Nothing I'd Rather Do

by Willa Shakespeare (AnonEhouse)

Summary

Mistaken identity, false betrayal, shattered love, scheming villains, doggerel, seeming tragedy, farcical matchmaking... all the Shakespearean staples are here.

Notes

Way back (2002 or earlier) two people on the Blake's 7 adult mailing list wrote B7 fic based on Shakespeare's 'Much Ado about Nothing'.

As my pen name for B7 adult fic was Willa Shakespeare (she's The Bawd of Avon- yes, I do pun. So did Shakespeare.) I felt I ought to do at least one Shakespearean B7 fic. This is it. It follows much of the original plot, with the exception of an Interlewd addition.

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"Yeah, right," Vila said, stretching his legs out on the teleport couch, enjoying the smell of Avalon's new ship (a combination of plastic that didn't smell of old sweat, and metal that didn't smell of old grease, and ventilation filters that weren't clogging with skin cells and stray hair) and the comforting feeling that no one was likely to shoot at them deep in rebel territory. "Tarrant duelling? With a *sword*? I'll eat anyone he kills."
Orac replied, *The archaic code of honor on Messina may be satisfied with first blood, however, there have been duels to the death within living memory.*

Vila looked worried for a moment, then he sniffed. "Nah. Never happen." He took another gulp of something lime-colored and fizzy.

"What will never happen?" Dayna said, entering the chamber, loaded down with lances, pikes and at least two broad-swords, all strapped around her or piled in her arms.

Vila looked at her in horror. "Here, you're not taking all that lot down, are you?"

"Oh, don't worry, Vila. It's harmless." She shoved the wicked-looking blade of a pike at the wall beside his head.

Vila yelped and ducked before noticing the blade bent and wobbled then snapped back in shape. "Are you all crazy?! First Blake, then Tarrant, and even Avon, all going along with this ridiculous Recreationist War-Game business of Avalon's. What's the point? I mean, we've always got people trying to kill us. Why play at it?"

"I admit it would be much more fun with real weapons," Dayna said, leaning down to readjust the pair of dirks she'd strapped to her boots. "But we do need time to recuperate and adjust to being under Avalon's command. Some of us more than others," she said, turning serious.

"Right, let's all worry about Avon and Blake." Vila crossed his arms over his chest. "In case you hadn't noticed, I was in that cell with the two of them afterward." He shuddered. "The doctors didn't bother cleaning them up after surgery. Thought I was stuck with corpses, until they woke up. Think it was pleasant for me, in the middle of that pair?"

"I know, Vila," Dayna said, very gently for her. "It wasn't easy. You did a good job keeping them quiet."

"Quiet? Quiet was easy, Blake couldn't talk to Avon, and Avon was pretending Blake wasn't even there, but the looks could boil your blood." He shook his head. "I was never so happy to see anyone in my life as when Avalon rescued us."

Dayna frowned. "I thought it was Tarrant who got to you?"

"Well, technically, but he was just looking for us because Avalon got the rest of you out and he didn't want to lose 'hero points'."

"Why is Tarrant in your bad books lately?"

Vila shrugged. "He's not in any of my books. If he was, I'd burn the library. Him and Blake, they're always together, planning new ways to make my life shorter and more miserable than it already is."

Dayna looked at Vila and said, "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were jealous."


"Well, then I guess you'll be the sanest one of us all, Vila," Dayna teased.

"Too right," Vila remarked, saluting her with his drink. "It'll be a cold day in the middle of a nova before I fall for any of Blake's ideas again."
Dayna shook her head and went to the teleport platform. "Put me down, Vila."

Vila opened his mouth to reply with a put-down, then paused. Maybe not all the weapons were rubber. "Same place?"

Dayna nodded. "Main staging area. Soolin's found quarters for all of us near the practice wrestling ring." Her grin grew. "They wrestle in the nude, Vila."

"The women, too?"

"Of course. Changed your mind about coming down?"

"I'll think about it. Tell me, when's your match scheduled?" Vila mock ducked Dayna's mock swing, and then he input the coordinates on the keypad, double-checked that it illuminated the hologrammatic globe of the planet Messina at the place marked MS1, and pressed the buttons, concentrating to make certain he got it right. The controls weren't the same as Liberator's or Scorpio's and he was having to unlearn a lot of conditioned reflexes. Dayna vanished, reported her safe arrival, and Vila started to relax again.

"There you are!"

Vila jumped at the cheerful, young voice, clacking his glass painfully against his teeth. He brushed at the spillage on his tunic, and said, "Where else would I be, Tarrant? Down with a bunch of hairy idiots who like being beat up?"

Tarrant grinned, showing a great many perfect teeth, seeming whiter than usual in contrast against the auburn beard he'd grown during the voyage so he would fit in with the Messinians, and turned back to shout down the corridor, "Here he is, Blake! I told you I'd find him."

"Why are you yelling? Blake isn't listening to you? Love-affaire gone off?"

Tarrant gave Vila his attention. "I'm always surprised you're still alive, the way you've been goading everyone lately."

"How could I die, and leave you with no one to take down that swelled head a size or two?"

Tarrant was amused. "It's funny, but everyone else seems fond of me. I'm a very lovable man, you know." His smile faded. "Not that I intend ever to love anyone again."

_Probably thinking of Zeeona. Or Servalan. Or Piri. Or Deeta. Or..._ Vila cut off the brooding thoughts with the ease of long practice at avoiding painful subjects. There were so many of them between the crew, it was a wonder they could talk to each other at all. "That's good luck for the universe, then. I'd rather listen to Avon yelling at Orac than hear you say you loved me." Vila put on a comical face.

"No fear," Tarrant said easily, "I'd have to be at death's door... and probably even then, I'd walk in."

"If it was locked, I'd pick it for you," Vila offered.

"My hero." Tarrant's lips moved at the same time Vila heard the words, but it wasn't Tarrant's voice. Avon entered the room, pulling on a pair of heavy black gloves. Avalon's wardrobe wasn't as extensive as Liberator's so Avon had been forced to forego the studs, but an Avon in plain black from head to toe was somehow even more chilling than the 'Dominator' outfit he'd inherited from Dorian. The neatly trimmed dark beard added to the effect. "Teleport, Vila," Avon said. "Quickly." He stepped onto the platform with no more than a glance at Tarrant.
"What's the rush?"

"Teleport. Now."

Vila heard the heavier footsteps coming up the corridor, and winced. "Teleporting, now," he said, putting Avon down at the same coordinates that Dayna had used.

"Avon's gone?" Blake said, coming into the teleport room bare seconds later. His beard was thicker than Avon's but much less sinister, as it curled in wild abandon.

"Just now," Tarrant said, radiating sympathy. "You just missed him."

Blake looked at Tarrant and rubbed one hand absently over his belly, pounds thinner after his recovery from Avon's projectiles. "A joke, Tarrant?"

Tarrant blushed. "No."

"No, you wouldn't." Blake smiled at Tarrant. "You're not the type." Blake's smile faded. "I wish I knew what type Avon was." He shook his head. "What do you think of Avon?"

Tarrant cleared his throat. "Oh, well, he's not as bad as some. Not as good as others, but really, I haven't given him much thought."

Vila looked at Tarrant and mouthed, 'Liar' so that Blake couldn't see, but Tarrant could.

Blake didn't give up. "I wasn't referring to his morals." Blake took a deep breath. "After I left Liberator things... personal things... started to come clear for me. The way Avon would talk to me. Even the way he wouldn't talk to me. The way he'd hold me on the flight deck sometimes when there was a battle and forget to let go when it was safe..."

Tarrant blinked. "You're kidding."

"No."

Vila was watching, open-mouthed, fascinated by the conversation.

Tarrant floundered, but then his natural courage came to the fore. "If you're asking if Avon is sexually attracted to men, I don't know. I can only say that he never propositioned me. Why would you care, anyway?" Tarrant said, defensively. "He's worked hard for you and Avalon, trying to make up for his... for our mistake." Tarrant waved, taking in the whole of the ship. "Teleport, star-drive, Orac, he's given them all to you."

"Yes. But what I need to know is, did he give them out of guilt, or out of love?"

Tarrant's jaw dropped again. "Bloody Hell. You're attracted to him. What, do you think he's offering you a dowry?"

Blake looked steadily into Tarrant's eyes. "Yes, perhaps."

"And would you accept?" Tarrant's voice rose an octave.

"If he wasn't such a bad-tempered bastard, I would." Blake blinked. "I might even then." Blake sighed and turned to Vila. "I don't think I need to ask you not to repeat this."

"Who would I tell?" Vila said. "Avalon?"
Blake smiled. "That's the last person I'd worry about. She knows how valuable he is, but will he stay? Has he decided he's loyal to the rebellion, if not to me? I'd sleep better thinking he wasn't about to run off to the first bolt-hole we pass."

"Well, then why don't you tell Avalon?" Vila suggested, and backed up when Tarrant and Blake stared at him. "Not about that. About getting Avon to take a loyalty oath with Orac playing lie-detector. If Avalon asks, he'd think she was being sensible."

Blake stared over Vila's head for a moment, then he picked up Orac. "Put me down at the command headquarters, Vila."

"Right." Vila watched Blake disappear, then he turned to Tarrant. "Blake and Avon. Who'd a thought it." He shook his head. "What about it, Tarrant? Ever fancy a man?"

Tarrant blushed again. "Don't be disgusting, Vila."

"What? It's not disgusting for Blake, is it?"

"That's different. Look, just put me down, will you? I ought to be practicing."

Vila worked the controls again, and sighed, looking at the half-empty glass on the console. "Well, it's just you and me, old friend, innit? Cheers."

Avalon was busy, but she pushed aside the message she was studying and held up her hand for her aide, Chevner, to stop speaking. "Yes, Blake," she said, smiling warmly at him, even as Chevner stepped back to make room for Blake in her crowded sanctum. 'Command Headquarters' was primitive, in keeping with the rest of the illusion of medieval times, although extruded plastics replaced bundled twigs and sprayed on polycrète had been used instead of cattle dung and clay. Blake wondered if they'd chosen to model the whole rebel recreation area on wattle and daub, or if there were a synthetic castle somewhere. The natives accepted them as just another tribe, and so far the Federation had been totally uninterested in the planet. For the rebels it was a place where they could play at simpler times for a few weeks when the stress of fighting a modern war seemed overwhelming.

Blake and Avon's crew had qualified, even though not all of them considered it a holiday.

Blake set Orac down on Avalon's desk. "I've come about Avon."

"Chevner. A chair for Blake."

Chevner obeyed, silently and then dropped back to the doorway, as unobtrusive as a well-trained servant. Blake glanced at him and Avalon said, "I can send Chevner away."

Blake shrugged. "It's hardly a secret." He paused. "I'm afraid I--we-- might lose Avon."

"Has he said anything?"

"No. He's changed. We both have. Judging by the reports of his activities in the last few years, he might now believe in the cause." Blake took a deep breath. "But if he doesn't, I don't want him offering his services as a grudging penance."

"He hasn't complained."

"He wouldn't. But I won't have it."
"You won't have it?" Avalon raised her eyebrows. "We're not talking about loyalty to the rebellion, are we?"

"It's all I'll ask of him, but no, it's not all I want," Blake answered steadily. "He may have forgotten how to love, but I haven't."

Avalon met Blake's gaze for a long moment, then she said, "I hope you're not proposing a test."

"No!" Blake shook his head. "No, just ask him outright, and use Orac to judge his sincerity."

"From what I saw on board Liberator I think he's been loyal to you all along."

"He has an odd way of showing it, then," Blake said, rubbing at his stomach.

"All right, I'll ask him. And if he answers as I think he will, I'm fairly sure he'll also have to admit his true loyalty is to you."

"I can tell the difference between dreams and reality. You needn't hold out hope to me." Blake rose and left the room.

B7 B7 B7

Tarrant had already tracked Avon down in his 'lair'. "You could light a lantern, at least," Tarrant said, as he ducked down to avoid cracking his skull on the low lintel. "They do carry this primitivism a bit far, don't you think?"

Avon made a noncommittal sound, and turned away from the antique computer whose screen provided the only light in the room. "What do you want?"

"I can't stop by just to chat with an old ship-mate?"

"No. What do you want?"

Tarrant sighed and gave up his attempt to have a civilized conversation with Avon. "I've come to warn you that Avalon may be along any minute to ask where your loyalties lie. I thought it was only sporting to give you a few minutes' head-start in case you don't want to be interrogated by Orac."

Avon's lips twisted in the nearest thing to a smile that he did these days. "Avalon? Say, rather, Blake."

"It wasn't Blake's idea."


"Well? What are you going to do?"

"I expect I shall tell the truth. Frequently it is the easiest course of action. Now, if you don't mind?" Avon waved at the door.

"Thank you for your concern, Tarrant," Tarrant said as he left, mildly disgruntled.

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Chevner was in Avalon's office alone, tidying and organizing data cubes and all the other
"What's wrong, Jahn?"

Chevner looked up and acknowledged the man who'd entered, "Konrad. Oh, it's the usual. Avalon says she doesn't blame me for that disaster on that damn iceberg of a planet, but I know she does."

Konrad made sympathetic noises, and Chevner continued, "I feel like the bastard half-brother, you know. Never an ounce of authority, never a chance to prove myself, just take orders and do the paperwork. To top it all off, Blake and his ragged bunch of misfits walk right in and become top priority. Do you know where Avalon is right now?" Without waiting for an answer, Chevner said, "On an errand for Blake. Would you believe, she's pimping for him, because he's in love with that cold-fish computer man of his?"

"I don't believe it," Konrad replied. "Avalon wouldn't..."

"Why not? Everyone loves a lover, isn't that what they say?" Chevner gave a bitter laugh. "What I wouldn't pay to see their cozy little plan backfire. Let Avalon see how pathetic and useless that lot is. Let her see who really is important around here!" He threw the last handful of data cubes into the cabinet and shut it only slightly less forcefully than before.

Konrad said, thoughtfully, "I've heard that people tend to die around Blake's crew, but they always walk away. Maybe it's just the way their luck works, but I'd be happier if they split off from our group. Sooner or later, they're bound to get tired of us and move on. Why not help it along?"

"Why not?"

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Vila had grown bored with teleport duty, and had one of Avalon's people send him down to the planet. It still didn't seem real, them being part of a group so large that Vila and his companions could all be on planet at once, or eat at the same time, or sleep together. Well, not together; at the same time in separate rooms. That always seemed such a waste, Vila thought, as he passed the muddy practice area for the wrestling. He paused long enough to admire Dayna.

"Vila!" Dayna straightened up. She was almost as covered by mud as if she were dressed. Almost. She waved her opponent off, and waded through the mud to the low rail fence surrounding the churned slimy pit where half a dozen groups rolled and tangled, half-fierce, and half-friendly.

It was too attractive a sight for Vila to resist, even if Dayna was planning to drag him into the mud. "Um, having a nice time?"

"Lovely." Dayna laughed and scooped some mud off her arms. "It's supposed to be very good for the complexion." She began stripping the mud off her collarbone.

"Um." Vila thought it better to look elsewhere for the moment. "Oh, there goes Avalon's second... what's his name...Chevner? What a sourpuss. Just looking at him gives me heartburn an hour later." Vila continued looking about the compound, and spotted a familiar lanky shape leaning on a fence-rail, stripped to the waist, and gleaming with sweat. "Pity you couldn't gene-splice a clone halfway between him and Tarrant. With half Tarrant's arrogance, and half Chevner's brooding, he'd be irresistible to women."
"Just women?" Dayna said, teasing.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I couldn't stand to kiss anyone who had a beard. Would make me think of my Great-great Aunt Maud. What a tartar she was!"

"And you've been taking after her lately, Vila. I can't see anyone with a beard wanting to kiss anyone with a tongue as sharp as yours! You'd shave it right off."

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"Avon."

"Avalon." Avon looked up from his work. "Taking Orac for a walk? Permit me." He took the computer from her and placed it on his desk. Then he folded his hands and looked at her.

Avalon frowned. "Someone told you."

Avon tilted his head in acknowledgement. "Some rebels are more talkative than others. That could be a disadvantage in certain circumstances. You might want to consider testing for that."

Avalon came in and claimed the other chair, pulling it up until she was only inches away from Avon. "Since you are still here, I assume you are willing to answer my questions?"

Avon's mouth twisted in distaste. "I am not willing to inconvenience myself by attempting to avoid the inevitable. Go ahead."

Avalon slipped Orac's key in place. "Orac, are you prepared to analyze the following conversation for veracity?"

_It is a misuse of my valuable time._

Avon said, "Oh, don't fight it, Orac. Let's get it over with."

_Very well._ The computer still sounded grumpy.

Avalon asked, "Avon, is your loyalty given to the rebellion?"

Avon stared straight into Avalon's eyes as he said, "No."

_That is a true statement._

Avon stood up. "Well, that would seem to be that. I'll be leaving on the next available transport. I've learned nothing important about your organization, so perhaps you will not feel the need to execute me. It would, of course, be the most prudent thing to do."

_Subject believes statement to be true._

Avalon held up her hand. "I'm not finished. Sit down."

Avon scowled but he obeyed. "I don't see why..."

"Is your loyalty given to Blake?"

"No!"

_That is a false statement._
Avon flinched. "So much for honor among computers."

"One last question."

"No."

"You agreed to answer," Avalon pointed out. "Do you love Blake?"

Avon's mouth worked. "There are so many different meanings to that word that it is essentially meaningless. Perhaps I love Blake as a comrade-in-arms."

*False.*

"You can be reprogrammed," Avon muttered.

"Yes or no, do you love Blake?"

Avon's mouth opened and shut a few times before he said, "Yes."

*Statement is true.*

Avon pulled Orac's key and handed it to Avalon. He looked at her for a long moment, then sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "He has never given me the slightest encouragement. I was certain he was as blissfully ignorant in that regard as in so many others, but apparently he did notice, and sent you to make certain before accusing me of falling prey to sentiment."

Avalon said, "I think he hoped too much to believe in the evidence of his own eyes."

Avon blinked. "Blake... hoped?"

"He told me he loves you."

"Blake..." Avon shook his head. "I need some time to think about this."

Avalon rose and picked up Orac. "You're not leaving?"

Avon gave her a rueful smile. "No. I've already tried living without Blake. I just need to adjust to the possibility of living with him."

Avalon smiled and left.

B7 B7 B7

"This is silly," Vila protested.

Blake said, "Stand still while I fix your..."

"Prickles?" Vila looked down at his straw-covered arms. "I mean, I like a party as much as the next man..." At Blake's tolerant look, Vila said, "well, provided the next man isn't Avon. Catch him in this..." Vila saw the sadness in Blake's eyes and went on, hurriedly, "at least could I leave off the top-piece?"

"No. That's got the voice-modulator in it. The whole point of this is that no one knows who anyone else is. It's a trust-building exercise that Avalon adapted from the natives." With that, Blake plopped the conical, straw-covered cap on Vila's head, completing the ambulatory haystack image.
Vila fiddled with the straw hat until he lined up the two peepholes for his eyes. "It itches already," Vila said in his filtered voice. Gender, accent, and intonations were all flattened to a generic 'human' voice.

"Vila." Blake wasn't yet in costume, and his voice was quite expressive enough to convince Vila.

"Oh, all right. But I bet I'll be bored stiff."

Vila stood in an alcove formed by a support pillar in a corner of the largest room in the largest building in the rebels' compound. It was noisy, music and voices intermingling, the place packed nearly elbow to straw-flaking elbow with people. Vila gave up trying to tell haystacks apart after a few minutes. The haystacks were enjoying themselves enormously, chatting, laughing and dancing with each other, without seeming to care what the sex of their partner might be. There was something about being totally anonymous that made it seem you could do anything without blame.

A panting haystack approached Vila. "This corner taken?"

"Help yourself." Vila applied his detective skills to this new subject. He couldn't see anything but hay, but he smelled... he took a deep sniff to be sure. Yes, underneath the grassy smell was the odor of a very expensive cologne that Avon had favored. Probably a present from Blake. "It's a good party."

"Yes." The haystack had caught its breath, but showed no sign of moving back to join the crowd, which made Vila certain it was Avon.

"Avon? It is you, isn't it?"

Vila's neighbor laughed. "I don't think I'm supposed to answer that."

"You are Avon," Vila said with satisfaction. "You may think I haven't noticed, but anyone who's ever met you knows you never say 'yes' or 'no' when you can say 'maybe'." Vila suddenly thought that perhaps Avon wouldn't be best pleased if Vila knew him so well. Better he should think this clever person one of Avalon's lieutenants. "At least, I've kept my eyes open on the way to Messina, and I know Avon's crew. You're Avon."

"Ah. Well, have it your own way. What else do you know about us, oh wise and discerning person?"

The mockery came through despite the lack of intonation, and Vila felt like showing off. "Soolin's cold on the outside, but there's a fire inside."

"Anyone could see that."

"Dayna's still a child, for all her ways with guns and bombs."

"I thought you were going to tell me something the universe didn't know?"

"Tarrant. He's the biggest soft-heart I've ever seen. He tags after Blake like a puppy-dog, and he worships the ground Avon walks on. He's gay, but he makes a big play for the ladies to try to throw everyone off-track."

"Ah." There was a long pause. "Interesting theory. You've missed one out. What of Vila?"
Vila couldn't decide what to say about himself. He certainly didn't want to give Avon any ammunition for their verbal battles. "I didn't spend much time with Vila."

"I can understand that. That mouth of his would drive away the most open-hearted man in the universe. Cold, cruel and sarcastic. It's a wonder one of his own crew hasn't done something about it." The haystack shook itself. "Would you care to dance?"

Vila was still smarting from the harsh assessment of his character, and seized the opportunity to end the line of conversation. "Only if I can lead."

The haystack laughed. "Are you a leader, then? Perhaps you are Avalon, under the shrubbery."

"Perhaps I am. I am a good dancer."

Vila found the haystack to be a good partner, once he, (Vila had gotten close enough in the press of the crowd to be certain of that much) got past the habit of leading, and let Vila guide their steps.

After a particularly daring pirouette, the haystack said, "You are very light-footed."

Vila was light-headed with the exertion of the dance and the wicked pleasure of having Avon's arms around him and he forgot himself enough to reply as in normal repartee, "No, no, it's light-fingered."

Vila nearly tripped as his partner stopped dead.


And the haystack left a bewildered Vila standing in the middle of the room, feeling that something horrible had just happened, but he didn't know what it had been. Why would Avon have been so upset? He had hardly said anything about Avon. It had been Tarrant he'd gleefully eviscerated with his tongue. Oh, no. In a blinding flash, Vila saw his mistake, and his life, pass before his eyes. Too short, and with nowhere near enough appreciation for his skills.

Chevner had been in charge of the costumes, and had marked the one assigned to Blake with a single red-dyed straw in the back of the headpiece. It had taken a while, but he located Blake and worked his way through the crowd. "You're Tarrant, aren't you?"

"How can you tell?" Blake replied.

"Your boots aren't our regular issue, and you're too tall for Vila or Avon, much too wide for Soolin or Dayna, and Blake wouldn't take time off from planning missions to attend a party."


Chevner was pleased that Blake was going to play along. "I wanted to ask you to help. I don't think Avalon's doing the right thing, trying to convince Avon to break with Blake."

Blake went so still that none of his straw rustled. Then he drew an audible breath and said, "Go on."

"I heard that she's been working on him for weeks, promising him a free hand in a research laboratory somewhere, along with that computer, Orac. I know he's clever, but I don't think it's worth alienating Blake. After all, even though Blake hasn't done much lately, he's an important symbol of the early days of the resistance."
Blake was silent for a long moment, then he said, "Avon always wanted to be rich and secure."
Blake whirled and left the party.

Once outside, Blake ripped off the headpiece, and took a deep, lung-filling breath of the clean air of Messina.

"Blake! There you are." Tarrant, also minus his straw hat, strode up to him, grinning. "I just heard from Avalon. Avon's passed the loyalty check."

"I wish her joy of him," Blake said.

"What?"

"He'll be very happy in his own private lab, I'm sure."

"What are you going on about?" Tarrant was shouting now. After he'd left the party Avalon had seen him and told him the good news. He had made a determined effort to be pleased for Blake's sake.

Blake started to walk away. Tarrant put a hand on Blake's straw-covered arm. Blake whirled so swiftly that Tarrant lost his balance and fell. Padded by straw the only thing hurt was his pride, but that had already taken a bruising. Tarrant leaped to his feet and yelled, "What is the matter with you!"

Others heard the raised voices, and came at a run, Avalon among the group. She hadn't put on a costume, and stood out among the shaggy, pale yellow shapes of her people, even though they'd all removed their hats when they'd come to investigate the cause of the disturbance.

Blake turned to her. "I know I have no right to protest anything you do for the good of the rebellion. But you could have told me!"

"What?" Avalon said, in total confusion, looking from Blake to Tarrant and back again. "Tell you what?"

Blake lowered his voice, to a soft, dangerous growl. "That you'd got Avon's loyalty for you, that you were going to give him a lab where I'd never see him again!"

"I don't know where you got that idea," Avalon said. "I did just as I said I would." She came close to Blake. "And Avon did just as I said he would."

Blake looked down at her. "He said yes? To everything?"

"He didn't say no." Avalon shook her head. "Give him time. He's confused, too." She took Blake's arm. "Let's go back to the party."

Blake noticed the spectators. "All right. Tarrant?"

"I've had enough party to last me, Blake," Tarrant said. "Enough fools telling me what a fool I am." Tarrant turned and strode away, without noticing that Vila was in the crowd, well within earshot, staring at Tarrant, white-faced and visibly shaken.

Blake saw Vila and was shaken out of his own musings by concern for his old friend. "Vila! What's wrong? Are you ill?"
"It's Tarrant." Vila groaned. "I've gone and told him things I never meant to say, but I didn't know it was him!"

Blake lowered his voice. "What did you say?" Blake pulled Vila to the side of a building, waving Avalon and the others to go on without them.

"I said he follows you like a puppy-dog, and he worships Avon."

Blake frowned. "That might annoy him, but I'm sure he's forgiven you worse remarks when you were drunk. Don't worry about it."

"I also said he was gay, but he was hiding by pretending to be a lady-killer."

"Ah. That might be a problem." Blake tried to bite a knuckle, and got a mouthful of straw instead.

"It's not as if I care about him, but..." Vila shrugged. "Now he hates me."

Blake puzzled it over for a moment. "Are you certain, about Tarrant, I mean? You weren't just winding him up, and had it backfire?"

Vila gave Blake a disparaging look. "I was in his brother's mind when he died. He knew. Tarrant's family didn't care for it and they had him conditioned as a teenager. Orac swears the conditioning wore off, but since he hadn't any... um... recent experience, he wouldn't let himself believe that he was finding men attractive."

"Men, as in one Delta thief?" Blake said, adding two and two and getting a three-credit note.

Vila shuffled his feet in the grass. "I wouldn't have him on a bet."

"Now that you've lost his heart, you mean?"

"He won it with cocked dice, so it doesn't count."

"Ah, Vila." Blake gave Vila a hug. "I'm sorry. And here I am in the opposite situation."

"What?"

Blake smiled. "Avon. Avalon spoke to him, and he admits he loves me." Blake was sure Avalon would not have hinted at anything less.

"Oh. I see. Everyone's got a boyfriend but me."

"I could ask among Avalon's men."

Vila wrinkled his nose in distaste. "There's not an interesting one in the lot. Do you have a brother, Blake?" he said, teasing.

Blake couldn't quite hide the pain that inadvertent remark cost him. "No, but would you have me, then?" he responded to the teasing with his own.

Vila pretended to consider it seriously. "No, not unless I could have a clone or two as well, for days when you're off blowing up things."

Blake laughed. "I don't think it's likely. Why don't you go on back to the party? They're about to have the unmasking, and after that the refreshments."

Vila brightened. "Perhaps I'll go drown my sorrows then." Vila gave Blake a hug. "You take care
of Avon. He needs looking after, worse than anyone I ever met."

Vila walked back to the party, back as straight as straw would allow. Blake shook his head.

"Vila has a good heart," Avalon said, when Blake met her later in her office. The two leaders found that they could relax together and discuss problems that couldn't be shared with anyone else. Such as Vila and Tarrant.

Blake agreed, "I think he would be a good match for Tarrant. Tarrant is noble, brave and honest, but perhaps too serious."

"On the theory that opposites attract, I must admit Vila a likely candidate, but they'd talk each other mad in a week," Avon said. He had come in with Avalon, but refused to tell them where he'd been. All he would say was that Blake had to give him time. "And the rest of us, by listening to them."

"Avon."

Avon dropped his gaze from Blake's sincere, loving look. "Don't do that," he complained softly. "It isn't fair, you know." Then he looked back up into Blake's face. "I suppose if the two of them are fully occupied with each other, it would make life more pleasant for me. But how are we to arrange this?"

Avalon smiled. "I have a plan."

Avon sighed. "Well, it's bound to be better than any of Blake's. But his mouth quirked upward as he spoke.

"Well, Blake?" Avon stood beside his bed, back to Blake.

Blake entered Avon's quarters and shut the door behind himself. "It's a bit Spartan," he commented, taking in the narrow bed, pair of spindle-legged chairs and small desk over-burdened with a red transparent box full of clunky-looking electronics hooked up to Orac by several sets of wires.

"I wasn't referring to the decor." Avon clasped his hands behind his back, straightened and turned to face Blake.

"Oh, well, in that case." Blake let his eyes rove up and down Avon's black homespun-clad form. "The packaging is rather dull. One can only hope the contents make up for it."

Avon let out an exasperated sound. "I would like to speak seriously to you for once. Kindly do me the courtesy of reciprocating."

"All right." Blake took the nearest chair, spun it around and sat on it, letting the slatted backrest serve as a barrier between him and Avon. He instinctively felt they needed some distancing mechanism.
Avon relaxed as soon as Blake sat, letting his hands hang free at his sides. "We have finally admitted to a mutual physical attraction."

Blake shook his head. "More than that."

After a pause, Avon nodded. "Yes, well, I have always recognized the force of your personality." He began fiddling with the ring-finger of his left hand.

"And yours," Blake said, letting his voice drop to a more intimate register. He kept his gaze locked with Avon's. Avon's eyes weren't very good at keeping secrets. At the moment Blake read uncertainty verging on fear in them. "I do quite like you, when I'm not being furiously angry with you, that is."

Avon nodded again. "I could say the same. But is that enough to base a... relationship upon? Physical attraction, and liking?"

"Perhaps not, but there is one other thing." Blake got up and approached Avon. He took Avon's hand and placed it against his chest. "I have you in my heart, so deeply that nothing you or I or anyone else can do will drive it out."

Avon swallowed nervously, and his eyes widened. "Nothing?" he whispered, and his other hand pressed firmly against the fresh scars on Blake's torso. He had never seen them, but he knew to the millimeter where they lay, how far they stretched, how close they had come to being fatal.

Blake put his other hand over Avon's and moved it in a caress against his belly. "Not even that. We are in a war and sometimes terrible things just...happen. Friendly fire, Avon."

Abruptly Avon pulled away, and Blake let him go. "Friendly fire? I think you go too far with your turn-the-other-cheek forgiveness."

"I didn't forgive you, Avon." Blake saw Avon stiffen again, and he came behind Avon, wrapping both arms around Avon and resting his chin on Avon's shoulder, his beard rasping over the harsh cloth. He could smell Avon's hair, recently washed in something that reminded Blake of oranges and pine trees. He whispered into Avon's ear. "I never blamed you."

Avon laughed, and Blake tightened his grip against the shivery feeling of near-hysteria, trying to lend Avon the strength he needed to finally confront the emotions he'd hidden from for years. Avon said, "Don't tell me you blamed yourself for not being supremely wise and understanding? Or was it Tarrant's fault for warning me? Or Vila's, for not leaping forward, saying 'oh, Blake wouldn't betray you'? You might as well blame that woman who sounded the alarm. I killed her. I nearly killed you! How can you not blame me?"

"It just happened. If I was to blame anyone, it would be the Federation, for creating a society so perverted that strong-willed men are forced to rebel, to learn to suspect everyone, to learn that waiting that extra moment to make sure might mean that more people died. But I won't live that way, constantly seeking someone to blame. I'm rebelling to make things better, not to seek revenge."

Avon went still. "I'm not that self-controlled. I wanted revenge," he admitted. "I went after the man who killed Anna."

Blake drew a deep breath. "And?"

"And I sentenced a pathetic creature named Shrinker to death. And then I found Anna, alive, a Federation agent. And I killed her myself." Avon's voice was totally toneless. "I had thought I loved her, and yet, when she threatened me, I did not hesitate to shoot her first."
Blake hugged Avon tighter, and said, "I doubt it will make you feel any better, Avon, but I am selfish enough to be glad that you are alive, and that she is dead. I had been afraid of her, you see."

"Afraid, you?"

"You had loved her, and even the memory of that love was strong enough to push me aside."

Avon didn't answer. He just leaned back into Blake's embrace. "I'm too tired to argue with you," Avon muttered after several minutes. "If you really do want to bond with me, who am I to stand in your way."

"Was that a yes?" Blake asked hesitantly.

Avon turned his head so that their beards mingled, dark silk against brown wool, and their lips were almost touching. "I rather think it was. Of course, if you'd rather wait until morning, I might be able to access some files of forbidden verses and offer you something more roman..."

At that point, Avon was interrupted, as Blake brought his mouth down on Avon's. After several minutes of increasing activity as hands roamed and bodies rubbed and mouths sucked, Blake pulled back, panting, to say, "I have only one question for you, Avon."

With tousled hair and his shirt pulled half-open at the throat and fasteners flopping on his trousers, Avon was at a slight disadvantage in his attempt to appear dignified. "Yes?"

"How do you feel about pre-nuptial sex?"

"It would be better without the beards," Avon replied, "But I'll settle for what I can get."

"I want to see you, Avon. All of you."

Avon nodded, and went to the nearest chair. He removed his shirt and draped it over the back of the chair, then sat down to pull off his boots. "This isn't a spectator sport," he said, noticing that Blake wasn't undressing.

"Oh? Pity, I'm sure I could sell the tickets for a profit."

Avon smiled, teeth startling white against the dark gloss of beard. "Fifty-fifty, Blake. Remember, what's yours is mine." Avon finished disrobing and neatly disposing of his garments then stood and smoothed down his ruffled hair.

"And vice-versa," Blake replied as he started taking off his own clothes. Instinct made him leave the long-tailed, sand-colored shirt for last. Boots, socks, belt, dark trousers, underpants all fell haphazardly to the floor.

Avon looked at him. "If you can bear it, I can bear it," he said, gently, moving forward to unbutton Blake's shirt with deliberate slowness. He pushed the opened shirt back over Blake's shoulders and stepped back as it fell. Blake had lost weight recently and his skin hung slack, half-covering the scar that crossed his mid-section. Avon's eyes locked on the shiny pink splash, as irregular as the outlines of a continent seen from space. He dropped to his knees, and both hands rose to smooth out the skin and trace the asymmetry, his mouth tightening in fierce concentration as if he committed the map to memory.

"It doesn't hurt any more," Blake said.
"It will always hurt," Avon replied. Finally he looked up at Blake's face. "Whatever either of us says about blame, or guilt, or forgiveness, there will always be some measure of doubt. You will wonder if I am kind to you because I am attempting to atone. I will wonder if you are kind to me because it keeps me useful to your cause."

"So long as we are kind to each other, does it really matter why?" Blake put his hand down to caress Avon's face. "Suck me, Avon."

"Why?"

Blake gave Avon an affectionately exasperated look. "Because I'm as randy as a teenager, your bed is too small for other things we might do, and the sight of you on your knees is about to make me lose control."

"Oh." Avon shifted his attention from the large, pink scar under his hands, to the large, red cock before his face. "Well, now, as long as you're being logical, I suppose I ought to reward you." He opened his mouth and licked. Blake bucked forward, and Avon put his hands on Blake's hips to steady himself, and set out to drive Blake wild. It was flatteringly easy. Blake kept moaning and rocking, and grabbing at Avon's head, then releasing him with semi-coherent apologies, only to grab him again a few seconds later.

Avon's knees hurt, and his back was warning him that he wasn't a teenager despite Blake's illusions of youth, he was half-choked and Blake had somehow managed to bruise Avon's left ear. He couldn't remember when he had last been happier. And then Blake said something that might have been a curse, or Avon's name, or possibly an endearment- or a combination of all three- and jerked in Avon's mouth, and nearly pulled out a handful of Avon's hair.

Blake finally unclenched and staggered backward, half-falling on Avon's bed. After a moment, he rolled over and looked for Avon. "Stop that!"

Avon shook his head, and continued taking matters into his own hands.

Blake growled and got off the bed. Avon was not cooperative, but Blake wrestled him onto the bed, then pressed him flat on his back. "It's my turn."

"Then get on with it, dammit!" Avon shouted, without worrying about the thinness of the mock-plaster walls, and the fact that Dayna, Soolin, Tarrant and Vila all were quartered in the same building. "Suck me, Blake!"

"I thought you'd never ask," Blake said, grinning, and then bent to his task. He was calmer now and took control of the situation, managing to do some exploration while Avon was too distracted to interfere. Avon's balls felt lovely, soft velvet fuzz warm against his palm and when he sucked on them, Avon opened his thighs and allowed Blake access to the crevice between. The hair was rougher there, but the skin beneath was as delightfully tender as Blake had dreamed on all those lonely Liberator nights when he wasn't sure what he wanted, or why, just that he wanted. He still wanted, but now he knew that sex alone wasn't the answer.

He wanted permanence, the assurance that the face on the pillow would still be there in the morning, all the mornings. He held Avon back from orgasm as long as he could, but it seemed Avon had been as deprived as Blake of late, and it was only a few minutes before Avon's hips lunged forward, then fell back.

Blake was a little disappointed that Avon made no noise, but when he looked down and saw that Avon's eyes were shut and his mouth open in graceless, honest exhaustion, he decided it was a tribute to his efforts. He stood up and considered his options. There was a shower down the hall,
and his own quarters, with a more spacious bed, awaited in another building. He could leave Avon a note explaining the logic of it, and they would both be more comfortable for the night.

Avon turned a little in his sleep, and his open hand flung out to one side, as if seeking. The fingers twitched, and Blake found his own hand going to fill Avon's. Avon's hand tightened on his. "Oh, well, nothing ventured, nothing gained," Blake whispered, as he cautiously climbed onto the creaking bed in the small space left un-Avon-occupied. Once there, he shifted them around until Avon was sprawled across him, finally reaching equilibrium with one arm around Avon's chest, and his other hand resting on a soft mound of buttock.

It was warmer than Blake was accustomed to sleeping, and they were both sweat-sticky, but the comfort of having a living, trusting Avon in his arms sent him almost immediately to sleep.

Blake woke to birdsong outside the open window and the scent of a dawn-blooming vine rich and heavy as perfume. But there was no warm, sweaty body in his arms, no soft, rasping snore in his ear. Blake made up his mind to suffer his grief quietly.

Avon had obviously ... what was that noise - a quiet, 'click-clack click' semi-continuous, and occasionally interrupted by a series of softer 'thuck, thuck, thucks'? Curious, Blake opened his eyes to see Avon sitting at the small desk, fully dressed and recently washed, judging by the still rebellious wave his hair indulged in before it was properly trained for the day.

Blake rolled up onto one elbow and enjoyed watching the sight of Avon unselfconsciously practicing some arcane art involving complicated hand-movements on an alpha-numeric control console.

"Enjoying the view?" Avon asked, without taking his eyes off the small monitor, or pausing in his hand-movements.

"Actually, yes. But what are you doing?"

"Nothing, really." Avon stopped then, and turned to Blake. "This antique is a computer, believe it or not, and remarkably, it still functions. Of course, it doesn't do anything useful."

"Then why bother with it?"

"It's better than mud-wrestling," Avon said dryly. "Avalon lent Orac to me so that I could collate and translate the games it contains into a usable format. She felt that would constitute 'recreation' for me. That was the object of our visit to this charmingly rustic planet, was it not?"

"I hope you're not going to spend all our bonded life playing with computers when I want you in bed with me."

Avon tilted his head to one side. "Get a bigger bed, then."

"Avon."

"Yes?"

"You didn't deny that we'd be bonded."

"No." Avon smiled suddenly. "I didn't, did I?" He got up, walked over to Blake, leaned down and kissed him thoroughly, then suddenly turned and walked away, returning to sit in front of the old computer. "But I did promise to finish this and I find you distracting. Go away until the
ceremony."

"How does later today suit you?"

Avon frowned. "Tomorrow morning. I do want to finish this and I am reasonably certain it will impossible once we move to a room with an indecent-sized bed."

"All right, then." Blake got up. "That will give me time to find you a proper bonding gift. How about something in black leather?" he said, teasing.

"So long as it is something I can wear in public."

"That limits it, but I'll manage. And what will you give me?" Blake said, smiling.

Avon turned to face Blake directly. "Everything," he said simply, then he turned back to the computer. "Damn." He reached around to the side of the computer and pressed a recessed button. The machine made a more pitiful groan than Orac at its worst, and its monitor went dark, then flickered as it began burbling. Avon sighed, and said, "Crashed. Again. I think it's an incompatibility problem."

"I'm sure you'll work it out," Blake said, leaning up against Avon.

"Yes. Well." Avon abruptly realized that Blake was not only naked, he was increasingly interested. "Go take a shower. A cold one."

"I'm definitely locking up all the computers on our honeymoon." Blake picked up the neatly folded stack of his clothes, which he remembered as being scattered across the room. Blake looked at the clothes, then at Avon, who pretended fascination in a series of rectangular icons appearing across the monitor. "I'll see you later, Avon."

"You've already seen me," Avon muttered. "Go do something rebellious to keep your mind, such as it is, occupied."

"And I love you, too," Blake said on his way to the showers.

Avon smiled at the computer.

B7 B7 B7

Jahn Chevner and his friend Konrad met in one of the storerooms, ostensibly while checking the supplies. Chevner was disgruntled. "Avon and Blake are going to be bonded. Avalon thinks it's sweet. Sweet! It makes me sick, thinking of Blake getting everything his own way. I'd give just about anything to break up that bonding."

Konrad said, smugly, "I can cross them up."

"How?"

"I've become friendly with the Mellanby girl. Her private quarters are in the same building as Avon's, only two doors away. She would let me spend the night with her."

Chevner frowned. "And how would that break up his relationship with Blake?"

"You go to Avalon, and tell her that you've learned that Avon is a traitor, unfit to bond with Blake."

"She's not likely to take my word over Avon's," Chever said, sourly.
"You'll have proof. You bring Blake and Avalon to stand outside Avon's window. I'll get Avon out of his quarters with a false message once the girl's asleep. I'll wear all black and stand in his room at the window giving a pretty speech of faithlessness, pretending to contact the Federation."

"It's dangerous." Chevner rubbed his chin. "How can I stop them from breaking in and finding you?"

"I'll make it obvious it's a personal betrayal, of Blake himself, not of the rebellion."

"Blake might still try to confront Avon."

"That's where you have to convince them that they must let Avon alone until they can find out who his accomplices are."

Chevner nodded. "It's worth the risk. With Avon disgraced and Blake heart-broken, Avon will have to rely on me."

"All right, then, I'll do it. But it is dangerous, so I expect to be well paid for my risk."

"How does five thousand credits sound?"

"Music to my ears, Jahn, it's music to my ears."

B7 B7 B7

Tarrant wandered into Avalon's study, looking for a recreational book-tape for distraction. The first one he chanced on was a lurid romance, cover decorated with two improbably beautiful young men locked in embrace. He dropped it hastily. "I can't believe it," he said to himself, shaking his head, "Avon in love. Avon of all people! Mr. Ice-heart himself melted into a soppy-eyed puddle at the thought of Blake's manly charms." Tarrant shuddered. "Not me, no sir."

His ears caught the sound of approaching footsteps and accompanying voices. "Oh, hell, Avalon and Rebel Love, himself. I can't face them." There was a recess between shelves of book-tapes, leading to another room. He ducked into it, and discovered, too late, that the door was locked. It was a fairly deep alcove, and thanks to the primitive lighting system- widely spaced hanging lanterns- it was also dark. Tarrant stood still, and hoped to be overlooked until they left.

"I enjoyed that, Blake," Avalon said as she, Blake and Soolin entered. She grinned, and pointed at an edge of blue cloak caught on a splinter of shelf. She whispered, "I thought I saw Tarrant come in here."

Blake nodded. He glanced at Soolin, who had been primed as to the 'plot' against Tarrant and Vila. She was amused by the whole thing.

"Yes, Blake, that was lovely," Soolin said, "It was kind of Sarkoff to give you recordings of ancient music. I particularly enjoyed that last song." She started to hum, then said, "I can't recall the words, but surely you must know it by heart."

Blake chuckled. "You mean, because of Avon? It does rather remind me of him."

"Then sing it for us," Avalon urged.

"I've no voice for singing," Blake protested.

"Nonsense," Soolin said. "I'll wager you've a fine singing voice. And when you're in love, you
must sing."

Avalon nodded. "It's in the rules I believe, Blake."

Pressed back against the wall, Tarrant winced. *He's not going to. He is! Love is a madness all right. I'm well out of it.*

Blake spread his legs a bit, and put his hands behind his back, in an unconscious imitation of his childhood memories of being called upon to recite his party piece at family gatherings. He drew a deep breath and sang:

"I've got nothing to be ashamed of
Love's been a little bit hard on me
If I shy away it's only because
Love's been a little bit hard on me

"Love's been a little
Oh love's been a little
Love's been a little bit hard on me
Love's been a little
Oh you know just been a little
Love's been a little bit hard on me

"I can remember when it's been so much
Love's been a little bit hard on me
I shy away at the slightest touch
Love's been a little bit hard on me

"Come out, come out
To the hopeless romantic inside
Shout it's all right, all right
To stay so dark
So close to the light

"I'll be back when I calm my fears
Love's been a little bit hard on me
See you around in a thousand years
Love's been a little bit hard on me"

"I do love that song," Soolin said.

"But not the singer," Blake replied ruefully.

"I thought you sounded wonderful," Avalon said.

Tarrant thought if Blake was an animal making that noise, he would have shot it to put it out of its misery.

Avalon took Soolin's arm and began urging her out of the study. "Look in Sarkoff's collection and find some music for Avon."

Soolin smiled broadly. "Something light and romantic?"

"Just the thing."

Soolin left just as Avon entered the room. "Blake. Avalon," he said by way of greeting. "I thought
I heard someone being tortured in here. I'm relieved to find it was only you."

"It wasn't too difficult finding me then, Avon?" Blake said in a light and teasing voice.

"No, I can't say I find you too hard to take," Avon replied, coming quite close to Blake, and looking steadily into his eyes.

Blake smiled.

Avalon turned to Avon. "Now, tell me, are you sure about Vila?"

Avon nodded. "He's hopelessly in love with Tarrant. I was surprised, and not just because I know he likes women."

"Likes?" Blake stressed the word.

"Yes, I see what you mean. It's a pity. Tarrant always looked down his nose at Vila because of his grade. He hasn't a chance."

Blake frowned. "Vila is making himself ill over it."

"You must be exaggerating," Avon said, "Vila jokes about love. It couldn't possibly matter that much to him."

"I think it does." Blake sighed.

"Has he told Tarrant?" Avalon asked.

"He hasn't the courage," Avon replied.

Blake said, "Not that it would do him any good. I caught him writing a love-note to Tarrant. It was pitiful. He ripped it up and cried, and said that Tarrant would never have him, not on a bet and that he wouldn't ever even dare to try to catch Tarrant's eye, for fear of making him hate Vila. I tell you, I don't think suicide was far from his mind."

Avalon suggested, "Perhaps someone else ought to tell Tarrant."

Avon said, harshly, "He'd only use the knowledge to torment Vila further."

Blake sighed. "That would be a crime. Poor Vila, he's much more than Tarrant credits him. How many men can keep a sense of humor and still care about others, after all Vila has been through?"

"And," Avon admitted, "he is not the fool Tarrant takes him for. His Intelligence Quotient is at least the equal of Tarrant's and his common sense far superior." Avon paused. "At least, he is intelligent in everything except in loving Tarrant."

"Perhaps if I gave Vila an official position in my organization, Tarrant might respect him?" Avalon considered. "Try telling Tarrant that."

Avon said, "But would it be the best thing for Vila, if Tarrant should agree to pair-bond with him?"

Blake said, "Vila might die without Tarrant and he'll certainly never say a word to him on his own."

"But what if Tarrant treats it all as a joke? That would surely kill Vila," Avon rebutted.
"Tarrant is an honorable man," Blake replied. "Perhaps he's good enough to deserve Vila."

Avalon said, "He seems cheerful and quite clever."

Reluctantly Avon said, "He does have a brain, when he cares to exercise it."

Avalon said, "He's brave."

Blake put in, "And sensible in a fight. He avoids it if possible, and if not, he throws himself into it wholeheartedly." Blake sighed. "I'm sorry for Vila. Perhaps we should tell Tarrant."

"No, Blake," Avon said gently. "Vila must learn to live without Tarrant."

"Let's hope he can," Blake replied. "I wish Tarrant could look at himself, and see how unworthy he is of Vila's love."

Avalon sighed. "Well, we really can't do anything about it. Come and examine my plans for the fourth sector uprising. It's easier to break the Federation's grip than to soften a hard-hearted young man."

Avon, Blake and Avalon left the room. Once out of earshot, Blake grinned and told Avon, "Later, you and Soolin will work on Vila. For now, have Vila sent to call Tarrant to the conference."

B7 B7 B7

Tarrant stepped out of the alcove, shaken. "It must be true. Avon pities Vila. Vila loves me? Enough to think of taking his own life? He can't even stand the sight of blood. Apparently, that's all that's kept him from it."

"And they all think I'm such a heartless bastard I'd tease him over it? Vila's not a bad sort. Not really." Tarrant was silent for a long moment, imagining himself and Vila embracing. Touching. Lips meeting. Bodies hot against each other. Vila yielding to him... Vila demanding Tarrant's surrender... Tarrant gasped in astonishment and looked down, reaching out with a hand to touch the evidence of his arousal. "Bloody hell. Vila was right. And so are they. I've underestimated him all along."

"I'd never considered marrying. Maybe it's because I was always picturing a woman as my partner, and I couldn't imagine waking up to the same woman every day. But Vila... Vila would be different." Tarrant remembered Vila's smile, and the courage he could display when least expected. He'd saved Tarrant's life more than once, and asked nothing in return. It was time Tarrant started thinking about someone else's happiness.

The door to the study opened, and Vila came in. "Oh, there you are. It was against my better judgment, but I'm to fetch you to a conference in Avalon's office."

"Thank you for going to the trouble."

Vila shrugged. "No trouble. I wouldn't go to any more trouble for you than you'd do for me. If it was trouble, I wouldn't have come."

"Oh, so you enjoyed bringing the message?"

"Yeah, sure, I enjoyed it just as much as you enjoy running into blaster fire. Go on, Tarrant, don't keep them waiting." Vila left.

Tarrant smiled. "Against his better judgment, meaning: He didn't trust himself alone with me. He
wouldn't go to any more trouble for me than I'd do for him? That from a man who's saved my life. He must hope I care that much in return. And as much as I enjoy running into blaster fire? He knows how I love excitement. He's practically confessed he loves me. If I don't take pity on him, I'd be a monster. I must love him. I must have loved him all along." Tarrant headed for Avalon's office, grinning.

B7 B7 B7

Avon turned to Dayna. "Vila's in his quarters, sulking. Tell him that you overheard Soolin and I talking about him here in Avalon's ornamental garden. If he hides in the flower-vines behind the gazebo he'll hear everything."

Dayna giggled and ran to her task.

Avon told Soolin, "Your part, however difficult it may be, is to praise Tarrant's manly virtues, if any. I'll be concentrating on how love-sick he is for Vila."

"Right," Soolin said dryly. They both sat on the bench inside the gazebo, waiting. After a few moments Soolin smiled at a 'crack' of broken branch and whispered, "A clumsy little minnow has risen to the lure."

"I've never gone fishing before," Avon murmured back, "I see it's all in using the proper bait." In a more normal tone he said, as if continuing a thought, "No, really, Soolin, it's impossible. Vila's not the type to ever tie himself down to one person, despite his talk of settling down."

"But are you sure? I find it hard to believe that Tarrant loves Vila."

"Avalon and Blake are sure. They asked me to tell Vila, but I persuaded them Tarrant was better let alone to get over his love-sickness and not to tell Vila a word of it."

Soolin said, "But why? If Tarrant loves Vila, surely..."

"No, Vila is too selfish, and proud of his own cleverness. You've heard how he speaks to Tarrant now. Can you imagine how miserable he'd make Tarrant if he knew?"

"Yes, you're probably right. But it is a pity. I mean, Tarrant is handsome, kind, generous, and all Vila can do is make fun of him as if his strengths were weaknesses."

Avon shook his head. "I'd tell Vila to go easy on Tarrant, but it would only make him more determined to practice what he calls wit. He's coward enough to enjoy a defenseless victim. So let Tarrant's love die a slow death of neglect. It'll be less painful than what Vila would do to him."

"Still, you can't be sure what Vila would do, if you don't tell him and give him the chance."

"I'd be more likely to go to Tarrant and warn him away. I know Vila well enough to give Tarrant some home-truths that would make him think less of his larcenous love."

"It doesn't seem fair to Vila. After all, Tarrant is quite a catch."

Avon said, musing. "Yes, probably the finest of the rebels here... after Blake."

"I wasn't comparing the two," Soolin said lightly. "But you must admit his good points. He is brave and clever, and loyal."

Avon shrugged. "I can't deny any of it, but it will do him no good with Vila. Enough of this idle gossip." He and Soolin got up and left the garden.
Vila waited until he was sure they were gone. He sat down in the midst of the vines to think about what they’d said. "My ears are burning." He shook his head. "Tarrant loves me? And I've been driving him away with my smart mouth? Hang in there, Del. I'll make it all right, somehow. I know they're right, you're better than I deserve, but I'll treat you so good, you won't mind that I'm only just Vila, and not some fine and fancy Alpha."

Avalon, Blake, Tarrant and Soolin were walking in the practice yard, idly watching rebels wrestle and tussle unscientifically, but good-humoredly.

Avalon said, "I'll stay for your bonding, Blake, and then I've got to go to Aragon to help organize the resistance there. They need encouragement and seeing a recognizable face helps."

"Perhaps I should accompany you?" Blake offered.

Avalon shook her head firmly. "And spoil your first few days together? No, I'll be fine with Tarrant. He's far too light-hearted to ever fall in love and leave the cause short-handed." She smiled.

Tarrant sighed. "Perhaps you expect too much of me. I doubt I'll be very good company."

Soolin looked at him and said, "True, you have been moping about lately."

Blake smiled. "Perhaps he is in love."

"No," Soolin protested, "Not our Tarrant. I think he's just realized that being a rebel doesn't pay very well."

Tarrant said, "Maybe I have a toothache."

"Well, go to medical..." Avalon looked at him closer. "No, you don't look ill, but something's bothering you. Cheer up, it can't be that bad."

"No, of course not. I'm sure I'm over-reacting. Never mind me," Tarrant replied, shortly.

Blake nodded. "He is in love."

Avalon and the other two looked at Tarrant closely. Tarrant blushed under the scrutiny.

Soolin said in astonishment, "He's shaved his beard! I hadn't noticed. What, did your friend complain?"

"It does make him look even handsomer," Avalon said.

Blake added, "And younger." He sniffed. "Expensive cologne."

Tarrant was purple with suppressed emotion, but he said nothing.

"Definitely in love," Soolin said. "It's the only thing that would keep him quiet."

Blake said, sadly, "I know who loves him."

"Blake," Tarrant said, sounding desperate, "Could I have a word with you alone?"
After Blake and Tarrant left, Soolin and Avalon exchanged satisfied glances.

"He's asking Blake for Vila's hand. Isn't that a bit old-fashioned?" Soolin said.

Avalon said, "I just hope you and Avon have prepared Vila well enough that our two cats won't attack each other when they're thrown in the same sack."

Blake returned in a few minutes, grinning from ear to ear. "He's head over heels. Vila won't stand a chance. He hasn't come straight out with it, but it won't take long now."

Soolin left to inform the other conspirators of their success, while Blake and Avalon simply stood together, enjoying a rare moment of quiet happiness.

Chevner approached them. Avalon took one look at his face and straightened, slipping back into her role as leader. "What is it?"

Chevner looked at Blake, and hesitated.

"I can leave," Blake offered.

Chevner shook his head. "No, you need to hear this too. I'm sorry, but it's about Avon."

"Is he ill? Has there been an accident?" Blake demanded to know.

"No, nothing like that." Chevner looked around and noted that no one else was near. "But I think...no, I know, Avon is disloyal."

Blake stepped forward so swiftly and with such anger on his face that Chevner stumbled backward, his hands rising to protect himself.

Blake stopped himself with a visible effort. "I don't believe you. Not Avon."

"Yes, Avon. Your precious hero-genius is betraying you," Chevner said, furious at himself for quailing before Blake's rage.

Avalon said, quietly, "We are not alone. Lower your voice." She turned to Chevner. "You must have evidence. I won't have my command disrupted by unfounded suspicions."

"Tomorrow Blake and Avon are to be bonded, isn't that so?"

"Yes," Blake admitted. "We had just decided and put it on the events board today. You must have been very quick to spot that."

"I am. Very quick. And I have the good of the rebellion as my highest priority, even above my personal feelings. Can you say the same?" Chevner stared challengingly at Blake.

Blake looked steadily back. "If you can prove Avon is a traitor, my love will not protect him."

Avalon said, "Where is your proof?"

"Tonight he will make the preliminary arrangements for your capture, Blake. Apparently, he tried on Gauda Prime, but miscalculated the greed of the local Federation agent who captured him as well. This time he is going to convince you to accompany him on a 'honeymoon' and turn you in at a supposedly neutral planet."
Blake's hands clenched. "I'll have a word to say about that."

"But not tonight," Chevner said. "He's not going to finalize the plan until just before the bonding ceremony. We need to hear the names of his contacts."

Blake nodded, reluctantly. "If Avon has played me for a fool..." It was easy for Blake to believe that Avon was only using him because he hadn't quite been able to believe his good fortune in finally winning Avon's love. Blake had lost everyone else he'd ever loved, why should Avon be an exception? For a long time, he'd thought Avon hated him. Maybe he'd been right. Maybe Avon was a far better liar than Blake had given him credit for, even willing to put on a show of...well, was it really affection? Or had Avon imagined his Anna in Blake's place? Had all that open-hearted discussion been meant to lull Blake's suspicions? Blake felt sick, but it all seemed to make sense.

B7 B7 B7

The rebel watch shift changed to the 'dog-watch' after midnight which lasted until dawn. It was easy duty on this world and tended to attract the lazier sort of rebel.

Peering through the dimness of a drizzling rain barely lit by starlight, a rebel approached the guard station and the commander of the shift. He'd had the duty so long that it had become his name. "Dog, that you?"

The guard hid his unauthorized smoke-stick in his cupped hand until he saw it was one of his cronies. "Yeh, it's me. What?"

"Got a new man tonight, Jorg Seakle. Tell him the rules."

"Right. If you see anyone you don't recognize, challenge him in Avalon's name. If he won't stop, call for help. Keep quiet when you're watching. We don't want to wake the whole camp. Tell any drunks to go sleep it off." He scratched his shaggy beard. "Look for trouble, but don't make any. That's about it."

Jorg shouldered his weapon and started to march off. Dog called after him. "And you might watch for horseplay tonight. Blake and Avon are to be bonded tomorrow, and someone might think it was funny to tease them." He switched his smoke-stick to the other side of his mouth. "I don't like trouble."

B7 B7 B7

Jorg followed orders. He had never been good at independent thought, so it suited him. He was being very quiet. He heard the two men talking long before he saw them as dim, dark shadows in the rain, huddling under an overhanging eave.

"Borak? Ey, Borak?"

"Here, Konrad, right at your elbow."

"Ah, I thought my elbow itched. I thought it was a scab."

"I owe you one for that, Konrad," Borak said, half-seriously. "Tell me, what have you been scheming?"

"You know me." Konrad laughed. "That jealous fool, Chevner, has paid me five thousand credits to ruin Blake's bonding."
"Five thousand! Some people have more money than sense."

"That's very profound."

"What could you do that would be worth five thousand credits?"

"Fashion, man, is very expensive."

"What?"

"Put a man in black where people expect to see a man in black, and what do they see?"

"A man in black?"

"Sometimes I think you're dumber than dirt, Borak. Then you go and prove it. They see Avon. They see Avon at his window, and they hear him calling the Feds to capture Blake. All Chevner had to do was bring Blake and Avalon to watch the show from the ground outside."

"And did it work?"

Konrad laughed. "Blake was so angry, he swore to arrest Avon at the bonding, Chevner said. He wants to humiliate him in front of his own crew."

Jorg stepped forward, and said in a loud, clear voice, "Stand, in Avalon's name! I'm taking you two in. Come quietly and I won't have to shoot you."

The next morning Dayna and Soolin were with Avon, 'helping' him to prepare for the bonding ceremony.

"Soolin, go shake Vila out of his bunk," Avon said. "Perhaps he'll let you style his hair. It will be a challenge for you."

"You really should let me give you just a trim," Dayna said, clacking a pair of wickedly sharp shears. "A fringe would really look..."

"Cute?" Avon said, sourly, backing away from Dayna. "I think not."

"Well, at least you could wear something a bit brighter. Black's for funerals, Avon!" Dayna said, exasperated.

"I will not wear white lace." He saw Dayna's eyes sparkle as a thought apparently occurred to her. "Nor will I be in something old, borrowed or blue."

Dayna threw herself into a chair, pouting. "You're no fun, Avon."

"It has been said."

"On your bonding day, you shouldn't be feeling low." Dayna giggled. "Unless you're feeling low on Blake's..."

"Dayna!" Avon snapped, just as Vila came into the room.

"Hullo, Avon." Vila sounded as if he was going to his own execution.

Avon frowned. "I'm supposed to be the one with 'bonding jitters'. You're still free."
"It's almost six o'clock. Time you were going." Vila sighed. "I'm sickening for something."

Dayna chuckled. "For lack of something more like. Tottie, Theft, or a Toot?"

Vila muttered, "For something that begins with T, at any rate."

Dayna said, "Well, if you don't turn chicken, there's no more lone sailing by the stars for you."

"What are you going on about?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," said Dayna. "I just wish everyone could have their heart's desire." She heaved a great sigh. "True love is so romantic." She batted her eyes at Vila.

Avon decided to intervene before Vila had an apoplectic fit. "Here, Vila, what do you think of these new gloves Blake sent me? The leather's been steeped in a rare scent."

"I'm stuffed, I can't smell a thing."

Dayna laughed. "Oh, you ought to be stuffed. That's just what you need."

"Since when did you become the crew wit?" Vila asked.

"Ever since you became so gloomy. Aren't I good at it?"

"I won't say no, for fear you'd practice on me. I'm already feeling sick."

"Perhaps you ought to take a Tarrant- I mean a tablet."

Avon said, "I think that struck a nerve."

Vila blushed. "Dayna, you really do let your tongue wag a bit much."

"I'm feeling happy, shouldn't I wag?" Dayna replied, cheekily.

Soolin came in, escorting Avalon, Blake, Tarrant, Chevner and several of the higher-ranking rebels. "It's time, Avon," she said.

"We don't need this... this procession, surely," Avon said, eying the crowd.

Avalon said, "It's traditional. Everyone expects it."

Avon sighed and went to Blake, who was looking glassy-eyed. Out of pity, Avon said nothing to him, although he had thought about remarking on the relative simplicity of having Orac insert their bonding agreement into the universal record without any human presence required.

The group was about to start out for the area set aside for ceremonies when Dog came in.

"Avalon," he said, self-importantly, "My men captured two trouble-makers last night and you should interrogate them."

"I am busy," she replied, glancing at Blake. "You question them first, and bring me the report later."

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The ceremonial chamber was fashioned after a local model, Avon saw with resignation: rough-cut faux stone walls, alcoves filled with crude statuary plasti-molded to match the asymmetric
originals, unhygienic wall hangings computer-printed with scenes from a dubious natural history. Well, it matched the participants, who were all wearing assorted versions of native costume and among the males, mostly sporting an array of beards that were, he hoped, not harboring an authentic crop of vermin. Tarrant's smooth-shaven cheeks practically glowed in the gloom, by comparison.

A white-haired woman in flowing gray robes came forward. She fixed her gaze on Blake and Avon and smiled.

Avon really wished they could have done this simply. Or at least that Blake would look at him, instead of staring directly ahead.

"Fria, we would like the simple ceremony of bonding," Avalon said.

Avon was relieved, as that gave him hope the embarrassment would be over sooner, but Blake still hadn't twitched. Perhaps he'd taken a bit too much liquid courage, following Vila's usual example? Avon sniffed discreetly, but noticed nothing.

The Fria- or perhaps the woman's name was Fria- turned to Blake, and said, "Roj Blake, you have come here to bond this man, Kerr Avon?"

"No," Blake said, and Avon frowned.

Tarrant said hastily, "To be bonded with him. You, Fria, are to bond them."

Avon couldn't understand why Blake had chosen this moment to worry about the niceties of exact word usage. He must be more nervous than Avon thought.

"Kerr Avon, you have come here to be bonded with this man, Roj Blake?"

"Yes," Avon said, glad that a single syllable was all that was necessary, as his throat was unaccountably tight.

Fria said,"If either of you know any reason why you should not be bonded, I ask you to speak now."

Blake looked at Avon. "Do you know any reason, Avon?"

Puzzled, Avon replied, "No."

Fria asked Blake, "Do you know any?"

Tarrant didn't know why Blake was behaving so oddly, but he could see Avon's expression, and decided to avoid any more hair-splitting replies or possible mentions of tracking galleries on Gauda Prime. "I'll answer for him. None."

Blake growled, "You'll answer for me, but I won't answer for you. You'll give up your leader to me?"

Tarrant was as confused as Avon. "Of course."

"And what can I give you back in exchange for such a rich and precious gift?"

Avon was frankly staring at Blake now, certain the man was drugged or ill, but the light in Blake's eyes was familiar. Blake was outraged, but why?

Avalon spoke up, "Nothing. Unless you give him back again."
Blake said, "Thank you, Avalon. I'm in your debt. Take him back, Tarrant. He's a traitor. You wouldn't think it to look at him, I know. How cunning he is, that he can look so confused and innocent. He looked the same way when he shot me, and I forgave him that. But I didn't know then that it was all an act, that all he wanted of me was the price on my head!"

Tarrant said, "That's insane, Blake!"

"It would be insane to bond with that devil! I thought he was an honest man, at least."

Avon finally spoke. "When I was ever less than honest with you, Blake?"

"Oh, on the surface, it seemed honest, all your threats of taking my ship, of subverting my crew, of caring only for wealth. It was very cleverly done, putting all your hatred out in the open, so everyone said he must not really mean it. But you did, didn't you?"

Avon looked at Avalon. "He must be ill."

Avalon's face was cold and set. "He was sick with love of you. Now he is cured, and just in time."

Tarrant protested, "I don't believe this, not any of it. It's a nightmare."

Chevner said, "It's real, and it's true."

Into the silence Vila said softly, "I suppose the bonding's off."

Avon snarled, "That is obvious."

Blake said, "I'll ask you one question, Avon. For the sake of what friendship we might once have had, answer it honestly."

"What, now I'm to be interrogated?" Avon said, angrily.

"I'll have your word on it!"

"I have never lied to you," Avon said, cold rage giving him the control he had been about to lose. "I swear to you, on my honor, I will answer whatever question you have, honestly. I may never speak to you again, as long as I live, so you had better make it a good question."

"Who did you talk to last night, between midnight and one o'clock? Who did you conspire with?"

Avon's brows drew together. "No one. I talked to no one then, and I certainly am part of no conspiracy."

Blake groaned. "I would have forgiven you- at least I would have let you go, if you had told the truth, Avon. Avalon, Chevner and I saw you. We heard you."

Avalon added, "In detail, and with reference to the failed attempt at Gauda Prime. You demanded fail-safes before you would try to betray Blake again and you raised the price you demanded. If they agreed you promised to deliver him, dead or alive, at their convenience."

Avon suddenly pulled a small gun out of his black shirt. "I did not betray anyone, but I will not be betrayed myself. Stand still, Blake!"

Blake glared. "Not then, and not now. Kill me. If you can."
Avon cursed and raised his gun just as Blake charged him. The gun went off with a flash, and two bodies fell to the faux stone floor.

There was absolute silence for a moment, then Blake rose to his feet. He looked down at Avon, and no one wanted to look twice at the expression on his face. "He never was a good shot," was all Blake said.


"Maybe it's better he should die, Dayna," Tarrant said, gently.

"No!" Dayna said, clutching Avon's limp body fiercely.

Chevner said, "Let's go." And Blake, Avalon, and their people left, leaving Avon's body lying on the floor, the shocked Fria and the ex-Scorpio crew staring at him.

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"I loved him, too, in my own way," Tarrant said, "and if he was a traitor, I'd rather he were dead."

Vila said, "I don't believe it. Avon was a bastard, but he never was a traitor. He might have killed Blake, but not for money, never for money."

"But why would Avalon and Blake lie? Avalon needed Avon's skill, and Blake loved him!"

Fria said, "Please, listen to me. I have been a student of human frailty my whole clerical life. I have heard a thousand confessions, and twice as many lies. Avon was innocent. I saw it in his eyes, in the pallor of his skin, in the very way he stood. He lies here, guiltless, brought to this by some terrible mistake."

Avon stirred. He lifted his head, and his eyes were unfocussed as he said, "I am...no... innocent."

He breathed heavily a moment, then went on, "but never guilty... of selling a man..."

Soolin snatched up the fallen gun, and examined it. "Stun!"

Avon said, "All I...could find..."

"That was lucky for you," Vila said.

Avon closed his eyes. "That remains to... be seen."

Tarrant said, "But what about Blake and Avalon, then? Why did they accuse you?"

"I've no idea." Avon pushed away from Dayna and sat up, cradling his head between his hands. Dayna tried to stop him, then gave up and helped him.

"If you're telling the truth, I'll go and..."

"What?" Avon said, looking up at Tarrant, finally.

"Maybe..."

"Attack the rebellion's two most popular rabble-rousers, in the midst of their camp?" Avon raised his eyebrows. "I doubt you would live long enough to accomplish anything."

Fria said, "I would advise you to stay dead, Avon. I can hide you in my sanctum while your friends pass the word about your death."
"What good would that do?" Tarrant asked. "Avon can't spend the rest of his life in your sanctum."

"Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that. You would have time to find out the truth, and thinking that Avon is dead would change the way people feel about him. Blake would remember what he had lost. Avon would become more desirable, his faults less important..."

"Faults?" Avon asked.

Fria continued, "Even if it turns out that you cannot prove his innocence after a while no one will expect to see him, and he can be disguised and leave with you."

"It'll take some time for me to get control of a ship," Tarrant said thoughtfully.

Dayna said, "You're assuming Avon's guilty!"

"No," Tarrant said, "I'm assuming it will be difficult to prove otherwise. I can't see Blake or Avalon lying, so it's likely Chevner is behind this- or at least in on it."

"I never trusted him," Vila said.

"But Avalon does," Tarrant said. "She'd never let us interrogate her second and without him, we've no chance of proving anything."

Avon got unsteadily to his feet. "Whatever we're doing, we'd best do it now, before Blake decides to come back and make sure of my demise."

Tarrant nodded. "You're right. Come on, Vila, we're off to spread the glad tidings."

"Glad tidings!" Vila said, annoyed, but he followed Tarrant.

Dayna paused to kiss Avon on the cheek. He sighed and patted her on the shoulder. He glanced past her to Soolin. "Fria will return to show you to this sanctum, won't you, Fria?"

"Yes, of course." Fria rummaged inside a cabinet and returned with a set of voluminous gray robes. "Put these on, and we'll go."

Soolin and Dayna left then, with Dayna putting on a display of weeping that seemed a little overdone to Soolin, but she considered it meant she was free to play the stoic, so it averaged out.

B7 B7 B7

"Vila, have you been crying all this time?" Tarrant said as he entered Vila's quarters and found Vila huddled on the bed, sobbing his heart out.

"Yes, and I'm not done yet," Vila said, wiping his sleeve across his eyes.

"I don't like it."

"That's all right, I wasn't doing it to please you."

"Vila, I believe Avon. I'm sure he was set up."

"I'd owe someone if he could upset Blake."

"How? I'd do it for you, you know that."
Vila stared at Tarrant. "What do you mean?"

Tarrant swallowed. "I love you. Isn't that strange?"

"I suppose it's as strange as the fact that I love you, but that doesn't matter right now."

"You love me?"

"It's a stupid time to tell you, but I'm past worrying about how you'd take it."

"I'll take it anyway I can get it. Ask me anything, and it's yours," Tarrant said, extravagant in his sudden happiness.

"Kill Blake."

Tarrant laughed. "Not in my wildest nightmare, Vila."

"Goodbye." Vila turned away from Tarrant.

"Now, just wait a minute."

"I'm not listening. You don't really love me. Go away."

"Vila?"

"Then I'll go." Vila started to get up, but Tarrant grabbed his arm.

"Vila. Don't go away angry. I want to be friends with you, at least."

"Oh, of course, it's easier to be friends with me than fight my enemy."

"Blake's not your enemy."

"Isn't he? He knew Avon better than I do, he knew just how to get that stubborn, selfish bastard to jump through flaming hoops for him—dragging me behind him, I might add."

"And even after Blake left Avon kept on taking me through the fire, for nothing more than Blake's memory. And Blake can't figure Avon out this time? I think Blake wanted to believe Avon was a traitor, because he can't stand anything coming between him and his precious rebellion. Well, it's a hell of a rebellion if it means throwing your friends into the fire, and pouring fuel on top of them!"

Vila jerked his arm out of Tarrant's grip and folded his arms across his chest. "I'd go after Blake myself, but I'm only Vila, and no one ever takes me seriously."

"Listen, Vila."

"Conversations at midnight, yeah, right."

"No, but Vila..."

"Poor Avon, for once he's innocent, and the only thing he had left, his good name as a rebel, is ruined."

"Vila?"

"Blake and Avalon. Oh, sure, they're too good and noble to tell anything less than the truth. Oh, I wish I had the nerve to do something about it, or that I had a friend who would be a man for my
"Vila, are you sure Blake has betrayed Avon?"

"As sure as I am that I'm a thief."

Tarrant sighed. "All right. I'm convinced. There are still some Alpha codes of honor that Blake may listen to. I'll call him out. Whatever happens, think of me. Go tell Avon not to give up hope. I'm off to announce his death, and arrange another. Either mine or Blake's. Goodbye, Vila."

B7 B7 B7

Dog pulled his hair in frustration. He wasn't an interrogator. All he had was Jorg's word against Borak and Konrad, and the two obvious villains had confused Jorg into sputtering incoherence.

All he knew was that they were up to something and it was to do with Blake's bonding with that computer-fellow, Avon. Oh, of course. Dog straightened and smiled. He'd heard how Avalon used Avon's computer as a lie-detector.

Dog found the computer in Avon's quarters, which were being guarded by Dayna. She agreed to let him borrow it, but insisted on accompanying the machine. That was all right with Dog because he didn't know how to use it anyway.

Dayna paused when she saw Konrad. He grinned at her, and her face hardened. Dog set the computer down on the table before Borak and Konrad. Dayna slipped in the key.

"That's not a torture machine, is it?" asked Borak.

Konrad told him, "Shut up, stupid."

Dayna glared at them. "Orac. You are to analyze what these men say and tell me when they lie."

She produced a gleaming silver knife the length of her hand and drove it into the wooden table so hard it vibrated. "For every lie, a finger. When we run out of fingers anything else that sticks out gets snipped off."

"You can't!" Konrad said, "You'll be for it, too."

Dayna smiled sweetly. "I may have been stupid enough to trust you in my bed, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't gladly sacrifice myself to repay you for what you've done to my friend. After the way you used me, I don't think you deserve to keep your cock. Don't worry, I know just how to do it, so you won't bleed to death. I'm very good with a knife."

Dog opened his mouth, then shut it.

Borak and Konrad confessed so quickly that they were interrupting each other.

"Right. Jorg, lock them back up," Dog said self-importantly as soon as the flood of accusations stopped. "Once I fill out my report, I'll present it to Avalon."

"Can't you report it now?" Dayna said.

Dog looked shocked. "Rules is rules." He turned to his desk computer and began calling up the proper forms. After a few minutes, he asked, "How do you spell 'humiliate', Dayna?" Getting no answer, he looked around, and shrugged when he saw she had left and taken the Orac computer with her.
Soolin was waiting in Avalon's office, sitting at the desk, with one foot propped up on a chair, and her gun resting along her knee, sighting directly at the door.

Soolin was very patient, and the gun shifted only slightly as the minutes passed. When the door opened and Avalon started to come in, but froze in surprise, Soolin smiled sweetly and said, "Come in, and bring Blake with you."

"What if he isn't with me?" Avalon asked.

"That would be a great pity, as I would like to have a few words with him. But then, I could simply discuss it with you."

Blake pushed past Avalon to enter the room. "Your quarrel is with me."

Soolin tilted her head, considering. "You, and Avalon. Don't mistake me, Blake. I can kill you both as easy as swatting a pair of flies. Easier."

"Oh, I don't doubt it," Blake said, coming close enough to lean on the desk.

"Ah ah," Soolin said, twitching her gun slightly. "Avalon, shut the door- quietly- and sit at that chair, where I can keep an eye on you, and where you aren't near any of these." She held up a handful of electronic devices, wires dangling. "I might have missed a few, but I do promise you, with a gun, I never miss."

"I'm sure that was useful to Avon," Blake said, as Avalon reluctantly obeyed Soolin's command.

"Perhaps you're used to people who only talk about revenge, Blake, but where I come from you don't allow your partners to be murdered without doing something about it. Even if you don't particularly like them."

Blake sighed, and his body-posture shifted. Suddenly he was no longer threatening, but merely a tired, sad man. "I didn't murder him and despite what he did, I am sorry he's dead. But he was a traitor. What else could I do? What do you want me to say?"

The door opened behind Blake, and Soolin swung the gun to cover it. "Tarrant," she said, lifting her eyebrows in what was for her, an extreme emotional response. "So, great minds do think alike."

Blake turned sideways, to watch both of them at once.

"Not entirely," Tarrant said. "I didn't come to threaten Blake."

"Neither did I," Soolin said. "I came to kill him."

"No, you didn't, or he'd be dead already."

Soolin made a face. "All right. I wanted to see if he'd rattle. If he'd gone for a gun, I'd have had Avalon's word that it was self-defence."

Startled, Avalon said, "You'd expect me to testify for you after murdering Blake?"

"It wouldn't be murder, any more than Avon's death was murder, would it, Blake? Fair's fair." Soolin got to her feet smoothly and stood beside Tarrant. "If you need me to back your play, I'm ready," she said.
Tarrant pulled out of his pocket the gloves that Blake had given Avon. Blake went a little pale, looking at them. "It's traditional that I slap you across the face, but that's a bit undignified, so can we just take it as read?" He tossed the gloves onto Avalon's desk beside Blake.

"What?" Blake said, astonished.

Tarrant sighed. "You wronged my friend. Avon was also Vila's friend. And Vila... Vila is my lover. I've a double-claim on you, and I mean to have satisfaction."

Blake straightened. "People don't *do* that anymore."

"Yes. They do. It's against the laws of Earth, but since when has that mattered to you? Alphas of honor have always kept the code, hiding the deaths as 'accidents'. You went to the right schools. So did I. So did Avon. This is one challenge you *cannot* deny. All I need do is tell the universe the circumstances, and you'll never find another Earth Alpha to follow you. The best pilots, the finest technicians, the most skilled in any number of fields that you so desperately need, are Earth Alphas. You *must* give me satisfaction."

Blake stood very still for a long moment, then he nodded. "It will give me no pleasure to kill you, boy."

Tarrant inclined his head. "We'll see. I'm fighting for love. You're only fighting for a cause. We'll see which is the better motivator." Tarrant looked sad. "In fact, you may not *want* to win, having lost your love simply because you couldn't give him the benefit of the doubt."

"As he gave it to me?" Blake said harshly, his hand instinctively curling to touch his belly.

"Well, I suppose that makes you even." Tarrant nodded politely to Avalon. "I'll check for suitable sites, and provide you with a list tomorrow. You choose the site. You provide me with a list of weapons, and I'll choose the weapon."

"According to the rules."

Tarrant nodded again, and he and Soolin left.

Avalon said, "You aren't going to go along with that, are you?"

"You heard him," Blake said. "There is no choice."

"We could arrest him. He's threatened you."

"No. Don't you see, I think maybe he's right." Blake sighed. "Not that Avon was innocent. But do I really want to live without Avon?"

Avalon blinked, and could think of nothing to say.

They were still staring at each other when someone asked admittance. Avalon shook herself, cleared her throat and said, "Come in."

Dog came in, with several guards surrounding the bound Borak and Konrad. Avalon looked at them. "What's this? Oh, yes, I remember, you said you'd captured two trouble-makers last night. Konrad? You're Chevner's friend, aren't you? Would you like him to be present?"

Konrad was sullenly silent, and Dog cleared his throat. "That won't be possible. Chevner stole a shuttle this morning. We don't know where he's gone."
Blake whirled, and Avalon took a deep breath. "I want a full report."

"Yes, Avalon." Dog ceremoniously handed her a sheaf of print-outs.

Avalon glanced at it and put it on her desk. "A verbal report first. Just the important parts, please, Dog," she said hastily.

Dog scratched his beard while he thought and then he said, "The watch heard them last night, talking about ruining Blake's bonding."

Blake's head lifted, and his eyes were bright, but he said nothing.

Dog continued, "I got a full confession today. Borak isn't much more than a gossip, but Konrad was paid by Chevner to set Avon up."

Blake flinched. He looked as ill as if he'd taken poison.

"He had a friend...um..." Dog shuffled his feet, "Well, actually, he used Dayna Mellanby so he could get into that building late at night. Then he sent a message to Avon, printed on dissolving paper. It set a place and a time to discuss something 'about Blake that Avon needed to know before the bonding'. He didn't leave enough time for Avon to tell anyone. Konrad figured Avon would assume when no one showed up that it was the sort of practical joke people play the night before a bonding. When Avon left, Konrad went to Avon's room, dressed in black, and pretended to be Avon, sending messages to the Federation. Chevner urged you to humiliate Avon in front of his own people. He wanted to be sure that whatever happened, the bonding would be broken and all of you would be so upset that Avalon wouldn't listen to you anymore, and Chevner would be important."

"Oh, Avon," Blake groaned, remembering how Avon had looked in the early days on Liberator, so full of life, of sly humor and curiosity, always arguing, and equally always giving in to whatever Blake asked of him. All that life, and beauty, and hope for the future, gone because of one man's jealousy, another's greed and Blake's willingness to be fooled.

"I wasn't the only one," Konrad said sullenly. "Chevner gave the order." "He had a friend...um..." Dog shuffled his feet, "Well, actually, he used Dayna Mellanby so he could get into that building late at night. Then he sent a message to Avon, printed on dissolving paper. It set a place and a time to discuss something 'about Blake that Avon needed to know before the bonding'. He didn't leave enough time for Avon to tell anyone. Konrad figured Avon would assume when no one showed up that it was the sort of practical joke people play the night before a bonding. When Avon left, Konrad went to Avon's room, dressed in black, and pretended to be Avon, sending messages to the Federation. Chevner urged you to humiliate Avon in front of his own people. He wanted to be sure that whatever happened, the bonding would be broken and all of you would be so upset that Avalon wouldn't listen to you anymore, and Chevner would be important."

"I wasn't the only one," Konrad said sullenly. "Chevner gave the order."

"And Avalon and Blake believed you," Soolin said.

"So did I," Dayna said softly.

Soolin shook her head. "All you believed of him was that he wanted you. You didn't deliberately set out to publicly humiliate and destroy someone because of his lies. These honorable leaders of the rebellion did that. I hope you're proud of yourselves."

Blake said, "I can't ask you to forgive me. Tell me, what would you have me do? I was wrong, dead wrong, but it was a mistake!"

Avalon said, "I was mistaken, too. I wish there was something I could do to help."

"You can't tell Avon not to be dead, can you? But you can tell all the rebels here that he was innocent all along," Soolin turned to Blake. "Fria was kind enough to let us give Avon a proper tomb among her family. If you want to show that you loved him, then go to that tomb and say it.
Tell him. And since you've killed his best friend, then you have more to make up to Vila than to any of us. Bond with him and I won't go after revenge. I can't say I'll forgive you, but I won't do anything."

Blake nodded. "All right." It would be a true penance, living with Vila, who he knew had loved Avon like a brother. "I'll do whatever I can to make Vila happy."

Soolin said, "Tomorrow then, where you were to bond with Avon. And tonight, I'll guide you to Avon's tomb. That should give you and Avalon time to tell all your people the truth."

Dog spoke up, "But what will I do with these two? And Dayna?"

Avalon said, "Lock those two up. I'll have them sent to a rebel cell that needs expendables. And I'll make quite sure they're trusted with nothing." She looked at Dayna. "I agree with Soolin. Dayna did nothing to justify any more punishment than she already faces, having been an unwitting accomplice to Avon's death."

B7 B7 B7

Tarrant paced outside Vila's room, trying to decide what to say. "I'm tongue-tied. It's crazy. This is Vila. I should know how to talk to him after years of living cheek by jowl with him. But then, I never was trying to recite him love-poems before."

"It's more difficult than I thought. I mean, all I could rhyme with thief was grief. Not terribly romantic: for pilot, smile a lot? Ridiculous. Oh, let's face it, I wasn't born under a rhyming star."

He straightened his tunic and knocked on the wooden door. "Vila, may I come in?"

Vila opened the door. "In, or out, but in's more fun."

Tarrant grinned and entered the room.

"Now tell me, what happened with you and Blake?"

"Nothing yet. Kiss me, Vila."

"Until those lips tell me Blake is dead, I won't touch them."

Tarrant sat on Vila's bed. "Look, Blake heard me out, and he's going to answer my challenge. But before I go to meet him, I want to know what drew you to me in the first place? Was it my wicked grin, or my devilish charm, or possibly," he said, patting his groin, "the bad boy himself."

Vila laughed. "I was always attracted to all the 'bad' things, Tarrant. Now, tell me, what made you first fall in love with me? My innocent face, my kindly nature, or possibly," he said, patting his buttocks, "my sweet cheeks."

"Oh, I don't know. I fell so hard, I've probably damaged myself." Tarrant grinned. "I've gone soft-headed over you."

"Poor little head, and with nothing to protect it but a bird's nest of curls." Vila smiled back.

They were slowly leaning towards each other, when the door flung open and Dayna burst in. "Vila, Tarrant! Come on, Avon's been cleared! Blake and Avalon are apologizing all over the place, Chevner was behind it, and he's gone. Avalon's making a public announcement in the hall where the masquerade was held! Hurry up!" Dayna turned and left without giving either man a chance to say anything.
Vila said, "Will you go with me?"

Tarrant replied, "I will live in your heart, die in your lap, and be buried in your eyes. And I will go with you to Avalon's announcement."

"You're an idiot, Tarrant," Vila said fondly. "Let's go."

B7 B7 B7

Fria and several people in hooded robes similar to her own led Blake and Avalon to a small building made out of genuine stone.

Blake asked, "Is this your family's tomb?"

"It is. And Avon lies within."

Blake turned to face the closed stone door. "Kerr Avon was murdered by lies, the most honorable, honest man I have ever known." He put down the stone plaque he had been carrying. "This stone bears my shame, and the truth of a hero's death. Let it speak to the ages, long after I am gone." He leaned his forehead against the cold stone. "I loved him, and I killed him."

Avalon stayed with him through the night while Blake silently mourned.

When dawn approached Avalon gently shook Blake's shoulder. "Come. You must prepare."

Blake looked at her blank-faced, and uncomprehending.

"Vila," she reminded him.

"Yes, of course." Blake nodded. "I must clean up and change."

B7 B7 B7

"There, you see?" Fria said, "Did I not tell you Avon was innocent?" She beamed at the small gathering who were waiting for Avalon and Blake to arrive at the rebels' ceremonial chamber.

Soolin said, "So are Blake and Avalon. They were tricked."

"I'm glad things worked out so well," Dayna said.

"And so am I," Tarrant added, "not least because I'd have to call Blake to account for it, otherwise."

Avon said nothing, but gathered his borrowed hooded robe closer about himself. Fria had decked Avon and Vila in similar robes when they had left the sanctum together with a handful of Fria's robed brothers and sisters. It was difficult to tell them apart, impossible if they kept their hands inside the overlong sleeves and draped the hood well over their features, as she directed them. The costume had been intended as one of religious modesty, but it worked equally well as camouflage.

"It's time for you to withdraw into the inner chamber," Fria said to Avon, "with your friend. When I send for you, remember to stay hooded. Avalon and Blake have promised to come here. They are due at any moment."

Soolin and Dayna went close to the outer door to watch for Blake's arrival.

Tarrant hesitated after the others had left. "Fria, I need a word with you."
"Yes, Tarrant?"

"I need you to... well, to bind me, or maybe to be my undoing. I'm not sure which at the moment. Vila and I...well, we love each other. I want to be bonded with him."

Fria smiled. "I will gladly do so."

Avalon entered the chamber accompanied by Blake and observed Soolin, Dayna, Tarrant, Fria and the others of her order waiting patiently.

"Good morning," Avalon said to the room in general.

Soolin replied for them all. "Good morning, Avalon. Blake, have you changed your mind?"

Blake said, "I'll promised, and I'll keep my word. I'll bond with Vila."

Dayna said, "Fria, call Vila."

Avalon looked at Tarrant. "Why, what's the matter, Tarrant? You look like you're about to be ill."

Blake said, "He's probably thinking about bonding. It's not an easy thing for such a free spirit to contemplate."

Tarrant swallowed hard, and replied, "You'd be surprised what love can do. I'd never have thought it would bring you to your knees."

A line of robed brothers and sisters entered the room, Vila and Avon among them.

Blake said, "Which is my bond-mate?"

Soolin touched one of the robed figures. "This is him, and I give him to you."

Blake said, "Let me see your face," and reached out, but Soolin stopped him with her hand on his wrist.

"No, not until you take his hand before Fria and swear to bond with him," she insisted.

Blake sighed, and lowered his hand, speaking to the robed figure beside him. "Give me your hand. I am your bond-mate if you will have me."

The man in the robe spoke then, in a quiet voice, barely above a whisper. "And when I lived I was your bond-mate. And when you loved, you were mine."

Blake stopped, shocked. "Avon?"

Avon slipped the hood back. "The same. I died, but I am alive, and as surely as I am alive, I am no traitor."

Avalon said, "But Avon is dead!"

Dayna smirked. "He was dead only while the lies lived."

Fria said, "After the bonding, I could tell the whole tale. But in the meantime, we have a ceremony to perform."
"Do we?" Avon stepped back away from Blake.

"Avon, it was all a mistake. I was told lies!"

"Which you were all too ready to believe." Avon tilted his head and his eyes glittered with anger. "In all the time we have known each other, how often have you demanded blind trust from me? And how few times have I asked it in return?"

Blake bit at his knuckle. "Avon."

"No, don't think to get around me with sad eyes and a honeyed voice."

"Then what do you want? I don't imagine you went through all this just to have the pleasure of walking away from me."

Avon stepped close. "Perhaps," he said softly, "I wanted to see you humiliated before the people whose judgement you valued. Before your comrades-in-arms. Perhaps I wanted to see you crawl."

Blake fell to his knees, crashing audibly to the faux stone floor. "Would this do?"

Avon stepped back. "Get up, you fool."

"Not until you say you've forgiven me." The floor was rough, and Blake's trouser knees hadn't been much protection. Blood was seeping out.

"Do you think I'll pity you if you cripple yourself? Get up!" Avon demanded.

"I'll stay here until I rot, or until you agree to the bonding," Blake said, quietly.

Avon grabbed at Blake's arm, and pulled, but Blake didn't budge. "Do you think you can out-stubborn me?"

Blake smiled. "It always worked before."

Abruptly, Avon's face twisted. It was hard to tell whether he was trying not to cry, or not to laugh. His voice was soft when he said, "Do you always have to come out on top?"

"We can take turns," Blake promised.

The laughter won, and Avon shook his head. "You win. Get up, and I'll bond with you, but someone else can bandage your knees. I never did like the sight of blood."

Blake rose and put his hand on Avon's shoulder. "I know. It will be all right."

Avon sighed. "We'll see."

Tarrant had been watching Blake and Avon quarrel, but kept looking around. Now he said, "Fria, where is Vila?"

Vila stepped forward and put back his hood. "Here. What do you want?"

Tarrant said, "You."

Vila looked dubious. "I don't know. I have to think about it. I don't love you, you know."

"You did a good job of fooling Avon and Blake then. They were sure you did."
"Do you really love me?" Vila asked.

"No, I suppose not all that much."

"Then you were very convincing. Avon and Soolin believed you did."

Tarrant's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "They said you were suicidal over me."

Vila's eyes went wide. "They told me you were sick to death over me.

As one, they turned to look at Avon, then at each other. "We've been had!" they said in unison, then laughed.

"Does it really matter," Tarrant said, "we are friends."

Vila nodded. "Good friends."

Dayna said, "Please, spare me. You two are disgustingly infatuated with each other."

Blake reached into his pocket. "I found this yesterday. It's a love-poem Tarrant wrote to Vila."

"What a coincidence," Avon said dryly, extracting a similar sheet from his robe. "I discovered this little ditty in Vila's pocket just now. Let me see..." He opened his mouth to read, but Vila snatched it from him, red-faced with embarrassment.

Tarrant reclaimed his errant missive with slightly more dignity from Blake. Tarrant sighed. "Vila? It looks like we have to go through with it. I'll take you, but it's only out of pity, mind you."

"Oh, well, I suppose I'll go along. I'd feel responsible if you really were sickening. Which you are, of course."

Blake said, "Enough!"

Tarrant looked sullen at the interruption in the slanging match.

Avalon shook her head. "Tarrant?"

Tarrant said, "You know, I don't think anything could make me unhappy right now. But I tell you this, Blake, I would have beaten you. But since you're about to bond with Avon, I'm just as happy to leave you to whatever punishments he'll devise."

Blake replied, "You had better treat Vila well, for your sake, if not for his." He gave Tarrant a small glower, which was all Blake had in him at the moment.

"Treat Vila well?" Tarrant laughed. "He'll talk me half to death and have me bailing him out of every jail between here and Earth. And then he'll fall into my arms drunk, and expect me to carry him to bed!"

Avon looked at Vila. "What have you to say to that?"

Vila said with a grin, "There's nothing I'd rather do."

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