



Alternative Escape

Written and illustrated by Kathryn Andersen

(being an alternative happening to *Escape* by Pat Dunn & Diana Smith,
which appeared in Multiverse #19.

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Motto: Put your money where your mouth is.

(This version of the story produced for net-archiving at
<<http://www.crosswinds.net/~rubykat>> by Kathryn Andersen <kat@connexus.net.au>)

"I'm searching for the anger
Consider it a gift
Open up that window
Come betray me with a kiss
You have won if nothing else
Rope enough to hang yourself
But what is that to us?"

(Beyond the Call - David Batteau, Darrell Brown, Kevin Dukes)

The survivor lifted his head and turned, the alarms still blaring. As he turned, more troopers entered; the inner corridor, the west door, the entrance they themselves had come in - each had its trickle, the whole a flood. Every door he faced, he faced the muzzle of a gun. He gazed down at his friend's dead, staring eyes.

You fool. And another part of him babbled *You fool! What have you done?* and the counter-train *You fool! You should have answered me. What else was I to think?...* But Avon ignored them both, with iron control. *You fool.* He stepped over the body, protectively. The alarms cut out. Not a noise was heard but the background pips and hums of the tracking equipment.

You never understood, did you, Blake? Avon thought as he slowly raised his gun. *The freedom those credits would have bought was freedom from this time and space, not freedom within it.* He smiled grimly. *I always thought our deaths would be linked.* He fired.

But Fate wouldn't let him die - not even now. His random shot had not been so random - it took out a bank of switches at the far end of the room. The lights cut out for a few vital minutes. Avon instinctively dropped to the ground while troopers shot at each other in the confusion. Avon took out one of the troopers who had been behind him, standing inside the circular tracking-control bench, the one good hiding place in all the room. When the lights came back on, Avon crouched there, gun at the ready. Reflex. No time to reflect. To even decide if he wanted to live. He thought he wanted to die. But his body over-ruled him. All it would take was one movement, and they would see him. One movement, and it would be over. But he couldn't. Deliberate suicide required total despair - and he had not reached that place, not yet. There had been no time...

The troopers were taking stock, wondering where their prisoner had gone. A noise interrupted them. The troopers doubtless thought it was another alarm, but had no time to rectify their error. From where Avon crouched, it sounded like a trumpeting elephant spinning in an echo chamber. What was it? Where had he heard it before? Why did he suddenly have an unaccountable hope...?

While he was still considering this, the noise stopped. If anyone had been looking in the right place, they might have noticed one of the pillars near the inner entrance waver for a moment, as if it were a mirage, but no-one saw it at all. The next thing that Avon heard

was what could best be described as a blue hum, and the thud of falling bodies. Troopers dropped like ninepins.

Avon scrambled up from his hiding place. He remembered where he had heard that sound before. The sound he had waited for so long, so long ago, when he was still a child, with a child's optimism.

"They've found me, after all this time," he said aloud. "I'm going home..." He began to relax; his iron control slipped, and a weight of weariness crashed down on him.

"I think not," a voice purred, as the muzzle of a hand-weapon touched Avon's neck. "Don't move, Avon."

His elation froze as cold as a dip in Deep Space. It is amazing what a gun to the neck can do for one's presence of mind. He stood motionless.

"Tell your friends to come out from wherever they're hiding," Servalan continued.

Avon said nothing. If he had heard aright, his rescuers had materialized behind them. The fact that Servalan had seen nothing amiss meant an efficient Chameleon circuit was operating. Now, if she didn't turn around...

Servalan raised her voice. "Come out, whoever you are, or I shall kill him."

"You know I can't allow that," a voice said behind her.

Servalan whirled, Avon ducked, and a shot echoed in the deathly chamber. Servalan, ex-President of the Terran Federation, who had laughed death in the face times without number, fell, and died, shot with a bolt from one of her own trooper's guns.

The gun in question was held by a tall man with bleached white hair, white as if it were frightened that way. Magnetic brown eyes in a strong face - mocking eyes, like Dorian's had been, full of secrets. Avon did not recognise him at all. And yet, and yet, there was something familiar in him. Something that said they had met before, that they knew each other...

"Father?" Avon quavered, his exhausted mind giving him no other answer.

"My dear boy," the Time Lord began, opening his arms and stepping towards Avon.

"I'm not a boy," Avon retorted, stepping back.

"Of course not, Avontrokerrdred." Soothingly. "It's been so long..." He took another step towards Avon. "We've been looking so long..."

"Why? Why did you take so long?"

"You were hidden too well, too far. But it's all over now, let's go home..."

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"Home..." Avon breathed, lost in a vision of memory. Yes, it would be nice to go home, home where they didn't bother you, home where they didn't expect you to follow their causes, home where you were safe...

He hardly noticed when his rescuer took him by the hand and led him into his Tardis. The wheezy bellow of dematerialization soon followed.

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Vila blinked. Playing possum was hard on the eyeballs. The trick was to keep your eyes open and stare fixedly at one point on the ceiling - or elsewhere. Like at Avon. What did he mean by going on without him, eh? Especially with all these troopers liable to wake up at any minute? It was too much to assume that they were all dead.

"And I'm not going to stick around to find out," Vila muttered, getting to his feet. He looked around queasily. "Must check," he gulped. Tiptoeing around the unconscious trooper's bodies, he checked his companions, one by one. Even while he was doing it, he was amazed at his self-possession; as if he were watching someone else going through the motions... They were dead. All dead.

He blinked away tears. "No time for that," he thought. "Get drunk over them later." If he could find anything to get drunk with. If he lasted that long. *Be still, quaking heart. You can't afford to be afraid. There's no one else to fall back on...* Avon had gone, and Orac - what about Orac? Avon must have been far gone to leave it behind. Unless he meant to pick it up later? But the way Avon had looked, long-term planning was the last thing on his mind. That white-haired guy was his father? Hard to imagine. Very hard. It seemed a bit too coincidental.

Avon most probably thought him dead, if he thought of him at all. A Vila bearing an Orac would probably be more welcome than a Vila without one; but did he have time to get Orac before the troopers woke up? Better check on that secret passage Avon went down - there might be another way out; Avon might have gone to fetch Orac anyway. Vila stepped up to the pillar.

A wavery bellowing disturbed the ambient noise-level. "That stupid alarm again," Vila thought, and continued to inspect the pillar. No tell-tale cracks; not even an interesting knob. This was going to be a challenge. But there was nothing like a challenge to distract him from his bleak current prospects...

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking for a door," Vila replied absently - and did a double-take. "Who - ?" he quavered, looking around for the owner of the voice.

The voice belonged to a thin, red-headed young man, outlandishly dressed, looking rather pale and cross.

"You're standing in the midst of a massacre, and you tell me you're looking for a door - in what is obviously a very solid pillar?" He rapped his knuckles on it - painfully. "You must be mad!"

"Mad to stay," Vila babbled. "That's my friends there too all dead except Avon and he went through this door and he's not going to leave without me and what's THAT?"

"That" was a large blue cabinet with double doors, taller than a man, standing impossibly solid in the (previously empty) aisle above the steps next to the pillar Vila had been examining.

"That's the TARDIS," the young man explained disdainfully.

One of those blue doors opened, and another young man stepped out, nearly stumbling, as his foot encountered air where it was expecting floor.

"He was definitely here," the man muttered, staring fixedly at the device he held before him. He looked to be no more than thirty, with blond hair, beige coat and peculiar striped trousers. "Distinct traces..." he continued, oblivious to Vila or his surroundings. "Off by a few minutes, but there was definitely a TARDIS..." He pointed the device at Vila's pillar. "There!"

"You mean there really was a door -" the redhead began, turning back to Vila.

It was all rather academic to the thief, since he had just noticed something that these strangers did not; one of the troopers was starting to rise - armed! Before you could say "self-preservation", Vila dashed for the closest cover he could see - the Tardis!

It only took a bolt or two from an irate blaster-wielding trooper for the other two to follow suit. Yet again, the tracking gallery was graced with the sound of a dematerializing Tardis.

The Federation Captain's report of the incident was cannily fictitious.

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"You don't look the same, father - you regenerated?"

"I had an accident with a tachyon funnel," the Time Lord said truthfully, surveying the Tardis console with an expert eye.

"Where's Mother?" Avon interrupted. "Why isn't she here?"

"She couldn't come."

"Why not?"

"The High Council wouldn't let her."

Something like contempt coloured his voice. "It's not the done thing for the President to go gallivanting around the universes." He gave an ironical smile. "They would very much like *me* to be on Gallifrey right now, if they knew where to find me!" One of the proximity-alarms started beeping, and he hobbled over to the other side of the console to deal with it. "This is very awkward. I could do with a hand..." He waved his arm over the displays.

"You know I can't!" Avon snapped in frustration. It had been years, more than thirty, since he had even been near one, and he had never been taught how to use them; his schooling had not advanced that far. There is only so much that a six-year-old can learn - even a genius. But anything was

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better than thinking about BI- about what happened back there...

"There is a way..." said the older man. "If you're willing to try."

"What?" Avon asked wearily.

"A modified version of the Morb-Terillian Process... direct brain to brain transfer of knowledge," his rescuer suggested.

"From your brain to mine? Rather risky, don't you think?"

"It's been done before - there's no chance of overload, the program takes care of that."

"And what if it goes wrong? It's *my* brain."

"Mine too. Surely it is worth it? CVE-navigation is a tricky thing, and I'm not up to par," the Time Lord admitted, hoping to sway Avon to his point of view. "If something happened, and I went into regeneration crisis, wouldn't it be better for both of us if you had the expertise to take over the controls?"

"Your logic is impeccable," Avon straightened up. "However, I feel uneasy trusting my head to a computer..."

"Aren't you the expert?"

"That is why I don't trust them," Avon smiled, shark-like. "I know how often they can go wrong."

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"This is worse than pink Asteroids," Vila muttered to himself, as he gazed around at the inside of the blue cabinet he had dashed into.

White walls patterned with circular depressions formed a room quite definitely bigger than the outside had been. And there were other doors; implying that there were *more* rooms in this queer cabinet. The centre of the room was dominated by a hexagonal bench/control-bank with many displays and switches forming a complicated array below a semi-transparent cylinder in the middle.

Uncanny. Unbelievable. And certainly not homelike.

"I like the scenery, though," he added with bravado, staring at a lovely pair of legs that belonged to the young woman who entered.

"Who are you?" she asked beligerantly.

Vila's answer was forestalled by the breathless entrance of the two young men.

"Hostile natives - we're leaving!" the redhead gabbled, as the blond started frantically punching keys and buttons. The central cylinder began its slow measured oscillations, and the blond relaxed.

"Well?" the woman snapped.

Why do all the nice-looking ones have bad tempers? Vila thought.

The blond man looked around. "Well now," he said. "I think it's time for introductions. I'm the Doctor, this is Turlough," he indicated the redhead who had accosted Vila earlier, "and that's Tegan." He gave Vila a gimlet stare. "Now who are you, and why were they shooting at you?"

"They weren't shooting at *me*!" Vila protested automatically. "Well, not at me in particular. I'm Vila,"

he added, answering the Doctor's first question second. "Thanks for rescuing me. I'm sure I'm much obliged..."

"Yes, you are," the Doctor said sternly. "Now who is it that we inadvertently and unintentionally rescued you *from*? Why were they shooting at us?"

"I expect they were cross at being stunned by that old geezer who came out of the pillar and shot Servalan. At least, I expect it was him - unless it was some rebel booby-trap; but the timing was rather -"

Turlough interrupted him, voicing his confusion. "Out of the pillar? Old geezer? That doesn't sound like him - who's Servalan?"

Vila shuddered theatrically. "Someone you never want to meet - she's soon as knife you as look at you. Who's this guy you're looking for?"

"We are *chasing* him," the Doctor responded, irritatedly pedantic.

"Why, did he steal something?" Vila asked, his mind going to what seemed most obvious to him.

"He's not a thief, he's a megalomaniac!" Tegan protested. "He killed my aunt, he kidnapped Adric, he nearly destroyed the universe - goodness knows what he's up to now!"

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It was relatively easy to satisfy Avon that even if something had gone wrong with the equipment, there were so many safety margins that to worry would be foolish; and that he didn't know enough about the equipment to be able to do anything about it anyway. A bewildering array of circuits and connectors, a control console, and two neural-tap helmets.

He was too tired to push the matter. There wasn't much choice, really. If he wanted the knowledge, he had to do it. It had not occurred to him to doubt the identity of his rescuer. Who else could it be? Who else would be looking for him?

"Let's get it over with," Avon said at last, putting one of the helmets on his head.

His rescuer followed suit, sitting in front of the console. He punched several keys and pressed the final switch.

A tingling, half-painful sensation flickered through Avon's head, and the process started in earnest. It implanted knowledge, yes, knowledge of time patterns, theory and practice, CVE navigation, TARDIS repair and maintenance, Galactic co-ordinates and cultures, regeneration and difficulties thereof - a torrent of information, enough to drown a man; and in that flood, threads of control, so delicate as to be unnoticed, but in their sum, woven to such an unbreakable net, that the mind caught therein had but one path - obedience.

"I am the -," the Time Lord began, then stopped his habitual phrasing. "I am your father, you will obey me."

"Yes," Avon whispered, colourlessly, and fainted.

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"You mean Avon's in one of these, these Tardis-things, with one of *your* enemies?" Vila squinted at the Doctor, who was sitting on the floor making adjustments to the device he had been waving before. "But why did Avon think he was his father, then?"

"His father? That's impossible!" the red-headed Turlough objected.

The Doctor dropped a probe and banged his head on the console overhang. "His father! Avon! Not Avontrokerrdred! Not in this space-time!" He jumped up and grabbed Vila in his excitement. "What does your friend look like? Avon! How dense of me! I just assumed... How long have you known him?"

Turlough and Tegan looked on in astonishment. They'd never seen the Doctor so worked up before.

"Er, when we were in our teens we met once or twice..." the thief began. "Then the last few years on the Liberator and Scorpio..." he trailed off under the intense scrutiny.

"Young enough," the Doctor murmured inscrutably, and dashed out of the room.

"What was that all about?" Vila blathered. "Does he usually interrogate his guests like that?"

"Only when they have friends called Avon who claim to have Time-Lords for fathers," Turlough remarked, deadpan.

"What's a Time-Lord?"

"Well, *he* is," Tegan answered, inclining her head to the door the Doctor had rushed out of. "This is a time-space machine, didn't you know?"

"A what? A time machine? Where *are* you people from?"

"Another universe," Turlough put in.

"You mean another galaxy, don't you?" Vila stuttered.

"Oh, no, I meant universe," Turlough answered smoothly, amused at Vila's discomfort.

At that point, the Doctor returned with a dusty holo-cube, and showed it to Vila. "Is that your friend?"

The cube showed a boy with sharp, almost elfin features, dark hair, and a solemn expression. Vila frowned at it.

"Well... maybe. He might have looked like that when he was a kid, I guess. If Avon ever was a kid. Hard to imagine..." He looked at the Doctor suspiciously. "Why all this interest in Avon? What's

he got to do with you? You're not even from this universe, if what Turlough said is true!"

"If I'm right, neither is Avon..."

"Enough cryptic comments, Doctor," Tegan demanded. "What *are* you talking about?"

The Doctor sighed. "My great-great-nephew Avontrokerrdred was kidnapped when he was six by the Master. We tried to trace him, but the trail was too faint, even with the help of his mother's link... We couldn't know which of the parallel universes he was in. But if the Master has returned to fetch him..." He trailed off. "How old is your Avon now?"

"Oh, late thirties, early forties, I'd say."

"To have missed him by thirty years!" the Doctor exclaimed.

"I wonder how he managed to live so long among humans without going completely mad," Turlough muttered, sotto voice.

I'm not so sure he didn't, Vila thought, remembering some uncomfortable moments. Then he recalled what the Doctor had said about his relationship with Avon, and frowned. "Oh, come on, you're too young to be his uncle!"



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The Doctor smiled slyly. "Why, how old do you think I am?"

"Why, late twenties, early thirties..." Vila stuttered.

"Multiply that by thirty and you'd be about right."

Unfortunately, there was one semi-immortal being that stood out in Vila's experience - and that was Dorian. He eyed the Doctor warily, and made note never to go into a room alone with him. Not that he was in a terribly good position now, trapped in a Tardis with nowhere to go. Why did it have to happen to him? Even gun-pointing troopers seemed friendly compared to a hidden basement with no exit. He sidled closer to Tegan.

"Er, how big is this place, Tegan?"

"Big enough to get lost in - I did, that first time." She frowned. "That was when the Master killed my Aunt." She gave a half-laugh. "I guess if I hadn't been in the Tardis at the time, he would have got me too. But if the car hadn't broken down, none of it would have happened at all..."

Vila looked again at the Doctor, who was doing something esoteric with one of the Tardis displays, and discussing it with Turlough. "Is he really as old as he says? How can that be?"

Tegan shrugged. "He's an alien - how should I know how it works? When he's nearly dying, he regenerates, looks completely different. I've seen it myself once; very strange."

"Ah," Vila said with relief. No hidden basements then.

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In another portion of that space-time, a Tardis hummed in good form. A white head and a dark head pored over its instruments, as they prepared to navigate another CVE. A minor display flickered, and a blip appeared on another screen.

"Father?"

"Er, what?" the white-haired Gallifreyan answered. This farce was getting painful, he thought. To think he had thought Avon's mistake a fortunate one!

"We are being followed by another Tardis."

"Are you sure?" He came around to watch Avon's screen.

"Certainly. Nothing else has this characteristic waveform. An older model, type 50 or even 40."

The Time Lord frowned. This was why he had thought it worth it; the boy was good; almost as good as himself. And he himself was brilliant, of course. Avon might even be better than he was in his current state - damn that tachyon funnel! Perhaps another ploy...

"Ah, yes," he said musingly. "I wondered about that earlier. It must be the Master, using a modified Dalek time-tracking device to follow me."

"The Master?" Avon hissed.

"Don't worry, we'll lose him through this CVE passage. He won't be able to follow," the Master said

in his best imitation of fatherly concern.

"Oh, no we won't!" Avon growled, flicking switches furiously. "I have a score to settle with *him!*" The hatred in his voice was unmistakable.

The Master shrugged off an involuntary shiver. The boy needed to be watched, that was for certain.

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"Er, Tegan, how many of the people in this craft are, er, human?" Vila asked uncomfortably, recalling Turlough's offhand remark earlier.

"Two - you and me," she replied promptly.

"That is, if *you're* human."

"Human enough for two," he answered, grinning suggestively. Wine, women and money were the best things in life - that and a challenging lock. Better to work on whatever was to hand...

"No, th - ooof!" Tegan said as Vila fell all over her. Before she could give him a real punching out, she realised it wasn't his fault. The Tardis was bucking. "What's going on?" she cried from the floor.

"We're caught in a tractor beam!" the Doctor shouted as he hung on to the console. He was the only one who had managed to keep to his feet with the first jolt. Turlough was somewhere on the other side of the console, and Vila was cringing next to Tegan, all thoughts of l'amour driven from his mind.

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"What are you doing?" the Master yelled as his Tardis started to shudder with the strain. He hobbled over to Avon's side. "A Tractor beam? You can't!"

"Of course I can - it is within the design tolerances..."

"Through a CVE? The strain will be too great for either Tardis! What in the galaxy are you hoping to achieve?"

"Revenge."

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The landscape was bleak and inhospitable - muddy grey and ochre ankle-turning stones and dusty-olive grass as tough as sword blades. The air fairly sizzled with the heat. It was flat and dusty as far as the eye could see - no, not quite flat; a grey monolith sat lumpily on the plain as if it had been there a thousand years, rather than a few minutes. Opposite it, brightly incongruous on that dull plain, was a squat blue monolith - if monolith it was, for it had appeared but a moment ago.

A figure in dusty grey, head shrouded in a hood, stood behind the grey monolith, watching and waiting.

A door opened in the blue box, and a voice drifted out, "No, you stay here, I want to see what he's up to."

"No good!" came the quip from further inside.

"That's as may be - you stay here."

Out stepped a man in a beige coat, striped trousers and a straw hat. He seemed oblivious to the

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heat. The figure by the monolith stirred - this was what he had been waiting for. As the man in beige stepped up to the monolith, the figure leaped upon him, knocking him to the ground. The dapper straw hat rolled off into the dust, revealing a blond head. He coughed out a gritty mouthful of dust, choking.

The hooded figure straddling his back paused with surprise. The blond twisted suddenly and threw him off with one of the peculiar moves of Venusian Karate. The grey figure stumbled backwards, hands flung wide. His hood fell back, just as the blond man pounced and knocked him to the ground. The blond stopped, halted by recognition.

"Avon!" he exclaimed. "What do you want to attack me for? I know I haven't been a good uncle, but that's no reason to attack me as soon as we meet!"

Avon gave the Doctor a glazed look. "Uncle Thete?" he said hesitatingly.

"None other," replied the Doctor, and offered his hand.

Avon looked at it as if it were a dead fish, and scrambled to his feet without assistance. He shook his head, as if to rattle it into order. "What - what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Chasing the Master," the Doctor replied. "And being beaten up by my long-lost nephew, it seems. Why did you attack me?"

"I - I thought you were the Master. He said you were -" Avon shook his head again, and blinked. "The Master," he ended coldly. His hands curled, as if they longed to be around the neck of his enemy.

They were interrupted by a voice. "I hope you don't greet your friends the way you greet your relations, or I'll just pop back inside," said Vila, strolling out of the Tardis now that the coast seemed clear.

Avon's head snapped around. "Vila - but you're dead!"

"Well, I have been better, but I'm not dead yet!" Vila quipped happily.

"How did you get here?"

"The Doctor gave me a lift."

Avon's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "How very convenient. That my *uncle* should happen to turn up just at that moment, and rescue *you*, who knows nothing of Gallifrey or my origins - or *claims* not to..." He drew his gun, and pointed it at Vila. "I don't know who you are, but Vila is dead."

"Now, look here, Avon -" the Doctor began.

"Shut up!" Avon growled, turning his gun to cover both of them. "You may not be the Doctor either. Chasing the Master indeed! You probably *are* the Master, in disguise. He said you were clever."

"Who said?"

"Why, father, of course."

"Keldred is on Gallifrey," the Doctor stated.

"The High Council impounded his Tardis after he spent so much time looking for you. Whoever you think he is, he is *not* your father!"

"You'll have to do better than that," Avon said coldly.

"Avon, listen to him!" Vila exclaimed. "He

knows what he's talking about."

"So you're against me too, are you, Vila?" Avon growled. "Traitor!"

"No!" Vila shrieked, and dropped cowering to the ground. "Don't shoot, Avon! Please don't shoot!"

Avon blinked and shook his head. "Vila, what are you groveling there for? Get up!"

Vila scrambled hurriedly to his feet, not daring not to. "You tried to kill me!" he whimpered.

"Don't be ridic -" Avon began, then noticed where his gun was pointing. He started to put it back, but his hand wouldn't move. "I have to - I have to kill..." he muttered, and his quavered. "You had better leave," he said coldly, "before I do kill you."

"But, Avon -"

Vila pulled at the Doctor's arm. "Come on Doctor, let's get OUT of here, before he kills us both!" Imprinted on his mind was a vision of Blake's corpse. He practically dragged the Doctor into the Tardis.

Avon just stared, as the blue Police Box vanished away into nothing. But it wasn't the police box he was looking at. He stared at nothing, as he debated furiously with himself, wrestling with a fear that chilled him to the bone. Loss of control. Madness. In all that he had been through, his own sanity was something he had always been certain of. But what could explain his own actions just past? The Morb-Terillian process! Had he been given more than his finite skull could hold?

It showed all the more how unlike himself he was when the next thought to occur to him was to ask someone else - his "father". But it didn't seem at all strange to him. He strode back into the Master's Tardis.

"Father, there's something wrong -"

Oh, yes, the Master knew there was something wrong - he had been watching through the Tardis monitor. *Avon should have killed them both! My compulsion obviously wasn't strong enough. It would have been so **delicious** to have the Doctor killed by his own blood! There may be another way to do it, but first...*

"No, no, nothing is wrong..." the Master interrupted, soothingly. "You will hear me. There is nothing wrong. Forget anything that troubles you, Avon. You will obey me..."

"I will obey..." Avon echoed to that cold, hypnotic voice. "There is nothing wrong..." Or course everything was all right. Didn't father say so? But somewhere deep inside, something fought against the smothering reassurances. Fought, but remained silent.

"Help me with the co-ordinate engine - your interference has put it out of alignment."

"Yes, father." Avon's voice was limp and lifeless.

The two Time Lords got out the tools and started working.

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"He's mad! The Master has sent him round the twist!"

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"Why did you have to drag me away like that?"

"He was going to kill us!"

"I thought he was your friend - surely he wouldn't have killed you?" Tegan exclaimed.

"Avon? You'd be safer if you were his enemy!"

Vila replied, and regretted it almost immediately. What would the Doctor think of his nephew? But Avon's great-great-uncle appeared lost in thought, and worry.

"Are you sure he wasn't crazy *before* the Master picked him up?" Turlough commented from his position by the wall.

"He may have been paranoid, but he wasn't crazy!" Vila protested. "A little healthy paranoia is a survival skill where I come from."

"It *must* have been a compulsion, hypnosis of some sort," the Doctor thought aloud. "Or else he was suffering from psychotic suppression. But I doubt it. This *reeks* of the Master. But I would have thought my nephew would be tougher than that..."

"Tough!" Vila exclaimed. "Avon's so tough a Thelesian Sand-Worm would spit him out!"

"I didn't mean physical toughness..."

"Holding out for five days of interrogation takes more than physical toughness," Vila said soberly. "He'd be broken before he'd be bent."

"Then maybe he's broken," Turlough remarked.

"No!" the Doctor protested, hitting the console with his fist. "I cannot believe that! I *refuse* to believe that."

"But what did he do to him, then?" Tegan asked, interposing herself between Turlough and the Doctor.

The Doctor shrugged, defeated. "I haven't the faintest idea."

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The tool box was shoved closer to the wall as the Master busied himself with the setting of a new group of co-ordinates. Avon entered the console room, having divested himself of the dusty grey robe, and changed into his favourite colour - a black one-piece with no sleeves.

"Where are we going?"

"We are *going* to check our navigation," the Master snapped. "I don't know the name, but the planet is an echo-planet; it has an analogue in our universe. We'll calibrate the co-ordinate translator there." He shrugged. "I heard it's quite primitive..."

Oh, what big ears you have, Grandmama a voice whispered in Avon's brain. He told it to shut up. It quipped at him, *The better to hear you with, my dear*. Why did his paranoia have to spoil things, now that his troubles were over?

The time rotor slowed as the Tardis materialized at its chosen destination.

"Primitive planets appeal to me," Avon remarked, sardonically.

"Really?" His father looked at him with eyes that would bore into his soul.

Oh, what big eyes you have, Grandmama, the nagging voice said. Why was his subconscious

spouting nursery tales at him? *The better to see you with, my dear*, it continued relentlessly.

"Sometimes," Avon replied, absently, pulling down the knob that controlled the door. It swung open with a hum, bringing a smell of decaying leaves and the raucous cries of tropical birds.

"Not right now, I trust?" The Time Lord flashed a diamond-bright smile at Avon, as false as saccharine, as deadly as a shark.

Oh, what big teeth you have, Grandmama, the voice piped up in his head. Oh, what was wrong? Why was his heart so uneasy? *The better to eat you with, my dear!* the voice roared - and he remembered the Doctor's words - *not your father... not your father...*

"You aren't my father," Avon said coldly.

"I told you, I've regenerated."

"You take me for a fool," Avon said, burning with hate. "As if any Gallifreyan could not recognise another, no matter *what* he looked like!" He unsheathed the gun he habitually carried. "You're the Master!"

"I am the Master - you will obey me."

Avon just laughed, hollowly, and raised his gun.

The Master changed his tactics... "No use threatening me with that toy," the Time Lord remarked contemptuously. "No weapons will work in a TARDIS. Use your *brain*, my dear boy. Think of the things we could achieve, you and I..."

If Avon had been less of a rational man, he might have considered that the state of grace operating inside a TARDIS probably had no effect on things like bare hands. But who said Avon was feeling rational? Though bare hands made a bloody mess. Blake had made a bloody mess. Cally had made a bloody mess. He was destined for bloody messes... He put the gun back. It would only get in the way.

"That's better," the Master continued, seeing compliance in Avon's action.

Avon stood taut as a bowstring, saying nothing.

"That's a good boy," the Master added. It was the wrong thing to say.

With an inarticulate cry of rage, Avon sprang at the Master and knocked him to the floor. The Master's tachyon-induced frailty had no chance against him. Avon pummelled him like a child, a child with the strength of a man; pummelled him senseless.

"I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" And with each utterance of hate, the Master's head banged upon the floor.

Avon let go the head like a dead thing. Blood was seeping onto the floor. Avon backed off, stumbled over the tool box, and groped at it. One of the laser probes caught in his fumbling fingers, and accidentally turned on.

"No!" He flailed out wildly, and the laser probe in his hand cut a swath of destruction through the Tardis console. Avon flinched at the sparks and noise like a wild beast, and fled out the door into the alien jungle outside.

★

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The modified Dalek time-tracking device attached to the console beeped meaningfully - meaningfully to the Doctor, that is. "Got him!" he exclaimed, "give or take a kilometer and ten minutes." He glanced at another section of the console. "Funny... those co-ordinates look familiar," he muttered, and shrugged. "Most places do, nowadays..." He straightened up and addressed the room. "The first thing is to get Avon away from the Master - which may be rather difficult to do, since he appears to be under his influence..." The Doctor paused, cogitating.

Vila wished he were invisible. He had a feeling that he was about to be asked to Volunteer - for something uncomfortable and dangerous, of course. Why couldn't he be asked to volunteer for something nice and pleasant for once?

"Vila will come with me," the Doctor announced.

"I knew it," Vila muttered. "Don't I get any say in this?"

But the Doctor must have had keener ears than Vila realised, for he looked at Vila sharply and said, "I thought he was your friend."

"I thought he was your nephew," Vila muttered back.

"Turlough," the Doctor continued, ignoring Vila's comment.

"You know I'm no good with fighting," Turlough hedged.

"Neither am I," Vila piped up.

Tegan was exasperated. "You're both cowards!"

"I am *not* a coward!" they both chorused.

"Good - then we're all going," Tegan declared, pulled down the door switch, and strode boldly out the door.

"Now, wait a minute, Tegan!" the Doctor shouted, and followed her, grabbing the tracking-device on the way.

Turlough and Vila looked at each other, trying to put off the inevitable.

"Well, I don't like to leave a damsel in distress," Vila remarked brightly.

"She's not *in* distress," Turlough pointed out.

"Well, so it's safe then," Vila added reasonably, waiting to be contradicted.

Turlough gave in, muttering something under his breath which sounded suspiciously like "Earthlings!", and strode to the door. Vila followed, timidly.

Stumbling over mossy logs and crackling leaves and ferns, they caught up to Tegan and the Doctor, where they were arguing by a tree.

"I tell you, this is Deva Loka!" Tegan was saying.

"It may be similar, but -"

"Similar! The trees are the same, the sounds are the same - even the dirt is the same!" She stamped her foot on the fine grey soil covered with a scattering of broad leaves.

"But Tegan, there is no way we have been here before."

Turlough jumped uninvited into the argument.

"Of course not! We're in a different universe, remember! There can't be *two* Deva Lokas."

"Actually, that's not quite true, Turlough," the Doctor remarked pedantically. "There are such things as echo-planets, which have exact physical counterparts in more than one universe -"

"Like Earth!" Tegan pounced. "You were born on Earth, weren't you, Vila?"

"Er, yes," the thief admitted, not quite following the argument.

"You see!" Tegan said triumphantly. "That proves it!"

"No it doesn't," Turlough said sourly. "It just shows that it might be faintly possible. Can we get this madness over with?"

"Not if you insist on acting like a herd of Elephants!" the Doctor snapped irately, raising the tracking device and peering at it. "Over there," he waved his arm. "And for goodness sake go *quietly*!"

But it isn't that easy for city-bred folk to go quietly in a forest. Leaves crackle, twigs snap, thorny bushes catch on clothing, low branches swish back to swat an unwary follower. They were hard put not to stumble on their faces more than once, foot caught in an unruly root or loose stone. Leela would have had no trouble, but Leela was long departed. Tegan and the Doctor seemed more competent than the others, but anxiety stiffened their movements - his for his great-great-nephew, and hers because of the nagging feeling that this was a planet she knew - the planet of the Kinda.

Suddenly the Doctor stopped next to a tree, one eye on his detector, and put up his hand for them to stop also. He looked around carefully. Vila wondered what they were supposed to be looking for. He couldn't see any pillars anywhere! Nor stone monoliths either! Just trees. There's a tree, and there's a tree, and -

"How many trees have open doors?" Turlough remarked ironically, and strode up to the so-called tree.

"Turlough!" the Doctor hissed, "don't be an idiot!"

But Turlough didn't hear him. Maybe Tegan's accusation of cowardice had stung, and he wanted to prove her wrong. But the Doctor's fears proved unfounded, as Turlough came out again, unharmed, and yelled at them to come over.

They did, gingerly. What greeted them was no clean and tidy home for a megalomaniac. On the floor, a man in black was stirring groggily, black hair caked with the blood that sat stickily below him. The console sparked fitfully, cut cleanly where Avon's laser-probe had flailed.

Tegan made a bee-line for the bearded man on the floor. "The Master!"

"What have you done with Avontrokerrdred?" the Doctor demanded.

"But this isn't the man who picked up Avon!" Vila protested. Nobody heard him.

"Where is my nephew!" the Doctor grabbed the Master and shook him, which certainly did not help, in his groggy state. "Where is Avon?!"

"Mad, completely mad," the Master mumbled.

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"Attacked me. realised I wasn't his father and attacked me."

Everyone started talking at once.

"Attacked you?"

"Pretended to be his father?!"

"Mad!?"

"But this ISN'T the man who picked up Avon!"

They all looked at Vila.

"Well, it *isn't!* He had white hair, and he was old, and -" Vila broke off as the Master started chuckling weakly.

"You really do have a pack of fools in your entourage, don't you, Doctor?" the Master rallied, with scorn. "Of course I don't look the same. I've regenerated!" He scowled. "Thanks to your crazy nephew - I hope he runs straight into a wild beast - or off a cliff!"

"Where *is* he?" the Doctor demanded.

"I haven't the faintest idea. I was unconscious at the time," the Master replied with asperity. "Chopped into bits by the natives, if he is fortunate!"

"Really?" Tegan said menacingly. "You're raving."

His previous outburst seemed to have taken most of his energy. He merely pointed at his damaged Tardis console. "Do you think I would damage my own Tardis?" he muttered caustically.

"You'd damage anything to get your own way!"

Tegan countered stubbornly, stepping past his position on the floor as if to begin a search of his Tardis.

"Done by a laser knife of some kind," Turlough remarked with skeptical interest, examining the console.

"You mean, one like this?" Vila piped up by the door, holding up a small instrument.

"Where did you find it?"

"Outside, by the door."

"He must have dropped it."

"Turlough, you stay here - the rest of us will look for Avon."

Vila quietly pocketed the laser probe. You never knew when such a tool might come in handy...

★

Something was crashing through the jungle, as blindly as a charging rhinoceros. A man, clad in black, far from immaculate, dusty grey smudges from falling over intruding roots, dark hair in wild disarray, totally uncaring of his direction. He was running away, running away from what he had done. Running away from his conditioning. But it ran with him.

/You killed your father. No I didn't it was the Master. You killed him! Yes I - no, I - you killed Blake! He betrayed me! You killed Father! No! It wasn't my father. It was the Master. He betrayed me. You killed your father. No I didn't!/ Avon started whimpering, "No, no, no, no, no..." as his mind made war on itself. He was no longer surrendered to the Master's mental manipulations, no longer conquered - but that merely had turned a state of truce into open warfare - and he had no allies.



On he ran, or stumbled, or fell. Until he almost crashed into something that was neither tree, nor root, nor bush. Something that clashed discordantly with his passage. Something formed by intelligence, hanging, translucent, musical. A set of wind-chimes.

He stopped, staring, fascinated. The tinkling seemed to drop on his ears like all the dreams he'd never had. He blinked, nodded, and sat down. Gradually, he slipped into slumber like seal slips off a rock into the sea. Rippling darkness swallowed him up.

★

It was Tegan who found the trail, crushed grass and scuffed dirt evidence enough that *something* large had passed that way. The Doctor led the way, picking up the traces of Avon's passage relatively easily. He had learnt tracking a few trips after that long-ago one to the Polynesian island where he had learnt fire-walking... Despite their impatience, their progress was slow, almost interminable. The trail was erratic; direction changed randomly as if the one making it was running nowhere - just away. But the fresh signs they came across kept them going.

"What's that noise?" Tegan asked suddenly.

The Doctor dismissed it. "Just a bird."

"No, it isn't, not even a bell-bird; they don't make that kind of sound," she insisted. "It's a sort of tinkling - don't you hear it? It almost sounds like -" She broke off, remembering what it almost sounded like, and remembering what had happened to her the last time she had heard such a noise. She stopped dead, listening, heart pounding.

"What does it sound like? - I can't hear anything," Vila prodded, curious, stopping also.

"Hush!" Tegan snapped, still listening. She

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heard it again. A tinkling, musical sound, off to the right.

"I've *got* to check," Tegan muttered to herself, and turned in the direction she had last heard the tinkling. There were no paths in this place - it was all open forest. One direction looked much the same as another.

Vila stood indecisively. The Doctor was forging ahead, oblivious of Tegan's departure, and Tegan was striding just as forcefully off to the right. He would have to decide soon, or he wouldn't be able to follow either of them.

He trotted off after the Doctor's retreating back. "Doctor, wait!"

The Doctor paused and turned around.

"What is it? Where's Tegan?"

"Er, she went off."

"Went? Went where? Why?"

But before Vila could reply to the obvious questions, they heard a yell. Without a word, both men rushed towards the sound.

Vila was babbling, panting, "I don't know - she heard a noise, she wanted to check it out, I don't know, I didn't hear anything..."

Presently they heard Tegan's voice, full of frustration. "Wake up - dammit, wake up!" More faintly, they heard a tinkling, chiming sound.

They burst through the trees, and there they saw, like a picture on the eye; a tree, translucent prisms swaying, Tegan kneeling, and there on the ground beside her, a man in black, unconscious.

It was Avon.

★

It was black, black as the inside of an eyelid, dark as a night without stars, dull as an eternity full of nothingness. No where. No thing. No one.

There was nowhere to go, so I went there, a voice quipped in Avon's mind. He couldn't be sure if it was himself. He couldn't be sure of anything - except that he was mad. This blackness was presumably another manifestation of his insanity. It didn't occur to him that decreeing himself mad must have meant he was at least a little sane - he wasn't up to such sophistry. He wasn't up to much at all. He would wait, and see what happened next. Or not see. He didn't much care, either way.

He wondered if this was that mythical place called Hell, and whether Servalan was around here someplace. She was dead, wasn't she? Father had killed her. No it wasn't Father, it was the Master. Though maybe all that was a dream, too, and he was undergoing the ministrations of Servalan's pet psychotechs. Or he was dead, anyway, and everything after Gauda Prime had been a dying nightmare, and now he was really dead.

"No, you're not dead," said a voice, and laughed, an unkind, jeering, self-satisfied laugh.

Avon turned around, and saw a young-old man, with a face painted like a mime artist - or perhaps it was naturally pale; it was hard to tell in this no-distance

no-light. The man was wearing elaborate and archaic clothing, which reminded Avon vaguely of Krantor; perhaps because they shared a similar aroma of corrupt decadence. Only with this man, it was worse.

"Then I must be mad," Avon replied.

The man seemed to study him, up and down, as if examining a particularly puzzling species of insect. "Oh, I don't think so," he declaimed at last. "Not yet."

"Does it matter?"

"Oh, you aren't any fun at all," said the young man petulantly, and vanished.

★

"He won't wake up, he won't wake up - you know what that means!" Tegan babbled. Her self-possession had left her entirely.

"What *does* it mean?" Vila turned worried eyes to Avon's prone figure, and back to the Australian.

"Oh, you wouldn't understand!" she snapped.

"What are we going to do?"

"Don't *worry* Tegan, I have an idea." The Doctor started going through his pockets. "I'm sure it's here somewhere..."

"What are you going to do?"

"Share his Dreaming..." He pulled out a blue prism on a round leather cord, and held it up. "I knew I still had it!" he exclaimed triumphantly.

"Could someone explain what is going on?"

Vila wailed plaintively.

"This is the Place of Great Dreaming - it must be. Even though we are not on the same planet, this appears to be as like Deva Loka as makes no difference - you were right, Tegan. The natives, the Kinda, are telepathic. This is where they go to share their dreams. But if a non-telepath should succumb to the sleep of the chimes, there is no-one to share their Dreaming - and their mind falls to the Dark Places of the Inside - where the Mara dwells."

Tegan shuddered. "It tricks you into letting him take you over," she mumbled, staring at the ground.

A shiver ran down Vila's spine. "What do you mean?" he asked, but he had an inkling. He just didn't want to believe it.

"I mean if we don't do something about it, your friend Avon will be possessed by the Mara, and able to take over other people!" Tegan snapped with fire. "That, or irredeemably mad."

"Which is why I must attempt to share his Dreaming," the Doctor stated, as he sat down cross-legged beside the unconscious form of his great-great-nephew.

"But Avon isn't telepathic - how can you?"

"Strictly speaking, Time Lords are not telepathic, no. But we all share a smattering of the Gift. It is particularly strong in Avon's mother. I can only hope he took after her..." He held the blue prism before him, cradled in his hands. "...and that this will be aid enough." The blue crystal began to glow.

"But what -" Vila began, but Tegan shushed him.

"Let him concentrate," she whispered. "It

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enhances mental powers - I think." she continued, telling him what she thought he wanted to know. "On Manoussa, they call it a Mind's Eye - a little one. On Darkover, they call it a Matrix, according to the Doctor. Now be quiet."

The thief sat down and complied. It looked like it would be a long wait.

★

Turlough looked appraisingly at the man on the floor. He appeared to have lost consciousness again. There hadn't been a sound out of him since the others had left. The console had stopped sparking ten minutes before, dull and inert as a lump of lead.

Turlough stole another glance at the Master. He really seemed to be out of it. He was still breathing, though. Fortunately. Or unfortunately. But at least he was out of the way.

He looked at the console again. He'd been itching to have a good old poke around at it ever since he noticed the cut of the laser knife through it - the Doctor would never dream of letting him near his own. Perhaps even sensible, considering...

But now, with a damaged one...

Turlough started collecting the tools scattered on the floor by Avon's hasty exit. One couldn't know which ones one would need. He righted the tool box and put it down by the console. Picking up a tool, he started carefully taking off the closest panel. He didn't consider how dangerous such an act might be...

★

It may have been a long time or a short time or no time at all, before the young man returned. His clothes differed slightly, and he seemed, if anything, more pale and ghastly than ever, and Avon noticed this time the pattern of a snake curling down his arm. Avon's eyes flicked up over him and away again. He had decided to sit down in this nothing no-place, as it was more comfortable than standing up. Even if only in the mind.

"Sulking, are we?" the young man taunted. "Or are we confused? Let's see, was it your father you killed, or your enemy? Your best friend, or your betrayer? How many people have you killed, eh..."

Avon ignored him, ignored his own confusion that matched the questions the young man was throwing at him. He thought he heard something, something not with his ears. Cally? But Cally was dead. He knew that. He'd seen her body himself, there in the underground base on Terminal. Then who...?

Avon, it came again. **Avontrokerrred. Listen to me.**

Definitely not Cally - this "voice" was masculine. Indeed, it sounded like...

The young man's haranguing broke off. "Who are you?" he exclaimed, looking at someone behind Avon. "You're not me. You're not even *him!* What are you doing here?"

Avon turned his head. He was not surprised at

all when the person behind him turned out to be the Doctor. Why not? When was madness rational?

"Hello, Uncle Thete," Avon remarked. "Come to join the party?"

"Only if it's a rescue party!" The Doctor looked as he usually did, beige cricketer's outfit, minus straw hat. The only difference was the blue glowing jewel hanging from a thong around his neck.

The young pale man laughed mockingly. "How very gallant!" He turned to Avon. "Do you want to be rescued by a figment of your imagination? Then you really would be mad, wouldn't you?"

"Don't listen to him, Avon!" the Doctor countered, clutching the jewel as if for strength or comfort. "This is the Mara! Don't you know what that *means?!!*"

The Mara flicked a glance at Avon, reading the answer in his face. The sneer in its eyes never faltered.

"What's in a, what's in a, what's in a name?" it said softly, jeeringly to Avon.

"The question will always remain the same.

Will you be me? Will you be free? Will you candidly agree?

With all that you've been going through,

I certainly wouldn't want to be *you!*" And it laughed, hard and cruel.

★

"Tell me about Avon, Vila," Tegan asked, determined not to be bored in this enforced wait, and rather curious in her own right. "What did you mean by being safer if you were his enemy than his friend?"

"Nothing," Vila mumbled, cursing Tegan's retentive memory. He'd been too worried about that slip of the tongue with respect to the Doctor, to wonder what the others might have thought.

"No you didn't!" Tegan insisted. She speculated the worst-case scenario; "Does he have a habit of killing his friends and sparing his enemies, is that it?"

"Not exactly," Vila began, not really considering how this would sound to Tegan. "He only killed his friends when they betrayed him. When he thought they betrayed him. Or in self-defense. To save his skin..."

Tegan would have been deaf not to detect the bitterness in Vila's tone. "Did he do that to you - try to kill you?" When he failed to deny it immediately, she burst out "Then why are you still his friend? I'd want to murder the bastard!"

"Because he needs a friend!" Vila retorted.

"Somebody who understands him, who won't push him. Blake wanted to be Avon's friend, but he wouldn't give him room. Blake expected too much, wouldn't let him be. I'm not sure whether even Avon knew if he hated Blake or loved him, but deep down, he trusted him. Blake was so... reliable. Your veritable white knight, too idealistic for his own good. Which made it so unbearable when Tarrant said he'd sold us out. I saw Avon's face..." Vila let out a shuddering sigh. "He'd been betrayed so often, you see."

"And Avon killed Blake?" Tegan asked softly.

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The thief nodded.

"But who was Blake, anyway? What were you all doing? How did you meet Avon in the first place?" So Vila told her.

★

The Doctor was fading. It wasn't easy to keep up this connection - he wasn't used to it.

"He is not real," the Mara said. "Tell him to go away!"

"I'll do something better than that," Avon muttered. "Go away! BOTH of you!"

It worked like a charm - literally. The Mara laughed as it went.

★

"It's been too long," Tegan fretted. "I want to *do* something!"

"You said you were here before," Vila began tentatively. "What did you do then?"

"I was asleep," the Australian snapped.

Vila stole a glance at the unconscious Avon, then back at her, speculatively. She looked at her hands, pouting.

Suddenly she jumped up. "The Wise woman!" she exclaimed.

"What?"

"There should be a Wise Woman, there *must* be a Wise Woman - there was before," Tegan babbled excitedly. "She would know what to do! I've got to find her!" And she made as if to dash off.

"Hold up, Tegan," Vila jumped up. "You haven't the first idea where to look -"

"Anything's better than waiting and doing nothing!"

"I can think of a lot worse," Vila said. He had been rather enjoying not being shot at for once.

"Good. You stay here and look after them."

"Now, just a minute -"

"And, Vila, if a snake appears on his arm, DON'T let him wake up!" And she was off through the trees.

"Don't let him wake up? I suppose she means knock him out or something. Me, knock out Avon? She doesn't know what she's asking. But I guess it wouldn't be Avon I was knocking out. Oh, why does it always happen to me?"

★

It was not long before it was back, this time as a woman. With long hair as black as coal, face as white as parchment, and a sickness in its eyes like a soul with no heart. It began to stalk him.

"Anaesthesia," the Mara cooed. "No more pain. No more responsibility."

Avon blinked. It would be a relief. Not to be confused any more...

"No worries," the Mara continued, pressing its perceived advantage. "No betrayals."

Avon jerked his head up. "You don't know anything!" he snapped. "I can't trust you." He scrambled to his feet. "I can't trust anyone."

"Of course," the Mara agreed. It was sure this fish had taken the hook, but it didn't want him to break loose. "You can't trust anyone. But what have you got to lose? You have already lost everything. There's nothing left that matters."

"No, nothing matters," Avon echoed. "They're all dead - except Vila..."

The fish was loosening the hook. "Are you *sure*?" the Mara said with oily persuasiveness. "You saw him die - you just imagined you saw him later - with some relative of yours? The one you imagined you saw just now? It isn't *reasonable*, is it? You've been seeing things! Come and be me, and you won't have to worry any more."

"They're all dead," Avon said bleakly, accepting the Mara's lie. "Even my enemies - they're dead." He stared emptily at the Mara facing him. "It doesn't matter any more."

"That's right," the Mara smiled like a beast before its prey, and held out its hands. "So be me and be free of it all."

Avon looked at its hands, and then at his own. Such a small thing, consent. So small, and yet so vital. He shrugged. "Yes," he answered.

He didn't even scream when the snake crossed to his arm. He wasn't the screaming type.

★

Faintly, like an old tattoo, the mark of a snake faded into existence on Avon's right arm. The mark became clearer even as Vila noticed it. Avon began to stir. Vila quivered, uncertain. Did he really have keep Avon from waking up?

The computer tech's eyes blinked, and a slow, languid smile curved across his face. That did it. That wasn't Avon's smile; more like Servalan's, really.

"I'm sorry, Avon," said Vila, and punched him in the jaw, out cold. The element of surprise had given him all the advantage he needed.

Vila sat down, wringing his hand. "Oh, you've got a hard jaw, Avon. And it's too much to hope you won't kill me for it when this is over. I just wish it was. Over, that is. All these ruddy alien invasions, but then, you're an alien, too, aren't you Avon? Should have bloody guessed, shouldn't I? You always liked your computers more than people. I just wish - oh where *has* that Tegan got to? Probably eaten by wild animals, I just bet."

★

The Extorkor of Miramarim have a saying: Never turn your back on an enemy. Unfortunately for Turlough, he had never been to Miramarim, and probably would not have been graced with that saying even if he had. So he was not prepared for the sudden blow to the head that occurred just as he poked his head back out from underneath the console after examining a

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particularly convoluted circuit. One blow was enough. Turlough fell like a log, with the Master standing unsteadily over him.

He was fortunate, really. At least it was quick.

★

"What was that?" Vila quavered at a noise in the forest. "Tegan, is that you?" There was no answer.

A twig snapped like the crack of a rifle. Vila shot up like a frightened rabbit, and thought about wild beasts.

"Sorry, folks," he nodded at the Time Lords on the ground below the chimes, "but I'm not staying to be eaten." He scuttled off in the opposite direction to the sound.

But it had not been a wild beast - it *was* Tegan; Tegan and a woman of indeterminate age, thin, dressed in a black shift and holding a long staff in one hand, and a box in another. They stopped and looked around. The area was, of course, deserted except for the two men on the ground.

"Where's Vila? I told him to look after them!"

The Wise Woman had put the box on the ground, and was examining the two men.

"We may be too late," she said. "This one already has the Mark of the Snake upon him." She lifted his chin. "But someone has knocked him out; there is a bruise."

"Vila! Where is he then?"

"It does not matter, we must act now." The Wise woman opened the box, just as Vila came running through the trees.

"No!" Tegan yelled. "Vila, get out of here! The box, the box of Jhana -"

"What's the matter? Who's that? What -" There was a flickering in his vision, a swirling in his ears, a smell that was a colour, and a taste that was a sound...

★

There were five, and blackness. Three together, and one, facing another. A man with a jewel at his breast, a dark-haired woman, a bewildered man with a cringing air, an older woman with a staff - facing a man in black with the pattern of a snake on his bare arm.

"This is the one you seek?" the older woman asked the younger.

"Yes," answered Tegan.

"Avon!" Vila started forward, but the Wise Woman barred his way with her staff.

"Be still, Fool. This is not the one you have known. He bears the mark of the Snake - the Mara is in him."

"And will not come out at your behest, woman," sneered the man in black.

"We contest your right to him," the woman replied.

"Challenge me, then," the man returned. "One to one."

"Very well," the woman nodded. There was the smallest of pauses, and the Wise Woman continued, in a voice of utter formality. "Who claims challenge on behalf of this man?"

"I do," said three voices. They stared at each other in surprise.

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The Wise Woman turned to the Doctor. "By what right would you claim this challenge?"

"By right of blood," the Doctor said firmly, quite at ease with this sort of ritual.

The woman nodded, but said nothing. Instead she turned to Vila and asked the question again. "By what right would you claim this challenge?"

The Doctor's answer had provided him with his cue. "By right of friendship," he answered unsteadily, avoiding looking at Avon, or rather, the thing that looked like Avon.

The woman nodded again. She turned to Tegan, who stood there uncomfortably.

"By what right would you claim this challenge?"

Tegan resisted an impulse to fidget. Why had she said she wanted to challenge the Mara? She must be mad! Oh, she hated it, she knew what it could do, she had been there - and it had defeated her. And maybe that was why.

"Answer, child," the Wise Woman prompted.

Tegan trembled. One of her uncles had said, the only way to ride a horse that has thrown you is to get right back on. To face your fear, and overcome it.

"By right of defeat," she said softly. Let them make of that what they would. The Doctor would probably understand what she meant.

The Wise Woman turned to the Mara. "Which do you chose?"

The Mara regarded them all in turn, sneering at them mockingly. He stared at the Doctor. "You, old man, are predictable." Vila flinched when that alien gaze turned to him through familiar eyes. "And you are a coward. You would be too easy to defeat." At the end of the line, Tegan. "The girl intrigues me." He leered at her, undressing her with his eyes. "A tasty tidbit. I will accept her challenge."

"Not Tegan!" the Doctor protested. "It's not her fight."

"It *is* my fight! Mine more than anyone's. You're fighting for *him*. I don't even know him. I'm fighting for myself."

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"You are a confounded nuisance," remarked the Master, staring at the still form sprawled on the floor. "Idiots come in all shapes and sizes," he added cryptically as he knelt down and felt for Turlough's pulse. He swore when he found it.

"Oh, Doctor, your companions are almost as bad as you are!" he cried to the wall. He rummaged through the tool box that Turlough had filled with no knowledge of its ordering. "I'm not keeping you," the Time Lord declared to the unconscious Turlough. "I've had enough of prisoners, compliant or otherwise." He tossed aside another tool in disgust. "Though that Peri-person was one of the worst... Adric was at least useful, while he lasted." He picked up a black cylinder with a clear bulge at one end. "Aha!"

He turned and pointed it at Turlough with an evil grin. He pressed a button on its side. Nothing happened. He pressed the button again. The tool made

a small whine, but that was all. The Master shook it next to his ear, listening for a tell-tale rattle. Nothing. He tried it again. Still nothing.

"Bah!" The Master threw it angrily towards the wall. As it slid up against the corner, it activated. A golden glow enveloped a discarded cloak on the floor, and suddenly it shrunk to a tenth of its size.

"It *does* work!" the Master exclaimed, and leapt up. Retrieving his tissue-compression analyzer, he pointed it at Turlough and pressed the firing stud. Nothing happened. Again. Nothing. "Blasted thing has a mind of its own!" he tossed it down again.

The Master was incorrect. He would have been better to remember something he had reminded Avon of, just before Avon attacked him - something about weapons and Tardises...

The Time Lord glared at Turlough. "I'll just have to get rid of you myself!"

★

There was just the two of them now - the others had vanished somehow into the vast nothing - or out of it, into the light of reality. Tegan, alone. And the Mara, wearing Avon's body like a well-worn cloak.

"Now what?" Tegan asked, fighting to keep the nervousness out of her voice. "What does this 'challenge' consist of?"

"Quite simple," the Mara drawled in Avon's voice. "You must persuade him to come with you - and I must persuade him to stay."

"How can I persuade *him* when you're speaking through him, then?" she snapped, irritated into courage.

"Easy!" said a voice behind her.

Tegan whirled. Another man stood there, palely grinning, dressed in tattered black denim, heavy boots, and safety pins. The pattern of a snake coiled vibrantly down one arm. Tegan stared, astonished.

"Sometimes I tire of courtly threads," it explained. "Now we can both argue with him. More than fair, don't you agree?"

"Fair?" Tegan burst out with a voice strangled between laughing and crying. "Fair? You were never fair! You never will be. You're a fiend!"

"So you hate me, child," it commented, quite unmoved. "Many have hated me before. It did them no good. Did you think you were unique in that, girl? You threaten to bore me."

Of course it had been hated. It probably thrived on hatred, just as it thrived on greed, fear and despair. She was only aiding it by hating it. But hate was better than fear. With hate, she could act. Fear would numb her to immobility.

"You *have* been defeated," she spat at it.

"Oh, really," it drawled. "In myths and legends, no doubt."

"No," she answered. "I was there." Oh, yes. she was there... she had been the Mara's instrument, in that other universe. And why had the Mara been defeated? Because the Doctor had found the still point, and stood firm, cutting off the Mara in the midst of its becoming. But she had no mental powers, no Little Minds Eye, no

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help at all.

"You are in *my* territory now," it said, grinning.

She shivered. /Brave heart, Tegan/ a voice echoed in her memory.

She steeled her jaw, and turned to Avon. "Why on Earth did you give in to it anyway?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter," he said.

"But the Mara is evil!" she exclaimed.

"What is Evil?" the Mara asked.

"You are!" Tegan snapped.

"Uh uh, wrong answer," it declaimed. "We are not abstract. In the abstract, Hate is evil." It smiled at her, nastily, making her think of blood-spattered pavements and broken bones. "You hate me, therefore you are evil."

"Yeah, I saw Star Wars too, and I don't buy it," she returned. "Whatever morals you judge by, you're evil - you *feed* off hate - you parasite!"

"But if I feed off the evil of Men, am I not part of the great Circle of Life, with just as much right to exist as any other creature? For if Mankind was not evil, I would not Be."

"But you take away freedom - you're evil!"

"I do not take it away," the Mara corrected. "It is given to me freely - always. I only take what is offered me."

The line of thought was seductive. Tegan shook her head, denying. "By trickery."

"She says I tricked you," the Mara commented to Avon, reminding her of her purpose. "Then again, she probably doesn't exist."

Tegan turned back to Avon. "Have you considered what the Mara will *do* with your body when it wakes up? Considered all the evil it could do with your knowledge and power? Think of your responsibility!"

"No," Avon replied. "I'm tired of responsibility."

"Don't you care?!" Tegan shouted, exasperated.

"No," said Avon. "I don't care."

"That's right," said the Mara. "Be empty."

"There are people who *care* about you Avon, who want you to come back," Tegan said earnestly. "Your friend Vila, and your uncle, the Doctor."

"If they *really* cared, why aren't they here?" the Mara countered.

"Because you accepted *my* challenge, not theirs!" Tegan snapped. "They still care."

"So what?" Avon remarked. "What difference does that make?"

"It makes everything you've done futile," Tegan replied. "Everything you've worked to achieve."

"Life is vain, and a chasing after wind," the Mara said. "She is nothing. You are nothing. We are all nothing."

"Nothing my foot!" Tegan retorted, stamping it. "I'm realer than you are!"

"More real," Avon corrected distinterestedly.

He doesn't care, Tegan thought. *The Mara could go on saying 'she is evil because she hates and hate is evil' forever and Avon wouldn't budge an inch. Hate is Evil? Hate Evil, more like it. Hate! Maybe I*

could get him to hate his way out of here. Not as nice as love, but easier to achieve. I must be getting somewhere or he wouldn't be listening to me at all.

"Blake would never be in a situation like this," she declaimed. "He cared too much to give in like you have. Is that why you killed him - because he would have showed you up for the cold-hearted bastard you are?" Her thoughts were not as harsh as her words. *That's going at it with both boots. This isn't the best way - it's the **only** bloody way! ...I hate this.*

Avon frowned. "He's dead. It doesn't matter why."

"And it wouldn't have mattered to Vila why you nearly tossed him out the airlock either, I suppose? To save your own miserable skin, while he died, breath bursting out in a stream of ice, miles above Malodar?" "I didn't kill him."

"But you were going to, weren't you? If you'd thought a bit faster, it wouldn't have been necessary - and you wouldn't have lost the Tachyon funnel either."

"What is a Tachyon funnel?" the Mara queried. "It is nothing."

"I suppose 'nothing' is all that mattered about Cally, too?" Tegan said sarcastically. "Why did you really go to Terminal, Avon? How much did Servalan pay you? Such a pity Cally had to go - but then she was too soft, wasn't she?"

"Servalan killed Cally, not me," Avon retorted.

"She is gone," said the Mara. "Dust blown away on the wind. Recrimination is meaningless."

"You didn't care about Cally," Tegan accused Avon, steeling herself against sympathy. It had to work, it just had to; or she would never forgive herself. "You would have killed Servalan if you had. You certainly had plenty of chances. But what do you do? You steal gold for her instead. And she killed Cally and made a fool of you. Because despite all you said, you did care about Blake."

"I don't care!" Avon said. Angrily.

"Be still," the Mara soothed. "Don't listen to these lies."

But lies didn't hurt - truth did.

"Cally cared about you," Tegan continued. "Vila cares about you - and he has so many reasons not to. Blake cared - but then he cared about everybody. Bit like your uncle, the Doctor. You don't deserve to be related."

"Idealists," Avon said precisely, "are fools."

"But not all fools are idealists," Tegan countered. "You are a fool. You were stupid enough to think that the Master was your father! The one who stole you away from your family and abandoned you on Earth."

"I was tired."

"Tired!" Tegan exclaimed, deliberately provocative. "What sort of excuse is that?"

"She is nothing - just a figment," the Mara said. "Ignore her."

"Was Anna a figment, Avon?" Tegan questioned. "Did you ever love her? Why did you murder her then? She was a cold-hearted bitch, using you for her own ends. She spat on your love! How

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many other men had she trapped in the same way?
You were just one in the line..."

"She let me go."

"That's what *she* said. You were caught
anyway, weren't you?"

"Why don't you crawl back where you came
from?" Avon snapped in cold fury.

"I'm not leaving without you," Tegan declared.

"You are the last person I would go anywhere
with!"

"Hate me, do you?" she asked.

"Yes," he retorted.

"The Master?"

"Yes."

"And Blake?"

"Yes."

"Servalan?"

"Yes!"

"Anna?"

"Yes!"

"The Doctor?"

"Yes!" he bellowed. "Everyone."

"What about the Mara?"

"Yes."

"More than anyone else?"

"Yes."

"Is that because you care about it more or less
than you care about the rest of us?"

"I don't care at all."

"Of course," Tegan agreed, knowing that he was
lying. "Coming now?"

She turned her back on them both, and walked
away. For the space of a heart-beat, Avon sat still,
indifference battling with rage. Rage won. Before he
had taken two steps, the snake faded from his arm.

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Avon stirred. Someone appeared to have put a
bird's nest in his mattress as a joke. And stuffed it with
stones and clay as well. He put out a hand and touched
something crumbly and damp. He was lying on



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ground, not a mattress! He opened his eyes, and found Vila hovering anxiously over him.

"Hello, Vila," the computer expert said. "I've had such a peculiar dream..." He touched his jaw. "Ouch! You really *did* hit me!" Vila scuttled back as Avon scrambled irately to his feet.

"She told me to, Avon, really, it wasn't you, Tegan said not to let you wake up..." Vila babbled, and stopped when he noticed Avon was ignoring him.

He was staring at Tegan. It wasn't a dream after all. Not at all. "You!" He came up to her in two furious strides. "You insufferable nuisance!" He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "I ought to break your neck!"

Tegan set her jaw. "At least you're alive, in one piece!" she snapped back.

"You expect me to THANK you?" he growled.

"I didn't do it for *you*," she retorted, forced to look up at him. "So you don't have to worry about being grateful."

He let her go, fury suddenly gone. "Why did you do it, then?"

She stood straightly before him. "You might say, revenge. That's a motive I'm sure you understand." She turned on her heel and stepped away.

But before Avon could reply, Tegan saw something in the direction they were both facing. A person, approaching.

"Turlough!" Tegan started towards the rather dishevelled redhead. "What happened to you? You were supposed to be guarding the Master!"

"The Master?" Avon was surprised into exclaiming. "I thought he was dead."

"He was," a voice said quietly from behind Avon. "He regenerated. He claimed *you* attacked him."

Avon whirled. It was the Doctor, looking accusingly at him.

Avon set his jaw. "He was correct. I did attack him," Avon answered coldly.

"He also said you were mad," the Doctor added, grasping for anything that would excuse his nephew's action.

"Perhaps I was," Avon conceded; but challenging, "Perhaps I still am."

"It just dematerialized, I tell you!" Turlough was arguing with Tegan as they came up. "I saw it go! I don't care whether the console was a wreck or not - it vanished!"

"See how violent I get?" Avon murmured, deadpan.

The pair had come up to the two Time Lords. "So how do *you* say he got away, then?" Tegan demanded of Avon.

"Two control rooms," he replied equitably. "The design is not uncommon."

"Well, what are we standing around here for?" Vila demanded, deeming himself safe from Avon's immediate wrath.

"How does being lost strike you?" Turlough commented. "I'm amazed I managed to find you at all, but I haven't the faintest idea where the Tardis is from

here."

The Doctor started rummaging in his ever-useful pockets. "Don't fret, we'll simply find mine the same way we found the Master's Tardis - with my tracker!" He brandished the device like torch, and set off. The others followed erratically in his wake.

Avon strode alone, glad of the walk and the distance; an excuse for silence. He wanted to think, to sort it all out. If that would ever be possible. Perhaps some things were better forgotten.

"Brooding, Avon?" Vila had decided that the computer expert had been long enough alone with his thoughts. "I thought that was more along Blake's line."

Avon's eyes flashed fire. "Don't mention that name."

Vila wouldn't let it be. "Why not? Because it hurts you that he's dead, or because you killed him? You both made a mistake, that's all."

Blake - now there was something that had been bothering him. "Vila - how did Tegan know about Blake? You - you told her, didn't you? What right -"

"What right did I have? He was my friend, too! And I wanted her to understand -"

"Understand what? What a fool I am?"

"Why a fool like me would stick to a fool like you - despite all the mistakes and bad moves." Vila grinned, abandoning seriousness. "After all, who else could I break the Big Wheel with, eh? Though I reckon me and Orac alone would have done fine..."

"You couldn't pull your socks up without recorded instructions!" Avon jibed back.

"You couldn't *find* your socks without a circuit diagram!" Vila returned happily.

"Well, at the moment, I only have one pair of socks, and they're on my feet," Avon replied equitably.

"Warn me when you're about to take your boots off, then!" And Vila was off through the trees.

Avon smiled, then frowned. Here came the last person he wanted to see; Tegan Jovanka.

"What do you want?"

"I want to get back to the Tardis," Coolly. "Don't we all?"

Then again, there *was* something he wanted to ask her. "What did you mean - 'revenge'?"

She pretended not to understand. "Revenge? What do you mean?"

"You said your motive was revenge," he said coldly, then decided to pretend at misunderstanding himself. "What did I do to *you*?"

Tegan laughed in astonishment. "You? Not revenge against *you*! Revenge against the Mara!"

"What did it do to you, then?"

"That's none of your -"

"Business?" Avon finished for her. "I think not. You certainly know enough of my sordid story - indeed, too much. How much wine did you give him?"

"What? Who?" Tegan asked, bewildered by this seeming non-sequetour.

"Vila the loose-tongued," Avon answered with a gleam in his eye.

"Oh," Tegan looked at the ground. "I think I insulted him into it."

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"Vila - insulted? I thought he was insult-proof."
"I thought back then that *you* were," Tegan said.
"It certainly took enough to get your attention."
"So that's what you were doing, then?" Avon's face was still. "Getting my attention?"
"It worked, didn't it?"
"Yes," Avon said slowly. "Yes it did."
"Truce?" She offered her hand.
He regarded it quizzically, eyebrow lifted.
"Truce," he agreed, after a pause, not taking the offered hand.
Tegan gave a crooked smile and retrieved her hand. "Okay," she said.

And then they both smiled.
"Come on you two - we're nearly there!" came Turlough's yell from up ahead. They started walking again.

There in the green and brown, a flash of blue; the Tardis. It seemed like no time at all before they were all stepping through its double doors to the white control room inside.

The Doctor went straight to the console. "Now to take you home," he smiled.

Tegan rolled her eyes. "Where have I heard *that* before?"

"I'm searching for the anger
Consider it a gift
Open up that window
Come betray me with a kiss
You have won if nothing else
Rope enough to hang yourself
But what is that to us?"

(Beyond the Call - David Batteau, Darrell Brown, Kevin Dukes)

