

FLOW GENTLY, SWEET AFTON

Leigh Graham

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He could see she wasn’t.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Blake? Is it you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blake nodded and led the way to lunch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"In what capacity?" Blake demanded.

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

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

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

"You don't know for certain?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Your children."

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

"She's your favourite, is she?"

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

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

"And you Blake, what do you do?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not quite certain yet."

"Been mindwiped, 'as 'e?"

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

"Salvageable, is 'e?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"May I suggest talking to his wife."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m ready, Madam.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What is your name?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No response.

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

“Have you ever been in prison?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is that what you want, Madame President?”

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

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

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

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

“But, Madame, I warn you....”

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

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

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

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

“And the children?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well?” his parent demanded.

“Oh, nothing much happened, Dad.”

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

“Well? I’m waiting, Del.”

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

“Am not!”

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

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

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

Del’s eyes narrowed and his mouth set firmly into

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

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

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

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

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

“Soolin,” he whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you remember me, Avon?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What are you going to do to me?”

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

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

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

“Any damage?”

+Negative.+

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What is your name?”

“Afton...no, Avon. Kerr Avon.”

“Where were you born?”

“Discia Ten.”

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

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

“Yes, well, let’s get on with it.”

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

“*Blake!*”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Avon?"

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

"Yes, Blake?"

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

"Is something wrong with Avon again?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do what?" Blake frowned, confused.

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

Once again the silence weighed heavily between

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

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

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

"Blake, stop."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blake shifted, nestling closer. "You do understand

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

"Such as?"

"The teleport."

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

"So?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you certain?"

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

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

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

Blake shook his head. "Me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blake's laughter followed Avon down the hall.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And now?"

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

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

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

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

She laughed. "If such a place exists."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Epilogue

"Now tell me your name, Chelle."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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