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BLAKES 7

A MARVEL
MONTHLY

NO. 16 JAN. 1987



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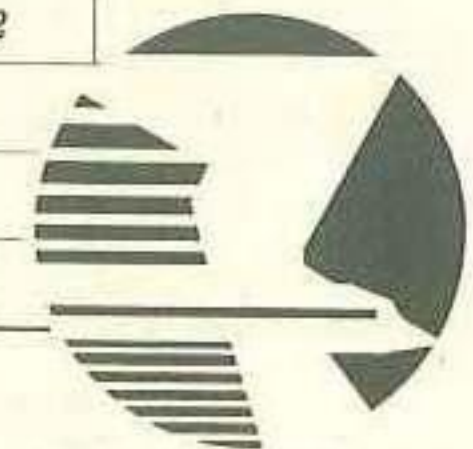
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BLAKES 7

Managing Editor: Bernie Jaye, Design: Floron Florenzo

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FEATURES

SCRAP BOOK P.4
A photo-feature to surprise you.

PAUL DARROWS LOVES. P.23
Find out about the women in Avon's life.



COMIC STRIP

DEBRIS P.9
The space debris is strange as strange can be.



TEXT STORY

THE COMET P.28
A prototype space ship design receives Servalan's full backing. . . After all, what better to trick Avon with.



LETTERS

POINTS OF VIEW P.15
More letters from you the readers. Lots of suggestions!



PIN-UPS

PAUL DARROW P.37

DAYNA P.14

VILA, TARRANT AND DAYNA P.20



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SCRAPBOOK

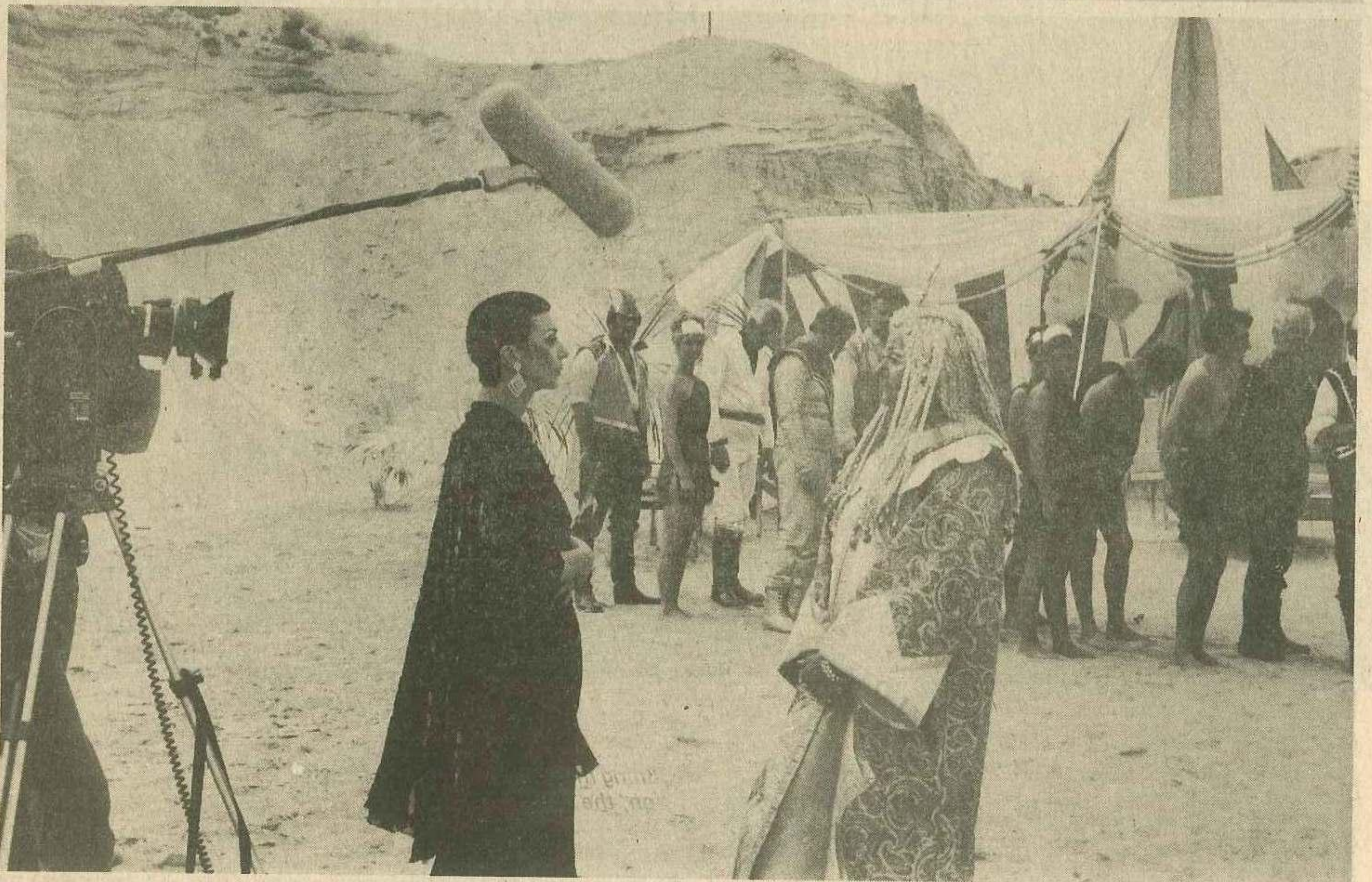


**MORE CANDID SHOTS
OF YOUR FAVOURITE
TV STARS FROM THE
OTHER SIDE OF THE
CAMERA.**

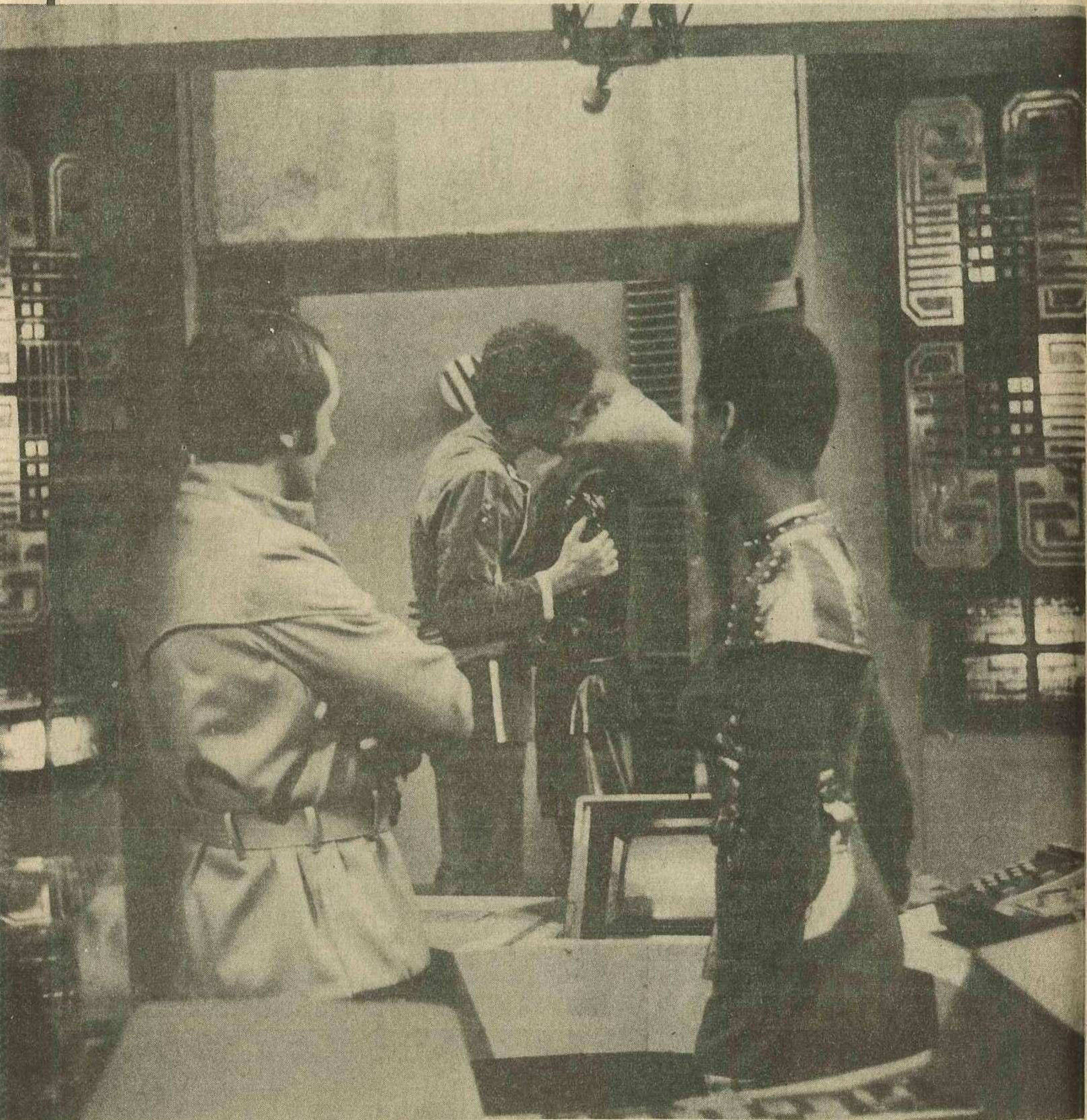
ABOVE: The flier is grounded? Not for long with the Special Effects team in action! When Blake and Tarrant were required to take off in a flier and zoom off over the surface of Gauda Prime, a wooden cockpit was constructed in the studio and, using a cunning mix of model film and back projection, the machine came to life.

TOP RIGHT: A collection of characters from the Arabian Nights? Not exactly! These 'buyers' were present at the slave auction during filming of 'ASSASSIN'.

RIGHT: Enter the 'slaves' for the auction . . . under the watchful gaze of Servalan and Ohjn Verlis (Betty Marsden) . . . and the film camera, of course.



SCRAPBOOK

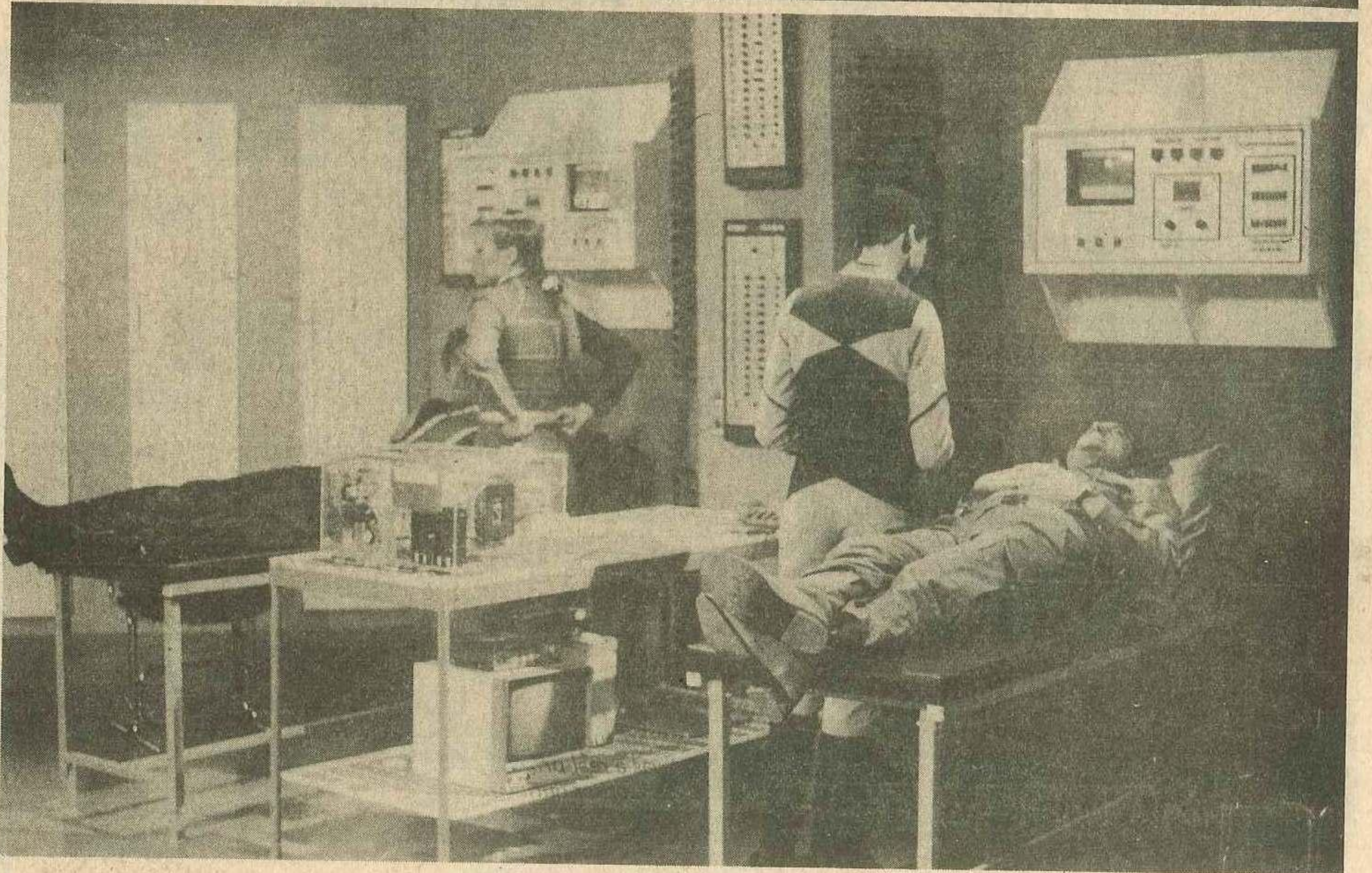


ABOVE: "He's at it again!" At least, that's what Mike Keating seems to be thinking; "Why does Tarrant always get the girls?"

TOP RIGHT: For these lucky fans Avon's autograph was a real prize for braving the terrible weather during filming at Box Hill, Surrey.

RIGHT: Lying down on the job again! Tarrant and Vila get a chance to put up their feet while preparing to be revived on the medi-couches by Soolin and Dayna.

SCRAPBOOK





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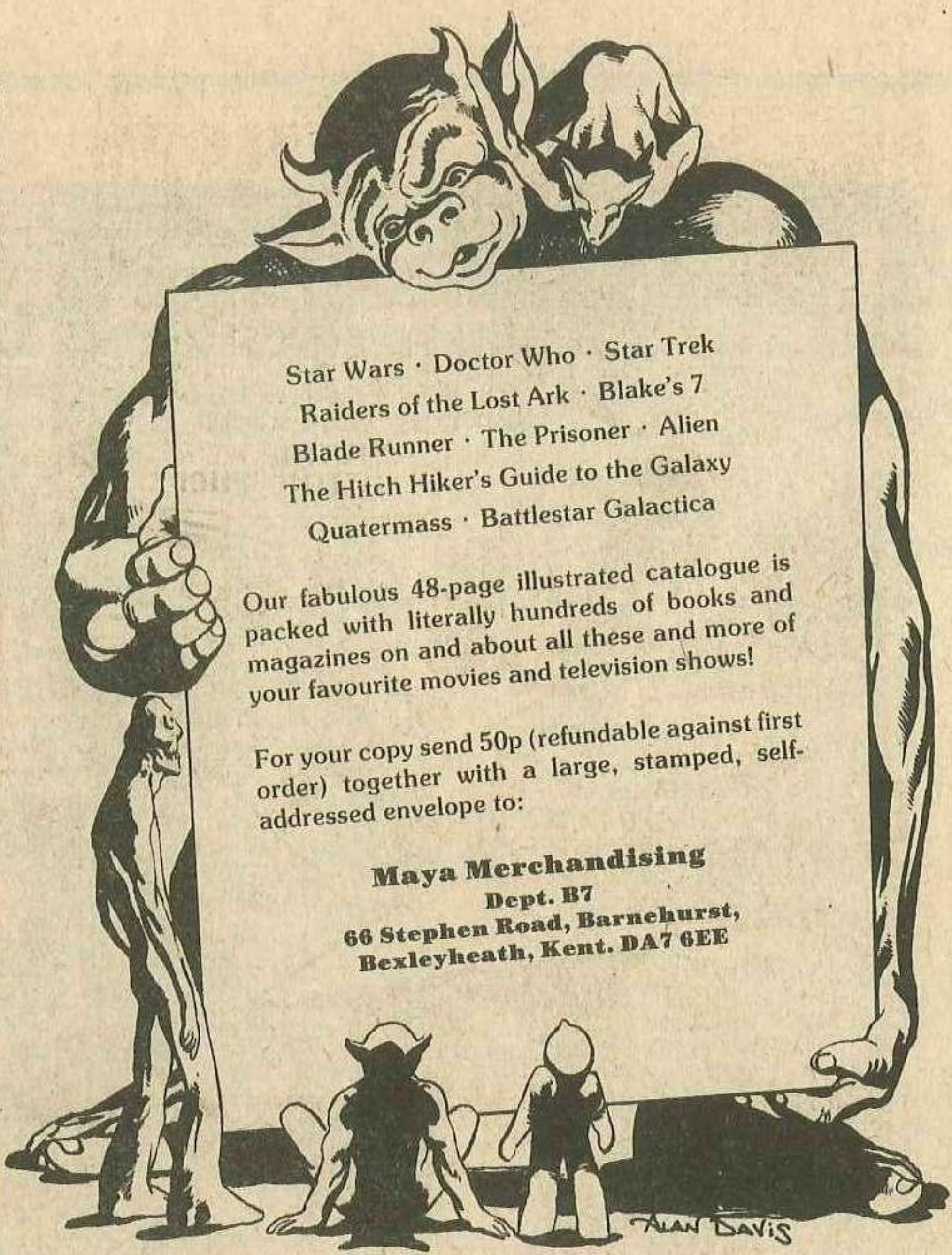
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THE STARSHIP SCORPIO EDGES BETWEEN THE DRIFTING DEBRIS OF A SHATTERED MOON... A MOON THAT IT DESTROYED SOME MONTHS BEFORE...



GIVES ME THE CREEPS SOOLIN! WHAT ARE WE DOING BACK HERE... THE FEDERATION COULD HAVE THIS PLACE STAKED OUT, WAITING FOR US TO RETURN! WE'RE A SITTING DUCK!

STOP WHINING, DAYNA THEY'RE PROBABLY TOO BUSY BUILDING ANOTHER COMPUTER-PLANET, AFTER WE MADE THIS ASTEROID BELT OUT OF THEIR FIRST TRY!

I DON'T LIKE THIS, TARRANT THEY'VE BEEN GONE FOR TOO LONG!

MONITOR THEIR CONVERSATION!

I CAN'T... THEY'VE TURNED DOWN THE POWER OF THEIR SUIT TRANSMITTERS...

THAT CLINCHES IT-- I'M GOING OUT THERE!

OUTSIDE THE SHIP, AVON AND VILA HAVE LOCATED THEIR QUARRY, A PARTICULAR PIECE OF SPACE DEBRIS... OR MORE CORRECTLY IT HAS LOCATED THEM!



MY HEAD... SPINNING...

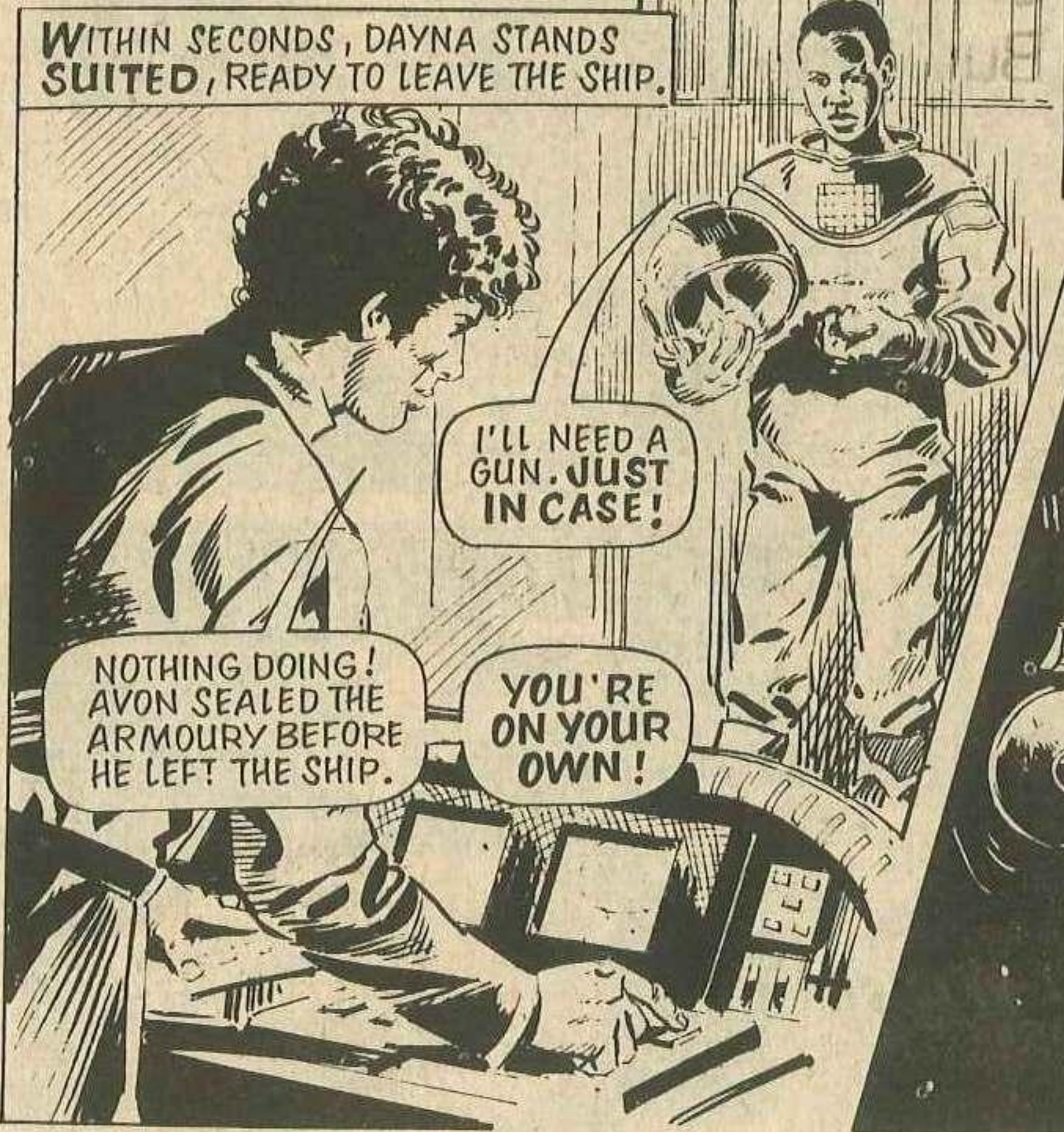
SO... TIRED...

DON'T WORRY, THEY'RE JUST CONSERVING ENERGY...



MAYBE SO! BUT I WON'T BE HAPPY UNTIL I'VE CHECKED THINGS OUT FOR MYSELF!

MEANWHILE, OUTSIDE, STRANGE OCCURRENCES... AS THE SPACE-DEBRIS JERKS INTO LIFE...



WITHIN SECONDS, DAYNA STANDS SUITED, READY TO LEAVE THE SHIP.

I'LL NEED A GUN. JUST IN CASE!

NOTHING DOING! AVON SEALED THE ARMOURY BEFORE HE LEFT THE SHIP.

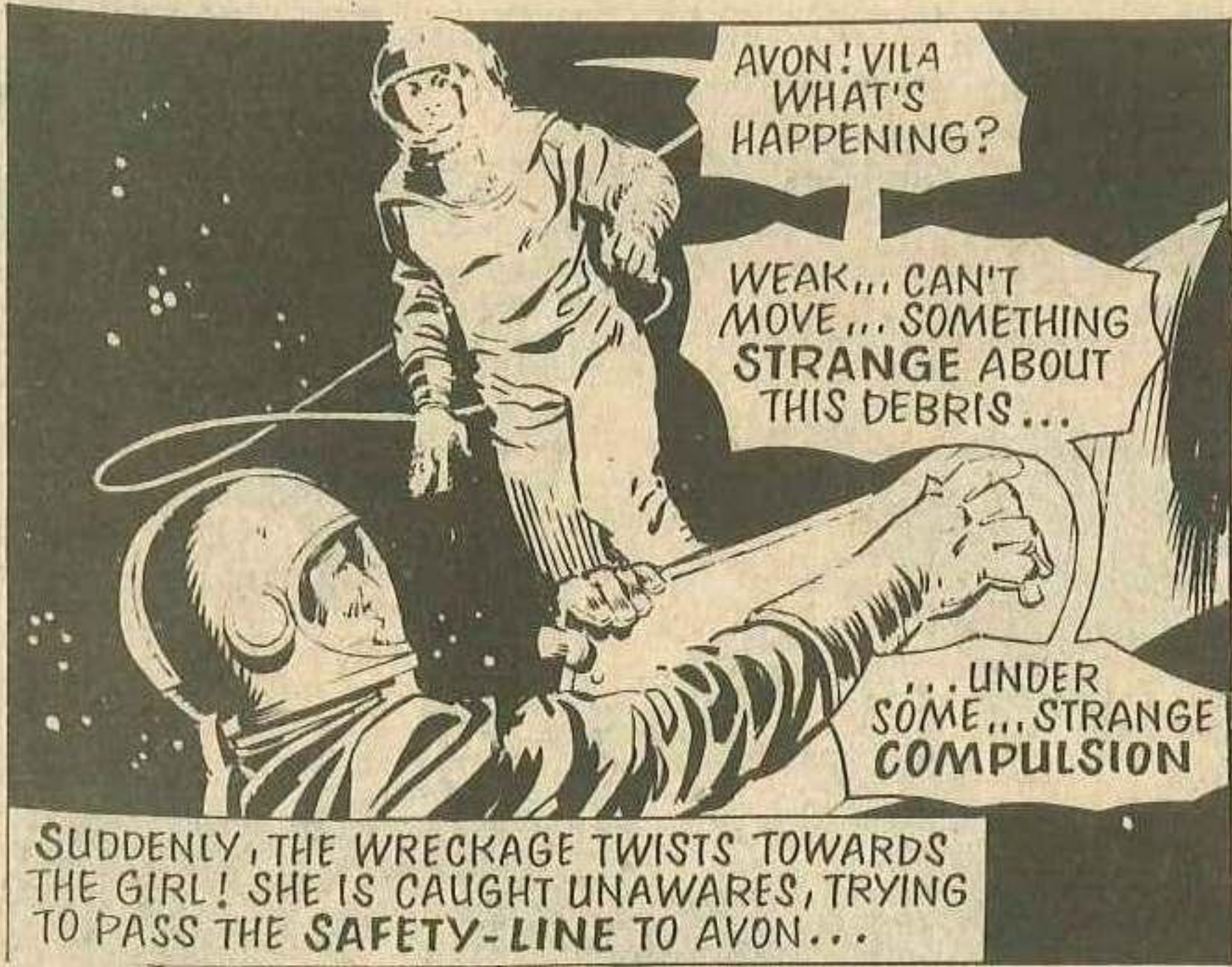
YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN!



IT'S MOVING... ..CAN'T LET GO!

NOR CAN I... HAND... PARALYSED!

DAYNA TO SCORPIO... CONDITION RED! THE WRECKAGE THEY'RE HOLDING'S MOVING BY ITSELF!

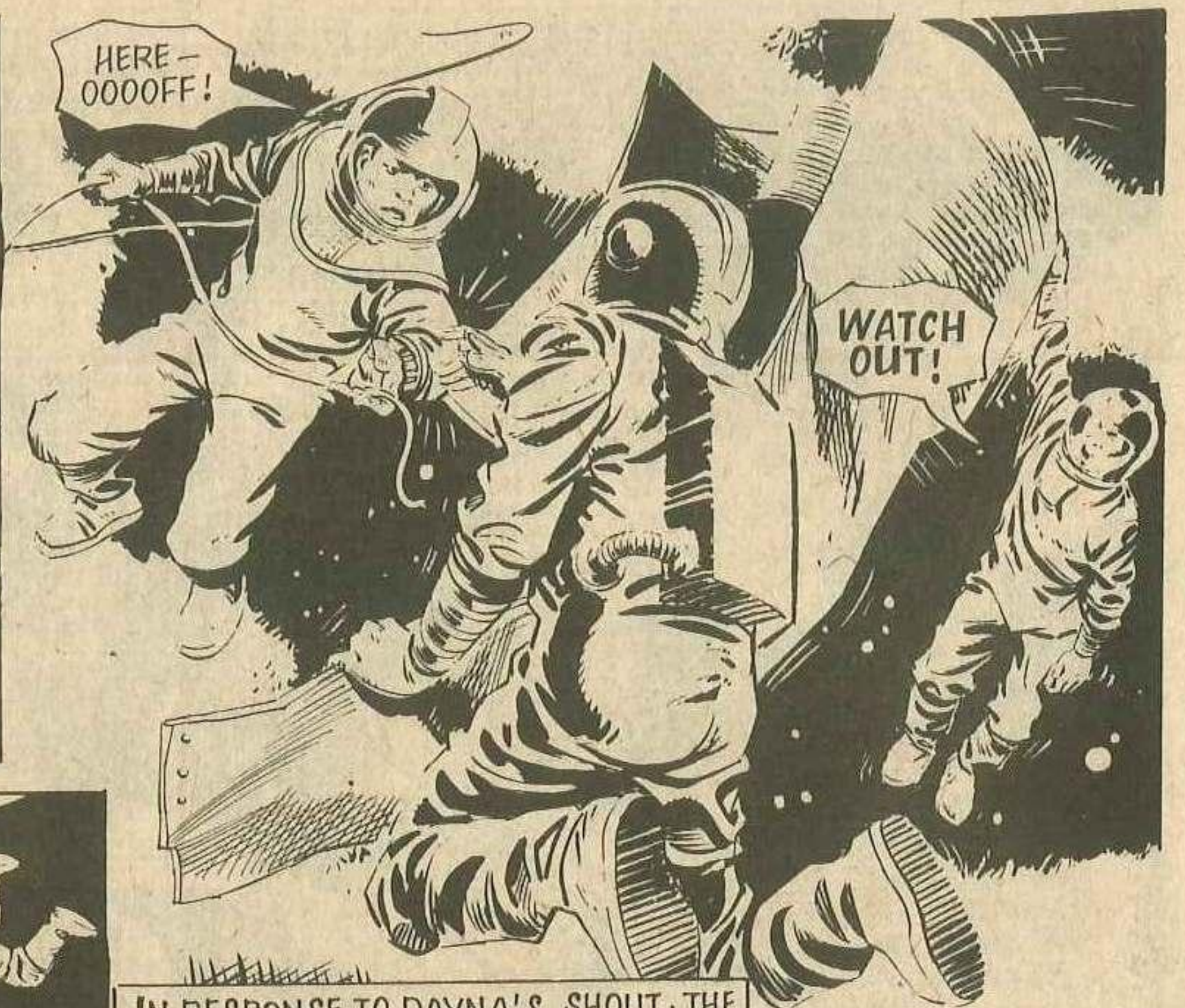


AVON! VILA
WHAT'S
HAPPENING?

WEAK... CAN'T
MOVE... SOMETHING
STRANGE ABOUT
THIS DEBRIS...

... UNDER
SOME... STRANGE
COMPULSION

SUDDENLY, THE WRECKAGE TWISTS TOWARDS
THE GIRL! SHE IS CAUGHT UNAWARES, TRYING
TO PASS THE SAFETY-LINE TO AVON...



HERE -
OOOOFF!

WATCH
OUT!



IT PUSHED THEM!
THE DEBRIS HAS A
LIFE OF IT'S OWN!

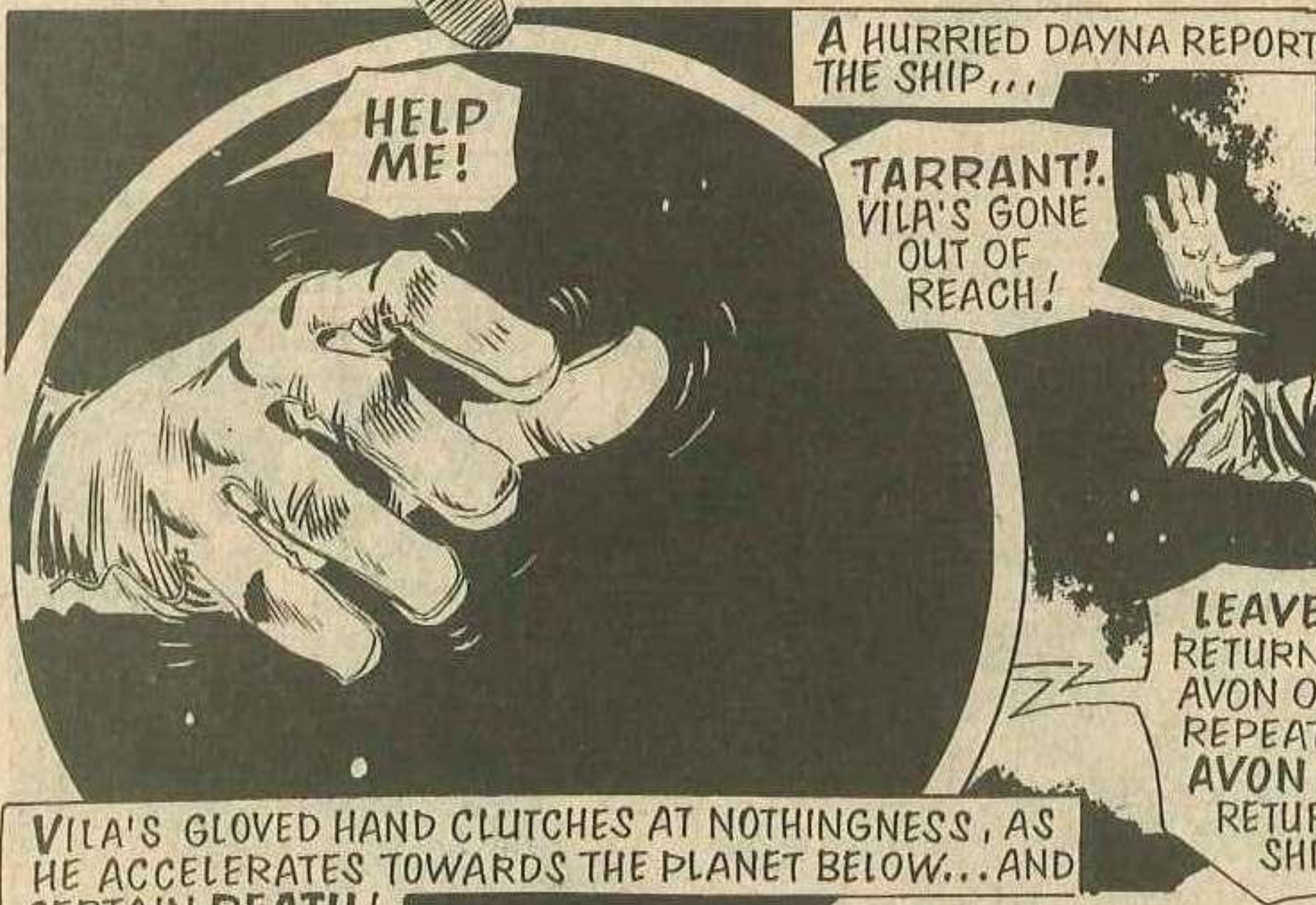
GOOD LORD
- VILA!!

DAYNA WAS
RIGHT... THERE
IS SOMETHING
WRONG!

IN RESPONSE TO DAYNA'S SHOUT, THE
SEMI-CONSCIOUS MAN'S EYELIDS
LABORIOUSLY OPEN...



DAYNA...
HELP ME!



HELP
ME!

A HURRIED DAYNA REPORTS TO
THE SHIP...

TARRANT!
VILA'S GONE
OUT OF
REACH!

LEAVE HIM!
RETURN WITH
AVON ONLY!
REPEAT... SAVE
AVON AND
RETURN TO
SHIP!

VILA'S GLOVED HAND CLUTCHES AT NOTHINGNESS, AS
HE ACCELERATES TOWARDS THE PLANET BELOW... AND
CERTAIN DEATH!

- IN SECONDS
AVON AND THE GIRL
ARE WINCHED BACK.



NOW IN PLANET FALL THE
HELPLESS FIGURE OF VILA
IS APPROACHED BY A
CURIOUS FORM...

A CURIOUS FORM PERHAPS,
BUT A BEING NEVERTHELESS...

AND IT
SPEAKS...

≡SSPK≡ I HAVE
YOU... AT MY ≡SSPSK≡
MERCY, ≡SSKPTT≡
VILA! AFTER ALL
THESE ≡SSKP≡ MONTHS!

... REVENGE
IS ≡SSKSPP≡
MINE!

... WHEN I COUNT TO
≡SSPKE≡ ... THREE, YOU
WILL ≡SSP≡ ... REMEMBER
AND ≡SSKKT≡ ... SUFFER...
ONE... ≡SPT≡ TWO...
THREE...

SUDDENLY, VILA REMEMBERS! HE REMEMBERED SO CLEARLY NOW, THAT DAY 6 MONTHS BEFORE... THE IMAGES FLOOD HIS MIND, AND THE VOICE DRONES ON...

IT IS I WHO SPEAKS TO YOU
SKPSSF JUST A FEW PALTRY
RELAYS, SWITCHES, SOLAR
PANELS AND CIRCUITS REMAIN...
SKRPPT OF WHAT I ONCE WAS
SPKSS... FEDERAC THE
COMPUTER WORLD!

... THEY GAVE ME LOGIC...
SPSS REASON, AND EVEN
SKRPPSS... PERSONALITY...
I AWOKE, THERE IN SPACE,
BRIGHT SPSSST SHINY AND
SPTZLSS... NEW, MY
WISDOM GROWING AS THEY
CONNECTED SPSSST IN
MY SPK... CIRCUITS...
AND THEN SPZE...

... SPSS... KSPSS
... YOU CAME... SPSS

THE OTHERS ON YOUR SHIP
COULDN'T BREAK MY SECURITY
DEFENCE SYSTEM, BUT I WAS
YOUNG SPSSST AND NAIVE
AND YOU TRICKED ME SSPST
YOU TRICKED ME WITH YOUR
SPSSST DIM WITTED COMPUTER,
AS GO BETWEEN... AND I SENT
MY DEFENCE SHIPS ON A FOOL'S
ERRAND...

... AND I WAS A... SPSS A
HELPLESS TARGET FOR YOUR
CANNONS... YOU BLEW ME TO
SPSSST SMITHEREENS, BUT
ONE OF THE PIECES SPST
RETAINED MY CONSCIOUSNESS,
AND...

WE'VE DESTROYED THE
COMPUTER-WORLD, BUT
WE'VE BEEN HOLED BY A
PIECE OF WRECKAGE...
IT COULD BE DANGEROUS...
WE'D BETTER TAKE A LOOK
FROM THE OUTSIDE...

I HAD TRIED AND FAILED TO
DESTROY YOUR SPSSST...
SHIP... AND YOU REMOVED ME...
I WAS SPZTT SPENT...
EXHAUSTED... I NEEDED TO
RECUPERATE...

... WITH MY LAST
REMAINING SURGE OF
ENERGY I SPSSST
HYPNOTISED YOU TO
RETURN WHEN I COULD
SKPSSST... DEAL
WITH YOU...

WHAT'S
THAT?

AN ELECTRICAL
DISCHARGE? BUT...
SUCH STRANGE
COLOURS...

AT THAT MOMENT IN SPACE THE SUITED FIGURE OF VILA STILL FALLS PLANETWARD! THE TEMPERATURE IN HIS SUIT IS BECOMING UNBEARABLE AS HE PLUNGES THROUGH THE THICKENING ATMOSPHERE...

HE'S GONE... FEDERAC'S GONE!

WHAT'S HAPPENED? WHERE'S THE SCORPIO?

- BUT THERE IS ONE DIFFERENCE... HIS SUIT RADIO IS SILENT!..

AS IF IN ANSWER THE SHIP FLASHES BY HIM... IN TOW HE SEES THE FIGURE OF...

AVON!

I THOUGHT YOU'D ABANDONED ME!

Phil Gascoine

HOW DID YOU DO IT? HOW DID YOU GET RID OF FEDERAC WITHOUT VAPORISING US BOTH?

IT SEEMS THAT FEDERAC WAS STILL A LITTLE TOO HUMAN FOR HIS OWN GOOD...

WITHIN MINUTES THE TALE IS TOLD...

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

COME ON BOARD! YOU'LL GET THE WHOLE STORY!

AND SO WE HAD SLAVE BROADCASTING 'YOU... AREE... SLEEPY'... AND THE DIRECTIONS TO ALPHA CENTAURUS OVER AND OVER AGAIN UNTIL HE WAS WELL AND TRULY HYPNOTISED...!

HE PUT HIMSELF INTO HIGH GEAR HE SHOULD BE SOMEWHERE NEAR ARCTURUS NOW...

THERE IS REJOICING FROM ALL BUT ONE MAN... WHO CHOOSES TO PONDER THE PASSING OF A ONCE GREAT INTELLECT.

THE END



DUNGEON!

FROM



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MEANWHILE, HERO, WHO HAS VOWED TO RID THE DUNGEON OF EVERY PURPLE WORM, HAS BEEN WAYLAINED ON HIS JOURNEY INTO THE EARTH BY A MALICIOUS HOBGOBLIN!



INTRUDER! PREPARE TO DIE!

OUT OF MY WAY, YOU PATHETIC FREAK. YOU'RE WASTING MY TIME!



HA! SUCH FOOLHARDINESS MAY BE BRAVE, BUT IT'S HARDLY INTELLIGENT! YOU'LL PAY DEARLY FOR THAT INSULT!!



NOT AS DEARLY AS YOU, MY UGLY FRIEND!

HERO CONTINUES HIS JOURNEY BELOW, AND THE DEEPER HE GOES THE MORE ABOMINABLE THE MONSTERS BECOME, BUT LUCK APPEARS TO BE WITH HIM AND HE'S INVINCIBLE.



EVEN WHEN THREATENED BY THE HORROR OF THE GREEN SLIME!

BUT LYING IN WAIT FOR HIM IS AN EVEN DEADLIER FOE - THE ONE HE'S DEDICATED TO EXTERMINATING!



AH! AT LAST! THE DEADLY PURPLE WORM! IT'S EVEN MORE HORRIFIC THAN I IMAGINED!



MY SWORD!

I'VE LOST IT!!

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B7 LETTERS

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It's very important you keep us informed of what you would like to see in your magazine, what you think of the features and stories and what your views on the programme are. We want to give you the monthly magazine you want to read. So, keep your letters coming and, remember, each letter receives personal attention.

Here are a selection of the letters we've received so far...

Dear Blake's 7,

I think your magazine is really good but you've missed out a bit on the modelling side of SciFi. The Liberator and Scorpio could prove to be very popular, as well as the Federal space ships.

You could do one of two things to put this right; release blue prints of the space ships which could be used as a guide or see if Airfix and Palitoy will kit some miniatures.

Also, it would be great to have a page set aside for space model expert, Matt Irvine, from the BBC (what has Orac got that he hasn't?)

Yours faithfully,

David George Llewellyn
Banbury

How many modelling enthusiasts are there among B-7 readers? This is the time to be counted, along with anyone else who would be interested in this aspect of the programme - I know I am. Write in and we will see if there are enough votes to support such a feature.
ED.

Dear Blake's 7,

The features, photos, pin-ups, scrapbook article and especially 'Paul Darrow Writes', are excellent! The art in the comic strip is usually very good and the interviews are superb, well done Ken!

But every month you print about ten pages of character assassination! Please understand, I don't criticize plots that are often original and the writing style, which is good. But, Avon's and Vila's characters...? Avon is ruthless, yes, but the way you make him treat the crew makes it certain that they would have left him a long time ago, probably dead. And please remember Vila and Avon ARE friends!

After that constructive criticism that you continually ignore from me, please could you tell me if there will be a Marvel B7 Annual? And please thank Geoff Senior for the poster in number thirteen!

Thanks for a first wonderful year in fandom, give it all you've got.

Yours faithfully,

Sarah Berry
Earley, Berkshire.

I can see what you are saying about Avon and Vila but it is very much subject to debate. I suggest we open the discussion up and 'invite Ken to join in', so, letters on the subject please.

There won't be a Marvel B7 Annual this year. Write to 'Granddreams' at the Marvel address if you want to put in a request for one next year.

ED.



Dear Blake's 7,

For the first issues Blake's 7 was received with mixed reactions, but now most of the letters have swung from bad to good. My only criticism is that the letters page is too short. It would be better with two pages.

How about changing the stories from the TV, starting with the early B7 programmes into words in your comic, as in Dr. Who. I love reading them from Dr. Who and I'm sure they'll be just as good in Blake's 7.

Keep up the good work!

Yours sincerely,

Colin Jenkinson, RFO, QNSF, FFF
Gorleston on Sea.

Thanks very much for the suggestions. I agree entirely about the letters page being too short. Expect to find a two page one next issue.

An archive series consisting of a straightforward, almost encyclopaedic account of each episode as in Dr. Who may well prove popular. Votes please.
ED.

Dear Blake's 7,

Congratulations! I have just bought Issue 13 and it is superb. It makes me want to take back all that I said some months ago when the format of the mag. changed. I was extremely critical then, but after this issue, I find that impossible.

I thoroughly enjoyed Paul Darrow's review of the series from Issue 6 onwards. It just makes me want to ask one thing - Please can we have more about the original cast + stories, as these were, after all, the ones who engaged our interest.

Once again, congratulations on such a superb mag.

Yours sincerely,

Maureen Hayden
Middleton, Manchester.

Yes, you can have more features and stories about the original cast! They will be appearing in the very near future, so keep a look out.

ED.

AT LAST!
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GRAPHS OF YOUR TV HEROES!

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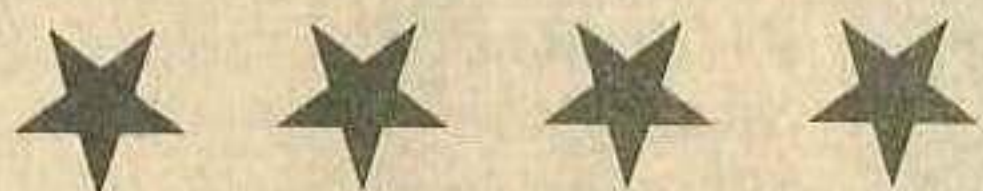
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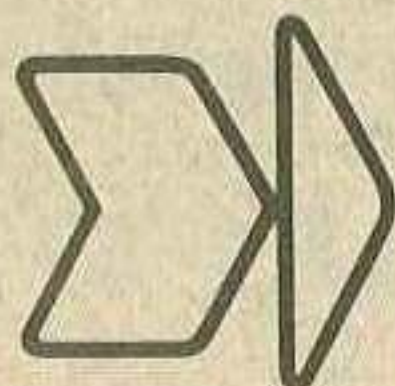
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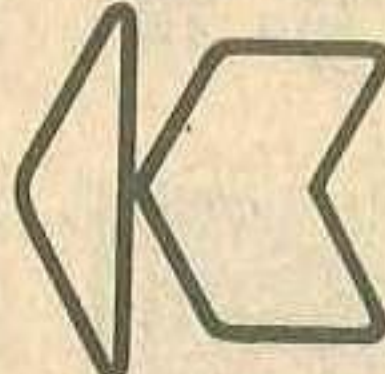
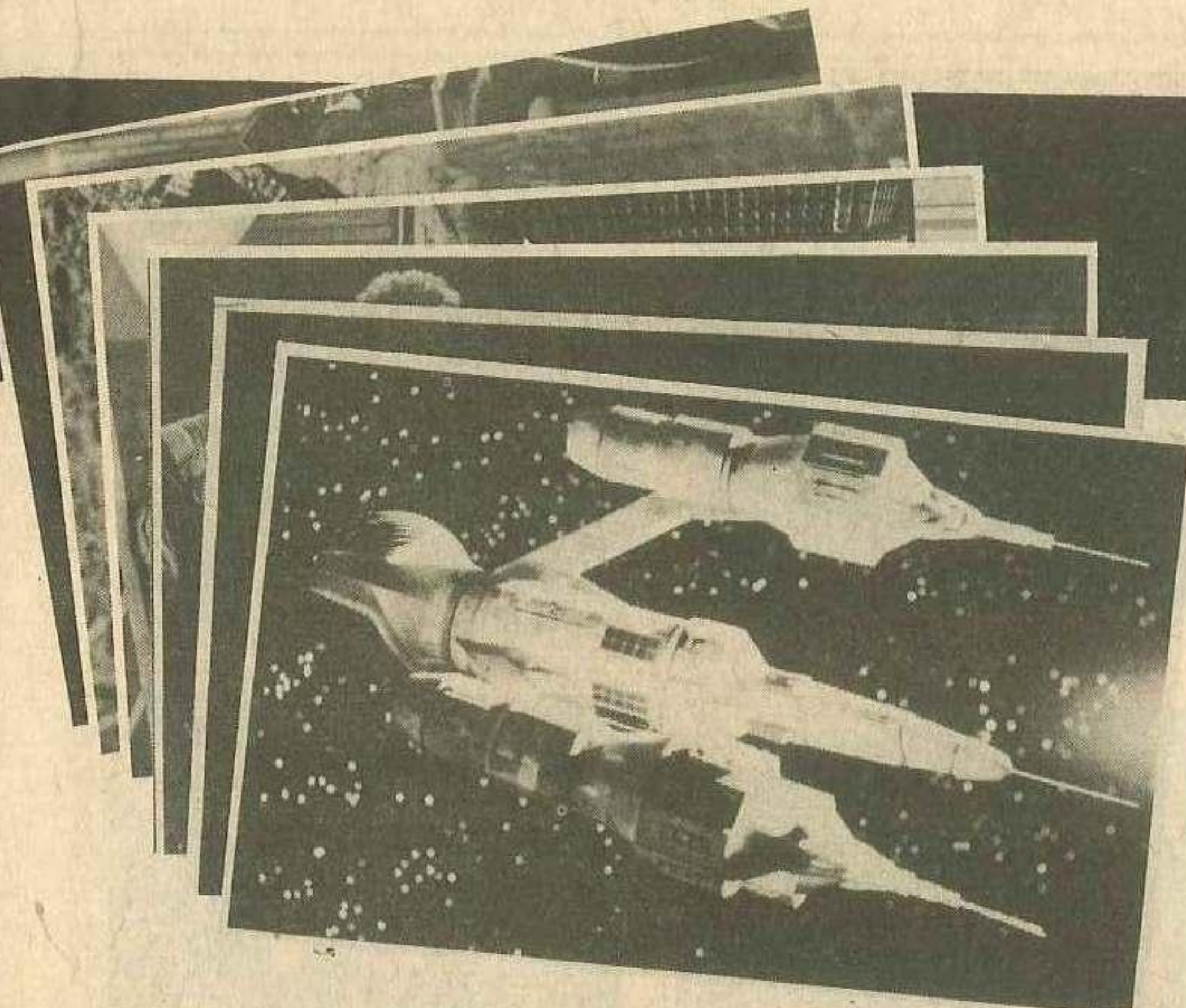
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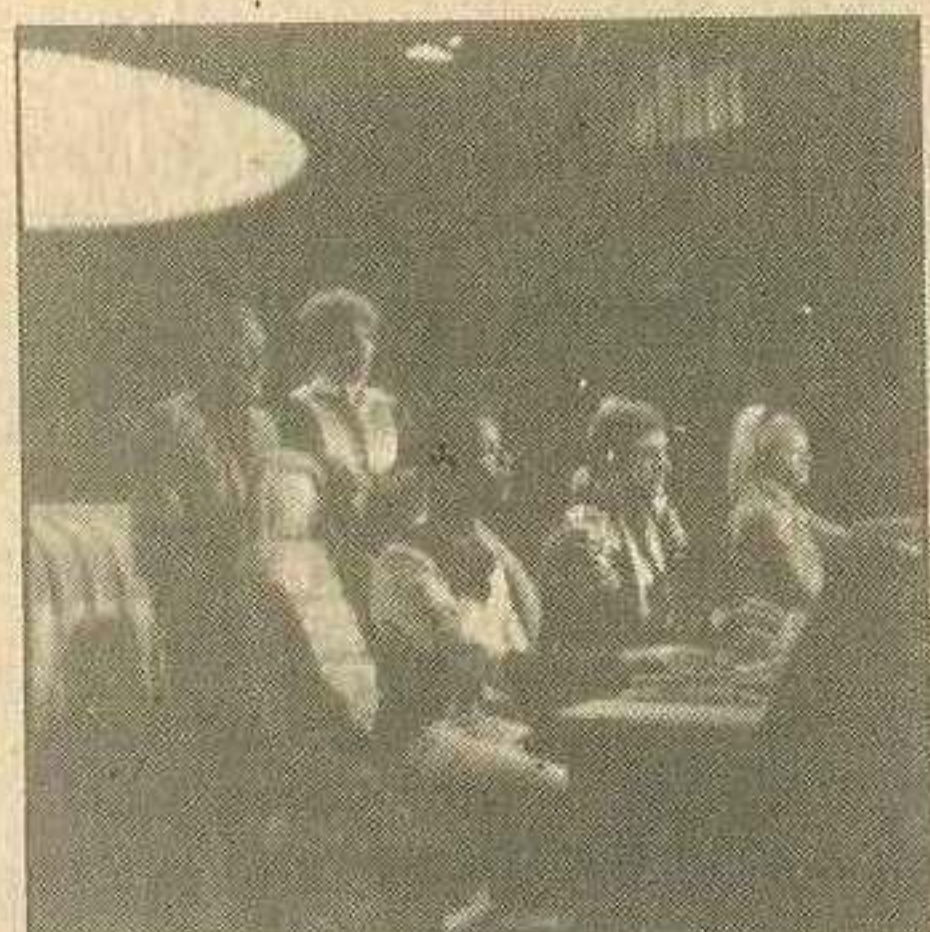
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A. Group shot in front of Slave.



B. Group shot with Orac.



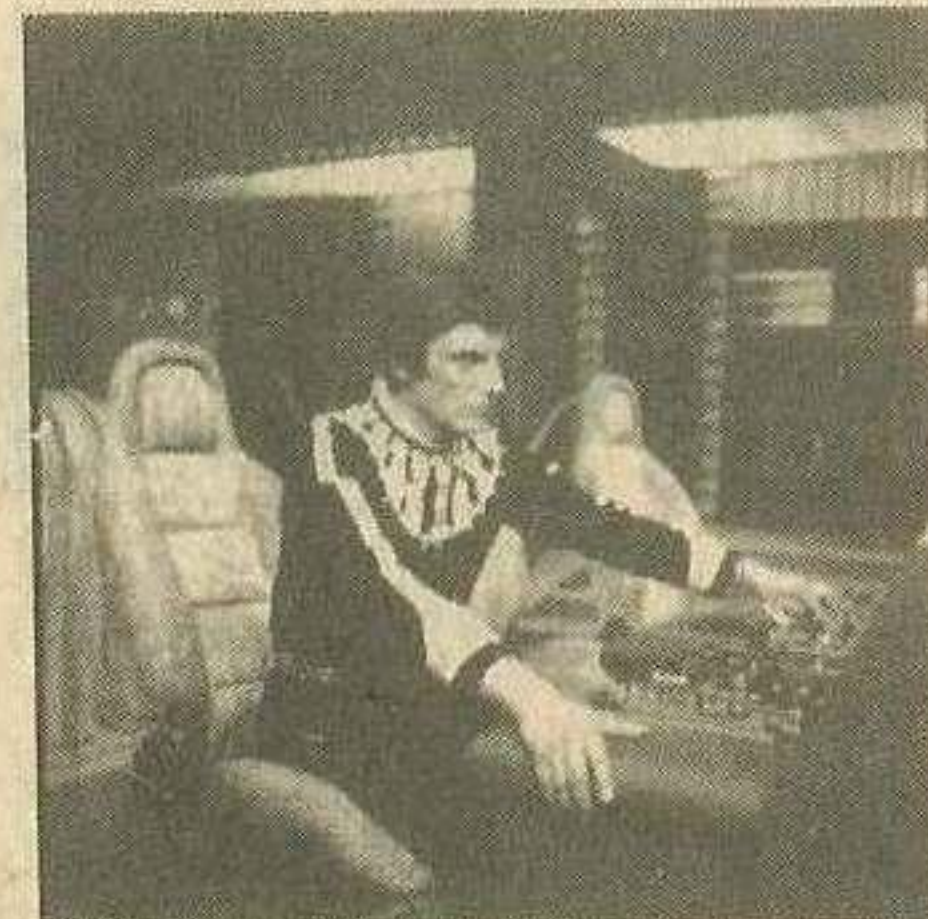
C. Group shot at flight controls.



D. Teleport trio Vila, Dayna, Soolin.



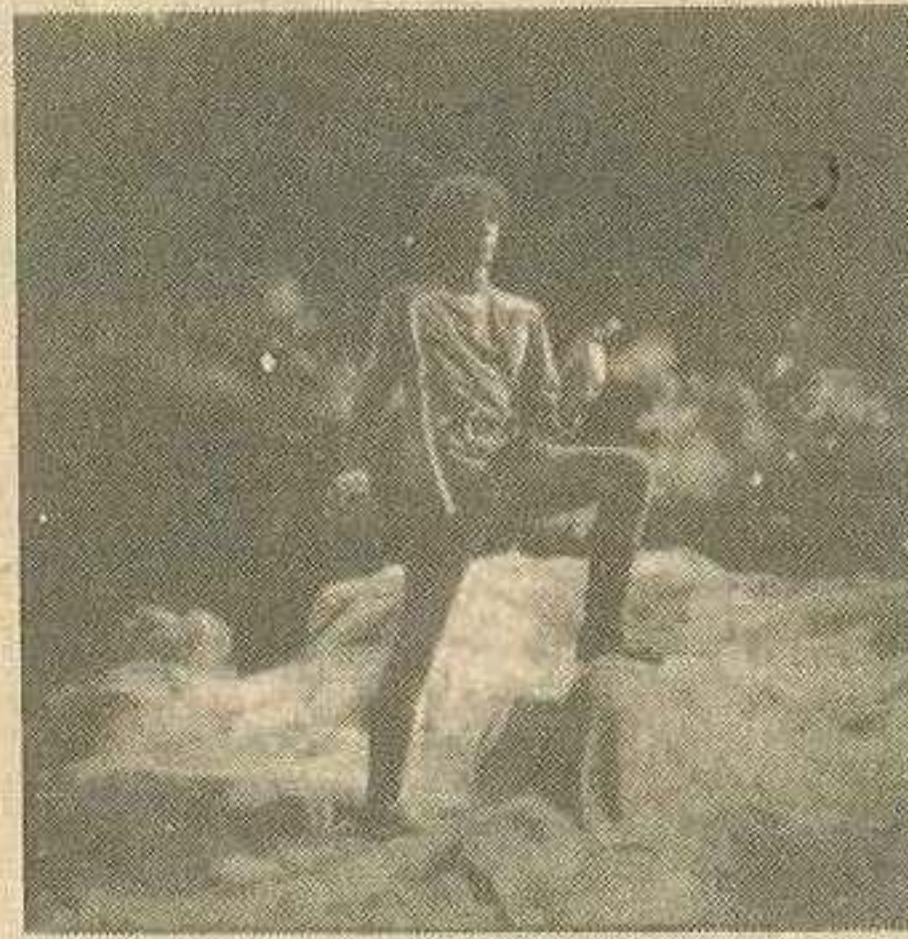
E. Avon with gun.



F. Avon at Controls.



G. Tarrant in close-up.



H. Tarrant standing.



I. Vila with gun creeping.



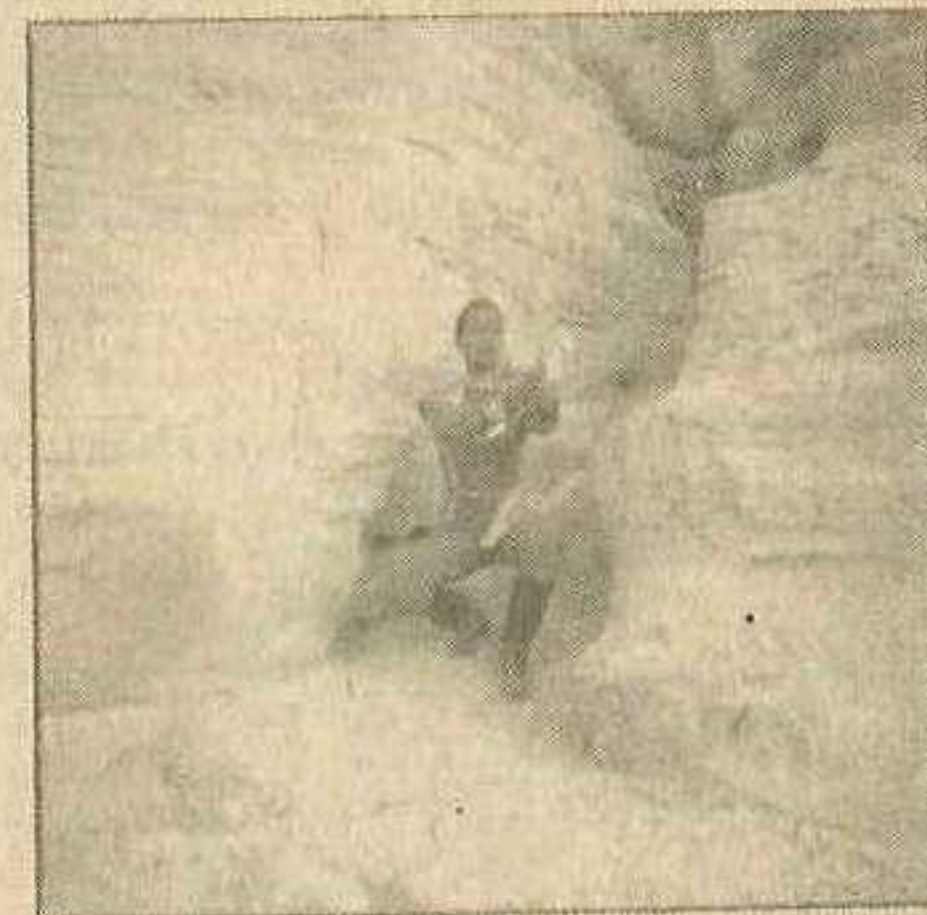
J. Vila smiling.



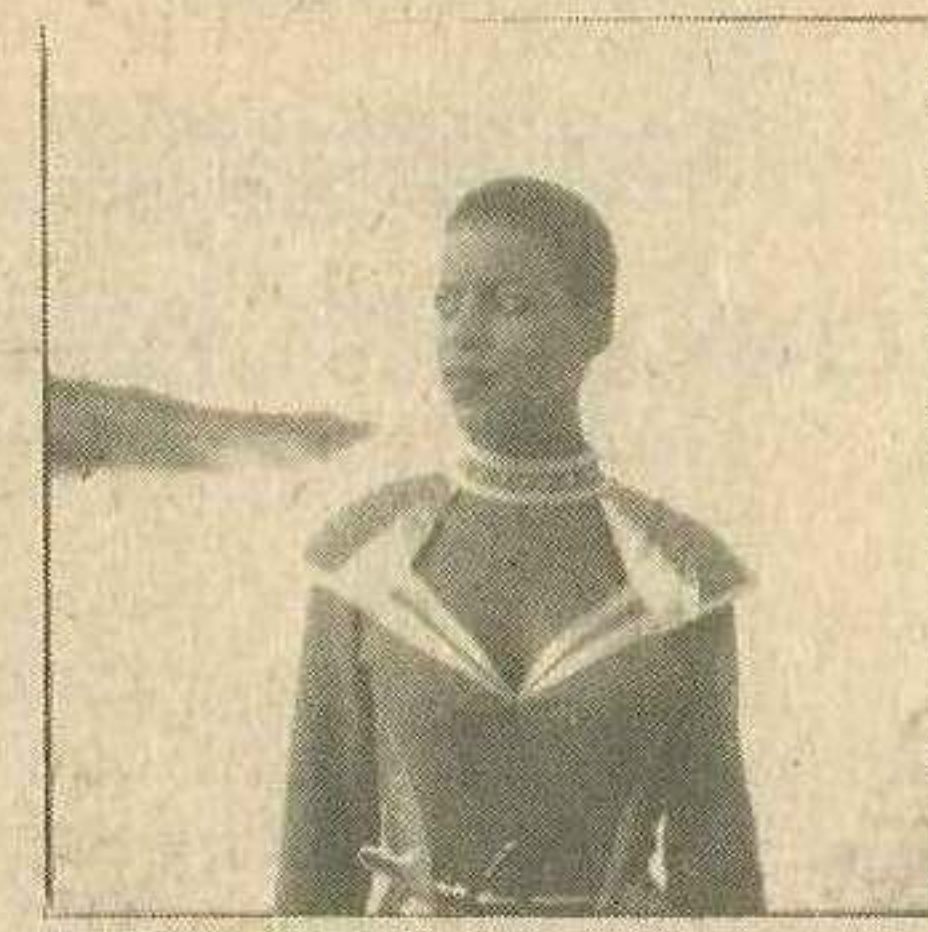
K. Soolin standing, smiling.



L. Soolin with gun.



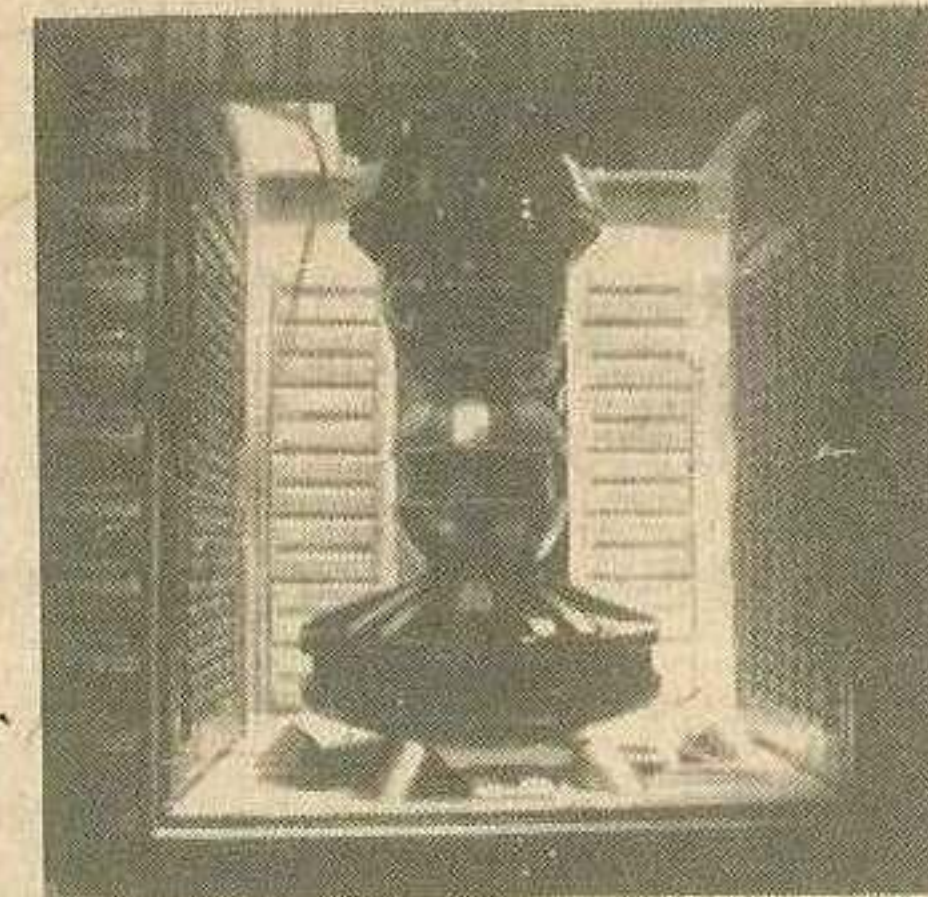
M. Dayna with gun.



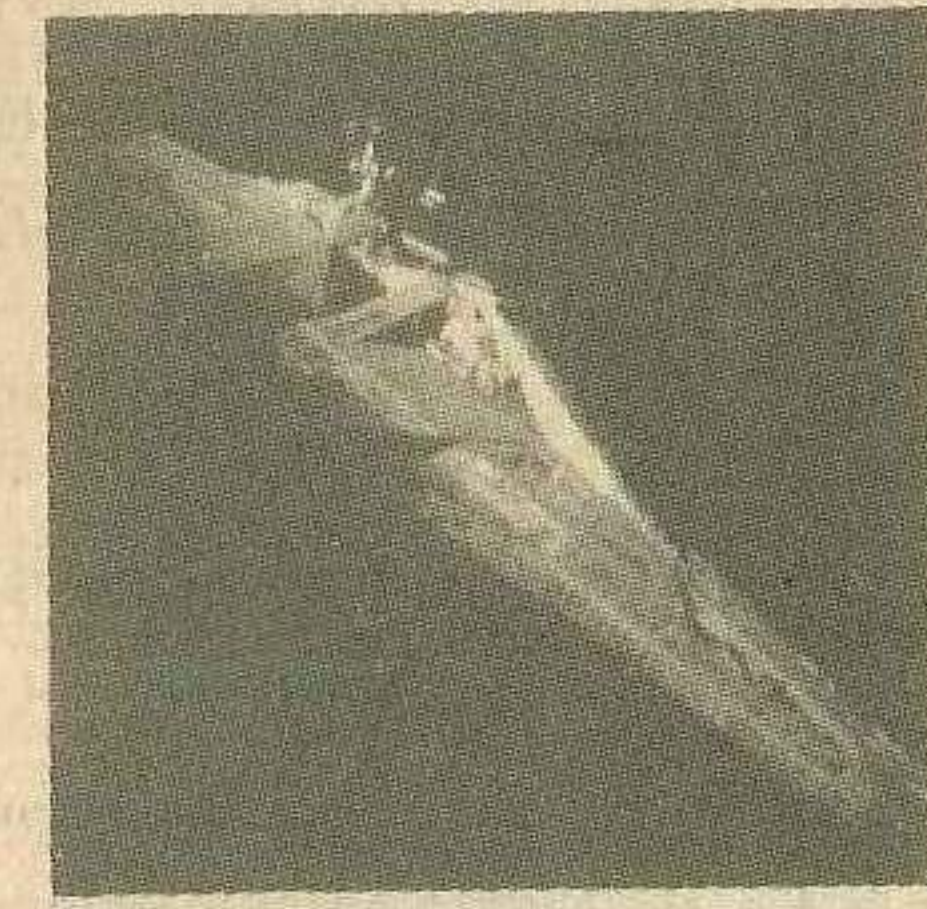
N. Dayna smiling.



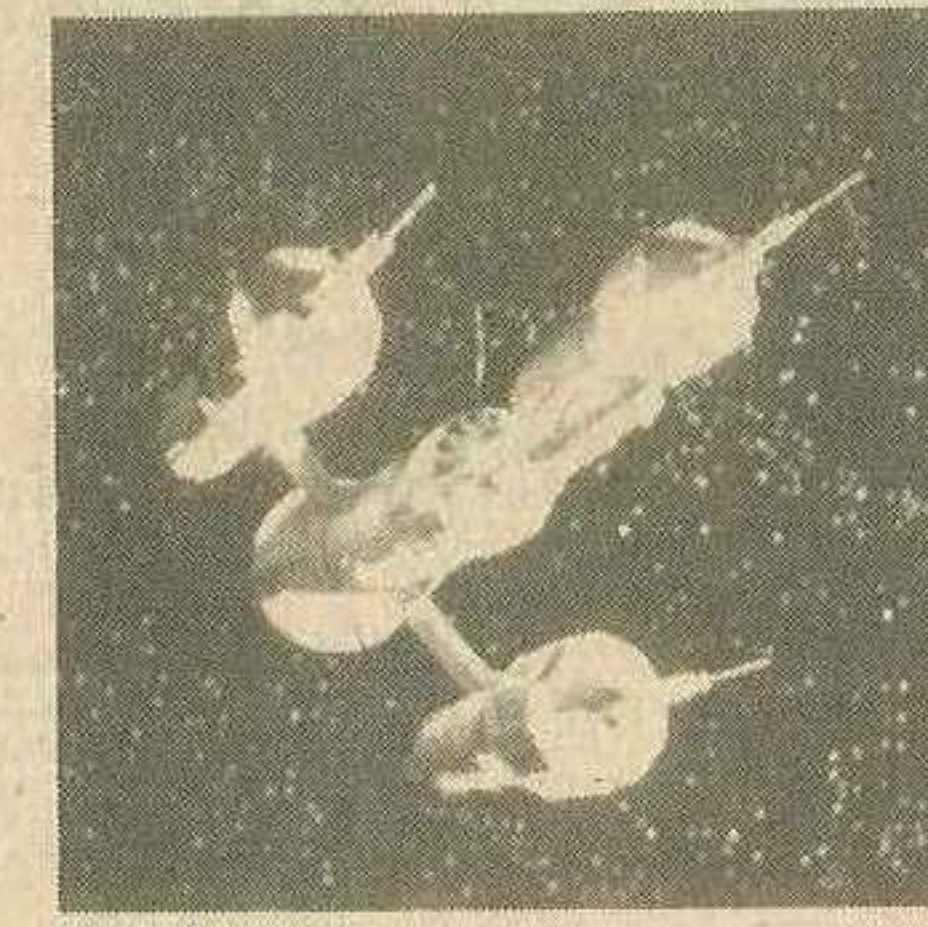
O. Blake and Avon.



P. Slave.



Q. Scorpio.



R. Liberator.

collectors corner

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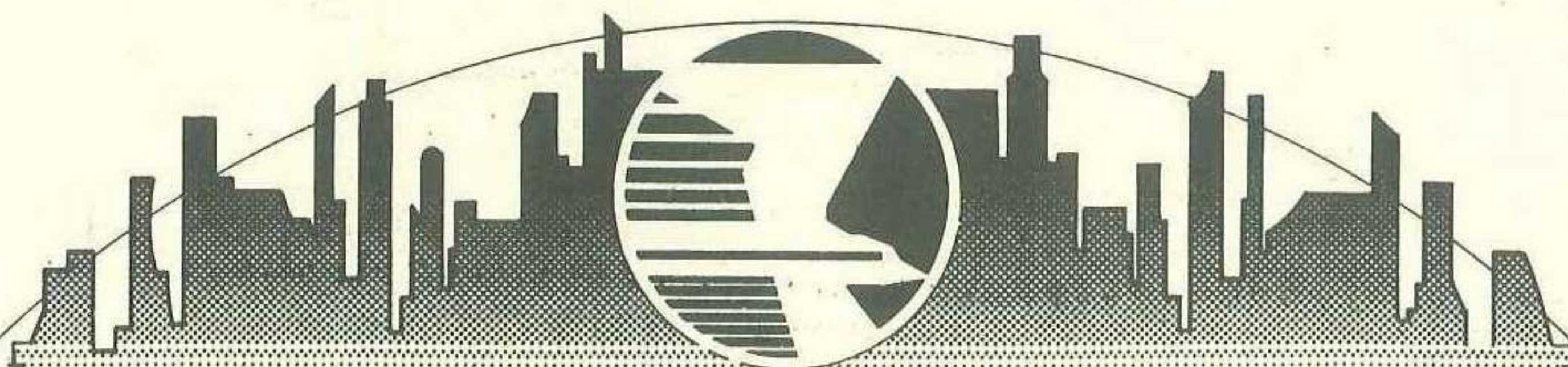
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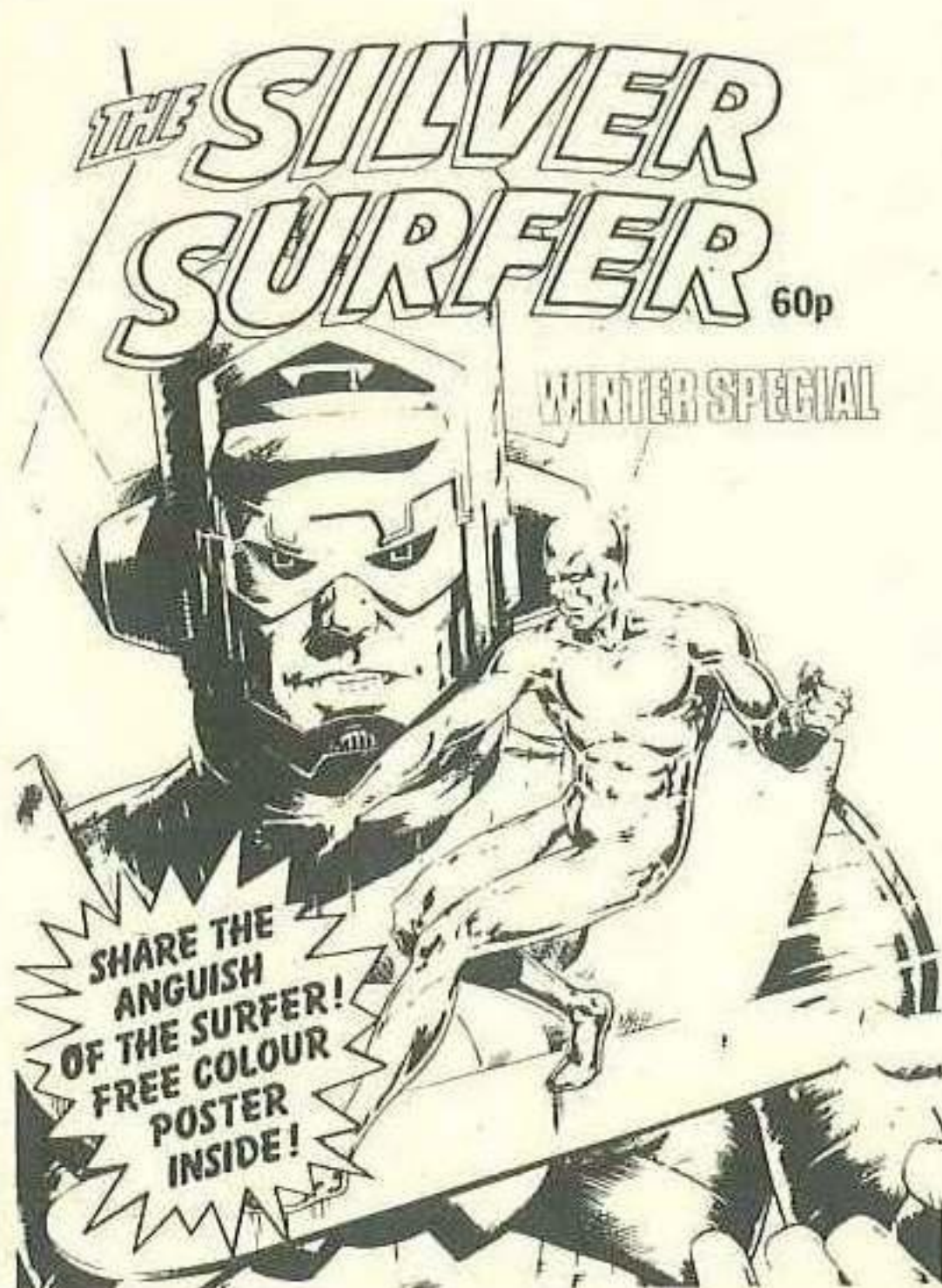
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for the LOVE of AVON

When it was first suggested we ran a series of articles in this magazine dealing with the women in Avon's life the choice of title for this feature posed a problem. AVON CALLING would be inappropriate as, more often than not, it was the women who called on him. It was then suggested AVON'S ANGELS might be suitable and, as far as three of the characters were concerned, the term 'angel' would not be too far off the mark. The fourth, however, was as far removed from an angel as you could imagine – so that title was scrubbed.

FOR THE LOVE OF AVON indicates these women were prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to secure his love, if indeed love is what they expected to receive from a man such as him. With such a sensitive subject to tackle only one person is really qualified to write about the tangled web of emotions which make up the man called Avon. He is, of course, Paul Darrow.

In the first of these articles written for us by Paul, he examines the first two characters who had an influence on Avon's emotions. The first, Meegat, recognised Avon's qualities immediately and threw herself on his mercy. The second did quite the reverse. In fact, the second could be called the greatest romance there never was. The woman in question was, of course, Cally. But now Paul Darrow explains what really happens

MEEGAT

Of all the beautiful – and not so beautiful – kind – or sometimes downright cruel – women and girls who appeared in "Blake's Seven", only four had a profound effect on Avon. One for each series!

Avon, you will remember, either killed or abandoned all of them!

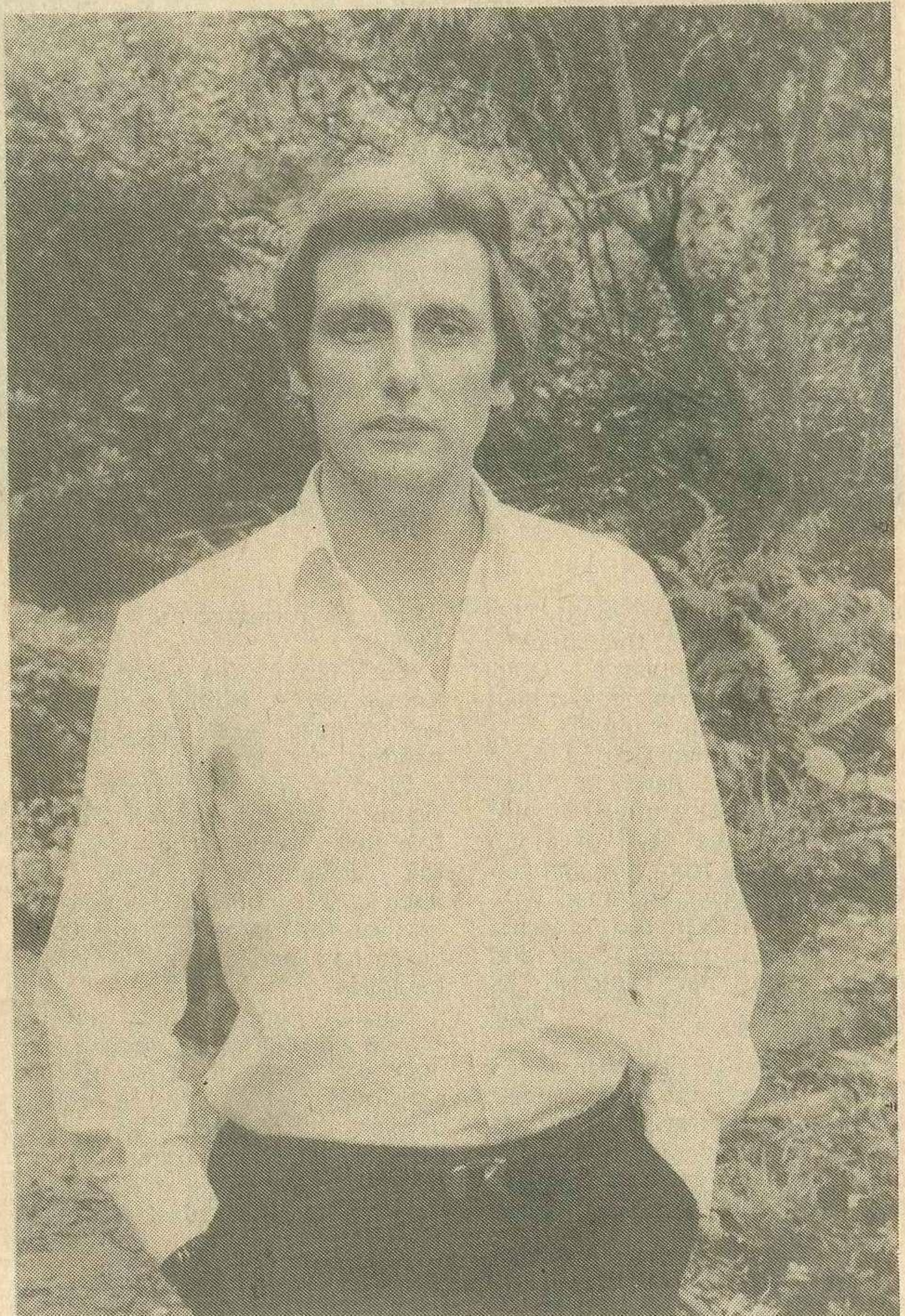
Of the four ladies, the first was the only one who might have stood a chance of maintaining his interest. (The other three were, at some time or another, untrustworthy.)

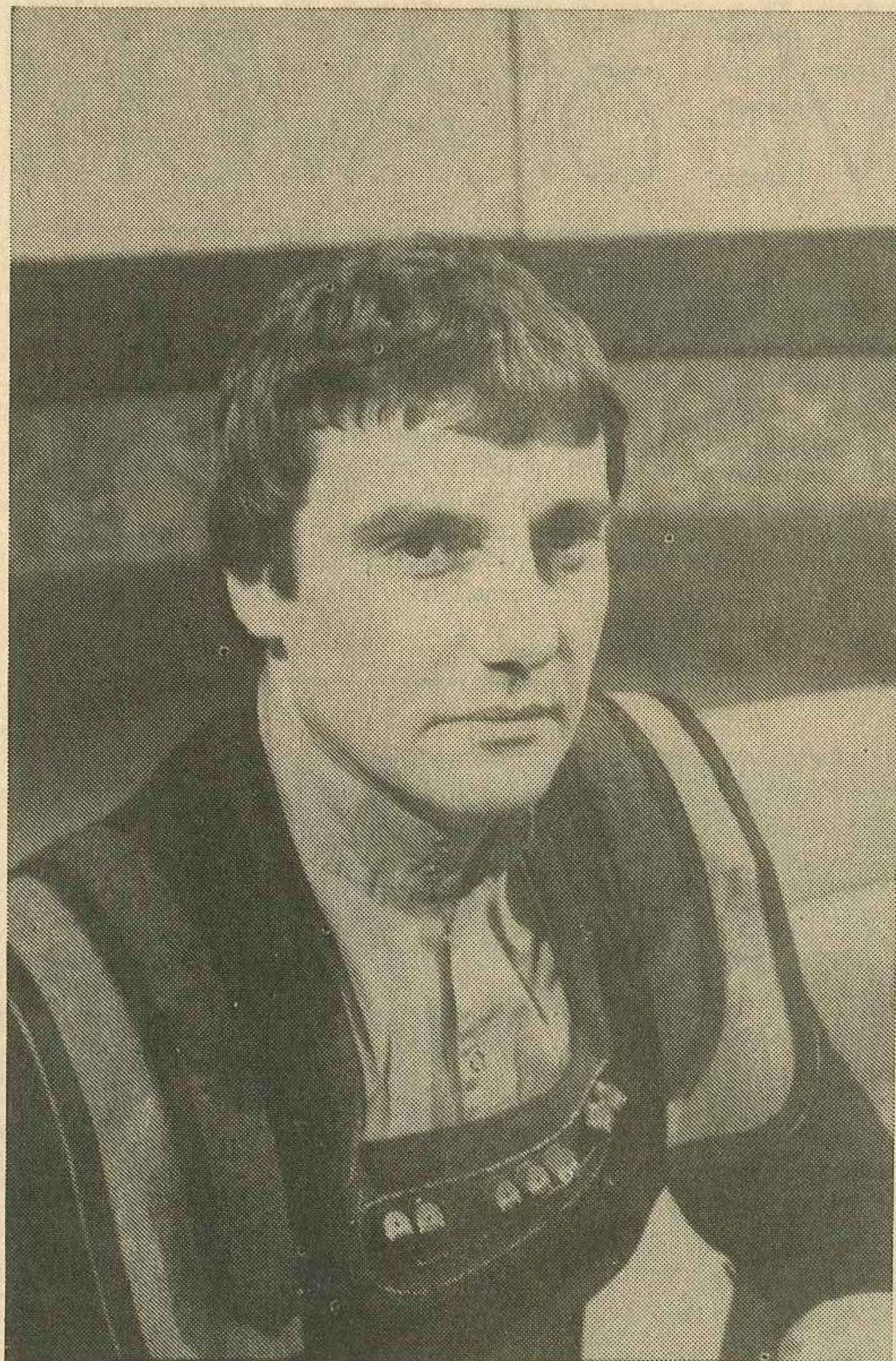
Meegat appeared in episode twelve of the first series and started off her relationship with Avon in the best possible way. From his point of view, that is. She dropped to her knees in front of him and referred to him as her, "Lord". Now, that could be unnerving for any man.

You would have three choices. You could burst out laughing. You could become embarrassed and irritable. You could decide to enjoy the experience. As Avon rarely smiled or laughed and wasn't easily embarrassed, the last alternative seemed the best course to follow.

The truth of the matter was that Meegat should never have met Avon in, "Deliverance", in the first place.

Originally, it was intended that Blake should teleport onto the planet in question while Avon

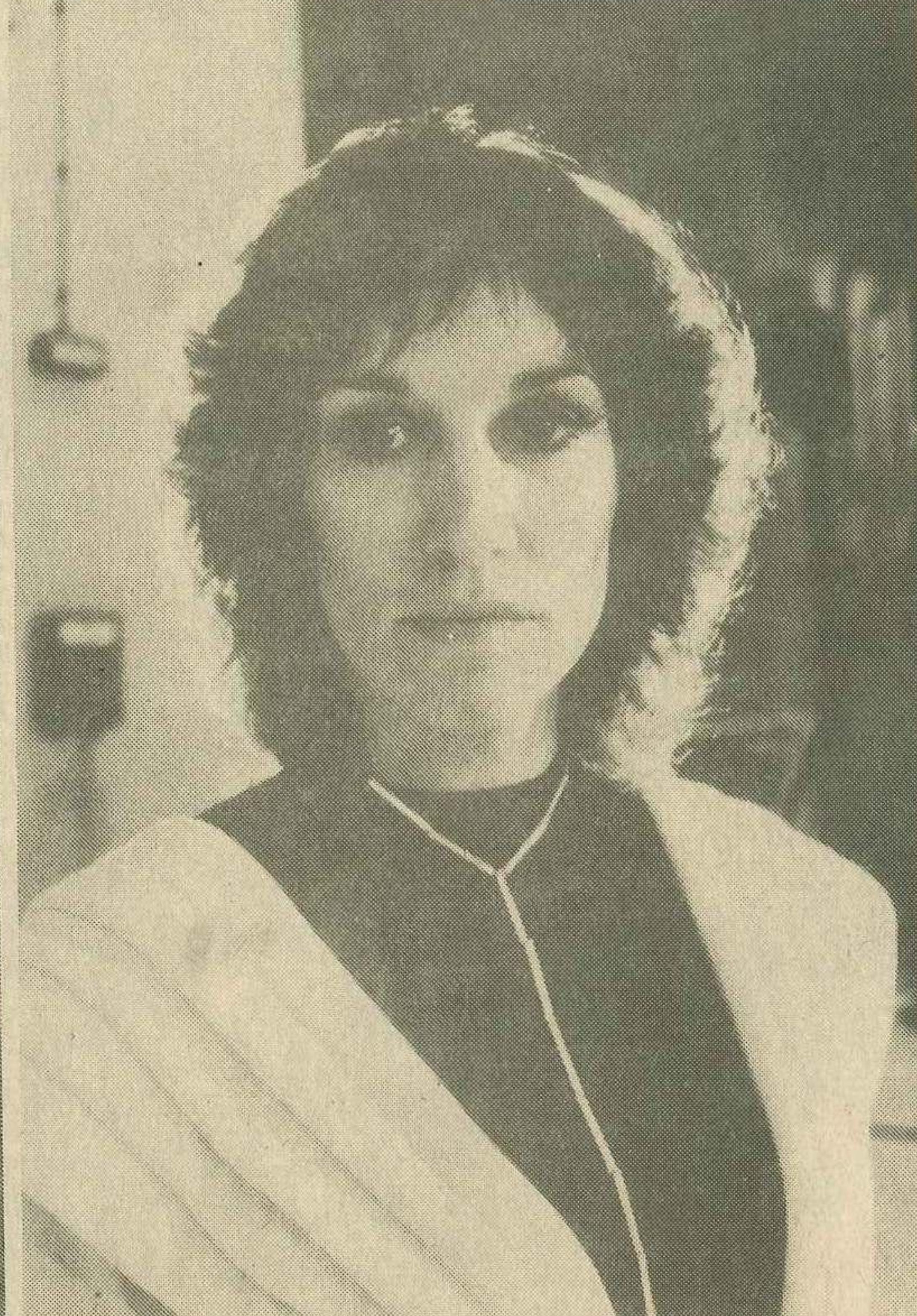




People still ask me to give them that 'Avon' look.



Jenna had a concealed crush on Blake.



Cally was the easiest and the most difficult to love.

searched for, and found, the genius Ensor and, the supreme prize of the next episode — Orac. However, the script department changed its collective mind.

It was reckoned that, if Avon was to get his hands on Orac before Blake, our eponymous hero would have the devil of a job getting it away from him and you would have been presented with an entirely different *second* series. The clash between Avon and Blake might have reached its bloodthirsty peak a little prematurely.

So it came to pass that, when Meegat opened the door of her subterranean hideaway and saved Avon, Vila and Gan from the hirsute villains who had already captured the accident prone

Jenna, she turned to the man most likely!

Let's face it, Vila wouldn't have known how to handle her and she would have been incapable of handling the giant Gan.

When a beautiful woman, in a figure hugging dress with a neckline that revealed much to alarm the imagination, clung so lasciviously to him, Avon could be forgiven for assuming that Blake's Seven had landed in a Ruritanian paradise.

Suzan Farmer, the lovely actress who portrayed Meegat, did not take kindly to spending the rehearsal period and recording days on her knees at my feet — but I loved it! The unusual quality that she possessed — in an otherwise manly Universe — was that

she was utterly feminine.

If Servalan could separate the men from the boys, Avon was adept at recognising a 'real woman'.

Of course, Meegat was not a fool. She recognised that Avon was capable of launching the space ship that contained the breeding stock of her people, this being her purpose in life.

Of all the criticism that could justly be levelled at Avon, I like to think that the fact that he bothered to keep his promise to Meegat and launch the ship on her behalf indicated a side to the man that was honourable and faintly sentimental. It also revealed that a certain tenderness would not leave him unaffected. Sadly, this aspect of his personality was rarely

touched upon again.

Blake's obsessive drive against the Federation captured most of Avon's attention hereafter and he was not in a strong enough position to challenge Blake in order to champion Meegat.

Had the script remained unaltered — and Blake had met Meegat — I suspect that the impact of the episode would have been very different. For one thing, Blake, the great democrat, would have been appalled to find himself mistaken for a god. Avon took that in his stride. His idea of democracy was that everybody should do what he said!

Not surprisingly, given our transmission time, sex was rarely permitted to raise its head in Outer Space. No relationship was

permitted to run a course. Our two heroines, Jenna and Cally, though feminine to a degree, dressed and behaved like men.

Jenna, it was intimated, had a concealed crush on Blake. Gan's woman had been murdered before the series started. Vila was not to meet Kerril for some time and Avon's interest in Cally was tempered somewhat by the fact that he considered her, at this time, an undesirable alien!

Servalan? Well, that's another story.

So, up to this point, the only possible, 'relationship', was the tenuous one between Avon and Meegat. It is surprising to note that the coldest, the most ruthless member of the cast was the first to show any feeling for a mere

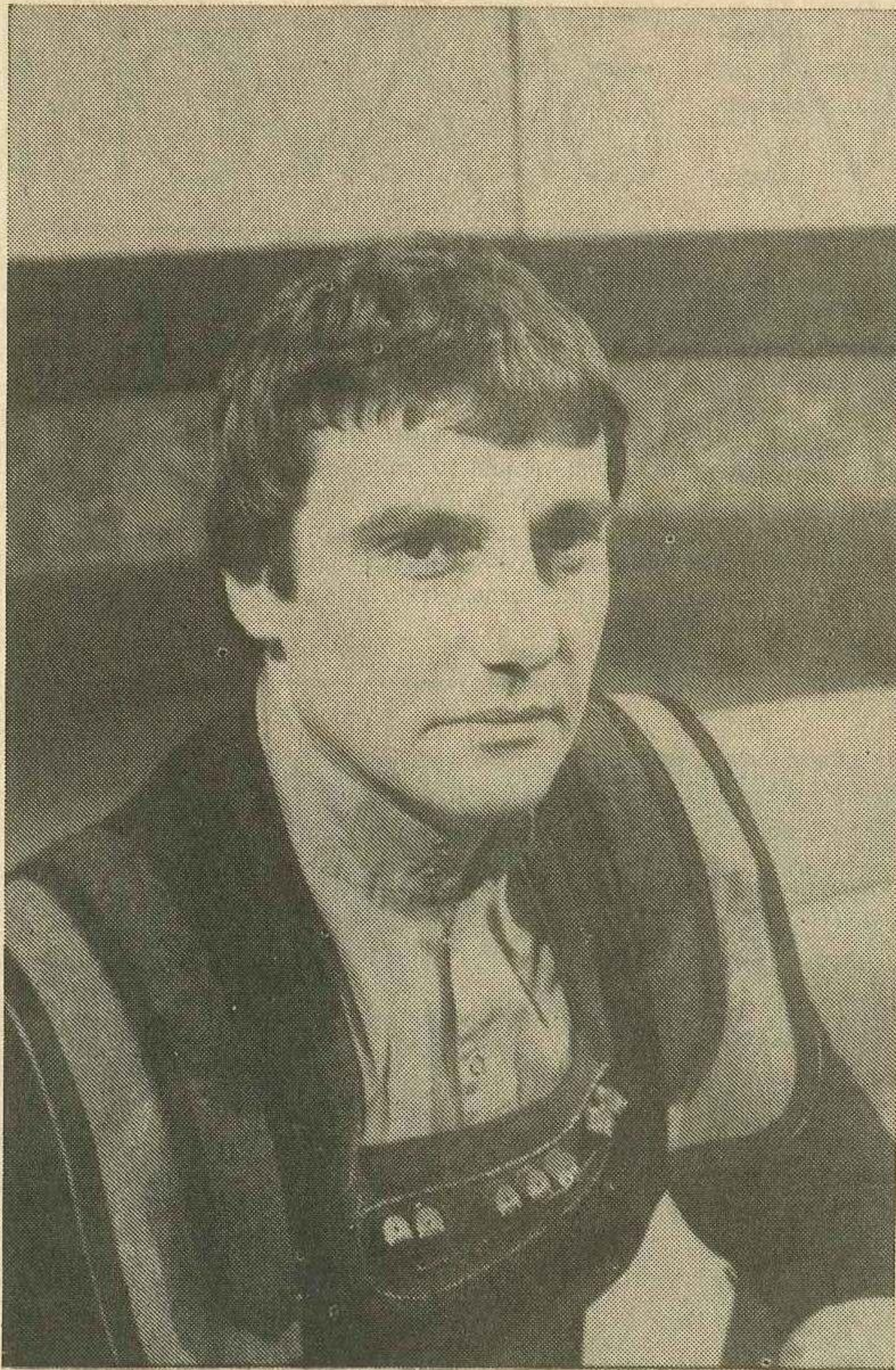
woman. Perhaps the script department missed out on something here.

In any event, Avon's attitude to women was never to be the same again. His deep mistrust of them would be nurtured by betrayal.

Perhaps the script writers in question were dyed in the wool cynics. Or perhaps, more simply, it was difficult to write a real woman into a Science Fiction adventure series.

But, one thing that I tried to introduce into the character of Avon was that, however badly he might be treated by women, there remained an affection for them. Avon liked girls!

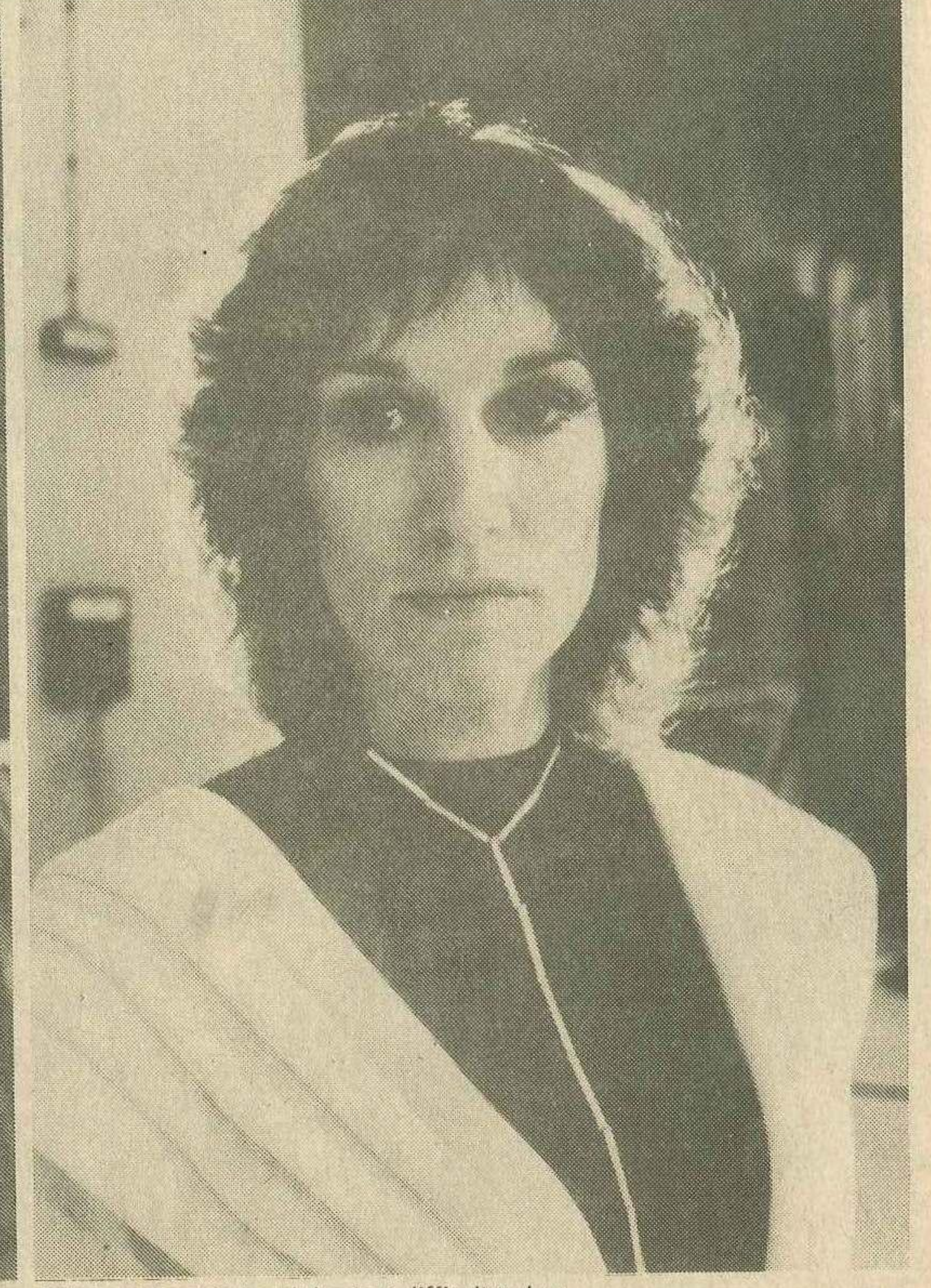
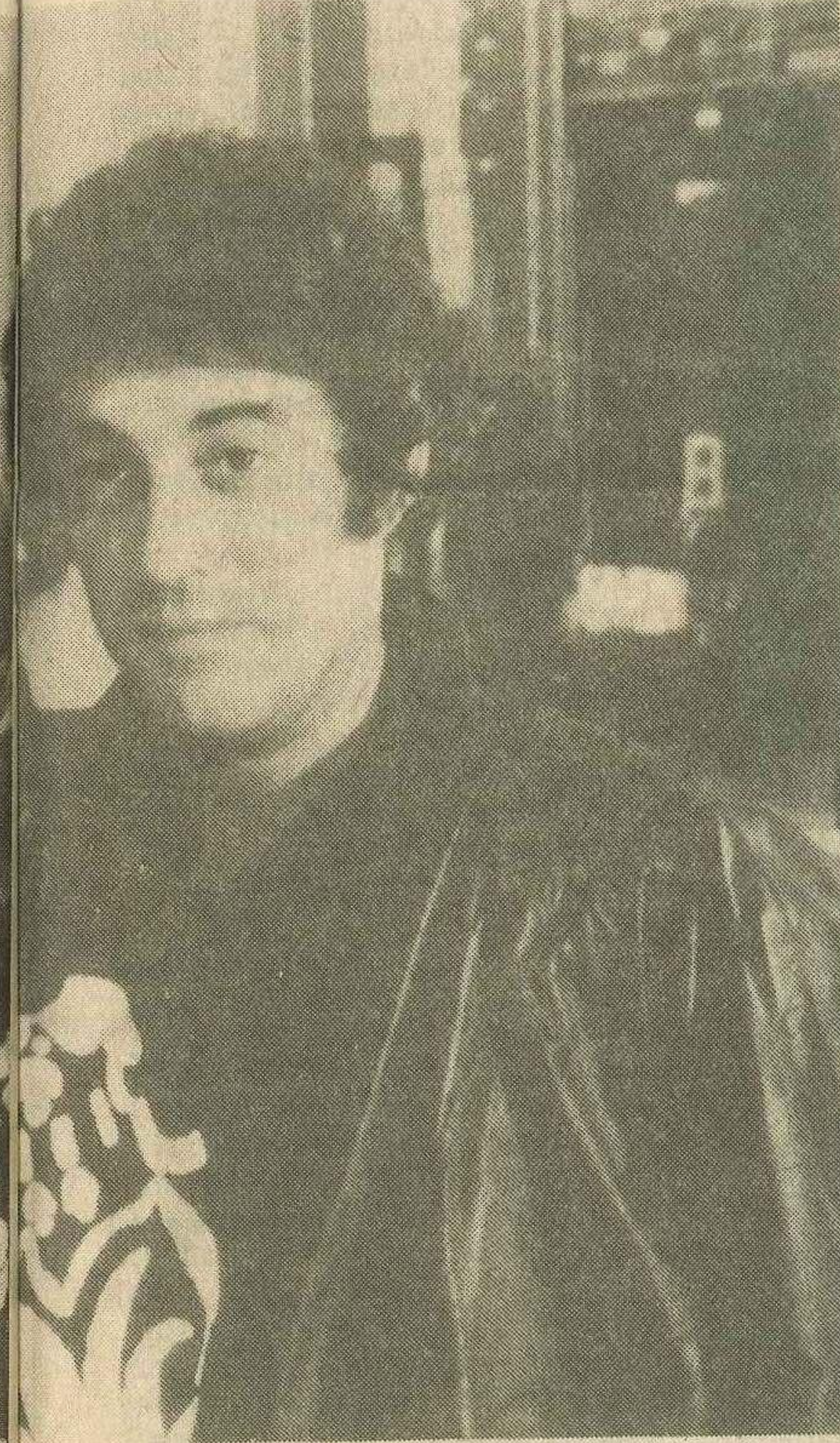
What a pity he never got to settle down with one in the end. If he had, he might well have settled



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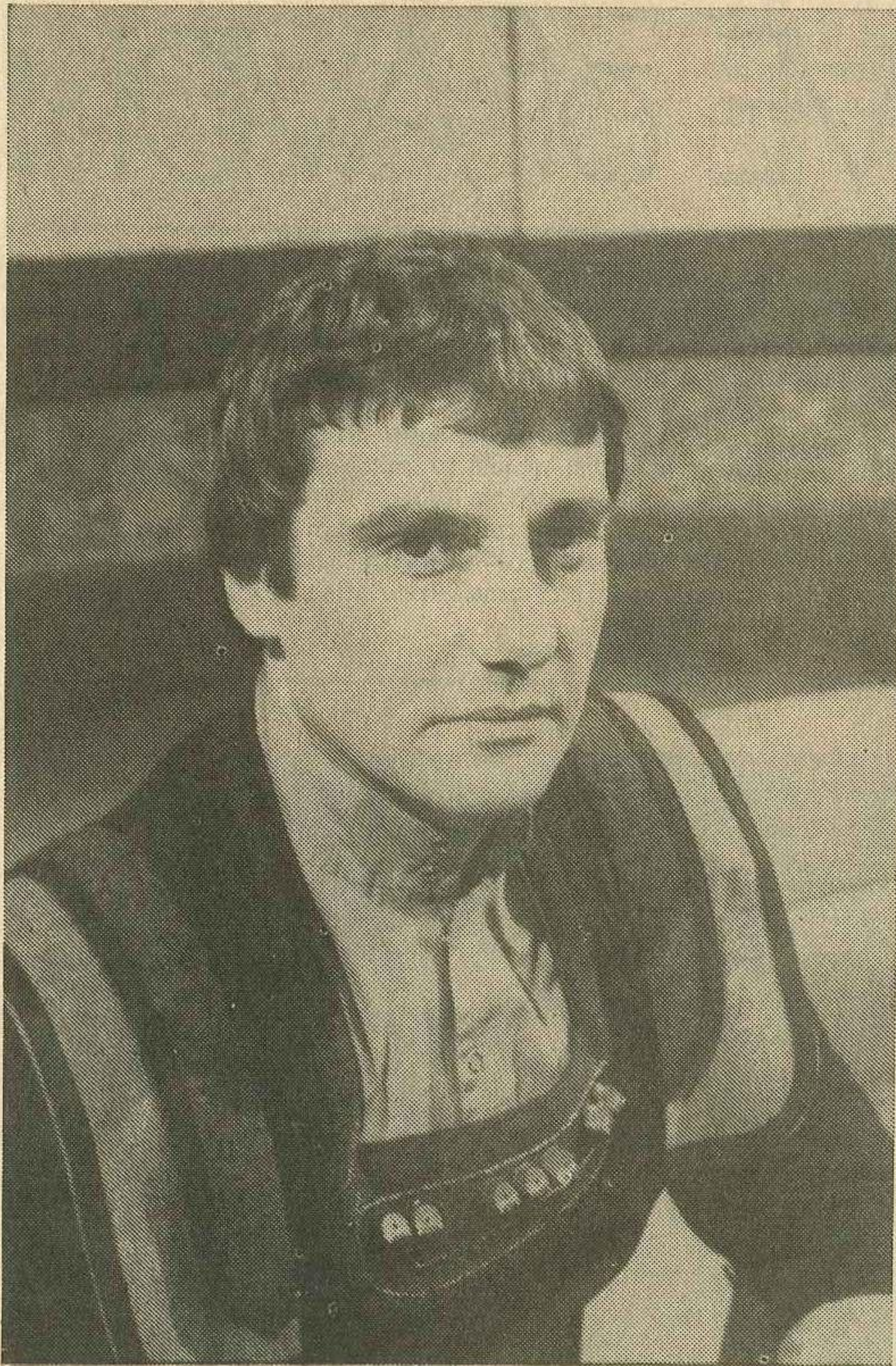
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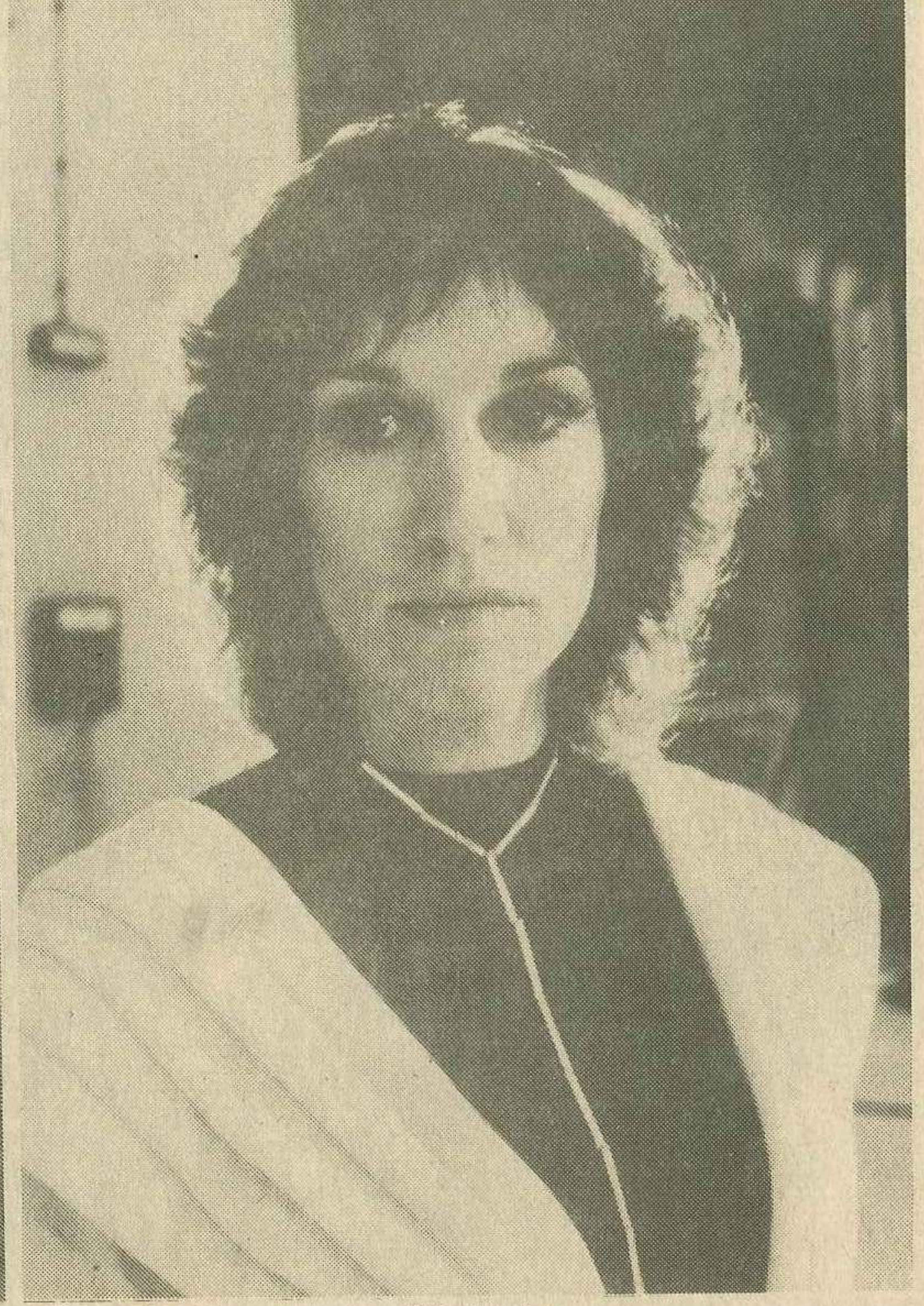
What a pity he never got to settle down with one in the end. If he had, he might well have settled



People still ask me to give them that 'Avon' look.



Jenna had a concealed crush on Blake.



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searched for, and found, the genius Ensor and, the supreme prize of the next episode — Orac. However, the script department changed its collective mind.

It was reckoned that, if Avon was to get his hands on Orac before Blake, our eponymous hero would have the devil of a job getting it away from him and you would have been presented with an entirely different *second* series. The clash between Avon and Blake might have reached its bloodthirsty peak a little prematurely.

So it came to pass that, when Meegat opened the door of her subterranean hideaway and saved Avon, Vila and Gan from the hirsute villains who had already captured the accident prone

Jenna, she turned to the man most likely!

Let's face it, Vila wouldn't have known how to handle her and she would have been incapable of handling the giant Gan.

When a beautiful woman, in a figure hugging dress with a neckline that revealed much to alarm the imagination, clung so lasciviously to him, Avon could be forgiven for assuming that Blake's Seven had landed in a Ruritanian paradise.

Suzan Farmer, the lovely actress who portrayed Meegat, did not take kindly to spending the rehearsal period and recording days on her knees at my feet — but I loved it! The unusual quality that she possessed — in an otherwise manly Universe — was that

she was utterly feminine.

If Servalan could separate the men from the boys, Avon was adept at recognising a 'real woman'.

Of course, Meegat was not a fool. She recognised that Avon was capable of launching the space ship that contained the breeding stock of her people, this being her purpose in life.

Of all the criticism that could justly be levelled at Avon, I like to think that the fact that he bothered to keep his promise to Meegat and launch the ship on her behalf indicated a side to the man that was honourable and faintly sentimental. It also revealed that a certain tenderness would not leave him unaffected. Sadly, this aspect of his personality was rarely

touched upon again.

Blake's obsessive drive against the Federation captured most of Avon's attention hereafter and he was not in a strong enough position to challenge Blake in order to champion Meegat.

Had the script remained unaltered — and Blake had met Meegat — I suspect that the impact of the episode would have been very different. For one thing, Blake, the great democrat, would have been appalled to find himself mistaken for a god. Avon took that in his stride. His idea of democracy was that everybody should do what he said!

Not surprisingly, given our transmission time, sex was rarely permitted to raise its head in Outer Space. No relationship was

permitted to run a course. Our two heroines, Jenna and Cally, though feminine to a degree, dressed and behaved like men.

Jenna, it was intimated, had a concealed crush on Blake. Gan's woman had been murdered before the series started. Vila was not to meet Kerril for some time and Avon's interest in Cally was tempered somewhat by the fact that he considered her, at this time, an undesirable alien!

Servalan? Well, that's another story.

So, up to this point, the only possible, 'relationship', was the tenuous one between Avon and Meegat. It is surprising to note that the coldest, the most ruthless member of the cast was the first to show any feeling for a mere

woman. Perhaps the script department missed out on something here.

In any event, Avon's attitude to women was never to be the same again. His deep mistrust of them would be nurtured by betrayal.

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But, one thing that I tried to introduce into the character of Avon was that, however badly he might be treated by women, there remained an affection for them. Avon liked girls!

What a pity he never got to settle down with one in the end. If he had, he might well have settled



Tarrant would moon over Zeeona . . .

for the soft warmth of Meegat — the antithesis of the screaming viragos of any Women's movement.

Male chauvenist, I hear you say. Perhaps, but I think not. At any rate, male chauvinist or not, Avon was the only one left standing after the final shootout.

At least the script department knew whose side it was on!

★ ★ ★ ★

CALLY

I know of half a dozen cats, three dogs and two little girls called Cally.

There are two boys who must go through life with the name of Avon. I even know of a house called 'Liberator', and many of you will have heard of "Avon's Villa".

It is entirely possible, if some-

what alarming, that there may be someone, somewhere, called Servalan! It is interesting to note, however, that Cally is the name most often quoted.

The first time I came aware of her effect on people was when I was located for the second series and met two children. The little boy wanted me to show him how my gun worked. He then told me, very quietly, that he thought Avon was very brave.

His companion, a little girl, was possessed of a shrewd romanticism. She said;

"I like Cally — I don't like you but," she paused for a long while, "... you love her, don't you?"

Of all the characters in our series, Cally was the easiest, and the most difficult, to love. That fierce emotion could only be applied to her. No other female character possessed just that — character!

In the early days, we were told, there was to be a love/hate relationship forged between Avon and Cally. It never materialised.

Blake, the JPR Williams of Outer Space, would claim the sugar coated Wonder Woman, Jenna. Vila would woo, and sadly reject, the scruffy gamin, Kerril. Tarrant would moon, calf sick, over the punk rocker, Zeeona. But, the relationship that seemed to grasp the imagination was a relationship that didn't really exist.

It was as if two opposites, meant for each other, did not understand, or accept, their empathy. The audience seemed to be whispering — don't look at Servalan or Anna Grant or Meegat. Here is Cally, right on your doorstep.

The more Jan Chappel and I researched our, 'relationship', and found nothing, the more you out there, watching us in the dark, told us that there was definitely something. It was an accident of personality perhaps.

One of Avon's early reactions to Cally was that — "She should be dumped!" At this point, an alien influence had gained control of her and was using her to attempt to destroy the rest. Avon realised that, even when the influence was removed, Cally would possess a quality that was as disturbing as it was exciting.

Like Avon himself, and like no other, Cally was dangerous! She was not beautiful, yet she had almost perfectly sculptured features.

She was not slinky and voluptuous like Servalan, yet she had a certain quiet sex appeal. Occasionally, there was a hint of neurosis — a spasm of irrationality. She was very tough, yet she was intensely vulnerable.

There is nothing quite like the woman who appears the equal of any man, yet is tender and aware and, despite masculine attire and martial art capability, can suggest the protective warmth that Cally, undoubtedly, could.

Perhaps Avon might have been better off if a relationship had been developed. But, remembering how the women in his life usually ended up, Cally might not have got much out of it.

Tanith Lee tried to suggest something in, "Sarcophagus", if you remember, but no other writer appeared interested in the theme.

Towards the end, it became clear, the series lacked something because Cally, or somebody like her, was not there. When she died she called two names — Blake and Vila.

Judging by the many letters received, many of you would have preferred it if she had called another. The fact that she didn't might explain Avon's brusque dismissal of her death. Or perhaps it illustrated something that you could understand and that the script writers didn't.

Inevitably, because of the magic word Seven, she was replaced. But Soolin, the pretty, acid gunfighter, was a kewpie doll in place of a siren and with Cally died any possible, 'relationship', for Avon.

The tough and the tender would never combine and any real feeling that Avon might have displayed in the earlier series became hidden behind a mask of ruthlessness.

Cally had contributed a certain morality to the series and coupled it with the fascination of mystery, this latter characteristic attributable to her alien background which was never fully explored.

The message of the series appeared to be that the aliens and



Soolin, the pretty, acid gunfighter, was a kewpie doll . . .

the computers were the nicest 'people'. The human beings didn't come out of it quite so well.

Come to think of it, machines are usually more dependable and, Steven Spielberg in 'E-T' and 'Close Encounters', seems to be suggesting that aliens might have something to teach us.

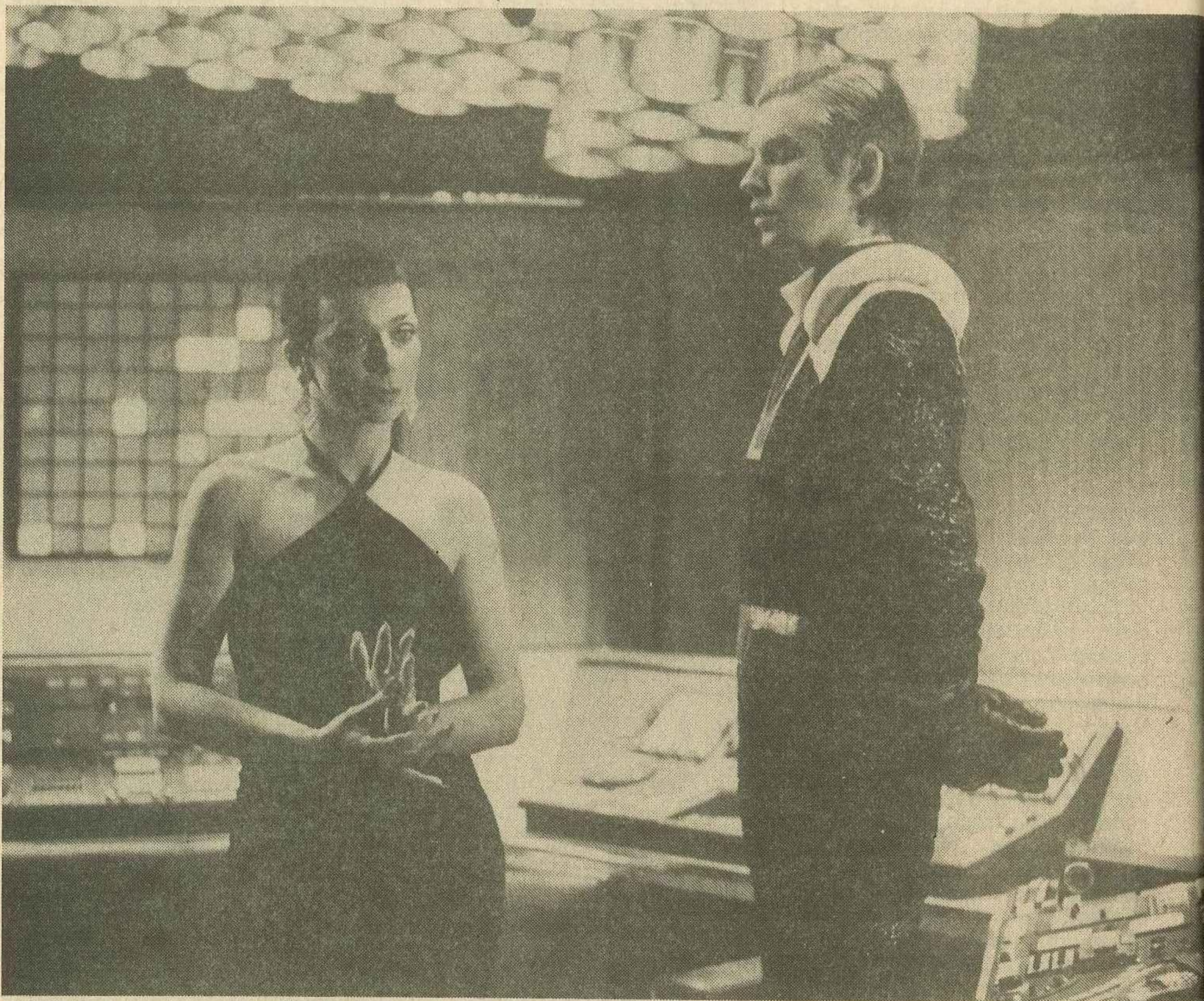
Jan Chappel once told me that I was very, "laid back". She might have described herself and Cally in

the same way.

Cool, distant, yet humorous appraisal of a situation might be a quality alien to most of us, but it is a quality that is to be admired. Cally, like Mr Spielberg, taught Avon that.

Servalan, you could say, 'untaught' him — but that's another story! ●

DON'T MISS PAUL DARROW'S 'FOR THE LOVE OF AVON' NEXT MONTH!



This is all very well but will it work?

The visual display units flashed, facts and figures appearing for a few brief seconds before being replaced by even more complex formulae with accompanying graphs. After a few minutes of such information, Servalan reached over, snapping off the machine. She sank back in her chair, pressed her fingers together in irritation then stared at the ship's captain. 'This is all very well. I understood about half of that datalogue, but the question still remains, will it work?'

'Varngas is certain it will, commissioner. He is waiting outside.'

'And the machine?'

'Er,' hesitated the captain, 'I believe it has yet to be built.'

'What?' exploded Servalan. 'He comes here to waste my time on schemes which cannot be put into effect immediately . . . and expects me to support his wild theories.'

'He's not the crank you think, commissioner,' interjected the captain defensively. 'I know him from our time at the academy together. He has a brilliant mind

. . . one far beyond his years. He would never come to you with something which would not work. After all, he knows . . .' The captain's voice trailed off.

'Know's what?' demanded Servalan.

'I . . . I was going to say he knows your reputation, commissioner.'

Servalan permitted herself a sly smile. The remark pleased her. 'In that case,' she purred, 'send him in.' Servalan turned once again to the visual display machines beside her and pressed the activate

THE COMET



He expects me to support his wild theories . . . ?

button. She might not understand all the information shown there, but when Varnogas entered, it would seem to him she was aware of every detail. She liked to give that impression.

Varnogas was even more nervous than when he first entered. He felt his palms moisten as Servalan scrutinised his plans once more. There was nothing in her expression to give any hint of her feelings. He had heard many stories about the woman in black sitting opposite him but none

hinted at the sheer sensuality of the person most feared in all the Federation. He was beginning to understand why men found her both fascinating and frightening at the same time. Vargas thought about saying something, then thought better of it. He would wait for her to speak first.

Servalan looked sternly at the diagrams laid before her. They seemed impressive in every detail although the complex wiring and programme calculations jotted beside the drawings in a spidery

hand meant nothing to her. No, what really captured her imagination was the thought of such a project actually coming to fruition although not in the way the creator had intended. She glanced at the young, bearded and very nervous man seated across the desk from her. Her eyes held his gaze for a few seconds before he averted his glance. She smiled. Vargas was indeed terrified of her. It made her want to laugh out loud but that would probably make the poor young man run a mile. Instead, she

calmly folded her arms, leaned back in her chair and dropped her voice to a soft purr. 'If I placed the facilities of the federation fleet workshop at your disposal, how long would it take to construct the machine, Vargas?'

The young man was caught by surprise. He had expected a hard battle to justify his calculations. He cleared his throat but could not get rid of the hard lump which seemed to fill his larynx. 'About a month,' he said hoarsely.

'Complete in every respect?'

'R. . . ready to fly, commissioner.'

'Then you have it. My captain will make all the necessary arrangements.'

'I. . . I don't know what to say, commissioner,' stammered Vargas.

'Then say nothing.' Servalan waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. 'Take all your plans with you and start work within the hour.'

When Vargas, beaming all over his face, had made his exit, bowing and scraping all the way to the floor, Servalan's captain turned to her with a look of pleasant surprise.

'You've certainly made his day, commissioner. I don't believe Vargas ever thought you would back his prototype design so quickly.'

'When I want something I generally get it,' she smiled.

'But what would you do with such a small ship?'

'I have a very special job in mind. Very special indeed.'

'May I ask what, commissioner?'

Servalan shot her captain a withering glance. 'No you may not!'

The captain bowed in obedience, sensing it was time to retire from his mistress's presence. She had one of her moods coming on. When the door closed behind him Servalan swung her chair to face a small screen mounted on the side of her desk. She pressed red button one, causing an image to flash to the screen. It was the face of a man. 'This time,' she hissed. 'This time you will be caught. Not even you will realise the plan until it is too late. You will be my prisoner! You hear me. . . Avon?'

'Are you certain it will do all you say, Vargas?' Servalan was standing at one of the spaceview windows overlooking the test platform of the Federation Fleet workshop orbiting planet Earth.

'I've checked and re-checked every detail, commissioner.'



When I want something I generally get it!

Vargas was sweating even more than normal but his own belief in his designs gave him a confidence normally lacking in his personality. 'Your own pilot is at the controls for the initial stages and the pre-programming is complete. Just say the word and the ship will go through its paces.'

Servalan studied the small, silver ship. Capable of carrying only two people in comfort, looking like a small bullet with tiny fins at the back it well deserved the name crudely painted on the side. . . . COMET. It looked as though it had been hammered together in the back yard of some space en-

thusiast's home but, if it performed as Vargas promised, it would fit exactly with her plans. 'Start the test,' she said in a low voice.

Vargas, trembling with excitement, leaned forward to the communicator.

'Initiate manoeuvre take-off,' he called. 'You have control, Kagin.' With that, a small spurt of orange flame issued from the engine area. The Comet eased up and forward in a smooth exit from the pad, turning towards the silver crescent of the Moon.

'All controls handle perfectly,' called back the firm voice from the communicator. 'Sensors show

clear line of flight past the Moon. Ready for pre-programmed sequence.'

Vargas, wiping his sticky hands on his trousers, lifted a small, shiny control box from a table nearby. Servalan frowned as she watched Vargas reach for the initiator button. 'Do it,' she hissed. 'Do it now!'

The instant Vargas made contact with the button there came a bright flash from outside the window. For an instant everyone thought the Comet had exploded but, as the flare cleared, the tiny pin-prick of light shooting off towards the Moon became obvious. A gasp

was heard from the communicator as the pilot lost consciousness.

'What speed?' asked Servalan excitedly.

'Nought to five times the speed of light in two seconds,' replied Vargas, a new confidence in his voice.

'What is the course set to fly?'

'To the edge of the solar system and back again.'

'Without hitting anything in its path?' Servalan sounded amazed.

'The flight controls are so sensitive they can take corrective action long before any trouble threatens the Comet's flight, commissioner.'

'And where will the ship arrive?'

'Right back where it started, commissioner. The pilot has no control over the flight at all. Everything is contained in the memory of the ship.'

Servalan fingered her lips, an old excitement building up inside her. If all this was true and proved to work then her plan could not fail. No ship, even the Scorpio, could match the Comet's speed.

'It's coming back,' called an operator studying a screen to one side.

'The speed?' called Vargas.

'Reducing to normal flight approach,' confirmed the operator. 'It will arrive in eight seconds from now.'

Through the glass Servalan watched as the tiny pin-prick of light, glowing red against the whiteness of the stars, grew larger as it neared the landing pad. In a perfectly controlled approach, the Comet touched down exactly at the point from which it had left. Technicians moved forward in their space suits to open the hatch. Vargas grabbed the loud-hailer microphone.

'Don't touch the hull,' he yelled. 'Leave the ship for two minutes until the radiation it has collected has been dispersed.'

'Impressive,' mused Servalan. 'Very impressive. The proof of success, however, is whether the pilot has survived.'

Vargas was sweating once more. Servalan had pin-pointed the only aspect of the flight which also worried Vargas. No-one had ever experienced such a massive surge in speed before. There was no way of knowing if the human frame could cope with acceleration of that magnitude . . . not until the door was opening. As he looked down on the pad the radiation dispersal machine was withdrawing from the Comet. Men were moving towards the hatch. Vargas had his heart in his mouth.

As the hatch was eased open, Vargas felt Servalan close beside him. Her proximity made him sweat even more. What would she do if her own captain had died in his machine? He shuddered at the prospect. Then, as a dark-suited figure emerged from the Comet, smiling and waving towards the window, Vargas gasped then burst into a high-pitched nervous laugh. Servalan also sighed. She turned to beam at Vargas.

'You will be well rewarded,' she purred. 'You have given me the vehicle I need at the time when I

I have a very special mission for him



need it most.' Servalan turned to one of her operators sitting nearby. 'I'm going to my office. Send my captain there as soon as he arrives. I have a very special mission for him. Very special indeed . . .'

'There's a ship entering orbit,' called Dayna, flickering a battery of switches in front of her.

'Identify the craft and predict its approach,' commanded Avon's voice from the communicator.

'Looks like a Trader, mark two, or something as ancient. A real old tub,' offered Vila, leaning over Dayna's shoulder.

'It could still be dangerous. Keep tracking it,' ordered Avon. 'I'm coming through to join you.'

'He's getting jumpy,' mused Vila, trying to clarify the image on the screen in front of him.

'With the plasma generator on Scorpio giving trouble it's worrying him. He doesn't like to have the main armament of the ship out of action like that. He's not even certain we have the materials or parts to repair it.'

Vila moved to a wall chart of the planet Xenon. He frowned as a small blip appeared on an area known as the 'tip'. 'Well, he'll have to do something about it pretty soon. That Trader's landed close to the area of the tip. He'll have to go out and investigate. We must know what they want there.'

'Why me, Vila?'

Avon's voice made Vila jump. 'Do you have to creep around like that?' he protested. 'You'll give me a heart attack one of these days!'

'Your bio-functions are of no interest to me,' growled Avon. 'Now what were you saying about the ship having landed?'

'There. Vila pointed to the blip beside the tip. 'Landed not far from that pile of junk which was once two federation ships. Remember? They're the ones we shot down over a year ago. What could anyone want with such a pile of junk?'

'As you so rightly said, Vila, we will have to find out. You and Dayna get ready. We'll pay that trader a visit.'

'But what about the base control area,' protested Vila making a wide sweeping gesture with his hand. 'We can't leave it unattended. Why don't I stay here and keep an eye on things?'

'Because I said you go, Vila,' growled Avon. 'I've already alerted Soolin and Tarrant. They will be here any second. Get your guns. We leave immediately.'

'Planet number eight,' said the

bearded man, adjusting his unfamiliar, grubby clothes. 'The one listed as Xenon. Have landed beside the wreckage of two unidentified ships. Will remain on the surface for two hours in the hope of making contact.' With that, the bearded figure switched off his transmitter, took a final look at himself in a mirror, pressed down a corner of his artificial beard then made his way to the airlock. Would this planet prove as fruitless as all the others? He hoped not. Commissioner Sleer was getting impatient. The quiet hum of the sliding door and the flashing green



*What about Tarrant . . . or even Dayna?
They'd be more use . . .*

light confirmed the atmosphere was able to bear human life forms.

The twisted and charred wreckage of the vast ships gave no clue to their origin. They could have crashed here in any one of a hundred conflicts which plagued this perimeter area of the system. They might even have collided. Kagin shrugged his shoulders then began rummaging through the piles of twisted metal. He had to act his part. The sight of an almost intact atomic charger caught his eye. Unfolding his small toolkit he set to work removing it. At least, he thought, he would have something

to show for yet another fruitless visit. It was as he was removing the last bolt he felt the pressure of cold metal against the back of his neck.

'Get up. Slow and easy. Move outside!'

Kagin dropped his tools causing a loud ringing in the wrecked hull. He knew that voice only too well. His mistress, commissioner Sleer, played the security tapes of him often enough.

'Who are you and what are you doing here?' It was Vila's worried face Kagin first saw as he emerged from the wreck. He had not yet seen Avon although Avon's gun was still pressed into the nape of his neck.

'Who wants to know?' Kagin was trying to act defiant.

'We will ask the questions, friend.' It was Avon's voice from behind. The tone was deep and threatening.

'Look,' began Kagin, making it as authentic as possible, 'if you're going to rob me get on with it and leave me to do my work. It's not the first time I've been held up. You get used to it in my line of work.'

'And just what is your work, friend?' It was Avon's voice again.

'Salvage, of course.' Kagin jerked a thumb towards his nearby ship. 'The old tub's full of it. Not that much of it would be of value to you. This trip's been a bit thin . . . but I've got a pretty good selection of stuff at my base on Pargan 4. Anytime you want spares or the like, look me up.' Kagin was more relaxed now. He sensed Avon was not about to pull the trigger. He continued. 'Well? What's it going to be? Are you going to get on with robbing me or can I get back to work?'

There was a moment's hesitation before Avon lowered his gun. After all, the bearded man was unarmed. 'We're not going to rob you, friend.' Avon moved to where Kagin could see him. He was exactly as displayed on Servalan's visual record list. A little older, perhaps, but not much. It was the eyes, though. The power and danger lurking behind them was much, much more evident . . . and all that power was directed towards Kagin. 'Have you got spares for a plasma regenerator?'

'Uh?' Avon's question had caught him off balance.

'Well?' Avon was holstering his gun. 'If you have I will pay you well.'

'I . . . I'm not sure. I'll have to check. Th . . . the ship—all the details are in there.'

'Then I shall come with you.' Avon flashed what passed for a smile, his arm indicating the way to Kagin's ship.

'Er . . . sure. Let's take a look.'

While Avon walked with Kagin towards his ship, Vila and Dayna relaxed but Vila was far from happy. 'A space scrap dealer,' he muttered. 'All that panic for nothing.'

'It could have been a federation ship, Vila. We can't be too careful.'

'It could still be, said Vila suspiciously. 'We'd better follow and keep an eye on the pair of them.'

'Bit of luck running into you like this,' said Kagin cautiously, moving towards a small and compact battery of computers inside his scruffy ship. 'This place your usual base?'

'No.' Avon was suddenly on his guard. 'We are just visitors ourselves.'

'How did you spot me so quickly? I didn't see any other ships around when I came into land.'

'You ask a lot of questions,' rumbled Avon.

'Oh, just trying to be sociable,' countered Kagin. 'Good for business, you know. Now,' he pressed several buttons lighting up the computers, 'it was a plasma regenerator, wasn't it?' Avon nodded. A series of numbers sprang to the screen with curious symbols beside them. Avon frowned. Kagin anticipated his question. 'My kind of shorthand,' he smiled. He studied the rolling lists for a few seconds then pointed to one line of meaningless figures. 'Yep. There you are. Suitable for any kind of installation. Expensive, though.'

'Price is no object,' said Avon flatly.

'Then we can do business!' Kagin turned to smile at Avon. 'Want me to deliver or will you collect?'

'Deliver,' said Avon. 'I shall give you a space coordinate and time.'

'Oh, yes? And how do I know you will come with the credits? I'm not in the habit of taking orders like that on trust.'

'I have already proved myself to you,' retorted Avon.

'How's that?'

'I've spared your life,' said Avon giving Kagin one of his looks.

'Er. yeah. Okay, I'll accept that.' Kagin swallowed hard. 'Now, what location for the pick-up?'

Avon was about to give details when Vila arrived beside them. He touched Avon's arm and indicated towards the hatch leading to the

hold. 'Come and have a look at this.' Avon followed without a word.

In the depths of the darkened hold, firmly clamped to a small launching trolley lay the Comet. Pieces of old and rusting machinery were stacked all round it.

'We could do with a little shuttle craft like that. Could be useful if Scorpio ran into trouble . . . or the like. What do you think?'

'Interesting,' mused Avon, moving closer to inspect the ship.

'Ah, the little Comet,' interrupted Kagin, arriving in the hold. 'Nice little thing. Picked it up for a song from a retired federation constructor. If you would like it, I'm sure we could arrange a special price.'

'Has it flown since you bought it?' Avon was clearing some of the debris from round the shining hull.

'Sure. I tried it before I bought it. Smooth as silk. I'd be sorry to part with it but, after all, it is business.'

'Then we shall do the same,' replied Avon. 'Vila, give the man a hand to get it outside. We're going for a test-flight.'

'We?' protested Vila.

'You and me,' confirmed Avon. 'I'll need someone to co-pilot on the flight.'

'What about Tarrant . . . or even Dayna? They'd be more use . . .'

'Vila!' There was menace in Avon's tone. Vila knew he was about to fly whether he liked it or not.

'All checks complete. Preparing for lift-off now.' Avon's voice sounded clear and cool.

'Good luck,' offered Kagin, trying to hide his delight.

'I'm going outside to watch,' said Dayna, making her way to the trader ship's airlock. 'This could be quite something.'

'Oh, it will,' confirmed Kagin. 'It will.'

Moments later the roar of the engines signalled the Comet's departure for the upper atmosphere. Two seconds after that, Kagin sprang into action causing outer doors to hiss shut and his engines start their run-up procedures.

'Hey!' yelled Dayna without a chance of her voice being heard above the din. 'What are you doing?' Her answer came only too quickly as a powerful down-blast of thrust sent her flying, her clothing singed by the searing heat. 'You creep!' she screeched at the top of her voice. Already her gun was in her hand, bolts of pure energy stabbing upwards towards

the fast disappearing ship. Those shots which did make contact had barely any effect. It was hopeless and she knew it.

'Tarrant—Soolin, can you hear me?' she called into her bracelet.

'What the devil's going on,' came back Tarrant's concerned voice. 'I've got two ships on the scanners!'

Dayna quickly explained as far as she knew. 'So what do we do now?'

'Get back here as fast as you can,' ordered Tarrant. 'I'm going to get Scorpio ready for flight. It looks like we've got trouble on our hands.'

'The plan is now in operation,' called Kagin excitedly, looking at the picture of his mistress on his screen. For the first time since he had worked for her, Servalan showed a real hint of emotion. She leaned towards the camera.

'You mean he's on board the Comet?'

'Yes. Avon and the one called Vila. They're both flying it now.'

'You mean you haven't pressed the pre-programming button yet?' There was a note of alarm in Servalan's voice.

'Doing it now,' called back Kagin as he thumped the shiny box beside him. 'The prisoners are on their way, commissioner.'

There came a pause then, when she spoke again, Servalan was once more in control of herself. 'Are you certain, Kagin?'

'I'd stake my life on it, commissioner.'

You just have, Kagin. You just have.'

'G. . . good grief. . .!' Vila was pinned to the back of his seat in the small cockpit of the shuttle by a sudden surge of power. 'Whatd'ya do that for?'

'I . . . didn't,' came Avon's tortured reply as he fought against the overpowering 'G' force nailing him to his seat. 'It's the ship! Something's happened . . . C. . . can't control!' With that, both men lost consciousness. The last thing either would remember was the sharp tilt of the craft's nose as it pointed up towards the blackness of space and the final flare of colour round the cockpit indicating their departure from Xenon's atmosphere. They were on their way to Servalan, neatly packaged in her shiny silver Comet transport.

'We nearly left without you,' yelled Tarrant as Dayna flung herself into her control seat on board Scorpio. 'Strap in. Here we go!' A split second later, the ship's powerful engines were driving it

high into Xenon's upper atmosphere while, all the time, Soolin called out the co-ordinates of their target craft . . . the Comet.

'Speed standard by fifteen and rising. Course eight-three-zero.'

'Verify speed,' commanded Tarrant. 'No ship that small can achieve that speed.'

'Speed now standard by twenty.' There was a note of alarm in Soolin's voice. 'It . . . it's still accelerating. It's gone off my scale but at a rough guess I'd say it's travelling at five times the speed of light!'

'It can't be,' protested Tarrant in disbelief. Then he looked at Soolin's serious face. Her expression said it all. 'It is, isn't it?'

'I'm afraid it is. There's no hope of us catching it.' She looked to both Tarrant and Dayna. 'I think we've lost Vila and Avon for good.'

An eerie glow filled the small cockpit in which the forms of Avon and Vila lay sprawled. Instruments flashed and blinked as data relevant to the flight was displayed to their unseeing eyes.

'Nnnnnfff . . .!' Avon was the first to stir. He opened and closed his eyes, trying to shake off the drowsiness which seemed to have turned his body to lead. As his focus improved he made out the form of Vila beside him. With a great effort he reached for his companion's arm and gave him a mighty shake. 'Vila! Come on, Vila. Got to waken up!'

'Uh . . .?'

'We're in real danger, Vila? I need your help!'

'Wh . . . whassa matter?'

'The Comet . . . we're not in control of it!'

Vila shook his head, trying to clear his senses. 'I . . . I can hardly move,' he said at length.

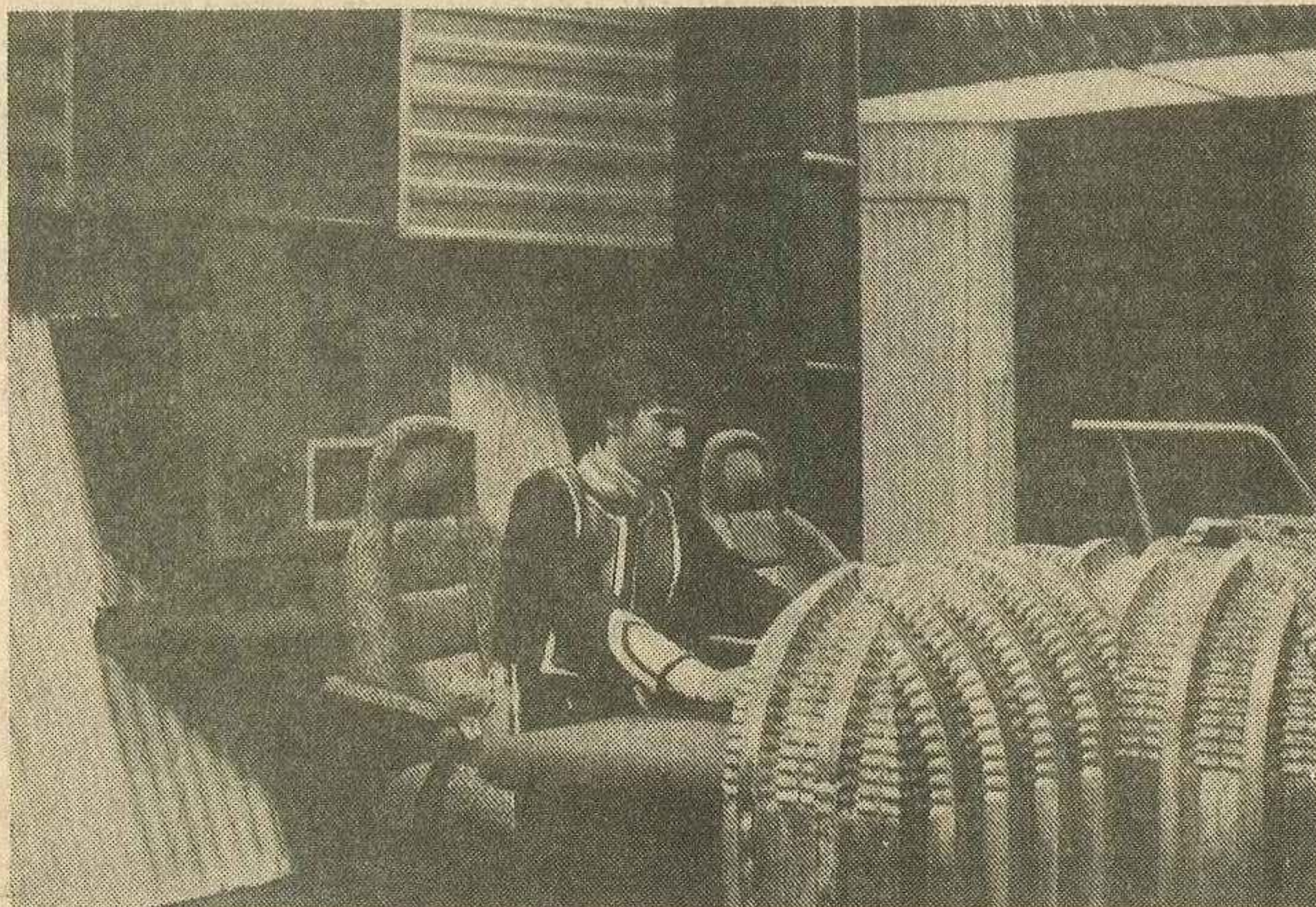
'It's the 'G' force,' rumbled Avon, reaching for the array of switches in front of him. 'It seems we're on a pre-programmed flight.'

'To where?'

'I'm sure you can use your imagination as well as me. That trader tricked us. I'll bet anything he was working for Servalan.'

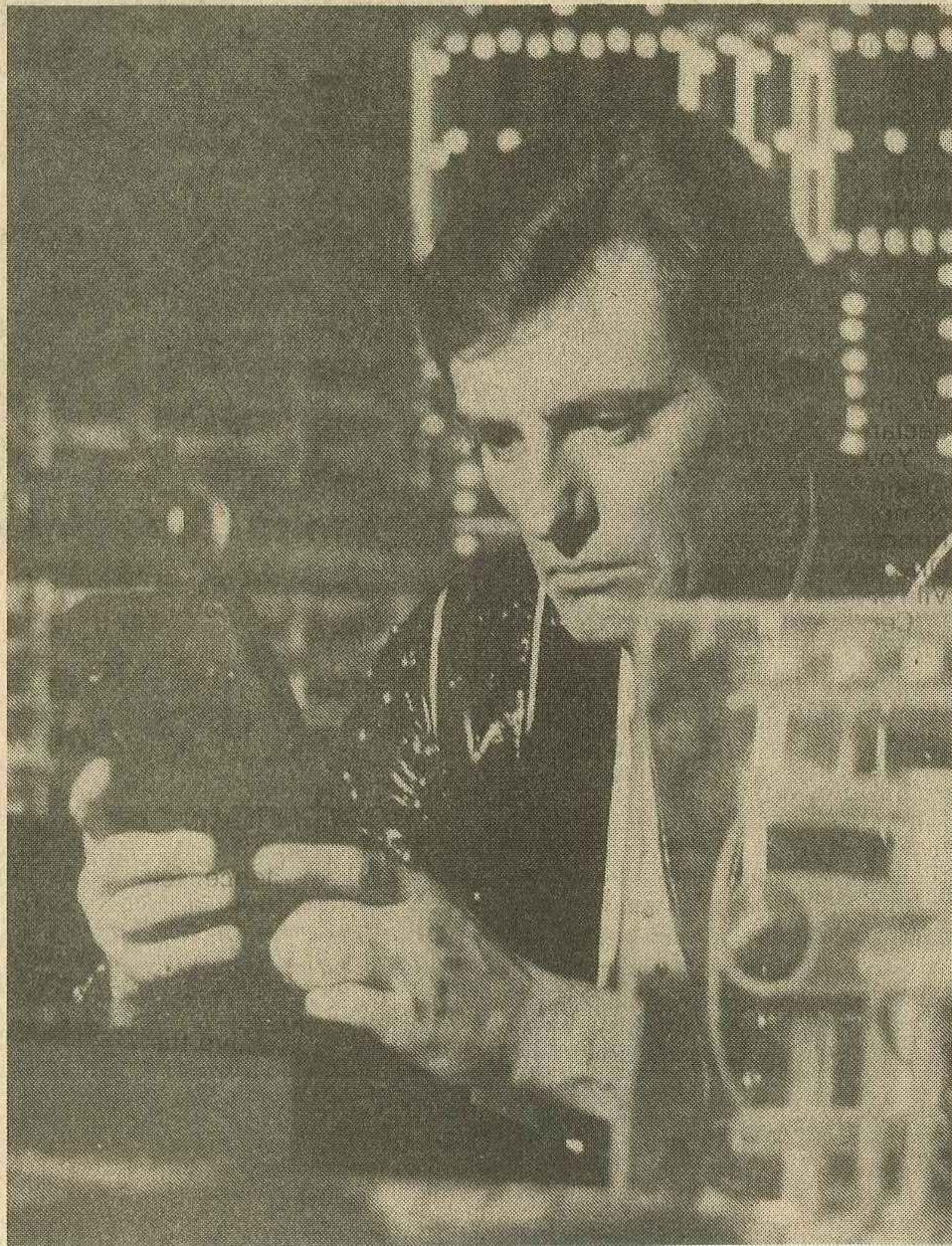
'Oh, no!' Vila wiped his face with his hand. He was perspiring freely. 'Then we're as good as dead.'

'Only if I can't stop this ship. Avon tried another battery of switches and controls. Nothing changed. The instruments continued to count off the vast distances at alarming speed. 'Damn it,' cursed Avon. 'There's no access



No ship can achieve that speed!

We should reach Federation Headquarters in thirty earth-standard minutes.



to the ship's computer through the panel!

'Then we are as good as dead.' Vila now seemed more resigned. 'What about our bracelets? Can't you contact Scorpio?'

'Not a chance. There's a radiation field round this ship which blocks all signals. Besides,' Avon turned to look into Vila's frowning face, 'at the speed we're travelling, Scorpio could never catch us.' Avon swept his gaze back to the instruments then withdrew a small calculator from inside his tunic. 'With the data displayed here, we should reach Federation Headquarters in thirty earth-standard minutes. I'm afraid this is the end.' He edged to one side as he withdrew his clip gun. 'We might as well get it over with. You first, then me.'

Vila stared at the gun with wide eyes. There was the all too familiar knot of fear in his stomach. 'I always said you'd be the death of me,' grumbled Vila. Avon burst out laughing—one of his deep and fearsome laughs, then his finger tightened round the trigger.

'Well, Tarrant?' asked Soolin. 'You're in charge of the ship now. What do we do?'

'Not so fast,' cut in Dayna. 'There's one source of advice we haven't used yet.' She jerked a thumb towards Orac sitting to one side of the Scorpio's flight deck. 'Avon would always ask Orac's advice before making a decision. We must do the same before we declare Avon and Vila lost for ever.'

'You're right,' agreed Tarrant, making his way to the small computer. He inserted the key bringing the machine to life. 'Well, Orac? Do you confirm Avon and Vila are beyond our help?'

'Certainly not,' snapped the machine. 'You have failed to take the only positive course of action open to you.'

'What's that?' asked a puzzled Dayna.

'Simple,' replied the computer. 'The small shuttle is on a pre-programmed course initiated by a relay signal device located on the bogus trader's ship. Find the ship, locate the control box, reverse the circuits and the Comet will return to its launch point on Xenon.'

The trio looked at each other. 'Of course,' agreed Tarrant. 'That's the answer! Orac, do you know where the trader ship is now?'

There came a short pause while Orac sifted through the mass of

data in his memory banks. The ship is on a parallel course to our present one lying three-thousand spacial below to port. Its speed is approximately half of this craft. Interception will take fifteen minutes.'

'Slave,' ordered Tarrant, 'correct course immediately. We've got to reach that trader as soon as possible.'

'I am at your service, sir. Course adjustment taking place now,' droned the machine.

'We could still save them,' beamed Dayna.



Well, Tarrant? What do we do now?

'Only if we intercept in time,' chattered Orac. 'I predict the Comet will arrive at Federation Headquarters within twenty minutes.'

A heavy silence fell over the crew. It was now a race against time. The lives of Avon and Vila were in their hands. Suddenly everyone was very serious again.

'You should have the Comet on your screens in just a few moments, commissioner. Everything has gone according to plan.'

'I'm very pleased with you,'

beamed Servalan from the monitor. 'You will be presented with the Federation's highest reward when you return, Kagin. You have delivered to me what no man has been able to deliver before.'

'It's all part of my duty,' smiled Kagin, knowing he would never want for anything in his life again.

'At last!' called Servalan excitedly. 'My operators confirm the Comet is approaching. I shall be in contact with you later!' With that the screen went dead. Kagin laughed. His mistress was like a child with a new toy but he also knew there was something more sinister in her desire to have Avon within her grasp. He wouldn't be in his shoes for all the credits in the universe. Kagin leaned back in his chair. It would be a long flight back but an enjoyable one. He had successfully completed his mission. He did not see the two figures shimmering into reality just behind his chair.

'The box! Where is the control box?' demanded Tarrant, his clip gun only inches from a startled Kagin's head.

'Y... you?' he stammered, staring up at the faces of Tarrant and Dayna. 'B... but... how...?'

'We'll ask the questions,' snapped Dayna, watching Kagin's right hand stray under the console, seeking for something. Dayna brought the barrel of her gun down on Kagin's shoulder with all her might.

'Ahhhh!' he gasped. The tell-tale clatter of a weapon hitting the desk confirmed Dayna's quick action.

'The control box for the small ship. You have five seconds to tell us before we blow your head off,' snarled Tarrant.

'Y... you're too late. It's already in Federation controlled space. Your friends are beyond your help,' rasped Kagin, nursing his shoulder.

'One... two...' began Dayna, the muzzle of her gun pressed to Kagin's sweating temple. The sight of her finger taking the tension on the trigger was too much for Kagin.

'There...,' he indicated to a small cabinet. 'It's in there.'

Tarrant dived for the door, flinging it open. The small, shiny box glistened in the dim light. With feverish fingers he removed it, studied it for a few seconds before tearing at a small back plate. It gave to his pressure. Inside, a maze of exposed wires lay before him.

'Jeez,' he exclaimed under his breath. 'Which is which?'

'Don't ask me,' smirked Kagin. 'I

wasn't the one who designed it. Besides, in ten seconds from now your friends will be touching down at Commissioner Sleer's base. You've lost. You might as well admit defeat.'

'That's a word I don't understand,' hissed Tarrant, his fingers gingerly switching wires from terminal to terminal. Then he stopped, looked to Dayna and she swallowed hard.

'Done it?' she whispered.

'It's now or never. If you know a prayer, start saying it now.' Tarrant's finger stabbed at the red button.

'Get it over with,' said Vila under his breath. 'You know I can't stand pain.' Vila was looking out at the vast floating space complex of Federation headquarters. 'She's down there somewhere just waiting for us.' The ship was drifting lower as it decelerated towards the brightly lit landing hanger.

Avon's face was set in taut lines, his gun still pointing towards Vila's heart but his eyes were on the scene in front of him. He knew it was certain death for him either way. It was strange to come to it like this but he had always known he would have to face it one day. He turned to look at Vila for the last time. 'I'm sorry about this,' he said, his voice softer than normal.

'Spare me the apologies. Get it over with!'

Avon's finger grew tighter and tighter on the cold trigger then, as if hit by some giant hand, he and Vila were flung back in their seats. The explosion of the clip gun sounded deafening in the confined cockpit, the charge searing across Vila's stomach, tearing at the cloth before embedding itself in the heavy insulation lining their would-be tomb.

'Urrrgh ...!' gasped Vila as the Comet's nose pitched up, stars streaking the windscreen of the machine. 'W... we're finished!' Neither Avon nor Vila knew another think before lapsing into unconsciousness once more.

'Enjoy the trip?'

The voice sounded only too familiar but to Avon's dulled senses it had a dream-like quality about it. Was this what death was like?

'Come on,' commanded Tarrant's voice. 'Get yourselves out of there before the Federation claim you back again.'

Both Avon and Vila, a look of bewilderment on their faces, stumbled from the cockpit, Vila's



You're a failure, Kagin, and I don't tolerate failure!

knees giving way the instant his feet touched the soil of Xenon.

'It's all right,' reassured Dayna. 'We managed to reverse the Comet's pre-programming. You're safe and sound on Xenon.'

'How?' Avon was shaking his head, trying to clear the cotton wool which seemed to fill his brain.

'It's a long story,' beamed Tarrant. 'I'll tell you about it one day.' With that he patted Avon on the back, helping him towards the concealed base entrance. A few paces further on Avon stopped, his face puzzled.

'The trader ... the Federation agent. What happened to him?'

'Oh, him!' Tarrant laughed. 'He's still up there somewhere, but I wouldn't like to be in his place. There's someone after his head right this very minute.'

'You have been a grave disappointment to me, Kagin.' The snarling, threatening voice emitted from the display screen contained all the venom of a woman thwarted. 'You could have had everything you desired, now you have nothing. You know what is expected of you.'

'B... but, commissioner,' protested the injured Kagin, 'it wasn't my fault. How was I to know ...'

'Enough!' commanded the voice. 'You are a failure, Kagin and I don't tolerate failure.'

With that the screen went blank. Kagin sank to his seat, tears welling up into his eyes. Resting his forehead on a clenched fist he felt for the small lever beside the seat. If only he'd pulled that lever when he realised he'd been boarded his mistress would have had the prisoners she so desperately wanted. He did not have the courage then to destroy himself and the ship because he believed there was no need. Now, with nothing to live for, he did what he should have done much, much earlier. The lever operated with a smooth action.

From the surface of Xenon, it looked, for a brief instant, as though a new star had been born somewhere in the heavens but Avon and the rest of Scorpio's crew knew better. Servalan had claimed another life but, thanks to Tarrant's actions, it was not one of theirs.

'Looks like another comet,' mused Vila as he strolled towards the base entrance nursing his bruised stomach and feeling the torn material. 'Anyone got a needle and thread? Avon's aim isn't what it used to be.'



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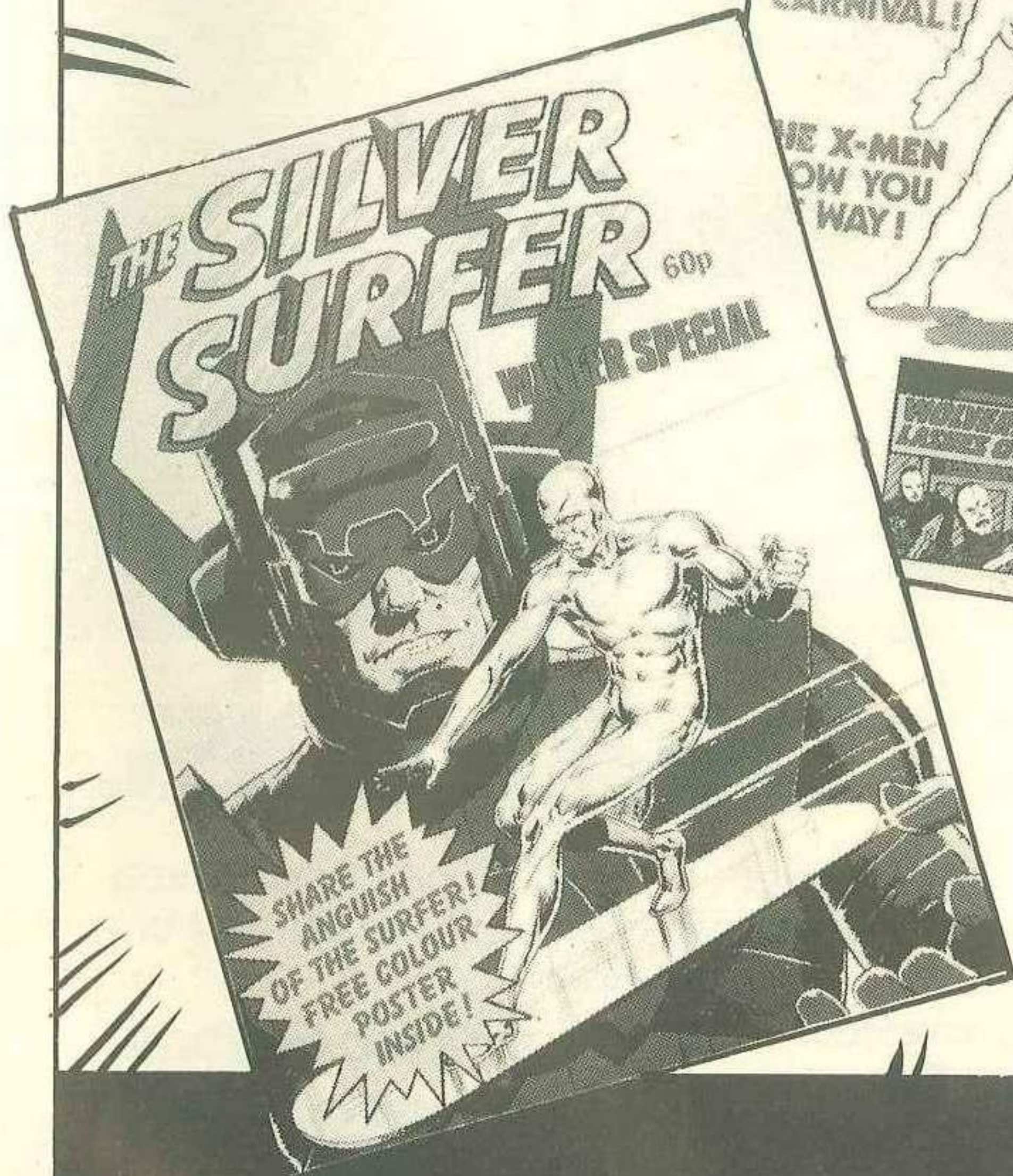
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