

by Sheila Paulson

The village had not long been deserted. Gathered within an interrupted wall of tall pointed stakes, the circle of perhaps two dozen rough wooden huts stood silent under the blazing sun, empty of any traces of life except for a few domesticated birds with lavish purple plumage and some small animals scampering about that looked like a cross between dogs and goats. Smoke rose from the remains of campfires outside the doors of various huts, and big iron cooking pots still held hot food, steaming and sending out pungent and not particularly appetizing odors into the clearing. Nothing stirred behind the leather flaps that covered the entrances to the huts, and nothing broke the silence but the sharp yapping of the doglike creatures. There was a waiting air about the place as if the people there had suddenly vanished and might reappear at any second, and it made Del Tarrant nervous. He was not by nature a cautious man, being rather given to impulsively plunging into action, but now he felt a prickle of unease, a sense of being watched, of being on display. He glanced over at Dayna Mellanby, who stood nearby, her gun drawn. "I don't like this," he said.

She nodded in agreement. "They were here not long ago," she replied in an undertone.

"They?"

"The villagers."

"And Blake?" It was an elusive rumor that had led the *Liberator* to Belarius, an out of the way planet in the eighth sector, a planet reputedly inhabited only by primitive tribes. Supposedly it had been an Earth colony once, a long time ago, but if it had been, the inhabitants must have degenerated quickly into savagery, because there had been no trace of complex civilization or modern technology, and now the Federation left the place alone, having found no strategic or commercial value to the place. The crew of the *Liberator* would have preferred to leave Belarius alone, too, mostly due to the tales that those who landed there returned insane, their minds destroyed, or else never returned at all. It seemed unlikely that Blake would have come to such a place, but if he had, he must have had a good reason for it, and so here they were to check the rumor. Having grown up on a

primitive planet herself, Dayna seemed best equipped to make the initial reconnaissance, and Tarrant had volunteered to accompany her. Predictably, Vila had been less than happy at the whole plan. "Blake would never have come to a place like this," he had pointed out more than once. "There's nothing for him here -- or for us, either. Let's just go away before somebody finds us."

"To whom are you referring?" Avon had asked him. "The natives? They can hardly harm you while you are hiding on the ship." They had gathered in the teleport section, preparatory to sending Tarrant and Dayna down to the surface, and Vila had sat down quickly to operate the teleport though he was not scheduled to go down, at least not yet.

"Yes, but will I stay on the ship?" he asked. "I know you, Avon. You'll have me down there in a minute, and those people are too primitive to have locks, so I wouldn't be much use, would I?"

"When are you ever?"

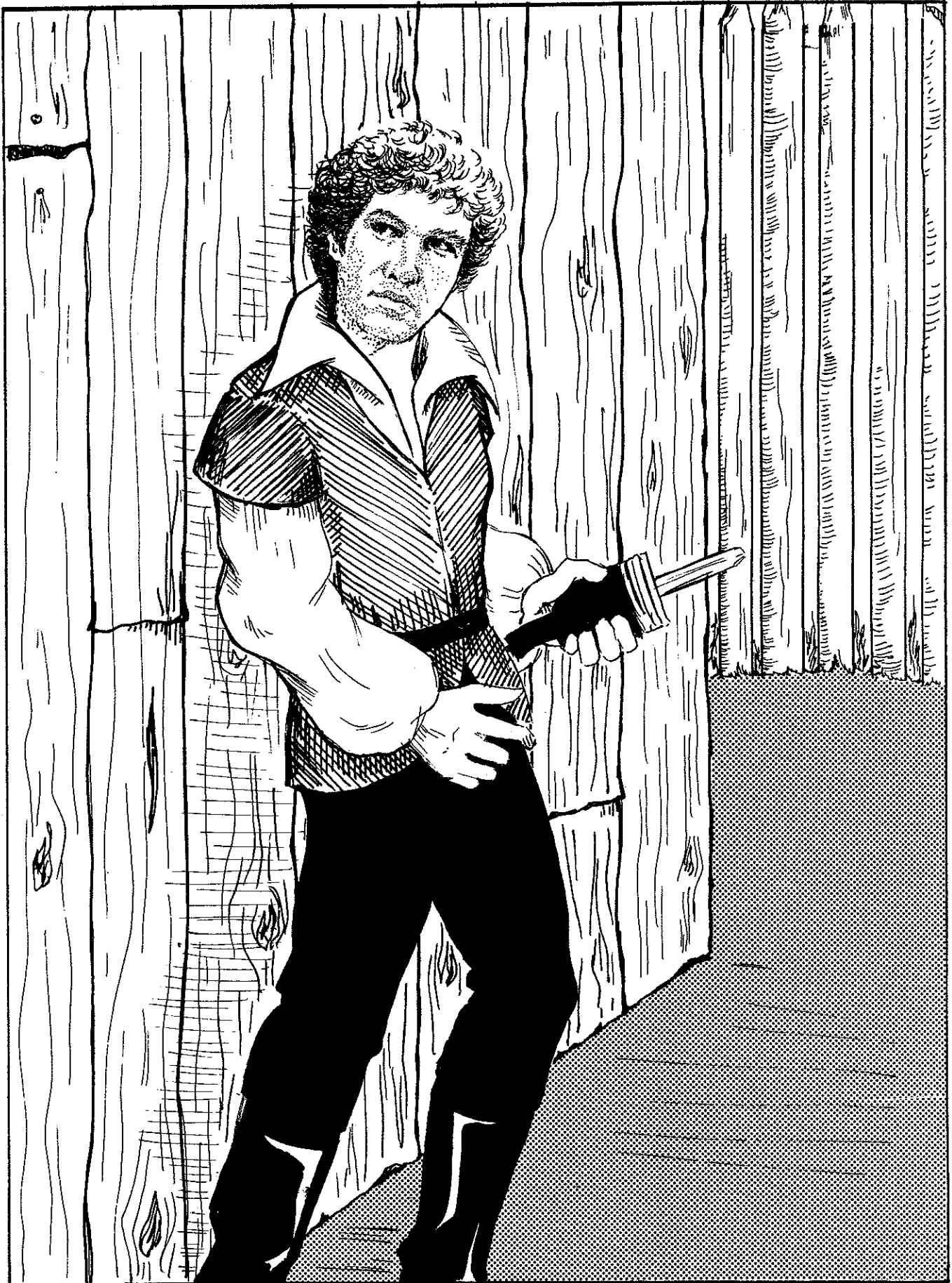
Vila had started listing times when his skills had been of use, and Avon had let him run on for a few minutes, then he'd said, "You never know how those skills might come in handy. Are you actually volunteering, Vila?"

"Me? Volunteering?" Vila had echoed in horror.

"I thought not. Be quiet, Vila." He had turned to Tarrant, who was fastening on his bracelet. "We don't know what to expect down there, but Zen informs us that there are settlements in only one area. You'll be put down near the largest of them. I want you to check in every fifteen minutes."

"Zen doesn't have any information on Belarius," Cally had reminded them then. "I think you will need to be very cautious."

"Zen doesn't always tell us everything he knows," Vila had reminded them. "There could be trouble down there."



"He is getting repititious, isn't he?" Tarrant had asked. "Put us down. We'll stay in touch."

That had been half an hour ago. Now Tarrant raised his bracelet to make his second report only to be borne to the ground as a swarm of people piled roughly on top of him and dragged him down. He had just enough time to realize that his assailants were all women before his head came into painful contact with the ground and the darkness claimed him. The last thing that he remembered was Dayna calling urgently, "Avon, teleport now."

* * *

"I don't know who they were," Dayna reported five minutes later in the teleport section. She had been brought up immediately, but Tarrant had not come with her. Repeated efforts to bring him up had failed, and he did not respond when they tried to contact him. "They didn't pay any attention to me at all," Dayna went on. "Just Tarrant. They must have removed his bracelet. Avon, I want to go back down there and free him."

"Before you do that, we ought to try to understand what went wrong."

"Tarrant could be dead by then. We can all go -- let ORAC operate the teleport. Whoever they are, our guns are more powerful. We can free him immediately." She checked her bracelet and started to reach for her gun.

Avon ignored her suggestion. "They made no attempt to attack you?"

"None." Reluctantly she let go of her gun. "They didn't seem to be very interested in me. They went straight for Tarrant. The place had been deserted when we first teleported. We'd searched a couple of huts, but there was no one about. Then, all at once, they were on him. There must have been at least twenty women."

"Women?" echoed Vila in surprise and interest. "Only women? No men?"

"Now that is interesting." Intrigued, Avon stared at Dayna consideringly. For Tarrant to be the victim of the attack was not really all that surprising. Some primitive tribes considered women no threat and would not have bothered with Dayna at all unless she had taken action against them. But an attack just by women aroused his curiosity. "All right," he said. "We will go down. A good pilot might be hard to replace."

"All of us?" Vila asked, remaining firmly in place behind the teleport console. "I mean, I could operate the teleport better than ORAC could."

"All of us, Vila," Cally said with a smile that did nothing to reassure him. "Besides, you are certain to be perfectly safe from them."

He gave her an affronted look and reluctantly put on his bracelet.

But when they teleported back down to the surface,

the clearing was deserted again. The place was quiet, ominously so. His gun at ready, Avon made a careful study of the clearing, only to be reassured that, for the moment, they were alone. There were scuff marks in the dirt at their feet, but no trace of Tarrant.

"Look at this," Vila said suddenly, bending to scoop up something loose and floppy from the dust. "It's Tarrant's jacket. It must have come off in the struggle."

"That's not all that came off," Dayna said from the other side of the clearing. "Look." She retrieved something else from the dust. "It's Tarrant's shirt."

"What did they do, strip him then?" Vila asked in surprise.

Avon strode over and took the shirt from Dayna's hand. He moved a few paces beyond the row of stakes and into the forest that surrounded the village, then came back holding a boot and Tarrant's trousers.

"It seems they did," he commented.

Dayna turned to Vila. "Cally was right, you are perfectly safe, Vila. Who would want to strip you?"

"You'd be surprised," he shot back.

"You're quiet right, I would be."

Cally joined Avon and looked at him seriously. "What are we going to do?"

"What would you suggest? Heroic rescues are Tarrant's long suit."

"You don't mean to abandon him?"

He shook his head. "Not immediately, no. But I'd like to know what we are dealing with. Dayna?"

She came over to join them. "Yes, Avon?"

"Do you think you could follow the trail they left?"

She took a few steps into the forest and came back with a grimace of disgust. "Anyone could follow that trail," she said scornfully. "Even Vila. They might as well have put up a sign. But it could be a trap, a plot to capture the rest of us. I think we should stick together."

"And teleport back to the ship at the first sign of trouble," Vila urged.

"Very well." Avon turned and led the way into the forest. "Stay close together then," he instructed. "And it wouldn't hurt if you would try to keep quiet, Vila."

"Me? Why pick on me?"

"Who better?" Dayna asked.

The trail was broad and easily followed; the thin feathery leaves of the Belarian trees did not entirely shield them from the sun, so there was plenty of light even in the thickest part of the

forest. As they went along, they could see that bits of branches were broken off the trees and the bluish-green bushes that grew thickly in spots, and there were definite markings in the dirt to indicate that a large party had passed that way. A bit further on, they found Tarrant's other boot.

The trail wound its way deeper into the trees, and as Dayna had said, it would take a blind man to miss it. As it was, it was Vila who spotted the place where it had branched. "Somebody went off this way," he pointed out.

Avon looked surprised that Vila had noticed. "Stay here," he ordered and moved off down the side path. It didn't go very far. After perhaps half a dozen paces, he found himself in a tiny clearing. The trail halted there, but no one was in sight, and the only indication that someone had been there was a small pool of some dark, sticky substance on the ground. He went down on one knee and investigated it with a cautious finger.

"Avon?"

He looked up to find Dayna bending over his shoulder. "Blood," he explained.

"Tarrant's?"

"There is no way of telling. But I would guess that Tarrant made a break for freedom and was prevented from doing so. They didn't kill him, or they would have left him here." He climbed to his feet and headed back to the others.

They rejoined Vila and Cally on the main trail. "Tarrant tried to escape," Dayna said flatly. "They caught him again."

"Do we go on?" Cally asked.

"Yes," Avon nodded. "For a time, anyway."

They moved out again, Dayna taking the lead and Avon bringing up the rear. Vila kept looking about him nervously as he walked, as if he expected hordes of savages to come leaping out on him at any moment, and he stayed close to Dayna, who seemed to be the most at home in the situation. After a bit, Cally attempted to contact Tarrant telepathically to reassure him that they were searching for him, but there was no way to be sure if he had received the message or not. Avon came after them slowly, attempting to analyze what they had seen so far, his gun in his hand.

Then there was a sudden rustle of sound behind him in the bushes, and he whirled to face a possible threat only to have a dozen women spring at him from the underbrush and drag him down before he could get a shot off. They were tall, for the most part as tall as he was, fair-haired and pale complected, and they wore light-colored tunics over dark trousers. There was nothing about them to suggest the primitive either in their appearance or their clothing. Struggling fiercely in spite of the sheer numbers that surrounded him, Avon tried to shout, to alert the others, but one of the women clapped a hand over his mouth, effectively silencing him. His companions

had vanished into the trees ahead of him, and if they heard his choked off cry, they did not react to it quickly enough. He was unconscious before he could attempt to call for help again.

Vila had been complaining to Dayna about the pace she was setting, and his voice, raised in protest, had covered Avon's abortive yell. "Well, I don't see what all the rush is, then," he argued. "I mean, we might miss something if we keep going like this."

"It's not that fast, Vila," Dayna disagreed. "You're just out of condition."

"Out of condition. That's not fair, Dayna. Look, slow down just a little. Please, Dayna."

When Dayna ignored him, Vila turned, seeking allies, and he noticed that Avon was no longer behind them. "Wait a minute," he said in alarm. "Where's Avon?"

Cally and Dayna spun around. Vila was right; Avon had disappeared. When they retraced their steps to look for him, they found nothing but scattered articles of his clothing strewn about.

"They'll get us all," Vila wailed, picking up Avon's torn shirt and staring at it in dismay. "Let's go back to the ship, Cally. Please."

"No. We must find Avon and Tarrant."

But the ground was growing rocky, and though they followed the trail left by Avon's captors, it soon led to a dead end. "We can't possibly take the risk of splitting up to look for them," Dayna said as she rose from an examination of the ground.

"What do we do now?" Vila asked. "There's no trace of either of them."

"I think we had better return to the ship," Cally decided. "And see what Zen and ORAC have to say."

"Good idea," Vila agreed heartily. "ORAC, teleport now."

* * *

Tarrant regained consciousness slowly, a dull pain throbbing in his side. He vaguely remembered the dart gun that had struck him; the wound had bled freely, more freely than such a slight wound would normally have done, and something on the dart had reduced him instantly to a state of mindless obedience. He remembered climbing willingly to his feet and walking with his captors without once more trying to escape. The drug had worn off now, leaving him drained and lethargic, but it rather looked as if it were too late.

He reached an exploratory hand down to examine the wound and found it bandaged with a small dressing that felt like a primitive form of synthflesh. That was interesting. Poison darts and primitive tribes didn't exactly match the technology implied by that dressing, and he opened his eyes to see what else didn't fit.

He was lying in a small cell, the walls a smooth and cool substance that felt like plastic, dimly lit by circular panels in the ceiling. It was very advanced for a supposedly primitive culture; there must be a lot more to the place than anybody knew about. Maybe the idea of Blake being here was not quite as ludicrous as it had seemed at first.

He looked down his side to examine the wound and discovered that he had an uninterrupted view because his clothes were gone. In their place, he was wearing a brief leather loincloth, not exactly the proper attire for a former space captain. He remembered the women removing his clothes enthusiastically, but the loincloth was something new. It made him look, and feel, ridiculous. He was glad that there was no one there to see him. He could just imagine Vila's "humorous" comments.

A faint sound from behind him jerked him around in surprise to meet a possible threat and he realized for the first time that he was not alone in the cell. Another man, similarly clad, lay sprawled on the floor, his face turned away, evidently unconscious. Tarrant was disconcerted to see that there was even less of the loincloth in the back than there was in the front. He hoped that he would have a chance to change his clothes before he was rescued.

Then it dawned on Tarrant that there was something about the dark hair and the build of the other man, and he went over and rolled him onto his back.

It was Avon.

Tarrant stared at him in dismay. He had considered Avon his best chance for rescue, not because Avon had any particular fondness for him, but because Avon needed a pilot for the Liberator, and also because Avon was by far the most efficient member of the crew. Efficient or not, Avon had been captured too.

"Avon?"

And Avon opened his eyes. For a moment, he looked confused and disoriented, then his eyes closed and he whispered, "Tarrant. I see that you have managed to stay alive so far."

"Yes. This wasn't one of your more effective rescues, was it, Avon?"

"No." Avon's eyes opened again, and this time, he seemed more alert. Noticing Tarrant's attire, he stared in disbelief, a hint of amusement lighting his eyes.

"It isn't funny, Avon."

A horrible suspicion began to form in Avon's mind, and reluctantly, he sat up and took a look at his own garb. "You're right, Tarrant," he said, for once in complete agreement with the pilot. "It's not remotely funny." He rubbed the back of his head and winced. "Have you learned yet why we have been taken prisoner."

"No. I woke up just before you did. And you're not going to like this, Avon, but they've got some sort of drug that makes prisoners compliant. I made a break for it, and they shot me with a dart

gun. I have a vague memory of cooperating fully with them after that." The memory suddenly intensified, and he felt his cheeks redden.

Avon noticed. "Cooperate completely how, Tarrant?"

"Well ..."

"Sexually." It was not a question.

Tarrant nodded.

"You did notice that your captors were all women?"

"Yes, Avon, I did notice that. I could hardly help it. They brought me to a complex -- underground -- then one of the women took me with her and ... well, it seemed an awfully good idea at the time."

"And now?"

"I must have been out of my mind."

"You would not have chosen to ..."

"To sleep with her? No, Avon, I wouldn't. A total stranger who treated me like a laboratory animal? I didn't even know her name." He shook his head in disgust and avoided Avon's eyes. "At the time, of course, I didn't want to resist at all."

"A charming place," Avon said sarcastically. "I wonder what happened to the men of this planet. Did you see any men, Tarrant?"

"Yes, one. Only he was ..." He hesitated, the memory distorted and vague. "He was like an animal. Dirty and primitive. Dressed the way we are. He didn't seem ... well, human, somehow."

"Oh now, that is interesting. I don't believe that a race could evolve with only one of the sexes intelligent, and this is supposed to have been an Earth colony. So we can assume that something happened here to alter things. A natural disaster, perhaps. Some type of plague."

"Or an artificially induced one. It rather reeks of Servalan, Avon."

"Yes, it does, doesn't it? With rumors of Blake to bait the trap. And we walked right into it. I wonder if they captured Vila as well."

Tarrant grinned. "Vila might actually enjoy it here."

"He might help us to get away. At least he could open the door." He climbed to his feet and surveyed the four blank walls of the cell. "Where is the door?"

"There has to be one." But the walls were of a uniform smoothness with no traces of openings.

Tarrant began to move about the room, examining the walls closely, then he stopped abruptly, a horrified look on his face. "Avon ..."

"Now what?"

"You don't suppose that whatever happened to the men here is ... still in operation?"

"That is one of your more unattractive ideas, Tarrant." But it was obvious from the look on Avon's face that he had already considered this possibility. "If the man you saw was a native of this planet, then perhaps not, but if he were an outsider ..."

"Then we could end up just like him," Tarrant finished.

It was an appalling idea, especially to Avon, who valued his intelligence so highly; although Tarrant was not pleased with it either. They exchanged an unhappy look, then Avon said, "We're speculating without complete information. I don't think we should make assumptions when we are in ignorance of the situation. What happened after your experience with the woman?"

"I fell asleep and woke up here."

"But you have seen more of this place than I have." He frowned. "Unless, that is, I have no memory of ..."

"An experience like mine?" Tarrant finished with a wry grin. "I didn't remember it immediately, Avon. But I think you would have remembered by now. You were stunned. They probably just left you here until you revived."

"And the local uniform?"

"This?" Tarrant looked down at the loincloth. "I hope we can find our own clothes before the others find us."

"Your clothes were scattered through that village, Tarrant."

"Wonderful."

Suddenly a light blinked and one of the walls slid down smoothly into the floor. Two women entered the cell. They were tall and fair and pale like the ones who had captured Avon, but these two wore white robes instead of tunics and trousers, and each of them carried a short metal rod with a glowing tip. They did not speak but motioned for Avon to accompany them.

Tarrant couldn't help grinning. "It looks like it's your turn, Avon," he said.

As he spoke, one of the women spun and touched the glowing tip of the rod to his bare chest. Incredible agony pounded through his body, forcing him to cry out sharply in pain. "Speak not to humans, animals do," the woman said. The phrasing was unusual, and there was a strange singsong note to her words, but the meaning was clear enough.

"We are not animals," Tarrant snarled.

She smiled and prodded him again. "Soon be," she said and turned to Avon. "With us, come you."

Avon looked at Tarrant, who had collapsed to his knees, his face contorted in pain, and chose not

to argue with them. He went.

He was led through a series of passageways built of the same material as the cell walls, lit with a bright stark light. Tarrant had said they were underground, and the lack of windows and openings to the outside would support that, but Avon was surprised at the sheer size of the place. It must have taken a very long time to construct.

They passed other women in the corridor, women who regarded Avon with frankly curious interest and who whispered to themselves as they studied him in great detail. He found himself resenting their stares. He was beginning to realize what Tarrant had meant about being treated like a laboratory animal, and he did not like the feeling one bit.

Finally the women stepped back and motioned for Avon to enter another room. He went in cautiously, not certain what to expect, but he found himself in a place bare of furniture except for a stool and a five-legged table. It was dimmer there than in the passage, the circular panels in the ceiling apparently set on low power. A meal had been prepared for him and was waiting on a transparent plate; some type of meat and a blue vegetable that looked definitely unappetizing. "Eat, you," he was instructed.

He hesitated, reluctant to chance it. There was no way of telling what had been added to the food, including the compliance drug that Tarrant had been given, but that could be administered any way they chose. If he refused the food, there would be dart guns or other undignified measures. He had no choice, so he sat down and began to eat. The food tasted every bit as bad as it looked and smelled. He grimaced but forced himself to eat.

"Sad is," one woman said to the one who had used the rod on Tarrant, "Animals at this stage to watch. Soon like all others will be. Pity is."

"Lucky are, Maga. Two healthy specimens at once, third promised."

"Glad am," Maga said, "but still sad, to know that places are where animals intelligent are."

The second woman shuddered. "Feel for animals you do not, Maga?"

"Finished ones, no. But ones like us begin ..."

Avon had listened to them in growing dismay; the order of their words and the singsong tones made it hard for him to make complete sense of them. Centuries of isolation must have caused changes in their language, creating a dialect that was a bit confusing at first, but he had grasped the gist of it, enough to realize that the theories he and Tarrant had been speculating were correct. More information was needed, but he did not want to risk the punishment rod. He decided to try a submissive tack, though it was galling to consider it.

He made himself sound meek. "May I speak?"

It was evidently the best way to proceed. Maga looked at him with interest. "Speak, do."

"What is the cause of the deterioration which happens to males on this planet?"

She listened very carefully. "Oldspeech have you. Repeat slow."

He went through it again more slowly and this time was understood. The two women exchanged glances, then Maga said, "Airborne virus is. Resistant women are. Something in males, y-chromosome called, vulnerable make."

"How did the virus begin?"

"Contamination," she replied, reciting the word like a lesson learned long ago. "Space from, many many seasons past. Yet prosper do our people, if males cooperate do."

An airborne virus? Vila would be affected, too, Avon realized, unless it was detected quickly and ORAC could devise a cure. "What is the rate of deterioration?"

"Repeat slow," Maga said.

"How long does it take for the effects to become known?" he asked, controlling his impatience with an effort.

"One-third season, almost. Affect does male child at puberty. Animals becomes, two-third season. Breed does animal healthy female, so develop did drug for docility. Prevent does killing or damage by animals."

"One-third season," Avon mused, reasoning that it would be perhaps three weeks or a month, considering the length of the Belarian year, which was similar to that of Earth. "If no effects are noticed for one-third season, why use the drug on Tarrant and myself?"

"Rare and very pleasant is, with intelligent animals mate. Ignored never, chance is. Cooperate best, males, drug given."

"I see." That made sense, though Avon was not at all pleased with the idea of being forced to perform for them, especially considering the attitude of the women in the corridor and Tarrant's experience. He left that for the moment. "We came through a primitive village on the way here. Is that intended as a cover to fool visitors to your planet?"

"Not. There animals live. Fear us do, hide self when citadel we leave. Arrived you, came we, fled animals. Answer question does?" Her tone indicated that she was not prepared to tolerate much more.

"How did you know we were here?" he asked.

"Soon enough, learn."

That sounded ominous, and Avon already had his own suspicions on the subject, but he had one more question that needed an answer. "Did a man named Blake come here?"

"No names animals have. Describe."

Avon did so, watching her carefully. She

listened closely to be certain she was understanding his words, then recognition flickered in her eyes and she nodded. "Yes. One-third season came. Sorry am if important was to you. Animal is."

Avon had thought that he wanted to be free of Blake's influence, but not like this. He was surprised at the rage he felt at learning that Blake had been transformed into a primitive creature, a shell that had once held someone called Blake. The knowledge hurt in a way he had never expected it to. It would not do to look too closely at the reason for that hurt, but he heard himself saying, "May I see him?"

"No. Permitted not. Finished meal, with us, come." It was a command. The question and answer session was at an end.

That was when he realized that the compliance drug had indeed been placed in the food. Although he did not want to go with them, he found himself rising obediently to his feet and following them from the room. He made a conscious effort to turn away, but he discovered that while he wanted to challenge their authority, he could not do so. There was a subtle difference, however, between his experience and Tarrant's. Tarrant had said he had wanted to cooperate, but Avon did not. The drug must be affecting them differently. He wondered if his unwillingness to participate would affect the eventual outcome. He hoped that it would. He did not want to give them the satisfaction of succeeding with him.

Then he was thrust into another room and saw a woman in a white gown reclining on a fur-draped couch. Even before she turned her head to look at him, he recognized her and cold fury swept through him. "Servalan."

She made an impatience gesture to the two women. "Leave us." And when they were gone, she smiled. "Avon, I think it would be most appropriate if you were to kneel before me." She waved her hand commandingly, and her voice was hard. "Now, Avon."

He found himself on his knees, hating the triumph that flashed in her eyes as he moved.

She leaned forward, taking in his brief leather attire with appreciative eyes, and stretched out a languid hand to caress his shoulder. "You will not pull away," she ordered when he drew back.

"What is the purpose of this, Servalan?" he demanded.

"Oh, and I thought you were the clever one, Avon. Surely you can see that this is going to give me the Liberator. In a little while, I will give you back your bracelet and order you to have the crew teleport down and bring me up."

"No."

"Oh, but the amusing thing is that you will have no choice."

"You set all this up. You lured us here with a report of Blake."



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"Yes, Blake. I may even have him brought here so that you can see him. He might even still recognize you. There might be enough humanity left in him for that ... Why, Avon, I didn't think you cared."

"I don't believe you, Servalan. I don't believe that Blake is here."

"No?" she asked carelessly. "Well, true or not, the rumor of him brought you here."

"I will not give you the Liberator, Servalan."

"You will have no choice. Doubt me? Avon, you must obey me. I will prove it to you." Smiling, she leaned forward and put her hands on his shoulders. "Kiss me, Avon," she said.

He obeyed her; he had no choice. When they drew apart, she gave a contented purr of pleasure and said, "Now that wasn't so bad, was it, Avon?"

"Actually, yes it was."

Fury darkened her eyes. "You will not speak to me in that manner again, Avon."

"No. I know that." But he met her gaze levelly. "You can tell me what to do, Servalan. But you cannot tell me what to think."

"I'm glad," she said. "I don't think I would like to see your spirit broken, Avon. It would not amuse me at all."

"I think it would," he said. "But know this, Servalan. If you must resort to artificial means to break me, then you have not won."

"The end result will be the same."

But he knew that it would not be. As long as his mind could resist this drug, he won, no matter what he was forced to do. That being the case, nothing that Servalan could do to him would matter. He looked her straight in the eye, and said, "Perhaps. But I will not have broken."

She smiled. "Then let us not even worry about it." She ran a hand down his cheek caressingly. "Must I make it an order, Avon?"

"I think you must," he said blandly.

"And there are times," she said coldly, "when I would like to break you. Very much." She smiled and pointed to the loincloth. "Remove that."

Avon gave her a cold and haughty look and complied.

* * *

"Avon?"

He awakened and lay still for a moment, getting his bearings. Things were hazy at first, then he remembered what had happened to him, quicker than Tarrant had remembered. He remembered all too well. Finally he opened his eyes to see Servalan bending over him, a complacent smile on her face.

"Avon, it is time for you to contact the Liberator."

"No."

She smiled. "You will, Avon. You have no choice."

But he suddenly realized that he did. The drug had worn off; he was free of it. But he could not let her know that, not yet. So he said with pretended bitterness, "I have no choice," and rose to put the loincloth on again.

Servalan produced two teleport bracelets, fastening one of them around her wrist and handing him the other one. "Call the Liberator, Avon. And don't arouse any suspicions when you do it."

"Very well, damn you." He snapped the bracelet on and raised it to his lips. "Liberator?"

"Avon?" Vila's voice responded instantly, astonished and relieved. "Avon, are you all right? We've been worried, I mean we've ..."

"Vila, are you standing by the teleport?"

"Yes, Avon, but ... are you all right?"

"Yes, Vila. Now listen to me. I want all of you to teleport down here now."

"All of us?" Vila asked in dismay.

"All of you," Avon replied, glancing at Servalan and noting her complacent expression. "Can you fix my location?"

"Yes, Avon, I've got you pinpointed. I'll call the others, shall I?"

"No, Vila, teleport now, me only." He spoke quickly and heard Servalan's cry of protest. She launched herself at him, but he fended her off easily, then the teleport was taking him and he had one last glimpse of her, going for a gun, her face contorted with rage.

Vila and Cally were both waiting in the teleport section, Vila operating the controls and Cally seated beside him, and they stared at the brief loincloth in disbelief. Cally looked away quickly to hide a smile, but Vila frankly stared. "Avon," he said brightly, "I like your tailor."

"Shut up, Vila. Listen to me, both of you. It was a trap. Servalan is down there. There is a virus in the air that affects males, causing them to degenerate into savagery."

"In the air?" Vila yelled in dismay. "You mean I've been exposed to it?"

"Yes, Vila, as have I. We will see if ORAC can discover a means to reverse the process. And there is Tarrant. We must get him back quickly."

"You seem very concerned for Tarrant," Cally said.

"I would not choose to expose anyone to that virus, not even Tarrant. But there is a problem. The

natives have developed a drug which guarantees compliance. We will need to get to Tarrant without being detected, to prevent the drug being administered to us. I was given the drug once, but it didn't work well with me, and it wore off quickly. More quickly than Servalan had expected." He smiled.

Vila did not care for the look of that smile. He said quickly, "I'll go fetch ORAC, shall I?"

"Bring ORAC to the medical unit."

* * *

Accompanied by Cally, Avon went directly to the medical unit without taking time to change his clothes. By the time Vila arrived with Dayna and ORAC, Cally had begun to run tests on Avon, and she motioned for Vila to join them so that she could examine him as well. Dayna went over and inserted ORAC's key, and while Cally ran the tests on both men, Avon explained to ORAC what he had learned on Belarius. For once, ORAC did not seem to resent being distracted from his own concerns. He found the virus interesting.

"A most fascinating situation," ORAC proclaimed. "I have not encountered anything of this type before."

"Do you mean we've got it?" Vila demanded in horror. He made no attempt to get to his feet again, as if he thought that lying down might somehow delay the inevitable.

"Test results would indicate that you do," ORAC replied. "Although the disease is slightly more advanced in Avon."

Avon had expected that, and his face gave nothing away.

Vila closed his eyes. "You mean we'll be like that?" he moaned. "I think I'm going to be sick."

This time, Avon agreed with Vila, but all he said was, "What exactly do the medical computers say?"

It was ORAC that replied. "Reports indicate that the degenerative process is caused by an airborne virus, one completely unknown to me."

"What? I thought you knew everything," Vila retorted without opening his eyes.

ORAC harrumphed and ignored the interruption, although Avon shot an irritated glance at Vila. "Continue," he instructed ORAC impatiently, rising to his feet and moving over to look down at the computer.

"Very well. Test results indicate that without prolonged exposure, the effects are not permanent, and they reverse themselves."

Vila's eyes flew open and he bounced to his feet. "Then we won't get it after all," he cried. "Why didn't you say so in the first place, ORAC?"

"Because you did not give me an opportunity to say so," ORAC replied pointedly.

Dayna grinned. She had been submitting to tests as well in order to make certain that she had not been contaminated, too, but now that Cally had finished with her, she got to her feet. "He means 'shut up, Vila'," she translated with a smile. "Cally, can you manage the test on yourself, or shall I help you with it?"

"I will manage." Cally turned to Avon first. "Avon, you were not down there long enough for the condition to become permanent, but you cannot risk going back down there."

Avon turned away from her. "Tarrant is still down there. I must go back."

She looked at him, perplexed. "Avon, what is it? It's not Tarrant. You have often said that a pilot can be replaced. You don't even like Tarrant. Why the sudden concern for him?"

Avon had begun to pace around the room as he spoke. "I have my reasons."

"It's Blake," said Vila suddenly, coming to stand in front of Avon and staring at him consideringly. "We came here to look for Blake. Is he here, Avon?"

"I don't know."

"But he might be," Dayna said. "You didn't see him down there, Avon?"

"No. However, Servalan said he was there."

"I wouldn't exactly trust Servalan," Vila put in. "Avon, she was probably lying."

Avon met Vila's look. "And if she wasn't, Vila?"

"Oh. How long had he been there?" Vila asked reluctantly.

"Too long."

Vila looked ill. "You mean he's got like ..."

"Like the primitives?" Dayna said. "Is that it, Avon?"

"I don't know. But I intend to find out."

"And if he is?" Cally asked.

"Then we shall see if it can be reversed."

"But what if it has gone too far?" Cally asked gently.

"Then I intend to kill him." His tone was utterly final.

"Kill Blake?" Vila exclaimed in dismay. "You can't do that. Can you?"

"Vila," Dayna said, "if he's been there that long, he won't be Blake anymore."

Vila looked sick and didn't argue further,

especially when he saw the look that flashed in Avon's eyes. He sat down quickly and said instead, "How are we going to find him then?"

Avon turned to face them all. "We go back down there."

"Cally and I will go," Dayna offered. She turned to Cally. "Did you finish the tests on us?"

"Yes. ORAC, what did you find?" She went over to the computer. "Are Dayna and I immune to the virus?"

"So it would appear," ORAC replied. "This is most interesting. There is absolutely no trace of the virus in either of you."

Dayna spun to face Avon. "You see. The virus won't affect us, Avon. It's the only sensible thing."

Avon knew that she was right, but he was reluctant to abandon the idea. "ORAC, is there any way to immunize Vila and myself so that we could return without risking the virus?"

Vila was on his feet at that. "Why not send Cally and Dayna, then?" he demanded. "They won't get it and we will. There's no reason for us to risk going back down there. No reason at all."

"An immunizing agent would take a considerable time to develop and the chances of its effectiveness being high enough to risk its use are small," ORAC informed them. "Such an agent would not be worth the risk of creating it."

"That's all right for you to say," Vila complained. "You're not going to be affected by the bloody disease." He thought about it. "Pity, that."

ORAC sniffed and said, "Chances of reversing the viral effects are virtually nonexistent. Damage to brain tissue will be irreversible after a period of three Earth weeks."

"Blake has been there longer than that," Avon said flatly.

Cally came to stand next to him. "If he is there at all," she reminded him. "You only have Servalan's word, and you must know how little that is worth. He may not be there at all, Avon."

"I think he is. It was not only Servalan who mentioned him. I questioned one of the women down there and she recognized his description."

Vila said tentatively from the background, "Maybe she'd been instructed by Servalan what to say."

Avon turned to consider that. Coming from Vila, it was an eminently sensible suggestion, but Avon shook his head. "We must check it out. I'm going to go and change my clothes." He had not failed to notice the surreptitious looks the others had been giving the loincloth, and he didn't like it one bit. "I don't want anyone to leave the ship until I return," he said. He was uncomfortably aware

of their eyes on him as he walked away.

* * *

They met on the flight deck fifteen minutes later. Vila promptly collapsed on one of the couches as if he were in the last stages of exhaustion. Dayna smiled at him, suspecting he would try to persuade Avon to leave him safely on the ship. She went to her station. Cally had already sat down, but when Avon appeared, clad normally once more, he went over to Zen. "Zen, are there any ships within detector range?"

+Negative.+

"Try the long range detectors."

+No ships in range of the long range detectors.+

"All that means is that they may be down on the surface rather than in orbit," Dayna said. "And they could leave at any time."

Cally turned to Avon. "Dayna and I will go down," she said. "Avon, it is the only sensible thing and you know it."

"Cally's right," Vila piped up from the couch. "The only sensible thing."

"How would you recognize sense?" Avon shot him a scornful look.

"Avon, you can't risk further exposure to the virus," Dayna insisted. "Cally and I will go down to free Tarrant--and find out about Blake."

Avon turned to stare at her. He didn't like to admit it, but he knew that it was the only reasonable plan. He said, "Very well. We can try to establish the coordinates of the cell. Once Tarrant is out of there, we will have a free hand."

"Tarrant should not stay there any longer," said Dayna. She went over and got a gun, and Cally followed suit.

"Bring back one of the natives with you, if you can," Avon instructed. "We may be able to get information from them more easily than we could from Servalan."

* * *

Cally and Dayna teleported down to the underground citadel. Avon had been able to come very close to pinpointing the location of the cells, and it took a few minutes to locate Tarrant. The door slid down into the floor to reveal the pilot sprawled on the floor. He glanced up in surprise when the door opened and smiled cheerfully at the two women. There was something not quite right about that smile.

"I think he's been drugged," Dayna said as she knelt beside him.

"I'm drugged," Tarrant echoed agreeably.

Dayna grinned. "That ought to mean he'll do

everything we tell him to."

"Everything," Tarrant agreed, a vacant smile on his face.

"We'd better get him back to the ship. He's been exposed to the virus longer than Avon, he shouldn't stay here any longer. Then we can look for Blake."

Cally produced a spare bracelet and fastened it around Tarrant's wrist. He continued to smile amiably. "Stand up," Cally told him. "We'll teleport you back to the Liberator."

He climbed obediently to his feet and stood waiting while Cally contacted the ship. "We've got Tarrant. He's been given that drug you spoke of, Avon, but he seems to be all right otherwise. Bring him up and we will stay here and have a look round."

On the ship, Avon nodded to Vila. "Teleport now."

In a moment, Tarrant was there, a broad smile on his face, still wearing the leather loincloth. Vila grinned. "It suits you, Tarrant."

"Thank you," replied Tarrant, smiling vacuously at Vila.

"Drugged isn't the word," Vila said.

Avon gave an exasperated sigh. "He won't be much use to us until it wears off--and not much then. You stay here, Vila, and I'll see what I can do to speed up the process. Come along, Tarrant." He turned for the steps.

"Yes, Avon." Before Vila could react, he had jumped forward and grabbed the gun that had been left in the teleport section in case they needed to go down to the planet quickly. He swung it around until it was pointing at Avon.

"Look out, Avon!" Vila yelled, and as Tarrant fired, "Don't shoot, Tarrant."

Tarrant obeyed instantly, lowering the gun, but it was too late. Avon had collapsed across the steps and lay there unmoving.

Tarrant had been drugged, Vila remembered, drugged into obedience. What other orders had Servalan given him? "Tarrant," he said nervously, "Give me the gun. It's an order, Tarrant."

Tarrant complied at once, passing the weapon to Vila, who pointed it at him. "Move over there," he ordered, gesturing away from Avon. "And don't try to go anywhere else. And from now on, you'll do exactly what I tell you and forget any previous orders. Right?"

"Right," Tarrant agreed placidly.

Vila edged past him and went to Avon, who had not moved. "Avon?" he faltered, but there was no response. Frightened of what he might find, Vila knelt beside him and felt for a pulse.

He didn't try to analyze the relief he felt when he found it, steady but weak under his fingers. The wound was in Avon's shoulder. He had reacted to Vila's warning; if he had not, he might be dead, but he had moved in time. Vila heaved a sigh and relaxed a bit. It could have been a great deal worse. But now he had to find a way to take care of Avon without turning his back on Tarrant.

"Tarrant," he said, "I want you to carry Avon to the medical unit, and I don't want you to hurt him. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Vila," Tarrant said at once. Vila decided that he could rather get to like this, having Tarrant obedient to his slightest whim, then he looked down at Avon and decided that it wasn't worth it. "Well, get over here, you great lout," he said. "And be careful when you pick him up. If you hurt him, I'm going to have to shoot you."

"I won't hurt him."

"You shot him."

"Had to. Instructions."

"My instructions are that you are not to hurt him." He hoped the blasted drug would wear off quickly. It was strating to get on his nerves.

Guarded carefully by Vila, Tarrant carried Avon to the medical unit and put him on the bed. Vila ordered Tarrant to sit down out of the way and not to move, then he tore open Avon's tunic and examined the wound. It wasn't as bad as he had feared it might be; Avon had been hit in the act of turning and the injury was fairly superficial, little more than a graze. He had not lost very much blood, and it didn't take Vila long to get the wound cleaned and closed and to regenerate the damaged flesh. When he had finished, he looked over at Tarrant. "You're lucky, Tarrant," he said. "He'll be all right. If you'd killed him, I would have taken great pleasure in throwing you out the nearest airlock." He thought that over and realized that he had said far more than he had intended to, and hoped that Tarrant would not remember it when the drug wore off.

"All right, Tarrant," he said quickly. "Come over here and we'll get the drug out of your system. You might even be a bit of use then." He connected the pilot to the equipment and started to work.

* * *

A bit later Tarrant's eyes opened and he found himself staring up at Vila. His head ached and everything was still a bit blurry around the edges. He didn't remember much yet, but there were the beginnings of memories, unpleasant ones. "What happened," he asked reluctantly.

"I don't think you want to know. How much do you remember?"

He forced his mind to work. "Servalan," he spat.

"Yes, Servalan. Gave you a drug, didn't she, Tarrant? Gave you a few orders too. Remember?"

"Drug? Orders?" He thought a moment, then a look of alarm crossed his features as his mind cleared. "I was to kill Avon and turn the Liberator over to her." His face creased in perplexity. Vila's hostility was worrying him. "I... didn't..."

"You had a good try at it," Vila replied, pointing. Tarrant's eyes followed the gesture and he saw Avon unconscious on the next bed.

"He's not dead?"

"Worried, Tarrant? No, he's not, no thanks to you."

"It's not my fault, Vila. I didn't ask to be given the drug, did I?"

"Shut up, Tarrant," Vila snapped at him. "Avon's not badly hurt; he'll wake soon. I've got the drug out of your system now. Too bad. I rather liked telling you what to do." He began to disconnect Tarrant from the medical equipment. "Kill Avon and give her the Liberator," he repeated. "Did she say anything about Blake?"

"No, not a word." Tarrant climbed to his feet and went over to look at Avon. "He will be all right?"

"Yes."

"Where are Dayna and Cally?"

"You don't remember them finding you?"

"Vaguely. It's all a bit confused. Vila, there's a virus in the air down there. Servalan told me about it...she said Avon had escaped, but she told me about the virus and said that I wouldn't be rescued. Then she gave me the drug--you know, I think she must have got rid of the guards so that I could be rescued; once she had given me the order to kill Avon, she wanted me out of there. At least it didn't work, Vila, about this virus..."

"We know all about it already. You weren't down there long enough to make it permanent." He added solemnly, "But Blake will have been--if he's there at all. Dayna and Cally are looking for him now."

There was a movement from the bed and they both looked down at Avon. In a moment his eyes opened and he stared up at them. "What happened?"

"Tarrant shot you. The drug..."

"I ought to kill you, Tarrant," Avon snarled.

"It wasn't his fault, Avon," Vila intervened. "Servalan's orders. We should have thought of that."

"I would not have expected you to think of such a thing." He sat up cautiously, wincing a bit as he moved. Vila reached out to help him and encountered a glare from Avon that made him abandon the idea.

"You're lucky," he said. "He wasn't a very good shot. Maybe you'd better not try to get up just yet, though."

Avon ignored that, rubbing his shoulder. The wound was tender, his shoulder stiff. He would wait a few minutes more before trying to move. In the meantime, there was Tarrant. Avon's instinctive reaction was anger, but he knew what the drug was capable of; he remembered what had happened to him under its influence, and Tarrant appeared to have less resistance to it than he did. "Have you recovered, Tarrant?" he asked.

"The drug's out of his system now, Avon," Vila assured him.

"Vila seems to have been running things," Tarrant commented. "I think he's gotten a bit above himself."

Vila flashed Tarrant a nasty look. "Well, there wasn't anybody else to do it," He said.

"I seem to remember that he threatened to throw me out the airlock if I'd killed you," Tarrant mused.

This time, the look Vila gave Tarrant was furiously angry. "Shut up, Tarrant," he said. "Or I might wish I'd done it after all. Besides, I had to protect myself, didn't I? I might have been the next victim." He changed the subject quickly. "Avon, what about Cally and Dayna?"

"What about them?"

"I haven't had time to contact them since we got Tarrant back, and they haven't called in. They might be in trouble."

Avon climbed to his feet, hesitating only a moment to get his balance, and headed for the teleport section without a word. Vila bit back a protest that Avon wasn't ready to get up yet. Avon would never listen.

But Cally and Dayna were not in trouble, merely out of touch. When Avon tried to contact them, Cally replied instantly. "We are all right, Avon, and we have a prisoner. She has told us the location of Servalan's ship. We haven't seen Servalan though. Our prisoner told us that she had been busy entertaining one of the 'animals' and that she had given orders not to be disturbed."

Tarrant and Vila turned to Avon speculatively, and he stared back, a cold expression on his face. "I want you to fix the location of that ship," he said to Cally, "Then come back here and bring your prisoner with you. It's time we got some answers."

* * *

The native captured by Cally and Dayna was one that Avon had not seen before, but it was apparent that Tarrant had. When Cally and Dayna escorted her onto the flight deck, he was suddenly embarrassed. Avon and Vila looked at him for a moment, intrigued by the interesting phenomenon of Tarrant turning red, then turned back to the girl, who was smiling rather benevolently at Tarrant. Then she grew

serious. "Why brought here am I? Return home now, demand it."

"You will be returned when we are finished with you," Avon said. "We do not intend to harm you if you will answer our questions."

"Questions are?" she asked coldly, pulling away from Cally and Dayna to stand defiantly in the center of the flight deck.

"Servalan. What did she offer your people?"

"For breeding purposes, healthy males, three."

Cally and Dayns grinned at the affronted look on Avon's face. Vila and Tarrant didn't look any happier about it than he had. For once all three of them seemed to be in total agreement.

"And what were you to do for her in return?" Cally asked.

"Males there keep, virus comes. Use of facilities to Servalan permitted. Woman too, she."

"That is debatable," Avon retorted. "And what of Blake?"

"Blake?"

Avon turned to ORAC. "ORAC, I want you to monitor the answers given to us by the prisoner and ascertain her veracity."

"I must remind you that my capabilities can be put to far better use than as a lie detector."

"Do it, ORAC."

"Very well."

"Servalan told us that Blake was on your planet," Avon said to the woman. "Another of your people, Maga, told me that he had been there for 'one-third season' and had become an 'animal'. Is this true?"

"No names animals have. No person Blake know. For five seasons came no one, before Servalan. Two males gave she, but infertile, to us no use."

"Mutoids?" Cally speculated.

Avon nodded. "Perhaps. Zen, show us a picture of Blake."

+Confirmed.+

An image of Blake appeared on the screen. Avon turned to the girl. "This is Blake. We were told he was here."

She looked at the picture consideringly, then shook her head. "Before seen, never. Every new animal see. Not here, this one. Never here, this one."

"ORAC?" Avon asked.

"Subject is telling the truth."

"So Servalan lied," Avon said, his voice cold and dangerous. "And she will pay for that lie. I want the coordinates of her ship." He turned to Cally. "I'm going down there."

"You can't, Avon. The virus..."

"I have no intention of staying for more than a few minutes. Vila will accompany me."

"I will?" Vila gulped, then he took a good look at Avon's face and added, "Yes, I will. Uh, why are we going down there, then?"

"I want you to get me into her ship, if it's sealed. Can you do it?"

"Yes, but..."

"No buts. Get your kit and meet me at the teleport in ten minutes." He added to the prisoner. "You will be released as soon as we return to the ship."

* * *

Vila protested all the way to the teleport. "Avon, what if something goes wrong? What if we're trapped down there? We could turn into those creatures, and I don't like it." He took the bracelet that Avon handed him and put it on without enthusiasm.

"Why are you complaining, Vila?" Avon asked as he fastened on his own bracelet. "You have less to lose than anyone else."

"At least I've got enough sense to know that it's not safe down there."

Avon ignored him. "Put us down, Dayna," he ordered.

They materialized on the edge of a large clearing in the forest. Servalan's ship was on the far side, shaded by large overhanging branches, and there was no sign of any guards, but Avon insisted on circling the clearing just within the shelter of the trees instead of going straight across. It was well that he did. Suddenly two guards came into the open and looked about as if they had heard something suspicious. Vila shrank back into the trees, but Avon fired and they both fell.

When a few moments passed and no one came to investigate, Avon went on. Reluctantly Vila followed, carrying his gear. He noticed that Avon's shoulder was giving him trouble with the package he was carrying and that he'd tried to shift its weight several times. When he had fired and let his bad arm take the entire weight of it, it seemed to have intensified the problem. Vila had asked him what he had brought down with him only to be rebuffed, so he'd given up, but now he said tentatively, "Avon, I can carry that for you if..."

"No."

"But your shoulder..."

"No, Vila."

"Oh, very well. I don't know why I bothered to worry. I should have let Tarrant kill you too, I suppose."

Avon's expression softened slightly, but all he said was, "Be quiet, Vila. We don't want anyone to hear us. It isn't far." He shifted the package to his good arm, though it was plainly too heavy and too awkward to carry one handed.

"Here," said Vila, in exasperation, putting down his load and snatching the package from Avon's arm. "You carry my kit. It's lighter." And, astonished at himself, he headed for the ship before Avon could protest.

Avon looked after Vila, grinned, and followed.

The ship appeared deserted, but neither of them were willing to take that at face value. They circled the ship carefully, waited a few minutes, then Avon stood guard, sending Vila to open the door. It didn't take him very long.

"Not bad if I do say so myself," Vila said as he repacked his bag of tricks.

"You always do say so," Avon remarked. "Stay here and keep watch, Vila."

It seemed to take forever, though in reality it could not have been as long as it appeared. Vila imagined all sorts of things going wrong. The ship had been full of troops; they would come swarming out and capture him. Servalan was on her way here and would discover him. The virus would contaminate him while he waited. A horde of 'animals' might attack. Nervously he paced back and forth, watching the clearing and peering into the trees.

"Vila."

He jumped at Avon's quiet voice behind him and spun around. "You did that deliberately," he complained. "Sneaking up on me like that." He couldn't help but notice that the package Avon had carried was gone.

"You were supposed to be alert," Avon reminded him unsympathetically, "So that no one else could sneak up on you."

"I was alert," Vila objected.

"So I saw." He raised his bracelet. "All right, Cally. We're ready to come up."

They materialized on the ship to find the others all waiting in the teleport section with the prisoner. "All right, Dayna," Avon said, "Take her back where you found her, then get back up here. We'll be leaving soon."

* * *

Ten minutes later, they were gathered at their stations on the flight deck when Zen said, "Information. Detectors have registered a massive explosion on the surface of Belarius."

"Thank you, Zen," Avon replied.

"Explosion?" Tarrant echoed.

"The ship," Vila exclaimed. "You blew up Servalan's ship."

"Yes."

"Was she on it?" Cally asked.

"I doubt it. It doesn't matter." His predatory smile appeared briefly. "But now she has no way to leave Belarius. I imagine she will be rescued eventually; it would not do for the Federation to lose its president."

"But in the meantime, she's stranded down there," Dayna said, a slow smile spreading across her face. "Down there with the 'animals'."

Tarrant burst out laughing. "I hope they never find her," he said. "Imagine her rage if she had to spend the rest of her life like that."

"You came close to spending the rest of your life there," Cally reminded him.

"Ah, but after a month or so, it wouldn't have mattered," Avon replied. "She will know, every minute of her time there, where she is. And why." Avon had hated the idea of Blake being reduced to an 'animal'. He would never let on to the others how he had felt about it, and he would never forgive Servalan for lying to him about it. But he had minded, very much. Vila smiled a bit to himself, then said, "There is one thing I regret though."

"What?" Dayna asked him.

"That compliance drug. I wish I had a supply of it to use on Tarrant. I rather liked giving him orders and having him obey me." He grinned broadly. "Do this, Tarrant. 'Yes, Vila. Immediately, Vila.' I could have got to like that very much."

"Why you..." Tarrant began and took a threatening step toward Vila.

"On the other hand..." Vila said, edging toward the exit. When Tarrant kept coming, he turned and fled, with Tarrant in hot pursuit. Dayna and Cally began to laugh.

Even Avon was smiling as he turned to Zen. "Zen, take us out of orbit, speed standard by four."

end.