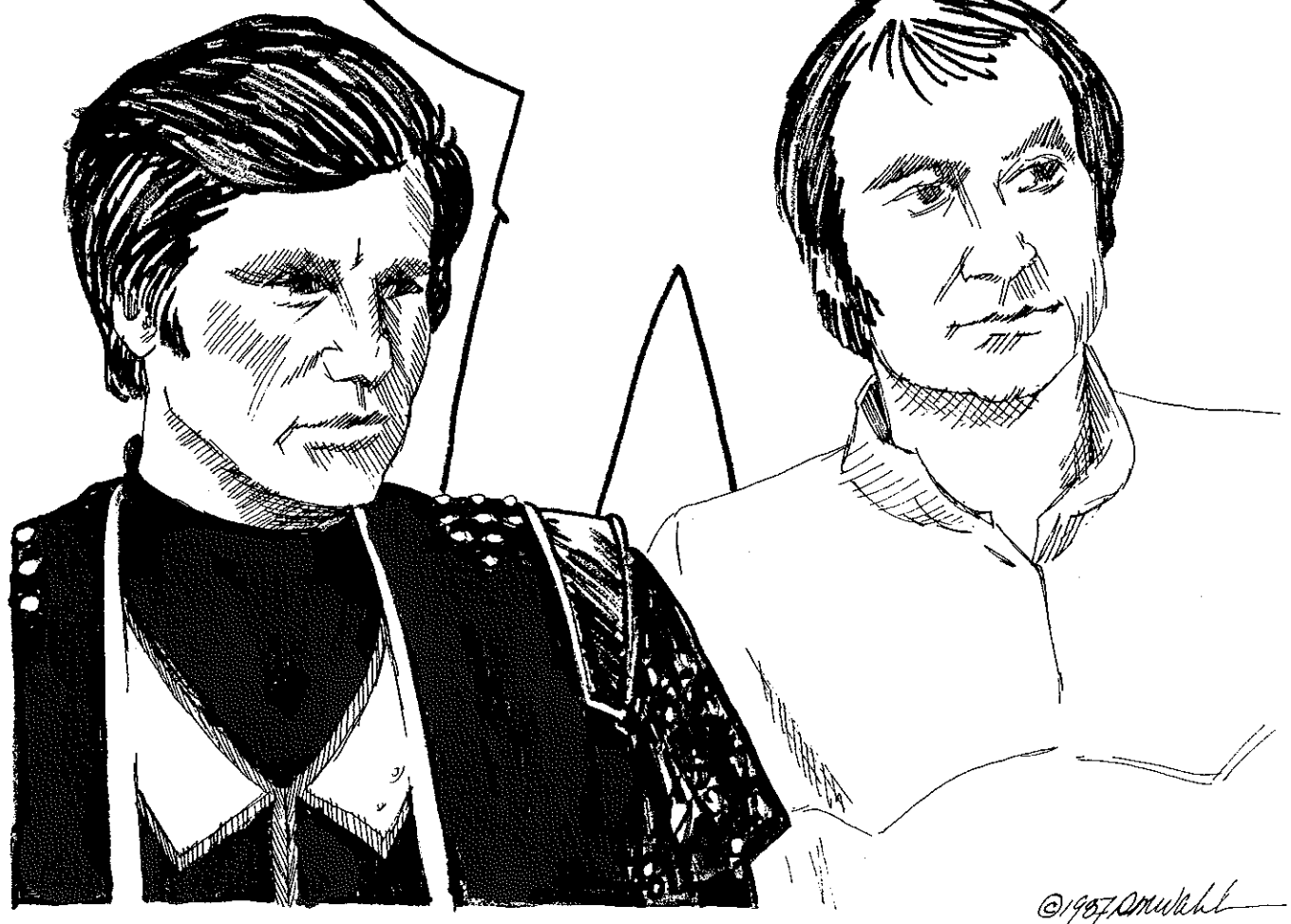


Relatively

Speaking

by Sheila Paulson



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Something was wrong with Avon.

Vila had first noticed it when Avon joined him on Egrorian's shuttle after the tachyon funnel had been loaded. He wondered what had taken Avon so long talking to Egrorian and why he had looked so grave and thoughtful and unlike himself when he returned. Not that that was a disadvantage. Vila had known for some time that Avon was changing. He'd always been a hard man, but lately he had become much worse as if the facade he wore had finally overwhelmed the rest of his nature, the mask replacing the face beneath. It frightened Vila. Until now, he'd felt relatively safe with Avon, knowing that Avon watched his back with the skill of an expert, and hoping that in protecting himself, Avon would protect Vila, too. It had taken some fancy footwork a time or two to stay out of Avon's way when danger threatened, but Vila was a survivor, too, in a different way than Avon was, and maybe that was why they complemented each other so well. Vila knew that in his own peculiar way, Avon had even liked him, though lately he was beginning to wonder if Avon was still capable of liking anyone, even himself. Especially himself. The others knew it too, and the atmosphere on Xenon and Scorpio was sometimes thick enough to cut with a laser. Vila didn't like it, and he'd not liked the way Avon had behaved around Egrorian, with all his false jollity and mad smiles. Avon was pulling something on the scientists. Vila had been around Avon long enough to recognize the signs. Whatever it was, Egrorian hadn't caught him at it and now they were back on the shuttle, heading for Scorpio and safety.

"We've done it, Avon," he exulted, not so much from relief at the successful escape as to prod an answer from Avon, who had been throwing him sidelong glances full of something Vila couldn't identify. He wondered if Avon suspected him of doing a deal with Egrorian or Pinder, but he should have known better than that. There had been nothing on Malodaar that Vila wanted to take away except his own life, and they'd managed that. "What's the escape velocity of this shuttle?" he asked when Avon didn't respond to his original gambit.

"I don't know," Avon replied. "Why don't you ask ORAC?"

"ORAC? Eh?" He stared as Avon stood up and opened a cabinet. ORAC! But it couldn't be. Could it?

"So what was that we gave to Egrorian?" Vila asked, flabbergasted.

"ORAC Mark 2. Just a replica I made a few months back. A contingency plan, Vila, and the contingency arose."

"But the thing worked," Vila objected.

"Well enough to fool Egrorian, anyway," Avon replied with satisfaction. "I fitted it with a voice box and a relay station so the real ORAC could run it."

"You could have got us killed," Vila accused him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well now, I didn't want to make you nervous. I was nervous enough for the both of us."

ORAC cut in. "The escape velocity of this vehicle is now confirmed at mach 15." A pause and ORAC added, "And unattainable."

Vila and Avon stared at ORAC. "What do you mean, unattainable?" Avon demanded.

After that, things got worse as they always did. Vila should have expected this. Egrorian had set them up. While he and Avon stripped the shuttle and rid it of any unnecessary weight, Vila wondered if the tachyon funnel was a phony as ORAC Mark 2 was. Probably. Avon was quick enough to sacrifice it. He must have realized that Egrorian wouldn't condemn his invention to burn up in the atmosphere. They were a pair, thought Vila bitterly, Avon and Egrorian, tricking each other like that. And it was Vila who would suffer for it. He cast a reproachful glance at Avon.

"What's the position now, ORAC?" Avon sounded increasingly short-tempered. Suddenly Vila wondered if he would be the next thing to be ejected. Avon had never hesitated to preserve his own life at the expense of others in the past, and he was worse lately. Whatever was bothering him when he first came aboard had been submerged by the present crisis, and now as Vila lingered at the back of the flight deck listening to ORAC describing how they fell short of escape, he felt the prickling of a new alarm. " ... 70 kilos, Avon," ORAC concluded.

Avon looked around the flight deck. "Damn it, what weighs 70 kilos?" he demanded furiously. There was nothing left to dispose of, and time was running out.

"Vila weighs 73 kilos, Avon."

Vila fled. If he stayed, he would be gone. Avon would throw him out. He had to. They were going to die anyway, but Vila didn't want to die at Avon's hands. Maybe they could still find something heavy enough to eject, but Avon wouldn't look for it now, not when he had a handy object to eject, something he didn't want anymore. Feeling sick and unhappy, Vila made his best time yet down the ladder ...

Only to hesitate as a crash echoed from above. It sounded like Avon's fist had slammed down on the console -- or even on ORAC itself. "That answer is not acceptable, ORAC," Avon snarled through clenched teeth. "Find me something else. Find the answer. What could Egrorian have put on this shuttle that would weigh enough to keep us from escape velocity? We should have found it."

Vila came to an uneasy stop. He'd been sure Avon would eject him, but Avon didn't sound like he would after all. Vila vacillated on the bottom rung of the ladder, wishing that ORAC weighed 73 kilos. From Avon's tone, ORAC would have gone out in a minute if it had been heavy enough.

"Vila," Avon called from the top of the ladder. "Tear this place apart. There has to be something ..."

"There's us," Vila muttered under his breath.

"That's not good enough," Avon growled. He came down the ladder after Vila, who almost bolted at the tight mask of fury on Avon's face. "He did this to us," Avon insisted. "We've got to find out how he did it."

"There's no time, Avon," Vila moaned, backing away. "We can't do it. We're going to die." He still didn't trust Avon, but in minutes that would be academic. They'd be dead anyway. Vila could hardly believe that Avon hadn't intended him to be the sacrifice. Avon was furious, but he was not looking at Vila with that hungry lion expression he wore when something got in his way. He ignored Vila as he tore frantically about the ship, and Vila joined him, though they found only a few things left to throw out. Not enough.

Then Avon stopped, bending over a plastic cube on the floor. One of them must have dropped it on an earlier trip to the airlock, but it wouldn't even weigh a kilo. Vila said, "Leave it, Avon. It's too light," in a tense, unhappy voice.

But suddenly Avon stiffened. "Vila, come here!"

Involuntarily, Vila backed up a step or two. "No," he objected. "I won't. What is it?"

"I know how they did it, Vila, but I need your help. It's a piece of neutron material, embedded in this crystal. I can't move it on my own." He looked at Vila, and something Vila had never seen in his eyes warred with impatience, frustration, and outright fear. "Get over here!" he barked. "Now!"

Vila obeyed. Avon was right, it was heavy. Maybe it was welded to the floor. They could never shift it. How could something that small be so heavy? Vila could see nothing in the plastic. It had to be microscopic, and nothing that small could be that heavy. Neutron material? Part of a collapsed star or something? How could the shuttle have got off the ground in the first place?

"It's moving," he exulted when he felt it give beneath their prying fingers. With agonizing slowness, they forced it toward the airlock. Egrorian hadn't brought it far into the ship. If they survived it would be because of that. Racing against time, they manhandled the crystal closer, then a panting Avon stretched up his arm and slammed open the inner airlock door. With a strength lent by desperation, they pushed the crystal into the airlock and Avon hit the "close" button and then the "eject." As the crystal was sucked out, the jolt as the ship lurched toward escape velocity tumbled Vila onto his back with Avon on top of him.

"Get off," he wheezed, pushing ineffectually at Avon. Really, the man should go on a diet.

Avon rolled over weakly and lay on his back, his eyes closed. Vila knew ORAC would

take over and get them back to the rendezvous. For a moment, he didn't want to move. He didn't think he could move. His heart was still thudding from the exertion and he felt dizzy with relief. Beside him, Avon lay still, but he opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling as if he'd never seen it before.

"We did it!" Vila exulted. "Avon, we did it. We're going to make it after all. We're not going to die."

"At least not at this moment," Avon replied. He sat up slowly, running his hands over his face and through his hair. Then he turned to Vila. "You thought I meant to eject you," he accused in a low voice.

"I hoped I was wrong," said Vila brightly. "You don't let people stand in your way, Avon, not when your life's at risk."

"There was time. Besides you know you are safe with me," Avon replied offhand, and he turned away again, shaking his head fractionally as if he didn't really understand what he had done or why. But the look he'd worn when he'd left Egrorian was back again.

"What happened down there?" Vila prodded tentatively. "Something did, when Pinder and I were loading the tachyon funnel. I know it did."

"What could have happened, Vila?" He stood up slowly, then stretched down a hand and hauled Vila to his feet. "I think we should leave now. Servalan may have been down there."

"Servalan!" echoed Vila uneasily. "Did you see her?"

"No. But when Egrorian -- he made sure I was well away from any speakers or monitors when he told me. Up until then, anything he said could have been overheard and was probably meant to be. But that -- no, he kept that from her. Maybe he planned to use the information later and wanted my reaction. I need to talk to ORAC. You stay here, Vila, and prepare for docking."

"What information?" Vila called at his retreating back. "Keep what from Servalan, Avon?"

"Stay here," Avon hissed. Vila started to object, then caught himself at the last minute. Avon had got so bad lately that Vila had begun to avoid him. Now, though he flung that order at Vila in much the same way he had any time since Terminal -- since Cally's death, Vila thought mournfully, wishing he didn't keep remembering -- Avon didn't sound vicious. He sounded perplexed. That made no sense at all.

Vila waited a bit to give Avon time to talk to ORAC, then he crept toward the ladder and began to inch his way up. One of the reasons Vila had survived as long as he had was because he knew when best to apply a little judicious snooper.

ORAC was speaking as Vila neared the top of the ladder, and the thief stopped there, close enough to overhear, far enough to slide to safety if Avon moved. Holding his breath, Vila listened.

"... time slippage would be possible under the circumstances," ORAC was expounding. "Based on the data supplied and theoretical projections, anywhere from 20 to 75 years discrepancy could have taken place. Fascinating. On a ship of that type over a distance of so many light years, it is conceivable that a number of years could have been gained. It will take time to tap into the existing Federation records and there will be security clearances to breach to discover if there is any record of the legal action."

"Very well, ORAC, as long as it takes. You will release this information to no one but me. Under no circumstances are you to tell any of the others anything about this."

"Yes, Master," ORAC mimicked Slave.

Avon sucked in an impatient breath. "Determine the location of the planet, ORAC. The sooner the better."

"You do not mean to go there?"

"What I mean to do or not to do does not involve you in any way, ORAC. Now get busy." The key was yanked forcibly, and Vila ghosted back down the ladder before Avon could turn and discover him.

The others were waiting at the hatch when they docked. Avon greeted them accusingly with, "You were a big help."

"There was nothing we could have done." For once, Tarrant didn't sound defensive in the face of Avon's accusation. "We couldn't dock at high speed, and we couldn't teleport. Tell me what you would have done to save us, if we'd been on the shuttle, Avon."

"And how are you, Vila?" Dayna asked pointedly. "I'm surprised to see you."

"Are you?" Avon asked her, and Dayna lowered her eyes. So she had done some speculating along the same lines that Vila had. Avon walked past them. "Bring ORAC, Vila," he called over his shoulder.

"Bring ORAC, do this, carry that," Vila grumbled to himself. "What would you do without me to pick on?"

Avon actually stopped and looked at him speculatively. He didn't reply; Vila hadn't expected that. Damn it, what could that mad scientist have told him to make such an impact on him? Then Avon shook his head dismissively and turned to Tarrant. "Get us out of here. I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't have Servalan after us any minute. This whole scheme reeks of being one of her plans."

The others exclaimed at that, but Avon ignored them. He took his position and sat there frowning while Vila deposited ORAC in his usual place, Tarrant began to lay in the course for Xenon and Soolin questioned Slave about other ships in the vicinity. Vila sat down too, turning to watch Avon. Something was happening, and Vila didn't know if he was going to like it. At least it had saved his life. He hardly thought Avon had become sentimental enough to risk his own life in trying to save Vila's. If it had come down to a showdown between them, Vila was sure Avon would have won. He didn't quite see himself shoving Avon out the airlock, not when Avon had the gun. Avon could have disposed of Vila easily enough, but Avon hadn't. Maybe back before everything had gone wrong, Avon might have tried to save him. Tarrant had even told him that Avon had stood up for him on Keezarn, but that was before Terminal and Cally. Damn. He'd have to stop thinking about Cally. Twice in one day, and he didn't have any soma to lighten the memories with. Vila knew he was drinking too much these days, but a lot of the time the others thought him drunk, he wasn't. When he did drink, it didn't help him forget Cally. Sometimes he saw her so clearly then it was hard to believe she was dead.

Cally had taken a part of Avon with her into death, just as Blake had. When Servalan had told Avon Blake was dead and then Cally had died in the booby-trapped base, Avon had died too, though he was still breathing. The Avon Vila expected to kill him on the shuttle was the one he'd come to know since Dorian had found them on Terminal. But today, something had breathed a little life into the corpse. It must have been Egrorian. When Vila had left with Pinder to shift the tachyon funnel to the shuttle, Avon had been the same as usual, but when he joined Vila on the shuttle, he was different. Vila had heard enough to pique his curiosity when he listened to Avon's orders to ORAC. What had that talk of time slippage meant? How did that tie in with legal action?

Vila had been born curious, and he sometimes wondered if one of the reasons he was so compelled to break into places, safes and even secret bases was because of a desire to see what was on the other side of the lock. In a way this was the same. Something had changed Avon and the man who would have sacrificed him only a day ago had been replaced by someone who found Vila's death unacceptable. Why? Surely not out of friendship. Avon might have regretted killing him -- at least the old Avon would have done. The Avon of Scorpio and Xenon base would probably have convinced himself no regret was necessary. But this new Avon had saved him at some risk to himself.

"There," Dayna cut into Vila's thoughts, startling him back to the here and now. "There's another ship leaving the planet. Servalan?"

"Perhaps," Avon replied. "What's her heading?"

"Earth sector," answered Tarrant, studying his screens. "Do we go after her?"

"She might have a fleet waiting," Vila objected in alarm. "I don't think she'd come here alone. She must know what a devious bastard Egrorian is. If she made a deal with him, she was meant to come out on top." He glanced over at Avon. "You were in good company, Avon. Or maybe I should say bad company."

"I doubt very much if Egrorian is still alive," Avon said.

Vila stared at him in surprise. "You didn't kill him?"

"No, Vila, I did not. There was no point. He didn't have the real ORAC, after all. He was deceived. By the time he returned to check on ORAC, we should have been beyond his range. We had the tachyon funnel and ORAC. No, Vila. If this was another of Smeer's plots, she would have been furious when she saw the replica of ORAC. I do not imagine he would have lived long after that."

"You didn't know she was down there, did you?" Tarrant asked suspiciously.

"No. Had I known that, I might perhaps have done it differently."

"I'm not entirely sure I believe that," Tarrant retorted.

"It was not I who became so close to her on Virn," Avon reminded the pilot in a silky voice. "I have no wish to keep her alive." He stared at the screen, ignoring the rage on Tarrant's face. "But by all means we can pursue her if it will make you happy."

Tarrant glared at him, then he turned away.

"Forgive me, Master," Slave cut in apologetically. "But I am picking up a fleet of ships approaching. The ship from Malodaar is going to join them."

"Then take us out of here now," Soolin cut in. "And make it fast."

* * *

"Where's ORAC, do you know?" Tarrant asked, meeting Vila in the passage. It was the next day and they had returned to Xenon without trouble. Since then, none of them had seen Avon, and now it looked like no one had seen ORAC either.

"Avon's got him," Vila replied with certainty. "He's checking on something he got from Egrorian." He didn't know why he continued, loyalty to Avon who hadn't killed him or just a desire to keep Tarrant out of it, but he added, "Maybe he's trying to work out a tachyon funnel for us after all. Egrorian told him something about how it worked."

"I thought you knew how it worked, Vila. I seem to remember you making some kind of grandiose claims back on Scorpio."

"I do," said Vila promptly. "But I leave the hard work to Avon."

"You leave it to anyone who will do it," Tarrant countered, catching Vila's arm when the thief would have slipped away. "What happened down there, Vila? Something's different, and I don't know what it is. I don't like it."

Vila looked at Tarrant, startled. He shouldn't have thought the pilot was that perceptive, but there were times when Tarrant surprised him and this was one of them. Besides, as Avon had been less abrasive on the journey to Xenon, Vila hadn't acted like himself either. He'd been prepared to die back there and he hadn't died, and it was because of Avon. He still hadn't reconciled himself to that, and he almost felt guilty. Expecting betrayal from the man who was probably his closest friend, not that that said much for the relationship, Vila had been the one to doubt, though he'd have been a fool not to. Had Vila's suspicion actually hurt Avon? No, it couldn't be that.

"I don't know, Tarrant," he replied honestly. "Something's up, but I don't know what. I think Egrorian told him something."

"Told him something? What could he tell him to make him act like this?"

"I don't know. Maybe he told him where his personal fortune was hid."

Tarrant looked disgusted. "Oh, very clever, Vila. I should have known better than to expect sense from you."

"I didn't know you could recognize sense when you heard it," Vila countered and slipped away before Tarrant could ask him anything else.

It wasn't until the following day that Avon emerged from his quarters. He was carrying ORAC, and when he joined the others, he set the computer carefully beside him

and took a stance that defied anyone to question him. "We're going on a journey," he announced.

"Well, it's about time," retorted Tarrant belligerently. "You mean we finally get to learn about the big mystery?"

"The only mystery I am aware of is how you are able to pilot a ship with your obviously limited intelligence. We will be leaving immediately. Here are the coordinates." He passed a plastex sheet to Tarrant, who hesitated just long enough to irritate Avon before he took it to study.

"That's right across the galaxy from here," he objected. "We'll be in Federation territory for much of the way. Whatever's there had better be worth the risk."

He seemed determined to push it, and something in Avon's stance warned Vila that this was not the best time to cross Avon, so he said quickly, "We're going after Egrorian's personal fortune. I knew it. It would take a lot of money to get Avon to go that far."

"Or a chance at Servalan," put in Dayna hopefully.

"Or word of Blake," Soolin muttered. Mentally Vila kicked himself. He should have thought of that himself, it was so obvious. Maybe Egrorian knew where Blake was and had hold Avon. That must be it.

But Avon favored the gunfighter with one of his icy expressions. "I am not interested in Blake." Maybe he could have convinced the Homiks that he meant it, or a Decima or two, but anyone with sense could guess that he wasn't entirely honest about it. He did want to find Blake, but Vila wasn't sure it was such a good idea right now. Blake had been gone for a long time, and though Avon might claim he didn't care what had happened to him, he had certainly seemed to believe Servalan when she claimed Blake was dead. If Blake showed up alive and well, he would have to talk hard and fast to convince Avon that he didn't mean him ill by vanishing so thoroughly.

Besides, word of Blake wouldn't have been reason to save Vila's life on the shuttle.

"Of course you're not, Avon. We know better," he babbled, hoping Avon would let something slip. Instead Avon favored him with a mildly impatient glance and smiled faintly. Vila had come to distrust Avon's smiles, but this one didn't seem dangerous. Perversely, that made Vila uneasy.

"Blake doesn't enter into this," Avon went on. "It's someone else I hope to find, and I shall need you with me, Vila." He sounded almost regretful, as if he didn't really want Vila with him, and that scared Vila still more. Maybe Avon had saved him to use as bait. He didn't know what kind of a trap he could bait, but there must be something.

"What about the rest of us?" Soolin asked. "You're being mysterious, Avon, and I'm getting tired of it. Why can't you ever just talk to us?"

"This is not your concern," he hissed at her.

"It is if I'm expected to come with you. The last mission went wrong. Egrorian had set a trap for us, or Servalan had. I'm not entirely certain you can recognize a trap, Avon. Now you're going after something you learned from Egrorian. How can you trust him when he betrayed you once already?"

"I don't trust him," Avon replied coolly. "I do, however, trust ORAC to locate information for me. Egrorian's story may be valid, and I intend to confirm it before Servalan does. She may have overheard us."

"Oh, great," Tarrant snapped. "We're chasing halfway across the galaxy on the word of a traitor to find something that Servalan may already know about. It had better be worthwhile, Avon."

"Stay here then. All of you stay here. I shall take Vila and ORAC."

"What? Why me?" Vila asked. "I don't want to bait your trap, Avon. Leave me out of it. I'll stay here and have some adrenalin and soma and when it's all over, you can --"

"Vila!"

"What?"

"You are coming with me. That is final. You have a stake in this too."

"I do? Then it is Blake?"

"Is Blake all you can think of?" He glanced at them all. "I shall tell you where we are going then. We are going after Kerril."

Vila's jaw dropped. Never in a million years had he expected that. "Kerril?" he ventured unsteadily. "My Kerril?"

"Exactly."

"But -- I couldn't find her," Vila admitted in a small voice. "I set ORAC to look for her and he couldn't trace her."

"Naturally not, with the little information you provided. I had more information, and I believe I have the proper location now."

"You mean Egrorian knew where Kerril is?" Vila asked in dismay.

"No. He knows nothing of her. But he had information that enabled me to locate her. If he was correct, we shall find Kerril there." He gestured toward the coordinates Tarrant was still holding.

Tarrant set them down. "We're to risk our lives for Vila, so he can have a romantic rendezvous? Not good enough, Avon."

"It is good enough for me. I don't need you, Tarrant. ORAC can pilot Scorpio if need be. There is more at stake than a romantic rendezvous. Vila will find Kerril much changed." He looked at Vila, his voice almost gentle. "I'm sorry, Vila."

"Changed? How changed? Is she dead then?"

"I don't know. If we find her, she will not be as you remember her. I'm sorry, but we have no choice. If Servalan knows anything, we must get there first."

"To save her life?" Dayna asked. "And protect her from Servalan? I can agree with that, Avon. Besides, if Servalan's coming --"

"If she is there, I give you permission to kill her." Avon's voice was a purr.

"Why are you so concerned for Kerril, Avon?" Tarrant asked, leaning forward and resting his elbows on ORAC as he stared suspiciously at the computer expert. "You weren't particularly concerned about her on Keezarn. Why the sudden interest now? Sorry, Vila, but I don't think Avon would care if Servalan got her or not. Why should he suddenly be so concerned for your sensibilities?"

"Yes, why, Avon?" Dayna asked. "It's not Kerril, is it? It's the crystals, or something else valuable on her planet?"

Avon threw them all a hostile stare. "Are you coming?" he asked as if he didn't care at all.

"I'm coming," Vila asserted. "If Kerril's in danger, we've got to help her."

"Uncharacteristically brave of you, Vila," Soolin commented, then she shrugged. "Why not? I've nothing better to do. I'll come, Avon. But I'd be happier about it if I knew the truth."

"We know more of the truth than usual," Dayna reminded her, and Vila would have been surprised at her sudden defense of Avon if he hadn't suspected that it was her desire to kill Servalan that had prompted it. "It's enough for me. I'll come too, Avon."

"Tarrant?"

Tarrant straightened up and folded his arms across his chest in an unconscious parody of Avon's habitual gesture. "Yes," he decided. "But if we arrive to find the Federation there in force, I'm turning around and coming back."

For a moment, Vila thought Avon might argue that, but he didn't. He glared at Tarrant for a long time, then he turned and stalked away. Vila was surprised that he had left ORAC

behind until he noticed the key was missing.

"That was strange," Soolin observed, twisting her head around to look after Avon. "I don't know why but I get the feeling he'd as soon kill this Kerril as protect her from Servalan. Who is she, Vila? An old girlfriend of yours?"

"Something like that," he said absently, looking after Avon, too. Now that Soolin pointed it out, Avon didn't seem to be rushing off to save Kerril out of anything like fondness. To keep Servalan from using her against them would be a more practical reason, but the fact that he and Kerril had been close wouldn't be enough in itself for Avon to consider her a threat. Vila might, but Avon wouldn't care about that. And Servalan knew nothing about her. She could have been any discarded girlfriend; Egrorian wouldn't have known that Vila cared for her, not unless he'd talked to her, and she would never have mentioned Vila to someone like that. He listened to Tarrant making a bad story of the trip to Keezarn to search for the crystals with Dayna correcting him from time to time. Tarrant didn't look any too happy but then Tarrant had not exactly shone on that occasion, and he probably wasn't keen to be reminded of it.

But to Vila's surprise, he was relatively honest about it, and when he finished, Soolin looked at him measuringly before she turned back to Vila. "I know you're anxious to see her again, Vila, but you'll have to agree that this trip has more purpose than a lovers' reunion. There's more to it than saving her from Servalan too. As things stand, she's no threat to us. Or rather, no threat to Avon."

"And it doesn't explain why Avon's suddenly so protective of you," Dayna added, looking up from the useless ORAC in disgust. "Is there anything you're not telling us, Vila?"

"Not a thing," he said honestly. "Except that Avon could have dumped me off that shuttle and he didn't. ORAC suggested it to him, the little traitor. I thought I was done for, but Avon told ORAC that wasn't acceptable. I never knew he cared."

"He doesn't," corrected Soolin.

"They why not kill me?"

"He didn't have to kill you, Vila," Dayna insisted. "What do you think would have happened if he hadn't found that neutron material in time to save himself?"

"I think we would both have burned up in the atmosphere," Vila said in surprise. "I don't know why, Dayna. I know it doesn't make sense, but I'm sure of it."

"What the hell happened on Malodaar?" Tarrant burst out. He poked at ORAC as if he halfway believed he could get a response without the key. "I don't like this," he added unnecessarily, then he picked up the coordinates. "I'll go check out Scorpio," he volunteered and went in that direction, muttering to himself.

* * *

They made the voyage in a strange state of tension. Dayna and Soolin kept glancing warily at Avon as if he were a solium radiation device primed to go off, and Tarrant was uneasy and resentful, knowing he had let Avon manipulate him one more time. Vila was nervous. Avon's mood alternated between a kind of smoldering resentment, a cool aloofness that would have felt natural before Cally's death, and a curious interest in Vila, sometimes studying the thief through narrowed eyes as if he'd never seen him before. It made Vila uncomfortable, and when he was finally driven to snap at Avon, the computer expert only smiled a little and went to check the flight systems.

They managed to avoid Federation ships, though twice Slave reported them at the edge of detector range. In neither instance were the ships moving directly toward them, and a little judiciously applied speed slipped them out of range.

Toward the end of the journey, they saw no Federation ships at all, just a few old freighters and planet hoppers and a couple of ships that might be smuggling vessels. What they were doing this far out was anyone's guess, but Homeworld did have the crystals and possibly other resources, and when Vila pointed that out, no one commented except on the name. "Homeworld, Vila?" Soolin asked with skeptical amusement.

"I wanted to name it Vilaworld, but she was set on the other name. I still think Vilaworld would have been better; they'd never have got there if it wasn't for me. It'd be a fitting tribute to my gifts."

"And your ego?" Tarrant inquired.

"You're just jealous because no one ever named a planet after you."

"Or you," Tarrant reminded him. "I don't imagine they let your Kerril name their world. They probably called it something unromantic like Keezarn 2."

"The trouble with you, Tarrant, is that you have no soul."

Avon ignored all that. He took out hard copies that ORAC had run for him and studied them intently, and finally Soolin looked at him and asked, "What's that, Avon?"

"Nothing," Avon returned in his usual secretive manner.

"We might be able to help better if we knew why we were going there," Tarrant pointed out. "We're going to save Kerril from Servalan. Fine, if there were any reason for Servalan to want her."

"Does the possibility of developing a working time machine sound like a plausible reason, Tarrant?"

They all stared. "Time machine?" Vila echoed in astonishment. "Kerril wouldn't know how to build a time machine, Avon. She's a gunfighter like Soolin. She wouldn't have a clue about something technical like that."

"You said she'd changed," Tarrant remembered, sitting up straighter and looking alert and thoughtful. "Did the people of Keezarn go through some kind of time warp? Backwards in time? Forward? That's it, isn't it? They went into the travel terminus into a different time, and you're afraid Servalan will learn how it happened and use it against us. I don't understand the mystery, Avon. We're smart enough to recognize the threat of that. We'd have been all the more anxious to come if we'd known why."

"But that would mean that Kerril --" Vila fell silent. "Is she older, Avon? She got there years ago? Is that why you said she was different? She's twenty years older than us or something?"

"Closer to forty."

Vila shut his eyes. He'd been eagerly looking forward to seeing Kerril again and Avon's warning had only made him think that life was hard there and she had toughened a little. But if she'd gone through a time warp, she could be old while he was still young. He'd let himself hope, and now he'd lost her a second time. He threw an accusing glare at Avon, feeling betrayed.

"I don't think Servalan could make a prototype from that, Avon," Tarrant went on. "I'd speculate that it was some sort of time shift caused by the length of the voyage and the type of equipment used. We could duplicate the ship and send it out and after 3000 years or so, it might go back in time a few years. Not exactly practical for Commissioner Smeer, is it?"

"It could be adapted. ORAC thinks there is a possibility."

"Does he? Not a large one, I'll wager."

"If there's even a slight possibility, I intend to keep it out of her hands," Avon returned.

Vila expected Tarrant to push it, but Tarrant must have actually agreed with Avon for he fell silent and concentrated on flying. Vila was disappointed. He wanted more information, but he didn't think Avon would give it to him. If Tarrant had kept after him, more might have come out. Vila looked hopefully at Soolin and Dayna, but he could find no help there. They were curious, but would wait to see what happened next. Sometimes Soolin would stand up to Avon, but she didn't seem to like the idea of Servalan getting her hands on time travel either. She could go back and attack them when they were children. Vila realized unhappily. Maybe she could prevent them from ever existing. Trust Avon to get them into trouble like this.

* * *

Homeworld wasn't the primitive place Vila had expected from his one visit there with

Kerril. In the forty years Avon claimed had passed since Norl's people had migrated there -- if Avon was right about the time line -- the planet had settled a good deal. Scorpio assumed a stationary orbit and Slave and ORAC assessed the world below them. There were a number of small settlements, some of which could be smuggler bases. Knowing Kerril, she'd had some contacts in that line of work, and if she could have worked out communications, she might have contacted some of them. Either that or the planet was already known to them before the people from Keezarn arrived.

There was no trace of Federation there, so Avon decided to go down. "I believe we have pinpointed Kerril's settlement," he announced at last. "Vila, you may come with me on one condition."

"What condition?" asked Vila suspiciously.

"That you stay in the background and don't tell Kerril who you are until I say you can."

"Why should I agree to that?" he demanded.

"Because if you don't, I'll take Tarrant down with me instead."

"What if she does recognize me then?"

"If she does, she does. Put your bracelet on and let's go."

If he didn't know better, Vila would have thought Avon was nervous, but Avon's face was a rigid mask, not unlike the one he'd worn after finding Cally's body in the ruins of the Terminal base. He took his gun from his holster as he prepared to teleport, and Vila did the same. "Put us down," Avon ordered.

Homeworld came into being around them, and Vila sucked in a breath at the sight of it. It looked like the same place; Avon had got that much right. After all this time, ORAC had found it for Avon. Vila was miffed.

In the distance were traces of a settlement, and Avon strode off in that direction without a backward look. Vila let out a squeak of dismay and followed him.

Halfway there, they were accosted by a tall, dark-haired man who looked rather like Avon, though a good ten years younger. Vila eyed him suspiciously and saw the young man return their look with equal distrust. "That's far enough," he warned, though he lacked a weapon to back his words. "What are you doing here?"

"They've got guns, Malix," a younger woman cautioned, stepping from behind a tree. She was armed with a bow and arrow and she looked more than competent with them. At this range, the arrow would probably go right through Avon, but that wasn't what got Vila's attention. It was the fact that she looked like Kerril. Her daughter?

"I'm good with this," she went on. "You're strangers. What brings you here?"

"Looking for a woman named Kerril," Avon replied, ignoring the bow and arrow. "Is she still alive?"

"She was this morning," the man said with a grin. "How do you know Kerril?"

"I don't," Avon replied. "I only saw her once. But I think she will be interested in us."

"Do you?" the girl asked. "That's her decision, not yours. She and Cirn are in council this morning. They'll see you, but not immediately. You'll have to wait. Before you start waving that gun around, let me point out that we're not the only ones here, just the only ones you see. My mother was a hired gun, and she learned to survive in a tough school. She taught Malix and me well."

"Your mother?" Vila echoed when Avon seemed to be at an unlikely loss for words. "Kerril's your mother?"

"Shouldn't she be?" the man replied. "And Cirn's our father. I think you should lower your guns now." He smiled a little, and Vila shivered as he holstered his gun because Malix's smile had some of the impact of Avon's smiles. This might be a dangerous man.

Avon holstered his gun and spread his hands in a mock conciliatory gesture. "Very well," he said. "We'll see her when she is free. We have a warning for her."

"Threats?" the girl demanded angrily.

"Back down, Cilla," Malix urged. "He's put his gun away. Try doing the same. I swear you're the most bloodthirsty girl I know."

"I take after Mother." Turning to Avon and Vila, she said, "We've let you know our names. Suppose we hear yours." Vila noticed that she hadn't lowered the bow. A lot like her mother, he realized, smiling.

"I'll tell her," Avon replied pointedly.

Malix grimaced and Cilla nodded at him. Then they turned and led the way to the settlement. It was a primitive enough place, but there were traces of modern technology here and there, modernizing what had begun life as simple huts. Behind one of them stood a radar dish and a power station provided outdoor lighting globes positioned around a central square. As they arrived, people began to emerge from the largest building, a rough structure constructed of wood with a thatched roof, though power lines ran into it too. There were several flyers and ground cars parked outside and some of the people coming out of the place were far from primitive, though many of them were armed. It seemed that Norl's people had either worked out a pact with the smugglers or had become absorbed by them.

Kerril emerged then and Vila recognized her immediately. The years had been kind to her, and though her hair was silver rather than gold and her face had a lot more lines, she looked supple and fit and confident, and Vila realized that life here had been good for her. He wondered if she knew about the time warp. If not, she would get a rude surprise, and he wondered if there was any way to cushion it. Then he saw a tall, fair-haired man beside her and knew from the way they seemed aware of each other without even speaking that they belonged together. This must be Cirn, their guides' father. He looked mild-mannered and there was a gentleness about him that was belied by his firm chin. His hair was hardly touched by gray, but his face was leathery and lined.

He was the first one to see them, and he touched Kerril's arm. She looked up at once, smiling at her children, then she noticed the strangers and came toward them. Avon promptly put himself between her and Vila, and Vila let him. Maybe it would be better to let Kerril realize who he was gradually.

"We have visitors," she said, and her voice sounded almost as young as it had back on Keezarn. "I'm Kerril, and this is my bondmate, Cirn. You've met our children. Who are you?"

Avon stepped forward and faced her with a trace of defiance that caused him to appear oddly defensive. "My name is Kerr Avon," he said. "My father was Ivor Avon. I believe you knew him."

At his name, she drew a shocked breath, and at the mention of his father's name, her hands flew up to her mouth and she took an involuntary step backwards. Realizing she was upset, Cirn put his arm around her shoulders.

"Cirn," she exclaimed. Vila had the odd idea that she was not speaking to her husband. Then she backed up still further. "No. You can't be."

"I assure you I am. Perhaps you never expected this. You certainly never wanted it."

"I wanted it every day since then," she cried. "You don't know how many days I cursed myself for what I did. How many times I wondered if Vila would have condemned me for it. Ah, he was a lovely man. It wasn't meant, but I always cared. Cirn knows."

"Yes," Cirn replied. "You don't know how many times she wished it could have been different," he told Avon. "I would have welcomed her child. She knew that, too, but it was best. Life here was so hard at first. We lost so many of the children. There was a virus and we lacked the means to control it. You would have died."

Vila's eyes felt like they were standing out on stalks. This made no sense. What did Kerril owe Avon? This sounded like -- no! That was impossible! "Avon?" he said plaintively. "What's going on?"

Kerril tore her eyes away from Avon and looked past him. Her eyes widening, she



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walked up to him slowly. "Vila?" she asked, her voice shaking. "Oh, Vila, is it you?" She put her arms around him and hugged him as if she were embracing her lost chances and her lost youth. He held her gently. She wasn't his anymore, but she had been once, and he felt his eyes fill with tears.

"I'm so sorry, Vila," she whispered in his ear. "I didn't want to part with your son; I loved him so much. I did it to make him safe. It was the only way. The virus was killing the babies and he was likely to die if he stayed here. When the planetary survey scientist came, he told me how far I was from my own time. He was a good man and he promised to give my baby a good home, an Alpha home. I never dared to hope he'd come back here. Never. I don't know -- did your father tell you?" she asked over her shoulder.

Avon was answering, incredible as it seemed. "He told me nothing," he said coldly. "Someone who had known him told me about you several days ago. I had no idea until then."

"Avon?" Vila asked, turning to stare at the computer expert in disbelief. "You can't mean --"

"Yes," Avon replied. "My father came here to survey this planet nearly 40 years ago. He came away with a child. Unfortunately, it was I. Do you think I believed it?"

"You must have done," Vila returned stupidly. "That's why you didn't dump me out the airlock on the shuttle, isn't it? That's really why we came here. Not for any time machine."

"Yes, I did," Avon insisted. "If Servalan believes these people have travelled in time, she'll want to learn more about it."

"Servalan!" Kerril spat. "Coming here? You did this to us?"

"No, he didn't," Vila defended him. "Someone else did, someone who'd betrayed us already. If Servalan overheard him, she'll be trying to find out where you are."

"She may never learn," Kerril protested. She turned back to Avon. "Yes," she said. "When I saw you today, I noticed how much you looked like Malix. I'd forgotten that one brief meeting."

"Then you knew when you gave him away?" Vila asked. "That we'd meet one day?"

"No. I scarcely remembered his name, Vila. It only sounded vaguely familiar when I met Ivor. It was only later, when I talked to others, that I realized the two of you knew each other. I didn't realize on Keezarn, Avon, that you looked like my mother's side of the family. I didn't know until much later that you knew Vila -- and neither of you knew until several days ago?"

"I still don't know," Vila said mournfully. "You can't really be saying I'm Avon's father?" He sneaked an uncomfortable look at Avon. "Of course he's almost as smart as I am, so --"

"Don't push it, Vila," Avon muttered threateningly.

"Sorry, 'son'." Vila couldn't hold back a huge grin. If this proved to be just a joke, he'd never let Avon live it down. But could it really be true?

Kerril was feasting her eyes on Avon. She believed it, and she was delighted. It was a good thing she didn't know Avon better. Vila decided the best thing he could do for Kerril would be to keep her from discovering what a nasty brute Avon could be.

Her children were staring at Avon with fascination -- they were Avon's half brother and sister, Vila realized. He hadn't dreamed this would turn into a family reunion when they had come here. Now Kerril was introducing Avon to his siblings, and for once Avon held back the sarcastic comments that must have been trembling on the tip of his tongue. The girl, Cilla, actually had the nerve to embrace her brother, who endured it with remarkable forbearance. Cilla was delighted. "We always wondered what you were like," she told Avon.

"And now you know."

She eyed him with momentary suspicion, then she relaxed as Malix shook Avon's hand. Seeing the two of them side by side, there was a definite resemblance. Avon must have noticed it immediately.

"About this Servalan," Cirn cut in. "How great a danger are we in?"

"There is a chance she overheard Egrorian telling me about my background," Avon replied.

"No there isn't," Vila objected suddenly. "That's not why we're here, is it? That's just the excuse you used to make the others come here. You want the time machine yourself."

"No, I don't," Avon returned. "It seems an unlikely venture, and the only people I could sell it to for what it is worth would use it against me."

"Then you're here to see Kerril?" Vila asked, not quite believing it.

"I'm here to see her, yes. Because I wanted to meet a woman who could give up her child in exchange for a guarantee of protection from the Federation."

"A guarantee of what?" Kerril drew back as if he'd slapped her. "Who told you that lie? I sent you away because of the danger to infants here. I neither asked for nor got guarantees of protection, though I think your father didn't give a complete report on this world. When he and the space major came here and told me I was in the past, I was crushed. I could never go home. They felt it would be better to keep this world a secret because of the danger of the time warp becoming known. Their idea, not mine. But I could save my son and Vila's, and that's why I sent you to Earth, Avon."

Avon looked skeptical, and Kerril met his eyes evenly. "I know a little of you, Avon," she said. "You believe I betrayed you, but I didn't. All I did, I did to save your life. I swear that is the truth."

"She's not lying to you, Avon," Cirn insisted. "It broke her heart to send you away."

"I'm quite sure," returned Avon, but without hostility. He was still wary, and he wasn't quite committing himself, but Vila suspected that for once Avon was vulnerable. Avon? His son? It boggled the mind.

"If there's a chance Servalan will come here, we must warn the others," said Cirn quickly to defuse the tensions in the air. "Is he still in there, Kerril?"

She glanced back at the council building. "He's still there," she agreed. "We can't let Servalan find him."

"Find who?" Vila asked, but he had a suspicion already, and from the way Avon's muscles tightened, Vila suspected Avon somehow knew. Not that Avon was psychic or anything; that'd been Cally's province. But Avon had been linked somehow, though he would have denied it. Blake? That must be who had told Kerril about him and Avon being friends. Vila eased a step closer to Avon. If that's who Kerril meant, any number of things might happen, and most of them would not be good.

"We're in the process of joining the rebellion," Cirn explained. "That's why we're meeting here today. That's why I thought you'd come at first."

As he spoke, Cilla darted over to the council building, emerging a moment later accompanied by a man. Vila stared hopefully, then began to smile. It was Blake, though he looked rather the worse for wear. He was thinner and grayer, and there was a scar at the corner of his left eye that must have come close to blinding him. It pulled that side of his face slightly out of sync and may have hampered his vision. Blake was listening to Cilla, who was talking eagerly, looking less bloodthirsty than usual. She caught Blake's arm and tugged it impatiently, urging him toward the others.

Blake finally looked up.

And saw Avon.

For what seemed an eternity, Blake and Avon stared at each other. Avon's expression was not readable, at least to the people of Homeworld, but Vila had always been able to read Avon's non-expressions well enough to tell him which way to duck. Now he saw something hidden there that overwhelmed everything, including the news of his parentage. Oddly enough, instead of hurting, that reassured Vila. In spite of their newfound relationship, Vila didn't want to disturb their old "friendship." He wasn't going to play the father with Avon and he didn't want Avon to try to be his son. He knew that wasn't likely, though the unexpected news had saved his life. He just wanted to go on being Avon's fool, and Avon's reaction to Blake convinced him that there was a chance of it.

Blake wasn't as good at hiding his feelings as he liked to think he was, and for a moment, Vila saw elation in Blake's eyes. It was quickly banished; Blake was nobody's fool. He wasn't taking any chances with Avon. Vila suddenly realized that one good thing had come out of his newfound relationship with Avon. Had Blake encountered him before Egrorian had told him, he would have met the Avon who might have cheerfully pushed Vila from the shuttle. Now he was facing an Avon who, while not quite the same as he had been before Anna had betrayed him and Cally died, was a man who had snatched himself back from a dark path that had terrified Vila. He might not be completely sane, but he was back in control and still improving.

Toning down his delight at the sight of Avon, Blake approached. "Avon," he said, and he couldn't keep the warm richness of his satisfaction out of his voice. "Did you come here to find me?"

Avon donned a haughty look that fooled neither Vila nor Blake. "No, I was searching for my mother," he explained, probably knowing Blake would think he meant it facetiously.

Blake smiled. "No matter," he replied. "It's good to see you."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say it is good to see you, Blake, though I do confess to a certain satisfaction. Servalan informed us you were dead."

"And you believed her, Avon? You're slipping."

"The circumstances were somewhat convincing," Avon defended himself.

"I should have known she would use me against you. I'm sorry about that." Blake glanced past him. "Hello, Vila. Are you still keeping the others out of trouble?"

"When I can get them to listen to me. Hullo, Blake. You've been hard to find."

"Accusations, Vila? Can I take that to mean you looked for me?"

"Someone did," Vila returned, with a glance in Avon's direction. "I can't imagine why. We got in enough trouble without you. Now there's sure to be more."

"Is there?" Avon asked, a certain stiffness creeping into his voice. "Where did you disappear to, Blake?" He tried to make the question offhand, but Vila wasn't fooled. He wondered fleetingly if he could read Avon so well because there was a genetic bond and decided it was probably just that he was clever with people. Yes, that would be it.

"Any number of places. I could have come back, but Liberator was yours. We needed time apart, you and I."

"Did we?" Avon asked, though Vila suspected he agreed with Blake's assessment.

"We looked for you in lots of places, Blake," Vila cut in quickly. "Obsidian, Terminal. Lots of others. Some of them were Servalan's traps. We're lucky to be alive." He frowned quite fiercely to hold his feelings at bay. "Cally's dead."

"I heard that. I'm sorry." He watched Avon as he said it.

Avon tensed up. "So am I." He finally looked Blake in the eye. "I believe I understand about Gan now. It isn't only fanatics who can be ... driven."

Blake watched him warily. "I wasn't accusing you, Avon."

"Maybe you should have done."

"No, there are better things to do. Now we've found each other again, I think we should make some plans."

"Scorpio is my ship, Blake," Avon said at once, then caught himself. "It isn't Liberator, and I'm sure you have your own ship?"

"Yes," Blake agreed. "And a growing base on a world called Gauda Prime. I wondered how long it would take you to find me there. I never expected to find you here on Homeworld."

Vila felt a twinge of memories at the name. So the planet had been called Homeworld

after all. He looked at Kerril and saw memories filling her eyes as she smiled at him. Suddenly Vila would have liked to go off by himself and cry.

"Servalan may know of this place, Blake," Avon said quickly.

"Servalan! But she's dead, Avon."

"No. She uses the name Sleer now. But she's just as deadly."

"Commissioner Sleer," Blake exclaimed, startled. "I've never seen her. But I've heard reports that she's searching for me. That's not unusual; most of the Federation is. But now I understand why she is. Do you think she'd come here, Avon? Why? Following you? Looking for me?"

"Neither."

"The crystals then?" Blake asked. "The Federation has a more convenient source. The time warp?"

"You know about the time warp?" Avon demanded suspiciously, shooting a questioning look at Kerril.

"Yes. Kerril told us. I know she'd met you before; we've spoken of Vila several times. Surely even Servalan wouldn't find that a reason to come here."

"We don't know she really is," put in Vila hastily. "But you know how suspicious Avon is."

"It must be hereditary," Avon muttered sourly for Vila's ears alone.

Blake nodded. "Avon, I've missed you, all of you. Lately I've been considering trying to get a message to ORAC. I'm afraid I've become more like you; it's difficult for me to trust people. Deva, back on my base, the people here, one or two others, are about all I trust these days, besides you."

"Oh, yes, that's right. From the very beginning. I see you have not become less foolish, Blake."

"Perhaps I needed someone like you to keep me in line," Blake offered, and Vila read in Blake's eyes the desire to recapture his past with Avon and Liberator. He could never do that, for too many things had changed. Liberator was destroyed and Cally dead. But there were three of them left, and maybe Jenna too. Could they recapture part of the old dream? Vila wanted to. He suspected Avon did too, but Avon's recent lessons in trust had been hard and bitter ones and Avon wasn't likely to admit to Blake that he wanted him back, if he really did.

But Avon surprised him yet again. "Perhaps you do," he returned smoothly. "State your terms, Blake."

"And you'll consider them?"

"I might."

"Then perhaps we should talk. Can you bring down the rest of your crew, Avon? I'd like to meet this Tarrant I've heard of. Jenna used to talk of him. He had something of a reputation in the outer worlds."

Jenna "used to talk ..." Blake's face had darkened when he said that, and Vila knew how to take it. He looked at Blake sadly. He'd always rather fancied Jenna, not that she'd ever had time for him. But that story would have to wait. Avon was actually responding with a cheerfully derogatory comment about Tarrant's recklessness. There was even a faint smile on his face as he nodded. "Yes, we should bring them down. Come, Vila."

He led Vila a little distance away from Blake and the others and lifted his bracelet to call the ship, pausing suddenly to stare at Vila.

Vila got in first. "Avon, it isn't real, is it?"

"What isn't real?"

"Me. You."

"Why, Vila, if that is a sample of your paternal devotion, I should be better off without it." Avon was in fine fettle. Finding Blake again must have done it. Lucky timing for sure.

"It's not that it isn't true," Vila persisted. "It just isn't real. I mean, I like the status quo. What about you?"

"I prefer it as well, This makes no difference."

"It did save my life," Vila muttered.

Avon looked at him warily, then he nodded, conceding Vila's point. "Perhaps. Surely you should appreciate that."

"Oh, I do, and I'm grateful. After all, a man's filial duty should always be carried out and all. But -- you won't tell the others, will you, Avon?"

"No. It does not concern them."

"That's what I thought," agreed Vila. He still found it so unlikely as to be impossible. He hoped Avon would accept Kerril. Sadly, she was now the right age to be Avon's mother. Fiercely regretting his lost chances, Vila decided he had better hold on tight to what he did have and could get. "We're going to join up with Blake again, aren't we?"

Avon looked at Vila for a moment then dropped his eyes, his non-expression a dead give away. "Perhaps it will prevent him from risking our lives in some dangerous and futile plan," he conceded, activating his bracelet. "Avon to Scorpio."

"Scorpio here, Avon," Tarrant returned in the tone of someone waiting to hear the punch line of a bitter joke. "What have you got us into now?"

"Suppose you come down and see," Avon returned, turning and flashing Vila a very feral smile. "I do think you will be interested."

"All of us?"

"All of you." Avon gave Vila a bright, expectant look, and Vila grinned, delighted. For the first time in ages, he could hardly wait for what would happen next. With Avon and Blake together again, the Federation had better look out.