

# Market Value



by Sheila Paulson

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"Pardon me, sir, but would you consider selling your woman?"

The unexpected question took Avon by surprise, and it was a moment before he realized that it was directed at him. He shot a startled glance at Cally, who was staring back at him in wide-eyed astonishment. It is not every day that one is asked to sell one's companion.

It had all started rather innocently. *Liberator* was in orbit around the planet Keschan, a world remote enough to be free of Federation domination. As such it would be a good world on which to relax, and even Avon could admit that the crew of the *Liberator* needed to relax very badly. He had chosen to visit the bazaar, a vast, sprawling complex, where, it was said, anything in the galaxy could be bought or sold. Built around a huge central square, the bazaar went on for miles, full of twisting passageways and broad avenues where storekeepers sold their wares from elaborate shops, makeshift shacks and tents, or simply spread their wares beneath the sky. Humans and aliens alike mingled in the vast crowds, to shop, to explore, to sightsee, to steal, to watch the performing troupes who put on their shows in the central square. The smell of cooking foods, exotic spices and perfumes, unwashed bodies, beasts of burden and dust from beneath one's feet combined to assault the nostrils, and the noise of sellers hawking their wares, voices raised in argument, musical accompaniment to the dancers and a thousand other sounds were enough to give one a headache.

Avon had a suspicion that Blake had maneuvered him into going down to Keschan first, but he had been glad enough to get away from the confinement of the ship and the close proximity of the others to overlook that fact. Since Gan's death, there had been various tensions and strains on the ship, and Avon would not miss the others while on the planet. He frowned, remembering Albion, their last planetfall. Blake had been after him ever since to tell him about Anna, and Avon had not chosen to do so. A time away from Blake would be more than welcome.

He was startled when Cally asked if she could accompany him to the bazaar, but not displeased with the idea. Cally would not prod at him with uncomfortable questions the way Blake would, and she would not annoy him with a stream of idiocy like Vila. But he was still surprised when he heard himself accepting the offer.

"I'll come too, if you like," Vila had put in as soon as Cally had gone to get ready.

"No, you shall not," Avon replied. "I think a holiday from you is an excellent idea."

"Oh." Vila's face fell, and Avon suspected that it was not his company as much as the bazaar itself that interested Vila.

Blake smiled a little. "Your turn will come, Vila," he assured him.

Vila sulked, but he came along to operate the teleport anyway. "See that you stay out of trouble down there," he told Avon, who raised an affronted eyebrow at the suggestion. "And don't stay all day. I don't want to miss anything."

"Put us down."

He and Cally materialized on Keschan and began to explore the bazaar. As they strolled through the crowd, Avon began to unbend a little. In the presence of the milling people, he found himself continually being separated from Cally and solved this by taking her arm. She gave him a startled look, but made no attempt to draw away.

As they walked, Avon began to make scathing comments about the merchandise displayed, speculated enthusiastically about the delightful prospect of buying Vila a carnivorous plant, and dragged Cally off to watch the dancing girls, a performance that turned her cheeks quite pink.

"Don't you find the performance esthetically stimulating?" Avon asked her.

She looked at him in surprise, and saw a sudden and unexpected humor in his eyes, then the two of them were laughing. Cally could not remember the last time she had heard Avon laugh in simple, uninhibited amusement, and she was delighted and charmed.

It was into this scene of merriment that the unexpected question came. Avon turned to find a rotund little man with a swarthy face eyeing Cally with a look that could best be described as greedy. His brightly striped robes were adorned with a number of silver chains, a local sign of wealth, and he carried himself with an air of smug satisfaction. Avon disliked him on sight. He said coldly, "I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, sir," the little man said placatingly, "I did not mean to offend your noble self. It is simply that I am quite enchanted with your slave, and I wish to own her. I will pay a very high price, a most excellently high price." He cocked his head to one side and his eyes slid over Cally in a way that Avon found offensive in the extreme. "Shall we say seventy bellons?"

The local currency went by the unattractive name of klatts. Curiously Cally asked, "What are bellons?"

"These," the man replied, pointing to one of the shaggy brown beasts of burden that seemed to be everywhere in the square. "I own the best bellons on the planet; anyone will tell you so. Bellons are typical slave offerings. It is a mark of respect, noble sir."

Cally tried to picture Avon suddenly saddled with seventy of the snobbish looking creatures and could not bite back a giggle. She could hardly wait to describe the incident to the others.

Avon saw her expression and said, "That is a most generous offer. I will consider it."

Cally trod on his foot.

Avon smiled. It was more like a grimace.

"Perhaps, noble sir, I might consider raising my price to seventy-five."

"Even more generous," Avon remarked. "However, the ... slave ... is not for sale. She is very ... useful to me. I would not wish to find myself deprived of ..."

"I quite understand," the little man said regretfully, disappointment filling his face.

\*I do not understand,\* Cally telepathed ominously to Avon. \*Perhaps you will explain to me what it is that you do not wish to be deprived of, Avon.\*

Avon flashed a warning glance in her direction, then turned back to the man. "If you will excuse us ..."

"Of course. And if you should reconsider, I am Selif. Anyone will tell you where I might be found. I do not give up easily. I will renew my offer."

"I will not change my mind," Avon said and all but dragged Cally away.

Once they were out of earshot of the little man, Avon came to a stop and began to laugh.

\*I am glad that one of us thinks it is funny,\* Cally sent coldly.

Avon's smile broadened. "If he had known you were telepathic, I might have got one hundred bellons for you."

"And how would you have explained them to Blake? I do not believe that we have room for even one of those creatures on the Liberator." She managed a tentative smile as the humor of the situation struck her, then she was laughing too. "I would have enjoyed watching you lead seventy of them through the bazaar."

"Perhaps we could take one of them back with us. We could give it to Vila. Maybe it would bite him."

Cally smiled, then she grew serious. "Avon?" she said thoughtfully.

"Yes?"

"Why would Selif assume that I was your slave? According to ORAC's information, slavery does exist on this planet, but it is not widespread."

Avon considered that, annoyed because he had not thought of it himself. They had heard about the slavery on Keschan -- Blake, predictably, had been ready to begin a campaign to win their freedom -- but it seemed to be limited to a small minority, and as far as ORAC had been able to determine, no one seemed to mind very much, not even the slaves, who could save money and buy their freedom if they should choose. Avon turned and looked across the bazaar, trying to determine which of the people were slaves and which were not. Women on Keschan had equal rights with men, so it could not simply be the fact that Cally was a woman. After a few moments of study, Avon came to a possible conclusion. "I am not certain, but I believe that all those we see wearing red are slaves."

Cally's eyes moved across the square, then she nodded. "Perhaps you are right." She looked down at her bright red cape with dismay. "Maybe I should return to the ship and change my clothing so that there will be no further misunderstandings."

"It might be wise." He glanced around and spotted an alley branching off the square. "We should be able to teleport from there undetected."

They entered the alley, following it around a bend until they were out of sight of the main square. As Avon raised his bracelet, there was a sound behind him, but before he could turn, something dark came down over his head. It felt like a sack. He struggled futilely as they jerked it down hard and bound it around his waist, trapping his arms inside. Fighting the awkward folds of material, he was trying to raise his bracelet when he heard Cally cry out.

"Cally!" he shouted. But his attacker must have wanted silence because something hard was slammed against the side of his head with enough force to drive him to his knees. Without his arms for balance, he fell clumsily, and the movement sent agonies of pain through his skull. He felt the darkness descending and lapsed into a period of muddled semiconsciousness.

\*Avon, they are taking me away!\*

That penetrated, but he could not fight his way free of the bag. "Cally?" he muttered weakly.

\*It is Selif,\* Cally continued. \*He ...\* Her telepathic message was cut off in mid-sentence, and that jerked Avon back to full alertness as effectively as if icy water had been poured over his head.

With a moan of pain, he managed to sit up, but the bag still hindered him, and no matter how he writhed and twisted, he could not free himself. Finally, hating the idea of the spectacle he would create in the teleport section, he managed to work his bracelet close to his mouth and activated it.

"Liberator?" It was a muffled croak of a sound, unlike his normal cool tones, and he muttered in frustration and tried again. "Avon to Liberator."

"Liberator." It was Vila, of course; Avon should have expected that. "Avon? You sound all muffled and funny. You haven't been drinking, have you?"

"Bring us up, Vila. Urgent!" he managed to say, his head still swimming.

Vila must have been in the teleport section because Avon felt the sensation of teleport almost immediately. Ordinarily a smooth process, it didn't do Avon a bit of good in his present state, and his head pounded furiously as he rematerialized on board the ship.

"Avon, is that you in there?" Vila demanded with glee. "What have you been up to down there? And everybody thought I would be the one to get in trouble."

"Get me out of here, you idiot," Avon snarled through clenched teeth.

Vila leapt forward and undid the ropes that bound the bag in place. With a groan, Avon came out of it, squinting against the light, and though he tried to harden himself against the dizziness, he sagged and would have fallen if Vila had not grasped his arm, his mirth replaced by a look of alarm.

"You can't even manage shore leave properly," Vila complained, supporting Avon with his arm and helping him to the teleport couch. His fingers encountered the lump on Avon's head and he gave a

dismayed whistle. "And you never do things by half, either. You'd think you'd be smart enough to stay out of trouble. What have you done with Cally?"

Avon clutched his head in his hands. "Cally?"

"Where is she?" Vila demanded with growing agitation. "You haven't lost her?"

"I told you to bring her up," Avon's voice was icy.

"She didn't come, Avon, I didn't think ..."

"You never think," Avon snapped. "Try again, you fool." He leaned forward and rested his head on his folded arms while Vila attempted unsuccessfully to bring Cally on board.

Then the dizziness came back, and the last thing Avon remember before he spiralled down into blackness was Vila's voice calling urgently, "Blake! Avon's hurt and Cally's missing. You'd better get down here right away."

When Avon revived, he was in the medical unit, and the blinding pain was gone. He felt much better. Sitting up abruptly, he realized that he was no longer dizzy. Blake's voice said soothingly from beside him, "Easy, Avon. You're all right." A hand came to rest on his shoulder for support.

He shrugged it away. "How long?" he asked.

"Since you were brought back here? Not more than ten minutes, Avon." Blake took a step backward. "We sent Jenna down to have a look around, but she could find no trace of Cally." He added, "You're lucky. You don't have a concussion. How do you feel?"

Avon ignored the question and climbed to his feet. "Selif," he said. "Cally said he was the one who took her. He'd tried to buy her."

Blake's eyebrows sbot up. "Buy her?" he echoed in disbelief.

"Yes. Someone --" this with a very pointed glare at Blake -- "neglected to mention that on Keschan the slaves wear red. Apparently Selif believed Cally a slave and was not inclined to take no for an answer."

"We've got to get her back."

"Yes, and I would not advise a delay, Blake. From the way he looked at her, it was all too clear what he intends for her."

"I don't intend to delay, Avon. Do you feel up to going down again?"

"I'm all right," Avon said shortly. "What do you have in mind, Blake? Going down there with guns blazing doesn't strike me as wise, and it would most likely get Cally killed."

"ORAC can help us to locate this Selif. Once we know where he is, we can make our plans. Let's get to the flight deck. I don't want to waste any time. You're sure you're all right?"

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Avon ignored that and turned to leave the medical unit.

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When they reached the flight deck, they found Vila and Jenna waiting for them. Blake strode across to ORAC and inserted the key. "ORAC, I have some questions for you."

"Why must you always assume that I have nothing better to do than answer your questions?"

"This is important, ORAC. We need to find out where to locate a man called Selif on Keschan. It's vital that we find him immediately."

"Is that all? Surely such minor work could be best performed by yourself without interrupting my work."

"Do it, ORAC," Avon said coldly, a threat ill-concealed in his voice.

"Oh, very well."

"Selif?" asked Vila. "Who's that? What do we want him for?"

"He's the one who has Cally," Blake answered. "We've got to find him so we can get her free."

"What does he want with her, then?" Vila wanted to know.

Avon only looked at him. "What do you think?"

"Oh," said Vila in a small voice.

"We're going down there," Blake said.

"What's your plan?" Vila asked.

"I'm working on it."

Suddenly Avon smiled. "I have a plan," he announced.

"Good. What is it?"

"It will involve Jenna." Avon turned to face her. "This is what you will need to do."

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"No," said Jenna.

"It's only a pretense, Jenna," Blake soothed. "We don't really intend to sell you into slavery."

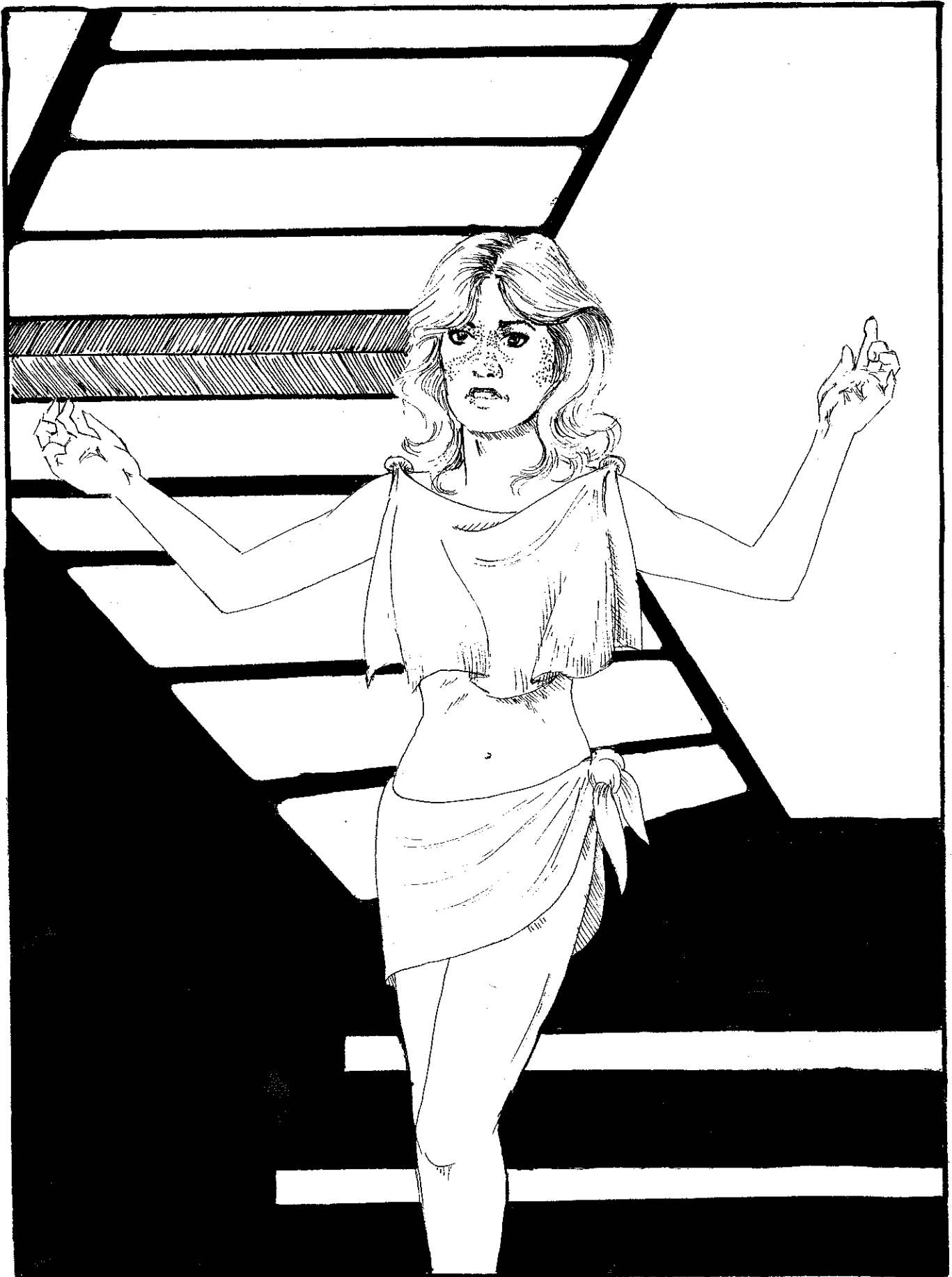
"You relieve my mind," she said sarcastically. "From what Avon says, he didn't intend to sell Cally either, and look what happened to her."

Avon gave her a hard glare. "Jenna, Selif will not bargain to free Cally. We must distract him long enough to keep him away from her while we free her."

"It won't be so bad, Jenna," Blake said in an attempt to placate her. "All we want to do is take you to Selif and see if he wishes to purchase you."

"And if he does?" she demanded.

"Then we'll simply teleport back here. The



Will do?

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point is that we must stall him. You heard ORAC. Selif's slaves become members of his ... er, harem. When he acquires a new slave, he chooses to initiate her the same night. We don't have much time."

"And just exactly how will you get her free while I'm being offered as bait?"

"Vila will break into the harem."

Vila, who had not yet heard this part of the plan, turned around and looked at Blake in astonished delight. "You want me to break into a harem?" he asked in disbelief.

"It will undoubtedly be guarded," Avon told him.

Vila waved that away, for once dismissing the idea of guards as negligible. The picture of the scantily-clad women that came to him more than made up for the possibility of a guard or two.

"I will accompany you," Avon said.

"And spoil all the fun," Vila muttered with a dark glance at Avon.

"I have a score to settle with Selif."

Vila remembered the bag and began to laugh. He had done this several times already, and Avon was rapidly losing patience with him. The idea of putting a bag over Vila's head -- permanently -- was beginning to appeal to him.

Vila saw his look and wisely stopped laughing, but he could not help remembering the delightful sight of Avon in the bag. Avon was all right; there had been no permanent damage, and the sight of that had been wonderful. He doubted that he would ever let Avon live it down.

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Jenna vanished reluctantly and returned clad in a very skimpy outfit consisting of a brief red top that did not come below her ribcage and a short skirt, an outfit that displayed her figure to advantage because so little of it was concealed. At the sight of her, Vila gave a whistle and an enthusiastic stare, Avon's eyes moved coolly over her, and Blake took a quick look, eyes widening, then turned away. Jenna smiled a little to herself and said with a hint of mischief, "Will I do?"

"It seems adequate," Avon replied maddeningly. "Vila, are you ready?"

"Just say the word, Avon."

Avon's eyes met Blake's and they shared a look of amusement. The sight of a willing Vila was still a novelty. It couldn't last.

\* \* \*

Selif smiled to himself. He had been right to take the slave from her master the way he had. The man had obviously been a stranger and would not know how to protest the loss of his woman, and Selif found her fascinating. She did not behave the way a slave generally did. When she was carried into the harem, she was struggling furiously, recovered from the drug hkr had used to subdue her. "What have you done with Avon?" she demanded furiously.

"Not a thing," he promised her. "I gave orders that he not be killed. That should please you."

Cally was frankly skeptical, but there was nothing she could do to help Avon now.

"You are now one of my personal slaves, lovely one. And this very day, I will come to your bed. In the meantime I will leave you here so that you can make yourself beautiful for me." He smiled in anticipation. "In less than an hour, I will return to you."

"I will not cooperate," Cally declared.

"You will. I do not like to take a new slave to bed under the influence of drugs, but I will if necessary." A note of hardness crept into his voice. "Slaves do not defeat me. Remember that. If you are not as compliant as I would wish when I come back, there are ways of making you so." He leaned forward and kissed her. Cally jerked away with revulsion and began to plan her escape.

Selif slapped her hard across the face and stepped back. "Drug her," he ordered to his body-guard and walked out without a backward look.

Cally watched him go, then she tried to concentrate. \*Avon, Selif has captured me.\* If Avon were back on the ship, he might be too far away for her thoughts to reach him, and the drug had muddled her thinking a little, making it difficult to concentrate on sending the message, but she had to try. She would try periodically until the time came, then she would fight. They would not expect that, nor would they realize what an accomplished fighter she was. She only knew that she would not submit.

The guard came at her then with a hypo. He was a huge man, bigger than Gan had been, and his face held only the bored expression of someone performing a dull and routine task. There would be no appealing to his better nature, but perhaps he could be fought. He might be slow and clumsy. Cally tried to evade him, but he was quicker than he looked, and he shot out a massive hand and grasped her wrist. No matter how hard she struggled, she could not break his hold.

Unable to help herself, Cally was forced to watch him inject the drug. It spread through her system quickly, making her feel warm and lethargic. She relaxed back onto the bed, smiling amiably at the guard. He released her and turned to go, and Cally discovered with quickly growing panic that she did not want him to go. "Come back," she pleaded, but the door closed firmly behind him and she was alone. Alone. Confused, she sat up, wrapping her arms around her knees, and waited for someone to come and relieve her of this dreadful aloneness. She did not think she could bear it.

After what seemed like eons of solitude, the door opened and the guard came in. Cally jumped to her feet and went to him, holding out her arms. He shoved something into them. "Put this on," he insisted.

Cally looked down at the nightgown stupidly. All she wanted was not to be alone, but if she must first change her clothing, so be it. She began to undress.

The guard watched her a moment without interest to make sure that she was obeying, then he withdrew and closed the door, locking it behind him.

"No!" Cally wailed. "Don't go." She shuddered, hoping that someone would come soon. She felt lost, confused, not even sure of her own identity. Maybe, she thought vaguely, she was no longer sane. \*Avon,\* she tried to send, but she felt blocked; she could not communicate with him, with anyone. Whimpering in fear and misery, she curled up on the bed, shivering.

\* \* \*

Selif returned to the main house to be told there was someone waiting who craved an audience. "And he has a slave with him, my lord," the houseman told him. "An exceedingly lovely slave."

Selif's thoughts were still with Cally, but the tone of the man's voice aroused his curiosity. "I will deal with them," he decided. "Bring them to me."

He had arrayed himself in his best chair, his robes spread regally about him when Blake and Jenna were ushered into the room. Selif's eyes widened at the sight of Jenna. Now here was a slave that he would like very much to possess. If he could buy this one, he would have two new slaves in one night. A delightful idea.

Jenna found Selif's eyes on her and gave him a disgusted look. She did not appreciate the lust in his face.

Blake didn't either, but he could not say so. He had a part to play and he must play it convincingly. "I bring you a slave for consideration, my lord."

"And a very lovely one she is too," Selif replied, rising to his feet majestically and walking around her as he might have done a horse he wished to buy. Jenna closed her hands into fists and promised herself revenge on Avon for dreaming up this indignity.

Blake was discovering that he did not care for Selif either. He would have liked nothing more than to drive a fist into that smug face, but he dared not risk that. He said, "I do not like to part with her, my lord, but sometimes one's expenses become more than one can deal with."

"Ah, yes, I quite understand," Selif replied. "Let us begin to bargain." He settled himself back into his chair and prepared to enjoy himself.

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Avon and Vila materialized in a clearing in some bushes behind the harem quarters and took a hasty look around to make sure they were unobserved. There seemed to be no one in the vicinity. "So far so good," Vila said optimistically.

"Keep quiet," Avon whispered.

"I am," Vila looked around. "Which way?"

"Over here." Avon led the way to a door. "Through here. Can you get it open?"

"Can I get it open? Of course I can get it open. There's no door I can't open. Any genius could do it."

He pulled out tools and proved his words in less than 30 seconds. "There, you see. Pure genius."

"Pure ego, too."

Vila grinned and stood back to let Avon precede him through the door.

They found themselves in a corridor, curving around the outer edge of the circular building. No one was in sight. A few fragile chairs and benches were set along the inner wall, but there was no other furniture. The walls were devoid of pictures or decorations, but draped with rich cloths in red and gold.

"It looks like a bordello," Vila whispered.

"You should know."

Vila gave Avon a dirty look.

Doors were set along the corridor at intervals, recessed into the walls. Avon headed for the nearest of them. "Come on."

They made their way along the corridor as silently as possible toward the first door. Avon opened it and found himself looking into an elaborate bedroom. An empty room. He backed out again and moved on, pausing to examine each door, while Vila stood guard uneasily, expecting trouble. It was apparent from Avon's reactions that some of the rooms were occupied, and Vila realized that it was Avon who was having the privilege of seeing the harem girls instead of him. Annoyed, he stepped forward as Avon vanished into yet another alcove. But before Vila could follow him, a huge hand came down on his shoulder and a deep voice rumbled from somewhere above his head, "Not so fast."

Vila spun around and found himself staring at the biggest man he had ever seen. The man was head and shoulders above Vila, and all solid muscle, and he looked decidedly unfriendly. "Oh, no," Vila muttered, and then went on to the man, "Look, it's not what you think. I don't mean any trouble. Anyone can tell you I'm completely harmless."

The guard stared skeptically down at Vila, then to the thief's astonishment, he stiffened and collapsed to the floor in a heap. Avon lowered the chair he had used to stun the guard. "You mean useless," he said to Vila. "Come on, I've found a locked door."

"Avon, maybe we should leave now."

"We don't have Cally yet."

"But there'll be more like him."

"If you had been paying attention, he would not have been able to sneak up on you. Come here."

There was an unyielding note in Avon's voice that Vila could not ignore. Still shaking from his run-in with the guard, he knelt beside the lock and stared at it. "There'll probably be more of them inside, you know."

Avon's reply to that was to take out his gun. "Open it, Vila. You have pointed out often enough that there is no lock you couldn't open if you were scared enough."

Vila was scared enough. He had the lock open in ten seconds flat.

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Avon pushed past Vila and went into the room, Vila trailing behind him unhappily. But there were no more guards. As they entered, a woman rose from a bed and flung herself at Avon. She was even more scantily-clad than Jenna had been in a brief and almost transparent sleeveless gown that did not come halfway to her knees. As she reached Avon, she flung her arms around his neck before he realized what she intended and pressed her lips against his. Sheer surprise held him rigid for a moment before Vila's shocked voice crying "Cally!" made him realize the identity of the woman in his arms.

Skillfully he detached her and held her at arms' length. Her eyes were huge and blank and unfocused, but she struggled to reach him again. "No, please," she said, "I must not be alone."

"You're not alone," Avon assured her, his voice surprisingly gentle. "Cally, don't you recognize us?"

It seemed that she did not. "Don't go away," she pleaded. "Please don't go."

"She's been drugged," Avon said to Vila. "Find something to cover her up."

"Must I?" Vila asked reluctantly, but when Avon turned toward him angrily, he fetched a sheet from the bed and tried to wrap it around her. As he neared her, she transferred her attention from Avon and threw her arms around Vila. Avon caught her arm and pulled her away, fastening a teleport bracelet around her wrist. Vila shot Avon a reproachful look as he draped the sheet around Cally's shoulders.

Holding Cally by the arms, Avon said, "Contact ORAC and have us brought up, Vila."

Vila hesitated, and Avon added, "I would not advise a delay. That guard will be waking up soon."

Vila raised his bracelet quickly. "ORAC, three to teleport. Now, ORAC."

\* \* \*

They took Cally to the medical unit where the ship's computers diagnosed that she had indeed been drugged. Avon began to set up the equipment to purge the drug from her system, and Cally fought him every step of the way. "Please," she whispered, "Don't leave me alone."

"You are not alone," Avon told her.

"Don't leave me ..." Her voice trailed off and she said faintly, confused, "Avon?"

"Yes."

"Avon, I have been drugged, I think."

"Yes. Lie still."

"I am ... afraid to be alone."

"You will not be alone," he insisted. Attaching the last connection, he reached out just for a second

to touch her hand, then he turned away. "Vila, stay with her," he instructed. "Blake and Jenna will want fetching up."

And he walked out of the medical unit without a backward glance.

"I'll never understand him," Vila muttered to himself. "All this fuss about rescuing Cally, and he doesn't even stay around to make sure she's all right." He shook his head and then turned back to Cally. "How do you feel?"

\* \* \*

Selif rubbed his hands together enthusiastically. "Yes," he said to Blake. "I think we can deal. Name your price."

Blake's voice was controlled. "Shall we say 100 bellons?"

"Shall we say fifty? I've never gone as high as 100."

"Fifty wouldn't be worth my while," Blake said with mock regret.

Jenna seethed. She knew that Selif had offered 70 for Cally, and found herself resenting the fact that she would not bring as high a price. Avon would pay for this somehow, she vowed. And what was keeping him? If he didn't hurry, they were going to have to teleport back without waiting for his signal.

"Ninety," Blake bargained.

"Fifty-five," Selif said.

Jenna glared at him as she surreptitiously reached for the recal signal on her bracelet.

The movement was a mistake. Selif's eyes followed the gesture. He had paid no attention to the bracelet earlier as Jenna's charms had distracted him from any other consideration, but now that he saw the bracelet, he recognized it. Surely the others had been wearing similar bracelets; these people must be part of a rescue effort, an attempt to free the slave Cally. Selif made a slight gesture at the guard in the corner, and the man drew out a weapon.

There was no more time. "So," Selif said, "you think to plot against me and steal my slave."

"No," Blake replied. "We think to take back our companion, who is not a slave and has never been one."

"She is one now," Selif said. And to the guard, "Take them."

But Jenna had hit the button on the bracelet. "Now, ORAC," she cried, remembering that ORAC was slower than one of the crew would have been, and hoping that he would be fast enough this time.

The guard stepped forward, his gun pointed directly at Blake. Selif leaped for Jenna, reaching for her bracelet. She pulled her wrist away and danced back out of range.

And then the teleport took them and they found themselves back on the Liberator, with Avon just coming onto the teleport deck.



"I was just on my way to contact you," he said.

"You took your time," Jenna said furiously. "I imagine you've been back here for hours while that brute examined me like an animal. He even looked at my teeth!"

"Have you got Cally?" Blake demanded.

"Yes, she's safe. She's been given a drug, but she will recover soon. Vila's with her. Did you have any trouble?"

"Trouble!" Jenna muttered in disgust, but Blake shook his head. "Not really. He recognized our bracelets and we had to get out fast, but as long as Cally's back, that doesn't matter."

Jenna still seethed with anger. "I'm never going to go through anything like that again," she said furiously.

Avon turned and looked at her with interest. "How much did Selif offer for you?" he asked coolly.

Jenna threw her bracelet at him.

\* \* \*

It was some hours later when Cally and Vila returned to the flight deck. Cally's eyes were still a little shadowed, but she looked more like herself as she came in and sat down on one of the couches. Blake went over to her. "Cally, how do you feel?"

"I feel better. I am free of that drug now."

"What did it do?" Jenna asked.

"I think it was supposed to make me receptive to Selif," Cally said with distaste. "But I am not a human, and it seemed to work differently with me. I only knew that I could not bear to be alone. I would have welcomed the company of anyone at all."

"Even Vila," Avon said drily.

"I'll have you know I was very useful," Vila retorted.

"Oh, but when?" Avon asked with every evidence of interest.

"I got you into the place, didn't I?" Vila gave a regretful sigh. "And it was all wasted. I didn't see a single slave girl, not one. Or have my time on the planet, or go to the bazaar. It's not fair."

"Perhaps you would like to go now," Avon said. "We can find you something red to wear, and Selif's guards will be looking for you."

"On second thought," Vila said, subsiding, "maybe I'd better stay here." He sat down next to Cally and said, "I suppose it would be too much to expect any adrenalin and soma."

Avon ignored the thief and turned to look at Cally, his face expressionless. She gave him a faint smile. "Avon, thank you for coming after me."

"It was a group effort."

She smiled at everyone. "Thank you." And her eyes came back to Avon, holding his for a moment.

He turned and went over to his position. "Well, Blake, your attempt at rest and relaxation did not work as you had planned. Maybe we should go back to attacking Federation bases. It might be safer."

Blake smiled a little at the sarcasm in his voice. "If you're volunteering, Avon ..."

Avon shook his head. "An observation, Blake. No more."

Vila said mournfully, "I still wish I could have seen a few slave girls."

"You saw Cally and Jenna," Avon pointed out.

Vila brightened. "So I did."

Cally and Jenna turned identical annoyed glances first at Avon and then at Vila.

The thief slumped down in his seat. "On the other hand," he said quickly, "maybe a Federation base would be safer after all."

*end.*