

## Revelations

by Angela Reese & Terri Halasz

The control room on Gauda Prime was frozen in a grim tableau. Avon stood over Blake's body, his gun raised and aimed at the Federation soldier in front of him as he ignored the other guards surrounding him. The bodies of Vila, Dayna, Tarrant, Soolin, Deva, Arlen, Klyn and two Federation troopers lay on the floor, unmoving. Avon smiled.

At that, the guard in front of Avon nodded, signaling the others to begin firing into the air and removing their helmets. When they had all removed their helmets, the guard lowered the unfired gun and pulled off the helmet, revealing a young woman with long red hair. She grinned cheerfully at Avon, swinging the strap of her gun back over her shoulder, then walked over to the communication console and began checking troop reports.

Avon loosened his grip on the gun, looked at it, then tossed it to the ground in front of him. He moved to stand next to Blake rather than over him.

Vila moaned suddenly. "Ohhh, what a nightmare."

Avon looked up sharply when he heard Vila, then walked over to him as Vila was opening his eyes. "Vila", he said softly, going down on one knee and offering the thief his hand.

Vila moaned again and opened his eyes, focusing slowly on Avon's face. He stared up at the other man for a few seconds, then turned his head away. Ignoring Avon's offer of help, Vila struggled to his feet and walked over to Blake. Standing beside him, arms akimbo, Vila glared down at the man for whom they had searched for the last two years. "All right, Blake, you've had your little joke. You can cut the charade now, before someone really does get hurt."

Blake blinked and opened his eyes, gazing up at Vila with a smile on his face. "Don't be angry, Vila. All of this really was necessary." Rising up to lean on his elbow, Blake reached up toward Vila with his free hand, silently asking for assistance.

Vila paused a moment, then reached down to grasp Blake's hand and pull him to his feet. "What was necessary?" he asked, as Blake removed his red-stained vest and shirt, to reveal a perfectly sound chest.

"It was a test, Vila." Blake paused, then turned to meet Avon's eyes. "A test of trust."

Vila looked from one to the other, puzzled and hurt. "Trust?" He turned to Avon, who was still watching Blake. "You were testing us?"

Avon turned to Vila. "I trust you, Vila."

"Then why test us?"

Avon gazed at Vila, the look in his eyes willing the thief to believe him. "I needed to find out if you can trust me," he said softly.

"Trust you to get us killed?" another voice rang out accusingly.

Avon and Vila turned to see Dayna sitting up and glaring at Avon accusingly, her hand on her shoulder. Glancing back at Vila, Avon walked over to help Dayna up. When she noticed Blake, Dayna gripped Avon's wrist tighter, turning to him with a confused look in her eyes. "What the hell is going on here?" she asked.

On the upper level, Deva moaned and tried to sit up. Blake quickly moved to help him as Avon freed his hand and went to check on Soolin. Dayna looked questioningly at Vila, but he didn't seem to notice as he watched Avon.

Soolin stood up shakily, just as Blake and Deva came back down the stairs. She looked at him sharply, then turned to face Avon, her eyebrows raised. "Did you use rubber bullets, Avon?" she asked sarcastically. "Or perhaps your aim is just a bit off." Avon simply looked at her,

emotionless, then turned to help Tarrant. Keeping a watchful eye on Blake, Soolin leaned down to pick up her gun and reholstered it.

Blake walked over to stand beside Avon just as Tarrant opened his eyes. The pilot blinked and seemed startled, but recovered quickly. "Quick healer, aren't you?" he asked Blake as Avon offered him a hand up. "Nice trick."

"I'm sorry I had to deceive you, Tarrant," Blake apologized. "It was necessary for my little game." He turned to face the others as well. "If you will allow me some time to clean up this mess, Avon and I will explain everything to you. Shall we meet in the rec room in, say, an hour?" Blake glanced around at the others questioningly, but saw no opposition to the suggestion. "Fine. One hour, then." He turned to Deva, standing by the communications board. "Deva, have Cord take Klyn and Arlen down to the detention area. Then go to the medical unit and make sure that you're all right." Deva nodded, then motioned one of the guards over to him.

The red-haired guard reentered the room and walked over to Blake, handing him a clean shirt. "All sections have reported in, Blake," she informed him. "The base is secure and the test has been completed."

"Thank you, Ann. Would you show Vila, Tarrant, Dayna and Soolin to the medical area? Once Tarrant is taken care of, you can show the others where they can clean up, and then bring them to the rec room."

"All right, Blake." Ann turned to the Scorpio crew. "If you'll follow me, please?"

Dayna and Soolin moved to take Tarrant's arms, then followed Ann back out the way she had entered, with Vila following along behind. Meanwhile, four of the guards were carrying Arlen and Klyn out another door.

Blake moved to the communications panel and activated a switch. "Kyle, take a crew out to the Scorpio and check it out for damage. See if anything can be salvaged." Blake started up the stairs, then turned back to Avon who was still standing in the center of the room. "Coming?" he asked teasingly.

Avon glanced up at him, smiling slightly. "Naturally."

Just over an hour later, Blake walked into the rec room to see everyone there but Avon. Tarrant, Dayna and Soolin were sitting in lounge chairs scattered between the couch and the door; Vila was sitting in another lounge chair next to the couch - and close to the drinks dispenser. Blake walked over and got himself a cup of coffee, then sat down on the end of the couch by Vila. The thief glanced at him, then finished his drink and went to get another. As he was turning away from the dispenser, Avon walked in. Vila looked up just as Avon glanced in his direction; they stared at each other for a moment, then Avon turned away and went to sit on the other end of the couch, separating himself from everyone. Vila swallowed the drink he had just picked up, then got another and returned to sit next to Blake.

Blake finished his coffee and put the cup on the table in front of him, leaning back in the couch. "I'd like to thank you all for showing up," he said warmly. "I believe a few introductions are needed. Vila I already know, and Tarrant and I have met," Blake grinned. "You must be Dayna," he continued, inclining his head in her direction, "and you, Soolin. Avon has told me much about you all."

"Odd he didn't tell us anything about you," Vila muttered, his eyes on the glass in front of him.

Blake gave him a curious look, then continued, rubbing the back of his neck. "After the Andromedan war, it was months before I could leave Epheron, where they treated my injuries. My teleport bracelet had been destroyed when my life capsule crashed, so I worked for passage on small

cargo freighters. I went from planet to planet, trying to get close enough to contact you. I heard what happened at Kairos and that the Liberator had been spotted near Earth. I happened to be en route to the Teal-Vandor Convention when I heard that war had been declared. I learned that a ship matching Liberator's description was in orbit, but you had left before I could make contact. Less than a month later, I heard that the Liberator had been destroyed. I assumed that you had been killed as well, and gave up the search. The only good news was that Servalan was reported to have been killed as well."

Blake paused and glanced around the room to gauge the others' reactions. Avon seemed to have withdrawn into himself at the far end of the couch and Vila was staring into his drink, while Tarrant, Dayna and Soolin seemed to be listening curiously to his story. He looked back at Vila, worried, then continued. "When I heard the news, I was on a cargo run to Gauda Prime. As soon as the ship landed I contacted the local rebel group, and discovered that their leader was Deva, a man I'd known while working on the Aquatar Project on Earth. We dreamed up the bounty hunter charade as a ruse to gather supporters. Six months ago, on a supply run, I met up with Ann - the redhead you met earlier. She's a good pilot and strategist, and so is her partner, so we joined forces. Since then we've been working on increasing our numbers; building an army."

Blake picked up his coffee cup and walked over to deposit it in the trash bin, returning to stand behind the couch near Avon. "About a month ago, our computers began picking up a very odd message that would only make sense to Avon and myself. I realized he was still alive and was using Orac to make contact. After I verified the origin, we spent weeks discussing various matters that needed solving between us. He informed me of his plans with the Non-Aligned Planets; at the time, I was having trouble on the base with raids going wrong and so forth. We decided to stop communications temporarily, to give ourselves time to work out our separate problems. Then I heard rumors of a traitor among the Alliance leaders, but before I could warn Avon you had already found out the hard way.

"Meanwhile, Deva and I had set up a series of tests for my people. There was reason to believe that several Federation informants had infiltrated the base, and the tests were a means of weeding them out. Avon and I had decided to use your arrival as a final test to check them. We decided not to tell you about the test, in order to keep your reactions as natural as possible." Blake turned his head to meet Tarrant's eyes. "I bitterly regret having to use you like that, Tarrant, but I couldn't afford to let down my guard for a moment."

Soolin spoke up. "Was all of the testing necessary?"

"Yes, it was," Blake replied, turning to face her. "Deva disapproved of some of the tests and methods I used, but I needed to be sure of everyone."

"That's all very nice," Dayna said, "but Avon has obviously known of your location for quite awhile." She looked at Avon for the first time since Blake had begun speaking. "How long have you known, Avon; and why didn't you tell us?"

Avon slowly glanced at each of them in turn, then looked back at Dayna. "I learned of Blake's location shortly after arriving on Xenon. At the time, I didn't feel it was advisable to contact him, as he was busy establishing this base." He paused and glanced at Vila, who was concentrating on yet another drink and refused to look up. "I finally contacted Blake after we returned from Malodaar, thinking he might be interested in reorganizing the Non-Aligned Planets. Then Zucan decided to support the Alliance; I knew the other leaders would follow him more readily than they would Blake."

"That still doesn't explain why you didn't tell us about Blake," Soolin pointed out.

"I suspected that one of the Alliance leaders had sold us out to Servalan. I did not want her to learn of Blake's whereabouts, or even his existence." Avon paused as Blake sat down again. "I decided to keep the information to myself to protect him."

At that, Vila's head shot up and he stared at Avon, his expression a mix of fury and confusion.

"Why test us, Blake?" Tarrant asked. "Were we part of the charade as well?"

Blake leaned back, raising an eyebrow. "As I said, Tarrant, it was a test of trust."

Soolin looked irritated. "Were you testing us as well? Avon?"

Avon looked up at her for a moment, then at each of the others in turn. Silently, he left the room. Blake looked over his shoulder at Vila, who was getting another drink. The thief did not sit down again, but moved to stand between his chair and Dayna's.

Dayna looked at Blake. "Was he testing us?"

"You'll have to ask him."

"Did you get the answers you needed, Blake?" Tarrant asked.

"Enough of them," Blake smiled.

Suddenly Vila exploded. "Why don't you give us a straight answer for once! I've had it with all the lies and the games, and my so-called friends!"

Dayna stood up and went over to him, but he pulled away to stand in front of the couch. Blake stood up, still startled by his reaction. "Vila..."

"Just leave me alone!" Vila turned away from him, throwing his half-full glass at the far wall behind Tarrant and Soolin, where it shattered. The others winced as he stormed out of the room and ran down the hallway. Blake slowly sat down again, a worried expression on his face.

In his office later, Deva was working at his desk while Blake paced back and forth.

"...and make sure that Arlen and Klyn don't get out while the Federation observer is here," Blake was reminding him.

"I know that," Deva commented absently, busy working.

Blake stopped pacing and leaned his hands on the desk in front of Deva. "So I worry a lot!"

Deva looked up and grinned. "I know that, too."

Blake grinned as the intercom sounded and Deva answered it. "This is Kyle out at the ship. This whole thing is scrap. I'm surprised anyone made it out alive."

"What about the flight computer?" Deva asked.

"There's some damage; nothing we can't eventually fix, though. The power cells are exhausted, but the memory circuits seem to be fine. As long as we have all the parts, we should have no problems repairing it."

"Good, bring it back to the base. I'll meet you in the repair bay." Deva switched off the communicator and looked up at Blake. "You won't need me for anything, will you? I don't know how long this will take."

Blake shook his head. "Until the Federation observer shows up, you can take all the time you want. Avon wanted to look over the personnel files, anyway; I'll just let him know he can use this office instead of the terminal in his room."

Deva nodded and they left, Deva to the repair bay and Blake to find Avon.

Blake walked into Deva's office for the third time in half an hour, interrupting Avon yet again. "So, Avon, almost finished? I'm eager to hear your opinions on my army."

Avon sighed and looked up from the screen. "I would be finished sooner if I was permitted to work without interruption, Blake," he pointed out. "Why don't you go hover over someone else for a while, hmmm?"

Blake grinned. "Very well. I'll leave you to it, then." Avon was already deep in calculations again as Blake left, heading for the control room. Stopping at a panel of monitors, Blake began checking the positions of the outer patrols. Suddenly, Vila wandered around the corner, not watching where he was going, and walked into Blake. He caught Vila's arms to steady him, remembering the thief's temper tantrum earlier.

"Is something wrong, Vila?" he asked curiously.

"Huh? Oh, no, nothing really," Vila stammered, trying to think of any excuse that would keep Blake from asking any awkward questions. "Er, where's Ann?" he finally asked, desperate for an excuse to get away.

Blake looked at him, curious and a little worried. He had not seen Vila since the meeting in the rec room, and could not help wondering what was wrong. And the way Avon and Vila kept avoiding each other... Blake abruptly came to a decision, and hoped it was the right one. "I think she said she'd be working in Deva's office while he was in the repair bay. Why?"

"Oh, well, she said she'd show me around the base, that's all. See you, Blake," Vila called as he hurried away, relieved. And she had offered to, earlier; maybe he would take her up on it, after all.

Avon had his back to the door when he heard someone enter. He sighed again. "I thought you had agreed to stop interrupting me, Blake," he said, not turning around. "If you keep coming in to check on my progress, I'll never finish."

There was a pause, then he heard Vila's voice from behind him. "Don't worry, Avon; I wouldn't dream of interrupting you," he said coldly.

Avon froze, then quickly turned around in the chair to see Vila standing in the doorway, a furious look on his face. "Blake seemed to think I'd find Ann here," he continued. "Odd; you don't have red hair. And I never thought you were a woman, Avon," he added, almost sarcastically, as he turned to leave.

Avon paled, remembering the last time Vila had said that to him. "Vila..." Vila turned back slowly and stared at Avon, a cold, very un-Vila look in his eyes. Avon forced himself to meet those eyes. "We need to talk, Vila. You don't understand about the test. It..."

"I thought it was fairly obvious," Vila interrupted angrily. "You don't trust us. You never have."

Avon winced slightly at the fury in the other man's voice, but stepped closer. "Vila, on Malodaar..."

"I don't want to talk about Malodaar!" Vila started to leave again, but Avon reached out and grabbed his arm to stop him. Vila glared at him, but Avon refused to let go, determined to finish what he had begun. Otherwise, everything would be worse.

"It's because of what happened there that made me decide to contact Blake," he said, praying that Vila would understand.

"Why then? Why not before?"

"I...I needed him."

"Needed him for what?" Vila demanded.

Avon met Vila's eyes reluctantly. "I needed him," he began, then paused and looked away. "I need him to keep me sane," he finished quietly, looking back at Vila.

Their eyes locked for a moment, then Vila pulled away. "I would've thought you'd be able to come up with something better than that," he said coldly, before he turned and left.

Avon stood frozen to the spot for a moment, staring after Vila, then sank back into the chair.

Vila stormed through the base, looking for the rec room, when he rounded a corner and collided into Blake. He glared at him and started to move around him.

"Vila, I..." Blake stopped him.

Vila wouldn't let him finish. "Damn you, Blake," he yelled. "You set me up! You knew Avon was there!"

Blake frowned, hearing the pain in Vila's voice. "It's about time I learned what's going on between you and Avon. He seems..."

"It's none of your business," Vila cut him off again. "Besides, I might have known you were worried about Avon. You always were. Never mind my feelings; never mind what happened to me; it's always Avon. Vila can take care of himself, no need to worry about him," Vila babbled on. "You only kept me around so I would open locks for you, anyway."

"That's not true, Vila. It's just that this whole thing has been rough on Avon, that's all."

"What makes you think it hasn't been any rougher on the rest of us?" Vila snapped angrily.

"None of you came here knowing you'd probably be killed!" Blake snapped, regretting it instantly. He'd promised Avon... Well, it was too late to stop now, he thought, noting the confused look on Vila's face. He put a hand on Vila's shoulder. "As I said before, Avon and I had set up our scene as the final test of my people. After all of you had been knocked out, the room was filled with my men dressed as Federation troopers. We had no way of knowing whether any were traitors or not. If there were any, they would've killed Avon. He voluntarily made himself - and only himself - a target."

Vila looked bewildered. "But why would Avon do that? It doesn't make any sense. Why would he let himself be killed?"

"He did it for you," Blake said softly. "He was willing to sacrifice himself for your safety."

"He'd have to be crazy to do something like that," Vila said, sounding dazed. "We were all of us in the same danger."

Blake shook his head. "No. We made sure you would all be safe. He made me promise that there'd be no chance that any of you would be hurt."

The intercom chose that moment to signal for Blake; as he went to answer it, Vila slowly wandered off down the hall, deep in thought.

"Blake here, go ahead."

"This is Deva. Blake, the observer's ship's just landed. You'd better get to my office quickly."

"All right. Have Ann collect Avon's people. Out." Blake switched off, only then noticing that Vila had left. He looked down the hall both ways, without seeing anything, then sighed and headed for the office.

Ann stepped into the rec room and turned on the lights, looking around. "No one here. Maybe he's back at the office." She turned the lights off again and closed the door.

In the back of the room, out of sight of the door, Vila lay curled up in a chair, asleep. Even asleep, he could hear Avon and Blake's voices, trying to tell him something. They sounded urgent.

"Vila," Avon's pleaded.

"He did it for you," came Blake's.

"I wanted to protect Blake." Avon again.

"He was willing to sacrifice himself for you."

"I need him to stay sane."

"He did it for you."

"I trust you."

"He did it for you."

"Vila."

"For you."

"Vila."

With a start, Vila was suddenly awake. He was covered in a cold sweat. "Avon?" he said quietly, almost questioningly, still dazed. Then he shook himself fully awake, as he realized just what Avon had been trying to tell him. Vila jumped up and hurried out the door to find Avon, to tell him that he understood.

In Deva's office, Avon, Blake, Soolin, Dayna and Tarrant were grouped around the desk, watching the monitors showing the Federation ship outside.

Ann walked in. "Is Vila back here yet, Blake?" she asked, glancing around.

Blake turned to face her, a worried look on his face. "No, he's not here. You didn't find him?"

Ann shook her head, starting out the door again. "I'll look again. Maybe I missed him."

Avon called her back. "Wait. Let's try the base monitors first. At least they'll show us where he isn't at."

Walking over to the monitor controls, he set them for the rec room - empty. The galley - empty. The residential area - empty. The medical unit - empty. The control room...

Hurrying to the office, Vila took a short cut through the control room. Several men, still in Federation uniforms, were standing about the room. Thinking they were Blake's men, and not pausing to wonder why they had their helmets on again, Vila headed toward the hall leading to Deva's office. As he reached the stairs, however, two of the guards stepped in front of him. Before he could react, he heard a sickeningly familiar voice from behind him.

"Hello, Vila. We meet again."

"Servalan," Vila whispered, turning around to face her. She smiled, apparently amused by the look of fear and shock on his face, and nodded. Before Vila could move, one of the guards hit him with the butt of his gun, knocking Vila to the floor, unconscious.

In the office, Blake had gone very pale. "Servalan," he muttered under his breath, staring at the monitor. Dayna's shout suddenly caught his attention again.

"Avon!" she cried out. Blake turned in time to see Avon disappearing down the hall to the control room.

"Avon! Stop!" he called, knowing the other man would not listen. Blake turned to his redheaded aide, beside him. "Go after him, Ann. Try to keep him from doing anything stupid."

Ann was already on her way out. "Right, Blake," she called back cheerfully.

Blake sighed and turned back to watch the monitor, chewing nervously on his finger.

Avon reached the door to the control room in record time, stopping in the outer hall to catch his breath. Smoothing his face into an emotionless mask, Avon casually stepped into the control room just as Ann turned the corner of the corridor. She moved to a position from which she could just barely see into the control room, but where no one inside could see her. Her blaster out and ready, she flattened herself against the wall to listen and wait.

Servalan smiled almost smugly as she watched Avon walk down the stairs to stand next to Vila's crumpled form. "Well, Avon," she said, "I hardly expected to find you here. What a pleasant surprise. I make an exceedingly long, dull trip to make a routine inspection of a backwater, proposed Federation planet, only to find Kerr Avon and Vila Restal, the two most wanted men in the galaxy."

"I didn't realize we were still wanted so badly by the Federation," Avon commented sarcastically, casually leaning against the railing and crossing his arms. He had glanced at Vila as he entered the room, to be sure the thief was still alive. Confident of Vila's safety for the present, it only remained for Avon to keep Servalan occupied long enough for Blake to come up with a suitably brilliant plan. "The Federation is so afraid of lockpicks and failed embezzlers, then, that they rate us more dangerous on their list than mass murderers?"

"Oh, not on the Federation's list, Avon," Servalan told him, a mock-surprised look on her face. "With Blake dead and the Liberator destroyed, you're no longer enough of a threat for Space Command to bother with you. My list, on the other hand..." She gave him a wicked grin. "Oh, yes, Avon, you rate quite highly on that. You see, I know exactly how dangerous you can be; given the opportunity, that is," she amended.

Avon's face abruptly brightened with an amused grin as he laughed shortly. "Ah, yes, of course, I nearly forgot. Careless of me, I admit. You've killed everyone else who knew your real identity, haven't you, 'Sleer'. Vila and I are the only ones left who can positively identify you. I'm surprised it's taken you this long."

Servalan only smiled. "You know me, Avon. I always put business before pleasure." She turned to the man standing beside her. "Why was I not informed of their presence here before, Controller Deva? I would have had a much more enjoyable trip." Her eyes darkened, and she suddenly seemed much more dangerous. "For that matter, why are they being permitted to wander around unobserved? You were aware of their identities, I assume?"

Deva brushed back his hair nervously, thinking rapidly. He had nearly panicked when Vila had run in, and had just gotten himself under control when Avon had shown up. Why had Blake let him...

"Of course I know who they are, Commissioner," he heard himself saying calmly, as he realized what must have happened. What he hoped had happened. "With the most up-to-date listings on the entire planet, how could I fail to? They arrived here, on foot, only a few hours ago. I didn't feel it necessary to interrupt your flight, or any business you may have been involved in, at such a late date. And naturally, they have not been permitted to wander about alone." Deva raised his voice slightly, praying he'd guessed correctly. "Ann," he called, "there's no need to remain in the hall."

Ann stepped through the door to stand at the top of the stairs behind Avon, one hand on her hip, her gun reholstered. Avon ignored her, still leaning against the railing.

"Ann has been following them since they arrived," Deva continued. She is my most trusted assistant, as well as the best bounty hunter on the planet."

Servalan looked interested on hearing Ann's credentials. "So, you're the best bounty hunter on Gauda Prime, are you?" she asked. "And just how can you tell? It's not exactly a job that awards performance points."

Ann grinned cheerfully. "I've survived longer, brought in more criminals, and made more money than anyone else on record," she retorted. "Since anyone not on record doesn't get paid, there aren't any bounty hunters not on record. That makes me the best."

Servalan glanced back at Deva, a delighted smile on her face. "I admire your taste in assistants, Controller. I could wish for such capable aides." She turned back as Vila suddenly

groaned. "Ah, I see my favorite thief has decided to join us at last. I was beginning to think that I'd lost the opportunity to interrogate him one last time. And I have such wonderful plans for him." She smiled. Heaven help anyone on the receiving end of that smile, Deva thought, nervously pushing back his hair again. "I've always wondered how Vila would react to losing his hands," she continued. "This will be an ideal opportunity to find out. Perhaps I'll even let him live."

Avon's eyes blazed with fury and hatred as he bent to check Vila. Servalan would die this time, he swore silently. One way or another, he would kill her. Vila blinked and opened his eyes, looking up at Avon; seeing the terror in them, he realized that the thief had heard Servalan's plans for him. Squeezing Vila's arm reassuringly, Avon helped him up.

Blake was staring at the monitor, his fists clenched in anger at the Commissioner's plans. Dayna had nearly run out to go to the control room herself, but Tarrant and Soolin had stopped her. They didn't seem too happy themselves; Soolin's expression was colder than ever as she stared at the screen, while Tarrant just looked furious.

Blake abruptly turned away from the screen and strode over to the desk, switching on the intercom. "Kyle? Blake. Take three of your men and set up an ambush between the control room and the detention area. Ann will be coming through with Avon, Vila and some Federation guards; dispose of the guards, then follow whatever instructions Ann has for you."

Servalan motioned for her guards to separate Avon and Vila, holding them securely. "Take these two down to security," she ordered. "I want two of you watching them at all times. Watching, not just guarding. I want them under constant observation. Especially that one," she added, pointing at Vila.

"You know where the detention center is, Ann," Deva spoke up. "Why don't you show them the way?"

"Of course, Controller," Ann replied politely. "Do you want me to report back here after they are secured?"

"That won't be necessary," Servalan broke in. "I wish to speak with you privately, however. There is something I wish to discuss with you." She smiled companionably at Ann. "I will expect you in the Controller's office as soon as you're finished with these two."

Ann nodded, smiling. "I'll be there." Turning to the guards holding Avon and Vila, she motioned for them to follow her out of the room.

Blake grinned and turned away from the monitor screen. "So, she's coming here, is she? Well, we'll have to give her a proper welcoming party, won't we?"

Dayna, Tarrant and Soolin slowly began grinning as well, as Blake outlined his plan.

Ann quickly strode down the corridors, the guards hard pressed to keep up. Having to practically carry Vila didn't help matters. The thief was still only semi-conscious, Avon realized, glancing at him worriedly. He was about to ask them to slow down a bit, as Servalan would hardly want Vila dead, when there was a blur of movement behind them. Barely a second later, the guards were out cold on the floor, Blake's men were collecting the scattered weapons, and Vila had collapsed again.

Avon bent over him, checking his pulse, as Ann began giving the men new instructions. "Kyle, you and Dan come with me. Jarl and Shen, you take these four down to detention, then meet us back at Deva's office. Sleer's on her way there, and Blake may need help." She paused for a moment, then moved over to Avon and Vila. "Will he be all right?" she asked quietly.

"I hope so," he replied, looking up at her. Carefully picking up Vila, Avon stood up. "We'll be in the medical unit," he informed Ann. "If anyone wants us, after you've dealt with Servalan, they can find us there."

Ann nodded once, then hurried down the hall to the office, followed by Dan and Kyle. Avon headed for the sickbay, carrying Vila very carefully, as the other two began dragging the guards away.

Deva turned the last corner to see his office door closed. //I hope you know we're coming, Blake,// he thought to himself, pushing back his hair nervously. Striding down the hall, he pulled the door open and ushered Sleer in ahead of him.

Servalan took a few steps into the room, then halted as the high-backed chair swung around to reveal Del Tarrant, leaning back with his hands behind his head. "Well, well," she said calmly. "Fancy meeting you here. I should have expected you'd still be hanging around with Avon."

Tarrant gave her a wicked grin. "It seems just like old times, doesn't it, girls?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," Dayna's voice replied from behind Servalan. She whirled around to see both Dayna and Soolin standing on either side of the door, their guns trained on her. Deva had closed the door and was leaning against it, a slight smile on his face.

Servalan aimed a look of pure frost at Deva. "So, Controller," she said sarcastically, "this is how you show your loyalty to the Federation?"

"Oh, but Deva has never been loyal to the Federation," a familiar voice spoke up from behind her. "Any more than I ever was."

Servalan had gone extremely pale at the sound of that voice, although she quickly got herself under control before she turned around. He was leaning against the doorjamb, in a second doorway beside the desk. "Blake," she said, managing to sound only mildly surprised. "So Avon finally did find you. I can't tell you how thrilled I am to find that you're still alive."

Blake grinned ferally. "I'm sure." He abruptly pushed himself away from the wall and stepped toward her, catching the gun Dayna tossed him without even looking and holding it to Servalan's head. "Just as I'm sure you'll understand why I'm sorely tempted to let Dayna take you out and shoot you right now; you've certainly earned it. I have plans for you, however, so I'm afraid I'll have to let you live."

Before she could make sense of his last statement, Ann and two of Blake's men entered through the second door. Blake stepped back and motioned the two men over. "Take her down to security. Put her in with Arlen; they can discuss Federation politics if they get bored."

Servalan glanced over at Ann, standing next to Blake. "Not the best bounty hunter, then, after all?" she asked, almost wistfully. "A shame; I had such hope for you."

Ann gave her a mocking bow, then waved the guards to remove her to detention.

Vila woke to find himself on a medical couch, with Avon lying on another. No one else was in sight. Slowly, the events of the last hour came back to him, and he began to shiver, wondering what was wrong with Avon. Vila started to sit up, only to be hit by a dizzy spell and a terrible headache. He struggled to remain upright, refusing to pass out again. Suddenly he felt Avon's

hands supporting him. Apparently the other man had only been resting, rather than asleep or unconscious.

"My hands," he moaned, still dazed. "Avon, my hands, she's going to..."

"No, Vila," Avon interrupted him, grasping Vila's hands. "She won't do anything to your hands, I promise you. I won't let her hurt you."

Vila clutched at Avon's hands tightly, closing his eyes and trying to relax. He knew his fright was only making the headache worse. Then he remembered...

"Avon," he said, opening his eyes, "I understand now. I was going to tell you when..." his voice faltered. Vila took a deep breath and started again, looking up at Avon. "I'm sorry for everything I said earlier, Avon," he apologized. "I finally realized what it was that you and Blake were trying to tell me. I guess I was too drunk and upset to let myself listen to you, before." Releasing Avon's hands, Vila reached into his tunic pocket. "I suppose this should have told me sooner, though," he added ruefully, handing him Orac's key.

Avon looked at him curiously. "Why on earth would this have meant anything?" he asked, bewildered.

Vila grinned. "You'd never have given me Orac's key to carry if you thought there'd be any danger to us. If you were expecting a Federation trap, you'd have hidden it just as well as you hid Orac, only in a different spot. Otherwise you would've kept it with you, as usual. But you gave it to me. You never have before."

Vila paused a moment, looking at the piece of plastic in Avon's hand. "After I...saw you, in Deva's office, I ran into Blake. I still wasn't listening too well, or maybe it would've sunk in sooner. He said that you knew about the test, that some of them might be traitors, and that there was a good chance you'd be killed. He also said you had made him promise that we'd all be safe, no matter what else happened. I didn't really believe him, that you'd purposely put yourself in danger, until I remembered the key." Vila stopped, closing his eyes. "Like I said," he added, "if I'd remembered I still had the key, I might have figured it out sooner, and we wouldn't have run into Servalan." He opened his eyes again and looked at Avon. "Why didn't you ask me for it before, Avon?"

Avon looked down at the key, turning it over in his hands, then back at Vila. "Partly because you wouldn't listen to me long enough for me to ask," he said, "but mostly, I think...I was afraid of what you'd say."

Vila slowly grinned, the old twinkle coming back into his eyes. "But Avon," he said teasingly, in a tone that Avon had missed hearing for too long; since before Terminal. "Don't you remember? You're always safe with me."

Avon just stared at him a moment, trying to keep a straight face, as Vila grinned happily back at him, then gave up as they both started laughing. Vila suddenly realized that he hadn't heard Avon laugh like that since they had lost Blake, at Star One. //I guess he really does need Blake,// he thought to himself. //Of course, he needs me, too,// Vila amended cheerfully. //After all, who else can make him laugh this easily?//

Vila hopped off the bed, still grinning. "Well, shall we go?"

"Go where?"

"To find Blake, of course." Vila began limping exaggeratedly toward the door. "I've been through a terrible ordeal, and I need appropriate comforting."

"And you expect Blake to comfort you?" Avon asked in a disbelieving voice, following him to the door.

"Of course not!" Vila scoffed. "I just want to ask him where that cute redhead is."

Avon rolled his eyes in exasperation, opening the door. "Oh, I'm sure she'll be very impressed with your suffering hero impersonation. I imagine she has better things to do than watch you drink yourself senseless; not that it would take long."

"I never drink myself senseless!" Vila defended himself loudly, then grinned again. "Besides, she smiled at me. And she has nice legs."

"She smiled at everyone, Vila," Avon pointed out. "That does not indicate an interest in you."

"You're just jealous," Vila accused, as the sickbay door closed behind them.

The guards were taking no chances with her, Servalan noted. They had kept a firm grip on her arms all the way to the security area, only releasing her when the door to her cell was opened. One had his gun trained on Arlen while the door was open; the other had had a small gun in her back for the entire walk, and kept it there until she was in the cell. They quickly closed and locked the door, resetting the force wall in the door as well. Even if the door was opened, the force wall would still be in effect.

Servalan had noticed a small, dark-haired woman in the opposite cell; Klyn, another of her spies. Arlen was sitting on one end of her cot, sullen. Servalan sighed and sat down on the other cot, wondering how she was going to get out of this one.

Avon and Vila were still arguing as they turned the corner to Deva's office.

"She was worried about me! You just said so yourself!"

"Concern does not indicate that she likes you."

"Bet she does!" Vila said gleefully as they arrived at the office door.

"You would need more solid proof than mild concern to convince me," Avon retorted as the door slid open and they stepped inside.

"Like what?" Vila asked, then realized that everyone - including Ann - was already in the room. Avon gave him an I-dare-you grin, obviously believing Vila would chicken out.

Vila glared at him, then walked over to where Ann was leaning against the desk, talking to Blake. Leaning one elbow on her shoulder, he put on his most innocent look. "Say, what's a nice girl like you doing with someone as danger-prone as Blake?"

Ann grinned at him. "You say the sweetest things, Vila," she said teasingly. Vila turned to give Avon a self-satisfied smile, then looked back as Ann continued, still grinning. "That's exactly what Blake said to me when he met my partner; almost word for word."

Vila gave Blake an injured look. "You've been stealing my lines!" he accused.

Blake grinned at him. "Me? I'd never do that, Vila." He looked over at Avon. "That would be like stealing from a philosophical flea," he teased.

Avon began laughing again, for the second time that day, along with Blake. Vila grinned at the mystified expressions on the others in the room and joined in the laughter himself. It was nice to be home.

Only the beginning...