

OBLAQUE IV: *to be taken intravenously*

A *BLAKE'S 7*
ADULT FANZINE

ISSUE NUMBER FOUR IN THE OBLAQUE SERIES

WARNING: THIS ZINE CONTAINS SAME SEX, ADULT ORIENTED MATERIAL. IT WILL NOT BE SOLD TO ANYONE UNDER THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN.

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I SUFFER...

We'd like to think of this as the hurt/comfort section of Oblaque IV. But these fantasies are set in the Blake's 7 universe where comfort is an ephemeral thing so easily twisted and transmuted into pain and suffering. Our authors struggle with the characters, pleading with them to be happy, but will they pay attention? Does Blake ever listen to anyone? And when has Avon ever done anything anyone ever asked unless it got him precisely what he wanted? Catocala's tale comes closest to what we all yearn for: a happily-ever-after, although both Avon and Vila suffer to get there. Jane Baron's story is poignant, sweet and sad, with apparent comfort firmly fixed on one side and eternal, unrequited love and suffering on the other. Be warned about M. Fae Glasgow's short but nasty piece: it is deliberately vicious and cruel, shocking and not for the squeamish. And then... Yes, then there is our opening story, Sebastian's emotionally wrenching history of relationships on board the Liberator. The story is a long one; do not, dear reader, rush through the reading of it. Take your time, let the words and sentences, the thoughts and sentiments, the passions and the emotions flow into your soul...

BITTERSWEET SEBASTIAN

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VILA RESTAL FELL IN LOVE FOR THE FIRST AND LAST TIME IN HIS LIFE WHEN HE MET THE SUPERIOR ALPHA COMPUTER GENIUS CALLED AVON.

Being practical, he understood at once that this was going to be one of the world's greatest loves doomed never to be, because although he discerned instantly that he was exactly what Avon needed, it was also obvious that Avon would never see it that way. Vila had some skill with predicting character—it was one of the reasons he survived so long—and he could read Avon's without trouble: he was one of those cripplingly proud types who, having once trusted and been stabbed in the back, immediately arm themselves thoroughly against potential future hurt by inventing—and believing implicitly—a fallacy that they need no-one, not ever, for anything at all.

There seemed very little that Vila could do: stay close to Avon, take his insults (for Avon, when he deigned to notice Vila at all, was scathing and impatient with him), have the pleasure of knowing that, sometimes, he amused Avon: and dream. Oh yes, Vila was good at that; Deltas had to be good at coaxing a little fantasy out of nothing, to please and soothe themselves so that the squalor might recede a little, just for a while. And thus in the privacy of his room at night Avon joined him in the sanctuary of his

own mind, his sharp tongue saying sweet things, his touch setting Vila alight.

But of course he knew it would never happen. Not unless he was very, very lucky.

It wasn't very long before Vila realised that Fate, in its usual manner of screwing everything up, had again made a total mismanagement of things.

For there he was, silently loving someone he couldn't have: and all the time the same thing had happened to Avon.

It wasn't surprising, perhaps, that Avon should be entranced by Blake, they all were, the majesty and vigour of the man's vision swept them all along with it: but Avon in particular was drawn to Blake. He clearly couldn't help himself: for the first time here was Avon's match, a man who stood firm in the face of Avon's sarcastic genius and who gave Avon none of the delicate and reverential treatment he clearly expected for being so special. All the factors were exactly right for Avon to fall for Blake very hard: and that was exactly what had happened.

Alphas were always dense about that sort of thing, Vila thought, his jealousy made rosier with a drink or three: it seemed hardly likely that Blake would make

Blake sensed that something had changed in Vila's mood: damn the dratted cards, he didn't believe a word of it anyway. Vila had probably been reminded of something or someone he had left behind: some past love perhaps who would never now be found in the infinite universe they travelled. His eyes were shrewd yet gentle as he surveyed Vila.

"You're not a fool Not in the things that matter."

Vila's eyes crinkled. He smiled at Blake. "Now I would say, I'm a fool in the ways that *do* matter. But thievery, trickery and magic—there I'm an expert."

His eyes still looked sad. Blake said: "Have you ever had anyone, Vila?"

Vila took Blake to mean something he did not. He arched one eyebrow, affecting affront.

"Come on. There'd have to be something wrong with me if I hadn't, at this age, wouldn't there?"

"No, I meant—have you ever had someone you loved?"

Vila's eyes flickered, looked away, all flippancy dropped. He *wanted* the catharsis of telling Blake—but then again, he didn't really want Blake to know...

"Oh yes, there's someone," he said directly, looking up into Blake's eyes. "Isn't there always... But the right ones never want to know, do they? Or perhaps they do, for you. It never seems to work that way for me, that's all I know."

Funny, Blake thought, watching as the smaller man shrugged and gave him a brief smile as if he had already forgotten that bitter little speech: funny how you might think you knew another person very well, and then one day they let something slip which made it clear they were quite, quite different from the convenient type you had pigeonholed them into. Vila had already slid back behind the mask of chirpy insouciance and was humming as he shuffled his cards: Blake put out a hand, stopped him.

"Some girl?" he asked quietly. "You had to leave her behind on Earth?"

Vila blinked in surprise, looking at Blake's hand covering his. Blake gave his hand a squeeze. Slowly Vila smiled.

"Wrong on both counts," he said.

Blake's eyes widened as that sank in. His waiting expression asked a wordless question.

Vila shook his head, dismissing the matter. "It's not important."

Again that offhanded shrug. "I'll survive. No-one ever died of a broken heart, now did they?"

Blake had a shrewd suspicion, now he came to think of it, where Vila's heart might lie: if he was correct, as Vila himself obviously knew, there could be no future in it. Vila, however engaging he might be, was a Delta, and that was that.

He smiled at Vila. "Tonight—"

"Yes?" prompted Vila after a heartstopped

pause.

"Let's make it a good night, Vila," Blake said, serious now but still smiling, still holding Vila's hand. "You and me. Shall we—?"

"All right," Vila said: and smiled too.

They played cards for a little while and drank a little more wine: Vila flirted gently with Blake who seemed to be in that kind of mood. Vila didn't mind, didn't mind at all: Blake had nice eyes and a strength Vila felt in need of sometimes. He felt it would be a nice thing, a *friendly* thing, to sleep with Blake tonight, and he wanted Blake to like it, to like *him*. Vila was full of flirtatious little wiles, to be produced from nowhere with a flourish: he felt Blake's gaze on him and knew he would not sleep alone, or maybe at all...

The door slid open and Avon entered.

Blake experienced no more than a passing regret for an encounter which had looked to be as pleasurable as it was unexpected, and now seemed certain to be cancelled at short order: but Vila, mildly drunk past inhibition, was quicker. He took a deep breath, and played the biggest gamble of his life.

"Come and sit down, Avon," he said, jumping to his feet and urging Avon in with little pulls and pats, prattling on, "Two's company, but three's an orgy, that's what they always say and quite right too, at least in *my* experience: come and have a drink."

Avon looked faintly bemused but suffered the induction. Blake was looking at Vila, surprised. Vila turned his head Blake's way and gave him a huge wink. Blake cottoned on then, amused. Avon would never play along—but if he did?

And if a little shiver of excitement stirred in Blake at the thought of what might occur, well, he was only human: and Avon a prize by anybody's rules.

Avon, brows faintly narrowed, was looking at him. His dark hair was shining, the fringe attractively ragged, needing a trim although Blake found it more aesthetically appealing the way it was now. He was trim in a grey jumpsuit with a black gilet over it: silver zipped pockets and leather boots completed the outfit. He looked remote and unapproachable: he took care to sit some way from the others.

"Yes, have a drink Avon," said Blake, and winked 'make-it-a-large-one' at Vila, returning his attention immediately to Avon. "Jenna's watch, isn't it?"

Reading this as a query into his presence, "I couldn't sleep," Avon said neutrally. "I thought I would take a look at the reprocessor here. Its light pattern is erratic." He accepted the glass Vila handed to him.

"Don't look at it now," Vila chirruped in. "This is a time for relaxation and merriment." He waved his glass expansively in the air and reclined back on the cushions, undoing a button on his shirt in a calm and

unhurried fashion, looking up with just a touch of seductiveness from beneath his lashes. Tactics which wouldn't work on Avon, but which very well might on Blake who was already inclined to cooperate.

Avon was a harder challenge, but Vila was relying on the spell of Blake's presence to reel Avon in. Blake might not know this—even Avon might not—but streetwise Vila knew: had seen it all before, one Alpha male drawn to another who would use a third, a Delta or a female maybe, to get what he wanted in a way which he could accept. Too proud, the Alphas: always had been.

"I don't see much merriment," Avon said. "Only you getting drunk, and Blake, apparently, joining you." He crossed one leg over the other and stared enigmatically at Vila.

"We'll get less drunk than we would have done, won't we?" Vila said gaily. "Now you're here to share the bottle with us. Think of it as a public service, Avon. The more *you* drink, the less drunk *we* shall be."

"Yes, stay Avon, do," Blake said. "We'd like you to share it with us."

Vila applauded this silently. Blake was quick learner. Blake smiled at Avon, who seemed faintly uneasy.

"Tell his fortune for him, Vila."

Vila gathered the cards and went into his act, flicking them together expertly then fanning them into a perfect tail.

"Choose two, Avon."

"You're a charlatan," Avon said, but he took two anyway, which were of course the two Vila had sleight-of-handedly intended him to choose. He laid them out in front of Avon, leaning forward; it was always both sweet and sad for him to be so close to Avon. He wouldn't pass it up for the world, though.

Avon leaned over the cards with him.

"The seven," Vila explained, "that's for luck, so you're going to be lucky, Avon. In conjunction with the Eagle—" he looked up at Avon, lowering his voice subtly, "well, that means—power. And excitement. Power, excitement—and love. Yes, that's what I see for you. A night of love."

"That seems unlikely," Avon observed with cynicism: but Avon was very sharp and Vila, watching from close quarters, saw the exact moment when awareness from within lit through Avon the very second he had finished speaking.

The room seemed suddenly very still, very silent.

Avon's eyes flickered as he studied some inner mental chart: Vila held his breath, every muscle frozen, and Blake sipped his drink, watching without frenzy. Avon would make up his own mind.

Then Avon lifted his head, looked Blake directly in the eye.

"What are you teaching him, Blake?"

Now the room seemed to sigh outwards, a shared exhalation of relief.

Blake spread his hands, a new gleam dancing in his eyes.

"I don't teach him anything," he said. "I'm afraid he was born this way."

"And what," Avon murmured, "shall we do with him?" Both their gazes slid to Vila, holding him. Well satisfied with what he had won, Vila grinned engagingly at them. His heart-rate was up, he was scared as well as exhilarated, but determined to go through with it.

Now all three of them knew what was going to happen: it was a strange time that drew on, the mundane words that passed between them laced with the spices of anticipation, apprehension, a mutual growing excitement, all hidden under routine phrases. It was all, Vila knew, because of him: their shared focus in a dance both complex and well-precedented. They both seemed relaxed enough about it, anyway, the conversation remarkably free of the usual needling. Vila flirted gently with both men, keeping their wine glasses topped up though neither was drinking much. He had most of it, to help him relax. Eventually, during a game of poker, the wine ran out. Vila gazed at the empty bottle dolefully.

"There would be more, only—"

"Only you drank it," Blake said. "I think he needs a lesson, don't you Avon?"

"Certainly he needs *something*," Avon agreed.

Unseen, Vila's nails clenched into his suddenly sweaty palms. But subtle reins held him: and his own inclination did not war with the inlaid conditioning. Vila smiled and, by all the signs of which he was capable, made it clear that he was willing.

It was Avon who suddenly doubted. Until this moment, it had been a game, a little exciting, a little dangerous: but Avon did not permit himself many games and this one was particularly risky. It was possible that it would destroy all he had taken care to set up. Narrow black gaze suddenly wary, he looked from Vila to Blake, the small man downy and insignificant, the apex of their triangle, and Blake its other cornerstone, a lazy gleam in his eye as he watched Avon.

There was nothing insignificant about Blake. Nothing.

You could be consumed in Blake's fire and yearn, as you died, for the touch of flame...

But Avon, too, could burn. Ice, not fire.

And Avon took up the challenge. Lifting his head, his dark eyes arched amusement and arrogance straight at Blake, answering Blake's unspoken question.

"Why not?" Avon said: and the unholy deal was made.

Vila let out a pent-up breath. It was here: it was going to happen. His hand went to the fastenings of his shirt, but Avon, watching, lifted one hand.

“Wait.”

He strode across to the door and keyed the lock, using an access code to ensure it could not be opened from the outside.

Vila shivered, his eyes closing. Avon’s deliberate act seemed at that moment the most erotic thing he had ever witnessed.

The friction had cleared, or at least altered. Their moods seemed almost playful, no abrasion marring the serenity of the quiet warm room. Blake eased himself down to the floor beside Vila, leaning against the huge mossy green leisure cushions. Avon stood watching them, a slight frown narrowing his eyes the only sign of the beginnings of sexual tension.

Vila smiled hazily and brightly at them, his hands falling away to his sides, signifying acceptance.

The little thief’s submissive, defenceless pose did not sit at ease with the panicky, anxious-eyed expression that looked out from Vila’s white face.

Recognising the condition, Avon dropped to his knees beside the other two.

“You have no need to be afraid, Vila. If Blake is a barbarian, I am not.” Spoken as reassurance for Vila, there was a hint of challenge too, for Blake. Their eyes met, over Vila. Avon extended a hand, smoothing Vila’s hair away from his face: his gaze, however did not leave Blake.

Finally, Blake smiled, his face crinkling up in a friendly kind of way. He looked down at Vila and reached over him to complete the unfastening of Vila’s shirt, his large hands firm and gentle.

“There you are, Vila. You have a champion.” He spread Vila’s shirt wide, and paused, his fingertips just touching Vila’s bare chest; he said to Avon:

“Beautiful, isn’t he?”

“He’s quite an appealing specimen,” Avon agreed, and Vila felt hugely proud. His panic was receding, soothed away by Blake’s fingertips and the quiet sound of Avon breathing: the rational part of him knew he had no need to fear these two, but he had known too often in the past how the sexual act changed men you had thought kind.

Blake began to unfasten Vila’s grey trousers. He didn’t hurry.

“There’ll never be anyone else but you, for me,” Blake sang, kneeling over him, as unconcerned as if he did this sort of thing every other night of the week. Vila lifted each foot in turn, obligingly, as someone (who must be Avon) unlaced his boots and drew them off. *Avon is undressing me.*

He clung on to that thought, and was not surprised, looking down, to see his own erection rising taut over his belly when Blake succeeded in slipping his trousers off. Now he was naked. He flexed his muscles and stretched, flaunting himself a little for them.

“Excitable,” Blake commented, running his finger down the length of him, “isn’t he?”

“Excessively, it seems,” Avon said.

Vila felt exposed, and very vulnerable: he squeezed his eyes shut and concentrated on nothing but accepting the sensations they were offering him. He wanted to trust them, wanted it more than anything, and gradually the gentleness with which they were touching him began to weave its subtle magic on him, relaxing him into a limp sprawl on the cushions while they explored him with curious fingers, making him shiver with delight if they happened to brush a spot which was pleasurable for him. It wasn’t a unique experience for him: you met some Alphas who drew pleasure from giving it—some, indeed, for whom it was the only way they could make it—but not so common, either, as not to be precious.

Besides which, both of these men were special to Vila, in different ways: he *wanted* to make this work.

“This is a little one-sided, isn’t it?” he managed in what was nearly a squeak.

“Ah,” Blake said, “I was coming to that.” And with grace he stripped off his clothes, not looking to see if Avon followed suit. Vila, made shameless by arousal, watched them both: Blake was bigger made than Avon, attractive in a robust, manly way. Avon was sleek and trimmer: in a wrestling match with Blake he would have no chance, Blake could pin him down and hold him without trouble.

I love you, Vila thought, his protective instincts roused at such a thought; he longed for Avon to touch him, hold him, and he knew at the same time with a sinking heart that the reality would not match up to his dreams: reality never did.

Blake whistled a little tune as he kicked his clothes into a corner: he seemed unselfconscious about all of this while Avon stayed just a little in the background, watchful, awaiting Blake’s lead. Vila shivered: he was not cold, warm currents of air playing on his heated skin, but he was nervous. He nestled back into the security of the soft cushions and waited.

Blake came back to him, looked over the three of them with satisfaction. Three erections: it was all very phallic and more exciting than he had expected. He was keeping very obviously calm lest Avon pick up on his tension and react to it: his mind was still reeling with Avon’s agreeing to be here at all. The implications of it he would work out later: for now he had to get them all through it, and out the other side in one piece. At the very least sharing this sort of intimacy must surely get him closer to Avon—and Blake *wanted* to get closer to Avon; the man was a difficult enigma.

“You’re *both* beautiful,” he told them: turning to Avon he added, “Aren’t you glad you turned up when you did?”

“I’ll let you know,” was Avon’s only, dry rejoinder.

der: when Blake’s gaze tipped upwards to meet his something sparked like electricity, the same tension that was always alive between them and which existed perhaps because they were two Alphas fighting for the same space and perhaps not.

Vila felt it: it made him uncomfortable. Risking it, he reached out and touched both of them, their skin warm and satiny under his fingertips, indistinguishable. Jolted by the touch, Blake’s eyes abruptly left Avon: he laughed, pressing Vila’s shoulders down and kissing him robustly, a real man’s kiss which reminded Vila once again of the reason he found sex with men so very much more exciting: women were sweet, and nice to touch, and gentle; but only another man understood when, and how, not to be.

When Blake released him, panting for breath, Vila kept his eyes shut in dread that Avon would not want to kiss him, but Avon leaned in to him without hesitation, his open mouth covering Vila’s. Into the pleasure and the disbelief and the sheer sweetness of it wound the unwelcome thought that of course Avon would want to kiss him because Blake had: Vila’s mouth which had been touched by Blake’s the nearest Avon could himself get to Blake, but even if that were so it could not change the actuality, which was Avon kissing *him*, his warm tongue rubbing the delicate inner surfaces of Vila’s mouth.

Vila let out a little moan of pleasure, his hands coming up to cup Avon’s face. Avon rolled onto his side, taking Vila with him; he slipped one arm around the smaller man and let his hand come to rest on Vila’s buttocks, stroking them with the palm of his hand. The other hand he slid between them to cradle Vila’s cock, petting him with a slow sure touch.

Unexpectedly Vila’s excitement peaked and spilled over in a crescendo of swift, unbearable pleasure as Avon’s hard finger fondled him: Avon, blessed Avon didn’t take his hand away, keeping it there as long as it was needed, helping him draw out the long pulses of ecstasy until they ebbed and died away.

“I’m sorry,” Vila managed once the haze of orgasm faded, for on Earth what he had just done would have been a grave breach of manners.

Avon shook his head, wiping his hand without fuss. He turned to Blake. “Excitable...as you said.”

“Sweet,” Blake added, leaning down to kiss him. Blake’s mouth was warm and Vila clung to him, needing the comfort. Blake’s lips moved around to his ear; he bit him very gently. “I hope you don’t mind my saying—”

“What,” Vila breathed, squirming.

“I’m feeling left out,” Blake told him. Vila gave him a shaky grin and turned over, wriggling into the best position; but Blake took hold of his hips and pushed him gently down so that he was lying flat. His thumbs kneaded Vila’s buttocks strongly, soothing him outwards; Vila began to relax, settle down. He lay with his cheek pillowed

on one arm, and waited.

He heard Blake saying, “Find something, will you?” and then Blake straddled him, his thighs gripping Vila between them. It felt nice, that part of it. One moist finger probed him gently and he liked that, too.

“Here,” Avon’s voice said, and Blake shifted impatiently down a little. Someone’s hand then—Avon’s?—preparing him with something soft and silky. Vila shivered violently, with excitement, with fear. “All right,” Avon said at last; and Vila clenched his teeth together, waiting for it to begin, the sudden shock of entry, the *oddness* of the sensation. Blake was big inside him, his movements quick, but not rough; it had been a long time since Vila had accepted a man in this way and it was uncomfortable. He tried not to show it, not to spoil it for Blake; he sank his teeth into his arm to stop himself from making a sound.

Suddenly he felt a touch on his shoulders. For a moment he thought Avon was trying to hold him down, and resentment filled him: couldn’t they see he wasn’t trying to struggle, even if it *was* hurting? Then he realised that Avon was, in fact, offering him comfort: kneeling beside his head he stroked Vila’s cheek with curled fingers, a quiet undemanding contact.

Vila’s involuntary panic lessened; he lay more peacefully with Avon there, breathing out slowly: Blake moved to and fro, in the very centre of him, a slick hot rhythm which was no longer painful. When Blake groaned above him and stiffened, Vila felt the spasms deep inside him; Blake slumped on top of him, a complete deadweight, his skin against Vila’s warm. He hugged Vila tight. “Thank you,” he said, still breathless, a low murmur into Vila’s ear.

There wasn’t a callous bone in Blake’s body, Vila knew that. He didn’t blame Blake for the pain: that happened sometimes. And now—

Now for Avon.

Avon waited, still kneeling by Vila’s face, his hands stilled on Vila’s shoulder. “It’s all right, Avon.” Vila could only manage a whisper. “Go on. Really. It’s all right...”

And after a moment Avon gave in: he was excited, carried away with the erotic vision of Blake fucking Vila. He took hold of Vila’s hips, urging him to raise them: it made the angle easier, deeper. Vila gasped when Avon entered him: Avon paused.

“Okay?” Blake, returning washed and still damp, eased Vila’s head onto his lap and stroked his hair while Avon stroked him inside with long slow thrusts. Vila drifted, dreaming; he was aroused again and melting, another sweet orgasm rippling effortlessly through him moments before Avon’s.

Sated and tired, Avon and Blake slept on separate cushions, limbs touching here and there. Vila stayed awake for a while. After he was sure they were both asleep

he crept to the bathroom at the end of the rec rom and washed thoroughly in the basin there. Then he returned, and lay down as close to Avon as he dared.

This might be all he would ever have...

Well, at that it was more than he had ever expected.

He had some memories now, to hug close to him and keep him company in the lonely nights to come. And, although Avon had only wanted him because Blake did, Avon had cared about him, and nothing could take that away.

He pressed his lips to Avon's sleeping forehead, and slept himself.

He was cramped when he awoke, but not cold; someone had covered him with a rug. He lay with every sense alert but didn't move; ingrained survival precautions. The he heard low voices: the others were awake.

Avon had moved away from him and was lying facing Blake. Although they spoke quietly, Vila could hear every word.

"We shouldn't have done this to him, Blake."

A chuckle. "He didn't mind."

"Blake. He's been conditioned not to mind."

"No, I swear it, he was quite willing."

"Before I arrived, you mean?"

"Especially after you arrived, I'd say."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Avon. You can't not have noticed."

"If you're determined to be obscure, don't imagine I can't contain my curiosity."

Blake's voice was almost indulgent. "Haven't you ever seen the way he looks at you?"

There was a little silence. Vila howled inside; his knees drawn up to his stomach, he hugged them in soundless misery.

"Well, if you're right, that makes it even worse."

"Oh, I don't know. I thought he enjoyed it."

Vila could hear the coldness in Avon's voice as he said:

"You went too fast for him."

Blake sounded playful. "Oho, now you're criticising my technique?"

"He was in pain."

"Was he?"

"He's bitten a chunk out of his own forearm," Avon said. "Does that convince you?"

"I'm sorry about that," Blake said after a pause, and he genuinely would be, Vila knew that.

"We'll make it up to him," Blake added.

Avon made a little sound. "I'm *not* intending to do it again."

"Why not? Didn't you—" Blake's voice dropped—"enjoy it?"

"That's got nothing to do with it," Avon snapped.

From the rustle of movement Vila could imagine him huffily moving away.

"I'd say it had everything to do with it."

"Well, in that case I hope the two of you will be very happy."

Crushed, hurt and confused Vila stuffed his fingers into his ears; the loud booming of his own heart created a private inner world where he was safe, cut off from their unmeant cruelty. He bit his lip and cried, burying his head in his arms to be silent: it was the most heartrending thing in the world to be Vila at that moment, only Vila, who meant nothing: to be discussed, open to their casual pity and their damning kindness.

When, much later, he cautiously unplugged his ears, all was silent. He scrambled round finding his clothes and trying not to make a noise.

But when he reached the door someone touched him on the shoulder. Vila jumped a mile. Avon.

"Are you all right?" His dark eyes searched Vila.

Vila nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He kept his eyes trained rigidly on an area below Avon's neck: to meet Avon's eyes was not something he wanted to do. Avon took hold of his chin, tipped his head up, not ungentle.

"Are you hurt?"

Vila shook his head.

"I thought I heard you crying," Avon said directly.

Avon stayed there for a moment, his gaze penetrating. Vila guessed sinking that he was remembering what Blake had told him, and wondering if it was true. Then Avon let him go.

"All right." His sudden smile was charming.

Vila turned gratefully to go but Avon stopped him again.

"Wait a moment."

And Vila let himself be gathered against Avon and held, for a sweet moment. Avon's lips were warm.

"Vila," Avon said, laying his cheek on Vila's cold one, "don't let yourself be taken advantage of."

Vila smiled at him, eyes too bright by far. "I don't."

Then he ducked under Avon's arm and was gone.

SOMEHOW ALL THE SONGS SEEMED PAINFULLY SAD, AND HEARTWRENCHINGLY APPLICABLE TO HIS OWN SITUATION: this was, of course, an inevitable symptom of being drunk and Vila knew that he was very drunk indeed. So he listened to the sad songs about lovin' someone whose heart for you is cold, and tipped the sweet wine down his throat and wept a little inside even as his mouth smiled foolish drunken smiles.

Avon had to shake him before he noticed his presence.

Vila lifted muzzy brown eyes to Avon, not sur-

prised to see him: he confided: "I wash jush shinking about you, Avon."

"This is the eighth bar I've tried," Avon snapped, "looking for you. Are you coming, or have you decided to stay?" His eyes swept the room with an expressive sarcasm Vila was too far gone to appreciate. "I must say, it seems to be very much your kind of place." With a fastidious sneer he dislodged a clinging female hand, which seemed to have come up from floor level to clutch at his trousers.

Vila let Avon heave him to his feet with two deft hands beneath his armpits.

"I'm glad you've come, Avon," he said with great solemnity, adding with a rush, "—didn't take off and leave me even though I'm late."

"Yes, well don't think it didn't cross my mind."

Tears stung Vila's eyes suddenly. Avon frogmarched him out of the door into a blast of cold night air.

"I just bet it did," Vila hiccupped miserably. "But Blake, good ol' Blake, wouldn't leave me behind." Leaving the noise and bustle and heat of the bar behind had cleared his head a little; he shook it vigorously.

"I feel funny," he discovered.

"I'm not surprised." Avon wrinkled his nose at the scent arising from Vila; the sparkle of the teleport took them.

Back at the *Liberator* Avon helped Vila along.

"Don' rush me, Avon, everything's spinning."

Avon took a tighter grip and hustled him along the corridors. In Vila's room he let him drop onto the bed. Vila opened his eyes and gazed up. He could see two Avons. He felt sick.

"Don' go."

"Sleep well." Avon was on his way to the door.

"Avon, please don't go. Just stay for five minutes. *One* minute."

Avon turned to look at him.

"It's all right," Vila said tiredly. "I'm not going to be a—a nuisance." His head really was spinning. He struggled to sit up; Avon was there with a hand under his shoulders. "Just wanna bit of company," he tried to explain. "Gets—lonely—"

"You'll be asleep in a moment." Avon showed his teeth in a sardonic smile. "No doubt you'll have some company in your dreams."

"Just stay," Vila said desperately. "Just a little while, Avon, please."

Avon stayed looking down at him. Vila essayed what he hoped was a bright smile.

"M'not going to embarrass you—I promise." He stared owlishly at Avon's face. "You think—you think I'm in love with you, don't you? *Don't say it, Avon.*"

After a pause, "I wasn't going to say anything,"

Avon said evenly.

"S a dirty lie. Don't love anyone, I don't. Not worth it. No-one's ever loved me, do you know that Avon? You don't look a bit surprised. Now that's not very flattering, not—very—flattering at all. All right, so no-one's ever loved me. No big deal. It's just that everyone I ever meet has such—lousy taste—"

The bright smile faltered, splintered into tears quite unexpectedly.

Avon was at his worst when dealing with emotion: his impulse was to leave Vila to it. He made for the door. Outside it, he paused to listen. The sound of Vila's shuddery sobs unsettled him: at some gut-level he wanted to help Vila, but the colder weight of intellect argued that there was nothing he could do which wouldn't be difficult, embarrassing, or even of any real help.

He made as if to walk away. But then the sounds of misery ceased abruptly; there was a scramble in the room, then the harsher sounds of vomiting, and Avon's wish to escape became more urgent.

But Vila could easily choke if left alone; and Avon was already feeling bruised with guilt.

He went back in.

Vila was on his feet and (mercifully) had made it to the bathroom. Purged inside and out he leaned weakly against the basin, dead white, beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Every time," he said in a small, pale voice, "this happens I swear I'll give up drinking. Until the next time."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Go away, Avon," Vila said wearily, turning away and suddenly ashamed of the stink of stale alcohol and sweat. "I thought you *had* gone. Can't a man be decently sick in private?"

Avon watched as Vila stripped off, dropping every single item of clothing one by one into the disposal chute. The waste of this did not strike him as inappropriate; they had quickly grown used to the luxuries of life on the *Liberator* which was richly stocked with all material requirements. Vila's spine was knobbed all the way down to scrawny white buttocks; he looked as vulnerable and unprotected as an animal shorn of fur. He was shivering as he turned on the shower, bluish goosebumps rising on his skin.

Avon lounged by the door, as strangely unwilling to leave as he had been eager a few minutes ago. He watched Vila's clever thief's fingers soaping himself quickly and neatly. Vila was nuisance, no doubt about it: wasting their time and trying all their patience with this little escapade.

But he was good-hearted. Avon was not yet so cynical that he did not appreciate the little man's uncomplicated nature: he would never dream of saying so, of course, and Vila's idiocies and failings would always earn his scathing invective; but in the ways which counted, he

valued Vila.

Vila's naked white vulnerability was not sexual, not at all.

And yet...

...in a perverse way, it was having exactly that effect on him. It was not stylised beauty, nor provocative sensuality; it was simply a bare human being, silly, pale and helpless, and Avon was suddenly struck with a wave of sheer, shocking lust.

Such impulses, of course, were not particularly rare even to an Alpha male, civilised, educated and restrained: Jenna, for example, leaning over her console, showing a curve of tender breast; or Cally, with her delicate dark-eyed mystery which Avon's purely masculine impulses urged him again and again to breach. Desires which were as impersonal as they were sudden, and easily put aside.

As he was going to put this one aside; the one time he had succumbed had spawned, it seemed, an endless trail of trouble.

Vila dropped the towel and turned, his face suddenly, unexpectedly sad, his vision locked on some inner bleakness. He saw Avon and jumped.

"I keep thinking you've gone. Then you keep coming back."

"How are you feeling?"

"I'll live." He tried to smile, ducked quickly around and began a vigorous brushing of his teeth.

"Oori, A-on," came the indecipherable sounds. He spat noisily and rinsed his mouth.

"What did you say?"

"I said, I'm all right, you can go now. Thanks." Uncharacteristically brusque, the little thief brushed past him and left the bathroom. Avon followed him.

"On the other hand," Vila said, his back to Avon, pulling on some clothes, "if you wanted to stay... I'd like that, Avon—but I expect you want to get away now, don't you, you've got things to do?"

The pathetic hopefulness tugged at Avon's conscience and his heart. Sensing indecision, Vila turned to him; the expression of yearning on his face was unmistakable.

"Please, Avon," he whispered hoarsely: "Please. You won't regret it, I promise you. You can do anything you like to me; or just name it and I'll do it to you. Please stay."

Avon's eyes narrowed to a black gleam. Watching him, Vila took a step forward, his breathing rushed and irregular.

Avon made his decision.

"Vila...get some sleep." As the door shut behind him, Vila turned and hurled the nearest breakable object at the wall, unflinching and blankeyed as it shattered into deadly, sharp splinters.

Things had been terrible lately.

Far from getting to know Avon better, Blake felt that Avon had moved a million miles away from him since the night they had shared with Vila. Avon had been vicious, antagonistic, sniping; calling down scorn on Blake and Blake's motives with all the venomous fluency of which he was capable. Blake, his equal in articulacy and even his better in the art of the unanswerable, coped with him. The thing was, hiding and fencing behind endless arguments about morals, motives and manipulation, they never talked at all about the things which mattered.

Blake knew he had to do something about Avon; what, he didn't know.

Passing Blake's cabin on his return from Vila's, Avon could see Blake through the open door. Blake turned as if he felt the touch of Avon's eyes—yet the truth, Avon knew, was likely to be far more prosaic: Blake had heard him, perhaps, or caught a flicker of shadow as he disturbed the light in passing.

"Oh Avon," Blake called. "Come here a moment, would you?"

Something in Avon rebelled as it always did: he was disinclined to answer summons; but as always, he followed it.

Blake, barechested, was facing a mirror on the wall and shaving. Avon watched the swell of his muscled brown back, the shifting movements of his shoulder-blades, sharp beneath smooth skin.

"What do you want now? A valet?"

"You've done some research into the teleport system," Blake said without turning, "haven't you?"

After a pause Avon decided there was no reason to deny it.

"I want you to explain it to me. Wait for me and we'll go down there."

"I see."

Blake turned, wiping his chin with a towel, and gave him a penetrating stare. "That's all you've got to say?"

"It's a century ahead of current understanding, Blake, and you want me to take you down there and explain how it works. All right. I'm not arguing."

Avon's sardonic cynicism only made Blake smile.

"We're both bright, Avon."

Avon's stare was very direct. "If you don't realise, Blake, just how irrelevant that is to this particular subject, then we've got a long way to go. Have you a year or so to spare?"

Blake said, jumping subjects: "Why *do* you research the systems on this ship? A thirst for knowledge?"

Avon's smile was slow, and grim. "Only partly."

Blake was thoughtful as they walked together

“Well, let’s put it another way. Since it obviously disturbed you so much, why did you agree to go along with it at all? I must admit, I was surprised.” Blake took another sip of his drink and stared at Avon with benign interest, head tilted to one side.

Avon smiled savagely. His voice was harsh as he said:

“Men have always been led by their cocks, Blake.”

Blake was momentarily silenced. Avon noted the reaction; his eyes creased with satisfaction.

“It isn’t a trait to be proud of, but there it is: man is only an animal, when all’s said and done.”

“I see. So you gave in to your animal instincts.” Blake studied his fingers, then peeked up. “And did you enjoy it?”

He enjoyed putting Avon on the spot this way; after all, Avon did it to him often enough. Avon’s eyes flickered at the direct provocation but he didn’t look away.

“Like machines: push the right buttons, we respond.”

“Is that, we in the singular?” Blake offered sweetly. “Or are you speaking for me as well?”

“Oh, I couldn’t speak for you,” Avon said. “You seem to defy every norm. I was speaking for the human species in general.” He rose to his feet.

Blake arched an eyebrow. “And where are you going?”

Avon looked around for somewhere to leave his glass. “I presume,” he said delicately setting it down, “from the tone of this that you are eager for a repeat performance.” He smiled nastily. “Well, you can fuck Jenna, Vila, and Cally all night every night, in any combination you choose; but leave *me* out of it.” He turned for the door.

Blake was there, one hand pushing at his shoulders, before Avon could press the door release.

So that was what Avon was expecting.

“You presume,” he said very coldly, “quite wrong.”

Avon stayed where he was, his eyes a long black gleam beneath downswept dark lashes. He glanced once at Blake’s hand pressing his shoulder: after a moment, unhurriedly, Blake let him go.

“Come and finish your drink,” he said, swinging away from him. Avon started to speak but Blake cut in, sharper. “I said, finish your drink.”

After a moment, Avon sat down without a word.

“I had to steal it from Vila,” Blake continued as if nothing had happened, “and stealing from a talented thief like Vila isn’t easy. So I’d prefer you not to waste it.” He swung his legs up onto a stool and crossed them at the ankle, the picture of ease. With one hand he untied the laces of his shirt. Avon’s eyes never left him throughout. Blake thought that he himself was being less obvious

about it; studying the table, his drink, his hand, while keeping Avon firmly in his line of vision the whole time.

“So, do I take it from your—” Blake looked down and smiled a little— “somewhat heated reaction, that you *didn’t* enjoy the three of us?”

“I gave you my objection at the time.”

“You haven’t answered the question. And that tells me quite a lot,” Blake said with satisfaction.

“You may choose to think so, of course,” Avon said promptly, and proceeded by his silence to undermine all certainty.

Blake sighed, conceding the round. “You should have represented yourself at your own trial, Avon. You’d have walked away with it.”

“I considered it,” Avon agreed, with no visible trace of awareness that he was being gently teased. “But I was advised against it. Probably a mistake.”

Blake gave him an incredulous stare. “Only probably?” For no particular reason an image of Avon that night had come into his mind; Avon’s mouth, open against Vila’s shoulders, nuzzling as he rode him, deeply joined to him; the abstracted, entranced expression as he lifted his face. Realising Avon was about to come, Blake had put out a hand, stroked Avon’s back, wanting to share, wanting him to enjoy it.

And here they were now arming themselves behind a wall of hostility while their mouths spoke careful negotiations over the top of it. Avon was answering him:

“It was a political trial, Blake. St. Peter himself could have come down and argued on my side and I’d still have been sent down.” Avon crossed one dark-clad leg over the other. He was wearing long black boots, elegant things besides Blake’s raffish scuffed ones. He now seemed in no hurry to leave.

Blake repeated, thoughtfully, as if they had never changed the subject, “So do I take it that the thought of a—repeat performance, as you put it, is extremely distasteful to you?”

This time Avon only sighed resignedly. “I can see how you’re feeling, Blake; why not contact Jenna? I’m sure she’d oblige you.” At a stroke reducing Blake’s complex feelings to a much more basic one, Avon appeared, smugly, to have won some sort of a victory: he set down his empty glass; seemed about to leave again.

“Maybe Vila appeals to me more,” Blake said, testing.

Avon’s eyes shot to Blake’s, suddenly hard. “Then ask him.”

“And you?” Blake said, equally hard.

“—are not interested,” Avon completed, rising to his feet. “Thank you for the drink, Blake. *And* the conversation. Very worthwhile. Excuse me now, I have things to do.”

“Why aren’t you interested?” Blake persisted.

At last he got the response he was after.

mean, Blake? Now I'm asking *you*."

Blake laughed, an open, rich chuckle. "All right, all right. Sit down. Stop breathing fire." He leaned nearer Avon and whispered devilishly, "Anyone would think you were frightened of me."

After a pause Avon said: "Why should that seem so inconceivable? Someone like you is always dangerous." He sat down. "And you haven't answered my question."

Blake took his time, chose his words carefully. "I think you couldn't face what happened, because of me. Because you couldn't bear afterwards for me to have seen you lose that precious self-control."

He hurried on before Avon could convert the freezing stare into words. "What's *wrong* with sex? It's free, it's harmless, it's good. You can't say that about many things in this world."

Avon looked at him coolly. "I didn't say it wasn't. Sex is, of course, a pleasure."

"But not with Vila?" Blake asked.

Avon sighed, a featherlight exhalation. "Yes, it was pleasurable with Vila. Is that what you wanted me to say?" His tone exactly inflected the sense: *now are you happy?*

Pleasurable. So Avon had felt pleasure, sliding his cock sweetly into Vila, his head tipped back, concentrating on some private inner marvellousness. Blake felt a lightning flash of arousal that made him flush.

"Then, why not again?"

Avon held his gaze, quite levelly. "I've told you why. Why won't you believe me? Vila is, in our hands, as helpless as a child. You know that as well as I do. There isn't any question of giving him a choice." He added with nasty sweetness: "Of course, you may prefer the frisson of an unwilling sexual partner?"

Blake threw his hands up. "He certainly won't have any choice following your logic. Vila's lonely, Avon. He wants to be loved. Would you deny him any sexual contact, ever, on the grounds that there's an outside chance he might just be responding to conditioning?"

"Not any sexual contact," Avon said. "Sexual contact with *us*."

Blake rubbed his chest slowly with the flat of his hand, watching Avon all the time. "Well, my guess is, it would only make Vila—happy."

"Don't be stupid, Blake," Avon snapped. "You may think you know us all, every one, turned inside out so you can inspect the pattern and predict our every emotion. But you can't."

Blake took a deep breath. His palms came down flat on his knees. "Would you like to be more specific?"

"I just picked up Vila," Avon said coldly, "drunk in a bar and crying. Since then he has disembarked himself of probably two litres of various alcoholic concoctions." Avon stopped there: Blake had a sense that there was more

to it than that. Then Avon added, spittingly:

"That's Vila's *happiness* for you."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Blake said directly. "Vila needs someone. In fact, he deserves someone."

"Yes," Avon said. "But since neither you nor I are likely to want the commitment or the responsibility, it seems unwise to create any false hopes."

"I don't think Vila *has* any hopes."

"Ah," said Avon, "well now... **that** is what I find sad. Perhaps now you understand."

He looked up sharply at Blake, and Blake did understand. He frowned to himself, and bit a finger tensely. He had never meant to manipulate Vila—in fact, as he recalled, if anything Vila had set out to seduce *him*. But Avon definitely had a point.

"And now, Blake, I really think I've taken up enough of your time." Avon smiled at him, diamond bright. "You must have plenty to do. The rest of us, of course, must make do with our petty little ambitions, survival and so forth, but the Saviour of the People, with his eyes ever fixed on a noble vision of the future—a future designed, engineered and brought into glorious being by Roj Blake..." Avon paused, head on one side; and let fly with one parting shot.

"Millions of people are going to suffer if you destroy Star One, Blake. Gan has already fallen victim to your delusions of godhood. Which of your loyal, but stupid followers will be next, I wonder?"

Blake opened his mouth, and spoke at last. "I don't suppose you care, so long as it isn't you."

"Right," Avon agreed. "But I should just like to know one thing. How do you sleep at nights?"

Blake snapped inside, his temper white-hot: Avon had gone too far this time. Half-formed intents coalesced into a hard determination: He *would* win out over Avon, wipe that smugness away. Avon persisted in wilfully misunderstanding him, sneering at him, trying to make him look foolish: as if he were a starry-eyed would-be hero who confused a simple desire to be sainted with true, sincere evangelism. Blake had had *enough*.

"I'm simply doing what seems right to me." He paused, hands clenching at his sides, balanced on the balls of his feet, gathering strength.

"Are you cruel, or just misguided?" Avon wanted to know. "I never can make up my mind."

"Perhaps this will help." Blake reached out and took hold of Avon, hands closing comfortably around his upper arms. He was just the right height to kiss. But Blake barely tasted his mouth before Avon twisted violently in his grasp, and hissed at him:

"I *knew* it. I *knew* this was what you had in mind."

"Good," Blake said. "That'll save a lot of trouble." He bent his head to Avon's mouth again: Avon's warm breath hit his cheek in a rush of outrage.

"I didn't say I agreed, damn you."

“But you do?” Blake suggested. He pushed Avon down onto the couch, shamelessly using his superior weight and height. Avon pulled as far away from him as possible and stared at him in incredulous fury.

“Blake, anyone else on this ship would probably be extremely flattered. Are you really going to resort to rape for the sake of the few extra minutes it’ll take to summon one of *them*?”

“I want you, not anyone else,” Blake said shortly. Risking it, he let Avon go: Avon poised for flight, his eyes a mad black glitter, but he did not move. Blake slid one hand into his hair and used the other to draw him close. With a sound of contentment he found Avon’s mouth again and kissed him, sliding Avon’s lips open with his tongue. He drifted his fingers gently over Avon’s ear and rubbed his scalp through soft hair. The lush warmth of Avon’s mouth was wonderfully intoxicating; Blake swallowed avidly.

Withdrawing for breath he leaned his head against Avon’s cheek, holding him lightly. “All right, Avon. Now you’ve calmed down, I’m *asking* you.”

The silence seemed interminable. Blake kept his eyes shut and leaned against Avon, swaying a little with him. Avon’s clothes smelt clean, of the *Liberator*’s freshening system; beneath them he caught a warm wave of soap and, faintly, sweat. Risking a look, he saw Avon’s eyes trained blackly on him. Blake arched an eyebrow in enquiry, waiting...

Avon’s voice was a hoarse whisper. “Lock the door then, Blake.”

His heart leapt, then raced. Lightheaded he rose to his feet and secured the door, switching off the buzzer as well. Then he returned to Avon, who hadn’t moved. He looked immutable, frozen.

Blake put his arms round him again, abruptly and oddly sorry for Avon. He had no doubts, but an inner certainty that this was a good thing, the right thing: he could be nice to Avon, devote himself to Avon’s pleasure. How could Avon fail to respond? Full of hope and optimism his lips sought out and captured Avon’s again, settling into the kiss with growing familiarity, tasting delight as their mouths drank sweetly from one another.

Running on instinct, Blake took Avon’s hand and held it for a moment, then pressed it to himself through his clothes. After a moment’s stillness Avon broke away from the kiss; he squeezed the hardness under his fingers and Blake gave a murmur of pleasure, leaning back. He pulled Avon’s head down to him and buried his face in Avon’s hair: it smelt of apples and woodsmoke, a peculiarly evocative scent which gave him a deliciously poignant echo of homesickness deep within his belly.

“What’s the matter?” Avon said softly against his cheek. “Have you come to your senses?” The hand caressing Blake stilled.

Blake shook his head, eyes shut. He only said: “I

want you so much.”

Avon was quiet for a moment, then he withdrew. Blake’s eyes flew open in shock. “Too many clothes,” Avon explained, and Blake nodded. He swung himself dizzily to his feet and began to strip off his shirt.

Finishing before Avon did he came up behind him and put his hands around Avon’s waist, sliding his palms down inside his trousers and coming across the crispness of body hair, his fingertips delicately seeking out and touching the warm, hard shaft of flesh between them, freeing it from confinement and drawing it upwards.

Avon gasped and threw his head back, leaning against Blake’s chest. They stayed that way for a while, moving gently: Blake handled him slowly and surely, feeling the soft, delicate skin move freely over the rigid hardness beneath. His own cock was pressing up against Avon’s buttocks, thrusting gently in an automatic reaction he couldn’t stop even if he wanted to.

Avon whimpered, pulled away from Blake and turned to face him. His eyes were wild, his hair disordered. Blake ran his hand through his own rough curls, fighting to get his breath back. Avon stripped his trousers off with an impatience so unlike him Blake found it almost too erotic: a deep, desperate yearning was gathering forcefully inside him. As Avon moved towards him again Blake seized him and propelled him towards the bed.

The sheets were black and the lights low. He pulled Avon down with him, entwining his legs with Avon’s; and kissed him again violently. The taste of blood, salt and sweet, was on his tongue; his or Avon’s, he didn’t know. It was warm in the room, but he shivered as he rubbed his whole body against Avon, marvelling in the beauty of bare skin against skin, rough hair, soft warmth: his cock pressed rapturously into Avon’s belly, working a slick little circle on his skin.

Avon moaned again. The sound nearly drove Blake mad. His hand slid between their bodies, sought Avon’s cock again, wrapping his fingers around it and squeezing hard, harder, eliciting another exciting moan. Avon pressed himself upwards, demanding more.

Raggedly breathing, Blake struggled to sit up. Avon’s eyes came open and he stared; he looked lost, wild. Reassuring him with murmurs and soothing hands which petted and stroked him Blake leaned over him, settling between legs which parted for him: a fine filament of transparent fluid shone at the tip of Avon’s cock.

Blake bent his head and licked it off luxuriously, tasting delicate salt. He heard Avon inhale sharply: for his own pleasure he asked, his voice sounding odd and hoarse:

“Do you want me to?” and Avon’s answering, whispered:

“Yes, damn you,” made him shudder, so that for a moment he could barely concentrate on Avon; but then he summoned up the will, somehow, to ignore his body’s thundering demands.

His mouth sucked Avon in, a perfect fit. Avon's cock touched the back of his throat making him gag for a second but he accommodated it almost at once. Warmly and wetly he moved the tight 'O' of his lips up and down the hard, slick shaft, pausing now and then to slide the point of his tongue across the slit at the tip, delving flickeringly inside to steal the slippery moisture. As he did so Avon gasped and shuddered under him, then went very still, his thigh muscles knotted rigid under Blake's gripping hands.

Blake felt Avon's cock contract, then the warm, energetic pulses softly hit the back of his throat. He swallowed instinctively. Beneath him Avon sighed, and relaxed suddenly, his hands falling away from Blake's shoulder. There was a raw, stinging sensation at the back of Blake's throat, a thrilling reminder of what he had done.

He moved up beside Avon, on his way kissing his softened cock, his belly, his chest and finally his mouth. His own urgency seemed to have receded a little, but that changed when Avon turned and breathed into his ear, his hand slipping down Blake's chest to find his erection.

Blake inhaled slowly, rolling onto his back, his cock turning sweetly in Avon's fingers, fists up by his ears on the pillow; a totally defenceless position which only added to the excitement. Avon's eyes gleamed as he looked Blake over, and squeezed him gently, pulling out his cock with slow, practised fingers. Blake shut his eyes and abandoned himself wantonly to the sensation. Desire gathered swiftly and poised itself for flashpoint. The next thing he felt was the soft touch of lips on his cock. He opened his eyes, propped himself up on one elbow to watch. Avon paused between his thighs; his eyes met Blake's. For the space of two heartbeats nothing happened.

Blake cleared his throat, forced himself to speak. "You don't have to."

Avon smiled an odd, unpleasant smile. "Oh, I want to." The assurance struck an odd chord; but Blake lost it as Avon said, with dark, erotic perversity:

"Watch me, Blake."

And Blake did, as Avon's lips settled gently on the fragile skin like a butterfly landing on a flower; turning his cheek over and over against the long hard shaft, nuzzling him with mouth, tongue, the slightest rasp of teeth.

Blake groaned, sweet fire rolling loose inside him until he ached with need; he dropped his head back and gasped out to Avon:

"Avon. Please."

"Well now," Avon said, sounding bright and cheerful, "this is better. I prefer you this way... infinitely." His fingers rubbed Blake's cock slowly and surely; responding instinctively, without even looking, to every throb. "Oh yes, I like you in this mood, Blake. I could do anything with you now, couldn't I?"

His hands slid underneath and gripped Blake's buttocks with a strong pinching motion. The small pain sent a rush of dizzying sensation through him: Blake sighed and arched upwards and growled,

"Well, I wish you damn well would."

Avon's thumbs parted his cheeks, probing the cleft. Then he gasped in utter blissful relief as Avon's mouth closed tightly over his cock, sucking him deep inside with no hesitation. A storm of honey gathered sweetly and painfully in his loins, a thousand-and-one fevered and exotic images unrolling in front of his eyes: a magic carpet floating him all the way to the edge—and over it. In ecstasy he felt the soft golden bullets of orgasm firing out of him, streaming down into the warm tight haven which cradled him and drew him out, exacting the last drop, the last pulse of the sweetest, most exquisite joy.

And then, as Avon licked him luxuriously, another, and another, dying away.

His blood was rushing in his ears as if he had finished a ten-mile sprint, his heart pounding, pounding, terribly fast. He reached out and found Avon's hand, pressed it to his chest to feel the thundering there.

"See what you do to me," he said, catching his breath. He gathered Avon into his arms and lay there cuddling him comfortably. He felt Avon shiver, and running his fingertips down Avon's arm discovered goosebumps.

"You're cold." He reached down and pulled a light cover over the two of them. Then he lay quietly holding Avon, a privilege undreamt of once and unnoticed now.

Blake, lulled by Avon's regular breathing, the warm body close to his, had drifted into a doze which deepened. When the intercom made a strident burst of sound Blake started awake, then scrambled across the bed to flick the button.

"Blake."

"Jenna. Is everything all right?"

His voice was foggy with sleep. He cleared it several times.

"Fine. I was asleep."

Her voice was contrite. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'll let you go. Oh—you haven't seen Avon, I suppose?"

Blake looked across at the other man, saw his eyes open and dark.

"No," he said. "No, wait. I think he was going to do some repairs in the diagnostic unit. He didn't want to be disturbed."

"Oh. Only he could look at the navigation controls sometime, it seems offline. It isn't urgent though. I'll ask him tomorrow."

"Any problems?"

She said no, and called off.

"Well," Avon said nastily. "So our leader is not so fearless, after all."

Blake's eyes dwelt on him, stony. "Actually, I had the feeling you'd prefer me not to be honest." He threw back the cover a little way and turned on his side to face Avon.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll find some way of 'accidentally' letting it drop," Avon said. "They'll adore you all the more when they hear, no doubt."

Blake leaned up on one elbow, the better to play with the hair on Avon's chest, running his fingers through the dark curls, surprisingly soft, silky.

"Still fighting, Avon? Hasn't this changed anything?"

Avon huffed in cynical surprise. "What did you expect it to change?"

"I thought you might be—friendlier." He brushed his thumb across one nipple, caressing it.

Avon said sharply, "Look, Blake, you wanted sex with me, you had it. Don't expect me to fall at your feet as well."

"Pity," Blake grinned. Avon was lying on his back, staring up at the ceiling. Blake took hold of his chin and tilted his face towards him. He kissed him long and thoroughly, his palm lying along Avon's cheek. When Avon responded, a lazy tongue accepting the invitation to play, Blake breathed in the warmly sexual scent of him and felt the low-lying excitement in his belly rising again.

"It would take a long time," he murmured, entranced, "before I had enough of you."

"Yes?" Avon's voice answered with dispassionate ice. "Hours—or weeks, do you think? Perhaps as long as a month? How long should I put aside?"

"The rest of your life, if you like."

Avon's eyes turned to him in an ironic roll. "That's what I admire about you, Blake."

"Well, I'm glad there's something about me you admire." He leaned over Avon, eyes roving. Avon was not heavily made; his limbs lean with the light musculature of a typical endomorph.

"What is it, by the way?" he thought to ask.

"It really doesn't matter."

"No, tell me."

Avon asked, seemingly inconsequentially: "Have you slept with Jenna?"

Blake hesitated, his brows knitting; then decided yes, intimacy owned some rights.

"Yes."

"And what did you promise *her*?"

An odd little stir of anxiety pricked him, at Avon's close intensity. He felt his way slowly.

"I didn't promise her anything."

"The delight of your company was its own reward," Avon nodded, as if it all made perfect sense. "Well at that, it probably would be. Jenna is not the most subtle of strategists."

Blake waited for him to ask about Cally, but he

said nothing more. Cally, perhaps, was hallowed ground: on more than one occasion he had seen Avon show her a gentleness which could not be explained wholly by circumstance.

"So," Avon said admiringly, "you really can turn your hand to anything, can't you Blake? Men, women—have you tried sheep? They make very good followers, so I'm told. Children—yes, we know about those—"

This was something he had not expected, even from Avon. Especially from Avon. Winded, he stared at the man with dislike.

"That seems a remarkably low piece of filth, even coming from you." Depression yawned open inside him; however could he have thought this would help? Every tiny intimacy gained Avon seemed compelled to outweigh with a backward step in sustained unpleasantness.

"How—odd. That's exactly what *I* thought," Avon's velvet voice murmured.

It took a moment to sink in.

Maddened, sickened, Blake raised his hand and hit Avon across the face, the weight of his hand smacking jarringly into Avon's mouth.

"Don't ever, ever say anything like that to me again." He stared down, seeing blood on Avon's lips, not seeing anything. "The charges were false, Avon. False. If you ever were in any doubt I'm telling you now."

Avon lay still for a moment. Then he lifted a hand to touch his face, examined the blood on his fingertips. "With a big stick to back up your protestations. I see." His voice sounded odd. Blake continued to stare at him.

"Don't you believe me?"

"If you say so, of course I do," Avon said with no visible emotion.

Blake gripped him in fingers which dug cruelly into bare skin.

"Avon. *Do you really think that of me?*"

Avon stared up at him unblinkingly. Blood welled in a bright red ruby which trembled, dissolved and ran from his mouth; he wiped it with the back of his hand. "No, I don't suppose I do."

"Then why did you say it?" Blake asked with a kind of anguish; he let Avon go and rolled to his back. More than anything that had happened so far, more (frighteningly) even than Gan's death, this shook him to the roots of his resolve and his purpose: to have come so far, and done so much which he believed right, and good: and Avon could still believe that of him.

And if he didn't: that made it rather worse.

"Congratulations," he said without opening his eyes. "You couldn't find a better way of proving that you hate me; I never really quite believed it before."

There was a silence, and then he felt Avon move, rising and leaving the bed. He heard water running.

"Blake."

The side of the bed depressed and he opened his eyes to see Avon looking down at him.

"I'm sorry," Avon said, uniquely in Blake's experience. "For what it's worth, I've never believed it. I would defend you, on that score, against all comers in the galaxy."

"Really," Blake growled, still sore. He put up his hand and brushed away a bead of blood with his thumb from the softness of Avon's lip. He didn't, in his turn, apologise. Avon had got off lightly with a split second's pain. *His* pain persisted.

Avon knelt beside him, hands lightly resting on Blake's shoulders. "How do you feel about the taste of blood?"

"What?"

Carefully, Avon leaned down and kissed him, gently at first. Blake was unresponsive for a moment, but Avon kissed him more deeply; that gesture warmed Blake and stirred him so that his mouth relaxed under Avon's; he found the little split with his tongue and sipped at it. Avon broke the kiss to whisper, "Vampire. I've always suspected you." His lips moved on to dabble at Blake's ear; a delicious sensation which made Blake shiver; then trailed sweetly down his neck to his chest, kissing each nipple in turn.

Blake made a little exclamation and reached down to hold Avon's head there; Avon obliged him, did what he wanted. Blake felt his cock twitch and grow, extending hugely as Avon bit each nipple gently then soothed it, nuzzling.

Feeling a threatening inner surge Blake stopped him as Avon kissed him lower, moving downwards; with enormous self-control he sat up and pushed Avon to the bed.

"Let's not hurry."

Avon lay back and let Blake do what he wanted; Blake had enjoyed the odd sexual fantasy about the enigmatic computer expert but they were fantasies without tenderness, more an issue of domination with Avon succumbing, after a battle. In reality, however, Avon lay spreadeagled under Blake's exploratory ministrations, limbs flung wide, an expression of pure pleasure on his face.

Gently Blake laughed at him, fingers playing in springy curls of hair; dizzily he inhaled the scent of Avon's skin. Running his hand over Avon's firm cock he slipped his fingers under Avon's balls, cradling them in his palm; he noticed with amusement Avon's eyes coming open and warily watching.

Moving suddenly he straddled Avon, thighs gripping Avon's flanks, and kissed him long and hard. Beneath his crushing lips he tasted Avon's blood again; his cock pressed ripely against its twin beneath.

A sudden obsession with penetration gripped Blake and he stopped kissing Avon with a gasp, laying his

head beside the darker one. He examined Avon's features, very close; the straightforward beauty of him captivating, from the delicate dark wing of his eyebrows to the cruel, tender curve of his lips. Avon's hand was on his arm, holding him lightly; his breath fell softly on Blake's overheated skin. Blake wished...

The most peculiar sensations were washing over him, making him lightheaded; he remembered feeling this way once before, as a youth: he had a girl, a slight delicate thing with huge eyes. Not his first conquest—that honour went to a matronly type who had taken a shine to him and introduced him to some more interesting moves than the elementary First Aid she was employed to teach him at his evening class—but a thousand times more important: he very much in love, romantic and desperate, she a virgin, anxious and shy but willing to please him. He had been nervous and unsure, terrified of hurting her, but brash, needing to keep up a manly done-it-all-before façade.

He was reminded of this for the first time in many years, here and now with Avon; ridiculous really, the situation so different, the *people* so different; that Blake had died long ago and Avon was not a nervous girl. But somehow now as then he felt a deep, deep yearning; for something longed-for yet not tangible, a tenderness which was not just the urge to protect him, but also to crush him and possess him.

He smiled shakily at Avon and wondered if he was falling in love. He was prone to violent attachments; and Avon had been an obsession even before.

"I think it's time I left," Avon said, breaking the spell; he was watching Blake narrowly. "Before you try any of your proselytizing ploys on me. I am *not* susceptible, Blake."

Blake drew back from him a little, the better to find the entrancing length of his cock.

"Don't think I don't know what you're trying to do," Avon snarled, eyes shutting.

"And it's no challenge at all," Blake said gently; he curled his fingers around Avon and squeezed warmly. He tried to draw Avon closer but Avon dragged himself away and glared. Empty-handed Blake just looked at him; he didn't know why Avon had suddenly turned so difficult when he himself was feeling only love.

"Avon," he sighed, and moved in on him again, curling up behind him. He stroked Avon's hunched shoulders and down his arms, kissing the nape of his neck, trying to comfort this sudden unease away with his warmth and his touch. After some little while, encouraged by Avon's stillness he snuggled himself closer, knees in the crook of Avon's, his cock sweetly cradled against Avon's buttocks. He nuzzled the nape of Avon's neck and slipped his hand around his waist to find his cock, hard and responsive to Blake's first touch, lengthening in his fingers. The scent of the two of them, warmly, sweatily sexual, came to Blake in a heady rush; he breathed in with

joy and hugged Avon tight, tighter.

His cock nudged, then slipped between Avon's cheeks as if drawn there irresistibly; it seemed to fit as if it were meant to. Excited, he shut his eyes firmly and held Avon close to him. The tip of his cock was slick, its passage easy down in the dark and secret places it invaded blindly. He was there, he could feel the rough little opening; it seemed to draw him inwards, and madly, he began to wonder—

would Avon let him?

but reality stopped him just in time, because however much he wanted it, however much Avon himself might want it right at this moment, Blake had to be strong for both of them: Avon would never forgive him, never never never.

So with terrible self-control he rolled onto his back, taking Avon with him, burying his mouth in Avon's as some small consolation; taking his tongue possessively, almost with aggression. Avon fought him at first, excitedly and passionately: then melted, pliant and boneless, plastered to him skin to wet skin. Flame flashing along dry kindling they lit, mouths clinging yearningly. The bed rose and fell, the sheets tangling around them as they pressed desperately and hopelessly together. Just when Blake, driven mad by unrelieved frenzy, felt panicky, he opened his eyes and saw Avon's face: his hair clustering damply with the sweat of arousal and effort, his skin faintly flushed as his face twisted with agony: as Blake watched, his expression blurred and reformed, the dark eyes dazed with pleasure: Avon choked with an odd smile, "Bastard." He hugged Blake tight, shuddering as his arms locked around him, pressing him close as his seed spread warmly and convulsively between them.

Blake waited for him to be still; then gathered him up and kissed him openmouthed, his eyes searching Avon's; finding what he wanted there in the nightshaded darkness his urgency peaked and ran over, away from him in a stream of glorious sensation, leaving him shaken, breathless, tired.

He covered Avon with grateful kisses.

"Avon," he said, making a statement of it: Avon turned a drowsy head his way.

Blake smiled at him; took his hand and twined their fingers together. He laid his face near to Avon's so he could watch him until he fell asleep.

He had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams; but the nightmares, all of them, were still to come.

That's where we're going."

There was a little silence, and then Avon's cutting voice interjected: "I see. And when did we decide that?"

Blake looked at Avon very thoroughly indeed, to quell any potential rebellion in the bud. "We have to find Docholli, and that's the most reliable lead we have."

"Which isn't saying much," Avon pointed out thinly, "considering your informant had a mortal gut-wound when he gave it to you."

"Blake," Jenna was chewing her lip, worried—"if we get caught down there it's bad news."

"When you say *we*," Avon enquired, "are we to take it that you're volunteering to accompany Blake on this heroic mission?"

Jenna ignored him.

"Blake, have you ever visited a military Fed. base?"

"Category double-A rating." Avon.

"No," Blake said, to Jenna.

"I have. I did a fast flight in and out once on a salvage run; I've never been so scared in my life. We were spotted in seconds, they shot at us with so much firepower it was a miracle, a *miracle*, we got out alive. At that the ship was a frizzled mess. Took a week in spacedock to put it right."

"That won't be a problem," Blake said crisply. "The *Liberator* will just pass in long enough to drop me off, then get straight out of detector range. After a prearranged time you can come in again to collect me."

"It all sounds so wonderfully simple," Vila said gloomily. "But I don't feel simply wonderful about it. Somehow."

This was not one of Vila's acts: he had every reason to feel gloomy.

"It does seem a big risk to take," Cally said worriedly, "on such a doubtful lead."

Avon came to stand at Blake's shoulder. Ignoring the others he spoke to Blake quietly; the eyes which flickered over the bigger man were troubled.

"This is not a sensible move, Blake. I think the probability of Docholli being on Z101 is very remote. He is not, after all, military personnel. Given the uncertainty, the risk seems to outweigh any likely advantage."

Turning away from Avon, Blake snapped, "So *you* say. It depends on your moral point of view, of course. If you have one, Avon, which has never been proved."

And if anything underlined just how closed-off to Avon he was at the moment, that did. Avon stayed where he was, his eyes quite blank, smiling a meaningless little smile at the wall. He took no further part in the conversation which ensued.

The others batted it back and forth for a while, Blake's voice always there to answer them his voice by turns persuasive, sharp, arrogant; and absolutely, unwaveringly determined.

"All right," Jenna said at last. "We've gone with you so far, we'll go with you again."

"Taking every possible precaution," Cally said severely.

"Taking a large protective suit," Vila edged in.

"And you?" Blake was talking to Avon, curtly,

his eyes cool. "Have you anything to say?"

Avon stirred, and came away from the wall. "Only one thing."

Blake took a pace after him. "Which is?"

Avon whirled to face him, an annoying smiling sneer on his face.

"A question. *Why will you never listen to me?*"

Something about Avon's intensity, his black-eyed pallor, silenced everyone. One by one they made excuses and left, or did not bother and simply left; until the two men were alone.

Blake was leaning against the wall, arms folded, staring down at his boots; he kicked the toe of one against the floor.

"You are doing a senseless thing, Blake," Avon said. "You are risking our lives—yet again—on a whim." He walked across the deck and stared up at the viewscreen, hands clasped neatly behind his back.

"No," Blake denied, looking up. "What's whimsical about it? You'd agree yourself, *Liberator* is plenty fast enough to get you and the others away if anything goes wrong."

Avon turned on his heel to examine him, head tilted to one side. "As it's so prone to doing. Yes: it sounds quite plausible. How did Vila put it—? Wonderfully simple?" Avon smiled grimly. "But the complex will, unfortunately, have its way. As in, the others refusing to leave behind their beloved leader in the lurch even when reason dictates it's the best course of action—moreover the course of action the said leader himself nobly insisted upon. As in, Servalan appearing with eight pursuit ships and *Liberator* caught in a military tractor beam while Travis takes potshots at the bow."

Blake made no move to touch Avon as he usually did when they were alone. With a sudden burst of energy he came away from the wall, paced around the room. He said with perfect coldness, "Even if the others did insist on foolishly hanging around to effect a timely rescue, I can't see that standing in *your* way. Despite everything, Avon, you're no more likely to abide by the majority vote than I am, if it goes against your instincts."

"Oh, instincts," Avon spat, "I prefer to work on rational intelligence: your *instincts* are going to get us killed one of these days, despite everything I can do to prevent it. *Blake*," he moved closer, his eyes intent, even passionate in a way, "even if we had a signed affidavit that Docholli were there, I'm not sure it would be worth the risk."

"Ah," Blake said gently. "And *there*, my dear Avon, is the crux on which the whole matter hangs. Because *I* am. Quite, quite sure."

Avon stared at him, one of his quite unfathomable moments.

"So you'll come?" Blake pressed sweetly.

Avon made a graceful gesture of acquiescence,

though his eyes belied any such gentility, hard and bold and black. "Oh, of course. Did you ever doubt it? Of course you didn't. The others won't follow me, while you're around. I don't have any self-delusions there."

"Vila probably would," Blake said, with mischief. Vila was a taboo subject and he regretted it the instant he had said it; but Avon did not react, putting down the clipboard he had picked up.

"Vila likes his heroes cut-and-dried as much as the rest of them. I'm going to my room; are you coming?" He turned and left, with firm brisk steps, not looking to see if Blake followed.

Blake's heart leapt, and he was hardpressed not to scurry after the other man with an over-telling enthusiasm. Nevertheless, follow he did, taking three strides to cancel out Avon's start.

He was no closer to resolving his sexual obsession for Avon: if anything, it seemed to have intensified. Like a young lad he felt the springtide of a vast and glorious excitement in Avon's company, the promise of a horizon of pleasure unlimited, the thrill of the chase renewed again and again as he laid his arrogant thrusting claim to Avon's body, Avon's favours coolly granted but warmly paid. He could conquer him, yet always he would rise to be vanquished again; whole and mocking and strangely untouched. Blake was surely and utterly captivated.

It was, no doubt, the usual fascination born of contrast: the cool disdain Blake confronted daily before the others—genuine enough, he faced a wall of ice on such occasions and battled it with only words and looks—set against the Avon who consented to him at night, willing to comply with Blake's every desire: or match it in perversity. For Avon was wonderfully, thrillingly, perverse. Blake was helplessly drawn by the age-old conundrum: the mystery of the wanton hidden irresistibly behind the monkish.

The second Avon's door closed behind them, he took hold of Avon and turned him and caught him against his own body; twining his hand in Avon's hair he tipped his head back and drank from his mouth, thirstily, like a man long starved of water.

When, panting, he released him he moved his lips around to Avon's ear and murmured: "I thought we were quarrelling."

He felt Avon's lips curve against his cheek.

"Well now, if we're going to let every matter of principle stand between us..."

Avon was wearing a silly leather outfit which looked marvellous, smelt exciting, but was hell to get off. Blake snatched at it impatiently, hauling bits apart.

"No finesse, Blake?" Avon breathed.

Blake's teeth flashed at him. "That comes later. Maybe." He pressed Avon to him for another lushly demanding kiss, hands roving over the soft leather, find-

because his own pessimistic predictions had been proved wrong, in that unreasonable way that some people have: on the other hand, he would surely be relieved to have Blake back in one piece—wouldn't he?

Blake smiled ironically to himself: how odd it was to have a lover such as Avon. He had never slept with anyone who disliked him so much.

Maybe it was exactly that which made the sex between them so good.

Certainly there was no need to be constrained by the usual proprieties: Blake didn't suppose there was anything he could demand in bed which would tarnish Avon's image of him the way such a demand might tarnish, say, Jenna's rose-coloured romance.

The sound of running feet outside, shouting, glass breaking, shattered Blake's peaceful thinking: the door burst open.

Blackclad guards poured in and began firing.

Blake was already diving for the floor, instinctive reaction taking over; he crawled behind bar-stools, groping for the blaster attached to his waist. But as soon as it had begun it seemed the firing was over. A pall of smoke hung in the room and the scorching, electrical smell of high-energy weapons was sickening.

"Everyone get up, over there, against the wall."

Blake rose slowly to his feet, his heart pounding violently at the unexpectedness of it all. Beside him the barman slumped over the bar, blood besmirching his white shirt, a black smoking hole in his chest; he was quite dead.

Blake's first thought, naturally, had been that somehow they had discovered his own presence here; but he was almost instantly disabused of that notion when he was lined up against the wall along with the others and frisked impersonally by a guard who seized his weapon and threw it away indifferently.

"You'll be shot for this," one of Blake's fellow prisoners spat.

"Shut up," was all the response he got.

One of the guards was taking off his helmet; the headgear which gave every Federation guard a stonewall appearance of fearsome, almost robotic impersonality. Without it he was quite a normal-looking individual; pinkcheeked and youngish, shaking out his flattened ginger hair. "All right. Now just let's all keep nice and still and quiet and no-one's going to get hurt. You lucky people are playing hostage for a little while—so you're quite safe. Just so long as you do as you're told."

He appeared a sensible enough type, not panicking, no light of fanaticism in his eye; simply a youngish soldier doing his job. But it wasn't his job. Something was clearly very wrong here.

Blake asked crisply: "Is this mutiny?" and ginger grinned whitely.

"That's right—Sir. Bright, no?" he added to his

cohorts.

"Scum," spat one of Blake's fellow hostages. "Traitorous revolutionist trash. You deserve to be flayed alive with a neuronic whip and thrown to the dogs."

The ginger soldier stepped in closer and hit the man across the mouth, the force of the blow snapping his head to one side. "Shut up."

More running feet, much scurrying and shouting. A few bangs and shudders shook the walls. Blake grinned blackly to himself. He had to turn up at a military base on the edge of mutiny, of course. *Troubles*, Xant Plante had said. All was now clear.

And good news, by and large; any rumblings of insurrection among the masses of Federation troops were music to Blake's ears. Mind you, this one didn't seem terribly well organised and these eager young men in the room with them were almost sure to be rounded up and executed within hours. In the meantime, Blake would give them all the help he could.

Talking into a handheld radio Ginger reported his position; there was quite a lot of arguing. Things were obviously getting confused. One of the big problems with any revolution, Blake reflected, is keeping track of your troops.

The enemy would have a very unfair advantage there, what with computers and video scans and on-line communications links.

Blake cleared his throat, uncrossed his arms and came away from the wall. He said abruptly: "You. Can I have a word?"

The leader swung his gun around and up, glaring at the big man who stared at him with bold directness, unafraid.

"Let me guess. You want to make a deal. Well, *no* deal."

"Not quite," Blake said. "I might be able to help you," and Ginger smiled with unpleasant understanding.

"I see. A traitor."

"Let's say—I'm a sympathiser."

His eyes searched Blake, hard. Then he took him to one side.

"Don't waste my time."

"Look," Blake said rapidly, "hostages won't do you any good and you know it: since when did the Federation put individuals before policy? What you and your men need is to make an assault somewhere which will really sting."

The trooper had light pale eyes and breath which smelt of his last meal: something spicy. He jabbed the gun into Blake's chest.

"And where would you suggest, then?"

Blake didn't move. "Be careful with that thing. I've got a map here which might be of some use to you. Top security if I'm not mistaken. Shows all the vital areas in scale detail."

Avon let the body drop, brushing the eyes shut with his thumb as he did so. He was about to continue, but...

A sudden wave of gorge-filling nausea caught at him irresistibly; blindly he turned away and vomited, a disgusting convulsion of weakness which left him fallen to his knees, drained and shaking.

Presently he pulled himself together, wiped his mouth and got to his feet, ready to go on.

There was a faint hope in that he had a homing fix on Blake's bracelet; not much of a hope, it was true, since Blake was obviously not attached to his bracelet right at present, but Avon thought it might be a start. His search soon brought him to a closed door; the signal was strongest here. He listened outside for a moment, heard voices; kicked open the door and burst in to kneel, mouth set in a hard line, weapon trained unwaveringly forward and steadied on his free hand.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to look at him. And Blake was there, whole and alive and unharmed, arrested in the act of leaning over a desk with a man possessed of ginger hair; Blake looked at him and smiled at him with an intense and lively pleasure, as if he were the person in the world Blake had most wanted to see.

"Avon!"

Well, of course. I'm his ticket to freedom.

"You know him?" said the redhead with Blake, eyeing Avon with deep suspicion.

"Of course." Blake's eyes twinkled at Avon, his square, honest face oddly attractive.

Avon began to rise to his feet, keeping his weapon at the ready, just in case.

"Are you coming?" he asked of Blake, his voice a cynical rasp. "Or have I interrupted a party?"

"My bracelet?" Blake turned to the guard. "I'll leave you the map. But I think I've stayed long enough."

"You've helped. We're grateful."

"And good luck to you."

Blake clapped the man on the shoulder. Avon stared and decided he had no hope of deciphering what was going on: explanations could wait. The guard was giving Blake his teleport bracelet. They were shaking hands like old friends. Trust Blake. Set him down anywhere in the universe and in two hours he'd make twenty lifelong friends and one mortal enemy...

...the door behind Avon crashed open and a blackhelmeted guard burst in, wounded and bleeding. He saw a dark, ununiformed man with a strange weapon trained towards his leader; he misread the situation and fired, falling to his knees as he did so. Blake shouted. But still Avon dropped to the ground.

Blake hurdled furniture and ran to his side, shoving the man who had fired violently aside. With a terrible anxiety he raised Avon gently. "Avon? Are you all

right?"

Stupid, stupid question. Avon was definitely not all right.

At that moment the wall at the far end crumbled and armed troopers began to climb through the debris, firing. Which side they belonged to Blake did not intend to hang around long enough to find out.

He said to Avon, urgently: "Can you walk?"

With Blake's help Avon got up and tried. His eyes were blank with shock; cramped white fingers clutched his own sleeve over the wound. Blake didn't look, not yet.

He slid his arm around Avon, taking a firm grip around his chest. "Lean on me, Avon, we're getting out of here."

Things were getting worse, with explosions, clouds of smoke, people rushing everywhere. No-one took any notice of a dirty bedraggled man supporting a wounded comrade, but Blake felt a pressing urgency to get away from this war which was not really theirs, back to the security of the *Liberator*. Anxiety made him terse:

"Come on, Avon, come on: it's your arm not your bloody legs, you know."

After that Avon, silent, did better.

At last Blake located the little access corridor which was their teleport point; they could wait here in relative safety among the brooms and the silent, slumped cleaning robots until the *Liberator* returned for them.

Blake fastened the door with drenching relief; then he came to Avon, sagging against the wall.

"Avon?" He was gentle now, they had time.

Avon's skin felt cold to his fingertips, but he was damp with sweat, the shirt beneath his jacket soaked and clammy. Blake talked to him as he searched him over, telling him what had happened, why he hadn't been there at the prearranged time: how much Avon was taking in he didn't know. There was a sink nearby; he filled a canister with water and brought it back. Avon was really only barely conscious his eyelids flickering rapidly. His pulse was very fast, his pallor extreme. Shock. Blake supported him and gave him the water, but Avon didn't seem able to take very much.

"We'll soon be back on *Liberator*," he said. "You'll be all right."

Avon's eyes came open wide; he seemed to come to himself a little. His fingers flexed on his injured arm; he looked down at it with something like surprise. Blood welled and flowed, soaking the black of his sleeve darkly. His words came with difficulty.

"Two women. And a fool. I left them—"

"They'll be all right." Blake made the empty promise.

A penetrating black gleam from beneath Avon's eyelids. "I left them. To come looking—for *you*." He stabbed the word out as an accusation.

“Why?”

Avon gave a bitter laugh. “Because—I knew—you’d do exactly what you did. Get yourself—mixed up—in someone else’s bloody revolution—”

There was a little silence. Although his words were accusatory, neither his voice nor the look from deep eyes had been. Blake had the feeling that Avon was unfairly vulnerable right now and must not be pressed.

He said: “Is that hurting you?”

“Just a scratch,” Avon murmured derisively. The rest had helped him, his face had lost its greyish look; but he was drawn around the eyes, breathing in short shallow puffs. Blake didn’t ask any more stupid questions like, was Avon’s arm hurting him. He held him when Avon sagged towards him and talked nonsense, of what he never did remember, until rescue came.

“Avon. Are you all right?”

Vila, tiptoeing in to hover anxiously. The last thing Avon wanted was company; being Avon, he said so.

Dejected, Vila’s shoulders slumped and he turned to go.

Avon lay and wondered why, when Vila was one of the only—the only—persons in the universe who wished him uncomplicated, unambiguous well-being; why it was that he could not be gracious to a simple enquiry.

“Vila.”

Vila turned back, all hope.

“Yes, I’m all right. Thank you,” Avon said with an effort. Just as he had feared—*now* he remembered why—it proved too much encouragement; Vila drew up a chair and sat by the bed, chatty and cheerful.

“I’m all for a quiet life, Avon—give me a simple answer to this. Why don’t we leave Blake?”

“Because you’d miss me.” A new voice from the door. Blake strolled in, large and lively and also irrepressibly cheerful. “Vila—hop it.” He jerked a thumb towards the door.

“Why should I?” Vila asked, affronted.

“Because I want to talk to Avon.”

“I’m talking to Avon.”

“Actually, I don’t want anyone talking to me,” came a voice from the bed; Avon was drily amused by this tug-of-war. Blake, meanwhile, took handfuls of Vila’s jacket and hauled him to his feet. Vila thought about protesting, but didn’t. Jealousy and anger sank his stomach like lead.

Outside the door he paused to listen, heard nothing, didn’t want to anyway, and went sullenly on his way. Life didn’t seem to hold very much that was good to Vila at the moment.

Blake winked at Avon, but Vila had already disappeared. He went back to the bedside.

Avon tipped his head back under Blake’s scrutiny and shut

his eyes. He felt exhausted. It really had been a nasty wound, worse than he had let the others know.

“What do *you* want?”

“To apologise.”

Avon gave a fierce smile. “Don’t bother. I wouldn’t believe you anyway.”

Blake acknowledged that with a smile of his own. “I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“Of course not. All in the line of duty,” Avon said politely. “I quite understand.”

Blake sighed as he sat down. “You *don’t* understand, Avon; I wish you did.”

Avon’s eyes came open at that and dwelt on him blackly. “This is a farce, Blake. You and I—we would be much better apart. Half a galaxy wouldn’t be too much.”

Blake’s brows furrowed in a frown of depression. “Don’t say that.”

Avon looked at him very directly. “*I don’t believe in what you believe in.* When will you understand that? *I* feel no sense of satisfaction that you have discovered Docholli’s whereabouts, no sense of purpose, no self-righteous conviction that we are doing these things for the good of mankind.” He paused, and smiled a little, his head tilted to one side. “You would say, perhaps, that I am a greedy opportunist, while I—I find self-sacrificial heroes with the light of glorious battle in their eyes tedious and, for the most part, wastefully misguided.”

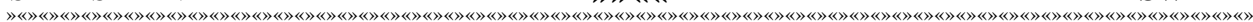
Blake was quiet for a little while, mulling over all this.

Understanding it was one thing, facing up to it another: that Avon was a selfish amoralist who truly did not care about anyone but himself. Blake wavered between believing that there were hidden depths to Avon he could reach if he only persevered, or that he really was as singleminded and one-dimensional as he insisted.

And sometimes there were days when he didn’t even care, just so long as Avon kissed him with fire in his eyes.

Avon gripped the stuff of his shirt in fingers which closed like a trap. He spoke with low, rasping intensity, his eyes burning.

“*Listen* to me, Blake. We have as good a chance of life as anyone in the galaxy... you and I could find some world, somewhere. We could work for anything we needed; skills like mine are saleable on any civilised planet. That chance exists just so long as we have the *Liberator* and our lives. You are risking all that every single time you so much as open your mouth in a Federated area. More than that, you are courting danger deliberately.” His hand rubbed over Blake’s collarbone. His gaze stayed fixed on it as he said, “I have told you over and over again: every time we come away from an encounter such as yesterday’s with our lives we have cheated the odds, and, unlike the toss of a dice they are not consequently foreshortened.” His fingers dug in and pinched, as he



glared up into Blake’s eyes.

Put like that, the future sounded bleak at best. It was not that Blake thought they led a charmed life, surrounded by a blessing of invincibility: but that he could never compromise his beliefs. Weary and depressed Blake shook himself gently free of Avon’s hand.

“Well then: perhaps you’re right. I must leave. Or you must.”

After a moment Avon’s empty hand fell back onto the bed. He had failed; as he always did.

“That seems the only possible solution.”

“Finish this with me, Avon,” Blake urged. “Let me find Docholli, and Star One. When that’s over—then we’ll see.”

“I suppose there’s no great hurry,” Avon said slowly. “I still have three untouched limbs.”

Blake smiled a little at that. He extended a hand to him, palm forwards. After a moment Avon touched his own palm to it, looking away. Blake brought the hand to his lips and kissed it, a caress which lingered on the tender skin at Avon’s narrow wrist, just where the pulse beat. Brushing back Avon’s sleeve with his free hand he traced the blue vein to the inside of his elbow with a fingertip, then followed it with his mouth.

Then he turned his eyes to the other arm, bare from the wrist to the shoulder but for the pink plasticity of the healing graft. Yesterday his heart had given a great leap of fear when he had cleared Avon’s clothing away; he had thought for a while that Avon might lose the arm. Cleaned up, the tiny exploded bloodvessels welded by the body repair unit, it hadn’t looked so bad. And now it would probably have healed altogether in two or three days.

If only all their hurts would mend so easily.

Blake slipped his arm across Avon’s chest and held him, laying his head over Avon’s heart, hearing its steady beat quicken.

“Would that *really* be enough for you?”

Avon’s voice was a lazy murmur. “What?”

“Obscurity on some backwater planet.”

Avon’s fingers stole through his hair. “Luxury, safety, and freedom on some backwater planet. Oh yes.”

Blake didn’t believe him for a moment. Avon, a restless intelligence if ever there was one, needed challenges as much as Blake did. But it was then with such a chilling premonition, that he began to see that their parting was inevitable...

Wanting the other so much, he had not realised it before.

He pushed himself away from Avon and rose to his feet, turning away without say any more.

Avon’s voice followed him to the door. “You see? I told you it wouldn’t change anything,” and the satisfaction of having been right was the bitterest victory he had ever experienced, left alone to stare at nothing, a forgotten smile on his lips.

BLAKE HELD OUT FOR FIVE MISERABLE DAYS.

Avon seemed just as usual; his arm recovered he resumed his duties. He was lightly cynical about everything, and turned silent when Blake, not asking anyone’s opinion, instructed Zen to plot a course for Docholli’s location. Once Blake, approaching silently, came across a congregation of all four of them; Jenna looked sulky, Cally thoughtful, Vila worried. Blake ignored them. Maybe Avon was planning a little insurrection of his own. Well, that was Avon’s business.

Ridiculously, the ache for Avon did not leave him.

Vila, who had learned his lesson, did not interfere, though he sensed the coldness after the heat. The trouble was easy enough to guess at: Blake had no time for a full-time love affair, and Avon was too flawed to settle for anything less. Blake wanted Avon *and* his Cause, while Avon only read into that Blake’s inability to love him. So what if Blake destroyed something in Avon, and created something else which Avon could not handle, and did not even know what he had done? *Vila* could do nothing. Only watch helplessly, glower into his glass, and bide his time. A natural scavenger: picking up the pieces was what Vila was good at.

Prowling one sleepless night Blake wandered into the room where Zen’s inner workings were; he was not looking for Avon, at least not consciously, but he was not surprised to see the straight and narrow figure halfway up the wall, head bent at an uncomfortable angle as he peered into some mysterious aperture.

Blake eyed him with disfavour. He had many worries, fears, responsibilities weighing on him right now, the vital need of the galaxy beckoning to him, crying inconsolably. What he needed was some uncomplicated gentle passion in his life, not the irresistible magnetism of Avon’s dark venom running hotly in his veins.

Not that he could entirely blame Avon for that, of course.

“What are you doing?” he asked coldly.

Avon jumped; and had to cling onto the wall, swaying, to regain his balance.

“Thank you, Blake,” he said with icy composure.

Arms folded, Blake leaned against the wall and watched him, aware that he was making Avon uncomfortable.

After a short time Avon snapped shut the probe he was holding and stepped off the stool. Blake smiled a grim inward smile and stared boldly at Avon.

“Do you want something in particular?” Avon asked without looking at him. “Or have you just come, as usual, to be annoying?”

Blake smiled at the floor, kicking it with the toe of his boot as he settled into a graceful slouch. “Just checking up on you, Avon: I never quite know what to

expect.”

“Ah, I see,” Avon remarked. He knelt on the floor, dark and lean in black shirt and trousers, and began to clear away his things into a large blue toolkit. “You think I might be about to reprogramme Zen to my own advantage? Now there’s a thought.”

“I’m sure it isn’t beyond your skills.”

Avon smiled to himself and did not reply. He slotted in the probe next to a line of others, in ascending size. Blake watched the line of his thighs as he knelt there, the dark hair which clustered at the nape of his neck, and wondered why his generous instincts towards the human race in general mutated themselves into something quite, quite different when he looked at Avon.

Something much more specific.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he said moodily. His fingers found and plucked at a bit of wiring protruding from the wall.

“Why are you angry with me, Blake?” Avon asked without turning; he knelt where he was, quite still.

Blake’s heart made a sudden leap; there was some hope, then. It was like stepping out into sunlight after five days in a cave.

Avon continued: “Just because we can’t agree on the best use of freedom? It seems to me, that is exactly the kind of repressionistic totalitarianism that you are fighting so keenly to stamp out.”

Blake was silent for moment, gathering his thoughts.

“Is it that?” Avon pressed; his voice sounded strained. “Tell me. I have to know.”

Blake fiddled with the little wires beneath his fingers. “I don’t need you to agree with me,” he said at last. “But I—don’t want you to leave me.”

A damaging admission. It was probably a mistake, ever, to advise Avon of a position of strength. Avon turned to look at him with an expression of not-very-polite disbelief. He picked up his box of tools and stood up, setting it down again when he thought of a good comeback.

“Really? I must remember that. I sometimes find the opposite easier to believe, when I find myself looking down the business end of a Federation weapon at *your* instigation.” He came nearer, planted himself directly in front of Blake; his breath fell onto Blake’s face as he snapped, “What *is* it about you, Blake? You could easily have died down there on Z101; or I could. Do you truly believe we are immortal? Have Vila’s cards predicted a long and happy life for us all?”

Blake didn’t reply. Avon followed his gaze down to the electronic wiring Blake still twiddle restlessly.

“Don’t do that,” he said, a technician’s reproof, and snatched Blake’s hand away in lean, pinching fingers.

Blake held onto the hand and used it to pull Avon close, to kiss him with hard, bruising force.

Avon’s mouth opened warmly under his and the weight of him settled meltingly against Blake. *Wonderful*. Blake’s eyes fell closed, in blessed relief and sheer, glorying delight in the taste of Avon’s mouth, the delicate touch of his tongue. He leaned back and pulled Avon hard against him, pressing the centre of their bodies together, thrusting against the hardness he found there.

Desire surged to flashpoint, taking him by surprise. He had to be quick, Avon would understand; a terrible urgency he hadn’t felt since teenage times when sexuality struck in its first incarnation. He ripped open Avon’s shirt, popping buttons, and Avon let him; massaged his nipples with his palms, sliding his fingertips into his armpits and touching damp hair. Too aroused to care, serving his needs as he must, his next assault was a feverish drag at Avon’s trousers; he managed to get them down, far enough, and his own, so that his cock was free to thrust between Avon’s thighs. He leaned his head onto Avon’s shoulder and did what he had to, urgently and quickly, faster until he came, forcing Avon close, painfully close with gripping muscles, pressing his trembling self against Avon until the jerking spasms of ecstasy grew weaker, and paler, and had passed.

Resting his head against Avon’s shoulder still, his breathing slowing, his heartbeat thundering in his ears, he was conscious of a resounding silence. Avon stood rock-steady, supporting him, but his attitude had a rigidity to it. Blake hardly dared look at him. From punishing desire through a sunburst of ecstasy to this damp embarrassment. Burying his face in dark, rumpled shirt all he could manage was:

“Avon. I’m sorry. I’m sorry...”

After a moment Avon pushed him away and busied himself rearranging his clothing. Doing the same with fumbling fingers, Blake risked a look. Avon’s pale skin was tinged with a flush.

Blake reached out, brushed his cheek gently with curled fingers. “Avon?” he asked tentatively.

Avon’s eyes flicked up to meet his, cold and contemptuous. Blake almost flinched from that look, experiencing a real sinking inside. Avon didn’t say anything, just pushed past him. Blake put out a hand and grabbed his sleeve.

“Avon,” he said wearily, rubbing tense fingers through his hair. “What’s the matter?” Probably a stupid question. How would *he* have felt, if Avon had treated him the way he just had Avon?

Flattered, most likely.

Not furious, not contemptuous. A little amused, a little sorry for Avon perhaps, but happy enough to let him do what he evidently needed to so much.

Avon no more than he had sexual hang-ups; so why this?

“Avon,” he pressed. “Tell me what the matter is. Even if it’s just—” he took a deep breath and said it—“that

you hate me. I'd rather know."

Avon turned to look at him then. "All this—" his eyes on Blake were dark, haunted—"is it just another way you've found to use me? Is it, Blake?"

The sudden, unhidden desolation in his voice had a wrenching effect on Blake; he felt physically sick with misery.

So that was what Avon thought.

"No," he said, in instant, furious rejection. "You couldn't be more wrong."

Avon folded his arms and stared at Blake. "Well, that's a position I'd like to hear you defend," he said with sarcastic disbelief.

Blake felt instantly better; he could not bear evidence of Avon's vulnerability. Desperate to convince him, he tried to touch Avon again but Avon dodged him without making a fuss about. Blake's hand slowly dropped to his side.

"Sometimes—I just need you so much."

Avon gazed at him stonily.

Blake tried again. "Don't *you* feel anything like that?" He willed Avon, he urged him with his eyes, to meet him half-way. His voice dropped to a harsh whisper. "Don't you, Avon?"

And after a heartstopping pause, Avon looked away. "Yes, I concede the sexual fascination."

Relief flooded through Blake. "Well, then." If Avon understood that much...

He moved closer and clasped Avon again. Avon held onto his upper arms this time, fingers running slowly up and down his biceps. Never had a contact seemed sweeter.

"But I think it's all part of your campaign to dominate me the way you do the others."

Blake was taken aback, shocked even. "I don't use sex that way, Avon."

Avon met his eyes equably. "Don't you? Very noble. I do. And part of the bargain, to my way of thinking, is that *you* should do what *I* want. At least some of the time."

Depression sank through Blake again. He shut his eyes automatically as Avon kissed him musingly, and said, lifting his chin so Avon could softly abuse the tender skin of his throat, "So now we're back to the luxurious backwater retirement?"

"That's right," Avon murmured between kisses. "Or, at the very least, a little more care for my skin."

This gave Blake the opening he had been casting about for. He leapt in immediately. "Avon, I do care. In fact I—"

"Don't be such a hypocrite," Avon hissed, his mood turned inside out as he glared at Blake. "I doubt that you have ever cared for anyone. Your precious Cause means more to you than any individual—as you prove to us on a daily basis. We are all expendable pawns in *your*

vainglorious little game."

Blake paused, gathering his thoughts. "Are you saying," he said levelly, "that if I loved you, I'd put you first?"

Avon's eyes flickered at the word. He didn't reply.

"I can't believe you'd ask me to make that choice," Blake said, turning away. The space between walls was limited but he paced a bit anyway.

"Oh, I'm not asking you anything," Avon said, softly, deady: I know, now, what it is that you want from me... and for the time being, I'll go along with it."

Blake swung around to face him. "And in the future?"

Avon's smile was bleak, bitter. "There is no future."

Blake, too, had begun to believe that way; from the unthinkable it had become the inevitable. They were too alike: Avon would say, too different.

Avon was turning, bending, collecting something from his working area. Blake said, taking a risk: "Why, then? *Why* are you going along with it?"

Avon dropped some little square wafers of plastic into his kit. His eyes came around to lock blackly with Blake's.

"The same reason you do."

How could you be so drawn to someone you did not like?

Caught in this obsessive passion for Avon, Blake had asked himself that question over and over, long before the sex began, almost since he had first laid eyes on him: and he had his own answer now.

Avon's, no doubt, would be rather different.

Well, they had what they had: it might not be much, or it might be everything. Blake shrugged off his anger and his worries and his frustrations: one thing was clear, anyway. They might as well make the best use of the time they had left.

For it couldn't be long.

"I'm going to my room now," Avon said in his quiet, beautiful voice, those dark eyes dwelling on him in a way which made his sensitized skin shiver. "I've finished here."

"Cally's on watch," Blake said. "Vila, too."

"Jenna?"

Blake grinned, sharing the joke. "Looking for me, probably."

"Then you'd better take refuge somewhere, hadn't you?"

"Is that an invitation?" Blake asked cheerfully, accepting it as such and picking up Avon's tools to carry them for him.

Avon said, "I've got some work to do. It'll take an hour or so."

Blake twinkled at him. "Just about right."

He was, as it happened, never to forget that night spent in Avon's room to the day he died; oddly, perhaps, the feeling which spiced the memory strongest was of something companionable, something comfortable. It was warm in Avon's room, the lights low which made it cosy; the rooms on the *Liberator* were not especially luxurious, but Avon had done the best with it that was possible, thick white rugs on the floor, an exotic wallhanging near the bed, which was made up with black sheets and a diamond-patterned duvet.

Avon switched on the computer terminal in the workstation alcove. "Do whatever you want, Blake."

"I will."

"But don't disturb me," Avon added. He was probably quite serious; Avon took his research very seriously. Idly curious, Blake came over to lean on the back of his chair and watch what he was doing. Avon laid the plastic squares on the desk; Blake picked one up to examine it.

"A datafile bank," Avon volunteered. "Zen has around nine hundred of those. Five is quite enough to look at at one time."

"You can't read it, can you?" The information would be microscopic.

"This can." Avon slotted one of the objects into a square black box. The screen of his terminal filled with green data Blake recognised as machine code.

"Each of these encodes part of Zen's operating system. But you know all that."

"How do I?" Blake demanded.

Avon scrolled the lines upwards. "You must have done a standard programming course somewhere along the line."

"I did. Nothing very specialised: I preferred social studies. Can you make sense of that?" He gestured at the screen, and squinted at it closely.

"Of course." Avon was never one to be modest. "It's standard low-level machine code, PROLINE as it happens. You would find it easier to read transcribed by an assembly language. You must have learnt one of them. I can do that for you, if you're interested."

Blake threw up his hands, chuckling. "No thanks, Avon. I'll leave that side of things to you, it's what you're good at. What are you looking for, exactly?"

"Among other things, Zen's primary directives." Avon smiled darkly at the screen. "I don't like these little bursts of initiative Zen comes up with sometimes. I'm trying to track his programming line by line and errortrap the discrepancies so they show up," he smiled again, "then strip them out and reprogramme so that Zen is reliably under our control. Not the work of a moment."

"Then I'd better leave you to it."

In Avon's bathroom he took a long slow shower, whistling loudly under the rush and hiss of water falling,

stingingly hot on his skin. He scrubbed his hair with a good deal of piney lather, soaping his groin, his armpits, his feet. Because he had used Avon's unguents he smelt like Avon always did at the end of it all, which pleased him. On the back of the door hung a black silk robe; Blake looked at his pile of clothes on the floor, debated, then left them where they were and slipped into the robe. That smelt of Avon too; it had a dragon embroidered on the back in pearly shades. Blake admired himself in it in front of the full-length mirror, and padded out barefoot into the bedroom.

As Blake came in Avon said, absorbed in the softly green-lit screen, "Help yourself to a drink if you would like one."

Blake wandered over to the cabinet and poured himself a glass of wine. "You?"

"When I finish."

Blake took time to examine a sculpture in some soft, silvery metal—it could, perhaps, be a bird, or then again two women kissing, or, more likely knowing Avon, an abstract representation of the beauty of thought. He took his glass and went to recline on the bed, one arm behind his head and his ankles crossed comfortably, watching Avon. He had butterflies in his stomach—why, he didn't really know—but it wasn't an unpleasant sensation, more a dainty spice to the excitement imperceptibly forming again. Idly he stroked the silk of the borrowed gown; unable to resist it he brushed his hands gently over his genitals, a delicious sensation under the smooth material. He looked up quickly to see if Avon was watching him, but Avon wasn't, much to his relief and a little to his disappointment. The wine a fiery warmth within, he was beginning to feel pleasantly drowsy and relaxed. He set his glass down on the bedside unit and lowered the lights over the bed. As he touched the control he noticed again the hologram he had seen before; he picked it up to examine it.

It was a young woman, delicate-looking with pale skin and pale straight hair, turning her face towards the viewer and smiling a fragile smile. It gave Blake a strange feeling, to be holding the likeness of Avon's dead lover, looking at the mouth Avon had kissed the body he had possessed, smiling a smile which had been for Avon. He supposed that Avon must hold a shrine to her in his heart; sentimentality always acquired a tenfold power once a romantic death became involved.

Avon shut off his terminal with a snap and stacked his pile of chips. His low, quiet voice came over to Blake. "I'll finish now."

"Anything interesting?" Blake asked. He saw Avon notice what he was holding.

"Not really. Put that down, Blake."

"It's Anna, isn't it?" Blake said, setting the cube aside. "She's very pretty."

"Anna wasn't pretty."

Just as I suspected, Blake thought; I'd never be

able to say anything right. Nevertheless he added: “Now do you want to tell me about her?” remembering when he had asked before.

“I told you: you wouldn’t understand.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Blake said with a touch of sarcasm. “Human feeling isn’t totally unknown to me, you know.”

Avon smiled bleakly. “I’m not so sure of that.” He switched off the station light and came across to sit beside Blake on the bed, unhurriedly, his fingers brushing over the gentle swelling of Blake’s cock, warmly ripe beneath its silky covering.

“This is a very sensuous garment,” Blake observed, closing his eyes. “Not really what I expected to find behind your bedroom door.”

“It suits you,” Avon said. His hand, which had been lightly caressing the plump, sensitive cock through the warm silk, left him. Blake watched with regret. Avon drew aside the edge of the robe; the cool air blew across his heated skin.

“Don’t go away,” Avon said with practised charm. It made Blake shiver; and Avon looked very faintly menacing, all in black, his eyes dark and gleaming.

Blake lay and waited, listening to the sounds of Avon showering, tingling vaguely with anticipation. It took superhuman effort not to touch his own self; eventually, being very human indeed he compromised and wrapped a warm hand around himself, keeping it still.

The water slowed to a trickle, then stopped. He opened his eyes to see Avon emerging, with only a white towel wrapped around his waist. His hair was damp and curling, his shoulders lean but strong. The dark hairs on his thighs were wet and slicked down. Blake watched him as he moved over to the cabinet and poured a glass of wine. He came over to Blake bearing the bottle too, from which he refilled Blake’s glass. Then he set it down, unplucked the towel from his waist and laid it on the bedside unit. He looked at his watch, the last thing he was wearing, and began to unstrap it. He said with wry humour, “How long do you think we’ve got? Until Jenna calls?”

Blake grimaced. “Long enough. I hope.”

Avon was leaning over him, laying the watch on his pillow. Blake made room for him on the bed and Avon settled on his side, propping himself on one elbow and studying Blake with such an odd intensity that it made Blake catch his breath, turn his head away from the scrutiny.

“So,” Avon murmured, long fingers taking his chin and turning his face towards him again, a strange excitement gleaming in his eyes; “what am I to do with you?”

Blake’s insides knotted with excited unease; he pulled Avon down for a reassuring kiss but was not reassured by it at all.

But Avon’s hands were gentle as he laid Blake

bare, spreading the robe down and off his arms. With one swift move he straddled Blake then, the soft weight of his genitals pressing into Blake’s, belly. Blake reached out as if in a dream—the wine—Avon’s nearness and the warm skin-to-skin contact working a subtle magic on his senses. He handled Avon’s cock, shyness eroded many nights ago now, his hands knowing the secret touches to spring Avon alight, rolling the hard organ between his palms.

Avon’s eyes opened and looked down at Blake, taking all of him in. “Well now,” he murmured, “I think I’m going to hold you to your offer.”

Blake didn’t say anything; he didn’t need to. As Avon’s meaning sank in along with a dawning memory his mouth went dry, and his testicles crawled within their sac. He could only stare as Avon looked at him assessingly. Instant refusal went through his mind, and was rejected: in the scale of who was using whom (which Avon obviously kept meticulous track of) Blake was well ahead in points so far. At least, that’s how Avon would see it.

He *couldn’t* deny Avon this.

But he wasn’t sure he could do it, either.

He certainly didn’t *want* to do it.

Did he? He remembered, Avon stroking him, his body’s sudden laxness, the feeling—

Avon watched him, his hands stilled on Blake’s arms.

“All right,” Blake croaked.

Avon smiled at him sardonically. “So eager. What are you afraid of, Blake?”

“I’m not afraid,” he lied, looking Avon straight in the eye.

Avon disbelievingly pinched a thin fold of skin in hard fingers. “A little pain doesn’t scare you, does it? You would willingly suffer far worse for the sake of your Cause, I’m quite sure of that.”

“It isn’t that.” He had no idea how much it hurt, but surely he could bear that, other people did. No, it was something else entirely...

“Well, I shouldn’t invest it with too much symbolism, if I were you,” Avon said. “I’m sure sodomy was around long before pride appeared on the scene.”

All very well for Avon to say. It wasn’t *him* lying here pinioned—for Avon had him, unobtrusively, well held down. Blake said, after clearing his throat so that some sound emerged, “Naturally. But nevertheless, I suppose you’re intending a reciprocal arrangement?”

Avon’s eyes sparkled with a rare humour. “Oh, I don’t know about that. It’s never been one of *my* fantasies.”

Blake stared at him. “And what makes you think it might be one of *mine*?” he growled.

Avon’s eyebrow quirked delicately. “You did suggest it,” he reminded Blake politely.

“That was the other night. I wanted—”

“Yes, what *did* you want, Blake?” When the other man did not reply, Avon added, “You may consent or dissent as you please, of course, but by all means be adult about your motivation.”

“What motivation do you want me to have?” Blake asked sourly. “Martyrdom, perhaps?”

There was a pause. Avon traced a fingertip down Blake’s cheek. “To please me?” he offered, oddly wistful, stunning Blake into total silence.

Avon waited for him, his hands making light circles around Blake’s nipples. After a moment Blake said gruffly, “Look Avon...All right. I’ll do it.”

Avon’s face hardened, then. “Very gracious, Blake.”

Blake had the feeling he had missed a rare opportunity; he had, clearly, sadly mishandled this. But he was involved too, dammit, and struggling with his own problems; doing the best he could.

Avon was quiet for a moment; then his grip on Blake relaxed. For a moment of contradictory emotion Blake thought he had changed his mind; but Avon said nothing more. He watched Avon’s mouth approach his with passive acceptance. He would have to go through with it now.

Avon kissed him warmly and deeply, leaning forward over him, his cock lying against Blake’s belly and chest. After a moment, Blake’s arms came up around his back; regretful of his churlishness he hugged Avon close and responded heartily to his kiss. He hoped he hadn’t ruined everything for Avon; if it had to happen at all he wanted Avon to enjoy it. He would just have to get through it somehow and conceal the cost from the other man.

Avon sucked in his top lip in a velvet-soft, parting caress, and sat up, sighing. He looked down at Blake, his eyes clouded and unsure. One hand came up to push a dark lock out of his eyes. Stirred indefinably Blake urged him upwards, so that Avon knelt either side of his neck. Blake reached behind himself to prop his head on a pillow; he fondled Avon’s cock with both hands, then opened his mouth and sucked in the rosy tip. Avon knelt up, then sliding his hands into Blake’s hair and holding his head close, closer.

After a while, palms flat on Blake’s chest he pushed him back gently, gasping.

“That’s very nice, Blake,” he said, catching his breath with an obvious effort.

Blake smiled at him, fondly crinkling. “I do my best.”

His smile disappeared when Avon rolled him onto his stomach, but he went without resistance. “Just trust me, Blake,” Avon’s voice said. “Will you?”

But I don’t trust you, Blake thought, clenching up with panic; almost instantly he forced himself to relax, calm down, take deep breaths.

Avon kissed the nape of his neck, causing shiv-

ers, and stroked caressingly down his arms as he kissed on down Blake’s spine, his mouth a delicate, hair-raising touch on all his sensitive spots. Wriggling, Blake parted his legs and settled himself again; responding to the invitation Avon brushed his lips over Blake’s buttocks, nuzzling sweetly and returning in a soft, lingering caress. Opening Blake to the cool air he pressed his mouth to the little hidden place, his tongue warmly, softly opening him out. It seemed to go on forever and he wished it would: cold air and despair struck him as Avon withdrew from him. He writhed, wanting more.

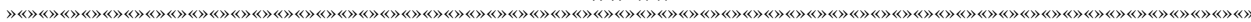
Avon’s hands took his arms gently and turned him. Half dreading it, he looked up into Avon’s face, but Avon looked just the same, his mouth set in a tender curve as he surveyed Blake quizzically. He reached out for his glass of wine and handed Blake his, silent; Blake downed his in two needy swallows and watched Avon savour the ruby dark liquor, rolling it around in his mouth before he swallowed. At this moment he felt very close to Avon; if the other man had left him now he would have been desolate.

Avon drew him close so they were lying face to face, belly to belly. Blake opened his mouth eagerly for Avon’s kiss, wrapping his legs around Avon’s and rubbing the soles of his feet on Avon’s calves with slow, warm strokes. Avon stopped kissing him, and leaned up over him, his dark eyes gleaming. Blake thought, *he’s going to give me the chance to back out*, but Avon only said: “Are you all right?”

“Of course I’m all right. Don’t keep me hanging about too long.” He remembered the usual interruption to their lovemaking and added with a chuckle, “Jenna, remember?”

Avon gave a delicate shudder. He leaned over Blake and began to apply oil between his buttocks. “I’d rather not.” Blake, distracted, wondered curiously if Avon was homosexual, one of those men fastidiously repelled by things feminine, an out-and-out faggot: but as Avon anointed him thoroughly, outside and in, he remembered Anna with a jolt and wished he hadn’t. The oil was delightfully warm and slippery, Avon’s fingers sliding deep inside him, a peculiar pressure which was at once alien but oddly thrilling. He closed his eyes.

“Do you like that?” he heard Avon ask, quiet, curious. He nodded without opening his eyes. Avon’s fingers described a final swirl or two within him and withdrew. There was silence. Blake looked then, to see what Avon was doing; watched him kneeling up, applying oil to himself from the vial. Blake was amused to note that his fingers were trembling slightly. Excitement? he wondered. A touching sign of nerves? He didn’t offer to do it himself, though his hands went out involuntarily; he liked too much the sight of Avon touching his own cock, very erect and shining with oil. Blake stared at it frowningly, estimating size; felt another annoying shiver of fear.



Avon followed his gaze and noted the shiver. He paused, his head coming up to stare into Blake’s eyes.

To forestall any doubts, his own or Avon’s. Blake began to turn onto his stomach but Avon stopped him.

“Not that way.”

“Why not?” Blake rolled back and stared up warily.

“It’s better like this.” Avon knelt between his knees.

“Who for?” Blake managed ironically.

“Both of us,” Avon said shortly.

“Are you sure?” Blake asked with a shaky smile.

Avon looked down into his face, as if learning every feature, committing it to memory, his eyes drifting from lips to temple.

“It could be anyone, that way... I want it to be you, Blake.”

Blake felt shaken by that.

He also felt that he was very definitely losing his nerve. He was about as far from excitement as it was possible to be; he didn’t think even fantasising, which had saved him on some lacklustre nights with Jenna, was going to help him now. But he couldn’t worry about hurting Avon’s feelings in that respect, Avon had already pushed him to the limit and extracted from him far more than was fair. He said with only half-feigned anger, “I wouldn’t do this for anyone else, you know.”

And Avon looked down at him, grave, and gave him a sudden, sweet smile which took Blake’s breath away.

“I know you wouldn’t.”

Lost in Avon’s dark expressive eyes Blake quite forgot to be humiliated or frightened or resentful when Avon lifted his knees to his shoulders, doubling him up; it felt extraordinarily comfortable, actually, like the gentle slopings of yoga. The hard warm length of Avon’s cock settled between his buttocks and passed across the slippery place: Blake tensed instinctively but Avon just leaned down to kiss him with warm ardour, gentling him.

The tip of Avon’s cock nudged at the entrance to his body; Blake drew in a long shuddering breath, his head turning to one side. This was it: this really was it, and he wasn’t going to be able to escape... but Avon seemed to know about his panic because he hushed Blake gently, stroking the side of his face, smoothing back his hair and talking to him quietly, saying things which at any other time would have inflamed Blake hotly with passion. He resolved to remember them, and knew he would not as Avon’s hands held his hips: fighting with himself to go with it Blake won the inner battle and relaxed as Avon’s hard cock pushed inside him.

Blake inhaled slowly and tremulously. I hope it doesn’t take long, I can’t stand it, *I can’t stand it*. He had a desperate inward battle to keep still, not to struggle:

maybe this was how women felt every single time, this terrible vulnerability, this dreadful surrendering of every last secret vanity. Opening his eyes he saw Avon’s hazily absorbed expression; he wasn’t looking at Blake but at some point past him. He could only guess at what Avon was feeling but it had to be better than this—this horrible, splayed and folded impalement. Avon made an indistinct murmur of pleasure; the more Avon was enjoying it the more Blake hated him. Avon thrust, going deeper inside him; gentle though it was Blake winced at the sudden, deeply internal pain.

Breathing very carefully he shifted as little as he possibly could. He *would* go through with it, he was determined to: he had withstood far worse pain; but never, it was true, anything so distressingly intimate. Avon gave a little, helpless moan of pleasure; his eyes had shut. His cock withdrew, sliding out painlessly. Blake sighed in relief, then inhaled swiftly and hugely as it pressed home again, pushing deeply inside him his body cleaving slickly to receive the hard intruder. It was deeper than before, he felt it very far inside him, but the pain did not return with the same force.

Without the pain, his mood changed drastically; he wriggled to accommodate Avon deeper inside him, and peered fondly at Avon’s entranced face. After all, Avon was being very gentle with him: Blake remembered from his own experience that wonderful moment of penetration, to feel your cock warmly gripped in a snugly velvet channel; the urge to thrust which came over you, fairly uncaring of your partner’s acquiescence, or otherwise: Blake understood, as all men do, the incidence of rape.

But Avon wasn’t raping him; he felt much more willing now. He reached around Avon to hug him close, his hands slipping down to Avon’s buttocks, pressing them closely. Avon rested against him, hardly moving. Blake could feel the sweat between them, warm and slick, the scent of it muskily sensual. Avon wiped his damp forehead across Blake’s hair and whispered to him, “All right?”

Blake was conscious of Avon’s ironhard, trembling control along every inch of him. He disliked, suddenly, this uncharacteristic nobility of Avon’s: he was a man too, he understood. “Come on, Avon,” he said roughly, “don’t drag it out all night.”

Avon’s eyes widened at that. “I won’t.” A sudden note of antagonism sparked between them. He thrust into Blake; Blake winced and shut his eyes. His hands rested lightly on Avon’s buttocks, following the clench and swell of Avon’s rhythm. Until now he had remained lightly on the outer fringes of this event, an onlooker; any excitement more mental than physical, arising from the taboos on this act, the closeness to Avon; but now there came a difference. A deep, thrilling sensation flooded the pit of his belly warmly and flowed outwards as Avon fucked him, probing the hidden pleasure spot, withdraw-

ing and stretching him in the most exciting way, thrusting deep inside him again. There was no pain, only the sweetest of sensation, the subtlest delight in surrendering himself so absolutely, entrusting himself entirely to Avon for Avon's any and every whim.

As Avon's warm lips moved from his neck to his mouth Blake clasped him suddenly, desperately close, feeling Avon's heart thudding against his chest, Avon so very deep inside him that they were joined as closely as it was possible to be. Blake felt deeply stirred by the very intimacy he had dreaded; he had been afraid that he would lose himself, and instead he had been given something much more precious in its place.

Avon stopped all movement and took a few deep breaths, his forehead pressed sweatily to Blake's. Then he pushed himself up and looked down into Blake's face.

"How are you doing?" he asked shakily.

"Fine." Blake smiled at him, pulled him down for a kiss. He felt Avon's cock flare inside him as he kissed him deeply and rapturously but Avon soon pulled away and sat up and looked down at Blake seriously. Carefully he lowered Blake's legs to either side of him; as cramps made themselves felt Blake groaned and stretched them out. Then he wrapped his legs around Avon; Avon thrust and his cock did something marvellous inside Blake. Blake let out a gasp and his eyes flew open wide. Avon smiled at him, and clenched his teeth as he thrust again; beads of sweat were standing out on his forehead and running down his face. Again Blake felt a sweet thrumming deep within, a faint fire which Avon could blaze for him if only he could reach deep enough inside. He grabbed Avon with desperate hands.

Avon brushed his cock then, a tentative, almost questioning gesture. Blake shut his eyes, whispering, "Oh yes. do it," and his cock was taken in a firm hand and squeezed in insistent rhythm, echoing the pressure within: Blake began to feel, marvellously, as if he were melting inside. He cried out softly, his head turning from side to side on the pillow as Avon's hand flew up and down his cock, a dazzling sweetness gathering and hanging there, ready, waiting.

Avon stopped touching him; with agonised disappointment Blake opened his eyes. Avon wiped the sweat off his brow with an unsteady hand. Then he took Blake's own hand in his and placed it on Blake's cock and watched him for a moment. Blake whimpered as his fingers began helplessly to move swiftly and wonderfully up and down the shaft.

"Do you still want me to hurry?" Avon managed with a ghost of humour.

Blake's reply was whisper. "You'd better." The scent of sex arose headily around Blake and the fire deep within him grew. As Avon withdrew and pressed into him again and thrust in slick rhythm Blake felt a hot flush tinge his cheeks; he turned his head to one side, moaning as he

stroked himself tightly between their close-pressed bellies. Avon's forehead turned against his cheek; he tasted the salt of Avon's sweat across his lips. Too much: he heard himself speak, some hotly passionate profanity which excited him even more; when Avon replied in a hoarse low whisper Blake gave in and gave up and lay very still, inhaling with perfect care. He felt himself inflaming with the most glorious feeling, rippling on and on and on. He tried to hold onto it, draw it out; his inner muscles tensed and tensed again, drawing a gasp from Avon: then he felt Avon's cock pulsing sweetly inside him, Avon's mouth seeking his urgently and he kissed Avon, with tenderness, while it happened for Avon.

Avon lay limply on top of him; they were soaked with sweat, plastered hotly together. Blake felt thoroughly used, with hot wet sticky places. Avon's head lay heavily on his shoulder; he had dropped instantly into a doze.

Hard work for you, eh? Blake thought amused; he put his arms around Avon and hugged him. To tell the truth he was dreading the moment when they must part, with all its attendant discomforts and embarrassments. More, he owed to himself that he had loved it, loved arrogant Avon inside him, needing something Blake's body could give him.

"At least we get on well in bed," he said aloud, rueful that this truce did not extend to the flightdeck. Avon started awake, his eyes flying wide, blackfringed darkness. "All right?" Blake asked him, and Avon yawned widely, his jaw stretching, and breathed a few times and moved a little bit. Blake didn't let him go.

"Well, bed seems to go all right for us," he repeated.

"I suppose," Avon yawned again, "it's the one place—where greedy opportunism couples well with reckless ideals," and Blake laughed at him and with him, running his hands along Avon's wet back. Out of nowhere the phrase he had used to Avon and Avon's reply came back to him: he blushed hotly and wondered if he'd ever dare remind Avon of them, reluctantly decided probably not. Secrets learned in bed, in the heat and haze of passion, were not bankable.

"Sleep now Blake," Avon said, surprising him for he had been unconsciously bracing himself for Avon to get up and demand they were both thoroughly cleansed; so he shut his eyes and lay back in Avon's hot and damp embrace.

HAVING FOUND DOCHOLLI, THE PATH LAY CLEAR. To Blake, if not to the others.

"Goth." Blake peered at the starmap, and wondered if he was beginning to need some kind of vision aid.

"I wonder what it's like there," Vila said, his tone gloomily expressive of the fact that he wasn't expecting anything good.

"Primitive," came a new, thinly sarcastic voice.

“Well, you needn’t come, Avon,” Blake said without turning from his scrutiny of pinpoint dots of light. “You can stay here. Like you did when Jenna and Cally and I went down to Freedom City.”

He whipped round just in time to see Vila’s eyes slide to Avon.

“Are you going to tell me?” he asked curiously.

“You wouldn’t be interested,” Avon said, smoothly distant. He sat down on a couch and picked up a puzzle board.

Blake eyed him. “Try me.” Avon was dressed in a cool silver tunic and tight black trousers. He looked icy and satanic. Blake repressed a sigh.

Vila on the other hand was bright and cheerful in grey and red. It had been a long time, Blake reflected, since he had cracked a bottle with Vila and shared some of his funny, sad wisdom. Avon had got too deep under his skin; the sharpest of thorns in the tenderest of flesh. Sometimes he could not see past Avon, at all.

Yet he had the feeling that they were far from friends, at the moment.

“Vila.” He turned on the little man, who jumped. “You’ll tell me.”

“Tell you what?” Vila gabbled. “I couldn’t tell you even if there was anything to tell, which of course there isn’t, but I wasn’t the only one involved, or at least I wouldn’t have been had there been anything going on—but as you can see, it’s all rather complicated.” Coming to an abrupt end, Vila perched next to Avon and leaned over Avon’s puzzle, affecting great interest.

Blake smiled as he sank down onto another couch. “I don’t know why you’re both so secretive. *I know* you went down to Freedom City.”

“Can you finish this?” Avon asked of Vila, ignoring Blake. “It looks just the thing for tiny minds.” He passed the puzzle over. Vila’s skilled fingers worked the cubes of wood a little.

“When I was a boy, in the under-eights penitentiary—” he tugged, achieved some measure of success which clearly impressed Avon. Blake felt his hackles rise: he didn’t like the sense that these two were excluding him. Despite the insults and the mutual contempt and the derision Avon and Vila had an oddly companionable relationship; you could imagine them bumping along together, up and down, for years. Being very human, Blake was jealous of that; but he was adult enough to find his own jealousy contemptible.

Vila finished the puzzle and handed it to Avon with much crowing and self-congratulation.

Blake itched for Vila to go.

He would have left himself, only he was not at all sure that Avon would follow him.

So it was with relief he heard Vila yawn widely, and announce that he was tired, and that he’d better get plenty of sleep if Blake was expecting him to go hunting

for brain patterns among primitives on a hostile, chilly planet—you never saw a primitive dressed in anything but furs, did you?—and so he was going off to his cabin to get his head down.

Down a bottle? Avon remarked.

And then they were alone.

“What *were* you doing on Freedom City?” Blake asked; he moved over to sit near Avon, on the same couch.

“Gambling,” Avon replied.

Blake’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “I never took that to be a vice of yours.”

“I’ve always been a gambler, Blake. The fascination lies, not in guessing the odds, which is easy, but outwitting them.”

“And how did you—outwit—them, on Freedom City?”

“Successfully, thank you.” Avon neatly curtailed that line of enquiry. In fact, Blake had not been so much curious as fiercely jealous that Avon had secrets from him. Thus appeased, he slung his arm around Avon’s shoulders and moved in a little closer.

Avon immediately backed off, violently.

“*Don’t*, Blake.”

Frozen with rejection Blake stayed where he was, lifting his hand away. “Why not?”

Avon gazed disbelief at him. “We’re on the main flightdeck, anyone might come in. You may want them to see you crawling all over me, but you will understand—” a travesty of a smile—“that I do not.”

Hurt beyond measure, Blake stared at him coolly.

“No, of course not,” he observed curtly, jumping to his feet and swinging away. “You wouldn’t want them to think you had any normal human pleasures, would you? After all, you’re going to lead them some day.”

“It’s all coming to an end, Blake,” Avon said irritably. “It’s over.”

Blake just could not believe his ears. “*Over?*” He took a turn around the couch, to confront Avon directly. “You didn’t act the other night as if it was over.”

“If all goes to plan on Goth,” Avon said in a hard, strange voice, “then we could be at Star One the day after, or ten, say, at the most, depending on where the location turns out to be.”

Blake took a deep, short breath. “And after that?”

“Then it will be finished,” Avon said, his eyes fixed on nothing. “We can go our separate ways.”

“*Avon.*” He had known things were wrong, he realised that now as little things popped into his mind and added up to trouble, but bound up in other concerns—Docholli, Servalan, Travis, and always, always Star One: he had not realised how wrong.

He touched Avon’s arm, but Avon would not look at him. “Isn’t this rather sudden? Tell me what’s wrong.”

Avon did look at him then, his eyes darkly expressionless. "You knew we would most likely part, after Star One. We agreed."

"Yes: but—" He supposed he had been reassured that they would not, that nothing more needed to be said, after that one, seemingly definitive night: what if, instead of a beginning, Avon had intended it as a farewell?

He hadn't seen much of Avon, it was true: he had assumed that Avon like himself needed a quiet time after their turbulent night together; and then other things had intervened so that all he needed at night was sleep, falling exhausted into bed, his eyes shutting gratefully, sleeping too deeply to dream...

What if it was something else, entirely, keeping Avon away from him?

He stared at Avon, judgmentally cold. "Now you've lost interest, is that it?"

Avon's persisting silence only convinced him that he was right.

Fury, and bitterness, made him want to wound Avon in the way he had been wounded, cast about for the dirtiest stone he could find.

"Well, I never had you down for that type, Avon. The thrill's in the chase, eh? Once you've had it, you can't be seen for dust, is that so?" He put his face close to Avon and said with unpleasantness worthy of the man himself, "Was that Anna's secret? She kept you strung out for it, did she? Did she, perhaps die a virgin in fact?"

Avon, paper-white, hissed at him: "Be quiet." He was about to walk out, but Blake caught his arm. Avon whipped around to face him, pale nostrils flared, eyes blazing. He spoke, however with extreme care: "You have a dirty mouth, Blake. *Don't keep mentioning Anna.*"

Blake nodded, up and down, furiously angry, his hands clenching and unclenching. "Hardly fit to speak her name, I know. Don't worry, Avon, I realise I'm only second best compared with the delightful Anna."

Avon's smile was the most chilling thing Blake had seen: seeing it, his stomach physically tensed to deflect his next words.

"You overrate yourself."

Blake swung back his arm to hit Avon; he actually let fly, with all his bodyweight behind it, but at the last moment he restrained himself with enormous effort, ending the movement with a violent swirl in the air as he spun away. "All right. I've understood you. No need to say any more." And he had gone.

Avon stayed very still, neat and shining head cocked slightly to one side, as if faintly, unperturbedly puzzled. After a while he straightened, and went over to the banks of instruments, and looked at them; very precisely, with an air of deep concentration; just exactly as if what they had to show was all he had to think about.

Blake felt very alone: who did he have? Vila was

distanced from him now, their nights of easy companionship gone long ago. Cally? Whoever could know Cally? Loyal she certainly was, but Blake never felt he knew Cally at all.

Jenna was angry with him, and cold; one snap of his fingers and she would probably come back but that was the last thing he wanted.

Avon had meant to hurt him. That much was all Blake succeeded in disentangling from the threads of wild emotion. Avon had wanted to hurt him, and yes, he was hurt: congratulations to Avon. He hadn't felt this sick sense of defeat and hopelessness, misery churning in his stomach, in a long time.

Love never was enough, of course, even when it was going well: he had always needed more. He had his Cause, a burning torch of revolution carried aloft, a real chance to do something about the evil which was the Federation. What did personal things matter, beside such a large issue?

He expected to be comforted by such plans and thoughts and dreams.

The ache remained: he pressed a hand to it absently as he stared out of the window of the observation deck, the blackness of night unlit. Avon's eyes looked that way sometimes: at others, they softened to velvet.

Behind him the door opened and Vila came in, clutching a bottle and a glass. On seeing Blake he stopped, stood irresolute, made as if to tiptoe out again, then stayed where he was.

Blake heard him enter but didn't turn. He was watching an asteroid, only a small one, whirling past, tinted a silver sparkle by *Liberator's* lights reflected.

"Funny, isn't it," he said. "How you just exchange one prison for another, wherever you go in life?"

"At least this prison's got a door you can open, any time," Vila said cheerfully, coming all the way in and sitting down on one of the couches. He put his feet up; poured a shot of soma into his glass. Blake turned to look at him.

"Well, somehow I think I'm going to open the door of this one, very soon." There. He felt better: he had said it. "What's that?" He nodded at the bottle.

Vila clutched it protectively. "Soma," he said, regretfully writing off at least half of it.

"Only one glass?" Blake pointed out.

"I'm not a proud man, I'll drink from the bottle." Vila handed the lone glass over, reached out and poured a healthy shot of instant relaxation into it.

"It's been a long time since we did this," Blake said at last. He stared still out of the wide window: you could imagine that space was a huge black cushion, blinding and suffocating, pressing in at the window.

"Yes," his companion said, not without bitterness.

Blake, hearing it, turned to look at him. "Avon

convinced me I wasn't treating you properly."

"Oh," Vila said sarcastically. "And you always take his advice, I've noticed."

"No," Blake owned, adding: "Sometimes I think that whatever I do is bad for someone."

Uh-oh, Vila's inner light, the one which rescued him speedily from maudlin drunks in bars, warned: Blake looked set for a moody self-recrimination session. Blake might enjoy that sort of thing—Vila remembered the long sulk after Gan's death—but he could do it quite as well on his own.

"Don't say that, Blake: it's not your fault if we all can't resist you, is it?"

Unfortunately that sparked off another unwelcome train of thought. Jenna, Vila, Avon. Reviewed like that it did seem a depressing tally of exploitation given a crew of five. Blake felt a deep gloom; he removed the bottle from Vila's very lips and refilled his glass.

"Avon hates me," he said, discovering the fact and tasting it.

Vila didn't reply to this. Rising, he resettled near Blake and clapped him on the shoulder to get his attention, gave a gentle cough and indicated the bottle. Blake passed it back, eyeing the level with surprise.

"This isn't going to last long, is it?"

"Well, a man in your position shouldn't be drinking too much," Vila said firmly, and took several deep swallows. "There's nothing I despise more than a drunk in a position of responsibility."

Blake sighed heavily and rubbed a hand over his brow. Vila sighed too. Life was nothing if not cruel and unfair. How come he found himself in the role of go-between? Because of him they had turned to each other, then they had excluded him, utterly and thoroughly and finally: and expected him to be perfectly philosophical about it! He supposed that if they thought about him at all—which seemed depressingly unlikely—they probably expected him to feel fawningly grateful that they had deigned to notice him even once. Alphas were like that. It was enough to crush the spirit of a lesser man.

But he liked Blake, nothing had changed that.

"Look, Blake..."

"Mmm?" Blake roused himself from a trough of misery to blink at him.

"About Avon—"

Blake squinted his way.

"Don't be too hard on him," Vila said with an effort; he had more to say, but Blake, evidently eager for a chance to address this particular subject, gave a snort and said:

"I'm the one who needs protecting, Vila, not Avon."

"You see, Blake, you like Avon, *I* like Avon," Vila unblinkingly understated, "but there's no getting away from the fact that he's not the *easiest* of people."

Blake was arrested by this; he stared at Vila as if he were unfolding some peculiarly powerful wisdom.

Vila continued: "Goodlooking of course; all that line of Alphas were lucky for looks—and he's very sharp—and if ever once he smiles at you you feel as if the moon's in your fingers, but deep down, Blake—" Vila leaned forward companionably and confidingly—"Avon just hasn't got the heart of gold you find beating at the centre of you and me. He's too highly bred, you see; the higher you go in the aristocracy the less heart you find, it's the old imperial failing."

Blake blinked. "But you like him."

"Oh well, you see, Blake," Vila said, "it's a very sad thing about human nature, but the really nice people, like me, never get a second look: people fall for black-souled cynics who abuse them, all the time."

Blake was truly fascinated by this. He couldn't remember a lot of his own life, a loss he had learned to live with, but he had a feeling Vila was ten times more streetwise in any case.

"It doesn't matter, Blake," Vila said. "Even Cally's got the soul of a terrorist...most people you meet are really not all that nice." He leaned forward and poked Blake solemnly in the chest. "I am able to tell you this as the result of many years finding out the hard way. Stop expecting love to make Avon a better person. It won't."

"Avon," Blake said with great care, twirling the stem of his glass and staring at it intently, "doesn't seem to be the type who falls in love."

"He's the type who finds personal relationships difficult, that's the type he is," Vila said, amused and disgusted. Didn't Blake *know* what he held in his hands? "Look how he is in day-to-day good mornings, how are you today's. If you do wake up in a good mood, meeting Avon first thing would certainly sour you right off. Being close to people panics him. He's probably worrying about what they might find."

Blake was following all this with a frown; and, fuddled by soma, brought his greatest bitterness out into the open.

"He managed all right with Anna."

"Ah," Vila said kindly: he had had a long night with Avon once listening patiently to Avon's neurotic hints about things he clearly thought he was keeping concealed: "better in retrospect than actuality I expect."

Blake was struck by this confirmation of his own guesses. "Just what I think. But mention her name, and he—"

He lapsed into silence, grimacing. "I can't think of one single reason why I should be so hung up on Avon."

"No," Vila said, who had had the same thoughts in his time.

"Apart from the fact that's he's very beautiful and wonderful in bed."

Vila had to laugh, although Blake appeared quite

see she had already melted towards him: she never could resist him in person, however brave and striking she might be rehearsing alone in her cabin. He supposed he must be Jenna's sexual ideal; somehow that idea amused him though he felt a flicker of surprise at his own cruelty.

"The trouble is, if we do it, if we destroy Central Control, and all those innocent people die because of *our* action, then I can't see that we're any better than the Federation."

"That *is* a problem," Cally said worriedly. "I cannot reconcile it."

Avon was watching all this, Blake had not failed to notice, with cynical disbelief and seemed to think now was the time to make his pitch. "Did you think you were playing games?" he said in a cold, amused way. "You have all completely missed the point: that this is not a sudden change of plan. It is exactly," one finger came up and stabbed unerringly at Blake's chest, "what HE has always intended. I don't understand this sudden flowering of reluctance among you. Gan died and you did nothing; are you morally less offended by one innocent death than by one million? Or did you truly not realise where all this was leading?"

"Don't listen to him," Jenna interjected. "You know he hates Blake—" Blake did not miss Avon's small, sudden smile at the floor— "And he'll say anything to discredit him."

"Do, you, then, think Blake is morally wrong to do this, Avon?" asked Cally, to whom such things mattered.

"No, on the contrary, clearly he is morally right," Avon replied, surprising everyone except Blake who was never surprised at anything Avon said: the man had a silver tongue to slip persuasive words around any argument, irrespective of what he actually believed. Avon met the stares of the others with buffered indifference, continuing, "I don't know how well you know History but, to take an uncomplex example, seven million people died in the Second World War, pre-Atomic age, and no-one would dispute Churchill's *moral* stance against Hitler." He looked around at them all, and added; "However, for the average man, living with extreme morality is not a comfortable thing."

"Then you think we should go ahead."

Avon hesitated, his gaze brooding as he stared past them all.

"Blake knows my views on this—"

"I've forgotten," Blake said sweetly. "Remind me."

"My belief is that we should use the chance we've been given in the form of this ship to ensure safety for ourselves. But Blake does not. Where is the line between moral rectitude and fanaticism? No-one knows. I don't. Perhaps Blake is right. Perhaps not. Only time will tell."

"But what do you actually *think*?" Blake persisted; more and more sure that so far they had had nothing of what Avon actually thought.

Avon transfixed him with a black stare, desolate or triumphant, it was impossible to tell. "At first, I could see what you were doing; a good deal of what you said was extreme, but that's good politics—" he smiled thinly— "for the troops: no-one is ever moved to follow wishy-washy neutralism. But it seems to me lately that you are becoming what you merely posture at being: a fanatic. You are as tunnelvisioned as Servalan, Blake, and much, much more dangerous."

Blake turned away from him. "That's the word from our resident clear thinker. What do the rest of you say?"

"Why do we have to destroy Central Control?" Vila asked. "I've never been all that keen on fireworks, not since a banger went off in my hand. Look, I've always fancied a life of luxury, servant girls and the like; couldn't we just take it over and run it ourselves?"

Blake was abrupt. "That much power would corrupt anyone. And some of us wouldn't put up too much resistance." He bent a burning glance on Avon.

Jenna and Cally exchanged a look. This was worse than they had expected: the galaxy-wide issues seemed to have shrunk back, become less important than the bitter struggle for power in their own little world.

"Well, one thing is clear," Avon snapped, "when this is over, it is finished between us." He added, when he saw Blake's fiery look his way, "The five of us. We can no longer pretend a happy-family situation, everyone working alongside a common aim."

This cast a freezing mantle over everything, as nothing before had done: no chance now of clinging on to the battered hopes and joyful optimism they had once had, freedom and the galaxy theirs, and *Liberator* ready to go. It had gone sour; broken down somewhere along the way. No-one had put it into words. Until now.

Blake had only one aim one goal left to him now, and that became momentous; because if he lost it, he had nothing. Nothing at all.

He said tersely, "No-one need say it." He paced around a little, massaging the tension in his neck. "Without me you will all rub along very well, no doubt. I've led you into nothing but trouble, risked your lives and brought you grief. As Avon says: living with someone else's obsession is never a comfortable thing. Support me through this—see Star One destroyed with me—and I'll let you all go."

The others' loud demurrals and rush of chatter clashed with something softer, which cut nevertheless through everything: Avon's dry, corrosive question:

"With—or *without*—the *Liberator*?"

He met Avon's eyes, a direct spearing gaze which flew between them and sparked like electricity as it

touched.

“With it, of course. That’s what you’ve always wanted. Isn’t it?”

THE INTERCOM WENT. Rousing from weird dreams Blake sat up with a start and rubbed a hand over his eyes.

“We have to talk, Blake. Shall I come to your quarters?”

Avon’s voice was precise and well-ordered, as if he had gone to a very good school, which he undoubtedly had, and been taught the elements and inflections of beautiful speech. Blake didn’t feel he could face that sharp, acid presence at the moment; his flesh was raw and would sting.

“I don’t think there’s anything I care to talk about with you,” he said. Sleep made him brutal.

That silenced the thing, and Avon’s voice along with it. Blake rolled over in a hot tangle of bedding; he felt the dulling ache of another hangover pounding in his brain and the parching of his mouth. Alcohol abuse was, of course, only too prevalent; Alphas just as much as Deltas falling prey to its easy, soothing charm. He must stop drinking. As soon as he left the *Liberator*. Which might, come to that, be today. He checked his watch. Fifteen hours until they arrived, and he no longer felt reluctant, but eager to get on with it.

He buried his head in the pillow again but could not recapture sleep. He thought he might as well get up, pack what few of his things he might need.

He showered, in the hope it might clear his head; a little refreshed he dressed in baggy trousers and a shirt and looked around his room. There was very little he wanted to take with him; in the end, he just packed his most comfortable clothes into a holdall. Not much to show for two years but there it was.

He was just rolling the last jerkin into a sausage shape when the buzzer at his cabin door went. Damn Jenna, damn Avon: he didn’t want to see either of them.

Avon. Worse than Jenna.

He met him with his most boldly demanding stare. “Whatever can you want, I wonder?” Avon looked slightly deranged, for Avon; chalkwhite, his eyelashes jerking nervously, his shirt half-buttoned.

“We have to talk, Blake.”

Blake sighed, and turned away, prowling back into the room. “I suppose you mean, I’ve got to listen. Look, Avon, contrary to popular psychology, talking never solves anything. Because, no-one ever says what they mean; they’re always too damn scared they might put themselves at a disadvantage.” He turned around, caught Avon who was slowly stalking him further in, and thrust his face close to Avon’s. “It’s too late, Avon. If you were Cicero and I were Shakespeare we’d never find the words to put things right.”

He wandered away, a moody knight unarmoured

down to shirt-sleeves, brown strong forearms emerging from rolled-back cuffs of white, his head of untidy curls bent over as he considered the room. Avon’s eyes followed him, noted the signs of packing.

“Where will you go?”

“Anywhere,” Blake shrugged. “After Star One, you can just take me to some suitable neutral planet.”

“And you’ll do—what?”

“It’s really no longer your concern, is it?” Look, Avon, if by any chance you’re feeling belatedly sorry for me, don’t waste the emotion. You don’t have many to waste. I’m a free man, which is considerably more than I expected after my trial. I’ve no secret wish to remain here and no desire whatever to tie myself to *Liberator*’s apron-strings. In fact, the more I think about it the more I feel I’ve stayed too long as it is.”

He really meant it, too. To walk free again, out in the open air beneath trees, smelling damp grass and leaves; doing what he was good at, rousing fervour and motivations within a new circle of would-be seceders; whipping the rabble into an organised frenzy as he sprang to its forefront, one bold fist in the air. Happily, happily he would leave all this behind, this stuffy recycled atmosphere, this enclave of niggling doubters whose hearts he had briefly moved, but whose sluggish scruples he had failed to stir into independent life.

Avon paced around somewhat, hands folded into one another behind his back. Blake tried to ignore him but had lost the thread of his purpose; he couldn’t concentrate with Avon, prowling, coiling like a tense spring, his eyes afire with—something.

Avon looked at him then and said about the last thing Blake had expected him to say.

“Do you want to go to bed?”

Well, that must have taken courage. Not that he was receptive to Avon’s courage right now. Blake threw his head back and laughed bitterly. “Not unless you’re into necrophilia. Dead from the neck down, that’s me. Are you?” he added, peering at Avon with interest, “into necrophilia, that is? I thought I had the odd kink or two, but I’ve a feeling we barely touched the surface of yours.”

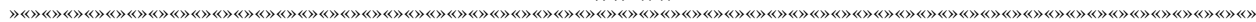
Something pithy and obvious about Anna came to mind which he bit back just in time.

“Everybody’s big brother...” Avon said, walking away from him. “So you can be vicious.”

“Yes, I’ve picked up quite a lot,” he allowed, pleased. He cocked his head to one side. “A mere amateur beside you, of course. I don’t overrate myself in every field, you note.”

Avon leaned one arm on the wall and laid his forehead on it, an odd, defeated gesture. “That hurt you, didn’t it?” he addressed the wall. “I didn’t mean you to take it so much to heart.”

Blake stared at him, astonished. “No?” he said with viperish flippancy. “Just a witticism? And good old



communication had opened up between them at long last: Avon did sit down, on the bed because there was nowhere else not too far away—trust Avon to pick up and respond to subtle social cues—and Blake said,

“Why did you come here, Avon?”

Avon did not reply. Blake tried again. “You said we had to talk. What about?”

“I don’t know,” Avon said with a kind of blankness.

“To ask me to stay? Beg me to go?”

“I’m sure you know better than I do. Or think you do, which may well be the same thing.”

“Only if you’re ultimately manipulable,” Blake said, “and I’m not sure that you are.”

He reached out with both hands and brought Avon closer. Avon’s mouth came to his for a kiss, pausing with his lips just touching Blake’s. Blake threaded a hand through his hair, feathering it around his ears as he licked Avon’s lips and lazily flickered his tongue into Avon’s mouth. He paused to murmur:

“Ahh, Avon... I’m going to miss you.”

Avon was very still for a moment, but Blake knew that he would not argue. Not now; he had played his last and most telling card. There would be hell to pay.

He sighed, and rested his cheek against Avon’s, waiting for the storm. “You’ll never forgive me for leaving you, will you?”

“I’ve never forgiven you for arriving in the first place.”

Pleased by the signs of returning spirit, he grinned engagingly at Avon. “It needn’t be forever. I may get tired of fighting—or you may find a lifelong pleasure-trip not quite so fulfilling as you imagine. Come and find me.”

“Are you sure you want to go at all?” Avon said; he would never come any closer to asking than that. Blake knew he had to do this; had to tear himself away from Avon though it was like skinning live flesh from bone. They would destroy each other: he wasn’t sure it wasn’t already too late.

He made it gentle. “I don’t think I’m good for you.”

“Ah well,” Avon said with delicate, sad devilry, “whoever said I wanted you to be?”

Blake wanted to rid the air of this poignancy, turn the ashes of sadness into something alive, some hope for the future. He began to strip off his clothes. Halfway into removing his shirt he stopped, and looked at Avon who was watching him. Arrogantly, almost carelessly, Blake lowered his mouth onto the wilful one and kissed Avon again, one hand sliding around to cup the back of his neck, drinking him deep and so hard that Avon’s mouth trembled under the pressure of his lips. With a softer, lingering caress he withdrew, kissing along the aristocratic line of the jaw, fingers stroking in the hair at the nape

of his neck, finally laying his head to rest on Avon’s shoulder as he undid his buttons.

Unseen, he said, “You make me so angry, Avon... But sometimes,” he trailed blunt, gentle fingertips down Avon’s chest, over the dark vee of hair between his small nipples, “I want you to make me angry. Do you understand what I’m saying?” A blush suffused his skin at this admission, but he ignored it, tilting his head back so that he could look into Avon’s eyes.

“Oh, only too well,” Avon murmured, lost in reflection of Blake’s searching gaze. His eyes were very black and his voice was doing strange things to Blake’s insides.

Blake laughed and shivered at the same time, seeing a twin excitement striking Avon. “We have to split up... We bring out all the worst things in each other.”

And Avon said, a lazy lick of fire in his voice: “I enjoy the worst things in you.”

Blake’s breath left him abruptly, as if he were winded.

“The dark side of you... is so much more to my taste than the light.”

Blake wanted to laugh, though he felt at the moment as if he would never take a moment’s happiness for granted, ever again. He wanted, more than anything, to be made to forget that this was the last time. He continued to undo his buttons, onehanded. Avon was watching the strip with interest, his eyes a downcast gleam. When Blake’s hands reached his trousers he pushed a hand against Blake’s chest. “I’ll do that.” Predatory, he forced Blake to the bed, and Blake went with it, looking up at Avon. As Avon leaned over him and stripped away his remaining clothes with a less than careful, hand, he caught a warm, sultry drift of Avon’s sweat; enchanted, he took hold of Avon’s biceps and pulled him closer. Odd how in this all-white age you spent hours of time cleaning away every last tinge of body odour and replacing it with expensive scents; some pleasant in their way—Avon’s warmly fragrant hair, for example. But no artificial scent could ever rouse Blake as hard as the sweet acidity of Avon, clean not long ago, now warm and aroused. He rolled to his side and opened Avon’s shirt a little way, burying his face inside, rubbing his cheek on satin-smooth skin, faintly damp. A nipple was close to his mouth; he lapped at it, daintily and avidly.

“You’re interrupting me,” Avon’s voice came, lazily amused.

“So sorry.”

Kneeling up, Blake stripped Avon’s clothes off, tossing them aside. The shirt was warm and still lushly fragranced: he wanted to hold on to it. “I’ll keep this,” he said, throwing it to land on his holdall. “Souvenir.” He lay down so that Avon could continue whatever it was Blake had interrupted.

“It won’t fit you.” Avon stroked the broad ex-

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He murmured acidly into Avon's ear: "Do you, in fact, need me at all?"

Avon's eyes shot open, revealing bright darkness. "Only peripherally," he said; an amused, ironic smile chased briefly across his lips and was gone.

"Don't stop. I like it."

"I don't care whether you do or not."

It was Blake's turn to smile. "Oh, I think you do, Avon." He turned on his side, and traced a fingertip around Avon's lips, letting Avon nip him, then he moved down to stroke his nipples, seeing a flush of arousal creep across Avon's pale skin, his hands tight, tight on his cock, not moving now. When Blake moved across to kiss him, Avon caught his wrist in an iron grasp.

"Now you do it," he said in a low rasp, pushing Blake's hand roughly downwards.

"But you do it so beautifully yourself," Blake said mockingly, pushing Avon's hands aside and taking hold of him.

"Harder," Avon only said.

Blake shut his eyes and pretended he was doing it to himself—which, interestingly, made him dare to handle Avon with far greater violence. Avon shuddered under him. It seemed only seconds before Avon, breathing fast and hard, stopped his flying hand with a punishing grip.

"Nearly there?" Blake asked him sweetly, looking up into darkly glazed eyes, seeing the droplets of sweat standing out on Avon's brow.

"Are you in a hurry?" Avon said, catching his breath.

"Me? No. I've got all night. You, however," Blake said, looking at him consideringly, "don't look as if you have."

Avon said, "I want—" and stopped.

Blake leaned his head nearer. "*What* do you want?" He rested his forehead against Avon's cheek. "Don't be shy. I won't say no." He was tense, strangely excited, strangely stirred emotionally by Avon's need. "But if you're going to hit me again—" Blake touched his cheekbone and winced—"how about somewhere that won't show?"

Avon lifted his head to stare at him. "Very intriguing." He laughed. "*Nothing* about sex strikes you as absurd, does it, Blake?"

Blake wiped the back of his hand over his mouth. "No, I love it." His wayward hand, outside his conscious control, wandered down Avon's torso to touch his cock again. "I suppose you despise me for that?"

"Not at all," Avon said amused. "Just reflecting on the very odd fact that you should share my low sexual tastes."

"Why odd?"

"When I realised you were sleeping with Jenna, I thought you must be very unimaginative."

Blake thought about saying that, on the contrary, sex with Jenna required plenty of imagination; a lingering kindness towards her stopped him.

He let go of Avon and turned himself around, laying his head on Avon's stomach and kissing the tip of his cock, licking delicately. "And Anna? Did she ever do *this* for you?"

Avon grabbed his head and thrust off the bed, forcing himself into Blake's mouth. The soft rasp of his voice filtered down:

"Suck hard."

Blake took him at his word, his face pressed close to the sweet musk of his groin. His hands stole underneath Avon's buttocks; finding the dry pucker between he stroked it and pressed inside. He wanted to speak, say riotously obscene things to fire Avon on, couldn't; heard Avon's own voice, hissing softly, deliver a phrase which burned in his ears and shot to his groin, lifting him with tension. Avon pulled on his hair in agonised distraction: soft, salt silk pulsed sweetly down his throat. Avon held him there, hard, until he was spent; then his hand let go of Blake's head, fell away onto the bed. Blake rolled onto his back, gasping and choking.

"No," Avon breathlessly continued the conversation as if there had been no gap; "Anna never did that for me." Blake opened his eyes and looked up into Avon's face, to meet his disagreeable smile. "Not quite like that, anyway."

Blake could imagine how it had been, Anna delicate and circumspect, kissing his cock as a great sacrifice, maybe using her tongue a little (but nowhere near the tip) while Avon politely lay and yearned to thrust it arrogantly down her throat. Women, very often, just had no idea.

"You seem obsessed with Anna," Avon said: he brought Blake up to lie level with him, a considering hand brushing the marks of abuse at his eye, the scratches on his cheeks.

"Only because you are."

"I don't keep asking you about Jenna." Try as he might, he could not keep the lilt of curiosity out of his voice.

"You'd probably like to, but you're too polite," Blake offered sardonically. Now they were both in the limbo of between-times, he felt more tender; he drew Avon to him and explored the softness of Avon's skin with his lips, tasting his sweat.

"I really don't know how you can bear to let me go," Avon said cynically and lightly, a moment of despair yawning a desolate chasm into being.

Blake didn't know either. "What's the one thing I have to do to keep you?" he said between soft, moist kisses. "Sign the pledge of neutral pacifism?"

"I'll lower the price," Avon said with a sudden, rash hunger: he cleared his throat and stared into Blake's

eyes with a kind of eagerness.

“I couldn’t bear you to do that,” Blake snapped at him, surprised by the force of his own emotions wrung from him.

Avon stared at him, and gave a short, harsh laugh. “I see. On the grounds that any scruple is better than no scruple at all. You make me laugh, Blake; you really do. You despise and loathe my position, and yet you expect me to defend it with strength. You’d be disappointed if, after all, I lay down at your feet and agreed to worship you, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course,” Blake said, as if nothing could be more obvious. He spoke the absolute truth.

Avon traced a deliberate thumbnail down Blake’s cheek and seemed absorbed by the play of shadows across Blake’s battered face. “Well, seeing that I

should hate to disappoint you, in any way whatsoever...” he murmured with exquisite, poignant care, “it really does seem that there is nothing more we can do.”

The night seemed long, but could never be long enough.

“It needn’t be forever,” Blake said; the very last thing before they parted. He hugged Avon, whose body felt like his own, and smiled with overbright eyes into dark ones reflecting his. “We’ll meet up again one day.”

He was sure of it. some premonition—

“I know we will,” he promised, and like a dream saw his own death in Avon’s eyes: just before the image splintered and fell into a million dark crystal shards, each one arrowing his heart with deadly passionate joy.

For Katharine, whose wonderful writing has given me more pleasure than any other.

insignificant next to the reality of what those four Gammas had been up to when the Alpha toff wandered into the cell.

Naïve, the Alpha'd been. Ignorant of prison ways. Blissfully ignorant, as it turned out, because it had worked for him, that unstudied, inimitable Elite manner. That inbred self-assurance which had sent him striding into the middle of the group without hesitation, eyes narrowed, jaw tight, a hint of dangerous smile about the lips. Demanding that the four veteran cons, the smallest of whom stood centimeters above him and a quarter again his weight, vacate *his* room immediately. Not for Vila. For his convenience. Because he was tired and did not care to be distracted by a noisy rape.

And they had obeyed, Gammas in their blood and bones. Obeyed without reflection that this intruder was nearly as slight as their Delta victim, besides being unarmed and much, much, prettier. Later they would have time to reconsider their decision and reverse it, and later still they would find better cause than an accident of birth to fear this man. But for now they simply dropped their victim and left, heading for the common room on this free cell-block. Backing out, some of them. Practically, remembered Vila, in the safe amusement of hindsight, *bowing* out, some of them.

He'd not felt safe then, not even when the dark Alpha with the cat-like stance and the eyes that could sear your soul had helped him remove the gag and the bonds. He'd known other Alphas, as elegant as this, as genteel, as aristocratic if not as gorgeous, with tastes that would turn the stomach of a Delta dockworker. Often the quiet ones were the worst. Palates jaded by a lifetime of unrestrained indulgence, they sometimes got...ideas. Innovations far beyond the feeble imagination of ordinary Gamma thugs.

But this Alpha, after releasing him, seemed to want nothing more to do with him. Ignored him. Walked away.

What, so confident, then, that everything was arranged already? Expecting Vila to somehow know just what was wanted, and when? Vila was tired, bruised if not actually injured, and still keyed up—all right, then, still almost beside himself—from his narrow escape. No matter how many times it happened it never hurt any less.

He was tired enough to snap, at last, once his more veiled probings were met with what seemed deliberately cruel misapprehension, "What d'you want, then? I'm not a bloody mindreader, am I? I'll do whatever, but you've gotta tell me, doncher?"

This had earned him the first *seeing* look for several minutes, and then the first complete sentence, as opposed to a monosyllabic rebuff, of the evening. The Alpha asked what the hell he was talking about. And Vila, who began, truculently, by denouncing the niceties of prison conduct even as he explained them, resigned but bitter all the same, ended up, defensively, feeling some-

how to blame for the entire system. The Alpha's disbelief and distaste were that clear.

Vila had ended up feeling defensive, all right—and something else. By the time the conversation had gone round a few times it was completely unnecessary for the Alpha to vocalize his lack of interest. But by then Vila had stopped feeling put upon, and, perversely, had begun to feel put out. This Alpha with the hooded eyes and the sensitive mouth was flouting prison law. He was not playing by the rules. And damned if he wasn't laughing in his sleeve at the very notion of bedding Vila.

If the laughter had stayed in the sleeve matters might have gone differently. The thief might have retired to nurse his wounded pride and been well enough satisfied to let the matter rest. But, as fate would have it, Vila's explanation of a particularly abstruse Delta cant term struck the fancy of the Alpha, who had first grinned and then laughed aloud. When Vila got his breath back several minutes later the issues of pride, convict law, and reciprocity were all moot. Even his gratitude was no longer the driving force. He simply wanted the Alpha.

In a Federation detention cell there is no tomorrow, so Vila merely waited until the Alpha was asleep, or mostly, and then quietly crept up and put a hand on his thigh.

Equally quiet was the voice which bade him remove it or lose it. It then took a fair amount of sniffing, the best lost-puppy expression the liquid brown eyes could muster, and a temerity based on the hopeful conviction that the Alpha really wouldn't do any of the dreadful things he was threatening, before Vila got his way. It was the talking that did it finally. Delta comrades and even a few upper-class one-nighters had told him he had quite a good line of sexy chat. But his cell-mate seemed not so much aroused as unsupportably annoyed by the unending flow of verbiage—or so Vila guessed by the fact that presently every sentence was punctuated not by 'let go,' but by 'shut up.'

"You don't have to do anything; just lie there. I'm good, honest. Really, I am. It'd be paying you back, like. I know what you said before, but I was just thinking—I mean, how long is it to Cygnus bleedin' Alpha, anyway? And no women—nobody else in your grade, even, that I've seen. You've been under a lot of stress; I can tell. All that nasty unhealthy tension..."

The Alpha made a comment about how unhealthy his tension was going to be any minute now for Vila.

Vila allowed himself not to believe it. If the man hadn't hit him yet, he probably wouldn't.

"You can just shut your eyes, don't even need to know I'm here," he encouraged. "Won't bother me any, honest. I'm used to it. You've got to think of your health, you know. I mean, a high-class tech like you, so gorgeous and all, and that smile—you can't be used to going without

for very long...”

He did, as a matter of fact, understand the Alpha’s polysyllabic reply. He turned the plead on higher and pretended he didn’t. In retrospect, though never entirely clear on what he’d said, he thought he’d dwelt for some time on the vicissitudes of being an orphan...

The Alpha was weakening, Vila could tell. Bar carrying out his threats, which by this time had waxed so extravagant that their execution would probably have meant another trial and a second life sentence, there really seemed to be no other way to keep Vila quiet.

“If I agree, will you stop talking?” he hissed at last.

Vila grinned, his most harmless and appealing grin, the effect of which was rather lost in the darkness. “Have to, don’t I? he whispered gleefully. “I mean, I can’t talk *and* do it, least never have yet, no, I don’t think I could...”

“Then for god’s sake prove it and *shut up*.”

Vila, very sensibly, did not wait for a second invitation, or, indeed, give the Alpha time to reflect on the first. His deft thief’s fingers already knew the whys and wherefores of prison jumpsuits and all that chat—including the really inspired bit about being an orphan—had aroused him. As he nimbly began his explorations, drawing feathery circles on the warm skin he had exposed and bending quickly—to quell any further temptation to babble—to tease and stimulate with his equally skilled mouth, he felt himself harden almost painfully. The Alpha was *nice*. As pretty without his clothes as with, and fastidiously clean. All graceful warm lines that responded to Vila in a most satisfactory way.

He sucked vigorously, using his tongue going for a blitz effect rather than a slow tantalizing introduction, and looking eagerly up after a few minutes to gauge his partner’s response.

He was disappointed. The Alpha was doing exactly what Vila had told him to do, lying with eyes shut, one arm draped over his forehead. There was nothing to be gleaned from the features that remained exposed. His expression was completely neutral, aloof. He might have been asleep.

Mentally, Vila shrugged off the disappointment, concentrating on the task at hand and his own enjoyment of it. Yet his pride was piqued, and he found himself wanting to do his best—better than his best—for this enigmatic Alpha. He threw himself into it with a natural enthusiasm and a skill honed by the uninhibited practice of years. Deltas did not have so many recreations that sex was taken for granted.

The lack of expression, of overt reaction, only spurred him on. And presently, utilizing other senses than sight, he realized that the Alpha was breathing very quickly and shallowly, and that tension was shimmering through all his limbs. Must be hard to keep so cool and

careless all the time with *that* inside, thought Vila, a genuine sympathy tinging his bewilderment. That much control couldn’t be good for you in the end...

The control in the body, at least, was breaking. Every caress, ever brush of Vila’s fingers, every swirl of his tongue, drew its own individualized response. And the supine man’s breathing was now not only quick but ragged, his contained but unsuppressible thrusting more rhythmic.

Bet you don’t get it this good all the time, thought Vila, unsure himself of the basis for this opinion. He was finding his own response to the Alpha shockingly strong. Pride mixed with a genuine desire to ‘do him right,’ and he felt a rush of pleasure as the beautiful, disciplined body suddenly stiffened, went rigid, trembling in an almost painful release. But it was the other thing that almost undid Vila, almost triggered his own orgasm. As the man came he made a sound, very soft but somehow arresting. Not a gasp or whimper, exactly, at least not like any Vila’d heard from a bed-partner before. It was the faint, plaintive sound of a child in sudden swift pain. After the uncanny silence, it was extraordinarily erotic, and surprisingly heart-wrenching as well. The thief had the sudden desire, absurd and perilously near fatal, to fling his arms around this hurt Alpha and comfort him. Rock him to sleep, maybe. Say silly soothing nonsense things...

There were no more sounds, but when the trembling spasms had stopped and Vila had reluctantly pulled up and let go, he was mildly appalled to find that the impulse to comfort had not entirely fled. It caused him, though he knew it was lunacy, to put that same hand on that same thigh and start to whisper—

—he could never for the life of him remember what, and he certainly never got to the end of it. His hand was struck away, and an icy and thoroughly-composed voice snarled at him to leave it and be off.

“As if it’s not enough to be raped by a scruffy Delta pickpocket the first night, or even to lose hours of sleep on that account, but to have to *listen* to any more is absolutely—”

He never got to finish *his* sentence either. Vila, whose nerves must have been more shredded than even he realized, had snagged up on the earliest part of the utterance. Now, to his utter mortification and astonishment, he burst into tears.

It was, perhaps, Avon’s finest hour, or anyway the finest that Vila was going to see for quite a while. Instead of knocking the blubbering Delta across the room, which surely must have seemed his inalienable right by then, he merely snarled—in a voice which Vila was later to realize was at the edge of losing control:

“What the *hell* is it now?”

“I didn’t rape you—didn’t mean nothin’ like that. Only just wanted you—Didn’t mean no harm by it. I’m not like *them*— You’ve got no call to say that...”

There was a long pause. Avon, Vila decided in retrospect, most likely had spent it doing differential equations, or whatever else Avon did to keep his temper under the slings and arrows of utterly outrageous fortune. Or perhaps he had just suddenly decided that Vila was deranged and not responsible for his own actions. Though, to be sure, Avon had never been known to suffer fools gladly—or at all...

“Come here,” he hissed, in a voice of dogged, if tenuous, calm. Vila, bawling, obeyed, without questioning why. The bawling did not noticeably interfere with his monologue.

“Just wanted ter be nice— ‘m not like them...never hurt nobody...just feelin’ lonely...wanted a friend...and you had ter go an’ say...”

“Shut up.” The voice was now one of unhesitating authority. “What are you called?”

“...Vila...I never thought...”

“That, at least, is painfully obvious. Shut up, Vila.” The hands, strong for all their delicacy, fixed abruptly on his shoulders, pulling him down on the bunk.

Vila’s sobbing became uncontrolled as he abandoned himself to grief. Now he’d done it. The Alpha was going to carry out his threats after all. He muffled his tears as best he could. They didn’t like you to make noise when they did things to you; it just made them angrier. The last coherent thing he said was one final hopeless attempt at explanation.

“I *liked* you...never forced nobody...never meant no harm...”

“Shut up, Vila.” There was an almost tangible feeling of decision from the Alpha, a sense of loin-girding. Vila, in the midst of trying to whimper more quietly, was suddenly shocked out of a year’s growth by the feel of warm lips on his.

The kiss was not gentle, but neither was it intrusive or hurtful. In fact, to Vila, its authority and firmness felt just about perfect. The pent-up arousal which had not dissipated but simply been suspended by his grief swept back over him full force. He shook and made helpless mewling noises of pleasure as the mouth took complete possession of his.

Whether engendered by compassion or exasperation, the tactic worked. All at once Vila had much better things to do than blubber. Silently—well, mostly silently—but enthusiastically, he arched and writhed and wriggled against his partner, clinging to him in unrestrained fervor. The Alpha broke away once to say distinctly and joylessly, “Oh, hell,” but when Vila dragged him back into the kiss he felt with a rush of gratification those delicate, strong hands caressing him. It was over in a few minutes, Vila quivering ecstatically before he knew it. He slumped blissfully against the warm body beside him.

“Now,” said the voice in the darkness, “if you’ve

quite finished, *shut up, Vila*. Or tomorrow I am personally going to see you get transferred within easy access of those four patrician friends of yours.”

Vila, smiling in the lazy pleasure of aftermath, did not believe him. But, either because the god of thieves was watching over him that night or because blind chance had for once decided to tip the scales in his favor, he did shut up. It was not until several weeks later, after many hours of careful and objective observance of Avon, that he realized in full how narrow had been *this* escape. When it was finally driven home to him he almost fainted.

Now, after two years more exposure to Avon, he wondered how he’d ever dared in the first place. Ever dared to proposition, to pursue, to pester the tech. He’d got a glimpse of his folly the next morning, when the Alpha had tossed him out of bed with the curt pronouncement that he never wanted to hear a word about the night’s doings again. *Ever*. Avon hadn’t needed to make threats that day; the chilling look in those heavy-lidded eyes was quite enough. So Vila had never referred to it again. Not in the detention cell, not on the *London*, not on the *Liberator*. There had been times, watching Avon stalk and capture and eviscerate Blake with no apparent effort and a very obvious pleasure, when Vila had wondered if the whole thing hadn’t been some kind of stress-induced hallucination. To think he’d ever imagined, even for a moment, that Avon needed comfort from him. Needed anything from him. Needed anything from anybody.

Paradoxically, this thought triggered a wave of resentful, defensive rebuttal from the thief who now crouched in the *Liberator’s* cramped ventilation shaft. Mentally, Vila took a long swig from his absent bottle of soma. So the great Kerr Avon thought he didn’t need anybody—well, the more fool him. Nobody could live their whole life like that. Avon’d get his one day, see if he didn’t. He’d find out he did *need* somebody, and then Vila would be there—just long enough to laugh in his face before striding out and leaving forever...

Only, Vila remembered wretchedly, as cold reality washed over him again, Avon had someone already. He had Blake. Blake the hero, Blake the compassionate conqueror, Blake the bloody space saint. When that day finally came and Avon realized how much he needed someone, Blake would be waiting with open arms...

Or maybe not. Heroes have a lot of work to do. Saints keep to a busy schedule. And Blake—well, of course he loved Avon, be pretty stupid not to, really...but was just loving enough? Blake came ready-assembled with a capital E ego of his own. It was hard for Vila to imagine the iron-willed rebel leader ever giving way to Avon, ever relaxing his dominance. It was equally hard to imagine Avon submitting to him. That was the problem with relations between Alphas, and especially Alphas like Blake and Avon, he thought. Their whole life together was

bound to be one long fight for supremacy.

And Blake probably wasn't even good in bed. Too pure. Enthusiastic maybe, (unless he spent his time there as elsewhere, with half his mind on the revolution), but dull. No technique. No artistic appreciation.

Well, whatever their fearless leader was or wasn't, these days he and Avon shared a cabin. A cabin with a big, wide, single bed. While maintaining their separate quarters the two Alphas had also commandeered the only room on board with proper sleeping accommodations for two. And all that fuss they had made—that *Blake* had made—about refitting the quarters. So smug. Putting it under a voice-activated lock controlled by Zen—well, if that wasn't just bloody asking for it, what was? Acting like they were afraid somebody might just accidentally happen to walk in on them...

As he wriggled round the final corner, Vila permitted himself an alcoholic grin. Well, maybe somebody *might* just have walked in accidentally—out of a perfectly natural curiosity. To see what kind of war games those two Alpha antagonists got up to when they were alone. But that somebody also knew better than to risk discovery and open confrontation. That somebody knew that if curiosity really had to be satisfied there were safer means of doing it. Because that somebody habitually memorized the locations and courses of ventilation shafts and such wherever he went, just in case one day it might become necessary to hi—that is, to temporarily absent himself from action.

Well, tomorrow *he'd* be the one laughing in his sleeve. Or, not laughing, maybe, but just wearing a pleasant expression that'd make everyone wonder. *He* would have a secret to be smug about. And sometime when Blake was giving one of his lectures about freedom for the masses Vila would just look at him, picturing Blake standing in front of the masses with his trousers down.

He'd reached his destination. Switching off the torch and inching forward on his stomach, careful not to make a sound, he probed with cautious fingers for the ventilation grill. He blinked owlishly in the darkness as he worked, merely to adjust his eyes, of course. Serve Avon right, he thought, if the burly rebel *was* imaginative, with a penchant for whips and chains and leather boots. All the more for Vila to chuckle over.

There. That had done it. The louvres eased open under his touch.

But now, with success literally within his grasp, Vila was seized with an inexplicable reluctance. It wasn't that he felt it was wrong—he was not troubled by any such moral inhibitions. It wasn't even that he was worried about the danger. It was just—well, it was just as if his body were balking at the orders his mind gave.

Stupid, *stupid*, his mind sneered at him. Did you come all this way only to lose your nerve at the last minute? Going to crawl back without even a peek?

Slowly, under that scathing instigation, he lifted his head to the grill. Probably, he thought with something oddly close to relief, they were asleep already. Or not in there at all. He couldn't hear a sound over the faint hiss of the air circulation system.

Asleep, yes, they must be. His eyes, used to the guiding beam of the torch, had still not adjusted fully to the dark, but what he could see seemed to confirm his suspicions. The room was dim and there were shapes outlined on the disgracefully big bed, but all seemed utterly still.

Well. There. Now, Vila, you bloody fool, go back and finish off that bottle that's been calling to you. You showed you could do it if you wanted, you've proved yourself. There're no secrets from you on this ship, and *nobody* can keep you out. Now go.

He had carefully reversed position and was fine-tuning the louvres, when he heard the sound.

It tore at his heart now just as it had done the first time, but for a different reason entirely. He bit down onto his arm to muffle the whimper that rose in his own throat. Damn Avon anyway, and a hundred thousand times over damn Blake. That sound was *his*; the big rebel had everything else. It wasn't *fair*.

Still biting his sleeve, he lifted his head as if compelled to look. His eyes were adjusting, but at first he could see only through a haze of tears. After a few moments he was able to blink them away, anguished jealousy succumbing to confusion. What the hell *were* they doing, anyway? Playing statues?

He could make out the entwined bodies, see the manner of their joining. But the longer he watched the more bewildered he felt...

The picture Vila had not been able to imagine, of Avon yielding, submissive beneath Blake, was laid out in raw detail before him. But *was* it submission? It was as if time had frozen in that cabin down there. The figures were motionless as a tableau.

It took Vila the space of several more breaths to see the movement. Blake, above, buried to the hilt in Avon, uncompromisingly interlocked with his partner, was rocking slightly. So very slightly, such tiny thrusts of the hips, such a very small rotation. The barest minimum of activity, the most economical of motions. And it was putting Avon into ecstasy.

That was the image that would remain printed on Vila's mind when the night was over; not the tangled, trembling-taut bodies, not the scattered bedding or the sweat-sheened limbs, but the expression of Avon's face. On both their faces. The lovers were gazing at one another over a distance of a handspan, gazing open-eyed, unwaveringly, as if they would drown in one another's eyes. Although he had never seen it before Vila recognized it instinctively. Utter trust. Utter abandon. All defenses down, all shields lowered, all barriers breached. The feeling flowing back and forth between them almost

and your dark eyes. And here's to Blake, who doesn't need to look behind him to make sure his followers are still following. And here's to all the Alphas everywhere who hurry on past, only seeing each other.

A picture rose up before him of the storage cabinet in the medical unit, where stronger draughts than soma were kept. Among those shining bottles were some that would help you forget forever.

Ah, no, thought Vila. No.

The pain was less, now, anyway. And he was tired; he wanted to sleep. And after all, he'd lost nothing, because in order to lose something you have to have had

it in the first place.

He squinted at the dregs of soma in the glass. Started to raise it to his lips, then raised it in the air instead.

One more for you, Blake, he thought. And someday, maybe, the luck of your charmed life will run out. Or maybe not. And maybe whenever, wherever it finally does, Avon will follow.

But if Avon *didn't*, and if he looked around, he'd find a Delta waiting behind him. Vila knew that now, at last. He'd be there, always. Waiting for a second chance at that lock he could never open. Or maybe just waiting for Avon to ask him to open the gates of hell.

His will? Engulfed, ensnared, eaten alive, willingly and willfully abandoned to its fate. And his honour, and righteousness, and decency and the milk of human kindness? Forfeit, what felt a lifetime ago... All he cared for, all he cared about, all he could even think about, was his body, and what was not being done to it.

The leather cache-sexe began to dry.

Tautening, tightening, it drew his balls up closer to his shaft, both with the sheer unyielding implacability of shrinking, drying skin, and the skin-crawling pleasure of the firm grasping that held him with such steadfast strength. Even stifled, he could still moan...

The hood muffled his sounds, even to himself, cutting him off ever more, making him alone even in the once-companionable confines of his own mind. And all the while, the leather around his cock was tightening, milking him, as Vila's hands had done, with the same delicious pressure, the same firmness, the very same consistent strength. Helpless, oblivious to everything but the pleasure and the emotionally sensual evocations that cradling harness nurtured, he responded, sinking in the sea of sensations, no touch-stone in his world, save his body and what it felt. There was nothing in his mind but tactility, and the echo of sexuality once absorbed with the same vibrant necessity as breathing itself. Afloat, he became nothing more than that flesh held hard by the leather, and the memories, the flickering images dancing silently inside his head: Vila, kneeling, sucking Avon, until he brought his hands up, those deft, indescribably skilled hands, manipulating him, manhandling him...

Hands upon him, loosening the hood that suffocated all sound. Soon, his brain remembered how to hear, and the noise came to him, a body, moving, behind him, skin whispering, wet sounds, wet, wet sounds, wet skin slithering, whispering, so close, so close... Another sound, his own inarticulate animal moan, deafening in its loudness amidst the faintest rustle of skin on skin.

And then, touch.

Life. Warmth. Pleasure—so severe it hurt, and pain so exquisite, it was ecstasy. He arched backwards, bowing his back, cock sticking out straight as an arrow, peaking the cache-sexe, fighting it, barely held in check by the censure of the leather. The skin behind him withdrew, leaving him with naught but his own body, so he wriggled and squirmed, trying desperately to gain some purchase on the pouch, to release the tension in him, to make the steady pressure pulse to the rhythm of his need. As he grew hotter, his sweat beaded his skin, slicking the leather down again, body betraying itself, loosening the pouch, leaving him, agonised, on the precipice of pleasure. He hung there, suspended between the hardness of the wrist shackle and the hardness of his own cock, a fulcrum of desire. Silent with torment, he waited, knowing how a Master reacts to unsanctioned initiative, knowing how he himself had always responded. He became very still, enticing the giver

of release to come back...

Nothing. No sound, save his own desperate, panting breaths, loud enough to defeat any other inhalation. No touch, save the leather brushing so tentatively against his groin and the bindings stretching his wrists. A terrible moan bubbled into his throat, escaping him, as he escaped his torment by fleeing into the past, and the remembrances of Vila's hands on him, strong fingers, smooth palmed, with that lone callous where the lock-picks pressed when the thief worked, that one harshness catching deliciously on the over-sensitive head of his cock. Vila, on his knees, or on his belly, or on his back, legs in air, but most, and best, kneeling in capitulation, hands shimmering over his cock, bringing pleasure to the body with the skill of his touch, and to the mind with the perfection of his submission. Those hands filled his mind, those hands he had examined so minutely, to discover the secret of the ecstasy they brought. Vila's hands, unique, instantly recognisable, even in the dark.

Sudden smell. Faint, a hint, a tantalising clue... Sandalwood? Vila, yes, always Vila. And another? Yes, the other one, the first, the very first, the titillation of the teacher's discovering them adding an edge to the sweet fumbings in the dark of the sleep-silent dorm; hands on him, thighs clasping him so tightly, with the desperation of the very young unveiling the secrets of sex...

Touch, again. To his fevered mind and body, it felt almost cold, that hardness, as it rubbed from one high globe of his rear to the other, dipping briefly, tragically briefly, into the valley between, giving him only the merest taste of what could be. Where no man had gone before, his mind shrieked to itself, torn between the joy and the despair... Oh, how jealously he had guarded that last bastion, how viciously he had defended his inviolate masculinity, refusing all-comers, keeping his manhood unsullied. *He* was the one who robbed others of their virginity, who stole a little of their machismo for himself, to cloak himself all the more firmly in the mantle of manliness. But now... now, if there were no gag in his mouth, filling him with the taste of his second skin, he'd beg, plead, pray for that cock to return to his centre, to take him, tame him, make him belong, anything, just to give him pleasure, just to fill him up. For that eternity, he knew how his partners felt, knew now what it was to be a bottom man, dependent on another man's whim for your pleasure. God, how he needed that cock in him, or a hand on him, or a mouth. Even, simply, pathetically, the feel of another human being touching any inch of him, bringing him back close enough to reality to focus, to be able to bring himself off with just the images in his mind, and the memories of pleasures past...

Skin, briefly, fingertips skimming his spine, following the line, dipping in between vertebrae, sliding the length of his ribs, the sharpness of nails now, scratching, bringing more pleasure because of the pain, leaving

him with the warmth welling up on his skin, his own blood heating him, its flow a caress, the only stimulation for him to feel.

And then the coolness was back, warmer now, almost as hot as the conflagration that was his skin and cock and mind. Wet. Slick. Slippery. In there. Pressing, without warning, digging into him, setting him on fire, burning him up with the agony of the entrance, that painfully slow, elongated penetration, and then, suddenly, it was over, the cock in him, all the way, reaching up inside him, filling him, touching his heart...

And with it, truth. There was one, only one, whom he would ever have allowed this, who had ever dared demand this. And only one who could ever have made him feel like this, only one he had ever dreamed of having him like this. Only one man, one cock, he had ever wanted to get down on his knees and worship, only one man, one cock he had ever stared at in self-confessed adoration until he knew it better than his own.

Blake.

Every detail was emblazoned into his mind, just as this cock was blazing its way deep into his belly, leaving no fragment untouched. Every detail, every vein, every fold of skin, every hair on those heavy, fecund balls, every pore with its very own breath of musk: he could remember it all, the one part of Blake that he identified most with the rebel. And the regret came flooding in on the tides of memory, bitter in its finality, that he had never given in to his most secret of desires, that he had never let it progress beyond the armistice of mutual masturbation. But he had felt Blake in his hand, had held him tightly in the desperate glory of orgasm, had felt Blake's lifeseed spurt to the top to cover them both. Yes, his body knew Blake, had imagined, with the intermittent flickerings of honesty, what it would feel like to take Blake within, to encompass him, encapsulate him, envelop him. Eat him alive... Make Blake *belong* to him and give up this vainglorious Cause. And this is how it would feel, this burning spear up him, bringing him agonising pleasure, touching every single inch of him.

He became nothing more than an arse being fucked and a cock being hammocked by the tightness of a leather pouch, every thrust forward fucking him into the leather, every yield backwards fucking him on the quintessential masculinity of hard cock. Still he could not see, for the blindfold. Could not speak, for the gag. Could not move, for the immutable straps. Could not hear, for the cascading roar of his own blood. Could not think, for the pounding of his cock and the pounding of the cock into him. He no longer existed, apart from his pleasure and his pain. No more responsibility. No more *angst*. No more guilt. No more blood on his hands. No more past, nor future. Only this present, this surrender to mansex, this subjugation to another man. Wonderful, glorious freedom, this stretching heaviness plunging to its limits up his

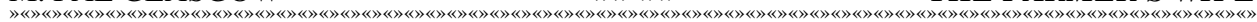
arse. Hitting on the gland buried half-way to his heart, plummeting more cum into his balls, forcing him faster on the dizzying rush to orgasm. A hand, fumbling, loosening the codpiece, freeing him a little, enough that he could rub his own aching hardness against it in syncopated rhythm to the slickness possessing him. A snap of his hips, a last, sliding jab, the cock in him shuddering as he toppled over the edge into the haze of ecstasy, body convulsing, sperm leaping free of him, to be trapped by the blackness of leather.

Trembling spasms still claimed him, as he hung there, the cramps of his muscles only now beginning to make themselves known once more, strong enough to keep him locked away from the blessings of sleep. The mind-numbing pleasure was beginning to fade now, and all that was left was the memorial ache up his arse, and the sure and certain knowledge that he had given himself to another man, that he had finally been taken. And he didn't know who... Who was it who had finally fucked him? To whom had he surrendered? To whom had he handed over that which he had always regarded as his own manhood? His fantasy had kept him sane, had said 'Blake,' but as fear returned in the aftermath of the cleansing of sex, his dreadful helplessness began to weigh on him, pressing him down into his bonds, his flesh yielding to the hardness, as the soft flesh of his arse had yielded to the hardness that had plundered him there, had stolen his last grain of fiercely held identity away... And he did not know to which man he had surrendered, had no way to tell, for he was blind. Utterly, absolutely blind, and with his hands bound, he had no chance of freeing himself, with even less chance of being rescued. Especially by Vila, who had fallen...

The wet cock slipped between his cheeks again, the tip pressing against the painfully dilated anus, the muscle puckered as if waiting for another kiss of that big cock. Who the hell was it? Who could it be who had taken dominion over him? The cock departed, leaving him bereft, once more devoid of even the barest hint of human companionship. Only Blake could be that cruel. But it couldn't possibly be him, for he had fallen, also... Tarrant, perhaps? No, not him. He could never possibly have surrendered his manhood to Tarrant, not even all unknowing. And, his mind ached as the cumulative losses swamped him, Tarrant had fallen, too...

Hands at the back of his head, catching in his hair, undoing the ties that bound his blindfold to his eyes, the strip of leather tapping briefly against the cum-filled cup at his groin. Lower, the anonymous fingers moved, just a fraction, until the buckles that held his gag to him were undone with the tiniest musical chime of metal on metal. The leather was drawn from him, letting him breathe, giving him a chance to speak, as soon as the numbness wore off and let his tongue move again.

The blindness lingered, the immobility of numb-



ness too. His hands were devoid of feeling, dead from loss of circulation, his tongue atrophied from its imprisonment. But finally, the darkness faded, as his eyes once more adjusted to freedom. And there she stood, framed, poised in the doorway, backlit by a light that could never leaven her darkness, fondling a harnessed dildo, a manufactured masculinity, the lie of the manhood that had converted him to slavery. She smiled, the glint of her hair as mocking as the wicked glint of her teeth. He almost expected them to be pointed, marking her as Unhuman, but no, the only pointed thing about her was the idol of manhood she dangled with such contempt from one manicured hand, the red polish gleaming, as brightly as his blood that she had spilled in her unholy feeding from his soul. Light glimmered off the pink tips of her breasts, tangled in the short cap of black hair, lost itself in the midnight depth of her pubic hair, where faint dampness caught the light and spun a black widow's web. She had him, held his masculinity as surely as she held the man-made tool of his deflowering. With a vengeance, he hated her, but could not bring that hate to bear on the object of his ecstatic defeat. She turned then, perhaps laughing, but he could not tell, his eyes and mind too ensorcelled by the evil delight coursing through him with the memory of that ivory hardness taking him, taming him at last with his own

dreams of surrendering to a man... The door closed behind her, as his mind wandered down the paths of pleasure where she had led him, leaving him alone with nothing but the paucity of his own manhood and the pale glimmering of light struggling for life amidst the darkness.

And then absolute horror began.

Interminable, neverending, annihilating in its mindless implacability, it took hold of him, strangling him slowly, so slowly. The light that had glinted on her painted armour was coming from two display cases, both so small, so innocuous in their daily banality. It was what they held within that drove him to the farthest reaches of sanity, toes scrabbling at the edge, nails clawing for a grip. Eyes wide, mouth straining, he stared at the cases, the minutest details on display rendingly familiar.

One held a hand.

Vila.

One held a penis.

Blake.

And then another light came on.

A third case.

A tongue.

Avon opened his mouth to scream.

And the silence never ended

II

...THE SLINGS AND ARROWS...

...or what we like to think of as things that get under your skin. For M. Fae Glasgow this means overcoming attitudes and values you have absorbed, sloughing off ingrained ideas. As a confirmed Blake-basher, she writes the character with little hope of achieving this. But Avon—give him the love of a good Delta and maybe everything will come up roses. Maybe...

N. T. C. also sees things that get under your skin. But for her they're more of an itch you can't scratch, the longing for something you can't ever have. As for the third story... Well you can always, always look at the section title and think literally...

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

M. FAE GLASGOW

NO TWO WAYS ABOUT IT: AVON WAS ONE OF 'THOSE'.

Like a stoat with a rabbit, Vila watched Avon: watched him as he moved around the ship, watched him as he familiarised himself with the equipment, watched as he made himself indispensable. Every time the man moved, he caught Vila's eye, the smooth, predatory grace of him drawing Vila ever closer to making his move. He was right about Avon, he was utterly certain of that. He could tell, he could *always* tell. There was that indefinable something that invariably gave men like Avon away to men like Vila. That same something that would have already revealed itself to Jenna, explaining why the blonde kept her distance, romantically speaking. Asprawl on the lovely plump flight couch, Vila sipped his drink, quiet in the darkness, lying in wait.

Avon's footsteps echoed down the stairs, his seat creaked as he settled himself, buttons clicked as he checked the status of the ship. Cool efficiency, concise competence, complete confidence—traits Vila admired almost as much as an attractive body. The footsteps approached the couch, the sudden hitch in the movement the only indication of any surprise Avon may have felt.

"Well now," the voice said sharply, "isn't this an unnatural sight. Vila, not only on the flight deck when he doesn't have to be, but awake, too. Wonders," voice martini-dry, "will never cease."

Vila simply sprawled more comfortably, spreading his legs, arching slightly so that the faint light would cast enticing shadows pooling at his crotch. "Fancy a drink?" he asked, the perfect picture of innocence, speaking as if he was unaware of his body's blatant seductive-

ness. He knew how carefully he would have to woo Avon, if he wanted to get into the man's bed. And his heart? Perhaps that would bring too many complications... "Go on, have one. What harm could one little drink do, eh?"

Avon stared down at him, barely resisting the almost subliminal need to lick his lips, the reaction of his body almost betraying him into that visible symbol of whetting himself for sex. He was perfectly aware that now would be quite the moment for a sharp come-back, but the words were stuck in his throat by a lump almost as big as the bulge in Vila's trousers.

"C'mon," Vila murmured up at him, patting the couch right beside him, "join us in a drink. I've got plenty, more than enough to share. C'mon, Avon, hate drinking alone..."

Avon glanced at the brown eyes, finally reading the same intent on seduction there that was written all over the languid body splayed on the couch. With a steadying breath, he sat down, promising himself that it would be for a drink, nothing else, never anything else. He had given all that up, when he had met Anna, when she had proven to him that he *was* capable of being a real man, that he *could* be normal, that he *could* belong. She had believed in him, trusted him—and *look*, his mind muttered in a vicious sneer, *where that got her. And just look at what you're thinking about now. Can't keep your mind off it, can you, you disgusting little pervert. Can't get yourself up out of the gutter, can you? Still want all the sick things you used to do, before she proved you weren't as bad as the psychs said. Going to make a liar out of her, are you, all for the sake of a tawdry, sweaty grapple, all for the sake of a bit*

of filth?

“Avon?” Vila asked, naturally concerned. Avon looked so disturbed, so distraught. Well, Vila had seen that look all too often in men like Avon, that look that said their minds were busy replaying all the poison the government and guilds and boards and doctors and psychs and teachers and parents and friends and even total strangers spewed out with such verve. He sat forward, pouring a tall glass of green surcease, framing the right words in his mind, hoping he could speak before Avon did, otherwise the opportunity would be lost, along with any chance he might ever have with Avon. Blunder through this instant and Avon would never dare risk letting him close enough for there to be a second chance. He jumped into speech, making sure that none of his hungry anxiety be betrayed by word or deed. “Been in prison a few times, I have,” he began casually, careful not to overtly notice Avon’s suddenly intense stare at the hackneyed opening gambit. “Heard a lot. Seen a lot.” He paused for a moment, the timing just right to give his words full impact. “Done even more.”

No reaction, the words dropped into a deadening pool of silence. Avon simply stared, eyes even more shuttered, keeping Vila out and all his secrets in, enforcing a palpable distance between them.

There was no possibility of Vila giving in: he wanted—no, *needed*—to end up in Avon’s bed, and he was going to brook no argument. It would be better for Avon to have some warmth in his life, and best for Vila to have a nice cozy haven. Not to mention the sex. God, how he missed that... “Bother you, that, does it? Me admitting to it like that, just out of the blue?”

“Well,” Avon had to stop to clear his throat, sending a little thrill of oncoming victory down Vila’s spine. “Well, it’s hardly the kind of thing that one expects to hear from a man of Class, so I really shouldn’t be at all surprised, now should I?”

“Yeh, but does it *bother* you?”

Avon glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, treading very carefully here. He had been baited once or twice before, and he still had the scorch marks to prove it. “That, of course, depends on what you are admitting to.”

The very cautiousness of the response encouraged Vila to pursue his seduction. If all were to go well, fervent disavowal should be the next thing from Avon, should he follow true to the pattern, if Vila were right and Avon wanted malesex as much as Vila himself craved it. “Oh, you know,” he said, tossing titillating vulgarity in at precisely the right second, “fucking men. Getting it up the arse, sucking blokes off, that kind of thing. Usually on the bottom, I was. Prefer that.”

He could actually see the convulsive swallow as it rippled down Avon’s throat, could actually feel the sudden flash of sexual heat tear through the man at his side. He smiled inwardly. A display of moral outrage, then

the apology, a bit of comfort, the bitter story of the past—his, or Avon’s, either would serve just as well—and then all would be well...

“Are you trying to seduce me, Vila?”

The voice was dangerously soft, throwing Vila off completely. This wasn’t on the cards, this wasn’t how it was supposed to be, he didn’t know how to read this... Panic tap-danced along his nerves and it was his turn to gulp.

“I wouldn’t recommend it, you know,” the voice continued, dangerously quiet, fervently sincere to white-wash the barefaced lies. “I’m straight, you see, very, very straight. Oh, I know, people often misinterpret the way I look, or my gestures, or even some of the things I’ve done, but that is hardly my fault.” A pause then, a moment to drive home the stridently hetero body language. “Of course, I’m also a civilised man, so if you can’t help yourself, then I’m not going to condemn you—nor betray your nasty little secret to the others—just as long as you keep your grubby little paws off me.” He paused, almost stopping there, but deciding to make sure that Vila was thoroughly convinced. “The truth of the matter is that I prefer women. I enjoy them, I like their bodies, I like the way they smell, I like the way they move,” he went on, getting himself caught up in his self-protective fabrications. “I hardly expect the likes of you to understand this, but I love everything about them. And I would rather screw an ugly woman than so much as hold hands with a handsome man. At least, even with an ugly woman, I wouldn’t feel sick, now would I?”

Vila strangled his sigh of relief before it could give him away. It was all right, he hadn’t mis-read Avon, it was all still right. The protests were just that fraction too intense, the sincerity just a touch too sincere, the honest protestations just a touch too much. Always that half step farther than a man with nothing to hide from anyone would ever need to go. “Oh yeh?” he answered belatedly, relaxing now, drawing Avon in with his tacit acceptance of unspoken words. “I used to be the same, but you get to change your mind, when you’re stuck in prison, with nothing but men, men and more men. I mean, it’s sex, sex, everywhere and not a drop to drink, innit? So if you don’t want to walk around with your legs crossed, you get to like men.”

“And is that supposed to excuse you your perversions? Your ‘crime against society’, because society is what put you in prison in the first place?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that. Prison just opened my eyes to what I could have. And how much I could enjoy it.” He stopped again, stretching his legs out a little more, timing quite, quite superb. So superb that it brought the old fear slithering down Avon’s spine.

Vila arched, just a fraction, trousers tightening over his groin, displaying that he was carrying left, tossing Avon’s insidiously cautious fear out the window. “And I

do, Avon. Every chance I get.”

Avon swallowed convulsively, hands rubbing nervously, palm to palm. “Is that an invitation, Vila?”

“Yes.”

There was a long hesitation. “And what makes you think I won’t shove you out of the nearest airlock for even suggesting such a thing?” And as he said it, a leaden coldness bowed his shoulders. How stupid of him to forget that most elementary of rules: attack first, to keep your cover intact. That hesitation, the question instead of the blow, had revealed him. And now Vila could blackmail him quite, quite easily, the old irrational panic screeched at him, sending the old memories turning in their graves...

“Avon?”

Avon stirred himself, bringing his attention back to the man who now held the reins, forcing himself to calm, slamming the headstones back on those old tombs, keeping the past buried. He glanced back at eyes that were full of guile, but it was sexual, not the deceptions that had bitten him before. He was torn, so very torn. Perhaps...

“I said, you won’t throw me out the nearest airlock, ‘cos if you do, you’ll be cutting your nose off to spite your face. I mean, here I am, ready, willing and able, what would you want to leave yourself with your balls in a knot for, eh?”

Avon’s nails were obviously fascinating, judging by the way he was staring at them so raptly.

“Discretion’s my middle name, you know. Vila Discretion Restal, that’s me.”

A small smile flickered briefly and Avon glanced quickly over at him. “Is it now?”

“Oh, yeh. Know how to keep a secret, I do. Wouldn’t let on to Blake or Jenna or anyone else, for that matter. Wouldn’t want to ruin my image, you know.”

Avon laughed outright at that, easing some of the tension. Just as Vila had planned. “So you would seduce me, would you?”

“If you’d let me, I am.”

“And if I don’t?”

Vila shrugged, not letting anything other than mild unconcern show. “Nothing, of course. Not much I can do on my own, is there? Apart from the usual, that is, but I get a bit bored with myself, after a while. Plus, you know what they say.”

“Dare I ask?” Avon murmured, allowing himself a moment—just a moment, he promised himself—of indulgence. Verbal sex was always such a tantalising treat... “And what do they say?”

“Two heads are better than one.”

Avon groaned, both at the pun and the lascivious, squirrel-bright grin in Vila’s eyes. “And are they?”

“Oh, yes. Or so they say, anyway. ‘Course, it’s been so long, I’m not sure I remember that far back. Don’t suppose I could persuade you to refresh my memory for me? I mean, you always say you know everything, an’

all...”

But the brief flicker of possible trust had been snuffed by the cold breath of controlled rationality earned with such bloody effort. Avon had been burned, more than once, and had paid society’s price in painfilled full. He had gone through the re-orientation treatments, had been scarred by his first re-education course when he was 14, had suffered the slings and arrows with something less than stoic dignity. No, he was not about to actually commit himself with words, not yet. Not even in the face of such honest guile. He was still safe: so far, calm reason whispered, everything he had said could be explained away and he had actually done nothing... He would not willingly give up his safety, not this time. This seductive moment smacked too closely of two of his entrapments, stank of corruption, bringing forward times best forgotten, pushing back all possible credulity in Vila’s trustworthiness, making the fear of the hunted guide him. Vila was an unknown quantity, with only the thief’s word for who and what he was. And, echoing of nights drizzled around hidden backroom bars with the ever-present threat of arrest, he was the personification of Avon’s weakness, down to almost every last detail the psychs had on file. Exactly the type that would be sent on entrapment duty amongst the Alphas, precisely the kind who would let you do everything to him and then slap the restraints on you, laughing at you, sneering, calling you names, using the ugly words, threatening to shame you before your family... Every detail had been taken care of in the form of this man sitting there, this man who effaced himself and made himself deceptively small and weak; all the fine points, right down to the non-threatening appearance of someone who would never challenge Avon’s own looks, someone who would not have a string of would-be suitors to riddle Avon with insecurity. Humour and wit, savviness rather than erudition, instinct rather than intellect. No shame, either, and that shamelessness would bring a breath of fresh air to any relationship, blowing away the stench of perversion that clung to Avon’s subconscious perceptions. Then there was the fillip of class, the automatic control that the disparity gave Avon. And most of all, the tantalising coarseness, the earthiness and the pleasure it promised... He did lick his lips this time, staring at Vila’s, thinking about it, imagining it, the two of them, twined together, locked together, sinking into welcoming flesh... He slammed the brakes on his recalcitrant flesh, thinking about Anna. And the police snares and then the conditioning, for that, surely, was what re-orientation was... All the while, Vila sat patiently, waiting for Avon to work this through, empathic enough to guess what Avon was going through. There were certainly times enough when a Delta would wish himself born Alpha, but perhaps poverty was a small enough penalty to be excluded from society’s hysteria.

So he sat quietly, eyes averted to offer Avon

privacy. Vila had his own needs here, but he could bide his time for now, when haste could destroy everything before it could even start. “No strings, Avon,” he offered quietly, still not looking, “and as I said, I like being on the bottom, so you wouldn’t have to do anything that was, you know...”

“Just what are you offering me, Vila?”

“Sex. Good clean fun. Well, good *dirty* fun, actually, that’d be more my style.”

“And the price?”

“Don’t be so bloody insulting, you! I’m a thief, not a prostitute.” He grinned, taking the sting out of the moment, refusing the shame that clung to Avon’s every word. “More a gifted amateur, really.”

“Oh, come on, nothing is ever free. What would you get—if I were to agree to your preposterous suggestion?”

“Same as you, Avon. Someone to share a bed with, someone to keep me warm, good sex.”

“And is that what you need? Badly enough to risk approaching me?”

“Of course I do. I’m a man, aren’t I? An’ even if Jenna would look at me, instead of Alphas like you and Blake, well, when all’s said an’ done, I’d rather have a man, to be honest.”

“And are you?”

“Eh?”

“Honest.”

“Not usually, but I am about this. If you let me,” he allowed the very tip of his pinky to briefly brush Avon’s outer thigh, “I can prove it.”

Avon jumped as if he had been burned, as if even that miniscule touch marked him for all to see his secret. “Really? Do you expect me to believe that?”

“It’s the truth.”

Avon stood with his back to him, twisting the spot where Anna’s ring had rested for so short a time.

“You know,” Vila muttered, apparently changing the subject, “I’m surprised at you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeh. I’d never have thought you were one to give in to the Federation, just because they said you should.”

“You are, presumably, referring to the usual attitude to your little perversion.”

“Not just *my* little perversion, eh, Avon? Our little perversion, more like. An’ a lot of other people’s too. Only seems as if there aren’t many of us about ‘cos most people are too scared to come out and admit it.”

Biting, bitter laughter then. “Oh, so now our resident coward and pervert is a hero, is he?”

“I’m not a pervert, Avon. An’ neither are you.”

Willful misunderstanding can be a wonderfully reassuring thing. “Oh, you’re quite right, I’m not a pervert.”

“That’s not the way I meant that, an’ you know it. An’ don’t try and deny it. If you weren’t that way inclined, you’d’ve beaten me to a pulp, or just laughed in my face at the very start. You’d never’ve let it go on so long, if you weren’t interested.”

“Prurient curiosity, nothing more.”

“You stupid bloody Alpha! Where were you when they were handing out brains? Still trying to work out how to put your trousers on both legs at once?” Vila exploded, rushing on before Avon could either draw breath or pummel him into the ground for his cheek. “There’s not a bloody thing wrong with liking men. Jenna does it, and you don’t hear anyone getting on at her about it, do you? Look, we may not have the education you lot get, but if there’s one thing we Deltas know, is that it doesn’t matter what address is on the envelope, but what’s inside. It’s only sex, Avon, that’s all. Just a tumble, a quick leg over. Doesn’t have to mean anything, unless you want it to. Nothing wrong with it.”

For a long moment, Avon remained where he was, standing stock still, barely breathing, his mind a whirligig of thought. There was Anna, so he knew, at last, that he could actually function like a man, so that, of course, brought Jenna into the picture. Except, Jenna wasn’t interested, and neither, if truth be told, was he. He skipped over that thought, not liking it one ounce. Then, there was Blake. A definite stirring of his groin at *that* thought, which made him shudder. With what the Federation had done to Blake, being approached by a queer—with the attendant misconceptions that insisted on confusing homosexuality and pædophilia—would be, to put it mildly, a complete disaster. A rehabilitation centre would be quite pleasant in comparison. And Gan didn’t even enter into the picture. A man so big, if he should be willing, would not be satisfied with being the bottom man and Avon, after his own past, knew that he could not possibly cope with being a bottom man again. Not after rehab and re-orientation... A precipitous thought caught him unawares before he could even stifle it. Anna... He had been capable with her, and was *that* what he had loved? Seeing himself as a ‘real’ man in society’s eyes, the allure of home and children and belonging? Something so simple as mere safety, the freedom from looking over his shoulder in an agony of fear every time he met a man he liked? And a means to escape the loneliness to which his kind was condemned... *I may be just a queer*, he thought to himself, vaguely aware of the still tenseness sitting on the couch, *but I’m not a coward. And I am a man, in every way, except sexually. After all, I’ve always been the best, at computers, at sports, language, everything I’ve ever done, I’ve proved myself to them.* He stared around himself at the flight deck of the *Liberator*, so alien from everything he had ever known, so very far from home and hearth and the hounding hate that had haunted him. His past had been ripped from him, those good things he had once had... *So why not*

the bad also? Why not take this, make it a chance for freedom? A spaceship of rebels, spatials away from the Federation, people living outside every other law, why not this? Blake will object, but I could fight him on it, or simply make sure he never finds out. But there is still the question of old habits, cautions learned so well as to be under the skin. A sigh gusted from him and he conceded defeat—or claimed victory, he was not entirely certain which this would prove to be. “And how can I possibly trust you, Vila?” he said, wanting to trust, wanting to take the chance, wanting that freedom so badly he could taste it in the air. “How can I possibly know that you are who you say you are, not some...”

“Oh, don’t be so bloody dense, Avon,” patience eroded by the tension and Avon’s excessive caution. After all, Vila knew the truth about himself—and Avon. He had no room for doubts. Not about the sex, only about the dangers of perhaps loving this man too much. “Everyone on the *London* had already been done, given maximum sentences, so why try and get them for something else? In case you hadn’t noticed, that wasn’t beautiful Barra we were being sent to, but Cygnus Alpha. The one you don’t ever get to come back from, remember? Nothing more they could do to any of us, so why bother sending an agent in to trap some poor bloke for wanting to have it off with whatever’s available?”

There was no answer and time tangled between them, muddying the issue.

“I almost got married, once.”

“Smokescreen?” Vila asked, adapting adroitly to Avon’s sudden conversational meanderings. This surely meant that he had been believed, that Avon had surrendered, that it was only a matter of time...

“No. I genuinely...cared for her.” *I think. I hope...* “A very great deal, in fact.”

This, Vila recognised, was not the overly loud protestations of ‘innocence,’ but a true concession, an unexpected window into Avon. “Loved her, did you?”

“Yes...perhaps. And I would have married her, but...”

“What stopped you?”

“Someone had beaten me to it.”

“An’ of course, Alphas don’t divorce, not without a hell of a good excuse. Which falling in love, isn’t.”

“Not in the eyes of the Marriage Tribunal it isn’t.”

Vila forgot the first rule of seducing a protector: he got interested in the personal details. “Good sex, was it?”

“Hmm? Oh yes, very good.”

“First time with a woman, then?”

Vila winced under the glower cutting him to shreds.

“Don’t be so bloody nosy.” But there was only a warning in the words, no real sting and Avon came over to

sit down beside Vila then, taking the proffered glass, drinking it back in a oner, filling himself with Dutch courage. As the drink mellowed from meteor in his throat to banked fire in his stomach, he turned to the casual sexual chat that sufficed in lieu of sexual intimacy. “Have you had women?”

“Oh, yeh, lots. But, I dunno, prefer men for some reason, always have. Prison just gave me a good excuse, that’s all. What about you?”

“I must confess,” Avon still hesitated, finding it terribly difficult to break the habits of a lifetime, wanting the freedom but shying slightly from the risks. Old habits died hard, especially when they were the habits of survival. “I must admit...that...I *like* women, I honestly enjoy their company and their wit, but...I don’t exactly find myself overcome by overwhelming lust every time I look at one. It would take an added something, like power, before I feel desire, and then it’s not for the woman, but the situation.” He blinked owlishly at this unexpected confession that had blurted from his own mouth without his brain knowing about it. “What the hell is this?” he muttered, holding his glass up to the light. Vila shrugged and grinned, and Avon was already well enough under the influence to simply let it all slide. “You know,” he went on, as if he hadn’t interrupted himself, pouring himself another glassful of excuses, “I’d much rather talk to her than have sex with her. When it comes right down to it, I would rather have a man, myself.” *Well, well, well,* he thought fuzzily, *confessing gets easier the more you do it. Rather like sex, really...*

“I’d rather have a man too,” Vila said, leaning back comfortably, one hand resting on Avon’s thigh, fingers moving gently, “but I wouldn’t limit it to just having him by myself. Always enjoyed threesomes, the more the merrier, I always say.”

Avon leaned back against the settee, roaring with laughter, well oiled by now and definitely feeling no pain. Nor any inhibitions, either. That would teach him not to examine what Vila was happily plying him with.

“I can just imagine,” the hapless man gurgled, “Blake’s face if you proposed a thing like *that!*”

Vila blanched and shuddered, not entirely for dramatic effect. “God, he’d kill me, he would. Have an absolute fit all over me. Nah, would never even *think* that kind of thought around our Blake. No point in cutting my brilliant life short and depriving the Galaxy of my incredible talents.”

“Tell me, Vila,” Avon said, concentrating fiercely on getting the dregs of the bottle transferred safely to their glasses, a touch glassy eyed himself, “what makes you so sure that Blake would kill you but that I wouldn’t mind?”

“Oh, I dunno,” Vila answered, looking for the answer in the bottom of his rapidly emptying glass. “Just something, you know, something that makes it as plain as

the nose on your face.” He giggled, delighted with the witticism he had just thought up. “An’ in your case, thass bloody obvious.”

“What’s obvious?”

“That you’d go to bed with me.”

Avon lurched to his feet, making for the exit to the flight deck. “Oy, whera fuck’re you goin’?” Vila yelled, the drink loosening his tongue and the upper class restraints he had placed on it.

“Thought you shaid you wanted me? Or w’s it me who wanted you? Well, sum’b’dy wanted sum’b’dy, so I’m going to bed. Are you coming?”

“Not yet I’m not. But I will be just as soon as I can get you into bed.”

Avon giggled, pleased as punch with the abundant witticisms. “Well, c’mon then. Lesh go and come.”

And with that, he began a slow slide down the wall he had been propping up. Vila grabbed at him, trying to still his slithering progress, but it was like trying to catch water in your fingers. He finally just let Avon sink to the floor and gathered him up from there. Slowly, they lurched their way down the corridor towards Avon’s room, Vila cursing himself every inch of the way.

“C’mon, Avon, one foot in front of the other, there’s a good lad. How could I be so bloody stupid, giving that soddin’ drink to a man like Avon. Strongest thing he ever takes is that watered down fruit juice they call bloody wine. Good, Avon, keep on walkin’, we’re almost there. Oh, please, if there are Gods, don’t let anyone catch us. Avon’ll kill me for getting him drunk.”

Avon chose that moment to display why, precisely, he always refrained from over-imbibement. He started to sing. And not quietly.

“Drunk,” Vila muttered, then reconsidered his assessment. “Drunk an’ bloody disorderly. Never thought you could ever get like this. One way and another, this has been quite the night for revelations, hasn’t it?” He leaned Avon up against the wall, propping him with one hand on his chest as he uncoded the lock with the other. “Trust you to keep your room locked up. Worse than a virgin and a bloody chastity belt. All right, in you go, over to the bed, that’s my lad...”

Avon, thankfully, had subsided into silence, eyes open a mere slit, limbs limp and lethargic. He smiled vaguely, full of unfocussed bonhomie, as Vila balanced him on the edge of the bed. The humour of the situation tickled his funny bone, and he descended into giggles, helpless at the sight of Vila struggling to take off those black boots. Avon had trouble with the damned things himself, which set him off even more. He relaxed into the laughter and relaxed himself right off the bed.

“Upsadaisy,” Vila said, trying to keep a grip on both his irritation and Avon’s unco-operative body. “Into bed with you. I’ll get your things off you a hell of a lot easier if I’ve got you horizontal.”

Avon stared up at him, his tongue as numb as his brain. The room was doing interesting things, as was Vila, and if he could just wake his body up he’d do interesting things back...

Vila raised his eyebrows in disgusted disappointment at the sound of the first snore. “Stupid bloody idiot, getting ‘im drunk as a puggy, what you go an’ do that for, eh? So much for the big seduction, so much for the romance.” He finished stripping Avon off, giving a goodnight pat to a decidedly and irrevocably limp penis. “And so much for the great sex an’ all. Oh well...”

On the verge of leaving, he stopped, looking back at Avon sleeping so peacefully, curled on his side like a child, mouth slack, eyelashes lush on pale cheeks, face open and unshuttered. The rest of the powerful body was covered by the bedclothes, only the barest dusting of hair visible at the base of Avon’s throat, a few inches under the darkening shadow of beard. He looked so inviting lying there, so sweetly silent, the sharp tongue stilled... Vila didn’t even bother coming up with some feeble excuse, such as being concerned that Avon might vomit and therefore choke, or would wake up and be disoriented, or have an allergic reaction to the booze and the mild drug Vila had dropped in there. No, he simply accepted the true justification: he wanted to sleep cuddled up to Avon’s strength and be there when he woke up in the morning. The booze, after all, should be completely out of his system by then and if he had suffered from brewer’s droop tonight, he would still almost certainly have a case of the morning matrimonials. And Vila would be more than happy to take full advantage of the situation. He dumped his clothes beside Avon’s and clambered into the narrow bed, wrapping himself around the heavily sleeping body, beginning the slow spiral down into slumber.

In the dark, in the amorphous moments between waking and sleeping, reality and dreams mingle and merge to form the hopes of the future and to reveal truths with a clarity filtered by the forgiveness of tolerance. As he drifted slowly away, Vila saw something about himself, and about Avon. He saw that his own need was not that of a man needing a protector. A convenient excuse, but this was no prison ship, there was no threat here, apart from the ever-present malice of the Federation baying in the distance. It was attraction that had pushed him, this feeling he had had for Avon, from the very start. Oh, this man could be terribly dangerous to Vila, but not because of Avon’s callousness. No, it was the warmth hidden underneath, the heat that could draw Vila like a moth, either to be burned into extinction, or captured, and held. Emotions, then, not just lust. His body stirred at that, the instinctive recoiling from danger, but his mind simply sighed and snuggled in closer to that lovely warmth. Avon. Physically, he followed his mind, pushing in closer until the softness of his genitals were cradled against Avon’s backside, cozy and snug and belonging. Avon: his

mind caressed the name and the image, seeing the loneliness there, knowing that it could be eased, that Vila could fill the hollows of Avon's life. He'd have a place then, filling all the empty spaces... *Yes*, he thought, reality and dreams becoming one, *we could do well together, be happy we could...*

It was the muttering that woke him.

"Let go, Vila!"

"Mmmh? What for?" he whispered against Avon's nape, kissing him sleepily, still happy from his dreamings.

"Because I need to go to the bathroom, idiot."

So much for romance and passion, he thought.

Again. This really wasn't going quite the way he had planned...

Cozy and comfortable, he listened to the sounds of Avon moving around in the bathroom: the whoosh of the loo, the rush of water, the evocative sounds of a body being cleansed. Smiling drowsily, he cooed in deeper into the blankets, a lovely snug cocoon of warmth, waiting for Avon to come back and join him. He wasn't worried, he knew Avon would come back: the man was too intelligent and too independent to cave in to the venom of mere labels. No, Avon was bent the same way Vila was, a man preferring men, even if there had been a woman in the past for him—after all, love was a funny thing, could make a man do all sorts of odd things out of character, including chasing after marriage. Always assuming that it had been out of pure love for her, and not at least partly adulation of what she could have brought him. Despite the brevity of their acquaintance, there were certain things about Avon that Vila's instincts screamed at him: here was a man, who despite this one love of his, would want the game of power to be between him and his women, something to add the edge of excitement he would need. Vila could just picture him, kissing some woman, then bringing his hand up to her throat to force her to lie at his feet. Power, yes, that's what would arouse Avon. And not only with women. His cock began to lengthen as his mind gave it images of Avon in leather. Black leather. Tight, crotch hugging trousers, longish tunics to hide all his best bits, just enough to tantalise... Absently, Vila's hand snaked down to his groin and he began stroking himself in the rhythm of his dreams to the intimate music of Avon getting ready to fuck him.

The door opened and closed, a whiff of soap and cleanliness spiralling into the bedroom. Vila stretched languidly, displaying his erection, made larger by the draping of blanket, finally opening his eyes to face the silence.

"Avon?"

Avon kept his back to Vila, face averted.

"Avon? What are you getting dressed for? Aren't you coming back to bed?"

There was a definite flush creeping over Avon's

face like lava over rock, covering everything in its path. Vila couldn't read Avon, couldn't tell if the flush were from embarrassment or anger.

"I...I have to get back to the flight deck."

"What for?"

Anger, then, as well as embarrassment. "You fifth grade Delta ignoramus!" the words erupted, come to a furious boil to camouflage the incipient, embarrassed fear. "Last night, you gave me a drink that was not only deceptively mild, but was laced with some drug or other. I'm not such an ingénue that I can't recognise the symptoms. Once my head clears, anyway. You made me intoxicated to the point where I left the flight deck unattended and this ship, therefore, unprotected and not just for the few moments it takes to go to the bathroom or fetch tea. No, long enough to have got us all killed." He rounded on Vila then, the fury submerging the embarrassment in a sea of hate. "And yet you expect me to trust you. You expect me, after you slipped me that damned concoction, to slide into bed with you like a lavender boy. A pervert, a poof, a queer. Ugly words, Vila, for an ugly truth. Well, even if I were that way inclined, and god knows what I said when I was doped to the gills, even if I were 'one of those', I would never let a lying cheat like *you* close enough to *me* to find out."

Even sliding doors can slam if there's hate enough behind them.

Alone, Vila lay in the pale light, nursing his wounds, sorting through what Avon had said and done, sifting the wheat from the chaff, the truth in a nice neat pile on his right, the lies an untidy heap on the left. No matter which way he juggled it, no matter how obvious it was to him that Avon *was* attracted to the idea of samesex, all of it was obscured by the clouds of anger, distrust and self-loathing that crowded around Avon. Explanation, then, of the bitterness, and of the over-achievement. Explanation, then, perhaps, of that most profound of mysteries: why Kerr Avon stayed with Roj Blake. Oh, bitter pill, that, to be rejected not only because of a lifetime's fear and condemnation, but because to Avon, he simply was not good enough. And spurned because he had been stupid and callous enough to force the issue, to manipulate a man without a thought to anything but his own selfish ends, stupid enough to use drink and a drug, no matter how innocuous... At that moment, he really didn't like himself very much, his opinion of himself falling even lower than Avon's.

And then the weeks went past, hours blurring into days, then to weeks, finally to months, until Cally was as much a part of this ravaged family as any of them could claim to be, whilst one crisis after another contorted itself into one long desperate flight and fight.

And now it was Avon who watched Vila like a stoat with a rabbit, turning the tables with surgical sharp-

ness. Of course, he had buried the hatchet, after the first three days of awkward and vitriolic encounters, seemingly willing to let it pass rather than explain the sordid details of their dispute to his fellow crewmembers, but that did nothing to allay the memory of manipulative betrayal. Despite it all, they even established a friendship, of the public sort, as long as no mention was ever made of their near-miss and as long as no attempts were made to render it a friendship in private as well. Avon’s sniping lost its vitriol, most of the time, unless a pustulant reminder tugged at him, bringing back the sting of Vila’s deception. But for the most part, it was comfortable, until a kind of contentment stole into Vila, an acceptance of what he could get, an appreciation of what he had. Better half a loaf than none at all, especially when the bread was still warm. Slow weaving, time healing all, allowing this tentative friendship to grow, quietly, in the unspoken shadows, the warp and weft of shared living and shared humour, the occasional bright flash of complete empathic comprehension. Trust, that most fragile coin of all, gradually crept back to hover on the wings, reluctant to take the stage lest it be once more shot down by human frailty.

And so they let it lie, the fallow field, both the betrayal and the trust, the lust and the understanding, the fears and hopes, allowing time to take its own slow course. The possibilities between them, the vague stirrings were sublimated, replaced by the procrustean struggles between Avon and Blake, by the cheerful mendacity of a would-be woman-chasing Vila. Comforting lies, for both of them, masking truths and pasts, smoothing out life just a little, a veil to draw over the ache of partnership lost before it could be born.

It simply continued, an itch just under the skin, a vagueness that required the barest brush of attention but which would never entirely disappear. Comfort gradually betrayed the hurt, comfort and comfortableness, one with the other, the two emotions balancing the two men, moving them on, a snail-paced healing. And amidst all the mundanity and complacency, there were moments when it would flare, fuelled by something as small as a glance or as grandiose as consuming danger. Those moments, those were the shards of pain, when Vila would glimpse what he had poisoned, what he could have had, if only... When Avon would see what could be, if only...

And for Vila, all that would be left behind would be a depressed and disgusted annoyance at himself, egging him on to seek the disguise of drunkenness to excuse himself from the others, whilst Avon would be once more churning with what independent intellect declared was right and normal, but a lifetime of society’s bullying dragged through the mire, the re-education slipping between his ribs with the ease of a stiletto, stealing all hope for peace from him, transforming life into a series of erotic pictures, all forbidden, taboo temptations to make his feet become clay and his self-worth a thing of the past. All the

while, with calm, measured poise, he cursed the Federation from here to Damnation, with stops at every Purgatory on the way... The way he felt, he knew he’d end up meeting them there.

And oh, how it hurt, always watching Vila, always knowing what comfort lay there, if he could shake the monkey from his back and lie with a man. To know him, to cleave to him, to plough and sow and reap... Temptation, such mouth-watering, cock-hardening temptation, leading to nothing more than soreness in his wrist, friction rubs on his cock and a lingering hollow ache that had nothing to do with emptying his balls. But at least he *was* healing, cell by cell, sloughing off the detritus of the Federation and those endless, looming grey halls that led to the treatment rooms. The shiver those memories evoked were duller now, the needled edge replaced by the lacklustre nagging of a nightmare almost dissolved in the brightness of day.

Always, that is, until the moment when Blake would look at him, that little question darkening his eyes. Always, then, Avon would straighten, literally and figuratively, cramming his lavender wrist under the butchness of leather, the old fear-pumped palpitations rattling through his veins. Whilst Vila simply sprawled a little more comfortably, lifting his drink to Blake, his very disregard better cover than Avon’s calculated pose. But still the looks continued unabated, until the stress began to infiltrate Avon’s spine, rekindling both the old back problems and the tersely smiled bad temper. Needless to say, with pressure like that building, the emotional boil had to burst. Messily.

Night, again, and Avon’s preferred watch. Much better this, giving him an excuse for the avoidance of sleep and humanity alike. Vila would be joining him later, as he always did, but Vila didn’t count as humanity. And not for the contemptuous reasons Avon averred. The best laid plans of mice and men... There really was so very little of the paranoid distrust and bitter resentment of Vila’s deception and guile. Perhaps now might be the right time for them to...shall we say, complicate their relationship. Thinking of it, thinking of him and Vila together in bed, Avon smiled.

“You look as pleased as punch, you do. What happened—Blake fall off his pedestal?”

“For some of us, Blake couldn’t even find the damned pedestal, never mind get up on it.”

Vila set his little trove of goodies on the table, shifting along the couch for Avon to sit beside him. “He’s really been getting on your nerves, hasn’t he?”

“You noticed! I am surprised.”

“Yeh, well, it’d be a bit hard to miss, what with the way you and him have been going at it hammer and tongs.” Face quiescent in thought, he poured two drinks, habitually ostentatious in his honesty: there were no interesting little additives this time. “Avon...”

A small, but heartfelt, groan answered that. "Oh, no. I know that tone of voice. You've been thinking again, haven't you, and after all my good advice, too."

"Not to worry, Avon, I've been taking my vitamins. Seriously, though, Blake really has been bothering you, hasn't he? You're getting really pissed off with him, aren't you?"

"Aren't we all?"

"Jenna's fit to be tied." He leaned over to whisper conspiratorially, "I don't think she's been getting her conjugals, you know."

"Actually, I do know. She's been trying to persuade me into bed with her."

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a carefully blank face is worth an entire volume.

"Oh, she has, has she? That's nice." And unvoiced, *And are you going to take her up on it?* And even quieter, slipping in under the door to whisper around their feet like a homeless cat. *What about me?*

"It just shows how desperate she's become, propositioning me. I'm quite certain," he paused to sip and ease the sudden drought in his throat, "that she knows about me and my...proclivities."

"Yes, but does she know about your men?"

A year before, Avon would have been tearing out of there so quickly both their heads would be spinning, but by now they each of them knew the other well enough to know when the intent to hurt was there. You could, after all, always tell, by the blood dripping.

"I'd hardly call you one of my men."

"You casting aspersions on my manhood?"

Avon made great display of looking at the area in question, saying nothing, merely raising an insolent eyebrow.

Vila sat quite still, happiness and lust beginning to harmonise through his veins. Avon was going to do it, Avon was going to let it happen, Avon was going to fuck him...

"If I could find it, I would. Actually, it was more that I can't claim you as one of my men. You haven't been to bed with me."

"Not from want of bloody trying!"

A quick look, sharp as the intellect driving it. "You have been trying, haven't you? You never did give up, just..."

"Waited."

"Patiently."

"I wouldn't go that far!"

Sudden seriousness to drench them with reality. "How far would you go, Vila?"

"Told you that first night. Anything and everything. And on your terms. Now, there's an offer you can't refuse, isn't it?" And he sat back, having learned from his mistakes. No seduction, this time, neither manipulation nor games, just an honest offer. Let Avon take the lead, let

Avon call the shots, and they just might manage to leave all the bogged-down stigmas and mistakes behind.

"Why?"

"That's a stupid question, isn't it? It's obvious *why*."

"To you, perhaps, but then you're used to combing through that compost heap you call a mind."

"Thanks a lot, Avon."

"Vila. I asked you a question."

Vila, guilty as sin itself, fiddled with the plate of snacks, rearranging everything, displaying his not inconsiderable artistic talent.

"Vila!"

"D'you want the truth, or do you want the diplomatic answer?"

"Both will do nicely."

"Well, you *are* one of the most fanciable men I've ever met in my whole life. Sexy as hell, well-built, good hands, lovely wicked sense of humour. Then again, there is always," a quick, sly glance sideways, "your packed crotch. Around you, Avon, crotch-watching becomes an art form."

Avon allowed himself to test the water with his toe, figuratively speaking, testing his own reservations with a fingertip, in actuality. He stroked the tip of his pinky down the outer muscle of Vila's thigh, smiling at the quiver of response and the flare of acceptance within himself. So. He *could* do it then, could shake the monkey off his back...and get the monkey sitting beside him flat on his back, legs in the air, spread and waiting... The image slowly flooded his groin, swelling it, filling it, heating him. Freedom, so very different from what Blake believed it to be, began its slow chant, oozing adrenalin into his bloodstream, exhilarating him, excitement banking up slowly, slowly, finally blossoming into a smile on his face.

"The unvarnished truth is so charming, coming from such an unexpected source. Now, let's have the diplomatic one, shall we?"

A mumble, completely indecipherable.

"Pardon?"

"I said," Vila repeated, still mumbling, but Avon was listening very carefully now, alerted by the most peculiar expression of courage screwing up Vila's face, "that wasn't the truth. Well, it was, and it wasn't. I mean, I really do fancy you and you really do have a lovely bum and gorgeous basket and all that stuff, but...that was me being diplomatic."

A raised eyebrow for that little confession. "A 'packed crotch' counts as *diplomacy*? At least that explains why Blake is such a terrible diplomat, I suppose. So much for diplomacy of the spade variety. Shall we try the plain, unvarnished truth now?"

"You won't like it."

"Won't I?"

An emphatic shake of a bowed head, hair glowing in the light.

"You seem quite sure of that."

"Dead bloody right, I am. You won't like it."

"Whyever not?"

"Breaks all the rules. It's unnatural."

Avon spluttered, almost choking on his food. "And calmly planning to fuck is *not*? Vila, what the hell are your trying to hide from me that can make two men indulging in *sodomy* seem natural?"

"Did you know your voice gets higher when you're really shocked? Never noticed that before."

"Neither have I. I don't think I've ever been quite as shocked as this in my entire life. Vila, what the hell is this dreadful truth that breaks all the rules?"

"Well, you remember that first night? The night I outdid myself on the stupidity score?"

Dryly—"How could I forget? I had a hangover for a week."

"Sorry about that, just didn't think," and before Avon could make his usual come-back, "but I have been thinking about this, which is why I don't think you're going to like this."

"Why don't you allow me to be the judge of that?"

"Because I don't want to bugger up my chance of getting buggered, that's why!"

Faint surprise trickled across Avon's face like treacle in winter. "Yes, I did rather decide to do that, didn't I? And I said it flat out, too..." He grinned then, really quite pleased with himself. It was such a lovely feeling to not be constantly craning to look over one's shoulder in fear, to restoke those few, heady moments of sexual dominance of his youth.

"Yeh, and I don't want to put you off."

Thoroughly enjoying his debauchery, slipping back into the habits formed in years of back-room parlours, submitting to another form of conditioning, Avon stroked his own groin through the leather of his trousers. "Oh, I don't think you could do that, Vila. It's been quite a while."

"Been months for me. Jenna won't, Cally says my mind is too chaotic, Blake's out of the question, Gan couldn't and you could but you wouldn't."

"So what have you been up to?" Flirtatious now, much to Vila's relief. Perhaps he could still get away without admitting the truth. Him and his big mouth, anyway. Realising Avon was waiting for an answer, Vila put his big mouth to better use than blurting out secrets he had meant to keep firmly to himself. "Same as you, I suppose. Right hand, vids, toys, the usual."

"And fantasy, Vila?"

He looked up then, straight into Avon's eyes, ensnared by the darkness. "Oh, yeh, Avon, lots and lots of fantasies."

And Avon looked back at him, seeing the truth that Vila was trying to hide, this sudden upper-hand filling him with unexpected cruelty, all the years of suppressed anger and humiliation finding expression in that single moment of uncontrolled power. He would regret it, he knew. But then, regrets are such a small part of life. And that first night, the night you won awards for being a fifth grade Delta ignoramus? What were you saying about that night, and this secret of yours that I'm not going to like? Are we harking back to my litany of foul words to describe what we will be doing tonight? Is that it? Did I miss one out, Vila?" he crooned, voice so soft it whispered over Vila's skin, stroking him with pleasure even as the words immolated him. "Did I forget to add that one, small phrase: 'The love that dare not speak its name'? Is *that* the perverted little tale you have to tell?"

"Don't you start that with me, Kerr Avon! Don't you start treating me the way you were treated back home in the Dome. There's no need, no need at all, just cos it was done to you, doesn't mean it's the only way..."

Tears, especially those choked off with the vicious grip of pride, always had moved Avon. Perhaps because it struck so close to home.

"Vila, Vila, do stop snivelling. There's no need..."

"That's what I said, only difference, *I* was right. There's no need for you to say things like that to me, take that attitude, but I'm bloody well entitled to get upset. You're not the only one who's been through the mill a few times, Mr. Bleeding Heart, just they got me in different ways, that's all. Bet you got the standard treatment, the old retraining a few times, bit of re-education, eh? Yeh, well, you should count yourself fuckin' lucky. I was pretty, an' a Delta, no Alpha protection for me, so I got the 'service' duty for the prison guards, an' before that, it was the same tired old rubbish at the Boys' Borstal. It happened to me and it's happened to thousands before me and there's no use hitting yourself on the head with it, Avon! You have to just get shot of it, chuck it away, instead of carrying it around like a bloody great chip on your shoulder."

"How dare you... And is that what you're accusing me of? Wallowing in self-pity? Why you..."

"Well what *else* would you call it? You're so busy congratulating yourself that you've left it all behind, but you haven't. All you've done is taken over the bully's part, that's all. And I may be a stupid, fifth grade Delta ignoramus, but that just makes you a stupid, *first* grade *Alpha* ignorant git! And if you think," he jumped up from the couch, took several steps towards the stairs, "even for just one bloody second," he hurried the last few feet to the bottom of the stairs, "that I'm going to put up with you dishing out the same crap that the monitors and the guards and the social workers used to wallop me with, then you've got another think coming!" and he stumbled, blind, from the flight deck.

In the eddying flurries of his departure, Avon sat where he was, by turns furious and shamed, all the words and accusations churning in mind and stomach, tying him up in a gorgon's knot.

And then Blake just had to walk in, didn't he. Just what Avon needed at this moment in his life. The tech was so thrilled, he almost broke out in a quick burst of the Hallelujah Chorus. "Avon, I just passed Vila in the corridor and he was in quite a state. What the hell's the matter with him?"

"How should I know?" Avon snarled as he stormed past Blake. And then the bitter confusion and pain in his voice stopped Blake in his tracks. "And why the fuck should I care?"

This time, the abrupt departure left frantically squealing flurries of suspicion behind, swirling and swirling around Blake until they finally settled, a heavy pall of suspicion, on his morality-bound shoulders. The words draped him, suffocating him, refusing to simply fade into silence. Not, perhaps, so much the words, but the tone, the *angst*, the feelings. Had it not been a man speaking of another man, had it been, say, Jenna speaking of Blake himself, that he could understand without a second's hesitation. But Avon, of Vila... The implications danced with hobnailed insistence through his skull, a raging headache in their wake. It couldn't be true, but it had to be, for there was no other way to interpret Avon's angered anguish. So. Avon and Vila. Homosexuals. And the other words snaked their way past his better nature, a hundred ugly words to mock the afflicted. Nancy. Queer. Brown nose. Cocksucker. Poof. And on his ship? The Rebels would crucify him...

Unsurprisingly oblivious to the monumental battles of conscience driving their fearless leader to distraction, Vila managed to stay in a complete, total and absolutely drunken stupor for a full three days, thus quite neatly (in his fuddled mind) avoiding both Avon and reality. Alas, all good things must pass and it was Blake himself who finally dragged him back out of his alcoholic womb, hauling him off to medical, where Cally, with a gentleness that surprised only Vila, pumped him full of detox and nutrients, painkillers and electrolytes, keeping the others at bay.

Mother fox with her cubs she may be, but as soon as Vila was fit again, she hauled him to his feet, dusted him off and sent him back to face the world. With which, by now, Vila had no problems at all. It was Avon he couldn't face. Silent as a wraith and just as pale, the thief stole his way to the relative sanctuary of his own room.

Of the tech, there was no sign, Avon being on the flight deck standing watch and barely standing Blake's speculative stares. He didn't want to even consider what was going through Blake's mind at present, he had more than enough on his plate. It struck him as so wickedly ironic that it was a fifth grade Delta who had finally made

him stop and think. Amusing, were it not so pathetic.

Morning, and Vila barely awake, mind disgustingly clear and free of any of the protective padding normally provided by alcoholic potions. And there, just to make sure reality was biting enough, was Avon, calling his name, knocking on his door with old-fashioned courtesy of a kind most people had long since left behind. There was a part of him that wanted to simply keep the door closed and Avon shut out, but the nagging ache to see him again, the gnawing hope of Avon's presence tipped his hand and finally, rather reluctantly, he started the scene all over again.

"Come in."

"Thank you."

"Drink?"

"No, thank you."

"Some tea or anything?"

"Thank you, but no."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Avon, stop being so bloody polite and just say it! Go on, get on with it, tell me to go fuck myself, tell me you apologise for treating me the way you did, but it was just the moment, just a reaction to the past, go on, spew the shit out. Get it over with. Then you can tell me to leave you alone and never actually say what it was you wouldn't have liked."

"All worked out, have you?" Avon said, prowling restlessly around the room, picking Vila's treasures up one by one, examining each carefully, replacing it precisely where he had found it. "You know all my reasons, everything I want to say. You have the future all mapped out for me also, don't you? And I never suspected that you were as omniscient as our beloved and fearless leader."

Uncomfortably aware of his vulnerability, physical and emotional, Vila slouched further under the covers, hiding his chest, hiding himself, hiding the unrepentant erection that had bloomed with such blatant disregard for its owner. Avon was so undeniably beautiful, paler than usual, skin, hair and eyes all in vivid contrast, displaying a tiredness of more than just standing watch. He drank his fill, intoxicating himself with the sight, storing it away for future reference, fuel for his right hand.

"I think Blake suspects me." Avon dropped that particular bombshell with admirable aplomb. Vila gaped.

"You what?"

"I said, I think Blake suspects me."

"Then you're bugged."

"Oh, no I'm not, never that. And certainly not by Blake. It would never do for the People's Hero to be a brown nose."

"Why d'you have to keep on saying things like that, eh, Avon?"

"Things like what?"

"All them nasty words they use for the likes of us."

"Habit, probably. What would you rather we

called...’the likes of us’?”

Wistfully, then. “Men. Just plain men.”

“Not in our lifetime, Vila, no matter if you do manage to live forever. Well, not on Earth, anyway.”

Tentatively bold, now. “Why’d you come here this morning, Avon?”

“Because I had watch last night and you needed sleep. And,” he finally continued when Vila thought that was all he was going to get, “as you said, to apologise.” Words and voice genuinely conciliatory, eyes downcast in melded apology and embarrassment. And that was the precise moment when Vila forgave Avon all, past, present and yet to come, awash in the knowledge that it was going to be all right, it was all going to be absolutely fine.

“Just because,” Avon continued without pause, oblivious to the change taking place on the bed behind him and of the rosy future so adroitly mapped out for him, “old habits die hard is no reason to visit them on others. It’s simply that,” he stopped for a moment, the actual saying of the words harder even than he had anticipated, “I learned to attack first, cover myself, make myself one of the boys, otherwise—well, with my looks, naturally my co-workers and friends would start calling me one of the ‘girls’. I had already lost my family, in a sense and quite frankly, I...”

“Got tired. Just got too tired to fight it any more, too tired not to play the rôles that let you pass as one of the crowd.”

“Yes.” A faint smile, self-deprecating, utterly, unintentionally charming. “Pathetic, isn’t it?”

“Nah, no worse’n what I did.”

“I shudder to think. But do go on, Vila, tell me what you did.”

“Pretended to be stupid.”

“*Pretended?*” But there was a smile behind the outrage.

“Yeh. Better than getting my head bashed in every other week, wasn’t it?”

“As long as it was only your head...” Avon trailed off, the pleasant insults losing their appeal. He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, straightened his spine and committed himself to being bent. Even if Blake *did* suspect. Life, after all, and regrets...

“What I actually came for, Vila, if you’re still willing, if you still want to...”

It was probably the most novel sight the galaxy had ever endured: Kerr Avon, blushing in embarrassment and insecurity, waffling off into silence at the hands of a Delta.

“You mean, if I’m still willing to, y’know, and if I still want to, you know...” Vila grinned up at him. “You just bloodywell try and get out of here without a thorough ravishment first!” And at the flicker of panic in the quickly shielded dark eyes, he tacked on, purely in the interests of clarity, “Been a long time since I’ve been fucked by

anything more interesting than a flesh-coloured, fully-detailed life-sized replica. Come to bed, Avon,” he added, more gently, “go on, come to bed.”

“I’d rather shower first. I’ve spent the last several hours crawling around checking the computers. I’m a bit...”

It was quite touching, really, this modesty. Even if it were a reaction to surreptitiously sweaty gropings in back parlours. Vila patted the bed in unsubtle invitation. “I don’t mind.”

“Yes, well...”

“Bloody first grade Alpha git!” Vila slagged him off, his own smile reflected by Avon’s. “All right, go on, have a shower and come out smelling ever so sweet, fresh enough for even my delicate hooter.”

And it sent shivers of the future down his spine to hear Avon laughing as he went into the shower. There hadn’t actually been a single word of love spoken, but Vila knew how he himself felt, and it was obvious that Avon was already several steps on to that slippery slope. Now, if only the whole thing didn’t get completely cocked up, they might actually stand a chance.

He was almost asleep again by the time Avon finally came back to bed, all damp and clean and smelling absolutely wonderful.

“Make a fortune, you would,” Vila mumbled as he curved his body to fit closely against Avon.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Bottle your smell. Make a fortune you would, all those husbands wanting to get their wives in the mood. Eau d’Avon, we’d call it, sell it in fancy bottles. Yeh, Eau d’Avon. Good name that, used to be a river called Avon once...”

“And where,” the suspicion blared briefly, was hard in Avon’s voice, “did you learn a thing like that, you fifth grade Delta ignoramus?”

“Bloke I knew in prison, once, served four years with him, con man he was, Beta level, stuck in with us lot as part of his punishment.”

A common enough practice. Avon remembered to suppress his native suspiciousness long enough to at least investigate the wonderfully hard object pressing into his thigh. He did, and Vila arched, gasping.

“God, that’s lovely, Avon, been ages since anyone did that.”

Avon stroked him, completely in command, Vila willingly allowing him the lead.

“Got good hands, Avon, oh, yeh, that’s it, that’s so nice, just there, bit more, harder, oh, c’mon, squeeze me, Avon, milk me, oh, Avon, let me at you, lemme touch you, want to taste you, c’mon, let me, let me...”

The hoarse words spurred Avon, flooding blood into his cock and he stretched, feeling himself lengthen and fill, feeling himself harden and rise, the sensations growing stronger, adding to the pleasure of his skin being

touched by roving hands and roving mouth, Vila's tongue a wide, wet swathe over every available inch. He moved back, allowing Vila room to manoeuvre, his breath catching at the first moist kiss on his cock, the soft roughness of tongue pushing his foreskin back even farther, unveiling all those sensitive nerve ends, every single one of them lovingly caressed by an incredibly skilful tongue. He was sucked in, hard, to Vila's mouth and throat, the smoothness of Vila's teeth brushing the sides of Avon cock, the head of his penis grazing the back of Vila's throat. A swallow, and Avon thought he would die from the pleasure. It had been so long, so very long... And willing though Anna had been, no one could hold a candle to Vila's skill in this, not even the few men who had sucked him before. Avon tangled his hands in soft, fair hair, the touch of it so silken he could feel the colour with his fingertips. He lurched up into the wetness, his hands holding Vila still, controlling both their movements, keeping the power to himself. He met only willingness, a calm acceptance of Avon's fears, comprehension and compassion. Naturally: Vila had seen what was done to the Alphas, both in revenge for betraying their class and breeding for being 'that way inclined' and as attempt to re-orient them to go back and breed lots of little Alphas to feed the Federation. Knowing the underlying need governing Avon's hands, Vila relaxed into the grip, opening his throat wider, closing his lips tightly around the hardness that encapsulated Avon, sucking him, vibrating his tongue on the throbbing vein, finally ripping to shreds the lingering shroud of Avon's past, of those entrapments, of other men who had seemed like Vila only to betray and mock and arrest.

Encroaching orgasm made Avon slow, drawing Vila upwards, leaving his wet cock to be cooled by the air brushing over its hyper-sensitivity. He had waited so long, he wasn't going to spend himself so quickly. There was so much more that he'd missed, so many sensations, smells and textures. He may well be too shy to allow Vila intimacies with him before Avon had showered, but he had no such compunctions about his partner, rather feeling the old longing rise up in him. The smell of a man, the heady scent clouding his brain, the taste... With a heartfelt groan, he swooped, catching Vila unawares, burying his face in Vila's groin, tonguing his cock, lips gathering foreskin up and sucking hard, knowing exactly what that felt like, the echo of it pounding through his own cock. Vila's moans whipped at him, making him want more, always more and he opened his mouth to suck him in but... Memories encroached, memories of being on his knees, sucking, pulling his own cock, cum spurting into his mouth, down his throat and then the laughter, the mocking laughter, the arrest...

Vila's hands cradled Avon's face, gently urging him upwards, as he whispered the dirty words he knew Avon would like, spreading his legs beneath Avon's

weight, wrapping arms around him, willing, so very willing.

"C'mon, Avon, need it, really need it, got to 'ave you, need you in me, now, c'mon Avon, fuck me, stick it up me..."

The words banished the past, leaving him with Vila, only Vila, no danger, no cruelty, only Vila... Avon pressed his face to the crook of Vila's neck, lapping up the beaded moisture there, the wetness kindling his memory. "Lubricant," he gasped, not one for talking when arousal was tangoing through him.

"In the bathroom..." Vila stammered, not caring the slightest bit. He could manage without, if it meant not having to let go of Avon for even a second.

"Whereabouts in the..." A sucking bite on Avon's shoulder and he lost the words, hips shoving down into Vila, hard cock to hard cock, undulating his hips, dragging the head of his cock through curling hair, almost whimpering with the intensity of it.

"Sod that. Here, let me suck you, get you wet..."

"No!" the cry was desperate, "I couldn't last if you sucked me. And I want to come in you, don't want just head... Here, let me up, put your legs over my shoulders, that's right."

Vila bit his hand to stifle his scream, the exquisite sensations of Avon's wet tongue moistening his anus, caressing every nerve with fervour, thrilling because it meant that Avon wouldn't leave. Not quite now, any way. He gulped great breaths of air, willing himself not to come, not yet, wait till Avon was in him. "S'all right, that's enough, I know how to open meself up, I'm ready, oh, fuck, I'm ready..."

Avon lowered him, just enough to have him at the best possible angle, knees pressed to his chest, arse spread, legs over Avon's shoulders, hands clenched around Avon's waist. There would be bruises there later, but who was to see, apart from Avon. *And Vila, oh yes, Vila...* He used his left hand to steady himself, his right to grab his own cock and guide it, pressing the flushed head against the pretty pink hole, panting as he watched his flesh be swallowed up by Vila's, as he sank so wonderfully slowly into the hot body, muscles clamping him, hugging him, not stopping until he was all the way in. Just a fraction of movement, and Vila was groaning, mouthing words, head tossing side to side, body and hands clutching Avon, pulling him in, pulling him closer.

The sweat dripped from his forehead to burst on the flushed heat of Vila's chest, flowing into the droplets of sweat. He threw his head back and thrust, hard, feeling the tightness of muscle, the sweet snub of his cock against Vila's prostate, thrust again and again, timelessly, holding back, refusing to lose this wonderful moment to orgasm. Whole body alive, every nerve singing sweet songs of delight, he drowned himself in Vila's body, felt the round head of his cock slide hard along the perfect smoothness

of Vila's prostate, felt the ripples surging through as Vila came in great, silent bursts, ribbons of white bedecking him, transforming him into beauty. Another hard thrust, short, sharp, arrhythmic, and then Avon was there too, shouting his orgasm out, his seed splashing deep within Vila. Slowly, they subsided, disentangling, staying close, gentle hands soothing and stroking, small kisses on sleepy mouths as eyes drifted closed into dreams.

And when Avon awoke, he hadn't gone blind, nor turned to a pillar of salt. No, the old lies were finally gone, even from his subconscious, where they had festered for a lifetime. Fingers threading through soft hair, warm breath whispering against his neck, lax limbs lying heavy on his own. *Strange, how simple sex can mutate, turning into something that took us both so much by surprise. He loves me, that is obvious, and who knows, one day I might even be able to return the favour...*

Avon searched his mind and found himself, shockingly, content, the satiation of his body filling his mind. Carefully, he considered his position, smiling a little at the pun, hugging Vila a trifle nearer, keeping them together. Here, then, was emotional surcease the likes of which he had had with Anna, but without the struggle to feel desire as often as a man ought. There would be no problems with libido here, not with the way Vila's body goaded his into response... Possibilities, then. A thief, as larcenous and amoral as himself, but governed, it would seem from what he'd had the chance to observe, by a code of ethics he could live with. Humour, too, and warmth. Belonging, then, and the chance of love, perhaps, if they were lucky, if they could find a way to steer clear of the moronic malice of others.

Vila moved against him, rubbing his cock along Avon's thigh, beginning yet again the slow flight to arousal. Avon surrendered, confident and content, enjoying the moment and, for the first time since Anna, hopeful for the future. He thought of her then, of her beauty, and her sacrifice for him. He would have done no less for her, and had done everything humanly possible to save her. The sadness was there yet, but the grief was healing, under the balm of Vila's loving hands. Possibilities... under his skin, the thief surely was, but Avon couldn't quite find it in himself to complain.

Blake, however, had no such compunctions.

The rest room, Avon's back to the door as he poured himself a hot drink, back relaxed and his whole being at peace. "Avon? A word, if I may?"

And with the chill of foreknowledge filleting his spine, Avon knew that this was it. This was his father all over again...

"Are you actually trying to imply I have a choice?"

"As much choice as you had this morning."

An elegantly slow pivot, an eyebrow arched, telegraphing challenging contempt, in actuality, a desper-

ate play for time.

"After last night's watch. You slept in Vila's cabin today, instead of your own."

"And?"

"Oh, don't be so damned coy, Avon. You know perfectly well what I'm talking about."

"Yes, I know precisely what you are talking about." He leaned forward, attacking to protect himself, going for the jugular so that his opponent would bleed to death before Avon himself was hurt. "We are talking about you spying on me, and on Vila. We are talking of a megalomania grown to such giddy heights that you sneak around..."

"We are talking," Blake butted in, "about deviant sexual practices being practised on my ship!"

"Your ship?" Avon spat. "Your ship? You cretinous, moronic, egocentric..."

"All right, all right, *our* ship. But the flagship of the Rebellion, of which I am leader. And I can't allow deviant sexual practices on this ship, Avon. It will stop right now, and no more will be said or..."

"Or what? Or you'll tell the others? I hardly think any of them would be surprised, Blake. You, as always, are the last to know, the last to see what is right under your nose. Am I supposed to tremble with fear at the mere thought of a bunch of Rebels and misfits finding out my deep, dark secret? Fetch the smelling salts, the very thought is making me come over all faint."

Blake winced at the last, delivered as it was with a lissome lisp and a spectacularly limp wrist. "Stop that! For god's sake, Avon, there's no need..."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more. There is no need for this moral outrage, Blake, no need for this disapproval, no need for this entire bloody conversation. It's taken me years, Blake, literally more than half my life to come to terms with my nature, and I'll be damned if I let you drive me back into the closet."

The shock paled Blake's face to the colour of whey. "You can't be serious, man? You intend to go public with this whole thing?"

An amused flicker of a look there, hitting Blake a glancing blow. "Hardly the *whole* thing. Or the whole *thing*, for that matter. I've no intention of flaunting it, Blake, but neither have I any intention of living a life of lies and fear. Not again. Not *ever* again."

"You can't do it on this ship."

"Why the hell not?"

"Surely you don't need me to spell it out, Avon?"

"Oh, but I think you do."

"The Federation charged me with child molestation. If I have two practising homosexuals on my ship, the implications! Mud sticks, Avon, especially when I have such a suspect past."

"Then educate the rabble out of their ignorance. Homosexuality and paedophilia have nothing whatever in

common.”

In answer, Blake nibbled a knuckle thoughtfully. “That’s hardly what the psychs say.”

“That’s hardly a reason to believe it, either! Don’t be even more asinine than usual, Blake. I am no more likely to attack a child than you are.” Suspicion reared its ugly head and stared Blake straight in the eye. “But that’s what you’re afraid of, isn’t it? If the truth were to come out about Vila and me, well, then, the truth might come out about you, mightn’t it?”

Revulsion blanketed Blake’s face, a grimace of distaste curling his mouth. “There’s no truth there to come out.”

“Isn’t there?”

“Avon,” Blake said with world-weary patience, “they wiped my mind, not my personality. I may not remember a blasted thing about my sex life before, but I can tell from what twinges of passion I’ve had since then that children don’t do a damn thing for me. No, I have no fears of that. What I fear, is the ignorance of others. And of them assuming the charges to be true because I have practising deviants on board.”

“And one of them your ‘right-hand man’ at that.”

A look severe in its disapproval met that comment head on. “This is neither the time nor the place for levity, Avon. Listen, man, you know perfectly well what public response to this kind of thing is, you know what happens when this kind of thing comes out...” The sight of memory gnarling Avon’s face, the pain grazing him, leaving him pinched and pale, slowed Blake, almost made him stop, almost made him think again, take the chance, fight for this freedom along with all the others, almost...

“This kind of thing?” Avon mocked, destroying his own best chances all unknowing. “Why not call it for what it is, Blake, or are you afraid the mere mention of the words will taint you, mark you for all to see? Buggery, Blake,” he sneered, hitting back before his own hurt could cripple him. It was his father, all over again... “Sodomy. Anal copulation...”

“Thank you for the lesson in linguistics, Avon. Now let me give you one in politics. As the leader, especially with those charges the Federation created specially for me, I have to be squeaky clean, not so much as a breath of scandal, and most especially, not the faintest hint of sexual scandal.”

“And of course, if you have a couple of queers on your ship, then you obviously have to be the same way yourself. It is, after all, terribly catching.”

Such bitterness, such pain... So tempting to offer haven, here, in the security of the ship, give Avon and Vila a home, a place to hide in safety... “Look, Avon, if you and Vila are willing to be completely discreet, I’m willing to let you both stay on, as long as the pair of you continue as before. But if you insist on this blatant behaviour...”

Now *that* piqued Avon’s interest. “What blatant

behaviour?” he demanded, voice reaching out to rip the answer from Blake.

“Nothing in particular, just the way you are with Vila.” That obviously wasn’t enough of an answer, so Blake swallowed his diffidence and elaborated. “The way you and he tease each other, the amount of time you spend together, the way you look at each other, the little touches...” He had been prepared for anything, except raucous laughter.

“Oh, how wonderful. Tell me, Blake, precisely how long have you suspected Vila and me of...being like that?”

Blake flushed and turned his gaze aside. This really wasn’t the kind of topic he felt comfortable discussing. “Quite some time,” he answered eventually, rather reluctantly reconstructing the past for review. “Several months, actually. Certainly since Horizon.”

“That long, really? Hmm, how utterly fascinating. Are you quite sure it wasn’t rather more recent?”

Hindsight being a wonderful thing, Blake claimed it for himself, quietly ignoring just how recent a birth these pangs had suffered. “Absolutely not. It’s been going on for months, but it’s only just very recently that it’s got so out of hand that I’ve needed to say something about it.”

“Really? Well, you should certainly find this interesting, then. For your information,” Avon grinned, his wicked sense of humour enjoying itself immensely. After all, he might as well get some fun out of this daunting business to leaven the difficulties that crowded the wings, waiting to steal the limelight from the pleasant glow lingering in the pit of his stomach and clustering around his nipples, where Vila had sucked and nibbled, and lower, where the caresses... He pulled himself up short, realising he had a most embarrassingly fatuous expression marring his face. Well, a man is entitled to a little foolishness in the giddy glory of the first flush of revolution. “I’m sorry, I seem to have lost my train of thought. Where was I?”

Blake shuddered to think, so lied. “You had some information for me about this sexual deviancy you’ve been practising?” and winced as the words left his mouth, the *double entendres* prancing giggling between them. Avon, contrary to the end, chose to ignore the display, opting instead for some seriousness.

“Ah, yes. I was going to tell you that, despite all this evidence you cite, Vila and I had not actually *done* anything until this morning. Which just goes to show, you can’t judge a book by its cover.”

“Oh, come off it, Avon! D’you honestly expect me to believe that? The way you and Vila are with each other? You’ve obviously been screwing each other from the start.”

“The only person on this ship who’s screwed me is *you*, Blake, and that had nothing to do with sex, now did it? And now you’re trying to take over even that most

traditional of last bastions of man’s freedoms: his choice of with whom he has sex.” He raked Blake from the roots of his hair to the scuffed toes of his boots, pausing with significant contempt somewhere near the middle. “And I refuse to take it. I have told you, from the very start, that you do not lead me, that I choose to follow. Well, I refuse to follow you in this. I will fuck whomsoever I please, regardless of whether it will give apoplectic fits to your missionary herd.” He leaned forward, once more on the attack, fighting for his own Cause, aflame with the zealous first flush of his freedom. He had made his choice, he had cast the past aside, he had rent asunder the ties that had bound him. As his family had ostracised him out, as his Class had exiled him, as Society itself had disposed of him, transporting an Alpha for mere theft, well...he could, and would, do more. He could, and would, do worse. He’d damned well throw them all into whichever level of hell they deserved and live his life to the absolute bloody hilt. For the first time, ever. And he was never going to go back. “I,” he said, firmly, with the strength born of the fight for sheer survival, “have had it up to here, with what other people think and say. What does it matter to *me* what the rabble gibber in shock at the idea of two men sleeping with each other? Why the hell should I care, Blake? There is no room for negotiation on this one. Either you keep your mouth shut and let Vila and me live as we please, or we both leave this ship. After, of course,” he smiled, quite dangerously Blake thought, “we have taken our portions from the treasure room. *You* can keep the ship, if *I* can keep the money. No matter what, I will be so rich that no-one, no-one at all, can touch me.”

“You can’t leave.”

Such certainty, meeting immutable determination. The mountain, and Mohammed. Except here, there was no way to tell which was which. “Oh, yes, I can. And I shall take Vila with me.”

“Always supposing he opts to go with you.”

A small smile, then, shocking Blake with its sweetness, frightening in its goodness. Where, then, was the evil, the dissolution, the moral decline that went with unnatural relationships such as that one? “My god,” Blake breathed, agog, caution swamped by surprise, “you love him.”

Face clenching shut, eyes shuttering, defensive castellations thrown up with dizzying alacrity. “Don’t be so bloody stupid, Blake. It’s simply that I’ve found someone of my own kind, someone who isn’t afraid to be open about it. And I’ve finally found my own courage. I won’t skulk, not again. Regardless of any crap you might mouth at me.”

Blake was still gaping, struggling to come to terms with this most unexpected of revelations. “You love him.”

A sigh of patience strained beyond endurance by a recalcitrant child. “So you’ve already said, and so I’ve

already denied. The truth, if you want it, is that I enjoy men, I prefer men and I’ll be damned if I’m going to spend the rest of my life lying about it.”

“But, surely, Anna...”

“Everyone is entitled to one aberration in their life, surely? And Anna was mine.”

“But you loved her. Or so you’ve led us to believe.” his voice hardened, as the reality began to shift from opacity to transparency, “or led yourself to believe. But that’s not how it was at all, was it, Avon? You used her as a smokescreen, a ruse to hide that you’re a pervert.”

Avon’s spine stiffened, his hackles rising. Only those and such as those were allowed to use words like that, only those who knew what it was to be on the receiving end. “Pervert is it now? And so short a time ago, it was right hand man. So. Now you want me to not only give up having a sex life, but you want me to change my very nature.”

“I didn’t actually say that.”

“But it’s what you want.”

“Well of course it is. But I’m not so naïve that I expect you to do it. It’s not your fault, you can’t help it, any more than someone can help being mentally ill and...”

Avon’s hand stretched out, slowly, with great deliberation, taking Blake by the throat, squeezing him, choking his words off, silencing him. “All my life,” he said, unconsciously pre-empting Vila’s words, were life not to be changed in this moment, “there have been people like you.” He tightened the muscles in his arm, feeling them quiver with strain, and then he had Blake lifted, just off his feet, bereft of air, struggling, shaking. “I’ve had it, Blake. I’ve had it with the attitudes, I’ve had it with the platitudes, I’ve had it with *you*. The only sickness I’ve ever displayed was the mental illness that made me follow you. And now,” he smiled, quite distressingly, frighteningly sweetly, “I’ve made a full and complete recovery. And I’m getting out, free and clear of you and all your kind, with your mealy mouthed platitudes and your intolerance. Go and fight for your misbegotten Cause, Blake, go and wade up to your armpits in other peoples’ blood. Just always make sure that the only freedoms you fight for are ones that you can mention over tea in mixed company. After all, it would never do to let all the little deviants and perverts show their faces. You might be to shocked to see how many of us there are. And *who* we are, Blake. That just might shock you most of all.”

And with that, he abandoned his erstwhile leader, leaving him floundering in a chair, gasping for breath, dragging great bouts of air and sanity back into to him. As he began to recover, as his heaving gouges of air lessened, as the noise abated, there was one more word, one more mocking victory in Avon’s first battle for self-determination. “Oh, and you might as well have your facts straight, Blake. You wouldn’t have two *practising* deviants on your ship. We’re far more accomplished than

that.”

Then he was gone, irrevocably, inarguably. Choice made, and with very little dismay. After all, what was a bloody Revolution, with the promise of a damp, earthy bed six-foot under, when compared to the promise of wealth beyond imaginings and a nice warm bed, with an even warmer companion, for however brief a time that might last? No, Avon could feel man enough without the *Liberator* between his thighs. He'd leave *that* cold comfort to Blake.

The work of moments, then, to gather money, and treasure, and Vila; to hie them to the teleport, to depart before another round of arguments, before the others could be brought in, before their private lives could be held up and examined like dirty linen. On then, to the neutral planet below, thence to another, and another, money smoothing their passage to a cruise of hedonistic pleasure. And finally, of course, to the one place they knew would welcome them. Space City. A station run by deviants, populated by deviants, full of life and light, sin and shame. Home. For now, Avon reminded himself. For now, until we split up, until it's over...

But the months flowed past, with no more than enough excitement to make life stimulating, certainly not enough to endanger life, limb and happiness. There were still the occasional contacts with Blake, when the rebel needed access to a computer system, or simply another in the long line of invitations to return to the *Liberator*. Second thoughts were a wonderful thing, when the mind has time to think beyond the visceral reaction of a lifetime's indoctrination.

“Another communiqué from Blake, is it?” Vila asked, not bothering to get up out of bed to find out.

Avon glanced over at the flashing message console, then ignored it, picking up his tea and taking it back to bed with him. “It would appear to be.”

“Your feet are bloody freezin’, Avon, keep them to yourself!”

“Does this mean you don't love me any more?” He settled himself down, wincing as he took his full weight on his bum, the evidence all too apparent that Vila did, indeed, still love him. Heartily and well, at that.

“Suppose we should read his letter, shouldn't we?”

“You fifth-grade Delta ignoramus, today is a day of rest, a time for relaxation, peace and hedonism. If instead, you want to read a rambling, inane ideological tract, then you may certainly do so. I'll make you an appointment with the doctor for tomorrow.”

Vila snaked one hand round to cup the heavy sac of Avon's balls, thumb tracing the division, fingers feeling the movement under the silk-soft skin. “So, you first-grade Alpha ignorant git, you think I need my mind examined?”

“I think we'd need to find it first, if you honestly intend to read Blake's letter.”

“Yeh,” Vila said, worry furrowing his brow, “he has been getting a bit over the top recently, hasn't he? Think we should do something about it?”

“Namely? What can we possibly do? The man's halo has slipped and cut off the circulation to his brain. If his followers are stupid enough to still let him lead, what can you and I possibly do?”

“Sleep on it?” Vila mused, a filthy chuckle spoiling the expression of innocence he had painted on his face with such care.

“*Sleep?*” Avon queried. “You *are* getting old, aren't you?”

The hand stroking his balls slid lower, one fingertip rubbing lightly against his tender arsehole. “If you weren't so bloody sore, I'd fuck you through the bed again and show you just who's getting old around here.”

“Hmm. I wouldn't go so far as to say I was actually *sore*, Vila, but...” he went on hastily, recognising that oh-so-familiar lusty gleam in those eyes, “perhaps it would be better if *I* were to fuck *you* through the bed...”

In answer, Vila sprawled beside him, spread his legs and hauled Avon on top of him. He said, falsetto Alpha, making Avon laugh, “Fuck away, dear chap, fuck away, do.” And Avon indulged him, indulged them both, revelling in it still, this luxurious freedom to do as he wished, with no threat hulking at his back ready to haul him off in the name of some Godforsaken morality.

Time enough together they had had, that each one knew all the other's secrets, but time enough together was yet brief enough that the very sight of exposed arousal was fuel to passion, was enough to flare bright and hot, lifting lax flesh and making it rigid and ready, easing tight muscle and making it lax and wide. Kissing deeply, hands teasing nipples, fingers trailing through hair, cocks jabbing sweetly, sweat beading flushed flesh, they soared together.

Together they moved, rocking closer, growing wild, sounds of sex, of murmurs, of skin sliding on skin echoing in their bedroom, the smells of sex saturating the air, sweat sharply sweet in the freshness of morning. Words, finally, words of love couched in lust, whispered, broken, into minds fractured by the glory of it all, as the peak stretched higher, bringing them up, every atom alive, the glow suffusing them. And then, suddenly, they were there, their spasms saturating the bed.

With a sigh, Avon eased Vila, dragging the pillow up to the top of the bed, resting his head on it, the redolent aroma of their lovemaking engulfing him. Contentedly, he settled Vila in against himself, felt the strong arms shifting him, reversing their positions, cradling him against Vila. He gave himself up the hedonism of it, giving Vila the lead again. He closed his eyes in the afterglow of loving, the warm hand stroking his hair, soothing him. He

slipped his hand lower on Vila's body, not stopping until he covered Vila's flaccid genitals, protecting Vila's vulnerability, just as Vila sheltered him.

Blake's communiqué languished unread, unnoticed. Unwanted, eventually returned to point of origin, completely forgotten by the only ones who could have made a difference.

And so, when the Andromedans attacked, as attack they must, war being indigenous to the species,

Liberator stood alone, Blake too proud and too obsessed to ally himself with Servalan, no matter for how brief a moment, no matter the cause, for it wasn't *his*.

And so, when the Andromedans broke through the Federation's stunned and scattered forces, Avon and Vila were curled cosily together, warm and drowsy and replete.

They never even knew what hit them.

SWEET THE SIN

N. T. CASILLAS

HIS ACTIONS WERE FORBIDDEN; that alone made them far more alluring, drawing him as nothing else might: not common sense, not the potential for personal harm, nothing weighed as much as the satiation of his curiosity. He continued down the darkened corridor, his nostrils flaring at the stagnant perfume of fear and tight-packed humanity smothering his senses. He'd never been to the lower domes; no one of his caliber had (or, if they did, the matter was private), and his associates would have thought him mad to even entertain such thoughts. No, the great, privileged Alphas refused to even consider what life in a urinal might be like.

What difference could it possibly make to them, he sneered privately to the unseen masses even as he wondered what the inhabitants felt about their living conditions or if they, like the brain dead upstairs, refused to see their existence for what it was.

If one could ignore such...squalor, he thought, stepping over a lump of something that might well have lived at one time, but which now had degenerated beyond recognition. He took care not to let any of the carcass brush against him or his black shirt and trousers. No telling what sort of disease it had succumbed to and getting infected by the damn thing was low on his list of priorities.

There had been people here, at one time. His fine, high-bred nose told him that, and, from the strangling force of the odor, not so long ago. How did hundreds of people (who could *go* nowhere) simply vanish? He could sense their presence, just as he could hear, barely, the sounds of activity, the hum and press of people not three streets over. So why was this street so eerily empty? Why did his shadow alone cast its solitary outline against the tenements when it should have been obscured by thousands of others? Why did his boots alone sound upon the broken shards of pavement when he shouldn't have been able to hear even his own name shouted above the din and

squall of the myriads of Deltas who lived here? And why did he feel that this avenue *wasn't* truly empty? That, somewhere, those hundreds of disembodied souls watched him with keen anticipation, their breaths caught as they watched him play out his fate?

He shrugged aside such fancy. More likely it was just the silence unnerving him. He had never been anywhere so entirely devoid of sound, and the crowds he could not see were but distant rumblings, like sounds heard under water. Save for those distant murmurings, the street was deadly quiet. Even on the upper level, some type of activity always commenced or terminated: the subdued whirl and click of the monitors, the tramp of a fellow Alpha going to or returning from any number of places and, always, the low, monotone of the dome's announcement system. An Alpha was never truly alone, even if he thought (or wished) himself to be. But here, worlds of experience away from the life he lived, he was completely alone. That the area was monitored, he had little doubt. The Federation could ill afford to allow even this cesspit to remain unobserved. Who knew what might fester and brew if Surveillance grew lax?

He pivoted, weighing which venue would lead to the intriguing noises which wafted to him on the air, that same air saturated with the salt tang of its creators' perspiration. He had, after all, come here to view Delta life, not some hauntingly desolate street.

He had walked only half way down his chosen street when he heard the distinctive scrunch of boots displacing gravel. So, he wasn't entirely alone, specters notwithstanding. Intrigued, he wondered, briefly, what his not-so-silent companion intended, as he continued walking, one ear trained to catch the sounds which would alert him to lethal intentions.

Another noise, the dense vocal boom of some alarm or bell seized his attention; yes, there, down that

walk-way, to his left. He twisted sharply following the sound, his dark eyes attempting to discern its origin. He could see very little, merely the darkened hall-corridor winding before him.

His brows knit in consternation. He could have sworn the noise had come from that direction, to his left.

Swinging around completely, he exposed his back as he sought the noise's genesis: he would have done better to guard his rear. By the time he realized his monumental error, his wrist had already been captured and forced up to the middle of his back, just far enough to let him know that his 'shadow' meant business.

Gripping his neck tightly, his captor trotted him up and around the corner, forcing him to the cool, grey wall before releasing him.

"Keep yer hands up there, where I can see 'em. Don't want you pullin' any stunts." His captor broke off, quickly darting glances up and down the darkened area. Satisfied that they could not be seen (and, therefore, interrupted), he turned back to his dark-haired prize.

"So, wot 'av I caught me? A pretty little Alpha run off from his nanny? Shouldn't oughta, you know, she'll be ever so cross when you don't turn up. Is 'at wot you are, wot you done?" He stepped back and turned the man's face to the light, gaining a better view. Catching the dark eyes and the sharp-cut, patrician features, he blew out a deep, appreciative whistle.

"Maybe *not*. Look more like an easy sweet wot slipped his leash and his pimp for the night. Is 'at wot you are?"

With a grimace of obvious distaste, the captive shook his head.

"Wot's amatter? You too proud to rent yerself, but not too proud ta come down 'ere and watch me and my kind kneel, bend and spread *our* legs for credits? Damned Alpha," he muttered as his anger colored his voice. "Came slummin', didn't you? Ta see 'ow the derelicts an' whores live?"

"No...I..."

"Shaddup. I wan' any a yer lip, you'll know it." He studied his tense prisoner, considering how best to use his advantage. He chewed his bottom lip. "Down here, bits like you always find out too late they don't belong. You fancy the idea of snuffin' it cos yer fancy high-born ways won't get you *spit* down here?"

Breathing harshly, the dark-haired man shook his head again quickly. "No...I don't fancy 'snuffin' it, as you say."

The assailant cuffed the helpless man on the shoulder. "You bein' funny? Yer humor gonna cost you."

"No, wait..."

"Naah. Down here, we don' wait for anyone 'cept ourselves." Quickly unobserved by his captive, he smiled. "What's yer life worth, eh, little Alpha?"

Hazarding a glance, the man stared at his captor

through emotion-dilated eyes. He moistened his lips and swallowed, reviving his parched throat. "I've no idea. I doubt I have anything of value..."

"You *are* an Alpha, aren't you? Not some other grade muckin' about?"

"Yes. I mean," he rushed to add as danger flashed in the other man's eyes, "no. I *am* an Alpha."

Then part wiv' yer credits."

"I...haven't any." He dropped his gaze before the other's reproachful glare.

"Humor again? Somun oughta tell you you're not very good at it. Now," he held out his hand, "give 'em up."

The prisoner shook his head. "But, it's the truth."

Lunging, the lower grade clenched the man's throat and shoved his victim to the wall. "I really hope, for *yer* sake, mind, 'at yer 'avin' me on," he muttered, mere inches separating their faces.

Clutching at the resolute fingers, the man struggled to prevent them from cutting off his wind. "Please," he managed as the hands tightened inexorably. "Normally, I do carry some, but I knew where I was coming and thought it better not to...tempt...so...I...left my credits at home."

The lower grade forced his prisoner's head to touch the wall, the better to stare into his eyes and drive home his point. "Talk like that, and you'll end up dead. You'd best have somethin' else to trade since yer skint."

"I doubt I've anything you could...could spend."

The aggressor eyed down his captive's body. The black clothing contrasted sharply against his white skin, complimented, in turn, the lambent darkness of his eyes. Though the dark-haired man still grasped the aggressor's wrist, he waited passively.

Power, addictive and exhilarating, surged through the lower grade at dominating an Upper. When he trailed the fingers of his free hand up the crotch of the other's trousers, detecting the higher grade's incipient erection concealed beneath dark cloth, the captor smiled slightly, unnervingly.

"Well now, pretty, little Alpha, you might just have something better than credits, or nearly, to give up."

"I...I'm not quite certain I take your meaning."

"Take my meaning.' Tha's very humorous, tha' is." He stared at the other intently and stepped closer. Kicking the man's legs open, he insinuated himself between them, still gripping throat and genitals. "I asked you earlier: 'what's yer life worth?'" When his quarry remained silent, he added, "Is it worth spreading those tender cheeks?"

"You don't...not...," the Elite whispered into the unyielding façade before him.

"Oh, yes, *that*." His fingertips skimmed over the firming ridge beneath his hand. "You've nothing *else* of value—so you've admitted, and I've got to have some-

around as though searching for a possible exit. He had very little time to take in the room's barren interior with its four dull walls and its single narrow bed adorned only by a silver duvet and bolster before he heard the one noise which could raise the hair on his neck: the click of a door bolt sliding home, assigning his lot.

He spared a look at the sole occupant of this room only to give ground before the other's ardent, ravenous stare.

"Please," he mumbled. "Whatever you're going to do—just get on with it."

"Oh, but that's just it." Aggressor circled captive, examining him from all angles, fingers tracing the line of muscle in a shoulder here, brushing the small of his back there. "I'm not going to do anything...not yet at any rate." His tongue moistened his lips. "You're going to perform for me. Needn't worry; I don't expect pyrotechnics, you bein' unused to that kinda activity. Still," he smiled, "give us your best, eh?" He sauntered away, his walk insulting by its very insolence. Relaxing back in a nearby chair, he added, "Now then, Bit, get your screams off, and give us a good show."

Flushing to the roots of his dark hair, the higher-grade turned away searching the bare room as though it might contain the required inner-grit to perform the specified act.

"Keep yer eyes shut an' start slow. Tha' should help you forget I'm here—for a bit any road," his captor offered pseudo-generously.

The first button was the hardest; his fingers seemed frozen to it as they clung to the hard, cold fastener, vainly stalling. He refused to blinker his vision, opting instead to examine the carpet as though the warp and weft might hold a clue to his possible deliverance while his fingers balked at this most simple, most defeating task. He inhaled once, sharply, as he toyed with the closure of the shirt, the knot in his chest warming, loosening, as the poisonous bite of submission flowed through him, swept away his resistance in its ensuing damburst and left him shaking, compliant in its wake.

He pushed the button free, and the rest were nothing after that. Pivoting, he allowed the black shirt to slide off one pale shoulder and gifted his audience with a brief, provocative flash of chest hair and nipple before turning sharply and exhibiting the long, smooth muscles of his back. The Alpha stroked one broad fingertip across the emerging nipple, peaking his sensitive flesh.

Gasping audibly, his audience spread his knees wider and reclined further in the chair, rasping open the zipper on his trousers and easing a hand inside to fondle himself as the show continued.

The shirt dropped off the Elite's shoulders only to pile in the crook of his elbows when his hands caught at the trouser fastenings. He fingered the shadowed line of the zipper with one hand while with the other he eased

open the catch, his large, square hand delving beneath the waistband. His slacks tumbled free, gathering around his ankles even as he stepped clear of them, bending to remove boots and slide socks off.

"Let's see how you do yerself, High-grade; show us what you like," a hoarsely whispered command behind him.

Kneeling precariously on the bed, he bent double, exposing his flawless, ivory cheeks to his assailant even as he stroked his hardened shaft.

"C'mon, Bit," his audience growled, "get yer fingers in play. Wanna see you work 'um in tha' perfect, white bum o' yers." The lower grade pumped slowly into his fist while his other hand cupped and squeezed his balls, stoking his arousal.

The captive shifted so that his upper body balanced against the bolster. His hand gripped the mound of one buttock then pressed on, fingers slipping between his cheeks and probing at that virgin cleft, as he thrust harder in the circle of his hand.

"Get on wi' it."

His middle finger pushed ahead, tentatively entering the passive, waiting mouth. Locking his hips outward, he partially relieved his anxiety even as his finger slid deeper, penetrating to the knuckle. Between his spread knees, he could see his abductor pleasuring himself, his long deft fingers wrapped lovingly around his veined shaft. Pale, shimmering droplets moistened the proud, flared head.

How much longer, I wonder, before you put it in me, the man reflected briefly to himself as his fingers tightened on his own cock, whetting his guilty abandon.

As though he had heard these silent musings, the other man stood and stepped out of the tangle of his own trousers before walking toward the bed. Stripping as he advanced, he dropped his shirt to the floor.

The dark-haired man faltered as the other knelt behind him, bestowing one kiss to each cheek as his hands traced over the generous, solid flesh. One hand settled, eventually, around his wrist and pulled it free.

The Elite tensed.

"Relax, beautiful. Needn't upset yerself; I'm just havin' a sample...uhmmm," he murmured as he buried his face between the vulnerable cheeks.

The darker man moaned once as the pliant, wet pressure of his assailant's tongue flicked across the puckered opening to his body before burying his mouth against the back of his hand lest any more condemning noises escape. He closed his eyes when the other's left hand traveled down between his buttocks, down further between his spread, trembling thighs to cup his swaying, coarse-haired balls.

Rolling the heavy sacs in his palm, the Delta pressed them tightly against rampant, aching flesh.

"What'ev we 'ere? A little added twist?" He bit

another kiss into the exposed flesh before him. “An ’ere I thought I was gonna ’af ta work to make you like it. You’re a right little whore, aren’t ya,” he whispered harshly before darting his tongue once more into the spasming pucker.

“If...if I...must...be,” groaned out, though not entirely in pain. Useless to deny it, he did feel the ‘right little whore.’ How, in fact, could he feel otherwise with his pre-cum drenching the coverlet beneath him, his captor’s tongue buried smoothly in him, each pass opening him further, eroding his will to whatever was demanded?

At that moment, his abductor’s demand seemed that he be worshipped with lips, fingers, and tongue. That talented muscle licked down and bathed his pendulous balls before an avaricious mouth sucked them, one at a time, into its burning heat. Despite himself, his body spasmed and convulsed.

“On yer back, now.”

When his prize lay sprawled before him, the aggressor continued, “As neither of us wants that sweet bum ripped, yer goin’ ta make it easier on both of us.” He straddled the man’s shoulders so that the tip of his cock just whispered at the man’s lips.

“Jus’ don’ get any ideas cos’ this,” he displayed his left hand, palm out, “will be right here.” Leaning back, he covered the man’s testicles. “So jus’ try an’ remember: if I lose, so do you. Understand me?”

Kissing the insistent cherry slit, the Upper closed his eyes and murmured his submission. His tongue snaked out, licking up the first salty dew on his captor’s prick and rolling it around his mouth before he swallowed.

“Look at me.” When the Elite didn’t, the Delta squeezed, just hard enough to scare and force obedience.

“You’ve got beautiful eyes; I want to see ’em while I fuck yer mouth.”

Flushing an unhealthy scarlet, the captive obeyed and used his hands to steady the hips above his face. His mouth covered the glans in suckling, appeasing kisses as he concentrated his vision straight on. The Delta’s smooth belly was far easier to face than either the man’s eyes or the demanding flesh in his mouth.

The assailant, now that he realized his captive had foresworn stupid thoughts, opened his hand, gliding it up, then down the turgid sex nuzzling his palm.

“Oh, yeh, tha’s quite lovely,” he murmured down. “Very nice for a beginner.” His palm rubbed over the taut, round balls, his fingers seeking out the hidden path behind them.

“C’mon, pet, open yer legs. You know where I’m goin’. Don’ wanna make me work ta get there, do yer? You wouldn’t like that at all,” he whispered as his middle finger stroked back, teasing the ridge behind the testes.

Bending his knees, the darker man rested his feet on the edge of the bed, allowing his legs to part. He raked his nails up the other’s stomach as his captor pierced him

orally and anally.

“Oh, that’s it; suck me deeper. Such a sweet, obliging mouth you’ve got.”

He strained to comply.

The aggressor’s middle finger slid past the clenching muscle and on into the embracing depths of his captive’s body. Careful with his thrusts, he pumped himself in and out of the man beneath him.

“Oh, slow down, pet, or you’ll have me done before I’m quite ready. We’ve all night to enjoy, and you’ll like the sucking better if...” A sharp intake of breath interrupted him as another wave of pleasure seared him, tautened his balls against his pulsing shaft. To draw out his pleasure, he lengthened his thrusts, forcing them slower and deeper into the wet furnace of his prisoner’s mouth while his index finger joined its fellow in wresting shudders and moans from his forced bed-mate.

Trembling, the Alpha’s thighs spasmed as the other worked his talented fingers fully into him, and he sighed, urging the man to penetrate him deeper. His hands caressed back, molding and kneading the leisurely flexing buttocks.

“God, yer heartbreak right now.” A malicious whisper profaning the air as the aggressor’s palm kissed the vulnerable testes. “Wot wi’ yer hair tousled an’ in yer eyes, and yer mouth full of *me*.” His breath snagged. “Ohhhh, tha’ is *nice*. Use yer tongue, uhm, all around the head.”

The higher grade’s hands pulled hard at the man’s buttocks, urging him faster. Though it would mean swallowing, if he could bring his assailant to climax, he might just manage to escape. His fingers squeezed at the cleft in the man’s ass, widening it.

The man above froze, fingers wavering for the merest second before they were rammed, full force, up his captive.

The unexpected anguish ripped his mouth open in a silent scream, the turgid prick escaping his pain-widened jaws. Eyeing him with undisguised suspicion, his captor panted heavily over him as one quickly striking hand clutched the supine man’s hair and wrenched his head back. He was forced to meet the Delta’s eyes. “Think I don’t know what yer about? I *know*. Tryin’ ta get me ta come in yer mouth so’s I won’t get to this.” The hand squeezed hard on one exposed buttock. “Well, it isn’t goin’ ta work, mate.” When the lower grade had gotten his wind back, he lifted himself off and stood between open thighs, studying the prostrate figure on his bed, choosing.

“Get yer hands under yer knees,” he directed, his decision apparently reached. “An’ lift yer legs back an’ outa me way.” Reading the question in the black, wary stare, he thoroughly enjoyed answering it. “I’m gonna like watchin’ yer eyes when it slides home. C’mon, get yer knees up; ya won’t like me forcin’ those legs back, not if walkin’ tomorrow’s in yer plans.”

Shuddering, the subjugated obeyed.

Finding the entrance to his captive's body once more, the assailant's fingers dallied with the constricted pucker as he aligned his cock. He studied his prize's averted face: his skin pale and sweaty in anticipation, his eyes wide and staring at anything but his companion. At the prick's initial kiss to his anus, the prisoner tensed but seemed to realize that anxiety would make the intensity of it unbearable. Exhaling sharply, he attempted to relax.

As his captor penetrated him to the glans, the Upper inhaled deeply, then breathed in rhythm with each subsequent thrust until the man above him lay sheathed to the balls in the embracing confines of his body. He waited.

Breathing a groan of unadulterated pleasure, the lower grade rested his hands on the alabaster, high-born shoulders, savoring the small, convulsive gasps of dilated muscle clenching his aching sex. He bent closer to kiss, his hands bracing the other's head.

"Yer mine," he asserted into the lips opening beneath his. "Now, like this, with me buried to the hilt in you an' you tight 'n hot around me, yer mine—no one else's." He flexed his hips once.

"Yes damn you, yes," murmured helplessly as the lower grade's burning thrust jarred him, forced the Alpha to feel.

The aggressor's hands shifted, fingers interlacing with his captive's as he pushed the knees back to the heaving chest, gaining an unobstructed view of the firm white cheeks and the banded, quivering mouth gripping him.

As he circled his hips and ground into the yielded flesh beneath, his languid thrusts forced staccato, counterpoint sighs from his prisoner, a prisoner now watching him, his mouth slack, his eyes luminous, heavy-lidded. He bent nearer staring straight into the fervid, black eyes scant inches from his own as he plunged deeper, his body seeking to quench its tortured need in the other man. The slap of flesh against flesh became audible as he drove toward his climax.

The lighter-haired man shifted once more and braced his knees on the bed, his hands pinioning his prisoner's wrists to the mattress.

Locking his ankles around plunging hips, victim urged captor to pound into him as though he longed to be destroyed by the brutal thrusts ravaging his body. Rubbing his own forsaken erection against the hot, trembling belly baring down on him, his captive sought his own release. Just that second, he didn't give a damn about class or reputation or anything beyond satisfying the hunger ravaging him. He hissed his need into waiting, listening ears.

"Harder. Now. You know I need it; bastard, you made me *need* it. Now finish it." He thrashed against the blood-heated flesh spearing him, trying to ease the seething tension.

Hips flexing, the aggressor worked to give them

both release. His man's prick branded his stomach as unreasoning passion blinded them, and the lower grade freed one hand to grasp his companion's suffering cock, stroking and appeasing its demands, but he was close, abominably close. The impending cataclysm pulled his balls, wracked them with the desperation to shoot—now—into his willing partner. Then, just before, he froze, remained completely still, so that his climax hung on the precipice, balancing delicately, awaiting the smallest clench, the merest second, to steal the pit from his stomach and send him down. His anticipation raised the hairs on his neck, and he gulped once before burying his lips against his captive's throat, muffling his scream of pleasure.

In silence, the victim bore the flushed body atop his. He could not suppress his body's mindless, unconscious jolt as the softening prick slid free, releasing him while denying his need.

His assailant seemed content to lie where he was for the moment, one hand lazily stroking his prisoner's waist.

"May I..." The Elite glanced away before the other's languid, knowing stare, unable to bear its intensity.

"Wha's 'at? You say somethin', pretty Alpha?"

"I...only wondered...if...if I might...go...now?" He swallowed. "That is, if you've done with me?"

"Now why would you want that, eh? Goin' to a fancy dress fire, are we?" He nuzzled into the hollow where neck and shoulder joined. "Suppose I 'aven't finished wi' you, uhm?"

"What more could you want to do to me?" a question birthed in a sigh.

If the lower-grade heard at all, he chose to ignore it, preferring instead to bite kisses along the ridged collarbone and inflict caresses on the man. When he stroked down more firmly, he realized that the prisoner beneath his hands still quivered in frustrated arousal though the higher grade struggled to conceal his involuntary jerks and starts. He regarded his helpless conquest through passion-washed eyes while his hands coursed over pinched, brown nipples and down the shivering belly, soothing the desperate man enough to listen.

"You've been sweet, awfully accommodating for an Alpha. So accommodating, in fact, I'm inclined to reward you."

His prisoner shuddered, and an agonized gasp escaped him as he twisted away, attempting to avoid the condemning honesty in his captor's eyes even as he asked, "You'll let me...live?"

Ignoring that as he had the earlier question, his assailant tipped the other's face back around.

"Ssh, easy now, my beauty. It isn't what you fear." He pressed a deliberate, fleeting kiss to the mouth beneath his. "I couldn't leave you undone," he whispered into the shaking fingers stroking his face and the higher-

grade's frantic, voiceless plea. Running his tongue along the line of collarbone before him, he elicited shivers from his distraught captive and savored his delicious vulnerability. All that had gone before was worth the eager lips parting beneath his, demanding that he explore. He knew precisely how to reward his treasure, had known it the moment he glimpsed the man—but not before he'd indulged himself a bit more.

"Keep your knees open," his voice hoarse, oddly gentle.

"W...why?"

"Just do it." He smiled tenderly removing some of the sting from his command.

The Alpha obeyed, as he had throughout.

The other eased down, secretly delighted by his victim's loss of control as he caressed him with the moist length of his body. As the lighter-haired man settled over parted thighs, he used one hand to press the Elite back against the bed while his free hand fingered the riches sequestered between pale, living marble.

Uncertainty widened the dark eyes.

Grinning wickedly, his abductor teased out with his tongue, letting it flicker within whispering distance of the higher-grade's rampant sex and the heated, gossamer dew slowly anointing its crown. His tongue struck out, lapping up that first salt and hinting at the relief it could grant, should it choose, then licked again, this time just under the glans, taunting that now hyper-sensitive spot.

The prisoner convulsed against the bolster, his head thrashing violently now that he lay pinned beneath the other's weight, powerless to resist the plundering delicacy of his tormentor's mouth. He could only lie there and be driven slowly mad by the leisured, deliberate passes over his cock, the contact too fragile to do more than enflame his need.

"Tell me." The aggressor trailed his tongue along the underside drawing a groan of despair from his partner before nibbling kisses into the ardent flesh beneath his lips. "You have to tell me or I won't know," he murmured as his tongue scraped harder at the salt-slicked skin.

His captive shuddered, his eyes dilated with the extremity of his want. "Oh, please," he mouthed, his voice failing him.

"Not very instructive that, 'oh, please,' is it?" Sliding lower, the Delta teased now at the tight-drawn testes with his fingers, his touch still lightly maddening. "You'll get nothing from me beyond this 'til you tell me."

"Please," the victim swallowed, trying to make his voice serve him.

"Humph, another 'please'. Since yer so fond of the word you ken ask for it instead."

Belly heaving, the darker man buried his hands in his hair, concealing his eyes as the last, small thread within him stretched, thinned and snapped, leaving nothing but his surrender.

"No more, please." Covering his eyes with one arm, he reached out with the other, imploring, "Please, let me...come. I...shall go quite mad if you...if you..."

"Keep playing?"

A fierce affirmative shake of his head.

"Oh, now can't have that," he whispered. "Be an awful waste an' I never like ta waste the good stuff: too little o' that trickles down 'ere as i' is, but tha's for later. I promised you someut, an' I like ta play straight wi' me word." He returned to his unfinished task, his mouth grazing the arching head, parting once more to grant it entrance.

At that first wet kiss, the Alpha's hips juttered, locking into a thrust, and he whimpered low in his throat as that experienced mouth began suckling him in contented silence.

The lighter-haired man rubbed his fingers over the pronounced ridge concealed by dark, sweat-moistened tendrils and teased back with his middle finger, seeking.

A low moan of pleasure and the dark-haired man pressed outward, grasping the proffered tip with heated muscle. The abductor answered that wordless invitation, easing his fingers in and filling his prize once more as his mouth and hands sought to please.

The edges between Alpha and sensation blurred, were interwoven into one non-thinking entity by the twin stimuli of hand and mouth. Captive, he knew no thought, no name, no personality, no consciousness beyond the primal heat and pressure rending him back into that truest, most basic clay. His fingers clenched tight the light-brown hair and compelled his captor's head down until his lips buried themselves in the higher grade's coarse, sable thatch of curls.

Another might have strangled, but the lower-grade, feeling that pressure, relaxed his throat and prepared for the final convulsive shudder, the ensuing gush of salt.

The Alpha's soul, his heart, spewed forth, swept out by the salt waves of cum only to crash into their waiting harbor, the welcoming throat of the man kneeling over him, the man who drank down his life and essence as quickly as it streamed out. In exultation and release, the Alpha's laugh resounded out, his hands relinquishing their death grip on the sandy hair caressing his thigh.

"Like that, did you?" his partner questioned breathlessly, rubbing one cheek against warm flesh.

"Oh, yes," whispered through another throaty chuckle. "Come here," he directed in a rush, his hands brushing his companion's shoulders. He gathered the panting man up in his waiting embrace and commanded another kiss before pillowing the flaxen head on his chest.

"You don't half wear a man out, Avon." Fingers circled one slowly relaxing nipple even as his face buried itself in the warm, curling chest hair.

Another indulgent, deep-throated chuckle, then, “Poor Vila, I had no idea that you might consider *this* work. And I thought my little game pleased you.” He stroked his hand down the arm hugging his chest. “Perhaps, next time,” his grip tightened, “you might try it from behind.”

“You mean...havin’...you?”

“Mhum-muum.”

His companion trailed his fingers through the moist hair coiling beneath his hand, garnering his thoughts.

“If you’d like.” His breath stirred the hair beneath his fingertips. “It ’ad be your turn to choose.”

“Ah, I’d almost forgotten. Then I shall have to devise something...innovative...for us to play. Shall I, perhaps, win you at cards from a sadistic Beta? We haven’t done that in quite awhile.”

Vila’s answer was long in coming. “Whatever you’d like I mean it *is* your turn to choose.”

“I’ll leave it until later then. We’ve more than enough time to plan.” His hand stroked up Vila’s arm until it could twine in the fawn-brown hair at the base of his neck.

“Admit it, though,” he whispered as he kissed the back of Vila’s salt-moistened hair. “You *enjoy* doing this to me.”

Knowing better than to answer, Vila rubbed his face in the fine, curling hair under his cheek. “Go to sleep, Avon. We’ll sort it out...later.”

NIGHT ABOARD THE *LIBERATOR*—OR AS CLOSE AS ONE MAY COME IN A SUNLESS ENVIRONMENT. Vila lay regarding his bed partner in the silence of the Alpha’s room. In repose, Avon had curled himself about the lower grade, his head and one arm resting on Vila’s shallowly breathing chest as though he knew the man wouldn’t disturb his rest no matter how uncomfortable Avon made him.

Do you even know what’s made you like this, Vila’s hand traced the pale line of a sleep-chilled shoulder, his mind returning to pensively well-worn thoughts, and what makes *me* choose this when it’s my turn, and I’d much rather love you...gently...the way you deserve? The only time you’ll even let me get near that is when I

blow you—an’ tha’s only after we’ve played your way. Or sometimes, when you choose, and you bed me slow and tender, never knowing that you’re breaking me ’cause I can see how very capable you are of caring, an’ fate rules that it has to be me.

He regarded the sleeping man with resigned dejection. He never knew for certain what it was that Avon pictured in those moments before Vila ‘caught’ him, those few, precious seconds when the Alpha turned toward Zen and the flight deck, his face lifted as though scenting a non-existent breeze. He had his suspicions, though. Suspicions, bloody hell, *certainties*, about the Alpha’s past. Certainties which he was loath to question too deeply if only to spare his own sanity.

Do you know, Avon? he thought. Do you have any idea? I’m so nondescript me own mother’s likely to forget me, but you...how could anyone forget you?

As if in answer, the man sighed and murmured in his sleep, enmeshed in the throes of some dream. One hand slipped down over the smaller man’s stomach resting finally, possessively on Vila’s quiescent sex.

Swallowing once, Vila eased his leg over, granting the larger man, even in sleep, access to him. He gently caressed the sweat-darkened head pillowed on his chest until the man in his arms quieted once more.

“Did you know it was me that night,” he murmured into the hair beneath his lips, “that night you went slummin’? A bored, pampered Alpha, all of 16, maybe 17, an’ no one an’ nothin’ could stop you from seein’ wot the lower domes were like. An’ you saw all right, didn’t you? Even got a taste of it that night. Did you know it was me then? The night you got it in that alley? An’ I can’t tell you cos you’d kill me for it, you would, for doin’ it in the first place, for keepin’ it from you now. So I’m condemned to repeat me past sins cos if I tell, you’d want reality from me. An’ I can’t...not anymore, not after all those years in prison, years when even me wits and thievin’ couldn’t always save me from bein’ anyone’s whore for the takin’. You’d kill me for tha’ as well, for bein’ unable to give wot I made you need. An’ if you didn’t kill me, tha’d be worse: you’d send me away. I couldn’t bear that, Avon, not when I’m powerless where yer concerned, as powerless as you are before yer memory o’ me.”

III

...OF OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE

And so we come to fortune, specifically outrageous fortune and a wealth of meanings to the phrase. Consider fortune as luck, pure chance. Jane Baron has. Change the movement of a molecule and you change the direction of a universe. Jane admits she wanted an optimistic ending for a Blake/Avon story, but that she could not see beyond the doom and destruction of the series. So she altered the paths the characters' lives would take. What would happen to Blake and Avon if...?

And then, of course, there's M. Fae Glasgow's perspective on fortune, her sweetly dark and perverse approach to Blake's 7. Here is an author who prefers the pessimism of the series. What does she do with fortune? She thinks in terms of bloodlines and inheritance. We are, she says, ultimately, the sum of our early teachings. There is no avoiding the heritage of blood. We can never completely overcome who we have been brought up to be. And if our names are Vila, Blake, or Avon...

THE BLINK OF AN EYE

JANE BARON

A DUSTMOTE DANCED IN THE AIR NEXT TO JENNA STANNIS' THICK FRINGE OF EYELASHES. Almost invisible to the human eye, it hung there, bobbing slightly. The number of molecules colliding with the dustmote on one side or another was totally random, thus relegating the question of the speck's immediate future to the strange world of quantum mechanics. In an infinite number of possible universes the dustmote swept boldly on to impinge on Jenna's sclera, where, impudently irritating the tender moist membrane, it forced her to blink.

In at least one universe, it did not.

Jenna was at the flight board, lazily punching in corrections to the course Blake head set, waiting for Blake himself to appear. She wore a peacock blue gown which plunged down in the front, nipped in at the waist, and fit sleekly all over.

"All well?" At Blake's voice she looked up. Then, gracefully, she straightened, her eyes fixed on his. She smiled.

Blake smiled back, pleasantly. "All well?" he repeated.

Jenna's smile slipped a little, but she nailed it back in place. "Yes, Blake." She leaned forward the least bit, resisting the temptation to wet her lips.

"Good. Cally?"

From the lower level of the flight deck, Cally had turned to face them. "All systems functioning normally;

status is firm," she said in a credible imitation of Zen. She added firmly, "That is a lovely outfit, Jenna."

"Thank you, Cally."

"So it is. Lovely. But then you always do look lovely, Jenna." Blake's voice was rich and warm, full of good-humor and camaraderie. Jenna's hands clenched into fists. Why, why, *why*? This time she wasn't going to be able to stop herself, wasn't going to keep her temper...

Why? *Why*—?

"Hasn't Orac finished those interpolations yet? I'd like to get some sleep before the next crusade." In sharp contrast to Blake's tones, the voice behind her was dry, clean-edged, and impatient. Blake and Cally glanced up.

It was at this point that the destiny of the dustmote was decided. By purest accident, it did not drift into Jenna's eye. It went the other way entirely. She did not blink. Her gaze remained fixed on Blake, as it had been, with an almost fierce concentration. And so she saw, in the barest fraction of a second, the change in his expression.

She turned.

Avon stood in the doorway, wearing a loose tunic of woven silver over black leathers which encased his lower body like a glove. His expression was one of abstracted arrogance. Nothing unusual about that. Nothing disturbing.

But she had *seen*.

The universe had changed.

"So *that's* it..." Drawing the words out sibi-

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lantly, she looked with slitted, burning eyes from Avon to Blake and back again. The tiny fire in the center of her being that she had tended so long with so little blazed up, turned all in an instant into a conflagration of hate.

"I beg your pardon, Jenna?"

"*That's* it, isn't it, Blake?" She managed to pack a year of frustration into one short, jagged laugh. "That's why you don't want me. Because you want *him*."

Blake's brows came together, more in puzzlement than in anger. "Jenna, what are you talking about?"

"*Him!*" She spat the word out. "Don't pretend it isn't true, Blake. All this time, all your fights...lovers' quarrels, were they? Kiss and make up afterwards did you?"

Blake, after his initial look of shock, had flushed dull red. "I don't know what you're implying—"

"I'm not implying; *I know*. You want to take him to bed." She turned her brittle smile on Avon, the viciousness of it dazzling. "Or has he done it already, Avon?"

The technician stood as he had before, only the slight narrowing of his eyes and the curl of his lips betraying any reaction. "And what do you think?" he asked smoothly, his voice matching her smile.

"I think that if he hasn't it isn't for lack of you trying. No wonder you're so cold to women. So obvious—I should have seen it before. Dressing like that, always standing so close to him. Provoking him...to do what? To hit you? Or—take you?"

A dangerous light shone in those hooded eyes. "You really shouldn't judge others by what you want yourself, Jenna."

Her laughter rang out harshly. "Oh, you needn't worry; I won't spoil your little game." She whirled back on Blake. "I always wondered why you put up with him. Simple, isn't it? So you can watch him all day, dream about him at night..."

"The only dreams I'm likely to have concerning Avon are nightmares—probably involving him killing me! For a reasonable profit, of course!" Blake was almost shouting.

Avon had gone very still. Now he smiled, and the temperature of the room dropped ten degrees.

"Speaking of bed, I was just going there myself," he said. "I'll leave you two to enjoy yourselves, shall I?" He turned on his heel.

"Avon, wait! Dammit, I didn't mean—" Blake looked furiously from the woman beside him to the empty doorway, then abruptly made his decision. Jenna's laughter followed him, a sound like breaking glass.

He caught up with the tech at the entrance to Avon's room and shouldered his way in before the door snicked shut.

"Avon, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way."

"Which way did you mean it, Blake?" Only

someone who knew the man well could have told how angry he was.

"I didn't mean it at all! I just lost my temper. What Jenna said made me think of those Federation charges—about those boys, those children..."

"I thought they were supposed to be false."

"Of course they were false. Just as false as this ridiculous idea of Jenna's. It's obviously untrue. *Obviously*. I can't begin to imagine what put it into her head..." Appalled, Blake heard the bluster in his own voice, watched his words take on new shape as they hit the air, twisting to mean the exact opposite of what they said.

Avon murmured, "Can't you?"

Blake shook his head, mortified at the way the blood continued to rush to his face. He forced himself to keep a veneer of calm, but he could not meet the other man's eyes. He felt the silence lengthen, knew the exact instant when it became remarkable. And then the truth lay between them, like a solid object, irrefutable. In plain view.

"I suppose," said Avon, softly, "that you also believe I provoke you?"

Blake felt himself burst out of the thin bubble of calm. "Well, why the hell *do* you dress like that if you don't want to lay the whole galaxy?" he shouted, dumbfounding himself.

Avon looked more amused than outraged—which was an outrage in itself. He relaxed suddenly, resting his hips against the desk, soft black boots stretched out in front of him. "Why do you think?"

Blake's face was on fire. "I can't believe I said that. Truly, I didn't mean that you—that you would—"

"What? Go to bed with a man? Or with *you*? I'm sure Jenna would feel vindicated to know that I've at least done the former." A deliberately inflammatory smile crossed his face. "Frequently."

Blake had no way to cope with the conflicting emotions which arose in him. His body's reaction threw him into confusion.

"Yes, well, that doesn't mean—what she said. And it's hardly as if I wanted—" Blake ran into the truth again and fell over it. "And, in any case, it's not what *you* want. I know you neither like nor trust me..."

"Have you ever given me any reason to do either?"

Blake stiffened. "Clearly not. And since this disturbs us both so much I'll just leave. I didn't come here with any—ulterior motives." He made a slight motion toward the door. "Which I'm sure will be a weight off your mind."

"Don't try to manipulate me, Blake. It won't work."

To his own astonishment, Blake heard himself saying:

"Then...what will?"

He stepped back to examine this incredible utterance, and, astounding himself even more, decided to stand by it.

The air in the room was suddenly charged with tension. Blake met Avon's eyes directly; neither looked away. Then the tech broke the silence, laughing aloud. Mockery shone behind that fey smile. "Well now, if it's so important to you, I'm sure we can come to an...arrangement."

Blake flushed more deeply at the open contempt. "Whoring, Avon? Sex for money? Not exactly what I would have thought of you. But that is what you're talking about, isn't it?"

The mocking smile merely grew sweeter. "Of course. As you always say, anything for a reasonable profit. Besides, you can't possibly imagine you have anything else I want."

The desire to hit, to hurt, rose in Blake. But there was another desire, too: an ache in his groin which had been increasing minute by minute, taking no heed of Avon's insults. Or perhaps...enjoying them? The two urges mingled, making him giddy, transmuting into the longing to *have*. He had never wanted anyone so much in his life. He needed—he wanted...

"Avon."

"We can discuss price later if you prefer. After you've sampled the goods," said Avon, nastily. As Blake stepped forward, anger uppermost, unsure himself of what he was planning to do, Avon stopped him. Cold. By unbuckling the belt which clasped the silver tunic.

Blake found himself frozen, tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, the hardness between his legs filling and thickening. His desire grew with every item of clothing Avon draped with casual precision over the chair. By the time the technician lay stretched out on the bed, naked, languorous, and all-too-obviously unaroused, Blake was in a sort of pleasurable agony staring at the other man. Gorgeous. Naturally. So beautiful. Oh godgodgod...

"Well? Are you going to join me? Or would you prefer to stand there staring until you come in your trousers?"

I will not let you win, I will not let you make me lose my temper. That is exactly what you want.

Then:

What do I want?

The answer came, a visceral thing which drove him to strip off his own clothes heedless of fastenings. Strangely, the answer also bound him into a kind of manic gentleness, so that he could not, could *not* throw himself on Avon and pin him down by sheer weight, taking by force what had been jeeringly offered for sale. Instead, he knelt by the bedside, almost trembling.

The tech had closed his eyes and turned away at the sight of Blake's expression. His own face was shuttered. Slowly, every muscle fighting every other muscle,

Blake reached out a hand to brush the curve of Avon's jaw. Now that he was doing it he knew exactly what he wanted to do. Anger had drained away, forgotten. With something like reverence he traced that achingly beautiful line, not touching the lips yet, not oh-my-god-that-mouth, but flattening his hand to slide down the smooth column of throat to the firm, lightly muscled plane of chest. His fingertips grazed a rosy-brown nipple and something leapt inside him as he felt it harden responsively. He bent, scarcely knowing what he was doing, to kiss Avon's forehead.

"Kerr...oh, god..."

Avon's snapped open. Some divine force had invented sovereign contempt especially for those sculpted lips—and then broken the mold. "You will *not* call me that, Blake. And if you don't get on with it I am going to be asleep before you start. So unless you should wish to add hypnophilia to your list sexual eccentricities, you had best do something."

Blake scarcely heard the words for the cool music of the voice. "Let's both do something," he murmured, trying to draw the technician's arms around him, to gather him in an embrace. "Just hold me..."

"You are not *listening*," Avon snapped, shrugging off the hands and twisting away. "Blake, take off the blindfold, pull the plugs out of your ears, and try to get one idea into that vast wasteland in your head. We are not lovers. I have agreed—for appropriate compensation—to lend you my body for the few minutes it is going to take you to 'get off'. That gives you the right to fuck me, not to drool all over me crooning endearments. And although you are paying to touch me, you surely can't imagine I should want to touch *you*."

Blindfold off, ears open, mind clear. The rage scalded him, coursing through his body, twisting his mouth into bitterness. "It's just sex, then, is it?"

"It is not anything remotely resembling sex yet. All you've managed so far is some heavy breathing. I am about to drop off through sheer boredom."

"Really, Avon? What about this?" His hand, rough now, slid down the flat belly to grip a hardening shaft of flesh.

Scorn melted into something softer, more sensual—and far more frightening. "Yes, well, I must admit that seeing you out of control, shaking like a fourteen-year-old virgin ready to explode at the touch of my hand, does do something for me after all. Although not, obviously, quite as much as it does for you."

The red haze of anger and the red haze of desire surged together in Blake's head, sweeping away thought. "Sex, then," he grated, seizing Avon's upper arms deliberately, sinking his fingers into the muscles. "Whatever you say." Roughly, he took the other man's mouth, forcing it open with the pressure of his own. It was the old primal battle between them now, all excuses suffocated under the

rush of power. He felt Avon's recoil, and ignored it, thrusting his tongue in hard. There was, in any case, nowhere for Avon *to* recoil. He was now lying trapped beneath Blake's body, one arm pinned above his head. Blake sank his teeth into the softness of a lower lip, then reached between Avon's legs. No softness there. He felt a cruel delight at the way the jutting erection thickened and swelled in his hand. Delight, too, at the sudden, undisguisable response in the tech's mouth, the yielding, the involuntary tremor that passed through his body. The taste of pleasure.

"So this is what you like, how you like it," he grated in Avon's ear, using his teeth, roughly, to do what his fingers had done so gently before: biting and sucking his way down the length of that smooth throat. He was making marks, marks Avon would not be able to hide later, and he was fiercely glad of it. He rasped a damp tongue and scraped with his teeth at the sensitive mound of a nipple and felt rather than heard the gasp this elicited. Felt, also, the sudden helpless thrust of hot flesh into his encircling fingers. Avon at once disciplined his hips into stillness, pride lending him the strength to wrest one arm free and lash out. A waste of energy: the larger man had the advantages of weight and power—and he also had a steel grip just a hairsbreadth from Avon's scrotum. Wincing as a blow connected, Blake knocked the fist aside and seized the tech by the hair, jerking his head back to look directly into his eyes. Simultaneously, he shifted his grip that hairsbreadth, feeling the reaction of fear—and arousal.

"Now," he said, panting slightly, his gaze boring into Avon's, "you are going to lie *very* still and be a good boy—or you're going to get hurt. Badly, Avon. More, I think, than even you would like."

The brown eyes were dilated, only the thinnest rim of iris visible around the black pupils. As Blake's meaning sank in they unfocused, as if Avon were mentally escaping what he must physically endure. The tech's expression was still remote, but the fight had gone out of him. Blake thought, with satisfaction, that it had been the words as much as the stranglehold that had done it. In his desire to wound, the rebel had instinctively—almost unwittingly—put his finger on a nerve in Avon's soul.

"That *is* what you like, isn't it?" he said, his lips turning up in a smile he himself would not have recognized. "A little pain to make you hotter?" He released the tech's hair and flicked a nipple sharply with his fingernail, watching Avon's reaction. "Ah. I thought so. Tell me, Avon, how does it feel?"

"Being raped by a leader of the Cause?" The voice was low and ice-cold with hatred.

Blake laughed shortly. "As you've so often reminded me, I'm no saint, no hero. Just a terrorist. Surely that entitles me to the odd bit of raping and pillaging, hmm?"

"Just get on with it, Blake. Do what you came to

and then leave." The tech's face was almost expressionless now, dark eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"Oh, no. It's not that simple. I've waited for far too long; I've wanted to be *close* to you for too long. You agreed to this and after all I'm the one who shall pay the price. You, my friend, are going to enjoy it; it's going to be the best you ever had. I want you to remember me."

Still holding Avon lightly and precisely, he bent to kiss him again.

Very, very gently.

The tech had no choice but to submit to it, could not struggle without putting himself in agony. Soft lips nibbled at his, then a gently probing tongue was thrust between them, the insidious sweetness forcing him to receive it. Circling and teasing, the tongue delved ever deeper, drawing his own tongue into Blake's mouth, wresting helpless waves of response from the depths of his being. Blake had once been an expert at this, and now he was combining the unremembered skill of years with a devastating tenderness to break through layer after layer of Avon's defenses.

He kept on doing it.

A long time.

He did it until the man lying under him was shaking, hips writhing uncontrollably in rhythm with the now-gentle hand which clasped him, breath sobbing into Blake's mouth. Until every lightest stroke caused a shudder of reaction, until there was no resistance to anything his hands urged. He did it until, looking up, he saw what he had never seen before: Avon's mask shattered. The tech's pale skin was deeply flushed, eyes slitted, head rolling mindlessly from side to side in rapture at the continued caresses. Small sounds worked their way out of his throat.

In the midst of realizing that he had won, triumph blossomed into something else, something so much deeper it was almost frightening. Blake put his lips to Avon's ear.

"It can be good this way, Kerr," he breathed. "It doesn't have to hurt. Let me do it for you; let me make you happy. Please. Relax and let it happen."

Avon jerked away from him. "Lights down," he gasped, his voice hoarse but much stronger than Blake would have expected. Then, hissing raggedly into the sudden dimness: "Rape is rape, Blake. I may not be able to stop you—but at least I don't have to look at your pious hypocritical face whilst you do it."

The lights would only respond to Avon's voice, but Blake felt more amused than thwarted. "I don't need to see *you*," he whispered, "to know how much you enjoy it."

"Did those three children—enjoy it?"

The ground dropped from beneath him and fury and desire both blazed white-hot. Blake jerked back and delivered one stinging slap, then reached down in a

merciless, hurting caress, feeling a savage satisfaction as Avon’s back arched, breath exploding from his lungs, rampant flesh pressing into Blake’s marauding hand.

“You like it well enough, don’t you? Don’t you, Avon? Say it!”

Sufficient light reflected off the curve of those perfect lips to show they were closed defiantly. Though Avon’s head was flung back, nostrils flared, neck corded, though he was breathing in rapid, shallow pants, it was clear he did not intend any cry of passion—or pain—to escape him.

“Say it, damn you!” Blake took his mouth again, bearing down on the smaller man with his full weight, grinding his erection between Avon’s thighs, against the throbbing flesh. Avon shivered, hips lifting involuntarily. He whimpered once, then was silent, denying Blake in the only way that he could.

Hit you, I should hit you. Don’t you know what I can do to you? God, I could slap you silly, half-unconscious, make you beg, make you cry, break you. And then...take you.

Yes...take you...

It was not pity which induced Blake to leap straight to the second part of this plan, forgoing the first. His own control was breaking, and he could feel the first irresistible stirrings of orgasm.

“Turn over,” he snarled, and when Avon, predictably, did no such thing, he wrestled him onto his stomach. Slamming a hand onto Avon’s neck, he pushed his head down, pressing his face into the pillow. With his other hand and his knees he roughly forced Avon’s legs apart, hips raised in offering.

Avon was fighting desperately now, heedless of what pain or damage Blake might inflict in revenge. Blake overwhelmed him easily, forcing him back into place by brute strength. He did not even think of using threats. Rationality was gone, usurped by a sexual desire beyond anything he had ever known, and a need to hurt as he had been hurt.

“You said I had the right to *fuck* you.” Blake brought out the word with a peculiar pleasure, savoring it. “Well, that’s just what I’m going to do.” His thumb, fumbling in unfamiliar territory, found entrance and sank in suddenly. Avon gasped, his entire body going rigid, clenching will-lessly on the intruding object.

“So you like it that much, do you?” The tight ring of muscles convulsed as his thumb probed deeper, scraping the dry channel, but it was not in an effort to expel him. No, those rhythmic spasms, that circular motion of the hips, bespoke a partner in the throes of pleasure.

“Tell me how you want it.” Blake’s own erection had swollen to unprecedented size now, steaming, thrusting bluntly toward entry, desperate to plunder. He had never in his life been so aroused, so excited. The picture of Avon impaled beneath him, writhing in an ecstasy of

abandon, filled his mind, blocking out everything else. His thoughts spun off dizzily; he heard his voice as if it were a stranger’s. “God, you’re so tight; you’re going to love this; the more you fight the more it’s going to hurt you—”

Avon shuddered, hands clutching at knotted sheets. Blake pressed harder on his neck, bowing it, forcing it deeper into the pillow, muffling the sounds he made.

“Hurt you, hurt you...” His body burned for completion, for annihilation; the craving of particle for anti-particle. Only one thing mattered, to fulfil this, to possess utterly, to master.

“Hurt you...hurt you...”

The sounds he made.

Like the backlash from a star’s implosion, like ice water in a sleeper’s face, it hit him. With a dizzying wrench Blake’s mind returned, a despairing cry from within him echoing Avon’s. Gasping, he threw himself back and crouched trembling on his haunches, eyes open but blind in shock and horror.

At the same moment, not an instant before or after, the other man suddenly went limp, collapsing bonelessly, head buried in his arms. His body shook visibly as he struggled for breath.

“Oh, Avon, god, what have I done? What was I *doing*? I didn’t mean to hurt you, never wanted to hurt you. Avon, please, oh god, I didn’t mean it—”

He had never seen the arrogant, aristocratic technician like this before: conquered, submissive. Blake’s mind reeled with self-loathing. Babbling the same words over and over, he reached out, taking the trembling, unresisting body in his arms, cradling it.

And in that instant his platonic intentions left him, overridden by the flare of sweet agony in his groin. Incredibly, Avon was still fully erect. As Blake pulled him close that silken hardness thrust between his legs, and he responded to it instinctively, like an animal in rut. The two of them surged together, locked in battle, connected by hot flesh and electric desire. Blake’s arms clasped Avon to him, his lips roved over Avon’s wet face, planting hundreds of tiny kisses, stopping his mouth with them, spreading them through his hair. Nothing existed except Avon, the smell of Avon, the taste of Avon, the feel of Avon in his arms. Vaguely, he was aware that he was speaking, a torrent of pleas and apologies and endearments mixed together. The universe tightened and focused sharply as need and pleasure built to an unbearable height, and he felt himself reach the crest. His vision blurred; time stood still in a moment of unheard-of promise. He heard himself whisper Avon’s name. And then he was shuddering, groaning aloud in exquisite release, as spasms of pure sensation washed over him. It lasted a long time, and it was, quite simply, the best physical thing he could ever remember happening to him. He felt Avon, still silent,



shuddering violently in his arms. Then rushing blackness swept toward him and he fell into it.

Some time afterward he became aware of his own slowly calming breath. Avon lay partially pinned beneath him. They were both soaking with sweat, Avon’s hair dark with it, plastered to his head. Blake lay stunned, his brain moving sluggishly, trying to comprehend what had happened. And failing.

“Get off me,” said a ragged voice, and he thought: that’s Avon. Avon. With whom you fight ever day, who makes you furious enough to kill him at least once a week, who always seems to be on hand to keep you from getting killed. Avon, whom you just tried to rape. Or did rape.

He had rolled off long before these tangled thoughts wound to their conclusion, obeying mechanically. He was sick with self-disgust. Dully, eyes shut, he felt Avon get off the bed, then heard, from the bathroom, the indistinct noises of cleansing.

He was grateful the lights were still down. Bad enough to face what he saw in himself in this semi-darkness; to look at his soul in the light would send him off screaming.

There was only one way to fight the utter panic which rose at this thought, and that was with anger—and denial. He hadn’t really hurt Avon. Avon had provoked it, had almost compelled him to do it. And he *wouldn’t* hurt Avon, would never really hurt Avon, because he—

A second panic, exactly equal to the first, burst out from another direction and between the two the threatening words were sent spinning into void. He would not hurt Avon, he corrected himself careful, because...he cared for Avon. He...respected him, even...admired him, And, in any case, Roj Blake was not a man who enjoyed hurting anyone.

Armed with this certain knowledge, he actually sat up when the bathroom door opened and Avon appeared in the doorway, framed with the light behind him. He sought to find words which would give him what suddenly seemed the most important thing in the universe—Avon’s forgiveness.

“What are you still doing here?” The tech’s voice was dispassionate, as if commenting on a household pest seen scuttling into a corner.

Blake found it very hard to swallow. “I thought...I needed...”

“Well, think and need elsewhere. Get off my bed.” The voice was utterly emotionless. Blake rose, feeling clumsy, then stood, feeling unclean. Inside and out. All at once it was more than he could bear to stand beside this immaculate stranger who was stripping off the sheets without so much as a glance at him. He bolted for the bathroom, afraid he was going to be sick.

Sometime later, skin stinging, he felt...well, not

human, but at least cleaner. At first he had tried to reflect on what he had done, but the dull pressure in his head soon made thought impossible. He felt drugged—or drunk. He could barely walk straight.

Re-entering the dark room, his light-dazzled eyes could just make out the impassive features of the man seated on the chair. Blake walked slowly—*lumbering*, he thought, with uncharacteristic self-derrogation—to the bed. His clothes had been thrown into a corner with the used sheets. He made no attempt to retrieve them.

“I don’t know what to say, Avon.” His tongue felt thick, awkward. The words of penitence were so shallow as to constitute insult. “I never meant to hurt you. I swear that.”

“But, Blake,” said Avon musically, “you mean so little of what you say or do.”

Blake did not even flinch, just let the blow sink in, receiving it.

“I think that may be true.” He sat and put his head in his hands, wishing he could massage away the crushing pain in his temples. Wishing he could find some way, not to make excuse for what he had done, but to express how he now felt about it. “I also think...I must be mad. I almost had myself convinced that you wanted it. To have done *that...to you...*” The sentence trailed off, dissolving in the acid mists of his pain and self-hatred. “There aren’t words, Avon.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll find some. You’re too fond of martyrdom to enjoy it in silence.”

Blake did not look up. He had no resistance left. Avon made a sharp sound of disgust.

“Pull a couple of stakes out of your bleeding heart, Blake. You were right the first time. I did provoke it. I’ve wanted it for a long time, and as always I got exactly what I wanted.”

“No.”

“Yes, Blake. I can face the truth even if you can’t. Everything went according to plan—except that you couldn’t quite go through with it at the end, could you? Robbed me even of that.”

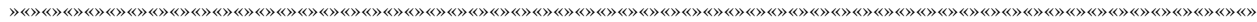
Blake did manage to look up then.

“Why?”

“To be rid of you. Finally. To prove that you’re no better than any other man. To—exorcise you. And I was willing to destroy you to do it. I want you to remember that the next time you pull out your hair shirt.” In the clouded depths of Blake’s mind he recognized something in the tone, and he thought: *You have nothing to be ashamed of. It was me, all me...*

“Now we have that settled, would you be so kind as to vacate my bed? Or do you feel inclined to try a little more forcible sodomy? At your leisure, of course.”

Blake was no longer listening. Avon’s admission had pulled out the last stay from under him and he was unbalanced, lost in his own constricted world of pain. *It*



was me, my fault, my responsibility... His body slumped until he was supported against the wall but the waves of vertigo continued unabated. He sensed, rather than heard, Avon move to stand before him.

“What’s wrong?”

He heard that, if only dimly. “Just—dizzy. Can’t—get up. Rest...”

“Here? And you expect me to *let you*? Not even you could be that stupid, that deluded...” The voice broke off abruptly. Blake had no idea how much time passed before he felt hands shaking him, pulling him up, then releasing him to fall back on the bed where he lay inert.

“Very well.” Avon’s voice was bloodless, drained, and seemed to come from a great distance. A chair squeaked as it took weight. “I certainly can’t carry you out, and there’s not much more you can do to me at this point, is there? Go to sleep, Blake. Maybe this has all been a dream.”

Because of Jenna, Blake thought through the pain. *None of this needed to happen, and but for her...* His thoughts unraveled and rationality left him again. *Perhaps*, he thought, *it is Jenna’s dream...*

The darkness was kind to him and enfolded him.

He woke up screaming. The next moment, choking off those horrible hoarse cries, struggling with something unseen in the darkness, he realized where he was. The throbbing pain was gone and he could reason again. Oh, god, what I have done now, he thought as his mind cleared, and then the memory of torment coursed through him. The dreams. Those hellish dreams. He should have expected them, they always came after the headaches, but this time he had been too dazed and hurt to think. And so he’d had one of his nightmares... in full view of Avon. The thought made him flinch.

Not just in view. There were hands pinning his wrists, the weight of a knee against his side. He fought to free himself—and then stopped. First rape and now battery, was that it? He let Avon hold him still.

“What the hell,” hissed the voice from the darkness, “is going on?”

He forced himself to speak calmly. “It was just...a nightmare. I have them sometimes, after...”

“After a spot of raping and pillaging?”

Blake did not answer. He was trying to stop shaking.

“Well?”

“No, Avon.”—dully. “I mean, I don’t usually go around raping people. The dreams... simply happen more often when I am... disturbed. Please let me go.”

There was a sound that might have been a laugh and the bed shifted as Avon settled more comfortably. “Oh, hardly. I really think, after all that’s happened, that I am entitled to a glimpse of what goes on in your saintly soul. Tell me about it, Blake.”

Blake tensed against the hands which restrained him. He didn’t want to hurt Avon again. But...

“I can’t. I don’t remember.”

“Try.” Getting no response, the tech added, “Let me help you. It begins with the mindwipe.”

“Yes.” He wet his lips. “Did I... say anything in my sleep?”

You said enough. The mindwipe: go on.”

Blake struggled with the enormity of his own inner darkness. To go down into *that*, willingly? To try to remember? To try and *speak* it?”

“It... hurt.”

A sound of exasperation. “Quite. Now tell me something a fifth grade Delta toddler wouldn’t know.”

Perhaps there was expiation in this. Perhaps Avon *was* entitled to see his private hell. Shivering, rationality balking, he did what he had never done before: made an effort to translate the nightmare images into words, laying his penance at Avon’s feet.

“I remember lights... faces. All around me. Never leaving. Hurting me. Wearing me out. Finally... breaking me.”

“Yes. Go on.”

“That’s all. The rest... is blocked. All I know is that there are some things worse than torture.” He stopped, frozen, unable to go on. Despite his intentions he could not force his mind into that darkness. He *couldn’t*.

“Tell me.”

“I can’t remember!”

“Tell me!”

“God damn you, Avon!” Terror woke a spark of self-preservation. “You’ve been going on about rape; well, this is just as bad. You want to tear into me, to violate my soul! You want to rip my mind open—”

“You sanctimonious *bastard*.” Blake suddenly felt the technician’s full weight on him, felt a searing pain in his shoulder as one arm was twisted above his head, felt, to his shock, Avon’s breath on his lips, in his mouth. “*You dare to talk about emotional rape? You? You’ve raped me daily since first we met, and what’s more, you’ve enjoyed it, quite safe, because of course it’s not for you, it’s for your bloody Cause. Your all-consuming Cause which excuses any crime, any sin you want to commit. Which allows you to gratify your endless need for self-destruction. You bastard, you are the greatest spiritual rapist in the galaxy now tell me what the bloody hell happens next!*”

Pain. Encompassing him. Inside and out. A shattering in his head and a feeling as if his internal organs were tearing loose along with the words he flung, shouting, into the darkness.

“And next they *kill* me! Are you satisfied, Avon? Is that enough for you? *They kill me*. They take *me* from me, and I’m conscious all the time; I can feel it. They tell me what they’re going to do and then they do it and I can feel myself dissolving. You want to know why I hate the

Federation? It's because I'm *not* Roj Blake; they killed Blake, and he was terrified and even now I can sometimes hear him screaming. They killed him and they sent the body back, all neatly sewn up and sanitized. Now do you see why I need to die, to destroy us all? Because if I don't, they *will*. Their way. Again. And *again* and *again* and *again*..."

The grip on his wrist had eased; all the pain came from inside now. He heard the terrible choking sounds, but for a time could not grasp their meaning. He had not cried like this since... well, since the death of Blake, anyway. He did it very badly, retching with the raw agony of it, lungs afire, body racked with the violence of his sobs. At last it became easier and he wept freely and silently for a while, then slowed to a stop. He lay still for some indeterminable time as awareness crept back to him.

His face was pressed against a warm, bare shoulder. A warm, bare, *wet* shoulder. Some vestige of humor drifted up in him like a dustmote in a shaft of light and he thought: soaked your sheets again, friend.

His legs were tangled in bedclothes and various physical discomforts assailed him. He lay perfectly still, feeling lightheaded but strangely calm.

"I *am* insane. I've been trying—hoping—to get us all killed." His own voice was so matter-of-fact, so reasonable, that it terrified him. "No... what am I saying?"

"The truth, I think; perhaps for the first time since I've known you. Now shut up." He felt warm breath on his neck and became fully conscious of the arms around him. The idea that he had had this—this breakdown, this catharsis, with *Avon*, was both so inherently logical and so inherently insupportable that he could dredge up no emotional response to it.

He needed to get away. Needed to get his bearings, to put these revelations into some kind of order. Needed to re-evaluate everything—his whole approach to life—in light of what he now knew.

The warm, wet shoulder suddenly seemed the safest place in the universe. But he had asked too much of Avon already. No, not even asked; he'd *forced* too much on Avon. Shamed, he willed strength into his muscles, trying to rise.

"Now what do you think you're doing?"

"Leaving. Avon...you've had enough of me. Forgive me—for everything. You need rest, and I need...to think."

"I doubt if you can learn the knack this late in life."

"What?"

"Oh, never mind, Blake. *I'm* thinking and I do it considerably better than you. Shut up and lie down."

Blake, obeying the hands which guided him back down to that shoulder, subsided for a while. It was astonishingly easy to turn his brain off and just lie and *be*. At last, he roused himself from stupor to ask, "What are you

thinking about?"

"Us, idiot. All right. Lights up full." With a lithe twist Avon was suddenly on top of him, straddling Blake's hips, looking down as the larger man blinked up at him. "Well, you've finally managed to do it, haven't you? I should have realized you would." The tone was brisk, businesslike, the dark eyes level. But Blake, staring, gasped.

"Oh, Avon. Oh, god. Oh, damn, damn, damn..." His hand reached out of its own accord to touch that livid discoloration on the cheek, the red marks of his teeth on the neck, the lips bruised and swollen from his brutal kisses. The tech's arms were bruised, too, and welts ran down his side...

Blake, shaking uncontrollably, tried to turn away, tried not to see. He couldn't cry anymore; his stomach muscles were cramped with agony, his throat scraped raw.

"How could I do that? To you? How could I do that to you when I love you, when I'm in love with you?" The words he had been unable to frame even to himself in the darkness now flooded out openly in the relentless light, dwarfed to nothing by the immensity of his deeds. Once he said them it seemed clear that they had both always known. "What kind of *abomination* does that make me?"

"One that enjoys sniveling. Leave it, Blake. It's true you're a complete bastard, so much so that only another complete bastard could ever hope to deal with you. But has it occurred to you to ask what *I've* done to *you* tonight?"

"No. It was my crime. My—sin, if you want to call it that. And this time I don't even have the Cause as an excuse, do I? I acted out of entirely selfish motives. And I've succeeded in destroying something I've...wanted...for so long...before I ever actually had it. That's—a bit funny, don't you think?" He began to laugh.

"Shut up, Blake. *I have* had enough tonight; I refuse to deal with your hysterics as well. And before you drown in that morass of guilt, there are some things about me you should know. Since the day you manipulated me into joining your unholy jihad, I have been trying to rid myself of you. Most of the time without much regard for your well-being. I have tried everything from ignoring you to abandoning you to breaking you...and nothing has worked. You just won't let go. As long as you are alive I will never be free."

Blake shut his eyes, overcome by a great weariness. "There's the obvious solution."

"Yes, and I've finally accepted it."

"It should be easy enough now. I won't fight you."

"No, I don't think you will."

"I *can't*, Avon. After what I've done..."

"What you have done, you bastard, is what you always do. You've won. Blake, I want you to gather the

few wits the mindwipe missed and join me in reality for a minute. We are not discussing your assassination. We are discussing the terms of my surrender.”

“We—what?”

“I can’t get rid of you. It’s useless. And I can’t keep fighting you forever. I’m too tired. Therefore, my only option is to join you, to save you if that’s possible. I don’t know if it is. But since the alternative is letting you sail on to your grand and glorious destiny—dragging me behind all the way to the funeral pyre—I’m compelled to try. You need someone you can trust when your own judgement is faulty, someone to keep you sane, someone to support you. You need *me*. And you can have me—but on my own terms. Without them there’s no hope for either of us. Are you ready to listen?”

Blake had frozen. A man blind from birth might fear to believe in light. He whispered, “Yes.”

“This is the...arrangement I am offering; these are my terms. Take them or leave them.

“First, there will be a bloodless mutiny on board *Liberator*. You will no longer make plans to suit yourself and then machinate the rest of us into carrying them out. We are going back to the old ‘thorough discussion’ routine—not that we ever actually *had* any discussions, but it was a nice thought. And I hold absolute veto over anything patently suicidal. The reason for that should be obvious.

“Second, you may well need a new pilot. Jenna’s loyalty to you may be seriously compromised. If so, she won’t trust either of us—and we cannot trust *her*. In an emergency that could be fatal.

“Third, if it can ever be done with reasonable safety, you will seek professional help. I don’t fancy spending the rest of my life as your personal, *unpaid* psychotherapist. And before you say it,” he continued softly, deliberately, “psychotherapy is not what *I* need. I know exactly what I am, but I won’t burden you with it now, especially since most of it is beyond the narrow range of your comprehension.”

“Oh, it is, is it?” —stung

“Yes, it is, judging by the quality of that dazzling riposte. I told you, shut up.

“Fourth, if you want this...personal relationship...of ours to continue you will have to make some other minor concessions.”

Personal relationship. Blake felt strangely winded. “Such as?”

“Learn some manners. Give me a little privacy. Stop trying to dominate me in public. Get me a bigger bed...” The most fleeting hint of a wry smile tugged at the corners of his lips. Blake blinked, tried to sit up, then lapsed back down again.

“By ‘relationship’ you mean—having sex.”

“If we can find someone brave enough to teach you how, yes.”

Blake felt bewildered, almost overwhelmed—

yet oddly bereft. Avon understood him, was offering to help him. But why? There was no softness in those brown eyes and the technician had more than enough reason to hate him.

“And those are your...terms.”

“Yes. In return for which, I will do what you’ve been maneuvering me to do all along. I will stay with you as long as you need me, provide you with sexual companionship, and try to keep you alive and sane. No easy task, that last, but one in which I have a certain amount of experience.”

“Fair enough.” There was an odd ache in his throat. He had hoped—what? It didn’t matter now. He opened his mouth to speak but Avon stopped him.

“One more thing.” The elusive flash of humor had disappeared and the dark eyes were narrowed. “Before you decide. This is probably the only time you will ever hear this, Blake, so I advise you to listen closely. I am in love with you. I have been so for quite some time, and it has played merry hell with *my* psyche. No,”—as Blake actually did manage to lurch up, a wild joy in his chest—“I *do not* want you whispering blandishments in my ear and making cow’s eyes at me. At the first sign of such behavior I shall promptly depart for the nearest paradise planet—with my share of the spoils from this common-law mindfuck. Is that quite understood?”

Blake nodded, slowly. He was the same man he’d been two minutes ago, the man the Federation had killed and resurrected to a half-life of angry confusion. He was the same, it was merely the universe that had changed. He settled back, wondering dizzily what cows were and whether they ever grinned like idiots. He hoped they didn’t.

“Those are my terms. Do you accept them, or not?”

“Avon. I accept them.”

Avon shook his head, disparaging this rashness. “Think.”

Blake laughed a breathy sound with the echo of hysteria to it. “Oh, I’m beyond that for the present. Anyway, you’re the expert. You think, then you can tell me what to do. Just as always, Avon.”

A slight twitch of the lips, and then, suddenly, the whole thing, the full smile, with bubbling, helpless laughter behind it. A rush of delight—and a surprisingly strong response of the flesh. Blake lurched up again, reaching.

Avon raised a hand to quell him. “Then we’ll consider it settled. And before you even ask, the answer is *no*, Blake. I’m exhausted, I’m in no mood for dalliance, and you need about three months of practice before I let you lay a hand on me again.”

“With whom,” Blake managed in a strangled voice, “do you suggest I practice?”

“I’ve no idea. I expect we shall have to hire a professional, since no amateur would stand for it. At least,

no sane amateur would do. H'mmm...maybe Vila..." Heavy lids suddenly drooped, hooding the dark eyes. "I am going to sleep now. Move over."

Blake moved. There was something new inside him, frighteningly fragile and yet so real, so substantial, that he needed to test it, to see how much weight it would bear.

"You don't hate me after all?"

"Blake, I have already told you, I won't say it again. Probably ever. So stop fishing and go to sleep."

Not so fragile after all. It held him up, supporting him. "Yes, Avon."

A snort. "Blake, you are about as servile as Servalan and as tractable as Travis. Don't even try it. You're not fooling anyone."

"No, Avon." But, although the other man had turned his back, he did not shake off Blake's hesitantly encircling arm. Blake lay and basked in the glow.

After a moment, very softly: "One thing..."

"No."

"Not that." He lifted back and away, utterly serious. "Before, you said I said something when I was—dreaming. What was it?"

He felt muscles stiffen. "I wasn't taking notes."

"Avon, please, damn it..."

A hiss of breath, then the slighter man turned in his arms to face him. "Very well," he said quietly. "Here it is. I will tell you and then we are both going to sleep. You did talk about the mindwipe. More or less incoherently. I came over to you and tried to shake you awake but you fought me off. Then you said that you were dying. You clutched at your head, then at your chest. Then at *me*. Your eyes were open, but I don't know what you were seeing. You just wouldn't bloody wake up. Then you said—" he

paused as if hearing some distant voice, then went on tonelessly, "You said, 'Oh, Avon...I didn't take any of them on trust. Except you. Only you from the very start...' Then you shut your eyes and started screaming."

Ice down his back, the fine hairs on his arms rising. "What did it mean?" he whispered.

"I don't know. I'm not sure I want to know. I want to go to *sleep*."

Blake realized, with a pleasurable shock, that Avon was stroking the back of his neck, absently, with a circular motion of his thumb. It was soothing, comforting. In spite of himself, in spite of everything, he lapsed back into peace. Into bliss. Examining his new store of wealth like a miser fingering hoarded gold.

Comfort from you, Avon? You in my arms? You in love with me, protecting me...?

As I will protect you. With all the resources at my command. You think you don't need tenderness; maybe I can change that. You also think I am a madman. Maybe I can change that, too. Perhaps not, perhaps our destinies are fixed, immutable; and, whatever I do, I can change nothing...

He was going to give it one hell of a try.

"I am after all, the resident optimist around here," he whispered. The desultory caresses had stopped. His battered, unbreakable tech was fast asleep.

Eyelashes longer than Jenna's. Disgusting, Blake thought.

"Disgusting," he whispered, leaning to just touch his lips to the other man's forehead, weak with tenderness. "Sleep well, Kerr," he added, in an even softer whisper, the barest breath.

"Shut up, Blake. Lights off."

Blake fell asleep grinning in the darkness.

THE FIELD OF HUMAN CONFLICT

M. FAE GLASGOW

"BLACKMAIL, BLAKE?"

"Oh, I'd hardly call it that, Avon."

"No, you wouldn't, would you? Just another master-stroke in pursuit of your damned Cause."

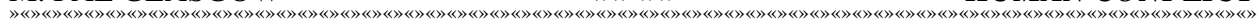
"Rather an unfortunate choice of phrase, that."

He cast a quick glance over his shoulder at the rabidly pacing Avon. "Given the circumstances, certainly."

"The circumstances. How very delicately put. I would have thought heavy-handed bullying would have described the 'circumstances' better, wouldn't you. Oh, but of course not, you wouldn't," he raced on, too livid to

pause for breath, the words hurtling out of him at the same devastating pace Blake's had steamrollered him. "After all, if we called it for what it was, it might tarnish your messianic halo, it might dent your shining armour, it might even," he dragged air into his tortured lungs, forcing himself to slow the landslide of cutting words bouncing so ineffectually off Blake's calloused hide, "remind you that you are as mere a mortal as anyone else and don't have the damned right to dictate a man's life."

The applause was caustically slow. "Oh, bravo, Avon, that was an excellent performance. You almost had



me believing your outraged honour. However, the simple fact of the matter is this: I need your skills, and I need Vila’s skills. If I lose you, I lose him. If you two leave, Cally will follow, because telepaths must be with people they care for. She’s fond of me, yes, friends with Jenna, too, but the pair of us are neither one of us enough to keep Cally stuck in space, away from empathetic minds. Therefore, if you go, they all go. So, Avon, I’m afraid, you’ll simply have to stay.”

“Whether I want to or not.”

Blake nodded gravely, not allowing even himself to see how much he was enjoying this particular skirmish. “Whether you want to or not. But I will give you this, though. I will insist you stay only long enough to do your duty to your people. After we find and destroy Star One, all debts will be cancelled, and you will be free to do as you choose.”

“Your generosity is overwhelming. You will give me my freedom? Who the hell do you think you are to take it in the first place? And more, Blake—” he stalked over to the flight deck, looming over Blake, vengeance personified, “do you honestly think you could take it from me?” He leaned his hands on the back of the couch, knuckles knotted bleached-skull white, danger glinting threateningly in his eyes. “Do you honestly, in your poor, deluded fantasies, think you can force me to bow to you?”

Blake rose to his full height, emphasising his own bulk, one hand stretched out. Avon stared at the package resting so innocently on that broad palm. He swallowed, hard, hypnotised by that one small object like a cobra before a snake charmer. “Oh, yes, Avon, I know I can.”

“You’d use it, wouldn’t you.”

“Oh, you can believe in that.”

Slowly, Avon lifted his eyes to meet Blake’s. When he finally spoke, his voice was dulled, hollowed like a worn stone, all the life fled. “It would seem that it’s all I can believe in. Doesn’t it.”

“You could believe in me.”

“Could, Blake? And which tense is that? Past? Or conditional? I could believe you, but then you became obsessed with Star One. Or I could believe in you, providing I’m willing to suspend disbelief, give up my own opinions and ignore those things you seem so convinced I lack: morals, ethics and simple feeling for my fellow man. You know why I have refused to aid you in this damned Crusade against Star One.”

“And you know why I’m insisting that you help me. Avon, Avon, why won’t you see? Sometimes, we need to sacrifice the few to help the many. Remember your history, if you won’t listen to me. How many times have a few brave people given their lives to buy time for the cause, or to win the war, just so that others could have the freedoms they never knew themselves?”

“Don’t stoop to sophistry, Blake, it really doesn’t

become you.”

The voice was implacable, as demanding as the hand gripping Avon’s arm tighter and tighter in its urgency. “How many?”

“How many of them were innocents led to the slaughter, or abandoned to die, never knowing that they were even in your damned fight? Tell me that, Blake, tell me that!”

“So what would you have me do? Go from door to door, asking each and every one of them, ‘excuse me, would you care to fight for your Freedom?’ There isn’t time, Avon, there simply isn’t the time.”

“Especially not for them.”

Blake stood back, letting go of Avon before this altercation turned into fisticuffs. Casually, he reseated himself, making himself comfortable, quirking his head to the side to stare at Avon with engraved curiosity. “Why all this sudden humanitarianism, hmmm, Avon?”

“Why all this sudden blackmail, hmmm, Blake?”

“I’ve already answered that particular question. It’s your turn now.”

“Oh, you’ve given me leave to speak, is that it? Given me back one of my freedoms, or is it merely on loan?”

“I’d never even dream of taking away your freedom of speech, as well you know.”

“I don’t know anything, Blake, not a bloody thing.” He turned on his heel, presenting an eloquent back to the judiciously silent Blake. “But you know, don’t you? Tell me,” he snapped, turning viciously on Blake, bitterness and anger vying to stake their claim to his face, “that memory cube—how did you manage to it? And what the hell makes you think it could possibly be true? It’s nothing but a fiction, fabrication from start to finish and surely only Vila could be stupid enough to be convinced by that load of twaddle.” He broke off abruptly, realising that his protestations of innocence were just a touch too much, suspicious in and of themselves. Changing tack, he drew on all his considerable dignity and breeding, flicking a disgusted finger at the innocuous cube in its pale peach cover. “So, tell me, where did you find...that...that...”

“Voice from your past?”

“Well, that will do as well as any other name for it.”

“Quite simply, actually. You really should have thought of it, and certainly before I did. I asked Orac.”

“You expect me to believe that? Orac is programmed to dispense only my version of the past, not the...” He trailed off into silence, his own words convicting him.

“Not the what, Avon? Not the truth, is that what you were going to say? Orac can be a very obedient little machine, if you know the right questions to ask. Of course, I was curious about you, about all the others too, so I asked

Orac about you all, right off. Nothing too surprising in any of it, but then, as time went on, I started to wonder. Just idly, at first, then I began to really watch you. And I started to wonder what went on under that façade of yours, what ‘made you tick’, as they say.”

“So you asked Orac.”

“I asked Orac. But I asked a far more interesting question this time, Avon. I asked Orac to retrieve every piece of information Kerr Avon had ever excised, edited or erased from the records. And that was when he came up with this.”

Avon stared as the pastel cube was tossed in the air with a fine disregard for Avon’s sensitivities. To see such a time bomb tumbling through the air so cavalierly, as if it were only a meaningless bit of plastic, as opposed to bytes that could devour Avon, engulf him, destroy this fragile life he had pieced together for himself...

“Will you stay?”

“Will you let me leave?”

“No.”

“No need to shilly-shally, Blake, a straight answer would do.”

“Now that really is an unfortunate choice of phrase, isn’t it, Avon?”

Avon flushed, turning aside, patrician profile suddenly graven with age and defeat. “I didn’t do any of it, you know,” he said proudly, defying both his own expression and the data impressed forever upon the memory cube. His protests fell upon ears willful in their deafness.

“Oh, I believe you, Avon. Every word.” The sarcasm was laid on with a shovel, a trowel being unequal to the task.

Avon shivered, obviously haunted by words beyond Blake’s hearing and by sights beyond Blake’s vision.

“Shall I tell you the truth?” he murmured, not wanting an answer from Blake, addressing his own conscience where it lay, somnolent. “Not that it will do me any good, though, will it? But at least, then, I’ll have tried. This time, I would have tried, spoken out...” He fiddled with one of the controls, brightening the lights from their mid-night shallowness. His fingers twisted again, plunging them into darkness. Threading its way along untried paths, his voice reached Blake. “I never intended to hurt anyone, you know, certainly not kill them. In fact, I never did. I was as much victim of the crime as they...”

The silence lingered for a moment, thoughtful, a faint whisper of beseeching hovering like a cloud. And then, Blake laughed. Heartily, and with the bitter edge of a man who must laugh, else humanity would drive him to despair, the hate-filled goriness of it flailing Avon. “Oh, I believe you, Avon,” he said, finally, words of faith, but the harshness of his tone pouring salt into the suppurating wound that was Avon.

With an almost audible snap, Avon’s shields

crashed back in to place, crushing him beneath their weight, but keeping him safe, keeping him whole, holding the past at bay...

“Oh, I believe you,” Blake repeated, quite deliberate in his cruelty, as Avon had been in his, as the memory cube had displayed with such nauseating clarity. “Thousands wouldn’t, but as you say, I’m a fool. So I believe you.”

“Stop saying that!”

The agonised sound shut even Blake up. “Avon?” he asked, unsure, incredulous that such a vulnerable noise had ever come from guarded and bastioned Avon of all people.

Silence. And darkness.

“Avon?”

Muffled sound. A stifled noise. Hesitation.

“Stop playing bloody games, Avon! It’ll take a better man than you to win my sympathy after what I saw on this damned cube.”

Hardening. Rigidity. Bright, blinding light.

“Far be it for me to want anything from you, Blake. So, let us see where we stand, shall we? You have my ignoble past on memory cube...”

“With another held securely where only I can access it.”

Avon gave a slight bow, the gesture of the superior temporarily defeated by one who knows the rules of the game, but not the spirit. “Well, what a surprise that is. As I was saying, you have the cube. I have the skills, and if I were to believe you, enough influence with Cally and Vila that they would leave if I were to. And so, you will stoop to extortion...”

“You really shouldn’t point the finger of guilt, Avon. You never know where it will stop.”

“...and blackmail to keep me under your heel, until after Star One is destroyed.” He brushed an impertinent piece of lint from his cuff, eyes averted from Blake. “Very well. I shall agree, on one condition. If you want me to help you murder millions, then when it is over, you will give me a way out. When it is done, when it is over, I shall return you to Earth so that you can lead the corpses to victory and then I shall take *Liberator* and go wherever the hell I want to. Without you. Without a word from you, without contact from you, without ever seeing your face again. Agreed?”

“No. I’ll need the *Liberator* to defeat what will be left of the Federation Space Fleet and as my flagship. I will give you another ship, your choice of the Federation.”

“I want the *Liberator*.”

“I need the *Liberator*.”

For a moment, Avon was lost in thought, then he faced Blake once more, face a mask, binding everything behind dead brown eyes. “I will take the *Liberator*, or I shall tell the survivors that it was you who destroyed their ecostructures and that you are up to your armpits in the

blood of the people they loved. And what, Blake, will they do with you then? Even the masses are not so insane as to follow the man who destroyed their homes.”

Blake nibbled at his thumb, plans and counteroffers running through his mind. He needed Avon, of that there was no doubt, for if Avon were to leave in protest of the immorality of Blake’s plan, then not even Jenna would remain. Cally would leave, for Avon was the only one on ship who could mindspeak with her at all, if only rarely, and Vila... Despite all disclaimers, the thief would jump off a cliff, were Avon to tell him he’d be along right behind him. For a moment, Blake toyed with the idea of bedding Avon, keeping him that way, his own charisma and talents all the bonds usually necessary, but tossed the thought away. He had tried that before, and all Avon had done was walk away from him, a tight, cold smile on his face, as tight and cold as the semen drying on his belly...no, sex was not the answer to the Avon cipher. The ship, then. Give him that much, to salve his conscience and seal his mouth.

“Very well. *Liberator* is yours, as soon as we have defeated the Federation.”

“Oh, no, that was never part of the so-generous deal you offered me. The ship is mine after Star One—or what we believe to be Star One—is destroyed.”

“After Star One and after you return me to Earth. I think that’s your best option.”

“You mean I actually have one? What a magnanimous despot you are. The Galaxy should flourish under you. Almost as well as it has under the Federation.”

With a shrug of his shoulders, Blake rolled the bitter indictment off like water off a duck’s back. He had won—he could allow the decent side of his nature to come through. After all, the Cause would be well-served, freedom had a much better chance with Avon on its side, regardless of how reluctantly he stood there. “If there were another way, Avon, believe me, I would take it. We have simply run out of choices...”

“Sounds familiar.”

“If I may go on?”

“Oh, do, please. I’m surprised you would let me stop you.”

“I admit, people will die when Star One is destroyed, but if you think our hands are bloodless at present, then you are lying to yourself. Don’t you think innocent people have died when we’ve sabotaged power generator plants? Or the food synthesiser on Avtaron? And what about when we destroyed the last supply of Shadow? How many people died then, Avon, and in how much agony? No, my friend, we are already up to our armpits in blood, and if we do not destroy Star One, then we shall have even more deaths than that on our hands. Think, Avon! Several million will die, all at once, all over the Galaxy, but there will be billions set free. But, but if we should let Star One continue to enslave the Galaxy, to give power to the Federation, then hundreds of millions will die over the

years, and the rest will still be slaves and subjugated and when we die, Avon, nothing will have changed. Not a single blessed thing will mark that we ever even existed, apart from a few bodies and some meaningless guerilla strikes. No, Avon, we must win. No matter how high the cost. I must be right.”

Blake stood, heaving in breath, towering on his righteous indignation, fired by his democratic fervour. Avon stood, stunned, appalled, amazed that Blake could have gone so far over the edge and that no one had even seen it. For a moment, he toyed with the possibility of trying to talk some sense into Blake, but discarded the thought as useless. Talking sense into Blake had never worked when the man was in full possession of his faculties; talking to him now would be an exercise in stupidity. Not to mention dangerous. Megalomania was a dodgy thing, and something with which Avon was only too familiar. And that familiarity bred not one atom of contempt, but rather, several tonnes of healthy fear. Later, perhaps, after he had consulted with Orac, after he had spoken to Cally, he would duel with Blake’s bulbous ego, but for now, deal with the present problem, the one Blake would be willing to see.

“One small matter remains, Blake,” he said with impressive calm.

“Which is?” Blake answered wearily, disappointed even though he should have know better than to have thought he could talk some sense into Avon. Really, the man did pick the most inconvenient of times to wear his conscience like a cloak.

“The memory cubes.”

“What about them?”

“Don’t add deliberate obtuseness to your repertoire of failings, Blake. You know perfectly well what I mean.”

“I shall give it to you as soon as you have taken me back to Earth.”

“And the other? Or others, as the case may be.”

“Those shall remain safely tucked away. I’m afraid,” he smiled, genuinely regretful, “that you’ll have to trust me on that. I can’t take the risk of the people finding out that I had to...persuade my right hand man to stay with the Cause.”

“So of course, you’ll keep however many copies you’ve made, expecting me to trust you not to reel me in when next you have a favour needing done.”

Blake’s spurious calm exploded, ricocheting into every corner of the flight deck. “I don’t have any choice! Do you think I like having to do this? Do you think I’m proud of it? No, and if there were another way, I’d leap at the chance. But I’ve run out of places to go, Avon, it’s this way or not at all, and I will not let my life and the lives of everyone who has died because of the Federation be completely wasted.” His fury and fear made him tremble, leeching his breath from him, leaving him panting in the

grips of his unholy passion. He sucked in a great lungful of air, the better to feed his bellow. "I have no other choice!"

Blake's ire inflamed Avon's own incendiary temper, precipitating him into speech, regardless of how wise it was—or was not—to beard the lion in its den. "How very convenient, Blake, how very nice for you. Oh, you poor hero, backed into a corner, no other choice, driven to blackmail and bullying for the sake of the greater good. And I am supposed to go, singing gaily, to my doom, is that it? Well, Blake, sorry to shatter your fond dreams but there is another choice, there is another way."

"Then tell me. Tell me, and I'll do it."

"Don't destroy Star One."

"Oh, for..." Blake jumped to his feet, running one hand frenziedly through his disordered hair. "You haven't listened to a word I've said, have you? Why the hell do I even bother?" This last was muttered, darkly, as he started up the stairs, as wearily as if he were scaling a slate cliff.

"There is one other option, then."

"No doubt equally as wonderful as the first."

"If you cannot forego destroying Star One, then I will agree to help you. If you agree to give me all the memory cubes. That, Blake, is the real choice. You could trust me."

The words sank heavily into Blake's unwelcoming arms. He turned then, facing Avon, studying him closely, examining the still figure carefully. There was an edge of hunger lying just beneath Avon's refractory surface, but not one that Blake recognised readily. Sexual hunger, that he knew, that he had already seen in Avon. Hunger for power? No, that was as familiar as the sound of Avon's voice. Quickly, Blake scanned every iota of memory the Federation had left behind after they raped his mind, and there, suddenly, it was: like a child, or a man never quite able to unhitch his past, Avon hungered for approval, for trust, for acceptance. Blake glanced down at the memory cube in his hand, glanced back at Avon quickly enough to see that choked swallow, the self-betrayal that unveiled the truth. He looked back at the cube, unwilling to see anything in those brown eyes that waited to ambush him into sympathy. "No, Avon," he said quietly, all his tiredness seeping out where it could be heard, "I'm afraid I can't do that. I've seen this..." And he hurled it at Avon's head. "I've seen every last second of that, 'old boy'," making the words a condemnation laced up tight in sneering disgust, "and I wouldn't trust you unless I had a gun at your head. Which is precisely what the other memory cubes are."

Eyes closed, sightless, Avon listened to Blake leave, listened as the mid-night quiet descended again, no other life sounds save his own, and those were muted, strangled, drowned out by the murmur and bleep of the *Liberator* talking to itself. Avon was a child again, left

alone, kept in the silent dark, listening to the subliminal noises the nocturnal creatures made in the old, Pre-Atomic cellar of his father's house, hiding place turned dungeon.

No one.

There was never anyone to listen, never anyone to hear, never anyone to believe. Why could they never believe him? He didn't want to do those things, didn't like doing them, didn't like how it felt... Hated even more how it felt when Daddy didn't love him...

The strident squeal of the alarm struck him, bringing him back to his surroundings, locking the child back inside the man. He hurried over to the console to rectify the navigational drift, cramming the exhumed memories down beside the silent scream that always lingered in his mind. Better this, working, better than thinking, better than remembering, better than going back, better than going forward... He absorbed his work, driving himself out of his own thoughts, leaving nothing behind but Avon the machine, feeling nothing, thinking nothing and hurting only a little. But when the work was done, when he heard Jenna's steps coming along the corridor, he went over to where he had stood when Blake left him. Unerringly, too acutely aware of it to have misplaced it, he found the pastel pretty cube, picking it up without looking at it, hiding it in his pocket, the sharp edges digging into him, cutting him open with the putrid secrets of his past.

"Morning, Avon," Jenna murmured, stifling a yawn.

"Good morning, Jenna," he answered with careful courtesy. Jenna stared at him. "There was a slight problem with the navigational programming, but I believe I have corrected it. There shouldn't be any more problems with it, but keep an eye open for slight drift. If you need me, I'll come back up and re-adjust the system."

"Thanks, Avon," she said, eyeing him suspiciously, unused to such a pleasantly polite Avon so early in the morning. "I'll do that. The instant anything comes up."

"Right. Well. Fine, I'll be off, now."

But still he hovered, almost, Jenna thought disbelievingly, as if he wanted to say something, as if he wanted to tell her something, but simply didn't know where to start. Quite deliberately, and very pointedly, she busied herself at the console, checking data, looking at the latest improvements Avon had made, cutting the man himself out. She'd let Cally play earth-mother, for she was having none of it herself. She had enough trouble playing simpering female for the sake of Blake's fragile ego, she was absolutely not going to add holding Avon's hand to her list of chores.

Avon took the hint of her downbent head, fingering the cube where it rested in the dark cave of his pocket, leaving with all the words unsaid. How, after all, could he possibly bring up the subject of Blake's mental equilib-

rium without bringing up that damned cube? And how could he ever even begin to explain that to her?

How could he ever begin to face that himself?

Slowly, he walked off, head lost in thought, feet automatically following the path of habit, leading him, eventually, to the Galley.

“You got off early,” Vila piped up in lieu of greeting, “Jenna on time then, was she? Makes a pleasant change, not that Blake’ll be pleasant, ‘cause if Jenna’s on time, then that means she didn’t spend the night with Blake and you know what that means. Misery loves company and old Misery Guts won’t be happy till we’re all keeping him company being miserable.” Deft hands dancing, he threw together a quick breakfast, his chatter covering Avon’s silence, his absorption in domesticity blinding him to the darkness lurking in Avon’s eyes. “I suppose,” Vila went on, popping everything on to the table, pouring the boiling water into the pot, rearranging the cups and spoons and knives, tsking at Blake, “he’ll be after us to save the Galaxy again today. Wonder what it’ll be this time?” He took the serviettes from the drawer, laid them on the table and stopped then for one last look to check that everything was in its place, finally going over to the cabinet to fetch the jam, blethering on without pause, “Probably be that bloody Star One again, always going on about that, isn’t he?” He glanced over at Avon, not even mildly surprised that Avon was standing in the doorway like a ship listing wearily in the Sargasso Sea. Avon always was a moody bugger, so Vila gave it no thought at all, just accepting it and the man for what he was.

And then, Blake hove up behind Avon, a privateer looming on the horizon of Vila’s cozy routine, sheer force of personality threatening to appropriate the Galaxy for his very own. Without turning, Avon stiffened and paled, sensitised to the point of immobility by the little contremeps which tangled around his feet, just waiting to trip him. He closed his eyes, wearily, just for a moment, just for a breath, a respite, a dream...

“Avon?” Vila murmured, confused. Seeing Blake standing there like the echo of thunder made him actually see Avon, notice how turned in upon himself he was, how terribly quiet, how terribly small... Avon straightened, dispelling the illusion, cowing the emotion back into its place, body language screaming out pride.

“Who else?” he said, belatedly answering the question in Vila’s voice.

“Me, for one,” Blake responded, pushing past Avon, seating himself at the table, taking one of the place-settings, helping himself to the meal, inviting himself in where he had no welcome.

And Avon, Vila noted with unvoiced shock, was letting him. Was simply sitting down at the other place, calmly beginning breakfast, face shuttered and dark.

Blake glanced pointedly at Avon, whilst speaking at Vila. “Aren’t you going to join us, Vila?”

“Only if I’m not interrupting anything.”

“Oh, what could you possibly be interrupting?”

Blake purred, a small smile of perfidy curling contempt at Avon. “What is there going on that any one of us could interrupt the other two at?”

And Vila wasn’t going to touch that with the proverbial barge pole. Oh, he knew that everyone knew, and they all knew that he knew, but it still wasn’t talked about. Just wasn’t the done thing, even though he and Avon were doing it and everyone knew... Or perhaps, it occurred to him, everyone hadn’t known and Blake had just found out which would explain all this monkey business going on... Drawing as little attention to himself as possible, he sat down at the table, dissolving into the background—until the crucifying moment Blake turned his full attention on him.

“I never seem to have the time to chat to you these days, Vila. Hardly ever see you, in fact. Unless you’re standing watch or on a mission, you seem to be... closeted away with Avon all the time. He’s not being too,” the pause was even less subtle this time, jumping up and down and waving, signalling the next word, “hard on you, is he?”

The atmosphere dropped heavily, spreading slowly, congealing.

“Is he, Vila?”

“I’m not complaining.”

Blake turned to stare at Avon. “Not complaining, is it? But not overly enthusiastic either, hmm, Avon? Perhaps you shouldn’t be quite so heavy handed.”

“Oh,” Vila butted in, “could you pass me the sweetener, please, Blake?”

Blake passed the cannister, eyes turned towards Avon. “Are you heavy handed? With him?”

The question lingered, trailing unspoken words along behind, a gallow’s rope of secrets. Vila glanced uneasily at the two Alphas, knowing he was caught in the middle, knowing he was a bone of contention, knowing he was a convenient excuse. And knowing that neither of the Upper Grades was even considering him as a human being, only a pawn.

“Heavy handed? I leave the bullying to you, Blake. After all, you’re so much better at it than I.”

“The student usually does surpass the master at some point.”

Avon neither responded nor reacted, his only sign of life the whiteness of his hand stirring, stirring the gleaming chromium spoon around and around, creating a whirlpool to suck his gaze down deep.

“Oh, yes, that’s how it usually goes, isn’t it, Avon?” Blake went on, needling, sticking the poison right in under Avon’s skin where it could spread its vitriol through him, “The pupil is taught by his master, then becomes a master himself, and then he takes on some tender young... mind to train. And of course, as they say,

there's no learning without suffering, is there, Avon?"

Avon snapped his gaze up to impale Blake. "In that case, no doubt you'll be awarding me my Honour's Degree any second now."

"Honour? Perhaps I should. You could certainly do with some."

"And you think you have enough to spare to so magnanimously dispense some to me? Your version of honour, Blake, is something I am far more likely to die by than live by."

"Then that should make you feel quite at home, shouldn't it?"

The blow was telling; Avon flinched drowned white from the words, from the memories they raised like howling ghosts to drag their chill bones through him. And the expression on Vila's face, oh, how that cut him. There was incomprehension there, naturally, for the thief had no idea why these oblique remarks were proving such telling blows, but the ignorance would not last. Not if Avon refused help to Blake. If he were to do that...

"You all right, Avon?" Vila, of course. Blake would know, to the very last millimetre, just how far from all right Avon was. And Vila? Vila would simply guess, would simply try to heal even when he could see neither wounds nor hurt, would cavalierly ignore Avon's beautifully crafted battlement of sanguine capability and casually just happen to be there with whatever Avon just happened to need. Be that need fulfilled with sex, or booze or biting humour, Vila would find the perfect panacæa. And as for now, this shard of a moment, would there be more solicitous words? No, not from Vila. Vila would leave well enough alone, would draw not one atom of attention to Avon, would save it all for later. Would, in fact, attract all the flak to himself, allowing Avon to retreat in good order. Any second now...

"Obvious what you haven't been getting, Blake. Jenna pissed off with you, is she?"

A good try, but Blake didn't lessen his stare at Avon.

"Listen, I've got a great idea!"

Avon smiled faintly, directly, at Blake, carrying their dispute on under the umbrella of Vila's cheerful chatter.

"Why don't we just forget about this Star One business and go off and find ourselves a nice little pleasure planet? Luscious women, lots of booze and great food..."

"Oh, I don't think either Avon or I would be able to forget about Star One just to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh, though, would we? Not quite what we'd choose."

Avon stared at him, then allowed his hatred to curve his mouth into a smile. "In my case, that's rather a moot point, isn't it, Fearless Leader?"

A small point, but enough to draw a pinprick of blood, blemishing Blake's seraphic robes. "Oh, I don't

think I could lead you anywhere, Avon. You've gone farther than I would ever care to."

"So you concede that you don't deserve your position as our supposed leader then?"

"I concede no such thing. I'm simply saying that I wouldn't walk a mile in your shoes for love nor money. Nor even both combined."

"Then perhaps you should bloody well refrain from passing judgement on me!"

The force of his leaving left a chair clanging to the deck and shock clanging through the two men rocking in his wake. Vila looked at Blake, looked at him hard and long, then, without another word being spoken, gathered food together on a tray, turning his back on Blake and going off in search of Avon. Ostracised, losing even more, giving up ever more for his voracious Cause, Blake bowed his head in shame and loneliness. It lasted but a moment, then he stiffened his backbone, rammed some more steely determination in there to bar him from buckling and running after Avon, telling him that it was all right, he wouldn't force Avon to help at Star One. But the very thought of the name was all the rigidity he needed. He wouldn't bend like a willow. He would break before he would yield. Surely, willing as he was to die for his Cause, he should be willing to give up his life for it? Avon—and Vila—would understand, once it was all over and they were free. Once it was all over. Finished. And he could rest... He thrust his outraged morality back under the rock from which it had crawled. The ends justified the means. They had to—otherwise it was all meaningless, as was he.

Avon, had, of course, gone to his own cabin, knowing that no one would disturb him there. Oh, Vila would come in, but that could hardly be described as disturbing. It would soothe him, to have that caring bandaging him, nannying him, accepting him. He laughed out loud, bitterly, aching painfully, at the irony of it all. That a service grade should be the one and only person in his entire life who had ever loved him enough to accept him as is, without trying to make all those little changes that everyone—even Anna—had wanted... Delectable irony indeed. A service grade to service his needs, but freely... No, that was a poor choice of word. Service grades always provided their services free of charge, but Vila did it willingly. Gladly, even. And all unknowing... A shudder ran through Avon, jarring his body as much as his mind. If Vila should ever find out, if the truth were ever to rear its ugly head, it would devour Avon whole. Would destroy what he had with Vila, would leave him cold and alone. Dead, once more. Nerve-wracking though it was to admit it, he did not think there could be anything left, were he to lose Vila, for it was Vila who was the Prometheus of his life, bringing fire to warm his mind and body. And although Vila knew Avon not one fraction as well as he believed he did, Avon knew him, thoroughly and well. There should be footsteps in the corridor shortly, bringing

Vila bringing food. Guaranteed, as sure as breathing.

The door opened, allowing Vila ingress, light spilling in with him like a chuckling friend. “Bit dark in here, isn’t it?” the chatter began, amidst the clatter and clutter of breakfast being distributed on the work table, Avon silently rescuing projects from hands that were more concerned with the importance of the moment than with the possible fruits of the future. “Stick the light on, will you? Or have you finally bothered to tell Zen to respond to my voice in here as well?”

“Try it and see.”

“Let there be light!” Vila declaimed. And light there was, flooding the place, revealing Avon in all his distress. Vila cast one quick, assessing glance his way, and gave up all thoughts of playing Monopoly with Cally and Jenna later. Avon would need him today, would need sex, and by the looks of him, would need it repeatedly. He made a mental note to pick up more lubricant from the medical supplies tonight, after Avon went back on shift: he had a feeling the half-full tube would end up completely empty before the day, and Avon, was done. “Brought you a bite of breakfast—or is it dinner? It’s gets confusing, doesn’t it, what with you staying up all night and sleeping half the day. Never could work out what I was supposed to eat after I got in from a night’s work, myself. Well, I’ve made breakfast, but I suppose, when you actually look at it, that could double for supper, it’s almost the same kind of food, so...”

Avon would have been surprised indeed, had he been able to see the expression on his own face, would have claimed that it was not a mirror reflecting him but a glass through which some other face claimed his: he would have denied to his dying day that such sop could ever survive a collision with his features. But there it was, for Vila to see, and treasure. Avon might not be much one for words, not when compliments or affection were due, but, oh, how he made up for it with the warmth of his smile and the way his eyes enveloped Vila in the safety of his affections. “Em,” Vila stumbled, losing the thread of his tangled monologue, the tickle of arousal in his groin distracting him no end, “er, anyway, as I was saying, em...”

“Something about eating, wasn’t it?” Avon said in a disconcertingly normal tone of voice whilst reaching one hand to cradle Vila’s face. “The question, of course,” he went on, leaning in closer and closer, until his breath warmed Vila’s lips, “is what exactly you intend to eat. I have one or two suggestions...” A kiss then, brief, sweet and electrifying.

“Oh, oh, I think I’m going to like what’s on the menu.”

“Really? So you’ve given up being vegetarian, then, have you?”

“Who said anything about me being the one to do the eating?”

“Ah. Variety is the spice of life.” Fingers stroked Vila’s earlobe, memorising the softness of the skin, whilst Avon’s other hand took a very firm grasp of the situation, not to mention the thickening at Vila’s groin. For his troubles, he got an armful of lax thief, heavy and warm and smelling faintly of soap. Avon held him, hands squeezing rounded buttocks, fingertips straying to the back seam on the beige trousers, pressing home, barely grazing the puckered nerves, poised for perennial pleasure, that exploded into life at the merest hint of Avon’s presence. “I’ll tell you what. I will allow you to select the appetiser, and I,” his fingers pushed in, rubbing cloth against Vila’s anus, beginning the opening process, promising penetration, “shall choose the entrée.”

“Sounds wonderful. But who gets to pay?”

The shadow dimmed Avon’s face then, making him serious and sad. Melancholy drifted in softly, whispering of secrets best left unsaid, crying of truths never spoken. “I’ll pay the price, Vila,” the words souged against Vila’s lips, filling his mouth, “I’ll always pay.” And then he kissed him, casting a pox on Blake and his misguided, messianic Crusade that could cheerfully destroy freedom to build Utopia. Vila melted into him, letting Avon take his weight, knowing instinctively that Avon needed to play protector again, for the first time in so many years.

But amidst the kisses, there was sorrow, slowing Avon, making him awkward, giving question to his right to do this to Vila, the past being what it was. So he let the thief go, with a small smile of reassurance to ease the unexpected sting. “I need to have something to eat, first,” he said, playing for time, stripping rapidly.

“Oh, yeh, been ages since you last had a bite. Must be knackered and all,” Vila replied, giving him all the time he might need, shrugging his own clothes off.

“Join me?”

“After all the hard work I put in to getting this spread done? An’ you expected me to just stand back and watch? Nah. Anyway, didn’t you notice? Set everything for two. So sit yourself down, and I’ll zap this lot in the unit—you did remember to fix it, didn’t you?—and I’ll hop in beside you and then when we’re finished with the food, we’re already nice and cosy in bed and if you just want to go straight off to sleep, well, you’ll be all set and...”

“Vila.”

“What?”

Avon picked up a forkful of egg and shoved it into Vila’s still flapping mouth. “Shut up.”

They sat, side by side, in companionable silence, the covers bunched up between them, keeping them from actually touching. If the silence were companionable, their thoughts were far from that. Vila, he of the pleasant face and guileless smile, was plotting ways of killing Blake, preferably extremely slowly, if not in revenge for

upsetting Avon, then in prevention of whichever noose that was slowly strangling Avon. And as for Avon himself...the very domesticity of the scene, its sheer banality, ate into his soul like a canker. Oh, he had already realised, a long time ago, just how much he needed Vila's humanity to keep him sane, but sitting here like this, a small, hysterical part of his brain screaming at him to memorise every last second for this—or this, or that—might be the last, the very last, the dawn before the dark... He sighed into the dregs at the bottom of his cup, drawing a sharp-eyed glance from his companion. Oblivious, Avon kept on staring, thinking, wondering when this nondescript coziness had become more important than mere material wealth, when this comfortable closeness had become more satisfying than faceless, mind-boggling lust. And wondering when Vila had superceded Anna, and his family, and his ambitions... Ousted, the lot of them, for one mouse of a thief. Who seemed somewhat less than mousey when his cock was deep inside Avon, or when Avon was joined to him. Who seemed far less than mousey or bland when the wickedness of his humour could reduce Avon into silent hiccoughs of hysterical laughter. Not a mouse, then, nor a fool, but certainly a Fool. Which would, rather appropriately, crown Avon King...

"Penny for them?"

"Hmm?"

"I said, deafie, a penny for them. Looked like they were funny, in their own way, mind you."

"Oh, I never sell myself cheap, Vila. If you want my thoughts, you'll have to offer far more than a penny."

"Now what do I have that you could possibly want, eh?" And he let his fingers do the walking, taking them for a stroll from one of Avon's pink nipples to the next, making mountains out of molehills.

Avon shrugged him off, setting the dishes aside, being just a touch too ostentatious in his brushing off of crumbs. Vila refused the hint. If he backed off every time Avon went a bit funny on him, they'd never have got to bed in the first place. He let his fingers take a nice little hike from the hill of one pap to the next, pausing for a paddle in the faint dewing of moisture beading Avon's chest. The water looked so inviting, he decided to go in for a dip, and leant forward, lapping thirstily with his tongue, leaving more wetness behind than before. Sighing happily, he swirled his way wetly through the dark whorls of hair, rearranging them, changing their direction then smoothing them back home. And under his mouth, Avon's began to breathe faster, began the first faint pinking of the flush of desire, began to arch into the pleasure. Abruptly, a hand landed on the back of Vila's head, taking a warning hold of his hair, drawing him away from the points of interest.

Made to face Avon, he could only stare in helpless confusion at the complexity of emotions scudding across Avon's features.

"Why?"

"Why what?" Vila asked, hoping to hell Avon would at least tell him the question so that he could give the answer Avon needed.

"Why do you sleep with me?"

"You know perfectly well why."

"Tell me again."

A long, slow smile then, for this was a game they played often. Avon never returned the words, but he never seemed to tire of hearing them. And what did it matter if it were only that Avon revelled in having someone so much in his thrall? He still wanted to hear it, still wanted to hear it from Vila, who had never expected an Elite to allow him to do more than merely service his needs. Vila had travelled that particular path before, in the old days; had heard the demands for 'service', as it was so euphemistically called, knew perfectly well what it was to bend or kneel in unnoticed obedience, the fear of the Elites' punishments far outweighing the fear of their pleasures. Sometimes, still, the old waking nightmares would grab hold of him again, until his body ached as it had in the old days and in the old ways, the memory imprinted on him, kneeling, cowering, whimpering in pain and fear... But not with Avon, never with him. With him, there were kisses, and caresses and equality. And love, oh, yes, always the love. Even if it were only one-sided, if declarations could be believed. And Vila believed Avon's protestations and silences not one whit. His eyes were too sharp for that, and Avon too transparent... He was interrupted by the suddenness of Avon turning aside from him, throwing the duvet off, back muscles clenched and screaming.

"Where're you going, eh?" Vila asked, arresting all Avon's movements by a word and a touch, his hand strong and warm on Avon's spine. "Take too long to answer, did I? Well, you know why, don't you?"

Avon sat very still, not leaving, not coming back, simply waiting. A kiss on his nape startled him, the beginning of a dance down his spine, then Vila's wet tongue lapped its way back up, shiveringly.

"Remember?" Vila said, a wealth of meaning in that single word, conjuring up so many nights out of the mists. "'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways'. Just takes a hell of a long time when it's me counting up for you. Could take weeks, Avon. Months, if I wanted to go into details..." And then the speech stopped and a different language began once more, as Vila's hands began their knowledgeable search for all the places that drove Avon to distraction.

And again, Avon stopped him, coming back into the bed, enveloping them in the covers, pulling Vila in close and tight against him. "Say it," he whispered, not quite demanding, nor quite begging either. "Just say it to me." Hands held Vila's face firm so that Avon could stare into Vila's eyes, searching for what Vila knew he could give.

but you got hooked, didn't you? Quite frankly, I can do without *this* particular compliment to my prowess."

"Hooked? As I said before, you have an interesting choice of words, Avon. You are implying that I was addicted by that one night of your charms, but I think it more likely that you were fishing for me, and now that you've reeled me in, you just don't know what to do with me."

"Oh, I know exactly what to do with you, but the others might object. It would, after all, be terribly messy. But you flatter yourself unconscionably if you think that I would waste the effort of chasing after the likes of you. Dangerous megalomaniacs I can do very well without."

"But you can't do without a certain *Service* Grade thief, can you?"

"I told you to leave Vila out of this. After all, that's what I'm paying for."

"Paying? With what, precisely? Family wealth?"

"More like family debts."

"I didn't see you as some Atlas to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders."

"Not the world, only my own share of it."

"And what do you know of guilt, Avon?"

"Absolutely nothing, of course. That's why I'm giving in to you. I'll leave the guilt for your hands."

"I concede that my methods may lack a certain moral rectitude, but given your attitudes..."

"Oh, shut up! We've been through this far too many times already. If all you're here for is to try and convince yourself of your own innocence, then just go away and leave me in what little peace you haven't been able to corrupt."

"Oh, that's ironic, don't you think, coming from you? Corrupt? What I've done, what I'm doing, isn't even a tenth of what I've seen on that tape. And as for corrupt...as I've said before, Avon, what do you think Vila will do if he finds out that you weren't born Kerr Avon, but Kerr Avon Wintzer? What will the *service* grade do when he finds out that your family grew fat and gross on the creation of the *service* grades? And what *services* you had them perform..."

Avon flinched again, wincing with fractious control at that needling emphasis. Blake was certainly a master at wielding the whip... "Well, well, well," he muttered, face once more impassive, control back in his own grip. "I do believe I've uncovered what this is all about. Star One, the freeing of the masses, the breaking of the Federation chains, those are merely convenient excuses, aren't they, oh great and fearless leader? You were quite willing to let our one night of illicit and ill-conceived lust languish in the past. Until, that is, you saw that tape. Until you saw what you had been missing. When all I was to you was a talented but basically quite normal screw, you were too wrapped up in your Cause to pursue me. Now you

know the kinds of kink in which I so frequently indulged, you're too wrapped up in me to pursue your Cause. You really *are* completely insane, aren't you?"

"Defence through attack? Yes, I suppose that *is* the easy way out. I shouldn't have expected any better of you, should I? After all, you do have a habit of running away."

And the hand on Avon's wrist with such loosely held menace tightened, focussing the attention of both men on the bond. Avon stared at Blake's hand, mesmerised. From his point of view, it looked almost as if Blake were holding his hand, not chaining him to the clay feet of a hero he had convinced himself was never needed.

"I won't let you run away this time, Avon. I won't let you hide from yourself. Face it, all of it, then you can conquer it. But don't run away."

"From what? From killing millions? Or from letting you experience true, unhindered debauchery? Oh, I can give you both, if that's what you want. You, you contemptible pinprick of a man, have the audacity to talk about cowardice and courage, when you can't even come right out and simply say what it is you want. Well, coward you may choose to call me, but I'm not afraid of giving name to dæmons, my own or yours." He clenched his fist, and brought his balled hand up between them, a symbol of their strife, held aloft where Blake couldn't deny it. Blake simply tightened his grip, making his own hand a fist, Avon's pulse throbbing frantically against his palm. "You see this?" Avon demanded, face seconds away from Blake, "you see this? That sums you up, doesn't it? The same old story it's been from the beginning. Free the masses from the death-threat of the Federation. And get Gan killed in the process. Free the masses from the Federation's yoke. And you're the one who treats Vila like a Delta, with your 'fetch this and fetch that'."

"And isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?" Blake whispered, baritone sunk to bass, control so tight it sounded like submission. "All I ask him to do is fetch things. *You*, you order him to kneel, like an animal, as if he were a sub-human service grade," he said, low and dark, taking a fractional step forward, taking that very last step, bringing the hardness of his groin to touch the heat of body-warmed leather, "to slake your beast."

And then Avon shocked Blake, utterly and profoundly, shaking the very foundation of the amoral moralist. The sound of Avon's laughter rang out, bright and clear, lightning through storm clouds. "Order Vila?" he finally managed, eyes glittering with hate and tears. "After *his* background? And combined with *mine*? Oh, not even I would dare take a risk like that. But," and his voice lowered an octave, becoming feline, a tom on the prowl, wrestling control the only way he had left him, using the lessons begun in childhood, "you would risk that, wouldn't you, Blake, for you've no idea what you're getting yourself into. It's true what they say, you know.

Absolute power corrupts absolutely. And believe me, you won't be over fond of yourself when you're finished. So. I'll give you what you want. I'll give you what you think you need. And *you* will give *me* all copies of that cube. Every last one of them. A deal, then, Blake? Star One and me, in exchange for my past." His unbound hand slipped between them, sliding, sharp as a shark, to squeeze Blake, moulding fabric around tumescence, coating him with coarse stimulation. "Well?" he asked again, staring at the rapture on Blake's face, undoing his fly, hand snaking in to hold hot flesh to moist palm. "Is it a bargain?"

"Your past in exchange for you now? Oh, a bargain at twice the price, Avon."

"Twice the price? You fool, you haven't the faintest idea of just what the price is. Is it a deal?" He stilled his hand, finger and thumb pinching Blake's foreskin to hood the crown of his cock.

"Oh, yes, yes, you have a deal. All of it, for Star One. And this."

Avon didn't deign to answer, now the contract was struck. Prostitution held no fears for him: he had, after all, learned it at his mother's knee. Submitting cost nothing but pride, and that, only if you were over-full of it and unsure of yourself. Avon was sure of very little in this Galaxy: all he knew he could count on was himself, and Vila. And the perfidy of life and the living. So he sank to his knees, turning submission into conquest, opening his mouth to suck Blake, making 'cocksucker' a title of honour.

"No."

So soft a sound, hardly worth the hearing. Avon flicked his tongue into the weeping slit of Blake's body, tasting the salt of life.

"No."

So hard a sound, irresistible. He stopped, tongue still warmed by the flesh under it. "You would prefer me to strip first?"

"No. Me. I want me to..." Avon raised an insolent eyebrow at Blake's lust tangled speech, sitting back on his heels, hands resting loose and relaxed on his thighs. Silently, curiously, with a flawless façade of indifference, he watched as Blake discarded his clothes with unseemly haste; watched, as Blake's hands trembled with his arousal; watched, basilisk-eyed, as realisation bloomed full and fertile in his mind. A small part of him was quite proud of his calm demeanour, whilst the rest of his mind was reeling in inchoate horror. He knew now what Blake wanted, what Blake had been angling for the entire time. It was not Blake who had been hooked, but Avon, dragged not from his element to suffocate, but dragged back to whence he had come to drown in what he had once been. What he could be once again... His throat closed on the words that would betray him, and he brow-beat his muscles into relaxation, one by one, not unclenching his will until he was the very picture of aloof Avon. No one,

not even Vila, would be able to see through this pyrrhic shell. Only Avon, and he was trying very hard not to look. Was trying even harder not to let his mind think the unthinkable: had he *known* that this was what Blake was after? Had he *allowed* himself to be manoeuvred into this? Oh, those were questions he didn't even want asked, let alone answered. For if answer there were, it would surely be in his father's voice, ringing through him as it had reverberated through the halls of his home. *You're one of us, Kerr. No matter what feeble, do-gooder notions you have in your head, you're one of us. You'll be back. If not for the money, then for the power of what we have here. You have a taste for all this, and you'll never shake the addiction to power and the sin. It's in your blood, Kerr. It's your legacy, your heritage. It's your bloodline.*

And if it were true? If it *were* in his blood? He almost laughed, the irony rusting his soul. If it were in his blood and Blake awoke the ravening beast again, then all his prostitutions and all his protestations and all his willingness to kill for contentment would be for nought. For he would sink again, and this time, it would be Vila who would bear the brunt...

A gasp exploded from him as Blake prostrated himself before Avon, spreading himself out on the floor to bow his head on Avon's seated lap. Teeth, perfect, white, omnivorous, snapped at the leather: tongue, pointed and wet and limber, lapped at his groin. Blake, before him, suppliant before omnipotent, eyes closed, murmuring deep in his throat, naked rump writhing, pressing cock painfully into floor, light glancing off the dancing globes of his rear. And all of it for Avon. All of it *belonging* to Avon. His, for the taking. If he could bear the price...

He started the struggle to his feet, to stalk from this den of iniquity, this charnel house of passion, but Blake was with him, every inch of the way. Hands darting to part fasteners, tongue darting to whet skin, teeth a nipping whiteness, leaving pinkness in their wake. On his feet now, Avon grabbed Blake's shoulders to shove him away, but the touch of skin was his undoing. So smooth, so terribly smooth, like the silk of... No, that was one predilection he would never allow to take breath again. Grasping at straws, one step back in the grave of his heritage that waited to swallow him, he thought of only the feel of the body beneath his hands and the feel of the body rubbing over his own. Flesh. Hot, living flesh, skin stretched pregnant by the passion within, and all of it desperate for Avon, for his touch, for his ownership, for his mastery. Master. It had been so long since he had last heard that, so long since he had last allowed himself to want it.

Master.

"Master..." Blake's voice, or Avon's, it didn't matter. They were both lost now, the acolyte and the Master, the innocent of body and the dissolute of flesh. It had taken so little, merely the opening of a door Avon had

thought locked, the key turned by something as petty as another man’s ignorant desires. Oh, how they would both pay for this. As his father had said, generation upon generation, his blood was tainted beyond redemption. Avon’s blood, the blue blood that had flowed through the veins of rulers for so long that what had once been benign and good had corrupted into clots of debasement. He took in a deep breath, one last lunge at freedom. And all he could smell was Blake, the primal surge of aroused male. He breathed again, more deeply. Himself. Primal male, arousal flooding him, flooding from him, skin flushing, musk rising, cock hard and aching. With a snarl, he went under for the third time, coming up clawing, reverting to what they had tried to make him, reverting to what he had once thought was right and natural and the best way in the world. He lifted his hand and brought it down, striking Blake on the face. Blake smiled, and turned the other cheek, inviting, inciting, insisting, living what he had watched only once, but which had haunted him awake and asleep, turning his life into a tarnished dream.

Avon twisted the next blow, reddening Blake’s shoulder, the next bringing a spring flush to the long back muscle at his ribs, the next, hovering, taunting by its absence, until Blake buried his head in the blackness of Avon’s trousers, suffocating himself in the smell, drowning in the desire to feel that hand descend upon him. Nothing, no blow, no touch, no Avon. Blake used his teeth to peel the leather away from Avon’s cock, revealing him, begging to be allowed to give pleasure to earn his own. He sucked Avon into him, using his tongue to press the veins and to fill his mouth with Avon’s taste. It was better this time, than that once they had had before, with its pleasant passion and profound possibilities. So much better, to be here, like this, pliant before the unyielding, forced to do the one thing he wanted more than anything else, but didn’t dare admit to. And Avon’s hands were pressing his face into Avon’s groin, the bulk of Avon was filling him, cutting off his breath, making his life dependent upon Avon’s whim. The glory of it, this utter submission of responsibility into the capable experience of the man who had been born to it. And now his decision was being made for him, he was being made to breathe, deeply, and to turn, just so, to get to his feet, to kneel, head and torso on the bed, seeping cock pressed into the covers, bare backside arched and bright in the light, delectably demeaning, exactly as he had hoped it would be.

Then it began. The cold hand, bringing heat. The white hand, bringing rosy afterglow. The delicate instrument of tormenting pleasure. With absolute perfection, Avon indulged Blake in what was even now called the ‘english vice’, giving him what he had wanted for so long, the coherent knowledge of it only slowly fighting its way out of the murk of memory loss. Almost, almost, Blake could remember this from Before: almost, almost, his body knew this. Almost, it gave him back what had been

ripped from him. That would have been enough, in and of itself, even had the pleasure not been so exquisite. And exquisite it was. He could feel the heat radiating from his red-blushing arse all the way down to the tip of his cock and all the way up his spine to explode in his mind. Oh, Avon certainly knew his business and Blake surrendered to that knowledge and that strength of purpose and that clarity of vision. No confusion here, only the convolutions of human sexuality celebrated in the dark of night and dark of mind. Blake felt orgasm threaten, wondered if he should warn Avon, or if he should ask permission.

“I’m going to come!”

Quick as a lightning bolt, the hand flashed between his parted thighs and grabbed him, pinching hard, dispersing the upswelling of orgasm. “No, you’re not. Not until I tell you. Now, stay still. Move, and I won’t do anything to you at all.”

And then there was nothing, only the faintest of sounds on the edge of his hearing, the vaguest of glimpses on the edge of his sight. He didn’t even dare turn his head, and that sent another surge of enjoyment through him. Oh, how he was relishing this!

Clothes dispensed with, tub of gel in hand, Avon turned back towards the bed, unscrewing the cap as he went, thinking of screwing Blake. He glanced down to look at the tub before he dipped his fingers in, and the shock of it deflated him completely. There, quite clearly, were the grooves left by his fingers, from the time before last.

Vila.

He wasn’t answerable to Vila, they had no exclusive commitments, for to commit Avon was to lose him, but to do *this*? And then the voice whispered again. Better to do this to Blake than to Vila... But still, he hesitated, wrestling with something he denied having: his conscience. Wrestling, that is, until Blake moved, a wanton wriggle of his hips, a spreading of his legs that spread his arse wide, exposing the pink puckered hole to Avon’s devouring gaze. God, how Avon wanted to fuck him, hard, selfishly, to punish him for bringing the skeletons out of Avon’s cupboard to dance with such macabre glee. Yes, better to do this with Blake than with Vila. Just as he had with Tynus, for that brief time he had yielded to the gyre that spiralled down inside him. “Yes!” the sibilant hiss escaped him at the moment his control slipped from his grasp. “Yes.” And unspoken, hanging between them, the agreement that there were no holds barred here, no limits, no recriminations, nothing but hard, dominating sex. Blake, under Avon. Submitting as he never could on the flight deck or before the others. Blake, on his knees, the champion of freedom willingly in chains. And Avon was the one who held them. Tyingly, he flicked them lightly, by speaking. “Show yourself to me,” he said, voice distant and cool, a man considering buying a used car. “Spread your cheeks so that your hole is wide and open and I can

see where I'm going to shove my prick." He was obeyed with an alacrity and anxiety that swelled his chest with pride. "Now move, show me how you'll move when I'm inside you, fucking you." And Blake gyrated, twisting his hips, breath coming in shorter and sharper puffs. "No, no, not like that." The body stilled, completely. "I said, as if I were fucking you. I won't ponce around with anything like that. Think of my prick up your arse, think of me ramming into you. Now show me." And Blake thrust forward, thighs slapping audibly against the side of the bed, balls swinging between spread legs, backside red and puffy from Avon's spanking. "Ah, that's better. Now you at least look like you've got a man up you. And that's what you want, isn't it? A man up you, none of this mutual masturbation crap, none of this frottage rubbish. You want me, in you, treating you like the cunt you are. Don't you, Roj?" A heavy hand cracked across Blake's arse, just at the crest of his undulation.

"YES!" Blake all but screamed. "God, yes..." the last dying on a sigh of needing.

"Do you want me to fuck you, bitch?"

"Yes, oh, yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes...Master."

"How do you want me to fuck you, cow?"

"Hard, Master, hard. Just ram it up me, make be belong to you, take away the guilt..."

"You want me to wash the blood from your hands, is that it, object?"

"Yes, oh, please, yes. I'm begging, Master, I've given in to you, you're the one in complete control, please take it off my shoulders."

Avon hesitated, just a breath's worth, the self-made man warring with his birth. And then Blake groaned and slid his own finger inside himself, fucking himself for Avon to see. With a snarl of lust, Avon gouged his fingers into the gel, coating them, then digging them into Blake and coating him too, transferring the viscosity from himself to Blake, transferring heat from Blake to himself. So hot Blake was, inside, where Avon was going to bury himself and all his qualms, so slick and smooth. The flesh eased for him, allowing his finger entry, the living channel indescribably lush. He slipped another finger in, then a third, twisting them, rubbing Blake's inner skin, fucking him with his fingers. Blake ululated under him, the vibration tingling against Avon's hand, his right palm flat on Blake's left buttock, fingers hidden deep inside Blake's centre. Avon stared down, at Blake, a helpless, enthusiastic victim, literally under his thumb, and he grinned. If this is what Blake wanted, if this was what Blake needed, he'd never find anyone better than Kerr Avon Wintzer...

Those buttocks were far too white, his mark faded and withered. And that would never do. He brought his left hand down with a stinging crack, his open hand temporarily tattooing Blake with his sigil. He raised his

hand again, slapping it down, making Blake buck with the delight of it. With every blow, the fingers buried in Blake's arse were pressed, hard and sharp, against the sensitised hub of gland, bringing all of Blake's being into focus, here, under Avon's hands, under Avon's body, under Avon's rule. The hand descended again, the sound commanding the room, the rapid tang of sex dominating the air. Avon dug his fingers in deeper, relishing the yield of Blake's being to his, glorying in the power of it all. He smacked him again, and again, until there wasn't an untouched fragment of Blake's rear left white, Avon's heat glowing from the base of Blake's spine to the crease at the top of his thighs. Another smile claimed Avon's face, a smile his family would have recognised gleefully. *A pièce de résistance*, a *coup de grace* perhaps, if they were lucky...

Avon forced his knee sharply between Blake's straining thighs, spreading them wider, then moving himself around quickly, out of the way, Blake spread-eagled and exposed, arse red and hot, Avon's white fingers still thrust deep into him. Now turned to stand at Blake's side, staring down at the body that quivered so ecstatically at his overweening touch, Avon felt his cock buck, frantically tapping at his belly, the exposed crown taunted by the line of hair up to his navel, the skin dampened by the precum oozing from him, fuelled by his uncontrolled passion. He smiled, yet again, loving this, the submission and the domination, the freedom and the slavery, the simple sight of his flesh becoming one with another. Blake was whimpering now, and Avon struggled to hear.

"Hit me!" was the plea. "Don't stop, don't leave, hit me, make the pain feel good, make me take it, fuck me, oh, please fuck me, hit me, Avon, spank me again, it feels so wonderful... Hit me..."

For once, Avon was happy to oblige. He lifted his left arm, flexing the muscle, pumping himself up, getting ready, revelling in the anticipation, lingering, waiting, enjoying it to the full, until the whimperings coming from Blake were desperate enough. Then his hand cracked down, not on Blake's backside, but between the cheeks, down low, where his legs joined his body. Where his balls sat, taut and tight and agonised with lust.

Blake moaned as the heel of Avon's hand impacted with the rimple that arrowed to his balls, screamed as, a mere instant later, Avon's fingers slapped into his balls, pain and erotic fire flaring through him, lifting him up to a new level of pleasure. He collapsed forward onto the bed, whole body trembling with the intensity of his arousal, mind completely oblivious to any questions. It never even occurred to him to wonder when his body had learned that pain was pleasure...

Inflamed by the overextended lust written all over Blake's sweat-damp body, Avon withdrew his hands, sliding them up over bunched back muscles, the

lubricant shining so beautifully on Blake's reddened and white skin. His groan echoed Blake's as he braced himself on the broad back, his palms filled with the intimacy of feeling Blake's every breath, skin sliding on skin. Even as his hands kneaded Blake's back, fingernails scratching, his cockhead laved its way up Blake's inner thigh, a shimmering trail tingling behind, his whole cock trembling with every brush of body hair, the lush sensation increasing as the hair grew denser, up there, higher, where it thickened, where Blake's balls nestled, fecund and full.

Onward Avon's cock travelled, past the minuscule clinging of hair and onto the smoothness of glutinous muscle. And then down, inward, to more hair, a mere hint, an echo of the forestation elsewhere, this delicacy framing the yielding pucker, mouth opening, lying agape, panting with Blake's pulse, wet with the gel Avon had unlocked him with. Wide, flared head, pressing, pausing, repelled by the body's instinct, that instinct overcome by the needs of the mind, and with a solitary, vicious lunge, Avon was in Blake, up him, mounting him, possessing him, fucking him, fulfilling Blake's fantasy of rape. He felt the muscle give, felt a flicker of heat drip onto him, virgin blood for his dowry price. Pounding now, hard, long, deep strokes that brought crisp pubic hair to grind into soft anal hair, pendulating balls, each forward lunge plunging them wildly between Blake's legs to hammer against his own, the painful pleasure almost unendurable.

And Blake had seen Avon doing this, on the tape. He knew how Avon would look, the feral expression on his face, the bared teeth. Knew, too, how he himself would look, back bent and bowed under Avon's lithe strength, the white body covering his, in blinding contrast to the rosiness of his arse where Avon's mark still glowed. He arched up into the annihilating force, orgasm rushing up to destroy him with the ecstasy of it all. Avon's hands gripped him, hauling him upwards and back, angling him so that Avon could sink into him that fraction more, reaching up inside, leaving no atom inviolate. Teeth sank into Blake's shoulder and he could feel the wetness of Avon's mouth mingling with the wet drip of his own blood. A keening sound, animal pleasure, and Blake was shocked to realise it was him. Oh, this was familiar, this is what his body knew, deep in its bones and what he craved, deep in his soul. And it was Avon giving it to him, Avon of the dark and light, Avon, with this burning flesh embedded in Blake, Avon, grunting, shoving, driving into him, spasming, coming, a Vesuvius exploding in Blake's guts. All he knew was Avon's cock stroking into him, wet heat bathing him, the step that kicked him over the edge, the last moment, and then the oblivion of pleasure. For a blessed moment, neither man existed. There was only what they felt, only what they shared.

Avon was lost, completely beyond thought, the power and the pleasure flooding him and pouring from him to fill the vessel of flesh that was wrapped around him.

And then awareness crept in on leaden feet, bringing weariness along for company. His body freed itself from Blake, his cream oozing slowly from between the upturned buttocks, a rivulet of life between the stamp of his hands. The old feelings were still in him, not yet dispersed after the fury of fucking, the old corruption of power rising up to join the new, compounding it, multiplying it. He whacked his hand down on Blake, just for the lazy enjoyment of inflicting pain and watching the body leap and quiver at his whim. One finger returned to the firm flesh, following the outline the entirety of his hand had left, then slithering forward to delve into the dark, swollen hole that was the centre of Blake's existence for the moment, while Avon wished it so. The finger slid inside, past the droplets of blood, awash in Avon's own slickness, his sperm clinging to him as if to be reabsorbed into him, to be given another chance.

As Avon had given himself another chance, once upon a time. Half a lifetime ago, when he had run from his family and met up with a precocious thief. A second chance he had just squandered on a second-rate hero, his bitterness whispered. A man Avon dare not judge fairly, lest he find himself being led, as he had allowed his father to lead him... Grimacing, he pulled his finger free, dragging a moan of protest and pain from Blake.

"Shut up," Avon muttered, stamping on the urge to belt Blake one. "You got precisely what you wanted, so just shut up." Desperate, at the last, for he feared what Blake could say. Feared more, the truths Blake could use to flagellate him. The truths Blake could use to tie them together, linked forever in this symbiosis of sin. For sin it was, for all its mildness when compared to what he had done when younger. Lacking the accoutrements of the discipline did not lessen it, the intent being the definition of the act. And this was sin, the willful desecration of another for one's own pleasure. It mattered not one whit that Blake had wanted this more than Avon, had manipulated until the scenario was inevitable. All that mattered was that they had both found truths neither was entirely equipped to deal with. Blake now had his cross to bear, the mockery of knowing that his fight for freedom was based, at his very core, when all the niceties were ripped away, upon the need to be enslaved. Small wonder he had never truly rid himself of the conditioning. Despite all his brave rhetoric, he had never truly tried.

And for Avon? Nothing. Nothing at all. Only an old truth, and a bitter one, the sharp barb buried so deep that obscurity blunted it. Blood, his father was fond of saying, is thicker than water. And it burbled like sludge in his veins, all the generations of the past, layer upon layer, amorality built ever higher on amorality, a veritable tower of turpitude, and that was his inheritance. From father to son, with the name they carried, came the moral torpor. And Avon had sunk back into the slime, on the flimsiest of excuses. His own debasement left him feeling unclean,

eroded by leprosy of the soul. Without a word, not daring speech, daring even less Blake’s answers, he gathered his dressing gown around him, walls in place, typical Avon-control his shroud. Still silent, only the movements of his body betraying him, he walked out, Blake left behind, still spread-eagled, still with Avon’s juices bleeding from him.

After some time, the chilling of his skin and the ache of his bladder forced Blake to move, to regain some semblance of self-control. Stumbling only a little, already beginning the deceptive weaving of crusading intent around him, he made his way into the bathroom. Where there were reminders of Avon with every breath he took, and with every glance. Distinctive smell of soap and aftershave, shampoo and dentifrice. Avon’s jacket from this afternoon, hung on the rack where he had left it. Avon’s depilatory, from this morning, when he had smoothed his skin as soft as a woman’s. It was then that it dawned on Blake, that apart from sucking him all too briefly, apart from a few hurried strokes of his hand, he hadn’t been allowed to touch Avon. That despite the devastating revelations coerced upon Blake, Avon had remained literally untouched. He remembered the quick glimpse he had stolen as Avon had left the room. So. Avon had remained emotionally untouched as well... That was not part of the deal Blake had made with himself, that had never been part of the equation. Untouched? He’d see about that. Let Avon remain untouched as this became a part of him once more. Just let Avon try to keep Blake at arm’s length then. Just let him try...

Untouched? Condensed as he was into his own misery, not even Blake would have thought Avon unscathed. Sundered, perhaps, but not unscathed.

And as for Avon himself... Avon felt raped. Felt violated, ravished, torn apart, all the sins of his sex piled upon his head, silent accusations ringing in his brain, too deep to be heard, too deep to do anything but wound. With none to blame but himself. Guilt, again, once more the past regurgitating him and ejecting him, gnawed and rendered, out to stand alone. And this time, would there be a Vila to be found, one who could counterbalance his brittle genius, one who could bring warmth to where only ice had been bred to flow in his veins? There was only one way to find out, and a man willing to kill millions to retain the only one who could make him real, a man such as that was too afraid to find the answer. He had had answers enough today, a feast of bitterness. One upon which he could not help but feed.

Time passed, as it will, and Avon with it. He manhandled the fear into a manageable lump, tucked it away in a pocket of his mind where it could fester quite nicely on its own without any help from him. He would, he knew, deal with it. But later, when he had some strength back, when he had fed from Vila, when he had beaten his inheritance back under its dark rock with the maggots that ate him alive sometimes. Like now, when every blink

became a closing of the eyes, all the better to catch the fleeting image. Blake...on his knees, red-welted, the finest tapestry of bloodlines etched into his skin, a work of the sadist’s art... But no, he hadn’t done that, not to Blake. To others, too many to count, too many to name, too many of them Servicers who had no name that he ever thought... No blood, not with Blake. He had left the tools of his perversion behind, to rot with his father. But his hands itched to feel the suppleness of leather under them, to feel the hardness of the handle as he wielded a cat-o’-ninetails, welding it to yielding skin, the strength of the body conceding to the weakness of flesh. He craved it all, the sounds to fill his ears, the sights to fill his eyes, the taste to fill his mouth. The feelings, to fill the void left when ultra-privilege is one’s lot in life. Absolute power, once more, absolute power beckoned him, siren singing, luring him onto the rocks...

Blake curled up on Avon’s bed, thought better of it, took a blanket and curled up on the floor, patient as a dog waiting for its master’s boot. Happiness, of a sort, coiled in his belly, warming him even as the heat faded from his arse, all anger at Avon’s abandonment driven out, serpents before the saint’s hand. Avon had abandoned him, yes, and that was part of the pleasure and pain too. It soothed the bloodlust in him, fed his need for martyrdom, to wallow in this pain, to suffer so. It was glorious, to be freed from freedom... Patient, he waited, breathing the amorphous dream.

The ship changed, an altered thrum vibrating infinitesimally through the bone structure of *Liberator*, the surge of energy disturbing Avon in his cycle of dream and nightmare. Slowly, hand going to the small of his back, he struggled to his feet, made ancient by his heritage. He took a moment, breathing deeply, leaning heavily on some of the other old skills he had learned from the cradle on up to the bacchanalia. Breeding will out, and he left his bolthole the very image of an Alpha elite. But it was only the very image, a trick mirror to deflect the vision of others. He walked through the halls of the ship, as he had walked through the halls of his home, aching from indulgences, but with his mind distressingly clear. No soft bandaging of drug to dull this pain...

His cabin. Blake. Inside? He could not face it. Could not go to Vila to get some of the clothes he had left there. Could not go on the flight deck dressed as a refugee from an orgy. Although the marks were none that any could see... He walked on, pace measured and sedate, an academic covering up a satyr, his cock filling with his blood, hardening against the softness of the fabric dressing gown. The thought of Blake, still waiting for him, made his head pound and his cock throb. Blake, who had seen the tape. Blake, who would know his every predilection, desire, peccadillo. Blake, who wanted to receive what Avon burned to give. Resolute, he turned his face away from his temptation and continued to the store

rooms. He would find clothes there. Black, of course, but not leather. Leather was the signal that he was sinking again into his passions... Black, but fabric, loose shirt, soft trousers that did not caress like a hand every time he took a step. No, not that, not if he were to face Blake. Resolute, indeed. For now. Until he yielded to temptation again... Dressed, undeniably, unaltered, *untouched* Avon, he walked back to the flight deck, to take his watch, and to take his accustomed place, as if nothing in the world had changed. And that, he feared, was the unvarnished truth. He could still smell Blake’s subjugation...

Routine, then, that tried and true method for dealing with the unbearable, all of them maintaining their nice, tidy little rôles. There were a few funny looks from Cally, but nothing that a smile or a sneer couldn’t defuse. Concerned, furtive glances from Vila, but all that brought was an increase of comfort for Avon. He passed through it all, Avon did, keeping a lid on both himself and what he had unearthed in Blake, refusing to rise to the taunts, refusing to respond to what was, in a twisted way, a courtship. He would not submit to Blake’s submission. Would take power some other way, in some other form. Not living, no. He would take what was his, the ship itself, and reject that which wanted to be his. And which, by being owned, would possess utterly.

Blake.

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The man was the personification of Chinese water torture, wearing shirts open, white fabric gleaming, the shadow of a nipple tantalising, making Avon’s fingers twitch with the desire to twist the erectile flesh. Trousers, once so loose, always seemed to be worn a little tighter when it was just Blake and Avon, a cylinder of flesh always visible, dressing left, growing as Avon watched. And the words. They never stopped, the challenges, the taunts, the arguments, guaranteed to drive Avon to retribution. Only now, they both knew there could be only one form of retribution, and had a price Avon was refusing to pay. And so the spats continued, escalating, Blake seeking him out, wearing at him, as patient as water on rock.

Drip, drip, drip.

He was beginning to weaken, knew it, even as he denied the pull of what he could have with Blake. The lure of what Blake craved to endure at his hands... The man himself came on to the flight deck, voluminous jerkin of leather creaking softly, seductively, the sound of restraints, the sound of the whip as it slinks through your fingers... Avon bolted from the flight deck, turning his back on Blake and all the inherent dangers there. He found Vila in his cabin, whistling, fiddling with one of the antique locks they had come across on Goth.

“Oh, h’lo. Here, come and look at this, then. Amazing, innit? See? The way this balance works there, and the lever fits in there, so that...” He stopped, Avon’s tongue filling his mouth. “Feeling randy, are we?”

“Oh, yes. Come to bed?”

“Need you ask?”

“Not with you.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Go on, sweep me off my feet—Avon! Don’t! You’ll do your back in and then where will we be? Come on, put me down.”

He was dumped on the bed, Avon’s hands blurring as they moved towards him. The sound of fabric ripping was loud, and louder still was the thud of shoes and boots being tossed aside. Avon grabbed the waistband of Vila’s trousers, fumbling in his haste, finally able to get the fastener undone, but the fly stuck. Inarticulate, he made a noise deep in his throat and tore the trousers open, a red welt blossoming where the fabric scored delicate skin. The sight inflamed him...

There was an edge of worry in Vila’s eyes, but he knew Avon, knew that the games never got truly rough, just a little wild, a little over the top. The thought thrilled him, all that barely leashed passion directed at him, a reservoir from which to drink his fill. He opened his body to Avon, arms and legs going around him, pulling Avon in tight, hindering the other man’s frantic strip. Abruptly, Avon shoved him aside, making him lie there, impaled by the hunger written on Avon’s face. Vila’s cock rose, firming, crown darkening, as he watched Avon toss his clothes off, until he stood there, naked and rampant, staring down at Vila. Warm pink skin, on Vila, scant swirls of hair decorating his chest with a tinge of brown, but a luxuriant patch to cradle the hardness of his cock in a nest of redolent softness. And Avon stood over him, all contrasts: white, white skin of alabaster, black, glossy hair, making his chest and groin so dark, wine-red cock standing straight and blatant. So strong, so very, very strong. Vila smiled up at him, spread-eagling himself, hot and ready, incited by Avon’s need. God, he loved this, when Avon lost control and came to him desperate. Made him feel terribly important, to know that Avon needed him that much, that he was willing to leave off all the trappings of blasé worldliness. Vila arched his hips, age-old invitation, age-old declaration: to the victor the spoils. And he was so looking forward to being spoiled rotten.

So vulnerable, he seemed to Avon, so unprotected, lying there on display like a Servicer at the meat market. So tempting... No, not that, not here. Not with Vila. If he must, then go to Blake, use him. Not Vila. He repeated it endlessly, a charm to ward off harm: himself. He gathered his will together, gentling his hands, softening his mouth, surprising Vila who had been expecting a good hard fuck. Slowly, Avon kissed him, putting all the wordless feelings into the gesture, saying it all with the caresses of his hands as they smoothed every available inch of Vila’s skin, aware of every pore and every delicate hair as it brushed his palms. He kept on kissing Vila, tongue deeply within the other man’s mouth, breathing with him, stroking him, re-exploring the inner sanctum. He clutched Vila close, adoring him with his body, wor-

shipping at the altar of pleasure. Painstakingly, he circled his palm lower and lower, following every line of muscle until he reached the indentation, that delightful dimple just above the swell of Vila's rear. He fondled him there, fingertips trailing a line of fire to the other dimple, kindling a network of heated nerves. Taking his time, Avon traced the cleft that divided the well-muscled backside, tickling lightly, fingers memorising the feel of skin on skin as Vila clenched down tightly, trapping Avon, demanding more satisfaction and less titillation. Avon pressed one finger home, going in dry to a place that relaxed so easily to his presence. Another finger, then Vila was squirming under him, wriggling around until a battered tube was fiddled into Avon's hand. Emollient oozed out, water filling a creek, until the cleft was completely moist and slick enough for anything. Groaning, Avon gave one hand to each buttock, squeezing hard, pulling the cheeks apart, making room for his cock. He pushed forward, and pressed Vila closed again, a wet tunnel of hot flesh for his erection. With every withdrawal, he spread Vila, with every inward thrust, he closed him up tight as a virgin, revelling in the feel of it. The sounds of Vila in passion, the sounds of Vila in love, cascaded into his ears, deafening the voice of reason, leading him farther and faster on the road to ecstasy. He heard himself echo Vila, his own mutters of lust and love harmonising with him, weaving a nest of sound around them. He was warm, so warm, so safe... The hunger began, deep in the pit of his stomach, the tunnel of flesh not quite enough, he needed tighter, he needed harder, needed to feel Vila all around him...

"Leggo a minute," Vila, husky, indistinct, mouth open and wide against Avon's neck, "need to move."

And Avon let him go, almost, keeping both hands still on him lightly, unwilling to lose contact. As Vila turned, his cock brushed Avon's and both men shuddered as hard heat connected. There was a tiny crack of pain amidst the pleasure and it erupted in Avon, exploded just as Vila rolled over and presented himself for Avon's pleasure. As Blake had presented himself for his Master. As the Servicers, rank after nameless rank of them, had knelt. His hand rose, slashing down, Vila's arse becoming rose instead of white. A jolt of silence then, and before Vila could react, Avon's mouth was on him, tongue swathing pleasure over the sting, overstimulating the flesh, making it—and the man—forget the pain. The flesh was ripe and lush under his lips, and Avon nipped it, a tiny, tantalising nibble, resurrecting memories of times when he had bitten hard enough to taste the saltsweet blood...

Avon drew back, horrified, mind aghast at what he was on the verge of doing, to Vila, of all people.

"Avon?"

He couldn't allow Vila time to think, couldn't allow Vila to doubt him, for if Vila doubted him, he was lost. Mouth shut tight as a mousetrap, closing out the insidious temptation, he used his hands again, silent

communication as always, telling Vila that it was all right, everything was all right, just relax... Riveted, he stared at his hands, seemingly tanned against the rose and white of Vila's bum, stared at the rosette of flesh waiting for him, so wonderfully tiny. And thought of it stretching to take his hand, as he had thought of Blake, as he had done before, to others, as he had had done himself... A thumb rubbed there, trembling, terrifying in its appeal, disappearing inside the glistening hole as Vila arched up onto it, swallowing it inside, sphincter clenching and easing in promissory rhythm. Avon gulped, taking a deep breath to calm himself, wondering, for a moment, if Vila had learned to like any of the more... esoteric pleasures of his Service years. Avon had never dared risking finding out, but now, with Blake fresh in his mind, with Blake eroding his self-imposed barriers, it was so ensnaring a thought. Before he gave in to his own weakness, he withdrew the thumb, his own voice groaning at the same instant as Vila protested. A rain of sweat broke out over Avon's skin, drenching him, flushing him as pink as Vila. He rose up to cover the other man, over this lover of his, this one person who had always remained. The one person who had always stayed Avon's hand... Head hanging, forehead resting on Vila's neck, nipples kissing Vila's back with every pass of his body, Avon slid his cock up between Vila's cheeks, felt his cockhead catch against the wetted muscle, felt Vila suck him in, taking in everything he had to offer, devouring everything Avon had to give, demanding more, body surging and undulating, voice moaning, words gutter-sexy and hungry. Spurred by it, Avon clenched his arms around Vila's middle, hands hanging on tight, feeling the belly muscles tremble.

"C'mon, Avon, c'mon, do me. Fuck me, 'arder than that, really do me. C'mon, c'mon, that's it, 'arder, really shove it up me. I'm yours, all yours, an' you c'n do wotever you want to me, so c'me on, fuck me, take your pleasure, use me..."

The well-remembered phrases streamed out of Vila and into Avon, sending him slamming into Vila, losing control completely, going too hard and too fast to make it last, taking Vila every inch of the way with him, hearing Vila, going on and on and on, the voice dropping to the caste-less urchinese of the Service grades.

Avon felt his insides gather into a knot, love and lust and power and fear commingling, congealing, hardening in his guts, filling his balls, one last keening surge from Vila toppling him over the edge, his cock spasming as Vila's arse spasmed around him, as Vila's cum splattered Avon's clutching hands.

And then it was over. Silence descended upon them, who had never been silenced before as Avon withdrew both physically and emotionally. It had happened before, and Vila remembered, every single time acid-etched into his brain. Always when he reverted to Service level, always when he forgot that Avon had fixed it so that

his grade read “Delta-Level 5”. But Avon couldn’t unmake what he had been born. He crept out from under the Alpha, sidling off into the bathroom to clean himself before returning to his fastidious partner.

Bereft, Avon lay still for a while, listening to the drumming of the water, imagining Vila standing under the weir. There would be bruises on him by tomorrow, perfectly conforming to the pattern of Avon’s hands. And not a word of reproach, either. There never was, never had been on those very few occasions when they had gone berserk like this. Only this time...this time, Avon was dreadfully aware of a difference. His control had been sliver-thin, a splinter trying to keep him afloat. He had come so close, so horribly close...

Damn Blake and his passions. Damn Blake for stripping Avon down to basics and bringing all the old lusts back to the surface where they stood, laughing in his face, mocking, taunting, daring him to deny them. And he barely had. This time, he barely had. And how long before he couldn’t? How long before he lost, and losing, lost Vila? How long?

A moment hit him like a blow to the solar plexus, knocking the wind from him: Blake, today, on the flight deck, bending over in front of Avon, seducing him with submission... Not long, then, before he faded in face of temptation. Not long at all... And where did that leave him, if not caught between a rock and a hard place, being ground to gravel between the two? The horns of a moral dilemma: if he followed where Blake led, to Star One, he would be guilty of the murder of millions and the freeing of millions more. As for not following—he was already guilty of so much, most of it, no doubt, captured on that bloody memory cube.

The water was still running and the realisation struck him, that Vila must feel soiled indeed to be taking so long to scrub himself clean. Avon knew that feeling of inner filth. And to have caused it in Vila... Oh, yes, it was only a matter of time before he sank, led into temptation by the messiah himself. Were he to be honest, and he was, sharply, bitterly, blindly, he only ever allowed Blake to lead him where he himself wanted to go. And did he want to go back to what he had once been, before he had staged his own revolution? He thought of Blake’s body, plundered; Blake, trusting him... Vila, gutter-mouthed, bent beneath Avon, with all that experience at his fingertips...

The shudder ran through him along with the knowledge of the choices available to him. Kill, and then lose, or lose. And then kill. Blake. One, or many? For no matter what, it was devastatingly plain that his interlude of reconciliation with his own nature was at an end. Vila would not stay, not once he knew who Avon was, and who he had been. And Avon could hardly blame him. After all, hadn’t Avon run, when the unmitigated truth had shattered him? And were he to give in to Blake, Vila would, one day, find out about Avon’s rôle in Star One. And were he to

give in to Blake, submit to Blake’s submission, Vila would find out about that, also. So. No matter what, Vila would know. And Avon would be left alone.

With the sound of Vila’s vain attempts at cleansing tapping at his ears like rain on a window, Avon lay on the bed, enveloped in the cloudy scent of sex, thinking. Remembering. Seeing what he would become...

The sound of the water still hadn’t ceased when he got to his feet and dressed in the fresh clothes he always kept in Vila’s room. The water was still veiling Vila as Avon opened the door, taking one last look, being given nothing more than a pink, amoebic shape standing stock still under the sheeting water. He stared for a long moment at Vila, thinking of what they had had, thinking of what he would miss. Thinking of what he would be sparing Vila from... One last second, one last look, and his hand reached out, almost touching the screen, almost taking a chance on truth, almost trusting Vila enough... But he stopped, hand outstretched, Vila’s unseeing back never knowing what it had killed with its blindness.

As he left, Avon didn’t dare look back.

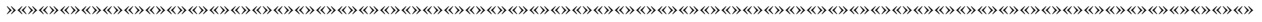
Whirlpool, that was what Blake had churning in his belly, his desires warring with his ethics. To have wanted that, to have manipulated Avon into giving him that—oh, that was hardly what a freedom fighter should have done. But, and it was this that dug poisoned talons into him, ripping him as it swirled around, would he have changed it?

“Yes,” he whispered out loud, “I would change it, of course I would.”

Yes, his conscience whispered within the guarded room of his closed mind, *yes, you’d chance it. You would have made it last longer, made it harder. You’d’ve made him do to you what you saw him doing to that sandy haired man in the tape. Wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t you?*

“No...” the word breathed from him, no more than escaping air, arid and dead. “No...” he said again, trying to give it life, make it true. “No...” But he couldn’t silence that gnawing truth. His only regret was that it had been so little, so unsophisticated, so far from the depths of depravity he had seen and craved. He wanted to wallow in it, cover himself with it, use it to cover the blood staining his hands. Out, out damned spot... And the only thing he could think to take the nightmare voice in his head away was to put everything on Avon’s strong shoulders, give him the responsibilities and the guilt for the dead and leave Blake his punishment and pleasure. No, he wouldn’t let Avon go. Not for money, not for freedom, certainly not for love. Determined, he rose to his feet, repeating the last time, motion for motion, walking with ponderous grace to Avon’s cabin...

Finally, the recycler warning came on and Vila turned the shower off. Water wouldn’t take it away any-



way. The psychs understood it, and Vila was a hell of a lot smarter than anyone but Avon had ever given him credit for. It was Avon who had—in strictest privacy, of course—given Vila access to all the courses he had ever dreamed of taking, all the knowledge, and thus, power, that he had ever longed for. So he knew from anguished experience that what the psychs said was true: abuse, done ‘properly’, was eventually learned as pleasure. And submission eventually became a state of grace, the giving-up of responsibilities and fears. With someone to take care of you, your fears were limited, reduced to worry over keeping your keeper happy. Such a small fear, compared to the daunting terror of facing an entire Universe of hostile decisions needing made and hostile people needing removed. Better, surely, to revert, go back to what he had been born, what they had made him. Alpha élites, Avon’s own family... And perhaps, now that the being forced into it was over, now that there had been enough time to heal, now that he was sure of love softening Avon’s hand—perhaps now would be the time to go to Avon, tell him what he needed, what he wanted Avon to do. Take the burden from Vila’s shoulders and place it on his own. Be what he was born to be. Vila could feel the familiarity of it settle like silk on his shoulders, warm and light and deceptively fragile. To be Servicer to an élite again, when that élite was Avon...

Determined, he threw his clothes on. He knew where Avon would be, and what he would be doing. It was, after all, Vila’s own fault for slipping into the old ways without asking first. They would discuss it, of course, Vila manipulating and manoeuvring Avon round and round and round until the right answer came out. He started out for Avon’s cabin, going through it in his mind. For, perhaps, it would even be easier on Avon to be able to go back to being an Elite. It couldn’t be easy, to give up all the power and indulgences, not the way Avon had for years. If you didn’t count the time he had fallen off the wagon and hooked up with Tynus. He’d seemed a bit happier back then, certainly less stressed, and so wonderfully, erotically charged up all the time. And it had been so lovely for Vila, to have Avon masterful in bed and out, making decisions, protecting him, dominating without bringing pain. Avon had saved that particular quirk for elsewhere, and Vila hadn’t asked. Hadn’t even let on that he knew about Avon’s family secret, just swept it under the carpet where Avon seemed to want it. He wondered, sometimes, what would happen if Avon ever found out just how much Vila knew about those skeletons of his. Wondered too, what would happen if Blake were ever to find Avon’s little secret out. Although, truth be told, recently he’d been more worried about this whole Star One thing, and what Blake was doing to Avon with the whole mess. Something funny going on there, and given time, Vila was going to get to the bottom of it. But before that, he had something more urgent to take care of: his Avon. Oh yes, he’d made up his

mind. He’d have Avon take care of him, make what the tech had been doing for years official. He’d revoke his 5th grade status, for Avon. For himself...

Deep in the hold, Avon tinkered with a ship the others had probably completely forgotten about, the one those bizarre aliens had been sealed in, the one he had piloted *Liberator* to rescue, to give Jenna and Blake air to breathe. He closed that door with a clang, mentally bolting and barring it too, just to make sure. He didn’t want to think, but simply *do*. With thought lay temptation, with temptation lay concession, with concession lay disaster. He frittered his energy away, packing supplies into the ship, stocking up for every eventuality he could think of, up to and including Orac making sure his escape would be unchallenged. He fretted, brow furrowed, going over, again and again, where he stood with Vila. And with Blake. Vila, with his need for Avon to take up the responsibilities his family had bred for him, Vila with his temptation to go back to his old habits, with someone who knew the game so very well. And Blake, of course. All he wanted was for Avon to take on the charge of genocide, destroy his Galaxy and take the blame for Blake’s little sexual foibles. The weight upon his shoulders was burying him, stifling him. And all the while, both of them were appealing to his basest nature, both of them tantalising him, one calculatingly, one because of the same curse that loomed over Avon’s head. Genes. It was all in the genes. It was in his blood, in Vila’s. And who knew what was in Blake’s past... Were he to give in to temptation, as his body and mind both longed to do, he would lose his fine veneer of humanity, descend into what he refused, utterly, to be. He had left once, to escape. He could leave a second time. After all, it was hardly much of a loss. All he’d be missing would be the murder of millions and the watching of love die. And, quite frankly, he’d been through the latter before and he was no idiot. He learned from his mistakes. When Vila turned to hatred, Avon would be a million spacials away, safe.

Well, away, anyway. Not even Orac could guarantee safety, not in this pathetic excuse for a ship. But at least it was a way out, at least he had found a bolthole. Of sorts...

Blake, lost in thought, neared Avon’s cabin, completely unaware that Vila was doing the selfsame thing. The only difference was that they, as usual, were approaching the whole thing from completely different angles. Physically, at any rate. Mentally, they were each one of them, contemplating the other, and Avon. Thinking about the burden the other was levying on Avon, thinking about how the other was making life so hard for Avon. Blake, only too aware of Vila’s emotional demands, Vila, only too aware of Blake’s unethical demands. It gave them both a very convenient whipping boy... It wasn’t until

Blake turned the corner that he saw Vila, saw the thoughtfulness that matched his own, wondered at it. With just cause, they were each as suspicious as the other, and both just as right. They were getting closer, almost abreast of each other, both of them with mouths filled with hot words just waiting to be hurled, ready to fight over Avon, neither one concerned with much more than how much he himself needed Avon and how good he himself would be for him. And they were both right, in their opinions, but their isolation rendered it all wrong. Apart, they would split Avon down the middle, and as for together...neither one of them could even conceive the inception, the actuality far beyond their grasp. The words drew ever closer, girding up loins, readying the two could-be friends for enmity.

And then the ship lurched, a small dip, really, but in a craft as fluid as *Liberator*, the staccato snap was shocking. Battle postponed till later, Blake and Vila raced for the flight deck, never a word spoken.

"Blake!" Jenna yelled at him, "Where the hell have you been? You were supposed to be on watch!"

"Zen," Blake ignored her, ignored her intrusion of her world into his obsessive globe, "what's going on?"

+Ship has been launched from the storage hold.+

"Ship? What bloody ship?"

+The ship brought aboard by Kerr Avon.+

"Those aliens..." Vila muttered, collapsing into the chair at his station, not even bothering to check the equipment. There was no point, instinct suppurating the truth. He didn't need any machine to tell him what he had done, what he had helped force Avon to do. He already knew what had happened. His heart sank into his stomach to set up home with his guilt, building a nice big ulcer. "Avon. He must be leaving..."

Blake turned on him then, bringing his impotent fury to bear on the thief, the handiest scapegoat, his own guilty conscience hearing accusation where none had been made. "What do you know, Vila?"

Before the thief could utter either condemnation or reprieve for Blake's guilty conscience, Zen interrupted, stentorian voice thrumming through the deck.

+Information. Alien ship launched and running. *Liberator* on locked course to Sector 3.+

"But that's the wrong end of the Galaxy, completely opposite to Star One! Zen, abort course change, resume heading to the co-ordinates of Star One."

+Unable to comply.+

"What do you mean, you can't do it? Resume heading for Star One."

+Cannot override voice lock. Return of *Liberator* control shall occur in approximately 73.95 hours, upon completion of locked-in flight plan.+

"Orac..." It was at that precise moment that it all hit him like a ton of bricks and he felt his world fragment into sand to run between his fingers, racing, racing, an

avalanche out of his control. Orac was gone, with Avon. In a craft that was barely space worthy. Outwards, out there, close to the very edge of the Island Galaxies. Avon. Alone. Driven to that by Blake, by Blake's needs, Blake's coercion, Blake's Cause, Blake's reflected tarnish. He looked up, catching sight of Vila...

Who was staring at Blake with dawning horror, Blake's guilty expression making two and two add up to five. If Blake knew, if Blake had somehow been able to use Avon's past against him... He watched, icily calm, too shocked by Avon's departure to feel anything at all, except hate for the man who had driven Avon to it. He and Avon had been doing so well, so very, very well; he ignored his own worries of so recently, when he had reverted to Servicer and had silenced Avon. It is, after all, always easier to see the mote of dust in thy neighbour's eye... For the first time in his life, Vila Restal contemplated murder. Or wearing the black hat of a hanging judge while his talented fingers wove a noose...

Jenna and Cally looked at each other, at the two men who stared at each other so fixedly, then the women looked back at each other again. Jenna slowly walked over to confront Blake, hostility in her every breath. "As we're going nowhere slowly, I think now would be a good time for an excellent explanation, don't you, Blake?"

He ignored her, slumping back in his seat, head in hands, the thoughts circling around and around in his mind, howling dervishes all. With his eyes closed, he could see the void, the great dark that crept the edges of the Galaxy. Avon, alone, out in that, running, hiding, refusing to bear the blood that Blake wanted spilled. Willing to risk his own, to avoid it. To avoid Blake himself...

Effacingly, Vila simply got up from his seat and wandered, barely coherent, to a cool, soothingly dark cabin. Avon's cabin. He crawled into the bed, bringing covers up to cocoon him, enveloping him in the lingering traces of Avon. If only he had said something, if only he had helped more, if only he had been enough...

Hemmed in by the hull on one side, the supplies stacked behind and Orac crammed on the other side, Avon stared out the view screen at the unspeckled darkness beyond. Not much of a ship, but he did have one hell of a computer, which gave him a 50-50 chance. As he had said to Vila, death was the greatest kick of all. He had just never included himself with the gamblers before, that's all. At least, not until Blake had demanded a billion heads on a silver platter, and Vila had started tantalising him with Service again... And certainly, never worth gambling when the stake was his own life, until Blake had whetted his lust again, the taste of blood savoury sweet on his lips. He closed his eyes then, shutting out the view outside the screen and his own reflection staring at him with such bitterly suspicious wariness. The thought invaded his mind again, of himself as he had been, of what he would

become, were he to have stayed with Blake and Vila, of what he had as his heritage...

His reflection staring back at him, he looked out

at the great unknown again and smiled.

Oh, yes, he thought with something akin to relief, better the devil you don't know than the one you do...

IV IN A LIGHTER VEIN

Yes, these are lighter pieces, definitely PWP's. Caroline Dare's is the second in a series of three, while the Glaswegian's tale is simply the usual suspects having it off thanks to the encouragement of the Liberator crew. Enough said about this twaddle...

A SPANKING GOOD TIME! A GAME OF TAG, PART II

CAROLINE DARE

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"19, 20, 21, 22, 23," AVON COUNTED ALOUD, HIS FACE BURIED THE SLEEVE OF HIS JACKET, BOTH ARMS CROSSED BEFORE HIM.

"Slower!" Vila shouted back at him.

"24...25...26...27..."

"And no peeking!" Blake admonished from a distance.

"I don't need to. Get going. 28...29...30..." It was true, he had no need to cheat. Between the pauses in his counting he could plainly hear their retreating footsteps. Blake was the heavy tread to his right, loose gravel crunching noisily underfoot as the man scuffed his way along. Vila was the quicker, softer step directly behind him, the whisper of branches being moved aside as the thief headed into the woods. Which to pursue?

"43...44...45..." Only a couple of hours left before Jenna would call them back to the *Liberator*, ending the pleasant shore leave interlude. Time for this one last round of play, and then who knew how long until the next one? Which to choose, Vila or Blake?

"66...67...68..." He owed Blake a get-even for cheating that last round. Vila had evidently tagged Blake in Avon's absence last time, and Blake had decided to then catch Avon unaware, without the customary recall and start-over. But Vila was equally culpable, for he too should have called a new round.

"84...85...86..." How if he caught Vila and disciplined him, also punishing Blake by ignoring him till the end of the shore leave? Yes, that would do nicely. He could put the fear of God back into Vila—well, the fear of Avon, same idea—and let Blake know he was being snubbed for taking unfair advantage. Not that Avon had minded Blake's deception terribly, but it would not do to let either man think they could escape without repercussions.

"One Hundred!" he shouted loudly. He whirled

front to back and headed directly for the last sound of Vila's passage into the woods.

At first it was easy, for the softer soil in the woods held recognizable footprints. But then the leafy canopy above filtered out much of the planet's bright sunlight, and Avon had to scrutinize crushed twigs and grass to find the tracks. They wound this way and that about the trees, then stopped dead at the base of a large, heavily boughed trunk. Avon almost laughed, it was such an obvious trick. Without even raising his eyes, he called out, "Come down, Vila."

There was no answer, and he remained silent a few moments to increase the thief's anxiety. Then, "Vila, I am not leaving without you. If I have to climb up this tree and haul you down I will, but you won't like what I'll do next."

A noisy rustling came from above as the thief clambered down from the branches he'd hidden in. "I was just settling in for a nap," Vila commented as he dropped down beside Avon. "No hope for that now, I suppose."

"No," Avon replied, and put his hands to Vila's throat, gripping it a little too strongly for comfort. "I've caught you. Now you are going to apologize for failing to inform me when you caught Blake."

"Blake said not to," Vila protested, and pulled at Avon's arm. The grip at his throat tightened.

"Are you talking back to me?" Avon asked softly.

"No! Sorry! Let go!"

Avon loosened his hold a bit, but did not release the flustered thief. "That doesn't sound a very sincere apology," he commented.

Vila drew a deep breath. "I'm awfully sorry, and I'll never do it again," he said carefully, "Ever."

Avon regarded his companion thoughtfully. "No," he decided, "that's not good enough. Grovel."

“Go to hell!” Vila sputtered. “Why should I?”
 Avon looked stern. “You have strayed, Vila. You have betrayed the confidence I placed in you. You will have to atone for your sins.”

Vila stared up at him round-eyed, nervousness quickly replacing his indignation. “What did you have in mind?” he asked cautiously.

“On your knees.”

Vila knelt down, swallowing with relief as Avon’s hard grip at his throat slid away.

“I am going to discipline you, and then I am going to screw you into the ground,” Avon announced coolly. “Give me your belt.”

Vila blinked. “Look, Avon, this is just a game, isn’t it? Let’s not get carried away.”

A hard cuff sent him sprawling, ears ringing. “Did I give you permission to question me?” Avon snarled.

Vila scrambled backward, trying to put the tree trunk between them. Avon stalked after him, and the thief kept backing away, falling with a squeak of alarm as he tripped over a stone. Avon stood above him, gazing down with cold dark eyes. Vila instinctively flung his arms over his head, and cried out, “Stop it, Avon, you’re scaring me! I don’t want to play any more!”

He huddled, waiting to be struck again, and flinched when he felt Avon’s hand take his. But Avon merely pulled him back up to his feet, and brushed dirt from his collar.

“All right, Vila,” Avon said in a softer voice. “You don’t have to.”

“Really?” Vila was a bit confused by the rapid change.

“There’s no point if you’re not going to cooperate. Run along, and I’ll go look for Blake instead.” Avon finished brushing the dirt from him, and stood regarding him, face impassive. Vila’s fear evaporated in the utter normalcy of the moment.

“Blake?” he asked Avon. “Did you want him instead?”

“No, I was looking for you.”

“Oh. Well here I am. You caught me. Might as well tag me, eh?”

“I’d intended to. You asked me to stop.”

“Stop hurting me, not stop...you know...having fun.”

“I’ve never hurt you, have I?” Avon smiled quizzically.

“You just hit me!” Vila exclaimed.

“Don’t be such a baby. It was a shove more than anything; it didn’t even leave a mark.”

“Well...I didn’t like it,” Vila repeated stubbornly. “Don’t do it again.”

Avon’s faint smile vanished. “I won’t,” he said tartly, and turned away. Vila watched him walk off, then

trotted after him.

“Avon, wait!” he puffed, catching up with the technician. “Don’t go. Don’t be angry. I still want to have you.”

Avon paused.

“C’mon, let’s have a nice time of it,” Vila coaxed, “like that time we were celebrating—what was it? Your uncle’s anniversary?”

Avon’s stiff posture did not relax, but he cocked his head to one side, remembering. “My grand-uncle’s hundredth birthday, had he lived.”

“That was it! Remember, you poured champagne all over me and started licking it off?”

Avon looked suitably discomfited. “It seemed appropriate at the time.”

“Oh, it was!” Vila enthused. “I was thinking something like that would be quite nice right about now.” He slid his hand daringly along Avon’s torso to caress his groin. “Right about here.”

“We haven’t the champagne.”

“No,” Vila agreed. “Guess we’ll have to improvise, eh?”

Avon sighed. “All right,” he gave in.

“That’s a pretty show of interest!” Vila exclaimed. “Anyone would think you were agreeing to muck out a plugged waste conduit.”

“I had a different sort of game in mind,” Avon admitted.

Vila looked wary. “The sort where I get smacked about? No thank you.”

“That’s a crude way of putting it.”

“It’s a crude game you want to play! I’ve been knocked about plenty in my life, and I’ve never enjoyed it yet. I didn’t think you got off on sadism.”

Avon considered. “Not inflicting real pain, real suffering, no. But the game...well, let’s say it lends excitement. Never mind, Blake was right. He’ll say *I told you so*, and we’ll leave it at that.”

“Blake was right about what?” Vila asked suspiciously.

“You. He said you’d be scared to death to try it. I, on the other hand, was of the opinion that you would be interested in expanding your horizons, tasting the thrill... Well, it’s not that important, I suppose.”

“Blake said I’d be scared to death?” Vila asked indignantly.

“Oh yes,” Avon affirmed. “He had no confidence in your sexual sophistication. He rather looks upon you as a timorous diversion, good for a snuggle and a snog, but not really equal to an Alpha’s appetites.”

Vila looked incensed. “Did he say that?”

“Well...not in so many words, perhaps. But the attitude is there. You’ve seen it, I’m sure.”

“Bloody arrogant Alpha studs,” Vila growled. “The pair of you! Yes, you too! You think I’m too thick to

see what you're up to? All right, fine. We'll play your little game, and we'll do it however you like. And you can go tell Blake after, tell him how you were right and he was wrong, and the silly Delta fell for it. Just one thing, Avon. Have a care what you do to me, because next time the tables will be turned, and you'll be on the receiving end. I mean it. You hit me too hard, you hurt me too much, and I'll make sure you know how it feels. Understood?"

Avon's eyes gleamed. "Perfectly."

"All right then." Vila swallowed hard, steadying his nerve, and knelt before Avon. "I'm ready, master."

Avon smiled within at getting his way. "Take off your clothes. Everything. You won't be needing them."

Vila wordlessly obeyed, standing before Avon for inspection when he had set aside his last article of clothing. Avon's eyes raked his body over, lingering over those areas which pleased him best. Vila shivered under the scrutiny. Normally quite relaxed with nudity, he felt more exposed than he could ever remember feeling before. Avon reached forward to touch him, and he pulled back slightly, suddenly feeling ticklish all over. Avon frowned.

"Ow!"

Avon had caught one of his nipples between thumb and forefinger, and pinched hard. "Stand still," he admonished.

"But...Ow! Don't! Sir!"

Avon had given another hard squeeze. When Vila gritted his teeth shut and was quiet, Avon released the nipple, licked his thumb, and rubbed it soothingly over the reddened skin. "That's better," he approved.

Avon continued tracing on Vila's chest with his thumb, circling the nipple over. "On your knees," he ordered. Vila knelt. "Cross your wrists." Vila presented his arms, crossed at the wrists. Avon suppressed a satisfied smile at the submissive appearance of the naked man. He loved getting his way, and he was definitely getting into his role. Pulling off his own belt and threading the end through the buckle, he passed the loop over Vila's hands, pulling it tight to bind his wrists.

"Over here." He led Vila to the sloping trunk of a fallen tree. His mind tumbled about with images of what he would do to the submissive thief tethered behind him.

Thhwp! A peeled switch whistled through the air as Avon tested the flexibility of the branch he'd cut from a tree. He'd intended to use a belt for this, but both his and Vila's had been used to secure the thief. Still the tree switch was, he felt, an inspired substitute. Vila lay face down along the barrel of the fallen tree trunk, his hands and feet bound by the belts. His shirt was tucked beneath his loins to protect them from the tree's rough bark, but the rest of his clothes lay tossed haphazardly aside.

"Are you ready?" Avon asked sternly.

Vila closed his eyes and nodded.

"Count." Avon's arm raised high again, and brought the switch snapping down on Vila's upturned ass. It left a thin red line emblazoned across the skin.

Vila drew in a gasp of breath and called, "One!"

The blows fell with slow hard rhythm, Vila hissing at each and calling the tally aloud. Gradually a red flush from the spanking lines spread to envelope his entire backside in a burning glow. Avon watched the rosy area increase with satisfaction, carefully weighing each strike to sting without raising welts. Vila groaned louder as continuing lashes fell upon increasingly sore flesh. He was squirming now at each snap of the switch, flexing his back and buttocks in useless evasion of the whipping. When a sob tore at his voice on the count of "Nineteen!", Avon paused.

"Finish it," Vila said through gritted teeth, edgy at waiting for the next smack, the next sting of heated flesh.

"No," Avon said, resting his palm over a flushed and throbbing buttock. "No, Vila, it's just starting. I shan't hurry to finish it yet." He stroked the burning skin gently, soothing the irritated surface with his featherlight touch.

"Whose hand is on you? Whose fingers are touching your naked skin?"

"Yours, master," Vila whispered.

Avon smiled arrogantly and continued stroking and fondling Vila's backside. "Can you stop me?" he asked softly, pressing down between Vila's tensed thighs. The bound feet flexed in helpless reflex.

"No, master."

"Can you stop this?" His fingers crept round Vila's scrotum, snugging the tender skin within their grasp.

"Ah, rather sensitive there? You'll have to offer me something better than 'please'."

Vila writhed in Avon's steel grip, trying to think what best to say. "I'll do whatever you want," he offered, pressing himself against the stiff fingers which squeezed at him. The fingers relaxed and he let out a shaky breath.

"What I want," Avon mused. "What I think I want right now is your mouth, Delta. I want your tongue to lick me hard."

He came around the trunk to stand before Vila's face, trousers unfastened and crotch exposed. The fingers which had just squeezed below so uncomfortably now smoothed through Vila's hair, gathering a handful of the light brown locks to grip tightly, pulling Vila's head up to a level with Avon's cock.

Vila parted his lips and passed them hesitantly over the head of Avon's already half-hardened penis. This bit of intimacy was something Avon had never permitted before, surprisingly skittish of having oral sex performed on his person. It was the control, Vila realized suddenly. Avon was afraid of losing control, and letting someone put their teeth around his cock must require more trust than he

was generally capable of. But under these conditions, in a position of unquestioned mastery, he could allow intimacies he usually shunned.

With a certain rush of pleasure at detecting vulnerability in his erstwhile master, Vila bent to the task of licking and arousing Avon's member with impassioned attention. Avon moaned and rocked forward on his toes, thigh muscles clenching as Vila's mouth nuzzled down over him.

"Oh, that's good, Delta. You've had practice I see. Yes, like that... Make me hard... Hard enough to spear your arse..." Avon's fingers clutched at Vila's hair, keeping his head positioned just so, his face pressed close. Vila licked and suckled persistently, enjoying the feeling of Avon's member swelling and hardening against his tongue. The feeling of power he had was incongruous, for here he was bound and beaten and helpless, yet flushed with the excitement of arousing Avon by his compliance. He felt his own organ stirring beneath him, infected by the sensual sexplay he participated in.

Avon was drawing deeper gulping breaths. His cock waved as the pull of erection warred with gravity's tug at the heavy flesh. It retreated from Vila's mouth, too big now for him to accommodate it all. Still he laved it fervently, spurred by Avon's flushed appearance and glazed eyes.

Then Avon jerked himself away, almost panting a moment as he regained equilibrium.

"Was that good, master?" Vila inquired innocently, watching with wicked glee Avon's evident arousal.

"Oh yes," Avon murmured. His eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Almost... too good." He raised the switch again, and ran a finger warningly along its length. "You're not trying to hurry me, are you Delta? Not trying to evade your full measure of stripes?"

Vila shook his head.

Avon slapped one buttock bare-handed. "Answer properly!"

"No, master!" Vila responded quickly.

"You're ready to continue?"

"Yes, master!"

Avon moved back into position behind Vila, stepping up closely this time so that his engorged cock rested up against the crease between Vila's haunches. "So am I," Avon said softly. He raised the rod again. "Continue the count. We have yet to reach thirty."

The stinging blows smacked down on Vila's blazing bottom in steady progression, Avon's heavy member sliding back and forth in the crease of Vila's ass as the thief squirmed beneath the rod. The thick cock was coated with Vila's saliva, and spread a welcome cooling wetness over the heated skin it rubbed upon. Vila began squirming more from the congestion in his own loins than from the discomfort of the caning. His knees parted

marginally, and Avon was quick to press into the widened gap. Their thighs touched, Avon's taut muscles straining between Vila's burning haunches. The pressure on his sore bottom smarted with fiery pins and needles, but also spurred Vila's cock into straining erection.

"Twenty eight!" he called at the latest swat.

There was a long pause, then the last two blows smacked into each buttock in quick succession, leaving his ass glowing with the heat of the ordeal.

"Thirty lashes, Delta. Your penance for having misbehaved earlier. And now that I have finished disciplining you, I am going to fuck you."

Avon leaned over Vila, spreading his blazing cheeks widely with a punishing grip. Vila felt the length of the technician's heavy cock slide between his legs, the crown of it pressing in toward his opening. Still slick with Vila's saliva, it glided over his flesh and thrust demandingly at the tight entry to his body. He tightened for a minute, the smart of Avon's grip on his burning backside making him clench muscles defensively. Avon ground himself against the flushed bottom, and Vila groaned.

"You can't stop me," Avon warned. He pressed harder, and the thick bulge at Vila's ass slid inside. Vila moaned at the brutal yet pleasurable shock of intrusion. He clenched his fingers into the unyielding leather of Avon's belt, his body writhing under Avon's full weight.

The technician was moaning softly as well, awash in the sensations surrounding his hungry cock; the tight resistance of Vila's passage, the warmth of the body tensed beneath him and greater heat of the whipped bottom pressed back against his thighs, and as always, the sheer delight of taking another's body for his own pleasure. He didn't care how selfish it was, he rejoiced in the power, the control, he wielded.

Steadily he penetrated Vila, holding the thief's shoulders for leverage when harder thrusts were required. Vila squirmed excitedly within that hold, half trying to escape the painful pressure inside him, half trying to position himself to gain the most stimulation from Avon's movements. The burning pressure within gave way to a rising excitement as Avon's cockhead probed deeply, touching areas of exquisite sensation within.

Vila began rocking frustratedly against the tree trunk, wanting more stimulation. His own cock was quite hard and it shivered to each stab his prostate received within. He wanted to touch himself, or have Avon touch him, and couldn't do anything about it. The belts lashing his wrists and ankles held securely, leaving him helpless to do aught but await Avon's pleasure. Groaning with need, he writhed as Avon continued thrusting into him.

For his part, Avon was fired with excitement. Every muffled gasp from his victim sent shivers through his loins, each spasm in the thief's body caressed his stroking cock with tight ripples of sensation. Avon's pace quickened, deepened, as his pulse soared. His hips slapped

into Vila's sore backside, shoving the thief repeatedly against the curved barrel of the tree trunk he lay upon. Vila's own cock, safely ensconced in the soft protective folds of his wool shirt, thrived under the rough treatment. Already well-stimulated, it rode the jostling and shaking as Avon pounded into the thief's body.

"Please, Avon," Vila gasped, on a plateau of excitement just short of fulfillment. "Hold my cock, just for a minute. Just touch it, I'm almost there..."

A hard smack at his hip was his reply. Avon, not slowing his thrusts at all, snarled at him, "You will get only what *I* choose to give you!" He slapped Vila's hip again, bucking into him at the same time so that the stab and the sting coincided, underscoring his words.

Cursing softly, Vila tensed to withstand Avon's accelerated thrusts. The thick cock in him churned back and forth, filling him then drawing back before re-penetrating. All his attention focussed on that movement within him, on the places where Avon's body touched his, and on the smoldering burn from his reddened cheeks.

Avon shifted slightly, trying to angle his penetrations deeper. His weight pushed down on Vila from a different angle as well, sending Vila over the edge of tension and anticipation he'd been trembling at. With a relieved cry of delight, Vila hugged the tree trunk as his cock jerked and spasmed.

Orgasm exploded upon Avon as Vila's body shook under him. He sank the length of his member within Vila one last time, feeling semen pulse through him and pour into the thief's snug passage. His body pressed tightly to the helpless figure in his arms, and he rolled his hips in luxurious final probes as his cock released its hold and relaxed.

Vila lay still, his head hanging limp between his arms over the side of the trunk. He sighed as Avon gave his ass a few last slow pumps before withdrawing. He wanted to curl up with a pillow and blanket and perhaps a friendly warm body, and go to sleep. That was the problem with wilderness sex, no creature comforts at hand.

Avon sighed heavily as well as he withdrew. His penis was scarlet red from the chaffing it had undergone. No matter the thrill of doing it rough, he absolutely would have to start carrying proper lubricant on these shore leaves. He pulled Vila off the fallen trunk and settle the both of them down at its base. The sexual encounter over, his interest in playing dominant male had been satisfied for the time being. It was a concerned, gentle Avon who was unfastening the belts, massaging Vila's wrists to sooth the marks left on them.

"You're all right?" he asked casually, eyeing Vila over for signs of damage. Apart from a few light bruises and a still-reddened bottom, the thief seemed quite healthy, if currently listless.

Vila nodded, then winced as he rolled onto his back. He quickly turned back on his side, leaning against

Avon's reclined form. "Oh my aching bum. It's sore inside and out."

"You'll recover. There's some excellent liniment on *Liberator*. Would you like me to come apply it tonight?"

Vila groaned at the thought of anything further touching his smarting behind. "I just want to hang it out to wave in the wind," he sighed. "Shame some things aren't detachable."

Avon's arm slid comfortably round his shoulder, inviting him to rest his head on Avon's chest. "You're not sorry we did that, are you?" he asked the tired thief.

Vila tipped his head to look up at Avon. A mischievous smile danced in his brown eyes. "Not at all," he replied cheerfully. "It's given me wonderful ideas."

Avon laughed. "Ideas? Did they die of loneliness?"

"No, really," Vila grinned. "Some lovely ideas. But tell me something; was all that the way you like it best? I mean, was that everything you wanted to do, or was there anything else?"

"Are you speaking from intellectual curiosity or do you think yourself capable of enduring another round of play?"

"Curiosity," Vila said hastily, more than satiated for the present.

"Ah. Well, it depends on the game being played, you realize." Avon closed his eyes and let his thoughts drift through the possibilities. "For this, I might like to try it again at night sometime. Or in the dark, at any rate. It would better suit the mood. Some props would add to the tone as well."

"Such as?" Vila prompted.

"Oh, any number of things. Blindfold, cockring, collar, probe, restraints... anything one cares to improvise, really. None of it's necessary, but, they help sustain the atmosphere."

"Kinky," Vila muttered.

"Yes," Avon smiled his charming smile. "It can be. Though the real point is to keep things fresh, interesting. With infinite variation available, infinite routes of pleasure are possible." He bent his head to kiss Vila's mouth for the first time that day, a soft lingering kiss. "We'll try this again with some variants, shall we?"

"Oh, yes." Vila returned the kiss eagerly.

"You'll enjoy it," Avon promised him. "I'll make sure you do."

Vila grinned up at him. "'All right, Vila?" Avon coaxed.

"Yes, all right," Vila agreed. Rubbing his smarting backside with one hand, he settled against the leather-clad form, idly spinning plans of attack.

Avon kissed him again as reward for him compliance. "By the way, Vila; Tag, you're it."

Vila laughed. "I know, Avon. *Just you wait.*"

ON THE TIP OF HIS TONGUE

CALLY DONIA

“MY BALLS ARE TURNING BLUE.”

Shocked into utter indelicacy, Avon sprayed tea all over the table in front of the flight deck couch. “I beg your pardon?” he spluttered, mopping up discreetly.

“Me balls are turning blue.”

Avon turned around to stare at the area in question. “I heard you. I just didn’t understand what the hell you said.”

“My. Balls. Are. Turning. Blue.” Vila repeated with studied patience, not to mention a look that questioned Avon’s intelligence. Or lack thereof.

Realising he wasn’t going to get a better answer, Avon changed tack. “But why would your balls be turning blue, when you’re wearing brown trousers?”

Now it was Vila’s turn at profound incomprehension. “Eh?”

“I said, why would your balls be turning blue when...”

“I heard, I heard. What’ve my trousers got to do with it?”

“That’s what I’m asking you.”

“You were the one to bring them up. I didn’t mention them.”

“No, you just suddenly announced—in the middle of the flight deck, I might add—that your balls were turning blue. I’m simply trying to find out what the hell you meant by your somewhat tasteless announcement.”

“All I’m saying is that my balls are turning blue.”

Avon heaved a sigh of utter frustration, knowing that he should leave well enough alone, but damned if he would allow Vila, of all people, to bamboozle him. “All right, all right, I should know better than to expect even a modicum of intelligence out of you, so allow me to simplify things down to your level. Shall we try a translation of that bizarre expression into standard English here, Vila, or is that just the slightest bit beyond you? What, exactly, does the phrase, ‘my balls are turning blue’ actually *mean*?”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“Vila...”

Funny how threatening one’s name can be. “Umm, just, you know, tied in knots.”

Avon stared at him blankly, flicked his glance to the pertinent spot and then raised an eyebrow in patented, polite incredulity. “That, idiot, is an anatomical impossibility.”

“No, no, not *actually* tied in knots. I was being metaphoric, you know.”

“Oh, so *that’s* what you are. Forgive me for not

realising—I was just so surprised that you know a word like that. But let me make sure that we are absolutely clear on this. Your balls, or testicles if we decided to be literal and circumspect, rather than metaphoric, are blue—which is rather more than we can say for your blood—and they are also tied in knots.” He paused, pointedly. “Metaphorically speaking, of course.”

“Exactly.”

“So, in plain language, you are suffering from the effects of extreme sexual frustration.”

“That’s what I said in the first place!”

“And which, with typical flair, sophistication and good breeding, you decided to announce, at the top of your voice, on the Flight Deck. With both Jenna and Cally liable to come wandering in at any moment.”

Vila had the sense to look shamefaced, even though he felt no such thing, because Avon could be quite disgustingly mediæval about the ‘girls’. “Yeh, well...but it’s still true. An’ anyway,” he continued, using the old standby of attack being the best form of defense, “why didn’t you know what I was talking about?”

The smugness that covered Avon’s face was enough to turn Vila’s stomach. Well, almost...

“Never having experienced the condition...”

“Oh, get off it, Avon. Everyone’s gone through it at some point. You’re just too much of a coward to admit it.”

“Don’t judge everyone by yourself, Vila. The disillusionment would be devastating.”

The familiarity of contempt was water off a duck’s back and Vila ignored Avon, as usual. He simply skipped Avon’s last comment. “But come on, Avon, you must’ve had blue balls at least once in your life. I mean, what about when you were a teenager?”

Avon smiled in warm reminiscence. “I attended a co-educational school. A co-educational *boarding* school.”

“Oh, it’s all right for some, isn’t it? Went to the local reform school, myself.”

“Well now, that explains everything.”

“Not my fault, you know. Just following the family tradition, that’s all.” He stared at Avon speculatively, sneaking a quick peak at a certain black-clad groin. “What I want to know is, even if you’ve never had blue balls, why don’t you know the word, eh?”

“Because, Vila, some of us aren’t fifth grade Deltas, that’s why.”

“So what do you fancy-nancy Alphas call it then?”

Avon cast a quick glance around to make sure

that neither of the women were within earshot, completely ignoring the fact that both Cally and Jenna swore considerably better than the average trooper and certainly well enough to curl the hair of any self-respecting Alpha. Perhaps that explained Blake... "Goolies," he muttered eventually, extremely quietly, and into his teacup.

"Pardon?"

"*Goolies*," he said, quite loudly this time, banging the poor, innocent little cup down on the tabletop. "We say, 'I have a bad case of the goolies'."

"Oh, I am sorry to hear that, Avon. Perhaps you should have a word with Cally," Blake answered as he approached Avon, trying very hard to keep his face straight despite this wholly unexpected and completely clay-footed announcement. "Very nasty condition, is that. Shouldn't let it go on too long, it can be quite damaging, or so I've been told. Is that the printout on the group on Ansolon? Thank you. And you really should get that," he flicked a hand at the crotch in question, "taken care of as soon as possible. I'll talk to Cally and send Gan up to take over, shall I?" And then he left again, quite unable to hide his grin, leaving Avon quite unable to hide his blush and Vila quite unable to hide his glee. The aforementioned thief picked himself up from off the floor, almost purple in his desperate efforts not to laugh himself to death: Avon was, after all, awfully close to the weapons wall...

"Sorry," he mumbled, choking on the bubble of hysterical giggles clogging his throat. "Didn't mean to land you in it like that."

"Well you did, and I promise you, Vila, that for every time Blake grins at me over this, I shall make your life even more of a misery than it already is."

"Oh, come on, it wasn't *really* my fault that you just announced that you had a bad case of the goolies."

"Well don't look at me, Avon," Jenna snapped, picking up the Monopoly board and turning on her heel to leave, "I've got my hands full with Blake. Why don't you ask Cally? I'm sure she'd be willing. She always did have a soft spot for those in need."

"Vila..."

"Umm, I think I hear Gan shouting at me. Yes, yes, I can definitely hear Gan," he muttered, sidling out of Avon's range of fire. One glare from those eyes and he'd be dead and buried. Or just buried. After all, Avon did have a particularly vicious streak in him sometimes.

"I don't hear anything of the sort, Vila. Now, I know this is probably beyond you, but stand there and face me like a man."

"Oh, Avon," Cally announced, dashing onto the flight deck, probe in one hand, schematics printout in the other. "I just bumped into Blake. He said you were having some kind of problem with your testicles. If you want to, as soon as I've finished this repair, I'll meet you down in the surgical unit and see what the computers can diagnose."

"That will not be necessary, thank you," Avon ground out with vitriolic politesse.

"Oh, it's no trouble, Avon. But this repair I'm doing just now could take me quite a while, so why don't you have Vila help you instead? He knows how all the equipment works." She stopped, looking from the stony, flushed Avon to writhing, flushed Vila. "Vila! What are you doing on the floor?"

"Selecting his burial site, I should imagine," Avon muttered.

Cally looked back at him, considering lowering her personal shields so that she could sense him. She looked more closely at his furious face and being nobody's fool, decided to beat a hasty retreat instead. "I think I shall just leave you two to it."

After she left, a faint trace of her perfume lingered, definitely the only sweet thing on the flight deck... unless you counted the sweetness of revenge that Avon was planning, that is.

"Avon, now, listen, Avon, it's not my fault, just a misunderstanding, I'll clear it up, I promise. I'll explain it to them, honest, sort the whole thing out, make sure they know that you don't have a bad case of the goolies, or if you'd rather, you can tell them," he squeaked, sneaking a little bit farther away. "I mean, I understand your hurry, but don't worry, between us, we can sort it out. It's not like it's anything major, we can take care of it, just me who's got a bad case of blue balls..."

"You as well, Vila? I got the impression from Blake that it was just Avon who had the, em, problem. Well, that does make it easier all round, I suppose. So why don't the two of you just trot off and I'll take over here." This time, the latest player in this farce was Gan, of course. Avon's humiliation had to be complete, after all. "Aren't you going, Avon? You really shouldn't let it go on too long, it's very damaging, or so I've been told. Off you go then, I don't mind." His eyes twinkled and he winked at Vila conspiratorially. "With both of you tied in knots, it's not like it's going to take long, is it?"

"Oh, it's not going to take long at all," Avon muttered under his breath, face brick red and carefully staring straight ahead as he dragged Vila off the flight deck. "Murder rarely does."

Gan grinned when he heard Vila's voice crying out Avon's name, the grin blossoming into a chuckle. He really did like to hear people enjoying themselves.

Vila, meanwhile, was not enjoying himself, not one tiny little bit. His arm was twisted up his back and his balls were still twisted in knots. He was shoved unceremoniously into Avon's room, which unnerved him no end. It was the only cabin that was soundproofed. Now *there* was an ominous thought.

"Avon," he began, dusting off both his clothes and his very best whine, "come on, let me go. It wasn't my fault, they all just jumped to conclusions..."

“With considerable help from you.”

“I didn’t say a word! It was you that kept saying the wrong thing at the wrong time... And it’s not as if any of them minded, is it?”

“I do not care to have my genitalia a subject for discussion!”

“Bit late then, isn’t it? Been a topic since the word go.”

The silence was deafening.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Umm,” Vila prevaricated, just now realising how stupid he was capable of being. “Well...”

“Vila,” Avon purred at him, using a voice more suited to seduction than the murder promised by the grip on Vila’s left arm, “I’m going to kill you anyway. You might as well confess all of it and die with at least one clean spot on your grubby little conscience.”

“Umm...well...”

“You have already said that, Vila. Let’s try it again, shall we?”

“It’s just, that, well, you know...”

“Actually, no, I don’t know. Which is why I asked you in the first place. Now, then, Vila, just precisely what did you mean, saying that my testicles have been a topic of discussion from the very start?”

“Not your balls, exactly...”

“Then what, exactly?”

“The crown jewels.”

“The Crown Jewels? I know I must seem rather refined to you, Vila, and certainly well above your station, but the Crown Jewels?”

“No, no, not the Crown Jewels. The crown jewels.”

The subtle difference was completely lost on Avon. Rather like his temper...

Vila squawked as his collar was tightened into a knot even tighter than his balls.

“Vila...”

That one word sounded less like his name and more like his tombstone.

“Yes?” he squeaked, trying for a man-about-town nonchalance, coming up with squelched mouse instead.

“What, exactly, was the subject of discussion, from the very start?”

Oh, that tone of reasonable, patient enquiry meant trouble. With a capital T, buried right in the middle of Vila’s skull, if he weren’t careful.

“It’s just that, well, you always wear your tunics so long, and your jackets, and you hardly ever take them off and just wear trousers and a shirt or something tucked in, you know, showing anything off. You’ve always been so discreet and all and well, we all used to wonder what you were like under all those clothes.” Avon’s face was utterly, frighteningly still. “And um,” Vila went on, trying

to postpone the explosion he could see building with such bellicose enthusiasm, “when we did catch a glimpse, you looked so...” he stopped, groping frantically for a way to say this that an Alpha with connections to the ancient royals wouldn’t find too uncouth for words, “um, well, we, em...”

“Yes?”

Oh, shit, he was going to kill them all, not just Vila...

“Em...nice.”

“Nice, Vila?”

“Yeh, nice.”

“For something you considered to have the bulk of the Crown Jewels, ‘nice’ seems woefully inadequate,” he snapped. “Rather like you, in fact.”

“Not inadequate, no, not a bit. Like I said, *nice*. Very nice. All full and round and heavy looking, with that lovely soft curve at the top of your right thigh...” Vila heard what was pouring out of his mouth and clamped his hand over it to shut himself up. Unfortunately, he always had been a bit slow on the uptake and this time, he had a horrible sinking feeling that he was too, too late.

“Soft?”

One word, whispered, changing everything like an alchemist’s spell. Lead into gold, the weight slipping slowly from Vila’s shoulders.

“Yeh,” he whispered back, hoping he was getting himself into something bigger than he could handle. Judging by that bulge he had glimpsed once or twice, he was justified in his high hopes. “All soft and waiting.”

“Rather like your brain, really.”

Oh, well, so much for romance.

Only problem was, all this talk, all this discussion of Avon’s important little—well, let’s be fair, *not* so little—places had gone straight to his head. And not the one where his brains were, medically speaking, anyway. If his balls had been blue before, they were positively cobalt now and all that blood rushing to his head made him a little dizzy, a little intoxicated. Not to mention plain daft, at least to the point of pinning all his hopes—not to mention surviving this latest debacle in his life—on that chink in Avon’s armour. Lust was such a lovely thing...

He arched forward, just a little, just enough to brush his poor, swollen groin against Avon. “My brain might be soft,” he murmured, desperation driving him to the insanity of trying to seduce Avon, “but my *head’s* as hard as you can get.”

“Not to mention thick.”

“Yeh, but if you’re used to one being thick and hard, you could probably get used to the other one, too.”

Avon simply stood there, one hand still tangled in Vila’s collar.

The silence could have become fraught, but embarrassment got there first, giving Avon a very rare sight indeed: the redoubtable Vila Restal blushing like a

virgin, and not the Vestal sort, either.

For a moment, Vila stopped thinking with the muscle between his legs and used the one between his ears, an errant thought popping in unannounced and popping right out of his mouth before he could catch it. “But how can you never have had blue balls, Avon? You’re not having it off with anyone on the *Liberator*.”

“What the hell makes you so sure of that?” But he was in rout, blushing almost as much as Vila and not all of it embarrassment. As they say, lust can be a lovely thing, but not necessarily when one is trying to be all cool, calm and collected.

“Well, Jenna’s got Blake, Gan can’t because of his bloody limiter—I know, we’ve tried—and Cally just doesn’t and I’d’ve noticed if you’d had me, so that means you’re not having your end away with anyone on board.”

Funny how when your mind’s already on that one track, you can understand even the most obscure slang. Avon glowered. Fortunately, Vila was too busy thinking for it to work, still working out possible permutations. Avon kept on glowering at him, thinking that this had gone far enough and that it was time to convince himself that he didn’t actually want to be seduced, time to regain some of his control. He’d be damned if he’d let a fifth grade Delta idiot embarrass him. Or inveigle him into bed, for that matter. Any inveigling to be done was, after all, the prerogative of the rich and well-bred, which definitely excluded a certain resident thief.

Vila opened his mouth and let his belly rumble, speaking before Avon could put any of his high faluting resolutions into effect. “So, if you’re not having a leg over with any of us, that means...” he grinned in sheer delight, “you’ve got to be flying solo. The old beating your own rhythm stick. Your good right hand.”

“Left, actually,” Avon said, as haughty as a garden party, for once speaking without thinking first.

“Left, eh?” Vila said consideringly, obviously picturing it in his mind. “Yeh, thought you were ambidextrous. Never been able to use me left hand, myself. Never can get the right rhythm going, and I hate it when you stutter, just when you’re getting down to the short strokes.” And interestingly enough, he noticed that the more he talked, the less inclined Avon seemed to be to murdering him...and the more flushed Avon became and Vila wasn’t too sure it was entirely embarrassment. Pointedly, he looked down at Avon’s left hand where it hung limply at his side. Avon swallowed. Hard. Just like the curve lying along the top of his right thigh... Well, faint heart never won fair lady, nor drop-dead gorgeous man, either, so Vila grabbed Avon’s left hand in both of his, turning it over. “Hmm, no hair. Must be good at it, then. Hair only grows if you don’t do it often enough to wear it off.” He looked up quickly, catching the unguarded lick of lust flashing across Avon’s face. He grinned, triumphant. Avon felt the blood rush to his face—not to mention other

little places. But, as Vila was happy to note, he didn’t move away, not by so much as an inch. And Vila was willing to bet that nice bulge had just grown by at least an inch. He loosened Avon’s grip on his collar and sank to his knees, all the better to see with. Yes, no doubt about it. That soft bulge wasn’t soft anymore, and the fabric of Avon’s trousers, which *was* still soft, was moving ever so slightly, with every pulse of that lovely trapped beast.

“Never had blue balls, eh?” Vila said, quite conversationally, his breath brushing where his hands longed to follow—Avon’s rather packed crotch. “Nah, but I’ll bet you’ve had a few bad attacks of the goolies, haven’t you? Be a pity that, to let a man suffer, and it all so needless. And as for plain old masturbation, well, what a waste. Man should never stoop to that.”

“What about fellatio, then?” Breathless, oh, so very breathless and husky, the sounds of a man desperate for sex, the sounds of a man who had no thought of murder, only *le petit mort*. Vila chuckled, gazing raptly at Avon’s groin so close to his face. And growing closer all the time... No *little* death here. Fellatio it would be then, if that’s what Avon wanted, whatever the hell that fancy word meant. But then, there was only one possible thing to do, when on one’s knees at such an altar, so language really didn’t matter. Vila just did that one and only thing possible, diving into the hedonism of it head first. He opened his mouth, leaning forward, the wetness of his mouth darkening Avon’s trousers. Around and around, always skimming the hardness at Avon’s centre, always skirting that rising mound, until finally, Avon groaned in defeat and pulled Vila’s head tightly to him. Vila grinned then, nipping lightly, feeling the throb of blood flooding Avon, the heat rising, fabric stretched tautly, outlining every perfect fraction of that curved line. Avon’s hand then, pushing at him, shoving him away only just far enough for trembling fingers to wrench fabric aside. Vila murmured his appreciation, taking his own turn at pushing someone aside, moving Avon’s hands out of his way, his own fingertips teasing a path through the lush black hair, one smooth fingernail drawing plans down into the goal still hidden by the blackness of cloth. Slowly, he eased Avon free of the trousers, his hand holding tightly, loving the heat and the strength of Avon’s cock, mouth watering at the thought of swallowing all that glorious manhood deep inside. And all that beauty, too, he thought, massaging Avon just so, his left hand slipping into the trousers to squeeze balls heavy with lust. He tilted his head back, grinning up at Avon, confident now, more than sure of the security of his position to tease a little. “So what brought all this on, then?”

“A bad case of blue balls, wasn’t it? Or was that just an excuse?”

Time to tread very carefully, now, Avon’s voice a knife edge for Vila to balance on. Just when you thought you had him completely fathomed... “Never expected

this, Avon, honest. Didn't know you might go in for this kind of thing, or I'd've tried it ages ago."

"So this wasn't a topic of discussion along with my...balls?"

Ah. Now there was a question.

"Well, Vila?"

"Well..."

"That's certainly informative."

"Well... Wasn't anything nasty, Avon, just friendly speculation, that's all. I mean, it's only natural, isn't it, if someone who looks like you won't let anyone touch."

"And how do I look?"

Vila stared up at him, one hand still holding Avon's cock. "Gorgeous."

Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but Avon would settle for a man on his knees any day. Vila was more than happy to oblige, realising that the best way to keep from putting his foot in his mouth was to put Avon's cock in there instead. That really didn't leave much room for anything else, as Vila was realising, much to his delight. He swirled his tongue around the deep flange, sliding against the fullness of the foreskin cowed there, darting the tip of his tongue into the sensitive slit, pleased as punch by the incoherency of Avon's response. Hands clutched at him, pressing him forward and he relaxed his throat, drinking Avon in deeply, moving back and forth with silken rhythm. After a few minutes though, he eased back, letting Avon go with one lingering hard suck.

"Why'd you stop?"

Amazing what lust could do to the human voice: that hoarse sound had been barely recognisable as sophisticated, controlled Kerr Avon.

"Knees're sore, back's killing me and I'm getting a crick in my neck. Out of practice, I'm afraid, Avon. Need a breather."

"Under no circumstances whatsoever! You're not getting out of it so easily, Vila Restal. For once in your life, you're going to finish what you started. Come here, up on to the bed with you and get those clothes off. You may be satisfied with adolescent fumbblings, but I'm accustomed to rather better than that." Clothes were tossed across the room with fine disregard for the niceties of housekeeping, neither man much interested in domestication. Rutting, well now, that was an entirely different kettle of fish...

Vila found himself flat on his back, completely naked with an equally déshabillé—in the fullest sense of the word—Avon. Needless to say, he didn't utter a mutter, more than content to lie back and think, not of England, but of all the joys awaiting him. Avon knelt over him, mouth poised over Vila's straining cock, his own cock and balls dangling over Vila's face like decorations on a Christmas tree. Vila grinned happily and stretched a hand up to pull

Avon down, opening wide and swallowing Avon as far down as he could. He vaguely heard Avon's moan of pleasure, but he was too busy being lost in the sea of his own enjoyment, thrusting his hips up slowly as Avon descended upon him, wetness engulfing him, the raw silk roughness of tongue pressing against him. He gave himself up to it, the consuming and being consumed, all the heat and wetness of it sending thrilling pleasure dancing over all his nerves.

Avon's hands stroked up the inside of Vila's thighs, whilst the tip of his tongue followed the knotted vein the length of Vila's cock, the blood thrumming under his tongue, Vila's balls heavy and hard with all that pent up need. Not quite blue, but certainly with a distinct touch of purple.

"Wot you laughing at?" Vila demanded, agrieved, abandoning Avon's cock in retaliation.

Avon skimmed his tongue tip from the purple glans to the almost bruised looking balls. "Does this mean we've both gone a bit 'lavender'?"

"A bit lavender?" Vila stared at Avon's cock for a moment, then contorted himself to see his own. "Nah, not lavender. Lavender's too pale. More a sort of mauve, I'd say. *Now* what's so bloody funny?"

Avon stifled his amusement, only the glint in his eye betraying him. "No, I didn't mean *lavender* lavender, I meant 'lavender'."

"Oh, hell, Avon, let's not start all of that again! *Page*
C'mon, get up here and have a bit of jolly..." *153*

Avon grinned at the unknown phrase, the meaning quite clear in the context. "If we keep this up, we shall have to compile a dictionary."

"The way you're yakking on, if either one of us can keep it up, it'll be a bloody miracle!"

Avon rubbed the flat of his palm over Vila's aching balls, getting a wonderfully heart-felt groan for his efforts. "Impatient, are we?"

"I am, but I'm beginning to have my doubts about you."

Warmth enveloped him, the weight of Avon's body pressing him down into the softness of the bed, the hardness of Avon's cock pressing down into the softness of his belly. "Patience is a virtue, Vila."

"Yeh? Well, give me vice any day, then."

"This kind of vice?" Avon scissored his legs, trapping Vila's cock between his thighs, squeezing him hard. Well, *harder*, seeing as how he was already well and truly hard. "Hmm? Does this suit you? Better than blue balls, certainly."

"Yeh," Vila said dreamily, brain in his balls again, mindlessly drifting on the waves of pleasure. "Blue never was my colour..." He opened his eyes abruptly, staring up at Avon staring down at him. "Always preferred brown."

All of a sudden, there was a wary stillness to

Avon. To concede to lust was one thing, this threat of emotion was something else entirely. It was quite all right to indulge oneself in sex on a mere whim, to allow the adrenalin of anger to transmute into the adrenalin of desire, but *this*... This was danger, this was personal involvement, this was Anna all over again. He withdrew, lifting himself up from Vila, taking all his heat with him, abandoning them both to the cold.

Feeling the chill, Vila cursed himself to hell and back, coming up with a few words even the 'girls' didn't know. Finally finished with his repertoire, he grabbed onto Avon, pulling them both back onto the bed, submitting, lying flat on his back, legs spread, Avon dominant and controlled over him. Always imaginative, he proffered his glib lie. "Don't go off like that, didn't mean anything. Just a Delta expression, same as blue balls."

"Oh?" Still cold enough to shrivel even the most passionate of hot cocks.

"Yeh, you know," he said, shovelling on confidence he didn't feel at all, "comes from, em, you know, *brown*, for..." he swallowed the word he had been about to use. Despite what else he had used his mouth for, Avon still hadn't allowed anything less couth than the word 'balls' pass his lips, and even then, always with a slight lift to it, almost like inverted commas. No, now was not the time to start bandying words like 'arse' or 'bung-hole' about.

"You were saying?"

"Yes, well, I was just trying to think of a polite way of saying it."

"You? Polite? Please, no. The shock of it would probably kill me."

Discretion being the better part of valour, Vila latched on to the insult, delighted with this new bone with which to distract Avon.

"When am I ever anything other than polite, eh?"

"When you are trying to evade answering a question."

"Oh, yeh, forgot to finish telling you about calling what two blokes do 'browning'."

"Ah," Avon said with every evidence of comprehension, confusing Vila no end, for he had absolutely no idea what bright lie he was going to come up with. "From the old expression, 'brown nose' or 'brown nosing'. Of course, I should have realised that. My grandfather was very old-fashioned and narrow minded, he used to call me... used to call *them* that. Or he'd say they had 'a touch of lavender' to them." The explanation, self-given as it was, reassured him and the word reminded him of where he had been before he was so rudely interrupted. "Lavender," he mused, fingers circumnavigating the heavy globes, sailing on up to follow the flow of blood along the distended vein, settling finally to hold tightly and squeeze. "No, as you say, not lavender." A quick grin then, humour restored by the resumption of good clean fun and right

down dirty pleasures. "But I'd hardly describe them as blue, either." He bent down then, mouth meeting the hungry upward surge of Vila's body, tongue tip delving into the slit at the head of the aching cock. "Gorgeous rather springs to mind."

Vila flaunted himself then, puffing up with pride—not to mention pure, undiluted lust from that flickering tongue. "All right then, am I?"

"Oh, certainly all right," Avon mumbled, mouth full. "Delicious, too."

"Avon?"

Avon sighed in exasperation, not best pleased with yet another interruption. "Who the hell else do you think? Or do you have the estimable Gan tucked under your pillow to while away any idle moments we might have?"

"Don't be stupid. Told you—with his limiter, the poor bugger can't."

"Then he can hardly be called a bugger then, can he?"

"An' if you don't get a move on, neither will you." There. It was out, he'd said it. Now Avon would either have his guts for garters or fuck him into next week. Vila held his breath, waiting to see just how far lust would carry Avon. Far enough, it would seem... now there was a finger rimming him delicately, pressing inwards, twisting into him.

"Now I could hardly turn down the opportunity for so illustrious a title, now could I? Bugger it shall be..."

"Avon? Where're you going?"

"Where do you think? Oh, I am sorry, I forgot. You gave up thinking for lent. I, you monolithic moron, am going to the bathroom, that being the room that any civilised man keeps lotions and creams and ointments."

A grin of sheer predatory anticipation spread across Vila's face as he settled back onto the pillows, one hand idly stroking his cock, keeping himself at full readiness. 'Ask and ye shall receive' indeed. Some men were so bloody funny about buggery, shying away from it, either for fear of intimacy or baseless fastidiousness. Speaking of which...

The second Avon left the bathroom, Vila darted in behind him, locking the door firmly, an 'I'll only be half a tick' drifting behind. Waiting with flattering impatience, Avon finally heard the toilet flush and the shower run, the sound going on and on for what seemed like a lifetime to his poor, aching cock. He retreated to the bed, waiting with what he had hoped to describe as mounting frustration, but due to Vila's sudden obsession with cleanliness, he was beginning to have his doubts. And now the little idiot was singing... That did it. Under the circumstances, that left only one avenue open: Avon decided to start without him.

He was enjoying his solo flight quite thoroughly when Vila finally emerged from the bathroom, all pink and flushed and naked, smelling sweetly of Avon's soap

and Avon's shampoo and Avon's after-shave, well and truly ready for anything else Avon happened to have to hand. And what he had to hand! Well, that would make it all worthwhile...

"Avon! Don't go on without me!"

"I have no intention of *going* anywhere."

"Just *coming*, eh?"

"What else?"

"Oh, I don't know," Vila said, grinning as he delicately draped the maroon towel over Avon's groin. "We could always build tents..."

"Go camping, as it were?"

Vila drew a finger from one peaked nipple to the other. "Oh, so that's what you call it."

"Amongst other things..."

"Mmh?" Vila mumbled, mouth busier with Avon's flesh than language.

"Oh, yes. There's..."

"Avon?"

"Mmh?" Avon mumbled, mouth busy gasping for air in the aftershocks of Vila's sharp teeth nipping him so exquisitely.

"Why don't you shut up?"

There was a sudden stillness, a chill veil descending to cast a pall over the proceedings. Vila stopped the movements of his hands, mind trying to come up with a good enough excuse to salvage this little tryst. Unfortunately, his facile tongue was interested in nothing other than the taste of Avon's flesh and his brains were definitely currently residing in his balls. He gave up on all attempts at glibness and reverted to the eloquence of his youth. "Oh bugger it!"

A very slow smile spread over Avon's face, defusing the situation beautifully. "I thought that was the general idea?"

"Yeh, it was, wasn't it?"

"Vila?"

"Hmm?"

"To quote the less than erudite—why don't you shut up?"

He got a cheeky grin for that. "Why don't you make me?"

Avon reached up, burying his hands deeply in Vila's hair, burying his tongue just as deeply in a very enthusiastic mouth, driving all the lightness and humour out, banishing everything but sheer, hedonistic delight. It caught them both by surprise, this consuming fire where both had expected a nice frolic, something perhaps worth repeating, but hardly this infiltrating pleasure that threatened to take up residence under their very skin, becoming as much a normal body pulse as heartbeat pumping blood. Not that Avon was willing to give in to it without a fight. He stopped them short, freezing Vila off for a moment, pausing to stare intently into somewhat glazed eyes.

"What'd you stop for? An' what're you staring

at?"

"I'm not sure. Your label's come off."

"Which is more than you can say for me, innit? But seriously, what's the matter? Cold feet?"

Avon stroked the sole of his foot down the length of Vila's shin. "What do you think?"

"Oh, *that's* warm enough. But doesn't tell me if you've got cold feet or not, does it?"

There was a decidedly contemplative edge to Avon's stare and Vila felt like an entry in a ledger. Or in a handicapped horse-race. Whichever, the assessing sharpness of that stare did not engender either confidence or preening. A quick visit to the nearest plastic surgeon was beginning to look rather nice... Then Avon nodded, once, decisively. "No, no cold feet. You'll do."

"Do what?" Vila asked, trying to sound seductive, fingers running the length of Avon's ribs, tickling and teasing and tingling.

"Anything I want you to?"

"Absolutely anything your heart desires," he whispered against warm skin, tongue darting out to flick shiveringly along Avon's jaw, slowing to lave the line from nose to mouth, tracing the lingering evidence of smiles. "Unless," he added thoughtfully, "it involves pain. Or work, for that matter. Or missing my sleep."

"Oh, I'd never ask you to miss your beauty sleep. You need it far too much."

"Yeh? Well, if it comes down to it, you could be insomniac the rest of your life and still look great."

"Compliments, Vila? Next it will be bouquets and chocolates."

"If that's what turns you on, I'll give it a bash."

"Freudian slip?"

"You what? I don't wear slippers, let alone Froydian's."

Avon cast him a sidelong glance for that. "Why are we even having this stupid discussion?" He grinned at Vila, pointedly. "Apart from the obvious."

"Cos we're both bloody petrified that we could get to like all this," he waved a hand to encompass the bed and their tangled limbs, "far too much. Scary, that."

"For a coward? Yes, I suppose it would be. But I, Vila, unlike you, am no cowering beastie."

Nimble fingers found his nipples, driving the breath from his lungs and the thoughts from his mind. After a moment, Avon let go of him and Vila finally remembered to answer him. "So you're not worried about going on with this, then?"

"Not even slightly," Avon lied beautifully.

"Oh, that's all right then," Vila said, pressing up with his groin, brushing their turgid cocks against each other. "Get on with it, then, shall we?"

"Why not?"

Fortunately, neither one of them opted to answer that loaded question. Avon, indeed, chose to use his mouth

to far better effect, leaning down to suck a pertly pink nipple between his lips, tongue tip dancing over it, a flickering flame. His hand snaked down the quivering belly to grasp Vila, squeezing him, holding him until his cock was as hard as Avon's grip.

"Oh, yeh," he muttered, mouth brushing Avon's hair, "that's nice, oh, that's lovely. Do it harder, do it harder, oh yeh, keep doing it like that, oh, that's fucking fantastic... 'Ere, get yourself round here, let me at you, yeh, that's it. All hard, are you, an' all for me. Yeh, all for me. This is all mine, all mine, so big, you are, just lovely, an' I'm goin' to 'ave you all, inside me, up me, hot an' heavy an' so fuckin' strong..."

The muttered words incited Avon, an incendiary passion filling his hearing and his mind, pulsing through every nerve in his body, rushing to his groin. He was going too fast, much too fast, had to slow down or he'd never be able to fuck Vila, coming too quickly, make it last, slow down, slow down... He dragged a deep breath in, a modicum of calm trickling through him, easing him back from the precipice. And then Vila spread his legs, wrapping himself around Avon, hands caressing the rippling muscles of Avon's back, mouth sucking and nibbling on Avon's neck, pushing him, pushing him harder and harder...

Groaning, Avon gave in, conceding this round to mindless, rutting passion. He twisted, turning himself until his cock was poised, quivering, bobbing desperately with his pulse, over Vila's mouth and Vila's cock was stretching achingly, yearningly up towards Avon's parted lips. Vila's arms came up, enveloping Avon's hips, pulling him lower, engulfing Avon's heat in the hot wetness of his mouth. A shadow of a second behind him, Avon devoured Vila whole, swallowing his entire length, throat caressing, tongue dancing and pressing cock, hands stroking balls, fingering the delicate skin as if it were the rarest of the fine silks. Vila bucked up into him, and Avon took him, throwing himself into the sensation, sucking and being sucked, fingers probing his backside, finding the hole, inveigling their way in, stretching and probing and feeling oh so wonderful.

He withdrew Vila from his throat, taking a second to suck his own fingers for a moment, then with synchronised sensuality, he sank his mouth down on Vila's cock as he sank his fingers deep inside yielding flesh. He felt Vila's moan vibrate along every inch of his own cock, felt as the bolt of passion trembled down Vila's fingers, the ripple riding out to wash over his own prostate,

flowing in a tidal wave out into his cock, ramming him further down Vila's throat, cascading out to every atom of his extremities, a spasm of pleasure curling his fingers against the firmness of Vila's prostate, the sweetness of it moaning in his own throat, to start the cycle all over again.

Together, they moved, in sinuous dance, undulating one against the other, no nerve left fallow, no iota of skin left insensate and unaware. The exquisite tension of arousal sang through them, stretching them taut, teaching them both new heights of pleasure. Avon could feel it building, glowing and trembling, growing stronger, more intense by the second. He pressed his tongue hard against the beating of the great vein, sucking upwards until he caught his lower lip in the flare of the glans, tongue vibrating into the slit, tasting Vila's essence, loving it, feeling it flow through him, filling him, the first taste flooding him, pooling in his balls, mingling with his own cum, that image vibrating along his spine with delightful tingling, the music of the pleasure playing his every nerve. Vila's finger pressed him perfectly, deep inside, once, twice, thrice, and then he was there, dissolving in the quicksilver joy, soaring away on pleasure, Vila's cum suddenly filling him, spurting liquid life into him, the sensation overwhelming him completely.

Gradually, he came back to himself, becoming aware of the silky hair and skin upon which his cheek rested, of the flaccid penis still nestled up against his lips. Vila's hands, still not quite steady, were stroking his hair, soothing them both, gentling them back into reality. Avon was acutely aware that the next few moments would decide it for them, dictate where this relationship would lead. Dictate whether or not this one mind-blowing bout of passion could, indeed, *become* a relationship. Serious—and they could burn each other out, leaving nothing but charred remains, not even enough to make a sandwich. Cold—and he could hurt Vila enough to chase him away forever. Humorous...

"Avon?" Vila asked, small and tentative, the shaking of his hands echoing in his voice. "How the hell did this happen?"

Avon opened his eyes, and grinned. He had an answer, a way to make this more than a one-off, a way to make this a beginning. Humour. Light, and covering a multitude of sins, such as commitment and affection and fondness and... "How did this happen?" he repeated, the smile colouring his voice. He leaned forward just a fraction, tongue giving Vila's balls a brief lick. "I'm not quite sure. It's on the tip of my tongue..."

V

ADDICTED TO LOVE

Intravenously most certainly conjures up images of drugs and addiction. Here are two stories from the Glaswegian which explore addictive personalities and their relationships with love. The first piece seeks to explain Avon's increasingly destructive and psychotic behavior as a function of the drugs he uses. The reader will admit, we think, that in the series Avon always appeared as someone who could very easily be a drug user. The second story has a somewhat lighter tone to it. Addiction is not always dependent on substances we inject or ingest...

MIST

M. FAE GLASGOW

IT GLINTED IN THE LIGHT, A THING OF BEAUTY, A JOY THAT LASTED SOMEWHAT LESS THAN FOREVER. AVON turned it over and over, the prismatic gleam from it colouring his fingertips with a lingering, dreaming glow.

Vila muttered from the untidiness of the bed, sprawled in chaos equal to that of the sheets and duvet, his words barely audible. "Hate that stuff, I do."

"A fact, which, like you, is of monumental unimportance. After all, you aren't the one who... indulges, are you now?"

"No, but I'm the one who has to sit here and watch you commit suicide, drop by bloody drop."

Avon's fist clenched around the sharp corners of the cube, the edges biting into him, just like Vila's old argument. He turned his back on both the man and his words. "We," he said, waving the tattered banner of his forbearance, "have gone over this before. Repeatedly."

"Yeh, an' the truth's still the same. That stuff, Avon... Look, I've seen sights I hope you'll never even be able to imagine, I *know* what that bloody drug does to a man."

"And I have already explained to you, idiot, that I am not a weakling like your service grade cronies, and so can hardly become addicted. I, not the drug, am in control here."

"Oh yeh?" Vila sneered, gaze solid and harsh, digging a grave in Avon's back. "That's what they all said as well. But Twilight gets you, Avon, lulls you along, convinces you you don't need it, until one day, a month after you take it or ten bloody years later, you waken up one morning and find you can't live without it." His words were obviously falling on barren ground, the seeds of truth left unplanted. "Avon," he tried again, dragging out the

argument, too afraid of the future Twilight would bring to back down from Avon as his common sense dictated. His tongue drifted off into silence for a moment while he marshalled his arguments, poor soldiers though they were. "Look, it's a derivative of Shadow, and you know what that does. You've sat there, eating your dinner, watching the news, seeing the victims, just like the rest of us. But Twilight is just as bad as the other bloody drug, in its own way. After a while, the need starts burning up your insides, then the paranoia and psychosis set in..."

"Vila." The soft word dropped like a stone into the flow of Vila's words, stilling them, the clenched calm drowning out the sense of what was being said.

"What?" Vila asked, prudently cautious.

"I am not about to become a psychopath, nor am I about to become addicted to this. Now, I have heard more than enough on the subject, let it drop before I drop you." He glowered over his shoulder at Vila, making sure his point was well taken. "From the nearest airlock."

Vila subsided, worrying his hair with restless fingers, mind shuffling ideas to find the ace that would convince Avon to give up the filthy drug. He rose to his feet, not bothering with coverings, modesty in him an unnecessary encumbrance in this room. Standing quietly behind Avon, he peered over the pale shoulder, at the hands moving with slow grace, performing the ritual dance of habit. His groin brushed the towel wrapped around Avon's waist, the towel used to hide vulnerability from Vila's sight, the silent, symbolic barrier between them. Reluctantly, he brought his hand round to cover Avon's, his own fingers shaking at his temerity, daring to bring the taint of emotion into their sexual arrangement.

"C'mon, Avon," he whispered, "don't. Don't do

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this to yourself an’ me. Don’t hurt yourself like this.”

An angry twist of Avon’s wrist, and his hand was once again free. “I’m warning you, Vila, you are seriously trying my patience. I suggest you get out while you can still walk out.”

“I can’t just keep my mouth shut about this, Avon! I can see what it’s going to do to you, what it’s doing already. C’mon, give it up.”

Avon snapped round to face Vila, his mouth a furious smear scarring his face. “I don’t try to stop you from your drinking, so don’t try to stop me from taking drugs.” His hand dug cruelly into Vila’s neck as he forced silence. “You are hardly in a position to preach, are you now, you drunken little sot. So shut up and get out.” The hand clenched around Vila’s throat opened, the tremble barely apparent, not even noticeable when Avon brushed past Vila and into the bathroom. As the door closed behind him, the last glimpse Vila had was the seraphic glint of the crystalline cube, waiting to give temporary cure to that nervous tremble. Despondent, Vila gathered his clothes in sullen silence and went off to drown himself in a bottle of his own hypocrisy.

As life wound its way through the passage of time, the tremor in Avon’s hands came more often, now, the nervous dusting of palms more frequent, always, invariably followed by a silent retreat from the presence of others. And that, always, invariably followed by a summoning of Vila to Avon’s cabin. Today, just as usual, regular as clockwork...

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In front of Vila’s carefully inscrutable face, the door opened smoothly, the room it unclothed bright and busy. Shelves lined the walls, electronic and mechanical components lined the shelves, tools stacked precisely in pristine white storage bins tucked neatly under the shelves. No art, no change in the original décor, only the walls and the bed altered by the personality of the man occupying the room. The bed was lush, piled high with the pillows Avon wallowed in when he indulged his passion for reading, a retractable shelf attached at precisely the right point for comfortable access. It held neither book nor drink nor smuggled, illicit chocolate. Just a tube, an inoffensive little tube, the colour of sun-tanned skin, tiny writing in burnt sienna, discreetly blending with the tube itself. Vila sighed when he saw it, a sound of mingled pleasure and disappointment. He hated intercourse, for its tantalising promises of love and affection, for its vicious prosaicness and its undeniable, addictive pleasure. But it was still better than nothing, still better than banishment from Avon’s bed.

The bathroom was redolent with the aromas of unscented bathing gels, of hypoallergenic, perfume-free beard remover, of clean Avon, the smell drifting through the open door, breaking into Vila’s dispirited contemplation of that little tube and all the heartache it held. Without

turning around to see Avon leaning on the doorjamb, Vila unfastened his clothes, folding them methodically, placing them on the chair in front of the computer console, turning off all the lights. The pillows tumbled onto the floor, leaving room for two in the non-standard bed, and he climbed in, not yet looking at Avon. His muscles were limned in the light still glowing from the bathroom, shadows and planes dignifying his face, glimmering on his hair. Then even that light was dimmed, leaving only the anonymous darkness and the faint sounds of Avon crossing the room, coming closer. The bed dipped, smooth skin slid the length of Vila’s, cold feet touched his briefly, and then the body was on top of him, beginning its slow undulation, its quiet climb to erection.

Knowing what was required of him, Vila wrapped his arms around Avon’s back, stealing a caress for himself, to add to his sensations and feed his own needs. Avon would feed and in fact, banquet, Vila’s physical needs, but emotionally, he would be left in famine, apart from his stolen morsels. He hardened under Avon’s body, feeling the echo against him, hearing it in the raggedness of Avon’s breathing.

Now, the kissing would start, now, at this moment when inhibitions were sloughed off like water from a seal, now that Avon was too far gone to particularly care what was—or was not—revealed in this brief freedom from masks and class and fear. It was almost impossible, even for Avon, to fear one who was so obviously besotted and held in thrall.

And so the kissing continued, tongues pressing and pushing, stroking and vibrating, darting from one home to visit another. Even lost within Avon’s arms, a part of Vila yet awaited the moment of truth, that killing instant when Avon would catch himself and hide himself away from Vila, as though he feared Vila would hurt him. Or worse, as though he simply did not want Vila to come quite so close, to see so much, to actually matter. So the moment would always come, when Avon, poised on the brink of completely losing control, teetering on the edge of giving sway to unrestrained, revelatory, emasculating passion would abruptly stutter, tension pushing the mindlessness of lust from his limbs. A sudden check in the midst of an embrace, a fragment of stillness, and then, again, as always, as it had to be every eviscerating time, Avon pulled himself back from the precipice and then the coldness descended once more.

“Over,” Avon said, hoarse and rough, control clenched tightly in his whitened fists. “Over!” he groaned, dumping Vila over onto his stomach, hand scrabbling on the bedside table.

Vila heard the vague click of nails on the hard plastic surface, heard the softer wisp of the loved and hated tube being grasped, felt the first chill of lotion on him. He bit his tongue to dam the words inside, where they could be held incommunicado and suffocated, as Avon wanted

them. The broad pad of Avon's thumb pressed against him, slid inside him, briskly covering him in the slick lotion. Today, there was not even the time for a long finger to penetrate him, rubbing the buried gland until he would squirm and arch, completely helpless before Avon had even truly begun to use his body. Vila knew perfectly well why it was like that, recognised the lusting power, even understood it. Would have revelled in it, if the chill control would only waver and set free a mouthful of affection. But Avon coiled his will around himself, binding himself within and binding Vila out, away where he could never become so important as to risk Avon's bitterly earned emotional distance.

The body hesitated a moment over Vila, coarse belly hair brushing the small of his back, then the thick, snub head of Avon's cock found him with easy familiarity, pressed, a second's pause, then the quick, convulsive thrust of him, and... It was begun. The long, hard driving strokes, tensile muscle pushing into Vila, pounding him, the weight of Avon hot and slick inside him, hot and sweaty on his back, moisture running down the back of his legs, pooling at the back of his knees. And Avon was grunting now, the ever-so-refined Alpha, sweating as much as Vila, as desperate for release, as mindless, as aswirl in pleasure, almost as oblivious as Vila to the niceties of polite civilisation. Nothing mattered now, for Avon, nothing other than the drive to unequivocal release, the cessation of consciousness, the ending of conscience. But for Vila... for him there was yet the aching pit of loneliness, made worse by the bigness of Avon that should have filled him, but instead left him emptier than before.

A sudden, final spasm, a convulsion of Avon's whole body, one last, desperate surge inside Vila, and then it was over. He lay under Avon, the weight of him growing oppressive with passion's passing, with the oncoming of the voiceless scream building white and anguished in him. *It shouldn't be like this, it doesn't have to be like this, oh, Avon...* And then the physical weight was gone, leaving behind the emotional burden hanging heavily on his shoulders, a mantle of misery. Almost immediately, Vila knew with cutting experience, lying there still as a corpse at a wake, just waiting for the self-importance of life to continue on without him, there would be the muted murmurs of Avon cleansing himself, washing Vila's intimacy from his skin, then the whisper of sheet and duvet being brought up to cover goose pimpling skin, the deep sigh and then...nothing. Silence, as Avon abandoned himself to sleep, content and secure, the spectre of emotional involvement banished for another night, buried deep and dark under sexual satiation. Business as bloody usual... Whilst Vila lay awake, unable to toss and turn, for that would waken the beast and he would be told in no uncertain terms, just precisely where he could go. So now he was simply lying there, safely, deliberately benumbed, body resting, mind churning, gnawing at itself, berating

himself for his foolish hopes and stupid dreams. And so it went, tonight no different from any other, time after dispiriting time, the hint of caring always withheld at the last moment, the rift unforded and both men left holding nothing more than chiffon cloaks of self-respect.

And as he was lying there this time, after another of those times, Vila was further than ever from making Avon open to him. He faced the bathroom door, thinking about the future horrors thundering down towards him, borne on Twilight. Fear lent him courage and he opened the door, unveiling the sight of Avon, nude, the crystal cube poised above the surging artery in his arm, a look of coiled anticipation poised on his face.

"Been thinking about what you said, Avon."

"Well, that's an event certainly worth immortalising in song." The cube was still held, the Twilight still encased.

"You're probably right, of course. I mean, you're always right, so why should you be wrong about this, eh? But you know, you never can tell what space travel will do to a person, can you? Look at that plague thing, that time we met your old friend Tynus. Wouldn't've affected us, if we hadn't all been gallivanting all over the galaxy, would it?"

"Get to the point, Vila. As you can see, I have something far more pleasurable to do than listen to your endless babble." But he didn't touch the crystal to his arm, as if the small whisperings at the back of his mind were making him wait his own well-stifled conscience hungry to follow if Vila had a way out of this maze of drugs and dependency.

"All I'm saying is, why don't you try something else while Orac does some checking to see if Twilight's all right. I mean, it wouldn't be that hard for you. As you keep on saying, you can give Twilight up any time you want to. Without even trying."

Avon quirked a smile at him, his unpredictable funny bone tickled by the sight of Vila coming right out and challenging him in precisely the way one well-bred Alpha would call another out. "And of course, if I should refuse to give in to your ignorant fears, you would be able to say that that's not what this little contretemps is all about, that it has nothing to do with me proving that I am neither addicted nor afraid of backing down from anyone, even a dismal Delta, that this whole stupid scenario is purely and simply for the good of my health. And so, no matter what, I have to give Twilight up, either for my physical well-being or for the sake of my pride. Well now, that's actually quite a clever piece of manoeuvring. For a one cell amoeba, that is."

"But you'll do it, won't you?"

A larger smile this time, more dangerous, less amused than the first. "Why should I?"

"Why not?"

"And what would you, from your vast store of

knowledge and experience, suggest I take in its place?”

Vila forced his own smile deep into the back of his mind. Now was not the time to feel the sweet surge of elation. Time for that when Avon had given Twilight up for good—and succumbed instead to the delights of the mist of luxuriating in his emotions and the Mist-inspired passions. “Well,” he said, pondering heavily, making a great show of his deliberations, not deceiving Avon for one second, “there is this stuff I’ve heard about... Has pretty well the same effect as Twilight, but it was developed on one of the space cities, so we know it’s all right for space travellers.”

“Almost the same effects?”

“Yeh, almost. It’s euphoric, and intellect-focussing, and an energy booster, not to mention an incredible aphrodisiac—perfect for a man in leather, when you think about it. It’s even mind-expanding, does the whole lot of stuff Twilight does.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“You said that it has ‘pretty well’ the same effects. What’s the difference?”

“Oh, the difference, yes, well...” Vila hesitated, his courage diminishing at a speed of knots. “Well...” He glanced up, but Avon was still staring at him, implacable. “It sort of...” In mute demand, the crystal barely touched Avon’s skin, not quite enough to start the osmosis. Not quite. Vila blurted the words out. “It’s an anti-inhibitant.” And Avon laughed, unrestrainedly, delightedly.

“Is that all? And that is what you were so afraid to tell me. Oh, Vila, what an idiot you are if you think that there are any inhibitions I have yet to lose, or anything I haven’t tried at least once. Usually twice. I am,” he put the cube carefully down on the bathroom vanity bar, “after all,” he stroked a single fingernail from Vila’s lips all the way down his chest, onto his abdomen, through the thick curls of pubic hair, down the length of flushed velvet cock, stopping only when the fingertip dallied in the slit there, “a decadent Alpha-élite, one of the sybaritic few.”

Stock still, Vila’s body quivered faintly under the rare sensuous assault. He held his tongue, knowing he was courting disaster, but unwilling to tell Avon the full truth. Yes, Mist lowered all inhibitions and yes, when behind firmly closed and locked doors, Avon had already lost all of his. Sexually speaking, that is. Emotionally, however... And that was Mist’s secret. The removal, brick by brick, or whole walls at a time, of all the emotional traps and barriers and blinds that people build to keep them safe. To keep them bastioned away from those who would love them. In this specific, painful instance, to keep Avon shut away from Vila. And so, Vila left the words unsaid, gambling, as he always did, turning his life on the roll of the dice. He stood before Avon, naked, eyes closed, barricading both hopes and fears away from predatory perceptiveness.

“And you,” the voice broke into him, startling him with its calm, “I presume, have some of this...Mist?”

“Well, funny you should mention that...I just happened to pick some up when we were on Space City. Can get it for you, if you want.”

“Why not? Well? What are you waiting for? I thought you were anxious to save me from myself, from my dread addiction.”

“Not from addiction, Avon. From what I’ve seen Twilight do.”

“You are being tiresome, Vila. Just shut up and get me this Mist. And hurry, or I shall simply indulge myself with my usual...poison.” Unnervingly, he lounged, un-Avonishly, against the doorframe, watching Vila scramble into clothes, all the while indolently stroking his body, fingers catching in the black curls at his groin—a picture guaranteed to make Vila hurry enough to outrun a plasma bolt. His own need went unacknowledged: Avon did not choose to see his own haste, his own desperation. He was, after all, not addicted, still in complete control, beyond the feeble grip of the Shadow derivative. He was still there, fingers rapping—from impatience, he re-assured himself, not withdrawal—on the doorjamb, when Vila returned, rumped and harried, a pale grey case in his hands.

“There you go, Avon. Mist, and plenty of it. You know what they say, a change is as good as a rest, and this stuff is quite a change, all that rest’ll really get you going. Aphrodisiac, you know. Not that you need it for that, of course, but...” He obeyed Avon’s glare and shut up, almost biting his runaway tongue in his haste.

With a slightly abstracted mask of mild interest on his face, Avon took the plush case, stroking one finger down its length, rather the way he did with Vila. He was acutely aware of the eyes watching him with veiled anticipation and fervid hope, as he unclasped the box, his own breath catching as the phials within were touched by light. They were vaguely cylindrical, vaguely grey, vaguely membranous, and wholly mysterious, seducing the intellect as quickly as the body. With delicate precision, Avon lifted one from its niche, holding this one to the light, watching as the phial drifted in gravity, becoming a teardrop, silken grey fluid twisting and turning in an endless möbius strip of tantalising delight. He looked at his own personal Lorelei and smiled. “Now this *does* look interesting. Certainly worth trying. Care to watch?” Vila’s face brightened at the invitation, only to be wiped clean almost immediately. “After all,” the rich voice continued, seductive in its cruelty, “this is an aphrodisiac, and you could certainly make yourself useful, couldn’t you?”

He took a moment to read the insert, then put the case in the wall niche above his computer, nestling it cosily in with his twinkling pyramid of Twilight. Back turned to Vila, he lifted the Mist to his mouth, letting the skin of the phial dissolve on his tongue, waiting for the

elation to flood through his body.

Several moments of silence passed, as Vila stood passively watching Avon, clenching his fists against the desire to touch the rippling back muscles. He imagined he could see the drug surge through Avon, could see as it travelled the pathways of his nerves, flaring up in unnatural pleasure. Motionless, he stood before the door, trying not to think, trying only to anticipate the coming moments. Before him, a sudden rush of sexual heat blushed over Avon's skin, and Vila felt desire colour his own, felt the heat gather and pool in his groin, lengthening and filling and hardening his cock. With Avon still turning the blank façade of his back to him, he stripped, dumping his clothes at his feet, air warm on his bared skin, tingling over the hair of his groin. He drank in the sight of Avon, pale skin pinked, buttocks clenching and unclenching, back muscles flexing. Patiently, knowing his reward would be heaven, Vila waited.

Eventually, Avon turned to face him, displaying an arousal as adamant as Vila's, the rosy cock lifted high, the foreskin slid back to frame his cockhead. He glanced down at his own enthusiasm, looked at Vila's, then met Vila's eyes.

And smiled.

A full, warm smile, overflowing with affection and desire, kindling a bonfire in Vila's belly, the heat erupting into his cock. Avon quirked an eyebrow as Vila's cock surged. "I thought I was the one who had taken what amounts to an aphrodisiac, Vila. Really, your...rampant enthusiasm commends you. Now," he whispered, lowering his voice, hand reaching out, "that looks somewhat uncomfortable, standing there all alone. Why don't we go to bed and find it some company, hmm?" And he stroked a single fingernail, shiveringly, down the length of Vila's body, as he had before, in that so familiar gesture. Eyes wide, Vila looked up at him, his knees liquid at the expression in Avon's eyes. Not the cold, shuttered passion of yore, but now... Vila was too scared to actually name it love. A hope such as that would break him if it were to shatter. And it was the drug, he told himself, only the drug. That certainty danced out the door as Avon drew him in for a kiss, his tongue breaching Vila's body, the encompassing caring breaching his defences.

Vila melted into the kiss, letting Avon take his weight, letting Avon support him, exhilarated by the strength of Avon's arms around him, muscle and skin and delicate hair caressing him. It's only the drug, a faint voice tried to scream in his mind, but the chant of hope drowned it deep. Mist: the lowerer of emotional inhibitions, the battering ram to break down Avon's walls. Not a brick at a time, no. Great chunks, massive boulders tumbling, leaving gaping maws behind, gates in a dam, torrents of emotion rushing through. Vila was swept up in it, willing flotsam, adding his own stream of feeling.

He was tipped onto the bed, laughter breaking

them apart, joining them in a pact of friendship. It rocked Vila, seeing Avon naked like this, eyes brimming with humour, giggling like a man half his age, tickling and tumbling and wrestling with unrestrained gladness, stopping only at the press of hardness against his thigh.

"Mmm, you *are* enjoying yourself, aren't you?" he said, hands squeezing and moulding, where before they had tickled and teased. "But then, you are always so willing, so ready to share my bed with me. So sexy, Vila, so very sexy... Come on, come closer, fit yourself to me, let me love you..."

Vila lay on him, kissing frantically, deeply, breath gasping from him as Avon turned them, pressing Vila into the bed with a single hard thrust of his hips. Desperately aroused, Vila felt boneless, wrapped completely in Avon, in his passion and his love, one thread of thought singing a pæan of praise to this drug that had finally given him Avon. Every other fibre of him was concentrated fiercely on Avon, and on his own body, every nerve dancing with the feeling of Avon's fingers in him, of Avon's body heavy and hot over him, the hotter, harder peak of him pressing into Vila, stroking the rimple of flesh that led, unerringly, to his arse and the hungry muscle there. He groaned, and the sound was devoured by the open mouth on his, echoed and amplified by the luxurious, guttural purrs coming from Avon. He was high as a kite on Avon's drug, as affected by Mist as Avon himself was. All his own barriers went down, knocked for six, unleashing all his carefully chained in needs and hopes.

Hands stroked him, the grip firm and sure and supple, squeezing his cock, bringing him on, closer and closer to orgasm, only to withdraw suddenly, leaving his cock flat against his belly, precum oozing.

"Avon!"

"Yes, Vila?" Breath whispered warmly into his ear, frissoning up and down his spine.

"Don't stop now, you bastard, c'mon, Avon, do me..."

The soft pad of a finger slid along him, making him writhe and mutter. "Oh, I fully intend to, no need to fret. However, a quick...'wank' is not quite what I had in mind. Spread your legs, Vila. Open up for me, that's it, lift up, hold me tight, wrap your thighs around me, let me at you, let me have you..."

Vila's eyes closed, all the better to savour the sensation of Avon moving him into place, positioning him just so, chest to chest, arse to belly, the heavy thickness of Avon pushing at him, slowly, slowly, as kisses covered him, like morning dew. The kisses fell harder, dew to rain to storm, Avon's slick cock pressing into him, filling him millimetre by millimetre, stretching him, filling him. Bumping slow and hard and wonderful against his prostate, every thrust of Avon's cock sent more spunk to pool in his balls and he felt the pressure building with delicious

warmth, the heat matching Avon's perfectly. He pushed up as Avon thrust down, pulling him in as deep as possible, taking all of him as Avon took him. It was glorious and delectable, and all too distracting. Moments passed before his brain heard the words whispered into his ear.

"Love you, Vila, love you..."

The words collided with the pressure of Avon's cock inside him and he came, exploding, shattering, ass clutching Avon in, holding him, needing him, while Avon's cum spurted from him, flooding Vila's body as his words flooded Vila's mind.

It took a long time for them to recover, time spent quite happily in the contented stroking of hands on languid muscle, in the murmurs of pleasure. Gradually, still held in Avon's arms, still cocooned in Avon's caring, Vila floated off to sleep, sparing not a single thought for mopping up or tidying tousled beds. All he would think of was Avon, of the sweet gentleness revealed by a small grey phial, of all the love unearthed... He drifted off to sweet dreams, all of them peopled by a handsome man with dark eyes and darker hair, strong hands and stronger affections. Vila was unquestionably, unquestioningly happy. Avon's fingers stroked him, kisses were pressed to his forehead and eyes and lips, and he lay there in the warm security of his bed, gloriously, foolishly, incautiously happy.

Waking up alone disturbed him not a bit: Avon was an early riser, while Vila would cheerfully ignore Armageddon, if it meant being able to have another five minutes dreaming. He stretched, pleased with the residual languor of his limbs, smiling at the thought of Avon so good and loving and open.

"Now there's a thought," he said to himself, hopping out of bed and checking the wall niche. Sure enough, the cubes of Twilight were all still there, every last one of them. Vila rubbed his hands in glee, proud of himself, elated that he had finally cracked the toughest lock of them all: Kerr Avon. He had the quickest wash in history, tossed his clothes on any old how, barely taking time enough to fasten everything, not even noticing how crumpled they were and raced up to the flight deck. Checking his headlong hurry, he stopped on the threshold, entering quite circumspectly and quite in character, disguising perfectly the change in his relationship with Avon.

There was no acknowledgement for him, no sign, only a decided chilling of the atmosphere when he came up to stand beside Avon, who was resplendent in his armour of black leather.

"Morning, Avon."

A glower answered him.

"Sleep well, did you?"

The stare was sharp enough to cut him dead.

"Mind you, you do look a bit tired."

If looks could kill, this was Vila's funeral.

"You ought to go back to bed."

"Only if you agree to take my watch."

So that *was* how it was going to be: a reversal from the worn pattern of before. Avon would be more distant, emotionally speaking, outside of the bedroom than in it. And that suited Vila just fine. He could do without the banter, if, in its place, there was loving and the whisperings of sweet words. Anyway, as Avon became more comfortable with the revelations of the dark and Mist, the easy sharp-clawed chitchat would come back. Secure, Vila smiled, warmed inside by the memory of the night, letting Avon turn, unanswered, from him. He waited until the other man was stooped in concentration over the console before he spoke.

"Can't take your watch, y'know."

Involuntary curiosity was displayed by the marginal straightening of Avon's spine.

Vila leaned forward, almost breathing in Avon's ear. "Need to keep my strength up for tonight, don't I?"

And before he could be denied, he turned on his heel and strode off, full of ideas to get the bedroom all set for tonight. In his starry eyed enthusiasm, he even went so far as to think of it as *their* bedroom. He whistled as he went on his way, confident that Avon's chill behaviour was a mirror image of how Avon actually felt, both a reversal of his true emotions and a perfect reflection of the nervous twitches of emotion that once stoic Avon was going through. It wasn't everyday that a cynic displayed his feelings like that. For that matter, it was hardly everyday that a cynic discovered what those feelings actually were. Small wonder the man was running scared. Vila saw no need to worry: Avon was, undeniably, an intelligent man; he would adjust, he would end up relishing the expression of the emotions as much as the love itself.

Avon hesitated, the teardrop balanced precariously in the palm of his hand. Loving the freedom and comfort this potion afforded him, he lusted after it, but there was a fear growing in him, its cancerous voice whispering warnings of dire and desperate straits Vila's cheerful whistling drew closer, deciding him. He would hang the voice of caution and hang the consequences along with it. This openness was doing him no harm, this relaxation was...pleasant, spilling over into his dealings with the others. His tongue was just as sharp, his mind sharper still, but the viciousness born of fear was, if not quite, then at least partially, gone. He was even finding the gentler effects of the drug lingering long after the chemical had dispersed, behaviour unleashed by Mist becoming a lesson learned by his subconscious mind. Even with his choice made, his hand hesitated again, a scant instant from his lips. With Vila's sweetly melodic whistling almost at his door, he popped the glistening greyness into his mouth, feeling it dissolve under his tongue, the familiar surge tendrilling through the tissue of his body, hardening his body and softening his battlements.

The door opened and Vila, all smiles, donned through. Before he could speak, before he could even stop whistling, Avon had a good hold of him, had hands clutching his arse, fingertips pressed into the crack, mouth hard and raging in a maelstrom of a kiss.

“So sexy, Vila, so very sexy,” the so familiar words were poured into his mouth. “Come on, come closer,” Avon murmured, voice hoarse and rough with desire and feeling, speaking the litany that had become so much a part of this nightly ritual, reciting the phrases that had become poetry to Vila, a whole week’s worth of ungrudged loving compounding every time he heard that breathless catch in Avon’s voice. “Fit yourself to me, let me love you...”

They stumbled to the bed, discarding clothes in haphazard haste, landing with linked limbs, tongues tangling, skin sliding so hot and sweet against the spring of hair. Words poured from Avon, raining Vila with love and lust, turning them both on, fuelling the passion. Surrendering, Avon bathed Vila’s body with his tongue, sucking on nipples, tracing the planes of muscle and the swirl of hair, frantic desire slowing to gentle adoration as Avon’s lips settled themselves around Vila’s cock. He sucked happily, tongue fibrillating on the underside, shooting pleasure hotly through the so sensitive nerves. Slowly, Avon withdrew his mouth, little noises of complaint coming from Vila, until attention was given the moistened head, the pointed tip of a tongue pressing into the slit there, tasting the first clear drops of precum, weaving them in a halo around the glans, pushing the free-flowing cream under the taught-drawn foreskin.

Vila gasped, thrusting up, yearning for more, knowing what was coming, the anticipation exciting him even more, the thought almost more exciting than the act. His back arched, hips lifting, shoving into Avon’s grasping, grabbing throat, lubricating himself with his own cum and Avon’s moisture. The haven was taken from him, and he found himself grinning fiercely. They flowed into a new position, not even having to think about it any more. Avon’s fierce grin matched Vila’s, both of them hungry for this, both of them high on this feeling of intense, condensed masculinity. Thumbs digging in just enough to send pain-painted pleasure coursing through his partner, Vila spread Avon’s thighs, pale skin reddening under the strength of his hands, Avon’s eyes closing under the onslaught of manhood. One hand moved up to massage the black belly hair, the other moved to squeeze tight-drawn balls. Hands clenching in the bedclothes, Avon spread himself even wider, squirming and twisting, cock bobbing up onto his belly, tapping hard against Vila’s hand.

“Ready for me, are you?”

“When am I not?”

“Want it?”

Questions, part of this affectionate game they

played, chatter, slowing them down, drawing this out, spinning the web of pleasure ever larger. “Would I be here if I didn’t, idiot? Of course I want it.”

Pretended, grandiose innocence. “Want what, Avon?” Hands stroking, squeezing cock and balls, waltzing around puckered muscle, teasing,

Arching body, heavy heat thrusting into tight fist, enticing. “You.” Words again, weaving the magic to cocoon them more closely, irresistible. “In me. Your cock up my arse.”

“Yeh? Want to feel me fuck you, want to feel a man in you, making you even more a man yourself? Want to take all of me in, do you, all that muscle, all that hot cum shooting up inside you, filling you up, touching you in there, in the dark, where it’s secret. Yeh, that’s it, oh, move like that, Avon, relax like that for me, let me in...”

The long, slow, sweet penetration, a single, smooth flex of muscle, a liquid surge and Vila was in him, face flushed, lifting Avon’s legs up, supporting them on his shoulders, hands rubbing the softness of hair and the hardness of quivering flesh. He caressed Avon’s legs, following the lean lines of trembling thighs, tingling in the pattern of thickening hair that led so unerringly to the tense balls and pulsing cock, the white flesh where his own red cock was planted. Avon was thrashing under him, convulsive with ecstasy, thrusting up to meet Vila’s downwards thrust, moving them in rhythm, giving the loving to both of them, making it so very, very right.

Easing down as far as he could, Vila kissed Avon deeply, fucking him with his tongue, fucking him with his cock, Avon fucking Vila’s fist, the undiluted masculinity redolent around them, an aura, the power in them feeding around in an endless circuit from cock to cock, mouth to mouth, balls to balls. They were complete, each one fulfilled, each one fulfilling, soaring on the freedom of love, unconstrained joy surging with every thrust of hips, building, growing, hurtling forward to fast while poised on the threshold, hammering against the locked door, that one last, interminable instant where pleasure becomes too great to bear. A heartbeat, a flurry of deep, pounding thrusts and Vila was coming, streaming inside Avon, the heat of him cascading Avon over with him.

The afterglow lasted a lifetime, a silence comfortable and secure settling them down into sleep, still entwined, semen pooling and cooling on uncaring flesh. All that mattered was the shared warmth, the breath of a loved one caressing skin, the calm delight of falling asleep in someone’s arms...

Vila came out of the infirmary, absently rubbing his stomach. The nausea was almost completely gone now, after an almost unendurable four days in his—literal—sick bed. Temperature back to normal, digestive system once more beaten into submission, he hurried on towards Avon’s quarters, already half-hard at the thought

of the welcome awaiting him. Whistling Avon's favourite song, he made a mental note to get Orac to work out a formula to manufacture Mist—Avon had taken a real liking to the stuff and at the rate he was using it, he'd have finished it before the week was out. Wouldn't like to give up this lovely Avon for the old cynical bastard he had known and loved. Well, more or less loved. He whistled a different tune, an old song his granny had always sung around the house. The tune faltered, losing itself, finding the key again, losing the melody. He could hear Avon. Avon speaking, saying those words. *His* words, words—and feelings—no one else had any right to hear.

“...so ready to share my bed with me. So sexy, so very sexy. Come here, come closer, let me love you, Blake...”

Tears strangled him, choking off what had been happy whistling, and he fled, running down corridors, running and running until he had reached the farthest recesses of the enormous ship. There was a corner there, somewhere quiet and dark and dead. Vila curled up into it, to numbed with pain to really feel the anguish stealing through his soul. Only one thought grazed his mind, leaving bleeding wounds to fester in its wake.

The drug, only the drug, no love, no love for me...

Avon's hands were shaking, as he stood there naked, vulnerable still even though Blake had left. To have slept with *Blake*... To have said those words. To have *meant* those words of sentimentality. To be so weak, so terribly, terrifyingly needful. With Blake. Not nice, safe, warm, predictably convoluted Vila, but *Blake*... That was impossible, that was just—too much. He was too scared to even try to dredge up some more appropriate term, he just wanted to get this fearful vulnerability gone, finished. It was so tempting, to simply give in, give up so much of what made him himself, to lean on these people who loved him and whom he loved. But the dangers... He grimaced with empathic, guilty pain as his mind relentlessly replayed the broken whistle he had heard, just as he had drawn Blake into a kiss. Equally callously, his mind displayed the memory of his own unreasoning needs and passion, casting a harsh glow upon the softness of loving someone. The drug. He was sinking under its influence, being undermined from within, losing his independence, his strength, his mind. He was out of control, needing his daily fix of love that Mist made possible, addicted, he laughed bitterly at the thought, not to a drug, but to the part of himself the drug brought into dominance. Addicted so severely that four days without Vila and he was seeking that part of himself, looking for that love in Blake, finding only sex. Or terrifyingly, finding the love, the caring. The

commitment.

He leaned heavily against the wall as he opened the niche, taking out the grey droplet, staring at it with dumb horror. A glistening cube was placed beside the soft greyness on his palm, and he balanced them, one against the other. On one side, lay possible—dimly possible, he reminded himself—psychological breakdown, paranoia, loss of reality, obsessive behaviour. On another, involvement, vulnerability, pain. And as for taking neither? Unvarnished, unpadded reality. A fate far worse than anything the drugs could possibly invoke. And not even a whisper of the word 'addict' found its way into his mind.

He simply stood there, staring at crossroads in his life that lay on his palm, thinking of the good and bad held within each, fear making him want to run from Mist, but the delicious, warmly loving memories of Vila gave him pause. And thoughts of Blake, in his arms, around him, devastated by passion... Vila, cheerful whistle breaking, spirit fading, running, running, and Avon too hooked on his daily fix to do anything about it. Yes, with Mist lay pain, his own, too. He straightened, breathing deeply. He couldn't manage without the buffer of a drug right now. Oh, he would, later, as soon as he decided he didn't want to take them any longer. He was *not* addicted. Not him. Lesser men, perhaps, but not he. He could stop any time he wanted to. He would never succumb, neither to the psychosis of Twilight nor to the weakness of Mist. Resolute, he gathered up both the Mist phials yet remaining and carried them into the bathroom, watching as they disappeared down the disposal. He felt as if a part of him was disappearing forever...

Shaking off the sentimentality to cover himself with his rediscovered independence, he strode back into his bedroom, grabbing a cube from the hidey-hole, ramming it against his arm, feeling the osmosis, feeling it surging through him intravenously, filling him, driving away the memory of Vila's pain, of Blake's overwhelming affections. He sighed with relief as the Twilight dispelled the Mist still in his veins, felt the old shell reharden around him, smiled. Yes, this was the right choice.

Serene now, he hauled the sheets off the bed, replacing them without a single emotional twinge, settling himself into pristine coolness, arms pillowing his head. He would be fine, now, paranoia and psychosis having no place in his well-controlled life. No, he absolutely would *not* succumb to those dire and dread side effects much touted by stupid and self-serving Deltas. Well...not if he could survive Servalan long enough. Not if he could stop Blake betraying him...

COME AS YOU ARE

EMMA SCOT

QUIVERING, TAUT AS A BOWSTRING, HE THRUST, HARD, DEEP, INTO BLAKE, FEELING THE OTHER MAN ABSORB HIM, FEELING THE MUSCLES SPASM AROUND HIM AS BLAKE CAME WITH HIM, PERFECT UNITY, PERFECTLY TOGETHER, FOR ONCE BONDED IN HARMONY AND NOT DISCORD. Slowly, with exquisite care, Avon withdrew, easing himself out of Blake's body, out and away before he could feel the unease and distaste solidify in the man beneath him. Quietly, pouting sullenly, Avon retreated to the safety of emotional distance before Blake could get *that* expression on his face again. Never varied: absolutely stupendous sex, followed by a grimace from Blake and angered hurt from Avon. And this time, he swore to himself in silent venom, he would *not*, under any circumstances, in any way, shape or form, play Blake's damned game. Not this time, not this time...

"If it's not to much trouble, I really would like to move."

That contemptible and contemptuous calm ripped through Avon's control, colliding head on with his temper. So much for the man's vows... "Oh, of course, do forgive me. You must have had my ejaculate in you for at least 30 seconds by now. I'm impressed you managed to wait this long before racing off to rid yourself of the unpleasant little details of being buggered."

"Avon..." said, unfortunately, in a tone rather reminiscent of a teacher to a recalcitrant schoolboy. And Avon never had been a model anything, especially not in matters of obedience.

"What? Didn't I move quickly enough? My god, you're right, it's been all of a full minute now. Tell me, Blake, if I were ever so foolish as to not orgasm at the self-same moment as you, would you pull out from under me and make me do with my own right hand?" He looked sourly at the ostentatiously reasonable expression plastered so thickly over Blake's face. "Oh, but of course, I shouldn't be taking this this way at all, should I? After all, it's such bad form to make a proper to-do about nothing more than a fraternal fuck, isn't it. I mean, what's a spot of sodomy between friends?"

"I just want to clean myself up a little, that's all, Avon. No need to go through the usual song and dance."

"How true. As long as you get *your* song and dance, I should be content, shouldn't I? As long as our great and fearless leader gets screwed, nothing else really matters." Furious as a harpy, he stood in the middle of the room, quite magnificently naked, Blake's semen still wet on his belly. One by one, he ticked his grievances off, finger by finger. "Nothing but anal penetration of you, by me. No sucking, no fucking, no frottage, no fingers. All

you tolerate is me doing you and I'm sick of it. It is wonderful, but it's getting *boring*. Not to mention disgustingly one sided. Now, I fully accept that you're completely addicted to being fucked, and I have absolutely no problems with that, not the way I enjoy fucking you, anyway. But, Blake, I would, just once in a while, like a little bit of variety. I would, once in a while, appreciate feeling that I was more than an animated bloody dildo! All we ever do is precisely what *you* want. Nothing more, and nothing less. And what does that make it, Blake? Tyranny?"

Half-way through the door to the *en suite* bathroom, Blake hesitated, unwilling to get embroiled in yet another of Avon's scenes, but almost equally unwilling to allow that particularly incendiary spark of slander pass unquenched. The legitimate complaints listed before, well, those he was more than happy to ignore. "Now, Avon," he said, grimly hanging on to his patience with both hands, "how can you call it tyranny when you virtually beg me for it?"

"Beg you? Not for the sex, Blake; that I can get from you any time I fancy it. But you're right, actually. Not tyranny. Perhaps it's more *droit de seigneur*."

If Avon was going to descend to impersonating a harridan, then Blake was going to lock himself in the serenity of the loo. The door hissed closed behind him, as the breath hissed from Avon in fury. Yet another battle unengaged, Blake winning without even trying. The blank door was cold under Avon's palm, his temper hot, as Blake's voice raised in unconcerned song, drowning out anything Avon might choose to say.

"Very well," he muttered as he drew his clothes on over his sticky body, "if that's how you wish it to be, then that is how it shall be. Nothing is what you want, nothing is what you'll get. If you want sex without the inconvenience of an emotional partner, then I hope you and your right hand are very happy together. Because," he snapped vitriolically at the unconcernedly closed bathroom door, "that's all you're going to be getting in the foreseeable future."

Blake neither knew nor cared when Avon had left his bedroom, only relieved that the usual conclusion to their usual messy spats had been obviated for once. Whistling under his breath, he climbed into bed, pulling the covers up, turning the lights off and drifting, conscious clear, body and mind completely relaxed, into sleep.

Avon, on the other hand, was wide awake. And plotting...

Two weeks could, much to Blake's surprise, seem like an eternity, when you haven't had sex. And

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Avon, it was abundantly clear, was avoiding him. More accurately, Avon had been avoiding being *alone* with him. The tech had no compunctions, unfortunately, about being in the same room as Blake. He also, even more unfortunately from Blake's point of view, had no compunctions about such morally barren practices as wearing clinging leather trousers. And then bending over... Although, perhaps, it was worse when he stood in front of a seated Blake and stretched up to reach something far above Blake's head. Which is when those taut, black, glossy, warm leather trousers stretched with each and every graceful movement of Avon's body, delineating each and every one of Avon's considerable abilities. Blake was having a hard time—literally speaking, that is—keeping his hands off the pricktease, even in public. Or should that be *especially* in public? It was the only time he ever got to see Avon these days, and exhibitionism was beginning to have an appeal all of its own. Quite frankly, a hole in the wall was beginning to look as beguiling as hell...

Three weeks later, even Jenna was beginning to look beguiling. Fortunately, she was also considerably more willing than a hole in the wall. Unfortunately, Avon didn't seem in the least little bit jealous. Even more unfortunately, she didn't have the necessary assets to keep Blake happy. Holes in the walls were rapidly losing their appeal. He began eyeing the wonderfully phallic blasters in a whole new light...

Another week. Vila began looking anxiously over his shoulder every time Blake came into a room.

A week after that, Gan began glowering every time Blake walked into a room.

Two days later, Cally's bloody knuckles perfectly matched the beautiful blue design blossoming on Blake's jaw...

Avon just smiled. Wickedly. He was rather enjoying himself—mainly because Blake wasn't. That right hand was beginning to look rather over-used, and any day now, Avon expected Blake to be raiding the store rooms for depilatory creams... As Blake's temper shortened, Avon's became ever sweeter, this unnatural state of affairs driving the motley crew completely round the twist. So perhaps it was fortunate that Blake finally broke before they did. Although that wasn't what Avon thought at first...

The hand descending upon his nape was warm and big and terribly familiar. The force with which he was being propelled along the corridor wasn't.

"Get your hands off me, Blake, before I do something you'll regret."

"You've already done something I regret, so I shall just have to live with the rest of it, shan't I? I want to have words with you."

"If you want an argument, then I suggest you wait until I've finished recalibrating the navigation computers. Blake, that was a subtle hint. Let go of me!"

The door to Blake's cabin opened, closed behind them, was locked to Blake's voice print. "Certainly, Avon, I'll be happy to let you go. As long as you go no farther than the bed."

"Oh, no you don't. I've had enough of your meaningless sex, and the last place you're going to get me is in your bed!"

"Fine," Blake said with desperation so deep it appeared serene, placidly stripping his own clothes off, "if that's the way you want it, then that is how you shall have it. Would you prefer on the floor, or," he paused a second to deal with a reluctant boot, "would you rather have it up against the wall? Oh, but I forgot. Your back." He stood again, trousers and pants being dropped to the floor to join Avon's gaping jaw, "With your back, I suppose the floor really is out. A quick 'knee trembler' it is, then. Well? Don't just stand there, Avon, you've got what you wanted. Me," he said, still in that mild, reasonable voice that was at such odds with the febrile passion in his eyes and colouring his cock dark red with hot blood, "quite literally," he grabbed Avon by the elbow and shoved him up against the wall, "on my knees." And before Avon could react, Blake was, indeed, on his knees in front of the tech, Avon's fly undone, along with Avon's resolve. The weeks of abstinence caught up with him in a oner, erupting in a hoarse groan as Blake's mouth devoured him for the very first time...

"Blake, Blake, Blake..." the rational fraction of his brain heard with horror, recognising that fatuous tone of voice. "Oh, Blake, oh, Blake..." How terribly embarrassing, to have tried to force Blake to crawl back to him and admit that he was addicted to Avon, only to find himself admitting that he was just as hooked on Blake. And surely he could come up with something less clichéd than crooning the man's name over and over again. Then even that faint hint of rationality joined in the crooning, as Blake's tongue found the mouth of his cock.

Blake wasn't exactly complaining, although his knees were. They were, to put it mildly, completely unused to this kind of abuse. He had never needed the other enough to have to sink to this, but there was a first time for everything. And he was finding it rather more pleasant than he had expected, Avon's bulky heat filling him up quite nicely, the taste sweeter than he had thought it would be, the smell even more pleasant close up. And it was positively delectable to feel the foreskin moving as he tongued it. He wondered if it did that when Avon was buried up to the hilt in his arse... That inspired him, and he sucked in deeper, squelching his body's attempt to gag, overcoming the instinct by the sheer eroticism of drawing Avon in, getting him ready to shove it up Blake. That was what made it all worthwhile...

Avon was thrusting now, long, lean muscles of his thighs straining to push him farther into Blake, sweat pricking his pearly white skin, sexual flush beading him

with pink, the rosiness spreading over his chest, up his neck and onto his cheeks. Blake's hands kneading his buttocks were spreading a rosy glow all their own, also. Vaguely, he noticed that Blake was fumbling at him, trying to get his clothes off and out of the way. Even more vaguely, he helped, taking care of the top half as Blake took care of his bottom half, in more ways than one. Finished with rebellious leather, he tangled his fingers in even more rebellious curls, threading through, enjoying the coarsely masculine spring under his hands, pulling Blake in closer, pushing himself in deeper, getting closer and closer to coming...

Quite obviously, Blake realised that, for he tugged himself free, leaving Avon's cock slick and wet and swaying in the breeze. Or at least, swaying in the unsteady shakiness of a body perched on the edge of climax... Blake stared hard at Avon's hardness, running his tongue around the inside of his mouth, tactily remembering the sensation of Avon filling him orally, sorely tempted to go back and finish him off, suck his seed inside, taste him... But no, he'd gone without a fix for more than long enough to blow the opportunity. So to speak...

Grabbing Avon by the wet cock, he circled the taut flesh, pinching him just so, forcing the incipient orgasm to go back where it belonged, deep in the bowels of Avon's flesh, until it could erupt deep in Blake's bowels. God, how he needed to feel a man in him again. Enough to make going down on his knees more than worth it. Still keeping one hand on Avon's obedient big cock, Blake stumbled over to the bedside cabinet, fumbling around till he found the tube, squirting some over Avon. With a barely steady hand, he smoothed some into the silken skin, fingertips trembling with every pulsing vein they encountered. He had never done this before, always leaving the tacky details to Avon, but this, oh, this was a delicious experience. If all of male sex felt as wonderful as this, he might have to give up his insistence that it was nothing more than what Alphas termed 'fagging' and Colonists called 'cornholing'. He looked down, saw Avon's belly quiver with contained passion, looked up, saw brown eyes almost glazed with the pleasure of Blake's hand on him. Yes, Blake realised, he just might have to give up his nice, safe heterosexual words and get in to the really good stuff. For a moment, the heady, taboo image of putting his arm around Avon in public swam into his mind, making him pant. Yes, there definitely was something to be said for taking the step beyond 'fagging'...

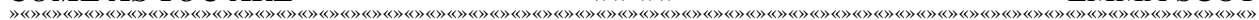
"What next?" Avon gasped, more to hurry Blake along than any real desire to know. Going by the past few minutes, anything Blake came up with was going to be just fine by him.

"I haven't gone to all this bother for nothing, Avon. The usual. It's what I want, it's what I'm after. It's

what I..." he turned suddenly, presenting his back to Avon, blunt hole blindly seeking the sharp point of Avon's body, "want, what I..." he drew in a hissing breath as Avon's hands steadied him, as Avon parted him, thrusting up and in and deep and hard, "need..." he groaned, slumping forward, bracing his hands on his bent knees, bending forward, letting his arms drop forward until his palms were flat on the floor and his bum raised in the air, Avon filling him up, feeding his addiction, giving him what he loved more than anything else in the world.

Avon shoved up as hard as he could, lifting up on tiptoes to completely penetrate the taller man. Again he thrust, buttocks clenching, flanks hollowing with every move, just as Blake's cheeks had hollowed with every luxurious suck. Again and again he moved, until he felt the twinge in his lower back, which was when he suddenly draped himself over Blake, forcing them both to their knees, jamming Avon's cock right up Blake's arse. The whole thing went to Avon's head. Prior to this, it had always been Blake, on his back, Avon taking him, yes, but still in control, still like schoolboys or University men, fagging around as boys and young men will, but this! This was real, this was honest sex between two men, this was Blake, choosing to be fucked like a real man might, were he confident enough. Were he to need the other man enough... All of a sudden, Avon wished their places reversed. To have Blake covering him like this, in him, all around him, would be heaven indeed. For then he could have all the love that Blake so insistently denied him... A nagging jolt of Blake's hips brought him back to what he was doing, to the hot flesh ensconcing him, to the smooth back supporting him, to the thick curls just waiting for him to bury his face in, for the vulnerable nape begging for his kisses and lovebites. He never was able to refuse a man on his knees... Blake would be sporting quite an artistic array for days, not that Avon was going to tell him. He'd wait to see Blake's face when someone else did... There was another jolt of Blake's hips, this one not to nag, but in pure, unadulterated hedonism.

There was nothing, absolutely nothing, in the world that Blake loved more than the feel of a man up his arse. If he couldn't get the real thing, then he would make do with plastic, but, oh, the joys of having living flesh cleaving him. He had, not surprisingly, absolutely no idea whatsoever where he had learned to love this feeling so, but he presumed it was at school, just as that was where Avon had learned his basic skills. And a bit more besides. Blake arched his back, pressing his spine into the softness of Avon's belly, feeling the strong muscles of Avon's chest pressing into him. He could even feel the tiny hard peaks of Avon's nipples as they scraped back and forth with each deep thrust. And the sharpness of teeth, the wetness of tongue, the softness of lips, the silk of hair... all of it flooded his mind and he clenched his sphincter, milking Avon, hugging him as tightly as he could, pump-



ing, pumping, until he felt Avon's hardness dissolve into liquid fire, and as it splashed him, inside, deep, deep inside, Blake himself burst forth, cum erupting to splatter his belly and splash on the floor. Avon's weight abruptly heavy on him, he collapsed, sinking none to gracefully into a sated, sodden heap.

It was the pain in his knees and palms that awoke him, and it was the ache in his back and the coldness on his skin that awoke Avon. Gradually, they stirred, moving slowly, still in unconscious rhythm, silently disentangling and clambering into the bed. Another first, Avon thought dreamily, clasping his arms around Blake's chest, refusing to let the other man go, although Blake gave no indication of wanting anything other than to lie here like

this forever. Or at least until their bodies were up to it again. A man could, after all, get as addicted to all the other bits of having sex as the fagging itself. Avon, meanwhile, was lying flat on his back, Blake untidily sprawled atop him, the weight and warmth more than welcome. He'd happily feed Blake's addiction, keep him hooked, in fact, if it meant he could get his own fixes when he needed them. Blake's arms snaked around him, Blake's curls tickling under his chin as Blake nestled home, soft lips brushing Avon's neck. Ah yes, Avon thought, happily floating off on fond, rose-tinted dreams framed by the fond embrace of Blake's arms. He'd be more than pleased to bugger Blake as often as the man wanted it, just as long as he could have the illusions of love after...

VI

AND SO IT GOES: THE DOME CYCLE

This is part three in an ongoing cycle of stories. As much as the editor dislikes serializations, she recognizes that the Glaswegian never intended to go beyond the first tale, and that since that wee storyteller has consented to continue our heroes' adventures, the editor will have to take whatever the Glaswegian decides to dole out. And when she decides to dole it. With luck, there will continue to be new Dome Cycle stories for at least several more issues of Oblaque.

If you're a new reader to the series, welcome. These tales occur in an alternate Blake's 7 universe (as, unquestionably, do all B7 slash stories). This particular universe diverges from the broadcast version quite early on and takes us to the heart of the Delta levels owithin the Domes on Earth. Here we are treated to a detailed look at this underclass and we experience both the richness and the ongoing horrors of their lives through the eyes of Avon—a stranger in a strange land—and Vila—the Prodigal Son indeed. Now, with Blake back in the picture, both Avon's and Vila's lives begin to change. For the better? The worse? And, of course, there is family. Always, there is family.

PROMISES, PROMISES...

M. FAE GLASGOW

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THE WORST THING ABOUT BEING IN LOVE, HE THOUGHT, WAS HOW IT HURT THOSE YOU MERELY LOVED. With every step he took, he could feel the hopeless, helpless hurt in Vila's eyes stabbing him in the back, asking the unanswerable. And how was Avon to even attempt the answering? How the hell was *he* to know what had happened, what had led to that kiss? Certainly nothing he had expected, certainly not this falling like the proverbial ton of bricks, and most definitely, not this falling at Blake's feet. He shifted his attention slightly, giving only the most peripheral thought to where his feet were taking him, his focus, drawn by forces far beyond Avon's control, to the man at his side.

Blake. Hirsute and gaunt and decked out in clothes that were to have been for his execution, but Blake nonetheless. A fact which Avon's body was appreciating to the fullest, all of him aware of the strength of the man bounding along beside him, his vibrancy. His potency... An overlooked guard dodged out from behind a door that lay ajar, and Avon shot him, without even bothering to look at him properly. After all, he was nothing, just someone who was threatening Blake, and that not a wise thing to do, considering what Avon had just discovered

about the rebel.

I am, or so it would seem, in love with him. Head over heels, besotted, blinkered and blind, rose-coloured glasses doing nothing whatsoever to bring reality into focus. No doubt, as soon as the first flush wears off, sanity shall hopefully return, but for the moment... For the moment, there was Blake, only Blake, and all the silent promises held within that body, all the hopes, all the dreams. To return Upstairs, back to his own milieu, back to whence he had come and what had made him; to be freed of a daily grind so grey that it washed out the higher aspirations, to be freed of the cloying openness of emotion, the vivacity of the Deltas being rammed down his throat with such complete disregard for Alpha sensibilities. To be able to go *home* again!

But those eyes were burning into his back, still asking the unanswerable.

What about us?

What about me?

He shivered away from the questions, loping along the bright and exhilaratingly clean corridor, one part of him, even amidst everything else, so gladdened by the measurable cleanliness hear, the very floor they walked on

better washed than old Doctor Harpic's examination room. Calmly, serene in the ballet of violence that surrounded him, he destroyed his foes, neither knowing nor caring who they were, thinking only that he was going *home*, that he was returning to a place where he wouldn't have to pretend, a place where he could doff the Delta mantle and just be himself. To simply *be*. What luxury, what pure, unadulterated luxury.

Unadulterated. Vila. The night before, vows made. A name, taken. Vila, floating away on Cloud 9... That brought him up short, the conflict beginning its tarnishing of his technicolour dream. Vila, who was running along behind him, watching his back, being habitually brave, just not bothering to hide it the way he usually did when he was amongst Alphas. How the hell was Avon supposed to juggle this? A vow made under the coercion of what he thought was a death sentence, should he have to leave the Delta levels; a man who was unabashed in his love of Avon, to the point of wanting to have a 'quickie' in full view of his entire family at last night's party; and then, of course, there was Blake. Damn Blake anyway, for making him feel this, for making life so damned complicated anyway, damn Blake just on principle for *being* Blake. And then all hell broke loose, cascading them with fire and bodies and blood, making all questions of love moot before the overwhelming drive simply to survive. Inundated with carnage, they all three lost sight of each other, just as the Rebels eventually lost sight of Servalan, unleashing her to fight another day. Each hour blended into the next, punctuated with bloodshed and pain, until, with Servalan routed, the organised counter-offensive collapsed and the tide slowly began to turn in favour of the Revolution. No one had much time for anything other than fighting and killing and trying to survive.

And survive they did. All of a sudden, on what he didn't realise was his third consecutive day, kept going by stim-tabs and will, the curtain of exhaustion parted and Avon stopped, took a deep breath, looked around to see whom he had to kill next and there was... No one. No one at all. He was alone in an empty room, papers and disks and memory cubes strewn, confetti at the funeral, blood and scorch marks decorating the place like wreaths. And the smell... Death, permeating everything, fear a thin sharp current cutting sourly into everything, anger and hate taking all the brightness away. And the once tangible cleanliness, no more than an echo, the occasional contrast to the mire, fading with his homecoming.

Blake. Where the hell was Blake? *If he's managed to get himself killed, I'll have his guts for garters*, Avon promised himself, falling into the colourfulness of Deltaism, and *if he's been stupid enough to get himself injured, I'll...* He sat down, heavily, all his strings cut, muscles gone loose with fatigue, cradling his aching head in begrimed hands. His gun was still warm to the touch, its long barrel hot and hard against his cheek, and he found

himself fighting the desire to take it into his mouth, suck on it, use it to obviate Blake's absence. Or attraction, whichever. Either. Both. Just something to get him out of the maze of emotions and people and commitments... The laughter seeped from cracks in his mask, then, chattering around the room, doing nothing more than making the emptiness emptier. How absurd, how truly absurd, to be sitting here, in a parlour filled with death, thinking about sucking on a gun as substitute for the man he had, mere hours before, discovered he loved. The only way it made sense is if he were to shoot the bloody thing and get the whole mess over and done with before it got any worse. *Damn you, Blake, damn you for damning me...*

And then, there was always Vila. Footsteps crunched along the remains of busts, grinding plaster and marble into the plush carpeting. Deathly grace moved Avon's limbs while his mind was still registering the sound. Quickly, he moved, a wraith sliding from one point of the room to suddenly be elsewhere, as the tread came closer. Heavy steps, ponderous and flat-footed, giving no indication of just how fast the walker could suddenly run.

"Blake." Avon stepped into the rectangle of light that lingered from broken tubing.

A quirked eyebrow, the quick twist of a smile, then all buried under a montage of what this man had seen and done these last days. "Shouldn't you have at least waited until you knew it was me before setting yourself up as target practice?"

That initial moment, in the condemned cell, came back full force, catching Avon a glancing blow to the midriff, stealing his breath, his chest rising and falling with the simple effort to breath. "Blake," he said again, in a very different tone, meaning something very different indeed. He smiled, warmth spilling forth, lighting his face up with something frighteningly akin to joy. And adoration.

Blake took half a step back, literally and metaphorically. There were people coming up the corridor, dozens of them, and this wasn't exactly a propitious moment for him and Avon to celebrate their reunion. At least, not in the way Avon had in mind, judging by the confessions of his body. "Later," Blake said to that promise in Avon's body, making promises of his own. "I'll sort things out with you later."

An elegant hand reached out, a single long finger briefly touched the scant inch of Blake's chest that could be found between the buttons, the skin touching skin directly over Blake's heart. "All right. Later. Now, I suppose, is hardly the time. Once your entourage departs, come with me, Blake."

Such a simple statement, but the allure of it was devastating. Blake felt all his resolve dissolve under that stare, under that finger, under the heat in those brown eyes. He took half a step forward, Avon's finger slipping against sweat-moist skin, and Blake could feel the tiny tremble of

it. “Yes,” he whispered, agreeing to far more than the words had spoken. “Oh, yes.”

And then it began.

“Blake!” called a man, a baboon in orange suit, sheaves of printouts in hand, modern man’s banana bunch. “Blake, we need a decision on this water sedation policy. If we just cut off everyone’s supply, we’re going to be finding people having psychotic incidents all over the place. Don’t forget, all the marginal minds aren’t treated, their just given the placebos and told to drink 3 glasses of water with each one, so if we just stop, then what will ha...”

Avon tuned him out, returning once more to the maroon sofa, slopping back into a slouch, letting his body collapse. But he didn’t—quite—put his gun down. It had been soldered to his hand for so many hours now, killing so many, saving so many, and he was so terribly, terribly tired... He forced his eyes awake, getting to his feet, going over to Blake, stumbling only a fragment. “Enough,” he said, in the voice Blake had once used, “enough!” The baboon had been replaced by a willow, a tall, thin blond man, all yield and no strength, to Avon’s eyes. “Enough,” he repeated, voice fading even as he did, his paltry reserves ebbing through his feet and into the carpet, “enough...”

Arms large with strength and comfort were around him, leading him away, taking him, the voice said, to somewhere called ‘rest’. He didn’t believe it—after the past three days, he didn’t think anyone knew where ‘rest’ was. His tongue, obviously, was as loose as his resolve, for it appeared that he had actually spoken.

“Course we know where to get rest. Some of us have been doing that, unlike some people I could name. Every time I looked for you, you were leading some raid, solving someone else’s problem...” *Starin’ after Blake with yer bloody ‘eart on yer sleeve, an’ I don’t care if everyone else thought yer were scowling at ‘im, I know you an’ I’ve been on the receiving end of enough of yer bloody scowls this past year that I c’n tell the bleedin’ difference.* “Upsadaisy, Avon, that’s better. Don’t fall asleep yet, not before I get you into bed.” *Hah! Chance’d be a fine thing. Ge’ yer inter me bed? That’ll be the bloody day. Not now yer’ve seen yer fancy man, not now tha’ bastard Blake’s stuck ‘is nose in agin. I’ll be for the off, right? Off with the old, on wiv the new, an’ compared wiv wot ‘e’s got ter offer, I’m pretty shabby, in’t I?* “Oh, come on, Avon, you can do it. Not much farther to go now.”

“Vila?” Avon straightened himself up as best he could, walking with a little less of his weight being taken by Vila. Squinting in the light, he stared around, trying to cow the weaving surroundings into stillness so that he could work out where the hell he was. He stared and glowered, putting one foot mechanically in front of the other, just going wherever Vila was leading. “Where the hell are we?” he finally muttered, allowing his head to

droop, just a tiny bit, just enough to ease the strain on his neck.

“We’re on Upper Level 1, Section 3A, Corridor 7. Recognise any of it yet?”

The address rang a bell, and eventually the bell woke his brain up. “Of course! I grew up here. My family’s house is...”

“Right here.” They came to a stop in front of a stoa crinkled with age, the nameplate a discreet and dignified rectangle set to the side, where none could accuse it of joining in with the door’s ostentation. Before Avon could actually get his mouth to do what his brain was screaming at it, Vila chimed the door.

“Vila! What the hell made you bring me here?”

“Good choice of words, that. What the hell made me bring you here was our beloved Blake. Him, and one of his new rules. “Due to the damage sustained by the Upper Levels, all personnel must return to their home levels and where known, their family homes. As soon as damages are under control, a de-stratification of grades will take place.” Or words to that effect, anyway. So, his wish is our command and here we are.”

The door swung open, unscathed of course, by anything so uncouth as mere tawdry revolution, and Thatcher, elegant even in morning whiskers and pyjamas, stood in the doorway. It took a moment, but recognition dawned, even going so far as to show on his face. “Sir! How lovely to see you again. And so exciting, for we’ve been hearing all about your derring-do. You must be quite exhausted and as it’s still rather early, would you care to come in to the sitting room whilst I see to getting the spare bedroom prepared? I’m afraid your cousin Wills is in your old room, sir. Lord Avon is not at home and the Lady Waylz your mother is indisposed, but I shall inform her that you’re here.”

Out of it all, the only thing that Avon really heard enough to care about was the promise of bed. And one thing that no-one had mentioned: “Tea, Thatcher,” he said, the words fuzzy, like an inner pocket. “Tea, and something to eat. I think it’s been quite some time...”

Thatcher’s words rumbled unheard as Vila supported whilst Avon steered, the pair of them finally stumbling across the sitting room. Avon plonked himself down on the nearest chair, too exhausted to even bother taking his boots off. It never entered to head that, before Blake and *Liberator* and Vila and the Delta level, it would never have occurred to him to take his boots off in the *sitting room*. But now he just sprawled back, too numbed to think about Blake and his complications that the man carried with him like a miasma of contradictions. All he could focus on was the fact that he didn’t have to make any more decisions, didn’t have to race down any more corridors, didn’t have to kill... China clinked, spoons chinked, plates slid from the pile to be filled with the things Avon hadn’t had since the day he’d been arrested, an entire æon

ago. Vila, then, again, at his side, urging him to eat, handling the delicate bone china as if it were made out of Avon Family bones and not just some heirloom or other. Gradually, Avon sat up, taking the proffered food, his befuddled mind slipping so easily into the lessons drummed into him by Nanny. *'Sit up straight—a lazy back means lazy digestion. Keep your plate steady—your dropped crumbs are someone else's work. Don't slurp—you'll sound like an animal and be taken off to the zoo...'*

He drifted off with it, mechanically eating, part of his mind quite comfortable watching Vila, storing it all away for when he was awake enough to actually look at it. And then the perfume was there, jasmine and tea-rose, so sweet, so wonderfully sweet. Home. That was the smell of home...

"Mother," he said, rising to his feet, grace only slightly defaced by his stumbling tiredness.

"Kerr," she said, offering her left cheek for a peck whilst keeping her beady eyes on the strange little man her son had brought home. She did so hope it wasn't one of 'those', not another one. Kerr did have *such* bad taste. Not to mention his appalling lack of discretion. That one, awful mid-term vac when he had brought his 'best friend' home and then expected them to be given the adjoining suite and left unsupervised! She shuddered to remember, and then, still with her younger son seating himself so untidily, she shuddered when she took a good look at the other man.

"And you are...?" she enquired, as politely as if she were asking an acquaintance what breed of dog this was.

"Vila. Vila Restal," Vila Restal murmured, stuttering a little, breaking out in even more sweat, making him even more uncomfortably aware that, what with a revolution and all, he may have had time to grab some sleep, but not quite a shower. And the way her face was screwing up like wadded paper, she knew it. He suppressed the desire to sniff himself, just to check. He had an awful suspicion that she could probably smell him from there.

"Restal? I don't believe I know your family?"

"Well, no, don't suppose you would. We're not Alphas, you see."

"Really?"

An' now I know where our Avon gets that toffee-nosed attitude of 'is. "No," he said, his back up against her snootiness, temper and tiredness getting the better of him, "I'm a Delta, actually." *An' so's yer bloody son, by our rules, you old cow,* he added, but silently. He rather fancied keeping his head attached to his shoulders for another little while. At least until he had done *something* to try and keep Avon. Perhaps if he were to live Upstairs, be an Alpha...

The real Alpha male was stirring, pushing himself to his feet. "He's also my friend, mother." And he

could see the speculation scud across her face, storm clouds bringing rain and how he *hated* it when Mother turned on the tears. "Please," he said, going slowly towards the door, "shall we continue this discussion after I've had a chance to sleep?"

"Yes, of course, Kerr," his mother responded, the perfect hostess. "And I'll have Thatcher see to having a bed made up for...for..." How on earth *did* one address a Delta? "A bed for Vila. Yes, I'll have Thatcher see to Vila." And Avon, tired beyond thought, inured to the iniquity on the *Liberator* and fresh from the familial intimacies of the Delta levels, didn't even notice that his mother was speaking to Vila as if he were a rather flea-bitten pet. All his exhaustion would allow his mind was the siren-song that dangled rest for him to chase. He was, peripherally, aware of someone helping him along the corridor and into the lift, of someone—he remembered the feel of those hands suddenly, going limp, relaxing into their security—of Vila helping him discard his stained and noxious clothes, wiping him down with stericloths, tucking him in as if he were a child come home once more, not simply a man temporarily returned to his family's house. A kiss then, light, fleeting, whispering remembrances to him, and then he was falling asleep, body cradled in luxury, sheets crisp and clean and dense, no threadbare spots here to catch an unwary toe. He burrowed into the aromatic bedding, the old, familiar scent of lavender catching him at his lowest ebb, taking him back years and years, to times of chasing his brother through the halls, Thatcher threatening them with a fate worse than death, and Nanny, who had eyes in the back of her head and always time enough to read a wide-eyed Kerr another tale of the olden days. Lavender...all this perfect luxury, of the bed and most of all, the opportunity to sleep and avoid thought, all of it was personified by that expensive smell. On the verge of floating away on a morphean cloud, he stretched one hand out from under the canopy of luxury, fumbling, reaching... Vila's hand took his, and Avon sighed, contented. *Best of both worlds*, his punch-drunk mind mumbled, clutching both hedonism and love to himself, *the best of both worlds*.

And on that thought, he was asleep, only then freeing Vila's hand, leaving Vila alone in a room that intimidated with its living aura of good breeding, of generations and centuries of history and power. Of a family so well-bred that even the servants were borderline Betas, the kind whose children would be able to cross the grade, were such things allowed. The kind of servants who would pass for masters to an ignorant Delta, who was suddenly becoming acutely aware of his own putrid clothes, with their stench of blood and fear, but most of all, worst of all, with their lingering perfume of poverty, of the great unwashed, of struggle, and of failing. He looked around this, the 'spare' guest room, the place that the unexpected was tucked away into, to be dealt with later,

once class had been established. There was art on the walls, real art, not holos. Ornaments, that to Vila were missiles in a domestic argy-bargy, littered the mantles and tiny, tip-toeing tables with aged elegance. And fabric. Everywhere he looked, there was fabric, cloth covering the walls, the chairs, the couch, the floor, the bed... And there was Avon, clean again, eyes closed, fine bone structure perfect in this place of artistic excess, belonging as he had never even come close to doing in the places where Vila belonged. And there was always Blake, and his directive for Grades to return to their levels, and his hold on Avon... Vila perched himself on the edge of the bed, clumsy in his own tiredness, almost knocking the figurine off the spindly bedside table, thief's hands catching it, thief's instincts dropping it mindlessly into his pocket. Then he simply sat and stared at Avon, longing to crawl in beside him, but not daring to, not here where one didn't even laugh publicly. And not when he was the wrong Grade to be here, for even if Blake's proclamation hadn't banned him, the sanguine elegance here surely had. Plus, he was nervously aware that Revolutions were amongst the most uncertain of times, and Vila didn't want to be some anxious Revolutionary's first big mistake, so he gathered his reluctance into a tangled ball along with his unhappy chaos and then he leaned over again, stroking Avon's hair, kissing him once more, just to tide him over until they had some time together. If Avon ever wanted to again. If Avon could ever see beyond the end of Blake's nose again. If Avon could ever slum it with a Delta again... Staggering with tiredness, he clambered to his feet, climbing down off the high bed, stretching to ease the pulled muscle in his back, then turning, to be confronted by the sight of a tall, dark woman, perfectly coiffed, perfectly dressed, even amidst the greatest upheaval her society had known. Avon's mother. So like him, yet so very different. The coldness, here, was not merely camouflage for a molten nature, but simply the flawless maquillage for the chill that lived within. Politely, no doubt. Vila took a deep breath, casting one quick glance at Avon's obliviousness as he walked away. Lady Waylz didn't speak to him, barely allowed her glance to be contaminated by touching him, doing nothing more than lifting her right hand, palm up, as he came abreast of her. Dumbfounded, Vila stared at her for a moment, until the heaviness in his pocket registered. Blushing, too embarrassed and intimidated to even do his usual patter, he dug in deep, dragging it out, clinging bits of paper hanky and all, and placed it in the accusatory palm. Guiltily, he fled, burglar's memory guiding him through the maze that was the Avon House, getting him to the front door and freedom in record time. It wasn't until he was crammed into the service lift that he even realised that he had been running, driven by the gene-deep, bred-in generation-upon-generation feeling of inferiority. The lift lost a few of its occupants at the various Beta levels, giving Vila room to

breath, cursing him with thinking-space, and every time the lift doors opened on the light and warmth of the sundry floors to decant cheerful revolutionaries, the iniquity of it stung a little sharper. Even more got off on the Gamma levels, until Vila was completely alone, with nothing but those emasculating thoughts careening, drunk drivers, through his mind. When the lift finally groaned to a halt, stopping at the only Delta off-load bay, the solitude had finally begun to infiltrate his senses, bringing numbing depression with it. Alone. Going back down to the Delta levels, the only one to ever leave and then come back again. The last time, it had been because he had had no choice, this time, was exactly the same thing. Lorded over by Alphas and their decisions, he had to move, pawn on *their* chessboard. It married into the brood that was the tangle of Avon and Blake shutting him out of their emotions, of Avon loving a fellow Alpha with a passion he had never shown (*never known*, a fragment of fairness whispered to his conscience), of Alpha sensibilities so far above his own that they scared him. Once married, the resentment and the fear and the hurt started the mating dance, beginning to breed, propagating, fuelling each other until Vila was finally able to stand tall again. As the doors opened onto the dim-lit chill, Vila strode through, a man to be reckoned with. *'Mongst the fuckin' Deltas, any road. Got a Revolution on our 'ands, so we 'ave, an' we'll bleedin' win. If we 'ave ter fight the Alphas themselves, we'll fuckin' win. Jest cos Blake's got wot 'e wants a sudden cruel image of Avon bent double under Blake, Blake's big cock piercing him, stabbed Vila in the heart, causing his feet to stumble and his resolve to harden jest cos 'e's got 'is power an' my Avon, don't mean 'e's got 'is pet Deltas runnin' and fetchin' fer 'im. Jest wait until 'e tries any o' it. Jest wait...*

When he awoke, Avon simply stretched, warm and replete and comfortable, the delicate aromas of rosemary and mint doing a minuet in the air. *Luncheon*, he thought to himself, not yet quite awake, rubbing his face into the lavender-misted pillows, vaguely aware that his world smelled odd, for some reason, *I must have had quite a night, for mother to allow me to sleep till luncheon. Oh. I did have quite a night, didn't I? Quite a few days, in fact...* He got himself out of bed, picking up the dressing gown that had been draped at the bottom of his bed, going into the bathroom, still yawning and stretching to ease the kinks. A servant knocked discreetly, then entered, revealing a young face Avon didn't recognise.

"Good morning, sir. May I draw a bath for you?"

With a raised eyebrow and a nod, Avon disappeared into the toilet, the sound of rushing water echoing behind.

And then, lying in the bath, hot water turning his shoulders pink, the smile faded from his face. What Deltas would give for this... This bath held more than their weekly per capita amount, a decadence they would never

even consider, not when it would mean doing without drinking and cooking water. It suddenly dawned on Avon, that one of the pervasive Delta smells was absent from here, too. The underlying acidity of the chem-toilets. He sank down deeper into the tub, enjoying himself. After all, they had had a revolution and Avon had won. He was free, and by now, Jess and Vera and old Ewan and Jak and his gargantuan brood would be enjoying this kind of thing too. Might take a few days, granted, simply to reprogramme the computer distribution systems, but soon... The last few days began to catch up with him and his eyes drifted closed, even as his mind drifted shut on thoughts of contacting Vila, and Blake...

By the time he appeared downstairs, luncheon was already served and progressed to the point of the main course. He hesitated at the doorway of the dining room, rather unfortunately aware of the last time he had joined his family for lunch. That had been the week before he had been caught embezzling all those funds, the week before his arrest, the time and the life before the *Liberator* and Blake and living as a Delta. He squared his shoulders and walked in, prepared for anything. Anything, that is, apart from what he got.

"My dear boy! Do sit down. I'm so glad to see you up and about in time for luncheon." *Father? Smiling? My father, being positively effusive?*

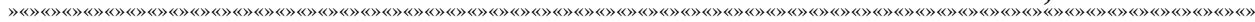
"Ah, Kerr, darling. Your place is beside Daddy. Thatcher, bring Kerr some luncheon, please..." *Mother? Fussing? Over me?*

"You must tell us all about your adventures, you know. It must have been *so* exciting, freeing everyone like that." Avon spared a glance for his brother Geoff, that vacuous, virtuous bore, personality as bland as the blond of his hair. Then he gave his attention up to his favourite, his baby sister Sian, all vivacity and cheek and bright brown eyes, the only one who ever came close to receiving as much parental disapproval as he. Conversation flurried, a scree of comments landsliding into another, all of it trapping him, making it as if he had never left, never robbed the Federation, never been brought up in a family vehemently opposed to reform of any kind. And now he was some kind of hero to them. If the food hadn't been so good, the hypocrisy would probably have made him sick.

And so it went, the silent surrender to all the things that had been bred into his bones, as surely as defeat had been bred into the Deltas. Perhaps it was that that made him accept all the excuses as to why Vila was too busy to come Upstairs to see him. Or perhaps it was the complexity of it all: it had been difficult enough Downstairs, amongst people who were cheering for them, but to live with him here, amongst his family and his peers, who understood school-boy diddling but no more... And certainly not if it took place between men of different Classes. Between elite and Delta was thinkable only in the realms of esoteric pornography, and that old attitude began to

infiltrate Avon, as it had barriered him once before. And there was, of course, always Blake...

The anticipation of their time together was a constant aching tumescence between his legs, the picture of Blake moaning under him interfering with his work, the thought of himself coming, streaming into Blake's heat was making familial conversation impossible. Sitting here, in the office he was all-but chained to, reprogramming the agri-computers and sedative controls and food distribution and water programmes, trying to concentrate on his work, he was far more aware of his cock chafing against the coarseness of trousers, and the hurt threatening to erupt in his heart, were he to listen to it and not his body. He didn't care to think about Vila, and what must be going on Downstairs, for there was far too much for all of them to do to allow time for love and sex and sorting out a triangle that he should never have been weak enough to allow to happen. He couldn't deny that he did love Vila, in his own way and after a fashion, but compared to what had hit him right between the eyes when he had seen Blake... A memory wound its way, leisurely, through the cortex of his brain again, as it had so many times these past few, frantic days. Vila, lying in bed with him, ready to love him generously and unconditionally, telling him that Avon was *in* love with Blake. And he hadn't denied it, his conscience knowing it for the truth even if his consciousness hadn't yet seen what was staring him in the face. He had accepted Vila's warmth and comfort then, not with lies of undying love, but with an apology. "I'm sorry," he whispered again, not even realising he was saying it out loud to a computer that couldn't have cared less. *I'm sorry*, echoed in his mind. So many regrets, to be weighed against so many happinesses. All he could hope for was that for Vila the good outnumbered the bad. Until such time when Avon could find the depths within himself, the courage, to face Vila, and Blake both. Hardest of all, to face himself. For, as he had conceded in the grime and sleaze of the Delta levels, he was a man who liked men, not merely an 'old school boy' who still enjoyed the occasional reminiscent tumble. A man who loved easily, and deeply, and all unwisely. Almost impossible to admit to himself even with the balm of being so far from home and all that stood for, but he had done it, going so far as to say it out loud, Affirming with Vila. *Yes*, that sneaky little voice bit at him, *but you did it in Delta, didn't you? Disguised, not being yourself, and you still haven't dared see Vila, in case it shows. In case everyone up here would see it written on your face like a dirty mark on your nose that you love a Delta. That you fucked a Delta. That you almost let a Delta fuck you...* No, he hadn't let Vila take him, the disputes of the moment had stopped him, class intervening yet again. But he had fucked Vila, in the metaphoric as well as literal sense. *Well, I can sort all that out later, once the worst of the work is over. And once I know where the hell I stand with Blake. Please God, if*



there is one, let Vila and me be wrong. Let it not be that I am in love with Blake. Let it just be lust... He shifted on his chair, rubbing his living hardness against the manufactured, thinking once more of Blake. Thinking about being in bed with him, kissing him, as he had in that first, fiery and unguarded moment of shocked recognition. Thinking about all the times he had found himself in officious meetings with Blake, hordes surrounding them, coming between them, all the decisions needing made at once, instantly and perfectly, so that only the messiah of freedom could pass judgement. For all of them, was the time and consideration, life and death pigeonholed and tied up neatly in little blue ribbons. And all Avon and Blake could get were snatched moments, stolen kisses, groins rubbed hard and desperate against each other until one of the plethora of aids would come knocking on the door. This time, he swore, it would be different. This time, he would have Blake, come hell or high water or police crisis, he didn't care. He was going to have the man...

His computer was chiming at him, the inanimate rather animate in the annoyed tone of that incessant chime. Avon sighed and keyed acceptance, wearily wondering which particular programming crisis needed solving this time. Complex equations dissolved into something far more complicated. Blake.

"Avon, glad you could find a moment to finally answer. Are you, by any chance, available to have dinner with me tonight? We could use the opportunity to discuss the best re-integration strategy together."

"I suppose, if you're willing to give up the bad habit of demanding instead of asking, I could find the time to dine with you." He was so proud of himself, none of his aching need betrayed by word or expression.

And then the bastard smiled at him. Warmly. Promising, as he had done that very first day, as he had the day exhaustion had claimed Avon and Vila had dragged him off to sleep... Vila, the zephyr grazed his mind, but he stamped it out. Later, he promised himself, later... Blake was still smiling at him, eyes crinkled, suggestion ripe around his full mouth. And Avon realised that he had what was probably the most embarrassingly hungry look on his face since his years of teenage desperation. Damn you, Blake, tinged with indulgence of new-born love, I'll get you for that. If you're lucky, it'll be tonight... His cocked jumped enthusiastically to attention at that, making Avon doubly glad that he had made sure to tuck himself discreetly between his legs this morning. Life was proving embarrassing enough without his body proclaiming his state for all to see. And Blake was grinning at him now, relishing the sight of a blushing Avon whose lips were parted, begging to be kissed.

"How very...accommodating of you, Avon," Blake finally said, not letting Avon off the hook.

"Really? From past experience, I would say that you were the more accommodating of the two of us."

"Traditions are made to be changed, Avon, wouldn't you say? Revolutions can make the most unexpected differences in a man's...anticipations, you know."

"I haven't found that to be the case, I'm afraid."

"Oh, but you haven't given it enough time yet. I'm sure I can...persuade you to my point of view."

"Over dinner?" Arch now, verging on coy, loving this open flirting.

"Over something, anyway."

"My dead body, probably."

And Avon's heart suddenly tangoed wildly at the lust in Blake's eyes and what that promised. "Only a little dead, Avon," he said, dipping his fingertip into his mouth, continuing, depending on Avon's equally well-bred education being up to the seduction, "only *le petit mort*, Avon, only that."

"I shall...hold you to that, at any rate, Blake. Dinner tonight then?" he added, needing to get away from those devouring eyes before he made a complete spectacle of himself.

"Why don't you come over to my rooms after the last of the day's meetings? Then we can guarantee not being disturbed."

"Oh, I wouldn't plan on that, Blake. I'm planning on ruffling every feather you've got." And with that, he broke the connection, shutting his console down, almost running from the room and the transparent walls and all those interested voyeurs. He hastened to the bathroom, still holding close the image of Blake smiling at him, the rich voice carrying him along until he was locked in a cubicle, trousers wrenched open, cock tugged out from its restraints, hand pumping, slickened into sliding pleasure by the pre-cum oozing, pushed by the promises of Blake, his voice, the smile, the pictures he had so wickedly painted for Avon, that voice pouring over his skin, beading him with sweat as his hand blurred and was beaded by white cum. His breathing slowed, his cock lost some of its rigidity, but the need was still there, the desperation to feel Blake's mouth on his, his legs spread under Avon... All of it, oh, how he needed it. Needed Blake to need him, to love him as he feared he loved Blake.

The cubicle door opened and he emerged, barely a hair out of place. Hands washed, hair smoothed, clothing perfectly neat, he walked back to his office, his cock trapped, rubbing, rubbing, rubbing, constantly reminding him of Blake, Blake, Blake... An afternoon can take an eternity to pass, nit-picking meetings can become even more interminable than ever imagined, the sight of the man you are in love with sprawled comfortably in an oversized chair can be sheer torture. As he wriggled on his seat yet again, trying vainly to find some degree of comfort that wouldn't set his cock off, Avon found himself staring at Blake, oblivious to the discussion droning meaninglessly around him, speculating on whether or not that sprawl was one of comfort, or if it were dictated by necessity. If that

you. Remember it, Blake? How it felt, to be so close, all that skin on skin, hard against each other. Remember how it feels to have me caress your balls, or suck on those beautiful nipples of yours until they're all swollen and red and standing up as straight as your cock? Remember?"

And Blake remembered, with every fibre of his being, remembered the fire and the glory and the lust, remembered Avon's face, twisted with orgasm, sweat dripping from him as he came, the cold sweat burning Blake as it rained on to him. Yes, he remembered. And his body ached with the needing... "Later," the word bled from him, to be absorbed by the heaviness of Avon's breathing, "later, for everything else. Hell, I need you..." He turned within the circle of Avon's arms, pressing them close together, fumbling with Avon's clothes, locking their mouths together. Avon's tongue was on him, in him, taking over his mouth and his breath and his being, and he roared with the pleasure of it. Hands came up to be lost in his hair, as Avon had always so loved doing, and then suddenly, those hands clenched, spasmed, trembled, Avon's mouth falling lax and empty, body leaning into Blake.

"I'm sorry," was murmured into Blake's neck, as the bigger man realised what had just happened. A single kiss, to break his control like that... *My god, how much have you needed me, and me too busy to see? One kiss, just one kiss... Oh, Avon, my poor Avon... I'm sorry, so sorry...*

And then Avon was pushing against Blake again, genitals regenerating, all that needing and longing making him forget that he was no longer a rapacious teen, bringing his cock to stand on its balls, the head flaring, foreskin drawn back to cradle the flange in a symphony of satin skin. Blake's hand delved deep, finding Avon, drawing him forth into the light, the rose-dark cock mysterious and beautiful in the lamplit glow. Avon was tearing at him, ripping his clothes, biting and licking and sucking in a frenzy, claiming every pore as it was revealed to him, and to him alone. He caught at Blake, holding on tightly to the heaviness of Blake's balls, fingering them, running his thumb up between them, separating them to frame the column of Blake's cock. Dewy skin, supple over the immutable hardness, heat drawing him, the honey-sweet smell bringing him down, lower, lower, until his mouth was on Blake, sucking him in, tasting him, for the first time, daring to go beyond school-boy rules, compromising his Alpha dogma with his Delta lessons. It inundated his senses, this bringing in of Blake, this confession before his equal. He loved it, Blake so thick in his mouth, the head smooth against his teeth, the flesh so springy under his tongue. Blake's hands were clasped together, braced on Avon's nape, urging him down lower, persuading him to take more in, deeper, as deep as he could. Mouth straining, Avon swallowed him, his left hand forming a tight tunnel for what his mouth couldn't take. In unison, hand and mouth moved, making Blake harder, making him grow,

bringing him to his full size. And it was only then that Avon was satisfied, holding his prize in his hand, Blake's rampant, daunting masculinity, overflowing his palm. He squeezed, leaning forward to press them belly to belly, cock to cock, his hand rubbing them one against the other, skin whispering sexy secrets to matching skin, pre-ejac slipping them so sweetly together. His own clothes were an unwelcome impediment, so he pulled them off, the leather clinging, only reluctantly letting his flesh go. He was desperate for this, aching to fuck Blake, to experience whatever it was that had combusted that second when they were reunited. Desperate, but not entirely mindless, not yet. One quick blur, and he had rescued the tube from his breast pocket, keeping it in one hand as he took Blake in the other and led him, cock first, to the bedroom. And love? Perhaps, perhaps, if life wanted to be difficult...

The bed was wide and smooth and piled high with feather duvet, pillows abounding, in Servalan's signature white. Escaped though she had, Avon doubted she would be coming in to demand just exactly what they thought they were doing in *her* bed. Too besotted to care, he tumbled on to the bed, bringing Blake with him, kissing him even as they fell together, gluing them to each other. He twisted, bringing himself into position over Blake, uncapping the tube, getting ready... And Blake grabbed it from him, using his strength, that thrilling strength, and the intensity of Avon's own needs. Implacable, unsmiling and unspeaking, Blake loomed over him, refusing Avon room to move, refusing Avon the right to choose. There was a struggle, all the more intent for its silence, and still Avon would not yield. Could not yield, for that would lead to... He chose not to allow that thought birth, aborting it before it could come between them and render all of this impossible. Avon arched up to shove Blake off, and found himself, instead, pressed hard and needy against a body just as hard and just as needy. But the difference, this time, was that Blake was not willing to give Avon the upper hand, that this time, Blake was the one who needed the control enough to stop all of this if Avon refused him his right. There was a moment, when it hung in the balance, and then Blake finally spoke.

"I'll give you everything you need, Avon, but you'll have to give me what *I* need. And that's you, all of you, just for me and no one else. I have to have you, Avon, the way you've had me. That's what it has to be. Me, taking you." And Blake touched him, staying Avon's struggle, silently, eyes speaking volumes, leaning down to kiss him, turning him, until Avon knelt on the bed, rump raised, arse presented for Blake's pleasure.

And Avon went very still, thinking about this, about giving himself to a man, to Blake... Ramifications, repercussions, all of it went through his mind, until he realised that it mattered not a jot. He wanted this, regardless of what it brought, regardless of whether it made him a nancy-boy. Regardless of whether or not it forever

branded him a man who loved deeply, and often, a cynic by disguise. He groaned out loud, letting Blake hear his concession, the sound a declaration of intent. He would let Blake have him, take him, make him... The first slither of ointment was cold, unwarmed by Blake's hand, in contrast to the steadying, reassuring pressure of palm on Avon's cheek. The first finger touched him, pressing in, brooking no argument, demanding surrender. The second finger, opening him, beckoning the penetration by more, by bigger. Then Blake's hand on his shoulder, pushing him down, until his face was on the pillow, nipples rubbing counterpane, forearms braced in anticipation. Then, oh, then it happened, the blunt, broad head of Blake's cock hard on him, pressing inexorably, insistent on its pleasure, asking for nothing, demanding everything. Pain, sharp, burning, expanding, widening his muscles, unfolding his sphincter, making his arse swallow Blake as his mouth had done. That made his cock listen to his age, going soft, the pain draining the blood from him. He thought of Vila, impaled under him, the twist of pain on that face, those first few times when Avon, like Blake, hadn't waited, hadn't taken the time or the love to overcome the emotional anxiety. *I'm sorry*, he thought again, not saying it this time, but it was the same old refrain, *I'm sorry, for the hurting and the letting Blake be the one to do this to me...* And then, as Vila had with him, he grew used to having Blake in his body, as he was growing used to having Blake in his life. The pressure against his prostate began its magic, blood pulsing into his cock to be held there by the slow upswell of pleasure. Another deep touch, and another, until his mind was filled with the image of himself under Blake and the image of Vila under himself, the two commingling and multiplying, until suddenly, his own cock was weeping against his belly, the joy of penetration overcoming any pain; the pain receding, as Blake held still for a breath, and then the movement began. Primal male, plunging into him, plundering his very essence, manhood mingling with his manhood, every thrust pounding against his prostate, making his cock buck and jerk with the intensity of his arousal. Blake's hands were on him, encircling him, Blake's weight heavy on his back, chest pressing Avon's chest into the bedding, cock pressing Avon's cock into the bed. He could feel Blake's balls slap against his own, clinging momentarily until Blake's flexing arse pulled him away again. A voice was murmuring into his hair, praising his beauty, telling him how wonderful he was and how tight, how marvellously fucking tight... Avon arched, rising up priapically, cock thrusting out into nothing but his own hand. He leaned back, into Blake, into that solid strength, Blake's chest heaving with every breath he gasped. Then there were hands on him, Blake caressing him, palms rotating, flat and hard, on his nipples, as Blake's cock rotated, sharp and hard, inside him. Mouth, sucking on his nape, nipping at his ear; cock, thrusting sinuously up into him; balls, slapping so round

and full against his own; hands pulling and twisting at his chest. His own mouth agape in a silent scream of pleasure, Avon leaned his head back, letting Blake take the burden, turning, twisting, until he could claim Blake's mouth once more, breathing his breath, tasting his taste, filling himself up with all that Blake could give him. Orgasm threatened to end the ecstasy, his skin flushing as rosy as the cock clenched so needfully in his fist, a runnel of sweat between his buttocks cascading onto Blake's cock and thus, into Avon himself, making the passage slicker, wetter, easier, faster, faster, both men undulating and writhing, and then Blake turned him, dominating Avon with Avon's own willingness, manoeuvring Avon around, cock still buried deep within, unable to bear to give up that most intimate of loving. And on his back, spread like a woman, a man fucking him, Avon saw a part of himself he hadn't even known existed: the desire to give up everything to this man. *In love*, it chanted through his brain, cantering down to every nerve-ending, *in love, in love, in love*, his mind mocked him, making him face himself. Making him face the bottomless well he had never even suspected was in him. Love. Boundless, generous, pliant. Love, *in love*, making him want to yield, to hand everything over to Blake, to keep the man happy, to... He shivered, not entirely from the pleasure. He wanted, (*ohgod, ohgod*, his fear screamed, somewhere far away in the darkened depths of his soul) to bind himself to this man, to commit to him, for ever and ever, amen... Willingly, no strings attached, no reciprocation required, as Vila had with him (*Vila, oh, hell, Vila, my poor Vila, I'm sorry, so sorry*, the weeping voice joined the fearfilled chant), giving without thought of receiving, this boundless wealth of his love. And then Blake thrust into him, driving his cock deep into Avon's body, driving thought far from Avon's mind until Blake, nearing the end, grabbed Avon's legs, lifting them high, hands bruising as they steadied Avon's hips, as he thrust so very hard into the hot, yielding suppleness of Avon's arse. Blake bent down, kissing Avon, stealing his breath along with his heart, joining them mouth and hip, an umbilical cord of loving, as cum streamed from Avon, his body jolting with release, Blake surging up, hips snapping forward in one last, juddering thrust, cock spasming deep inside as Avon's prostate quivered against him.

And then it was over, Blake collapsed into Avon's waiting embrace, Avon dizzy with the emotion of it all, body finally limp and sated after the agony of anticipation. He whispered to Blake then, whispering into an ear that could not hear him, the intensity of climax having claimed Blake for sleep. Words poured from Avon, as his lifeseed had poured from him, drenching Blake, giving him his all. For the first time in his life, Avon said it, said the words that had the power to make him sick with fear. Said them again and again, cleansing himself, freeing himself, casting off his shackles and embracing the future, and Blake.

stopped in his tracks, the scales falling from his eyes as that one glaring anomaly stared back at him—the live-donor record, with its lists of organs replaced in over-indulged, effete Alpha men and women. And with sinking horror in the pit of his stomach, Avon knew exactly where—and how—those donors were being ‘recruited’. RAID, the cry echoed through his mind, with the sound of a crying infant being suffocated into silence and the inaudible cry of tears pouring down a young woman’s cheeks. RAID., the voices gibbered through his mind. Proof, he muttered to himself, *you can’t believe this of someone without proof.* Programme initiated by hurried hands, the computer began spewing out its indictment. All the changes Avon had overseen, all the alterations he had made, or had ordered, all of them, every last one of them, doctored, the benefits to Deltas removed with surgical precision, none of Blake’s promises fulfilled. *Rather like me and that moment of truth when first I saw him again...* And there it was, the recommencement of ‘live donor volunteer programmes’, starting yesterday, the death knell blinking at him in glowing blue and black, bruising evidence of the on-going iniquities. Nothing, not a blessed thing had changed, not for the Deltas anyway. It would still be as miserable as before, as it had been in the eternity when Avon had lived there. As the time that Vila had lived there since the Revolution. *Since I let him walk out of my life, without so much as a farewell. Despite the giving of my word... If Blake has treated me shallowly, then it is, probably, no better than I deserve.* He checked file after file, all of them carrying the notation, “action delayed until resources available”. *In other words, let them wallow in the muck, for they’ve never known any better, for heaven forbid that an Alpha or a Beta should have to tighten his belt a notch so that Delta children have enough to eat...* And again, the memory of the Raids chilled him, taking him back to the fear and the impotent fury and the stench of the cowering mass. Vila’s family. *His family, should you choose to look at it that way. The children he had taught, the wifies he had laughed with, perfecting his Delta accent. The ire began then, volcanic, a legitimate focus for the anger spawned of his illegitimate love and the bitter fury of what was being done, once more, in the name of Class. This then, would be his weapon against Blake. This, then, would be his vengeance for Blake not loving him...* He began to close his console down, hurrying in his haste to confront Blake with this débâcle of a Freedom revolution. The irony of it made him smile, else he’d find treacherous tears threatening him. *Just think, Vila is in love with me; and I, fool that I am, am in love with Blake. Who is in love with nothing so mundane as a mere mortal. HIS great love is the masses,, his own masses, in their entirety, on their knees at his feet. Hardly surprising that one man can’t even begin to compete with so heady a feeling. After all, how could mere love ever compete with absolute power and the absolute corruption it brings?* The

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last fail-safe was running now, and he sat there, so impatient, anxious to get at Blake and get on with it, a twisted echo of that day when he had sat here, chafing to get at Blake before, but for such a different reason. And one no less self-destructive. And then the lights dimmed, faded, came back. The computer spluttered, chiming and flickering gibberish at him. The door slid halfway open, then groaned to a halt. Air whispered softly to a close, leaving terrifying silence hemming him in. He recognised the plans he had authored in a time of desperation, remembered every move and the order in which it should happen, remembered the injustice that had helped fuel those plans. Deltas, tired of it all, ready to force the high-ups to listen. As the lights went out, suffocating him in darkness and the echoing screams of the trapped Alphas, he grinned, wolfshhead in the dark.

Vila, he thought, viciously proud of his rebellious protégé, who was wreaking revenge on a recalcitrant lover and a handful of empty promises as Avon had planned to unleash himself on Blake, *it always seems to come back to Vila...*

Through the corridors that were finally darker and grimmer than the Delta Warrens, Avon made his way to the hub of Blake’s HQ, knowing full well that this is where the greatest chaos would reign, and that there would be where he could be of most use, for what he wanted to do: disavow Blake, not help him. Not to mention that this was where he would be able to see Blake’s face, when Avon was the one to tell him why the lights were out and why the power was down, why the circulation was off, why the lifts didn’t work, why the food processors were pleading starvation and the taps, drought. Implications be damned—he was going to enjoy this.

There was, of course, unrestrained, total pandemonium, with Alphas running around, some of them literally in circles, going from one computer to another, trying desperately to get them back on line. The control room reminded Avon of a poem he had once loved enough to memorise: Dante’s Inferno. For this was hell, for the uncomprehending, oh-so-educated Alpha, all his toys broken and all his knowledge useless. Emergency lamps glimmered in pockets of light, doing nothing to dispel the gloom, the miasma that was beginning to settle with olfactory heaviness over the entire proceedings. Avon lounged by the doorway, until the whirlwind that was Blake surrounded by gesticulating advisers came within hailing distance.

“...want them on-line immediately. We have the emergency power grid, lock us in on that. And establish communications with the other levels, and use your feet to run you there if you have to. Drake,” this was the baboon, today in something that looked melon-ish in the faded light, “I want you to establish some kind of calm with the general population. Tell them that everything is under control, that this is purely temporary and nothing to be

concerned about, you know the kind of thing.”

“Yes, Drake,” Avon drolled from his post leaning beside the door, gracefully standing away from the doorjamb, “just feed them the usual dietetic pabulum. Lie, in other words. After all, we wouldn’t want to break a perfectly bad habit, now would we?”

Blake rounded on him, looking for all the world as if he had seen his very own, personal messiah. “Avon! Thank goodness you’re here. Look, man, I need you to do something with these computers, the damned things simply will not come on line to run everything...”

“That, my dear Blake,” he said, thoroughly enjoying every second of this, allowing his own hurt and disappointments to transmute into supercilious anger, all of it fanned by the gross unfairness of the Alpha policy for the Deltas, “would be a waste of my time. You see, the *computers* aren’t running a damned thing right now. The Deltas are. And the only thing *you* should be running, Blake, is scared. I,” he said, voice hard and blunt as a runaway train, “know exactly what is going on, and what *you* and your little clique of pampered pets have been doing. Or perhaps I should say, I know what you’ve *not* been doing. What about your promises to the Deltas, hmm? Enough food, you said. Enough water, you said. Enough medicine, you said. All those promises, as empty as your bloody mind. You’ve given them nothing but false hope and that is cruel, Blake, viciously and unnecessarily cruel. And now, if everything is going according to schedule, you will have armed and irate Deltas pouring in through every access corridor and every service lift on the Upper levels, their broods following behind for their share of Alpha wealth. Just think of it, Blake, an entire Class of furious, dangerous *dirty* Deltas after *your* blood. Considering the way you’ve bled them dry, rather appropriate, don’t you think?”

Blake’s glower promised nothing but retribution for Avon, but later, as always when it came to him and Avon, after his beloved Cause had been satisfied. “Where are they coming through, Avon?” he asked, the rumble of anger in his voice causing uneasy glances all round. All, of course, excepting Avon, who had always thrilled to see Blake in a temper.

“As I said, they will coming in through every single access hatch there is, most of which the Alpha levels don’t know about, because it’s always someone else who takes care of the dirty work, such as maintenance. You,” he smiled a despot’s smile, including every single one of the Alphas listening to him with such sharpness, “don’t stand a chance. They are well-armed, well-organised and hungry. So if I were you, I wouldn’t waste my time right now either fighting them or looking for them. Really, Blake, don’t worry, you’ll find them.” He turned and strolled through the door, one last, personal barb cloaked as a professional dagger aimed directly at Blake’s weak spot. “They’ll be looking for *you*, you see. Although I’m

sure once they do, they’ll wonder why they bothered.”

And with that, he was gone, swallowed up by the anonymous darkness, the proof of Blake’s trust in his intellect echoing down the hall behind him. “Evacuate and regroup,” he heard and then he was out of earshot, making his way towards the adit he knew Vila would be using. The adit he had planned on using himself, all that time ago. It was time, perhaps, to see if he could salvage mere love, now that he was beginning to realise its worth. Half a loaf, after all, truly is better than starving to death at the hands of a man who values appearances over substance, who valued distance, over closeness. Who valued the same things that had held such lucre for Avon, before almost a year amongst the Deltas had taught him otherwise.

Abruptly, blinding him, the lights came on full force, a ragged cheer stumbling after them in welcome. Sound came back, on all those subliminal little noises that natives never notice, unless something is out of kilter with them, warning of something gone wrong. And there was an imbalance here, now, with the lights and the air and the whirr of technology all singing a happy madrigal together. Stock still, amidst all the haste of people scurrying around him, Avon stood, head cocked, listening very carefully indeed, to the subtle nuances of a lifetime’s Dome dwelling. Yes, there was a difference, an almost visceral swell of sound, a rambunctiousness that was beginning to flow around him, growing louder, until even the muffled Alphas could hear it. Avon smiled, slouching a little, just a fraction, as the horde that had adopted him came running. First, he knew, would be the fighters, the Jaks and Sylvies and Decs and Meris of the Deltas, mowing down Alphas with the same efficient disregard as they got rid of bugs. Although, were they to follow the plan exactly, they would simply be stunning the Alphas, rounding them up, using threat, not enemy-unifying slaughter, to tip the scales. After all, they wanted real victory. They didn’t want to *destroy* the Alpha luxury levels. They wanted to *live* there. Avon thought of his mother. And smiled.

Almost jaunty, he wound his way to the adit, only to find that it had already been cleared, someone he didn’t know guarding a herd of Alphas in the corner.

“Oi! You!” the unshaven spectacle called, his mate levelling her weapon. “Ge’ over ’ere, you. Wiv the others, c’mon, c’mon, move it, move it!”

“Nah,” Avon said, slipping into the Delta with conscious thought, not the easy slide of returning Alpha-ness, but perfect at it nonetheless, “wot’d I want ter do a thing like tha’ for then, eh? You don’ know me, duz yer? I’m Avon Restal.”

The Deltas looked at him, then at each other, the woman nodding at the man, then speaking. “Yeh, recognise yer now I do, didn’t at first, no’ wiv yer fancy clothes an’ everythin’. I’m Wilma Fee an’ this is me wifey, Vic. We’re wiv the Dockerty lot. You lookin’ fer Vila?”

“Yeh, yer seen ’im?”

“Whiles ago. Wen’ off ter take care o’ some high muckety-muck, some bloke called Blake, I think ’e was.”

“Yeh,” Avon agreed, “’e would be, wouldn’t ’e?”

“Oi, Avon,” the voice called after him, so he turned to listen. “Lissen, we all appreciate the way yer was willin’ ter stay up ’ere, away from yer hubby, jest ter ge’ us inside info, ter make sure them Alphas o’ yours was doin’ wot they ought ter be doin’. Made a difference, it did, knowin’ there was summun up ’ere, watchin’ out fer us.”

So that was the excuse he came up with. Certainly saved my bacon as far as the Family are concerned, he thought, not even noticing that the family he referred to had nothing whatsoever to do with the elegant good-breeding to which he had been born. *No doubt, though, he shall have an entirely different approach the instant he gets me alone.* And it struck him then, that there was no image, this time, of being alone with one of his lovers—that particular thought boggling his brain, to see himself as a man with not one, but *two* homosexual lovers, even if one of them refused to concede as much—engendered not sexual heat hot enough to fry his brain, but the resumption of responsibilities, the resumption of commitment. He remembered his most recent sight of Blake, eyes all distant, focussed on his Cause and his power and not a thought spared for Avon. He thought of Blake, at those damned dinners they had to attend, each of them with a woman on his arm, although Avon at least was honest to Cally, enjoying her company and her ever more acerbic wit. He thought of sneaking through deserted corridors, dodging the law patrols, creeping like a thief in the night from one bed to another, hiding from his peers, hiding from his family, hiding from himself. And he thought of being hugged with open exuberance, of living openly with a man, of being able to come home at night to a warm body that waited for him with an even warmer heart. Being *in* love then, had proved just as stupid a thing to do as he had feared. But perhaps, simply loving, comfortable, old-slipper loving, that could be bearable. Perhaps the fire-works belonged as an occasional display, but simple loving could be a way of life. Perhaps. If he had the courage to do it. If he could bear to live as a Delta again, up here, amongst his Alphas...

With Blake ‘evacuating and regrouping’, taking Avon’s advice, for once, now that it suited Avon not at all, Vila would have no one to fight, for Blake would take his upper strata of leadership with him. With one notable exception, that is. *He* was going home, to the place he knew Vila would eventually come. He would do what he had once found so terribly difficult, with the carrots of fireworks and freedom dangling so temptingly before him. He would go home and wait. For Vila, now that he had tasted those forbidden fruits and found them sawdust between his teeth. No, he was no fool to repeat the mistakes of the past endlessly. He would learn from these

bitter mistakes. He *would* go home, to wait, for Vila. *Yes, it does always seem to come back to him.* And this time, there was no fear there, no emasculation. Just Vila, comfortable, warm Vila. Who, love being purportedly blind, might be willing to overlook a certain little infidelity...

For the first time in his memory, Thatcher didn’t open the door, even though it wasn’t his day off. Puzzled, Avon let himself in, crossing the foyer, which is when the noise hit him. That was Jak’s youngest, for only Lin could screech quite like that, surely. There couldn’t be two of her in this world, although the decibel level implied that perhaps there were actually six or seven of her. With great trepidation, honestly unwilling to believe his ears, he crept towards the parlour door. There was one minor aspect that he had conveniently forgotten about, when thinking of coming home to Vila: the entire bloody family would come home with him, too. And it sounded dreadfully as if most of them hadn’t waited for the all clear and had descended, en masse at that, into the Avon-Waylz family parlour. He sagged against the wall, remembering words spoken so long ago he had managed to completely forget them. *An’ share wiv ’im wot we’ve got.* Old Restal’s words, and their implications, thudded into his mind. *Share and share alike. And now, that means the Avon-Waylz family home is about to be shared with the other half of my family. Which explains why ‘may you live in interesting times’ is a curse. And I think my own personal curse has just moved in: All of them...*

He peeked round the door, more cautious than when facing a medley of mutoids. His mother was there. Both of them, if you counted his Affirmation. And there were children, everywhere, every single last one of them fingering every single last item in the room. Including the silkiness of his mother’s stockings... Avon groaned, recognising little Dev, whose real name no-one ever remembered. Dev, short for ‘deviant’, their 16 year old retarded cousin who could pass for 10 and never let anything animate get away without him making a pass at he, she it or them. And he had that look on his face. Stalking Geoff. Buttoned-down, strait-laced Geoff, who would never know what had hit him. Avon closed his eyes, seriously considering that, as discretion is the better part of valour, this might be a truly propitious moment to run away from home, his age be damned. Then he heard Vera...

“Oooh, yeh, I’m jest tickled fuckin’ pink, ter finally meet yer, no’ tha’ Avon ever said much abou’ the rest o’ ’is family ter us, secretive little sod, bu’ I don’ mind tellin’ yer,” she was saying, in that peculiar, high-pitched squeal that only Deltas seemed able—or willing—to master, one big palm popping out, cack-handed punctuation marks, to punch Lady Waylz on the upper arm with every phrase, “’e’s a lovely boy, tha’ Avon o’ yers. Lovely, lovely lad. An’ such a catch for my Vila, never thought my boy’ud ever bring ’ome a lovely fish like your

Avon. Done a grand job wiv 'im, yer 'ave, hen, grand job." She folded her arms, resting her huge, slumping breasts on them, pushing them upwards in her enthusiasm. "An' it's sech a pleasure, meetin' yer is, meetin' the wifey wot's responsible fer our Avon bein' sech a lovely boy." She didn't seem to notice Avon's mother absolutely flabbergasted expression. Nor the fact that the Alpha woman's jaw seemed dislocated, until she closed it with a snap, remembering her breeding, covering her shock with a thick patina of blank outrage. Avon knew that look, remembered it from that telling (had he been willing to listen to himself) episode with his best friend from school. There certainly was trouble brewing. And for once, his money wasn't on his mother... He cringed in anticipation, cursing his mother's phenomenal gift for languages. It was typical, so bloody typical that she, of all people, would understand Delta...

"Oooh, yes," Vera was going on, unabated, "we're so proud o' our Avon, oh, I 'ope yer don't mind us callin' 'im *our* Avon, jest tha' 'e's so much one o' us, now, wot wiv 'im an' Vila Affirmed together. No' tha' you fancy Alphas call i' Affirmed, does yer though, ? Married, is wot you lot call i', if I don't misremember..."

Avon groaned out loud then, the Outer Rim planets beckoning wildly.

His mother looked as if a fit of the vapours was rapidly becoming her only option. It was written all over her face: *My son, my flesh and blood, married, to a DELTA? Come and meet my son the poof, and his Delta husband...* What very little colour she had, drained from her face, only to flush back as a snotty-nosed 3 year old investigated what fancy Alpha ladies with funny stuff covering their legs wore for knickers.

"Gerroff, you!" Vera yelled, grabbing the tot by the ear, dragging it—Avon couldn't remember which one of the brood it was, and Vera didn't look too certain herself—off and away, protecting the other woman's dignity and privacy, only to destroy it by brushing down her skirt for her. "Tst, tst, can't take the little brats anywhere, can yer? Our Avon much bovver when he was just an ankle-biter then, was 'e? Ooh, but 'ere I am, talkin' the 'ind leg off a donkey," which metaphor gained her the unbelievable: an increase in the look of outrage on Lady Waylz' face, "an' me no' even askin' yer if yer the one wot brung 'im up, or if yer mate over there is yer wifey."

And it was only then that Avon noticed his father. His chalk-white, terrified father, pinned to the chair by at least four children, although it was hard to tell, with so many limbs squirming and jumping so much. He gave up on his father, and went back to his mother. She, after all, was the one who would kill him for this. Father would, of course, simply retreat into icy snubbing, but Mother...Mother dearest would ladle into him with the pointed comments and tears. As she looked like she might be about to do with Vera...

"Who do you think you are, barging in here like this, bringing these, these filthy...things with you? Just who do you think you are?"

"Your sister-in-law," Vera said, going very quiet, leaning in, her waterwing breasts daring to press against the politely discreet swelling at Lady Waylz' chest, "your sister-in-law, that's who I am. An' I don't know 'ow yer works it up 'ere, bu' where I come from, family shares everything wot it's go'. An' yer've go' more'n enough up 'ere ter feed every last mouth we've go', an' yer've probably go' the medicine we need fer Jess' little'un. We're family, you an' me, kith an' kin, an' tha' means I'll gi'e yer a 'elpin' 'and when yer needs it, an' yer'll lend the same 'and ter me."

"Sister-in-law? Oh, I doubt that. Marriage between perverts isn't recognised and..."

"Wot're you callin' my sons, eh, you old cow? Wot are you callin' me sons then? They're good lads, they are, even if our Avon can be a bi' o' a toffee-nosed git sometimes, 'e's a good lad at 'eart. An' I'll not 'ave yer callin' them names, not 'less they done summat wot makes 'em deserve it. An' anyway, d'yer 'onestly think my Vila would be stupid enough ter marry a pervert? Nah, our Vila likes 'is sex nice an' straight, 'e does." Insults instantly forgiven and forgotten, as was her way, she winked at the horrified Lady Waylz, conspiratorial, nudging her, "They really go a' it, don't they? Fair gets me blood goin' 'earin' them fuckin' away at each ovver, really givin' it lalledy, the poor bed creakin' an' groanin' like our old bones when we ge' a bit o' the old 'ow's yer father. Lovely, innit, though, 'earin' them goin' at. Make a terrible racket, though, don't they? No 'ope of anyone gettin' any rest until our Avon's 'ad 'is, is there?"

At that point, Avon wanted the ground to open up and swallow him. Unfortunately, the only thing that opened was Vera's mouth to allow her to swallow her other foot and then chew vigorously.

"Ooh, yeh," she said, all misty-eyed reminiscence, "I remember the night they 'ad ter stay at my 'ouse, cos two of Jak's kids 'ad the pox an' we 'ad ter keep 'em separated like—an' innit terrible when the kids get sick, hen, jest awful, all that puke an' shite all over the place, bu' well, we're mothers, 'ave ter love 'em even then, don't we—bu' anyway, was lovely tha' night, wiv our Avon an' our Vila sleepin' in our 'ouse, not that they did much sleepin', o' course," she snickered, nudging Lady Waylz once more, causing that redoubtable Dame to check to see just how dirty her blouse was getting, "them 'uffin' an' puffin', like that. Sneaked a peak, I did," she whispered, leaning in close, her breath almost making Avon's mother faint, "an' there they were, no' a stitch on, yer Avon wiv his cock shoved up our Vila's arse. Lovely sight," she sighed, "lovely sight. Got ever such a nice bum, our Avon 'as. You don't mind me callin' 'im 'our' Avon, does yer?" And this time she actually waited for an answer.

“Not at all,” Lady Waylz replied, drawing herself up, back stiff as a board, attitude just as rigid, hands busy smoothing her real linen skirt from where grubby hands had left their marks. “In fact, going by what you’ve been telling me, you just might be welcome to him. Although I seriously doubt that any son of mine could possibly live as a Delta, and certainly not to the point of *I marrying one*.” Anything else she was going to say was shattered by the sound of an ornament meeting the floor loudly. A Dresden figurine on a real-wood floor. A *genuine*, pre-Atomic Dresden figurine. And one of the little animals had been pawing it...

“Dec! You pick tha’ up, yer mangy little bugger. Wotcher think yer doin’, playin’ wiv wot’s the grown-up’s, eh? Ge’ over ’ere, so’s I can give yer a thump.” But then April was climbing up on the antique chair to reach the pretty, bright carriage clock with its spinning brass balls and that little blond boy, the one whose nose ran as perpetually as he did, was investigating one of the funny pictures. With a pen in his hand... Avon stepped in, before chaos could become entrenched even more heartily than it already was.

“April! Yeh, you,” he bellowed, “gerroff. An’ Dec, go on, yer ’eard yer gran, pick the fuckin’ thing up an’ keep yer bleedin’ ’ands off. An’ tha’ goes fer the lot o’ yers, d’yer ’ear me? Better fuckin’ behave yersel’s in ’ere, or yer’ll ’ave me ter answer to. This is *my* ’ouse yer in now, an’ I make the rules, so yer jest watch yerselves.” He made a dive across the room where Dev was getting rather too friendly with Lord Avon. “I said,” he yelled, shaking the retarded teen by the collar, his father agape with shock at the sight of what he *had* thought was his younger son, “keep yer fuckin’ ’ands OFF.”

And then there was silence. Profound and utter silence. With Avon, Alpha-élite Avon, standing in the middle of the room, the echoes of his foul-mouthed

Deltaism still ringing in everyone’s ears, still with a teenager dangling from one clenched hand. “Ah,” he said, not knowing where to begin, “yes, well...”

“Kerr?” his mother asked, obviously completely taken aback. After all, if her son were capable of speaking like that, then perhaps he was capable of ‘having his cock shoved up our Vila’s arse’. *Meet my son the poof and his Delta husband...* She was, quite simply, going to become utterly hysterical. It was, under the circumstances, the only suitable thing to do...

“Mother, I really can explain everything, it’s honestly not quite as dreadful as it all seems at present...” Avon lied, watching warily as his mother turned all sorts of interesting shades, none of it funny, not now, not with everyone staring at him and both his families just looking at him, his Alpha family because of his Deltaness, his Delta because of his alienating Alpha-ness that they had never actually seen before, not in all its glory, in a room of elegance overlaid with their commonness. *It can’t get any worse than this*, he thought.

And of course, with such an invitation, Fate just had to prove him wrong. Blake walked in. So, unfortunately, did Vila. The sight of them brought it all back with a vengeance, all the tangles and the pain and the agony of it ripping through Avon again with fresh force, joining the new snarl of his two families facing off for a battle royal. And they, the man he loved and the man with whom he was in love, despite his better judgement, looked ready to kill, the only question being *whom* they were going to murder. But Avon, he realised with depression roosting heavily on his shoulder, seemed a very likely candidate for both of them.

Oh, fuck, he thought, mixing his Delta language with his Alpha speech, dropping Dev and drawing himself up tall and proud to face the fray, *it always has to come back to both of them, doesn’t it...*