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HURLING METEOR ISSUE 2430

by
**Jennie
Sawyer**

METEOR ISSUE 243071

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"Here's that magazine you wanted, Cally," Vila said as he stepped off the teleport platform.

"Thank you, Vila," Cally answered hurriedly as she snatched the tabloid out of Vila's hands, folded it under her arm, and scurried past Avon, off the teleport deck.

"What was that?" Avon asked from the teleport bay stairs, eyebrow arched in Cally's general direction.

"Hurtling Meteor," Vila replied, staring off in the direction Avon's eyebrow arched. "Latest issue."

"Hurtling Meteor! That's a counterculture rag!" Avon sniffed. "What could Cally possibly want with that?"

Vila graced him with a disdainful expression. "Not everyone reads Popular Psychotronics, Avon."

* * *

The object of their debate paused at the junction of two corridors and glanced furtively around her. Satisfied she was alone and unobserved, she extracted the magazine from under her arm. She flipped quickly toward the back, carefully scanned down a particular page, and with a pleased nod, slapped the magazine shut again. She replaced it under her arm, and strode confidently toward the flight deck.

* * *

A few days later, Vila stood watch on the flight deck, monitoring incoming communications traffic. Suddenly, he let out a long, low whistle.

"What is it?" Avon demanded, instantly at Vila's side, peering intently at the screen display of the intercepted messages.

"Cally sure is getting a lot of mail. Look at all this -- every bit of it's addressed to her!" Vila exclaimed, waving at the screen.

"And it's all in code, too," Avon added suspiciously. "I wonder if ORAC could break it ..."

"Oh, come on, Avon, this is private. Tampering with someone's mail is a Federation offense. Not to mention rude."

"Who is tampering with mail?" Cally asked from the entrance to the flight deck.

Vila jumped guiltily and gulped loudly. "Uh, no one, Cally." He shot Avon a withering, accusatory stare. "I said hampering -- ion disturbance is hampering the mail."

Cally nodded dubiously, casting a suspicious glance at Avon, who merely glowered darkly. "Is there any mail for me, Vila?" she asked innocently.

"Tons! Do you want me to hardprint it --"

Cally walked over to ORAC and inserted the key which had been resting alongside the perspex computer. "ORAC, are you recording all messages directed at me?"

"Of course I am! Your instructions were quite specific."

She turned and smiled enigmatically at Avon. "Good, ORAC. I shall retrieve them later at my

leisure." She pivoted on her heel and marched up the stairs, pausing to glance back over her shoulder, looking coyly at the thief. "Thank you, Vila," she murmured and left the flight deck.

"I don't like mysteries," Avon muttered ominously.

"I don't imagine they like you much, either," Vila replied impudently, frowning mightily in Avon's direction, before an answering glare convinced him he had better -- and safer -- things to do with his time.

* * *

Her face illuminated by the flickering glow of the vidscreen, Cally scanned her mail with great satisfaction, jotting down notes occasionally as an entry of interest scrolled up before her. Finally she reached the end of the day's transmissions, and stretched back languorously in her chair. Folding her arms behind her head, she sighed contentedly. All was going well. In fact, all was going very well, indeed.

* * *

"Well?" Avon demanded darkly, fists planted belligerently on his hips.

Vila shrugged. "More of the same. She must have a lot of friends," he added helpfully.

"A lot of friends, Vila?" Avon snorted harshly.

"Look, just because you don't have any doesn't mean Cally doesn't either."

"Any what?" Blake asked, entering the flight deck, munching on a sandwich.

"Friends," Vila flung out, slumping down in his seat and glaring frostily at the computer technician.

"Oh," Blake answered, turning his attention back to his sandwich.

"'Oh', he says," Avon parroted nastily. "Cally's tapped into some network or other, won't say a word about it to anyone -- doesn't that make you the tiniest bit suspicious, Vila?"

"Not especially. What do you think she's doing -- selling secrets to the Federation?" Vila teased impishly.

Blake looked up, a spark of interest in his brown eyes. "Collaborating with the Federation? Cally?"

"It's silly," Vila pronounced, crossing his arms over his chest as though to close the subject.

"Hmph! Who know what telepathic weapons the Federation have developed? They may be influencing her, forcing her to work with them against us . . ." Avon elaborated.

"Nah," Vila replied negligently.

Blake crammed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth and considered in silence. Finally, through a hail of bread crumbs, he said, "It's possible. How long has this been going on?"

"Three weeks," Avon replied flatly, with a triumphant glare at Vila.

"And how much traffic?" Blake pursued, shaking the crumbs off his shirt.

"The equivalent of twenty letters a day," Vila supplied. "Even more than that, at first."

"And you've asked Cally about this?"

Avon and Vila glanced at each other. "Not really. Not directly, I mean," Vila added, shrugging. "She comes in every day to pick up the data diskette, and goes off to her cabin to read it all."

"It's all in code," Avon added with dark foreboding. "And ORAC is instructed to record it for retrieval on Cally's voice code only."

"Have you asked ORAC the source of the transmissions?"

Now Vila turned accusing eyes on Avon. The computer technician shrugged in turn, shaking his head. Blake frowned, a frown that said he thought Avon was an overrated idiot, and not worth his non-existent salary, and got up to go over to ORAC. Inserting the key, he asked ORAC the source of Cally's daily transmissions.

"Eighty per cent of the transmissions originate from the editorial offices of the Hurling Meteor," ORAC reported. "The remaining twenty per cent come from Auron and Lindor."

"Auron and Lindor. Nothing suspicious in that, Avon," Vila advised brightly. "Her family and Lee Han."

"The Hurling Meteor?" Avon repeated curiously. He shook his head. "Just what is Cally up to?"

"Maybe she's formed a fan club," Vila offered cheerily. "Maybe she's the president of the Unlikeable and Irritating Computer Geniuses Fan Club."

Vila ducked quickly as Avon's arm came down in a vicious sweep. Blake held his hands up pacifically. "Enough. Vila, keep monitoring the flow of traffic, and keep tabs with ORAC on the sources. Tell Jenna and Gan when they come on watch. I don't imagine we'd get much out of the Hurling Meteor -- they're pretty close-mouthed about their correspondence. But I'll have a word with a friend of mine on the staff just the same," Blake added thoughtfully, rubbing his chin.

"It could be a Federation front," Avon insisted.

"No, I doubt that. Have you ever read the Hurling Meteor, Avon?"

Avon gave him a look that said he'd never read it, never intended to read it, and would cheerfully shoot three times anyone who insisted he did. Blake shrugged eloquently. "It's very counterculture. Radical, you might even say. If it is a Federation front, the Federation is putting a lot of effort into keeping the rebellion going."

Avon pursed his lips haughtily, and settled back in his seat with an injured air. Blake shook his head, glanced at Vila, who returned the negative gesture with interest, and exited the flight deck.

* * *

The following week, the flow of traffic fell in volume to only a few transmissions a day. Vila traced most of them to Auron and Lindor, with only one or two coming in from the offices of the Hurling Meteor. He reported his findings to Avon, who received the news with a black look and a grunt. Blake seemed to think the whole thing was based on jealousy, because Avon never received any mail from anywhere, except for the odd bill for back taxes, or solicitations to join "Save the Intergalactic Egotists" or other organizations. When told about the mystery, Jenna merely shrugged, chalking it up to Cally's naturally gregarious personality, and went back to reading the latest issue of True Smuggling. Gan merely nodded, and went back to his copy of Body Building Digest.

Eventually, the volume of transmissions fell to only two a day, one from Auron, and one from the Hurling Meteor offices. Vila suggested that Cally had had an argument with Lee Han, or perhaps the Auronae ambassador had gone on vacation. Soon, the entire crew, with the notable exception of Avon, had forgotten about the matter, and continued to go about their own business of blowing up Federation installations, agitating the rabble, and generally making well-publicized nuisances of themselves.

Nearly two months after the mysterious transmissions had begun, the crew was having a particularly bad day. Their normal round of strafing runs, pirating communications crystals, grand larceny, and general trouble-making had left them all feeling out of sorts and irritable. Vila was just downing his third adrenalin-and-soma when Cally came round the back of his seat, running her hands sensuously along the headrest.

"What we all need is a holiday," she announced authoritatively.

"Huh," Blake agreed, staring blankly at the screen in front of him.

"We need to get away from the day-to-day grind, take a rest, recharge our energy cells," she continued sagely.

"I could do with a good massage," Jenna avowed, stretching uncomfortably in her seat. Blake's attention was instantly riveted on the lithe figure that wriggled inside the tight-fitting jumpsuit Jenna wore, and the silly grin on his face earned him a frown of distaste from his pilot. The grin evaporated.

"We need a change of pace," Cally added, pressing the matter.

"Have you a specific place in mind?" Avon challenged silkily.

"I was thinking of ... Plaisir IV, actually," Cally replied lightly.

"Plaisir IV," Vila repeated dreamily. "They have the best ... ah ... physical therapists there."

"The vita particles are very strong this time of year, too, I hear," Gan offered.

"They're non-aligned," Jenna supplied, warming to the idea.

"And they always take last-minute reservations," Blake pointed out.

"And they're very near our current flight path, aren't they, Cally?" Avon conjectured, his voice still tinged with suspicion.

"Are they?" she asked innocently. "Why yes, Avon, I do believe our flight path is leading us in that general vicinity."

"Sounds good to me," Blake agreed. "I could do with a break."

"We all could," Cally answered, casting a victorious look at Avon.

"Fine. Set course for Plaisir IV," Blake ordered. "I'll be in my cabin," he casually addressed the others as he left the flight deck. Jenna gazed after him thoughtfully, paused a moment pursing her lips, then got up and quickly followed the rebel leader.

"How soon will we arrive at Plaisir IV, Zen?" Cally asked.

"Two days, ten hours, fifteen minutes," Zen replied.

"Excellent," Cally said to herself with satisfaction, and with another glance at Avon, flounced off the flight deck.

After Cally had gone, Avon pounded a fist on his console.

"What is it now, Avon?" Vila demanded wearily.

"This has something to do with those transmissions, I just know it!"

"You know something else, Avon?" The computer technician looked at the thief expectantly. "Sometimes you really are boring. Give it a rest, will you?"

"Your problem, Vila, is that you're too trusting," Avon replied testily.

"And your problem, Avon, is that you're too you," Vila shot back, and trotted off the flight deck.

Avon glanced around him, and found the only person left was Gan. "Aren't you going to say something?" he demanded.

"Who, me? Why should I? It's more fun to watch the fireworks than get caught in them," the big man said equably.

Avon responded by glowering into his viewscreen.

* * *

By the time Liberator had achieved stationary orbit over Plaisir IV, each of the crew had chosen his or her own poison, and stood ready to teleport down the pleasure spot of his or her own choice. They were each travelling separately, and ORAC was left on the ship on guard duty, grumbling vociferously about missed opportunities for valuable research (Vila suspected ORAC had designs on the primary games computer of the Plaisir IV casino complex). Finally, only Cally and Avon remained on the ship.

"So. Where are you teleporting to, Cally?" Avon asked nonchalantly, leaning against the teleport console and batting his baby brows suggestively at her.

Cally smiled, not fooled for an instant. "Somewhere nice, quiet, and private. What about you, Avon?"

Avon shrugged noncommittally. "Nowhere in particular. I thought I'd start at the main complex and see where serendipity leads me."

Cally nodded dubiously, her eyes dancing mischievously.

"Shall I put you down, then, Cally?" Avon offered in elaborated innocence.

"No, thank you, Avon. You go ahead. I just remembered I forgot something very important in my cabin. I will see you in three days." She smiled sweetly, barely suppressing a flood of giggles at Avon's discomfiture, and left the computer technician to gawk protestingly at empty air.

"I don't suppose, ORAC," he said dejectedly, leaning wearily on the perspex box, "I could persuade you to teleport me to the same place as Cally?"

"Of course not! The coordinates of her destination are confidential!" replied ORAC testily.

"And voice-coded, no doubt," Avon added bleakly.

"Of course," ORAC answered.

Avon sighed heavily. Somehow, he was going to get to the bottom of this. Unfortunately, Cally knew just how determined he was, and she had no intention of giving him the satisfaction of learning her secret. Not for the first time, Avon felt a pang of regret for "losing" her pet moon disk. Things hadn't been quite the same between them since.

He gathered up his things and clipped a teleport bracelet on his wrist (no mean feat, as he awkwardly balanced an overstuffed rucksack, a never-used tennis racket -- brought along for camouflage, of course -- a pair of goggles, snorkel, a set of flippers, binoculars, a microcamera, and a dogeared copy of Fun with Computers: An Expert's Guide to Fame and Fortune). "All right, ORAC. You might as well teleport me down."

Moments after Avon dematerialized, Cally reentered the teleport deck, carrying a medium-sized suitcase and a small overnight bag. "Has he gone, ORAC?" she asked, glancing around her as though she expected him to come leaping out of the shadows at any moment.

"Yes," ORAC hissed. He was beginning to tire of the cloak-and-dagger intrigues Cally had enmeshed him in.

"Good," she answered brightly. As she fastened her teleport bracelet on, she questioned, "Have you received the recognition signal?"

"Yes. You are to rendezvous at 1900 hours at coordinates double-ought seven, three-eight, twenty-two. You are to carry a copy of Hurtling Meteor and you are to wear a red carnation."

"A red carnation? What for?"

"That is part of the recognition code," ORAC answered irritably. "Without it, contact will not be made."

"I understand." She picked up her cases and moved onto the teleport pad. "Put me down, ORAC."

* * *

Locating a red carnation proved a simple matter, thanks to the assistance of a helpful if overly lascivious bellhop, and Cally entered the lounge fully prepared for her clandestine assignation. The glittering shimmercloth gown she wore clung seductively to the curves of her body, dipping daringly in the back to reveal a straight spine and soft skin, and the colors of the fabric shifted and shone as she moved sensuously through the throng of holiday-makers, toward the appointed meeting place. She had prepared carefully, taking time over her toilette. The scent of Auronae Musk drifted faintly in her wake, and her hair was upswept, elegantly pinned in place with combs of dark gold. Under her arm she carried a tattered copy of Hurling Meteor, and behind her ear she wore the red carnation. She felt faintly ridiculous, and fervently hoped she hadn't made a serious mistake.

* * *

Behind the fronds of a patted palm lurked Avon. The listening device he'd planted near ORAC before teleporting to Plaisir IV had paid off, and now he watched in open-mouthed astonishment as the transformed Cally glided easily among the patrons of this most exclusive -- and expensive -- establishment on Plaisir IV. His microcamera and binoculars nestled in the carryall slung over his shoulder, but the sight of Cally, draped in the corruscating gown of shimmercloth, the low-cut back revealing a great deal of a figure he'd before only imagined, and the whiff of perfume he caught as she passed near his place of concealment, almost made him forget the purpose of his surveillance, where he was, who he was, and the fact that he looked exceedingly silly drooling into the palm fronds. With an effort, he shook himself and pulled his binoculars out of the shoulder bag.

* * *

The coordinates Cally had been given coincided exactly with an elegant private dining room, and on seeing her, garnished with the telltale red carnation, the elaborately-garbed waiter snapped to attention and grovelled obsequiously to her as he led her into the softly-lit chamber.

"M'sieur eez waiting for mam'selle," he murmured in an atrocious and obviously rented French accent. She smiled slightly as she heard him add under his breath, "Lucky m'sieur!"

Inside the room, the steady murmur of human -- and alien -- sounds muffled by the half-closed doors, Cally's breath caught in her throat. There he was! He stood with his back to her as he stared silently into the crackling flames of the aromatic wood fire. The glow of the embers formed a halo around him, gleaming on his highly-polished ... leather tuxedo? He was tall, over six feet, dark-haired and broad-shouldered. Near him was laid out an elaborate table for two, a pair of candles flickering in the dim light, and a magnum of champagne rested invitingly in a frosty ice bucket. She sighed pleasurably as the waiter cleared his throat

decorously. The man turned slowly.

Cally choked. The waiter pounded her back anxiously. "Mam'selle, mam'selle -- are you all right?" he demanded worriedly. Another dead patron could cost him his job, and then what would his parole officer say?

"I am all right," she gasped, waving him off. Her eyes locked with the man's. "Leave us."

The waiter bowed deeply, repeatedly, and back nervously out of the room, still bowing.

"Travis!" she breathed incredulously after the door had clicked shut. She snapped open the magazine and extracted sheets of paper. "YOU wrote these?" she demanded in disbelief, waving them at him accusingly.

His eye flicked over the papers she held, and he nodded, shrugging slightly.

"I would never have suspected you of writing poetry!"

"We all have our little hobbies," he replied off-handedly, staring at her curiously.

She hugged the poems protectively to her chest. "But these!" she protested. "This is a nasty way to set up a trap, Travis."

He pouted in response. "It's not a trap," he growled sullenly. "I had no way of knowing it was you," he added, his manner indicating that if he had known, he wouldn't be within thirty light years of this small, intimate, and romantically-appointed dining room.

"The man who wrote these ..." Cally began, dropping the magazine into a chair and prowling restlessly around the room.

"... is standing right here," he finished morosely. He gestured toward the fallen magazine. "I wouldn't have thought you'd need to bother," he said bitterly.

"What does that mean?" she demanded.

"From what I've heard, a member of Blake's crew shouldn't need to advertise for ... company?" he answered, raising his eyebrow challengingly.

She paused in her wanderings, and drawing herself up, fixed him with a cold stare. "I never mix business with pleasure," she said haughtily.

"That's not what I've heard," he replied, turning his attention to the bottle of champagne lodged in the burnished ice bucket. He busied himself with pouring out two glasses.

"You had better explain yourself, Space Commander," she insisted icily.

"Well," he began, watching the foam subside in the first glass, "from what I've heard, you rebels find enough diversion among yourselves. If you need to go outside the ship for fun, then your appetite must be prodigious."

"It is," she agreed, seating herself gingerly at the table. "But as for diversions among the crew ..." she let the sentence dangle.



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He handed her a glass of champagne and stared down at her thoughtfully. "I had no idea you were so beautiful," he said gently.

She smiled slightly as she accepted the glass. "Where did you hear such stories?"

"Servalan," he replied, seating himself opposite her.

"Ahah!" she cried triumphantly.

"You mean to tell me you rebels don't go in for orgies and gang-bangs?" he asked, in obvious confusion.

"I told you, I never mix business with pleasure. Besides, you should give me a little credit for taste -- an egotistical computer jockey, an incorrigible thief, an oversized paperweight, and a starry-eyed idealist? Please! Besides, where would we find the time to rampage the galaxy if we were all fooling around as much as you suggest?"

"Servalan was pretty sure of her facts," Travis argued dubiously.

"She probably read them in the Galactic Enquirer."

"Hmm," Travis replied thoughtfully, taking a sip of his champagne. "She does spend a lot of time at the space mart. I've always wondered why she insists on doing the station's grocery shopping herself. She's not normally the domestic type."

"There, you see? All lies. Come to think of it, I thought you and the Supreme Commander ..." she said suggestively, sipping at her own champagne.

"Servalan?" he scoffed. "The line forms on the right, dear. She's working her way through the Federation Commlink Directory. My turn may come up in ... oh, two hundred years or so."

Cally wondered fleetingly if Servalan were completely thorough, and just which letters she'd worked her way through so far.

"She's still on 'A'," Travis volunteered, as though he'd read her mind.

"Are you telepathic?" she asked hopefully.

"No. Just a good guesser." He breathed in her perfume. "That's a nice scent you're wearing."

She blushed slightly. "'Guaranteed to drive men wild'," she quoted with embarrassment.

Travis fell into a contemplative silence as he sipped at his champagne and studied the menu laid beside his place setting. Cally did the same, casting surreptitious glances at him. He was kind of cute, she thought to herself, and he did write very nice poetry. And his tight-fitting leather tuxedo fueled rather than disappointed her imagination ...

"This could be quite awkward," he said suddenly. "After all, I am sworn to kill you."

"That is Blake," she corrected him. "You are sworn to kill Blake."

"True," he agreed, nibbling absently on his artificial finger.

"And after all, this is not an official meeting."

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she continued, laying down her menu.

"Also true."

"And it would be a great shame to waste these lovely poems ..."

"And your replies were so ... intriguing ..."

"And we are here now ..."

"And no one but us knows it." He laid his own menu down, and leaned in toward her, his fingertips brushing against hers. Their eyes met and stared soulfully into each other. "It would be a shame to waste such a golden opportunity."

"Yes," she breathed, half-rising out of her seat.

"What do you want to do?" he asked breathlessly, rising up to meet her.

"I want to have a nice dinner," she whispered. "Good conversation. Then you can read me your poetry. And afterwards ..."

"Yes?"

"We go up to my room and boff each other's brains out."

"Works for me," he answered, and they met over the candle's flame in a passionate kiss.

* * *

Avon waited impatiently in the hotel's lounge, furtively tossing glances toward the door of the private dining room over the top of his copy of The Rebel Times. At least they'd gotten his name right for once. In the previous issue, they'd spelled it "Curr Yvonne." It was becoming downright embarrassing.

The waiter, jellified by fear, had come out of the room some time ago, and now stood resolutely before the door, bucking up his courage with a swig of liquor from a hip flask before entering again. Avon wondered just who was beyond the door that could instill such terror in the man. He quickly ducked his head behind his newspaper as the waiter looked around the lounge, then, swallowing hard, knocked on the door.

Avon watched the door for a few minutes, then gave it up as a lost cause. The waiter was probably lying in a corner, dead and bleeding. Or was that bleeding and dying? He never could get the hang of forensics; it probably had something to do with his aversion to mysteries. Then he heard the obsequious "Thank you m'sieur, thank you, mam'selle. At once, m'sieur. Everything eez under control ..." Avon shook his head, and went back to reading an article on rebel footwear.

A few minutes later, Cally exited the dining room, heading for the ladies' room. Her hair was dishevelled, and her dress, precariously draped on her frail figure to start with, seemed to have nearly come undone. Avon felt a surge of anger as he watched her hurry across the lobby; what maniac's lair had she walked into? Suddenly, he decided that nothing came to those who sit and wait, and hurriedly left the lounge in search of the kitchen.

* * *

The champagne seemed to give a glow to Cally's cheeks as she leaned across the table, listening to Travis read his poetry. She wondered how this man, so eloquent, so passionate, could also be a Federation thug.

"Where do you write these poems?" she asked after he had finished his latest.

"On my ship. There's nothing else to do," he answered modestly.

"No? What about your mutoids?" she asked teasingly.

"Mutoids?" he repeated distastefully, grimacing. "Give me some credit for a little taste. Do you still play with dolls?"

She shook her head, and giggled. There was a knock on the door.

"That'll be dinner," Travis announced. "Enter," he called out pompously.

The waiter, head ducked down, entered, clumsily balancing the trays of food. He murmured greetings in a gruff voice, and placed a tray in front of Cally, and the other in front of Travis. "You've got them backwards," Travis complained ominously. "I order the fried tassa root. The lady had the Gauda Prime filet."

The waiter quickly and silently transposed the trays, bowing and scraping obsequiously as he did so. As he leaned over to place the correct tray in front of Cally, she gasped. Avon! In disguise (a not-necessarily good one), and unarmed, certainly, but she'd recognize that profile anywhere. He sensed her recognition, and shot her a dangerous look, and she covered her mouth with her hand and coughed delicately.

"Are you all right?" Travis asked solicitously.

"Oh, yes, I am fine," she lied, darting nervous glances at the waiter, her hand trembling slightly as she curled her fingers around her glass. "My throat is a little dry, that is all."

"You need some more champagne," Travis pronounced, and poured more into her glass.

"Thank you," Cally replied, and downed the glassful in one gulp. Travis watched her, eye widening, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, then refilled her glass again. The bottle was empty, and he turned to the waiter.

"Waiter."

The waiter turned toward him, and for a moment, Travis could see him clearly. Suddenly, he coughed, too, staring at the face tilted toward him.

"Yes, m'sieur?" answered the "waiter" in a gravelly voice, colored by an atrocious accent.

Travis's mouth worked silently for a moment, his eye slewing sideways to look at Cally. His brow furrowed a moment, then he caught a grip of himself, and answered authoritatively, "More champagne. And be quick about it."

"Yes, m'sieur," replied Avon in a low voice. He gathered up the tray covers and started to exit the

room when he spied a copy of Hurling Meteor lying on one of the chairs. He snatched it up and left the room silently, closing the door behind him.

Cally coughed again, and Travis's attention shifted back to her. He stared at her a long moment, his eye narrowed. Suddenly, he folded his napkin and stood up. "Excuse me. I'll be back in a few minutes." He strode out of the room without another word, leaving Cally to stare apprehensively at the closed door.

"Was it something I said?" she murmured fearfully.

* * *

In the kitchen, Avon frantically flipped through the pages of the magazine. He recognized it by its cover as the one Cally had claimed from Vila so many weeks before. The key to the puzzle was here, he just knew it.

Finally, he found the page he was looking for. The entry was circled numerous times in red marker, the page dogeared and tattered. His hands tightened spasmodically around the paper as he read the entry:

FUN-LOVING STF CAREER WOMAN LOOKING FOR POETIC AND UPWARDLY-MOBILE SM PARTNER FOR FUN ON THE RUN AND BRIEF ROMANTIC ENCOUNTERS IN OUT-OF-THE-WAY PLACES. MUST BE ADVENTUROUS AND ABLE TO GET AWAY AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE. REPLY HURLING METEOR BOX LIBR8R.

He glanced up at the column heading -- "PERSONALS." He crashed the pages of the magazine together with a low moan.

"Having a good read?" inquired a familiar voice from the doorway.

Avon turned slowly to face Travis, who leaned lazily against the doorway. He straightened up and walked over to Avon, glancing down at the unconscious waiter slumped against the wall.

"Really, his service wasn't that bad, you know," Travis commented with a wry smile.

Avon clutched the magazine in a tight fist and waved it at Travis. "What's this all about, Travis?" he demanded.

"Are you here out of concern for your fellow crewmember, or jealousy that she had to go outside the ship for company?" Travis asked, his smile turning sly.

Avon put the magazine down on the counter, and sat on the edge of the tabletop. He crossed his arms over his chest and considered for a moment while Travis shifted his weight and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his leather trousers.

"Neither, actually."

"You suspected collusion."

"In a word, yes. Mysterious transmissions coming in daily, Cally very secretive -- she's very susceptible to outside influence, you know. Her mind has a 'For Rent -- Cheap' sign on it. Bad guys get special seasonal rates. I thought she might be leading us into a trap."

"Self-preservation, then. Hmmm. That makes

sense. So, how've you been, Avon?" Travis asked suddenly, clapping Avon on the shoulder.

"Not too bad, considering. It's a hard life."

"Running from Servalan usually is," Travis answered with a twinkle.

"Still, when you consider the alternative, I can't really complain."

Travis nodded solemnly. "Yes. I know what you mean."

"So ... you and Cally ...?" Avon ventured tentatively.

"We'll see how it goes. I had years taken off my life when I saw it was her. The last person I expected to advertise in the personals was a member of Blake's crew!"

"I didn't know you needed to go through the personals for dates, either, Travis," Avon commented teasingly.

"Hey, a lot's changed since the old days, old friend. Things aren't as simple as they were at the academy. It's not easy meeting nice girls in Space Command, you know."

"Hmm. I know what you mean. You don't meet the most genteel class of female in the rebel business, either."

"Yeah. It's tough being a sensitive, intelligent kind of guy," Travis agreed, staring at the waiter, who was beginning to come round.

"I guess we should do something about him," Avon said, gesturing toward the awakening man.

"Did he see you?"

"'fraid so."

"Right. You go out the back way, I'll take care of him."

"You sure?"

"Hey, if a Galactic Academy graduate can't help out his old roommate once in a while, what's the universe coming to?"

Avon stuck out his hand. "We'll have to get together sometime, talk over old times."

Travis gripped the hand firmly. "Some place neutral. Freedom City, maybe."

"Right."

"Now get out of here."

With a backward glance toward Travis and a quick thumbs-up, Avon scurried out the back exit while Travis hunkered down in front of the groggy waiter. He slapped the man on each cheek, ungently. "Hey, you -- wake up! We're out of champagne in room 3. Get to it or I'll report you to the manager for drinking the profits!"

With that, Travis stood up and strode out, leaving the waiter to struggle to his unsteady feet, shaking his head. It was his job for certain

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now. Now what would his parole officer say?

* * *

Travis leaned over to retrieve his drink, deftly removing the paper umbrella from the glass and tossing it onto the table. He sipped at the drink and relaxed against his lounge with a sigh.

Cally looked across and smiled, openly appreciating the sight of Travis's lean figure beneath the loose shirt open to the waist, the leather bathing trunks gleaming in the sunlight. She recaptured her own drink and stirred it with the straw, pursing her lips thoughtfully.

"You know, it's funny about that waiter," Travis said suddenly.

"What waiter?" Cally inquired nervously, adjusting her sunglasses to mask her unease.

"The one in the dining room our first night here."

Cally tensed, and shot an apprehensive look in Travis's direction. "I do not know what you mean," she protested weakly, wide-eyed (to prevent wrinkles) with innocence (to prevent unpleasantness).

"Yeah, it's really funny. Y'know, he looked just like my old roommate at the academy. Small universe, don't you think?"

"Who ... who was your roommate at the academy?" Cally asked slowly.

"His name was ... Kerr Avon. Quite a coincidence, wouldn't you say?" he added, turning to look at her with an enigmatic expression.

Cally choked, coughing violently. Travis leaped across the breach to clap her on the back. He eased her back into her seat as her breathing became more controlled.

"You ... you know Avon?" she gasped.

"Pretty well. We're old pals, you might say." Travis settled back on his lounge and took a swallow from his drink. "I don't think you need to worry about Avon." He put the drink down and grinned at Cally. "We reached an understanding, my old roommie and me."

"Oh," Cally replied in a small voice, leaning back in her seat and regarding Travis sheepishly.

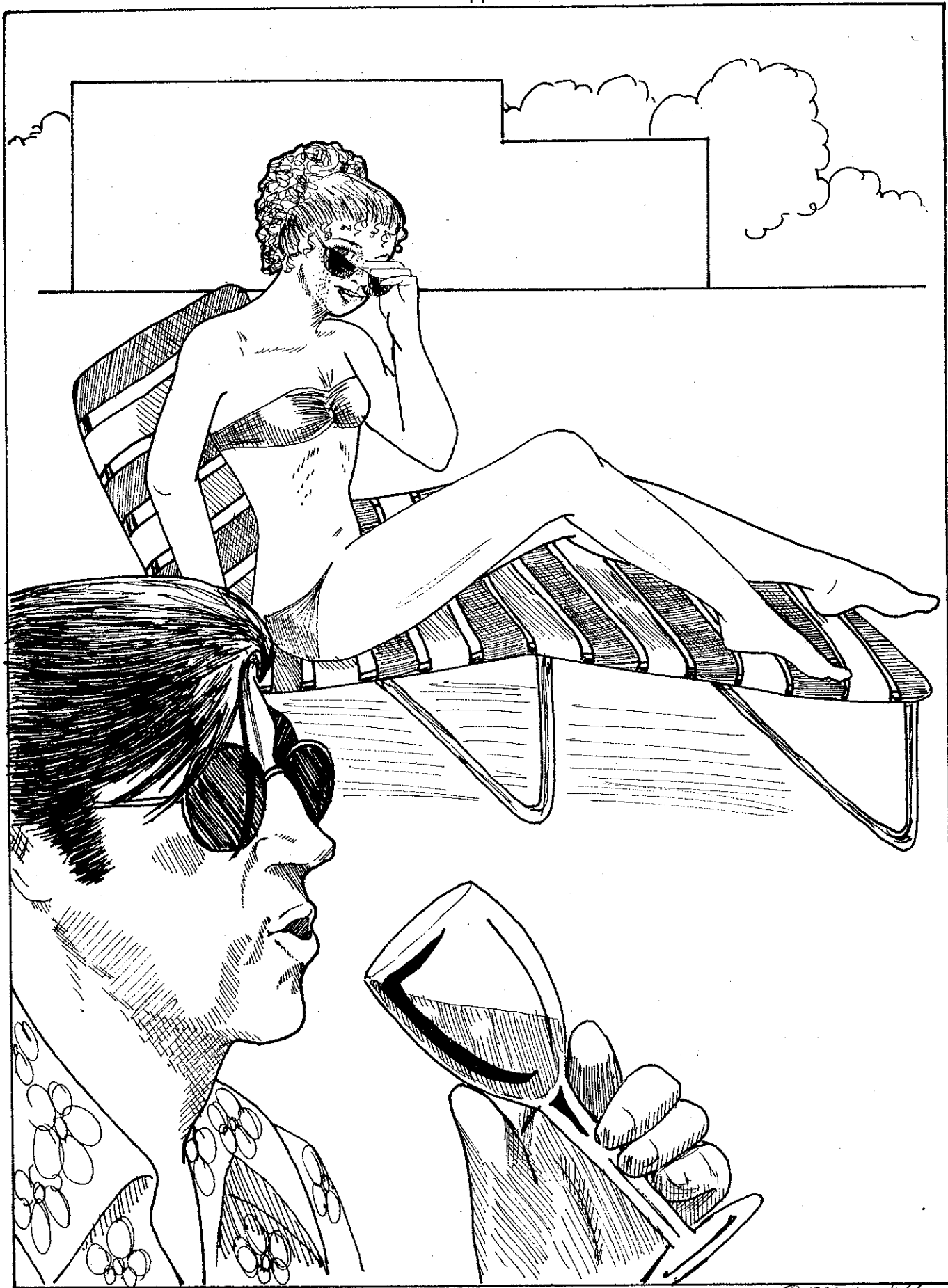
"Well," Travis said brightly, "It was a minor occurrence in an otherwise perfect weekend. It's always nice to see an old friend, but some new friends are even nicer," he added suggestively.

Cally blushed prettily, smiling. "It is a shame it must end," she said, sighing.

Sipping from his drink again, he asked hopefully, "There will be other ... occasions, won't there?"

She sat up and looked at him for a long moment. "It will not be too awkward for you?"

"I shouldn't think so," he answered, setting the drink down again. "I mean, I can always find a good reason to be in the near vicinity of the



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Liberator."

"That is true," she agreed, nodding. "But it would be terribly inconvenient if you happened to destroy it. Not to mention unromantic."

He chuckled. "I think I could restrain my enthusiasm ... in certain areas."

She smiled, settling back in her lounge to enjoy the last few hours of sun and relaxation before she had to return to the dull grind of life on the Liberator. The future was beginning to look very bright ...

* * *

"Isn't Cally back yet?" Vila asked, setting his baggage down with a thump on the teleport deck.

"She is on holiday, Vila," Avon reminded him with characteristic acid.

"Hmph. Some people know when it's time to quit," Vila replied huffily.

"Oh? Then why are you still here?"

"I know when I'm not wanted," Vila threatened, gathering up his gear and stomping off the teleport deck.

"I really don't think so, Vila," Avon muttered to Vila's retreating back.

"I am ready to come up now," Cally's voice sounded abruptly over the communicator.

Avon worked the controls, and Cally materialized, fairly glowing with contentment, on the teleport pad a moment later.

"Have a nice holiday?"

She smiled, sighing. "The best I can remember." She started to leave the teleport deck when she turned suddenly and fished something out of one of her bags. "Our mutual friend said this might interest you."

He accepted a copy of the latest issue of the Hurling Meteor gingerly, and waited until Cally had departed the teleport deck before turning to the personals. Outlined in red he found the entry:

AGGRESSIVE, AMBITIOUS, ATTRACTIVE SF LOOKING FOR INTELLIGENT, INQUISITIVE, INEXHAUSTIBLE SM FOR EMOTIONALLY-SATISFYING PARTNERSHIP IN GALACTIC DOMINATION. IMAGINATION OUR ONLY LIMIT. APPLY HURLING METEOR BOX STAR1.

With a moan, Avon's head sank into his hands as the magazine fell to the floor.