

The Memory of Anna

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In an entirely different forum, someone said "Why is it that all love stories end as soon as the couple kisses?". Why that made this idea spring out of my subconscious I'm not even sure I want to know.

Featured fandoms: Blake's 7

Featured pairings: Anna Grant/Servalan

A.S.S Story codes: ff

Story rating: R

He entered her cell without knocking. It was to be expected, of course. She was, as far as she knew, the most important member of the old regime that they had managed to capture, so they did every petty little thing they could to prove themselves more important than her.

"Commissioner Sleer?"

He was not entirely young. A bit over thirty, perhaps. His hair was dark, as was his eyes. His skin was pale, and he was well dressed. He wore a perfume she knew to be very exclusive and hard to get.

"Call me Servalan," she said. "There is no reason to pretend."

He sat down on the single, hard chair the cell provided. It matched the small, bare table and well-worn cot that made up the rest of the furniture. He put his dataslate in his lap and activated it.

"I would like to ask you a few questions," he said. "I hope you will answer them willingly. You if anyone should know that any refusal will be quite futile."

She sat on the cot, leaning against the cold wall. "Of course," she said. "Ask away."

He cleared his throat. "To begin with," he said, "I would like to know why you came back not just to Earth, but to your old palace. You must have known that there of all places, in the place of the failed coup against your presidency, someone would recognize you for who you are."

She looked at him in silence for a while. He was just about to remind her that she'd said she'd cooperate when she spoke.

"That is a much longer story than you might think," she said. "Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"Absolutely," he said. "Go right ahead. We have plenty of time."

The Student

We met at the Federation Space Academy Command School. I'd always known I'd be going there, but it wasn't something I was looking forward to. Not that I had anything against what was being taught, far from it, it was the gateway to the career I wanted. But it wasn't a popular choice of career among my friends and relatives, so I rather expected to be alone there with a lot of dedicated and dour Alpha youths.

Imagine my relief when another aristocrat walked into the lecture hall that first day.

I didn't recognize her, so I guessed that she wasn't from Earth. While Earth held more Ungraded than any other planet in the Federation, it still wasn't a huge number. At one time or another, I had met almost all of them. I had certainly met all of the ones close to me in age. This was someone new.

The first lecture passed. I don't even remember what it was about, I was so busy sneaking looks at the new girl that I wasn't paying attention.

The main lecture hall at FSACS is smaller than you expect. It's built to hold all students and all staff, which may sound like a lot, but at any one time there aren't all that many of them. There are some two hundred seats, all in all, and they're almost never all filled. The hall is very high, with the upper ten meters or so made out of slightly blue-tinted glass, letting in much light. Together with the light pastel colours of the walls and furniture, it gives the hall a kind of otherworldly feel.

The new girl had sat down in the same row as me, but on the other side of the hall. She had brown hair, a slender body and sharp, almost predatory, features. Her appearance appealed to me. Even if she hadn't been a fellow Ungraded I probably would have started talking to her, to see if she was worth taking to bed.

As it was, I knew from the very first that I wanted her. I have never, before or since, met anyone else who gave me as intense a rush of pure lust as Anna did.

When the lecture ended, I approached her.

"I'm Servalan," I said and offered her my hand.

"I guessed as much," she said as she took it. "I'm Anna, from Ceres III. I've heard a lot about you."

"Really," I said, still holding her hand. "Good or bad?"

"Interesting." She raised an eyebrow and smiled the crooked little smile I'd get to know so well.

"If you just got here," I said, "maybe you'd allow me to show you the grounds? It will perhaps not be as efficient as a guide module, but I'm quite sure I can make it somewhat more... interesting."

She let her gaze move all over my body, unashamed, arrogant.

"Sounds like fun," she said. "Right now?"

"When else?" I replied, and led her out into the sunlight, still without letting go of her hand.

We first made love a few days later, lying on the grass in one of the outer gardens. It was very early in the morning, and we'd been dancing all night. I no longer remember who first took the initiative. It was probably one of those moments of complete agreement where two people simultaneously move towards the same goal. We kissed, and we undressed each other, and our slender young bodies moved in unison, softly lit by

the early rays of the rising sun.

A few weeks later, we were living together. That, too, was a gradual thing. From the very first day we spent much time together, and after that night in the garden we spent our nights as well as our days side by side. Anna had her servants fetch what she needed from her quarters as she needed it, and eventually all of her things had migrated to my suite. After that, letting the allocation of her rooms lapse was a decision so minor that we didn't even notice it at the time.

Our days were filled with studies and exercises, our nights with pleasures of the flesh and of the spirit. We were both brilliant students, as was expected of us, and we were the center of the FSACS' social life, a state of affairs we both found so natural and expected that we never consciously thought about it. We knew that we were, by pre-natal genetic screening and life-long physical and mental conditioning, a breed superior to the Alphas who were our classmates and the betas that were our servants. With the singular arrogance of privileged youth, we used them all for our entertainment, much like cats play with mice.

Days of bliss, days of happiness, they passed one by one and grew into months and years.

Anna had been born on Ceres III, only daughter to the planetary administrator and his wife, who had, quite contrary to the custom of the time, carried her within her own womb from conception to birth. Ceres III was, and still is, a minor world. Anna and her parents were the only Ungraded on the entire planet, and Anna grew up predictably spoiled. She was used to getting everything she wanted, and she didn't take disappointment well.

Also, I think, she felt a bit out of her depth on Earth. There were many more people than she was used to, and a not insignificant number of the ones she met were older and more experienced Ungraded. She felt threatened. She felt insecure. And, of course, she tried to compensate. To find a way to feel safe.

The way she found was physical aggression. Not unreasonable, in a military academy. Ceres III has a higher than average gravity, so she had an advantage in strength and reflexes just from growing up there. She spent as much time in combat training as I spent in the immersion library, and she became a truly extraordinary fighter. Strong, fast, smart and driven by both her own insecurity and the fierce ambition bred into us.

She became very protective, and more than a little bit possessive, about me. When other students came up to me to talk, about classwork or parties or anything else, she'd be there at my side glaring at them. That was all she did, glare. Once or twice I think she made a little growling sound or took half a step forward. She didn't need to do any more, at the Academy. People there had seen her practice, seen her take on and demolish four opponents at a time. They'd heard the rumours about when we'd got the stupid idea of going to a delta club down by the spaceport and some lout pinched my ass.

I remember standing in the stinking, badly lit club. The only people still there were me, Anna, the guy who'd pinched me and a couple of his friends unconscious on the floor. Everybody else had fled. Anna was talking to him, spelling out with great elaboration why he should keep his hands *off* his betters. Every word that came out of her mouth was accompanied with the cracking of another breaking bone. He'd stopped screaming, and the smell of urine and excrement grew ever stronger.

I'd never been so turned on before in my entire life. I watched Anna working him

over, and I adored her as never before. My slender, dangerous love. My predator, my ever so barely tamed wild beast. Her movements were a love poem to me, every thud and crack and pained grunt a syllable in a sonnet of love. I admired the economical movements of her arms, I delighted in the way the muscles tensed under her skin when she snapped another bone. Overcome with feeling I knelt beside her. Leaning over the twitching body, I took her face between my hands and kissed her. My beloved.

I'm not sure exactly how the rumour got to the Academy. Probably someone there had a relative in the police. Anyway, after that Anna never even had to use harsh language towards anybody there, and they were all extremely polite to me. Except once. But once was one time too many.

The FSACS graduation ball is held outdoors. All students from all the FSACS compounds all over the Federation come to Earth to graduate, and there is no room there that can hold them all at once. So, the ball is held in the Mountain View Garden. It's held at night. The sky is clear. A full moon shines down, and the cherry trees blossom. The weather technicians work for months making sure of that.

A few months before our graduation, Anna started getting tense. It took me a while to figure out why, but once I did it was quite obvious. We were about to leave the small world in which we'd been queens. We'd still be among the elite, of course -- but that was the problem. We'd be *among* the elite. Also, we'd be in the military. There was a good chance we'd be assigned together if we asked for it, but it wasn't sure. We might get separated. Neither of us wanted to think about that, so we didn't talk about it. But I think it bothered Anna a lot, near the end.

I don't remember his name. He was a nonentity, some Alpha come to Earth for the graduation.

We were dancing, Anna and I. The orchestra played something traditional, almost ancient. I'd gone through the archives and found a description of a dance that was supposed to go with it, and it hadn't taken us much time to learn it. We danced through the silvery moonlight, alone on the grass. The other students stood still, surrounding us, watching us move. Admiring us. The music stopped, we stopped, people started moving about again and as we walked towards a food table he came up to us and grabbed my arm.

That was all it took.

He grabbed my arm and said something about letting him have a dance, and before he knew what had hit him he was sitting on the grass with an aching jaw.

"You don't touch her, maggot," I heard Anna hiss. "If you want to live, you don't touch her."

He looked surprised, then angry. He got up, and he tried to grab my arm again.

"You don't decide what..." he managed to say before Anna hit him again. This time, she hit him like she meant it, and I heard the cracking as his jaw broke. She was moving to follow up with a kick to crush his larynx when I stopped her.

"I think he's learned his lesson," I said. "Besides, he's a student, so if you kill him in front of witnesses they'll have to punish you. Let's go get something to eat."

Reluctantly, she came with me, leaving him moaning in the grass.

The next morning I woke up alone.

Anna's side of the bed was not only empty, but cold. She'd been gone for some time. This was unusual, but it had become more common as graduation day ap-

proached, so I didn't worry. Much.

In between the ball and the actual graduation we weren't doing much but waiting to be told were we'd been assigned to. I decided to start the day with a very long shower, which halfway through changed into a very long lovemaking session when Anna returned and joined me.

I didn't think about it again until later that week, when I got my assignment.

"I'm afraid I have to deny your request to be assigned alongside Commander Anna," the old woman said.

She was the commander of the Command School, and to this day I don't know what her name was. She was always just the Commander. She'd been the head of FSACS for decades, and she had enough dirt on enough of her old students to stay there as long as she wished.

"What?" I replied, not really having taken in what she'd just said.

"You'll be going to separate places. Two weeks from now, you will be the new political officer on Security Station Alpha One. You'll be promoted to Space Commander before then, of course, and you can look forward to another promotion within the year. I'm not supposed to tell you where Anna is going, although I rather suspect she'll tell you herself soon enough. In any case, it will be a very long way from here or anything else that matters."

"Why? Why can't she be with me?" I whispered. I had not expected this. I had known it was possible, but I had never imagined it might actually happen. When I'd been thinking about the future, Anna had always been in it with me. Without her, all my plans were moot. I didn't know what to do or what to think.

"You may remember that she hit a student during the graduation ball," the Commander said. "For touching you, I believe."

"I remember."

"The morning after the ball said student was found dead. He'd been hit once, with great force, a perfect killing strike. The attack was made in one of the very few blind spots in this complex's surveillance system."

I looked at her while she spoke, dread turning my insides to lead.

"We know it was Anna who killed him," she said. "If she hadn't been Ungraded, she'd be on her way to mutoid conversion as we speak. As it is, she'll never have a sensitive assignment or get promoted above Space Commander."

"I'll go with her," I said. "Wherever you send her, I'm willing to go with her."

"Yes, I'm sure you are. That doesn't matter. I can't possibly give you anything but the best assignment available. You have a remarkable academic record, you're from the best possible background and you are the only student ever to get a teacher convicted of treason. If I send you to where Anna is going, your guardians will scream bloody murder and you'll be assigned somewhere else so fast you won't remember your name. I'm sorry, Servalan, but you're going to SS Alpha One, and Anna is going to escort freighters. And that's that."

That wasn't that, of course.

I'd expected Anna to explode when I told her, to lash out in fury and wreck our quarters. But she didn't. Instead, she collapsed like a house of cards in a strong wind. She sat down on the bed, heavily, and I hurried to her side.

"I knew it'd be like this", she whispered into my shoulder. "I knew they'd never let us stay together."

I felt her trembling, as if she fought to keep years of pent-up fear from getting out.

"Don't be silly," I whispered back to her. "This is just a temporary setback. We'll be together again. Just you wait and see."

She tore herself away from me and looked at me, wild and desperate.

"No we *won't*," she said. "They'll see to it. They'll make sure we never get together again. They don't think I'm good enough for you."

"Once we get to our assignments, we *are* 'they'," I tried to tell her, but she wasn't listening to me.

"Maybe she hasn't sent the orders yet," Anna said, and I wasn't quite sure that she was talking to me any more. "Maybe she's just made up her mind, not actually done it."

She got up from the bed and looked at me but not *at* me.

"I'll fix it, love," she said, and what I saw in her eyes made me afraid. Suddenly, I wasn't at all sure about her. I'd seen her go wild before. It was a large part of why I loved her. But the way she looked right now wasn't just wild. It was beyond that, well into violently insane territory. Which is often a good thing in combat, but very rarely so in a more social context.

"Anna, wait," I tried to say, but she was long past listening. She grabbed a combat knife from among her training equipment and vanished through the door.

For once, I really didn't know what to do.

Once more in the Commander's office. There was a bright pink scar on the side of the Commander's neck, where Anna had nearly sliced her throat open.

"Is she a mutoid yet?" I asked, not wanting to hear the answer.

"No," the Commander said. "She won't be converted. Ungraded never are. We don't publicize that, but so it is."

I looked up. A glimmer of hope?

"What will happen to her, then?"

"She will be killed. Painlessly and without ceremony. Her family will be in disgrace, and any further children they have will be Graded."

No hope. Not that I had expected any. Assaulting a senior officer was about as bad a crime as it was possible to commit. The only mitigating circumstance here was that the Commander hadn't been badly hurt. It might be mitigating enough for my last, thin and feeble ray of hope. I gathered all the courage I had.

"I have a suggestion," I said.

The Commander raised an eyebrow. "Really? What might that be?"

"You still have an unsolved murder of a student," I said. "That is a blot on your record. I'm sure such a blot is irrelevant to someone of your stature, but wouldn't you still prefer not having it?"

"You're offering to inform on your lover."

It was a statement, not a question.

"What's in it for you?"

That was a question.

I wet my lips. "Occasionally," I said, "an informer has been allowed to choose the convicted's punishment, within the limits legally available. It is within your power to let me do that."

"So it is," she said. "But I don't really see what you'd gain from it. All the legal alternatives are variants of execution."

"Yes. But I still want to choose."

She shrugged. "Very well. As far as I can see, I lose nothing and gain something. You have a deal."

I wasn't there when they arrested her.

I wasn't there at the trial. I wasn't there when sentence was pronounced, nor at the fake public execution. I never saw any of it, never saw my Anna's last moments. They're in the records, but I never even felt tempted to look them up.

The way I see it in my nightmares is quite bad enough. She's sitting at the accused's desk, with guards flanking her. I'm standing a few paces behind her. As the judge's words die away, she turns to look at me. She's looking so small and vulnerable and confused.

"Help me. Please," she begs.

"I'm sorry, love," I hear myself saying, my voice utterly calm and collected. "It's for your own good."

"But I don't *want* to die," she says, and somehow I'm now close enough to touch her. Tears are running from her eyes, and I wipe them from her face with my hands.

"Shush, dear," I say. "I have to kill you to get you back."

A look of horror takes over her face, and as she shrinks away from my touch my dream-self realizes what she's said. I try to say something, but no words leave my mouth. The guards start dragging her away. She doesn't fight them at all, and she doesn't look at me. As I raise my hands to try and touch her one last time, I see that her wet tears on them have turned to blood.

Then I wake up.

The Political Officer

It was about two years before I saw Anna again. Two years in which I did my duty during the days and woke up sweaty and afraid of I didn't know what during the nights. I worked like an automaton, so full of despair and desperate hope that there was no room for any other feelings. Countless hours passed while reading reports, writing reports, listening to interrogations and filling my private archives with potential blackmail material. All ordinary, all expected, all what the world thought an up-and-coming brilliant new Space Commander should do. What little free time I allowed myself I spent in the gardens, looking out at the Earth and trying to spot the location of the Academy. Imagining I could see that spot almost in the shadow of the dormant volcano where we'd lain that morning. Imagining that things could ever be that perfect again. Which, of course, they never would.

She arrived late one night. I was in the garden, too afraid of the nightmares to return to my quarters and go to sleep. I heard steps behind me, but didn't pay any attention to them. People often walked in the garden, it was nothing unusual.

Then she spoke to me, and my insides froze.

"Space Commander Servalan?"

I couldn't answer. I wanted to say something, I knew I should say something, but I was suddenly paralyzed.

"The duty officer said I could find you here, in spite of the hour," she went on. "My name is Anna Sheyl, Space Commander. Alpha Grade. I have been sent here to be your new assistant."

My name is Anna Sheyl, Space Commander.

The words echoed in my head. Two names. Alpha Grade. Of course she would be, it just hadn't occurred to me before. With her mind erased and a new personality built in its place, there was no way she could still be Ungraded, could still have a well-known family. She'd be another pointless face in the teeming hordes of humanity.

"Yes," I said, my mouth dry as bone. "I've been expecting you for some time."

I turned around and looked at her.

When I was a little girl, I was told in no uncertain terms never to cry in front of the servants. Occasionally, that old habit has served me well.

"Oh. I'm sorry," she said. "I was only told yesterday I was to come here. My apologies if I have kept you waiting, Space Commander. I have spent the last couple of years in hospital, and I'm still not quite recovered."

It was Anna yet not Anna. It was her body, her face, her eyes. But it was not her body language, her expression, her hard gaze. Inside that beloved head was someone else, someone new.

My name is Anna Sheyl, Space Commander.

Someone to be thrown out.

I smiled. "Don't worry, dear," I lied. "I haven't been waiting for precisely *you*, just for an assistant to be sent. You have no reason to be afraid."

"Thank you, Space Commander," she said, and bowed a little.

"It's late," I said. "See me in my office tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Space Commander."

As she walked away, I watched her. She still moved like my Anna.

In the following months, I treated her just like I would've treated any other assistant, if not worse. After some rather cursory instruction, I had her work more or less on her own.

The Political Officer is never popular. It's her task to find the flaws in the behaviour of others, to see the chinks in their mental armour through which inappropriate thought might enter. It's she who ferrets out the uncomfortable secrets, who sees that which has been hidden.

Among the security forces, when sent to watch the watchers, she is not only feared but also fiercely resented. They want to be the trusted ones. They watch others, but they do not want to be watched. The Political Officer is living proof that they are not fully trusted, that they are watched. So they resent, but they dare not show it.

They do, however, dare show it to the Political Officer's assistant.

Not openly. Not in any crass or obvious way. But in small ways, in many small ways, in uncountable all but inconsequential ways. A living hell of innumerable obstructions, all of them too small to object to.

When she tried to complain, I pretended not to understand what she was talking about. In a very calm and pleasant manner, of course. I kept my meetings with her short, both to strengthen her isolation and because that was all that I could bear.

Slowly, the days passed while I waited for her crack.

"Can I talk to you, Space Commander?"

We were overseeing an interrogation. An important rebel, one of Kasabi's gang, important enough that most of the command staff felt the need to be present. A few of them occasionally looked my way, probably remembering my role in Kasabi's fall from grace. I didn't really care.

"Of course you can," I whispered back to Anna. "You can always talk to me."

We were sitting a bit apart from the other spectators, and over the screams of the accused nobody could hear us.

"I.. I would like to request a transfer," she said.

"Denied," I said. "I need you here."

She was sitting next to me, and out of the corner of my eye I could see her fist clench so hard the knuckles whitened.

"I can't stand it here," she whispered. "The place, the people. It's... stressful. And the doctors said that I should avoid stressful situations, at least for a year."

Inwardly, I smiled. Yes, my pretty, I thought. You should avoid stressful situations. They're not good for you. They might make the fragile construction that is you collapse and let my Anna come back.

"Surely it's not so bad," I said. "You're just not used to it yet."

"I wouldn't know, really," she said. "I don't remember anything before the hospital, so I don't have anything to compare with. But it *feels* that bad."

I smiled. "Ah yes, the hospital. I forgot. It must be harder for you than it'd be for someone norm... someone else. Maybe I should have taken more care of you."

She turned her head and looked at me with an expression I couldn't quite read, a mixture of hope, surprise and distaste. I leaned closer to her and placed my hand on her thigh.

"Let me make it up to you," I said. "Have dinner with me tonight. We can have food brought up to the garden, to get away from the drab mess hall. What do you say?"

She looked away from me and nodded.

I wanted so badly to touch her.

She sat on a bench in the station garden, dressed in a drab gray uniform, daintily eating something based on rice and red beans. Moonlight lit us both. This close to the moon, it was about as bright as an overcast day down on Earth.

My Anna would never have eaten like that. She used to eat like food was about to go out of fashion, she'd wolf it down at a furious pace. But then, she burned a lot of energy. Working out. Fighting. Loving. My Anna never did anything by halves.

It was a month or two after Anna Sheyl had tried to resign as my assistant. We'd had our dinner, and I'd made a weekly thing out of it. I wanted her closer to me. I wanted her only release from the isolation and stress of her job to be me, my companionship and presence.

She'd stopped eating entirely, only halfway finished.

"Is something bothering you, dear?" I asked.

She put down her plate. "Can I tell you something that will sound pretty strange?" she said.

"Of course, dear," I said, giving her my nicest smile.

"I dreamt about you the other night," she said. "We were in a garden looking a bit like this one, but on a planet, not a station. I think it was Earth, because there was a big moon in the sky. There was a single mountain in the distance. We were... we were making love there, on the grass. The sun was just rising above the horizon. In the light from it your skin looked like gold."

I wanted to grab her and kiss her silly. She *remembered*. Anna's, *my* Anna's, memories were bleeding through. It was working! She was coming back! I wanted to shout with joy, I wanted to jump and dance in sheer happiness.

"That sounds like a nice dream," I said, smiling mildly.

"You don't mind?" she asked.

"How could I possibly mind?" I said. "Quite the opposite, I find it quite flattering. Unless, of course, you found the dream to be a nightmare."

"No!" She blushed. "Not a nightmare. Not at all a nightmare."

I leaned closer and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"Maybe it was a prophetic dream," I whispered.

She pulled away. For a moment, she looked shocked. Then, a peculiar change came over her features, ending in a lusty smile I knew very well. Before I could react, she'd pushed me down on my back and lay on top of me, her tongue deliciously probing my mouth. She tore at my clothes, wildly desiring my naked flesh.

Like my Anna used to do.

Like my Anna did again.

"I'm weak as a kitten," she said. "She didn't take very good care of my body."

Sitting in my bed, silhouetted against the starscape outside the window.

"You'll have to pretend to be her," I said. "You're officially dead."

She smiled. "No problem," she said. "I have enough of her memories."

I rolled over on my side, reached out and touched her. "I missed you so much," I said.

She smiled down at me. "Can't say the same, I'm afraid. Being dead and all."

Briefly, I considered asking her about those last days at the Academy. Fear of the answer held me back. "We should be able to get your promoted quite quickly," I said

instead. "At least enough to get you halfways decent quarters."

"And here I thought I'd be spending my nights in yours," she replied.

I laughed and shook my head, still giddy with relief and happiness. Failing to find the words to tell her what I felt, I pulled her naked body close and showed her.

She was right, of course. Having got her back, I wanted to be with her as much as possible. I'd done the impossible, I'd beaten death, and I wanted my reward. I wanted it so badly that I became blind to what was in front of my eyes.

Anna soon discovered that she didn't have all her memories. I don't know what she first found missing, probably something to do with her family or childhood. It doesn't matter.

For her to say that she wasn't whole would've been to admit to a kind of defeat, that her personality hadn't actually been strong enough to overcome the Psych Directorate's machinery -- and Anna *never* admitted to defeat or weakness. That much of her was intact. More than intact, the missing memories fed the insecurities that was the ultimate source of her strength, and made her more stubborn and bloody-minded than ever before.

So she never told me. And so history repeated itself.

"How long has she been in there?"

We were standing outside one of the station's exercise rooms, in a bare and chilly piece of corridor. The young trooper had come to get me as soon as he realized who the problem was, even before he reported it to his own superiors. Such insight in a trooper was rare and dangerous, and a part of my mind was pondering whether to recruit him or have him killed.

"For an hour, Space Commander," he said. "At least that's when the log from the lock says that it was broken."

From the outside, the lock looked whole. But the door wouldn't open, and the trooper had assured me that as far as could be determined from the outside the lock was stone dead.

I recognized the technique. I hit the button on the communicator.

"Anna?" I said.

"Servalan?"

Even through the raspy communicator I could hear how strained she sounded.

"Yes, it's me. What's happening?"

"He's dead, Servalan. I didn't know he was so weak. I didn't know I was so strong."

I turned to the trooper. "Go get a tranquilizer injector," I said. I already had one in my pocket, but I wanted him gone and it was the first reasonable thing that sprang to my mind. "Hurry. She's ill. She may have hurt someone."

He nodded and ran off. I pressed the communicator button again.

"Let me in, Anna," I said. "I'm alone now. We'll fix this, whatever it is."

I tore the door open the instant I heard the lock activate. What I needed most was time, time to do some cover-up before someone else arrived and saw the scene.

She was sitting on an exercise machine, looking at a man lying on the floor with his head at a decidedly unnatural angle. The man was Kerrel, the station commander's assistant and an unpleasant being.

"What happened?" I asked.

Anna shook her head. "I... I'm not sure. He said something about how I was sleeping my way up the career ladder, and suddenly all these times when he was being

nasty to *her* welled up. I'd hit him before I even knew I was going to. I hit him good and hard, too."

She giggled, a tense and desperate sound that had more in common with cries of fear than with laughter.

I looked up at the surveillance camera. The little light on top of it was steadily blinking red.

Somehow I was not surprised or upset at what had happened. No, what I felt was more of a deep, tired sadness. As if I had been carrying a huge weight for a very long time, and just found out that I would have to carry yet another way.

I pulled lightly at her arm, beckoning her to leave her seat and come to me. She fell into my embrace like a starving woman to a piece of bread.

"Hush, my love," I said while I fished the injector from my pocket.

"I will make it all better," I whispered into her hair as I pressed the injector to her skin. She sighed lightly and suddenly my arms were the only things holding her up.

The station doctor was a despicable creep. There was not a vice he had not tried, not a debauchery so low that he had not stooped to it. He had a wife and son safely tucked away in a residential dome on Earth, where he rarely had to see them and they never got into the way of his pleasures. My blackmail file on him was impressively thick.

"But that's *murder*," he said. "Mindwipe is murder. I can't do murder."

"I'll make sure to tell your wife," I said. "That you stopped at murder. That you found dealing Shadow and frequenting the meatpuppet bars on Space City acceptable, but that you stopped at murder. I'm sure she'll see the reason in that. Particularly after I explain to her exactly what goes on in those bars."

He licked his lips. "Those kids were marked for the mutoid conversion anyway. What I did wasn't that much worse."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Look," he said. "You're not giving me much choice here."

"I thought I made myself perfectly clear. Either you do as I say, which means that you get executed for murder, or you don't, which means that I turn you in for as many things as I can make stick. Which still gets you dead, but a lot less cleanly and with your wife and kid sold into slavery on top of it."

He slumped into his chair. "Who is it you want wiped?"

The Planetary Commander

The interrogator looked at her with an expression of revulsion. "So you had her killed again?" he asked.

Servalan smiled. "Of course," she said. "She was Graded and her crime had been recorded, she would have been killed or converted no matter what. I only chose her means of execution. As I said, history repeated itself."

He rubbed his eyes. "I trust this story will eventually answer my question?", he said.

"It will," Servalan said. "I warned you it was a long story."

"So you did. Well, go on then."

"If you don't mind I'd like to ask a question of my own first. I'm quite sure the answer to it will be short."

He looked at her face, as if trying to see in which way she tried to fool him. "What question?", he said.

"I would like to know your name," she said.

"Tarris," he said after some hesitation. "Tarris Merrilee."

"Merrilee," she said. "A good, solid Alpha name. Your family has a long history of service to the Federation."

"We have," he said, clearly proud of it but too well-mannered to say so.

"I think I knew your grandmother," she said. "Nayla Merrilee."

"Yes, she was my..." His voice tapered off as realization struck. "How old are you?" he asked.

"We fucked her, Anna and I," Servalan said. "At the Academy. On a table in the library, where all her classmates could see. Anna held her down while I tore her clothes off and explained that we really didn't care if she cooperated or not. We'd get our fun either way."

She watched his face carefully while she spoke, watching for the small telltale signs of immersion-trained emotion control. Signs that were there in abundance.

"She wasn't particularly pretty," she went on. "But we were bored, and she happened to catch our attention."

"I..." he started to say, but had to stop to get control of his breath. "I believe you have a story to finish," he said.

Her smile widened. "So I do," she said. "So I do."

As the FSACS Commander had predicted, my rise through the ranks was meteoric. I left Security Station Alpha One shortly after Anna got mindwiped for the second time, and in the couple of years that passed while she gained adulthood for the third time I went via a short time as Pacification Specialist at Space Command to Planetary Commander on Ursa Tertius III. As far as I can remember, I never even reflected over the fact that my career moved orders of magnitude faster than the careers of those who had been my classmates at the Academy. I took it for granted. It was my birth-right. I was Ungraded, and they were not. I commanded, and they obeyed. That was the natural order of my world.

My office at Ursa Tertius III looked out over the central boulevard of the planet's capital city. It was a huge office, built for some forgotten potentate way back in the plan-

et's history. The main material was polished stone, with the occasional bits of metal and glass. It was a cold and hard room. It could not have been more perfectly suited to my position there if I had designed it myself. When I arrived, I had all the old furniture taken away. I replaced it with a straight-backed metal chair, placed underneath the Federation sigil on the wall. It had dataslates visibly built into its armrests. It carried, in all, a very unsubtle message: Here sits your ruler. In me, they would see the Federation as I wanted them to see it: cold and hard, with no unnecessary decorations or submissions to frail humanity. I wanted them to see what raw power looked like.

My task as Planetary Commander was simple. Ursa Tertius III held no natural resources of any strong interest to us. The only reason we had occupied it was because it happened to be a convenient stepping-stone to tastier morsels. We intended to use it as a staging ground, and nothing more. The locals only concerned us as far as we could use them for slave labour. We took food and steel and mutoids from the planet, more because we could than because we needed it. Because we could, and because the strip-mining of land and people wore down the locals' spirits.

It was my job to make sure that the locals never disturbed the military bases we built there. As long as there was no trouble, the food and steel flowed to the warehouses and the live bodies to the conversion centers, I was free to do what I liked with the planet. Within those restrictions, I was absolute dictator over fifty-six million humans.

There is an old saying that power always corrupts. The saying is correct, in much the same way as saying that raw meat always spoils. Eventually it will, but it depends very much on the circumstances. Properly stored, raw meat lasts for centuries. Placed in the right hands, power can stay uncorrupted. My lone and cold office chair did not only serve to remind the people of the source of my power, but also to remind myself of who I was. The pinnacle of the Federation. Bred, born and trained to be *better*. It is the burden of the Ungraded never to rest, never to relax. We are called upon to lead, to be shining examples to our inferiors. They are the sheep and we are their shepherds.

Anna was returned to me halfway through my ninth month on Ursa. I first learned of her arrival from my assistant Tarl Orlek, a well-bred Alpha from one of the larger colonies. It was early in the morning, and he was reading me the nightly reports. I stood by the windows in the office, looking down at the people moving in the city below. The reports were predictable, movements of raw materials and troops, security actions, hints of an uprising. Nothing very important.

"...and finally, there's a trooper waiting to see you," he said.

"To see me?" I asked, quite surprised. "Why?"

"I don't know," Orlek said. "She arrived from offplanet shortly after midnight, and her orders were to report to you in person. Her paperwork says that you personally requested her transfer here, almost a year ago. Her name is..."

"Anna," I interrupted him. "Her name is Anna."

"Yes," he said. "Trooper First Class Anna Ai, Beta Grade, personal protection specialist. She must be something quite special, if you've been waiting for her all this time."

Personal protection specialist. Bureaucrat language for bodyguard. Someone at the retraining center had done an better than average job there. My Anna would be perfect in the position, with the speed and strength from her high-gravity youth and the fierce sense of aggression that was just her very own.

"Well, show her in," I said.

He saluted and went to obey, returning after a few minutes with Anna. She looked well, strong and healthy and as beautiful as ever before. I couldn't stop looking at her, her wonderful hair and eyes and hands.

"I would like a report on those insurgency rumours by noon, Orlek," I said. "Until then, you are dismissed."

She stood at attention a few steps inside the door, where Orlek had left her. Her eyes stared vacantly straight ahead, just as she'd been taught. I stifled an impulse to grab and kiss her.

"You are to be my personal bodyguard," I said.

"Understood, Planetary Commander," she said.

Her voice sent shivers down my spine.

"I suspect that there may be a conspiracy against my person among the Federation personnel on this planet," I lied. "You are my protection against them. You will have as little contact with other troopers here as possible. You will accompany me at all times. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Planetary Commander."

"Any questions?"

"Only one, Planetary Commander."

"Yes?"

"When do I start?"

She started then and there. From that moment on, she was my constant shadow. When I was in my office, she stood next to my command chair. When I was out in the city, she walked behind me. When I attended receptions, she was at my side. She ate when I ate. She slept when I was working alone in my study, on a cot just outside the door.

My fear for a conspiracy among my troops was a complete lie, of course. It was nothing but a way to keep her from getting friends, to keep her isolated and alone. The constant presence of a bodyguard was totally unnecessary, I had done fine without it before she arrived. But it was her job to stay ever vigilant, constantly on the lookout for an attack that would never come. It was an exercise in isolation and frustration, with an added dose of irregular nourishment and lack of sleep.

No human trooper would be able to stand that sort of life for any length of time. My hope was that the tense inaction would be even more intolerable for my Anna, and that it'd drive her to wake, to throw out the interloper living in her brain. To return to me. I'd made her come back to me once before. I'd make her do it again.

Days turned into weeks, and the rumours of unrest among the population grew into a minor rebellion. A medium-sized city that had been hit particularly hard by mutoid recruitment rebelled, and in a night managed to kill most of the troopers there and take their weapons. They barricaded the roads into the city, and used appropriated missile pods and laser cannons to set up an aerial killing zone above it. I remember standing on top of a troop transport vehicle parked a safe distance from the rebel forces on the main road leading to the city, wind pressing my white dress against my body and bringing the smell of burning plastic to my nostrils. I looked at the barricades through a pair of binoculars. The rebels were waving their weapons in our direction, and engaging in other futile displays of bravado.

I had been waiting for this to happen. I had not known exactly which city, or ex-

actly when, but I had been sure from the start that at some time the locals would rattle their chains, to see if they really were as strong as they appeared. Towards that end, I'd had a few places treated more harshly than others, hoping that one of them would be the first to break. That I would be able to keep the vast majority of the planet unharmed by visibly destroying an unimportant part of it.

"Are they in position?" I asked.

"Yes, ma'am," my communications officer said. He was standing next to me, with Anna behind us. He was wearing a backpack that kept him in contact with a squadron of ground attack ships in orbit above us.

"Tell them to attack when ready," I said. He whispered into the microphone attached to his collar. For maybe ten, twenty seconds nothing happened. Then, without warning, a dozen pillars of light appeared in the city, stretching from the ground to as high as we could see. A blink of an eye, and the pillars were gone again, but where they had touched the ground clouds of dust, debris and fire were rising into the air. A few seconds more, and the deafening blast and roar of the orbital bombardment reached us. The sound was as a living thing, clutching and beating at my inner organs and totally obliterating any other sound. I couldn't even imagine what it must have been like inside the city.

When the noise had passed and the debris fallen to the ground, I put the binoculars to my face again. The soldiers at the barricades were no longer waving at us. They were milling about, agitatedly talking to each other. Trying to figure out what had happened, most likely. Trying to understand why they were still alive.

"Report," I said.

"The squadron reports all targets destroyed, Planetary Commander," the comm officer said.

I wondered if Anna would ask what was going on. She used to be curious, when she was herself. But this Anna wasn't, and she kept her silence.

After that we waited. The rebelling city had been founded to exploit rich and easily available deposits of heavy metals in the mountains above it. Which it did quite nicely, but which also had the drawback that the water and soil around it contained large amounts of heavy metals. So it had to have all of its food shipped in, and all its water purified before it could be used.

Which made it very vulnerable to an orbital strike that destroyed the food warehouses and water purification plant. Six days after our attack, the rebels surrendered unconditionally. My men started shipping the rebel people out within a few minutes, and the executions started as soon as they reached their assigned population centers.

I don't remember exactly how many had lived in the rebel city. A few tens of thousands, I think. As the most populated area on the planet, the capital got about a fifth of them. The executions went on for days, fast in the beginning and slowing down over time as the troopers had to venture ever further from my palace to find unoccupied lighting poles to hang the corpses from. The stench of rotting flesh paralyzed the capital, and for once I think my troopers were glad to have their hot but air-filtered helmets. Every day during this time, I'd walk through the city after my office hours were over. Without any protection except my lovely bodyguard, dressed in my usual pristine white, I walked the streets of the capital, watching the dead and the living. I saw few of the latter, since all who could stayed indoors, trying to escape the smells and sights and sounds of decomposing bodies. As the weak cattle they were, they fled from the face of death.

If she had been able to, Anna Ai would have done the same.

I didn't let her. I knew what she was, how her mind had been designed from the wreckage of my Anna. She was what the Alpha bureaucrats considered a good soldier. Brave, as long as things went her way and offered no surprises. Obedient, as long as the orders were not too unpleasant. Harsh, unless it came to action rather than words.

Cowardly. Weak. Merciful.

Useless.

As we walked the city, I saw her face turn from just pale to sweaty and greenish. The smells and sounds and sights got to her, spoke to her well-structured artificial subconscious in the language of atrocity. Anathema to her. Not so to my wild, untamed beloved.

"May I ask a question, Planetary Commander?"

We were a few blocks from the palace, on our way back after a long walk through the carnage. The executions had stopped a couple of days earlier, but it would still be some time before the local scavengers had eaten all the carrion.

Something about the way she asked the question made me pay attention.

"Yes," I said.

"Did you do all this for me?" she said. "Because, you know, a girl might get touched at the extravagant gesture."

Anna.

I spun around. "You're back!" I said, tingling all over. She had her eyes again, strong and arrogant and oh so lovely. Not the limp, weak gaze of Anna Ai.

"I think I am," she said. "Again. What happened, Servalan? I remember being on the station, then there's the sort of dream-like memories of the Ai person, until it fled and let me out."

"You killed an officer," I said. "While in front of a security camera. I'm sorry, but I had no choice but to do this all over again."

She looked away for a few moments. "Well," she said. "You brought me back."

"Always, my love. Always."

"What do we do now?"

"We rule, my dear. We rule. You're my bodyguard, and always by my side. We'll never have to be apart again."

She reached out and caressed my cheek. "Bodyguard, you say? Tell me, does your body need much guarding these days?"

It was so good to have her back! It was as if a missing part of myself had been returned. I felt *whole*, for the first time since that terrible day on Alpha One.

"Oh yes," I said. "Particularly at night."

Life went on much as it had before, except that my presumed bodyguard suddenly became a lot more outspoken and active. I promoted her a few levels, to make it look less strange that one of the troopers was on so familiar terms with the Planetary Commander. No doubt rumours spread about us, but I didn't care. It wasn't like anyone could complain about me. The days passed. We spent months following up on the oh so very public destruction of the mining city, making sure that everyone on the entire planet had got the message loud and clear: disobey, and you will be killed.

The nights... Oh, the nights. My quarters turned from an auxiliary office into a wonderland of carnality. That first night after she returned, we'd scarcely got inside

the door before I started tearing her uniform off, desperate to touch the body I'd been looking at for the weeks since Anna Ai appeared. She laughed at my eagerness, but never for a moment rejected it. She undressed me as roughly as I did her, pushed me down on the bed and possessed me body and soul. We made desperate love, hard and fast and careless. I remember thinking that I would get bruises from her holding me so hard, but not caring the slightest. I would wear the bruises proudly, as long as they came from her hands, just as she would not mind the bleeding scratches on her back as long as it was my nails that made them. Her tongue probed my mouth, her fingers my sex. Everything was right again.

As we lay naked in each other's arms, spent and sweaty, she spoke to me.

"You never answered my question," she said.

"Which question?"

"Did you kill all those people for me?"

"No," I said. "They were the example. Fairly standard pacification procedure. Get them to rebel before they're really ready to, and bring the rebellion down extremely hard. The probability of a recurrence within a decade is less than five percent, when we do it this way."

I snuggled in closer. "Although," I said, "it's not usual to have so many corpses on display near the central Federation offices. So the ones in the streets we've been walking through are for you, my love."

"My beast," she said. "My slender, dangerous beast. How the poor humans must rue the day you descended upon them."

Her hand travelled along my body, and the fires so recently banked flared again. We spoke wordless love to each other over and over again all night, as the stars moved and the corpses rotted outside.

For a time, my life was perfect. My career was moving smoothly along. I was the youngest Planetary Commander on record, and after putting down the rebellion with no losses to my forces, I was all set to be the youngest ever of higher and better things in the future. My beloved was by my side. The wars of conquest beyond Ursa Tertius heated up unexpectedly, and my ability to swiftly provide more ships, food and mutoids for the war effort gained me an official commendation from the Supreme Commander. I felt like nothing could possibly go wrong.

I should have known better.

The first hints of trouble I didn't even notice. As Anna grew more comfortable in her new identity and role, I occasionally sent her on errands that I would otherwise had done myself but was hard pressed to find time for. She got them done well enough, of course, but she complained that the troopers didn't obey her quickly enough. I didn't pay attention. As long as they obeyed, who cared if it was quickly or not?

Had I thought about it for a few moments, I might have realized that if it had been me they'd been tardy in obeying, they would've been subjects for the biolabs faster than they could blink. Anna was used to the same level of obedience that I was, since she was also Ungraded. Except as far as the troopers knew, she was just a Beta Grade jumped up the ranks above them. So they chafed. Not obviously or badly, she was still a superior officer and my personal favourite. But enough that she noticed. Noticed, but couldn't do anything about it.

At least not according to the book.

It was more than half a year after she awoke to herself. She still had large gaps in

her memory, and she had a hard time getting used to it. She was, after all, used to always being the best, the flawless, the perfect one who did everything right. Having a wound that would not heal irked her, like an itch she couldn't scratch. To compensate, she drove herself harder than ever before. She trained her body to heights even I found hard to believe. She studied everything that had happened since her first death at the Academy. She made damn sure that all the tasks I gave her got done, quickly and efficiently, even if she had to do everything herself. Later, after I'd lost her again, I heard stories about how she'd got fed up with waiting for tardy troopers and taken out entire buildings full of criminals all by herself. How she'd vanished into the darkness near her uncooperative troops, and later appeared again covered in blood, none of it her own.

And to me, she only said that her troopers didn't obey her quickly enough. I can't say why I didn't find that noteworthy when I knew quite well that she never complained about anything. Maybe I knew subconsciously that it was a sign of a problem I couldn't fix. The harbinger of doom, if you wish.

"I had to kill another trooper today," she said, casually, as if it was the most ordinary of things to do.

It was some time after midnight, and we were in bed together. We'd just made love, and I was slowly drifting off towards sleep when she said it.

"What?" I said.

"Had to kill a guy again. Wouldn't obey me when I told him to hurry up."

"That's nice, dear," I said, and fell asleep.

But I didn't forget. The day after, when I sat in my cold and hard chair of command, her words returned to me. She'd killed troopers? Why didn't I know? One by one, I called up her reports of her missions, starting with the one yesterday and moving on backwards.

She'd killed dozens of them. Previously, I'd just looked at the summaries, so and so many criminals detained or killed, so and so many troopers lost. I'd never thought to check *how* they'd been lost. But there it was, as plain as possible. *Killed by superior officer for insubordination in the field.* Again and again and again.

My innards suddenly turned to ice. This couldn't be happening. It must be a mistake.

"Call Major Ai to my office," I said towards my current communications officer. "Right now. As soon as she gets here, everyone else leaves."

There was a muted chorus of "Yes, Planetary Commander" that I hardly listened to. My brain was busy trying to figure out what had happened, and why, and what to do about it.

"Is there a problem?" she said after everyone else had left.

"You've been killing troopers," I said.

"Yes," she said. "They were insubordinate. It's all in my reports."

"You can't do that," I said.

She stared at me as if I'd gone insane. "Excuse me?" she said.

"You can't kill troopers like that," I repeated. "Put them in the brig, yes. Court martial them, yes. Give them the most awful duty imaginable for the rest of their careers, yes. But you can't just kill them. Not for something as small as what these had done."

"But they were just Graded! Who cares if they live or die?"

"I care!"

Somehow, I had got up from my chair and approached her. I didn't remember do-

ing so. I'm not quite sure what I had expected her to say, but somehow I had thought that it would be different than this bold statement that she had done nothing wrong. That the lives of those troopers were hers to spend.

"Says the one who had tens of thousands of people killed just to send a message! What's a few troopers compared to that?"

"Those thousands don't matter, they were locals. The troopers were Federation citizens. They were *my* citizens!"

Anna sneered at me.

"Oh, come off it," she said. "There's no difference. Locals or Graded, they're all cattle compared to us. We're stronger and better than they are, and because of that we rule over them. Their lives are ours to play with as we like, and you know it. Surely you can't have forgotten how we used to play with the Alphas back at the Academy?"

"We were never responsible for those Alphas. Playing with them like we did was... I don't know. Youthful folly. We're adults now, and the world rests on our shoulders. We can no longer afford to play."

"You sound like our old teachers!"

As soon as she said it, I knew she was right. I did sound like our teachers. Anna didn't. She still sounded like we both had, way back before we left the Academy. In a flash of revelation, I saw how my time out in the real world, short as it had been, had matured me into a proper member of the Ungraded class. A ruler, as I should be. Anna hadn't, of course. Most of the time she'd been brainwiped, and in the few months she'd spent as herself I had always been there to take all the responsibilities. She hadn't grown up. What was worse, since we could never admit to anyone that she was even alive, she would never get the opportunity to do so. As I was a shepherd, she was a wolf. And no matter how much I loved her, I could not let her prey on my sheep.

All the fight left me. I walked over to the windows and looked out over the city. The sun was about to set.

"Maybe you're right," I said. "Maybe it is of no importance."

"You've been working hard," she said. "Maybe the view from that chair has made you lose sight of what you are."

"Maybe," I echoed. "Stop killing them, will you? As a favour to me?"

She came up behind me and put her strong arms around my waist.

"As you wish," she said. "Will you be working late tonight?"

How I loved her smell. She never wore perfume, just her own wild and heady scent.

"Probably," I said.

"I'll wait up for you," she said. "Before we sleep, I want to apologize for upsetting you."

I closed my eyes and leaned into her. "I love you," I said. "I love you more than I have the words to express. I want you to know that."

She smiled, and kissed me, and left the room.

We made love that night, like most nights. Unlike most nights, I was all but insatiable. In a few short hours, I had to get a lifetime's worth of her, her inflaming touch, her wild laughter, her beautiful eyes. I touched her body with my hands and my lips and my skin. I tried to feel her so intensely that the memory of it would never fade. Her lips, tasting of me. My fingers in her hair, pulling her face harder against me. Her hard nipples pressing against my breasts. My beast. My wolf.

Eventually, we stopped. We lay in each other's arms, panting and spent. I felt her heartbeat slow down, and heard her breath soften into sleep.

"I will always love you," I whispered in her ear, and then I pressed the soporific injector to her jugular.

The next day, I refused to see anyone. I sat in my chair of command, its dataslates inactive and dark. I tried not to think about what was going on down in the medical section, tried not to think about my betrayal, and failing miserably. My inner eye kept returning to the last I had seen of her the night before, the last I ever expected to see of her. After I was sure she was properly drugged, I'd dressed her in a FSACS-issue jumpsuit and called for the medics to take her away. The sight of her on the stretcher as they carried her away would be with me to the day I died, I felt certain.

The door opened and my communications officer entered.

"I thought I made it clear that I do not want to be disturbed," I snarled.

"You did, Planetary Commander. But the doctor wants to talk to you. Apparently it concerns Major Ai. I judged that you would probably want to know."

I don't remember if I told him he'd made the right call or not. Even if I didn't, he probably figured it out from the way I got up and rushed down to the med section.

Just like every other medical facility in the Universe, this one tried to look calming and nice while actually coming across as sterile and inhuman. It was too clean, too hard and angular to really be a place where one could feel at ease. It smelled of disinfectant and fear.

The doctor looked up from her dataslate when I stormed in.

"Ah, Planetary Commander," she said. "There has been a complication, I'm afraid."

"I don't understand," I said. "I thought a mindwipe was a well-known and straightforward procedure well within your capabilities."

"It is," she said. "It turns out, however, that Major Ai's medical file isn't complete. It doesn't mention that she has been mindwiped before. Not only that, I'm quite sure that she's been through the procedure more than once before."

I didn't know what to think or feel. Fear that she was dead fought with fear that she was still herself.

"What happened?" I asked.

"She has suffered from a syndrome so rare it doesn't even have a name. I only know about it because I used to work with Central Security. It occurs only in victims of repeated mindwipes, and those are extremely uncommon. What has happened, roughly speaking, is that her brain has developed a kind of immune response to personality manipulation. She has become a kind of blank slate over which larger or smaller sets of her previous personalities come and go. If you were to speak to her, she might recognize you for a minute and then, as a part of another personality took hold, have no idea who you are."

"Can you fix it?"

"No. As I said, her brain has developed defenses to the tools we use to manipulate it. We can still use them on her, but she will throw off the effects fairly quickly. By using drugs and less orthodox techniques, it's possible to get a certain personality to stay in control for a few months, but no more. And even then, the memories gained during that period will be mostly lost the next time that particular personality surfaces. She will never be able to lead a normal life again."

"So what are you telling me? That I might as well have her killed?"

"That might be the kindest thing to do. There is, however, one career for which she

is now perfectly suited."
And so, Agent Bartolomew was born.

The President

When I first arrived at Ursa, I expected to be there for a couple of years at most. But the planet's importance grew and I continued to meet or surpass the demands put upon it, so I was kept there. At the end of my fifth year as the Planetary Commander it was decided that the planet be brought into the Federation proper, and its puppet government applied for colony status. It was granted, and I was promoted from Planetary Commander to Military Governor. This meant little on the planet, but it gave me a hugely increased importance in off-planet circles. As a Governor, I was someone to be listened to in Federation politics. A position I used to the best of my ability. I used every bit of skill I had to increase my power base. I bargained. I bribed. I flattered. I blackmailed. I threatened. I killed. Until, finally, the President of the Federation appointed me Supreme Commander of all the armed forces. Almost to the day twelve years after I first arrived on Ursa Tertius III, I left it for Space Command.

All that time, I kept an eye on Anna.

I still loved her. Intellectually, I could convince myself that I ought to let her go, to leave her behind me and let my wounded heart heal. But my heart wouldn't let me. Like one may pick on an old scar, I followed her peculiar career in Central Security.

When we sent her to them, I think they expected to get the sort of slightly sub-par ordinary trooper that one might expect to get mindwiped. They didn't even ask about her, they were just happy to get an agent who was incapable of turning on them. Imagine their delighted surprise when that agent turned out to be eugenically enhanced and trained to within a hair of perfection. Anna, or, rather, Bartolomew, was all their wet dreams come true. In her first year with Central Security she carried out three highly spectacular assassinations, all without leaving a single trace. After that, I think they managed to better stabilize the personality implants they gave her, so they could assign her to slightly more long-term undercover work. She dropped out of even my sight for long periods of time.

Time passed. Things happened. Blake came and went, although his small group of useless rebels remained. We fought the war against the Andromedans, and I assumed the Presidency. The long and arduous process of rebuilding the Federation from the scraps left by the war began. There were things that had been lost that had to be retrieved. There were things that had been destroyed that had to be rebuilt.

And there were things that had been misplaced and forgotten.

When the war started Anna had been on a deep undercover mission, as usual. She was posing as the wife of a member of the High Council, Chesku, in order to investigate him for reasons I never tried to find out. I don't know how they made him go along with it, if they took the time to make him think that he married her of his own free will, or if they just programmed him to think he was married to her, like I'd heard they'd done to another man to make him think he was Anna's brother. Because of the war, she wasn't called in to have her current personality strengthened when she should have been, and it started to unravel. Fragments of other personalities she'd carried began to surface. And unfortunately, one of those personalities was that of a violent rebel. Behind her supposed husband's back, she started recruiting followers and executing attacks against the Federation. Until one day she got the opportunity to go for the juiciest target of them all.

Me.

I'll never forget the moment when she walked through the beaten-down door to my new office. It was the first time in a decade and a half that I saw her in the flesh, but it was as if we'd never been apart. She still looked as beautiful as the day we met, and hardly any older. Her soldiers flanked her, obedient to her as was her birthright. For a moment, I forgot that she was no longer herself, and I spoke to her as I might have back at the Academy.

"I take it these creatures belong to you."

Somewhere, deep within her eyes, I could see her respond. Somewhere, deep inside, my Anna wasn't quite dead. Some remnant of her remained, some small scrap of her original personality. The personality I had caused to be destroyed three times.

Deep within her eyes, I saw love and hate fight for supremacy.

Before I could react, before I could say anything, one of her soldiers struck me down. I heard her speak to me, but I didn't listen to her words. They were empty, without meaning. It was her eyes that spoke to me, spoke more clearly than words ever could. *I don't know whether to kill you or kiss you*, they said.

Strange as it may sound, the thought she might grow to hate me had never occurred to me. The reality of her hatred, even if tempered by old love, hit much harder than the feeble blow from the soldier. I was struck speechless. Stunned, I let them lead me down to the cellar and chain me to the wall. On our way down, I was convinced that they were taking me down there to execute me, and at the time I felt that that was the right thing for them to do. Anna hated me. How could I deserve life, when I had taken hers? I didn't even try to protect myself when Anna's soldiers decided to beat me up. When Avon showed up, looking for the one who had killed *his* Anna, it seemed like a cruel joke. A distortion of hers and mine history together. The finding. The losing. The false identities. The betrayals. The now you're dead now you're not of Anna.

And then she was dead. Finally, and for real. When the immediate crisis was past, when I was the only still living person left in the cellar, I knelt by her side and kissed her cooling lips one last time.

"And then I left," Servalan said.

Merrilee frowned. "I believe you still haven't quite answered my question," he said. "I guess that you came back here because it was here she finally died, but why now? Why never before?"

She smiled at him.

"Part of it is that I wasn't ready to. It took me far longer to accept her death, her true and final death, than I expected. The many years of her being sort of dead but not really made it harder. I was so used to the thought that I could somehow bring her back that the harsh knowledge that I couldn't took a long time to sink in. The other part of it is that today it's exactly fifty years since she died, and I wanted to be here."

"And for that you threw away all your years as Sleer? All that work, down the drain for a sentimental gesture?"

He sounded incredulous, almost upset. His dataslate lay forgotten at the table, all his attention focused on his interrogation subject.

"Of course not," she said. "Those years weren't wasted at all. Verifying that the right sort of people were in the right places took me a long time. The war weeded a

lot of you out, and gave openings for the sort of people that we'd never have let into a position of authority otherwise. I had to wait for several of them to retire before I had a clear enough field to move."

"I don't understand."

"Nor should you, dear. Nor should you."

He reached for his slate and started to get up from the chair.

"I think we're done for today," he said.

"I don't," Servalan said. She looked steadily at him and uttered a short series of nonsense words. He froze in place, right in between sitting and standing.

Servalan got up from the bed. "Sit," she said, and he did as she said.

"What's happened to you," she said, "is a kind of post-hypnotic suggestion planted deep within your mind while you were studying at the Academy. All of you immersion-trained Alphas have it. An emergency backup system, you might say, originally conceived by the Federation leaders who became the first Ungraded and kept in service by us ever since."

She moved behind his chair and slowly dragged her fingers through his hair.

"You see," she said, "we're not just smarter, and stronger and longer-lived than you poor Graded -- we also cheat. You are our sheep, and the sheep never win over their shepherds. It's the order of the Universe."

She took his dataslate from the table and held it out to him.

"This is what you will do," she said. "You will file a report that the troopers who brought me in were mistaken. I wasn't Servalan after all, just someone who happened to look a lot like her. The prisoner has had a selective memory erase and been released. This entire incident is over and done with."

He activated the slate with a thumbprint, and as she talked he wrote on it, stiffly, as if in a trance.

"Once you have done that," she said, "you will send a message to the members of the High Council, using the special code to summon an emergency meeting of the utmost urgency."

"It is done," he said after a short while. "They are convening. They will be waiting for me in the Council Hall in fifteen minutes."

Servalan smiled. "See?" she asked. "Where else but here could I get them all assembled so quickly? All of the good, honest Alpha Grade members of the High Council. A pride to the Academy that produced them."

She took the slate from his hands and threw it on the cot.

"Let's go," she said. "It won't do to have the High Council wait. I want them all to be there when we arrive. I have a speech to give them."

He got up from the chair and moved towards the door. He opened it and moved on into the corridor outside, followed by Servalan.

"I promise it won't be long," she said to herself and smiled.