

OBLAQUE

A *BLAKE'S 7*
ADULT FANZINE

WARNING:
THIS ZINE CONTAINS ADULT ORIENTED SAME SEX MATERIAL.
IT WILL NOT BE SOLD TO ANYONE UNDER AGE EIGHTEEN.

Published by:
Oblique Publications
PO Box 43784
Tucson, AZ
USA 85733-3784

oblique@oblique-publications.net
<http://www.oblique-publications.net>

Send SASE or email for information.
Age statement required.

Oblaque is an amateur publication, copyright © October 1988 by Oblique Publications. All rights reserved. This copyright is not intended to infringe upon or conflict with other holders of *Blake's 7* copyrights, including Terry Nation and the BBC. No reprints of any type are permitted without express, written permission of the publisher and individual contributors involved.

CONTENTS

I A SNARL, A SNEER, A WHIP THAT STINGS, THESE ARE A FEW OF MY FAVOURITE THINGS.

The Things We Do For Love 6
M. Fae Glasgow

Destiny 18
Adrian Alexander

Love's Raw Edge 24
Adrian Alexander

II FOOD FOR THOUGHT AND OTHER PERVERSIONS

Tea For Two 30
Edi N. Burgh

In a Plain Brown Wrapper 31
Cally Donia

Cream 36
Emma Scot

Cream and Sugar 39
Gael X. Ile

III GET BLAKE, GET AVON, OH BLOODY HELL, GET EVERYONE!

If Only I Could... 43
A. L. Hughes

Backfire 53
M. Fae Glasgow

Rise... 56
Cally Donia

IV AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

The Protector 59
M. Fae Glasgow

V WE TIP OUR HATS TO THE MASTERS

Motif 62
Leigh Graham

PREFACE

“What,” mused the Glaswegian, during our tea break, “would you call someone who writes *Blake’s 7* slash stories? I mean, a B7 slasher sounds a bit inappropriate for a British programme.”

“Well,” said I, “in Britain a slash mark is known as an oblique, isn’t it?”

“Mmhm.” She sipped her tea.

“Then it’s simple. You oblique *Blake’s 7*. You are an obliquer.”

“Of course,” she said and passed me the chocolate digestives.

“Yes, of course,” I returned, smiling modestly and acknowledging both her query and her praise. The biscuit tasted delicious. “You know what we really should do? Produce our own zine. We should oblique Blake and call it *Oblaque*.”

Her auburn haired head turned to mine, her Scottish grey eyes locking with my own mundane hazel ones. “That’s dead bloody *brilliant!* I can write Avon and Vila the way I’ve always thought they should be written. And Blake! What I want to do to Blake.... Do you suppose we should call the Southern Contingent and tell her to whip out her writing pad?”

“Uhuh. And speaking of *whips*, would it be possible for you to write...?”

And so it came to pass. The writing was done in two and a half months (with some of the stories going to the second issue of *Oblaque*), and I, the editor, have since sweated over the editing, layout and design during a pressure filled, three week period. All of this has only been accomplished thanks to our wonderful Macintosh© computer.

Be warned: every story in *Oblaque* is oblique. We’ve tried to present a variety of ideas, many of them a little dark, a little daring. There are also stories which are merely fluff—sex vignettes if you will. (In fact, we’d like to call a section in the next issue, Gratuitous Sex.)

Now, a word or two about our spelling: it’s inconsistent. For that you may blame the Glaswegian, even when it’s the editor’s fault. Our Scottish friend has been in exile for far too many years to remember whether a particular spelling is American, British, or some convoluted Scottish variant. When I tell her she’s made up her own spelling, she informs me—impolitely, of course—that my “head buttons up the back.” At least the Southern Contingent has the humility to ask how something is spelled.

My very special thanks to everyone who helped make this zine possible: to Mr. Terry Nation for creating the show and to the actors for bringing its universe alive; to the Glaswegian and the Southern Contingent for their tireless efforts to write to a ridiculous deadline; to the San Diego Gang of Four who gave me my start in fan fiction and introduced me to my cohorts; to FKB for her on-call literary researches; to BAA who saw her contribution as a way to provide erotic reading material to the women of the English speaking world; and, most especially, to my husband LDM who wholeheartedly supported this project via letters and long distance calls from Yugoslavia.

—Caroline K. Carbis, Editor

“To paraphrase the words of someone I’ve become very well acquainted with over the past few months: ‘It is finished. It is over and I am finally free—of her!’ And, no, I don’t mean Servalan. Being the only voice of reason through this whole thing...”

“You wish!”

“I just want to thank all the little people, (those five feet and under—she knows who she is), who beat me, chained me to the computer and fed me hot tea and chocolate digestives until I wanted to throw up.”

“It’s your just desserts for the southern fried chicken and gravy (shudder) you forced me to eat.”

“Shut up...I’ve come to really appreciate our editor...”

“That’s not what you said when she wanted “Motif” by Tuesday.”

“Quiet! Unfortunately, I now have a soul deep fear of the words, ‘I have a problem with this’.”

“Dead, bloody right...but, then you did hear it rather more often than I did.”

“In...your...dreams. To go on...”

“And on...and on...and on...”

“Shut up!”

“Being redundant, now are we? Always was your speciality, though.”

“Right! That’s it! Raid! Immigration! Illegal alien here.”

“Sod off! I’ve got my green card now.”

“Right, well, then, how about these pictures of you in that skimpy leather thing on Santa Monica Blvd.? What have you got to say for that?”

“Story research.”

“What?”

“Story research for *Oblaquer*. You ought to see what I’m going to have happen to Avon...”

“Oh please, not again!”

“And I thought you liked whips and chains. Now, I’ve had enough of your hawering. Let’s get on to the cliché bit about how this wouldn’t’ve been possible without our beloved editor.”

“We have to say this, folks, or she’ll wipe all our floppy disks clean. She knows everything about the computer. I have a healthy respect for any woman who can destroy an entire story with the push of a button. I think it’s the way she smiles when she does it that worries me.”

“She and Mac do have this dead strange relationship. They’re as bad as Avon and Orac. And you’re right about the smile, I’ve noticed it a lot lately. Anyway, again, our humble thanks to our friend and editor, (who’s still our friend despite being our editor), without whom this wouldn’t have been possible. And we hope everyone takes this the way it was intended as good, dirty fun.”

“Yeah, ditto. Y’all enjoy”

“Thanks, Caroline.”

“Right!”

I A SNARL, A SNEER, A WHIP THAT STINGS, THESE ARE A FEW OF MY FAVOURITE THINGS.

Welcome to Oblaque's bleak oblique Blake—and Avon—section. (And try saying that one bit aloud three times in succession.) The stories that follow are somewhat pessimistic in tone and resolution, consistent, I believe, with the Blakian universe's soap opera structure and overall despairing outlook. If you are not of a mind to agree, then please skip forward to the next part. But I warn you—you'll be missing some very interesting speculations and some wonderfully dark, brooding writing.

THE THINGS WE DO FOR LOVE M. Fae Glasgow

IT IS VERY DIFFICULT INDEED FOR A LARGE MAN TO SKULK, BUT BLAKE WAS DOING HIS LEVEL BEST, SNEAKING INTO AVON'S ROOM, TRYING TO FIND ORAC'S KEY. Careful to replace everything precisely where he found it, he tiptoed around, looking in drawers and under tapes, between computer parts and amongst clothes. He was going through the trouser pockets of Avon's red leather suit when he heard the door open. //Oh, bloody hell,// he thought and dived into the wardrobe to hide, frantically trying to still the clacking of coathangers and the creaking of Avon's multitudinous leather outfits. All sound died away, leaving him uncomfortably aware of silver studs pressed into his left cheek and the stuffy, redolent air in the closet. Avon's footsteps sounded strange, muffled as they were by the wardrobe door. Blake heard him move around the room, dropping his boots on the floor, and doing other, obscure things that Blake couldn't quite identify. Blake prayed fervently to any and all deities that Avon wasn't going to bed, that he wouldn't strip and hang his clothes up. Or at least, that he would be atypically untidy and leave Blake safe in his hiding place. He heard the creak of the bed and assumed Avon had climbed onto it. The big rebel heaved a sigh of relief—he might just get out of this in one piece.

After a while, Blake inched the door open, enough

to let in some light and air, enough for him to have a perfect view of the bed. Blake was somewhat taken aback, to put it mildly. The man lounging on the bed was Vila. He was glancing through a booktape, sipping from a tall glass of soma and adrenalin. Before Blake could recover from his astonishment, Vila looked up as the corridor door opened.

"You're late....," Vila snapped at Avon. "Where the hell have you been?"

The comptech lowered his head. When he spoke, Blake nearly fell over from shock—the sweet, conciliatory tone sounded stunningly unnatural coming from Avon's lips. "I'm sorry, Restal. It really wasn't my fault...."

"That's what you always say. Well, you've wasted enough time. Get over here and get on with it."

"Yes, Restal."

Avon walked quickly over to the bed. He was standing sideways on to Blake, so the rebel leader could see the glint of enjoyment and lust gleaming in those usually flinty eyes. Blake was completely agog—after sixteen months, he thought he knew these two men, but it was abundantly clear that he had miscast them totally. Vila lounged on the bed, dominant and confident, while Avon played his part in what was obviously an established ritual for them.

He slowly stripped, one garment at a time. He carefully folded each item, forming a neat pile on the floor. As he drew every piece of covering clear of his body, he would pause, inviting Vila's look of approval. The thief lay quietly, drinking his soma, watching the show. When Avon was finally, gloriously naked, Vila made a little circling motion with one finger. Avon, eyes lowered demurely, smile hovering, obeyed, flexing muscles and stretching voluptuously. He turned towards Vila again, giving Blake the biggest surprise of his life thus far—Avon's dark-rose penis jutted from its lush bed of black curls, aroused simply by the eroticism of stripping for Vila and submitting to his appraising, masterful gaze.

Slowly, it began to dawn on the rebel leader just exactly what sort of display he might be in for. The prospect of watching Avon and Vila had embarrassed him and made him very uncomfortable, but the thought of seeing Avon subdued and conquered like this...Blake considered throwing himself on the gods' mercies and bolting from the room. The only drawback there, of course, was that Avon was *dæmon*, not god, and would surely kill him for seeing as much as he had already. Plus, Avon being Avon, despite this arrangement in the secrecy of his own bedroom, would surely make absolutely certain that Blake would suffer—repeatedly and often.

Blake clenched his eyes shut and buried his face in the nearest jacket—he would, at least, have the decency not to watch. Into his blackness came Vila's voice.

"All right. Now get my clothes off me."

Clothes rustled. Skin silked against skin.

"Slowly, slowly, don't be in such a hurry. I want to take my time tonight."

Blake stifled a groan—*bang* went his hope of a brief encounter followed by blessed sleep, when he'd be able to slip free.

"Now then, on your knees, Kerr. No, not on the bed, on the floor, where you belong. That's my boy. You know what to do. Suck me...oh, that's nice, that's very nice...harder, use your tongue now...."

Blake couldn't take any more. He wrenched open the door—and froze. Avon knelt, pale body gleaming in the bright light, jutting cock reddened, an ivory dewdrop glistening at its tip. Vila was balanced on the very edge of the bed, legs thrown over Avon's shoulders, head thrown back. Dark hair moved slowly, smoothly up and down, devouring Vila's long, slim cock. Both men had their eyes closed, as they rocked, wrapped in their unity of pleasure. Blake

gulped and silently closed the door over, easing carefully to the other end of the wardrobe, where he could see them better. He watched, flushed, as Avon kept up the steady tide of suction. Unexpectedly, Vila pulled Avon up and slapped him hard on the face.

"No teeth, I said!" The hand which had slapped him now slipped under his chin and raised Avon to look at Vila. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you. First you're late, now you've used your teeth...and you know fine bloody well that those are the two things that are guaranteed to get you punished, right? Anyone would think you're doing it on purpose, just to get in trouble." Avon's eyes were bright, his whole body a taut bowstring of anticipation. Vila tightened his grip on Avon's face. "You've been a naughty boy, haven't you? And naughty boys need to be spanked, don't they?"

Avon's voice was breathy, seductive. "Oh, yes, Restal. I have been...very naughty and I do so *need* to be punished." He got to his feet, cock tip brushing against the fair hair on Vila's chest. It swayed between them, a blazing cry of need.

Vila leaned back against the wall, legs spread out in front of him, across the bed. "Over my knees, Kerr."

Avon draped himself over Vila, inhaling sharply as his cock was caught between strong thighs and Vila's hardness stabbed a burning brand into his stomach. The thief laid his left arm firmly across the bunched muscles of Avon's shoulders and raised his right hand high.

"What happens to naughty boys?"

The slap ricocheted around the small room, sending a sharp jolt of pleasure through them all. Blake stifled a moan, biting into one of Avon's leather jackets, sinking his teeth into the yielding, tensile skin. His cock jumped at every slap, a terrifying, transforming lust. He couldn't tell what aroused him so: dominating Avon, sexual pain turned to pleasure or the sweet siren call of submission.

Vila's voice startled him. "I asked you a question, Kerr. Answer me!" Another slap, reddening Avon's white buttocks. "Not quick enough. What do we do to naughty boys?"

"Punish them!"

Vila spanked him again. "Not a good enough answer. You know better than that." Another slap and another, a flurry of stinging, caressing blows. Avon gasped, breath hissing between his teeth, arching his neck back, exposing his face to Blake's stare. The self-contained, cold comtech was flushed, eyes closed in passion, lost in his chosen world of painful de-

light. "I'm asking you again, now tell me. What do we do to naughty boys?"

"Make them sorry for what they've done! Punish them to make up for all the wrong things they've done! Let them pay for their sins with pain."

"Very good, very, very good." Exalted by the praise, Avon rotated his hips in a sinuous, erotic surge against Vila. The hand spanked him again.

"I didn't give you permission to move, you little bugger. He plunged a finger into the tightness of Avon's arse, making the man whimper and writhe. "I told you not to move." Another slap. "Spread your legs."

Avon opened his legs, stretching them as wide as he could, quivering with the agony of pleasure, trying to obey, trying to stay still. Vila pulled his finger from Avon and smacked him again, palm on his sweat-moist backside, fingers on the sensitized line from ass to balls, finishing the blow with a sweet stroking. Avon arced, plunging between Vila's clenched thighs, while Vila held him, thrusting his fingers into him, pushing him ever higher. The thief pushed Avon off his lap, making him kneel before Vila on the bed. The dark man reached back to pull his cheeks apart and fully expose the naked nub of flesh nestled there. Vila arched forward a little, the blunt head of his cock stroking against warm skin. He used one hand to guide his wet cock and then pushed forward, driving completely into Avon. Sound exploded from them, as Vila kept one hand clenched on Avon's backside while he fucked him hard. The safecracker used the other hand to push Avon down flat on the bed, head over the edge. The thief's hand was inexorable and strong on the back of Avon's exposed neck, pressing down with every inward thrust of his hips. Avon whimpered, grinding his cock against the rough covers, rubbing his nipples against the coarseness of the fabric. Vila pounded into him, balls slapping against Avon, piercing him, possessing him completely.

Blake's hips surged forward, undulating and circling in perfect echo of Vila's movements. The big rebel thrust into his clenched fist, fucking his hands as he imagined himself fucking Avon, sheathed in the submissive body, causing the moaning and writhing. The image flipped in his mind. He saw himself under Avon, welcoming the pounding, the thick heavy flesh stretching him wide, wider as Avon filled him. The picture transmuted again, replaced by the reality before his eyes. Blake's fire built higher, his balls filling and tightening, thinking of them smacking against Avon....

He came with the other two, three climaxes exploding in unison, three bodies peaking then relaxing as one. Blake smothered his face against Avon's satin top, milking the last few, precious drops of cream from his slackening penis. Vila collapsed on Avon's back, fingers still tangled in wavy hair, cock still pulsing the last of his lifeseed into Avon's pliant, sated body. Avon dragged himself back to conscious thought and cleaned Vila, then started to wipe himself off.

Blake was haunted by the pit of loneliness gaping in his soul. He needed to touch them, be a part of them. Trembling, knees weak, he started to open the door.

He was, quite literally, saved by the bell. The intercom chimed and Jenna's clear voice sliced through the miasma of sex filling the room.

"Avon? We can't find Blake and we just sighted five pursuit ships coming up on us."

Vila jumped off the bed and both men made a dive for their clothes. Avon was pulling his trousers on over still-sticky thighs when he got to the intercom. "I'll be there in just a minute." He shoved his feet into his boots and pulled his sweater on, combing his hair quickly, to tame it, hiding telltale signs from the scrutiny of his sharp-eyed crewmates. He snatched up his jacket as he started from the room. Vila was a step behind him, buttoning his shirt haphazardly. The door opened and Avon took a single step outside and turned to Vila. "Get a move on, you idiot. Go and find Blake, then get our Fearless Leader to the flight deck. If it takes you more than two minutes, forget him and come straight up there yourself. It may come to a fight and I'll want you on the blasters. Now move!"

"Right! I'm on my way." Vila called to the retreating back and darted off in the opposite direction.

Blake pulled himself together and crammed his limp penis back into his brown trousers. He took a moment to wash the drying semen from his hands, then bolted for the flight deck. Avon was already at his position, as were Cally, Vila, Gan and Jenna

"We're up to standard by 8 now, Avon."

"Good. Try to get around the blind side of that asteroid. They may not be able to detect us there."

They heard the pounding of Blake's feet as he raced in from the corridor. "Where the hell are those ships? And why are there five of them?" Blake scanned Avon's console. Five blips were flying in deltoid formation on an intercept course for the *Liberator*. Avon's course correction would put them on a

retrograde course, keep them from detection—always supposing, of course, that the ships hadn't already noticed them. The great ship fled through the void, seeking some semblance of safety.

The *Liberator* slowed, then came into a fixed orbit, poised behind the dense asteroid. The ship's occupants were still, all attention locked onto Zen's viewscreen. Vila whispered, "Keep going, keep going," cold fear oozing from his every pore. Moments elongated and twisted as the five lethal craft passed close, too close, to their protective asteroid. Finally, the formation continued on, oblivious to the prize so near to them.

"Bloody hell! I thought they were going to get us that time. I shall break out in a rash, if that happens again. Oh, my poor heart started there."

"Pity your poor brain didn't do the same. Now shut up, Vila." Avon turned on Blake, "That was too damn close. You were supposed to be on watch—where the hell were you?"

"I could say the same of you! I needed to consult Orac, so I went down to Subcontrol 4, where you said you would be. When you weren't there, I went off to look for you."

"Leaving the flight deck unattended? Blake, I hate to spoil your illusions, but this is hardly a Scouting trip. Our lives—*my* life—are at stake here. You can't just go wandering off like a curious child simply because you can't remember what two and two make!"

"Oh, I know exactly what two and two make, Avon." The comtech stared at him, suspicion stirring, two and two beginning to add up in his own mind. "And there's no need for you to raise your voice like that, Avon—you sound like a hysterical queen."

Avon stalked closer to Blake, stopping scant inches from him, flaying the big rebel the accusation in his eyes. The timbre of his voice was indigo velvet—the kid glove hiding the fist of iron. "Would you care to repeat that? Or are you a coward as well as stupid?"

They stood staring at each other, the truth a raw wound, a lethal weapon between them. Avon raised his arm and Vila was suddenly there, out of nowhere, hand casually resting on Avon's jacket sleeve, chatter pattering around them. "Don't mind me, I mean, I don't want to interrupt or anything, but surely Zen should've given us more warning? I thought he had instructions for ship-wide alert if the flight deck were empty and Jenna says she only found out what was coming our way because she came up to see Blake and...."

"You're right, Vila. This is neither the time nor the place for this," Avon said. He turned his basilisk stare back onto Blake. "After I have checked Zen, you will come to my room to discuss certain matters between us."

"Oh, shall I, indeed?"

"Naturally."

"And if I opt not to accept your gracious invitation?"

Avon smiled maliciously. "Then I shall opt to leave the *Liberator*—and your precious Cause needs me, even if you do not."

"Don't threaten me...."

"Then don't spy on me!"

"I wasn't spying, for god's sake. It was...."

"Innocent?"

"Far from it. To be perfectly honest, I'm very disappointed in you...."

"*You* are disappointed in *me*? You sneak around, poking and prying where you don't belong. If you see things that...."

Vila piped up, "Personally, I thought your original idea was better, Avon—not to mention easier on the old ears. All this shouting's giving me a shocking headache."

Synchronised, Avon and Blake spun on their heels away from each other. The eye of the storm hovered uneasily over the flight deck, all the others dying of curiosity, but considering that far better than the certain death of reopening this particular kettle of fish.

It was well into the night before Avon had corrected Zen's programming to a satisfactorily alert status. He went to his room and downed several pills to drown the fatigue and anxiety eating him alive.

Blake, meanwhile, was still slouched in the rest room, having downed enough potions to blur the sharp edges of the chaos eating *him* alive. His reaction to Vila and Avon had been, to put it mildly, confusing. Cally sat opposite him, patiently waiting for him to speak.

"You're wasting your time, Cally. As I've already said, I can't even begin to discuss it."

"And why not?"

"Because...because it would mean revealing things about Avon and Vila that I shouldn't even know, let alone gossip about."

"You are talking, of course, about their sexual proclivities, the way Vila dominates Avon?"

Blake almost gave himself a nasty case of whiplash, he snapped his head up so quickly. "You knew?"

Cally looked at him with affectionate contempt. “Of course I did. I am a telepath, Blake, I sense people’s thoughts and feelings, especially when it’s someone strong and intense, like Avon. And I don’t see why you’re so shocked. Those two together like that, well, it makes perfect sense.”

“How the fucking hell can pain make sense? Tell me that!”

“Yelling and swearing at me does not help the situation, Blake. Sexual domination games are to be expected when men from their background are involved.”

“Their background? Cally, Vila is a Delta-5th Grade, which is the lowest of the low and Avon is an Alpha-elite, which is miles higher than even I am.”

“Materially, perhaps, they are diametrically opposed, but emotionally, psychologically, it is a very different matter. Have you never talked to them about their pasts?”

“Ask *Avon* about his past? That’s absurd.”

“Is it? You’d be surprised how willingly he will speak to a caring *non-judgmental* listener.” Blake shot a sharp look at her for the pointed emphasis.

“Well? And what did sweet, open, communicative Avon reveal to his *non-judgmental* listener?”

“The self-same history of emotional and sexual abuse, coupled with outright neglect that Vila has.”

“What!”

“As Avon would say, give your brain some exercise, Blake, and think!” She glanced at him impatiently. “Look, money and position have nothing whatsoever to do with it. Vila never knew who his father was—his mother claimed he was an Alpha, a regular customer of hers. She disappeared when Vila was only 11, so he was abandoned to the streets.”

“But the social services....”

“Apparently don’t pay too much attention to the service grades. Now, as for Avon...well, his parents bought him everything there was, provided him with the best-trained nannies and governesses and tutors, but emotionally speaking, they abandoned *him* the day he was born. He always knew he was only an insurance, a way to keep the old family name alive, should anything happen to his elder brother.”

Blake stared at her, trying to absorb this. He had heard stories like this, and far worse, before, but it was quite a different matter when people you knew were involved. Guilt began to settle in a churning lump in the pit of his stomach. He hadn’t asked, hadn’t suspected...hadn’t cared. All he had wanted was for them to further the Cause, to risk all for *his* beliefs.

Cally watched his face pale, then continued. It was past time for Blake to be reintroduced to the slimy underbelly of society. “Of course, like so many outwardly normal people, they both have a history of being abused. Vila was taken in by a woman who ran a crimo ring. While they were young enough, the children were prostituted to pædophiles, for sex and viscasts and the like. Later, when they reached puberty, they either continued in prostitution or were trained in other crimes.”

“Which is where Vila learned his trade.”

“And why that’s the one thing about thieving he refuses to talk about.”

Blake rubbed his hand across his face. Of course, he had noticed that little detail, but hadn’t bothered to follow up on it. //Just said, Vila, open this, Vila steal that....// He looked up at Cally. “Tell me about Avon.”

“Ah, yes, Avon.” She got up for another cup of tea, busying herself with milk and sweetener, marshalling her thoughts. Somehow, it seemed worse for Avon. “Until Anna, there was only one person Avon believed actually loved him. That was his brother, Bartolomew. Unfortunately, Bart was a bully, and a pædophile. He was eight years older than Avon, quite old enough to manipulate and molest a helpless child. It was the usual story: touching like this means I love you, but if you tell anyone, they’ll know you were very bad and they’ll hurt me and take me away from you forever.” In his mind’s eye, Blake could see Avon’s brother, saying the all too common words she had just quoted.

“And then Avon would be left completely alone. But surely, *someone* could have stopped it....”

“Who? Who is going to believe a fanciful, imaginative, moody child, telling a tale like that about his perfect older brother? Blake, you don’t understand. There was no one who cared enough, no one Avon could trust.” She watched impassively as Blake staggered over to the sink and splashed water on his face. She could feel his pain as if it were her own, but he had to go through this. If it were left to fester unspoken between the three men, then surely, the *Liberator* would not survive.

Blake whirled around. “But why *Vila*? Why pick Vila to...do this kind of thing?”

“Because Vila *understands!* Because Vila has a...complementary need. Two different personalities, Blake, taking different lessons from the same teachings. Avon learned that ‘love’ was sex with pain. Vila took it from the opposite side, that *giving* pain of that

sort was how one expressed love. Or simple lust, for that matter.”

“So in a twisted way, they fit together, balance each other out.”

“Perhaps. At least they can fill the other’s need.”

Blake sat down heavily and cast a questioning glance at Cally. “You don’t seem to disapprove? Is this kind of thing common practice amongst the Auronæ?”

“Indeed it is not—it is common practice amongst *your* people, Blake. However, I see no reason why I should pass judgment on what two people do behind locked doors.” She made him meet her eyes. “Speaking of which, Avon only told me that you knew. He didn’t say how you found out.”

“I needed Orac’s key, couldn’t find Avon, so I went in to his room...”

“...and when he came back, you didn’t want him to catch you red-handed, going through his private belongings.”

“Yes. I hid in the wardrobe, thinking he’d just popped back for something. Instead, I saw...everything.”

Cally leaned on the table, bringing her very close to Blake. “And how did you feel when you saw them?”

“I was...I don’t know.”

“Why are you lying to me, Blake?”

“I’m not!” Her accusatory glare squeezed honesty from him. “Well, perhaps I’m not telling the entire truth.”

“You’re not telling anything at all! It’s very important that you face this. Now, tell me, *how did you feel?*”

Blake got up to pace the room, trying to sort through his conflicting reactions. “I’m honestly not sure. I was horrified, repulsed, angry, torn...”

“It aroused you, then?”

“How can you say that?”

“By the very strength of your denial, by the way you unconsciously rubbed at your groin, and because I’m a telepath. I’m a very hard person to lie to, Blake.”

Blake grinned at her, “I had forgotten that.” He sat opposite her, serious again. His nervous fingers broke a biscuit into tiny pieces as he spoke to her, revealed things to himself. “Part of me was sickened by what I saw.”

“What sickened you? The sex, the pain, the dominance?”

There was a very long pause. Blake looked at her, a hint of fear in his eyes. “I...I was sickened by my-

self, by the way I wanted Avon, by the things I wanted to do to him, the things I wanted him to do to me.... I don’t understand it Cally. I saw him under me, but also me under him. How could I want things so completely opposite?”

“Blake, people often have very twisted, confused reactions like this. Sexuality seems to be the most complex thing about you humans.”

“But I’m so very confused. My mind seems to be going, my memories fading in and out....” He stared at her in dismay. “My god, Cally, I wanted to hurt him, victimise him....” He buried his face in his hands. “And not the way Vila was doing it, either. Looking back on it now, thinking about the way they are together, in public, I mean...it’s obviously by mutual consent, an agreement. But I really want to...I don’t know.”

“You really want to subjugate him. In a sense, possess him?”

“Yes! And have him control me.” He was distressed, appalled by himself. He had always considered himself to be a decent man, but this one single event was shattering his self-image. Blake demanded noble perfection from himself, leaving no room for the complexities of being human.. As usual, he focussed on what effect he would have on another being. What kind of man am I, Cally, that I could even think of doing that to someone?”

“Fairly average, I should think. We all have our dark secrets, the things we’d rather not know or admit about ourselves. The details aren’t what’s important. What we choose to actually *do*, is.”

“Oh, there’s no question of what I’ll do, Cally.” He answered her questioning look. “I’ll steer well clear of him, sexually speaking. Should be easy enough.”

“And why do you say that, Blake?”

“Well that’s obvious, isn’t it? I never wanted him *before* I saw him and Vila, so I’m hardly going to succumb to bouts of unbridled passion, am I now?” He rose, dropping his tea things in the steriliser.

As he walked through the door, her voice stopped him. “Don’t simply dismiss this from your mind. It has to be dealt with. You’ve seen Avon submissive, imagined yourself submissive under him. Do you honestly believe you will ever be able to forget that? And Blake—” He turned away from her, going through the door. “You will have to decide what you want from him, or it will drive the two of you apart.”

Cally sat alone at the table, worrying over these people she cared for. She was afraid what this was

going to do to Avon. She knew his mind, was too familiar with its fragile hold on cohesive reality. Plus, Blake's confused, shifting attitude did not bode well.

"Ah, Fearless Leader. Do come in. I see you decided to knock this time."

"Avon...."

"You don't need to say it. I've heard it so often I can quote it for you. "Let's not start off fighting, we must try to have an honest exchange and sort this out." Close enough, Blake?"

"Verbatim, Avon. But then, you're very good at parroting phrases, aren't you?"

"Into the heart of the matter so quickly? That's hardly your style."

"The heart of the matter?"

"I thought 'parroting' was my speciality."

"Avon, stop dancing circles around me. It's late, I'm tired and I may well have had one over the eight. Let's just get this over, shall we? I was wrong to come in here, it was worse to hide, worse still to watch. I'm sorry, I apologise most profusely, I deeply regret it ever happened." Blake turned on his heel to leave Avon's room for the second time that day.

"Do you really think that a flowery, insincere apology will wipe the slate clean?"

"Insincere? Oh, Avon, you have no idea of just how sorry I am."

"For yourself, not for your intrusion on me—and Vila." The tech was boiling with rage, fists clenched at his sides.

"Listen, I really do wish I hadn't seen you. For all our sakes. If we don't handle this right, it could tear the *Liberator* apart."

"The crew, probably, but I doubt if the ship will even notice our heinous secret." He deliberately unclenched his hands and examined his fingers, as though checking that the always immaculate nails were clean. "Have you told the others?"

"Of course not! I have discussed *my* reaction with Cally, but that's all—and she already knew the general gist of what goes on in here."

"Naturally."

"She said...you would talk to her. Why, Avon?"

"What you mean is why her and not you, right? Because, Blake, she *listened*. Even though it didn't affect the damned Cause, she listened to me and I knew that she, at least, wouldn't judge."

"And were you so sure that I would?"

"Oh yes, there was no doubt at all. You only pay attention for the great, glorious Cause and individu-

als be damned. You judge everything and everyone against your own insular moral structure." He glowered up at the big rebel. "And you can be shockingly, offensively...naive."

"How can that possibly surprise you? I was *mindwiped*, for fuck's sake! I don't remember my past—Avon, I don't even remember if I've ever had a man!"

"Or a woman, for that matter."

"Precisely." Blake felt drained, exhausted by his tension and the angst bleeding from Avon. The tech spoke again, voice almost whimsical, completely changing the tone of their confrontation, bewildering Blake even more.

"Do you ever feel...desire?"

Blake glanced at him and decided to go along with whatever the comptech had in mind. Warily, he answered honestly. "Well, not exactly, no. I don't think so...."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean? Either you do or you don't. I rather think it's similar to being pregnant. She either is, or she isn't. So do you lust after others or not?"

Blake laughed. "I definitely don't *lust* after anyone, Avon. But sometimes, I feel...a tension, a restlessness. For some reason, I associate it with sex."

"I can't think why," Avon said in a droll little voice. "So," he continued, "they suppressed your libido, too."

"Obviously," Blake admitted dryly.

Avon didn't move, didn't change his expression, but Blake felt the mood shift again. The tech spoke. "And with whom—or what—do you experience this strange, unidentifiable sensation?" He smiled seductively. "Or do I need to ask?"

Blake backpedaled, mindful of his high-principled decision. Unfortunately, alcohol was befuddling his already confused mind. Sex was one area where the mindwipe seemed most convoluted and the most erratic. "That depends, of course, on whom you've guessed is the recipient of these...faint stirrings."

Avon came closer to him and smiled challengingly. "It's me, isn't it? You're drawn to me and you didn't know why?"

"I think now I know why but I don't think I could actually...."

"Bring yourself to touch the pervert?" Avon snarled bitterly.

"That's not what I'm trying to say! It's just that...." He paused, rubbing his fingers along his lips. "This

challenge/submit game we play...it's sexual for you, isn't it?"

Avon sighed in exasperation. "After what you saw, you still have to ask that? Of course it's bloody sexual for me. What the hell else did you think it was?" He relented slightly, sighing heavily. "It always has been."

"Your brother?"

"Well, now, Cally really does talk rather too much, don't you think?"

"Actually, I thought she didn't say enough."

Avon's mercurial temper, made even more unstable by the drugs, flared up. "What are you after, Blake? The gory, sordid details? Do you want to hear how Bart blamed me for everything that went on, telling me that I was the one who wanted it, that I enjoyed it best when it hurt?" He stood toe to toe with Blake, glaring at him, making the big rebel retreat. "Do you really want tales of sodomy? Of my beloved big brother's friends? Well, do you?" He suddenly turned away, wrapping his arms around himself.

Blake stood impotently behind him. He was sure of only one thing: he wanted to clean Bart's shadow from Avon, take the smaller man and hold him safe, away from all the hurts the universe inflicts. He reached out, whispering the tech's name softly. He rubbed Avon's tense back, tenderly easing the knotted muscles, sliding his hands around to clasp his waist. "It's all right, Avon. Lean on me, I'll take care of you," he murmured, bringing his mouth up to Avon's ear. He nibbled and nuzzled, feeling Avon's weight rest against his ample strength. Blake's desire rekindled, Avon's scent going straight to his head. An avid mouth devoured his, opening wide, silently asking Blake to take control. The burly man responded, feeling himself growing larger, feeling his sense of self swell. He turned Avon, bending the smaller man over his arm. The tech groaned against him, pliant and amenable. Blake lowered him onto the bed, tongue thrusting into his mouth, shoving Avon's hand against his crotch. The tech obeyed the silent command, unzipping Blake's trousers, masturbating his turgid flesh.

The rebel pulled back for a moment, staring in astonishment at Avon's passion-filled face. The tech's hands were trembling against Blake, his breath panting from him in great gusts. He lay on the bed in wanton abandon, licking his lips, undulating his hips in a classic bump-and-grind. Blake groaned and leaned forward, ripping Avon's shirt in his driven

desire to get at the man. The tech laughed, pulling Blake hard against him. Suddenly, he twisted under the big man, rolling out of his reach. "To have me, Blake, you have to get me first."

Blake grinned, enjoying the game. He growled, "I'm coming to get you. You'd better run." He lunged after the tech, his longer reach letting him catch Avon easily. Playfully, Blake wrestled with Avon on the bed, both men rippling and writhing with the other. Blake pinned Avon, but a quick twist freed the small man from Blake's firm grip. The tech snaked under him, suddenly changing the wrestling into serious sexuality, mouth sucking its way down Blake's torso, stopping only when he came to the waistband of his trousers. Head still level with Blake's navel, he looked up through long lashes. "Well now, I know you've been mindwiped, but surely even you can remember that one usually takes one's clothes off first."

Blake tangled his hands in Avon's hair. "So strip me."

Avon did, using his teeth to lower Blake's zip, while Blake kicked off his shoes. Avon's eager hands pulled the baggy corduroy trousers off and tossed them aside. A mouth settled on Blake's engorged penis, filling him with almost blind sensation. He shrugged his shirt off, tearing at Avon's clothes until he finally had the man naked and on his knees. The symbolic pose inflamed Blake and he grabbed Avon's head, needing to thrust deeper into the wide mouth, needing to fuck him. Avon gagged at the suddenness and depth of the penetration, but Blake just pulled the struggling head farther down onto his hardness. Retching against the enormity in his throat, Avon tried again to pull free. Blake drew his hand back and cuffed him on the side of the head. "Why are you pretending? You know this is what you like, you know you can't have your sex just straight. No, that's boring, isn't it? You need the struggle, the strength..." The big man returned both hands to the back of Avon's head, using his hair to push and pull in the rhythm he wanted. He went on and on, ignoring the tech's muffled moans, telling himself it was passion, feeding on it. On the verge of coming, he withdrew abruptly from Avon's mouth. The tech heaved in great gulps of air, massaging his tortured throat. Blake turned from him, rifling through the bedside drawer. He found a tub of gel and coated his aching cock with it. He was almost purple with congested blood, cum oozing from the tip. Avon was crouched on the bed, wide-eyed, a wounded waif.

He paled when he saw how big Blake was. Blake's lust roared at the helpless sight.

"Blake," he whispered, "I don't want to...I don't want you in me."

Blake grabbed him and turned him over, forcing him on all fours. "Don't fucking lie to me, you little bastard. You've been trying to get me to do this since the London. All those snarls and sneers, just a way to get me like this, just your way of seducing me. Well, this time, you're going to get what's coming, you're going to get what you've been begging for...."

Despite the tech's frantic strugglings, Blake roughly manhandled Avon into position at the edge of the bed, face in the covers, backside in the air. Words flooded brokenly from the tech, his voice catching, quavering. Blake spread the white cheeks, moaning in anticipation when he saw the tiny pink bud cradled there. He leaned forward, leaning his full weight on Avon's slender back. The comtech turned his face to the side and Blake saw his expression. Gone was the passion of before, gone was the ecstasy written there when Vila had plunged into him. Avon's eyes were screwed up, tears stealing from between the cage of his lashes. Leaning forward as he was, Blake could make out the words. "Please don't, oh please, no. Not this, you know how much this hurts, I'll do anything else you want me to, I'll be good, I won't tell. Please, oh please don't, Bart...."

Reality dashed cold water in Blake's face. His erection shrivelled, all desire fleeing before the sickening knowledge of the hideousness he had been about to commit. He reeled away from the crouched tech, sagging against the bed. "My god, Avon. What have I done? What have I done?"

Avon lay in a huddled, foetal mass on the bed. He didn't speak, didn't move.

"Avon, I'm sorry...I didn't mean to...."

Suddenly, Avon threw himself at Blake, screaming. "Yes you did! You knew what you were doing, you knew what you wanted"

"I didn't want to...."

You wanted to own me, you wanted to subjugate me." He shoved Blake off the bed. "You wanted my absolute degradation. You wouldn't settle for a little rough stuff, because under all your high-mindedness, you're nothing but a sadist! Do you hear me, Blake? A sadist." The tech dragged the cover over his nakedness, over his limp manhood. He turned his face to the wall as Blake approached him.

"Oh, Avon, I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me... You made me so wild...."

Avon whacked Blake's tender hand aside, wishing, like a child, that he could make the man disappear in a thundering flash of smoke. The adult in him spoke with utter coldness. "You realise, don't you, that what you're saying and doing is classic textbook behaviour?"

"For *what*?"

Avon stared directly into wary brown eyes. "Rapists, molesters and sundry bastards."

Blake felt nausea rise. "I'm no rapist."

"No? Then what, precisely, did you have in mind to do to *me*? Certainly not sweet romance."

"You provoked me...."

Avon's voice stormed over them. "Even if I did, how can you possibly use that as justification for what you did?"

"For what *I* did? Avon, I was doing what you wanted, what you've been trying to provoke me into for the past two years!" Blake lowered his voice, dropping it below hurricane level. "I was just doing what Vila...."

Avon's bitter, biting laugh stopped him. "Oh, no, Blake, don't even think about comparing what Vila does with what you tried to do. He and I have a.. an arrangement, but everything is mutual, everything is, to 'parrot' a phrase, between consenting adults. There's no real force there, no real pain. A bit of bondage and discipline, perhaps, but that's all. I have as much control as he does and we both know that as soon as we walk back through that door, everything is just the same as before. In a sense, it's all false. But you," he looked at Blake with the betrayed eyes of a nightmare-ridden child, "*you* wanted the real thing, you wanted to possess and hurt me, you wanted to literally have me at your feet, accepting you as my master." His face twisted with disgust. "And I almost let you."

Blake raised his face from its hiding place in his shaking hands. "But that's not true." His fractured thoughts had cast aside the memory of his conversation with Cally, his fragile emotional stability had run screaming from the things he had glimpsed in himself. "I didn't want to do that to you. I'm not like that...."

"How the fuck do *you* know? You were mindwiped, your past ripped away. The slate wiped clean." He leaned forward, an ugly expression on his face. "Tell me something, Blake. How do you even know that those molestation charges against you were faked?"

Blake's eyes filled with horror, terror seeping into

him. He was lost, whirling adrift. “No, Avon, no. Not children, I couldn’t do that....”

“Just like you couldn’t rape me?”

“But I didn’t, did I? I stopped. Avon, please. I did stop, I couldn’t actually do it. I don’t know what even got me started behaving like that....” He pleaded with Avon, begging him for help. “What kind of man *am* I?”

Avon sighed wearily, all the fight suddenly draining out of him, leaving him filled with nothing more than sorrow and pity for both of them. “You’re just like so many of us, Blake. Abuse done to us as children comes out later, when we try to abuse someone else. We use the same methods other people used on us to prove that we do matter, that we are important...that we are men.”

He wiped his cheeks, mildly surprised to find traces of tears. Blake reached hesitantly to offer comfort, but withdrew slowly, miserably, when he saw the other man’s reaction. “But to think that I might be capable of something so terrible, so...monstrous.” He shook his head. Keeping his eyes downcast, he said, “I can’t undo what I tried to do, but....”

“Oh god, today’s been bad enough already, Blake. Don’t start hitting me with nobility. My stomach’s quite queasy enough as it is.”

An incredulous brown stare met a cool, dark one. “Joking, Avon? After what just happened?”

“What else is there for us to do? We could sit here and go over this again and again *ad nauseam* but it won’t help. What’s done is done. I can’t leave, you can’t leave, but there can never be any trust between us.”

“I still trust you.”

“Do you? For once, give your brain some exercise and *think*, Blake. Do you fully believe that this little fiasco was entirely your fault, or is there still some part of you thinking that I provoked it? And do you trust me not to provoke you again, whether intentionally or not?” Blake opened his mouth to answer. “No, don’t say anything now. Think about it.” He gave Blake a wry smile. “You always wanted to know why I keep so distant from people, why I don’t like them. You can’t even begin to imagine what my life was like. Everyone thought it was so perfect, telling me how lucky I was....”

“But you hated it.”

“Naturally. I have seen people at their most insensitive, at their cruelest. I’ve seen exactly how depraved and petty and vitriolic they are.” He paused for a moment, not sure whether or not to go on. He

had already said more than he had ever thought he would, to Blake. He breathed in, calming himself. “I also got to see the depths to which I was capable of sinking, and that is just as low as everyone else.”

“Hence your cynicism. You expect the worst, because you’ve seen the worst.”

“Because I’ve been on the receiving end of the worst.” There was a very long pause. “Because I’ve done the worst.”

“But,” Blake hesitated, knowing he had no right to ask this, but knowing also that this rare, intimate discussion was the only chance he and Avon had of remaining together—and the only chance Blake had to begin to forgive himself for the darkness within. “But, surely, with your background, the last thing you’d want is Vila...” He stopped, trailing off delicately.

“Spanking me? Blake, haven’t you listened to a single word I’ve said? *That’s* entirely different. There’s no abuse involved there, just something we both enjoy once in a while, something that fills a need in us. It is, for us, a form of comfort, a healing. What you wanted, was...slavery. Emotional and sexual obedience. To have me kowtow to you, to lick your boots on the flight deck.”

Blake stood up quickly and strode as far away from this devastatingly perceptive man as he could. He rubbed at the back of his neck, beginning to see how emotionally unstable he had become. After Star One, he would take a very long holiday and just think. Nothing else, just think. He glanced at Avon. “I never believed that I could be capable of that.”

“Well, at least you did stop. This time.”

The ominous words hung between them for a long time, as they stared one at the other. Blake finally came back to the bed, sitting down, carefully, not coming too close to Avon. “How the hell do we live with this?” he asked, almost begging.

Avon shifted uncomfortably. Offering emotional guidance was never his forte. “Well now, there’s an interesting question.” He fiddled with his hands, noticing the knotted veins and prominent muscles of a hard worker. His grandmother would have chastised him for that, once....” I know how I shall live with it.” He gave Blake a cursory glance. “I shall ignore it.”

“That’s not going to help.”

“It’ll help *me*,” Avon hissed back at him. “You really have got a cheek, haven’t you? First you try to rape me, then you come whining to me, asking me how to live with yourself. I shall ignore it, Blake, for

I did nothing for which I should feel shame. You, however, have to find some way of dealing with the fact that you are no messiah, no saint, no better than any one else. *You*, Blake, need to find some way to accept that you are as capable of being an utter bastard as the cruel masses you are fighting this damned crusade for.”

Blake shook his head in denial. “Oh no, you don’t, Avon. You’re not going to visit your bitterness on the entire population, just because of what I did.”

“There are times, incomprehensible though it seems, when you are a bigger fool than Vila. Blake, look at history. If you can’t remember that, then look at today.” Avon knelt forward, trying to make Blake see. “The people you are wanting to free are the same people filling the ranks of the Federation. Where do you think Servalan gets her troops? From the average city, the average family, the average man. The one you so nobly wish to free.”

Exhaustion was eroding Blake, leaving him a numb, baffled, battered lump. “I will not believe that people are as evil as you say they are.”

“Whyever not, Blake? After all, *you* are.”

Once said, words cannot be unsaid. Blake looked at his accuser. His erstwhile victim suddenly felt profoundly, deeply sorry for this man, watching innocence die, seeing in Blake what he had felt in himself those long, painfilled years ago. Blake’s voice was broken, a reflection of the man within. “I am, aren’t I? Look what I tried to do to you....”

“Yes, well, but you couldn’t actually bring yourself to do it, could you now?”

“No....”

“I’d prefer a little more conviction there, if you don’t mind. Now try it again.”

“No. I couldn’t do it. I saw it was hurting you and I stopped.”

“So perhaps you are the only saint in the galaxy, after all.”

Blake stretched his hand out to Avon. It stalled between, as unwelcome as a plague ship. “Will you ever forgive me, ever let this rest? Or will it always be a weapon between us?”

The pills Avon had taken were wearing off rapidly and he felt his body and spirit sag. “If it is, then it shall simply be one more in the arsenal, won’t it now?”

“Why does it have to be that way? Avon...I don’t know how to put this, but I think there is a part of me that...might love a part of you.”

Avon smiled at Blake and the melancholy pain

there startled the rebel. “Love, Blake? Not the selfless love you have for the masses, but rather a consuming drive to own, I think.” He got up from the bed, making sure the cover stayed wrapped around him. Facing Blake, but his gaze averted, he slowly dressed, taking a sweater from the drawer to replace his torn shirt. “That’s why no matter what we may feel, or think we may feel, you and I will never have more than an armed neutrality.”

“Why? Why can’t we grow, change? I have seen a part of me I didn’t know existed. But now, *now* I can get rid of that, now I know it’s there, I won’t let it out.”

“Ever the optimist. Or the fool.” Avon straightened the sleeves of his jacket, smoothing his sweater. He went into the bathroom to brush his hair, acting, from obvious practice, as though nothing untoward had happened. When he re-emerged, Blake was still sitting where Avon had left him, perched on the edge of the bed, unclothed. Avon threw Blake’s shirt and trousers at him. “Get dressed and get out. You will not be here when I come back.”

“Avon.”

The tech didn’t turn from the doorway.

“Avon, at least now I know what I’m capable of. I can control that, bury it where it can never hurt you.”

Avon sneered at him. “It, Blake? You make it sound like it’s a separate entity. I hate to disillusion you, but it isn’t. It’s *you*, yourself. And until you accept that, you are a terrible danger to me.”

“Avon, I will never try anything like that again.”

The comtech turned on him, anger rising to join the pain in his eyes. “For once, you’re absolutely right. Because I won’t give you the chance to ever betray me like that again!”

“That’s what’s the worst for you, isn’t it? The trust thing.” Blake, by now, had his elbows on his knees, trembling hands cradling his throbbing head. He appeared the very picture of abject misery. He looked up at Avon, a new thought dawning in him. “Something you said....” The tech was intensely wary, poised for flight. “You said, you almost let me do it. That’s the crux of this whole thing, isn’t it? More even than trusting me, you feel you can’t trust *yourself*. That’s it, isn’t it? You’re afraid you’ll end up under my heel, and liking it, just like that bastard brother of yours trained you to be.” Avon was frozen, like a tableau titled ‘fear’.

“Oh, Avon....”

“Oh Avon nothing. The farce in here never happened, do you hear me, Blake? Nothing happened

between us. NOTHING!" He bolted, running to breathless refuge in the computer room.

Blake spent several minutes sitting on the bed, staring at the empty door where Avon had been. Eventually, he dragged himself off to dress and wended his weary way to his cabin. He stared at the ceiling for a long time, unable to sleep, unable to think. Life was a convoluted mess, wreathing around him like smoke. He couldn't deal with Avon, couldn't deal with his own murky secrets, couldn't deal with anything. Gradually, he centred on his Cause, on freeing the masses, on making them noble. By taking away the sleaziness Avon saw in them, Blake could, perhaps, wash the muck from himself. Grasping at straws, he turned his mind to thoughts of Goth....

It was night. The separate individuals on the *Liberator* were at rest, as best they could. The charges were ready, the plans set, the final destination almost within sight. Avon sighed and stretched, easing the aches in his lower back. He had done everything he possibly could: the ship and the computers were as prepared as he could make them. He stiffened as Blake came on to the flight deck.

The big rebel was at least as uncomfortable. "Time for my watch, I think," he said. "Anything going on?"

"No." He almost got off the flight deck without incident, but he couldn't quite ignore Blake's quiet voice.

"Every time I think we're getting places, you go like this on me. Can't we put...that incident behind us—permanently?"

Avon turned back for a last glance, yet another vicious barb tickling his tongue, waiting to be sent into Blake with deadly accuracy.

The rebel's pervasive dejection and depression made him stop. As he walked away, he said softly, "Not until there's trust between us. Not until one of us is willing to risk everything, absolutely everything, by being the first to trust again."

Blake stood alone, silence gathering around him, settling into his soul. His mind stuck an elastoplast on the gaping, festering wound in his psyche. He turned back to Star One.

His mind was heavy, he could feel deep depression and guilt slithering in under his barriers. He stopped by the galley for a bite to eat, but then realised that his stomach would rebel most violently if he were to do anything so foolish. He tossed the food into the disposal and walked dispiritedly to his cabin, stopping at the door, straightening his spine, readying himself for his interminable battle with insomnia. The door opened. Light spilled into the corridor suffusing him with warmth and a welcome sense of homecoming. He smiled. From within the room came a voice.

"You're late...."

DESTINY

Adrian Alexander

THE RAIN THRUMMED A LOUD TATTOO AGAINST THE WINDOW. Avon laid his hand on the cold glass, watching large droplets skitter down the slick, sheer surface. Antique leaded windows were not proof against the storm's fury and a chill draft pushed at the open robe protecting his nakedness. Slowly, he turned and walked lethargically back to the couch. Stretching out, he stared impassively at the shadows cast by the dying fire as they danced and skittered across the wall. Sleep blurred his vision.

"You can't throw me out in that...it's...it's inhuman!" The street girl protested. Avon got up from the sofa and strode over to the woman. Contemptuous and angry, he threw her tawdry, gaudy finery at her.

"You were contracted for a service. You have performed that service. You have been paid and paid well. Now get out!"

He towered over her and the tiny woman cowered beneath his cold, menacing glare.

"My old man..." she began to protest weakly, glancing at the storm raging outside. "He'll go berserk. He'll make me work out in that if..."

"Then it would behoove you to use what little brain you have to find a way to avoid him for the rest of the night."

The girl pulled her dress on over her head, almost ripping it in her haste. "Oh, yeah, right. Avoid him, he says." She glared at him. "Have you ever tried avoiding a pimp?" She ran her fingers quickly through her short, curly brown hair, then slipped her stiletto heeled shoes on and clattered across the hardwood floor to the door.

She paused, her hand resting on the knob. Her erstwhile customer had shut her out of his vision and now lay supine on the moss green, plush couch, right hand shielding his eyes, the left dangling the half-filled fluted glass. "Yeah, well, it shouldn't be hard to find someone who's a helluva lot better in bed than you are. Makin' love to you is like screwin' a dead fish."

"Ah, yes, that would explain your abominable technique since you obviously prefer 'dead fish' to men." He stood suddenly. The delicate crystal glass shattered against the wall beside her head. "Now get out!"

The soft rapping at his door made Avon sit up, eyes wide and fully alert.

"Who is it?" Avon called out, swinging his legs over the couch edge. He listened intently, but could not quite make out the muffled reply. He paused, standing to one side of the door before opening it marginally. Vila's nervous face pressed itself to the opening.

"Avon, let me in," he whispered, glancing around, desperate. Reluctantly, the tech allowed the little thief inside and immediately regretted it. Rancid terror emanated from the little man: he stank like three day old meat.

"What do you want?" Avon demanded, cinching his dressing gown tightly about his narrow waist, covering himself from Vila's curious look.

Vila quickly scanned the room to make absolutely certain they were alone. "I think Blake's in trouble," he confided, keeping his voice low.

"Well, no one would be surprised by that. But what made you draw that astounding conclusion *this* time?"

Nervously, Vila went to the window and peeked out. Satisfied that no danger lurked in the garden below, he turned back to the tech.

"When I was coming back from the last pub I was in, I saw some Federation troopers patrolling the streets. Well, that sobered me up fast. Quite spoiled my night, they did. I mean, Blake said there weren't supposed to be any here, but he obviously forgot to tell *them* that. Blake said we were safe here," he wailed.

"Obviously Fearless Leader was wrong, as usual." Avon headed for his gun. "Did they see you?"

Vila looked wounded to the core. "Course not! What kind of a thief do you think I am if I can't evade a couple of stupid troopers?"

"I shall refrain from answering that right now. Now, tell me the rest of it."

"I ran up here...well, not here, but to Blake's room."

"Why were you going to *Blake's* room?"

"Now, *I'll* refrain from answering. Anyway, I was just about to knock when I heard these really peculiar noises coming from inside...and...and..."

"Your innate cowardice overcame your concern for our hero and so you decided to drag me into this. Has it ever entered your tiny little mind that Blake may be...entertaining someone in his room?"

“Blake? Our Blake? Oh, come on, Avon. This is Roj Blake we’re talking about here! He’s not like us—he won’t let his hair down until he’s wiped out the Federation. You know that.”

Avon looked out at the storm. Grudgingly, he wrapped his holster about his middle. Whipping the gun out, he checked the charge, then headed for the door, a hesitant Vila in tow.

“I presume it was only abject cowardice that stopped you from making sure Blake was all right yourself? There are no important details left out from your charming narrative?”

“Well, I mean, I was all alone and unarmed...and what if Servalan was in there torturing him, eh? I’d only’ve gotten myself caught. And anyway—the door was locked.”

Avon halted and glared down at the little thief. “And when has that ever stopped you?”

“I know, you’re still furious at me for walking in on you and that girl on Phobos, interrupting you right in the middle of things—so to speak—but it wasn’t my fault. Blake *made* me.” Avon stalked off down the hall, Vila scurrying in his wake “He did, Avon, honest.”

Outside Blake’s room, the dim hall was empty. Avon leaned lightly against the door, ear pressed to the panel, but he couldn’t quite be sure of what the faint noises meant. Pulling his gun out, he kept an eye on the hallway while Vila took a few seconds to pick the simple lock. The thief straightened and nodded. Avon started to ease his way in, cautiously, with Vila at his heels. Roughly, the tech pushed the smaller man back.

“You watch the door.”

Vila frowned, but stepped back to do as he was told. Silently, Avon crept through the tiny hallway toward the fairly loud but as yet indistinct sounds emanating from beyond a panelled door. Carefully, the tech nudged the bedroom door open, peering into the brightness ahead. He didn’t proceed any farther. He could see all he needed to see.

Soft, white rope firmly bound Blake’s wrists and ankles to the corners of the opulent four-poster bed, but he wasn’t fighting against them. Beaded with sweat, he lay on his belly, his quivering body covered by a smaller, dark haired man who was thrusting enthusiastically between Blake’s ample buttocks. The rebel pushed back as far as his restrained position would allow, straining to capture as much of the other man inside as he could.

Avon watched, fascinated, in spite of himself.

Blake clenched his fingers into linen sheets, moaning and begging the other man never, never to stop, but it was patently clear to Avon that the smaller man couldn’t last much longer. His long thrusts were shorter, his face drenched, the muscles on his back bunched. He was lost.

With a last impassioned cry, that stranger threw his head back and for the first time, Avon was able to get a good look at his face. The sight of it rooted him where he stood, stunned. Even with his eyes pinched shut, the man inside Blake could have passed for a clone of the tech.

Regaining control just in time and before the recovering men could notice his presence, Avon stepped back, very quietly and closed the door behind him. He returned his gun to its resting place and smiled. There was more to Blake than he’d ever imagined.

Barefoot, Avon padded back to the hall door and slipped out.

“Well?” Vila asked anxiously.

“There is no need to worry. Blake’s found someone to...amuse himself with.”

Vila sighed and smiled, “Well, I suppose that just goes to show how much we know about Blake. I mean, who’d have ever thought he’d tumble some local lovely when he’s got a couple of the best aboard the *Liberator*?”

“Perhaps he thought it best not to mix business with pleasure,” Avon offered, escorting Vila down the hall and away from Blake’s room. As they halted in front of Avon’s door, Vila grabbed the tech’s robe sleeve and gave it a tug.

“Tell me, was she, you know...something else?” The little thief winked and smiled and nudged him just in case Avon didn’t catch his meaning.

A small smile crept back onto the tech’s lips. “Oh yes, indeed, Vila, Blake’s bedpartner really was...something else.”

Rather confused by Avon’s cryptic smile, Vila decided not to pursue his line of questioning further. “Say no more! Well, right...’night, Avon.” He started off for his room. Suddenly he came to a screeching halt and whirled around. “Wait a minute! What about those troopers I saw?”

Avon grasped the door handle to his room. “I wouldn’t worry about it. I very much doubt they were looking for us. After all, this is an open planet and they have as much right to be here as we do, so just make sure you stay out of their way. You might stay in your room until it is time for us to leave. With

room service, you can order up absolutely anything to satisfy your petty little heart's desires."

Vila's eyes brightened, "Yeah, room service, now why didn't I think of that?" The thief mumbled to himself, "Yes, I'd like two blonde virgins, please and some marmalade. No," he muttered, disappearing off down the hall. "Not marmalade, *honey*. Yes definitely honey...."

Sequestered safely within the walls of his room, Avon dropped his holster on the floor behind the couch. The last embers of the fire cast a dim glow over everything, brightening with an occasional shimmer of sparks as the dying coals settled into cinder. Suddenly, the heat in the room seemed oppressive, but the wild storm outside prevented him from opening a window more than a fraction, rain flurrying in through even that small chink.

He walked into the bedroom away from the red flickering fireplace, but found little respite from the heat he carried within. Tossing his robe across the bottom of the curtained bed, he climbed between cool, smooth sheets. Closing his eyes, Avon watched the scene in Blake's room replay itself in his mind. Slowly, his hand slid down his chest to his groin to begin caressing his hardening shaft.

The thought of Blake, bound and helpless beneath him quickly completed his erection. Kicking away the constraining sheets, Avon wrapped his fingers tightly around his cock, his strokes, strong and firm, as he succumbed to practiced rhythms. In his mind's eye, Blake lay as he had in his room, legs spread wide for him, but now Avon could see his face clearly. He pictured himself kneeling between Blake's thighs, cockhead pressing against tight opening. He could feel the moment when Blake's body opened to accept him, could feel pliant ripe buttocks squeeze his hardness, pulling him in deeper, welcoming him to Blake's core. The tight grip milking his penis was Blake's body as it wiggled and writhed beneath him. He could see himself plunging into Blake, hand pumping Blake's penis as in reality he pumped himself. He could smell Blake as his mouth nipped and bit and kissed Blake's shoulders and neck. The rebel thrashed about under his merciless onslaught, Blake's desperation for completion feeding a need in him he would never admit.

The agony blended with the ecstasy. Blake's face mirrored his own pleasure/pain as with one final, frantic thrust, he released hot semen over his belly.

The cooling warmth brought him back to reality. Avon lay quietly trembling in the darkness. Gradu-

ally his breathing returned to normal. Stripping the pillowcase from the down pillow, he wiped the sticky, slick fluid from his body. Flinging the soiled piece of satin aside, he got up to take a bath.

"Are you certain, Vila?" Cally asked, smiling from ear to ear.

"Course I am. I told you, Avon said she was something else."

"Well, that says something about Avon's poor taste in women. Blake came back aboard early."

"He did? How'd he look?"

Jenna looked down at the teleport console, suddenly very uncomfortable. "Tired."

Vila beamed, "See...see!"

"*Liberator*," Avon's cool voice interrupted Vila's revelry. "*Bring me up.*"

Jenna grinned, her fingers paused over the console buttons. "Did *he* get a little stress release?"

Vila snorted, "Who? Avon? His idea of a good time is communing intimately with a computer and since we didn't let him take Orac down he's probably in a terrible humor."

Jenna shook her head and pressed the controls.

Avon surprised everyone. He coalesced on the teleport with a smile on his face and four small, brightly wrapped packages in his arm. Springing from the pad, he deposited one gift on the console in front of Jenna and handed one each to an amazed Cally and Vila. Openmouthed, they watched him merrily jog down the corridor to the flight deck.

Cally was the first to recover. "He seems to be handling his sexual frustration rather well, Vila."

"Yeah," the little thief watched as the two women disappeared around the corner, "I wonder what he's up to?"

The fourth day out from Kennert ended in an altercation with the Federation. No one had expected it and the *Liberator* paid dearly for their mistakes.

Tired and irritable, Blake had jumped down everyone's throats for being lax. No one took his criticism well. Even Vila had snapped back at him with a particularly nasty, but accurate retort.

No one took it well, except Avon. He sat through Blake's soapbox tirade without comment. Then when the storm had died down, he picked up Orac and quietly headed for his quarters. Blake suddenly stepped in front of him blocking his path.

"Leave Orac here," The rebel commanded.

Vila drew in a sharp breath, waiting for the fire-

works. On rare occasion he'd seen Blake in these moods, baiting the tech deliberately looking for a fight, but he had never seen him physically challenge the smaller man.

Avon stared levelly, but his expression never changed. Slowly, he turned and placed the small computer on a nearby console. He turned again to leave.

"What? No scathing retort, no biting challenge to my authority?"

Avon stopped, one foot poised on the lowest step. "Why should I? You're right. We have been lax. We were caught, quite literally, with our pants down. Next time..." he turned and smiled, "we may not be so lucky."

Blake stood for a moment, surprised by Avon's acquiescence. "Don't you want to know why I need Orac?"

Avon's placating smile broadened. "You must need him for some secret and important research or you wouldn't have *asked* me to leave him here. Correct?"

The tech's lack of animosity took the wind out of Blake's sails. When he didn't respond, Avon turned and continued up the stairs.

"By the way," Avon called back, "return him to my cabin when you're through, Blake. I would appreciate it."

Several hours later a barely perceptible knock roused Avon from his book.

"Come in, Blake."

Blake strode through the door. He set Orac on Avon's work table and turned to the man relaxing, comfortably on the bed.

"Here's Orac. How did you know it was I?"

"Cally and Jenna never come to my quarters. If they need me they always call on the intercom. Vila picks the lock. The common courtesy of knocking before entering would indicate some knowledge of social graces, since I was in here. It had to be you. Simple deduction."

Blake smiled wearily and shook his head over Avon's long, drawn out explanation. He pointed to the chair by the workbench—the only one in the room.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"Please do, before you fall down."

Blake sighed and rubbed his hands over a two day stubble.

"Did you get the information you wanted?" Avon asked.

"Yes."

"Are you going to tell me about it?"

"Not yet."

Avon nodded and returned his attention to his book. After a few moments, Blake cleared his throat. The tech suppressed a smile and peeked over the top edge of the volume in his hands.

"Aren't you going to try to pry details out of me or at least berate me for being so secretive as to risk your precious life?"

Avon laid the book in his lap and turned his full attention on the rebel. "My life is precious to me, but I know you, Blake. You'll tell me what you want me to know, when you want me to know it and not before. So why should I waste my breath?"

Blake sat back and studied his friend. "I'll have to let you go planetside for a little R and R more often. Getting laid has done your disposition a world of good."

"Well, it would seem that 'getting laid' as you put it, hasn't done *your* disposition much good at all."

Blake stared hard at the man on the bed. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

Avon silently reprimanded himself for his slip of the tongue. He knew the man across from him well enough to know he wouldn't let it rest until he had his answer.

"What I meant was you should be quieter if you want to keep your rendezvous secret. Vila spotted a couple of Federation troopers in the streets our last night on Kennert. Of course, in his paranoid little mind, he thought they were after us. He did the only thing his limited cellular capacity could come up with: he panicked. He went to tell you, but became frightened by strange noises. He tried to convince me to check it out."

Blake didn't take his eyes off Avon. He watched the tech warily. "And did you...check it out?"

Avon nodded. Minutes of silence ticked by.

"And?" the rebel prompted suddenly more tired than ever. He waited for the other shoe to drop. "Well, were you surprised?"

Avon smiled ever so slightly, relishing the other man's discomfort. "A bit," he admitted honestly, "but I don't know why. It all makes sense. If Cally and Jenna knew of your predilection for men, the odds are you'd lose their loyalty. Part of the reason they stay is their attraction to you."

"And Vila?"

Avon's smile blossomed, "He'd probably jump into your bed at the drop of a hat. He idolizes you."

Blake laughed, "I doubt that." He paused, the smile toned down to a small grin. "And what about you?"

"What about me?" For the first time in the course of the conversation Avon broke eye contact. He glanced down at the book strategically covering his bulging erection.

"What are your feelings about what you saw?"

"Have you always been a homosexual?"

"Bisexual...for as long as I can remember. Of course, the problem with that answer is that my memory covers only a very short period of time. You didn't answer my question."

Avon looked up into worried eyes. "How did your little affair affect me? Well, it was very entertaining and educational."

"What are you going to tell the others?"

"Why should I tell them anything?"

Blake nodded, "What do you want, Avon?"

The tech smiled and leaned his head back against the cold, steel wall. He stared up at the ceiling. "I choose to keep my options open. For the time being your secret is safe with me."

"To be dangled over my head like the proverbial sword. To wait for you to pick the perfect moment to snip the last thread and have my world come crashing down around my ears."

"Yes, well, too bad your fellow rebels are so parochial in their thinking. Otherwise you could come out of the closet and I'd be left with a useless piece of information."

Suddenly, Blake began to laugh. It started out as a deep, low rumble and built to a full belly laugh. Tears flowed down Blake's cheeks as he doubled over onto the floor. Avon sat up, startled by the rebel's outburst.

"What's so funny?"

"You...you really don't have a clue, do you? Come on, Avon, you claim you're the smart one. Replay that bedroom scene over in your mind. Like in the children's books, look at it and tell me what's wrong with the picture?"

Flustered and angry, Avon stood, intending to rid himself of the jellylike irritant on his floor.

"Blake! Avon! Come to the flight deck now, we've got trouble." Cally's voice set both men running for the door.

The ensuing battle took less than an hour, but the strain of the sudden attack showed on everyone. As soon as the danger was over Blake looked around, but Avon had already departed the flight deck. With a nod, Blake left Jenna in charge and retreated to his cabin for a long, hot shower.

The steam rolled out of the bath as Blake reappeared half an hour later. He buried his head in a fluffy towel, drying his damp curls. Suddenly he realized he wasn't alone.

"Taking up some of Vila's bad habits, Avon? I never thought you'd stoop to picking my lock."

Avon tossed a computer panel onto Blake's bedside table. "I didn't have to pick it. You left it open. You're becoming neglectful and needlessly careless in your old age, Blake."

He watched as the larger man pulled the towel tightly around his waist. Blake sat down and crossed his legs, waiting.

"This is it, isn't it? The detail I overlooked: a computer control unit. It was at your bedside in the hotel. This little holiday was all a set up and that young man's resemblance to me was not coincidence, now was it?"

Blake smiled, "Avalon met him on Gastron. She was amazed by how much he looked like you. He works in a high security Federation computer complex on Kennert." He paused, stretching out his long legs. "We persuaded him to remove the panel and replace it with a slightly modified one."

"One which Avalon's resistance can tap into."

Blake nodded.

"Was his reward for risking his life one night with you?"

"You make it sound as if I were selling my body."

"Weren't you?"

The tall rebel stood. His anger flushed his body as he moved threateningly toward the smaller man. "I do what I have to do, Avon, I don't always enjoy it."

"But you did, this time, didn't you!" Avon jumped to his feet, ready for a fight.

"Truth, Avon!" Blake bellowed, "You want the truth? Yes! Yes, I enjoyed it. He was talented! It was wonderful and I enjoyed it!"

Avon retreated a pace.

"What is it, Avon?" Blake pressed his attack, "Jealous?"

The rebel staggered back a few steps from the impact of Avon's fist connecting with his jaw. The tech moved swiftly, trying to slip past the larger man before he could recover. He did not make it. Blake grabbed him by the arm and swung him hard, bouncing him violently against the wall with a force that knocked the air from his lungs. He collapsed onto the bed in temporary immobility. Blake seized his wrists and pinned them beneath his body. The crush-

ing weight of the larger man atop him made it difficult to breathe. “Are you...going to...rape me, Blake?” he finally managed to gasp.

Blake rubbed hard against Avon’s leather covered groin. “What a fascinating idea,” he smiled wickedly, “but it is difficult to rape the willing.” He pressed his groin tightly to the one below him.

Avon’s body betrayed him. He felt his shaft harden as he arched up to meet the rebel’s possessive mouth. Suddenly, Blake pulled away, releasing his hold on the smaller man.

“Do you want this, Avon? Do...you...want...me?”

“No!”

Blake grimaced and started to push up.

“Yes!”

The rebel looked down, bewildered. “I’ve never known you to have a problem making up your mind. Now what is it, yes or no?” Blake smiled again, “Do you want me to just ‘take’ you so you’ll feel absolved of guilt? Are you a virgin, Avon, where men are concerned, I mean?”

“Don’t toy with me, Blake.”

“I wouldn’t dream of toying with you, Avon.”

The tech pulled Blake to him. Blake’s towel landed across the room and the larger man suddenly found himself beneath his prey. Blake moaned, revelling in the tech’s onslaught. Hand and lips were everywhere. Nipping, licking, searching for the hidden spots which made him squirm.

Rough leather gave way to soft skin. Blake felt his arms trapped to his sides as Avon straddled him. Less than gently, Avon pressed the head of his cock to his lover’s lips. Blake smiled, licking the glans lasciviously. With one final lap, he drew the hard shaft into his mouth. He felt Avon tremble like a leaf, fighting hard against the urge to come here and now.

Reaching up, Blake caressed the backs of Avon’s thighs and buttocks, drawing him closer...deeper. Avon gasped. Sweat poured from his face and chest as he began to thrust into the generous mouth.

Suddenly, the tech stopped. He eased back, pulling away from Blake’s still suckling lips.

“Turn over. I want you the way he had you.”

Blake rolled over. He pulled his arms up over his head and grasped the edge of the headboard. Avon slid down, running his hands along his lover’s back, blazing a trail with his tongue to the entry he sought.

Pushing his lover’s legs apart, Avon rubbed his shaking hands over the muscled mounds, pinching and kneading them before prying them apart and settling his thick cock between them.

“Avon, there’s cream in the bedside table. If you don’t use it, we’ll both pay.”

With one abrupt jab, Avon delved into the hot, waiting orifice beneath him. He smiled at his own pain and at the small scream Blake bit back with the harsh penetration. Slowly, painfully, he pressed on, but after three lunges, Blake relaxed and began to push back. It didn’t take long to bring Avon to a thrusting frenzy. Again and again his thighs slapped against his lover’s bottom. Blake moaned as his seed spilled forth and as if on cue, Avon stiffened behind him, his hot fluid flooding the dark passage.

Avon dropped, spent, onto Blake’s sweaty back. his breath heaving from him. Blake could feel the smaller man’s heart pounding wildly, but slowly the sensation disappeared.

Blake lay quietly, not speaking when Avon slipped from his body. He didn’t open his eyes, but he knew Avon, fastidious as ever, was wiping off the sweat and traces of semen. The sound of rustling clothes reached his ears. Blake rolled over onto his back.

“You used that computer tech for your own gain, just as you use *them*...as you try to use me.”

Blake looked up; sweat plastered a few curls to his forehead. “It was necessary.”

Avon snapped the last fastener shut at the shoulder of his tunic. “That sounds like something Servalan would say.”

Blake dropped his head. “Avon,” he whispered, “don’t go. I...I need you.”

Avon paused, bracing himself with one arm against the door jamb. Blake’s plea might refer to the immediate present, but he recognized the hidden edge of desperation in the voice and instead addressed himself to the future. “I’ll stay...for a while, if for nothing else but to keep you from becoming as evil as the thing you are fighting.”

The door closed with a grave finality. Blake scrubbed his hand over his face and rolled onto his stomach. Pounding his pillow into a lump, he bunched it under his chest.

“I wish I could tell you more, Avon,” he mumbled. “I suppose I’ll have to leave you enough clues to work it all out yourself after I’m gone.”

He smiled, almost asleep. “You’ll have your *Liberator*, but you’ll also have a mystery. And I know you, my friend—you’ll work on that mystery until you solve it and then....”

Blake’s smile hardened, “You’ll be in for quite a surprise, Avon, because, you see...there’s no one freer than a dead man.”

LOVE'S RAW EDGE

Adrian Alexander

AVON BARELY LOOKED UP AT THE SOUND OF HIS CABIN DOOR OPENING. He took another large swig of twenty year old whisky. It burned a fiery trail as it slid down his throat. The pain reminded him that he was, unfortunately, still alive.

//Alive, but not living.//

"You shouldn't be drinking alone, Avon," Vila smiled blithely, sitting his decanter of soma and adrenalin on the table.

"You should know," Avon growled. He was in no mood for Vila and the thief's endless chatter. Avon was exhausted, his inner being eviscerated and every atom of his body hurting. All he wanted was to be left alone.

Vila poured himself half a glass of his green concoction. With a shrug, he reached out and refilled Avon's glass to the brim with the amber warmth. The thief raised his glass and saluted the man across from him.

"To Blake, to Kerril, to Anna and all the others who've broken our hearts."

The tech stared at his glass for a second, then downed half of it. Without a word of recrimination, Vila topped it off again, then added a small amount to his own. They sat in silence, drinking. Vila watched as Avon's eyes began to droop.

"You're exhausted," he said to the hollow man across from him.

The thief stood up to get Avon into bed. The world skewed in and out of focus, spinning around him like a top. He grabbed the table's edge to still his staggering. "I'm worse off than I thought," he mumbled as he moved around to stop behind Avon. Gently, he pried the technician's fingers from the empty glass clutched in his hand like a weapon, keeping reality at bay.

"Come on, Avon. Beddy byes." He grabbed the other man's arm and half carried, half dragged him to the bed.

Avon flopped back, loose limbed, onto the narrow bunk. Vila propped him up against the wall and clumsily started loosening the fastenings on his shirt.

"What are you doing?" Avon glared drunkenly through half closed eyes.

"I'm going to rape you, what else would you expect, eh?" Vila laughed, pushing the black shirt off

narrow shoulders. The laugh quickly faded into sympathy when he saw the massive bruises and welts on his friend's torso. One particularly nasty red mark ran along Avon's side, disappearing below the waistband of his trousers.

"You're hurt a lot worse than you let on, aren't you?"

"Leave it!"

"You know Cally said she saw you coming out of the infirmary. Why don't you go back and let her have a look at you?"

"No!"

Vila jerked back, frightened by Avon's vehemence. He studied his friend. "I know you, Avon, even if you don't think anyone does. I bet you think you deserve to suffer because you killed Anna, right? But Avon, don't you see? You had to because she tried to kill you first. She *betrayed* you."

Avon closed his eyes and let his head drop back against the wall. "Shut up, Vila. You're a fool. You don't know anything about anything. Now just be quiet and get me another drink."

"Then will you let Cally check you over?"

"Drink!"

"All right, all right! I suppose you're not that badly off if you can be this crabby," the little thief muttered as he backed away. When Vila placed the glass in the tech's hand, Avon raised his head and drank the entire contents in one single gulp. He opened his eyes to find Vila watching him.

"She did it, didn't she?" the thief said.

"Who?"

"Servalan."

"What are you babbling on about?"

"She sent us a corpse, didn't she?"

Avon's head fell back. "Leave me alone, Vila."

"Will you sleep?"

A twisted smile formed on bitter lips, "Sleep?"

Vila shivered involuntarily at the low, growling tone.

"Oh most assuredly, I shall sleep. I am so very, very tired. Close the door behind you. And Vila, just make sure no one disturbs me."

Reluctantly, Vila took his decanter of soma and headed for the door. He turned and stood there silently. Something niggled in the back of his mind,

telling him he shouldn't leave, but the tech had asked him to go and it was not wise to make Avon ask twice. He frowned and shrugged as the door slid shut behind him.

Vila sat on the shadowy flight deck. Zen had lowered the lights, simulating late night. Only the gentle, almost subliminal hum of the ship's engines broke the quiet. He wasn't sure how long he'd sat there staring off into nothingness, his untouched glass of soma dangling loosely from his fingers.

Suddenly, the thief jumped up, alarm etched onto his face. His glass crashed to the floor as he whirled around and ran headlong for the corridor. A startled Tarrant moved to follow him, but stopped short.

"Vila, what's wrong?"

"Avon!"

Tarrant grinned and shook his head, returning to continue his work at the flight console. "Oh right, Vila, nice trick. You really had me going for a second there."

Vila tried to enter Avon's cabin, but found the door locked. He remembered he had left it unlocked.

"Avon!"

Vila pounded hard. The sense of impending disaster which had pervaded his thoughts now overwhelmed them. He pulled his set of lockpicks from his boot and set to work. It took less than a minute to get the door open, but Vila felt like it was a lifetime.

He found Avon's pale form sprawled naked and face down on the floor. Multihued pills were scattered in all directions around him, a deadly rainbow in the night.

"Avon! Avon!" He yanked the other man upright. Old memories flooded back. Another time, another place, a different face, but the same events. Tears of fright threatened his eyes. His hands shaking, he felt for a pulse. Nothing. The warm skin was obscenely still. "Oh god, not again, not Avon..."

He lay Avon back on the floor, his mind working feverishly remembering the things Cally had doggedly taught him. He breathed into the tech's mouth, forcing oxygen into the unwilling lungs. He thrust hard against Avon's sternum, demanding...insisting...begging the quiet heart to beat again, to pulse with blood. He covered the tech's mouth pumping air into the motionless man under him. Vila stopped for a moment, then felt a weak cough and a slight hiss of breath as life grudgingly returned. Relieved, he sat back on his heels then hauled the tech upright once more.

"Avon! Wake up! Wake up!" Vila shouted, slapping the tech's face with a stinging blow. The body he held stirred weakly, sluggish arms batting at him.

"Where there's life, there's hope. Someone said that. Someone smarter than you, you great oaf!" Vila ranted. "Don't you die on me. You hear me? Don't you die on me." He made a Herculean effort to drag Avon to the bath. "Avon! Please don't make me be a hero. I really don't want to do this, you know." He slapped his friend again. "You know I hate violence. Come on, Avon, wake up!" He slapped him again, the smarting blow leaving a red welt on Avon's cheek.

His efforts elicited a low moan. "Don't complain. At least, you'll live." Prying the other man's mouth open, he rammed two fingers inside, reaching far into the back of the throat. Avon began to retch. Vila did it again until the tech got rid of the remainder of the pills and booze in his stomach, body heaving and wrenching.

The little thief held him over the toilet, supporting him. "I should let you fall in, that's what I should do. Let them find you, drowned, in the bloody loo. Serve you dead bloody right for trying to kill yourself. You bastard. Killing yourself, huh. What good's that going to do, you bloody fool."

The retching subsided and Avon's trembling, sweat soaked body fell back into the thief's arms.

"What the hell did you do it for, eh?" Vila asked, not really expecting an answer. He was doubly surprised when he got one. Weakness and desperation forced the truth from Avon.

"Because I honestly loved her, Vila. I loved her and I killed her."

"Oh, Avon, you had no choice, don't you realize that? She would've killed you if you hadn't shot her first." Vila could feel the thin body he held shake. His heart ached and he cradled Avon closer. He shut his eyes to hold in the pain for he knew Avon was crying.

"I should've let her," Avon whispered hoarsely, choking on the agony of guilt and loss. "I wish I had."

"No, Avon, no. She didn't really love you or understand." Vila hesitated. "Not like I do," he whispered. He held the beloved body close against his chest and rocked, willing motion and comfort to dry the tears. Avon struggled pathetically to free himself from Vila's embrace and the threat of life he offered. His captor, his torturer simply hugged him tighter and poured the salt of love into his seeping wounds. The thief's hand reached out to tenderly smooth sweaty hair. "I'd've missed you if you'd let her kill you, you know."

He held on tightly for several minutes until Avon's protests were worn away into defeat and the thief knew then that he had just pulled off his greatest job of all: he had stolen a soul from death's gaping maw. He sighed and slipped on the disguise of practical mundanity. "Come on, let's get you cleaned up. You smell awful. Worse than something the cat dragged in."

Avon listlessly allowed Vila's ministrations. The thief filled the tub, then carefully lowered his charge into it. Slowly, soothingly, he cleansed the too white skin, massaging gently, trying to ease the pain away. He wished fervently that he could siphon the misery off into himself. He could cope, he knew and he wouldn't lose Avon. Avon's eyes remained closed as though death could still be invoked, but his breath shuddered explosively when Vila touched the angry red welt on his side.

"Don't!" He hissed through clenched teeth.

"It hurts?" Vila glanced up, but the tech's expression remained impassive.

"What do you think?" he said listlessly, shutting his eyes against the devouring dark within.

"I think it hurts, but that you're too bloody stubborn to admit it. That's what I think."

Avon shook his head, then allowed it to drop back against the wall. Vila continued, trickling warm water down his friend's arm to clear away the soap. He thought, momentarily, about going below the water line, but first looked up to see if Avon's eyes were still closed. He found himself caught by a deep, brooding, mesmerizing stare, a look which seemed to be issuing a bizarre challenge, but a look which at least held life. Without taking his gaze from Avon's, he let his hand slip beneath the water to brush the soft hairs on the tech's thigh. He moved to the knee then retraced his course up the inner aspect of Avon's leg.

Avon swallowed hard. Vila could see a nervousness in the normally cold eyes as his fingers brushed lightly against the furred scrotum. Avon didn't move; he didn't even breathe. Vila smiled and drew his hand away.

Vila's expression gentled in the face of the misery still bleeding from Avon. "Come on out of there. If you don't, you'll start looking like a prune." The worst, at last, was over. Avon had reached bottom and the inescapable need to survive forged into the core of the human soul had driven him back up to the surface. He stood and grabbed a large, fluffy

towel. "Come on," he coached, "I won't bite. Well, not hard anyway." He smiled.

Avon stood and stepped out, the water sheeting off his smooth skin. With silence and that same dangerous passivity, he allowed Vila to dry him, standing unmoving as the thief searched through the closet for a robe; there was only one. It was battered and brown and two sizes too large for the tech. Vila knew immediately that it had belonged to Blake. Not questioning why the tech had commandeered this particular piece of clothing, he wrapped Avon in it.

With gentle prompting, Vila steered Avon to the bunk and for the second time that night, he helped him stretch out on it. The brooding Alpha stared sadly off into space. The hurt...the pain Vila saw there made his heart ache for this man, lost in the outer extremities of loneliness.

He leaned closer and took Avon into his arms away from that terrible solitude. He felt the other man tense, an uneasy withdrawal. Vila knew better than to push too soon. Reluctantly, he released the tech.

"Vila, I'm not that kind of man."

Vila smiled warmly, "Never said you were." He reached out stroking the pale, drawn cheek. "But you need someone like me tonight."

"I don't *need* anyone."

Vila frowned with exasperation. "What you did wasn't just an act of grief or despair, you know. It's anger, Avon, soul-deep anger eating away at you. That's why you tried to kill yourself instead of just living with the pain the way you always do. You're angry with yourself."

Avon started to turn away, but Vila quickly trapped his chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing the tech to look at him.

"You think I'm stupid. You make no bones about that, but there are some things I do know. When I talk about suicide, I'm not just talking through a hole in my head. I know the subject...", he let go of Avon's chin, "only too well."

Avon watched him warily.

"When I say you need me, I don't mean *need* need. I mean...oh, you know what I mean." He picked up Avon's hand and kissed each finger lightly. "You *need* me."

The little thief's eyes locked with Avon's as he gently inserted the tech's index finger into his mouth and sucked hungrily, sliding his lips down then up the entire length of the digit. He repeated it again with the next finger and the next until Avon closed his eyes, unable to control the emotions brought to

the surface by the erotic show, the display of lust or...love?

Vila let go of the slender hand and got up off the bed, leaving the tech suddenly bereft of the vital caring caressing him. Avon's eyes flew open and for a brief second something akin to panic flashed through them.

"I want you, Avon. I want you to know there's someone who cares for you. I want you to see there is more to life than wires and computers and people who betray you."

Vila reached down to grab the hem of his tunic and drew it up over his head. Tossing it to the side, he stretched and flexed. The dim light cast shadows, showing how firm chested and well muscled the Delta thief truly was.

Avon smiled, comprehending for the first time the reason for the baggy clothes the other man insisted on wearing. They were part of his protective camouflage. The way he dressed and spoke, the way he carried himself, the tech was sure, were all carefully studied, designed to complete his deceptive facade of the doltish Delta stereotype. The clothes covered his physical strength, making him look flabby and weak so that no one would require more than the minimum from him. The cowardice hid an emotional nucleus strong enough to force a man to rejoin the living. It surprised Avon to realize that there were so many ambiguous facets to this man.

Vila rubbed his hands down his hairless chest, slowly, sensually trailing them across his abdomen to his waistband. The catch was no match for the thief's talented fingers and the zipper gave way without a fight. Hooking his fingers into his pants, he stripped the constricting material from his body then straightened up to see Avon's eyes widen, staring down at his groin.

A long, thick cock hung down, cleaving a pendulous scrotum. Vila stood, proudly, legs apart. His left hand reached down and cradled the heavy sac lovingly. Two or three strokes with his right caused his semierect penis to fill to capacity.

"Yes, Avon?" Vila responded to the questioning look in the tech's eyes.

"Are all Deltas as well endowed as you, Vila?"

"Me?" A teasing smile lit the little thief's face. "Naw, most are bigger." He stepped closer; the smile faded. "Touch me."

Avon hesitated, watching the lockpick caress himself. Impossibly, the shaft seemed to grow larger. The tech felt a flash of fear. He had been raised an Alpha

and there were strong social taboos against same sex unions. Only lesser grades engaged in such activities, but he had always held the liberal belief that everyone should live as they pleased and societal restrictions be damned. Now his beliefs were being put to the test. His mind warred with his body: the prohibitions ingrained in him from childhood fighting the almost painful fullness in his groin, physical proof of his attraction for another man, or at least, the haven offered him.

He didn't know if it was the combination of drugs and alcohol still in his system, or something deeper that made him choose to break his conditioned barriers. He watched, fascinated, casting pain from him, as his hand reached out and ran a finger along the underside of Vila's cock.

"No," Vila moaned, "touch me." He wrapped the tech's fingers tightly around his shaft and thrust into them. The feel of it sent an erotic chill through his body.

"You've never been with a man before, have you Avon? I thought you and Blake...." Vila's voice faded into silence seeing the bright hurt flare in the other man's eyes. "Doesn't matter." He grinned, trying to lighten the moment, to stitch the wounds closed again. "I know enough for the both of us and probably for two more besides. Let me teach you."

Avon let go and leaned back. The cool bulkhead felt good to his overheated skin. "That should be amusing," he said, dredging up a spark from dim embers.

Vila sat down and cupped Avon's face between his hands. "You know you have the most sensuous lips I've ever seen on a man. Sometimes, on the flight deck, you'd be deep in thought and you'd run your tongue over your lips, moistening them. I always wanted to be that tongue." To emphasize his words, he leaned forward and carefully outlined Avon's pouty lips.

One hand slid down the side of the tech's neck, over his shoulder to his chest. Vila's fingers deftly toyed with the chocolate nipple bringing it to hardness. "I'd always wondered whether or not you had hair on your chest."

"Well now you know." The almost imperceptible tremor in Avon's voice revealed his arousal and his trepidation. Without hesitation, Vila moved closer, taking and possessing the Alpha's lips. His tongue pressed insistently until Avon allowed him admittance. His fingers on the tech's nipple slowly gravitated down the abdomen and under the bed covers

where they found a firm tumescence. They fondled it, thumb rubbing skillfully over the glans spreading the clear preejaculate found there. The slickness further excited the tech, helping him float free into the mindless realms of passion.

As the Delta drew back, Avon tried to move with him, but a hand on his chest restrained him. Vila smiled lasciviously. Avon's pupils dilated, eager for more. He sat still, with his kiss bruised lips parted, trying to regain some of the oxygen the little thief had stolen from him.

Vila pulled down the sheet, admiring the prize in his hand.

"I hope it's not a disappointment." Avon tried to smile, but missed.

"Oh no, it's not."

"It can't match your length...."

"But it more than makes up for that in diameter," the thief beamed. He stroked the organ harder, feeling the pulse quicken within it, then bent to lick a tiny, milky drop from the narrow slit in the head. He closed his eyes, his face reflecting sweet bliss, savoring the taste, as if it were a fine and delicate wine. Vila drew Avon's hard member into his mouth. He heard the tech moan with pleasure as he worked his hand in concert with his mouth.

Avon threw back his head. His eyes stared at the ceiling wide with wonder. He'd never felt anything quite so extraordinary in his life. Fleeting thoughts of what other Alphas were missing made him appreciate the little lockpick's talents even more.

He reached down and hesitantly petted the soft hair on the bobbing head. Vila's hand moved to caress the inside of his thighs urging him to spread them apart even more. Fingers grasped his balls and gently rolled them, one digit slipping downwards to probe his rectum. Avon gasped; involuntarily, he held his breath.

"Avon, breathe," Vila murmured, knowingly. As Avon complied, Vila could feel the tight sphincter loosen and he moved his finger farther in.

An electric shock traversed up Avon's spine to his brain as Vila aggressively massaged his swollen prostate. Waves of intense ecstasy flooded his mind. He found himself moving in counterpoint with the delightful onslaught from front and behind. He groaned, fighting the urge to explode. Vila seemed to sense this and redoubled his efforts.

"Vila!" Avon cried and stiffened. Hot semen filled the thief's mouth and throat. He swallowed, franti-

cally trying to take in as much as he could, lips and chin dripping with Avon's seed.

The tech lay limply on the bed. He was vaguely aware when Vila withdrew his finger. Deep inside, he felt only two things: a profound weariness which penetrated all the way to the bone and an astounding sense of satiation unlike any he had ever felt before. For a brief moment, time did not exist. He had no worries...no pain.

Vila tenderly kissed the tech, gifting Avon with a taste of his own cum. The flavor was not what the Alpha had expected. This tiny bit of information brought his thoughts back to the present.

Vila rolled onto his side, grinning like a Cheshire cat. "Well, was I any good? I mean, I know you don't have a lot to go on, me being your first and all, but...."

Avon looked at his lover through half closed eyes. "Don't ruin it, Vila."

A playful sparkle lit the thief's eyes. Avon felt something hard poke him in the thigh. He glanced down at Vila's still hard shaft. It made his own shrivelled penis look ridiculous by comparison. Vila noticed the look.

"Don't worry about me, I'll take care of myself later."

"Do it now."

Vila's eyes narrowed, not knowing what to make of Avon's odd tone. "Here?"

"No, on the flight deck. Of course, here, I want to watch you."

Vila laughed, "I always knew you Alphas were a bunch of peeping toms." He lay back and turned his head to watch the tech's face. His hand drifted to his cock. He enveloped it in his palm and began working it in a slow, deliberate pace. Avon stared impassively, his eyes revealing nothing. Gradually, the thief's rhythm quickened. His eyes almost drifted shut as he lost himself in the sensations wafting through his brain.

"You're fantasizing about me, aren't you?" Avon asked.

Vila's eyes opened a fraction, "What, don't you want me to?"

"Tell me what you're thinking."

Vila closed his eyes, letting his mind form the images of the two of them together. "I can almost feel your fingers on my cock, pumping me, making me really hard. I look down and your lips are wrapped around me. Oh god! The thought of that makes me want to come. I love the feel of your skin, the smell of it."

Now, you're under me and I'm inside you." Vila's movements became more animated. "You're virgin tight...so bloody good. My hand is gripping your shaft and I milk you and we...we come together."

Vila worked hard pulling desperately at his rose colored member. Sweat rolled off his forehead, soaking the pillow. His breath rattled tremulously from him.

"Why must it be you coming in me? Why can't I be the one fucking you?"

"Oh shut up, Avon, and let me finish. It's my friggin' fantasy."

Avon was about to reply, but thought better of it seeing the grimace of intense concentration on the other man's face. Vila moaned. Hot, white cream erupted from him. Wave upon seemingly endless wave of semen splattered both men.

Avon watched, mesmerized. He'd never seen another man masturbate. He'd never seen anyone come. Polite to a fault, even he had closed his eyes during the pertinent moment itself.

Reluctantly, Vila's hand slowed, changing from frenzied abuse to a loving caress. The thief lay quietly, relaxed and feeling more than a little sleepy. Warm lips pressed to his and he smiled, deepening the kiss.

Avon drew back, looking into the Delta's eyes. "Vila, will you ever betray me?"

"Aw, Avon, talk about ruining a mood." But Vila could see the pain in his eyes and knew from whence it came.

"I'll be honest, Avon."

"That should be a novel concept for you."

"You know I can't promise you I'll *never* betray you. I mean, tomorrow's a very uncertain thing. But I can promise that I'll try not to." Vila snuggled up under the tech's chin and closed his eyes, too tired to think anymore.

Avon felt the little thief's breathing slow. When he was sure his bedmate was asleep, the tech allowed his subconscious thoughts to surface. He kissed the thinning hair on top of his lover's head and rubbed his cheek across its softness. He lay still, analyzing the events that had transpired, realizing that the anger and grief which he'd held inside so long were only part of the emotions which had driven him to the desperate act of suicide to relieve his suffering. These familiar feelings had momentarily dissipated only to be replaced by a more dangerously seductive sentiment—caring.

II FOOD FOR THOUGHT AND OTHER PERVERSIONS

“Plot?” said the Glaswegian. “What plot? Plots are like wearing clothes: they just get in the way of the good bits.”

The editor agrees—sometimes. There is a time and place for light-hearted, gratuitous sex. So, if you’re in the mood for slash unencumbered by too much actual story, then please read on.

TEA FOR TWO Edi N. Burgh

crumpet *n* 1. *pl* only an English pancake-like muffin served with butter and/or jam. (*Would you like some tea and crumpets?*)
2. *slang* for gratuitous sex. (*I could go for a bit of crumpet.*)

Avon, d’you want some tea and crumpets?

And just exactly who did you have in mind, eh?

Well what are we hanging about for, then? Let’s get on with it.

Oh so you want to have your cake and eat it too?

You mean that? Honest? I mean, d’you mean what I think you mean, if you know what I mean?

Honest?

And that can be quite brutal.... You don’t mean to hurt me, do you?

So you just want a bit of crumpet, then, eh?

Well, then, better get a bloody move on. Your crumpet’s already hot and we don’t want it to get cold, now do we? And then, just to show how good I am, I’ll make you your tea—after you’ve eaten some crumpet, that is.

Oh, I most certainly would like some crumpet.

Well, now, I think that’s rather obvious, don’t you?

What about my tea?

Not exactly, no. I was thinking more of having crumpets...and then having crumpet also.

Oh yes.

As honest as I ever get.

Despite your idiotic theories on men who wear black leather and studs, I do not enjoy pain—neither the giving, nor the receiving.

Naturally.

Well now, that makes it all worthwhile.

IN A PLAIN BROWN WRAPPER

Cally Donia

EVEN BY HIS OWN STANDARDS, VILA WAS BEING FURTIVE. He sneaked along the quiet corridors, keeping to the shadows as much as humanly possible. He clutched a small, plain brown parcel close to his chest, his eyes never still, darting around like a pregnant rabbit.

Intrigued, Blake followed him, watching as Vila dashed into the sanctuary of his room, the door sliding shut behind him. The 'locked' light Vila had rigged lit up instantly.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Blake muttered.

"What is?" Jenna asked.

"Oh, I didn't see you there."

"No, I just came off the flight deck. It's Avon's shift. But what is it that's so strange?"

"Vila."

"Yes, well, Avon's been saying that for months. What made you notice?"

"The way he was skulking along the corridor just now"

"If that little thief has been pinching things from my...."

"No, he was coming from the teleport. I don't understand it, Jenna. He positively begged me to let him go planetside, and now he comes creeping back on board a full three hours before he was due."

"Now that really is odd behaviour for Vila."

"It gets stranger. He was hanging onto some package for dear life."

"Now you've got *me* curious, Blake. I wonder what that little thief's been up to?"

The big rebel gnawed a knuckle and grinned delightedly at Jenna. "I have absolutely no idea, but it will be rather amusing to find out, don't you think?"

Thus began the case of the plain, brown wrapper...and an interrogation the Federation's best psycho-manipulators would have been proud of.

They began by waiting until Vila was on the flight deck, irritating Avon with masterful ease, then searching the thief's quarters. Unfortunately for Blake and Jenna, a thief is by nature paranoid (comes from having people after you all the time), and so therefore has more hiding places than the extinct magpie of lore. They found numerous hoards of alcohol (some of it unrecognised even by the extremely well-travelled smuggler), but not a trace of the plain brown pack-

age, its wrapping nor anything that could possibly have been worth agreeing to an entire month of that most dreaded of duties—the mid-watch—just to go planetside for a spot of shopping. The great leader of the Rebellion and the best smuggler in the inner worlds opted for heroic measures: they called upon Cally, Avon and Gan to help. At first, morals and integrity were an insurmountable barrier to Jenna and Blake's pleadings, but then Blake, being a master manipulator of people, told them, precisely what he had seen. Gan immediately set off to chat to Vila, while Cally submerged herself in meditation to try and pick the little thief's brains, which, according to Avon, was an absolute waste of time. The comtech had his own ideas on how to get Vila to tell them.

Gan approached Vila quietly, making the thief jump when the burly man cleared his throat. "What do you have there, Vila?" he asked with studied non-chalance.

"Oh, it's just that analogue board Avon wants me to redo for him. Funny how my safecracking tools work better on some of Zen's innards than all of Avon's fancy gadgets."

"Can I see?"

Vila looked at him suspiciously. "You've never been interested in any of this stuff before. How come you're so curious all of a sudden?"

Gan gave him his most disarmingly honest smile. "Oh, you know how boring it's been, just sitting around, while Avon works on Zen. Some of us didn't get off the ship, you know." He smiled again. "Buy anything interesting when you were down there, did you?"

"Was it you in my room the other night?"

Gan was glad that it had been Jenna and Blake doing the breaking-and-entering. "No, no, it wasn't me," he said with profound sincerity. "Why would I have wanted to go into your room in the first place? Is there anything in your cabin worth seeing?"

Vila glowered at him, sensing deep in his dishonest bones that here was a man hiding something from him. "Yeah, well, I don't know, perhaps, but I know for a fact that SOMEONE was poking around my things."

"Now you're being silly, Vila. Why on earth would anyone poke around your things?"

“That’s what I’d like to know, I don’t mind telling you. But you lot’ve been acting dead funny since I came back on board after my...little business trip.”

“Oh, so it was business, was it?”

That did it. Vila had a phobia of people—even ones he liked as much as Gan—asking questions. The product, no doubt, of his fine upbringing. Either that, or his over-familiarity with law enforcement agencies.

Vila picked up his tools and the board and sidled out the door. “I’m going to go get Avon to help me with this, I think.”

Gan sighed in defeat and left to report his failure to the others.

Several futile days passed. Vila was becoming more and more paranoid, mainly because of the others hounding him incessantly with supposedly casual questions. Avon was ignoring the entire matter. It was his considered opinion that the thief had merely been replenishing his stocks of potable concoctions or indulging his passion for erotica. Either way, the comptech wasn’t interested. He didn’t drink much and had a quite considerable collection of erotica himself, thank you very much. The other four, however, were well on the slippery road to obsession. In other words, it was perfectly clear that until Avon had finished the three weeks work on Zen, the co-conspirators were too bored to let the matter rest. They decided to pin Vila in the rest area and pump him for information until he revealed his secret.

“Vila,” Blake smiled down at the seated thief. “I’d like to have a little chat with you.”

“You and everyone else,” the thief muttered.

“Yes, well, we have been a little heavy-handed, I admit. But, Vila, we really need to know.”

“Know what?”

“What it was you brought onto the *Liberator* from Bresos III.”

Vila looked at them in amazement. “Is that what this is all about?”

Blake glanced at his three cohorts. “Yes.”

“What d’you need to know for?”

Blake blushed slightly and rubbed his chin. “In case it could harm the *Liberator*?”

“Is that the best excuse you can come up with? What d’you think I am? Stupid? No, don’t answer that. Avon’ll do it for you later. By the way, where is he?”

“On the flight deck, as you well know, Vila. Now don’t try to change the subject, just tell us,” Cally said.

“Why should I?”

“Vila,” Jenna said very quietly. The safecracker turned towards her. “If you don’t, I’ll tell Avon that....”

“You wouldn’t!” Vila squeaked.

“Oh, yes, I would.”

Vila believed her. “It’s nothing, really. Totally harmless. Like me,” he said hopefully. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Then you’ve got no reason not to tell us, have you?” Gan said.

Vila fiddled with his fingers, doing a limbering exercise for advanced lockpicking. “Well....”

Blake stood over him. “Vila, now just be reasonable and tell us.”

Vila made a sudden decision. “You won’t tell Avon, will you?”

Blake looked at the others. “If we promise not to, will you tell us?”

“Yes.”

Blake spread his hands. “Then we promise.”

Vila stared at each one in turn, until they all promised, crossed their hearts and hoped to die. “It’s like this,” he started. “I was talking to Orac one night, you know, just chatting.”

“You *chat* to Orac?” Jenna said in amazement and amusement.

“Quite interesting pile of bolts, that machine is. Anyway, we were talking and we got onto the subject of Avon. And....”

“And?...And? Well, don’t keep us in suspense.”

“Orac said it was Avon’s birthday soon and that there was a way I could get Avon to sleep with me....” He stopped at the stunned gasps and the shocked expressions coming from his crewmates. “Oh don’t come the innocents with me,” he scolded. “I’ve seen you all looking at him.” He turned to Jenna. “You can’t keep your eyes off his bum.” He looked at Cally. “You always just happen to be exercising at the same time he is.” It was Gan’s turn. “You always seem to end up in the computer rooms whenever he’s there and as for YOU, Blake, well....” He grinned up at his blushing leader. “You have to wear nice, baggy trousers every time you’re around him, don’t you. Especially if you just happen to get into an argument with him so that he comes and stands right up against you to yell or hiss at you, right?” Vila got up to leave. “All I’ll tell you is this: I got something that’s *guaranteed* to make him putty in my...skilled hands. And don’t bother talking to Orac—I put a voice lock on him! But if you want some clues, here you go. One,”

he ticked it off on his fingertip, “it’s organic, but not grown. Two, it used to be really common, but now it’s one of the rarest things in the galaxy. Three, it’s available from only one single place, and that’s an island in the Irish Sea. Four, it costs more, milligramme per milligramme, than any other...substance known to man. And fifth, it’s orgasmic, addictive and mood-altering, but not a drug.” He grinned as he went out the door. “Eat your hearts out.”

It was Avon’s turn to have four of his shipmates asking odd questions and looking at him strangely. As he walked back to his cabin, stretching his back, he decided to have Orac start a search for a nice, solitary bolthole. But, on the whole, he was feeling quite pleased with himself. He had finished modifying Zen to his satisfaction (including a rather reassuring ‘ultimate override’ voice command) and had been able to evade every single member of the crew for the entire day. He always gave himself a whole day away from people, immersed in work, as a birthday present. Then, his habit was to go off for the evening and indulge himself in utter hedonism. The facilities on the *Liberator* were severely limited (his favourite brothel didn’t deliver) and his other...addictions would be left sadly unfulfilled. He sighed as he opened his room door, promising himself that he’d make Blake go to Freedom City, as a generous gesture of gratitude for his hard work. He stripped, hanging his black and grey suit up in the wardrobe. He didn’t bother with a dressing gown, but went straight into the bathroom for a shower. He liked to masturbate in the warm water and that looked to be the best he could do for this particular birthday. He programmed the shower, then noticed the flashing light signalling that the unit had run out of soap and lotion. Avon cursed in a most un-Alpha way (using a wonderfully expressive word he’d picked up the time Vila dropped iced soma down the front of his trousers), then turned to get new containers from the storage cupboard under the bed. Naked, semi-aroused, he stopped, framed in the doorway.

Vila grinned cheekily at him from the bed. “Great, you’re all ready for me!”

The tech stalked towards him, covering himself (completely inadequately, much to Vila’s delight) in dignity. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Oh, I know exactly what I’m doing, Avon me old chum.” He stretched, showing off his own, not inconsiderable nakedness. “I’m seducing you.”

Avon burst out laughing. Vila looked at him, wounded to the core. “Oh, you may laugh, but just you wait and see what I’ve got for you.”

Through tears of laughter, Avon gasped, “Oh, I think I’ve already seen what you have for me.” He sobered somewhat. “Vila,” he said, almost serious, “Can you give me one good reason *why* I should allow you to seduce me?”

The thief grinned up at him and took the tech’s left hand in his, tugging at him. “Sit here beside me, and I’ll tell you,” he said. Avon looked at him with sudden interest. He had never heard Vila use that particular tone of voice before, and he conceded a certain weakness to and predilection for sexy voices. He sat.

Vila stroked the tech’s slender thigh while he reached behind the pillow to withdraw the package in a plain brown wrapper. Avon’s eyes crinkled with amusement when he saw it. “You lot’ve all been going daft trying to find out what’s in this, haven’t you?”

“Your fellow idiots were, Vila. I really wasn’t interested.”

“Well you should’ve been. It’s for you and you’ll love it, I promise.”

“Shall I now?”

“Dead bloody right you will.”

He handed it to Avon, who slowly untied the string and then methodically unfolded the brown paper. Vila watched impatiently—he wanted to get to the good bits, and at the rate Avon was going, he’d be too old and shrivelled to enjoy it. The tech lifted the plain brown box out of the wrappings. “Isn’t this taking it rather too far, Vila? What could you have possibly bought that could be obscene enough to warrant such anonymity?”

“Who said it was obscene?”

Avon glanced at the wide-eyed innocence on Vila’s face, suddenly uneasy. He really didn’t trust the thief when he was being honest. Carefully, he opened the box, revealing another box nestled within. He gasped in delight when he read the name on the box: *Terry’s Velvet*. Vila sat there, smug and confident. “Told you you’d love it.”

“Oh, I do. I do. But,” the tech murmured, wickedly, “what has this got to do with you being here, in my room, naked on my bed and with your hand on my cock?”

Vila bolted upright. “Eh? Well, you, em, we’d...you’d...”

“What am I supposed to do, Vila? Fall at your feet

in abject gratitude for this gift? I admit, it is perfect, and you must have half-emptied the treasure room to be able to afford so extravagantly expensive a present, but do you honestly believe that it's worth sleeping with you for?"

Vila looked at him for a moment, then his eyes saddened. "No, I don't suppose you would think it was worth it." He got up from the bed, gathering his clothes from their pile on the floor. With his back to Avon, in a quiet, lonely voice, he said, "Do us a favour, though."

"That depends entirely on what that favour is."

"When you laugh at me for this, don't do it front of the others, will you? This is humiliating enough all by itself. It doesn't need any help."

A slender hand stroked the cleft between his buttocks. "Well, now. I don't remember saying that the gift was *not* worth sleeping with you." Vila turned towards him and the hand trailed around to close on his penis. "In fact, I would have slept with you even without that." Two hands slid along the thief's bottom, stroking him. Fingers probed delicately at his anus and a deliciously wet tongue lapped at his erecting cock. Avon's eyes were closed, black lashes forming crescents against his pale cheeks, tongue pink and wet as it laved Vila. Avon followed the river of every vein hiding under the silken skin, every fold covering hardness. He licked up to the flared glans, catching his lower lip on the prominent ridge. He inhaled Vila's scent, rubbing his face in fair pubic hair, grazing sharp white teeth over sensitive flesh. Leaning back a little, he swallowed Vila, holding him deep in his throat, swallowing, milking the hot cock. Vila groaned, thrusting happily into the welcome, massaging wetness, knees trembling with the sudden flare of desire. Licking every detail on the thief's cock, Avon released it from his mouth. He kissed its length, sweet, affectionate little kisses. He stretched his mouth wide and took the glans inside again, thrashing his head from side to side, rubbing the cockhead against his inner cheek. He slid it free, kisses followed by bites, followed by hard suction. Vila could hardly breathe, chest heaving and reddened. He tangled his hands in Avon's soft, sweat-curled hair, murmuring his name over and over, as his thighs shuddered and his knees threatened to give way. Avon pulled away from him for a moment, to look at him, then smiled, a sultry, sexy grin. As Vila gazed down at him, he could see his own hard cock jutting and pulsing, and Avon's rosy erection weeping in his hand. The thief grabbed the smiling face and pulled it forward, push-

ing his cock into a hungry mouth. Teeth teased him, giving him a tingly, playful squeeze, then opened fully to welcome the thief into his rippling, devouring throat. Vila pushed, faster and faster, pleasure gathering in a single thrusting point, carouselling off into orgasm. He collapsed, hunched over, his full weight landing on the unprepared tech. They fell to the floor in an ungainly and extremely undignified heap. Avon couldn't have cared less.

He gave Vila a few moments to recover—but not quite long enough to fall asleep—then hauled him up. His erection jabbed the thief's side as they clambered onto the bed. "Here," Vila said, "let me take care of that for you." He leaned down to suck the tech, but strong hands drew him up.

"Not like that." Avon took Vila in his arms, massaging his back. He knew from experience that sex standing hunched over in that particular position, holding the other close to one's own body, played havoc with the male back. "Before we go on, I'll rub the kink from your back." If Vila hadn't been so contentedly sleepy, he'd have made a very bad pun. As it was, he cuddled into Avon and snaked a hand down to the tech's erection.

"Impatient, aren't you? Don't you realise that the best things in life are to be savoured, made to last—enjoyed to the fullest?"

"That's all fine and dandy, but I'd much rather just do more—oftener!" Avon laughed a little, giving the thief's hand back to him.

"Very well, idiot. Get my present for me."

Vila sat up, reluctantly leaving Avon's body for a moment, then after some scrabbling about, managed to get hold of the box. "Now, Vila. Open it."

The thief obeyed, looking questioningly at Avon when he had finished. A wonderful, rich smell drifted through the small room. Avon breathed in deeply. "It's been so long...." He stroked Vila's cheek. "Now, Vila," he said again, "put it in my mouth." Vila took out one of the pieces from the box and inserted it between Avon's waiting lips. The tech bit down, then moaned in pleasure as chocolate-covered lime cordial tumbled over his tastebuds. He laced his fingers behind Vila's head and pulled him down for a lingering, luscious, truly delicious kiss. The thief explored Avon's mouth eagerly—he had never tasted chocolate before. One of Avon's hands took Vila's and wrapped it around his cock, starting a rhythm, moving his hips in unison. Vila stroked him and kissed him and thrust into him with his tongue, until the tech arched under

him, body shuddering in orgasm. He fell back onto the bed, pulling Vila over to cover him completely. Quickly, Vila rolled off him and sat up.

Avon looked at him warily. Not everyone understood his...passionate fondness for chocolate, and it had caused many a lover to leave his bed.

Vila picked the box up and examined it closely. He grinned impishly at Avon. "Just checking," he said, "and everything's all right." He laughed at the relief on Avon's face. "Yes, everything'll be just fine," he murmured as he came back for another kiss. "There's at least another fifty chocolates in there...."

CREAM

Emma Scot

SYNTHESIZER UNITS HUMMED QUIETLY, DOOR SEALS THWUMPED GENTLY AS BLAKE SYSTEMATICALLY SEARCHED THE ROOM. He kept the lights low, his movements stealthy and cautious. He rifled every storage place in the room, until finally, he found what he was seeking. A cold draft wafted up under his robe creating tiny goosebumps on his bare flesh, adding to his excitement as he lifted the steel-grey bowl from the pale blue light of the stasis unit and placed it on the countertop. He eased the cover up, revealing a mound of ivory smoothness. Blake sighed happily and smiled in triumph, thrilled to hold it in his hands at last. Delicately, careful not to leave any obvious marks to mar the pure-as-driven-snow surface, he stroked a finger along the top of the bowl's contents.

"Well now," came a voice from the doorway, "what *are* you up to, Blake? Surely skulking around in the middle of the night is hardly appropriate behaviour for our Fearless Leader?"

Blake blushed and surreptitiously lowered his laden finger. "Why, hello, Avon. I didn't expect to see anyone this late."

"That's rather obvious. When one is expecting to meet others, one is unlikely to slither furtively around in the dark." He snapped the lights on full. "And you didn't answer my question."

"No, I didn't, did I? I was rather hoping you wouldn't notice," Blake murmured, smiling a little, turning on his disarming charm.

"No, Blake. You didn't and I did." Avon walked over to stand beside the rebel. He looked at the bowl, then at Blake's finger. "However, it's obvious that you think it's worth ruining Vila's surprise for tomorrow, despite the unnatural amount of work the idiot has put into it."

Blake shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, well, I'm not ruining his surprise, am I?"

"Now this should be amusing. Just exactly how do you choose to rationalise this...skulduggery?"

"All I'm doing is...anticipating the event, nothing more."

"Ah. I must remember that, next time I want to take a break from your damned Revolution. I'll simply say that I'm...anticipating the Federation's defeat, shall I?" Annoyed, Avon realised that he had lost Blake's attention to the goo dripping off the

rebel's index finger. His curiosity got the better of him. "What is that?"

"Cream." Blake decided the well-educated, high-born computer expert really didn't know his arse from his elbow—not where important matters were concerned, anyway. "It's for trifle." The comptech did not seem to be fully appreciating Blake's explanation.

"I shall regret this, I know, but...what the hell is trifle?"

"Well," said Blake, warming to his subject, and Avon, who was looking rather fetching in his lovely red-leather suit. The one that showed off all his interesting bits so...interestingly. "Where was I?"

"God knows, but it certainly wasn't the rarefied strata of thought."

Blake stuck his finger in his mouth, lovingly licking the cream off. "Oh, yes. Trifle." He stopped again, recoating his finger and licking it with evident delight.

"Trifle?" Avon prompted, becoming a trifle annoyed himself.

"Amongst the lower grades, every new year, they have a huge family party, with food and games and dancing."

"How very thrilling."

Blake ignored the cynical comment. "I had forgotten all this, you see. I didn't remember any of it until Vila started all this carry on about ne'erday. Anyway, my maternal grandparents were born Betas, so they continued with some of the old ways, and passed them on to us."

"Sounds like a disease. Does the Department of Health know about this?"

"As *I was saying*, every year, we'd have this big family party. My grandmother would disappear into the kitchen for hours, just like Vila did..."

"So the little idiot reminds you of your old grandmother, does he? I must remember to tell him—I'm sure he shall feel positively honoured."

Blake ignored him again—it seemed to be the best way to have a conversation with Avon. "Her *pièce de résistance* was her trifle."

Avon sighed heavily. Having a conversation with Blake sometimes seemed like having a discussion with a malfunctioning Teasmaid. "To re-

peat myself, probably uselessly, what the *hell* is trifle?”

“Oh, it’s a dessert.”

Avon threw his hands up in disgust. “All right, that does it, I give in. I shall ask Orac. Even that recalcitrant machine will make more sense than you tonight.” He paused. “Actually, any machine makes more sense than you do. Any night.”

“Avon, can you describe a cloud? Can you analyse the soul?”

“Blake, have you finally lost those few, minute, precious marbles the Federation left you?”

Blake stuck his finger in his mouth again. A grin slowly blossomed across his face. The tech did a double take. Was that smile Blake’s attempt at looking...seductive? The computer expert shook his head in bemusement. No, he must be mistaken. He was convinced that Blake’s libido had been surgically removed at birth and replaced by a halo.

Blake licked his finger, sucking on the very tip. “What I was trying to say, was how can one explain a flavour? How can one quantify a sensation?”

Avon turned to leave, realising that to stay would only lead to one possible thing—Blake’s death. Avon didn’t suffer fools lightly. In his heart, he knew everyone in the Galaxy was of baser intelligence compared to *himself*. That explained quite nicely why he was such a perfect picture of a misanthrope. That, and years of practicing his menacing glare in front of the mirror.

“Before you go, Avon. Aren’t you always the one who says that any knowledge is potentially useful?”

“Hardly always, Blake.”

“Well, fairly often at any rate. So, surely you should at least try trifle before you disappear off for your little tryst with Orac?”

Avon looked daggers at the burly rebel. “Jealous, Blake?” he said, wickedly.

Blake grinned again, quite smugly. “No, not at all. Orac lacks certain...assets, shall we say. Assets which I enjoy to the fullest.”

Again, it crossed Avon’s mind that Blake was using sexual innuendo, but the image was so absurd, he dismissed it. Blake, meanwhile, was beginning to think Jenna was right—Kerr Avon was one place where there was smoke, but no fire. Or as Vila had been heard to complain, “All black leather and studs, but no stud.”

“I believe I shall return to the flight deck and do some work. Not to mention ask Orac what the hell trifle is.”

“Facts and figures won’t explain it, Avon. Why don’t you,” and this time, not even Avon could miss the blatant suggestiveness in the sultry voice, “try it for yourself?”

Blake leaned against the cabinets, index finger liberally swathed in a thick layer of cream, poised in overt invitation. Avon paused for a moment, considering this bizarre and unexpected turn-up for the books. He shrugged. “Why not?”

He came up to Blake and grasped the rebel’s hand in his own. He opened his mouth and leaned forward. Blake raised his finger in anticipation, waiting for the luscious mouth to descend upon him. Suddenly, Avon moved his head and Blake found an extra tongue in his mouth, vibrating in a sinuous dance. After several eons had passed, Avon withdrew from Blake. “Hmm,” he murmured. “Not bad. Not bad at all.” He smiled, giving Blake a quick, but thorough lesson in ‘How To Seduce, The Easy Way.’ “The cream was quite nice as well.” He started to walk out.

Blake moved the bowl of cream out of the way, then quite calmly and confidently went over to Avon, picked the smaller man up and plonked him down on the counter where the cream had so recently lain. Avon opened his mouth to speak, which Blake took as an engraved invitation to kiss him soundly. The tech, having no air left, didn’t protest. He became downright enthusiastic when Blake managed to get rid of the infamous red suit with a few quick movements. The persnickety part of Avon’s mind made a mental note to ask Blake how he had done it so easily, when Avon had spent the better part of a fortnight trying to beat the damn thing into submission. Blake purred with pleasure when he got the comtech naked. Now *this* was Avon at his very, very best. Blake filled his hands to overflowing with a rigid cock and tight balls. He kept his mouth on Avon’s—this was no time for the man to use his sharp tongue for anything other than kissing. Avon indulged himself, sucking on Blake’s tongue, biting on his lower lip, giving a host of tiny butterfly kisses all over the rebel’s mouth. Blake wrapped Avon’s legs around his own ample waist, loving the way the comtech crossed his ankles, clutching Blake hard against his groin. The rebel’s robe fell forgotten at his feet. Pleasure surged through them and Blake started them moving together. The kissing went on and on, much to the growing delight of the big rebel. Avon responded with wild abandon, lunging against Blake, moaning into his mouth, grabbing huge handfuls of hair, and running his fingers through the buoyant

curls. Blake pulled Avon forward until the dark man was perched on the very rim of the counter. The rebel dug his left hand into the bowl, enveloping his rigid member in cream. He bit Avon's nipples, moving rapidly from one to the other, rubbing his solid hardness against Avon's lust-engorged groin. The tech moaned and whimpered, whispering absurd terms of endearments, using gutter language the likes of which Blake had never heard. It excited him enormously to hear Avon talk dirty like that. It spurred Blake on. The big rebel suddenly lifted Avon straight up in the air and then plunged him down, just as suddenly. The tech was ready for Blake, his body screamed at him to fill it. The larger man was more than adequate. Avon threw his head back, breaking the kiss, loudly keening his pleasure. He tried to push himself down on the big rebel, but couldn't get enough purchase. Blake grinned at him and withdrew slightly from the hot moistness clutching him. He thrust in, hard, pushing Avon up. The tech bit Blake's shoulder, tiny drops of blood like rosebuds in his wake. Blake thrust into him again, an abrupt upward jab of his hips, burying himself to the hilt in Avon. The tech moaned, abandoning Blake's shoulder for his talented mouth. The big rebel was the only person Avon had ever found who kissed better than he did himself. He submerged himself in the erotic delight of Blake's mouth, of Blake's cock, of his own phallus rubbing, enveloped by their two bodies pressed so wondrously close. The tech wrapped his arms tightly around the burly rebel, hanging on as Blake surged in rhythm, every thrust stroking Avon deep inside, massaging him, bringing him higher and higher. He rippled his muscles, caressing the essence of the man he held within. Blake shuddered, gasping and shouting, pulsing orgasm streaming through him and from him, draining his seed. Avon, as al-

ways, followed where Blake led, burying his face against hot, sweaty skin, drunk on sensation.

They stayed locked together for several minutes, Blake's softening penis held inside by Avon's greedy muscles. He didn't want to relinquish this, not quite yet. Blake was still kissing him in the afterglow, tender mouth sucking on delicate neck. The big rebel smiled to himself. He had always said that he wanted to leave his mark on Avon, and now he was. He wanted to make sure the lovebite would show, no matter what fabric armour Avon might choose to wear tomorrow. Blake raised his head and Avon stretched his neck out for more kisses. Blake obliged, happily, sucking just under Avon's jaw... Eventually, the chill of the room and the counter digging into his back made Avon disengage his legs and reluctantly pull away from the rebel's embrace. He smiled up into smoky brown eyes and gently shoved the other man away.

"Avon? Something wrong?" Blake asked, concerned, knowing only too well how mercurial this man could be. He watched, trying to keep serious, but losing the battle as Avon lost *his* battle to get into the infamous suit with some semblance of dignity. Blake, magnanimous to the core, went over to help him. Seconds later, the tech was bound up in the glove tight leather, snug and safe.

"One of these fine days, I shall have to make you show me how you managed that..." Avon said absently as he bent to pull on his boots.

"Is that it? Is this how it's going to end? Does it just stop here? Avon, wait a minute, man, where the hell are you going?"

The computer expert grinned at him. "I have to go and see Vila." Avon paused, letting the grin bloom to a full grown smile, "He has a recipe I want to borrow...."

CREAM AND SUGAR

Gael X. Ile

PUT QUITE SIMPLY, AVON DIDN'T TRUST BLAKE—AT LEAST NOT WHEN HE WAS CREEPING STEALTHILY AROUND THE NIGHT-DIM CORRIDORS OF THE *LIBERATOR*. The comptech played an elaborate game of cat and mouse, shadowing his would-be leader the entire length of the ship. He followed the big man's example and ducked into hiding as a cheerfully whistling Vila strolled by, oblivious. The thief's passing seemed to galvanise Blake, for he rushed forward, his goal obviously within reach. Avon followed, in high dudgeon, his ire rising meteorically.

He rounded the final corner, tongue sharpened and ready. Pausing in the doorway, he slapped the lights on full and found—Blake, caught like a child stealing the sugar, his finger in his mouth, a trace of ivory froth furring his lips. The big man had the grace to look sheepish. He even blushed. Avon was torn between fury at missing a good fight and hysterical laughter at the sight the burly rebel presented. He settled on impatient with a dash of contempt.

"Vila will kill you, if he sees you stealing that." He approached Blake, taking the large, grey metallic bowl from him and placing it on the galley worktop. "He's spent hours preparing this... veritable feast for tomorrow. Surely the least you could do is respect his traditions and wait a few short hours for the celebration? It is only polite, after all."

Blake took the bowl back. "Yes, I know, and I did mean to...but when he said what he was making for afters...."

"Your high morals sank back into the primordial slime." Avon retrieved the bowl back from Blake's tight grip and put it back on the countertop. He glanced at it, not immediately recognising the contents. He was, after all, Dome born and bred, none too familiar with anything other than synthesized, prefab meals.

Avon looked up as Blake reclaimed the bowl and swirled his finger in it. "Well now, so this is worth risking your messianic halo, is it?" He leaned forward a little. "What, precisely, is it?"

Blake paused for a moment, mouth full, finger newly dipped. "Sweetened cream," he said, in a muffled way. "Your kind of thing, actually. It's whipped."

Avon arched a brow in innuendo. He smiled, a

sensual quirk of his lush lips. Dark eyed, he held Blake with his smouldering, simmering sultriness and suddenly swallowed Blake's finger into his mouth. He sucked hard on it, tongue throbbing against it. He let it go, with a last, lingering flicker of his tongue. Speechless, Blake stood agape as Avon finally released him.

"Now then, Blake," he murmured provocatively, "was there some particular significance in getting me to...suck the cream from your rigid member?" He smiled sexily, then turned on his heel and left, his sophisticated amusement—almost—hidden from Blake.

The fearless leader was left standing, open-mouthed and taken aback, with one wet finger raised as though testing the direction of the wind.

Three hours later, he stood, indecisive and insecure, outside Avon's closed door. He desperately wanted to go in and take Avon, lustily and strongly, but he had one slight problem. He wasn't absolutely sure he knew how. Admittedly, he had read books and seen a vistape or three, but they had stirred no memories in him. So, here he was, a virgin of some thirty-odd years, knowing what goes where, but not entirely certain as to *how* one got it there.... He raised a hand to knock, then changed his mind. If he did something stupid, forgot something vital or simply wasn't very good, Avon would laugh him into oblivion. He leaned his forehead on the chill door.

"Do you always hold the walls up, Blake, or is this a new trick you've learned especially for this occasion?" Avon's voice came from behind Blake, scaring several years off his life.

He mumbled to the tech, "Oh, I just...well, I...I had a sudden dizzy spell...."

"Naturally," Avon said smugly, with an insufferably knowing smile. He opened the door and gestured for Blake to precede him. "In that case, perhaps you should come in and lie down. We wouldn't want you to faint, now would we?"

Blake felt like the proverbial fly as he walked into Avon's parlour. Blatantly nosy, he examined everything in sight, from the luxurious satin bedspread to the stacks of tapes. He picked one up, impressed when he realised that not only was it an esoteric treat-

tise on history, but that it was also in a foreign language. Elegant fingers took it from him, placing it back on the pile. Blake smile uncertainly at Avon, who seemed quite content to watch him silently. The tech leaned nonchalantly against his desk, patiently waiting for Blake to acquaint himself with his would-be lover. The burly revolutionary turned to the paintings on the wall. They were masses of swirling colours, creating an almost tangible aura of feeling around them.

“These are very good, you know,” Blake said.

“Naturally, or else they wouldn’t be gracing the walls of my humble abode, now would they? I’m flattered, however, that one of your...classical background, should recognise their quality.”

Blake turned back to him. “In spite of what you think, I’m not just an engineer. That was my second career choice.”

Avon turned an amused glance on him. “All right, I shall fall for it. What, pray tell, was your first?”

Blake grinned. “Lecturing in Literature and Art at the University.”

“However, no doubt your...revolutionary proclivities made you somewhat undesirable to the authorities.”

“Actually, no. I found I couldn’t stand up in front of 300 people and talk at the same time.”

Avon’s tone lowered seductively as he came closer to Blake, the backs of his fingers brushing the hairless chest where the rebel’s shirt lay open. “And,” he murmured, “can you talk and have sex at the same time, or should we dispense with all this chitchat?”

Blake pulled back, face reddening, butterflies in hobnailed boots doing the Highland Fling in his stomach. “Avon....”

The tech’s hand recoiled from the perceived rejection. “What’s this, Blake? I can look, but not touch? You knew perfectly well what would happen if you came here tonight. Why the blushing bride routine.”

“I don’t know how to say this....”

“Oh come on, Blake! You’re a grown man who....” the tech’s voice trailed off and a delighted grin split his face, “has had a mindwipe. You don’t remember, do you?” he asked, voice positively gleeful.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t.” The fearless leader drew himself up to his full height, bearing his courage before him. “Go ahead and laugh,” he said bravely.

“Oh I shall, but I think I’ll save it for when you do something stupid. I shouldn’t have long to wait. A virgin. To all intents and purposes, you are a virgin.”

“Yes....”

“I shall enjoy this...I’ve always wanted to be someone’s first.” He started undoing Blake’s clothes, and the big rebel’s facade of confidence with them. “And,” he mused, between causing Blake’s heart to thud and his cock to jump, “I think for this special occasion, we shall take this quite slowly. Quite a novelty for me, nothing quick or rough....”

Blake’s sense of humour returned. “So you’ll be gentle with me, then?”

“Oh yes, indeed. I shall wait until later before I bite....” He leaned up to kiss Blake on the side of his neck, sucking on the throbbing vein like an infant vampire. Blake gasped under the onslaught. He grabbed Avon’s face between his large hands, diving into the tech’s mouth for a starving kiss. After a few moments, he realised Avon was pushing, not gently, at him. He pulled back and the tech gulped in air. “Blake,” he gasped, “even when kissing, a man needs to breathe.”

“Oh, sorry, Avon. It’s just that I’m so excited about this....”

“Well, control your enthusiasm, please. You’re an adult, not a puppy. Now, let’s try that again....” He leaned up into Blake’s embrace, his skillful tongue weaving a magical trace of sensation on the rebel’s open mouth. The big man hugged Avon closer, drawing him in, feeding on the embrace.... He suddenly felt a sharp kick on his shins. “Blake! You’ll break my ribs. Remember, we agreed, nothing rough.” He looked askance at the hangdog expression on Blake’s face. “Now, I know I said I’d be gentle with you, but I think perhaps it is I who should be asking that of you.” He nibbled lightly on parted lips. “Let’s get these clothes off.”

Avon considered complaining—he had been rather fond of that sweater—but decided to simply bend to the task at hand. He eased them, naked, onto the bed, past the two piles of clothing (one of them ripped by clumsy, delirious hands). Avon leaned over Blake as he settled the burly man on the slick satin bedcovers. Unexpectedly, Blake rolled them over, making the dignified computer tech lose his balance—and his dignity—landing them both on the floor. The weight of his supposed leader falling full on his chest, knocked the wind from Avon. When he got it back, he simply lay, unmoving under Blake’s frantic, feverish caresses. “Blake,” he said, in a curiously calm voice. “Blake.” The bigger man continued unabated. “Blake!” Avon dunted him in the ribs.

Something penetrated Blake’s obsessive exploration of Avon’s navel. “What?”

“Blake, I really do hate to disturb you when you’re having so much fun, but I, for one, am too old to have sex on the floor like a rabid teenager.”

Blake was so fogged by lust that he didn’t answer immediately.

“I mean, Blake, that this *always* ruins my back. I end up in pain for days, so...Get off, you great oaf.”

“Oh, sorry, Avon. It’s just that I’m so excited about all this...”

“Yes, well, I had noticed. Come on, get off. Let’s get onto the bed.”

Reluctantly interrupting his contemplation of Avon’s navel, Blake clambered up onto the bed, pulling the tech along behind him, almost dislocating the man’s shoulder in his anxiety to get back to business. Avon quietly, but firmly, retook control of the situation. “Well now,” he said, trailing his fingers along Blake’s considerable length, “what have we here?” He curled onto his side, sucking on the glans of Blake’s erection. The big man bucked, his rampant enthusiasm almost ramming Avon’s teeth down his throat. The tech hurriedly pulled away.

Blake realised what he had done. “I’m sorry, Avon, it’s just that...”

“Yes, yes, yes, we’ve already been through that. Look, I’ll tell you what,” he said rashly, “why don’t we swap places?”

Blake grinned enthusiastically and Avon started to worry. The leader of the galaxy-wide rebellion lowered his head, stretched his mouth wide, carefully closing over Avon’s semi-aroused penis—and promptly bit him. The tech bolted up with a muffled howl of pain. “Bloody hell, Blake! You’re not supposed to use your teeth!”

Blake ducked his head with embarrassment and an almost overwhelming sense of failure. Seeing this, Avon decided that, if he ever wanted to have the big rebel on a regular basis, he was going to have to boost his confidence. Not to mention teach him what the hell he was supposed to do. Avon sighed and reached for the lubricant he kept in the hidden cabinet above his bed. With a mesmerized Blake watching his tiniest move, the tech carefully relaxed his anal muscles—he was smart enough not to risk *that* delicate task to Blake’s enthusiasm—and spread cream inside. Ready, and aroused by his self-ministrations and the passion pulsing from Blake, Avon smiled and stroked lotion onto Blake’s weeping cock. The rebel started to turn Avon over. “Oh no you don’t!” he said firmly. “We’re not doing it like *that*.” He caressed Blake, subtly getting the man to lie flat on his back.

Grinning, the tech straddled the twisting, moaning rebel, slowly sliding onto the thick, heavy erection under him. Both men groaned in pleasure, at the sensations drowning them, at the sweet ecstasy.

“Avon...Avon...,” Blake muttered. “Oh, this is so wonderful. You feel so...” Lost for words, he smoothed his hands up the soft skin on Avon’s abdomen, pausing inexplicably to investigate his navel again, then moving on up to hard nipples that nuzzled his palms. He stroked his way up to Avon’s shoulders and, gripping the tech strongly, uttering moans of lust beyond enduring, he rolled them over. Avon, stunned, lay under Blake’s weight—again. Inexperienced, Blake had slid out of Avon during the manoeuvre. He spread Avon’s slim thighs, kissing full lips, his hard cock rubbing against sensitive flesh. Avon abandoned himself to Blake’s embrace, surrendering himself to passion. He felt the large cockhead tease him, seeking entrance. Suddenly, Avon writhed against Blake, muffled words breaking against the rebel’s mouth. He twisted free, shoving the heavy man off of him. “I’m sorry, Avon...”

“Yes, yes, I know. Where the hell did you learn to do that? A brothel for mutants and misfits?”

Blake blushed furiously. “Actually, no...it was on a vistape.”

Avon cradled his head in his hands. He was going to regret this, he knew he was. “All right. Which vistape?”

Avon wasn’t sure how he did it, but the rebel blushed even redder. “*Fanny Does Freedom City...*”

Avon shook his head. “Oh, Blake. Oh, Blake. Listen, men don’t fit together that way—it just doesn’t work.” He carefully rubbed his sore backside, gazing contemplatively at the obviously worried rebel. He knew he was going to regret this too, but he asked anyway. “What’s wrong?”

“Everything! I can’t do anything right...”

“Yes, you can. You just need some...guidance.”

“Avon, I’m like a bull in a china shop!”

“Well,” the tech said archly, “you’re certainly like a bull...” He smiled at the big rebel. “Come on, give me your hand. There’s one thing that *everyone* can do. Come here,” he whispered, drawing Blake into his arms, sliding his hands down the ample body, filling them with the overabundant genitals. “Masturbate me.” He began massaging the hardness in his hands, tracing veins and stroking under the round glans. “Come on, Blake, touch me...”

Blake was devastatingly close to coming. He reached out, confident, grasping Avon, doing to oth-

ers what he would have them do unto him. Unfortunately, instead of whimpers of delight, he heard a squawk of pain. “Let go! Let go!” He let go. Avon glared at him in absolute, utter, profound disbelief, gently soothing his aching cock.

“I’m sorry....”

“Not half as bloody sorry as I am! Blake, it’s obvious you like a firm hand, but...I prefer a little—just a tiny bit—less...crushing force, all right. Where are you going?”

The rebel had risen from the bed and started to hurriedly draw on his clothing. “Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? This...I have been a total failure, a complete wash-out. So I’m leaving now, before you let that vicious tongue of yours off its leash.” He glanced quickly at the tech. “And I’m sorry....”

“If you say that just once more....” Avon sat on the bed as Blake picked up the rest of his clothes. He hated to admit failure. He hated even more to be left, frustrated and sore, alone in his own bed. “Blake.”

The rebel looked up.

“Take your clothes off. Again.”

“Why?”

“Because there is *one* thing we haven’t tried....”

Blake stripped. He hated to fail and he hated even more the prospect of having come this far only to be denied unveiling the mystery of mutual orgasm. He was a trifle hesitant, however, as he approached the bed. *Fanny does Freedom City* really hadn’t given him much idea of what else they could possibly still try, and with Avon’s fondness for leather and studs....

“Lie down. Good. Now, listen to me, Blake. You will lie completely still. You will not hold me, you will not masturbate me and you most certainly will not use your teeth on me. Agreed?”

Blake, in reply, played dead. “Good,” said Avon,

fitting his body length to length on Blake. “Very, very good.”

He rubbed them together, forever, feeling Blake’s arousal grow, feeling the other man’s erection slide slick and wonderfully hard against him. Blake was murmuring in his ear, lips gently grazing his cheek, big hands lightly stroking his back. Avon relaxed into lust, letting himself hurtle on towards the long awaited, much postponed orgasm. It was wonderful, sweet and fulfilling, an erotic delight. Then Blake started to move under him. The man was very big and very strong. He clasped his hands on Avon’s taut buttocks, kneading them with every undulating move he made, matching the movement of his hands to the clenching and unclenching of firm muscles with every sliding thrust Avon made. He bucked wildly, almost tossing Avon from him. The tech grabbed Blake and held on for dear life as the rebel rose on a tidal wave of passion, Avon tossed along with him like so much seaweed. Even the tech was willing to admit, though, that what Blake lacked in skill, he made up for in sheer enthusiasm—and more than made up for in excitement. Avon felt his being spasm into a single line of fire, jetting out of his cock, his cream meeting and mingling with Blake’s. Avon lay there for several minutes, trying to recover. Never, ever, in his extremely extensive experience with men, women and/or both, had he ever had to work so hard for such a brief moment. There was only one possible course of action. He rolled off Blake and raised himself on one elbow. He looked down at the big rebel, who was finally, blessedly still. “Blake,” Avon began.

“You just don’t know what to do with me, right?”

“Oh no, Blake. I know precisely what I shall do with *you*.... I shall send *you* to Vila for lessons.”

III GET BLAKE, GET AVON, OH BLOODY HELL, GET EVERYONE!

Sometimes it's rather a delight to 'stick' it to one or more of our favourite characters and in this section we do precisely that. We go from one extreme to another—or should I say extremity? We explore wanting a thing to happen which will not, not wanting something to happen which does, and then, of course, "...the best-laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley, an' lea'e us naught but grief and pain, for promised joy." (To a Mouse, Robert Burns)

IF ONLY I COULD... A. L. Hughes

THE COOL AUTUMN BREEZE LIFTED A PIECE OF SOFT, BROWN HAIR THEN LET IT FALL SLIGHTLY ASKEW. Leaves rustled around the lean body stretched out on the hard ground. Dark eyes watched carefully, noting the change of the guard, lights being turned on and off in the temporary buildings below, wary for any sign something was wrong.

"All quiet?"

Avon didn't turn his head, keeping his eyes on the encampment. He knew the tall rebel had been trying to be stealthy, but his lumbering steps had announced his arrival to the tech's sharp ears long ago. Blake stretched out on his belly beside the tech, rustling the blood-red and glowing gold leaves.

"It's been far too long. I don't think he got in this time."

Blake smiled. "Of course he got in. He always does. Besides, I trust him not to let me down."

Avon slowly twisted his head round to stare at the rebel's profile in the mist-clad murk of the chill predawn. "He has failed you, Blake."

"I have faith in him."

"Well, I'm glad somebody does. Idiocy loves company."

A pile of damp leaves skittered in a frosty fall close to Avon. He whirled around, his gun at ready, silently cursing himself for his laxity, but Blake always did seem to have a knack for distracting him. Vila dropped his tool kit on the ground between them.

"That wasn't easy, you know. I could've easily gotten myself captured or worse...killed." He smiled down at Blake. His deep brown eyes flashed their amusement.

The rebel leisurely rolled over onto his back. His smile broadened. His breath plumed in the air as he spoke. "Any problems?"

"Course there were problems. Why do you think I ended up in this monkey suit?" He slapped a spot of mud off the black troopers uniform he'd confiscated. Scratching, he pulled at the tight, itchy material.

"But nothing you couldn't handle, obviously."

"Well, no, I mean, it was only a stupid Federation safe, now wasn't it?"

Vila reached down and took Blake's outstretched arm, helping him to his feet. He moved to offer Avon the same, but the tech scowled at the proffered hand. Vila shrugged and exchanged an amused glance with Blake. Avon got up on his own, fastidiously brushing the shards of autumn gold off his own black leather pants.

"Here, this is what you wanted, isn't it?" Vila handed the flashing crystal comptroller to his leader.

"Good work, Vila." The rebel's smile had a light of its own.

The little thief glowed under this praise and arched a brow coquettishly. "Do I get a prize, then?"

Blake wrapped an arm around Vila's shoulders

and gave him an affectionate squeeze. “We’ll see.”

The rebel raised his teleport bracelet to his lips. “Cally, bring us up.”

“Just who the bloody hell does he think he is!”

Avon’s head popped up at the sound of the angry words. Calm eyes followed Jenna as she stamped across the flight deck in high dudgeon. He watched Jenna kick hard at the navigation console. She immediately regretted her impulsiveness and sat down, pulling off her boots, to nurse her aching toes.

“Upset, Jenna?”

The pilot glared at Avon. For several minutes the two stared at each other, but when it came to a staring showdown, Avon always won.

“The little bastard. Who does he think he is anyway? He hovers around Blake like a nursemaid, protecting him from...from...” Jenna fumed, nursing her sore foot. “Acts like a damned guard dog, keeping everyone out of Blake’s boudoir. Jealous little faggot!”

Avon’s eyebrows raised. He’d heard her carry on many nights about their leader’s rumored relationship with Vila, but she’d never been so vehement in the past.

Avon got up and nonchalantly circled around behind her. Gently, he laid his warm hands on her tight shoulders and began to massage the knotted tension from them. Her head lolled back, neck muscles loosened up by his attention.

“Uhm, that feels so very nice, Avon.” She turned a sultry look on him. “Care for a roll in the hay?”

Avon smiled down at the soft, blonde hair and considered the invitation.

//It could be the most expedient means of getting the information I require.// He considered. His smile broadened. The tech leaned down, nuzzling and tenderly kissing her rounded ear. He let his tongue sensuously trace its curvature. “Well now, I’m not too sure of that, Jenna. I do hate being second choice.”

Jenna smiled, “Oh, you might’ve been first choice if I’d known you were heterosexual. I thought you were as queer for Blake as Vila is.” She turned her head and for a moment lost herself in Avon’s warm, inviting kiss. “Shows just how wrong a girl can be,” she gasped, leaning over to take the tech’s pouty lips again. “I’ve been in all male crews for far too long. All work and no play.”

Her fingers entwined in the dark hair. Their lips never slipped as Avon slid over the back of the flight deck couch into Jenna’s waiting arms. He allowed

her to explore his body freely, moaning occasionally, at exactly the right moments, to encourage her trust.

“Jenna.” Avon eased back from her slightly. He traced her kiss swollen lips with his index finger. “Just what did Vila do to make you so very angry?”

Jenna’s eyes rolled up. “Not now, Avon,” she replied, exasperated when the tech avoided her next kiss.

“No, now. I want to know now.”

“Later, Avon, later. Sex now, talk later.”

Avon shook his head. Jenna realized she wasn’t going to get anywhere unless she played this little game his way. She felt his hand slide along the inside of her thigh with featherlight caresses. It stopped, pressing invitingly at the junction between her legs. Suddenly, the huge room seemed stifling, heat building up until she found she was having a hard time breathing. She had suspected there was an untapped talent lying in wait in the tech’s graceful fingers. She had long wondered what it would be like to make love to him, to get at this heretofore unexplored territory of Avon’s body and now she intended to take full advantage of the situation and find out.

“Damn sure of yourself, aren’t you?” She grinned, then threw back her head and her smile extended from ear to ear as his skilled fingers maneuvered under her tunic to her bare breasts.

“Tell me!” he commanded, rolling her nipple to hardness between his thumb and forefinger.

“I...I can’t think when you do that.”

“Then I’ll stop.” He let go of her, his open hand hovering delicately above her breast.

“No! No,” she said, pressing his hand back where she wanted its warmth and tactile strength. “I’ll tell you.”

“Go on.”

“I don’t know, I suppose I was just extremely randy tonight. Blake’s made a few passes, or at least I *thought* he was flirting with me. All right, so I had noticed how close he was with Vila, how protective, and I had made all sorts of jokes, but I honestly just thought it was the attitude a parent would have for a child—or an *idiot savant*.”

Avon smiled. His hand broadened its caress. He started to lift her tunic up over her shoulders. Jenna’s eyes crinkled in amusement and surprise.

“Here?”

“Why not? I thought you were adventurous. Besides...,” he bent his head, kissing and sucking the raised pink bud, “no one will see anything they haven’t seen before.”

Jenna hesitated, then her need for his ministrations won. She sat up and peeled her tunic off, dropping it on the floor beside the couch. Avon took in the sight, lips curved, then he leaned forward and began stroking the soft paleness with his lips and tongue.

"You were saying." Avon felt her fingers fumble with the shoulder fastening of his tunic. He allowed her to open it enough to slip her hand inside. Her cool fingers explored a small area of his hairless chest.

"I always wondered whether or not you had a hairy chest. I mean, you could never tell under all that leather."

Avon smiled his most bedazzling smile. Jenna felt a small part of her heart melt. "Well, now you know," he whispered, his voice deep and husky, exciting her even more. "Talk."

She laughed and gently nudged the tech's head down in the direction she wanted him to go. Avon complied, blazing a wet trail down her stomach. Gingerly, he slipped his fingers into the stretchy waistband of her slacks and in one swift movement, he deftly stripped them from her long legs. Tossing them across the flight deck, he toyed with the malleable skin above her pubis, teasing and nipping at it, causing her to writhe and moan under the erotically pleasurable onslaught.

"Tell me more." he encouraged. Again, the pilot laughed, losing herself in Avon's skillful manipulations.

"I'm glad you're not a Federation interrogator, because if this is your idea of torture, no one could hold out for long. Lower, Avon, please, lower."

"Oh, I shall, I shall, just as soon as you tell me what you saw."

"Vila was already in Blake's room when I got there. He opened the door so I just pushed past him. I didn't think I'd have any problem getting rid of him."

"But you did." Avon prompted her to continue with purring voice and sucking lips.

"He said Blake was in the shower. I said that was fine by me and he should leave now, but he wouldn't take the hint, so I became more...physical."

Avon could feel her shudder from head to toe as his tongue tickled her secret spot. Jenna moaned and pushed up into his generous mouth.

"And even that didn't work?"

Jenna watched as Avon lasciviously licked her juices from his lips. She spread her legs wide as he insinuated three fingers deep inside and began working them back and forth.

"Oh, Avon," she groaned, losing herself to his talents.

His fingers pushed deeper and harder, bringing her to the verge of orgasm before backing off. "Tell me what happened next?" he demanded, keeping his voice soft.

Jenna shook her head, trying to clear her mind enough to comply. "I...I, uh, heard the shower stop. I knew he'd be out any second, so I grabbed Vila by the arm and tried to shove him out the door."

The tech's broad thumb rubbed hard, back and forth across the sensitive nub between her labia. "Oh god, Avon!" Jenna screamed tossing her head side to side. "Please, please!" she begged, uncertain, in her quickly evaporating rationality, of what more he could do to make her feel anymore wonderful.

"Vila kept babbling," she gasped, "about how Blake was too tired and how he didn't want to see anyone. Then before I knew what he was doing, the little worm twisted and instead of me having a hold of him, he had me. Vila's surprisingly strong, you know."

"No, I didn't know." Avon filed this bit of information away for future reference. "Go on," he murmured, thumb teasing her, making her shiver with pleasure.

Reluctantly, Jenna forced her thoughts back to her story. "Blake stepped into the room. He was wet and..." the image of Blake in her mind made her body even more responsive to Avon. Now it wasn't the computer tech doing all these delightful things to her body, it was Blake. "And flushed," she continued. "He had a towel wrapped tightly about his waist. He's quite good looking without his clothes, you know."

"I hadn't noticed. And how did he react when he saw you?" Avon's tongue joined his fingers in teasing the tiny bud.

Jenna fought to think, afraid he would stop if she discontinued giving him what he wanted. "It was strange, so many emotions. I startled him, I know and he was embarrassed, but then he glanced at Vila. You couldn't mistake the guilt in his eyes."

"Then what?"

"Nothing," The pilot growled. "Nothing, Vila had me practically out the door by then. He said he was sorry and that he'd talk to me later. So I left."

Avon's hand worked faster, his thrusts into her firmer, more certain. "He wasn't angry?"

"No," Jenna cried, bucking in counterpoint to his rhythm, trying to take more of him in.

“Was Vila?”

“Why do you want to know?” Jenna tried to keep her wits about her, but under Avon’s intense attack that was thoroughly impossible.

“Just tell me.”

“No! No!” she screamed. “He was worried and anxious, but not angry. Damn!” The pilot raised herself up on her elbows and locked eyes with her tormentor’s as she felt herself explode from within. She fell back, letting the sensations inundating her take over. Again and again, orgasmic waves shook her body until finally, trembling furiously, she could take no more. Slowly, her breathing began to return to normal.

“Why would Blake bed that snivelling Delta thief when he obviously prefers me? Damn you, Blake!”

Avon sat up. Reaching down, he picked up her tunic and wiped his sweaty, sticky face and hands with it, then he tossed it over Jenna’s naked body. He smiled at her, but his thoughts were far from the sight before him. He reattached the catch at his shoulder. //Yes, why would Blake prefer Vila? Why, indeed?//

Standing, he straightened his leather tunic and left the blonde pilot to regain her sensibilities alone.

Avon watched Blake watch Jenna throughout the entire second shift, amused by the fruitless mating dance enacted there. Each time one would gather the courage to make eye contact, the other would look away. When either came too close, they were overly polite. Vila arrived toward the end of the shift and stealthily slid in behind navigational control. He pretended not to notice the ugly glare Jenna was giving him, but Blake noticed. He stood beside the little thief for a few minutes, listening attentively to his whispers, then he nodded.

Vila made vague excuses for leaving on some mumbled errand. Avon kept his eyes down on his work feigning disinterest in the exchange. Circuitously, Blake made his way around the flight deck until he ended up beside the pilot. He studied the screen in front of her for a moment before catching her eye with his most irresistible smile.

“Jenna,” Blake spoke her name so softly, she had to lean closer to him to hear. “I’m very sorry about our little misunderstanding last night.”

Jenna returned his smile with an added edge of invitation. “We could always get together tonight, if you want?”

Blake’s smile faded a fraction. Watching surreptitiously, Avon noted the minute change.

“I’m sorry, but really I can’t.”

Before Jenna could voice the protest flashing in her sapphire eyes, Blake laid a restraining hand on her arm and continued. “No, please, let me explain a little. There are many reasons I can’t, and before you say it, no, Vila is not one of them. Uppermost, is the high respect and deep affection I feel for both you and Cally.”

Avon had to fight down the amusement tugging at his lips. //Don’t spread the manure on too thick, Blake. She can’t be *that* stupid.//

“It’s just that every time I allow myself to become involved in a relationship with women, I do a right royal job of mucking things up.”

Jenna’s smile faded as a fractional frown creased her forehead. “Blake, I don’t necessarily want a love relationship with you. A physical one would do just as nicely.”

Blake frowned and shook his head. “Jenna, it simply doesn’t work that way for me. I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I can’t be the man you want me to be.”

Avon grimaced. //Oh, Blake. You’ve really put your foot in it this time. That’s it, Fearless Leader. Chalk up the loss of one pilot to your terminal, boring inanity.//

Jenna nodded and a small smile crept onto her lips. “I think I understand.”

Avon’s eyes widened in amazement. //My god, she *can* be that stupid!// The tech frowned at his console, lowering his head to make sure they didn’t see his change in expression, pretending utter absorption in the routine maintenance check.

“And I respect you for your honesty, Blake...”

//His what? If that woman had brains she could be upgraded to idiot.//

“And for not making me feel like a fool.”

//He didn’t have to. You’re doing such an admirable job of it yourself.//

“Thank you.”

Almost shyly, Jenna leaned closer. “Could I at least have a hug?”

The strain of the moment broke when Blake emitted one of his rare, but hearty laughs and wrapped his long arms tightly around the tall blonde.

Avon quickly buried his head under the console. To say his mind wasn’t on his work would be an understatement.

“Avon.”

The computer tech’s head whacked the underside

of the console, startled by the sound of Blake's voice so near.

"If you could stop eavesdropping for just a moment and get this thing put back together, I would be most grateful," Blake smiled sweetly. "We do have an appointment on Albion, you know."

Avon glared up at the rebel, chagrined at being caught, but he returned to his work without comment.

"Blake," Vila called softly, wary of Blake's uncertain temper, as he entered the rebel's darkened quarters. Blake looked up from the papers in front of him on his desk. "Is everything all right now?" the little thief asked cautiously.

"Yes...this time."

Vila sat down and stretched his legs out, flopping back with a relieved sigh. "That was a close call."

"Yes, it seems I'll have to be rather more careful around the girls in the future."

The little thief snickered, "Actually, that's the least of your worries."

"What?" Blake looked up again, uncertain he'd heard correctly.

"What I mean is, what about Avon?"

"What about Avon?"

Vila shook his head and frowned, "You mean to say you haven't even noticed?"

Blake laid the printout down and gave his full attention to the man before him. "Haven't noticed what?"

"The way our Avon looks at you! He *wants* you, you know."

Blake shook his head, "No, Vila, you're wrong, absolutely wrong. You're seeing problems where none exist." He got up and circled around behind the little thief. His fingers kneaded the stiff muscles in Vila's neck and shoulders with studied familiarity. "You're wrong, Vila. Don't go around making something out of nothing. There's enough to worry about without you adding Avon to my list." His thumbs dug in deeper. "You're awfully tense tonight."

Vila closed his eyes and nodded. "'Tense,' he says, 'course I'm bloody tense. Mind you after what I've been through the last few days I'm just lucky to be alive to feel tense." Blake laughed.

"No," the rebel whispered, "but I know what I can do about it."

His hand slid around to the front of Vila's soft brown shirt and began unbuttoning it. The thief's hand reached up and stopped him.

"You really don't have to do this, you know."

The tall man leaned down, enveloping the smaller man in his arms, "I know, I know. You've never demanded anything of me and god knows, if anyone has the right to, it's you. Come on. Tonight's as much for me as it is for you. I enjoy making love to you."

Lips tenderly nibbled at a rounded ear before slipping down to caress the soft skin along Vila's throat. Blake stopped and smiled.

"What's wrong?" The thief turned and looked up into amused, amber eyes.

"You need a shave."

"A shave, eh? I thought you liked your sex rough."

With a grin, Blake pulled Vila up by his collar and dragged his not too reluctant lover to their bed. Slowly, Blake finished unbuttoning Vila's shirt and ran his hands around his lover's sides, drawing their bodies close together. He stole the little thief's lips. His tongue found entrance and explored the welcoming warmth freely. He luxuriated in the hot, firm body he held.

Vila returned his kisses with enthusiasm. Blake stripped the thief's shirt from him, gently nipping the tender skin along his bare shoulder. His hands dropped to Vila's waist. With practiced skill, he un-snapped the band and slipped his hands inside. Blake pulled back, admiring his find. He stroked the already hard shaft firmly. Shoving the restraining cloth to the floor, he had no problem removing them as Vila stepped gingerly aside.

Stretching the thief out on the bed, he surveyed his territory like a satisfied monarch. Quickly shedding his boots, shirt and pants, he climbed atop the quivering body, fitting them snugly together.

Blake's lips worked feverishly down Vila's chest, pausing for only a moment or two to tease the soft, brown nubs to stand at rigid attention. The thief moaned and pressed up into his lover's skilled caresses. The rebel worked his way down the wiggling body. He took one long lick up Vila's straining shaft and danced playfully about his sensitive glans. Vila's penis jumped, rising up with the deluge of sensations created by the rebel's attack.

Suddenly, Vila groaned. He found himself ensheathed in delicious, moist heat. He looked down watching the curly head weave and bob. The sight of Blake sucking him made the fire build in his groin. He couldn't halt the urge to give in to it.

"Blake!" Vila protested, feeling the delightful stimulation of his cock cease.

Reaching into the cabinet above the thief's head, Blake removed a tube of cream and squeezed a generous portion into his hand.

Vila's eyes widened, "Blake, you really don't have to...."

"Oh, yes, I do." The rebel began to anoint Vila's thick, hard shaft.

"Honest, I'm serious, you don't have to, you know that." Graceful fingers traced the line of his lover's jaw.

"I need you tonight, Vila. Truthfully, do you really think making love with you is such a great sacrifice? Believe me, I need this at least as much as you do. Now, move over."

Blake stretched out on his stomach. He turned slightly and handed the cream to Vila. He relaxed completely, revelling in the feel of Vila's talented hands on his body. Eventually the thief worked his way to his lover's buttocks. He poured a large dollop into his hand and spread it, gently inserting one, then two fingers into the tight opening. Blake moaned. He kept his eyes shut as he moved against the narrow invaders.

He felt Vila ease his legs farther apart and position himself between them. Slowly, carefully, Vila entered, pausing when he saw a grimace of pain flash across the rebel's face.

"Blake?"

"It's fine, Vila. I'd almost forgotten how well built you are, I'm afraid."

"If you want me to stop I will."

"No," Blake smiled warmly. "I don't want you to stop."

Again, the little thief pushed forward and as the lubricating cream liquefied, Vila could glide effortlessly in and out of the well greased channel. Blake extended his arms above his head, clutching at the sheets. His hands opened and closed in rhythm with Vila's increasingly powerful thrusts.

Vila struggled for control, but Blake expertly massaged his cock internally bringing molten fire to the surface. With a strangled scream, he pumped once...twice...three times into the gripping orifice.

"Please, Blake!" Vila begged as Blake tightened around his erupting shaft forcing his seed to explode from him, sucking like a vampire with his victim, draining every last drop of cum from him. With a shuddering breath, Vila dropped, sweatsoaked, across his lover's back.

Slowly, he softened and only then did Blake loosen his grip, releasing him. Vila rolled onto his side, draw-

ing Blake into his arms. They lay together in silence. Eventually, Vila's breathing returned to normal. Gradually, his heart slowed to its usual pace and lethargy overtook the little thief.

Blake lay quietly for a few moments more, then he started to unwrap Vila's arm from around his chest.

"Blake?"

The rebel stopped, surprised the thief was still awake.

"Thanks. You were right, I did need that."

Blake smiled, "See, I told you."

"But you're still wrong about Avon."

The rebel's smile transformed into a frown. "Go to sleep, Vila." He got up and wrapped his lover in warm blankets. At the entrance to the sleeping alcove, he turned and studied the sleep-innocent face on the bed. With a weary sigh, he disappeared into the bath.

Avon had little time to study Blake before Shivan and Governor LeGrand side tracked them. Only quick thinking on the tech's part saved them after that deadly fiasco on Atlay.

From that point on, Blake seemed more singleminded than ever in his pursuit of the megacomputer Star One and the total destruction of the Federation, the obsession consuming him as the ocean erodes the shore.

In Avon's eyes, they were all on a wild goose chase of galactic proportions. He felt that Provine had given them a name, any name, in a vain attempt to save himself. Privately, he didn't hold out much hope of ever finding the cybersurgeon, Docholli, but to his secret surprise, with Orac's help, Blake did.

Blake's decision to search for Docholli in Freedom City with only Cally and Jenna came as somewhat of a surprise, but Avon quickly saw that this could be the perfect opportunity to study and question Vila...alone.

His scheme to convince Vila to go down to Freedom City against Blake's orders for a little profitable relaxation proceeded flawlessly. He hadn't bargained on Vila playing the Klute, but the fact that the little Delta kept his wits about him enough to win certainly put a chink in the Klute's overinflated ego.

They timed their return perfectly, though Vila almost spoiled their coup with his babbling. Fortunately, Blake was easily sidetracked from his suspicious questioning. Avon simply had to ask him about Docholli and Blake forgot everything else. He'd got-

ten another piece of his puzzle in his search for Star One and he headed off to track it down.

Avon was glad when Blake left for he could tell the little thief was still under the influence of Krantor's drug. Vila, looking like the cat that'd eaten the bird, draped an arm over Avon's shoulders as they walked along the bright corridors.

"Where are we going to hide all that lovely money, Avon?"

The tech grabbed the little Delta roughly and all but threw him into his cabin.

"Ouch, Avon, that hurt." Vila whimpered, rubbing his sore arm.

"I should do more than that. You must be a worse idiot than even I thought. Anyone could have heard you out there. What do you think Blake would do if he found out we have five million credits each?" Avon turned his back on his prey.

The thief put on his most submissive voice. He was used to dealing with Alphas and knew what would quell their anger. It had saved his life more than once. "I'm sorry, really sorry, Avon. I'm not feeling quite myself. Sort of dizzy. Can't think straight...." Vila stopped inches behind the tech. The drug Krantor had given him seemed to be doing what the man had promised, but its aphrodisiac properties were acting at the wrong time. His groin ached to feel the touch of slender fingers.

He closed his eyes, knowing his desire was a fantasy that could never be played out, but the combination of the drug and the alcohol in him made him reckless and bold.

"Avon?" Vila whispered, lightly running his hands down the other man's arms. It surprised him when the tech didn't pull away. "Where could we hide the money?" Since he hadn't been rejected, Vila took advantage of Avon's receptiveness and pressed closer. His hard shaft visibly evident and straining to escape the confines of his pants, the thief molded himself tightly against the tech's backside.

"I'll find a place when all of them are out of the way, then I'll tell you where it is."

Vila licked and sucked the soft lobe of Avon's pale ear. He slid his hands around and down, trapping the tech's arm beneath his. Avon leaned his head back as Vila's exploring right hand roughly moved between his legs. Avon spread them slightly, letting the thief feel where he wanted.

Suddenly, Avon felt the fastener at his waist give. Another lock quickly picked by the expert and Vila

reached inside for his prize. The thief stroked the tumescent organ to fullness.

"You are extraordinary, Avon, bloody marvellous. I haven't held something like this in my hand in a long time." His fingers followed one sculptured shape of the flared glans. "I can hardly wait to wrap my lips around this."

Avon smiled, "So Blake, despite his body size, is not exactly...well endowed?"

Vila slowed his massage, sensing a trap. "Oh, he's big enough. And he's very good with his mouth."

"I'm pleased he can do something skillful with it since public speaking doesn't seem to be his forte."

Avon spun around and captured the startled thief's lips with his. He quickly divested the Delta of his clothes. He pulled the smaller man to him, rubbing the taut leather against bare flesh, exciting the thief almost beyond endurance.

Avon allowed Vila to take away his tunic, then he lead the thief to his bed. Vila lay quivering and completely vulnerable on the midnight, satin sheets. He watched Avon remove first one boot then the other and throw them across the room. Avon turned his back on the Delta and gave him the best view of his rounded, firm buttocks as he pushed his trousers down and off. As he straightened, he ran his hands up his side and let his fingers creep into the crevice between his cheeks, enticing the little thief even more.

Slowly, he strolled to Vila's side and stood over him, caressing his hard shaft. Vila ran his tongue over his lips invitingly. Avon smiled and took him up on his offer.

Straddling his lover's arms, Avon pinned him down. Leaning forward, he couldn't stop the violent shudder of pleasure which raced through him as he watched his penis disappear between the Delta's lips. Vila proved to be extremely talented. His tongue pranced over and around the cock, drawing Avon into a thrusting frenzy.

Suddenly, Avon pulled back. He willed his panting breath to a more normal rate. He looked down at the Delta with new respect. No one had ever gotten him this far, this fast before.

"Do you want me to come in your mouth?"

"Yes!" Vila raised up and licked a droplet from the head of the Alpha's penis. Avon wet his fingers. Reaching back, he started to insert them into the opening in Vila's body. He raised an eyebrow, curious about the obviously pained grimace on the smaller man's face.

"Doesn't Blake have anal sex with you?"

Before he thought, Vila replied, "Actually I've got no objections, its just that...."

Avon's eyes widened, "Ah...he prefers to be the submissive partner. I see...."

Vila tried to sit up but the weight on his chest stopped him. "No...no, you don't see."

"Do you fuck him, Vila?" Avon drove his fingers deeper inside. Vila gasped. The fingers spread and the thief cried out in pain. "Answer the question!"

"Avon, stop. That's sore!"

"Answer the question!"

"All right, yes...yes, I do."

"Does he 'bugger' you?" Again, the fingers started to spread. Vila wiggled, trying to get away. Suddenly, what had seemed a fun idea had turned into torture. "Answer the question, Vila!"

Tears formed in the Delta's eyes, "Please, Avon."

"Please, Avon' is not the answer I'm looking for." He drove his fingers in to the hilt.

"No!"

"No, what?" Avon started to pull his fingers back.

"No, he doesn't take me in the arse."

Avon removed his fingers and soothingly rubbed the irritated orifice. "I want you, Vila. Here." He cradled the thief's balls between his fingers, rolling them, squeezing them lightly before running his thumbnail along the underside of the thief's still hard shaft. His voice was soft, sweetly seductive—totally different from the Avon Vila knew. "You want me in you, don't you? You want me to fill you up, don't you?"

Vila stared up into Avon's totally black eyes, hypnotized by the beauty of them. All he could do was nod.

"On your knees then." Avon lifted off the Delta's chest allowing him to obey. Moving in slow motion, as if in a dream, the thief rolled over and raised up on his knees, presenting himself to the Alpha.

Vila felt a warm gel slathered between his cheeks and again the tech's fingers invaded him, probing deeply and painlessly. The knowledgeable fingers sought out his secret spot and caressed it lovingly. Vila whimpered and pushed back, but the fingers disappeared.

He felt Avon spread his legs wider as he climbed between them. The Alpha eased in, ignoring the small groan of passing pain from his lover. Excruciatingly slowly, Avon pressed on until he was ensheathed, ball-deep in Vila. Wrapping one arm around the Delta's middle, he placed his other hand on the thief's neck, forcing his head down and making his buttocks rise to the most advantageous position.

Avon practically pulled all the way out. Only his glans remained within, rubbing and teasing the tight ring. Vila moaned and tried to rotate his hips, but the tech held him in a vice-like grip. Without warning, Avon rammed forward. His thighs slapped against the thief's pale cheeks. Again and again, Avon slammed into the little Delta. Pain fought with pleasure for dominance in Vila's mind and unexpectedly, he felt his semen splash onto the bed covers. Spurred on by Vila's strangled cry, Avon continued to pound into him. Suddenly, fire filled the little thief and a full throated scream of fruition exploded from him.

Blake heard Vila scream as he came down the hall. He recognized the voice and his eyes widened with horror as he imagined what Avon could be doing to the little thief to make him cry out like that. Surprisingly, Blake found Avon's cabin door unlocked and he bulldozed in.

The rebel stopped short, frozen to the spot as he watched Avon stiffen and come into the Delta. Unreasoning fury made him step forward and backhand the tech, sending him flying off the bed and away from Vila. He hit Vila knocking him over. His hand grabbed the startled Delta by the throat.

"You had to do it, didn't you!" Blake bellowed; his face was red with rage. Avon shook his head, trying to gather his wits and make some sense of what had just happened.

"You had to prove you were right! Damn you!" His grip tightened. Vila struggled to pull the larger man's hand away. Blake was quickly crushing the life from him. "You stupid idiot! You bastard! I should kill you!" But instead he tossed the little thief back onto the bed like a limp rag doll. "Get dressed and go back to our quarters. I don't ever want you out of my sight again."

Vila jumped up and hurriedly pulled on his pants. He snatched up his boots and shirt and quickly made for the door.

"And you!" Blake turned on the naked man still crumpled on the floor. "I'm wise to you, Avon. I know what you want and you can't have him. Do you hear me? Stay away from Vila."

Blake spun around and left the tech to lick his wounds.

Cally checked their orbit for the second time.

"The chances of Lurgen or the brain print being on that dreary, little planet are slim."

"I agree." Cally looked up, surprised to see Avon standing so near. "But it is the only lead we have. We have no choice but to follow up on it."

Avon's fingers began to knead the muscles at the base of Cally's slender neck. "Hasn't Blake's maniacal obsession with Star One put you off, or is there something other than his insane desire to defeat the Federation tying you to him?"

Cally relaxed a little, enjoying Avon's attention, but she knew him well enough to be wary of him. She noted the marked incongruity between his actions and his words. The Auron knew Avon never did anything without a good reason. Curious, she lowered her mental barriers and let her mind float free, trying to pick up on his thoughts.

The tech's hands reached up to her forehead and his fingers began making soothing circles. "We could be spending our time far more agreeably, if you like," he whispered, nipping at her ear with his teeth.

Cally smiled carefully; something in the human's tone made her cautious.

"I mean, Blake's down there. We're up here, all alone. He need never know."

Cally's eyes narrowed in anger. Suddenly, his thoughts were all too clear to her. She jerked away from him and whipped around. "You! You are despicable!"

Avon held out his hands in surrender. "I don't understand. What's gotten into you? I..."

"You understand perfectly well. You wanted me to give you any information I might have on my physical relationship with Blake." She balled up her fists and took a step toward him. Wisely, Avon took a step back.

"Don't be absurd!"

"I'm not. Now get out of my sight before I do something we'll both regret."

Avon believed the threat in the Auron's eyes and backed away before turning and exiting to the safety of the lower level of *Liberator's* flight deck.

+ Main detectors report Federation pursuit ship bearing 132 course 276, leaving the planet and entering orbit.+

Avon frowned slightly. "Put it on the main screen."

+Affirmative.+

"Are we in range of its detectors?"

+Negative.+

//To have you, Blake, it seems I'll be forced to save you...one more time.// "Plot us a course to intercept."

+Affirmative.+

Avon lay on his bed staring up at the ceiling. He'd had a twinge of doubt about what he was doing. Vila had returned from Goth frightened and cautious. He admitted to himself that he had used the little thief, but he had never intended to harm him.

Even Cally and Jenna had withdrawn what paltry friendship they might have felt for him, perhaps suspecting in some rudimentary way what he was up to. The only one who seemed oblivious to his plan was Blake and, *his* mind was completely occupied with Star One.

"I will not play second fiddle to some overrated Federation computer!"

Avon rolled off his bed and stalked out of his cabin in search of Blake.

He saw the tall rebel disappear into his quarters. Quietly, he followed him in.

"Blake."

Blake whirled around, surprised to find someone close on his heels.

"I want to talk to you."

"If it's about Star One, there's nothing to talk about." Blake looked down at the printouts in his hands.

"It's about you and me."

Blake's head popped up. His eyes narrowed as he scrutinized the other man. "What do you mean, 'you and me'?"

"Avon, no!" Vila stepped out of the shadowed bed alcove.

"Keep out of this, Vila," Avon commanded, moving closer to his prey.

"Blake...", Vila begged.

The rebel looked deep into his pleading eyes and knew in that instant that what the thief had warned all along was true. He focused his stony gaze back on Avon, but the tech didn't seem to notice the change.

"Keep out of this, Vila," Blake warned in a tone the Delta had not heard since the *London*. His eyes locked with Avon's. "It wasn't Vila you wanted the other night, was it, Avon? It was me. I've been your target all along, haven't I?"

Avon smiled, confirming what should have been obvious. The tech pressed closer. Now they were nose to nose. Blake let the printouts fall from his fingers and waited.

Slowly, Avon leaned forward. His head cocked to one side as he captured the rebel's parted lips

in a kiss. He drew back when Blake failed to react, but with determination in his eyes, he drew the Alpha into a soul-deep kiss, invading the hot mouth with his tongue. Blake responded, greedily, hungrily, taking what he so sorely wanted from the tech. Avon pulled back, breathless. His heart pounded wildly in his chest. He looked up into sad, regretful eyes, sensing Blake's withdrawal from him.

"What's this? A second class Delta grade thief is good enough for you, but I'm not?" Avon shoved Blake away from him.

"Avon," Blake whispered as he shook his head, "I'm sorry, I can't be the man you want me to be." He pulled the smaller man to him, "God, if only I could...."

"What do you mean, 'you can't be the man I want you to be'? How very pompous. That trite adage may have worked on Jenna, but I'm hardly as gullible as she."

"No." Blake grabbed Avon's arms and whipped the startled tech around pinning his back to the wall. "No, I know you. You won't just let this go, will you? You know I want you. It's probably written all over my face, isn't it. You can't just let this go because *that* would be the intelligent thing to do."

The tall rebel bore down on him. "No, you're stubborn and stupid and stupid little men tend to be very singleminded. Once they set their sights on something, no one and nothing will stand in their way. They don't care whom it hurts as long as they get what they want. I should know."

He pressed the length of his body to Avon's, feeling the excited hardness at the other man's groin.

"Blake, don't," Vila moaned.

"Shut up, Vila! Avon won't be satisfied until he has had his answer to the mystery of Roj Blake." Deftly undoing his pants, he reached and grabbed Avon's right hand. "You won't stop until you have your answer, will you? But I won't have you hurting anyone else with your meddling. You wanted to know why I can't be the man you want me to be?" He pressed harder into the pliant body beneath him. "You want to know why I hate the bloody Federation so much that I'll lower myself to be just as stupid as you? So obsessed that I'll risk everyone and everything in my hell-bent effort to destroy them?" He jammed Avon's hand into his pants and moulded it around his groin. Blake waited as bewilderment began to form in the tech's eyes.

"Because...." He forced the tech to feel him again,

spitting the words into Avon's face, "They castrated me! They emasculated me, altered me, gelded me. They made me a eunuch. All those wonderful euphemisms for cutting my balls off and making ME less than a man." He scowled down into Avon's horrified, pitying eyes. "Apparently, you see, reconditioning the second time around wasn't punishment enough. They wanted to make sure there wouldn't be any more little rebels running around to fight the Federation."

Avon closed his eyes. He couldn't bear to see the other man's pain and humiliation. He could imagine what a devastating price Blake was paying to tell this. It showed him how far Blake would go to manipulate him into staying on for Star One.

The rebel released the smaller man and stepped back from him. "I trusted you, Avon, and now you know everything."

"But what about your relationship with Vila? The rumors on the *London*?"

Blake turned toward the thief as he fastened his pants. "Vila found out about me straight off, but he knew a lot of the other large males were afraid of me simply because of my classification. Our relationship has been based on mutual need—his need for protection and mine to keep others at arm's length. Just how many do you think would follow me if they knew about this?"

Blake's head dropped to his chest. "It was Vila's idea to spread the stories about me on the *London*. About my being a 'bull Alpha' and about my prowess in bed. It worked because no one ever challenged us. Not even Gan questioned my status. But of course, you couldn't leave well enough alone."

Blake raised his head and turned to look down into the other man's eyes. "All I ask is that you keep this quiet until after I've destroyed Star One. After that, it won't matter. You may do as you like with your tawdry bit of information. After Star One, the Federation will lie in ruins and it will be finished." His eyes hardened as he bore down on Avon. "And I will be free of you!"

Tattered dignity shielding him, Blake left the room before anyone could speak.

"You bastard, he trusted you, you know, Avon. He wouldn't believe me when I told him about you because he *trusted* you. More fool him."

"More fool him, Vila? Oh no, more fool me." Avon sighed and exited the room heading for the flight deck to ready the computers for the attack on Star One.

BACKFIRE

M. Fae Glasgow

From this high window, Avon could see most of Blake's base. To his left was the low, grey building of the Tactical and Training Centre, or TNT as Vila had dubbed it in one of his incomprehensible fits of humour. Directly in front of that and farther down the slope lay the warrens of the service domains. To their right, and higher up the gentle hill and therefore closer to the upper echelon quarters where he now stood, were the intelligence and administrative offices. Far, far down the slope, almost on the banks of the sluggish, fetid river, were the Delta barracks, where Vila ought to have been lying, sound asleep at this late hour. Gazing out into the magenta night, Avon's mind drifted like the murky river, back to dinner earlier in the evening...

It was a prefab, utilitarian room, made pleasant by great bouquets of flowers, baskets of local blossoms, pots of pretty herbs. There was a vast refectory table planted in the centre of the room, bedecked by 'liberated' crockery and cutlery. A huge sideboard stood against one wall, its surface completely hidden by large covered food platters. There were at least twenty people milling around, most of them laughing and drinking, quite merrily. Blake tapped a fork on his wine glass and all eyes turned to him. Several glasses were raised in silent toast. Blake acknowledged them with a small, warm smile. "I see we are all assembled, good. I think all of you have met Avon by now. For those of you who haven't had that...pleasure, he's the one who kept the Rebellion alive and in the public eye, while I was developing ground-level support and uniting all the various factions. He's the one who killed my *doppelgänger*, while I was safely here, building this base and laying the final plans for the uprising."

Avon pointedly sat down and draped his genuine cloth napkin across his lap. "I'm sure everyone here has already heard the facts and the far more entertaining rumours by now, Blake. Why don't you simply save your breath for your speech later...I'm quite sure you'll need it."

Blake gave Avon a look, but subsided. The real Blake was almost as battered as the clone Servalan had used. The only visible differences: this Blake was clean and had had the scar on his left eyelid repaired, saying that he couldn't risk the impaired vision. When asked why he wouldn't give up the rest of the

scar, he would only reply, enigmatically, "for the same reason Travis did."

Avon's glance travelled surreptitiously around the room, observing and weighing the twenty-one people filling the places at the table. The fair haired man on Avon's right started chatting. "I'm Col Rankin. We met in the computer room, your first day here—what, two weeks ago? Anyway, tonight promises to be wonderful."

"And why should tonight be so wonderful?" Avon asked, continuing his assessment of all of his dinner partners.

"Not only is this a kind of celebration in advance—we really can't lose, not now your computer broke those Federation codes and plans—but best of all, we'll be having real food tonight. None of that processed rubbish."

The auburn haired woman on Avon's other side joined in. "Some Delta grade is apparently a marvelous cook."

Blake continued his conversation, but cast a concerned glance at Avon. The computer expert bristled every time grades were mentioned. The woman continued, "I mean, he sounds quite amazing. How he ever learned something so complex, I'll never know. Deltas are such stupid little things, aren't they?"

Avon caught Blake's look. "Speaking of stupid Deltas, Blake—where's Vila? Surely he should have joined us this evening?"

Blake flushed and looked down at his gleaming plate. He had tried to have a discussion with the comtech before this dinner, but Avon had been under tranquilizers up until yesterday evening. The medics said it was the only way to let his mind begin to recover from the past two years' trauma. Unfortunately, that meant the two former crewmates hadn't had the chance to talk, to avoid the battle Blake knew would erupt. He hemmed and hawed a few times, trying to think of a noninflammatory way to explain Vila's absence.

"Vila?" the auburn-haired woman said. "Oh, yes, that is the name of the Delta cook. Did he work for you, Avon?"

"Not exactly, no...." He cast a scolding glower around the table, as the few details he had noticed suddenly clicked into an ugly suspicion in his newly-

clear mind. He got to his feet. "Please, excuse me for a moment. I shall be back shortly."

Blake rose to follow, but one of his highest-ranking officers buttonholed him. He was still stuck in conversation when Avon returned, dragging a protesting Vila by the scruff of his neck. "This isn't the bleedin' *Scorpio*, Avon! This is an *Alpha* dinner and I don't belong...."

"It is a dinner in honour of those who have made or will make a major difference in the damned Rebellion. Now sit!" Col Rankin and the woman rose as abruptly as Vila fell into Avon's chair.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Rankin demanded.

"Correcting an unfortunate oversight on the guest list. As you know, the rest of the *Scorpio* crew are off-planet on that shake-down cruise, which nicely eliminated the problem of what to do with one former Beta and two unclassifieds, didn't it now, Blake?"

A black-haired young man Avon recognised dimly as Gav Rennie blustered into outraged speech. "I really must protest this! This...man is only a Delta!"

"You must protest?" Avon hissed at him. "He has far more right to be here than you do. Where were you when the Andromedans were invading the Galaxy? Where were you when Servalan almost captured Orac? He was fighting for your miserable little lives, risking his own, while you were sitting around boasting about your family trees."

"Hang on a minute Avon. You're making me sound like a hero and they might take you up on that and then they'd expect me to do nasty, dangerous things...."

Avon steamrolled over the rising protests and Blake's silence. "You pathetic rabble were enjoying your luxuries and privileges while Vila and the rest of us were fighting and dying, losing what little things of value we had. And for what? Look at yourselves. For mewling babes who still cry for mummy's milk."

"Avon," Blake began, in the warning tone of before. "You're causing a scene."

"Ah, is that what you call it. Well, Fearless Leader, all I'm doing is speaking the truth." He swept his hand around the well-appointed table. "Is this pampered privilege what your great and glorious Cause has degenerated into? The few, fat enfranchised living off the sweat and suffering of the majority, the "masses"? Just like the Federation. Is *this* bunch of ninnies, these spoiled brats, what I struggled for? And so that you, great bleed-

ing heart that you are, can enforce the wretched class system?"

"It will be different when we overthrow the Federation, Avon! *You* were the one who was always telling me that to win, I had to compromise my 'ostentatiously pure and pious standards'. Well, I did."

Avon looked contemptuously at him.

"I *had* to, Avon. If I hadn't made this one, single concession, I would have had no help from the upper echelon, the very ones I needed most for their training, education, technical expertise...."

"All the things Deltas lack simply because of the self-same caste system you seem hell-bent on preserving."

"It will *change* when we have defeated the Federation!"

"Keep on saying that, Blake. You might be able to convince yourself, but you certainly won't be able to convince anyone else. Think about it. If you change it, you will lose...people like these." He waved a languid hand at the gaping Alphas crowded around the table. "How will you run things without them?"

"I'll manage."

"Then why can't you manage *now*?"

"Avon, we shall discuss this later...."

"What an absolutely brilliant idea! C'mon, Avon, when did you get into the class revolution, eh? It's not worth it, let it go." Vila tugged on Avon's sleeve, anxiously trying to make the glowering comptech listen. Their position amongst Blake's huge organisation was tenuous, to say the least.

Avon ignored him and smiled his dangerous smile at Blake. "You really have become a politician, haven't you. Such a small thing to compromise on, wasn't it? Just a temporary enforcement of the class stratification. But Blake," he said, leaning over the table at him, speaking very, very softly, "that small compromise will make millions and millions of lives absolute hell. You yourself are enslaving the very people this hypocritical Cause of yours was supposed to free. All you are doing is changing the hand that holds the whip." Blake leaped to his feet, angry retorts on his tongue. "And Blake," he said, quietly enough so that none of the others could hear, "how long will it be before you form an alliance—a temporary one, with Servalan? Just until she helps you defeat the Federation, of course." He didn't see the horrified shock in Blake's face. //How the hell did Avon know about the Accord?//

Avon swept the room with his gaze, seeing the others around the table, most of them on their feet.

He looked at Blake facing him, simmering away blackly. Avon tucked his hand under Vila's arm and hauled him to his feet. "It would appear that, due to present company, we have suddenly lost our appetite. If you'll excuse us...." He dragged Vila along a half-step behind him, leaving behind a hive of angry voices.

When he got them to his room, Avon took Vila, quite roughly, blaming him for the split, blaming him for the pain he was feeling. Vila knew exactly how to handle Avon, when the tech was like this. He deliberately relaxed all his muscles, becoming accommodating under Avon's body, yielding to him, easing the aching void gnawing at the comtech. Avon used him, as he always did at these times, then cast him aside, abandoning him, rising immediately to stand by the window, looking out at the base spread below.

... The dying torch of a departing, distant shuttle drew Avon's eyes upwards, away from the slow moving waters and back towards the stars. The rest of Scorpio's former crew were due back in the early hours of the morning. Avon decided it was, perhaps, time to have a long talk with them.... His thoughts turned back to Blake, to the man he had become. It struck the tech as funny, in a truly twisted way, that Blake, the great crusader, had become what he had set out to fight, that the freedom fighter was now fighting against freedom. With an almost imperceptible gri-

mace, Avon's battered mind gave up its guerrilla war against the conditioning that had raped it on Terminal. With a sigh of resignation, it settled into the morass of rejecting Blake and his goals.... Two years too late, Servalan's conditioning had just backfired on her.

A soft rumbling snore drifted over Avon's shoulder from the bed, drawing him back to earth. Feeling almost relaxed, for a reason he didn't comprehend, he moved towards it and stared down at Vila, who lay sprawled amongst the tangled covers, firmly ensconced in Morpheus' embrace. / Poor Vila, // Avon thought to himself, quite fondly, // he's been through so much, so quickly. // He nudged Vila's bare shoulder and the thief obligingly rolled over onto his side, and the snoring idled into quiet. Avon stripped his clothes off to wrap his nakedness around the thief's smooth warmth. He began to tongue the dreaming man's nape and eased a hand round to stroke the sleeping penis. It awakened to his touch, kissing his palm, nuzzling up into his fingers. Vila muttered and stirred, swimming slowly through the cloudy layers of sleep, pushing back against Avon's growing passion. The tech nipped relaxed shoulder and neck muscles, until he finally heard a muffle mumble that may have been, "Avon? What, again?" Vila smiled and twisted in his arms, bringing them length to length, his half-open eyes still full of sweet dreams, his mouth promising sweet satisfaction. As Avon gathered him into a fiercely demanding embrace, he thought, // Yes, my poor Vila. To have been through so much, so soon. And now you have to watch me dispose of Blake.... //

RISE... Cally Donia

“...AND THAT SHOULD KNOCK OUT A MAJOR PART OF THE 5TH FLEET,” BLAKE CONCLUDED. He had called this meeting of the entire crew on the flight deck to announce his latest attempt to hasten the demise of the Federation. Avon straightened up from where he had been lounging, insolently, against his console.

“There are times, Blake, when I wonder if you have two grey cells to rub together,” he said, whimsically. “And then,” he hardened his tone, “you come up with stupid schemes like this and I have my answer.” He paused for dramatic effect, not quite satisfied with the degree of annoyance displayed on Blake’s face. “It’s also abundantly plain that you have no idea how to use the single cell still rattling around in your skull.”

To the tech’s surprise, instead of letting rip with blistering invective, the big rebel spread his hands in the age-old gesture of *pax*. He smiled at Avon and said, in a tremendously reasonable voice, “Avon, I refuse to play your little games any further. I’m sorry, but I’m tired of the discord and it’s bad for crew morale. So, I’ve decided to simply stop the whole fiasco, as of now. The niggling and arguing is over. I won’t take the bait and you cannot get a rise out of me, not any more.” Blake’s reward was a look of total disbelief dawning on Avon’s face—and a gleeful cackle of laughter from Vila.

“Oh you’ve had it now, Avon! No one can beat Blake when he’s dug his heels in like this!”

Blake smiled, rather too sweetly, at the comtech, then looked around at the others. “I’ll be in my cabin, if anyone has anything they need to discuss. All right, Avon?”

Gan, Cally and Jenna left the flight deck behind the rebel leader, each one smirking as they passed. Cally, at least, had the decency to cover her mouth. Vila, that less-than-decent Delta, was still howling with mirth when he stumbled by, clutching his aching sides. “Oh god, am I going to enjoy *this!*”

Avon sat on the couch, brooding and, as the poet once said, ‘gathering his brows like a gathering storm, nursing his wrath to keep it warm’. “Well now, “ he murmured to the quietness of the flight deck, “so you think I can’t get a rise out of you, Blake. We shall see, oh, yes, we shall soon see.”

For the next four days, nothing he said or did drew

so much as a sharp look from Blake—only endless, cloying, nauseating reasonableness. He had felt the urge to scream, or throw up, when he had said, “This is stupid and suicidal. And you are an imbecile, Blake,” only to have the rebel reply with, “Avon, you’re not going to get a rise out of me by catcalling. But I’m sorry you feel that way about the mission. Perhaps you have a suggestion as to how we could better the plan?”

When the mission had, of course, failed, Avon had really torn a strip off Blake. After the verbal flaying, Blake had only shrugged and said, “You *are* entitled to your opinion, Avon. Isn’t freedom to speak one of the things we’re fighting for...?”

Worse even than his inability to pierce Blake’s armour, was the reaction the whole situation was getting from the others. Every time he went near Blake, they would all suddenly appear, as if by magic. They would hang around, “casual-like, not doing anyone any harm,” as Vila was developing the habit of saying, waiting for the show.

Avon even stooped to tormenting Vila, arguing with Cally and insulting Jenna, often succeeding in getting at all three of them at once, but Blake would simply say, mildly, infuriatingly, “Avon, as I have already told you, you’re not going to get a rise out of me. So why don’t you just give it a rest and leave everyone alone, hmm?” And then Avon would fume and mutter, clattering around the ship like a tempest in a teapot. He bellowed and hissed, complained and threatened—and, much to Vila’s dismay, he actually followed through on his threats.

“Aw, c’mon, Avon. Just ‘cause you’re pissed off at Blake—and all right, so I did laugh a bit, but you’ve got to admit it is funny, hysterical, actually, but anyway...Just ‘cause you’ve got your knickers in a twist about Blake that’s no reason to throw me out of your bed!” Vila, at this point, was sitting on the floor of Avon’s cabin. The comtech simply had been refusing to have sex with the thief since the whole ‘Blake thing’ had reared its ugly head two weeks earlier. So Vila, in his uniquely indirect way, decided that the direct approach was his only remaining option. Therefore, he had picked the lock on Avon’s door, sneaked in, stripped off, and without so much as a by your leave, clambered into bed beside the sleep-

ing man and started stroking his penis, rubbing his own body against Avon. The only problem was, Avon's reaction had left him an ignominious puddle on the floor.

"I come in here, nice as ninepence, only thinking about you, I might add—and what do I get for my trouble? An elbow in the stomach and chipped out of bed. It's not *fair!*"

Avon sat up in bed, turning the light on. His hair was awry and his eyes still slightly hooded from sleep. "Of course it's not fair, idiot—*this* is real life. Now get out of here. I really have neither the inclination nor the patience to deal with you at present."

"Avon, you're just cutting your nose off to spite your face—both our faces, if you think about it. Why are you being such a bad loser?"

Avon snapped at him, "I haven't lost yet!"

"Haven't you? That's not what it looks like from where I'm sitting."

"Considering that you are sitting, naked, in the middle of the floor after having been rejected by a man you claim is your lover, that view really doesn't disturb me at all.

Vila got up, rubbing his sore backside. "All right, all right. So we'll say you haven't lost." He sauntered over to Avon and hitched himself onto the edge of the bed. He turned on his best whine, the one Avon always found himself giving in to, just to shut the thief up. Or at least, that's what he always claimed. It had, of course, absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that Vila usually proposed what Avon wanted, but was too inhibited to start. The whine infiltrated Avon's defences with consummate ease and worked its usual magic. "Avon, why deprive *us*, just because of Blake? He doesn't deserve it! Plus, if we stop doing what *we* like, because of him, then he really has won, hasn't he?" He kneaded Avon's chest, teasing his nipples. Then he 'did an Avon' and purred, "And you know how you hate to lose...."

Avon smiled wryly. "You are obviously going to plague me until I satisfy your baser carnal impulses. Very well, I might as well get it over and done with." He leaned forward to kiss Vila. "Then, at least, I'll get a little peace...."

"Oh, you can have as big a piece as you want...."

They kissed, Avon lying back down, drawing Vila with him, pulling the thief on top. The tech's hands moulded Vila's firm body, scraping his nails in light, teasing circles on every single erogenous zone he could find. And after 14 months of practice, he could manage to find just about all of them. Vila pulled

away from him, levering himself up on his elbows, grinning down at a lustful Avon. "Now isn't this a helluva lot better than sulking?" Before the dark man could even think of a retort to *that*, Vila thrust his tongue deep into him and those oh-so-skillful hands were shaping him as Michelangelo had shaped David. Vila, obviously, hadn't exactly wasted the past 14 months himself.

Avon allowed Vila several glorious minutes of mastery, then suddenly rolled over, pinioning him underneath. Avon grabbed the thief's hands, caressing their smooth suppleness. He stretched Vila's arms out above his head, leaving him passive and powerless. The little thief lay there, very happily, held by a dominant Alpha male who was taking his own sweet time to lazily trace affectionate features with lips and tongue and teeth. Vila smiled against the nipping lips.

"Got me where you want me, eh, Mr. Alpha Elite, sir?"

Avon licked a path to his ear, pausing on the way for a languorous detour down Vila's neck. "Well now, Delta 5th Grade, I would say it's more that I have you precisely where you belong."

Vila laughed quietly. "Oh you think so, do you? I'll let you in on a bit of a secret, then, shall I? We Delta grades just let you superior types feed your egos—I have *you* precisely where I want you....," and he arched up under Avon, pressing them hard, groin to groin, slipping against one another. Avon gasped and in that fractional loss of control, Vila twisted and wrapped his legs around the tech. The thief felt a hot sharpness sliding against the sensitive line from his balls to his ass. He undulated again, drawing Avon to him, into him. He smiled in sensual delight—he knew his Avon and had been confident enough of him to use a healthy dollop of their favoured lubricant (Chanel #519) in anticipation of the tech's sweet surrender. His body knew this feeling so well, relaxing and opening in eager response to the current, delicious stimulation—and the past 16 days, 4 hours and 20-odd minutes of absolute frustration.

Avon's face was pressed into the nook of Vila's neck, hands clenched into round buttocks, cock surging deep and deeper within hot, loving tightness. Vila moved under him, tacitly asking for the motion he liked most of all, the one that made him soar: wanting Avon absorbed inside him and then sliding free, feeling that fulfilling moment of entry time and again. Vila panted, heart pounding in his flushed chest. He whimpered, turning to kiss Avon frantically. He felt teeth gently nip at his shoulders,

soft lips tracing behind. He clutched Avon's sweat-moist backside and pulled him—hard, deep, here, now! And came, spiralling off in a widening gyre of glory, feeling Avon thrust into him, filling him forever, then heard the dark man cry out, stiffening in his own burst of orgasm.

Vila slowly lowered his legs and stretched out under Avon, cradling him in warmth. Moments later, as always, Avon was already sound asleep, succumbed to the single cure he said he had ever found for insomnia. The thief lay there, idly stroking his lover's cooling back, taking full advantage of the only chance he ever got to actually show love for Avon. He whispered sweet nothings and raunchy somethings into an unhearing ear, kissed closed eyes and hugged the man tight. He made promises and commitments, dreamed aloud of (sadly) unlikely futures for them. Finally, peace and contentment would steal over him, he'd turn out the light and cuddle even closer, moving them both so that he could fall asleep, safe in Avon's arms.

And then...into stillness ruffled by soft snoring, Avon would open his eyes and watch the man wrapped around him, giving him warmth and comfort, easing the bitter loneliness in the only way Avon dared allow.

Meanwhile, through two attacks on Federation installations, one mad dash for necessary parts and one strange, alien plague—in other words, a normal week on board the *Liberator*—Blake kept up his mild, calm, *infuriating* reasonableness. Avon seriously considered leaving the ship—or killing Blake, which he, personally, thought was by far the better of the two options. He sat in his cabin, brooding, coming up with plans and casting aside stratagems. And then, in a moment of inspired genius, the solution came to him. He knew, now, how to win this battle. He *knew*, with elated clarity, how to break Blake's teeth-grating reasonableness.

The *Liberator* was in geocentric orbit around Nelcro, for some much-needed (according to Vila, anyway) relaxation. The entire crew with the exception, of course, of Avon, were clustered in the teleport room, preparing to leave. Blake and Jenna were standing very close together, discussing where would be the best (most private/romantic, that is) place for the two of them to stay, when Avon stalked

in, all black leather and studs. He gleamed, eyes shining, entire body exuding sensuality. Cally actually blushed and the look Jenna gave him was speculative in the extreme. Vila grinned like the proverbial cat who got the cream—he and Avon had already decided where they were going to stay and Vila *knew* that he was going to be on the receiving end of all that pent-up passion. He passed Avon a teleport bracelet and was rewarded with a glorious smile for his trouble. Erection blossoming, he had to stuff his hands in his pockets or he'd have surely grabbed Avon by the hair and dragged him off to the nearest cave. Avon went so far as to wink at him, obviously in rare high spirits. The tech unleashed his smile on Blake.

"Well, oh Great and Fearless Leader," he mocked, coming to stand immediately in front of the large man, "are we all dressed properly? All washed the backs of our necks and behind our ears? In that case, and if we have your gracious permission, let us proceed."

Blake smiled, reasonably. "Why, of course, Avon. You know, we'd all be better off, if you'd drop the sarcasm. I mean, quite simply, you're not going..."

"...to get a rise out of you? Oh, but I am, Blake." One hand tangled in thick curls and brought Blake forward for an impassioned, erotic kiss. The other slid slowly, insistently down the broad, bared chest to squeeze and stroke Blake's penis through the heavy cloth of brown trousers. The caresses, oral and manual, lasted an eternity. Everyone was stunned into immobility, except Avon, of course. And all of Blake's important little places too....

Withdrawing from Blake, Avon smiled up at him, flicking a last, lascivious lick at the corner of parted lips. Blake's penis was standing straight out from his body, tenting his once-voluminous trousers. Avon patted him, intimately and insolently. "Well now, it would rather seem that I *can* get a rise out of you after all...doesn't it, Blake?" And grinning with wicked delight, he turned on his heel, grabbed a gawking Vila by the arm and hauled him onto the teleport. He called into the shocked silence, "To the victor, the spoils...Orac, teleport now."

Blake was left standing there, beet red with embarrassment, vowing fervently, loudly and obscenely, that he would never, never, NEVER dare Avon on *anything*, ever again.

IV AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT...

The authoress describes this as being “pretentious twaddle,” but then, what does she know? Nudge, nudge, wink, wink, say no more, say no more. A nod’s as good as a wink to a blind horse....

THE PROTECTOR M. Fae Glasgow

NIGHT, IN PRISON, IS NEVER STILL. Noises bloom and die like morning glory—a sigh whispers here, a moan falls into the darkness, a scream of pain is severed. And footsteps, there are always footsteps. Men condemned to purgatory, knowing that hell follows, rise with the dying of the sun to deny their own mortality. In the face of their truths, some will shuffle, lost in regrets and fears: others will stalk the night, searching for victims, upon whom they unleash the twist of their pain.

Black Davis prowled.

The vast room stretched infinitely, fading into mystery where light failed. Davis went from bunk to bunk, alcove to alcove hunting his prey. For now, he had sought the little man, ensnared by the contradictions held in that compact, supple body. Davis prided himself on his ability to smell a ‘chicken’ out the instant one was thrown into the wolves’ den and this one....this one was virgin, pure and fresh, despite his claims and posturings. Black Davis wanted him, with a fire that blazed high enough to engulf them both. His intended prize had eluded him by such sheer ingenuity that the stalker himself conceded a grudging admiration. However, the hungry predator in man cannot be assuaged by something so slight as respect. Here, in the great cauldron of the holding cells, civilisation is rendered, separating once more into the herding beast we all still are.

The air was warm, redolent with the spices of trapped men: sweat, lust, hate, but most of all, fear. Amongst the coarse, mundane horror, Black Davis’ flared nostrils caught the fine, sweet tendril of fear he sought: The Innocent. His keen senses homed in on it: the ritual was awakened, the dance begun. He loped towards his intended mate, careless of the mid-

night and the others locked within this concrete shroud.

The lone, bare light shone as if it longed to be a star in the low concrete sky of the cells. Beneath it, Davis’ mate lay waiting, white skin gleaming, brown eyes shimmering; the alert, fearful gaze of the doe awaiting the buck...or the hunting man.

The small man on the low cot stared up into the light and the huge form silhouetted into nightmare over him. His harried mind provided details: no less than 6’2", 18 stone, broad and muscular, hair streaming in waves of amber, possessive eyes as grey as the metal of their cage. And scarred: the man bore his history on his face and body, would point, like an illustrated man in olden times, to the tale captured in each mark. A morbid, admiring crowd would gather when Black Davis unfolded the lore gouged into his skin, the legend that had earned him the title ‘Black’. The little man had no stomach for such fables, needing neither reminders nor warnings of the kind of man who had chosen him for his pleasure. And he was afraid of fighting and fighters, had been all his life. He avoided trouble, unwilling to risk his fine hands, his very livelihood, his anonymity for something so useless as proving physical superiority. He was all too aware, that given such a struggle, he would certainly lose. He had never been as strong or tall as the others his own age, so he had learned to use his wits and humour to avert situations before they metastasized into a cancerous battle. The institutions in which he had spent months at a time, only made him softer, more appealing to the bully seeking a whipping boy. His quickness was his only defence. So, bitter experience—and Davis sniffing around him like a dog around a bitch in heat—told

him that this time, quickness would not be enough. In this primordial dance, he would lose, painfully, his soul ravished with his body, for this stalker of the realms of night had enough traces of Man in him to force utter subjugation.

Black Davis loomed, arms akimbo, over the pensive bowstring stretched below him. Certain of his intended's solitary vulnerability, triumph surged through him. Laughter rolled out of him, spreading the scents and sounds of conquest across the uncarving room. It was answered with faint signals of unity and fainter sighs of relief that *this* night, the chosen was another. Davis bent at the waist, thick torso casting a canopy of shadow over the bed. Into the circle of light came a larger shadow to engulf them. There was only one man amongst the imprisoned group bigger than Davis, only one tool the small neolithic man could use to survive the neanderthal. The thief had sought this weapon out, made his proposal and struck his deal: an equitable trade. He serviced his protector, in freedom of choice and the necessity of bondage: the big man offered him a bolthole in the face of unmanageable danger, a refuge from the world where words and quick wits were not enough to repulse the ugliness of Man's dark depths.

The stag, claiming his right, extending the hand of safety, stripped off his tunic, leaving his nakedness glimmering in the light, the heavy shadow pooled at the cusp of his thighs, pierced by a gleaming spear of flesh. The bigger man offered Davis not so much as a glance of acknowledgment as he lowered himself into the welcoming, needful embrace of his partner...And the small man, burning with shame and embroiled in hatred, surged under him, darting over on top of him like a silvered fish in moonlight. The buck stood still, weighing things which can be neither quantified nor touched. The bigger man drew Davis into his gaze, over the brown hair nestled against his chest, the smaller one's eyes closing the world away. There was no challenge in the winner's eyes, only the absolute certainty of supremacy. The buck bowed to the stag and retreated to a safe, respectful distance, watching.

Knowledge, and eyes, burned into the small man. It seemed to him that, as some bard had once said, all the world's a stage. He did indeed feel like a player, but there were no options here, no reality, excepting that of man's baser moments. He sighed and gave himself another precious instant to gather himself, to hide his being deep within its fleshy envelope. No one would truly touch him, no one would truly see

him. He congratulated himself, briefly, on his choice of protector: this one was the gentle giant of childhood's fairy tales, one who seemed to be decent, that rarest of beings, the honourable man, the one who proffered safety, simply to prevent harm to one weaker than himself, and accepted 'recompense' only because, without such displays, battle would inevitably be joined, growling and flaring, rioting throughout the confined rabble.

The smaller man's respite was past: his essence secured away amongst his buried treasure chest of savoured memories. He sighed once more and surveyed his prison. He took the bare bulb above him and made it a star, he took the faceless crowd pulsing in the darkness around him and make it his bower. Prepared, he wove his temporary reality, a fragile world of pleasure in defiance of truth. He reached for his survival.

In motion, he was liquid mercury, quicksilver, flashing and sinuous. He covered the girth beneath him, wreathing him in the illusion of a knight in shining armour, his bright cavalry. Teeth grazed flesh, nipping at hair, catching at the light. Tongue laved, the moist trails shimmering. Hands squeezed and moulded, clay into marble. Manhood rose, ivory tower awaiting the descent of the warm, sweet tunnel of night. The men both had brown eyes, the colour of polished wood and their gazes caught and held, fastened together, a bridge to cross the void. The smaller man held himself poised over his protector, offering. The protector grasped muscular hips, accepting. The tower was hot, moistened by anticipated release. Slick cum smoothed it to alabaster, coating hardness with pliancy, the key to the lock. Darkness descended, engulfing the gleaming tower whole, devouring the safety, clutching it tight. They rose and thrust as a single being, attuned and in temporary unity against the night. They surged, ebbed, flowed together in the same tide. Bodies pounded, one on one, in the oldest ritual of all, the primitive dance of power and yielding. They tensed and shuddered, spilling life, losing the gossamer world laced around them.

The protector lay on his side, huge chest still heaving in great gulps of air. He cradled the smaller man against himself, providing a wall of solid flesh between the lascivious, devouring stares and his *dependent's* sensitivity and nervousness. Within the cradle of the giant's arms, the supple body slowly stilled, allowed to relax against warmth and security. The opaque shell the small man had built around

himself dwindled and faded as he flowed back into himself, thinking about the big man. Simple, yes, in an astoundingly uncomplicated way, but most assuredly not stupid. Rather, the stolidity of integrity and a generosity of spirit, forged into gentle protectiveness: the kind of man it would be possible to truly trust. The thought tingled through him, bringing cold fear with it. He shivered, pushing back against the softly haired chest, pulling thickly muscled arms more closely around himself. Without warning, the great strength was withdrawn. He was released, left in fragmented panic, revealed once more to the carnivorous glares consuming him. The moment passed, the large warmth ensconced him again, a blanket cocooning them both. The weary man leaned into the muscular chest, desperately wrapping himself in the security freely given him. He inhaled the heady scent

of musk, the aroma of sex and began to sink into it, giving himself over to the protective embrace.

He felt shame rising like bile in his throat. He was diminished, in his own view, by such weakness, by his failure to win his way by his wits. But at present, this man's kindness was his only option. There were no other choices, not here, not in this new life. He swore fervently to himself that if he could ever be free again, he would stand alone, dependent on no one. He sighed, giving in, temporarily, to luxury, safe in his bolthole. He shivered against the fear of betrayal, here in his own nightmare. Breath murmured against his cheek, dry lips brushed his skin in chaste benediction. Gan's voice whispered its seductive promise.

"It's all right, Avon. You know you are safe with me."

V WE TIP OUR HATS TO THE MASTERS

The Southern Contingent informs me this is the first in a series of three linked stories. Each will be complete by itself, so you need not complain about waiting for the next installment. And, believing that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, see if you can tell which authors have inspired the piece.

MOTIF Leigh Graham

“Cream?”

“Thank you, no, but may I have spot of milk?”

“Sugar?”

“Yes, please. Arata, this place compliments you. It is very beautiful here. So green...so very quiet.”

“I come here to organize my thoughts and relax.”

“I sympathize with you, young one. The pressure on you has been enormous. Has your operative contacted the first?”

“Yes, she has.”

“Good. Was there time for a briefing?”

“She understands very well what must be done. Timing in this project is all important.”

“Yes, timing. It all depends on timing. Your honey-suckle smells so sweet. It reminds me of home. Are those chocolate digestives?”

Garrett heard the door slam shut downstairs. His master was home and by the sound of it he was in another foul mood. The young man scurried, finishing his nightly preparations as he heard Treg’s weighty footsteps coming up the stone steps.

On cue, as he had for more than a thousand nights, Garrett positioned himself by the carved door of his master’s chamber. The door flew open, slamming hard against the stone wall. The young man’s arms reached out and snatched up the heavy leather and fur cape tossed at him.

“Dinner is ready for you, milord.”

Treg turned and fastened his cold, dark eyes on his manservant. Garrett shivered involuntarily. Even after so long a time serving this man, he was still frightened by him.

“I’m not very hungry tonight, Garrett. Bring me wine.”

Garrett swallowed hard. He knew Treg’s mood was never improved by alcohol. This night there was a strangely, dangerous edge in his master’s voice. Looking down at the floor, his heart pounded noisily in his chest

“Perhaps, a little bread and cheese, too, milord?” Garrett suggested softly. Treg’s eyes hardened, cutting through the trembling youth.

“I think not.”

Garrett bowed deeply, his long, blond braid falling across his right shoulder. When he straightened, he felt Treg’s warmth only inches from him, but he dared not move, not even breathe. There was a tug on the leather lace at the end of the braid and the silky hair escaped, flowing over Garrett’s tan, well muscled shoulders. The hand that had removed the clasp travelled downward until it rested easily on his buttock, stroking and kneading it.

Garrett couldn’t keep from glancing at Treg and immediately wished he hadn’t. There was a smile on the older man’s face, but it held no warmth. His throat constricted. One other time his master had come to him in such a mood; it was one of the few times he had been hurt when they had sexed. He feared tonight would be a repeat performance.

“Fetch my wine.” Treg’s hot breath wafted across his neck. Garrett bowed again and started to back away. His master whirled around and strode toward the balcony. He yanked open the glass doors, paus-

ing a moment before stepping out. "Is my bath ready?"

"Yes, milord."

Garrett hurried from the room to get the wine. Treg stepped out onto the stone balcony. He leaned heavily against the wrought-iron balustrade, grimacing as a brief pain shot through his chest, just below his heart. The agony passed quickly, but the vague memories it evoked didn't. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the frigid aromatic night air. His eyes impassively surveyed the serenity before him, but he found no peace in it.

Instincts he had long thought dormant told him something was wrong, terribly wrong. Something was about to happen and he couldn't figure out what it was. It bothered him.

Pain from old injuries which had remained silent for so many years, suddenly decided to plague him, interrupting his sleep and dredging up old nightmares, ghosts he thought he'd buried a long time ago.

He heard Garrett's nearly silent return. He knew the young man feared him and that was the way he wanted it. Garrett had been with him longer than any of the others. Perhaps it was time for a change. He watched the lithe figure attentively. Each movement was poetic and natural, an unstudied grace few could claim. Any other night, he would've succumbed to his slave's elegant beauty, but tonight something held him back.

"Extinguish the lights." Treg commanded as he reentered the warmth of his tapestried bedchamber.

Garrett quickly did as he was told. The room was softly illuminated by the red and amber glow from the fireplace. The young man paused by the table, a glass of wine and the decanter poised, one in each hand. He couldn't help studying his master, a threatening, mysterious man filled with ominous secrets.

The flickering light deepened the lines in Treg's face, making him look older, harder. He moved restlessly, suddenly uneasy under Garrett's intense scrutiny. He reached out and snatched the fluted glass from his manservant's hand and took a large swallow. Garrett quickly refilled the glass.

"Do you wish me to stay with you tonight, milord?"

Treg could hear the disquiet in the other's voice. He'd thought fleetingly about drowning the deep ache he felt in wine and passion, but now there was only an emptiness. Profound melancholy set in. He just wanted to be left alone.

"No," Treg replied, sensing Garrett's relief as he took the decanter from him. "Go to bed."

The blond head bowed low again, as Garrett backed away. The heavy wooden door closed quietly leaving the lord of the manor to his private thoughts. Without warning Treg spun around, his face darkening. He raised his glass, hand back and ready as if he meant to throw it, but he stopped short. Looking down at the decanter clutched tightly in his other fist, a sour smile creased his face. He slowly lowered his arm and refilled his glass before heading for his bath.

The dim glow from the bedchamber cast eerie shadows about the high-vaulted room. The darkness didn't diminish the opulence of the great, sunken roman pool. The steaming black water welcomed him as he immersed his naked body. A small ripple lapped at his nipples.

His deep sigh echoed as he took a final sip of wine before setting it next to its cut-crystal companion on the ledge. He submerged, letting the hot water cover his head. He could feel the warmth seeping into his weary muscles. Closing his eyes, he continued to hold himself underwater. Calm began to reassert itself, drawing off the inexplicable irritation. Distorted by the water, as if in a dream, he heard a sound. It was a low, inconspicuous hum, but distinctive. A sound from his past.

Shooting up out of the water, Treg peered into the shadows. He was no longer alone. A figure, draped in a shroudlike black robe, stood at the far side of the cavernous room. Its hand held a gun, trained unswervingly at his heart. For several seconds, neither spoke or moved, then the figure glided closer.

"Kerr Avon." The soft voice drifted over to him.

"My name is Treg."

The black hood fell back, revealing a pale face framed by dark brown, wavy hair.

"What you call yourself now is irrelevant. The name you were born with and will probably die with is Avon."

His uninvited guest pronounced his name as only a few others would. He sensed this ominous intruder knew quite a lot about him and that by keeping up this charade he might provoke her into killing him. Not that he minded dying, he just wanted to know who his executioner was and why she was there.

"What do you want?" He eased back, leaning against his end of the shallow pool, pretending a nonchalance he didn't feel.

Her icy blue eyes locked with his. "I was told,"

she began as she dipped the weapon slightly, “that I would get only a negative response from you if I threatened you. My informant was right. Let me try again.”

The robe slid from her thin shoulders. His eyes scanned the narrow, steel muscled frame as she lowered herself into the water at her end of the tub.

She advanced on him with her weapon fixed to a point on his chest. She stopped five feet away.

“The scar on your left arm, you got from Travis on X-Bar. Blake refused to leave you and bided time until his uncle saved you both.”

Nothing showed on the other’s face.

“The one on your left thigh,” she continued, slowly moving closer, “is from a knife wound. You were protecting Blake and Cally on Omni.” She took one more step then halted. He judged her to be about a meter from him, still too far to safely disarm her.

“The large scar below your left nipple, the one on your thigh and the one squarely in the center of your back, you received on Gauda Prime at the hands of Servalan’s shocktroopers. By all rights, with wounds like those, you should be dead. Instead you woke up three months later...three months you have never been able to account for. You walked out of that little village on Ceron with your wounds practically healed and a free man. Free, perhaps, but with a hundred unanswered questions.” She smiled without feeling.

Much to his annoyance, she retreated. The woman came to a standstill and laid her weapon carefully at the side of the tub, then moved to her end. Her eyes never left his. She sank down, letting the water swirl over her bare shoulders.

“I hold the answers to some of your questions, Kerr. I have information which could be very valuable to your continued existence. The choice is yours, my friend. Talk to me or kill me. It is extremely doubtful I can reach the gun before you do.”

When he didn’t react she continued, “I am curious, Kerr, you could’ve had those scars reduced by now. You haven’t. Why?”

“Who are you?”

Inside she laughed. She’d known the chances of getting that question answered were slim. “I am called Breaker.”

“Who sent you?”

“The people who saved your life on Gauda Prime.”

Avon glanced quickly at the gun beside the tub. The look didn’t go unnoticed.

“I’m not from the Federation.”

“I didn’t think you were.”

He straightened, stretching his arms along the tub’s edge apparently relaxing. “How and why did *your people* rescue me?”

Breaker laughed, her eyes sparkling with delight. “I’ll bet that one has been tearing at you for years.”

“Answer it!” Avon snapped. For a brief instant, he considered trying for the gun, but discarded the notion almost immediately. He felt there was still too much he could learn from this woman.

“I was told that by the time they reached the Gauda Prime base, only you, Vila and two others were revivable.”

“Vila?” A montage of emotions rushed through him—Vila alive!—perhaps safe, perhaps even looking for Avon. A haunted loneliness scudded briefly across his eyes.

She continued, ignoring his query. “They learned of Servalan’s plans too late, I’m afraid, to prevent the attack, but they were able to pick up some of the pieces. As to why, well that’s two-fold.” Breaker sighed, luxuriating in the hot water. “One, they owed Blake a favor, a rather large one it turns out and two...,” she hesitated, “they knew, one day, they’d need you.”

“Me? Why?”

“That I don’t know.”

Avon nodded. In spite of his native caution he believed her. As to why, he was uncertain, but the fact remained: he did. Something niggled at the back of his mind. Again, he felt the looming sense of urgency which had plagued him for over a week.

“You claimed to have information vital to my continued existence. What is it?”

It was Breaker’s turn to nod. “You have been betrayed to Servalan by your manservant, Garrett.”

Avon frowned. “Garrett? Why...and how?”

“His brother is being held by Parreg, the territorial governor, for some minor crime. Unfortunately, Parreg’s method of justice is rather singleminded. All criminals, regardless of the severity of their crimes, are sentenced to death. Cuts down on his need for prisons, I suppose.” She shrugged. “Garrett has known your true identity for some time. He traded you for his brother.”

“But he had no way of knowing who I was. I have told no one.”

Her youthful face split with a small, but honest smile, “Did you know you talk in your sleep?”

Avon eyed her skeptically. Breaker continued to smile as she lifted herself from the water. She

wrapped her robe tightly around her. “Garrett has instructions to unlock the front gates at dawn. The Federation are keeping civilian ships from leaving orbit to prevent any escape attempt you might make.. The only reason you haven’t already been arrested is that Madame President herself is coming. She wants to be on hand for your arrest, torture and summary execution. You know the old adage, Kerr, ‘if at first you don’t succeed...try, try again’.”

Breaker reached deep within her robe sleeve and removed a teleport bracelet. Snapping it securely around her wrist, she continued, “I can get you away. I will wait at Castigia House until one hour past dawn. If you do not show, I will assume you did not believe me and are in Servalan’s custody.”

Breaker started to bring the bracelet to her face, but Avon’s sudden movement restrained her. He levelled the gun on her.

“I have no reason to mistrust Garrett, but I will take what you have said into consideration. While I do, though, I would prefer you stayed. I still have a few questions to ask.”

She shook her head, “I am sorry, my friend, I cannot. It’s not in the cards.”

“I must insist.” His face hardened as he backed cautiously out of the water.

“Do you think I’d be foolish enough to leave a powered weapon within your reach, Kerr? I may be many things, but I am not stupid.”

Without thinking, Avon glanced down. Too late, he realized his distraction created sufficient time for his guest to make her get away.

Wearily, he sat down on the edge of the pool. Deep inside he felt a grudging respect; the enigmatic woman’s ploy had been faultless. With a smile he pointed the gun at the water and pulled the trigger. The water exploded in a deadly eruption of scalding steam. His smile broadened and for the first time in years, he started to laugh.

The silver studs on his black leather jacket reflected the dim early morning grayness. The gun Breaker had left behind hung from his waist repowered and ready. He fingered it lovingly, waiting. He had reasoned there was no great loss in being prepared, in case the young woman had been telling the truth.

Hearing the barest stirring in the garden below, he stiffened and drew back into the shadows. He peered into the murky predawn mist and made out Garrett’s form heading for the gate.

“So, she was telling the truth after all.”

Avon grabbed the ivy-laden trellis beside the balcony and swung on to it. The lingering darkness hid him well, but it was fading fast. Voices filled the cobbled courtyard. A single shot rang out and Avon hit the ground running, his gun drawn and ready.

Without warning, a black figure loomed up in front of him. Abeyant instincts reactivated themselves. Avon fired, taking out the trooper before the man knew what hit him, but the sound drew unwanted attention.

Avon turned sideways and slipped through a concealed opening in the wall. Zigzagging through the streets, he avoided the many troopers searching for him.

Castigia belonged to the wealthiest family in the territory. Their palatial home sat at the mouth of a cove on the edge of the fishing village. The street in front was wide and open, the gate to the house shaded by large trees, with a sleepy cat on the lowest branch. Avon hesitated, scanning the immediate vicinity for his enemies. It was almost full daylight and he knew he would be an easy target in this broad thoroughfare.

He ran full out across the street, heading for the huge, wooden door. Pounding on it with his fists, it seemed to take forever to get someone’s attention. A peephole slid open and frightened eyes met his through the wrought-iron grille.

“My name is Avon. Let me in!” he hissed.

The door cracked open and the tech pushed his way inside. After rebolting the door, the terrified servant led him through silent marble halls.

“Avon?” A tall, dark-skinned woman blocked his way.

“Yes.”

“Follow me.”

She took him to the breakfast atrium. Breaker looked up from her meal as they came in.

“Shocktroopers are after me.”

“Did they see you enter?” She asked, unconcerned.

“I don’t believe so.”

She nodded, then made an odd sweeping gesture with her fingers. The other woman and the servant returned the nod and left.

“Here. Put this on.” Breaker tossed him a bracelet. Just as the clasp locked into place, he heard familiar words.

“Teleport us up.”

His world for the past seven years dissolved around him.

Breaker strode off the teleport pad and headed down the corridor without looking back to see if Avon was following. He wasn't. He stood, dumbfounded.

// *Liberator*? But it can't be!//

His eyes fixed on the person manning the teleport. The dark haired man could almost have been himself twenty years ago. A little taller, perhaps, hair slightly curly, but the resemblance was unnerving. If it hadn't been for the young man's age, Avon would have believed him to be some unacknowledged bastard son. He couldn't help staring at the youthful face, seeing himself.

"You'd best go to the flight deck."

Even the voice had the same tonal quality. His *doppelgänger* frowned disdainfully. "It's that way." He pointed to the corridor Breaker had taken.

Collecting his wits, Avon hurried off, a little paler and with a disturbing sense of *déjà vu*.

He needed no further directions, feet following patterns set years before. There were subtle differences, but for all intents and purposes, this vessel was of *Liberator*'s design. The flight area was where the differences were most obvious. Breaker paced restlessly on the elevated landing, her lower lip snagged fretfully between her teeth as she listened.

+ Three Federation heavy cruisers approaching. We remain shielded and undetected at this time. All shields and armaments to full power. Time distort is at your command.+

"Set course for Cypria. Standard by 20 after we clear those Federation ships."

+Instruction acknowledged.+

"Zen?" Avon asked, looking at the viewscreen.

"No, her name is Ariadne."

"So this isn't *Liberator*."

"Well, in a manner of speaking, it is. I call it the *Nemesis*. It's the *Liberator*'s sister ship"

Avon roamed around, touching, studying everything he came upon. He was vaguely surprised when no one tried to stop him.

"May I help you with anything, Kerravon?"

The dark head jerked up, startled by the voice beside him. He stood, entranced by the blazing emerald eyes which held his. Wispy, white-blond hair cascaded about a sharply angular face. He could almost catch that elusive seductive perfume clinging to her.

"I am Rabeth." She smiled and held out a fragile,

pale olive hand. Avon took the offered hand, surprised by its tremendous warmth. "I am supposed to handle armory, but I'm really a jack of all trades."

Avon still didn't speak. He stared, enraptured by this strikingly beautiful creature. A small smile crept onto his face.

"Kerr...Kerr!" Breaker's voice penetrated his thoughts, pulling him back to reality. "Are you all right?"

"Yes...yes, of course I am!" He released Rabeth's hand. She turned and he watched her glide silently from the room.

"She affects everyone that way. Pheromones."

What? Avon shook himself, realizing he was behaving like an infatuated schoolboy.

"Pheromones. I think she's a bit overwhelming because she's near her time."

"Her time?"

"To procreate. Baueses are very cyclic. You showed admirable restraint." Breaker moved off, but she knew Avon's eyes followed her. "Normally, she would be on her homeworld at this time, but we need her badly."

"I will not, do you understand, will *not* be held responsible if this damned thing blows up in your faces."

Breaker's face screwed up in pain as a short, rotund humanoid stalked into the command room.

"You all seem to think I can work miracles. Well I can't!"

"Kerr, Kismet, our engineer. Kismet, Kerr Avon."

Kismet didn't even glance at the man. She drove on her attack as Breaker retreated to the lower deck level and sat down. The little humanoid tied into her. She complained about everything from the state of the engines to the food. Her voice screeched to an ear splitting crescendo. Breaker listened for a long time, outwardly showing no signs of irritation.

Avon began to get angry with the abrasive woman's unnecessary tirade and was about to express his discontent when Breaker suddenly stood, towering over the much smaller woman. Avon didn't know her well, but even he could see the storm clouds looming overhead.

"Are you quite finished?" Her voice took on a peculiar, deep, resonant tone that sent an involuntary shiver up Avon's spine. It told him a lot about his hostess. She was far more powerful and dangerous than she let on. He filed the information away for future reference.

"Uh...", Kismet faltered. He could see she tried

to step back, to pull away, but something unseen held her.

“You are not here by choice, Kismet. I know that and you know that. You owe the Sisterhood. *You* are here to repay that debt. I am here to make sure you pay it in full. You don’t have to like anything about me, this ship or the agreement you made, but on your life, you *will* fulfill your obligation.”

Avon could see the smaller woman quake. There was fear, bordering on panic, in her eyes.

Breaker’s voice returned to normal timber, but it still affected the engineer strongly. “Now, I believe you have duties to attend to before we reach Cypria. I suggest you get started.”

Kismet stumbled back two steps, almost falling into Avon. With a mumbled apology, she ran from the room.

Several minutes passed in silence.

“I handled that badly,” Breaker said softly to no one in particular. “Damn! She brings the worst out in me, always has.”

Avon watched her return to the upper level. His past rose up to mock him. He recognized the signs of a reluctant leader, the marks of forced responsibilities. Personal experience showed him the infinitesimal cracks slowly appearing in her control. He could see the conscious effort she was putting forth to dissipate her anger, resealing the cracks.

“How many are on board?”

“Only our crew and you.”

“Why are we going to Cypria? Or is that information still...not in the cards?”

“To retrieve Vila. He has lived there for some time, modestly, with a wife and two children. He, too, unfortunately, has come to Servalan’s attention and the Sisterhood has agreed to give them sanctuary in return for his help.”

Avon walked slowly around the console, climbing the steps to the upper level. He stopped only inches from her. “Tell me about this...Sisterhood of yours.” The tension between them was palpable.

“I can only tell you what I know. I know they have existed for millennia. They have an allegiance to no one but themselves and, like you,” her eyes hardened with an unreadable emotion, “I owe them my life—which means, I, like you owe them a debt “

Avon wasn’t sure he like the sound of that. “What sort of help do you need from Vila and me?”

Breaker shook her head. “I honestly don’t know at the moment, Kerr. They tell me what I need to know when they decide I need to know it. Nothing

more.” She looked away. Avon could sense this lack of knowledge bothered her almost as much as it did him. He was following along on blind trust and hated it. Who was he trusting and why? Too many unanswered questions gnawed at him.

“Come on, I’ll show you to your quarters where you can freshen up and get a bit of sleep. I’ll wake you for lunch.”

Avon tried to rest, but now, as it had been for two weeks, sleep was elusive. He sat up, surveying his comfortable, but austere room.

//Too many questions.// He stared at the cabin door. //But I think I know where to get some answers.//

His cabin door slid shut behind him. At first, he turned toward the flight deck. His eyes narrowed, considering. He did an about face and disappeared off in the opposite direction.

Several hours later, Avon found Breaker sitting quietly in her cabin with her feet propped up on her desk, as if waiting for him.

“You missed lunch.” She smiled, dropping her feet to the floor.

“I wasn’t very hungry. I had some questions I needed answers to.”

“Did you find your answers?”

“A few, but it rather seemed I found more questions.”

Breaker held her hands out in a gesture of surrender. “Ask me. I’m an open book.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

She got up and circled him. Avon turned with her, never letting her get behind him. Her eyes brightened with interest.

“It’s happening more quickly than my informant thought it would.”

“What is?”

“The old Avon personality is reasserting itself. Wonderful! It’s good to see what I have only heard tales of. Your mind is regaining its sharp, acerbic edge. Your movements...more wary...more confident... like a Terran cat.”

“Then you’d best watch out for my claws.”

“Oh! That sharp tongue, the acid wit.” Breaker clapped her hands in unrestrained delight. “By the Gods, I may end up surviving this fiasco after all, with you on my side.”

“I am not on your side.” He spat angrily, “I don’t even know what your side is. Give me some answers and perhaps I will consider being on *your* side.”

"I am not led by him. I choose to follow. There is a difference." She recited words he had almost forgotten. Words he'd said about Blake long ago.

Avon grabbed the woman by the arms and pulled her to him. Her face mirrored his. Cold, deadly cold. Slowly, he loosened his grip on her, but didn't let go. The intercom on the wall squawked.

"Breaker, Cypria in twenty minutes. We have contact with Vila. There's trouble."

Avon's hands dropped from her arms. Breaker reached out and touched the reply button. "Call me when we are in teleport range. Avon and I are going down." As an afterthought she added, "And have someone deliver two guns to the teleport. We may need them."

She rubbed her neck as she turned back to Avon. "Your questions will have to wait a short time, Kerr."

Avon stiffened. For the first time it fully registered that she was taking the liberty of calling him by his given name. Only a select few in his life had been given that privilege—and she was not one of them.

"I prefer to be called Avon." He paused, slightly amused by the annoyed frown. "But, yes, I'm sure Vila will have a few questions of his own."

"Possibly, but unlikely. He knows far more about all of this than you do. In fact, I believe he knows a few details I don't."

"Vila?"

"Vila," she hesitated, avoiding his gaze, "is not the same man you once knew. He may not greet you as amiably as he once would have."

Avon frowned. He never thought of Vila changing. In the past, he could always count on the little thief to be one of the few constants in his universe.

"There is something I need to do before we go down. I'll meet you in the teleport shortly." Without another word, she darted from the room, leaving him alone to ponder his growing list of unanswered questions.

Breaker bounded onto the teleport, two guns in hand. She shoved one at Avon.

"No word from Vila," Morgan offered.

Breaker's forehead furrowed, her jaw tightening as she yanked the gun from its holster and held it at ready.

"Not good. Avon?" She looked over at the other man. Quickly, he flipped his gun out, checked the charge, then nodded toward the dark, intense young man at the console.

Morgan depressed the controls and they dissolved.

When their world reformed, instinctively, both dropped as one to a crouch. A sense of danger tingled strongly at the back of Avon's neck. Dense foliage concealing their arrival also prevented them from having an unrestricted view of their surroundings. The only thing that was clear was the narrow path where they stood.

With a nod, they split. Eyes and ears on the alert for anything. Avon lost sight of Breaker almost immediately. He decided to continue along the path to see where it led. The trees thinned, revealing a tiny cottage.

A new garden, a rope swing and a neat, manicured entryway, exactly as Vila had always dreamed, all attested to their owner's love of home and family. He could still feel that love, though the house stood dark and empty. Silently, Avon maneuvered around the side of the building. The rustling of leaves in the bushes distracted him for a fraction of a second. Seeing nothing, he turned. A sharp poke in his back told him he was no longer alone. The gun moved to the base of his neck.

"You," A familiar voice accused. "I should've known you were behind all this."

"I have no idea what you're babbling about, Vila. Now, is this the customary way to greet old friends on this planet?" Avon tried to turn, but the pressure at the base of his skull increased.

"Old friends, eh? Maybe once, but not now. I'm glad you were stupid enough to come alone. Now I can finally put a stop to my nightmares by putting an end to you."

"But I didn't come alone. I came with Breaker."

"Breaker!"

As if on cue, Vila felt the barrel of her gun press to the back of his head. "Hello, Vila. Fine mess we have here. You kill Avon, I kill you and the Sisterhood hunts me down. None of that sounds very pleasant. Now why don't we call a truce? There's too much at stake right now and far too little time to argue about trivialities. We can always kill each other later. Whatta ya say?"

Vila lowered his gun. Breaker followed, putting hers back into its holster.

"Where is Chadron?"

"She took Claire and the children to the mountains," Vila said as he put his gun away. But he kept his eyes fixed on Avon.

“How long ago?”

“Twenty...twenty-five minutes. She asked me to keep the troopers off their trail for at least thirty minutes and that’s what I’m going to do.”

Breaker smiled. Suddenly suspicious, Vila tried to react, but Breaker held his arm in a vice-like grip as she clamped a teleport bracelet in place. Then she shoved him hard. The little man stumbled back into Avon’s surprised arms.

“Morgan, teleport them now!”

The man who pulled away from Avon and stormed off the teleport was a stranger. Gone was the frightened, little Delta thief of the *Liberator*. Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, he had transformed into a strong, bitter man filled with unforgiving anger.

He flew at Morgan, his face a mask of fury as the tech jumped out of the madman’s reach. Seeing Morgan going for the knife he kept secreted in his boot, Avon jerked up his own weapon from its resting place and held it on them.

“Enough!” His command cut through Vila’s anger. He turned on Avon, but before he could speak another voice interrupted.

“Morgan! Morgan, answer me!”

Keeping his eyes on Vila, Morgan returned to his console.

“Yes.”

“Give me fifteen minutes. If I don’t ask for recall by then, get the ship out of here. Vila has the coordinates for our next destination. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“Damn her!” Vila screamed, throwing his handgun so hard against the wall that its handle shattered. He slammed off down the corridor to the flight deck.

Avon ambled over and leaned against the teleport console. He gazed impassively down at Morgan. “I won’t pretend to understand what just happened here.” He smiled ever so slightly, “Care to enlighten me?”

Morgan looked up at Avon with identical eyes and a carbon copy smile. “Not really.”

Avon’s smile dissolved. Morgan had failed to notice that the tech still held his gun at ready. Pointing it in the young man’s face, he reminded him of that fact. “But you will, won’t you?”

The young man sat back, seemingly unfazed by the older man’s threat. “Vila and Breaker ran a couple of trade scams a number of years back. Before he met Claire, his wife. Something went wrong during one of their jobs and Breaker ended up being captured

by the Federation.” Morgan stopped to brush a piece of nonexistent lint from his sleeve. “Probably let herself be caught so Vila could get away. The Sisterhood apparently rescued her just as she was to be executed. She’s been at their beck and call ever since.”

“And you? Are you at their beck and call?”

Morgan laughed, but there was no humor in it. “Oh yes, my dear Avon and since the day they saved your miserable life on Gauda Prime, so are you.”

“Morgan! Morgan teleport now!”

The young man’s fingers flew over the buttons on the console. “You’re moving. I can’t get a fix on you. Stand still.”

“I can’t!” Explosions filtered through the communicator.

Morgan grew intense as he concentrated on the console. Avon watched, fascinated, as a tracer appeared on the teleport locator screen. It locked onto a rapidly moving dot.

“I hope I get all of you, Breaker,” Morgan muttered as he activated the teleport controls. “If not, I’ll have a hell of a mess to clean up.”

A figure formed on the platform. Its momentum propelled it across the room to tumble, head first, over the teleport console just as Morgan deftly slipped out of the way. He stood over Breaker’s dishevelled body.

“I won’t ask if you’re seriously injured. I couldn’t be that lucky.” Morgan nodded to Avon and left. Avon watched him, fascinated.

The young woman groaned and slowly righted herself. She stood, dusting the dirt from her clothes. Leaning over, her finger stabbed twice before she hit the button she was looking for. It was then Avon noticed a small drop of blood hit the countertop.

“Where’s Vila?” she asked the communicator. Her voice was tense with pain. She wiped the blood off her face with her sleeve. Pressing two fingers just over the cut on her brow, she got the bleeding stopped.

“He was here a minute ago,” Rabeth’s soft voice answered. “He left some coordinates which I have put into the navigational computer, but we end up in the middle of nowhere.”

The cut began to bleed sluggishly again. “Where is he now?”

“I think he went to his old quarters.”

“All right. Get us out of here. Standard by six. I’ll be right there.”

Breaker slammed her fist on the console and started to move off.

“Wait!”

She stopped, but didn’t turn around. She didn’t

move when she felt Avon's hand rest lightly on her shoulder.

"I want some answers and I want them now. I'm tired of standing around like an impotent fool, feeling as though I'm the only one who doesn't know what's going on."

Slowly, she turned. Blood smeared with dirt made her visage grim. She stood toe to toe with Avon and looked him straight in the eye. "You want to know what's going on?" Go back to your cabin. You'll find your answers there. I'm going to stop this bleeding. You want to speak to me, you can do it when I'm on the flight deck...when I don't hurt quite so much." She turned back and hobbled toward the infirmary.

Avon barely held his anger in check as he made his way back to his cabin. He refused to play her games, refused to relinquish his self-control. It was one of the very few things he had left. Entering, he turned up the lights. The object sitting on his table made him stop and stare. He circled it, uncertain if it was real or a hallucination. He reached out and touched its cool plastic skin.

"Orac?"

The activator key lay to the side. With a trembling hand, Avon shoved it into place.

"Orac is it you?"

Of course it's me.

"How did you get here?"

I was carried. Such superfluous questions are not up to your usual caliber, Avon, the computer chastised.

"Sorry, I'm just a little stunned to see you." Avon sat down and listened to Orac's familiar hum. It brought back memories of the long nights on the *Liberator* and later at Xenon base when he'd relax with his friend. He sighed wearily. It all seemed a lifetime ago.

Well? Chimed the little computer.

"Well is not a question, as you were always so fond of reminding me." He smiled. He imagined if Orac had a face he would be frowning. "Who are the Sisterhood?"

They are an apolitical matriarchy whose extensive roots can be traced back as far as the Isis worshippers of ancient Earth history. They have insinuated themselves into carefully chosen areas of power inside and outside the Federation. They have been most effective in their goals.

"What, specifically, are their goals?"

*They have succeeded in being the dominant con-

trol of man's history. They are truly the power behind the scenes, so to speak.*

"In short, political...governmental entities may come and go, but the Sisterhood remains intact."

That is correct. Hence the expression, behind every successful man...

"...there is a woman," Avon finished softly, finally comprehending what he might be up against. "What are their plans for me?"

Unknown. Apparently, there have been a series of murders within the upper echelon of the Sisterhood. Your appearance here, at this time, may have something to do with solving this mystery, or.... Orac hesitated.

"Yes?"

It could be for a reason as yet unclear to me.

"Tell me about Breaker."

Sinean Breaker is a class A Federation officer. Eight years ago, she stole a Federation pursuit ship. Investigation into the incident showed she used the ship to destroy two other pursuit ships. Aboard each vessel were officers who had evaded charges in the rape and wrongful death of her younger sister. Since then, she has been on the Federation's most wanted list. She has supported herself as a successful smuggler and mercenary until being turned into the Federation authorities by Vila Restal.

"Vila?" Avon frowned. Instead of answering his questions, the information he was getting was creating more. He removed Orac's key and pocketed it before heading for the flight deck.

The computer tech found Breaker at the navigational console. Though cleaner, exhaustion etched her sharp features. Dark circles had begun to form under her eyes. Rabeth nodded to him, but didn't say anything. Avon sat down beside Breaker.

"Where are we going and why?" He asked softly.

"Didn't you ask Orac?"

"I'm asking you."

Breaker sighed and pushed her hair away from her face, "We're headed for a planetoid in the Margay system. There's an important computer installation under its surface. We're to get inside, locate a piece of equipment called a diastatic manipulator unit, remove it, then destroy the complex. My problem is I have no idea what one of those little units look like."

"I do."

"I know. That's why you're coming with me."

"If I refuse?"

"I will let Vila kill you. If he fails, I won't."

“So I go under threat of death.”

“As you please, but you are going.”

“I suppose, I’m only valuable to the Sisterhood as long as I cooperate, is that it?”

“No, they’d probably be terribly angry with me if I carried out my threat. They definitely have something special in mind, but I’m too tired to argue with you. Make no mistake, I’ll do what I say...Kerr.”

Avon chose to ignore her dig and drove on with his questioning. “Why is Vila acting so strangely and why did he turn you into the Federation?”

Breaker sighed heavily again. She punched off the display in front of her and leaned back, burying her face in her hands.

“It’s a long story.”

“Computer,” Avon addressed the screen, “How long before we reach our destination?”

+Twenty point two hours at present speed.+

“It sounds as if we have the time.” Avon turned so he could see her face. Breaker’s hands dropped to her lap. In profile, she seemed more weary...older.

“When the Sisterhood rescued all of you from Gauda Prime, they deliberately split you up for two reasons. One, it would be easier to create new identities if you were far apart and two, they could control you better.”

Avon started to protest, but Breaker held up her hand to cut him off. “Do you want your questions answered or not?”

Avon nodded.

“Vila was very badly off. They kept him at one of the compounds run by the Sisterhood. When I say he probably knows more about them than I do, I’m telling the truth.”

She ran her fingers through her unruly hair, pushing it out of her face again. “When I met him, his animosity toward you was intense. Several times, he tried to talk me into helping him find you so he could kill you.”

Painfully, she stretched out her legs and continued, “He blames you for killing Blake and for the death of someone named Cally. Usually, I’d hear all about this when he was in his cups. He also vowed to avenge the other crewmembers who died on Gauda Prime. Did you really shoot Blake?” She looked over at him, curious.

“Yes, but to this day I don’t know why.”

“I do and so does Orac.” Avon stared at her. Breaker went on with her tale. “I hooked up with Vila. We pulled a few scams. He’s a great little thief, brilliant in his own right.”

“Go on.”

“Well, to make a long story short, one of our plans fell through. They grabbed Vila. They thought he was nothing and so they made a deal to get me. He sold me out.”

Avon smiled, “You don’t seem too upset about it.”

“Oh, I was, at first, but when I got all the facts, I realized that if our positions had been changed, I probably would have done the same thing. No grudges. He talked the Sisterhood into getting me out, but now I know to watch him more carefully. He can be very unpredictable.”

She laughed, but there was no warmth in it. “Although he eventually saved me, he did put me into the uncomfortable position of owing my life to the Sisterhood and I promise you they have ways of making you pay your debt that you have never dreamed of. Now if you excuse me, I have a lot of work to do.”

Breaker heaved another sigh and leaned back up to the nav computer and lost herself in her work, pointedly dismissing him and any further questions he might have. Seeing he would get nothing more from her today, Avon got up and started to leave. He stopped beside Rabeth and stood silently for a few moments studying the woman at the nav computer. She seemed so fragile to him, conflict held together by sheer willpower.

“Does she never rest?” he said quietly to Rabeth.

“Ghosts.”

Avon looked up into Rabeth’s emerald eyes. “Ghosts?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean Kerravon. Like you, every time she tries to sleep ghosts fill her dreams. Frightening, horrible things. She always works herself to exhaustion so she will fall into the death sleep and perhaps not dream.”

“And if she does?”

Rabeth shook her head sadly. “You’ll hear her one night and you’ll never forget the sound. It is the sound of death.”

Avon looked again at the woman below him. Quietly, he turned and went back to his cabin. He didn’t bother to tell Rabeth that it was not the sound of death; it was the sound of one seeking the final night. And he already knew that sound...intimately.

“Ready, Kerr?” Breaker poked her head into the computer room.

“In a moment.” He closed the panel he’d been working on and followed her to the teleport. Mor-

gan was at his usual station; otherwise the room was empty.

"Just you and I?" Avon smiled dangerously.

"Sorry I'm late," Vila apologized as he bounded down the steps. He noticed Avon's look of annoyance. "Didn't think I was going to let my friend go down there with only you to cover her back, did you?"

Avon shook his head. "Vila, your paranoia amazes me."

"Not paranoia, Avon. I just know what you're capable of, so of course I don't trust you."

"Coordinates are set." Morgan interrupted their exchange. All three stepped up onto the platform, armed and ready.

"Set us down."

The terrain was a gray reserved for only the most desolate of places. The small planetoid's dwarf sun glowed drably at midday. The group could make out the shadowy entrance to the underground computer complex.

"Damn! Morgan set us down too close." Breaker led the way to a stand of rocks. No sound, no sign of guards greeted them.

"I don't like this." Breaker's eyes searched the surrounding area. "No guards."

"No need." Vila smiled.

"Why?"

"If you knew what you were looking at you'd know why."

Avon studied the scene before them and discerned an almost imperceptible wavering. "There's a forcefield."

Vila raised his eyebrows, surprised at the other man's astute observation.

"How do we get around it?" Breaker asked.

Vila dug into his shoulder bag and pulled out a small box. "First, we find out if there are any monitors." He aimed the box at the complex entrance slowly moving it to one side then the other. Nothing happened. Vila frowned, concerned. "No monitors."

"Meaning they either didn't expect anyone to be able to find the complex entrance, which is unlikely or...." Avon's eyes scrutinized the ground around them, "they didn't expect anyone to get this far. Look!"

Avon pointed at a bleached stick lying a few yards from them. Breaker suddenly realized it wasn't a stick. It had been an arm at one time.

"A minefield."

Vila stared at the other two. His mouth agape. "You mean to tell me we're standing in the middle of a minefield?"

"More like on the outer edge." Avon offered.

"Oh, now there's a comforting thought." Vila looked around nervously.

"How can we get through that forcefield, Vila?" Breaker asked, but her eyes never left the ground.

"No problem, really. I have a little device in my bag I stole from an inventor on Diaglose. It'll open us a gateway, but it'll only last as long as the batteries hold out."

"Which is?"

"Twenty minutes, twenty-five at the most."

Avon glared at Breaker, "You mean we have only twenty minutes to locate, remove and depart with a diastatic manipulator unit?"

"And we have to disable the complex," Breaker reminded him, ignoring Avon's deadly stare. Breaker turned her full attention to the little thief beside her. "Where's the edge of the forcefield?"

"There, where the ground's smooth." Vila pointed to the spot.

"Let's go then. Avon follow close."

"But not too close." Vila whispered to no one in particular.

Carefully, Breaker stepped to the forcefield. Avon followed, hesitating a moment before deciding on where to step. Vila stood almost on top of Breaker. Gingerly, he bent down and set his neutralizing device on the ground.

"Shield your eyes." He warned, then switched on the black box. A blinding light flared, cutting a visible doorway in the forcefield.

"Ladies first." Avon grandly waved his hand at the portal.

Breaker jumped through and ran for the complex.

"Towards second," Avon smirked menacingly. Vila was about to protest, but Breaker cut them short.

"Nineteen minutes left, gentlemen. I wouldn't stand on protocol if I were you."

Vila bounded through, closely followed by the computer tech.

"Can't you hear that high pitched whine? It's killing my ears!" Vila clasped his hands tightly to his head, trying in vain to keep the noise out.

"Yes, it is annoying," Breaker agreed.

"I can't hear anything." Avon calmly looked at his cohorts, "Now are we going in or not?"

"You can't hear it?" Vila asked, incredulous.

"I said I couldn't, didn't I? Or is your tiny little

brain affected by it too?" Avon glanced around the corner of the building. There were still no guards in sight. Obviously, Vila had been right about the monitors. "Why don't you stay here and keep watch if this noise is so irritating to you? It may get worse before it gets better."

Vila looked suspiciously at Avon.

"Sounds reasonable, Vila." Breaker nodded.

"All right."

The two started in, but Vila grabbed Breaker's arm. "Be careful, Breaker. You can't trust him when he's being reasonable."

Breaker gave him a small smile. She pulled away gently, "I'll try to remember that."

"Remember this. If he comes out alone with some story about you getting yourself captured or worse, I'll kill him, I swear."

A larger, more reassuring smile lit her face. "It's the least you could do for me. Thanks, Vila."

She ran off after Avon, who stood waiting impatiently in the corridor.

Vila leaned back against the protective wall. Suddenly, he felt very tired. He shook his head, reflecting on how time seemed to have doubled back on itself. Him on guard while Avon and Blake would go inside. He had a very bad feeling about all this and the noise grating on his eardrums didn't make things any better.

Breaker grabbed a hapless lab assistant around the throat and pressed her gun to the side of his head. "I'll ask you this once and only once. If I think you're lying, I'll kill you."

"And if she doesn't, I will." Avon pointed his gun between the terrified man's eyes.

"We're looking for the computer core and we don't have much time. Where is it?"

The man hesitated, but the feel of Avon's gun on his forehead persuaded him to cooperate. "Down this hall, turn right, then right again at corridor 2B. It's the large door on the left."

Breaker holstered her gun. Retrieving a tranquilizer patch from her pocket, she placed it on the tech's forehead and he immediately slumped into unconsciousness.

Avon watched, amused, as Breaker struggled to drag the dead weight into an empty room and deposited him there. The junction of corridor 2B was empty. Breaker stopped.

"You go get the unit. I'll set charges and make sure we have a way to get out when you are through."

Avon frowned. He didn't like the idea of having Breaker out of his sight for even a minute, but he knew time was running out—rapidly. He nodded and headed for the computer room.

Breaker estimated it took four minutes to set the demolition charges. She had been forced to kill one guard, but she'd done it quickly and quietly with the stiletto she kept hidden in her boot. Breaker headed for corridor 2B, hoping Avon had been as fortunate and fast.

"Avon," Breaker called softly. She stuck her head into the room. Avon was nowhere in sight. "Damn!" She cursed her own stupidity for leaving him alone. A shot struck the wall beside her head. Without conscious effort, she turned and fired, bringing down the guard who had spotted her. She ran for the corridor junction, but two more guards appeared out of a side room. One shot hit the wall, but the second scored.

Pain ripped through Breaker's leg as it gave out from under her. She landed hard on the steel floor, her gun clattering away across the slick surface. She panicked at the sound of footsteps as the guards moved in for the kill.

Suddenly, one blast then another brought down her assailants. Vila rounded the corner.

"I had a feeling he'd abandon you. See, I told you you couldn't trust him. He's no good. He's never around when you need him most."

Without warning, another shot rang out and Vila turned around to see another guard, face blown away, drop onto the cold floor. Avon stepped around the far corner.

"That's Blake's reputation, not mine."

He helped Vila pull Breaker to her feet and lead the way as the thief half carried, half dragged the bleeding woman to the exit.

Vila's device flickered from existence the second the trio crossed back over. The forcefield snapped on with a deadly blue crackle.

"Morgan, bring us up."

The three dissolved before Avon could lower his teleport bracelet from his lips.

Vila peeked around the infirmary doorway, "Are you awake?"

Breaker opened her eyes and smiled drowsily. "For you, always." She yawned, "Whatever Rabeth gave me is working. No pain, but I can hardly keep my eyes open." Again, she yawned.

Vila brushed back a stray lock of brown hair from

her sweaty brow. "I can come back later." He turned to leave.

Breaker struggled up and grabbed his hand. "No, wait. We need to talk."

"Is it that important?"

Breaker lay back down, drawing the little thief closer. "Yes it's that important." She closed her eyes for a moment to gather her thoughts. The medication was working exceedingly well.

"It's about Avon."

Vila started to pull away. "There's nothing you can say about *him* that'll interest me."

"It wasn't his fault. He couldn't help what he did. It was Servalan."

"You're too doped to know what you're saying."

"No, believe me. I got the story straight from the High Councillor of the Sisterhood. She told me to tell you, but I was to pick the time and the place and this seems as good a time as any."

Vila looked at her skeptically, but he didn't try to leave.

"It started on Terminal," Breaker began, "when Servalan tricked him and trapped him. She had her puppetmasters condition him. They implanted the idea that when he next saw Roj Blake, poor Avon would be unable to stop himself from killing him. Then they covered it over with a dream, but things began to go awry. Events occurred which Servalan hadn't counted on. Subconsciously, Avon was fighting hard against her subliminal command. It was so against what he truly wanted, it caused an imbalance."

Vila frowned. He couldn't help, but listen. Deep inside he desperately wanted to believe her. "That could explain why he acted so strange. Why he kept getting more and more crazy."

Breaker nodded, "How did Avon react when he killed Blake?"

The thief thought for a minute. "He just stood there, sort of stunned, like he couldn't believe what he'd done."

"And that's because it was as much of a shock to him as it was to the rest of you. You see, Servalan used him. She got to him on Terminal and none of you knew because you didn't understand what was happening."

Vila leaned heavily against Breaker's sickbed. "I should have known. I was the only one who really knew him." He stared sadly at the back of his hands. "You're right. It all makes sense now. All of it. All these years I've held him responsible. I know what

its like to be conditioned. They tried so many times on me and couldn't make it stick, but I can see how it would work on Avon. He really couldn't help himself, could he?"

Breaker shook her head.

"Oh, Avon, I'm sorry." Vila looked up into Breaker's cool, blue eyes. "Does he know?"

"I don't know. Even if he does, I suspect he wouldn't forgive himself. He loved him, you know." She touched the man's hand lightly. "Why don't you go ask him?" She squeezed the hand and held on. "Don't you think its time you had a real talk with him. Even if he doesn't say it, he's missed you and the way you've been treating him since coming aboard has hurt. He probably thinks it's what he deserves. I hear he always accused Blake of having a martyr complex, but he should take a look at himself."

Vila nodded. He leaned down and kissed Breaker on her forehead. "Speaking of having a talk, one of these days we'll talk, you and I. But for now you need your sleep. Goodnight, Sinean."

He reached over and extinguished the light by her bed.

"Talk to him, Vila," Breaker called softly after him as her eyes fell shut.

Avon heard the cell door open. He stirred restlessly as he heard it close. Instantly, he knew it wasn't a dream and he sat bolt upright in bed. He remembered where he was and he remembered locking the cabin door. Reaching out, he tried to find the light switch in the dark.

"Who's there?" He demanded, still quietly feeling along the wall for the switch.

"Just me." Vila's voice pierced the blackness. Avon stopped searching.

"Well, Vila, have you come to kill me? If so, you'll need the light."

"I want to talk."

"Talk? I thought your hatred of me carried you beyond that." Avon was surprised to feel the side of his bed droop as Vila sat down. "You see very well in the dark."

"Tool of the trade, you know. Excellent night vision."

"I'll try to remember that when you come to hunt me down."

"Avon...shut up."

Even in the dark, Vila could sense that both Avon's eyebrows were arched in surprise. "What I've come

here to say is going to be hard enough without having you prattling on at me.”

Avon leaned back allowing the thief more space on the narrow bed. “Go on, I’m listening.”

“Breaker told me what Servalan did to you on Terminal.”

“She did, did she? And how does Breaker know? I don’t remember her being there.”

“She got the information from the High Councilor in the Sisterhood.”

“A reliable source, I assume. However, the question remains. How do they know?”

Vila sat silent for a moment. “They know things, Avon,” the little thief warned, “and they’re always right. I learned that when I stayed with them.”

“I can hardly believe you were privy to their innermost secrets.”

Vila laughed. “No, they usually kept me more in the dark than we are now. What I learned about them I had to sneak around to find out.”

Avon kept himself from pulling back when Vila’s warm fingers touched his face. “I just want to say I’m sorry. I understand now. You couldn’t help yourself. Servalan probably put her best manipulators to work on you. Being an Alpha and all, you wouldn’t have had a chance.”

“What do you mean by that? What has my being an Alpha got to do with anything?”

“You really don’t know anything about psychomanipulation, do you? You’d never had it done to you before Terminal, had you?”

“No.” Avon shifted his weight to the right, intrigued that anyone, especially Vila, could teach him anything.

“You see,” Vila lectured, “they get inside your head and they find the one thing that can control you. Probably, in your case, the one thing that would set you off. Sometimes it’s hate or fear, but sometimes it’s...love.” Vila could feel the other man begin to tremble. He didn’t know whether or not to go on.

“Yes?” Avon’s soft voice prompted him to continue.

“Well, when they find that one thing, they take it and distort it...pervert it. That’s the trigger mechanism, so whenever you get into a situation—like with me, whenever I was about to steal something—this image flashes subconsciously through your brain and you do whatever they’ve planted there. You do it before you even know you’ve done it...like turning back before you pick a lock or like...killing Blake.”

Vila heard a shaky sigh escape his friend. “I

should’ve realized. I should’ve stopped myself.”

Vila stroked the warm, now damp cheek. “There was no way you could’ve. Manipulation’s designed for lower grades, like me. It’s a thousand times too strong for someone like you. That’s why you behaved so strangely after Terminal. You were trying to fight it, unconsciously, but you couldn’t. It tore you up inside. Honestly, all those mistakes that almost got us killed, even the time you tried to kill me. It was all Servalan’s doing. If there’s anyone I should hate, it’s her.”

“I’ll kill her.”

Vila shivered involuntarily at the malice in the other man’s voice. “And I’ll help ya, but for now....” Vila’s fingers brushed lightly over Avon’s lips. The little thief leaned down and did one of the things he had always wanted to do to Avon. He kissed him.

It took a second for the tech to recover, but even in the dark Vila knew there was an amused grin on those lips.

“You certainly are a changed man.”

“Not really...just kept to myself back on the *Liberator*. As for now, well, I mean, my philosophy has always been, why discount fifty percent of the population just because of gender?”

Avon’s fingers found Vila’s rounded jaw. “Why, indeed.” He leaned into the thief, possessing his lips. Avon felt warm hands aggressively massage his neck and shoulders before sliding down his arm.

Reluctantly, Avon pulled back. He relaxed and lay down on the bed. The tech heard the sound of shoes, one at a time, hitting the deck followed by the soft rustling of clothes being discarded into a pile on the floor.

Bare flesh pressed to bare flesh as Vila climbed under the covers of Avon’s narrow bed. Avon heard the thief snicker as he snuggled closer.

“What’s so funny?” Avon asked, letting his hand roam freely down the other man’s flank.

“Nothing, it’s just...,” Vila hesitated, “it’s just that I never thought I’d end up in bed with you. I dreamed about it, but I never really thought I’d be crawling into your bed.”

“Does it make you happy, Vila?”

The thief was silent for a minute. “As happy as I can be while being separated from my family, heading for god knows where into who knows what. There’s one consolation though.”

“What?” Avon allowed a small moan to escape his lips when his lover’s skillful fingers wrapped themselves around his hardening shaft.

“With me in your bed—even if it’s just this once—and with you at my back until all this is over, I know I’ll survive.”

Avon smiled and kissed the soft lips into silence. Two tongues waged war for dominance. The tech gasped, surprised by Vila’s ability to take his breath away.

Quick hands turned the tech onto his back. He felt Vila’s straining shaft press against his belly. He moved slowly, effortlessly over the mound. There was no urgency in the thief’s movements, but the friction was creating a fire which started in Avon’s groin and fanned out to his brain. He tried to move to ease the strain, but every time he did, Vila moved with him as if he sensed what his lover was trying to do and he wasn’t going to let him get away that easily. Just when Avon felt as if he was going to explode the pressure was relieved.

“Vila!” Avon protested.

Lips nibbled and licked their way down the center of the hairless chest, past his navel, seeking and engulfing their prey. Avon’s back arched, forcing his cock deeper into the generous mouth, sucking and drawing his seed to the surface.

“Vila!” Avon cried again, his dark head thrashing wildly side to side. His hips bucked frantically then suddenly stilled as fiery lava surged from him filling his lover’s throat.

Vila swallowed again and again, taking Avon’s gift. The thief slowly raised his head. He heard a low rumble begin in the tech’s chest and for the first time in over ten years, Vila heard Avon laugh a hearty, joyful laugh. Smiling, Vila reached down and used the sheet to wipe his own stickiness from his stomach and from the tech’s thigh.

Vila felt Avon’s hands slide under his arms and gently pull him up until they were chest to chest. Avon held the thief to him as if he would never let him go.

“Well now, this is certainly a novel experience.”

“What? You expect me to believe you’ve never had a man before?”

“If all I’d ever had was you, then the answer would obviously be yes.” He hid his face against Vila’s neck, the bombast gone out of him. “This is the way it should have ended, Vila. Not like it did on Gauda Prime.”

“You mean, me in your arms, snuggled all cozy in bed after fucking our brains out?”

“Don’t be flippant, Vila.”

“Only if you agree not to be maudlin, Avon.”

They lay together, holding and being held.

“Vila, I know it’s almost incomprehensible that you would know something I don’t, but...there’s a question I’ve always wanted to ask.”

“Why haven’t you?”

“Because I didn’t think you’d answer me truthfully. Honesty and you always were such strangers. Will you answer my question...honestly?”

“Depends.” Then Vila reconsidered, “Yes...all right, I’ll answer your question—whatever it is. Ask away.”

Avon took a deep breath and expended it on the one sentence, “Are you really a Delta?”

Vila’s tongue flicked out and stroked a nipple to hardness. “What do you think?”

“Answer it!”

Lifting his head, Vila paused, “No, Avon, I most certainly am not a Delta.”

“What are you classified as?”

“That’s two questions, Avon. You’re only allowed one.”

The tech’s objections were muffled by Vila’s enticing lips. Avon tried to smile against their onslaught. Feeling the firmness beginning to swell in his groin again, he knew it was going to be a very long night. The idea pleased him no end.

“Are you with us, Breaker, or are you off gathering wool in some distant glade?”

Breaker looked up. She chastised herself for being so lost in thought that she hadn’t noticed Avon’s arrival on the flight deck.

“Distant, Kerr? Thought you didn’t mind my aloofness. And when did you become so concerned about my state of mind?”

Avon leaned back and smiled. “Well now, you’re being evasive. I said you seemed distant, not aloof. You’re distracted by something. If it’s enough to make you careless, “ he let her know, subtly, that he noticed her inattentiveness, “then it could have a bearing on my continued well being. Anything I should know?” he asked, not really expecting an answer.

“Perhaps.”

Avon kept his face impassive, waiting.

“Read this.” Breaker handed the tech a computer readout. Avon studied it then looked up.

“It would appear to be a routine communiqué, but....”

“What?”

“From your attitude, I gather that it isn’t.”

“The right words, but at the wrong time.” Breaker frowned, running her fingers through her hair, leaving it disheveled.

“Does this have to do with our next pick up?”

“Yes.”

“Do we have to show up?”

“Kerr, there are people’s lives at stake.”

Avon pursed his lips unable to restrain his irritation with her. “That’s a very Blakian statement. You say it as if it explains everything. If you’ve already decided to retrieve these people then why ask my advice?”

“I want to know *how* to do it...and survive.”

Avon bent forward, pressing his hands tightly together. “I will make you a deal.”

This time it was Breaker’s turn to smile. “What kind of a deal, Kerr?”

The tech was inches from her ear. “I will devise your plan if you will cease and desist in calling me Kerr. My name is Avon.”

Breaker sat back, and there was no humor in her eyes when she answered. “If your plan works, I will consider it and if it doesn’t...” A grim smile graced her lips, “it won’t matter, now will it?”

Avon spent the next four hours occupying Orac. Breaker had disappeared fifteen minutes after he started his project. He found her asleep in her cabin.

He stood by her bed looking down at her. Her hair fell in a sweet haphazard wave across her forehead. He observed how the lines in her face deepened, rather than softened in sleep.

“Breaker,” Avon called her name softly. “Breaker, wake up.” He reached down and laid his hand lightly on her shoulder.

Without warning, the tech found his hand locked in a viselike hold. Breaker jerked up, her eyes unfocused with fear. Avon bit down on his lip to keep from crying out in pain as his fingers worked frantically to try and extricate his right hand from her crushing grip.

“Breaker!”

He backhanded her across the cheek. He heard her head snap back from the force of the blow, but his abuse served its purpose. Breaker released him.

She lay on the bed, dazed. Her lip bled freely where Avon’s hand had ruptured it.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Avon hissed, nursing his damaged hand.

“Nothing,” she whispered, licking at her own blood. She raised herself up to a sitting position, but

stayed in the shadows of the dimly lit room, huddled in the corner as far away from the tech as she could possibly be. “What have you got?” Breaker nodded at the fallen papers.

“Your damn plan.” He slowly straightened his fingers and grimaced.

“Will it work?”

“If no one screws up, it’ll work.” Avon paused, gingerly closing his fingers into a fist. “I just hope whoever we’re after is worth it.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Avon looked Breaker straight in the eye, “I think you’ve broken my hand.”

“How’s your hand, Avon?”

“Badly bruised.”

“Sorry.”

Avon turned on Breaker. “Somehow your apology lacks sincerity. Perhaps you’d like to try it again.”

Breaker whirled around, ignoring his insult. “Morgan be ready to recall us at a moment’s notice. We’ll probably find some troopers and we may need to get out of their way—fast.”

“Do I have a choice?”

Breaker frowned hard. “Remember the computer estimates we can remain undetected for one point two hours. Then the powers that be down there will notice there’s another ship circling their planet that’s not showing up on their screens.”

“We’ll remember. Just hope it doesn’t take that long to find who we’re after.” Vila murmured.

Avon stepped onto the teleport pad with Rabeth and Vila. He was a little peeved at her altering his original plan which had called for only her and Rabeth to go planetside, but she had insisted he and Vila join them as backup. What surprised him more was the fact that Vila had seemed practically eager to jump at the face of danger.

His displeasure at being pushed into this exhibited itself in the tight scowl he gave everyone before nodding to Morgan. The young man pressed the controls.

They materialized in a dim, silent corridor.

“Rabeth.” Breaker made a sweeping sign with her fingers. The Bauses seemed to comprehend the meaning of the odd gesture. She nodded.

“I hear voices. That way.” Rabeth pointed with her gun to the left. Rabeth and Breaker moved as one, heading for the sound. They traversed the hallways

noiselessly, but Avon could feel Vila right behind him, staying much closer than was necessary. He could sense the little thief's nervousness and it only added to his own disquiet.

"Avon?"

"What is it, Vila?"

"The hair's standin' up on the back of my neck."

The tech was about to reprimand the thief for being so absurd until he realized, quite literally, that the hair on the back of his own neck was bristling. He raised his gun higher, but grimaced at the pain under his left nipple. Once again the old injuries were toying with him for no apparent reason.

"Stay behind me, Vila." Avon warned as they closed the distance between them and the women.

Everyone stopped at a junction in the corridors. Angry voices and gunshots could be heard in both directions.

"All right, Avon, you come with me. Vila with Rabeth."

Avon shook his head. "I would prefer to have Vila at my back."

Breaker quickly glanced at the thief, who nodded and tightened ranks with the tech.

"Right, but be careful. Don't shoot until you're positive of what you're aiming at. There're one man and one woman we are to meet. Neither should be dressed in Federation garb, but we don't know the situation here so, please, try not to kill the wrong people."

They split with Avon and Vila taking the right passageway. Stealthily, they crept down the shadowy hall. Suddenly, a trooper stepped out of a doorway. He was just as surprised to see them as they were to see him.

Avon cut him down and turned quickly to catch another in the chest with a power bolt from his weapon. A black figure fell into the tech's peripheral vision. The headless corpse hit the steel flooring with a resounding thud. He looked up, but Vila was already on the trail of the trooper he'd seen jump back out of sight when he killed the one gunning for Avon.

The thief disappeared. Avon ran after him quickly, but couldn't find him. The passage split into a Y. The tech paused, listening, trying to decide which way to go when an energy bolt exploded against the wall beside him. He spun about and dropped to a crouch as he fired, catching the unlucky trooper in the gut. Another bolt struck the floor near his feet, again he whipped around and took out another trooper.

Old survival instincts reasserted themselves as he twisted around, gun at ready. A large, powerfully built man stepped into his line of fire. An energy bolt cracked the wall beside the big man's head.

Slowly, Avon stood. He stared, eyes wide with disbelief. "Blake, is it you?" he whispered as he lowered his gun.

"Oh no, I'm not making the same mistake twice, Avon. I'm staying stock still until you convince yourself it is me. My weapon's useless so all I can do is hope you don't want to kill me...this time."

"It is you, isn't it?" Avon still couldn't believe his eyes. He took a hesitant step forward.

"Will you shoot me if I say yes?"

"No."

"Then, yes, Avon. It's me."

The sound of gunfire interrupted their reunion.

"Vila!"

Blake's eyes flashed with concern. "He's here?"

"Yes, I lost track of him a little while ago. I've been searching for him."

A high pitched scream propelled them into action. They skittered around a corner and to their utter amazement the floor dropped off into nothingness. Blake was able to grab the tech's arm before it was too late and drag him to safety.

"Help me, Avon! Help!"

Both men looked down. Vila hung by his fingertips from a swaying, broken pipe several feet below them. The bodies of two troopers lay crumpled on the ground a hundred feet down.

"Hang on, Vila, I'll pull you up." Blake turned to the tech, "Keep watch, Avon," he commanded easily. Blake lay down on his belly and stretched out his hand.

"Hurry up! I can't hold on much longer." It was at that second that the little thief decided to look up. "Blake!" His fingers almost slipped from the pipe. "You're alive!"

"Yes, Vila, now give me your hand."

Carefully, Blake pulled the smaller man up. Vila stood at the edge, clinging to the rebel.

"You're alive!" Vila reached up and planted a kiss squarely on the other man's lips.

"Well, it would be difficult for a dead man to lift you up out of that, now wouldn't it?" Avon scolded the thief, then had to smile at the confused look on Blake's face. "You'll have to forgive him, he's been fulfilling his fantasies of late."

The sound of running feet reached Avon's ears. "And speaking of dead, we may be just that if we

don't get out of here." He raised his bracelet to his lips. "Morgan, have you heard from Breaker?"

"Yes, she reported in about a minute ago. Apparently the female is dead...."

Vila just caught Blake as he dropped to the floor. The thief panicked and slapped the larger man harder than necessary to bring him back to consciousness. Tears welled up in Blake's eyes.

"Oh my god! It's Jenna. She was trying to protect me. No, please, not Jenna." Blake barely felt the teleport bracelet Avon snapped into place around his wrist.

"Morgan, bring us up...now!"

"I don't think I can go through with this."

"Little one, I understand."

"No...no you don't understand. Everything's blurred, I'm getting so confused...."

"Sit down, child. Now tell me, what is wrong?"

"I'm afraid. I've come to care for these people. Even Breaker seems so real. Before she was just a phantom, but now...."

"Shush, child. Empty your mind of these worrisome thoughts."

"I can't...I wish I could, but I can't. Where has my reality gone?"

"Feel the touch of my hand on your brow. Your reality is here...with us, and you'll return to the Sisterhood when you have finished."

"But the others."

"What must be, will be. We are not the controllers of their fates."

Pleading eyes searched the Councillor's for reassurance, but found nothing. The woman lowered her head, letting her tears flow freely.

"Aren't we?"

After depositing Blake in the infirmary under Vila's care, Avon went in search of Breaker.

"Where is she?" Avon grabbed Morgan by the arm and swung him around. The young man made no attempt to get away; he just stared levelly into Avon's dark eyes.

"You'll have to be more specific, there are three 'shes' on this ship."

"Breaker."

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Avon demanded.

"Just that," Morgan replied calmly. "I was able to get a trace on Rabeth and recall her easily enough,

but I couldn't find Breaker. Apparently, she's taken her bracelet off."

"Or she's dead."

A strange smile appeared on Morgan's lips and he shook his head. "Oh no, she's not dead. I'd know."

Avon abruptly let Morgan's arm go, but his eyes never wavered. "Until this moment, I never understood the reason for you being here. You seemed superfluous, but you're not, are you? You're a telepath, just like Cally was."

Morgan stepped back, the smile fading from his lips. "Just like Cally, only better...and more."

Avon took a step toward the young man. "More? How? Tell me!" he commanded, realizing he was finally at the end of his patience.

The young man grimaced as if in pain. The movement was not lost on Avon.

"Ah, so you're empathic, too. My anger, my emotions are hurting you. That's your weakness, isn't it? That's why you keep to yourself. You can't handle all the input, can you? You can't deal...."

Morgan shoved Avon back with amazing strength. "I can deal with it, but can you handle this? Can you deal with what I've been living with since you came on board? Can you deal with what I know, every time I look at your face?" Angrily, the young man pressed on. "Haven't you worked it out yet? I'm a clone, Avon, but not just any clone. I'm genetically altered. That's where my unusual psi abilities come from. Genetic material from a true telepath was added to me even though my base genotype had some of these skills already. You see, his weren't tapped...weren't trained as mine are. I came into existence, by the Sisterhood's good graces, ten years ago. My growth was controlled until two years ago, now, they say, I will age normally and guess who I'll look like in a few years...Father." He spat the words, bearing down on Avon. The older man was a couple of inches shorter than Morgan. He stared at his clone in disbelief. "Come on, Father, it doesn't help to try and deny it. God knows I've tried. You've noticed the resemblance since the first moment you saw me, haven't you?"

Avon closed his eyes and leaned heavily against the hull. "Why? Why would they do it?"

Morgan laughed harshly, "Why does the Sisterhood do anything? I suppose I'm just another pawn in their grand chess game. Where do I fit in, what is my ultimate purpose? Your guess is as good as mine."

"Morgan! Avon! Come to the teleport at once. I think I've located Breaker, but...but I'm not sure."

As one, both men took off at a run down the corridor.

"Your operative seems a bit unstable."

"Only a temporary aberration. It was predicted."

"Of course. Then everything is proceeding as planned, I trust?"

"Just as planned, High Councillor."

"Good. Has the third phase of your plan been introduced?"

"Not yet...soon."

"I look forward to following your progress on this project. Warn your operative to keep a safe emotional distance from all of them, especially Kerr Avon. He can be very dangerous. I've had dealings with him in the past. He is unpredictable and therein lies his predictability. If you are certain he will behave one way and that he is under your complete control...think again. Now, do not disappoint me."

"I will not, High Councillor."

"Of course you won't."

Morgan slammed into the seat behind the teleport console. A weak, almost indiscernible voice could be heard over the comm, the sound oscillating and distorted.

"Morgan...help me. Teleport...Tele...port."

The young man struggled with the controls. "I can't get a fix on her."

Rabeth's normally smooth brow furrowed deeply. "That's why I called you. Please, Morgan, hurry. She's in trouble. I can feel it."

Morgan looked up into Avon's dark eyes, "Aren't you tired of feeling impotent, yet?"

Avon turned on Rabeth, "Get Orac from my cabin...now!"

A breathless, flushed Rabeth returned in less than a minute and set the little computer on the chair beside Morgan. Avon didn't even wait until she had put it down before he started demanding answers from the animated box.

"Orac, why is it so difficult to get a teleport fix on Breaker?"

She is within an intradimensional field.

Avon arched his eyebrow, intrigued. "Explain."

She exists in more than one plane at the same moment. The fact that the teleport system can pick her up at all indicates she may be trying to free herself from it.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that she's not just lazing around, waiting for us. Now, how precisely can we help her?"

Monitor and retrieve her at the exact instant I command.

"In short, trust you," Avon smiled. "And if she is unable to free herself?"

Then there is nothing you can do.

"Morgan...please...." Breaker's voice remained weak, but it was clear and undistorted. The look of pain in Morgan's eyes cut through to Avon's soul.

"Orac!" The tech slammed his fist on the console beside the little computer.

Be ready.

Morgan flexed his fingers and held them poised tensely over the controls.

"Morgannnn...."

Teleport now!

The teleport hummed and a kneeling form coalesced on the pad. Breaker's eyes stared lifelessly at the two men. A charred, smouldering wound existed where her left shoulder had been. The mercenary's eyes rolled up into her head as her body pitched forward, slumping unconscious to the deck.

"Well, we're not going to find out what happened to her soon, now are we?"

Avon watched as Morgan and Rabeth gingerly picked up the limp body and hastened to the infirmary.

"Avon?"

Avon raised his weary head from his chest. He blinked twice, clearing away the blur brought on by sleep. "Finally decided to rejoin the living, Blake?"

The big rebel turned slowly and looked at the figure on the table next to him. Breaker lay quiet, heavily sedated with pain medications and tranquilizers. It had taken them two hours of delicate reconstructive surgery to repair the damage done to her shoulder. She'd been unconscious since materializing in the teleport, so, as yet, no one had a clue as to what had really happened to her.

"Will she be all right?" Blake nodded toward the ashen form.

"Well, she does seem to have amazing recuperative powers. Unfortunately, by being in the Sisterhood's employ, she's had to use them rather too often in the past fortnight."

"Better be careful—your cynicism is slipping, Avon. You actually sound as if you care."

The tech chose to ignore the jab and he changed the subject abruptly. "You weren't surprised to see me earlier, were you?"

Blake lay back and stared at the ceiling. "I've kept track of you over the years, Avon. Both you and Vila."

"Well, now, that sounds exceedingly ominous to me. Planning your revenge?"

Blake raised up on his elbows and smiled most disarmingly. "Hardly. Rather, it was simply that you two are old friends and...I knew you and Vila would be assets to the Sisterhood one day."

Avon stood suddenly, his face a warped mask of rage. "You bastard! You did betray us, didn't you? You betrayed me, but not to the Federation. No...you betrayed me to the Sisterhood."

Blake jumped up off the bed, but had to stop and grip a table to keep from falling down as a nauseating wave of dizziness rolled over him.

"No, Avon, you don't understand." But by the time Blake made it to the door, the tech was long gone, disappeared into the warren of corridors. Holding onto the wall, the big rebel maneuvered his way to where the tech's old quarters had been located on the *Liberator*. He found the door locked. He knew Avon and even though the computer tech would deny it to his dying breath, in some ways he was a creature of habit.

"Avon!" Blake pounded on the steel door with his fist. "Please, let me talk to you. Let me explain. Let me...."

The door slid open unexpectedly. The large man fell through face first and ended up prostrated at the tech's booted feet. One powerful kick and Blake bounced against the wall, gasping for air. Another blow caught him solidly in the ribs, but he was able to grab his tormentor's foot and twist it before the third blow could land.

Avon came down hard on the floor, his breath whooshing from him in a gust. Before the tech could recover and continue his attack, Blake threw himself on top of the smaller man, pinning him to the floor.

"Avon! Avon, listen to me. I had to do what I did. You don't understand, damn it! I did it to save your life."

Avon's futile struggle under the stronger man lessened, but Blake didn't relinquish his hold. He knew Avon hadn't given up. The tech was just biding his time, but it gave Blake the chance to tell his side of the story.

"I said, listen to me! The Sisterhood found me on Tiberon and I helped them free some of their people from a Federation prison. I didn't ask for payment. I kept that as a debt *they* owed *me*. Then later, they came to me and told me what Servalan had done to

you. They showed me proof, irrefutable proof and I knew that if Servalan's puppetmasters were up to par, breaking your conditioning would be almost impossible."

Avon began to struggle again. He bucked up his hips and almost dislodged his captor, but Blake held on.

"Oh no, you don't. I know all your little tricks. You're going to listen to me whether you want to or not."

Avon sighed and stopped struggling again.

"The bounty hunter scenario was all my idea. I didn't let the Sisterhood in on my plans, which I see now was my mistake. I should have asked them for help, but I didn't."

Again the tech fought, almost escaping. Suddenly, Avon found himself flipped onto his belly, both arms crooked painfully against the center of his back. He bit his tongue to keep from crying out in pain.

"One of Servalan's agents infiltrated my group and gave away the location of the base, so despite my best planning, Servalan was still one step ahead of me. Luckily, though, the Sisterhood considered all of us valuable enough to protect. From what I was told, the ensuing battle after you were downed, between Federation forces and the Sisterhood, was truly formidable. Only Servalan and two mutoids managed to escape." Blake paused for a moment to subdue another of Avon's bouts of rebellion.

"To save you and the others, I had to agree to the Sisterhood's terms. I had no choice, Avon. I *had* to betray you!"

For several minutes, Avon lay quietly beneath the warm bulk. The silence was too much for Blake.

"Well, don't you have anything to say?"

Avon turned his head slightly to the right. "Yes...get off of me."

Blake rolled off onto his back. He lay there, silent, listening as Avon pushed himself over with a grunt of pain. The rebel laughed.

"What the hell is so funny?"

Blake smiled and turned his head to look at the annoyed tech. "We're getting old, I'm afraid. I remember when we'd end up side by side on the floor like this after a far more taxing round of sexual play and I'd hardly even feel winded. And you...you'd be at me wanting more. Now we're two old men who haven't the energy for even one good roll in the hay."

"Speak for yourself."

Blake's eyes widened. "What's this? I thought you were angry with me?"

"I am," Avon pushed himself up off the floor and held his hand out to the rebel, "but I can't think of a better way to work out my frustrations."

Blake took the proffered hand. In one swift motion, the rebel got to his feet, then laced the fingers of his free hand into the long, soft hair at the back of Avon's neck, drawing him forward into a voracious kiss. They lost themselves in the feel of it, the sheer hedonism. Blake couldn't seem to get enough of the sensual lips trapped between his. Slowly, reluctantly, the two men drew apart.

"Sometimes, I would dream about you...kissing you and how terribly sweet and demanding these lips of yours were. When I was being rational about it, I thought that my memories had been colored by my fantasies."

"And what conclusions have you drawn? Is reality closer to fact or fantasy?"

Blake smiled down into the dark eyes. "Fantasy, Avon, definitely fantasy." He leaned in for another kiss, letting his hand roam down the side of Avon's neck. His fingers brushed lightly over his lover's tunic and boldly molded themselves around Avon's leather encased groin.

A small moan escaped the tech's lips. He drew away. "Not here, there..." He nodded toward the bed. "You may well be right about my getting past it. The idea of doing it on the floor doesn't quite hold the same old thrill it used to."

Blake followed, watching Avon strip as he walked. With each step another piece of clothing fell to the floor until by the time he had reached the bed he was naked. Avon stretched out, extending his arms over his head, his eyes glistening with anticipation. He enjoyed the way Blake surveyed his body—drinking him in deeply—until he observed that the rebel's eyes had stopped to scrutinize the long, deep scars from the wounds he had received on Gauda Prime. Dark eyes met dark eyes and a truce was declared.

Slowly, Blake unfastened his shirt and Avon's eyes narrowed. The chest beneath was muscled and firm; not an extra ounce of fat graced Blake's form as it once had. No telltale scars delineated where he'd been wounded by Avon's gun. Blake pulled his boots and pants off over well muscled thighs and calves and stood over the tech, revelling in the barely concealed surprise he saw in his lover's eyes. "Well, at least one of us didn't go to pot," the large rebel grinned.

Avon frowned and moved over, allowing Blake to crawl in beside him. Again, the rebel's lips sought

Avon's. Blake nipped and kissed his way down his lover's neck to the tiny, hard nubs on the tech's chest. He paused for only a moment and at Avon's prompting, travelled due south.

Without hesitation, Blake took Avon's hard shaft in his mouth and began to suck like a man dying of thirst hoping to draw out one droplet to satisfy his craving. Avon thrust up, unable to control, unable to deny his body's need. Suddenly, the intense sensations stopped.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Avon found his arms trapped to his sides. Blake's huge cock waved in front of his face.

"I want you, Avon. The way we used to do it. I want to come in your delicious mouth. In my book, you always were the best."

"You...!" Strangely, Avon's expression changed from anger to an odd, dangerous and toothy smile. "Why, certainly, Blake, go right ahead—put your penis in my mouth." The smile broadened, "You know you're always safe with me."

Blake stopped. He looked into the tech's eyes and reconsidered. Cautiously, he lifted up and started to scoot down. Carefully, he placed his shaft alongside Avon's, then lay down. He smiled, "Perhaps I should just be satisfied with mutual frottage tonight."

Avon thrust up against the warmth. "For once, I actually agree with you."

Old memories gave way to practiced rhythms. Blake felt the heat build up quickly and he pressed down hard. Avon groaned, matching Blake. The rebel exploded. He could feel Avon orgasm beneath him, pulsating hot semen between them. Blake gradually calmed. He rested his sweat soaked head on the tech's shoulder.

"Blake." Avon's soft voice cut through the rebel's dreamy haze. "Blake, get off. You're crushing me."

Reluctantly, the larger man moved back against the wall. Avon sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. For a moment his fingers lingered longingly on the cool stickiness on his belly, then he reached down and pulled the sheet out from under Blake and started to rub away the remnants of their lovemaking.

Pulling one leg up under him, Avon turned so he could see the rebel's face. "Blake."

"Yes, Avon." Blake threw his forearm over his eyes.

"This is the end of it. The end of us."

Blake withdrew his arm and looked into Avon's eyes. He saw the determination there...the finality.

He gave a heavy, heartfelt sigh. He had expected this, had truly expected far worse. He locked gazes with Avon, leaving himself open and honest and vulnerable. "I will always be here for you if you should ever change your mind."

"I won't."

Suddenly, Avon's world lurched and he found himself sitting on the cold, hard deck.

"Avon! Avon! We're under attack! Avon!" Vila's panicked voice blared over the intercom.

Avon arrived on the flight deck clothed but disheveled. It was difficult to get every hair in place when you were bouncing around like you were in an earthquake. No one seemed to notice except Vila and the thief was having a hard time suppressing the grin on his face.

"Status!" Blake demanded as he hit the flight deck.

+Force wall at sixty percent. Plasma bolt fired and running,+ the ship's computer responded.

The bolt hit, flinging Avon into Vila's waiting arms. "Didn't waste much time going back to him, did you?"

Avon pushed away from the embrace. "I'll talk to you later." Another explosion rocked the ship. "If there is a later." Avon spied Orac sitting atop the command console on the foredeck.

"Orac, what can you tell me about that ship?"

"It's a modified Wanderer class. Usually manned by one or two humanoids. The rest of the space is utilized for cargo.*

"A smuggler."

Correct.

"Then why the hell is he firing on us?" Blake belated.

"Because we fired on him." Morgan stepped forward, coming into view. Blake stood stock still, mouth agape, seeing the young man for the first time. Swiveling his head to the left, he looked at Avon, then quickly back to the younger man. He closed his mouth, realizing that now was not the time to ask questions.

"Did you have a reason or were you just feeling murderous?" Avon asked.

"Orders came from the Sisterhood. We were to find this ship and bring its crew on board. When we approached, it ran. I had Rabeth fire a plasma bolt at the main engine to disable it, but at the last second, their ship rolled and took the majority of the blast on its underbelly."

"Ariadne," Avon addressed the ship's com-

puter, "institute evasive. Get us the hell out of here." Avon turned on the young man, "You assumed that with Breaker out of the way, you could take control." He paused, his eyes hardened, "Well, you were wrong."

+Wanderer class ship pursuing.+

"Project status grid."

Immediately, *Nemesis* and the smuggler's ship appeared in miniature on the screen in front of them.

"Orac, analyze his attack plan," Blake ordered, finally coming to life. The little computer hesitated.

The analysis does not make sense.

"Explain," Blake demanded.

If the pilot of that vessel attempts the maneuver he is entering into his flight computer, the stress on the ship will cause it to break up.

"Are you certain?" Avon's brow furrowed.

Of course I am.

"If he succeeds?" Blake asked, his tone cool and calculating.

Then we will be utterly destroyed.

"Then you and Ariadne had best come up with a brilliant plan and fast!" Vila shouted. "You've got just as much to lose as we do, you overrated hunk of junk."

Avon moved to Blake's side. "What do you think that young man's planning, Blake?"

The tall rebel looked down, not trying to conceal his surprise. "This is a momentous day, you asking my opinion. What makes you think he's young?"

Avon sighed, "Simple deduction. The maneuvers he's putting that ship through are too idiosyncratic for a computer, therefore he is doing it manually. Ergo, only a man with superior reflexes would do what he is doing. And as you were just pointing out to me, everything goes a little as we get older...."

"Then what do you suggest we do?"

Avon smiled and started back to Orac. "Just remember, Blake, age and treachery will always win out over youth and skill. Orac!" Avon turned his attention to the whirring box on the table. "Have you come up with anything?"

Yes.

Avon glanced up at the status board and saw that the smuggler's ship had started its attack run.

"Then don't keep us in suspense. I suggest you put it into action."

Blake watched in amazement as the little ship avoided *Nemesis*' defenses and drove on its attack. Suddenly, the smaller ship turned and its intentions became clear.

“He can’t do that.” Vila stared, aghast, at the screen.

“I know that and you know that!” Avon whirled around, anger clouding his features. “The question is, does he know that? Orac!”

Abruptly, everyone on the flight deck was thrown to the floor. Tremendous gravitational forces pinned them there for less than a minute, but it felt like an eternity.

Blake was the first one to pick himself up off the deck. “Status.”

+*Nemesis* is unharmed. Wanderer class ship intact, but helpless. Life support aboard other vessel is marginal.+

“Maneuver to take them aboard.” Morgan commanded.

Avon looked over at Morgan, “You do have an explanation for wanting that ship, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Morgan smiled and moved off toward the shuttle bay. Blake followed the young man, questions churning. Avon helped a groaning Vila up from the deck.

“What happened?”

“We won. You can ask Orac for the details later.”

Vila shook his head and limped after Avon. “I will. You can bet on it.”

The little ship was terribly unimpressive, by anyone’s standards. Its hull was scorched black in places, showing that this tangle with *Nemesis* was not the first of these sort of battles for it.

Avon stood safely back in the shadows, letting Blake stay up front in the limelight. Slowly, the hatch creaked open and an elongated shadow stepped out into the light.

“Vila?”

“Tarrant!” Vila leaped up into the pilot’s outstretched arms.

“You’re alive!”

Tarrant squeezed the little thief so tightly he could hardly breathe. “God, it’s great to see you,” he laughed heartily. “I can’t believe I actually said that. Blake?” Tarrant turned to the older man. “It is Blake, isn’t it? I didn’t recognize you without that nasty scar you had on Gauda Prime, I’m afraid.”

Blake stepped forward, hand extended in greet-

ing. “Shall we try it again, Tarrant? This time, I promise, there’ll be no surprises.”

Tarrant smiled broadly, taking the rebel’s hand and pumping it vigorously. “This is what I had hoped to do the last time I met you.”

“I must compliment you on your flying. You have quite a gift. If we hadn’t had Orac, you’d have beaten us.”

“Even with that wad of plastic and wires you almost had us,” Vila chimed in.

“Tarrant.” Avon stepped out of the shadows behind the pilot.

The expression on Tarrant’s face changed dramatically. Now Blake understood Vila’s description of the young man as all teeth and curls. The pilot turned round to face the familiar, non-committal voice. Without warning, Avon’s head snapped back and he found himself flat on his back at Tarrant’s feet.

Tarrant stood over the tech, grinning from ear to ear. He rubbed his sore knuckles. “Hello, Avon.” He reached down and pulled the smaller man to his feet. Dusting the bewildered fellow off, the pilot explained, “Conditioned reflex, I’m afraid.” Tarrant sighed. “I’ve dreamed about doing that for so many years, I just couldn’t help myself.”

Avon frowned, rubbing his jaw. “The least you could do would be to say you’re sorry.”

“Now, why would I want to do a thing like that, Avon?”

The young man turned back to Blake and Vila. “What’s going on?”

Blake wrapped an arm around the pilot’s shoulders and grinned, “We’re back in the rebellion business. Would you care to join us?”

Tarrant looked down at Vila, who nodded enthusiastically, then slowly turned to face Avon. “Well?”

The tech shrugged, disinterestedly. Blake started to lead the young man off. “Let me tell you about our backers. This wonderful group is going to enable us to topple the Federation once and for all.” The rebel’s enthusiastic voice faded as the two men disappeared around the corner. “Then we’ll finally free the galaxy from this damned yoke of tyranny.”

“Well now,” Avon stood, hands on hips and looked over at Vila with a troubled frown, “that makes it all worthwhile, now doesn’t it.”