

Remembrance

by Sophia R. Mulvey

Pret Danfield nodded pleasantly to the maitre d'. The man was an absolute toad, but Danfield knew it was in his best interest to play up to him. Being an immensely practical man, he always did what was in his best interest.

Catching his reflection in the gaudy 20th century art deco mirror, he frowned. "Remembrance of Things Past" was a notorious night spot for Vianney's elite. If one wanted to make connections, whether with high society or the underworld, "Remembrance" was the place to be. Overdressed pillars of Carpinian society rubbed shoulders with more conservatively bedecked crime lords with gay abandon amid the tacky, overdone decor.

Thinking of what had brought him to this place made Danfield wonder, not for the first time, if it was ... if he was worth the risk. His frown became a wry smile. Probably not, but it was a debt owed and Danfield intended to stamp paid, one way or another, to all his debts in the next few months.

"This way, sir," the officious little head waiter said, directing Danfield to the secluded table he had specifically requested. "Christof will be with you shortly. Enjoy your meal."

Danfield sat at the table and stared blankly at the menu. He hoped his nervousness didn't show. He had worked too hard, for too long, to slip up now.

"Ah-hem," the waiter cleared his throat loudly to catch the distinguished-looking customer's attention.

Danfield blinked, then gave the waiter a casual glance through heavy-lidded eyes. "I was here several months ago and placed a special order. I was very pleased by the service," he said in a smooth, silky voice.

"Perhaps if the gentleman could be more specific. We are very proud of our 'special' services and appreciate all our return patrons."

Danfield hid his unease behind a haughty facade. It was an act he had once developed to perfection. He only hoped he now remembered enough of his old self to be convincing.

"There was a particular hen which was imported from a coop on Marcus Prime."

"Ah yes, I remember now. A dangerous dish to handle, but one well worth the risk to so discriminating a gentleman as yourself," the waiter snickered. "Do you have another hen you would like to import."

"No, this one is more of a rooster," Danfield replied wryly.

"I see," Christof said, giving the gentleman a second once-over, "and where might this rooster be found?"

"This rooster is hopefully maturing at the Federation facility on Leukon."

"It is very expensive to acquire livestock from Federation facilities."

"Yes, I know," Danfield smiled. "I am willing to pay twice the amount I paid for the 'hen'."

"This rooster must be very important to you."

"Important enough," Danfield conceded, "but not so important that I will be coerced into paying more."

Christof withdrew slightly from the sudden gleam of danger in his customer's eyes. "I did not mean to imply ..."

"I do not care what you meant to imply," Danfield cut him off. "I will not be played with, understand that."

"Yes, but of course."

"Good. I will have a Somarian aperatif followed by the House Cut filet done rare." Danfield snapped his menu shut and handed it to the waiter. At the same time he passed Christof a non-traceable credit voucher and a slip of paper with a name and address typed on it. "As for my other order, I am giving you half the payment now and the rest when I receive word my order has arrived safely on Carpin. I want him delivered to the same address as the hen, and my name is not to be mentioned to anyone."

"But I do not know your name," Christof replied weakly. The maniacal look in the gentleman's eyes was affecting his usual steely nerves.

"Good. Keep it that way and there will be no problems between us," Danfield said, flashing the man a predatory grin.

"Very good, sir," the waiter bowed politely and went to place both orders.

* * *

Five months later ...

"All right, Restal, on yer feet."

"What is it now, Bevins? I've finished my chores, it's my rest time."

"I don't care what time it is, mate. I was told to fetch you 'round to the office."

"The office?" Vila asked fearfully.

"'at's right. What a little mouse like you could have done to get their attention is beyond me, but it looks like you ticked somebody off."

Vila collected his nerve and got off his bed. It wasn't a bed really, more a slab of steel with a poor excuse for a mattress on it. As he stepped through the cell door he took one last look at the spartan room. It wasn't much, but over the past sixteen months it had become home. He had kept it reasonably tidy and in turn it had kept him safe from the brutality of the other prisoners.

He had been treated well at first, especially during his trial, but after all, he was a celebrity. Once the formal proceedings were over and his notoriety faded, he had become just another victim of the system. It hadn't been long before the other prisoners began picking on him and making his life even more miserable than it already was.

Then a miracle occurred. Orders came through to transfer him to a solitary cell to await sentencing. Vila was at first grateful and then suspicious of the move but knew better than to question it. The fact that he was being called to the office now must mean that they had finally decided upon his sentence. With his luck they were probably sending him back to Cygnus Alpha. At least this time that maniac Vargas wouldn't be waiting for him. Blake had seen to that. On the other hand, Vargas had probably been replaced by someone equally mean and nasty.

"Move it out, Restal, I haven't got all day, ya know." Bevins prodded Vila, none too gently, between the ribs and Vila started to shuffle down the corridor.

He was ushered into the warden's office without ceremony. Warden Jenkins and an officer of the court sat waiting for him.

"Sit down, Restal," the warden said gruffly.

Vila hurried to do as he was told.

"Well, Restal, you must have been born under a lucky star. Either that or you have a very influential friend in a high place."

"I ... I don't understand."

Warden Jenkins held up a piece of parchment. The official seal of the Federation Council was prominently displayed at the bottom. "This has just arrived from the court. It is an official pardon decree. It seems that the powers that be have decided that you are not worth the bother of incarceration. You are to be released."

"When?" Vila asked, numb with shock.

"Immediately. Guards have been sent to collect your belongings from your cell. Bevins will take you to discharge where you will retrieve your own clothing. Your personal effects will be waiting for you there."

"And then I'm free to go?"

"And then you are free to go." With a curt nod a Bevins, the warden sent Vila on his way.

Within an hour's time, Vila Restal found himself standing on the sidewalk outside the Federation Penal Institution in Vianney on the planet of Carpin. He was a free man. For the first time in over eight years, no one was trying to catch him or hurt him or kill him. The thought was staggering.

Vila was so preoccupied with the miracle of his freedom that he did not notice the fancy city hover keeping pace with him until it pulled up to block his path. The front door swung open and a short seedy-looking man stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of him.

"Vila Restal?"

"Yes." Vila was somewhat taken aback by this total stranger knowing his name. He was also somewhat afraid.

"I have something for you. Here."

The bewildered thief didn't respond at first as the creepy little man pushed a plain brown envelope at him. "What is this?"

"Open it please," the odd man instructed, stepping back to expose Vila to the view of the hover's remaining passenger. Vila tried to make out the man's features, but the window was too darkly shaded.

Vila gave up looking and opened the envelope. Inside was a thick bunch of 100 credit notes. He looked up in confusion. "I don't understand."

"The envelope and its contents are from a ... friend. He recommends you get yourself as far from Vianney as possible."

"Does he now? And where does my mysterious benefactor suggest I go?"

"The outer territories are nice an anonymous. The town of Camary is very pleasant this time of year." The man turned and reentered the hover. Just before closing the door he looked at Vila again. "One more bit of advice, Restal."

"What?"

"Change your name." With that he closed the door and the hover sped away.

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Governor Sleer paced the floor in front of her elegant desk, her agitation clearly broadcast by her rapid gait. //Those damn fools let Restal go. 'Orders from above,' they said. 'Official Council pardon,' they said. Bah!// If she ever found the individual responsible, well, let's just say it wouldn't be that person's best day.

Three of them were free now. Tarrant had escaped from the Federation Penal Colony on Leukon five months ago and Soolin two months before from the work farm on Marcus Prime. Now Vila had been mysteriously pardoned. She had rescinded the phoney decree as soon as she had found out about it, but it was too late. The wily thief had already left the city and hidden himself away among the dregs of Carpinian society.

With Mellanby and Blake both dead, that left only Avon still in custody. The

Governor General of Carpin poured herself a snifter of Savorite brandy. Custody. What a delightful word for the marvelous situation she had arranged.

Sleer/Servalan had been furious when she'd discovered Dayna Mellanby had been killed, against her orders, but that was nothing compared to her fury when she had discovered that Avon was in critical condition. The cumulative effect of having been hit with over a dozen stun blasts had sent him into cardiac arrest. Avon was successfully resuscitated but it was a tense two weeks, for all concerned, before he regained consciousness.

When he did regain consciousness it was only to reveal that he had total amnesia. He remembered nothing. Avon's memory was a complete blank until the moment he opened his eyes to find Servalan's anxious face staring back at him. It was then that she developed her plan.

The amnesiac Kerr Avon was subjected to intense psychomanipulation as an entirely new "past" was created for him. The computer technician was force-fed, to the limits of his endurance, an elaborate set of memories to go with his fabricated past. No detail, no matter how trivial or personal, was overlooked. During that same period of time Servalan's agents searched the galaxy until an actor was found who matched Avon's general description.

For a generous fee the actor agreed to undergo plastic surgery and become Kerr Avon for the duration of Avon's trial. He was promised that after the trial he would be rewarded generously and sent on his way.

The scheme worked to perfection. No one, not even his former crewmates, had the slightest suspicion that the man they saw executed on galaxy-wide vicast was a drugged actor and not the real Kerr Avon.

At last Avon was hers and hers alone. Best of all was that in his new persona, Avon had become her devoted servant, with no knowledge of their past "differences." Now, just when things were going so well, someone, somehow, had systematically arranged for the escape of the survivors of Scorpio's crew. To what end? The myriad of possibilities drove Servalan to distraction, but none was more disturbing than the thought that whoever was responsible knew that Avon was alive and would be coming for him next.

//Perhaps now would be a good time for the planet Carpin's Governor General to go on an extended tour of her outer territories.// Her train of thought was interrupted by the entrance of her secretary. "Yes, what is it?" Servalan snapped more sharply than she had intended.

"I have the grain and mineral studies you requisitioned, as well as the proposed menu for next week's Governor's Ball for your approval," the secretary answered in a wounded tone.

"Very well, put them on the desk. I will go over them later."

"Starting without me I see," the secretary said in a rich, mellow voice. He reached over and took the snifter from Servalan's hand. Raising the glass to his lips he sipped at its contents. He smiled with pleasure as he pulled Servalan into his arms and gave her a languorous, brandy-laced kiss.

"What do you think you are doing?" she sputtered when he finally withdrew his mouth from hers.

"I am being unpredictable. I thought you liked that," he said with an arched eyebrow.

"What if someone walked in?"

"The day is done, Governor Sleer. Your office is closed, the doors are locked, and we are alone. It is time to cast off our wordly woes and appreciate the finer things in life," he explained with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"I see. Well, in that case you have my official permission to continue."

"Thank you, Madame Governor." He smiled down at her as he traced the crest of her ear with his fingertip.

Servalan trembled under his caress. She gazed up at the handsome face of Pret

Danfield, her devoted secretary and lover. Her mind knew every finely chisled feature by heart. It was the face of the man she had alternately hated and longer for. It was the face of the man she had hunted and schemed and killed for. It was the face of Kerr Avon.

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"G'day, Mikey. How's the world treatin' ya today?" the bartender of the Tin Whistle asked.

"Not bad, I suppose." The pleasant-faced man known as Mikey Keats sat wearily on his favorite bar stool. "I've had better days, Quinn, but then again I've had worse days, too."

"Ain't we all?" Quinn agreed. Keats had only been in town a few months, but he had already become a fixture in this bar. His affable good humor had made him well-liked and accepted by all, in spite of the fact that no one knew who he really was, or where he had come from. In a town the size of Camary, where everyone knew everyone else from cradle to grave, that should have been a major handicap, but not for Keats.

Quinn had suspected Keats of being a spy for the new government at first. There was nothing overt to suggest that, but the way Keats' eyes always seemed to be moving, watching, and the coiled tension in his body made Quinn suspicious. One thing for sure, there was more to Keats' past than the "loss of his family" and a "desire to seek greener pastures." "What'll it be today?"

"The usual." Keats gazed around at the deserted bar while he waited for his mug of ale. "Where is everybody? Business is usually booming by now."

"At the bloody parade, I expect," Quinn said, making a graphic gesture of disrespect.

"What parade?" Keats asked, sipping at his mug.

"The one to welcome the Governor. You been hiding under a rock or something, Mikey? It's been on all the public viscasts and papers for days." To prove his point Quinn pulled a local tabloid out from under the bar and plopped it down in front of his customer. "Here, see."

GOVERNOR GENERAL SLEER TO TOUR OUTLYING TERRITORIES. CAMARY TO BE FIRST STOP. Keats studied the photo beneath the headline with interest. Servalan hadn't changed much over the past two and a half years. She was wearing her hair a little longer and had toned down her outlandish taste in clothes, which he personally found more attractive, but he only noticed her in passing. It was the figure standing beside her which commanded his full attention. The trim, smiling man in the sleekly tailored gray suit was identified in the caption as being Pret Danfield, the Governor's secretary and escort. There were some subtle changes around the eyes and the pleasant smile and style of clothes helped somewhat to disguise his appearance, but Vila Restal, known to Camary's citizens as Mikey Keats, had no doubt that he would know Kerr Avon if the man were wearing sackcloth and had a bag over his head.

"Mikey. Mikey? Hey, Keats, are you okay?" Quinn finally resorted to giving the pale man a shove. "What's wrong? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"Maybe I have." Vila/Keats looked up at Quinn, then gestured down at the picture. "This Danfield fella, do you know anything about him?"

Quinn shrugged. "Just what everybody knows. He showed up with Sleer maybe two, two and a half years ago. Some say he's just a lackey, a hanger-on. Others say he's a real right bastard who would kill as soon as look at ya. Whichever is right, they all agree he's devoted to Sleer. I heard a rumor once. Something about how he was some kind of criminal she saved from prison, but the person I heard it from wasn't very reliable."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Vila said doubtfully.

"Naw, Stewart was nothing but a rabble rouser. He was part of that rebel group that was big some years back. They were following a fool, name o' Blake."

Color suffused itself back into Vila's face. "Any idea where Governor Sleer and her entourage are staying?"

"Only one place classy enough in Camary for them to stay. The Starfall Hotel, of course."

"Of course," Vila stood and turned to go.

"Hey, Mikey, you ain't finished your ale."

"Next time, Quinn," he said, slapping a five-credit note on the counter. "Be seeing you."

Keats was usually a big tipper but five credits was more than three times the price of the ale. Quinn stared after the retreating man. Something about Danfield certainly got the little man all shook up.

Quinn looked down at the paper again. He carefully studied the grainy photograph one more time. As he did he was surprised to realize that Danfield did indeed look familiar, but Quinn couldn't quite place the face. He shrugged and dismissed both Keats and Danfield from his thoughts as his afternoon crowd finally started to file in.

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Kerr Avon rubbed at his tired, itchy eyes. The contact lenses Smeer's doctor insisted he needed did little but change the color of his eyes and irritate him almost beyond endurance. As he fought the urge to rip them out he realized that the strain he had lived under for the better part of the last two years was beginning to tell on him.

He straightened and stared out the window. If all went as he hoped, it would soon be over. If Vila had taken the hint and come to Canary. If Tarrant and Soolin had stayed put with the rebel group to which he had had them delivered. If he could keep Servalan from suspecting him just a little longer.

If, if, if! Too many ifs, too many chances, but what choice did he have?

When his memory had first started to return, he had been terrified, and feared for his sanity. Once he fully realized what had happened, he feared for his life. If Servalan suspected he was starting to remember, he had no doubt she would have him reprocessed. Having been put through the psychomanipulation protocol once was enough to last him several lifetimes. Avon had no desire to ever repeat the experience.

Being Servalan's private plaything had been difficult enough back when he really believed himself to be Pret Danfield. Since recovering his memory his life had become an endless, danger-filled charade of being "Smeer's" devoted aide-de-camp and lover. Not that his intimate association with the woman had been completely unbearable. He had managed, with her patronage, to amass a considerable fortune, and their evenings did afford him a degree of physical pleasure. However as time went by he found it increasingly difficult to hide his true feelings for her.

Avon stiffened as he heard the door opening behind him. He struggled to compose his features into the pleasantly bland look that was Pret Danfield's normal expression.

"So this is where you have been hiding," Servalan said as she came to stand beside him. "Our hosts have been asking for you, and here you are, off by yourself admiring the view."

"I needed to get away for a few moments. I seem to have developed a headache."

"A headache? You have been having rather a lot of headaches lately. Perhaps we should have Dr. Evard look at you."

"It's nothing, really. I'm much better now. As a matter of fact, I was just about to return to the party."

"Are you sure? You really don't look at all well," Servalan said with concern as she noted the beaded perspiration on Avon's forehead and the tightness around his jaw. "Why don't you go up to our suite. I'll make your excuses and join you in a little while, darling."

Avon shivered with revulsion as he suffered her caress. He smiled with wry amusement when Servalan obviously mistook his reaction for enthusiasm. "Yes, well, if you are sure you don't mind being left alone to these yokels?"

"They are a backward lot, aren't they?" she sighed. "I'll manage, darling, I always do." She watched Avon leave. There was a hint of suspicion mingled with her concern. Dr. Evard had repeatedly assured her that the chance of Avon regaining his memory,

particularly after the extensive psychomanipulation to which he had been subjected, was virtually non-existent.

Still Evard did not know Avon as she did. If there was a chance, no matter how slight, that Avon could regain his memory, she was not about to risk it. As she returned to the ballroom she began to make plans to detour her trip by Dr. Evard's facility. After all, it had been nearly three years since Avon's initial treatment. A little reinforcement wouldn't hurt.

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Avon entered the suite of rooms he was sharing with "Governor Sleer" and hesitated a moment. With a trace of his old smile, he entered the main room and walked over to the bar. He poured two snifters of fine cognac and turned back to face the room.

He savored the aroma of the fine brandy, and as he took a sip he extended the other glass. "Come on out, Vila, and have a drink with me for old times' sake."

"You had better start explaining what is going on, Avon, or we will be drinking a toast to your death, you bloody bastard." Years of suppressed anger and rage bubbled to the surface as Vila came out of the shadows, his silencer-equipped blaster aimed at Avon's chest. "You, you are the one who sold us out. You somehow got together with Servalan and sold the rest of us out to save yourself, didn't you?"

"No, Vila, that is not quite what happened," Avon started, using what Vila had called his "let's be reasonable" voice.

"I don't want any of your fancy double-talk, Avon. I want the truth."

"The truth? Very well, Vila, but put that ridiculous weapon down." Avon placed the second snifter on the low glass-topped table between them. "If you still want to kill me after I've finished, you will have the opportunity to do so. You, more than most, have earned the right." Avon took another sip of the cognac and calmly settled himself on the elegant simuleather sofa.

Vila watched him carefully for several minutes then sighed. Picking up the second snifter he sat in the chair opposite Avon. "This is good stuff," he said enthusiastically after sampling the brandy.

"I'll tell Servalan you approve. I'm sure she'll be thrilled to hear it."

Vila's pleasant face clouded over with anger again. "I'm waiting to hear your story."

"I shot and killed Blake," Avon confessed. The look of pain and horror which swept over his face illustrated just how much the admission had cost him, and cut off the nasty retort Vila had been about to make. Avon took a deep breath and another sip of his cognac. His hands trembled with the effort.

"I didn't plan it that way, Vila. I ... I needed Blake. I wanted to believe, but he had changed so much. You noticed it too, didn't you, Vila?" Avon's voice almost pleaded. "And then when Tarrant said Blake had sold us out, I didn't know who to believe, who to trust. When he came at me like that, I just ... I don't know. I don't even remember shooting, just the look of surprise on Blake's face as he fell at my feet."

Vila was moved, in spite of himself, by the unusual amount of emotion in Avon's voice. "What about Servalan?" the thief asked, trying his best to remain angry.

"Ah yes, Servalan. I was getting to that. I was stunned, like the rest of you, but unlike the rest of you I was hit far more often. I must have been out for quite some time, I'm not sure exactly how long and there hasn't been anyone I could ask."

"I don't understand."

"When I woke I had amnesia, total loss of memory. When I opened my eyes it was to the sight of a hauntingly beautiful woman. I was frightened and confused and she seemed very concerned about me. She told me a doctor friend of hers had developed a new method to help me regain my memory.

"It was about the most unpleasant thing I have ever experienced, but within a few weeks I remembered everything ... about Pret Danfield."

"Psychomanipulation? She made you believe you were somebody else?"

"It worked very well." Avon broke into an evil smile. "I even attended 'Kerr Avon's' trial and execution."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know. Some poor fool Servalan paid to impersonate me and die in my place, though I'll wager that was not part of his original bargain." Avon gave the thief a wry smile.

"When did you start to remember?"

"Two years ago. It was little things at first, memories of people and places, things that Pret Danfield would have had no knowledge of. Worst of all was the memory of shooting a man, someone who had been special to me." Avon shook his head to clear his mind. "Then I woke one night in Servalan's bed and I remembered who I was, how I got there, everything. That was when I started planning my revenge."

The computer technician stood abruptly and Vila reacted as if threatened. The nimble thief jumped to his feet and once again aimed his blaster at Avon. At that moment the suite door opened and Servalan swept into the room, distracting both men. Avon recovered first and lashed out with his foot, knocking the the weapon out of Vila's hands. Quickly claiming the gun he trained it on the stunned thief.

"Good timing, my dear," Avon called over his shoulder in his rich, smooth voice. "This street ruffian somehow made his way in here. He claims to know you."

Servalan, who had been on the verge of fleeing, looked from Avon's haughty expression to Vila's wounded puppy-dog face. Coming to a fateful decision, she closed the door and walked further into the room.

"He claims to know me?" Servalan gave Vila a malicious grin then turned to Avon. "How would such as he ever know me?"

"He claims that your name isn't Smeer. He claims that you are really someone called Servalan, ex-Federation President and a fugitive, and that I am a notorious fugitive as well. What do you have to say to these allegations, my dear?"

"Why, Pret darling, of course they are ludicrous." Servalan's shimmering silver lame gown flowed around her lithe body as she moved toward the viewphone. "I'll call security and have him removed."

"Not so fast, Servalan," Avon pronounced her name slowly, accentuating each syllable. He relished the look of shocked surprise which appeared on her face. "I happen to believe Vila. You see, my dear, I have regained my memory. My real memory."

"How? When?" The color drained from Servalan's face.

"Almost two years now."

"That's impossible," she stuttered.

"I'm afraid not. I have been playing you, Servalan, giving you what you wanted. I have been using you, the way you sought to use me. You were so pathetically easy to deceive, but it is all over now. Well, almost."

"What do you intend to do, Pret?"

"Damn you Servalan, use my name, my real name! I want to hear you say it, one ... last ... time."

"Avon, you don't mean to kill me? Avon?"

"Oh, but I do."

"How could you? After what we have shared, after what we have been to each other?" she pleaded.

"You shared with Danfield, a man you had created to your own warped specifications. We shared nothing, Servalan!"

"I need you, Avon. I love you, Avon. Surely that must count for something. How can you betray me like this?"

"You should know, Servalan. You were there for Anna, for Blake. You should know." Avon spoke barely above a whisper, his tone tortured, haunted. "It shouldn't come as a surprise to you. It is never your enemies you have to worry about, it is the people you allow yourself to trust and love who will ultimately hurt and betray you."

As Servalan stepped forward he shot her with Vila's silenced blaster. Once, twice, three times. "You of all people should have known better, Servalan," Avon whispered as he stood in a familiar pose over her lifeless body.

"Avon ... Avon, we've got to get out of here."

"No, Vila," Avon said, turning his attention back to the thief.

Vila swallowed convulsively as Avon now seemed to be aiming the weapon at him. "Avon?"

"Go, Vila, quickly. There is a rebel group in the township of Elstern. Their headquarters is an old factory at 115 Whitechapel Street. Tarrant and Soolin are there. Go and join them, Vila, and fight these bastards!"

"Tarrant and Soolin ... but how? You! You are the one who got me my pardon." The surprise in Vila's voice was almost comical.

Avon smiled in spite of himself. "You haven't really been pardoned, Vila, it was a forgery. Servalan rescinded it. You are still a fugitive, I am sorry to say."

"The private cell? The money when I got out? That was your doing too, wasn't it?" Avon's smile was all the answer Vila needed. "Tarrant and Soolin, you somehow arranged their escapes as well." Vila shook his head in amazement. "How Avon? Why?"

"How isn't really important. Why?" Avon shrugged. "Why, I suppose, was to help me sleep at night. An apology for Blake, perhaps. An atonement or remembrance if you prefer. Now go, Vila, you haven't much time. There is no reason for anyone to connect you with her death."

"What if someone sees me leave?"

"It won't matter. When I am through here, no one will question that this was anything other than a murder/suicide."

"You're crazy!" Vila exclaimed in disbelief.

"Well now, I have been accused of that before, haven't I?"

"Don't do this, Avon, don't throw your life away, please! Not for her," the frightened thief pleaded. "Come with me. The rebellion needs you. There is so much good you could do if you wanted to."

"Me, join the rebellion? Now who is crazy?" Avon laughed. "They would kill me on sight. I am the one who murdered 'Saint Blake', remember? No thank you, Vila. Somehow I think that taking my own life will be easier, not to mention far less painful, than what the rebels would have planned for me."

"But I'll explain. I'll make them understand. It wasn't your fault, Avon, not really. Please, come with me," Vila begged.

"Why would you do that for me? Why should you care?"

"Avon, for a smart man you can sometimes be a damn fool. You are my friend, even if you are a cocky, egotistical bastard, and I have precious few friends left. I can't afford to lose one, not even you. What do you say, Avon?"

Avon arched an eyebrow in contemplation. He studied Servalan's face, now peaceful in death. Coming to a decision he dropped to one knee and placed the blaster in Servalan's hand. It wouldn't fool anyone for long, but perhaps it would buy them time to get away.

"Very well, Vila. I may be damned for a fool, but I will place my fate in your hands. Let's go find the others, shall we?"

Vila smiled as he and Avon walked to the door. "Cheer up, Avon, this is going to be great, just like old times."

"Vila," Avon warned as he closed the suite door behind him, "don't press your luck."