Only *in*?"

Dayna nodded. "Only in," she said."

On her way back to the hotel, she walked like zombie. Her thoughts fled back, back to the Liberator, to the Scorpio. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Vila, and when she turned to him it was a stranger. Across the room, Avon smirked at her confusion, except of course it wasn't him. From a wrought-iron balcony covered with vines, Tarrant's laughter floated down to her.

In her head, Cally whispered.

Long dead, she whispered from Dayna's memories, whispered of loves past, loves lost, loves remembered. She whispered of a blonde, hard smuggler's soft embrace. She whispered of mutual discoveries made in a Liberator cabin, of loneliness not broken but at least eased.

"It's a Liberator rule," Cally said in her memories, with the secretive little smile on her face that she had when she wasn't serious.

"What rule?" a much younger and oh so very serious Dayna had said.

"Seductions take place in the *older* woman's cabin," Cally had answered.

"Why would you need a rule like that?" the oh so very serious Dayna said, confused.

Cally rose up on one elbow so she could look down at Dayna's face.

"I'm joking, dear," she said. "It just occurred to me that Jenna approached me in much the same way that I approached you, and we were in her cabin at the time. I'm sorry if I upset you."

"That's fine," Dayna whispered and ran her fingers along Cally's naked flank. "What was she like?"

"What was who like?"

"Jenna! Who else?"

"I'll tell you some other time."

But she never did. She hinted at things. She mentioned things in passing. She al-

luded to. But she never got around to actually telling Dayna what Jenna had been like. She'd been a secretive woman, Cally, never one to offer information freely.

Being buried in a hole on Terminal didn't make her any easier to get answers out of either.

Oblivious to her surroundings, pondering things past, Dayna walked back to the hotel.

"I have to think about it. I'll get back to you," Jenna had said before they parted. So Dayna waited, as patiently as she could, for her answer.

She wasn't very good at patience.

In her hotel room, she lay on the bed looking at the plain white ceiling. Images raced after each other in her mind, memories appeared and vanished. Sounds leaked in through the window, sounds of people, cars, aircraft, sirens and occasionally guns. The bed smelled of clean but many times washed and stored cloth, the room had the particular smell that is a blend of all the smells of all the people that ever stayed in it, mixed with cleaning chemicals.

And there was the soft clicking sound from Tey pressing the next-page button on her reading pad. And there was the smell of Tey, clean, fresh, young.

It had been a long time since she'd had a close friend, a partner, a lover. It had been a long time since she touched another woman in love or desire.

"Tey," she said, still watching the ceiling. She heard the girl move.

"Yes?" came the reply.

"When you asked me to teach you how to rebel, what did you really expect to be taught?"

"I don't know. But you've lived much longer than any of the people I knew who tried, so you must have done something right that they didn't."

"What if I told you it was blind luck?"

"Was it?"

"Yes. No. Maybe. I don't know." Dayna say up and looked at Tey, who looked back at her.

"Look," Dayna said. "I grew up with no company except my father, my adopted sister and a lot of natives who tried to kill us. Once or twice we were visited by tutors, but they never stayed for long. One day, a space battle passed by our world and a lot of things fell from the sky. Some of the things were escape pods. One of the pods held Servalan, the then president of the Federation. Another held Kerr Avon, one of Blake's gang. The natives killed my sister. Servalan killed my father, only minutes after she'd left my bed. The taste of her was still in my mouth when I found his body. When Avon left, I went with him. Suddenly, I was a rebel."

She got up from the bed, walked towards Tey who rose from her chair.

"I was a rebel for a few years. I got a ship to call my home. It was destroyed. I got a lover. She was killed. I got another place to live. That one we destroyed ourselves, once the Federation learned where it was. Shortly after that, we were defeated, overwhelmed by troopers. Only I was captured, the others were killed. By incredible luck the people who got us didn't bother to check who I was, or I would've been executed. Instead I spent four years in a prison compound on Gauda Prime."

She stopped right before she touched her, close enough that their breaths mingled.

"The prison brutally removed my illusions about knowing how to fight. I knew the moves, I was fast and I was strong -- and I had no idea how to *fight*. But I learned. Pain is a very good teacher. After the first winter, I led the largest gang in the com-

pound and my life got better. Not enjoyable, but at least tolerable."

And I had lovers, she thought. No, not lovers. Companions. Live bodies to warm my bed and sate my desires. Sweet young girls very much like you, and I didn't particularly care if they were really willing or if they just didn't dare say no.

"How did you get out?" Tey asked, breaking her train of thought.

"There was a power failure that knocked out most of the perimeter defenses keeping us in. I persuaded two of the other gang leaders that this was our chance, and we made a joint charge at a guard post. We overwhelmed it, got some weapons. The rest of the guards arrived quickly, and it turned bloody in an eyeblink. There were far more of us, but they had more weapons."

She could see it in Tey's eyes, see her enjoy the tale, see how she found it heroic and exciting.

"While the people of my gang were fighting for their lives and dying one by one by one, while the guards were busy fighting for *their* lives, I fled. I snuck away into the darkness, to climb over the unguarded powerless fence at the other side of the compound. As I was leaving the fight, someone saw me. A friend, a woman I'd known for three years, a woman who had on many occasions shared my bed. She was just about to shout something, if to me or to someone else I don't know. But I knew that the way out I had been aiming for even when I started the whole escape attempt was for one person and one person only. So before she could draw attention to me, I shot my friend in the face."

There was shock in Tey's eyes.

"After that, I retrieved something that had been waiting in a cave for four years and a bit, and began to plan to avenge my father."

Acting on an impulse, she stroked Tey's cheek.

"So do you still want to be a rebel?" she asked. "You will be hunted until the day you die, which will probably be quite soon. You will have no real home. You won't be able to trust anyone. And in the end, you will lose and they will win, because there are always more of them than there are of you."

Tey put her hand on top of Dayna's, held it against her cheek.

"I am already hunted," she said. "My home has been destroyed. There is no one I trust. And I never thought I'd win."

She let go of Dayna's hand. Leaned that little bit forward necessary to fully close the distance between them, put her arms around the older woman's neck. Kissed her.

Jenna walked out on the balcony. The nightclub had a name, but that changed as often as the club changed owners, so the sort of people who used to go there called it the Lookout Club. Not a very inventive name, describing as it did the club's most prominent feature.

Rather than do the predictable thing and look out over the landscape, she turned her back to it and looked in through the glass wall. Richly dressed people moved danced drank. Pulsing music leaked weakly out through the damper field, small lamps in many colours glowed softly here and there. A well-dressed man, middle-aged and hard-looking, came out and walked up to Jenna. He took a small device out of his pocket and fiddled with it for a moment.

"We're clear," he said. "Nobody's listening."

Jenna leaned on the rail separating her from a hundred-story drop, sipped a little from a clear blue drink.

"So what do you think?" she said. "Is she genuine or just a clever fake?"

"Hard to say," he said. "Had you asked a year ago, I would've said that she was clearly fake. But then Restal got himself arrested on Space City -- quite a feat, that -- and we found out that the report saying that the bodies of Avon's entire gang had been found on Gauda Prime was not quite accurate; Restal's and Mellanby's were in fact not there at all. Where Restal's body ended up we know, of course, but we never managed to find out what happened to Mellanby... So it's not impossible that it is her."

He paused for a moment, as if thinking.

"The woman who talked to you goes under the name of Lydia Greynor. She arrived at Medolor recently, and she's staying in a rather expensive hotel. Greynor's data trail is absolutely impeccable. There is nothing strange or unusual about it in any way whatsoever. Except..."

He fell silent.

"Except?" Jenna asked.

"Except that the first time I looked at it it wasn't there. There was a surface, a thin layer of data sufficient to fool customs or a hotel but not any sort of intelligent scrutiny. Well, that's it, I thought, Greynor's a mirage, the woman is deeply fake. But when I tried to copy it to a data cube a few minutes later, I found a perfectly ordinary file. Not only that, but all the log files said that the file hadn't been modified since she checked into the hotel. So either I'm having delusions, or someone somehow changed official Federation records *and* the safeguards on those records immediately after I accessed them. And did so without leaving a single trace. That is so incredibly unlikely that I'd rather believe that my own memory was the one at fault -- if it wasn't for one little thing."

"Orac," Jenna said. "She's got Orac."

The man smiled. "That's what I thought," he said. "The miracle machine that first Blake and later Avon was supposed to have. It was, supposedly, able to do exactly this sort of thing. If this machine exists and she has access to it, it would also explain how she managed to stay undetected for all these years."

"It exists all right," Jenna said. "I used it myself, while I was on the *Liberator*. Annoying little thing, but very useful."

"Given that, I think we can confidently assume that the woman who claims to be Dayna Mellanby actually is Dayna Mellanby. If you want to be sure, we'll need a tissue sample to compare to her father's records."

He paused for a few moments. Jenna finished her drink and put the glass down on the railing.

"So, what do you want to do about her?" he asked.

"We shouldn't have any problems doing as she asks, should we?"

He shook his head. "Of course not, Commander. None at all."

"Then I think we just had the opportunity of a lifetime fall into our laps. Let's do as the lady asks."

She played with her tongue over Tey's, held her close and felt their breasts press against each other. She felt warmth and softness, she smelled youth and excitement. She felt memories well up, choked on them and broke the kiss abruptly.

"So anyway," she said to avoid the silence. "Since I haven't got anything useful to do until I hear from my contact, I thought I'd do as I said before and teach you something about how to fight."

She could hear herself how strained her voice sounded.

"Yeah. Right. Fighting."

Tey looked, and sounded, very confused. Dayna found she couldn't bring herself to meet the younger woman's eyes. She could well imagine what she'd feel like herself if someone first seemed interested in her and then abruptly broke it off when she responded.

"You're not big or strong," she said, "so I think you'd better stay with long-range weapons as much as you can. In fact..."

"Yeah, I'm sure," Tey interrupted. "Look, could we do this later? I have to go do ... something."

It wasn't even a good lie.

"Yes, of course," Dayna said. "I'll wait for you. Take as much time as you need."

She kept looking at the door long after Tey's oh-so-tempting backside had vanished through it. She'd never been any good at this sort of thing. Never any good at all. No wonder the only *real* girlfriend she'd ever had was a bloody alien telepath. She sat down at the edge of the bed, closed her eyes and swore at herself, comprehensively and thoroughly.

When she stopped, she could still feel Tey's lips against her own, the subtle fragrance of the girl still filled the air, the heat of her body lingered on Dayna's skin.

When she got hungry, she ordered up some sandwiches from room service, since she'd told Tey she'd wait for her.

The sandwiches tasted like misery.

When it got dark, she opened the curtains and tried to see the sky. But the buildings surrounding the hotel were too high, the skylights too bright. All she could see was a diffuse grayish-yellow haze. She looked across the street instead, looking in the few lighted windows on the other side. But there was nothing much to see there either. She ended up just sitting there, staring emptily into the night until the communicator chimed.

"Yes?" she said.

"Lydia Greynor?" said a voice she didn't recognize. It was unnaturally bland, the way a voice got when filtered through an anonymizer.

"Speaking."

"I'm calling on behalf of my employer, Sien Versh, who you had a short meeting with earlier. I hope I'm not calling inconveniently?"

"No, that's fine. Does she have a reply yet?"

"Yes, she does," the voice said. "She says that she can help you. She has to leave on a business trip for a short time, but would like to see you when she returns."

"Sure. Just say where and when."

"Sien Versh would like to invite you to her landyacht. If that is agreeable to you, we will pick you up at your hotel at ten in the morning the day after tomorrow."

"Fine. Just fine. I'll be waiting for you."

"Until that time, then. Good night, Greynor."

The faint disconnection click nearly drowned in the soft drone of the air cycling system. "Good night, whoever you were," Dayna said to the empty room.

She must have fallen asleep eventually, because she woke up. She was lying on top of the bedspread, covered by a blanket. Tey was sitting in one of the armchairs, looking like she hadn't slept at all.

"I'm sorry I ran away like that," she said.

Dayna sat up and tried to get her brain going, with doubtful success.

"No need to apologize," she said. "I shouldn't have kissed you like that."

"So you don't really like me that way?" Tey asked. It was obvious from her voice that she fought to keep it under control.

"That doesn't matter," she replied. "This is neither the time nor the place for something like that. Let's talk about it again after I've done what I came to do, all right? If either of us is still in a shape to talk, that is?"

Tey looked at her for some time before she seemed to decide that the suggestion wasn't a rejection.

"Yeah," she said. "Let's do that. So, do we train now?"

Dayna smiled. "I really think you need to sleep a bit first. Then we eat something, then we train. There should be room enough for target practice down by the docks, I think."

By the time she finished the sentence, Tey was already asleep where she sat. Dayna cautiously touched her arm. She mumbled a little, but didn't wake up.

"Hey," she said, softly, still with no effect.

The same room that had a few hours ago felt cold, empty and desolate now felt warm and friendly. Such difference the soft breaths of a sleeping dark-haired girl could make. Dayna sat on the floor in front of the armchair for a long while, just watching her sleep. Watching her chest rise and sink, her eyes move under her eyelids, her small twitching movements as she dreamt. Eventually she picked her up -- carefully, oh so carefully -- and carried her over to the bed. She felt so small, so fragile in her arms. She didn't feel like someone hunted, she felt like someone who should be safely in school, making the first discoveries of love's pleasures, wantonly not planning for a life she didn't even doubt would be long and reasonably good. She shouldn't be here, in a sterile hotel room with a washed-up old rebel on a suicide mission. But she was.

Imperfect universe indeed.

Target Practice

"This is a pretty cobbled-together weapon, so it hasn't got any real targeting equipment. You'll have to do most of the aiming manually. This is a design feature, it's relatively easy for a scanner to detect a targeting computer. Over the distance I'll be shooting at and with the relatively long time I'll have to aim hitting won't be a problem. And, quite coincidentally, it means that you'll have to learn how to shoot the old-fashioned way."

They were standing on an abandoned landcruiser loading bay. One side held several large doors leading into an equally abandoned warehouse. The opposite side was open towards the outside of the city, only a few score meters away they could see the faint shimmering of the forcefield that marked the end of easily breathable atmosphere. By one end of the bay some largish pieces of old rubbish from the warehouse had, with the help of a marker pen, turned into a practice target. At the other end, some fifty steps away, Dayna and Tey stood.

"Once the string is fully pulled back, remove the puller," Dayna said as she removed the small box from the top of the crossbow and put it on the ground at her side.

"Put an arrow -- properly known as bolt -- in the groove and make sure it's firmly in place."

Again, her motions mirrored her words.

"With your hands at the obvious places, put the stock firmly against your shoulder. Keep your finger on the outside of the trigger guard. Look with your right eye through the tube on the top of the bow. Strange as it may sound, it's easier if you don't close your other eye. Once you see your target through the scope, move your finger inside the trigger guard. Get the target in the center of the cross-hairs. Breathe out. Without breathing in, make the last few aiming adjustments. When your aim is true, squeeze the trigger. If you don't get your aim where you want it before you have to breathe, take a few breaths before you try again or you'll just get winded and won't be able to hit the broadside of a space cruiser."

In a single smooth movement she lifted the crossbow, aimed and fired. There was a surprisingly loud snapping sound, and the bolt appeared as if by magic in the center of the improvised target.

"With this crossbow, the bolt gets enough speed that you don't have to think much about falling distance and wind drift, at least not over this distance. Now you try it."

She handed the bow to Tey, who took it eagerly. She put the grey puller box into its slot and pulled the string back. Put an arrow in, brought the bow up to her shoulder.

"No, not like that," Dayna said. "Put your left hand further forward and hold the elbow down, not out."

Tey tried to follow her instructions, but only managed to end up with her arms awkwardly bent. Dayna smiled.

"Here, let me help," she said. She moved in behind Tey, put her arms around the girl and moved her arms to the right position by pushing gently with her own.

"Lean your head to the right now, and look through the tube," she said. She was acutely, almost uncomfortably, conscious of Tey's physical presence. "Aim, breathe

out, finish, fire."

Again, a loud snap. A small cloud of dust appeared where the bolt had penetrated more than a handwidth into the concrete wall beside the improvised target. Tey stumbled back, not prepared for the crossbow's recoil, and ended up leaning against Dayna.

"Not bad," Dayna said. "Not bad at all for a first shot. To be honest, I didn't really expect you to hit the wall."

But I did expect you to fall backwards like this. And I fear that I won't be able to force myself to push you away if you make no attempt to move away yourself really, really soon now. For the sad, pathetic truth is that your merest touch makes me feel warm all over, and I've never been any good at resisting temptation.

A sharp snap from the bow, a dull thud from the target a fraction of a second later and another bolt struck the target.

It had soon become clear that Tey was more talented than Dayna had expected, and they built a new target a couple of hundred steps out from the loading bay for her to practice at.

A soft buzzing sound as the string was drawn.

Dayna sat on the bay floor, leaning on an old crate, watching Tey pick up another bolt and insert it in the crossbow. She watched her put her elbows on to the floor and put her cheek to the crossbow's side, she watched the muscles of her back tense, she watched the graceful curves of her arse and legs. Wind blowed in smells of dust and decay from outside, in the distance she could hear the noise of the city above them. The wind was hot enough to make her sweat, dry enough to take the sweat away again almost instantly.

Another sharp snap, another dull thud.

She'd lain like that once, in an empty cargo bay on the Liberator, practicing with the curious and not very good Auron rifle Cally had brought with her when she first joined the crew. She'd fired shot after shot, trying to get used to the idiosyncratic aiming device, concentrating so hard that everything around her faded away -- until she found herself seeing herself from behind and slightly above. Her grey jumpsuit clung tightly to her arse and legs, hugged her hips, revealed nearly as much as it hid. With the vision came a strong sense of lust.

"Cally!" she said, looking up from the rifle scope. "You're distracting me!"

The older rebel looked down at her from where she was standing, pretending to be hurt at the suggestion.

"Me? Distract you?" She sat down beside Dayna. "No, if I wanted to distract you I'd do this," she said and slowly ran her hand up the inside of Dayna's thigh.

"Cally!"

She dropped the rifle and turned over on her back, laughing. Experienced hands quickly found the fastenings on her suit and pulled it open, went on to fondle her breasts. She grabbed Cally's head with both hands, pulled it down and kissed her deeply. She felt hands move away from her chest to the floor by her sides, then the weight of her lover settling on top of her. She let go of her head, ran her hands down her back, tried to pull her clothes off.

Cally broke the kiss. "Maybe not right here," she said. "Someone might come."

"Yes. You will, unless I've totally lost my touch," she said, and was rewarded with another eager kiss.

Another sharp snap, another dull thud, and she was back in the present.

Tey fired the few arrows she had within arms reach and put down the bow. She sat up, rubbed her eyes and stretched.

"Not too bad, is it?" she said.

Dayna looked at the target and saw that the entire clutch of bolts had ended up well within the head-shaped outline.

"No, not bad at all," she said. "Let's go eat, I'm starving."

A small eating place at one of the lower-level interior arcades. Big enough to have a few tables, not big enough to get pretensions of being a real restaurant. Food uncomplicated, but reasonably good and plentiful. Noise, the noise of a thousand thousand people moving, of people living, people buying, people working. Public broadcasts booming out from receivers hanging from the walls of stalls selling toys trinkets trash, faint rhythmic beats from portable players. Clatter of plates and bowls on tabletops, clinks of glasses against other glasses, roaring laughter, sudden yells. Uncountable steps, moving slowly quickly carefully hurriedly arrhythmically.

Life.

All of the noises, life. Every sound adding to the cacophony, every note in the symphony of randomness, a single trace of a moment in a life. Lives lived entirely within these walls, not just physically but mentally. Federation news, Federation censors, no mention of other places, other people, other ways of life.

These were the people Blake and Avon had been fighting for. These were the people she had killed to bring new dreams. These were the people she had thought she could help.

She no longer thought that.

There were too many of them, too many of the Federation, too few of her. There was too much to change, too much inertia. Points of view can be changed at the point of a gun only if you have very many guns. All she wanted, all she could do, was to bite back. To get revenge, like an ant biting an elephant that had happened to step on another ant.

A gesture. Nothing more.

Except for the girl sitting next to her, the lost life she had more or less accidentally lit a flame of freedom in. The girl she'd be leaving on her own, having given her a taste of something outside the life she used to lead.

Her conscience didn't want her to do that.

"Tey," she said, softly.

The girl looked up, her mouth full of food.

"When I go in to... do what I have to do."

Caught between reluctance to say what she had to say and desire to tell the truth, her voice failed her for a moment. "There's a pretty good chance I won't be coming out again," she compromised.

"I guessed as much," Tey said.

"You guessed," Dayna said, a strange feeling spreading through her.

"Yeah," Tey said. "It's in one of the texts you gave me to read, if you read between the lines a bit." She looked up, met Dayna's eyes.

"'An assassin willing to trade his life for his target's can almost always find a way to succeed', it says. Sleer's security will be just about the best there is, yet you're confident you're going to be able to get her. And you never once mentioned how you're planning to get out again. So... you're not."

How can you be so calm, was Dayna's first thought. But her own mind gave the an-

swer before she could even voice the question. Because it's not new. Someone Tey cares about goes away and leaves Tey behind. Part far too many in a never-ending series.

Dayna looked away, unable to meet Tey's eyes.

"I'll try to get out. You're right that I didn't intend to, but I'll try my best. Maybe Jenna can suggest a way," she said. But she didn't really think so. Jenna would know just as well as she did that helping an assassin get out would be infinitely much more dangerous than helping her get in.

"I'll try," she whispered.

The sleek landyacht slowly slid out from the bay, its repulsor fields turned up to maximum in order to make sure they wouldn't accidentally hit any of the other luxury yachts. The huge propellers on its masts turned lazily to give it just speed enough to get it out onto empty sand. As it passed beyond the outer limits of the harbor, the propellers were given more power and the many tons of ceramics and wood sped up. The sand made a hissing noise as the repulsor fields pushed it down and to the sides.

"Great craft, isn't it?" Jenna said. "Patterned after ancient wind-powered water craft. Not the most practical, but beautiful and not nearly as bad as you think when you first see one."

They were standing on the aft control deck, a fair bit higher than the main deck. Jenna had one hand on a big wooden steering wheel, the other on the power control to the engines powering the propellers. Dayna stood behind her, leaning on the aftmost railing. Behind her was a twelve-meter drop down onto the sand. Looking down, she got a far stronger sense of speed than she'd ever had in spaceships traveling many millions of times faster.

She liked it.

It was big, about three times as long and half as wide as it was tall. Unlike its remote ancestors on the seas of Earth, it didn't really need a crew at all. The on-board computers could handle everything, the manual controls Jenna was using was only there for their entertainment value.

As far as Dayna knew, she and Jenna were the only people on the ship. This surprised her, on a ship like this she had expected some sort of crew, to serve food and clean cabins if nothing else. But then, the fewer ears, the freer they could talk.

Jenna had dressed to fit the notion of the craft as an ancient sailship. She had a loose white blouse in some fairly coarse material, knee-length blue shorts in even coarser material and nothing else that could be seen. She stood barefoot on the deck, and the increasing wind pressed the blouse against her voluptuous chest. Her long hair danced in the wind.

"I'll just get her up to cruising speed and on course," Jenna said, raising her voice to be heard. "Then we'll go below decks, further out the sand gets nasty when it blows up here and the air isn't much good for breathing anyway. You can smell the sulphur already, if you try."

Dayna nodded.

Below deck in the prow was a large room, sumptuously furnished. The hull was made out of transparent material. It was warmer and much less windy than at the control deck, but the view was every bit as exhilarating.

"We're safe here," Jenna said. "The entire ship is swept for monitoring devices before each trip, and I have jamming equipment aboard that can deal with anything Fed-

eration security's got."

"Must have been expensive," Dayna said.

"Yes, but worth it. My clients tend to be a bit on the careful side."

"So, where are we going?"

"Nowhere in particular. It's a standard route I have, going past the better views around here for as long as we like. The ship is very well stocked, we can stay out here for years if need be."

"A mobile base." Like the Liberator, Dayna thought but didn't say.

"Yes. I got used to having one, you could say."

Dayna sat down in the middle of a low, well-padded couch. "Do you ever miss the Liberator?" she asked. "I do, sometimes. It felt safe, knowing that we were more powerful than any other ship in space."

Jenna remained standing. "I know what you mean," she said. "She was the loveliest ship I ever handled. I wanted her to be mine so badly. When I finally realized that I'd have to kill both Avon and Blake to get her, I left."

"You really would've minded killing Avon? He must have been a more pleasant man before I met him!"

Jenna laughed. "Well, all right, Avon I could've killed. But not Blake. I really liked him. Besides, I don't think Cally would've liked me killing either of them. She was touchy that way."

"She was. Got more so over time, too. I think every death near her took something out of her, and she got more and more reluctant to kill. Some telepathic thing, I suppose."

"Could be. I sometimes wondered what she really did on Saurian Major before we picked her up, but she never told me."

"She never wanted to talk about the past at all. She never told me much about you either."

Some moments of silence, before Jenna spoke again.

"But I'm being a bad hostess," she said. "Do you want something to drink? I thought we'd eat in an hour or two, but we can adjust that depending on how hungry you are."

Evasion. Curiosity woke in Dayna's mind.

"Food in an hour or two will be fine," she said. "And in memory of our dear and not so dear departed, why not have some Adrenaline and Soma?"

"Of course," Jenna said. "What else?" She walked over to a cupboard and started mixing the drinks. "Maybe we should get business taken care of before we start drinking," she said.

"We probably should, yes."

"So, you need to get in. What do you need once you're there? Are you bringing anything with you? Do you need to be there in advance? Give me the details."

"I'm bringing two arm-length pieces of equipment and some smaller things, probably in a bag. I'll need about thirty seconds undisturbed to assemble and load my weapon, then two or three seconds to aim and fire once I can see Servalan." She hesitated briefly. "And I would like to get out, if possible," she added.

"Your stuff, will any of it trigger the security sensors?"

"No. That's why I need so long to assemble and load."

Jenna shrugged. "Well then, getting you in should be a breeze. Getting you out, on the other hand... probably not. We can try, but I very much doubt we can make it. Killing the president tends to really get security's knickers in a twist."

She sat down on a couch opposite the one Dayna was sitting in.

"The inauguration is going to be held in the main room in Council Hall. It's fairly large... What's the range of your weapon?"

"More than enough."

"All right. At one end of the room they'll set up the stage. At the other end, there's a second-story walkway open out to the room. There's a stairway leading up to it behind a locked door. I can get you a pass to the main room and a key to the door to the stairs. The walkway itself will have sensors on it, so you'll have only a few seconds to act once you step out there. But if I understand you correctly, you should be able to prepare while in the stairwell and only step out to fire. Does this sound reasonable to you?"

"Yes. Is there any way at all to get out of there afterwards?"

"No good one. There are windows at each end of the walkway, but they're armored. You could head for the main stairs and try to get to the roof. There's probably going to be a guard or two up there, and you need someone to pick you up in an aircraft from there."

Jenna sighed. "I'm sorry, but that's the best I can think of for an escape route. You said you only wanted in, so that's what I focused on."

Dayna nodded. "I know. Never mind, it was just a thought."

"We're agreed, then?" Jenna said and handed Dayna a glass of milky green liquid.

"Yes," she replied. She raised her glass. "Who to start with? Vila, because of the drink?"

"To Vila," Jenna agreed.

"May he rest in peace, the lecherous little sod," Dayna said, surprised to feel tears stalk into her eyes. She drank half the glass in one go, to hide her sudden burst of emotion. When she lowered it, she saw that Jenna had done the same.

"Avon?" she suggested.

"Avon," Jenna agreed, and they emptied the rest of their glasses. Jenna went to fill them, but changed her mind and brought a couple of bottles with her instead. "We're not in a hurry anywhere, are we?" she asked as she opened one of the bottles.

"No," Dayna said. "And nobody ever really held a proper wake for them."

"So let's do that." She filled a couple of glasses with something clear and blue. "Who's next? The only one left we both met is... her."

She felt the tears threaten to break out again. "Let's save her for later. And I did meet Blake, although very briefly."

"To Blake, then."

"To Blake."

They raised and emptied their glasses.

After a couple of bottles they ate. They still hadn't drunk to the memory of Cally. Occasionally one of them would approach the subject and then back off, like a probing tongue to an aching tooth.

The food was excellent, and getting something in her stomach cleared Dayna's head somewhat.

"You loved her too, didn't you?" The words escaped before she could stop them.

Jenna nodded.

"So how could you just leave her?"

"I didn't. Not really. It was messy, when we abandoned the Liberator during the war. We got separated when we boarded the life pods, without really thinking about

it. And then I just didn't return."

"I never could get her to talk about you. Not really. There'd be the odd sentence, the offhand mention, but never anything more."

Some of her offhand remarks came floating out of her memory. *She liked to have the undersides of her breasts stroked*, she heard Cally saying in her head.

"I still do," Jenna said, grinning, and Dayna realized she must've said it out loud.

"So what do *you* like?" Jenna asked.

Embarrassed, she looked out. Close by, the sand sped past too fast to see any details. Further away, stones and dunes became visible and yet further away she could see mountains and smoke plumes from volcanos. It was a stark, inhumanly beautiful landscape. Gliding through it gave her a dreamlike feeling.

"My neck," she said, knowing while she did so that she'd never have done it had she been sober. "I like to have my neck kissed."

Jenna slid down from her couch and lurched on all fours over to Dayna. Dayna's gaze moved from the view outside to the even more enthralling view of Jenna's breasts moving inside her blouse.

"I'll just try to make up for being such a bad hostess earlier," she whispered as she unsteadily climbed onto the couch and placed herself in Dayna's lap, facing her and with a knee on each side. She leaned forward, her warm lips touched the skin of Dayna's neck.

Dayna moaned and bent her head as far forward as she could, resting it on Jenna's shoulder. Her arms reached around the blonde woman, her hands found and started to explore her arse and thighs. She felt the tip of Jenna's tongue play against her skin, and her hands pulling the hem of her tight black top up. Cool air caressed her increasingly bare back and belly, lips left her neck and her head was forced up as the top was pulled entirely off.

"Hmmm, lovely," Jenna said, looking at Dayna's breasts.

Dayna grabbed each side of Jenna's blouse firmly and pulled, sending buttons flying all over the room.

"Yes," she said as she slowly dragged her fingertips along the undersides of Jenna's breasts, getting a pair of closed eyes and a delighted moan in reply. Wanting more, she squeezed the breasts firmly, then released one just enough to get her mouth over the stiff nipple. She sucked and bit it gently, and felt Jenna's fingers running through her hair. She felt unbelievably turned on, days of suppressed frustration from being close to Tey suddenly returning with a vengeance. Without thinking about it, she let a breast go and pushed her hand down Jenna's shorts instead.

Jenna laughed. "Eager, aren't you?" she said. "Wait, let me."

She stood up and slowly, teasingly undid her shorts and let them drop.

"Like what you see?" she asked, taking off her blouse.

Dayna got up, swaying slightly. She didn't say anything, just moved closer, put one arm around Jenna's waist and the other behind her back with her hand cradling the back of her head. Pulled her even closer, skin touching skin, and kissed her deep, hard and rough. Jenna responded enthusiastically, and her hands got to work getting Dayna's knickers off. She broke the kiss.

"Sit," she said, gently pushing at Dayna's chest.

Dayna sat down, at the very edge of the couch. Jenna knelt in front of her, pushed her legs apart. Kissed her way from the knees up the insides of her thighs. Dayna leaned back and closed her eyes. Arousal stormed within her, she felt a strong desire to grab Jenna's head and pull it the rest of the way to her pussy. But she resisted. An-

ticipation was almost as sweet, and the floating feeling brought by the liquor made it easier to just relax.

Until Jenna did reach her goal, and kissed her clitoris hard, when it suddenly got to much and she screamed out loud. She grabbed Jenna's head, pulled it closer, willed her to go on doing what she was doing -- which she did. Her mouth and tongue kept working at Dayna's sex, her hands roamed as far as they could reach, stroking, caressing. Something ran down Dayna's cheek, she brushed it off and was surprised to find it to be tears.

She felt Jenna move, starting to kiss her way further up along her body. The other woman's mouth had hardly left her crotch when she felt a couple of fingers push into her vagina. Not quite a scream, this time. She ran her hands along Jenna's pale flesh, roughly massaged her breasts, tried to reach her sex, without much success until Jenna had worked her way far enough that they were again face to face. While they kissed, while Jenna's fingers slid out and in of her, she pushed her own fingers inside Jenna and tried to keep the heel of her hand pushing on her clitoris. Judging from the shudder she felt race along Jenna's body, she was successful. She kept doing it, harder and harder as her own excitement grew, until an exquisite orgasm swept through her, strong enough to make everything else fade out.

"You all right?" she heard Jenna ask when she came to her senses again.

"Yeah," she said. "Although that wasn't really something I planned for."

Jenna laughed. "Well, us rebels have to be ready for the unexpected."

Dayna slid down on the thick carpet and sat there, resting her back against the couch, utterly relaxed.

"Did we ever get around to drinking to Cally?" she asked.

"I don't think so. Get a bottle?"

Dayna checked the bottles they'd been drinking from before dinner. "These are all empty," she said.

Jenna got up from where she slouched on the couch and walked unsteadily over to the liquor cabinet. Dayna followed her with her eyes, admiring her curvaceous body.

"I bought this one a long time ago," Jenna said, pulling out a bottle. "Never even opened it, it's just been sitting in the back of the cabinet since then. It's from Auron..."

Dayna didn't answer, since she couldn't figure anything to say. She just watched in silence as Jenna opened the bottle and filled two glasses with a slightly viscous brown liquid. Suddenly feeling that it'd be wrong to drink to Cally's memory sitting down, she rose and walked over to the outside hull, looking out at a field of burning bushes.

"Doesn't smell too bad," Jenna said. She handed Dayna a glass, standing close enough by her side that Dayna could feel her heat against her skin. "To Cally," Jenna said.

"To Cally," Dayna said. "She didn't die alone and silent."

The Auron drink tasted bitter.

"We'll have the pass and key delivered to your hotel the day before the inauguration," Jenna said. The ship was only minutes away from the harbor it'd left from the day before. The two women were again standing at the aft control deck, although the ship was operating under computer control.

"If all goes as you expect or worse," Jenna went on, "we'll never see each other again. But we can always hope for better."

"We can always hope," Dayna agreed. They moved in among other craft and other people, back into civilization, out of the dreamlike wilderness.

"I hope this isn't going to get you into trouble," she said.

Jenna shrugged. "Nothing is a hundred percent sure. But it shouldn't. I'm using favors and resources I acquired ages ago with no particular plan in mind, just in case they'd come in handy some day. Their traces are long buried. Don't worry about it."

But she did worry about it. She had come to Medolor pure, empty, with nothing to bind her to any other living being, nobody to miss her or be hurt by her dying. Step by step she felt that purity being polluted, felt herself getting drawn into the huge web of civilization.

A slight bump as the ship docked with the pier. "Well, that's that then," Jenna said. "We're back."

"Yeah. I'd better be off." Dayna climbed the steps down to the midships deck. As she set foot on the gangway she turned and looked back at Jenna, still standing by the controls.

"May there be companions for your death!" she yelled, hoping to be heard over the noises of the harbor. Not waiting for a response, she turned and walked away.

Execution

"Lydia Greynor?" the voice in the phone asked.

"Yes?" Dayna answered.

"This is the reception desk. Sorry to disturb you so late, but there is a gentleman here who insists that he has a delivery for you that has to be delivered personally."

"Ah. Let him up to my room, please."

"Certainly. Have a nice evening."

The hotel room was mostly dark, lit only by a lamp on the desk where Dayna was checking out her crossbow yet another time, and by the weak glow from Tey's reading pad.

"A courier from my contact is on his way up," she said. "Maybe you should stay out of sight while he's here."

Tey looked up from the pad. "You don't think they already know I'm here with you?"

"They probably do. But maybe this particular person doesn't, and maybe he happens to be someone who shouldn't see you. You never know. I've found 'better safe than sorry' to be a pretty good policy."

"Fair enough. I'll be in the bathroom, stealthily looking out."

She got up and through the door to the bathroom at about the same time as there was a knock on the door. Dayna opened it.

"Yes?" she said. Standing outside was a man somewhere around fifty years of age, smartly dressed and with a bearing that indicated that he was or used to be military.

"Lydia Greynor, I hope?" His voice was not as deep as she would have guessed.

"Yes," she said again. "Would you like to come in?"

"That will not be necessary. I'm only here to give you this." He handed her an envelope. "Have a pleasant evening," he said, and left.

She closed the door. She could feel two stiff rectangular objects within the envelope. The pass and the key. The reality of them filled her with apprehension bordering on dread. To her own surprise, she found herself afraid.

"Well, so much for being careful," Tey said as she came out of the bathroom. "What's that he gave you?"

"Ticket to the inauguration."

"Oh. Tomorrow night, is it?" She sounded as if she hadn't really believed it either until now.

"Yes. Tomorrow. I should sleep."

"I guess. You should be rested and alert tomorrow. So you don't make any mistakes."

Dayna put the envelope on the desk beside the crossbow, putting an arrow on it to keep it from being blown away by some imagined stray draft.

"Tey, there's something I need to ask of you," she said.

"What?"

"I want you to hide somewhere close to Council Hall, where you can see its roof. I'll try to make it up there after I shoot Sleer. If I make it there but they catch me before I can get off, I want you to shoot me."

"What!? *No!*"

"Yes!" She raised her hand, silenced Tey's further protests. "Listen to me! If they catch me, I'll be dead anyway." She took Tey's hand. She could see fear in her eyes. Fear of being abandoned again, she guessed. "I've seen what they do to rebels. It's not just torture, although there will probably be some of that. They'll pick my memory clean, find out everything I know. They will find Orac. They will find the person who's helping me get into the inauguration. They will find *you* -- and when they have all that, they will reprogram me with new memories so that I can appear in public as a 'reformed citizen' to retract my crimes. Then, but only then, they will execute me." She kissed Tey's hand gently. "It'll be so much cleaner, bring so much less suffering, if someone kills me before they can do all that. The dead keep their secrets, even from the Federation."

There were tears running down Tey's face. "This is why you wanted me to train with the crossbow," she said.

"Not only. But, yes, it is," Dayna agreed. "I'm sorry."

"Why me?" Tey asked. "Why do *I* have to do it? Why can't you take poison or something?"

"Time," she said. "They will be quite eager to get me alive. There is no poison that works fast enough that they couldn't save me. And if I try to shoot myself they'll gladly shoot an arm or a leg off to prevent me. After all, they only really need me to survive long enough to get my head intact to the medicos. So I need you to make sure that they don't."

Tey nodded. "I'll do it, if you'll promise me one thing," she said.

"What?"

"That you will really try to get away. That this is not just an elaborate attempt at suicide."

Dayna smiled a bitter and twisted smile. "I promise. On the memories of my father and my lover who Servalan killed, I promise that I will do the best I can to flee and return to you after I kill her."

She gently wiped some tears from Tey's cheek. "Will that do?" she asked.

"Yes. It will. Thank you."

"You're welcome. And thank you for doing this," she said. Thank you for giving me a reason to even try to get out again, she didn't say.

"Dayna..." Tey said, hesitantly.

She turned to the young woman without saying anything.

"Can I sleep in your bed tonight? Only sleep there, nothing more? Just this once?"

After a moment, Dayna nodded.

A pair of black trousers, loose enough to give freedom of movement and tight enough not to get in the way. A turtle-necked armless black top, skin-tight. Rugged black combat boots, suitable for anything except looking elegant. Strapped to her back, an intricately folded hang-glider. Over it all, a red leather coat hanging down to the top of her boots. On the inside of the coat, hanging from hoops sewn there for the purpose, the stock and crosspiece of her crossbow and four explosive arrows. Not that she thought she'd ever get the opportunity to use more than one, but it'd be better to have and not need than to need and not have.

She was standing at the back of the room, among the less important guests. The local people, the ones who were important by virtue of controlling industries and companies rather than other people.

People who were guaranteed not to have seen President Servalan.

The room was built in sort of classical-revival style, with large areas in dark brown or muddy green. There were few decorations, and most details were of brushed aluminium. The door she had the key to was dark brown in a dark brown field, obviously meant to be hard to see. Which of course suited her just fine. Trying her best not to look surreptitious, she opened the door with her key card and stepped through, hearing it close and lock behind her. She found herself, as expected, in a stairwell leading up. She carefully removed the two main parts of the crossbow and put them together. The four arrows went into clips on the bow's side, from where they could be quickly loaded. Having emptied the coat of everything useful, she left it on the floor at the bottom of the stairs and climbed up.

At the top of the stairs there was no door, just an opening. Standing just inside the opening, she could easily see the stage and the podium where Servalan would stand when accepting the presidency. She put the puller box on the bow's stock, watched the string pull back. She removed the box, detached an arrow from its clip and put it in the crossbow. Leaned the bow against the wall. All she had to do now was wait.

First a local dignitary held a speech.

Then a more important and less local dignitary held another.

And another. Dayna was about to burst with frustration.

Then she was there. Older than when she first saw her, but unmistakably her. She felt hate well up inside her, hate enough to make her unable to breathe. She fought it down, forced herself to relax. If she was too tense when she fired, she might *miss*...

Slowly, she raised the crossbow. Carefully, she found Servalan's smiling face through the bow's sight. Keeping it there, she followed while the woman in the black dress climbed up onto the podium. As she turned to face the audience, she placed the cross-hairs right between her eyes and breathed out.

"My people,..." Servalan's voice rang amplified out through room and via the networks to the rest of the Federation.

Dayna squeezed the trigger.

Hardly hearing the snap of the string, hardly feeling the bow kick against her shoulder, she watched Servalan's face through the scope.

She watched a dark spot appear between her eyes, right where she had aimed.

She watched as a cloud of blood, brain and pieces of bone exploded out behind her head, leaving her face intact. She watched as she stood, perfectly still, for a fraction of a second before she collapsed and chaos erupted.

Knowing she had only seconds, if that, to get away, she dropped the bow and ran like she had never run before. Out on the walkway, turning right, she ran crouching towards the opening to the main stairway. "Up there!" she heard someone shout from the crowd below her. The muscles of her back tensed, expecting a bolt from a security guard's weapon to hit at any moment.

But none did.

She heard and felt a bolt strike the wall a meter behind her, then she was at the opening and threw herself through it. After spending a precious moment to find her bearings, she ran again, this time up the wide carpeted stairs towards the roof.

When she was a few steps out from the exit onto the flat roof she pulled the cord that made the hang-glider start to unfold.

When she was halfway to the edge, she began to hope that she would make it. The glider was as extended as it was going to get while she was still running, the rest

would snap into place when she started falling, and she was only a few score steps away from escape.

Another few steps closer, and she heard running steps behind her.

A few more, and a Security flier rose over the edge of the roof with a thundering noise and pinned her in the glare of its floodlights, lights brighter than anything she had seen since she entered Medolor's eternal twilight.

Dayna stopped.

"Drop that thing on your back and stay where you are!" a voice amplified beyond any recognition bellowed. With a feeling of despair, she hit the harness' emergency release and felt the glider fall from her back. It clattered when it hit the roof, snapped when it pointlessly extended itself fully.

Steps approached her from outside the circle of light. She shaded her eyes, trying to see the troopers she was sure were coming to shoot her.

"Well. That was farther than I expected you to get," a well-known voice said. A voice belonging to Jenna, a Jenna dressed in a Federation Security Commander's uniform. "That hang-glider was a clever idea, I must admit."

Dayna stared at the blonde woman in the black uniform. "You're with them!" she exclaimed. "How can *you* be with *them*?!"

Jenna waved to the flier, and the glare from the floodlights dimmed but didn't go away. She stopped within arm's reach of Dayna.

"Maybe I got tired of being on the losing side," Jenna said, and it suddenly struck Dayna that she hadn't brought any of her troopers with her. The two of them were well outside anybody else's hearing range, most sounds not being audible from more than a few steps away due to the noise from the flier. Further away, she could see troopers aiming at them. "Maybe I decided to oppose them from within. Who can tell where anybody's loyalties really lie, these days?"

Dayna looked at her in disbelief. "Why did you help me? Why did you pretend to be a smuggler at all? You must have enough power to get what you want anyway!"

"There is no such thing as enough power." Jenna smiled. "An identity in the criminal world comes in very handy at times. Occasionally it gives you the most amazing opportunities."

She couldn't look at her. Bile rose in her throat, and she turned away, desperate to see something else, anything else.

"You're going to take her place," she said.

"Oh, no", Jenna said. "That place is far too dangerous, as you just demonstrated. Someone else will be president -- someone with the muzzle of my gun pointing squarely at her neck."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw something move against the skyline of the building next to the Council Hall. Someone girl-shaped, someone holding something shaped like a T.

"You're telling me this. You're not going to leave me walking around," she said.

"No," Jenna said. "How could I? You know far too much about my past. But I could get you exile to a comfortable prison, if you give me what I want."

"And what could I possibly have that you'd want?"

The answer came quick and short. "Orac."

Dayna chuckled darkly. "Yes, of course. Orac. An indispensable tool for the modern dictatorship." She took a step, turned. She couldn't see Tey any longer, but knew she was there. Their crossbows were powerful, much more powerful than any in the ancient world ever were. An arrow from one could easily smash a head to pieces,

even after flying a couple of hundred meters.

Even after flying a couple of hundred meters and crushing another head first.

She took another step, turned again, making sure that Jenna was between herself and Tey.

"I accept your offer," she said. "On one condition."

"You're not exactly in a position to bargain," Jenna said.

"Oh, but I am. If I weren't, you'd already have killed me."

Jenna shrugged. "So what's your condition?"

"I want you to kiss me," she said. "Now and here."

That was obviously not something she had expected. "What? Why? What good would that do? What would it give you?"

"Call it a gesture," Dayna said. "I'm a sentimental sort of girl."

"A kiss. And then you'll give me Orac and accept exile?"

They were standing very close now. Dayna could smell her, a faint odor of clean sweat and armor cloth.

"Yes," she said, and put her arms around Jenna's neck, felt the other woman's arms embrace her waist. She felt her heart race, the palms of her hands sweat, all the signs of fear. She smiled, tried not to show any of it. Their breaths mingled. Their lips met, more stiffly and awkwardly than any first kiss in any schoolyard. Dayna forced herself to relax somewhat. She felt Jenna's soft lips opening against her own. She stuck her tongue out a little, met Jenna's. Feeling warmth and softness, she managed to find enjoyment in it.

She explored the other woman's mouth, hot and wet.

She felt her body, firm but giving, warm and alive.

She wondered if she'd feel it when the arrow struck.