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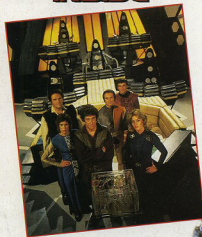


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# BLAKES7

POSTER MAGAZINE

**GIANT  
SEASON TWO  
CAST POSTER  
INSIDE**



**THE CONTINUING  
ADVENTURES  
OF THE  
LIBERATOR CREW**

# Cause and FX

by Mat Irvine

BBC visual effects designer Mat Irvine worked intermittently on all four seasons of *Blake's 7*. In the first of a two-part look at the series' impressive effects work, Mat explains how he first became involved with the adventures of the Federation's greatest enemies . . .

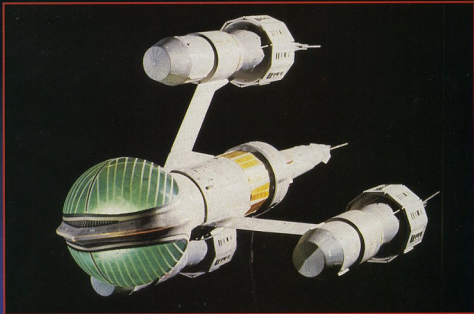
The first indication appeared as a name on the allocations board in the visual effects department main office, which I'm positive originally announced it as *Blake's 77*. However whether this was a slip of translation from planning schedules or maybe someone was being a little too enthusiastic with the felt-tip pen, I've no idea. Even reduced to *Blake's 7*, it still didn't originally give much of a clue what it was all about.

Personally, I wasn't involved at the very early stage. I had just finished a lengthy science series and coming into the main office and gazing at the allocation board was just as much a part of the ritual as going to the BBC Club and ensuring you got next week's copy of *Radio Times*. However Ian Scoones, the visual effects designer who was initially assigned to the series, soon announced that this was a new science-fiction series that was going to be far bigger than individual episodes of the existing stalwart, *Doctor Who*, and would consequently require more than one designer on the programme. The other one consequently became me.

It was somewhat unfortunate that I wasn't in at the very beginning of the series, though this was not

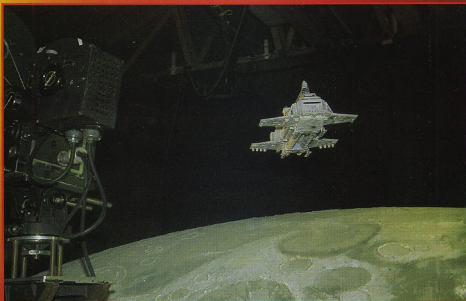
unusual as far as the effects department was concerned. With a few notable exceptions, visual effects were invariably booked after everyone else had been involved, with the consequence that you were forever saying "Well if you'd called us in earlier, we could have suggested an alternative (cheaper) way to do this. . ."

With *Blake's 7* even Ian wasn't in at the very beginning. Items such as the Liberator, designed by Roger Murray-Leach, was not originated by visual effects, though responsibility reverted to us soon after. It was also unfortunate, though hardly unusual, that having been assigned to the programme you were metaphorically chucked in at the deep end and left to flounder about attempting to sort out what was required and when, without being able to ask anybody anything because they were already off doing their own thing. Ian was in fact involved with the continuing model shoot - getting stock shots 'in the can' - plus readying the location effects requirements. Consequently I initially ended up organising the effects for the latter half of the studios while attempting to talk to Ian about the design feel that he had established. This wasn't entirely



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helped by the fact that Ian, evoking his background in Hammer films, had insisted on doing the model shoot at Bray Studios, which consequently meant travelling out towards Windsor every time I needed a consultation! However it did mean I got involved, albeit only slightly, with the Season One model shoot and I can proudly announce that when the prison ship London first appears, travelling over the Moon's surface, (the latter a prop reused from the Gerry Anderson series *Space: 1999*), it's me rotating the Moon by hand!

By the time that Season Two of *Blake's 7* came around, things had changed slightly. Ian was not involved and instead there would be three effects designers - Peter Pegrum, Andy Lazell and myself. Working on the first season also brought with it the confirmation that attempting to do all the effects work - models, studios and location - was impractical and, in fact, unnecessary. This ironically is the way all outside (ie non-BBC) effects personnel worked; you specialised. Consequently, general model makers did not get involved with floor effects; did not get involved with special make-up effects and so on. The BBC's visual effects department did precisely the opposite - everyone did everything. Although this actually led to a wide range of experience with all types of effects - and still does as the procedure even these days is much the same, it isn't necessarily suitable with every production. Although I cannot be precise that this, the second season of *Blake's 7*, was actually the first such BBC series to work with a split effects team, it was probably amongst the first and it ended up that I was to concentrate on all the miniatures while the other two did the 'live action' - studios and location (it actually finally finished with myself handling two of the studios as well, but otherwise it panned out as planned.)

Being left with the sole responsibility for miniature filming meant at least it could be organised the way

I personally wanted it, including choosing the cameraman and also setting the style. This had been somewhat mixed in Season One which used both three-dimensional model work and two-dimensional graphics. It also of course left me with the perennial problem of attempting to get far more model shots done per day than was either sensible or desirable, but that's the way it was and - to be perfectly honest in many ways - still is; at least with television programmes.

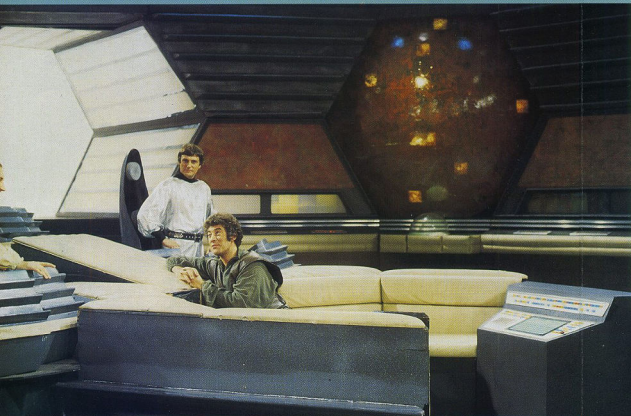
However, on analysing the shots that would be required for the entire thirteen-part series, it was soon apparent that they could be split into those that just required the *Liberator* and then everything else. Where the *Liberator* was concerned this would, most of the time, involve it arriving at a planet; stationary over a planet or leaving a planet. Of these two factors - the planet and the movement of the *Liberator* - it was the latter that was the more difficult. This was before the days of motion control being easily available for television productions (as opposed to cinema films) so the only movement available was to move the model. This was either done by flying on wires or moving it on some sort of camera-dolly. The *Liberator* was 'flown' both ways, and although it may have been a distinctive shape, it was a pig to fly (thinking of it, it probably would have been easier to fly a pig!) because the centre of gravity was way too high and the original model was far too heavy. This was one reason why a second, smaller, model of the *Liberator* was made so that it could in fact be flown where this was unavoidable, while the larger version was only ever moved on a camera-dolly.



**NEXT ISSUE: Mat looks into the various attempts to make the *Liberator* fly through space . . .**

# The Harvest

by Ness Bishop



With disappearing hope, she fell. The hands that she put out to save herself sank beneath her, the marshlands swallowing them up. She was tired. She was ulcerated. She was Shona.

Every movement demanded agonising effort. Again she dragged herself upright and resuming her path, trudged on. Shona shivered at the cold, and drew her clothes tighter to her body. She wore what appeared to be shapeless folds of cream-coloured cheese-cloth, ragged and torn in places, stained in others by the mud and the bog. It covered – just – the large sores which festered at intervals over her body. The largest abscess sat on her neck and shoulder, and was the one – at this time, at least – that gave her the most discomfort. She cupped her hand, which was thick with muck, and placed it on the area as if to take some crude measurement of the swelling. It stung so badly that she halted her journey and sank into the mud, so as to let the throbbing subside.

Shona had ill-timed her rest. Twisting her head to the side, she focused on a large mass that appeared to be growing out of the marshland – although she knew that wasn't the case. The swell was golden-brown, and from her distance, its crust looked smooth and even. Its size was about six times that of hers and, she thought with revulsion, it looked about ready.

Wearily she got back on her feet and moved on.

“Face it, Blake – it isn't here. It isn't anywhere here.” Avon wiped the back of his hand across his brow. The atmosphere was heavy; it had made him wet, hair and clothes. He looked

down – his boots had disappeared beneath a quagmire. “This is the most revolting place.”

“Just a little longer. Just until I see the next horizon. I'll be satisfied then.”

“Look,” Avon called after him. “Even if it was a signal we picked up on, it was so muffled and degenerate that it could have come from any one of the Five Planets.” Blake gave him no response. He just carried on wading through the filth. “On the other hand,” continued Avon in a less audible voice, “the instruments were probably picking up on your mounting paranoia.”

“Avon,” Blake beckoned him with a gesture of the head. “If you were to go under, I very much doubt I'd be able to get to you. We've got to stay within reach.”

“This planet . . . Avon hesitated, in a guess where next to put his foot, “can barely support me, let alone a Federation Tracking Station.” He took another step, which was better judged than the last, as he actually seemed to rise out of the sludge when he took it. “And even if there was a base, what would you propose to do to it?”

“Destroy it . . . sabotage it . . . blow it up.”

“Another act of terrorism?”

“No,” Blake insisted dourly and, as if to stifle his companion's sarcastic comment, added “an act of freedom.”

“If you say so,” came the bland reply.

For a few moments there was silence. “You do know,” began Avon “that this area had to be scanned for over ten minutes before any hard ground could be found to put us down on? I didn't like the sound of that.” He viewed his surroundings – the

dank mist, the swamp, the occasional scattering of trees. Trees that seemed to burst forth with vigour, from the water, only for their sickly-looking branches to bend and flop down beneath the surface again. "And I like the look of it even less. You should have brought Gan with you."

"I'm beginning to wish I had," Blake turned the top half of his body to face Avon, sparing himself the effort of altering his position. "If I was going to go under this stuff, then I need to know that the person with me will be able to get me out of it. But I must be able to do the same. With Gan, I may not be that lucky." He threw Avon a quizzical look. "And I don't know what the hell it is, but something inside me makes me trust you." Blake turned away again, partly to choose his direction and partly to avoid that thin, lipless smile that he could already feel burning into his back. He took a step and then withdrew it, letting out a sigh of resignation: "Oh, you're right of course."

"I am."

"Yes - about the base. They'd be out of their minds to build anything here."

"It wasn't a rhetorical remark."

Blake hadn't even paused or heard the reply. "Even if they built it on stilts, on a rig of some kind, what would be the point?" He pulled at some weed from the top of the marsh, tore it from its roots and threw it in front of him, in a small display of anger that was rendered rather ineffectual by the plop as it hit the surface. "It wouldn't be worth the bother - not even for them."

"Or anyone," added Avon with increasing disinterest. "There's nothing here but wet and filth ..."

"And those," Blake interrupted.

"What?" Avon almost groaned the word in fear that Blake had found something which would delay their departure.

"Those. We've already passed a couple. And there's another."

"Fungus." Avon took in the sight and then deliberately turned his head away from it in an attempt to stop any further discussion.

"Big, though, isn't it?"

"Yes Blake, it is big." The tone became patronising as he heard the rhythmic squelching of the marsh, indicating that his companion had started to make a path towards it. "I am soaking and tired. You are persistent and tiresome. And that is fungus and big. Happy?"

"No," Blake called back.

"Good. Now we've got that established, I'll talk to Vila and tell him that we're fine."

Blake had taken two more strides before he realised that Avon hadn't actually finished his sentence. That was so unusual in itself that it made him glance back. Avon had frozen. He reminded Blake of a snake before its final attack. He could see his breath spiral out, disturbing the heavy mist around him, but his body was taut and still. His eyes were fixed at a point on the horizon and Blake tried to guess it:

"What is it?"

"There's someone out there." The words were said with disbelief.

"What? Where?"

Avon slowly raised his arm and pointed, and Blake followed its direction.

"There." The sound of the marsh underfoot became audible, and the figure, as it tumbled through the fog and weed, became solid. They both reached for their guns and stood poised, one the mirror image of the other, awaiting the attack. But the figure stumbled, fell, rose to its feet, fell and then tried again.

"You see? There is someone here." But Avon's arm had become relaxed, his grip on the gun handle casual.

"Though hardly in Federation battlegrounds." By the time the figure had fallen again and tortured itself once more by attempting to continue, both guns were back in their harnesses. By the time of the figure's last effort, it stood before its onlookers. They watched its legs buckle and its collapse, splashing heavily downwards onto a bed of mud and weed. It was the body of a young woman.

Inanimate, she lay at their feet.

\* \* \*

"The woman is diseased, probably infectious."

Compassion was not one of Avon's greater qualities. He proceeded to wade to and fro agitatedly, the same three or four metres, over and over. He watched Blake knelt over the limp body. He watched as he peeled away a portion of loose clothing and saw that the swelling on her face and neck was also





apparent on the arms and chest. "If you had any sense, you'd keep away."

But look at her, Avon - look at her. She's ill. We can't just leave her.

"Watch me." But his jibe was pointless. Blake could be just as cold and methodical as Avon. He could ambush fighter ships, blow them out of the sky and consider that a good day's work. But what so irritated Avon was that when Blake was faced with individual cases of human suffering and tragedy, his compassion and pity could be seen to visibly weaken his reserve. At these times, it amazed Avon that the Liberator wasn't a home for stray dogs. There again, perhaps it already was...

His thoughts were broken by a disturbance. The woman had attempted to prop herself up. Flinching in pain, she opened her eyes and spoke.

"Who are... where did you..."

"We're travellers," offered Blake. Avon nodded in acknowledgement. The woman coughed her name - Shona.

"What can we do to help you?"

"You can't. No-one can."

Avon, still standing, cast her one of his sly, sideways looks. "Contagious, is it?"

"No, but very painful." She tried to turn, to look over her shoulder, but the action was difficult. "Can you see anyone? They'll be after me. Discovered that I'm missing."

"You're being followed?"

Avon drew his attention. "It's unlikely, Blake."

"Is it the Federation?" The answer was no - the look of confusion on her face told him that.

She had escaped, she revealed, from what used to be an offenders' camp, adding somewhat bitterly that she was looking for the Healing Place - "if it ever really existed." Avon had begun to pace again, agitated at the prospect that he might be discovered by the woman's captors.

"Great. A convict. My friend collects escaped convicts, don't you Blake? Not usually so ill, but he's not one to discriminate."

"Where is the Healing Place?"

"Oh, leave it! This isn't anything to do with us!"

Shona lifted her right arm and made a gesture with her hand towards the direction from which Blake and Avon had just come.

"There's an area - one of hard ground, it surrounds a pool of such clear, bright water." Blake had guessed the rest.

"And the healing properties are in the purity of the water."

"Yes - it's as simple as that." But she was being discouraged. "Why do you shake your head?"

"Because" Avon interrupted, "we've just come from that place - and there's nothing there. The hard ground, yes - but no pool. His misplaced smile appeared cruel. "Sorry."

"You could be mistaken." But she knew he was right, and she was not surprised - such propaganda was rarely true.

"You know," she addressed Avon, "in these conditions you will quickly tire if you don't stop pacing around like that." Her concern made Avon feel awkward, and as if to hide it, he offered a question:

"What has made you like...?" He waved his gloved hand around in an attempt to define some visual description, but in the end simply settled for "like this?"

"Oh, it's part of the punishment. They're very proud of it. For them, it's most economical."

"Punishment for what?" Another question, that not only surprised himself but Blake as well.

"Well... I'm a food thief - that's what I've been branded, anyway. I'm not, though - I was set up. But those in power can make things look pretty convincing."

Blake nodded. "I know."

"I was force-fed on Turporus. They do it to all the criminals... And the disappearances. It's quite common here. It's fungus. Grows by the marsh pools."

"Poisonous?"

"Poisonous," she confirmed. And looking along herself, she explained that what they saw was a reaction to it, that she was nearing the end of a cycle which started with an ache within the gut. Next her skin colour had been affected, changing to a brown and becoming soft and leathery. And finally, the swelling and the sores. She began to cough sharply, clutching the sores on her stomach as if they might burst with the exertion. "Soon I won't be able to move at all. And within a day or two, I shall look like that." She gestured to the side of her and Blake and Avon followed it. It rested upon one of the large fungi that had so fascinated Blake.

"Now that," said Avon, with thinly disguised curiosity, "is unpleasant. And he made his way to the large rippled mass of fungi that he had earlier dismissed. He prodded it. It was hard, crusty, quite unlike the woman's skin. He called back: "But why do it? Why do something so..."

"Horrific...," said Blake.

"Thank you, Blake. Yes - horrific. I mean, as criminals we don't usually have such choices. We're usually offered either a bullet or a colony. But to be turned into a mushroom... now there's a new one." Avon closed his fingers around a small irregularity of the surface and snapped a portion off. He examined it, noted the wound it had left. Noted the soft, sponge-like surface that lay beneath the exterior. Noted the colour - a soft, meaty pink. And its smell - sweet. Blake had got to his feet. He had offered to pull the woman up, but she had refused.

"There must be a cure. An antidote?"

"There isn't. Or the reality is, they haven't tried too hard to find one." She spasmed. Her eyes closed tightly. The marsh spat and dribbled as it was squeezed through her clenched fist. This isn't just a punishment. This is a way of solving this planet's malnutrition problem. This is... survival.



Avon still held the specimen between thumb and forefinger. He gestured with it. "People are going to eat this?"

"Yes."

He ran it around his fingers one last time, then dropped it with a ploip into the marsh. "Cannibalism - of sorts."

"But you said it was poisonous."

"Yes. Growing amongst the vegetation, it is poisonous. But when Turporus is digested by a mammal, it goes through a change. It mutates, it grows into something edible. The poisons become consumed, annulled. At the end of the cycle, you have a perfectly edible bi-product that is many times larger than its original host."

Blake's eyes scanned the marshlands, taking in the scattering of fungal shapes. He walked a complete circle around Shona. There was the one to which Avon had returned. Two beyond that. Ahead of him, what looked like another. To his left, another. And obscured by the mist, another. And he remembered those that he and Avon had commented on, that lay behind them.

"All of these were people?"

"That's what she said - and I don't fancy joining them." Avon was beginning to become restless again. "Blake. The call was ignored."

"You - I mean your people . . . they must be on the verge of starvation."

"I've never known anything else." She told them of the vegetables planted, which were rotten before the Harvest; the depleted livestock, eaten at a rate faster than they were able to reproduce. "So this is now our food source. First the law-breakers, then the unfortunates, like me, who are found to replace them. But the reality is that it's already becoming indiscriminate. People are just dumped out here when they're nearing the final stage."

"Blake." The call was ignored again.

"But you're not in the final stage."

"I told you - I escaped. I hid on the dumping cart. If I'm going to die, it won't be in the camp. I shall die of exhaustion as they chase me across the marsh. They won't want me making an unexpected and messy reappearance back at the colony. They don't like to be reminded of the butchery. They're only interested in the food. As long as the two can be separated, in their minds at least, then the practice remains legitimate. People do so want to live."

"Blake." Avon, by grabbing his companion's shoulders, physically turned Blake to face him. His eyes demanded the other's

attention. They flashed momentarily towards the woman and then back again. Then, with a much subtler action, he placed his hand upon Blake's arm and drew him away. Although angry for Blake's attention, he made an effort at the very least to hide his intentions from the woman. In lowered tones, he began: "I'm going. He saw that childlike face of disbelief again. It irritated him. Look, you heard what she said. She's being followed. What on earth do you think you can do for her?"

"Maybe not her, but there are others."

Avon lost his restraint. "Look - you can't just liberate everyone." The outburst drew Shona's attention. He turned slightly, so to keep her from his vision. "This planet's finished. Her people are finished. They have no land, no livestock . . . the planet's turned upon them. They can no longer farm it, so they farm themselves. Their time is past. They've reached their end. So they've chosen to fight it in this way. But the conclusion's the same." He emphasised the next words in staccato tones: "There is nothing we can do. In five years Blake, there probably won't even be a colony for you to worry about."

But Blake was stubborn. And right now, he wasn't going to give Avon the satisfaction of admitting failure. There was always a solution. There had to be.

"Irrigation. Their crops are rotten because of the marsh - it could be a matter of simple irri-"

"D'you think they haven't done that? Thought of it? D'you think they would listen to you? Why should they? They're farmers, farmers turning into savages."

"But . . . Blake started but didn't know how to continue."

"And there's that signal to follow up. The Federation, Blake. The Federation." Blake was as aware of the taunt as he was of the truth. The planet's problem was not theirs - it was its people's. With a nod, he gestured to Avon to look where the woman lay. He didn't.

"Well, look at her."

Avon slowly turned his head. "She's gone" - a statement that wasn't strictly true. Both of them could see her staggering away, her bent form becoming slowly enveloped in mist. "You let her go?" It was said with some considerable relief. He could see that the problem was literally running away from Blake and that would make it easier, knowing his character, for him to abandon it.

"You're right of course." At any other time, Blake would have expected Avon to repeat his last two words. But this time he simply asked: "Why?"

"The Federation, Avon. The Federation."





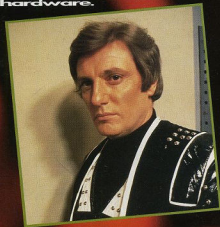
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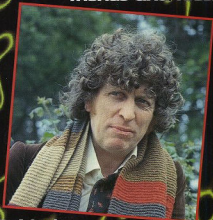
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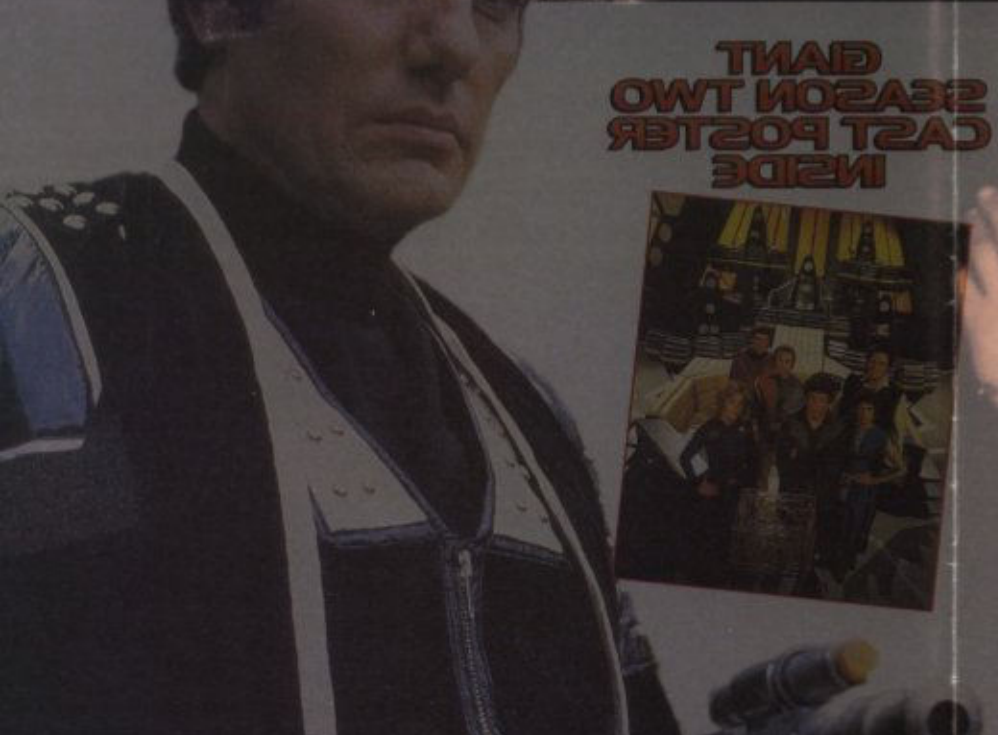








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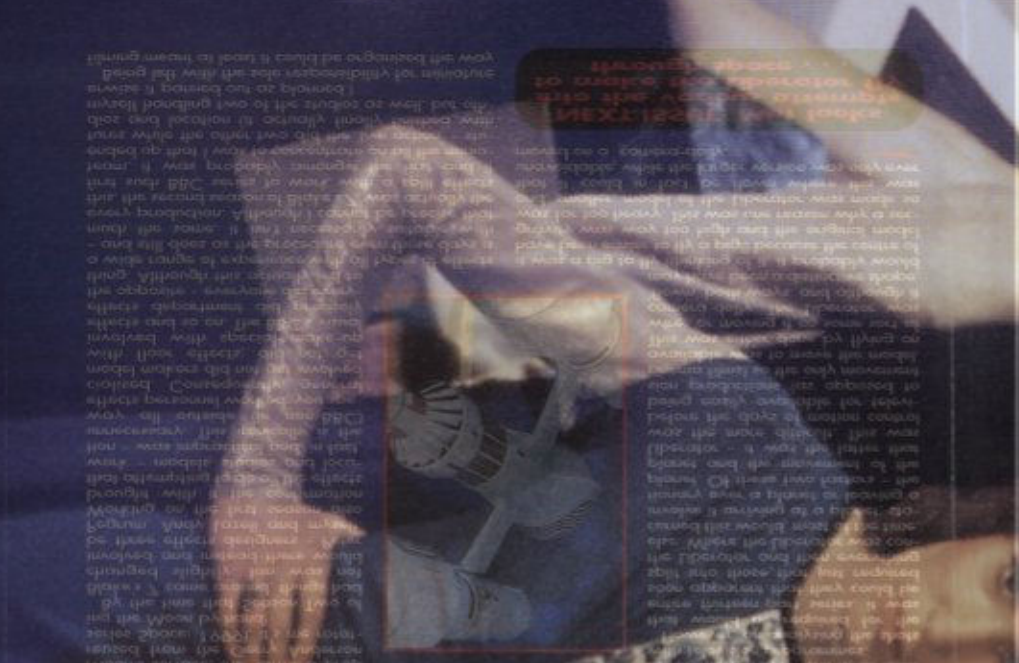
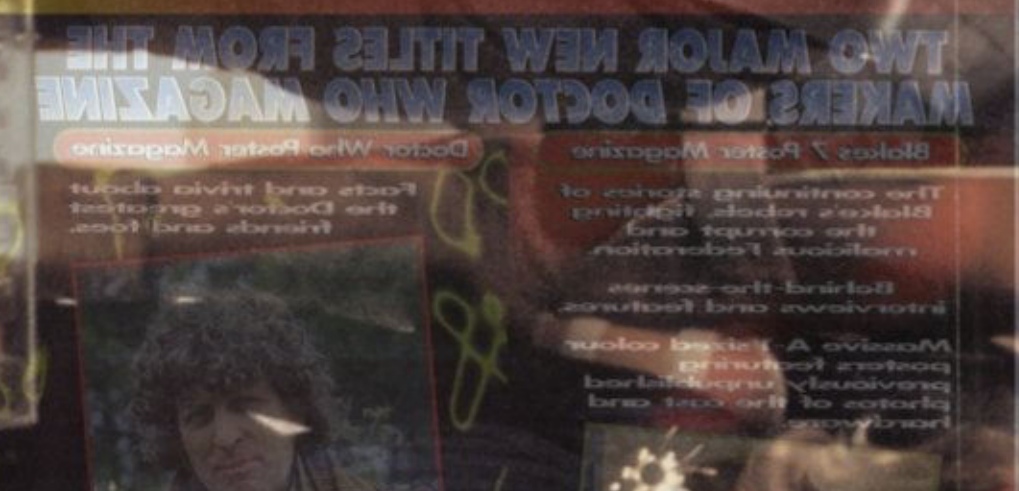
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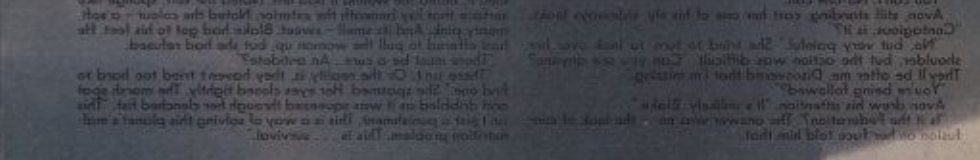
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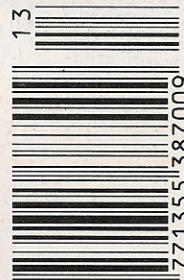
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# Cause and FX

by Mat Irvine

BBC visual effects designer Mat Irvine worked intermitently on all four seasons of *Blake's 7*. In the second part of his look at the work of the department, Mat explains how the Liberator came to fly . . .

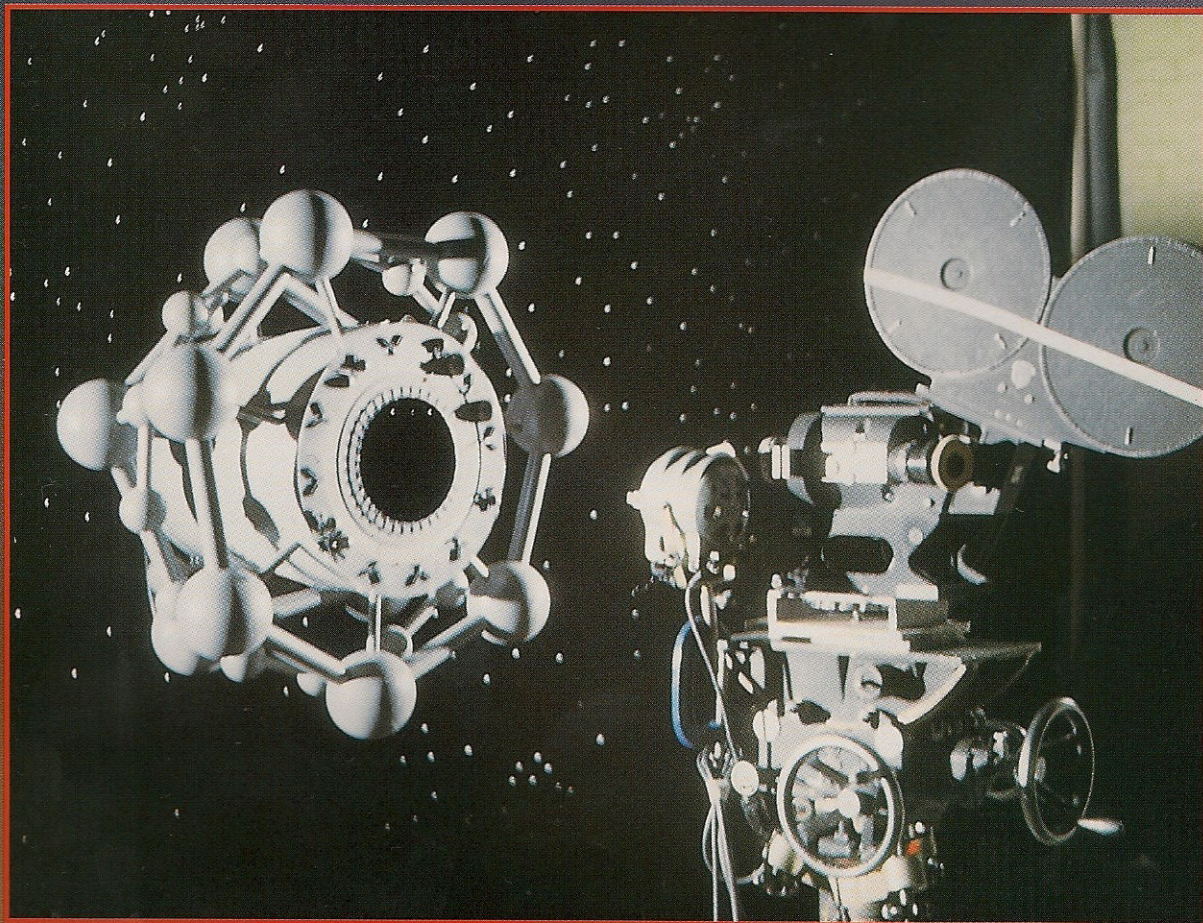
One over-riding problem, probably the over-riding problem, that occurs when attempting the filming of space miniatures, (besides that of suspending the audience's disbelief), is keeping everything in focus. The low light levels that are par for the course in outer space, mean camera lenses are working at a wide aperture, which means a very narrow depth of field. This was the primary reason for developing techniques such as travelling mattes and its newer cousin, the blue screen process; or even using multiple passes within the camera. The last is where the film is exposed with one image, the position of which is carefully noted on a screen or a video monitor, then the film is rewound and a second pass put on another image elsewhere in the picture. Its time consuming, but you do end up with original images on one piece of film and it is all in focus, though there are invariably very obvious 'blank' areas where the background image has been kept clear. Better are hand-drawn travelling mattes, or more often these days, motion control set-ups that can do much the same thing,

and much more besides. Because every single frame can be monitored, the images can be made to exactly coincide by using high-contrast stock to create the travelling matte film. In addition bright lights or engine exhausts can be put onto the existing film by exactly coinciding multiple passes. But all these techniques and processes take a great deal of time - one shot a day if you are very lucky - which isn't often available for a television production, and certainly wasn't for *Blake's 7*.

Consequently this is where a bit of lateral thinking came in and the adoption of what was not exactly a new process, especially for the film industry, but one that was currently only just being discovered by television - since then its been forgotten about again, but this was nearly twenty years ago now! The process is Front Axial Projection, or FAP, a way of combining two images, but which end up on the one piece of film. It used to be used a great deal in the film industry with two of its most famous occurrences being how Superman flew in the original movies, and for the opening African plain

sequences of 2001 : A Space Odyssey.

FAP is of course related to back projection. However whereas the latter projects the image on the back of a screen - as is fairly obvious considering its name - and the image has to be viewed through that screen, invariably with a dulling of the image; front projection does what its name suggests and projects onto the front and retains its clarity. But



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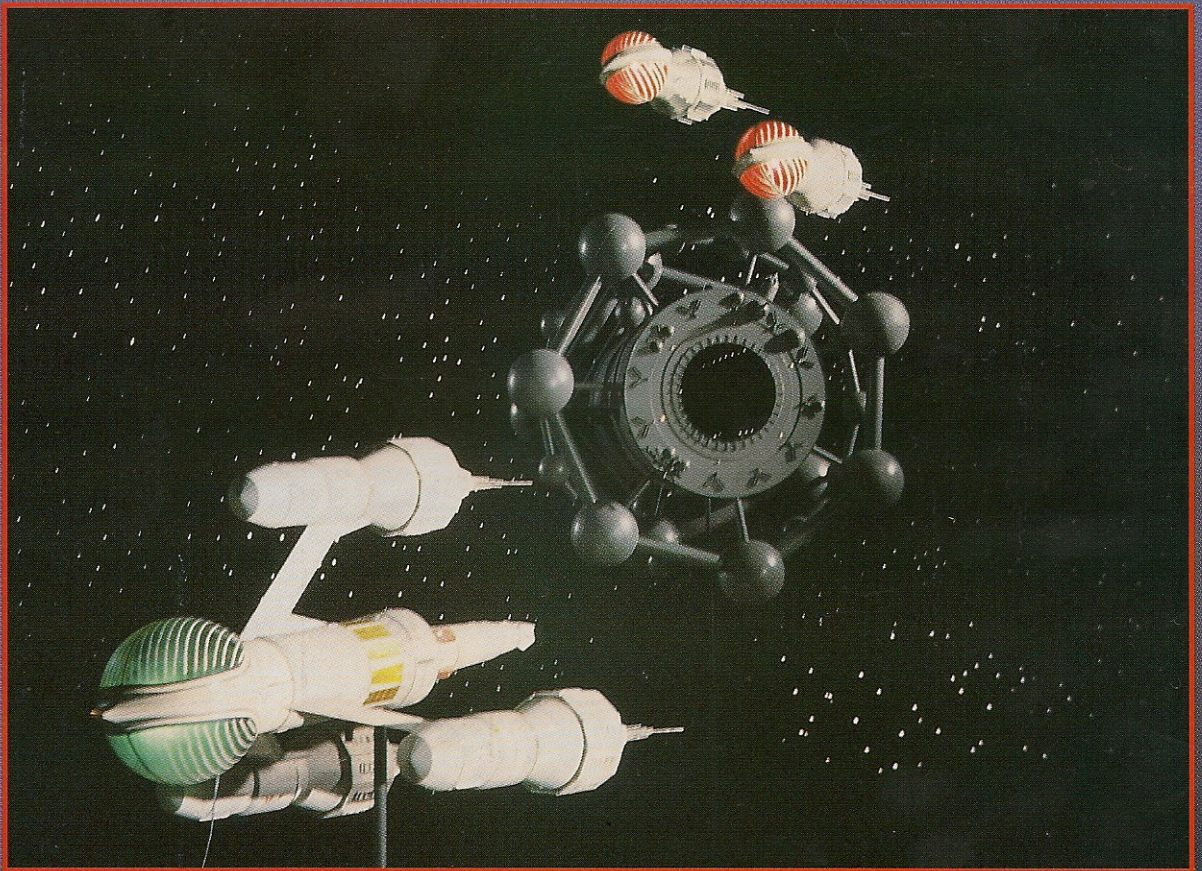
there are two problems associated with front as against back projection. One is that any object in front of the screen will throw a shadow on the screen, and secondly the light from the projector will also throw an image onto any foreground object. This is where the 'axial' part of the name comes in. Firstly the back-

ground image is projected, via a half-silvered mirror, exactly down the line of sight of the film camera, so the shadow, that is still there of course, is exactly hidden by the object - the Liberator or otherwise. This solves the shadow problem and the excess light is solved by projecting a very low light level onto the screen, only about ten per cent of available light, but ensuring the image remains bright by using a highly-reflective screen. This is akin to reflective car number-plates and road signs, but far brighter.

With FAP providing the background to the shot, the time can then be spent setting up the foreground model on either its wires or a camera-dolly. The movement can then be lit so that it remains in the light during the whole of the intended travel. This of course means that the actual travel doesn't change shot to shot, only the background changes with the consequence that if you actually analyse the movements of the Liberator in various episodes of *Blake's 7*, especially during Season Two, you should find that the travelling movement of the ship is identical shot to shot, only the backgrounds have changed from Planet A to Planet B. This comparison is not of course something that was intended, though these days of sophisticated home video players it's a situation that has to be accepted.

With the foreground movement solved, attention is then turned to what is actually visible in the background. The background artwork for Season Two, was specially commissioned from top British astronomical artist David Hardy, who, having been given the brief of how many planets were required and with whatever peculiar features, then produced art-work that was astronomically correct. The paintings were then photographed onto large-format transparencies, ready for the Front Axial Projector. Still FAP images were also used to produce some planetary surface shots by combining model landscapes with a real sky background, which helped to lend an air of reality to what as after all an alien scenario.

Besides still pictures, the FAP set-up could deal with a moving image. This was mainly used in the opening episode of Season Two when the Liberator returned to



her makers. This is where Spaceworld came into the picture, which was meant to be immense space station, dwarfing the already pretty large Liberator.

Practicalities meant that the Spaceworld model was in fact not much larger than the Liberator, but Season Two's film cameraman, Paul Wheeler first filmed this, on 35mm film stock (far steadier than 16mm), and performed all the necessary movements tracking both out and back into the Spaceworld model on a camera-dolly. When the film was processed it was the wound onto the spools in the FAP machine and projected over the small Liberator model. Now the view was from a position in front of the Liberator - we were flying with her so as to speak - and the movement appears to be arriving or leaving Spaceworld. In reality it's only the background image that moves, in practice everything is stationary on the model stage and the 16mm camera on the FAP machine itself films everything anew as one image. There is a secondary advantage of using 35mm for the background plate for by the time it gets onto the final film, it will be a second-generation image, and dropping down to 16mm means it matches the first-generation foreground.

FAP doesn't solve all problems by any means, and in many ways it has gone out of favour with both film and television, being replaced with blue screen and motion control or electronic editing. Ironically modern faster film stock (500ASA as against the 100ASA used during the time of *Blake's 7*) has meant that it is now possible to retain a far greater depth of field, meaning a return to shooting both foreground and background in one take and keeping it all in focus. However at the time FAP was a convenient method of obtaining reasonable quality images in a very short period of time.

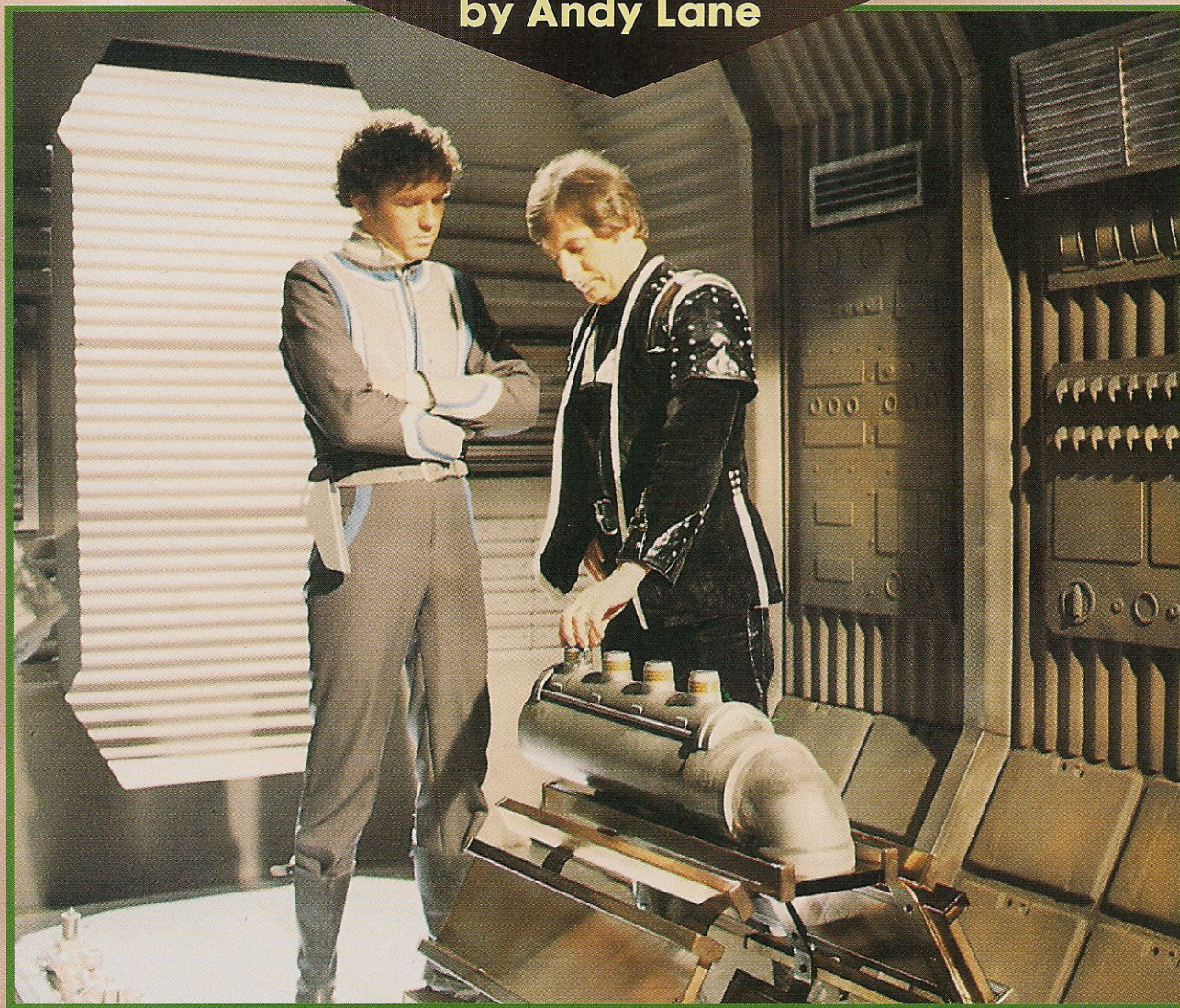
Every now and then I wonder what it would be like to re-do all the *Blake's 7* footage using modern techniques - motion-control, highspeed stock, and all the other trappings of the modern media industry? But you can't go backwards in this industry; *Blake's 7* was a child of the Seventies and even stuck with the limitations of technology then, the overall result came out reasonably well.

Mind you, it would be nice to go back and try again . . .



# FACELESS ON GHAZAR

by Andy Lane



**D**el Tarrant gazed at each of the people in turn, wondering which one of them was going to kill him. There were six of them squeezed shoulder to shoulder in the small Federation hover-transport. Six highly trained killers with short-range, high-power guns. Six pairs of watchful eyes and six itchy trigger fingers. Six figures in black metal-weave Federation Trooper uniforms, faces hidden by helmets. Only five of them, however, were the real thing. The sixth one was Tarrant himself.

Ghazar's small blue sun beat down relentlessly upon the metal exterior of the hover-transport, baking the inside like an oven as it moved slowly back to the Federation research centre. Tarrant could feel sweat pricking across his scalp and down his back. His bare fingers left moist trails upon the stock of his gun. Sulphurous fumes drifted in from the cracked volcanic landscape outside, pricking at his nostrils. And somewhere in the distance he could hear the sound of energy weapons being discharged.

Something was trickling down his forehead towards his cheek. For a moment he thought it was a bead of sweat, but it was too thick and too heavy for that, and it left warmth behind it rather than coolness. The wound on his scalp must have opened up again. Just what he needed.

His gaze flicked from mask to mask. He couldn't make out any features behind the translucent visors. No way of telling who the people were. No way of even telling who was male and who was female. Not that it mattered. If they knew who he was, what he was, then the remainder of his life would be slightly shorter than Dayna's temper.

Dayna. The last time he'd seen her she had been smiling that cold, ruthless little smile of hers whilst discharging a plasma bazooka in a contin-

uous stream of hot energy towards Federation lines. He wondered if she were still alive. He wasn't worried about Avon, of course: Avon would survive anything. He'd probably already made his plans for avoiding the end of the universe. But what about Vila? He had been crouched at Dayna's feet, complaining about the noise. What had happened to Vila?

More importantly: what was going to happen to him?

\*\*\*\*

Blue sunlight glinted off the domes of the Federation research centre. Geography had disguised it well: smooth volcanic rocks surrounded it on all sides, and it was only the small cluster of dishes and antennae on its crown that gave it away to Tarrant's binoculars.

"There they are," Jarhow growled in a deep, cracked voice. "The vicious swine." His baggy, dark clothes and weathered skin blended in with the rock so well that he looked like a part of the planet itself, rather than a second generation settler of Earth descent.

"We'll take the insults as read, if you don't mind," Avon said dryly from beside him. "All Federation Troopers are vicious swine, all rebels are courageous and idealistic freedom fighters. That would appear to be the way of the universe."

Snorting slightly, Jarhow slid back down the scree slope to where Dayna was waiting with the rest of the Ghazar Freedom Party: all twenty-three of them. Local miners mostly, with a smattering of escaped scientists and prostitutes from the centre.

"I'd expected more commitment from you," Jarhow yelled over his shoulder. "When I contacted Blake in the Loritol Sector and asked for his help, he was pleased to give it. Roj Blake was an idealist."

"Idealism is all very well," Avon said, gazing across the riven landscape



towards the Federation base with an unreadable expression on his face, "but it doesn't pay the bills."

Jarhow pulled his hood over his face and took a weapon from Dayna. "It may not cut much ice with you," he shouted, checking the firing mechanism with professional movements, "but the Troopers guarding the research centre are sadistic murderers, and the fall of the Federation has left them unchecked. We need your help to destroy them, and you're being well paid."

"No arguments there," Avon agreed, so quietly that only Tarrant could hear.

"Is this really fair?" Tarrant asked him.

Avon's eyes held a sardonic expression.

"Of course not," he replied. "Nothing is fair. I'm surprised you've lasted as long as you have without realising that."

Tarrant gazed down the slope to where Dayna was instructing the rebels in the operation of the weapons.

"Left to myself I'd be perfectly happy to shoot Federation troops all day," he said. "Do we really need to take these people's hard-mined minerals as well? I thought you said that the *Liberator* was stocked to the gunnels with currency and jewels."

"Considering your history as a mercenary and gunrunner," Avon said, "you have an amazing capacity for self-deception, Tarrant. Nobody works for free: apart possibly from Blake, but he's a law unto himself. And besides: they're not paying us in minerals, they're paying us in information."

"Information?" Tarrant was puzzled.

"After Blake's life pod ejected from the *Liberator*, he apparently met Jarhow on Epheron. According to Jarhow, he promised this ragtag group our help, and gave them the right recognition codes to contact us.

Typical Blake: make commitments and then move on, leaving us to clear up the mess for him. Jarhow knows where Blake went. He'll tell me if, and only if, we get the Federation off Ghazzar for him."

"Sounds fair," Tarrant replied.

"Tell me Avon: why do you want to find Blake so desperately? After all, he knows how to get hold of us if he needs us."

Avon's blue eyes focused unblinkingly upon Tarrant.

"I want Blake," he said. "Reasons don't matter."

He slid down the slope towards the group below. Tarrant gazed across the hellish landscape one last time.

"And what will you do when you find him?" he asked, then slid down the slope to join the group.

\*\*\*\*\*  
"How many did we lose?" the trooper on Tarrant's right growled, his voice muffled by the mask.

"Most of the battalion," replied the one on his left. She sounded young to be a trooper. "Damn rebels. I hope they all fried."

As the transport lurched slightly, Tarrant tried to remember how many women had ever been accepted as troopers. Not many, he knew that. Despite Servalan's position before the alien attack as - what was it? President of the Terran Federation, Ruler of the High Council, Lord of the Inner and Outer Worlds, High Admiral of the Galactic Fleets, Lord General of the Six Armies and Defender of the Earth - women weren't highly regarded within the Terran Federation. Perhaps Servalan hadn't liked the idea of competition.

"Well?" a male voice said, "what do you think?"

Tarrant suddenly realised that the middle one of the three troopers sitting opposite was talking to him. He knew that voice: flattened though it was by the mask, there was something familiar about the intonation. Somebody he'd been through Federation training with?

Somebody he'd met and escaped from during his short but eventful time on the *Liberator*? He had to remember. His life might depend upon it.

"Sorry?" he said, trying to roughen his own voice in case he was recognised.

"I asked whether you identified any of the rebels?"

They were all looking at him now. Perhaps it was his imagination, but it seemed to him as if their guns were all angled his way.

"No," he said, "no, I didn't know any of them." Deflect the question, quickly. "What about you?"

"Somebody said that it was Blake's rabble," the left-hand trooper opposite said in a young, eager voice.

"They were certainly incompetent enough," the one in the middle - the one with the familiar voice - replied.

"They managed to knock out most of the battalion," Tarrant snapped, then cursed silently. The last thing he should be doing was defending his friends. His possibly dead friends.

Blood was seeping steadily down his cheek now and pooling in the recesses of his uniform. The sick throb in his head was getting worse: pounding in time with his heart and the throb of the hover-transport's engines.

How had he got himself into this?

\*\*\*\*\*

A sheet of plasma energy swept over Tarrant's head. He ducked, returning fire, before realising that the energy had come from behind him. Still crouching, he turned around. Dayna was standing a few metres behind him with a plasma cannon braced against her hip. She grinned an apology, and fired again across the plain, bringing down an entire line of Federation troops. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

There was no sign of Vila.







"We're on the verge of losing," Avon said from beside him. Like Tarrant, he was using the Liberator's hand-blasters to pin-point individual troopers as they advanced across the shattered ground of Ghazar.

"What do you mean, losing?" Tarrant snapped, blasting another trooper through the chest and watching the figure drop, writhing, to the obsidian ground.

"I mean that there's too many of *them* and not enough of *us*," Avon dropped another trooper in his, or her, tracks. "I suggest that we teleport up to the Liberator."

"And leave the rebels alone to fight the Federation?" Tarrant was aghast.

"You would rather die here with them?" Avon fired again, hand raised to shield his eyes from the glare of the sun. "Touchingly loyal, but practically stupid. I'm surprised at you, Tarrant. I thought that you, like me, were a survivor."

"There's survival," Tarrant said, laying down a line of fire, "and survival at any cost. There's a difference."

Avon took several quick steps back.

"Not from where I'm standing," he said. His hand waved at Dayna behind and obediently she fell back with him. "It's no good Tarrant. We're not making a difference."

Tarrant deliberately stepped forward. "Is that all that we're here for? To make a difference?"

"What else is there?"

The Troopers, scenting an advantage, moved forward across the volcanic ground. Behind them, armed and armoured hover-transport brought up the rear.

"What about your precious information?"

Avon smiled: a cold, heartless smile.

"Vila already has it," he said. "He managed to get into Jarhow's computer files. I know where Blake is now. Or at least, I knew where he was."

"And Vila?" Tarrant asked as Federation fire stitched the air above his head.

"Back on the Liberator with Cally," Avon said.

"Safe and sound," Tarrant said to himself, unsurprised.

"That's the way he likes to be," Avon agreed. "And that's the way I prefer him. At least he can't wreck things for us down here if he's up there."

"Leave, if you have to. I'm staying here." Even as he said it, Tarrant knew how stupid it was. He owed these people nothing. The mysterious Blake had got him into it, and the psychotic Avon had made sure that he couldn't get out in a hurry, but there was no reason why he should stay.

Apart from common decency.

"You go," he added. "I'll hold the fort."

"Very noble," Avon snapped. "But Cally would never forgive me. Losing one idealistic hero is misfortune: losing two would look like carelessness."

A sudden volley of fire from the Federation troops took the rebels by surprise. Tarrant, taking aim at the trooper in the lead, was barely aware of Avon falling back behind him. The lead trooper raised his weapon.

A bright flash filled Tarrant's vision, and pain exploded through his skull.

And then there was darkness, and blessed relief.

\* \* \* \*

"Blake's collection of misfits can't even shoot straight," the trooper opposite Tarrant persisted. "If we were massacred by anybody, it had to be the locals. Once they were given weapons by Blake's vermin, they went mad."

Tarrant racked his mind over whose voice was emerging from behind the mask. He'd shared a room with fifty other trainee officers back on Earth, and it could have been any of them. Or it could have been one of the crewmembers of the first, and last, Federation ship upon which he'd served. After they had discovered his little sideline in stolen Federation weapons he had drugged them all and set the controls for the heart of the nearest sun, but it was possible that some of them had managed to drag themselves to a lifepod in time. Whose voice was it? And would they recognise his voice, or his face?

"Don't underestimate Blake's trash," he said cautiously. "They've got a lot of experience. They bested Klegg's death squad, remember?"

"That was Kerr Avon," the trooper said. "He's an intelligent man, for a rebel. The rest of them aren't worth a plugged credit."

"That's right," said the trooper to Tarrant's right gruffly. "The women, Cally and Mellanby, are only good for one thing." He mimed a crude gesture with his hand. "And the thief, Vila Restal, is just a snivelling coward."

Tarrant tried to stop himself, but couldn't. "What about the other one?" he said.

"Other one?" the woman on the same side of the hover-transport asked. "What, Blake? He's dead. Him and the woman, Jenna Stannis."

He could taste blood in his mouth. His own blood.

"Tarrant," he said. "Del Tarrant. The mercenary."

The trooper opposite was silent for a moment.

"The boy scout, you mean?" he sneered finally. "The backstabbing gun-runner. Too puffed up with his own self-importance to see what's going on around him. Too obsessed with image to make a difference. Not a patch on Blake. Now there was a man with class, even if he was a rebel."

Tarrant stared at the trooper. The trooper stared back. All Tarrant could see in the curve of his visor was Tarrant's own visor: two mirrors reflecting each other to infinity.

"You could be right," he said dryly, and looked away.

"I'm always right," the trooper said in that maddeningly familiar voice.

\* \* \* \*

Tarrant woke with blood matting his hair and sticking his eyes together. There was noise all around him, and the acrid smell of the volcanic gases was mingled with the stench of cooked flesh. He tried to open his eyelids, but had to stop when a sickening spike of pain lanced through his skull.

Still, at least he was alive. That was something. Wasn't it?



Eventually he got his eyes open. The sun cast long shadows of spiky outcrops of rock across the glassy plain to the domes of the Federation research centre. The battle appeared to have moved on past him. He listened for a moment, but couldn't hear anybody nearby. Taking a deliberate risk, he rolled over.

Flashes of light on the horizon suggested that the battle was still going on but, in the distance, the blocky shapes of the hover-transport appeared to be retreating towards him. The tide had obviously turned at least once since he had been hit.

He ran a hand across his scalp. It came away covered in flakes of dried blood. He'd been unconscious for some time, then. Looking around the immediate vicinity he couldn't see any of his comrades, although the bodies of four rebels and a handful of Federation Troopers lay in contorted poses.

He reached for his teleport bracelet, but it was gone, probably knocked from his wrist when he fell. He scanned the rough vitreous ground, but it was hopeless. The bracelet could be anywhere.

He looked back towards the distant battle. The hover-transport were definitely getting closer. Squinting against the sun and the pain in his head, he thought he could make out helmeted figures retreating towards him, firing backwards as they came.

Tarrant glanced at the nearest trooper. His head was missing from the nose upwards - probably the result of Dayna's plasma cannon - but his uniform was untouched. Nearby, another trooper's chest was holed from front to back, but his helmet was in perfect condition.

Tarrant looked back at the horizon. He didn't give much for his chances if the troopers found him there, and he didn't have the time to search for his bracelet. Time to switch sides again, at least temporarily.

His hands moved with practiced skill across the magnetic seams of the headless Trooper's uniform.

"You're bleeding," the female trooper said, looking at Tarrant in concern.

"It's nothing," he said, cursing silently. The blood must have finally found a way out of his uniform.

"Look, take that helmet off for a moment. I'll slap a patch over the wound.

It'll do you till the doc can see you."

Tarrant's heart suddenly leaped to something that felt like standard by seven.

"No, really," he protested, aware of the eyes that were fastened upon him. "It's just a scratch. I'll get it seen to when we get back to the base."

"I've got a medkit here somewhere," the trooper opposite him and to the right said in a Carfled-accented voice as he fumbled inside his uniform. "Sterile. Only take a jif. Get that helmet off, lad."

"No!" he shouted, then tried to recover the situation by stammering, "I... I'm fine. Really, I'm fine."

Too late. Hands moved towards triggers.

"Got a problem?" the Carfled-born trooper said softly.

Surreptitiously, Tarrant tried to move his gun round to cover them, but the female trooper beside him snatched it away. Five guns swung to cover him.

"Take that helmet off, vermin," the female trooper snapped. "You haven't earned the right to wear it."

Her chest suddenly glowed red hot, and she screamed as a bright bolt of energy emerged, melting the metal-weave uniform. As she fell, her comrades turned, trying to see who was firing. The gruff-voiced trooper's head exploded in a bright red shower of bone and blood. The one with the Carfled accent fired a shot into the roof, sending sparks raining down over all of them as an energy bolt passed through his heart. The young trooper opposite was screaming, but it didn't do him any good. He died anyway, as a bolt of glowing light melted his helmet, his skull and the far wall of the hover-transport.

Tarrant stood slowly as the bodies slumped to the floor, counting the last remaining seconds of his life and the few inches that lay between him and the nearest weapon. The trooper opposite held his Federation blaster one-handed, aimed at Tarrant's throat, with the other hand raised as if to shield his eyes.

"Well?" Tarrant asked. "If you're going to kill me, do it now."

"If I was going to kill you," the trooper replied, pulling his helmet off, "I would have done it when we first met."

"Avon."

Avon's cold, blue eyes held no expression at all: no worry, no fear, no feeling for the four troopers he had

just killed. He might just as well have been on the flight deck of the *Liberator*, discussing an abstruse problem in computer logic.

"Perhaps you were expecting Servalan?" he said firing carelessly at the bulkhead that separated them from the driver. There was a scream, mercifully short, and the transport lurched to a halt and sank slowly to the ground.

Tarrant searched Avon's face for some clue as to his feelings, but there was nothing there. Nothing at all.

"Thank you for saving my life," he said.

"I didn't intend to: I was trying to get into the Federation base in disguise so I could blow it up, but you've managed to spoil that little plan."

Tarrant frowned. "I thought you were teleporting back to the *Liberator*."

"We took a democratic vote," Avon said.

"But you don't believe in democracy," Tarrant smiled.

"Unfortunately," Avon snapped, "Dayna, Cally and Vila do. I was tempted to let you sort the problem out yourself, but they persuaded me that we can't afford to lose a pilot. Not even a mediocre one."

"A simple 'you're welcome' would do," Tarrant said, and looked down at the bodies, the blood and the contorted faces. "But I can't fault your solution. We were all wearing helmets, and if I couldn't recognise your voice, you couldn't be certain of mine, even if you were trying to provoke a reaction from me. How could you be sure that you shot the right people?"

Avon smiled. He didn't do it often, and it didn't look right on him.

"I couldn't," he said. "You were lucky."

"Story of my life," Tarrant muttered. He took a last look around. "Come on," he said with a grimace, "we've got a firefight waiting for us."

"And that," Avon said darkly, "is the story of my life." ●





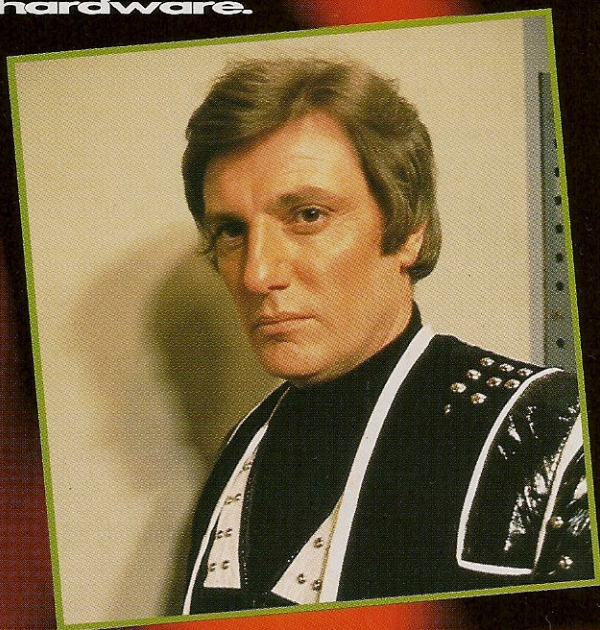
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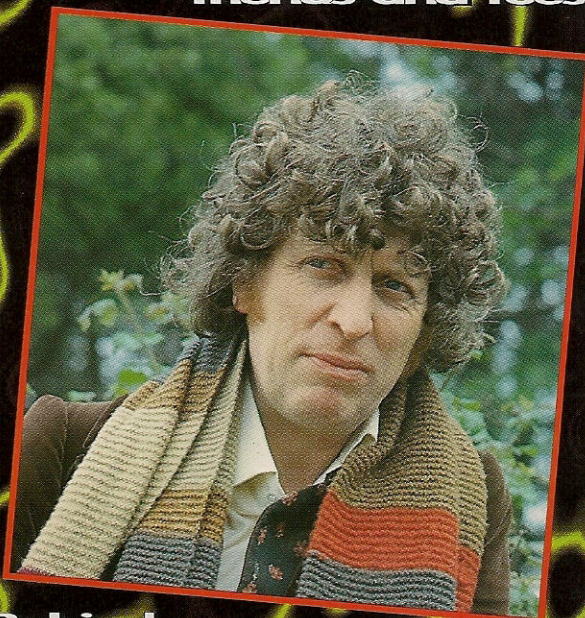
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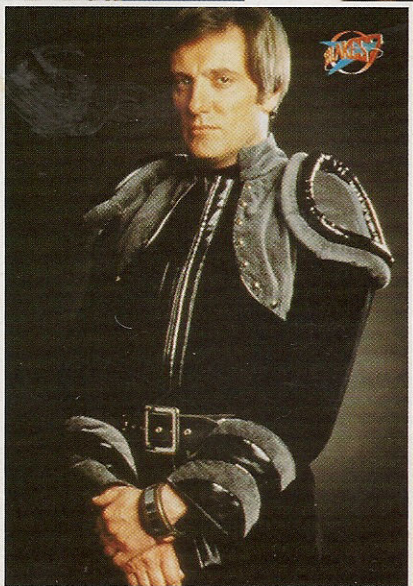
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CREW!**





# GUIDING THE 7

During the production of *Blake's 7's* first season, the following five-page document was issued by the BBC. Doubling as a press release to announce the series and an incentive to merchandisers to purchase licences, it is one of the earliest known documents about the series.

We are reprinting it here word for word, as it was originally distributed.

"BLAKE'S SEVEN"

is

A NEW AND MAJOR BBC TELEVISION SERIES OF SPACE ADVENTURE.

A FIRST SERIES OF THIRTEEN EPISODES IS ALREADY IN PRE-PRODUCTION AND PRINCIPAL SHOOTING WILL BEGIN IN SEPTEMBER. IT IS HOPED TO TRANSMIT THE FIRST EPISODE EARLY IN 1978. THE SPECIAL AIM OF THE SERIES IS TO PROVIDE FAMILY VIEWING AND IT IS DESIGNED TO APPEAL TO A VERY LARGE AUDIENCE IN A WIDE AGE GROUP.

TERRY NATION, ONE OF BRITAIN'S LEADING TELEVISION AUTHORS AND THE MAN WHO CREATED THE 'DALEKS', HAS CONCEIVED AND WRITTEN THE SERIES. IT WILL BE PRODUCED BY DAVID MALONEY. WITH VAST TELEVISION EXPERIENCE AND A DISTINGUISHED CAREER AS A DIRECTOR. HE HAS, AMONGST HIS MANY CREDITS, DIRECTED A LARGE NUMBER OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL EPISODES

OF "DR. WHO".

TOY MANUFACTURERS, PUBLISHERS AND PRODUCT ADVERTISERS HAVE ALREADY RESPONDED TO THE SERIES WITH GREAT ENTHUSIASM AND A HUGE RANGE OF MERCHANDISE IS PLANNED FOR RELEASE TO COINCIDE WITH THE PROGRAMME'S LAUNCH.

"BLAKE'S SEVEN"

is

A SPACE ADVENTURE SERIES OF THE FUTURE:

It is set in the third century of the second calendar. Space travel is routine and many planets in the Sun Galaxy and beyond have been colonised.

The planets are politically and economically linked in a Federation. Their peoples are ruled from Earth by a ruthless totalitarian regime.



**Terry Nation's Blake's 7 Poster Magazine** Issue 3. Published by **Marvel Comics UK Ltd.**, Jim Galton, Chairman, Mike Hobson, Managing Director, Paul Neary, Editorial Director, Editor Gary Russell, Associate Editor, Marcus Hearn, Assistant Editors, Warwick Gray & Gary Gillatt, Designer, Gary Gilbert, Production, Mark Irvine & Irfan Yunis. Thanks to: Gary Leigh & Adrian Rigelsford, Office of publication 13/15 Arundel Street, London WC2R 3DX, England. Published monthly. Not for sale in Canada or the United States of America. All Blake's 7 material is © Terry Nation, licensed by BBC Worldwide Publications 1994. Blake's 7 logotype is a trademark of the BBC and is used under licence. Blake's 7 logotype © BBC 1978, licensed by BBC Worldwide Publications. All other material is © Marvel Comics Ltd unless otherwise indicated. No similarity between any of the fictional names, characters, persons and/or institutions herein with those of any living or dead persons or institutions is intended and any such similarity is purely coincidental. Nothing may be reproduced by any means in whole or part without the written permission of the publishers. This periodical may not be sold except by authorised dealers, and is sold to the condition that it shall not be sold or distributed with any part of its cover or markings removed, nor in a mutilated condition. All material sent to this magazine will be considered for publication, but the publishers cannot be held responsible for unsolicited manuscripts, photographs or artwork. Printed in the UK and distributed by Marketforce (UK) Ltd, 247 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 0AU 071-261 5555. ISSN 1355-3879



Roj Blake is a man who once challenged the regime. As punishment he was subjected to memory erasure and re-programming, in Administration hospitals. But whilst Blake remembered nothing, there were many who remembered him. His name would always be associated with the freedom movement.

Some years later Blake became unwittingly involved with a subversive group. His connection discovered, he was arrested. Eager that he should not be seen as a martyr, the Administration framed him on charges that would totally discredit him. He was tried and found guilty by the Justice Computer. His sentence: Transportation and life imprisonment on the penal planet Cygnus Alpha. A Devils Island in space.

On the prison ship that transports Blake to Cygnus Alpha his fellow prisoners are the worst of society's misfits. Thieves, murderers, smugglers, embezzlers, weapon runners and extortionists. They have only one thing in common. The desire to escape.

During the long voyage, Blake organises the prisoners in a plan to take over the ship. The mutiny fails, but ultimately leads to Blake's escape and the finding of an abandoned but fully operational space craft. The ship is of unknown origin. Certainly it was not manufactured in any of the known galaxies. Its design and performance are light years ahead of the most advanced technology. A truly magnificent space ship that ultimately becomes one of the major stars of the series.

Blake rescues a crew from his fellow prisoners. They are briefly grateful to Blake but reluctant to operate under his command. They do not take happily to working as a team. They are individuals and each has an individual criminal talent. None of them has a burning loyalty to Blake, and it is only his strength of will that binds them together. The natural inclination of the criminals is to use the superb space ship to raid and loot. Blake on the other hand is determined to use 'Liberator' in his continuing fight against the Federation.

This frail alliance is fortified by one external factor. The knowledge that the Federation will continue to hunt them. Each of them is marked for extermination.

Space Colonel Travis of Federation Security has been appointed to 'locate and destroy' Blake and his group. With his flight of three pursuit ships and his team of androids, Travis is determined to track them to the edge of the Universe if he must. His shadow is always on their shoulder. This then is the background to **BLAKE'S SEVEN**. Fugitives in space. Driven to run into distant galaxies where they encounter strange races and situations. Attackers too, taking every chance to hit and run where they can do damage to the Federation.

Each week we will tell the story of one of those adventures. It is a series of limitless scope and has the potential of being one of television's most durable long runners.

#### "BLAKE'S SEVEN" THE PEOPLE AND THE HARDWARE

##### BLAKE'S SEVEN

are

**BLAKE:** Cast in the classic heroic mould. Dedicated to the destruction of the Federation. He has the personality and will to hold his crew together. His is the determination that takes them into and safely out of, a thousand adventures.

**JENNA:** That she happens to be stunningly beautiful is not what qualifies her a place in the crew. As an inter-planetary smuggler she learned to be one of the best space craft pilots in the business.

**AVON:** A technology man who is close to genius. But a flawed genius who programmed computers to rob the Federation banking system of hundreds of millions.

**GAN:** A man of enormous physical strength. He saw his home planet Zephron destroyed by the Federation. In its defence he killed several of the raiders. He has a 'limiter' implanted in his brain that stops him being able to kill again.

**VILA:** A thief. No locking device in the universe is proof against his skills. A master of sleight of hand and a happy self confessed coward.

**CALLY:** An incredibly beautiful girl from the planet Saurian Major. She is telepathic. Her disregard for her own life frequently places her companions in still greater danger.



##### AND THE SEVENTH?

**ZEN:** The speaking computer that controls all the systems on the great space ship. A machine that becomes almost human and is Blake's ever-ready and willing servant.

##### THE HARDWARE:

A very essential feature of the series will be the specially designed equipment. Starting with the space ship itself and going through weapons; hand guns; laser swords; communicators; teleport bracelets; utility belts (a power pack fixed to a belt and from which numerous gadgets can be operated); survival kits; locators and so on. New equipment will appear in almost every episode of the series.

**SPECIAL SETTINGS:** On board the Liberator is a teleport section, a flight deck and a space laboratory. Surface vehicles are stored on board. There are space capsules for limited space travel.

In short, there is no limit to the product range that can be genuinely attributed to "BLAKE'S SEVEN"

##### IN CONCLUSION:

There is little doubt that "BLAKE'S SEVEN" will be the mass audience series of 78-79. Excitement about the series is already mounting and the national press have featured it widely. We predict that "BLAKE'S SEVEN" will create a major impact and will be on our screens for a long time to come. ●



# WIDMANSTATTEN'S WORLD *by Paul Cornell*



The two outlines sprang down to the surface from space. They hung there, gathering matter and form, and then there were two people standing on the planet.

Avon had his gun out, his left hand outstretched. Jenna sighed, and unclipped her weapon from her belt. Visibility was down to a few feet, a thick brown sludge of a mist slithering over the pebbles.

"Why do you always do that?" she asked Avon.

"Do what?" Finally, he moved. Just relaxing the left arm.

The gun remained ready as he glanced at her.

"Land like you're in a shooting gallery."

"Just . . ." he grinned, quite struck by the simile "keeping on my toes."

There came an urgent chime from Jenna's communicator bracelet. "Jenna?" Vila's voice asked, "Are you all right?"

"Down and safe. We were just admiring the scenery."

"Oh, is it nice?"

"Shut up, Vila." Jenna closed the link. "So, where are they?"

"Hiding." Avon's gaze swept the fog that filled the gully. "In this atmosphere, that must come as second nature."

"I'll have to be careful how I breath - you could put on weight inhaling this stuff. Ah, the welcoming party . . ." From all around, there came the sound of disturbed shale. Two figures in red coveralls were approaching them cautiously from the front.

Avon turned to his left and right, and found that they

were encircled by red-garbed troops, several weapons of indeterminate nature pointed in their direction. He carefully replaced his gun on its belt hook.

Jenna did the same.

"Are you Blake's people?" came a gruff voice from one of the figures.

Avon interrupted Jenna's reply.

"We're -" he glanced at her, "the people from the Liberator."

The local rebels lived in a plastic dome under a ledge in a hillside. Their leader was Kelstor, a lean, pale man with a white beard. His followers sat in a circle around Avon and Jenna, who were seated on large cushions and fed warm broth. The rebels regarded the strangers with a satisfying blend of awe and hope.

"You got our message, then?" Kelstor asked, trying to remain composed.

"Yes . . ." Jenna got in this time before Avon could come up with a sarcastic retort. "You said that the Federation are developing some new weapon here?"

"Indeed they are. Widmanstatten's World was originally a thriving colony. You know, an agricultural planet -"

Avon clicked his fingers. "Of course! The richest economy in the whole cluster!"

Kelstor looked at the others. "You'd heard of us back then?"

"I had . . ." Avon waved the question aside with his hand,



"a professional interest. Nothing came of it."

"The Federation introduced new crop rotation policies . . . stripped all the goodness out of the ground. One by one, all the farmers had to move on. Then the atmosphere started to thicken. The air here used to be pure and sweet. Now it's a biochemical soup. Those of us who were left either had to leave on the final carrier ships, or go underground."

"That's bizarre," Jenna frowned. "The air's still fit to breath though, isn't it?"

"Oh yes. The impurities get to you after a while, though. Most of us live with bronchial problems."

"Some form of industrial pollution?" Avon suggested.

"Perhaps they're planning to make this a refuelling base for pursuit ships."

Jenna shook her head. "No. I had Zen do a mineralogical analysis. There are none of the trace elements that'd indicate the compounds needed for sublight fuel. Used to be an old trick of mine . . ." She glanced up at Kelstor, reticent as always about her past. "If you're low on fuel, you blow a hole in some island from orbit, and hope the natives have refining technology."

Kelstor smiled back at her. "I'd heard you used to be a smuggler."

"Not a very good one."

"No." Avon had been examining the surface of the plastic dome. "Good smugglers don't get caught."

"Unlike good computer pirates, I suppose?"

Kelstor glanced worriedly between the two luxuriously dressed outlaws. "It'll be dark soon. Do you want to go and see the Federation base?"

"Must we?" Avon's eyes hadn't left Jenna's. "I was looking forward to more smugglers' stories."

They broke camp soon after dusk, though in the soupy fog, it was hard to tell just when the sun sank below the horizon. Avon had been in contact with the Liberator, asking if he couldn't come up and teleport down again when he was needed, but Blake had insisted that the teleporter was used sparingly. With the range of sensor equipment that the Federation had on Widmanstatten's World, they couldn't be sure that there wasn't something that might trace the teleport beams.

Avon snarled an affirmative and spent the evening staring straight ahead, mentally playing chess. Jenna fought down an urge to make friendly overtures to him. That would be like throwing stones into the ocean. Besides, for all Avon's bravado, their reputations were just about equal. She'd been caught by sheer chance, but there was something about Avon that suggested he'd played a part in his own downfall. Hubris like that demanded that somebody kick it.

She spent the evening chatting with Kelstor and his men. There were a few women, wives and girlfriends, in the dome, but none of them were combatants. This particular rebel army had been formed from a pretty traditional farming community. As always, Jenna had the urge to ask them about their lifestyle, about what was so appealing about fighting rather than running or trying to turn a profit. Avon and she were alike in that at least. But it would have sounded odd, a hero figure asking what it was like to be a rebel. So she didn't. She talked instead about Blake, and

in doing that she found herself talking about the rebellion with enthusiasm. Much easier when your friend is the purest sort of rebel.

When all this Cinderella stuff with the Liberator and the teleport came crashing down around their heads, she'd grab Blake and kill everybody in the way until they got out. He'd make a terrible smuggler, but maybe they could find some life to lead together. Whatever, she'd save him for his dreams.

"The good thing about him is that he really believes in the basic goodness of human beings," she told her enrapt audience. "He believes in -"

"Time to go." Avon appeared at the door, his gun in his hand once more. His gaze swept the room quizzically and settled on Jenna. "Well? Isn't it dark enough for you?"

They made their way from rocky outcrop to rocky outcrop, running in a crouch across the open stretches. Jenna glimpsed flat expanses of barren earth which she guessed had once been fields. The brackish fog rolled in dollops across the countryside, and even the occasional gaps revealed an oily and filtered night, the stars shining like tiny rainbows with the diffraction.

There were lights up ahead. Kelstor led the rebels to the edge of a precipice, and they squirmed on their stomachs and elbows to see over it. A basic federal dome, gun-metal grey, with a landing pad beside it, lay in the valley. Lights on its surface blinked unsteadily in the haze. On the landing pad sat a Science Corps research vessel.

"Standard science research base. Entrances here, here and here . . ." Avon pointed. "None of them a good idea. Crew of thirty, so a direct assault is not out of the question. Providing, that is, you are willing to lose most of your men."

Jenna put a hand on Kelstor's shoulder before he could reply. "There are better ways. We could teleport inside."

"Whatever it takes," the rebel leader replied. "Whatever they're doing down there, it's literally destroying our world."

"Destroying?" Avon raised an eyebrow. "Destroyed would be more accurate. Do you have plans for evacuation?"

"Why . . . no." "Then I suggest you make some. I can't see this planet ever becoming fertile again, unless . . ."

Avon raised a hand as if to grasp a passing thought. He smiled at the notion. "Now . . . wouldn't that be interesting?"

There came a sudden sound from behind them. A high-pitched hum that rose quickly to a shriek.

A Federation security robot was speeding towards them across the top of the ridge, its guns flipping up to lock onto the rebels. Vaguely man-shaped, but angular and harsh, the robot had a hoverpad base which skimmed it swiftly over the loose shale.

One of Kelstor's men turned to run. The robot's systems instantly put him

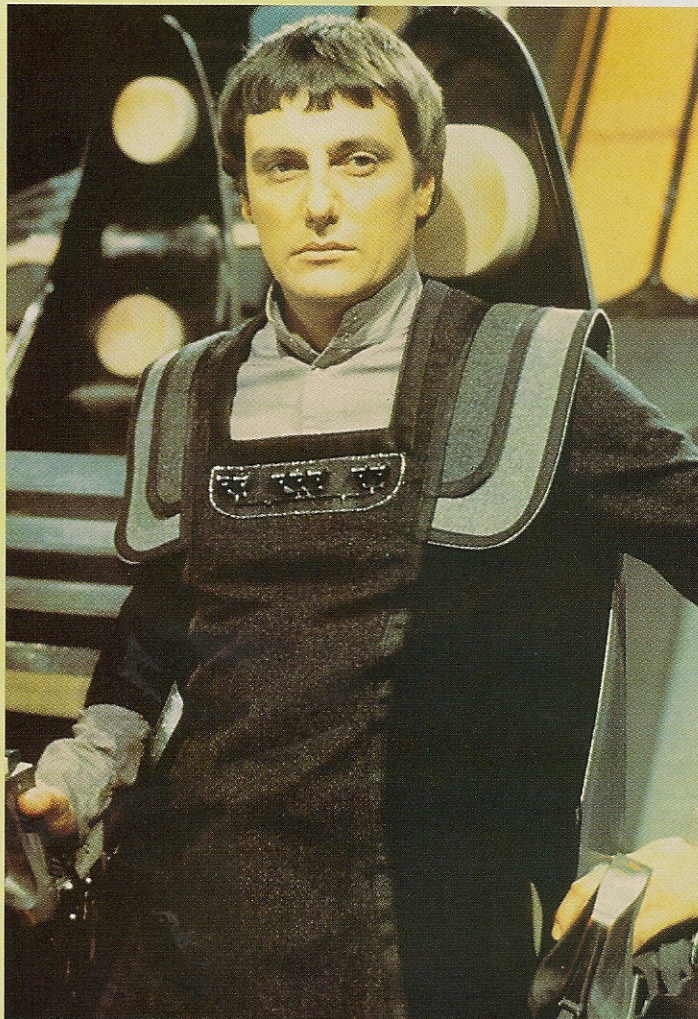
at the top of its list of priorities. He screamed as a plasma bolt smashed through his chest, sending him flying over the cliff top.

They were trapped by the thing, its metallic electrified taser arms extending to fence them off at the edge of the cliff.

Avon had already raised the bracelet to his face, his finger on the communicator button.

"No." Jenna told him firmly.

"Why not?" Avon didn't move.







"It's not going to kill us. It would have done that by now."  
 "Tell me over a glass of brandy on the flight deck."

"You can get your own," Jenna slipped the teleport bracelet from her wrist.

Avon lowered his arm. "Blake would never forgive me. All right, what are we going to do?"

Jenna motioned the rebels to lay down their guns as the familiar black-clad shapes of Federation troopers ran up behind the robot.

"Whatever they want. For the moment."

The troopers marched the rebels down the winding mountain path until they were in clear sight of the science dome.

"They either don't know, or haven't been briefed on, who we are," Avon whispered to Jenna.

"How do you make that out?"

"They'd have taken these," Avon casually tapped the teleport bracelet that Jenna had returned to her forearm.

"Quiet!" shouted the patrol leader, and Avon turned to show him a dazzling grin.

Senior Scientist Picus turned to the communications technician. "Any word on those disturbances?"

"No, sir. It's as if something were blocking all off-planet communications."

"Possibly a side-effect of the atmospheric changes. A tactically useful one as well. I wish there were more time to study things like that. Ah well. Were you able to report the arrival of that strange ship in orbit?"

"Yes, sir. Space-Command seemed to take it very seriously before we were cut off."

"Really? Looked like the echo of a cargo barge to me. Are the prisoners inside?"

The technician touched a control. "Affirmative. According to the patrol leader, they represent about two thirds of the remaining population."

"A reasonably-sized controlled experiment then. If only we could get them all. With a bit more budget we could have had some prisoners shipped out here or something. Too late now." He glanced at the digital chronometer on the wall. "F minus two hours."

The technician shivered. "I'd like to be off-planet as soon as possible, I don't mind admitting, sir."

"Oh, don't worry. We don't want anybody getting hurt." Picus headed for the door. "Well, none of our people, anyway."

Avon glanced around the functionally white room they'd been imprisoned in. "Why always white? Anybody?"

The rebels grunted and shook their heads in despair. Jenna raised her head from the exercises she'd been practicing against her bonds. "Because it shows the blood, I'd always heard."

"Or it shows that there's not supposed to be any. Every detail of general design will have been looked at by the Federation's psycho-specialists. They never think they miss anything. Their biggest flaw."

"But who can save us now?" Kelstor cried, "I would have thought that was obvious," Avon replied quickly. "The only choice you have to make is -" The door hissed open and his voice dropped to a whisper. "Now or later."

Jenna smiled at the effect this had on the rebels. They turned to face their captor with a measure of pride. Sometimes Avon's arrogance paid dividends.

Picus regarded the captives with something approaching joy. "Oh, yes! Healthy, muscular, absolutely perfect! And we've even got a woman! Good, you'll do fine!"

He was about to leave once more when Kelstor gave an anguished cry. "At least tell us, you monster! What have you done to our world?"

"Tell you? Well, why not? Your world, as you put it, has been the perfect testing ground for my - I'm Armand Picus by the way - my theory of atmospheric restructuring. By introducing certain chemicals into the air over a period of years, we've now balanced it at a precise point. The point where -"

"It will explode." Avon turned lazily, drumming his fingers together in his manacles. "Given a big enough detonator. Like, for instance, an artillery plasma bolt fired from orbit?"

"Oh, well done!" Picus grinned.

"Thus, the Federation will be able to seed the atmosphere



of any world it regards as a threat. If the ecological damage doesn't get them, the fireball will. And with all organic life burnt down into the soil, within a few decades the resulting cinder will make a very fertile colony again. Correct?"

"Absolutely."

"So what's our part in this?"

"Test subjects."

Avon nodded and pursed his lips. "I thought so."

They were chained to stakes spaced at intervals across the shale beside the landing pad. Picus checked their chains himself. "Not that there'll be anywhere for you to run to, you understand, but when we return to what's left we'll be able to see just how efficient the atmospheric explosion is at stripping organic material."

"We understand," nodded Jenna calmly.

Picus put a finger under her chin. "There's something unusual about you. Why are you the only female terrorist?"

"My way of keeping fit."

"Ah well. Death is the great leveller. The fireball should arrive over the western horizon. Wonderful sight. Briefly."

Picus gestured to his guards and technicians, who were carrying cases from the dome. "Board immediately. Tell the pilot to begin take-off procedures." He turned back to the prisoners. "Thank you for your help in this vital experiment." Then he turned and scampered towards the spacecraft himself.

As the noise of take off rose to a scream, Avon turned to Jenna and shouted. "Would this be a good time?"

Jenna nodded. "It would, if I could reach my communicator!"

"You don't have to!" Avon struggled to make his voice heard against the roar of the rising spaceship behind them. "When I touched your bracelet, I cranked the volume switch up to full."

Jenna twisted her hands in front of her, and slammed the transmit button against the stake. She struggled to raise her hand to within a few feet of her face. "Jenna to Liberator! Jenna to Liberator!"

The science vessel rose up out of the planet's murky atmosphere, and attained orbit with little grace. It turned back to face the brown world below, and a stubby turret rose from its nose cone. The barrel of a plasma bolt cannon focussed on Widmanstatten's World.

From out of nowhere a white and green spacecraft appeared. A moment later there was a flash of light.

As the larger craft vanished into the distance once more, the science vessel erupted into a silent bloom of expanding gas.

"So, where would you like us to take you?" Blake stood, his hands on his hips and a wry smile on his face, at the last of the rebels and their families stepped out of the teleport area.

"Anywhere!" Kelstor beamed, shaking him by both hands.

"You couldn't save my world, but at least you spared other worlds the same fate."

"Oh, I think that for that you have to thank Avon and Jenna." Blake indicated his crew members with an open palm.

Jenna dipped her head and smiled, but Avon only raised an eyebrow. "Sometimes," he purred, "the line between saving the universe and one's own skin is a slim one."

++Warning++ boomed the stentorian voice of Zen, the Liberator's computer. ++Federation Pursuit Ships approaching++

Jenna ran through to her pilot's post, the others on her heels. "Damn. They must have been warned. Three of them coming in fast."

"Zen!" barked Avon, "prepare course to outrun them -"

"No!" Jenna's fingers were flickering over the control pads. "We haven't the energy left. We're going to have to fight them."

"We don't stand a chance!" yelled Vila, hopping up to his control position. "We got here so fast that the energy banks need at least six hours to recharge. Bye." And he was gone, probably in the direction of the survival pods. Cally and Gan ran up to their positions as the rebel families threw themselves into the more comfortable area below the control deck.

"Options, Jenna?" Blake asked calmly.

"One good one. Give me a minute." She checked a control once more. "Good. Here we go." She grabbed the manual controls and swung the Liberator in a wide arc, causing

the others to stagger. "Zen, standard by three, put us into a shallow planetary orbit."

++Confirmed++

The Liberator dipped into the murky atmosphere of the planet, diving below the horizon just as the three red spars of the pursuit ships came over it. Zen's screen cleared to show the deadly shapes approaching.

"Turn and assume firing position."

"We only have energy for one blaster shot!" shouted Avon.

"That's all it'll take. Kelstor, get up here!" The rebel leader ran to Jenna's side as the three Pursuit Ships appeared over the curve of the planet's atmosphere. "Target: planetary surface!" called Jenna. She grabbed Kelstor's hand and slapped it onto the firing control.

"Ready . . . ready . . ." Her eyes didn't leave the screen.

"Now!"

Kelstor slammed the control.

A fine energy blast shot from the Liberator to the planet below.

The Pursuit Ships closed to firing range.

And the planet exploded into flame.

The screen filled with light, the three Federation ships engulfed in a vast flare which sent them spinning off, their power sources detonating.

"Zen, full reverse!" yelled Jenna, and the planet receded until it was a shining star in the distance. She took Kelstor's hand from the control and straightened up, smiling. "Thank you."

"No, thank you. Our planet managed to strike a blow against the Federation after all."

Jenna turned to Avon. "Not bad for a failed smuggler?"

Avon scowled for a

moment, then broke

into a grin. "Nine . . .

out of ten." ●





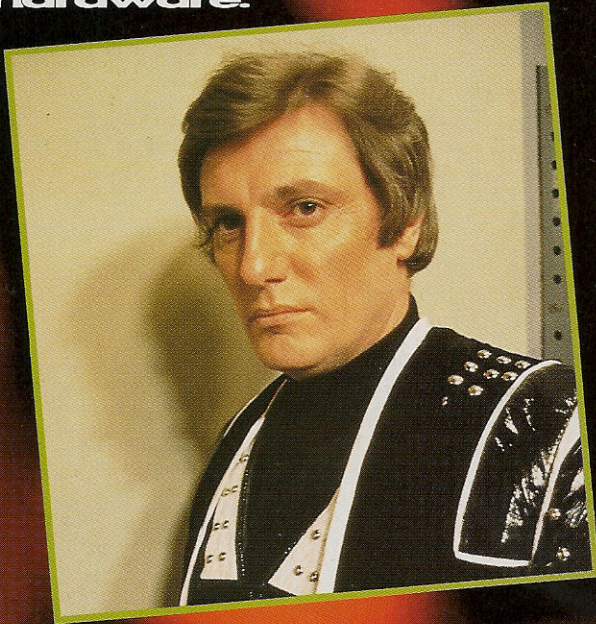
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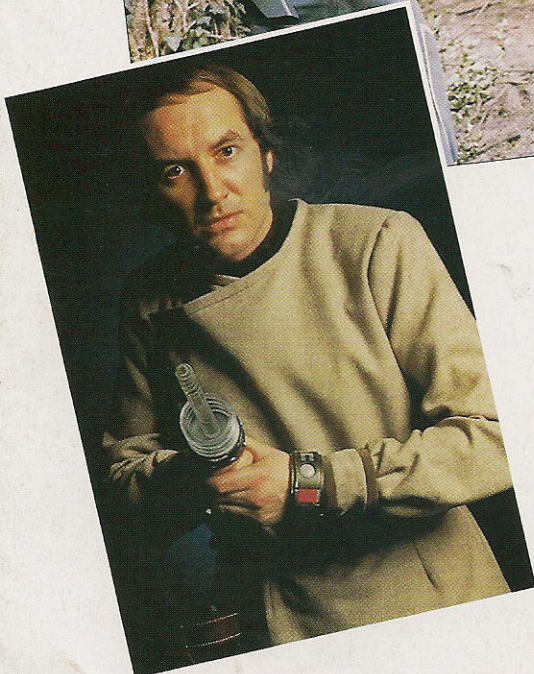
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# BLAKES7

POSTER MAGAZINE



**TWO  
GIANT  
POSTERS  
INSIDE!**



**THE  
CONTINUING  
ADVENTURES  
OF THE  
SCORPIO  
CREW!**



# ROJ BLAKE

**NAME:** Roj Blake

**BIRTHPLACE:** Earth

**FIRST EPISODE:** A1: The Way Back

**FIRST LINE:** "Ah, Ravella"

**LAST EPISODE:** D13: Blake

**LAST LINE:** "Oh...Avon!"

**CHARACTER LINE:** "Not until free men  
can think and speak. Not until power is  
back with the honest man!"

An idealist and rebel figure head, Roj Blake was destined to go down in Terran history as a semi-legendary figure, battling the evil, the repression and domination of the Federation and Earth's Administration. After studying natural history, Blake joined Bran Foster to become one of the leaders of the Freedom Party, attacking political rehabilitation centres and releasing prisoners. However, one of the meetings was infiltrated and a Federation officer called Travis sprung an ambush. When Blake, Foster and his people offered a peaceful surrender, the majority were massacred. Blake tried to escape but was wounded by Travis. Blake retaliated and believed he had killed the Federation officer.

Captured by the authorities, the thirty year-old Blake was extensively brainwashed and placed on trial. This gave the Administration a 'model citizen' who denounced his rebel cause and encouraged others to obey the laws - thus preventing the movement from claiming a martyr. Subsequently, Blake's memories were suppressed further and he returned to the tranquilised



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# BLAKE



world of the domed city on Earth to work on engineering projects.

His brother and sister were exiled to Zeigler IV, but murdered on their arrival, although Blake was sent faked videotapes of them to maintain his mentally rearranged state. Four years later, he was approached by a girl called Ravella who led him out of the domed city to meet with the Outsiders. It was there that he once again met Bran Foster and a new group of rebels. Once again, a Federation traitor in their midst brought about a massacre in which Foster and Ravella died but this caused Blake's real memories to re-assert themselves. Later ensnared by the Administration he became embroiled in a plot to discredit him as a corrupter of minors. As a result he was exiled to the penal planet Cygnus Alpha but became determined to return to Earth and seek justice for himself and everyone like him.

After adopting the *Liberator* and setting about establishing his cause, Blake enlisted help. He never forced any of his crew into staying – each had their own agenda and reasons for remaining aboard. However, he was prone to withholding information and at times displayed a near-fanatical desire to pursue his idealist objectives of rebellion. He was also capable of showing great trust in others, generally gaining equal trust and respect in return. But this gentle side could swiftly disappear when the situation demanded, revealing a man capable of making harsh or even brutal threats to his enemies. He would never kill for pleasure though and was a reasonable judge in most situations.

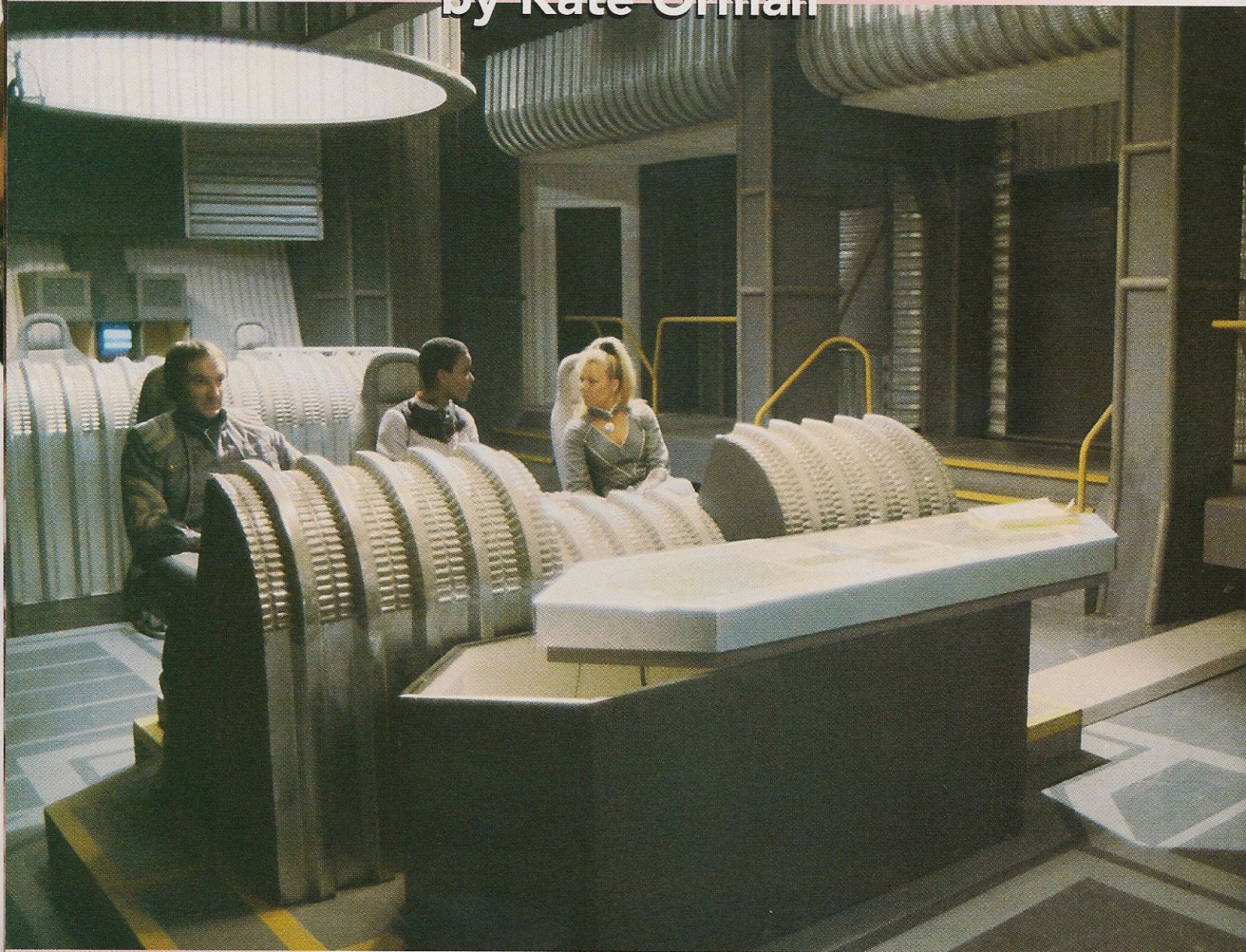
After the abortive attack on Star One, and the damaging of the *Liberator*, Blake seemingly vanished after the rest of the crew lost track of the life pods containing him and *Liberator's* pilot, Jenna Stannis – their destination appeared to be the planet Ephron. Rumours about Blake on Obsidian led his crew there, and he was also used as bait for Avon to bring the *Liberator* towards Terminal by President Servalan. She claimed however that Blake had in reality died on Jevron a year previously. Servalan was wrong – Blake had established himself on Gauda Prime, posing as a bounty hunter but in reality he was setting up a new rebel stronghold. He drew Avon and the rest of the crew to Gauda Prime to try and convince them to join him, but a misunderstanding between the two of them resulted in the mentally unstable Avon shooting Blake dead. ●





# YOU CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU

by Kate Orman



Vila Restal should have been delighted. He was standing next to a stunning blonde woman with an athlete's figure. And he was one of only two men on the entire planet. Vila was not delighted. Scibys IV's cold, damp air got right up his nose. Literally. He sneezed. Soolin turned steel grey eyes on him, and he smiled weakly, kicking a bit of shale aside. "It's not the place I'd choose to retire to," he said. Scibys IV was another rocky, dull and slightly moist planet in a galaxy of rocky, dull and variably moist planets. "Look, there aren't even any weeds. There can't be anything here worth stealing. Let's go back up the to the ship." Soolin was ignoring him. "Down and safe," she told her wrist communicator. "What are you staring at?"

"Oh, me? Nothing. I mean, I was just looking at your gun. Really."

"Really." Soolin started making her way across the rocky ground. Vila followed. Soolin's gun was perched on her hip in a way that was making his stomach do strange things.

"I mean, I'm just curious. It's a very interesting job, shooting people for a living. Much more interesting than being a clerk, or a spaceship polisher or something. Oh, when I say people, I mean, you wouldn't shoot anyone who -"

She turned. Vila gulped and stopped babbling. "It's a very interesting job," she said, "stealing things for a living."

"Er," said Vila. He still hadn't quite got used to Soolin's stare; it was a cross-hairs look, as though she were calculating his range.

"That's what you're here for. To open locks. I'm here to do the talking."

Vila nodded mutely. And to shoot people, he thought. Though if their information were correct, and Agron did live on this mudball completely alone, there wouldn't really be anybody for Soolin to talk to. Or to shoot, for that matter.

They trudged for an hour through the mud and scree. As far as Vila could tell, one bit of this planet looked pretty much like any other. Only Soolin's occasional conversations with her bracelet showed that they were making any progress - Orac was tracking them from Scorpio's geostationary orbit.

"If I were this Agron," said Vila, after a while, "I'd have pushed off long ago." Soolin didn't reply. "Friend of yours, is he?"

"Not exactly. He knew a teacher of mine."

"Can I ask you a question? What exactly have we come to steal?"

Soolin stopped. "Did you sleep through what Avon was telling us?"

"Not this time," said Vila. He grinned cheekily. "I know it's a computer database full of Federation secrets. I know how large it is and how much it weighs. I even know what colour it is. But what's in it?"

"You said it yourself. Federation secrets. Hopefully information we can use."

"It's a bit vague, isn't it? What kind of Federation secrets?"



Weapons? Statistics? The locations of covert bases? The colour Servalan paints her toenails?"

"If Avon is right," said Soolin, starting to pick her way down a rough slope, "the name of every traitor, spy and rebel sympathiser in the whole Federation is in that database."

"Now that's something worth stealing."

"Imagine what we could do with that knowledge. Create allies, organise sabotage, gather intelligence -"

"Or make a fortune in blackmail."

Soolin rolled her eyes. "Is that all you ever think about? No, you're a thief. Of course it is."

Vila tried to look indignant while climbing over a muddy boulder. "What I do isn't about money."

"Yes, it is."

"All right. Yes, it is about money. But that's not all it's about."

"What's the point? What would you do if you had all the money you wanted?"

Vila had often asked himself this very question. "Buy myself a few pleasure planets. Settle down somewhere quietly with seven or eight devoted wives. Nothing too ostentatious."

"In short," said Soolin, "be safe."

Vila shook his head. "Don't you see? I realised long ago that I'd die of boredom after a few years of that." He flicked his fingers, like a stage magician. "The truth is, the Liberator was stuffed full of wealth. If I'd really wanted to, I could've bought those planets years ago."

"But you stayed on."

"Anything for a good cause."

Soolin smiled for the first time, wryly. "If you're so interested in good causes, why'd you put up such a fuss about teleporting down here?"

"Estimating dangers is part of the thief's trade," said Vila solemnly. "I assumed that, since we were after something so valuable, it would be pretty dangerous down here." He looked around at the flat mudplain they were on. "As much as I hate to admit it -"

"You were wrong?" Soolin's eyes sparkled in a rather nasty way. "A very generous admission - but you weren't." She held up her bracelet. "Orac's been guiding us through a warp mine field. It also put us down through a teleport barrier that would have scattered us both in little pieces over the entire countryside."

Vila managed to stop himself from fainting and falling over onto a warp mine. "So Agron's very serious about keeping his collection of secrets to himself."

"Very."

"They must be quite valuable then."

"Quite."

Vila beamed suddenly. "Well, that's all right, then!"

"Good, because we're here." They had come to the foot of a huge, irregularly shaped hill, covered in mud and devoid of distinguishing features. Vila looked at Soolin out the corner of his eye. She was waiting for him to ask a stupid question. Instead he said, "This will only take a few minutes," and took his tool kit out of his jacket. He unrolled it carefully. There were a dozen high-tech instruments inside, delicate devices with tiny computers and sensors built into their slender forms. He deliberated, hand hovering theatrically over the instruments, and took out a balloon.

Now it was Soolin's turn to ask a stupid question. "What are you going to do with that?"

"Not every problem has a technological solution," said Vila, crouching down where the hill rose out of the ground. "Force fields are a very simple solution to the very complicated problem of keeping people out. You just throw as much energy as you can at the problem. Brute force, not very sophisticated." Carefully, he knelt down and poked the nose of the balloon into the mud.

"How did you know it was a

force field?"

"The refraction index is slightly wrong," Vila improvised.

"And you're going to deactivate a force field the size of a small mountain with a child's toy?"

Vila grimaced with mock indignation. "Certainly not. I'm just going to make a small hole in it. Then we can stroll through. Er, we can just stroll through, can't we? You do know what's on the other side, don't you?"

"Agron's gardens and mansion."

"Gardens and mansion? Probably full of booby traps," said Vila, a little muffledly. He was bent over in the mud, trying to blow up the balloon.

Soolin was trying to keep one eye on their surroundings while watching whatever Vila was up to. "I keep expecting an attack," she said. "But I think Avon was right - we are the first people ever to find Agron's hideaway. When you're this well-hidden, why advertise your presence by posting guards?"

"What about the mines? Orac must have detected them from orbit."

"Leftovers from a civil war. The colony that used to be here effectively committed suicide. There are irregular patches of mines all over the continent." Soolin stepped back involuntarily as the mountainside started to bulge outwards. Vila snapped a knot into the balloon's business end and stood back. The balloon went on expanding to an impossible size, inside the rock, as though the mountainside were nothing more than muddy mirage or a cheap hologram.

"A very large force field usually has pores," said the thief. "There's a direct relationship between the volume of the field and its tendency to develop temporary gaps. We used to practice collapsing the anti-theft fields around parked vehicles with needles and toothpicks. I used my little finger once. As soon as you put pressure on the pore, it expands -" the balloon burst, with a gunshot sound, " - until it reaches a certain maximum size dictated by the field's harmonic coefficient."

There was a neat five-foot high hole in the mountainside. Inside the force field, Soolin could see green and blue and white. The smell of growing things spilled through the gap.

"I'm impressed," she admitted.

Vila grinned and slipped through the hole like a rabbit, plucking up the shreds of burst balloon and stuffing them into a pocket. A moment later, Soolin followed him through. They stood blinking in the unexpected sunlight. The sky overhead was deep blue, fat clouds drifting low in the sky. If

Agron could program his force field to look like a mountain on the outside, thought Soolin, why not a sunny afternoon on Earth on the inside? They were at the edge of a meticulously planned and maintained garden. Hedges, trees, flowers from a dozen worlds - stretching away for kilometres. Songbirds warbled in nearby trees. The grass was firm and damp underfoot.

"Agron must blow his nose with money," said Vila.

Soolin was watching a tiny, round robot crawling over one of the hedges, trimming it with miniature laser blasts. "He sells the Federation's favourite commodity." The robot whipped its head around to look at her. Blackness flashed in her eyes, blanking out the garden for a moment. She blinked, rapidly, her training kicking in on automatic. Orient yourself! Where! Who? How many? The confusion snapped out of her brain. There was a charred hole in the hedge, metal and wood fused together at the edges in a chaotic circular sculpture.

Vila was lying face-down on the grass. She nudged him with her foot, gently, and realised that her whole body was stiff and numb. Her right hand ached. The little thief stirred, groaning. Soolin shook her head. "What was that?"

"Proximal psi-burster," Vila mumbled into the lawn.

Soolin realised she was clutching her gun so hard that her whole hand had gone white. She sheathed the weapon and shook her fingers hard, trying to get the circulation going again. She hauled Vila to his feet. He gaped at the hole in the hedge.

"You shot it. Two more seconds of that and our brains would have





someone's enemy, comfortably disposed of. Either way, I'm paid - both for my good work, and to avoid choosing . . . certain names."

"Evidently, Chynlallee didn't pay you enough."

"Ah," said Agron. "That's why you haven't shot me yet."

"Yes," said Vila. "why haven't you shot him yet?"

"You always were a silly little slip of a girl," said Agron. "I never knew what Chynlallee saw in you. Why she bothered to train you. I think she just felt sorry for the helpless orphan girlie."

"Was that why you turned her in to the Federation?"

"Because she was soft? No, girlie, because she was worth money."

"And it didn't bother your conscience that they tortured her to death?"

Agron shrugged. "She was a stubborn bitch. Probably didn't have the sense to tell them what they wanted to hear. You're standing inside a weapons-dampening field. The gun won't fire."

Very slowly, Soolin put her gun back into its holster.

Vila's panic went another two notches up the scale.

Agron bent down, carefully putting his tray on the ground. Then he came stomping across the grass with a roar like an enraged bull. Vila bolted, the little robot following in his wake. Soolin waited calmly until the huge man was in range. Suddenly she lashed out with her foot.

Agron's belly collided with her toes with all his mass and speed. He bent double, the air whooshing out of his lungs. Soolin snapped her elbow into his head, swivelling her hips to increase the impact. He fell backwards, gracelessly, thumping out at her with a clumsy, fat hand.

"All muscle and no skill," said Soolin, dancing back out of his reach. "Isn't that what Chynlallee said about you?"

Agron roared and kicked out. His huge foot twisted between her legs. Soolin snarled and overbalanced. "All mouth and no muscle," said Agron, "Isn't that what I used to say about you, girlie?" He rolled, trying to get on top of her, to crush her with his giant's weight.

She jammed nimble fingers into his eyes, and he yelled and tried to slap her hands out of his face, but she was already reaching for a pressure point at the base of his skull. Vila and the robot watched from behind a hedge as Soolin gripped the back of the huge man's neck. Agron spasmed once, violently, shouted in fury and embarrassment, and slammed into the lawn.

Vila counted to one hundred. When Agron didn't get up, he carefully came out from behind the bush. "Soolin?"

She wriggled out from underneath Agron, and stood up, brushing the crushed grass from her jumpsuit.

Vila edged up, nervously. "Is he -"

to steal anything at all?" said Vila.

"You want money," said Soolin. "I want all debts to be paid."

"I'd say that one was paid. With interest."

She eyed the little thief suspiciously. "What's that in your jacket?"

"Nothing. Er . . . it's just a little something from Agron's house . . . I mean, we can't teleport the whole house, can we?" Vila pulled a small wooden sculpture from his jacket pocket.

"When did you get that?"

"Just now. While you were keeping him occupied."

Soolin took it from him and turned it around in her hands. It was some sort of marine life, perhaps something from Earth.

"That's real wood, that is," said Vila. "It'll be worth a small fortune on the black market. And anyway, he can't take it with him, can he?"

Soolin smiled nastily and tossed the carving back to him. "Let's get out of here," she said. ●







been pudding." There was a buzzing sound from behind the hedge. Vila peered through the hole. "It's still functional," he said, reaching for the little robot.

Soolin stopped him. "What about the burster?"

"If it were still functioning," said Vila, "We'd already be dead." He sat down on the grass, holding the robot in his lap, and took out his tool kit. Soolin folded her arms, turning slowly to keep an eye on their surroundings as he worked. "All this security," said Vila. All this... He waved at the gardens with a tool. "All for one man."

"Agron lives alone for a reason. No-one would trust him enough to live with him. Whenever he needs more money, he just sells one of the people on his database to the Federation."

"No blackmail?"

Soolin shook her head. "Agron never did like... complications."

"Still, it's odd. He could have a steady trickle of money, a constant supply instead of occasional pay-packets. I'm finished." Vila stood up again, let the little robot drift out of his hand. It hovered in mid-air, wobbling drunkenly. "Right. This little fellow will block us from the sensors of any of its friends."

It was half an hour later when they found Agron's mansion.

"Soolin," breathed Vila, "I think that's real wood." As good as Vila's word, the little robot had shielded them from any further unwanted attention. They'd strolled through small orchards, past gazebos, gotten lost briefly in a hedge maze. They had emerged from the labyrinth beside a stone fountain in a huge, tidily mown lawn. The mansion dominated everything, an ancient house that looked like it might have been transported plank by plank from some other world. "And the database is somewhere in there," said Vila. "I think we should just steal a few of the doors and leave."

Soolin's gun had suddenly jumped out of its holster and into her hand. Vila tried to look in all directions at once. The little robot buzzed nervously around, alarmed.

"Agron," said Soolin.

Vila followed her line of vision to where the largest man he had ever seen was standing. He must have come out of a side door of the house. He was bigger even than Gan, wide-shouldered, shaggy-headed. Incongruously, he was carrying a tray with a glasses and a pitcher of lemonade. He looked down at Soolin. "You've grown," he said in a voice that could shake windows. "How'd you find me?"

"Our computer traced one of your signals."

"That's impossible."

"Manifestly not."

"She's got the drop on you, you know," said Vila, fidgeting in panic. "So why don't you just hand over the database and we'll leave you in peace?"

"Database?" Agron had not taken his eyes off Soolin, whose gun was still trained on his bulk. Vila wondered how many shots it would take to stop him.

"What database?"

"The list of Federation traitors," prompted the thief helpfully.

Agron threw back his head and laughed. "You're not here to steal any database!" he roared. "Ask her."

"Soolin?" said Vila, confused.

"There is no database," said the markswoman.

"There isn't?" said Vila.

"Agron just chooses a name at random. Don't you?"

"He does?"

"The Federation's so riddled with corruption that it makes no difference whom I finger," boomed the big man. "They're either guilty, or



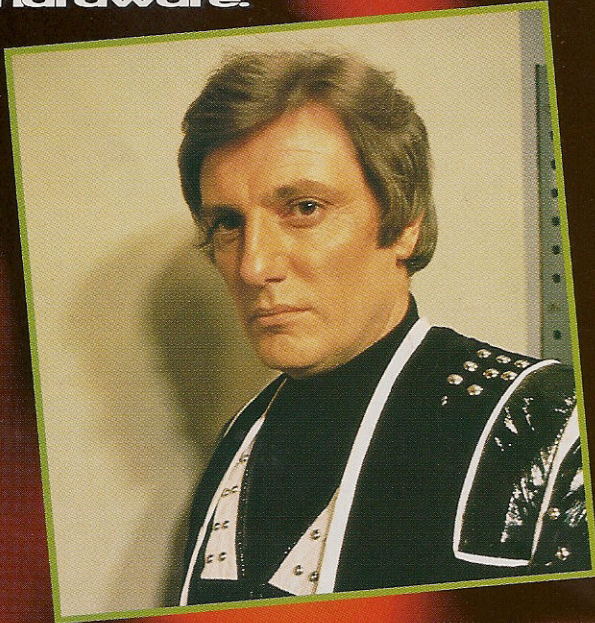
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