

PROLOGUE I

Dressed all in white, they parachuted, in eerie silence, out of a black sky into the snow covered grounds of the discreet mansion. It was as if angels were descending from a heaven. But if it were so, these would be angels of death.

The mansion was set on an almost hidden plateau amidst a series of mountain peaks. Two spacious rooms dominated the ground floor. They were designed for receiving and for dining, both served by an equally spacious kitchen, stocked with fine foods and wines and presided over by a master chef, as well as being staffed by well-trained minions. The lobby entrance and elsewhere were watched over by well-trained bodyguards. Outside, set in a pleasant open space, was a landing pad, with helicopters and vertical take-off aircraft providing the only viable access to the plateau – except when the less orthodox method taken by the interloping parachutists was adopted. An upper floor, reached by a grand staircase rising from the lobby, provided three large en-suite bedrooms, a writing room and an observation post. This latter was occupied by surveillance experts and it was from here the surrounds of the building were monitored through the use of closed circuit television cameras. In charge of this key position was a Federation Major called Jubal. To the rear of the mansion was a long, low, flat roofed building which served as accommodation for a dozen servants and twice that number of Federation guards. On the roof were machine guns, cannon and an anti-aircraft battery. Arguably the most remote and possibly the best defended residence in the entire Federation Empire on Earth, it was fitting accommodation for its future Supreme Commander and, later, President.

But not everyone within the embrace of the Federation – on Earth, or anywhere else in the known universe and beyond, that it had conquered and colonised – was prepared to tolerate what they considered to be its corrupt misuse of power, and any number of dissident groups had come into being. Some contented themselves with peaceful protest, others resorted to violence. Of the latter, one group in particular was proving to be dangerous: targeting high ranking Federation officials, civilian as well as military, for assassination.

As the four intruders drifted in to land, the CCTV cut out. The operator let out a startled exclamation. Major Jubal sought to soothe any fears by saying, 'It's just a slight glitch. There's been a heavy snowfall and that's probably affected our technical equipment. Back-up will soon get it going again.' And, as if by magic, the CCTV reactivated. It had been dysfunctional for exactly one minute and 45 seconds. That was more than enough time for Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta – the code names of the attackers – to conceal their parachutes and reach the veranda that jutted out from the main building. Delta, bringing up the rear, covered their tracks in the snow.

Jubal and the operator studied the camera input intently and, when the latter sighed and said, 'Well, there's nothing out there,' the Major permitted himself a secret smile and excused himself.

'I'll just take a look around the building,' he said nonchalantly.

Ignoring the front entrance to the mansion, but leaving Delta to cover it just in case, Alpha led the other two to a side entrance – a service access, almost hidden by foliage that adorned the walls. Very gently, he pushed it open, grunting with satisfaction at finding it, as expected, to be unlocked. Gamma remaining outside as further cover, Alpha and Beta entered into a short, wide corridor that led them to the presently deserted kitchen. With extreme caution, they moved out of the kitchen into the similarly silent and deserted reception room. Alpha opened a door – just a crack – to the lobby. A solitary guard was on duty, seated in a plush armchair, a shotgun

by his side. Alpha levelled a long barrelled pistol at him and fired. There was an almost imperceptible sound, like an exhalation of breath, as a small dart flew across open space and struck the guard in the neck. The guard sighed, as if aggrieved, and slumped in the chair. Alpha and Beta scurried to the foot of the staircase. Beta checked that the guard was unconscious and nodded confirmation to his leader. Then, he and Alpha ascended the staircase, making no sound as they trod the deep pile carpet. When they reached the landing, Beta locked and loaded his gun, but Alpha gestured for him to put it aside, and watch the lobby downstairs, as well as the corridor here above. Beta would have a commanding view of both. Alpha set off, moving very slowly, towards what he knew to be the master bedroom.

Delta didn't know what hit him – likewise Gamma. Both men dropped where they stood. A camouflaged sniper, lying in cover by the landing pad, fired two silenced shots and blew their brains out.

Blood and grey matter stained the snow.

Alpha entered the bedroom. After taking a second to adjust his eyes to the gloom, he noticed that the large bed was occupied. He moved towards it and suddenly, as if he had triggered an alarm, the lights came on and he felt the ice-cold steel of the barrel of a gun against the back of his neck.

The occupant of the bed sat up, then stood. He was a tall man, dressed entirely in black. He wore a patch over one eye. He smiled first at the trooper holding the gun at Alpha's neck, then at Alpha.

'I'd drop the shotgun, if I were you,' he said to Alpha, not unpleasantly. Alpha hesitated, but the pressure of the gun barrel at his neck encouraged him to comply with the polite suggestion. He dropped the shotgun.

There was the sound of gunfire outside and the man with the eye patch winced. 'I thought all our weapons were meant to be silenced,' he said to no one in particular. He approached the now disarmed intruder. 'I expect your comrade has just been disposed of,' he said, before punching Alpha in the face.

Alpha fell to the floor. Recovering from the blow, he shook his head and looked up at his assailant. 'Who betrayed us?' he asked. Answer came there none.

Beta had been shot in the back by a female Federation officer who had emerged unseen from another bedroom. A burst of sub-machine gun fire had sent him toppling over the balustrade and his corpse was now sprawled in the lobby below.

The officer sprang to attention as the man with the eye patch appeared in the corridor. 'My silenced weapon jammed, Commander Travis, and I was obliged to use my machine pistol,' she said, a hint of fear in her voice.

Travis raised his hands, as if in mock surrender. 'You did what you had to do,' he said, 'but you've made a mess on the carpet. She won't like that.' He smiled. 'We have taken their leader alive,' he said, 'Falk is keeping an eye on him until I decide when his interrogation should begin.' He shrugged. 'Not that we are likely to learn anything that we don't already know.'

'And the others are dead?'

'Of course. Gounod never misses! And neither, it would seem, do you. All in all, things went the way I had suspected they would. I rather enjoyed staging this little melodrama... and it's not over yet, is it? Where is Major Jubal?'

'I took him into custody as soon as he exited the observation room. He's in the far bedroom.'

'Is there no one to watch over him?'

'I rendered him unconscious, so that I could deal with...' she gestured in the direction of the crooked corpse below. 'I manacled him to a bedpost.'

'You have done very well,' Travis said coolly, as he moved towards her. 'You must remind me to make sure

you are properly rewarded.’ He leaned forward and kissed her gently on the lips. She returned the kiss.

Travis smiled. ‘You might care to tell everyone that the first act is over now and they can get back to normal duties – whatever they may be.’

The young woman began to descend the stairs.

‘Be careful when you open the front door,’ Travis said lightly, ‘We wouldn’t want Gounod mistaking you for one of the assassins, would we?’

She smiled back up at him. ‘I’ll be careful.’

‘By the way, what’s your name?’

‘Lieutenant Sara Trilby.’

‘Well, consider yourself promoted to Major. You can take charge of this facility. The post is about to become vacant.’

‘Thank you, Commander.’

‘It’s my pleasure.’ Travis said. ‘Don’t trip over any bodies.’

He turned towards the bedroom where Trilby had indicated Jubal would be. As Travis entered, the now demoted Major, having recovered consciousness, struggled to his feet, his face red, his mouth twitching in anger. But as soon as he realised who his visitor was, he sank back onto the bed, his anger dissipated and he grew pale.

‘Are you sitting comfortably?’ Travis enquired.

‘I don’t understand what is going on,’ Jubal said plaintively.

‘Oh well, in a sense I’m staging a little play. You played a key part in its preparation.’ Travis smiled coyly. ‘Of course, what started off as very dramatic is now turning into something of a farce – a bedroom farce.’ He chuckled. Then he sat in a chair and studied Jubal with his one eye. ‘The attempt to murder our Commander has failed,’ he said quietly, ‘and we have the leader of the little group of amateur assassins in custody. You don’t know him of course, but he knows all about you.’ He sighed. ‘If you had not been betrayed, you might have succeeded.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Jubal said, almost courageously. ‘I suggest you release me immediately, or I shall make a complaint to the Commander herself. I shall probably do that anyway.’

Travis clapped his hands slowly. ‘You’re awfully good at pretended innocence and indignation, Jubal. But you really must face facts. You’ve been caught out. So now, as well as the facts, you must face the music.’

‘I demand to see the Commander!’

‘Well, I’d be more than happy to oblige you, but she’s not here.’

‘That’s a lie – I have seen her.’

‘What you saw was an actress impersonating her. I was not prepared to take the chance that I might fail to protect the real thing. Candidly, I didn’t think she was very good casting, but she fooled you, so that’s all right.’ Travis frowned slightly. ‘If you don’t mind my saying so, ten million credits’ worth of gold would have been a poor return for your efforts.’

Jubal’s eyes widened for a moment.

Travis smiled and continued, ‘Your lover made a brave attempt to ensure the gold would be carefully distributed amongst a number of safe depositories but, alas, a very serious fraud was going on within Federation banking and the fraudster... well, not to beat about the bush, outmanoeuvred him. So you wouldn’t have got the money anyway.’

Again, Jubal’s eyes widened.

Again, Travis smiled. ‘In investigating the fraud, we came across your little transaction. It wasn’t too difficult to unravel what was going on and when we “interviewed” your lover he very quickly caved in.’

Jubal choked back a sob. 'What have you done to him?'

'You mustn't be too cross with him,' Travis said. 'He's a frail little fellow. Very pretty though, I must say. Except, of course, he isn't pretty anymore.'

Jubal looked as if he were about to be sick.

'The reason I decided to play out this little scenario,' Travis continued, 'was to get my hands on the lead assassin, kill the others and oblige you to tell me who recruited you. Had I arrested you from the start, we would probably have had to go through a messy trial – and we wouldn't have wanted that.' He paused for a moment. 'So, give me a name.'

Jubal hesitated then said, 'I had no personal contact with anyone. It was my lover, as you call him, who was recruited. He persuaded me to go through with the plot.'

Travis shook his head wearily, 'Oh dear, I've made a mistake. It never occurred to me that he would know more than you. So, you fell in with the plan simply for love of him and money? Oh well, it's too late now.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm afraid he is deceased. Shot whilst trying to escape was the official declaration. It was for the best really. I doubt you would have wanted to renew the relationship. Not once you had seen his disfigurement after the interrogation.'

Jubal's face crumpled in shock.

'So, what's going to happen to me?' he whispered.

Travis shrugged. 'I have a funny feeling you might go the same way. But look on the bright side. Your demise will be swift and painless.'

'Is there no way I can get out of this situation?'

Travis stood and looked down on him. 'You can commit suicide if you like. An honourable way out – or so I'm told. I'll leave you a gun, shall I?'

Jubal smiled weakly. 'What's to prevent me shooting you with it?'

Travis seemed shocked. 'You wouldn't do that, would you?' Then he laughed. 'I'll leave you a gun and a bullet. By the time you've loaded, one handed, I'll be gone. How does that suit you?'

'It would seem I don't have any choice.'

'That's right, you don't.' Travis placed a small pistol on the bed. He held up a single bullet. 'If you don't use this,' he said icily, 'someone else will.'

He placed the bullet beside the gun, turned on his heel and left the room, pausing in the corridor outside until he heard the shot.

PROLOGUE II

'You're hard to keep up with,' Travis said, as he handed the Commander a glass of champagne.

Servalan smiled. 'What's this in aid of?'

'It's a celebration of the fact that you are still alive after an assassination attempt – which I thwarted.'

'That was clever of you.'

'It's what I do. I watch your back while you dart hither and thither, sometimes despairingly, looking for dissidents and renegades, or terrorists, to maim or kill.'

'There are a lot of them about.'

'I would remind you that terrorism, like charity, begins at home.'

'Who was it who tried to have me killed?'

Travis shrugged. 'I've no idea. It could have been anybody. You're not exactly everyone's favourite Supreme Commander and would-be President.'

Servalan licked the rim of her champagne glass and smiled again, this time, coyly. 'I'm not supreme yet.'

'You will be.'

'Jubal didn't talk then?'

'He didn't have anything to say.'

'What about the lead assassin?'

Travis sighed. 'Died during the course of my interrogation.'

'That was careless of you.'

'Well, he had a cyanide capsule in one of his teeth. When the interrogation got too rough for him, he bit down on it. I've never liked the smell of almonds – or the smell of death, for that matter.'

'But it's what you deal in.'

'We both deal in death, Servalan. It's our way of staying alive.'

'What about the actress who impersonated me?'

'I had my doubts about her initially, but she did a good job. I killed her with some reluctance.'

'Why kill her?'

'Well, we couldn't have her running around telling all and sundry that a group of terrorists had succeeded in penetrating our security. That might encourage others to have a go.'

'They will anyway.' Servalan studied Travis carefully. 'What happened to the money?' she asked slyly.

'Half of it is hidden in your personal account.'

'What about the other half?'

'It's hidden in my personal account.'

Servalan laughed. 'Well, I suppose you earned it.'

It was Travis's turn to study her carefully. 'The fraudster who inadvertently led us to Jubal's plot. He could be dangerous – what have you done with him?'

Servalan bit her lip. 'He was given a swift trial. He was convicted, of course.'

'And...?'

'He was en route to a prison planet with other convicts,' she smiled humourlessly, 'one of whom was your old enemy. The one who took out your eye.'

Travis instinctively touched his eye patch and grimaced. 'You use the word "was". Why is that?'

'They escaped from the convict ship.'

Travis's single eye widened. 'How the *hell* did they manage that?'

Servalan shrugged. 'It was probably due to the incompetence, and perhaps over-confidence, of the prison ship officers. Details are sketchy, but it would seem they encountered an alien spacecraft. The convicts commandeered it and ran away.'

Travis swore, downed his glass of champagne and poured himself another. 'Well, at least that's given you some more terrorists to hunt down, hasn't it?'

'Oh, I'll hunt them down, you can be sure of that.' Servalan moved very close to Travis, took his glass from him and sipped from it. 'Might you care to join in the chase? Maiming and killing is not solely my prerogative, after all.' She licked her lips lasciviously. 'What was the name of the man who deprived you of half your sight?'

'You know damn well who it was,' Travis said quietly, 'I wanted him dead, but you tell me our esteemed

justice system merely condemned him to a prison planet. I suppose that's the price we have to pay for pretending there's a smidgeon of democracy left in the Federation.'

Servalan frowned. 'It is taking rather longer than we thought to get rid of it. In order to do what needs to be done, a stronger hand is needed at the helm.'

'I wonder who *that* might be,' Travis said, raising a solitary eyebrow. 'The man's name is *Blake*, in case you had really forgotten,' he added, and shook his head resignedly. 'He is a zealous righter of wrongs, almost messianic in his zeal and, consequently, a formidable opponent.'

'Avon, the fraudster, would appear to be his exact opposite,' Servalan said. 'A disciple of the devil, perhaps!'

'In which case, their combined forces will have created an unholy alliance and all hell is likely to be let loose.'

'That's a pretty good summation,' Servalan said, nodding sagely, 'but the loosing of hell is definitely my prerogative. I take it that you're indicating you would care to join me in hunting them down?'

'Just as long as I'm in at the kill,' Travis said, smiling bitterly.

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'Travis I know all about,' said Blake, 'but what about Servalan?'

Avon smiled slightly. 'That's a good question. Who is Servalan, what is she?'

'Do you have an answer?'

'Not really. But I have a funny feeling we're going to make her acquaintance before very long.'

'Are you afraid, Avon? You surprise me.'

'Oh, I'm full of surprises which, in due course, you will undoubtedly find out. But so, I suspect, is she.'