

SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR

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Avon's own callousness had finally done what all Servalan's scheming cruelty could not. It had defeated him. With the death of Blake, at his hands, had come the end of his tenacious survivalism. He was beaten.

AVON LAY ON HIS SIDE, BACK TO THE WALL. His wrists were in restraints in front of him, and the harsh cloth of the prison uniform chafed at the cuts and bruises which covered his body. He did not remember how he came to be in such a state, nor even where he was; but it didn't matter. He was in a prison cell, most likely one of the Federation's. And whether it was on Gauda Prime or elsewhere would hardly change the fate he knew was inevitable.

Alone for hours, his mind raced down the many corridors of madness. *Blake*. He remembered Blake dying at his hands; remembered the death grip of his lover's hands on his arms while they still had strength to hold, the touch somehow warm and forgiving; remembered the sound of that deep, compelling voice calling his name once again, in almost the same tone it had done years before at moments of supreme ecstasy.

The scream brought from grief and guilt as he called out the dead man's name, echoed down the halls of the prison...or did he only think he had cried out. He wasn't sure. His memory recalled the shock and horror he had felt when those strong hands weakened and let him go. He stood over the body, looking down, watching the blood pouring out and with it the life, leaving those eyes—even scarred, Blake's eyes were compelling—to turn glassy, cold, and dead. At that moment, Avon wished nothing more than to join his wronged friend, to explain away his actions in some safe and comfortable afterlife.

But they had taken him alive. Though he had fired on the ring of troopers, and surely had killed several, they did not return fire. Instead, one simply walked up behind him and knocked him unconscious. He remembered nothing beyond that point, only pain, and Blake. Always and forever he would remember Blake.

The scent of fine perfume replaced that of harsh prison disinfectant. It was accompanied by the tapping of high-heeled shoes on the hard floor—and the

ever-present tramping of boots. It took no great feat of logic to know who was coming.

"Avon." Her voice was haughty, cool and demanding. Small, soft fingers tipped with hard, pointed nails caressed his cheek.

He opened his eyes. "Servalan," he said huskily. His throat felt strange, as if long unused. He looked past her at the guard. "You do know who this is, don't you? It is Servalan, your ex-president. The price on her head, if it were known she still lived, would be even higher than that on mine."

The guard didn't move from his position of attention at the door. Avon heard Sleer's silvery laughter. "My guards are hand-picked, Avon. Of course he knows who I am—and he is loyal to me. Which is more than can be said of you, darling."

Avon did not express anything of the revulsion the endearment brought to him. "I never claimed to be loyal to you."

"A good thing, too. For I have seen what you can do to those to whom you do claim to be loyal."

Did she really think she could hurt him with mere words after what he had done? He saw her ploy for what it was, and said nothing.

Servalan saw the fire of Avon's emotions flash in his eyes, and as quickly be extinguished. "I should thank you, Avon." She stroked his tousled hair. "The way you wrapped up the Blake Affair for me was elegant. Not merely dead, but discredited as well. Instead of thousands rallying to their martyr, half of the rebel groups, yours, will be fighting Blake's in imitation of their leaders. Not only is Blake dead, but his petty rebellion soon will be as well. I really do owe you a debt, Avon."

Have I not only killed you, my love, but your Cause as well—the jealous mistress not only destroying the husband, but the wife in the bargain? He stared at the wall past the black cloth of her skirt.

"Avon, you were such a fool," she said, touching his face again, turning him to face her. "You could have had it all."

Avon looked into her eyes, his own gleaming with the released emotions he had withheld so long.

He propped himself against the wall, moving slowly so as to not alert the guard. He took her hand from his face with his bound ones. He kissed her

fingertips. “Such a little hand,” he said softly, sweetly, “to hold such power alone. Perhaps I was a fool, after all.” *Carefully*, he thought, *make it what she wants to hear, but she is shrewd, it has to be good. Come closer.*

She came closer; her sleek body brushed warm against his legs. Avon sat on the edge of the slab and reached up to touch her, to cup her face in his hands and bend her lower for a kiss. As their lips touched he guided her to sit next to him. His bound hands excited her as they gently caressed her face and she returned his kiss with fervent passion.

Slowly, he slid his hands to her throat. As she began to struggle, he broke the kiss. “Good-bye, Servalan,” Avon said. He was strong, and could crush the life from her before the guard could stop him.

“Let her go!” The black pit of the paragon’s barrel looked inviting as Avon stared into it, gripping tighter around Servalan’s neck. He smiled.

The guard fired. Pain flooded Avon’s body, and blackness filled his vision. He was jerked back, and worse, he lost his grip on Servalan. As he fell, he inwardly cursed the guard who faintly shouted, “Bring her to Medical! Hurry!” Then his thoughts were stilled.

Avon awoke in a Federation cell. *How many times has it been? Was I dreaming*, he thought. *Did I kill her? Did I even hurt her?* Again, he could not remember clearly. He wondered why he was still alive. Orac. They wanted that and perhaps the small bit of propaganda to be gained by a public trial like Blake’s. They could put him through the latter, but they would not get the former.

Suicide, however, would not be necessary. Sooner or later, *they* would kill him.

This time there was no such special reception. There was only the beginning of routine prison life. The guards did not speak to him nor pay any attention to him. Trays of food were placed in his cell, and collected whether he ate from them or not. Avon tended to eat. There was no particular reason for him not to. Perhaps the suppressants would dull his memories.

Unfortunately, either they had the dosage wrong, or they were under orders not give him any. After a few days, he began to suspect the latter. Also, the wait for his interrogation *did* begin to get on his nerves. He wanted it over and done with. He wanted to die.

Avon could be patient, though, even under these circumstances. He did have one thing left to defy

them for, and eventually, she sent for him. He smiled as the guards took him out of his cell. He was more than ready for the final confrontation.

He was taken to a viewing chamber and strapped to a chair facing a large darkened window. Presumably, Servalan would enjoy watching his torture from the other side, having learned the danger of coming too close.

The restraints the silent guards had put on him were thorough. Avon was amused. Wrists, elbows, feet, throat, waist—Gan wouldn’t have been able to break free of the device. She was taking no chances this time.

He sat and waited.

The room beyond the window was lit suddenly to a brilliant whiteness, a blank canvas for the interrogators to paint with their macabre art. Two uniformed guards intruded black upon its purity. Then Avon felt her delicate finger caress his jaw.

“Avon,” she whispered in his ear. “I have you now, where I want you.”

“Pity that has become irrelevant, Servalan. You rather bore me now, I afraid.”

She slapped his face. “Oh, Avon. I expected better from you. After all, last time was very pleasant, up until the last.”

“I enjoyed it, too—right up to the point I heard the guard say, ‘take her to Medical’ and I knew you’d live.”

“But of course you knew I’d live, Avon.” She paused, and a look of bitterness crossed her face. “There are times when I begin to think I’d live through anything. That won’t be true of you, though. Not much longer. You will give me Orac, you will have your trial, and then you will receive your richly deserved execution.”

“The second and third events are probably inevitable, but the first is out of the question.” Something about the setting was beginning to disturb Avon: a prickling of memory, as yet unformed. “For that matter, why bother with the trial? You could save us both a great deal of trouble by just shooting me.”

“Handling you has never been any trouble, Avon.” She walked around, trailing her fingers down his collarbone, until she stood smiling in front of him. Paradoxically, she had chosen a white gown for the occasion, as if Avon’s death would somehow restore her innocence. But the style was more typical of Slerer than of Servalan. The neckline was drastically low, and the side slit very high to the hip. Her arms were bare, but a trailing white scarf went from her shoul-

ders to the floor. “And I don’t anticipate it being any trouble this time, either. You *will* give me Orac.” She touched a panel by the window and the lights in the room dimmed, bringing the chamber beyond into sharp focus.

“You might be interested to know that there was *one* survivor of your little raid on Gauda Prime.” She stood at Avon’s side and stroked his hair. “Guards, you may bring in the other prisoner now and prepare him. Inform Kessler that he may begin shortly.”

“Yes, Commissioner.” The response came loudly, over an amplified speaker.

Servalan smiled as Avon was startled by the volume. “I wouldn’t want you to miss even the slightest whimper of what’s about to occur, Avon. And Vila *does* whimper so prettily.” She faced forward as the thief was brought into the room. “This should be quite a pleasure.”

Vila’s voice carried high-pitched and whiny over the speakers. “You don’t have to do it, really you don’t. If I knew where it was, I’d give it to you. Useless piece of junk, anyway. It never liked me. You can have it for all I care. Avon!” Vila struggled suddenly with the two guards, lunging at the window. They caught him and strapped him to a chair similar to Avon’s own.

“Tell Kessler to come in. He may begin with the prisoner’s hands,” she said, prettily.

“Ay-von! Don’t let them do it! Please! Give it to them, Avon, you don’t need it now,” Vila pleaded.

A tall, thin man entered the room with Vila. He wore a white jumpsuit, and his face and hands were so pale as to almost disappear in the glare from the room. He stood next to the prisoner and unrolled an instrument kit.

“Avon!” Vila wailed.

“Let him go,” Avon said quietly in the other room. He looked directly at Servalan. “Let him go!”

“Why?” she asked. The torturer held a laser knife above the palm of Vila’s left hand. Vila’s screams became incoherent and wild. The blade hadn’t even touched him yet.

“I will give you what you want. Orac. For him. Just order them to stop. If he is hurt at all, then there will be no bargain.” Avon’s voice was hard.

Servalan nodded. “Wait,” she ordered. “What bargain did you have in mind, Avon?”

“You were willing to pay a hundred million credits for that machine once. Surely the life and freedom of one insignificant thief would be far less. Without the rest of us pushing him around, he would never

have moved against the Federation. As to any vengeance you wish to extract, you have me for that. Set him free and Orac is yours. Hurt him and you’ll never find it.”

“Good. But not quite, Avon.”

“Do it, Avon! Please? Whatever she wants! You owe me, Avon!” Vila’s voice was loud and irritating to the computer tech. There was a persistent buzzing that would not go away.

Avon looked through the glass into Vila’s eyes, glistening with tears, pleading with Avon. “As he said. Anything you wish, Servalan. I do owe him!”

She laughed. “I am not offering you his freedom. Only his miserable life. He would be taken from here to a penal colony—exactly as he was all those years ago—no better and no worse off for all his adventures.”

“It’s good enough, Avon!” Vila shouted. “Take it, please! I don’t mind, really I don’t. Avon, I don’t like the alternative...” he added looking at the torturer who straightened his instruments.

“Obviously, he agrees to your terms. The choice is his as well. Transportation will be acceptable, although I will require proof of his safe arrival.”

“The journey will take too long. You’ll just have to trust me,” Servalan purred. “Or take the alternative.”

“Very well. Bring me a map of the Gauda Prime complex and I will show you where I’ve hidden Orac. I will place in it an order to self-destruct if it ever ceases to monitor Vila’s safe existence on the prison colony. That is my assurance. I will not bargain for Vila’s life in vain.”

“Very well.” Servalan ordered the map brought.

Avon was allowed one hand free with a guard close by to show Servalan the location. Then he was re-bound.

“You two will wait here, until my agent on Gauda Prime assures me that Orac was where you said it would be. You may transmit the destruct order via a radio link, and then Vila will be sent away.” She and her guards left the room.

Avon looked at Vila. He seemed small and rather lost in the big white room. “It was the best I could do,” he apologized.

Vila nodded silently, breathing deep to calm himself. “What about you, though, Avon? I didn’t mean for you...”

“It doesn’t matter,” Avon replied.

There wasn’t much to say. They sat in their separate rooms. Occasionally, Vila would launch into a

spell of terrified babbling, which Avon would cut off with a harsh reassurance.

After a couple of hours, Servalan and the guards reentered. Orac had been found. In working order. Avon was to transmit his conditions. And Vila was taken from the other room.

“Guards, prepare the execution of Vila Restal,” Servalan ordered.

“How?” cried Avon. “The destruct order...”

“...was faked, Avon. The transmit link was hooked to a voice synthesizer which simulated Orac’s tones. *You don’t make the conditions any more!*”

“We had a bargain, Servalan,” he hissed. “Vila for Orac.” *Blake, you were right.* Suddenly the set of the rooms brought the memory to the fore. *You wouldn’t have saved me if you had given them what they wanted. I haven’t saved Vila, either, only lost your rebellion. You never did betray me. Not then and not on G.P. You were bluffing, and your bluff bought us time. My surrender has brought only death...to Vila, to the others. If I had understood then... I turned you away when we could have stayed together. I let you think that I hated you. You might never have gone to Gauda Prime, had I said simply, ‘No, I don’t hate you, Blake. Don’t be ridiculous.’ You might still be alive...* His thoughts spun wildly and a cold rage filled him. Far too late, he found himself embracing Blake’s cause because he no longer had the man himself to embrace. He hated the Federation and he was not helpless. Not while he still breathed.

“The bargain no longer holds, Avon,” she said, coming close, as in restraints, there was nothing he could do to her. “It is broken as easily as giving the order. You have nothing left to bargain with. I tricked you again. Surely you must be expecting that by now.”

“Servalan!” he shouted, straining at the straps that held him.

“Has *your* nerve finally snapped, Avon? I told you it was an old wall. It has waited long to have you bound to it. You were the only one that even came close to defeating me. And you were very close.”

“Let him go, send him to Cygnus Alpha or wherever you like, but I paid for him, Servalan!”

She smiled. “Not enough. There is only one thing you have left to offer that might even vaguely interest me.” She leaned over the chair, took his face in both hands and kissed him furiously. “And that, is your body,” she whispered as she let him go.

“Hold to our bargain,” Avon repeated. His hair fell darkly over his forehead and he met her eyes. “I

will do whatever you demand.” *I have to think of the living, Blake. I was faithful to you once you had gone. There was only ever Anna... I killed her, too. If I save Vila, my life will have been worth something...he was your friend, too. She will only have my body, Blake. My heart died with you.*

“Stay the execution order,” she commanded. “And see to it that he is taken to the transport cell.” She turned again to Avon. “A fair bargain this time. His life for yours. It will not be Cygnus Alpha, though. You know where that is. He will be sent to Corvus Nine...where there are guards and guns and facilities to carry out my orders. His continued existence will depend on your...cooperation. Do you understand?” She nodded, and the guard left.

“Yes.” He stilled the hatred burning inside him and tried to recall the desire he had felt for her. Vila’s life would be short indeed, if he could not perform. He smiled, thinking of the feel of her body pressed against his that time on Sarren... He stopped the rest of the thought: thoughts of Hal Mellanby’s death, thoughts of his daughter, Dayna.

Servalan’s eyes glittered, and she stroked his arm. “I had this planned from the beginning. There is a special cell prepared for you...more of a suite, actually, with every comfort you could possibly desire. Except freedom, of course. You will spend the rest of your life in that cell.”

“Hopefully a short one,” Avon said casually.

“I think you underestimate your capacity to please me,” she said tilting her head to the side. “Besides, you can be assured you will live for at least eight days. I have to prove you wrong.”

Avon had quite a lot of time to himself. The life of a Commissioner was a busy one, leaving little time for diversions. Servalan provided him every comfort and distraction as promised, but these things failed to hold his interest for long. It was fortunate for him, and for Vila, that Servalan’s tastes in bed ran to the primitive. He found that the edge between lust and hatred for the woman was easily blurred, and with time, he became quite skilled at pleasing her, as she became quite skilled at drawing response from him. She was with him almost constantly those first eight days, and most of their time together was spent in bed.

Among the many books and vistapes he was given to keep himself amused was the tape that the Federation’s propagandists had put together from the surveillance tapes on Gauda Prime. Over and over,

he would play the tape, watching his last meeting with Blake, studying the minutest details about the man. He would plead silently to the lost rebel, to deny his accusations of betrayal, then watch in stunned horror as the blood spattered his hands.

At night, he dreamed of holding that ragged and weary man close in his arms; of kissing that terrible scar, begging his forgiveness.

The dreams always ended in a wash of blood and the echoing sounds of the three shots with which he had destroyed the only *real* love he had ever had. Avon hated that as he woke screaming, tears streaming down his cheeks, she was watching. The monitors covered all angles in the suite. He had no privacy, not even in the bathroom. Normally, the numb acceptance of this that had settled on him on the *London* left him uncaring of the observation. But that she should see his nightmares was an invasion he could not bear.

With time, though all things will pass, and eventually, Avon ceased watching the vistape. Only rarely did he allow himself to think of the rebel leader. More frequently his thoughts were on Vila, travelling in a slow prison transport destined to a distant penal colony. He estimated that it would take a year for him to arrive. It was unlikely that luck would provide him a DSV and a charismatic leader to facilitate an escape.

As the weeks and months dragged on, he became skilled at noticing Servalan's subtle moods and inclinations. Perhaps too skilled. He was bored and she began to lose interest. Avon feared for Vila's life once she had tired of him completely. She might even goad him one last time by ordering Vila's death before his own. Their lovemaking became quite exotic at times.

Once, she stayed away for an entire week, while Avon paced in frustration. When she finally returned, she was wearing a startling blood-red gown. Avon had never seen her in colors before. It might mean anything. If she did not order Vila's death in front of him, he was convinced she would not at all. She would only use him to torment Avon; otherwise, he was just too insignificant to bother with. If she did, Avon would do his best to give Vila a 'companion for his death'.

His suspicions were confirmed when she stopped close to where he sat waiting and said, "I am going to miss you." She stroked his hair, wistfully. "Chasing you was one of the major amusements of my life."

"If you're bored with keeping me tame, Servalan,"

he said smiling, "why not just let me run? I'd lead you a merry chase."

"Oh, you're far too dangerous for that, Avon. I'm not fooled by your seeming docility. I am not about to let you go to gallantly rescue Vila and start your rebellion again with a new crew." She sat next to him. "Are you afraid?"

"Hardly." The ice was back in his voice, and his eyes glittered brightly. Servalan caught her breath. Once more, if only for a moment, he was the man she had wanted so much. She needed to tame him again, though, extinguish that fire, or her plan would not work.

"You have no reason to be." She leaned his head back and kissed him. "The solution was obvious. I've grown quite fond of you, fond enough not to want your execution. I may want to...use you again." Avon looked at her, confused. She laughed. "I sold you." She stood and watched as he registered the statement with a shocked expression. "I've even made quite a nice profit on all you've cost me. It seems your skills are quite in demand, and your looks and breeding assured a good price. Not only that, but you've been broken and trained, and you come complete with your own Delta-grade leash."

"Where?" he asked, quietly, keeping his feelings controlled.

"You might remember the place. They certainly remember you. You were there with Blake, and with Vila." She saw a flicker of pain in his dark eyes. "I sold you to Toise, the man who runs Freedom City now. You'll be working at a place called the Red Door, one of that rat-hole's better establishments, known for its...variety. You will do whatever Toise says and you will stay there until he wants to be rid of you. You'll want to do a good job for him," she purred, stroking his throat, "for your own sake and for Vila's."

"It could be no worse than whoring for you these past months has been." Avon turned his face from her touch.

She stepped away from him. "Well, you might find yourself looking on our...time together with remembered fondness. I'm sure you will hate it there, but you will perform adequately, just as you have for me." She paused. "Then again, you might enjoy it. I may even visit you again, sometime or other."

"I will constantly be thinking of you," he said truthfully. The fatal passion he had once felt for the cat-like woman was gone, replaced only with hatred, cold purpose, and the ability to control his body's reactions.

She used him again that night, and Avon gave a magnificent performance.

Toise eyed the game with a proprietary amusement. He would never allow his prized and most requested possession to play the Klute officially. The usual stakes were too much to risk. Besides, Shevron had beaten the chess genius once or twice, and Toise knew the prize he would ask for would be his freedom. He had finally drawn from the reticent man the method of his winnings with his friend a few years ago. It was the loss of the ten million credits that had precipitated the beginning of the end for old Krantor, so Toise felt kindly disposed to Shevron, and gave him a freer run of the place than most of the others enjoyed.

The Klute laughed and made his move. Shevron frowned a moment, then with only seconds to go, he made his response, a shark-like grin spreading over his handsome features. The smile sent a chill up Toise's spine. It was no wonder the Klute was Shevron's only friend in the establishment.

"You're dead in three moves," the Klute giggled as he made the first of them.

Shevron didn't lose his grin. He moved swiftly and decisively, the colored lights of the lounge glittering on the silver leather of his tunic, and shadowing the hollows of his aristocratic features. "Are you certain?" he asked, coolly.

The Klute moved again. "Fool!" he squeaked. "An obvious ploy to distract me. Check."

"Really," Shevron drawled. He chose his move and leaned back.

"You would be a rich man, Shevron. It is a draw."

"Or I'd be a dead one. You still win more often than not."

"It is good to have someone with a true feel for the ruthlessness of the game," the Klute replied.

As they analyzed the finer points, Toise watched with appreciation. *You won't always be so handsome, my pet, though you are such a pleasure and a profit to me now. You are a rare thing to find, these days: the genuine article. Fine Alpha breeding and looks, haughty appeal, skilled at the arts of pleasure. But I may have a use for you even after you've been retired.* A sensual smile spread on his gilded features. Shevron would still be imposing long after his hair had whitened, and his face aged. Dressed all in black, he could eventually become the Klute's replacement if the dwarf became too independent. Toise intended to squeeze every credit's worth from Shevron, one way or the other.

Rule of the house, Shevron. Toise wins, either way. He interrupted the players' conversation. "There is a client to see you, Shevron," he said, lightly touching his shoulder.

The large man looked wealthy and generous. His 'special requests' had brought Toise to the Red Door that night to see him. He found the pirate with his rich costume and golden jewelry most intriguing. His look told Toise's expert eye that this one wanted something special indeed. He looked to be a rough customer, but the rough ones tipped well, and it mattered little to Toise what they did. If they damaged the merchandise, they paid well for the privilege, or he had *them* damaged.

Toise sauntered over to him, resplendent in his wig and velvets. "Welcome, friend," he said, taking the pirate's arm and showing him into his private office. "What exactly can I do to make your stay here in Freedom City...memorable? I can provide for your every pleasure. Whatever you dream, whatever you most desire waits for you here." He finished the pitch with a dramatic flourish, disappointed that it failed to affect the man with the warm, haunted eyes. "What is your name, fine sir?"

"Baylor." The voice was so rich and deep that Toise was almost intrigued for himself. "Tak Baylor."

"I'm certain we can please you, Tak. Tell me your secrets. They will exist for you tonight and vanish in the morning without ever a word passing through the Red Door."

"I heard that you had a man..." Baylor began.

"We have many men."

"A special man...of the upper grades. An Alpha."

"You have indeed come to the right place." Toise sat Baylor down. "Tell me what you require."

"Is he dark?" Baylor began the requests.

"Dark and as cold as a black sun."

Toise's poetic flourishes were making the difficult and embarrassing task no easier. "I want him wearing only a brief black wraparound tunic. Soft leather, if that's possible." Blake remembered something Avon had once worn to his bed.

"A very popular fetish. We can accommodate it easily. In fact, the gentleman in question has a preference for leather clothing."

"Does he have a fine voice, a Dome accent?"

"The genuine accents of Terra's highest grade," Toise replied. "Are there any particular phrases, words he might say to thrill you? Mannerisms he might effect, instruments he should use?"

“Only his body,” Baylor answered. The man was probably an out of work entertainer, that Toise should offer such refinements. “If he is capable of a convincing performance, he should be cold and reserved, witty and sarcastic with a dangerous edge to him. But he must, of course, relent eventually.”

“It will, then, be a most convincing performance, as such is his nature.”

“I will want the entire night, uninterrupted.” Baylor set down a soft leather bag of gems. Toise checked them out, greed and appreciation for their beauty apparent in his eyes. “And I should like the room kept dark. No light at all. It would be too much of a coincidence should your man have the looks I seek as well.”

“He is everything you have described and more. If you will have a complimentary refreshment in the lounge, I shall go and see he is prepared.”

Toise left with a flourish and Baylor waited at the bar. He ordered adrenalin and soma in remembrance of a friend, and tried hard to ready himself for the illusion, to convince himself that this expensive prostitute was really Kerr Avon.

It might be enough, Avon thought, stacking the neatly-bundled credits he had just counted into the lockbox beside the pile of glittering jewelry. Tips from satisfied ladies, wealthy gentlemen...even a few keepsakes from Servalan. She had visited him three times so far, the excitement of watching him being used by others providing a new thrill for her. The last visit had been to celebrate the ‘election’ of Councillor Sleer. *All I need now is the right smuggler*. He closed the box and hid it and the baubles in a secret panel.

In days, or at most weeks, he would be free because Vila would be free. He would probably die, as Sleer would be furious, but his death was something that had been delayed eleven months now. He had to arrange Vila’s escape before that ship reached the prison. Security was at its weakest then. The ship would have to be a fast one.

Avon had long since become numbed to the pain and humiliation of his life, but had always managed a stunning performance. None of his clientele had cause to complain. Although he responded physically to them, even those responses had become distanced, muted, meaningless. In ways working for Toise was easier than it had been with Servalan. There was the anonymity of what he did, little pretense of intimacy was required, and what was, was for only brief mo-

ments of pleasure, like when he’d beaten the Klute. But now that it would all be ending soon, Avon was losing a little of that distance. The carefully built walls guarding him from his past were threatened.

He dressed in the costume that Toise had ordered him to. The soft leather felt warm on his chest as he wrapped the tie around him. He brushed back his hair and put on the carefully-designed masculine cosmetics a little heavier than usual. The client had requested a darkened room. *Cold and dangerous*, he thought as he dimmed the lights and surveyed the effect in the mirror. *You will never know, my space captain, just what truth lies behind those words. But you’re safe, wealthy stranger...because I don’t love you. How fast is your ship, I wonder?* He dimmed the lights still further and lay back on the bed. Lazily waiting, he massaged his cock through the leather of his tunic. He reached for tube of ointment by the bedside, and squeezed some onto his hand. Turning on his side, he parted the firm cheeks of his ass, and lubricated himself, slowly inserting a finger, moving it in and out gently loosening his muscles, preparing for his customer. His right hand kneaded his balls and the tumescent flesh of his cock.

For a moment, the thought of being touched by anyone, ever again, gave Avon a sense of revulsion the physical sensations he was causing himself couldn’t overwhelm. He thought of all the bodies that had come and gone, all the hands that had touched him, all the times that he wouldn’t let Blake do even the simplest of things he now allowed with ease. Mostly, he thought of Blake. He closed his eyes and remembered the warm feel of the rebel’s big hands massaging his cock, as his own hand imitated the motions. He heard footsteps outside his door. It was a large man’s gait. He brought his mind back to the present and waited for the door to open.

Silhouetted in the light from the hall, Avon could make out the bulk of his client: tall, large, dressed flamboyantly, dark curly hair catching the light in its silver strands. He turned his head and buried his face in his arms until the door clicked shut again. The customer had requested not to see him, a request that piqued his vanity.

With the light from the door, ‘Baylor’, catching his breath, stared at the man on the bed for a long moment. He was thinner than Avon had been, and perhaps a bit taller, though it was hard to tell in his prone position. His hair was a perfect match, perhaps a bit longer than he had remembered, more like in that horrid tape. It was rich, dark brown, thick with

a slight wave. His legs stretched from beneath the leather tunic Blake had requested be worn. They were long, with powerfully muscular thighs, well formed and covered with brown hair that Blake knew would be soft, as Avon's was. The man covered his face. It was well that he did, for the illusion was near perfect, otherwise. He shut the door behind him.

"You wanted me?" came the rich, silky voice in the darkness. It was amused and slightly contemptuous. The accent was as Toise had promised, the soft cultured tones of the Earth-bred Alpha Elite. It was a beautiful voice, sensual, dangerous, and alluring. But Avon, his Avon, would have snarled the words harshly, making them a challenge. He had rarely been seductive, and never gentle.

Blake walked to the side of the bed, remembering it's placement in the dark. He touched his arm, squeezing gently, feeling the strong muscles tighten under his grip. *Now that was like you Avon.* "Yes," he replied. He sat on the bed. His hands traveled the width of the prone man's chest, sliding under the leather, thrilling at the feel of his warm flesh. "You're very much what I wanted," he said haltingly. "I need you," *Avon*, his mind completed. He untied the tunic and pushed it from the man's shoulders. He slid quietly out of his own clothes and sat back down on the edge of the bed.

"I want to touch you." His companion lay perfectly still as Blake's caressing fingers explored the man's body. It seemed so familiar to him. Avon would be like that at times—tolerate Blake's affectionate needs by simply allowing him the touch, never touching back himself. He lay next to the man on the bed, and touched his hair. It was soft, like Avon's. He avoided touching his face, but instead moved his hand lower, stroking over the light sprinkling of hair on his abdomen with the flat of his palm. The other man gasped. *A good response. You are quite an actor,* Blake thought, his conscious mind desperately reminding him that this was not Avon, could not possibly be him.

Avon was stunned. He did not expect to feel anything, did not expect to want this man, this stranger whose hands reminded him so much of the hands he had imagined only moments before. The big hands were warm, and gentle, but demanding as they caressed him and stroked their way to his rising cock. Avon lay very still. *You are not Blake. Blake is dead. Don't touch me the way that he did. Don't make me remember. You have only bought my body. He still owns my soul.* Avon guided the large man down to his erection, his

fingers tangling in the tousled curls, then pulling away as if stung.

Blake slithered down the length of the other man's body, licking and nuzzling along his side and his hips. The intensity of his partner's responses pleased and excited him, but were unlike the Avon he had known. He sought to justify them within the context of his fantasy. *You must be angry, love. That's it*, he thought. *You need me, and you always hated needing me for anything.* He wrapped his arms tightly around his lover's waist and drew the cold man to him, pressing his chest against his engorged penis, licking a trail from his navel to the soft curls of his pubic hair, gently nibbling at the base of his cock.

Avon's fingers found their way into Blake's... *No! This is not Blake!* he told himself. Still, he stroked the man's curly head. *He is only a customer, only a space captain in port for a bit of fun. And he might be Vila's rescuer if you please him well enough.*

Blake smiled in the dark. "You are very good tonight," he murmured. The tension radiating from his bedmate was electric, and whether it was real or forged, it was so much like Avon's that Blake ached with desire and memory. He slid down still further to lie between the parted thighs, and began sucking and nipping gently at the Alpha's balls. His efforts were rewarded with a soft, breathless gasp. The sound tore at Blake's heart—it was exactly the response that his actions had always drawn from Avon. He nearly cried out the dead man's name. Instead, he put his mouth to the straining cock before him. Filled, he would utter no indiscretions.

The hot mouth descended suddenly on Avon, and he cried out again. This man seemed to know all the ways to draw pleasure from him. Wildly, he thrust his hips, plunging deeper into the warm wetness of his client's throat. Urgent need sped him on, perhaps rougher than usual with a paying customer, but this one had requested Avon be at his most natural. Judging from the low, rumbling moans vibrating his cock, and the thrusts of the large man's hips against the bed, there would be no complaints. This captain, this stranger who felt so familiar, took his time with Avon, bringing him close to the edge, then, changing motions, easing him down again, building desire and need at each level. Avon thrashed his head, biting into the pillow, burying within it the cry he would not allow to escape him. *Blake! You never will let me go,* Avon thought despairingly. Gunshots rang in his mind, and blood, remembered, splattered on his hands. Stretched taut, stiffening,

unmoving except for the uncontrollable quivering in his limbs, he came, pleasure and memory burning together, searing his soul. He lay silent, almost as if he were dead. The captain's mouth lifted from him, the large body sliding up, wrapping strong arms and legs around him, burying his head in Avon's shoulder.

Avon. Grief struck at Blake like a physical blow. This time the illusion had been too real, too perfect. The feel and the taste of this Alpha-grade prostitute was too much like Avon's. The wild response, the breaking of control, the stiff and almost painful way of release was so like his reluctant lover. He felt himself start to cry, hated doing so, but didn't care to stop. He buried his face and clung with desperate need to a man that wasn't Avon. Strong arms went around him and held gently as Avon never would have done before. *No, only as you so rarely did*, Blake thought remembering times that had been like this. Too few times. He hated burdening this anonymous person, this hired bedmate, with his pain, but he felt he had to tell someone. He couldn't confide in Jenna. She didn't know about what had passed between himself and the dark computer tech. She would be jealous. With reason. But he knew what would be said here would go no further, if said right.

"He's dead," Blake finally choked. "My lover. You are so like him...I can't help it. We had a fight...years ago. We had so many fights," Blake sighed. "He left, or I did, it isn't really clear. He needed to be free. And so, I never went after him. I loved him enough to let him go." The man next to him was silent. "I've wandered now for years, looking for him in places like this. Especially since I heard of his death. I look for men like you, men who will let me pretend they are him, just for one night...to let me pretend he loved me and wanted me back." Blake's eyes squeezed shut hard against the tears that flooded them. "He died almost a year ago. I was worlds away. I couldn't stop it. He died hating me."

"Perhaps...he didn't hate you," came the silken voice, even that a little like Avon's, if Avon cared, if Avon were saddened and showed it. "Perhaps he only feared how he felt about you."

The big man clutched at him and Avon stroked him. *Blake*. The memory was crushing him. The grief he had held in so long was slipping free. The story was eerily like his own, the other man's grief so honest, Avon felt the need to comfort him. He'd said the first thing to come to mind, remembering how often he'd rejected Blake, remembering how he'd hurt him

with his silence, regretting it all. He found his own eyes becoming moist, as well. *How maudlin*, he thought. But his need overcame his cynicism. It all seemed so stupid, so senselessly tragic. He held the man tightly, and buried his face in his neck.

The Alpha was shaking, and Blake felt a hot tear on his shoulder. In that strange, soft voice, filled now with a despair to match his own, he heard, "I lost my lover, as well. I never told him..."

Blake sensed the man's pain and hugged him fiercely, stroking the back of his head. *That was real, wasn't it? You weren't pretending to be my Avon. Even you are not that good an actor. You must have been so lonely here...* Blake thought. He ran his fingers over the man's face, touching the dampness at his eyes, feeling the hollows and lines there, feeling the soft lashes, running his fingertips down his cheek, tracing the outline of the fine jaw. He was feeling him like a blind man. He wanted to know the man with whom he had shared his memories of Avon, who had shared his own with him.

Blake's chest tightened. *I've gone mad*, he thought. *I've driven myself insane and begun to believe in it*. Those cheeks, those heavy-lidded eyes *were* Avon's. His fingers sought familiarities, and found them. The little crease between his brows, deeper than Blake remembered it, but there nonetheless and shaped exactly the same. The large aquiline nose that Blake had found so attractive, the chiseled, arrogant lips parted slightly. His fingers followed them to the left side of the mouth. There, just below the corner of his mouth, was a small indented curve of a scar.

"Avon..."

The voice of Avon's nightmare cut him like a knife. The fingers touched his face, stroked him, and Avon stared in shock through the darkness, unable to see, feeling the madness take hold of him again.

"You're alive," Blake said.

Then the nightmare ended. The warmth of Blake's voice was real and undeniable. Blake was alive. Blake was here, with him.

"It really is you, Blake. I thought I had..." Avon choked.

"Yes. I know. I saw the vistapes. I saw it all. I saw you die there, defying them, protecting what you thought was my body."

"Blake," Avon whispered hoarsely, the false-sweet whore's tones gone from it. "I killed you."

"It wasn't me, Avon." Blake gripped the other man's arms firmly. "It wasn't me. The man you killed was my clone. I was never on Gauda Prime, Avon."

Like Terminal, Avon thought. Again. "But I would have killed you. I didn't know it wasn't you."

"He wasn't me. That's all that matters. We can never know what might have happened if it had been; what I might have said differently, what you might have done differently. There is only what is now, and that is that you are alive, and I am alive. And even if you still hate me, I want you to know that I love you and I have never stopped loving you.," Blake said in a rush of sincerity.

"Blake," Avon smiled, "I never hated you. I was too angry to answer you then, before Star One. I couldn't believe that you actually thought..." He paused. "Blake, I could never hate you because I love you."

Blake gathered him close again, holding him tightly and kissing his neck. "I needed you, Blake. Without you, I...well I think I went mad." Avon's voice shook.

"I'm here, Avon. I won't leave you again. It's all right now." Blake murmured reassurances into Avon's ear, alternating them with intensifying kisses.

The past fell away from Avon. All he could think of now was how much he'd longed to touch Blake, to hold him, to be held by him. His mouth sought out that of the rebel leader's and covered it, tongue swirling over the moist lips, thrusting deep into his mouth.

Avon's kiss was as fierce as Blake remembered, desperately intense as only Avon could be. *How could I not have known you*, he thought as Avon's hands caressed his body.

They lay on their sides, entwined and entangled, hips thrusting, cocks rubbing against each other's belly, desire building. One thought echoed through them both—that the other was somehow, miraculously alive.

"I want you," Blake whispered, breaking the kiss. "I want you in me, Avon." His lover kissed him again for answer, then reached to the side of the bed and returned, slicking a glistening cream on his hand and his cock.

"Blake," he whispered, as his hand reached down to stroke the other man's ass, spreading the cream over the puckered opening. "I need you, too."

Blake spread his legs and raised his hips slightly, offering himself to Avon's probing cock. He pressed himself forward as Avon entered him, thrusting his hips up to meet Avon's. He lay still, then, relaxing and revelling in the feel of being made love to by the one person he never imagined he would be again.

Soon, though, Blake was panting and sweating, and Avon felt his strong hands grip his ass, pulling his thrusts even deeper. Blake clenched around him and moaned. Avon felt everything but desire burn out of his brain. He gripped Blake's shoulders and forced himself to slow down, to prolong the moment. Blake's huge cock rubbed against him insistently, and Avon loved the feel of it. He wrapped his hand around it and began to pump in rhythm with his thrusts. With each thrust, he nearly withdrew, and each stroke ran the entire length of Blake's throbbing member. He felt more alive now, at this moment than at any time since Star One, since Blake had gone.

The maddeningly slow pace of his lover had Blake gasping and trying desperately to speed him on, thrusting his hips to meet him, and clasping tightly with his inner muscles. Avon's hand stroked faster, palm rubbing over the head of his cock, slick with the lotion and his own pre-orgasmic fluids. Avon plunged into him wild with passion, breathing heavily. He looked up, wishing for a light, instead touching Avon's face, brushing damp hair from his eyes. The feel so sweet, so perfect, combined with the other sensations to push him over the edge. As he came, Avon pressed deep within him, holding still, filling him totally.

Blake pulled Avon down to him, his come and their sweat slippery between them. Avon began to thrust again; short, rapid thrusts to bring him to orgasm. Blake licked the sweat from the hollows of his throat, the taste salty-sweet. Holding on hard, arms wrapped under Blake's back, and crying out his name, Avon came. Blake held him close, stroking his back gently, calming him and easing him down afterwards.

I never want to lose you again, Blake thought. Avon was lost in thoughts similar.

"I'm taking you with me," he said, squeezing Avon possessively.

Avon raised his head, suddenly alert. "You can't."

"And why not?" Blake rumbled. "What hold does that prancing fool downstairs have on you that you won't come with me?" Old fears resurfaced. "Or is it that you would rather stay?"

"Vila," Avon said. "He's got Vila, or rather *She* has him. Servalan." Avon spat the name with more venom than he had intended. Blake squeezed him and he continued. "He's alive also, or should be. I have no proof, of course. He's on a transport bound for Corvus Nine—it should arrive there in a month. His life was the price of my...cooperation. I paid it."

Blake read the warning signs in Avon's tense body and strained voice. *Vila. Still alive. And what you had to do... Don't moralize, he thought. Don't give in to the outrage. And above all, don't overprotect him.* "You did this for Vila?" he asked, amazed at his fortitude, remembering another time when Avon had been unwilling to make such a sacrifice for him.

"He was my friend once, and I owed him... If only for the time I tried to kill him..." Avon paused. "We were in a shuttle together. There wasn't enough fuel." Avon's voice was flat, distant. "He hid, and I found another solution, but not before I had hunted him with a gun. I *would* have killed him, Blake."

"But you didn't. And with what you have done for him, I am certain he considers the debt paid." Avon slid off his stomach and curled in Blake's arm. "But why can't I take you with me? The *Rim Runner* is a fast ship; faster than anything the Federation's got short of their top-line cruisers. We'll get there in plenty of time to rescue Vila."

"I am not a prisoner, Blake. If I keep up appearances, Toise won't suspect anything...and he won't report to Servalan. She has Orac now. She can be in constant communication with that prison ship. The moment I was missing, or even uncooperative, she would order Vila's death." Avon smiled wryly. "She is, I'm afraid, quite bored with me, and it might well amuse her to kill us. Were you to mount a rescue, Blake, you would have to prevent that ship from signaling. If she hears he's free, my life here won't be nearly as easy nor long enough for you to bother returning."

"There won't be any signal," Blake reassured, with a depth of resolve Avon remembered well from their *Liberator* days.

Renny stared in awe as Vila deftly and swiftly unlocked the sealed aft compartment before the security camera swiveled to cover them again. They stood nonchalantly as it turned away. Then Vila pulled the panel open.

"In. Fast." Renny scrambled inside and Vila followed faster than the young man thought anyone could move.

"There we are," Vila said, flicking on a small torch to dimly illuminate the compartment. "Privacy. And I've got a surprise for you," he said grinning, and produced a small flask from apparently nowhere.

"Where'd you get that?" the young man asked, astonished.

"Nipped it from the commander's cabin when I

was out and about yesterday," Vila said, opening it. "I thought we could share a drink. If you're old enough to be transported, way I figure, you're old enough for anything."

"Glad I finally convinced you," Renny laughed, taking a sip from the offered bottle and putting his arm around the thief's waist.

"Me, too," Vila replied, leaning over and kissing Renny's liquor-sweetened, full lips. "Tastes nice," Vila licked his lips. "You goin' to share, or are you planning on keeping it all to yourself? I want you relaxed, not unconscious, y'know."

The sandy-haired young man laughed, his blue eyes gleaming in the light. He passed Vila the bottle. They went on exchanging kisses and sips from the flask until they were quite happily drunk and quite fully aroused. The space was small, but it had plenty of room to stretch out in, and above all, it was private.

Vila was always very discreet with the young man. He was young and attractive, looking far closer to sixteen than the eighteen years he claimed. He was Vila's and that provided him some safety; as a famous political criminal, with a reputation far out-reaching the actuality, Vila had little trouble from the other prisoners for once, so he lent what protection he could to the young man. Still, he didn't want to tempt fate, so their interludes had been hurried and infrequent. It had taken Vila some time to collect the things he needed to get into this compartment. They don't send thieves to prison with their lock picks.

For Renny's part, he had been grateful when finally, on the ship, he had met the famous revolutionary who had once been with Blake. Though only a teenager, he had been tried and convicted as an adult for conspiracy, treason, and trying to overthrow the state. He had written an article for his school newspaper about Blake and his cause, calling for his fellow students not to believe the vicious and obvious propaganda tapes from Gauda Prime. When the editor refused to print it, he did so himself and distributed it, not only on the campus, but in the Dome plazas as well. His parents were unconnected and unimportant Beta-grade clerks who quickly disavowed their son to save themselves. His mother and his brother even gave testimony against him at his trial.

In the holding cells, he discovered what happened to good-looking youths when they were locked in a cell with twenty men and no women. Renny was not a virgin; he had always felt attracted to other young men at school and had even had a couple of furtive

attempts at consummating some of the attractions. One of the 'friends' he had done so with was also more than willing to testify to his 'deviant' nature at the trial. It was one of the factors that led to a judgment of transportation, he was certain, and gossip about it had led to his being passed around and gang-raped in the holding cells.

On the ship, he met Vila. One of Blake's original seven. Vila regaled him with tales of the revolution he and Renny both fought for, but his friendship had another, more practical effect. It seemed that Blake's seven, or Avon's gang as they were now mostly known, had a reputation for violence. Even though Vila appeared to be mostly harmless, the rest of the prisoners didn't care to take the chance. Restal was an important political terrorist who had friends. So when Renny took up with Vila, it was assumed by the crimos that there was a claim there.

Vila allowed that thinking to go on, pleased by his new position of protector rather than protected, but never touched the youth. Well, not for months any way; Renny became rather insistent in his will- ingness, and Vila's resistance weakened.

With his skilled fingers, Vila undid the fastenings on Renny's tunic and trousers. The young man easily slid out of his clothes while Vila removed his own. Renny lay on his back and pulled the thief on top of him, their erections pressing into each other's bellies. Vila leaned over to kiss the young man's mouth, tongue finding easy entry.

They tumbled and rolled, enjoying the freedom of movement and each other's bodies. Renny had the lean muscularity of youth. His body was not yet filled out; it was hard even bony. His chest was smooth and hairless with small dark pink nipples that beckoned Vila's lips, which soon answered the call, licking and nipping first one and then the other. Renny let out a nearly silent gasp, barely more than a whisper. They had both learned to keep their responses quiet. The need for discretion had made them both more attentive to the subtle reactions of their partner's pleasure.

As Vila teased his nipples, Renny reached down with his left hand to grasp the straining cock which thrust at his hip. He took his own member in his other hand and pumped both in rhythm. He looked down in the dim light and watched the rebel's face as he sucked on the bit of puckered flesh. Vila was really quite handsome; his eyes were closed and his lashes rested softly on his cheeks giving him an innocent look. Soft hair pressed into Renny's chest and he

nuzzled the top of Vila's head with his chin, planting kisses there.

Vila trailed his tongue down Renny's chest, licking ribs. "You don't eat enough, lad," he admonished.

"I get enough, you just work it off me at night, you randy bugger," he laughed. "Besides, I don't want to get all fat and have you go off me, now do I?"

"You don't have to worry about that, my sweet."

Renny reached and pulled Vila to him. "Vila."

"Eh?"

"You're driving me crazy, you know that? Are you going to finish what you started?"

It was Vila's turn to laugh. "In me own sweet time, I will, impatient youth." He kissed Renny's mouth, then his cheek, and nipped his ear lobe. "I don't think you want me to rush, do you?" He licked the sensitive flesh behind the young man's ear.

"Vila!" Renny gasped softly. The thief didn't stop licking and sucking the earlobe. His hands wandered down to Renny's hips, his fingers kneaded his inner thighs. "Vila, no! It's...oh!"

Vila stopped licking at the ear. He knew the lad's sensitive spots, and the ones that were too sensitive, as well. He grinned. "Too much for you, am I?"

"Yes! 'N you know it, too!"

Vila smiled. "Just want you good and ready for me, that's all." The thief's hand gently kneaded Renny's balls, one finger exploratively dipping into the smooth crack of his ass.

"If I get any readier, it'll be too late, Vila. Come here." Renny pulled Vila up to kneel over his face. Vila's erection brushed his lips and he parted them, his tongue flicking out to lick at the head. Vila gasped as Renny slicked his shaft with saliva, tonguing its length, and taking it into his throat.

When his cock was dripping, Vila slid down between Renny's legs. The young man lifted his long, thin limbs above his head and grasped his ankles. Vila bent over and kissed the back of Renny's thigh and licked at the young man's tautly spread, pink asshole., probing it with his tongue. He licked his finger and slid it slowly in.,

"Vila," Renny panted. "I need you. Please?"

Vila was only too happy to oblige, and he licked Renny's ass again, dribbling saliva around the opening. Prison ships did not come equipped with such luxuries as lubricant, and he didn't want to hurt the lad.

Vila's cock was throbbing with desire as he slowly pressed the head against Renny's opening and entered him. Long legs rested on his shoulders as the

young man shifted to raise his hips to meet Vila's slow thrusts.

"Oh, Vila," Renny gasped. The thief kissed the young man, nearly lying on top of him. Renny broke the kiss and nuzzled in Vila's neck. "You feel so lovely."

"Mmm," Vila murmured and began thrusting short and deep into Renny's tight ass, feeling the young man's hard cock pressing up against his belly.

Vila pulled away and knelt back. He grasped the insistent member and stroked it, balancing himself and pushing Renny's ass open more by leaning on the back of his thigh. Renny was bent backwards, his knees up near his head, his ass spread around Vila's cock, as the older man's thrusting became more rapid and his concentration wavered.

Snaking his hand around his leg, Renny gently touched the hand that was on his cock and Vila moved it to his other thigh. He watched Vila fucking him, his eyes pinched shut, his lips parted as he panted; sweat beaded his brow, dampening his fine hair and slicking it to his head. Renny began pumping his cock in rhythm to Vila's thrusts, and tightening his ass muscles around the base of Vila's cock when he was fully sheathed.

The thief moaned and pressed forward, his cock swollen and throbbing deep inside Renny who clenched around him. His hot come pulsed out, filling Renny and driving him over the edge as well.

Vila slid his cock out and fell onto Renny, come and sweat slippery between them. Renny licked his neck. "Nice," he whispered, smiling, after awhile. "But you weigh a ruddy ton, y'know?"

"Umm," Vila replied, not moving.

"Vila!"

"Wha'?" he grumbled sleepily.

"Roll over, you're crushing the life outa me, you sleepy sod."

"Awright." Vila rolled, but clasped his hands around Renny's back, so that when he rolled their positions were reversed. He smiled. "Didn't wan' to let go yet."

Renny propped himself on his elbows and smoothed Vila's hair. "I like it."

"What are you talking about?" Vila asked.

"This." Renny wagged his hand indicating the room. "Our own little hideaway." He kissed Vila's cheek. "How'd you know it was here?"

"Not the first time I've been transported, is it?" he said evasively. "Got an early start on my criminal career, I did, just like you."

"I'm a *political* prisoner," Renny replied, eyes flashing.

"Yeah. I know," Vila sighed. "Just like Blake."

"Well, what's wrong with being just like Blake?" Renny defended.

"Nothin'. If you like bein' dead, that is." Vila reached up and brushed the young man's long unruly hair from his face. His hand lingered. "Don't want to see you end up like him, that's all. Or like the rest. All that's left of Blake and his seven's me." Vila paused. "Me and Avon."

Renny knew better than to press Vila about Avon, or even much about his time with the computer genius turned reluctant revolutionary; Avon who had shot Blake on Gauda Prime. All Vila had told him about that was not to judge as he hadn't been there and all was not as it seemed. Renny took the thief's word and gave Avon the benefit of the doubt. Renny rolled off Vila and lay nestled in the crook of his arm.

"Any of that brandy left?" Vila asked, breaking the silence.

"Renny turned to find the flask. "Sorry."

"Me, too,"

Renny tried to break Vila's mood. "So you pinched it straight from the top brass, huh? Pretty nifty trick, that."

"Nah, the locks on these old tubs are no challenge. You could've done it yourself. I've shown you enough already."

There was a clanging sound then the ship lurched and vibrated. They grabbed for their clothes. "We've been holed!" Vila cried nervously, pulling on his trousers. Renny got into his and ran for the hatch.

"Easy there. This compartment's still part of the main hull. Doesn't fill up with sealing foam like the one on the *London* I told you about. We're all right here, just got to get out before we're missed, that's all."

"How? If we're in an emergency, the halls'll be filled with crew, and we can't risk the hull passages."

Vila mulled it over. "You're right. We'd be safest if we just stayed out of sight in here 'till it's all over." They settled down to wait.

"Did you knock off that transmitter antenna?" Blake asked, peering at the screen. The small, standard prison transport was in the center.

"I think so." Jenna's fingers clicked on the keypad and the ship leapt into closer magnification. "Yes. It's gone Blake. And I'm getting no signals on any frequency, either."

The tension in Blake eased. “Good. Can they still receive signals?”

“From Earth? No. From us? Probably.” Jenna shifted the display again as Blake walked to the comm console. “This is Tak Baylor, captain of the *Rim Runner*. We demand your immediate surrender. Your communications have been destroyed, your ship is unarmed and we are faster than you. That was only a warning shot. The next will be to your main engine compartment. Use your landing lights to signal your acceptance of our terms.”

Blake and Jenna waited, watching the little transport.

“I hope this works, Blake. It may take a lot for just the two of us to take them.”

“They don’t know how many are with us. This is a large ship,” Blake replied, “and we’ll have the prisoners on our side. I’m sure they’ll be glad enough for their freedom.”

“And if the captain tries what Raiker did on the *London*?” Jenna asked, remembering the hostages the Sub-Commander had killed to make Blake surrender—and that it had worked.

“We won’t let them know it’s Vila that we want—and we shall threaten first. If so much as one prisoner is shot, take out their flight deck.”

The transport’s landing lights flashed once.

Blake smiled with relief and signaled them. “These are our terms: all officers and guards will surrender their weapons immediately to the prisoners, and explain that the *Rim Runner* is here to pick up a missing crew member. The prisoners will be given control of your ship. Then you will extend a transfer tube to my ship and we will send across a party. If you cooperate, no one will be hurt. Confirm compliance with your lights.” Blake switched off.

The transport’s lights remained dark.

Lieutenant Zandor protested, “We can’t just give in to these demands, Sir! We’re an official Federation vessel. Think of your career!” he added, thinking of his own.

“We have no choice,” Captain Artix replied. “I know very well that they have given us no guarantees—we can’t even open a channel to negotiate!” he added in frustration. “Surrender is our only option.”

Sub-Commander Klaven interrupted. “Think of what will happen when revenge-happy prisoners are given weapons, Sir.” He paused. “There might be another option.”

“Yes?”

“Let me conceal a party in the airlock. We can capture their boarding party and then we will have something with which to negotiate.”

The young captain rubbed his chin and nodded. “All right. Get your party together and dress them in prisoners’ clothes. Give your uniforms to several of the more docile prisoners and try to trick them.” He turned back to the controls. “Give the signal, Lieutenant.”

Vila and Renny listened at the panel and heard the guards exchanging clothes with some of the prisoners. Renny grinned. “Somebody’s mounting a rescue!” he whispered excitedly. “We’re going to be free, Vila!”

Vila smiled back at him, then his features darkened. “What about Avon?” he asked rhetorically. “Such a wonderful stroke of good fortune, and it’s going to get us free and him killed.”

Renny didn’t follow Vila. Was Avon being held somewhere, under some kind of threat? Vila never spoke about what had happened to the computer tech after Gauda Prime. “What...”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Vila interrupted. “You’re another bleedin’ fanatic just like Blake. You’d sacrifice anyone just to fight your war.”

Renny started to deny Vila’s accusations, but was ignored.

“Avon’s not a hero,” the thief went on. “Neither am I, for that matter, lad. He didn’t ask to join this Cause of yours, didn’t want to die for it, or to get me out of it. But he’s going to be killed all the same, as soon as I get on that rescue ship. Now what do you think Blake would have done?” Vila paused. “What he would have done in the old days, I mean.” Vila knew that using the young man’s hero as an example was a dirty trick, but Vila didn’t want to lose Renny. “You’ve got a choice,” he went on. “You can go out there and take your chances they’ll rescue you, or you can stick by me, and by Avon.”

Renny gulped. It was a hard choice, but one to which he knew the answer. “I’m still with you, Vila. Part of Blake’s new seven,” he grinned. “I didn’t know you were a rebel leader, too.”

“I’m not,” Vila said, sadly, and the two of them waited in the dark.

The scanner showed a party in the airlock. Half a dozen sullen officers guarded by a fierce-looking group of prisoners. The officers looked frightened; the ex-prisoners, confident.

“Blake!” Jenna pointed at one of the prisoners.

“I remember him, too,” Blake said, his eyes narrowing. The man she indicated was older than Blake remembered; he looked worn and tired, but it was the same man. “I believe his name was Artix.”

“It’s a trap,” Jenna stated. She turned to Blake. “What are you going to do?”

“Whatever I have to,” Blake replied. “They have Vila in there, and Avon back on Freedom City,” he sighed wearily. “I’ll do whatever I have to, Jenna.”

She nodded and handed him a gun belt, then buckled one on herself. They went to the airlock. Jenna stayed around a corner, out of sight for back-up.

The inner door of the airlock opened. Blake held his gun on the group. “No one move.”

Zandor brought his weapon up, but before he completed his aim, Blake fired and the disguised lieutenant fell.

Blake moved his aim. “Artix, you’re next,” he said. “Order your men to surrender.”

The captain froze. “Blake,” he gasped, staring.

“That’s right. How nice of you to remember me. Now do what I told you.”

Artix flinched. “Drop your weapons,” he ordered. His sub-commander glared at him and hesitated. “Drop the gun, Klaven. It’s all right, Blake is an honorable man, an idealist. He’s not going to let the prisoners harm us.” He turned to the rebel leader. “Will you?”

“Do what I tell you and no one need get hurt.”

Klaven laid his weapon on the deck. The former prisoners picked up the weapons and trained them on the officers. “Take me to where the rest of the prisoners are being held,” Blake ordered.

“Right. I know who you want, Blake,” one of the fake officers grinned. “Restal’s on board. He talked a lot about you.”

Blake laughed, “I’m not surprised.” He turned to Artix. “You’ll come with me. I trust the locks work the same way as on the *London*? Palm prints?” Artix nodded, and Blake turned back to the former prisoner. “What’s your name?”

“Durkin. Jan Durkin.”

“Well, Jan, you keep an eye on this lot. Don’t shoot any of them unless you have to, all right?”

“Right,” Durkin confirmed and began getting the former officers under control and his fellow prisoners under command.

Blake signaled Jenna on his communicator. “All fine, Jenna. I have Artix and he’s going to take me to Vila.” Artix nodded.

“All right, Blake,” Jenna responded. “I’m going back to the flight deck to get her ready to move in a hurry. Out.”

“After you,” Blake said, herding Artix out of the staging area.

Vila listened to the cheering outside and his heart sank. “They’ve taken the ship,” he said bitterly.

Renny grabbed his arm. “Maybe we can stop the transmission or something.” Vila had explained about the symbiotic relationship Sleer had placed him and Avon in. “Or we can convince them to keep one of the officers around to make the report, then we can try to rescue Avon ourselves.”

Save one of the officers? Vila thought. He began working at the panel’s lock. “Come on. There might still be time.” Bent to his task, Vila froze. He heard a voice from the past—the voice of a ghost.

“Well, where is he?” Blake roared outside. “It’s a small ship. If you’re playing for time, Artix...”

“Blake,” Vila whispered in his hiding hole. “It’s Blake.”

“Then let’s go!” Renny’s eyes shone.

Vila was remembering Gauda Prime, imagining what Blake, scared and changed, might do to him...and to Avon. *It’ll be a People’s Court*, he thought with horror. *A fair trial You would be fair, Blake. And they’ll kill him just as dead as that bitch would.*

“Vila!” Renny shook him. “I don’t know how, but if it’s Blake, come on!”

“Oh, it’s Blake, all right,” Vila said. *That voice is unmistakable.* He finished unlocking the panel. *Maybe I stand a chance pleading with him*, he thought. *I don’t stand a chance with her.* He opened the door.

Blake turned at the noise, his gun still held ready.

Vila’s hands shot into the air. “Don’t shoot! It’s only me,” he said quickly. He stared. Blake was laughing. Unscarred. Not angry.

Blake holstered his gun and grabbed Vila’s shoulders. “I should have guessed. Who’s that?”

Renny had climbed out after him. “Renny. He’s me mate. I’ve recruited him, well he kind of recruited himself. Blake,” Vila began, “Avon’s in trouble. He’s on...”

“...Freedom City. I know, Vila. We’re going back for him, but he wanted to make sure you were safe.” Blake grinned at the thief, glad to see he was all right. The young man though...he didn’t look to be more than sixteen, seventeen. Renny was staring at Blake with hero-worshipping eyes, and an absolute trust in the legend. *You’re too young for this war, and for...*

He cut off the thought. It wasn't fair to assume anything untoward existed between the youth and Vila. It was probably just more hero-worship. "I'm afraid you're not coming with us, son," Blake told the lad.

"But Blake..." Renny began.

Vila cut him off. "He comes with me, Blake. I promised to take care of him and I'm not leaving him behind with this lot."

Blake eyed Vila suspiciously. The defiance was something new to the thief. *I suppose I can't expect him to be the same man he was three years ago*, Blake thought. "All right, Vila. Let's get things settled here and get back to Avon. Jenna's in the ship waiting." The young man's face split into a grin.

Avon waited, keeping up the pretense of cooperation. It was different, though. Once again it was a habit, an act, something he was doing to accomplish what he needed to do. He felt stronger; his mind was clearer than it had been for a long time. Most of all he realized his heart felt whole again. Thoughts of Blake were with him, but now they held no pain.

Six days and no word. Avon had calculated that they were just now reaching Vila's transport and attacking it. His preparations had changed as well. He was now unwilling to die to accomplish his goal of Vila's freedom. He bought a personal weapon on the underground and kept it and his credit with him at all times.

On the ninth day, his careful routine was broken. Avon had become a good actor, and even as he waited for the order he feared would come from Servalan if Blake had been unsuccessful, he managed to behave as though nothing were different. A good actor, but not good enough.

He sat at a small chess table in the Klute's private quarters. His mind was not on the game. The little man moved his piece, smiled his hideous little smile, and said, "You're leaving soon, aren't you?"

Avon looked up, too quickly, despite the calmness of his features. "What makes you think that?"

The Klute frowned, looking at the board. "Your game is off lately." He switched off the board and looked Avon in the eye. "When are you going?"

"As I said," Avon replied coldly, his gun concealed, icy weight against his chest, "why do you think I'm going anywhere. I've had bad days before."

"I know you made a bargain with the captain of the *Rim Runner*," the Klute smiled. "Don't you know I'm always three moves ahead of you?" He leaned back and folded his hands. "Don't worry, the idiots

who run this place have never monitored my room. After all, what harm could their pet freak do to them? And there's nothing...interesting to watch."

"And if you were correct?" Avon purred.

"I would do nothing, Shevron." He arched the name. "It amuses me to observe you, that is all." He smiled again. "You paid the captain from the considerable store of credits you've won from me and stolen from that fop who runs this place. You then sent him to rescue your friend, the one I almost crisped. Once 'Baylor' has him, he'll return for you."

"Why?" Avon asked.

The Klute shook his head. "No, Avon. I don't want to come with you. Your fight is not mine. I am not anxious to hurry my death and out there, you're not exactly healthy company to keep."

"You would have made a good psychostrategist," Avon complimented.

"So I've been told by one of the best."

"Then I ask again, why?" Avon sat back. Everything was a game to the Klute. The stake for this one was his life. *Typical*, Avon thought and chuckled.

"Yes," the Klute answered, joining in his laughter.

"Game to you," Avon conceded. "Will you press the key, so to speak?"

The Klute pondered the possibility. "I think not." He switched on the chess display. "Perhaps now you can concentrate on the game?"

Tak Baylor returned to the brothel. As casually as before he asked for the Alpha, Shevron, and paid for the entire night. Toise was unsuspecting.

Avon came down the steps wearing his usual black leather trousers, a tight turtleneck and a loose-fitting vest. Tak looked him over appreciatively and frankly. Avon gave him a hard look to cover his embarrassment. Then he smiled and walked over to Blake. The large man slid his arm around Avon and squeezed. A signal. Everything was fine.

"I have permission to take you out on the town tonight," Blake said, acting his part.

"I'm glad you came back," Avon said honestly.

Blake kissed him. He felt the hidden weapon and pouch as he held him close. "I had to see you again."

There was a feminine shriek of rage and both men turned to look along with the rest of the crowd.

"A small disturbance," Toise mumbled apologetically. "Nothing to worry about..." He exited in a swirl of violet cloth; he had been playing a Roman that day.

“Let’s get out of here,” Avon hissed. “A convenient diversion.”

“Wait,” Blake said, holding Avon’s shoulder.

Avon’s eyes widened. “You aren’t going to play the hero now, are you ‘Baylor’? I’m leaving.”

“No.” Blake’s strong features clouded with suspicion and an outrage Avon knew all too well.

A half-naked girl with long dark hair ran out of the back room. The assembled patrons laughed at her disarray and applauded the view. Then they saw the gun.

“Anyone moves, I’ll shoot!” she cried, waving the gun around the room and settling it on a heavily robed and wealthy patron. “You. Give me your clothes. Now!” The Issikan removed his outer robe, bundled it—and tossed it in her face. Her shot went wild and the gun flew from her hand; the Issikan dove for it only to come up with the muzzle of Avon’s hand weapon in his face.

“Leave it,” he said icily.

Blake picked up the fallen weapon and returned it to the woman.

She quickly shrugged into the robe, taking the weapon and backing away from Blake, aiming it at his belly. “I don’t need help from your kind.”

Blake drew his blaster and covered the crowd. “I’m the best chance you’ve got, girl,” he said, his voice rich and warm.

“It was a pirate like you that got me into this,” she said defiantly.

“You can tell us your life story later,” Avon snarled. “Get moving or we leave you here.”

Toise came into the room and Blake turned to cover him. “Shevron? What are you doing?” he asked.

“You,” Avon hissed, “stay there. I wouldn’t regret it a bit if you got shot.” Avon kicked the Issikan away and stood, pointing the gun at Toise.

“Avon, no!” Blake called out.

“Why not?” He looked at Blake.

The girl decided. “I’ll go with you.” She backed towards the door.

“Avon, let’s go. Leave it,” Blake said.

Quickly, Avon turned, and brought up the rear as the trio left the room.

They ran. “Where now?” the girl asked.

“Bay eight,” Blake replied leading the way. “My ship’s there and the pilot is waiting ready. But you can leave if you want. Freedom City is a big place, lots of places to hide, other ships to take.”

“New policy, Blake?” Avon asked with a trace of his old sarcasm.

Blake laughed. “Perhaps I’ve learned my lesson.” He turned to the girl. “Well?”

“I’d rather take my chances with you—and him,” she indicated Avon.

“Then let’s go.” Blake led them to the bay.

As they reached the ship, a tall figure, armed, came out of the mists. Avon stepped to the fore. “Donner.”

“That’s right, Shevron. The boss thought this pirate scum might try to steal his most valuable piece of property.” He aimed his weapon at Blake. “He was right. Only you took a little something extra, too, didn’t you?” The thug smiled. “Don’t worry, you’ll be safe at home soon, pretties.”

As he prepared to fire on Blake, Avon shot first, hitting the gun and his hand.

The ship’s hatch opened and Jenna leaned out. “Glad you finally made it, I was beginning to worry.” She eyed the girl. “Who’s she?”

“I don’t know,” Blake answered. “Everything ready?” Jenna nodded and they ran for the flight deck.

The *Rim Runner* was larger than the *Scorpio* and better outfitted. When they got to the flight deck, Avon found the computer station and settled into his seat. In the rush of the take-off he had no time to acknowledge Vila, but did notice him beaming from the weaponry station. He also noticed an unfamiliar young man off to the side with Blake’s rescued woman. Freedom City had little in the way of space-bound resources, and they were not followed. Jenna piloted them to a safe sector.

Jenna, Avon thought. You never mentioned she was still with you. Jealousy boiled in him. Just the two of you alone on this ship for the past three years... Is that why you left, Blake? Why I could never find you? He knew that he had no right to expect fidelity from Blake, certainly not after he was thought dead. Jenna had always loved the big rebel and Avon knew it. She would have just been moving in to ease the pain he had caused. *She was always loyal to you...*

Vila came over to stand by Avon. The tech hadn’t said a word since arriving, just bent to his task. He glanced over. Avon did not return the look. *How do you thank someone who’s just gone through hell for you?* he wondered. “Avon...”

The comptech looked up, startled. “Vila,” he said noticing the thief. He smiled. “I trust it wasn’t too bad for you, and that you’re all right?”

“Fine, Avon. Fine.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “Umm...thanks. I don’t know...”

“Don’t mention it.” Avon looked Vila in the eyes. “Really,” he added, firmly.

Vila nodded. He wandered back to his seat. “Just like old times, eh, Blake?” he asked, looking up at the rebel leader.

“Old times indeed, Vila.”

“But with a new crew. Innocents for the slaughter, this time, Blake?” Avon added biting. “A Children’s Crusade?” Blake reddened.

“I’m not a child, I’ll have you know, I’m eighteen,” Renny interrupted. “I was a political prisoner.” He stood next to Vila. “I wanted to come.”

Avon eyed the pair suspiciously. “A fool’s fool, then,” he said, dismissing him. “And you?” he indicated the girl.

“You’re Blake’s Seven, aren’t you?” she asked, eyes a little wide.

“I see. You can’t count either,” he said acidly.

“I thought you were all dead. That vid-cast was faked, then?”

“Something like that,” Avon replied, not elucidating further.

“What’s your name,” Jenna asked, practical as usual.

“Tania.” She looked at Blake. “I have skills.”

“I’m sure you do,” Avon muttered under his breath.

Tania shot him a quick glare. “I can use a gun and I can fight, I meant.”

“Good,” Blake reassured. “I need another gun hand in my crew.”

“The ship isn’t as big as the *Liberator*,” Jenna apologized, “but there’s room for everyone...barely.”

“I’ll show you your cabin, Avon,” Renny added enthusiastically.

“Thank you, no. I’d rather...explore on my own.” He turned to leave the flight deck but stopped at the corridor and turned. “Blake?” he asked.

Blake nodded and joined him. They left the flight deck together.