



# STAGECRAFT

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## STAGECRAFT : SUMMARY

A mysterious political rival is trying to smear Servalan's name. The traitor is making her life difficult while she tries to forge a tricky alliance with an aggressive, resource-rich planet. Nasty reports allege Servalan has allowed the planet special benefits she can't deliver. She must act quickly to restore confidence to the fragile alliance without provoking a civil war, and flush out the traitor trying to embarrass her.

The planet is Zephron, Gan's home. Blake, Vila and Gan respond to a distress call originating from the capital, hoping to rouse a rebellion against the unpopular alliance. On teleporting down they discover themselves in a concert hall. To distract the disquieted Zephron people from the scandal plaguing Servalan's takeover, the Federation has employed the services of an intergalactic rock band to unite the planet in celebration. The fortunes of star Hans Highlander and his musicians take a turn for the worse when the plan backfires. Instead of messengers of Federation prosperity they are perceived as symbols of Federation corruption. Rumours that Servalan is going to renege on her deal fans the flame of civil war, and Hans has sent a distress call in hope of rescue from the angry masses.

Meanwhile, Servalan is reassuring the Zephron ambassador while devising a plan to expose the traitor. Her enemy appears to have intimate knowledge of internal Federation politics. She narrows it to three suspects; Alana, a section leader styling herself as Servalan's protégé, Stephen the snivelling Presidential secretary or the Zephron ambassador himself, Jak. Acting quickly, she has all information channels to and from Zephron censored and submits ambassador Jak for interrogation.

Back at the concert hall, Blake, Vila and Gan argue about what to do. Gan refuses to help as he doesn't want to see his home Zephron becoming another Federation pawn. Vila perceives the depth of Blake's political will for the first time, wondering if he will leave the musicians to their deadly fate in the name of overthrowing the Federation. Tempers fly among the musicians too. Guitarist Micky reveals his rebel sympathies. He wants the band to break their Federation contract and act for the freedom they sing about.

Having suppressed information about the Zephron rebellion, Servalan discovers the rat. She asks Alana, her ambitious section leader to visit Zephron as a Federation representative. When Alana hesitates, Servalan sees that Alana has engineered the rebellion to destabilise Servalan and seek rule for herself. Servalan devises a crueler fate than traitor's execution. She commands Alana to wipe out the rebels. Contacting Star One, the computer complex controlling weather patterns on numerous worlds, she must secretly cause a catastrophic natural disaster. The "mistake" will destroy her political career forever.

On Zephron the weather changes quickly and vast storms create tsunamis which flood the cities. Barricaded backstage, the band are surrounded and tensions are high as they prepare to defend themselves. Furious at their apathy and swept up in revolutionary adrenaline, Micky deserts the band. He flings open the door to join the rebels and is shot instantly. Blake orders the crew to teleport back the liberator, fearful of being mistaken for Federation sympathizers.

On board the *Liberator*, Cally, Avon and Jenna are relieved to see their companions. Cally attempts to console Gan, knowing he must be distressed by the reports of widespread destruction to Zephron caused by battle against the Federation and the natural disaster. Gan, however, has faith in his people's ability to stay strong and fight for their lives. It won't be easy, but they will struggle through.

## STAGECRAFT : STORY

*An Intergalactic Echoes concert was never one to miss. The music itself was conventional, the melodies bland enough to appeal to the masses with just a touch of subliminal engineering. The thumping rhythm echoed the beating of a heart, keeping the mosh pit dancers in time and under control. The lyrics were nothing special and the musicians didn't quite deserve their titles as most of the music was produced through computer programs belonging to their record label.*

*The performance, however, was truly something else. Hans Highlander was a veteran of the stage, a consummate performer who knew exactly what his audience wanted. He was illuminated beneath a brutal spotlight, his silver hair standing on end in the punk style that had seen another resurgence after its popularity ten years ago, and another twenty before that. It suited his commanding, lanky frame, a perfect clotheshorse for fussy fashion designers keen to have their wild creations made famous through association with him. Costume was essential to Hans' enterprise. No concert was complete without the band clad in suits of metallic scales or punkish sparkling chain mail that seemed to bind the performers to their instruments.*

*Today's performance would be no less spectacular, and Hans Highlander smiled as he lazily lifted a hand to the spotlight. Soon he would break the awed silence that had descended over the auditorium. He would snap his fingers and the music would begin, and the audience would fall off the razor edge of silent, desperate anticipation and roar into life. There would be frenzy of notes, and the lights would burst into a dizzying array of colours...*

*Hans looked over his audience and waited for the music to play.*

*The first gunshot rang out instead.*

The crew on board the *Liberator* hadn't quite worked out how to go about meal times. Jenna's suggestion that at least one person be present on the flight deck at all times hadn't met resistance. Avon seemed to distrust the ship's computer more than he distrusted the crew. People were predictable, he'd said, and computers even more so. An unpredictable computer was a liability. Zen could not always be trusted to accept a direct command, so therefore Zen could not be trusted not to wake the crew in an emergency.

And, he added at Vila's protestations, you could not trust the crew to wake themselves either. Some of them seemed to be in a perpetual state of lethargy.

They had worked out a rudimentary sleep roster, though it was frequently disrupted whenever the alarm was sounded at the appearance of Federation ships on the scanners, or at asteroids, or at any other anomaly. For something so vast and mostly empty, space often seemed a little too busy for comfort.

Perhaps it was the perpetual sense of threat hanging over their heads that had them coming together for meals. There was comfort to be had in company, even if that company was distasteful, argumentative or just plain odd. Vila still couldn't comprehend Cally's Auron custom of waiting for

others to eat before taking a bite herself. If there was food in front of him, he was going to damn well eat it quickly in case someone else took it away!

"We're maintaining course and speed," Jenna announced from her position at the pilot's console. She preferred to take her meals there, ready for action should their Federation pursuers make a sudden and unwelcome appearance. The current chances of this were high. They were skirting as close as they dared to an area of busy Federation activity, a cluster of planets under close surveillance. The resource-rich, the recently colonised. It was unfortunate they had to pass this close at all but when the alternative route to rendezvous with Blake's latest rebel contacts was dotted with a family of black holes there was little choice.

Jenna wasn't the only one keeping a close eye on their course. Gan hadn't touched his meal and was gazing intently at the visual screen depicting their careful glide through space.

"Vila!" Cally's sudden admonishment made Gan jump, and he looked down at a plate he'd thought was full. To his side Vila looked chagrined, or as chagrined as he could with half of Gan's bread roll in his mouth.

"He didn't want it!" The voice of their thieving companion was muffled as he swallowed hastily. "You didn't want it, Gan old friend? Well... you wouldn't have known you wanted it if you hadn't realised it wasn't there, if you understand me, if you see what I mean. Only these fingers of mine... they're out of practise. You'd never have known what you were missing, if Cally--"

He looked up to challenge Cally's gaze and thought better of it.

"---if I'd been faster. Anyhow. Er... how's our course running, Jenna? Our journey, I mean. Not course. I'd hardly venture our meals have *courses*, but I've only ever had the one course per meal anyway..."

"Maintaining course and speed," Jenna repeated drily, though a cursory glance at the displays caused her to frown. "Zen, is that a signa--"

#### *INFORMATION*

The booming interruptions of the ship's computer still took some getting used to.

*COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS INTERCEPTING DISTRESS SIGNAL. ORIGIN IS PLANET ZEPHRON*

Blake looked up. "What are the contents of the message, Zen? What's the emergency?"

*NO INFORMATION, DISTRESS CALL TAKES FORM OF GENERIC S.O.S. SIGNAL PATTERN*

"We ignore it," Avon said curtly, "We're taking enough of a risk being in this sector at all. If you paid attention to every electronic cry for help you'd soon learn the reason for the early resignation rate among diagnostics technicians."

Blake ignored him. "Is there no more information, Zen? If the Federation are having trouble with resistance in this area, I want to know about it. We've gone undetected this long, there's no reason why..."

"You're a fool!" Avon would have stood but for the dinner plate balancing precariously on his knees. "Why consider it? We know nothing about this area, we know nothing about Zephron. There is no logical reason for endangering ourselves further."

"That's not entirely true." All heads turned to face Gan. He wasn't often vocal during heated discussions, though when he was his contributions were considered and valuable.

"There's a reason I'd like to investigate too, though I suppose it's only logical from my perspective."

When he was met with silence and the questioning faces of the crew, he added simply- "Zephron is my home."