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Bitter Wine

by Jean Graham



hy do you think I've never gone back? Affection for him?

I am not often so cruel with words. But yours was an anger that fed upon my own, festering until I could do nothing else but retaliate. And so I exchanged hurt for thoughtless

hurt.

Forgive me, Avon. For my words and for the deception that followed.

I never meant the bonding to last so long. I was wrong, I know, to form it at all. But I simply could not allow you to face the interrogators alone when there was a way ...

I only wanted to help. How could I possibly have foreseen the random element of Anna Grant's return from the dead?

Anna was one agony I had not intended to share.

The rumors of my death ...

Have been greatly exaggerated.

How lightly Tarrant spoke the words, both blithe and blind to your torment. But your reply was anything but light as you slotted the teleport bracelet into its rack.

Well ... slightly exaggerated, anyway.

And when you walked away, your pain was tangible enough to drive me to the cushions at the teleport console, biting back the urge to cry out. Though you'd gone, the horror of your single thought remained with me, bleak and coldly terrifying.

Not Anna too.

I knew the source of the horror then. So many others had already betrayed you. Everyone for whom you'd ever cared ... or tried to care. You had come to believe that your "walls" would protect you from ever being hurt again. And now ... You had not counted on the intervention of a ghost, any more than I had. The hardest betrayal to bear is the one you would never ... ever ... have expected.

Please God ... not Anna too.

"Cally?"

I jumped, aware of a hand suddenly touching

mine, and a voice -- Vila's -- concerned and gentle.

"Cally, what is it? What's wrong?"

I should have expected that of all of them, Vila would be the one to notice my distress. But I could not tell him. How would I explain?

"I'll be all right, Vila. Thank you."

"Well, you don't look all right. You're white as a ghost. Here, wait a minute. I've got something can help that ..."

"No," I stopped his reach for the bottle. "Thank you. But I really am all right. Or I will be, as soon as I've taken care of something."

He glanced nervously at the corridor, the way you had gone, and then back at me as though he might be uncannily aware that some connection did indeed exist.

"He'll be all right," he said.

I blinked at him, not understanding.

"Avon," he added with a rueful little smile. "He'll be all right, too. He's always all right. Nothing ever gets to Avon."

Oh, but you are wrong, Vila. So very wrong.

I wanted to say the words aloud, but could not. The pain had returned, a frigid, clutching thing from deep within the bonding. Your physical discomfort I had intended to share, through the interrogation, and to lessen if I could. But this ...

This thing had been born in the darkest hell any Auron may face. It drew its pain from cruel, uncompromised isolation. Your fear, Avon. Alone and silent.

Why did I ever consent to have any part in your revenge? Even so small a part as implanting the transmitter? Perhaps because the thought of forming the bond had occurred to me. And if I could not stop you from going, I might at least help you to face the interrogators.

My people call it *Uhrtra*.

The Sharing.

It is done easily -- and undone -- with nothing more than a touch. A simple mental link. Quite fragile, really. But it can serve a useful purpose, as it did in this case. And you need never be aware of it at all. I knew you would be angry if you knew. Angry that anyone dared enough to care.

I formed the Uhrtra when we implanted the transmitter, whilst you were still unconscious. I did not think then what a risk I would be taking. If you had died in your quest for this insane revenge, I would have died with you. Uselessly.

The Auroae say that revenge is bitter wine. One always learns, too late, that it is never worth the price you pay.

So I shared, through the bonding, your five-day ordeal. For each of us to suffer only half the pain, I reasoned, was better than for one to bear it all. I told the others I was ill -- that was true enough -- and I retired to my cabin. They assumed that I was only mourning Auron's loss, and that was also true, in part.

But I had never realized just what horrors you were ready to endure in order to exact your "justice." I had never been the "guest" of Federation interrogators on a level with these. You had. Yet you were willing to go through it all again, just to get your hands on Shrinker.

Was he worth it, Avon?

I think not.

You killed him. You dispassionately *orchestrated* his death -- and yet it turned out he had never known Anna at all. Had not killed her. Had never seen her.

An empty victory.

I began to regret the Uhrtra then. But I did not break it, even after Shrinker's death, because you placed yourself in even greater danger by going after Servalan.

Again, I was foolish. And again, I might have died with you.

It was I who warned you when Anna drew the gun. Did you realize that, I wonder? I tell myself that it was as much for self-preservation as for ... well, for any other reason. Yet even that is partly a deception. I know it, but I don't pretend to understand it.

I do not know my own feelings anymore, Avon. *I do not understand why I care* ... when it seems that you have never cared.

My brooding at the teleport console was disturbed again by Vila's solicitous voice.

"Are you certain you're all right? Why don't you let me get you that drink, Cally? It'll do you good. Promise."

I forced his hand away, gently but firmly. "No, Vila. There is something I must do."

Over his objections, I departed in the direction you had gone, praying that he would not follow. Fortunately, this time, he did not.

I knew where you had gone. Even without the Uhrtra, I would have known. I'd seen you on the starboard observation deck before, and assumed you had gone there for the same reason I often did. To lose yourself for a time in the vastness of the stars. To think, to remember ... or to forget.

Only now you could do none of those things,

and the stars were no longer a comfort. They were nothing now but a billion torments, scattered, hard and shining, as empty and alone as the agony we shared.

I regretted the Uhrtra more than even in that moment, not because I could not withstand the pain, but because this was a personal anguish upon which I had no right to intrude. I felt suddenly cheap and deceitful for not having told you; you would never have forgiven me in any case. And yet, to stop it, I had somehow to touch you ...

I came onto the observation deck and stopped just within the door. The room was lightless, but I could see you silhouetted against the rectangular port, standing there, staring out at nothing.

I felt the tears, unshed, burn in my own eyes, and I recoiled at the pain no Auron would have willingly shared -- the acrid, bitter twist of the betrayer's knife that left you so horribly alone. It murdered the soul, that knife; made it draw remorselessly in upon itself like a collapsing star. Never to trust again. Never to ... love ... again. New walls, re-erected, were meant now to imprison you forever. Alone. To an Auron, they would have precursed certain madness. I feared they might well do the same for you. But they were *your choice*, those walls. I wanted only to be free of them, to break the Uhrtra, once and for all.

Yet I could not.

I couldn't bring myself to move another step into that room. Somehow, to reveal to you that I was there at all seemed a betrayal as cruel in its way as Anna's had been.

Something else you would never have forgiven.

So, cowardice defeating me, I fled the room and sought solace once again in the confines of my cabin.

For ten hours, I fought, unsuccessfully, to banish the demons that raged at you. I even tried to drown them in the misery of my own private sorrow: I studied the drawings of Auron, a long and morbid reverie mourning the passing of a world. My world.

It did not help.

* * *

Ten hours of grief gone by, and your voice calling softly at my door brings both surprise and, guiltily, relief. Now at last, a chance to dissolve the Uhrtra. And you still need never know.

I scarcely hear your words -- or mine -- as you remove the drawing from my grasp and gaze at it, detached, controlled once more. As though your agony had never been. But it is still there, behind the walls. I feel it burning. A cold fire, twisting ... consuming.

"Regret is part of living," you say, concealing your own regret once more behind the omnipresent mask. "But keep it a small part."

Now is the time, I know, that I must make the contact. Break the link. So simple and innocent a thing, a touch. Yet this one must be oh-so-

much more.

"As you do?" I ask, and your smile is a thing somehow more frightening than reassuring.

"Demonstrably."

Now. It must be now.

I smile as well, summoning a laugh, and place an almost playful hand upon your chest. A friendly touch, light and fleeting. It is all you are likely to allow.

But it is enough.

The Uhrtra gone at last, I move past you to

the door and turn my feet toward the flight deck. A part of me wishes I could tell you ... explain to you. But I know you would not understand.

Another part of me wishes I could have done more, somehow, to help you. But that, too, is impossible. You have made it so.

Pain, isolation, emptiness. They are all yours once more. And I cannot -- will not -- share them again.

I am sorry, Avon. But this is how it must be.

He who drinks the bitter wine must drink alone.

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