

# OBLAQUER

A *BLAKE'S 7*  
ADULT FANZINE

*ISSUE NUMBER TWO IN THE OBLAQUE SERIES*

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

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# PREFACE

Welcome to *Oblaquer*, the second issue in the *Oblaque* series. For those who have not read us before, let me explain where the name *Oblaque* comes from. In Britain the “/” is not known as a slash mark, but rather is referred to as an oblique. Thus, if you “slash” *Blake’s 7* you oblique it—or so we like to think. Ergo, *Oblaque*.

We’ve had a very positive response from people who read issue no. 1. My thanks to every person who talked to us or sent letters of comment. I realize that we can’t please all tastes all the time, but I think most readers found something they liked. In truth, however, we admit—the Glaswegian, the Southern Contingent, and I—that we are writing and publishing to please ourselves. It’s not surprising that this zine has a lot more of what the first one had: graphic, explicit sex; a lot of angst and emotion; the occasional real plot or storyline thrown in; and a number of gratuitous sex scenes.

And speaking of gratuitous sex. We promised to entitle a section Gratuitous Sex, but if you’ll look at the Table of Contents you won’t find it. Sorry. Stories that were intended to be in it just kept drifting off in other directions. But there *are* gratuitous sex stories, they’re just scattered in different sections. And thanks

to Sean Charles, we’ve given such vignettes an appellation: PWP. That stands for ‘Plot? What Plot?’—the Glaswegian’s favorite line.

You will find that there are far more Avon/Vila than Avon/Blake stories in this issue. Your editor weeps over this as she always prefers the sparks that fly when Avon and Blake get together. However, the Southern Contingent and the Glaswegian have a strong preference for Avon/Vila and that’s what they seem to keep writing.

A final word regarding our spelling. I said this last time and I’ll repeat it again: We’re inconsistent. Sharp eyed readers will note that stories drift back and forth between British and American spellings, sometimes within the same paragraph. I tried very hard to get this mess straightened out, but it was hopeless. Let the Glaswegian get her fingers on the computer keyboard and she immediately sets to work ‘correcting’ spelling. Never mind that she’s changing someone else’s creative efforts.

My thanks for this issue go to the Southern Contingent and the Glaswegian, naturally, to our two Macintosh® computers, and to LDM, my husband, whose lewd and crude suggestions kept our spirits up when we were pushing our deadline.

—Caroline K. Carbis, Editor

# I TRUST AND TRUTH

We begin *Oblaquer* with some wonderful tales of relationships, each one threaded with typical *Blake's* 7 themes of trust and truth.

## THE TRUTH WILL OUT M. Fae Glasgow

"BLAKE," AVON CALLED THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR. "Blake!" His increased impatience and volume both went unacknowledged. The comptech decided to take a leaf out of Vila's book and simply barge in.

Blake sat, disconsolate, at his desk, oblivious to his surroundings. His cabin was cluttered, bed unmade, clothes and personal things scattered in shadow-laden mounds. He was marooned in the pool of light cast by the desk lamp, absently turning one of Orac's printout tapes over and over in his hands.

Avon sighed in irritation and strode over to his distracted, would-be leader. He put his hand on a tense shoulder, bringing Blake out of his reverie.

"Yes, Avon? What is it?" The voice was tired, scratchy with emotions coiled inside.

"I merely came to give you Orac's key." When Blake showed no reaction, he went on. "You did ask me to, immediately I was finished, don't you remember? Or has the memory wipe spread again?"

Blake glowered at him, snapped into anger by the—almost—teasing comment. "I have had *enough* of your snide remarks about my memory! D'you think it's funny that most of my life's been stolen from me?" he exploded. "Get off my back, Avon. I have quite sufficient unpleasantness to deal with, without adding you to my list."

Avon stepped back, discomfited and rather guilty. He considered it for a moment, then said the words anyway. "I'm sorry. I didn't intend to upset you. At least, not this time."

The rare, welcome olive branch swept Blake's volatile temper away as precipitously as it had risen. He smiled up at Avon. "No, no, it's all right. I'm the one who should be apologising. I'm just in high dudgeon, that's all, and you got it."

"Right between the eyes, at that. Well, anyway,

here's Orac's key." He proffered the small plastic rectangle and Blake reached out slowly, a question warring on his face. As he took the key, his fingers lingered on Avon's, far longer than was discreet. He looked up into dark brown eyes, his own full of vulnerable loss. "Avon...can you imagine what it's like to forget everything? I know where I lived, because it's in the files, but I couldn't tell you what colour my bedroom was. I know the names and faces of the rebels with whom I associated, because they're in the selfsame files. But I don't remember the *people*." He juggled Orac's key with the file disk in his hands. "I don't know where I went after work, whom I would to see. Who I had tea-breaks with, what I was interested in—apart from the Rebellion, of course. That's incredibly well documented in this damned thing." He hurled the disk against the wall. Avon stared at him, outwardly impassive, eyes busy cataloguing Blake's every breath. "You said, today, in the teleport, that we worked on the same project. Did you ever meet me then? Can you tell me anything more personal?" His eyes begged Avon, all the sparkling light fled from them, driven, not by Avon's worst enemies—memories—but by their absence. "Or was I so obsessed, so shallow a man, that, apart from the Rebellion, there was no room left over; that there wasn't enough of *me*?"

The tech stared at him thoughtfully for a long, long time, questions of his own warring across his face. He looked off into a lifetime ago and made his decision. A whimsical little smile touched his lips, melancholy touched his eyes. "Well now, all you had to do, was ask." Under Blake's silent gaze, he locked the door and sat on the crumpled bed, idly picking up the pillow and plumping it.

"Avon—" Blake stopped, fiddled with Orac's key, placed it on the desk. "Well," a smile skimmed

weakly over his face like mist in the morning, “I shall ask, then. Did you know me? Before?”

Restless unease made Avon get up to wander around the untidy room, picking things up at random, replacing them neatly. He weighed his words, trying for the right ones...or if not them, then the least wrong ones. “I...was the main researcher in our section, you were the chief applied engineer. I would come up with what you called “harebrained ideas” and you would, as I put it, stupidly refuse to see possibilities and find ways to build relatively simple equipment.”

“In other words, you did know me and we got on as well then as we do now.”

Avon smiled bleakly. “Not exactly, no. Despite our professional disputes, we actually—absurd though it now seems—struck up quite a friendship. Naturally, we never let it show at the lab—the stench of favouritism, and all that—but, I have to concede, we were...friends.”

“If we never showed it at the lab, then how could we have had a friendship?”

“Oh, Blake, you really are dense, aren’t you?” the tech’s voice bubbled with amusement, but he sobered immediately. “You always were. You could be incredibly astute, then, just as I would begin to think there might be hope for you yet, you’d come out with something as stupid as that.”

“Then,” the rebel was becoming annoyed again, “pray enlighten me. Put me out of my misery. It is, after all, *my* life we’re talking about here.”

Avon stopped with his back to Blake and then, as he spoke, he slowly walked over to sit on the bed once more. “We shared a lot of interests: the same kind of music, art, books, even martial arts. We often spent time at each other’s flats, or perhaps taking a trip somewhere—anywhere to alleviate the interminable boredom of Blytee.”

“Go on...” Memories fluttered and died, still atrophied by the mindwipe, asphyxiated by the conditioning. Yet, there was something struggling for birth. If nothing else, at least now he knew there were still memories there...

“You used to talk even more than you do now. You’d go on and on about everything under the sun...except the Rebel movement. You never mentioned it to me, never discussed politics with me at all. Your favourite topic of conversation was...your lover.”

Blake was suddenly on his knees at Avon’s feet, hands grasping Avon’s cool ones tightly, hope flar-

ing undimmed and unrestrained in his bright eyes. “Tell me about her, Avon. Tell me *everything!*”

Avon squirmed uncomfortably, extricating his hands, looking everywhere—anywhere—but at Blake. “Well now,” he finally said, a blush colouring his cheeks, “you’re jumping to conclusions again. I’ll simply tell you what you told me, all those years ago, shall I?” He rushed on, leaving Blake no room for answers or questions. “You claimed that your lover was a ‘pearl beyond price’, a ‘joy and delight forever’, ‘wondrously talented’ in bed... and that he was your ‘sharp-tongued love’. And...” he continued, ignoring Blake’s startled gasp, “that you’d never leave him.”

“Him? *Him?*” Blake sat back on his heels, dumbfounded, until growing knowledge dawned with unerring certainty. “No, not him. *You*. I’m right, aren’t I, Avon?”

The tech looked at him dubiously, dusting his palms together. “Yes...” he said, hesitantly. He watched Blake, unadmitted hope mingled with fear, all triggered by the same thought: Blake might want them to get back together, to perhaps even live together as they had so often discussed...

Thoughtfully, Blake stared at Avon, for long, long moments. Then, he spoke. “You bastard. You absolute, unmitigated *bastard*.” His voice rose, anger boiling from him. “How could you do this to me? Knowing what you did, knowing whatever it was that we had between us, and you were too fucking selfish to tell me? What kind of a man are you?”

Startled by the furious vehemence, for once in his life, Kerr Avon found himself at a complete loss for words. Blake barrelled on into him, words knocking him flying, bruising his spirit. “What’s your excuse? Afraid I might demand a commitment? Afraid I might actually *want* something from you? Avon, you left me in total ignorance, floundering around trying to put some semblance of a life together, and you just sat there, watching me.” Blake shook his head in disgust. “Jenna’s right. You are a cold, vicious sod. And if you’re an example of the kind of person I used to get involved with, then perhaps the Federation did me a favour wiping you from my mind.”

“Now that is completely uncalled for. Yes, I knew details of your past, but what did you expect me to do? Come up to you on the *London* and say, by the way, I know you don’t remember me, but once upon a time, we were lovers and swore undying devotion to each other?”

“If you were too much of a coward to tell me about

that, then what about all the other things you must know about me, things that any co-worker could tell me?"

"Because I knew precisely what would happen, Blake. You would ask me about your personal life and then immediately about romantic liaisons, not satisfied until I had told you everything."

"Running from responsibilities again, are we, Avon? You owed it to me, to tell me about the past. To help me understand who the hell I am."

"Well now, there's something I could never do. I never understood you, Blake, neither then nor now. You have always been such a contradiction, so very noble, but just as one thinks you are different from the rest of the base human race, your callous manipulation jumps up and slaps one on the face."

"It is not I who is manipulating this, Avon, nor I who is being callous here, so..."

"Not callous? You? You're suffering from delusions of grandeur again, Blake."

"Oh, hark at the man. He's kept my past secret from me, watching me, laughing up his sleeve at the poor, ignorant fool. How you must hate me, to do what you've done."

Avon stared at Blake, his eyes as hard and sharp as slate. "Hate you, Blake? Oh, how I've tried, how I've tried."

"So, you still love me then?"

"I said no such thing."

"No, but then, you didn't deny it, either."

"Then I shall deny it now, if it'll keep you happy."

"Actually, it would. I'm not certain that I would want love from a man like you."

"No, you just want my gun and my computer skills and my blood spilled for the sake of your damned Cause. You have no idea, Blake, how much I do hate your ideals, your delusions, the false pap you feed the others."

"That, Avon, is simply because anything good or honourable is beyond your feeble, pathetic shallowness."

Avon shook his head in pained disbelief. "You really haven't changed at all, have you? Still a vicious bitch when we fight."

"Well, I'm glad that even then I had enough good taste left to row with you."

"Oh, shut up. I've had more than my fill of this useless fiasco. I knew it would only lead to a complete débacle, should I tell you. Well, now you know, now I've done the decent and honourable thing—and in case you didn't recognise it, yes, that was sar-

casim—I will leave. Definitely this room and probably your damned Revolution."

"Avon."

The voice stopped him, making him curious at the abrupt change in tone. "This isn't at all like you. To let me say the things I did, without flailing me for it, without offering some kind of reason, no matter how backhanded. Why, Avon?"

Avon's voice was strangled with weariness and lonely loss. "It doesn't matter, Blake. Unfortunately, it never really did."

Blake sat for hours, simply staring at the blank door through which Avon had walked. More even, than the vitriolic words, more than the revelations of his past, the thing that stayed with Blake was the weight of depression bowing Avon's square shoulders. He found himself wondering at the cause, puzzled by the implication of continued caring. Eventually, he lumbered to his feet and walked slowly to Avon's room. Unsurprisingly, the tech wasn't even close to sleep. Surprisingly, he did open the door to Blake's quiet request.

"What is it?" he asked, eyes circled with weariness. "I thought we had both said more than enough."

"Yes, we did, didn't we? I've been," Blake paused, fiddling with the tapes on Avon's shelf, "well, sort of remembering. Odd images, fragments, pictures, that kind of thing."

"How very wonderful."

"Enough, Avon! As I was saying, I've been remembering. Feelings, too, Avon. And sensations. I've been replaying a night in my mind, a time when we made love. It was...quite remarkable between us, wasn't it?"

Avon slumped onto the bed, pulling a pillow over his face, muffling his answer. "That, it would seem, was the best thing between us."

"Nothing else, Avon? None of the long afternoons, sitting by the fire, reading books to one another? None of the challenging debates? None of the shared dreams?"

"You have been remembering, haven't you?"

"You haven't answered my questions."

"No, I haven't, have I?"

"Well?"

"As Orac is so fond of saying, well is not a question."

"Was the sex truly the only good thing about our relationship, in your eyes, anyway?"

Avon stayed safely hidden behind his pillow, an-

gry with himself for his abject cowardice, but not yet so angry that he was willing to show himself—to expose himself to the oh-so-skillful manipulations he remembered far too well. “To be honest...yes. Oh, we deluded ourselves that there was more, but, well, my only defence is that I was younger then, and foolish.”

“Why are you so convinced that the sex was all that was good in our relationship “

Avon jackknifed upright, hurling the pillow at Blake’s head. With burning, deadly bitterness, he whispered, “Because it was all our relationship was, you stupid... Oh, why bother? Just get out, Blake. Leave.”

“No, Avon, not until I have some answers. This is my *life* we’re talking about here and...”

“It’s my fucking life, too! And it is *not* open to discussion. Now shut up and get out!”

Blake was taken aback—despite their many, many arguments, despite the vitriol they so often flung in each others’ faces, he had never heard Avon swear, not even a ‘bloody’. For a moment, he cast aside his own concerns, really and truly looking at Avon, seeing him clearly, paying him his full attention. “There has to be a reason for you to be so certain that we had nothing but sex to hold us together. I honestly don’t remember, Avon. Tell me...”

Avon balanced himself on the edge of his bed, shoulders slumped, head bent, gaze averted. “Surely, it’s patently clear? Despite our fond declarations of love, whispered secretly so that no one knew our terrible secret, of course, regardless of the...warmth of the time we spent together, look at what happened. You left me, without so much as a good-bye...”

“That’s unfair, Avon! They *arrested* me.”

Hollow, haunted eyes stared up at him. “But I didn’t know that. I spent days, weeks, searching for you, unable to eat or sleep, worried to distraction what had happened to you. Frightened for you, terrified that you had been hurt or killed and I wasn’t there for you....Then, I found out that you had been picked up by the Security Unit for treason. Do you care to know *how* I found out, Blake? I was held for ‘questioning’, tortured and beaten, for information on my ‘known associate’. That was when I discovered that I didn’t know you at all. Would you like to know something else, something quite interesting, if you cared about me at all? They said that, as I was your lover, then, obviously, I was a homosexual and as such, not deserving of the...protection the other prisoners had. And that, as a *queer*,” he spat the poi-

sonous term out, “then, I would be more than willing to keep them...happy.” He saw the dawning horror on Blake’s mobile face. “Oh, yes, your suspicions are all too true. They raped me, frequently, during the entire time they were investigating me.”

“How long....”

“Two months.”

“Oh, Avon, I’m so sorry...”

“Well now, pity isn’t going to do me much good now, is it? A bit of honesty then, the right to choose whether or not I wanted to openly associate with a Rebel, a traitor...that would have been much more to my taste.”

“What happened after you were released?”

“I was having a rather...difficult time. Employers are leery, no matter how much of a genius you might be, of taking on someone who has such a large and obvious black mark against their name. And then, I met...Anna. She was wonderful to me, truly...wonderful And that made me realise, seeing how happy I was with her, how quickly and deeply I fell in love with her, just how shallow and pathetic and feeble *our* relationship had been.” He hurried on, not daring to allow Blake speech. “She had contacts, friends in high places, because of her husband. She introduced me to one of her associates and he agreed to give me a job in the banking system.”

“Which you then proceeded to rob, for Anna. Avon, are you blind? Can’t you see that she was a Federation plant, that she set you up?”

Avon came at him, hands outstretched like the gnarled and twisted fingers of a corpse, lunging for Blake’s throat. “Don’t you ever *dare* to say anything like that about her again!”

Blake, bigger and heavier and unblinded by rage, wrestled him to the bed, landing on top of him, confining the writhing twisting body beneath the bulk of his own. “Avon,” he said, gripping the man’s wrists in his own big hands, “Avon! Stop it!” Avon brought a vicious knee up towards Blake’s groin and the rebel tangled their legs together, bringing them groin to groin. Eyes locked with Avon’s, the hatred burning between them, Blake realised with shock that the man beneath him had an erection, that the hate in those eyes was a passionate one, that the body under his was squirming and rolling, rubbing them together. True memory flooded him, memories of the vicious fights after the quiet afternoons, of the jealous ire hurled in his face, only to be followed by sweet kisses.

“That’s the way it’s so often been between us, isn’t it, Avon? This love-hate, this fighting passion. This is

what turns you on. And when this mood hit you, we would have to go through this, time after time, you needing to fight me, needing to have me literally beat you into submission so that you could allow yourself to have sex. That way—*this* way—you couldn't be held responsible for having sex with a man, for falling in love with someone who was foolish enough to be born a man who wants only men."

"Get off me, Blake."

"Was that your stock phrase? Your excuse? I'm so much bigger than you, how could you possibly be expected to resist? That's the truth of it, my friend. You wanted me—loved me—too much to let me go, but you couldn't break free of your narrow minded, conditioned homophobia." He thrust against Avon, hard himself now, scraping the rough fabric of his trousers against the tender skin beneath him. "Well, it wouldn't do to disappoint you, would it, not after all these years..."

Still angry, Blake plundered Avon's mouth, sucking on his tongue, drawing his breath from him. "I'll give you what we *both* want, Avon," he whispered, sinking slowly into the warmth, the passion awaiting him. When Avon brought his arms up to encircle him, Blake felt a sudden, overwhelming surge of homecoming, of belonging. "Oh god, Avon," he groaned, "I didn't even know this was what I was so hungry for, didn't know this was what I was driven to search for..."

Freed from responsibilities for his feelings, Avon threw himself into the lovemaking, filling his arms and his heart with the man over him, whispered, reassuring words pouring from him and into Blake. He hugged Blake's welcome girth to him, frantic, desperate to feel him inside, to feel the size and weight of him again. He ripped at Blake's clothes, getting them off him, uncaring of where the shirt and trousers and boots went. Enraptured, face flushed, he cradled Blake's cock and balls in his hand, staring at them, then swooping down, swallowing him with remembered, fervent ease. He drank in the taste of him, the smell of him, the relief map of veins throbbing and pulsing on his tongue. He moaned, muscles massaging heavy cock, sucking the cum up, licking a drop from the head. He sat back, staring at the transfigured Blake, at the glorious sight of him, naked and hard and ecstatic. "Blake..." he whispered, lost once again in that secret Nirvana he could only ever find if Blake led him to it. He gripped the generous cock in both hands, drawing the foreskin back and forth to hood

the head, pulling it back to display the round, full tip, the ridge of the glans. He bent down to suck it again, but those huge and wonderfully powerful hands stayed him, raising him for a deep, loving kiss. He drowned, and didn't care, for dying in this man's arms had always been such heady bliss.

Blake laid his lover back on the bed, Avon's fine hands busily spreading precum over Blake's cock, adding natural lubricant to the lingering wetness of his sucking. He spread his legs, anxious—desperate—for Blake. The big man leaned forward, bending Avon's slender legs up over his shoulders, folding him almost in half, opening his arse up for display. Blake pushed forward, sinking into yielding, tensile flesh. Pain flashed through Avon, for it had been a very long time since he had done this and Blake's build had always stretched him to absolute capacity. He stared into Blake's brown eyes, feeding on the hunger there and in their joined bodies. He was pounded, battered, bruised from uncontrolled passion, painfully full and—happy. Blake grinned down at him, sharing the moment, sharing the joy, until his eyes closed, his thrusts becoming more intense, deeper. Avon pulled on his own cock, matching Blake, movement for movement, uniting with him in the moment of orgasm, that instant of brilliant, exquisite glory.

Avon lay still under Blake, until his muscles quivered with cramps and the rebel eased him down. They lay together, sleepy, sated, satisfied after months—centuries—of abstinence. Slumber crept over them, still enmeshed, still wrapped together in the bonds of the past and the hopes of the future.

Avon awoke several hours later, to the almost forgotten sensation of a heavy, sleeping body draped across him. He lay awake, thinking, feeling, seeing the past anew, seeing Blake again. He rolled out from under the comforting arm and leg, and padded, naked and sticky, into the bathroom. After he had bathed, he returned to his bedside, standing still as a cenotaph, thinking. Eventually, his presence at the bedside—or perhaps his absence from his side, woke Blake up. The rebel stretched with luxurious, languorous ease and opened his eyes. Wordless, Avon stared down into the sleepy, loving eyes gazing up at him.

"Get up," he finally said.

Puzzlement furrowed the broad brow. "What?"

"Surely even you can understand monosyllabic terms. I said, *get up*."

Blake propped himself up, wiping the sleep from



his eyes and the dreams from his mind as Avon dressed, slowly pulling on the many layers of his protective armour. “What’s wrong? I thought we had sorted things out last night...”

“You’re not Vila, so stop acting like an idiot. We resolved *nothing* last night, we merely fucked an old memory.”

“Avon,” Blake said warningly, “don’t do this to us...”

“Us?” Avon sneered, ugly disdain marring his pretty mouth. “Last night proved to me that there is no ‘us’, as you so coyly put it. Yes, you are still as bent as a corkscrew and yes, I concede that I do still...enjoy sex with you, but nothing else has changed. It is still sex, and sex alone, which holds us to each other.”

“How can you say that, after last night? What the hell is the matter with you?”

“Nothing,” Avon hissed at him. “The problem is still yours. Think about this, Fearless Leader. If, as you are trying so hard to convince me, there is more to ‘us’ than sex, then why,” his brittle façade crumbled, the vulnerability and the agony and the rank betrayal shot out for a moment, blinding Blake, “oh, *why*, when you saw me again, lived with me here on the *Liberator*, why did that supposed love never show its face? Too shy, perhaps? Or simply too false, too much of a convenient lie to get me into your bed and into your pocket? I have had enough of you and your lies and your manipulations and...”

“And I have had enough of your self-destructive insecurities. Avon, what the hell do you want from me? How could I possibly display love for you—in case you’ve forgotten, the bloody Federation *mindwiped* me.”

“Oh, they certainly did, didn’t they? Apart, of course, for your damned Cause. You seem to have no trouble remembering *that*, do you now?”

Blake sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, his nakedness flaunting itself in front of Avon’s thirsty eyes. The tech threw clothes at Blake. Pointedly, knowingly, the rebel calmly laid them aside, rising to his feet, coming close to the other man. “I can remember facts quite well, Avon, as you well know. Details such as how to operate standard equipment, food processors and the like, but the *people*... That’s entirely different and...”

“Do you take me for a complete fool? You remembered your uncle and cousin perfectly, and yet I, for some reason, have slipped your mind completely. Obviously, it is because I was less important to you

than either your cause or some cousin you hadn’t seen since childhood.”

“Don’t be absurd, Avon. Now that my memories of you are beginning to return...”

“The empty platitudes are returning with them. Tell me,” bitterness painted his voice the colour of old blood, “what *do* you recall of your...little affaire with me? The lust, the fighting, the falling-outs?”

Blake flooded Avon with his affections, holding him by the shoulders, drawing him in ever closer, almost daring an embrace. “I remember the love,” he whispered, voice warm, mulled wine on a winter’s night.

Some of Avon’s ice melted, but he still pulled away. “There was no love there, Blake.” Back to Blake’s eyes, hidden away from the perceptive, persuasive gaze, he slowly revealed himself, filling Blake with almost overpowering emotions. “Love,” Avon continued, a faint, fragile sound in the dimness of the womb-like room, “for it to exist, requires trust and honesty. For two people to love, there must be absolutely no deceit between them, no secret lives. And look at ‘us’. You were a Resistance leader, yet never once thought to mention so minor a detail to me, even though you were risking my life.”

“Let me explain...”

“No, let me finish. You never, obviously, trusted me and you had another entire life, completely apart from the one you shared so sparingly with me. Oh, there was lust aplenty and the delusion of love, but that was all.”

“That simply is not true, Avon. How could I possibly have told you about my involvement with the Resistance? Your father used to be head of the Internal Justice Department, an incorruptible IJD man, loyal to the core.”

“It is hardly my fault that my father was what he was. Anyway, my late father’s job is a terribly feeble excuse. Surely you can come up with something better?”

“How about not wanting to endanger you by giving you information the Federation would kill you for?”

“Equally pathetic.”

“Avon, I still don’t have full possession of my time with you, it is still spotty, filled with holes. But I do know that I had very good reasons for not telling you, for...”

“For betraying me by simply disappearing from my life one day?” Avon turned on Blake, hurt driving him, as always, to viciousness. “No, there is only

one reason and one reason alone why you never bothered to impart details of such a tremendously important part of your life to me: you simply didn't care enough, there simply wasn't the love there."

Furious, Blake grabbed Avon again, giving him a good shake. The tech wrapped himself in dignity and with a glance, froze Blake's hands from him. "I can tell you, with utter certainty," he continued quietly, "because I did eventually find the authentic article. Perhaps I should thank you, actually. I was...on the rebound, I believe you would say, somewhat thrown by your betrayal and so, when Anna introduced herself to me, I leapt at the chance for a new relationship, a way to fill the nights. And with her, Blake, I discovered trust and honesty and the security of having no secret lives to tear us apart."

"But she isn't here now, and I am."

"And I would gladly have the two of you swap places. You can't hold a candle to her, Blake."

One of Blake's hands cupped Avon's cheek, turning the dark head to stare into deep, brown eyes. "No? Perhaps not. But I am here, and she is not and surely we should rebuild what we had before?"

With a venomous twist of his head, Avon pulled away. "No thanks. One house of cards, built on sand, is more than enough for one lifetime." He started towards the door, preparing to escape into the soothing balm of work.

"It wasn't that at all," Blake yelled, losing his patience. "We were in love, we had quite a relationship, even if you're too much of a coward to admit it."

Avon's back stiffened in mute eloquence. "And you would have us go through it all again? Why, Blake? So that you could betray me once again? If you had truly loved me, the way you said, then why did you feel nothing for me when we met again?"

Blake remembered enough, and had learned enough, to recognise that tone of conciliation, Avon's tacit request for someone to force him to love, to break free from his self-imposed prison of safety...and loneliness.

"Avon," Blake murmured, deep voice a purring caress, "how do you know I felt nothing for you? Always jumping to unhappy conclusions—I swear you could find a bad side to a silver lining." He stroked Avon's back, kneading out some of the tension and pain. "I was drawn to you from the first, on the *London*. Oh, I didn't know why, but it was there. More than attraction, more than mere interest. I wanted to have you with me, at my side. You can't deny that, can you?"

"Oh, can't I?" Avon asked drily.

"Not and still tell the truth, anyway. No, it has been there. Why do you think I never complained when you would grab hold of me in an explosion, or a storm. Why I always sought you out? Why I put up with your foul temper and fouler disposition, even defended you to the others?"

"Do you honestly expect me to believe such a patent tissue of lies?"

"No, actually, I don't."

"Then why are you wasting both our times? I can only speak for myself, of course, but I for one, have far more important things to do than..."

"Than sort out your life for the better, hmmm?" Blake interrupted. "Shall I tell you why I never even tried to act upon my feelings? Because Vila told me what you said when he made a pass at you. And I had no wish to have my balls made into earrings."

"That was different, that was Vila. I wouldn't have rejected you, had you bothered to approach me."

Blake could here Avon's decision wavering in his voice. He slipped his arms around the other man, leaning Avon's back against his own naked chest, rubbing his hands in circles over and over the leather-clad chest. "But I thought that your reaction was because you were a hetero, not to mention positively homophobic. It was simply too great a risk to take."

"And last night, of course, I solved your dilemma for you."

"Yes. And very satisfyingly, too," Blake murmured, lips against Avon's nape. "Well, Avon? Give it one more try, shall we? One more chance at love, one more try at being together? You know my deepest, darkest secret already, so there can finally be trust between us and honesty."

Avon rested lightly against Blake comfortable bulk, soaking in the man's heat, warm memories racing and tumbling through his mind. The hands on his chest started to undo buttons, and he watched, mind going over the so familiar scene. "And if I refuse?"

The hands stilled, then began once more. "Then I shall simply try to persuade you, that's all."

The insidious luxury and peace of being with Blake stole through Avon, and he warmed himself at the banked blaze of this one man who could always make him willing to follow. He leaned back, resting his head on Blake, closing his eyes, not seeing Blake's smile of success, nor the glint of happiness shining from him. "And can I trust you, this time?" he asked, beginning to drift under Blake's ministrations.

“You know you can always trust me, Avon. No more secrets.”

Avon turned to look at him, searching dark eyes, finding the honesty there. “All right,” he whispered,

hands coming up to cradle Blake’s grinning face. “All right. Once more, it is, then. And no more betrayals...”

“Never, Avon. I shall never betray *you*.”

The next time he did, Avon killed him.

# THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

## Adrian Alexander

“I NEED HIM DOWN HERE NOW, BLAKE, NOT TOMORROW!”  
AVON BELLOWED, FRUSTRATED BY THE UNNECESSARY DELAY.

“If you were to shut up a moment, I will tell you, I have already teleported him. I set him down right beside you.”

Avon didn’t bother to glance around for the missing thief. “Impossible. He’s not here. Believe me, I would have noticed.”

“I’m telling you,” Blake’s voice boomed from the comm bracelet, “I...,”

Avon could almost see the rebel stop and note that he hadn’t changed the coordinates on the locator.

“I..., oh no, sorry, Avon.”

“Sorry, Avon’ doesn’t quite do it.”

“He’s back where we dropped you off.”

“I suspected that. You had better try his communicator. You set me down at the top of a steep flight of stairs. As a matter of fact, this entire city is built on a hillside, so if Vila is his usual graceful self, he’s probably at the bottom of those steps with a broken leg.”

“I’ll check on him, then call you back.”

Several minutes passed without the promised response, and Avon paused, frowning at the encroaching darkness. He had hated the idea of coming here from the instant Blake had suggested it.

“Avon, he’s not responding. He may be in trouble.”

“Well, I, for one, am not surprised. I’ll make my way back to the landing site, whilst you get kitted up to join me there and we’ll search for him. I’m afraid you’ll have to write off this mission, Blake. I didn’t think it was particularly important anyway, certainly not worth the risk you were asking me to take.”

“We’ll discuss it later, Avon. I’ll meet you in ten minutes. *Liberator*, out.”

Grimly, the Alpha brushed his hand lightly over his gun as he stepped from the doorway and pressed on through the crowded streets.

When Blake materialized he found Avon crouching at the base of a long, broad staircase, torch in hand. He could see what Avon had scolded him about. If he had coalesced two more inches to the right, he would have tumbled down the sharply angled stairway himself. Vila, unfortunately, was nowhere in sight.

“What have you found? Any sign of Vila?”

Obviously annoyed, Avon looked up as Blake stomped off the bottom step. “I’ve found a few drops of fresh blood, possibly Vila’s.” He stood, wiping his hands on his trouser leg, “Even with a small injury, it’s unusual for Vila to stray far. He would want to stay and play it for everything he could get.”

“Very true. So, what do you think happened?”

Avon glared at the other man. “I have no idea, but whatever it was, it sent him off in that direction.”

With a nod, the two set off, heads down, following the daisy chain pattern of blood droplets. The trail stopped abruptly in the middle of the road a couple of blocks away. Both sides of the street were lined with pubs. Avon looked up at the big rebel. “Wounded animals do tend to wander toward familiar territory. Well? What do you suggest now?”

“We search, obviously.” He waved his hand at the two long lines of pubs. “Pick one.”

In the far back corner booth of the third bar they tried, Vila sat sipping a drink with one hand, the other dabbing at the cut over his left brow with a blood-stained cloth. He saw them the instant they came in the door. The first thing Blake noticed was the uncharacteristic look of arrogance on Vila’s face. The thief barely gave Avon a glance, instead he kept his eyes fixed on the approaching rebel leader.

“It took you long enough to get here, Blake!” Vila growled and gone was the familiar Delta phraseology and tone. “You handled the teleport with your usual ineptness. Next time I’ll have Orac do it—him, I trust.” Vila swallowed the last of his drink. “Now sit down, Blake. Forcing me to look up at you may give you a false sense of superiority, but it’s just giving me a headache.”

He held out his glass to Avon, gracefully balancing it in his hand. “Make yourself useful, idiot, and get me another drink.”

Blake froze. There was no mistaking to whom Vila was talking. He could feel the anger reaching its fiery peak in the man beside him. Quickly, he turned and drew the tech close. “Do it, Avon, and for once, don’t argue. Do you see that bruise on his head?”

Avon nodded almost imperceptibly, standing on his dignity.

“Something’s terribly wrong, for he’s obviously

not himself. We need to get him back to the ship without further damage so Orac can diagnose him.”

Without a word, Avon swept the glass out of Vila’s hand and headed toward the bar. Blake was glad Avon couldn’t see the undisguisedly predatory look in the thief’s eyes.

“I love the way Vila walks, it’s so sexy...so alluring. He’s such a whore.” A familiar, yet dangerous, smile parted the thief’s lips, but it wasn’t Vila’s smile.

“Vila?” Blake couldn’t keep the incredulity out of his voice as he slipped into the seat across the table from the Delta.

The thief focused coldly on the rebel. “Yes, Vila. It would help if you’d wash your ears out from time to time, so you could hear me. I do not appreciate having to repeat myself.”

Avon returned with the drink, placing it none too carefully in the thief’s hand.

“Avon.” Both men looked up. Blake quickly shook his head at the tech and frowned. “I see you have quite a nasty bump on your head.”

“How terribly observant, above your usual standard, Blake.” Vila sneered as he lightly touched the sore spot. He pulled back his hand and stared at his fingers, then rubbed them together, fastidiously wiping away the small traces of blood.

Blake continued, “Shall we go back up to the *Liberator* and have Cally and Orac look you over? At least up there, you can get some rest and quiet, a bath and perhaps something for the nasty headache you must have.”

Vila sat back and crossed his arms, “Don’t be patronising, Blake, there’s nothing seriously wrong with me.”

Blake stood and leaned over the table. “I insist.”

In a flash, Vila’s gun was out of its holster and pointed, unswervingly, at Blake’s heart. “You do not tell me what to do. Try it and I shall surely kill you.”

It took Blake a second to regain his composure and he noticed that even Avon was taken aback by the thief’s vehement reaction. Blake held his hands up in surrender. “All right, Avon, I shan’t insist, but I can see that you’re in pain and it’s rather stupid to put up with it when you don’t have to.”

Vila frowned, still angry, but calmer. “You do know how to bring the out the worst in me, Blake.” Suddenly, he stood and pushed past Avon. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Blake and Avon had to run to catch him up. Vila’s wrist was at his lips calling for teleportation before anyone could stop him.

Jenna was manning the console when the trio materialized. Vila strode off toward the infirmary without so much as a glance in her direction.

“What’s wrong with him?” Jenna asked, bewildered by Vila’s unusual behavior.

Blake reached the intercom and pounded the button, “Cally.”

“Yes, Blake?”

“Bring Orac and meet Avon and myself in the infirmary. Vila has injured himself and he’s acting...peculiarly, so just play along with whatever he says, for the time being.”

“Very well.”

The intercom went dead. Blake turned to find both Avon and Jenna staring him down.

“The idiot thinks he’s me, doesn’t he?” Avon broke the silence.

Blake tried to smile, but missed, “I’m afraid so. But cheer up, Avon, someone once said that imitation is the greatest form of flattery.”

“They might well have been right, but then, they didn’t have a Delta grade thief doing his impersonation of them.”

Jenna smiled, “Oh, I don’t know, Avon, I think he has you off pat. The right walk, the right pseudosuperior attitude, he even holds himself the way you do—arrogantly.”

The tech was obviously not amused. Blake stepped in to head off the inevitable fight. “Avon, please, play the part of Vila until we get some test results from Orac on his condition and treatment. We really shouldn’t traumatise him unnecessarily.”

“To be traumatised, he would have to have a brain. As Vila has none, I fail to see how I could do any further damage...and since when have you been so concerned about Vila’s psyche?”

Jenna came to Blake’s defense. “He’s right, Avon. Who knows how badly injured he is and if we’re ever going to get into that installation on the planet, we need him functional.”

Avon turned on the big rebel, “If you still plan to attempt this suicide mission, you can do it without me.”

The tech started to storm off, but Blake’s voice stopped him.

“Avon, that’s not the issue right now, Vila is. I thought, perhaps, you cared about what happened to him.”

Avon hesitated, “If this little charade backfires....”

The tech left his threat unfinished, leaving Blake to fill in the blank with something suitably imaginative. All three made their way to the infirmary.

Orac hummed happily as Vila lay on the bed with a tranquillizer patch balanced on the center of his forehead. The little computer was analysing the information he was gathering from the electrodes attached to the man. Avon came to stand by the Auron, giving her a quick smile. "How did you persuade him to let you sedate him?"

Cally returned the smile, but let it linger a little longer on her lips, "He didn't have a choice, actually. He was behaving far too much like you, so I slipped it onto him when he wasn't looking."

"He'll be furious when he wakes up."

"Probably."

"Well?" Blake asked, interrupting the couple's whispered conversation.

"Orac." Cally prompted the little computer impatiently, "Give me your analysis of what is wrong with Vila."

\*Obviously, Vila has suffered a traumatic injury to the left temporal lobe. My scans note aberrant electrical behaviour consistent with a concussion. Other tests reveal he is experiencing a form of amnesia. From his behaviour prior to being sedated, I conclude that he has taken on the persona of someone he has always wanted to be and is using what he has studied about this individual to form his own version of this person.\*

"How do we cure him?" Blake asked.

\*You do not. It will take an indeterminate amount of time for the concussion to resolve and with it, the amnesia.\*

"Well, its going to be rather confusing having two Avons aboard ship." Jenna frowned at the prospect.

\*You can not have two Avons,\* Orac piped in. \*Vila truly believes he is Avon and could become hostile and dangerous if pushed. Since the real Avon is in his rational mind, it is logical that he should play the part of Vila as well as he is able.\*

"What?" Avon growled from the corner. "You can't be serious, Orac, I can't...."

\*You must if you wish Vila Restal to make a complete recovery.\*

All eyes fixed on the tech. Avon shrugged and crossed his arms protectively across his chest.

"You wouldn't want anything dreadful to happen to Vila, would you, Avon?" Cally asked.

"And it *is* only for a little while." Jenna added, trying to be helpful, smiling broadly.

"Well?" Avon looked at the still silent Blake.

The rebel rubbed his chin and grinned. "It's entirely your decision, Avon."

Avon's mouth hardened into a tight line. "And if I don't go through with this charade and something does happen to the little fool, I'm sure all of you will take great delight in taking me apart, piece by piece, with a laser probe."

"And stuffing your remains out an airlock." Blake smiled.

Cally and Jenna nodded their agreement.

"All right," the tech conceded, "but I do it under protest and..." he moved away from the wall and headed for the door, "I, for one, am not going to be around when you take that tranquillizer patch off him. He'll probably try to kill someone." A small smile creased Avon's lips. "I certainly would."

Several hours later, Avon saw Cally, still alive, in the hall. She looked perturbed by something.

"Avon."

The tech stopped and turned to face her. "I'm pleased to see you came away unscathed. How did you manage it?"

"I palmed the disc and told him he'd simply passed out for a while due to the concussion."

"And he believed you?"

"He seemed to."

Avon smiled, but he could tell by the look on the Auron's face that something else was bothering her.

"You know," she continued, "I was always under the impression that you like women...sexually, that is."

The tech's eyes widened, baffled by her odd statement. "I...I do." He replied, softly, taking a step closer, "What are you getting at?"

Cally shook her head and tried to smile. "Nothing, really. I just mean, watching him, listening to him, he has your inflections and your mannerisms off pat, but there's something else he's picked up on with you which frankly..." she looked him square in the eye, "puzzles me and disturbs me a little. As I think back on you, I can see why he's behaving the way he is, but...."

"But what?" Avon prompted.

"Vila!" A sharp voice sliced the air between them like a knife. Avon had to catch a snippish comment that poised ready to spring from the tip end of his tongue.,

Vila put his hand on Avon's forearm, making his body a barrier to the Auron. Cally moved away, treading very carefully where Vila was concerned. "I need you to get my calibration tools. Zen's sensors are not quite right and I want you to help me realign them."

When Avon didn't move, a taunting sneer caressed Vila's lips. "Are you waiting for an engraved invitation, Vila? I'd give you one, but I doubt if you could read it."

Cally could see the anger rush into the tech's face. His hands balled into tight fists. Cally shook her head once to remind him to play along.

"Yes, Avon," he replied, letting the words hiss out through clenched teeth.

"All right, then, get the tools and meet me on the flight deck."

As Avon turned and walked away, Cally couldn't help but notice the lustful look Vila was using on his shipmate.

Avon had to admit Vila did know what he was doing when he realigned Zen's scanners, but, then again, the thief had helped do the job many times and even an ape could be taught to mimic. Blake watched both men closely, amused by Vila's hand gestures and facial expressions, an exact match for the real thing.

Vila stood up, stretching, grimacing a little as he rubbed the spot near the center of his back which plagued Avon from time to time.

"Well, Blake, are we going to stay in orbit around this dustball until we die of inertial rot or are we going to do something?"

The rebel glanced over at Avon, who looked away seemingly disinterested. "I haven't really thought about it...Avon."

"What no battles to fight, no rebellions to raise, no citizens to save from the tyranny of the Federation? Obviously, you have finally realised that mission down there was futile, as well as stupid." Before Blake could reply, the thief turned his attention on Avon. "And you...you've been unusually quiet. Are you sick? No that can't be it, if you were sick you'd be proclaiming it for everyone to hear so you could get out of work."

Avon's eyes flashed. "If you don't enjoy my company, just say so. I'd be more than happy to leave."

And so it continued, with Vila being Avon, or at least, a version thereof. Almost imperceptibly, Avon became more like Vila, elaborating upon his impersonation, changing it from mere gritted-teeth acquiescence, to a display that showed as much knowledge of Vila's character as the thief did of Avon's. Unfortunately, the thief seemed to concentrate on the more abrasive aspects of Avon's character, lashing the tech with truly vicious witticisms.

Blake found Avon in the rest room. Every twelve

hours, Zen lowered the lights in an attempt to simulate night and preserve the humans' circadian rhythm. Avon was stretched out in his chair, feet propped on the table, a glass of soma and adrenalin hung limply from his fingers. The rebel had never seen the other man look so dishevelled and it was unnerving to think that Avon might be falling into his role of the Delta thief too easily. "You seem to be down in the mouth, Avon."

The tech half grinned and took a large swig of his drink, "Avon's not here, remember? My name's Restal, Vila Restal."

"Starting to understand what it feels like to be on the receiving end of your sharp tongue, Avon?"

The tech threw him a withering glare.

"Don't sulk, Avon and don't feel put out. We do need you."

Avon laughed, but there was no humor in it. "Need me? Why? He can do everything I can do, but I couldn't pick a lock if my life depended on it. I'm just beginning to realise how...unnecessary I am. If Vila, when he reverts to his former personality, is taught to tap into what he subconsciously knows, and I'm sure Orac could tell you how this could be accomplished, I, to all intents and purposes, would be superfluous to this crew."

"Oh, come on, Avon, I don't believe that."

"You always did have a problem believing the obvious."

Blake shook his head. "Mind if I join you?" When the tech didn't answer, he took it as a 'yes' and got his own glass of the fluorescent green solution. "You know," he started as he settled his large frame in the chair across the table from his friend, "he does portray you rather well."

"Well, all of you seem to think so. Frankly, apart for a time or two, I really don't see it."

Blake sipped at his drink and smiled. "It's the little things he does: the tilt of his head, how your smile sort of creeps up, grudgingly, on your lips, but he is far more blatant about..." The rebel suddenly seemed uncomfortable, as if he'd stumbled into something he found difficult to explain.

"What are you saying?" Avon was curious in spite of himself.

"Well, you know." Then he realized the tech really didn't know what he meant and backpedaled furiously. "No, really, its nothing."

The tech sat up and leaned toward the other man. "Obviously, it *is* something and I want to know what it is."

Blake tried to laugh it off. "It's just that he is somewhat less...discreet than you are."

"What do you mean, 'less...discreet'?"

Blake cleared his throat, looking around the room at anything except Avon. "You know, you...Vila."

"Just precisely what are you getting at, Blake?"

"You and Vila."

"So you have said already. Specifics, Blake!"

"Well, everyone on this ship knows..."

Avon leaped to his feet and grabbed the other man by his collar, dragging him across the table. "Everyone? And what, precisely, does everyone think they know?" The tech's voice dripped with deadly venom.

"That you two have a relationship," the big man croaked, choking.

Avon's eyes widened with horror, his mouth gaped open, very much like a fish gasping for air. "You...you think I'm a bloody homosexual, don't you?" When Avon threw the rebel from him, it took several seconds for Blake's color to return.

Blake smirked. "Oh, come now, you can't keep something like that a secret, not a man as sexy and desir..." The rebel never got to finish his sentence, for Avon's fist got in the way.

"You bastard, all my life there have been people like you, labelling me a fag, a poofter. Well, you are wrong...*dead* wrong."

Blake struggled to pick himself up off the floor.

"I don't understand," Avon continued, the horror of this suppressed nightmare coming back full force. "Why? Why do you think that? Why does everyone always think that?"

The rebel rubbed his sore chin. "Oh, come off it, Avon, I've seen you. The way you touch people, especially Vila and me. For example, the other day when you and I were arguing and Vila had to get to his post, you deliberately stood so that he had to press against you to get past."

"I was only teasing him. Even a moron like you could see that," the tech protested.

"And," Blake pushed on, "you can't deny, that despite Jenna and Cally's best efforts, you've never taken either one of them to bed."

Avon whirled around and tried to flee the room, but the only exit was blocked by the big rebel. He pounded his fist against the wall in frustration.

"Damn it!" He turned and faced the other man, head down. "All my life I've had to fight against that stereotype the lot of you have always put on me. And I simply do not understand why you all do it. I love women. I think they're beautiful and sexy. I love

making love to them. I revel in how they feel, their softness...how they smell. I just don't understand it." He leaned wearily against the wall, this latest round in his interminable private war draining him. It was always like this, first the accusations, then the doubts crowding in behind. He sighed and continued with his explanation, a variation on one he had had to give so many times. "The reason I touch you is because, until now, I trusted you. I trusted both of you not to misinterpret my meaning. However, now I can see that you both did and as for Cally and Jenna..." Avon looked up, his eyes pleading for understanding. "I didn't think I needed to prove my manhood to anyone, not any more. I don't love frivolously, Blake and I've always been aware of the fact and if I were to become involved with either one them, then if something were to happen to them, I don't think I would care to deal with that. Damn it, Blake, you're as bad as all the rest." Again, his head dropped and the tech fell silent. A warm hand was placed lightly upon the tech's arm, making Avon look up.

"I'm sorry, I truly am. Believe me, Avon, I never thought you were exclusive. I thought you were bisexual, I mean, we all are." He looked up a bit uncertain, "Aren't we?"

"No, we are not."

"Oh." Blake hesitated. "Well, I am. Sorry, Avon."

Avon turned his head, not wanting to meet the rebel's eyes.

"I suppose I had better warn you," Blake continued. "Even if what you say is true, Vila firmly believes that you and he have a relationship, a sexual one, at that. You can see it in his eyes when he looks at you and I think he's growing a rather impatient waiting for you to make the first move. Maybe that's all a part of his fantasy about you, but I just hope, for his sake and yours that either his amnesia clears up before he decides to act on his dreams or you work out some way to talk him out of it."

Avon smiled sarcastically. "I could always tell him I have a headache."

"You could, but I doubt he'd accept that, for you certainly wouldn't. And what if he tried to push the issue?"

"True. Vila's the last person in the world I'd want to hurt," Avon confessed, deeply surprised by both his own words and the concern he could see in the other man's eyes. He spoke quickly to cover his slip-up. "Don't worry, if what you're warning me about should happen, I shall think of something. After all, I am only *pretending* to be Vila."



Blake cuffed the smaller man gently on the shoulder. "If you should need my help..."

Avon nodded. "I very much doubt I will."

"But if you do, don't hesitate. Orac or no Orac, I'll end this game one way or another. I don't want anyone hurt." He started to back away from the tech. The tall rebel turned, leaving Avon propped against the wall.

Several minutes passed before the tech moved away from the hard, cool surface. He stopped at the cabinet and poured himself another stiff shot of Vila's favorite beverage. Hand raised, his glass paused midway to his lips as he stared at the dark shadows in the corners of the room, his brow furrowed deep with thought. *And could Blake be right? Have I been denying some part of myself? Do I, perhaps subconsciously, want to find out if I have and that is why I have allowed this charade to continue?*

He shook his head and downed his drink in one great swallow, shivering as the fluid burned its way down his throat to settle heavily in his empty stomach. *You're as much a fool as Vila to even consider it.* The tech chastised himself as he took off for his room, or rather Vila's room, to ponder the question in private.

"Vila, come and help me in the computer control centre," the thief's voice ordered over the intercom, breaking the silence on the flight deck.

The look of alarm on the tech's face was not lost on anyone. "He doesn't know anything about that portion of the system. If he tries to 'fix' anything, he could do considerable damage to the ship," Avon whispered to Blake.

"Avon," Blake spoke as calmly as he could into the intercom. "Must you do that right now?"

"Are you questioning my judgment, Blake?"

"No, of course not."

"I didn't think you were. Now send Vila down. I need him."

The rebel looked helplessly over at the tech. "I think you'd better go, Avon, if only to keep him from turning Zen inside out."

Uncharacteristically, Avon nodded and left without a word.

Cally slipped up beside the tall rebel and rested a hand lightly on his arm, gaining his attention after the tech was well out of earshot. "I'm curious. You've talked to Avon, haven't you, about... Vila?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"He told me he's strictly heterosexual. That you and Jenna are definitely his type, not Vila at all."

"And do you believe him?"

Blake rubbed the still-sore area on his throat. "Oh yes, I believe him. Or at least, that *he* believes him."

The Auron couldn't hold back her smile. "I see." Then the smile faded. "But what about Vila?"

"Well, obviously, Vila has been in love with Avon for quite some time and he's only now acting out his fantasy. Personally, I think it's tremendously interesting, the things Vila's chosen to highlight as Avonisms."

"I don't understand." Cally frowned, cocking her head to one side.

"You know, the gestures, the attitudes. It's refreshing to see that if push came to shove, Vila could do very well defending himself from Avon's constant abuse."

"You think Avon abuses Vila?"

Blake smiled. "Oh, I don't mean physically, but mentally and certainly verbally, he's quite hard on him. Before I knew the truth about Avon, I always thought it was Avon trying to prove to the rest of us that he didn't really care for Vila, to sort of throw us off the scent, you see." The rebel noted the confusion in the Auron's eyes. "No, you don't see, do you?" he sighed, resigned.

"Why would anyone hurt the one they loved, Blake, the way Vila has Avon this past week? I've seen it happen several times among your people and I always find it very disturbing."

"Yes, you're right, we do tend to do that," the tall Alpha nodded, "and that is what I had thought all that was, between them. But, now, with what Avon has told me... It seems almost a case of 'methinks the lady doth protest too much', and Avon has been protesting rather loudly and rather often."

Cally's lips pursed tightly together as she considered her leader's words, not fully understanding the quote, but certainly the meaning. "And you think, if the situation were right, Avon might respond to Vila sexually?"

"All I'm saying is, I think there is a lot more to Avon and Vila's relationship than Avon is willing to admit to. Simply by agreeing to go along with Orac's suggestion, he showed all of us how much he does care for him."

"But what of Vila, Blake? What happens when he gets his memory back? What if he remembers all the things he's said and done to Avon? Even if he doesn't, I don't see how Avon could ever treat him the same."

“True,” Blake grinned, “but Vila is Avon’s problem now. All in all, it should be interesting to see how Avon handles him, because I suspect our Delta friend has more in mind than a little computer circuit cleaning.”

“And you are going to let him go down there, unaided, into a situation which could become terribly awkward? I thought you did not want to see anyone hurt, Blake?”

“Oh, I don’t. But it has reached the point, Cally, where Avon has to make his own decisions, where Avon has to make choices, about his life.”

“I hardly think forcing him into a situation with Vila is the best way to do that.”

“Perhaps not, but this is the best chance Avon will ever have to try a new lifestyle. For if it doesn’t work, or if he cannot cope with it, well, all he has to do is say that it was under duress, that it was because of the situation, nothing more.”

“So, in a sense, what you are doing, is giving Avon the option, with none of the responsibilities?”

“Exactly, Cally.”

“In other words,” she said tartly, “you are hurting the ones you love, simply being cruel to be kind.”

Blake looked at her sharply, but she simply turned her back on him and went back to work, cutting off all possibilities of further conversation.

The lights in the control center were so dim, Avon had to squint to see anything. Suddenly, a warm body pressed itself against his back. The tech stiffened—he had hoped he wouldn’t have to face this. Roving fingers travelled down his chest.

“I’ve missed you, Vila.”

Avon could feel the thief’s hard cock pressed against his backside. “I don’t understand—um—Avon, I’ve been here all the time.”

Hot breath blew enticingly in his right ear, sending a shiver down his spine.

“Now, don’t be coy, Vila, you know exactly what I mean.” The fingers moved downward and massaged Avon’s groin. To his surprise, he felt his body responding to the caress. His breath quickened and he could feel his heart start to pound like a jack hammer in his chest. He jerked away from the thief and moved across the room.

“I thought you wanted to work.”

“I do, but not on computers. I want to work on you, idiot, for you are far more interesting to me at the moment.”

Avon sidestepped, making for the door, but Vila was quicker.

“A new game, Vila?” The thief’s eyes sparkled dangerously. “Do you want me to have to rape you? Is that it?”

“No!” The tech whispered hoarsely.

“Ah, of course, that’s it. You’ve told me about this particular fantasy of yours a hundred times, but the moment was never right...until now.”

Lightening fast, the thief grabbed the slightly taller man’s arm and twisted it painfully behind his back. Grabbing the tech’s hair with his other hand, he yanked his victim’s head back, taking his lips in a soul possessing kiss, driving his tongue deep down Avon’s throat.

After what seemed like an eternity, Vila came up for air, freeing Avon to gasp and refill his own lungs.

“Vila, don’t!” Avon struggled, trying to pull away, but the thief held him tightly.

“What is this, Vila? So caught up in passion that you forgot your own name?” the mocking voice chastised. “But then what else could I expect from a grade five Delta thief? Unfasten my trousers with your free hand, Vila, even that should be simple enough for you.”

“Vil...Avon, please, don’t.”

“Oh, you are doing this very well. I think I rather like this new game of yours. Come on, Vila, play it through, or do you really want me to hurt you? Is that what I have to do?”

Avon knew that tone well, for he’d heard himself use it so many times in the past, that he knew that Vila meant what he was saying. Wisely, he decided to do as he was told as the thief nipped and licked his way down his outstretched neck. Suddenly, he felt Vila change his position and he struggled to break away from the surprisingly strong grip, but instead, his efforts ended him up on his knees, his arm crimped almost to the breaking point. Pain lanced through him and he couldn’t stop the small cry from escaping his lips.

The tech’s mind whirled as he felt his own trousers being stripped from him. For the first time since the struggle began, Avon realized he genuinely was going to be raped and, at least for him, it was no game...but it was for Vila. His mind searched frantically for an answer, because soon, there would be no way out.

“Avon, please, you’re hurting me. I know I wanted you to rape me, but I didn’t think it’d hurt this much and you know how I hate pain. Please,” Avon forced

his voice into soft submission, pleading in the way he knew would work on himself, were it he being the aggressor. "I'm not sure I like this game so much anymore. Please, Avon," he tried to take on the Delta's petulant verbal cadence. "Come on, Avon, let me go. Let's go back to our room. It's comfortable there and I'll make it good for you. You know I can. Please, just let me go."

The stress on Avon's arm lessened, but he wasn't released. Overwarm fingers wrapped around the dark haired man's penis and it only took a few firm strokes to bring him to full erection. Teeth embedded into Avon's neck, but he hardly felt the pain, lost in the pleasure of what the skillful manipulations were doing to him. Losing control, he unable to prevent his body from thrusting into the tight cylinder made by Vila's practised hand.

Again and again, he pushed up, seeking satisfaction. Emitting tiny groans of carnal gratification, Avon felt as if he would explode. He fought it, but knew in his heart he'd fail. The fingers tightened their strokes, firming until, with a strangled cry, Avon came, splattering his benefactor's hand and the floor with creamy, white semen, his body shivering, wracked in fulminating orgasm.

"Now, Vila," the thief whispered and released his exhausted captive to drop limply on the floor, "now we can go back to our room."

"Blake." The urgency in Cally's voice cut through the silence on the flight deck. The tall rebel turned and looked up at her. "Vila's hurting Avon. Sexually. I can sense it."

Blake shook his head. "No, I really don't think so. They're probably just going at it a little too enthusiastically. When men do, sometimes there's a little pain."

"No, Blake, this is more than the pleasure/pain of sex. I have experienced *that*. This is much more. He truly is hurting Avon." Her eyes projected her sense of urgency. "We need to help him and he would never be comfortable with me again if I saw him like this. You must go down there."

Blake hesitated, chewing his lower lip, mulling over all the possible consequences of his actions.

"Why are you waiting? Do you not believe me? Or are you trying to punish Avon for some old wrong he has done you, by letting him suffer at Vila's hands?"

"That's ridiculous," Blake said, trying to convince himself she was wrong.

"Then prove it. Help him."

Her words prompted him to action. He exited the flight deck at a sprint.

"Vila!" Blake shouted at the locked door. It took him several minutes to manipulate the lock the way the thief had once shown him. When it finally gave way, the sight which met the rebel stunned him. He stumbled two steps into the room, then faltered to a halt. Avon was tied, hands above his head, face down on the bed. A gag cut painfully into his mouth, but with the way he was lying, Blake couldn't tell if Avon were conscious or not. Both legs were tied, spread-eagled, to either corner of the bed and Vila had insinuated his body between them, thrusting enthusiastically into the helpless man below him. What startled Blake almost as much as Avon's defencelessness, was the expression of brutal sensuality etched on Vila's face. Eyes closed, sweat streamed from his lean, well muscled body, a strong body that had been kept well hidden under soft, baggy clothes in the past, until he had taken on Avon's façade. Even the leather hadn't made it entirely clear, but now one could see how the Delta thief could overcome Alpha.

"Vila!" Blake bellowed again, seeing blood smeared on Avon's backside and the bruises created by the powerful hands gripping hips too tightly.

"Vila! Stop!"

Vila threw his head back, his unseeing eyes fixed on the ceiling, screaming as his lifeseed shot from him into the inferno encasing his hard shaft. Twice more he rammed into the pliant body, releasing the last of his cum.

"Vila!"

The sound, at the moment of intensity, made the thief blink. Sweat blurred his vision as he looked down at the person beneath him, his head pounded with a vicious migraine and he found it hard to catch his breath. Slowly, his sight cleared and what he saw scared him to death.

"Avon?" Vila croaked. He shook his head, trying to make the nightmare stop, but the smell of sweat, fresh blood and semen told him this was reality. "Oh god! What've I done?"

"Get off him, Vila!" Blake growled, helping the thief by pushing him off the bed.

"Oh god! Oh god! What've I done, Blake? Avon's going to kill me, if I haven't done him in already. Oh god, is he all right?"

"Get up off the floor and call Cally, she's on the

flight deck. Tell her it doesn't matter how he's going to react later, I need her to get Jenna and a stretcher and help me take him to the infirmary, *now*," the rebel ordered, loosening the ropes holding Avon's ankles. Vila sat stock still, shocked.

"Move Vila, or I will kill you, before he gets the chance."

The thief quickly got up, his voice trembling as much as his body, whilst he contacted Cally. When he'd done what he'd been told to do, he looked once again at the man on the bed. Blake had released Avon's wrist restraints and was gently removing the gag from the broken and bloody mouth, gently wiping the sweat from the bruised face. The tech lay motionless in Blake's arms. Black nausea swelled up in Vila's stomach and he grabbed his mouth as he ran for the bathroom to throw up, literally sick with the knowledge of what he had done.

"Hello, Avon." Cally's smiling face and soft, gentle voice greeted the tech as he awakened from the sedative she'd given him earlier. "Are you feeling better?"

Avon didn't respond; instead he turned his head in the direction of the other person he sensed in the room. "Where the hell is Vila, Blake?"

The rebel smiled, ruefully. "He's in his room, hiding, waiting for you to come to kill him."

The tech sighed and looked away. "Then he's back to normal, is he?"

"Yes, it would seem so."

"You were right, then. I suppose that makes it all worthwhile." Avon conceded, grudgingly.

"Yes, but believe me, I didn't want you to be hurt in the process."

"Did he do much damage?" Avon asked, looking at the medicomp next to his bed.

"No, not really. Bruises, mainly, muscle strain, a small rectal tear. I'm afraid you'll be very sore tomorrow. Avon, in Vila's defence, I have to say that if the two of you had had the kind of past relationship he'd fantasized about, well, speaking from experience, even that would not have happened. Unfortunately, you were still...a virgin." Blake waited for a scathing retort, but none was forthcoming, so he continued on. "And that was the problem, physically speaking." He paused a moment, nibbling on a knuckle. "Are you going to kill him, Avon?"

The tech turned his head further to the other side, not wanting to look at his visitor. "Probably not."

"He'll be glad to hear that. He's terribly worried,

about how you are and how you'll react to him. He doesn't quite believe me, when I tell him there's no real physical damage. I think he'd like to see you himself, just to make sure...but only if he could be certain you weren't going to kill him the instant you laid eyes on him."

"So he remembers everything, does he?"

"Unfortunately for him, yes. Will you see him?"

Blake could see Avon stiffening, thinking over what had happened.

"When hell freezes over."

Blake sighed and manoeuvred toward the door. "Should you change your mind, just say so," he paused, looking back at his friend, "and if you should want to talk to me, day or night, don't hesitate to call. I understand far better than you think."

The tech kept his eyes riveted to the wall as the gentle hiss of the door closing marked the rebel's exit, leaving him to ponder himself and others, and the new truths laid bare for all to see.

"Blake," Cally called from the infirmary, "Avon's not here. I left him alone for only a few minutes. I think he may have gone after Vila."

Blake didn't ask any questions, simply grabbed a gun and headed for Vila's quarters, worried that the anger in Avon had built up, changing his mind about killing the thief. He raced into the room and to his surprise, only a startled Vila was there. It took him several valuable moments to surmise where Avon might be.

"Come with me, Vila."

"But why, Blake, if you're going after Avon, I'd only make him angry, really I would. You don't need me. Really..."

"Vila!"

The thief put on his best look of pathetic suffering and followed, swallowing his fear, willing to take a chance to help Avon.

Blake found Avon exactly where he'd suspected. Avon was dressed and kitted up in the teleport—armed.

"Avon."

The tech turned around, hand automatically dropping to his weapon.

"What do you think you're doing?" Blake demanded.

Avon sneered at them both. "Leaving, even that should be evident to an idiot like you."

"Why?"

The tech glanced quickly at the frightened Delta

standing beside Blake, but understanding fought with the unforgiving anger in his eyes. "Because I have to."

"But why, Avon? I never meant to harm you, honest, I didn't. Please don't go, don't leave me." Vila begged, tears flowed unchecked from his eyes. He clutched at Avon's tunic, hanging on grimly, refusing to let him go. "Please, Avon, you're the only friend I ever had. I was stupid, but I wasn't even in my own head, I couldn't help myself. I'm sorry for all those terrible things I said and those awful things I did. I know you're angry with me, but can't you give it time? I swear I'll make it up to you. Just don't leave. Please don't leave."

Avon couldn't quite bring himself to reach out to him, even though he was beginning to admit to his true feelings for this broken man.

"Avon, you can't leave." Blake said, willing him to see reason, to accept what had happened, to move on from it.

"Oh, yes, I can," he said, face hardening. He stepped up onto the teleport pad. "I have my reasons."

The rebel nodded, then noted Orac sitting on the teleport console, humming away, benignly unaware of the importance of the scene going on around it,

awaiting Avon's order to teleport. He was quite certain Orac had been instructed not to reveal the tech's reassembly coordinates. He looked back at Avon. "And are those reasons enough to leave all of us...to go off completely alone?"

Avon stared at Blake, giving him a cynical smile. "As an ancient bard once said, 'O wad some Power the giftie gie us, to see our sels as ithers see us!' Or to put it simply enough for even Vila to understand, 'Oh, to see oneself through others' eyes.' I have seen what others see in me, and I can recognise it myself. I know what your vainglorious rebellion has done to me and will do to me, and you are dragging me down to the dregs to join the rest of your rabble. I *will not* allow that to happen. I refuse to become the man Vila sees me as, I refuse to stay with the way I now see all of you, and I most certainly refuse to let you all snicker and sneer at me, waiting to find out how long I take to act upon this new 'truth' about myself and my sexuality. I will not suffer that indignity, nor will I become the kind of man Vila thinks I am." Quickly, he turned aside from Blake, "Orac, teleport," he snapped before anyone could speak.

As Avon diminished into nothingness, his eyes rested briefly, regretfully, bitterly on Vila's stricken face.

# TERMS OF SURRENDER

## Sean Charles

THE DOOR WAS UNLOCKED. Blake walked in and saw Avon sitting on his bed, clothed in black and staring at him with dark shattered eyes. Slowly Blake crossed the room and grasped Avon firmly by the shoulder. The dark man pushed him away and stood, backing away to create again that invisible barrier of distance.

“Why, Blake?” Avon rasped. “Why did you do it?” Blake sat on the bed and looked up at Avon. “You could have given them what they wanted.”

“Avon,” Blake pleaded, “I couldn’t. Dozens of lives were at stake, not just yours and mine. I had to keep silent.”

“You just watched while they did it,” Avon said softly, numb with disbelief. Suddenly, the vulnerability was gone from Avon’s eyes. The fragile trust that had taken Blake nearly two years to build was replaced with hatred. “Did you enjoy seeing them rape me? I was impressed, Blake. You showed so much courage as you watched them at their work. You should have a medal for it, *hero*.” Avon spat the word.

“Avon, what else could I do?” Blake looked away, unable to bear Avon’s gaze. “That information was vital. You can’t really have expected me to just hand it over to Travis.”

“Can’t I?” Avon shot back. “But then, I see I was mistaken.” Avon turned his back to the seated man, then spun on his heel to face him again. “Just remember this, Blake. That was the last time you use me like that. I am not an expendable pawn in your games of revolution.”

Blake stood before Avon, looking into his intense eyes. Avon was nearly trembling from anger. “I have never considered you expendable, Avon, you know that.” He reached out towards him.

Avon backed away quickly. “I would prefer not to be touched,” he said, icily. *Especially by you*, Blake read in his eyes.

“Avon, you’ve faced interrogators before; that was certainly not the first time. You put up with how many days of it for Tynus, and he betrayed you. And you finally told me how Anna died under interrogation for you. All without giving them what they wanted. I had expected the same from you and I thought you expected the same from me.” He paused, shaken. Avon’s accusation had hit him like a physical blow. Avon *had* to understand. It was going all

wrong. “We won, didn’t we? We’re both still alive and those two rebel groups are safe.”

“Ah, Yes. We were rescued. Enjoy your victory. After this, it is finished.” His voice was very flat and very final. “I am willing, since I have little choice, to continue to fight for your precious rabble, to wade in blood and shoot until I cannot lift my arm; but I am not willing to die for *them*.”

“You are alive, aren’t you?” Blake snapped, his patience wearing thin.

“Thanks to *Cally*, who repaired the damage to my intestines. Fatal damage, Blake. I would have died. When that man reached into me with his fist, I could *feel* him touching my *heart*, Blake. He tore me on the way out, and I’m certain that was his intention from the very beginning. He was the type who enjoyed it, who would enjoy leaving me with damage that wouldn’t kill me until hours later, and then painfully.” Avon shuddered, the memory chillingly fresh in his mind. “All while you watched him do it through that window. One word, Blake, *one word* and he would have stopped, or never even have started in the first place.”

“You knew me, Avon. I can’t be anyone but who I am. You can’t possibly expect me to betray the rebellion.”

“Oh, no, never your beloved Cause, your precious masses,” Avon said acidly. “Just *me!*”

His words stung Blake. “I did not *betray* you, Avon.” Avon looked unconvinced, and smiled bitterly. “Can’t you understand? By your own admission, Avon, you endured worse for your friends. And Anna. She died for you, and you respected her for the fact that she never gave them your name.”

*Yes. and you will use anything to get what you want. Even her*, Avon thought.

Blake had a sinking feeling, recognizing that he was handling this entirely wrong. That for all his supposed skill with words, and ability to sway people, he was at a total loss with Avon. Avon was retreating, withdrawing into the cold, solitary fortress of his mind. Blake tried to soften his tone, to remove his own anger from between them. “You never give in. As long as I have known you, I have never known you to give them anything they want out of sheer bloody-mindedness if nothing else. I had no *reason*

to expect otherwise this time. This was important. Why won't you see that? Why is this time so different from the others?"

Avon blinked slowly. "You still do not understand, do you? Tynus was my *friend*. I felt a personal attachment to him. As for Anna, I would have gladly given my life for hers because I loved her. Had it been to save you, or even one of the others of the *Liberator*, it would have been different, as before. Reluctant as I may be to admit it, I do feel a personal attachment to them, as well."

If these had been different circumstances, Blake would have laughed. "That's quite an admission, coming from you," he observed.

"Now don't blow it out of proportion, Blake, or bother to try to convince them of that. I would not appreciate being taken advantage of. I have had more than enough of that this afternoon—for the sake of a faceless rabble on a planet I have never seen."

"You don't understand!" Blake roared in frustration.

"Oh, but I do," Avon said coolly. "I simply do not agree. And I did not agree when I lay on that table and suffered for them. That was your choice, *not mine!*"

"I had no choice!" Blake emphasized each word. "Did you really think I enjoyed sitting there watching them rape and torture you?"

"Did you? I don't know, Blake. I know you've wanted into my ass since the first time we had sex together. And despite your assurances to the contrary, I am not convinced that you *do* understand that I do not find that act in any way pleasurable—with *anyone*. Not even you." Avon paused, then smiled coldly. "Perhaps you got a thrill seeing it by proxy."

Blake's fist travelled half the distance to Avon's smirking mouth and jolted to a halt? He took a deep breath and slowly uncurled his fingers. "I have always respected your desires, Avon. While I may have hoped that things could be more...mutual...between us, I never have wanted to hurt you nor see someone else hurt you. You *must* know I would have done anything to stop it."

"Anything—except give them what they wanted."

"I couldn't? I had no choice? Would you have sacrificed all of those people?"

"Yes," Avon replied simply. "For you I would have; or for a friend. As to choice, well now, you are the one who has said with such monotonous frequency, 'there is always a choice? There was a choice this afternoon and you made it. If you are too naïve

to accept the consequences, then I am not surprised. But do *not* come to me afterwards with your wonderful voice and your pretense of caring. I have learned all too well just whom and what you care for."

"I can't help it if you like my voice," Blake said, taking a step forward.

Avon pushed him away. "It may lure others and inspire them to martyrdom, but it does not work on me. Spare me your speeches and your attempts at justification, Blake. They have never moved me."

"Would you have rather the Federation knew all they have to do is to capture one of my crew and I will give in to them?" Blake snarled.

"Of course not. You have it right, though. As of now I am *one* of your crew, nothing more."

"Oh, you'd rather I let them know otherwise, would you? I'm sure the Major would have gotten a thrill knowing you were special to me, that I *love* you. I'm certain that he would have thought of something even more inventive to do to you." Blake paused. "I *had* to hide my feelings, Avon. To save *you*."

Avon conceded that Blake was right on that point. "It didn't work, though, did it? I doubt there would have been anything more inventive than what did happen." Avon paused. "But I can see the logic of concealing any *particular* regard you claim to have had for my life. What I don't understand is why you continue to do so here. Unless your first justification was the true one, unless you do feel a much stronger attachment to your followers than you do to me. Since that seems to be the case, I am, as of now, temporarily, one of them. I will continue, as I said, to fight for you, to repair your computers, but nothing else, Blake." His eyes flashed. "Anything else is over with. And when you have found this Star One of yours, it will be over for good."

"You can't just walk away from what we had together, Avon. You might be able to set aside your feelings that easily, but to me, I will always be your lover." He loomed over Avon, his words caring, but his tone harsh.

Avon stood perfectly still? "When all else fails, Blake, try physical dominance. Well, I have had enough of that for one day. You will still have my guns and my hands—but I will no longer be your whore."

Blake physically recoiled from the words. "Do you really think that is what you are to me?" He stepped forward again and grabbed Avon by the shoulders and shook him hard, nearly knocking him off his feet.

"I want to shake some sense into you? You have to understand? *I HAD NO CHOICE!*"

Avon's face paled and twisted with rage. He lashed out instinctively, slamming Blake down to the floor and pinning him there with a strength which surprised him. His fingers were buried in Blake's throat. "I told you not to touch me," he said, hoarse and fierce. Then he let go and stood up, backing away from Blake's supine body. "Do not do that again. You have made your choice and I have made mine. Now get out."

Blake rubbed his neck as he pulled himself up to sit on the edge of the bed. "I only came down here to comfort you."

"You have a new and unusual way of doing that," Avon said, contemptuously.

"I didn't think you wanted tea and sympathy from me."

"Hardly."

"Despite what you think, there was nothing I could do," Blake repeated. "You should understand, unless your memory of Federation interrogation techniques has become as full of holes as my memory of the past." He looked up at Avon. "Do you honestly believe that if I had told them what they wanted, it would have stopped? Or would the Major just have given the order anyway, to make me squirm? Once I gave him the information, neither of us would have been worth anything to him. I had to stall for time? I had to do that to save you."

"That is perhaps the only rational thing you have had to say about it, Blake," Avon observed. "But why, if you only acted to save your own neck—something I *can* understand—did you need to burst in here and try to justify it to me for the sake of your worthless rabble?"

Blake thought about what Avon had said. "Maybe I needed to justify it to myself," he said heavily. "Avon, I couldn't *let* myself care about what they were doing to you. You of all people should understand that. I had to make them believe that the information was more important than you were to me. Then, perhaps, they would give up torturing you. Then, perhaps, we would both live through the experience. I had to convince myself as well. I couldn't bear to think about what was happening to you." Blake sighed. "You simply have to understand."

"I think I do," Avon said gravely. *Or is it just that you have to keep coming up with motives until you find one that will satisfy me?* he thought. Choosing not to voice his fears, he let Blake continue.

"Avon, do you think I could stand seeing you abused like that?" Blake shook his head. "I've never felt so helpless before. I know it was you they hurt and not me. You were helpless. But can you see how it must have affected me as well? Put yourself in my position, Avon, and give yourself reason not to relent and then see how you would feel."

"You gave a very convincing portrayal, then. You convinced them, you convinced yourself, and you most certainly convinced me." The chill within Avon grew and thoughts refused to leave his mind. *The first thing you said is likeliest to be the truth, not all these hit-and-miss attempts at comfort.*

Blake stood. The look in Avon's eyes kept him at his distance. "Avon, I am truly sorry." The hardness of the gaze did not waver. Blake exploded again. "What do you want me to do? You've always known my feelings. The rebellion comes first. I put your life on a priority no lower than my own."

"That is the trouble," Avon replied coldly. "You do not particularly seem to value yours, either. You belong to the vast masses who follow you and you will give them every last drop of your blood. That you would also give them mine is no comfort. Remember that some of us are revolutionaries by chance rather than choice. I do not believe in it, and I am not..."

Blake cut him off. "Political. I know. You always tell me. But somewhere inside of you is an idealist—buried, I admit, but there nonetheless. As to your assertion that you are not political, I have seen evidence to the contrary. Your great crime for which you were sent to Cygnus Alpha has been variously described as stealing something between five and five hundred million credits—you never deign to confirm the amount. Yet, when you described it yourself, you said you were attempting to 'undermine confidence in the Federation banking system? Rather a strange way to describe a simple computer swindle, don't you think?" Blake smiled. "And other things, as well. I don't think they routinely teach demolitions and weapon use to children at ACS along with their computer skills."

"All right, I have, in the past worked with other fools who were themselves political. But I was a mercenary, Blake. I sold them my skills. For a high price, I might add."

Blake was relieved that his accusations had distracted Avon, even momentarily, from the issue. "I have no doubt that you did. Just like your friend, Del Grant. Rather *exactly* like your friend, Del Grant.



You can never convince me, Avon, that you do not believe some things are worth fighting for. You *are* a fraud, Avon. You *do* care.”

“And you have quite an imagination,” Avon said sarcastically. “Your motives seem to change every minute. If it did save your life, this afternoon, I am glad of that anyway. Otherwise, that is the end of it.”

“Would you like me to call up the nearest Federation base and transmit to them the list?” Blake shouted. Avon had returned to the same stuck point in the argument. “Would that prove to you that I care more for you than them?”

“That would be pointless now, Blake. It is just a little too late.”

Blake took a deep breath. “I admit I had mixed emotions at the time, damn it? It is a bit disconcerting to watch your lover being raped. I had to save you *and* I had to save them. The same thing accomplished both. You lived—and the Federation did not get the information they wanted. It was a high price for winning, and one I wish you would believe that I’d’ve rather not paid, but we did succeed.”

“*You* paid? *You*? Spare me your bleeding heart. But that still doesn’t explain this invasion of my cabin, nor the way you’ve behaved since coming here.”

“Avon,” Blake said, almost pleading. He stretched out his hand again, but Avon remained well out of reach. “I couldn’t stand it. I had to sit there and watch them damn near kill you and not let it show, not let any of it show. It was the only chance you had and I knew it. When we did get out, when I brought you back up to the ship...” Blake paused a long time, the memory washing over him. “Avon, haven’t you ever seen a mother who almost lost her child, to an accident or something, suddenly get angry at the child? I lashed out because I *do* care about you too much and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do to save you any of it.” Blake buried his face in his hands. He could no longer bear the pain of the memories or of Avon’s anger.

“I never appreciated that response in my mother, either,” Avon said drily.”

Blake looked up at him. “Take it out on me if you must or if it would make you feel better. I don’t care what you do to me. But do try to understand, Avon. You’re not the only one with complex motives here.”

“I don’t think I should, Blake.” Avon turned his head a little to the side. “I might enjoy that too much.” Blake sat down again. “There is something in me, Blake, that is a little too much like that torturer.”

“No, there isn’t.” Blake’s voice was rich and warm, almost hypnotic, almost comforting in its sincerity. “You could never be like that.”

“Couldn’t I?” Avon tried to deny the truth of Blake’s words.

“No, you couldn’t.” Blake’s denial had the ring of the absolute to it.

“Besides, your allowing me to would take the fun out of it.” Avon stepped closer to the seated man. He would not admit that no matter what was said or done in anger, Blake was right—he did not want to hurt him. Still, what he wanted had rarely mattered—he certainly had not wanted Anna to be killed, though he had feared it might happen, nor had he wanted his friend, Tynus, to sell him out, though he had planned for that eventuality. “Don’t take any more chances with me, Blake,” he said, softly, not entirely sure what he meant by it.

Blake looked up to Avon, longing in his eyes. “Avon...”

“You know where I stand now,” Avon interrupted. “I am *not* willing. For you, yes. Even for the others. But not for them.” *I am tired, Blake*, he thought. *Tired of fighting the Federation, and tired of fighting with you. You have not convinced me.*

He stepped closer. “I will forgive you,” he said calmly, falsely, knowing that Blake would believe him because Blake *needed* to believe him. “*This* time. But stop trying to justify it to me. You never can. Not for them.” He stood between Blake’s knees and rested his hands on the large shoulders. *Is there room there for me, Blake? Are these shoulders large and strong enough to carry the masses and still leave room for me to touch you?* Avon leaned forward.

“Only for you.” He kissed Blake slowly, feeling angry at his sudden urge to run away. *No. Blake is not the enemy. I do not fear him*, he tried to convince himself. Blake’s arms went around his waist suddenly large and warm and familiar. Avon felt himself pulled to sit next to Blake and Blake’s hand stroking the back of his head, lowering it to the large shoulder. Strong fingers gently ran down his back, easing the tension slightly.

The embrace was comforting, but claustrophobic. Still, Avon submitted to it, letting the larger man hold him tightly and touch him gently all over. Blake needed that, needed proof that he was alive. And that need was more reassuring to Avon than the caress itself. What *he* wanted, he kept to himself. He wanted not to be touched or gentled or comforted; what he felt was an intense desire to assert himself, express

his own dominant, primitive urges. He wanted to throw Blake back hard onto the bed, and plunge recklessly into him, to feel Blake's strong body yield to him. What he had said to Blake was true in part, except for the sadism. He had no desire to cause Blake pain, and revenge was not what he had in mind. Still, despite his thoughts, he lay quiescent on Blake's broad chest and felt Blake, not himself, shaking with emotion.

"Avon..." Blake whispered his name. Blake's need comforted him and he began to relax. "Avon."

Blake crushed him closer and Avon began to feel aroused. He lifted his head suddenly and kissed Blake deeply. Blake moaned. Avon slid out of his trousers and boots in a smooth movement and reached for Blake's hand. He firmly brought it where he wanted it and leaned against Blake so that they fell on the bed.

Blake broke the kiss, his arm still encircling Avon's shoulder. "Isn't it too soon?" he asked, warm and concerned.

"No Blake. Just do it. The damage was bloody and painful, but essentially superficial. The tissue regenerator worked fine." Avon put Blake's hand back from where he had removed it. "Let me be the judge of my own body."

Blake took him at his word. Now was not the time for yet another argument. If he were wrong, then the medical unit would undo any minor damage caused. What was more important was that Avon wanted him, and he would not deny him. Blake began stroking Avon's hard cock, feeling him shudder slightly with the excitement.

Avon pressed his body hard against Blake, gasping slightly. He had misjudged the intensity of his own passions, and was very close to release. Blake kissed him and stroked his shoulder. Avon shivered and began to feel his come rising uncontrollably, seeping out just a little at the tip. Blake's

warm palm slid over the drops and slicked them down Avon's shaft.

He was nearly there. Blake stroked him faster, whispering his name into his ear. Avon felt his cock strain, the pleasure so strong that it was almost pain. Feelings began to well in Avon that he could not understand: a strange mixture of terror and excitement, attraction and repulsion. To him, Blake's hand felt possessive, confining, even while it was giving him pleasure. It seemed almost as if coming would be some sort of surrender. Avon wanted to scream. He was trapped in the intensity of his emotions. Blake could not be ignored or forgotten or cut off or gotten over. Avon groaned and arched his back, straining to escape, as his come gushed over Blake's strong, compelling fingers.

Blake touched Avon gently after he came, pulling him again into his embrace. As always, he was amazed at the depths of passion his cold-seeming lover revealed. Avon seemed almost racked with pain, and Blake felt again the terrible pang of having nearly lost him. He squeezed Avon's cock, not crushing, but holding him, feeling the vital pulse of that organ. It seemed for that moment the most precious thing Blake had ever touched. It was Avon, and he was alive.

Avon lay back, exhausted, on the bed as Blake gently towed him clean then lightly stroked his side. He loved to see Avon like that, enjoyed stroking the loose, unstrained muscles, holding him close. Those moments had seemed rarer since Gan died. Avon was so often guarded, nervous, careful...even when they made love. But not this time. Blake stroked his soft, dark hair. *I don't ever want to lose you*, he thought, and his fingers transmitted the thought as they curved around his head.

*You never will let go of me*, Avon thought, feeling Blake's warm, possessive touch. *Not until we both lie dead at the feet of your cause.*

# NEEDS MUST

## M. Fae Glasgow

“I WANT HIM DEAD.”

The words oozed out of Blake in a hate-filled, betrayed whisper. “I want him dead. I want his head on a platter. Find him. Take as much time as you need, as many men, as much equipment, but I want Kerr Avon found.”

Vila watched from the shadows by the hospital room door, uneasily tugging on his lip. He had been making a point of being completely invisible, but even he had to concede that now was the time for him to speak.

“He wasn’t himself, you know.”

Blake turned his ravaged face towards the thief, so that he could impale him with his one good eye. “He seemed just like the old Avon to me, Vila.”

“Yeah? Well, you probably seem like the old Blake to you, too.”

Blake sighed back onto the piled pillows of his high hospital bed, easing the pressure dressing around his chest. It was the only thing that had kept him alive, after the fiasco at the base. The healing tissue itched abominably, adding to his discomfort and geometrically increasing his foul temper. “Vila, he knew exactly what he was doing. He didn’t trust me, he jumped to the wrong conclusions and then he quite deliberately decided to kill me. There is nothing more to be said on the matter. Leave it.”

“Yeah, but, Blake...”

“I said *leave* it! Do you hear me, Vila? The bastard tried to kill me and I want him where he can’t be a danger to me any more. I refuse to live with that threat running around loose, just waiting to pounce on me.”

“But he wasn’t himself, Blake. You can’t really blame him...”

“Oh yes, I can. And that’s hardly reassuring, you know. A sane Avon is dangerous enough, but an *in* sane Avon is a terrifying thought.” The rebel rubbed wearily at his eyes, the scarred one burning worse than usual. One day, he really was going to have to make the time to have some surgical repairs made on it, but not before Avon was out of the way. He watched Vila, noting the rather major differences in the thief since he had known him so many months before. The Delta-level attitude was almost gone, replaced by a homogenised non-class, not quite Alpha, not quite Beta, but both, with hefty doses of the other

two groups mixed in. He was, Blake thought, a definite asset to the Rebellion, a skilled thief and very good at training all the recruits, unbounded as he was by class. Yes, Blake decided, he would definitely make it worth Vila’s while to stay, to silence the thief’s mutterings about leaving Gauda Prime and seeking a new life far, far away. “What do you think of Tarrant?”

“Eh? I thought we were talking about Avon?”

“No, we—I—had finished talking about him. Now I want to discuss Tarrant.”

“Oh, I get it. Star One all over again, is it? If it’s not your bloody Cause, you just don’t want to know. All right, then, we’ll talk about Tarrant. *Avon* said he was the second best pilot he’d ever come across, but that was before Tarrant really showed us what he was made of, before he did all sorts of fancy flying on *Scorpio*. That’s the ship that *Avon* got for us. *Avon* said Tarrant had definite possibilities, if he could live long enough to grow into them. *Avon* said Tarrant was impetuous and stupid and immature and hot-headed and easy to manipulate. *Avon*...”

Blake spoke very quietly indeed. “That’s quite enough, thank you. I will not discuss Avon with you. I’ve made my decision and I shall stick to it. The matter is closed. Now, please leave. I need to rest.”

Vila poised on the threshold, looking at the injured, slowly recovering Rebel in the sterile white bed. “Oh, by the way,” he said in a disgusted voice, “I know it doesn’t matter any more, not to you anyway, seeing as how dead people can’t help your bloody Cause, but the girls were wonderful, Blake. They were talented and bright and pretty. Much too good for the likes of you.”

“Don’t push me, Vila. I could still deny you sanctuary. No other rebel group would take you in, not after your association with Avon. And you have nowhere else to go.”

Saddened, Vila shuffled out of the hospital room dispiritedly wandering off to his own, paltry room. Of all the nasty, vicious tricks the universe had ever thrown at him, Blake’s degeneration into this obscene metamorphosis was by far the cruelest, sickest joke of all.

He tried very hard not to stand waiting, watching

at the protectively grimy window, but at least, when his visitor arrived, he was able to hide his pathetic gladness at seeing him. He stood now, waiting, watching, for his weekly visit, for the only company he ever received, for the precious supplies brought to him by someone who no longer owed him anything. In the fading dusk light, he saw the trim figure stride whistling up the street, invisible in his mundanity, blending in perfectly with the crowd eddying around him, laden with his heavy bags of innocuous shopping. The man in the street never so much as glanced up at the flat window, never once finding out his dependent's secret. Awaiting the imminent arrival, Avon arranged himself on the bed, a superb display of indifference. The door opened and Vila came in, smiling, as always. "Well, how are we today, then?" the thief asked.

"I am perfectly well. I presume you know how you yourself are."

"Oh, I'm glad to see you, too. Come and give me a hand, will you? All this work is enough to wear a man out."

With a show of reluctance, Avon got up off the bed and walked over to join Vila in the kitchen area. The off-yellow tiled room opened on to the single room of the flat, clashing quite horribly with the rust and blue décor of the bedsit beyond. The bathroom was even worse, but then, as Avon had so often cursed, beggars can't be choosers. Methodically, as he did every week, he helped Vila stock the cupboards and fridge with food, then took the smuggled components into the living area to pore over them, in his never ending attempt to replace Orac. The rebels had it now, but fortunately, and to Avon's surprise, it had steadfastly refused to aid them in running Avon to ground. In the wee sma' hours of the morning, it amused Avon to think that the closest things to friends he had, were a Delta-grade failed thief and a machine. He wasn't amused now.

"Vila, these are absolutely useless. You idiot, can't you tell the difference between an short range transponder and a long range one?"

"No I bloody can't. Not all of us exactly got the kind of education you got, you know. And do I hear a thank you? No, that would be too polite, wouldn't it? No, it's, 'idiot, get this', 'fool, bring that'. I'll have you know it's not easy getting this stuff. First I have to steal it, then I have to cover up that it's gone, then I get to do the really enjoyable part: I get to smuggle it out to you, right under the noses of Blake's guards..." He stopped to disengage his foot from his

mouth. Mentioning Blake to Avon was almost as wise as mentioning Avon to Blake. He considered Avon's closed face for a moment, then decided to chance it anyway. He had to be told, sooner or later. "Avon..."

"Well?"

"It's about Blake..."

"Yes?"

"He still hasn't calmed down about you. He's actually been getting worse. Obsessed. Like with Star One. He's given orders, cos he's convinced, you see, that you're still on GP, so he says that anyone caught helping you will be considered a traitor and dealt with accordingly."

"And what exactly does he mean by that?"

"No one's really sure. Traitors are usually executed, but he wouldn't do that, would he? Not for helping you."

"Oh, but I think he would. You see, Vila, for the first time ever, I can actually understand Blake. I can see why he wants me dead, why he'd go to any lengths to get me. I tried to kill him, I saw him for what he was..."

"Avon," Vila perched on the chair beside the tech, staring at the hooded profile, testing the waters carefully before he plunged in. This was the first time the other man had mentioned the attempted killing, the first time he had been willing to talk. "Why did you want to kill Blake?"

Avon smiled at him, sending tendrils of unease shivering through Vila. "Because he *had* betrayed me—us—and I couldn't let such rank behaviour pass unnoticed."

"How did you know he'd betrayed you? What Tarrant said?"

"That—and the information Orac gave me just before I went into the Control Centre." He answered Vila's quizzical expression. "Orac told me that a special team of Federation Enforcers were on their way to pick up a particularly important group of terrorists—we were mentioned by name—and the message was from Blake. Orac did a voice check on it, and it was definitely Blake. He sold us, Vila. The man is a turncoat, methodically supplying the Federation with each name on their list of undesirables."

Vila thought about that, trying to reconcile the scenario Avon was describing with what he had seen in the time he had spent on Blake's base. It simply was not possible. Blake may have sunk into sheer bastardliness, but he was positively not a turncoat. And Avon's perception of reality was rather skewed, had been for a very long time. Vila was very aware

of the kinds of tricks the human mind could play on itself, altering details, changing facts, rearranging reality, all in an attempt to heal itself of the traumas visited upon it. He sighed, no longer expecting Avon to see the truth. Oh well...

He changed the subject, dunting the tech, distracting him from his brooding. "Need anything special for next week?"

"If Blake's being so...vitriolic, are you positive you're brave enough to continue making yourself useful? Or will abject cowardice overtake you by next week?"

"Oh get off it, Avon. I've known for weeks what would happen if Blake ever found out what I've been up to. And how do you think I've been getting those electronic parts for you, eh? Del bloody Tarrant, that's how. Oh, no need to look so shocked. He didn't want you to know, and he didn't want to know—officially, that is—what I was up to, but when Blake made his announcement about you, Mr Toothy Grin quietly slipped me the security codes for the storage rooms. I'm not the only friend you've got, Avon, despite...despite everything."

"And what do you expect now, Vila? Abject gratitude? Perhaps a floral declaration of fond friendship? You'll get none of that from me. However, you may tell Tarrant that I thank him for his assistance and I'm...sorry, about Dayna and Soolin."

Vila's expression warmed, softening the hardness now so frequently resident in his eyes. "We're all sorry about the girls, Avon. Tarrant's sorry about the whole Blake thing, too. You know, he wouldn't half mind seeing you."

"Considering he only has half a mind, that's hardly surprising."

"Will you let him come? He could come with me next week."

"I thought he didn't want to know what you were up to on your free time passes?"

"Oh, I think he could be persuaded. It's funny, now that I stop to think..."

"Ah. We've finally uncovered the mystery of why Vila never laughs."

"Oh, shut up, smart Alec. No, seriously, I don't think our Tarrant entirely trusts Blake, either. Wonder why?"

"Perhaps he has seen through Blake's façade, also," Avon said, over his shoulder as he went off to make them tea. He busied himself in the scullery, keeping an unobtrusive eye on Vila, watching the thief perched on the divan. "Or," he continued, "af-

ter my sterling performance as a leader, he has decided to be somewhat more wary, for the time being at least."

"Yeah, but he's been with Blake for almost three months. I wonder if it's got something to do with the way Blake's so determined to get you at all costs? I mean, I can see his point, but it does seem a bit extreme. All right, so you tried to kill him, but he had kept himself hidden from you for two whole years and..."

"He did more than keep hidden." Vila looked over at Avon. The tech crooked his finger at him and he went over to help with the tea things. They put the stuff on the small table by the divan, settling down comfortably against the piled rust and blue patterned cushions. Vila waited patiently until Avon had selected a slice of cake and poured himself some tea, knowing that not a word would be forthcoming from the tech, until the essentials in life had been dealt with. Eventually, Avon continued. "You see, I knew where Blake was for almost a year before I brought us to Gauda Prime. I had tried to contact him directly, but he refused all communications. Orac was quite certain it was Blake, but there was some question as to his...loyalties."

"So it wasn't until you got desperate that you were willing to take the chance of coming here. You should have told us, Avon. You should've *told* us."

"Why? And told whom? Three children and an idiot?"

"That was uncalled for! They weren't children, they just didn't have as much experience as you and me and how the hell were they supposed to get it with you keeping everything to yourself and not telling us a bloody thing and...What're *you* smiling at?"

"You, of course. You're so quick to defend the others but you don't even deny that you're an idiot."

"Why bother? Doesn't matter what you actually *think* I am, you'll never stop calling me an idiot." He frowned suddenly. "Avon, if Blake really was setting us up, how come the Federation had troopers there, at the end?"

"Presumably because Servalan double-crossed Blake the same way she did everyone else."

"Suppose that does make sense..."

"Oh, stop it, Vila."

"Stop what?"

"Behaving as though, if you try hard enough, you might be able to make sense out of the deluding meanderings of an insane man. And no," he continued, holding his hand up to prevent Vila's automatic

denial, “don’t pretend that you think I’m fine. I believe you usually say that I’m ‘not quite myself’, or ‘not quite right’, or some similar such drivel. Well, the truth of the matter is quite simply this. I was under extreme duress and I had no stamina to spare for sentimentality or even for...feeling. It was too dangerous. I knew that it would be very easy indeed for me to have a nervous breakdown, so I walled myself off from the rest of you. However, callousness does not a maniac make. It takes rather more than that.”

“Yeah, well you should know, you’ve tried hard enough.”

“Have I? No, I’ve done everything I could to hold on to my sanity, even if it meant killing those I had no desire to kill.”

Vila watched him silently for a moment, as Avon went off into some dark, drear place in his mind, the graveyard of his memory, the sarcophagus of his past. “You had to be like that, towards the end there, because everything hurt too much, didn’t it?”

Silence.

“That’s why you tried to keep everything from us, all the responsibilities, all the worries. You were trying to take care of the whole lot of us, and the Universe besides. And Blake’s Cause, because of that stupid promise you made him after Star One, right? Avon, what’d you do it for? I know I don’t let it show, but you know what I’ve been through, I can stand on my own two feet and...”

With a wry, sad smile, Avon answered him. “It was precisely because you had finally broken down, when Cally died, and told me what kind of life you’d had, that I tried to protect you.” The smile became more wistful, self-deprecating, a little bitter. “It merely proves my point, Vila. Altruism is bad for the soul.”

“Yours was good for mine. And the young ones.”

Avon admonished him with a glance. “I’m hardly old and decrepit myself. Yet.”

Vila laughed at him. “I can’t picture you old. I think you’ll always look just like you do now. Well, maybe a few more wrinkles, a little bit more weight, perhaps a bit grey-haired...”

“Spare me the details, please. But...” he pulled a loose thread from the tapestry cushion, “how has Blake been?”

“Still can’t work him out of your system, eh?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s simply that I shot the man and he had the bad manners to survive. Naturally, I’m curious.”

“Yeah, right. Anyway, he’s recovering, slowly but surely.”

“And...is he just the same as always?”

“Not really. More like you, in a lot of ways. Much more cynical, not so willing to trust. Not willing to trust at all, actually. Bitter, too. Very bitter. I think the strain of all this is eating him alive, the way it did to you.”

“Well now, I’m still here, alive and well, so the pressure obviously didn’t ‘eat me alive’, did it now?”

“Only because you killed Blake and had to go into hiding first. You know,” he mused, tidying up the tea tray, “being a hermit agrees with you. I’ve never seen you more relaxed, even despite going crazy ‘cause you’re cooped up in here, day in, day out. I should’ve carted you off to some backwater planet years ago—would’ve done you the power of good and saved me a lot of fuss and bother.”

“And would you have stayed with me then, too?”

“Course I would.”

“Why ‘of course’? You owe me nothing, Vila. I discharged you of any debt you might have owed me the day I tried to kill you over Malodaar.”

“Avon,” he sat down on the divan beside him, “I’m still here not because *I* owe *you*, but because I owe myself.”

“I suggest you tape this, Vila, because I sincerely doubt you’ll ever hear it again. You’ve confused me—I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Oh, Avon.” Vila reached out, knowing that his touch was welcomed. “I stay with you because it’s what *I* want, that’s all. I’m being selfish. You may be unbearable at times—quite often, in fact—but I’m still happier with you than without you. And no, you don’t need to look at me like that, I’m not going to go all sappy on you, no going down on bended knee or anything. It’s just...you’re important to me.”

“Important enough to risk continuing to come here, regardless of Blake’s threats?”

“Yes.”

Avon looked at him shrewdly, thinking, almost able to feel Blake’s noose around his neck, seeing Blake’s gun held at Vila’s head, but not stilling the hand stroking his arm. “What would it take to drive you from me, I wonder?”

Vila grinned impishly. “I’ve got no idea. You’ve tried almost everything already—including killing me and palming me off on other people I might add—so there’s not a lot left to try, is there?”

“Oh, I’m sure I can think of something.”

“Well thanks a lot. It’s nice to know someone

spends all his time trying to think of ways to get rid of me. I really appreciate that. You know, some day, you ought to try being nasty to me, if getting shot of me is what you consider being good to me.”

Avon decided to change the topic of the conversation, before he tripped himself into saying things Vila might want to hear, but that Avon himself considered far better left unsaid. It was, he believed, the kindest course of action, to protect Vila from hopes that could never be realised, from dreams that could never possibly come true. “How long a free pass do you have this time?”

“Not long, more’s the pity. Blake’s almost as much a slave driver as you were. Did you know he’s got me teaching? Classes in lockpicking and pickpocketing and how to plant bombs. To *kids*, Avon, kids even younger than Dayna. It’s awful, I feel as though all I’m doing is hurrying them along the garden path. I know he’s going to get them killed, because they’re so bloody young and idealistic, they take stupid chances for this friggin’ Cause of his. They think he’s a cross between a god and a hero, with a hefty dose of saint thrown in.”

“In other words, Blake continues to surround himself with fools and fanatics.”

“Let’s talk about something else, eh, Avon? I need to get away from all that stuff—it’s driving me crazy.”

“Would you leave Blake?”

“In a second. You wouldn’t see me for dust, if I had somewhere to go.”

“And if I were to provide you with somewhere...?”

“You know me, Avon. You’re always saying I’m an idiot, so I’ll have to try following you at least five or six times before I realise how awful it is.”

“Your loyalty and enthusiasm are thrilling. But back to my original question, how long do you have this time?”

Vila stretched out on the bed, covering his face with his arm, yawning hugely. “Only till midmorning tomorrow. He’s cut everybody’s time off down, until they find you.”

“Well now, I suppose it’s flattering, in a way, to be accorded the same status as the infamous Star One.” He lifted Vila’s arm up, making him squint in the light. “If you intend to sleep here tonight, then I suggest you bathe first.”

“Subtle as a bloody sledgehammer, you are.”

“Yes, well, it does have the desired effect.”

“Join me in the shower?”

“No, thank you. I’ve already bathed.”

“Wait for me in bed?” Vila asked quietly, never entirely certain how far Avon was willing to go. If solitude had improved his mental condition, the inactivity had played havoc with his libido. Or perhaps it was simply, in his admitted need for Vila’s help, Avon was finally able to ask for affection, without having to disguise it as lust as he had on so many lonely nights.

A slow smile kindled in Avon’s dark eyes. “Well now, where else would I be?”

“Be back in two ticks,” he said, giving Avon a quick promissory kiss. It took more than two seconds, of course, and when he returned, the lights were out, the cushions piled tidily on the floor and Avon was lying on his side, apparently asleep. Vila slipped in behind him, curling up against the smooth skin, wrapping his arms around the slight form.

“God, your feet’re freezing, Avon.”

“Then warm me.”

“That an invitation?”

“If I thought you could read it, I’d give you an engraved one. Now,” he said, rolling over, fitting quite cosily into Vila’s embrace, “shall we?”

Vila’s smile was smothered in a kiss, Avon’s loneliness and need for companionship colouring it fiery red. The first time was always so intense, so very quick, it said far more to Vila than Avon ever wanted revealed. The aching hunger devoured them, both men going gladly into the maw, each racing and urging the other to hurried, explosive relief. It was only afterward, once the first, frantic coming together was over, that there was time for caresses, for the luxury of savouring the nuances of love. Then, they stroked and kissed, small sweet kisses giving rise to passion, and held each other tightly, free, for the moment, to allow their bodies to speak the language of love their minds would never allow. Face buried against Vila’s neck, Avon sighed in satisfaction.

“Happy?” Vila whispered.

There was a long, thoughtful pause. “Well, considering the circumstances and my nature...”

“You know, one of these days, you’ll decide to commit suicide and actually admit that you love this.”

The lips against his neck moved, shivers radiating like ripples on a deep lake. “Then at least you’ll be the one to have the dubious pleasure of seeing me die.”

“You have a hell of a way of telling someone you love him.”

“Oh, is that what I said? Surely you know by now what a liar I am.”

“Yes,” he whispered, tightening his hug, “exactly. And I...”

“Shh, don’t say it, Vila. It’ll only ruin things.”

“Because of Anna? Is that why you’re so afraid of admitting to love? ‘Cause people have a bad habit of dying or betraying you?”

“Only when those words are between us, like a bomb ticking away, just waiting to go off and destroy...”

“Happiness?”

“Happiness is for blind fools. I am neither.”

“No, just lonely. And scared.”

“I’m not afraid of Blake.”

“I didn’t say you were. You know what you’re afraid of.”

Avon pulled back, far enough to see Vila in the dim sheen from the street lights outside. “There are times when you remind me of Cally.”

“Oh, because I’m so perceptive and understand you so well?”

“No. Because you have the same bad habit of interrupting perfectly wonderful sex for stupid conversations.”

“Well, if it bothers you that much, shut me up, then.”

“Oh, I shall. Here, move down here, like this. That’s right, oh, yes, that’s exactly right...ohh...”

Vila slid down the bed, manoeuvring them so that he could reach Avon’s cock with his mouth. As he felt cool hands and hot mouth on his own cock, he licked Avon, tasting the saltiness of cum, the tactile memorial to their once sated passion. Slowly, keeping his hands on Avon’s slim thighs, he licked from balls to tip, up and down, up and down, his eyes closed, lost in loving Avon. He sucked first one, then both, smooth testicles into his mouth, rolling them on his tongue, filled to capacity by their leaping life. With a lingering kiss, he let them slip free, returning his lips to the lengthened, hardening cock, nipping with his teeth, grinning at the sharp sounds of pleasure driven from Avon, vibrating against his own cock, buried so deeply in the massaging throat. With the silent communication of long experience, he let Avon know how he wanted him to move, steadying Avon’s body as he knelt on all fours over the thief. Smiling his thanks as Avon thoughtfully tucked a plump pillow under his neck, he began to match Avon’s movements, surging up to swallow his cock, sucking hard, bringing the comtech so terribly close to orgasm, then, suddenly, stopping. There was an inquiring pause from the other end, then a sigh as

Vila withdrew his penis from Avon’s mouth. The thief carefully positioned Avon, bracing the lean hips over his head, sucking Avon’s hard cock into his mouth as deeply as he possibly could, burying his face against Avon’s body, nostrils filled with the intoxicating, exhilarating scent of Avon’s tight balls. Vila could almost imagine feeling the cum rising in the shaft against his tongue, so he lay back down, Avon’s wet cock hanging stiff and lonely above his lips. He stretched his tongue out, delicately lapping at the head, pushing the foreskin back to trace the flared neck of the pale cock.

The skin flowed back, whispering softly across a universe of sensitive nerves, flooding Avon with tides of delicate, exquisite pleasure. He moaned, resisting the desperate urge to thrust, wanting the lingering, gently devastating orgasm Vila was gifting him with. The tongue laved him again, the very tip slipping under the skin, trapped with wondrous tightness, stretching the translucent skin with the roughness of his tongue, drawing the cum to it like magic, as it circled, time and again, rejoicing in its imprisonment. Slowly, Vila freed his tongue, smiling as Avon’s cock bucked, pulsing and jerking as orgasm melted the body above. Avon’s voice was scratchy, hoarse, as he called Vila’s name.

The thief took no mercy on Avon, neither pumping him nor sucking him, but rather, with a fine, fragile touch of his tongue, he lapped the cum from Avon, penetrating the slit, lifting the ribbons of white out, drawing back to form cloudy streamers, a bridge of iridescence, fragile, yet an indestructible bond, a bridge joining them cock to mouth, man to man. The orgasm lasted forever, the cum floating slowly from Avon’s balls, rising with eternal pleasure up and out of him, drifting down into Vila’s mouth. The loving tongue wrapped the creaminess around and around, bedecking the gleaming head where it peeked out from the soft skin, until finally, with one last groan, Avon lowered himself to the bed, satiated and contented, wrapped in languorous warmth. Vila crept up beside him, taking him into his arms, tangling their legs together, willing to satisfy himself with Avon’s heavy-eyed gaze and the strength of his own hand.

“No, Vila, not like that.” A happy sigh came from the tech, a warm smile its echo. “Get the lubricant.”

“You sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. Come inside me tonight.”

Never taking his eyes off Avon, Vila scrambled in the bedside drawer for the tube and covered himself



with cream. With lotioned fingers, he caressed the silken flesh awaiting him, overflowing with feeling at the undisguised caring on Avon's face. The body beneath him opened, and he slipped three fingers within, relaxing muscles, massaging, bringing a return of delight to the man who lay there, so open and so terribly exposed. There was so much vulnerability in Avon, frightening when displayed, awesome in the burden of responsibility it laid upon the shoulders of those very few privileged to ever see it. Avon lifted himself up, spreading his legs on either side of the thief, resting his backside on Vila's thighs, lust hissing from his clenched teeth at the feel of the hard, thick cock firm against him. Still silent, Vila leaned forward a little, nudging at the yielding hole with the snub head of his cock. Avon pushed up, starving muscles pulling Vila inside, clutching him tightly, filling them both with a burning pleasure. Vila thrust, his rhythm building, reaching for the moment of glory.

"Stop."

Vila froze, the quiet word numbing him.

"Get out of me." Vila complied, incomprehension written all over his face. "All right, let me roll over. I want you in me properly, Vila. You're not in me deeply enough like that." Avon settled himself, leaving his legs wide open, his firm bum glistening with sweat and the cream which made passage so sweet. He raised his ass in mute invitation, smiling contentedly when Vila took him up on his offer. The thief leaned over him, pressing his cock into him with perfect slowness, sliding in smooth as silk until Avon felt the tingle of pubic hair against his cheeks. He groaned, circling his hips, wanting Vila to touch every inch of him. The thief lay down upon him, fitting his smooth chest to the defined muscles of Avon's back, their sweat slicking their skins into suppleness. With sinuous grace, fully enclosed in Avon's heat, Vila surged and thrust, pushing in only a fraction, just enough to rub his cock against the tantalising bump of Avon's prostrate. With a week's celibacy to fuel him, Avon got hard again, the strength of Vila's movements pushing him back and forth across the sheets, scraping his foreskin up and down, the touch as sensitive and exciting as Vila's skilled hands.

Avon suddenly lay very still, concentrating his being on the sensation of Vila, deep within him, of his balls, constricted and tight, jumping against the skin of his ass, of the cum rising in the hard cock, jetting out to fulfill him, touching his very soul. He felt the balm of Vila's life seed bathe him, reaching

all the way up inside to his heart, felt the trembling hand reach round to his own pulsing penis, grabbing him tight, pulling him hard, demanding that he come also, *now*, forcing semen out in an arc, bathing hand as he was bathed within. A heavy weight settled on him, the wonderfully comforting solidity of Vila, collapsed in satiation, enveloping him in his love. In time, after they had both calmed, when they had recovered enough to move, Avon manipulated a limp, sleepy Vila onto his side, moving in close behind, covering them with the blankets. And when Vila's soft snores finally ruffled the night, Avon allowed himself to join him in sleep.

The bright morning light was muted into gauzy brilliance by the grime on the windows, but it was still enough to awaken Avon. His right arm was, of course, numb, but then, he went through this every time Vila spent the night. He considered it a small price to pay for the physical satisfaction it brought. He glanced at the kitchen clock, disappointed at the hour, knowing that they'd have very little time for sex this morning, and he hated 'quickies', as Vila termed it, preferring to take his time, unless abstinence made him too...precipitous. The word called Tarrant to mind, making Avon consider next week and all the weeks thereafter. He had no choice; he knew, as he had known last night, he had to leave. He had already cost Vila and Tarrant too much, and now, it would appear, that he was risking the price of their lives—again. He had barely managed to avoid having their blood on his hands before and he would not chance it now. Gently, he stroked Vila's hair, noticing how it had thinned in the almost five years he had known him, seeing the lines crinkled like old jokes around his closed eyes, the ones that told tales of worry and fear. His fingertips lightly traced the newer lines, the ones that cried of bitterness and pain and loss. No, Avon promised himself, there'd be no more suffering written on this face by his hand. He would go, swiftly, like a scurrying rat, if need be, rather than be guilty of more crimes. There was a way off GP, a route he had been reluctant to take, but one that would cost him less than remaining here for sure capture by Blake and the horror of the ultimate denial of friendship. He would not see Vila, nor Tarrant, harmed, not when the only paths he had led either to certain death from his once-upon-a-time friend, or the chance of possible mercy, from that most steadfast and true enemy, Servalan.

Vila woke to sweet kisses on the nape of his neck,

to soft hands stroking his chest, rubbing his nipples into tiny mountains of pleasure. Electric anticipation filled him, shooting from nipples to groin. A hard cock thrust between his legs, bumping his balls, making him hard himself. He turned, nestling himself in Avon's arms, smiling 'good morning' at him, giving himself up to the luscious lips on his, the loving tongue invading his mouth. Avon covered him, every inch of skin teased and tickled and aroused by the all-encompassing presence.

With deliberation and concentration, Avon set about the task of making love to Vila, stretching him to attain new depths of feeling and satisfaction. He poured himself into the supple, sensuous man under him, filling him with well-being and belonging, stirring him to passion, washing him in the eddy of loving. Vila responded whole-heartedly, murmuring and whispering, stroking and kissing, repaying Avon with the essence of his being. Face to face, close enough to share breath, Avon pushed the head of his cock against Vila, feeling flesh and muscle stretch to accommodate him, feeling the willingness, the anxiety to be taken. This had always struck him as a moment of absolute trust, far more so than for women, who were, at least, designed with the far more difficult task of childbirth in mind. He looked down at where his body disappeared inside Vila, at the difference in the whiteness of Vila's backside to the redness of his own swollen cock. He spared a hand to grasp Vila, soothing the foreskin back and forth, soothing the moment of difficult entry. Finally, he was fully in, balls nestled against Vila's ass

Vila felt as if he were being split in two by the thickness stretching him. As always when Avon entered him, the ancient words entered his mind: and they shall cleave as one, one to the other, forsaking all others. He understood, with Avon buried deep in him, with Avon's balls slapping against the cheeks of his ass, with Avon's cock filling every fragment of his being, making him complete, the image and reality of 'cleaving'. Semen pooled deep, pushed upward and outward by the merciless, heavenly pounding against his prostrate. Keening, he came, great spurts of life warming Avon's skin. The tech smiled down on him, enjoying seeing his abandon, luxuriating in the unbridled lust. He leaned down, lying flat on Vila, splaying the thief's legs, thrusting impossibly deep inside him as his tongue claimed Vila's throat, his mouth claiming his breath, his cock claiming his heart. With an inarticulate scream, buried in Vila's mouth, he came, buried in Vila's love.

For long, long minutes, they lay there, tangled together, each lost in his own realm of thought. Eventually, with unadmitted and frightening reluctance, Avon withdrew, rolling over and propping himself up on one elbow.

"It's almost time for you to leave," he said, voice still rough with sex. His hand, beyond his conscious control, fondled soft, fair hair.

"Avon..." Vila's voice was full of wonder, "last night, and this morning, were...magical. It's always been so great between us, but this was different...special. I've never felt anything like that before. No holds barred, eh? Everything out in the open between us, even things we didn't know we knew, even things we're too scared or too inhibited to say."

Avon's fingertips memorised Vila's face, engraving it in his mind: the softness of skin, the roughness of unshaven beard, the flutter of eyelashes against his fingers. He had indulged the weak sentimentality that riddled him, given himself one single night of...home. It was over, it was time. He took a deep, shaky breath, and then forced himself to do it. "What do you mean?"

"Eh? Last night, Avon, and this morning. It was different from all the other times. This time, we weren't afraid to actually make love, to really admit how we honestly feel about each other."

Very convincingly, Avon frowned in profound puzzlement. "I'm afraid you've managed to do it twice in 24 hours—I must be slipping. You've confused me, Vila. What do you mean?"

"Oh, don't come it with me, Avon. You know perfectly well what I mean. I'm talking about us giving up all this claptrap about 'mutual convenience' and 'friendly, no strings sex'. *This* was love, Avon. Don't be a coward and hide behind indifference."

"Oh, I'm not indifferent. I confess to being quite fond of you, in a twisted kind of way. But, last night, was, well, I was merely grateful to you for the risks you've been taking for me and I thought it would only be polite to show that..."

"Gratitude? Was that what it was? I don't believe you." But he did, in the dark, destructive part of his mind, the part that made him view himself as a worthless victim. That part jumped on the painful possibility, hungry to make it reality, avid to make true all the bad expectations people had heaped on him all his life.

"I'm sorry if you were misled. I honestly didn't intend to encourage you, to foster any...romantic

feelings in you. This is rather..." he dragged a blush out, pasted it on his face to cover the truth and lied through his teeth. "...embarrassing. I never expected you to be like that, Vila. I always thought you were as... masculine as I. I never suspected you might truly be a...queer."

"And what are you, eh?" Vila snapped, stung and hurt, bleeding on the inside, where no one would ever see it, where alcohol would embalm the pain until it no longer ripped him. "You've been screwing me for years, four and a half fuckin' years, so what does that make you?"

"Vila, it has always been no more than casual, gratuitous sex for me, merely one step beyond masturbation, for all the emotional impact it has on me."

"What? So I'm just a useful hole for you, a skilled hand, an open mouth? A public convenience, is that what I am?"

"Well, you, unlike the girls, were available, so yes...you were a convenience."

"You bastard. You absolute, utter *bastard*." Vila stared at him in unmitigated horror, pain welling in his eyes, filling his vision. He threw himself out of the bed, grabbing his clothes, hauling them on haphazardly, desperate only to cover his dreadful, vulnerable nakedness. "You just wait and see if I come back next week, you just see how bloody 'convenient' I am then. You wait and see how important I am then, you'll find out how much emotional impact I have on you then."

Avon forced himself to lie still, reclining more casually back against the pillows. "Actually, I was going to talk to you about that. This may not be the

best time, but...needs must. I am going to leave soon. I have found a way, using some of the components you've brought for me in the past few weeks, to tap into the computer of the Stellar Line Passenger Service. I shall be able to get a flight out, oh, not more than four days from now. So, that is why I was so...generous last night. I simply wanted to thank you for all you've done in the past and..."

The slamming of the door stopped his speech dead. He drew a great sigh, shoulders slumping in weary defeat. Slowly, with heavy footsteps, he went to the window, pulling aside the translucent curtain. After a few seconds, he saw Vila come tearing out of the doorway downstairs, rushing away, clutching his jacket to his chest. For a moment, before the agonised, humiliated, and most importantly, alienated, figure disappeared, Avon watched him. As his only friend ran away from him—was driven away, he corrected himself—he mouthed a silent, solitary good-bye.

Turning, he gathered together the few things he wanted from this prison and took the only component he had been able to build. Setting it on the small bedside table, he looked over at the window again, then back to the still-warm hollow of where Vila had lain in his bed. "Needs must," he whispered, dredging the survivor up from the depths of his being, suffocating the dangerous, that is, the loving, part of himself.

He opened a channel on the communications device. Almost immediately, a voice hung, disembodied, in the room. "Central Command."

"Get me Commissioner Sleer. Tell her, it's Avon."

## II

# Black Leather and Studs

Have you ever wondered just why it is that Avon wears so much leather—particularly black leather? Well, the Southern Contingent has been pondering that very question...

## COVERUP

### Brennen Barrett

“ANY SIGN OF HIM?” SOOLIN ASKED AS SHE TOOK ANOTHER SIP OF HER DARK AMBER BREW. She smiled slightly, noting the way Tarrant had to readjust the crotch of his trousers before sitting down. Her smile broadened. *Not bad, Tarrant, the way you walked to the door and back was pretty damned sexy. If you weren't so pompous, you just might get lucky once in a while.* She had always liked men with long legs and that was the first thing she'd noticed about Dorian, well, almost the first thing. Tarrant's voice interrupted her private reverie.

“Of course not. I mean, his royal bloody majesty, high and mighty, grace us mere peasants with his shining presence?” The pilot glared down at his glass, “Not bloody likely.”

“Now, now Tarrant, don't be touchy, just because Avon was smart enough to see through your little ploy.” Dayna motherly patted the man on his curly head, but had to jerk her hand away when he grabbed at her.

“Dayna, I did not invite Avon to have a drink with us to get him drunk. I don't think I'd like to see him that way. He's enough of a handful sober; drunk, he's probably uncontrollable.”

“Nah, actually, he's very controllable.” Two tables away, Vila sat with his back to the group, feet propped up, enjoying his own personal bottle of soma and adrenalin.

“Well, finally, some comments from the balcony.” Tarrant turned to face the thief, who still didn't bother to give them more than a passing glance. “So you claim you've seen Avon drunk.”

“Course I have.”

“Where?” Dayna couldn't help herself, though she'd always claimed she didn't care to know anything about Avon's or anyone else's past lives.

“Freedom City.”

“Does he become deeper and darker and broodier?” Soolin asked, watching the amber fluid swirl in her glass.

“Not really, he's, well, more open to suggestion.”

“Suggestion?” Dayna snickered. “Avon? Oh, come off it, Vila. Are you implying what I think you're implying?” She giggled, suddenly realizing how much her own glass of vodka was affecting her.

“Well, I could believe it.” Tarrant smiled smugly, turning back to the group. “I mean, he does have a penchant for black leather and studs, now doesn't he?”

Soolin slapped the pilot's leather clad arm. “Look who's talking. Why do *you* wear black leather and studs, Tarrant?”

The pilot grinned and shook his head. “No...no, now don't get off the subject. We were discussing why Avon wears black leather and studs, not me.”

Dayna smiled shyly into her drink. For the first time in a long time, she actually looked as young as she was. “I know why,” she whispered.

Her two comrades leaned closer. Even Vila cocked his head in their direction.

“It's because he's like a turtle and it's his hard, protective shell against the dangers of the world around him.” The other two stared at her impassively, waiting. “Then again,” she laughed, “it could be because he knows it shows off his bum so well. I'm afraid he's caught me mesmerised a couple of times.”

Soolin shook her head. “I sincerely doubt that his bum was the portion of his anatomy which hypnotised you. Anyway, you're wrong. The reason Avon wears black leather and studs it that...” she hesitated. One minute she seemed certain of her answer, then

the next she was frustratingly uncertain. Her friends had no inkling of the struggle going on within her alcohol affected brain. "Well," she said finally, after taking in the last sip of her drink, "it's either that he really *is* the coldhearted bastard he appears to be and the leather is the only thing that will keep him warm, or..." her eyes mellowed as she stared off into fragmented memories, glimpses of another side of Avon, "or he's quite warm and it's all show. The black leather and studs are just camouflage to keep people away." Her eyes refocused and her normal cynicism reasserted itself. "Or it could be that he's just into B and D."

"What?"

"Bondage and domination," Tarrant explained to Dayna. "Try it, you might like it." He leaned closer to the pretty black woman and leered.

Dayna's eyes sparkled as she took his hand. "Oh Tarrant, I didn't know you wanted to be my slave."

The pilot yanked his hand back. "Not hardly."

"All right, Tarrant, what's your theory on why Avon wears black leather and studs?"

"Mine? No, you don't want my theory."

"Come on, Tarrant, or is it that you don't have one?"

Tarrant took a hefty swig of his drink. "Oh, I have one all right." Both women stared at him.

"Tarrant," Soolin warned menacingly, "if you don't tell us, I'll make it my personal challenge to find out why *you* wear black leather with studs."

"And studs," Dayna corrected.

The mercenary turned her steely blue eyes on the young woman. "I said what I meant."

"Oh." Dayna looked down at the table, properly chastised, then suddenly Soolin's words clicked on the light in her head. She glanced up to see a twinkle of amusement in the other woman's eyes.

"Oh!" she said, a broad, revealing smile etching her face. No one noticed Vila's quick glance in their direction, a grin matching Dayna's dancing across his face. He filed that bit of interesting information away for further reference.

"The reason Kerr Avon wears black leather and studs is...is because it makes him feel powerful."

Both Soolin and Dayna started to groan.

"No...no, really, he thinks he cuts an intimidating figure in his little suit of armour."

"He's right, he does," Dayna laughed.

"And it works, doesn't it, Tarrant. I mean, he's used it on you with enough success, now hasn't he?" Soolin challenged, but Tarrant was not to be swayed.

"And it impresses you women. You think of him as just a large, predatory animal when, in fact, he's just a harmless old puss."

"Right, Tarrant, then you'd better watch out," Dayna warned with a sparkle in her eyes. "That cat has very long, sharp claws and he can rip the likes of you to shreds."

"And as for him being sexy to women, well, all I can say is, it's not just women who consider him sexy. Is it?" She looked hard at Tarrant, then smiled, inviting comment.

"But we're all forgetting the one person who'd know, *really know*, the answer."

Vila felt three sets of eyes latch onto him. Slowly, he got up and stood over them. "Of course I know the real reason, but it'll cost you."

"How much?" Tarrant laughed, reaching for his money pouch. Vila snatched the remainder of Tarrant's bottle of real scotch from the table. When the pilot started to protest, one look from the women made him back off. "All right," Tarrant relaxed, "tell us, all knowing Delta, why *does* Kerr Avon wear black leather and studs?"

The thief took one swig from the bottle and carefully screwed the top back on. Tucking it under his arm, he straightened with a smile and tossed his comment casually over his shoulder, leaving a shocked, stunned silence behind him. Absurd though the words first appeared, they carried the weight of truth, and none of the three *Scorpio* people could get Vila's answer out of their minds. "'S obvious, innit? The reason Avon wears black leather and studs is to cover up his lace panties, of course."

# BLACK LEATHER AND STUD

## Grennen Barrett

TARRANT STEPPED ONTO THE FLIGHT DECK OF THE *SCORPIO* TO TAKE OVER THE WATCH FROM DAYNA. He found her with her head down on the navigation console, sound asleep. For a second, he was tempted to scold her for falling asleep, but the softness of her features at this particular moment tugged at his heartstrings, forcing him to forgive her laxity. They were all tired and the fact that they had chosen to hide out in the middle of nowhere before venturing back to Xenon base, turned their exhaustion to boredom.

"Dayna...Dayna." Tarrant gently shook her shoulder, waking her.

"What?" She jerked up, eyes wide with fear. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

The pilot shook his head. "Nothing's wrong. You just fell asleep."

Her large eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Tarrant, I'm so sorry. Five minutes...that's all I wanted. I was so tired."

"I know. It's all right. Just be glad I caught you and not Avon."

Dayna shivered. "He'd've killed me."

Tarrant smiled a little. "No, he wouldn't."

"I'm not so certain, Tarrant. He's been in a terrible mood lately and since he and Vila got back from Malodaar, even Vila's been acting strangely."

"Yes," the smile faded from the pilot's lips. "I've wondered what happened down there, but neither one's talking." He saw a great yawn part the pretty face and his smile returned. "Go on. My watch. You climb into one of the sleep pods and get some sleep, some real sleep."

"Are you sure you don't want some company? It's awfully boring. Slave's not much of a conversationalist."

+Conversation is beyond my humble capacity, mistress, I am most terribly sorry.+

"Don't worry about it, Slave, I've got a few projects to keep me awake and you..." he grabbed Dayna by the arm, pulled her up and steered her toward the sleep pods, "you get some sleep. I don't know, but I think some things are going to come to a head very soon and I want you to be ready."

Dayna turned and smiled winningly. "When am I not ready? Aren't I always?"

Tarrant watched her disappear around the cor-

ner, his smile dropping quickly. "Yes, I'm sure you will be."

The pilot roamed around the small flight deck, checking circuits, running a few systems checks, but everything was as he knew it would be...in perfect working order. Avon had been a fiend about making sure everything was absolutely right. Now that he and Vila were on the out and out, all that pent-up passion was manifesting itself in some decidedly unpleasant ways. He stopped for a second and smiled at his own thoughts, wondering at his willingness to help Avon out. He'd never been interested in a man before...any man, but Kerr Avon had an aura about him, a sexiness which transcended gender, an animal magnetism which drew male and female to him and, despite all denials to the contrary, held their love and loyalty.

"Oh, now that's a novel and decidedly disturbing idea, Tarrant," he chastised himself. "You want to make love to Kerr Avon." His smile broadened. "No, you don't want to just screw him, you want to fuck him blind. You want him to beg for mercy, you want..." Suddenly, the pilot stopped his fantasy and glanced around, letting out a great, heaving sigh when he had reassured himself that he was alone.

Tarrant stretched his long body, a yawn creeping past his lips, but he was quick to put a lid on it. "Now, now Tarrant. None of that. We have to stay awake, alert. Never know when a Federation pursuit ship might sneak up on you from out of nowhere." He grinned and jogged back and forth in front of Slave a couple of times, feeling the oxygenated blood start to re-energize his brain cells. "How many more hours before someone relieves me, Slave?" he asked the inboard computer.

+Five hours, fifty-seven minutes, twenty-two seconds if the Master is exactly on time, sir.+

Tarrant smiled. "Oh, he will be, Slave, he will be." The pilot took a step up toward his own station, the only place he hadn't visited on the flight deck.

"Has he checked my station, Slave?"

The computer hesitated uncharacteristically, +No, sir. The Master stated he left that for you.+

"Well, that was kind of him."

+Kindness had nothing to do with it, sir. He said that idle hands and weak minds tended to get into

trouble, so he left you something to occupy your time with.+

“He did, did he?”

+I am merely repeating his own words, most kind sir.+

“Oh, I believe you, Slave. I’ll have a word with ‘the Master’...later.”

The second Tarrant hit the top step he saw it. An angry frown creased his face, and with undisguised disgust he swept the offending object from his chair. Holding the black leather and silver studded glove high aloft, he scrunched it in his hand. “Avon, for a man who is so fastidious in how he works and dresses, you are a slob with your clothes. First, a dirty undershirt thrown in the corner of the mess, then your boots and socks strewn across the rest room and now this. Damn it, Avon, didn’t your mother ever teach you to pick up after yourself?”

He was about to throw the glove into the teleport and send it off to parts unknown when he realised the pettiness of his actions and started to laugh. “They did warn us about this in the Academy. Living in close quarters like this, it was bound to happen, I suppose.” He held the glove out with a smile. “Sorry, Avon. Couldn’t help myself. It’s not your glove I want to teleport into space, it’s you.” Then he shook his head and frowned. “No, it’s not you, either. Maybe it’s me.”

He sat down heavily in his chair, tossing the glove from one hand to the other. With a grin, he held the glove out and slipped it on his right hand.

“Hah! Very nice, Avon. Almost feels like a second skin.” He clenched his fist, hearing the leather crunch, the studs pressing tantalisingly into his hand. “Very nice, indeed.” He held the glove up, admiring it. “Black leather and studs, yes, a man after my own heart.” He opened and shut his hand twice more. “Definitely makes one feel powerful,” he whispered. He stared at his hand, fixated on it. Slowly, he ran it down the side of his cheek, his eyes closing involuntarily with ecstasy. “Avon.” The word hissed sensually from him. Suddenly, his eyes jerked opened. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” He snatched the glove away from his cheek and started to rip it off his hand, but something stopped him. Chewing on his lip, he looked down at his straining groin. As if of its own volition, the leather covered hand brushed over the tumescence, caressing it, sliding between his legs, massaging his tight scrotum.

Tarrant hesitated, “Slave, how long before Avon relieves me.” The minute the words left his lips he knew they were a poor choice.

+Five hours fifty-three minutes, precisely, most kind sir.+

“Thank you, Slave.”

His groin pushed up into his right hand: there was more than enough time.

Quickly unfastening his trousers, Tarrant released his hard cock from its confines. The gloved hand moved as if it had been trained to do this and only this. The silver studs dug into the sensitive skin of his penis sending erotic, electric thrills quite literally from one end of him to the other. His leather encased hand didn’t seemed satisfied with simple masturbation. It roved down, forcing him to change his position and give it access to the more inviolate parts of his body.

In the pilot’s mind’s eye, he wasn’t doing all these wonderful things to his body; it was Avon. Avon’s hand held him. His soft, almost feminine lips, held his, his tongue driving deep in his throat, commanding him, sucking the breath from his body. He groaned and felt himself entered from behind. Avon’s thick cock was jammed full into his body, thrusting in and out, pleasuring both of them to the limit. Then the tech pulled back and moved his hand and mouth to enclose the pilot’s straining member, drawing him up, compelling him to raise his hips and drive deeper into the welcoming heat.

The hand worked up and down his shaft in time with the beating of his heart, the pressure inside his groin building to a exquisitely painful crescendo before erupting, spewing frothy, white semen over everything.

Gradually, Tarrant’s breathing returned to normal. He looked down at his wilted erection, flopped lazily over the black leather glove. The semen glistened for a moment, before, much to the pilot’s horror, it began to melt into the false skin. He snatched his hand up and vainly started to wipe the stains from it. Using his sleeve, he scrubbed, dimming the offending spots to barely perceptible blemishes. Holding the glove out for inspection, he was satisfied that Avon would never notice the spots, but as he leaned forward to remove the glove from his hand, a distinctive odour touched his nostrils. His eyes widened as he recognised the smell.

“Perhaps, all it needs is to air out,” he whispered wistfully. “Slave, how much longer now?”

+Five hours twelve minutes, sir.+

“Five hours twelve minutes? You mean, I took...?”

+Sir?+

“Nothing, Slave, be quiet.”

+Yes, sir.+

Tarrant stood and hastily refastened his trousers, then retucked his semen sodden tunic, uncaring how uncomfortable it soon would be. He knew he was dead if Avon discovered what he'd done. Of that, there was absolutely no doubt in his mind. He looked down at the condemning glove. For a brief instant, he thought of throwing it out an airlock, but knew even this would give the tech reason to do away with him.

For a moment he stopped, wondering why he had this unreasoning fear of Avon, why he hadn't considered whether or not he could defend himself adequately from the other man's wrath. Perhaps, he realized in the back of his mind, it was simply that Avon was going mad and was no longer predictable or reasonable.

He laughed to himself and shook his head. "And what you just did was the act of a sane man?"

Leaving the glove where he'd found it on the chair, Tarrant moved down to the nav computer where Dayna had been asleep. He sat in her chair, playing a tattoo on the console, quickly becoming bored and sleepy. With her actions as guide, he rationalised that five minutes with his eyes shut wouldn't hurt anything.

One second before Kerr Avon appeared on the

flight deck, Tarrant's alert ears heard him coming. He jumped from a sound sleep to almost complete wakefulness with no steps in between. Without a word, Avon walked to the pilot's seat. He didn't notice the younger man's back go board straight as he picked up his black leather glove from the cushion.

Tarrant felt his heart pound wildly in his chest. Blood rushed to his head and roared, deafeningly, past his ears when he heard the sound of the leather and studs scrunch and click as they returned to their rightful place on Avon's right hand. He felt his breath starting to come in short, quick gasps and fought to clear his head enough to work out why he was acting this way.

Then the thing he dreaded happened. The unmistakable sound of Avon inhaling deeply sealed his fate. He could feel the rage of the other man building, the heat of his eyes on the back of his neck. He tried to stand, but only got halfway up before turning. The anger in the tech's eyes was riveting, his face a storm-black cloud as he turned on his heel and his clenched fist rose into the air. His lips twisted in a snarl and the word screamed from Avon, as in sheer relief, Tarrant dropped in a dead faint onto the cold, steel flight deck. Unseeing back to the indisposed pilot, Avon screamed the single word again.

"VILA!"



# III BLISS

“You want emotions, relationships and happy endings?” queried the unbelieving Glaswegian. “Well, I’ll try.” And she did. She produced emotions and relationships...but don’t count on happy endings.

## DOMESTIC BLISS or TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES M. Fae Glasgow

WORDLESSLY, VILA HUNG UP THE JACKET AVON HANDED TO HIM, WATCHING CAREFULLY, SEARCHING FOR CLUES TO EXPLAIN THE UNUSUALLY INTROVERTED MOOD HIS FRIEND WAS IN. He was acutely worried—Avon was disquietingly quiet, neither an insult nor witticism passing the grim drawbridge of his mouth. He stepped aside to let Avon pass him to get into the bathroom, frowning his unease as he wandered off to the galley for tea. By the time he returned, Avon was already propped up in bed, showered and shaved, staring impassively at the hapless printout clenched in his white hands, his tendons and muscles straining with intense, controlled stillness.

“Want some tea?” Vila asked, acting as though nothing was untoward between them.

Avon nodded, slightly.

“Biscuits?”

Another faint nod.

“Sugar and milk?”

This nod, almost surreptitious in its smallness, made the thief tense with fractious distress. Avon never, absolutely never, not even after the disaster with Anna nor the dreadful time he’d caught the ‘flu, was distracted enough to let so stupid a question pass. When there was not so much as a, ‘surely after three and a half years, even you can remember that much’, Vila decided now would be an excellent time to begin to get really, really worried. He stripped off quickly, dumping his clothes on the chair, continually casting concerned glances at Avon’s distraction. No matter how many times he went over the day, nothing volunteered as the culprit cause of Avon’s

dark introspection, this sense of a whirlpool slowly gathering.

“Want some arsenic in there, too?”

Yet another dismal nod. Vila heaved a sigh, glancing around furtively for rescue. There being no other scapegoat available, he dared the question. “Avon? Avon!”

Pre-occupied eyes focussed on him. “Hmm?”

“What’s the matter? Don’t just look at me! C’mon, Avon, there’s obviously something wrong. What’ve I done this time?”

With great care, Avon put the printout on the bedside table and picked up his tea, giving apparent deliberation as to whether the plain or the iced biscuit would suit him better. The iced won, being eaten before the hovering question got its answer. “Where have all our excuses gone, I wonder?”

“Eh?” Vila muttered in confusion as he climbed in beside Avon. Automatically, the tech drew the blankets up over Vila, adjusting his position so that the thief fitted in comfortably against him.

This time, Avon gave Vila his full, undivided and undiluted attention. “Our excuses, Vila. Look at us. We have a nightly ritual, as if we had been married for years, yet...we always gave ourselves the nice, tidy excuse that this was mere convenience, simply a way to have sex without the complications and ties that would be unavoidable with the girls. But...”

“It’s no different from before. I don’t get what you’re getting at, Avon. It’s just the same as always.”

“That, idiot, is precisely the point I’m making. Tonight, just as we have done for so many nights, we

went through our usual routine, so comfortable and practised that we can both get ready for bed in a single room, without once getting underfoot, without a word being spoken.”

“So what’s wrong with that? You used to yell at me often enough at first, now I get it right and you’re moaning at me for that. God, some people are never bloody happy, are they?”

“You’re missing my point entirely, of course. I mean, Vila, that *if* this is nothing more than casual sex, *if* this is nothing more than a means to an end, *if* this is simply a way to avoid complicating life on board ship, then why the hell am I sitting here in bed with you curled up beside me, when you could so easily—and happily—have gone off with Kerril?”

Vila looked away, fingers nervously picking at the blanket, in perfect echo of his mind picking at the question. He’d already gone round and around that ponderous query, like a manic Maypole, trying to find some answer that would leave him with his fond illusions intact. He glanced up, only to find Avon still staring at him. “Dunno,” he finally ventured.

“Why didn’t you leave with her? Surely, not even *you* are so stupid that staying on the *Scorpio* seemed your best option?”

“Well, maybe I am that friggin’ stupid. I’m lying here with you, aren’t I? And *that’s* not something I’m going to win any prizes for, is it?”

“Exactly, Vila, so why the *hell* are you still here?”

“Oh, nice to be wanted, innit? If I’d known you’d wanted rid of me this much, I’d’ve been up and off like a shot.” Nice legs notwithstanding, staying with Avon was beginning to seem like a very poor choice indeed.

An exasperated sigh drew his attention back to the man beside him. “I’m not trying to get rid of you—believe me, Vila, if I ever do, not even you will be able to doubt my intentions. All I’m trying to say, is that our tissue of lies is coming undone. That our excuses have worn rather thin, in the grim light of reality.”

“You saying we’re queer?”

Avon unleashed a glower on him, making an abject, instinctive apology rise up in Vila’s throat. “No, I am not saying that. I, for one, still prefer women. The question, especially after today, is...do you?”

Outraged, Vila bolted up in bed, wide-eyed, righteous fury turned loose on Avon.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that, Vila. You remind me all too much of Blake, immediately after I’d re-

minded him of the sheer futility and folly of this forlorn excuse for a Revolution.”

“I’ll look at you any way I bloody well please! Listen, for your information, I *still* prefer any woman to any man—and that includes you.”

“Then, explain one minor detail to me. *Why are you here with me, instead of with her?*”

“Why are you trying so hard to make me leave? I mean, down there today, you made it sound like you couldn’t care less if I stayed or went, same thing right now. What are you so afraid of?”

“What are you looking so smug about? Proud of yourself for turning the tables so neatly? Wrong—it didn’t work. I still want to know why you didn’t go with her.”

Vila subsided onto the pillow, his head heavy against Avon. “I honestly don’t know, Avon. Wish to hell I understood it myself. I mean, there was a great opportunity—not to mention a great pair of legs—and I turned it down. And for what, I ask you. Danger, dirt, that bully Tarrant and you. Not much of a bargain, is it?”

“Perhaps, it was simply a matter of opting for the known, rather than risking the unknowable,” Avon murmured, creating a new tissue of lies for them.

“Nah. More than that. Didn’t really occur to me to leave you behind. Feel too responsible.” Vila clamped his mouth shut to trap the even more damning words tripping his tongue up. “Um, what I mean is...well, er...”

Avon lay down beside him, absently pulling Vila into his arms. “One of the very few talents you possess, idiot, is the undoubtedly unsurpassed ability to put both your feet in your mouth simultaneously—and still continue speaking.” He ignored the muffled ‘sorry’, continuing quietly. “No. I have always felt my death would be caused by Blake’s. Perhaps my living is tangled with yours.”

“Would that be so awful?”

The silence stretched out long and hollow, leaving Vila to listen to the steady pulse of Avon’s heart beneath his ear. “It killed Cally.”

“No it bloody didn’t! *Servalan*, the rotten bitch, killed Cally. Wasn’t your fault!”

“Wasn’t it?”

“Oh, going to wallow in self-pity, are we? Listen, Avon, you’re no more responsible for everything in the entire bleedin’ Universe than Blake ever was, and no one in their right mind could blame you for something *Servalan* did.”

“But, then, I’m hardly in my right mind, am I?”

“Been eavesdropping on me and Orac, have you? Well, I’ll have you know that he and I are of the opinion that all you need is a right proper rest and...”

“And that is why you wouldn’t leave me. Too worried about my mental health.”

“Rubbish! Some of us are just as selfish as you are, you know. Had to stay with you, didn’t I? I only fancied Kerril and that seems a pretty poor reason to go off gallivanting across the Galaxy when I’ve got someone I really care about waiting for me.”

“I thought you believed I wanted rid of you?”

“Oh, Avon, pack it in. You’ve got me so’s I don’t know *what* I believe any more. One minute, you’ve got me convinced of one thing, the next you’ve got me quite positive of the opposite. Look, I came back. Let’s just leave it at that, all right?” He turned onto his side, closing Avon out. A hand stroked down the curve of his spine. “Leave off, will you? After all this going round in circles, I’m too bloody dizzy to be in the mood for screwing. I’m going to sleep.”

“Not until I have this little mystery solved, Vila, old friend. Where have all our excuses gone? Why are we content to share a bed, even if we don’t indulge in sexual athletics? Why would you turn down the offer of domestic bliss to remain by my side?”

“Misguided loyalty. Or sheer bloody stupidity, more likely.”

“Oh, you’ll have to do better than that, if you want me to let you sleep. I’d rather like to know *why* you’re still here.”

A sharp, annoyed breath came from Vila. “I already told you, I don’t know why. Just am, that’s all. Why d’you always have to analyse everything to death, anyway?”

The hand stroked him slowly, lingering at the base of his spine, delicate fingertips lightly, teasingly, tracing the dimples at the small of his back, strolling lower to tantalise his backside. “Why are you still with me?” The voice was softly seductive, enticing an answer from even the most unwilling subconscious. “Hmm?” Moist lips fluttered across his nape, tongue leaving a glistening line of arousal behind. “Why?”

Vila’s eyes closed, his mouth opened. Breath sighed from him, passion bled into him. Avon’s chill hand wandered across his hip, exploring down into the valley of his groin, tightening with pleasure as it gained its destination. As the tumescence there thrust, the hand withdrew, climbing slowly up Vila’s chest to his mouth, lingering there, while, in their familiar pattern, Vila licked it wet. It raced back down to its

original goal, cool, wet strength pumping firm flesh into complete hardness. Taunting, the hand departed, the cock bounced up against Vila’s abdomen, beating a tattoo of lustful need. “Tell me...” the seductive, hypnotic voice murmured, “why?”

Vila squirmed, grabbing Avon’s hand and drawing it back to the centre of his being. “C’mon, Avon. Don’t be a bastard, keep going.”

The hand stilled. “Tell me.”

It finally dawned on Vila that the words he feared most, were the very words Avon wanted most to hear. He paused, thinking, his quick mind examining his revelation from a kaleidoscope of angles. No matter how he turned it, the answer was always the same. The unthinkable had become the truth. “Cause...’cause...”

“Because of what? Go on, Vila, you can tell me. I won’t hurt you. You can trust me...”

The warm tongue tingling the hair on his neck sent shivers *frissoning* up and down his back, pooling in his crotch, but they couldn’t disguise the truth. For better or worse, Vila did indeed trust Avon, with his life on numerous occasions and now, it would seem, with his affections. “Love you, Avon.” He muttered the words very, very quietly, giving them both a cover if he should be wrong, if these words were the last in the Galaxy Avon would welcome, coming from him.

“Say it again.” Teeth nipped sharply on his shoulder, the hand squeezed wetly against the soft skin covering his hardness.

“I love you, Avon.”

“Ah, I was, as usual, right. So much for your protestations of convenience. The truth will out, as they say.” He eased his cock between the cheeks of Vila’s bum, letting his companion feel the promise there, then rolled Vila over to face him. With such uncontrolled passion flooding him, Avon could not wait for the delicacy of preparation, the unwitting tendernesses of preparing Vila for his thick length. He needed relief—fulfillment—and it had to be now. The feelings flaring through him demanded recognition and, in his congenital fear of dependency, he named them lust and power at the dominion of another man. Only the coward had the courage to name his emotions for what they were, only the idiot had the perspicacity to recognise them. Safe in his delusions, Avon tightened Vila’s hand around his cock, his own hand returning to the other’s weeping hardness. In mutual rhythm, their hands moved, blurring in passion, stopping only to add moistness to the

palms and slick delight to their cocks. Avon held Vila's gaze, seeing nothing but the warm depths in which he so willingly, so deceptively, drowned. Leaning forward, he opened his mouth against Vila's, thrusting his tongue inside, fucking him orally and manually, the exultant feeling of his balls filling soaring through him. With each squeeze of his hand, he knew, he was bringing Vila closer to the pinnacle, that exquisite pleasure so seemingly unattainable, until that last, aching moment when the ideal became reality. He heard Vila cry out under him, stickiness bathing him, his own orgasm blessing him with completion. He stiffened, body as rigid as his spurting cock freed him, the moment passing, collapsing limply on top of Vila. Welcoming arms embraced him within their enchanted circle, giving lie to his convenient self-deceptions. He lay there, heavy with contentment, until fear crawled its insidious way into his mind. He started to pull away, but Vila's arms tightened, surprising him, as always, with their strength.

"I'm not the only one to have a light go off tonight, am I?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Now, let go, I want to...."

"Shh. Just lie here a minute, give yourself a chance to recover. Coming like that—you try to walk now and I guarantee your legs'll turn to jelly."

The excuse was as logical as all the previous ones, so Avon lay where he was, held and comforted, pampered and petted. His eyes grew heavy and the combined semen on him dried stickily, covering his pubic hair with a hoar frost, filling his nostrils with the undisguised scent of sex. Again, he started to push away.

"It's all right, Avon. It's really no different from before. Still the same old story, still the same old excuses. They've worked this long, they'll last a bit longer."

"But we both know you love me."

"And why should that change me, eh? I only just discovered it tonight, but it's obviously been in there a helluva long time, so why should *knowing* it make a difference, when it happening in the first place didn't change a bloody thing? Wouldn't make any sense, would it?"

Avon's murmur was amused. "No, I don't suppose it would. So, then, we continue as before."

"Of course. Why muck up a good thing just 'cause we've found out we love each other?"

Avon pulled away sharply, leaning away from Vila. "I never said I loved you."

Vila smiled up at him, sleepiness clouding his face. "No, but that's all right, I don't mind you not coming right out and saying it. Any case, I'm not too sure I'd like it if you did. It'd ruin your image something awful."

"As long as you realise I'm not a sentimental fool, like you. I'm not that weak." Avon moved quietly back into the waiting arms, brow furrowed in contemplation. "When do you think you first started to love me?"

"God, now there's a question! Let me think..."

"Is that entirely necessary? I would like to get *some* sleep tonight."

"Oh, shut up... God, what a frightening thought!"

"Yes, I can see the shock of actually thinking would be rather distressing to you."

Vila dunted him in the ribs, not even bothering to argue: it was a foregone conclusion, anyway, who would win. "It's quite terrifying, actually. I hate to say this, Avon old pal, but I think it wasn't that much after I saw you on the *London*. You really made me worried, I felt very threatened by you, but I always just put that down to your charming, friendly attitude. That and your threats to kill me. No, I'm beginning to think I might have been attracted to you, even then. I mean, didn't exactly take us long to get together once we hit the *Liberator*, did it?"

"Less than a month," Avon slurred, drifting, unwillingly, into sleep, sharp mind dulled by tiredness and satisfaction. It didn't even occur to him that he should wonder as to *why* he should so readily accept Vila's feelings, which was hardly a loss. He would only lie to himself, refusing to see how very comforting it was to be loved, how such caring provided an anchor amidst the daily confusion of life. He burrowed his head into the crook of Vila's shoulder, breathing slowing towards slumber. Vila stroked his hair, lost in thought, carefully assessing how this revelation would affect them—or more importantly, Avon—and what he should do about it. Abruptly, Avon sat up, the blankets slithering off them, puddling on the floor.

"Avon! What'd you do that for? I'll catch my death of cold and freeze my balls off." Vila grumbled, twisting around to haul the covers back up.

"I have just thought of something far more unnerving than anything you have come up with."

Vila settled himself and looked up at the horror-stricken expression on Avon's face. "What's the matter? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"Oh, worse than that. Far worse than that."

“Well? Are you going to tell me, or keep me dangling here on tenterhooks?”

Avon flushed and turned aside. “It’s nothing. Go back to sleep.”

“Don’t give me that! C’mon, Avon, *tell me*. It certainly can’t be any awfuller than my dread confession.”

There was a long pause, then Avon mumbled his reply. “It just suddenly occurred to me, that even including Anna, you have been my...lover for longer than anyone else in my entire life.”

“Oh, I beg your pardon. Forgive me for being involved with you.”

“Don’t be snide, Vila, it doesn’t suit you.”

“No, I’m supposed to leave that to you, right? I don’t mind telling you, buggerlugs, I’m getting sick and tired of this attitude of yours. You act as if I’m just a nothing and I’ll have you know I’m just as good as you are, just as much an equal, so if...”

His words were cut off, the wind knocked out of him by Avon’s full weight landing squarely on his chest. His arms were suddenly stretched out above his head, wrists clamped in one of Avon’s strong hands. “So you want equality, do you? Want me to treat you as if you were my fellow Alpha? Is that what you want?”

“Yes, it bloody well is, there’s nothing wrong with that...”

“Oh, but there is. Should I behave as though you are also an Alpha, my equal, my, as it were, *partner*; there would be certain restraints and restrictions on you that I sincerely doubt you would appreciate.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, let me be the judge of that. Anything’d be worth being on a par with you...anything that doesn’t hurt, that is.”

“You little coward. Where’s your gambler’s spirit?”

“Buried six foot under along with his body, I hope.”

“Do you want to be my equal, Vila? Take an hour or two to turn the question over in your mind and actually think.”

“I’m not as stupid as I pretend, you know. I don’t need to think, I know for a fact what I want.”

“And would that, perchance, be me?”

“Dead bloody right it is.”

“Good. Then I shall name my terms. One: we continue as before, no public displays, no indiscreet remarks. Two: in private, you will refrain from maudlin sentiment. Three: no terms of endearment. I will not tolerate inane insults, such as ‘darling’ or ‘sweet-

heart’. Four: no effeminate behaviour. If I want a woman, I shall go and get one. And last, but by no means least, you will be faithful to *me*, and me alone.”

“That’s not fair! You get to go off and have women and I have to be stuck with you?”

“Oh, no, you can have women also. But no men. If I find that you have been with another man, I shall consider it betrayal and I shall kill you.”

Gazing up into Avon’s burning eyes, Vila believed him, implicitly. He thought over the terms, weighing the pros and cons. The only possible drawback was the stipulation that he couldn’t have any men and, considering that Avon was the first and only man he’d ever been drawn to, well, that condition didn’t even count. “Sounds all right to me.”

“Then we are agreed?”

“Yes, so why don’t you put your money where your mouth is and let me go, eh?”

“Certainly.” The hands released him, coming down to tease his nipples and stroke his arms. “Just remember, Vila. If I catch you betraying me, or if I find out that you have done so, at any time from this moment forward, I shall indeed kill you.” He silenced the thief with a deep kiss, slowly rubbing his body on the soft skin beneath him.

Vila pulled away, needing to breathe. “What ‘re you up to, eh, Avon? You know it’ll be a good 45 minutes before you can get it up again.”

“And it shall be a very *good* 45 minutes indeed.

Tarrant never had been good at chess.

He lay in the next room on Xenon base, fist clenched around his red, abused cock, struggling to come. Thankfully, the sounds of passion from next door had finally diminished and the tantalising murmuring afterwards had ceased. Tarrant pulled on his cock, rampant jealousy no longer preventing him from coming, ingrained shame at his self-feared homosexuality fading. He felt semen pool in his balls, with building intensity. He contemplated Avon, yet again, as a possible lover, but discarded the tempting idea almost immediately. Avon was far too dominant a character for Tarrant’s taste: the slightest conversation between them liable to erupt into a territorial battle. No, Avon was out of the question. Vila, however... Now there was a tantalising little morsel. Tarrant pumped himself harder, thinking of Vila under him, bullied and subdued into pliant obedience. He pictured Vila naked, on his knees, sucking hard on his cock, head held firmly in place by Tarrant’s masterful hands, while Tarrant fucked his

mouth. He moaned, his come rising from his balls, erupting onto his belly. Breathing heavily, he sank back onto the pillows, muscles all aquiver. Yes, he would definitely have Vila, regardless of anything the little coward might say. In fact, it might be rather

exciting to have to 'persuade' him, with just a soupçon of force, perhaps...

He lay contemplating the capture of the pawn, never once thinking of the eventual fall of the black king.

# BUCOLIC BLISS

## M. Fae Glasgow

NO MATTER HOW MANY PLANETFALLS HE MADE, BLAKE COULD NEVER QUITE GET USED TO THE LIGHT. It was pervasively different from shipboard or Dome illumination, the natural seeming so very artificial to him. It always struck him deep inside, a bizarre truth that light could be warm, that it could be felt on the skin, that it could change with such irresponsible frivolity. He walked slowly through the copse, touching the tree boles as he passed, fascinated by the rough texture of living growth. Ground springy beneath his feet, he found himself walking almost flat-footed, bracing himself against so unreliable a surface. He laughed out loud at the thought, at the very absurdity of considering a planet's surface to be less stable and still than the floor of a ship hurtling through the uncertainties of space. The smorgasbord of smells thrilled him, flora and fauna inundating his senses. A sweet smell hovered around him: honeysuckle. Before he disappeared off for a solitary break, Avon had informed him that the initial colonists had imported as much of Earth's natural and extant life as was possible. For the first time ever, Blake found himself thanking the Federation for their thoroughness. Coming to a particularly lush patch of grass, garlanded by buoyant clover, bordered by reeds, he realised that he had finally reached the stream the Rebels had mentioned. It was small and slow, almost completely silent, no tumbled stones, no loamy moss, no darting fish—hardly a respectable stream at all. At least the water was fresh and cold when Blake sipped some from cupped hands. He took off his boots and socks, standing up to his ankles in the chill flow. He stayed there for a while, thinking, regaining some sense of calm and balance, after the frantic pace of the past five weeks. Eventually, toes whitened, numb and wrinkled, he retreated to the bank of the stream, lying down on the disconcertingly pliant ground, pillowing his head on his arms.

The sun was very warm on him and he thought of the banned literature he had read such a lifetime ago. His great-aunt had been a rebel, or merely rebellious, he was never certain which, corrupting both the father and the wide-eyed idealistic child named Roj. One of his favourite passages was the fragment that survived about a child in the now-uninhabitable North American Desert, in a naïve era when a boy

could steal off to lie in the sun by a great river. This might not be any great river, but it was the closest thing to innocent childhood Blake had been free enough to have. Gleaming sunlight and bright-winged insects flittered across his face, their shadows chasing the troubled shades from his mind. He began to drift away, thoughts sliding gently from topic to topic, idea to idea, until, finally, he eased into the realms of daydreams.

Smiling, enjoying his unaccustomed irresponsibility and foolishness, he placed himself in the shoes of the mysterious boy from the past, casting himself as Huck, idly wondering whom he could cast as Tom. A delighted chuckle bubbled from him, imagining Avon, sitting on a raft, fishing, complete with a raggedy rustic, woven straw hat. The more he thought of it, the louder he laughed, until the tears streamed from him. The hilarity ebbed weakly, leaving hiccoughing giggles in their wake. Sighing, Blake eventually calmed himself, relaxing back into the lullaby of the woodland sounds. Most of them were totally unfamiliar to him, but he had been assured that not one of the creatures in the woods could or would harm him. Unless of course, as Avon had said to him, one of the inhabitants turned out to be a Federation spy... Blake smiled at the memory, of Avon so unexpectedly relaxed and at ease, strolling off into the bucolic landscape, defiantly non-conformist in black leather, studs and heavy boots. Blake wondered at him, at the contradictions so tightly contained in Avon's compact body and manner.

Realising that he was about to start brooding again, he deliberately turned his mind away from Avon and on to any other subject he could think of, refusing to tie himself up in emotional bondage to a cypher he didn't really think he wanted to solve. Bathed by luxurious sun, tickled by fragrant breezes, his mind conjured up thoughts of sex, images of how Jenna's looks matched the smell of the breeze, how Cally's long, long legs were like the slim lissome branches of the young trees. Knowing himself to be alone, unencumbered by either Cause or Halo, Blake slipped out of his shirt and threw his trousers off to lie tangled on the grass beside him. He stretched in the unexpectedly heady gloriousness of being nude with natural sunshine gilding his skin. Smiling hap-

pily to himself, he began to slowly indulge himself, with stroke of hand and image of mind.

The parlour-polite sound of a genteel throat being cleared stuttered his hand to stillness. Grabbing his shirt to cover his embarrassment, he twisted over onto his side, raking the surrounding copse for his well-mannered voyeur. Well above the ground, veiled by leaves, reclining on the long, thick branch of a spreading oak tree, Avon lay leaning against the aged trunk, shirt and boots discarded, milk-white skin pinking in the dappled sunshine and shifting shadows. "I thought you might prefer to know that you had an audience, before you gave your impromptu performance, Blake," he said, voice quiet and missing its usual cutting edge.

"Why, thank you," Blake replied, discomfiture colouring his own tone. "How very considerate of you."

Absently tearing a leaf into small morsels, keeping his eyes off of Blake, Avon mused aloud, as if to himself, "And what, I wonder, evoked such an uncharacteristic moment of self-indulgence in our great and fearless leader? What—or, perhaps, who—could ensnare him enough to free him from his servitude to the glorious revolution?"

"That's enough, Avon. Leave it."

A sudden grin lit the tech's face, leavening the moment and the atmosphere. "Oh, but I'm not entirely certain I want to. The question is far too intriguing to dismiss so lightly."

Blake lay in a circle of light on the ground, propped up on one elbow, shirt still strategically draped. He stared quizzically up at Avon, confused by some odd twist to the tech's mood. He wondered, again, if Avon were using drugs; if something so seedy could be the key to understanding the elegant convolutions of his fellow Alpha. Avon's eyes were, indeed, bright, pupils dilated despite the mottled darkness drifting erratically over him. His smile hid itself, leaving behind his spiralling humour—almost whimsical, a dry sweetness, like wine.

"Well, Blake? Are you going to put me out of my misery and unravel this, the eighth great wonder of the Universe? Or do you condemn me to languish forever in the bottomless pit of ignorance with only Vila for company?"

Blake conceded to the teasing attitude, deliberately responding to Avon's unaccustomed openness: the whys and wherefores behind it be damned, and his own instinctive uneasiness at becoming too involved with the man could be damned along with them.

With a smile, he replied, "Now, I could hardly do a thing like that, could I now, Avon. Wouldn't exactly go with my messianic image, would it?" He rolled flat onto his back, losing sight of Avon, speaking instead to the oblivious audience of the long strands of clouds sailing above him. "If you're really so curious, I was thinking of Jenna and Cally..."

"Together? With each other, together with you, or singly with you?"

Faint surprise tinged Blake at Avon's puerile curiosity. "Actually, only how attractive they both were."

"Well now, I don't suppose I should be surprised by such lack of imagination, not considering the source is a self-admitted messiah."

"Had you given me more time, perhaps I wouldn't have disappointed you so."

"Oh, I certainly hope so." A breeze quickened, rustling the leaves noisily, blossoming goosepimples on Blake's exposed nakedness. "Tell me, messiah, are your carnal thoughts limited to such infantile imaginings, or are you capable of sophistication, in this area at least, as it is so woefully lacking elsewhere?"

"Why do you ask? Can't come up with any ideas of your own? Shame on you, Avon. You had me thinking you were a genius."

A slight chuckle came from Avon's perch, the sound merging with the melancholy call of a nesting bird. "Lack of imagination has never been one of my problems."

"And what *do* you consider to be 'one of your problems'?"

"I *have* only one, Blake. You."

Blake seized the opportunity to have the nagging, aching question at the back of his mind answered at last. "Only me? Not the mysterious, elusive Anna?"

There was a long pause between them, then Avon spoke again. His voice was defenceless and sad, hesitant in its revelations. "You want to know about Anna? Then I shall tell you, Blake, and I wish you more joy of the knowledge than I have ever had. She was...very important to me, possibly the most important person in my entire life. I can imagine only too well what happened to her. No matter how hard I try, a day doesn't pass without me *imagining* what happened, what they must have done to her, how she must have died..."

The voice hardened, grating against the submerged pain in his throat. "She was young and chic and complex, an irresistible mix of intelligence and



beauty and vulnerability. I was drawn to her like a moth to a flame...but it was not I who was burned. No, it was my Anna, arrested and tortured to death for information she never gave them, information that would have captured me, but freed her. She died for me, Blake, for my greed, for my driven need to provide her with wealth and comfort beyond that which her husband could give. She died because I would not be satisfied with what she gave me—I wanted to make her leave him, to take the risk of being a renegade, just for the...pleasure of being with me.”

Cautious, moved by the emotion in Avon and the story he told, Blake spoke softly. “She obviously loved you as much as you loved her.” He paused, waiting for the expected denial of emotional commitment. Into its absence, he continued, “why, then, would she not leave her husband for you?”

“Because, dolt, her husband was on the High Council and had the power—and malice—to make accusations of treason against both of us. He had the influence and he had the necessary access to the Security Forces. She stayed with him to protect *me*.”

Blake pondered this for a moment, wisely deciding to say nothing about married women having affairs, who managed to come up with a reason to stay with their husbands—especially when the given reason was the protection of their lover. “And when you think of love, is that all you can see? The pain and the loss?”

“Oh, no, you don’t, Blake. I’ll not allow you to practice your amateurish psychoanalysis on me.”

“Then what do you imagine, when you...”

“Masturbate? Surely so innocuous a word cannot sully your brightly shining halo. *Surely* even fearless leaders are allowed to experience sexuality? Or is a virgin sacrifice what your bloody Cause demands?”

“If that’s the case, I had better renounce my leadership, then, because I most certainly don’t qualify!”

The pseudo-horror and mock shock in Blake’s voice tickled Avon’s unpredictable sense of humour, just as the rebel had intended. He had no desire to waste this precious day of freedom on Avon’s darkness. As the laughter dimmed, Blake went on, twisting them onto a brighter path. He glanced over at Avon perched up a tree, idly swinging his legs, plucking leaves and dropping them to the ground below. “If you could only see yourself, Avon, the man in black, up a tree, like a stranded kitten.”

“If you could only see yourself, Blake, the man in halo with his...assets hanging out all over the place.”

Blake blushed, hurriedly looking down at himself, twitching the brown shirt over to cover his tumescent manhood. “*Touché*,” he muttered.

They maintained their separate silences for another moment, then Blake threw caution to the winds and asked his question again. “What *do* you think about when you masturbate?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“To save me from that bottomless pit of ignorance with only Vila for company, of course.”

“Well now, I think I would prefer it if you satisfied my curiosity first and told me what *you*, an exemplary, gleaming icon of the Rebellion, fantasize about.”

“Oh, I see. You tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine?”

Avon smiled at the amusement in Blake’s voice. “It does seem somewhat...immature, when phrased like that. Very well, I shall go first.” He paused, giving Blake the impression that he was weighing whether or not to tell the truth, and, of course, how much. “I think of Anna. Of the times like this, when we would come to her country estate and escape the drudgeries of reality, to dwell in ‘bucolic bliss’, for a brief time.” The bitter sarcasm in his voice made Blake wince, but then the tone was gone, replaced by wistfulness. “I would climb a tree, just as I did in my childhood, at home, when I needed to escape my tutors or brothers or all the long list of things expected from me. I’d sneak into the garden and hide in the trees and dream...Anna shared that with me, in a way. She has...*had* a fondness for living, natural things. I simply liked to evade the pressures foisted on me by other people’s demands.”

“And?”

“And I would spin her tales, erotic stories, and she would laugh with delight, until she called me to her, to make the stories true...” Avon stopped and Blake left him his solitude, gave him time as a balm.

“You haven’t quite answered my question.”

“No, I haven’t, have I?”

“And you’re not going to, are you?”

“Tell you my deepest, darkest secrets? Not on your life, Blake. Not on your life.” He sat for a moment, adrift in thoughts of the past. He stirred, bringing his mind back to Blake. “Well,” the tech said, businesslike, humour forced back into his voice, “now it’s your turn. What do you fondly imagine, on those precious few occasions when you allow yourself that most human of vices?”

“Me? As I said, I think of Jenna and Cally, of how

beautiful they are...," he murmured, leafing through his catalogue of fantasies, "and about Vila..."

"Vila?" Avon spluttered. "You think how beautiful Vila is?"

Blake laughed uproariously. "No, no, not how beautiful he is. How skilled those hands of his must be!"

"That's better. You had me worried there, Blake. For a moment, I feared that it might actually be possible for you to be even stupider than I had already thought." For the first time, Avon looked at Blake as he spoke, keeping his attention on him, waiting for Blake to answer his question. "And what of me, Blake? Do you think of me?"

Blake stared up at him, mesmerised by the deep eyes, held by the unspoken words locked within them. "Oh yes," he breathed, turning over to face Avon, letting his shirt drop at the sexual willingness written in those eyes, "oh, yes, indeed." He gave in to his second greatest weakness: wanting Avon. "I think of how your hands would feel on me, your mouth open under mine, your hardness pressed against me..."

He rose to his feet, walking naked and pale towards the tree, his erection firming and rising before him, seducing Avon with words and image. "I think about how you would nip and bite me, your lips tracing all over me, opening to take me inside you, tongue stroking me as I take you within me. I think," he said, as he reached the bough cradling Avon and reached up, calling Avon down into his arms, watching with undisguised happiness as the man succumbed to him, his eyes enraptured by passion, painful cynicism suspended by hopeful homecoming. "I think of how you would feel inside me, fucking me, of how you will sound when you thrust into me, of how you'll sound when you come inside me..."

Avon grabbed him, drowning them in a desperate, ferocious kiss. Blake was shocked to his core by the frantic need in them both, at the strength of the long-denied and carefully unacknowledged feeling between them. He saw the root of his uneasiness with Avon, recognised the cause of their pyrotechnic push-me-pull-you relationship. In that single, searing kiss, he saw his fear and knew its name: love. Moaning, from lust, love and terror at the fire burning them, he knelt before Avon, a needy acolyte. Slowly, with lingering fingertips and laving tongue, he peeled supple black leather from lithe thighs, unleashing the long, slender cock, revealing its translucent skin and pulsing blue veins. Gracefully, Avon stepped free of

the pool of night at his feet, a single kick arching the unwanted trousers. Blake stood, picking Avon up, hoarding him in his arms, clenching him tight against reason and common sense, against the sensible, passionless warnings to let go *now* lest he, like Anna before him, was consumed by the brilliant candle in the dark that was Avon. The mouth open beneath his withdrew, making them both breathe, allowing reason a glimmer of its vicious knowledge to part them. Then, deliberately, with infinite care and boundless comfort, Avon soldered them back together, joined at the mouth, breathing, one for the other. Blake surrendered his soul, gladly sacrificing at this altar. He lowered Avon to the pliant, yielding grass and lowered himself onto the pliant, yielding flesh beneath him. He lost himself in tactile heaven, stroking and kneading, needing and loving and filling empty places in his life with this living, pulsing passion surging beneath him. Avon rolled them over, kneeling over Blake, hair falling into his eyes, cheeks flushed rosy, eyes sparkling with love. "Well, now," he gasped, "does this improve on your mental meanderings, or shall I leave you to your fantasies?"

Blake growled up at him, hauling him down to press their cocks together, rubbing against the exquisite hardness. Avon slipped from his grasp, sliding slowly down Blake's body, strong hands squeezing and shaping smooth muscles as he went. He grinned at Blake, eyes heavy with lust, licking his lips in anticipation. Watching Blake watching him, he lowered his head, stretching his mouth wide and engulfed Blake with a single swallow. The rebel bucked under him, almost undone, and Avon granted him mercy. Leaving him heaving in great lungfuls of air, he bent Blake's legs at the knees, exposing his goal, his haven. Still watching the febrile brown eyes staring at his, at the speechless, quivering man at his fingertips, Avon licked his palm and slowly stroked the wetness over the smooth skin of his penis, licking and wetting again and again until Blake was cursing with frustration. Then, slowly, with exquisite control, he moved forward between Blake's bent knees, sliding down until he was almost completely prostrate on the ground, the lush grass caressing his erection as a forest of trees caress the wind whilst it snakes its sinuous dance among them. He lay one hand on Blake's dewdropped cock, fingertips feathering the length of veins pounding under the silken soft skin. Distracting Blake with his delicious touch, he moved forward, easing himself into the rebel, pushing quickly past the painful ring of muscle into the need-

ful warmth beyond. He groaned, thrusting, burying himself in Blake. His eyes closed, losing sight of Blake writhing under him.

Blake still watched, savouring each moment and movement, gazing with rapt adoration at the transforming love etched on Avon's face. He couldn't withhold the words any longer, he had to share his discovery. "Avon," he whispered, hoarse with emotion. "Avon..." The dark head raised, almost-black eyes meeting Blake's. "Avon..." he breathed again, needing to hear the name on his lips, to feel his mouth forming his feelings. He swallowed back his inbuilt, still-lingering wariness of those, the three most powerful words he had ever known, part of him awaiting the stinging rejection the damning phrase would unleash on him. "Kerr, I love you."

Avon smiled at him, lying flat on him, leaning down to kiss his mouth as deeply as his penis kissed him inside. "I know..." Avon whispered softly against Blake's lips. "It became rather obvious, didn't it now?" Avon knelt, bringing Blake up onto his thighs, curling Blake under him, opening him up to even deeper penetration, pumping faster and harder, sweat dripping from the two of them as passion flared, as climax approached, as they lost themselves in the culmination of lust and denied love. Blake's whole body spasmed once, twice, a third time, exploding his seed from him, garlanding the hair on Avon's chest like a tree with winter's snow, plummeting Avon over the precipice of driven need to the blinding pleasure of orgasm.

Blake felt Avon's weight drop onto him, constricting the rebel's legs, bent between their two bodies. Reluctantly, he eased Avon off, gently cradling the spent man in his arms against the slowing beat of his over-full heart. Languidly, ready for this moment to continue forever, he stroked the dark hair, smiling at the way it curled, laughing inside at the man's vanity in never allowing the waviness to show. Avon settled into the embrace, gentle hands stroking, soft lips bestowing little kisses on damp skin, tasting the fruits of both their efforts, rubbing Blake's cum into his own skin and onto Blake's. Gradually, he stilled and Blake thought him asleep. The rebel's own movements grew more lethargic as sleep crept up on him also, sending him drifting on the cloudy river of dreams.

The motion of Avon twisting out of his embrace and sitting up roused him. He watched indulgently as the tech smoothed his hair, got to his feet and moved off to the side of the clearing. Blake stretched,

enjoying the luxury of sun and zephyr on his skin, giving Avon privacy while he went about his business. The sound of a zipper rasping made him bolt upright.

"Avon?" he said, not wanting to understand why the tech was getting dressed.

"Yes?" he answered, utterly blank, a typical Avon non-expression defacing him.

"Why are you getting dressed?"

"I wanted to go back to the camp for some lunch. It's getting rather late."

Relief washed over Blake and he jumped up to gather his own clothes. "I'll come with you."

"No, don't bother. I know you brought a picnic and you did say that you wanted a whole day away from the Rebellion with all its stress and worry. So, why don't you just go on with your plans and I'll go on with mine."

Blake felt himself chill. "No, no, it's quite all right. I'll come back with you." Fear crept up his spine, making his voice cold and unfriendly. "We could go straight back up to the ship...if you want to."

Avon looked at him, apparently puzzled. "Why would we want to do a thing like that? Honestly, Blake, you do get worse. You spend weeks complaining about having no free time, no rest, no privacy, and as soon as you get what you've been snivelling for, you're racing back to the ship. Well, not I. I shall go for lunch and then meet that computer expert they told us about. If it isn't mere coincidence that the names are the same, then she's someone I knew at University and I'd rather like to renew our...acquaintance."

"Enough, Avon! Look, I don't know why you're trying to do this, but I won't let you..."

"And what, precisely," Avon said, voice dangerously calm, "is it that you won't *allow* me to do?"

"Destroy this. Deny what happened between us..."

"Ah," Avon said, as though a great revelation had descended upon him. "You are, of course, referring to our little...tryst." He smiled. Blake shuddered, girding himself for the battle to make Avon live with his feelings, to accept the possibilities of love. "You foolishly think I'm going to pretend that it never happened."

Relief washed over Blake.

"Don't be absurd, Blake. It was the best fuck I've had in months."

Horried, struck speechless, Blake watched as Avon finished pulling on his boots and turned back

to the path. "You can't diminish it like that. It was far more than mere 'fucking' and you know it!"

"Do I indeed? And I thought Cally was the only one who could read minds."

"Avon, stop right there. Listen to me," Blake said, rushing over to grab Avon by the shoulders, barely resisting the temptation to shake some sense into the man. "What we had there was very special..."

"Oh, I'm not denying that."

"It was more than sex, Avon. That was making love."

Avon sneered up at Blake, dusting the offending hands from his shoulders and the offending words from his mind. "You may tell yourself whatever tales you wish, if that will keep your halo untarnished in your own eyes, but *I* deal with reality. It was sex, very good sex, I admit, but only sex. That is all, and nothing more."

"Avon, I saw how you responded to me. I saw how you reacted to me!"

"Just like in your fantasies, Blake? To the very last detail, by any chance?" Avon said, dripping acid into Blake's opening wounds. "You know what they say. Delusions of grandeur. You are trying to magnify a fleeting fuck into something far grander."

"No," Blake shouted, again grabbing Avon. Again the tech brushed his hands off. "No," he continued, quieter, wary of pushing Avon further away, watching helplessly as the man withdrew to an even more daunting emotional distance. "It was more than that."

"Perhaps, if you should say it often enough, you might convince me, but I doubt it. Unlike you, I'm hardly likely to confuse lust with love. As I said, I deal in reality, not romantic and stupid dreams. I'll leave that to you and Vila."

"Oh no you don't, Avon. If you try to pretend that what happened between us was just, as you so crudely said, 'fucking', then you are the one who is refuting reality. Tell me, why are you so afraid of love?"

"I'm not afraid of *love*, Blake," Avon snarled, turning contemptuously on his heel. Blake gripped his

upper arm, quite painfully, knowing that he had already lost this round and had no reason, now, to tread delicately around Avon's over-developed sense of dignity.

"Then what *are* you afraid of?" Blake asked. He stared at Avon's unresponsive, shuttered eyes. "Shall I tell you what *I* think frightens you? What I think terrifies you?"

"Well now, until you condescend to let me go, or until I decide to allow this unpleasant little scene to degenerate into a brawl, it seems that I really don't have much of a choice, now, do I?"

"I think—no, I *know*—what scares you so. It's the vulnerability, the loss...the responsibility for someone else's pain. Is that what's wrong here, Avon? Does this remind you too much of Anna? Did you feel too much of that with me? That's the real problem, isn't it, that it was anything *but* just 'fucking'."

Avon glared at him with supreme contempt and perfected disbelief. "You, Blake," he sneered, "are precisely what I've always said you were: an idealistic fool. Now, let go of me. I have had more than enough of your inane prattling." Blake held him, leaning down to kiss him, to reopen the feelings between them. Avon stood rigid under him, mouth clenched shut. Blake increased the intensity of his kiss, pouring all the love boiling inside him into the simple embrace. Suddenly, elatingly, Avon's mouth opened under him. Blake thrust his tongue into the welcome warmth and shocking unexpectedness, Avon bit him. Hard. Bleeding, Blake pulled back, astonished and utterly shocked. "I told you to let go of me, Blake. Try that again, and I shall bite it off."

Spitting blood from his lacerated tongue, Blake could only watch in lonely, helpless defeat as Avon stalked off into the sylvan beauty around him, the singing of birds and sighing of trees masking the sounds of his leaving.

Blake's tongue mended, of course, but the wounds to his spirit lay deep and suppurating, like the chasm that suddenly yawed between him and Avon...all the way to Horizon.

# IV CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

*Or do they? Is it perhaps a lack of clothes? And are appearances really everything?*

## BATHTUB Adrian Alexander

AVON HAD ALWAYS SUSPECTED VILA DIDN'T HAVE THE SENSE TO COME IN OUT OF THE RAIN. What truly dismayed him was the fact that he was standing out in it alongside him.

After the incident on Albion, Blake had gotten it into his head to check the Federation records for other planets being held hostage by the Solium bomb. What he planned to do about it was anyone's guess and Avon's was that Blake expected him to repeat his performance and disarm each and every bomb they came across. As far as Avon was concerned, if this was, in fact, what the rebel had in mind, he'd better think again.

Epcan had been first on Orac's list and a quick check showed the planet had been experiencing internal strife since receiving news of Albion's successful revolt from the Federation's yoke. Blake rushed to Epcan, but Orac's analysis revealed that the Federation had learned from its mistakes and detonated the bomb early in the uprising. The population of this small world was extinguished by the simple push of a button. Unfortunately for Blake, this particular piece of bad news put a damper on any further revolutions in progress on other subjugated planets, leaving this grim warning floating in space, seemingly lifeless, save one thing—a distress signal. Blake, naturally, decided that they must investigate this, in case some were still alive, but unfortunately, in his eagerness to become the saviour saint of Epcan, took a tumble down the steps of the flight deck, badly spraining his ankle. Cally had to watch over Blake, and Jenna had to watch over the ship and Cally and Blake. So by process of elimination and sixty minutes of continuous arguing between Avon and Blake and Cally, and Blake and Vila and Avon, *ad infinitum*, it still left Avon and Vila—no matter how they argued—to do the dirty work

of sorting through the muck and mire to find out who had survived.

After several hours of searching, the two had found the distress beacon working diligently on automatic, as it had been ordered to do before its owner died from radiation poisoning. An abrupt, harried call from Jenna warned them that two pursuit ships were in the area and that Blake had ordered the *Liberator* to move away, out of teleport range, to give the pursuit ships a wide berth. She cut them off before either man could protest, or ask for survival equipment. Without so much as a by-your-leave, the Alpha tech and the Delta thief were left to their own devices until morning.

And this was why Kerr Avon was standing in the rain, soaked to the bone and furious with himself for allowing Blake to talk him into such a preposterously stupid act as coming down to this godforsaken rock.

"Avon, if we don't find somewhere soon, we'll die out here. And I don't mind telling you, dying in the rain is no fun," Vila groaned, trying to keep up with the tech.

"I had no idea that dying in any form was fun." Avon stopped, his eyes searching the area, trying to see clearly in the encroaching darkness.

"I mean, the first signs of dying from exposure are you get sleepy and exhausted," Vila continued to babble, dancing from one foot to the other, "and I'm freezing, my body's as cold as Servalan's heart."

Avon hated to admit it, but the thief had a point, the chill rain beginning to take its toll. "We could always backtrack to that communications station and get out of the weather there."

Vila shuddered. "With all those dead bodies lying around? No thank you. I'd rather curl up next to a fire in a nice cave somewhere."

"You'd probably find bodies in there, too—people

futilely searching for a safe place, but of course, there weren't any. And this," he swept a hand round the gathering gloom, at the hunched bodies still visible, "could have been Albian. The bomb here exploded, sending forth radiation which penetrated as deeply as twenty miles into the surface, through earth, stone, concrete and metal. No one and nothing was spared," Avon lectured, taking a narrow path to the right. "Even the bodies we've seen lying around won't decompose until microorganisms are reintroduced into the ecosystem. Every living creature, no matter how small, is dead. This world is utterly sterile."

Vila pulled a leaf, seemingly undamaged, from the tree. "You mean this is dead?" He held it out, but even as he asked his question, the leaf's cellular structure began to disintegrate, allowing it to crumple to dust.

"Obviously."

Vila brushed the remaining bits of leaf from his fingers. "Will it hurt us? I mean, I don't fancy getting another dose of radiation poisoning, I felt awful enough the last time it happened."

"Within twenty-four hours after the blast, it was safe to return to the planet's surface, and within forty-eight hours the planetary radiation levels were back to normal. Nothing holds this specific type of radiation for long, not water, metal nor any other inorganic building material. Even the organic ones which maintained their integrity, give up the radiation within forty-eight hours. Unless we run into troopers, there is nothing left on this planet which can possibly hurt us."

Vila eyed the tech skeptically. "Well, if that's so, then why do you still have your gun out?"

Avon glanced down at the gun in his hand. It felt so natural there he'd forgotten he was still holding it. He did an excellent job of keeping how foolish he felt from showing on his face and if Vila noticed, he knew better than to say anything.

"Look." Avon pointed with his free hand as he replaced his weapon in its holster. The thief could make out a dark shape which coalesced into a cabin as they neared it.

"Hope there's no *body* home," Vila whispered.

Avon stifled a moan at yet another pun. He studiously ignored Vila as the thief picked the lock easily and stood aside, letting Avon go first as they entered the cavernous, one room cabin. A huge fireplace dominated an entire wall, its massive stone façade bleak and uncompromising. A large bed, smothered in comforters, stood almost immediately before it,

separated from the wide hearth by a pair of stiff upright chairs. To the right of the door stood a small, functional kitchen area. The place was obviously a weekend hideaway and more obviously, there was no one home

"Build a fire, Vila. There's a wood-shed immediately outside of the door. I shall check around outside."

With only a minimum of grumbling, Vila got a roaring fire going. The light from the blaze danced shadows along the walls, as he leaned close, warming himself. The dull thud of boots on the wooden porch made the Delta straighten and leap like a frightened deer, coming to light beside the door, gun drawn and ready. Avon frowned at the weapon pointed in his face. With a disdainful wave of his hand, he brushed away the offending object and pushed on past the thief. With relief, Vila saw that the tech actually smiled a little when he saw the fire. Avon dropped down on the bed and struggled to remove his waterlogged boots.

"Avon," the thief murmured from the other side of the room. "What's this?"

The tech looked up, to see Vila standing beside an old porcelain bathtub. "It's a tub, idiot, generally used for bathing. Don't Deltas bathe from time to time?"

Vila looked up, considerably more than a little indignant. "Of course we do, but we only get showers, not like you Alphas and they're usually sonic ones at that. I've heard of a bathtub, mind you, but I've never seen one before, that's all. I'm not *entirely* stupid, you know."

Avon released a long suffering sigh. "Well, you could've fooled me." Vila stared at him as Avon started trying to drag the wet leather clothes off. He shook his head and looked at the shivering thief. "Why don't you use it? The hot water should work. I saw what I think are primitive solar collectors on the roof. It will take the chill off and perhaps help you smell better. I am going straight under the covers."

Vila watched, fascinated, as the tech draped his shirt and jacket over the edge of a straight backed chair. Glimmering light from the fire rebounded off his white skin, highlighting every muscle. A small shiver ran through the thief. Quickly, he averted his eyes, reprimanding himself for the lecherous thoughts running rampant through his mind.

"What do I have to do to make this thing work?"

Avon opened his mouth to start to tell the Delta, but instead of words, he sighed again and gracefully

moved across the room. Pushing Vila out of his way, he reached down and put the plug in place, then turned the handles. Almost immediately steaming water came pouring out of the taps. "Hot...cold. Adjust the temperature to your liking by turning them one way or the other and this..." he pushed back hard on the handles, "is how you turn it off. Leave about six inches to the top or it will overflow when your mass displaces the water. Understand?"

It took a second for Vila to bring his thoughts back to what the tech was saying; the nearness of the Alpha's half naked body was severely disconcerting.

"Of course, I understand. A child could understand that."

"Good, I was afraid I'd made it too difficult for you." The tech whirled around and returned to the bed. Vila started to pull his shirt off over his head and was blessed with a quick glance at Avon's bare body as he slipped under the bed's heavy duvet.

Vila turned back to the steaming tub. Slowly at first, he began to strip off his clothes, but the chill of the night air made him complete the job quickly. He'd felt Avon's eyes on him from the start and it stirred his curiosity to find out what was going on in the tech's mind. The dark haired man had always kept to himself, even on the *London*. They'd shared a few moments of camaraderie, but the majority of the time, it seemed Avon only tolerated him for his skills and his ability to withstand Avon's scathing wit. Now something was different; there was an odd feeling, a sense of mixed emotions coming from the Alpha.

Back turned, Vila decided to go on his instincts, draping his clothes beside Avon's next to the fire and naked, he carefully climbed into the deep bathtub, submerging himself to the neck, a deep sigh escaping his lips. Raising his hand from the water, he watched the crystal droplets fall from his fingers, smiling at how the red/amber firelight made them twinkle. The body on the bed shifted, but remained silent.

Vila let his thoughts wander, taking the memory of the tech's lean body sliding under the covers one step further. In his mind's eye, Avon lay exposed on the bed, his body shimmering in the undulating light, a fine sheen of sweat his only covering. He looked at the thief through half closed eyes, tracing his sensual, full lips with the tip end of his moist, pink tongue. Vila could see his outstretched arms envelop him as he melted into the inviting body.

"Vila."

The thief jerked upright, water splashing over the

sides, startled back to reality by fantasy's voice. "What? Eh...um?" Guiltily, he removed his hand from his straining member, willing it to do the impossible: to forget Avon.

"If you fall asleep in there, at best you'll drown, at worst, you'll have a case of terminal wrinkles. So get out and come to bed."

"To bed? With you?"

Avon dramatically glanced side to side, sweeping the empty room with his gaze. "Well, now, either that or you could cuddle up with any *body* you desired back at the communications station."

Vila could hear the smile in the tech's voice and something else...an invitation? Grinning at his own fanciful thinking, he shook his head sternly admonishing himself. *Vila, me old chum...*

He stood up, his erection bobbing at half mast, then almost sat back down again in a futile attempt to hide it. But it was too late; Avon had raised himself up on one elbow, carefully watching with cool, impassive eyes. A cold draft made Vila shiver, goosepimples suddenly forming on his damp skin. Quickly, he looked around for something to dry off with, but there was nothing in sight. His lost puppy look seemed to evoke just the right amount of sympathy from Avon, who tossed the comforter back and patted the bed. Vila stared a moment at the petitioning hand, then gave in to the only reasonable option available and made a mad dash towards the inviting warmth. He tumbled in, drawing the heavy cover up to his chin, letting it hold the heat of his body, cocooning him snugly. Across the room, the crackling of the fire played a staccato counterpoint to the drumming song of the rain beating down on the metal roof. It was peaceful and warm, so lovely and warm. His eyes drifted shut, the muscles of his body going slack, succumbing to a deep weariness.

"Vila?"

"Eh?" His body jerked at the sound of the intruding voice.

"What were you thinking about in the bathtub?"

"Me?" Vila swallowed guiltily. "Oh, you know, the usual." He cracked an eye open, only to find Avon looking right at him. Quickly, he closed that eye.

"No, tell me," Avon's soft, persuasive voice prompted.

"The usual." Vila struggled to avoid a truthful answer. "How much I hate this place...girls...sex."

"Sex and women? Or sex with women?" the tech asked. He seemed to have edged closer. Vila could feel additional body heat flooding against him, se-

ducing him in sweet warmth. Again, he allowed one eye to peek open and took a long, hard look.

Avon's features had softened in the dancing, dim light. Everything, save the curve of his mouth and the look sparkling in his eyes, suggested youthful innocence, but there was no mistaking his intent.

Vila decided to take a chance. He turned and mimicked Avon's casual pose. "I know how stupid you think I am. Not two brain cells to rub together, but before I get my head knocked off, I just want to make sure you're suggesting what I think you're suggesting." He shifted a little closer to the heated body in the bed beside him. "Mind you, I wouldn't be averse to a little, um, slap and tickle, if that's what you're suggesting, but I want you to know, straight off, that I prefer women, soft ones, blonde if I can get 'em, but..." Vila hesitated, noting the smirk on the other man's face. "What's so funny?"

"You. I've been waiting for you to take a breath. You finally did." Warm fingers slid along the square jaw. "I was just wondering if that mouth of yours could do anything besides talk?"

The thief returned the gesture, eyes flashing with mischievous delight at the offer being extended. "Oh, what it can do to you," he whispered, then gently bit and sucked his way down the tech's neck. Avon dropped his head back, smiling from ear to ear. Hot, wet lips brushed lascivious ones and Avon responded with a deep throated growl as he wrapped the smaller man in his arms and rolled him over.

Suddenly the tech found his arms empty as the slippery thief stole his way down the lean narrow body in bed beside him. Fiery wetness enveloped Avon's hard shaft and he couldn't stop the spontaneous, sudden thrust. Instead of choking, Vila felt the added pressure and let the muscles of his throat relax to take the tech more deeply within.

Vila brought his smooth fingers into play, massaging Avon's hypersensitive glans, forcing a moan of ecstasy from his lips. Avon pulled back, panting and trembling.

"Where the hell did you learn to do that?"

Vila smiled wickedly. "Oh, here and there. If you liked that, you just wait till you see what I can do, if you get on your back."

Enthusiastically Avon complied, opening his mind and body to whatever pleasure the talented thief wished to bestow on him.

Skillful fingers and tender lips teased and taunted, drawing Avon to the brink only to back down and allow him to tumble, unrelieved, from the precipice.

"Damn you, Vila Restal! Get on with it."

"Get on with it, he says." Vila leaned back, grinning, flaunting his newfound power over his distraught bedmate, but the power was short-lived as Avon grabbed him by his ears and pulled him down into an intense kiss, tongues intertwining in the warm wetness. Suddenly fingers gouged into the lockpick's ribs. He wriggled and rolled, trying to pull away. "Avon! Avon, stop that!"

Snorts of laughter erupted from the tech. "Ah, so you're ticklish, are you?" With fiendish delight he started after the smaller man.

"No, Avon, don't!" Vila pleaded, but his impassioned words fell on deaf ears as Avon stalked his prey from one corner of the bed to the other.

"Avon, stop. I hate being tickled, listen, I'm serious, dead bloody serious." Vila tried to keep the smile off his face, but failed miserably. "I'll fight you on this."

Avon laughed heartily. "Then fight me."

It took only a second for the thief to consider the precariousness of his position, balanced on the very edge of the bed, then he lunged at the tech. Avon's eyes widened, surprised at Vila's strength. They rolled as one, Avon trying to tickle and Vila trying, in vain, to stop him.

Gales of laughter rolled through the room. Shadows played off their shimmering, sweat-soaked skins. Vila pushed hard against his torturer and grabbed his wrists, quickly drawing them behind the hapless tech's back. Forcing his weight down onto the larger, but unbalanced, man, Vila found himself staring down into black, bedroom eyes.

"Well, now, it seems I've got you right where you want me."

Vila grinned, "I'd say you'd gotten that wrong, but I know you haven't." He took his tongue and traced the outline of Avon's delicate lips. "You are bloody marvellous. A helluva lot more fun than Blake."

Avon frowned. "Blake? You've had Blake?"

Sensing his mistake, Vila quickly tried to distract Avon by nipping down the side of his neck. "If you could call it that."

Avon's back arched as hot lips sucked and bit his nipples. A thrill of electricity shot through to his brain, raising tiny goosebumps on his skin.

Vila released the captured wrists and travelled downward. Engulfing the hard shaft, he threw himself into it, giving Avon the ride of his life, making him buck and squirm until Vila had to put a restraining arm over his narrow hips to hold him still.



Tiny whimpers and evocations to god prompted the thief to stretch his imagination, making things up as he went along, responding to Avon's pleas for completion. Vila suddenly felt the lean hard body shudder violently underneath him. Hot, salty semen filled his mouth and he had little choice but to swallow or drown. Avon threw back his head and cried out, a long, low wail, wrought not of pain, but of complete and utter satiation.

Avon's long fingers reached down and tenderly stroked the head resting on his abdomen.

"If you want to do this again, Avon..."

"Oh, yes."

"We'll have to find a soundproof room. If we do it aboard the *Liberator*, everyone will know. You're a noisy one, you know."

"I enjoy myself."

"I'll say you do."

The fingers ceased their caress. "And Blake, does he enjoy himself?"

Vila moaned and raised up so he could see the tech. "You know I shouldn't say a thing."

"But you will, won't you?"

Vila cocked his head. "Only if you say I can answer his questions about you...if he should ask, that is. I mean, it's only fair, Avon."

The tech thought for a moment, his own curiosity warring with his innate desire for privacy. As usual, his curiosity won out. "All right, you have my permission to answer any questions Blake may put to you about our little escapade, but nothing more. Now, what about Blake?"

"He's quiet, but his face scrunches up." Vila tried to show what he meant, forcing a laugh from the tech, who reached down and ruffled his fine hair.

"Do go on."

"Well, he's...now don't take this wrong, Avon, he's—um—bigger than you, but size doesn't mean a thing if you don't know what to do with it."

"And Blake doesn't?"

It was Vila's turn to laugh, "Well, you know how really big men are, they expect you to be so thrilled with the size of them, that they don't think they have to do anything but stick around being huge. I mean, Jenna knows more about giving a blowjob than Blake does...and even if he ever knew how in the first place, they wiped it from his mind with all his other memories."

"Jenna? You've had Jenna?"

Vila's eyes widened with surprise, "Haven't you? I thought everyone'd had Jenna—even Cally's had

her. Unless, of course, Jenna's not your type, if you know what I mean..."

Avon stared off into the darkness, perplexed. "Oh, but she is and Cally, oh, Cally very *definitely* is. I simply thought..." He paused, then continued, obviously intrigued. "What about Cally, is she a good lover?"

Vila sighed wistfully, "Oh, Cally is sweet, very gentle. A little naïve, but she learns quickly, so that's all right, but..." Vila hesitated, "but she does this little trick when you're ready to come and she's ready to come with you. She sneaks into your mind and, well, she experiences it from both sides at the same time. Must be quite a thrill for her, but..."

"But what?"

"Oh, nothing, it just feels really strange to have someone else walking around in your brain."

"Then why do you let her do it?"

"Well, I honestly don't think I could stop her and anyway, she enjoys it so much. 'Sides there's plenty of room for the both of us up here." Vila tapped his head and smiled.

"I don't doubt that for an instant," Avon grinned, taking the sting out of the insult. "And what about Gan?" he asked quietly.

"Gan?" Vila paused, his eyes sparkling with reflected light from the tears which threatened them. "Gan was my friend. There aren't many people I put in that category. Gan would've given his life for me." Again, the thief hesitated, "And he did, didn't he. I miss Gan. I really miss him." Angry with himself for revealing so much, Vila quickly wiped the tears from his cheeks. "Now look what you've gone and done, made me all melancholy. You've ruined it now, haven't you? Damn it, Avon, sometimes..."

Hot lips smothered angry words as a warm hand slid down the thief's hip and to the limp penis between his legs. The caress began gently, at first, then the narrow fingers tightened, quickening the pace. The thief's breath came out in short uneven gasps as wave upon wave of pleasure rolled through his body. Mouth joined hand, both working in concert. Vila couldn't take his eyes off the bobbing brown hair until at last his own orgasm took him, forcing his head back into the pillow as his life's seed flowed from him.

Both lay still, wrapped in a cocoon of silence. Only the crackling of the dying embers of the fire serenaded them to sleep.

"Avon? Avon, are you all right?"

Avon sat straight up in bed. It took a moment or

two for him to reorient himself and remember where he was...and with whom. The tech leaned down and snatched his bracelet from the floor.

"Of course I'm all right, Blake. After all, you merely abandoned me on an uninhabited planet with only an idiot for company, so why the hell shouldn't I be all right?"

"Well, you took long enough to answer. What is it? Do you like that planet so much you and Vila want to wait for the Federation troop carriers coming our way to arrive and explain how the two of you survived the Solium?"

Avon punched Vila in the ribs lightly. The thief simply groaned and turned over.

"Well?"

"Give me a few minutes, I have to waken Vila up."

"I'll give you exactly two minutes and then I'll teleport, ready or not."

Avon threw the comforter off the bed. "Get up, idiot and get dressed. You have less than two minutes. Unless, of course, you want to arrive on the *Liberator* stark naked." The tech hopped out of bed and grabbed his leather pants, mouth twisting in distaste at the feel and smell of the damp leather, then both eyes widened with surprise. Try as he might, he couldn't get the trousers past his hips.

"Vila!"

Avon's angry shout roused the thief.

"Get up—now!"

Dulled with sleep, Vila rubbed his eyes, rolling over to face the fireplace and Avon. He came fully awake as he watched the slightly larger man pull Vila's own trousers on.

"Wait a minute, Avon, what is this?"

"My clothes are still wet and as they were quite tight beforehand and I do not intend to go back aboard *Liberator* with only a sheet around me, I have decided to, shall we say, accept your kind loan of clothing. Now, get your shirt on, before Blake teleports you as is."

Sensing impending disaster, Vila quickly did as he was told. Dropping his feet to the cold wooden floor, he ran over to the now-dead fire, shouldering into his shirt, running back to try and get a sheet before Blake teleported him back up, with only a shirt to cover his bare assets.

Blake, Cally and Jenna fought to keep the grins off their faces as a half dressed, bedraggled, unshaven Avon stepped forward off the teleport pad, looking like something the cat would refuse to drag in. The killing look in his eyes dared them to be stupid enough to comment as to why he was carrying his own clothes but wearing Vila's trousers; however, their parting view of a redfaced Vila brought gales of knowing laughter, as the thief beat a hasty retreat toward his cabin, naked bum wiggling in the light.

# ONCE MORE, DEAR FRIEND, INTO THE BREECHES Cally Donia

“AVON?”

VILA’S VOICE SOUNDED PARTICULARLY SMALL IN THE DIM SILENCE OF THE FLIGHT DECK. “Avon? You awake?”

“Of course, I’m awake. Thankfully, your sleeping sickness does not appear to be contagious,” the comptech replied, his voice ringing out with irritated clarity.

Vila walked slowly around until he could see Avon hunched tensely at his station. “Well?” the dark man muttered. “Have you something to say, or did you just come here to watch the rabid beast?”

“Avon...”

“You have already said that. I’m sure if you search long enough, you’ll find that even *your* mind contains more than one word.”

By now, Vila was standing close beside Avon, contemplating the sharp profile, weighing things in his mind, trying to choose the best words. “Avon,” he began and was rewarded by an exasperated sigh. “Yes, yes, I know I’ve already said that, but I’m not sure what I want to say. Well, I know what I want to say, I’m just not sure how to say it...and manage to keep my head attached to my shoulders.” He stopped, still watching the discouraging profile. “It’s just, well, I’m not the greatest genius ever born, and despite what *you* say, I’m not a complete fool, either. And even if I were, I’d still be able to see that you’re losing grip.” If looks could kill, Vila Restal would have died instantly. He gulped a breath instead and, trying not to flinch too obviously under Avon’s gimlet stare, he continued. “I mean, when you went off your rocker like that earlier, it’s well, it’s just not you, is it? Ranting and raving like that—more Blake’s style, really, if you think about it.” This time, Avon’s baleful glower would have buried the little lockpicker—alive, preferably. The comptech returned his gaze to his console, face blank, as he seemed to dismiss Vila’s very existence from the Universe itself.

“Avon, listen to me, don’t just shut me out. Now, I’m not saying I blame you, mind. I mean, it’s just not funny what’s been happening, what with Blake gone and Cally dead and everyone else betraying us right, left and bloody centre...but you can’t let it get on top of you like this. You can’t come apart at the seams.”

“I am not, as you put it, ‘coming apart at the seams’, nor am I losing grip. And even if I were, Vila, it would be my choice and no mealy-mouthed mumblings from you would hold me back.”

“No one *chooses* to go under...no one in their right minds, at any rate.” Avon turned a scalding glare on Vila. His victim paled, but held his ground. He dredged the depths of his compassionate understanding and affection, then gently, very soothingly, began to speak again. “Avon. It’s obvious that you’re not quite...right, just now. It’s the pressure, I suppose, and the losses, isn’t it? You’re in a horrible position, too. And, well, leaving aside the reasons—and some of them are very good ones, mind you—you *are* losing it a bit, aren’t you? But Avon,” he said, his voice low and intense, “you’ve got to fight harder! We all need you. *I* need you, Avon. Don’t you see? You’re all I’ve got left from...before. If you buckle, we all sink, one big belly-flop. We need you to keep going so’s that...”

“So that we can postpone the inevitable moment when the Federation kills us? Or better yet, captures us alive for a nice cosy mindwipe? Really, Vila, you disappoint me. I thought even you had more sense than to sacrifice yourself to the Great and Glorious Cause.” Vila simply kept on looking Avon straight in the eye until the computer expert gave ground.

“That’s not what I meant at all—and you know it, if you’d care to admit it. I meant that we—you and me—need to hang on just a bit longer until we find Blake. That’s all we have to do.”

Briefly, Avon softened and sighed. “Ah, what I wouldn’t give to find Blake...” His face clenched shut again. “To throw this miserable cause of his back in his face and wash my hands of the whole putrid mess.” He looked blankly into the middle distance, into the emptiness yawning before him. “And then walk away.”

“Yes, well, if that’s what you genuinely want, I suppose you can do that, too—when we find him, that is. But in the mean time, you’ve got to get a grip on yourself. You can’t go around giving repeat performances of this afternoon, or you’ll end up on the funny farm.”

“Is that a threat, Vila? No, of course not. You don’t have the courage to make that kind of threat to me. I am not going insane, Vila, despite your diagnosis. And anyway, from whence did you glean this sudden...expert knowledge of psychiatry? Not from your own personal experience, surely. To you, the human brain is merely a minor organ, infrequently used.”

Vila rolled his eyes heavenward, bit his tongue on his instinctive retort and instead, reached, fingers atremble, to touch Avon’s face. He turned the dark head towards him, letting go hastily when he saw the expression etched there. “Avon,” he whispered, “you’re not an easy man to help. You won’t let any of us touch you or get close to you. But in spite of that, you know I’d give my right arm if it’d make life more bearable for you. And don’t give me that look, I’m not saying this out of pity. *No one’s* that stupid. But back to what I started to say, what I came here for. Anyway, Avon, the only thing keeping us all alive is a nice, healthy paranoia. We’re all entitled to be a bit...eccentric. But what I’m talking about is you being under so much pressure, you’re going to burst. And I don’t mind telling you, I don’t fancy cleaning *that* up—blood and guts everywhere, the very thought makes me feel quite faint. So what I mean is that you’re getting to the end of your tether, aren’t you?”

Avon started to speak, but stopped. He snapped his mouth shut against the insidious, weak words hitting against the back of his teeth, fighting their own rebellion against an intractable dictator. Pride, of course, won. He rose to his feet and strode over to the loungers in front of the teleport area. He perched on the edge of the left-hand chair, rubbing his hands together. Vila followed behind him, stopping at the foot of the lounge, staring down at the troubled being he was risking so much to help.

“You have to listen, Avon—you know that. Look, you’ve got to find a safety valve, a way to let off some of that pressure and, with any luck for the rest of us, one that’s a helluva lot better than today’s performance.”

Avon scowled up at him. “And you, in your infinite wisdom and scintillating brilliance, have found the solution to my supposed...problem?”

Vila blushed and looked down at his feet, shuffling experimentally, seeing if they could distract his attention enough to give him the coward’s way out, to make him forget what he had come to say. It didn’t work, but at least he knew that it only *felt* like Avon had nailed him to the deck.

“Seems obvious, if you ask me,” he said, diffidently, worried by the consequences looming over him.

There was a heartfelt sigh. “All right, Vila. I *am* asking you.”

Vila still couldn’t quite look at Avon. “Well, yes well, it seems to me that if you...you know, kind of...sort of...”

“Will you get to the point! Always assuming, that is, that you *do* have a point? And stop standing there like a recalcitrant schoolboy and look at me.”

Vila did something no one else on the *Scorpio* would have believed him capable of: he shed his Delta slouch, drew himself up as Avon’s equal and spoke with utter clarity and confidence. “My point, Avon, is that there is a tried and true way for releasing tension, reducing stress, and generally making you somewhat less than impossible to be with.”

Avon looked at him, giving away absolutely nothing, waiting for Vila to continue.

“I’m talking about sex, Avon. Gratuitous sex, if you can remember that far back.”

The words hung between them, irretractable, unforgettable. The empty silence twisted around them and flowed over the flight deck. In the face of Avon’s absolute, unblinking stillness, Vila’s confident pose collapsed. He looked everywhere but at the tech, not sure if he’d gotten away with his proposition. Avon stared at the little thief for a long moment, then a chuckle started deep in his stomach, rushing up and out into a full-throated laugh. It echoed around the flight deck, surprising and unnerving Vila. The laughter suddenly cut off, but the dark eyes retained their mocking glint.

“And exactly whom do you propose should assist me in this process? Dayna? Soolin? Or,” his mouth tightened in a smile, “perhaps...Tarrant?” Vila looked down at his feet again, knowing better than to let Avon see how hurt he was that his name wasn’t even included on the list of possibilities.

“Yes, well,” the thief mumbled, “actually, they’d all complicate matters now, wouldn’t they? Want reciprocation and mutual...relief and stuff like that. It’d just get messy, right?” He raised his eyes, watching the comtech, waiting for a response. Finally, he spoke into Avon’s silence. “I’d do it. I’m used to that kind of thing, what with being in prison and a Delta and all, so it’s not something I’d have a problem with. It just being straight sex for your benefit and no change in how you are with me out of bed, I mean.”

Avon stared at him, thoughts raging behind his unreadable eyes. Vila couldn't hold the contact. He turned his head to the side, waiting fatalistically for the decision that could alter the course of both their lives. He stole a quick glance and Avon smiled at him. It was not reassuring. "Avon..." he mumbled, backing off a couple of steps, lowering his eyes.

"Well now, for the first time in your pathetic little life, you have actually made perfect sense, Vila." The tech smiled again, even more unnervingly. "Very well. As you seem to think that I'm so close to the edge, in such dire and desperate straits that I'd go so far as to lean on *you*, I shall humour you. Gratuitous sex would be rather...relaxing, shall we say, so I believe I shall accept your...sacrificial offering."

Vila blushed furiously, torn between his exultation at the prospect of finally going to bed with Avon and needing to make the comtech understand that this was no sacrifice, no unwelcome chore. Words tumbled over and over in his mind as he frantically searched for the lone phrase that would make Avon understand, but wouldn't alienate the tech from him.

Into the still silence of the flight deck, there came a single, familiar sound—the stunningly loud rasp of a zip being yanked open. Vila's head snapped up to meet Avon's coolly mocking stare. "Well? It was your idea, after all. Or are you all mouth—in all the wrong ways?"

Vila swallowed hard and involuntarily looked down at Avon's groin. "On the *flight deck*?" he squeaked. Clearing his throat, he tried again. "I mean, how about somewhere a bit less...a bit more..."

"Hidden? Where the others will never see whose cock you're willing to suck?" Avon smiled wickedly, his expression matching his voice. He reached his hand into his trousers and pulled his phallus free. It lay, tumescent, in pale contrast to the black leather. His other hand reached up and grabbed the back of Vila's neck, forcing him inexorably lower. "It would appear that the moment of truth has arrived, hasn't it now? Well? Did you really mean what you said, or are you just full of hot air?" The voice had grown seductive, almost purring, a gentle tone in total opposition to the harsh grip on Vila's nape. Apparently unfazed, Vila twisted so that he could see Avon's face.

Quietly, he said, "I only thought that we'd go somewhere more private so's you wouldn't be disturbed before you finished, that's all." He shrugged out of Avon's loosening hold, his expression momentarily bleak. "I've had to perform in public before, you know. If someone came in, wouldn't bother me,

anyway." He came back to the present and cleared his expression, smiling into the brown eyes which always made him think of the warmth of potent cognac sliding down his throat. He knelt suddenly, pushing Avon's legs wide apart. Still staring into the bright eyes, Vila slipped his hand into the black trousers, fingertips brushing along the silken softness of skin and into the coarseness of hair. Avon's eyelids grew heavy, lowering to veil sudden vulnerability, charging his face with passion. His lips parted, eyes closed completely, his lashes a curve of midnight against the pallor of his cheeks. Vila dragged his own eyes away from this novel version of Avon's familiar features. He undid the heavy belt, pushing it aside, hurriedly shoving shirt and trousers out of the way. He sat back on his heels to admire the view of Avon's genitalia set in a triangle of white skin framed by black leather, watching his own fingers dance tremblingly along the engorging penis. Some of the tremors were the result of his nervous anxiety to do this right, to make Avon want to come back again and again, but most of the tingling shakiness came directly from his balls. He *wanted* Avon, wanted to hold him in his mouth, savour the taste and warmth, swallow him as he would a fine brandy. He needed to contain him, have this little part of the man, even though he knew it could only be for the few, brief moments Avon would allow. Licking his lips, Vila leaned forward, a small moan of anticipation escaping from him, slipping past his self-imposed barriers. He inhaled deeply, carried away by the heady scent of Avon—musk, maleness and the ever-present leather. Lightly, more lovingly than he could safely dare to admit to either one of them, Vila kissed Avon's long, rose-dark cock., then licked, entranced, from balls to tip. His tongue drew Avon's foreskin back, laving around the head and down, until he could nip and nuzzle at the heavy testicles. He raised his head, eyes closed, as though lost in a familiar, favoured dream, then swooped down, engulfing Avon suddenly and completely. He was awash in the waves of his desire, utterly oblivious to everything but his own body and the luxury of enjoying Avon's.

The object of his desire watched, his eyes liquid with expression, emotions glimmering through. Passion, pleasure and even something suspiciously akin to affection flowed from him, cocooning them in their small world. Starved, Avon devoured the look on Vila's face as his cock disappeared and appeared between wide-stretched lips. Warily, uneasily thinking of how his affairs and friendships always seemed to

end, Avon lifted his elegant hands to cradle Vila's transfigured face, stroking a cheekbone, an eyebrow, the moist line where his body and Vila's lips joined. He slid his hands through soft, short hair—the colour so like his Anna's... He deliberately unclenched his fingers, shoving bitter melancholy back into its home in his soul. He thrust into Vila's mouth, a sudden upward jolt of his hips. Vila took him in eagerly, moving to his rhythm, pulling him in deeper, grabbing at buttocks, squeezing and slapping, the noise and smells and movements fueling their lust in a spiralling surge of feeling. Avon arched higher, sliding farther into Vila's throat. He opened his eyes to look at the thief—and froze. Directly opposite him, transfixed in the open corridor door frame, Tarrant stood gaping at them, shocked.

The younger man was staring at the back of Vila's head, watching, in utter fascination, the rapid up and down motions. Like a lion cub suddenly scenting danger, Tarrant wrenched his attention upwards and met Avon's dark eyes. Deliberately, the comptech gripped Vila tighter, thrusting harder into his straining mouth, flaunting the lust in his body and on his face. He started talking to Vila, huskily encouraging him, telling him how each stroke of his tongue felt, how each flex of his throat muscles stimulated the tech's cock, and never releasing Tarrant's gaze. Mesmerised by those eyes, hypnotised by the sounds of urgent, imminent sex flooding the flight deck, Tarrant began to move forward, slowly, hesitantly, one step at a time. He was beyond reason, wanting only to get closer, perhaps even to touch.

Unaware of the pilot's presence, Vila pulled frantically at his own trousers, trying to ease his own aching cock. Avon groaned and surged into his mouth, thrusting desperately hard, coming deep in Vila's throat. The thief swallowed, drinking him down,

massaging the last, few, precious drops of cum from him. Reluctantly, he let Avon's dwindling cock slip from his mouth. Resting his head on the tech's quivering lap, Vila tried to surreptitiously force his own swollen penis back into his trousers. He had told Avon that this would be exclusively for the tech, that he wasn't about to start adding any more complications to the unhappy man's convoluted life. He would simply take care of himself later, thinking about the taste and feel and slight of Avon... Hands pushed at the thief and so, resigned, unsurprised, he moved out of the way. To his total amazement, Avon slid down onto the floor beside him. A warm, luminous smile stunned him even more as Avon leaned forward and kissed him. Vila opened himself to the tongue sliding against his, blood pounding at the unexpected caress. There was a tentative groping at his groin, then a sure hand found his cock and pulled strongly at him, bringing him quickly, too quickly, to the edge of orgasm. Avon's free hand tangled in Vila's hair, pressing them closer together, kissing him intensely, penetrating him, not slowing until the cock in his hand jerked, spasming warmth on him. Avon kissed Vila languorously, lasciviously massaging cum into the skin of his softening penis, until finally, sated and dazed, Vila collapsed against his chest.

By the time Avon looked up again, Tarrant had already fled. A small smile quirked his lips as he sheltered Vila against himself, smoothing his hair, giving Vila what he needed as surely as the thief had given to him. There would be an abundance of time later, to mock himself for this weakness, to punish Vila for bringing it out in him, but for now, there was release, and relief. He held his comfort in his arms; he cradled fidelity close. For now, he had a light to draw him out of the dark and dreary maze of lost and faded reality.

# THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

## A. L. Hughes

AVON STOOD IN THE MIDDLE OF HIS CABIN. Orac had been obstinate about giving him the information he had requested earlier that morning, so he'd decided to continue his rewiring of some of *Liberator's* more minor systems. It had proved to be a hot and tiring job in the bowels of the great ship so, feeling sticky and dirty and with nothing else to occupy his time at the moment, he decided to take a hot shower.

As the warm water cascaded over him, Avon reflected on the past few days. Everyone—Orac, Dayna, Cally, Tarrant and Vila—was behaving peculiarly. He couldn't quite put his finger on the problem, but it was beginning to affect their performance and it didn't bode well for any of their chances of survival. He set his mind to finding out precisely what was going on.

Through the noise of the falling water, Avon heard a sound. At first, it was very soft, then more insistent. Shutting off the water, he stepped out of the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist, and went to investigate the cause. Again, he heard the suspicious, indistinct sound. It seemed to be coming from the hallway and in the back of his mind he thought it was someone desperately calling his name. Unable to contain his curiosity, he stuck his head through the door. Again, he heard it. It was definitely a voice, but he was even less certain than before of what it was calling. Carefully, he stepped out into the hall. Without warning, the door to his cabin snapped shut, trapping the corner of his towel between its jaws. He tried to reenter, but nothing, including the lock override, seemed to work. As the awkwardness of his situation hit him, he did the only thing he could think of doing.

"Vila!" he shouted down the hall, keeping what was left of his towel tucked tightly around him. "Cally!" Neither answered nor came after a few minutes, and this, in and of itself, was unusual. Normally, there was activity at all hours along this corridor and now, for some reason, there was none.

Avon knew that if he could reach Orac without running into anyone, he could order the little computer to override *Liberator's* locking system and then, with luck, he could get back into his room before anyone saw him. He knew his only choices were either to stand there waiting for someone to come and

rescue him or take matters into his own hands and accept the risk of getting caught, and Kerr Avon was not the type to just let things happen. He took off at a stately pace down the hall toward the flight deck.

"Damn it! Come on, Zen. Let me in!" Tarrant pounded the door one more time, but to no avail. Zen wasn't listening. The pilot heard soft footsteps and gave a quick glance down the hall. "Avon, what the hell is going on? I stepped out of my cabin for an instant and now Zen's locked the door on me and I can't get back in."

"You have tried the other doors, haven't you?"

Tarrant frowned and started to turn. "Of course, I have. I'm not stupid, Avon, I..." His voice trailed off as he got a good look at the tech.

"Yes?" The look in Avon's eyes challenged the young man to say anything.

"Um," Tarrant swallowed hard and was successful at keeping the smile off his lips, "I tried every door in this corridor and the ones leading to the teleport. All of them are locked. We do seem to have a straight shot at the flight deck, though."

"Have you asked Zen or Orac what's going on?"

"Yes, and Orac mumbled something about it being all your fault. What is he talking about?"

Avon grimaced and looked the pilot square in the eye. "It probably has something to do with some recircuiting I was attempting, but then again, if it affected other systems, Zen should have kicked in and corrected the problem by now. Orac may well have something to do with this."

"Well, Orac's on the flight deck. Shall we go?" Tarrant smiled patronizingly and grandly motioned for Avon to lead the way.

After a moment's hesitation, Avon grudgingly did. "When I get my hands on Orac's circuit board, I will enjoy ripping it apart piece by piece."

"Now, now, stiff upper lip, Avon. We all have our little crosses to bear and Orac's yours." The pilot could see the hair, quite literally, stand up on the back of Avon's neck as the tech preceded him down the corridor.

Avon had hoped beyond hope that there would be no one besides himself and Tarrant on the flight deck, but today luck was not with him. Dayna sat, looking at a book and, of course, glanced up when

they came in. Avon heaved a mental sigh of relief when she didn't seem to notice his state of undress; unfortunately, he was forced to walk past her to get to Orac.

"Lovely outfit, Avon," was the almost whispered comment he heard as he pushed by. He didn't have to look back to see she was laughing. The thought of it made him go beetroot from head to toe...and that made him even angrier with the little computer.

"Orac! What the hell is going on?"

\*To what are you referring?\*

"You know very well to what I'm referring. What is wrong with the doors on the *Liberator*?"

\*They are all locked, as per the order they received.\*

Avon frowned. "Order? Whose order?"

The little computer hummed several seconds before answering. \*Zen is confused. Apparently, there has been some rewiring of his circuits. He blames this for the loss of data.\*

"Then, in the long run, it's your fault, eh, Avon?" Tarrant gloated as he sat down, enjoying the view tremendously. Avon started to turn to do verbal battle with the irritating young man, but, much to his chagrin, he found his anger and the leering stares had brought on an erection. He willed himself to calm down. "How long before the doors will open automatically?"

\*Zen estimates repairs will take 10.2 minutes, perhaps longer.\*

Avon's shoulders sagged in defeat as he felt Cally step onto the flight deck and take her seat, studying him. "Can the locks be picked?"

Orac hummed irritably at the question. \*Why do you waste my time on questions with such obvious answers? Of course they can.\*

As if on cue, Vila appeared, bottle in hand, at the top of the stairs. "Hello everyone. Anyone for a drink?" The thief stopped dead in his tracks when he caught sight of Avon. His drunken laughter was slow to build, but when it erupted it was explosive. "Avon! You're naked!"

The sight of Vila, on the floor, clutching his sides, vibrating with laughter was the last straw. Beyond furious, Avon grabbed the thief by his collar and with the superhuman strength afforded those in stressful situations, hauled the man to his feet with one jerk. Vila's eyes, wide with surprise and fear, stared into the face less than an inch away.

"I have a job for you, Vila," Avon growled, throwing the smaller man in the direction of the corridor.

Vila scrambled to his feet, somehow managing to keep his bottle clutched tightly in his hand as he backed down the hallway with Avon in close pursuit.

Just out of sight, but not out of earshot of, the flight deck, Vila stumbled and fell. The tech stood over him, his face pinched with extreme disapproval. "Get up, you fool, and unlock my door. I don't want to have to stand here and listen to their taunts and laughter behind my back. I'm humiliated enough as it is."

The low, menacing tone spurred the thief into action.

"Well," Vila whispered over his shoulder, "I don't hear anything, maybe it's not so bad, Avon." But the eyes he felt boring into his back kept him moving.

As soon as Vila was well on his way, Avon took a moment to notice that what the thief had said was true. No one was laughing; in fact, they were talking quietly. Unable to contain his curiosity, Avon took a few steps closer to hear better.

"Yes, well, I don't think that proves anything, but you did accomplish the impossible. You got Avon on the flight deck naked, so I owe you one thousand credits." Tarrant, even in defeat, still tried to have the upper hand.

"No, you owe me two thousand," Dayna insisted.

"Two thousand, if you proved Avon and Vila were having an affair, but I didn't see any sign of that."

"He's right, Dayna," Cally arbitrated.

"Well, he didn't give me enough time to come up with a better plan. If I had more time I'd've gotten the two of them, stripped, on the flight deck with Vila going down on Avon."

Avon's eyebrows arched with surprise, amazed by Dayna's words. He heard Tarrant chuckle with disbelief.

"Impossible."

Then Avon heard something he had never believed he would hear. He listened closely, barely able to make out the Auron's words from this distance.

"I would like to see that. Could you really do it, Dayna?"

The tech could hear the hesitation in the young woman's voice. "Of course, but it may take some time, they're so damned discreet that it's going to be difficult. I mean, they already have a relationship, as we all well know, but still..."

"You know that, do you?" Avon whispered to himself.

"And you would have to make it worth my while



in taking the risk." He could almost see the smirk on Dayna's face.

"Would ten thousand credits be incentive enough?"

Avon's mouth dropped open. A small crease formed between his eyes as he pondered Cally's possible reasons for this bet. It bewildered him why the Auron would be willing to pay ten thousand credits to witness an act which could be performed on command for five credits on any backwater planet in the galaxy. And the idea that they believed he and Vila had a sexual relationship was particularly disturbing. He tried to think back to see if he could pinpoint any reason for their erroneous beliefs, but none sprang immediately to mind.

"How long do I have?" Dayna asked.

"Fourteen days seems fair, but I do have stipulations," Cally amended.

"Yes?"

"I want to be on the flight deck when they do it and I don't want anyone else, but me, to witness it."

He heard Tarrant groan.

"Oh, Cally, you take all the fun out of it. I mean, seeing Avon naked was a real treat. He's not bad looking, you know."

"Yes, we know." Dayna did not hide the disapproval in her voice. "He's quite beautiful, but you're not his type, Tarrant."

"Perhaps, but who would've thought Vila was? Anyway, I'm not completely convinced."

Again, the undisguised smirk filtered through into Dayna's voice. "Then why isn't Vila back yet?"

Avon straightened up, back flat against the wall as he stealthily made his way down the corridor to his cabin.

"Vila! Get up!" Avon went straight to his closet and removed a heavy, dark dressing gown, quickly wrapping it around his waist. The thief wavered slightly as he sat up on the edge of Avon's bed, where he had collapsed in a hung-over heap, after all the hard work of opening Avon's door. He leaned forward, trying to get up, but a warm hand on his shoulder stopped him and made him look up.

"I want to talk to you." There was no mistaking the seriousness in Avon's voice.

"I thought you wanted me to get out," Vila whined and finished the last sip of his wine. "Another dead soldier." He mourned and looked soulfully at the empty bottle in his hand. Avon swept it from his fingers and tossed it aside, getting the thief's full attention.

"I said, 'get up', not get out. I want to ask you something."

"I haven't done anything wrong, honest I haven't."

"Now, I seriously doubt that, but it has nothing to do with what I want to know."

"You mean, I know something you don't know?" A lopsided smile creased Vila's lips, until a loud burp parted them.

"Perhaps," Avon grudgingly conceded.

"All right. Ask away. I'll do the best I can." Vila turned, but found he was having a hard time focusing in on the tech's face, so he returned to the spot on the wall across from him that seemed to move only a little.

"I suppose that's all I could expect." Avon settled on the bed and rolled the questions he wanted answered over one more time in his mind. "Are you aware that the rest of the crew think you and I have a sexual relationship? Have you any idea where they came up with such an idea?"

Vila froze. Avon could see he scarcely breathed. "Yes...and no."

"Yes? And no? What kind of an answer is that? Vila, if you want to live beyond the next few minutes, you had better explain your answer and tell me what you know."

"Well," the thief started slowly, suddenly feeling the urge to find another bottle of good wine, "Yes, I know they think you and me...sort of, you know, I mean, really, Avon I never gave them any reason to think it. I only found out 'cause I heard Cally and Tarrant talking one night. I honestly thought it was just gossip, you know, 'what if' type of stuff, idle gossip. I didn't think anything of it, really. And before you start asking, no, I don't know where they came up with the idea, but I think it's fairly recent." Vila frowned, dismayed at how sober he felt. "Bother you, does it?"

Avon nodded. "It does when they start pulling practical jokes and making bets."

"Making bets?" Vila's ears perked up.

"Yes," Avon spoke softly, looking off in the distance, "Cally just bet Dayna ten thousand credits that Dayna couldn't arrange for Cally to satisfy her voyeuristic tendencies and watch us have oral sex on the flight deck."

It was Vila's turn to shake his head. "Ten thousand credits is a lot of money. If they'd just asked, I'd've found some way to talk you into it for half the price. Cally, eh? Tarrant I could see, maybe even

Dayna—she's a very curious girl—but Cally? Shame I couldn't get in on the bet. I'd've split it with you." The thief looked over at the man next to him. Avon seemed so lost in thought that he didn't hear.

"Well, would you, Avon?" Vila asked, biting his lip slightly.

"Would I what?"

"Let me go down on you on the flight deck with Cally watching for five thousand credits?"

Avon sighed. "Don't be an idiot, Vila."

"Sorry. Was only asking. I'd be the one doing all of the work, you know, anyway..."

"But they do need to be taught a lesson," Avon continued, thoughtful. He hated being the brunt of anybody's joke. "Perhaps we can play a practical joke of our own."

"What if we give them what they want, but to the extreme. An old prison pal and I used to do that and then the others would always leave us alone. It was kind of fun, too, but..."

Avon looked over at the thief, pensive. "But what?"

"But it means we'd have to convince them...you know, do things."

"If you do not stop running around in circles, I will cut off your legs so you'll be forced to tell me what you are getting at."

"Things..." Vila hesitated, then drew up what little courage he had to go on, "such as touching." He waited, but Avon just nodded for him to go on. "Hugging...ending up together in the same cabin all night, then get seen leaving the next day. Feeling each other up in public." The tech frowned, but refrained from making any comment which gave Vila a touch more bravery. "And kissing, in public."

"Kissing? You and your prison friend, *kissed*?"

"Course, I mean, considering those brutes there pegged any unpaired male as fair game, kissing was nothing compared to getting bored in the arse." Again the thief hesitated, "And anyway, it wasn't so bad. It's different from kissing a woman, you know."

"No, I didn't know." Avon looked away, considering the angles of this game, realising how difficult it might be for him to play the role convincingly. "All right, kissing, but we'll build up to it slowly and when it does happen, no tongues."

"No tongues, aw, Avon," Vila moaned.

"And if you try, I'll bite it off."

Vila nodded, indicating his acceptance of Avon's terms. "Should I tell you before I do it, what I'm going to do?" the thief asked, getting up from the bed.

"No, spontaneity will make it work better I think, but..." Avon looked up at Vila, "I wonder why you assume you'll be taking the lead in all this?"

Suddenly, the thief really did have an extreme desire to leave. "Well, I'm the one with the experience in *all this*, now aren't I? I can make it look right. If they aren't convinced, Avon, the joke won't work." Vila took one last look at Avon, his eyes darting nervously from door to bed. "Suppose I'll start now. I've been away from the flight deck long enough that they'll think you and I have been going at it." He reached up and messed his hair, then pinched his cheeks to make them pink. "May as well give them a show," he said and exited quickly, before the tech could say another word.

Avon returned to the flight deck, fully clothed, but hair still damp from his protracted shower. No one said a word as he ran through all of Zen's systems manually. Vila, meanwhile, was conspicuous by his absence. Finishing, Avon moved around the console and sat down in the center of the flight deck couch. Tarrant, sitting at the far end, concentrating on a computer chess game, barely gave the tech a glance.

"Where is Vila?"

A small grin, split the pilot's lips. "I'm sure you'd know the answer to that question better than I, Avon."

Avon leaned over and pushed a button, moving Tarrant's rook to take a computer knight. "Would I, Tarrant? Why do you say that?" He kept his tone deliberately neutral. Studying the young man's reaction, he couldn't tell if Tarrant was more upset by the question or the move Avon had made in the game.

"Hello, Avon," Vila said, as he slid in beside the tech on the flight deck couch. Quickly, supposedly unobtrusively, he grabbed Avon's hand and squeezed it, then turned to Dayna, who had followed him in. He started to carry on his normal babbling conversation as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Not to be outdone, Avon leaned closer to Vila. While relating his plans for getting much needed supplies from the people of Mylocar, he let his arm rest atop the back of the couch, behind the thief. The tech had a hard time keeping his mind on his story as he watched Tarrant watch them. Avon decided that a little experiment was in order, to see how captivated Tarrant was.

Slowly, Avon flexed his fingers and then let two of them caress the thief's upper arm, lightly. Like a cat watching a ball of yarn, the pilot's eyes moved to and fro, hypnotized, glued to the fingers.

"Vila," Cally's voice interrupted the moment. "I need your help up here."

Vila gave Avon a smile and a gentle pat on his thigh before getting up and seeing what the Auron wanted of him.

Tarrant hastily looked back down at his game, but from his quick loss it was very evident that his mind was indeed somewhere else.

The rest of the shift was uneventful, except that Cally volunteered to take Vila's late watch, sending the thief off the flight deck early. A soft tap on his door, brought the tech to complete wakefulness in seconds.

"Yes?"

"Avon? Let me in." Vila's voice seemed small and frightened, muffled through the door. With the push of a button, the door slid open, admitting his late night visitor. Vila stood, stock still, just inside the doorway. "Dayna's stalking me."

"Then come over here and we'll set a trap for that young huntress. She fully expects to find you in here with me, so, we shall simply further our own cause and show her what she's looking for." Avon pressed two more buttons on the console by his bed, then smiled. The light in the room came up ever so slightly, casting a romantic yellow tone glow over everything. "Sit down," he commanded softly and the thief complied immediately. "Now," Avon sat up, wrapping his arms around Vila's neck, glancing at the corridor monitor on the console, "she's approximately two feet from the door." He said, glancing down at the console, then he counted to five. "All right, kiss me."

"Now?"

"Now, idiot." Both men leaned awkwardly into the kiss, dry lips pressed to dry lips, Vila turning his head, giving the kiss more passion, just at the right moment for the door to Avon's cabin to swoosh open. Dayna stood, startled into inactivity by the unexpected happening. Both Avon and Vila, ignored her. Vila let his hands roam freely over the tech's naked back, drawing the other man closer to him. Seeing more than enough, Dayna breathed a silent sigh of relief at not being caught as she stepped back, away from the door, allowing it to close.

Avon pushed Vila away and shook his head as his hand came up to wipe his lips. "I think you liked that rather too much."

"Course I liked it. You're a good kisser, doncher know?" Instead of wiping his lips, Vila salaciously licked his.

"Don't get any ideas, Vila." Avon tossed a pillow

onto the floor beside the bed, then he reached up and locked the cabin door from his console controls.

Vila sighed and melted like hot butter from the bed to the floor. Pounding the pillow into a shape he approved of, the thief lay down on his side, his back to the bed. "You don't know the fun you're missing, Avon."

"If I'd known what a pest you'd be, I wouldn't have started this thing in the first place. Now, go to sleep and leave me alone."

Again, the thief sighed heavily and cuddled his pillow closer. "Don't I even get a blanket?"

The warm cover came flying at him. He had to dig his way out from under it in the dark.

"Shut up, Vila."

The next few days held Dayna and Tarrant's attention, and although Cally seemed indifferent, Avon had caught her watching them once in teleport area when, much to his surprise and secret pleasure, Vila's skillful fingers had found a way to stimulate him through his leather pants. It was that evening that Avon began to analyze his feelings and motivations in carrying on this charade. It bothered him a little that he was beginning to like what Vila was doing to him and that Vila's nightly sexual suggestions were becoming more and more vivid and erotic. He always backed down when told, but the tech was starting to notice that he was being masterfully played. Sitting alone on the flight deck, he felt himself becoming painfully aroused at the thought of Vila actually going through with all his lewd suggestions.

His hand dropped to his groin and unconsciously, lost in a fantasy, he started to caress the tumescence between his legs.

"Vila not handy, Avon?" Tarrant came silently around the edge of the couch. He smiled as he saw the tech's hand slip unhurriedly away from his swollen groin, to rest on the soft cushion. Tarrant sat down next to the smaller man, his confidence boosted by Avon's obvious need. Boldly, he placed his hand on the tech's groin and stroked firmly. "I could make you happy, too, Avon. An Alpha and an Alpha. It'd be quite a competition to see who'd come out on top."

A viselike grip grabbed hold of the pilot's wrist and very unceremoniously removed the offending hand. "You're a fool, Tarrant. I had you pegged from the very beginning. You like to think you can control this ship and this crew, but there's something standing in your way—me—and if you had me cowed sexually, you'd have the pseudopower you've always

wanted. No deal, Tarrant. Your little game isn't going to work." Avon stood and glared down at the grimfaced young man. "Your strategy is as flawed as your chess game." Avon's voice dropped low and threatening. "And what makes you think I wouldn't be the one to come out on top? After all, I do in everything else, where you are concerned."

Avon was working on the nav console two days later when Vila bounced onto the flight deck, whistling and twirling something on his finger. Stopping on the level above the tech, Vila tossed the object onto the top of the console for everyone to see.

"You know, Avon, I really wish you'd clean up after yourself. I'm really very tired of being your housemaid. First towels and now this."

Avon frowned as he pulled his head out from under the console. Then he saw the black leather and silver studded cockring resting atop the computer. Quickly, he snatched it up and jammed it into his pocket. Redfaced, he turned back to his work, not hearing Cally when she sat down on the floor beside him. Leaning back, he almost collided with her.

"Avon?"

The tech didn't answer her, pretending to be more involved with his work than with her, but her nearness was having a strange effect.

"Avon, what is the name of that object Vila placed on your console?"

"None of your business," Avon growled, returning to his work. She scooted in close beside him.

"I do not ask the question facetiously. I truly do want to know what it is and why it embarrasses you so to talk about it."

Avon sighed. He knew Cally wouldn't tease him and it was possible the Auron had never come across such a thing. "It's called a cockring." He took it from his pocket and placed it in her hand. "You are familiar with human anatomy, aren't you?"

"Of course. I've seen all the men aboard this ship, naked, at one time or another."

"Well, when the male penis is flaccid, the ring is slipped over the penis and the scrotum is brought through. When the male becomes...aroused, his penis firms, becoming engorged with blood and the scrotum tightens. The...ring prevents the blood from returning to the general circulatory system quickly, thus prolonging the erection."

Cally turned the ring over and over in her hand. "Is it painful?"

"No, it's not."

"Do some men have a problem keeping their erections?"

Avon smiled at the innocent look on the Auron's face. "Yes, some do."

"Do you?"

The tech sighed and reached for a sonic screwdriver. "No."

Cally frowned and sniffed the leather, her eyes widening, still curious. "Then why do you have one of these?"

Avon dug deeper into the innards of the computer. "Sometimes, it's a stimulant. The feel of it is...sensual." Without looking at her, Avon reached out and snatched the cockring from her fingers. "Enough questions for now, Cally. I have a lot of work to do."

The Auron rubbed her hand across the tech's back soothingly. "Thank you for the information, Avon. Perhaps we can talk again, later."

Avon mumbled a noncommittal answer and gave his complete attention to his work.

Avon grabbed the little thief by the throat. Undisguised fury darkened his eyes. "Where did you get this?" He shoved the cockring in Vila's trembling face.

"I got it from a drawer in your cabin." Vila croaked as the fingers began to squeeze tighter.

"You have no right to go through my things." Avon jerked his hand back, but kept Vila pinned to the wall with his body. "If you try it again, you may find a nasty surprise." He stepped back, putting some distance between them. "You may end up losing those talented fingers of yours if you insist on putting them where they don't belong." He turned on his heel leaving Vila behind to reflect on his error.

On the thirteenth day following the overheard bet, Dayna complained she was feeling sick and requested she be given the night shift off. Tarrant made the excuse that he, too, wasn't feeling particularly well and refused to pick up the young huntress' shift. Tired and irritable, Avon instructed Orac to wake Vila early so the two of them could split the watch. Cally offered to take a double shift, but Avon was too weary to argue and insisted that his was the best plan. Quietly, Cally conceded to him. She stopped and talked to Vila in whispered tones as she headed for her cabin. With a nod, they both left.

Things were eerily silent on the flight deck. Avon ran every check he could think of to keep himself alert, but when Zen automatically lowered the light-

ing, simulating ship's night, he found it almost impossible to keep his eyes open.

"Zen," Avon instructed, "wake me if anything at all appears on the long range scanners."

+Affirmative.+

Stubbornly refusing to give in completely to his body's demands, Avon remained sitting, but slumped on the couch, legs sprawled, arms crossed protectively across his chest as he let his head drop. He fell asleep.

Somewhere in his unconscious mind, Avon became aware of warm, caressing hands taking inventory of his body. Wet, soft lips brushed his and he couldn't stop the moan which escaped him, delighting in the delicious sensations both hands and lips were creating. When the fingers in the dream started to unzip his trousers, Avon began to pull himself up through the many layers of sleep until, slowly, carefully, he opened one eye.

Vila was on his knees between outstretched legs. Without looking up, the thief tenderly removed the tech's hardening shaft from its leather abode and ran his tongue up the underside.

"What do you think you're doing, Vila?"

The thief froze. "You'll like this, Avon, really, you will," he babbled. "We're all alone and you looked so...so beautiful lying there asleep. I couldn't help myself. Really, I couldn't. I just wanted to do something nice to you. I'd never hurt you. Never."

Avon smiled wolfishly. "Altruism isn't your only reason, now is it, Vila? Money, perhaps, to the tune of ten thousand credits. At least you're not a cheap whore. Don't look so shocked. You see, I can sense Cally standing in the wings, watching." He turned his head slightly to the right and the Auron stepped from her hiding place.

"Why Cally?" he asked, not looking down when Vila's lips took his straining member completely in his mouth.

The Auron moved around to stand directly behind him; he could not see her face without arching his neck but she, obviously, had a clear vision of what Vila was doing. She pressed her cool fingers to his temples and began to massage them in slow, rhythmic circles. "I need you, Avon. You see, I, too, have a libido, but Aurons are unable to mate with humans. You simply aren't built right, I'm afraid. But I can experience the act and the orgasm vicariously."

"Then why didn't you have Vila go after Tarrant? He'd have been a much more willing partner. Why use this elaborate ruse to get at me?"

The Auron tilted Avon's head back and she looked deeply into his eyes, diving down to his very soul. "Unfortunately, Avon, you are the only one left with psychic compatibility. When Blake was here, he helped me, but Blake's been gone a very, very long time. I find myself anxious and needing to..." Cally hesitated, sucking in a deep breath at the same time Avon did, joining him and highlighting the explosive sensations building in his cock.

"Do not reject me, Avon. I need you," the Auron pleaded.

"The ploy..." Avon found his voice husky, almost unrecognizable, as he fought to maintain control over his consciousness; it wasn't an easy task with what the talented thief was doing to him.

"...was a double blind, Avon." Cally tried to explain, but she, too, was losing herself in a sea of building orgasm. "I caused the doors to lock, not Dayna. I worked it all out with Vila and Dayna. Tarrant has no knowledge of the plan. I sensed you were standing out in the corridor that day. I knew you would listen in and so...*I set the trap.*"

Avon heard her final words in his mind. He knew he should have been angry with her, but her desperation and sincerity touched something deep inside him. That Vila's ministrations were working, broke down any further opposition he may have had to her sharing his orgasm with him. He smiled, a small part of him intrigued with the idea of the experience not being a singular one.

"All right, Cally, enjoy yourself. I plan to." Avon arched his back, but kept his head well within her grasp. He thrust deeply into the Delta's generous mouth and revelled in the thief's skill. No woman had ever been able to bring him to this point so fast and so delightfully. He let one hand drop down onto Vila's bobbing head, entangling his fingers into the silky soft hair. He projected, enhancing everything he felt to the Auron. Avon heard her groan with pleasure, her fingers trembling with the strain of maintaining contact.

*Please, Avon,* the tech heard the Auron plead deep inside his head. With an inward grin, he released the last shreds of his control. He leaned his head back, opening his eyes, willing the Auron to do the same. Their eyes locked. Sweat rolled off his forehead as he smiled and Cally, much to her amazement, could hear him in her mind.

*This is for you, Cally.*

The thought faded, replaced by overwhelming, unadmitted emotions of love and lust for the alien

and the thief. She felt the fire in the tech's groin rise up as if it were her own, exploding from him into Vila's frantically sucking mouth.

Avon vaguely remembered hearing someone cry out. He wasn't sure if it was himself or Cally. Joined with the Auron as he was, he didn't care. He basked in the warm afterglow she projected to him, feeling for the first time in his sexual life, a sense of total completeness.

Avon felt Vila draw away after a moment and settle next to him, resting his head on the tech's thigh, breathing deeply to catch his breath. Cally leaned down and kissed Avon lightly on his lips. She stroked his damp forehead, putting an errant piece of hair back in its place.

"You are a very special man, Kerr Avon," she whispered, removing her fingers from him.

Avon sighed, reluctantly releasing her, feeling alone once again. Quietly, Cally started for the corridor, wanting to let the two men have time to recover in private.

"Cally," Avon called to her softly. The Auron turned with a smile.

"Yes, Avon?"

"You owe us ten thousand credits," he stated, but the broad grin spreading across his face belied the seriousness of his voice.

"I was hoping you'd consider giving me a discount since I intend to be a volume consumer," she laughed as she exited the room.

Vila couldn't contain his amusement, but a light tap to the back of his head brought him back to the reality of the situation.

"Avon?"

"Yes, Vila," Avon sighed, closing his eyes.

"Do you want to do this again sometime? I mean, it'd be all right by me. And Cally seemed satisfied enough, didn't she? I can do a lot more than this, Avon. I could keep you a very happy man, really I could, if you'd give me a chance. Will you?"

"Vila."

"Yes?"

Avon looked down at the anxious face resting against his leg. He smiled. "Shut up...and get something to clean me off."

Vila returned the smile and jumped to do as he was told.

# V THE SISTERHOOD TRILOGY

*We began this trilogy in the first issue with Motif, but the new reader should find Leitmotif enjoyable by itself. It takes place in a post-GP setting where we learn that there is a far more deadly and powerful force to be dealt with than Servalan and the Federation.*

## LEITMOTIF Leigh Graham

TARRANT WAS PUTTING THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON HIS UNPACKING WHEN A SOFT, ALMOST INDISCERNIBLE TAP CAME ON HIS DOOR. Slowly, he straightened and a small smile played at his lips. He didn't bother to turn around.

"Come in."

The pilot waited, hearing the door open and close. Slowly, he moved to face his visitor.

"Tarrant."

"Avon."

They stood and stared at each other, assessing the changes in both. Time had been kind to Tarrant, as the tech knew it would be. Gone was the boyish roundness of his face, replaced with more angles and lines creating the illusion of hard won wisdom. Avon smiled and rubbed his jaw.

"Still sore?" Tarrant asked, his smile broadening.

"Yes, rather."

"You deserved that, you know."

Avon laughed, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "Yes, I suppose I did, didn't I?"

Then Tarrant did something completely unexpected. He wrapped his arms around the tech and hugged him tightly. "And you deserve this, too. I've missed you, Avon, I really have."

Gently, Avon pulled back from the embrace, but he didn't lose his smile. "You are becoming maudlin in your old age, Tarrant."

The pilot's smile faded slightly. "You're right, perhaps I am." His finger traced the deep valley etching the tech's left cheek. "That scar looks..."

"Distinguished?"

"No, dangerous. It certainly mars your beauty. You know that that's the one thing I always remembered about you, how beautiful you were, not handsome, but beautiful."

"Well, now, you'll have to reevaluate your assessment of me, then."

"Will I?"

Avon turned away. "Are we going to continue this banter or are we going to finish what we started eight years ago."

"Today." The pilot made the word a definite statement.

"What?"

"Eight years ago today, I worked up the courage to ask you to go to bed with me. You never did give me a reply."

"Didn't I?"

"No, you know damned well you didn't, we were interrupted."

The tech stood silently, contemplating the wall. "Eight years is a very long time, Tarrant."

Again, long strong arms enveloped the shorter man. "Not so long, Avon. My proposition still stands."

"Same rules?"

"You remember them?"

"Oh, yes."

"As far as I'm concerned, nothing's changed in that respect. No ties, no commitments. Just for tonight if that's all we want."

"All I want."

The pilot sighed, "All right, all *you* want. But I hope I can change your mind." He gently turned the tech to face him, looking down into the bottomless, chocolate eyes. "I'll certainly enjoy trying."

As if in a dream, Tarrant slowly leaned down and took possession of the sculptured lips he'd desired for so long. The kiss deepened and the pilot felt himself held by a strong hand, fingers spread through

his curls at the base of his neck. He could hardly catch his breath as their tongues fought for dominance in an unwinnable war.

Quick hands divested him of his clothes, throwing each piece haphazardly about the room.

“Damn it, Tarrant!” Avon cursed, trying to unfasten the younger man’s trousers. “When did you start wearing so many layers?”

“I picked it up from you,” Tarrant laughed.

“Yes, well, not one of my better habits, I assure you. Especially at a time like this.” Avon grimaced as he finally got the last clasp undone. He slipped his hand inside and came out with his prize. “Yes, now that’s what I’ve been looking for.”

“’Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door; but ’tis enough, ’twill serve.”

“You’re destroying my mood, Tarrant,” Avon warned.

“Mood? I rather pictured our first time coming after a leisurely dinner on some quiet little planet in a top-rated hotel.”

“My, my, you have been dreaming, haven’t you?”

“Yes, well, a man in my position, who hasn’t been able to do much else for the past few years, finds great solace in dreams.”

Avon stepped back from his partner and sighed, “Well, do you want to wait?”

Tarrant smiled and shook his head. “Another thing I learned from you, Avon, is never to wait, because there may be no tomorrow. If you’re willing, why don’t we fulfill fantasy dream sequence number two?”

“You’ve numbered them?”

“Of course. Number two and number seven are my favourites, you know.”

The tech cocked his head, intrigued. “All right, tell me what to do.”

“You mean you want to play my game?”

“Only if you’ll get on with it. Besides, I’m curious what half a mind such as yours could come up with in eight years.”

The pilot stripped his trousers and boots off, tossing them aside and threw himself down onto the bed. Making himself comfortable, he stroked his shaft to firmness.

“Strip for me, Avon. Slowly, sensually, one piece at a time. Be a whore. Enjoy yourself.”

“And then?”

Tarrant’s smile grew brazen. “Suck my cock.”

Both of Avon’s eyebrows shot up, a spark of amusement lighting his eyes. “Presumptuous little

pup, aren’t you? If this is fantasy number two, I wonder what number seven is like?”

A wicked glint filled Tarrant’s eyes. “What you should wonder about, Avon, is all the other fantasies in between.” He held his peace as Avon began to live his dream for him, smiling, beginning the strip.

Long, slender fingers climbed up to the closure on the right shoulder of the black leather jerkin. Slowly, erotically, each layer gave way to another. Avon never took his eyes off the young man on the bed as he disrobed. Tarrant’s body glistened with a fine sheen of sweat as the tech removed his shirt and let his fingers drift down, teasing a nipple, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger, turning it into a pink bud. Both hands dived into the cleft between his spread legs, one remained to caress his leather encased groin while the other worked on the fastenings.

Even when the tech bent to remove his boots, he never lost eye contact with his lover. Leisurely, Avon slid his pants down and off. Tarrant’s eyes widened with delight.

“I hope you’re not disappointed, Tarrant.”

“Disappointed, Avon? Never. Now, come here and let me touch you so I can convince myself that all this is real.”

“Oh, I’ll convince you it’s real, all right.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Avon swooped down on his prey and engulfed Tarrant’s straining member, taking his role as whore to heart. Unconsciously, the pilot’s hand came down to rest on the back of the tech’s head. Avon backed off with a disdainful look.

“Don’t push me Tarrant,” Avon warned in a voice that meant business.

Quickly, Tarrant removed the offending hand. “Oh, sorry, Avon, just got carried away.”

The tech frowned and settled back to the job in hand of making a dream come true.

“Do you trust him?” Tarrant asked his bedpartner as he opened his eyes to stare at the ceiling.

“Who?”

“Blake.”

“As much as I ever did, I suppose.”

The pilot looked over at Avon and grinned. “You never trusted him,” he laughed.

“Untrue,” Avon smiled. “I did trust him. I trusted him to be fallible, reckless, uncaring toward others and blind to everything but his damn cause. I was never once disappointed.”



"Are you going to go along with his plans?"

"For now."

Tarrant sat up, incredulous. "Oh, come off it, Avon. It's me, Tarrant. Are you trying to convince me you think this little rebellion he's trying to reignite has a snowball's chance in hell of succeeding?"

"I'd forgotten what very little intelligence you have, so I'll try to explain to you in words of one or two syllables. At the moment, I have very little choice and neither do you, if you'll look at your alternatives. Furthermore..."

"Go on."

"I'm curious."

The pilot let his hand rest lightly on his lover's chest. "Now, that sounds more like the Avon I know. What are you curious enough about to put yourself at his mercy?"

Avon's gaze fixed on the still youthful face. "The Sisterhood."

Tarrant fell back onto the bed, his flaccid arm slipping to his side. "I was afraid of that. You always did have a knack for wanting to find out about things that were better left alone. Don't do it, Avon."

It was the tech's turn to raise up on one elbow. "Explain."

Tarrant tossed his arms across his eyes, "You don't want to get involved with them, Avon, believe me."

"Tell me your connection with them," Avon demanded, pulling the lean, muscled arm away from sad eyes.

"Smuggling. Gunrunning. They gave me a ship after my wounds healed on the condition that I do some work for them. At first, it wasn't much, then...then they began to have me pick up computer components. Not the usual stuff, Avon, but the more obscure and delicate pieces. They were working on something important. It was one of the times I wished you were there to figure it all out."

Intrigued, Avon moved closer. "Did they succeed?"

Tarrant shrugged. "I can only guess, but I think they did. They stopped using me about three years ago, so either they completed their project or they got someone else to do their dirty work."

The tech lay back, going over this newly acquired piece of information in his mind. "Interesting." Quickly, he sat up and threw his legs over the side of the bed as he reached for his clothes.

"Avon."

The tech turned and looked down.

"I know I've probably gone and done something

stupid by telling you this, but I want you to know," Tarrant paused, searching for the right words, "I've known you a hell of a lot longer than I've known Blake and...and when it comes right down to it, as I'm sure it will, I want you to know I'm *your* man, not his. I'll hate myself in the morning for saying this, but it's you I'll listen to."

Avon let a small smile creep onto his lips. "I'll just bet that cost you a lot."

"What?"

"Admitting you would follow me, rather than Blake."

Tarrant lay back; Avon's grin was infectious. "Yes, well, don't let it go to your head."

Breaker slowly opened her eyes. Tiny lightning bolts of pain shot to her brain, bringing her fully conscious, but it took several minutes more for her to realize she wasn't seeing double. Avon and Morgan stood over her and at least one of them was smiling.

"Well, back with the living, are we?" She felt Morgan's fingers gently stroke the back of her hand.

"Am I?"

"Either that, or to quote Vila, you've died and gone to hell and it's full of Avons." The tech's eyes twinkled with sardonic humour.

Breaker grinned weakly, "Oh my, now that's a horrible thought."

"What happened to you? Where were you injured?" Avon pushed.

The mercenary glanced at her left shoulder, noting the medicomp doggedly regenerating the bone, muscle and skin she'd violently lost. "Well, it appears, where, is my left shoulder. As for the first part, I was ambushed."

Avon was not to be put off this time. "Orac said you were locked inside an intradimensional zone. One which the teleport couldn't penetrate. Tell me about this place."

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"It's a secret."

Exasperated, Avon pressed forward against her bed. "You do a very poor imitation of Vila. Now tell me."

Breaker looked over at Morgan, noting the look of curious concern in his eyes. There was more Avon in him than she had suspected. She turned her head, locking eyes with the intent, dark haired man, "I'm sorry, Avon, I don't know enough to be of use to you and even if I did, I like living far too much."

Avon turned and started to stalk off, but stopped before he made it to the door. "I don't know why you insist on playing these games with me. You are far more than you pretend. I'm not stupid. I see what you are trying to do, how you are attempting to control every one of us. You're probably very high up in the Sisterhood. You'd have to be to have access to that intradimensional field, but someone is out to get you, Breaker. Be smart, wouldn't it be better to have me at your back instead of at your throat, instead of standing around while you get yourself killed?"

Breaker didn't look at him. She lay silent, jaw set, eyes staring at nothing.

"Learn what I have learned the hard way, Breaker," Avon continued. "Never follow anyone blindly. It always ends up badly." The door swooshed shut as the man exited, but not the emotion he evoked.

Morgan brushed a tiny piece of hair from the mercenary's brow. "You should listen to him, you know."

"Oh?" She fixed her hard eyes on the younger version of the man which disturbed her so. "And when did you become a member of the Kerr Avon fan club?"

Morgan let his hand drop to his side, irritated by her condescending tone. "When he started making sense."

"Avon?" Morgan called as he entered the man's darkened cabin. The sound of running water told him why he wasn't getting an answer. The young man smiled and sauntered to the bathroom door. "Avon." Still no words, scathing or otherwise, answered him. Slowly, the telepath pushed open the door and was immediately enveloped in pure steam. He almost choked. The shower door opened and a pale, naked figure stepped out, towel over his head, drying his brown hair.

"Avon?"

The head jerked up, startled to see the other man. "What?" Vila gaped. Suddenly, conscious of his state of undress, he hurriedly tried to wrap his towel around his waist. Morgan smiled, amused by the thief's uncoordinated efforts.

"What are you smiling at? And what are you doing in Avon's bathroom?" Vila demanded, trying to pull together what little dignity he had left.

"I could ask the same thing of you."

"I'm waiting for Avon."

Morgan's smile broadened. "So am I, but taking a

shower was not one of the things I would have done while awaiting his arrival."

The thief's face reddened as he pushed past the young man. "Oh? And what would you have done?"

"I don't know. Any suggestions?"

Vila glanced over at the other man casually leaning against the bathroom doorjamb. He wasn't sure what this interloper was getting at, but he had an idea. There was an innocence to the face which resembled Avon's, a softness the computer tech had probably never possessed. A little voice screamed in the shadowed depths of his mind warning him that if Avon caught him with anyone else he'd kill him, but another voice, more demanding, called to him from the periphery. A voice so like Avon's, compulsive, addictive, irresistible and yet...

The telepath smiled, radiating vulnerability, a final straw shattering Vila's defences. Perhaps being separated from his wife and children made him reckless. Claire had always been his anchor, his rock of rationality. Undeniably, there was something magnetic about this man, a sensuality the Delta felt whenever he was with Avon. He couldn't explain it, but somehow the thought of hiding in this fantasy for a time, away from the black depression which had beset him, intrigued him. Or perhaps the notion of Avon catching them together—a sure-fire means for inviting death—was what he actually wanted. Either way, he knew taking this man in his arms could be suicide.

He found the idea enticing, not repellent as it normally would have been. The young man's eyes seemed to burn into him, calling him, drawing him closer. He watched, mesmerised, as the delicate pink tongue wetted nervous, pursed lips.

"I...I don't know what to do," Morgan finally admitted in a whisper.

"Doesn't matter. I do." The thief smiled, letting his towel drop to the floor, casting caution to the wind. "Come here."

Morgan moved in slow motion, dragged forward, as if in a dream. Time seemed too lethargic to be moving. The lockpick's fingers deftly disrobed the lithe, lean body. His lips wantonly traced a line down the long throat, his tongue creating a warm, wet trail along the tightly muscled shoulder. Taking the slender fingers, he wrapped them around his hard shaft, moving into the warm body. When Morgan didn't respond, Vila stepped back and eyed the young man curiously.

"You weren't joking, were you? You don't know anything."

Morgan's chin rested on his chest, his cheeks blushing with embarrassment. "I don't lie, Vila. I don't know what to do. Because of my past, I haven't the foggiest notion where to start. I know you and...and Avon have had a relationship in the past. I thought, perhaps, you would be willing to teach me. Avon trusts you." He looked up and their eyes met once again, "I trust you."

Vila sighed and took a step back, which, unfortunately ended him up on the bed. He sat there staring at the young man, lost in thought.

"Vila."

The thief snapped back to reality at the sound of the younger man's voice, "Eh?"

"I'm freezing."

Vila smiled, "Sorry." He pulled up the covers on the bed and grandly swept Morgan beneath them, then climbed in beside him. Placing a light kiss on the soft, full lips, he brushed an errant piece of hair from the unmarred brow. "Well, I taught Avon everything he knows...well, almost everything. I suppose I should get you started out right and make your first time good."

"Thank you, Vila."

"Oh, don't thank me yet. We've got a long way to go." And to prove his words, the thief stole another kiss, deepening it and feeling the young man quickly and enthusiastically respond.

Narrow fingers groped, trembling, uncertain as they tried to acknowledge the expert's ministrations. Smiling, Vila grabbed Morgan's hands and dragged them up above his head. "Slow down. It's all right," he cooed soothingly, "I'm not going anywhere. We've got all the time in the universe, you and I. Just relax and enjoy yourself. Let me do the work, and the next time, you can. Now, take a couple of deep breaths and let me make love to you."

Again, the lean body trembled under him and if the room hadn't been so silent he would've missed the young man's words. "Is it me you love, Vila or Avon?"

Vila looked up. The smile was gone from his eyes, "Never doubt it, lad, it's Avon, always Avon." He let his words sink in. "But I do like you a lot. You do look quite a bit like Avon. Are you two related by any chance?" The body beneath him surged up. A firm shaft stabbed the thief in the stomach forcing a smile to return to his lips. "All right...all right, impatient, are we? Do you know what's coming?"

Morgan laughed, "No, but I have a feeling its going to be good."

"Beyond good, lad" Vila lowered his head to the young man's groin, "Welcome to heaven." He engulfed the straining member and sucked hard. Morgan gasped and cried out. Vila's hand worked skillfully with his mouth, drawing his lover to the brink, yet not quite allowing him relief.

"Vila!" Morgan's voice dropped, croaking huskily from his throat as he thrust uncontrollably into the generous orifice. Fire erupted from him. Sweat streamed from every pore on his body. He felt his mind spiralling downward, having fallen over the precipice into the great, black abyss beyond.

"Vila!"

In the back of his mind, the thief recognized the subtle change in voice calling his name, but he was slow in responding. Drawing his head from Morgan's penis, semen continued to pour from the softening shaft he still held. The fist which connected with his head impacted so hard that it sent him sailing across the room. He landed in a heap, stunned. Rough, strong hands grabbed him by his throat and pulled him to his feet. Again and again the fist struck him in the face. Weakly, he tried to defend himself and couldn't. As suddenly as the vicious attack began, it ended. When his world coalesced, Vila saw Morgan holding Avon back. Avon's eyes blazed with demonic fury.

"How could you, Vila? My son. My own son! You bastard! You bloody bastard!"

The lockpick struggled to his feet and tried to speak, but strangely, his jaw didn't seem to want to work. Quickly, he snatched up his clothes, knowing he had to get away from Avon, now, before his momentary self-destructiveness got him killed and poured more blood onto Avon's hands. Yanking on his trousers, he fled from the room, tears of pain and anger streaming from his eyes.

"You what!" Avon slammed his fist so hard on the nav console it left a dent. "How could you have been so stupid!" he yelled, enraged, still not totally recovered from what Vila had done to Morgan. Taking a menacing step toward the frail, green skinned woman, he held his fist out threateningly and the look in his eyes told Rabeth he was completely capable of following through with his intentions "Get Breaker. Now! I don't care if you have to pump her full of stimulants and painkillers. Get her up here, now! And tell her what has happened."

Rabeth turned and ran in the direction of the infirmary, terrified.

“Orac, give me more information on this installation Blake is intending us to raid.”

\*Minon is strategically located in the Minondor system. It contains a major computer center, a communications center and a garrison of troops. At this moment, it is particularly important to the Federation because it is a resupply post for the Federation forces quelling the uprising on the main planet, Kaldor.\*

“So, Blake thinks if he can disable this outpost, then the rebellion on Kaldor will flourish.”

\*Precisely.\*

“Will it?”

\*Unlikely.\*

“Yes, it may take the Federation a while longer, but they have the manpower and the supplies and weapons to overcome any second rate colonial skirmish. The Kaldorians are doomed to fail. But now, Blake is going to get all of us killed attempting this *blitzkrieg*.”

A noise in the corridor distracted Avon from his thoughts. Breaker, with Morgan at her side, slowly limped down the hallway. She looked up and the pain Avon saw in her eyes told him she'd taken nothing the alien, Rabeth, had offered.

“I'll call Blake.”

“I already have.” Breaker hissed though clenched teeth as the young man helped her to sit down.

Rabeth stood in the corner with Kismet at her side. Neither said a word, they kept their eyes glued to Breaker. The mercenary settled back and nonchalantly moved her hands as if warming them, but Avon could see the method in her movements and noted the reactions of the other two women. They glanced quickly and uneasily at one another, but remained silent. When the tech turned his eyes back to Breaker, he found her staring at him, watching him in much the same way he had watched Rabeth and Kismet.

Blake bounded down the steps, Tarrant followed close behind.

“What's wrong?”

“You've set course for Minon,” Avon said levelly, not allowing his anger to show.

“Yes, I have.”

“Why?”

“Because the people of Kaldor need all the help they can get. We can put a pretty big dent in the Federation's stranglehold on them, if this outpost is eliminated.”

“A limited and possibly expensive victory at best.

Have you taken the time to wonder if we want to go and do your dirty work for you?” Avon challenged.

Blake stared hard at the other man. Their eyes never wavered, for to do so would be a sign of weakness. “So that's the way of it, eh, Avon? Challenge me at every turn. You think its going to be like the old times, do you? Well, it seems you haven't been informed. This is not the *Liberator*. This is not a democracy. I decide what we do, where and when we go. You are merely along for the ride. I no longer have to consult you at every turn, for I have the support I need from the Sisterhood. You, you high and mighty Alpha computer tech, are superfluous. So get off my back.”

Avon's eyes widened with rage and before he could say or do anything Rabeth and Kismet were on either side of him, holding him. Breaker, painfully, struggled to her feet and turned to face the tall rebel. It took her a second to catch her breath.

“This ship is going precisely nowhere, Blake.” Breaker announced, “Ariadne, hold position for now.”

+Affirmative.+

“You can't do this.” Blake took a step toward her, but the look in her ice blue eyes stopped him.

“I can do as I please. As you said, it is not a democracy and I am the Sisterhood's representative, not you. Until I get clearance from them, we stay here, but...” slowly, deliberately, Breaker turned in Avon's direction, “if the High Council gives their approval to Blake's plan, then we will resume course for Minon.”

“But we're wasting valuable time.”

“Yes, we are, Blake, and the longer you stand there arguing with me, the longer it will take for me to put your plan to the Sisterhood. Please clear the flight deck.” Her eyes softened when she looked at Morgan. “Everyone, I'm afraid.” Morgan nodded and lead the others from the room.

Morgan stopped Avon in the hall. “We need to talk.”

Avon shook his arm free of the restraining hand. “There's nothing to talk about.” He started to move on down the corridor.

“It wasn't Vila's fault.”

Avon halted, his back stiff, jaw firmly set. “What do you mean it wasn't Vila's fault? I know what I saw.”

The young man's hand came to rest lightly on the tech's shoulder. “I asked him to make love to me.”

“You expect me to believe *that*.”

“It’s true. I was a virgin, Avon, what else could I be, with the way the Sisterhood had me cloned? And I was frightened. I’ve never been with anyone. I was curious, I wanted to find out what was so wonderful about sex and...I did. I asked Vila because I knew he had been with you. I knew that if he could please you, with us being so similar, that he could please me.”

“He betrayed my trust in him.”

Morgan moved around to face the older man. “And what about you, what were you doing when Vila was making love to me? Where were you?”

Avon’s back straightened even more when he realised Morgan was reading his guilty thoughts. *Get out of my mind!*

Morgan stumbled back as if slapped in the face. “You sensed me.” The tech started to push past, but Morgan grabbed him.

“Leave me alone!”

The young man’s eyes widened with concern. “How long have you been able to do that?”

Avon heaved a sigh. “All my life. Now, let me go.”

Morgan did as he was told. “Then why didn’t you know of Blake’s plans on Gauda Prime, if you could read him?”

“It’s not consistent. It comes and goes, but since I’ve been around you, it’s been easier. It was easy when Cally was around.”

“A conduit,” Morgan whispered, then he looked up at the growing frown of impatience on his father’s face. “And what of future events?” He pressed on, before the other man could seal himself up tight as a clam.

“When I was a child, I foresaw things, but not since I reached adulthood. Why? Is it of importance?”

“Avon, believe me, please,” Morgan begged, “please don’t let them know you can send as well as receive thoughts; it is vital you not let on.”

“Why?”

“The Sisterhood have plans for me. I’m not certain what they are, just vague guesses, but I fear that if they knew you hold most of my abilities, they’ll use you as leverage, perhaps to force me to do their bidding in the future.”

“It would be stupid of me to let them, now would it?”

Morgan shook his head and smiled, “I doubt you’d have a choice.” The young man’s face suddenly clouded with unexplained emotion and he stepped forward to embrace the other man. “Avon, be care-

ful on Minon, I can feel it. Something terrible is going to happen there. Some of us are going to die.”

Avon pulled back, understanding where the young man had gotten his information, because he sensed the same, an unwelcome echo from his troubled childhood. “So that’s how they’ve decided, is it? And, I assume, we’re not going to be lucky enough that one of the dead will be Blake, now are we.”

Morgan shook his head. “I don’t know, but I doubt it. Just do one thing for me...and for yourself. Make peace with Vila, Avon.”

Avon noted the seriousness of the request in the young man’s eyes and felt the truth in his mind. For a moment he felt his throat tighten and found it hard to swallow past the lump which had formed there, deep dread filling his stomach. The tech released the man he now considered more than a son and made his way to the infirmary.

The battle for Minon went on around Avon, fast and furious. He’d tried to stay near Vila, to protect him, but the thief fought with a fervour heretofore unseen by the tech. Even Morgan showed an astounding penchant for survival as he took down two Federation troopers with hardly a glance. Avon noted the watchful eye Tarrant kept on him from a distance. Unfortunately, Blake’s plan seemed to be working, increasing his naive opinion that nothing would go wrong with the Sisterhood behind them and the fact that they had managed to dig up rebels from the outer reaches of the galaxy and bring them here, together, in the nick of time, to fight and die for Blake, did nothing to increase Avon’s estimation of them.

Suddenly, part of a burning building came crashing down in front of the tech, almost hitting him. With Orac in hand, he jumped back out of the way just in time, but a fiery plank had struck his gun hand, knocking the weapon from him, into the sparking inferno. Unarmed and cut off from the others, Avon turned, about to call the ship for teleport, and then he saw it.

At first, it seemed like nothing at all, but the closer he came the more substantial it became. It was a black nothingness hanging a few inches above the ground. He approached cautiously.

“Orac, give me your analysis of *that*.”

The little computer hummed for a few seconds before replying. \*It is a doorway into intradimensional space.\*

“A doorway? Then that means I can go through it.”

\*I would strongly advise against such an action.\*

“Why?”

\*I do not have enough data to give you an answer to your question.\*

“Is there danger?”

\*I do not have that information.\*

Avon moved toward the doorway, drawn by his insatiable need to know.

\*I do not advise this course of action. If you insist on it, I request being left here.\*

“Why?”

The computer refused to answer. \*Please do not take me inside. I do not advise....\*

“Oh, shut up, Orac.” Avon said as he stepped though the black hole.

The world as Avon knew it ceased to exist. He sensed no up or down, no side to side, no physical frame of reference existed for him and it was extremely disconcerting. “Orac, analysis.”

The computer remained totally silent. No comforting hum, no flashing lights. It was as if Orac, along with time and space, had simply ceased to exist. Avon turned around, looking for the doorway where they had entered, but it too was gone.

“Well, well, I should’ve guessed. They say curiosity killed the cat, Avon. You’d better watch out, my friend, you’re running out of spare lives. You used at least five when you were aboard *Liberator*.”

With a small smile, Avon turned toward the familiar voice. “Yes, of course it had to be you. The *London*, then the *Liberator*. Is that where you got the cells for Morgan? Late one night, while I was in a drug induced sleep so I wouldn’t wake up and catch you, Jenna?”

The tall blonde moved comfortably through the nothingness. The smug expression on her face never changed. “Would you like to have tea with me, Avon? We can talk.”

“I think I should get back to the battle.”

The former pilot laughed. “Oh, don’t worry, Avon, it’ll wait for you. Time stands still here. Come on, follow me.”

As if in a surreal dream, the mists which rose up around them parted, and an iron gate opened, allowing them to enter a beautiful, enclosed garden. Tea and steaming scones, fresh butter and marmalade awaited them. Jenna sat down and indicated the other chair for her guest. Avon allowed her to pour his tea and butter his scone for him, never taking his eyes off her.

“What is all this?” The tech nodded at his surroundings.

“This is a figment of my imagination, or more precisely, the dreams of many. An illusion of reality in nonreality. It gives me a point of reference. Up...down.” She indicated with her hand, making her point, “Right...left. Otherwise a person could go insane left with nowhere, quite literally, to turn.”

“I see.”

“Do you really?”

Avon ignored the barb. “Blake thinks you’re dead.”

“Jenna Stannis is.”

“Oh? Then who are you now?”

“I am the High Councillor of the Sisterhood.”

“In the presence of royalty, am I? Then I had best mind my manners,” Avon smirked, taking a sip of his tea. He looked up and saw that his little dig had made no difference in her. “Tell me about this place, this intradimensional zone.”

Her eyes twinkled with amusement, “So very predictable.” She cleared her throat and started her lecture. “This *place* is no where at all. It is situated between time and space. We, the Sisterhood, learned a long time ago that there really isn’t a line between the two; it’s just that we’ve never had the tools to control both, until now, and even that is in its more rudimentary stages. With a device we have developed, we are able to travel vast distances in the blink of an eye. Move people and equipment from one part of the universe to the other in seconds. Unfortunately, until recently, we didn’t know how to do it without expending vast amounts of energy. We realised that if we used the zone very often, its expense would outweigh its value on a grand scale. Also, we were limited. We can, at present, only move laterally in time.”

“You mean, only move in the given moment.”

Jenna smiled, pleased, in spite of herself, that Avon actually seemed to comprehend. “Very good, Avon. Yes, only in the given moment, but soon, very soon, even that limitation will be a problem of the past.”

Avon’s mind whirled with ideas. The uses of this intradimensional zone were infinite and the holder of its secret would truly be the ruler of this universe and all others.

“Do I exist elsewhere? Are there parallel time lines?”

“Do you mean, is there another Avon, somewhere, taking his children to school and then going off to his humdrum job?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“No. It is a pleasant, philosophical idea, but a false one. This is it. No undulating, no crisscrossing, this is it, straight and narrow.”

The tech frowned obviously bewildered, and sipped the last of his tea, “Then how...?” He stopped himself short, remembering Morgan’s words of warning concerning his psychic abilities and it also told him another useful piece of information—that the Sisterhood was wrong. He cleared his face, seemingly brushing off his unfinished question as insignificant. “Well, if you’re finished boring me with this little lecture of yours, Jenna, don’t you think you should be rid of me?”

Jenna studied him for a moment, her eyes narrowed in thought, then she nodded. “Yes, I’m sure you’re ready to get back to reality. Most males cannot deal with the insubstantialness of this world for very long.” She stood and lead the way to the gate. Again, the wrought iron door opened, but this time instead of the mists, a stop-motion picture of the place he’d come from met them. There was only one thing out of place. Untouched by the effects of the zone, Morgan walked slowly toward the doorway. Nothing moved around him, not the flames, not the specks of dust suspended in the air. His eyes locked solely with Avon’s. Jenna continued to speak to the tech as if she didn’t see the young man and it was then that Avon realised that she didn’t. There truly was something special about his son and now he felt he was on the verge of knowing what it was. Hurriedly, Orac in hand, he stepped across the threshold into Morgan’s outstretched arms. The noises of the continuing battle enveloped them.

“We’re this way.” Morgan shouted, pulling Avon to the left. The tech allowed him to lead him a few steps, but then he stopped, digging in his heels like a recalcitrant mule and glanced back, not surprised to see that there was nothing there to mark the entryway’s existence.

*He knows something. Something which could affect us. Then things cannot proceed as planned. Warn Breaker.*

*Kerr Avon must be kept alive....at all costs.*

*At once, High Councillor.*

*Then I want everyone on this. We must know what he knows. This turn of events was not predicted and I want to know why.*

*Yes, High Councillor.*

*And, young one?*

*Yes, High Councillor?*

*Do not fail me...again.*

“Morgan, take Orac and return to the ship. I have to get to Blake. We must get out of here,” Avon shouted, as he shoved the little computer into the young man’s hands.

“But, Avon....” Morgan started to protest.

The tech grabbed his son by the shoulders and shook him. “Don’t argue with me. It’s important, if we are to survive. Just do it.”

Morgan frowned and shook his head, but, like an obedient child, he did as he was told. Avon stayed long enough to see him vanish in the teleport field before he darted between the burning buildings in search of Blake.

It didn’t take him long. Where the fighting was the most intense was dead center of where Blake and his people were. Avon had passed the bodies of Rabeth and Kismet in his search, sparing them only a parting glance. Dodging another piece of falling debris, Avon suddenly realised he wasn’t armed. Looking around, he saw a gun still clenched in a dead trooper’s fist. He bent down, but it took him more time than he liked to disengage the weapon. Too much time as it turned out, because when he stood again, Avon found himself peering down the barrel of a Federation trooper’s gun. Even as he raised his weapon to fire, he knew he was no Soolin and that there was no way he could outshoot the other man whose finger, even now, tightened on the trigger.

Suddenly, a dark blur flew across his vision, knocking him down as three quickly fired shots rang out. Avon, startled and frightened, shoved the great mass covering him off to one side. Tarrant rolled from him, face up, eyes open wide in surprise as the last remnants of life drained from him. Blood started to pool on the ground underneath him. As an afterthought, Avon drew his gun up, but the hapless trooper was lying face down on the ground, still smoking from the energy bolt driven through him by Breaker’s weapon.

She stood between both downed warriors, looking first at the trooper and then at Tarrant. For an instant, Avon saw what he interpreted as regret, tempered by respect before her eyes hardened once again. Looking out over the devastated landscape, she motioned with her gun for him to get up.

“Come on. Let’s get Blake and Vila, if he’s still alive, and get out of here.”

It took fifteen minutes of arguing and a rifle butt to the head to get the rebel back aboard ship.

The failed battle on Minon was nothing compared to the verbal warfare being waged by Blake and Avon on the flight deck of the Phoenix, neither man prepared to give an inch. The only thing keeping them from blows was the gun Breaker held loosely, but ready, in her hands. A weapon they both knew she was prepared to use.

\*I have information which may be of importance to the Sisterhood.\* Orac stated matter-of-factly, interrupting Blake's oratorical barrage.

Breaker leaned forward in her chair. "Elaborate, Orac."

\*President Servalan has launched a retaliatory strike against the planet of Kaldor. One point two million prisoners are being held hostage and the Federation troops have been ordered to execute all those being held.\*

"What! She can't...!" Blake grabbed the edge of the table where Orac sat to steady himself, his mind clouding, refusing to believe what the transparent computer was telling them.

Avon watched Breaker with interest. Her eyes glazed with tears, but she said nothing. After a moment, she drew in a long, slow breath. She seemed to be fighting to hang onto her control.

"Orac?" She asked quietly, "When are the executions to take place?"

The computer hummed for a minute. \*They are occurring at this very moment. One pulsar blast was released on the containment area. All those held within have been annihilated.\*

Breaker sat back, her voice betrayed nothing, "Is there a list of those executed?"

\*Yes, but it is incomplete. No children under the age of seven years are listed by name, only by parent.\*

"She even murdered the children." Blake stared incredulously at the machine, still unable to believe that even Servalan could be so cruel.

"I want you to run that list through Ariadne so the Sisterhood can have an assessment of our losses."

\*Very well.\*

"And Orac," she hesitated, "if there is any correlation to anyone aboard this ship, notify us immediately."

\*Of course I will.\*

Avon turned on the benumbed man leaning heavily on the table by Orac. "So, Blake, your grand

plan backfires yet again." Avon moved in for the jugular, "One point two million, your death toll is definitely up. I must admit, if your scheme is to make Servalan angry enough to kill every one in the known galaxy so she won't have a Federation to rule, I'd say you were well on your way."

Blake's eyes filled with fury. He had taken a single step toward the tech before Orac's voice intruded again.

\*I wish to report I have found a correlation such as you requested. There is someone on board whose name corresponds with one on the list.\*

Like automatons, Breaker and Vila stood, undisguised dread filling their eyes.

"Who is on the list?" Morgan asked softly from the back of the room. His eyes transfixed on the statuelike pair.

\*The name of Claire Restal appears on the execution list.\*

Breaker dropped into her seat as if someone had cut the strings holding her up. Vila remained standing, his eyes woodenly locked onto a spot on the wall opposite him.

"Orac, were Vila's children listed?" Morgan looked sadly at his friend. Though the thief didn't show it, Morgan could feel the pain radiating from him. He wanted to comfort him, but knew instinctively now was not the time.

\*Two unnamed children were registered with her.\*

As if the wind were totally taken out of him, Vila bent forward, bracing himself against his console, then without a word, the thief turned and fled the flight deck. Avon started to follow, but he stopped short. Morgan's thoughts poured through to him as clearly as if he were speaking the words aloud, advising him to give Vila time to himself. Silently, the tech agreed with his son and returned to his control console to pick up where he'd left off in his repairs before this whole fiasco had begun. He knew if he didn't have something to occupy his hands that their next move would be to wrap around Blake's throat and squeeze the very life from him.

"Wasn't the first time enough of a show for all of you?"

Avon whirled around to face his surprised visitor. He'd known who was intruding upon his private reverie for several minutes. He never heard her soft footsteps, only her thoughts and, for the first time in his life, the admission that he could sense the thoughts of others didn't frighten him. Tossing back



the last of the drink he held in his hand, he stood stock still, glass dangling with practised nonchalance from his fingers. He knew he'd need all the resources he had if he were to have a chance against this formidable foe. He still couldn't bring himself to believe that Blake was stupid or blind enough not to see the real threat.

"Taking up some of Vila's bad habits, are you, Avon?" Breaker spoke softly. "You didn't kill Tarrant, Avon, any rational, thinking man would know that."

Dispassionately, he noted how carefully she pitched her voice, the tone deliberately soothing and submissive. He fought not to give in to her, but he found himself eased by that trained and skillful voice. "Oh, but I did...I did as surely as if I had pulled the trigger myself."

"No, Avon, what happened to Tarrant was something even we of the Sisterhood have had to come to terms with, it's something, try as we might, we cannot control."

Curious in spite of himself, he had to ask. "Oh? And what is that? I thought you controlled everything, or at least that's what I'm told, often enough."

Again, she kept her voice to its calculated level, but there was a hint of fey humour in it. "Fate. Of all the things in the universe we can do, we still cannot control Fate. Tarrant was still useful to us and we haven't survived this long by randomly discarding those things which are serving their purpose."

Avon turned on her, anger etched deeply into his features. "Are you trying to tell me the Sisterhood had no hand in this? If you are, then you may as well save your breath. I am not Blake, desperate to free humankind, willing to believe in your fairytales"

Breaker shook her head, then opened her hands out to him in a supplicating manner. "No, I'm not saying that, all I'm saying is that I don't know, why Tarrant died and why all those others died, too." She waited, pausing a moment to allow him to speak. He remained silent, a monument to stubbornness. "What do you want me to do, Avon? Find the person who pushed that button on Kaldor and kill them?"

"Oh, no, I know who ordered that button pressed and I want Servalan...dead. If you haven't the stomach for it, I'll be more than happy to kill her myself."

"And what will that prove? That you can? They'll only replace her with someone else, someone far worse, perhaps. Will killing her satisfy some sort of primitive male need to feel superior?"

The dark haired tech studied her, suddenly

realising she was speaking her unguarded thoughts. Cobralike, he struck out, seeking this new source of information. "Don't the Sisterhood feel any compassion for humankind?"

"For *hu-man-kind*, Avon? No. But *some* of us weep for the needless loss of our Sisters."

Carefully, Avon used her trick and modulated his voice, issuing the challenge, "So it is a war, an internal struggle for power within the Sisterhood. But do you actually care how many innocent deaths you have caused, Tarrant, Kismet, Rabeth, Vila's wife and children and the other one point two million you allowed the Federation to murder on Kaldor? Forgive me, if this frail, primitive male mind cannot comprehend the overall insignificance of their existence within the larger scope of the Sisterhood's master plan. This war of yours, the battle between the sexes, is one in which there can be no winner."

A cruel sneer ruined Breaker's normally pretty face, but she took the bait. "No winner? You don't see it, do you? You pathetic little man. That's not the war which rages around us. We won *that* war over a millennium ago. We made you, the male of the species, mentally and physically dependent on us. The Sisterhood manipulated you, the males, into doing our bidding with surprising ease. You see, we condition you from birth and control your every move until the day you die, urging you to fight the battles we want fought, to make the political decisions we think expedient. Think about it, Avon." She paused. "Now think about this. You are right, there is a power struggle within the Sisterhood, but the hierarchy is far from chaotic. You and others are very important to the faction to which I subscribe and I will go through hell and high water to protect you, for that is my job, but know this, when it is all said and done, when things go back to normal, you will still be only a man, controlled, carefully guided, manipulated until you have outgrown your usefulness and then you will die. The choice you have to make is this. Do you want to die a decrepit, old man, tucked up safe in your bed?"

The mercenary smiled at the frown on the other's face, as he realized how expertly he'd been lulled into believing he had control of this conversation, understanding for the first time in his life, how true her words were. His eyes turned hard as stone as he glared angrily at her, too furious to voice how he felt, but what he was feeling was plain enough.

Breaker nodded, picking up the gauntlet he'd figuratively tossed down between them. "No, I didn't

think that would be the way of it, oh no, not with you. Well,” she sighed almost wistfully, as she turned to leave, “flames of glory it is, then. Goodnight, Kerr.”

The silence of the room was shattered by the sound of a glass smashing against the closing door.

Avon lay awake in the dark, running over the day’s events, analysing and reanalysing the information he had on the intradimensional zone and more importantly, the Sisterhood.

Quietly, the door to his cabin opened and he made out who belonged to the familiar shape coming toward him before the door shut, plunging them both into blackness. The soft rustle of clothes being removed and cast to the floor ended and Avon felt a brief moment of cool air passing over his naked body as his blankets were lifted, then lowered, covering another body.

Avon allowed his bedpartner to take his arms and wrap them securely around the trembling form. They lay together, fitted like spoons, listening to each other’s regular breathing.

“Vila,” Avon whispered into the ear pressed so near his lips, “I’m sor...”

“No, Avon,” the thief halted his flow of words by scooting closer to his lover, “don’t say anything, not yet. Please...just hold me.” Avon felt the other man draw in a sharp, ragged breath. “Just hold me.”

Pulling the thief even tighter to him, he buried his nose at the nape of Vila’s neck and lay silent, doing for once, exactly what his friend had asked him to do and held onto the other man, anchoring him firmly against his roiling sea of grief.

“Orac, status.” Avon demanded as he bounded onto the flight deck. He shook his left arm, still feeling the cramp in it where he had remained in one position all night, holding Vila.

\*It is more within the ship’s computer’s capacity to deliver such trivial information. I am busy with research...\*

“I asked you a question, Orac, I expect an answer.”

\*Oh, very well, then.\* the computer snapped. \*We remain undetected and are continuing to orbit the planet, Minon.\*

Avon frowned. “Why?” Then for the first time he noticed how empty the flight deck was. “And where are the others?”

\*Vila Restal is still in your cabin. Blake is in the teleport area. Breaker and Morgan are not aboard ship.\*

A feeling of grave unease began to rise up from the pit of the tech’s stomach. “Where, precisely, are they?”

\*Precisely? I do not know.\*

“Don’t banter semantics with me, Orac, I’m not in the mood for it. Now, where are they?”

\*If you would ask your questions properly, then I could interpret them correctly.\*

“Orac!”

\*They are planetside.\*

“Why?”

\*That information is unknown to me.\*

Avon turned slowly toward the corridor leading to the teleport, “You may not have that information, but I know who does.”

“Where are they, Blake?”

Blake looked up from the teleport console, no hint of surprise evident on his face. “You’re early, Avon. I thought you’d be...consoling Vila, until at least midday.”

Avon’s hand shot out lightning fast, tightening Blake’s collar for him. “As usual, Blake, you were wrong. Now where are they?”

A firm hand broke the tech’s deathgrip. “They are doing a favour for the Sisterhood,” the rebel growled, his eyes never wavering.

“The Sisterhood? Not another of your less than brilliant ideas, you over-the-hill revolutionary?” Avon stepped back, looking down at the other man warily. “Explain it to me, Blake. How is it that you’ve suddenly become a follower instead of a leader? Why did you become the Sisterhood’s lackey?”

The rebel did nothing to hide his growing anger. “You have very little room to talk, Avon. What have you done for the past eight years, except to sit back doing nothing except grow fat? Eight solid years of hiding and feeling sorry for yourself, that’s all.”

“At least I haven’t been lying to myself about what has been going on around me.”

“Oh, yes, I’d forgotten how innately paranoid you were. Seeing a conspiracy at every turn.”

“But this time, there is one and the Sisterhood is at the centre of it. What did they tell you to get you to send my son and that mercenary into Federation infested territory?”

Blake’s brow furrowed, expressing his disbelief. “Your son! That’s impossible! He must be...”

The tech turned away. “He is, technically speaking, my clone, created by the Sisterhood, altered so that he is able to tap into my dormant genetic tele-

pathic and empathic abilities. In much the same way you felt your own clone was your brother, Morgan is just as surely, my son.”

Blake glanced away, uncertain, opening his mind and his eyes for the first time, allowing himself to see the undeniable similarities in the two, more than could be readily explained by his assumption of family ties, of perhaps a brother’s son... He looked back at Avon, owing him the truth, which would be accepted, and his comradeship, which no longer would. “Orac notified us the Federation was very close to completing a non-tarial cell computer. Their research centre is in the main complex planetside.”

“Orac notified you? That’s very unlike him. In fact, unless someone made a direct inquiry, he wouldn’t volunteer the information.”

“Perhaps he’s afraid of a little competition?” Blake sighed, resting his hands on the edge of the console.

The tech whirled around, his eyes narrowed, thinking. “No...no, there’s something I’m not seeing.” He focused on the rebel. “Where are they, Blake?”

“Presumably, somewhere inside the main complex. Orac didn’t give us the exact coordinates.” Blake sat down, feeling a sense of urgency at finding the pair, if for no other reason than to put his own mind at rest. He began to press buttons, activating the teleport locator.

Avon disappeared down the corridor, heading for the flight deck. It only took a few minutes for the tech to return with the lightweight supercomputer, dangling it from his hand. Slamming it onto the tabletop, he jammed its oblong key in place. “Have you found them?” he asked, looking at Blake’s hunched figure.

The rebel shook his head. “No, nothing...they must be in a shielded area.”

“More likely, they’ve been captured and their teleport bracelets destroyed. Orac, have there been any communications to Security Central?”

Quietly, the little computer hummed, but didn’t respond. A low, deadly tone entered Avon’s voice. “You will answer me, you overrated, egocentric bit of rubbish or I shall melt you down to a puddle of unrecognisable plastic. Make no mistake, Orac, this is not a threat, it is a promise.”

It took only a second for Orac to come to life. \*I will not be intimidated!\*

“Tell him what he wants, Orac, or I will be delighted to help him.”

\*Oh, very well, but I must warn you, if I scan Fed-

eration records here, the other computer could become aware of my presence.\*

“For the ten more seconds you still *have* a presence, Orac,” Avon said, gripping the handholds on the computer’s casing and hefting it off the console.

\*Since you are aware of the possible consequences, I have done everything I can. Yes, the Federation have captured the one called Morgan and the one called Breaker. They are to be transferred to Earth via heavy cruiser by order of President Servalan.\*

“Servalan! We can’t let her have them.”

“Mark this day in your diary, Blake, because for once, I agree with you.”

“We could take them from the cruiser. Our firepower is vastly superior.”

\*It would be inadvisable. There is a high probability of mortal damage being inflicted on the Federation ship in battle. I advise contacting the Sisterhood to negotiate their release.\*

Avon locked eyes with the rebel. “Don’t do it, Blake, they are manipulating us like pawns on a chessboard. Even Orac...”

“But there’s no denying it, Avon, that Orac could be right. If we try to take them from the troopers, we could very well end up getting one or both of them killed.” Blake’s eyes hardened, “And I, for one, am not willing to take that chance. I’ve had too much death around me. Orac’s right, the Sisterhood may be our best bet.”

Avon dropped Orac to the floor with a resounding crack, his face livid with fury and frustration. “You haven’t listened to a word I’ve said, have you?”

Blake leaned forward, speaking directly into Avon’s face. “On the contrary, I’ve heard every word, but at this moment I believe I’m the only one thinking rationally, not blinded by feelings and influenced by certain things that have passed between the two of us.” He bent down and picked up the computer, setting it on the console again. “Orac, if you’re still functioning, establish a communications link with the Sisterhood for me.”

Avon shook his head in total disappointment. “You are a fool, Blake.”

“Yes, well, so you’ve said often enough. And if it means going to Earth itself, if it means going against the Sisterhood, then I shall do so. Fool or not, I intend to get them both back...alive.”

Avon teleported into Servalan’s office. He’d taken the risk of her being here when he materialised, but he knew this would be the only room in the mansion

without surveillance. Her office, fortunately, was empty. Looking around at the familiar setting, he was unsurprised by the fact she'd kept the same furnishings from before Anna's aborted coup. Spying the old-fashioned writing instrument on the desk, he picked it up and studied it for a moment before taking a piece of paper and writing on it. Depositing the pen in his pocket, he carefully folded the paper and left it in the center of Madame President's desk. Silently as a cat, he padded to the door, hesitating only a few seconds before he headed out to his next destination.

"Good, that's done. What a wonderful way to start out the day, eh, Simpkins?"

The nervous, tightlipped young man nodded. "Yes, Madame President. You were quite brilliant in dealing with the Sisterhood's representative."

Servalan smiled introspectively. "Yes, I was, wasn't I? It does my heart good to see Blake so...defeated." She looked down and saw the folded piece of paper on her otherwise immaculate desk and was about to ask her secretary what it was doing there, when she saw the unmistakable handwriting.

*I await you in what was once the prison of a queen. Come alone.*

Her smile broadened. "Well...well."

"Is something wrong, Madame President?"

Servalan shook her head. "No, Simpkins, just cancel my appointment with the Argon ambassador, something has come up, something which requires my...personal attention. You are dismissed."

Simpkins bowed deeply at the waist and backed hurriedly out of the door.

Dressed in white satin, like a bride on her wedding day, Servalan stopped at the door leading to the old mansion's basement. She hadn't been to this place in many years, more due to her hectic schedule than to any bad memories it evoked...or at least that's what she tried to convince herself over the past thirty minutes. One part of her was nervous about seeing the man she knew waited down below, but another part demanded it to make this day's victories complete.

"Guard, stay here. I won't be long. Just do not come down unless I call for you. Is that understood?" The mutoid guard nodded, its face remaining set in nonemotional repose.

The door creaked as it opened and Servalan ventured down the steep steps for the second time in her life. The single, outmoded lightbulb glowed

dimly in the middle of the room, casting eerie shadows against the stone walls. Her eyes searched the murkiness for her guest.

"It's been a long time, Servalan."

Madame President whirled around, almost losing her balance on the slick, hard floor. Quickly, she corrected her misstep, regaining both her balance and her composure. "Well, it is good to see that you haven't changed much, Avon." She smiled and started to approach. Everything, but the look in the tech's eyes, welcomed her. Warmly, he wrapped her in his arms and covered her generous lips with his own. The kiss started out almost chaste, but it deepened until their tongues fought for dominance and until both were forced by lack of oxygen to pull back and regroup.

Her eyes glistened with unshed emotion, "Oh god, I've missed that."

A tiny smile crept onto Avon's lips as he stepped back from her. "I haven't."

Rubbing her bruised lower lip with a slim finger, she returned the smile "Do you honestly expect me to believe that?"

"Believe what you like, you usually do anyway."

Servalan started to circle him. "Why are you here, Avon? It can't be because you missed me, now is it?"

"Hardly."

"Then what?"

"You have something I want. Something which belongs to me."

"Oh...and what is that?"

Avon turned and stared down at her grinning face. "A young man called Morgan."

Servalan laughed. "And I always thought you were something of a ladies' man." Avon didn't grace her with a reply, just a foul look. "I'm sorry, Avon, I was under the impression that *he* belonged to the Sisterhood. I just completed a very profitable deal with them and have sent him and that troublesome woman, Breaker, back to their ship via one of my shuttles." She paused, her eyes sparkled with obscene amusement. "But, you see, I'm not as gullible as they think. I know I won't get anything from them in the long run, I know that what they usually pretend to give up has little value to them, but this young man must be important." The small woman caressed Avon's cheek with her fingertip. "I don't like being made the fool, so, you see, they aren't going to get anything from me."

The tech's eyes hardened with anger as he backed the tiny woman up against the wall she'd been

chained to, so many years before. Nervously, Servalan glanced at the cold stone as her own prophetic words came back to her...it was an old wall and it had waited.

"What have you done, Servalan?" When she hesitated, he pressed his body to hers threateningly. An unreasonable thrill of erotic delight surged through her. She trembled, revelling in the primal dominance which radiated from this man she could never tame.

"Do you remember Malodaar, Avon? When you and your little...thief tried to take my tachyon weapon from me? Well, this time, my little plan will work far better than it did on you." She laughed. "Your friend is as good as dead."

Avon stared down at her. She didn't realise it, but his finely tuned, computerlike system overloaded, she had finally pushed one too many of his buttons. The tech saw her with utter clarity and knew then that there was only one avenue left open to him. With deliberate slowness, his hand stretched up and his fingers encircled her slender, swanlike throat. Unafraid, Servalan smiled and her fingers traced a delicate trail down his leather encased forearm. "What are you going to do, Avon, kill me? For what? A mere toy, one you could replace on any pleasure planet. Stay with me, Avon. I'll make you a king. You can have your cake and eat it too...just as long as I get my share."

The fingers tightened ever so slightly and a smile she'd witnessed only one other time, on Gauda Prime, possessed his lips. He spoke and his voice dropped low, as if reciting some private prayer for absolution. "For Gan and Cally..." the fingers tightened a little more, "for Keilor, for Dayna Mellanby and her father, Hal Mellanby," Servalan's eyes widened and she could feel panic beginning to well up in her, "for Soolin and Deeta Tarrant..." The dark woman's talons clawed at his hands trying to free herself, suddenly comprehending her peril, struggling with him so she could breath and call for help. "For Vila's wife and children and for Del Tarrant..." She fought in vain, trying to get away from this madman who had pinned her very effectively to the wall. A rush of blood pounded so hard in her ears, she could hardly hear what he was saying, but Avon made sure she didn't miss a word.

"And for Anna, my poor, sweet Anna, whom you corrupted with your greed, your insatiable hunger for power until she was twisted enough to betray me," Avon paused, letting his words sink in, "and for my son, Morgan." Servalan's eyes widened, too

late understanding her final mistake. "And lastly, Servalan, you bitch, you...whore, my...love, for *me*." Avon pressed his lips firmly to hers, sealing her mouth, depriving her of her last breath, as he felt her larynx crumple beneath his fingers.

The President of the Federation's body started to turn cold quickly in the frigid cellar. Avon stepped back, suddenly disgusted by the idea of being so close to her. She dropped, lifeless and limp, to the floor at the base of the wall which had, in fact, waited for her.

The tech slapped at the teleport bracelet on his wrist.

"Avon! Avon, where have you been? Oh, god, Avon something terrible has happened."

"Stop babbling, Vila, and bring me up."

A somber Avon materialised, but he hadn't taken two steps before Blake and Vila swooped down on him.

Blake stood in front of him, a hangman waiting to deliver the bad news, or the victim waiting to be hanged. "Avon, I'm sorry. Morgan and Breaker are dead. They went down in a Federation shuttle after leaving Servalan's prison. She killed them, I know she did. Avon, and I swear to you, if I get my hands on that bitch, she's as good as dead."

"Too late, Blake."

Vila didn't bother to hide his surprise. "What?"

"But you are wrong, Blake, they are not dead and I intend to find them. I intend to find my son."

Blake shook his head. "Avon, honestly I know how you feel. If it were my son, I'd be distraught, not wanting to admit the truth, but, believe me, they are *dead*. No one could have survived the crash. If you don't believe me, then ask Orac."

"I don't choose to ask Orac anything, and I certainly wouldn't trust anything it had to say. For some reason, its loyalties lie elsewhere. I know what I know, Blake, and I haven't the time nor the inclination to explain further. Now, either help me or get out of my way, I have a lot of work to do."

The tall rebel grabbed the tech by the shoulders and swung him around as he tried to pass. "Avon, you don't know what you're saying, you're not thinking clearly. The best thing you can do right now is to help me complete my plan for promoting the rebellion on Argon. With their assistance, we will be able to defeat the Federation. If you have killed Servalan, then there will be chaos in the bureaucracy and *now* is the perfect time to strike."

Angrily, Avon shook himself free of the man's

grasp. “The Federation be damned. You stupid, narrow-minded fool, can’t you see that’s what *they* want you to do? If they keep you nice and comfortable wrapped in your idiotic crusade, you won’t look to the larger scope of things, as I have. The Federation isn’t the threat, it never was. It is the Sisterhood, you

class C moron. *They* have him. He is the key to a millennium of planning and he is alive. Morgan is alive and I am going to find my son, Blake, and if you do anything to hinder me, I will not think twice about killing you...again.” He turned his icy gaze on Vila. “Nor anyone else who deliberately gets in my way.”

# VI BLACK LEATHER WITH STUDS

*The three stories in this section are each one part of a whole and should be read in order. The editor finds it amusing that the first story has no sex scene, the second is nothing but a sex scene (PWP), while the last is that lovely combination of emotion and relationship loaded with good sex.*

## HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT Cally Donia

AVON WAS OFF SOMEWHERE, TINKERING, AS USUAL, WITH THE EQUIPMENT, ATTEMPTING TO GET THE *SCORPIO* COMPUTERS REPAIRED ENOUGH FOR THEM TO RETURN TO XENON BASE, HIS GROWL BAD-TEMPERED ENOUGH TO CONVINCING EVEN VILA THAT *THIS* TIME, HE MEANT IT. So Vila sat, bored, in the hotel room, watching Tarrant watch the girls play Monopoly. Soolin, for all she was quick with a gun, was truly awful at the game, and as far as Vila could see, that was what appealed to Tarrant. “Uppity little get,” he muttered.

“What was that, Vila?” Tarrant questioned sharply, catching the tone, but not the words.

“Nothing, nothing,” Vila sighed. God, it was times like these when he could weep, for missing the old days, back when Cally and Gan and Blake were still with them, when Avon’s snarling and hissing was only the way of a cat, fur bristling, demanding that you stroke it to prove you still loved it. Now, it went deeper, frighteningly so, and Vila was scared witless sometimes when Avon came to his room at night. He was waiting, just waiting, knowing it was only a matter of time before the brooding darkness of Avon’s Celtic soul engulfed him. And what worried him most was that he wasn’t entirely certain that the stressed, distorted man would even regret it. He took another hefty swig of wine, wiping his mouth with his hand, not bothering with the social niceties. After all, Avon wasn’t here, he wouldn’t care... Oh, how he missed Cally. She always knew how to calm the comptech, smoothing his ruffled feathers, bringing some hint of harmony back to the *Liberator*. Bringing Avon back to Vila’s bed, his demons gentled into submission. Now...

“Trying to be a big man, are you, Tarrant?” Dayna’s voice knifed into his thoughts. Here we go

again, Vila thought, readying a joke and a remark that would turn the anger on him, diminishing the fraught tension between the others, keeping the group together for another day. Dorian had been only too right when he said they belonged together, bound by pain and suffering. Days like today, Vila felt as if it were all *his* suffering and pain.

“I don’t need to *try*, Dayna. I’m not Avon, wrapping myself up in macho leather and studs to prove I’m a man.” He grinned at her, supposedly seductively. “I can prove it far more...satisfyingly.”

“Well glory hallelujah. One day, when I’m really bored and need a good laugh, I’ll challenge you on that.”

Vila didn’t know, nor did he care, what had struck the sparks to inflame this little spat, but he defused the situation anyway. “Is that really why you think Avon wears all that leather gear, Tarrant?”

“Vila, you surprise me. I didn’t think you were still sober enough to speak. You must be slipping.”

“Afraid to answer my question? Scared I’ll tell Avon, are you?”

Tarrant bristled, puffing up like a peacock. “No, not at all. You can tell him anything you want...”

“Because you’ll just say I was drunk, like that time you tried to get me to join you against him?”

Discomfited, Tarrant flushed. “That was a long time ago, Vila.”

“And you haven’t changed one single bit. So tell me, *big man*,” he taunted, all his good intentions blown out the window by the bluster of someone he considered still a callow youth, “why does Avon wear all that black leather and studs?”

“Well, it seems perfectly clear to me.”

“That’s quite a novelty,” Soolin said snidely.

"It seems perfectly clear to me," Tarrant continued, pointedly ignoring the blonde, "that he wears it so that he seems more dominant, so that people...like me...will be less inclined to challenge him."

Dayna laughed, outright contemptuous, tactless as always. "Avon doesn't *need* any props to do that, Tarrant. The man exudes sexuality and power. He doesn't need to add to that."

"Dayna's right, Tarrant. He can control, be the dominant male, by sheer presence alone."

"And," Vila said, sneakily, manipulating them as they would never believe possible, "just maybe, it's got something to do with the way Dayna described him when she first saw him, eh?"

"And just how did you describe him on that memorable occasion?"

"I said he was...well, I said he was beautiful. I didn't know," she shouted, over the gales of laughter coming from Soolin and Tarrant, "I didn't know you weren't supposed to say that to men. Anyway, he didn't seem to mind."

"What are you two laughing at?" Vila brought them up short. "You trying to tell me you've never thought of him like that yourselves?"

"Well," Tarrant blushed, "not exactly *beautiful* perhaps..."

"Just dead bloody gorgeous, eh? Or pretty, even? D'you know, he's had to put up with that all his life? You know what I mean, we've all said, some time or other." Vila clasped his hands melodramatically over his heart, feigning a swoon, "Those lips!" he cried. "Those eyes!"

"Those thighs," Soolin murmured.

"Those hands," Tarrant whispered.

"That lovely cock," Dayna said, loudly.

Three very shocked pairs of eyes were turned on her, but, accustomed as she was to Avon's reactions to some of her less...discreet comments, they didn't faze her one ounce. "Well," she said, grinning girlishly, "he is gorgeous and I got to see it once, when he came out of the shower when he stayed with my father. And you've got to admit, those leather trousers of his enhance all his..."

"Little assets?" Tarrant sneered.

"And well you should be jealous," she snapped. "His assets aren't so little and they're a hell of a lot

bigger than yours. And," she said, getting positively nasty and revealing the true cause for the quarrel, "I'm quite certain he's not *precipitous*—not like some people I could name, right, Tarrant?"

Vila and Soolin snickered quietly and Tarrant stopped them the only way he could think of on such short notice. "And you, Vila? Why do *you* think he wears all that black leather and those damned studs? After all, as you are always telling us, you've known him far longer than the three of us put together."

Vila picked up his bottle, got to his feet and prepared to leave. He looked at them with undisguised pity. "You lot haven't got a clue, have you? It's quite simple, see. He's hiding the real reason the best way there is—he's hiding it in plain sight. Then no one ever thinks that what seems so bloody obvious is true. It's as plain as the nose on your face!" He shook his head in honest bewilderment. "God, what are you three doing, running around the galaxy, blowing things up, killing people, when you don't even know enough about life to see Avon for what he's become. Children, that's what you are. Innocent, naïve, *stupid* children." He opened the door, but Tarrant grabbed him by the arm and whirled him around.

"Then tell us, Vila," he said in a credible affectation of one of Avon's more dangerous tones. "Put us out of our misery and have a fifth grade Delta ignoramus complete our woefully lacking education."

Vila looked at them each in turn, then turned back to Tarrant. Holding him with his eyes, unnerving the pilot with his honesty, he said, "Take this as a friendly warning, Tarrant, the best thing I could ever do for you. He's changed, over the years, and what used to be an occasional twist, a bit of fun has turned into something nasty. Watch yourself, unless you know what you want to be, and that's under his heel." He glanced at the girls, tucked his bottle more firmly under his arm and stepped through the door. His final words left stunned silence in his wake, the truth of them shocking...and titillating.

"What else could he possibly be, Tarrant? Our Avon, refined, genteel Kerr Avon, is a sadist. A *real* sadist. Why do you think I hardly ever sleep with him any more? I've always told you—I hate pain. And he doesn't, not any more. God help him, not any more."



# THE GAUNTLET

## Gael X. Ile

THE LONG, PINK TONGUE LAVED THE LENGTH OF HIS BOOT, SLOWLY TRACING ITS WAY UP THE CALF, THEN ALONG A LEAN THIGH, LICKING LEATHER TROUSERS WITH SHORT, SHARP STROKES. The mouth came to his groin and nuzzled there, rubbing and groaning with pleasure. His supple hands, so securely protected from human contact, and therefore, human need, cupped the face pressed against the leather and his cock. Their engloved fingers roamed the adoring visage, moulding it, shaping it to characteristics more pleasing to his eye. He shoved his thumb into the open, gasping mouth, fucking it with blackened skin and silver studs, the heavy barrier the only part of him touching the other man. He pushed a finger in to join his thumb, his own face expressionless, the leather gauntlet, masculine and potent, beginning the ravishment of the submissive on bended knees before him. He moved his hand to hold the head tightly, the wet black glove sliding smooth as a sucked cock over soft skin.

Carefully, white teeth gleaming against the black leather, the man on the floor nipped at and caught the tab of the zip, pulling it lower, millimetre by redolent millimetre. Long-fingered, pale hands came up to join the lips, peeling the outer skin aside, revealing the tender softness within. Using only his mouth, he freed the yet-limp penis, holding its nascent tumescence in his warmth, sucking on it, flooding it with stiffening blood. As it grew in his mouth, so did his pleasure, and the pleasure of his Master. He was new to this, his training only recently recommenced after many years of sublimation and repression, but he took to his lessons with a fervour born of passion and emotional need. The life in his mouth was large now, and thick, parting his lips, stretching his jaw. He continued sucking, grazing lightly, teasingly, with his sharp white teeth, as his Master had so...painstakingly taught him to. He hummed, far in his throat, vibrating an erotic surge against his Master's cock, pleased beyond reason when the man over him thrust forward, an involuntary, uncontrolled buck of desire.

Obedient to the Master's every whim, he followed the faint flicker of a finger gesture and stripped the taut garment from the burgeoning groin, displaying the faintly gleaming skin in the dancing light. His tongue followed the leather, tasting two skins, ani-

mal and human, drinking in two scents, drowning in two passions. He himself was already naked, as his Master commanded, with only a slender golden cock ring to adorn him, keeping his hard cock pulsing against the firm muscles and fine hair of his belly.

Eyes closed, awash in the pleasure of unquestioning obedience and therefore, total trust in his Master, his Lord of All, freed from all responsibilities, he returned to the jutting cock, swallowing its rosy length, tongue throbbing against prominent, swiftly-beating veins. He nipped, a touch too hard and his Master cuffed him on the side of his head. Displeased with this failure, his Master commanded and he obeyed, crawling over to the bed, leaning his folded arms on the edge, resting his forehead on his crossed wrists. The studded leather gauntlet came down on him, a cracking blow, leaving mottled red pleasure marks in its wake. Again the hand descended, the studs forming little tiny craters, indents of lust, hollows aching to be filled. The white cheeks grew as rosy as dawn, then as fiery as sunset, as the hand caressed him again and again with painful accuracy. He cried out, in delight, in agony, loving the mastery, the freedom of obedience, the luxury of being controlled.

Lubricating, numbing, tingling gel squiggled and swirled over him, down the crack of his ass, kissing at the opening to his body. The hungry mouth of muscle there loosened and he could feel the tiny halo of flesh pushing out, stretching, more than ready to be filled with the blessed baptism of erupting, thrusting cock. Tensile leather and hard, smooth studs teased him, pirouetting up to the straining hole, then fleeing away, always promising, never delivering. He thought he would surely die, if his Master continued to taunt him like this and a sob of frustration forced its way out.

The Dark Lord chuckled, his free hand tangling in the curly hair, his other hand returning to fond spanking of the quivering arse. Both gauntleted hands came down in a resounding whack, clutching at his subject's backside, fingers splayed wide. He felt the power surge through, from the soles of his feet to explode in his brain, as he towered above his possession, made taller and bigger by the other's submission. He clenched his fists, and the slave groaned, writhing back against him, the mute body

begging for his Master. Again, the Lord brought both hands down on him, skelping him, the red skin framing his black gauntlets, those ancient and universal symbols of masculinity and strength and domination. Both thumbs delved deep into the slave's arse, the studs catching delicately, erotically, on the short silken hair hidden between the cheeks. Grinning, not through humour, but from the conquering glory of the other man's humiliated, embarrassing surrender, he spread the flesh, exposing the dark entry to his prize's yielding being. As he watched, the muscles dilated, like flower petals unfurling or a portal opening, screaming his slave's deepest need, the need to know his place, to be led, to be freed from the daunting and terrifying necessity of taking a 'man's' place in the world—to play the part for which his nature suited him and to leave off the mask of 'Alpha male' which he donned with such obvious insecurity and blatant, frantic machismo. A stifled moan escaped the slave and he pushed against the thumbs, desperate to have the hollow aching emptiness inside filled to overflowing with his Master's cock, with the Dark Lord's hot seed, with the security of being in Avon's power.

"Ready for me, are you?"

"Yes, Avon."

The fist in his hair clenched, pulling his neck straight.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Master."

"That's better. Now, tell me what you want."

"I want you to fuck me, Master."

"I'll just bet you do. Why do you want me to fuck you?"

"Because of the way you feel inside me. Because you like to. Because...oh, god, Avon, I never thought I'd ever feel like this again. Not since Jarvik at the FSA..."

"This is *better* than Jarvik at the FSA, isn't it, Tarrant?"

"Yes. *Yes!* Oh, please, Master, do that again."

"You mean, this?" Avon murmured, bringing his gloved hand down in a stinging smack, sliding it along moist skin to knead and squeeze firm young muscle. "Or this?" He whacked Tarrant hard, the indentations of the studs standing out momentarily, a shocking white against the bright red of Tarrant's quivering buttocks.

"Both..."

"No, no more of that. I think it's time for something a trifle more...satisfying for me. It is, after all, the only reason we're doing this. Spread your legs."

Tarrant obeyed, kneeling pliantly submissive, his monumental erection scraping painfully, deliciously against the side of the bed. Well slicked, muscles relaxed and wide and hungry, Tarrant waited. The leather gauntlet teased him again, tantalising his arse, coquettishly flirting with him. Then, the thumb became intent, attacking its goal, sliding confidently, easily in, hand spread starkly black against his pale skin, dark fingers of night, speaking of secret, hidden passions, of forbidden pleasures and taboo lust—and of love twisted and distorted and beaten, murdered in the cradle of the heart so many times, that this painfilled dominance was the only expression still alive.

Tarrant moaned as the supple leather rubbed against the nerve centre of pleasure, as the smooth studs glided in and out, stimulating him, their domed slickness sending chills of eroticism rippling through his body. In and out, around and around, back and forth, the leather and the studs moved, thrusting deeper and deeper until their limit had been reached. Tarrant rocked back, trying to hold the intruder within, surrendering his body and his dignity without even a token fight. The thumb withdrew, leaving Tarrant empty and bereft, until the hand smacked him with rapid rhythm, raining pleasure on him like a cascading waterfall, or a flood of molten lava, burning a path to his soul.

Avon's cock knocked at the back door of Tarrant's body, demanding entrance, thrusting sharply and sweetly into the wet, hot tunnel. The flesh yielded to him, as the will had so long before, as the will would in the future, leaving Avon unchallenged, the final leader—the dominant male. The power of it flowed through him, making him drunk, flying high. He pounded into the pliancy beneath him, uncaring, seeking only his own release from the painful tightness strangling his balls. Skin slapped against reddened skin, Avon's sharp hipbones bruising tender buttocks, his balls drawing up closer and closer to his cock as the come gathered, waiting, waiting to erupt, building more, burning inside, filling him too, too full and then... He was free, soaring on the wings of desire and the painfully pleasurable crescendo of relief.

Tarrant bucked with him, coming as the cock inside him jetted its load of hot cream into him, feeling as if the liquid shot directly into his mind, eroding his need to challenge, his urge to lead.

Suddenly limp, Avon withdrew from Tarrant, signalling that this session was over. "Here," he said, tossing one of his own black leather tunics at the

pilot, "I want you to wear this. It should fit you very well, apart, perhaps, for length. You will wear it until I permit you to remove it and you will remember, that while that is on your back, you are *mine* and are willing and anxious to obey me, to win my approval, but without snivelling. At least make it look as though you are still a challenge for me, it's all too dismally boring otherwise. And, if you are very, very good, I shall allow you to serve me again in a day or so. Now, get out."

Tarrant scrambled into boots and trousers, waiting until he was outside in the corridor before slipping on Avon's plain leather tunic, the one with only a few silver studs around the yoke fastening. Grinning, whistling merrily to himself, pleased as punch that he had obviously done well for his new Master, Tarrant took himself off to Xenon Base's rest room in search of Vila. The chain of human dominance was once again forged. He had some lessons to practise and bullying Vila seemed a very good place to start...

# EXEUNT

## Emma Scot

THE SUDDEN COOLNESS ON HIS BACK TOSSED HIM ABRUPTLY OUT OF THE VAGUELY FRIGHTENING DREAM, OPENING HIS EYES ONTO THE ALMOST COMPLETE BLACKNESS OF THE RENTED HOTEL ROOM. "Avon?" he whispered, recognising the chilled body against him, questioning the man's mood, not his identity.

"Go to sleep, Vila. I don't want sex, just sleep."

*Upset then, Vila thought, tenser than usual. So something didn't go right tonight, something's made him tighter than he was before he... went out.* Even in his own mind, he was unwilling to name where Avon had gone, what he had done there. To so much as think it was to incite it, to invite the darkness to be visited upon himself. Cautiously, he stroked a soothing hand along the arm encircling him, sighing in relief when the gesture was permitted.

"Feel like talking?" he ventured.

He felt Avon's chest swell with sudden anger. "I've already told you what I want, idiot, so shut up and go to sleep, unless...." The voice tailed off into a hostile hiss, draining away some of the violence. In the old tone of the past, Avon spoke again, control once more clenched in his hands. "Just go to sleep."

Almost two hours later, Avon lay, still awake, fraught and disturbed. He sighed, knowing Vila was not asleep, well aware that, incomprehensibly, his thief would do whatever was asked of him. "Give me a massage," he said, the four words an effort, rolling over onto his stomach. The night air was cool on his back, the lotion cooler still.

Vila's voice was pitched low and soft. "Mind if I turn the light on a bit, so's I can see better?"

It was too much bother to speak, so he simply shook his head. Hands came down on him, stroking and smoothing him, easing some of the tension, untying knots and undoing cramps. Vila's fingers dug into him the wrong way, bringing pain amidst the ease. With violent alacrity, Avon swirled around, ready to beat Vila, his face twisted and ugly with hate, fist clenched. Mid blow, he froze, shuddering, a strange, derailed blankness drifting over his face. He shook his head, a faint movement, swallowed by the nothingness in his eyes. Rationality stole into his mind on moth wings, opening up the pit of horror within. "Vila?" he whispered, fist still poised.

Wild with fear, brown eyes fixed on the raised hand, unable, unwilling to shift to the tortured face. *Oh god, Vila thought, I need a drink. It's finally going to happen, he's finally going to do it, he's going to hurt me. It's been building up to this and now...*

Avon hunched away from Vila, a gasp of pain coming from him as he curled on the edge of the bed. His shoulders trembled and shook and for a dreadful moment, it appeared that he was crying. But then he stiffened, straightening his spine, sitting as still as a tombstone.

Vila didn't even pretend to understand Avon's moods any more, trying simply to deal with them as they arose, be they bitter, ugly or frantically, desperately amused. He reached a hand out, knowing that the violence was gone as abruptly as it had erupted, disappearing through one of the many cracks in Avon's façade. "Come on," he said, "get back into bed, where it's warm. Here, lie down, it's all right."

"No, it's not all right. It is never all right and it never will be all right."

Vila stroked his back, beginning the massage again, patiently helping in the only way he could think of. How he missed Cally, with her wonderful insight and skill, and for the way she held Avon together, gently, implacably, forcing him to interact with all of them, letting him keep the walls of his fortress high, but making him leave the drawbridge down and the moat empty. Vila felt so much at a loss, these days, when the bitterness in Avon spilled over, burning them all with his acid, now, when Vila's bright optimism and earthy practicality no longer did anything other than irritate.

Avon stretched, drifting, feeling the strength in those skilled hands, mind idly leafing through the long history he shared with Vila. They had been lovers for so long, he sometimes found it hard to remember a time without him. Frowning, Avon tried to pin down the first time he had slept with Vila. Certainly, it had been long before that disastrous prison adjustment had turned the thief's memory into a sieve and well before Anna. "Do you remember when we first had sex?" he asked, voice a reed of smoke in the faint light.

"Not sure. I remember that time you fenced the Urquhart jewels for me, was that it?"

“Possibly. Or the night I showed you how to break the computerised lock codes?” Avon paused, floating free in the warmth of the bed. “No,” he murmured, “I remember. It was the night I met you for the first time...”

His mind drifted back to memories of two very young men, one caught in the unexpected lights of a house he had thought empty, one caught by the sheer aliveness of a totally unexpected presence in a home that always *felt* empty, no matter how full it might be. “You had considerably more hair then. It was forever falling in your eyes and it was so fine...”

“Yeh, well, I was a helluva lot younger, back then. And who are you to criticise, eh? What’s this, if not age?” He grabbed two handfuls of the thickening at Avon’s waist.

“You usually call those ‘love handles’, don’t you? Only...it has been a very long time, since you said that. You have become almost a different man from the one I first knew.”

“Sorry, but everyone has to grow up, even Delta grade thieves.”

“And bored, isolated Alphas.”

Vila didn’t answer, not entirely sure how to continue this conversation, never certain, these days, as to how Avon would react to him. So, caressingly, he rubbed Avon’s long back, squeezing and stroking, gently soothing out the tension. If he could, if he dared, he wanted to get Avon to talk about whatever had gone wrong tonight, find out what had brought the tech home to him so unexpectedly early. He heard a deep sigh and settled back on his knees, thinking Avon asleep. “Vila?” the quiet voice rose, muffled, from the pillow of tired arms. “Don’t stop, I’m still awake.”

“In a sec, my arms are awful tired.”

Avon twisted on the bed, knocking Vila off him with his sudden movement. Before the thief could catch his breath, his fright-filled eyes were staring up into Avon’s burning, almost mindless fury. A hand came down, slapping into his face with an echoing crack. Tears sprang to his eyes and horrified awareness sprang into Avon’s. “Oh, Vila, “ he said, that same, distressingly familiar look creeping over his face: the expression of a man who gets up and looks in the mirror one morning, only to see someone else’s face staring back at him. Workworn fingers circled the reddening bloom on Vila’s cheek, nightmare-ridden pain circled his eyes, tightening his mouth, grating in his voice. “Not to you, not you. It was bad enough to do it to him...”

Vila sat up, pain sublimated beneath worry. He gripped the back that Avon turned to him, knowing that this was the instant, now, when the sporadic, irrational anger had just flared brightly and would be damped down with such fierce, ever more desperate, control. “Avon? Did you...hurt him, tonight? I mean, actually hurt, not just, you know, kind of, sort of...”

“Stay within mutual limits? And what do you want to hear, Vila? Do you honestly think you can deal with the truth?”

“I know I can, Avon. The question is, my old friend—can you?”

Avon didn’t answer him, but buried his face in his hands, answering with visible pain and inaudible confession. “It’s all right, love, it’s all right...” Vila whispered against his shoulders, again and again.

“No, it’s not idiot. Don’t try to numb me with your mindless, meaningless platitudes. Save them for the three children we drag with us to share our deaths. Don’t you realise?” he shouted, for once raising his voice, turning around, grabbing Vila by the shoulders and shaking him hard. “I *hurt* that boy tonight. I seriously hurt him and I only stopped because a part of me recognised that that would simply lead to more difficulties. How can you possibly say that it’s *all right*? I have become a monster, Vila, a caricature of the man I once was, and I need it to stop, I need *me* to stop, to have this charnel-house *over!*”

“So stop it, then!”

“I suppose, to an idiot like you, it seems quite simple, doesn’t it?”

“What’s there to be complicated, eh? You’ve had enough, I’ve had enough, I’m sure the three kids’ve had enough too. So,” he shrugged, “we just stop.”

Avon laughed and Vila shivered. “How? Tell me *how*, and I shall do so. We—I—have people depending on me, alliances to form, I have to meet with Egrorian...”

“Who’s he? And does he really matter, Avon?” Vila asked, trying hard to get this man to listen, desperate to reach the old friend tucked away inside the psychopath. “Why do you have to keep this rebellion thing up, anyway? You never believed in it, so what are you doing all this for? At least Blake had an excuse—he was barmy, completely daft, mindwiped, the whole bit, but *you*... You know better, Avon.” He heaved a sigh, staring sadly at the closed profile, the bitterly unhappy downturn of lips. He could barely remember the last time he’d heard Avon laugh out of pure humour, the times of carefree lust were be-

coming few and far between and as for times of affection, well, they'd long since gone the way of the snowball in hell. "Listen, Avon," he started again, but the comptech spoke over him.

"Blake did, indeed, know better. You were right, when you said he was...a 'manipulative bastard', I believe, was your so eloquent term." He turned and smiled at the thief, an echo of the radiance long gone by. "I can't give up, Vila. I can't stop it. I promised Blake—he made me give him my word—that if we were separated and whilst he was still alive, I would find him and take him to Earth to finish the rebellion."

"So what? Break your word. Just cos you've never done something before doesn't mean to say you can't start now. I mean, I know you're getting on a bit, but even old dogs can learn new tricks."

A fragment of the old anger fractured Avon's voice. "I gave him my word," he said slowly, with great distinction. "As long as we are both alive..."

"So that's what I have to do, is it? Kill Blake? Cos that's what it's going to come to, Avon. Either you're going to kill me, I'm going to have to kill you or one of us kills Blake. And you know what my money goes on." He put his arms around Avon, rubbing the other man's front, tangling his fingers in the swirling chest hair, rubbing his own, slightly whiskery, jaw on the too vulnerable nape. "Avon, Avon," he murmured, "you used to be such a dreamer, didn't you? Before all this, before Blake, before Anna and all the rest of it."

"And now I simply have nightmares." The easy familiarity of their positioning, of Vila's comfortable caresses lulled him back into the patterns of the past. Sometimes, it was so tempting to speak, to tell his friend all his troubles. "That boy tonight..."

"Tarrant?" Vila asked with sudden tension. Bad enough that Avon had hurt someone, truly awful if it had been the pilot.

"No, I wasn't with him, not tonight. He is somewhat...precipitous and I wanted rather more than simple submission. And you must admit, if there is one word to describe Tarrant, it is 'simple'."

"The boy, Avon?"

"Ah, yes. Him. I...picked him up, at the club. I call him a boy, but he was actually older than Tarrant, he just looked very, very young. As young and vulnerable and alone as you did, that evening in my father's study. Anyway, I went with him to his flat and we...began. Everything was wonderful at first. He had been well trained, very gifted. But then...well, you can use your mind for once and imagine."

"How badly did you hurt him, Avon?" Vila asked with trepidation.

"Bruises, mainly, perhaps.. you really don't want to hear about this. You were rather loud in your protestations that you never wanted to get closer than a million spacial to what I do when..."

"You go off and be an Alpha."

"Well, that's as good a euphemism as any. And better than the truth."

"Look, I know you don't want to hear this, but you're only human, Avon. You eat, sleep and go to the toilet just like the rest of us, so you have to expect that sometimes the great Kerr Dyffed Avon has clay feet, too."

There was a glint of the old, self-deprecating humour in Avon's smile, softening the sharp edges of the wolf's head grin. "And that is supposed to be reassuring? The knowledge that I'm like you...and Tarrant? I'm so thrilled, I may have to commit suicide."

"Keep on saying things like that and I'll kill you and save you the bother."

Avon slipped from Vila's grasp, getting under the covers to calm the goosepimples on his skin. "I've had more than enough talk of death and killing, tonight." And Vila heard the unspoken self-condemnation: *and I came more than close enough to actually doing it, tonight.*

Finally realising that he himself was cold also, Vila crept under the covers, keeping a weather eye on Avon, feeling neither one of them was on steady ground, aware that it would take very little to topple Avon from the narrow ledge on which he balanced so precariously. The thief shrugged: he had always been a gambler. "Avon," he whispered, stretching out under the blankets against smooth skin and silky hair, "there's something we haven't done for a helluva long time, and it's just what the doctor ordered, to clear up the whole thing about the kid tonight."

Avon's face was utterly impassive, as unrevealing as a waxen death mask.

Trembling, Vila's fingers traced the shape of his mouth. "Remember how it used to be? Your mouth...so fucking generous." He danced his fingertips down Avon's chest. "And all this hair...feels wonderful, tickling and stroking me." The hand touched coarser hair, velvet flesh. "And your cock. Remember how it feels in me? Remember how it feels when I suck you off? I want that again, Avon, instead of an absentminded quickie." He dared a glance at the eyes. "That all right?"

“And is...indulging you supposed to expiate what I did tonight?”

“What you *almost* did.”

“Well now, I suppose I should be thankful for small mercies.”

“We’ll have less of the small, if you don’t mind. I’m considered rather well endowed, where I come from.”

“Which is why, no doubt, the Delta birth rate has been dropping so alarmingly.”

“Don’t be snide. You’re just jealous, that’s all.”

“Of you? I hardly think so.”

“Well, you ought to be. *I* can still remember what to do with mine, but you seem to have forgotten...”

“And is that puerile barb supposed to make me take you with wild abandon?”

“No, Avon,” Vila said, voice and eyes very serious. “It’s supposed to make you realise that no matter what you did, or almost did, I know why, know that it’s only because you’re so friggin’ close to breaking and that I’m not going to change how I feel about you.”

A suddenly hungry look emptied into Avon’s eyes, times from the past returning to bounce with inveterate happiness through his mind: two teenagers, discovering new ‘games’ with each other; two men not yet scarred enough to refuse happiness on the grounds that it cannot possibly exist in a galaxy so cruelly vindictive. He brought his attention back to his old friend, catching up on the thief’s words.

“...so you see, if we can bring those times back, here, after what went wrong tonight, after that side of you got loose like that, well then, stands to reason that we can just say stop and put this whole rebellion rubbish back where it belongs—in someone else’s lap.”

“But my word...” he had to protest.

“Given under duress—not binding. Anyway, truth is, Blake’s dead. Or, living on that planet with that pretty girl, whatsherface, and *that* Blake doesn’t want to go to Earth. I mean, if you asked him, it’d be like asking the real Blake, him being a clone and all that, and seeing as how *he* doesn’t want to go near Earth, well, ’s obvious, innit? You can’t keep your word because Blake doesn’t want you to. Simple, really, to a man of my intellect.”

“Throwing straws to the drowning man, are you?”

“No, I am not. These are ruddy great girders! Now, get a grip on one, and just give it all up.”

“If we can recapture the...gentleness of the past. It hardly seems fair that the future of the Galaxy depends on how good sex is.”

“Isn’t that what the future is *always* built on? How’d you think you got here, eh?”

Silence hung between them, until Avon finally sighed and reached out for Vila. “Come here, idiot,” he said. And Vila thought he had died and gone to heaven and it was full of Avons. This was different from their recent, prosaic couplings, the sudden, surreptitious matings, with Avon taking him with quick, impersonal efficiency. Now, there were faint glimmerings of the past, of the wondrous sexuality they had once shared with such frequent, unselfconscious fervour.

Avon stopped, staring down at Vila for a long moment, obsidian eyes revealing not one word of his thoughts. The thief lay quiescent under him, knowing this man well enough to leave him to make his own decisions, in his own way. Vila was too tired, too battered and demoralised by the grinding harshness of their lives, by the incessant peacekeeping and unobtrusive organising of the daily minutiae, those terminally necessary details such as providing food and clean clothes, the small things that stretch out into infinity. He simply waited, trusting in Avon once again, as much through habit as weakness and tiredness. When all was said and done, Avon was a survivor and he had always taken care of Vila, protecting him from Tarrant’s bullying and Blake’s lethal idealism. The moments wove on into a tapestry of complexity, masking Avon’s eyes, hiding him from the chills of the worlds. Slowly, life was reborn in those umber depths, a small, bright glinting of hope and possibilities and the future.

Tentatively, a tight reign on the bitter darkness that was so prevalent in him now, Avon reached for Vila, swaddling him in his arms, stretching out against the slender warmth. His hand came round to mould a muscular buttock, squeezing it gently, fingers swirling in small circles. Little sucking kisses crept up Avon’s neck, following the line of sensitivity from collarbone to earlobe, tongue dipping deep and with sudden, urgent sexuality. Vila curled himself around Avon, a sheltering warmth, a windbreak against the gales of time. “C’mon, love,” he whispered, “let it go, let it all go and come back to me...”

Avon paused, looking into Vila’s eyes, finding some kind of ease there, some hint of peace. He lowered his head, pouring himself into the kiss, sliding his tongue on Vila’s, inviting Vila in, filling the dark hollow of his mouth. “Oh, that’s it,” a soft voice murmured, words and hands encouraging, rebuilding the old ways, restructuring the old Avon. With

fragile, deceptive strength, Avon covered Vila, transposing them, as always taking the responsibility, the lead. He cupped his hands full of yielding flesh, slaking his thirst for forgiveness, solace proffered to him with generous honesty. His fingers found Vila's erection and there was a sudden cry of delight in his mouth, a sudden upsurge of glory against his groin. Avon rubbed them together, precum singing from them, sweet and easy, carrying his burdens with it.

"Hang on a minute," Vila whispered into his mouth, "I need to get something." He squirmed out from under Avon, careful to keep one hand on him, holding him with ties of emotional surcease, chaining his demons away. He found the tube where he'd left it on the bedside table and passed it to Avon.

"No," the other man breathed, sitting back on his heels, withdrawing. "Not after tonight...."

"Yeh, after tonight. *Epecially* after tonight. Avon, it's all right, I trust you. You're not going to hurt me."

Blank eyes stared at him for an eon, then a trembling hand took the gel, the shaking diminishing, confidence and self-belief returning. A small smile curved Avon's lips, and he stroked copious, cooling lotion, covering himself. He slid a single whetted finger within Vila, and as Vila's body opened to Avon, his eyes closed, sensation flooding through him as that finger found and fondled the nub of pleasure inside his ass. He pushed up, muscles dilating, demanding more. Teasingly, Avon slowly pulled his finger out and knelt forward, bending Vila, taking his legs over his own strong shoulders, looking down at the moist floret awaiting him. Vila struggled up on to his elbows, awkward and precarious, but needing to see, to put picture to delight, to watch with Avon as the rosy cock pushed into him. First the round, red head, then the flushed shaft, until finally, they were fully joined, ass to belly. Vila threw his head back, collapsing against the pillows, squirming and pushing, muscles clenching and relaxing, milking Avon for all he was worth. With slow, exquisite control, Avon thrust, filling Vila, making him feel bigger and replete with the presence of the cock in him. Eyes locked, they moved together, with abrupt, frantic kisses, Vila's hands desperate for more and more of Avon, grabbing him, holding him, pulling him in deeper. Blood pounding, voice keening, Vila came, ass clamping down on Avon, hurling him over the precipice, his essence shooting into Vila. Boneless, he fell on top of his friend, still in him, unwilling to withdraw until, in the soft afterglow, his penis slipped free. Tangled in Vila's arms and legs, suffused with

contented release, he whispered, "Blake did get my promise under duress..."

Under Avon, a sleepy voice answered, hope rousing him, bringing him back to life after the little death. "Yeh, and even if you *do* decide that it's wrong to break your word to him, *that* would be a decision you could live with. Keeping up this wild goose chase is only going to end up cooking our geeses. Or something..." Vila watched Avon carefully, watched the doubt come crawling in on slimy underbelly. He found he wasn't too tired to fight for this man, after all. "Listen, you may think it's a really disgusting thing to do, breaking a promise. But, Avon, is that honestly worse than whatever you did to that man tonight? Not that I want to know, nor nothing," he added with alacrity, "but just think about that. Blake wasn't exactly an honourable man, not even close, was he now? So why are you throwing yourself and those three kids we've got tied to our apron strings into his bloody mess? You know what I always say, you make a mess, you clean it up yourself. It's time to just stop, Avon. It's that simple. You say, no more, I've had enough, I'm retiring. And you just *stop*, no big brouhaha, no fanfare, nothing."

Avon idly traced an oval around Vila's left nipple, wandering his finger down into the thief's navel, watching the skin shiver in his wake. "Listen, Avon," the voice continued, snaking its way into his mind, past his defences, following old, well worn paths. "We could retire, you and me, give up all this rubbish and go back to thieving. And if it bothered you, not finishing Blake's revolution for him and all, we could always kill two birds with one stone."

Avon glanced up, intently interested.

"Go back to your original idea. Break the Federation Credit System. Without the FCS, they'd go bust, you'd be so bloody rich, you could buy me a planet with a thousand hand picked virgins in red fur, and still have enough left over to own the rest of the Galaxy yourself."

For more long seconds, Avon stared at him silently, then slowly, piece by piece, the frighteningly blank façade he'd been wearing began to crack and crumble, the old Avon beginning to peer through. Vila grinned, knowing that at least now, they had a chance of getting out of this ball's up in one piece. Avon grinned at him, and shrugged. "Why not?" he said. "Why not indeed? I have given Blake and his damned cause more than either ever deserved and as for Servalan...well now, destroying the Federation and watching her starve might just be revenge enough..."



# VII

## ODDS AND SODS

*Well, what else would you term a catch-all category in a slash zine? Enough said. Please read on for situations comfortable, strange, and ridiculous—in that order.*

### COMING HOME

#### Sean Charles

AVON ENTERED HIS DARKENED ROOM. In the dim, he was able to make out a familiar lump in the bed. He arched an eyebrow and walked over to it.

“I didn’t expect to see you tonight, Vila.”

The thief started and began to get out of the bed. “Want me to leave?”

Avon reached out a hand to stop him. “No.” He paused. “In fact, I’m rather glad you decided to stay.”

“Oh, that.” Vila smiled. “There was nothing there worth stealing.”

Avon walked over to his wardrobe and began to methodically undress, aware that Vila was watching his every move. As he hung up his brown and black leather jacket, he said, “Trust you to find the only thing there that was.”

“Eh?” Vila was too busy noticing the way the tight black turtleneck clung to Avon’s chest to hear him well.

“The weaponry crystals. I really am impressed.”

Vila met his smile with one of his own. “Well, maybe that really does make it all worthwhile.”

Avon turned, a bit too quickly Vila noticed, back to his wardrobe and pulled the shirt over his head.

No matter how many times Vila watched Avon undress, he was always fascinated by his body and his movements. Avon had a still deliberateness that seemed to imply total concentration, yet Vila knew that the man’s mind worked on a multiplex level. With Avon, nothing was ever just as it seemed.

“All that wealth and no way to spend it. I’d’ve gone crazy there, Avon.” Vila paused to watch Avon bend over to remove his boots, brown suede stretched tightly across his ass. “Besides.”

Avon stood “Besides *what*, Vila.”

“Kerril was in love with me.”

“I see.”

“Bet you don’t.” Vila looked into his eyes. *He’s so strong, but so fragile at times*, he thought. “I wasn’t in love with her.” Vila left unsaid what he would have liked. He wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the answer, either way.

“I would have thought she could provide the answer to your dreams—a home, safety, a family, affection...”

“The safety part might have been nice,” Vila laughed.

“I’ll try to keep that in mind.” Avon undid the catch of his trousers and slid them down. He stood still, naked for a moment and smiled at Vila, before getting into bed.

Vila snuggled up next to Avon’s warm body. He curled in the crook of his arm and began lightly trailing his fingers over Avon’s chest, teasing the light sprinkling of dark, curly hairs.

“Cally told me what you said to Tarrant.”

“Yes, she would.” Avon curled his arm around Vila and stroked the back of his neck.

“Listen, I really appreciate it. Thanks, Avon,” Vila said sincerely.

“I merely pointed out your value to the ship... to *me*.”

Vila’s cool fingers brushed Avon’s hard, hot nipple. “Sometimes I wonder,” he muttered softly.

“I can replace our new pilot, if need be, although I’d rather not. He is good at what he does; better even, than Jenna.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that, Avon. He doesn’t scare me as long as I know you won’t let him toss me off this ship. I know how things work between you Alphas.”

“Really?” Avon asked, dryly.

“Um-hum. It’s all a dominance thing. Like you and Blake. Only now you’re Blake and he’s you.”

"I am *not* Blake."

"I didn't mean *that*. Just this Alpha thing." Vila turned slightly and propped himself on his elbow to look at Avon. "As long as you're in charge I'm not worried about Toothy."

Avon smiled. "This is *my* ship, Vila. And despite his native stupidity, Tarrant will learn that in time."

"Things are always complicated between Alphas. Between Deltas, too. We fight all the time amongst ourselves, just that we do it differently." Vila's fingers began working on Avon's chest and belly again. "That's why I like it between grades. No problems. Not the usual, anyway."

Avon's breathing began to get heavier, and it took more concentration to keep up the conversational tones. Vila's tongue gently licking at his nipple was making it no easier. "Vila."

"Want me to stop?" Vila asked.

"No, you idiot," Avon breathed. "You never did that before... Obviously Kerril taught you some new tricks."

"Umm," Vila murmured around Avon's nipple. He stopped and looked up at Avon, smiling. "Like it?"

"Yes!"

"Thought you might."

"Did you use a low energy probe on that door, or did you lick it open?" Avon breathed.

Vila began attentively licking Avon's chest, emitting the occasional moan himself. "You know, you've got the sexiest ribs," Vila said, kissing and licking the bottom edge of Avon's rib cage.

"That really should be ticklish, but it isn't. Actually it feels wonderful." Avon ran his fingers affectionately through Vila's fine hair.

Vila traced a path along the long scar that ran along the other side of Avon's ribs. *Anna*, he thought, *maybe he's finally getting over you, getting on with his life*. He felt Avon stiffen slightly, nearly imperceptibly, but his sensitive fingers could always tell. He moved them lower, and his tongue followed.

Avon's cock was erect, jutting darkly from thick curls of pubic hair. Vila nuzzled in the crook of Avon's hip, inches away from his desire, teasing himself as much as Avon. He moaned slightly, but no, he wanted to take his time, and if he didn't move on, Avon would become insistent, and it would be over too soon. He began licking down the outer edge of Avon's leg, tongue teasing through the hair, tasting the warm skin. He wriggled down the too-narrow and too-confining *Liberator* bunk, trying to get comfortable, his

own erection pressing against the silky sheets of Avon's bed.

When his journey brought him to the sensitive spot behind Avon's knee, Avon lifted his other leg over Vila's head and turned onto his stomach, presenting Vila with a lovely view.

Avon looked over his shoulder at Vila and smiled evilly. "Well? What are you waiting for? A technical manual?"

"Typical bloody arrogant Alpha," Vila replied as he inched his way up between Avon's spread legs.

"And don't you love it."

Vila gently spread the cheeks of Avon's ass, revealing the puckered opening. He placed a soft kiss on it, then licked, swirling his tongue around to all the spots he knew drove Avon to distraction.

Avon gasped and lifted his hips to accommodate his erection and allow Vila's skilled hands access. Teasing, Vila's fingers kneaded the mounds, spreading them wider, pulling Avon's ass taut and open to his tongue darting wetly into it. Vila ran his thumbs along the places behind Avon's balls, enjoying watching the Alpha struggle for control and lose. Finally, he closed his hand around Avon's unrelenting shaft and stroked it slowly as his tongue thrust deeply into Avon.

"Vila!" Avon demanded, but Vila kept on with his maddeningly slow pace. His free hand wanted to drift down to his own rather painful erection, but he fought the need, letting his desire for Avon build until it drove out every other.

He pulled away, gasping, "Avon, can I suck your cock?"

Avon turned quickly onto his back as Vila's hot mouth descended voraciously onto him. Sensation whirled in him as Vila swallowed, sucking, taking his entire length into his skilled throat. He felt Vila reach for himself, but with a perverse selfishness he hooked a foot around Vila's arm, blocking its path. Vila moaned and pressed himself down onto the bed.

Denied this small pleasure, Vila was forced to focus on Avon's cock, the feel of it sliding between his lips, the taste, the hardness, the absolute insistence of it. He swirled his tongue around the head as his hands played gently, but firmly with Avon's balls. He tasted salt as the first drops of Avon's come pressed forth. He swallowed deeply as his lips ground into Avon's pubic hair, his tongue licking hard along the underside of Avon's cock, his own hips thrusting wildly at the bed as his hands grasped Avon's and held tightly. He felt the hot flood of come

rush down his throat, as Avon's hand held his head hard to him. Avon's cock swelled and jerked in him as he tried to gasp for breath, but the hand held him firm. His own moans were strangled as he came into the sheets.

Finally, Avon lay absolutely still, hands pressed flat onto the bed beside him and Vila felt the cock soften in his mouth, letting it slide softly, wetly from between his lips. He laid his head on Avon's hip and brushing his lips lightly into the curls next to Avon's cock, he sighed. "Beautiful."

Avon reached down and stroked Vila's head, unable to do anything farther than that and as yet unable to say a word.

They lay together for what seemed like hours, neither wanting to move.

Eventually, Avon pulled Vila up next to him, encircling the thief in his arms, kissing him insistently until at last Vila's lips parted and allowed Avon's tongue in to explore his mouth. Now recovered, Vila returned the kiss, his own tongue licking the soft fullness of Avon's lower lip, sucking it gently. He followed the outline of Avon's lips, trailing his own along the wetness.

Avon's breath caught, but he had ideas other than letting Vila continue his oral teasings, no matter how delightful they were. He grasped Vila's shoulder with his hand and pressed him back into the bed, along the wall, returning Vila's soft kisses more forcefully, feeling the Delta yield beneath him. He half lay on top of him, trapping him, his hot hands running down the length of Vila's cool body. The thief shivered uncontrollably beneath him. He reached down and stroked Vila's semi-hard cock to full erectness, as he held him tightly and kissed him.

Vila broke the overpowering kiss, and gasped for breath. "Avon," he cried.

"Shh, Vila. I believe I heard Tarrant prowling about in the corridors earlier. You wouldn't want him to walk in on this, now would you?"

"Uh-uh. He might want to be where I am, and I'm already here." Vila smiled.

"Surely you don't think..."

"Avon, all you'd have to do to get our fly-boy on his knees is stand your ground and push a little. He might not be too thrilled about it afterwards, or maybe he would and that'd be worse, but he'd give in in an instant. You just think about it." To Vila's surprise, Avon did. "Perhaps you'd rather have him. He's handsome and he's another Alpha, like Blake..."

"Vila," Avon interrupted.

"What?"

"Shut up." Avon kissed him quiet. "You may be a Delta, and an idiot, and a fool, but you're *my* Delta and *my* idiot and *my* fool; mine because I want *you*. And as for your implied question, no, I was not sleeping with Blake."

"I didn't think you'd done much sleeping."

Avon gave an exasperated sigh. "I did not have sex with Blake. I had you."

"You could have, you know. I thought there really was something between the two of you and that I was only a little something extra on the side."

"As you said, Vila, between Alphas sex is often a game of dominance. And I have absolutely no desire to be dominated."

Vila smiled. "I shouldn't think you would. You'd much rather be worshipped, Lord Avon." His hand ran down Avon's side to rest on his hip, pulling them together, groin to groin.

Avon smiled back at him. "Naturally, Vila. I am a god on Cephlon and you are a hero on Keezarn." Vila laughed.

Avon cupped his and Vila's balls together as their cocks rubbed into each other. Gasps and moans of pleasure interrupted their conversation. Avon pulled Vila more towards the center of the bed and slid his cock between Vila's legs, lying on top of him. The soft hair on Vila's balls tickled his shaft and Vila's cock pressed into his belly. He trailed kisses down Vila's smooth chest as he knelt between his wide-spread legs.

Cool air hit Vila's skin where Avon's fire had been and he moaned at the loss of the touch. Avon reached out to run his fingers along his belly and it calmed him as he lay there. Avon's hand moved to encircle his cock, stroking it, aiding the steady, warm pressure building within him. He looked up at Avon who was watching his cock through heavy-lidded eyes. The faintest trace of a sensual smile played about the corners of Avon's lips.

"Avon," Vila called out again, this time more softly.

Avon's eyes met Vila's pleading ones. "Yes, Vila?" he asked, innocently.

"C'mon Avon, I need you!" Vila cried out in frustration.

"Do you want me to fuck you, Vila?" Avon asked.

"Yes, Avon, please." Avon lifted Vila's legs over his shoulders and pulled his hips to where Vila's ass just brushed Avon's cock. "Oh, Avon!" Vila squirmed, trying to press himself onto Avon's waiting shaft.

Avon reached for the jar of ointment and spread some on his cock, bringing it to its full length, his hand brushing against Vila's ass with each stroke. He lifted Vila's hips a little more and ran his slippery hand down Vila's crack, teasing at the opening. Vila pressed himself onto Avon's lubricated finger, gasping at the entry, but Avon pulled his finger away and began to guide his cock into Vila's eager ass.

He leaned forward, slowly sinking deep into Vila. When he was sheathed to the balls, he held still, feeling Vila's hot ass muscles clamp down around his cock.

Vila squirmed and wiggled on the impaling cock. Avon filled him totally, and he would have said painfully, if it weren't that every time he wriggled it felt exquisite and his own cock leaped to attention. Avon slid slowly back, nearly withdrawing, and Vila pressed forward, but Avon's hands on his hips held him immobile. Then, slowly again, Avon thrust into Vila. Vila cried out, and stuffed his hand into his mouth, biting down so as not to make any more noise. Avon, buried deep inside, grasped Vila's cock and held it tightly as Vila whimpered and moaned.

Avon lifted Vila's legs from his shoulders and levered them down so that Vila was bent in half, his ass open wide on Avon's shaft. His long-fingered hand spread on Vila's thigh to hold him in position as his other hand still pulled at the rigid Delta cock. Slowly at first, keeping both hand and thrusts in synch, Avon began to fuck Vila in earnest.

The thrusts became wilder, and Vila planted his feet hard against the head of the bed to hold himself up to the wonderful onslaught. It was becoming nearly impossible for him not to cry out, and only the thought of Tarrant's overhearing kept his cries to whimpers into the back of his hand. As he came, he stiffened and arched, his whole body stretching tautly between the wall and Avon's hand and cock.

Avon pressed himself hard into Vila, feeling the thief's internal tremors around his cock. While he watched Vila's come spill onto his chest, he felt his own orgasm begin. He held Vila's hips tightly as with short, deep thrusts he filled Vila's ass with his come.

Long moments later, when Avon eased back into reality, he realized Vila's legs were locked tight. He

stroked them gently bringing life back to them, easing them down onto the bed as he slid out of Vila.

"Ow!" Vila cried.

"What?" Avon asked, concerned.

Vila pouted. "I bit myself."

Avon rolled over Vila's leg and lay next to him, laughing.

"It's not funny, Avon, it really hurts, you know."

"Let me see," Avon said, taking Vila's hand. There were deep red weals in the back and palm around the thumb that Vila had bitten, but the skin hadn't broken and no serious damage seemed to have been done. "Oh, I think you'll live, Vila," Avon pronounced as he let go of Vila's hand.

"But it hurts," Vila continued to complain.

Avon reached in the bedside table for a soft towel and wiped Vila's chest of the cooling puddles of come. "Well, I could always take you down to medical..." Vila seemed to brighten. Avon smiled. "And then you could explain to Cally why you bit your own thumb."

"No," Vila said, grabbing the towel from Avon and finishing the job himself. "It'll be all right." He reached down with the towel in his other hand and wiped Avon's cock and his ass, then tossed the towel across the room.

"Vila," Avon chided, at the mess.

Vila ignored him and held up the injured thumb. "But you could always kiss and make it better, Avon," he smiled.

Avon laughed and kissed the thumb. "Now I'm quite certain that stopped it from hurting," he said dryly.

"No, but *I* feel better." Vila snuggled down into Avon's arms.

"Vila..."

"Humm? Oh. Can't I stay tonight, please, Avon?" He looked up into Avon's dark eyes.

"You idiot. If you would only shut up for just a moment, I was about to ask you to stay."

"You were? Honest? Well then, in that case, Avon, I *will* stay." Vila paused. "I'll stay for as long as you want me," he said.

"I *do* want you. Well, for tonight anyway."

"Now that really does make it all worthwhile."

# AGAINST THE WALL

## Edi N. Burgh

HE FELT ALMOST AS IF HE SHOULD WEAR A DISGUISE, JUST IN CASE. *In case of what*, he mocked himself, *if anyone were to see me here, then they should be as embarrassed as I*. He hid behind his drink, a huge tankard of foamy ale, bitter and sour and strong. With the silence of a big man used to treading lightly, he perused the hallways, peering into those rooms where the door lay open. The women beckoned to him and normally, he may well have been tempted by some of them, but tonight, he needed hardness, needed another man, the feel of potency, not fecundity. He wandered around, searching out the right section of the House, seeking the proof of their Galactically famous claim: *no desire left unfulfilled*.

He turned a corner and nearly choked. *Brazen little...hussy*, the thought came involuntarily, slipping past his guards of tolerance. Vila was in the public room, on the stage, with three—no, there were too many hands for that—four people, a blend of male and female, dark and light. The thief was obviously having a whale of a time. Grinning, chuckling quietly into his beer, Blake continued walking, taking in the sights, slow arousal building, kindled and fueled by the open displays of lust all around.

He rounded yet another corner, realising that he had stumbled upon the truly intimate section: the fantasy rooms. Here, people bared their dreams, not necessarily their bodies, finding in these rooms acceptance of whatever they desired, of whatever choices they made, of whatever oddities they would normally keep hidden away from the judgmental eyes of outsiders. There, a woman dressed in long black robe, a pillar of night, acted the rôle of Temple Mother, demanding the sacrifice of the first born's innocence; there, a man, in everyday street clothes, was wooed by a pretty woman in a floral frock; there, two men wrestled in Olympian contest, to win the Greek goal.

Blake walked on, embarrassed and fascinated to see these people at their most vulnerable, dreaming out loud, as it were. Once, he stopped, just for a moment, to watch a man, sitting alone, erection pulsing against his stomach, his room stark and staring white, as the solitary figure simply remained motionless, apart from the tap, tap, tapping of his cock. Blake couldn't comprehend this man's dream, the fantasy he was sharing, the insular arrogance he was display-

ing. As a viper strikes, the man turned and looked directly at Blake, hooking him with the barbs in his eyes, reeling him in, smiling in silent mockery. The smile was what freed Blake. He had seen better than that, had been played with greater skill than anything this fellow could muster. Blake walked on through the pathways of other people's dreams, sometimes feeling pity for the visions he saw, sometimes feeling only disgust at the nightmares being inflicted upon the unwary wanderer.

Eventually, he found himself in the dimmest corridor, a fragment of an open street, brought indoors to the falseness of daily night and misty anonymity. Here, none of the doorways led anywhere, mere indentations in the façade, hollows for the facelessness of casual, gratuitous sex. The sounds here were overwhelming, drowning the senses with their honesty, the veneer of polite social interaction completely discarded, baring the unvarnished truth to the world. And the smell, too, raw sexuality, tidal eddies of perfumes and colognes, danger and lust and excitement. Everywhere Blake looked, there were brief, liquid flashes of skin, hands moving, eyes flashing, teeth gleaming. Lust. All around him, unfettered, unchained by the niceties, raged unrestrained lust. He filled his lungs with it, drinking in the freedom. *This* was what he needed. Anonymous, casual, brief and impersonal, a blazing contrast to the unfulfilled complexities on board ship. Confident, swaggering a little in his assured and blatant manhood, he strode on down the street, picking and choosing, taking his time before he made his decision.

His stride faltered into questioning disbelief. *Avon? Here? Surely not*. But it was, standing in a doorway, pressed against the wall by a burly big man, hands clenched in auburn hair, mouth locked to another's. Blake stepped forward, recognising that it was absurd not to have expected to see Avon in the Sector's most famous brothel, that it was outright stupid not to have seen that this blank, pseudonymous street would be the only area he would risk finding satisfaction.

Step by slow step, Blake approached the two men, mesmerised, cock hard, chafing against his trousers. Without thought, he unzipped himself, stroking himself in perfect harmony with the movements of

Avon's pale hands on the stranger's tanned backside. The hands shoved the green trousers further out of the way, revealing the full globes of the ass, the hairy musculature of the bulky thighs. Avon kissed and kissed, eyes closed, and Blake wondered where Avon's mind was, whom that head held within, whose mouth Avon dreamed he was kissing. Coming closer, hand stroking his cock, thumb pulling fore-skin back and forth in a tender caress, Blake stopped inches from the stranger, all three of them completely engrossed in the erotic skill of Avon's luscious mouth.

Dark eyes flew open, impaling Blake with the honesty of their gaze, demanding a choice from him, defying him to have the courage. The big rebel took the final step, stopping with the tip of his cock pressed against firm buttocks. The stranger did not—could not—give up Avon's mouth for the paltry sight of the man at his back, simply reaching one hand behind himself to spread his cheeks in silent invitation, then sliding his hand forward again to stroke Avon.

Eyes still locked to Blake, Avon kneaded the man's backside, opening him up to Blake, offering the closest thing to sex between the two of them that either could ever hope to accept. This was uncomplicated, unacknowledged. Tomorrow, on the flight deck, Avon would fight with him just as viciously, would throw hostility at him to mask the terrifying possibility for love they both saw: a love that they both tacitly agreed would be suicidal, or murderous, if allowed to bind them, if allowed to grow unchecked. There was too much danger in the depths and heat of the emotion that crackled and stormed between them, too much fear triggered by the implicit dependence with which they would both be afflicted. To each, this love that they both tried so desperately to abort was weakness, sentimentality, a sure road to death. But for now, they could have sex, of a kind, and love, if one were willing to face it.

Eyes bright and piercing, Avon stared at Blake, pulling him forward, pushing him away. Blake reached into his pocket, pulling out the lubricant the management dispensed with such unobtrusive practicality. The easeful liquid slipped inside the stranger, borne on a careful finger. Already hard, more than ready, Blake pressed his erection home, entering the welcome heat, penetrating Avon without so much as touching him. The tech groaned, feeling the stranger surge up against him, lifted onto his toes by Blake's deep thrust. Every time the rebel moved his hips, swirling and plunging, fulfilling and denying, the stranger's cock rubbed against Avon's, snub heads bumping with such fine, devastating pleasure. Blake

took the stranger, the go-between, his surrogate for the sweetness and danger of having Avon. Still staring into Avon's eyes, he thrust, lifting the stranger off his feet, breaking the kiss finally, leaving Avon gaping and panting.

Inexorably, Blake was drawn to Avon, by the dark eyes, by the dark depths of the man. Mesmerised, hypnotised, he brought them together, a toe testing the waters of possibilities between them. Avon's sigh filled Blake's mouth, touching him to the heart, his tongue thrusting into Blake as Blake himself thrust into the warm body shielding them, one from the other. Vast doors flew open, caverns of feelings swallowing them, devouring them in the power of their passion. Avon melted into Blake, Blake flowed into him, bodies loving and thrusting and heating, furnaces ready to consume them, to burn their individualities into ashes, to commingle them into a single interdependent entity.

Groaning, Blake felt orgasm approaching, in himself, in Avon, in the living, supple bridge across the chasm of fear that separated them, a bridge that was the only way for them to ever cross the aching, empty space. Tongue against Avon's, breathing for them both, agonisingly wonderful orgasm shook Blake, taking the strength from his legs and from his sanity's recognition that this—here and now—was all he could ever have with his dark angel. Avon quivered in his arms, the stranger's spasming muscles as warm as the tech's, as sweaty, as beloved, in this fragile, rare moment.

As feelings subsided, as chill reality froze Blake's dreams, as the onrushing coldness placed his hopes in suspended animation, the two of them pulled apart, lips reluctant, minds unwillingly acknowledging the true state of affairs for them. Watching Blake, Avon kissed the stranger with all the display of love he could dare, touching the stranger's hair as Blake turned the man, in turn gifting the interpreter with all the deep adoration he wished and feared giving to Avon.

Still looking at the possibilities being murdered before they could even try to succeed, Avon and Blake parted from the stranger, and, hence, each other, each returning to his own protective armour, be it halo or cynicism. They straightened their clothing, disguising their moment of truth, completing the illusion—the *delusion*—of competition, and nothing more, between them. Without a backward glance, in an impressive display of abject cowardice, they each turned to face the opposite direction, naturally, and walked away, quite literally turning their backs on the past, the present and most assuredly, the future.

# APPETITE

## Caroline K. Carbis

Perhaps, if the Federation had included hunger suppression in their reconditioning procedures, the incident would never have begun. Blake was a big man—not the size of that gentle giant Gan—but large boned and far from slender. It was not uncommon that he should leave the flight deck during the middle of a quiet watch to wander down to the galley in search of sustenance. As he began the first of a week of midwatches, he decided that perhaps it might make sense to stockpile a few edibles for snacking now and delay the inevitable tea break until those weary hours when the ship's night drew close to morning.

The *Liberator's* corridors were still and silent as he trod quietly through them. The other crewmembers were probably all in bed or at least in their cabins, he thought. A muffled noise coming from the branch corridor to his right shattered that illusion. The complete unexpectedness of the sound startled him and he felt that instantaneous surge of adrenalin the body unleashes in self-protection. He stopped, looking to see the source of the noise. The corridor lighting was dim. At the beginning of their stay aboard ship they had all decided it would be best to replicate planetary conditions as much as possible. Cally agreed when she joined them shortly afterwards. She also insisted that for their mental and physical well being they adhere to a gradually rotating watch schedule. "No one will be forced to always stand the same watch and it will alleviate some of the boredom that is inevitable with shipboard life." Even Avon, who had been known to disagree merely to see Blake's reaction, voiced no dissent.

The branch corridor was very short. At its end, a single door led into the *Liberator's* generous exercise and recreational facilities. Blake could see that the door stood open now, with two figures close together outlined in the frame. He recognized Vila's back and the clothing he wore, but whoever stood in front of the master thief, embracing him, was less visible. Not Jenna surely—his mind refused to conjure up that pairing. Nor was it Cally, for the shape was all wrong. Then who? Blake peered a little harder, not daring to move, to step forward, but with a curious desire to know who was kissing Vila.

Whoever it was seemed aware of Blake's presence.

The kiss ended, and as arms came up to encircle Vila, a dark head moved slightly sideways: Avon looked directly at him. Blake gasped faintly. If he'd been unable to move before, now he was firmly rooted in position. He could neither bend a leg to take a step away nor could he turn his head nor close his eyes. He stared at Avon and the comtech stared fixedly back. Even in that shadowy space, Blake could sense a silent struggle between them, a struggle he knew Avon would win. The man seemed incapable of being embarrassed, least of all by Blake. Finally Avon, confident of his small victory, moved his head back towards Vila. The rebel leader watched, mesmerized, as Avon slid his hands down to grab Vila's ass and pull it firmly forward against his own groin.

A taunting gesture of contempt. Blake belatedly felt himself flushing deeply and then, suddenly, released from his paralysis. He started off again, heading for the galley, but his ears picked up Avon's low voice murmuring, "Go in and wait for me, Vila. I shall return in a minute with supplies."

"Do you always prowl the corridors during your late night watches?"

Blake looked up from the sandwich ingredients before him and sighed. "It wasn't intentional, Avon, and well you know it." He had hoped the matter closed.

"Yes, well...perhaps I do." Avon's face registered a conflicting set of emotions, which Blake interpreted as the comtech's usual arrogance and air of superiority, underlain by incipient uncertainty and the faintest whiff of fear. A potent and deadly combination, Blake thought. There was tension enough on board the *Liberator* and his own relationship with Avon was a jagged, shifting thing, rather unnerving. Neither one of them needed the further aggravation or complications this untimely conversation might bring. He started to speak, to placate the leather clad Alpha before the situation worsened.

"Look here, Avon, I don't much care what you and Vila get up to on your off-duty hours provided it doesn't affect your performance during a mission.

"How very enlightened of you, oh Great Leader, but I wasn't asking for your permission."

"Oh weren't you now? Then why follow me down

here?" As the very words were forming on his tongue, he knew they were the wrong thing to say, but, as always, where Avon was concerned, he had no control over his statements. He and the tech never seemed able to carry on normal conversations. The simplest interchange between them became antagonistic, as though they were both the repelling forces of different magnets.

"I was on my way here when I was...interrupted."

"So I had noticed," Blake said irritably. Silently, he cursed himself. Avon always *seemed* to win the arguments—even when he didn't.

"That surprises me."

"What does?"

"That you would...notice. You never seem to show any *personal* interest in anyone, Blake. Many details of shipboard life escape your comprehension completely. For a charismatic leader who engenders such loyalty among his followers, you are exceedingly dense. Perhaps it is a congenital defect: you have a natural ability to ignore the psychology of the individuals around you in favour of the undefined group. However much you think you understand the masses with your ideas of 'good for the whole,' you are completely ignorant

Blake bristled. "I wasn't aware there was any problem."

"Of course you weren't. You're blind, Blake. Blind to anything but the ideals you've spun into a protective cocoon. You refuse to see anything that does not have a direct bearing on your precious Cause. The most blatant behaviour does not affect you. Let us take Jenna as a simple example, shall we? The woman has been throwing herself at you for months and you've never even noticed. Think about it, Blake. Outside of the Cause, you have no passions...no desires...no appetite..." The flow of accusations died slowly on Avon's lips. He stared at Blake, his eyes narrowing, face taking on the cold mechanical mask it wore whenever he gave full measure of thought to an interesting problem. "It's as though the mindwipe stripped you of those abilities... Tell me, Blake, when was the last time you made love to someone?"

Blake felt the blood rushing to his face for the second time in half an hour, Avon the root cause in both instances. His instinctive, immediate response was to defend himself, to cut Avon off before the conversation got any worse, but the question had touched something deep inside him, sending out waves of uncertainty and scrambling his ability to think. He finally managed a less-than-thundering retort.

"That's a very personal question, Avon. What right do you have to ask it and why should I bother to give you an answer? And even if I..."

"Oh, do stop spluttering, Blake," Avon cut in. "You don't want to answer because you can't remember. Which is exactly my point. You have been mindwiped and in the short time since, you have experienced no sexual desires, had no sexual experiences. I would venture to say that you haven't even pleased yourself and no," he interjected, cutting off Blake's protestations, "I'm not asking *that* question. I already know the answer," he finished smugly.

"All right, Avon," Blake said in resignation, conceding the battle to Avon. He had neither energy nor will enough to continue fighting, and even if he had, it was entirely unclear what winning would mean. "I admit defeat. You may cease your nettling and return to your rendezvous, victory in hand. Leave me to my repast and my midwatch." He picked up a knife and began slicing meat for his sandwich, turning his attention to the details of food preparation, wishing foolishly that Avon would simply leave.

Avon, of course, ignored the dismissal. "Oh no, Blake, no. I will not allow you to dismiss me like that." He cautiously began circling Blake, left arm crooked at the elbow, hand held in a delicate curve before his chest. "This has been a most...enlightening conversation. Intriguing facts have been revealed and I find myself...fascinated by them." He paused, halfway round in his journey, to watch as Blake began assembling the pieces of the sandwich.

"Fine. I'm delighted you're fascinated by my psychology. It means so very, very much to me to have had the benefit of your expert analysis," Blake added sarcastically.

"Well now," Avon smirked, "I'm glad we're in agreement. I shall be able to concentrate my efforts on breaking the conditioning left from the mindwipe."

"You'll what?" Blake turned to stare, his sandwich left unfinished. There was in Avon's face the persistence of the hound on the scent of his quarry, determined to reach the end, not to be shaken from his objective.

"Oh, I feel certain I can unleash your libido, Blake. Without further discussion, I can bring you to my bed within a week's time."

"Can you now?"

The left arm broke from its statue's pose, fingers extending until their tips grazed ever so lightly



against Blake's cheek. "Of course I can. I *always* get what I want, Blake."

"Do you, Avon? Do you really?" His voice was low, hard, cold, but Avon's brand burned hotly on his face.

He had intended to spend his watch hours sifting through information and reports, planning strategy and deciding how best to foment revolution. It was, after all, his task, his duty as a leader in the great Cause, and, he conceded to himself, fighting the Federation brought some feeling of self-worth and respect, some emotional stability for when he thought back to the past and found only blankness and uncertain memory. Avon accused him of living his life within a narrow focus, of being so totally manipulated and remade by the Federation, that he was now an incomplete human being, lacking in vision and passion. Could that be true? What of the deep anger buried in his core, the anger he channelled so carefully, polishing its roughness like a gemstone, only letting its various facets be seen as good and righteous qualities? He wanted choice and freedom for all. He hated the Federation. Were not those passions and desires? Avon was merely speculating without facts. Or was he? Had the mind wipe destroyed bits and pieces of his soul?

A flashing light at his console, demanding attention and response, broke through his thoughts. He sighed, dismissing the fruitless meanderings of his mind. It was all such unproductive twaddle with no bearing on anything important.

And yet... Without volition he raised his hand to brush his cheek, dawning realization of his actions reigniting the burning touch of Avon's fingertips.

A thing unknown, undreamt of is not missed, but an idea once thought, once spoken of, cannot be forgotten. Or so it seemed to Blake. The seed Avon had planted took root in his mind, surfacing every time he was in the tech's presence. And that occurred with increasing frequency. He could hardly leave the flight deck every time Avon appeared and even withdrawing to the rest room or his own quarters offered no respite. Avon sought him out, posing his usual questions, needling Blake's decisions, mocking his choices, or—contrary to their accepted behavioural norms—asking Blake's opinions, agreeing with him, even offering support. This latter action was often accompanied by a quick pat to the shoulder or a hand to Blake's forearm.

Blake could not shake his shadow. Avon had set himself an intriguing goal and to this end, he waged a silent but persistent seduction. His public behavior seemed unchanged, his caustic, provoking comments hurled in unvarying proportions at all crewmembers, his duties carried out with efficiency and attention. Yet on the flight deck, when Blake would glance over to him, he would see Avon drawing the fingers of one hand upwards along his inner thigh, or skimming the tip of his tongue over his upper lip.

To Blake's dismay and Avon's delight—for Blake was certain that Avon was keenly observing his every action and reaction—these movements, so minimally erotic had anyone else done them, Avon's little gestures made Blake's body stir, reawakening it from the latency of the mindwipe. Blake would find himself blushing, when Avon would smile at him in that particular manner, or worse, would feel his body warm and tingle at the sight of the pink tongue tracing full lips. Blake had no doubt whatsoever that Avon knew precisely where his mind wandered, after watching those fingers wander up his thigh.

Four days after the late night kitchen conversation, Gan arrived early in the morning to take the watch from Blake. They entered into an ordinary conversation, Gan asking the expected questions and Blake updating him on the mundane minutiae of the night just past.

Clear, precise footsteps sounded at the flight deck entrance. Avon. Blake didn't turn to look. Still, his body responded with an uncontrolled, undesired, violent shivering as the footsteps came to stop directly behind him, no greeting given. Quickly, Avon reached out a hand and caressed Blake downwards from the base of his spine. His fingers dug through the layers of cloth and into the crack, pushing against flesh that was suddenly more responsive, more sensitive than Blake had ever imagined. Just as quickly, the fingers withdrew and Avon moved on to seat himself on one of the flight deck's leather couches.

He gave a mocking grin to Blake, daring the suddenly flushed figure to say anything. Blake struggled with himself; he was desperate not to show the physical reaction he could not control. Thank the stars Gan was oblivious to the interchange, engrossed as he was in his scanning and several seconds passed before he looked up from his console to ask something more, giving Blake much-needed time to control himself.

The next time it happened, Blake was alone in the

rest room, almost dead with a fatigue of his own making—he'd stayed awake through most of his sleep period in an effort to catch up on a sudden flurry of incoming reports. He sat balling his fists against his eyes, hard copy printouts scattered across the table. The tea in his cup had long gone cold. He'd taken a few sips at first, then forgotten it with the distraction of work.

"Ruining your health for the Cause, Blake?" Blake started at the sound of Avon's voice. He must be tired; this time he hadn't heard the man's approach at all.

"There's a lot of planning to be done, Avon, and it requires a human mind to do it. Orac cannot make these sorts of decisions."

"Your exhausted brain cannot make those decisions, either. In your present condition, you are more likely than usual to decide the wrong thing." The voice moved to just inches away from Blake's ear. "I will not," it whispered, "allow you to risk my life because *you* refuse to get some sleep. We are not in a crisis situation." Hands rose to Blake's temples, pressing and massaging against the dull ache within. Blake sighed. Avon's touch seemed to bring home his weariness, his lack of sleep. He found his eyes drifting shut, his head lolling backwards and he thought how paradoxical it was that heat and warmth flowed from Avon's fingers, when it seemed the man possessed the coolest, iciest core of any living being. The warmth shifted as the magic fingers plunged up into his hair, gently pulling the tight curls and making small circles against his scalp, banishing the pain and exhaustion. It felt absolutely wonderful; where had Avon learned his technique? Then in a tactical move, the fingers were on his ears. They danced around the outer rim, rolled the lobes back and forth, then delved and spiraled into the inner recesses. This, too, felt wonderful, Blake conceded to himself, but there was a change, something he couldn't quite pinpoint. The left hand dropped away for a second but was quickly replaced. No—it wasn't Avon's hand on his ear; it was the comptech's mouth, his teeth and lips nuzzling and nibbling provocatively. Very provocatively. The Rebel Leader found his body beginning to respond. A buzz of sensation settled in his groin, blood quickly rushing there to stiffen and engorge his organ. Involuntarily he sucked in his breath, then bit his lip, while cursing himself that this gesture would draw Avon's attention. Cautiously, he opened his eyes, completely aware his erection was very visible and very evident. Avon's mouth had fled its perch on Blake's ear. The tech stood slightly to the side gaz-

ing directly down into Blake's embarrassed eyes. A slow, contained smile pulled his lips up. It was a look of smugness and self-congratulation. Blake cringed and immediately looked away. That possessing smile had told him everything. It was obvious Avon was fully cognizant of the physiological reaction he had induced; indeed it was exactly the reaction he was after—of that Blake was positive.

"Well, Blake," he heard Avon say at last, "I should have thought that sensitivity to environment and responsiveness to external stimuli were qualities to be *cultivated* in a leader. Perhaps there is hope for you after all."

He was halfway to the recreation room before conscious thought broke through. Old habits become quite ingrained sometimes and refuse to accept changed circumstances: Blake was hungry. The big rebel had actually taken some of Avon's advice—though he never would have admitted it—and determined to sleep for 8 or 9 hours this first night after his week of midwatches. His intentions were good and, he promised himself, so would be his follow-through. He would prop himself up in bed with only a small amount of paperwork to look through and when it was done, he would immediately turn out the lights and go to sleep. He would allow himself no excuse whatsoever to pull back the covers and get up. He needed to sleep soundly and perhaps in the morning, he would find the unease and unexplained tension that had begun to bother him had disappeared.

He lay quietly, on his back for almost an hour. A glance at the luminous numbers of the chronometer confirmed it. Sleep wouldn't come. *Nothing* seemed to work, not even Cally's exercises for mental relaxation. In desperation, he tried counting sheep but that, bother it all, sent messages to his stomach which growled in response. Shrugging off the blankets and heading for the door, his mind was focused on the delectable morsels stored in the galley; hot cocoa and biscuits, tea and cake, rhubarb tart and custard. He turned in the direction of the galley and padded along, his mind still conjuring different combinations of food. Oh, he was hungry. With luck no one would be aware of his foray, his 'galley' raid. Cally had told him he was too involved in the Cause, that he didn't look after himself properly. He wouldn't want her to see what he was now thinking of consuming—she would be appalled—and then, there was Avon. God forbid he should meet Avon in the galley again! That

little to-do last week had set the comptech onto him. The man had been all over him all week, and Blake found himself almost frightened by the possible results of another encounter. This time, perhaps, it would not end as before, with mere words, but rather, with actions, irrevocably changing him.

It was then that he came to a full stop, his wandering, out-of-kilter mind finally recognizing where it had directed his feet. Around one more corner and he would almost be at the recreation room door. He told himself to leave, to leave Avon's trap unsprung. But his body, his feet and hands were no longer listening to any rational part of his mind. He was simply compelled to walk through that door and when he did, Avon would win again.

In the space of a deep breath he was through the opening, all nagging doubts, all warnings of conscience shed like water sheeting off an emerging swimmer. He stood on the other side of the threshold, pressing the flat of his hands against the hard burnished metal of the door, as if the ship's innate coldness could seep through and cool the internal heat he felt building within. The room was softly illuminated; the usual harshness of the standard lights had been banished and in its place was the yellow glow of—candles? Yes, real, wax candles, perhaps a dozen or so, were burning in several groupings along the deck floor and on several low benches. For a moment Blake gazed at their flickering light, a soft warmth which concentrated on the spa and left dark the edges and height of the room. But his eyes were quickly drawn to the centre of the light, to the stage and players on it.

Vila, submerged in the spa water with elbows resting along the sides, smiled dreamily—drunkenly—up at him. Within Vila's reach was a half empty bottle of something decidedly decadent and decidedly not soma, and next to it stood three glasses, two used, the third pristine. Blake started at the physical evidence of his expected arrival. Avon, of course. Avon had invited him and Avon knew he would come. With this thought Blake felt himself flushing deeply, his heat building again. He closed his eyes to banish it, to wish himself away from here and away from Avon. But his wish went unfulfilled. Or perhaps it was simply that he didn't *really* wish it. When he opened his eyes the subject of all his perturbations glided out of the darkness and into his vision. Avon, gloriously naked with cock thickened and fully erect, smiled his own silent seductive smile of invitation to Blake and began the final act of his campaign. He

drew one hand slowly across his own chest stopping at each nipple to fondle it with his thumb. His other hand picked up a tube from one of the benches and squeezed out lubricant which he carefully and sensuously applied to his aroused member. Blake, mesmerized by the motions, felt himself begin to sway. His own groin was aflame now, his cock stiffening and filling, responding to each touch, each caress he could see the comptech making. His knees began to buckle and slowly he sank to the floor. Avon came up to him and knelt down, undoing the sash of Blake's dressing gown, then pushed the garment down the big rebel's shoulders till gravity took hold. Blake stared at the velvet brown eyes just inches away. Avon had instilled such need in him—such hunger, such unyielding desire—he trembled in the nearness of those eyes, of that muscled body. He longed for a touch, something to quiet his building passion, but when Avon placed his index and middle fingers on Blake's sternum there was no respite, only greater hunger and a more desperate need. The fingers drifted downwards skimming lightly over hair and skin until they came to rest at the top of Blake's cock. The rest of the hand came round and enclosed it. Blake moaned and threw his head back. He could feel his shaft pulsing against the palm of Avon's hand. He ached to move against that hand and began to thrust gently into it. A sensation of coolness joined the fingers that gripped him. Vaguely, he realized the tech was applying lubricant, then the fingers and hand withdrew. Blake managed to lift his head and once more Avon smiled his knowing, sensuous smile, while his eyes dared Blake to follow.

The rebel leader had no choice. The same force which had brought him here compelled him to rise unsteadily and cross to where Avon stood knee-deep in the water. Vila was still submerged within the pool, but the thief had moved onto his back so that only one elbow hung over the side and his free hand could work his own stiff rod. His face retained its dreamy quality, although now there was anticipation crowding it. Vila looked from Blake back to Avon then rolled over to his original position, sighing happily.

He had entered a strange erotic dream. The wildly arousing tableau before him was not real. Avon moved forward to part Vila's cheeks, Blake feeling each and every movement. He throbbed with Avon's heat and felt as the tightness at the tip of Avon's cockhead slowly yielded to a moist all-encompassing warmth. There was a cry when Avon slowly pushed forward—his voice, Avon's Vila's? Perhaps

all three, for Blake couldn't tell, was only certain that he was drowning in sensation, in an ever-expanding pull of lust that made him move forward into the water to stand behind, Avon who now lay quietly across Vila's back, head turned sideways, waiting. Waiting for himself, Blake realized. The desire was so strong. It pulsed and pounded against him, begging, demanding fulfillment. He raised both hands to touch the smoothness of Avon's shoulders and in the instant of that connection, the lust and need and desire surged into him with the force of a wave breaking heavily against the shore. He cried aloud again; the pleasure was so sweet, and in one swift motion, raked his hands down Avon's back to find the opening and plunged himself fully and completely into Avon.

The Alpha tech thrust back suddenly aggressive against him like a gape-jawed barracuda flashing onto its prey, then just as quickly pulled away, pressing deeply into Vila, arm encircling the Delta to milk his swollen organ. The rhythm set, they rocked smoothly against each other, Avon pistoning back and forth, Vila and Blake pushing steadily against the glorious onslaught. Intense sensation began to overwhelm Blake. He felt himself centred on his cock, a steel rod being slowly heated at the forge and connecting straight through Avon into Vila. The tech ground against him insistently, urging him onwards. He lifted his hands to Avon's waist, securing it against his frantic thrustings, his insistent pounding...pounding...pounding. He teetered at the edge of a speeding, swirling whirlpool. The waters of the spa began to churn with the motion, slapping noisily against his ass and flanks, sloshing over Avon and Vila, creating a discordant rhythm apart from the thrusting. Harder and harder he thrust, feeling himself grow impossibly hot. The fire in his cock glowed red-hot, white-hot and he slammed one last time against Avon, melting in the forge, spewing white-

hot cum. His exultant cry was joined immediately by Avon's and Vila's voices as they, too, melted in the flames.

Some minutes later Blake regained his senses. He had slipped from Avon down into the spa, whose waters now seemed cooling, soothing.

"What do you find so amusing, Blake?"

Blake opened his eyes and took the now full third glass Vila held out to him. He turned to Avon, content and utterly incapable of being provoked by anything the comtech might say. "I was thinking how you accomplished precisely what you said you would. You will remember, of course, that you accused me of having no appetite or hunger. But appetite, my dear Avon, is the reason I am here. I got hungry and headed off to the galley for a bedtime snack."

"I should think you've had it now," Vila snickered. Avon indulged the thief with a look of contented tolerance that precluded a sharp retort.

"You still haven't answered my question, Blake"

"Yes, well...I seem to have partaken of one item I hadn't considered. I thought about cocoa, scones and jam, or even some of Vila's leftover trifle. What never came to mind was to have a sandwich."

"A sandwich! Oohh, that's rich that is. I suppose that makes you the 'meat' in middle, Avon," giggled Vila who had sunk down into the pool until his ears just barely cleared the waterline. "For a piece of meat, you're very filling."

"Oh, I quite agree with Vila, Avon. That was by far the best midnight snack I've ever had. I have only one question."

"And what might that be?"

"What do you intend to serve for breakfast?"

Avon flashed a smile of complete satisfaction. "Well now," he said as he began to follow Vila's lead and sink below the waterline, "I was rather hoping you'd want some more meat. And *that* would make it all worthwhile."

# VIII

## AND SO IT GOES: THE DOME CYCLE

*“More? What do you mean you want more?” complained the Glaswegian. “Just remember this: life is not tidy and neither are endings—especially in **Blake’s 7**.” But the editor wants to know what happens next and so she is pleading—in print—for the author to write more stories set in this alternate **B7** universe.*

### THE WAY OF IT

#### M. Fae Glasgow

AVON THOUGHT HE WOULD SURELY BE SICK. The food was an overcooked, limp, distorted mess, awash in an ocean of oil and the hand placing the plate before him was grimy in the extreme, black crescents of dirt caked under the ragged nails, fingers stained from smoking weed. He glanced up at Vila, who had followed the benefactress back to the antique cooker.

“But mam, me and my friend just need a place to stay for a while, until we can work out what we’re going to do next.”

The woman kept on stirring the pot, a frown knitting her brows. She was tall, taller than Vila, but with his same fine, fair hair. Her great waterwing breasts filled her floral dress from chest to waist, the fabric threadbare, the flowers faded like old funeral wreaths. “Yeh, son,” she said, “but you’ll be bringin’ nowt bu’ trouble t’yer family ’ome, win’t yer?”

“Nah, mam,” Vila said, voice sliding into Delta tones, body language shifting, mutating. Avon watched, fascinated, as the transformation progressed, displaying a truth Vila had gone to such great, chameleonlike lengths to hide. “Lissen,” the thief was saying, “it’ud only be fer a bit, jest till we get on we’re feet, then, it’ud be off, scarpered. An’, while we’re ’ere, we can ’elp wiv all sorts o’ stuff. An’ I can thieve, like wot I used ter. Was the best o’ the whole bunch, weren’t I, mam? C’mon, mam. least give us a shot, let us ’ave a proper go. We need a place ter ’ide, a bolthole. Why doncher call a family meetin’, let the whole brood decide.” His mother slowly stirred the mixture in the pot, not refusing, but certainly not agreeing. “Mam, when all’s said an’ done, we’re *family*.”

“Yeh, tha’ yer are, t’ain’t no denyin’ it. But the thing is, son, is the fancy Alpha one o’ us?”

Avon filed Vila’s blush and nervous glance away for future study. “Yeh, mam,” the thief muttered. “Told yer already, ’e’s me mate.”

Vila’s mother came over to the battered kitchen table and the fastidious Alpha sitting there with such incongruous elegance, not even pretending to partake of her hospitality, despite his hunger. She examined him, then glanced pointedly around the room, at the discolouration of the walls, the worn-out, patched sofa-bed, the corner set aside for the seedy kitchenette. “’E don’t fit in, Vila me lad,” she said finally, an edge of regretful sadness softening her voice. “Never work, so it won’t.”

“But, mam,” Vila said, and this time, it was the desperation of his tone that Avon filed away for future examination, “don’t matter none if it’ll work or no’, right? ’E’s me *mate* an’ that makes ’im one of us, don’t it? Yer can’t turn ’im out, mam, cos ’e’s me mate.”

She looked at them, one to the other and then back again. “Yeh, ye’re right. ’E’s family, now, yer’ve brought ’im in. All right, get on the blower and tell yer granda there’s ter be a family meetin’ the night, straight away, soon’s nosh is done. Go on, git on wiv it, great lazy lump. An’ take yer pretty frien’ wiv yer. ’E’s makin the ’ouse look dirty.”

Less than two hours later, Avon found himself in a carbon copy of the first home, the same tattered plastics furniture, the same questionable degree of cleanliness, the same forlorn plants battling to bring some semblance of hope to the barren waste, and yet

another reproduction print hung over the wall heating grate. Here, however, there was a great press of humanity—or Vila's family, at any rate. With tears in his eyes, the thief was making his way around the room, patting cousins on the back, smiling at his elders, always keeping a weather eye on the diplomatically silent Avon. The Alpha hadn't needed Vila's whispered plea for silence—he could see that, amongst this class anyway, his accent would not be welcomed and he would be labelled as a part of the society that strangled this life of theirs, excising all hope of improvement by a mere accident of birth. Instead, he sat on a hardbacked chair in a corner, limiting himself to a raised eyebrow as one Restal after another strolled past, sizing him up, and, unfortunately, finding him lacking. Surreptitiously, Avon checked his gun, readying himself for whatever fate had waylaid him for this time.

On trial, segregated in the dock, as it were, Avon occupied himself by observing the people who were his last and only chance. All attempts to get off planet had been miserable failures, calls closer than he could comfortably bear, and there was not a single person on Earth that Avon could ask for assistance—not if he wanted to stay free, that is. Unexpected laughter drew his attention to a jocular group over in the far corner. At first, Avon couldn't see what had pooled the small crowd, but as a pair of behemoths moved out of the way, the two teenagers were revealed, *in flagrante delicto*, at that. The two young men, oblivious of the amusement of their elders stood together, the redhead against the wall, the taller one with black hair rubbing hard against him, mouths and hands bonding their bodies together. Avon smiled at the irony of it: growing up, his home had had separate rooms for breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner and every other possible activity, but here in the Delta depths, one room sufficed, parents and children sharing everything, privacy a state of mind and nothing else. He looked away from the orgasmic couple, granting them an invisibility they neither needed nor noticed. He glanced around the room, inundated by the voracious vivacity here, the aura of living intensely, knowing that life was indeed short. Almost in the centre of the room, an argument was in full swing, to the obvious and full enjoyment of both the participants and the audience, with particularly good insults being greeted with applause and the unimaginative cliché eliciting howls of contempt. For a moment, Avon thought back to his own childhood, with its endless, formal afternoon teas, sitting side by side

with his brother, dressed in matching navy blue suits, perched on hard back chairs like parrots waiting to perform. In the wake of Avon's gaze, harsh looks from the Restal clan followed, hostility answering the perceived condescension in the Alpha élite's eyes. The mutterings grew, along with the air of rejection and despite Vila's frantic attempts, Avon could almost see his relatives digging their heels in. Fascinated, Avon watched Vila, watched the way the thief had shed his façade of a semi-respectable upbringing, completely re-adopting the mannerisms of his own class, his fearful nervousness replaced by an air of confidence, justified, it would seem, by the respect accorded him by even those obviously his elder. Here, Vila was in his element, the milieu perfect for him, a celebrity amongst his own level, boosting his ego, creating an assured manner.

The comptech let his attention wander around the room, trying to ignore the miasma of unwashed bodies and raw alcohol. Close to the ceiling, the air was a golden-grey mist, a cloud of weed-smoke, eating up what little oxygen was unconsumed by the host of people.

Worry creasing his face, Vila came over to crouch in front of Avon, bringing them very close together, making private conversation possible. "It's not looking too great," he said, speaking Alpha to the Alpha, "and unless we can convince my old granda to override everyone, I don't think they're going to let us stay."

"So much for your assertions that Deltas have more honour than Alphas."

Bristling, Vila snapped back at him, "If you weren't so bloody toffee-nosed, we wouldn't be having this problem anyway. Look, Avon, you've got to mingle, forget your high-falutin' background and remember, if these folk don't take us in and hide us, Servalan'll catch us in two seconds flat. And I for one don't even want to think about what she'll do once she gets her claws in us."

"And what would you have me do? It would take several weeks without bathing to even begin to merge with this...."

"Don't you take that attitude here! I'd like to see you keep clean on the water rations we get down here—this isn't your fancy Alpha levels, you know. So keep your opinions to yourself until you know what the hell you're talking about."

Angry, Avon stood, opening his mouth to deliver his exact and detailed opinion, but the sudden hush in the room silenced him. He stopped, uneasy under

the harsh glares of every single person in the room, man, woman and child. A great bruiser of a man sauntered up to them, staring directly at Avon, speaking to Vila. “Yer...’mate’ givin’ yer a bit o’ bovver, is ‘e? Want me ter sort ‘im out fer yer?”

“Nah, nah, ‘s’all right. Jest a bit o’ a row, yer knows ‘ow ‘tis, under strain an’ on the run an’ all. Leave us ‘alf a mo’, jest need a quiet word, that’s all.”

Reluctantly, the man stepped back, ostentatiously giving them privacy, but just as blatantly keeping a very close and warning eye on Avon.

“That’s me cousin, Jak. He’s really hard, works as a persuader and I’ve always been his favourite. If he thinks for one minute....”

“It would surely be a miracle. Vila, what the hell is going on here? Your family are obviously not as willing to shelter us, unquestioningly, as you had promised. What is wrong?”

“You are. You’re so bloody arrogant and...” He broke off as a withered old man tottered in, leaning on a cane, disdainfully waving off a helping hand. “All right,” the voice wheezed, “Where’s me grandson? Where’s that little bugger?”

“Right o’er ‘ere, granda.”

“Nah, nah, doncher move, I’ll come ter yer. Only exercise I’m up fer, these days. Ah, so this is yer mate, is it?”

Vila glanced nervously at Avon, who had risen to his feet, pleading silently for the tech, just this once, to follow his lead, praying that the desperation of their situation would force the Avon’s hand. “Yeh,” he said to his grandfather, keeping it brief, trying not to put his foot in his mouth too quickly.

“E’s a pretty ‘un, I’ll grant ‘im that. Bit posh, though, in’t ‘e?”

“Yeh, but t’ain’t ‘is fault, ‘t’were the way ‘e was brought up, weren’t it?”

“Yeh, can’t ‘old a man’s past agin ‘im, t’ain’t fair. D’yer think ‘e’ll be able ter fit in?”

“Do you think you will be able to speak directly to me, rather than behave as if I were a retarded imbecile?”

“Oh, got a sharp tongue on ‘im, ‘e ‘as, ‘asn’t ‘e? Wotcher doin’, son?”

“I beg your pardon?” Avon questioned, glancing at Vila for a translation.

“He wants to know how you are,” Vila said, very, very quietly, looking from one to the other.

“As well as can be expected, considering the present circumstances.”

“Oh, ‘e don’ ‘alf talk nice, do ‘e? An’ what are yer

‘present circumstances’, eh?” The affable old man disappeared, to be replaced by the family patriarch. His eyes were as brown as Vila’s, framed by a ripple of wrinkles. “Wotcher done ter me grandson, that ‘e’s gotter ‘ide from the Bitch Queen ‘erself, eh? You answer me tha’, sonny.”

Avon stared him down, his inherited arrogance drowning his common sense. “I,” he said pointedly, “have done absolutely nothing to the little fool. He had the same misfortune as I—he became caught up in Blake’s rebellion. And that, not I, is the reason why Servalan would be after him. If she knew that he was still alive, that is.”

Vila groaned in disbelief and the old man turned on him with a creaking of bones and a visible rage. “You told us she were after yer, you little sod. You been lyin’ ter us, Vila me lad? Yer been tellin’ tales agin, ain’t yer?” A gnarled hand came up to grab his shirt front. “Wotcher do a stupid thing like that fer, eh?”

“Well,” Vila vacillated, glancing apologetically at Avon, trying to save the man’s life, unsure if he’d be killed for his efforts. “Like I said, ‘e’s me mate, granda. Do anythin’ fer ‘im, I would. Yer know ‘ow ‘tis, yer remember that far back, don’t yer?” He closed his eyes for a moment, as horrified disbelief flared in Avon’s.

“Vila...” the tech warned.

“I have to tell them, Avon, otherwise they won’t let you stay and how long will you survive here, in the main dome, with Servalan after you? Don’t forget, she’s got Orac now, and that bucket of bolts is about as loyal as a clapped out prostitute.” With one last glance of apology, he turned back to his grandfather, speaking to him loudly enough for the entire host of family to hear. “Granda, can’t ‘elp it none, I love the stupid bugger an’ ‘e’s the one wot I’ve picked fer me mate.”

“Vila!”

Vila ignored Avon, continuing undeterred. “‘Tain’t ‘is fault ‘e’s the way ‘e is an’ honest, ‘e ain’t as bad as he seems, mean ter say, ‘ow’d you be if yer ‘ad the entire bleedin’ Federation after yer blood, eh?”

Avon stood agape, shocked enough not to speak, until survivalist instincts awoke and took over. He glowered at Vila, his expression as sour as his disposition, but kept his peace.

Old Ewan Restal watched his grandson’s purported mate through slitted eyes. “I’ll let yer away wiv lyin’ ‘bout the Bitch Queen bein after yer, cos yer was protectin’ yer mate, an’ that’s right an’ proper.

Now though, yer definitely tellin' the truth 'bout 'im bein' yer mate? This is yer last chance, Vila me old son, set us right an' none'll say a word agin yer, bu' if yer keeps yer trap shut now an' I find out later that you was tellin a whopper, yer'll be fer the off, grandson o' mine or no'. Well? Wot's yer word on this, eh?"

With unwavering honesty written all over his face, Vila lied through his teeth. "No two ways 'bout it, granda. 'E's me mate, come hell or bloody 'igh water an' 'e's family. Yer shut 'im out, I leave wiv 'im. Jest no' possible fer me ter stay wivout 'im, simple as that."

Only Vila's youngest niece, searching for her mother's nipple, broke the silence, her cries wrinkling the room's stillness. Old Ewan stared at Avon, who stared back, uncowed, damned if he was going to beg. "So yer 'is mate, are yer, eh?" Restal wheezed, pausing to clear the phlegm from his throat. "Well? Are yer?"

Avon didn't even glance at Vila, sparing only the barest flicker of his eyes for cousin Jak and his equally enormous friend looming on the horizon like enthusiastic thunder storms waiting to happen. "Yes," he finally said, continuing over Vila's involuntary sigh of relief, "yes, actually, I am."

"S'obvious why 'e picked yer, but wotcher pick 'im fer? 'E ain't much ter look at, always been right small fer 'is age and not a pretty sight. So why 'im, eh?"

This time Avon did spare a glance for Vila, full of sardonic humour and sharp edges "Well, now, appearances aren't everything." He cast a quick look around the room, gauging just what would be the answer that would win him refuge, deliberately switching on his considerable charm, his conspiratorial, delightful smile winning answering warmth from reluctant stone. "Being a skilled thief, he does, after all, have very gifted hands."

Loud guffaws and Vila's blush greeted the words and abruptly, the mood of the family volte-faced, the tension fleeing, replaced by conspicuous bonhomie. "Yeh, 'e 'as that," the old man laughed, wiping his rheumy eyes, giving Avon one last appraisal. "Yeh, yer'll do. All right, kith and kin, Avon 'ere is one o' us, Vila's mate. Treat 'im like on o' the family, protect 'im an' share wiv 'im wotever we've got. Soon as yer make it official, yer'll be out o' the Bitch Queen's reach, fer as long as yer need."

"Make it official?" Avon asked, casting aspersions at Vila, voice giving Vila enough rope to hang himself. "And how, exactly, do we do that, old friend?"

Vila shuffled his feet, blushing, getting redder and redder as Avon's look sharpened and the laughter around him became ever more uproarious, the comments flying through the air with the greatest of ease.

"Wot, Vila, yer've gotten all shy in yer old age, 'ave yer?"

"C'mon, Vila, wotcher waitin' fer? 'Fraid once yer start on yer pretty feller yer won't want ter stop?"

"Oi, that 'ud be fine, we'd jest all watch an' 'ave a rare old time, right?"

"Vila?" Avon's voice was as smooth and lethal as the light from a gun.

"Yeh, well, actually, they just wants us to...to, well, just..." Vila stumbled, unable to find the right words, vacillating from accent to accent.

"Go on wiv yer, tell 'im! 'E can cope, 'e's a big boy!"

"So yer bleedin' 'ope! Jest keep yer eyes off 'im, 'e's Vila's an' doncher even think 'bout touchin' another man's mate, sonny jim, yer knows better."

Throughout it all, the backslapping and the joking comments, Avon's eyes remained fixed on Vila, who was busy looking anywhere and everywhere, as long as it wasn't at the tech.

"C'mon, son," Ewan said with some asperity, suspicion beginning to colour his voice. "Anyone 'ud think yer was lyin' 'bout 'im bein yer mate, an' yer won't 'ave done nuthin' tha' stupid, will yer? So get on wiv it, make it official."

Eyes downcast, Vila took the two steps that separated him from Avon. He swallowed audibly and slowly slipped his arms around the stiffening man, looking up finally, trying to explain silently, asking Avon to understand that necessity, in this case, was certainly a mother. A small smile twisted the comtech's mouth, his expression unreadable, as he waited, impassive, for Vila's mouth to touch his. At first, the kiss was tentative, shy, but as the comments around them became more ribald, more questioning of their affiliation, Vila deepened the embrace and Avon allowed it, opening his mouth to the insistent tongue tip trying to intrude with such delicate, restrained politeness. Vila held on tight, kissing and kissing him, nibbling Avon's lower lip, pressing them closer, sucking a reluctant tongue into his own mouth. A round of spontaneous applause chattered around them, freeing them from the display. Breathless, Vila drew back, instantly looking away, turning back to his grandfather. "Well," he said, "that official enough fer yer, eh?"

"Yeh, that'll do jest nicely, son," the old man said.



“All right, that’s it, Kerr Avon is now Kerr Avon-Restal, until ’e picks a feather fer ’is name, so’s none’ll find ’im. ’E’s one o’ us, an’ part o’ everything we got an’ responsible fer as much as every other wifey in the family.” Vila closed his eyes in horror, scrunching his face up, dreading the reaction he was sure must be written all over Avon’s face. Fortunately, any Alpha elite would have extreme difficulty comprehending all of Delta speech, understanding the gist rather than the details. Before any more could be said, the call went up for the chair carry and several beefy behemoths descended upon them, each pair linking hands to form a perch, others lifting the two ex-rebels off their feet and onto the human sedans. Amidst great cheering and lewdly friendly congratulations, they were carried into the flat’s only bedroom and tossed onto the small bed.

Old Ewan was the last to leave, as was his right as head of the family. “Now, yer listen ter me, sunshine,” he said, wagging a finger at Avon, “doncher do nuffin’ ter hurt me grandson. I’ve always ’ad a soft spot fer ’im, and yer’ll be dead meat if yer does a rotten thing ter ’im. Yer hear me?” He grinned at the pair lying tumbled on the bed. “An’ don’t do nuffin I wouldn’t do—was I forty year younger!” He shuffled out, the closing door, guillotining the spilled light from the other room.

Vila lay in the dark, on the lumpy old bed, waiting for the sky to fall in on him. “Well, why don’t you say something? I had to do it, there wasn’t any other choice, d’you think I wanted to lumber myself with you as me mate and before you kill me, you’d better just think about what me old granda said, because he meant it and....”

“Shut up, Vila.” Vila shut up: that voice had been frighteningly calm and quiet, exactly the way it got immediately prior to flailing Blake. “Tell me,” it continued, still distressingly reasonable, “why the hell you didn’t explain to me what you were doing? Don’t you think it would have been sensible—not to mention decent—to at least *warn* me that the price for shelter was to pretend to be *married* to you?”

“Married? Who said a dickie bird about marriage, eh? Told them you were my mate, didn’t I? And any case, what would you have done, if I had told you first? You’d’ve gone off shooting, getting yourself killed, for what? Pride, that’s what. Look, Avon, she’s got Orac. You touch a computer anywhere, and that friggin’ machine will find you. Here, in the Delta levels, is the only place you stand a chance of staying free. Jenna and Cally tried to rescue us from that mess

at Control Central, but they just got themselves caught, didn’t they? So we don’t have a ship to run to, right? And we know that those rebels that got killed were the last organised group left, so what good would it have done to go anywhere else, eh? When it comes right down to it, hiding amongst the Deltas was the only chance we had.”

“And you, in your infinite wisdom, decided to claim we were ‘mates’. Oh, I understand why—your family made it quite plain that the only reason I’m being protected instead of sold off to the ‘Bitch Queen’ is because I’m your ‘mate’ and I concede that it was necessary. But surely, even from the depths of your stupidity, you could see that warning me in advance would have been the intelligent thing to do? Although, that does explain why you didn’t do it.”

“Oh, pack it in, Avon. I’ve just saved your life, and what do I get? A thank you very much? A ‘oh, I do so appreciate what you did’? Nah, I get complaints, don’t I?” He rolled on to his side, facing away from Avon. “Believe me, if there had been any other way, any other way at all, I’d’ve done it. But we were stuck, caught between a rock and a hard place, so I had no choice. And as for telling you....I value my life too much—didn’t want to give you time to come up with any nasty ideas for revenge.”

The silence was long and fraught, then Avon sighed and spoke. “Well now,” he said, “it seems that I do owe you an apology for not thanking you. However, it also seems obvious to me that you need to tell me exactly what the situation is and how long this is likely to last.”

There was an aggrieved sigh from the other side of the bed. A body was huffily rearranged and Vila propped himself up in the darkness, leaning on a decrepit pillow. “Well, we don’t do things like you Alphas, down here. We’re not allowed to get married, so we just pick mates and that’s good enough for us. When you’ve got a mate....a man can’t even *look* at anyone else, just not the done thing, and anyway, if you did, your family—or your mate’s family—will be after your blood, so you can see why I’m not exactly thrilled about being stuck with you. All the drawbacks and none of the good bits. As for practicalities, that’s easy. The Federation don’t bother much with us, don’t even register us as individuals until we get caught doing something wrong. They just send the contracts down and then the food allos come when everything runs smooth, so that’s how some get the basics. The rest...steal, or earn a bit of money doing other stuff, usually going on the game.”

“Going on the game?”

“Prostitution. Oh, you can wipe that sneer off your face. Just because it’s dark in here doesn’t mean I don’t know what you’re doing. Going on the game is respectable, down here. Better’n being a burden and it’s fed many a family, I’ll have you know.”

“Well now, I suppose I should feel grateful that you didn’t pick *that* as our cover. But,” he said, sitting upright, dusting off his clothes, “now that we do have a bolthole, we can begin to plan how we shall be getting out of this mess. First of all, I want you to start finding a way for us to get passage off planet and...”

Fear knotted with a seaman’s expertise in his stomach, but Vila knew that this was the moment the entire truth would rear its ugly head. “Hold yer horses, Avon. We can’t do that—she’ll have the ports sewn up tighter than a virgin’s knickers, so how...”

“Because, Vila, we are now part of the great unwashed masses and as such, invisible, which means...”

“That we’re Deltas and Deltas aren’t allowed near the ports at the best of times. All the dirty work there is done by Gammas or robots, cause we don’t have the education. You really don’t know anything about life down here, do you?”

“What do you expect? I had never even met a Delta until I encountered one in prison. And if you don’t start telling me the things I need to know, I shan’t get to meet any more. Although that hardly seems like a hardship, does it now?”

Vila ignored Avon’s sharp tongue, as usual. “All right, time for an education, then. Firstly, Deltas aren’t allowed on the upper levels, so it’s not just cause you’re an Elite that you never saw one. A few of the Delta-first grades talk to the Gammas about work schedules, but that’s as far as any of us get to go, unless we end up as crimos, of course. Anyway, Delta work is all here in the Bowels, we take care of the basic mechanics of Dome life, like the lighting and heating power units, the air circulation vents, sewage and all those interesting, fun things, that’s the only teaching we get. And that’s it. No access to ports, no computers, not even basic food prefab units. Nothing.”

“There must be more—after all, you can at least read.”

Vila laughed, an ugly, bitter sound. “Course I can read—I’ve been processed by the Law a good seven or eight times. Prison’s the only place Deltas pick up any reading at all, and then only enough for the forms

and rules. Then living amongst you lot, with all them books and stuff... Anyway, there’s not many who’ve had that kind of opportunity. More info you need to know. Delta levels are like a separate little Dome, all to themselves. The Federation don’t bother us much, apart from the occasional raid, and we just do our work and take our food and that’s about it. So here, you pay your dues to the Terra Nostra and we make sure folk follow the rules in our own way.”

“Yes, well, I’ve seen cousin Jak, I’m quite certain I can work out how.”

“Yeh, exactly. And I’m serious, Avon, they’ll kill both of us if they find out I lied to them about you being me mate. Family doesn’t put up with lying and you ought to see what the Nostras do. Actually, you shouldn’t—it’d make you lose your breakfast.”

“If this is such a potentially hazardous situation, why did you take such a stupid risk? Courage is hardly in character for you.”

“Oh, stupid, is it? Well, it’s kept you alive, hasn’t it? Look, Avon, we’ve been through a helluva lot together, what with Blake and Servalan and all, I couldn’t just leave you out-Dome. It’ll be getting rainy out there soon, and I’ve seen what that does to a man caught in it.”

“So, you helped me out of misguided loyalty.”

“You really are horrible sometimes, you know that. We’re here, we’re safe, for as long as you can keep to yourself and out of Servalan’s sight.”

“But, according to you, still with no access to the ports, because I can’t use the travel facilities as myself and Deltas can’t go there. To all intents and purposes, then, we are not free from Servalan, merely held in a larger prison.”

“Merely still alive, you mean. She gets you...” Avon’s hand suddenly covered Vila’s mouth, silencing him, leaving the sounds from the door suspended in their quiet. Catlike, Avon slipped from the bed, gun drawn, motioning for Vila to follow. He was ignored, Vila continuing to sprawl on the bed. “Oh, Avon, forget it. It’s not a pack of Federation troopers, it’s just the youngsters trying to listen to us.”

The tech slapped the light on, holstering his gun and pulling the door open. In tumbled two teenagers and grimy waif of about ten years, rat’s tail hair flying. They took one quick look at Avon and squealed, “Scarper!”, disappearing into the crowd in the living room. Vila came up behind Avon and grabbed the tech in a one-armed hug, slamming the door shut with the other. “You daft?” he asked, shocked. “You trying to make them realise that I was

lying to them? They find that out and we'd be at Servalan's for tea and the Nostras would have us for dinner. And I don't mean we'd be guests, either."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Going to the door like that."

Avon heaved a long suffering sigh. "Going to the door like what, precisely?"

"Fully dressed, of course. I tell you, we had better hope none of the adults saw you there, I mean, we're supposed to be in here having it off, and you have to go up there, bold as brass, covered from head to foot in your bloody leather suit. You really like trouble, don't you? God, I'll be glad when we get a flat of our own, I'll be able to keep you out of bother then."

"Vila, you...."

"Lads? Can I come in?"

The two men stared at each other, Ewan Restal's voice startling them.

"Er, jest a minute, granda," Vila called. He raced for the bed, stripping off as he went. "God, he'll kill us, if he finds out we were just talking."

Avon took one look at him, one look at the door, the one which led directly to cousin Jak, the Terra Nostra and/or the 'Bitch Queen' and immediately followed Vila's example, casting off his clothes rapidly, jumping under the blankets, arranging himself decorously. Vila clambered in beside him, and reached an impertinent hand over to ruffle Avon's hair and rub his lips, the other hand tapping the tech's cheek, reddening it.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Avon hissed.

"Making it look like we've been going at it, of course," his companion hissed back, "So start looking decadent." He ran his fingers through his own hair, pinching his cheeks and biting his lips. By the time he had raced through this repertoire, Avon had to admit that the effect was, indeed, decidedly dissolute. "Come in, granda," Vila called, voice deliberately husky.

The old man shuffled in, a bottle in one sagging cardigan pocket, two glasses in the other, a third clutched in his gnarled hand. "Jest thought I'd bring yer a drink, an' apologise fer the youngsters, like."

"Oh, yer shouldn't o' bovered, granda," Vila muttered, one leg casually draped over Avon, one hand idly resting on the other man's chest. "Sorry 'bout no' lettin' yer come in straight away, but we was...well, yer know."

The old man cackled, a delighted grin beaming from him, false teeth gleaming in the bright light.

"Yeh, I can imagine. Oh, yer can wipe that look from off yer face, Kerry, me old son." He apparently didn't notice the gimlet daggers Avon launched at him, continuing blithely. "We don' stand on ceremony like yer do Upstairs an' yer'll 'ave no secrets down 'ere. That's the way of it." He ogled them, astute eyes taking note of the intimacy of their pose, the flush on their faces. He nodded, satisfied. "I'll 'ave yer know, I used ter be a right raver, in me younger days. Try anything like that an' I'd jest keel over, these days, more's the pity." He passed them each a glass of the dark red liquid, raising his glass in a toast. "May all yer days be long and full o' worth," he said, in the tone of a man speaking directly to Fate, "an' all yer troubles little ones."

As Avon brought the glass up to drink from it, tears filled his eyes. The fumes were, to put it mildly, potent. Vila knocked his back in a single draught, gasping in satisfied pain as the raw booze hit his throat. "Thanks, granda," he said, checking on Avon, relieved that the tech was being so thorough in his subterfuge, subtly, but noticed by Ewan, moving slightly so that Vila's hand was rubbing against his chest. Satisfied with the display and the reassurances of truth, the old man creaked to his feet, leaving the bottle behind, with a wink and a rude gesture. "See yer in the morning," he said, patting an outraged Avon on the rump. "Sleep well, the pair o' yer."

The door closed behind him, reducing the noise to a dull roar, a bad tempered lion. Limp with relief, Vila collapsed in a heap on top of Avon, groaning with embarrassment as the other man pushed him off. "God, I'm sorry, Avon. Nothing personal, honest," he lied, "always happens to me when I'm scared, thought granda thought we weren't doing anything, that I was lying to him."

"And fear gives you an erection?" Avon asked, in clear disbelief.

"Every time."

"Then you must have spent half your life in a state of embarrassment."

"Oh, at least half."

Glancing at the uncomfortable Vila out of the corner of his eye, Avon murmured, as if asking what the other wanted in his tea, "I suppose you shall have to...take care of certain matters, then?"

"I'll have to jack off, if that's what you mean."

"I'm not entirely familiar with the vernacular, but I'm quite sure I understand your meaning. Well, do whatever you have to do." He rolled on to his side, turning his back to the thief. "I am going to sleep."

“Before you do...” Avon would have sworn the voice itself blushed, “we should make sure they all think we really are going at it, otherwise, they’ll be dead suspicious, so...I’m going to take care of myself, but I’ll be as noisy as I can and we’ll make it sound right, or we will, if you can make the bed bounce a bit, you know, get the old rhythm going.”

“No.”

“What d’you mean, no?”

“I will not sit and bounce a bed to convince eavesdroppers that...”

“That’s the key word, Avon. *Eavesdroppers*. All them people, including cousin Jak, listening to make sure that you really are me mate and worth the risk of hiding you from the Nostras and Servalan.”

Avon stared him down for a minute, then pointedly looked at the tented blanket over Vila’s groin. He shook his head, then began to bounce the bed, grimacing as Vila moaned and groaned in companion rhythm, harmonising with the imaginary thrusts. Despite his best intentions and all the good manners his nanny had so painstakingly drilled into him, he found himself watching the veiled movements of Vila’s hand and the peak that hand was sliding up and down on. Carefully, he started matching his shoves down on the bed with Vila’s strokes on his cock, moving faster and faster, transforming the white bedspread into a whirling snowstorm. Faintly, amidst the almost theatrical moans, Avon heard a small sound: the minuscule click of the door being eased open. The noise from the other room had subsided, the silence of forty bated breaths. Avon’s glance flew to the door and then down to the flushed face of the man on the bed and he realised there could never be a ‘fate worse than death’. As the first face, the wizened visage of old Ewan Restal, bridged the gap, Avon threw himself on top of the shocked thief.

“Avon?” he quavered, pelvis pushing up into the unexpected warmth covering him, asking what the tech wanted, convincing the host of family that this was, indeed, a true match. Avon’s mouth fastened on his, keeping him quiet, silencing the damning questions. Vila felt cool hands grip his shoulders, a long body pressed to his, the weight full and satisfying on top of him. At the touch of silken pubic hair on his hard cock, Vila came, spilling his seed over Avon, dragging his mouth free, crying out Avon’s name. At this romantically satisfying conclusion, a collective sigh rose from the doorway, and the door

was pulled to, the viewers convinced the couple had no idea of their little test.

Left alone and unobserved, Avon pushed off of Vila, taking a corner of the sheet to rub himself clean. “I am beginning to wonder what is worse—being stuck here as your mate or running to Servalan.”

“S’all right,” the muffled voice replied, answering the unspoken question. “Wasn’t personal and you don’t need to worry ‘bout me doing that kind of thing again. When I get randy, I’ll usually take care of meself in the bathroom, so you won’t even know. And don’t bother suggesting I go to one of the girls ‘on the game’, ‘cause I’m lumbered with you and....”

“They’ll kill you if you stray. I’m beginning to think the Delta lifestyle is more dangerous than that of a revolutionary.”

“Only if you lie or cheat or steal from family. Speaking of which, cousin Dav—he’s Jak’s big brother—will be the one to help us find a place to stay, but it’ll take a while. Granda’s house is far too small for two extra bodies.”

“It seems sufficient for three people.”

“Yeh, but he’s not here on his own, is he? He’s got his grandson and his family and Jess and her baby, so...”

There was a sudden uproar outside and a heavy pounding on their door. “Raid!” The cry was raised, galvanising everyone into their prearranged roles. “Raid!”

“Quick, Avon, get up and throw your clothes on,” Vila shouted. Old habits, fortunately, die hard, and he was instantly dressed and gathering up the very few personal belongings they had carried with them. “We’re heading for a safe house, only got a couple of minutes to get there before the raid hits.”

Avon bit back his question, busy with dressing, frustrated by his lack of knowledge and expertise in this lifestyle, his hands tied by ignorance.

Vila chattered on, filling Avon in, keeping his own mind off their imminent danger. “We’ll make for a hiding shed, keep out of sight of those friggin mutoids. Unless you want to end up with your kidneys in one man and your heart in someone else?”

Avon stopped halfway through snapping his jacket closed. “They pick people up and use their organs?”

“Nah,” Vila said, suddenly serious, “to the Federation, we’re not even people. We’re a cross between slaves and walking organ banks. Now, c’mon, get a

move on. If we're late, they won't wait for us, and believe me, you don't want to get caught by the bloody mutoids."

Six weeks and eleven raids—a new record—and Avon was by now utterly familiar with the pattern, as confined and restricted by that as by his time in the dim, grey limbo of hiding amongst Deltas, trapped as much by boredom and enforced inactivity as he was by Servalan's guards crowding all the exits out of the lowest levels. Unless he were willing to risk the burning rain and the poisonous mists outside, he was mired precisely where he was.

Early in the morning, the alarm had been given yet again and Avon was once more pressed against Vila, for the first time since it had been unavoidable that once, but this time, despite the fear radiating from the thief, an erection was conspicuous by its absence. As before, as always, for every single one of the uncommonly frequent sweeps as the Federation combined a donor drive with a search for Avon, he was hemmed into a small, unlit room, crammed with people, with seemingly dozens of Vila's extended and close-knit family. The smell was almost overwhelming to Avon, the heat and crowding claustrophobic, but he kept quiet, hardly breathing, listening to the encroaching, approaching sounds of an entire battalion of mutoids methodically, mindlessly, searching for 'donors'. Avon instantly recognised the new sound that filled their shelter with such dangerous volume—Vila's youngest niece, colicky and hungry, exercising her lungs. With everyone else in the room, Avon looked at her, at the frail teenager cradling her crying baby in her arms, shushing her, rocking her, trying to get the baby to suckle, anything to quiet her and protect the family crowded in the sepulchral gloom. As if in response to a signal in a language Avon did not know, every eye in the room lowered, leaving the little mother sequestered, despite the horde. Avon alone watched her, her blue eyes meeting his, filling with tears, turning them into an ocean. Slowly, her hand rose, palm covering her baby's mouth, fingers pinching the tiny nostrils closed. Horrified, Avon stared as the infant struggled weakly in her mother's arms, the baby frightened and uncomprehending of this cruelty from the kindness of her mother's hands. Avon started forward, opening his mouth to speak up for tiny Riva, the mutoids be damned, when a hand covered his mouth in painful echo of the weeping girl's. Vila's hand was inexorable, his eyes full of pain and anger as he glared at

Avon, silent, impotent fury at the injustice of life raging from him. Cousin Jak gripped Avon's arms, holding him immobile, hammering in the final nail in the infant's coffin. Drowning blue eyes met Avon's again, then slowly, she lowered her eyes, watching as her baby's struggles faded, body spasming faintly, limply sinking into death.

The clash of the mutoids' booted feet on the walk outside their refuge grew, a wavelike crescendo, finally muting into the distance, but no one moved, bitter experience having taught them that safety only returned with the mutoids' departure for the upper levels, screaming trophies in hand. The lookout finally sounded the all clear and Jak freed Avon's arms and Vila released his mouth, instantly pulling Avon in close, spitting the words into his face. "Don't say a fuckin' word," he raged, with controlled and agonised quiet, "she *had* to do it, didn't have no choice, either the baby or all of us, that's the way of it down here. But you—you had to make it worse for her, didn't yer? Don't you understand? Up on your fancy Alpha levels, you look away if someone burps at dinner, to make it easier for them to cover it up, but no, here you had to stare at her like a bloody arbiter while she had to kill her baby." Upset by a scene he had faced too many times, Vila slipped into the Delta accent, as he did with ever increasing frequency these days. "Fact o' life, hereabouts, Avon. Sometimes one has to die to save the whole group, that's just the way it goes an' none of us like it, but all we can do is make it as unawful as we can. So don't you dare say a word ter the girl, she'll have ter live with this the rest o' her life, jest like we all will." He shoved Avon away from him, trembling with grief and fury, turning on his heel and fleeing the room. With Jak at his back, Avon watched him go, then looked towards the young mother, slumped on the floor against the wall, tears streaming in silent cascades down her cheeks, stroking her baby's fine hair, crooning words of love to her dead child. Old Ewan hobbled over to her, in the father's wake, waiting until the young man, little more than an adolescent himself, covered his firstborn's face with an aged handkerchief, then wrapped her in his jacket, prying her out of his woman's arms. The old man patted the young man on his shoulder, in unspoken sympathy. "We'll give 'er a proper, decent burial, out-Dome, if yer like, wiv flowers and sky and real light shinin' on 'er. Do it the morrow, before our Jess 'ere gets too out o' it, the way the women do, when they've 'ad ter do summat like this. All right, lad?"

The youth nodded mutely, grateful that at least the old man had enough past behind him to know better than to say the terrible words, "You're young, there'll be more young'uns fer yer." The old man stepped aside, allowing the quick and the dead to pass.

Cousin Nell took Mac's girl's arm, gently bringing her to her feet. "I'll take care o' yer lass fer yer," Nell said, thin hawk-face worn in the paths Jess had only just started on. "Yer can see ter the babe first an' then come an' take Jess 'ome wiv yer, or yer can stay wiv me the night, we can always find room fer two more, lad." She patted him on the cheek, then kissed her fingertips, resting them briefly on the covered head of the dead baby, a ritual benediction repeated by every one of the Restal clan as they filed slowly by, each one sparing a word for the father, a blessing for the baby, leaving the bereaved mother alone, for the moment, granting her the dignity of her grief. There would be time enough, in the way of the Dome, to mourn with her, to help her bury her loss as they would bury her daughter.

Avon and Jak were the amongst the last to leave, and Avon found himself face to face with Jess, the one member of this large and rowdy family who had accepted him unequivocally from the beginning. At the look in her eyes, unbeliever though he was, Avon brought his fingertips to his lips and brushed them against Riva's forehead, then he stepped silently from the hiding room, Jak on his heels. The big man, for the first time ever, walked beside Avon, as an equal, not behind him, as a watchdog. Disgusted, Avon realised that it had taken his participation in a ritual of sympathy for an obscene tragedy, the result of the cancerous inhumanity of the Federation, to win the acceptance of the Restals. Outrage and impotent ire speeding his pace, Jak rushing along beside him, Avon hurtled with controlled fury through the grimy, grey, forlorn streets of the Delta sector, feeling more affinity for the grimly quiet man at his side than the pampered members of his own class, reclining in plush hospital beds, waiting for transplants to prolong their lives or undo the damage of overindulged weaknesses.

Without a word, they parted at the door of Ewan Restal's house, Jak going on upstairs to the room he shared with his wife and four children, Avon to the solitude of the bedroom he lived in with Vila, striding past the family members clustered in depressed silence around the kitchenette table. He stormed around the empty bedroom, needing to vent his rage,

trapped in the small room by his Alphaness, imprisoned by the differences that marked him to other Deltas, the signposts that would have them send him directly to Servalan's lair. He glowered out of the window, watching with sick anger the nightly ritual of the neighbours in the flat opposite. Time after time, the man raised his arm, connecting with an audible slap and piercing scream with the face of his wife, as his children sat cowed in a corner, looking on, listening and watching, saucer eyed, as their mother begged their father to beat her and spare them. "That's the way of it, down here," was all Vila had said when Avon had commented on the brutal behaviour. "That's what you grow up with, that's what you learn, that's what you do." Repulsed, he hauled down the blind, shutting out the sight, muffling the noise. Adrenalin boiled through him, fueling his body, driving it to activity. He looked around at the patina of grime that so offended him and all good sense fled. He threw open the door and strode outside, without his bodyguard, without the protection of the Restal clan.

He roamed the back roads for hours, his pace finally slowing as some of the anger burned itself out. He wandered along the streets, as they were called, the term a far-flung echo, preserved by poverty, of the days when the Dome was first built, by the ancestors of the people who now endured the same harsh realities in their turn. Eventually, he turned his steps back towards the area where he stayed, under the close confines of the protective custody that the Restals used to maintain his freedom from Servalan. It was past time, he thought, for Vila to have gone home and past time for him to wend his way back also. Unlike the born Delta, however, he could not—would not—accept the grimness of the day as an inevitability. He was an Alpha, without the years of defeat bred into his genes, without a lifetime's struggle simply for the minimal necessities of existence, without the destruction of spirit that comes from living in a cauldron of strife. He turned a corner, back straight, arrogant good-breeding covering him like a cape, and walked straight into a group of men lounging against the eroded wall. Instincts flared, warning him that these were precisely the kind of people he most needed to avoid, so he gathered himself, wishing fleetingly and futilely for a gun. He used the only weapon he had available: the primal air of dominant male, the tacit declaration of dominance of the one over the many. The group closed in on him, undaunted, a pack readying for the kill.

“Well, well, well, wot ’ave we ’ere?” the first man asked, a filthy hand shoving greasy black hair off his forehead.

“Juicy piece o’ meat,” one of his cohorts answered.

“Pretty an’ all,” the voice leered behind Avon and the tech whirled around, fingers jabbing for the jugular. A huge hand grabbed his before the blow could land.

“C’mon,” Jak said, “don’ cause no trouble, sunshine. No offence,” he grinned at the six men closing ranks around them, “’e’s Vila Restal’s new mate an’ ’e don’ know ’is arse from ’is elbow, born off world, ’e was.” The Restal name worked its usual magic and the threatening violence faded into wary truce.

“Yeh?” the leader muttered. “Well, yer can tell Vila that it don’t matter ’ow big a shot ’e is nor ’ow big a gang ’is family is, if ’e don’ keep ’is fella under better control, ’e’s fair game, next time. We don’ want no trouble wiv you lot, bu’ this is our turf an’ ’e’s ours, if ’e comes strollin’ in ’ere like Lord Muck agin. Got it?”

“Yeh, yeh, jest a mistake, won’ ’appen agin, honest. C’mon, Kerr, Vila’s bin lookin’ fer yer.”

The fury started by little Riva’s death hadn’t even begun to truly dissipate; it had merely been beaten down into a hard, unforgiving lump in Avon’s belly. The anger rose again, foundation for the towering rage this humiliation built in him. He refused to speak, closing Jak out, ignoring his lecture, barely even registering his explanation of following him to get him out of the tight spots his ignorance would tangle him in.

For the second time that day, Avon and Jak parted silently and in shared anger at the door of Avon’s purdah. This time, however, when Avon went in, there was one person present, one other person not attending the wake for the sacrificial baby. Head tipped back, Vila took another hefty swig from the bottle of raw booze, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, an expression of dark, dangerous anger blackening his face.

“An’ where the fuck ’ave yer been, eh, Avon? Wotcher think yer doin’, runnin’ off like that, makin’ me look like a fool in front o’ me family?”

“Shut up, Vila. And put that bottle down—you’ve done more than enough drinking these past weeks.”

With slow deliberation, Vila corked the bottle and got to his feet, walking with the careful steadiness of the very, very drunk. “Don’ yer go tellin’ me ter shut up, Avon. This is my turf we’re on, not yours, yer out o’ yer depths ’ere, yer needs me fer protection, like

wot I needed yer wiv them Alphas. This t’ain’t some fancy Alpha ship, wiv clean sheets and all the water yer can use. This is real life, Avon. An’ yer me mate an’ I asked yer a question. Remember the rules? Mates share everythin’, good an’ bad, stick up fer each other, no matter wot, takes care o’ each other in every single thing. All tha’ stuff, Avon, an’ me out thievin’, an’ runnin’ an’ hidin’, runnin a stable o’ kids ter steal, so’s I c’n get yer food an’ a place ter live an’ parts so’s yer can build yer ruddy gadgets. An’ fer wot? A matey who runs off, leavin’ me ter look the fool.”

Wrinkling his nose at the rank smell of alcohol, Avon turned his back on Vila. “You’re drunk and pathetic, a feeble excuse for a man. And how dare you complain about me, when Jess had to murder her own child today.”

“Yeh, she did, din’t she? An’ fer wot, eh? So’s yer can go runnin’ off an’ risk gettin’ killed. Oh, that’s nice, tha’ is. Nice thanks ter give the girl, tha’ is.”

Anger boiled over and Avon faced Vila, venting his spleen on the only available target. “Worried about nothing except your pathetic pride, just like Blake and his damned Control Central. How dare you rail at me for getting out of this prison, when you have crawled off to hide in yet another bottle. Complaining about working, as usual, when I can’t so much as set foot out that door without one of your cousins ’escorting’ me, unable to speak above a whisper in public, in case someone outside of your brood hears me and turns me in. Nothing to stimulate my mind, not that you’d understand that problem, no one to speak to, apart from illiterate dolts and a drunken fool. You disgusting, petty little man.” He stormed out of the living room, slamming the bedroom door behind him, picking up Vila’s discarded clothes and hurling them across the room. The door was flung open behind him and Vila walked in, displaying the firm control of the habitual heavy drinker, the result of the practice he had had for the past six, dreadful weeks, as he slipped back down into the mire of his past, sinking below the surface of the septic tank that was acceptable behaviour in the Delta warrens.

“Just shut up, Vila. I’ve heard more than enough today.”

“No yer ’aven’t. Weren’t jest pride wot ’ad me so friggin’ worried, y’know. Terra Nostra been sniffin’ round ’ere like a pimp around a gal.” Avon turned to face him, a question on his face. “Lookin’ fer the ’fancy man’, they was. An’ if they’re after yer, then so’s the Feds. An you ’ad ter go an’ run off like that,

worryin' me sick." He shuffled into the bathroom, grabbing the medicine bottle and dissolving two pills under his furred tongue. As an after thought, he took another one, making a face at the taste, then brushing his teeth to clear some of the sewage out of his mouth. He could still hear Avon, pacing back and forth with measured tread, the sound of a caged panther. The drugs hit his system, rushing through him like a gale force wind, neutralising the alcohol, leaving him depressingly sober. "Waste of perfectly good booze," he muttered, rinsing his face in cold water.

Avon paced evenly, never interrupting his stride as Vila squeezed past him within the small confines of the bedroom. "Well? What else do you know, about the Nostra searching for me."

"Just that," Vila said, crawling under the covers, shivering in the cold. "God, I wish Upstairs would stop monitoring the heating system so's we could turn it on early this year. Bloody freezin' in here."

"The Terra Nostra, Vila." The voice demanded, impatient.

"Yeh, well, not much to say, really. Sent a couple of their hard nuts around and about, askin' about a fancy bit o' stuff that's been told to them."

"Damn!"

"Means we'll have to rearrange the relatives, and hurry up getting a place of our own, can't risk granda."

"No, idiot, it does *not* mean getting our own flat, it means getting off Earth and away from this miserable prison."

"And how do you propose to do that, eh? We've been through this till it's coming out my ears. We can't get you access to computers, cause Orac'll find you. We can't get near the ports cause none of the 'fixed' papers'll get past the security systems there an' the mutoids'll eat anyone who so much as looks suspicious to them. And considering they're walking vampires, that covers a helluva lot of people."

"No, there is a way, I simply haven't found it yet. I have been stuck in this limbo for over six weeks now, and I refuse to continue living like a rat in a trap."

"There's no *choice*, Avon. It's been like this down here for hundreds of years but you plan on paintin' a new picture in a few weeks? Deltas get to work themselves to death, so's you bloody Alphas and the Betas and the Gammas can live a life of privilege. D'you think we *want* to live like this? D'you think we like never being clean enough, never having any decent food, knowing that our kids are going to grow up to a life just as bad as ours?"

"Then why the hell haven't you done something to change it?"

"How? And to what? Year after year, we lose babies like Riva and older kids like Ven's lads, and every year, we lose mothers and youngsters to the blues, they just get so depressed they pull away from people and hide in their own little worlds. And the rest of us have to watch it happen and pretend that we don't care, that it's not important, that it's just 'the way of it'. Cos if you don't, you can't survive. So anyone who can break out of here, stays out, even if it's by joining the Nostra or going to work in one of the dope dens. It's still better'n here, in some ways. I'm the first ever to be stupid enough to come back, and if it hadn't been for Blake, I'd still be gone. There's no hope down here, Avon, no way out. You get born a Delta, you live a Delta, you die Delta. Can't break the cycle."

"If you weren't so afraid of work..."

"Afraid of work? You've seen how hard it is just to survive down here. Girls pregnant before they're sixteen, usually, boys having to feed a family, old parents needing looked after."

"You steal everything else, why not contraceptives?"

"Cause the only ones we can get to are Gamma grade ones, and they don't block the extra fertility gene that's bred into us. After all," he said, with aching bitterness, "our fatality rate is so friggin high, they had to do something about our population drop."

Avon turned his back on him, resuming his pacing, brow knit in thought. "I will not accept this as my fate, Vila. I will get out of this and..."

"And what? Disappear off, to some other planet, leaving the rest of us stuck here?"

"And what would you have me do? Take the entire brood with me?"

"No, but you could at least do something for them. Look at you, all spit and polish and why? Cause we all know you're an Alpha an' that I've gotten to be like one too, so they give us more'n our share of the water, just so's we can be as clean as we like. Well, almost, anyway. An this," he waved his hand around the room, "all this for just two people, when Jak's got his four stacked to the ceiling in his place. And what have you done in return, eh?" he asked, the day's strain stringing him taut again, the unresolved anger bubbling up. He stood up, coming closer to Avon. Faintly, they could hear the neighbour next door start in on his mate, the yelling soon to escalate to blows, both men appearing



bruised and battered the next morning. As always, an unchanging, debilitating cauldron of violence and anger, one feeding on the other, a never ending supply of vitriolic energy. “Hear that?” Vila asked. “That’s what my family think I should be doing to you.”

“Then that merely proves that your family are as...”

“Want to know why?” Vila continued, talking over Avon’s words. The Alpha raised an eyebrow at Vila’s assertive behaviour. Here, in his own milieu, a celebrity among his peers, the thief was a very different man, but this was the first time it had ever carried over into their private conversations. “They say you’re making a right fool out of me, what with me working me fingers to the bone and you not doing a hand’s turn.”

Avon stiffened with anger at the unfair comment. “Are you implying I’m lazy, for that, coming from you, is an affront. As you well know, I cannot even go outside without risk, so how...”

“Look at this place, is what they’d say. We’re mates, an’ I’m playin’ the role of hubby an’ that makes you me wifey, fer now. But you do nothing around the house, and they think it’s cause *you* think it’s beneath you. So they all snicker and laugh at me behind me back, an’ make fun of me cause you never let me lay so much as a finger on you.” Avon opened his mouth to speak, but the tears glistening in Vila’s eyes shackled him, making him incompetent, as always, when it came to other people’s emotions. “Not even a finger, and you know what that makes me look to them. Probably why the Nostras’ve been sniffing around for you, too.”

“You are trying to say that because we do not indulge in public displays of affection, people are beginning to feel that I am no longer your ‘mate’ and therefore no longer protected?”

“Avon, listen, will you? You can hear them next door, when they fight and *when they make up*, right? And upstairs, and Jess and Dan in the front room and...”

“Point made.” He turned away, going over to the lone chair, the farthest point from Vila. He knew only too well what was coming, had seen the inevitability of it but had no desire to hurry it along. Sentimentality, was, of course, weakness, probably more so here than on the front line of the Resistance.

“Avon,” Vila said, following him, kneeling at his feet. “Don’t you see? You’re risking both our lives ‘cause you won’t fit into the lifestyle down here.”

“I refuse to become an under-washed, under-educated...”

“Stop it! Shut up!” Vila screamed at him, lurching to his feet, yelling out weeks of fear and humiliation at Avon’s thoughtless, supercilious hands. “What d’you expect, eh? You’ve seen what we’ve got down here, an’ how little that is. An you, d’you try an’ help, no, you just turn your nose up at us, making me ashamed of me own mam, not cos it’s her fault, but cos she’s so common and ignorant that she doesn’t even know it. But d’you know what’s worst? It’s feelin’ like that even though I know my folk are good and strong and proud, but seein’ them through your eyes, watching you sneer at the dirt and the way they say things... “ The volume lowered, the defeated sadness bleeding through. “An’ all the time, them askin’ me why I’m with a prick like you, why I’m lettin’ you treat me as bad as you do, why I’m stickin’ with a man the likes of you when I could just announce that you’re not me mate any more and go off and get me someone nice, who’d take proper care o’ me, cos I take proper care o’ them, provide them with a home and food and clothes an everything.” He threw his hands up in disgust. “Why am I even bothering to talk to you about any of this? Doesn’t matter to you, you know I’m not going to risk you, cos I love you too much. Just goes to prove, you’re right—I am an idiot.” He sagged back, staring at Avon with damning honesty.

Horrified, Avon sat back in the chair, disguising himself with the look of a polite man confronted with a snotty nosed child. It had never for one second, crossed his mind that Vila actually saw their situation as being the same as Jess and Dan. Oh, he had seen the warning signs that Vila hoped for a more physical aspect, but *this*...it positively flabbergasted him. To see love in those eyes, to see the fear of being hurt beyond endurance... “Vila,” he began.

“Don’t need to say a thing, I already know it. Yeh, it was just, what did you call it? Expedience, right. Well, if you want us both to survive, we’d better start being helluva bloody expedient again.”

A small smile found its way to Avon’s lips. “Does this mean repeat performances of the first night at your grandfather’s.”

“Yeh.”

Avon looked away, not answering, watching in silence. Vila accepted the rebuff and then walked heavily, dispiritedly, over to his bottle of spirits. “Drink that after your sobriety pills and you’ll be thoroughly sick.”

“What’s it to you? You won’t have to clean it up and me drinking gives us a bloody good excuse for not doing anything.” He uncapped the bottle, a twist of revulsion on his face as the fumes hit him.

“I would rather have to put up with your melodramatic moaning and groaning than the sounds of you retching half the night.”

The bottle paused. “That a proposition?”

“Of a sort.”

“Supposed to make me jump up and down for joy, is it?”

“No, but it should at least ease some of the tension and give me a break from your incessant prowling.”

Vila dumped the bottle on the table, and slouched his way over to the bed. He slumped down on it, pulling his clothes off haphazardly, tossing them on the floor, crawling into bed. He turned on his side, facing away from Avon, his words rather indistinct. “Better get on with it then, before you change your mind. An’ it’s all right, I’ll lie on my stomach this time, so you won’t even have to see anything.” He looked at Avon, almost as if he were memorising the strong and beautiful face, the love and fear of rejection bright in his eyes.

Silently, Avon came over and sat on the bed, discreetly turning his back also. He felt the mattress begin to move and glanced over his shoulder, to see Vila undulating under the covers, obviously rubbing himself on the bed. The thief’s face was turned aside from him, but he could see every move under the blankets. “Be more convincing if you make some noise, too.” Vila’s voice was oddly flat and stuffy.

“Tell them I’m the strong silent type.”

There was no answer, only a break in the shrouded body’s movements. Vila picked the rhythm up again, shoving harshly against the mattress, creating a convincing, if solo, racket. His face was red, sweat beading his furrowed forehead and Avon watched him, engrossed. The thief pounded away, in lonely pursuit of pleasure, a mixture of lust and hurtful emotions blended into his features.

Hesitantly, Avon reached a hand out to touch the uncovered shoulder, knowing what Vila wanted, knowing what survival required, knowing that his own body was screaming at him for relief, of any kind. As if stung by an electric shock, he pulled his hand back, leaving it hovering mid-air, as Vila stopped his motion, rolling on to his back. His nipples were brown and small, in the low light, the skin pale and pearlescent, dark hair lying smooth and flat

across his chest. “Avon?” he asked, keeping his eyes closed, holding his breath.

“I am no vestal virgin to sacrifice myself for my honour, and sex does not seem so high a price to pay to elude Servalan.”

Vila stretched out, settling himself comfortably as Avon stripped and came into bed, apparently completely at ease in this situation, as in almost every other. He fitted his body on top of Vila’s, snuggling their cocks and balls together, enjoying the duty far more than anyone could ever have the right to. He could feel Vila’s muscles, the satin strength buoying him up, cradling him in equally supportive arms. Eyes wide with the struggle to bury his hopes before it was completely too late, Vila leaned up into a kiss, ushering the new tongue into his mouth, arms hugging with matching strength. Avon stopped for a moment, framing Vila’s face with his hands, staring into the dark eyes. He had been forced into a decision, a choice: did he stick to his high morals and make this friend, this lifejacket unhappy, or should he at least try, and run the risk of making them both happy? Vila solved his dilemma for him, manhandling him back into the land of the living, groaning as he cupped Avon’s genitals with the same firm strength as the dark man cupped his face.

Warm hands lifted his penis, starting a smooth squeezing motion, filling it with blood and Avon with unexpected fervour. “Vila...” he said, quietly.

“Shh, ’s’all right, I already know. ’S not the same for you with me. You’re not in love with me the way you were with Anna—or Blake,” he answered, his voice a stiletto knife in the dark, slipping past Avon’s defences and impaling him.

“I’m sorry,” he stroked Vila’s face, hands following an imaginary line from his cheeks straight down to the thief’s nipples, catching them between finger and thumb.

“What’s there to be sorry about, eh? You’re here with me, not with them, so that’ll be enough for me.”

The only answers to that were cruel and for once, pained enough by the grimness of his current reality, marooned on a spec of dirt in an ocean of enemies, Avon forbore, using his mouth to kiss, instead of deliver invective, using his sharp tongue to make Vila shiver, not cower. Wordlessly, he allowed the tightly-reined passion in him to creep forward, hands and mouth and body covering Vila, touching him everywhere, doing everything Avon liked himself and everything every lover of his had ever appreciated. Vila’s balls filled the palm of his hand to perfection

and he rolled and squeezed them, to a syncopated accompaniment of loud moans.

Desperate hands pulled Avon's face up from Vila's chest, bringing him eye to eye with the fevered expression and evident love. Vila stared at him for a long moment and Avon allowed it. In the Delta warrens, death came all too swiftly and hardship was the only way of life. Avon may well have been an emotional cripple, better with computers than people, but he was no fool. The warmth was a balm to his spirit, a rebellious, revolutionary yell that neither Servalan, nor the Nostras nor Darkness itself could defeat him.

Awestruck, Vila reached up a little and kissed Avon, sweetly, gently, as if for the very first time. Avon parted his lips, felt a tongue trace his teeth, slip past the white barrier reef and fill his mouth with sensation, sending blood pounding to his groin and lust to his brain. He grabbed Vila tightly, almost crushing him, giving the thief that which he needed second most of all—a safe haven of strength, another being to fray the edges of night that always seemed descendant upon the Deltas, a way to cry that life still flourished, even down here. There was no cause for Avon to hold back this first time, the way he had had to with the virgin Blake, so he gave his needs full throttle, spreading Vila's legs, pressing his hardness to the raised line of pleasure that stretched from balls to ass. The bud there was opening in the spring rain of human closeness, uncaring whether this was love or lust, exulting only in the life.

"Ang on 'alf a mo'," Vila mumbled, returning to the voice of his past in the heat of the moment, "go' some juice in the drawer. Lemme ge' it."

Avon rolled off him, letting him up, sprawling on the bed to watch the naked man cross the room to the little table. He grinned as Vila turned and hurried back, considerable erection bobbing and weaving in his haste, wiping the smile from his face at the distress on Vila's. "Oh, don't be such a fool. I'm not laughing at you, it's simply that I never expected to be in such a situation and..."

"An' it's yer hell bent sense of humour, is it?"

"Yes—that and your somewhat bizarre speech."

"Wot's wrong with the way I'm speaking?"

"I shall tell you later, now come back here, before you lose the...point, shall we say?"

Vila walked more slowly back to Avon, a wariness tingeing his steps. Mutely, he handed the tube to the Alpha, standing at the bedside, waiting for...something, an invitation, a welcome, a warn-

ing that this would turn out to be another bruise in his life.

"Come here, idiot," Avon murmured, pulling the thief by the hand, leading him under the covers, into the warmth and out of the midnight cold, smoothing the goosepimples down, rubbing arousal back into the tense body. Vila settled himself along Avon, covering him with his weight, watching him by the dim light fading in through the street window. The Alpha lay for a moment, allowing the look, as he had before, but he was far from a patient man, twisting suddenly, pinning Vila beneath him, hard cock surging, hands demanding. Vila spread himself, wrapping his legs around Avon's waist, drawing the flared head of his penis to the bud awaiting pollination. A slick finger probed him, easing muscle, asking tacit permission, a mouth on his blotted out all other thought, narrowing the universe down to himself and Avon, to life and lust and the undeclared love smuggled in under the auspices of necessity.

One man pierced, another welcomed. One man thrust, another yielded. One man pushed down, deeper, another soared upward, performing their own timeless ritual, their own dance of fruition, feeding passion with passion, need with need, striving for that endless instant of perfection, orgasm screaming, semen streaming, life pulsing.

Sated, Avon collapsed on to Vila, whose arms encircled him, the thief unwilling to let go, to give up his delusions and stolen dreams quite yet. Lying still, Avon relaxed into this latest prison, uncomplaining, for the moment, of the chains Vila was busily forging from the tangle of emotion and passion. Sleep stole up and claimed him, dragging Vila with him, adding to the healing, choosing the Delta way to survive grief and fear.

The arm and leg draped protectively over him were warm and limp, heavy with sleep, the lightly furred hair soft against his skin. Avon stretched under the weight, smiling, until memory returned. He rolled onto his back, turning his head so that he could see Vila's face. There were lines there he had never noticed, an encyclopædia of experience waiting to be read. Avon reached a long finger out and chapter by chapter, entry by entry, his hand read the braille of bitterness and loneliness and hard-won laughter. Quiet as a church mouse, Avon rose and padded over to stand by the window, the top blanket wrapped around him to keep out the sunless chill of the low-

est levels that never ceased, area-wide heating to valuable to waste on the drones. He stood deep in thought, part of his mind attuned to the faint snoring coming from the lumpy bed, part noticing that Jak's middle child wasn't running across to pick up fresh bread for breakfast: obviously, the wake had spilled over into the morning, the celebration of life and the living giving way to the mourning of the survivors for those now gone.

Avon held the past few weeks up to the clarity of light and was disgusted by what he saw—all those hours spent in a misshapen grey limbo, scurrying and burrowing, hiding himself away, doing nothing, suffocating in the permeating stench of helplessness. He conceded that, until things changed dramatically, he was trapped in the Delta warren, out of Servalan's sight and more importantly, her grip, but that should simply have spurred him to make the changes, alter the circumstances to suit his needs, not fume and fritter, watching Vila skid lower and lower into the dregs he had so recently been freed of. No, immobilised he might well be, but certainly not helpless. Looking down on the street as first a few sluggish workers, and then more, until a veritable crowd churned their way through the day, he planned. He built scenarios, razed them with efficient ruthlessness, restructured, laid foundations, asked questions until he found the answer he wanted, the one means to turn this debacle into triumph, or at least, revenge—the selfsame thing, in Avon's view.

Clutching the blanket closer, he hastened back to the bed, the cold air finally registering with him. He perched momentarily on the edge of the mattress, until the frigid temperatures drove him under and he gathered Vila into his arms, warming himself inside and out. He said the thief's name, not bothering to whisper, knowing that Vila would never be awakened by so minor a disruption. He said "Vila!" again, shaking him for good measure. A third and a fourth attempt were equally unsuccessful.

"You ought to try the old fashioned way—wake me with kiss."

"You have all the subtlety of Travis in a torture chamber."

"Well, can't blame a man for trying, can you? Any way, it's all your fault, if I get ideas. I mean, I wake up, expecting you to be up and off, but you're not, you're here and cozy and snug and...."

"Oh spare me Vila, you sound like melodramatic viscast."

"Just thought it might be a good idea to do a bit

more convincing, you know, get the dogs off our scent."

"Do you honestly think that now, so soon after yesterday's death and disappearances, that your interminable relatives will be paying the slightest attention to what we do—or do not—practise?"

"Especially now, cos this is when family pulls in closer, to help those that have lost and just to enjoy the ones we still have. Gossips at full speed after the raids, with everyone worrying about everyone else's health and their love-life."

"So they shall be watching, shall they? It would appear that voyeurism is endemic amongst your class."

"Better than the drugs in yours!" Vila snapped back, stung. He started to pull away from Avon, but muscular arms tightened, refusing him. A firm penis pushed against him, mutely suggesting a better way to end the comments.

"Shall we kill two birds with one stone, Vila?" Avon murmured into his ear, breath tingling.

"You mean, fix the way we always end up arguing and be a bit more expedient, for the family?"

"No," was the answer, lips depositing little kisses around the rim of Vila's ear, "I mean, the expediency for your family, and the expediency for us—six weeks is too long to be satisfied with just once."

"Oh, a right little sexpot, are you? Get an extra libido for your birthday, did you?"

"Naturally. The Federation had to do something about *our* dropping population and so...they gave us a slight extra on our chromosome."

"A built in aphrodisiac! You ought to find out how to do that, Avon, you'd make a fortune." He paused to stretch down to squeeze Avon's turgid erection, letting go only long enough to gather his own cock in his hand, to hold them together, head to head, almost millimetre to millimetre, silken skin slipping against warm silken skin. "Then again, do that, and you'd be too busy to ever do this kind of thing, wouldn't you?" Emboldened by Avon's silence, by the mouth still engrossed in kissing his neck, he continued. "I'd rather be poor with you, than have tons of money and be without you. Couldn't ever be rich, if you weren't there."

"You're sounding like a third rate viscast again, Vila."

"So shut me up, why don't you?"

Avon shut him up most effectively, tongue plunging into his mouth, hands cascading over him like a rainstorm, covering Vila, thrusting hard against him,

his straining phallus jabbing, Vila's enthusiasm drowning them both, churning Avon's still waters, bringing the depths to the surface. Avon rubbed them together, glorying in the feel of a man stretched so taut under him.

Vila freed his mouth, gasping for air, voice a hoarse whisper. "Nah, don't want to just come rubbing like that. Want it like last night, want you in me. Want to feel how big you are and how you fill me up. C'mon, mate, the juice is right beside the bed..."

Avon did not hesitate, inflamed, as always, by the image of another filled with his cock, crying his name, helpless and powerless with the ecstasy he was creating in them. One arm snaked out from under the covers, rooting around until he found the tube on the floor, uncapping it with awkward, practised, finesse, bringing it into play, anointing Vila, frowning with attempted control as strong, sure hands stroked warmed gel onto his erection, pulling back his foreskin, a delicate finger tracing liquid fire around the proud flare of the glans, feathering up to tease the slitted head. The same hands, moistened now, slid around to rest on his buttocks, gripping tightly, urging Avon down and in.

From that angle, it was, unfortunately, utterly impossible, so Avon disengaged himself from lusty hands and rolled a willing Vila over on to his stomach. Kneeling between slim, white legs, Avon reached under and fondled Vila's cock, teased his balls, long fingers trailing back up, seeking and finding the small, hungry mouth. He spread Vila's cheeks, exposing him, a lone finger soothing lotion inside, stretching him. Balancing carefully, Avon leaned over Vila, sparing a hand to guide his erection into the waiting warmth. He watched his penis disappear into Vila, ensconced, enveloped, in living flesh. The tightness clasped him and he plunged forward, so that he rested full against the plump backside under him, groin to ass, chest to spine, muscle to muscle. Wrapping his arms around Vila, small hard nipples nuzzling his forearms, he moved his hips in small, controlled circular motions, pressing against the nub of prostrate, his movements rubbing Vila's cock against the bed.

His head was level with Vila's, close enough to kiss, for tongues to measure sinuous dance, for breath to mingle. Vila murmured words of love and commitment into Avon's mouth, and was allowed to, the emotions undenied, the terms of surrender undisputed. Vila groaned, pushing back up against Avon, needing more than the sweet plundering of his body,

encouraging, demanding more, deeper. Avon plunged in and out of him, his balls slapping almost painfully on Vila with every downward thrust, racing frantically towards orgasm, coming with one final, wild push, shoving Vila up on the bed and right over the edge of sensation into the storms of fulfillment.

Calming, Avon lay down on Vila, rubbing his bristled cheek against the sweated shoulder, feeling his heart slow to its normal, pedantic rate, the evidence of lustful indulgence fading, leaving not a mark, but making profound changes.

"You all right?" Vila asked, turning his face towards his mate.

"Well now, surely I deserve praise higher than 'all right', after a performance like that."

Vila laughed quietly, echoing Avon's spoken smile, enjoying this unexpected intimacy almost as much as the sexual. "Wotcher want to hear? Best in the world?"

"In the galaxy, I should say."

Delicately, Vila shoved Avon off, rolling over so that they could lie chest to chest, with their arms enclosing the other in a circle of gladness. "Tell us then," he said, "wot were you laughin' at, yesterday evening?"

"Ah," said Avon, fingers skating a figure of eight around and around Vila's nipples, Vila's concentration skittering along behind. "Why was I laughing at you. You mean apart from the fact that you are eminently laughable?"

"Avon, be nice! If yer not, I'll tell cousin Jak..."

"I'm quaking in my shoes."

"I'll tell 'im that yer game..."

"Well, in that case—it's only that I find it amusing, the way your accent wanders from almost Alpha to definitively Delta, mid-word, at times."

"Wish you'd told me that last night. I mean, there I was, walking around displaying the family jewels, carrying my future before, so to speak, and there you were, laughing. I thought..."

"Now you see the dangers inherent in you thinking. However, when I think..." He flattened his palm on Vila's stomach, watching it rise and fall with every breath the thief took, then looked up suddenly, directly into Vila's eyes. "I come up with a way to free the Delta masses."

"Oh, listen to Mr. Modesty himself here. Look, we've been trying to find a way out of this for generations, but how can we? We're genetically marked, so's the security signals register that a Delta's there.

We're not even allowed up on the Gamma levels and the only way out is the only way Upstairs—crime. Get arrested, get transported—or promoted by the Nostras and then they send you off-world, too. The best we have to offer get siphoned off, helps keep us in our place.”

“My point, precisely. It must be possible to break the Federation’s grip on the lower levels, otherwise they wouldn’t go to the lengths cousin Jak has been telling me about.” He stopped to kiss Vila thoroughly, knowing full well that there was no chance whatsoever of his body being up to it again, but simply enjoying the luxury of closeness, of tactile contact, of human warmth. Vila began to quite happily drift off under the hazy glow of Avon’s touch, but the usually silent voice of his conscience kicked him hard.

“Leave off,” he muttered, regretfully untangling himself from Avon’s embrace. “C’mon, don’t make this any more bloody difficult than it already is. I’ll never get out of here, if you keep this up.”

Letting go, reclining on his side, propped up on his elbow, head resting on his palm, Avon watched with undisguised possessiveness as Vila covered his body from other people’s eyes. “Where are you going that could possibly be more important than staying here with me?” he said, his voice a deliberate, sexy purr.

“Oh, give it up, will you, please? I’ve got kids waiting.”

Avon launched himself up out of the bed, grabbing Vila, hands unrestrainedly roaming. “The children, Vila. Tell me, what do you teach your ‘stable’? Pickpocketing? Burglary? Lockbreaking? And for what?”

“To give them a way to make a living, to get them out of all this, if they’re really lucky. ‘Course, the money they bring in is quite nice, I suppose.”

“And yet, the best they can hope for is that the Nostra will take them and send them off planet, to work where and when they are told, to obey every rule, or be killed. In other words, you do not get rid of the chains, you merely change the slave master.”

Vila bristled, temper rising. Half way through dragging on his trousers, he stopped dead. “Better’n nothing. Would you want Servalan holding your chains, if you had a choice. No, on second thought, don’t answer that.”

Avon pointedly ignored him, continuing as if he were speaking to himself. “But if one were to *teach* them, truly teach them, educate them, show them the worlds that exist out there, the possibilities that are

being denied them, focus that hunger they have for something better....”

Vila looked at him with a mingling of horror and awe, overlain by hope. “You’re going to take over where Blake left off, aren’t you?”

“There’s no need to be insulting—unlike Blake, I am no idiot, to be caught and held incommunicado, beyond our admittedly limited means of even tracing him. No, Blake, as I always said, was an idealistic fool. He never realised that you cannot start a revolution from the top, for the upper echelons are too fat and comfortable. If one wishes to overthrow a government, one must begin at the bottom, with the people who have nothing left to lose.”

“They’ve still got their skins to lose, Avon. D’you think no one thought about having a nice little revolution before? Been tried and the minute there’s the slightest bit of bovver, in come the mutoids, kill off a generation or so and then off they go, back Upstairs, ready for the next massacre.”

Avon came over to stand directly in front of Vila, the old brown cover wrapped around him again, continuing to speak as Vila finished dressing. “And if the doors were sealed from within? And the mutoids didn’t have enough time to break through before the Upstairs systems began failing?”

With profound suspicion, Vila stared at him, apparently looking for that extra head. “How the hell will the upstairs system fall apart?”

“For just a moment, Vila, think with the organ between your ears, instead of the one between your legs. Deltas are manipulated by both the Federation and the Terra Nostra into maintaining a quite remarkable level of ignorance.”

“We’re not stupid, I’ll have you know, we can...”

“I am well aware of that. You were perfectly capable of running the sensors, once I had shown you how. And that is what I’m going to use, the untapped potential of every single person living in this sty. Think about it, Vila: the Alphas enjoy the benefits, working only for individual profit, using and developing the highest levels of technology and are the only ones with real computer skills. The Betas know how to press buttons, regulating the basic necessities of dome life, one step down. In their turn, the Gammas run the mercantile and service systems, which is the next lower level of sophistication. And then come the Deltas, who do the physical maintenance of the actual machinery that runs the Dome. Each level, Vila, is incapable of functioning in the next Class, having neither

exposure nor access to the others. Therefore, the System is safe, protected from within by the ignorance of those who serve it.”

“And you’re saying...”

“Break the system. Teach these children of yours how to read, teach them other technologies, not simply the ones their fathers’ have passed on from generation to generation, without comprehension, merely parroting back a mantra.”

“What good’s that going to do, ’cept to make them dissatisfied and downright bloody....rebellious. Oh, that’s clever, that is, Avon. That’s very clever. And you’ve got the education and the information to do it.”

“That’s right. I’m the one factor neither Servalan nor her predecessors ever expected: an élite in the Delta level, the one grade who has access to *all* data, both applied and theoretical. Imagine, for a moment, what will happen if the Deltas stop the machinery — we will have the entire Dome on its knees in minutes, for what can they do, without light, power, plumbing, food....”

“Air circulation, computers, viscasts....”

“Everything, Vila, is controlled down here, not Upstairs as everyone has always believed. That is simply another Control Central, to camouflage the true situation. All the decisions are made by the Alphas, all the ‘intellectual’ work is carried out Upstairs, but none of what they do is possible without the Deltas.”

“Yeh, I mean, if some fancy Alpha is sitting in his office and decides to do a research project on something, if it wasn’t for us, his bloody computer would just sit and stare at him, ’stead of working, wouldn’t it. His doors wouldn’t open, the communications wouldn’t work....”

“Absolute chaos. Train and organise the people down here, arm them, and we could do what Blake, for all his good intentions, never could.”

“Defeat the Federation.” A look of wonder filled his eyes, then a grin broke over his face. “If I do my fair share, will I get to be Planetary Governor?”

“If you do your fair share, I shall probably fall over in a dead faint from the shock.” He leaned in for another kiss, holding Vila close, hands massaging the aching, over-worked muscles of his back. “So are you with me?”

“Bloody stupid question to ask, innit?”

Avon actually laughed out loud, exulted and exonerated by his decisions, exhilarated by his plans. “Not necessarily, Vila. You may be with me in the

bedroom, but that is a far cry from the very real dangers of fomenting revolution.”

“What d’you think I’ve been doing, bringing you here in the first place, coming back and showing people what I’ve learned, eh? Stirring things up—accidentally, mind you, but that’s what happened.”

“Ironic, isn’t it? The true Resistance fighters are imprisoned Upstairs...”

“We hope.”

“And so the two thieves are the ones who will lead the final Rebellion, the one that will actually do what it is supposed to. Unlike Blake, who tried to free ‘everyone’, but only ever helped the Alphas and off-Earthers, who have freedoms beyond what the Dome-dwellers can even begin to imagine, and the middle grades who are quite contented to stay amidst their tranquilised dreams, *we* shall have an uprising for those who need it most.”

“Don’t mean to sound ungrateful, or anything, but what are you doing this for?”

Avon looked pointedly around the room, the best squalor money could buy. “If I must be trapped, then the cage shall, at the very least, be gilded.”

“An’ have you thought of one minor detail, in amongst all this revolutionary fervour? Thought about how to keep this all secret, cos the Federation probably wouldn’t find out in time, but the Nostras know every bloody thing that goes on down here.”

“Then why haven’t they found me? Oh, yes, they *suspect* my presence, but they cannot prove it and they cannot risk damaging your family. After all, although the Nostras can claim many members down here, they can still only function fully through the intermediaries, which means...you.”

“Me!” Vila squeaked with convincing innocence. Fortunately, Avon knew him better than that.

“Yes, you. You are quite a celebrity here in the Bowels, very popular and your skills and fame have made you quite powerful. In other words, you are a fairly large fish in a very small pond. Of course, being old Granda’s favourite does help...”

“Yeh, well, don’t look so pleased with yourself. I’ll never get his place, don’t have a good enough head for business, and that’s what this all comes down to, don’t it?”

“Yes, the business of crime and the business of revolution. I will provide the knowledge you will need, and you will provide me with the power *I* need. And one more thing, also.”

It took Vila a moment before he answered—despite being late for his ‘stable’, the group of children

he was training into a crime ring—for Avon’s mouth on his and Avon’s hands on his bum were far too distracting to be cast aside for mere responsibilities. “Keep on doing things like that and I’d give you my old grandma, for nothing.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, shall I? No, what I want is far less...perverse than that. I want you to teach me how to speak and behave like a Delta. I want you to teach me how to walk like a Delta, mannerisms, slang, everything. I want to be able to pass for one of you.”

“What would you want to do a thing like that for? I mean, I thought we were going to show our lot how to be Alphas, so what...”

“No, we are going to teach your ‘lot’ how to fight, how to sabotage, how to run the upper levels when we get there. I need you to help me pass as one of your ‘lot’, so that they will listen to me, so that I can have them do what I want them to.”

“Oh, so that’s what it’s all about, is it? Mega-blood-lomania, eh?”

Avon grinned, pulling Vila tight in against the tautness in his groin. “Oh, there is that. And revenge, Vila, repaying Servalan for everything she has ever done to me. Perhaps even revenge for the deaths of the others, if she has had them quietly killed. If not for that, then certainly to set them free. But most of all...”

“The injustice of all this, of people having to live like this and...” Vila trailed off, under the insistence of Avon’s caresses and the look of offended incredulity the Alpha was loosing on him with such unrestrained vigour.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Vila. I’m referring to the slight matter of the *Liberator* and Orac. They are *mine*, not hers and I will have them back.”

“And Blake be damned, eh?”

“Blake was damned a long time ago, without any help from me, the day he picked up his martyrdom to carry in his pocket.”

“You worry about him, too, don’t you?”

“Don’t be such an idiot.”

“Yeh, I mean, next I’ll be saying you’re worried about Cally and Jenna as well, and that’s completely absurd. Got nothing to do with the way you wake up in a cold sweat, shaking, calling for Cally, has it?” He took Avon’s hands in his, stroking the backs of them with his thumbs. “D’you often hear her calling you?”

Avon drew him a dirty look and turned away, withdrawing his body and his warmth, cutting Vila out as if there had never been intimacy between them,

turning his glowing sensuality off with the flick of an emotional switch. “You had better be on your way,” he said calmly, “your artful dodgers will be getting into all sorts of unimaginable mischief whilst they wait for you.”

“Avon, listen, I’m not trying to be pushy, or anything, but after last night, well, it’s dead bloody obvious it’s more than just sex for me, innit? So if you ever want someone with you when you hear Cally, or if you want someone to scream and yell at...”

“Remember what you have just said, next time you whine at me for arguing with you. Now, the first thing I shall need you to do, is give me your ‘stable’ for two hours every day and start the tribe to gathering the parts we shall need to begin the resistance preparations, and...”

“But Avon!”

“But nothing, idiot. That...”

“Raid!” the cry ricocheted amongst the incestuously close flats, “Raid!” Feet pounded, voices rose, entire families disappeared into the woodwork with the practised skill of cockroaches. Avon and Vila headed for their group’s bolthole, herding Jak’s brood before them, helping old, ever more infirm, granda.

In the interminable cycle of poverty and fear, the scenario repeated itself like a bilious nightmare, time and again, weaving its way into the daily fibre of Avon’s life, insidiously colouring his life with its tedious greyness, until the warning of ‘raid’ became little more than a routine inconvenience. Yet again, Avon found himself in a small, cramped and dark space, people pressing in on all sides. Seven months had bred a casual contempt in him, relegating the risks to somewhere far down on his lists of priorities, and his mind was far from his own situation as he fiddled with an analogue board in the pocket of his brown tunic. He felt a small jolt against his stomach and looked down at cousin Jess, not entirely certain quite how he felt about the strangely powerful sensation of life kicking against his belly, pressed as he was to the enormity of Jess’ pregnancy. He leaned down closer to catch her whisper.

“Where’s our Vila, eh? Don’t ‘e ‘ave enough sense any more ter come in when them mutoids is out an’ about?” she hissed.

“E ‘ad ter see ter the stable, ter get them on in safe. ‘E’ll be fine, yer know our Vila.”

Measured, marching footsteps thumped closer, echoing in the corridor, filling what little free space was left in the safe room. Jess didn’t answer Avon,



simply looked at him in mute disbelief, flinching as the sound of screams impaled them, going on and on. He wrapped his arms around Jess, suddenly thirsty to feel that life again, to feel that intractable surge of the future and of hope. Tiny, recognisable feet pushed on him, making him ache with worry, cursing himself for sentimental weakness, thinking of Vila and the thief's unfulfilled yearning for a family. Thinking of Vila, somewhere, with a gaggle of urchins, mutoids systematically stripping the level, ripping people away to fill the demands of the cosmetic surgeons Upstairs. He could imagine, with futile clarity, the fear that

would surely be etched on the thief's face as he struggled to keep his 'kids' safe and he could imagine how he himself looked, standing here, clutching Jess, concern about his mate writ large upon his face.

"The way of it," he whispered under his breath, trying on the Delta fatalism for size, finding it did not fit him at all. Seven months of it, seven full months of the hunting and the haunting, the tension and the strife, the vivacity and the pleasure. The heavy tread of mutoids came closer, the sound increasing, the threat approaching, as always, as ever. The only difference, this time, was Vila's absence from his side...