

OBLAQUEST

A *BLAKE'S 7*
ADULT FANZINE

ISSUE NUMBER THREE 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

Oblaque. Pronounced OhBláke! and deriving from the combination of “/” (called an oblique mark in Britain) and *Blake’s 7*.

Oblaquest. The third issue in the series.

Welcome readers to *Oblaquest*. We hope this issue meets with your approval and interest. And if it doesn’t, then may it at least generate a definite opinion. We at GBH Productions look upon the *Oblaque* series as a forum for strong writing, an outlet for hard, slightly over-the-edge slash fiction that deals with emotional and psychological themes. An indifferent reaction to our work means we’ve failed.

Not that we want to limit ourselves to only those sorts of stories; indeed we haven’t. In *Oblaquest* you will find adventure stories (which are also slash), love stories (there is always a place for some soppy romance), PWP’s (“Plot? What plot?” also known as gratuitous sex), humorous vignettes, plus the usual dark, emotion-wrenching pieces that make you sit back and say, “Now *that’s* what good slash writing is all about.”

What won’t you find in *Oblaquest*? Two stories that were promised for this issue. The Southern Contingent wasn’t happy with the third part of the Sisterhood Trilogy and the Glaswegian needs more time to rewrite Shakespeare. Look for both in *Oblaque IV*.

And speaking of *IV*, it’s already in the planning stages. We like to think ahead and try to write stories for specific themes or sections. The results aren’t always what we expect—they certainly weren’t for *III*—but we do try.

All the usual suspects need to be thanked: the Southern Contingent, the Glaswegian, our Macintoshes (we’ve got three now), and, of course, LDM.

—Caroline K. Carbis, Editor

Standard Spelling Disclaimer

The editor no longer makes any effort to standardize spelling. She will accept the proper spelling of a word (American—although the Glaswegian disputes this), British (because English characters obviously would only say dialogue with British spellings of words), and, with some reluctance, variant Scots-English. If something looks peculiar to you and is not due to editorial incompetence, then it probably is the Glaswegian’s own particular perversion. She claims spelling is optional!

Standard Vocabulary Disclaimer

We highly approve of authenticity in dialogue. English characters should avoid pronouncing blatant Americanisms. However, there are times when *certain* people let *certain* Scottish regionalisms creep into both description *and* dialogue. Editors can be tolerant and allow ‘coorie’ to stand as is, but the line must be drawn somewhere and ‘oxter’ is where it is at. For once in her life, the Southern Contingent can smile sweetly and truthfully say, “Don’t blame me, I didn’t write it.”

I THEN GOD CREATED AVON...

Ah, yes...Avon. The stories in this section consider how our favourite character might change and why. And does he truly change? The first two tales are part of a trilogy of three examining the possible consequences of Orbit. It's a chilling view without a happy ending, but for those who insist on an optimistic finish, M. Fae Glasgow was blackmailed into writing a third story. You can find it in the sappy, romantic section of this issue. Leigh Graham's work is set several years after GP and the title truly says it all. The final selection began as a humourous piece and changed direction midway through. Some writers just can't make up their minds.

REORBIT: THE DARKNESS DROPS M. Fae Glasgow

TURNING AND TURNING IN THE WIDENING GYRE
THE FALCON CANNOT HEAR THE FALCONER;
THINGS FALL APART; THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD;
MERE ANARCHY IS LOOSED UPON THE WORLD,

HE WAS UNRAVELLING, COMING UNDONE, THE DETAILS OF HIS PERSONALITY TENDRILING OFF INTO THE VOID AND NO MATTER HOW FRANTICALLY HE STRETCHED OUT AFTER THEM, HE COULDN'T REACH THEM, COULDN'T RECAPTURE THEM, SIMPLY COULD NOT REEL HIMSELF BACK IN. Even his vision was distorted, the world edged with black, the light gone from his sight, turned into texture to be felt by his fingertips like a blind man learning to recognise his own face. There had been a moment, a brief, piercingly fragile moment, when he had felt his brittle shell hold, keeping him safe and complete within, but then, that too, was riven, Vila's anguished face exploding on his mind, the knowledge of what he had almost done causing his own undoing. Another man, his *friend*, crouched huddled and cowering in the casket of the storage bin, tears streaking his face, fear and hurt and disillusion turning him the pasty white of the newly dead. And it was Avon's fault, the unforgivable almost becoming reality in his hands, blackening his soul, the abhorrent almost done, in the voice and by the hands of a lover.

His fault.

The guilt of years pressed in upon him, hundreds upon thousands upon millions of things, myriad tiny

events, a crushing wall of sand, suffocating him, driving him in and in upon himself, helpless as the outline of his very being was lost, unwinding, unknitting, the stitches dissolving, the warp and weft of what made him a man spiralling off out of his reach, and all he could do was watch, the impotence of breakdown straightjacketing him into a facsimile of lifelessness.

Under the bright, bright lights of the *Scorpio*, every facet of him exposed, he stared as the final dismal fragment of his self-containment flowed off upon the current of his sanity, leaving him alone, shackled in the incoherent and incohesive dungeon of his mind.

And all the while, Vila watched.

THE BLOOD-DIMMED TIDE IS LOOSED, AND EVERYWHERE
THE CEREMONY OF INNOCENCE IS DROWNED;
THE BEST LACK ALL CONVICTION, WHILE THE WORST
ARE FULL OF PASSIONATE INTENSITY.

He had, of course, a bottle in his hand, and from whence it came, no-one knew. The *Scorpio* had none, so the only possibility had been filching it from Egrorian's base. Wherever he had 'liberated' it from, Vila was well on the way to drinking it to the dregs. He staggered gently, almost dancing rather than falling, subsiding into one of the flight couches. He lay there, eyes hard and bitter, staring at Avon, who seemed to be staring at the inside of his own mind.

"Always safe with you, eh? An' what did you

mean by that, I ask you? Dead bloody certain it wasn't what I meant, right?"

"Vila..." Dayna started, warningly, looking at Vila with annoyance and Avon with concern.

"Oh, don't 'Vila' me, my pretty thing. The worm, as they say, has turned. *He* finally drove me to it, didn't you, Avon. An' it wasn't the trying to kill me that did it, no, I expect survival at any cost from him, always have done. It was the way he tried." He stumbled to his feet, face worn and serious, coming to lean against the front of Avon's console. "Why'd you do that, Avon?"

Avon stirred himself from the nightmare behind his eyes. "Do what?"

Vila's face clenched with anger, but still he tried, uncaring of the setting, caring only for the answer. "Why'd you do it like that, talking to me like we were in bed, eh? Why'd you have to go and use your bedroom voice?" he begged, his hurt drowning out the shock the others felt at the revelation.

Avon stared at him blankly, too lost to really follow a conversation, his silence rejecting Vila, flailing him with his callous indifference. "Oh, is that it? The stupid bleedin' Delta doesn't deserve an answer." Tarrant came up beside him, taking him by the arm, trying to ease him aside until this unexplained cauldron was at only a simmer.

"Gerroff me! I'm tired of being shoved around by you lot, little kids pushing me around just cos I'm a Delta and you lot aren't. We aren't in the Domes now, are we? No, Avon, we're not. And I'm tired, d'you hear me, *tired*. I've had it up to here with you and your silences and your nasty little comments. I'm supposed to put up with all that, amn't I, because you make it up to me at night. Is that it? Buying my co-operation, my submission, with your body? Poor bloody bargain for me, if it is. Well, you listen to me, Mr High-and-Bloody-Mighty Alpha, we're finished. No more sneaking little visits in the night, no more screwing around, no more twisted little games. If you want me, you're going to have to crawl to me, like what you made me do to you. Well? Got nothing to say, have you? Come on, Avon, say something!"

"Shut up, Vila!" Dayna shouted, bringing a flinch to Avon's face. "Can't you see there's something wrong with him?"

"Oh, poor little Avon," Vila sneered, blinded by disillusion and betrayal. "It's always him, innit? *He* tries to kill *me*, and he's the one who gets all the sympathy. Disgusting. Absolutely bloody disgusting."

Before he could go on, Tarrant grabbed him in an

irrecusable grip, dragging him off to the sleep cubicles. "Get in there, Vila, and sleep it off. Don't come back out until you're sober and fit to be with. And get off Avon's back. I don't know what you did to him on that shuttle, but you've obviously just sent him over the edge. I hope," he snarled, displaying real fury and unexpected concern for Avon, "that you're satisfied, because if he doesn't pull himself out of this, I'm going to kill you. Always supposing I can get to you before Dayna, that is."

Vila curled himself up in a miserable foetal ball, the same hunched horror he had been in on the shuttle, another death sentence passed on him. He lay there, nursing his empty bottle, all the years of bitterness and pain and humiliation bubbling up like black sludge over the cheerful edges of his better nature. There was too much, this time, to bury down where it belonged, too much, this time, to forgive. He contemplated his revenge, knowing full well that Avon, despite his ominous blankness, was too strong to ever allow it, consoling himself with the closest he could ever come to regaining his own self-esteem. Before, that is, he managed to persuade the others to take him somewhere, anywhere far from Xenon and set him free. If he stayed, he would lose himself, he would turn into the pathetic little Delta he played.

Avon sat as still as a memorial to the dead, unblinking, almost unbreathing. None of the attempts the three on the flight deck had made had even come close to giving him a lifeline to follow out of the mire, this circular maze of madness and guilt. He struggled silently within, seeking a light or a rope, or even ground to stand on. There was nothing. Only his own blackness. Only his own wrongs.

"...stupid little fool was saying?"

"Some rubbish about Avon trying to kill him."

Ah, Avon thought, Dayna. Talking about Vila. And what I did. The chill shuddered through him, the voice of his father coming back unexpectedly, the quiet tones of utter contempt still with strength enough to choke. *'your fault, Kerr. Your fault, it's always your fault. You're so stupid, so clumsy, you just make me too angry. It's your own fault I have to hit you. And you deserve nothing better than being locked in the wardrobe at night, because of what you did today. You know better than to cry.'*

"...but Tarrant..."

Blessed coolness, that meant it was Soolin.

"...if—and I do say *if*—Vila is telling the truth, then surely we have to do something about it, if only for

our own survival. If Avon's reached the point where he's trying to kill Vila..."

It's my fault. I did it. I did, I tried to kill Vila.

"...is true, then he and Avon are lovers, and yet look at what he says Avon tried to do. It just doesn't make any sense."

Oh, but it does. Always make the one who loves suffer. That's life, that's how it supposed to be. *I'm only doing this because I love you, Kerr. Now Kerr, don't look at me like that. Mummy loves you, you know I do. That's why I'm sending you away to school. You make Daddy so angry all of the time, always getting into trouble, well, he's told me that I have to send you to school or he won't be able to stay here. Why? I don't know, darling. Perhaps because you look too much like your first daddy. What can I do, darling? If you would only listen to him, remember your place. Just say 'sorry' sometimes. But you won't, so now all I can do is send you to school. Oh, stop snivelling, Kerr. It's your own fault. You could have been like your brother, obedient and respectful, but you chose not to be. Now, do be quiet before you make Daddy angry with you. And you know how much that hurts me, because I love you so much.*

"...doesn't matter. What are we going to do, that's what I want to know."

Do? What can I do? There's no way out of here...

Time passed, crawling slowly as they hurtled back to Xenon. There was almost no sound on the flight deck, only the occasional murmur needed to fly the ship safely. Even Orac maintained a sensible silence, refusing to offer any help when the others had demanded it.

They off loaded the ship, Avon moving with stately morbidity to his own room without their assistance, a fact they took as encouraging. Vila waited until they had all gone, leaving him forgotten and alone, as usual, before venturing from one prison to the next.

In the quiet of night, Avon walked slowly, very carefully, along the base corridors until he reached Orac. He slipped the key into the casing.

Avon?

"Close enough."

Well?

"Well what?"

What is it you need to know?

"I know what is wrong with me, I can see it happening. What I need to know is how to halt the process, how to find a way out of this tangled mess."

Find a way to expiate your guilt, of course. It is standard psychiatric procedure.

"And how does one expiate a lifetime's guilt, Orac?"

I don't know. Now, kindly leave me to the research you so urgently asked me to do.

Avon turned away, the key lying abandoned in the lock. There were no answers for him here, and so he simply left, not thinking about where he would go. His feet took him along the path they usually followed on his nocturnal wanderings. Vila.

The door opened, and Vila stepped into sight as soon as he realised it wasn't Tarrant. "What do you want? I suppose you expect to..." his words drifted into muteness, draped with the heavy blackness Avon carried around him. The hurt and fear in Vila twisted his guts, breaking the fineness of his spirit, the years of abuse and uncaring visited upon him debasing him. All the ill Avon had ever done him, whether the smallness of not listening or the mountainous attempt at slaughter, imploded in concert, deflating him into a petty, desiccated man, all his goodness shrivelled into the drive for revenge, for something that would be balm for his wounds. And if the revenge failed in that, it would at least embalm him, and he would still be free of Avon and the pain that came from those gifted hands. A change came over Vila's face, a change no less extreme than that transforming Avon. They stared at each other, each watching with a numb horror as their accepted natures passed between them in liquid alteration, leaving Vila dried hard with the putrescence of pain and Avon vulnerable with the pounding of guilt in his brain.

Look at his face. Avon thought. So like mine. Another mirror for me, but this one breathing, living. Able to deal to me what I lack the courage to do to myself. Oh, if I had half the honour I should, or half the courage... It would be over, then. I would have paid my penance and yet have found a way to stay my hand. I'd be set loose from this helpless cruelty. Look at him! See the pain? Was it truly so obvious on me, or do I recognise it simply as my own? What do you know about guilt. Typical bloody Blake, to hit the very core and not even see it. Instinct. Such an inexact science, for lack of a better word. He had such good instincts, he was simply profoundly deaf and utterly blind. But my own instinct, for once, was right. My death and his were linked. The good in me started dying the day Terminal happened. Guilt. Always the guilt... *Why did you do it, Kerr? You were my big brother, and yet you ran off to your great fancy school, leaving me alone with that bastard who fathered me. You left me, Kerr, to him. How could you do that to a little boy, just so that you could go off to public school? If I thought you cared at all, I'd tell you what he did to me, but you must have*

known. You were the only protection I had, and you knew it. You abandoned me, Kerr. You betrayed me. You promised me you'd always take care of me, that I'd always be safe with you. Well, you left and I can't take any more of what he does to me. You were all right. All he ever did to you was hit you. I can't survive alone any more. I can't survive him any more. At least you left your migraine opiates behind. Sixteen of them. I'll only need eight, so there's some left for you. If you ever had the courage to use them. So good-bye, 'big brother', I hope this letter finds you in better fucking health than I'll be in. Only fourteen. Only fourteen, when life is such chaos, suffering seems eternal and hope is something the 'grown-ups' try to palm you off with. So young. My little fair-haired brother. What would you do if you could, to me? What would you make me pay for my betrayal of you?

The ghosts still lingered, but now they hovered silently behind his eyes, pleading for forgiveness in the words that would never pass Avon's lips. That angered Vila, compounding the damage and the bitterness. The powerless impotence of the years fed on him and he glowered at Avon, the sickening part of him gloating that his tormentor was now the tormented.

"Look at you," he sneered. "Unshaven, hair a bloody mess, clothes like you've slept in them. Where'd your sartorial elegance go, eh? 'D you chuck that out the airlock when you couldn't find me?"

"Vila..."

"You're contemptible, you know that? You tried to do me in, and you won't even say you're sorry. And you are, aren't you? Answer me, Avon!" Momentarily, the anger gave way to the sorrow. "You are sorry, aren't you, Avon? You didn't really want to kill me..."

"What other choice did I have, Vila?" Avon asked in an echo of his own voice.

"What other choice? You could have chucked bloody Orac out, but no, *he* matters more to you than I do. You think a machine is more bloody important than me. What other choice? You could've landed that shuttle and we could have sat it out until *Scorpio* came for us. And if we hadn't survived the crash, then at least we'd've gone together, instead of you stalking me, like it was one of our games."

Avon crossed the room to him, reaching out to help and be helped in the only way he had. Vila stared at him in utter disbelief as Avon lowered his head the fraction it took to kiss Vila on the lips, moving gently, softly, trying to ease the twist inside both of them.

"You *bastard!*" Vila screamed at him, shoving him

off with the violence born of years of insignificance in the eyes of those who mattered. "Is that all it is to you? A bit of a hiccup that you can screw your way out of, the way you usually do? Not bloody likely!"

"For god's sake, Vila!" Avon yelled, voice breaking in what Vila heard as anger, not hearing the anguish lurking in the shadows of Avon's mind.

"Gerroff me!" Vila shouted, punching Avon's hand away. "Leave me alone, you great bully. You expect me to love you, after what you did? You expect me to want you? Not a snowball's, Avon, not a bloody snowball's."

Avon came at him again, mind a confused tangle of hurt and debasement, the need for comfort and punishment knitting together to form a cable of confusion, leaving him atremble.

Coiling and snaking through him with insidious malice, the heady surge of power and control mastered, Vila lashed out, hitting Avon for everything anyone had ever done to him. He punched Avon, kicked at him until he had him on the ground, then landed on him, slapping and pummeling and hurting as much as he could, cauterising years of humiliation. "Why don't you defend yourself, eh, coward? Why don't you fight back, you snivelling idiot?" he snarled, repeating the words he had heard repeated too many times. "Not man enough to fight me, eh?" The pliancy of Avon's body limp under his went straight to his head, the giddiness of it filling all his empty, aching places. "Yeh, that's it. Not man enough. Oh, you were too good to ever do anything much more than let me service you, but now look at you." He got to his feet, toeing Avon with the tip of his shoe. Avon didn't move, nor did he resist, simply lay there, a litany of names marching their dirge through his mind. "At my feet, now."

Slowly, asea in the madness of power, Vila bent down and grabbed Avon by his tunic front, dragging him to his feet and then flinging him backwards to land asprawl the bed. "You're mine, now, Kerr Bloody Avon. I'm the strong one, *now*. And d'you know why? Cos I don't love you, not any more, not after what you done. I don't need you, Avon. D'you hear me? *I don't need you*. And that's what gives me the upper hand. And d'you know what I'm going to do with that hand? I'm going to make you suffer and crawl the way you've been making me suffer and crawl these months. You've made me the unhappiest I've ever been in my entire life, and that's pretty pathetic, Avon. And now you're going to say sorry..." Staring down at the unspeaking man, he felt himself grow,

felt his spine straighten out from its habitual defensive slouch. He felt his manhood grow with this dominating power flowing into him.

“Strip.”

Avon looked at him, questioningly.

“You heard me. Strip.”

There was an oddly satisfied smile on Avon’s face, the look of the martyr at the stake, his lack of sanity filling him with a beatific serenity as he faced his just desserts. He rose slowly and dropped his clothes, item by item to the floor.

Vila undid his trouser fly, reaching in past his underwear, pulling his cock free. “First you’re going to suck me, and then I’m going to fuck you, Kerr bloody Avon, just the way you’ve been doing with me. On your knees and suck. *Now, Avon.*”

Still with that smile, Avon obeyed, straining to take Vila completely into his mouth. He stretched muscles unfamiliar with the act, keeping lips carefully covered, as Vila had always done with him. He took the turgid penis into his mouth, trying not to gag, trying to use his tongue as he had insisted Vila did. Hands tangled in his hair, pulling him close, too close, until he could barely breathe. An involuntary motion of his hands, a futile pushing away gesture, was ignored, as the body in his mouth demanded more.

Vila swayed back a little, taking his penis from Avon, using the hardness of his flesh to swat at Avon’s unshaven cheek, the faint, fragile remnant of his good conscience punishing himself for his paltry vengeance. “Like that, do you?” he muttered, dragging his cock along Avon’s cheek, the stubble stinging against the head. The sandpaper scored him, the abrasiveness matching the sour taste in his mind. “Well,” he said, voice taking on a different cadence, bringing back a night better forgotten, “you’re not very good at it, are you, idiot? I’ll just have to find some other use for you...” The bitter words lingered, like the memory of Avon’s destructive grief over Cally, and of the vindictiveness of his mourning. “Bend over.”

For a moment, Avon paled, struggling with himself, but the maze was too dark for him to find a pathway. He turned, still on his bended knees, and leaned across the bed, offering his blood sacrifice, as he had taken his burnt offering from Vila a year before. As the pain split him, he smiled.

His own face grimacing with the pain of entry, Vila lay on Avon’s back, held snug and tight by the body under him. He could feel his erection begin to shrivel, as the realisation of what he was doing be-

gan to rise in him. And then Avon moved, a sinuous curl of his hips and Vila was lost, the hate rising faster than the compassion, curdling the love in his throat. “I hate you,” he said, meaning it. “Hate’s the other side of love, so they say. Well, Avon, you just tossed a coin and this time, it was the hate that came up.” He drew back, then slammed into him, his cock dragging dry and sore through the ring of muscle. “D’you hear me?” he screamed, body pumping fast and truly furious into Avon. “Bloody Tarrant knows about that little spare Orac you built—just in case—but not me. Not me, no you don’t tell me your secrets anymore. I was right, wasn’t I, when I said it was more than just fucking to you. Even in front of all the others, you didn’t even hide it. That’s why they were so surprised on the flight deck, wasn’t it? It was because they thought you were finished with me, wasn’t it? Thought you had taken up with the fly-boy, didn’t they? After nine years, Avon. *Nine* years, and what do I get? Tossed aside half the time so that you can go off for some fresh meat. *I HATE YOU!*”

“No more than I do myself.”

And that was when Vila discovered that he didn’t quite entirely hate Avon after all. Within the painfully tight band of muscle, he shrivelled, pulling himself free and staring in horrified self-loathing at the blood colouring him. “Avon?” he whispered, confused and fuddled beyond sense.

“Yes?”

“Avon, what have I done to you?”

“Paid me back, I believe.” At least a little, he thought, when words became too tiring and actually speaking to another human became too difficult. At least let me pay off a little of my debt to you. Was I really so cold to you, Vila, when I would play our little games? They surely could not have seemed like games to you, kneeling there, without a word of comfort or affection. So this is how it feels to be betrayed by a lover’s voice and at a lover’s hand...

“...sorry, I’m sorry, didn’t mean to hurt you, just went a bit mad, you hurt me so much, oh god I’m sorry...”

That’s not right, is it? Surely I am the one who should apologise? After all, the guilt is mine, the blame is mine, the blood is on my hands. Why should you be sorry, Vila? I’m hardly worth the pain...

So very empty inside...so very dark... so very cold... and the ice is warm and it welcomes me... I think I shall rest, here, in the empty silence...

THE DARKNESS DROPS AGAIN...

REORBIT: STONY SLEEP

M. Fae Glasgow

THE DARKNESS DROPS AGAIN; BUT NOW I KNOW
THAT TWENTY CENTURIES OF STONY SLEEP
WERE VEXED TO NIGHTMARE BY A ROCKING CRADLE...

NAUSEATING SMELLS TRICKLED THROUGH TO HIM, TURNING HIS STOMACH AND ALMOST DRIVING HIM BACK INTO THE SWEET EMBRACE OF MADNESS. The light dancing so far ahead of him in the distance began to lose its siren lure under the onslaught of the malodourousness of his own body wastes, but then, there were hands on him, hands he remembered, perhaps, if he remembered anything at all, if this weren't simply a new dream to soften the horror. There was another sound. A door, opening, a voice, an answer.

"No, no, it's fine. New here, aren't you? I'm Vila. I'm a...I was a friend of Avon here, and, well, I owe him. And it's not as if I've never done this kind of thing before, you know. Used to do a bit of orderly duty at the prison hospital, way back when."

"Yes, but it's my job to take care of him, and..."

A light voice. A woman—no, younger, little more than a girl. Like Dayna...

His mind shied away then, diving back into the protective warm darkness, his body staying behind, limp and unfeeling and unmoving. Unbeknownst of the shell lying in the high, white bed, the bruises had healed by now, the implant discovered and removed, but no surgeon could bring back a mind that had declared unilateral independence from reality. But people could...

Where is my darkness? This isn't it, and yet I hear Blake. Who is dead. Ah. That would explain it. Perhaps I have my reward. Perhaps I have died. But if Blake is here, then there is no reward for me, only punishment...

A fragment of him fought the self-flagellation, recoiling from it, struggling not to drown under it. And then the voices again...

Soolin? No, not cool enough. Too much open warmth, like the campfire on Terminal. Dayna, then. And yes, Blake. Who is dead. And Vila. Who is not. So which, then, am I?

"...should just leave us alone for a few minutes. We've known each other quite a while, Vila and I, so..."

"So he can make you feel sorry for him! Look, Blake, I don't know you and I don't owe you any loyalty and I'm not going to leave Avon alone with

that little viper again!"

"He'll hardly be alone, girl! I am here and I won't leave until you come back. Now, leave us be, Dayna. I want to talk to Vila."

So protective of me, so like Cally. Perhaps, if I can hear Blake, I can find her. But wait. No, Blake isn't dead. I had Orac search for him, 'line through in infinity'. The bastard's alive. The bastard's been alive the entire time I was keeping my word to him, while he reneged on his.

"...be back in half an hour or so, you mark my words. Can't say as I blame her, mind you. I wouldn't leave me alone with Avon either."

"But you've been here with him every night. Oh, don't look so surprised, Vila. The staff here are under orders to report every detail to me, every change, every treatment. And every visitor. Vila...it's obvious from what everyone has said that you...did something to Avon, something that pushed him over the edge. What was it you did, hmm?"

Nothing I hadn't ever done to him. And if the doctors are reporting his visitors to you, then they will have surely reported the prurient little details they discovered when they must have examined me. Why add to his suffering by making him confess? Why are you so angry, Blake? All Vila touched was the physical. You, bastard that you are, touched my soul.

"...know why. Couldn't help meself..."

Oh, do stop grovelling, Vila. He's not worth it. And you know how red and blotchy you get when you snivel. But not, perhaps, as well as I know it...

"...worse than an animal, to do a thing like that! There is no excuse, Vila, for what you did..."

No? Well, then, there is no justification for what I have done to him. I did to his spirit, Blake, what you did to mine. Rape seems far too pleasant a word.

"...have to leave, don't you think I know that?" Vila's voice was almost a scream, a viscid blend of hurt and recrimination and humiliation and fear.

Why so afraid, old friend? Being free of all of us should surely fill you with relief. Ah, but no. As you have said so often, you have nowhere else to go. Who would keep you safe, if not them?

"...ridiculous. Two wrongs can never make a right and it would be wrong to throw you out. You'd probably walk right into a Federation patrol the second you left here."

Such a bitter silence, Vila. Are you beginning to see that side of him which I was 'privileged' enough to see before? That side which made me hate him as much as I... Even within the balming embalmment of his madness, Avon couldn't bring the word out. In the days of the ancients, names were the stuff of great power. Now, in this day of casual oppression, love was the word of power, the one thing that could destroy a man as easily as a wind tears a cloud to shreds.

"...known better. Never a second's concern for me, no, just worry what I might let on about when they start torturing me."

"Vila! That's not what I meant and you know it."

Ah, but I don't know it and I think that is precisely what you meant.

"...believe that? Not even I'm that much of a fool."

"What happened, Vila? No, I don't mean that night. I mean to you."

A voice warm enough to melt even the ice in me.

"...and years, never being good enough, it was always, 'Delta, get out the way' and then later, it was 'Vila, open this', 'Vila, fetch that'. I'm a *man*, Blake, just as much as you are. And just as vulnerable as he was. 'Cept I didn't go all the way over the edge. I came back, but I don't know if he will."

Tears, Vila? Surely not. Not when there is so much hate in you for me.

"...hated him sometimes, but most of the time I just loved him, couldn't help it."

The sound of someone walking around the bed, of a hand brushing fabric. "Oh, I can understand that, Vila. He was an easy man to hate, but an easier man to love."

"Was? Wotcher mean, was? Still alive, in't he?"

Really?

"Yes, but...now that they have removed the neural implant..."

Neural implant? What the hell is he talking about? Servalan! And it had to be on Terminal...

"...and the doctors say that by the time the course of psychiatric treatments are finished, he'll be rid of all the scars of his childhood and the guilt the neural implant augmented. Don't look so glum, Vila. As they say, he'll be a new man."

Over my dead body! I won't let them turn me into the semolina pudding that passes for society these days.

"...new man. I want the old one. The one I first met."

"And even if he were to go back to that, Vila, how long would it be before he changed again?"

"But if you let them change him, fiddle around

with his brain and memories and stuff, then there won't be any of *him* left."

"Don't be absurd, Vila. It'll still be Avon, but simply the man Avon would have been, had he had a decent life."

"But you can't take a man's troubles away from him—they're what make him who he is!"

That's right, Vila, fight for me. I can't seem to be able to get my mouth to do my bidding...

"But look at what he had become, man. A bitter, cynical husk of a man, unhappy and making everyone around him just as unhappy."

"You know, we've been so busy asking what the hell happened to me, we've forgotten to ask what on earth happened to you."

"Oh, most of it wasn't on Earth, Vila."

"Oh, don't come the martyr with me, Blake. None of us have exactly had it easy, so how come you get to be such a bastard while I get to have lectures and psychiatric treatments, eh? I don't need any big-mouthed doctor telling me what I did and why I did it. I already know that. What I need to know is how I can get Avon to forgive me and give me another chance."

"Vila, listen to me. It is for your own good that the psychiatrists are putting you through the treatment. Yes, yes, I know it's difficult and emotionally painful, but..."

"But what bloody good does reliving all the rubbish do me? Blake, I don't need them to tell me that what I did to Avon was triggered by how he he'd been treating me and mixed up with what's been happening to me since I was twelve. I know it comes from the foster camps. And so did Avon. Just like I knew what he was doing was coming from his dad."

"His father?"

Such greed, even greedier than Servalan. You would devour me whole, wouldn't you, in your impertinent search for the key to me. You'd do anything, including set the psychiatrists loose on me. And all because of the one night you gave in to your curiosity and my attraction. Or was it my attractiveness? Love and hate, a homophobe and a bi. What a lethal combination...

"No, and you can just stop asking. I'm not telling you nor the bloody head doctors a thing about Avon. If he wants them to know, he'll tell them himself. If they give him more choice than they've given me."

"The treatments are *necessary*, Vila. If you are to be a part of my organisation, I need to be sure of you."

"And two years of running around, risking my life at your beck and call isn't enough? Another two

years after that, with Avon, trying to keep his promise to you, while you sit nice and safe and snug on your little planet, laughing at us?”

“Hell’s bells, man, I have not been laughing at you! I was...”

“Sitting there on your fat bum, letting Avon take all the risks, letting Avon go over the edge, an’ driving me there, too. Have you listened to yourself recently, Blake? Or d’you have nothing but the likes of old porridge face—what’s ’is name, Deva—around to keep you on the straight and narrow? Cos if that’s the best you’ve got around you, then small wonder you’ve turned into what you have.”

So the worm really has turned. Don’t you realise, fool, that you are risking your position of safety here with every ill-considered word you utter? Oh, he may not choose an airlock, but he will throw you out just the same.

“...to me. I have the weight of the entire Rebellion on my shoulders, Vila. It is up to *me* to see the Federation destroyed, so don’t stand there criticising because I’m not the hero you convinced yourself I was. And you are hardly one to stand in judgment, are you now?”

Oh, vicious, Blake, vicious. I could almost hear that blow strike. Vila, don’t start crying. Don’t you see that that is precisely what he wants you to do? To make you weak again, to make you cowed and obedient.

“...sorry. It was just as bad as him trying to kill me, but I was off my head, I was so scared and hurt and...and...”

The voice, now, was muffled, and was accompanied by the sounds of comfort, hands stroking and soft words murmuring.

You bastard! You unmitigated bastard! Don’t you dare do that to him. He’s not strong enough, he can’t possibly cope with your little ploys, when you dangle affection and comfort with one hand whilst using the other to hold him. At a distance, but hold him, nonetheless. Leave him be, Blake. Leave him be.

“...penance balances the wrong. And he will forgive you, Vila. I’m quite sure of that.”

Then you are surer than I. Knowing why he did it, I’m afraid, does not alter the way I feel about it...

“...he does, won’t help none. He’ll still be the same.”

“No he won’t, Vila, and that’s the beauty of it. He will finally be the man he was born to be.”

Such a cold silence, Vila. What, I wonder, are you thinking? Always supposing, that is, that you CAN think.

“Do you realise what you sound like, Blake? You sound like a puppeteer.”

He actually did hear the blow strike that time, cracking across Vila’s face, knocking him heavily to the floor.

Doing to him what you never quite dared do to me? But there were words he wanted to hear, words leading him forward into the light, and so he began gathering the tendrils of his will and knitting them.

“...do that for? Gerroff! Get your big paws away from me, I don’t want your help. Get away!”

“All right, all right,” the voice, soothing and calming, and not at all apologetic.

A sudden sharpness in Vila’s tone. “You’re not sorry, are you? Just worried you might have screwed this up. God, you must need me for something, is that it? Got some lock you need opening? Or am I supposed to teach a whole gaggle of thieves for you? Star One. Star bloody One all over again. You know,” dawning wonder and horror, “I’ve been sitting here, worried about Avon, worried about him going insane and I never once saw it did I?”

You always were slow, idiot. Yes, you are seeing now what I suspected at Star One...

“...not Avon. You. You’re the one who’s stark staring mad. Since bloody Control, too.”

“Don’t be absurd, Vila. As you can see, I’m quite, quite sane. And I simply want to help...”

Help? You? Don’t make me laugh.

“Help? You? Don’t make me laugh...”

Well done, Vila. Quite the efficient little mouthpiece...

“...all you want is for me to open locks and Avon to provide you with his genius and his gadgets.”

And my broken spirit at his feet. Psychiatrists indeed. Not when you know, from my own lips, how I react to the psychiatric care drugs...

“...simply not true. Avon is important to me...”

And if you believe that, you’ll believe anything.

“I may be stupid, but I’m not *that* stupid, Blake. If Avon was important to you, you’d be sitting here with him at night and talking to him, not just palming him off on some faceless bloody doctors. Especially when you know as well as I do how much he’s afraid of the bloody butchers.”

“What the hell do you want me to do, Vila? Moon around like you, playing the bereaved widow?”

Black widow spider, perhaps. The first faint glimmerings of humour began their healing, weaving the disparate strands together, forming the foundation for his protective shield. *Or even better, Blake widow spider. You never could forgive me for that night, could you? Not even the excuse of drunkenness was enough for you. Small wonder you thought I would run, at Hori-*

zon. The memory of it slowly unravelled all his stitches again, dissolving him from the here and now into the then. And the memory... *Of your hands on me. It certainly wasn't just your damned Cause you were passionate about, was it Blake? And you were too provincial, too much the Dome-bred Alpha to free yourself the way you claimed you were going to free the masses. Our own prejudices are far harder jailers than any Federation could ever be...*

There was silence, the silence wherein lies the moment of truth, the seed growing and feeding on the stillness.

"You fancy him, don't you? Friggin' hell, that's the problem. And you're so bloody narrow-minded and insecure that you can't cope with that. So now you've got him where the doctors can have him and make him into what you need him to be. No more bisexual Avon, no more worries for you, right?"

"Vila, don't you dare say a thing like that about me! I'm not attracted to Avon and..."

"No? Well, how come you're more worried that I might think you're like him and me than you are that I'm saying you'd have someone's mind altered to suit you, eh?"

You have been listening, haven't you? Perhaps all those arguments weren't fruitless after all.

He lay on the bed, white blankets up to his chin, face impassive, but mind avidly devouring every detail: the words, the tones, the voices, the smells of the room and the distant clatter of the base. This was interesting, interesting enough to draw him out of the womb...

"I have no intentions whatsoever of having Avon's mind altered, you idiot! The man needs psychiatric care. Which, if I remember correctly, is why you brought him to me in the first place."

"I didn't bring him. The kids and Orac brought him to you. I didn't even bother arguing, I mean, what was the point? He needed help and they wouldn't listen to me, not to the man what did this to him. 'Cept, none of them know you, Blake, none of them know how you were with Avon, dangling and leading him like that. Apart from that one night, of course."

Avon could hear that blow land as well, hear the air hiss from Blake as the shock of Vila's words stunned him.

"You little bastard. How the hell did you know? He promised he wouldn't say anything..."

"And he didn't. But I've got eyes, I can tell. He didn't have to say anything. I saw you going into his

cabin, heard the shouting and all, so I disappeared off, let the two of you sort it out. And when I came back, you were gone, but the smell of you wasn't."

And you never said a word, did you? Just crept in beside me and held me, as if nothing had happened. But then, it was obvious that you knew something had gone on, else, why hold me like that? Oh, my little fool...

"Nothing happened, Vila. I had had a few drinks, we argued, we settled it, we had a drink to seal it, I went back to my room. That's all, nothing more."

Keep it up, Vila, you've got him running now. Don't give in. I don't want them to wipe me...

"Rubbish. I know that smell, smelled it often enough, so don't give me that. And I saw Avon, saw what you done to him. He was bruised, did you realise that? Oh, not from abuse, but from how strong you are. And how strong you reacted to him. Bet that scared the crap out of you, eh? Never reacted like that before, did you? Not with women, anyway, I'll bet."

You snide little bugger. Just don't stop. It's about time Blake heard all this. And it's rather nice to know that you care. That...what you did, was a moment's madness, no more.

"...perfectly normal. **NOTHING HAPPENED!**"
Hush, Blake, before you deafen us. And no one believes a word you say, anyway.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much. Oh, goin' to hit me again, are you? Really manly, that."

Another silence. Another moment of truth. A voice of defeat.

"I don't know how it happened. I've never been drawn to men before."

"How would you know? They wiped you—remember?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I also remember what they accused me of."

"What's that got to do with Avon? He's no child. He is a bit childish sometimes, mind you, but..."

"I couldn't prove them right! I couldn't be a pervert, because then what they said about the children could have been true!"

"What a load of codswallop! Having it off with a bloke's got bugger all to do with kids. I've liked men all my life, so's Avon, and we've neither one of us touched a child. Ever."

"And what about Tarrant?"

"Tarrant's rotten, but he's not that rotten."

"No, I don't mean that. I mean Tarrant, and Avon."

Below the belt, Blake. That is unfair, to cast that in his face. When I have recovered, I shall have to deal with

you...if I recover. If your damnable treatments don't damage me...He sounds so very tired. Poor Vila. This is too much like work, isn't it?

"Avon... You've got to understand something about Avon. He needs people, all the time, but on his own terms. There's not many what can put up with that, so that means he gets let down all the time. So, he wanders. Picks them up, puts them back down again when it starts getting sticky. I'm not even going to talk to you about Avon and Tarrant. If they want you to know anything, they can tell you themselves."

"He already has."

"You're a right bastard, aren't you. You've got him trusting you, haven't you, just the way you got me and even our Avon."

Oh, no, I never trusted him. No matter how tempted I was, I could see enough of him to never fully trust. Of us, Vila, you have always been the fool. After all, you loved me, didn't you...

"Avon never trusted me, Vila. And that is one of the reasons why I'm so keen to have the psychiatrists help him."

"What he won't give freely you'll have him brainwashed into? Oh, real saint material, you are."

"Vila, will you listen!"

You sound just like the old Blake. And perhaps you are. Perhaps now it is simply that the veneer of normalcy has finally been rent, and we can see the madness that the mindwipe left in you. It happens to everyone, why should you have been any different? But that is the extent of your danger to us...to me. You could convince us of anything, with that gilded tongue of yours.

"...explained till I'm blue in the face, I'm not going to let them mind alter Avon!"

No, you're going to order it. Don't try that with me, Blake. I am far better than you at lying by telling the truth.

"No? Then how come you've got them drugs dripping into his arm, eh?"

"Sedatives, Vila, nothing more."

"Yeah, right. Why am I even arguing with you? You won't listen, any more than you listened at Star One. I thought you had changed, but the problem is that you haven't, not one bit. And..."

"All right, Blake. Time's up. Come on, the doctors want to see Avon, so you have to clear out."

"Dayna..."

"Don't even speak to me, you disgusting little worm. Just get out!"

Dayna, Dayna, will you never grow up? He did something terrible, yes, but I have done worse. I have killed,

without regret. Sometimes, without need. Yet you will forgive me that, but not him. Rape, my dear, is something from which I can recover, death, I'm afraid, is rather more permanent.

When he came back to himself, the room was quiet again, only the ticking and whirring of the medical equipment to interest him. He slid Lethe-ward once more, but death no longer held its attraction for him. In the dim recesses of his mind, he found himself, reweaving the fabric of his mind.

It was the hands on him that re-awakened him; the hands and the whispered words.

"...them pump you full of this stuff. God knows what it'll do to you, nasty concoctions. Here, let me disconnect you. I think it'll be a good four or six hours before you're back with us again, so I'll go and get some stuff together. When I'm ready, I'll come back for you. I'm getting you out of here, Avon. I'm not going to let them fiddle with your head any more than they already have. Although it has to be an improvement, don't it? Don't know where we'll go, but anywhere'd be better than here. Well, for you, anyway. I can always disappear, but Blake won't let you do that. No, he wants to make a new man of you. Told him I'd settle for the old one, but he's not about to listen to me, is he? I'll find us somewhere to hide, till you get better. Be difficult though, mind you, but that's all right. I owe you, Avon, for what I did."

Lips brushed his forehead, touched his closed eyelids and pressed lightly against his mouth. "Be back in a bit, Avon. Don't go anywhere without me, now!" A last gentle kiss, to belie the pain disguised as a joke, then the whisper of footsteps and the gentle click of the door. Avon lay still, as immobile as he had been since Xenon, but his mind was awake, and functioning. And rarer still, his conscience was alive too.

So, he's going to come back for me, even though he must know that Blake will come after us like a bat out of hell. Stupid fool, stupid sentimental fool. All that risk, for what? So that I can mistreat him yet again? So that I can watch the hurt in his eyes again? Wonderful. I can hardly wait. Doesn't he realise that with him there, I will not change? I will have him as my whipping boy, as always, and he shall pay for my guilts and failures, as always. Oh, now there's a word that hurts. Failures. I failed. Many times, many, many times...Anna. Blake. Vila. Not all of it my fault, but still... Not my fault. No, it wasn't, not with Blake. And with Anna? I shan't even think about my Anna, not quite yet. Vila? It will only be my fault if I harm him again... Out, out, damned spot, indeed. It is time for me to wash my hands clean of other peoples' blood...

The hours passed slowly, each one spinning on and on with interminable reluctance, until he could feel the drugs leave his system, taking the near paralysis with them. *How clever of Blake, to incapacitate me under the guise of continuing catatonia, so that he could finally mould me in his image and free himself of this constant nagging guilt. And get a mealy-mouthed bowl of mush to say 'yes' constantly. Oh very clever, very clever indeed. If you can't live with your conscience, then simply...destroy it.*

Eventually, he was able to rise, to gather clothes

from the wardrobe and Orac from the table. He glanced around the room he had seen so briefly and bade it farewell without a moment's regret.

In the dead hours of the morning, with Orac playing maestro on the computers and scanners, Avon left the base, 'borrowing' a small ship, taking his freedom with him and leaving Vila his.

When he found out, Vila quietly, and with great dignity, ran as far and as fast as he could. It was over a year before he crawled out of his bottle...

FLOW GENTLY, SWEET AFTON

Leigh Graham

“DADDY, I’M SICK.” Brown eyes slowly opened to behold the tiny face of an angel. The angel plastered her best pout on her ruby lips and raised the blankets to climb under with her father. Tiny, hard shoes scraped against his pulled up knees as she nestled, safe, in his arms. Her soft, wavy brown hair tickled the man’s chin as its fine threads caught in his two day growth. It had become his practice not to shave on weekends...much to his wife’s chagrin.

Tenderly, a large hand rested on the child’s forehead. “You aren’t sick, Michelle, you simply don’t want to go to school.”

The little girl pressed closer, “I want to stay home with you, Daddy.”

“You can’t, I’m afraid. Daddy has to get up and go to work, just like Chelle has to go to school. You go to *learn* things, Daddy goes to *earn* things.”

“Michelle!” A young, yet definitely masculine voice called from the other room. A boy, tall beyond his years appeared in the doorway. “Chelle,” he sighed, seeing father and daughter curled up together. “Come on, girl, we’re going to be late. Mummy says she’ll transport us if you’ll get moving.”

“Daddy?” The little girl sat up looking for sympathy from her father.

A quick smile crossed his lips, but he shook his head, “To school, Michelle, to school. Go on now.” And to make his point Karl Afton got up too.

“Karl, I’ll be working late,” the pretty redhead said as she packed up things in her work bag. “So remember, make the children go to bed at a reasonable hour and,” she pointed to the vide on the kitchen counter, “there’s a message for you from a co-worker. At least, I think that’s what he said he was.”

Jenen Afton took her daughter by the hand and headed out the door. Karl saw his son’s lunch and grabbed it, running to catch up.

“Wait!” He handed the plastic container to his eldest, then turned to face his wife. “Listen, I thought we were supposed to go to dinner tonight. I cleared my calendar for it.”

The woman turned her icy blue eyes on him, the intensity of them burning a hole through him, reminding him of their argument of the previous night. “These things happen, darling,” she snapped, “I’m terribly sorry.”

He could see she wasn’t.

“Anyway, the middle of the street is neither the time nor the place to discuss any of this.” She glanced nervously about at the ruffled blinds in several of the lower flats. Karl forced himself to calm down. His head had begun to throb and all he could concentrate on now was getting back inside and taking a pill to get rid of the pain before it made him nauseous.

“Very well, later on then.” He sighed and turned back for the suburban townhouse. Jenen stood for an instant longer, watching her husband with a clinical eye, frowning when he stumbled slightly. His fingers dug into the right side of his head trying to hold off the pain as he entered their residence.

Even during the minute it required for the pill to give him relief, the pain inside his head was still working itself up to an explosive crescendo. Karl dropped down onto the sofa, lower lip clenched between his teeth, barely holding back a scream. But with absolute predictability, the agony began to subside and the man rested his head on the back of the couch, catching his breath, waiting for the pain to completely dissipate. Releasing a heavy sigh, he got up and went for a hot shower and a shave, trying to focus his mind on the day’s upcoming events.

Thirty minutes later, Karl finished tugging his tunic on over his wet head. As usual, he was running late and so once again he’d have to tolerate unruly hair. He grabbed his black leather jacket from the hall cupboard and was just slipping it on when the flashing red light on the vide reminded him he had a message. He punched the tape rewind then started it. A face appeared on the screen.

Karl Afton, my name is Blake...Roj Blake. I doubt very much whether you remember me, not after they were finished with you, anyway.

Karl’s eyes widened. The face seemed vaguely familiar. A rush of hope flowed through him: here was someone who knew him before his transport accident. Jenen and the doctors had told him he’d been in a coma for three months and that his injuries had been extensive, as was obvious from the numerous scars on his face and body. They’d also warned him he would have frequent headaches, usually associated with stress, and there would be nightmares,

vivid, horrifying nightmares which would intermix the coma stimulated hallucinations with his true past, but that Jenen could help him decipher the fact from the fantasy.

Because of his work, shortly after he'd been released from hospital, they'd moved to an entirely different Dome, which was Jenen's excuse as to why none of their friends from before the accident came to visit. He had never quite been able to believe her, fearing that it was more that he simply wasn't important enough to any of them. Now, here was someone who knew him, someone who'd taken the time to look him up. Quickly, he rewound the tape again when he realised he hadn't been listening.

...but regardless, I would like to meet with you and talk to you. If you're at all interested, come to a restaurant called the Thieves' Den on Wilmingshire. I shall be there at one, and then I'll wait thirty minutes. If you don't turn up, I'll simply assume that you'd rather not see me. The man paused, a grave sadness entering his eyes. I do hope that you'll show up. I have missed you, you know.

The tape ended, but Karl just stood there, staring at the blank screen, images and faces flashing in and out of his consciousness. Something about this man made him afraid and yet he knew he couldn't stay away. He had always known there was some aspect of his life Jenen had never really told him about and this man knew what it was. His soul shivered in anticipation.

Karl made his way through the winding streets. What made him even more curious about this person from his past, was that this obviously Alpha male had chosen a restaurant in a predominantly Delta section of the city. He felt both comfortable and uncomfortable in the unusual surroundings and it was these mixed emotions which spurred him on.

"I'm looking for Roj Blake," he said to the young woman who met him at the entry of the *Thieves' Den*. She nodded curtly and motioned for him to follow. Instead of taking him to a table in the dining area, she led him down a narrow corridor, then down below to the subbasement, to a dimly lit room. It took a few minutes for his eyes to adjust, but as they did, he could make out a shadowy figure approaching.

"Blake? Is it you?"

The figure halted abruptly. "Yes, Avon, it's me, Blake."

The deep brown eyes blinked twice. He stared blankly at the other man as invading images blurred indistinctly and disturbingly in his mind. The pain

in his head began its habitual dull ache. Karl cleared the frown from his face and smiled, "My name's Afton, Blake, and I thought I was the only one who had memory problems."

"Yes, of course. *Afton*." Blake stepped closer, grasping the offered hand in greeting. "Memory problems?"

"Oh my, yes, I thought you knew about the accident. That's why I've been out of touch with all my old friends. I couldn't remember any of them, you see, what with my bad head injury and the accident and all. That's why I have all these scars." Karl fingered the marks marring his right cheek, "But I'm fine now. By the way, I hope you don't mind if I ask you a lot of questions, because you see, I'm most awfully curious about my past. I mean, my wife has filled in as much as she possibly could, but there's always so much that goes on in a man's life that his wife doesn't know anything about, of course, and please, why don't you tell me about yourself and what you've been up to since last I saw you? I'm sure you can understand why I'm so terribly curious, why..." Karl smiled again, seeing the taller man's brow furrow. "Oh, I am sorry. I do tend to babble on at times. If I begin to ramble just say something. I won't take offense, honestly, I..."

Blake held up his hand to curb Afton's incessant chatter. "Perhaps we should eat. Won't you be missed in an hour or so?"

"Actually, no, I won't. I'm afraid I did what my little girl tried this morning. I called in sick, told them I had a migraine which really wasn't a lie earlier, but the pills took care of it. I really wanted to be able to spend time talking to you."

Blake nodded and led the way to lunch.

"Tell me about yourself, Afton," Blake said as he sat down to a beautifully laid out meal. He paused. "After your accident, I mean."

"Well," Afton began slowly, disappointment colouring his face fleetingly. He had so hoped to find out more about his past. Perhaps later, this friend from before would be enough at ease to answer his questions. So very many people had shied away from him after 'The Accident'. "Apparently I had a transport accident eight... in fact, almost nine years ago. Got myself bashed up pretty badly, especially my head." Again he frowned, unconsciously reaching up and touching his right temple. "That's why I'm forgetful sometimes, which is quite a bother to my wife, and why I'm prone to migraines now...and night-

mares." The dark eyes seemed to unfocus for a moment as he stared at his lunch companion, then as if pulling himself from some alluring dream, he shook himself and smiled. The only sign that something was disturbing him was the mild tremor in his hand when he reached for his glass of wine. "I really shouldn't have this, you know, but I do like the taste of it from time to time." He nodded his approval as he tasted it. "A very good year, Blake, but your palate wouldn't appreciate it, I'm sure."

Stricken, Afton frowned and set his glass down. "I'm terribly sorry. I don't know why I said that. It was so rude. Please, forgive me, I...I do that sometimes. Since the accident."

"Oh, I don't think there's anything to forgive, Avon," Blake smiled and sipped at his own glass of burgundy.

Afton glanced at him, but decided to let it slide. "Now where was I? Oh yes, I now work in computer research, on some minor projects only, I'm afraid, nothing very important and I have a wife and two children, Michelle and Del. My wife, Jenen, works for the government."

"In what capacity?" Blake demanded.

"I'm sorry—what was that?" Afton looked up, confused by the sudden change in Blake's tone of voice.

"Your wife, in what capacity does she work for the government?"

"Oh, um, public relations, I believe."

"You don't know for certain?"

Once more, Afton frowned and stared into space, the tone of his voice deepening, "There are so many variables, I'm uncertain. I don't like mysteries, do I?"

Blake smiled, seeing a fragment of memory returning. "No, you never did like mysteries. Fortunately, you always were very good at solving problems."

The dark eyes cleared and locked with his companion's. "Oh I was, was I?"

"Oh, yes, *Avon*, indeed you were."

Suddenly perplexed, Afton glanced away, then forced his eyes back up to meet Blake's, shaking off the unnerving feeling of a new personality gnawing inside his mind. They sat in silence for several minutes, both searching the other's face for clues to the men they had been in the past. Afton was the first to break out of his self induced trance, stammering, "um, well, where were we?"

"Your children."

"Oh, yes, the children. My youngest, Michelle, is five and a half."

"She's your favourite, is she?"

Afton smiled and nodded. "I'm afraid so. Del's the eldest, he's eight. He's a bit dark and moody, but he's a sweet boy, for all that. He's quick to learn, with quite a sharp tongue, I'm sorry to say. I just wish I knew where he'd got it from!"

At this the rebel bent his head and smiled. A saying about reaping what you sow came immediately to mind.

"And you Blake, what do you do?"

The large man heaved a sigh. "Well, you could say I'm also in public relations, of a sort, but not exactly for the government."

"Oh?" Afton took another bite of his food. "For a large company?"

"No, rather a small one, but we are growing."

More small talk followed, mainly Afton's and Blake was content to sit back and let him, enjoying this opportunity to watch Avon's face after so very long. Much of what he was hearing was disturbing, but he held his peace, allowing the other man free rein with the conversation. Afton had so little control over his own life now, that given this audience, he was using it to its fullest and was enjoying himself immensely. Blake understood this so well, patiently listening uncritically to the years of bottled up socialness. The hours passed very quickly, frittered away on the past.

"Avon," Blake said softly, trying to break into the other man's monologue. "*Afton*." He had to speak forcefully to get the other's attention. "It's getting late. You really will be missed." He stood and Afton followed. "I'll have someone escort you back to the tubes."

At the door, Afton turned back to him. "Will I have the chance to see you again, Blake?"

"Certainly, should you want to. I'll be in touch in a day or so. There's rather a lot about your past that you should know and some of it..." Blake hesitated, "in fact, most of it, won't be easy for you to hear, I'm afraid. You may not want to believe me, but unfortunately, it's all true."

Afton looked down at his shoes, thinking. When he did look up, there was another echo in his eyes of something familiar. "I'm not quite sure why, but I feel as though I should say that you've always trusted me. Haven't you, Blake?"

A warm smile suffused Blake's face. "Oh, yes, Avon, I always have," he purred, voice deep and rich.

"You shouldn't have, you know." Afton smiled, but the smile died in sudden fearful hope as Blake

stepped forward to run his hand boldly up the side of Avon's neck, fingers sliding seductively into fine, straight hair, thumb caressing an earlobe.

"Oh, but Avon, I always had good reason to." Before the moment was lost, Blake bent down and kissed the stunned man, tongue delving deeply, seeking what had once been his. Afton pulled back, flushed, redfaced, embarrassed by his own extreme reaction of pleasure to this blatantly erotic assault.

"Well, wotcher think 'bout 'im?" The short, balding man got up from his desk in the office of the *Thieves' Den*.

"I'm not quite certain yet."

"Been mindwiped, 'as 'e?"

"Oh, most certainly. After all, it takes one to know one," he said with a bitterness to match the harsh ale.

"Salvageable, is 'e?"

Blake shook his head and took a seat near the door. "I honestly don't know."

Maren Restal sat back down and contemplated all he'd been electronically privy to. "Well, I don't 'ave ter tell yer I'll do wot I can fer the both of yer—fer me younger brother's sake, mind yer. Thought 'ighly of you lot, 'e did, anyways, that's wot 'e said the three or four times I 'eard from 'im. Even went so far as ter say 'e thought of yer—'specially that Avon bloke—as family. An' that means a helluva lot down 'ere."

"I appreciate that. Thank you. You and your contacts have already been invaluable. I'm impressed by how many people we've been able to infiltrate into the system. We're well positioned, should any opportunities arise."

"Yeh, but wot 'bout 'im? We both bleedin' well know yer can't let 'im keep on workin' on this teleport business. Poor sod don't even know wot'll 'appen if 'e gets it right. An' 'e's makin' progress, 'e is, an' yer know wot that means, fer 'im as well as the rest of us. Set the Rebellion back hunners of years, so it will."

"Don't you think I realise that?" Blake hissed, exasperated. "I know, I know it only too well."

"'E's not goin' ter like wot yer've got ter say ter 'im. Probably tell yer exactly where ter get off, 'e will."

"Yes, yes, I know." Blake stood, stretching, rubbing his hands over his face, "Yet all I can do is *try*. If we can't break his conditioning, if I can't get him to cooperate, give us Orac and work on the secret of the teleport for us, then..." his jaw tightened with the strain of his decision, "then it'll be me who does

it. I shall kill Avon." The pain of it forced his eyes closed. "Because I can't let the Federation have him."

The lunch had stretched out longer than he had expected, leaving him no time to think about his own perturbing reactions: his children were waiting. He did as the therapists had taught him, pushing the disturbing end of the meeting to the back of his mind, focussing on and remembering only the positive, and the safe. The sexual energy rechannelled, Afton picked his children up from school, taking them to the park for a romp and then out for dinner. Reluctantly, he ignored their protests and set off home to get homework and baths done. When he had finally tucked them in and fetched the ubiquitous glass of water—which was only an excuse for another kiss or hug—Karl sat up and waited for Jenen, the excitement of what had happened with Blake making him eager to tell her every last detail.

But as the evening progressed and the hour became later and later, the thought of telling Jenen anything faltered. He was no longer thinking about *just* the conversation or just the pleasantness of finding someone from the past, but about the man, the all-encompassing man himself. The words they had spoken no longer mattered; it was Blake's image that permeated his every thought now and his vision revolved around the one thing he could never tell his wife: Blake's kiss, Blake's mouth taking him, Blake devouring him whole.

At three in the morning, while he lay still awake in bed, he heard the door open downstairs and the soft footsteps Jenen used when she was sneaking in. He closed his eyes, feigning sleep. He heard her quickly undress in the dark and felt her slip in beside him. Without a word, stifling all thoughts of Blake, he rolled over and took her in his arms. For a moment, she stiffened, then heaved a long suffering sigh. Suddenly, his hands tightened on her. "You forgot to wash your hair. You still smell like him."

She jerked out of his arms and threw the blankets off. Lights blazed, blinding him. "Are we going to go over this again? I won't have you accusing me of having sex with another man."

Afton sat up on the edge of the bed. He rubbed his hands over his face as his head started to throb again. He had promised himself he wasn't going to fight with her, for the fighting only led to pain and he knew he was becoming heavily addicted to the pain pills, but he couldn't help himself. "Or woman," he continued after a moment, "because you certainly

haven't been with me in the past few months. The last time I had sex with you I felt as if I were raping you."

The pain was already reaching its peak when she slapped him. He tried to raise his hand to protect himself, but her second blow fell hard and sharp, stinging the right side of his face, causing the agony to arc through him like a lightning bolt stabbing the ground. Before she could hit him again, the pain pushed him over the edge and Karl Afton passed out.

Jenen looked down scornfully at the unconscious man on the bed. Hate rose like bile in her throat and it took all of her self control to keep from reaching out and strangling him here and now. She gathered her clothes and headed for the extra bedroom. One last glance told her that the bruises to the side of his face would be noticeable this time and there could be trouble for her. But then she would simply talk her way out of it. Just as she always had in the past.

"I want changes made and I want them made now!" President Servalan abruptly stood up from behind her desk. Her hands slammed down hard on the white marble surface, making her point, viciously, to the nervous, elderly man sitting across from her.

"But, but as I've tried to explain, Madam President, we must handle Kerr Avon gently. If we should alter any part of the illusion, change any detail of the present life we've so carefully constructed for him, the entire thing could come tumbling down like a house of cards. We are finally, Madam, after this length of time, after all this painstaking work, getting results. He's showing us how to build a teleport and he doesn't even know it. As you yourself have said, Madam President, we must keep him unaware."

"But that bitch has hurt him again. Didn't you see the bruises on his face? His limiter will not allow him to strike back at her and I will not allow *her* to strike him any more. I want him capable of defending himself from that sadistic bitch."

"May I suggest talking to his wife."

Servalan sat down in her chair, taking a second to recover the calm she always lost when talking about her former enemy. "Oh, we have, but to no avail."

"Then perhaps you should threaten her with dire consequences."

"Well of course I have, but she's become very bold over the years. She knows it would be almost impossible to replace her and she seems to think that gives her some say in the situation."

"If you wish, I could condition her for you?"

Servalan shook her head. "Unfortunately I picked her myself from the secret service ranks. And one of the reasons was her ability to live undercover. She's been trained to resist conditioning. Which means that we can't tamper with her."

The older man got up and laid his briefcase on her desk. "But Madam," he snivelled, "I really don't understand why you care if she beats him. After all, he is only a criminal and he's useful just for as long as he complies."

"But if she goes too far one day, Dr. Maners, we will have lost everything, the entire project. We have spent a great deal of money for very little progress thus far and I will not lose him. If he can defend himself, and without the limiter I assure you he will," she paused, then smiled sweetly, "Kerr Avon will simply...dissuade her from any farther abuse."

"But that is the problem, Madam, surely. That would allow more of his true personality to surface and we will lose valuable control. Memories will come through unchecked. There is even a chance that with the right prompting he could remember who he really is."

"And who would do that, Doctor?" she said with strained condescension. "You may not have the wit to have noticed, but they are dead, they are *all* dead, every single one of Blake's group is dead. Really, if you weren't such a gifted cybersurgeon, I'd would have got you out of my sight a long time ago. We have absolutely nothing to fear." She glared at him, but the old doctor looked at her skeptically, not convinced by her confidence.

"As you wish, Madam, as you wish. How far do you want me to go?"

"I want him to be able to hit her back...hard, at least twice before the limiter kicks in."

The man sighed and punched in the unlocking code on the case. "You do realise, of course, that if I go that far it will allow other things, emotions such as anger, hate, love and lust to filter through."

Servalan shrugged. "Do you think I care if he gets a lover on the side? As long as he gets to work, on time and undamaged, I don't care what he does."

The doctor nodded and removed two small devices. "I will need to sedate him so that he's only marginally aware of what is happening to him."

Servalan frowned. "Can't you simply render him unconscious?"

The cybersurgeon shook his head. "I'm afraid not. When you insisted that the device not be visible from

the outside, it placed certain inherent restrictions on it. As a result, I have to gauge his reaction visually to certain trigger questions, so that I may judge how much or how little to adjust the limiter. He must be able to speak.”

“Oh, very well.” Quickly, she glanced at the chronometer on her desk. “He should be here any second.”

“I’m ready, Madam.”

As if on cue, the light on the President’s desk flashed. She didn’t ask who had arrived, she simply instructed Afton be brought straight in. Standing, she plastered a dazzling smile on her face, but inwardly, she knew it was only half pretend. She hadn’t seen Avon in two years and couldn’t completely restrain the warmth and respect she’d always felt for the brilliant computer tech.

“Karl Afton. What a pleasure to see you.” Servalan glided around her desk, hand outstretched in greeting.

“Madame President.” Karl smiled weakly, nausea beginning to rise in the pit of his stomach. He knew his fear of President Servalan was unreasonable, but it existed nonetheless.

“What has it been, Karl? Two years since our last talk?” She backed away from him and leaned against the front of her desk, waving him to the chair the doctor had so recently vacated. “How is the job working out for you? I hope you like it, it seemed the least I could do to, shall we say, offer some small recompense for my entourage literally running over you.”

Afton sat down quickly, trembling slightly, eyes locked onto the nervously clenched hands in his lap. “Oh, the job’s absolutely fine, Madam President, and really, it’s more than enough to make up for...” he touched his right temple with the characteristic gesture.

“Karl,” she said softly, “do you know why you’re here?”

Afton’s shoulders hunched forward and he shook his head, never daring to glance up. “If its about me always being late, Madame, I’m sorry but I can’t help it. The transit system just doesn’t run properly and even if it does, the children hold me back, you see, Jenen doesn’t like to get them up and going so usually, in fact, almost always, it’s left up to me.”

Servalan frowned, watching the pathetic, submissive man wring his hands nervously. Even the tone of his voice had changed. He was totally compliant and afraid, like a dog who’d been beaten too many times by his master. He babbled on and on as if some-

thing he might hit on in explanation would placate her. But instead of soothing her, it only made her angry, not at the quivering half man before her, but at his ‘wife’ and at the doctor standing waiting in the corner. What she saw cowering before her only confirmed that she was doing the right thing.

“Karl.” Servalan tried to interrupt, but Afton kept on talking, words rolling inanelly off his tongue. “Karl.” The second time she caught his attention and the verbal barrage ceased immediately. “This is Dr. Maners. You do remember him, don’t you?”

Afton looked up and turned to see the doctor. “Yes...yes, I remember you.” Afton touched his right temple lightly. “You repaired some of the damage—up here—after the accident.”

“Yes, I did. Good. As I told your benefactor, President Servalan, there have been several unfortunate cases rejecting a synapse control like the one we implanted in you to manage your seizures. Now I’m not saying *you* are rejecting, but it does need to be checked.”

Afton glanced nervously back and forth between Servalan and the doctor. He’d never really liked or trusted the man.

“Dr. Maners assures me that the testing is painless, Karl and it can be done here, in my office.”

“Oh, quite easily, yes.” Maners jumped in, not giving his patient time to think. “I’ll just give you a little sedative,” he said, actions rapidly followed his words. Afton could feel the drug beginning to work almost immediately. “With this, you won’t feel anxious, but you’ll be alert enough to answer the few questions I’ll need to ask as we go along.”

The drug fully in his system, Afton’s head dropped back, resting against the high padded back of the chair. Maners nodded and Servalan returned to her seat to observe. Maners preset the second device in his hand and pressed it against Afton’s temple. The man grimaced once slightly, but then his face resumed its calm repose, looking more like the Avon Servalan remembered.

“What is your name?”

“Karl Afton,” came back the whispered, sleepy reply.

Maners cast a quick glance at Servalan before posing the revelatory word association. “Blake.”

There was a slight frown, but then Afton’s face resumed its former serenity.

“What does that mean?” Servalan asked, a small concern flashing through her mind.

“It could mean that he’s remembering...or it could

be as simple as having met someone recently with that same first or last name.”

Servalan nodded, making a mental note to check on this and motioned for the cybersurgeon to go on. “Rebellion.”

No response.

“Vila Restal.” Again there was no change in his visage, but neither interrogator noticed the slight twitch of his foot.

“Have you ever been in prison?”

“No.” Karl answered, his face betraying nothing. The cybersurgeon removed the device and reset it. He looked at the woman in white. “So that he can defend himself, I’m going to allow him to feel anger.”

Servalan laughed. “Why not something equally as potent, doctor, and not nearly so destructive, such as...lust?”

The doctor considered her request for a moment, then readjusted the device. Again, he pressed it to his victim’s right temple. “Ask him anything you wish, Madam.”

“Do you love me, Karl?” she asked, giving herself a momentary fantasy.

Afton’s eyes shot open. They locked with hers, pupils fully dilated, black as midnight. He stood and stretched across her desk. Grabbing the back of her neck, painfully, he pulled her to him and kissed her, his tongue forcing its way between her teeth, lips bruising lips, sucking the breath from her. Then just as suddenly he stopped. She opened her eyes and stared deeply into his, seeing the old flame beginning to spark in them again.

“Love you, Servalan?” Afton growled in a voice more reminiscent of his former self, “What the hell do you think?”

The pain increasing at the nape of her neck forced Servalan back to reality. “Sit down!” she hissed. Afton grimaced and the look of arrogance on his face disappeared. He stumbled back, falling into his chair as he clutched at his head.

“Is that what you want, Madame President?”

Servalan watched the piteous man in front of her. She could see how the limiter was affecting him.

“Well, Doctor, was that lust or anger?”

Maners shook his head. “Difficult to tell, Madam. In this subject, the two have always been so closely linked.”

Rubbing her fingers over her swollen lips, she smiled wickedly, “unleash him a little bit more.”

“But, Madame, I warn you....”

Servalan’s eyes flashed with anger. “You, Doctor, will do as you are told. Now!”

Bowing to her considerable will, Maners did as instructed. “He should be taken home to rest for the remainder of the day.”

“I’ll see to it. And what about his incessant babbling? It has become quite irritating.”

“Oh, that’s not the limiter. To bury the Avon personality we had to allow him to take on someone else’s. It was his choice to be outwardly such a submissive fool. Almost a Delta personality, in fact. But I can’t argue with it. He has very effectively submerging Kerr Avon’s traits. Besides, almost everyone likes him.” Dr. Maners packed his instruments away in his case. “I must recommend that you keep his wife away from him for a week or so.”

“And the children?”

“No.” He sighed, dragging the case from her desk. “She antagonizes him, but he’s particularly close to the children and they calm him. I suggest that you have him come back to work next week. Give him some time off, perhaps provide him with a housekeeper who can stay with the children if he chooses to go to a play or wants to dine out alone. With these changes, he can’t help but notice some differences and he’ll need a chance to readjust before you start picking his brain again.”

“I’ll take your recommendations under consideration, Doctor. Now, I suggest you get back to work. I assume you do have other things to do?”

Outside the President’s office, Dr. Maners glanced back one more time. He’d tried to warn her. He hoped it was enough.

Brown eyes opened slowly. They felt like they’d been washed out with sand. “Daddy’s awake!” A small, high voice cried. “Ingrid! Daddy’s awake. Can we have our tea now?” The little girl bounced off her parents’ bed and ran for the door.

A tall blonde appeared in the doorway, carrying a silver tray topped with a teapot and a heaping plate of steaming scones. She set the tea things down next to the bed.

“My name is Ingrid, Mr. Afton, and I’m to be your housekeeper for the week, compliments of the company. The doctor has prescribed a week off for you. Also, there was a message from your wife. She will be away on business the entire week, perhaps longer.” She smiled prettily, helping him sit up. Afton eyed her warily as his little girl climbed up beside him. Something seemed strangely familiar about this

woman. As it had been with Blake, he felt drawn to her and the fact that she was here, about to serve tea, seemed all wrong. Setting a large tray across his lap she poured him a cup.

“Come along, Del, join us. And tell your father about your day at school.” Ingrid motioned to the tall boy. Reluctantly, Del sat down on the edge of the bed, not looking at the older man. Instead he concentrated on the food, removing the lid of the marmalade container, his eyes lit up. “Dad, it’s strawberry jam. Mum never gives us strawberry jam.” He spread it thickly onto the hot scone.

Ingrid offered a buttered half to Afton, her smile never wavering. He took a bite, somehow not surprised by its perfection.

“Perhaps we should trade your mother in and keep Ingrid,” Afton suggested, taking a sip of tea brewed exactly the way he liked it.

“That sounds fine to me,” Michelle agreed cheerfully, stuffing a dripping scone into her mouth.

“Tell your Dad about school, Del. I’ll be back shortly for the tray.”

Del Afton looked at his father and for the first time he felt as if he were looking at a stranger.

“Well?” his parent demanded.

“Oh, nothing much happened, Dad.”

“Yes, it did,” Michelle piped up, cuddling closer to her father. Del frowned disgustedly at his tattling little sister.

“Well? I’m waiting, Del.”

Del looked away, made nervous by his father’s unusually authoritative tone. “Chelle almost got herself in a lot of trouble today, picking a fight with some of older children. She’s always doing stuff like that and then I have to rescue her.”

“Am not!”

“Are too! You’re always getting into trouble.” He glared at his little sister, sitting so snug and cherished in their father’s arms. “And next time I’m not going to help you, so there!”

Afton grabbed his son by the collar and jerked him forward, spilling the contents of the tray onto the floor.

“Del, I will say this once and once only, so listen, and listen well. Michelle is your sister, your *little* sister. If I’m not there, then it is your responsibility to protect her and get her out of any hot water she manages to find her way into. But no matter what she does, whether you think it’s right or wrong, you will take care of her. Do you understand me?”

Del’s eyes narrowed and his mouth set firmly into

a straight line. There was something different about his father, a new look in his eyes which demanded response. “Yes, father.”

“And as for you, Michelle,” he turned the same look on the little girl, “you have the same responsibility to your brother. Never and I mean *never* put him in the position of having to fight for you because of something stupid. If I ever find out about this sort of behaviour again, I will spank you.”

Michelle had been smiling as Del had the riot act read to him, but it quickly faded under the serious look in her father’s eyes. Her little chin quivered as she nodded her head obediently.

Ingrid appeared at the door and her smile turned to a frown when she saw the destruction. Looking from her to their father, both children hurriedly vacated the room. “Excuse me, sir, I was instructed to tell you your doctor recommended you relax and enjoy yourself this weekend. Dine out, go to a play, whatever and I will be here to take care of the household and the children, so you’ll have nothing to worry about,” she said, beginning to clear up the mess from the carpet.

“How very kind of the good doctor.” He heard the sarcasm in his own voice again and his brow creased as unrelated fragments of memory finally began to form a whole.

“Soolin,” he whispered.

The woman stopped, frozen to the spot. Slowly, she raised her head. Her pale blue eyes locked with dark muddled ones, but she didn’t say a word, afraid of pushing him in the wrong direction. After a moment, Afton blinked, breaking the spell. “I’m sorry,” he apologized, reaching for the bottle of painkillers next to the bed. “I get confused sometimes. It’s from an old accident. I don’t know why I called you that, after all, I know your name is Ingrid. I feel so foolish. Please forgive me. I don’t even know anyone by that name, it just popped into my head. I really am so sorry.”

Ingrid got to her feet. “Why don’t I get you some water so you can take you medicine,” she said, effectively stopping another flow of profuse apology. “Then perhaps you should take another nap. I’ll wake you in a couple of hours.”

Afton fell asleep quickly after the pills took effect. Del and Michelle were safely sequestered in their rooms, so no one saw the lone figure attach a cable to the vide and punch in a series of numbers on a portable keyboard. With a subdued ping, the vide came to life. Blake’s face appeared on the screen.

“Something’s going on Servalan had something readjusted in his brain today and he’s starting to behave more like his old self, but just when the old personality starts to sneak out, this new one reasserts itself.”

“Do you think you’ll have trouble maintaining your cover there?”

Ingrid bit her lip. “I don’t know. He just called me Soolin. If he begins remembering too soon....”

Blake nodded. “I’ll leave him a message to meet me tomorrow. I’ll make my final decision then.”

The vide went black. Carefully, Ingrid removed the clamps and cable, leaving no sign the unit had ever been used for anything so illicit as contacting the leader of the Revolution.

Afton woke again in the middle of the night. He lay quietly in bed, staring at the all too familiar shadows. Light and dark played together creating pictures and faces. They teased and taunted him from the edge of his memory, making sweet promises to reveal themselves, but none were fulfilled.

The silence of the room cocooned him. Voices and words flooded his subconscious, bubbling and rising upward but never quite breaking through the surface to memory. Ingrid’s face floated before him and he thought he recognized her, but not as the woman she said she was. His fingers dug deeply into the mattress as if holding on for his very life, trying to hold onto the rapidly fading face of a much younger woman, who only smiled in irony at the past. The face and the name finally evaporated in the mists. He shook himself, forcing reality to return, resolutely focusing on mundane practicalities to force the dilemmas from his mind. He got up and headed for the kitchen, obeying the cry of his empty stomach.

In the darkness, the red message light flashed like a beacon. He was drawn to it like a moth to flame, but his hand hesitated, fingers poised over the rewind button. Finally, slowly, his hand descended, sealing his fate.

Afton, I would like to meet with you again. I think you’ll be interested in what I have to tell you. Why don’t you meet me today at eleven. Just take the tubes to Central station and I’ll arrange for someone to meet you...someone you used to know. Please, trust me, and I promise you won’t regret it.

The image of Roj Blake faded from the screen, but for uncounted minutes afterwards, Afton remained staring at it, motionless, transfixed. Again, opposing feelings of overwhelming dread and desire warred

within himself, but he knew which would win; the unknown held too much appeal for him to seriously consider resisting the invitation.

That morning, before school, Ingrid didn’t question him when he informed her he’d be gone for a while. Michelle, on the other hand, demanded a hug and a kiss before she smilingly, let him out the door.

Afton stood on the tube platform, eyes searching the crowd for the familiar face Blake had promised, but there were so many people, they seemed to blur one into another. A light tap on the shoulder made him spin around, and his mouth dropped open.

“Do you remember me, Avon?”

The comp tech’s eyes narrowed as he closed his mouth. Slowly he nodded.

“Yes, Blake thought they might have left your memory of me intact, since you believed I was dead.”

Suddenly, Afton threw his arms around the tall woman, clutching her so tightly to his chest neither of them could breathe and then he softly whispered her name, not quite believing she was real.

Yes, I’m real, Avon. He heard the words drift through his mind, settling in the comfortable familiar nooks they once inhabited. “Now,” Cally said, pushing away, but not before depositing a quick kiss on his slightly parted lips. “We must go. We are attracting too much attention.” She turned and motioned for him to follow.

Question upon question crowded his mind. He sensed the answers were all there, but it was like sorting through a maze. Uncharacteristically subdued, he followed Cally through the throng, not even really noticing when they entered a nondescript building, nor did he pay any more attention as to how many levels they descended in an antiquated service elevator. When the door opened, Blake was there. He nodded to Cally and the Auron returned it and then discreetly disappeared along a corridor.

“Come with me,” Blake ordered. He didn’t have to look back to see that Avon was following. He lead the way to a small, cluttered room. The only place to sit was on a bunk and Blake indicated to his visitor that that was where he wanted him. “Stretch out.” Again the tech did as he was told.

“What are you going to do to me?”

The rebel’s face remained impassive, “Something I wish weren’t necessary, but I’m afraid it is. I am going to give you back your past,” Blake said while he carefully attached tiny electrodes to each side of Avon’s head.

“Analyze,” Blake commanded the air. A computer responded almost instantaneously.

+Brain function slightly agitated at present. Note presence of internal limiting device.+

“Any damage?”

+Negative.+

Blake sat on the edge of the bunk, frowning. “You, my friend, have a limiter and I suspect you have been reconditioned into the bargain.”

Afton shook his head, unwilling to deal with that particular truth. “No, your computer’s mistaken, I have a neural device to control seizures.”

“That’s what *they* told you. *They* lied. *They* have told you nothing but lies.”

Afton’s eyes widened and he opened his mouth to protest, but Blake continued before he could. “To begin with, your name is not Afton, but Avon. Kerr Avon.”

“No...no,” Afton started to sit up, only to be pressed back down onto the bunk by Blake’s large hand. “I’m Karl Afton, I must be, this...this Avon person is....”

Blake took a device from his pocket and pointed it at the wall. A hologram appeared. “This man was a friend of yours, Del Tarrant, as was this girl,” a dark skinned beauty appeared, “and this man,” Vila’s sheepishly grinning image appeared. “The Federation killed them...every last one of them. They would have killed you too, but you were far more valuable to them alive.”

“No!” Afton struggled to sit up, but Blake’s hand pressing down on his chest made it impossible for him to get any leverage.

“You were responsible for their deaths, Avon and you may be responsible for many more if we can’t break your conditioning.”

“No! No!” Avon screamed, fighting to get away as pain exploded in his brain. Without warning, like a puppet with its strings cut, he stopped struggling and passed out.

“Maren,” Blake addressed the hidden intercom, “fetch Cally. We have a lot of work to do and very little time.”

Reality replaced dreams. Afton knew he was awake, but he seemed to be floating somewhere warm, wet and completely silent apart from a soft voice. It intruded on him from time to time to ask him questions or to tell him things; some made sense and some didn’t.

“What is your name?”

“Afton...no, Avon. Kerr Avon.”

“Where were you born?”

“Discia Ten.”

Blake looked at Cally in the control booth. “That’s a border world. I thought he was born on Earth.”

“So did I, but then again I think it might have been our own assumption.”

“Yes, well, let’s get on with it.”

There was no way of measuring the passage of time for Avon. He seemed to float forever in his endless salty sea., images and events, both real and imagined drifting in and out of his mind until one particular one stuck. Sirens blared in his ears. He found himself standing somewhere...a control room of some sort. It all seemed such a long time ago, such a very, long time ago, but now it was happening again and with an immediate, eviscerating horror. Red light bathed the carnage, but his eyes looked through and beyond it, unwilling to focus on the stilled bodies of his shipmates, those who had come to mean more to him than he would ever admit. He realised then that he was standing protectively over one body, and curious, he looked down. A tremor of pain started in his gut and spread outward, encompassing his entire being. He stared down at the slightly altered face and in the dead eyes, he saw himself. The certainty of prophetic words uttered so long ago filled his mind: *I always knew our deaths would somehow be connected.* Yes, it was true; as his fingers stroked the weapon in his hand, he knew it was completely true. Blake was to be the death of him. Filled with anger at being so easily duped and with a sense of fatalistic irony, he raised his gun one last time. As the sharp burning of the first shot hit him and he felt the blood start to flow only one thought came to mind. The name of the man responsible for it all:

“*Blake!*”

He didn’t know how many times he screamed. He only vaguely remembered hands grabbing at his thrashing body, ripping wires from him so that in his struggles he wouldn’t become tangled and drown. They pulled him from the chamber, kicking and biting like a wild animal and when his terrified eyes rested on the man from his memory, he lunged at him, his fingers snatching at the man’s clothes as unseen others carried him away.

Cally came to stand quietly at the Blake’s side. “My god, Cally, have I gone too far this time?”

Cally stared after the flailing man being carted down the hall. A small smile crept up on her face

"No. No, I don't think so." She turned and left without a further word of explanation.

Afton awoke and knew he wasn't alone. Blake's large body pressed up against his back, a heavy arm draped protectively over him. He could feel the other man's warm breath on his neck and more; even in sleep, Blake was aroused. Afton moved slightly, cautiously, trying hard not to disturb the big man. Though Blake seemed perfectly at ease with the situation, Afton felt strangely disquieted, his body tense, almost expectant, knowing something his mind couldn't quite remember. He tried to move again, but the arm encircling him became possessive, a living restraint. With a soft, soft sigh he yielded to his imprisonment. His body might be held, but here, in the night, in the semi-dark, his mind could wander, searching, seeking the truth of what he was. Inches from his left ear he heard Blake mumble something as his hand traveled up and came to rest alongside Afton's face, fingers lightly touching his lips. The scent of the man. Blake's scent. A heady, powerful maleness which poured off the hand and the fingertips, flooding his nostrils and his brain, opening and clearing the pathways to that which he could not remember. Vivid, intense images flashed into his mind: Memories of night upon night of exciting, erotic lovemaking in a time when he'd been called Avon; Words whispered in the dark, promises made and never kept. He knew now what drew him to this man.

Afton lay still, barely breathing, as Blake's hands slid sensuously down his body to cup his exposed genitals. He felt the avid response of his body and knew that, for the moment, at least, he was completely unable to fight this. Feelings rushed over him, bringing the echoes of the past to drown him.

He shivered. A voice in the back of his head grew insistent, forcing him to acknowledge the name he feared was his. A tiny tear squeezed out from the corner of his tightly clenched eyelid, a tear of grief and remorse because with this acknowledgment came a harsh legacy: the death of Karl Afton.

Blake's hand began to fondle him and instead of fighting, Avon allowed the intimacy, hungry to recapture some of the good of the past to sweeten the bitter pill of returned memories. He moaned and pushed his hips forward, wanting desperately to lose himself in the joy of it.

Blake gradually awakened, slowly realising what he had been doing in the uninhibitedness of sleep. For a moment, he hesitated, uncertain if he should

try to rekindle their relationship so soon, but Avon took the decision away from him as he reversed course and rubbed his buttocks against Blake's rough cloth trousers. Reassured, Blake gently turned Avon over in his arms and looked deeply into his eyes.

"I don't want to hurt you, Avon," Blake whispered, tenderly kissing the inviting lips.

"Oh, but you must," Avon replied, cryptically, the spoken words finally loosing his long buried personality, his hands pulling and sliding frantically over Blake's body, taking more from Blake, demanding his full attention, not giving him time to think.

Blake responded, unable to contain his enthusiasm at the feel of Avon's hands on him, hands literally tearing away his clothes. He moaned, pulling back to slide the shredded shirt from his shoulders, not wanting to leave, even for an instant, the greedy, succulent lips which had fastened on his. He felt the hands move to his trousers and his pants, undoing them and impatiently urging him out of them. And when he was free of them, finally naked, full arousal on display, the demanding hands rolled him over onto his back and Avon straddled him. For an instant, Blake felt an icy, chilling fear course through him when he looked up into Avon's feral eyes. They blazed with an unnatural light that Blake read as a desperate, undeniable need to possess, to reclaim what had been lost. Tomorrow he and Avon would begin to sort this all out, but for now, for these few hours he was the cup where Avon would quench a decade old thirst. He opened his mouth to say that it was all right, that he understood, but one of those magic hands stilled his words as hungry lips attacked him and sucked their way down the side of his neck. A hot tongue teased and tickled his left nipple to hardness as thumb and forefinger roughly worked on the other. He felt his hard shaft press up into the crevice between Avon's muscled cheeks, nestling securely into familiar territory, and he rocked his hips as he lost himself in the feel of Avon's skilled onslaught. Suddenly, the mouth was withdrawn; stretching out, wedging his legs between Blake's, Avon thrust forward, cock to rock solid cock. Blake tried to raise up...tried to recapture Avon's lips with his own, but the tech deliberately turned away. Blake gasped, feeling Avon surge up against him, a hard, full stroke forcing him to quick, unexpected orgasm. He cried out in sudden pleasure as the first contraction spilled his seed between them and with the second, he felt Avon add his to the slick, hot pool on their abdomens. For several minutes afterwards,

Blake held the tech tightly, revelling in the feel of having this man in his arms again, of passionately loving him.

Then Blake realized there was something odd about the form he held in welcome, loving embrace. Looking down, he could only see the top of his lover's head.

"Avon?"

There was no reply. Blake crooked his knee and pushed them both over. Avon fell limply onto the bed. It took an instant more for Blake to realize that the man was unconscious. Slapping Avon's cheek lightly, then more firmly, he was unable to wake him. He reached over to the comm button beside the bed. Cally's soft voice responded almost immediately.

"Yes, Blake?"

"Cally, come here. Bring a portable med scanner. Don't alert anyone, is that clear?"

"Is something wrong with Avon again?"

"It may just be the limiter, but I want you to check."

"All right, I'll be there in a few minutes and Blake..." he could almost see the smile on her face, "*put some clothes on or I may take advantage of you.*"

When Blake reentered his room there was no doubt in his mind about the identity of the man sitting quietly on the side of his bed. Karl Afton was very, very dead. The look in the computer tech's eyes made that clear.

"Hello, Blake." Nothing in Avon's tone gave any hint as to what he was feeling.

"Avon." There was a long uncomfortable pause as each man waited for the other to begin.

"Am I a prisoner, Blake?" Avon nodded toward the guard at the door.

Blake looked around and motioned for the man to leave. "No...no. Why should you be?"

"I did try to kill you, if you recall."

"Well, you did kill my brother...my clone, but you weren't exactly yourself, now were you?"

"Wasn't I?" A quick, playful smirk teased at Avon's lips and he glanced away. "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?" Blake frowned, confused.

Avon shrugged. "All this. I don't believe you had an attack of nostalgia and wanted me at your side..." he paused and fixed his eyes on the rebel, "or in your bed again. It's for a far more important reason you and your revolutionaries would go to all this trouble to disrupt my life."

Once again the silence weighed heavily between

them, but then Blake laughed, tossing off the tech's dour mood. "Of course, you're right, Avon, but I don't want to talk about that right now." Blake walked over and leaned down to Avon, cupping his face in his hands. He noticed for an instant the sadness in the tech's eyes, but then Avon closed them and allowed himself to be kissed. "There's so much for us to remember," he whispered.

Avon felt an involuntary flush colour his cheeks. He drew in a deep breath, trying to feed the oxygen demand his pounding heart was making on his body. He wanted to run...to hide away from this creature who had always been able to unleash emotions he would rather keep under lock and key. His mouth went dry as Blake's index finger trailed down his chest and stomach to his tightening groin. Strong fingers dug into the tender flesh, sending surges of pleasure to his brain.

With supreme control, Avon reached down and removed Blake's hand from between his legs. It took a moment before he could collect his scattered thoughts, but he felt there were things he had to know before he could go on with this.

"Blake, stop."

"You want this as badly as I do." He sat down beside Avon, tongue tracing Avon's gently rounded ear.

Avon sighed. "Yes, I do. I won't deny that, but..."

"You always were one for liking it rough. You know, I could just take you, as I used to."

"Yes, I'm sure you could, but as I recall, you liked it better when I cooperated. Talk to me now, tell me what this is all about and I'll consider being cooperative."

Blake threw his head back and stared at the ceiling for a moment. Making his decision, he scooted back and stretched out on the bunk, pulling the tech against him. He cradled Avon in his arms, kissing the top of his head, letting his right hand roam over the thin material covering Avon's chest.

"Where is Orac, Avon?" Blake asked nonchalantly, tracing the brown aureola surrounding Avon's left nipple.

The tech stiffened imperceptibly. Blake had finally gotten around to revealing his true motive in all this. "It's safe."

"Yes, I know. Not to mention very well hidden."

Avon noted a point in Blake's favour for not trying to conceal the fact that he had hunted for the little super computer. "Why do you want to know?"

Blake shifted, nestling closer. "You do understand

now that you were used, don't you Avon? Used by Servalan to try to get at me and after she thought she had killed me, she very carefully manipulated you. She couldn't be overt because you were too clever for that, so she allowed you to bury yourself in the persona of Karl Afton, provided all the trappings of the fantasy you yourself designed. She used that weakness in you, that need to bury the man you had been, to carefully draw out certain well-hidden memories."

"Such as?"

"The teleport."

Avon's brow furrowed. He thought over Afton's recent past, back to the projects he'd been doing at the computer center and realized Blake, unfortunately, was right. He had been slowly, but surely designing a working teleport for the Federation.

"So?"

"So," Blake shifted his position once again, "certain factions within the rebel underground believe you are a very dangerous man to have around. A functional teleport in the hands of the Federation could be devastating to the Cause."

"Yes, well, any fool could see that. But, of course, you and your band of renegades would use it more wisely."

"I did when we had the *Liberator*."

"Oh? Now that's debatable." Avon turned slightly and looked skeptically at the rebel.

"All right, Avon, point made," Blake conceded. "Nonetheless, I must warn you, my friend, your life is in danger just as long as you continue to work for the Federation."

"It would seem my options are rather limited...join you or die. In truth, neither alternative pleases me very much. Don't your followers understand that the Federation will sooner or later develop a teleport of their own, with or without me?"

"We'd rather it be later and without your help." Blake pulled the tech to him. "Join us, Avon. Join *me*. You won't have to fight. You won't even have to get involved with any part of the rebellion. You can just sit in your little lab somewhere and make things for us like the teleport and more of your wonderful little gadgets. You and Orac would be left alone with your work."

Avon sat up, turning to face Blake. "And what about my family, Blake? Do you expect me just to up and run off with you? Abandon my children to the Federation...to Servalan while I help you battle windmills? If that's what you have in mind, think again."

Avon pulled away from Blake, throwing his legs over the side of the bed, but Blake was right behind him, snatching his wrist and jerking him back down onto it.

A hardness set Blake's features. He'd known this would be the worst part of trying to convince Avon to come with him. If he failed here, he'd be left with little choice. "Avon, you may have no other choice. Your wife..."

"My wife is a Federation agent, Servalan's puppet. She will do whatever Servalan orders her to do, even kill the children if that is what Servalan orders."

"She won't. Not even Servalan is that cold hearted."

Avon smiled ruthlessly, "Then you sorely underestimate your adversary, Blake. She will and I will not make them sacrifices to your cause."

Blake bit the inside of his cheek, thinking. "All right, we'll get them out, too, but I want you to understand that I can't assure anyone's safety absolutely...not even my own."

"Oh, but you will have to, this time. I will not abandon my children as I was, to be dependent upon the kindness or cruelty of strangers. They are mine, Blake, and I will protect them from enduring what I had to suffer. You will guarantee me that they will be safe or..." his words snapped off, the agonising surge from the limiter crippling him. He felt Blake lower him to the floor, was dimly aware of the vague sound of a voice, and then Cally was there, injecting him, the medicine alleviating his pain.

Now situated, warm and comfortable, in Blake's bunk, Avon could make out her whispered words of warning to Blake, reminding him of the consequences of the limiter inside his head. She then quietly left the room, leaving the two men alone. A weight crushed down the side of the bed, enticing him to open his eyes.

"I now comprehend what Gan must have gone through." Avon heard his own voice croak from his dry throat. He coughed, trying to clear it.

Blake brushed back a stray strand of hair from Avon's sweaty brow. "Servalan has practically freed you from the effects of the limiter."

"No, not freed me. Simply put me on a longer leash." Avon paused and closed his eyes again. "Like Gan, I find I may be forced to remain with you because, apparently, I am incapable of protecting myself."

"That doesn't have to be a permanent condition, you know. If Servalan's cybersurgeons could change

the limiter's parameters, perhaps, with Orac's help, we could render it harmless."

Nothing showed on Avon's face, but Blake's words inspired hope and the creation of an idea. *Oh, Blake, how sadly you have changed. Almost, he thought with surprise, as much as I. The past is dead and this time, I'm afraid, despite my recalcitrant feelings for you, I find that I have priorities outside myself.* When he opened his eyes again, he knew what he had to do. He sat up and wrapped his arms tightly around Blake's chest. His chin balanced lightly atop Blake's shoulder.

"I'll need time. Just a little. I have to prepare the children. Throw up roadblocks so Servalan will not be able to trace us."

"All right," Blake nodded, "and I'll start arranging for some sort of child care so they can remain near you while you work on the teleport."

Avon released the other man and made to get up. Blake laid a restraining hand on him. "Where do you think you're going?"

Avon smiled. "Home. I considered another... little *divertissement* with you, but we'll have all the time in the world for that later. Besides, you're usually so anxious to get your little schemes into action. I assume you do want me working for you as soon as is humanly possible."

Reluctantly, Blake had to admit his friend was right. "All right, but be careful. I'll have a man go with you just to be sure."

Avon shook his head. "That would draw too much attention in Afton's area. I'll be absolutely fine just so long as Servalan doesn't suspect my conditioning has been broken."

"Are you certain?"

"The role of mother hen really doesn't suit you terribly well, Blake." Avon stopped at the door and turned to look at the rebel on the bed. "Answer me one question truthfully, for old time's sake."

"Old time's sake? Now look who's getting nostalgic." He smiled at the frown on Avon's face. "What's the question?"

"Simply this, Blake. Had I not opted to join your Cause, who would have been the one to kill me? Certainly not Cally. Soolin, perhaps? Or some faceless stranger?"

Blake shook his head. "Me."

Avon laughed, covering his reactions well. *Not faceless, then, but a stranger nonetheless. I never believed I would actually miss that bleeding heart of yours.* "Of course, that seems very appropriate somehow. Well, perhaps one day you'll get to do just that. Oh yes,

one more thing. Is Soolin still a mercenary or has she fallen to your Cause as well?"

"Soolin?" It was Blake's turn to laugh. "She reminds me of you. Always the sceptic, but her lack of conscience has come in quite useful from time to time."

Another piece in his plan dropped into place. Avon smiled. "I will contact you in forty-eight hours, Blake. Be ready to get us off Earth because the instant Servalan realizes I'm missing she'll have the dogs out after us."

Blake nodded. "Avon?" The tech stopped halfway out the door. "I have missed you terribly much. I'm glad you'll be with me again."

"Yes, well, I wouldn't make any hasty declarations yet if I were you. We may end up getting on precisely as well as we did on the *Liberator* and next time, you may be the one who takes a blaster to *me*."

Blake's laughter followed Avon down the hall.

The door to Afton's townhouse slammed shut, startling Chelle from her private game of dressing and undressing her doll. "Daddy!" she screamed and ran to the dark haired man. He scooped her up and kissed her chubby cheek before giving her a squeeze. Del and Soolin appeared at the top of the stairs. Avon looked up at them and smiled a smile Soolin would never forget. She returned it, knowing which mind now inhabited the tech's body. Avon set his daughter down.

"Chelle, go play with your brother for a little while. I need to speak with... Ingrid privately."

Del cocked his head, studying the man at the bottom of the stairs. After a moment he smiled and held out his hand to his sister and dragged her along behind him to his room. When Soolin's foot touched the bottom step, Avon's hand darted out, grabbing her and pulling her into a passionate kiss.

"Why didn't you come after me earlier?"

Before she could answer, he kissed her again, pushing his tongue past her teeth, delving deeply, commandingly into her mouth. When he pulled back from her, he was pleased to see the pink flush of excitement in her cheeks.

Soolin smiled. "So Karl Afton's gone now, is he? Too bad, I was rather getting to like that mealy-mouthed little worm. You definitely surprised me, Avon, I never knew you had it in you."

"Yes, it is disturbing to know there's a little bit of Vila in each of us. Now answer my question."

"Lots of reasons," she began, regaining some of

her icy composure. "One being, Servalan had you under heavy surveillance for several years. I couldn't just wait around on the off chance she'd slip up. A girl has to make a living, you know."

"And now?"

Her smile never changed, but there was a curious glint in her eyes. "Would you believe Blake made me an offer I found hard to refuse?"

"Perhaps, but what if I make you a better one?"

Her cool, blue eyes narrowed. "I'm listening."

"A ship and a planet where the Federation can't touch you."

She laughed. "If such a place exists."

"Oh, it does. Believe me, it does."

She backed away, face set in contemplation. "What do I have to do for this?"

"Protect my children," Avon hesitated, his fingers, unconsciously, coming up to toy with his right temple, "and me, if it becomes necessary, but my children would be your priority."

She took a few steps, then a lustful grin graced her delicate lips. "If you throw in an occasional sexual assignation and a few thousand credits to make it worth my while, it's a deal."

Avon smiled. "I think I've been very subtly insulted."

"You have been, but what can I expect from an over the hill, mind-altered computer tech? Now where are we going?"

Avon took a step up the stairs. "First of all, Gauda Prime. I need Orac. We'll have to leave within the hour to catch a shuttle there."

"What about Servalan? Won't she get suspicious when she finds out you're leaving the planet?"

"Why? My children and I have the proper visas and the only one who's supposed to tell her about my comings and goings is you."

Soolin smiled. This definitely was the Avon she knew and perhaps if she'd let herself admit it, admired. "And what about Blake?"

Avon turned around, his sneer brought into play facial muscles he hadn't used in years. "Blake? Blake who?"

Epilogue

"Now tell me your name, Chelle."

"Michelle Avon." The little girl laughed when her father smiled. "I like that name, Daddy. Can I keep it?"

He pulled his child to his chest and hugged her tightly. "Always."

"If the two of you are finished, Soolin wants to see you, father."

Avon released his daughter and turned to his eldest. The boy's hair had already begun to lighten and a feather dusting of freckles was evident on his cheeks. He'd adjusted to their new home far more quickly than his sister and neither child seemed to miss their mother very much. Soolin had become more of a mother than the original ever had been.

Venargus, as the peaceful, primitive natives called their little planet, had been a good choice. Avon had already won the locals respect with feats of what seemed to them as magic with modern science. He had, with Orac's help, plotted out a supply route through perilous territory, which they could use for emergency supplies, transported by a planet hopper provided by a couple of Blake's more unseemly former associates. Avon understood the peril of being tempted to use the ship too much. It was too easily traced. Fortunately, though, it was simple enough in design so that Soolin, with Orac, could pilot the it by themselves, if necessary. Blake's men were good and had found them on Sarran, but before they could get a message off to their leader, Soolin, cool and efficient as ever, earned her keep and quietly disposed of them. The rebel had proved to be far more tenacious than anyone had suspected he would be. With an inner smile, the tech reminded himself that hell hath no fury like a lover scorned...and made to look the fool in front of his followers. In this uncharted area in Sector thirteen, an area unmapped by the Federation for the simple fact that any ship which entered had had a nasty habit of never coming back, they found the perfect bolthole.

Avon had taken a page from Hal Mellanby's book. The tech spent ten days getting Mellanby's ship on Sarran spaceworthy, then, with Soolin flying cover, they'd lumbered into Sector thirteen to find a home. He'd sunk the vessel under the sea on the tiny, hospitable planet and spent the next seven days allowing automated diggers to create numerous tunnels to the sandy shore; when he and his family finally emerged from their watery homesite, the natives hailed them minor gods.

It had been six months and the newness of their arrival had not completely worn off. Avon looked from his son to the clear, blue sky. A warm breeze ruffled his uncut hair and he revelled in the freedom of it. Orac gave regular reports of Blake's successes against the Federation. According to Orac's predictions, the rebel would achieve victory over the Federation in eighteen months and then, Avon knew, Blake would come looking for him in earnest. Wisely, Avon had covered his tracks well. He had had access to the Federation's cen-

tral computer when he was Afton. Using his still viable entry codes through Orac, he infected the system with an undetectable virus and purged the megacomputer of any information concerning their little portion of the universe.

The dark haired man smiled. Blake, leader of the grand revolution, saviour of the inner and outer worlds, purveyor of freedom...his former lover, would come after him because he wanted what only Avon had, but the tech had

made sure that the odds were in his favor, that the rebel's searches would prove fruitless.

Avon got up and wiped the sand from his trousers. He took his little girl by the hand and headed for the main lock. The smile faded from his face as he looked out over the blue-green ocean. Blake was never far from his thoughts. It wouldn't do to underestimate the man, but he'd done all he could think to do and they would be safe enough...for a while.

HAUF FUN, 'HALE EARNEST

Cally Donia

An old Scottish saying meaning something begun in jest which is, in truth, in deadly earnest...

"OURS IS NOT TO REASON WHY, OURS IS BUT TO DO AND DIE. Is that it, Blake?"

"Avon," Blake replied with worn patience, "we *must* do this. What we have here is an entire planet, in one of the most important strategic positions of this Region and they have invited us—all of us—to put forward the Resistance's point of view."

"So if it is merely a propaganda mission, why not simply send Avalon or some other paltry underling?"

"Avon, Avalon is no underling, for there are no underlings in the Rebellion and she is not someone to be ordered at my beck and call."

"Unlike us, of course," Avon said, swinging around to stand in front of Blake, challenging him as always, enjoying the fight with vicious enthusiasm. "We, naturally, can be ordered around, despite the fact that we are *all* exhausted, despite the fact that we are *all* in desperate need of rest, despite the fact that *you* are the most diplomatic amongst us—which merely proves how ill-qualified we are to take up this so-called 'mission' of yours."

"There is no one else available, Avon. That is the final fact and the one that makes this decision for us. And yes, I know how much we need a holiday, and that is one of the main reasons why we are going."

"Sitting around discussing unrealistic political ideals is what you are proposing as relaxation? Oh, come now, Blake, you're being even more stupid than Vila. No, I'd rather stay on the *Liberator* while you go and beat your breast."

"It's nothing so formal as the meetings on Kieron were, and if you would shut up just a moment, I would explain to you."

"Then," Avon said, grandiosely, seating himself on the couch between Cally and Vila, "pray continue. I am waiting." He gave in to the temptation with a smile. "With bated breath."

Blake ignored the dripping sarcasm, walking over to stand beside Gan and Jenna, garnering sympathetic, amused glances from the pair. "Well," he began, with studied patience, "the invitation is from Scotia..."

"Scotia?" Vila perked up.

"Yes, do you know it?"

"Who, me? I'm a Delta, what do I know about anything?"

Blake allowed the comment to pass, speaking before Avon and Vila could get started on one of their slinging matches. "Anyway, the people of Scotia are in the process of deciding whether to allow the Resistance to use their planet for bases, or whether they want to invite the Federation in to improve their trade situation."

"So, in other words, they are a planet of shopkeepers and you want us to go in there to convince them that you will be a better customer than Servalan?"

"No, Avon, that's not what I want. Now will you please listen?" Avon's polished gesture of concession was pure aristocracy wrapped around a core of pure insolence. "Thank you," Blake responded, with a fair dose of insolence himself. "As I was saying, the Scotians want this to be an informal presentation, so they've invited us for something they call 'The Gathering of the Clans' and the 'Beltane Festival', whatever those may..."

Sudden interest brightening his eyes, Avon spoke up. "You did say the *Beltane* Festival, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course I did. If you were to listen..."

Interrupting again, Avon rose to his feet with jackknife grace. "Well, now," he said, "that seems to be everything settled. Zen, Standard by 8 to Scotia."

+Confirmed.+

"Wait a minute, Avon," Jenna called to his retreating back, jumping into Blake's flabbergasted wordlessness. "I thought you were opposed to this, on a matter of principle?"

"Only on the general principle of being opposed to anything Blake proposes..."

"That's what I meant."

"...and on the grounds that anything *he* thinks is a good idea for his damned Cause is intrinsically bad for *me*. This time, however..."

"Avon, just a minute. Before you go rushing off."

On the threshold, Avon turned back to face Blake. "What is it now, Blake?"

"Why are you suddenly so keen to go on a mission for the 'damned' cause?"

"Who ever said I was?" With a supercilious smirk, he turned on his heel and left.

"You going to just let him off like that?" Vila complained. "How come you never let me get away with things like that, eh?"

"Never mind, Vila. It simply means that Avon won't know all the...ins and outs of our hosts' requests until the last moment, that's all."

Paused a few feet down the corridor, Avon grinned widely as Blake's expected condition was listed and the expected squawk of horror from Vila followed.

"You want us to wear *what?*"

A considerable length of flight later, having reached the blue planet with its garlands of pink and white clouds, the entire crew—apart from the ever-rebellious Avon—was gathered on the flight deck, in varying stages of discomfort or amusement. Cally and Jenna were being less than kind in their comments and their laughter, and Gan was growing more and more uncomfortable. He itched, abominably, in the worst possible places, all those little areas society deems it impolite to scratch in public. He settled for fidgeting with his clothes, casting envious glances at Blake, who was seemingly unruffled, despite his precariously sagging outfit. Vila, on the other hand, was taking his ease rather too obviously, much to the delight of the two women on board.

Seeing that Gan was about to inform Vila of the indelicacy of his position, Jenna spoke up. "Does anyone know where Avon is? Or is he just too embarrassed to show his face?"

"And his knees!" Cally whispered, setting the two of them off into gales of giggles again.

"Sorry," Jenna muttered, stifling her amusement under the blackness of Blake's expression. "But you must admit," she went on, with a stunning lack of diplomacy, "you all do look rather funny. I mean..." she paused, taking her time looking around the flight deck at each man in his turn, at the sight of them in homespun, voluminous shirts, brogues, pleated skirts and knobby knees, "look at you. You're quite a picture."

"Yes, but of what?" Cally laughed, collapsing into her seat as Vila discovered just what was uncovered when a man in a skirt sat down, legs asprawl in wanton abandonment.

"Really, ladies, you have to..." Blake's words dried up in his throat as he turned, in choreographed unison with every other person on the flight deck, their strings all pulled by the man intent on making his entrance...quite spectacular.

There was a long, pregnant pause. Avon stood at

the head of the stairs, milking the moment, consciously framing the picture he made. With studied elegance, he tugged gently on his lace cuff, where it peeped perfectly from his black velvet jacket, giving them time to take in the vision of perfection he was so generously presenting to them. He remained there, in all his glory, from the shine of his dark hair to the toes of his polished brogues, light glistening on the burnished silver buttons of his black velvet jacket and the silver tassels on his black leather sporran. His kilt was the dark Graham of Montrose, his kilt pin silver with a thistle of amethyst, twinkling in the brightness of technology. As he slowly descended the short flight of steps, his kilt swung beautifully, a sexy sway to echo the movement of firm buttocks. Smiling wickedly, he approached the gapemouthed group clustered around the flight couch, his silk-lace jabot cascading down his sumptuous jacket, rising and falling gently with his every breath.

"Well?" he said, coming to a halt in front of them, standing where each one of them could see every superb detail. "Haven't any of you ever seen proper Highland dress before?" He stopped long enough to survey his fellow men with calculated contempt before turning to the two women. "Actually, it's rather painfully obvious that they haven't, isn't it?"

"Avon..." Blake said in the voice he usually reserved for Travis and hairy aliens.

"Yes?" Avon said brightly, smiling sweetly, flicking a mote of dust from the glimmering plush of his jacket.

"Where," Blake said with as much patience as he could muster while standing in a sagging kilt, feeling like the jester next to the king, "did you get *that?*"

"What? Oh, you mean, *this*. Why, it's simply standard Highland dress."

"Oh no it is not! We asked Orac for 'standard Highland dress' and he gave us these bloody skirts and shirts that are too big and bloody great clodhopping shoes. Now how come you're all dolled up to the nines, eh, Avon?" Vila snapped, lacking Gan's good upbringing, and, therefore, scratching at his backside.

"Well now, it's really rather simple. *You*—or rather Blake, I should give credit where credit is due—asked Orac for 'the kilt as the Scotians usually wear it', is the phraseology I believed you used. As we all know, only too well, Orac rarely gives exactly the answer one wants. Hence, *you* are dressed the way the Scotians usually do—for such things as work, chores..." he looked around at them again with the sophisticated amusement of the sartorial don for the

country bumpkin, “throwing the rubbish out. I, on the other hand, am wearing the kind of Highland dress they bring out for special occasions, such as a Gathering of the Clans. And so...”

Liberator, Liberator, are ye up there or are ye a’ still off gallivantin’ about the Universe?”

“That, I believe, would be our hosts,” Avon said, going over to the communicator, kilt swaying behind. “This is *Liberator*. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

“Naw, tae whom dae I huv the pleasure o’ speakin’?”

“Trusting types, obviously. Scotia, this is...”

“I’ll handle this, Avon, thank you very much. Scotia, this is Blake, on board the *Liberator*.”

“Oh, aye? Well, ye’d better get yersel’s down here, or ye’ll be missin’ the start o’ the cei—sorry, I forgot m’sel’. Ye’ll no’ be knowing the proper words yet. The party’s aboot tae stert, so ye’d best be gettin’ doon here. Ye’ve got the co-ordinates an’ there’ll be someone waitin’ on you. Scotia out.”

“Wait!” Avon called, catching the Scotian before he terminated the communication. “One question: what’s your name?”

“MacGregor, an’ before ye ask, I’m the man in charge hereabouts. All right? Now, will you lot get down here?”

“The natives are restless,” Vila said dryly.

“Enough, Vila, I don’t want you antagonising anyone down there.”

“True, true. And Vila,” Avon said, leading the way off the flight deck, glancing back at the tartan of Blake’s kilt, “why bother? After all, Blake will do *that* well enough himself.”

They materialised in the midst of what had to be the biggest party even Vila had ever seen. The square was huge, dotted with memorial, heroic statues and enormous spreading trees casting flickering shadows over the gathering. Off to one side, an area of parkland sported a mushrooming of garishly bright tents, people thronging and swarming around in a muted dance of gaudy colours. The *Liberator* crew slowly took in their surroundings and everywhere their fascinated gaze alit, were people dressed in the quaint costumes of a bygone era. And Avon smirked, avidly anticipating the moment when one of his shipmates was stupid enough to give voice to such a comment.

“Ceud mille failte,” the old white haired man said, stepping forward to greet them, the MacGregor tartan of his kilt swaying gently in the breeze.

“Thank you,” Blake said, handling the unknown with aplomb, making a good guess at the meaning

of the incomprehensible greeting, “we’re very glad to be here.”

The MacGregor grinned at him and proffered his hand, which Blake shook, careful not to mangle the man’s fine lace cuff. He spared a withering glower for Avon, who returned it with a caustically sweet smile.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us all, Blake?” he arched, smoothing the pile of his exquisite jacket. “And why don’t you step forward into the light, where we can all see you?” *And your kilt*, he added silently, gleefully.

Blake blasted him visually for that less-than-subtle reminder about his manners and stepped forward from the dark shade of the spreading tree and right into a death-dealing glower.

The MacGregor stared at him, hostility and mistrust written all over his face. “An’ what will ye be wearin’ *that* here for?”

Puzzled, Blake exchanged quick looks with the others, but only Avon seemed to have any idea of what the problem was, and he was not about to be helpful. He was having far too much fun enjoying Blake’s rare discomfiture.

“This?” Blake asked, indicating his kilt, hitching it carefully in case there was something offensive in its sag. “Your invitation did rather insist that we wear appropriate Highland dress...” he continued, blandly ignoring Vila’s not quite stifled splutter of amusement, “and I’ve done my best to comply. I apologise if I haven’t quite carried it off properly, but I confess, we did all have a bit of trouble even managing to get these things to stay on.”

“Oh, it’s not how you’re wearing it that’s fashing me, laddie, although that’s bad enough. It’s the *nature* of it that’s giving me the de’il. You’ll no be knowing it, I suppose, so I’ll just have to be forgiving tae you, but you’ll no be welcome aboon here wi’ a *Campbell* kilt wrapped aroun’ you.”

That last, profound statement was met with such nonplussed expressions that Avon had extreme difficulty keeping his laughter bottled inside. He bit the inside of his cheek, making himself look suitably concerned, but he dared not look at any of the others in the sure and certain knowledge that if he did, he’d collapse in the most undignified howls of hysteria ever imagined. He concentrated instead on the abstract patterns the dappling of light and shade painted over the smooth slate paving stones.

“I’m sorry, obviously this pattern offends you...”

“It’s not a pattern, it’s a tartan. And aye, it does

offend me, but there's not a lot we can be doing about it the now, is there? The ceremonies are about tae start an' we'll be missed if we don't get ower there the now. Come on, all of you, we'll make the introductions all at once up at the table."

He went off, muttering dire invectives under his breath, leading the *Liberator* crew behind like a mother goose with her goslings.

Two hours later, they were still sitting at the table while various toastmasters recited various incomprehensible poems, to the liberal and constant libation of the deceptively smooth and mild *usquebaugh*, the laughter and the joking flowing as freely as the spirit. The *Liberator* crew were scattered around the table, out of conversational reach of each other, but not out of reach of Blake's dampening gaze. Unfortunately, no one seemed to think it necessary to pay any attention whatsoever to his leadership. On the contrary, even the staid Cally was blooming under the ministrations of the man at her side and the unerringly sober Avon was becoming pleasantly fuzzy around the edges. Vila, Blake was annoyed to note, was already half-way under the table. Not, however, for the reasons Blake thought...

Eventually, the MacGregor rose to his feet, to deliver the last address of the night. "For the benefit of our guests, an' tae the detriment o' those who thocht themsel' tae far above mere lowly mortals, the night I'll tell the story o' this land an' the people in it. Mony a long year since, in the days when the Domes on Earth were first tae be built, the folk o' the North thocht about this, an' about the oppression we'd have tae endure under the yoke o' the Sassennach. Afore, we had had oor freedom, for we had our land. But now, they were wanting tae tak' that frae us an' all, an' there were some amang us that declared Independence, that said, we'll no' be lyin' here at yir feet like dogs waitin' tae be kicked. So we gathered what wealth we could, stole what wealth we hadn't, an' we bought an old space craft. And so, we came here, after mony a year an' mony a woe, tae build oursel's a life we were proud tae gi'e our bairns. Thus was Scotia born. We had lost our ain past, an' so we made oursel's a future. Here, all the old ways would be preserved or reborn, wipin' awa' the years o' tyranny. We would speak the auld way, wi'out fear o' misunderstanding, we would wear the kilt again, wi'out fear o' laughter, an' maist importantly, we'd renew the auld values an' kinships. An' so, here, we have a haven, a harbour, for all our kind an' onyman that would be ane o' us." He raised his glass, and every

person at every table echoed him, the crystal and amber twinkling like stars under the ruby dance of torches. "An' now, the toast. 'Here's tae us! Wha's like us! Slainthe!'"

The instant the toast was drunk, a visceral drone started, sending shivers up and down everyone's spines—for varying reasons. The Scotians cheered as the music started, the *Liberator* crew winced, but joined as the revellers arose, *en masse*, to descend upon the flag stones of the dance area. The party was now, officially, in full swing. And so were the kilts, much to the delight of Cally and Jenna.

Blake, still relatively sober, hurried throughout the throng, gathering his group together into a semi-quiet corner beside a wistful weeping willow. "Well," he said, getting down to business, grabbing an incipiently wandering Vila by the scruff of the neck, "I gather then, that the Federation didn't see fit to send representatives."

"Perhaps," Jenna snickered, looking pointedly at his pointed knees, "they couldn't find anyone fit to be sent!"

Blake's furious glare did absolutely nothing to still the two women's giggles, the sight of him, all righteous indignation and drooping skirt sending them off into further flights of hysteria.

"Well then," Avon interrupted, speaking with the exaggerated care of a man who refuses to concede that he's had anything to drink at all and is, in fact, quite sober, "there's no need for us to be itinerary...itinerarary...itenerently...well," he gave in to the whisky embalming his tongue far out of the reach of his brain, "we don't have to be here for your cause, so..."

"We can just join the party, right?" Vila piped up, disentangling himself from Blake and sidling off into the night, hitching his kilt up as he went. Blake started after him, then realised that Jenna and Cally were drifting off, lured, no doubt, by the faint gleam of white teeth smiling from the two large Scotians over under the canopy of trees. Actually, it was more the bulge at the front of the men's kilts that was interesting the ladies...

Blake turned back to the more sensible members of his crew, and only then realised that he hadn't seen Gan since seconds after they had all gathered here under this tree. Which left Avon. Who was leaving. Suddenly very annoyed by the rank revolution undermining him, Blake grabbed Avon by the shoulder, spinning him around, pinning him against the bole of the tree. The other man grinned up at him

and then, to Blake's profound shock, deliberately became coy, rubbing against him, whispering seductively.

"Why, Blake," he said, sex filling his every word, "I never knew you cared."

"What the hell are you playing at, Avon?"

"What?" Avon mocked, smile gleaming faintly in the dark, murmured words barely drowning out the sounds of lusty couples in the bushes. "Didn't you do your homework, Blake?" the voice caressed him, with calculated sensuousness. "Tonight is Beltane, one of the revived customs. One of the revived *pagan* customs. A celebration of the Mother, a celebration of the force that brings life. In other words, Blake: sex. Glorious, unfettered, unrestrained, uncomplicated sex." The attraction he had felt from the beginning rose inside him, giving him the boldness to go on with his plan to take advantage of both this rare set-up and Blake himself. He wanted the man, needed to have him before this...attraction warped into something more. Such as love. "Anything and everything is permissible here, tonight," he said, seeking to sublimate the emotional into the sexual, ensnaring himself in the seductive spell his own words were weaving, catching himself in the trap he had started for Blake. "Men with women, women with women. Men with men. Even, Blake," he said, willing to take the chance of offering, here in the safety of an anonymous celebration, "you, with me..." And he stretched up, bringing his lips to Blake's, sealing them together. Hands came down to hold his sides, warming the velvet softness of his jacket, stimulating him.

"What is it, Avon?" Blake whispered against Avon's neck. "Finally decided to take the risk with me, is that it?" The words shocked Avon, taking the wind out of his sails. For Blake to have known...and still allowed him the time to find his own pace, was alluring in the extreme, a quicksand of possibilities. "Finally decided that perhaps admitting to me that you find me attractive would not be such a dreadful thing?"

"Is it, Blake?" Avon was very serious, one of those rare moments when he dropped his guarded cynicism and the vulnerable man glimmered through. All the humourousness was gone, all thought of a casual tumble to satisfy this building obsession buried under a cascade of the unspoken offers Blake was making. It was in the man's eyes that he was wrapping the future up in a pretty package to present to Avon. "Or," Avon spoke again, facing the reality in-

stead of Blake's dream, "is this going to be something we both regret, if we give in to the atmosphere of this hedonistic place?"

"I can't tell you that, Avon, I don't have those kinds of answers. But," he said, hugging Avon, letting the other man feel the depth of his strength and the security of his arms, "I can promise that I, for one, won't deliberately bring hurt to either one of us."

"Not even if it's necessary for your damned Cause?"

Blake drew back a little, a furrow of concern planted between his brows. "I can't promise to put my own need for you before what the entire race needs, Avon."

"In other words, not undying devotion, but merely sex?"

"Is that what you need, Avon?" Blake breathed against the sensitive skin of Avon's cheeks. "You want me to be the one to define and limit our relationship to just sex, to keep emotions from it? Well, I'm afraid I can't do that. We both know that there's been an air of inevitability between us, this sense that one day, we'd wind up as lovers. But neither of us would actually admit it, would we? Until now, until the magic of this place."

"Magic?" Avon sneered, trying to keep his distance, all his seductiveness scattered to the four corners by the wind of fear. "More likely the *usquebaugh*. And please, spare me your romantic frills and furbelows. I can well do without purple prose, Blake."

"Why? Because you're so damned afraid that you'd like it?"

"No, because I'm afraid it will make me sick."

"Oh, yes? Now why is it, Avon," Blake said, pressing up against Avon, the sporran between them, the hardness of it rubbing against Avon's groin, "I find I simply can't believe that?"

"Stupidity, perhaps?"

"Oh, I doubt that. Insight, perhaps, and seeing behind this barrier you seem to think you need around all of us, me in particular."

"The only barrier I need is to make all of you—and you in particular—respect my privacy."

"I respect your privacy, Avon, I simply don't respect your self-delusions."

Avon shoved him away, breaking free from the insidious security of Blake's embrace, and of Blake's certainty, turning his back on both the man and the possibilities.

"Avon." Large hands rested on his shoulders.

There was no verbal response, merely an attitude of listening awareness.

"Why are we even having this discussion?"

"Because Blake, you have quite a penchant for ridiculous conversations, that's why."

"Oh, it's that, is it? And I was thinking that it was because you've been so badly burned in the past that you won't let me make the offer."

"What offer?"

"To love you."

"Second to your Cause, of course." The bitterness was blinding.

"You would never be secondary to the Cause, Avon. Not in my life, not in my emotions."

"So if I asked you to give it all up, you would lisp, yes-dear-of-course, and throw yourself into my arms?"

Blake erupted into laughter, both at the words and the delightfully lavender delivery. "Never that, Avon, oh, never that. My Cause is my goal, Avon, my work, if that is a term you can more readily accept. Would you stop working for me?"

"I wouldn't stop dying for you, Blake."

"But that's the one thing I'm asking you to do, Avon." The hands began to slowly stroke the velvet covering Avon's arms, a small part of Blake's mind intrigued by the body warmth bleeding through, so different from the usual chill from Avon's form. "I'm asking you to stop this holding motion, this standing in one place, waiting to die. You vaunt yourself as a survivor, but you seem to have forgotten that to survive, a man has to be alive in the first place. Who was it, Avon, who did this to you? Who left you more dead than alive?"

"Who made you more melodramatic than intelligent?"

"Mere chance, no doubt. You haven't answered my question."

"What makes you so sure that there was someone?"

"You. Everything about you." Avon looked at him disbelievingly. "The way you adamantly refuse involvement, even after it's obvious you're involved, the way you shy away from emotional contact with us all and most of all, Avon, the way you can't make up your mind whether to push me out the nearest airlock or lock me to you so I can never leave."

"Well, from the latter, it's obvious you're suffering from delusions of grandeur again, Blake."

"Am I, Avon?" The question was soft, but so dangerous, bringing the truth out between them. "And

if I'm not? Do you honestly expect me to hang around, putting up with your moodiness, just on the off chance that you'll decide to let me close to you? Or," he said, turning Avon around, bringing him in to hold him against his chest, "are you waiting for one of our spats, waiting for me to finally lose my temper and force you to give in to me, to 'make up' afterwards? Is that it?" he whispered, brushing his mouth lightly, lingeringly over Avon's.

"Stop that!" Avon snapped, pulling away.

"Tell me," Blake asked, his temper beginning to flare, "if the emotional aspect is too complicated for you to deal with, just one thing. Do you want me, Avon?"

"For sex?" Wary, hopeful.

Blake paused, considering, weighing what he was willing to settle for, if he couldn't have Avon in his bed with an admittance of love. Half a loaf is always better than none... "If that's what you want. If that's all you can give."

"Just fucking? Nothing more?"

"Well," Blake smiled, quite gently, "I had been thinking of being somewhat more adventurous. The missionary position does get rather boring, after a while."

"You are, of course, speaking from experience, I take it."

Blake laughed again, deliberately using one of his most effective weapons in his private little war to woo Avon. "Oh, no, Avon, I *never* let things get boring."

"And is that a promise?"

"Yes." He answered, saying more than one simple word, promising Avon everything and anything.

Avon ignored the threatening promise, staring at Blake, balancing him on his own inner scales of judgment. For once, Blake did not fall short in Avon's eyes, and so, he stepped forward, placing his palms flat against the warmth of Blake's stomach, sliding his hands around to hold Blake to him. "For sex, then," he said, coming closer, letting his right hand slip down over the coarse texture of Blake's kilt, fingers tracing the pleats, gathering the fabric up, ruching it in his fist, lifting it clear of the naked skin underneath. Blake's breath caught in his throat as Avon's cool hand snaked down the swell of his backside, curving into the cleft of his ass, boldly, masterfully caressing.

"Not here," he gasped, reluctantly deflecting Avon from his intent, "on the ship. I think I would rather prefer some privacy, if you don't mind."

"Ashamed, Blake?" Avon said defensively, looking for a fight to ease the dangerous intimacy.

"Hardly, Avon. I'm the one who has been pushing for this, remember?"

"Actually, no I don't. If memory serves, and I'm sure it does, I am the one who was given to touching."

"Only in public, where it was nice and safe, where nothing could possibly happen. I, on the other hand, was the one who would approach you in private, where there was no one to see and restrict us."

"You approached me? And when would that have been? When you asked me to repair Zen?"

"No, Avon. In the rest room, that day when you were so tense and I rubbed your shoulders." Avon's face closed in denial. "That day, on Mercos IV, when you hurt your leg and I carried you in my arms, despite all your complaints. And all the other times that you have so very conveniently chosen to forget."

"Very well," Avon said with ill-grace, "you've made your point. It's simply that your technique is so poor it leaves considerable room for doubt."

"Then I shall remedy that, shall I? Orac, teleport now." And before he could even gather breath to argue, they were gone from the nomadic shadows of Scotia and bathed in the harsh brightness of the *Liberator's* technology. "Come on," Blake said, taking Avon by the arm, leading him off before he lost all semblance of advantage, "this way."

"I know perfectly well where your cabin is, Blake. This is, after all, as much my ship as it is yours."

"Yes, Avon," came the long-suffering reply. They proceeded in silence the length of the corridor, coming to a stop outside Blake's door, Avon figuratively digging his heels in.

"Purely for sex, right?" he said, brooking no disagreement.

"Absolutely," Blake said, his eyes saying something else entirely. "Now will you come on?"

With one last look at his rapidly disappearing options, Avon allowed himself to be ushered into Blake's room. He had never dared come here before, always too leery of the unspoken strand of attraction between them. He stared around himself with unconcealed interest, taking in the starkness, an blatant statement of impermanence. Blake's hands on his back wrought him tight with tension, the kiss on his nape doing nothing to uncoil the serpent of desire twisting in his belly. Feigning disdain, he stepped away, beginning to disrobe, starting with the buckle

on the belt of his sporran, watching Blake from the corner of his eye. Since it had become clear that they were finally going to do something about this fell draw between them, Blake suddenly no longer looked foolish in his drooping kilt.

Blake's clothes more or less fell from him, to lie in a puddle at his feet. He simply stood, watching Avon, his penis rising with every item that was dropped to the floor to mingle with his own. He was almost hard by the time Avon's white fingers deftly unfastened his kilt pin, then went unhurriedly up to the buckles of his kilt. The pale hands hesitated under Blake's hungry gaze, stuttering stop under the raging hunger of Blake's bobbing erection. Uncertain, Avon's brown eyes met Blake's, the fear engendered by the past shaking his underpinnings.

"Sex and nothing more?" he whispered again.

"If that's all you can take, then, yes." Blake reached out and began unbuckling Avon's kilt, halting his actions as Avon shied from his touch. "Who did this to you, Avon?" he asked again, voice soft as night. Avon did not answer, as before, locking his past away with his heart, where Blake could not reach. Blake waited in vain for a response, finally conceding this round in their subtle battle, hand once more going for the restraining buckles, while his erection stood between them, striving to touch Avon.

The rough fabric fell to the floor; the two men stood naked, face to face, staring at each other. Blake, very slowly and very carefully, stroked his flattened hand along the planes of Avon's chest, lingering over his nipples, luxuriating in dark hair shadowing his chest, fingers tracing the swirls down to the curling blackness at the base of Avon's lengthening cock.

"Just remember, plain sex, simply fucking, nothing more."

"And what's the penalty if I do more?" he asked, mouth wrapped around the nubile nub of Avon's left nipple.

"I'll kill you."

Bright eyes laughed at him. "I accept. But only if it's *le petit mort*, Avon my friend."

"Stop showing off, Blake and get on with it," Avon responded, businesslike in the extreme, his trembling hands betraying him as they buried themselves in the generosity of Blake's curls.

Blake lifted him then, echoing the time before, carrying him this time, to the bed and not the makeshift shelter. He laid his burden down gently, arranging himself as securely as possible on the narrow bedside beside Avon, cautiously making certain that

he was not pushing too fast, too far. He did not wish to chase Avon off with his rampant enthusiasm.

"Oh, for hell's sake, Blake, come here!" Avon snapped, dragging Blake to lie heavily on top of him. "I'm not fragile, I'm not going to break and I'm far from virginal." He spread his legs, thus making Blake slide down flat on him, bringing them groin to groin, drawing matching gasps of satisfaction from them both. "Much better. Now, then, shall we get on with it?"

His mouth on Blake's was skilled, confident, but despite the physical closeness, there was an almost palpable emotional distance chilling the air. Blake allowed it, encouraging Avon to set the pace, letting the other man become comfortable with this long-postponed intimacy. It was obvious that Avon loved to kiss, nibbling and sucking and licking, enticing Blake's tongue into his mouth, pushing his own into Blake's, tracing teeth and palate, kissing harder and harder as his erection pressed harder and harder into Blake's.

Avon used all his talent, all his practice, to demean this encounter, bringing years of sexual experiment to their bed, making this out to be no more than whoring for convenience, if not actual profit. For every polished trick Avon loudly proclaimed with his body, Blake countered it with contained, intense affection. For every touch of technical finesse, Blake had a touch of tenderness. Slowly, carefully, pouring all the hours and days and months of desire and loneliness into his hands, he remoulded Avon, washing him with the finer feelings, defying him silently, refusing to surrender their unconfessed feelings to the mire of lust.

Blake lay stretched on top of Avon, the other man's legs wrapped around him in mute demand, a cream-slicked hand wrapped around his cock in silent command. Blake waited, poised on the threshold of Avon's body, uncertain despite the certainty of Avon's choice.

"Are you quite sure?" he asked, searching the dark eyes for the reason why the trust of intercourse should be so easily given, when all other intimacies were so fiercely protected.

"Actually, now that you mention it, no I'm not. I always just happen to lie in this ridiculous position when I want to chat. Of course I'm sure, Blake, now for god's sake, get on with it before my legs go to sleep."

So then, it was either that Avon enjoyed intercourse as much as kissing, or it was that Avon could

make this act both confession and commitment. There was a flicker in Avon's eyes, a mere gossamer of need, but Blake saw it and recognised the depth of loneliness and feeling betrayed by that moth's wing moment of weakness. Secure now in the knowledge that Avon wanted him, *emotionally*, and not simply as mere satiation for base desires, Blake let his weight press him forward into the tight circle of muscle that opened so readily to him. The sensation of sinking into Avon, of being absorbed by Avon, of being welcomed by Avon, almost made him come undone, but he gritted his teeth and forced himself to slow, to fade back from the edge of orgasm. Carefully, he slid deeper into the yielding body, never taking his eyes off Avon, watching for signs of pain and of passion. The face was almost neutral, the eyes closed to hold the experience away from Blake, to stop anyone from sharing this most delicate of moments.

Circling his hips in tiny motions, keeping them both tight with pleasure. He leaned down to kiss Avon with his mouth as he kissed him inside with his cock, but Avon turned aside. Stung, Blake rammed into Avon suddenly, fiercely, driving himself in as deep as he could, trying to go deeper than the haunting memory that was keeping Avon from living. He framed the closed face in his hands, willing Avon to look at him. The stillness of his body tormented them both, but Blake was fighting for Avon, while Avon was fighting the insurmountable barrier of Blake's infinite patience.

Avon opened his eyes, staring straight up into scalding honesty and undimmed emotion. The body in him moved again, thrusting slowly, surging deeply within. He felt himself almost yield to the promise of it, felt the feared emotion begin to swell and clamour for freedom, but he slammed the door closed, damming them inside.

Blake saw the glimmerings of love in Avon, the first faint gutterings of a candle in a chill draught. He leaned his hands on the pillow beside Avon, bracing himself, pushing hard, beginning to thrust in earnest. He dropped a kiss on Avon's eyes, then kissed the sculpted lips with all the need in him. Avon closed him out again, denying them both, choosing the past and all its wreaths of woes over the future and all its glistening prizes. "Who did this to you, Avon?" he asked again, expecting no answer now. There was none. "It doesn't matter, anyway," he whispered, mouth to mouth, his breath mingling with Avon's ragged breath. "It doesn't change anything, nothing at all. I love you, Avon."

Brown eyes snapped open, catharsis filling them. Hands came up to snarl in his curls, a face was buried desolately in the crook of his neck. The voice was almost silent, husky, filled with loss and guilt. "Anna. Her name was Anna."

And the barrier was broken, or at least breached, for this time they had together. With Avon clutched to him like a leech, Blake pumped into him, the downward movements of his body met with upward thrusts of Avon's, moving together in harmony, the past cast aside for the moment. Sweat glistened on them as skin flushed and pleasure grew. Avon's cock was trapped between them, rubbing against them both as Blake filled him within. They climbed the hill together, reaching for the peak, the pinnacle hovering almost within their grasp until finally, Avon came, his muscle spasming and clamping down on Blake, milking him, boosting him up to join Avon in the tumble over into orgasm.

They lay together on the bed, tangled in bedding and warmth, Avon allowing Blake the luxury of holding him. He himself had said no word of reciprocation to Blake, but they both knew the words were there, merely unvoiced. The confession of 'her' name had been enough for Blake, the tacit declaration of trust and closeness and acceptance of the future more than compensation for three small words left unuttered. Blake stroked Avon's hair, smiling as it curled lazily around his finger, Avon's tight control over it unstraightened by the heat and sweat of sex.

"Did I hurt you?" Blake asked diffidently, still tender from the intimacies.

"You're not *that* big, Blake," Avon answered, voice slow and tinged with reluctant affection.

"No, but I really didn't prepare you at all."

"Which, considering the amount of whisky I drank down there, was no problem at all."

"Yes, but still..." he said, settling Avon comfortably into the cocoon of his arms, draping a leg over him, assuming closeness until denied.

"Well now," Avon muttered, eyes closing, slipping towards sleep, tired beyond sharpness by the emotion and the sex and the drink, "if it bothers you so bloody much, next time you can do the whole routine."

"Next time?"

"Of course, next time."

"I wasn't certain...not after what I said."

"This isn't a court of law. I'm not going to take it down and use it against you."

"I was rather concerned you might. You don't exactly have typical reactions to that kind of thing."

"For which, Blake, you should be truly grateful, for otherwise, I would have knocked your head from your shoulders for approaching me sexually."

"Still trying to claim it as only sex? Shame on you, Avon."

"Blake, don't push me," Avon said, an edge of danger colouring his voice.

"I wouldn't dream of it. After all, why the hell do you think I waited all this time until you made it clear you wouldn't kill me out of hand?" Blake asked, thumb tracing Avon's lips.

Strong white teeth nipped the thumb, holding it hard for a moment. "I might still prove to be a black widow."

"That's a chance I shall simply have to take. But I don't think I need worry. I think you're too much of a man to devour me for loving you."

Avon's hand came up, cradling Blake's, the action speaking of his feelings. There was doubt in his voice, and concern. "And what if I hurt you, unintentionally?"

Blake heard 'her' echo in his voice, in the sudden flurry of pain. "Then you may apologise, very nicely, of course, and then we shall begin again."

"Such martyrdom." The voice was pleased.

"Such confidence."

"In yourself?"

"In you."

"You are a fool, Blake." The usual words, delivered without the usual sting.

"Am I? I think that of the two of us, Avon, you are the one who is the fool. I at least have the sense to live in the future, not in the past."

"The future, Blake," Avon said, with profound weariness, "never comes."

"Then why don't we compromise, and live in the present? Take each moment as it stands, and not try to hold you down?"

"That...is acceptable. Now, you have manipulated me into precisely the stance you wanted, so do shut up and go to sleep. Some of us have work to do tomorrow."

And as he lay safe, basking in the warmth of Blake's bulk, Avon did something he had not done for what seemed a lifetime.

He laid plans for the future.

II ...AND SUNDRY BASTARDS

Ah! But Avon isn't the primary bastard in the following stories. No, in this section we consider secrets and truth, and how things are not always what they seem to be. Just when you think you really know somebody...

HE WHO LAUGHS LAST... B. Sassenach

HE STOOD AT THE WINDOW STARING OUT AT THE THRONGS OF HUMANITY HURRYING FROM PLACE TO PLACE ON BUSINESS OR PLEASURE, UNDER THE FALSE BELIEF THAT THEIR LIVES WERE PRIVATE...UNKNOWN; but now, with Orac in his hands, no one in the known universe would be able to keep anything a secret from him and his move to become the supreme power in the Federation would soon be complete.

It was good to be home...to be himself again. The noise of the door sliding open behind him made him turn. The sight of the coveralled female thrown prostrate at his feet provoked a mirthless smile.

"Hello, Servalan."

Slowly, the dark head lifted from the floor. Painfully, she pushed up. Her eyes opened wide, staring incredulously at the man towering over her.

"You!" she croaked from her parched throat. "You...the Lord High Executioner? Impossible!" She shook her head trying to dismiss the preposterous notion from her mind.

"Good, I'm glad you're surprised. It means I did my job well."

Servalan climbed to her feet with as much dignity as she could muster. "You must excuse me," she said as she straightened her outfit, buying time to try and sort things out with this unexpected turn of events, "but I am still having a rather difficult time facing your brand of reality. Although, I suppose it does make a bizarre sort of sense," she admitted reluctantly. "You were, after all, with them from the very beginning on the *London*. Was Blake sanctioned?"

"Oh yes, but Blake was not my main target. You see, the Council had their eyes on you, and your ambition. They wanted you to believe you were suc-

ceeding, gaining popular support." He turned and toyed with a small decorative statuette on his desk. His voice softened. "And you almost succeeded. Blake's unexpected disappearance after Star One was fortuitous in dissipating your power, but that forced me to keep up my charade until we could dispense with him on Gauda Prime. He was, unfortunately, becoming too much of a liability."

His smile widened dangerously as he slowly removed his gun from its holster. Panic and fear filled the small woman's dark eyes. "No! No, listen to me. I know you have Orac. Together...you and I could be unbeatable."

A harsh laugh erupted from the Lord High Executioner. His eyes glistened with a feral cruelty. A sneer twisted his lips "Alone, Servalan, I am unbeatable. With you at my side, I'd be dead in a week."

His finger tightened on the trigger and the weapon barely kicked as it discharged its projectile. The silence returned, creeping back cautiously, carefully peeking around the corners before enveloping the occupants of the room. He stabbed at the comm button on his desk.

"Yes, Milord?"

"Misha, this room is a mess. Send someone to clean it up."

There was a short pause, and Misha's voice reflected his nervousness.

"Immediately, Milord."

He released the comm button and returned to the window, enjoying the view outside. "Milord," he whispered to himself. "Yeah, I like the sound of that."

Tarrant groaned and straightened as he finished zipping up his pants, the toilet automatically flush-

ing as he stood for a moment watching the red life fluid swirl away. He'd been urinating blood for two days and he knew by the way his back felt that his interrogators had done some impressive damage to his kidneys.

Turning, he glared at the glazed eyed buddha sitting, cross legged and silent, in the corner. Dragging one leg, the pilot painfully made his way to the opposite side of the room and scooted down the wall. They sat, squared off like two fighters in an arena. Tarrant studied the man in front of him. Bruised and battered, his lip split in three places, Avon's left hand was swollen to uselessness, probably every bone in it crushed. He imagined the tech's pain was at least equal to his own, but Avon never said a word, never gave any indication of what he felt.

Avon ate when forced, slept and stared. He acted as if the interrogators had mindwiped him. Tarrant shook his head and looked away. *If they have, he thought ruefully, they've lost the most brilliant computer genius in the Federation and beyond.*

And that bewildered him. He knew Servalan understood Avon's value; even without Orac, the tech was far from superfluous. The more he thought about their situation the less sense it made. Day in, day out, they were questioned and beaten as if Servalan were extracting retribution before having them executed. But if this was the case, then where was she? The former Supreme Commander, ex-President of the Federation, had never once set foot inside their prison to gloat over the victory of their capture three weeks before.

The tired, young pilot ran his hands through his curly brown hair and sighed. "It just doesn't make any sense, does it, Avon?"

Again he tried to talk to the tech, but his words brought no reaction whatsoever. Tarrant rested his head on his knees and waited for the time when they would come to get him. To ask him the same questions they had asked for three weeks. To receive the same truthful answers he'd given them for three weeks. And it wouldn't matter, because he suspected things were coming to a head and with the way his body felt and the lack of medical attention, this might easily be the last beating he could endure.

The sound of the cell door opening startled him. He struggled to his feet, but instead of the guards coming in to drag him or Avon to their deaths, they pushed two women inside. Tarrant's eyes widened and he laughed, stumbling toward them. The women had to catch him before he fell.

"Dayna! Soolin! Thank god you're alive." He captured Dayna's face between his hands and kissed her. Shakily, he encased Soolin in a hug and to his surprise she returned it. "But why the hell have they put you in here?"

Soolin smirked. "They told us we'd be easier to watch if we were all together. They plan to kill us in the morning."

Without warning, the pilot's knees buckled, but with his friend's help, he slid gently to the floor.

"Oh, Tarrant," Dayna tenderly touched his face, "they've certainly done a job on you."

Tarrant nodded and smiled crookedly. "Looks like you weren't spared our host's hospitality, either."

The girls exchanged quick glances. "Nothing like you," Soolin murmured, "or him, for that matter." She nodded to the man in the corner who didn't seem to register their presence.

Dayna scooted across the floor on hands and knees to Avon. She stared long and hard at the tech. "Avon?" There was no reaction. She looked over her shoulder at Tarrant. "Have they...?" she tried to ask, but the words caught in her throat.

"Mindwiped him?" Tarrant finished for her. "I think so. He's like a zombie. He takes care of his bodily functions, but nothing else. They take him out and beat him on a daily basis, but because he doesn't respond, I think the interrogators are getting a bit bored."

Dayna got up and walked back to her friends huddled in the far corner. For several minutes, they studied the unmoving, glassy-eyed shape regretfully.

"It's a shame...a damned shame." Soolin shook her head, focusing her attention back on her two comrades. "What happened to Vila?" she asked.

Tarrant shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know. I haven't seen or heard anything about him."

"That's odd."

"Very," Tarrant agreed, his brow furrowed with thought, "but I don't think he's dead. He's more of a survivor than any of us, but..."

"But what?" Dayna looked up catching his eye.

"I've been thinking—when I've been conscious, that is. I really haven't had much external stimuli to interfere with me, not with him being the way he is."

"What have you been thinking?" Dayna prompted, but a curious look passed between the two women.

"About Vila. I mean, I haven't known him as long as Avon, but even in the time I've been around him, I've noticed considerable incongruities in his person-

ality. For instance, that time he knew how to utilise the forcewall to make a work environment so Avon and I could repair the damage that asteroid did to *Scorpio*. Despite his little story, that wasn't exactly classic Delta thinking."

"Yes," Soolin confirmed, "and he was just pretending to be drunk to manipulate you and Avon into doing the dangerous work yourselves."

"He did what?"

"With consummate skill, at that," Dayna added. "Before that, when the space enzymes were eating the *Liberator* and there were only the two of us left aboard, he just sort of took over. I mean, Tarrant, you should have seen the transformation. His voice, his attitude, even the way he stood, just changed. Suddenly, as I look back on it, he wasn't Delta anymore, he was definitely an Alpha. And he knew quite a lot about Zen's inner workings. A lot more than he should have."

Soolin nodded. "Not to mention how strange it was that he could pick so many Federation locks so easily. I put it down to his being a master thief...the best of the best, as he was always saying. But then again, I remember a story Avon told me once about a Federation installation where Vila had to bypass the recognition coding system to get in. That would have taken major computer knowledge, not the kind of thing Deltas are taught at their grade level."

Tarrant looked from one serious face to the other, "You know where this line of speculation is taking us, don't you?" He shook his head. "No, no it's just too preposterous." But the pilot hesitated, unable to get his mind off of the facts that had been presented. Suddenly the pieces began to fall into place. "But if it were true, then that would explain why Vila was so anxious to stay on board the *Liberator* and work the teleport when Avon went after Servalan and Councillor Chesku on Earth. He knew who Chesku was married to and I'll lay a bet Anna Grant...Bartolomew knew him. It also explains about the Federation officer on G.P. The way he flattened her, well, those moves weren't those of a street fighter, they were the moves of someone trained at the Academy." Tarrant sat up straighter. "What's more, he wasn't afraid of that officer, he was nervous...worried that she would give him away."

Dayna's eyes locked with Tarrant's. "He knew she wouldn't shoot him because she *knew* him! The little bastard!"

Tarrant struggled to his feet and stared down at the two women. "That little worm was..."

"...a Federation spy," the soft voice from the corner finished for him. All heads turned and three sets of eyes fixed on the statue in the corner. "From the very beginning, even from before the *London*."

Life began to sparkle again in the deep brown eyes. "It wasn't Blake who betrayed me...who manipulated me..." his eyes narrowed with hate, "who *used me!*"

The statue came to life, stretching out his legs. His fingers worked feverishly, ripping the seam along the right inner thigh of his pants.

"Avon, what are you doing?"

The eyes fixed on the young man, mesmerizing him with their dangerous, bestial glare. Avon struggled to his feet and headed for the door to their cell, clutching a small object in the palm of his hand. He leaned down to the primitive lock and Tarrant could make out the shape of a sonic lockpick.

"I am going hunting..." the pick hummed softly in the tech's fingers, "for a Federation rodent called Vila Restal." The pick beeped, indicating it had finished its job. Avon stood up and smiled tightly at the three in the corner. "I have a score to settle with *him!*" The smile widened, emphasizing the look of insanity they'd witnessed before Gauda Prime. "Care to join me?"

Vila sat, silent, contemplative, sipping on a small snifter of brandy in his sumptuous library. He enjoyed being back in his family home. Orac hummed quietly on the dark oak table next to him. A low fire cast dancing shadows around the room. He watched them, impassively, thinking. Avon's escape had been...unfortunate and his bloody reign of terror set him at the top of the Federation's hit list. Many had tried to get the *Scorpio's* former crew, but all had failed...as he had known they would and now, as fate would have it, the job had fallen to him: a job he knew he would one day be forced to do because Avon would have it no other way. He had planned well for this contingency. His tutors had been some of the finest psychostrategists the Federation had to offer and he'd had four years to lay the ground roots of his scheme.

The High Council had become a bit of a problem. In return for his continued anonymity, they had insisted he...remove the thorny Avon and the rest of *Scorpio's* old crew from their tender political backsides. He took another sip of his brandy. Avon, he thought sadly, *if only you'd waited another month. I would be rid of the High Council and I could've given you all of my attention. As it stands...*

“Any further information, Orac?”

Negative.

“Avon’s smart. He’s stayed away from any system you could tap into. He’s only made one mistake, and that was using that computer on Misgot, but that was probably deliberate. His way of telling me he knows.”

Gone was the soft Delta accent and demeanor, replaced by cool, calculated Alpha tones and phrases. “Ah, Avon,” Vila sighed wistfully, “you were my greatest challenge. My crowning achievement. You kept me on my toes because you were so...mercurial, so unpredictable—even before the *London*. No one has been half as much fun as you.”

I have information.

The little supercomputer’s words startled Vila from his revelry. “All right, Orac, what is it?”

A message.

Vila’s eyes widened and a small grin creased his face. “From Avon?”

Yes.

“Then give it to me.”

I can make a direct voice link if you wish.

The grin broadened to a smile. “Yes,” he said and then hesitated a second. “Can you trace the communication to its source?”

Possibly.

“Then try. Now open the channel.”

Several minutes passed. Orac’s lights blinked erratically, almost going out.

“Orac?” Vila sat forward, worry furrowing his brow as he took the computer in his hands. “What’s wrong?”

“*Nothing’s wrong with him, he’s just very glad I’m here. Hello, Vila. Or is there some other name you would prefer?*”

Another smile replaced the former thief’s look of concern. “It will do, Avon. Besides you would probably feel uncomfortable calling me anything else.”

“*Yes, you’re probably right.*” Vila could hear the amusement in Avon’s voice. “*Do you miss me, Vila?*”

The Lord High Executioner frowned at the odd question. “Miss you?”

Vila could almost see the smirk on Avon’s face. “*Still having difficulty with the simplest of answers, are you, Vila? Allow me to repeat myself. Do you miss me?*”

Vila thought for a moment. Avon never asked a question without a reason and it was peculiar that this particular question related so closely to what he had been mumbling to himself. The odds against it being coincidence were staggering.

But, his rational mind informed him, what else could it be? “Yes, Avon, I miss you...terribly. It’s been such an intolerable bore here. Bureaucrats! I’d forgotten what a complete nuisance they were until I had to deal with them again.” He paused. “But why do you ask? When I see you next, I shall have to kill you, you know. I really haven’t any choice, I’m afraid. Oh, I know you or Tarrant or even Dayna will make some futile attempt at getting me, but...”

“Futile attempt? You’re very confident of our failure, aren’t you. Is there, by any chance, a reason for that?”

Vila bit his lip, chastising himself for his foolish slip of the tongue. The soft life these past few months had taken it toll, blunting his edge. “Avon, be reasonable. They aren’t my targets. They are very small fish in a very large pond. All I want is you and if you hadn’t begun this irrational, blind retaliation of yours against the Federation, I could’ve left all of you alone for the rest of your lives. Honestly, I would have, but you forced my hand.”

“Oh, I am sorry, Vila.” An inaudible whisper interrupted their conversation. “*Just a moment, Vila.*” Avon broke the link. Vila took the time to check Orac, but it seemed to be functioning adequately now. “*Vila?*”

“I haven’t gone anywhere, Avon.”

“You have no idea how glad I am to hear that.”

A familiar hum filled the room. Vila jumped up from his chair, but a blast from Avon’s weapon destroyed the desk drawer which held his gun. He stepped back, hands in the air. Slowly, he turned to face his old friend, a smile spreading from ear to ear. “I’ve missed you, Avon.”

The tech tilted his head slightly to one side and returned the smile. “Have you now?”

“Surely, you don’t intend to kill me, now do you, Avon?”

“Oh, but that is precisely what I intend to do.” The tech walked slowly to Vila’s large comfortable chair and sat down. He never took his eyes off the expensively dressed man and the gun never wavered from its fixed position over Vila’s heart.

“May I lower my arms?”

Avon nodded, “why not? But if you try anything I’ll kill you sooner.”

“Perhaps.” Vila’s smile started to fade as he dropped his hands. “Why haven’t you killed me already?”

“There are some questions I want answered.”

“I’ll just bet there are.”

Avon frowned. Vila’s lack of concern for his future was not what he had expected, but then again,

he had to remind himself, that he was no longer dealing with an easily frightened Delta thief. The man who stood before him was a stranger, one of the Federation's finest undercover agents. The elite of the elite. A killer and a master psychostrategist. Rationality demanded caution, but Avon had lost his rationality when he'd lost his mind.

"I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED YOU, AVON," Vila began, his voice suddenly low, sweetly seductive, the words pronounced with a strange slowness and utmost clarity, "ONLY YOU. YOU ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN MY LIFE, AS I AM THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN YOURS." His eyes, staring into Avon's, never wavering, glistened brightly in the failing light from the fire. His tongue ran teasingly over his lips.

Avon felt a wave of disorientation crash over him. Vila's words, their sound, their meaning, broke against him like the tide against the shore, shocking him into an almost paralytic immobility of both mental reason and physical reaction. His weapon swayed to the side. He tried to look away from the former thief, but vivid images of their nights together filled his mind. Confused by his body's reaction to Vila's words, he shifted his position, only barely relieving some of the sexual tension that was building within himself. He felt uncontrollably drawn to the man.

"What the hell are you doing to me?" he finally managed to ask.

Vila smiled tenderly, stepping up beside the tech. He ran a finger down the side of Avon's cheek and across his lips, pleased when Avon kissed his finger as it passed. Leaning down, he whispered, "I control you, Avon. I *conditioned* you from the very start. You can't hurt me. Now put the gun down."

Like an automaton, completely unable to resist the instructions, Avon did as he was told. Vila smiled, knowingly, and began his lecture. "You see, my love, in my studies I found out what you needed, something you never had in your life...love. I gave it to you in full measure. I loved you without reservation. I even encouraged you to give yourself to those who were doomed to betray you."

"Blake," Avon whispered.

"And Anna. You never told her about me, did you? If only you had, Avon, she would've warned you about me. She knew me, you see. I was the one who talked her superiors into shutting you down early. I was the one who got her out of the way."

"And Cally?"

Vila straightened. "Oh, Cally was for you. I encouraged your relationship with her because, if you

think back, it was during a time when you were questioning your sexuality or rather, your homosexuality. Your psych profile showed you were basically heterosexual, but with love manipulating you...you were willing to do anything for it, even have intercourse with a man." Vila leaned over, draping his arms around Avon, reaching down to stroke the rigid shaft so clearly outlined by the leather trousers. He nibbled on Avon's tender earlobe, letting his tongue delve deeply into the tech's ear. Avon moaned, leaning into the wet warmth.

"No, please," he begged. The tongue receded.

"Get up, Avon. Come with me."

Avon pushed weakly out of the chair. "What...what are you going to do with me?" He could barely find the will to question his former lover; he felt horrifyingly helpless.

"Do with you, Avon?" Vila chuckled, slipping an arm about the tech's waist, steering him toward the bedroom. "Why, I'm going to fuck you one more time. I'm going to get a little more information from you, such as how you found me. I suspect you've built a computer that Orac can't tap into and I want to know where it is. It's probably with the others, so I'll be required to exterminate them to get at it." He saw the deep distress in Avon's eyes. "But of course, I may spare them if you please me."

"And then you'll kill me."

"Alas, I must." Vila gripped the collar of Avon's shirt and ripped it to his waist. Avon trembled uncontrollably under the touch as cool fingers pinched brown nipples sending electric shocks through his body. Lips followed fingers, sucking, lapping at them until they were firm. "Take your trousers off and get into bed, on your back. When I take you I want to see your face because I'm going to kill you when you orgasm."

"That could be quite a deterrent for premature ejaculation," Avon replied, more than a little startled that Vila's control of him did not seem to extend to his wit.

Vila laughed. "Yes, it certainly could. Now get into bed. I'll be back in a moment." On his way to the library, he unbuttoned his shirt and unfastened the waistband of his trousers. Picking up Avon's gun, he released the clip, checked it and after he was satisfied it was in good working order he returned it to its home. With a smile, he unzipped his trousers as he went back for his last assignation with the Alpha who'd abused him more than any person in his life.

He planned to make Avon beg for more and then, after he'd given it to him, he'd kill him. It was a thrill

he had missed all those years he was stuck aboard the *Liberator* and then the *Scorpio*. He usually liked to do it with his hands, to choke or smother his victim, but he wanted to see Avon's face clearly when he shot him through the left ventricle. It would take several seconds for Avon to realize he was dead and in those brief instants he wanted to see Avon as he said the trigger words and released him from his conditioning. He wanted to bask in the dissolution of the tech's life force. Though the benefits were short-lived, they were exhilarating...and addictive.

Avon lay atop the bedcovers: naked and ready. Vila kicked his shoes off and dropped his shirt and trousers to the floor. Climbing onto the bed between Avon's spread legs, he rested his weight on the slightly larger man. Lips sought lips, teeth willingly parting allowing Vila the dominance he had always held over Avon, even if it was only in the bedroom. He pulled back letting Avon catch his gasping breath.

"I want you to suck me, Avon, until I come, and then I want you to get me hard again so I can fuck you in the arse," he said, giving special emphasis to the crude word borrowed from his Delta persona. "Just remember, Avon, if you come I'll kill you." To make his point, he pressed Avon's gun to the side of its owner's head.

Vila enjoyed the feel of Avon surrounding him; he had been denied this particular 'pleasure' for several months now, so within minutes he more than filled the generous mouth. Still slick with cum, he moved down the tech's body, his tongue lapping at a tiny pearl at the tip of Avon's shaft. "Poor Avon," he murmured, glancing up to look at Avon's face, a moment of real sympathy slipping through. "I know how *difficult* this must be," he added with malicious delight. He smoothed back the foreskin and let his tongue dance around the sensitive glans. Avon couldn't stop the upward thrust of his hips and Vila laughed at the struggling, sweaty man.

Climbing over the wriggling body, he took a tube of lubricant from the drawer, and put a generous portion on the end of his gun. "On your side," he commanded, turning so they were face to groin. "Now get me hard again."

Slowly, trying his best to resist, Avon found he was unable to stop. He drew Vila's cock once again into his mouth and after a few seconds of reluctance, seemed to give himself over to the inevitability of the situation. Parting the tech's legs, Vila bypassed his straining member and toyed with the tight opening to his body. Avon's deep throated moans soon roused him.

"On your back." Wordlessly, the tech complied. "Now pull your knees up to your chest." Again, obedience. Passion flushed Avon's face and chest. Wild anticipation seemed to have banished any fear he may have had. Spreading the muscled cheeks wide, Vila pushed the tip of the gun past the tight sphincter. He leaned into the tech, driving the cold, hard steel in deeper.

"I could kill you now, but I won't." He moved the weapon back and forth, licking the underside of Avon's rock solid shaft with his tongue. "Tell me where your new computer is, Avon."

"Ship," Avon groaned, pulling his knees up tighter.

"Where is the ship?"

"Grid 722, mark 17."

"Have the others got orders to destroy it if you don't come back?"

Avon swallowed hard and the word squeaked by the heavy lump in his throat. "Yes."

"What a pity. You just signed their death warrants, Avon."

"No."

Vila smiled, "No?" He started, pretending to misunderstand, "You want me to stop?"

"No, please, no."

"Wouldn't I feel better in you than this?" He jammed the barrel of the gun in further to make his point.

Avon gasped at the sudden pain. "Yes."

"What?"

"Yes...please."

Slowly removing the gun, Vila replaced it with his now rigid shaft and revelled in the exquisite pain he caused Avon by the abrupt entry. He glanced at the clock by his bed, realizing he had only a half hour before he was to meet with a member of the High Council. With a sigh, he plunged ahead, thrusting deep and hard, feeling the urgency building in his groin, an urgency which demanded completion. He knew there were only a few seconds left to him.

"I'm going to do you a favour, Avon." Vila grabbed Avon's hand and wrapped it around his firm cock. "I'm going to set you free before I kill you. Now listen carefully, Avon. WHITE ROSE."

Avon stiffened slightly. He shook his head as if to clear it, but he didn't stop what he was doing; nothing else seemed to matter except completion for both of them. He tossed his head side to side, eyes wild, working with a furious passion.

Vila exploded first into the untamed creature he

was buried in. Startled but thrilled, he was caught completely off balance by Avon's scream of release, a violent eruption sending streaming white ribbons of semen onto his chest. He braced himself with one arm and pressed the barrel of the gun to Avon's heart, starting to squeeze the trigger. It took him a moment to realize he was in pain. Not in his groin, but in his chest. He loosened his grip on his gun and tried to take a deep breath, but all he felt was blood, warm and stifling, rush up and fill his mouth. He attempted to cough to clear the obstruction, spilling bright red fluid over Avon's chest. His body and his penis spasmed as he dropped dead onto his intended victim.

"Are you all right, Avon?"

The tech lay silent for a moment before the glazed look in his eyes cleared and he focused in on Soolin. Complete and utter disgust graced his sculpted lips. "Get this *thing* off of me."

Vila's limp corpse pooled like melted butter on the floor, the quickly congealing blood still slowly oozing from it. Avon looked down at the mess. No alarms blared. No guards tried to force entry. No one seemed to take notice of the sound of a blaster being fired in the middle of the night. Perhaps it had be-

come too common of an occurrence for anyone to care.

"In the back, Soolin? Not exactly sporting, was it?"

A distasteful sneer creased the pretty face. "Probably, but no less than the little bastard deserved." Avon turned and went directly to the shower with Soolin close on his heels. "Besides, I didn't have the time to be more creative. I only had a few seconds to teleport down here when you turned off your homing device." She hesitated before asking her original question again. "Are you certain you're all right?"

"Yes." She could hear him clearly despite the roar of the cascading water. "He did exactly what I predicted he would do. He said the release code words. The conditioning is broken."

The water ceased and Avon stepped out, dripping wet. Without a word, he gathered the tall blonde in his arms and kissed her passionately. "Now, does that get rid of any doubts you may have?"

The mercenary leaned back with a smile, ignoring her sopping clothes. "Why Avon, I've never doubted you."

He smiled the first sane smile she'd ever seen on his face. "Come on, let's get out of this place. I never did like graveyards."

APPEARANCES

Sean Charles

WALKING UP BEHIND HIM, AVON GAVE VILA A FIRM, BUT GENTLE SHOVE INTO HIS CABIN. He shut the door after, not bothering to lock it. He knew that it would be neither effective nor needed to keep the thief in the room and no one else would dare to enter. Leaving Vila standing there gaping and confused, Avon turned away and began to undress himself. He felt the heat of Vila's widened eyes on his back as he stripped off the tight black leather tunic he wore, deliberately today without anything underneath it. He breathed in the heady, sensuous smell of body-warmed leather.

He broke himself from his reverie and whirled on his boot heel to face Vila. "Well?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Um...Ay-v..." The thief's protestations were broken off by Avon's grabbing him by the front of his perpetually rumpled tunic.

"Not fast enough, Delta." The dark man tore the cloth open, ignoring fasteners, and pulled it from Vila's body. "But then I always knew you were slow." Quickly and roughly, he stripped the quivering man.

Avon took two steps back, eyeing Vila's naked form, taking in the view. Unexpectedly, and utterly charmingly, Vila blushed a bright pink all over under the scrutiny of the Alpha-élite computer technician. Avon felt his cock swell, the leather of his trousers constricting and rubbing his sensitive flesh. He touched himself with the palm of his hand, running his thumb along the leather-clad length of his growing organ. Vila's eyes were transfixed.

"You will do anything I want you to, won't you, Delta?" He put an odd emphasis on the last word.

Vila started to nod before the words came out. "Yes, Avon."

"I rather thought so." Avon had to struggle to keep from smiling as the thief blushed again. "The evidence is quite...obvious." He directed his gaze down to Vila's rising penis. Avon stepped forward, reaching out his hand to brush the tip. "I'm glad to see that the popular myth about the...service grades is not unfounded." He wrapped his hand around the shaft and stroked Vila to full erection. "But then, that is what we breed you for. Obedience, docility and...potency. I trust you will prove to be as much a member of your grade in that as in your usual lack of intelligence."

Vila breathed heavily. "I won't disappoint you, Avon," he said, leering.

Quickly, Avon brought his hand up and slapped Vila's face, a little harder than just playfully. "You wouldn't dare, Vila," he said, menacingly and pushed the thief backwards onto the bed.

Vila looked up at him expectantly, with more than a touch of fear in his eyes, but flush with desire. "You arrogant Alpha bastard!" he taunted, rubbing his cheek. "You're goin' to have to make me."

Avon chuckled low in his throat as one-handed, he loosened the buckle of his studded leather belt. "Oh now, Vila, what would be the challenge in that? I imagine anyone with a cock could 'make' you and probably has." Not taking his eyes off the sprawled thief, Avon slowly removed the belt from its loops.

Vila gasped and a look of utter terror crossed his features. Avon laid the belt aside. Vila's eyes were drawn to the bright chromed pyramid studs.

Avon followed his gaze, then turned his attention back to the thief. "You're very easy, aren't you?"

Vila swallowed and nodded fiercely, unable to voice a reply.

Avon stood between his spread knees, bent and grasped his shoulders, pulling him to sit up. He turned Vila's face up with one hand and bent to kiss him, forcing his tongue into the thief's warm, wet mouth. Vila closed his eyes and opened to the kiss, gently countering Avon's ferocity. He felt something cold fall heavily against his back. He pulled away, eyes wide, and stiffened.

Avon had draped the belt across Vila's back and shoulder, studs pointed inward. Avon grasped the belt and shoulder, pressing hard with his hand. "Leave it, Vila," he warned. "As long as you please me, it'll stay right there." He reached down and hung the belt around Vila's neck, dangling the ends over his chest, playfully brushing the end into one of the thief's nipples.

Vila looked into the dark, predator's eyes. "I'll do whatever you say, Avon."

"Then suck me, Vila." Avon stood straight, tilting his hips forward. Vila reached for the snap at the waistband of the leather trousers.

Avon slapped his hand away. "I didn't tell you to

touch me, Delta!" he said sharply, grabbing the thief's wrist and holding it tightly.

"I'm sorry!" Vila pleaded, letting his hand go limp, offering no struggle.

Avon let go. "Better," he said. "Try again." He stroked Vila's head, brushing the fine hair aside. Avon rested his hand on the back of the thief's neck, pressing gently on the belt.

Vila leaned forward and nuzzled the leather-clad bulge of Avon's erection. The tech's hand was relaxed and heavy, but not insistent or guiding, so Vila was free to indulge himself. He brushed his lips over the taut leather, ran his teeth along the ridges made by Avon's cock and balls, lost in the sensations his mouth and cheek felt as he sucked on Avon through the second skin. The scent of leather mingled with Avon's own natural scent, and always, there was the surrounding, warm presence of Avon's hand. He licked at the top of the waistband, where the snap was opened, entwined his tongue in the curling hairs there, delving wetly in and around Avon's navel. Carefully, he nuzzled the zipper, finding the pull with his teeth and easing it down. With deft motions of his mouth and face, Vila worked to free Avon's cock and then his balls from the confining, too-tight leather.

Avon's cock was glistening with sweat and precome. Vila parted his lips and bent to surround the head. Avon's hand tightened. Vila paused, barely an inch from his goal.

"You want to suck it, don't you?" Avon stroked the back of Vila's head. He ran his fingers over Vila's cheek, turning Vila's face up and tracing the line of lower lip with his thumb. Vila moaned softly, opening his mouth wider. Avon smiled. "You can always tell a Delta cocksucker by the way he opens his mouth if you touch his lips." Vila reddened. Avon stepped back and lazily stroked himself. "So, does the Delta want to suck my prick?" he asked insolently.

Vila slid off the edge of the bed onto his knees. "Yes!" he breathed, leaning forward.

Avon stepped back again; his hand cupped around his balls and his thumb circled the base of his cock. "Ask for it, Vila."

"Avon, can I suck your prick?" Vila leaned forward again. His own cock was rampant between his legs. He desperately wanted to touch it, but more desperately wanted to touch Avon.

"*Beg* for it, Delta." Avon stepped back yet again.

"Please, Avon. Please let me suck you. I really want to. I'm really good, Avon, honest."

Avon grinned. "I'll just bet you are. Deltas are good for something at least."

"C'mon, Avon, please?"

Avon stepped back until he leaned against the wall. His hand stroked himself, tantalizing the thief. "Crawl for it, cocksucker," he said easily.

Vila dropped to all fours and crawled, looking up at Avon, whose gaze was fixed on his ass. He lifted his hips slightly and inched forward.

"Not like that, Vila," Avon corrected. "On your belly. I want to see your pretty Delta arse squirm."

Vila eased himself forward. The position was awkward. Avon's belt was still around his neck and the studs pressed into his chest as he moved. Because of his own erection, he couldn't comfortably lie flat, so he lifted his hips and balanced on his knees, which pressed his chest harder to the cold floor and ground the studs almost painfully into him. He did have to admit, imagining himself from Avon's perspective, that it was an enticing position. It made Vila very aware of the vulnerability of his ass and of his urgent desire for the computer tech; it presented, he was sure, a lovely view, as well. He crawled to Avon.

Vila lay still at Avon's feet. "That was very nice, Delta." Avon's breathing was uneven.

Vila got to his knees and settled on his haunches, waiting, watching Avon's hand stroke his cock. "Please, Avon?" he asked, looking up. Avon nodded almost imperceptibly.

Vila sighed and leaned forward, letting his lips brush the tip of Avon's shaft. He moaned slightly as sensitive flesh touched sensitive flesh. His tongue slid wetly over his lips and he lapped the swollen head of Avon's prick. He gently laved the entire shaft, exploring its contours, feeling it stiffen. When he reached the base, he licked Avon's thumb which still circled there. Snaking his tongue under the hand and prying it away with his mouth, Vila took first one ball and then the other into his mouth, teeth gently nipping at the thin skin.

Avon's fingers tangled in Vila's soft, fine hair, grabbing two handfuls. "*Now*, you damn tease," he hissed. "You wanted to suck it, well, do so!" He pulled Vila's head away and pressed his cock against the slightly parted lips.

Vila opened his mouth and Avon pulled him down on the shaft. Quickly, Vila swallowed as Avon thrust the entire length down his throat. He opened to it, pressing his tongue up along the underside, making soft, moaning sounds as he struggled to accommodate Avon's rather large endowment.

Avon held tightly to Vila's head and moved it up and down his cock. "Oh Vila," he moaned, "that's good." He watched the thief's mouth surround him. Vila's eyes were shut, his face contorted in a mixture of pleasure and pain. Avon pulled hard on his head. Vila's mouth opened even wider and he gasped. Avon filled him with his cock. "That's right, Delta. Suck it," Avon breathed. He moved Vila's head faster. "Delta cocksucker."

Avon loosened his grip on Vila's hair, but the thief needed no prodding to continue. Avon's hand found the belt still draped around Vila's neck. He slid it free, dragging the studs across his bowed back. "Ah, Vila," Avon moaned as the thief sought to distract him with pleasure.

Avon was not easily distracted. Vila felt the belt loosely encircle his throat like a collar. Avon held the ends together—a leash. Avon pulled.

"Enough of that," Avon said sharply.

Vila let Avon's cock slide from his mouth, but teased at it with his tongue. Avon stepped away and headed for the bed, still holding the belt ends. Vila was jerked from his position and scrambled across the floor where Avon led him.

The Alpha sat on the edge of the bed. "Take my boots off, Vila." Vila began to do so. "Quickly," he added, his cock aching for attention. "Now the trousers." He lifted his ass and Vila deftly pulled the skin-tight leather from his legs. "Now, on the bed, Delta."

Vila clambered up onto the bunk while Avon held the belt, guiding him to lie on his stomach. Avon stood by the bed. He slapped Vila's ass, leaving a reddened handprint. "Push your arse up. I want you ready for me." Avon knelt behind the thief and grasped Vila's cock.

"Avon!" Vila cried out desperately, arching higher and pressing himself into Avon's hand.

Avon let go and Vila moaned. He kneaded the spread mounds of Vila's ass, rubbing his thumbs into the ridge behind his balls; his fingers dug into the tender flesh. He slapped Vila again. The thief made a sharp cry. Leaning forward, Avon retrieved his belt from where it lay under Vila's neck. He carefully draped it over the rise of Vila's ass and the thief quivered. Avon slapped him again.

"Avon!"

"Yes, Vila?" Avon responded innocently, rubbing his hand over the warmed red skin.

Vila bit into the pillow and moaned.

Avon laughed softly. "I thought so." He reached for the lubricant, squeezing a little of the cold oil di-

rectly onto Vila's hot asshole and rubbing more, warmed in his palm, on his cock.

"S cold!" the thief yelped.

"I'll warm it for you, Vila," Avon purred, rubbing a finger along the Delta's slicked ass. He picked up the belt in his right hand and folded it, leather outward.

"No, Avon! Please!" Vila begged. Avon laid the leather against Vila's ass. The thief calmed. Still massaging Vila's ass, his thumb probing the opening, the tech carefully re-folded his belt. Vila's cock stiffened.

The belt hit, metal studs leaving rows of whitened welts. Vila screamed and fell forward onto the bed, grinding his erection into the mattress then uncontrollably arching his ass up again. Avon entered him, roughly pulling him up to meet his thrust. His left hand kneaded the welts and held Vila firm; with his right, reached around the thief's hips, found his still-hard prick and stroked it.

Avon's onslaught was merciless. "Oh, Avon, please! Fuck...ow! Yes! No!" His cries were incoherent.

Avon ignored them all, driving into Vila, pulling on his prick, kneading and slapping his ass and the too-sore, now bruising welts. His own obscenities, moaned low and guttural, mingled with Vila's pleading ones. Vila screamed in frustration and pain as he felt Avon suddenly pulled out of him.

"What the *hell* are you doing!" Blake shouted, dragging Avon back by the hair.

"I would think that was obvious," Avon hissed, his eyes narrow and dangerous.

Blake's fist pounded into his sneering mouth.

"No, Blake! Don't!" Vila scrambled around and tried to pull the big man away from the semiconscious tech. "Stop it!"

Avon shook his head sharply for one dizzy moment, a bitter look on his face, his eyes locking with Vila's.

Vila ignored him. It was wrong, it was all very wrong, and it wasn't fair. "Blake," he tried to explain, pulling a sheet to cover himself and the 'evidence', "I wanted him to...we were just..."

"You don't have to defend your rapist!" Blake interrupted. "I heard...I saw what happened!" He slapped Avon hard and a trickle of blood slid from Avon's cracked, lower lip. Avon glared at the man holding him by the hair like a trapped animal. Blake looked at him with contempt. "I ought to throw you off this ship, now, in mid-flight!"

"Really?" Avon drawled. "Even the Federation

does not exact such a strict penalty for simply using one of the service grades, Blake.” Avon’s eyes burned, but his words were sarcastically cool. “I’m sure they will be amused to know that *you* are so morally pure.”

Blake released Avon, pushing him away. “Oh, you’ll live, Avon, though you don’t deserve to,” Blake spat. “Get dressed!” He threw the leather trousers at the computer tech.

“Blake, please!” Vila tried again. He was tangled in the sheet and pulled on it. The belt hit the floor. Vila tried to grab for it, but was too late. Blake picked it up.

“I suppose you used this on him!” Blake brought the belt down full force across Avon’s back as he bent, putting on his trousers. Avon stiffened, then continued to pull up his clothes, ignoring the blood that streamed down his back. Vila whimpered.

“It’s all right now, Vila.” Blake tried to draw the frightened thief into a reassuring embrace. The thief skittered away. Blake nodded his sympathetic understanding.

“No, Blake, you don’t understand! I really wanted Avon...asked for it...that’s what I...”

“Shut up, Vila.” Avon’s voice was heavy and cold. “I have been tried and convicted. That is plain enough.” He turned to Blake and flashed him a wide smile. “You won’t mention this to the others?”

“Fearing for your cool, reserved, distant Alpha reputation, Avon?” Blake countered.

Avon shrugged. “It is Vila’s already dubious reputation that is at stake. Mine is hardly likely to matter long.” He pulled on his tunic, not wincing as the leather drew across the wounds. He held out his hand for his belt. Blake tossed it at him and he bent to pick it up.

“I don’t believe you care anything for him, or anyone other than yourself,” Blake snarled.

“As you like,” Avon responded, pulling his belt tight, ignoring his own blood on it.

Blake turned to the thief. “You’re safe now, Vila. That won’t ever happen again.”

Vila started to object, but again saw Avon almost imperceptibly shake his head. He felt small and miserable...and ignored. The fight was between the two Alphas. He was just something to be fought over—a point to be won.

Blake opened the door and stood back from it. “I’ll take you down to medical myself. Cally doesn’t have to know unless you’re too badly hurt for me to take care of.”

Vila gave Avon one last, questioning look. The computer technician’s face was blank. Vila wrapped

himself in the sheet. “I’m all right, Blake. Not hurt, I mean, not physically. Nothing I haven’t had before.” Avon’s eyes flashed. “I’d rather be alone.”

“If you’re certain?” Blake said, concerned.

“I’m certain.”

Vila left Avon’s room and headed for his own cabin. He felt sick. *Avon, I got you into this mess, why won’t you let me get you out?* He locked his door behind him and went for the shower. *As if I could. As if Blake or any other damned person on this ship ever listens to me!*

Alone again in his cabin, Avon silently contemplated the smoothed, once-crumpled printout. *Technical Manual*, the cover read, and in Vila’s small, rounded letters, *The Care and Feeding of the Delta Service Grades*. Three pages of rough, unpolished, crude but imaginative porn followed, ending with more handwriting: “For a spot of fun, call D.E.L.T.A.” He carefully folded it and put it into his pocket with another bit of folded paper. Another memento of a time also brief and also sweet.

After enough time had passed that Vila would be out of medical if he had gone there, Avon went to his door. It was locked. He smiled wryly. *If I had thought to do that before...*

In the bathroom, he undressed, peeling blood-soaked leather gingerly from his back, daubing it with a wet towel. He bit back his anger and laid on yet another layer of emotional armour.

Blake took the night watch—Avon’s watch. He was finally alone on the flight deck. He had snapped and growled at the others all day, much to their bewilderment. When asked where Avon was, he told them that Avon was ill. No one asked about Vila, as it was not uncommon for the thief to go missing, especially when there was work to be done. They had interpreted Blake’s mood as concern for the computer tech and Cally had offered to go to see him. Blake sharply rebuffed her and then refused to explain.

He had come very close to telling Gan what the trouble really was. The big man was Vila’s closest friend on the *Liberator*. But Blake had seen his temper flare in the past and knew that while unable to kill, he could *hurt* quite well and knew also that the strain that put on his limiter caused him pain. He would not put off the responsibility for Avon’s punishment onto someone else. Instead, he ordered Zen to keep Avon’s door locked to any voice but his and set the ship on course for Rell-3, standard by eight.

Rell-3 was a neutral planet, far from Federation influence. In fact, far from anything. It was a low-tech, agricultural world. Avon would have to work there to earn his keep. As far as Blake knew, there wasn't a computer on the planet. He smiled to himself. Nor would the sturdy, conservative farmers there take well to Avon's 'civilized Alpha' degenerate tastes.

Blake slumped on the couch, holding his head in his hands. "Why?" he whispered. Cally was a lovely girl and she seemed to like Avon very much. He had always thought... But then, Cally was a proud warrior. She would never have pandered to his sick and perverted games, would never have allowed him to do to her what he had done to Vila. What he had done to Vila... "Why?" He asked again, futilely clenching his fists.

"Because I wanted 'im to," came the drunken reply. Vila wobbled in the entryway, a bottle of green courage in his hand.

"Stop it, Vila." Blake stood and turned. "Oh, I know you're no informer. Thieves' honour and all that." Vila snorted. "I saw it with my own eyes."

"Didja now?" Vila asked. "Of course, you did. Why should you listen to me? I'm only a Delta. Send me down, put me in danger, Vila go here, Vila do that; all the time. Avon, at least, doesn't pretend he's doing it for me own good."

"I could see that he wasn't!"

"Well, maybe you shouldn't believe everything you see. Appearances can be deceiving, y'know." Vila glared at him.

Blake was confused. "I know this has been hard for you," he said more gently. "You can't have had an easy time of things."

"What would *you* know of it!" Vila spat angrily. "Bloody Alpha!"

"Exactly, Vila. And you don't have to cater to the likes of Avon any longer. I haven't told the others and I'm not going to."

"Well, that's something." Vila set down the bottle and for a moment his camouflage slipped. He didn't seem as drunken as when he walked in. "Blake, for once in your stubborn Alpha existence, would you listen to me! Avon's covering up..." Blake started to interrupt. "Not for himself, you stupid prick, but for me! That's the way things are...Avon *understands*. He's protecting me, makin' it seem like I was raped so I don't get it worse from somebody else."

"Vila! I would not allow..."

"Shut up, Blake!" Vila shouted. Blake stared at

him, gaping. He went on, calmer. "All right. So you wouldn't. So no one here would. It hasn't always been like that, all right? Habits. Avon knows 'em. He knows *me*. Knows what I need from him. And he gives it, too."

"But, Vila...I..." Blake tried to work it out.

"If it's a crime to you, perverted or whatever, then I'm just as guilty as Avon is. We were doing it *together*."

Blake nodded and put his arm around the smaller man's shoulders. Vila shook him off. "I've wanted Avon all along, ever since I first met him on the *London*. And I finally get to him, get him to wanting me, too, and then you've got to come in and ruin it!" Vila was shaking. He couldn't meet Blake's eyes any longer. "I...I think he likes me a bit, or at least he *did*, anyway," he finished.

"Vila," Blake said as he walked back to the couch and sat, "sit down. You can talk about it with me. I'm listening now. Tell me about you and Avon." He was beginning to see...and it was worse than he had thought. He needed to be certain.

Vila took Blake at his word and sat. "I told you. I've...wanted Avon since the *London*. I don't just go for anyone and Gan made sure they didn't go for me, leastways nobody I didn't want." Blake looked up at that. "Yeah, Gan knew. Not the specifics. That isn't nobody's business." His eyes flashed. "But he knew what I did. He even knew I wanted Avon." Vila smiled. "Avon's so beautiful... Well, maybe you wouldn't think so, but anybody that likes men would. He is. We understand each other."

Blake nodded, feeling a pang of sympathy. Love was written all over the little man's face; love and loyalty and Avon didn't deserve either. *Oh you knew well whom you could take advantage of, Avon*. It all made sense. "I believe you," Blake said gently. "When I think about it, I've seen you watching him on the flight deck."

Vila smiled widely. "Yeah. Especially when he wears those tight trousers of his. I told Zen to make 'em a bit to small so's I'd have a better view."

Blake felt a wave of disgust at Vila's admission and at the way Blake felt society had perverted his normal desires.

Vila saw the 'noble crusader' look come into Blake's eyes. "It's not that uncommon, Blake. Especially in prisons, but in the Domes, too. You learn to like it, at least like the good ones and Avon's the best."

"You deserve better." Blake's voice rumbled with the force of his sincerity. Vila cringed.

“But what I want is Avon.” He sat up. “I’m not getting anywhere with you, am I? Blake, if you put Avon off this ship I’m leaving. With him, if he’ll take me, alone, if he won’t, but I think he will. Avon and me, we’re a team. We’ll manage all right.” He tried to look defiant and succeeded in looking puppyish and pleading. “Though I’d rather we both stay.”

“You’re in love with him,” Blake stated, surprised that Vila could find enough to love in the cold technician.

“Don’t you tell *him* that!” Vila stood quickly. “It’s not like that. You’ll scare him off me, you will. You’ve mucked around too much with us as it is. Just leave be, Blake!”

Blake drew a deep breath. *Avon, you’ll pay for this.* Vila seemed vulnerable, even fragile. The pattern was clear. Blake realized that it was that pattern which he objected to—the brutality, the callousness, the coldness of it—not that Vila preferred sex with men. If Vila were with someone who cared for him, well, it would still make Blake queasy, but he could accept that. “I don’t hate you for it, Vila,” Blake reassured him. “I don’t think any less of you.”

“And Avon?” Vila asked.

“We’ll see,” Blake hedged. “I need time to think.”

“Think about it, Blake. Avon’s the best thing that’s happened to me in a long time.” Vila turned to leave the flight deck, forgetting his bottle behind him.

That tells me how hard your life has been, Blake thought sadly, his mind unchanged.

The door opened silently. “Avon?” Vila whispered softly.

Avon rolled over and half sat up, instantly awake. “What are you doing here?” he asked fiercely. “You do *not* want to be caught again.”

“Won’t be. I locked the door,” Vila whispered conspiratorially and started to undress. “Blake’s on watch for another two hours and everybody else’s in bed. I want to be, too.” Vila slid under the covers next to Avon.

“Make yourself comfortable, Vila,” Avon said sarcastically.

Vila snuggled down and wrapped his arms around Avon. “I will,” he smiled. His hand brushed into the edge of a bandage. “He hurt you...”

“Not terribly,” Avon replied stiffly. Vila pulled his hand away and Avon rolled onto his side, facing him. “I suppose you think that whatever is under ‘lock and key’ is yours, thief,” he teased.

“Course I do.” He reached up and touched Avon’s

swollen lip lightly. He looked up at Avon, question in his eyes. *Can I kiss you?* He did. Avon didn’t pull away, but sensuously returned Vila’s kiss, licking the edges of his lips. He pulled Vila tightly to him and stroked Vila’s back.

“I hadn’t expected you to come back, Vila,” Avon whispered, nuzzling the thief’s ear.

Vila licked Avon’s throat, tonguing the sensitive hollows. “We hadn’t finished,” Vila explained, inching his way lower. He twined his tongue in the soft chest hair and finding a nipple, he closed his lips around it.

“That feels good,” Avon purred and stroked Vila’s hair. He moved his hips, rubbing his cock against the thief’s smooth belly. He could feel the growing press of Vila’s erection against his thigh. “Come up here,” he said, pulling the thief where he wanted him and pushing him firmly onto his back. He slid one arm under Vila, turning him on his side, nestling him ass to cock.

They moved together slowly, Avon’s hands wandering over the thief’s cool skin. His fingers delved into pubic hair and grasped the base of Vila’s tumescent shaft.

Vila shifted his ass, lifting his leg backwards up over Avon’s. The tip of Avon’s hard prick bumped into his balls. With the hand that was underneath him, Avon teased at his nipple. Vila couldn’t twist around to touch Avon, only lie there and be touched himself; it felt wonderful. Avon’s skin was hot and moist, his own cool and dry. As they rocked back and forth, the tech nuzzled and nipped at the back of Vila’s neck and shoulders.

“Avon,” Vila breathed softly. “Mmm...you feel wonderful. Want you, Avon. Please?”

Avon released Vila’s cock and reached onto the shelf behind him for the tube of oil. Sensuously, he lubricated himself and Vila, his hand teasing both of them.

Vila arched his ass up to meet Avon’s prick and he felt the head press against his opening, entering slowly, stretching him wider. He moaned and Avon’s other hand covered his mouth. He turned his face away and bit into the pillow until Avon was fully sheathed in him.

Avon’s hand slid around the curve of his ass and he felt the rows of raised bruises there from earlier. He touched them lightly with his fingertips.

“It’s all right, Avon. Really,” Vila said quietly.

Avon licked his earlobe. “I know, Vila.” He slid his hand around to grasp Vila’s cock again and be-

gan pumping in rhythm with his thrusts while his other hand pinched and twisted the nub of Vila's nipple. Avon bit a mouthful of Vila's hair and pumped in short, fast strokes, groaning slightly. He rubbed his palm over Vila's cockhead at the end of each stroke, kneading the swollen flesh roughly. Vila flailed his arm back and pulled Avon to him as his come sprayed out over Avon's hand.

Avon thrust deep into Vila, biting his shoulder hard, as the thief's orgasmic clenchings drove him to his own release.

He slid out of Vila, holding him close, enveloping him with his arms and legs. He held his come-smear hand in front of Vila's mouth and touched his lip. Vila took the tech's wrist in both of his own hands and guided Avon's hand as he licked his come from it. When the hand was clean, Avon reached up and smoothed Vila's sweat-soaked hair.

"Avon," Vila started, still quiet lest they be overheard again.

"What, Vila?" Avon asked distractedly.

"Take me with you," the thief murmured, reaching up and squeezing Avon's arm. "We're better off together."

"You are safer here," Avon replied. He stroked Vila's back.

"Oh, I am, am I?" he asked, dubiously. "Blake's always sending me into something dangerous and now he'd be doing it without you there to watch my back...ummm...what you're doing to my back feels lovely."

Avon chuckled. "Are you sure you only want me to *watch* your back?" Vila murmured in pleasure. "But I doubt that Blake would put you down anywhere within a hundred spacial of whatever planet he has chosen to be my prison, even if you chose to leave with me. He'd never believe it was your choice. You'll have to stay here."

"He couldn't do that!"

Avon hushed him. Vila continued more softly. "I tried, Avon. I tried to make him understand."

"Vila," Avon warned.

"I know. But it mattered, and he wasn't even listening to what I said. What I want doesn't matter to him, only his high and mighty bloody morality!" Vila rolled onto his back and looked up at Avon. "You've got to talk to him."

"No, Vila," Avon replied. "I refuse to justify myself or my actions to *him*," he hissed.

"Please, Avon?" Vila paused. "Or don't *you* want me with you?"

"I think we'd make a...profitable working team on any world on which Blake put us down. But I doubt anything I have to say to him will do any good." Avon ran his hand along Vila's ribs. Vila turned again, facing him and slid his arms around the tech, careful of his back.

"Avon, I told Blake I was leaving, too. By myself, if he forced me. I mean it. I can't stay with him alone. Not after this. And I'd rather go with you; it'd be safer."

"Blake won't hold you to that. You'll be able to stay on *Liberator*, and he won't do anything to you, either."

"Avon, *he* wouldn't listen to me, but will you? I don't *want* to stay!"

Avon turned the thief's face up to his and looked into his eyes. They were moist. Vila pulled his head away and buried it in Avon's chest. "All right, Vila. I shall speak to him. And if that doesn't work, I shall simply take what is mine when I leave the ship." Vila nodded his assent against Avon. "I trust you can get out of what you get in to?"

"Eh?" He looked up, confused.

"My door, idiot. If I'm going to talk to Blake, I'd rather do it on my terms."

"Oh, yeah." Vila scrambled out of the bed and unlocked the door.

"Sleep here, Vila. I don't want to have to look all over when it's time to go." Avon smiled as he left the cabin. Vila locked it behind him.

Avon was waiting in the galley for Blake as he came off watch. The big man didn't seem too surprised that he had escaped his room, and he poured himself a cup of coffee before joining the comtech at the table. He drank the hot liquid in silence, waiting for whatever it was Avon intended to say.

Avon said nothing. "You don't have the slightest remorse, do you?" Blake said, finishing his coffee.

"None at all." Avon looked up. "Should I?"

"You don't have any conception what you've done."

"I know exactly what I have done. It is common practice in prisons and other unsavoury places. Next time you should do your recruiting from a better source. And if your ignorance is still unsatisfied, ask Vila or Gan, for I refuse to cater to your prurient interest."

"You cold-hearted bastard!" Blake shook his head. "Vila trusts you. He cares for you. Yet all you do is take advantage of that trust."

“Why so concerned, Blake? Jealous?” Avon smirked.

Blake leapt to his feet and pulled Avon up by the front of his tunic. Avon smiled, having succeeded in provoking the rebel leader. Blake let go.

Avon leaned on the counter. “Vila says that he has spoken to you?”

“Oh yes, he defended you. Very fervently, too. He seemed to think that being abused was the natural way of things for him, being a Delta and you being an Alpha. Damn them!”

“I see.” Avon drew himself a cup of coffee and sat. “Did it ever occur to you that he *meant* what he said?” Blake sat across from him. “Whether or not you are right,” Blake looked up. “You *might* be, I never did concern myself with profound philosophical questions. Regardless of what you might think the Federation system has done to Vila, it *is* done. You’re not dealing with the idealized masses you so long to free, but with individuals. With Vila. He has told you and he has asked me to confirm it. I was not...inclined to do so.” Avon paused, sipping at his cup. He set it down deliberately. “I did nothing to Vila Restal that he did not want me to do.” The evidence was folded in his pocket, but he would not use it. Vila had written that for Avon alone and privacy was a luxury the thief had never been afforded. “You will have to take my word for it—or his, should you ever decide to listen to one of the labour grades, if he is not utterly beneath your contempt, despite your great ‘concern’.”

“That has nothing to do with it! I did listen to him. And I’m listening to you now.” With a shake of his head, Blake knocked himself free of the web of cool logic Avon was weaving. “You raped Vila and you beat him, and he let you because that fool loves you and would do anything you wanted him to. You can’t just take him as though it were your *right*. It isn’t.”

“Vila has made his own decisions, Blake. In any case, it is not your right to judge us.”

“How can you take advantage of his feelings for you like that?” Blake asked.

“How can you take advantage of Jenna’s?” Avon countered. “Or does your Cause justify anything—even using your body to keep your pilot loyal?”

Blake slammed his fist on the table. “Jenna isn’t your concern!”

“And Vila isn’t yours!” Avon answered, leaning forward.

Both men sat back and forced themselves calm.

“Vila has said what he wants. Or are you going to

high-handedly make the decision for him? Force him to conform? Are you going to condition him? Or try to, rather. I doubt you’ll get farther than they did.” Avon paused. “Those are my terms, Blake. I shall leave this ship at whatever hellhole you have chosen for my imprisonment, but I am taking Vila with me...and our share of the treasure room.” Avon smiled.

“Your share?” Blake sputtered. “You’re lucky I didn’t toss you out an airlock! And Vila is going precisely nowhere—least of all with you!”

“Vila is *mine!*” Avon hissed. “Nothing and no one, not even you, is going to take him from me!” half standing, he shouted at Blake.

Blake looked up at Avon. Suddenly the entire situation became clear as Avon hovered over him, shaking with barely controlled rage. “Sit down, Avon,” he said evenly.

Avon stood straight, but visibly calmed. “Well?” he asked.

“You have convinced me.”

“Of?” Avon arched.

“That you care for Vila, Avon. Perhaps even as much as he does you. But you have to understand what it looked like to me...what made me jump to conclusions...the violence of it, Avon. My god, man, you were beating him!” Avon’s nostrils flared. “All right, so he wanted you to do it. I could have accepted, understood if the two of you had simply had sex together...”

“Well, thank you very much, generous leader!” Avon said acidly. “But I’m not *asking* for your approval...only that you leave Vila to me!”

“Exactly,” Blake smiled. “I may not agree with your way of expressing it, but I can see that, in your own way, you love each other.”

“What!” Avon blinked in disbelief. “Can’t your fuzzy-headed romantic idealism comprehend two men fucking? It doesn’t have to be a protestation of undying love. It isn’t like that with Vila and me.” Avon shook his head. “Whatever, Blake, I am not interested in whether or not you understand.”

“But you are,” Blake answered, smiling and all too smug. “And I do. I am convinced that you do care about one other person at least: Vila. And that his feelings for you are not one-sided. Whether or not you want to admit it, you are in love with him, as well.”

Avon sputtered, “whatever is between Vila and myself is private, and between us.”

“I will respect your privacy and so will the oth-

ers,” Blake said as Avon turned to leave. “Only next time, if your privacy concerns you that much, you might be a little quieter about it and lock your door.”

Vila was sitting on Avon’s bed, two carryalls on the floor next to his ‘bag of tricks’. “Well, Avon?” he asked as the computer tech shut the door behind him.

“I did what you asked,” Avon replied noncommittally.

“And?” Avon shrugged. “What’s that supposed to mean? Is he going to let you take me with you?”

Avon gave Vila a small smile. “He couldn’t stop me, Vila.” Avon crossed the room. “I told you. You’re *mine* now.”

“So, where’re we going then?” Vila asked. “He wouldn’t put us down on some place as awful as Cygnus Alpha, would he?”

Avon shook his head and sat at his desk, turning the chair to face the thief. “It’s up to you, Vila. It is your decision.”

“Somewhere like Freedom City, then!” Vila exclaimed.

“Or we could always stay,” Avon said quietly.

“Blake would let us? I mean, he’s not going to throw us off?”

“No. We can stay or go; the choice is yours.”

Vila thought about it, but it didn’t take him long. “Stay. We’re a lot safer from the Federation with the *Liberator* around us.” Avon nodded. They sat silently for a few moments. “So he listened to you, then, eh?”

“It seems so,” Avon replied.

“So I suppose this is my watch. Bloody hell,” he grinned. “And on no sleep, at that.”

“Oh, you poor, overworked Delta,” the comptech said with mock sympathy. “Just make sure you take your...luggage with you. You are *not* cluttering up my cabin with your collection of odds and ends.”

“Avon...” Vila began.

“I’m tired, Vila,” Avon interrupted, “and you’re late, as usual.”

Vila gathered up his things and opened the door.

“Vila,” Avon started.

“Eh?” The thief looked over his shoulder, nearly dropping one of the bags.

“After your watch, you can fix the lock on this door. I’d really rather not have any more...unfortunate interruptions.”

With a nod and a grin, Vila left the cabin. For the moment...

THE PRICE TO PAY

M. Fae Glasgow

IT WAS INESCAPABLE, COMPLETELY UNAVOIDABLE. He was going to pay for this, and pay dearly, at that. *But then*, he thought, unable to keep the sneer from either face or thoughts, *if Blake considers himself the 'Leader' of this 'revolution' then surely I can consider myself 'Chancellor of the Exchequer', in charge of the Liberator's treasury, as it were. And my Budget calls for an Entertainment Fund for his 'loyal crew'. So...I believe I shall allow one small bauble from the treasure room to pay to bring one of these little trinkets into my bed.* It mattered not one whit to him that Blake had ordered—*ordered*—him to find the components they needed to build a defence against Imipak and then return directly to the *Liberator*. He had also said that Avon had a maximum of four hours, and it had taken barely one to find the component. And Avon was not a man to waste time—or opportunity.

He leaned even farther back into the plush midnight blue of his easy chair, one hand toying with the champagne flute, the other flickering in a tiny movement. The madam, clothes as opulent as her body, saw the gesture and hurried the handsome *young* man off the dais, replacing him with a lissome blonde. Avon relaxed with a heartfelt sigh, his very pores absorbing the luxurious decadence to which he had once been so accustomed: before he had overcome one of his addictions, the gambling courses, the sweet exhilaration of watching the strong and the brave or the merely deluded race and fight and strive, fortunes turning on the performance of muscle and brain. Avon narrowed his eyes, relegating the past behind him, where it belonged, focussing instead on the panoply of beauty unfolding before him. As the parade continued, he slipped more comfortably into his old skin, a fine air of dissolution settling translucently upon his face. With his eyes so narrow and his pupils so dilated, with predatory sexuality and with in-bred arrogance so complete it seemed nothing more than self-assurance, he waved the skilled courtesans on, one by one. He had, or so he had said to the madam and himself, no particular type in mind. However, as blonde followed redhead, as brunette followed blond, as white followed black, he began to admit to himself that he obviously did, indeed, have something very specific in mind. The delicate, male or female, were ushered past by the flick of his

finger, the burly man and husky woman were similarly dismissed. Then came the real beauties, incandescent glory guaranteed to stir even so jaded an aesthete as Avon. These, too, were passed over.

The madam was growing visibly uneasy, her best workers leaving unselected. She was running out of services to offer, and her serenity was becoming as ruffled as the feathered boa cascading down her gown. It amused Avon to watch her, out of the corner of his eye, the Servalan of the whores' world, at his mercy. Unfortunately, he was wasting his precious, stolen time and he wanted to find someone to ease the pressure building up in him. A man of voracious libido, he couldn't continue this celibacy indefinitely, which given Blake's plans, looked distressingly likely.

Surreptitiously, the madam called forth her last chance: the so-called 'special interest group'. Always a risk, but a necessary one when dealing with a man of equal power and wealth. A part of her mind assessed him once more, gauging his background with a skill born of hard-won insight. She saw Avon, obviously one of the 'old boys', the privileged, high-class few who attended the private, state-owned schools, living in a luxury redolent of bygone excesses, far beyond the simple imaginations of the mundane world. And so, the procession began, the selection that could get even someone as well protected as she, run out of business. She smiled to herself, smug assurance that the high-bred Alpha would be unable to resist her little cherubs.

"Get them out of here!" he bellowed, rising from the chair like a pillar of righteous fire. "Don't ever—ever—procure children for me again. That is simply not tolerable and quite the sore point with me. Now, I have come here to purchase the services of someone willing to rent me the use of their body, not to molest children. I like my partners to be willing, flexible and imaginative, not frightened, abused little innocents."

Mincingly, the madam tottered over to him, one long-nailed hand stroking his arm placatingly. "I apologise most profusely, sir, my little cherubs really did not intend to offend. I shall see to it that..."

He shoved the fawning woman out of the way, the cloying scent from her cleavage turning his stom-

ach, getting her out of his sight and mind. Without even glancing at her, he stormed free, managing to wait until he had reached the relative privacy of the alley way before contacting Orac as relay to the police. It would almost be worth getting caught himself, just to see the face on that callous hag as she was towed away by the vice squad. At least the children would be protected, as best as was humanly possible, which, Avon conceded, was not necessarily much protection at all.

That, however, left him with his original problem. Solving the woes of a gaggle of children may have given him a warm glow right over the spot where conscience was supposed to dwell, but it still did not give him an answer to the dilemma bulging so crudely in his trousers. *That* was something which simply would not respond to moral posturings, so... Resolutely, he headed off towards one of the less reputable bordellos, since this last one had offered him no succor, it was as plain as the nose on his face that he wanted something a little...cruder, perhaps a touch more base. Gradually, he passed by most of the establishments hugging the curved outer wall of the space station, finding himself perilously close to running out of options. There was one place left, a somewhat tawdry 'joint', rather run to seed, and so, making sure his Alpha aloofness was firmly intact, he strode in, pausing for precisely the right amount of time, framed in the doorway. The moment he stepped inside, he knew he would find what he was looking for. The very walls seemed to pulsate with sex, the coloured viscosity flowing within its plastex shield, writhing in time to the heavy beat of the music thrumming through the floor, straight up his legs and into his groin. Grinning wryly, Avon spared a glance at his over-enthusiastic and disobedient cock, suddenly understanding why Vila had been known to do the same thing and then mutter, "down, boy." Unfortunately, he didn't think that would have any more effect on the pertinent—or *impertinent*, so to speak—part of his anatomy than it had for Vila. Still smirking, he settled himself against the bar, ordering an incongruously fine wine from the behemoth serving drinks.

Predators and prey alike stared at Avon, all of them hungry, buyers and sellers seeking him with equal fervour. An impromptu parade began before him, professional after professional offering their wares. Not one truly had whatever it was that Avon needed this night, apart, perhaps, that lone wolf against the far wall, leaning there with polished insolence, sap-

phire blue eyes glittering and gleaming with mockery, all lean and hard and intensely, provocatively male.

Primal male.

Moth to a flame, Avon felt himself drawn, but he willed his body to stillness. If this man were for hire, then let him come to the buyer. So, Avon relaxed against the bar, sipping his wine, hooking the stranger with his eyes, reeling him in, inch by inch.

The stranger grinned at him and sat at a table.

Avon raised a brow.

The black-haired man raised one right back at him. Avon found himself grinning.

Again, the stranger gave him his grin right back, adding his own insolent touch: a tongue-tip traced wetly around well-defined lips.

With that, Avon decided that even if the other man were buying and not selling, there would *still* be a transaction between them tonight. This man, this lithe embodiment of all that was male, would be his, and his alone. For the night, for the hour, for however long they could burn side by side without engulfing the other. Collecting the bottle which had been opened for him, Avon chipped a credit disk at the troll behind the bar and strolled over towards the darker man, deliberately imbuing his movement with all the raw sexuality at his command.

The stranger grew hard, his whole body and face taut with barely reined lust. He didn't even wait for Avon to breast the table, meeting him almost halfway, pausing for a bare second to lock eyes, to wage the war of domination. Avon wouldn't yield an atom, nor would the other. They stood there, face to face, each examining the face of an enemy or lover, neither quite sure which they would find. Finally, it was the dark stranger who gave the necessary inch, grabbing Avon by the arm, muttering, "I've got a room upstairs."

Elegantly, Avon bowed him forward, following a half step behind as they wove through the clustered tables. The staircase was arcane and unkempt, littered with the debris of those who had gone before and the stranger gave the fastidiously sneering Avon a defiant glower as he led him up to his lair. It took only a couple of minutes and then they were there, eye to eye, in the small clean room the stranger kept.

"Andru. Andru Brodie."

"Avon," he unnerved himself by speaking the truth. "Kerr Avon."

Andru grimaced at him. Last name first: class had been established, then, leaving him far behind the

Alpha. He shrugged, hauling his jacket off, hastily dragging off the rest of his clothes, quite surprised when the Alpha proved to be in an even a greater hurry. It occurred to him, then, that they had not discussed money, but it hardly seemed likely that this Avon would be tricking for money. And if he did, it would be in a far more expensive place than the “Odds and Sods.”

Naked, they stood opposed, simply staring, each taking in the sight of the other. Brodie was impressed by what was displayed for his ravenous eyes: a slight man, delicate boned but full of compact strength, fine skin, soft hair, bottomless brown eyes, intelligence carried like a weapon before him. Rather like the long, reddened cock slowly rising all by itself from its nest of crisp black curls, blindly seeking the thin line of hair that pointed from groin to bellybutton, arrowing straight up to the dusting of black hair on the pale chest. A nice body, firm and slender, focussed in that single point of contained manliness. His attention wandered back to the arrogant face, only to meet amused eyes, busy making their own assessment.

And Avon liked what he saw. It had been a very long time indeed since he had last encountered a body that stirred him as this one did, rampant, unrestrained with lust. Andru was taller than he, nicely so, bulkier, muscles full and defined under alabaster skin, torso hairless, not even a hint around the pink, poised nipples, only the barest shading on his rippled belly. Even the hair cradling his cock was not lush, but still glossy and full. Smooth legs, almost shaven the hair was so lightly scattered, long, luscious thigh muscles that Avon could imagine straining and trembling as they lowered that tight, lithe body down onto his own rigid cock. He felt the remindful twitch at his groin and grinned, lopsidedly, at his companion, a welcome echo beaming back to him.

So, he thought, looking at the man who reminded him so of himself, despite their physical disparities, *it's to be that simple. Sex, in all its glory and in none of its complications. Just release, after so damned long. And with what a body—one that might even match the charisma of the mind.* He closed the distance between them, laughing with the elation of finding an equal, toppling them onto the tidy bed, wrestling with the muscular warmth squirming all over him.

They tussled, briefly, tacitly agreeing not to make this a contest—not yet, anyway—settling to the suddenly serious business of sex. Resolutely, Avon cast aside all thoughts of the—yes, he would have to use the word—*friends* he had aboard *Liberator*. He would

not consider them, would not even contemplate entering into a relationship with any one of them. There were too many complications already, and too many ties to bind him. *This*, here and now, was what he wanted. Raw sex. And a man as convoluted as he was himself. He stilled his hands' exploration of the rippling muscles above him, suddenly framing the almost elfin face. The eyes that stared back at him were of so intense a blue, that on anyone else, Avon would have believed them artifice, lenses added to create allure. But on this face, no other colour would have seemed real, nor would have burned brightly enough to reflect the personality within. If it were only personality, Avon felt as if he would be looking at a mirror of himself, recognising so many of his own traits in Brodie. But then, that sculpted mouth descended upon his own and he cast all thought to the wind, centring his awareness entirely upon his body, and the other body which was proving to be such a delight.

Lazily, he smiled, stretching his hand down to cup and fondle Brodie's cock and balls, merely raising an eyebrow to echo the quizzical expression on his bedmate's face. Avon allowed Andru to move his hand, willingly participating by kneading and squeezing the firm buttock where the other placed his hand. He didn't even object when strong thighs slid between his own, spreading him open, making great display of his turgid genitalia. He merely sighed, grinning slowly, putting on a performance for Brodie.

“Oh, yeh, do it for me, Kerr. That's right, pull on your cock for me. Oh, very nice.” The words were punctuated by strong sucking kisses all down the side of his torso, kisses that verged on the painful, kisses that left purpling marks behind. Avon didn't care: after all, who was to see them? Only himself, and only then if he chose to look in the mirror and remind himself of this encounter, later, when the *Liberator* was well on her way again, and this luscious stranger was nothing more than a residual ache in his arse.

Surprise blossomed briefly through him. *So that's how it's to be, is it Avon? Minutes after you meet him and you're willing to trust him to fuck you? I must be getting very mellow in my old age—or simply randy beyond belief. Or more likely it is because he seems to be myself, merely contained in a different body. Such sentimental twaddle—you'll be considering love next. But regardless of all that, fucking it is, then.*

He pushed Andru off, then rose from the bed to

fetch his jacket, or more accurately, the lotion in his jacket pocket. Brodie's eyes lit up combatively when he saw the tube, then dimmed to mere speculation as Avon knelt beside him, holding the nozzle a millimetre above Brodie's dark cock. A fine line of glittering gel eased onto him, adding to the sensation, the images it carried provoking him to greater hardness. He pressed his hand on Avon's nape, pushing the head as dark as his own down, down, until the breath from Avon's mouth warmed him where the gel had tingled coolly. "Suck me."

Avon resisted. He had never liked fellating other men; after his experiences in school, he couldn't help but associate it with being demeaned. A fault of his, he knew. He should be able to move on from that, but he never did seem to be quite able to leave the past behind, no matter what it held. He would not lower his head, instead bringing his hand up to massage the easeful lotion into satin skin.

"Bit odd, isn't it? Willing to let me fuck you, but you won't suck me off? Or is this cream just for a nice mutual hand job?"

"Oh, it's not for a hand job," Avon breathed, seducing Andru with the glimmering gaze from below lowered eyelashes. "I rather enjoy being fucked, unlike going down on a man. That, I'm afraid, reminds me rather too much of school."

Bright comprehension hungered briefly in Brodie's eyes. "School, eh? Boarding school? Alpha grade?"

"Why, yes. What does it matter?"

"Games, Kerr, games."

Avon tensed, sensing for the first time the underlying twist of Brodie's personality. The one that resonated all too well with one of his own. *Damn! When the hell will I learn never to trust my instincts?* When he spoke, his voice was cool and hard, denying both the implicit desire in Brodie and the hated secrets in himself. "I'm afraid I was never very good at sports."

"You know perfectly well that that's not what I meant, Avon. I'm talking about breaking in new boys, punishing the lower Forms. Being punished. That's what I'm talking about, Kerr," he said, emphasising the use of the Alpha's first name, just in case the calculated power-play had gone unnoticed.

Avon sat very still, holding himself tense and ready to fight. Again. He had had to do this so very often, persuading others that he had no interest in their painful little games. Sometimes he had won, sometimes lost, but he had never given in without a fight. "You can talk about it all you want, but I'm not

going to indulge you. I simply don't enjoy pain." He looked the other man directly in the eye. "Andru." There, the first name, putting the class games aside by so simple a word.

"But I do, Alpha. I do."

The attack was swift, sudden and thorough. The detached, scientific observer in Avon's mind recognised with sick shock that Brodie was well-practised at this, and he wondered how many other people had been taken in by those beautiful blue eyes with their twinkling smile. He fought back, literally tooth and nail, drawing blood and leaving imprints of his teeth behind. Every dirty trick he had ever learned, from Auron guerrillas to Delta service grade prison graduates, he used, viciously, snarling, refusing to even consider defeat. Even when Brodie had him pinned, chest heaving and arms locked over his head, he still didn't think himself conquered, merely temporarily restrained. He kicked hard when Brodie relaxed his grip marginally, only to receive a hard punch to the stomach, winding him, knocking the stuffing out of him. Hands as hard as the blow forced his arms straight, keeping them painfully crossed at the wrists, shooting agony from twisted muscles across his shoulders. After Brodie had finished fiddling, the pain lessened to discomfort. It wasn't until the grinning man had sat back on his heels that Avon realised he was tied to the built-in restraints of the upper headboard. He roared his fury, struggling desperately against his bonds, bruising his wrists and adding to the arousal of his attacker.

"Oh, keep going, Kerr. I like a man with a bit of fight in him. Makes the winning all the sweeter."

Avon lay suddenly still, like a felled tree. He recognised those words. Not from this man, who could not possibly have ever known him, but from himself. From himself as a young man, undisciplined, callous with the immortality of youth and class, vicious with the indifference that sees not a person, but only a body. He clenched his eyes shut, the horror pouring in on him. *And is this why he reminded you so of yourself, is that it? Is he the man you keep hidden so carefully from yourself, the reason you refuse to seek out liaisons with the others? Oh, with Anna it was different, she sought you, gave you love until not even you could turn her aside, but with her, there was never this viciousness, never even a hint of it.* An abrupt pain dragged his mind from its safe little haven of self-questioning back to the insistent hands violating his body. He kicked Brodie, catching him in the balls, bringing tears to his eyes and folding him into a foetal curl. All

Avon could do was lie there helplessly, unable to escape the ties around his wrists.

Several minutes passed before Brodie stopped gasping and uncurled himself. With extreme satisfaction, Avon noticed that the other man's erection had shrivelled, but that pleasure faded when he saw the look in Brodie's eyes.

"Oh, there'll be a price to pay for that, old son. There's something I like to do, Avon old chum, that most of my men friends really aren't too thrilled about." He grabbed the discarded tube, and Avon relaxed infinitesimally: rape he could cope with. That, he was determined, would be abuse of his body and nothing else. And despite his lack of sexual athletics with his friends on the *Liberator*, he still had his...toys. He willed his anal muscles to relax, unlocking them, preparing himself for the worst.

"D'you know what it is that I like and they don't?" the soft voice continued, sweetly seductive. "It's called fisting. Yeh, Kerr 'old boy', I'm going to fist-fuck you."

Avon's eyes widened in unmitigated horror. *That* he wasn't prepared for. That, he could never be prepared for. A slick finger slid inside him, and he clenched down on it, hurting no one but himself. He forced his mind elsewhere and his body to relax, switching himself off from what was happening to him.

Two fingers. Bumping against his prostate.

He thought of probability squares, of chess, of Vila's unique way of playing chess, of the comments Blake had made when he had seen Vila winning that game, what he had said to Blake later over lunch and the story Cally had told about growing up on Auron and how very strange it was to feel another person in your mind and...

Three fingers, moving slowly, without the expected viciousness. A hot wet mouth sucking him, lips pulling his foreskin back and forth, tongue flicking into the slit, catching under the flared head...

Just like Anna, ohmygod, Anna!

More of the soothing gel. He had, of course, bought the very best. A bubble of hysteria rose in him: always so considerate of his partners, perhaps in defiance of some of the things he had done when he was younger, and now it was paying off. For him.

Four fingers, filling him like a big man, pushing smoothly in and out with luscious strength, the edge of pain pushing him smoothly back into the past, to the games he had, indeed, played. Only part of his mind was surprised to feel his body responding, for

only part of his mind had truly forgotten what he had tried so hard to deny. He felt in memory and reality the little bites the length of his cock, the way he had taught Anna, because he liked the sweet sting of pain, even if he would never admit it to her. Or to himself.

He arched his body hungrily up onto the fingers, stretched almost beyond endurance by the palm bringing him completion. Fingers deep inside him rubbed the gland, stroking it hard, every surge against it making him feel like he was coming. It built and built inside him, until his hoarse voice was cursing and spitting out the coarsest gutter language he knew. All he could think of was how much he wanted this, the pain and the delight, the submission and the exhilarating power and pride of taking so much inside himself. He was writhing and moaning in complete abandon, all control gone, and he didn't care. "Fuck me, come on, Brodie, *fuck me!*" the words poured from him, bringing him down, making him equal with the man he was holding within. "Is that all you can give me? I want more, *more*, come on, come on..."

"Oh, so you want more, do you?" the voice crooned, stilling his fingers, moving only the very tip of one of them, tantalisingly, an echo of promised pleasure/pain. "I've got something for you then, Kerr. It's this." He fisted his hand, shooting agony up Avon's spine, where it burst in his brain then ricocheted to pool in his groin. "Oh, you *do* like pain, don't you? Lied before, did you? Hmm? And who were you lying to, Kerr? Me? No, not really. I think you were lying to yourself. Yeh, that's what you'd do. A nice refined Alpha, supposed to forget all that stuff the minute you walk out of those school gates for the last time. But you were one of the ones who couldn't, weren't you? What have you been doing all these years, eh, Alpha Plus? Been hiding it? Or d'you go slumming, like all them other Alphas? What was your vice, Kerr?" In the reverberating silence, the hand began a slow withdrawal. "Tell me, or I'll pull my hand out and leave you. I won't let you cum if you don't tell me. What was your vice?"

The hand eased out a little further, the loss tearing the answer from Avon. "This! This, this is what I wanted."

"Did you go slumming, Kerr?"

"No. Not often, only rarely."

"When?"

"When I needed it too much to ignore any more."

"And how did you get it?"

Avon didn't answer, until the hand began to retreat again. "I'd go to the Dens."

"Oh, dope as well as kink. What would your mother say?"

Silence.

"Sore point, that? What happened, did Mummy find out?"

Silence.

"Answer me, Kerr. What did Mummy do?"

Burning hatred and inflamed pain crackled. Brodie twisted his hand, hurting Avon, threatening a rapid, complete withdrawal.

"My mother...mother barred me from her house and..."

"And?" the single syllable threatened the final removal of the agonising pleasure.

"She told my brother."

Brodie stopped for a moment, genuinely surprised by the tears glistening faintly on Avon's lashes. "Close, were you?"

"Yes. Now I've answered your damned questions, get on with it!"

"Oh, it *has* been a long time since you've played the game, hasn't it? You don't demand, Kerr. *You* don't even get to ask. We do this my way, and my way only. Now, you behave yourself, or you won't get your fun. Spread your legs more. Lift them. Higher, higher. That's right, brace them against the headboard. Good, now I can see your tight little arse. This your cunt, is it? Hmm? This where you like your men, Kerr? Just like the Seniors taught you in school? Or were you a teacher's pet?"

Brodie didn't wait for any answers, too intent on watching his four fingers glide firm and slow inside Avon's pale ass, watching his flanks quiver under the erotic assault. "Is this what you like, Kerr? This why you're a leather boy? Hmm?"

Avon was far beyond being able to reply, lost in the realms of painful delight, a kingdom he had thought himself exiled from, never to return. Not since Anna...

There was a dreadful sound: the chime of his bracelet. Time was running out, but Avon couldn't bring himself to care. All he could think of was how fortunate it was that Brodie obviously assumed that it was his pocket computer, a mundanity to be ignored. The thought faded from Avon's mind, along with the outside world. All that existed was his body and the fingers giving him such terrible, soul-churning pleasure.

"You know something, I think you're enjoying this

too much. Have to do something about that. After all, it's no fun for me, if *you* are having fun."

The hand inside him twisted and pulled free, dragging a protesting, pain-filled wail of dissent and loss from him as it departed. Abruptly, his legs were shoved down as Brodie repositioned his body. Eyes snapped open as Avon realised what was pushing at his gasping mouth. "No!"

"Oh yes, Kerr. Open your mouth up and suck it. Do it, Kerry-boy. You won't like it if I have to force you."

"No," he snarled through clenched teeth, believing himself.

"Not leaving me any choice, are you? All right, sunshine, you've asked for it." With studied callousness, Brodie knelt astride Avon's chest and, grabbing his head to hold it steady, thrust at the tightly clenched lips. "Now, come on, Kerry-boy. You're making this very uncomfortable for me. Open up. Come on. You know," he continued, suddenly quite conversational, despite the fact that he was trying to shove his cock into an unwilling mouth, "I think you'd run, if I untied you. And you look dangerous, too. I do believe, sunshine, that I shall have to leave you tied for a while. And if you don't open up, I'll have to beat you up, too. You don't want to have your pretty face spoiled, do you now? And anyway, how would you explain the bruises to people, eh? Open, open, aah, that's it..."

The cock filled his mouth, hitting against the back of his throat and he gagged. The frantic swallowing only seemed to incite Brodie more, making him groan and thrust forward until his pubic hair was scratching against Avon's nose and lips. "Ooh, that's lovely, keep on swallowing, oh, very nice. You do this very well, you've obviously had a lot of practice. Suppose, with that mouth of yours, and those eyes, at one of them schools, stands to reason." Abruptly, all speech stopped, the only sound Brodie's moaning and panting, and the wet sounds of a hard cock slamming into a sucking mouth. Despite himself, despite what he had told himself all the years since school, since Tynus, Avon rediscovered the elation of swallowing another man's cock, of feeling the veins throb on his tongue and the way the balls bounced up against the shaft to bump round and heavy against his chin. He felt cum rise against his tongue, felt the hot explosion on the back of his throat, his ears filled with Brodie's cry and...his own moan. Shocked, he felt his own cum rise, filling his balls, shooting up his shaft and out, to splash scalding on his belly, long

white banners declaring his own self-deception. The cock in his mouth softened and was withdrawn. Clarity of thought returned in the wake of mindless passion and Avon flailed Brodie with his gimlet stare. Blue eyes grinned at him mockingly.

"I love you too, sunshine. And I can see you love me so much," he stopped talking until he had poured himself back into his clothes and pulled his shoes on. "I can see you love me so much, in fact, that I think I'll leave you tied up here for a while. I'll get in touch with the management in a couple of hours, have them come up and release you. Oh, don't blush. they're used to this kind of thing, men forgetting to untie their whores. Speaking of which," he pulled out his wallet, "I almost forgot. Very talented, I must say. Fifty credits should cover it, I think. Anyway, ta much. Oh, and by the way. I wouldn't bother yelling, if I were you. Nobody'll pay any attention."

The door snicked closed. Alone, still bound, furious with Brodie and even more so with himself, Avon lay very still, trying very hard not to start on the self-analysis. He would leave that to Blake. He groaned. Blake. The *Liberator*. If the manager didn't set him free soon, the others would be looking for him. And should they find him here, like this, he could say good-bye to more friendships. *Not that they matter, of course. It's merely the embarrassment of being found like this, that's all. I don't know who's going to be worse: Jenna will laugh at me, Vila won't be shocked, but he'll have to tell everyone in the known Galaxy, Gan will be horrified—the man's exclusively hetero, damn him—Cally will be repulsed and Blake. Well, Blake will probably choke on his halo. None of which helps me, stuck here with nothing to do but think.*

As if on cue, his bracelet chimed. Avon, of course, couldn't answer.

Avon, this is Liberator. Avon. Avon, respond!

Avon lay very still. Perhaps Cally wouldn't be the worst one to come for him.

Avon? Avon, respond, please.

He lay there, acutely aware of his own semen still white on his belly and Brodie's still lacing his chin. *At least I suppose I should be grateful they didn't just come down to fetch me ten minutes ago.*

There was the familiar tingle in the air, the familiar sense of air being pushed aside by an invisible hand and then the sound. And a figure. Avon groaned again. *Blake. It had to be Blake.*

He glared defiantly up at the man looming over the bed, refusing to acknowledge that there was anything even slightly unusual about being covered with

semen and tied to a bed. And worst of all, Blake looked like he believed him. An expression of extreme distaste crossed Blake's face, to be hidden behind a façade of tolerance. Wordlessly, he leaned over the bed and Avon's nudity to untie the flushed and defensive man.

"This isn't what it looks like, Blake," Avon found himself saying, just as he had to his mother. "I had no intention of this happening."

Blake remained silent, grimacing with disgust as his hand accidentally brushed against the drying semen on Avon's face. Grimly, he continued to work at the bonds, pulled tight by Avon's earlier struggles. And his later squirms of delight.

"He forced me, Blake," he said, not sure which one of them he was actually trying to convince, pulling his hands down to rub at the wrists the second Blake had him free. Still numb, he barely caught the trousers Blake threw at him, turning his back to dress, not seeing when Blake disappeared into the adjacent bathroom. With sick humiliation resonating through his body with the memories of the past, Avon went pale as a damp cloth was tossed in his general vicinity. "Believe me," he said, harsh with hurt, trying to undo the present and stop the past in its dreadful haunt, "it really isn't what it looks like. I didn't want this."

"Oh, for god's sake, Avon, if you can't have the courage of your convictions, at least have the courage of your perversions. Now hurry up and get dressed. I'd like to get out of this filthy, flea-ridden dump."

In the process of dressing, Avon still took the time to glare sharply at him. "I concede that this is hardly an ivory tower, but if you came down from yours once in a while, you would be able to recognise real life. Without being disgusted by it."

Blake didn't answer. He simply picked up something gingerly and held it out to Avon with a look of profound disappointment.

Avon finished with the last button on his jacket and looked up just in time to see what Blake was holding. It was, of course, the damning, insulting 50Cr. chip. Contemptuous, Blake dropped it down onto the rumpled bed, frowning as it landed amidst the tangled rope. "I must be honest, Avon, I never expected anything like this from you. Oh, I didn't think you would be a boy scout, but *this...*"

"Blake, I..."

"What? Do you want to deny all this again? What's wrong, Avon? Afraid that now I know your dirty little

secret,” he gestured at the snarl of rope and money, “your little ‘titillation’, as it were, that you’ll have run out of places to run? After all, if a group of revolutionaries and criminals won’t tolerate you, who will? But don’t worry, this isn’t the kind of thing I would want to soil myself by telling any of the others about it.” Before Avon could snap at him, Blake’s bracelet chimed.

Blake, there’s a Federation ship closing in rapidly. If you’ve found Avon, I think the two of you should get up here as quickly as possible.

“Are you ready, Avon? Not going to run then, are you? No?” He palmed the control on his bracelet. “All right, Jenna, bring us both up.”

“Blake, we can discuss this...”

“No, Avon, I really don’t want to hear the sordid details. If this is an example of it, then you can keep your private life very private, thank you.”

“But...” his protestations were lost, first, in the

teleport effect and thence in the grim silence Blake maintained around him. It had happened again. That one twist of his nature had cost him yet another friendship—one he was miserable to realise he had quite unexpectedly come to value.

Deep in thought, he walked slowly the length of the corridor, the teleport co-ordinates readied, his mind not on Blake’s mission to Horizon, but rather, on Blake’s barely concealed hostility to him. The hostility that barely concealed his revulsion.

At least, he thought as he approached the teleport area, it was Blake who came down that day. And at least, he hasn’t told anyone else. That is the one thing I doubt very much that I could bear.

He hesitated, hearing the murmured confidences, not quite able to make out the details. And then he heard it, the fatal words:

“I think Avon might run.”

III GRATUITOUS SEX

Unlike our heroes, this section was not precipitous. Better late than never. And remember, these sweet little perversities require neither plot nor explanation. They're PWP's—"Plot? What plot?"

YOU'RE IT: A GAME OF TAG, PART I Caroline Dare

AVON PEERED OVER THE SMOOTH CURVED SURFACE OF A BOULDER AS A NOISE CAUGHT HIS ATTENTION. No sign of anyone yet, but the scrubby brush and angle of the gully's edge in which he was hiding made it difficult to see anyone approaching. Still, the cover it afforded made up for the lack of view, and he stayed put.

The noise grew louder, and he ducked back down, crouching low in the shadow of the boulder. Louder, louder, and then positively identifiable as that of a man slogging through underbrush with no attempt at concealment. Avon grinned to himself, making a mental bet that it was Blake. God knew Vila found it impossible to move silently too, but only Blake had the weight and clumsiness to create such a racket.

"Avon? Are you here?" Blake's hoarse call carried easily to Avon's place of concealment and he grinned at winning his bet with himself.

"Avon? Vila's coming this way, I wanted to warn you."

Ah. So Vila was still it, was he? And for over two hours now, tch.

Blake's voice came closer still, passing directly below the boulder Avon crouched behind. "Avon? If you're down here, you'd better get moving. I found a good place up further; come with me."

Avon couldn't resist. He straightened and casually leaned over the top of the boulder. "Well now, if Vila is as blind as you, I should just stay here."

Blake whirled and gaped, then grinned. He strode back up the sloping gully to Avon, who waited smugly. But just before Blake reached him, Avon sensed a wrongness. Blake was exuding smugness as well, which could only mean...

"Bastard!" Avon yelled and sprang back, scrambling around the far side of the boulder and up the

hill. Blake lunged after him, catching hold of the corner of Avon's tunic hem for an instant before it slipped from his grasp. Then Avon was racing away, fleet-footed and rapidly widening the distance between them. Blake chased after, but it seemed Avon would make good his escape.

Then something soared past Avon and landed across his path: a forked, leafy branch which his feet caught on and tripped over before he'd had time to avoid it. It only knocked him to his knees, but by the time he'd staggered up Blake's shoulder slammed the small of his back and he was down again.

He struggled furiously, unwilling to concede defeat. "Fraud," he hissed venomously as Blake pinned him. "Cheat! Liar!"

"All's fair," Blake soothed, running his hands up under Avon's tunic to stroke the tensed back beneath. "Relax Avon, or you won't enjoy this next part at all."

Avon strained up from the ground, trying to throw Blake from his back. Blake rocked to one side, but managed to keep a leg thrown over Avon's torso. He shifted back quickly, shoving Avon's shoulders down, flattening him to the ground. Avon's face was pressed to the dirt as well, and Blake found the sight of his fastidious tech all mussed and dirty to be quite an erotic spur.

Still using his bulk to keep Avon pinned, Blake pulled at his hip, reaching around it to fumble at the trouser fastenings. Avon shifted for him readily, but before Blake could wonder at his cooperation, he'd rolled far enough over to fling Blake on his side. He tried to bolt then, but Blake's arms locked about his hips. Arms flailing wildly, the tech came crashing down atop Blake, and the two men wrestled in the dirt. Blake's superior strength began to overwhelm Avon's determined escape efforts, but it was a pro-

longed struggle for each was taking care not to injure the other.

At last Blake was able to straddle Avon's hips, securing Avon face down on the ground once more. Avon's feet beat up at his kidneys, but without leverage they barely cuffed Blake. Still, it was annoying enough for Blake to grab a flailing wrist and twist it around, tightly wedging Avon's arm behind his back.

"Naughty," Blake panted, using his other hand to stroke the tech's fine dark hair. He smoothed the ruffled locks, brushing the dirt from them, soundly cursed by his prisoner all the while.

"Come now, Avon, I've got you. Not fair and square, perhaps, but secure." He let his free hand trail down his squirming captive's back, then reached back behind to squeeze the shapely buttocks. "Are we going to do this gently, or do you want it rough?"

Avon's face was pressed sidelong in the dirt, but one eye glittered slantwise at him, angry and dangerous. Then Avon was speaking, low-pitched, taunting, insulting. "You fraud," the imprisoned tech hissed. "You can't. Do you think you can force me? You? You're soft all through, you're nothing but air. You haven't got what it would take to take me."

Blake closed his eyes, feeling the thrill of anger and possessiveness shoot through him. He squeezed his thighs about Avon's torso, loving the feel of the tense body below him. "All right, Avon," he breathed. He had the permission now. "Rough, then. Very, very rough."

He scooted down lower along Avon's hips, reaching around the squirming body to grope once more for the trouser fastenings. Avon bucked and twisted, making it impossible to do more than keep him pinned. Blake lost patience and wrenched harder on his arm.

"Ahh!" Avon gasped and held still long enough for Blake to yank open his pants, dragging them down to expose his perfect buttocks. They tensed in useless protest as Blake's hand stroked over them. Avon tried locking his legs together, and felt Blake shifting on top of him. He flinched as Blake's knees suddenly wedged hard between his legs, then Blake's hand was rubbing into the crease of his ass. Avon shuddered visibly at the feel of Blake's wide thumb pressing against his anus, and Blake felt a stab of delight at that reaction.

"C'mon, Avon," Blake breathed in his ear, knowing his appeal would go unheeded. "Time to stop fighting. You're only hurting you now." His digit

jabbed forward and Avon cried out, squeezing down on the intruding presence as he tried to block it out. Still it penetrated further, and he stiffened, trying to pull away.

Blake let go of his wrist, and Avon's sore arm was eased down. He took little notice, for Blake's other hand was jammed up between his legs, pressing its thumb full length into him. His legs strained inward against Blake's with no leverage to block the knees which kept him parted open.

"No," he moaned softly, straining back against Blake. But it was a different sort of struggle now, a tentative testing to check that he was completely confined.

Blake recognized the change and stroked the back of Avon's neck, pressing down at the same time to show the man he was still pinned, come what may. His other hand worked steadily at Avon's ass, stretching and probing, tickling with the middle finger at the underside of Avon's scrotum. Avon groaned again, an inviting sound which made Blake's stomach flutter with anticipation and his cock swell rapidly. He opened his own slacks, releasing the straining organ.

He loved this, the physical mastery of his dark companion, and no matter how Avon might protest, the tech was coming round at last, helplessly aroused by his captivity.

Avon was still cursing him, still squirming, but the movements had become less desperate, more rhythmic. Blake slowly withdrew his thumb from Avon, drawing the man's hips back to better position him for coitus. Avon resisted, but Blake had little trouble now in maneuvering him. He sensed Avon's inner acceptance as well as he understood Avon's outer display of rejection. His Avon needed to be forced, craved the domination which relieved him of all responsibility for desire. And if Avon was stimulated by the mock fighting, Blake was no less aroused. There was something enormously satisfying about overpowering his acid-tongued companion, holding him helpless and plundering his beautiful body.

Giddy with excitement, Blake lined up his hungry cock and pressed it up into Avon's still squirming body. A ragged gasp from the tech served to encourage him, and he let his weight carry him down onto Avon's back, driving his cock deeply into the tight passage before it.

"No," Avon choked, "You can't...it's too much." His body locked in spasm beneath Blake, who hissed in reaction as Avon's muscles clamped down on his

swollen member. He kneaded Avon's back with strong fingers, digging into the knotted muscles and forcing them to relax.

"Take it," he ordered coldly, keeping alive the important pretense of indifference. His hard massage moved to Avon's shoulders, pushing at them, pinning them, pulling back again as he thrust slowly forward. The pressure on his cock was fantastic, rings of muscle rippling over it as Avon's body tried to squeeze shut. But there was no way to force out the intruder, and the spasming passage only locked down around Blake's cock, unable to close itself to this probe.

Avon grimaced and shifted as best he could under Blake's weight, trying to ease the pressure of Blake's full length within him. It was terrifying, the realization that Blake was inside him and nothing would stop him until he'd finished with Avon. But it was exciting as well, exciting enough that the painful fullness began to feel good.

Blake groaned appreciatively as the warm body below him stirred and pulled away, stroking the length of his cock with its tight anal ring as it did so. He allowed Avon to pull himself nearly free, then seized the tech's waist and held him in place as he sank all the way back inside.

"...so good, Avon, you're so bloody tight...I'm buried inside you, can you feel me? Can you feel this?" He pushed hard, winning a moan of surrender from Avon at last.

"Yesss..." the tech hissed, twisting in painful delight as Blake repeated the slow heavy stroke. "Oh. Oh, yes..."

Further aroused by Avon's response, Blake hugged Avon's waist closely, plowing through him with greater energy. Avon's moans sent chills of delight through him as he stabbed into the impossibly tight, warm channel of Avon's body.

Avon's eyes were screwed shut, perspiration shining on his face, his body shaking with fatigue from resisting Blake's implacable penetrations. Yet his own organ strained beneath him, fully aroused and aching for completion. Blake's fingers brushed it teasingly as Blake's cock surged within him.

"Damn you," Avon gasped, straining for satisfaction, pinned immobile by Blake's uncompromising strength. "Do it, give it to me..."

Ahhh. Sweet music to Blake, though he did not halt his thrusts for a moment. "Beg, Avon," he grunted, and ground his hips into that impossibly firm taut bottom. "Beg me to make you come."

Avon swore at him, then gasped as Blake yanked his hair back, pulling his head back to claim his mouth in a long, hard kiss. "I'm close," Blake warned, lowering his hands to clamp them around Avon's hips and roll them to his satisfaction. He surged into Avon harder still, faster now, pulling him back for each deep penetration, easing him down at each withdrawal.

Avon's face twisted in fury, but the humiliation was overridden by heightened desire. "Yes," he choked, "Please. Hard. Touch me... Oh, there, yes...harder, Blake, hold me...touch me...Ah!" Wrapped in Blake's embracing limbs, Blake's thick cock wedged tightly up inside him, Blake's hand squeezed tightly round his own cock, Avon spasmed in delirious orgasm. Blake held him securely throughout, safe against intrusions, the world, himself. He felt the answering pulses of Blake's cock releasing within him as he trembled in the aftermath of his submission. Blake's arms were locked tightly about him, the man above him groaning his release, groaning with the sheer pleasure of prolonged exhilaration.

Avon sobbed a few last breaths of relief, his cock shivering forth its last drops of semen. His muscles went lax with sweet exhaustion, and he lay unmoving, unprotesting, beneath Blake until the larger man withdrew and collapsed beside him. Blake sighed with satisfaction, reaching over a finger to gently stroke Avon's cheek. Avon closed his eyes but kept still, permitting the caress.

"I did that to you," Blake mused. "I got you that hot, and I made you come. You don't let anyone else do that to you."

"Not like that," Avon agreed quietly, enjoying the soft tracing of Blake's finger over his skin. For the moment, he was relaxed enough to trust, content enough to speak truthfully.

"But you don't like it that way all the time."

"Mmm." Avon considered. "I enjoy sex in many forms. Surrender can thrill. The drawback is finding a partner who can be trusted, someone who will stop when it is time to stop."

Blake grinned. "I'm flattered."

Avon allowed him a small smile. "You'll do."

"And Vila? Does he do?"

Avon looked at Blake appraisingly. "He does very well indeed. Are you jealous?"

Blake snorted. "Of Vila? I can't imagine him doing this to you, not as I do."

"He doesn't. It's not his style. But Vila makes up

in versatility what he may lack in passion. And he is gratifyingly eager to please me.”

“Bastard,” Blake growled, without rancor. “User.”

“Vila likes what I do with him. Perhaps I should try taking him like this some time.”

“You’ll scare him to death.”

“You coddle him, Blake.”

“Vila like what *I* do with him, too. And I know better than to try anything this...intense. Trust me on this one, Avon. Vila needs leading along gently.”

Avon smiled insincerely. “If you say so.”

Blake sighed, stretching out his arms and leaning side to side to work out stiffness from his back. He clambered to his feet, fastened up his pants, and gazed down at his beautiful technician.

“We’ve got another couple of hours left before Jenna calls for us. I hope you’ve got it in you to recuperate before then, or you’ll have a long wait till our next shore leave to pass it on.” He leaned over and deftly tucked Avon back inside his clothes, fastening them up. With a last fond pat on Avon’s crotch, he murmured, “Tag, you’re it.”

THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

Emma Scot

“GET YOUR MIND UP OUT OF THE GUTTER,” VILA SAID WITH THE PLUMMY SOFTNESS OF AN ALPHA BORN AND BRED, SWIPING AVON’S HANDS AWAY FROM THEIR IMPERTINENT EXPLORATION OF HIS UNCLOTHED CROTCH. “I merely came to your room tonight to have you massage my back. Unlike some people, who shall fortunately remain nameless, I do work.”

“Yeh? Well, if yer ask me, I’d say yer were bloody stupid, sloggin’ away like that, for the likes of Blake. You should be out doin’ for yerself, makin’ a nice tidy nest egg,” Avon answered with a grin, throwing himself wholeheartedly into this most favoured of games.

“All the better to set you up in a style to which you could become accustomed? Shame on you, Avon. Putting filthy lucre before the shining glory of the perfect Cause.”

“So you don’t want your share of the Big Wheel money, then?”

That got a laugh from Vila. “You never bleedin’ give in, do you?”

“Accent, Vila, accent.”

“Oh, sorry. Ahem,” he cleared his throat with great ceremony. “Really, Avon, must you be so infuriatingly persistent? After all, it is only money.”

“Oh, easy for you to say, growin’ up in the lap of luxury with a platinum spoon in yer mouth.”

“Nothing so uncouth, actually. I’m afraid we’re ‘old money’. One simply doesn’t display one’s wealth. That would be rather poor taste, wouldn’t it now?”

“I wouldn’t know taste if it jumped up an’ bit me in the face, Vila. ‘Ere, lissen, I have to take the next watch. D’yer want a massage or don’t yer? With the way Blake’s been slave drivin’ me, yer lucky I’m still awake an’ if yer makes me hang about like this much more, I’ll fall asleep on my face. I’ve been up all hours, runnin’ at everyone’s beck an’ call...”

“Oh, do stop being so querulous, Avon.”

That got a double take. “Where the hell did you ever learn a word like that?” he snapped, forgetting the game for a moment. Suspicion gleamed in his eyes and smug glee gleamed in Vila’s. “My diary. You little bastard, you’ve been reading my diary!” He launched himself at the Delta lounging with such insolent ease on the bed, landing full on him. Instead

of the expected fear, he heard laughter. He stopped, looking down quizzically at the thief.

“Don’t look so surprised, Avon. ‘Course I’ve been reading your diary. Put a lock like that on something and you know it’s only a matter of time before the temptation gets to be too much to resist.”

“I’m going to kill you, Vila. Slowly.”

“As long as it’s impalement on a blunt instrument, I don’t mind,” Vila giggled, smiling up happily as Avon blushed furiously. “Told you I’d read it, Avon. ‘Impale’ me all you want, love.” His face grew serious, hands coming up to frame Avon’s face. “An’ it’s all right, I know about you an’ Blake, an’ I don’t mind. You’re not a man who should limit ‘imself to just one partner. Would get out of hand for you, if you did that, the way it did with Anna. No, don’t flinch. She’s past, Avon, dead and gone and you’re alive and here, with me. And Blake. And Cally and Gan and Jenna. You’ve got people now, Avon, people who know your faults and still put up with you.”

“Vila, don’t talk such twaddle. You...”

“I’m never going to leave you, Avon. Never.”

Avon looked at him, then, serious himself, all fury at the penetration of his privacy gone. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, idiot.”

“Then how about this one? If it is within my power, if it is humanly possible, I will never leave you. Even,” he grinned, “if you do do a terrible Delta accent!”

A slow, brilliant smile spread across Avon’s face, warming them both, commitment to him made and accepted. He leaned down and kissed Vila, lightly, reverently, his eyes closing in silent promise. “Well,” he said after a moment invested in simply memorising how open love looked on Vila’s face, “weren’t yer complainin’ ‘bout yer bad back, eh? Or was that jest an excuse an’ yer after a bit of the old ‘ow’s yer father?”

“Actually,” Vila responded in kind, “I was rather hoping that you could see your way to indulging in a spot of gratuitous sex with me. And perhaps a spot of tea, after?”

“Sorry,” Avon said, with a perfectly straight face, “I’m not kinky like wot you Alphas are. I’m not into water sports.”

Vila roared with laughter, remembering the first

time he and Avon had had sex and the subject of tea had come up, to be completely misunderstood by a streetwise, but parlour-ignorant, Delta fifth grade.

“No? Then it must be the only filth you lower grades avoid. Now, then, why don’t we,” he stroked the sharp edge of his fingernail up under Avon’s tunic and along the ripple of his ribs, “pack away all this riposte and simply get on with it? I have to take the next watch, and really don’t want to waste all this time on cheap badinage.”

“True. I mean, if you did, what possible purpose would Blake serve?”

And Vila was still laughing as Avon’s mouth came down to cover his. The laughter spread its contagious warmth and light into Avon, bringing gentleness to his eyes and reassurance to his doubts.

Warm hands came up to splay long fingers against the muscles of Avon’s back, pressing him lower, encouraging his closeness. Avon lay down fully on top of Vila, his clothes lithe and stimulating on Vila’s skin, the leather breathing in the warmth of the two bodies pressed so close together. Vila spread his legs and Avon slipped in where he belonged, rubbing his red quilted leather trousers on Vila, the second skin catching with delicate tension in the curling brown pubic hair nestling so cosily close to his rising cock. Vila muffled a curse against the side of Avon’s neck, his hands hurriedly trying to doff the leather impediments and let him get at the tantalising hardness he could feel. Avon laughed at him silently, rubbing harder, hampering Vila, turning talented, deft hands into clumsy, shaking lumps.

“Ay-von!”

“Tut, tut, Vila. Really, you must remember your accent. We really haven’t been playing the game at all well tonight, have we?”

“That’s cause it’s not a game tonight. Is it, Avon?”

Avon stopped moving, allowing Vila’s hands to relearn their skills and unleash his erection. He thrust down into the cusp of Vila’s thighs, the velvet head of his cock hard against the ridge from balls to anus, the glans teased by the dusting of crisp hair.

“Is it, Avon?”

“Aren’t you just a trifle overconfident of my reaction, Vila?”

Vila cupped Avon’s buttocks, loosening his grip only long enough to pull the distancing leather down and out of the way. “What—too cocksure of myself, am I?”

Avon grabbed the emphasised portion of Vila’s anatomy, squeezing firmly, with exactly the right

rhythmic touch. “With this? You could *never* be too cock sure. But where is my coward, my babbling fool who couldn’t quite manage to ask me into his bed for fear of my murderous reactions?”

Limpid brown eyes stared up at him. “Oh, him. *He* disappeared the minute he read your diary today. Said a lot in there, Avon my friend. I’ll never be afraid of you again. I’ll always be safe, with you.”

“Yesss,” Avon sighed, thrusting again, gathering Vila close in his arms, rubbing his body in sinuous dance the length of Vila’s skin. Frustrated by the barrier of leather, they simultaneously attacked Avon’s clothes, shedding them like the useless skin they were. Naked, rampant, Avon lowered himself carefully onto Vila, matching them, cock to cock, black hair tangling with brown, rosy cock fencing with dark red. Filled with the smell of him, Avon buried his face in the crook of Vila’s neck, feeling the arms come round to hug him fiercely, just as he had written about in his diary. The words came back to him... *Blake may bring stunning and dazing passion to my bed, and god knows, I need that. But Vila...he brings me steadiness and belonging. When I bury my face against his neck and he wraps me in his arms, holding me to him with all his strength...that is a feeling that lasts longer than gaudy pyrotechnics. And the price exacted from me is one I can comfortably pay, and if he should continue the way he has been since the beginning, on the London, well...*

Lips lingering on the hollow at his collarbone brought him back from his musings and a hard cock digging into his belly in rigid harmony with his own instigated tumultuous arousal, setting his nipples tingling and his spine into quicksilver pleasure. He shivered, and Vila’s hands were on him, the warm, smooth palms soothing and erotic, the fingers so knowledgeable and sure. With ease of long standing, they twined together, Vila’s legs wrapped around Avon, skin silking on skin, the smooth planes of Vila’s chest tantalising his nipples. Avon eased one of Vila’s hands around to his front, settling the fingers on a neglected nipple, smiling as Vila began to twist and squeeze the way he liked. He murmured in his throat, eyes closed, very comfortable with this man, free to be unguarded and relaxed. There was no struggle here, no conflict, just the occasional game of Alpha/Delta, and even there, it was a reversal and fun.

Fun. What a revelation to him it had been when he realised that he had written that in his diary, a simple, small word, but one that had always been too expensive to have in his life. Vila’s mouth was on his, Vila’s tongue against his own, drawing frantic

mewlings from them both, rushing them headlong into the white rapids. They flowed together, surging, undulating, never losing an inch of contact. Avon licked his palm, reaching between to hold his cock to Vila's, delighting in the strength, in the parity and equality of it. He pumped, sliding skin on hardness, rubbing his palm over the flared head of Vila's cock, only to be pushed aside by Vila's mindless lust. He was surrounded by Vila, and now his cock was gliding against Vila's, his balls heavy and full and exquisitely tight, every inch of him touching and touched by Vila, his spirit enveloped and elated by the unafraid love pouring from his partner. The fire built, fed by the endless kisses and the roving hands, fanned into a bonfire by the indescribably erotic feeling of cock on cock. Of the feeling of the man he loved rubbing against him with such fierce tenderness. Avon felt the cum pool in his balls, felt Vila shudder, the sudden heat of cum spreading between them, the quivering spasm of Vila's cock precipitating his own, his seed flowing from him in its desperate, urgent need to touch Vila.

They lay together for a long time, neither speaking, each content to idly stroke and fondle the places of passion, tactile memories preserved forever in their fingertips. Slowly, the glow faded, leaving simple sleepiness in its wake, and with great groans of reluctance, Vila dragged himself to his feet. It was their old pattern...

"Stay?" Avon asked, and the diary sprang to mind. *If I were to ask him to stay, he would understand me well enough to know that from me, that is a declaration indeed of feeling.*

Vila turned and smiled at him from the bathroom doorway. "Didn't I say I would? Be back in half a tick," he said, disappearing into the bathroom, appearing momentarily, towel in hand. He came and wiped Avon clean, amidst a great deal of kissing and licking and purely unnecessary fondling. Contented, Vila finally sank back into bed, into waiting, welcoming arms. The final step had been taken, at last. Avon had recognised what he had with Vila. Bless Blake. If it hadn't been for his spectacular, sporadic and unreliable passions, Avon would probably never have gotten around to appreciating the deeply rooted stability being offered him. Vila lay in the cradle of Avon's arms, thinking about how to best phrase his thanks to Blake...

"Vila?"

"Hmm?"

"One question, then I'll let you sleep."

"S'all right."

A small kiss of affection on his brow surprised Vila pleasantly. The question almost shocked him into next week.

"What took you so bloody long to break into those damned diaries? Have you any idea how much effort it took me to 'surreptitiously' hide them?"

A COMPLETE BALL'S UP

Gael X. Ile

THE ONLY SOUND IN THE ROOM WAS THE NOISE OF BALLS SLAPPING AGAINST TENDER ASS, AS AVON POUNDED INTO VILA. He was drenched in sweat, skin flushed rosy red, muscles rippling and bunching with the strain. Vila was under him, bent double, feet braced against the bulkhead, ass stretched wide and full by Avon's heavy thickness in him.

Vila groaned with pleasure, reaching up to pull Avon even closer, running his hands up and down the fluid muscles, lower, onto the undulating hips. Avon's sweat dripped onto his face and he licked it up, tasting the salt sweetness, thinking of the salty sweetness soon to be unleashed in him. And of the gallons he had already drunk tonight, as Avon indulged his recently uncaged passion for oral gratification. An unrestrained obsession Vila had been more than happy to sate. In fact, he was considering making it his main hobby...

Avon lifted himself up onto his toes, bracing his arms more firmly, beginning to thrust harshly, pumping short and sharp in the beckoning rush to orgasm. Needing to feel Avon in him even deeper, wanting more friction against his prostate, Vila shifted under him and suddenly, with a loud cry, Avon stopped. Dead. Right in the middle of a thrust.

"Avon? What the hell d'you think you're doing. Or not doing, as the case may be? What the frigging hell is the matter with you?"

Avon's face was pasty white, the veins standing out in a *bas relief* of pain. "My back. I've put my back out."

"Oh god no! Here let me..."

"Don't move, you idiot! My god, that was sore. Lie still, Vila, stop squirming."

"But I'm getting cramped..."

"You're often in this position far longer, now lie still and pray that my back eases."

"Avon, I'm usually what you could call distracted when I'm in this position, and there's always a bit of movement going on, what with the way you get all enthusiastic when you fuck me, and this lying still like this is killing me."

"Well, move again and I shall be the one doing the killing. Vila, I literally can't move." He tentatively shifted his muscles and winced. "I'm afraid I may have slipped a disc this time."

"Told you we should give up doing it like this. Warned you, didn't I, that one fine day you'd end up knocking your back out, didn't I?"

"All right, you've said 'I told you so', now will you shut up and think of a way to get me out of this—and you, for that matter."

A horrible thought dawned in Vila's eyes. "You really are stuck, aren't you? In me? God, Avon, what if we have to get Cally to come and help?"

"Idiot, how could she help?"

"She'd give you one of them relaxant pads. That'd ease things up enough for you that you could get out of me. Are you positive you can't even lift up a couple of inches to get out of me, before *my* back gives out?"

Even in the midst of this predicament, Avon was not about to let that particular slur pass. "You are obviously judging others by yourself again, Vila. It would take more than a couple of inches for me to get out of you."

"Well, if you can't move your body, how about if we make you kind of, sort of, em, lose your erection, then you'll just sort of slip out?"

"If the pain hasn't done it, then I can't think of anything short of death that will." He actually managed to dredge up a wry grin. "This is a rather unfortunate way for you to discover that your boasts of your charms were all too accurate. You're right, Vila, once you've got me in you, nothing short of a plasma bolt could get me loose."

"That's it!"

"A *plasma bolt*? Surely that's just a touch extreme, Vila. I'm afraid embarrassment is hardly a fate worse than death. Although, for the others to see me with a fifth grade Delta ignoramus..."

"More like *ignoranus*, I'd say."

"Oh, Vila, I'm in enough pain without you adding your damnable puns."

"What? D'you think I'm adding insult to injury then?"

"Obviously, your cramped position isn't causing you enough pain. I'm sure I could remedy that..."

"Not in the position you're in, Avon me old pal. No, but listen..."

"It would appear, trapped as I am, that I really have very little choice."

"But that's what I mean. You're stuck inside me, right, right up to the hilt, so my arse is like a cockring, stopping you from going soft?"

"With such exceptional powers of observation, you really should be a forger, not a mere thief."

"Anyway," Vila continued, ignoring Avon's interruptions with the ease of long practice, "why don't I just use my muscles to pump you? Once you come, you'll slip out, and then I can get up, give my poor stomach muscles a break, and get you one of them pain pads from Cally. She'd never even know what brought it all on."

"Use your muscles on me? That and that alone? Are you seriously offering to do all the work?"

"Listen Avon, my back feels like it's breaking, my legs are going to sleep and my stomach muscles are killing me and I've drunk so bloody much of your cum today that I'm beginning to feel a bit... delicate. Making you come is the lesser of two evils here. Now, shut up, move back just as much as you can and concentrate on how I feel around you..."

The sudden squeeze of muscle around his cock made Avon gasp and close his eyes. The pain in his back didn't matter; just for the moment, he had far more important things to think about. He forced himself to relax the undamaged muscles, easing the pain in them, and put all his attention into the eight inches of hard flesh locked inside Vila, muscles clenching around him, milking him. He opened his eyes to look down at the man under him, impressed by yet another aspect of Vila's bedside manner. "What other lights are you hiding under a bushel?" he asked, breathless.

"Eh?"

"What other hidden talents do you have?" Avon translated.

"Keep coming around and you'll find out."

"Is that supposed to make me willing to risk my back again?"

"There are other positions, you know."

"Yes, and all the ones you have in mind have *me* on the bottom."

"Not a bad place to be, Avon. C'mon, live dangerously."

"Not in my sex life, thank you. Blake makes the rest of my life dangerous enough as it is."

"Will you shut up and concentrate? This is bloody hard, I'll have you know."

A particularly strong squeeze on his cock shut Avon up and he concentrated on the exquisite sensation, eyes slitted, watching Vila's hand stroke him-

self, filing the motion and the preferences away for future use. There was still so much to discover about each other, and he had grave doubts his back would stand up to the exploratory missions. He moaned as Vila clenched and unclenched, faster and faster, the sight of the thief's blurring hand and flushed face fueling his own lust. The come rose in his balls, jetting free, bathing Vila's quivering insides with his seed.

Vila felt Avon come inside him and that, with one last hard pump on his cock, sent him over the edge, the white viscosity ribboning his heaving chest.

Avon softened and shrivelled, his limp penis sliding free of Vila's relaxed and loosened ass muscles. With the utmost caution and extreme care, he eased himself down off Vila, the pain shooting up his back almost unbearably. Vila didn't seem to be in much better condition, moaning and groaning as he tried to massage the cramps from his legs and his stomach at the same time.

Eventually, Vila was able to move, which is more than could be said for Avon, who was still lying death-still, face down on the bed. Vila, still making little mewling sounds of pain, dragged himself up and gingerly pulled on his clothes. "Aren't you glad," he said from the doorway, "that we decided to do this in your room, and not mine? We'd have a hell of a problem explaining you naked in my bed, wouldn't we? Oh, and Avon," he looked back at Avon lying on the bed and, just as the door was about to close, said, very cheekily, "you have got such a lovely bum. And I'm sure Cally will agree with me..."

Gingerly, watchful of his back after yet another intense bout of overindulgent sex with Vila, Avon came down the steps on to the flight deck, walking over to Blake to give the blinkered hero a piece of his mind. He caught sight of the medical report in Cally's hand and abruptly changed his mind. He was entirely too uncertain as to what those damned diagnostic computers would have revealed... He busied himself doing nothing—quite intently—over by the wall, where he would still be able to hear.

"Tell me the bad news first," Blake rumbled, obviously far more exhausted than Avon, despite the tech's exertions.

Avon almost choked with curiosity and bemusement when he heard Cally's reply. "Your headaches are from the same source as Vila's stomach cramps and Avon's back pains."

Blake? Blake? And with whom...

And then the combined disappointment and relief. *At least*, Avon thought, *my 'secret' is safe...*

“...fatigue...space shock...”

But what a pity that Blake's headaches weren't from the same source. Now that, he thought, watching Vila putting on a truly spectacular performance, *would*

have been interesting. The scent of Blake's hair drifted up into his nostrils, making his hand twitch with the desire to tangle in the tensile curls. *Very.* He allowed his glance to wander lower, to Blake's groin. *Enormously so. I wonder if Vila is dissolute enough for a threesome...*

IV CUPID STRINGS HIS BOW...

The stories in this section all have happy endings—well at least as much as seems reasonable in the Blakian Universe. The last tale, in particular, was written to appease those who complain that the Glaswegian always does dark, twisted, nasty endings. She suggests that reading it could cause cavities and that toothpaste be packaged with the zine. The Southern Contingent shakes her head at this suggestion and wonders why the Editor ever took the muzzle off the Glaswegian in the first place.

HELL Adrian Alexander

BLAKE GOT UP FROM HIS BED. Sweat streamed off his naked body in rivulets. Bracing his palms against cool stone columns, he stood in the doorway separating Avon's room from his, hoping to catch a small breeze on his skin and alleviate some of his suffering. Negotiating with the rebels on Valtos Four was proving fruitful, but the heat here never seemed to end. The planet's dual suns made the days unbearably hot and the nights gave little respite. Political dissidents whose deaths would have reflected badly on the Federation had been sent here for decades, creating a colony of well-educated malcontents who weren't supposed to be able to live long in this place. But they'd fought the Federation in the only way they could: they had survived. The now second and third generation natives had adjusted to the high temperatures, but Blake, and especially Avon, had been hard pressed just to function. Any suggestion to resume talks aboard the *Liberator* had been wholeheartedly rejected; the rebels were cautious, almost paranoid. Their experiences with the Federation had been beyond horrendous, which only added to the reasons why Valtos Four was affectionately known in the Federation archives as Hell.

Silently, Blake made his way across Avon's room to the window. He sat down on the thick sill and looked out over the rough-hewn terrain of Symitar Valley. They'd been given quarters high up on the cliff face, so their rooms would get any little breath of cool air that might happen by, but tonight the air seemed different. Far into the distance, Blake could

see flashes of lightning bursting from the sky. He could smell the ozone it created and much to his amazement the wind stirred. He stood up and stretched out his body like a sail to catch any minute bit. In the back of his mind he prayed for rain to relieve the heat, but rationally he knew any moisture would turn to steam by morning, making it impossible for them to stay any longer.

A distant roll of thunder reached his ears. He sighed, trying to collect his thoughts. Unable to sleep, he occupied the time by running over the coming day's agenda in his mind. A low moan distracted him and he turned to see if the computer tech was also awake.

Avon lay, apparently asleep, on his bed. His narrow, naked frame glistened with perspiration. Absently, his hand rubbed down his chest and across his abdomen wiping away some of the salty fluid, but it was almost instantly replaced by more. Blake stared at the other man, assessing him. He had never really looked at Avon before. Oh, he'd seen him nude on several occasions, but he'd never really looked at him, and now, reluctant to waste the moment, he took this opportunity to satisfy his voyeuristic curiosity. He liked the shape of Avon's face, and even the sculptured lips, which should have belonged on a more delicate person, seemed right on Avon. The pulse beating in the tech's neck was more rapid than he would have expected, but the heat was affecting both of them strangely. And Avon was more muscular than predicted. Belly flat.

His eyes lingered on the curly mass of dark pubic hair and the shaft nestled comfortably against the tech's right thigh. Blake cocked his head and smiled. It was reassuring to know that despite Avon's superiority in most things, he was average for a man his size. No surprises there. His eyes travelled on down the leanly muscled thighs to the small, perfect feet. A little envious, Blake wished he'd been blessed this way. He'd always had a problem finding shoes his size. When he did, they never seemed to fit right and so, in turn, he always had problems with his feet.

Avon groaned and his hand slipped on down to his groin. Cupping his penis in his hand, he stroked it. Blake watched, fascinated, as the organ firmed. He sat mesmerized as the tech began to masturbate in his sleep, amazed that Avon had the inclination to do it with this heat. The tech's movements were enticing. Blake shook his head. Once again a smile blossomed on his face. He felt the first faint stirrings of desire growing in his own groin and even though he was rarely inclined to want a man, Avon, naked, stretched out before him like a sacrificial lamb, vulnerable, was almost too much for him to turn down...almost. He sighed and looked away. Therein lay the trap. If he acted on his feelings, several things might happen and a couple of them were not particularly pleasant to think about: he knew nothing of Avon's views on men making love to other men.

The storm was definitely coming in their direction, moving slowly. The breeze had picked up and little dust devils kicked about in the fading moonlight. Shifting his position, Blake once again tried to concentrate on other matters, but his thoughts kept meandering back to Avon. He remembered how it felt to hold another man. So different from women. Men were hard, their strength more definable. Women, even women who were well muscled, always seemed to have a softness about them. Into his mind came images of taking a man, pulling his cock

between his lips, sucking greedily, demanding surrender of mind and body to him. The power of it!

Shocked at the direction his thoughts were going, Blake had to force his hand away from his aroused member. *Was that it?* Blake questioned his motives. *Do I want to dominate Avon? Do I want to see him submit to me?* The big rebel stood, his brow furrowed deeply with emotion. The tech had been the first man in his life he couldn't outmaneuver. Avon's mercurialness made him a wild card. He couldn't decipher the man...didn't understand his motivations for staying with the *Liberator*. Though Avon had tried to convince him he wanted the ship and only the ship, that that was why he stayed, Blake knew there was more. He closed his eyes and sighed. His hard on was not going away and the vision of what Avon was doing to himself behind his back was becoming more and more vivid. *Am I afraid he'll reject me or am I afraid, as in other things, that he'll dominate me? Am I willing to lose?*

The wind pulled at Blake's loose curls. Lightning brightened the room for an instant and the deep grumble of the thunder shook the sill the large man leaned against. His hand reached down and he stroked himself vigorously, bringing his member to fullness. His jaw set with firm determination as an old adage sprang to mind: *Better to rule in Hell than to serve in Heaven.*

Lightning erupted again as Blake turned toward the man on the bed. Dark eyes flashed and the rebel stood, transfixed, as Avon smiled ever so slightly. Without a word, the tech turned onto his side and scooted to the far side of his bed. His hand patted the damp bed linens, inviting Blake in. The rebel smiled, taking advantage of the unspoken offer. The first touch of Avon's lips on his was the beginning of the end for any doubt of where he may have stood with his new lover. He would be glad to serve in Heaven.

IN THE BEGINNING

Edi N. Burgh

“SO WE ARE AGREED, THEN?” AVON SAID, A SMALL SMUG SMILE WARMING HIS FACE.

“Yeh, all right,” Vila replied, with less than flattering reluctance. “I suppose so...”

A bright grin lit the room and Vila basked in it. *Can't be too awful*, he thought, caught in the rainbow shower of that smile, *I mean to say, he ain't half bad, and he don't seem cruel or vicious and with a mouth like that...* He saw Avon's quizzical expression, and broke from his reverie, turning his fingers to the task at hand, removing his clothes with deft untidiness. *Course, with our Avon, the problem isn't going to be him, is it, Vila old chum? Nah, it's going to be your reaction to him. And I have a sneaking suspicion he'd have your guts for garters if he got a whiff of you falling for him. This is just an 'arrangement', like he said, so keep a grip and...*

“Vila? I would appreciate it if you could possibly gather your few wits and rejoin me—or is even that beyond your humble talents?”

“Oh, sorry, Avon,” Vila muttered, shoving his gathered wool into the back of his mind. Avon was already in bed, the grey satiny bedding up to his waist, the other side lifted in silent invitation for the thief.

“Are you quite certain that you have done this before, or is your memory as suspect as our Fearless Leader's?”

“Oh, I've done this more times than you've had hot dinners. Shove over.”

Avon raised an eyebrow at the tone and the tension on his would-be friend's face, but let the concern slip from him as Vila's skin slipped along the length of him. He smiled, reaching for the thief, drawing him closer, luxuriating in the feel of a warm, willing body against his. It had, finally, been long enough after Anna for him to consider a bedmate, but yet, the memories of her scent, her softness lingered in his mind like the misty echo of rain. He was uneasily positive that with either of the women on board, one of two things would happen: he would call Anna's name, embarrassing and revealing, but hardly fatal or, he would be impotent, which depending on how aroused his partner was, could very well be. No, the different sameness of another man was what he wanted, and a mutual 'arrangement' would suit him very well. Affectionate, friendly sex, no ties, no pit-

falls, no complications. That left only the choice to be made. Gan was out of the question: he was too big, too protective, too nurturing. Avon had no desire to be treated as a wife and praised for his beauty, as so many had sought to do too often in the past. As for Blake, well, one had only to look at the man to see why *he* was out of the question. Halos are, after all, a terrible nuisance in bed. The fact that Avon could so easily become deeply involved with him, had, of course, no bearing whatsoever on the comptech's decision. So that left...Vila. Avon looked at the man in question, lying here in his bed, puzzled insecurity covering his face and he laughed. “You,” he said, “look as if you can't make up your mind what I'm going to do—sleep with you or devour you in your entirety.”

“Sorry,” Vila answered, making himself small, wiping all expression off his face. “Well, how d'you want me?”

“Enthusiastically, naturally.”

Surprised, Vila looked up, taken aback by Avon's attitude. *Well, here's a right turn up for the books, he thought, so much for him being all tight and prissy in bed. And if he wants me enthusiastic, god, I could live with that. They usually only want me to do the necessary, but him...*

With evident satisfaction and confident expectation, Avon lay back, throwing the cover off, displaying the beginnings of desire. He stretched languorously and his cock rolled against his thigh, the hairs there stimulating him like a thousand tiny fingers. “Well?” he grinned, sex beaming from him. Vila found himself returning the smile, and the 'all in good fun' attitude. He slid down on the bed, lowering his head to take Avon in his mouth. As was to be expected, the tech was deliciously clean, a small mercy Vila was more than thankful for. As the flesh filled his mouth, the lovely musky scent filled his lungs, the taste and aroma going straight to his head, spinning him around like a top. He couldn't keep his hands still, running them over every inch he could reach, ruffling fine hairs, tingling on nerves, making Avon shiver under him. Vila swallowed, bringing Avon's length right down into his throat, rubbing his nose in springy pubic hair, vibrating his tongue on silken skin and ridged veins. Slowly, atom by atom,

he released Avon, sucking as he went, pulling the foreskin completely closed over the weeping eye.

“God, Vila, stop!” Frantic, trembling hands lifted his head, wild, wide eyes greeted his. “It’s been rather a long time, I’m afraid. Keep that up and it’ll be over before it’s started.” The smile, this time, was slow and radiantly warm. Vila was entranced, mesmerised by the heat, following Avon’s gentle promptings without thought, simply going where those wonderful hands led. The hands brought him up to within an inch of the full lips and the fingers slid into his hair, palms cradling his face, thumbs stroking his lobes. “I think it’s time for us to slow down somewhat,” the soft voice whispered against Vila’s parted lips, the lithe body under him twisting to lie, full weight, upon him.

For once, Vila welcomed the load of a man on top of him: the heaviness felt comfortable and reassuring, ensconcing him in Avon’s aura of sensuous sexuality. Hard and thick, Avon’s cock nestled against him, nudging his balls, the smooth slickness tingling on the so sensitive hairs, feeling too good to be true. *Oh, god, Vila thought, I’m in trouble. Why’d he have to be so fuckin’ nice? Oh, no, what the hell am I going to do? No, he can’t be going to do what it looks like he’s going to...*

Lips still stretched in a smile, Avon brought his mouth down on Vila’s in a light, teasing kiss. “Just as well I don’t mind the taste of soma, isn’t it?” he murmured, tongue tracing Vila’s teeth, stroking his tongue, filling him with affection. Avon lost himself in the kissing, in the sweet snug tightness of cock on cock, of balls bumping round and heavy on the man below. Small sounds came from him, as his hands moved in skilled orchestration over supple muscle and firm skin, over the faint roughness of light hair encircling a tiny mountain of nipple. His mouth roved Vila’s face, licking and nibbling, stopping abruptly at the new taste: salt, and not the salt of sex-roused sweat. He propped himself up on one elbow, staring down in rank amazement at the clenched features and tightly capped control. “What the hell...” he muttered.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” the broken whisper promised. “I can’t help it, I’ll stop in a minute, doesn’t mean anything, honest.”

Avon rolled off him, intending to leave, not even caring that this was his room. “If it bothers you to such a marked degree, if it fills you with such... what would you say? Horror? Disgust? Or are those words too mild? I must be slipping—I really hadn’t realised that I had become so repulsive that even a fifth grade Delta would...”

“No, Avon, no! It’s nothing like that. Honest.” The hand on his arm was insistent, irremovable. “It’s just...”

The tech turned around to loose his gimlet stare on the hapless thief. “It’s just what?”

Blushing, looking everywhere but at the tech, Vila muttered his answer.

“What? Honesty is obviously so alien to you that you can’t bring yourself to make it audible.”

“I said, it’s just that no one’s ever kissed me before. Well, they have, but that’s been Delta grades like meself, out for a quick tumble, but none of the Alphas ever bothered, none of them took the time.” His eyes were filled with awed, child-like wonder. “You made it seem like you actually wanted me to enjoy it, like it was important.” Avon’s frown stopped him and he changed track with the slick ease of a lifetime’s lying. “Not that I thought, not even for a second, that I really was important or anything, I mean I’m not stupid enough to think a thing like that, you being an Alpha and gorgeous and all...”

“Vila,” the cold voice snapped, “What the hell are you babbling on about? What insane idea do you have careering through the great empty void of your skull?”

“Well, we’ve got an arrangement, like you said.” Vila’s face and eyes hollowed with the loss of so much, of dreams asphyxiated before they were even born, of self-contempt. “So, I’m just saying that even though you like to have it all nice and friendly and everything, it’s all right, you don’t have to worry, I’m not going to get ideas, I know my place.”

Hesitantly, Avon reached out a finger to trace Vila’s mouth, wanting to draw the unaccustomed bitterness away. “We are renegades, exiles, cast out of the Federation. Here, you have no ‘place’. Quite literally, we are all in the same boat now. It matters not one whit that you were born Delta, or Gan, Gamma. Nor even that I am an Elite.”

“You can’t mean that....No,” his voice hardened, “no, you can’t. You’re just playing some Alpha game with me, eh, is that it? ‘Let’s see if we can get the common little Delta all involved, see if we can get him to believe we think he’s as good as the rest of us.’ Well, I’m on to you, Kerr Avon. I know you don’t mean any of it—not with the way you speak to me.”

Avon was a man of great affections, almost impossible to engender, but there nonetheless. Perhaps it was because he saw Vila as a pet, or because cold though he pretended to be, Avon was not a man foolish enough to turn aside the possibilities of love...and

certainly not the offer of blind loyalty. With consummate sensuality, writing fondness deep and clearly on Vila's face, he brought his mouth down close, brushing skin with his breath. "Well now, the way I speak to you, Vila, is based not on class, but on merit. And you must concede that, so far, your display of abject stupidity has been most convincing. And anyway," he chuckled, lips teasing Vila's, "I'm actually nicer to you than I am Blake..."

Vila was satisfied by the reason, as reassured as he would have been made uneasy by protestations of affection. He relaxed farther back into the pillows, resettling Avon's weight on him, fitting easily into the comfort of their tacit closeness. "Coming from you, that's not much of a compliment, is it?"

"Oh, do shut up, Vila. There's a time and a place for everything, and bed is neither the time nor the place for chat."

Quite happily, Vila shut up, mouth filled with Avon, with his taste and his tongue and his lascivious humour. His cock was sharp and hard against the line of hair on Vila's belly, stickiness oozing from the tip, sliding Avon so smoothly along his skin. He brought his hands up, holding Avon, feeling his touch encouraged, realising that the tech honestly did want enthusiasm and equality, in here, if nowhere else. Affection surged through him and he pulled away for a second, long enough to catch Avon's eye and grin, then he threw himself wholeheartedly back into the sweet glory of Avon's arms. It really had been a long, long time, for both of them, and they pushed and rubbed and twisted against each other, climbing the peak, seeking the crest, mouths and hands and bodies hungry, heat flushing fair skin, sweat beading them in silken ease. All Vila's muscles tensed with the desperate desire to come, and with Avon's sudden hard grasp on his cock, the come shot through him, draining him, spraying Avon with his passion and leaving the thief limp and satisfied and content. Over him, Avon still moved, eyes slitted, mouth open, voice quivering with onrushing orgasm. Holding Vila with his eyes, held in Vila's arms, cradled in undemanding, unthreatening strength, Avon came, groaning Vila's name out as his seed pulsed from him, garlands of white, months of unexpressed needs come home to waiting, welcoming warmth.

Vila was ready for the sudden drop of weight upon him, hugging Avon close, almost laughing with the sheer happiness of it all. To be accepted, to have *that* moment shared, to be wanted and liked and tolerated, by Avon... The tears started again and when heavy lids dragged themselves upwards, Avon subsided with another deep groan. "Now what?" he asked, still hoarse.

"Nothing, nothing, nothing. Oh, god, Avon," he burbled, "was wonderful, wasn't it? Best ever, I mean, you kissed me and everything and..."

Avon spared a moment to consider what kind of past Vila, an orphaned Delta, must have had, trapped in the Earth Domes. One day, he promised himself, he would find out and if he could, he would do something about it, something to make the past worthwhile, even if it were only to prevent some other small, laughing child from growing up into a slight, frightened man. Or better: destroy Servalan and her ilk. He allowed Vila to pull him closer, pillowing his head sleepily on a nicely muscular shoulder.

A soft voice in his ear dragged him back from sleep. "D'you want me to move now, so's I don't disturb you when I leave?"

Now why, Avon wondered lazily, would he sound so sad about asking such a minor detail? Maudlin does seem to be his natural condition but... of course. The past. I can well understand its echoes. "It's all right, Vila. If you promise not to snore and to refrain from kicking and stealing the bedcovers, you may stay the night." He could actually feel the happy, surprised delight erupt from the thief and made a mental note to keep more of a distance between them, reduce the closeness, rebut the complications. Tomorrow, that is, when he wasn't quite so sleepy...

Several hours later, Avon woke up, cold, sore and bad tempered. Pulling the blankets out of Vila's death grip, he dunted the thief, silencing the snoring at last. He was about to shove the other man out of bed, when brown eyes opened, a warm smile bloomed and a sleepy voice whispered, "Avon..." Strong, supportive arms reached up, pulling him down into a sleep-warmed hug, a loving mouth opened under him and, despite his very best intentions, Avon was lost...

LAMENT, PART I

Cally Donia

AND JUST AS MY EYES START SEEING
(AFTER ALL THE PAIN)
THE TWISTS IN MY LIFE START HEALING
(JUST TO TWIST AGAIN)
IN STILLNESS
IN SORROW
RETURNS THAT
SOFTLY, SINGING LAMENT

LAMENT.

AND JUST AS MY SMILE'S RETURNING
(AFTER ALL THE PAIN)
THE FIRE INSIDE STOPS BURNING
(JUST TO BURN AGAIN)
IN MOMENTS
OF MADNESS
RETURNS THAT
SOFTLY, SIGHING LAMENT

LAMENT.

This story is set in an alternative time-line. What scenarios would we have been able to explore had Zukan not betrayed them to Servalan, had he seen that Avon's lot offered him greater opportunities for an even larger sphere of influence? In this story, Zukan came to Avon, selling Servalan out to a higher bidder, thus forming the Alliance and setting the manufacture of the counteragent into motion. Xenon Base has become home to the main Rebel force organisation, all the rooms filled, the entire place a-bustle with men and women full of the exhilaration of seeing the Federation finally, after so terribly long, on the verge of defeat. They are ready to take over, well-prepared, eager. Avon, freed of the spectre of failure and destruction which has haunted him with such mocking enthusiasm, has regained his mental/emotional equilibrium, losing the frightening—and frightened—fraught tension of the time of Malodaar and before, gradually easing himself out of the yoke of command and back into the freedom of simply planning strategy and advising. Tarrant has come into his own, leading the Alliance Armada, grudgingly willing to follow the new power structure. On this latest mission, he, his crew of four, and Vila have gone on a raid to break into and sabotage the main Federation Base in the next sector.

OF COURSE, HE ABSOLUTELY WAS NOT IN THE MAIN CONTROL ROOM SIMPLY TO KEEP AN EYE ON THE COMMUNICATIONS BOARD: THE MAINFRAME COMPUTER HONESTLY DID NEED TO BE RE-CHECKED. And of course, the trembling that made his hands so clumsy was not caused by worry; the frown marring his brow was most certainly not the result of fear. Privately, even he, however, was willing to confess to his relentless conscience that the horror in his mind was, indeed, due to the fact that no word had been heard from *Scorpio*. No sight. No sign. No Vila.

He sighed heavily, sitting back on his heels, resting, just for a moment, he promised himself, leaning his forehead on his arm, easing the knotted weight bowing his shoulders. Four days. Ninety-eight hours and forty-five minutes, to be truly accurate. Not that he was counting: he was merely keeping track of an Alliance ship that had been...lost. He slammed his hand against the casing of the damned computer, then sagged, rubbing his forehead hard against the leather of his sleeve, repeating that bitter word in an endless, vicious cycle in his mind. Lost. Lost. He had

finally lost Vila. Chance had done what his own psychopathic tendencies could not. He had *lost*. Vila. He worried at it viciously, like a tongue-tip on a throbbing tooth, poking to sharpen pain to give respite from the bone-wearying, enervating ache. Again, the words replayed in his head, an endless loop tape. He rose from the floor beside the computer access panel and glumly crossed to the communications console, dismissing the staff on duty, taking the woman's place on the revolving chair. It was still warm from her, the erotic pull of which was uncharacteristically lost on Avon, evoking instead memories of Vila, smiling, moving over in the bed, welcoming him in, leaving the warm spot for Avon. The smell of it, the feel of it, the heat of Vila's skin on his...

With deliberation, he brought himself back to the console, looking at it properly, triggering the computer to play back the last recorded communication from *Scorpio*.

"Oh, come off it, Avon. The entire raid was a brilliant success and Vila was the perfect choice to accompany me. You're just too jealous to admit it, that's all. I mean, you were the only one to make any mistakes, when it came to this mission. Even Vila did perfectly well."

He stood by the console, smiling just a little, enjoying this—purely accidental, of course—opportunity to speak to Tarrant. Well, that was going a touch too far, but it was pleasant to hear the familiar voice again, and unexpectedly sweet to hear Vila in the background, grumbling and whining away, making his usual pointed, vilifying comments about Tarrant, Life, the Universe and everything else, just in case he had missed something.

Avon simply didn't even bother answering Tarrant, addressing Vila instead, tiredness and overwork making him careless for once, indiscreetly and unwittingly giving himself away to Tarrant. "Well now, idiot," he said, affection unalloyed in his tone, "how does it feel to have someone as... knowledgeable as Tarrant sing your praises? To have actually done something right, for once?"

"Well now," the voice returned sharply, in a credible imitation of Avon himself, "the novelty is somewhat overwhelming. Rather like big-wig's ego here."

"Listen, Avon," Tarrant butted in, "the raid..."

"Avon!" Vila yelled. "Tarrant—do something! There's a bloody great battle cruiser right on top of us, somehow they must've sneaked past our detector shield! Plasma bolts fired and running. Oh, god." The distressing sounds of flurried activity, the agony of impotence, the fear-filled, fearful cry ringing through the speakers. *"Avon!"*

And then, the silence. The unrelieved, unmitigated silence. Still no sign, still no sight. None of the search

ships had reached the last-known position yet and even when they did, there might well be no way to know what, precisely, had happened. Just a 'bloody great battle cruiser'. And the silence. Avon sat in that still quietness, listening not to the world around him, but to the images inside his mind, to Tarrant's slowly maturing brashness and to Vila's endless complaining. Gradually, as he sagged into the chair, the loss of sleep sabotaging him, he started listening to Vila's voice, all the variations, of tone, of accent, of class. To the little sounds Vila would make when Avon kissed him, or fellated him, or settled his hand so firmly around that pale, blue-veined penis, or that little whimpering pleasure sound as Avon slid into him slowly and smoothly, filling Vila up. Or the sounds from Avon's own mouth when he had recently relented and allowed Vila to take him, the shocking, broken murmurs begging Vila, needing him, the thief unlocking yet another prison door. Avon swallowed hard against those most recent memories, shying away from his own vulnerability, searching for something, anything to occupy his mind while he waited. Just waited. To hear that voice again or to hear that the loss was undeniable, that there would be no miracles this time, not even in a Universe where the Federation could actually be overthrown. He rose to his feet, going back to the mainframe, picking his tools up as he passed.

The sound jolted him bolt upright, sending him careening to the console, flicking the switch with what would later be embarrassing alacrity. "This is Xenon Base," he answered the faint, scratchy signal. "*Scorpio*?"

"Sorry, Base, there's no sign of Scorpio at present. This is Hunter. We've found a considerable amount of fuel and weapon radiation still here, that's what's making communications so damned staticky, but no ship, so far. Just some debris. We shall continue search pattern."

He slumped, all the sudden hope gone just as suddenly. "Very well, keep on looking. And Jackson."

"Yes, Avon?"

"They were friends of mine. Don't give up just because you get bored and want to get back to the comfort of Base. Understood?"

Even through the distortion, the resigned disgust was apparent. *"Understood. Hunter out."*

Avon closed the console down and went back to his work. Again.

Merely human, inured to loss, all his old calluses forming over the same old places in his heart, Avon

went back to his usual routine. There was no one for him to talk to, no one that he chose to explain his current, spectacularly foul mood to. He was all too aware that everyone on the Base knew that it was because of his friends' deaths, but that Soolin and Dayna were too close to the truth, each trying, surreptitiously, to help him to deal with Vila's absence, to cope with the slow erosion of all hope. They, however, thought that it was only the loss of his oldest friend. Or so they said, never once hinting at anything else. He glanced up when the doorchime sounded, instinctively knowing that it would be the two girls, coming to offer their condolences, now that the search had finally been called off. No hope left. Not now.

Sure enough, the door opened to reveal Soolin and Dayna on his threshold, both wearing almost amusing expressions of uneasy embarrassment. Soolin gave Dayna a very pointed look and the other woman cleared her throat.

"Avon? Can we come in?"

"Why not?"

If he could have been bothered, he would have been terribly amused by the concerned glance that flitted between the women and at the way they hurried to cover that concern as they carefully intruded into his bedroom. For a moment, he toyed with the idea of being the spider in the parlour, but, quite frankly, he was too tired. He settled for a blank stare instead, not even thinking about how it appeared, uncaring, for once, of his image. "Well?" he prompted at the two grown women shuffling like schoolgirls.

"Well." Dayna suddenly raised her eyes and looked directly into his, hurting him with the painful clarity of her vision. "Look, Avon," she said, voice verging on harsh, coloured by her diffidence at prying into and bringing more suffering to Avon—no matter how good it was for his soul, it was not easy to do. "Listen," she trailed off, then gathered herself in the face of his blank indifference.

"What we came here to say," Soolin jumped in with both feet, "is that we know how badly upset you are by Vila's death and we just wanted to say that if you want to discuss it, or him, then we're ready to listen. I mean," she raced on, hoping that it really wasn't anger making his eyes glitter like that, desperately praying that it was anger and not tears, "you were with him for years..."

"What we're saying, Avon, is that it's hard enough to lose a friend, but when you lose someone you really...care about," Dayna temporised, skitting

away from the planned speech they had prepared with such diplomatic care, "someone who's actually important to you..." She faltered to a stop, the hard shine of his eyes damming her words. Another quick glance at Soolin, then she girded her loins and went over to kneel beside him, taking one of his cold hands in her own, holding his attention, looking directly into his eyes, her honesty once more found. "Avon," she murmured, memories filling her, "I know how it feels to lose someone you..."

"Love?" he whispered for her, saying the word, the oh-so-dreaded word, hanging it right there in the open for the world to see.

"Yes. Love. You did love him, didn't you?"

"We were...you could say we were lovers."

Soolin sat at his other side, not quite looking at him. "But did you love him?"

It took a very long time for Avon to answer, even in the deep solitude of his own mind. "Love?" he whispered again. "Would *he* have called it 'love', I wonder? I never pretended to it, not even..." he trailed off delicately, and Soolin filled in the discreet blank.

"Not even in bed? Not even in a 'game'?"

Unexpectedly, Avon looked at her with his own discomfiting clarity. "I don't believe I'm entirely comfortable discussing my private life with you two."

"If it's any consolation, neither are we!" Dayna grinned at him.

He found a faint echo of a smile to answer it. "Ah, but you shall have so much fun gossiping about it later, won't you now?"

"No," she said, all seriousness. "Not this. If Vila were still alive, just kind of... missing, well, that would be different. But it's been over a week, he's not coming back." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she could have bitten her tongue off.

Avon folded in on himself, withdrawing again, drifting off into that frightening, pain-filled void from after Malodaar. "I tried to kill him, you know," he said quite conversationally. "I never so much as hinted that I actually quite liked him, but I did try to kill him. He cried. It went on and on, those muffled sounds. I could hear him, but I couldn't quite find him. And all the time, I could hear him sniffing. I knew how he would look, too. It wasn't the first time I had made him cry..."

Really worried, Soolin and Dayna exchanged a long look, then both turned back to the distant Avon. Soolin spoke very softly, in the voice she had needed so desperately to hear when her family had been

murdered and she had been raped by the murderers. “Avon, it’s not your fault he’s dead. You didn’t kill him.”

“Not this time. But I made him cry. Did you know what his last words were, as the plasma bolt hit? My name. He called for God and *me*. I could put that on his urn. ‘He said my name.’ After all that has been between us...”

“He still loved you, Avon.” Dayna paused, then realised that there was no confidence left to break: the man she had promised was dead. “He understood, he knew that you couldn’t say you loved him, he understood why you tried to kill him on the shuttle. He had *forgiven* you. Can’t you forgive yourself?”

Avon smiled the old smile, the same one he had used to answer the question of guilt. “Did he think I... cared about him?” he asked, carefully masking his fear that Vila had not even had that much. He had meant it to be more... reciprocal, soon. As soon as Vila had come back from the raid, in fact...

With the utmost sincerity, Dayna lied to him. “Yes, he did.”

Soolin arched a brow, but added to the deception. “Yes. Once, when he was really drunk, when you had first come to Xenon and he was still so upset by that creature in the cave, he tried to tell me that you and he were lovers.” *But, she didn’t add, I didn’t believe him. Not until he broke down and told me the truth, or what he thought was the truth, anyway. He told me that he was your bedwarmer, your way to ease the tension without getting involved with a ‘real person’. And he offered me his services. ‘If I can be Avon’s unpaid whore, why not do for the whole bleedin’ lot of you, eh?’* She watched as the lies she and Dayna had given him covered some of the hurt with balm, salving some of the pain.

“Then he was far more perceptive than I ever gave him credit for. Which would not be difficult, even for him.” He paused, gathering himself. “Which would not *have been* difficult, even for...him,” he said softly, consigning Vila with the rest of his dead: to the past. Blinking, he came out of his personal graveyard, narrowing his eyes at the two women. “Why the hell are you here? Surely, if you came to offer sympathy, you are sorely lacking.”

“What? Because we forgot your tea?” Dayna teased, very gently, as one would a sick child. Worried by the expression on his face, she turned to Soolin, who was making urgent, but futile, ‘don’t!’ gestures. Horrified, Dayna closed her eyes briefly, then looked back at Avon, guilt raising colour in her

cheeks. “I’m sorry, I just forgot, about you and him and him bringing you tea and...”

“And I’m not so fragile that I’m going to break if you mention someone I used to sleep with,” he said briskly, in the old Avon tone, worrying his companions no end with this abrupt volte-face. “Now,” he continued, determinedly getting up and dusting off his hands, “it is quite a loss to have both Tarrant and...Vila die like that, so now we have our work cut out for us. I want you two to find out what Zukan and the others are doing about replacing Tarrant. I confess to being somewhat remiss recently. In the meantime, I shall stay here and continue my work on finding a way to strengthen our detector shield.”

“That’s it?” Soolin yelled at him, beating Dayna to it. “They’re dead, let’s not bother any more and go and find a replacement. Dayna, we were wrong. He hasn’t changed. He’s still a shallow bastard, feels something for a couple of days until the inconvenience of these people dying gets in his way, then it’s ‘let’s find replacements’,” she spat out.

Dayna watched him carefully, trying to see past the utterly calm eyes, unable to find the sorrow that she fervently wanted to see, the proof that Avon, under it all, was the man that she and Soolin had so hoped he was. There was nothing there, no sign of the pain so briefly glimpsed when he had spoken of Vila. The silence stretched between them, charged, pregnant, as Dayna reconsidered. *But you never once said that you did love him, did you? Never said that you missed him, that you were upset about him being dead. Only about how you weren’t as good to him as you think you should have been. Guilt, Avon? Oh, you wear it so well, it actually looked like grief to us. More fool me, right?* “Let’s just leave you to your work, shall we? After all, we wouldn’t want mere emotions, mere *human* feelings get in your way, would we? Come on, Soolin. I’ve had enough of him.”

Together, they turned on their heels and left him, both women storming through the door in high dudgeon. In their wake, Avon sat back down on the bed, heavy, weary, relieved that he had, at least, been able to dam the damning tears, that he had been able to hold on to his control long enough to survive their caring.

I couldn’t talk to you about it. You seem so very young, to understand, or to go so far as to discuss my sexual relationships. Such a lack of sophistication in both of you, despite all life’s little adventures recently. And it had to come to sex, didn’t it? It’s what I always used with him, my little barrier to prevent either one of us seeing too clearly

what I needed from him and why. An overactive libido always seemed so much easier to blame, didn't it, Vila? Did you know, he thought, addressing the dead, as he had when his brother had died in the hospital, the day he had stayed home to study for his exam, *that I once told Tarrant that pilots were ten a penny, but a good thief was hard to find? Even then, I meant simply that I couldn't replace you, not your talents. And so it went, Vila. I never told you. I had barely begun to tell myself, to be willing to take that risk again, after Anna. He stared dumbfounded at his hands. How very peculiar. It no longer hurts to think of her. Has your death been the price of finally healing that particular wound? Or rather that this is just a new layer, covering the old? No matter. I miss you, old friend. The words I'd never say, now seem so very cheap, when compared to what they would have given you. I know that Jenna used to call you my bedwarmer. Did that hurt? Yes, well, you're right, of course it bloody hurt...*

Startled, he shook himself from his reverie, unwilling to follow that path again. He had actually heard Vila's voice in his mind, answering him. "Ghosts," he told his room, "do not exist. Nor do psychic links between non-telepathic people. If I couldn't hear Cally after she died, then I certainly would not be able to hear Vila. Ergo, I am beginning to lose grip on reality again. Therefore, I will..." He plopped down on the bed again, slumping over, resting his elbows on his knees. *Do what? Get a grip? That isn't always too easy, is it? But then, I suppose the psychiatrists would all say that such a reaction is normal, given the circumstances. Vila. Dead. I half believed him when he said he would live forever. A pity he couldn't have lived another week. A pity,* he thought to himself, becoming angry, *that you had to be melodramatic and wait until the date we did our first job together, isn't it? Or was that just another excuse? Yet another reason to postpone confessing to him, like getting the Alliance firmly established, or setting up Xenon—or letting Malodaar fade? To put off making it public, because you knew he would the minute you told him that he mattered to you. He wouldn't have been able to help it, would he? Not our Vila. Not my Vila...*

He stiffened, recognising the danger signals in what he was doing, taking the first steps down the path he had followed after Blake, after Cally. But this time, there would be no Vila waiting silently in his bed, offering warmth and closeness, accepting him, easing the hurt for a while, loving him... Carefully, he got to his feet, to do the only thing anyone could, given the circumstances. He would go on with his

life, day by day, letting each day have sufficient evil unto itself, as this one surely had.

It had taken over a week, but he had done it. There was, indeed, a weak spot in their detector shield, and now he knew a way to compensate for it. Avon shoved the finished gadget away with a grimace of disgust, revolted by the new existence of something that was so relatively simple and would have saved Vila and Tarrant. That is, had he bothered to work on it earlier, when he had first realised they needed one. Sour, he scrubbed his hands clean, rubbing them hard, using the strongest solvent his skin could bear, well aware of the psychological motivation behind this compulsive cleaning. Shrugging, he rinsed his hands again. None of the medics on the Base dared come near him and it gave him momentary relief from the nagging guilt of having contributed to losing Vila and Tarrant and it postponed the moment when he would have to find another project to occupy him. He wanted to try to fall asleep tonight without the pills and soma, reluctant to add drug addiction to his list of griefs. And if he failed, well, sometimes, the insomnia was better, for then, he didn't have the twisted, fiery nightmares of Vila, hiding, sobbing in the shuttle, with Avon stalking him, a plasma bolt glowing warmly in his hands. Without sleep, he wouldn't see Vila's face, wouldn't hear that dreadful cry as the plasma snaked millimetre by millimetre towards him, wouldn't hear the sobs as Vila burned, consumed by Avon's fiery dæmons. Would not hear that wisp of sound, a sound he had heard so many times as he lay there feigning sleep; the lonely murmur of Vila's voice in the night, whispering words of love. That, more than anything else perhaps, was what haunted him so devouringly, leaving him drained and empty, disgusted with himself for his cowardice and guilt. And so, he did as he had learned to do: he stood, took a calming breath and walked out of the room, facing the pain a single day at a time. That way, lay sanity and survival, and he intended to live. As for happiness, well now, that was nothing more than a carrot to be dangled before the stupid donkeys of the masses, a sop to their foolish needs. *He was beyond that, he did not need it. Which was just as well, for he surely did not have it.*

He hadn't even registered the subliminal vibrations of yet another ship landing, so the first he knew of it, the very first hint, was the excited gabble coming from the corridor, snippets of "star drive blew when they were escaping, knocked them off course,

so our lot couldn't find them, but neither could the battleship."

Bloody great battleship, he thought, with a sudden, bone-chilling, frightening hope. *Bloody great battleship*. He got up from the lunch table with controlled energy, face carefully schooled not to reveal the butterflies dancing to merrily in his stomach.

"Had to limp back."

Bloody great battleship.

"Communications were destroyed by that plasma bolt, but it was the only one that hit them."

Bloody great battleship.

"Yes, it's a miracle that none of them were killed.

Vila! Avon cast discretion to the four winds and ran from the refectory, down the corridor, pounding along, racing to the landing bay. Out of breath, he slowed down, marginally, catapulting himself into the large unloading area. There they stood, filthy, smelly, scrawny, but alive. All of them, the four crew looking at him strangely as he barrelled up to them, Tarrant grinning and stepping aside with a flourish, revealing the scruffiest Vila he had ever seen. The man looked—and smelled—as if he had been coated with machine oil and then covered with a light dusting of dirt. The grin on Vila's face faded under the stern fury on Avon's.

"Avon?" he asked, voice nervous. "Avon?" he asked again, all hope of welcome disappearing. "Wasn't my fault, I didn't do anything, honest, I..."

Avon grabbed him by the chin, shutting him up, making the warm brown eyes widen. "If you ever

ever dare do a thing like that again," he snarled, "I'll kill you." The other hand came up to hold Vila's head steady, despite the thief's struggles. "You scared me out of several years' growth, Vila. And I do not choose to go through that again. Understand?"

A light brightened Vila's eyes. He did understand—he hoped. And then, there, in front of everyone, Avon proved that Vila understood perfectly. He leaned forward, kissing him fiercely, slowing to gentleness, slipping his arms around to hold Vila tightly against himself. "Now then," he whispered, rubbing his own smooth cheek on the grimy stubble of Vila's, "as soon as the doctor has finished with you, I expect you in my cabin, where you will bathe for as many hours as it takes to get you clean. Understood?"

Vila was so taken aback by Avon's behaviour that he forgot to complain about how much he hated doctors, twisting, as the medics led him off, to stare over his shoulder at Avon, dumbfounded amazement slackening his features.

Grinning from ear to ear, Tarrant couldn't resist it, getting his comment in just before Dayna and Soolin came tearing down the corridor to claim him. "Finally going to make an honest man of him, then?"

The girls rescued him before Avon could do what the plasma bolt had failed to, leaving the tech amidst a horde of Base personnel, defying one of them to comment on his sudden impulse. And despite Avon's frequent comments to the contrary, not one of them was a complete imbecile: every single one of them wisely kept his mouth shut.

LAMENT, PART II (LOVE'S GREAT ADVENTURE)

Cally Donia

FRITTERING HIS TIME AWAY IN NERVOUS THOUGHT, ENSCONCED IN THE LAVISHNESS OF WHAT HAD ONCE BEEN DORIAN'S PRIVATE QUARTERS, HE COULD HEAR VILA THROUGH THE CLOSED BATHROOM DOOR, SINGING A POPULAR SONG, VOICE SOUNDING EXACTLY THE WAY VILA LOOKED. Pensive, Avon stripped, ending up on the edge of the bed, holding the black raw-silk dressing gown Vila had given him. *It always comes back to him, doesn't it now? Like a fifth columnist who's quietly infiltrated all my defences, taking me unaware, without a struggle. I didn't even realise that I should be fighting him. But the battle's lost and I have made my decision to give what he needs. What we both need. All I have to do now, is find the courage to actually do it. To actually take the risk and try to be happy. It's always so much easier to simply say that one doesn't want all those timeworn ideals, for then, one never has to try, one can never lose. But now... Oh, how he would laugh, were he to see what a coward I truly am.*

He shouldered into his dressing gown, tying the belt tightly, stuffing his hands into deep pockets. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained. He who dares, wins. No pain, no gain. Love's great adventure... And I could stand here all night, reciting clichés and platitudes to myself and find myself a month from now, with Vila truly dead and all the truths unsaid. All the chances missed...*

He squared his shoulders and rose to his feet, approaching the bathroom with all the determination of the condemned, giving himself one more cliché.

"Once more, dear friends, into the breach..." He came to an abrupt halt in front of that door, feeling awkward. He had never gone in to the bathroom while Vila was actually using any of the facilities. It seemed rude, somehow, overly intimate. *And anal sex is not?* He raised his hand, tapping lightly on the door, going in before Vila spoke or his courage failed him.

"Aren't you finished yet?" he demanded, damned if he was going to let Vila see his nervousness.

"Have you any idea how long it takes to get engineering-hold grime off?"

"So far, almost two hours. Surely you haven't suddenly developed a streak of fastidiousness at this late stage in life?"

"Late stage in life?" Vila squeaked, clambering out of the Romanesque bathtub, water streaming from him, clouds of sandalwood surrounding him. "Late stage in life? I'll have you know," he muttered, stand-

ing in the circle of the dryer, "I'm a good four years younger than you, so there."

"Well now, I suppose that would explain why you're so far behind me."

Vila glanced up to give as good as he was getting, but stopped before he started. "Avon?" he whispered, enthralled by the expression on Avon's face.

Avon couldn't quite wipe the foolishly fond grin off his face, the elation at being able to slag Vila off again too much to ignore. "You know," he said, leaning casually against the doorjamb, "I've actually rather missed our badinage."

Wearing only the skin-softening lotion automatically dispensed by the dryer, Vila slowly crossed the huge bathroom, coming to a halt millimetres away from Avon. He reached a tentative, trembling hand up, fingertips barely brushing the lips he had wanted so much. "I missed all of us, Avon. Even the fights and your bad temper in the morning."

"Even bringing me tea at 'the crack o' bleedin' dawn'?"

Vila didn't care that he now had a foolishly fond grin plastered on his face—it wasn't everyday a man gets to come back from the dead to find out that those he loved returned the feeling. "Even miss getting up early to help you with your work. Now how's that for 'stupid sentimentality', eh?"

"Oh, quite exceptional, I would say." He straightened up, taking Vila by the hand and leading him into the bedroom. "But I confess," he continued, "that I would rather indulge your sentimentality in a less stupid way. That is," he paused, suddenly considerate, "if you're up to it?"

"When am I ever *not* 'up' to it? Anyway, I just spent two solid weeks on the *Scorpio* with nothing but Tarrant and four bloody idealists for company, so I should think there'd be something wrong with me if I wasn't up for it."

Avon didn't answer him, simply taking him up on his offer, drawing them close, untying his dressing gown, wrapping Vila up in it, bringing warm moist skin against himself. His fingers found a little pool of moisturiser in the hollow of Vila's collarbone and smoothed it away, eyes cast down, watching his fingers. He had done it again, he knew, postponed the moment, allowed Vila's comfortable, undemand-

ing welcome as excuse not to speak. Yet, the memory was still too fresh: the horrible numbness of nights thinking Vila dead and the lingering ache of that almost loss forced him to open his mouth. He couldn't quite find the courage to look up as he said the words, staring instead at his endlessly circling fingers.

"It's all right, Avon. You don't have to say anything. I know you missed me and you kissed me, in front of everyone and everything. That'll do me, honest."

Avon looked at him then. "Yes, it would, wouldn't it? But it would be unfair, also. Vila," he hesitated, again fascinated by the hollow under his fingertips, "I...missed you."

A lithe body pressed into him; the scent of sandalwood filled his nostrils. He could feel Vila getting hard against him, feel the cock lengthen and rise, the turgid flesh held tight against the line of hair that ran from navel to groin. "Feel that?" a soft voice murmured in his ear, lips fluttering against the lobe.

"Yes."

"That's how much I missed you, and this," a strong hand gathered Avon's cock and balls in a measuring grip, "is how much you missed me. That's enough, for me, Avon. Never expected love and romance from you. You're not exactly a hearts and roses kind of man, are you?"

"No, but you are. Therefore..."

"You think you have to do all that kind of stuff, to keep me happy? What—d'you think I'll just bugger off and leave if you don't give me all that silly stuff?"

"It had crossed my mind..."

"Well," Vila whispered, one hand busy rubbing Avon's back, the other squeezing the longed-for cock, hungry for the touch of that silken hardness, "tell you what. You don't leave me and I won't leave you. That sound fair enough? Look, Avon," he said, very seriously, drawing back far enough to look straight into dark brown eyes, "I'd rather not hear any words from you, or have you go through the motions, if that's all it was. Motions, like. I mean, it wouldn't feel right if you did all the right things just 'cause you felt you had to. It's better when you do something that's natural for you, and I know how much that means."

"So instead of bouquets, you would rather...what?"

Vila let go of him, sitting down, marshalling his thoughts. "Listen, Avon," he began, clarifying things for both of them, "until you kissed me today, right in front of all those people, I honestly thought I was just a tumble for you. Oh, I *hoped* it was more, but

most of the time, I couldn't convince myself. Then you kissed me. God, that was wonderful, in front of people like that. And you're not an affectionate man, Avon, so that means a lot and it says a lot. I don't need much, not from you, not now I know what's behind all this hopping into bed. You actually like me, don't you?"

Avon simply stared at him in disbelief. *Is that all you think it is, Vila? Have I honestly been so cruel that today's little display can be explained only by 'liking'?*

"Avon? Have I got it wrong?"

Look at you, sitting there, so afraid that you're wrong, that it was only some twisted guilt that made me publicly acknowledge you.

"Avon?"

And I still can't bring myself to actually say it, to wipe the fear from your eyes. Perhaps Soolin and Dayna know me better than I know myself.

Vila watched, wide-eyed as Avon took the final step to close the distance between them, staring as the slender hands reached to cup his face, fingers threading his hair. An open mouth descended upon his, limber tongue claiming him, filling him with longing, the sweet assuagement of fear beginning. The heaviness of Avon's body covered him, pushing him down flat against the bed, the weight satisfying and reassuring, the starving hands suddenly raging over him a declaration.

"Oh, god, Avon," he said into the mouth on his, "I love you. Iloveyouloveyouloveyou..."

And the words were not cast back at him, the enveloping desire was not withdrawn, the man did not flee. Instead, the mouth kissed and licked the length of his torso, swirling desire in its wake, lips sucking gently, until Vila saw the dark head reach his groin. He watched as Avon slowly, with infinite care, laved his length, opening his mouth wide, swallowing Vila completely. Avon's eyes closed in desire, as the satisfying taste and smell filled him, deliberately making Vila feel worshipped, needed, important.

The words ricocheted through Avon's mind, echoing Vila, but trapped at the back of his throat. *love you, Iloveyouloveyou...*

Avon sucked hard, his tongue rough against the underside of Vila's cock, drawing moans and incoherent mumbblings from the man beneath, a man restrained only by the strength of Avon's arms across his body. There were no restraints, no limits, on Vila's enthusiasm, nor on his frantic desire and most especially not on his emotions, a waterfall of love cascading over them both, the fluid sheet of emotion clos-

ing out the world. Vaguely, Avon heard Vila, registering the meaning, spurred on to even greater efforts by the unfettered words. Words of love, of belonging, of homecoming, the very words that Avon wanted to say, were being said for him, and to him. With a lingering vibration of his tongue, he allowed Vila to slip from his lips, then languidly trailed his way, mouth open and wet, back up, nuzzling trembling muscles and hypersensitive skin, pausing for a nibble at a tiny pink nipple, grinning in delight as Vila became ever more desperate. He wanted so much, and yet asked for so little, making it as easy as possible on Avon, freeing the tech from all demands, thereby tying him with invisible, unbreakable bonds. And for once in his life, Avon couldn't find it in himself to complain, or to run. He lay his full weight on Vila, arms folded across Vila's chest, chin resting on his forearms, leaving his face a scant millimetre from Vila's. "Well now," he said, somewhat breathless, "is this a suitable 'welcome home', or would you prefer something more formal, an afternoon tea, perhaps?"

"I don't care what, just so long as I get to come. Avon, c'mon, don't be cruel, don't stop."

Avon grinned as the body under him heaved, Vila desperately trying to rub them together, to ease the unbearable tension in his cock. Propping himself up on his elbows, Avon looked down between their bodies, at Vila's swaying cock, nudging at the dark hair on Avon's belly, at his own cock, seeming to reach down to touch its mate. Even he wasn't proof against lust, his own control now tenuous, fragile as the scent of sandalwood still lingering in the air. He held back, just for another moment he promised himself, but then, Vila surged up under him, bringing their cocks together, the hardness devastating. Avon collapsed onto Vila, arms locked around him, exulting in the strength of both Vila's own grip around him and the love being lavished on him. He fell into the rhythm Vila started, sliding easily, running his cockhead the length of Vila, his glans catching delicately in the nest of hair coiling at the base of his friend's cock.

"Fuck me," he heard Vila say, a wealth of meaning in the words. "Fuck me, come in me, I want you, up my arse, c'mon Avon, you know the way I like it, shove it up me, fuck me..."

The words inspired him, sending delicious delight to *frisson* up and down his back, the gutter talk continuing all the while as he found the lubricant and dilated Vila to get him ready. Three fingers in, he could feel the imminent orgasm, so he pulled free, twisting his hand a little as he did, pushing his cock

in quickly, a deliberately harsh shove of his hips. The edge of pain caused a hiccup in Vila's litany of lust, just enough discomfort to head off the orgasm, to give them time to enjoy this first time. They had done just about everything in the past, including this act, but never truly this, never this unleashed love making to fill the small quiet places hidden within.

"C'mon, c'mon, Avon, fuck me, ram it up my arse, harder, harder, oh, oh, oh, that's it, oh, that's it, I love you, oh god, Avon, I love you..."

The words Avon needed to hear, the affirmation that Vila *would* stay, despite all the wounds he had inflicted upon him, burst into Avon, tossing him far from the remnants of his control, setting his body to wild thrusting, ramming into Vila, the force of his passion shoving them higher on the bed. He could smell them, could feel the sweet sweat slicking their bodies, Vila's nipples against his, bumping with tiny jolts of pleasure, in perfect harmony with the great explosions of pleasure streaming from his cock. The headlong, rushing orgasm grabbed him by the throat, cutting his breath off, suspending him in momentary unsullied pleasure. Thought returned and he could feel Vila squirm under him, balls so tight, riding up high on the sides of his shaft, whole body shaking, needing that one last stimulus. Weak with release, Avon wrapped his hand around Vila and pumped, once, hard, then felt the pearlescent streamers pulse over his hand, Vila's strength ebbing with each eruption, the delectable tension of arousal fleeing, languorous ease creeping in on satin slippers.

Physically sated, Avon fed his emotions, nuzzling Vila, hundreds of tiny kisses, mouth speaking for him, wordlessly. The words still wouldn't come, phrases that had seemed so simple and harmless with Vila gone returned now, double edged, honed so sharp they could make him bleed before he would realise he had been cut. Anna's memory rose like a lingering corpse, the fear of it silencing him. She had laughed, keeping it inside where he couldn't see it, using him, hurting him. Destroying him. The stench of the past overwhelmed him.

"Avon?" the voice was soft, so soft, like a childhood dream of candy clouds and rainbows. "Shh, love, 's'all right, don't cry..."

Stunned, Avon touched a finger to his cheek and felt the moisture, that most unexpected banner of his regret.

"You don't have to say it, don't have to say anything. Just let me hold you."

Is it so damned obvious, Vila? Well, it patently is. And

not a smirk, not a giggle, not a gleam in your eyes. That's the answer, isn't it? She loved me as best she could, which wasn't very much, but you... Oh, you have depths, my little fool. Such depths, and you've given them to me, knowing what I could do to you. Knowing what I have already done. So much trust, Vila, so much power you have given me.

Avon stretched Vila out, rubbing his face in the fine, fair hair on Vila's chest, saying by action that which he couldn't say in words. He kissed him everywhere, feeling Vila's fingers in his hair, hearing the crooned words of thanks and love. Burying his face, he licked Vila's underarm, lapping up the sweat of their shared lovemaking, moist mouth flowing lower over ridged ribs to the other liquid mark of their union. Reverently, he licked up Vila's seed, taking the other man's essence within, making this his words of commitment and love. Slow, gentle hands raised him, bringing them face to face for a long kiss, bodies settling comfortably together, still needing the closeness of touch. Eventually, as time passed, sleep came stealing the moment away, and for the first time since he was a small boy, Avon fell into sleep with a smile and without fear

The light was still on when Vila awoke, a thoughtful gesture to the man who hated the dark, but it didn't ease the cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. He knew, instinctively, completely and immediately, that Avon wasn't there, that the tech had gone. He lay stiff for several moments, mummifying the pain inside, embalming the wounds until he could face the emptiness of the bed beside him, tucking

yesterday's hopes away into a sandalwood chest. He rolled over, prepared for the absence.

Frowning with incomprehension, he picked up the single blossom lying there on Avon's pillow, a profusion of fragrant yellow petals, one he recognised from his own forays outside. Only a weed, true, but the very best available in a thousand spicals. A smile began to grow and, leaning up on one elbow, he read the note lying beside the blossom.

It took him several moments to decipher the writing, the scrawl at the end almost defeating him, but then the significance of it finally hit him, and for the first time ever, the tears caused by Avon were not those of pain. Vila read the note again, saying the words aloud, giving them credibility, testing this new reality, savouring every syllable of the unspoken message.

Grinning, he launched himself from the bed, grabbing the first clothes that came to hand, no matter that they were Avon's black leathers and that the fit wasn't exactly perfect. He didn't notice and if he had, he wouldn't have cared. He was going in search of Avon. The other man might not yet realise it, but leaving flowers behind and notes that were, more or less declarations of love? It was patently clear, to Vila at least: Avon was more than ready to start off on love's great adventure. And Vila knew just who would be his guide...

You most certainly 'got it wrong', Vila. One doesn't leave flowers for those one merely likes, now does one?

—Kerr

REORBIT: THE SECOND COMING

M. Fae Glasgow

SURELY SOME REVELATION IS AT HAND;
SURELY THE SECOND COMING IS AT HAND.
THE SECOND COMING!...

FINGERS SHAKING, HE ORDERED A HARDCOPY. This, he would need to hold in his hands; this, he would need to touch to believe.

ARTFUL DODGER. MEET OLIVER IN THE HANGMAN'S ARMS. HAPPY ANNIVERSARY.

Printed, the words were no different from the coloured lights that had danced across his screen, mesmerising him. He rose to his feet, to stand and gaze from his window at the glimmering darkness beyond. There was always the possibility that it was a cruel joke, one of Dayna's little revenges for what he had done to her adulated Avon, but he doubted it. No one but Avon and he knew about the names, or the place. Or the date.

"Happy anniversary," he muttered, a tinge of bitterness beneath the sadness. "Happy bloody anniversary. Six years, Avon, six fucking years and not a word, then...happy anniversary."

His mind travelled the well-worn, manicured paths to his past, to the beginning of it all. A beautiful Alpha, in the only pub on this particular planet where the high- and the low-born could commingle, looking for something to relieve the boredom of the science labs where he worked and the pleasant parlours where his kind mixed. And a Delta thief, fresh out of prison, no money, no stake, no contacts made. The offer.

"And I turned you down, didn't I, Avon? Probably the first person in the history of the human race to turn the great Kerr Avon down. Never did tell you why, did I?" His voice drifted shut and he leaned against the window of this, his new life. He was an Alpha now—thanks to some fancy footwork and greasing of the right palms—and living the life of Reilly. *Couldn't let you buy me that night, could I? First second I set eyes on you, I wanted you. And straight from prison...I'd had enough of the roughness and the cruelty. Wanted to have you, not let you rent me body like I was some hard-hearted pro. And now you want to meet me again, the same place, the same time. Happy anniversary. What d'you mean by that, eh? Did you say that to hurt me, or was it just cause that's a message so obscure that*

no one could break the code and catch you? Six years, Avon. Six long bloody years.

He sat down on the couch, sipping his drink, the fruit juice he now favoured after Avon's disappearance. He had gone on a bender then, one he had barely survived, reemerging on some distant planet having done enough damage to require a liver transplant. Somehow, Blake had found him and seen to it. Why, he never understood. They had all started in on him, then First Blake. Then Tarrant. And Soolin. Dayna had just smiled, unforgiving him for the confession he had made in drunken anguish, his penance yet unpaid. They had blamed him, every last one of them, for Avon running like that. *As if I even mattered that much to him. No, he was running because of what he had done his whole life and because once Blake's blokes on Gauda Prime broke Servalan's damned self-destruct conditioning, what else could he do? You can't go poking and prying inside Avon's head and expect him to hang around while you look at him knowingly. Besides, I just helped him do what he would have done, anyway. But all this thinking about what's been and gone isn't getting you anywhere. Think, stupid. What are you going to do about Avon's message?*

There really had never been any question. He put the tools of his trade away, stripped off for bed and climbed between the sheets. He would need to be awake for his meeting with Avon tonight...

He had fussed and bothered with his appearance, cursing the thinning of his hair and the wrinkling of his face. Six years worth of the passage of time, each day exacting its price. He was finally ready, dressed in the expensive clothes he had just bought, wearing the only cologne Avon had ever expressed a positive opinion on. So he sat, now, in the self-same pub, on the self-same day, at the self-same time. And Avon wasn't there.

Happy anniversary, he thought, waving off the attention of a Delta pro, cringing inside at the memory of how he must have appeared to the fancy Alpha... Worse, though, was the very thought of how he must have appeared, that night on the *Liberator*, after Gan died, when he confessed in the inviting darkness of Avon's cabin. *"Only good memory of then I've got, is the time I met you, Avon, and you took me to bed like an equal,*

because I stood up to you, wouldn't let you buy me..." And Avon's unexpected reaction, his cool voice murmuring sleepily, "Well, in that case, we shall just have to consider the night at the 'Hangman's Arms' your anniversary, then, shan't we?"

It was never again mentioned. Until the message. Vila fingered the hardcopy in his pocket, stifling the urge to check the time again. Another hopeful approached him, but this was an Alpha, obviously not 'on the game', simply attracted. Vila preened a moment, then sagged again, sending the other Alpha away with a genteel and discreet shake of his head.

And still no Avon.

The other memory still ached like an amputated arm, the hollow pain of Avon's catatonia, Orac's unexpected offering of information and the desperate dash to Gauda prime and to a Blake no longer Blake. A changed man, a bitter, twisted suit of armour with all the heart gone out of it, only the consuming fire of The Cause remaining. And then, the weeks of Avon's serene insanity, until the doctors there were able to break the conditioning Servalan had visited upon Avon, preying like a scavenger on his weak spot. His guilt. *And that was when all hell broke loose, wasn't it, Avon old boy? Can't say I blame you. Can't even say I blame you for leaving me without so much as a good-bye.*

He raised his head from his musings, his hackles tingling, his every sense suddenly alert. And there he was. Even after all the years, even under the auburn hair and beard, he recognised the man.

Avon.

Staring at each other, each examining in minute detail the changes time and experience had wrought, Avon approached Vila, who sat dumbfounded, waiting. Avon breasted the table and stood, also waiting.

It took a moment for Vila to realise the reason why. *My god, you're treating me like an Alpha!*

He had to clear his throat before he could speak, the reality of Avon after all these years choking him. There was so much suffering written on that face, and behind those disconcertingly hazel eyes. "Care to join me?" he asked, the mundanity camouflaging the extremity of feelings, of the litany of love careening through his mind. It hadn't faded, hadn't died, simply lain still and pretended that time was, indeed, healing all ills. But the love was there still, tempered by time and compassion and long hours of thought. "Please," he repeated, a graceful gesture indicating a chair, "do sit down."

With the old remembered elegance, Avon seated

himself, barely taking his eyes from Vila. The question was there, as easy to read this man's silent conversation now as years ago.

"I'm so nondescript, no one ever notices me," Vila said, ostensibly chatting up a prospective companion, answering the question of why he, unlike Avon, had done nothing but let time alter his appearance. "But you, you're so handsome..."

A smile quirked the unforgettable lips. "Not beautiful? Nor lovely?"

Words whispered at night, in the glowing aftermath of sex, the question asking what paths Vila was willing to tread now.

"Still that, oh, definitely still that." The answer given, unhesitatingly. For all the problems, for all the melancholy given birth by Avon's wordlessness in love, there could never be any other answer. "What's your name?" *Who do you want to be with me? The old Avon? Or someone completely new?*

The old grin, the hell-bent sense of humour that had survived even the deepest psychosis. "Stratford," he said, expecting Vila to remember the conversation and the joke.

"A name that flows trippingly from the tongue," Vila grinned back. *So, the old Avon with a new twist. And why are we here, eh? To renew our old acquaintance, or just to check up on the loyalty of friends?*

"Thank you, I rather like the name myself. May I buy you a glass of wine? Or something stronger, perhaps?"

Accepting me for what I am? Keep this up, Avon, and the shock'll kill me. "Thanks, but no thanks," he said, doing a little shocking of his own, revealing the little details that even Orac wouldn't know. "I don't drink." The look of stunned amazement on Avon's face was priceless. "But," Vila went on, grinning, playing the part, both for the safety of anonymity amongst the watchers in the pub and for the possibilities that might still be there for him with Avon, "I'd be very interested in something a trifle more...potent?" *Do you want me, Avon? Even with my hair thin and my crow's feet?*

"I have," Avon breathed, "some very potent potables. If you would care to join me?"

"Thought you'd never ask. Shall we leave?"

They got to their feet in unison, so easily flowing back into the subconscious rhythms of the past, walking shoulder to shoulder out the pub, envy and jealousy following them all the way.

Neither spoke, Vila simply following Avon's lead, waiting until they reached the rented hotel suite.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the old bucket of bolts. How are you, Orac?”

Busy. On more important things that your mindless chatter.

“Glad to see you, too, you useless pile of junk.” He turned on his heel, to face Avon, the awkward first moment ameliorated by the old banter. He needed to look at him, needed to see his eyes, to know he was all right. Needed, desperately, to say the name.

“Shh, Vila,” Avon temporised, “there’s something I have to do, first. I have,” he confessed with that rare and fragile shyness of his, “planned this for quite some time, but there were a few things that had to be left to the last possible moment. If you’ll excuse me?” And he left, disappearing into the bathroom before Vila could draw breath.

He could hear the sounds of Avon bathing, all the little noises of preparation, the fastidiousness of Avon unchanged, despite his new face. Eventually, the door opened.

“Avon...” Vila whispered, stumbling forward, drawn inexorably to the man framed in the doorway, the stranger’s face gone, his Avon standing instead, in all his glory, his nakedness shimmering in the light.

He opened his arms for Vila to find his haven. “I told you I had been planning. Neutralise the temporary colour, remove the lenses, a simple shave, and here I am.”

Vila wrapped himself around Avon’s slenderness, hands weaving a pattern of passion on his back, raising the dead. “Is it really goin’ to be this simple, Avon, this easy?”

“Wasn’t it always this easy between us?”

“Nah. I was the only easy bit.”

“Too easy.”

That stung. “Lissen, you were quick enough to take me up on my offer and you were the one who approached me first and... Listen to me. Five years of living as an Alpha without a single slip, you come back and five minutes later I’m speaking and acting like a stupid little Delta again.”

“No.”

“What d’you mean—’no’?”

“Not stupid, merely ignorant. And anyway, all you are doing here and now is reverting back to your true self. I find your...honesty,” he gave the word a lifetime’s meaning, “quite charming. But to answer your original question, yes, it is going to be that easy, if that is what you wish. I have had,” he paused, gazing at Vila’s shoulder, the smooth skin so much easier to face than perceptive eyes, “six years in which to

think, six years of life that bore no resemblance to my past. And it has...healed me. I have changed, Vila, mainly for the better, I believe.”

“Well it couldn’t have been for the worse, I’ll tell you that for nothing.”

“But you’ll charge me for everything else?”

The old joke brought the laughter bubbling forth from Vila, filling Avon with his glow. The playful slap on his back only added to his smile.

“You’re a rotten bugger!”

“Really? Then why, pray tell, did you let me bugger you so often?”

“Because,” the response was instant, instinctive and brutally honest, “I didn’t have any choice.”

“Oh, you always had a choice.”

“Yeh, take you as you were or not at all. And that’s no choice, Avon.”

Avon started them towards the bedroom, silent. “Vila,” he said at the bedside, skilled hands undoing Vila’s clothes, “one of the things I thought about a great deal was the last night I remember, from before...”

“Avon, I’m sorry, dead sorry, I didn’t really mean to hurt you, I was just lashing out...”

“Forcing me to do what I never cared to do before, demeaning me as I had you. Oh, don’t look so stricken, Vila. Neither one of us was entirely sane and if I can’t forgive you, then I would hardly be able to forgive myself the things I did when I was...” he paused, searching for a suitably delicate word.

“Bananas?” Vila supplied. “Nuts? Bonkers?”

“Yes, well, on the edge, certainly. However, the past, I have finally learned, is exactly that. It is not something to carry around as baggage. So,” he took a deep breath, “I decided to contact you again.”

“I don’t get you. Surely, if you’re getting rid of the past, I’d be one of the first to go?”

“Not when you consider that I rather hoped you would be part of the future...” There. It was said. He had taken the risk.

“Me?” Vila whispered in wonder. “Me? You really want me? This isn’t going to be a tumble for old times’ sake? Honest?”

“When have I ever lied?”

“When have you ever told the truth?”

“Now.”

“Yeh,” Vila grinned, slipping into Avon’s embrace, manoeuvring them down onto the bed, covering Avon with himself. “Now...”

The insidious fear fled Avon then, driven by the utter certainty in Vila’s eyes, relegated, finally, to the past by the love enveloping him.

"I promise," he whispered into Vila's ear, kissing him between words, "that it shall be different this time. No more of the coldness, no more of the callous casualness..."

Vila stilled his distracting explorations. "Avon," he began, not quite sure how to phrase this. "I hate to tell you this, but...well, you weren't as good at hiding as you seem to think. Everybody knew you were just a big softie inside. Why else d'you think we all stayed with you? And if you were cold, well, it was never when you were in bed. Not with me, anyway."

"Then why," Avon stopped, all thoughts of love-making abandoned, "did you react the way you did? If you knew, better than I, how I felt?"

"It's one thing to *know* something, Avon, it's another thing to *feel* that, and to remember it all the time. I *knew* you weren't as cold as you'd like to be, but I didn't really believe you loved me. Or even liked me, for that matter. I had a few things I could say, well, see, he did this or he did that, but there weren't many of them, compared to all the other crap. And after Cally died..."

"No matter how much I may want to, I can't undo the past."

"True. So...shall we just start on the future, then?" he said, fingers reaching down to fondle Avon, using the masculine form of emotional communication. "Everything brand new?"

Avon answered with a fierce kiss, filling Vila's mouth and his mind with the overflow of need from him, starting them turning and turning in a widening gyre, but this time, there was neither falcon nor falconer, only two men, finally coming together as equals, the spectres of guilt finally entombed safely in their mausoleums. Avon's hands were on Vila, his breath brushing his cheeks delicately, as he said all the words of praise Vila had always needed. Slowly, with great deliberation of movement, punctuating the actions to underline the significance, he undulated down Vila's body, bringing his face level with Vila's arching cock. Eyes closed like an innocent lover stealing a first kiss, he brought his lips to the hardness, nuzzling the softness of skin, then opening mouth to swallow and eyes to see as he engulfed Vila.

It was so easy, now, to perform this act, to do something that before threatened him far too much. He lost himself in the glory of it, until he realised the hardness in his mouth was diminishing. He looked up, pained by the tears glistening in Vila's eyes.

"Been practisin', eh? How come all those years, you wouldn't do it for me? You've been doin' this with other people, so you have. Couldn't bring yourself to suck my prick, but you've been doin' it with strangers? Why?"

"Because, Vila," he said softly, decisively, with the openness cultivated so painfully over the most recent years, "with you, it mattered. Too much."

And then his mouth was on Vila again, and this time, the bleak pain of inadequacy did not hamper them, and the flesh in his mouth grew and firmed, responding with heart-stopping alacrity. Vila's hips bucked, his hands were tugging on Avon's hair, his whole body was writhing with the glorious pleasure of Avon—*Avon!*—going down on him. Only in his wildest imaginings had he dreamed this, only there, had he dared see this.

Realising Vila was coming perilously close to the moment of no return, Avon let him go, lying flat on top of him, sliding his length sensuously up Vila until he could kiss him once again. He had, indeed, been planning, and hoping that he would be able to persuade Vila once more to his point of view, and had, with a mocking smile at himself, tucked a tube of analgæsic lubricant under the pillow. He retrieved it, and, seeing it in Avon's hand, Vila smiled the satisfied smile of the lover and automatically tried to lubricate Avon's cock.

"Oh, no, you don't," Avon said, nipping his earlobe affectionately, "not this time. I've already told you that this would be different, now didn't I? It's finally your turn."

All Vila could do was stare, stare into those brown eyes full of such unexpected warmth, laced with so much light and love. "You know something, Avon my friend, you ought to have complete breakdowns more often. They definitely agree with you."

"I shall," Avon murmured, arching an eyebrow in wry humour, "keep that in mind." He grinned suddenly. "So to speak."

"I'd rather you didn't. You've got too beautiful a mouth to waste it on the hot air you usually spout."

"So you think everything I've been saying is complete nonsense, do you?"

"Well," he backpedalled comfortably secure in Avon's affections, and knowing it for the first time, "I did say *usually*. Everyone's entitled to an occasional off day..."

"Vila."

"Yeh?"

"Shut up."

The smile was warm and wicked, the eyes brimming. “Make me.”

Avon did. He handed him the lubricant.

“You serious?”

“Of course I’m bloody serious. But if you keep this chatter up, I won’t be able to keep it up. If you catch my meaning?”

Vila claimed Avon’s cock in a greedy, possessive grip. “Wouldn’t worry about it, love. I can keep it up enough for two.” He rolled them over, until he was on top, legs ensconced between Avon’s. “Lissen, though. Em...um...look, how careful do I have to be?”

Avon grabbed him by the buttocks, pulling him in hard and tight. “I’ve practised that too, now shut up, Vila. It’s been six years, I don’t intend for it to be another.”

Looking into Avon’s eyes, Vila stroked him, bringing the insolent serpent to its full height, his full weight satisfyingly heavy on Avon. He moved his hand, fingers rubbing firmly on the raised ridge that led to Avon’s anus, coming to rest delicately, questioningly, on the rosette of flesh. Avon’s eyes closed and his back arched, body blindly seeking to suck Vila inside. “God, you really have been practisin’. Like it, by any chance?” Vila murmured, the broad pad of his thumb rubbing erotic circles, as he watched Avon, swept along by the extremity of desire he saw. Avon grabbed the tube from him, hands trembling, copiously coating Vila with the unctuous liquid, stretching inelegantly to cover himself. That charmed Vila, to see Avon so uninhibited, because of what Vila was doing. He took the tube from Avon, soothing the viscid gel onto him, one finger and then two sliding it inside him. His fingers moved easily, the muscles anxiously gripping him, fighting to keep him inside. Avon’s hands were on Vila’s hips, urging him into position, incoherent little murmurs encouraging, asking, demanding. Poised, Vila hesitated a moment, and then Avon’s legs were wrapped around him, Avon’s arms clutching him tight, Avon’s voice in his ear. Slowly, he pressed against the wet opening, feeling resistance and then he was past it, surging inside with thrilling, exquisite ease. Muscle clenched around him, hugging his cock as tightly as Avon hugged his body, and he moved, whimpering, driven by the fierce love in both of them, using this as their celebration and their commitment.

With Vila in him, Avon felt a calm completion steal over him. Yes, he had done this before, but it had never mattered, it had never *touched* him. He had changed, fought his way kicking and screaming and

bleeding, until he was free of his past and all the guilts he had allowed to bury him alive. But now...he had clawed his way free of that grave and he was damned if he’d ever go back. A small part of his mind laughed at him, at his surrender to sentimentality, but he quite frankly didn’t give a damn. He was finally warm, inside. The ice was gone.

Vila thrust deeper, and Avon pushed up, wanting to consume him whole, make him a part of himself, forge them into one single unit that would never, ever feel the cold again. With Vila, he would be whole. With Vila, he would be safe...

Vila stared down at Avon, at the face shuttered and locked away from him, and he felt a moment of despair. Despite the words, then, it was not to change. Despite the difference in Avon sexually, it was not to change. And then, Avon opened his eyes. And smiled. And Vila knew that it *had* changed, and for the better.

Avon lifted his legs higher, elated by the feel of Vila stretching him so tight and full, exulting in the feel of Vila’s balls slapping against his ass. Finally, exalted by the way Vila no longer slapped against him, warmth suffusing his familiar features. His balls rose against the base of his cock, as he knew Vila’s were. His come rose in him, as he knew Vila’s did. He felt the last frantic movement of Vila’s body, felt his own body spasm in sweet empathy, then the wild serenity of orgasmic pleasure flowing tumultuously through him and out of him and into him.

Vila was hot and heavy on him, and he was more than comfortable, cradling his weight, waiting for him to resurface into the land of the living. The reawakening was slow, languorous, dotted with sporadic kisses and luxurious caresses. The old doubts awoke along with reality.

“Do you want me to leave, now we’ve finished?”

“Don’t you ever listen to me, idiot?” Avon said, turning the insult into endearment. “As I have said, *ad nauseam*, it has changed. I have changed. And no, I don’t want you to leave.”

“Avon...are we talking about, well, you know, staying together?”

“No, we most certainly are not. We are doing it and that’s all the discussion there will be on the matter.”

“Making my decisions for me? Thought things were changed around here? Thought I was going to be making my own choices?”

“Not when I know what’s best for you.”

“Well thank you very much.”

“You don’t sound very much as if you are complaining.”

“That’s cos I’m not. But you might as well make yourself useful, then, and make another decision.”

“Hmm?”

“What are we going to do to make a living.”

“Simple. What we do best.”

“Nah, you’re too proud to be a prostitute.”

“I am going to take that, dubious though it may be, as a compliment. We, Vila, are going to be thieves. Or allow Orac to subvert the credit system so that we may live a life of ease.”

“Living off Orac’s immoral earnings? Now there’s a wonderfully kinky thought.” He snuggled in closer to Avon, making himself completely comfortable.

“Want me to leave?”

“Vila,” there was actually a snap of annoyance under the satiated slur of Avon’s voice, “I have already told you I want you to stay, *ad bloody nauseam...*”

“Yeh, I know. But I want to hear it *ad bloody infinitum* as well...”

And he did.

V ...WHILST AVON STROKES HIS BEAU

Or as close as that twisted psychopathic 'tall, dark, and handsome' man can come...

And just who is his 'beau'? Does he hold Blake in 'warm' regard? Or is he somehow 'tied' to Vila?

THE WARM PATCH Adrian Alexander

BLAKE STOOD ON THE CLIFF OVERLOOKING THE GREAT OCEAN, WATCHING THE LAST RAYS OF SUNLIGHT AS THE SWOLLEN, ORANGE ORB DROPPED BELOW THE HORIZON. The breeze picked at his clothes and tousled his curly hair. The rebel reminded Avon of some tragic character out of a pulp novel, standing alone, facing his destiny in the same way. Darkness fell swiftly and the air turned damp and cold driving Blake back to the bonfire Avon had going. They hadn't said two words to one another since Jenna had called down to say the *Liberator* was temporarily leaving orbit to avoid pursuit ships. Except for the frequent arguments they'd been having, this was the norm for them.

The rebel pulled a piece of meat from the bird Avon had killed and cooked for them. The lean-to shelter they'd built would keep them warm enough for the night...if it didn't rain. Minutes had drifted into hours; Blake continued to eat slowly and when that was done he stared silently into the fire. Avon took the opportunity to study the surroundings Blake was so pointedly ignoring, and when he got bored with that, the constellations in the night sky occupied his mind.

"Has it come to this, Avon?"

Blake's soft voice came as such a surprise it caught the tech momentarily speechless. Still, he recovered quickly, "Are you being deliberately obtuse, Blake, or have I missed something? Has what come to this?"

"You and I."

Avon frowned and shook his head, honestly confused, "I'm afraid I still don't understand. You and I?"

Blake turned and his eyes locked with Avon's dark chocolate ones. "You know what I mean. Have we come to this point? Haven't you noticed that the only thing we do now is argue?"

"Well, now, if you would listen to reason from time to time instead of risking life and limb—*my* life and limb in particular—for your pathetic cause, we just might have more to be civil about."

Blake shook his head and turned his attention back to the fire. "You know very well that's not the reason. It's a coverup, Avon, a blind to throw the others off. But not only do I know what you are doing, I know *why* you're doing it. Unfortunately," he sighed, "I also know there's nothing I can do or say to stop you except to let you know I'm on to you."

Avon laughed harshly. "Well, now, this I have got to hear. Do tell, Blake, what ulterior motives have I for arguing with you?"

Blake braced his elbows against his knees and rested his chin on his laced fingers, not bothering to look at his cohort. "You want to destroy the seed we planted that night. You, Avon, are afraid."

Avon's head dropped back against the rock he was using as support. "Afraid! Of what? One drunken night of lust. Too much celebrating with Avalon and her group which allowed something that should never have happened."

"But happen it did, Avon," Blake's words flowed from him with deliberate slowness. "And..."

"And," Avon interrupted, "we both said some things we quite frankly didn't mean."

"I meant every word." Again, silence hung heavy between them. Blake took a small stick and poked at the fire, stirring the embers, making tiny hot ashes take flight and watching them die in the cold, night air.

"Do you want to know what I most remember?"

"I'm certain you're going to tell me whether I want to hear it or not."

Blake continued to stir the fire. "I remember the warm patch you left on your side of the bed."

Intrigued, in spite of himself, Avon raised his head and glanced curiously at the man by the fire. "Par-don?"

"When you left in the middle of the night you thought I was asleep...but I wasn't. I listened while you got dressed and it took all my self control not to smile when you kissed me on the forehead before you left." Blake tried to smile then, but missed. "When I heard the cabin door close, I turned over. I sleep better on my back and that ended me up on your side of the bed. It was so warm...warmer than my side and it smelled like you. I shall never forget that...the warm patch."

Avon looked away trying to hide his discomfort at hearing the pain in Blake's voice as he related his memories of their one evening together. He'd left the rebel's cabin that night firmly resolved there would be no repeat of the incident because it had evoked such feelings in him...feelings he had long ago buried. And, he wanted them to stay that way, but Blake had shown him that night that he could draw them out, make them come to the surface where any well placed shot could hurt him. He was tired of pain. He knew any kind of relationship with Blake could only have one ending and that kind of agony would be too much to bear.

"Careful, Blake, you're becoming maudlin in your old age."

Blake's expression never changed; he simply stared at the fire watching it grow weaker. "I meant it when I said I loved you, Avon."

"Spare me. I don't want to deal with this right now...or ever. It's over, let it go. I have."

"I can't, because I don't believe you. I felt something that night and so did you, whether you care to admit it or not."

Avon's fingers scratched up a small rock. He tossed it at the dying flames. "I know you, Blake, you won't let this matter rest until I convince you that our little assignation meant nothing. An insignificant entry in the story of my life."

"If it meant so little to you then prove it. Make love to me again tonight then tell me to my face that you don't care."

Avon shook his head, exasperated, "How can I make love to you again when I've never made love to you before? I fucked you. I had sex with you, but that was all. If you want me to do it again, all right." Avon stood and started to unhook the fastenings at

his shoulder. "Your technical expertise was adequate and since I obviously have nothing better to do, I might as well spend my time relieving a little stress." He dropped his tunic on the ground and started to undo his leather trousers. "Well?"

Blake looked up at the tech. The sadness in his eyes was almost overwhelming. Slowly, the rebel stood and stripped. He stepped up to Avon and ran his hand across the tech's slightly furred chest and around until he held him in a gentle, but firm embrace. He rested his head on the other man's shoulder, drawing in a long, shaky breath. "Make love to me, Avon. Don't be afraid. Trust me as I trust you. Let me into your heart. There may be no tomorrow for either one of us and tonight may be all that we have. But if we're lucky, I'll be given more time to show you that I'm not lying to you. That I'm not trying to trick you into loving me then turn on you when you're no longer useful. I swear I'll never betray your trust. Please, Avon."

Blake's strong hands moved down the narrow back to cup the leather encased, muscled buttocks and to pull the tech closer. Raising his head, he bore down on Avon's parted lips. Greedily, he took them, plundering the tech's mouth with his tongue. Avon responded with equal fervor, pressing his swollen groin against Blake's, the rough leather only exciting the rebel more. Blake gasped and pulled back slightly. Placing his hands on both sides of Avon's face, he gazed down into the now ebony eyes. He felt himself falling into their great abyss as he searched for the thing...the emotion he knew Avon kept hidden there.

Avon broke the rebel's trance by drawing him back down into an ever deepening kiss. He rubbed himself against the larger man, inflaming him until Blake dropped to his knees, his fingers tearing at the metal zip of Avon's trousers, feverishly helping Avon remove them. Avon's cock jutted out proud and firm, challenging Blake to take it. The rebel teased the underside of the shaft with his warm, wet tongue, circling the glans, forcing a low moan to escape from Avon's lips.

Blake looked up at his lover's flushed face. A fine sheen of sweat reflected the light off his skin, making it glisten. "I love you, Avon. I'll give you what you want. I love you...love me." His words didn't go unnoticed. Blake could see the tech's jaw tighten, but he never said a word in reply.

Long, narrow fingers wove their way into Blake's tight curls and gently drew him closer. He bent his

head and took the firm shaft in his mouth, sucking hard. He let Avon guide the rhythm: slow and even at first, then growing more frenetic.

The fingers tightened as if frightened Blake would change his mind and leave Avon cold and alone as so many others had. He thrust deeply into the heat. Throwing his head back, mouth open, eyes staring unfocused at the stars above, Avon groaned and exploded into the overwhelming warmth. He felt lost as he had that first night; felt Blake's love bleed through his defences. He screamed his frustration and shoved hard against the larger man, throwing him into the fire. Blake rolled quickly, feeling the sting of the flames as they caressed his naked skin, burning him. He sprang to his feet and backhanded Avon all in one fluid motion. The tech fell back hard against the rocky ground, winded and surprised. Before he knew what was happening, Blake was on him, pinning him to the rough gravel.

"What the hell was that all about, Avon? Were you trying to kill me?"

Avon fought like a wildcat. The two sweaty combatants rolled and tussled on the stony surface, ripping their skin in a hundred places, but inevitably, Blake ended up on top. Avon was effectively constrained beneath him, still struggling.

"Are you so frightened of what you're feeling?"

Avon started to speak, but Blake's lips crushed down on his, silencing him. "Don't try to lie to me. I can see it in your eyes. You do love me. I swear to you, Avon. I will never, ever betray your love. What you see is what you get and I'm not bloody likely to change."

The tech turned his head away, not wanting to look into the pleading eyes anymore. "What am I supposed to do now, Blake? Say 'I love you', too? Tell you that I believe every lyrical word just so that you'll get off me?"

Blake closed his eyes, but a single tear escaped. Avon felt it splash warmly on his cheek and he whipped his head back around. Another fell and with a tremulous sigh, the rebel rolled off his lover, to curl up on his side, not caring what might happen next. Avon climbed stiffly to his feet. He made his way over to the fire. Shaking out his trousers, he slipped them back on and resumed his place by the rock.

"Get up, Blake and get your clothes on. You're going to catch pneumonia." But the rebel didn't stir. Several minutes passed before Avon got up from his spot, took a blanket from the survival pack and went to wrap it around Blake's shivering body. He pulled

the man up into a sitting position. Blake's pain hung heavily about him and though Avon tried to deny its effects, he found himself crouching down and cradling the wretched man in his arms. "I told you not to love me, Blake. I can't give you the love you want. It's just not there, but I suppose..." Avon hesitated, sensing deep inside that one day he would regret the words he was about to say, "I can give you my trust. But I warn you, Blake, betrayal in my book has dire consequences. I will go to the ends of the universe for those I trust, but I will kill anyone who makes me out the fool for trusting."

Blake looked up; only a little of the sadness seemed to have faded. "So perhaps, then, someday, you will learn to love me."

Avon smiled, but it didn't mask the deeper emotions he was feeling, "Don't hold your breath. Now come on, I'm tired. Lie down here beside me and we'll conserve our body heat." Blake nodded and did as he was told. Avon pressed himself against the rebel's broad back and fell asleep almost immediately.

The next thing Avon remembered was the sound of Blake's voice. He rolled over, pulling the blanket up closer to his chin, trying to block out the cool, moist early morning breeze. He noticed, with a little grin, that the spot he'd turned on to was far warmer than the area he'd been in. He opened his eyes. Blake was standing by the cliff, dressed, with the teleport bracelet raised to his lips.

"Are you sure there aren't anymore pursuit ships in the vicinity?"

"*Orac and Zen assure me we're clear now,*" Jenna's voice replied.

Blake rotated slightly and smiled when he saw that the tech was watching him. "All right, but give us about fifteen minutes before you teleport. We need to break camp and get the fire out."

"*Fifteen minutes, see you then.*"

Blake came over and dropped down onto the ground by Avon. The tech saw a small burn on Blake's cheek. He flinched and pulled away when Avon touched it.

"Are there any others?" Avon asked softly, the memories of what had happened between them the night before flooding back.

"Yes," Blake blinked and looked away. "And some are deeper than others." They both knew they weren't talking about the burns.

"I told you last night. I shall trust you." Avon stood and grabbed his leather tunic, pausing a moment to pull it over his head and fasten the shoulder clasp.

“But I think it best if we end our physical relationship now. We will only hurt one another more...” His eyes locked with Blake’s and said more than he wanted them to. “And I for one, have had enough

self induced pain in my life. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not the martyr type.” He turned quickly away from the rebel and brought the teleport bracelet up. “Jenna, we’re finished here. Bring us up.”

THE ROOM

M. Fae Glasgow

THE ROOM. The four blank walls always waited, entombing him in this claustrophobic, technological womb. He sat, poised, naked, on the outer extremity of the shallow bed, alone, devoid of companionship, simply waiting, as he felt the room did for him. All the while, the featureless greyness mocked him with supercilious indifference, his own imagination anthropomorphising the lifeless cube, crediting it with all the contempt he felt for himself. As if observed by unfriendly eyes, he lay back, slowly, cautiously, stifling the urge to cover his exposed masculinity with his hand, fighting the unreasoning need to protect himself from the unseen enemy: the memories etched into those damned, unfeeling walls. No matter where he looked, there was no colour, no vitality, no humanity. Nothing but a vacuum, with him suspended, twisted, in the centre. He found himself staring at his groin and the pink flesh framed in black hair there, at his chest, with its two faint pink nipples, cherishing the colour and the life as he sat alone, waiting, for the resolution of today's vicious fight with Avon. It would come, he knew, as it always did, as it always would. The bellicosity of the man would simmer and stew, finally erupting into outright war, triggered by a word or a look—or the lack thereof. And so, he waited, for the armistice, for the treaty signed in his semen, the proof of his surrender. He thought of this war of attrition, this hundred years' war, their eternal struggle. It was almost a symphony, melody, then dramatic discord, a crescendo of shocking intensity until finally, from sheer emotional exhaustion, he would concede, a fragmented glance signalling time to return here to no man's land, time to bind their wounds and bury the hatchet and kiss reality good-bye. And so it would *be*, for a time, for a moment, until the anguish rebuilt bringing the fear and then the anger to envelop the love in its entirety, leaving the merest melancholy whisper behind.

He sighed and rose from the bed, once again returning his sight to the room and its blandness, its bloodsucking *nothingness*. Just like his 'relationship' with Avon. Speaking of the devil can make him appear and footsteps were barely audible as they approached the room. He listened, mentally following Avon's path, first past the dunsel engineering room, then past the back-up processor, to the unused stor-

age hold. Finally, the steps came to a halt outside the small cubicle, original use unknown, caught between two useless parts of the ship. The door opened, more slowly than the others in the rest of the active parts of the ship, the light in the corridor outside dingy and grey, a hollow echo of this empty space he now occupied.

Avon stood in the doorway, for a moment only, as if reweighing his decision. With a precise disdain, he entered, deft fingers punching in the security lock code, pivoting lightly on silent feet. His eyes never once came to rest on the other man in the room, cancelling out his presence by utter indifference. Graceful as always, he stripped, following his usual pattern, folding his things onto the single chair, careful not to cause creases, marks which would raise questions from the others and make the memory of this bitter room linger and overlap into reality. Fully nude, he climbed into bed, lying on his back, waiting. Blake sighed heavily and admitted defeat, walking over slowly, sliding onto the bed beside this nemesis lover of his. A hand reached out and took his, guiding it to Avon's cock, closing tightly, beginning the ritual passion.

Blake lowered his head, mouth closing in on Avon's, but the other man, of course, turned aside, leaving Blake nothing but the slight roughness of a faint growth of beard. As always, so Blake conceded, using his only strength in this particular situation: the passion he could inflame in Avon. Covering the other man with his bulk, he lapped his way down the length of the slender torso, using his teeth to give tiny, tantalising hints of pain, Avon's delight. He feasted on him, on the colour of him, the dark chest hair, the snaking curls leading him down towards the flushed pink cock filling and rising at the cusp of Avon's legs. Blake skated around it, revelling in Avon's involuntary movement towards the teasing mouth, enjoying the moment of power, using it to bring them closer together. Mouth open, he swirled his tongue around the hair of Avon's thighs, always taunting that needful cock, dancing around it, promising, promising, but never actually delivering, until Avon, with a groan wrenched from his very depths, grabbed him by the hair, pulled his head to where he needed it to be, then thrust, suddenly, deeply, into

Blake's anticipatory mouth. Once he had Avon entrapped within, Blake sucked on him fiercely, rubbing hard with his tongue, teeth catching with fleeting nubs of pain on the flared head. As Avon bucked and writhed under him, Blake pulled back, sliding Avon so slowly from his mouth, eyes locked on the rosy darkness of him, the blueness of veins, the enthralling intensity of his colour. Then, as he always did, Avon suddenly yielded, going limp and boneless under Blake, spreading his legs, supple muscle and limber joints widening to accommodate, brown eyes shielded and shuttered. Blake rose up on his knees, one hand stroking Avon's inner thigh with firm, even pressure, nails tingling the length of him. With his free hand, he found the lubricant, coating himself generously, then sliding a long finger into Avon, beginning the careful process of easing the way for the passage of his cock.

Blake never gave in: each and every time they met in armed neutrality in this room, he would try to inveigle Avon into meeting his eyes, into a kiss, but the dark man had yet to succumb before blind passion drove his mind from him. As always, Avon turned away, rejecting Blake's tacit declarations of emotion, refusing the offer of involvement before it could even be made. Stung, Blake stopped stroking, using that hand to grab Avon, to demand that, this time, there would be a kiss, that this time, there would be contact between them, instead of this barriered sex. The danger of the look in Avon's eyes chilled him, almost turning his passion into limp defeat, but with a quick, deft twist of his hips, Avon brought them together again, cock to cock, belly to belly, recharging them, bringing Blake leaping into voracious life, denying the kiss yet again.

Avon settled pliant under Blake, as was their pattern, suddenly yielding again to the other man, making this concession, now that the issue of the kiss was once more settled, inviting, his very passivity demanding dominance. And Blake gave it to him, spreading Avon's thighs, exposing him, making him vulnerable. He returned his slickened finger to Avon's hole, sliding back to a kneeling position to watch as the more tanned finger disappeared into the alabaster whiteness of Avon's ass. His attention contracted, enveloping them in this umbrella of life and colour, denying the mocking indifference of the damned room. With his other hand, he cradled Avon's balls, lifting them up out of the way onto the pale abdomen, cupping them close to the rosy cock and the black hair. He rolled them, not gently, smiling harshly

as the man under him filled their room with sound, a sudden, devastatingly loud groan of pleasure. Another finger joined the first in the dark warmth, the light glistening brightly on his gelled skin, the lube spreading to gleam on Avon's taut buttocks. A third finger, and Avon's cock jumped, his balls moving in the palm of Blake's hand, a flush beginning on the sunless chest. A pale flush, but darkening, becoming ever rosier, like the cock pressed under Blake's hand.

Without warning, Blake moved, shoving Avon's legs even wider, lunging between, thrusting abruptly and deeply, hurting Avon, hurting himself, the two of them aswirl in the sudden plateau of pleasure. A feral grin crossed Blake's face as he plunged in and out of Avon, watching the purple of his cock bury itself in the white skin, watching Avon twist and writhe and moan under him. Harder, he thrust, pounding them, lifting Avon, bending him to his will and to his body, shoving in deeper and deeper and then, suddenly, sweetly, it was there: the look in those dark eyes, the glowing flush on his skin, the way he tossed his head, the tightness of his legs locked around Blake's heaving body. The bigger man leaned down, hesitating, checking, wary of mistiming this, of destroying the fragile web they wove. It was time. He kissed Avon, felt the agile tongue dart into him wetly, the strong arms come around to cradle him close as their rhythm slowed, transforming from an act of dominance and force into sweet equality, into two men who both wanted this and were not afraid.

Avon reached for Blake, scraping his sharp nails in long ellipses the length of Blake's bunched muscles, red welts fading pinkly in his wake. He murmured, wordless, under Blake, pulling him closer, participating, joining them, twisting just so, bringing the thick cock inside to rub against that wonderful nub of pleasure, letting Blake feel that firm spot amidst the softness, letting Blake push there, adding to the eroticism for both of them. He opened his mouth, and Blake filled him, mouth and ass, body and mind, all the empty yawning chasms of loneliness erased.

And slowly, as it built within them, Blake started thrusting faster, his partner encouraging him, moving with him. A gasp fled from him as those mink-hued eyes opened under him, their clarity disturbing, the hate and love and need flooding forth in battering waves. Blake forced the tide back with the love in his own eyes, casting aside all the insidious doubts, the complete duplicity of his relationship with Avon. The fire was banking higher and higher in his belly

and he knew from past experience—not with Avon, who simply wouldn't take him—precisely how Avon was feeling, with a cock inside, hammering on his prostate, ecstasy cresting with every pulse against it. Deliberately, Blake slowed once more, easing the pace, keeping them both at the eternal precipice, begging and demanding that Avon speak, that this dark man should clear the barriers of the past and reach for him. The eyes staring up at him were fully cognizant and willful, lids lowering to mask the struggle. For a moment, it seemed, the time was almost here, that Avon would speak, that Avon would allow them to be real people, not just bodies humping in armistice. With an inaudible snick, the lids snapped shut, closing the eyes and the man away from Blake, losing Blake more than he had already lost. Blake brought his mouth down on Avon, but the kiss was refused, rebuke for the audacity of Blake's attempt to change this thing between them. Muscles clamped hotly around Blake's cock, catching him unaware and he came, almost before he had time to recognise his body's betrayal as it turned traitor and submitted to Avon. The come streamed from him in white streamers of heat, pulsing in syncopated rhythm with the creaminess jetting onto Avon's belly. A last, convulsive tightening of the arms around him, and Blake was clutched in a strangling embrace, all Avon's needs holding them both hostage, welding them together. But then, Blake felt coherent thought return to the man he held so tautly, felt the emotional withdrawal followed by the physical. Knowing better, he still couldn't stop himself from looking up, once more being hit broadside with the expression of refined disgust on Avon's face as he disengaged himself from Blake.

Blake allowed himself to be shoved off—he wouldn't resist, but he'd be damned if he'd help Avon reject him. But then, hadn't he been damned the day he fell under the spell of this maze of a man? He lay very still for a moment, thinking about Avon, mind spinning around like an off-balance top, finally giving the effort up, knowing full well that he would find no answers, not here, not with Avon lying cold as death beside him. There was a sigh, which, of course, did not come from Avon, followed by the rustle of bedding as Blake manoeuvred himself heavily until he could observe Avon. It did him absolutely no good whatsoever. No matter how he willed it, the other man would not look at him, would not acknowledge him in any way. Blake satisfied himself with watching as Avon's bright flush slowly

dimmed and faded, seeming to bleed all the life from this room as it eroded the colour too. Gradually, the sheened skin paled to white, only slightly darker on the hands and face, the true sign of an Alpha born and bred. No colour to him, save his hair and eyes. Attention wandered down to the shade lurking at Avon's groin, but all the colour there had been leached by the dark shadows. The depression settled comfortably into Blake's soul, numbing him, leaving him bowed with weariness. The recalcitrant, revealing sigh escaped him again, but he let it hang suspended in their frigid silence, the temporary peace of their lovemaking now withered and gone. Avon's skin, his very mood, had taken on the lifeless hue of the room itself and Blake felt as if he were leaving a corpse behind. Mutely, too defeated for speech, he gathered his clothes and dressed in miserable silence, turning back for one last lingering glance before the door closed, embalming Avon in that empty room.

He heard Blake leave and heaved a sigh of his own. Sometimes it was so damned difficult not to give in, to resist the undermining temptation to yield. But to submit to Blake... That would mean losing his autonomy, for Blake would never settle for anything less than full commitment and with a zealous, idealistic Rebel, that entailed paying a price far higher than Avon could even dare contemplate. No one had that much emotional collateral, most especially not one tired, hurt and very used failed embezzler. Lethargically, he dragged himself to his feet, wincing at the pain inside and the ache in his pelvis: this was price enough. Reluctantly, he replaced his clothes on his body, rebuilding his strength of personality with every chink of armour he reapplied. Piece by methodical piece, he covered himself, blanking his mind of loss and pain, counting it only as mere sex and not what, in the cold realms of reality, it really was. The very concept was too dangerous, here, with Blake, but it gnawed at his soul anyway. Love. And in this sterile room, he allowed himself what precious little love he could risk with Blake, with the one person he had ever been willing to hand himself over to, gift wrap included. Anna... with Anna, he had gone unaware, losing the war before he had realised battle was joined. But with Blake, with *Blake*, he was forewarned, knowing these truths about himself. Knowing how sweet it was to let someone else lead, to allow someone else to care enough to direct... Forewarned is forearmed. He would not yield. He would not submit.

He paused at the door, cementing the final part of his armour carefully in place. It took him longer each time, but finally, he had wiped the vulnerability away and then he built his face again, reforming the man they all expected—the man who could deal with life and thumb his nose at love. Avon opened the door, straightening his spine, breathing deeply. Supercil-

ious confidence in place, he stepped half-way across the threshold, pausing, like Blake, for one last glance. One more sigh, then he, too, stepped through, leaving the scant peace behind, leaving himself with even scantier comfort. Blake had surrendered, as always, but as it ever was, as it ever would be, both of them had lost.

SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR

Sean Charles

Avon's own callousness had finally done what all Servalan's scheming cruelty could not. It had defeated him. With the death of Blake, at his hands, had come the end of his tenacious survivalism. He was beaten.

AVON LAY ON HIS SIDE, BACK TO THE WALL. His wrists were in restraints in front of him, and the harsh cloth of the prison uniform chafed at the cuts and bruises which covered his body. He did not remember how he came to be in such a state, nor even where he was; but it didn't matter. He was in a prison cell, most likely one of the Federation's. And whether it was on Gauda Prime or elsewhere would hardly change the fate he knew was inevitable.

Alone for hours, his mind raced down the many corridors of madness. *Blake*. He remembered Blake dying at his hands; remembered the death grip of his lover's hands on his arms while they still had strength to hold, the touch somehow warm and forgiving; remembered the sound of that deep, compelling voice calling his name once again, in almost the same tone it had done years before at moments of supreme ecstasy.

The scream brought from grief and guilt as he called out the dead man's name, echoed down the halls of the prison...or did he only think he had cried out. He wasn't sure. His memory recalled the shock and horror he had felt when those strong hands weakened and let him go. He stood over the body, looking down, watching the blood pouring out and with it the life, leaving those eyes—even scarred, Blake's eyes were compelling—to turn glassy, cold, and dead. At that moment, Avon wished nothing more than to join his wronged friend, to explain away his actions in some safe and comfortable afterlife.

But they had taken him alive. Though he had fired on the ring of troopers, and surely had killed several, they did not return fire. Instead, one simply walked up behind him and knocked him unconscious. He remembered nothing beyond that point, only pain, and Blake. Always and forever he would remember Blake.

The scent of fine perfume replaced that of harsh prison disinfectant. It was accompanied by the tapping of high-heeled shoes on the hard floor—and the

ever-present tramping of boots. It took no great feat of logic to know who was coming.

"Avon." Her voice was haughty, cool and demanding. Small, soft fingers tipped with hard, pointed nails caressed his cheek.

He opened his eyes. "Servalan," he said huskily. His throat felt strange, as if long unused. He looked past her at the guard. "You do know who this is, don't you? It is Servalan, your ex-president. The price on her head, if it were known she still lived, would be even higher than that on mine."

The guard didn't move from his position of attention at the door. Avon heard Sler's silvery laughter. "My guards are hand-picked, Avon. Of course he knows who I am—and he is loyal to me. Which is more than can be said of you, darling."

Avon did not express anything of the revulsion the endearment brought to him. "I never claimed to be loyal to you."

"A good thing, too. For I have seen what you can do to those to whom you do claim to be loyal."

Did she really think she could hurt him with mere words after what he had done? He saw her ploy for what it was, and said nothing.

Servalan saw the fire of Avon's emotions flash in his eyes, and as quickly be extinguished. "I should thank you, Avon." She stroked his tousled hair. "The way you wrapped up the Blake Affair for me was elegant. Not merely dead, but discredited as well. Instead of thousands rallying to their martyr, half of the rebel groups, yours, will be fighting Blake's in imitation of their leaders. Not only is Blake dead, but his petty rebellion soon will be as well. I really do owe you a debt, Avon."

Have I not only killed you, my love, but your Cause as well—the jealous mistress not only destroying the husband, but the wife in the bargain? He stared at the wall past the black cloth of her skirt.

"Avon, you were such a fool," she said, touching his face again, turning him to face her. "You could have had it all."

Avon looked into her eyes, his own gleaming with the released emotions he had withheld so long.

He propped himself against the wall, moving slowly so as to not alert the guard. He took her hand from his face with his bound ones. He kissed her

fingertips. "Such a little hand," he said softly, sweetly, "to hold such power alone. Perhaps I was a fool, after all." *Carefully*, he thought, *make it what she wants to hear, but she is shrewd, it has to be good. Come closer.*

She came closer; her sleek body brushed warm against his legs. Avon sat on the edge of the slab and reached up to touch her, to cup her face in his hands and bend her lower for a kiss. As their lips touched he guided her to sit next to him. His bound hands excited her as they gently caressed her face and she returned his kiss with fervent passion.

Slowly, he slid his hands to her throat. As she began to struggle, he broke the kiss. "Good-bye, Servalan," Avon said. He was strong, and could crush the life from her before the guard could stop him.

"Let her go!" The black pit of the paragon's barrel looked inviting as Avon stared into it, gripping tighter around Servalan's neck. He smiled.

The guard fired. Pain flooded Avon's body, and blackness filled his vision. He was jerked back, and worse, he lost his grip on Servalan. As he fell, he inwardly cursed the guard who faintly shouted, "Bring her to Medical! Hurry!" Then his thoughts were stilled.

Avon awoke in a Federation cell. *How many times has it been? Was I dreaming*, he thought. *Did I kill her? Did I even hurt her?* Again, he could not remember clearly. He wondered why he was still alive. Orac. They wanted that and perhaps the small bit of propaganda to be gained by a public trial like Blake's. They could put him through the latter, but they would not get the former.

Suicide, however, would not be necessary. Sooner or later, *they* would kill him.

This time there was no such special reception. There was only the beginning of routine prison life. The guards did not speak to him nor pay any attention to him. Trays of food were placed in his cell, and collected whether he ate from them or not. Avon tended to eat. There was no particular reason for him not to. Perhaps the suppressants would dull his memories.

Unfortunately, either they had the dosage wrong, or they were under orders not give him any. After a few days, he began to suspect the latter. Also, the wait for his interrogation *did* begin to get on his nerves. He wanted it over and done with. He wanted to die.

Avon could be patient, though, even under these circumstances. He did have one thing left to defy

them for, and eventually, she sent for him. He smiled as the guards took him out of his cell. He was more than ready for the final confrontation.

He was taken to a viewing chamber and strapped to a chair facing a large darkened window. Presumably, Servalan would enjoy watching his torture from the other side, having learned the danger of coming too close.

The restraints the silent guards had put on him were thorough. Avon was amused. Wrists, elbows, feet, throat, waist—Gan wouldn't have been able to break free of the device. She was taking no chances this time.

He sat and waited.

The room beyond the window was lit suddenly to a brilliant whiteness, a blank canvas for the interrogators to paint with their macabre art. Two uniformed guards intruded black upon its purity. Then Avon felt her delicate finger caress his jaw.

"Avon," she whispered in his ear. "I have you now, where I want you."

"Pity that has become irrelevant, Servalan. You rather bore me now, I afraid."

She slapped his face. "Oh, Avon. I expected better from you. After all, last time was very pleasant, up until the last."

"I enjoyed it, too—right up to the point I heard the guard say, 'take her to Medical' and I knew you'd live."

"But of course you knew I'd live, Avon." She paused, and a look of bitterness crossed her face. "There are times when I begin to think I'd live through anything. That won't be true of you, though. Not much longer. You will give me Orac, you will have your trial, and then you will receive your richly deserved execution."

"The second and third events are probably inevitable, but the first is out of the question." Something about the setting was beginning to disturb Avon: a prickling of memory, as yet unformed. "For that matter, why bother with the trial? You could save us both a great deal of trouble by just shooting me."

"Handling you has never been any trouble, Avon." She walked around, trailing her fingers down his collarbone, until she stood smiling in front of him. Paradoxically, she had chosen a white gown for the occasion, as if Avon's death would somehow restore her innocence. But the style was more typical of Sleer than of Servalan. The neckline was drastically low, and the side slit very high to the hip. Her arms were bare, but a trailing white scarf went from her shoul-

ders to the floor. "And I don't anticipate it being any trouble this time, either. You *will* give me Orac." She touched a panel by the window and the lights in the room dimmed, bringing the chamber beyond into sharp focus.

"You might be interested to know that there was *one* survivor of your little raid on Gauda Prime." She stood at Avon's side and stroked his hair. "Guards, you may bring in the other prisoner now and prepare him. Inform Kessler that he may begin shortly."

"Yes, Commissioner." The response came loudly, over an amplified speaker.

Servalan smiled as Avon was startled by the volume. "I wouldn't want you to miss even the slightest whimper of what's about to occur, Avon. And Vila *does* whimper so prettily." She faced forward as the thief was brought into the room. "This should be quite a pleasure."

Vila's voice carried high-pitched and whiny over the speakers. "You don't have to do it, really you don't. If I knew where it was, I'd give it to you. Useless piece of junk, anyway. It never liked me. You can have it for all I care. Avon!" Vila struggled suddenly with the two guards, lunging at the window. They caught him and strapped him to a chair similar to Avon's own.

"Tell Kessler to come in. He may begin with the prisoner's hands," she said, prettily.

"Ay-von! Don't let them do it! Please! Give it to them, Avon, you don't need it now," Vila pleaded.

A tall, thin man entered the room with Vila. He wore a white jumpsuit, and his face and hands were so pale as to almost disappear in the glare from the room. He stood next to the prisoner and unrolled an instrument kit.

"Avon!" Vila wailed.

"Let him go," Avon said quietly in the other room. He looked directly at Servalan. "Let him go!"

"Why?" she asked. The torturer held a laser knife above the palm of Vila's left hand. Vila's screams became incoherent and wild. The blade hadn't even touched him yet.

"I will give you what you want. Orac. For him. Just order them to stop. If he is hurt at all, then there will be no bargain." Avon's voice was hard.

Servalan nodded. "Wait," she ordered. "What bargain did you have in mind, Avon?"

"You were willing to pay a hundred million credits for that machine once. Surely the life and freedom of one insignificant thief would be far less. Without the rest of us pushing him around, he would never

have moved against the Federation. As to any vengeance you wish to extract, you have me for that. Set him free and Orac is yours. Hurt him and you'll never find it."

"Good. But not quite, Avon."

"Do it, Avon! Please? Whatever she wants! You owe me, Avon!" Vila's voice was loud and irritating to the computer tech. There was a persistent buzzing that would not go away.

Avon looked through the glass into Vila's eyes, glistening with tears, pleading with Avon. "As he said. Anything you wish, Servalan. I do owe him.!"

She laughed. "I am not offering you his freedom. Only his miserable life. He would be taken from here to a penal colony—exactly as he was all those years ago—no better and no worse off for all his adventures."

"It's good enough, Avon!" Vila shouted. "Take it, please! I don't mind, really I don't. Avon, I don't like the alternative..." he added looking at the torturer who straightened his instruments.

"Obviously, he agrees to your terms. The choice is his as well. Transportation will be acceptable, although I will require proof of his safe arrival."

"The journey will take too long. You'll just have to trust me," Servalan purred. "Or take the alternative."

"Very well. Bring me a map of the Gauda Prime complex and I will show you where I've hidden Orac. I will place in it an order to self-destruct if it ever ceases to monitor Vila's safe existence on the prison colony. That is my assurance. I will not bargain for Vila's life in vain."

"Very well." Servalan ordered the map brought.

Avon was allowed one hand free with a guard close by to show Servalan the location. Then he was re-bound.

"You two will wait here, until my agent on Gauda Prime assures me that Orac was where you said it would be. You may transmit the destruct order via a radio link, and then Vila will be sent away." She and her guards left the room.

Avon looked at Vila. He seemed small and rather lost in the big white room. "It was the best I could do," he apologized.

Vila nodded silently, breathing deep to calm himself. "What about you, though, Avon? I didn't mean for you..."

"It doesn't matter," Avon replied.

There wasn't much to say. They sat in their separate rooms. Occasionally, Vila would launch into a

spell of terrified babbling, which Avon would cut off with a harsh reassurance.

After a couple of hours, Servalan and the guards reentered. Orac had been found. In working order. Avon was to transmit his conditions. And Vila was taken from the other room.

“Guards, prepare the execution of Vila Restal,” Servalan ordered.

“How?” cried Avon. “The destruct order...”

“...was faked, Avon. The transmit link was hooked to a voice synthesizer which simulated Orac’s tones. *You don’t make the conditions any more!*”

“We had a bargain, Servalan,” he hissed. “Vila for Orac.” *Blake, you were right.* Suddenly the set of the rooms brought the memory to the fore. *You wouldn’t have saved me if you had given them what they wanted. I haven’t saved Vila, either, only lost your rebellion. You never did betray me. Not then and not on G.P. You were bluffing, and your bluff bought us time. My surrender has brought only death...to Vila, to the others. If I had understood then... I turned you away when we could have stayed together. I let you think that I hated you. You might never have gone to Gauda Prime, had I said simply, ‘No, I don’t hate you, Blake. Don’t be ridiculous.’ You might still be alive...* His thoughts spun wildly and a cold rage filled him. Far too late, he found himself embracing Blake’s cause because he no longer had the man himself to embrace. He hated the Federation and he was not helpless. Not while he still breathed.

“The bargain no longer holds, Avon,” she said, coming close, as in restraints, there was nothing he could do to her. “It is broken as easily as giving the order. You have nothing left to bargain with. I tricked you again. Surely you must be expecting that by now.”

“Servalan!” he shouted, straining at the straps that held him.

“Has *your* nerve finally snapped, Avon? I told you it was an old wall. It has waited long to have you bound to it. You were the only one that even came close to defeating me. And you were very close.”

“Let him go, send him to Cygnus Alpha or wherever you like, but I paid for him, Servalan!”

She smiled. “Not enough. There is only one thing you have left to offer that might even vaguely interest me.” She leaned over the chair, took his face in both hands and kissed him furiously. “And that, is your body,” she whispered as she let him go.

“Hold to our bargain,” Avon repeated. His hair fell darkly over his forehead and he met her eyes. “I

will do whatever you demand.” *I have to think of the living, Blake. I was faithful to you once you had gone. There was only ever Anna... I killed her, too. If I save Vila, my life will have been worth something...he was your friend, too. She will only have my body, Blake. My heart died with you.*

“Stay the execution order,” she commanded. “And see to it that he is taken to the transport cell.” She turned again to Avon. “A fair bargain this time. His life for yours. It will not be Cygnus Alpha, though. You know where that is. He will be sent to Corvus Nine...where there are guards and guns and facilities to carry out my orders. His continued existence will depend on your...cooperation. Do you understand?” She nodded, and the guard left.

“Yes.” He stilled the hatred burning inside him and tried to recall the desire he had felt for her. Vila’s life would be short indeed, if he could not perform. He smiled, thinking of the feel of her body pressed against his that time on Sarren... He stopped the rest of the thought: thoughts of Hal Mellanby’s death, thoughts of his daughter, Dayna.

Servalan’s eyes glittered, and she stroked his arm. “I had this planned from the beginning. There is a special cell prepared for you...more of a suite, actually, with every comfort you could possibly desire. Except freedom, of course. You will spend the rest of your life in that cell.”

“Hopefully a short one,” Avon said casually.

“I think you underestimate your capacity to please me,” she said tilting her head to the side. “Besides, you can be assured you will live for at least eight days. I have to prove you wrong.”

Avon had quite a lot of time to himself. The life of a Commissioner was a busy one, leaving little time for diversions. Servalan provided him every comfort and distraction as promised, but these things failed to hold his interest for long. It was fortunate for him, and for Vila, that Servalan’s tastes in bed ran to the primitive. He found that the edge between lust and hatred for the woman was easily blurred, and with time, he became quite skilled at pleasing her, as she became quite skilled at drawing response from him. She was with him almost constantly those first eight days, and most of their time together was spent in bed.

Among the many books and vistapes he was given to keep himself amused was the tape that the Federation’s propagandists had put together from the surveillance tapes on Gauda Prime. Over and over,

he would play the tape, watching his last meeting with Blake, studying the minutest details about the man. He would plead silently to the lost rebel, to deny his accusations of betrayal, then watch in stunned horror as the blood spattered his hands.

At night, he dreamed of holding that ragged and weary man close in his arms; of kissing that terrible scar, begging his forgiveness.

The dreams always ended in a wash of blood and the echoing sounds of the three shots with which he had destroyed the only *real* love he had ever had. Avon hated that as he woke screaming, tears streaming down his cheeks, she was watching. The monitors covered all angles in the suite. He had no privacy, not even in the bathroom. Normally, the numb acceptance of this that had settled on him on the *London* left him uncaring of the observation. But that she should see his nightmares was an invasion he could not bear.

With time, though all things will pass, and eventually, Avon ceased watching the vistape. Only rarely did he allow himself to think of the rebel leader. More frequently his thoughts were on Vila, travelling in a slow prison transport destined to a distant penal colony. He estimated that it would take a year for him to arrive. It was unlikely that luck would provide him a DSV and a charismatic leader to facilitate an escape.

As the weeks and months dragged on, he became skilled at noticing Servalan's subtle moods and inclinations. Perhaps too skilled. He was bored and she began to lose interest. Avon feared for Vila's life once she had tired of him completely. She might even goad him one last time by ordering Vila's death before his own. Their lovemaking became quite exotic at times.

Once, she stayed away for an entire week, while Avon paced in frustration. When she finally returned, she was wearing a startling blood-red gown. Avon had never seen her in colors before. It might mean anything. If she did not order Vila's death in front of him, he was convinced she would not at all. She would only use him to torment Avon; otherwise, he was just too insignificant to bother with. If she did, Avon would do his best to give Vila a 'companion for his death'.

His suspicions were confirmed when she stopped close to where he sat waiting and said, "I am going to miss you." She stroked his hair, wistfully. "Chasing you was one of the major amusements of my life."

"If you're bored with keeping me tame, Servalan,"

he said smiling, "why not just let me run? I'd lead you a merry chase."

"Oh, you're far too dangerous for that, Avon. I'm not fooled by your seeming docility. I am not about to let you go to gallantly rescue Vila and start your rebellion again with a new crew." She sat next to him. "Are you afraid?"

"Hardly." The ice was back in his voice, and his eyes glittered brightly. Servalan caught her breath. Once more, if only for a moment, he was the man she had wanted so much. She needed to tame him again, though, extinguish that fire, or her plan would not work.

"You have no reason to be." She leaned his head back and kissed him. "The solution was obvious. I've grown quite fond of you, fond enough not to want your execution. I may want to...use you again." Avon looked at her, confused. She laughed. "I sold you." She stood and watched as he registered the statement with a shocked expression. "I've even made quite a nice profit on all you've cost me. It seems your skills are quite in demand, and your looks and breeding assured a good price. Not only that, but you've been broken and trained, and you come complete with your own Delta-grade leash."

"Where?" he asked, quietly, keeping his feelings controlled.

"You might remember the place. They certainly remember you. You were there with Blake, and with Vila." She saw a flicker of pain in his dark eyes. "I sold you to Toise, the man who runs Freedom City now. You'll be working at a place called the Red Door, one of that rat-hole's better establishments, known for its...variety. You will do whatever Toise says and you will stay there until he wants to be rid of you. You'll want to do a good job for him," she purred, stroking his throat, "for your own sake and for Vila's."

"It could be no worse than whoring for you these past months has been." Avon turned his face from her touch.

She stepped away from him. "Well, you might find yourself looking on our...time together with remembered fondness. I'm sure you will hate it there, but you will perform adequately, just as you have for me." She paused. "Then again, you might enjoy it. I may even visit you again, sometime or other."

"I will constantly be thinking of you," he said truthfully. The fatal passion he had once felt for the cat-like woman was gone, replaced only with hatred, cold purpose, and the ability to control his body's reactions.

She used him again that night, and Avon gave a magnificent performance.

Toise eyed the game with a proprietary amusement. He would never allow his prized and most requested possession to play the Klute officially. The usual stakes were too much to risk. Besides, Shevron had beaten the chess genius once or twice, and Toise knew the prize he would ask for would be his freedom. He had finally drawn from the reticent man the method of his winnings with his friend a few years ago. It was the loss of the ten million credits that had precipitated the beginning of the end for old Krantor, so Toise felt kindly disposed to Shevron, and gave him a freer run of the place than most of the others enjoyed.

The Klute laughed and made his move. Shevron frowned a moment, then with only seconds to go, he made his response, a shark-like grin spreading over his handsome features. The smile sent a chill up Toise's spine. It was no wonder the Klute was Shevron's only friend in the establishment.

"You're dead in three moves," the Klute giggled as he made the first of them.

Shevron didn't lose his grin. He moved swiftly and decisively, the colored lights of the lounge glittering on the silver leather of his tunic, and shadowing the hollows of his aristocratic features. "Are you certain?" he asked, coolly.

The Klute moved again. "Fool!" he squeaked. "An obvious ploy to distract me. Check."

"Really," Shevron drawled. He chose his move and leaned back.

"You would be a rich man, Shevron. It is a draw."

"Or I'd be a dead one. You still win more often than not."

"It is good to have someone with a true feel for the ruthlessness of the game," the Klute replied.

As they analyzed the finer points, Toise watched with appreciation. *You won't always be so handsome, my pet, though you are such a pleasure and a profit to me now. You are a rare thing to find, these days: the genuine article. Fine Alpha breeding and looks, haughty appeal, skilled at the arts of pleasure. But I may have a use for you even after you've been retired.* A sensual smile spread on his gilded features. Shevron would still be imposing long after his hair had whitened, and his face aged. Dressed all in black, he could eventually become the Klute's replacement if the dwarf became too independent. Toise intended to squeeze every credit's worth from Shevron, one way or the other.

Rule of the house, Shevron. Toise wins, either way. He interrupted the players' conversation. "There is a client to see you, Shevron," he said, lightly touching his shoulder.

The large man looked wealthy and generous. His 'special requests' had brought Toise to the Red Door that night to see him. He found the pirate with his rich costume and golden jewelry most intriguing. His look told Toise's expert eye that this one wanted something special indeed. He looked to be a rough customer, but the rough ones tipped well, and it mattered little to Toise what they did. If they damaged the merchandise, they paid well for the privilege, or he had *them* damaged.

Toise sauntered over to him, resplendent in his wig and velvets. "Welcome, friend," he said, taking the pirate's arm and showing him into his private office. "What exactly can I do to make your stay here in Freedom City...memorable? I can provide for your every pleasure. Whatever you dream, whatever you most desire waits for you here." He finished the pitch with a dramatic flourish, disappointed that it failed to affect the man with the warm, haunted eyes. "What is your name, fine sir?"

"Baylor." The voice was so rich and deep that Toise was almost intrigued for himself. "Tak Baylor."

"I'm certain we can please you, Tak. Tell me your secrets. They will exist for you tonight and vanish in the morning without ever a word passing through the Red Door."

"I heard that you had a man..." Baylor began.

"We have many men."

"A special man...of the upper grades. An Alpha."

"You have indeed come to the right place." Toise sat Baylor down. "Tell me what you require."

"Is he dark?" Baylor began the requests.

"Dark and as cold as a black sun."

Toise's poetic flourishes were making the difficult and embarrassing task no easier. "I want him wearing only a brief black wraparound tunic. Soft leather, if that's possible." Blake remembered something Avon had once worn to his bed.

"A very popular fetish. We can accommodate it easily. In fact, the gentleman in question has a preference for leather clothing."

"Does he have a fine voice, a Dome accent?"

"The genuine accents of Terra's highest grade," Toise replied. "Are there any particular phrases, words he might say to thrill you? Mannerisms he might effect, instruments he should use?"

“Only his body,” Baylor answered. The man was probably an out of work entertainer, that Toise should offer such refinements. “If he is capable of a convincing performance, he should be cold and reserved, witty and sarcastic with a dangerous edge to him. But he must, of course, relent eventually.”

“It will, then, be a most convincing performance, as such is his nature.”

“I will want the entire night, uninterrupted.” Baylor set down a soft leather bag of gems. Toise checked them out, greed and appreciation for their beauty apparent in his eyes. “And I should like the room kept dark. No light at all. It would be too much of a coincidence should your man have the looks I seek as well.”

“He is everything you have described and more. If you will have a complimentary refreshment in the lounge, I shall go and see he is prepared.”

Toise left with a flourish and Baylor waited at the bar. He ordered adrenalin and soma in remembrance of a friend, and tried hard to ready himself for the illusion, to convince himself that this expensive prostitute was really Kerr Avon.

It might be enough, Avon thought, stacking the neatly-bundled credits he had just counted into the lockbox beside the pile of glittering jewelry. Tips from satisfied ladies, wealthy gentlemen...even a few keepsakes from Servalan. She had visited him three times so far, the excitement of watching him being used by others providing a new thrill for her. The last visit had been to celebrate the ‘election’ of Councillor Sleer. *All I need now is the right smuggler*. He closed the box and hid it and the baubles in a secret panel.

In days, or at most weeks, he would be free because Vila would be free. He would probably die, as Sleer would be furious, but his death was something that had been delayed eleven months now. He had to arrange Vila’s escape before that ship reached the prison. Security was at its weakest then. The ship would have to be a fast one.

Avon had long since become numbed to the pain and humiliation of his life, but had always managed a stunning performance. None of his clientele had cause to complain. Although he responded physically to them, even those responses had become distanced, muted, meaningless. In ways working for Toise was easier than it had been with Servalan. There was the anonymity of what he did, little pretense of intimacy was required, and what was, was for only brief mo-

ments of pleasure, like when he’d beaten the Klute. But now that it would all be ending soon, Avon was losing a little of that distance. The carefully built walls guarding him from his past were threatened.

He dressed in the costume that Toise had ordered him to. The soft leather felt warm on his chest as he wrapped the tie around him. He brushed back his hair and put on the carefully-designed masculine cosmetics a little heavier than usual. The client had requested a darkened room. *Cold and dangerous*, he thought as he dimmed the lights and surveyed the effect in the mirror. *You will never know, my space captain, just what truth lies behind those words. But you’re safe, wealthy stranger...because I don’t love you. How fast is your ship, I wonder?* He dimmed the lights still further and lay back on the bed. Lazily waiting, he massaged his cock through the leather of his tunic. He reached for tube of ointment by the bedside, and squeezed some onto his hand. Turning on his side, he parted the firm cheeks of his ass, and lubricated himself, slowly inserting a finger, moving it in and out gently loosening his muscles, preparing for his customer. His right hand kneaded his balls and the tumescent flesh of his cock.

For a moment, the thought of being touched by anyone, ever again, gave Avon a sense of revulsion the physical sensations he was causing himself couldn’t overwhelm. He thought of all the bodies that had come and gone, all the hands that had touched him, all the times that he wouldn’t let Blake do even the simplest of things he now allowed with ease. Mostly, he thought of Blake. He closed his eyes and remembered the warm feel of the rebel’s big hands massaging his cock, as his own hand imitated the motions. He heard footsteps outside his door. It was a large man’s gait. He brought his mind back to the present and waited for the door to open.

Silhouetted in the light from the hall, Avon could make out the bulk of his client: tall, large, dressed flamboyantly, dark curly hair catching the light in its silver strands. He turned his head and buried his face in his arms until the door clicked shut again. The customer had requested not to see him, a request that piqued his vanity.

With the light from the door, ‘Baylor’, catching his breath, stared at the man on the bed for a long moment. He was thinner than Avon had been, and perhaps a bit taller, though it was hard to tell in his prone position. His hair was a perfect match, perhaps a bit longer than he had remembered, more like in that horrid tape. It was rich, dark brown, thick with

a slight wave. His legs stretched from beneath the leather tunic Blake had requested be worn. They were long, with powerfully muscular thighs, well formed and covered with brown hair that Blake knew would be soft, as Avon's was. The man covered his face. It was well that he did, for the illusion was near perfect, otherwise. He shut the door behind him.

"You wanted me?" came the rich, silky voice in the darkness. It was amused and slightly contemptuous. The accent was as Toise had promised, the soft cultured tones of the Earth-bred Alpha Elite. It was a beautiful voice, sensual, dangerous, and alluring. But Avon, his Avon, would have snarled the words harshly, making them a challenge. He had rarely been seductive, and never gentle.

Blake walked to the side of the bed, remembering it's placement in the dark. He touched his arm, squeezing gently, feeling the strong muscles tighten under his grip. *Now that was like you Avon.* "Yes," he replied. He sat on the bed. His hands traveled the width of the prone man's chest, sliding under the leather, thrilling at the feel of his warm flesh. "You're very much what I wanted," he said haltingly. "I need you," *Avon*, his mind completed. He untied the tunic and pushed it from the man's shoulders. He slid quietly out of his own clothes and sat back down on the edge of the bed.

"I want to touch you." His companion lay perfectly still as Blake's caressing fingers explored the man's body. It seemed so familiar to him. Avon would be like that at times—tolerate Blake's affectionate needs by simply allowing him the touch, never touching back himself. He lay next to the man on the bed, and touched his hair. It was soft, like Avon's. He avoided touching his face, but instead moved his hand lower, stroking over the light sprinkling of hair on his abdomen with the flat of his palm. The other man gasped. *A good response. You are quite an actor,* Blake thought, his conscious mind desperately reminding him that this was not Avon, could not possibly be him.

Avon was stunned. He did not expect to feel anything, did not expect to want this man, this stranger whose hands reminded him so much of the hands he had imagined only moments before. The big hands were warm, and gentle, but demanding as they caressed him and stroked their way to his rising cock. Avon lay very still. *You are not Blake. Blake is dead. Don't touch me the way that he did. Don't make me remember. You have only bought my body. He still owns my soul.* Avon guided the large man down to his erection, his

fingers tangling in the tousled curls, then pulling away as if stung.

Blake slithered down the length of the other man's body, licking and nuzzling along his side and his hips. The intensity of his partner's responses pleased and excited him, but were unlike the Avon he had known. He sought to justify them within the context of his fantasy. *You must be angry, love. That's it*, he thought. *You need me, and you always hated needing me for anything.* He wrapped his arms tightly around his lover's waist and drew the cold man to him, pressing his chest against his engorged penis, licking a trail from his navel to the soft curls of his pubic hair, gently nibbling at the base of his cock.

Avon's fingers found their way into Blake's... *No! This is not Blake!* he told himself. Still, he stroked the man's curly head. *He is only a customer, only a space captain in port for a bit of fun. And he might be Vila's rescuer if you please him well enough.*

Blake smiled in the dark. "You are very good tonight," he murmured. The tension radiating from his bedmate was electric, and whether it was real or forged, it was so much like Avon's that Blake ached with desire and memory. He slid down still further to lie between the parted thighs, and began sucking and nipping gently at the Alpha's balls. His efforts were rewarded with a soft, breathless gasp. The sound tore at Blake's heart—it was exactly the response that his actions had always drawn from Avon. He nearly cried out the dead man's name. Instead, he put his mouth to the straining cock before him. Filled, he would utter no indiscretions.

The hot mouth descended suddenly on Avon, and he cried out again. This man seemed to know all the ways to draw pleasure from him. Wildly, he thrust his hips, plunging deeper into the warm wetness of his client's throat. Urgent need sped him on, perhaps rougher than usual with a paying customer, but this one had requested Avon be at his most natural. Judging from the low, rumbling moans vibrating his cock, and the thrusts of the large man's hips against the bed, there would be no complaints. This captain, this stranger who felt so familiar, took his time with Avon, bringing him close to the edge, then, changing motions, easing him down again, building desire and need at each level. Avon thrashed his head, biting into the pillow, burying within it the cry he would not allow to escape him. *Blake! You never will let me go,* Avon thought despairingly. Gunshots rang in his mind, and blood, remembered, splattered on his hands. Stretched taut, stiffening,

unmoving except for the uncontrollable quivering in his limbs, he came, pleasure and memory burning together, searing his soul. He lay silent, almost as if he were dead. The captain's mouth lifted from him, the large body sliding up, wrapping strong arms and legs around him, burying his head in Avon's shoulder.

Avon. Grief struck at Blake like a physical blow. This time the illusion had been too real, too perfect. The feel and the taste of this Alpha-grade prostitute was too much like Avon's. The wild response, the breaking of control, the stiff and almost painful way of release was so like his reluctant lover. He felt himself start to cry, hated doing so, but didn't care to stop. He buried his face and clung with desperate need to a man that wasn't Avon. Strong arms went around him and held gently as Avon never would have done before. *No, only as you so rarely did*, Blake thought remembering times that had been like this. Too few times. He hated burdening this anonymous person, this hired bedmate, with his pain, but he felt he had to tell someone. He couldn't confide in Jenna. She didn't know about what had passed between himself and the dark computer tech. She would be jealous. With reason. But he knew what would be said here would go no further, if said right.

"He's dead," Blake finally choked. "My lover. You are so like him...I can't help it. We had a fight...years ago. We had so many fights," Blake sighed. "He left, or I did, it isn't really clear. He needed to be free. And so, I never went after him. I loved him enough to let him go." The man next to him was silent. "I've wandered now for years, looking for him in places like this. Especially since I heard of his death. I look for men like you, men who will let me pretend they are him, just for one night...to let me pretend he loved me and wanted me back." Blake's eyes squeezed shut hard against the tears that flooded them. "He died almost a year ago. I was worlds away. I couldn't stop it. He died hating me."

"Perhaps...he didn't hate you," came the silken voice, even that a little like Avon's, if Avon cared, if Avon were saddened and showed it. "Perhaps he only feared how he felt about you."

The big man clutched at him and Avon stroked him. *Blake*. The memory was crushing him. The grief he had held in so long was slipping free. The story was eerily like his own, the other man's grief so honest, Avon felt the need to comfort him. He'd said the first thing to come to mind, remembering how often he'd rejected Blake, remembering how he'd hurt him

with his silence, regretting it all. He found his own eyes becoming moist, as well. *How maudlin*, he thought. But his need overcame his cynicism. It all seemed so stupid, so senselessly tragic. He held the man tightly, and buried his face in his neck.

The Alpha was shaking, and Blake felt a hot tear on his shoulder. In that strange, soft voice, filled now with a despair to match his own, he heard, "I lost my lover, as well. I never told him..."

Blake sensed the man's pain and hugged him fiercely, stroking the back of his head. *That was real, wasn't it? You weren't pretending to be my Avon. Even you are not that good an actor. You must have been so lonely here...* Blake thought. He ran his fingers over the man's face, touching the dampness at his eyes, feeling the hollows and lines there, feeling the soft lashes, running his fingertips down his cheek, tracing the outline of the fine jaw. He was feeling him like a blind man. He wanted to know the man with whom he had shared his memories of Avon, who had shared his own with him.

Blake's chest tightened. *I've gone mad*, he thought. *I've driven myself insane and begun to believe in it*. Those cheeks, those heavy-lidded eyes *were* Avon's. His fingers sought familiarities, and found them. The little crease between his brows, deeper than Blake remembered it, but there nonetheless and shaped exactly the same. The large aquiline nose that Blake had found so attractive, the chiseled, arrogant lips parted slightly. His fingers followed them to the left side of the mouth. There, just below the corner of his mouth, was a small indented curve of a scar.

"Avon..."

The voice of Avon's nightmare cut him like a knife. The fingers touched his face, stroked him, and Avon stared in shock through the darkness, unable to see, feeling the madness take hold of him again.

"You're alive," Blake said.

Then the nightmare ended. The warmth of Blake's voice was real and undeniable. Blake was alive. Blake was here, with him.

"It really is you, Blake. I thought I had..." Avon choked.

"Yes. I know. I saw the vistapes. I saw it all. I saw you die there, defying them, protecting what you thought was my body."

"Blake," Avon whispered hoarsely, the false-sweet whore's tones gone from it. "I killed you."

"It wasn't me, Avon." Blake gripped the other man's arms firmly. "It wasn't me. The man you killed was my clone. I was never on Gauda Prime, Avon."

Like Terminal, Avon thought. Again. "But I would have killed you. I didn't know it wasn't you."

"He wasn't me. That's all that matters. We can never know what might have happened if it had been; what I might have said differently, what you might have done differently. There is only what is now, and that is that you are alive, and I am alive. And even if you still hate me, I want you to know that I love you and I have never stopped loving you.," Blake said in a rush of sincerity.

"Blake," Avon smiled, "I never hated you. I was too angry to answer you then, before Star One. I couldn't believe that you actually thought..." He paused. "Blake, I could never hate you because I love you."

Blake gathered him close again, holding him tightly and kissing his neck. "I needed you, Blake. Without you, I...well I think I went mad." Avon's voice shook.

"I'm here, Avon. I won't leave you again. It's all right now." Blake murmured reassurances into Avon's ear, alternating them with intensifying kisses.

The past fell away from Avon. All he could think of now was how much he'd longed to touch Blake, to hold him, to be held by him. His mouth sought out that of the rebel leader's and covered it, tongue swirling over the moist lips, thrusting deep into his mouth.

Avon's kiss was as fierce as Blake remembered, desperately intense as only Avon could be. *How could I not have known you*, he thought as Avon's hands caressed his body.

They lay on their sides, entwined and entangled, hips thrusting, cocks rubbing against each other's belly, desire building. One thought echoed through them both—that the other was somehow, miraculously alive.

"I want you," Blake whispered, breaking the kiss. "I want you in me, Avon." His lover kissed him again for answer, then reached to the side of the bed and returned, slicking a glistening cream on his hand and his cock.

"Blake," he whispered, as his hand reached down to stroke the other man's ass, spreading the cream over the puckered opening. "I need you, too."

Blake spread his legs and raised his hips slightly, offering himself to Avon's probing cock. He pressed himself forward as Avon entered him, thrusting his hips up to meet Avon's. He lay still, then, relaxing and revelling in the feel of being made love to by the one person he never imagined he would be again.

Soon, though, Blake was panting and sweating, and Avon felt his strong hands grip his ass, pulling his thrusts even deeper. Blake clenched around him and moaned. Avon felt everything but desire burn out of his brain. He gripped Blake's shoulders and forced himself to slow down, to prolong the moment. Blake's huge cock rubbed against him insistently, and Avon loved the feel of it. He wrapped his hand around it and began to pump in rhythm with his thrusts. With each thrust, he nearly withdrew, and each stroke ran the entire length of Blake's throbbing member. He felt more alive now, at this moment than at any time since Star One, since Blake had gone.

The maddeningly slow pace of his lover had Blake gasping and trying desperately to speed him on, thrusting his hips to meet him, and clasping tightly with his inner muscles. Avon's hand stroked faster, palm rubbing over the head of his cock, slick with the lotion and his own pre-orgasmic fluids. Avon plunged into him wild with passion, breathing heavily. He looked up, wishing for a light, instead touching Avon's face, brushing damp hair from his eyes. The feel so sweet, so perfect, combined with the other sensations to push him over the edge. As he came, Avon pressed deep within him, holding still, filling him totally.

Blake pulled Avon down to him, his come and their sweat slippery between them. Avon began to thrust again; short, rapid thrusts to bring him to orgasm. Blake licked the sweat from the hollows of his throat, the taste salty-sweet. Holding on hard, arms wrapped under Blake's back, and crying out his name, Avon came. Blake held him close, stroking his back gently, calming him and easing him down afterwards.

I never want to lose you again, Blake thought. Avon was lost in thoughts similar.

"I'm taking you with me," he said, squeezing Avon possessively.

Avon raised his head, suddenly alert. "You can't."

"And why not?" Blake rumbled. "What hold does that prancing fool downstairs have on you that you won't come with me?" Old fears resurfaced. "Or is it that you would rather stay?"

"Vila," Avon said. "He's got Vila, or rather *She* has him. Servalan." Avon spat the name with more venom than he had intended. Blake squeezed him and he continued. "He's alive also, or should be. I have no proof, of course. He's on a transport bound for Corvus Nine—it should arrive there in a month. His life was the price of my...cooperation. I paid it."

Blake read the warning signs in Avon's tense body and strained voice. *Vila. Still alive. And what you had to do... Don't moralize, he thought. Don't give in to the outrage. And above all, don't overprotect him.* "You did this for Vila?" he asked, amazed at his fortitude, remembering another time when Avon had been unwilling to make such a sacrifice for him.

"He was my friend once, and I owed him... If only for the time I tried to kill him..." Avon paused. "We were in a shuttle together. There wasn't enough fuel." Avon's voice was flat, distant. "He hid, and I found another solution, but not before I had hunted him with a gun. I *would* have killed him, Blake."

"But you didn't. And with what you have done for him, I am certain he considers the debt paid." Avon slid off his stomach and curled in Blake's arm. "But why can't I take you with me? The *Rim Runner* is a fast ship; faster than anything the Federation's got short of their top-line cruisers. We'll get there in plenty of time to rescue Vila."

"I am not a prisoner, Blake. If I keep up appearances, Toise won't suspect anything...and he won't report to Servalan. She has Orac now. She can be in constant communication with that prison ship. The moment I was missing, or even uncooperative, she would order Vila's death." Avon smiled wryly. "She is, I'm afraid, quite bored with me, and it might well amuse her to kill us. Were you to mount a rescue, Blake, you would have to prevent that ship from signaling. If she hears he's free, my life here won't be nearly as easy nor long enough for you to bother returning."

"There won't be any signal," Blake reassured, with a depth of resolve Avon remembered well from their *Liberator* days.

Renny stared in awe as Vila deftly and swiftly unlocked the sealed aft compartment before the security camera swiveled to cover them again. They stood nonchalantly as it turned away. Then Vila pulled the panel open.

"In. Fast." Renny scrambled inside and Vila followed faster than the young man thought anyone could move.

"There we are," Vila said, flicking on a small torch to dimly illuminate the compartment. "Privacy. And I've got a surprise for you," he said grinning, and produced a small flask from apparently nowhere.

"Where'd you get that?" the young man asked, astonished.

"Nipped it from the commander's cabin when I

was out and about yesterday," Vila said, opening it. "I thought we could share a drink. If you're old enough to be transported, way I figure, you're old enough for anything."

"Glad I finally convinced you," Renny laughed, taking a sip from the offered bottle and putting his arm around the thief's waist.

"Me, too," Vila replied, leaning over and kissing Renny's liquor-sweetened, full lips. "Tastes nice," Vila licked his lips. "You goin' to share, or are you planning on keeping it all to yourself? I want you relaxed, not unconscious, y'know."

The sandy-haired young man laughed, his blue eyes gleaming in the light. He passed Vila the bottle. They went on exchanging kisses and sips from the flask until they were quite happily drunk and quite fully aroused. The space was small, but it had plenty of room to stretch out in, and above all, it was private.

Vila was always very discreet with the young man. He was young and attractive, looking far closer to sixteen than the eighteen years he claimed. He was Vila's and that provided him some safety; as a famous political criminal, with a reputation far out-reaching the actuality, Vila had little trouble from the other prisoners for once, so he lent what protection he could to the young man. Still, he didn't want to tempt fate, so their interludes had been hurried and infrequent. It had taken Vila some time to collect the things he needed to get into this compartment. They don't send thieves to prison with their lock picks.

For Renny's part, he had been grateful when finally, on the ship, he had met the famous revolutionary who had once been with Blake. Though only a teenager, he had been tried and convicted as an adult for conspiracy, treason, and trying to overthrow the state. He had written an article for his school newspaper about Blake and his cause, calling for his fellow students not to believe the vicious and obvious propaganda tapes from Gauda Prime. When the editor refused to print it, he did so himself and distributed it, not only on the campus, but in the Dome plazas as well. His parents were unconnected and unimportant Beta-grade clerks who quickly disavowed their son to save themselves. His mother and his brother even gave testimony against him at his trial.

In the holding cells, he discovered what happened to good-looking youths when they were locked in a cell with twenty men and no women. Renny was not a virgin; he had always felt attracted to other young men at school and had even had a couple of furtive

attempts at consummating some of the attractions. One of the 'friends' he had done so with was also more than willing to testify to his 'deviant' nature at the trial. It was one of the factors that led to a judgment of transportation, he was certain, and gossip about it had led to his being passed around and gang-raped in the holding cells.

On the ship, he met Vila. One of Blake's original seven. Vila regaled him with tales of the revolution he and Renny both fought for, but his friendship had another, more practical effect. It seemed that Blake's seven, or Avon's gang as they were now mostly known, had a reputation for violence. Even though Vila appeared to be mostly harmless, the rest of the prisoners didn't care to take the chance. Restal was an important political terrorist who had friends. So when Renny took up with Vila, it was assumed by the crimos that there was a claim there.

Vila allowed that thinking to go on, pleased by his new position of protector rather than protected, but never touched the youth. Well, not for months any way; Renny became rather insistent in his will- ingness, and Vila's resistance weakened.

With his skilled fingers, Vila undid the fastenings on Renny's tunic and trousers. The young man easily slid out of his clothes while Vila removed his own. Renny lay on his back and pulled the thief on top of him, their erections pressing into each other's bellies. Vila leaned over to kiss the young man's mouth, tongue finding easy entry.

They tumbled and rolled, enjoying the freedom of movement and each other's bodies. Renny had the lean muscularity of youth. His body was not yet filled out; it was hard even bony. His chest was smooth and hairless with small dark pink nipples that beckoned Vila's lips, which soon answered the call, licking and nipping first one and then the other. Renny let out a nearly silent gasp, barely more than a whisper. They had both learned to keep their responses quiet. The need for discretion had made them both more attentive to the subtle reactions of their partner's pleasure.

As Vila teased his nipples, Renny reached down with his left hand to grasp the straining cock which thrust at his hip. He took his own member in his other hand and pumped both in rhythm. He looked down in the dim light and watched the rebel's face as he sucked on the bit of puckered flesh. Vila was really quite handsome; his eyes were closed and his lashes rested softly on his cheeks giving him an innocent look. Soft hair pressed into Renny's chest and he

nuzzled the top of Vila's head with his chin, planting kisses there.

Vila trailed his tongue down Renny's chest, licking ribs. "You don't eat enough, lad," he admonished.

"I get enough, you just work it off me at night, you randy bugger," he laughed. "Besides, I don't want to get all fat and have you go off me, now do I?"

"You don't have to worry about that, my sweet."

Renny reached and pulled Vila to him. "Vila."

"Eh?"

"You're driving me crazy, you know that? Are you going to finish what you started?"

It was Vila's turn to laugh. "In me own sweet time, I will, impatient youth." He kissed Renny's mouth, then his cheek, and nipped his ear lobe. "I don't think you want me to rush, do you?" He licked the sensitive flesh behind the young man's ear.

"Vila!" Renny gasped softly. The thief didn't stop licking and sucking the earlobe. His hands wandered down to Renny's hips, his fingers kneaded his inner thighs. "Vila, no! It's...oh!"

Vila stopped licking at the ear. He knew the lad's sensitive spots, and the ones that were too sensitive, as well. He grinned. "Too much for you, am I?"

"Yes! 'N you know it, too!"

Vila smiled. "Just want you good and ready for me, that's all." The thief's hand gently kneaded Renny's balls, one finger exploratively dipping into the smooth crack of his ass.

"If I get any readier, it'll be too late, Vila. Come here." Renny pulled Vila up to kneel over his face. Vila's erection brushed his lips and he parted them, his tongue flicking out to lick at the head. Vila gasped as Renny slicked his shaft with saliva, tonguing its length, and taking it into his throat.

When his cock was dripping, Vila slid down between Renny's legs. The young man lifted his long, thin limbs above his head and grasped his ankles. Vila bent over and kissed the back of Renny's thigh and licked at the young man's tautly spread, pink asshole., probing it with his tongue. He licked his finger and slid it slowly in.,

"Vila," Renny panted. "I need you. Please?"

Vila was only too happy to oblige, and he licked Renny's ass again, dribbling saliva around the opening. Prison ships did not come equipped with such luxuries as lubricant, and he didn't want to hurt the lad.

Vila's cock was throbbing with desire as he slowly pressed the head against Renny's opening and entered him. Long legs rested on his shoulders as the

young man shifted to raise his hips to meet Vila's slow thrusts.

"Oh, Vila," Renny gasped. The thief kissed the young man, nearly lying on top of him. Renny broke the kiss and nuzzled in Vila's neck. "You feel so lovely."

"Mmm," Vila murmured and began thrusting short and deep into Renny's tight ass, feeling the young man's hard cock pressing up against his belly.

Vila pulled away and knelt back. He grasped the insistent member and stroked it, balancing himself and pushing Renny's ass open more by leaning on the back of his thigh. Renny was bent backwards, his knees up near his head, his ass spread around Vila's cock, as the older man's thrusting became more rapid and his concentration wavered.

Snaking his hand around his leg, Renny gently touched the hand that was on his cock and Vila moved it to his other thigh. He watched Vila fucking him, his eyes pinched shut, his lips parted as he panted; sweat beaded his brow, dampening his fine hair and slicking it to his head. Renny began pumping his cock in rhythm to Vila's thrusts, and tightening his ass muscles around the base of Vila's cock when he was fully sheathed.

The thief moaned and pressed forward, his cock swollen and throbbing deep inside Renny who clenched around him. His hot come pulsed out, filling Renny and driving him over the edge as well.

Vila slid his cock out and fell onto Renny, come and sweat slippery between them. Renny licked his neck. "Nice," he whispered, smiling, after awhile. "But you weigh a ruddy ton, y'know?"

"Umm," Vila replied, not moving.

"Vila!"

"Wha'?" he grumbled sleepily.

"Roll over, you're crushing the life outa me, you sleepy sod."

"Awright." Vila rolled, but clasped his hands around Renny's back, so that when he rolled their positions were reversed. He smiled. "Didn't wan' to let go yet."

Renny propped himself on his elbows and smoothed Vila's hair. "I like it."

"What are you talking about?" Vila asked.

"This." Renny wagged his hand indicating the room. "Our own little hideaway." He kissed Vila's cheek. "How'd you know it was here?"

"Not the first time I've been transported, is it?" he said evasively. "Got an early start on my criminal career, I did, just like you."

"I'm a *political* prisoner," Renny replied, eyes flashing.

"Yeah. I know," Vila sighed. "Just like Blake."

"Well, what's wrong with being just like Blake?" Renny defended.

"Nothin'. If you like bein' dead, that is." Vila reached up and brushed the young man's long unruly hair from his face. His hand lingered. "Don't want to see you end up like him, that's all. Or like the rest. All that's left of Blake and his seven's me." Vila paused. "Me and Avon."

Renny knew better than to press Vila about Avon, or even much about his time with the computer genius turned reluctant revolutionary; Avon who had shot Blake on Gauda Prime. All Vila had told him about that was not to judge as he hadn't been there and all was not as it seemed. Renny took the thief's word and gave Avon the benefit of the doubt. Renny rolled off Vila and lay nestled in the crook of his arm.

"Any of that brandy left?" Vila asked, breaking the silence.

"Renny turned to find the flask. "Sorry."

"Me, too,"

Renny tried to break Vila's mood. "So you pinched it straight from the top brass, huh? Pretty nifty trick, that."

"Nah, the locks on these old tubs are no challenge. You could've done it yourself. I've shown you enough already."

There was a clanging sound then the ship lurched and vibrated. They grabbed for their clothes. "We've been holed!" Vila cried nervously, pulling on his trousers. Renny got into his and ran for the hatch.

"Easy there. This compartment's still part of the main hull. Doesn't fill up with sealing foam like the one on the *London* I told you about. We're all right here, just got to get out before we're missed, that's all."

"How? If we're in an emergency, the halls'll be filled with crew, and we can't risk the hull passages."

Vila mulled it over. "You're right. We'd be safest if we just stayed out of sight in here 'till it's all over." They settled down to wait.

"Did you knock off that transmitter antenna?" Blake asked, peering at the screen. The small, standard prison transport was in the center.

"I think so." Jenna's fingers clicked on the keypad and the ship leapt into closer magnification. "Yes. It's gone Blake. And I'm getting no signals on any frequency, either."

The tension in Blake eased. "Good. Can they still receive signals?"

"From Earth? No. From us? Probably." Jenna shifted the display again as Blake walked to the comm console. "This is Tak Baylor, captain of the *Rim Runner*. We demand your immediate surrender. Your communications have been destroyed, your ship is unarmed and we are faster than you. That was only a warning shot. The next will be to your main engine compartment. Use your landing lights to signal your acceptance of our terms."

Blake and Jenna waited, watching the little transport.

"I hope this works, Blake. It may take a lot for just the two of us to take them."

"They don't know how many are with us. This is a large ship," Blake replied, "and we'll have the prisoners on our side. I'm sure they'll be glad enough for their freedom."

"And if the captain tries what Raiker did on the *London*?" Jenna asked, remembering the hostages the Sub-Commander had killed to make Blake surrender—and that it had worked.

"We won't let them know it's Vila that we want—and we shall threaten first. If so much as one prisoner is shot, take out their flight deck."

The transport's landing lights flashed once.

Blake smiled with relief and signaled them. "These are our terms: all officers and guards will surrender their weapons immediately to the prisoners, and explain that the *Rim Runner* is here to pick up a missing crew member. The prisoners will be given control of your ship. Then you will extend a transfer tube to my ship and we will send across a party. If you cooperate, no one will be hurt. Confirm compliance with your lights." Blake switched off.

The transport's lights remained dark.

Lieutenant Zandor protested, "We can't just give in to these demands, Sir! We're an official Federation vessel. Think of your career!" he added, thinking of his own.

"We have no choice," Captain Artix replied. "I know very well that they have given us no guarantees—we can't even open a channel to negotiate!" he added in frustration. "Surrender is our only option."

Sub-Commander Klaven interrupted. "Think of what will happen when revenge-happy prisoners are given weapons, Sir." He paused. "There might be another option."

"Yes?"

"Let me conceal a party in the airlock. We can capture their boarding party and then we will have something with which to negotiate."

The young captain rubbed his chin and nodded. "All right. Get your party together and dress them in prisoners' clothes. Give your uniforms to several of the more docile prisoners and try to trick them." He turned back to the controls. "Give the signal, Lieutenant."

Vila and Renny listened at the panel and heard the guards exchanging clothes with some of the prisoners. Renny grinned. "Somebody's mounting a rescue!" he whispered excitedly. "We're going to be free, Vila!"

Vila smiled back at him, then his features darkened. "What about Avon?" he asked rhetorically. "Such a wonderful stroke of good fortune, and it's going to get us free and him killed."

Renny didn't follow Vila. Was Avon being held somewhere, under some kind of threat? Vila never spoke about what had happened to the computer tech after Gauda Prime. "What..."

"You wouldn't understand," Vila interrupted. "You're another bleedin' fanatic just like Blake. You'd sacrifice anyone just to fight your war."

Renny started to deny Vila's accusations, but was ignored.

"Avon's not a hero," the thief went on. "Neither am I, for that matter, lad. He didn't ask to join this Cause of yours, didn't want to die for it, or to get me out of it. But he's going to be killed all the same, as soon as I get on that rescue ship. Now what do you think Blake would have done?" Vila paused. "What he would have done in the old days, I mean." Vila knew that using the young man's hero as an example was a dirty trick, but Vila didn't want to lose Renny. "You've got a choice," he went on. "You can go out there and take your chances they'll rescue you, or you can stick by me, and by Avon."

Renny gulped. It was a hard choice, but one to which he knew the answer. "I'm still with you, Vila. Part of Blake's new seven," he grinned. "I didn't know you were a rebel leader, too."

"I'm not," Vila said, sadly, and the two of them waited in the dark.

The scanner showed a party in the airlock. Half a dozen sullen officers guarded by a fierce-looking group of prisoners. The officers looked frightened; the ex-prisoners, confident.

“Blake!” Jenna pointed at one of the prisoners.

“I remember him, too,” Blake said, his eyes narrowing. The man she indicated was older than Blake remembered; he looked worn and tired, but it was the same man. “I believe his name was Artix.”

“It’s a trap,” Jenna stated. She turned to Blake. “What are you going to do?”

“Whatever I have to,” Blake replied. “They have Vila in there, and Avon back on Freedom City,” he sighed wearily. “I’ll do whatever I have to, Jenna.”

She nodded and handed him a gun belt, then buckled one on herself. They went to the airlock. Jenna stayed around a corner, out of sight for back-up.

The inner door of the airlock opened. Blake held his gun on the group. “No one move.”

Zandor brought his weapon up, but before he completed his aim, Blake fired and the disguised lieutenant fell.

Blake moved his aim. “Artix, you’re next,” he said. “Order your men to surrender.”

The captain froze. “Blake,” he gasped, staring.

“That’s right. How nice of you to remember me. Now do what I told you.”

Artix flinched. “Drop your weapons,” he ordered. His sub-commander glared at him and hesitated. “Drop the gun, Klaven. It’s all right, Blake is an honorable man, an idealist. He’s not going to let the prisoners harm us.” He turned to the rebel leader. “Will you?”

“Do what I tell you and no one need get hurt.”

Klaven laid his weapon on the deck. The former prisoners picked up the weapons and trained them on the officers. “Take me to where the rest of the prisoners are being held,” Blake ordered.

“Right. I know who you want, Blake,” one of the fake officers grinned. “Restal’s on board. He talked a lot about you.”

Blake laughed, “I’m not surprised.” He turned to Artix. “You’ll come with me. I trust the locks work the same way as on the *London*? Palm prints?” Artix nodded, and Blake turned back to the former prisoner. “What’s your name?”

“Durkin. Jan Durkin.”

“Well, Jan, you keep an eye on this lot. Don’t shoot any of them unless you have to, all right?”

“Right,” Durkin confirmed and began getting the former officers under control and his fellow prisoners under command.

Blake signaled Jenna on his communicator. “All fine, Jenna. I have Artix and he’s going to take me to Vila.” Artix nodded.

“All right, Blake,” Jenna responded. “I’m going back to the flight deck to get her ready to move in a hurry. Out.”

“After you,” Blake said, herding Artix out of the staging area.

Vila listened to the cheering outside and his heart sank. “They’ve taken the ship,” he said bitterly.

Renny grabbed his arm. “Maybe we can stop the transmission or something.” Vila had explained about the symbiotic relationship Sleer had placed him and Avon in. “Or we can convince them to keep one of the officers around to make the report, then we can try to rescue Avon ourselves.”

Save one of the officers? Vila thought. He began working at the panel’s lock. “Come on. There might still be time.” Bent to his task, Vila froze. He heard a voice from the past—the voice of a ghost.

“Well, where is he?” Blake roared outside. “It’s a small ship. If you’re playing for time, Artix...”

“Blake,” Vila whispered in his hiding hole. “It’s Blake.”

“Then let’s go!” Renny’s eyes shone.

Vila was remembering Gauda Prime, imagining what Blake, scared and changed, might do to him...and to Avon. *It’ll be a People’s Court*, he thought with horror. *A fair trial You would be fair, Blake. And they’ll kill him just as dead as that bitch would.*

“Vila!” Renny shook him. “I don’t know how, but if it’s Blake, come on!”

“Oh, it’s Blake, all right,” Vila said. *That voice is unmistakable.* He finished unlocking the panel. *Maybe I stand a chance pleading with him*, he thought. *I don’t stand a chance with her.* He opened the door.

Blake turned at the noise, his gun still held ready.

Vila’s hands shot into the air. “Don’t shoot! It’s only me,” he said quickly. He stared. Blake was laughing. Unscarred. Not angry.

Blake holstered his gun and grabbed Vila’s shoulders. “I should have guessed. Who’s that?”

Renny had climbed out after him. “Renny. He’s me mate. I’ve recruited him, well he kind of recruited himself. Blake,” Vila began, “Avon’s in trouble. He’s on...”

“...Freedom City. I know, Vila. We’re going back for him, but he wanted to make sure you were safe.” Blake grinned at the thief, glad to see he was all right. The young man though...he didn’t look to be more than sixteen, seventeen. Renny was staring at Blake with hero-worshipping eyes, and an absolute trust in the legend. *You’re too young for this war, and for...*

He cut off the thought. It wasn't fair to assume anything untoward existed between the youth and Vila. It was probably just more hero-worship. "I'm afraid you're not coming with us, son," Blake told the lad.

"But Blake..." Renny began.

Vila cut him off. "He comes with me, Blake. I promised to take care of him and I'm not leaving him behind with this lot."

Blake eyed Vila suspiciously. The defiance was something new to the thief. *I suppose I can't expect him to be the same man he was three years ago*, Blake thought. "All right, Vila. Let's get things settled here and get back to Avon. Jenna's in the ship waiting." The young man's face split into a grin.

Avon waited, keeping up the pretense of cooperation. It was different, though. Once again it was a habit, an act, something he was doing to accomplish what he needed to do. He felt stronger; his mind was clearer than it had been for a long time. Most of all he realized his heart felt whole again. Thoughts of Blake were with him, but now they held no pain.

Six days and no word. Avon had calculated that they were just now reaching Vila's transport and attacking it. His preparations had changed as well. He was now unwilling to die to accomplish his goal of Vila's freedom. He bought a personal weapon on the underground and kept it and his credit with him at all times.

On the ninth day, his careful routine was broken. Avon had become a good actor, and even as he waited for the order he feared would come from Servalan if Blake had been unsuccessful, he managed to behave as though nothing were different. A good actor, but not good enough.

He sat at a small chess table in the Klute's private quarters. His mind was not on the game. The little man moved his piece, smiled his hideous little smile, and said, "You're leaving soon, aren't you?"

Avon looked up, too quickly, despite the calmness of his features. "What makes you think that?"

The Klute frowned, looking at the board. "Your game is off lately." He switched off the board and looked Avon in the eye. "When are you going?"

"As I said," Avon replied coldly, his gun concealed, icy weight against his chest, "why do you think I'm going anywhere. I've had bad days before."

"I know you made a bargain with the captain of the *Rim Runner*," the Klute smiled. "Don't you know I'm always three moves ahead of you?" He leaned back and folded his hands. "Don't worry, the idiots

who run this place have never monitored my room. After all, what harm could their pet freak do to them? And there's nothing...interesting to watch."

"And if you were correct?" Avon purred.

"I would do nothing, Shevron." He arched the name. "It amuses me to observe you, that is all." He smiled again. "You paid the captain from the considerable store of credits you've won from me and stolen from that fop who runs this place. You then sent him to rescue your friend, the one I almost crisped. Once 'Baylor' has him, he'll return for you."

"Why?" Avon asked.

The Klute shook his head. "No, Avon. I don't want to come with you. Your fight is not mine. I am not anxious to hurry my death and out there, you're not exactly healthy company to keep."

"You would have made a good psychostrategist," Avon complimented.

"So I've been told by one of the best."

"Then I ask again, why?" Avon sat back. Everything was a game to the Klute. The stake for this one was his life. *Typical*, Avon thought and chuckled.

"Yes," the Klute answered, joining in his laughter.

"Game to you," Avon conceded. "Will you press the key, so to speak?"

The Klute pondered the possibility. "I think not." He switched on the chess display. "Perhaps now you can concentrate on the game?"

Tak Baylor returned to the brothel. As casually as before he asked for the Alpha, Shevron, and paid for the entire night. Toise was unsuspecting.

Avon came down the steps wearing his usual black leather trousers, a tight turtleneck and a loose-fitting vest. Tak looked him over appreciatively and frankly. Avon gave him a hard look to cover his embarrassment. Then he smiled and walked over to Blake. The large man slid his arm around Avon and squeezed. A signal. Everything was fine.

"I have permission to take you out on the town tonight," Blake said, acting his part.

"I'm glad you came back," Avon said honestly.

Blake kissed him. He felt the hidden weapon and pouch as he held him close. "I had to see you again."

There was a feminine shriek of rage and both men turned to look along with the rest of the crowd.

"A small disturbance," Toise mumbled apologetically. "Nothing to worry about..." He exited in a swirl of violet cloth; he had been playing a Roman that day.

“Let’s get out of here,” Avon hissed. “A convenient diversion.”

“Wait,” Blake said, holding Avon’s shoulder.

Avon’s eyes widened. “You aren’t going to play the hero now, are you ‘Baylor’? I’m leaving.”

“No.” Blake’s strong features clouded with suspicion and an outrage Avon knew all too well.

A half-naked girl with long dark hair ran out of the back room. The assembled patrons laughed at her disarray and applauded the view. Then they saw the gun.

“Anyone moves, I’ll shoot!” she cried, waving the gun around the room and settling it on a heavily robed and wealthy patron. “You. Give me your clothes. Now!” The Issikan removed his outer robe, bundled it—and tossed it in her face. Her shot went wild and the gun flew from her hand; the Issikan dove for it only to come up with the muzzle of Avon’s hand weapon in his face.

“Leave it,” he said icily.

Blake picked up the fallen weapon and returned it to the woman.

She quickly shrugged into the robe, taking the weapon and backing away from Blake, aiming it at his belly. “I don’t need help from your kind.”

Blake drew his blaster and covered the crowd. “I’m the best chance you’ve got, girl,” he said, his voice rich and warm.

“It was a pirate like you that got me into this,” she said defiantly.

“You can tell us your life story later,” Avon snarled. “Get moving or we leave you here.”

Toise came into the room and Blake turned to cover him. “Shevron? What are you doing?” he asked.

“You,” Avon hissed, “stay there. I wouldn’t regret it a bit if you got shot.” Avon kicked the Issikan away and stood, pointing the gun at Toise.

“Avon, no!” Blake called out.

“Why not?” He looked at Blake.

The girl decided. “I’ll go with you.” She backed towards the door.

“Avon, let’s go. Leave it,” Blake said.

Quickly, Avon turned, and brought up the rear as the trio left the room.

They ran. “Where now?” the girl asked.

“Bay eight,” Blake replied leading the way. “My ship’s there and the pilot is waiting ready. But you can leave if you want. Freedom City is a big place, lots of places to hide, other ships to take.”

“New policy, Blake?” Avon asked with a trace of his old sarcasm.

Blake laughed. “Perhaps I’ve learned my lesson.” He turned to the girl. “Well?”

“I’d rather take my chances with you—and him,” she indicated Avon.

“Then let’s go.” Blake led them to the bay.

As they reached the ship, a tall figure, armed, came out of the mists. Avon stepped to the fore. “Donner.”

“That’s right, Shevron. The boss thought this pirate scum might try to steal his most valuable piece of property.” He aimed his weapon at Blake. “He was right. Only you took a little something extra, too, didn’t you?” The thug smiled. “Don’t worry, you’ll be safe at home soon, pretties.”

As he prepared to fire on Blake, Avon shot first, hitting the gun and his hand.

The ship’s hatch opened and Jenna leaned out. “Glad you finally made it, I was beginning to worry.” She eyed the girl. “Who’s she?”

“I don’t know,” Blake answered. “Everything ready?” Jenna nodded and they ran for the flight deck.

The *Rim Runner* was larger than the *Scorpio* and better outfitted. When they got to the flight deck, Avon found the computer station and settled into his seat. In the rush of the take-off he had no time to acknowledge Vila, but did notice him beaming from the weaponry station. He also noticed an unfamiliar young man off to the side with Blake’s rescued woman. Freedom City had little in the way of space-bound resources, and they were not followed. Jenna piloted them to a safe sector.

Jenna, Avon thought. You never mentioned she was still with you. Jealousy boiled in him. Just the two of you alone on this ship for the past three years... Is that why you left, Blake? Why I could never find you? He knew that he had no right to expect fidelity from Blake, certainly not after he was thought dead. Jenna had always loved the big rebel and Avon knew it. She would have just been moving in to ease the pain he had caused. *She was always loyal to you...*

Vila came over to stand by Avon. The tech hadn’t said a word since arriving, just bent to his task. He glanced over. Avon did not return the look. *How do you thank someone who’s just gone through hell for you?* he wondered. “Avon...”

The comptech looked up, startled. “Vila,” he said noticing the thief. He smiled. “I trust it wasn’t too bad for you, and that you’re all right?”

“Fine, Avon. Fine.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “Umm...thanks. I don’t know...”

“Don’t mention it.” Avon looked Vila in the eyes. “Really,” he added, firmly.

Vila nodded. He wandered back to his seat. “Just like old times, eh, Blake?” he asked, looking up at the rebel leader.

“Old times indeed, Vila.”

“But with a new crew. Innocents for the slaughter, this time, Blake?” Avon added biting. “A Children’s Crusade?” Blake reddened.

“I’m not a child, I’ll have you know, I’m eighteen,” Renny interrupted. “I was a political prisoner.” He stood next to Vila. “I wanted to come.”

Avon eyed the pair suspiciously. “A fool’s fool, then,” he said, dismissing him. “And you?” he indicated the girl.

“You’re Blake’s Seven, aren’t you?” she asked, eyes a little wide.

“I see. You can’t count either,” he said acidly.

“I thought you were all dead. That vid-cast was faked, then?”

“Something like that,” Avon replied, not elucidating further.

“What’s your name,” Jenna asked, practical as usual.

“Tania.” She looked at Blake. “I have skills.”

“I’m sure you do,” Avon muttered under his breath.

Tania shot him a quick glare. “I can use a gun and I can fight, I meant.”

“Good,” Blake reassured. “I need another gun hand in my crew.”

“The ship isn’t as big as the *Liberator*,” Jenna apologized, “but there’s room for everyone...barely.”

“I’ll show you your cabin, Avon,” Renny added enthusiastically.

“Thank you, no. I’d rather...explore on my own.” He turned to leave the flight deck but stopped at the corridor and turned. “Blake?” he asked.

Blake nodded and joined him. They left the flight deck together.

THE TIES THAT BIND

L. A. Scotian

THERE IS ONLY ONE THING IN THE UNIVERSE MORE DANGEROUS THAN KERR AVON'S PSYCHOPATHIC TENDENCIES, AND THAT IS HIS SENSE OF HUMOUR. It is, of course, open to discussion, as to whether or not there is, in fact, any difference between those two most lethal of traits. After three full weeks of incessant, unmitigated, unrestrained boasting, Vila Restal was on the verge of finding out.

"Go on," he was saying, yet again, miraculously avoiding spilling a drop of Dorian's best rosé. "I dare you! Try and find a lock I can't pick or a system I can't beat. I'm the best there is, and don't try and deny it, just 'cause you're jealous. Eh, Avon, old chum? Tell this young pup here that there's not a lock in the Galaxy I can't pick."

"Oh," Avon said absently, determined to ignore the intellectual flea, "I'm sure there's a lock somewhere in the Galaxy that would defeat you. On a child's pencil case, for example."

"Nah, you're just like Tarrant."

Avon's attention snapped up, eyes suddenly dark and dangerous. "Would you care to repeat that, or are you a coward as well as stupid?"

"You're just jealous, the same as him. I'm telling you, I can pick any lock in the entire Galaxy. With one hand tied behind my back. And the lights out."

"Only one hand?"

"All right, both hands. But not tied behind me back, tied in front, so's I can see what I'm doing. But even like that, there's nothing I can't break into—or out of."

"Oh, really?" said Avon, funny bone well and truly tickled. "I'm sure I could come up with something."

Vila saw the old, unnerving glint of glee in Avon's eyes, but he went ahead and did the stupidest thing anyway: he appealed to Avon's wicked sense of humour, just the way he always did. After all, he always could resist everything but temptation... "Go on, then. I *dare* you. In fact, just to make it interesting, I *double dare* you."

"Oh come on," Tarrant butted in, "you sound like a pair of children."

In unison: "You keep out of this!" Then Avon turned towards Vila. "A dare?" he murmured with deceptive disinterest. "A *double dare*? Really, Vila, you

honestly shouldn't dare me. People who do, invariably regret it."

"You're only saying that to try and get out of the dare, that's all. What's the matter, Avon, old pal, old chum, you too afraid to challenge good old drunken Vila to something?"

That did it. "Very well. I say that there is a lock that not even you could possibly ever escape. And I shall prove it. If I fail, I will give you my share of the money from the Big Wheel. If, however, the obvious happens and *you* lose, you will give me *your* share. Agreed?"

"Yeh, yeh, like taking a lollipop from a baby, course I agree. Now, where's the lock, so's I can prove you wrong and get all that lovely money for myself. It was mine in the first place, by the way," he grouched away to himself, the alcohol fuddling him away from the subject in question. "Where was I? Oh, yes, Bring on this magnificent lock of yours, then, Avon old pal. Let me at it, then I can get all of that lovely money. Well? Where is it?"

"I didn't say I *had* the lock, I merely said I was sure there was one that..."

Tarrant dumped Vila's legs up onto the couch beside the rest of his limp body. "Save your breath, Avon, he's dead to the world."

"And isn't it a great pity that it's only temporary." Shrugging his shoulders, he set off in great good humour, making the best laid plans of mice and men. Except, he grinned, *his* most assuredly would not 'gang a gley'. Not with what he had in mind...

This time, Vila was sober and somewhat more sensible about tweaking Avon's sense of humour. As in, he was trying to get out of the dare.

"I mean, I was drunk, Avon, pickled, half-cut, pie-eyed, blotto, pissed out of my skull..."

"I believe the word you're looking for is 'stupid', Vila."

"Yeh, well, that too. But you see, then, don't you, that you can't keep me to a dare, not one I made when I was one over the eight, right? Please?"

"Oh, no, you're not getting off that easily. Where's your professional pride?" The smile that accompanied that was something to make brave men tremble—brave women, too. And for a variety of reasons, at that.

“What professional pride? I was *drunk*, Avon, professionalism’s got nothing to do with it. I was talking through a hole in my head.”

“Ah, so you concede that you’re not much of a lockpick, then?”

“Now wait a minute, I didn’t say that. Just said that...”

“Vila,” Avon began with profound, calculated patience, his expression of wicked amusement making Soolin, Dayna and Tarrant stifle smirks, “are you or are you not, capable of opening any lock in the Galaxy? With both hands tied in front of you?”

“With the right tools, yes. I mean,” Vila galloped on, falling easy victim to Avon’s trap, “I *am* the best there is, better at lockpicking than Tarrant is at flying, that’s dead bloody certain.”

This time, it was Tarrant’s look of outrage that caused the others to stifle smirks. “Oh?” he blustered, flushing with annoyance. “And do you still say that you’re better in your field than Soolin is in hers?”

“Yeh,” Vila said, the pugilist in him surfacing briefly, inflamed by the ‘young pup’s attitude. “Dayna too.”

“And,” Soolin said, purring dangerously, “What about Avon?”

That made him pause, but he wouldn’t back down, not when it came to the one thing he was proud of, the one talent that he himself felt he excelled at. “Better’n him, too.” He didn’t quite add ‘so there’, but they all heard the childish boast anyway.

“Really,” Avon murmured, coming up to stand less than a foot from Vila. “I find that quite...”

“Interesting?” Tarrant supplied.

“Oh, no,” came the answer, lit by one of those rare grins of pure delight, “I was rather thinking it was more...insulting, actually. It is, isn’t it Vila? In fact, it’s quite enough to make a man willing to enter into an absurd ‘double dare’, isn’t it? So I don’t believe I shall release you from your bet—honour amongst thieves, and all that. Don’t you agree?”

By now, Avon’s smile was beginning to worry Vila. He remembered it from way back when: way back when he and Avon first met, the slumming Alpha looking for some illicit excitement in the Delta Dome, a smile to die for and a sense of humour that could get them both killed. Taking his chances with the hommiks was beginning to look awfully good to the coward...

“Running scared, are we?” Avon purred, neatly encapsulating that infamous night, the memory of

which was still guaranteed to make Vila defiant and reckless and foolishly brave. The one night, in fact, that could drive the thief to machismo. Precisely as Avon planned.

“Wot—me? Scared, of something you might come up with? Not on your bloody nellie!”

“So then, you are willing to meet my challenge?”

Pugnacious, Vila leaned forward into Avon, challenging him right back, burying the memory of that night under a mile thick layer of macho. “I’m ready to *beat* any challenge you can come up with. Just like before.”

The three younger people were watching this in complete silence, only glances flashing back and forth between them. They had all had hints, at various times, of the long-term ‘acquaintanceship’ Avon shared with Vila, but it was all too rare to actually see them in action like this, going back to what they had obviously been before. Fascinated, they watched and listened, gathering up details to gossip over later during a lovely long session of “and did you see his face when...?” and “I wonder what was behind it when he said...?” Oh, at this rate, this was going to keep them going for months.

Meanwhile, the main protagonists were simply staring at each other like two immovable bulls, neither budging an inch.

“Well?” Vila finally asked.

“Well is not a question.” Avon almost chuckled.

“Where’s this lock of yours then, eh? I’ve got better things to do than hang around breathing your stale air, so give’s the lock. There’s something I want to do in about five minutes, so that should give me more than enough time to take care of your pathetic little trick. It won’t take me longer than two shakes of a puppy dog’s tail.”

“Oh, I think it’ll take longer than that, Vila, old friend. But true, let us proceed. Why don’t you stand over there, in the middle of the room, where no one can slip you any little...added advantages, shall we say?”

“Oh, we wouldn’t dream of it, Avon,” Tarrant muttered. “Not even to get even with you. That little runt has actually been more obnoxious than you, of late.”

That drew a sharp look from Avon—he was never in such a good mood to ignore *that* kind of comment. Not when it came from Tarrant, anyway. “I wouldn’t worry about it, Tarrant. He still hasn’t come close to challenging your lead in that area.” He turned back to Vila. “Now then, to make it fair, you may select

the necessary tools, but to make it fair to *me*, you will also strip, so that you can't cheat."

"Now hang on just a minute, Avon," Vila spluttered through the laughter of his audience, "d'you really think these three are old enough to see a man of my...considerable charms?"

"Your charms are about as considerable as your talents, so it really shouldn't be too disturbing for them. You won't even make Tarrant feel inadequate, so..."

"Just a minute!"

"You already said that. Now, Vila, keep up your side of the deal. Strip."

"No."

"Vila," Soolin said in what Vila called her 'murdering maniac' voice, "do as Avon says. A bet is a bet, after all."

"Yes, Vila. Plus," Dayna came up very close to him and smiled, "I'm rather looking forward to seeing what you've got to offer. Talent-wise, of course. Who knows, I may even be interested. After, if you can prove yourself...more skilled than Avon."

The best way to get a Delta thief to do anything, is to appeal to his prurient nature. Vila broke all records getting out of his clothes, various tools of his trade tumbling to the floor as he revealed his favourite tool of them all. "Well," he said, with gusty bravado, "show us this lock so's I can convince this lovely lady here of just how talented a man I am."

Avon grinned from ear to ear, and picked his parcel up from the table. It was a small package, in a plain brown wrapper and one which Avon had made an early supply trip to fetch. "Hands out in front, Vila," he said, "that was part of the deal."

"Oh, all right. Here." Vila stuck his hands straight out, at chest level.

The wrist cuffs Avon held up were metal, joined together, and with a steel bar running from their welded intersection to a single, extremely large, circular link. Seeing it, Soolin dissolved into helpless giggles, confusing everyone but Avon, who simply tucked her recognition away for a possible dalliance later. He looked back at Vila, who was looking back at him with a confident grin. Even with his hands linked so closely together, he would have no trouble utilising all the tricks of his trade. He was so looking forward to making a fool of Avon... "Well, get on with it," he mocked. "Quicker you get me ready, quicker I can get this done and get down to a nice discussion about talent with Dayna here." Dayna, at this point, was listening with wide-eyed delight at the explanation Soolin was whispering to her.

"Oh, you'll get ready quickly enough. Although with this, I doubt you'll be as precipitous as Tarrant." Which last statement was more than Dayna could stand and she collapsed to join Soolin in helpless hysterics, too. Avon ignored her, apart from letting his grin get even brighter. "Give me your hands, Vila," he said, sweetly enough to give even Tarrant cavities.

Vila's bravado was rapidly wearing off, especially as he began to reconsider Avon's sense of humour. And some of the things it had spawned in the past... Still, a bet was a bet, so he stepped forward to put his hands within Avon's easy reach. Heaven forbid the Alpha should have to come to *him*, after all.

It took him bare moments—very bare ones, from Vila's point of view—to lock the cuffs in place, handling the device with obvious familiarity. Tarrant decided to file that particularly interesting revelation away for future possible dalliances himself. Well and truly secured, Vila stood staring defiantly at Avon. "You've got me with my hands locked at my front, so where's this lock? I'll have you know it's bloody freezing in here."

Avon's face grew suddenly, profoundly sombre, but his eyes were still dancing with unholy glee. "The lock, Vila, is truly simple, little more than a snap catch. But believe me, you won't be able to undo it."

"A snap catch? Won't be able to undo it? Don't be so bloody insulting, Avon."

"Oh, but I'm not. You really are stuck, Vila. In fact," he actually broke out in a chuckle, an unexpectedly warmly rich sound, "you might even say that you're in over your head. One of them, anyway." And so saying, he proceeded to attach this unopenable lock. Under the stunned and bemused stares of the other two men and the eager and amused stares of the two women, he very gently took Vila's slightly tumescent cock in his left hand, holding it firmly in place, quietly ignoring Vila's squeals of "Avon!", while he carefully—he didn't want to catch any delicate skin, did he now?—opened the large link at the end of the bar and reclosed the ring around Vila's cock and balls, the fit snug and arousingly tight. He moved back and stood there, grinning at Vila. "Well?" he said, "Let's see you prove this estimable skill of yours, the one that makes you so superior to all of us. Go on, Vila. Don't be shy."

The last comment reduced Tarrant to helpless giggles too.

Because of the shortness of the chain and the way the cockring was placed, no matter how he tried, Vila

couldn't keep his hands off himself, and his penis was beginning to show its appreciation of the fact. It hadn't been getting enough attention, of late, after all. It could be excused what was rapidly becoming rampant enthusiasm.

Satisfied that Vila was now locked in what was such an unsatisfactory—or eminently satisfactory, depending on one's point of view—position, Avon juggled the key mockingly in his hands, then turned on his heel, leaving the hapless thief, naked and very, very exposed in the middle of the room. Ah, vengeance was indeed sweet! He paused on the threshold, unable to resist one last glance. Vila was standing there, getting redder and redder. In more places than one...

"By the way," Avon murmured, breaking through the gales of laughter, "I wouldn't suggest getting one of the others to help you, Vila. You see," a grin split his face again, "the cuffs have sonic locks on them, and only I know the frequency. Which means, if anyone other than myself, or an expert like yourself, should try to unlock them, you will receive some rather unpleasant shocks...in all your important little places. Goodnight, Vila."

"Avon, wait a minute, *AVON!* Come back here, you can't leave me like this, oh, come on, Avon, don't be cruel, all right, you win, you can have all the money. *AVON!*" he screamed down the now deserted corridor. With one last attempt at a withering glance over his shoulder—which was rather spoiled because he was far from withered himself and was standing sideways on to them—he left Tarrant, Soolin and Dayna in a liquid puddle of dissolving, hiccupping laughter and ran off in search of Avon, his bum—

and other, more pertinent, bits—jiggling and wiggling in his haste.

The first place, obviously, was Avon's room, but the tech wasn't there, only a tidy profusion of possessions. Next on Vila's list—immediately after killing Tarrant, who had dragged himself up off the floor to follow the fine upstanding figure of a man searching for Avon—came the computer rooms, but there was nothing and no one there, apart from a silent and keyless Orac. The cockring made it impossible for him to lose his erection and the positioning of his hands within the cuffs made it impossible for Vila to keep his hands off himself, leaving him in the unenviable position of either running around at full mast or coming in front of all three giggling youngsters. Vila decided that discretion was the better part of valour: he'd kill Avon tomorrow and retire in defeat to his room tonight. And he had to admit, given different circumstances, these cuffs wouldn't be half bad... He rounded on his camp followers. "Seen enough? I certainly hope so, cause it's all you're going to see, cause I'm going off to bed, so there!" And so saying, he threw himself into his room, profoundly glad that the doors closed automatically. Confined the way he was, reaching up to work locks and such was just a bit beyond the realms of possibility. Not even Deltas were that well-hung. A faint chinking noise attracted his attention, and he spoke loudly, ordering the lights up full. To reveal a naked Avon, draped like a reclining Venus on his bed, the key dangling from one languid finger.

"Well, Vila," he grinned. "Would you care to have your lock picked?"

VI AND SO IT GOES: THE DOME CYCLE

The second installment, or, as the Glaswegian refers to it: "that monolithic, monstrous great lump." To those who haven't read the first part, the editor apologizes; this piece isn't meant to stand alone. We can only hope that continued threats and blackmail will result in reasonable third installment by the next issue. Readers have permission to threaten the author.

On a more trivial note the title, 'For A' That, has been lifted and mangled from the original poem by Robert Burns. A Scot, naturally.

FOR A' THAT M. Fae Glasgow

PROBABLY WHAT SURPRISED HIM MOST WAS HOW COLD HE WAS, THE CHILL MAKING HIS MUSCLES SHAKE WITH AGUE. Or fear. He wasn't entirely sure which and he shied away from delving deeply enough to find out. He ached, abominably. His lower back screamed at him, his eyes like gravel and sinuses red embers of coal, stomach and chest pulsing, not with his heart, but with his pain. Even his lungs seemed reluctant, shallow, filled with ash. Ash. The bitter stuff of grief, crawling into the open spaces inside him, choking them off, choking him. Not tears, no never tears. He did not cry, that simply was not his way. Instead, there was only the pain, the bone-wearying suffering, this loneliness filled with nothing but the dregs of life. Grief. Hardly an emotion others would associate with him, but one he had experienced all too often in his time.

Recognising the position his body had subconsciously sought, he forced himself out of the foetal curl, arranging himself flat on his back, deliberately straightening out, as far from the symbolic shape of vulnerability as possible. He lay there, staring at the ceiling, listening to Jess crying upstairs, the sound increasing his guilt.

The old plastic above him offered neither solace nor distraction, serving only to remind him of nights before, spent here in this flat that was now his home, watching the ceiling, planning, listening to Vila snore. That damned name again. There was no escape, no respite from it. The name and the face to go with it. No matter how he tried, he always went

back to the one conversation he most desperately wanted to forget.

"Me granda says it's worse than just being caught for services Upstairs. If yer taken Upstairs for that, you live for a while, then get worn out. Once that 'appens to yer, they just give yer a jag, some lethal substance then yer gone, dead before you even realise what's coming yer way."

Avon stroked thinning hair, fingers straying down to trace the shape of Vila's lips. "Your accent is slipping again," he said softly.

Vila lifted himself up far enough out of Avon's embrace to look at him in disgust. "You're bloody 'orrible, you are. 'Ere I am, tellin' yer a horror story, an' yer only concerned with how Delta or bleedin' Alpha-esque me accent is."

"No, no, don't be so stupid," the answer came back, the tone placatory, edged only with a fine lace cuff of sarcasm. "It's quite simply that I am capable of thinking about more than one thing at a time, so..."

"So you can afford to be bloody flippant to hide when somefing bovvers yer, right?" Vila settled back into Avon's arms, pulling the worn old brown blanket more snugly around them. "Wot? Got nothing to say? Never have liked the truth, have yer?"

"Isn't this rather a case of the pot calling the kettle black? You're criticising me for digressing, yet you are doing the selfsame thing."

"Getting away with it again, are you? Yeh, well, it's not worth a fight, is it? Anyway, so's me granda tells me, if yer gets caught in one o' these raids, like wot the one we had today, then the mutoids haul yer Upstairs and yer harvested for yer organs. They only paralyse yer, keeps

yer conscious, something about anaesthesia damaging the 'freshness' of all those spare parts. So yer gets to see jest exactly what they're doing to yer."

"And how often do these raids usually occur? In the time I've been incarcerated down here, there doesn't seem to have been a regular pattern."

"That's 'cause it depends. Sometimes we get hardly any, then some other times, there's one every day. 'S like being in a war, then."

Vicious, he slammed the door resolutely shut on that particular memory, refusing entry to the rest of their conversation, and the fight that had led, finally, to them making love. He turned the phrase over again in his mind, testing the bouquet of the words as he would a wine, finding them redolent with the fullness and body of truth. Admittedly, they had had sex before, but that night, he conceded heavily, had been the first time any true feeling had been expressed. On his part, that is, of course. Vila—Vila had always been one for wearing his heart on his sleeve, the red badge of courage indeed. *And*, his conscience whispered sullenly, *more courage than you've ever had, right?* It didn't even occur to Avon to wonder when that intrusive little voice in his soul had become Vila's, but as with so many other things, the thief permeated his life, a phrase, a gesture, a smile filed away, popping out to trip him at the most unexpected moments. *Such as now*, he thought wearily, *such as now*. Lying here, in a bed in which he had never slept alone, on a pillow punched into the particular pattern of lumps Vila liked, under blankets enough only for the Delta born and raised. Of course, it had served as such a good excuse for sleeping pressed so closely together, Vila wrapped around Avon like a mollusc's shell, knees fitting snugly in at the back of Avon's, chest against Avon's back. The warmth of his flesh. The warmth of his living flesh...

Still not cold, not even buried yet, but come to haunt me already, hmm, Vila? The memory of you, the need for you. The way you needed me so terribly much. Is that what's going to be my final downfall? I have survived the Delta warrens, even learned how to pass as one of them, survived Servalan and mutoids, even Blake's murderous idealism. But your death... that seems, somehow, the insurmountable barrier, the one thing against which even I am not proof. So was I wrong, Vila? I had always believed my death and Blake's would be somehow linked, but was that simple conceit, an evasion, born of an unwillingness to admit that it could be a Delta, a Delta male, of all things, to whom I would finally tie myself?

Jess' crying wasn't easing, as he had assumed it

would; it was simply changing, ebbing into liquid misery, the sobs finally purged from her. Rising from the too-large bed, Avon found himself more sympathetic than was wise, the sinews in his body resonating like the strings on a harp to the loss he could hear from her. He knew it too well, unexpected though that might be to him. He, too, when all was said and done, regardless of how he painted the situation, had lost a spouse, for surely, these past seven months had transformed Vila from friendly thief to partner, had changed him from someone well-liked to someone...well-loved. The words strangled his mind, stronger than the term 'making love', which was, after all, a popular euphemism, but to think of Vila in such a way was, to Avon's background, nothing short of emasculating. And terrifying.

In a devastatingly normal tone of voice, he spoke the words aloud. "Well-loved. I love Vila. Vila is my... spouse." The words sored him, leaving him as burnt and dry as the desert, the ash inside parting, opening a yawning chasm of chaos within. *Love? Vila?* And if he did, what did that make him, what did that do to his manhood? It was one thing to sleep with another man, to indulge in sex, for such activities do not a homosexual make, but *love!* Sex, a physical release for a recalcitrant body, a libido that did not know its place, a way of having some ease without complications. It was only sex...*And what of Blake?* his vicious conscience howled. *Does it make a difference when it's with an Alpha, 'old school boys' together? Does that stop it from meaning anything?* A stringless puppet, confused and tangled, Avon flopped down onto the bed, collapsing back to once again study that unhelpful ceiling, his mind hurling his conscience out of the window, turning back to the unmitigated grief, bringing a face back into the focus of his mind's eye. A much missed face, a much loved face. *Love—surely not, not for Vila. Fond, yes, terribly fond, but surely not love?*

Still, Jess cried, hiccupping into silence now and then, but never quite entirely finding ease.

Avon took his emotions and held them in his hands, twisting them this way and that, the unnerving, unmaning truth cackling in glee. *Love. For another man. Not as it was with Blake, who after all, had the breeding to understand the truths of such a situation. No. A Delta. A thief. A man who was barely literate when first I met him. A man the opposite of Anna, and of Blake.*

He couldn't face those wraiths, not yet. How could he possibly deal with the self-knowledge that would proclaim him a man who loved easily, and deeply?

Where would the cynic be then, what shield could his armour then afford him? No, there would be time to face that, in the future, a time that can never be now.

But a man? he thought, playing back all the damning images, turning halogen lights to glare brightly as the differences were paraded before him with knee-weakening enthusiasm, showing him the contrasts of the times with Vila and the politely passionate tumbles with Blake. And worst, the nights where he had not indulged himself sexually, but had instead, simply held Vila. *No, you didn't hold him. He held you, didn't he? Here, in the Bowels, he's the stronger of us.*

Words from that very first night, all those months ago, came back to him like bile, the term used by the papyrus-old Ewan Restal. *Wifey.* A term most conveniently forgotten, relegated to the very back of his mind where he wouldn't come across it, even by accident. *And that is what I've become, isn't it? Vila is the one who brings in our income, while I teach children and other stay-at-homes to read and reason. I am the one who has taken on what is still the secondary role, the power behind the throne, as it were, the one who stays behind. Waiting, as I am now, for my man to come home.* He bolted up from the bed, scalded by his own thoughts, driven by fears, his fragile emotional self a fulcrum, balancing the equally terrifying: Vila, dead and never returning, or Vila alive, with Avon sitting home impotently—*impotently!*—waiting.

With deep breaths, he calmed, forcing his fears to back down a little, to let him breathe. He was a man, still; his feelings could not emasculate him—could they? He walked heavily back over to the bed, remembering the hysteria evoked when they had moved here, five months previously, their antics in getting this damned bed upstairs giving no end of amusement to their neighbours, all members of Vila's huge extended family. And the comments, varying only in their degree of ribaldness, the ones that had made Vila blush and Avon glower. There was a hollow in the centre of the bed, where one would roll in the course of the night regardless of how one tried to keep one's distance. That, basically, was the excuse they had used to begin having sex on a very regular basis. It is, after all, extremely difficult not to 'help' one another in the dozing fuzziness of morning, when both awoke with erections. Yet another excuse, just like the lack of blankets. No matter that they could have afforded to buy new ones, that wasn't the issue. No, Vila had understood how much Avon had needed the delusion that excused their growing close-

ness and Avon had simply refused to think about the whole issue, running from it as fast as he could. *As long as it led straight into his arms.*

And still, Jess' misery could be heard, now no longer sobbing, the crying melted away into dry unhappiness, the steady tread, tread, tread of her feet marking her sorrow like a death-knell. The loss of life mouldered away inside him, compounding the shaking the recognition of love had given him. All the while, at the back of his mind slithered the worry, the nagging nightmare of what they would be doing to Vila now, at this very moment. Finally, he understood the Delta attitude: as soon as someone had been 'taken', they were dead, completely and irrevocably. Now, at this ebb of day, he would not have fought with Vila over the defeatism of that approach, would not have railed at him for not attempting rescue. He knew why. He felt the small scream howling in the back of his mind, that part of him thinking about what Vila was going through, how he would be feeling, what it would be like for him to watch them 'harvest' him like some inanimate object, dehumanised to the point where he didn't even deserve the kindness one gives to a dumb animal. The small scream was growing larger, threatening him, forming an unholy alliance with the dread of emasculation, looming and towering over him like an impending thunderstorm.

And still Jess suffered.

Avon grabbed his jacket and ran from his home and his chamber of horrors, racing upstairs to the one person with whom he had truly become friends—Vila's sister.

A touch hesitant, he tapped on the door, half expecting that Jess would be the typical Delta and have a houseful of relatives, but she ushered him into a silent tomb, not needing to speak, not to Avon, who always understood so well. It dawned on him, belatedly, that she, also, had been unable to brave the wakes tonight, unable to thumb her nose at Death, just for this moment, just for this flood of solitary death inside. For a while, they simply sat together, his arm around her, her hands clutched together on the life kicking in her belly, the one unerring defamation of Death.

"Worst is," the whisper fled from the stern cage of her self control, bleeding strength with it, "I jest can't ge' it out o' me mind wot'll be 'appenin ter 'im. Ter them both. Know I shouldna think o' it, bu'..."

"But the nightmare won't fade, will it, Jess? I am sorry, truly sorry..."

"Me, too. You really only jest go 'im, didn't yer? All tha' talk abou' yer bein' mates fer years, load o' lies, tha', weren't it?"

"Yes," he admitted without pause, knowing that Jess would never reveal the truth, would never risk him, for his own sake, as well as her brother's. Knowing too, bitterly, that now it didn't matter, for only he would be asked to prove the truth.

"'E really loved yer, 'e did."

A sudden, sharp intake of breath. "I know."

"Makes it 'arder, don't it?"

Desperate, he clung to her words, minimising his own loss, denying his own pain, refuting his love. "Harder, surely, for you. After all, you've lost husband and brother."

"Vila's so much older than me, an' 'e was gone most o' me life, so I don' really know 'im, 'e's too different from me."

"Yet you look so alike," hand stealing a touch of her hair, his fingers remembering Vila.

"So everybody says. Can't see it meself."

"Oh, it's there. Jess... What will happen to you now that Mac is gone?"

"Wotcher mean?"

"How will you take care of the baby and yourself, without him?"

"'Til I got preggers, was me wot brought the money in. After this 'un's born, I'll jest go back on the game an' me cousin Nell'll take care of the babe fer me."

It was a sign of the difference time can make, that he saw nothing wrong with her going back to prostitution, seeing it rather as a respectable way to make a living. Clearly better than the dope dens and thinking of it was certainly better than dwelling on Vila.

That name again. He lapsed into silence, dragging her down with him, each one wrapped in the frozen tundra of loss, their pain overlapping, mingled, compounded. Avon shuddered, his imagination forming memories, detailed pictures of things he had never seen: Vila, crying in fear, waiting for his turn under the knife; himself, continuing on with the revolution, but alone, a mere husk. He had had a taste of real life, recently, with vivacity and fervour all around, with someone who was completely unafraid to love and sanguine in his sexuality, unrestricted by class. Vila had never had to consciously open his mind to love between men, where Avon should have, but had, instead, merely hidden behind 'sex without complications', the fraternal fuck. And yet, Avon had been tied to him, restricted to sharing life with one person

only, but he had never been freer, nor more filled with vitality. Despite the struggles and woes, he had known true elation as he mastered the first real challenges he had ever had, the first things which had not seemed simple mental exercises.

His mind was skipping around badly, like a faulty programme, as he jumped from one fear to another, the loss of life and love commingling with the skulking fear of emasculation to undermine him. *Joie de vivre*, he suddenly thought, a phrase Vila had mispronounced so badly that Avon had taken several listenings before he recognised it, but the meaning of it was clearer to Vila, here, in his own milieu, than to anyone else Avon had ever met. *Joie de vivre*, the art of living whatever life was available, to its fullest, finding the good under the dross and making it shine.

Horrified, he felt the tears threaten, Vila's death at the hands of surgeons hitting him, blasting into his solar plexus, stilling his heart, a whirlpool of pain castrating him. He clutched Jess to him, fighting the tears and the horror, needing to touch the life she was.

"Avon?" she whispered.

The sound shuddered through Avon, the feminine echo of the man he had grown to love, despite all the taboos and interdicts to the contrary, a complex web of needs tangling them in their sticky fronds.

"How long's it goin' ter be till they come agin, an' next time, they could ge' me or you. They'd take me baby, they would. An' mebbe use me fer breedin'. Heard tales o' tha', I 'ave. Oh, god, Avon, we 'ad a great big row this mornin'. Afore 'e left, I told 'im to never bovver comin' back!"

"Shh, Jess, don't think of it. All we can do is survive and keep regret as a very small part of life. It was only an argument. He would have known that you didn't mean it, that it was only said in the heat of the moment."

"'E loved me, 'e did. An' I keep on thinkin' wot young Dave said. 'E saw them takin' me Mac, so 'e did. Said 'e was screamin'..."

"Shh, my girl, shh," he murmured helplessly, stroking her hair as if that would soothe her tears away. Moisture filled his own eyes, warring with the deathly stillness inside him. He was cold, so very cold, all the life fled from him as the bereavement claimed him. No one had seen Vila being taken, no one could tell him how it had been. But he knew, he *knew*, as surely as if he had seen it himself. Vila, the professional coward, would have been like a vixen

with cubs; cornered, the thief was fierce, when protecting his own, and those youngsters had been his, not by birth, of course, but by dint of the fact that he was training them to be his very own crime ring of gifted little thieves. The very same children Avon was teaching to read. Rigidity set in as that realisation dawned upon him with gut-twisting pain: the children. Vila hadn't been seen since the raid, nor, as far as he knew, had a single one of the children. They must have been caught in some small safe-hole, huddled, cowering... The sheer volume of death threatened to overwhelm him and he cursed his weakness. All that death, all those faces marching before him to their graves...

Against his stomach he felt the thrust of tiny feet, the aliveness of it shocking, as it had been that morning in the safety-house. The feet pushed petulantly and his hand was drawn there like a magnet, his palm made large with the smallness of the feet fitting into it. Jess sobbed, once, into his shoulder, abruptly wrapping her arms around him, making him her lifebelt, the mooring keeping her afloat. He stroked his hand over her belly, needing to see those little feet, opening her clothes up, fascinated and repulsed and aroused by the life moving beneath the skin. He brought his face down to rest against the soft skin of her abdomen, closing his eyes on his pain, bottling it inside, reminding himself of his words to Jess, that regret had to be only a small part of living, that it was useless to feel guilt. It was not his fault, he told himself fiercely, that Vila had had to choose him and so give up the possibilities of his longed-for family. Condemned to end his line, by his own sense of honour—almost a contradiction when applied to Vila—but not in this. The commitment had been total, all-encompassing and Avon had barely returned it, and then only through default. Jess' hands were in his hair, her body sliding lower to lie prone on the couch. He found himself on his knees on the floor, face buried in her fecundity, tears soaking his mind in their grey cloak, face twisted and dry. *So much lost, so very much left undone...*

He needed to be alive, to place the sigil on his brow, to warn the angel of death to pass over him. Slowly, he raised his eyes until he met Jess', the honesty passing between them. *An act of memorial, then, for our men and all the destroyed futures...* Not infidelity, not betrayal, but a way to bring them back for a small, brief farewell, the good-byes that would fester forever unsaid.

He kissed her then, thinking of Vila, as he knew

she was thinking of Mac. Tenderly, he loved her, careful with and worshipful of the life held safely in her, warm hand gently sliding over the taut, smooth dome of her belly. She reached for him, almost in echo of Vila, filling her hands with his hair, smoothing his face of the lines given by a lifetime's strain. Quiet, melancholy, he lay beside her, protecting her as he had never shielded her brother, no matter Vila's needs, and he held her, holding Vila close this one last time. Together, they celebrated life with a measured seriousness, giving it honours, fanning the fragile flame. Jess fitted into the curve of his body, head cradled against his shoulder, her hand slipping inside his trousers to grip his turgid cock, his hand echoing hers, sliding in to stroke her. Their movements were in dirgelike harmony, a slow, mournful rise to poignant pleasure, orgasm so sad, there was no passion, only the thin cry that *here*, there was life still. And after their brief requiem was over, they lay motionless, one against the other, her child—the very embodiment of life—cradled between them. There were no words, for none had been invented to heal them and they had no desire to hear worn clichés and platitudes, where before they had had sharp truths and pointed humour.

Eventually, silently, Avon rose, helping her to bed, fetching a cover to blanket her with, stroking her forehead with the Delta ritual blessing for the dead. He left her solitary in the dark, returning downstairs to his own room, to the chattering cold of his solitude, there to battle with his dæmons alone. It had all gone unspoken, neither needing to say that this would be forever secret between them, their own wake, one that the Delta code would not allow, one that healed no more than the raucously defiant celebrations staggering to a close. He had looked down on her for a moment, as she lay there, lying on her side to accommodate the baby, her blue eyes closed, profile sharp as Vila's, hair as fine. He had watched her for as long as he could, cherishing her and Vila until the chill cruelty of reality pierced him, the short flare of life extinguished, leaving them both more lost than before, sending him hurtling from her room.

Jak's middle child was whistling as she crossed the street to the baker's to fetch the morning rolls and milk, the tone-deaf tune quite murderous to the ear. Avon groaned and stretched, unsurprised that he had actually become prey to exhaustion and fallen asleep. As the grogginess clarified into a semblance of alertness, it was obvious that it wasn't Jen's whistle

that had awoken him. There was another presence in the room. The floor creaked, protesting this misuse of its ancient skeleton, the noise coming closer, stopping only with the squeak of the bed as a weight was dropped onto it.

"Vila?" he said, leery of turning around, unsure of whether reality or nightmare would meet his eyes. A hand came to rest on his shoulder, tugging gently, rolling him over. A pale, weary face greeted him with a worn smile and his heart in his eyes.

"Where the hell have you been?" Avon yelled at the top of his lungs, surprising himself far more than Vila. He paused, grabbing his self-control with both hands, clearing his throat of the sudden, embarrassing lump.

"Oh, that's nice, that is," Vila said, climbing in beside Avon, hungering up close to Avon's warmth, his skin chill and clammy. "Been out all night, hiding the kids, getting lost, finding our way back and then delivering every single bleedin one of them 'ome and all you can say is 'where the hell 'ave you been'? Didn't Mac tell you wot I was doing? Or is it just," a quick grin lit his face, "that yer missed me that much, eh?"

The only answer given him was the fierceness of Avon's mouth on his, of the desperate hunger devouring him whole, fanning a surging thrust of excitement flying through his body. Avon locked them together, hands flurrying over every inch of Vila, stroking, kneading, squeezing, fingertips delving into hollows and tangling hair.

With straining intensity, Avon sought to regain Vila, to bring that essence back inside to dispel the ice that eroded him. His mate relaxed under him, opening up in welcome, hugging Avon back with all the strength he had, murmuring, whispering words of love and reassurance, renewing a bond that before had always been tacit.

Abruptly, as the words infiltrated his passion and filled his mind, echoing and reverberating through him, Avon stilled his body, bringing his hands up to frame Vila's face. "Say that again!" he demanded.

Avon's expression belied his tone, giving Vila courage, making him grin widely. "Going deaf in your old age, are you?" he said, slipping into the Alpha's phraseology.

"Don't tease, Vila," the reply was firm, "just say it."

"I..." a pause for a sweetly fleeting kiss, "love..." a quick nip on an enticing earlobe, "you..." and this time, the kiss came from Avon, devouring them, fran-

tic, desperate, speaking far louder than words, shouting out all the lessons of the dead night, making speech an intrusion.

Avon abandoned Vila's mouth, racing down his body to the straining erection standing there so forlornly, engulfing it, practised mouth and throat enveloping Vila in his heat, drawing back to kiss and nibble and lick, teasing droplets of cum from the slitted head, lips catching on the widely flaring neck. Slowing, he traced with wet tongue and trembling finger, the embossed blueness of veins, thrilled by the acts almost as much as Vila, drunk on the fierce arousal pulsing there, under his lips, the life-blood beating and flowing for *him*, no one else, but purely for Avon. His eyes were hooded and dark as he eased his way back up Vila, keeping close, pressing them together, his own hard cock dragging through the hairs on Vila's legs, up on to his thighs, higher, to leave a trail of precum in the fine trailway of hair on the smooth stomach, higher still, cockhead bumping with minute flares of pleasure against the tiny hill-ocks of nipple, finally stopping, poised and flushed with need, over Vila's open mouth. Avon hesitated a moment, ignoring the insistent kneading at his buttocks, then he twisted, turning so that as he plunged into Vila, Vila surged up into him. They sucked, unconsciously matching rhythm and depth, hips moving in undulating unison, both feeling orgasm thunder towards them with all the subtlety of a tidal wave. There was no time, this dawning, for intercourse, no spare moment to prepare and ease, only starvation and thirst, hurtling them towards completion. Avon felt his balls jump, could feel that endless moment just before coming and pulled himself from Vila's mouth with an agonised groan. The thief wasn't ready yet, wasn't completely in synch with him and, absurd though he would no doubt deem it in the callousness of day, in this moment of truth, he needed them to come together, in affirmation of their relationship: as confession to Vila of the power the thief had over him. Love. The strongest chains in the universe, and he had willingly handed them over to a fifth-grade Delta. Lips still stretched taut around Vila, Avon smiled, driving a gasp from his thief, a sudden buck from the cock in Avon's mouth, bringing them, now, both of them, a fragment away from orgasm. Avon thrust back into Vila, pushing his own head down as far as he could, nose buried in the coarse spring of pubic hair, completely inundated with Vila, and they came, as a pair, in unison, as Avon had needed them to.

Slowly, he allowed the softened penis to slide from his mouth, holding the taste within, collapsing his body to lie heavily on Vila, face still pressed against the fragrance of hair. Gentle hands on him gradually persuaded him to move, urging him up and into cradling arms. "You all right?" he heard, the words breathed against his left ear, a small kiss punctuating them.

"Yes," he answered, "perfectly all right." It amused him how unmoved his voice sounded, how the breeding held true. He sounded no more excited than a man at the ballet.

"Didn't realise how worried you were. If I had, I'd've come home straight away, but Mac said he'd... what is it?" Vila broke off, warned by Avon's sudden tension.

"Mac..."

Silence. "Oh." More silence. "Was a good pal, 'e was. 'Ow's our Jess? She with cousin Nell?"

For a moment, temptation tripped Avon's tongue and he almost told Vila of his time with Jess, but then he thought better of it. There was no need, for mention of their 'wake' would only distress the living, would mean explaining just how close Avon himself had come to breaking, and how driven he was, still, by the narrowness of his past. He would bring not even an echo of the shame dictated by the tyranny of his class; rather, he would take that final step and touch life. "Jess elected to stay alone last night. I checked on her to make sure she was all right, put her to bed and then left her to work things through on her own. That's Jess' way, Vila, as well you know."

"Still..."

"Not everyone mourns the dead as you would."

The seriousness of Avon's tone tugged at the thief's mind. "Avon...did you think I was dead?"

"After the way I greeted you tonight, no, this morning, you still need to actually ask that? Just how great a fool are you?"

"Judging by the way you came," Vila cooed in even closer, bringing them length to length again, "I'd've said the best fucking greatest in the Galaxy." He felt Avon's body laugh, heard the almost silent chuckle close to his ear.

"Well now, I suppose I should be grateful."

"Cause," the voice was as blatantly seductive as the tongue tingling around Avon's ear, pushing the night's fear and loss far behind them, "you've got the best fuck in the business?"

"No. Because you fuck better than you speak."

"Oh, casting aspersions on me accent again, are we?"

"Not this time. Perhaps you should start coming to my classes, Vila. The 'best fucking greatest' indeed."

Vila's hand cupped the heavy weight of Avon's balls, a fingernail delicately traversing the folds. "Who needs grammar? Anyway, If I start *coming* in your class, well, what would the neighbours think, eh?"

Laughing, Avon tumbled him over, pinning him underneath. "Oh, that you were the 'best fucking greatest', I assume." His face grew suddenly serious. "You are, you know."

"Oh, compliments now. I'll be getting big-headed next."

"I seriously doubt that. Should that happen, all you'd need to do is look in the mirror."

"And if that's the case, it doesn't say much for your taste in men, does it?" Vila stopped still under Avon's hands.

"Vila? Is there something wrong or did your body just join your mind in the realm of the never-used?"

The teasing words and even more teasing kisses were ignored, Vila squirming instead until he was lying side by side with Avon, not touching, but still close, rolled together by the old familiar dip in their bed. "But you've never had any choice, not down 'ere, anyway. Lissen, Avon," he started to fiddle with the brown cover, pleating it with precise measured movements. He hadn't planned on saying it at this very second, but it had to be said and the opportunity, damn it, had just jumped up and slapped him in the face. "Avon," he tried again, gathering his courage and decency into a knotted lump, "somethin' I have ter say ter yer, an' t'ain't easy fer me, bu' got ter says it anyways."

"Shh," Avon smiled at him, fingertips reaching out to brush a wonderfully responsive nipple. "I know perfectly well how you feel about me. And if you don't say anything, then I won't be sarcastic back, now will I?"

"God, you really pick yer moments ter get all palsy-walsy, doncher? Don't touch me!"

Burned, Avon snatched his hand back.

"Can't think when you touch me like that, get all selfish an' all I c'n think abou' is 'avin' you. Look, Avon, yer never 'ad any choice abou' you an' me becomin' mates. We both jest 'ad to, right? Well, wot I'm tryin' ter say is, tha', now that you c'n pass fer one o' us, when yer needs ter, you don't need me as much. An' I 'ave ter say this afore the next big 'do'—the big party, the one fer the start o' the New Year.

If," he swallowed, a single convulsive jerk of his throat, "if yer wants ter, yer c'n make the announcement an' stop bein' me mate an' ask the family ter accept yer as one o' us, in yer own right. Won't stop yer, honest. I'll even be one o' the two yer'll need ter speak fer yer. Jess'd be the other, or Jak. Got a soft spot fer yer, 'e 'as, an' Jess thinks yer magic, so..."

"What you are offering me, then, is a way out?"

The answer was so muffled not even Avon could hear it, but nonetheless, he knew what Vila had said. He could read it in the tired misery of the thief's face. "Well now, it's certainly a generous offer."

The face crumpled a little more with the effort of holding the tears inside.

"And there is, I'm afraid, only one possible answer."

"Well, say it! Ge' it over wiv!"

Warm full lips pressed lightly, dancing over his face, rubbing softly on his unshaven chin, surprising him enough that he opened his eyes to look at Avon. And found him smiling, quite fondly.

"I shall even phrase it in a way you are capable of comprehending. Wot?" His whole voice changed, suddenly becoming Deltan shrill, "Dump yer? Wotcher fink I am? I'm no' as bleedin' stupid as yer, am I?"

"You mean that, Avon?"

"I said it, didn't I?"

"An' you are a man of yer word... Oh, Avon..."

Vila didn't care to delve too deeply into the whys and wherefores of Avon's decision to stay with him, too afraid that he'd find that it was for the power Vila had down here in the Bowels and the contacts he had with the other criminal clans. No, he'd wallow in the warmth and safety of Avon's arms and snatch this happiness with greedy hands, to clutch it close to him and keep it preserved in the rosy glow of memory. The flesh pressing down on him was warm and heavy, redolent with the tang of their sex, the smell and heat fluttering around him like the fingers weaving lyrics of passion over every inch of his being. He gave himself up to it, spreading his legs, wordlessly asking that Avon take him and fill him and give him this one assured moment together, before the grimness of reality could intrude. This, too, was his wake, his memorial for the ones he had heard during the long hours, screaming and crying and scrambling to escape the Hell that awaited them Above. And the children... the smell of Avon masked and finally overwhelmed the scent of fear and lost innocence.

He grabbed Avon, hauling him in close to kiss him fiercely, to celebrate life and the living of it, sucking up the all-encompassing protective possessiveness flowing from his mate. This, more than anything Avon could have gifted him with, was what he needed: the belonging, the welcome. The love. Unspoken, naturally, which did not distress Vila in the slightest. After all, he had watched Avon for two years; he knew how to read this man—sometimes. A memory floated back to him, barely rippling the surface of his pleasure with Avon, rustling in his mind with less presence than the tongue snaking its way up the length of his cock, and that memory was of Avon, ostentatiously uncaring, 'I have never seen why...one must even prove it at all'. Watching Avon's head rising and falling like breathing, seeing his cock disappear into that willing mouth, Vila didn't see any reason for Avon to become irrational. This, *this* feeling would suffice, and he would nurture it and make it grow.

"Avon, Avon, love, c'mere." Elation corkscrewed through him when the endearment was accepted, a brief kiss of approval anointing the head of his cock. Eyes dark as the soul, Avon slid his body along Vila's, settling comfortably into his mate's embrace, his erection tapping a reminder on Vila's thigh. "Want you inside me, love," Vila whispered.

"I thought you would have been too tired for that."

"Nah, all I 'ave ter do is lie there an' le' yer 'ave yer wicked way with me."

"Mmh? I should have realised that sheer bloody laziness was at the root of this. However, as I am *extraordinarily* fond of hard work, perhaps I might indulge you." His right hand squeezed Vila's cock tightly, then moved on to tickle his balls, finally following the line that led to his anus. He rubbed there, gently at first, tantalising the raised nub, feeling the small opening widen under his eager finger. He resisted temptation and waited until Vila had fumbled the tube of gel into his hand, using it to liberally coat the clutching tunnel. Slowly, he eased two fingers within, grinning as Vila arched up, body demanding more. A third finger joined the first pair, then he withdrew, quickly bending Vila, helping him to brace his feet against the headboard, displaying the rosette of his intention. He positioned himself carefully, hands on either side of Vila's head to take his weight, hips poised to plunder. "Ready?" he asked, as he always did, that gesture of respect and recognition that Vila so treasured.

In response, Vila reached up to grab him, fingers digging into firm buttocks, pulling him inexorably

down. Avon slowed their pace, bending his head to take in the sight of Vila taking him in. With all the hurry of a sleepy snail, he sank into the living flesh, the muscles clamping down on him, stroking him, heating him, as he moved in and out, dividing his attention between the love in Vila's eyes, his cock moving in Vila's body and the exquisite delight building in himself. So sweet a sensation, feeling his entire body refined down to the single spasm of pleasure growing in his belly, the cum rising, filling his balls, filling him with the irrecusable explosion of orgasm.

Vila stared up, entranced, as Avon's face was transformed far beyond its usual schooled gentility into a twist of lust, then he groaned, deeply, as he felt Avon swell and then jolt inside him, as the liquid heat burst into him. His own cock quivered tautly as Avon collapsed onto him, one fist coming forward to grip Vila with exactly the right amount of strength. A mouth descended upon his, a tongue thrust into him, Avon's need for him poured over him like rapids over rocks. The emotion of it fueled him, and he came, spiraling off into an extremity of pleasure.

Momentarily, Avon left the bed to fetch a towel, cleaning both of them off before he would return to Vila's somnolent embrace. He settled comfortably, one hand gently rubbing Vila's chest. His body begged him to sleep, but his mind couldn't entirely cast away the thought of Vila and the children during the raid. "Where did you hide, earlier?"

"Wot? Oh, em, down the old streets and in the history places."

Avon nudged him, bringing him back to some faint semblance of alertness. "And what are those?"

"Aw, Avon, 'm tired, been up all night, then all this, lemme sleep. I'll tell yer later. Promise."

The fair head burrowed into his shoulder, and Avon stroked it, dunting Vila to get him to move that sharp elbow, admitting defeat at the sound of a whistling snore. Finally managing to fit them together snugly, Vila's smell filling his nostrils, soft hair tickling his cheek, warm breath smoothing over his clavicle, Avon struggled to stay awake to ponder his situation, to analyse how he felt and how the night had changed him. Or if indeed, it had at all. There was still, unfortunately, that nagging fear of emasculation, fed and fired by his Alpha past, united with the uneasiness over seeing himself change so much to survive here in the Bowels. It had been different, of course, with Blake. Then, he had remained fully Alpha, truly himself, and it was quite acceptable for

'old boys' to... 'help' each other. He was more than happy to ignore the details of his relationship with Blake, as he had aboard ship, clinging tightly instead to his fond delusion of himself as a hard-hearted cynic. Sleep washed ashore in his brain, gradually obliterating his thoughts until he had sunk into a half-awake limbo, smiling when a dreaming Vila suddenly pushed closer against him, whispering Avon's name and kissing him. As he hugged Vila back, the faintly coherent part of his mind declared a pox on all questions and so, contented, he slept.

The next several days were taken up with the depressing task of consoling the living, making new arrangements to fill the gaps left by those taken in the raid and the burying of the dead. It was the way of it, down here, to 'bury' those taken by the mutoids. Thus, there was an end to it, a time when all the suffering could be over, a time to set the mourners free of their deathwatch. Their strength impressed Avon, adding to the grudging respect that had reluctantly built in the more than seven months he had been living here. Almost imperceptibly, he had begun to adopt their ways, at first to survive amongst them, then, gradually, to survive the hardness of life down here. This 'losing' Vila had been a watershed for him, the chrysalis of change slowly peeling from him as he shed more and more of his pre-programmed dogma. Without truly realising what was happening, he slipped more and more into the vitality around him, shedding inhibition like a useless hide. He was not prey to the numbing greyness of most of these Deltas: his background forbore that, the belief that one controls oneself and one's future engendered in his very genes, it seemed. And it was contagious. His absolute certainty that this time—*this* time—they would be able to change things infiltrated all the others, the words of revolution growing and gathering like storm clouds, small rebellions against the system beginning to fall like the first shower of spring. Which is why old Restal himself demanded that Vila and Avon come and see him. *NOW*. Naturally, Avon had no intention whatsoever of obeying so peremptory a summons, but Vila managed to persuade him that such a decision would be less than wise. The way cousins Jak and Nell strong-armed him proved to be a very convincing argument also.

They stood together outside the door to old Ewan's flat, Cousin Jak trying to fuss with Avon's clothes, Avon succeeding in freezing him with one of his patented glowers. They waited, until it was

finally three precisely, when Vila knocked briefly then proceeded to breeze in as though this were nothing more than the most casual of visits, and he had just happened to be nearby at tea-time. The sudden frailty of the withered man in the bed shocked him to a halt.

"Well, set yerself down, young scallywag. An' yer mate an' all." He turned his bad tempered glare on his great-nephew and great-niece, and snapped at them, "Wot are you two ruffians doin' 'ere? Ain't yer go' more important thing ter do bu' 'ang abou' listenin' ter yer betters? Away wi' yer, give us some peace."

"Oh, em, all right, Uncle Ewan. Em, well, see yer two later, will we?"

"Oh, shurrup, Jak. C'mon, ge' off wi' yer, an' leave 'em ter their grand discussions. I'll cook up a nice supper fer yer both, lads, so ye c'n jest come round my 'ouse later, all right?"

With an ingratiating grin that didn't even begin to hide her voracious curiosity and a hefty shove at her brother, Nell ushered Jak out of the door, leaving an awkward silence behind.

"Well?" Restal finally said. "Yer gonner sit there like a pair o' doolally dips, or is one o' yer gonner fetch the tea?"

Vila was halfway out of his seat when Avon stopped him. "I'll see to it. Why don't you chat to your grandfather?"

"Oh. Em, well, all right, Avon, if yer don't mind..."

As soon as he had left for the kitchen, Restal turned to his grandson. "Diplomatic sort, ain't 'e? An' smart an' all. Knows when best to disappear ter make things go the way wot he wants them ter. Got a bloody good idea o' why I've got yer 'ere, ain't 'e?"

Honesty—within their own code, that is—was the only safe policy with the patriarch of the family, so Vila preferred to lie as little as possible. "'E's sure it's cos o' the way 'e's got everyone an' 'is granny up in arms. Bu' yer can't be too pissed off at 'im, granda. I did clear it wiv yer first."

"No need ter ge' defensive, son. This t'ain't no court, is it? Nah, I'm no' pissed off at yer mate, quite like 'im, truth to tell. 'E's no' snotty, like wot I expected, jest helluva bleedin' posh, bu' 'e can't 'elp tha', so we jest 'ave ter pu' up wi' 'is fancy ways." He coughed, spasm building to a cacophony of breathless hacking. It wasn't until he'd had several sips of his beer that he could continue. "'ear that?" he wheezed. "Yer knows wot tha' is—lung rot. I'm no' long fer this world, Vila old son, so's I gotter make decisions, an' choices."

Unbeknownst to the elder Restal, Avon stood poised on the threshold, listening intently.

"Wot choices, granda? 'S'all decided, innit?"

"Nah, nuffin's decided. No' publicly, anyways. In me own mind, different story, tha' is, lad. I know fine who I wants ter take me place, bu' 'e 'as ter prove 'imself. An' I think yer can."

"Me? Wot—me? Yer can't be serious, granda. No' me! Wot do I know 'bout runnin' the family, eh? Wot do I know 'bout runnin' wiv the Nostra?"

"Don' be such a bleedin' prat, Vila. Now lissen, I wants yer ter take over after I'm dead an' gone, which won't be too much longer now, no' if I'm any judge o' the rot. Seen enough die o' it, an' I'll be goin' soon meself. Anyways, I wants yer ter ge' started on provin' ter the whole brood that yer capable o' fillin' me shoes once I'm gone. An' one o' the things I need ter know, though, is jest 'ow loyal is that mate o' yours?"

Vila shifted nervously in his seat, looking everywhere but at his grandfather. His eyes came to rest on Avon, hovering in the wings. He met him, look for look. "Oh, 'e's loyal, all right, granda. We might no' end up stayin' thegither, bu', well, 'e ain't gonner turn anybody in ter Servalan, I can tell yer that fer nothin'."

"An' wot abou' this revolution o' 'is?"

"Wotcher mean?"

"Will 'e lissen ter reason, if one o' the older folks tells 'im somethin' fer 'is own good?"

"Only if they c'n convince 'im that it really is fer 'is own good, an' no' jest some bee in their bonnet. Wotcher askin' tha' fer?"

"Because, despite wot yer fancy man thinks, 'e's not the only one workin' at 'avin' a Revolution. Some o' us 'ave been at it fer years. An' that means we've got a structure in place." He paused to cough up into the battered old spittoon. "Don't it, Kerr?"

A raised eyebrow was Avon's only reaction, then he came forward into the room, setting the tea things down on the small table in the centre between the three piece suite. "Yes, it certainly does. What form does this structure take, exactly?"

"Oh, never yer mind 'bout that, sunshine. Yer can jest wait an' see if yer matey 'ere c'n prove ter me that 'e can fill me shoes, then yer can get yer grubby little paws on a' that."

Avon smiled his most charming smile. "Oh, but since I showed your brood how to refilter, reprocess, re-route and re-use the water supply, I haven't had to go 'grubby', have I now?"

The old man cackled, making an obscene gesture with forearm and fist. "Bu' I bet yer've been filthy, right?"

Avon's best 'who, me?' expression only set Restal off into gales of hysterical laughter, culminating in a truly stomach-turning coughing attack. Restal's breathing became more and more laboured, his lips blueing with the lack of oxygen in his overtaxed lungs. Finally, weakened and gasping, the coughing abated, leaving a brittle autumn leaf of a man, ready to crumble and blow away in the wind. All thoughts of tea were abandoned, deluged by the severity of Ewan's illness and the billowing mothering of his wife fussing and clucking over him. Avon and Vila left the old man to Dora's tender ministrations and quietly slipped out, returning in almost complete silence to their own flat.

In the quiet hour before dinner, Avon lay on their bed, the brown cover over him as usual, reading, while Vila sat at the table, adapting a perfectly respectable sonic screwdriver to superbly illicit talents. The thief didn't hear Avon the first time, being too carefully engrossed in his work, knowing with complete certainty what Avon would want to discuss, but unwilling to talk about taking his grandfather's place before the man was even in his grave.

"Vila!"

"Yeh?"

"Put that down for a moment, I want to talk to you."

"I can listen and work at the same time. Not just bloody Alpha geniuses that can do that, I'll have you know."

"What is making you so nervous?"

"Who says I'm nervous?"

"I do. And so does your accent. You always adopt the Alpha tones when you are nervous or tense around me, even now. As is hardly surprising, when you are thoroughly relaxed, you are also thoroughly incomprehensible."

"That a fact, eh? Been making a study of the way I speak, have you?"

"I've been living with Deltas. Studying your accent is the closest thing to a mental exercise there is. Oh, do stop bristling. It was intended as a joke."

"Well, before you ask, no I haven't got the faintest foggiest idea what me old granda meant when he was talkin' about the 'structure'. Never mentioned it to me before. Mind you, he never mentioned me taking his place, before, either."

"There's no need to be so nervous, Vila. Amongst this flotilla of fools, you seem to be quite talented."

"Thanks a bloody lot. High praise indeed. I mean, don't kill yourself stretching over to pat me on the back, or anything."

"Well now, if you gave me something to pat you for..."

"Look, Avon, I don't know what he meant, I don't know anything about the 'structure', don't know anything about what he's going to have me do. Avon, I don't even know if I want to take his place."

"Of course you do! Don't be a fool, Vila, for god's sake, try and act out of character."

That stung. "Oh, too much of a fool fer yer, am I?" he snapped, the Delta in him coming out, his anger at Avon freeing him from any diffidence he might have had. "It was me bein' a right bleedin' fool an' takin' the risk o' bringin' yer 'ere wot saved yer rotten little life, you toffee nosed get."

"And you shall never let me forget that, shall you? But then, that's hardly surprising. It's the one time in your life you've ever been of any use and you're so lazy, it's to be expected that you'll want to rest on your laurels forever more."

"Oh yeh? An' wot'd be wrong with tha', eh? Bu' who is it wot's been 'elpin' yer wiv yer revolution, eh? An' why're yer gettin' yer knickers in such a twist? I don't know nothin' at all about 'old granda's plans. If I did, I'd tell yer, yer know that."

"Do I, Vila?" The voice was so smooth, it was deadly. "Do I indeed? Where, I wonder, do your loyalties lie in this? With your sprawling, thieving, lying, cheating family? Or me?"

"Don't you talk about me family like tha'! An' in case yer've forgotten, they're your family now an' all. Wot's the matter wiv yer, Avon?" He stopped suddenly and stared knowingly at man asprawl on the bed. "No, yer don't 'ave ter tell me. It's wot granda said, isn't it? It's the way 'e spoke about yer, as if yer were second ter me. That's wot's wrong, innit?"

"Don't be absurd, Vila. I knew perfectly well what I was getting into when I decided to use you as a front."

"But knowing it and living it aren't the same, are they, Avon? It's no' easy, bein' the power behind the throne, is it?"

Avon dealt with the difficultly insightful question the way he invariably dealt with all such questions: he walked away from it. In this case, literally. And he didn't return until the wee hours of the morning, refusing even then to speak to a pacing Vila.

The tense silence gnawed away at both of them for several days, until it degenerated into a resumption, of a sort, of their relationship—of a sort. They worked in concert with the maturing children of Vila's crime ring, they shared meals, they shared their bed with each other, but the sex had become precisely that: sex, no more, no less. Neither one was overly enthusiastic about instigating relations now, each fearing the chipping away of walls. An armed truce reigned over them, degenerating into brittle skirmishes every time Vila would go off to do old Restal's work, leaving Avon home, in ignorance, fuming, learning precisely how ill-suited he was to this lingering in the shadow of another man.

Vila had left extremely early, before the daylights had come on, sneaking with silent subterfuge from the darkness of their room, Avon's last sight of him the limning of his silhouette in the frame of the door, disappearing into the lighted stairwell. The anger started in Avon again then, anger made all the worse by the sure and certain knowledge that Vila was doing nothing more than was necessary and less than Avon himself was more than willing to do. Cursing under his breath—yet another Delta habit he had adopted—he threw the covers aside, storming off to have a wash, glowering at himself in the mirror with a self-contempt bordering on disgust. Dressed and ready to face the Delta warrens again, he realised the futility of it: tonight was the big party to celebrate the beginning of the new year and not a soul would be out, not one person would be available to ameliorate his tension. They would all be far too busy literally sweeping clean. Disparagingly, giving into the too-dangerous temptation, he looked around the small room he lived in with Vila, comparing it to the graciousness in which he had grown up.

This room had never had a former glory from which to fade; it had started out cheap and seedy and had slithered down-hill from there. *And*, Avon thought to himself as he stared at the untidiness, willing it to disappear and leave him free to live amongst those he understood, *is some of this chaos your own fault? There are neither servants nor automatics here. I can't change the face of the Delta Dome overnight, but at least this small hovel is under my control.* To protect his clothes, he grabbed something Nan had left behind from one of her rather infrequent cleaning blitzes and turned his ire loose on the hapless room, attacking it with all the built-in fury left to rot by every delay, by every difficulty, by every hurt. And by every time he

had been thwarted in his attempts to bend his world to his will.

A tornado of coerced inactivity suddenly unchained from its enforced curbs, Avon submerged himself in physical activity, ridding himself of the past year as much as was possible: the mere accumulation of dust. Brow furrowed, he attacked the room with the same fervour he did everything else, but this time, the fine, restraining control was gone, the genteel outline blurred into a twisting of Alpha and Delta, of 'male' and 'female'. And still his temper brewed, simmering away with the blackness of incipient despair, as in his mind, Avon watched the months parade before him in all their uselessness. Admittedly, he had made progress. *Or rather*, he thought with cruel honesty, *I've enabled others to make progress. And all the steps forward I thought I was taking have been a complete waste of time. Restal and his ilk have been laying the foundations for years, all I have done is add another layer of brick work.*

He scrubbed viciously at the mark on the kitchen counter, obliterating it as he could not obliterate the feelings welling up inside. It was nigh near impossible to maintain his polite, distanced Alpha sensibilities down here, where life was for the living of it and not for the presentation thereof. He came to a halt in the middle of the room, suddenly realising there was nothing left from which to wipe the painful disillusionment of the past year, and the more painful recognition of himself as secondary, here, amongst the lowest of the low, amongst the people that even the other Deltas looked down upon. The Service Grades. The last two rungs on the social ladder, the fifth and fourth grade Deltas. The ones marked like possessions to keep them in their places, the ones useful for only the dirty work and their body parts. And he was one of them now, until he could get himself out of here and free of the filth and the endless cycle of hopelessness and poverty. And yet...there was Vila. And the others to whom he had come to give grudging respect for their ability to survive and still love and laugh, when the price Avon had paid to survive the Alpha levels had been so much higher. He could feel the insidiousness of the Delta fatalism seeping into him, the attitude that this was just 'the way of it' and there exists no reason to try to change anything. Unless...unless he were to find the way to use the extant revolutionary structure that Restal and his cronies had, to force them into a rebellion, instead of this endless waiting 'for the right moment'. He needed more data so that he

could set the fated flow in motion, but he would find a way to kick start this damned revolution and put a stop to this enervating lifestyle once and for all.

The anger and the impotence fired each other until Avon became a kiln and his frustration a hard knot strangling him. He *would* make a difference, he *would* change things. He already had the best lever for power available down here: Vila. And he would use him, unhesitatingly. Loving was a weakness, one that could too readily drive a man on the paths chosen for him by others, but loving could also be a strength. Avon had never had any difficulty in exploiting his own weaknesses and thus transforming them into his greatest strengths. When one recognises those areas where the defences are at their slimmest, then one can shore them up, and by making a target of them, when the time was right, one defused them to the point where they could become a weapon. So, he took this weakness he had for Vila, this all-pervasive fondness and wrought it into a tool to unshackle them from this decrepit grimness. And by so doing, he made it possible to pretend that his feelings for Vila, while being love, were only one facet of the many-hued spinning top that made up that most disobedient of emotions. *Yes, he justified to himself, I concede love, but surely no more that one has for friends with whom one shares the occasional companionable session in bed. It is, after all, aggrandised by dint of the simple fact that we are trapped here together and must present a united front if we are to destroy the Federation power base. It's the only way I can be free again.*

He took one last frowning glower at the dingy little room, hating it and all the multi-layered list of things it represented. He caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye. Glancing down, he grimaced and ripped his floral pinny off, balling it up, hurling it across the room, damned if he'd ever wear the thing again. Resolute, he set off in search of his main source of information and power, Vila, determined to get this whole thing at least partially solved before the damned family gathering later that night.

He didn't find Vila, Vila found him, hours later, when Avon had finally given up his search. No one knew, or was willing to tell, where Vila had gotten to. Eventually, over a last pint of bitter lunchtime ale, accent beginning to slip back into the dangerous smoothness of his former life, Avon had decided to simply go back to the flat and wait. He lay on the bed, flat on his back, staring at the ceiling, unwillingly going back a month to the stomach turning pain of believing Vila dead, and of what he had done with

Jess; she had never referred to it, still treating him with the same sarcastic fondness she had shown before. It was unavoidable, that he should remember that night, lying here again, waiting for Vila. *But then, he thought, I was waiting for someone I feared dead. This afternoon, I'm waiting for my passport out of here. My only chance to survive Upstairs long enough to kill Servalan.*

His train of thought broke off with the sound of Vila opening the door. Avon sat up, leaning back against the headboard. Arguments, thus far, had been worse than useless, threats counterproductive, so that left only one way to get the information he needed to be able to manipulate the Rebel structure to suit him. *Seduction*, he turned the phrase over in his mind, watching as Vila warily came in, obviously expecting yet another snarling match, *the easiest of tasks with Vila, who is so woefully eager to be wanted. To snatch some crumb from my table. Well now, this afternoon he shall have a veritable feast.*

"The grapevine," he said, reworking an old conversation to lead them to a different conclusion, "says that old Restal is very pleased with the job you've been doing. I'm impressed."

"Oh, praising me again are you? Next time, you'll be patting me on the back."

There was an extremely knowing, satisfied grin beaming from Avon. "Well now, all the way over there, it's quite impossible for me to pat you on the back. Or anywhere else, for that matter. Why don't you come to bed and we'll see how much patting I'm willing to do?"

His libido and his heart never having said the word 'no' before, Vila came over to the bed, coming to a halt immediately beside it, willing to let pass, unquestioned, Avon's reticence on the subject of the powerplay. The man in question stood up, stripping quickly and efficiently, bringing his hands up to divest Vila of his clothing also. As each scrap of covering was dropped to the floor, the skin it revealed was licked and kissed and nibbled, a nipple rolled between a thumb and forefinger then moistened by a sucking mouth, the cool breeze of Avon's breath tingling across it, the questioning not bypassed, merely delayed. "Remember our rather unproductive meeting with your grandfather? There's something that's been puzzling me since then." He stopped to gently bite his way down Vila's side, the skin shivering in delighted confusion behind him. Avon gave his full attention to the flesh at his hands, knowing that Vila would expect a question of his 'political' motivations,

thus leaving him terribly vulnerable to the emotional appeal. "Tell me, why did you tell the old man that you weren't sure if I would stay with you? It's obvious, from the grapevine at least, that he would be unwilling to name you his successor if you don't have an extremely stable home life. Some quaint notion he has about an unhappy or unsatisfied man opening his mouth in places it should never be opened. He seems to think it would make you a liability to the family."

"Yeh," Vila answered cautiously, acutely aware that Avon was playing him with all the skill of a highly trained psychomanipulator, touching him in all the affectionate little ways that had always been his undoing. "Well, yer might not stay with me. I mean, yer can pass for one of us with them that yer need to, and so many other folk in the family know yer now as me mate an' one of us, that yer don't even need to hide, so yer don't need me as much as yer used ter. Just like I said the other day there."

"And just as I said the other day there, I am *definitely* staying with you."

"Well, it's wot you said, anyways. But the way we've been fighting this last while..." the words were mumbled against Avon's neck as his hands busily moulded the firm hillocks of Avon's ass. "An' I never know how yer feel 'bout me. But then, I suppose, yer need me fer power ter keep this revolution going the way yer want it so's yer can get back to yer own class, back Upstairs."

"Vila, really..." the disapproving words were robbed of their sting by Avon's mouth sliding open and wet down Vila's throat, the Alpha proceeding with his sedition, continuing down, down, lower and lower until Avon was on his knees, sucking Vila's cock up into his mouth, Vila's hands tangling in the soft brown hair, pressing the willing head farther and farther down. He felt Avon push back against his hands and he let go, allowing Avon to come up for air and to speak.

Avon stayed on his knees, knowing full well what the sight of him there, mouth wet from sucking Vila's cock did to the thief. He smiled, deliberately turning on the warmth of his eyes full blast, convincing himself that this was fake, merely for show. "Shall we continue this in bed? I can assure you," he whispered the words low and vibrantly rich, "it's far more comfortable."

Uncaring of the tangled miasma of reason behind this banquet of sensuality, Vila tumbled them both onto the bed, landing heavily atop Avon, rolling over,

pulling Avon over to blanket him. "Yer mean it 'bout stayin' with me?" he asked, in spite of himself, needing to trust.

"Have you ever known me to lie?"

"Jest cos I've never caught yer at it doesn't mean ter say that yer don't do it, does it?"

"Your logic impresses me. Pity the truth hasn't impressed you."

And that was all the reassurance Vila would be getting. He responded, not bothering to dissect Avon's version of the truth. No, he would simply accept what was given him and pay the price when Avon finally got round to presenting him with the reckoning. He poured all of himself into this, allowing the love and casketed passion to escape into the strong arms holding him with such delicious ardour.

Avon smiled at the response his seduction was fertilising, setting about his task until he could reap the harvest. Sex as a tool: he was very comfortable with it. The niggling image of himself writhing in ecstasy, impaled on Blake's cock came back to haunt him, intermingled with the almost equally disturbing memories of Tynus. But they were, he consoled himself, men of his own class, men who understood 'an arrangement' for mutual convenience. Not love. No, he did not love easily, neither was he led nor mastered by his emotions. Anna's face blossomed at the edge of his mind, her blonde beauty hovering like a dawn cloud. With vicious decisiveness, he kicked that memory from his mind. Stoically, he turned his back on the past and turned his face to the future, settling down comfortably to enjoy himself with Vila, his false face of cynicism clutched to him like a child's beloved teddy bear. He clutched Vila just as closely, and buried himself in the doubting, accepting love offered to him, pushing them quickly onwards, towards orgasm and away from thought. He pressed his belly to Vila, rubbing their erections hard and smooth together, escaping from one truth into a more welcome one, the sweetness of filling his hands and mind with the tactile glory of touching Vila. The man beneath him responded wholeheartedly, echoing every move, stealing Avon's breath away with the skill of his fingers and the addictive sensuousness of his body. The moment quietly scaled the walls of his turret, and Avon didn't even notice when he had slipped from seducing Vila for information into making love with a mere fifth grade Delta thief. The control passed smooth as a sheet of liquid mercury from an acquiescent Avon to a volatile Vila, all the Alpha's anger balmed to si-

lence by the sheltering reassurance of being loved for oneself—warts and all.

“Want yer under me, Avon.” He heard the words, felt them breathed against his ear.

“Oh, you do, do you?” he murmured, a moment of private rebellion returning at the dominating words.

“Yeh,” Vila whispered, greedy hands squeezing Avon’s heavy balls. “Want ter see yer face when I fuck yer, when yer filled to the brim wiv me. That’s wot I want. Yer gonner give it ter me, eh, matey?”

His answer was being pushed aside, to allow Avon to raise his legs, bending them slightly, wrapping his arms around them at the knee. He grinned up at Vila, brimming with that seductive combination of mockery and lust that seemed to belong to Avon and no one else. “Well? Is this clear enough?”

“Oh, yer, it’s more’n clear. All right, give us ’alf a mo’, lemme get the juice. Oi!” he said, slapping Avon on the buttock, made masterful by the image of Avon lying there, like that, for him. “You jest stay where yer are, mate. Yer can ’ang about like that, I like ter see yer bum all open an’ naked an’ waitin’. On yer back,” he spanked Avon again, a faint pinking lingering after the sharp caress of his palm, “where yer belong, Alpha.”

A vulpine grin fled briefly across Avon’s face, then he surrendered to the challenge, responding to the twist of it. “Really? Why don’t you,” he murmured, deliberately emphasizing the buttered bread smoothness of his accent, running the tip of his tongue over his lips, “prove it.”

Vila paused midstep, then returned to the bed, new tube of lubricant in hand, staring at Avon thoughtfully, giving warning, a recognition that this night might come after too many fights, after too many moments of malcontent. “Careful wot yer wish fer, Avon, yer might jest get it.”

“From you? Hardly.”

The challenging gauntlet hung in the air between them. Thoughtfully, Vila picked it up, running it through his mind before slowly uncapping the tube. “All right. Yer asked fer it, yer did. Literally. Keep yer legs up out o’ the ways, Kerr. Kerr? Nah, don’t suit you none, can’t call yer *that*. Plain old Avon’ll do fer me.”

Avon’s astonishment was plain and unvarnished, an unguarded fragment from his past cutting them both. “You surely wouldn’t expect me to allow you to call me *Kerr*, would you?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Jest cos

I’m no fancy bleedin’ Alpha don’t mean yer can take that attitude with me! Got no right to say that, got no right to pull class on me, not ’ere, not after wot I’ve done fer yer. Or is this jest a new twist on our old game, eh, is that it? Yer ’ve always liked playin’ a bit rough, now an’ then, ain’t yer? Is that wot yer after, pal?” He brought his hand down sharply on Avon’s exposed buttocks, and not the playful sting of before, but a serious blow. Avon winced, suddenly, sharply, aware that this had gone out of control—out of *his* control—and he made a move to stop it. Vila’s full weight descended heavily upon him, pinning him on his back, arms trapped by Vila’s body and tangled painfully with his own legs.

“Get off me,” he hissed.

“Wot, tired of the game already?” Vila smacked him one again, keeping him in place with his body, freeing one hand to gag Avon’s too smart mouth. “Doncher want this? Wot is it, eh? ’S’all right for you ter use me, but no’ the other way ’round? Don’t try an’ deny it, that’s wot all the love an’ kisses were fer this afternoon, right? Ter get me ter tell yer wot me granda’s been up to, give yer a way ter take control. Well,” he went on, slapping Avon again, the flesh reddening now, “if yer wants the power, yer’ll ’ave ter pay the price an’ that’s stayin’ wiv me.” His hand rose and fell again, this time catching Avon painfully on the balls, bringing fear to the man feeling the harshness of his hand. This was no longer one of their games, this was no longer Vila indulging Avon’s penchant for a little pain. “There’ll be no more of this crap yer’ve been hurtin’ me with, no more of this refusin’ ter understan’ that I ’ave ter keep me mouth shut. Yer should know better, ’stead o’ hurtin’ me the way yer ’ave...” His words penetrated his own mind, shocking him with their accusing hypocrisy. “Oh god, Avon. Look at me!” He got up off of the other man, unfolding Avon’s legs, massaging them, trying to rub away the degeneration of what he had done. “I’m sorry, honest, dead bloody sorry. ’Ere I am goin’ on ’bout you hurtin’ me an’ wot am I doin’ ter yer?”

“Get away from me, you little bastard.”

“Avon! I didn’t really mean it an’ I stopped, didn’t I? Before it even got out of ’and!”

Avon shoved him aside like so much flotsam, getting up from the bed with barely leashed fury, on the verge of turning his violent anger loose on Vila, hauling his clothes on with callous disregard for the weakness of mere leather.

“I never meant ter hurt you. I never mean ter hurt yer. Jest got so upset this afternoon, wot with yer usin’

me an' all like I was a bit o' nothin'. Avon!" he called to the retreating back, almost sobbing the word, the name, the agony. "I didn't mean it! An' I stopped, I never hurt yer, stopped when I realised it weren't a game any more. Avon, don't go, don't leave... AVON!" The last word bounced unheeded off the slammed door and Avon was gone.

Vila lay there on the bed, staring up at the same unhelpful patterns that had so occupied Avon in his time of pain, almost three hours passing before he could even begin to think about dragging himself together for the New Year's celebration. It was, he thought dispiritedly, going to be even worse than anything with which his imagination had so far been able to torture him. It had never occurred to him, including in his loneliest of nightmares, that Avon would not even be there tonight. Nor that he'd have to face his entire family, without his mate, jilted on his Night of Affirmation.

The hurting worsened before he had even left the block of flats. Jak, Vera and their four children came thundering down the stairs just as he opened his door to leave, a rollicking cascade of festive, excited children preceding their more staid parents.

"'lo, Vila," Jak said, craning to see before Vila pulled the door closed. "Where's your Kerr, then?"

"Em..." To his shame, Vila felt the flush burning his cheeks as he fumbled for words. "'e's, em, 'e's gone off ter do something first. 'E'll be over in a bit."

Jak looked at him, a sympathetic questioning in his eyes. "Oh, yeh?" was all he said, keeping his nose out of other peoples' business.

There was the sound of another door being closed and Jess' heavily pregnant footsteps creaked down the stairs. Vila chased after the children, using that as an excuse to flee before his youngest sister could hit him with more awkward questions.

This was, without doubt, the most important night of the year. Now was the time to clear off all debts and to bandage all arguments, to bind couples and commemorate births. Death was not allowed here, nor was the spectre of the past and all its hardships. This was a night of glory, of joyous celebration, laughter and love intermixed equally with decisions decreed to last the year out. New Year's Night. The most important festival down here, the only one for which all fighting and disputes were laid aside, the only one where even the bitterest rival clan could slap a man on the back and wish him well—and then turn the next day and strike him. Tradition ruled this night,

old rituals and beliefs handed down from the days before the nuclear wars, when the Dome was first built to protect against the acid rains that fell burning from murky brown skies. Tonight, the old ways prevailed and this was the time to renew the vows, to take out the precious philosophies and have one's breath stolen by their awe-inspiring glow.

And Vila was hunched in a corner, doing his very best to be ignored.

"Wotcher, sunshine! 'Aven't seen yer in an age, been workin' 'ard, 'ave yer?"

The friendly whack on his shoulder almost sent Vila precipitously into the next world, but he managed to catch his breath well enough to answer the too hearty greeting from his second cousin by marriage, four times removed. "Oh, 'lo, pal. I'm fine, how's it goin' fer yer, eh?"

"Mustn't grumble, mustn't grumble. Always some poor sod wot's worse off'n yer are yersel', right? C'mon, there's young Jo, 'm gonner go talk ter 'er. Fancy 'er summat chronic, I do. See yer. Oh, 'ang abou'. Where's yer matey, the dead posh bloke? Weren't yer supposed ter 'ave yer Affirmation the night?"

"Um, yeh, we were, but, em, 'e's no' 'ere, right at this moment. 'E'll, er, em, be over later, nearer the time."

His cousin—the one whose name he could never remember—grinned with malicious glee. "Oh yeh? Given yer a dizzy, 'as 'e?"

"Wot? Dumped me on our Night o' Affirmation? Don't be stupid. 'E's jest no' well, is all. 'E'll be 'ere later, if 'e's up ter it."

"Wot's the matter wi' 'im? Got a sudden attack o' plague, 'as 'e, wot's stoppin' 'im from comin' over? Come on 'im all o' a sudden, like, did it? 'Appens sometimes, when yer matey's tired o' yer. Yer should lose a bi' o' weight, Vila old son, mebbe then 'e'd be more likely ter stay 'ome wiv yer."

"Wot's that meant ter mean? Eh?"

"Oh, nothin', nothin'," the bovine cousin smirked, thoroughly enjoying his revenge for what he saw as Vila's usurping of his place in Restal's affections. He was too stupid to realise that he had never *had* a place in the patriarch's affections to begin with.

"Lissen, you cloth-eared, thick-headed prick, yer've wormed somethin', now either come right out an' say it, or shut yer stupid bleedin' mouth up, before I feed yer yer balls fer breakfast."

"You an' whose army, eh?"

Borrowing one of Avon's many tricks, Vila

grabbed the great lug by the throat, twisting the skin with painful viciousness. “Me all by meself, you plook. Now, yer gonner tell me wot yer meant, in’t yer now?”

Appearances can be deceiving. The cousin was not as stupid as he looked—he had enough sense to answer quickly and then run while Vila’s attention was focussed inwards. “Saw ’im down at the new pub, over by the baker’s. Stone cold sober, ’e was, though ’e did ’ave a bitter in front o’ ’im an’ one o’ the lasses beside ’im. ’E didn’t look like ’e was in none too much o’ a hurry ter leave, ’e didn’t.”

Vila sat as still as a rock, the implications pulling the legs out from under him. He paid no attention when Jess came to speak to him, waving off the concerned enquiries of his multitudinous family, gathering a becalmed silence around him.

“Vila? Vila!” Large hands grabbed him by the upper arm, dragging him in his befuddlement to his feet. “Vila, pull yerself together! Wot the ’ell’s the matter with yer, eh? Anybody’d think yer’d jst been ter yer own funeral. C’mon, now, yer old granda’s gettin’ through the business at a fair old clip. ’E’s already done all the births and new matings and the business partnerships and the apprenticeships. ’E’s gettin’ ter yer bit, now. Where’s yer matey gone? ’E should be ’ere fer this. This is yer big moment, y’know.”

What could he say that would not worsen matters? That would not add to his humiliation and hurt? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. For once in his life, Vila Restal held his peace and the cutting shard of loss inside.

Ewan Restal was holding forth from the head table, a mellow glass of booze in his hand and an even mellower twinkle in his eyes. “All right, kith an’ kin,” he said, “on ter our last two bits o’ business before we get inter the really good stuff. So getcher filthy paws off the trifle, little Den, or I’ll be after yer! Now, as yer all know,” he dissolved into a coughing fit on cue, “I’ve got the rot an’ I won’t be ’anging about with all you bloody miscreants—good word that, Vila, one o’ yer mate’s best!—fer very much longer. I’m for the off an’ I’ve come ter me decision on wot’s the best ter follow me. ’E’s been workin’ ’ard, an’ ’e’s kept ’is mouth shut, an’ ’e’s done it. We, the Restal family, now ’ave an alliance with the Cochranes. Full alliance, my little lovelies, with all the benefits—an’ responsibilities, mind—wot come with it. An’ Vila’s been keepin’ the books straight, or as straight as anythin’ in this family ever is, an’ ’e’s

been runnin’ the jobs. So, kith and kin, I give yer, Vila Restal, me successor!”

The roar was deafening, the pats on his back crippling, and all Vila could muster in this moment of triumph was a faintly sick smile. And then that faded, as he saw the black clothed man staring at him from the doorway. Avon did not smile, nor did he make any attempt to cross the chaotic room to Vila’s side. He simply stood, staring, measuring, assessing, leaving Vila in the agony of ignorance.

“Now, before we get ter the last bit o’ business, me timin’ ’s off, so if yer don’t mind, Vila, we’ll do the toast first, an’ then get ter yer Affirmation. That all right with yer, son?”

“Yeh, yeh, granda, that’s fine,” Vila mumbled, keeping his eyes on Avon, trying to decipher the thoughts barricaded behind those dark eyes.

Equally intense, Avon watched Vila, noting the clammy paleness of his skin, the tiredness around his eyes and the damnably blatant evidence of tears. It was obvious how Vila had spent his hours since Avon’s departure, even if the Alpha’s face revealed nothing about his. Thoughts do not show, they are forever locked inside the mind, until the thinker opts to interpret them for the outside world to poke and prod and render into the meanings they choose. It was not written as plain as the nose on his face that Avon had spent the entire afternoon with his past in tatters before him and the horrible screaming banshee of trust knelling his doom. For that is what this afternoon’s débacle had taught him: he trusted Vila. Enough to have known no real fear at his hands in bed this afternoon, more than he had ever dared trust Blake or Anna, and certainly enough to come back to him. And that frightened him. To trust again, to hand someone those skewers of liquid fire and invite them to do their best...which for oneself, might be the worst. Trust. A more terrifying dæmon than love, for love can be a weapon, but trust only an elusive shield built of nothing more solid than promises. There was trust there. The question now was—could he live with it? And if he were to choose to live with it, and Vila, what of the emasculation that came of being the power behind the throne? Could he deal with being the man in the shadow—instead of the mystique-laden man of shadow? Vila’s eyes were full of fears, not answers; doubts, not certainties.

The room fell silent, reverence replacing revelry, respect casting eyes downwards. It was the parent of the gesture of farewell to a martyred infant and child of the Code that ruled the family from cradle to

grave. Ewan Restal's voice was uncommonly rich and deep as he spoke.

"Sometimes, youngones, it's 'ard ter remember that we're all kin, that we're all the same, no matter wot. None o' us is any better than any other one o' us, an' that means none o' us is any less. We're all from the same seed, don't matter one whit whether we're male or female, when it comes ter The Words o' Conscience, we're all 'men'. Jest remember, an' yer knows which ones o' yer I mean—doncher, Huw?—that yer can't judge a man fer somethin'. T'ain't fer us ter do ter each other. We've got enough enemies, enough folk tryin' to keep us under their thumbs wivout us gettin' uppity ourselves. Now, the year's gonner begin, so will yer all join 'ands."

As the evening had progressed, people had gradually gravitated close to those they most valued and at Restal's words, hands were clasped warmly, forging a living chain, link by living link, until all were joined, even Avon. He still stared at Vila, as if expecting his answers to be tucked away in one of Vila's infamous pockets. Shuffling, Vila lowered his eyes, gazing down at the floor in symbolic humility, until only Avon stood with his head held high and his eyes wide open, blind to the simple truths he sought. Old Ewan Restal's words made him see.

"We've never ter ferget, wot makes us better than the animals or the mutoids, nor ever ter feel shame fer wot we are. We're still free, freer'n some ways than them wot lives Upstairs in all their finery, fer we're not so stupid as ter think less o' a man fer wot 'e does ter feed the family, or fer wot 'e chooses ter believe or fer who 'e chooses ter love. An' we daren't ferget that, fer if we do, we'll end up jest like them Upstairs. No matter wot we do, no matter wot we are, it's wot we 'ave inside an' wot we do fer others that makes us Men. An' so we never ferget the motto, the words to prick our conscience when it's so easy ter ferget that we're all jest the same. Join wiv me now in a toast, kith an' kin, a toast ter the Incomin' Year an' ter all o' us. *Fer a' that, an' a' that, A man's a man, fer a' that.*"

Amidst the cheers and the roaring good humour, Ewan Restal's voice was a drop of water indeed, but those closest to him settled down to listen. "All right, before yer gets dug in to the party, we've one more piece o' business left from last year. The Affirmation of Vila and his mate, Kerr Avon. So," he said, turning towards Vila who stood, transfixed, staring at Avon, "d'yer want ter stay wiv 'im fer the rest o' yer life, Vila? Think 'e'll be able ter

put up wiv yer fer that long, eh? Well, c'mon, son. D'yer affirm yer choice?"

Those shuttered eyes still gave Vila nothing but Avon's fascination of what he referred to as the pathology of love. But Ewan was waiting, there was no time to think about choices and the prices to pay.

"Yeh, granda." He said it loudly so everyone could hear it: said it loudly and with courage, his pride striding full force behind his words. He had lost Avon, he knew, but he still had his feelings, still had the warmth of the nights to cherish. By letting Avon reject *him*, he was giving the other man considerable status within the family, as the one who was wanted but refused, as the one who had the power in the relationship. Vila walked partway across the room along the path cleared by relatives suddenly embroiled in this struggle, their fascination paving Vila's way. He stopped at the foot of the laden table and picked up the glass Nell had set there, leaving its mate to stand in an oasis of white cloth, the amber liquid filled with the shimmering glow of the bright lights. Vila turned to the still distant Avon and raised his glass to him, his own as warm and brimming as the whisky. He took a sip of the traditional 'water of life', signalling his bond, then held his glass aloft in the pregnant silent stillness of the gathering.

"Here's to you," he said, in Avon's language but with the words of his own heritage, their almost magical significance dimming under the weight of his sorrow. With a wry twist to his mouth, he repeated the words of love, unerringly certain that this was the first time they'd ever been used to say good-bye. He took another sip, to show he drank fully of life. "Here's to you, mate, and this night. May all my nights be with you."

In a single quaff, he drank the rest of the whisky, the burning glow staving off the chill in him.

The entire room held their breath, waiting.

Vila gave a half-hearted shrug and a watery smile, then turned his back to Avon, placing, with tender care, the empty glass beside the full. There was a gasp, a mingling of horror and pity, then a ruffle of movement and chatter spluttered into abrupt high gear, trying to immolate the humiliating symbol.

The first of many hands of condolence came to rest on Vila's shoulder and he shrugged it off, not daring to accept comfort until he would be able to show his grief in private. The hand returned, insistent, demanding, turning him back to the table. Vila turned to glower at cousin Jak, but utter disbelief crossed his face instead. Avon stood by the

table, eyebrow raised, glass in hand. He took a sip, and then another, proffering the glass then in mute declaration.

"Here's to you," Avon said, then grinned suddenly. "'Ere's ter yer, mate. An' may all our nights be long!"

There was a heartbeat's pause, then Jak roared the cheer, setting the entire family into a cacophony of congratulations. Backs were pounded, hands were shaken and even the occasional hug was stolen—but only by Jess, who dared share in Avon's second reaffirmation of life. The party, then, was off tumbling and bubbling, the music loud and the laughter louder still. The younger ones started the dancing, bringing in everyone from grandparents to tots, whirling and spinning in raucous abandon.

Vila grabbed Avon by the arm and manoeuvred him into a relatively quiet corner, behind a couple busily engaged in showing each other the finer points of kissing.

"Wotcher do that fer?" Vila asked, crunched in close against Avon.

"Do what?"

"Stick with me."

"You would rather I hadn't?"

"Don't be stupid, Avon, course I wanted yer ter stay with me. But after this afternoon, an' that stupid prick o' a cousin o' mine seein' yer over in the Hung Man wi' one o' their girls..."

"And it obviously didn't enter your pea-brain that the 'girl' in question might be Sandy's sister making sure that the little layabout was coming to his classes? The day of Affirmation, the day when old Ewan was going to name you heir apparent, and you think I'm as big a fool as you, to go out and cheat, *publicly*, with a very cheap whore. Really, Vila, surely by now you know I have better taste."

Vila had the grace to be shamefaced, more in apology for the entire day than that one small misunderstanding. "Don't know nothin' o' the sort. I looked in the mirror today, didn't I? But Avon, after this afternoon, why'd yer stay with me?"

"Well now, it certainly wasn't for your perspicacity and whip-sharp wit, was it?"

"Avon, come on, tell me!" He stopped, reconsidering, thinking about the expression on Avon's face when he had come into the party. "Nah, on second thoughts, don't bother. I know why, don't I? Your bleedin' revolution. Yer gettin' as bad as Blake, you realise that, doncher? Anythin' fer the friggin' Cause. Even if it means stayin' wiv the likes o' me. Until yer

gets back Upstairs, anyways. Well, yer've cut yer nose off ter spite yer face, Avon. Told yer already, I'd back yer, no matter wot. Yer didn't need ter Affirm wiv me, could've jest gone off on yer own."

"But then I would not have had your power to use, would I now?"

"Don't come it, Avon. Yer'd 'ave me 'power', as you call it, even if yer'd dumped me."

"Everyone knows old Ewan's attitude about 'stable 'ome set-ups', don't they?"

"'E 'ad already named me, before our Affirmation, 'adn't 'e now? Avon, why d'yer stay with me?"

Discomfitted, embarrassed and still less than comfortable with his own choice, Avon stared with entranced fascination at the toes of his shoes. "Well now," he began, "my reasons for staying."

"Ello, Avon, Vila, me old chums, wotcher mates?"

"Oh, 'lo, Stan. We're fine, ta much."

"Congratulations are in order, are they then? Double congratulations."

Avon firmly saved his hand from the over-enthusiastic pumping it was being pummelled with, a very polite smile freezing Stan in his tracks.

"Em, yeh, well, em..."

"Thanks, Stan, dead nice of yer ter say that. I'll be seein' yer soon, down the pub, all right?"

"Yeh, all right..." Stan muttered, taking his lank hair and spotty skin as far from Avon's sneer as he possibly could.

"Now, then," Avon began, "I promised Jess that I'd talk to her tonight, so..."

"'Ang on a minute, you. Yer 'ave ter talk ter me first, matey. Yer not gettin' away with it that easy. Lissen, why don't yer jest tell me why yer stayed an' then that'll be it done, an' I'll never so much as even breathe a word o' it anywhere. Won't even think about it, from the second yer utter the words. Why d'yer stay wiv me?"

"Honestly?"

"Honestly."

"Do you think your system could stand the strain?"

"I'm not afraid, y'know. I've heard the truth before. An' it didn't traumatise me then, it's not goin' ter do me in now, is it?"

"Very well. Why did I stay with you?"

"Yeh, yeh, we've already done that bit. Stop prevaricating, Avon. Think of it like one o' Cally's potions. Bitter and disgustin', but there's no way to avoid it."

"Cally..."

"Yeh, remember 'er? Tall, curly hair, alien, bad 'abit o' pokin' around in yer brain when yer weren't lookin'? Yeh, her."

"Actually, I was going to say that she was one of the reasons."

The music had come to an end and Jak's eldest was all fingers and thumbs, none of them seemingly able to slip another disk into the slot. Rather rude and downright crude comments were flying, the couple beside Avon and Vila pausing in their lessons long enough to join in the friendly haranguing.

"Oh, so's yer can rescue her, that it? Usin' us Del-tas as yer bleedin' cannon fodder?"

"Vila!" Every head turned to stare at the posh off-worlder Vila had landed with, mouths agape at the ceiling-denting yell. Avon merely stared back at them, his sheer arrogance outnumbering them all.

Disguised by the music once more, Avon turned his attention loose on Vila. "Will you listen to me, you fifth grade idiot? I'm trying to explain something to you, which is a daunting task at the best of times. Now, what I was saying was that Cally always said something to me, and that was that the only true sin was cruelty. She didn't, I'm afraid, understand our little bouts of badinage."

"Neither did I!"

"Yes, well, no one's going to be surprised by that. I did use words of more than one syllable."

"Look, Avon, are yer gonner tell me, or d'you want me ter die of old age waitin' fer yer?"

"I simply mean this. Yes, I affirmed with you because I want to be free of this squalor and the only way I can do that is by getting rid of my enemies. However," he added, turning back the tide of black anguish flowing over Vila's face, "I also did it because it suits me to have a steady, comfortable relationship and it would have been too cruel to 'dump' you tonight, in front of your entire family."

"Yeh, I'd've lost too much face, wouldn't I? Then wot use would I 'ave been ter yer, eh? So it was gain an' pity, was it then?" he muttered, straightening his shoulders, strong and unneeding of his coward's mask here amongst his own kin. "Didn't think yer'd opt ter stay wiv me. Not when I saw yer face when granda was talkin' an' I was makin' me Affirmation."

"I...to be honest, Vila, I hadn't intended to Affirm with you. I had planned on refusing that and being sponsored in by you and Jess. I had actually decided to do simply...to simply live with you, rather than make you my mate."

Vila's voice was breathless, hope battling with pragmatism. "Wot made yer change yer mind?"

"The things your grandfather said, about how 'a man's a man, for a' that'. That no matter what, *nothing* I chose to do could emasculate me."

"Avon," he whispered, "takin' me on as yer mate. Does that mean yer loves me?"

"I'm not *in* love with you, Vila. I would say that..."

"Vila me old son! Wotcher, mates." They all waited until Restal's coughing had stopped, Avon looking away nauseated, while the old man spat up into a metallic bottle, capped it and shoved it back into his pocket. "Yer really 'ad me goin' fer a minute back there, Kerr, honestly thought yer were gonner dump our Vila, an' me jest after namin' 'im me second. Gave me poor heart quite a turn, yer did. Now, c'mere a sec, there's somethin' I fergot ter get yer ter do, wot wiv the scare yer gave me. Yer come an' all, Vila. 'E's yer mate. Gotter stand wiv 'im."

With Vila still cursing the interruption, his grandfather, the Federation and all the gods in the Galaxy with egalitarian and liberal fury under his breath, the three of them went back to the head table, where Restal gathered everyone's attention by the simple act of banging his shoe on the table. "All right, you lot, lissen 'ere. We all fergot one very important thing. Now that 'e's an Affirmed member o' our family, 'e 'as ter pick 'is name." He motioned Avon forward, sidestepping to allow him the centre spot. "Yer've been known as Kerr Avon-Restal fer the time yer've been 'ere. Now, if a body joins us, once they've been a part o' the family fer a year, they gets ter choose their own name. Wot's yer choice, son?"

He looked straight at Vila, and gave him his wickedest grin. "Avon."

Vila's face fell. Avon's grin expanded. "Avon Restal. Well, Vila, I really have always hated 'Kerr'."

A drink was pressed into his hand, and Avon raised it in silent toast to Vila, whose eyes were brimming at him once more, but this time, for far better reason.

"Well," Vila said, looking at Avon with wonderful warmth, completely oblivious of the family hordes around them, "that really does make it all worthwhile, don't it? Yer loves me, don't yer?"

"Now, Vila, do you honestly believe I would say a thing like that?"

"Nah, wouldn't 'ave believed it, but yer did, didn't yer? Yer said yer not in love with me, an' yer knows wot that means, don't yer? An' then, ter pick my name—my name!—well, it's as obvious as the nose on yer face. An' in your case, that's pretty obvious!"

"Vila, I..."

"C'mon, sons o' mine, grub's up, an' yer granda wants the pair o' yer sittin' beside 'im at the top table," Vila's mother boomed, taking them under her wing and pulling them inexorably over to sit beside Restal. "An' yer don't want ter keep the old sod waitin', do yer?"

"Tonight, Vila, I want to talk to you tonight," Avon hissed around her ample bosom, half suffocated by the meaty arm wrapped around him.

Vera hugged them even tighter, coming perilously close to losing both of them to unconsciousness. "God, I'm so bleedin' proud o' yer, Vila me son. Yer've done well fer yerself, there's none wot can gainsay that, go' yersel' the best job in the Warren, go' yersel' the gorgeousest man in all the Dome an' yer the first to come back from bein' gone. An' ter think yer da thought yer was too much o' a runt ter keep!"

"Mam," Vila squeaked out around her forearm, "me an' Avon need ter talk an'..."

"Yeh, right! D'yer honestly think any one o' us is gonner believe yer wants ter *talk*? Yer'll jest 'ave ter keep yer paws off, paddington, until the party's done. Now, c'mere an' sit beside me an' shut yer trap an' get stuck in. 'Ere, start wiv this stew 'ere, it's bloody good." Restal grabbed Vila by the arm not pinned to his side by his mother's girth and pulled him down into a seat. Vera took Avon off to sit opposite their grandfather, despite his surreptitious attempts to loosen her grip.

They were wined and dined, the party mutating from the usual beginning of the year 'do', to a celebration of the announcement that assured continuity in family leadership and promised some semblance of stability in a life where there were few dependable certainties, and all of those were ones better avoided. Food devoured and libations drunk, the tables were cleared away, to open the room up for serious dancing. There was the usual scuffle to waylay Uncle Gordy before he could reach the impromptu stage and render, once again, his painful and murderous version of the old songs. The younger ones complained at the lack of 'decent' music, but gave in and joined in with gusto as the traditional dance tunes were struck. Amidst the melée, Avon grabbed Vila and hauled him off towards the closest thing to a quiet spot he could see.

Vila threw his drunken arms around him, landing boneless and heavy against Avon, almost knocking them both to the floor.

"Vila," Avon hissed into the ear nearest his mouth,

"I need to talk to you. You've gotten hold of the wrong end of the stick, idiot and Vila!"

"Got 'old o' the right end o' the stick, 'aven't I, Avon me mate?" Vila slurred, one hand squeezing and stroking Avon through the thickness of his trousers. "Lovely stick it is an' all," he went on, nuzzling Avon's neck, licking his lobe and moving back a fraction, all the better to rub Avon's turgid cock.

"Vila, get your hands off me!"

"Thought yer liked me hands on yer. Said yer were me mate, didn't yer, an' if yer didn't like me 'ands on yer, yer wouldn't 'ave taken me on, would yer, so that means yer likes me 'ands on yer, so wot are yer sayin' yer don't fer, eh?"

"Not in public, Vila. Now get your hands off!"

"Can't."

"What do you mean, can't?"

The giggle was no where near as inebriated as it should have been and Avon looked sharply into brown eyes that were looking just as sharply into his own. "Cos me 'and's stuck. Inside."

"Vila..." The threat in that one word would have frozen a coven of mutoids, but Vila, high on the emotions and successes of the night, lacked that much sense.

"C'mon, Avon, it'll be hours yet before we c'n leave an' I really want yer. I'll settle fer jest a quickie, no one 'll notice, jest think we're dancin' helluva close an' yer c'n rub against me an' I c'n 'ave me 'and down yer front an'..."

"And if you don't remove your hand from me, I shall remove it from you. Now, Vila!"

A pained expression clouded the bright eyes and a limp body gradually re-found its bone structure and Vila stood up and away from Avon. Blushing, casting continual furtive glances around him, Avon zipped his trousers up. That accomplished, he gave his full attention to glaring at Vila. "Don't ever try that again!" he said, speaking loudly to be heard over the racket that passed for Gordy singing. "I am not a rutting beast to have sex in public, in front of children and people I have to try to drum some education into."

"Sorry. Didn't mean no harm, Avon, just wanted you, that's all."

"Ey, look who I've found 'ere! The newies! C'mon, Dec, bring the 'toe over 'ere an' get a good luck kiss between these two."

Avon's glower darkened as the infamous and ill-loved nameless cousin grinned with malicious glee. A smaller man came over, a piece of indiscriminate

greenery in his hand and the bovine cousin snatched it out of his hand, holding it over Vila's head instead. "Yer know this tradition, do yer, fancy man? Wiv a bit o' the 'toe over 'is head, 'e's supposed ter be kissed by anyone wot likes 'im."

Avon stepped back, recognising the lout from the vague awareness he had had of the partying crowd down at the pub.

"Wot? Doncher like our little Vila 'ere? Mind, 'e's not so little as once 'e was, is 'e?" He patted Vila—hard—on his stomach, the grin widening with every passing second until it looked as if the malevolence of it would split his skull in two. "Told yer shoulda lost a bi' o' that lard, Vila me old pal. Mateys or no', 'e still don't want fer anyone ter see what 'e lets yer do in private. Good at gettin' down on yer knees, are yer then?"

Avon's fist shot out, knocking the witless wonder even farther into the realms of absolute lack of thought, the unconscious body hitting the floor with a resounding thump that drowned out even Uncle Gordy. Rubbing his knuckles, Avon passed a polite glance around the room, daring anyone to question him for bringing violence to this most peaceable night of the year. No one said a word, but the looks were disapproving, until Avon bent and picked up the weed from the floor and handed it to Dec. "We were in the middle of something there, weren't we?" he said with studied mildness. "Shall we continue?"

Warily, Dec held the 'toe over Vila's head, both men waiting to see if they were going to be the next to be floored. Avon straightened his cuffs and jacket, then stepped forward, leaning the last couple of inches until his lips brushed Vila's. Avon was suddenly hugged tight, Vila turning the traditional chaste embrace into a deepening kiss, which he refused to relinquish, milking the moment for everything he could. When Avon finally broke loose, Vila held on tightly to him for another moment, burying his face against Avon's neck. "Yer've got me so's I don't know which way I'm turnin', Avon. I don't know if yer loves me or if yer jest usin' me, but when yer do stuff like that, stand up fer me an' claim me in front o' the family, I understand yer perfectly."

"That's ridiculous, Vila. You don't even understand simple arithmetic."

"Oh, yeh, I do. But I understand people better, don't I? Yer loves me, Avon, yer jest can't admit it or show it, that's all. But it's there, an' yer gonner stay with me, aren't yer? Even after the bleedin' Revolution, yer'll still find a place fer me an'..."

Before Avon could respond or even free himself from Vila's arms, a sudden silence descended upon the room, cutting the revelry off with the sharpness of a sword.

"Vila!" Old Restal's voice cracked sharply. "Get over 'ere, an' bring yer Alpha. We've got trouble."

"Wot is it, granda?"

"This 'ere's part o' that structure yer mate's been tryin' ter find out abou'. 'Er name is Fiona an' she's our contact from the rebel faction wot's riddled the Terra Nostra."

Avon and Vila shared a quick glance, both of them conceding surprise at Restal's words. Neither one of them had had any idea that the structure was quite so widespread, nor so powerful. The contact was an average woman, completely nondescript from the tips of her mousey hair to the toes of her comfortable, practical shoes. She was also obviously a Gamma, her attention sidling nervously around the thronging horde of lower caste Deltas hemming her in.

"Tell Vila 'ere yer business, lass. There's no point tryin' ter keep any secrets now, is there?"

"Well," she started, hesitant. She was prepared for revolution and to die for her cause. She was able to pick pockets and risk transportation with nary a flicker of the eye. But she couldn't shake off the terror stories told her all her life: "Be a good girl or the big bad Delta will come and steal you and eat you all up."

Avon automatically took charge, his native arrogance coming to the fore. "It's perfectly all right, they don't bite. Well," he smiled charmingly, "not out of their grade, anyway. Now, why don't you tell us everything you know?"

"Well, sir," she began, responding unquestioningly to the authority of an Alpha, not even stopping to ask what an Alpha was doing here, "one of our contacts in Dome Administration sent down a message that there was an attempted coup in the Alpha section and that fighting was still going on. Our side is losing and they need help from all the levels."

"Granda, is the system ready to go?"

"Been ready for years, son, we've jest been waitin' till we could get all the levels ter agree on the right time ter strike."

"I suppose then I should be grateful to Servalan for precipitating matters, otherwise we'd all be in our graves, waiting."

"Oh, it wasn't Servalan who started it. Well, it was, in a way, I suppose."

"Would you care to repeat that? Preferably in a way that makes some modicum of sense?"

"It was Blake."

"Blake!"

"Damn that man! Even in prison, he can *still* ruin everyone's plans. What the hell has the idiot done this time?"

"He had some communications going with the Alpha sector faction and he was trying to speed the revolution up. Servalan found out and an hour ago, she ordered him and all the others from the *Liberator* to be executed and..."

"And of course, the mindless masses rose up onto their knees and rushed off to spill their blood for their great and fearless leader."

"Yeh, but at least there's still a chance the others are still alive, isn't there, Avon? All right, granda, we're gonner 'ave ter move, an' move fast, an' get some help Upstairs. We 'ave ter make this an all-out try, or nobody stands a chance an' Blake an' me other friends'll be dead. An' as soon as they finish mopping up Upstairs, the mutoids'll be down 'ere lookin' fer every Delta they can find, cos they'll need all the spare parts they can get."

"Well, don't jest stan' there wagglin' yer gums. Get on wi' it. Yer've got all yer folks 'ere already an' I know exactly wot we 'ad planned fer all this time. Nell, yer the one in charge o' weapons, ge' them all up from Avon's armoury an' give them out an' Stan..."

And that was the way of it. Avon's revolution was taken out of his hands by plans laid down a generation ago, held secret under the deathly discipline of the Delta code, his control usurped by the actions of a man supposedly incommunicado in prison. A man whose very name plagued Avon, a man whose mere existence had complicated Avon's life beyond conscience, from the first time they had met. There was no love in Avon now, as he took his place, fuming and boiling, in the great plan, only anger and annoyance and the lust for revenge. It was Blake's fault, as usual, that he was here in a narrow, claustrophobic and filthy access tunnel, leading the spearhead group, not up to the computer control rooms where he belonged. No, that task was being left to Alphas already there. Avon, being one of the only two rebels who would recognise all four of the *Liberator* crew, was on his way to rescue the bane of his existence. The other man was crawling along behind him, cursing and sighing.

They finally were free of the access tube, spilling into the brightness of the Alpha level. Avon was disoriented for a moment: he had forgotten how brilliant the light was Upstairs, and how clean, and how fresh the air.

"Avon, move yer bum, fer god's sake, it's bleedin' stiflin' in 'ere!"

Vila clambered out behind him, the rest of their group following with rapid relief. They could hear fighting in the distance, coming from the opposite direction they intended to take. They raced down the corridors with as much caution as time afforded, meeting only a pair of mutoids, cutting them down without so much as a stutter in their stride.

The sign read: *Section A. Cells 931-1069.*

The two guards standing underneath the sign took one look at Avon's group and turned on their heels and ran.

"Not much use, were they?" Vila muttered, dropping to his knees beside the door, assessing which tools he would need. His nimble fingers started their quick work, Vila chattering all the time. "I mean, ter jest run like that..."

"What would you do, if you saw six dangerous Deltas coming at you." He stopped dead, unable to believe what he had just heard coming from his own mouth. "Five Deltas. One Alpha."

"Well, saved us a lot of bother, didn't it? 'Ere we go, door's open. Now let's go rescue Blake. Again."

"And when I do, Vila," Avon muttered, pelting along the corridor behind Vila, trying to reach his colleagues from the past before any more guards came along, "I am going to take his revolutionary fervour and ram it down his throat until he chokes on his own idealism. I am," he paused to shoot a startled uniformed gaoler, "also going to kill him for risking my life—in *absentia*—again, and taking a chance with an entire revolution just because," he stopped to let Vila go in front of him to unlock the door to the cell the contact had said held Blake, "he has grown tired of having nothing to do but polish his damned halo. And furthermore..."

All his words died in his throat. He stumbled into the room, staring, rapt, at Blake, struggling desperately to wrestle his feelings back under his mask. This shocked him, this sudden, unsuspected well of emotion opening like a pit under his feet, annihilating his stability and his certainties.

"Blake?"

"It's me, Avon, under this beard and these clothes. It's me."

"Yes, yes, I see..."

Vila, forgotten, stared in horrified fascination at the emotional interplay between these two men. It made all his moments with Avon pale into mere candle flickers in the shadow of the burning sun that was flaring between Avon and Blake. It was painfully obvious neither man had expected this, that neither one quite knew how to deal with it.

"You came for me."

"Yes, well, rescuing you has become something of a habit."

They both took an almost compulsive step forward, closing the mental gap as surely as the physical.

"Then I suppose that means waiting for you is a bit of a habit of mine, does it?" Blake murmured, not meaning the rescue.

"Yes..."

"I suppose that makes you a knight in shining armour then?"

"Only if it makes you the damsel in distress."

Blake laughed, the rich, rolling sound of thunder in the hills and took the final step forward, resting his hands on Avon's shoulders. "Oh, I'm no damsel, Avon, as well you know. Not after I met you."

And then Vila's world fell apart, utterly destroyed by uncaring thoughtlessness. Avon leaned up just that fraction, that distance he obviously knew so well from practice, and pressed his lips to Blake's, melting into the bigger man, opening his mouth, letting passion play between them.

Vila tore his eyes away, wrenched himself free of the hypnotising horror unfolding before him. He turned, stumbled, then found the door and staggered through it. In the corridor, he looked back again, hoping that perhaps Avon had regained his senses, but the Alpha was still clutched to his fellow Alpha, the intensity and blatant lust making a mockery of the faint kiss he had given Vila Downbelow. *Only ter prove a point, Vila old son. Only ter prove a point ter someone wot was doin' somthin' wot made Avon look bad cos it made a fool of his mate. 'Cept, didn't need that stupid*

bleedin' cousin o' mine ter make a fool o' me. Nah, did that all by meself. Thinkin' that Avon loved me.

Avon and Blake were still kissing, small sweet nibbles, so caught up in the passion of their reunion that neither one of them seemed to care that there was a Revolution going on around them. Vila started to leave, damning them, hungry to let them go to hell in their own handbaskets, but when all was said and done, even if Avon didn't love *him*, he certainly loved Avon.

"Pardon me, don't let me interrupt or anything, but you two do have a Revolution to take care of, if you can stop snogging long enough, the rest of us would really appreciate it."

Blake and Avon turned towards him with choreographed grace, neither one fully letting go of the other.

"Yes, of course," Blake said, moving forward, pushing past Vila. "And as soon as this is over and we've destroyed the pestilence that is the Federation, Vila, I shall take great delight in spending several hours with you, finding out just precisely what you've been doing this past year or so." He stepped through the door, finally losing all *physical* contact with Avon. The last phrase came over his shoulder as he went off in search of his Revolution. "I won't rest until I've heard every single last detail, my friend."

The expression on Avon's face when he hesitated before Vila said more than words ever could. Or should. They stood for a moment, staring at each other, neither knowing what to say. Avon opened his mouth to speak, but was forestalled.

"Avon? Come on, man. We have a tremendous amount of work to do."

Avon hesitated a second more, then, driven by emotions he had yet to beat into submission, hounded by the fear that he had thought resolved by Restal's words, he followed Blake.

As he always had.

As, Vila was miserably certain, he always would.