

VIII

AND SO IT GOES: THE DOME CYCLE

*“More? What do you mean you want more?” complained the Glaswegian. “Just remember this: life is not tidy and neither are endings—especially in **Blake’s 7**.” But the editor wants to know what happens next and so she is pleading—in print—for the author to write more stories set in this alternate **B7** universe.*

THE WAY OF IT

M. Fae Glasgow

AVON THOUGHT HE WOULD SURELY BE SICK. The food was an overcooked, limp, distorted mess, awash in an ocean of oil and the hand placing the plate before him was grimy in the extreme, black crescents of dirt caked under the ragged nails, fingers stained from smoking weed. He glanced up at Vila, who had followed the benefactress back to the antique cooker.

“But mam, me and my friend just need a place to stay for a while, until we can work out what we’re going to do next.”

The woman kept on stirring the pot, a frown knitting her brows. She was tall, taller than Vila, but with his same fine, fair hair. Her great waterwing breasts filled her floral dress from chest to waist, the fabric threadbare, the flowers faded like old funeral wreaths. “Yeh, son,” she said, “but you’ll be bringin’ nowt bu’ trouble t’yer family ’ome, win’t yer?”

“Nah, mam,” Vila said, voice sliding into Delta tones, body language shifting, mutating. Avon watched, fascinated, as the transformation progressed, displaying a truth Vila had gone to such great, chameleonlike lengths to hide. “Lissen,” the thief was saying, “it’ud only be fer a bit, jest till we get on we’re feet, then, it’ud be off, scarpered. An’, while we’re ’ere, we can ’elp wiv all sorts o’ stuff. An’ I can thieve, like wot I used ter. Was the best o’ the whole bunch, weren’t I, mam? C’mon, mam. least give us a shot, let us ’ave a proper go. We need a place ter ’ide, a bolthole. Why doncher call a family meetin’, let the whole brood decide.” His mother slowly stirred the mixture in the pot, not refusing, but certainly not agreeing. “Mam, when all’s said an’ done, we’re *family*.”

“Yeh, tha’ yer are, t’ain’t no denyin’ it. But the thing is, son, is the fancy Alpha one o’ us?”

Avon filed Vila’s blush and nervous glance away for future study. “Yeh, mam,” the thief muttered. “Told yer already, ’e’s me mate.”

Vila’s mother came over to the battered kitchen table and the fastidious Alpha sitting there with such incongruous elegance, not even pretending to partake of her hospitality, despite his hunger. She examined him, then glanced pointedly around the room, at the discolouration of the walls, the worn-out, patched sofa-bed, the corner set aside for the seedy kitchenette. “’E don’t fit in, Vila me lad,” she said finally, an edge of regretful sadness softening her voice. “Never work, so it won’t.”

“But, mam,” Vila said, and this time, it was the desperation of his tone that Avon filed away for future examination, “don’t matter none if it’ll work or no’, right? ’E’s me *mate* an’ that makes ’im one of us, don’t it? Yer can’t turn ’im out, mam, cos ’e’s me mate.”

She looked at them, one to the other and then back again. “Yeh, ye’re right. ’E’s family, now, yer’ve brought ’im in. All right, get on the blower and tell yer granda there’s ter be a family meetin’ the night, straight away, soon’s nosh is done. Go on, git on wiv it, great lazy lump. An’ take yer pretty frien’ wiv yer. ’E’s makin the ’ouse look dirty.”

Less than two hours later, Avon found himself in a carbon copy of the first home, the same tattered plastics furniture, the same questionable degree of cleanliness, the same forlorn plants battling to bring some semblance of hope to the barren waste, and yet

another reproduction print hung over the wall heating grate. Here, however, there was a great press of humanity—or Vila's family, at any rate. With tears in his eyes, the thief was making his way around the room, patting cousins on the back, smiling at his elders, always keeping a weather eye on the diplomatically silent Avon. The Alpha hadn't needed Vila's whispered plea for silence—he could see that, amongst this class anyway, his accent would not be welcomed and he would be labelled as a part of the society that strangled this life of theirs, excising all hope of improvement by a mere accident of birth. Instead, he sat on a hardbacked chair in a corner, limiting himself to a raised eyebrow as one Restal after another strolled past, sizing him up, and, unfortunately, finding him lacking. Surreptitiously, Avon checked his gun, readying himself for whatever fate had waylaid him for this time.

On trial, segregated in the dock, as it were, Avon occupied himself by observing the people who were his last and only chance. All attempts to get off planet had been miserable failures, calls closer than he could comfortably bear, and there was not a single person on Earth that Avon could ask for assistance—not if he wanted to stay free, that is. Unexpected laughter drew his attention to a jocular group over in the far corner. At first, Avon couldn't see what had pooled the small crowd, but as a pair of behemoths moved out of the way, the two teenagers were revealed, *in flagrante delicto*, at that. The two young men, oblivious of the amusement of their elders stood together, the redhead against the wall, the taller one with black hair rubbing hard against him, mouths and hands bonding their bodies together. Avon smiled at the irony of it: growing up, his home had had separate rooms for breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner and every other possible activity, but here in the Delta depths, one room sufficed, parents and children sharing everything, privacy a state of mind and nothing else. He looked away from the orgasmic couple, granting them an invisibility they neither needed nor noticed. He glanced around the room, inundated by the voracious vivacity here, the aura of living intensely, knowing that life was indeed short. Almost in the centre of the room, an argument was in full swing, to the obvious and full enjoyment of both the participants and the audience, with particularly good insults being greeted with applause and the unimaginative cliché eliciting howls of contempt. For a moment, Avon thought back to his own childhood, with its endless, formal afternoon teas, sitting side by side

with his brother, dressed in matching navy blue suits, perched on hard back chairs like parrots waiting to perform. In the wake of Avon's gaze, harsh looks from the Restal clan followed, hostility answering the perceived condescension in the Alpha élite's eyes. The mutterings grew, along with the air of rejection and despite Vila's frantic attempts, Avon could almost see his relatives digging their heels in. Fascinated, Avon watched Vila, watched the way the thief had shed his façade of a semi-respectable upbringing, completely re-adopting the mannerisms of his own class, his fearful nervousness replaced by an air of confidence, justified, it would seem, by the respect accorded him by even those obviously his elder. Here, Vila was in his element, the milieu perfect for him, a celebrity amongst his own level, boosting his ego, creating an assured manner.

The comptech let his attention wander around the room, trying to ignore the miasma of unwashed bodies and raw alcohol. Close to the ceiling, the air was a golden-grey mist, a cloud of weed-smoke, eating up what little oxygen was unconsumed by the host of people.

Worry creasing his face, Vila came over to crouch in front of Avon, bringing them very close together, making private conversation possible. "It's not looking too great," he said, speaking Alpha to the Alpha, "and unless we can convince my old granda to override everyone, I don't think they're going to let us stay."

"So much for your assertions that Deltas have more honour than Alphas."

Bristling, Vila snapped back at him, "If you weren't so bloody toffee-nosed, we wouldn't be having this problem anyway. Look, Avon, you've got to mingle, forget your high-falutin' background and remember, if these folk don't take us in and hide us, Servalan'll catch us in two seconds flat. And I for one don't even want to think about what she'll do once she gets her claws in us."

"And what would you have me do? It would take several weeks without bathing to even begin to merge with this...."

"Don't you take that attitude here! I'd like to see you keep clean on the water rations we get down here—this isn't your fancy Alpha levels, you know. So keep your opinions to yourself until you know what the hell you're talking about."

Angry, Avon stood, opening his mouth to deliver his exact and detailed opinion, but the sudden hush in the room silenced him. He stopped, uneasy under

the harsh glares of every single person in the room, man, woman and child. A great bruiser of a man sauntered up to them, staring directly at Avon, speaking to Vila. “Yer...’mate’ givin’ yer a bit o’ bovver, is ‘e? Want me ter sort ‘im out fer yer?”

“Nah, nah, ‘s’all right. Jest a bit o’ a row, yer knows ‘ow ‘tis, under strain an’ on the run an’ all. Leave us ‘alf a mo’, jest need a quiet word, that’s all.”

Reluctantly, the man stepped back, ostentatiously giving them privacy, but just as blatantly keeping a very close and warning eye on Avon.

“That’s me cousin, Jak. He’s really hard, works as a persuader and I’ve always been his favourite. If he thinks for one minute....”

“It would surely be a miracle. Vila, what the hell is going on here? Your family are obviously not as willing to shelter us, unquestioningly, as you had promised. What is wrong?”

“You are. You’re so bloody arrogant and...” He broke off as a withered old man tottered in, leaning on a cane, disdainfully waving off a helping hand. “All right,” the voice wheezed, “Where’s me grandson? Where’s that little bugger?”

“Right o’er ‘ere, granda.”

“Nah, nah, doncher move, I’ll come ter yer. Only exercise I’m up fer, these days. Ah, so this is yer mate, is it?”

Vila glanced nervously at Avon, who had risen to his feet, pleading silently for the tech, just this once, to follow his lead, praying that the desperation of their situation would force the Avon’s hand. “Yeh,” he said to his grandfather, keeping it brief, trying not to put his foot in his mouth too quickly.

“E’s a pretty ‘un, I’ll grant ‘im that. Bit posh, though, in’t ‘e?”

“Yeh, but t’ain’t ‘is fault, ‘t’were the way ‘e was brought up, weren’t it?”

“Yeh, can’t ‘old a man’s past agin ‘im, t’ain’t fair. D’yer think ‘e’ll be able ter fit in?”

“Do you think you will be able to speak directly to me, rather than behave as if I were a retarded imbecile?”

“Oh, got a sharp tongue on ‘im, ‘e ‘as, ‘asn’t ‘e? Wotcher doin’, son?”

“I beg your pardon?” Avon questioned, glancing at Vila for a translation.

“He wants to know how you are,” Vila said, very, very quietly, looking from one to the other.

“As well as can be expected, considering the present circumstances.”

“Oh, ‘e don’ ‘alf talk nice, do ‘e? An’ what are yer

‘present circumstances’, eh?” The affable old man disappeared, to be replaced by the family patriarch. His eyes were as brown as Vila’s, framed by a ripple of wrinkles. “Wotcher done ter me grandson, that ‘e’s gotter ‘ide from the Bitch Queen ‘erself, eh? You answer me tha’, sonny.”

Avon stared him down, his inherited arrogance drowning his common sense. “I,” he said pointedly, “have done absolutely nothing to the little fool. He had the same misfortune as I—he became caught up in Blake’s rebellion. And that, not I, is the reason why Servalan would be after him. If she knew that he was still alive, that is.”

Vila groaned in disbelief and the old man turned on him with a creaking of bones and a visible rage. “You told us she were after yer, you little sod. You been lyin’ ter us, Vila me lad? Yer been tellin’ tales agin, ain’t yer?” A gnarled hand came up to grab his shirt front. “Wotcher do a stupid thing like that fer, eh?”

“Well,” Vila vacillated, glancing apologetically at Avon, trying to save the man’s life, unsure if he’d be killed for his efforts. “Like I said, ‘e’s me mate, granda. Do anythin’ fer ‘im, I would. Yer know ‘ow ‘tis, yer remember that far back, don’t yer?” He closed his eyes for a moment, as horrified disbelief flared in Avon’s.

“Vila...” the tech warned.

“I have to tell them, Avon, otherwise they won’t let you stay and how long will you survive here, in the main dome, with Servalan after you? Don’t forget, she’s got Orac now, and that bucket of bolts is about as loyal as a clapped out prostitute.” With one last glance of apology, he turned back to his grandfather, speaking to him loudly enough for the entire host of family to hear. “Granda, can’t ‘elp it none, I love the stupid bugger an’ ‘e’s the one wot I’ve picked fer me mate.”

“Vila!”

Vila ignored Avon, continuing undeterred. “‘Tain’t ‘is fault ‘e’s the way ‘e is an’ honest, ‘e ain’t as bad as he seems, mean ter say, ‘ow’d you be if yer ‘ad the entire bleedin’ Federation after yer blood, eh?”

Avon stood agape, shocked enough not to speak, until survivalist instincts awoke and took over. He glowered at Vila, his expression as sour as his disposition, but kept his peace.

Old Ewan Restal watched his grandson’s purported mate through slitted eyes. “I’ll let yer away wiv lyin’ ‘bout the Bitch Queen bein after yer, cos yer was protectin’ yer mate, an’ that’s right an’ proper.

Now though, yer definitely tellin' the truth 'bout 'im bein' yer mate? This is yer last chance, Vila me old son, set us right an' none'll say a word agin yer, bu' if yer keeps yer trap shut now an' I find out later that you was tellin a whopper, yer'll be fer the off, grandson o' mine or no'. Well? Wot's yer word on this, eh?"

With unwavering honesty written all over his face, Vila lied through his teeth. "No two ways 'bout it, granda. 'E's me mate, come hell or bloody 'igh water an' 'e's family. Yer shut 'im out, I leave wiv 'im. Jest no' possible fer me ter stay wivout 'im, simple as that."

Only Vila's youngest niece, searching for her mother's nipple, broke the silence, her cries wrinkling the room's stillness. Old Ewan stared at Avon, who stared back, uncowed, damned if he was going to beg. "So yer 'is mate, are yer, eh?" Restal wheezed, pausing to clear the phlegm from his throat. "Well? Are yer?"

Avon didn't even glance at Vila, sparing only the barest flicker of his eyes for cousin Jak and his equally enormous friend looming on the horizon like enthusiastic thunder storms waiting to happen. "Yes," he finally said, continuing over Vila's involuntary sigh of relief, "yes, actually, I am."

"S'obvious why 'e picked yer, but wotcher pick 'im fer? 'E ain't much ter look at, always been right small fer 'is age and not a pretty sight. So why 'im, eh?"

This time Avon did spare a glance for Vila, full of sardonic humour and sharp edges "Well, now, appearances aren't everything." He cast a quick look around the room, gauging just what would be the answer that would win him refuge, deliberately switching on his considerable charm, his conspiratorial, delightful smile winning answering warmth from reluctant stone. "Being a skilled thief, he does, after all, have very gifted hands."

Loud guffaws and Vila's blush greeted the words and abruptly, the mood of the family volte-faced, the tension fleeing, replaced by conspicuous bonhomie. "Yeh, 'e 'as that," the old man laughed, wiping his rheumy eyes, giving Avon one last appraisal. "Yeh, yer'll do. All right, kith and kin, Avon 'ere is one o' us, Vila's mate. Treat 'im like on o' the family, protect 'im an' share wiv 'im wotever we've got. Soon as yer make it official, yer'll be out o' the Bitch Queen's reach, fer as long as yer need."

"Make it official?" Avon asked, casting aspersions at Vila, voice giving Vila enough rope to hang himself. "And how, exactly, do we do that, old friend?"

Vila shuffled his feet, blushing, getting redder and redder as Avon's look sharpened and the laughter around him became ever more uproarious, the comments flying through the air with the greatest of ease.

"Wot, Vila, yer've gotten all shy in yer old age, 'ave yer?"

"C'mon, Vila, wotcher waitin' fer? 'Fraid once yer start on yer pretty feller yer won't want ter stop?"

"Oi, that 'ud be fine, we'd jest all watch an' 'ave a rare old time, right?"

"Vila?" Avon's voice was as smooth and lethal as the light from a gun.

"Yeh, well, actually, they just wants us to...to, well, just..." Vila stumbled, unable to find the right words, vacillating from accent to accent.

"Go on wiv yer, tell 'im! 'E can cope, 'e's a big boy!"

"So yer bleedin' 'ope! Jest keep yer eyes off 'im, 'e's Vila's an' doncher even think 'bout touchin' another man's mate, sonny jim, yer knows better."

Throughout it all, the backslapping and the joking comments, Avon's eyes remained fixed on Vila, who was busy looking anywhere and everywhere, as long as it wasn't at the tech.

"C'mon, son," Ewan said with some asperity, suspicion beginning to colour his voice. "Anyone 'ud think yer was lyin' 'bout 'im bein yer mate, an' yer won't 'ave done nuthin' tha' stupid, will yer? So get on wiv it, make it official."

Eyes downcast, Vila took the two steps that separated him from Avon. He swallowed audibly and slowly slipped his arms around the stiffening man, looking up finally, trying to explain silently, asking Avon to understand that necessity, in this case, was certainly a mother. A small smile twisted the comtech's mouth, his expression unreadable, as he waited, impassive, for Vila's mouth to touch his. At first, the kiss was tentative, shy, but as the comments around them became more ribald, more questioning of their affiliation, Vila deepened the embrace and Avon allowed it, opening his mouth to the insistent tongue tip trying to intrude with such delicate, restrained politeness. Vila held on tight, kissing and kissing him, nibbling Avon's lower lip, pressing them closer, sucking a reluctant tongue into his own mouth. A round of spontaneous applause chattered around them, freeing them from the display. Breathless, Vila drew back, instantly looking away, turning back to his grandfather. "Well," he said, "that official enough fer yer, eh?"

"Yeh, that'll do jest nicely, son," the old man said.

“All right, that’s it, Kerr Avon is now Kerr Avon-Restal, until ’e picks a feather fer ’is name, so’s none’ll find ’im. ’E’s one o’ us, an’ part o’ everything we got an’ responsible fer as much as every other wifey in the family.” Vila closed his eyes in horror, scrunching his face up, dreading the reaction he was sure must be written all over Avon’s face. Fortunately, any Alpha élite would have extreme difficulty comprehending all of Delta speech, understanding the gist rather than the details. Before any more could be said, the call went up for the chair carry and several beefy behemoths descended upon them, each pair linking hands to form a perch, others lifting the two ex-rebels off their feet and onto the human sedans. Amidst great cheering and lewdly friendly congratulations, they were carried into the flat’s only bedroom and tossed onto the small bed.

Old Ewan was the last to leave, as was his right as head of the family. “Now, yer listen ter me, sunshine,” he said, wagging a finger at Avon, “doncher do nuffin’ ter hurt me grandson. I’ve always ’ad a soft spot fer ’im, and yer’ll be dead meat if yer does a rotten thing ter ’im. Yer hear me?” He grinned at the pair lying tumbled on the bed. “An’ don’t do nuffin I wouldn’t do—was I forty year younger!” He shuffled out, the closing door, guillotining the spilled light from the other room.

Vila lay in the dark, on the lumpy old bed, waiting for the sky to fall in on him. “Well, why don’t you say something? I had to do it, there wasn’t any other choice, d’you think I wanted to lumber myself with you as me mate and before you kill me, you’d better just think about what me old granda said, because he meant it and....”

“Shut up, Vila.” Vila shut up: that voice had been frighteningly calm and quiet, exactly the way it got immediately prior to flailing Blake. “Tell me,” it continued, still distressingly reasonable, “why the hell you didn’t explain to me what you were doing? Don’t you think it would have been sensible—not to mention decent—to at least *warn* me that the price for shelter was to pretend to be *married* to you?”

“Married? Who said a dickie bird about marriage, eh? Told them you were my mate, didn’t I? And any case, what would you have done, if I had told you first? You’d’ve gone off shooting, getting yourself killed, for what? Pride, that’s what. Look, Avon, she’s got Orac. You touch a computer anywhere, and that friggin’ machine will find you. Here, in the Delta levels, is the only place you stand a chance of staying free. Jenna and Cally tried to rescue us from that mess

at Control Central, but they just got themselves caught, didn’t they? So we don’t have a ship to run to, right? And we know that those rebels that got killed were the last organised group left, so what good would it have done to go anywhere else, eh? When it comes right down to it, hiding amongst the Deltas was the only chance we had.”

“And you, in your infinite wisdom, decided to claim we were ‘mates’. Oh, I understand why—your family made it quite plain that the only reason I’m being protected instead of sold off to the ‘Bitch Queen’ is because I’m your ‘mate’ and I concede that it was necessary. But surely, even from the depths of your stupidity, you could see that warning me in advance would have been the intelligent thing to do? Although, that does explain why you didn’t do it.”

“Oh, pack it in, Avon. I’ve just saved your life, and what do I get? A thank you very much? A ‘oh, I do so appreciate what you did’? Nah, I get complaints, don’t I?” He rolled on to his side, facing away from Avon. “Believe me, if there had been any other way, any other way at all, I’d’ve done it. But we were stuck, caught between a rock and a hard place, so I had no choice. And as for telling you....I value my life too much—didn’t want to give you time to come up with any nasty ideas for revenge.”

The silence was long and fraught, then Avon sighed and spoke. “Well now,” he said, “it seems that I do owe you an apology for not thanking you. However, it also seems obvious to me that you need to tell me exactly what the situation is and how long this is likely to last.”

There was an aggrieved sigh from the other side of the bed. A body was huffily rearranged and Vila propped himself up in the darkness, leaning on a decrepit pillow. “Well, we don’t do things like you Alphas, down here. We’re not allowed to get married, so we just pick mates and that’s good enough for us. When you’ve got a mate....a man can’t even *look* at anyone else, just not the done thing, and anyway, if you did, your family—or your mate’s family—will be after your blood, so you can see why I’m not exactly thrilled about being stuck with you. All the drawbacks and none of the good bits. As for practicalities, that’s easy. The Federation don’t bother much with us, don’t even register us as individuals until we get caught doing something wrong. They just send the contracts down and then the food allos come when everything runs smooth, so that’s how some get the basics. The rest...steal, or earn a bit of money doing other stuff, usually going on the game.”

“Going on the game?”

“Prostitution. Oh, you can wipe that sneer off your face. Just because it’s dark in here doesn’t mean I don’t know what you’re doing. Going on the game is respectable, down here. Better’n being a burden and it’s fed many a family, I’ll have you know.”

“Well now, I suppose I should feel grateful that you didn’t pick *that* as our cover. But,” he said, sitting upright, dusting off his clothes, “now that we do have a bolthole, we can begin to plan how we shall be getting out of this mess. First of all, I want you to start finding a way for us to get passage off planet and...”

Fear knotted with a seaman’s expertise in his stomach, but Vila knew that this was the moment the entire truth would rear its ugly head. “Hold yer horses, Avon. We can’t do that—she’ll have the ports sewn up tighter than a virgin’s knickers, so how...”

“Because, Vila, we are now part of the great unwashed masses and as such, invisible, which means...”

“That we’re Deltas and Deltas aren’t allowed near the ports at the best of times. All the dirty work there is done by Gammas or robots, cause we don’t have the education. You really don’t know anything about life down here, do you?”

“What do you expect? I had never even met a Delta until I encountered one in prison. And if you don’t start telling me the things I need to know, I shan’t get to meet any more. Although that hardly seems like a hardship, does it now?”

Vila ignored Avon’s sharp tongue, as usual. “All right, time for an education, then. Firstly, Deltas aren’t allowed on the upper levels, so it’s not just cause you’re an Elite that you never saw one. A few of the Delta-first grades talk to the Gammas about work schedules, but that’s as far as any of us get to go, unless we end up as crimos, of course. Anyway, Delta work is all here in the Bowels, we take care of the basic mechanics of Dome life, like the lighting and heating power units, the air circulation vents, sewage and all those interesting, fun things, that’s the only teaching we get. And that’s it. No access to ports, no computers, not even basic food prefab units. Nothing.”

“There must be more—after all, you can at least read.”

Vila laughed, an ugly, bitter sound. “Course I can read—I’ve been processed by the Law a good seven or eight times. Prison’s the only place Deltas pick up any reading at all, and then only enough for the forms

and rules. Then living amongst you lot, with all them books and stuff... Anyway, there’s not many who’ve had that kind of opportunity. More info you need to know. Delta levels are like a separate little Dome, all to themselves. The Federation don’t bother us much, apart from the occasional raid, and we just do our work and take our food and that’s about it. So here, you pay your dues to the Terra Nostra and we make sure folk follow the rules in our own way.”

“Yes, well, I’ve seen cousin Jak, I’m quite certain I can work out how.”

“Yeh, exactly. And I’m serious, Avon, they’ll kill both of us if they find out I lied to them about you being me mate. Family doesn’t put up with lying and you ought to see what the Nostras do. Actually, you shouldn’t—it’d make you lose your breakfast.”

“If this is such a potentially hazardous situation, why did you take such a stupid risk? Courage is hardly in character for you.”

“Oh, stupid, is it? Well, it’s kept you alive, hasn’t it? Look, Avon, we’ve been through a helluva lot together, what with Blake and Servalan and all, I couldn’t just leave you out-Dome. It’ll be getting rainy out there soon, and I’ve seen what that does to a man caught in it.”

“So, you helped me out of misguided loyalty.”

“You really are horrible sometimes, you know that. We’re here, we’re safe, for as long as you can keep to yourself and out of Servalan’s sight.”

“But, according to you, still with no access to the ports, because I can’t use the travel facilities as myself and Deltas can’t go there. To all intents and purposes, then, we are not free from Servalan, merely held in a larger prison.”

“Merely still alive, you mean. She gets you...” Avon’s hand suddenly covered Vila’s mouth, silencing him, leaving the sounds from the door suspended in their quiet. Catlike, Avon slipped from the bed, gun drawn, motioning for Vila to follow. He was ignored, Vila continuing to sprawl on the bed. “Oh, Avon, forget it. It’s not a pack of Federation troopers, it’s just the youngsters trying to listen to us.”

The tech slapped the light on, holstering his gun and pulling the door open. In tumbled two teenagers and grimy waif of about ten years, rat’s tail hair flying. They took one quick look at Avon and squealed, “Scarper!”, disappearing into the crowd in the living room. Vila came up behind Avon and grabbed the tech in a one-armed hug, slamming the door shut with the other. “You daft?” he asked, shocked. “You trying to make them realise that I was

lying to them? They find that out and we'd be at Servalan's for tea and the Nostras would have us for dinner. And I don't mean we'd be guests, either."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Going to the door like that."

Avon heaved a long suffering sigh. "Going to the door like what, precisely?"

"Fully dressed, of course. I tell you, we had better hope none of the adults saw you there, I mean, we're supposed to be in here having it off, and you have to go up there, bold as brass, covered from head to foot in your bloody leather suit. You really like trouble, don't you? God, I'll be glad when we get a flat of our own, I'll be able to keep you out of bother then."

"Vila, you...."

"Lads? Can I come in?"

The two men stared at each other, Ewan Restal's voice startling them.

"Er, jest a minute, granda," Vila called. He raced for the bed, stripping off as he went. "God, he'll kill us, if he finds out we were just talking."

Avon took one look at him, one look at the door, the one which led directly to cousin Jak, the Terra Nostra and/or the 'Bitch Queen' and immediately followed Vila's example, casting off his clothes rapidly, jumping under the blankets, arranging himself decorously. Vila clambered in beside him, and reached an impertinent hand over to ruffle Avon's hair and rub his lips, the other hand tapping the tech's cheek, reddening it.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Avon hissed.

"Making it look like we've been going at it, of course," his companion hissed back, "So start looking decadent." He ran his fingers through his own hair, pinching his cheeks and biting his lips. By the time he had raced through this repertoire, Avon had to admit that the effect was, indeed, decidedly dissolute. "Come in, granda," Vila called, voice deliberately husky.

The old man shuffled in, a bottle in one sagging cardigan pocket, two glasses in the other, a third clutched in his gnarled hand. "Jest thought I'd bring yer a drink, an' apologise fer the youngsters, like."

"Oh, yer shouldn't o' bovered, granda," Vila muttered, one leg casually draped over Avon, one hand idly resting on the other man's chest. "Sorry 'bout no' lettin' yer come in straight away, but we was...well, yer know."

The old man cackled, a delighted grin beaming from him, false teeth gleaming in the bright light.

"Yeh, I can imagine. Oh, yer can wipe that look from off yer face, Kerry, me old son." He apparently didn't notice the gimlet daggers Avon launched at him, continuing blithely. "We don' stand on ceremony like yer do Upstairs an' yer'll 'ave no secrets down 'ere. That's the way of it." He ogled them, astute eyes taking note of the intimacy of their pose, the flush on their faces. He nodded, satisfied. "I'll 'ave yer know, I used ter be a right raver, in me younger days. Try anything like that an' I'd jest keel over, these days, more's the pity." He passed them each a glass of the dark red liquid, raising his glass in a toast. "May all yer days be long and full o' worth," he said, in the tone of a man speaking directly to Fate, "an' all yer troubles little ones."

As Avon brought the glass up to drink from it, tears filled his eyes. The fumes were, to put it mildly, potent. Vila knocked his back in a single draught, gasping in satisfied pain as the raw booze hit his throat. "Thanks, granda," he said, checking on Avon, relieved that the tech was being so thorough in his subterfuge, subtly, but noticed by Ewan, moving slightly so that Vila's hand was rubbing against his chest. Satisfied with the display and the reassurances of truth, the old man creaked to his feet, leaving the bottle behind, with a wink and a rude gesture. "See yer in the morning," he said, patting an outraged Avon on the rump. "Sleep well, the pair o' yer."

The door closed behind him, reducing the noise to a dull roar, a bad tempered lion. Limp with relief, Vila collapsed in a heap on top of Avon, groaning with embarrassment as the other man pushed him off. "God, I'm sorry, Avon. Nothing personal, honest," he lied, "always happens to me when I'm scared, thought granda thought we weren't doing anything, that I was lying to him."

"And fear gives you an erection?" Avon asked, in clear disbelief.

"Every time."

"Then you must have spent half your life in a state of embarrassment."

"Oh, at least half."

Glancing at the uncomfortable Vila out of the corner of his eye, Avon murmured, as if asking what the other wanted in his tea, "I suppose you shall have to...take care of certain matters, then?"

"I'll have to jack off, if that's what you mean."

"I'm not entirely familiar with the vernacular, but I'm quite sure I understand your meaning. Well, do whatever you have to do." He rolled on to his side, turning his back to the thief. "I am going to sleep."

“Before you do...” Avon would have sworn the voice itself blushed, “we should make sure they all think we really are going at it, otherwise, they’ll be dead suspicious, so...I’m going to take care of myself, but I’ll be as noisy as I can and we’ll make it sound right, or we will, if you can make the bed bounce a bit, you know, get the old rhythm going.”

“No.”

“What d’you mean, no?”

“I will not sit and bounce a bed to convince eavesdroppers that...”

“That’s the key word, Avon. *Eavesdroppers*. All them people, including cousin Jak, listening to make sure that you really are me mate and worth the risk of hiding you from the Nostras and Servalan.”

Avon stared him down for a minute, then pointedly looked at the tented blanket over Vila’s groin. He shook his head, then began to bounce the bed, grimacing as Vila moaned and groaned in companion rhythm, harmonising with the imaginary thrusts. Despite his best intentions and all the good manners his nanny had so painstakingly drilled into him, he found himself watching the veiled movements of Vila’s hand and the peak that hand was sliding up and down on. Carefully, he started matching his shoves down on the bed with Vila’s strokes on his cock, moving faster and faster, transforming the white bedspread into a whirling snowstorm. Faintly, amidst the almost theatrical moans, Avon heard a small sound: the minuscule click of the door being eased open. The noise from the other room had subsided, the silence of forty bated breaths. Avon’s glance flew to the door and then down to the flushed face of the man on the bed and he realised there could never be a ‘fate worse than death’. As the first face, the wizened visage of old Ewan Restal, bridged the gap, Avon threw himself on top of the shocked thief.

“Avon?” he quavered, pelvis pushing up into the unexpected warmth covering him, asking what the tech wanted, convincing the host of family that this was, indeed, a true match. Avon’s mouth fastened on his, keeping him quiet, silencing the damning questions. Vila felt cool hands grip his shoulders, a long body pressed to his, the weight full and satisfying on top of him. At the touch of silken pubic hair on his hard cock, Vila came, spilling his seed over Avon, dragging his mouth free, crying out Avon’s name. At this romantically satisfying conclusion, a collective sigh rose from the doorway, and the door

was pulled to, the viewers convinced the couple had no idea of their little test.

Left alone and unobserved, Avon pushed off of Vila, taking a corner of the sheet to rub himself clean. “I am beginning to wonder what is worse—being stuck here as your mate or running to Servalan.”

“S’all right,” the muffled voice replied, answering the unspoken question. “Wasn’t personal and you don’t need to worry ‘bout me doing that kind of thing again. When I get randy, I’ll usually take care of meself in the bathroom, so you won’t even know. And don’t bother suggesting I go to one of the girls ‘on the game’, ‘cause I’m lumbered with you and....”

“They’ll kill you if you stray. I’m beginning to think the Delta lifestyle is more dangerous than that of a revolutionary.”

“Only if you lie or cheat or steal from family. Speaking of which, cousin Dav—he’s Jak’s big brother—will be the one to help us find a place to stay, but it’ll take a while. Granda’s house is far too small for two extra bodies.”

“It seems sufficient for three people.”

“Yeh, but he’s not here on his own, is he? He’s got his grandson and his family and Jess and her baby, so...”

There was a sudden uproar outside and a heavy pounding on their door. “Raid!” The cry was raised, galvanising everyone into their prearranged roles. “Raid!”

“Quick, Avon, get up and throw your clothes on,” Vila shouted. Old habits, fortunately, die hard, and he was instantly dressed and gathering up the very few personal belongings they had carried with them. “We’re heading for a safe house, only got a couple of minutes to get there before the raid hits.”

Avon bit back his question, busy with dressing, frustrated by his lack of knowledge and expertise in this lifestyle, his hands tied by ignorance.

Vila chattered on, filling Avon in, keeping his own mind off their imminent danger. “We’ll make for a hiding shed, keep out of sight of those friggin mutoids. Unless you want to end up with your kidneys in one man and your heart in someone else?”

Avon stopped halfway through snapping his jacket closed. “They pick people up and use their organs?”

“Nah,” Vila said, suddenly serious, “to the Federation, we’re not even people. We’re a cross between slaves and walking organ banks. Now, c’mon, get a

move on. If we're late, they won't wait for us, and believe me, you don't want to get caught by the bloody mutoids."

Six weeks and eleven raids—a new record—and Avon was by now utterly familiar with the pattern, as confined and restricted by that as by his time in the dim, grey limbo of hiding amongst Deltas, trapped as much by boredom and enforced inactivity as he was by Servalan's guards crowding all the exits out of the lowest levels. Unless he were willing to risk the burning rain and the poisonous mists outside, he was mired precisely where he was.

Early in the morning, the alarm had been given yet again and Avon was once more pressed against Vila, for the first time since it had been unavoidable that once, but this time, despite the fear radiating from the thief, an erection was conspicuous by its absence. As before, as always, for every single one of the uncommonly frequent sweeps as the Federation combined a donor drive with a search for Avon, he was hemmed into a small, unlit room, crammed with people, with seemingly dozens of Vila's extended and close-knit family. The smell was almost overwhelming to Avon, the heat and crowding claustrophobic, but he kept quiet, hardly breathing, listening to the encroaching, approaching sounds of an entire battalion of mutoids methodically, mindlessly, searching for 'donors'. Avon instantly recognised the new sound that filled their shelter with such dangerous volume—Vila's youngest niece, colicky and hungry, exercising her lungs. With everyone else in the room, Avon looked at her, at the frail teenager cradling her crying baby in her arms, shushing her, rocking her, trying to get the baby to suckle, anything to quiet her and protect the family crowded in the sepulchral gloom. As if in response to a signal in a language Avon did not know, every eye in the room lowered, leaving the little mother sequestered, despite the horde. Avon alone watched her, her blue eyes meeting his, filling with tears, turning them into an ocean. Slowly, her hand rose, palm covering her baby's mouth, fingers pinching the tiny nostrils closed. Horrified, Avon stared as the infant struggled weakly in her mother's arms, the baby frightened and uncomprehending of this cruelty from the kindness of her mother's hands. Avon started forward, opening his mouth to speak up for tiny Riva, the mutoids be damned, when a hand covered his mouth in painful echo of the weeping girl's. Vila's hand was inexorable, his eyes full of pain and anger as he glared at

Avon, silent, impotent fury at the injustice of life raging from him. Cousin Jak gripped Avon's arms, holding him immobile, hammering in the final nail in the infant's coffin. Drowning blue eyes met Avon's again, then slowly, she lowered her eyes, watching as her baby's struggles faded, body spasming faintly, limply sinking into death.

The clash of the mutoids' booted feet on the walk outside their refuge grew, a wavelike crescendo, finally muting into the distance, but no one moved, bitter experience having taught them that safety only returned with the mutoids' departure for the upper levels, screaming trophies in hand. The lookout finally sounded the all clear and Jak freed Avon's arms and Vila released his mouth, instantly pulling Avon in close, spitting the words into his face. "Don't say a fuckin' word," he raged, with controlled and agonised quiet, "she *had* to do it, didn't have no choice, either the baby or all of us, that's the way of it down here. But you—you had to make it worse for her, didn't yer? Don't you understand? Up on your fancy Alpha levels, you look away if someone burps at dinner, to make it easier for them to cover it up, but no, here you had to stare at her like a bloody arbiter while she had to kill her baby." Upset by a scene he had faced too many times, Vila slipped into the Delta accent, as he did with ever increasing frequency these days. "Fact o' life, hereabouts, Avon. Sometimes one has to die to save the whole group, that's just the way it goes an' none of us like it, but all we can do is make it as unawful as we can. So don't you dare say a word ter the girl, she'll have ter live with this the rest o' her life, jest like we all will." He shoved Avon away from him, trembling with grief and fury, turning on his heel and fleeing the room. With Jak at his back, Avon watched him go, then looked towards the young mother, slumped on the floor against the wall, tears streaming in silent cascades down her cheeks, stroking her baby's fine hair, crooning words of love to her dead child. Old Ewan hobbled over to her, in the father's wake, waiting until the young man, little more than an adolescent himself, covered his firstborn's face with an aged handkerchief, then wrapped her in his jacket, prying her out of his woman's arms. The old man patted the young man on his shoulder, in unspoken sympathy. "We'll give 'er a proper, decent burial, out-Dome, if yer like, wiv flowers and sky and real light shinin' on 'er. Do it the morrow, before our Jess 'ere gets too out o' it, the way the women do, when they've 'ad ter do summat like this. All right, lad?"

The youth nodded mutely, grateful that at least the old man had enough past behind him to know better than to say the terrible words, "You're young, there'll be more young'uns fer yer." The old man stepped aside, allowing the quick and the dead to pass.

Cousin Nell took Mac's girl's arm, gently bringing her to her feet. "I'll take care o' yer lass fer yer," Nell said, thin hawk-face worn in the paths Jess had only just started on. "Yer can see ter the babe first an' then come an' take Jess 'ome wiv yer, or yer can stay wiv me the night, we can always find room fer two more, lad." She patted him on the cheek, then kissed her fingertips, resting them briefly on the covered head of the dead baby, a ritual benediction repeated by every one of the Restal clan as they filed slowly by, each one sparing a word for the father, a blessing for the baby, leaving the bereaved mother alone, for the moment, granting her the dignity of her grief. There would be time enough, in the way of the Dome, to mourn with her, to help her bury her loss as they would bury her daughter.

Avon and Jak were the amongst the last to leave, and Avon found himself face to face with Jess, the one member of this large and rowdy family who had accepted him unequivocally from the beginning. At the look in her eyes, unbeliever though he was, Avon brought his fingertips to his lips and brushed them against Riva's forehead, then he stepped silently from the hiding room, Jak on his heels. The big man, for the first time ever, walked beside Avon, as an equal, not behind him, as a watchdog. Disgusted, Avon realised that it had taken his participation in a ritual of sympathy for an obscene tragedy, the result of the cancerous inhumanity of the Federation, to win the acceptance of the Restals. Outrage and impotent ire speeding his pace, Jak rushing along beside him, Avon hurtled with controlled fury through the grimy, grey, forlorn streets of the Delta sector, feeling more affinity for the grimly quiet man at his side than the pampered members of his own class, reclining in plush hospital beds, waiting for transplants to prolong their lives or undo the damage of overindulged weaknesses.

Without a word, they parted at the door of Ewan Restal's house, Jak going on upstairs to the room he shared with his wife and four children, Avon to the solitude of the bedroom he lived in with Vila, striding past the family members clustered in depressed silence around the kitchenette table. He stormed around the empty bedroom, needing to vent his rage,

trapped in the small room by his Alphaness, imprisoned by the differences that marked him to other Deltas, the signposts that would have them send him directly to Servalan's lair. He glowered out of the window, watching with sick anger the nightly ritual of the neighbours in the flat opposite. Time after time, the man raised his arm, connecting with an audible slap and piercing scream with the face of his wife, as his children sat cowed in a corner, looking on, listening and watching, saucer eyed, as their mother begged their father to beat her and spare them. "That's the way of it, down here," was all Vila had said when Avon had commented on the brutal behaviour. "That's what you grow up with, that's what you learn, that's what you do." Repulsed, he hauled down the blind, shutting out the sight, muffling the noise. Adrenalin boiled through him, fueling his body, driving it to activity. He looked around at the patina of grime that so offended him and all good sense fled. He threw open the door and strode outside, without his bodyguard, without the protection of the Restal clan.

He roamed the back roads for hours, his pace finally slowing as some of the anger burned itself out. He wandered along the streets, as they were called, the term a far-flung echo, preserved by poverty, of the days when the Dome was first built, by the ancestors of the people who now endured the same harsh realities in their turn. Eventually, he turned his steps back towards the area where he stayed, under the close confines of the protective custody that the Restals used to maintain his freedom from Servalan. It was past time, he thought, for Vila to have gone home and past time for him to wend his way back also. Unlike the born Delta, however, he could not—would not—accept the grimness of the day as an inevitability. He was an Alpha, without the years of defeat bred into his genes, without a lifetime's struggle simply for the minimal necessities of existence, without the destruction of spirit that comes from living in a cauldron of strife. He turned a corner, back straight, arrogant good-breeding covering him like a cape, and walked straight into a group of men lounging against the eroded wall. Instincts flared, warning him that these were precisely the kind of people he most needed to avoid, so he gathered himself, wishing fleetingly and futilely for a gun. He used the only weapon he had available: the primal air of dominant male, the tacit declaration of dominance of the one over the many. The group closed in on him, undaunted, a pack readying for the kill.

“Well, well, well, wot ’ave we ’ere?” the first man asked, a filthy hand shoving greasy black hair off his forehead.

“Juicy piece o’ meat,” one of his cohorts answered.

“Pretty an’ all,” the voice leered behind Avon and the tech whirled around, fingers jabbing for the jugular. A huge hand grabbed his before the blow could land.

“C’mon,” Jak said, “don’ cause no trouble, sunshine. No offence,” he grinned at the six men closing ranks around them, “’e’s Vila Restal’s new mate an’ ’e don’ know ’is arse from ’is elbow, born off world, ’e was.” The Restal name worked its usual magic and the threatening violence faded into wary truce.

“Yeh?” the leader muttered. “Well, yer can tell Vila that it don’t matter ’ow big a shot ’e is nor ’ow big a gang ’is family is, if ’e don’ keep ’is fella under better control, ’e’s fair game, next time. We don’ want no trouble wiv you lot, bu’ this is our turf an’ ’e’s ours, if ’e comes strollin’ in ’ere like Lord Muck agin. Got it?”

“Yeh, yeh, jest a mistake, won’ ’appen agin, honest. C’mon, Kerr, Vila’s bin lookin’ fer yer.”

The fury started by little Riva’s death hadn’t even begun to truly dissipate; it had merely been beaten down into a hard, unforgiving lump in Avon’s belly. The anger rose again, foundation for the towering rage this humiliation built in him. He refused to speak, closing Jak out, ignoring his lecture, barely even registering his explanation of following him to get him out of the tight spots his ignorance would tangle him in.

For the second time that day, Avon and Jak parted silently and in shared anger at the door of Avon’s purdah. This time, however, when Avon went in, there was one person present, one other person not attending the wake for the sacrificial baby. Head tipped back, Vila took another hefty swig from the bottle of raw booze, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, an expression of dark, dangerous anger blackening his face.

“An’ where the fuck ’ave yer been, eh, Avon? Wotcher think yer doin’, runnin’ off like that, makin’ me look like a fool in front o’ me family?”

“Shut up, Vila. And put that bottle down—you’ve done more than enough drinking these past weeks.”

With slow deliberation, Vila corked the bottle and got to his feet, walking with the careful steadiness of the very, very drunk. “Don’ yer go tellin’ me ter shut up, Avon. This is my turf we’re on, not yours, yer out o’ yer depths ’ere, yer needs me fer protection, like

wot I needed yer wiv them Alphas. This t’ain’t some fancy Alpha ship, wiv clean sheets and all the water yer can use. This is real life, Avon. An’ yer me mate an’ I asked yer a question. Remember the rules? Mates share everythin’, good an’ bad, stick up fer each other, no matter wot, takes care o’ each other in every single thing. All tha’ stuff, Avon, an’ me out thievin’, an’ runnin’ an’ hidin’, runnin a stable o’ kids ter steal, so’s I c’n get yer food an’ a place ter live an’ parts so’s yer can build yer ruddy gadgets. An’ fer wot? A matey who runs off, leavin’ me ter look the fool.”

Wrinkling his nose at the rank smell of alcohol, Avon turned his back on Vila. “You’re drunk and pathetic, a feeble excuse for a man. And how dare you complain about me, when Jess had to murder her own child today.”

“Yeh, she did, din’t she? An’ fer wot, eh? So’s yer can go runnin’ off an’ risk gettin’ killed. Oh, that’s nice, tha’ is. Nice thanks ter give the girl, tha’ is.”

Anger boiled over and Avon faced Vila, venting his spleen on the only available target. “Worried about nothing except your pathetic pride, just like Blake and his damned Control Central. How dare you rail at me for getting out of this prison, when you have crawled off to hide in yet another bottle. Complaining about working, as usual, when I can’t so much as set foot out that door without one of your cousins ’escorting’ me, unable to speak above a whisper in public, in case someone outside of your brood hears me and turns me in. Nothing to stimulate my mind, not that you’d understand that problem, no one to speak to, apart from illiterate dolts and a drunken fool. You disgusting, petty little man.” He stormed out of the living room, slamming the bedroom door behind him, picking up Vila’s discarded clothes and hurling them across the room. The door was flung open behind him and Vila walked in, displaying the firm control of the habitual heavy drinker, the result of the practice he had had for the past six, dreadful weeks, as he slipped back down into the mire of his past, sinking below the surface of the septic tank that was acceptable behaviour in the Delta warrens.

“Just shut up, Vila. I’ve heard more than enough today.”

“No yer ’aven’t. Weren’t jest pride wot ’ad me so friggin’ worried, y’know. Terra Nostra been sniffin’ round ’ere like a pimp around a gal.” Avon turned to face him, a question on his face. “Lookin’ fer the ’fancy man’, they was. An’ if they’re after yer, then so’s the Feds. An you ’ad ter go an’ run off like that,

worryin' me sick." He shuffled into the bathroom, grabbing the medicine bottle and dissolving two pills under his furred tongue. As an after thought, he took another one, making a face at the taste, then brushing his teeth to clear some of the sewage out of his mouth. He could still hear Avon, pacing back and forth with measured tread, the sound of a caged panther. The drugs hit his system, rushing through him like a gale force wind, neutralising the alcohol, leaving him depressingly sober. "Waste of perfectly good booze," he muttered, rinsing his face in cold water.

Avon paced evenly, never interrupting his stride as Vila squeezed past him within the small confines of the bedroom. "Well? What else do you know, about the Nostra searching for me."

"Just that," Vila said, crawling under the covers, shivering in the cold. "God, I wish Upstairs would stop monitoring the heating system so's we could turn it on early this year. Bloody freezin' in here."

"The Terra Nostra, Vila." The voice demanded, impatient.

"Yeh, well, not much to say, really. Sent a couple of their hard nuts around and about, askin' about a fancy bit o' stuff that's been told to them."

"Damn!"

"Means we'll have to rearrange the relatives, and hurry up getting a place of our own, can't risk granda."

"No, idiot, it does *not* mean getting our own flat, it means getting off Earth and away from this miserable prison."

"And how do you propose to do that, eh? We've been through this till it's coming out my ears. We can't get you access to computers, cause Orac'll find you. We can't get near the ports cause none of the 'fixed' papers'll get past the security systems there an' the mutoids'll eat anyone who so much as looks suspicious to them. And considering they're walking vampires, that covers a helluva lot of people."

"No, there is a way, I simply haven't found it yet. I have been stuck in this limbo for over six weeks now, and I refuse to continue living like a rat in a trap."

"There's no *choice*, Avon. It's been like this down here for hundreds of years but you plan on paintin' a new picture in a few weeks? Deltas get to work themselves to death, so's you bloody Alphas and the Betas and the Gammas can live a life of privilege. D'you think we *want* to live like this? D'you think we like never being clean enough, never having any decent food, knowing that our kids are going to grow up to a life just as bad as ours?"

"Then why the hell haven't you done something to change it?"

"How? And to what? Year after year, we lose babies like Riva and older kids like Ven's lads, and every year, we lose mothers and youngsters to the blues, they just get so depressed they pull away from people and hide in their own little worlds. And the rest of us have to watch it happen and pretend that we don't care, that it's not important, that it's just 'the way of it'. Cos if you don't, you can't survive. So anyone who can break out of here, stays out, even if it's by joining the Nostra or going to work in one of the dope dens. It's still better'n here, in some ways. I'm the first ever to be stupid enough to come back, and if it hadn't been for Blake, I'd still be gone. There's no hope down here, Avon, no way out. You get born a Delta, you live a Delta, you die Delta. Can't break the cycle."

"If you weren't so afraid of work..."

"Afraid of work? You've seen how hard it is just to survive down here. Girls pregnant before they're sixteen, usually, boys having to feed a family, old parents needing looked after."

"You steal everything else, why not contraceptives?"

"Cause the only ones we can get to are Gamma grade ones, and they don't block the extra fertility gene that's bred into us. After all," he said, with aching bitterness, "our fatality rate is so friggin high, they had to do something about our population drop."

Avon turned his back on him, resuming his pacing, brow knit in thought. "I will not accept this as my fate, Vila. I will get out of this and..."

"And what? Disappear off, to some other planet, leaving the rest of us stuck here?"

"And what would you have me do? Take the entire brood with me?"

"No, but you could at least do something for them. Look at you, all spit and polish and why? Cause we all know you're an Alpha an' that I've gotten to be like one too, so they give us more'n our share of the water, just so's we can be as clean as we like. Well, almost, anyway. An this," he waved his hand around the room, "all this for just two people, when Jak's got his four stacked to the ceiling in his place. And what have you done in return, eh?" he asked, the day's strain stringing him taut again, the unresolved anger bubbling up. He stood up, coming closer to Avon. Faintly, they could hear the neighbour next door start in on his mate, the yelling soon to escalate to blows, both men appearing

bruised and battered the next morning. As always, an unchanging, debilitating cauldron of violence and anger, one feeding on the other, a never ending supply of vitriolic energy. “Hear that?” Vila asked. “That’s what my family think I should be doing to you.”

“Then that merely proves that your family are as...”

“Want to know why?” Vila continued, talking over Avon’s words. The Alpha raised an eyebrow at Vila’s assertive behaviour. Here, in his own milieu, a celebrity among his peers, the thief was a very different man, but this was the first time it had ever carried over into their private conversations. “They say you’re making a right fool out of me, what with me working me fingers to the bone and you not doing a hand’s turn.”

Avon stiffened with anger at the unfair comment. “Are you implying I’m lazy, for that, coming from you, is an affront. As you well know, I cannot even go outside without risk, so how...”

“Look at this place, is what they’d say. We’re mates, an’ I’m playin’ the role of hubby an’ that makes you me wifey, fer now. But you do nothing around the house, and they think it’s cause *you* think it’s beneath you. So they all snicker and laugh at me behind me back, an’ make fun of me cause you never let me lay so much as a finger on you.” Avon opened his mouth to speak, but the tears glistening in Vila’s eyes shackled him, making him incompetent, as always, when it came to other people’s emotions. “Not even a finger, and you know what that makes me look to them. Probably why the Nostras’ve been sniffing around for you, too.”

“You are trying to say that because we do not indulge in public displays of affection, people are beginning to feel that I am no longer your ‘mate’ and therefore no longer protected?”

“Avon, listen, will you? You can hear them next door, when they fight and *when they make up*, right? And upstairs, and Jess and Dan in the front room and...”

“Point made.” He turned away, going over to the lone chair, the farthest point from Vila. He knew only too well what was coming, had seen the inevitability of it but had no desire to hurry it along. Sentimentality, was, of course, weakness, probably more so here than on the front line of the Resistance.

“Avon,” Vila said, following him, kneeling at his feet. “Don’t you see? You’re risking both our lives ‘cause you won’t fit into the lifestyle down here.”

“I refuse to become an under-washed, under-educated...”

“Stop it! Shut up!” Vila screamed at him, lurching to his feet, yelling out weeks of fear and humiliation at Avon’s thoughtless, supercilious hands. “What d’you expect, eh? You’ve seen what we’ve got down here, an’ how little that is. An you, d’you try an’ help, no, you just turn your nose up at us, making me ashamed of me own mam, not cos it’s her fault, but cos she’s so common and ignorant that she doesn’t even know it. But d’you know what’s worst? It’s feelin’ like that even though I know my folk are good and strong and proud, but seein’ them through your eyes, watching you sneer at the dirt and the way they say things... “The volume lowered, the defeated sadness bleeding through. “An’ all the time, them askin’ me why I’m with a prick like you, why I’m lettin’ you treat me as bad as you do, why I’m stickin’ with a man the likes of you when I could just announce that you’re not me mate any more and go off and get me someone nice, who’d take proper care o’ me, cos I take proper care o’ them, provide them with a home and food and clothes an everything.” He threw his hands up in disgust. “Why am I even bothering to talk to you about any of this? Doesn’t matter to you, you know I’m not going to risk you, cos I love you too much. Just goes to prove, you’re right—I am an idiot.” He sagged back, staring at Avon with damning honesty.

Horrified, Avon sat back in the chair, disguising himself with the look of a polite man confronted with a snotty nosed child. It had never for one second, crossed his mind that Vila actually saw their situation as being the same as Jess and Dan. Oh, he had seen the warning signs that Vila hoped for a more physical aspect, but *this*...it positively flabbergasted him. To see love in those eyes, to see the fear of being hurt beyond endurance... “Vila,” he began.

“Don’t need to say a thing, I already know it. Yeh, it was just, what did you call it? Expedience, right. Well, if you want us both to survive, we’d better start being helluva bloody expedient again.”

A small smile found its way to Avon’s lips. “Does this mean repeat performances of the first night at your grandfather’s.”

“Yeh.”

Avon looked away, not answering, watching in silence. Vila accepted the rebuff and then walked heavily, dispiritedly, over to his bottle of spirits. “Drink that after your sobriety pills and you’ll be thoroughly sick.”

“What’s it to you? You won’t have to clean it up and me drinking gives us a bloody good excuse for not doing anything.” He uncapped the bottle, a twist of revulsion on his face as the fumes hit him.

“I would rather have to put up with your melodramatic moaning and groaning than the sounds of you retching half the night.”

The bottle paused. “That a proposition?”

“Of a sort.”

“Supposed to make me jump up and down for joy, is it?”

“No, but it should at least ease some of the tension and give me a break from your incessant prowling.”

Vila dumped the bottle on the table, and slouched his way over to the bed. He slumped down on it, pulling his clothes off haphazardly, tossing them on the floor, crawling into bed. He turned on his side, facing away from Avon, his words rather indistinct. “Better get on with it then, before you change your mind. An’ it’s all right, I’ll lie on my stomach this time, so you won’t even have to see anything.” He looked at Avon, almost as if he were memorising the strong and beautiful face, the love and fear of rejection bright in his eyes.

Silently, Avon came over and sat on the bed, discreetly turning his back also. He felt the mattress begin to move and glanced over his shoulder, to see Vila undulating under the covers, obviously rubbing himself on the bed. The thief’s face was turned aside from him, but he could see every move under the blankets. “Be more convincing if you make some noise, too.” Vila’s voice was oddly flat and stuffy.

“Tell them I’m the strong silent type.”

There was no answer, only a break in the shrouded body’s movements. Vila picked the rhythm up again, shoving harshly against the mattress, creating a convincing, if solo, racket. His face was red, sweat beading his furrowed forehead and Avon watched him, engrossed. The thief pounded away, in lonely pursuit of pleasure, a mixture of lust and hurtful emotions blended into his features.

Hesitantly, Avon reached a hand out to touch the uncovered shoulder, knowing what Vila wanted, knowing what survival required, knowing that his own body was screaming at him for relief, of any kind. As if stung by an electric shock, he pulled his hand back, leaving it hovering mid-air, as Vila stopped his motion, rolling on to his back. His nipples were brown and small, in the low light, the skin pale and pearlescent, dark hair lying smooth and flat

across his chest. “Avon?” he asked, keeping his eyes closed, holding his breath.

“I am no vestal virgin to sacrifice myself for my honour, and sex does not seem so high a price to pay to elude Servalan.”

Vila stretched out, settling himself comfortably as Avon stripped and came into bed, apparently completely at ease in this situation, as in almost every other. He fitted his body on top of Vila’s, snuggling their cocks and balls together, enjoying the duty far more than anyone could ever have the right to. He could feel Vila’s muscles, the satin strength buoying him up, cradling him in equally supportive arms. Eyes wide with the struggle to bury his hopes before it was completely too late, Vila leaned up into a kiss, ushering the new tongue into his mouth, arms hugging with matching strength. Avon stopped for a moment, framing Vila’s face with his hands, staring into the dark eyes. He had been forced into a decision, a choice: did he stick to his high morals and make this friend, this lifejacket unhappy, or should he at least try, and run the risk of making them both happy? Vila solved his dilemma for him, manhandling him back into the land of the living, groaning as he cupped Avon’s genitals with the same firm strength as the dark man cupped his face.

Warm hands lifted his penis, starting a smooth squeezing motion, filling it with blood and Avon with unexpected fervour. “Vila...” he said, quietly.

“Shh, ’s’all right, I already know. ’S not the same for you with me. You’re not in love with me the way you were with Anna—or Blake,” he answered, his voice a stiletto knife in the dark, slipping past Avon’s defences and impaling him.

“I’m sorry,” he stroked Vila’s face, hands following an imaginary line from his cheeks straight down to the thief’s nipples, catching them between finger and thumb.

“What’s there to be sorry about, eh? You’re here with me, not with them, so that’ll be enough for me.”

The only answers to that were cruel and for once, pained enough by the grimness of his current reality, marooned on a spec of dirt in an ocean of enemies, Avon forbore, using his mouth to kiss, instead of deliver invective, using his sharp tongue to make Vila shiver, not cower. Wordlessly, he allowed the tightly-reined passion in him to creep forward, hands and mouth and body covering Vila, touching him everywhere, doing everything Avon liked himself and everything every lover of his had ever appreciated. Vila’s balls filled the palm of his hand to perfection

and he rolled and squeezed them, to a syncopated accompaniment of loud moans.

Desperate hands pulled Avon's face up from Vila's chest, bringing him eye to eye with the fevered expression and evident love. Vila stared at him for a long moment and Avon allowed it. In the Delta warrens, death came all too swiftly and hardship was the only way of life. Avon may well have been an emotional cripple, better with computers than people, but he was no fool. The warmth was a balm to his spirit, a rebellious, revolutionary yell that neither Servalan, nor the Nostras nor Darkness itself could defeat him.

Awestruck, Vila reached up a little and kissed Avon, sweetly, gently, as if for the very first time. Avon parted his lips, felt a tongue trace his teeth, slip past the white barrier reef and fill his mouth with sensation, sending blood pounding to his groin and lust to his brain. He grabbed Vila tightly, almost crushing him, giving the thief that which he needed second most of all—a safe haven of strength, another being to fray the edges of night that always seemed descendant upon the Deltas, a way to cry that life still flourished, even down here. There was no cause for Avon to hold back this first time, the way he had had to with the virgin Blake, so he gave his needs full throttle, spreading Vila's legs, pressing his hardness to the raised line of pleasure that stretched from balls to ass. The bud there was opening in the spring rain of human closeness, uncaring whether this was love or lust, exulting only in the life.

"Ang on 'alf a mo'," Vila mumbled, returning to the voice of his past in the heat of the moment, "go' some juice in the drawer. Lemme ge' it."

Avon rolled off him, letting him up, sprawling on the bed to watch the naked man cross the room to the little table. He grinned as Vila turned and hurried back, considerable erection bobbing and weaving in his haste, wiping the smile from his face at the distress on Vila's. "Oh, don't be such a fool. I'm not laughing at you, it's simply that I never expected to be in such a situation and..."

"An' it's yer hell bent sense of humour, is it?"

"Yes—that and your somewhat bizarre speech."

"Wot's wrong with the way I'm speaking?"

"I shall tell you later, now come back here, before you lose the...point, shall we say?"

Vila walked more slowly back to Avon, a wariness tingeing his steps. Mutely, he handed the tube to the Alpha, standing at the bedside, waiting for...something, an invitation, a welcome, a warn-

ing that this would turn out to be another bruise in his life.

"Come here, idiot," Avon murmured, pulling the thief by the hand, leading him under the covers, into the warmth and out of the midnight cold, smoothing the goosepimples down, rubbing arousal back into the tense body. Vila settled himself along Avon, covering him with his weight, watching him by the dim light fading in through the street window. The Alpha lay for a moment, allowing the look, as he had before, but he was far from a patient man, twisting suddenly, pinning Vila beneath him, hard cock surging, hands demanding. Vila spread himself, wrapping his legs around Avon's waist, drawing the flared head of his penis to the bud awaiting pollination. A slick finger probed him, easing muscle, asking tacit permission, a mouth on his blotted out all other thought, narrowing the universe down to himself and Avon, to life and lust and the undeclared love smuggled in under the auspices of necessity.

One man pierced, another welcomed. One man thrust, another yielded. One man pushed down, deeper, another soared upward, performing their own timeless ritual, their own dance of fruition, feeding passion with passion, need with need, striving for that endless instant of perfection, orgasm screaming, semen streaming, life pulsing.

Sated, Avon collapsed on to Vila, whose arms encircled him, the thief unwilling to let go, to give up his delusions and stolen dreams quite yet. Lying still, Avon relaxed into this latest prison, uncomplaining, for the moment, of the chains Vila was busily forging from the tangle of emotion and passion. Sleep stole up and claimed him, dragging Vila with him, adding to the healing, choosing the Delta way to survive grief and fear.

The arm and leg draped protectively over him were warm and limp, heavy with sleep, the lightly furred hair soft against his skin. Avon stretched under the weight, smiling, until memory returned. He rolled onto his back, turning his head so that he could see Vila's face. There were lines there he had never noticed, an encyclopædia of experience waiting to be read. Avon reached a long finger out and chapter by chapter, entry by entry, his hand read the braille of bitterness and loneliness and hard-won laughter. Quiet as a church mouse, Avon rose and padded over to stand by the window, the top blanket wrapped around him to keep out the sunless chill of the low-

est levels that never ceased, area-wide heating to valuable to waste on the drones. He stood deep in thought, part of his mind attuned to the faint snoring coming from the lumpy bed, part noticing that Jak's middle child wasn't running across to pick up fresh bread for breakfast: obviously, the wake had spilled over into the morning, the celebration of life and the living giving way to the mourning of the survivors for those now gone.

Avon held the past few weeks up to the clarity of light and was disgusted by what he saw—all those hours spent in a misshapen grey limbo, scurrying and burrowing, hiding himself away, doing nothing, suffocating in the permeating stench of helplessness. He conceded that, until things changed dramatically, he was trapped in the Delta warren, out of Servalan's sight and more importantly, her grip, but that should simply have spurred him to make the changes, alter the circumstances to suit his needs, not fume and fritter, watching Vila skid lower and lower into the dregs he had so recently been freed of. No, immobilised he might well be, but certainly not helpless. Looking down on the street as first a few sluggish workers, and then more, until a veritable crowd churned their way through the day, he planned. He built scenarios, razed them with efficient ruthlessness, restructured, laid foundations, asked questions until he found the answer he wanted, the one means to turn this debacle into triumph, or at least, revenge—the selfsame thing, in Avon's view.

Clutching the blanket closer, he hastened back to the bed, the cold air finally registering with him. He perched momentarily on the edge of the mattress, until the frigid temperatures drove him under and he gathered Vila into his arms, warming himself inside and out. He said the thief's name, not bothering to whisper, knowing that Vila would never be awakened by so minor a disruption. He said "Vila!" again, shaking him for good measure. A third and a fourth attempt were equally unsuccessful.

"You ought to try the old fashioned way—wake me with kiss."

"You have all the subtlety of Travis in a torture chamber."

"Well, can't blame a man for trying, can you? Any way, it's all your fault, if I get ideas. I mean, I wake up, expecting you to be up and off, but you're not, you're here and cozy and snug and...."

"Oh spare me Vila, you sound like melodramatic viscast."

"Just thought it might be a good idea to do a bit

more convincing, you know, get the dogs off our scent."

"Do you honestly think that now, so soon after yesterday's death and disappearances, that your interminable relatives will be paying the slightest attention to what we do—or do not—practise?"

"Especially now, cos this is when family pulls in closer, to help those that have lost and just to enjoy the ones we still have. Gossips at full speed after the raids, with everyone worrying about everyone else's health and their love-life."

"So they shall be watching, shall they? It would appear that voyeurism is endemic amongst your class."

"Better than the drugs in yours!" Vila snapped back, stung. He started to pull away from Avon, but muscular arms tightened, refusing him. A firm penis pushed against him, mutely suggesting a better way to end the comments.

"Shall we kill two birds with one stone, Vila?" Avon murmured into his ear, breath tingling.

"You mean, fix the way we always end up arguing and be a bit more expedient, for the family?"

"No," was the answer, lips depositing little kisses around the rim of Vila's ear, "I mean, the expediency for your family, and the expediency for us—six weeks is too long to be satisfied with just once."

"Oh, a right little sexpot, are you? Get an extra libido for your birthday, did you?"

"Naturally. The Federation had to do something about *our* dropping population and so...they gave us a slight extra on our chromosome."

"A built in aphrodisiac! You ought to find out how to do that, Avon, you'd make a fortune." He paused to stretch down to squeeze Avon's turgid erection, letting go only long enough to gather his own cock in his hand, to hold them together, head to head, almost millimetre to millimetre, silken skin slipping against warm silken skin. "Then again, do that, and you'd be too busy to ever do this kind of thing, wouldn't you?" Emboldened by Avon's silence, by the mouth still engrossed in kissing his neck, he continued. "I'd rather be poor with you, than have tons of money and be without you. Couldn't ever be rich, if you weren't there."

"You're sounding like a third rate viscast again, Vila."

"So shut me up, why don't you?"

Avon shut him up most effectively, tongue plunging into his mouth, hands cascading over him like a rainstorm, covering Vila, thrusting hard against him,

his straining phallus jabbing, Vila's enthusiasm drowning them both, churning Avon's still waters, bringing the depths to the surface. Avon rubbed them together, glorying in the feel of a man stretched so taut under him.

Vila freed his mouth, gasping for air, voice a hoarse whisper. "Nah, don't want to just come rubbing like that. Want it like last night, want you in me. Want to feel how big you are and how you fill me up. C'mon, mate, the juice is right beside the bed..."

Avon did not hesitate, inflamed, as always, by the image of another filled with his cock, crying his name, helpless and powerless with the ecstasy he was creating in them. One arm snaked out from under the covers, rooting around until he found the tube on the floor, uncapping it with awkward, practised, finesse, bringing it into play, anointing Vila, frowning with attempted control as strong, sure hands stroked warmed gel onto his erection, pulling back his foreskin, a delicate finger tracing liquid fire around the proud flare of the glans, feathering up to tease the slitted head. The same hands, moistened now, slid around to rest on his buttocks, gripping tightly, urging Avon down and in.

From that angle, it was, unfortunately, utterly impossible, so Avon disengaged himself from lusty hands and rolled a willing Vila over on to his stomach. Kneeling between slim, white legs, Avon reached under and fondled Vila's cock, teased his balls, long fingers trailing back up, seeking and finding the small, hungry mouth. He spread Vila's cheeks, exposing him, a lone finger soothing lotion inside, stretching him. Balancing carefully, Avon leaned over Vila, sparing a hand to guide his erection into the waiting warmth. He watched his penis disappear into Vila, ensconced, enveloped, in living flesh. The tightness clasped him and he plunged forward, so that he rested full against the plump backside under him, groin to ass, chest to spine, muscle to muscle. Wrapping his arms around Vila, small hard nipples nuzzling his forearms, he moved his hips in small, controlled circular motions, pressing against the nub of prostrate, his movements rubbing Vila's cock against the bed.

His head was level with Vila's, close enough to kiss, for tongues to measure sinuous dance, for breath to mingle. Vila murmured words of love and commitment into Avon's mouth, and was allowed to, the emotions undenied, the terms of surrender undisputed. Vila groaned, pushing back up against Avon, needing more than the sweet plundering of his body,

encouraging, demanding more, deeper. Avon plunged in and out of him, his balls slapping almost painfully on Vila with every downward thrust, racing frantically towards orgasm, coming with one final, wild push, shoving Vila up on the bed and right over the edge of sensation into the storms of fulfillment.

Calming, Avon lay down on Vila, rubbing his bristled cheek against the sweated shoulder, feeling his heart slow to its normal, pedantic rate, the evidence of lustful indulgence fading, leaving not a mark, but making profound changes.

"You all right?" Vila asked, turning his face towards his mate.

"Well now, surely I deserve praise higher than 'all right', after a performance like that."

Vila laughed quietly, echoing Avon's spoken smile, enjoying this unexpected intimacy almost as much as the sexual. "Wotcher want to hear? Best in the world?"

"In the galaxy, I should say."

Delicately, Vila shoved Avon off, rolling over so that they could lie chest to chest, with their arms enclosing the other in a circle of gladness. "Tell us then," he said, "wot were you laughin' at, yesterday evening?"

"Ah," said Avon, fingers skating a figure of eight around and around Vila's nipples, Vila's concentration skittering along behind. "Why was I laughing at you. You mean apart from the fact that you are eminently laughable?"

"Avon, be nice! If yer not, I'll tell cousin Jak..."

"I'm quaking in my shoes."

"I'll tell 'im that yer game..."

"Well, in that case—it's only that I find it amusing, the way your accent wanders from almost Alpha to definitively Delta, mid-word, at times."

"Wish you'd told me that last night. I mean, there I was, walking around displaying the family jewels, carrying my future before, so to speak, and there you were, laughing. I thought..."

"Now you see the dangers inherent in you thinking. However, when I think..." He flattened his palm on Vila's stomach, watching it rise and fall with every breath the thief took, then looked up suddenly, directly into Vila's eyes. "I come up with a way to free the Delta masses."

"Oh, listen to Mr. Modesty himself here. Look, we've been trying to find a way out of this for generations, but how can we? We're genetically marked, so's the security signals register that a Delta's there.

We're not even allowed up on the Gamma levels and the only way out is the only way Upstairs—crime. Get arrested, get transported—or promoted by the Nostras and then they send you off-world, too. The best we have to offer get siphoned off, helps keep us in our place.”

“My point, precisely. It must be possible to break the Federation’s grip on the lower levels, otherwise they wouldn’t go to the lengths cousin Jak has been telling me about.” He stopped to kiss Vila thoroughly, knowing full well that there was no chance whatsoever of his body being up to it again, but simply enjoying the luxury of closeness, of tactile contact, of human warmth. Vila began to quite happily drift off under the hazy glow of Avon’s touch, but the usually silent voice of his conscience kicked him hard.

“Leave off,” he muttered, regretfully untangling himself from Avon’s embrace. “C’mon, don’t make this any more bloody difficult than it already is. I’ll never get out of here, if you keep this up.”

Letting go, reclining on his side, propped up on his elbow, head resting on his palm, Avon watched with undisguised possessiveness as Vila covered his body from other people’s eyes. “Where are you going that could possibly be more important than staying here with me?” he said, his voice a deliberate, sexy purr.

“Oh, give it up, will you, please? I’ve got kids waiting.”

Avon launched himself up out of the bed, grabbing Vila, hands unrestrainedly roaming. “The children, Vila. Tell me, what do you teach your ‘stable’? Pickpocketing? Burglary? Lockbreaking? And for what?”

“To give them a way to make a living, to get them out of all this, if they’re really lucky. ‘Course, the money they bring in is quite nice, I suppose.”

“And yet, the best they can hope for is that the Nostra will take them and send them off planet, to work where and when they are told, to obey every rule, or be killed. In other words, you do not get rid of the chains, you merely change the slave master.”

Vila bristled, temper rising. Half way through dragging on his trousers, he stopped dead. “Better’n nothing. Would you want Servalan holding your chains, if you had a choice. No, on second thought, don’t answer that.”

Avon pointedly ignored him, continuing as if he were speaking to himself. “But if one were to *teach* them, truly teach them, educate them, show them the worlds that exist out there, the possibilities that are

being denied them, focus that hunger they have for something better....”

Vila looked at him with a mingling of horror and awe, overlain by hope. “You’re going to take over where Blake left off, aren’t you?”

“There’s no need to be insulting—unlike Blake, I am no idiot, to be caught and held incommunicado, beyond our admittedly limited means of even tracing him. No, Blake, as I always said, was an idealistic fool. He never realised that you cannot start a revolution from the top, for the upper echelons are too fat and comfortable. If one wishes to overthrow a government, one must begin at the bottom, with the people who have nothing left to lose.”

“They’ve still got their skins to lose, Avon. D’you think no one thought about having a nice little revolution before? Been tried and the minute there’s the slightest bit of bovver, in come the mutoids, kill off a generation or so and then off they go, back Upstairs, ready for the next massacre.”

Avon came over to stand directly in front of Vila, the old brown cover wrapped around him again, continuing to speak as Vila finished dressing. “And if the doors were sealed from within? And the mutoids didn’t have enough time to break through before the Upstairs systems began failing?”

With profound suspicion, Vila stared at him, apparently looking for that extra head. “How the hell will the upstairs system fall apart?”

“For just a moment, Vila, think with the organ between your ears, instead of the one between your legs. Deltas are manipulated by both the Federation and the Terra Nostra into maintaining a quite remarkable level of ignorance.”

“We’re not stupid, I’ll have you know, we can...”

“I am well aware of that. You were perfectly capable of running the sensors, once I had shown you how. And that is what I’m going to use, the untapped potential of every single person living in this sty. Think about it, Vila: the Alphas enjoy the benefits, working only for individual profit, using and developing the highest levels of technology and are the only ones with real computer skills. The Betas know how to press buttons, regulating the basic necessities of dome life, one step down. In their turn, the Gammas run the mercantile and service systems, which is the next lower level of sophistication. And then come the Deltas, who do the physical maintenance of the actual machinery that runs the Dome. Each level, Vila, is incapable of functioning in the next Class, having neither

exposure nor access to the others. Therefore, the System is safe, protected from within by the ignorance of those who serve it.”

“And you’re saying...”

“Break the system. Teach these children of yours how to read, teach them other technologies, not simply the ones their fathers’ have passed on from generation to generation, without comprehension, merely parroting back a mantra.”

“What good’s that going to do, ’cept to make them dissatisfied and downright bloody....rebellious. Oh, that’s clever, that is, Avon. That’s very clever. And you’ve got the education and the information to do it.”

“That’s right. I’m the one factor neither Servalan nor her predecessors ever expected: an élite in the Delta level, the one grade who has access to *all* data, both applied and theoretical. Imagine, for a moment, what will happen if the Deltas stop the machinery — we will have the entire Dome on its knees in minutes, for what can they do, without light, power, plumbing, food....”

“Air circulation, computers, viscasts....”

“Everything, Vila, is controlled down here, not Upstairs as everyone has always believed. That is simply another Control Central, to camouflage the true situation. All the decisions are made by the Alphas, all the ‘intellectual’ work is carried out Upstairs, but none of what they do is possible without the Deltas.”

“Yeh, I mean, if some fancy Alpha is sitting in his office and decides to do a research project on something, if it wasn’t for us, his bloody computer would just sit and stare at him, ’stead of working, wouldn’t it. His doors wouldn’t open, the communications wouldn’t work....”

“Absolute chaos. Train and organise the people down here, arm them, and we could do what Blake, for all his good intentions, never could.”

“Defeat the Federation.” A look of wonder filled his eyes, then a grin broke over his face. “If I do my fair share, will I get to be Planetary Governor?”

“If you do your fair share, I shall probably fall over in a dead faint from the shock.” He leaned in for another kiss, holding Vila close, hands massaging the aching, over-worked muscles of his back. “So are you with me?”

“Bloody stupid question to ask, innit?”

Avon actually laughed out loud, exulted and exonerated by his decisions, exhilarated by his plans. “Not necessarily, Vila. You may be with me in the

bedroom, but that is a far cry from the very real dangers of fomenting revolution.”

“What d’you think I’ve been doing, bringing you here in the first place, coming back and showing people what I’ve learned, eh? Stirring things up—accidentally, mind you, but that’s what happened.”

“Ironic, isn’t it? The true Resistance fighters are imprisoned Upstairs...”

“We hope.”

“And so the two thieves are the ones who will lead the final Rebellion, the one that will actually do what it is supposed to. Unlike Blake, who tried to free ‘everyone’, but only ever helped the Alphas and off-Earthers, who have freedoms beyond what the Dome-dwellers can even begin to imagine, and the middle grades who are quite contented to stay amidst their tranquilised dreams, *we* shall have an uprising for those who need it most.”

“Don’t mean to sound ungrateful, or anything, but what are you doing this for?”

Avon looked pointedly around the room, the best squalor money could buy. “If I must be trapped, then the cage shall, at the very least, be gilded.”

“An’ have you thought of one minor detail, in amongst all this revolutionary fervour? Thought about how to keep this all secret, cos the Federation probably wouldn’t find out in time, but the Nostras know every bloody thing that goes on down here.”

“Then why haven’t they found me? Oh, yes, they *suspect* my presence, but they cannot prove it and they cannot risk damaging your family. After all, although the Nostras can claim many members down here, they can still only function fully through the intermediaries, which means...you.”

“Me!” Vila squeaked with convincing innocence. Fortunately, Avon knew him better than that.

“Yes, you. You are quite a celebrity here in the Bowels, very popular and your skills and fame have made you quite powerful. In other words, you are a fairly large fish in a very small pond. Of course, being old Granda’s favourite does help...”

“Yeh, well, don’t look so pleased with yourself. I’ll never get his place, don’t have a good enough head for business, and that’s what this all comes down to, don’t it?”

“Yes, the business of crime and the business of revolution. I will provide the knowledge you will need, and you will provide me with the power *I* need. And one more thing, also.”

It took Vila a moment before he answered—despite being late for his ‘stable’, the group of children

he was training into a crime ring—for Avon’s mouth on his and Avon’s hands on his bum were far too distracting to be cast aside for mere responsibilities. “Keep on doing things like that and I’d give you my old grandma, for nothing.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, shall I? No, what I want is far less...perverse than that. I want you to teach me how to speak and behave like a Delta. I want you to teach me how to walk like a Delta, mannerisms, slang, everything. I want to be able to pass for one of you.”

“What would you want to do a thing like that for? I mean, I thought we were going to show our lot how to be Alphas, so what...”

“No, we are going to teach your ‘lot’ how to fight, how to sabotage, how to run the upper levels when we get there. I need you to help me pass as one of your ‘lot’, so that they will listen to me, so that I can have them do what I want them to.”

“Oh, so that’s what it’s all about, is it? Mega-blood-lomania, eh?”

Avon grinned, pulling Vila tight in against the tautness in his groin. “Oh, there is that. And revenge, Vila, repaying Servalan for everything she has ever done to me. Perhaps even revenge for the deaths of the others, if she has had them quietly killed. If not for that, then certainly to set them free. But most of all...”

“The injustice of all this, of people having to live like this and...” Vila trailed off, under the insistence of Avon’s caresses and the look of offended incredulity the Alpha was loosing on him with such unrestrained vigour.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Vila. I’m referring to the slight matter of the *Liberator* and Orac. They are *mine*, not hers and I will have them back.”

“And Blake be damned, eh?”

“Blake was damned a long time ago, without any help from me, the day he picked up his martyrdom to carry in his pocket.”

“You worry about him, too, don’t you?”

“Don’t be such an idiot.”

“Yeh, I mean, next I’ll be saying you’re worried about Cally and Jenna as well, and that’s completely absurd. Got nothing to do with the way you wake up in a cold sweat, shaking, calling for Cally, has it?” He took Avon’s hands in his, stroking the backs of them with his thumbs. “D’you often hear her calling you?”

Avon drew him a dirty look and turned away, withdrawing his body and his warmth, cutting Vila out as if there had never been intimacy between them,

turning his glowing sensuality off with the flick of an emotional switch. “You had better be on your way,” he said calmly, “your artful dodgers will be getting into all sorts of unimaginable mischief whilst they wait for you.”

“Avon, listen, I’m not trying to be pushy, or anything, but after last night, well, it’s dead bloody obvious it’s more than just sex for me, innit? So if you ever want someone with you when you hear Cally, or if you want someone to scream and yell at...”

“Remember what you have just said, next time you whine at me for arguing with you. Now, the first thing I shall need you to do, is give me your ‘stable’ for two hours every day and start the tribe to gathering the parts we shall need to begin the resistance preparations, and...”

“But Avon!”

“But nothing, idiot. That...”

“Raid!” the cry ricocheted amongst the incestuously close flats, “Raid!” Feet pounded, voices rose, entire families disappeared into the woodwork with the practised skill of cockroaches. Avon and Vila headed for their group’s bolthole, herding Jak’s brood before them, helping old, ever more infirm, granda.

In the interminable cycle of poverty and fear, the scenario repeated itself like a bilious nightmare, time and again, weaving its way into the daily fibre of Avon’s life, insidiously colouring his life with its tedious greyness, until the warning of ‘raid’ became little more than a routine inconvenience. Yet again, Avon found himself in a small, cramped and dark space, people pressing in on all sides. Seven months had bred a casual contempt in him, relegating the risks to somewhere far down on his lists of priorities, and his mind was far from his own situation as he fiddled with an analogue board in the pocket of his brown tunic. He felt a small jolt against his stomach and looked down at cousin Jess, not entirely certain quite how he felt about the strangely powerful sensation of life kicking against his belly, pressed as he was to the enormity of Jess’ pregnancy. He leaned down closer to catch her whisper.

“Where’s our Vila, eh? Don’t ‘e ‘ave enough sense any more ter come in when them mutoids is out an’ about?” she hissed.

“E ‘ad ter see ter the stable, ter get them on in safe. ‘E’ll be fine, yer know our Vila.”

Measured, marching footsteps thumped closer, echoing in the corridor, filling what little free space was left in the safe room. Jess didn’t answer Avon,

simply looked at him in mute disbelief, flinching as the sound of screams impaled them, going on and on. He wrapped his arms around Jess, suddenly thirsty to feel that life again, to feel that intractable surge of the future and of hope. Tiny, recognisable feet pushed on him, making him ache with worry, cursing himself for sentimental weakness, thinking of Vila and the thief's unfulfilled yearning for a family. Thinking of Vila, somewhere, with a gaggle of urchins, mutoids systematically stripping the level, ripping people away to fill the demands of the cosmetic surgeons Upstairs. He could imagine, with futile clarity, the fear that

would surely be etched on the thief's face as he struggled to keep his 'kids' safe and he could imagine how he himself looked, standing here, clutching Jess, concern about his mate writ large upon his face.

"The way of it," he whispered under his breath, trying on the Delta fatalism for size, finding it did not fit him at all. Seven months of it, seven full months of the hunting and the haunting, the tension and the strife, the vivacity and the pleasure. The heavy tread of mutoids came closer, the sound increasing, the threat approaching, as always, as ever. The only difference, this time, was Vila's absence from his side...