Being editor has its perks, and sometimes M. Fae will listen to pleadings and threats and give the editor one of her favorite pairings. Yes, this, too, is Avon and Blake. It's a strong story, slow to build but powerful when it gets there. The setting is early fourth season, and we all know what happens at the end of fourth season, now don’t we? Again, the title comes from the Beatles—one of the lines in You've Got to Hide Your Love Away.

Here he stood, head in hand, his face turned to the wall. Not until the footsteps came too close did he slowly lower those hands, his mask, cracked and battered but all the protection he had, falling into its familiar place seconds before the others came into the room.

“Your late,” he said, catching them all in the variegated heat of Vila’s failings.

“Late, he says, late! I’d like to see Mr. High and Mighty there not be late if he only had five minutes notice.”

“You had considerably more warning than that,” Avon said, casually ignoring the fact that Vila hadn’t, and that the only reason Vila was late was that Avon had wanted to talk to him privately first, “and I can’t possibly be held responsible for the length of time it takes a message to penetrate your thick skull.”

“Glad to see you too,” Vila muttered, throwing himself down onto the plump sofa, a glass of wine appearing in his hand almost faster than the eye could see. “Be gladder to see the back of you though, the way you’ve been.”

“Shush, Vila,” Dayna said not quite quietly enough, removing Vila’s glass with an admonishing glower, “you know how he’s been since, well, since…”

“Yeh, I do know how he’s been since. And you think I haven’t been the same way since?” Vila snatched his wine back from Dayna, proving he wasn’t quite the coward he liked to pretend. “He doesn’t have a monopoly on suffering, you know.”

The effort it took all of them not to stare at Avon was almost palpable, and it made Avon’s skin crawl almost as much as feeling their eyes upon him every time he turned his back. Staring, endlessly, at him, their busy little brains fervid with activity, and the only bright spot amongst all this was that Avon knew the fools had no idea of the real truth.

“Yes, but he lost her, you know,” Dayna had lowered her voice, too busy sorting Vila out to see the vicious amusement in Avon’s eyes, “Cally, on Terminal. You can’t expect him to just snap out of it the way the rest of us can.”

If bitterness could be amused, then Vila was positively chortling. “Yeh, I know. I knew her an’ all, don’t forget that.” He glanced at Avon, saw the expression in those eyes, turned back to Dayna, his own expression a picture of conflicting reactions. “You really don’t understand, do you? You’ve absolutely no idea—”

“All right, all right, I know you were friends with Cally as long as Avon was and you’re just as upset about losing her,” Dayna said with audibly thinning patience.

“Near enough,” Vila muttered. “Suppose that’s as close as you’re going to get.” He looked once more at Avon, raised his glass in mocking salute. “Isn’t it, Avon?”

“Shut up, Vila, and listen. The change will be as good as a rest for all of us. Now,” Avon went on, voice brisk and cold as the surface above Xenon base, “I have had Orac do a thorough inventory of
supplies, facilities and matériel, and I have come to the conclusion,” he looked pointedly at Soolin who returned the look with her own twist of cold superciliousness, “that Dorian had some rather more...esoteric needs than most of us here gathered, and that this base is lacking in some items I consider to be essential. Such as basic nutrients and adequate fuel for Scorpio.”

Soolin’s voice was drier than Dorian’s wine. “Yes, well, Dorian was expecting to pick up one or two useful bits and pieces on Terminal.”

“One or two? Is that all?” Vila interrupted, gulping down another mouthful of appropriated wine. “I thought it was five of us he was after.”

“Regardless of what Dorian wanted,” Avon said before Soolin could use Vila for target practice, “the fact that we are here and he is not, shows that he didn’t succeed. Which means that we have to acquire certain items.”

“Oh, that’ll be nice,” Tarrant spoke up for the first time, stepping forward close enough to annoy Avon. “We’ll just pop into the nearest supply station and ask them to fill our shopping list for us, shall we?”

“Tarrant,” Avon said and his tiredness was uncommonly visible, “you really shouldn’t try to be witty until you have found some wit to use. As for acquiring matériel, we will do that on Stavros.”

“Stavros?” Vila demanding, sitting up straight, all his air of misery shed like snake’s skin. “Stavros? As in, Outer World Stavros?”

“As it is the only Stavros in our Galaxy, that would seem a safe bet.”

“A man with my talents can win a fortune in the betting dens on Stavros,” Vila sighed happily. “Stavros, a planet that anyone in his right mind would call Eden.”

“Hardly,” Avon replied, with less of a cutting edge than might be expected, his mood fractionally thawing for a moment before the recent frost returned. “Stavros has a considerably higher density of population. And you won’t be thrown out for sampling anything that grows on the local trees.”

“Won’t be tossed out for sampling anything at all on Stavros. Anything goes—and I do mean anything. Wonderful, isn’t it? Stavros,” he repeated happily, grinning with enough lewdly libidinous delight that even Soolin managed a genuine smile. “Pubs, casinos, talented professionals in the brothels, gifted amateurs in the parks...”

Dayna, however, wasn’t smiling, and she was looking concernedly at Avon. “You’re disgusting, you know that, don’t you, Vila?”

“Oh, come on, Dayna, Avon’s no prude. And just cos you’ve never sampled the joys of the flesh, there’s no need to put a man down because he’s well experienced. Not to mention talented,” he added, sidling along the sofa to her, drenching her with his most charming smile. “And so that you’re not a fish out of water, I could give you a few lessons. You know, so you won’t be embarrassed by—”

“The only thing any of us are going to be embarrassed by, Vila,” Tarrant neatly intercepted Vila’s more winsome—or repugnant, depending on viewpoint—wiles, “is you and everything about you. In fact, I think we should leave you on Scorpio to make sure this teleport works. Don’t you, Avon?”

“I think,” Avon said, heading for the door, resolutely ignoring the others staring at his sudden departure and the blossoming of sympathy behind him, “which is more than can be said of you. The four of you can sit here and discuss the charms and sins of Stavros for as long as you like. Providing you remember that we leave in twelve hours. And Vila,” he said from the doorway, “if you’re late again, we’ll leave without you.”

“Fate worse than death,” Vila muttered under his breath, then he leaned over and whispered into Dayna’s ear, distracting her from her obvious intent of pursuing Avon. “Which is what I’d be saving you from if—”

Twelve hours later, everyone was aboard Scorpio, with one notable and entirely predictable exception.

“Wait!” they could hear wailing down the access corridor. “Don’t close the door!”

Avon toyed with the door mechanism.

“Avon, don’t be cruel,” Dayna said, sounding remarkably, and unnervingly like Cally, the echoes of his old comrade shivering through Avon. He stared at Dayna harshly, and she met his gaze levelly. “All right, so I’ve been going on at him as much as everyone else, but perhaps he needs this trip to Stavros more than any of the rest of us. Anyway,” she said, her own expression saddening, her sympathy tangible, Avon not, quite, shaking off her hand from his arm, “we could all do with something to take our
minds off what happened on Terminal.”

“Oh, yes, the loss of the Liberator,” Avon said with deliberate and pointed misunderstanding, and then he smiled his most charming smile, the one that tended to make people check that both their finances and their backs were still intact. “We all do need a break from that, don’t we? Hurry up, Vila, or I really will leave you behind.”

“You wouldn’t do a thing like that, would you, Avon?” Vila demanded breathlessly, clambering on board and making it to a seat in a display of considerable speed. “I mean, if you left me behind, who would break into all those places that you’re going to steal all that stuff from?”

“Ever the elegant turn of phrase, Vila. Now, make yourself useful or I’ll let Slave practice the teleport on you.”

“Slavedriver,” Vila muttered, managing to pilfer a smile from Avon.

“Just check the flight plan, Vila,” Avon said, starting the count-down procedure for launch. “And while we’re underway, you just might want to ponder that until every last item on this list of necessities finds its way onto Scorpio, you won’t set foot off this ship without myself or Soolin keeping an eye on you.”

“Oh, come on, Avon, even you couldn’t be that horrible. Anyway, you know what they say about all work and no play.”

Well, in your case, it’s already too late so it shouldn’t make any difference. Tarrant,” he said, effectively shutting Vila out, dismissing the other man to where Vila could as well not have existed, “double check the data coming from Slave. I still don’t trust that machine, no matter how pleasant a manner it has.”

“Well,” Tarrant said, eyes and fingers busy with the flow of data across his station, his voice sarcastic, “at least now we know to grovel and snivel like Slave if we want to keep you happy.”

Avon’s sudden laughter was chilling, and unpleasant. “Oh, would that it were so easy,” he murmured. “Life would be almost as simple as you.”

Avon bent his attention to his screen, but still, he could feel all of them staring at him, the force of their gazes washing over him like radiation, and almost as burning. Face hardening, Avon looked slowly from one staring face to the next. “We have a ship to fly,” he said harshly, wincing inwardly at Dayna’s expression of sympathy that never seemed more than a whimper away, “so I suggest we get on with it.”

There was a scurry of movement, and then the carefully modulated read-outs and followings of procedure, but still, Avon’s skin crawled with the memory of them all, staring.

THERE WAS still a long way to go, and the lights on Scorpio’s flight deck had been lowered, so it would seem, for the benefit of the three sleepers, Soolin on Dorian’s lateral sleep couch, Dayna and Tarrant less comfortably on the loungers on the foredeck. In the near dark, a false night that Vila knew was more for Avon’s ease than for any notion of comfort for the sleepers, Vila cast small, interrogative glances in Avon’s direction.

“I heard her, you know,” Vila began in that most casual of tones reserved for those most serious of topics. “When she died.”

No need to ask which ‘she’, nor which death, not between these two.

Avon, giving nothing but ice away. “I imagine half the planet ‘heard’ her.”

Another one of those looks from Vila. “Could feel a bit of what she was feeling as well.”

The muscle along the side of Avon’s jaw jumped and twisted, and Avon swallowed hard. Of course, when he spoke, his tone was light, deceptive, camouflage for the tension bleeding from him. “You’ll forgive me if I’m not consumed with jealousy.”

“Ah, but I didn’t expect you to be jealous, did I? I mean, I’m not Tarrant, am I?”

“Apart from the obvious, starting with your hair and going all the way to your age, what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Temper, temper,” Vila said mildly, handing Avon a brimming glass of wine, relaxing a trifle when Avon took it, and drank deeply. “I’m talking about Tarrant’s little theory.”

“Apart from his head and his mouth, I thought everything about Tarrant was small.”

Well, this theory’s smaller than most. As small as…” he broke off, Avon a funny bugger about some things, especially these days. “Well, small anyway. But this theory of his—”

“Oh, do get on with it, Vila.”

“Tarrant,” Vila said with relish, watching for Avon’s reaction, “thinks you’re upset because Servalan’s dead.”

It was the first time in ages that Vila had
heard Avon laugh.

“Yeh, thought you’d like that one.”

“And what about Dayna—as if I really needed to ask.”

“Ah, the lovely Dayna. Very inhibited that girl, did you know that? It’s shocking.”

“Now there I just might disagree with you.”

Vila sank a little more comfortably into his seat, positively basking in this return of the Avon he had known and—well, he wasn’t going to say ‘loved’. He wasn’t stupid enough to think a thing like that, not about Avon. Beyond his volition, one hand strayed out and touched, briefly and with a lockpicker’s delicacy, the cool, smooth skin of Avon’s hand. No rejection, but Vila wasn’t going to push his luck. “The question is if you’re disagreeing with me cos it’s shocking that someone as lovely—not to mention deadly, remind me to tell you about her little trick with the explosives—someone as lovely as our Dayna is as inhibited as our Dayna. Or you’re telling me our Dayna isn’t inhibited at all and maybe I should try decking myself out in black leather and studs.”

A month or two ago, and Avon would have had a come-back for that comment, something perfectly polite and respectable, until the double entendre sank in. Tonight, ship’s night, there was only a faint smile.

Oh, well, Vila thought, at least I tried, and at least he didn’t bite my head off.

“Has Soolin advanced her own theory?”

“She just thinks you’re a foul-tempered, bad-mooded bastard completely devoid of scruples or any of the finer feelings and what’s more, you’d cook your granny for dinner if you had to.”

“I thought she was a sensible, perceptive young woman.”

“Either that or she’s met your granny.”

“That’s always a possibility.”

Silence for a few moments, not comfortable, not the easy silence these two had once enjoyed together, but then, it wasn’t the fraught tension that had become a daily routine.

“And you, Vila,” Avon asked softly. “What’s your theory?”

He could, of course, not answer, or lie, but where would that get him? Avon had an aversion to being lied to, unless it suited his purposes, and when he asked like that, in that precise tone of voice, it didn’t do well to doctor the information. “My theory?” Vila temporised, trying to come up with the best way to phrase all this. “My theory. Yes, well, em…”

“Vila…”

“The way I look at it,” Vila began slowly, thoughtfully, picking his way carefully, “is that it’s a lot more complicated than you nursing a bit of a broken heart because Cally’s dead, or because Servalan exploded with the Liberator. Me, I think it’s Cally, and Liberator, and with Servalan gone, well, it’s hard to feel like the big, hard man when all you’ve got to go up against are a bunch of low-level flunkies trying to hold the Federation fleet together, isn’t it?”

That would have been more than enough for anyone else, but this was Avon, and he knew Vila, recognised the minute markers that said Vila was throwing just enough to the lion to keep himself in one piece. “And what else, Vila?”

“Nothing much, nothing at all, really, you know, just idle speculation to keep my brain ticking over, and you know how idle my brain is, I mean, how many times have you called me a stupid fool, so that just goes to show you that the rest of it is just a pile of crap and—” he paused for breath, and cast a quick glance in Avon’s direction. He knew that inimical expression, which meant that he had a choice: make a clean breast of it now, or have Avon wear him down with all the comfort and pleasure of the Chinese water torture. “Oh, all right,” he said ungraciously, “but just you remember, you asked for it.”

“Yes, I did, and I would like to hear it before Tarrant can use senility as his excuse.”

“Blake,” Vila said baldly, startling a glare out of Avon.

“What?”

“Blake. Remember him? Big bloke, curly hair, had this thing about overthrowing the Federation.”

“I know who you’re talking about,” Avon all but snarled, teeth exposed in atavistic threat. “Now tell me why you’re talking about him.”


“Blake.” Barely breathed, Avon’s eyes focussing on some internal field of conflict, and dark now with pain.

Very gently now, treading very carefully lest Avon should snap back to himself and bite Vila’s head off. “He was there, wasn’t he?”
“I don’t know.”
“Cally thought—”
“Cally couldn’t have had time to see much,
ever mind think about it.”
“But she saw—”
“We don’t know.”
“Right, so if we don’t know what she saw, then
what did you see?”
“Tranquilised dreams,” Avon said slowly.
“Tranquilised dreams of a man whose feet were
dirty.”
“Eh? What’ve his feet got to do with it?”
All of a sudden, Avon came to himself again,
gathering his defences around him like a cloak.
“Nothing. Nothing at all,” he said sharply. “Have
you checked our flight plan?”

BY THE TIME they reached orbit round Stavros,
Avon’s temper was more than a little frayed by the
endless presence of the others in the confines of the
flight deck. It didn’t help that Vila constantly found
it necessary to share another bit of his lore, about
why these old freighters pressurised only the
control area in transit, and it helped even less that
Vila was now staring even more than the rest of
them. There were times, turning away from
Dayna’s sympathy and Soolin’s speculation and
Tarrant’s evaluation, that Avon would catch Vila’s
eyes on him, and unlike the others, Vila never
looked away. Avon could almost hear Vila laugh-
ing at him, if only because Avon suspected that
Vila, with his gossiping and his confidences and his
sharp eyes, knew more about all this than Avon did
himself.

Avon was sure that Vila knew one thing the
others didn’t. Blake. Every time Vila stared at him,
Avon heard that name ricochet round his skull, and
weaving in amongst it, his own comments, deliv-
ered over the years with varying degrees of vitriol,
his never-ending condemnation of Blake’s actions
and his contempt for his goal. And every time,
every single time, Vila stared at him, Avon heard
Blake’s name, and he heard his own voice, sneering
at him now with its cynicism. Sometimes, amidst
the din, he could even remember the precise tone of
voice Blake had used, when he had asked why
Avon was still following on…

“I said,” Tarrant repeated loudly, “we’ve
arrived. I’ve done all the proper procedures,” and
no-one needed him to add ‘because you didn’t do a
damned thing to help, Avon’, “and if we’re willing
to trust Orac, then we’re free to go planetside.”

“So you think we’re free, do you?” Avon re-
plied, with that abrupt upswing of nastiness that
more and more often his mien these days.

“Free?” Vila butted in, reaching across Avon to
grab a teleport bracelet. “I’ll have you know I used
to make a pretty penny, back in my young and
pretty days.”

“You? People paid you money to—”

“Oh, Tarrant, must you?” Dayna asked, picking
up a teleport bracelet for herself. “And right before
lunch, too.”

“Dayna, you just don’t know what you’re—”

“Orac, operate the teleport as required,” Avon
cut through them all as if they weren’t even there,
“and keep me informed of all pertinent develop-
ments. Which should keep it quiet about you,” he
added to Vila as he passed them. “We meet in three
hours, there’s a printout map beside Orac. Now,
this may be about the safest planet for us to be on—
well, safest of those actually inhabited. But that
doesn’t mean any conspicuous behaviour. Under-
stand, Vila?”

“What d’you mean, ‘understand, Vila’? When’ve
I ever done anything to draw attention to myself—”

He was still going on and on when the teleport,
mercifully in some opinions, cut him short.

THREE AND A half hours later, Vila dragged in
by the scruff of the neck, they were all met, in an
eatery as famous for its food as for its entertain-
ment.

“I can hardly wait,” Tarrant was saying. “Real
food, cooked properly—”

“Fresh fruit,” Dayna added, engrossed in the
menu display, “and crisp vegetables—”

“Not to mention something a bit stronger than
Dorian’s wine”

“Soolin!” Vila declaimed, adding a florid gesture
just for good measure and it wouldn’t have upset
him at all if Avon managed to crack a smile over
the performance. “A woman after my own heart! A
fellow connoisseur—”

“Judging by the way you knock that wine
back, somehow I doubt that you have time to
connoisseur anything, Vila.”

“I’ll have you know I’m an expert on the potables of a dozen worlds—”

“Sometimes in the same day,” Avon put in, cutting Vila down in mid spiel. “And usually to the regrets of anyone forced to be around him.”

“You know something, Avon,” Vila replied nicely, all the better to point out the nastiness of his words, “you can be a real bastard sometimes.”

Avon’s smile was perfectly urbane. “So my father always told me. Ah, look, our servo is finally here.”

“Saved by the bell, Vila?” Tarrant whispered.

“Who needed saved?” Vila demanded, staring pointedly at Avon. “Whoever it is, it definitely isn’t me.”

With the appreciation of real food luxuriating through them, a person would be excused for not recognising them as the bickering troupe that had first sat down at the table. Conversation clustered round the topics of how good the food was, and what a wonderful change from rehydro rations. Even Avon was seen to tuck into his meal with some enthusiasm, which was perhaps the pleasantest sight of all. Dessert had not yet been brought when the floor show started, the lights above the stage brightening, the lights over the dining area dimming, the Scorpio group isolated into the small pool of light cast by the flickering faux-candle on their table.

Vila, needless to say, was enthralled by the spectacle. “I haven’t seen this much bare skin since that tape of the Auron crèche Cally showed us.”

A habit by now, Dayna shushed him, the sound abruptly cut off, her expression changing as she looked at Avon.

She wasn’t the only one reading expressions. “What is it?” Vila hissed, making himself smaller in his chair: when Dayna got that look, it usually meant something very nasty was about to happen. “What?”

“Over there,” she replied almost absently, her attention homing in on something several yards away. “By the door.”

Vila struggled to see what she was talking about, muttering, “I don’t see anything.”

“You never do,” Avon said icily. “And this is not the time to improve your track record.”

“What the hell was that all about?” Tarrant asked, staring after the now departing Avon.

“Nothing,” Vila said, making sure that he definitely did not see the man he thought he saw Avon stalking, “not a fucking thing.”

**THROUGH DARK** streets and along a bright esplanade, the salt lake rushing on to the shore, high-flung spray tangy on his tongue, Avon hurried after the man he could not, entirely, believe he had seen. Strolling in like that, as casually as if he did it every night.

Of course, Avon reminded himself, this fellow just might do that. Either because he was simply some poor innocent and not the man Avon thought—feared—he might be. Or because it really was a man Avon had last met when Servalan had his veins full of drugs and his mind full of visions.

Nightmares, he amended, remembering less the dreams and more the awakening. Definitely nightmares.

Down a side street now, past shops and discreet brothels, narrower streets now, with pubs and knocking-shops, on to yet older streets, with tired buildings lining the pavement, and tireder prostitutes lining the walls, catering now to the passing trade who liked it rough, or sleazy, or both.

Still, the man walked on ahead, never once looking back, not even a glance over his shoulder, suspicious behaviour in so despoiled a place. Surer with every step, less sure with every passing moment, in a turmoil over whether this was reality or just another falsehood, Avon followed on, the darker underbelly of his mind amused that here he was, one glimpse, and he was trotting along behind Blake as if nothing had ever changed.

But it had changed and not for the better. Not even close.

The street was curling round now, the Blake-figure rounding the curve so suddenly that Avon lost sight of him for a moment. Long enough, it would seem, for a master of disappearance like Blake.

No one here was stupid enough to stare, but Avon knew every movement was watched by greedy eyes, and he didn’t give a damn. Strangers didn’t count as anything but bodies blocking his line of vision, and it was only when a group of flamboyant young men moved on that Avon saw the only place Blake had enough time to disappear into: the dark mouth of a close, the gate not fully shut, the hallway dark as a maw. Cautiously, Avon entered, weapon drawn, hackles risen.

Off to the right, there was a bank of lift doors,
and on the left, another passageway led off the main hallway, a staircase spiralling upwards to where the light panels glowed at minimum power. Beyond that opening, a battered and graffitied door opened unwillingly under Avon’s hand. A small courtyard, rife with the smell from the uncollected recycling units, and beyond, a door to match the one he’d come through, and another hallway like the one he’d just walked, and beyond even that, another street, with another group of young people hanging about waiting for life to happen to them.

Of Blake, or the man who had looked so like Blake in the diffused light of that eatery, there was not a trace. Disgusted, Avon began to retrace his steps, the mere thought of his reception turning him off his intended path. Back to the ship, he decided, all interest in replenishing supplies completely absent now that he’d seen Blake. Or a man who looked like him. Yes, back to the ship, and he’d get an answer from Orac if he had to threaten the recalcitrant machine with a blunt screwdriver.

And yet…

The man he’d known… That Blake would have doubled back by now, returning to the place least expected, namely the very place where he’d shaken his pursuers. An old trick, and Avon could well remember the when and the where of him teaching it to Blake. Grim determination unpleasant upon his face, Avon went back to whence he had so recently come. Rationally, in logical progression, Avon checked the possibilities, respecting neither locked doors nor the privacy of the people within.

It seemed fitting that Blake, with his lofty ideals and loftier attempts at rhetoric, should have found himself an ærie, the last door perched on the top floor, no one near enough to intrude or threaten.

If, Avon reminded himself against the thudding of his heart, it were Blake and not merely someone who looked so like him it made Avon’s bones ache. Unhurriedly, Blake sat down at the window-side table, his gaze unwavering. “Not a nice way to greet an old friend.”

“Not a very nice old friend. Running away from me the second you saw me—”

“Now you’re wrong there,” Blake said calmly. “I didn’t run.”

Avon’s mind was only half on the conversation, the rest of him marking every detail of Blake’s appearance, from the springiness of his hair, to the smooth paleness of his face, to the burliness of his body. “I was being metaphoric.”

“And how is Vila?” An echo of an old conversation, and ancient laughter, memorial of a time when they had been both more than friends and nothing less than enemies. “Our metaphoric flea.”

“There’s nothing metaphoric about him, although he is still forever trying to flee. And you haven’t remembered that particular conversation clearly.” With measured tread, Avon came all the way into the room, unflinching as Blake used a remote to reset the lock.

“A sensible precaution round here,” Blake said blandly.

Avon gestured slightly with his gun, and smiled, nastily. “I’m all in favour of sensible precautions myself. As you can see.”

“Do you want to know what I see?” Voice low, hypnotic, drawing Avon in and changing all the rules of the engagement.

“No.” Defiant, a droplet of desperation hanging from that one strangled shout. “I’ve had more than enough—” He stopped then, wry amusement lightening his eyes, incipient confession aborted before he could fall into the old pattern of telling Blake more than good sense would ever choose to.

“I have a mirror, Blake, and unlike you, I’m not blinded by blinkers. But there is one thing,” he said quickly, filling the slight pause before Blake could speak, “about which I confess I’m very curious.”

“Let me guess,” Blake said flatly, looking downwards, his hands held out for his own inspection. “What I’ve been up to for the past year.”

Nothing more, Blake staring at his hands, forehead furrowed in thought.

“If an entire year is too much for your limited abilities, then I’ll settle for where you were a month ago.”

“Meklos.”

“And not Terminal?”

Blake reacted sharply to that. “The psychomani-...
“Oh, I wish you’d told me that before.”
Slowly, very carefully non-threateningly, Blake rose to his feet, approaching Avon, stopping a half a metre away. “What did they do to you, Avon?”
“What makes you think—”
“Don’t you remember the old adage—it takes one to know one?”
“Don’t be ridiculous, Blake, I haven’t been mindwiped.”
“They did more than that to me. A lot more. And they left most of it buried deep inside my brain…” A deep breath, a hint of movement towards Avon. “What did they do to you?”
“They did nothing.” Stony, implacable, and not up to concealing the pain behind the words.
“Then what do you think I did to you?”
“What makes you think that you were the bait?”
“What else would make you go there?” Blake asked, spreading his hands in enquiry. “What else would make you come here to find me?”
“You know, it’s almost reassuring to find that even the megalomania is still the same way it has always been.”
“I asked you a question, Avon.”
“So you did. And I asked you one first.”
“Oh, come on, Avon, surely we’re both a bit too old to be indulging in childish one-upmanship?”
“True enough. But I notice you still didn’t answer my question.”
Blake looked at him steadily then, perhaps cataloguing the changes the past mountain of months had wrought on that face. “I suppose I owe you that much.”
“It’ll do as a down-payment. So go on, Blake, tell me. What have you been doing that was too important to return to Liberator?”
Blake examined a cheap print on the wall, a cheerfully bucolic scene, the sort of thing that was still banned in the Domes. “When I regained consciousness in my escape pod, I realised that not all the blood on me was my own.”
Avon didn’t really need to ask, but some small kernel of pity moved him to say it to save Blake the obvious pain. “Jenna.”
“Yes. As far as I can remember, there was only the one functioning pod left, and she had to all but bundle me into it. I think that when she was trying to programme the release sequence, there must have been another explosion, or perhaps something had already been shaken loose.” The dry recitation hesitated, but only for a moment, Blake going on, repeating the story as if it were some distant, rote history lesson. “She must have been hurt then, must have fallen forward into the capsule, and with the door mechanism being automatic…”
“The capsule was launched. And after you woke up—then what?”
“Yes. Oh yes, I know.”
Blake’s laughter was cruel, laced with contempt. “I doubt that, Avon. I seriously doubt that.”
“Cally’s dead.”
Blake became very still, his head lowered, a sharp intake of breath marking this new burden. “I’m sorry.”
“Not as sorry as she was.”
“Avon—”
“What else did you expect from me? A completely reformed character?”
“I expected…”
“Yes? You expected, what, precisely?”
“I expected that you would take over and do better than I ever managed.”
“My god, do I hear an admission of fallibility?”
“You hear an admission of defeat.”
“Avon—”
“Yes?”
“What was it that finally defeated our Great and Fearless Leader?”
“The one thing that no-one can win against. Time.”
Avon looked at him, refusing to let Blake off with so facile an explanation. “I got old, Avon. Old and tired, and disillusioned. It took me months to recover from the crash, and the whole time I was ill, all I heard were people complaining about the interim government, and how wonderful it would be to go back to the good old days when the Federation took care of everything.”
“Which would certainly be galling for the man willing to destroy Star One to prove himself right.”
“I was much younger then.”
“No matter how lively, a year isn’t—”
“But it wasn’t a year, it was an entire fucking lifetime.”
“Oh, bravo,” Avon said languidly, his tone of voice a slow hand-clap. “Your amateur dramatics really have improved.”
“Thus speaks the man who enters rooms with his gun already in his hand. If that is your idea of restraint…”
“Then I surely learned it from you. Very well,” he went on brusquely, circling round Blake, never letting the other man from his sight. “If you won’t tell me what, then you can tell me why.”

“If I knew the reason why,” Blake said heavily, “then you’d be the second person to find out.”

“Are you honestly—if you still remember the meaning of the word—trying to tell me that you simply…grew tired of the Cause—of the Rebellion you started?”

“Not very heroic, is it? But then, you never did believe in my heroics, did you?”

“I believed—” Once again, Avon pulled himself up short, unwilling to give another thing to this man. “I thought you were the one who was supposed to have faith?”

“Was I?”

“Blake, you were always so certain.” A silky sibilance of sound, a dangerous mildness in Avon’s voice. “So all that was a lie also?”

“That was the only lie.”

The atmosphere charged with Blake’s intensity and Avon’s tension. “Why the hell should I believe that?”

“Because it’s the truth.”

“Really? Unlike everything else you ever said.”

“I’m telling you, some of it was true.”

“What, precisely? The part where you said you would never rest until the Federation were defeated and the masses free? Or perhaps it was when you said that destroying Star One was in the best interests of the largest number of people. Or perhaps,” and Avon stepped forward, crowding Blake, lips drawn back in a vulpine smile, “it was when you said that you had always trusted me. From the very beginning.”

“I left you with the Liberator. I would think that was proof enough—”

“Oh, no, you abandoned the Liberator, you abandoned Cally and Vila and—” a quick verbal swerve and only someone extremely well-versed in Avon-watching would ever notice the shift, “Gan, Jenna, Cally and Gan are all three of them dead. Vila’s drinking himself into an early grave.”

“And you?”

“Me? Unlike you, I take my word seriously. I made you a promise, and I’ll keep it. No matter how much I want to wash my hands of the whole bloody mess, I’ll keep my promise. Even,” the words hissed with snaking venom, “if it means doing all the work while you sit here on your spreading backside—”

“Don’t you dare say that about me!”

“True. Being out of the revolution business obviously agrees with your health. All right, I concede that you are not growing fat on my labours. But you are still doing nothing, while I lose Cally—”

“I am sorry.”

“So you’ve already said, and it didn’t help then either, but then, empty platitudes so rarely do.”

“What the hell do you expect me to do? Fall on my sword?”

“Well now, that would be a start at least.”

“I am not responsible—”

“Aren’t you?” Sharper than nails and twice as piercing, pinning Blake down for an answer. “You still haven’t convinced me. Where were you last month?”

Reluctantly, with thumb nibbled thoughtfully. “I was on Meklos setting up another cell.”

“Ah, now we really are getting to it. Another cell. How delightful. Now, were you going to tell me you were back in the Revolution before Vila gets killed, or were you planning on waiting until I’m dead and out of your way?”

“That’s unfair—”

“Oh, it certainly is, but when did unfairness ever so much as delay you?” Avon sat down suddenly on the old sofa, the cushions yielding what little give they had. “You made me promise not to let your damned Revolution die until I could be sure that you were dead, and now you tell me that while I was fighting a battle I didn’t want, you are not only alive and well, but enjoying yourself?”

Give credit where it is due, Blake didn’t bluster, his retreat to defectiveness not yet a rout. “No-one could claim this past year has been a pleasure—”

“Grass-roots rebellion? That, Blake, was always your idea of heaven.”

“Not exactly. But the simple fact is that what’s done is done, and now you’ve found me.”

It might have been a stirring of laughter, but it was too rusty and dry to sound like Avon. “I spent months actively searching for you. I had this...absurd notion that you might need help. And if you didn’t need help, then you would want to be found.”

“And there is the crux of the matter,” Blake said, voice rich and mellow and full of regrets. “It wasn’t being found I didn’t want. It was what would follow.”
The slightest hint of friendliness drained instantly from Avon, his mouth thinning down to a narrow line, his eyes flinty. “Well, you don’t have to worry about that. I’ve come to my senses and the only interest you have for me is how quickly I can give you back your—”

“That’s not what I meant, Avon. You weren’t the problem. You were never the problem.”

“Now this is interesting,” Avon said, shards of pain sharpening his words. “I was never the problem? But you didn’t want me finding you—”

“Because if you found me, then so would everything I had been able to leave behind.”

“Compliments and reassurances never were your strong suit, were they?”

“All right, so I phrased that badly. Look at it from my point of view. I was incapacitated for months, with nothing to do but think. Especially about some of the things you said, about Star One. Out of the heat of battle, I had to look at myself, at the things I had been willing to do, for no better reason than proving myself right. Don’t you see, Avon? I had become as evil as the people I was fighting. Absolute power—”

“The others may have flocked round you like sheep at times, but absolute power? A pretty enough excuse, but not the most convincing.”

“Convincing or not, it’s the simple truth.”

“The truth is rarely simple, Blake.”

“We could go round on this for hours, and that’s a waste of time. That’s the way of it, and if you don’t like that, then I’m sorry, but there’s nothing I can do. Tell me,” Blake said, cutting off Avon’s arguments, “what happened to Cally?”

“Servalan.” Succinct, dry, to the point, and simplifying a truth ad absurdum.

“I gathered that. But what did Servalan do—”

“You already said it yourself, interestingly enough. A trap, with you as bait, although it was Cally who was caught, not me.”

“And now?”

“Now?” Avon did laugh then, the laughter fading into an unreadable expression. “They watch me endlessly. Since Cally died, I have been...not quite overflowing with joie de vivre.” More laughter, mocking himself, his bitter eyes staring at Blake. “They think I’m wearing my heart on my sleeve.”

That gave Blake pause, clouded his expression. “And are you?”

“I’m hiding something in plain sight.”

Blake looked at Avon then with the old, needfully remembered compassion. “What did Servalan do to you?” Blake asked again, softly, his voice a burr of kindness.

“Well, she didn’t throw a party. She did, however, kill Cally and destroy Liberator. Although as a consolation prize, she did manage to blow herself up—”

“Did she?” Blake broke in sharply, backpedalling the instant he saw the naked suspicion in Avon’s eyes. “You were the one always telling me not to underestimate that woman.”

“Yes, I was, wasn’t I?” A swift shift of mood, Avon seemingly suddenly tired. “Pleasant though this little chat has been, I think it’s time you met the others and start making plans to retake the leash—”

“I’m not coming back, Avon.”

The words dropped gently like a smooth stone into water, the effect rippling out in waves, washing over Avon slowly, then more quickly, anger leaping and gambolling. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Don’t pretend to misunderstand me, Avon. I said, I’m not coming back.”

“Oh, I think you’ll find that you’re wrong about that as well. I have had enough—”

“And you think I hadn’t? I turned into a monster—”

“You didn’t turn in to anything. You were simply revealed as what you were, and if you can’t cope with that—” He stopped, breathing quick and shallow, his temper wrestled under control. “Then you have my sympathy. You also have the leadership of this damned Cause of yours back in your hands.”

“No. You stay in the public eye, and let me do the real work behind the scenes.”

“In other words, set myself up as target—”

“Only if you’ve suddenly lost every talent and brain cell you ever had. Fight the Federation as you have been, and I will organise indigenous rebellion on key planets. I’ve been setting this up, Avon, and in a matter of months—a year at the most—it’ll be ready. I’ll be ready. Don’t you see? That’s the way we can both win this and survive it. You saw what happened to me when I was the one leading the whole thing. Let me have these few months to finish setting this up on a level that doesn’t corrupt me—”

“You know, that’s stretching credibility, even by your standards.”

“Why the hell won’t you believe me?”
“Because I haven’t yet lost every talent and every grey cell I’ve ever had. Because, Blake,” his tone was a caress, a haunting reminder of what had once been, “you are lying to me. And I don’t like it when you lie to me.”

Blake lowered his head, resting it in his hands, so perfect a picture of dejection that Avon automatically suspected it, even while a dim part of his mind was admiring the light on Blake’s curls, and remembering how that hair had felt, moving lightly over his belly as Blake’s mouth—

Not quite the thing to think about, given the present circumstances. Avon took a deep breath, and consigned his libido to purgatory.

“All right,” Blake finally said, raising his head and looking at Avon. “The truth... Oh, Avon, how can I even try? I can never win, that’s the only thing Star One proved.”

“I won’t argue with that. But then, I thought the whole idea was to struggle on until the right side, if not the right man, won?”

“Yes, but... Hearing everyone talk about me, whispering behind my back, seeing the state I’m in...”

“It’s what you condemned me to.”

“Oh, no, you can’t blame me for this. I didn’t force you to promise—”

“No?” A single word, scything through Blake’s defensive bombast.

“Coerced, perhaps. But you could have said no.”

“Which I thought, at the time, would result in the whole nightmare dragging on forever. Or until you finally turned yourself into a martyr.”

“I didn’t know you cared.”

Utter incredulity, and outrage, underpinned by dismay and hurt. “You didn’t know? So much for the communication of passion.”

“So much,” Blake corrected sharply, “for lust without a single declaration—”

Which was not how Avon had seen it, not at all, and not something he chose to dwell on, hastening away from that pain as surely as Blake had run away from the perversions of power. “What is to stop me,” Avon asked musingly, “from revealing your location to Avalon and all the others?”

“Nothing,” Blake replied easily, the old ability to follow Avon’s every twist and turn not one that he’d lost. “But then again, what’s to stop me disappearing again?”

“The fact that I know that you’re still alive.”

The comment hit Blake hard, driving the breath from him. “You thought I was...”

“When even Orac couldn’t find you, what else was I to think?”

“Orac had instructions—”

“Which I countermanded. And he still couldn’t find you. Which makes me wonder: where were you, Blake?”

“I have told you—”

“Nothing. A single planet, a vague fairytale about being injured and Jenna dying in transit—”

The anger, too long controlled, was boiling over, Avon’s gun coming slowly, with inexorable purpose, to press against Blake’s neck, under the chin, where a single pulse of energy would fry the brain. “Do you remember discussing this? The morality of killing the enemy cleanly,” he moved his gun, caressingly, obscenely, along Blake’s cheek, to his temple, “or of partially destroying the brain with the initial burn,” the gun slid languorously along Blake’s skin, the tip pressing against tightly-closed lips, “and leaving them to suffer incalculable agonies for a few seconds. Or possibly a full minute.”

With a gun lapping his lips, Blake could not answer, was forced to stand there, mute, his eyes speakingly furious.

“I was never entirely sure that we were friends or allies,” Avon went on, gaze fixed on where the tip of his gun was growing moist from its slow invasion of Blake’s mouth, “and now I’m not quite certain that we’re enemies.” He smiled, his eyes alive with pain and betrayal, his free hand coming up to stroke Blake’s cheek in a way that should have been seductive. “Oh, I am surprised,” he went on, sarcastic now, the gun pressing harder, “it’s so unlike you to have so little to say.”

Avon’s hand strayed to the nape of Blake’s neck, holding him firm, giving him no leeway at all, and the gun pressed forward, harder, until even Blake could not resist, lips opening, teeth parting, the gun entering Blake, and Avon, smiling, watched it all, feral grin on his lips, desolate fury in his eyes.

“I could kill you,” Avon whispered, his body against Blake’s. “I could kill you with the simplest movement of my finger.”

Blake covered Avon’s gun hand with his own, and pushed the other man back, the gun leaving his mouth, the long barrel glistening moistly in the light. “You’re a sick bastard, Avon,” he murmured, but any venom in him was well hidden. “But at least you’ve made it clear what you want.
What you always want.”

“Stupidity is hardly an appealing trait—”

“True, but I love you anyway.”

Such mockery, and so much truth disguised so well. “Love me? Blake, you—”

“Shh,” Blake whispered, leaning in closer, the heat of his attention freezing Avon in place. “We both know what we want, and we’re grown men, why shouldn’t we indulge?”

Because Avon had come here for answers; because Avon had come here to dump the Cause back where it belonged; because Avon had come here for revenge.

But then, when had he ever been able to resist, when it came to this man, and his passions?

“No,” he said loudly, jamming his gun into Blake’s belly.

“Yes,” Blake said quietly, knowing what Avon wanted, surer of him now than he had ever been.

“No.” But more softly, the protest dying.

Blake enveloped Avon in his arms, the gun between them harder than their bodies could ever be, but hot now, latent power leaching along the barrel.

“Put it away,” Blake murmured against Avon’s ear, his tongue briefly tasting the salt-sweat skin of Avon’s neck. “Put the gun away.”

A movement, Avon beginning to reholster his weapon, then an abrupt twist, the barrel hot against Blake’s throat. “No,” Avon repeated, and perhaps only he could hear the desperation in that defiance.

“On your knees, Blake,” he said coldly, even though his blood was running hot and his mind was on fire with a lust he had long wished dead.

With grace, Blake knelt, face close to Avon’s groin, the black fabric devouring light. “Is this how it has to be now, Avon?” Blake demanded. “And you still claim you don’t believe that power corrupts?”

“Ah, yes, but I was corrupted a long time ago, and not by power.”

Not waiting to be told, hurrying as if fearful that the moment would pass and Avon’s twisted sexual desire would fade, Blake undid the fasteners of Avon’s trousers, his hands so white against the black, Avon’s skin paler still. Trousers tugged down to the tops of his thighs, jacket pushed open, black sweater shoved upwards so that the thin line of hair on his belly was exposed, Avon stood there, staring down at Blake, cock in Blake’s hands.

He wanted this. More than he had thought, more than was wise, but still, he wanted it.

And what price could be worse than that already paid?

“Suck me,” Avon said hoarsely, hating himself for this ineluctable addiction, hating Blake for making him feel love in the first place. “I want to see you take me inside…”

Blake’s eyes were large, and preternaturally knowing. “I’m going to eat you alive.”

“You did that years ago.” One hand holding Blake’s head in place, Avon rammed his cock into Blake’s mouth, his tumescence thickening at the first touch of moist heat, his cock lengthening rapidly to beat at the back of Blake’s throat, the wet sounds of gagging and the massaging spasm of throat muscle a joy to Avon, revenge and release in one sweet package. He thrust harder, fucking Blake’s face, not listening to that part of himself that was horrified, refusing to hear that small voice that mocked him for doing only this because he feared not being able to take Blake, feared that if it came to fucking, it would be Avon, a willing Avon, on the receiving end. And Blake had fucked him more than enough.

His gun still hot against Blake’s flesh, his other hand holding Blake’s head rigidly in place, Avon kept on thrusting into that wet mouth, again and again and again, frustration building as orgasm eluded him, not even the pressure of Blake’s chin on his balls helping. He thrust harder, fucking Blake’s face, not listening to that part of himself that was horrified, refusing to hear that small voice that mocked him for doing only this because he feared not being able to take Blake, feared that if it came to fucking, it would be Avon, a willing Avon, on the receiving end. And Blake had fucked him more than enough.

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And then Blake reached his hands around, and spread Avon’s cheeks, and slowly pushed a finger inside him.

It was, almost, enough, and even as passion set him alight, shame burned even hotter.

Taking advantage of Avon’s distraction, Blake pulled his mouth free for a moment, and waiting until Avon was staring at him, sucked on two fingers, their wetness cool as they entered Avon, the ingress of the fingers matching the entering of his cock into Blake’s mouth again, wetness within and without, hardness within and without, and it was almost as good as being fucked.

Close now, so close, and Blake abandoned Avon, but only long enough to wet three fingers, a hard wedge of flesh forcing its way into Avon’s arse,
Avon’s body still tight after all these months of allowing no-one that particular power. Three fingers, spreading, opening Avon up, and a wet mouth sucking him in, pleasuring him, and Blake was all around him, and in him, and there was no room left for doubts or fears or anything but the singing, stinging pleasure of orgasm dissolving him, Blake’s fingers on his prostate, every pressure of that hand making the cum erupt from Avon’s cock, emptying him into Blake.

And then it was over, and he was standing there exposed and limp, and Blake was climbing to his feet, unruffled, his mouth wet and swollen from sucking Avon’s cock.

It seemed then, at that moment, that it was Avon who had been debased.

“Come on, Avon,” Blake was saying, undramatically tidying Avon’s clothes, smoothing over both the nakedness and the awkwardness. “Have a drink, and then a lie down. We can talk again later.”

“The only thing,” Avon began, had to stop, clear his throat until his voice once more sounded like his own. “The only thing I want to do is have you take over the mess you left me—”

“And I will,” Blake said kindly, and Avon knew better than to listen to that, but kindness was rarer than gold, and more precious to a man starved for it. “All in due time,” Blake went on, urging Avon into the bedroom, sitting him on the edge of the bed and pulling his boots off, repeating a pattern they had perfected on the Liberator, the once-familiar rhythms a balm to the spirit. “First, though, you need some sleep.”

Avon, trusting as ever, waited until Blake had taken a drink from the glass before he himself took it, draining the sweet local wine in a single draught. “Will there ever be time enough?”

“Of course,” Blake soothed, fiddling round with the bottle and glasses he had taken from the wall cupboard, “there’ll be time enough for that later.”

Avon, trusting as ever, waited until Blake had taken a drink from the glass before he himself took it, draining the sweet local wine in a single draught. “Will there ever be time enough?”

“Of course,” Blake soothed, fiddling round with the bottle and glasses he had taken from the wall cupboard, “there’ll be time enough for that later.”

Avon looked at him then. “The pot calling the kettle black?”

“Something like that.”

And it was the sympathy in those eyes that made Avon look away, spine crawling as if Vila knew, as if Vila could smell Blake on him, and would know. “Look, Avon,” Dayna was saying quietly while Soolin kept Tarrant otherwise engaged, “We didn’t come after you this time, but another half hour, and we would have had to. We were really worried about you, and that’s just not fair. And I know it’s hard for you, but you shouldn’t just disappear like that. You shouldn’t just shut us all out. My father always used to tell us not to let things get to us, and it has to be true even for all of us: love will find a way.”

“How wonderfully reassuring,” Avon grinned, set it all up, you’ll see…”
and his eyes glittered. “And if it doesn’t, hate surely will.”

He began the sequence to take them out of orbit, his mind already working on ways to trace that bastard Blake, and under it all, the festering suspicion worried like a hungry dog at the bone of contention: where the hell had Blake been, and had he simply guessed certain details? Or had he known them?

A man, bearded, lying on a bed, his feet dirty, although he was supposed to be no more than a figment of some psycho-manipulator’s induced nightmare.

Avon smiled to himself, as the others gathered round, protesting the course he was setting, complaining about leaving, kicking up quite a fuss, all of it as water on stone.

Let them. Let them gather round, clowns in a choreographed circus. Let them babble on about whatever they wanted, Avon knew what they were really saying: get over it, put it behind you, and hide this love away where it wouldn’t be either so embarrassing or so dangerous.

Avon let them think whatever they wanted to. He welcomed the ice as it crept through him, the familiar numbing that eased him through horrors such as this. Felt the cold creeping into every dark cavern in his mind, freezing the pain and the hurt and the humiliation, until only one thing was alive and warm and pulsing.

Revenge.

If it took him a lifetime, he would find Blake again.

And then they would see who had been set up.