

OBLAQUE

IN VENERY VERITAS

ISSUE NUMBER FIVE IN THE OBLAQUE SERIES
A *BLAKE'S 7* ADULT FANZINE

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now, here, throw him across the table, rip those trousers from him, plunge his burning cock into the tempering darkness of Avon's body. The hunger frightened him, reminding him of the memories—the realities? ohgodplease, please let it all be a lie, please don't make it true, he couldn't have done those awful things to the children, he couldn't, couldn't, couldn't—

A shaken gasp, and he was sitting on the bunk, hands clasped tight together, trembling for all his strength, shaking with fear. He threw the living horror out of his mind, telling himself over and over again—think! Just think clearly, clearly, in a straight line, don't let yourself wander like this, take a deep breath, calm, calm down, think clearly, don't let the bastards win—and then he raised his eyes. There was no surprise in him, when he found Avon staring at him, only the serenity of the inevitability of Fate settling into place.

Oh, yes, he was going to have Avon, was going to lay his hands as gently upon him as he was the Universe, guiding him from this morass of—self-inflicted?—misery, getting the dictator off his back, making him soar with freedom again, right there, at Blake's side. He smiled, slowly, in no rush now that it was all so obviously clear, all so obviously mapped out. All that remained to be fixed were the details, to be carved out with fine-art skill, plotting every step on the path that Avon would tread. There would be no ham-fisted, cack-handed approaches to Avon, no. Delicacy was needed here, delicacy and sensitivity, he thought to himself, watching Avon watching him. But not, he decided, soppieness, our Avon would see that as weakness, wouldn't you, Kerr? What was she like? he wondered, the woman who left you drifting like this? Or was it a man? D'you like men, Kerr? D'you like the feel of muscle under your hands and the feel of a man on top of you? And how do you like it, my beautiful Kerr? I can't picture you playing catamite, although you must certainly have looked the part just a few years ago. Can't imagine you reclining like a bloody hot-house flower, waiting for your man. Too guarded by half, that's you. You'd need an equal, wouldn't you? In fact, you'd need someone more than your match, wouldn't

you, Kerr?

He laughed out loud, convincing another couple of hapless criminals that they really were locked up with a raving loony. But Blake wasn't insane, far from it. He took a deep breath, feeling it fill his lungs, hitting his blood, invigorating him. In the time since his—he found a word for it, liking the poetic, metaphysical hue of it—re-awakening, it had all been intellect and fire, burning bright and strong, but consuming him. There had been nothing for it to feed on, save his Self and the core of what he thought he had once been, before the Federation had turned him into a jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing.

But it was time and enough now, for him to break this silence he had with Avon. He asked, and Avon answered.

"I relied on other people," he said to Blake who fell on it hungrily, hearing a wealth of meaning and pain behind those words. Relied on? he thought, not trusted? Do you ever trust, my Avon? Have you ever known that luxury, that delight?

"Why all the questions, or is it merely a thirst for knowledge?"

Oh, how you look at me, Avon. You're drawn to me, aren't you? You know instinctively that you can trust me, that I can be the one to set you free.

"Not exactly," Blake said, taking great care not to scare Avon off by any excessive display or by a show of his hunger. "Having defined the problem," and I know your problems, Avon, "the first step is the acquisition of data," and I shall know all your secrets, all the things that keep you enslaved. "You should know that." And you will know a lot more besides. I'll show you, Avon, how to love and how to be free.

But Avon was looking at him with everything but trust and affection and devotion. "Define the problem."

Oh, I already have, Avon. I have even defined the solution. "How to avoid spending the rest of our lives on Cygnus Alpha." Or the rest of our lives trapped in lifeless, loveless servitude. There was more after that, none of it really remembered, victim of the short-term memory damage caused by the unholy alliance of mindwipe and remembering, with



prison medicine thrown in for good measure.

But he would never forget watching every step Avon took as that man walked—no, stalked—from the room. Now, he thought, a seraphic smile on his face, a comfortable, welcome heat curling in his groin, the future unfolding before him with something akin to a rosy glow, now I've got someone to live for. Amo, ergo sum. And I'm going to teach you that, Kerr. I'm going to teach you how to love...

AVON, PACING THE SAME FEW METRES OF CORRIDOR THAT HE HAD BEEN PACING FOR THE PAST HOUR, WOULD HAVE BEEN LESS THAN BEST PLEASED, HAD HE KNOWN OF BLAKE'S INTENTIONS. Irritated beyond endurance by the mindless shufflings of the underlings he had been shipped with, offended by the years of unwash that clung to some of them, despite the ship's sanitary tyranny, he escaped, finally, into one of the uncomfortable seats that the others all avoided like the plague. Attendant memories of misery at watching Earth diminish behind him bothered Avon not one whit. Why should they, after all? All that mattered to him was dead, tortured and tormented and—

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He took a deep breath, looking down at his clenched hands, forcing himself to lace his fingers together in a façade of perfectly relaxed calm, thinking fiercely to himself to get a grip, to just think clearly... But he couldn't let it go. To let it go was to betray her, to abandon her once more. And once had been more than enough. Far more than enough, and the sadness washed through him again, sucking out all his strength, eroding all his foundations, the hissing sigh all that remained.

He still, sometimes—oh, all right, he told his nagging conscience, every day, every single blasted day—hoped that the Federation investigators had been lying to him, had tricked him into believing she was dead. There were times when it seemed so blatantly obvious that that was what they had done. After all, it had become apparent, rather quickly, that he was not about to tell them how he had managed to infiltrate the banking system like that. Nothing had worked, but they had softened him up, how they had softened him up. His body and mind still bore the bites of that. How better, then, to get the information

from him than to break his spirit? Tell him Anna was dead. Tell him Anna had died because of him. Tell him that it was Anna who had betrayed him, confessing to her captors everything she knew. Tell him that she had bled for him, screamed for him, died for him...

It just went to prove how little they had learned about him. As if he would give them their little details if Anna had died to keep all that secret! What fools they were, if they had truly believed that Anna's death would make him confess all. As if he'd betray her a second time... But it had broken him, albeit briefly—and it would be brief, he thought with a sudden flare of fierce fire, it would be brief!—to hear that she had died, and how she had died, and what she had said and screamed before she died... No, he thought with spurious calm, don't think about the last moments—hours? days? weeks? his mind whispered with sibilant fear. You were injured, ill, cut off from day-time and night-time, no idea of how long they had you for before they told you about Anna, no idea how long after that that you finally found out the date when they told you about the trial. It was all just one long coil of horror for you and they had you for months before they set you before the Arbiter so how long did they have Anna, how long did they make her suffer, how long did it take her to die for me?—don't think about it, don't think about it, don't think about it...

He took the flimsy out of his pocket, that shred of plastic one of the few things he'd been able to get back after...after the arrest. His thief had appropriated it for him, of course. Who else would have been able to get hold of it? And who else, he thought with a burst of fury, would have been clever enough to get it and then stupid enough to get caught? Typical bloody Vila. Half a loaf was better than none, the old adage said. Hardly true when your half of the loaf was an exit visa. Without ID papers to go with it... How Vila had managed to get the flimsy past the security checks Avon preferred not to know, but the idiot savant had managed, walking up to an unsuspecting Avon in the holding cell, chirrupping, 'fancy meeting you here!' and waving the bloody flimsy at him. How had the fool managed it? To get an exit visa,

the pair of 'em. An' 'ere's me sittin' 'ere like a china bloody ornament, an' neiver one of 'em's go' the sense ter ask me wot ter do. I mean ter say, oo's the one wot's been in prison before? An' more times than they've 'ad 'ot dinners. He fed his aggravation, nurturing his sense of outrage that it might feed him long enough to get through yet another period of pain, yet another time of loss and loneliness. Behind his pleasant, ostentatiously harmless façade, he perused them as others would a book, knowing far more than the objects of his attention would ever want him to. No' that they'd care, would they? Don't give a toss, eiver one. Blake's too busy playin' at Robin Fuckin' 'Ood—another proper wanker if you was ter ask me, not tha' His Holiness an' His Highness would ever do tha'—an' Avon's too busy wallowin' in 'is own misery. Never thought 'e'd be one of 'em sorts wot jest lies there moanin' abou' 'ow unfair life is. 'Course, 'e'd be the first one ter deny 'e's doin' that, mind, but don't they always? Fuckin' prat. An' wot's 'e think 'e's doin', treatin' me like dirt on 'is shoe for, eh? Wasn't my fault, was it, tha' the fuckin' Seccies were after anyone wot so much as breathed wrong. Security Forces—biggest bastards tha' ever walked. Or crawled more like, knowin' the soddin' seccies. Can't stand 'em, not many as can, I s'pose, but they're fuckin' vicious when they ge' started. An' they always ge' started on the likes of me, don't they? If Avon wants ter contemplate things wot aren't fair, 'e oughter think about wot's 'appened ter me, an' for wot? For 'elpin' a hoity-toity Alpha wot won't even admit 'e knows me. Oh, I'll give 'im wot for, when I gets 'im on 'is own. I shall give 'im a proper piece of my mind, so I will an' all. 'E'll know all abou' it, when I'm finished wiv him, so 'e will. An' 'e'll be sorry for wot 'e's done ter me.

No' much chance o' a bit o' the old 'ow's yer father, though, no' wiv bloody Blake 'angin' around like a bit o' trade lookin' for a quick shag. 'E should be so fuckin' lucky. Avon's never been tha' simple in 'is life. Always all the games first. Yer've got ter prove ter 'im tha' 'e c'n trust you an' tha' you ain't gonner 'urt 'im. An' then yer've go' ter get 'im all ready an' rarin' ter go, afore 'e'll relax enough ter let yer

up 'im. Mind you, if Blake's willin' ter spread it fer Avon, it'll be all over bar the shoutin', won't it? A quick leg-over, Avon'll pop off an' then walk away. An' 'ow's poor Blake gonner cope wiv tha', eh?

Fuck, bu' they're sickenin', starin' at each ovver like lovesick mutoids, they are. Disgustin'. An' they both think they're gonner be top man, don't they? Upper class fuckin' twits. Somebody's always gotter end up on the receivin' end, don't they? An' that pair are gonner 'ave a very nasty shock comin' when they find tha' out, ain't they? Fuckin' perverts. Not as 'ow they likes fuckin' men—fond o' tha' meself, bu' it's this way they 'as of makin' it look like it's a fuckin' battle, no' a bit o' fun. An' tha's all wot it oughter be. Bit o' fun, nice bit o' rumpy, none o' this circlin' round like dogs in a pit-fight. But if it was... Know oo I'd put me money on.

Me. I'll be 'ere, jest waitin' fer when the fireworks is over an' Avon's ready fer a bit o' real life again, none o' this snotty love-affaire crap.

They'll kill each ovver, or one of 'em'll get the ovver one first. An' tha's Avon. Vicious bastard 'e c'n be, when 'e needs ter be. 'E's no artsy-fartsy Alpha-rebel type, not our Avon. Cold as glass, 'e is. 'Less you catch 'im when 'e's lonely an' all sad, the way 'e gets. Then...mush. Tha's all 'e is then. Big mushy 'eart an' 'e 'angs on ter yer all night an' tells yer 'ow good yer 'ands are an' 'ow good yer fucks 'im.

Like 'im best when 'e's like tha', no' bu' tha' 'e lets many sees 'im then. An' such a fuckin' idiot when 'e goes an' falls fer somebody. Look at tha' precious bleedin' Anna of 'is. Nothin' but a bi' of baggage she was. An' I'll bet good money after bad tha' she's livin' it up somewheres, Lady Muck, shaggin' 'er stony little 'eart out wiv the feller wot was supposed ter interrogate 'er. Oh, no, our Anna, our sweet fuckin' Anna wouldn't've ended up in no cells, not 'er. Might've spoiled 'er 'air-do an' we can't 'ave that, can we? Fancy bitch, tha's all she was an' good riddance ter bad rubbish. Glad ter see the back of 'er. Never did Avon no good, she didn't. He could remember, with the same brittle clarity that marred Anna's beauty, the very first time he'd met her. At

An' I love 'im, tha' counts fer somethin', right? Course it does. An' if it didn't, 'e'd never 'ave gone on at me like wot 'e did, moanin' an' complainin' at me till I learned 'ow not ter drop me aitches and then sound so terribly, terribly much as one truly ought, if one wishes to better oneself. Load of old codswallop, if yer ask me. 'Course, it's stood me in good stead, I s'pose—not many as is in 'ere, even, would know me now fer wot I started as. Sometimes ferget meself, ceptin' when I'm this fuckin' knackered. An' I am absolutely jiggered, no two ways abou' tha', is there? Always get out an' out lazy in me thinkin' when I'm tired. So c'mon, Vila me old pal, pull your socks up. Get yer mind out of yer arse—get your brain in gear, an' star' yerself ter thinkin'. Start thinking. Go on, lazy mind makes yer—you—careless. Think about it. Apply yerself. Those two are like two toms on 'eat, but neither one of them's stopped to think about wot's goin' to happen when they get down to the business of fucking. Fireworks, that's wot it'll be, an' not the kind they were after, either. Fuckin' hell, it's goin' to be a soddin' mess, when them two get that far. An' if we're all stuck together on Cygnus Alpha with 'em when the explosions start, I'll be the first one to go bury me head somewhere. But I'll be back, so I will. Avon's not the only one wot comes back. An' when all's said and done, the old bastard needs me.

But his bones were aching from the side-effects of the drugs in the food, and he sat down, in the pose of habitual laziness that got him out of so much work. He could see it all coming, could see where this liaison of Avon and Blake's was going to lead them. And he liked it not at all.

Bu' wot c'n I do about it? 'S not as if they're gonner listen ter me, is it? Nah, not them pair. Destroy each the other, if they're not careful. Pushin' and pullin' an' never listenin' ter wot the other 'as ter say... Disaster, tha's wot they are. As fer why Avon can't jest stick wiv me, wot understands an' loves 'im, I'll be buggedger if I know. Stupid, really, bu' 'e's always been like tha'. Always after wot 'e can't 'ave. Although 'e'll be able ter 'ave Blake, no fear about tha'. Bu' tha's jest like 'im, 'e eiver wants wot 'e can't 'ave, or 'e gets wot 'e shouldn't oughter

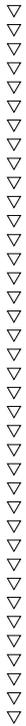
want. Restlessness crawled over him like lice and he moved, abruptly, an implosion of energy that brought him to his feet and half-way round the perimeter of the room before he was even aware of the need to move, to get away. Then, masochistically, in the manner of one who has to race to the scene of the accident, in the manner of one who goes over a nightmare again and again, he came back to where he could watch the two Alphas and their mating dance. An' they're still at it, the pair of them, talking backwards and forwards, as if they're foolin' anyone with their games. Only people they're making fools of is themselves. Each as bad as the other, thinking they're playing such fancy nancy games, and all they're doing is skirting each other to find out who gets to do the fuckin' and who gets to bend over and spread'em. Be interesting t'see if they get that far, mind. Be interesting to see if Avon'll let Blake fuck him. Don't see it meself. Not even Avon gets so besotted as to let someone like Blake 'ave that much power over him. But then, Avon loves being fucked, not but that he's ever going to admit as much. Still think tha's why he wouldn't marry that Sarah-fluff. Couldn't give it to him, not hard enough—so to speak. Needs a firm hand, does our Avon, and I wonder if you've realised that yet, Blake. Wonder if you've got the faintest, foggiest idea what you're lettin' yourself in for, if you're takin' on Avon. He's a handful, a proper handful and you have to know when to pull 'im to heel and when ter let him go. Fuck, but I'm tired. Need a sleep. All the drugs in the food, always does this to me. Need to sleep. Tha's all right. Them two won't be doin' nuffin yet. Not fer ages yet. He stumbled over to the bunk that he had claimed so wisely the second they had, en masse, set foot on the transport. He did a quick check of his hidden pockets, the ones that made him look permanently bedraggled, and all his little treasures were there. No matter what happened, he'd be all right. Still had his basic tools of the trade, still had marketable skills.

And he didn't give a fuck what Blake thought, or what Avon thought either, for that matter.

He still had Avon.



I N VITRO



An artificial environment or literally, 'in glass.' Glass House and Heatstroke provide views of sexual desire through the artificiality of their settings. Glass House is a bleak and despairing look at captivity, the circumstances unfolding bit by bit. Heatstroke is a single scenes in a single room, its initial dreamy surrealism suddenly shifting in tone.

GLASS HOUSE

K. THOMAS & D. D. M.

AN INTELLIGENT MAN CAN ADAPT.

Avon had said that to Blake once, a long time ago. But in the Glass House—as Avon had learned—being civilised was not a survival characteristic.

Tonight he'd been assigned Suite Seven. He'd only been here one time before, but the walls draped in red velvet and the metallic black furnishings were etched in his memory. The ebon-and-scarlet decor made the place look like a damned bordello. Which of course it was.

Behind him, the door swung closed and locked.

The ever-present stink of sandalwood emanated from a cast-iron incense burner in one corner, and a polished marble dais dominated the room. It was waist high, a perfect jet-black rectangle about two meters square. A puddle of glittery cloth was lying on top of it.

Barefoot, Avon padded forward through plush sable black carpet. His owners usually left him some sort of costume, and he preferred to cover his nakedness as long as he could. Remembrance of months of futile struggle

and failed resistance kept his face impassive. Somebody would be watching him, and he didn't intend to let anyone witness his emotions.

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After hastily donning the sleeveless silver tunic and the black silk trousers he found underneath, he surreptitiously examined his immediate surroundings. On an ebony pedestal next to the dais sat the inevitable jar of lubricant salve. (It was also scented like sandalwood—obviously the Odor of the Day.)

Next to the jar stood a pair of fluted silver candlesticks with red candles in them. Avon could imagine a few unpleasant scenarios involving those candlesticks, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

He scratched at the near-constant itch on his wrist. The electronic slave-bracelet clamped around it could stimulate the nerves more inventively than any Federation interrogator could.

Only the barest amount of reddish light filtered through the opulent curtains, making it rather hard to see. He might as well light the candles.

As the hiss of the match sputtered and

went out, the door bolt shot back, followed by a slight electronic humming and the swish of drapery. Tonight's business had begun. What would it be this time? Pain, humiliation, bondage? It seldom turned out to be mere sex. Repressing a shudder, he made himself finish what he had started.

"Avon."

Recognising the voice, Avon felt his whole body go cold. He turned with deliberate, almost zombie-like calm and answered tonelessly, "So it's you this time, Blake."

The figure in the doorway gave a tiny nod and stepped into the room. The door slammed shut and locked again: they were alone together.

Blake wore a floppy-sleeved pirate's outfit—scarlet trousers and thonged vest, a heavy leather belt, knee-length black boots—no doubt unearthed from the vast wardrobe the mistress kept on hand for clients and slaves alike. Appropriate costume made the illusion so much more compelling.

Blake's face was as noncommittal as Avon's own. "Do you want it easy," he said in steady, a strong voice that echoed around the small room, "or do you want it rough?"

Avon shrugged. He knew what he was supposed to answer, but he couldn't. As if he really had a choice. "Do what you're going to do, Blake. I just want it over with."

"I can make it easy for you—you just have to cooperate," Blake replied earnestly. "It's my option."

Avon choked back a laugh. "Ever the noble hero. Do you imagine I care?"

"Rather more than you let on," Blake said and with the old customary briskness he pulled off his vest and shirt.

Avon watched in mounting fear; abruptly he turned his back to Blake. "What makes you think I want things to be easy?"

He felt Blake's arms slide around his waist. "Don't be difficult, Avon." Blake's hands slipped under the tunic, rubbing Avon's stomach. "You have to respond," he said under his breath, "that's part of it."

"I always do," Avon said bitterly.

Blake's hands were gentle on him, massaging up his chest. Now they stopped. "Have you been drugged?"

"No. They don't need to drug me any more."

Blake spun him round and held his face to inspect his eyes intently. After a moment he relaxed, thumbs circling lightly at the tender skin of Avon's temples. "I couldn't bear it, if they had drugged you."

"I don't see what difference it makes," Avon said, "to you. Just so long as I perform." The demon of perversity whispered in his ear. "At least I am old enough to understand what is expected of me."

Blake's eyes hardened. He seized Avon by the hair and kissed him roughly. Breathing fast and hard, he pushed Avon back onto the dais and began to fondle him through the tunic. The slip and slide of the satiny cloth against his chest was pleasurable; Avon shut his eyes and concentrated on the feeling, blocking the knowledge from his mind that this was another man, that it was Blake. His body knew the ritual. By now it reacted to any touch, any hands, snatching at the least of pleasures from whatever quarter they might be offered.

And Blake was more skillful than most, though his fingers seemed furtive, as if he were under the stern eye of a guilty conscience.

Avon opened his eyes when Blake kissed him again, soft and careful. "Undress," Blake said in an urgent undertone. He shifted enough so that Avon could sit up.

Avon stripped off his clothes and tossed them aside. He watched as Blake did the same. Blake's body was in a lot better shape than Avon's; it didn't show the marks and bruises of angry passion and contemptuous sensuality that Avon had been subjected to over and over. A sigh of relief escaped him as Blake discarded the belt.

He sensed Blake studying him but made no further effort to cover himself. What was the point? Blake moved closer and touched him again, tracing a series of newer scars along his belly.

He flinched when Blake explored the fading greenish bruise on his right shoulder. He forced himself to meet Blake's eyes, to confront the shock and pity he knew he would find, where once there had been respect and admiration.



Oh, yes, the strangers who came and went could hurt him, degrade his body in ways he hadn't known existed, but of course Blake, who knew him, would inflict the most subtle of tortures: kindness.

Mercifully, Blake closed his eyes. He shook his head, then opened his eyes again. "Let's get on with it, shall we?" He didn't wait for an answer, only slid a hand up Avon's thigh into the soft swelling of his crotch.

"Quick, aren't you?" Blake smiled the knowing little smile of complicity. His fingers curved around the shaft and he began to stroke.

"Am I?" Avon replied. He would not break the gaze, though what he seemed to see reflected in Blake's eyes made the blood burn his face with shame. Excuses rushed to his lips; remained unspoken. He wanted desperately to explain, to tell Blake how long and hard he had fought. No, it was no use saying anything at all, for in the end he had succumbed like every one else, hadn't he? He'd learnt to live with the self-loathing, but that Blake should see how far he had sunk tore the crust of apathy from his humiliation and left it fresh and raw and bleeding.

He lifted his chin in brittle defiance. "That's right, Blake, even I am no more than an animal."

"More, much more," Blake said in a near-whisper, "but not less." He bent his head and pressed his mouth to Avon's, licking at his lips until Avon gave in and let them part. Blake put an arm around him and drew him close, sank deeper into the kiss, while his other hand continued its slow caresses. Avon moaned and pushed himself hard against Blake's hand, his body responding of its own volition to the unaccustomed tenderness.

He tilted his head back as Blake's mouth pressed against his throat and put his hands on the slick surface of the dais, groping around behind him until he managed a balance, and leaned his weight onto his arms.

He felt Blake's breath on his face, then Blake kissed him again.

"Must you keep doing that," Avon said tiredly.

"Doing what?"

"Kissing is not necessary."

"I'll decide what's necessary," Blake said, but he left off anyway. He flexed his hand, then wrapped it tightly around Avon's erection. He placed his other hand beneath the first and started stroking him in earnest.

Avon closed his eyes and went with rising flood of sensation. It was so rare he felt any uncomplicated pleasure, anything remotely resembling normality and he wanted to drown in it. Blake was bringing him to the edge of climax—he held his breath...

He was losing the feeling, skidding away from the crest. Caresses were no longer enough.

Conditioned, you've been conditioned, his mind screamed, but it didn't matter. He opened his eyes.

"Blake. Hit me."

"No."

"Please."

"It's not necessary."

"Yes, it is."

Blake stared at him in horror, and he hated himself, but he was desperate to feel something, anything at all, that would plunge him over the edge.

"Do it."

Blake hit him, an open-handed slap across the face.

The clean, simple pain of the blow brought tears to his eyes. "Again."

Blake slapped him again, harder. The hot tingling aftermath on his cheeks coiled through his body, exciting him into madness. He thrust up once into Blake's tight-clenched hand and he was coming in great gouting spurts, racked with fiery profane delight, falling backward.

Blake caught him as he fell and bore him down against satiny stone and held him until the last tremor had passed, murmuring "I'm sorry," over and over.

The corrupt ecstasy faded as quickly as it had appeared, left him drained of all energy. Only a sickening revulsion at his weakness remained. He turned his head and saw the glitter of the crystal jar, reminder of worse to come.

"You know what happens next," Blake said, as if he'd overheard.

"Yes."

Blake gripped his shoulders and whispered, "I'm going to get you out of here."

"Of course you are."

Blake's weight was oppressive, pushing his shoulder blades cruelly against the unyielding surface of the dais, and it occurred to him that even for a rape, hard marble was not optimal. "Couldn't we use the floor?"

Blake complied and rolled him onto the floor, knocking the wind out of him. He waited, limp and unresistant as Blake prepared him.

He stared resolutely at the tuft of carpet, sinking his fingers in deep. Relax or you will really get hurt, an early adviser in the slave-quarters had told him. But then, everyone found a way to hurt him anyway. He never understood why they hadn't killed him in all those months of angry rebellion. It didn't make sense—it had never made sense. Even a brothel pandered to appetites other than sadism and humiliation.

Uncomprehending, Avon recalled the madam's cynical assessment. "But Avon, you suffer so beautifully."

When it was all over, he curled up into a little ball and shivered.

Blake drew nearer and tucked Avon next to his chest. Avon momentarily stiffened and refused to respond to the gesture—he was damned if he was going to show any feeling now the performance was finished.

But he felt so cold. The room was warm enough—it was his soul that was chilled. His dignity, his self-respect had shredded bit by bit, his ordinary human impulses twisted into parodies of themselves; what was the desire for comfort compared to those?

With a sigh, he leaned against Blake and allowed him to fling one arm over his shoulder. The arm with the slave bracelet that matched Avon's.

"Why, Blake? Why is all this happening to us?" Avon muttered in a barely audible tone. He hated the pathetic sound of his own voice. "You're an engineer—I'm a computer technician. Why didn't the Amagons sell us for that?"

"Because no one could have ever trusted our docility," Blake replied, eternally reasonable even in this terrible place. "Like it or

not, my friend, we're two of a kind. And one way or another, we are going to be free."

"I admire your optimism," Avon said. But Blake's immortal if naïve determination soaked through the layers of numbness and warmed him in spite of himself. Blake never changed, and he discovered there was as much comfort in that as in the reassuring bulk of Blake's body.

Blake squinted at the grandfather clock in the corner. "With any luck, we'll be dismissed for the night before the mess hall stops serving dinner."

"You're actually adjusting to the environment."

"No. But I do what I have to." Blake directed a cold and terrible stare at him. "And Avon—don't ever mention children to me again."

Avon froze. There were some questions he would never dare ask.

He shifted his head and saw the drapes were drawn back to reveal a transparent wall. Avon knew from painful experience that the wall could not be smashed—not by his own bleeding hands or metal chairs or even those damned candlesticks.

That wall gave Glass House its name. On the opposite side, tonight's patron was lounging on an overstuffed ottoman, squeezing a bonbon with pudgy beringed fingers. Her rich jewels and elaborate make-up couldn't conceal the vapidness of her flushed, excited expression. Immediately her gaze met Avon's, she quickly rearranged her clothing.

He marshalled the last of his reserves and eyed her in utter contempt.

But she smiled pleasantly, and leaned forward with an air of anticipation.

Defeated, Avon hid his face in Blake's shoulder. Even if he escaped one day, he would never be free again.

Blake's other arm went round him in a protective embrace, then Avon felt him go rigid. An instant later Blake sprang up and pounded his fists against the glass. The woman drew back, not in fear, or anger, but in impatience, and the curtains swept across the glass.

With a cry of pain, Blake grabbed at his wrist and squeezed his eyes shut. Punishment for any transgression was always swift and



inevitable. Blake relaxed again after a few seconds; clearly only a small reminder.

“That was pointless,” Avon observed.

“She closed the curtains, didn’t she?”

“For the moment.”

Blake came and sat down next to him. “I mean what I said, Avon. I’m going to get us out of here, no matter what. And the others, if I can find them.”

“Then what?”

“Go back to the revolution. What else?”

“What else indeed,” Avon said softly.

“Are you with me?” Blake said, less a question than a summons.

“What good would I be to you—now?”

“All the good in the world.” Blake took his hand and squeezed it. “What we’re made to do doesn’t change the way we feel. The way I feel, anyway.”

Avon stared at him, and felt the burden of

despair lift as he was enveloped by the waves of loyalty and warmth and resolve radiating from the other man. Perhaps for the first time, he trusted Blake completely. Nothing deflected Blake from a goal he’d set himself, no amount of degradation tarnished Blake’s spirit, and in that stubborn strength lay Avon’s only hope of salvation. “If you get me out of here, I give you my word I will support you in any endeavour you care to name,” he said passionately, keeping his voice low so as not to be overheard. “I will follow you anywhere.”

Blake smiled at that and raised his eyebrows in faint surprise. “Anywhere?”

“Anywhere.” Avon shuddered. “I can’t imagine any place worse than this.”

“Oh, I can.”

Avon bit at his cheek to suppress an upsurge of hysteria. Blake always had to have the last word. “Oh?”

“We could be on the other side of the glass.”

HEATSTROKE

GAEL X. ILE

IT SEEMED ABSURD THAT AVON—the quintessentially elegant Kerr Avon—should snore, but he did, albeit with delicacy and refinement, a display of the profundity of sleep, not the coarse abandonment of lesser mortals. He lay, asprawl and propped up on a pile of pillows, his only covering the darkness of hair that highlighted his body like kisses dropped with sweet profusion. The burnished light of the window followed the highways and by-ways of his body, drawing the eye to a curve here, a convexity of muscle there, the blush of summer’s heat where it lingered, there, and there, bringing a touch of rose to the alabaster skin. A glistening of sweat bejewelled his groin, the silver shimmering counterpoint to the darkness of curls and the pinkness of cock. It lay, drowsing lazily, in the hollow of Avon’s hip, that grooved

valley which led the mind and eye down to the very centre of his body, defining the line between the breadth of torso and the beauty of groin. Deep within his sleep, Avon shifted, the subtle breath of fantasy moving him, left leg turning slightly, cock hesitating a moment behind. The dampness of his body clutched at his cock, holding it still for a second, trapping the foreskin so that the pretty pink mouth of his cock peeped out for an instant to pout, coyly, invitingly, before another restless breath freed the skin to flow back, whisperingly, like a lover, to hood the velvet cockhead once more. A flare of lightning twinkled amidst the glowing blackness of the gloaming clouds, the brilliance illuminating Avon as the work of art he surely was. Then came the hollow-belly rumble of thunder and with it, an irritated tightening of Avon’s lips,



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as the outside crudity of reality nipped at the dancing heels of his dreaming. He shifted again, a delicate trickle of sweat drifting with the slow beauty of tears through the shower of chest hair until all that was left was a single glowing pearl, poised against the fluff of curl cradling the languid cock.

And Blake wanted to lick him. All of him, every inch, every atom, every cell. Wanted to eat him, devour him whole, consume him so completely that it would change the signature DNA to Blake's own name. He wanted to possess Avon until he could be sure his dark conscience could never leave him to struggle on alone with the burden of revolution and the corruption of power vamping seductively at him from the wings. He wanted Avon to be his, all his, with the mindless intensity of the infant.

The droplet of sweat shimmered with Avon's breathing, spilling over finally to be lost in the thicket of luxuriant hair, that secret place where Blake hungered to bury his face, to fill his lungs to overflowing with Avon's musk, to lose himself in the utterly masculine perfection of this man that he dared not even call friend. But he dared not. Not with Avon lying there so seductive in his vulnerable obliviousness. Not with Avon lying there in such utter perfection. Not with Avon lying there, a dream come true, for it was all fantasy, mere meanderings of a mind grown dizzy with lust. For if Blake were to touch, to lick, to kiss or devour, then Avon, no succubus he, would rise up to destroy Blake for his impertinence. Gods, gods, gods, why had he assumed that Avon would be his usual insomniac self? Why did the man have to pick tonight, all of nights, to sleep so soundly and so early? And with the door unbarred. Leaving Blake to stand there gaping, needing, needing so much he should never dare even dream of. There could be no simple passion between them, no easy moment of desire sated, once, to be re-lived when the notion took them. If Blake wanted to devour Avon, and he surely did, then Avon would want to devour Blake just as surely, just as completely, although the reasons would be different and myriad enough to fill a library of leather-bound, gilt-edged books.

Blake could hear himself breathing, the

sound louder than it had any right to be, no matter how raddled with lust he was. But he could hear himself, could hear the revelatory catch of his breath that skipped, fractionally, with even the slightest movements made by the limpid body in the bed. Avon twisted amidst the rumpled hillocks of bedsheets, the whiteness stark and dead against the soft paleness of his skin and the lustrous vitality of dark hair. A smile, very small, the faintest hint of pleasure, painted Avon's lips in the night-fall dimness and a pulse of carnal heat beat strongly, for a moment, in his cock, suffusing it with a translucent rose and bringing it to life. Blake felt his own cock stirring, filling, lengthening, blindly nuzzling on the smooth fabric of his underwear, seeking, searching, looking for the source of its pleasure. Blake stared at that source, the wellspring of all this turmoil that was eroding his will and his honour with equal ease. He wanted Avon, no surprise in that, Avon himself had commented upon it—publicly—often enough. There had been enough small revenges from Blake—'Go back to your position'—to carefully display that it was nothing more than lust. And looking at Avon, who could possibly blame him? The man exuded sexuality, dressed for it, made a public show of it all, dragging everyone around him in closer, closer, moths to the flame of his feral charm. So, then, just the same as the others, Blake stood there, imagining the same expression of lust on his face that he had seen covering Vila, and Jenna. Imagining the tolerantly amused desire that he had seen written so often and in such large letters upon Cally's face.

But it was different, and he knew it.

Not for him the safety of sexual heat. God, no, nothing so tame. Nothing so mild, nothing so reasonable. For him...

He closed his mind to it, as he always did, desperate to control the burgeoning arousal, flesh uncoiling, uncurling, hardening into a club to beat at his trousers, demanding freedom, demanding satisfaction, demanding...

Avon. Avon, lying there, all unawares, one hand thoughtlessly, slowly, fingers loose and sleepy, sighing down his chest to touch,

hadn't wanted it, then, he knew that much, but he couldn't quite find the same feeling of unity with the distant masses that he had had then. He had felt for them he knew that as surely as he knew his name, but the feeling was lost to him somewhere between disillusionment and failure. Yet he'd recapture it, he would. When he stood in Star One, when he stood with his hands on the control, he would feel the emotion that matched this intellectual certainty he had...he hoped.

But he wasn't wrong, was he, to want to destroy the Federation? And everyone knew that sometimes, to save the patient, you had to cut out the disease so that the rest of the body could live. That's all he was doing now, wasn't it? Nothing more. Just doing what was best for everyone. The voice in the back of his head was very, very small, the barest zephyr of sound to whisper words that he didn't want to hear, that told him of how much an inveigling pleasure it was to have command and control over the Universe. And how much that command and control was embodied in the man lying sleeping on the bed. If he could control Avon, if he could command Avon...

As went Avon, so went the Galaxy? Well, it would certainly appeal to Avon's sense of importance. But if it were true, that Blake tried to contain the Universe in Avon, if it were true that Blake used Avon as a kind of litmus test, what did that say about Blake?

Nothing that Blake wanted to hear. Not a single thing. Not a single word he wanted said, in his mind or in his hearing. He shushed his conscience, palming it off with reassuring pats and platitudes, telling it that he wasn't hunting Avon as a way of proving to himself that he was right about what he was doing in the larger scheme of things. Promised himself that he wasn't after Avon to prove that as he knew best about this one man, this representative of the human race, then he would surely know what was best for the rest of the human race. Promised himself that it really was love for Avon, just as it really was the purest humanitarian love that drove him to destroy Star One. It had to be done, after all. People had to be free. Free to make choices, free to live and love as they chose, not as dictated by the Federation and its puppets.

A sliver of sweat rained down his spine, making him shiver, refocussing him on where and when he was. He blinked, rapidly, clearing his vision and his mind, trying to re-establish his inner balance, something that seemed to be getting harder and harder, since that last bout of mind control the Federation had tried on him. Sometimes, if he didn't quite listen, if he pretended his mind was busy elsewhere, he could still hear that high-pitched tonal whistle, just there, on the outskirts of his mind. Calling to him, it was, all the time, he thought, but it was so hard to tell, so hard to sort it out from under the burden of responsibility he felt to get to Star One before Travis or Servalan did. He rubbed at his ear, trying to make the faint whine disappear, but it took actually noticing Avon again to do that. Gods, but the man was beautiful! Just look at him lying there, so naked and vulnerable and strong, muscles firming out his skin, milk-white skin in such glorious contrast to black hair. Here, in the storm-lit night, all of Avon looked either white or black, save for the blood-flushed rosiness of his cock.

Blake wanted that cock in his mouth with a sudden, fierce desperation that shocked him, making him stumble a step forward, toward the forbidden heaven that lay on the bed. He barked his shins on the chest at the bottom of the bed, a shimmer of dust rising from the intricate and lewd carvings, giving him even more ideas of what, precisely, he could do to Avon. Or have Avon do to him. Oh, gods, yes! his body screamed at him, cock rising so hard and hungry that he just had to touch himself, couldn't not, couldn't stop. As for walking out from here, walking away from Avon—easier for the stars to stop. He licked his lips, thinking about licking Avon's cock, tasting the salt of his own sweat, imagining the salt of Avon's cum. Trousers undone now, beginning their slow slide down his hips, slithering down his skin with a whisper so akin to skin on skin that he heard his own groan before he knew he was going to make it. His right hand was milking his cock, his left smoothing the arch of his own buttocks, wishing, wishing, that it was Avon he was touching, that it was Avon responding with such frantic desire to the touch of his hands.

warmness of Avon's mind. Making love, obviously, going by the erection that had inspired his own. Making love, with Avon, he mused, and found himself with a fond smile on his face, betraying him to the man under him. But then, as he reminded himself, one could only be betrayed to an enemy. To a friend, to a lover, one could only be revealed. And he felt no anguish at that, at the being laid wide open for Avon to see and read what he would. It was, in fact, rather giddy, to be this vulnerable, this honest with Avon, of all people. To make love with him...

He leaned down, very, very slowly, his lips parting slightly, his breath coming lightly, preceding him, laying down claim markers for what he was going to take. His mouth touched Avon's, briefly, oh so briefly, the scantest of caresses, the deepest of promises, all the love of which he was capable shown by the very sweetness of his kiss. He drew back a little, to look in Avon's eyes, but those dark brown eyes were closed, eyelids shuttering them away from him, but Avon's mouth was open, Avon's face was vulnerable, begging Blake to continue the soft loving that had obviously made his dreaming so honeyed. He lowered himself a little again, until his body lay upon Avon, joining them hip and chest, their hearts beating together, each one racing the other, whilst their breath leaped and trembled through them. Blake kissed Avon again, his lips and tongue silken upon Avon, moistness mingling as they kissed and kissed, Avon responding as slowly as a man still asleep. But then, and the thought made Blake smile against Avon's mouth, poor Avon quite possibly thought he still was dreaming of the lover he had never dared ask for, dreaming of the man who made him so hard, saying the name in his sleep. Gods, Avon had said his name! To think that Avon belonged to him so much that he even dreamed about him, when all the barriers were down, when the core of who and what Avon was governed him, to think that then was when Avon had said his name! He had been right, he knew, feeling Avon's body quicken under his, muscles rippling, mouth kissing him back with frantic fervour. He had been right all along...

And then Avon bit him. Then Avon's hands came to life, gripping Blake's upper arms, fingers biting into him as Avon's teeth bit into his lower lip. Gasping, he drew back, shock covering his face like the rain blanketing the night-dark window, pulling away from this sudden sharpness that was Avon. He opened his mouth to speak, and found it filled not with words, but with Avon's tongue, a tongue that pushed into his mouth, taking over, delivering pleasure with a ruthlessness that jolted him all the way to the tip of his cock. Avon's hands released him, his arms tingling where Avon's grip had begun to bruise, the blood rushing to pool under the surface to form Avon's mark on him. A second, and then there was a scream in his throat as Avon's hands clamped down on his arse, wrenching his cheeks apart, the caress of the night air as severe as a blow. The strength in those hands was almost frightening, the power seductive. Avon was surging up under him, thrusting at him, his cock sharp and hard in Blake's belly, fucking him as if to go straight through the skin to his heart. There were animal growls in his mind, or in his mouth, he didn't know which, all of him topsy-turvy and inside-out, all his preconceptions tangled like knitting, the skein of his nerves tied in knots of pleasure. Avon's hands left him, letting the air chill his skin, until those same hands came down on him in cracking heat, Blake's back arching with the unexpected joy of the pain that burnt through him, singing through his blood. My god, he had time to think, what's he doing to me? I've never been like this, I've never wanted this, my god, don't ever let him stop...

And he was shifted, moved as if he were nothing more than a lump of flesh put there for Avon's amusement; then he was across Avon's knees, and brusque hands were grabbing his cock and shoving it down between Avon's legs, to press there so hard and hungry against Avon's cock. Strong thighs clamped shut, trapping them there together, and when Avon's hand came down upon his arse again, he was thrust, achingly, against Avon's cock, with the hair of Avon's balls tantalising him with a delicate pleasure that was exquisite counterpoint to the sharp pain that was

breathe and gods this was fantastic. He tried to take even more in, but his nose was already buried in the coarseness of pubic hair, Avon's balls slapping his chin, getting wet with Blake's sucking of his cock. There wasn't a sound coming from Avon, apart from the rasp of breath and the wetness of his cock thrusting in and out of Blake's mouth. With an aggressive surge of hunger, Blake wanted to break that silence, to rend that control like so much tissue, ripping Avon open as surely as Avon was ripping him.

He set to with a will, using every skill that had supposedly been lost with his memory, sucking and licking Avon voraciously. And then he bit Avon, as Avon had bitten him. There was utter silence for a moment, not even the sound of a breath or a heartbeat, and then he heard Avon's lush groan, and the hands in his hair tightened convulsively as Avon's secret was set free. Blake bit him again, just enough to deliver the soupçon of pain that would be poignant perfection, Avon shuddering in his mouth with the pleasure of it; then Blake was left hollow, as Avon withdrew, shaking hands upon his body, turning him, moving him, taking away all hint of autonomy. He stiffened, silently protesting the change, silently refusing Avon this power over him. And he was hit again, and the pleasure took his underpinnings from him, leaving him as solid as a house built on sand. He shifted, pushing back, pushing away from Avon, but the hands on him were stronger than he expected them to be. Face hidden away, he grinned with elation whilst his body challenged Avon to go that bit farther, to push their limits that bit closer to the edge. He locked himself rigid so that Avon couldn't manoeuvre him, but oh, how Blake could manipulate Avon. If he couldn't have the banal simplicity of lovemaking, then he'd have all the complexity that was in Avon. He'd force the man to face parts of himself that were better left buried, parts that would shake his foundations, even as Avon was undermining Blake. But that was how one reached the truth, that was how one learned to trust, to look beyond oneself. Yes, he'd show Avon, teach them both how to reach out. Give them both back the feelings that

had been beaten from them by the Servalans and Traveses of this universe.

When Avon reached for Blake's arse, Blake clenched himself shut, forcing Avon to push harder, to force Blake to do what Avon needed him to do. He recognised, in that moment of defiance, what they were both doing: Avon living the fantasy of committing rape, and he himself living the fantasy of being raped, of having all the responsibilities taken from off his shoulders. To be free of all moral duty, to be free from making justifications and excuses for what he wanted or did. To put it all on Avon's amoral back, let him carry it. For what negativity could there be for Avon? They both knew that if Blake seriously wanted this whole thing to stop, then all he would have to do is fight him and it would be over, leaving them slightly bruised and battered perhaps, but it would be over. This, he thought, as Avon hauled and pulled at him, grabbing him by the wrist, twisting his arm up behind his back in vicious immobility, was really quite perfect. To be raped by the man he had chosen to take him, to rape by forcing Avon to do what Blake himself wanted

He allowed himself a sigh, careful to make it sound like a moan of pain, squirming when Avon's hand reached for his cock—after all, it simply would not do for Avon to find out just how turned on Blake was, now would it? The fantasy would be destroyed then, rent asunder by the intrusion of reality. And that was the last thing Blake wanted. He twisted aside again, when he felt Avon's wet fingers try to probe him, laughing to himself at the groan of combined fury and frustration he won from Avon. Oh, good, Avon was getting as taut-strung as a violin and his hands were shaking as they forcibly subdued Blake. Again, a wet finger came to open Blake, and again Blake fought, forcing Avon to renew his punishing grip on Blake's arse. Go on, Blake willed him, you know what you have to do. You've no choice left, my Kerr, but to do it, unless you want to rub yourself raw. You need me wet, Kerr, so go on, do it. I'll let you rape me if you do...

As if he had heard, Avon did it, his tongue shockingly hot and wet on Blake's arsehole, the limber strength plunging into him, wet-



ting him, making him tremble all over as he was penetrated, as the violation began with Avon's submission. He pushed back, arse muscles relaxing, Avon's tongue going deeper, making Blake wet enough that Avon could enter him without causing himself agony. But Blake wasn't going to let him off without some pain, oh, no, not that. So when the tongue eased free, when the last biting kiss left him, when the daunting bulk of Avon's cock pressed at his arse, Blake tightened up, making Avon work for it, making himself work and suffer for it. It hurt, the pain bringing tears to his eyes, even as it turned him into a conflagration of pleasure. He could feel Avon's fury, could feel the way Avon was struggling to push in. Could feel all the battling that would convince Avon later, when sanity had calmed the rutting fever, that Avon had raped him.

When actually, Blake smiled to himself, his teeth bared on the skin of his forearm, teeth tugging at the tiny hairs, a pain to mitigate the pain in his arse, a pain to add to the pleasure, it's the opposite way round, isn't it, my poor Kerr? You think you're the one, you think you're the only one who chooses to follow instead of being led by the nose. Well, let me tell you, Kerr fucking Avon, you're led by your cock, aren't you? Just listen to you, huffing and puffing over me. I bet if I could see your face now, you wouldn't be the super-cool Alpha elite, would you? Animal rutting, bestial lust, that's what I've reduced you to. You want me so badly, you'll do anything it takes to have me. Including rape, and you know what a weapon that is against you, don't you? You and your peculiar set of ethics. You'll hate yourself for getting out of control like this, won't you? Oh, but feel how sweetly you slide inside me. I can feel every detail of you, did you know that? I can feel your balls banging into mine, god, but that's fantastic. And I can feel your hair on my arse, and your belly against my back. I can hear you breathing and I can feel it. Can feel you all the way inside me, touching me, just there, oh, gods, that's fucking fantastic, yesss, just there, like that. Want that, Kerr, but I'm going to struggle, because it's better that way. You'll never be able to leave me after

this. I own you now, because you think you've just dominated me, but I'm the one who calls the shots. I'm the one who decided what I wanted, aren't I? And you'll feel so guilty for raping me, won't you? I'll use that, to set you free. No need for you to be so cold and distant. Not with me. Ooh, yesss, do that again, oh, do that again. Let me feel you fuck me all the way to my soul, yesss, like that, like that...

He lost all semblance of thought, awash in the sensations, asea in the strength of the man over him and in him. He was moving in perfect harmony with Avon, voices and bodies commingling, breath harsh and united, sweat rubbing off, one to the other. Avon was thrusting into him, hard and harder, long strokes giving way to shorter ones, rhythm failing him, until he arched, perfectly still, as deep inside Blake as he could ever be. Then he was moving again, shudderingly deep thrusts, Blake drinking him in, devouring him as he had wanted to from the start, absorbing him until they were one. Avon's weight was heavy on Blake's back, Avon's cock heavy inside him, his own balls tight and full, his cock seeping, quivering on the verge of orgasm. A quick blur of his hands, knuckles white, fingers taut, and he was there, cum spurting from him, his seed spent in Avon's bed.

He pushed Avon off, smiling inwardly, arranging his features in an outward expression of righteous outrage. And was met with a look of such contemptuous comprehension that all the words died unborn. Avon lay back on the bed, his cock reddened from its punishing pillaging of Blake's body, his eyes heavy and lustrous with satiation. And amusement.

Oh, gods, Blake thought, he knows. The bastard knows...

No. The bastard thinks he knows, the bastard *hopes* he knows. I'll show him, I'll prove to him...

And Avon half-laughed, shook his head and turned his back on Blake, pulling the sheet up over his shoulder as if the night had been devoid of anything but solitude. Astounded, Blake knelt behind him, shut out so completely that the fury came upon him out of nowhere. He grabbed Avon, pulling him

over, only to meet eyes that knew, everything, more than Blake did, more than Blake wanted to. Eyes that dared Blake to turn the tacit fantasy into bitter reality. Eyes that Blake didn't care to meet.

Truths that Blake didn't care to meet.

Truths that didn't bear thinking about.

Trust Avon to ruin everything. Trust Avon not to see the truth the way he was meant to. Trust Avon, he told himself, consigning truth and fairness to the corner of his mind populated by nothing but ghosts and guilts, trust Avon to make it all so difficult. Well, he'd show Avon. If Avon could understand about love, if Avon couldn't reach out after sex, then, well, he'd just have to show him elsewhere, wouldn't he? And where better than Star One? Avon thought him a fool for even pursuing Docholli, never mind destroying Star One. Let him wait, let him wait. He'd

show him. He'd show him that Avon had been wrong about Star One. He'd show Avon he'd been wrong about love. Yes. He'd show him.

He got to his feet, gathering up clothes that had come off in the heat of the moment, fastening clothes that had clung to his skin while he'd been otherwise occupied. Avon was still lying in the bed, his back to Blake, exuding mocking contempt. Blake stared at him for a moment, thinking of how different it would be, when they stood together after Star One and saw how much better off the Universe was. And when they saw how right Blake had been.

Without a backward glance, he left the room, going to his own, and his own plans. He'd show Avon.

And how very sweet revenge would be, when served piping hot and panting. Oh, yes, he'd show Avon...



EST QUAEDAM FLERE VOLUPTAS

There is in weeping a certain pleasure. Two pieces from Sebastian, that writer of darkly, bittersweet tales, who refuses to see easy resolution to the Avon/Blake relationship. Here there is the initial discovery of desire, of venery, and a probing of the idea that imminent danger or death can be a sexual turn on. The second story continues with what the first one has set in motion and leaves us waiting for more.

CAT'S CRADLE I SEBASTIAN



THE MAN SAT VERY STILL, HIS HEAD delicately tilted as if concentrating on some exquisite task: the table however was empty, save for his hands laid there, fine hands, the fingers laxly curled. His profile was calm, the long straight nose and sculpted mouth a giveaway to the darkeyed and darkhaired Roman ancestry buried many generations deep in his heritage.

Long, darksilk lashes stirred gently as he breathed in, and out, quite peacefully.

No clues here to the fires within, the vivid passions lodged between flat belly and lean thigh, the dark turmoil in his heart and the anger pulsing in his blood: the words which rang in his head over and over.

"Get to your position"

His head came up and his eyes opened wide, then narrowed as the deadly sting of it seeded itself and grew, a twisted hemlock root of gnarled and ignoble descent.

He knew what to do now. Perhaps he might even enjoy it.

"WHERE'S AVON?" Blake said peremptorily. "I need him." He swung round as if Avon might

materialise at his will, coming swiftly down the steps to the flightdeck; but the entrance framed nothing but emptiness.

With a brittle laugh Jenna said, "I should think he's sulking in a dark corner. You pushed him just about to the limit."

There was no condemnation in her tone; respect, rather; she was proud of Blake, whom she admired, for putting Avon, whom she did not, so crushingly in his place.

"I had to. He'd argue night was day if I said the opposite." A wide strong type with tight brown curls and ruffian's clothes, Blake took a pacy turn around the couches, eyes set forward. "Let Avon get out of hand and we've lost. I need Avon. God help us all, I wish I didn't."

Brilliant and complex, Avon seemed to have an energetic devil inside him: with *Roj Blake* inscribed on its wickedly-pronged fork. Difficult wasn't the half of it: Avon seemed hell-bent on perverting Blake's every move and motive, arguing his way at every turn, his predatory tongue twisting every way to wear Blake's purpose down.

His was a lone voice, though Blake sensed



that didn't trouble him: the man was clearly born to be a loner with his contrary nature, where darkness conflicted with his sweeter urges—and usually won. The others neither liked, nor trusted Avon. They seemed happy enough to follow Blake, who was large, warm, passionate in belief and purpose: everything Avon was not. Blake held them in the palm of his hand and ran them ragged. They didn't seem to mind.

Avon, however...

Avon was, so far, resisting the trumpet-call of glorious Causes.

Jenna said, with sympathy: "He never lets up on you, does he?"

Blake smiled at her, a dimple dancing in his cheek and a light in his eye. "Don't worry. I think I've got the measure of Avon."

He ran Avon to ground in his cabin. He said, folding his arms and leaning against the door, "I need you to start work on getting through to those defence computers on Epsilon 9."

Dressed in greys and blacks, with his usual meticulous attention to detail, a leather belt at his waist and his hair groomed and shining, Avon looked up at him with brilliant dark eyes.

"Yes, you do, don't you?" he observed, and he gave Blake a smile. It wasn't a pleasant smile, and his tone was not precisely what Blake was expecting.

"So get started," he said curtly, and turned to leave. Exchanges with Avon were best kept to a minimum: get in fast, strike low, leave while Avon was still thinking about it.

"Just a minute." Avon's cool voice reached him before he got through the door and Blake halted his steps but didn't turn. "That's today's order, is it?"

"That's right," Blake said crisply.

"Well, now I have one for you. Come back here at 2200."

Blake turned a wintry stare on him. "Whatever for?"

"I'll tell you then," Avon replied: no emotion.

"That's the middle of my sleep period."

Avon gave the ghostliest of smiles. "Miss it," he suggested.

This had the scent of a childhood adven-

ture book of Blake's; a shadowed tower in the moonlight, a secret, dangerspiced tryst to watch some mysterious dance of the planets.

He shrugged as he made for the door. "Frankly, I'd rather have the sleep." Behind him, Avon's voice did not rise, but every word was clear as ice.

"Either you come, or I won't touch the Epsilon 9 computers. It's up to you, Blake."

"Blackmail, Avon?" he said, lip curled. He wasn't worried. He could handle Avon. It was tricky and time-consuming and required strong nerve; but he always won, in the end. Blake leaned on Avon with all his force of will; and sooner or later Avon shut his mouth on acrid dissent and buckled into line, however sour the taste on his tongue.

Of course, forcing a creature such as Avon to swallow such bitter stuff had its price: namely that he could never turn his back on Avon and be sure; never leave him behind on *Liberator* with any certainty that that miser's hoard of resentments might not surface and Avon take the sweetest revenge of all.

"Call it what you like," Avon said, with that same, greyish detachment. "But if you're not here, then nothing and no-one will get you what you want from Epsilon 9, for I certainly won't and no-one else can."

Blake left the room, untroubled: for when had Avon not carried out his every demand? Avon might flicker viciously as a serpent's eye, but there was nothing to back it up, no real power to put up against Blake's own.

But time drew on, and something about Avon's lack of anger, his cool, uninflected tone of voice, his very stillness, stayed with him more forcefully than Avon's snapping temper would have done. At 2200, or a little after, he found himself at Avon's cabin door: curiosity, he told himself. Maybe Avon was going to unfold some mysterious wonder before his eyes.

Avon answered his quiet knock promptly, the door sliding open. He looked neat and spruce and unsurprised; there was, Blake noted with some disquiet, a blaster strapped to his waist.

"You're late, Blake. But then I expected that. Always the little psychological thrust with you, isn't there?"



“Well?” Blake said coldly, stepping inside. “What’s all this about?” Behind him the door swished shut. Avon stepped past him with a polite ‘excuse me’ and touched his palm to the lock. Blake’s eye was caught by the action. He frowned.

“I think I should just tell you,” he said with utter cool, “that Jenna knows where I am.” He eyed Avon’s weapon once, and looked up.

Avon lifted one eyebrow. “Really. Do you want her to spectate? By all means, call her.” He actually indicated the intercom, seemed to be waiting for a reply. Blake gave him the coldest of looks, took a turn around the room and sat down, throwing one leg over the other and leaning back in the chair.

“I’m waiting,” he said with sarcastic boredom.

“Yes: and patience is not one of your shining virtues, is it?” Avon regarded him with dispassion, the black arch of his eyebrows narrow and demonic above the dark, enigmatic glitter of his eyes. He leaned against the desk and watched Blake.

“Avon, I’m tired, I want to get to bed,” Blake said roughly. “Get on with it. That’s if you have anything to say.”

Avon flipped a light on, unexpectedly. It shone directly into Blake’s eyes. He shifted a little, shielding them from the glare.

“What rating did you have as a member of the Federation, Blake?” Avon asked him, inconsequentially.

He lifted his chin and answered sturdily: “Alpha A,” without hesitation; part of one’s life, ratings stuck and could never be entirely shed. He moved restlessly, out of the main beam of the light.

“High,” Avon mused, narroweyed. “But that’s about what I would have given you. Perhaps a little higher than I would have given you. You must have met the assessors—” he smiled downwards, dusting his sleeve with one hand— “on one of your better days.” His head snapped up and met Blake’s eyes. “What was mine, I hear you ask?”

“No, you don’t,” Blake said; because Avon had Alpha-Elite stamped all over him from the dark harmony of feature and form to the beautiful voice and prettiest of wits. Avon laughed at him, a sudden, sharp white

showing of teeth. “I see you don’t need to. I wouldn’t argue with your rating, Blake; and nor, I think, would you argue with mine.” For one brief moment, his tone was rich with contentment; but it left him as the smile fled from his lips and he leaned back a little, the better to concentrate his gaze on Blake.

“And if you think about it, which I don’t suppose you ever do, the most elementary psychology will tell you that, by treating me like you would the lowest grade of lifeform, you are simply ensuring that I will leave you. And on the unhappiest of terms.”

“You haven’t left yet,” Blake growled.

“Don’t push it,” Avon said, snapping up abruptly. “Because that’s the one thing you don’t want, isn’t it Blake? You can’t afford it. Your precious Revolution needs me, and you know it.”

“Oh, get to the point, Avon.” Blake’s bored voice did not reflect his feelings, gave no voice to the trouble growing inside him, the uneasy feeling that he was not, for once, a step ahead.

“The point?” Avon said, calm. “I thought you knew the point. It’s obvious, isn’t it? After your little display of power-hungry ego today, it’s finally happened. I’ve reached my limit. I will not and shall not take any more from you without certain provisos of my own.”

Blake lounged back with ready insolence. “So what do you want?” he asked with fine contempt. “A kiss to take the sting away?”

The room seemed suddenly very still.

“I was thinking more of reciprocation theory,” Avon said, with an odd, dark chill in his voice.

Surprise and disquiet flowered in Blake’s mind: the very word sent a shiver down his spine, a fingertip grazing on his nerves as he remembered... Reciprocation. Another of the Federation’s little tricks to ensure tractability. Blake remembered as if it were yesterday the little enclosed room, the bright, harsh lights, the disembodied voice of the questionmaster who hated your guts: sometimes your boss, sometimes the man beneath you, forcing upon you a ritual psychological humiliation intended to purge grudges and frustrations before they got anywhere near the point of threatening the efficiency of the work force. Blake’s mind shied away from the

memory of some of those sessions, flatly rebelling.

"Not a chance," he said, forcefully. "That sort of thing is one of the reasons I'm fighting the Federation: civilised men don't need to be brought to heel like mindwhipped dogs."

"No?" Avon said. "I rather thought you might say that. In that case, Blake, I've finished with you, and your very noble Cause: it can shrivel up and die as far as I'm concerned and you with it. You can set me down at the next habitable planet."

Blake reconsidered.

He could see that Avon meant it. That quiet, unstirred certainty bespoke a limit passed. He hesitated, thinking: steeping his hands and watching Avon over the top of them, yet not seeing him, seeing visions instead, the death of his hopes, the crumbling of ambition.

"There's no other way, Blake," Avon said as coolly as if this weird deal were credible, even possible: "I can't live with your unashamed manipulations and your derisory bullying by day and by night without *some* return of my own. It's not psychologically viable—even you can see that. You won't give me reasoned discussion and mutual decisions and a sharing of responsibility. So you must give me something else."

Blake thought of his glorious cause, a universe wide, a bigger concern than personal vanity; the ambitious plans he would need every scrap of help to have a chance of carrying out. He thought of Avon's brilliance and Avon's knowledge like a storehouse of invaluable treasures there for his rifling: all lost to him should Avon leave.

He took a deep breath. "All right."

Avon's expression gained a little satisfaction. "Very sensible of you."

"Childish though it is," Blake bit back.

Avon's half-smile deepened, darkened. "Oh, don't worry. It won't be childish."

Blake felt a faint shiver of apprehension at Avon's quietness; there was a stillness and a calm about him which seemed quite unnatural. Determined not to let Avon psych him, he rose to his feet and stretched, deliberately turning his back, hands locking behind his neck.

"No time like the present, is there, Avon?"

"This is a deal then—is it?"

"It's a deal," Blake told him, carefree. He yawned; his joints clicked.

"Turn around, then, Blake."

Blake did so, slowly, and his pupils shrank to tiny pinheads as the light arrowed into his eyes and dazzled him.

"Sit down," Avon said, and all Blake could see was the nozzle of the blaster swinging up and aiming straight at him. His heart plummeted into his stomach at a speed which disoriented him and made him dizzy with a sense of nauseous starvation.

"I don't recall reciprocation ever went this far, he said with a dry mouth.

"Then you were lucky," Avon said gravely.

Blake felt chilled to the soul, water churning painfully in his bowels as he stared at the weapon balanced across Avon's wrist: Avon was a good shot, the best besides Blake himself, better even. Besides, even Vila could hardly miss from a distance of five feet.

"Avon—" and Avon's voice leapt out at him like a flame in the dark—

"Shut up Blake; and sit down."

Blake dropped into the chair. He watched Avon steadily and wondered whether to chance it and dive for the door. Then he remembered that slick palm-press as he entered; after all, he would have to see it through.

"That's better," Avon said, his tones cool and clear. "What a fireball you are, Blake; all fine ideals and heroic energy whirling around a zero core of common sense. Take off your clothes."

Blake bolted upright and stared hard across the room. "What?"

"You heard me."

"I damn well didn't," Blake growled, getting to his feet. "For your sake as much as mine."

"One chance," Avon warned him, his voice harsh as a nail snagged on silk. Over the blaster he consulted his watch, timing some unknown limit.

"You're sick," Blake told him bluntly, and he made for the door purposely. Avon shot him, with no hesitation and perfect aim.

The jagged yellow fireball zipped past him. Blake gasped in shock and pain and clutched at his side. The naked heat had seared his

your mind. And all this in the name of the only right, the only possibility... Are you proud of all this, Blake?"

"And you, Avon?" Blake said, without opening his eyes. "Which is it with you—are you bewitched by my body, or am I something for you to believe in?"

"*I don't believe in you,*" Avon hissed. "You're a dangerous man, Blake. Don't think I haven't met your like before; starry-eyed idealists who want to change the world. They have everything in common, including the fact that they all die, very young and dragging a hell of a lot of their friends screaming with them onto the glorious pyre of lost causes. It never occurs to them to change the world from within instead of trying to crack it from outside like a nut; oh no, nothing but large gestures of massive revolution suit their style and their little power complexes which demand huge, bloody sacrifices to feed it, yet they do it all in the name of—justice, and *that is you, Blake.*"

"I know I'm right in what I'm trying to do, Avon," Blake warned, low and quiet. "You won't get through to me this way. So why waste your breath?"

Avon's lip curled in a sneer, his voice a thin whine of contempt. "All fanatics know that they are *right.*"

"And some of them are."

Avon was looking at him as if he had lifted a dirty stone and found Blake lurking damply. "The trouble with you, Blake," he said, with quick, measured judgement, "is that you're really not very bright. You conceal a basic lack of foresight and intelligence with loud-mouthed commando tactics and personal charisma. Perhaps you even believe in your—'Cause'—yourself. I wouldn't know about that. I think perhaps you do believe it. So—you are not a fraud. But that doesn't make you the honest man you set such store by being. What you are building of your character is a cardhouse of illusions: watch your followers' faces when it all comes tumbling down. As it will. That is, of course, if they're still alive to watch."

Blake didn't like that, didn't like accusations of pretence and illusion when truth and honesty mattered to him more than anything.

"All right, Avon, you've got me here and you're damn well not going to waste the chance of telling me just how low your estimation of my character is. I'm awed by your insight and duly chastened," he said with icy sarcasm. "Are you feeling better now you've got that off your chest?"

His head snapped upwards as the blaster jabbed into the soft underside of his chin. He opened his eyes in shock and looked straight into Avon's, very black and close, shining with a peculiar intensity.

"No, I'm not feeling better," Avon whispered to him with hatred. "The truth might help you, that's if you'd listen to it, but it doesn't help me at all." The silky voice caressed him like a lover: the gun scraped hard along his skin. "Punishing you is the only way I can come to terms with travelling your thoughtless path to the screaming bloodbath and ensuing chaos you've set your great big loving heart on; and all the while you treat me as if I'm really not quite fit to tread in the marks left by your saintly feet."

"How else can I treat you, Avon," Blake asked, sweatily conscious of the blaster jammed under his chin, ready to fry his brains if he pushed Avon too far, "when you admit yourself that you can be bought? I have belief: but you, you're available for purchase," he said, putting his finger nicely on the cause of Avon's inner disturbance, "and knowing you, the price is something unpleasant. You know I'll pay it, and you don't care how much I despise you for it. So why not get on with it?"

For a moment he thought he really had gone too far, his heart leaping with fear as anger flared like a flame of insanity in Avon's eyes, dark as death; the gun trembled at his throat and he knew he was going to die at Avon's hands, here and now. Ridiculously, like a hanged man leaping out into the void, he felt lightheaded and dizzy, the terrible fear melting into a rapturous lack of resistance, a honeyed conviction that Avon was actually going to do it, actually going to kill him and there was nothing at all he could do about it; there was a strange and delicious feeling spreading warmly inside him as he tasted his own death and found it oddly sweet.

He closed his eyes, curled lashes wavering



Immediately, Avon hit him. The flat of his hand smacked solidly into Blake's buttocks, a stinging thrill rather than a pain.

"Stop that," Avon hissed. "Don't think I can't read you, Blake. You haven't got where you are without being a prime manipulator, quite inspired at times. Why do think I'm not a convert? *Because I can see inside you, Blake, the beast inside the saint.*"

Undaunted, Blake stayed where he was, head turning more comfortably to one side, speaking low and crudely, the veneer of politesse stripped away now they were down to this:

"Come on, Avon, do it: why not? I'll bet it feels wonderful: they say it is. Revenge is what you want, isn't it? Well, here's your chance. If you want to fuck me, do it now: *you'll never get another chance.*"

"I'm not so sure of that, Blake." Avon's voice was the merest, darkest whisper, very close to his ear, and resounding in the hollows of his head like the swell of an ocean booming in a cave. "I never thought it before—never dreamed—but maybe a master is just what you've been looking for."

Something nagged at Blake; he tried to pin it down but it slipped away from him as Avon continued, bleak with disgust: "You're worse than I thought, if that's possible. You don't think I'm going to give you what you want, do you? I wouldn't touch you if you begged me, which, don't tell me, is going to be your next move."

"No thanks, Avon," Blake whispered. "I'd probably enjoy the gun more."

The tension between them took on life. Stirring into sentience, a black, stinking dark thing pulsing with every heartbeat, an erotic intensity sweeping over the skin like static, a deep deep yearning inside ready to flower. Eyes shut, Blake felt the room beat in some great sensual rhythm around the two men at its centre, linked beyond reason in some unspoken metre of shared sexuality, Avon the ringmaster cracking the whip which drove them on. And just when Blake most yearned for Avon to touch him the only caress on offer was the roughness of wool against the frenulum of his cock; and at that, it was nearly enough to bring off the flashflood of

ecstasy he felt gathering in his loins.

Suddenly, shockingly, he felt a hard kick thunder into his ribs. Blake winced and lay still. He heard the clatter of the gun as Avon kicked it to one side.

"Lie on your back."

Slowly Blake rolled and lay there, in a beautiful state of arousal. Avon stared down at him, hard and dark and menacing. His eyes glittered with contempt, with anger, with hatred.

"You disgust me, Blake."

"Then walk away," Blake said. His gaze laced delicately with Avon's, weaving black magic. Avon dragged his eyes away. He kicked Blake's hard erection with the toe of one leather boot. Blake shut his eyes, his head dropping back and turning to one side. Avon's voice floated down to him:

"I doubt, I really doubt, that your loyal followers would continue to admire you, knowing you have such—propensities."

"Aren't you going to tell them?" Blake asked sarcastically. He added, eyeing Avon's darkclad figure, "Do you always have sex with your clothes on, Avon? Sadists like you always have such *little* cocks." He flaunted his own, leaning up on his elbows.

Avon watched his movements, frowning: then his eyes lifted to Blake's, darkly a gleam, and he seemed abruptly amused. "Do you think so?"

"Of course. You get no pleasure so you'll settle for pain. Preferably someone else's. Isn't that right, Avon?"

If not, prove it.

His cock stretched blindly and longed for the touch, even accidental, of Avon's fingers. He could imagine, what it would be like, how the skin touching his would feel, how Avon's hand would move... He balled his own into fists and dug his nails into his palms.

Avon knelt beside him, and Blake opened his eyes to see him there, a dark excited glitter to his eyes, a stain of rare colour along his pale cheekbone. Avon spread his hands.

"No gun. You see? Just the two of us."

He spoke it like a statement, a little triumph.

Blake cleared his throat and said, very low, "You brought this on, Avon. You think I'm going to hate myself after this, don't you?"



thing Blake saw before closing his eyes under helpless glory was the bitter, triumphant blaze of Avon's.

And when he opened them again Avon was on the other side of the room a million light-years away from him, looking at him dispassionately. Reality sharpened and the dream slipped away; the beautiful sensations still gripping him echoed faintly and were gone. Love turned to hate, lust to ashes in his mouth and the sick taste of disgust, at himself mostly.

So Avon had won, after all. Because that was exactly what he had wanted.

For once in his life Blake was without words.

Avon dragged his eyes away from Blake and walked off crisply into the bathroom, returning with a towel which he threw, hard, at the other man.

"Now get out of my sight."

The warm scent of his own naked body, the saltmarsh smell of his sex and the tang of sweat curled around Blake, embarrassing him. He used the towel in silence and threw it into a corner. Avon, regarding him in a speaking silence all the while, removed the towel and dropped it into a laundry chute. Blake began to get dressed. Despite Avon's hard, unwavering gaze, he didn't hurry. The ruined shirt he left where it was without touching it.

He felt weary, and sick with himself. How easily life led you, and promised you something fiercely sweet! Temptations arose from the darkest, most unexpected quarter so that, dazzled by the light, you did not see the ominous shadow looming behind: and if you

let yourself be seduced by passions unsuspected then the shadow took hold and darkened the world for you, forevermore.

For he knew that Avon was not going to let this go.

Some black, blighted star, watching their fates entwine, had conjoined this thread of their lives in a cat's cradle of twists and turns; each strand a perversity, a dark line of sick passions and unhealthy feasts of emotion, all entangling in a Gordian knot they would never get free from now.

Blake did not think these things consciously; he simply looked at Avon, standing silently there, and knew with a leaden sense of doom that henceforth Avon, in a personal sense and for Blake alone, was going to be big trouble.

Fastening his belt he looked up from under his lashes at Avon, his hands weaving the leather deftly through the buckle. His chin tilted, then jutted defiantly.

"Well?" he said, sweet but strong. "How was it for you?"

Avon smiled; sharp, provocative to the end. "Really quite good. Perhaps it could have been better."

Blake's eyebrows rose. His eyes dwelt on Avon's bruised and swollen mouth, marked by Blake's kisses as he said:

"Until the next time, then?"

Little lines of amusement creased around Avon's eyes; his lips quirked in sarcastic response to Blake's impudence.

"Perhaps."

No, Blake thought on his way out, not perhaps at all: definitely.

Only next time, things would be different.

Sebastian, 7/90



CAT'S CRADLE II

SEBASTIAN

NO SPECIAL FLAIR FOR NECROMANCY was necessary to read Avon's thoughts: as the huge door swung shut on him with a depressing clang Blake staggered as he was shoved bodily through, put out a hand to steady himself, muttered an imprecation, and angrily met Avon's eye.

"Marvellous," Avon said bitterly from where he hung on the wall. "Are you the cavalry?"

Blake turned on his heel, bit a thumb and said with sweet venom:

"All right, Avon; but then you'd hardly expect me to have the wit to avoid the same trap you fell into, now would you?"

"No indeed," Avon snapped, his eyes a bright, feverish glitter beneath wavering lashes. "And now here we both are: at least solitude was peaceful."

Wheeling around to face him, Blake stopped short and took Avon in properly for the first time since being heaved into the room. "Peaceful it may have been, comfortable I don't believe," he commented, and came over to him. With sturdy fingers he worked on the bonds which strung Avon to the wall.

"Don't bother," Avon said distantly, head turning to one side. "Laser-bonded steel, which is what that is, requires cutting with a laser saw. Unless you happen to have one concealed about you?"

Blake grinned raffishly, shaking his stinging fingers. "Actually, it's my week for the ultrasonic file." He produced one like magic and pirouetted it in his fingers for Avon's inspection, but it had no effect on the limber steel. After a while he paused in his efforts, sweating.

"I told you," Avon said.

"And if only I listened to you, Avon!" Despite the twin set-backs of incarceration and the breakdown of his negotiations with some very mistrustful aliens, finding Avon, whom he had secretly feared dead or worse, had done a lot for Blake's spirits.

"What a pity I arrived first," Avon observed. "Handcuffs would suit your heroic style so much more than mine."

Blake grinned, a dangerous gleam in his eye. "I beg to disagree." For Avon made a pretty sight: darkly, sultrily angry, and chained to the wall with his wrists linked together. Picturesque indeed: and yet Blake noted too, the dry lips, the overbright sparkle to his eyes.

"Pity I can't offer you a drink," he commented, inserting a blunt finger between Avon's wrist and the steel bands surrounding it. "But I'll owe you one: stand you a pint next time we pass old Joe's Bar." He drew in a sharp breath at the raw skin he found chafing there. Avon, passive, did not move, gazed over his head to the wall beyond. A rivulet of bright blood, freed by Blake's action, rolled down Avon's wrist and disappeared inside his sleeve. Something of Blake's initial cheerfulness evaporated.

"I can't think why they've reacted to our presence like this," he muttered, frowning. From a pocket he extracted a large, cleanish handkerchief which he tore into strips beneath Avon's desultory eye and did a bit of mopping. "They simply wouldn't listen to reason at all."

"Perhaps their view of reason is not the same as yours."

"Reason is reason," Blake said obdurately. "There's nothing subjective about it."

"If you say so." Avon permitted himself a small, cynical smile, unseen over Blake's head as the man tied neatish bandages around his wrists. Blake's tunnel vision had its moments of unintentional humour. No doubt if Blake believed the earth was flat he'd argue the cause with utter conviction, regardless of the view from the moon. Glorifying silently in the new comfort around raw, sore flesh, he stretched a little. He didn't bother to thank Blake, who wouldn't expect it. Blake had left



him and was pacing.

“Avon, you can’t deny that it’s unreasonable to lock us up when we’re here on a mission of mercy.”

“Perhaps it’s not the first time they’ve been given the same impression—by less sincere Samaritans.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Blake said bitterly. He took a few more turns around the room, a large and vital man dressed in a flowing white shirt, dark trousers delving into wrinkled leather boots. Blake had not said it, but Avon knew he was perplexed, that the Mallians had not recognised the sincerity shining from his sober brown eyes, the passionate warmth of his need to help, the staunchly honest line to his character.

Blake returned from a fruitless search for an exit and sank down the wall, coming to sit beside Avon’s feet. He did not say anything. A light unease struck into the quality of silence. Impatient with it, Blake shook his head like a dog, running the fingers of both hands through his curls to dislodge knots, and said without moving his gaze from the sealed door,

“Avon. We’ve got to talk.”

“Have we?” Avon said coldly.

Blake half-turned and glanced up at him. “Of course we have.”

“Perhaps you must,” Avon said in a voice which froze the blood. “But I don’t share the urge.”

“I blame myself as much as you,” Blake offered, with a quite sickening nobility. Avon shuddered delicately.

“You have a yen for martyrdom, don’t you Blake? All right then: it was your fault. Now shut up.”

“I should never have agreed to go along with it,” Blake muttered, running a hand through his hair with that fine lack of care for order which drove Avon silently mad. He looked down at the parting of Blake’s thick, strong hair where Blake’s fingers trawled the restless chestnut strands, and fought down irritation.

“The theory of reciprocity is quite sound,” he said sharply, “as you would know if you’d studied any foundation psychology.”

Blake jumped in instantly. “It might be, Avon: but the fact is, it’s a theory open to wide

interpretation and a great deal of abuse.”

Yes, certainly that. And who had abused whom?

How very much more simple, if that was all that were necessary: to decide on the victim, the abuser, and mete out accordingly balm and penance. But the really shocking thing, Blake mused, was the inescapable and unpleasant fact that they had both jumped into the breach with such eagerness, seized upon the chance to experiment on one another with thrilling little sexual games, passed the sword of mastery back and forth in perfect complicity.

What Avon thought about it Blake didn’t know, though he was sure Avon had been as disturbed by it as Blake too was disturbed: there were times when he caught Avon watching him, saw bleak, unforgiving memory stamped across his face. Yet Avon would say nothing. Not a man given to patency, he remained tensely, darkly unimpeachable.

“I won’t discuss it, Blake,” was all he said now.

Blake was taking off again around the room, too much energy for such an enclosed space. Avon shut his eyes. He shifted his position and groaned soundlessly to himself. His arms were tired, and very soon he was going to have cramp in his left leg. Wonderful.

“What you did to me was terrible,” Blake said in a low voice.

Avon opened his eyes, incredulous. “What I did to you. What about what you do to me—every single day? Why am I here? Why am I ever anywhere in some illconceived fiasco? Why do I nearly get myself killed for your damned Cause so often when I don’t give it a chance in hell? What I did to you, Blake, was nothing, nothing, in the face of the profound sublimation I impose on myself every single day, just to do for you what you want.”

Blake planted himself in front of Avon and glared, hands on hips. “But I get the inescapable feeling, Avon, that you wouldn’t be too happy yourself about looking back through my eyes.”

“Of course,” Avon snapped. “That was the whole point.”

“You wanted to make me look a fool, at all cost. You didn’t care how far you went to get

urge rose: to throw himself on Avon and kiss him until they were both breathless and desperate and unable to speak.

This one he gave way to, crossing the room in two paces and leaning in close as he took his mouth possessively. Avon smelt of warmth and of fear; he tasted exactly as Blake obsessively remembered and a rush of intoxication hit him. When he released him Avon's eyes were blazing, his lips moist; unable to wipe them or to move he spat at Blake:

"You must be mad. Didn't last time teach you anything?"

"Oh yes," Blake said, hard, his eyes inflexible. "And you?"

"Nothing useful," Avon snarled, like a trapped mink, exotic and violent. Such a paradox: the conflict excited Blake desperately, he wanted Avon to fight; and yet he wanted him to be a willing conspirator. He ran a gentle finger down the severe curve of Avon's face, brushed back his hair with both hands, smoothing it over and over as he stared into his eyes with serious attention.

"Don't, Blake," Avon said hoarsely. But Blake kissed him again anyway, his mouth covering Avon's deeply and thoroughly. As he leaned more closely against the other man he felt the beat of Avon's heart against his chest and the hot hard thrust of Avon's cock against his thigh, a glorious thrill as he pressed against him and it gave him all the certainty he needed. He kissed the corner of Avon's mouth, kissed it gently, teasing it with the point of his tongue.

"Why are you doing this?" Avon whispered, and Blake felt his insides twist at the look in Avon's eyes.

"Because you want me to." he answered him.

"No I don't," Avon said, in that still, quiet voice and Blake smiled at him strangely.

"I think you feel as guilty as hell about what you did to me. I'm going to make you feel—better—"

He fell to his knees in front of Avon and looked up, to see Avon's innocence dissolve, foreknowledge haunting his eyes and his voice was terrible to hear as he said, "No."

"Don't turn me down," Blake said. "I don't suppose it's an offer you get very often; or at

all, these days." Deftly he found the opening of Avon's trousers and undid them; Avon twisted and strained against his bonds but it was a futile effort. Sweat began to bead and cluster along his brow.

"I've always wanted to do this, Avon," Blake said, "and you're the only person in this world I'd admit that to."

"For both our sakes, Blake. Don't—"

The trousers slid down, revealing long-muscled thighs, lean and strong. This was the worst moment. He did not want to lift his eyes to Avon's face; and above him Avon's voice almost sobbed, from somewhere in the universe.

"I'll kill you, Blake. Make no mistake; I'll kill you for this."

The room seemed to slant and darken; Blake's hands clenched tight on tender flesh. But he recovered himself in no time: for he had to taste this side of the coin. Avon was impossible with guilt: and Blake could not bear to lose. Things would be better after this...

Despite himself a long shudder went through Avon as Blake pressed his hand over the warm sculpture of his body covered only by thin cotton, rubbing a finger across the head of his cock, back and forth.

With a sigh he pressed his cheek to Avon, turned his face slowly across the soft, swelled fabric. He undressed him with fingers that shook, and caressed him; the first cock he had ever touched save his own. The similarity delighted him: the same fragility of the skin over proud rigidity, the soft smoothness of it, inviting delicate stroking, the rosepink head and tracery of blue veins beneath. It took on a life of its own as his gently moving fingers pleased it, drawing itself up with proud tension; well, you'll like what's coming, he promised it, you'll like this. He had told Avon the truth: this had always been a fantasy of his, very nearly the worst, the most secret, the darkest dream you would admit to no-one: but he did not know, had never known, whether he would be able to go through with it.

He supposed it was the taste he was dreading, and yet at the same time it was the thought of that which made him tremble with



excitement; he wetted his lips with his tongue and glanced up at Avon's face, to find it shuttered, withdrawn, saying clearly 'I have no part in this'. Save that he could not help himself, his cock pressed itself touchingly against Blake's fingers, shyly seeking out his caresses.

Encouraged by the scent of soap and warmth Blake leaned forward, ran his tongue along satin skin: his stomach churned with shock and nerves, and he looked up to meet Avon's eyes which were sick, and shadowed.

But as his tongue made soft passes around the proud little rim of flesh he felt Avon shudder in his hands; and he could not stop now.

Lured into bolder caresses he dipped his tongue into the slit at the tip, finding a new taste there which suddenly flooded his belly with excitement. He shifted his hold on Avon and worked his tongue around the rim and under it, feeling Avon quiver, and gasp, too sensitive to bear it; with regret he glided his mouth down the living marble of the shaft to kiss lower. Love warmed his belly and swelled his heart: he was jolted out of his dreamlike state when Avon sighed again, and spoke in a harsh whisper: "Pleasant though it is, if you do it that way it'll take forever."

Stung by this, over-sensitive, Blake retorted, "Not good enough for you? I'll try and do better."

He looked up into Avon's face, saw irritation there, and scorn in the set of his mouth; yet, also, the dazed dark softness of his eyes: the bewildered inner delight. Deny it as he would, Avon was in a little private heaven; pride lit through Blake's emotions and with it that old, treacherous, headlong rush of love. In love with Avon! For the peculiar turbulence of emotion he experienced in Avon's presence, the intensity of feeling, there could be no other explanation.

Yet it did not make things easier: more frightening than fantasy, Avon's body in his hands was alive and vivid and real. A sudden panic seized him up with fear; and then Avon's voice was there to help him, set like stars in the blackest of nights, a whisper to lead him there gently:

"Haven't you ever heard the slang? You

have to suck, Blake..."

Blake slipped his hands around to cup Avon's buttocks, squeezing hard, harder... His lips parted again, and taking a deep breath he swallowed Avon down as far as possible. For a moment he hated it: this was the real thing and he couldn't breathe and the thing in his mouth was choking him; disgust curled thinly through his belly only to melt away when he heard Avon sigh, then make a small noise like a whimper, lost, entirely in Blake's hands. It was all too much. He felt Avon tremble, trembling on and on beneath his touch; removing his mouth, gulping in air, Blake pressed his hot face hard against Avon's quivering thighs, engulfing himself, pinching Avon's skin between his nails.

"Would you do this for me?" he whispered fiercely, desperately.

Avon was silent, save for his quick, panicky breathing; it rushed and jerked in counterpoint to Blake's own. Looking up at his face Blake saw that Avon's eyes were closed, his expression tense with some inner concentration; as he watched Avon's lashes lifted, revealing the dark, expressive depths of his eyes, and Blake knew that if his hands had been free, Avon would have reached down helplessly to touch his face. It moved him unbearably; but it hurt him unbearably too, because now he knew what he had done.

He would give anything to have it undone.

But it was already too late; even as the ache in his heart and the sinking in his guts and the punishing regret flayed at him, Avon was speaking to him, his voice quiet and beautiful, asking him—

Needing him to carry on.

Blake's skin prickled all over exquisitely, his spine tingling, sick with sudden lust; he mouthed Avon's slick cock again, then lapping at it, overwhelmed with the hungry desire of his dreams. With a choke he swallowed Avon again, lashed him with his tongue, sucked and sucked until Avon's hips lifted and thrust his cock into his mouth, and went still. Something silken shot down Blake's throat and he drank it convulsively, again and again. Avon slumped with a sigh and it was over.





VENERY



IT HAD BEEN WORTH WAITING FOR.

Avon, standing before him, eyes like embers, slowly, so excruciatingly slowly, undressing. For him. Such delight, such joy, in watching Avon carefully, with such carefilled caution, unpeel the layers of his shell, garment by garment, leather tunic and linen shirt, until the stark black yielded to the harmony of tones that made his skin so alive, so...touchable. Helpless to resist, he reached out, only the very tips of his fingers brushing the nuance of hair on Avon's chest, ruffling the darkness, smiling in the light as he saw Avon's sudden intake of breath. Not unmoved, no. So a heart did beat beneath that igneous exterior: he had begun to think Avon nothing more than fire and bluster and a rock-hard core that would never soften to him. But his first impression was right: Avon needed love, and as is so often true of the desperate, he was too afraid to grab it when proffered him. Smiling still, Blake let his fingertips wreak havoc on Avon's left nipple, playing with it until it peaked, the flesh clustered round it rimpling. Oh, yes, Avon needed this. Needed the love, needed the

Into the thick of it. Into the middle of things. Into the full fledged indulgence of sexual desire and gratification. The second of the Venerly tales.

Into the middle of venerly.

IN MEDIAS RES M. FAE GLASGOW

passion, needed to be needed, but most of all, needed to be coerced and cajoled until he conceded the point. Not that he had cried pax easily—what was there about Avon that could be called easy, apart from his wit? And if one were to look, to peer behind the theatre mask, one would see that Avon's wit was perhaps the hardest of all. The original double-edged sword could not have cut more deeply, especially to the man who wielded it.

Blake knew all about that, had watched as blood seeped from Avon as he cut the nose off to spite his face. So typical, Blake thought, all warm and benevolent with love, Avon's always doing that to himself. Saying the nastiest things to drive people away, then wishing to heaven he hadn't. Then again, this *is* Avon—he'd be the first to tell me that there was no heaven to wish to. But that's where he's wrong. Heaven is here and now, with someone to love you and someone to love. He'll learn. I know he shall.

"Take off your trousers for me. There's no need to be shy, Avon, we're all boys together."

"I rather more saw myself as a man. But then, perhaps you prefer to think of us as

boys?”

Blake stared at him with enough tolerance that it bore the weight of rectitude. “Wasn’t that a bit unnecessarily vicious, even for a man trying so desperately to prove that he doesn’t need this at all?”

“Oh, but I never said that. In fact, I admit that I do need this—it’s just that you and I disagree on what *‘this’* is.”

Blake caressed Avon’s face, cupping his chin with one hand, catching the beat of his heart with the other. “This,” he said, a mere breath away, “is love.”

“This,” Avon said, cupping Blake’s groin, “is lust. Let’s not confuse the two, shall we?”

“You can call it afternoon tea if you wish, it won’t change the truth.”

“A rose by any other name? But I disagree with that, Blake. Is the truth you spout the same as the ‘truth’ Servalan broadcasts? The name’s the same, but you would surely claim that the meaning was completely opposite.”

“Don’t stoop to sophistry, Avon. Confess that you’re afraid to love and be done with it.”

“Oh, I’d like to be done with love. And I am. So don’t *you* stoop to self-deception in here. After all, you do so much of it outside.”

“Do I? Is that what you honestly believe?”

Eyes narrowed in justifiable mistrust, Avon watched him, aware peripherally of able hands undoing fasteners. “Of course I do.”

“Then why,” and those able hands were exposing him, touching him, setting him alight, “do you follow me?”

“I don’t follow you, and well you know it.”

“Don’t you and do I? You do a fine impersonation of a follower. And well you know it. But perhaps the reason you...allow yourself to be led is because of what goes on here,” and the foreskin of his cock was slipped back with perfect slowness, “and here,” and the warmth of Blake’s mouth was kissing the skin that covered his heart.

“Or perhaps,” Avon said, not at all pleased by the tremor in his voice, “it’s because I’ve yet to find my bolt-hole.”

“What? No concession to the fires of the flesh and the thunder of the heart?”

“What *have* you been reading, Blake?” But the supercilious defensiveness was spoiled by the way his breath was shivering, by the

way his cock was hardening and by the way his arms were coming up to encircle Blake, drawing them closer together, chest to chest, face to face, until there was nowhere to look but into each other’s eyes. “Why are you doing this to me, Blake?” A hard question, so softly asked.

“Because you need it. Because I need it. Because you need to learn to love, my friend.”

Avon stared at him, and Blake gazed back, all warmth and twinkle, all confidence and certainty. “Or is it that *you* need to teach me to love? And I’ll tell you this right now, my ‘friend’. Love is the last thing I need to learn.” He took a step back, breaking the simmering touch of their bodies, turning away from the magic of Blake’s eyes. “Love is something I mastered a long time ago.”

“Is it, Avon?” Blake reached out again, knowing what Avon needed, loath to leave Avon trapped in a world of lovelessness and distrust. If only Avon would lean on him, if only Avon would allow himself to trust, then what a vista would be opened before him. Blake stroked the knotted muscles that lay shadowed, little pools of tension, on the long leanness of Avon’s back. He remembered love, Blake did, although it was dimmer than it ought, and vaguer than he hoped. But he remembered the sweet pleasure, the singing happiness, the *belonging* that went hand in hand with love like the lovers it created. Remembered to, or less dimly, the fury of the arguments that would lead to the searing heat of the recompense that always followed so quickly behind. There were no faces to go with these memories, but an occasional sound would haunt him, or the colour of an eye, or the way the light gleamed on hair. His breath would stop then, just for a second, whilst the pain thundered through him, jeering and screaming in chorus with his outraged fury and atavistic rage. It was those moments, those rare moments, when it was a toss of the coin whether he would want to kill, to destroy the Federation down into the rubbish it was—or whether he would throw it all over and run away, to look for the love he no longer knew, apart from the bitter ache of its absence. But he had Avon now, Avon of the dark eyes and darker humour, of dark clothes that hid such



someone else with whom to take my pleasure, and by doing so, I shall take your pleasure with me, because if all you have to have 'fun' with is yourself, then you are going to be a very disappointed man."

"And if you believed that for a second, you would never have come near me in the first place, would you? But that's always supposing that you're here for the 'plain, old-fashioned fucking' and nothing else. As you arrived on my doorstep anyway, even though you're trying to tell me I'm an unattractive bore, then you'll forgive me for thinking that there must be more to this than just lust."

"I won't forgive you anything."

Blake heard the warning in those words, no empty threat but serious, dire warning. Play with me, and you'll be playing with fire. Play with me and I'll burn you to a crisp, Avon was telling him. Play with me and you shall be running a higher risk than anything Servalan could ever dream of.

"Shan't you?" he asked in his turn, mildly, although nothing else about him spoke of anything but passion. "Then I shall just have to make sure I do nothing that would ever beg your forgiveness."

"Beg?" Avon looked down his nose at Blake, at the posture of conquest, at the bullish pride that Blake himself did not even suspect, as those who think themselves reasonable so rarely do. "Why not—when I would so like to see you beg."

"Don't try that game, Avon, not here, not with me. I've had more than my fill of domination and submission and at hands far better at it than you. You see, you, my dear friend," and he was all soft warmth again, with sharp heat quivering javelin-like at his groin, "have something they all lacked, and that makes you an amateur at that kind of game. You, Avon, my dear Avon, have a soul. And a heart, and compassion and love and trust and—"

"An imbecile for a bedmate. What the hell do you think I am, Blake?" This, whispered, a raging thirst for knowledge, for comprehension. "All appearances to the contrary, I really don't like pedestals—they make me dizzy, directly before I fall off them."

"Tell me something. Why is it that you are

so ashamed of yourself? Why do you hate yourself so?"

"Why can't you see what's staring you in the face? I'm neither ashamed of myself, nor do I hate myself. I simply don't have any delusions of myself as either saint or saviour."

Blake bent downwards to lick, with lingering wickedness, Avon's cock in its cozy nest of hair. "Saint?" he whispered, smiling up at Avon through his lashes, coyly dissolute. "Oh, I think you can come up with a better word than that, don't you agree?"

"I think," Avon said steadfastly, making manful display of ignoring the flickering touches of tongue on his cock, "that we are wasting a hell of a lot of time on something we could very well do on the flight deck, instead of spending our time on—"

"—Good, old-fashioned fucking? Is that what you were going to say?" He blew, moistly, tormentingly, on Avon's cock. "That's the most you're willing to concede, then—for the time being?"

"Due to the fact that I would never be suicidal enough to fall in love with you, Blake, and am not so maudlin as to be swayed by amity for my fellow man, then that's all you're liable to get—ever."

Blake took firm hold of Avon's even firmer cock, playing with the foreskin, slipping his tongue under to be trapped, fat and tight and delectably, wetly hot, between skin and flesh. He circled Avon's cock, listening enraptured as Avon's breath fled Avon's control and belonged to Blake, responding to every move of his tongue, to every caress of his lips, to every devouring swallow of his mouth. When Avon was suitably aquiver, desperate enough to be repeating Blake's name in endless pæan, he drew back, Avon's poor cock bobbing, unloved, in the chill disinterest of ship's air. "Are you quite sure of that, Avon?"

Avon, at this point, wasn't entirely sure of his own name. "Of what?" he asked, hips arching forward, cock blindly seeking mouth, body mindlessly seeking pleasure.

"That it will never, ever go beyond fucking?"

A bucket of cold water, dousing him, making him hard with anger, not lust. "Don't try to manipulate me, Blake. You shall push me too far if you do."



“And then what? You’ll leave, so that I shall be no worse off than I am now? You’ve got me absolutely terrified, Avon. In fact, I think I shall have to lie down.” But before he did, he stripped, uncovering the smoothness of his skin and the arch of his cock, the heavy fecundity of balls and the richness of flesh. “In that case, I suppose,” he went on, becoming all the more conversational, as if lying naked, cock tapping the pit of his belly was worthy of no more mark than what was for dinner, “I shall have to do without then. Not entirely, of course,” and with this, his hand settled round his cock, teasing it, then gripping harder, the other hand coming to roll his balls and tease at his own rump, “I’m sure I can think of something to do with myself. After all, I’m not afraid of having a bit of pleasure with someone I care about, even if that is me.”

He watched Avon, who stood stock still at the foot of the bed, watching Blake watching him, and all the while Blake’s hand was moving on his cock, faster and faster. Blake relished the moment when Avon’s tongue slipped out to moisten lips gone dry from lust and frustration, taking that image and threading it through his fantasy, licking his own lips, talking to himself as if Avon were there only in his imagination. He closed his eyes, all the better to enjoy his illusion—but still knew to the millisecond when Avon moved, when his trousers creaked and rustled the floor to land on the boots that had been discarded what felt like half a century before. The bed dipped, and Blake spread his legs a fraction wider, displaying himself more, inviting and enticing. A moment, and Avon’s hands were there, touching him, on his cock and it was perfect and then another moment, and his thighs were locked tightly together, Avon’s hands trapped so sweetly there.

“I don’t choose to have sex with you if all you can offer me is the certainty that you’ll never be able to go beyond lust. Not ever, Avon,” he said, squirming a little so that his cock rubbed meaningfully against Avon’s hands, “if all you can say is never.”

A long pause, whilst Blake stared at Avon again, then finally, words. “All right, all right. For the time being, it’s just lust.”

“But you won’t rule out the possibility of

seeing the light at some point in the future?”

“Pardon me, I didn’t realise this was a religious conversion—I thought it was sex.”

“That shows how wrong you can be, doesn’t it?” He shifted slightly, letting go of Avon’s hands, giving Avon his much-needed illusion of freedom. Blake was more sure than ever, now, with Avon so fraught above him, so terribly taut with desire and fear. It was so obvious what was wrong, what it was that held Avon back from giving himself over to love. “It’s because it’s more than just sex that you’re too insecure and untrusting to admit that the feelings are there. Why won’t you just try, Avon, to say it?”

Avon knelt astride him, inner thighs brushed by Blake’s flanks, Avon’s arse nestling cosily over Blake’s cock. “You,” he finally said after several moments silence, of scrutinisation and assessment, “are the most expensive whore I’ve ever met.”

“Expensive whore? I haven’t asked you for a single credit!”

“No, you’re asking for something far harder to pay for than money. But if I want to leave here without doing permanent damage to my balls, then I shall pay my entry fee. All right, Blake, you win this round. I concede that one day I might actually love you. I also concede that one day, the stars may travel backwards in their orbit and I might grow a beard. Satisfied?”

“Not yet,” Blake replied, the palm of his hand pressing his cock into his belly, the back of that same hand nestling hot and rough under Avon’s balls. “And not just sexually either, Avon, but...” He smiled suddenly, with all the charm and seduction that was in him, “Rome wasn’t built in a day, was it? I’ve got a lifetime of yours to erase, haven’t I?”

“Delusions of grandeur are the first sign of insanity in self-appointed heroes of the people.”

“I’m no hero, Avon and—”

“I said self-appointed, Blake. Unlike the rest of them, I have a brain and therefore don’t need a hero.”

“What you need, my friend, is a lover. And before you start repeating yourself, I’m not just referring to a bedmate. You want someone to love and someone to love you.”

never the emotional bonfires that marked his time with the Annas and Blakes of this life. But it was sweet, and Vila was sweeter, but not yet so sweet as the gathering glow of pleasure in his cock. He lifted his hips higher, wrapping his legs round Vila, making it abundantly clear that this was one night where there would be no need for long drawn-out advances. Simple and plain, that was how he wanted it. Uncomplicated, or as uncomplicated as anything in his life could be, these days. Just him and Vila and their delight in each other's bodies, and Vila's love gift-wrapping it all up for special, adding a luminosity to the passion. He had Vila's tongue in his mouth, and Vila's cock knocking at the back door of his body, the slickness of pre-cum wetting him, whilst the sure strokings of Vila's hands on his flesh whetted his appetite for more.

It kicked him in the belly, the sudden need, the sudden starvation, to have Vila inside him. He wanted, desperately, to be fucked, by Vila, just hours after his last fraught scene with Blake. Wanted to drive the memory of Blake from his body, as if that would clear the man from his mind. He needed to think, and he couldn't, not with Blake occupying every nook and cranny of every thought he had and every move he made. But he'd be damned if he let Blake come between them any more than he already had. Who, after all, was here, and on Avon's own terms? Who was it who was reduced to incomprehensible gibberish just because Avon had thrust upwards, his cock shoving at Vila's belly. No skirmishes here, to see who would end on top—to see who would win the war on the flight deck. Just pleasure, and the cascade of love all around him, numbing the sting of this endless battling that Blake had become. And it was so obvious, now, back with Vila, hearing what Vila was mumbling at him, feeling the trembling tenderness of Vila's hands, feeling the buck and weep of Vila's cock, just how little of the love Blake professed was selfless. How little was truly for Avon's own good and how much was for what Blake needed. The perfect mirror of his own relationship with Vila, if you stopped to think about it. And he did, his own hands stopping Vila's, who

stared at him for several seconds, then opened his mouth to speak.

"Don't say it," he told Avon. "Don't say anything at all."

Would the fool never learn?

But then Vila's mouth was on him and Vila's body was plastered to his, and Vila's hands were milking his cock. There was no room left for thought after the pleasure had claimed him, so he allowed himself the rarest of his luxuries: he relaxed in the bedroom, trusted himself over to the hands of another person, gave himself up to being what someone else wanted him to be. He arched upwards, saying the dirty taboos that made Vila shiver in his arms. The lube was in the same old place, the same tube that he'd left there himself the last time they'd needed it which had been—too long, his mind nagged him. Too long. Eyes open, he watched the love on Vila's face as cream was slicked into his arse, as fingers fucked him with precisely the right rhythm. Almost of its own accord, his hips lifted, widening the hole that Vila's fingers were in, displaying in silence arrogance that he was ready—now!

Gasping breath above him, gasping coming from his own body, then the moment of stillness as the blunt head of cock pressed against snub bulb of muscle. Then—a single thrust and Vila was in him, all the way in him, his prostate massaged by what felt like yards of hard cock. He moaned, letting Vila hear it, making sure that Vila knew how much pleasure Avon was feeling, determined to assure Vila that his love was not rejected. Hard hands were grabbing his hips, harder cock was rippling up his insides, he was moving and being moved. He saw the words on Vila's lips, the words that were never allowed to spill out.

Avon's eyes fell closed and his head fell back, rubbing, rubbing on the pillow as the cock inside him rubbed and rubbed on his prostate. He knew if he moved just—so—his cock would be caught between his own belly and Vila's, pressing it tight, pubic hair caressing it, flesh squeezing it. Perfect, it was perfect, and all the ecstasy was enfolded by the endless stream of words, by all the things that Vila always told him. Everything, apart

up like a mollusc in the bed beside him, all protective shell and ‘don’t look at me’. Separate now, they lay there, Avon listening to the silence, contemplating what had to be the most boring ceiling he had ever seen. As if it were mere chance or purest happenstance, his left hand moved a couple of inches, just enough for his little finger to touch Vila’s warmth, the tip of his hand tracing soothing circles in the small of Vila’s back.

“I’ve never asked you for anything, have I?” Vila asked him, answering the question himself. “Apart from help when I’ve come out of prison or needed something to tide me over till I recovered from an adjustment, right? What I mean, is, I’ve never asked you for nothing in bed. Apart from the usual push and pull, you know, do it this way, do that to me, that kind of thing. It’s not as if I’ve gone around and asked you to...”

“You’re babbling, Vila.”

“Sorry.” A long pause, only the dim light, the soft sound of breathing and the endless circling of Avon’s caress. “Listen, I know I’m steppin’ out of line, Kerr, and you don’t have to answer this—not that you would if you didn’t, of course—and I’m not going to ask you what’s been goin’ on these past few months an’ I’m not goin’ to start pokin’ my nose where it’s obviously not wanted nor nothing, but I want to ask you just one thing, all right?”

“Oh, you can ask anything you want.”

“As long as I don’t expect an answer, eh?”

“Ah, at last! So it is possible to teach an old dog new tricks.”

“Give over, Kerr. I’m trying to be serious here. Look, what I want to know is, and I’m not prying or anything, it’s not as if I’m trying to get the details—not that I’d want them even if you’d tell me, that is, mind—I just want to know,” and his little speech was flooding faster and faster, until he was almost gabbling it out, “Kerr, what does Blake call you in bed?”

There were so many answers he could give to that. Silence, or a list of darlings and sweethearts and my friends. But still, Vila deserved better than that, if only for being stupid enough to let him come back, no other questions asked. “He doesn’t,” Avon finally answered, just as Vila’s back had sagged with

defeat, “call me Kerr.”

A blur of motion, and Vila was wrapped around him, a blanket of hollow-eyed misery, clinging on for dear life—or a scrap of comfort. “Oh, Vila,” he muttered, hands full of a man trying so desperately hard not to cry, to not break, to be strong and not scream out all the feelings inside him, “why the hell do you have to love me?”

No answer to that, of course, just as there was no answer as to why Avon himself couldn’t love Vila. Oh, he was fond of him, he didn’t even consider denying that—not even to Vila himself. Had even said it, one night long, long ago. In the holding cells, actually, during the first act of this current farce he found himself living. Annoyed, he shifted position, only to have to shift again, as his move was misinterpreted by Vila. He couldn’t quite definitively decide which annoyed him most: his life, this unheard-of lack of control he had over aforementioned life, feeling this guilty about Vila (or about that stupid question on the flight deck—what did he know about guilt indeed!) or finally, Blake.

Fingers playing with the long silk of Vila’s hair, he thought about Blake, and where he was leading them, and what was in store for all of them, all because Blake ‘loved’ the masses.

“There are times, Vila,” he said, looking up, addressing himself as much as his companion, “when the only solution to all of this that I can see, is to pick up the nearest weapon and use it to get Blake.”

“Sounds reasonable to me,” and Avon could hear the very real resentment in those words. No hint of humour, but resentment and the confusion that they all seemed to feel over Blake.

“Tell me,” he said, a question for a question, “and I don’t want one of your feeble attempts at wit: why do you stay with Blake? With Star One and Travis and all the rest, when you are the least crusading person I ever met and the one most concerned with the good life—and a long one. Why do you stay with him?”

“But I don’t stay with him,” Vila said, rather surprised. “I stay with you.”

“Ah.” Not quite what he had wanted to

purring. Impossible to think, with Vila snoring like that, so obviously utterly content in the sweetest of dreams. So hard to stay awake and think about Blake and all the rest of it...

The sharply bright seed of knowledge lay ignored in the nurturing dark of Avon's mind, feeding on his fertile imagination, a pod waiting to burst upon him when least he expected it. And Avon, lulled by exhaustion and self-deception, slept on.

HE WAS ENTITLED TO RESENT BLAKE AS MUCH AS HE WANTED TO, IN HIS OPINION, NOT THAT ANYONE BUT HIMSELF EVER LISTENED TO HIS OPINION. Which just went to show what stupid bastards they all were, didn't it? In his opinion, which didn't matter.

Nothing mattered much, not really. So they were going to blow up Star One and kill billions of people. Not that you'd notice, not from watching that lot. He'd seen them get more worked up about where to go for a bit of a rest. But it made sense, he supposed. They were all either Alphas or alien, so what did they care if billions and billions of people died, eh? What did they care if what was left of Gan's family died of starvation because the weather control failed and they went back to the old cycle of drought and typhoon? Didn't give a toss, any of them, and why should Vila? All right, so he had seen holos of Gan's two kids—and he was willing to bet good money that none of the others even *knew* that Gan had had a family—and he'd got a sister and her three youngsters—two nieces and a nephew, twin girls with the prettiest smiles he'd ever seen—on a planet that needed the supply system to survive, but what did that matter?

Everything. That's how much it mattered. And he mattered nothing, nothing to say that the others would listen to, so he'd keep his mouth shut, pretend to be even stupider than usual, hide himself away in the biggest glass of soma he could get his hands on. Nice drop of stuff, soma. Made a man pleasantly numb, but not the way most booze does. Nah, this numbness was on the inside, where all the pain lived. Nice to be able to shut all the voices in his head up. Nice to stop them moaning at

him that he should do something.

As if he could do anything. He couldn't even keep Kerr—no, not Kerr. Didn't feel right calling him Kerr any more, not when he was sniffing round Blake like that. All right, so he couldn't even keep Avon in his bed, and as for getting the bastard to admit he loved him, well! Fairy dust and nonsense, his mum had always said. She'd never approved of Avon—never met him either—and she always said that Alphas were never anything but trouble. Hated Alphas, she did, although his Dad thought the sun shone out their backsides. And him, after living with them for almost two years?

His thoughts were interrupted by yet another acrimonious interchange between Avon and Blake, an argument that everyone knew had sweet f. a. to do with Star Fucking One. Neither one of them cared about what was going to happen. All they were interested in was their pathetic little power struggle. No sense, that was the problem with Alphas. They'd think some problem to death, and then go and miss the most obvious bit. Such as the obvious fact that there'd be no Earth to go to, if they destroyed Star One. Everyone knew about the geo-thermal controls, right? Everyone knew what would happen if they all failed at once, right? Ka-boom, the biggest fireworks display in the known Galaxy. He could hear the tour-guides now: 'We are entering the famous Terran Asteroid Belt, renowned for it's astonishing beauty. Underneath the beauty lies a tragedy. This was once a planet thriving with people'...

His people. His family, apart from his sister and her three. Mum, on her own now since Dad passed away, and that lout of a brother of his, and his sister and his baby brother. Poor Den, he'd never understand what was coming, not even if they had enough time to warn the people. But maybe that was the best way to be, if Earth was going to go, you know, a bit simple, like Den. He'd like to be the same as Den right now. He'd be able to stop thinking if he were...

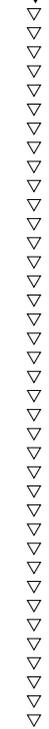
But perhaps there were safeguard controls on Earth, to take over if Star One failed? Maybe there would still be a planet left when Avon got his fucking ship and dumped Blake.



SUA CUIQUE VOLUPTAS

Everyone has his own pleasures. Time for a little light-hearted relief from all the emotional Sturm un Drang Avon and Blake seem to be putting us through. Lights Out is the final part of A Game of Tag, and the questions under consideration here are: will Vila have his revenge? Will it be pleasurable? And for whom? In Vino Veritas, on the other hand, has Avon wondering about pleasures already partaken of...

LIGHTS OUT A GAME OF TAG, PART III CAROLINE DARE



SMOKE CURLED ABOUT THE DIMLY LIT bar, only marginally more irritating than the choking odor of spilled alcohol and unwashed humans. Grimacing, Avon found a seat near the door where he could watch the patrons come and go and get a small measure of fresh air. A buxom serving woman, once handsome perhaps, but now long past the age and weight to flatter her brief costume, swung her way over to him and slapped a napkin on the table before him.

“Whatly’ave?” she rumbled in invitation.

Avon shook his head. “No drinks. I’m waiting for someone.”

She eyed him appraisingly. “Need a greaser ’r a mule?” she asked in a voice as rough as her surroundings.

“Pardon?” Avon couldn’t begin to guess what the terms were slang for on this misbegotten backwater planet.

“Sum’ought t’ grease yer privies, ’r sum’ ought fer nightwork?”

Someone to sleep with or someone shady for an illegal job, Avon translated to himself. “Neither, thank you.”

She grunted and swept up the napkin

she’d put down. “Ten fer table and chair, then. No loitering!”

Avon drew a fifty credit chit from his vest pocket and spun it lazily on the table. The woman’s eyes glittered greedily.

“Sure you don’t want a greaser? Got some pretty boys and girls upstairs. Very clean. See the doc every week.”

Any idle desire Avon might have felt died at that comment. “No,” he said firmly. “I’m trying to find a friend of mine. A Delta grade, average looking, with brown hair, short sideburns, not a very impressive hairline. He likes to drink odd concoctions and gets talkative. Friendly.”

“Ah, you be talkin’ bout Vila Restal, I wager,” the woman nodded sagely. “Left a coupler hours ago. Such a dear he were, givin’ handsome tips all night.”

Avon felt unreasonably disappointed. He’d known Vila had planned a bender the minute they set down for shore leave, but he’d hoped the thief would stay put in one place long enough for Avon to find him, before Vila became too incapacitated to explore other shoreleave activities.



back alleys of a port town. On the other hand, stepping blindly into a dark room held no great appeal either.

“Vila?” he called questioningly. No answer issued from within. Avon edged his way across the threshold, peering in to see if he could make out any detail of the room. The weak light from a distant street lamp did not penetrate more than a foot into the room. Avon took another step inside, sweeping his hand along the inner wall, seeking a light switch.

A big hand, hard and meaty, closed around his wrist. He yelped as it jerked him forward into the room and the door slammed shut behind him. Now he was truly blind. Avon lashed out but failed to connect with his assailant. A hand caught his ankle, dragging him off balance. He wasn’t hurt, for the floor seemed to be thickly padded, but he wuffed as a heavy form dropped onto him and quickly wrestled him to his stomach, pinning him in place. The strong hands pulled his wrists around behind his back, fastening them together securely with flexible strapping bands.

“Now you’re going to be quiet,” a low masculine voice whispered in his ear. “Keep quiet and you won’t have to get hurt. Understand?”

He nodded quickly, unable to breathe against the weight on his back. His captor must have worn nightlenses, for the nod was accepted and the weight on his back eased off. Avon drew a few cautious deep breaths, trying in vain to calm his thudding heart as adrenaline coursed through his system. He pulled tautly at the straps about his wrists, discovering them too tough to tear open. He ventured to get up but the hand pushed him flat again, then a booted foot kicked his legs apart.

“Help me search him,” the low voice rumbled. One set of hands held him still as another pair patted and rifled his clothing. So there were at least two of them. And how many others might lurk out there in the darkness, waiting and watching?

“Got a gun in his waistband,” a softer male voice reported. “Feels like a knife or something in his boot, too.”

“Get them off. Take the belt, too.”

There was a fumbling at his waist and his belt slid free, then his boots were yanked off and tossed aside. Avon did not resist. He strained in the dark silence to pick up any clues to his attackers.

“Do you know what we’re going to do with you?” the deep voice whispered by his ear again, close enough for the man’s breath to tickle at his hairline. A hand, warm and large, pressed firmly over the swell of his crotch, fingers curling inward to cup under his scrotum. Avon started, but still offered no resistance, waiting warily for the first chance to escape.

“Tell him now,” the second voice urged.

“No, let him wonder a bit longer.”

“We made out point. Don’t want to scare him out of all usefulness.”

“Mmmm, all right.” And then an all-too-familiar voice, no longer disguised, chortled, “Tag, Avon, you’re it!”

Avon choked.

“Blake?!”

“And me,” Vila’s voice put in. “You did say you’d like to try it in the dark sometime. Gave me all sorts of ideas.”

Avon’s thoughts sped from shock to fury, but then his anger gave way to a grudging admiration for the elegant simplicity of the trap he’d landed in. He sighed deeply and struggled into a sitting position.

“Very good,” he acknowledged dryly. “I suppose we’re even now. I do think it was cheating though, having Blake help you.” He addressed his comments through the darkness in the direction of Vila’s voice.

“More of a collaborative effort,” came Blake’s genial reply. “I thought Vila could use a hand disciplining you. That was a bit harsh, what you put him through last time.”

“I don’t dish out anything I wouldn’t take myself,” Avon refuted.

“Yes, we thought you’d say that. Ready to take your medicine, then?” Blake challenged.

“It would take a better man than you to make me back down,” Avon sniffed. He turned his head sightlessly, trying to track Blake’s movements. “Turn the lights on; I’ll put you both out!”

“Hear him!” Vila scoffed. “He thinks we don’t know how to handle his sort. Spoilt little



of his surroundings. He sighed and leaned in to brush his cheek alongside Blake's, but a heavy hand caught the back of his neck and forced his head down. His first thought was that they meant for him to suck them, and he wondered how they intended to secure his cooperation. But the gag in his mouth remained, and he was merely sprawled face down across Blake's lap. Two meaty hands pinned him down, one clasping over his thigh, the other pressing down between his bound wrists, on the small of his back. Under him, Blake's legs spread and shifted, allowing Avon's phallus to drop between them before they closed together again, trapping the organ between hard slabs of muscle. Avon swallowed nervously, wondering how tightly those thick legs could squeeze. A thin trickle of saliva spilled past his gag, the bulk of the bit in his teeth making swallowing difficult.

"Ready, Vila."

Avon started as the thief's hand caressed his goose-fleshed bottom.

"Nervous, Avon?" the thief taunted. "Pity you can't see yourself right now. You look so *vulnerable*. Very pretty, too. I always thought you made your best impression arse-side up."

Avon made a muffled remark into the gag, faintly decipherable as "Go stuff yourself."

Vila continued, unruffled. "We've been talking, Blake and me, and we agreed you've been a naughty little computer technician and you need to be...what was it, Blake? Chastised, that was it. Chastened, if not very chaste," the thief chuckled merrily. "Now, 'cos, I'm such a nice fella, I'm gonna give you a choice. You can give it up now, give in like a proper humble little sod, and beg for mercy, and I might just take pity on you, providing you make yerself pitiful enough. Or, you can take your punishment like a man, and be able to look us in the eye when all this is over."

Avon made another disparaging remark into the gag.

"Yeah, I thought you'd choose that way. Hold him tight, Blake."

There was a whistling sound, and just as Avon wondered where he'd heard the familiar whine before, a smack of fire burst over his arse, running in a narrow stinging line across

both cheeks.

"That's one, Avon. I'll keep count for you, seeing as how you're inconvenienced right now."

The whip whistled through the darkness again, laying another fiery stripe across his buttocks.

"Two."

Avon squirmed on Blake's lap, unable to escape the stinging blows, but unable to keep still for them either. The lashes flared across his quivering form. His cheeks began to throb along the strike lines. He tried to cover himself with his hands, but they wouldn't reach down far enough. Blake wouldn't let him move much anyway. But Blake was moving. He was slowly squeezing his legs together, compressing Avon's cock, then relaxing and rubbing his thighs up and down the lengthening column of flesh between them. Avon groaned into the gag, thrusting his cock deeper into the haven of Blake's thighs as snaps of pain rained over his upthrust arse.

"Twelve."

How long would it go on, the tech wondered. He'd whipped Vila thirty lashes before; did the thief mean to even the score? Or maybe exceed it? Avon's heart gave a skip at the realization that there was nothing he could do to stop the man if Vila chose to wax vengeful. But Blake would stop him, wouldn't he? *Wouldn't he?* Avon shivered in uncertainty.

"Twenty."

Vila's hand cupped over him again, tracing softly over the throbbing heat of the whipping lines.

"You should see yourself," the thief sighed lovingly. "All that blood rushing to the surface. Really stands out with these infrared lenses. Looks like you put on little red panties. Ah, missed a spot here." The whip slashed down again and Avon jumped, nearly losing his cock to the clenched grip of Blake's thighs.

"Twenty one. Yeah, you're warming up nicely."

As the hand stroked his arse Avon heard the faint squidge of something viscus squeezing through a tube. Sniffing, he thought he could smell something oily. The hand lingered near his anus, a finger circling



probingly over the clenched entry.

“Let’s see how warm you are inside...”

Avon held his breath as the finger pried him open, rubbing cold slickness into the opening. The oily smell intensified. He squeezed his eyes shut in reflex, though his world was just as black as with them open. There existed only sounds, smells, tactile sensations: the throb of aching buns, the feel of being held and touched, the rasp of skin rubbing skin, the smell of the lubricant and the men close to him, the dull taste of the bit in his mouth. In a world without vision, his other senses crowded the void with their loud, limited information.

“Hold him tighter, Blake. I’m going to use my hand for the rest of these.”

The grip on his thigh and back grew heavier, forcing Avon’s cock deeper into the join of Blake’s legs. The stiff finger up his arse dug deeper as well, prodding him to tilt his cheeks up for the final flurry of punishment. Then the solid smack of an open palm shook his buttocks, flaring pain where it covered tender whip marks. The heavy hand came down again on the same area, and Avon gave his first yelp of protest.

“...Twenty four. Starting to squirm, eh?” Again the slap of an open palm against fleshy surface, again the burst of stinging sparks across his arse. Avon groaned softly, rolling his hips within the limited give of Blake’s grasp. The finger in him twitched against his prostate, and Avon drew in a hissed breath of appreciation. The contrast of pleasure and discomfort maddened him as Vila continued both the spanking and the probing.

And then the heaviest blow came, one hard and driving enough to make him arch back and bellow with the pain. The stiff finger in him bore up strongly, compressing his prostate gland with enough force to stimulate its discharge. The gag swallowed Avon’s second shout as come shot from his straining cock, slicking Blake’s surrounding thighs.

“Thirty,” Vila breathed in the stillness that followed. “Now we’re even, Avon. Now we can start having fun with you.”

Avon shook his head limply. Oh, they’d got him this time. There would be no easy escape. The gag was not removed, the bindings on his

wrists and ankles were not untied. The lights stayed extinct, imprisoning his senses in claustrophobic void.

He was tumbled from Blake’s lap to lie alone on the mats as something heavy was dragged his way. Then he was abruptly grabbed and hoisted over a barrel-shaped object, arse high on the crest, his head hanging down over the other side. The barrel smelled of wood and lanolin, and the portion he was laid across had been covered with something soft and furry. A scrap of carpet? Sheepskin? Vespa fur? He burrowed his face in the softness, sniffing at the musky odor.

Hands pushed and prodded at him, aligning his cock with a snug hole in the barrel’s surface, then stuffing it through to dangle down into the emptiness of the barrel’s interior. Hands unfastened the straps at his ankles, parting his legs to retie them to new restraints fixed on the floor. They released his arms from behind his back as well, letting him stretch out the cramp a minute before securing his wrists to new straps on the sides of the barrel. He pulled tentatively at the restraints, feeling a small shiver of vulnerability at his inability to close his legs or pull away. Did this excite them as much as it did him? It must. He did not need vision to know how invitingly splayed open they’d arranged him.

A finger trailed up his leg from instep to inner thigh. He tensed as it teased about his balls. Then the blunt smoothness of hard male flesh pressed at him. A heavy cock rubbed along the crease of his arse, dipping down to squeeze slowly in between his thighs. His breathing quickened.

“Do you feel me, Avon?” Blake spoke softly from above him. “Do you feel how hard you’ve made me?”

Avon moaned into his gag as the heavy organ stroked along his thighs. He could measure the thickness of it as it pressed between his legs, feel the weight glide up and down the crease of his buttocks.

“That’s what’s going inside you, Avon. All that stiff cock sliding up your arsehole, and you just drooling to feel it.”

Blake’s finger—or was it Vila’s?—bore confidently through his clenched entry. He sighed at the intrusion, tensing at the stiff



slender probe, then relaxing his muscles as it massaged him internally, spreading lubricant in preparation for the larger probe to follow. A second finger twitched its way in, pulling at the pursed orifice in opposition to the first finger, stretching open a gaping mouth to swallow Blake's maleness.

The heavy organ nuzzled up between his cheeks, its velvet skin stretched taut with rigidity. He felt pressure, then a change in heat as it stoppered his opening, slowly bulging past the guarding ring of muscle to slide up inside him.

Avon groaned loudly, the sound spilling over the gag in his teeth as he pulled at his wrist restraints. It seemed to take an eternity, the steady deliberate penetration awakening every buried nerve in Avon's vitals. Blake paused halfway in, then began a corkscrewing motion back and forth as he slowly sank his length the rest of the way inside Avon's writhing form. The weight of him pressed down on Avon, cramming the base of the tech's cock down through the knothole in the barrel.

After enduring such long and terrible craving for just this satisfaction, Avon nearly sobbed at the aching goodness of Blake's inward thrusts. He'd never felt so pulled apart and filled, his passage stretched impossibly wide and stuffed with swollen flesh.

A hand caught hold of his cock inside the barrel. Avon gasped and jerked back in alarm, trying reflexively to free himself. It was too late. Blake was full up him, pinning him into place, and his own cock was trapped tight by the knothole itself, too swollen with new arousal to fit back through.

The hand pulled at his tender flesh a moment, making him fear an assault on his unprotected phallus, but then moist smoothness caressed him instead. Lips trembled over the hypersensitive flesh, —and oh—little flicks from the tongue poking through them. It was excruciating heaven.

Above him Blake still rocked slowly, keeping his cock plumped inside the captive computer tech. The flexing motions grew longer, withdrawing the firm staff from its slick sheath then sliding home again. Avon's legs strained to keep his arse upright for the reaming, his

toes digging into the yielding surface of the mats for added support. The ankle cuffs kept him from closing his legs together even a fraction, denying him any real leverage to move. Loving the helplessness, the submission to their lewd attentions, he twisted and groaned as Blake kept up his rhythmic thrusting.

A warm wet tongue laved over Avon's shaft, the caress seeming to come out of the same void as the thick rod pumping up his passage. Avon shivered to its touch. He wanted to beg for more, for those anonymous hands and mouths and cocks to enfold him, to fill the vacuum in his gullet, to encompass his own cock and bring him again to completion. But the gag kept him mute, a vessel with all thought and feeling bottled tightly inside. Those thoughts, those feelings, swelled without outlet until Avon thought he must burst from the pressure inside him; and still Blake's cock thrust within him, as Vila's mouth closed over his straining shaft and started to gently suck.

Avon began to whimper, a tiny high moan at the top of his throat, breathed out his nose. He was flush with sensation, aching from the desire for release. The little sound seemed to spur Blake to harder and faster strokes, each forward snap driving Avon up off his feet, with only the cuffs to stop him from being thrust over the back of the barrel. His balls were mashed and bounced on the furry covering of the barrel as Blake's loins smacked rhythmically against his reddened arse, and his cock was driven repeatedly through Vila's nursing mouth. He was trapped between the two, the driving staff up his backside and the tongue slavering at his isolated cock.

The sensation soared upward and out, cresting with shattering force to make Avon scream and convulse. His body shook, fingers clenching, back arching, as a wave of pleasure crashed through him. Liquid pleasure burst from his rigid staff, to be swallowed away by the wet vacuum of Vila's mouth while the heavy cock inside him hammered the last drops of seminal fluid from his prostate.

Avon whimpered and twitched slightly as the final spasms flared and died away. He was purged, cleansed, all desire sated, all



IN VINO VERITAS

CALLY DONIA

HE SHOULDN'T HAVE DONE IT, HE KNEW HE SHOULDN'T HAVE DONE IT. Of course, at this point, he wasn't sure what it was he had done, but whatever it was, he knew he shouldn't have. Which left him lying in the dark, the fetid murk of his mind trying to work out not only what the hell it was that he had done that he really shouldn't have, but also such minor details as where the hell he was—and who the hell was in bed with him. For if there was one thing of which he was absolutely certain, it was that he was not alone. Not by a long chalk, judging by the heat and the bulk he could sense behind himself. He considered turning over to see who it was, but that involved several truly unpleasant options, not least of which was the matter of discovering with whom, precisely, he had done whatever it was he shouldn't have done. Whatever that was...

Tentatively, he moved his head on the pillow—pillow? Yes, definitely a pillow, definitely a bed, albeit altogether too narrow, definitely some very peculiar bedding. Not to mention the bedmate...—and discovered that his head didn't fall off when he moved, nor did a horde of tap-dancing michelin-men start hobnailing it about. So, whatever it was he shouldn't have done, although he had been stupid enough to get drunk enough that he had done 'it', whatever 'it' was, he hadn't been so stupid as to get drunk without first taking a very effective hangover cure first. The main drawback of that, of course, was the fact that it left his entire body rather pleasantly numb, which left him rather pleasantly unaware of whatever the hell his body had been up to the night before. This being the morning after, however, he was beginning to wonder if it might not be better for his state of mind if his body were in slightly worse condition. If that were the case, then at least a discreet squirm or two would give him some idea of whatever it was that he *had* done that he *shouldn't*

have. So, no obvious physical signs, bar the recognisable vagueness that was a hangover—that-wasn't. He knew he should feel as sick as a dead parrot, but the medicine had blocked that. He knew that his head should feel as if it were going to fall off—but all he had was the uncomfortable sensation that several screws were loose. And all of them had to do with last night.

He felt like a child locked in his bedroom at night, with an aggressively raucous grown-ups' party going on in the living room. He dreaded it, even though he had no idea what it was. He really should turn over. Really, he ought to. Get it over with. After all, how terrible could it be? All right, so he had got drunk—inward, horrified cringe at that—and fucked someone. What was so awful about that? Backtrack, he thought to himself, go back over yesterday evening. Spacefall early evening local time, mid-afternoon our time. Mindless morons in endless meetings, then I got rid of Blake and went out to sample what passes for night life—if you get so drunk you go blind. Pub, with Jenna and Gan and Vila. Cally hovering round, as she will, some drinks, lots of chit-chat, more drinks, even Cally getting rather merry, more drinks and then...

He couldn't remember. There was something, and then nothing, and then waking up here. The bit in the middle was a cypher to him. Well, he'd always been embarrassingly good at puzzles, so let's go through this piece by piece. Drinks, in that pub that would have been called 'charmingly rustic' on a civilised planet, but which was the height of sophistication on this back-water mudball. Then...Oh, yes, then there was that. Walking along the boring street, arm-in-arm with what some ignorant, unsophisticated observers might have called drunken camaraderie. With Vila singing solo, until Jenna had joined in with that song about the dong with



the luminous nose and where he'd shoved it and what had happened when... Well, it had seemed funny and sexy at the time. That was when... Oh, bloody hell, what had happened next? He rubbed his face into the pillow, trying to clear the muddiness from his mind. The magic pills might get rid of every symptom imaginable, but they couldn't do a damned thing for the fuzziness of the mouth or the mind. He struggled—rather lethargically, his brain at least half dead—through the gauze and then the next part came back to him.

The Brothel. Groaning, he wished, most fervently, that his mind had remained what was now looking like a very comforting blank. Oh, yes, then had come the brothel. With Jenna doing a strip on the table and—

He had, hadn't he? He'd poured champagne—or fizzy grape juice, it being a local product—all over her, so that everyone could lick it off her. And everyone had. Jenna. God, he had fucked Jenna. Well now, no-one was going to be surprised by that, were they? Apart from himself, of course. Jenna. It could be worse, he supposed. At least she was intelligent and strong, independent, forceful—had great tits. Yes, it could be worse. Jenna wouldn't be after him to father her children, wouldn't be looking for a long-term commitment—for that matter, Jenna probably wouldn't even be looking for a second go. He tended to be embarrassingly enthusiastic when drunk. But then, Jenna was the athletic type, not to mention inventive and adventurous. And as he had mentioned before, she was very forceful. He could still remember the day on the flight deck when Vila, with a mouth bigger than space itself and never as empty, had asked her how she would describe herself in bed. "Dominant," she'd said, and he had almost been able to feel every cock in the room spring to attention. He flexed a little, but he couldn't feel anything, let alone whether or not Jenna had plyed any little specialities on him.

But... Something was missing, apart from his memory. That was it: Jenna's perfume. It wasn't there, and it wasn't the kind of thing you could avoid noticing. How they ever managed to get past guards was beyond him—you could always smell Jenna before

you saw her coming. So it wasn't Jenna then. Which left the question begging: if it wasn't Jenna, then who the hell was it? He was tempted to roll over, but if he wanted to see whoever it was he had done whatever it was that he shouldn't have done it at all with, then he would have to put the light on. Which would probably waken whoever it was, and that was *definitely* something he shouldn't do. The last thing he wanted was to face someone in the moment when he learned who it was: one might reveal all sorts of things that one really didn't want revealed. Such as shock that one had actually gone to bed with whoever it was he had gone to bed with. He didn't much fancy his chances if Cally were to see his horrified shock if he'd gone to bed with her. Worst thing about sleeping with Cally was that you couldn't keep your mind out of the bedroom. She was more interested in cerebral knowledge than carnal knowledge, which was fine—in a person who wasn't a telepath and who wasn't sleeping with Avon.

But...hadn't Cally gone off with that tall dark-haired woman? The one with the gorgeous rump? He thought she had... Oh, yes, that comment Vila had made, the one that had gone right to his head—the head he kept in his trousers, that was right: Cally had gone off with the brunette, and Jenna... Now what had Jenna done? He pondered this for quite some time, rebuilding the few sotted fragments he could come up with. Ah, yes. Jenna. And the entire crew from the spacers' transport. Ah, yes, Jenna, a woman of enormous taste and even more enormous libido. Not to mention stamina. He could feel himself beginning to droop at the mere thought of it all.

But drooping like a wall flower wasn't getting him any nearer to solving his puzzle. And unless he wanted to confront his bedmate all unprepared and therefore vulnerable, he had better work out who the hell he was with—and what it was he had done. Without knowing why, he cringed at that, which made him all the more nervous. What the hell had he done that his mind was being as coy as a maiden with a lace fan, trying to hide the details from him—whilst dying a death of embarrassment at the very mention of last night?



and lots and lots of them, he thought with a sudden burst of self pity, imagining himself trying to make Blake see sense and having Blake repeat back one the the really idiotic things that one was prone to saying in the heat of the moment. Or the heat of the body. He did get on the maudlinly romantic side when actually inside another person's body, but at least that would still be better than having been fucked by Blake. He couldn't believe it. Not Blake. Surely, even drunk, he wouldn't have been insane enough to have let Blake fuck him.

But then, he reminded himself with scrupulous and vindictive honesty, you did ask for it. Literally. Remember? And unfortunately, he did. He had been so sure of himself, so convinced that it was *such* a good idea. Just waltz up there, seduce Blake, fuck him into oblivion, being as dominant and macho and supercilious as possible, force Blake to admit to having latent desires and even more importantly, latent respect, for Avon himself and...

He'd bumped into Blake when he'd wandered off on his own after the others had all found companions for the night, and lain in wait until Blake was available—in more ways than one. All the Dutch courage he'd imbibed had gone to his head, numbing his brain as surely as if it were already dead and swimming quite mindlessly in formaldehyde. Oh, no, he muttered inwardly, I didn't actually say *that*, did I? Oh, but he had, as his rising blush proved. To have been so...so...adolescent, at his age, and with his experience behind him, and with his reputation—and to have said it to *Blake!* A fate worse than death, indeed.

At least Blake didn't have a big mouth like Vila, who would have broadcast it all over the ship and half the known worlds while he was at it. But then, the queasiness in his stomach reminded him, Blake had used all that inside information he had on Jenna to keep Jenna very sweet—or as sweet as Jenna was ever inclined to be. And everyone, but everyone, knew all about Blake and Avalon. And Fionulla. And Morag. And...

Perhaps he could hang himself before Blake woke up. Instead of taking such dire—not to mention permanent—action, he frowned,

trying to remember what he had said after he had...persuaded Blake to come back up to the ship with him. It was all a disturbingly murky greyish-brown colour, as if he'd had his eyes shut the entire time. But... Now there was an interesting thing, a peculiar little awareness that was slithering down his spine like a lecher's paw: anger. Now why the hell was he angry at Blake? No, nothing so banal nor mild as merely angry. He was furious, absolutely bloody furious. Spitting tacks. Blood boiling. Any number of phrases would do, as long as they were suitably violent. Curious, he probed at it with all the skill and finesse of a surgeon, and when that didn't work, he went at it like a bull in a china shop. And when that didn't work, he did the only thing available to him in the circumstances. He got even angrier. Blake, being his typical bloody self, had obviously done something truly iniquitous, but then, that was par for the course and he'd been a fool to expect anything else.

And he hated being made a fool.

Which meant that Blake was going to pay for whatever it was that Blake had done last night that Blake was about to learn that he really shouldn't have done. Just as soon as he remembered what it was that Blake shouldn't have done, he'd kill him. Slowly. Now there was a tremendously comforting thought. It had rather a nice ring to it, a pretty irony, the getting back at Blake for whatever it was that they had both done. It served the conniving bastard right for all the other things he'd done that Avon hadn't been able to wreak revenge upon him for. He was going to enjoy this—especially as blaming Blake left him free to completely ignore his own part in the whole débâcle. It was quite fair, really, if you looked at it from the right point of view—i.e. Avon's, and excluding Blake's. There were far too many times Blake had got off scot free, but he'd get him for this, whatever 'this' was.

It was ridiculous, he stoked his righteous anger, for Blake to take advantage of his lapse from grace, which was a nice way of avoiding the fact that it was Avon who had set out to seduce Blake in the first place. Deciding to seduce someone was hardly grounds for—whatever it was that Blake had done. Avon

squirmed a bit at the thought, an uneasy awareness crawling through his skull like lice. Perhaps Blake hadn't been entirely at fault here.

So? Why should he let that stop him? After all, Blake had never let a minor detail such as fairness stop him before, why should Avon be any different? Why should I be any different from Blake—apart from the principle of the matter, very few things in life being worse than being the same as Blake. Apart, of course, from being fucked by the megalomaniac bastard. Oh, why, why, why had he conceived the notion of proving his point to Blake in bed? His cock twitched, putting in its own potent reminder. Apart from that, he said to himself. And if he'd been so appallingly randy that he would have considered sleeping with Blake, why not simply reduce the frustration by fucking Vila? As both Delta and thief, Vila was well used to servicing people, so why not simply take him in hand, so to speak.

Because I like him, his honesty piped up before he could strangle it. Because I like him. Be that as it may, he answered, that's no reason to be nice to the little snot, is it? In fact, liking someone was the best reason he knew for backing off at a rate of knots and running off to the farthest star. After Anna... Well, after Anna, he hadn't been up to much, in more ways than one, and the drugs in the prison food hadn't exactly helped. That was probably a lot of what was wrong, he consoled himself, telling himself that it was all because the drugs had finally lapsed out of his system and let his libido kick in—with a vengeance, not to mention a really sick sense of humour, considering that he had gone after Blake. What on earth had possessed him? Being drunk obviously gave besotted an entirely new meaning. But Blake. How could he have let it be Blake? And how could he have come up with such an insanity, drunk or sober?

Perhaps because he'd always had a weakness for big, burly men with masses of curls and a smooth chest and soft skin and large hands and hung like a horse and... He was beginning to wish his brain was still drunk, or at least unconscious. The last thing he wanted to do was succumb to a litany of

Blake's charms. Eyes still closed, he considered that possibility, examining it from every angle he could think of, a probability square of the mind. Was he succumbing to Blake? Falling in love with him?

Well? Was he?

His cock twitched again, whilst his mind and heart remained impassive. Thank god, thought the atheist, I was getting worried for a minute there. Lust I can deal with. Lust I know and like and lust is something I can control. Apart, an awkward confession twinged through him, from when I'm drunk and do something I know I shouldn't have done, even if I don't know what it is that I've done. Yet—a circumstance that he was absolutely certain that Blake would be more than anxious to reverse. I'm sure that Blake will be quick enough to regale me with every salacious fact—suitably embroidered with puerile crudeness, just to make it *really* entertaining. But if he thinks I'm going to just lie here, waiting here for him to deign to tell me what I did—his *version* of what I did—when I did whatever it was I really shouldn't have done. Although I have some rather unpleasantly prurient ideas of what it was that I got up to. But I'll be damned if I shall lie here on tenterhooks whilst Blake snores his way through *my* life.

They say that defence is the better part of valour, but in Avon's book, attack was better than defence any day of the week. Especially the morning after the night before. Umbrage in full flight, he slapped the light switch on and turned round to give Blake a very sharp piece of his mind and the even sharper edge of his tongue and found—

—Vila. Who was wide eyed, wide awake and really not what Avon had been expecting at all. "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

"Oh, that's nice, that is. It's *my* fucking bed, that's what I'm doing here." he glowered his disappointment at Avon. "But chance'd be a fine thing, wouldn't it?"

Attack was still better than defence, although there was a certain amount of lingering alcohol induced stupidity that not even the finest hangover medicine could cure. But regardless of the evidence right in front of his eyes, Avon would have sworn blind that he'd



“All my fault?” Avon snapped, outraged that Vila should be so unfair—after all, it was, as everything else was, all *Blake’s* fault, surely. “Because you can’t control your animal instincts, you—”

“I can’t control? *I* can’t control? Who was it what came in to who last night, eh? You tell me that. Wasn’t me, was it, oh no, it was you, Mister Fancy Alpha. It was you who was shouting and moaning about Blake falling asleep before you could fuck him, wasn’t me making a proper charlie out of myself.”

It is very difficult to sneer down one’s nose at someone, when said someone is leaning over one and one is lying flat on one’s back in someone else’s bed, fielding complaints about one’s sexual talents. Difficult, certainly, but nothing was impossible for Avon. “And if I were,” he answered, feeling decidedly stung and very hard-done-by from the pointed and legitimate complaints, his pride drooping alarmingly, “it is only because you are contagious. You accuse me of making a fool of myself—how, when there was no-one else here to see me but you?”

It was as if he had stuck a pin in a balloon, Vila deflating to defeat with a suddenness that was enough to make even Avon feel like a heel. “Yeah?” Vila was saying, all bravado and braggadocio. “Yeah, well, you made so big a fool of yourself, you’d’ve been a complete and total fool even if you were the last man alive.”

“If you were here, I’d still be the last man left alive, wouldn’t I?” But his conscience was tut-tutting at him, doing a rather unfortunately excellent impersonation of his maiden aunt. And when all was said and done—or not done, as the case might be, looking at last night—Vila really didn’t deserve to bear the brunt of his bruised pride and horrified embarrassment. He would rather, much rather, save that for later, and Blake...

“I didn’t get any complaints last night, which is more than I can say for you, isn’t it?” muttered Vila, the dig undoing all of Avon’s fledgling good intentions, whilst he bolstered his pride by refusing to give in completely, despite his much-vaunted and frequently displayed cowardice.

“Considering the inspiration available,”

Avon retorted, taking a leaf out of Vila’s book and refusing to give in completely, although in his case, it had a lot more to do with pride than cowardice, “it’s hardly surprising I wasn’t exactly chomping at the bit.” He was quite pleased with himself, rather enjoying this decidedly *déclassé* interchange, all the more pleased because at least in Vila, he had someone who could give as good as he got—well, almost. Better, certainly, than Blake, who had a truly nasty habit of hitting the nail on the head—in public. Vila now, well Vila... He lay back down, looking at the other man, noticing his eyes, and the crinkle of smiles that lingered on his face, as if just waiting for the fun to begin again. Vila really wasn’t all that bad, if you were willing to concede that the right background and education weren’t everything. Vila at least always gave a man enough room to manoeuvre. Always gave a man his due, said the wrong thing at the right time so that Avon could sort them all out. Unlike Blake, who wanted to dissolve him into the casserole mess of the bloody Cause. And then fell asleep on him, just when Avon had decided to seduce the bastard. He did, of course, without so much as a blink, ignore the fact that he had done something of the same to Vila...

Who was looking at him, as expectant as a broody hen. It appeared that he had missed something, some pearl of wisdom. No, he thought, erase that adage. I’m no swine, although perhaps Vila would argue the point with me. And he would be right, poor idiot. But he asks for it, and so well, too. So inviting, all his ignorances and witticisms—and here we must use the term at its very loosest—and sarcasms. Entertaining, if nothing else, and when all one had to look forward to was either being killed by the Federation or Blake’s good intentions, a little entertainment could go a long way. And to give credit where credit was due, Vila did have a knack for making all this nightmare seem as if it were purely temporary, a minor aberration on the way to a life filled with an excess of riches and an embarrassment of vices. Larcenous little bastard, he thought with a smile. He’d steal the gold from a corpse—but say sorry whilst he did it. Charming, really, in his own way, and those



silence from his bedmate. Vila was sitting up on his knees, cock a rampant sentinel rising up from between his thighs as if to guard the softness of the belly. Hard cock, tremors of tightly-packed desire, but fear, oh such fear and such pain in those eyes. And would I have ended up looking at Blake like that, Avon thought. Would I have ended up feeling as if I were nothing more than an acolyte at an altar or a pathetic worshipper at the feet of the big, straight man?

“What about me?” Vila was asking, cock weeping whilst his eyes stayed dry. “What about me?”

“Well now, you are only a Delta,” Avon began, seeing as every word hammered into Vila like a nail, whilst a part of him regarded this much power with curiosity. “And one shouldn’t expect a mere Delta to know this,

but the saying is,” and he smiled, letting all his charm and affection and reciprocal desire show, throwing Blake and repercussions out the window with a fine disregard for reality, “if at first you don’t succeed—”

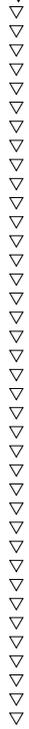
“Then,” said Vila, and Avon smiled as his favourite idiot bounced across the bed towards him and sighed as Avon wrapped him in his arms and let him begin to thrust them together, beginning the rebuilding of lust, “try, try again.”

And they did, even though they got it right on the first attempt. And later, much, much later, when he finally awoke in a room that was redolent with their spent passion, Avon realised that he not only knew what he had done, but that he was absolutely positive that he should have.





F INEM RESPICE



Look to the end. Sound advice for anyone about to take an irreversible step. The stories in this section take place after Orbit, close to the final doom of Gauda Prime. And Dreaming, Awake speculates that a single action or response might have avoided the inevitability of G.P. Caveat Emptor, however, considers venery in a most appropriate setting with Avon aware of what his choice to commit to Blake will bring...

AND DREAMING, AWAKE EMMA SCOT

IN HIS BED HE LAY, A BIER OF PIL-
lows and cushions and great billowing ha-
vens of silk, colours blended and merging
exquisitely to do shame to the rainbow that
spawned them. For himself, of course, there
was only black, the union of every hue that
could be, commingled into a shroud for him
alone.

But the door opened and his mausoleum
was breached, light and life breathing in to
touch him. He could see it, as he lay there,
staring up at the other, the word Dayna had
spoken written in brown eyes that had known
him far longer and far better than he had ever
known himself. The comfort of ages was gone
from those brown eyes, now, but for the
moment, for this instant, the brightness was
back and Vila gazed down upon him with
something akin to the old love he had grown
so very accustomed to seeing. Akin, yes, that
was the word. Akin. They were family, now, in
a way, in a sense, where all other bonds and
ties had withered or been hacked by butcher's
knives. Or ripped out by the roots, poison to
make the roots writhe inside him, as Anna
had been.

Bartolomew.

He saw the name echo in Vila's eyes as he
had seen the word Dayna had given him
written there, and then the old loving was
back, the old feelings, no longer merely akin
to what had once been, but there in full
measure. Life, fluttering, stirred in his heart
and his blood beat, once, twice, slowly,
sluggishly, the reluctance of the mind
shackling the body to its will. But Vila saw, of
course, would always see the slightest breath
of warmth in him, would answer it, would fan
it, fuel it and yes! Vila was there. Vila was with
him, had come back to him...

A smile there was, all he had left in him now
to give to Vila, this smile that betokened a love
of which he had never spoken. For how could
he speak, when he knew nothing of it himself?
Oh, yes, he so quick to see love in others, he
so quick to see that fiery weakness when
others succumbed to it for him, but always as
slow as the dead to see it in himself. Long it
had slumbered in him, the lazy comfort of a
summer cat, only to stretch itself too late.
Too, too late...

But Vila, ah, dear Vila, was approaching



the fittest. Not his fault, most definitely not his fault. If Tarrant and Soolin had bothered to put a bit of effort in, Servalan would have come as no surprise. He would have known in advance, could have outfoxed her, hood-winked Egrorian and come back with not only the Tachyon Funnel, but with Servalan's head on a platter.

He could just imagine Tarrant's face, if he'd done that. What a very satisfying picture, he thought, leaning back into the succulent heat of the bath, sighing as some of the ever-increasing tension unravelled itself from his muscles. Oh, yes, Tarrant's face would have been worth a thousand words—he must tell Vila, make him laugh at the thought of his nemesis sagging in heart-broken grief at the sight of his lover's head...

Perhaps it wasn't such a pleasant thought after all. Wouldn't do to give Vila ideas, wouldn't do at all. And he was no longer so sure of his position with his thief as once he had been. Not sure at all. There was, he confessed, a reason why he'd taken to both sleeping with multiple alarm systems on and to leaving enough wine lying around the base to incapacitate the average elephant—or inebriate a certain hollow-legged thief of his acquaintance. Involuntarily, he smiled at that, remembering the night he and Vila had had sex for the first time. Drunken excess was such an effective excuse for an Alpha, so convenient in fact that it had been he to suggest a drinking contest between the two of them, never for one second in doubt as to which one of them would win. Him, of course. Oh, Vila would consume far more alcohol, but with barriers lowered, with excuses copiously provided, Avon had had his chance to try the thief without getting into anything that could later prove awkward.

Not that it had been. Vila's idea of demanding had been to have more sex more often, and that was the kind of demand Avon could live with quite comfortably. Preferably when it was, as it had been, with nary a string attached. Well, none visible, anyway. None that he had seen until it was all far too late. Typically bloody stupid of Vila, though, to let things go on like that, never really—not really, not irrefutably—letting on that it was more

than casual relief for himself. If only the idiot had told him, he'd have...

Laughed, he thought ruefully, sinking below the surface of the water, the fragrance of cedar and sandalwood seeping into him. There were no two ways about it, he'd have laughed, then chased Vila for his life. Not that anyone could have blamed him, of course. After all, it would have been the height of stupidity to fall into that particular trap of emotionalism, considering they were being chased hither and thither over the Galaxy by foes too numerous to mention. Although Servalan did rather spring to mind. No, who could possibly take him to task for staying true to form and being sensible and smart and altogether in control of himself. Pity, he considered, that the Universe—and Vila—hadn't been so restrained. But then again, he thought as he watched the water sliding down his body to puddle at his feet, droplets clinging here and there to catch the shimmer of light only to fade as the heater dried him off, he wasn't so sure that he would have wanted to have done without seeing that soft expression in Vila's eyes at the end of some particularly mindless mission. Wouldn't have wanted to do without Vila's silent acceptance and tacit affection waiting for him to cuddle into, to take the sting of the day away. Wouldn't have wanted to do without the spectacular sex.

Wouldn't have wanted to do without Vila. As he was having to learn to do... Life, as the old saying went, was a bed of roses: full of thorns and liberally coated with manure. By the time he had his face as smooth as he preferred, it was scowling at him from the mirror, reflecting back at him his own sense of put-uponness and displeasure with the Universe in general and his own life in particular.

"Oh, fuck," he said to himself, becoming more annoyed when venting an expletive helped not one jot. "Fuck it all to hell."

Except, as he had decided when still very, very small, there was nothing worse than the world in which he lived, which made Hell completely redundant. Rather like the concept of God. Rather like the concept of a Universe that went out of its way to make life



of undying devotion. Well, not being one for expecting such inanities. But, he conceded, now when it made no difference, now, when it could hold no power over him, the sentiments might be inanities, but they were not lies. Had not been so for a very long time. How long he couldn't say: he had refused to recognise the signs in himself, so by the time the facts had jumped up and bitten him, it was too late to say ah, *this* was when it happened, *this* was when lust changed to...

Too late. He had already thought it and it sat in his mind, as indigestible as coolant in the stomach and just as appealing. And just as familiar. It was, he couldn't deny, getting easier to think that word in connection with himself and Vila. In connections with his feelings for Vila. In connection with something other than the disaster that had been Bartolomew. Yes, the thought balm to him as he reorganised the top of his desk, putting flimsies in their shallow pigeonhole, as he placed the chip that wanted mended in its clear case, it definitely was easier to think of her only as Bartolomew, for then he didn't have to remember any of his foolishness, any of his silly romanticism with Anna. Or any of the pain that still clung to him like meat on a bone. Still, he almost chuckled, black humour being an old friend of his, that was the one good thing about this situation with Vila: it relegated Anna to a grief of the past, instead of an ever nagging ache. And, now that he was willing to dare risk thinking of it, whilst he was awake with all his defences in place against what she had done, it occurred to him that perhaps he hadn't been quite as romantic and foolish as he had always squirmed at. After all, it had always been Anna trying to wrinkle declarations out of him, hadn't it? Not that she'd been overly successful in that field, reticence being so much a part of him that he noticed it no more than breathing.

Until, of course, it became as much a hindrance as breathing could sometimes be. Cally... Even the Wonderboy thought he knew how much Avon missed Cally, but then, Tarrant always had been a complete and total idiot in a way that Vila never could be. Oh, yes, he couldn't hide that he missed Cally, but he could certainly hide the degree. She

had been...almost easy to let in behind his barriers. Not that he'd had much choice, and even that hadn't rankled as much as it ought, all the prickly pride soothed by her warmth and acceptance of him for what he was. Rather as Vila always had. Until the incident over Malodaar, of course.

Fool. How else should he expect Vila, of all people, to react? Oh, so they neither one of them had ever bothered with words, although their reasons had been diametrically different. But it was one thing for Vila to accept his place in Avon's bed as a substitute for a place in Avon's heart, it was quite another to accept having Avon come after him with a gun.

I should never have used that tone of voice, really, he admitted, reshuffling the flimsies, changing his mind about where the chip should go, rearranging his styli. Salt in the wound—or adding insult to injury, as Vila said, to come after him like that, sounding for all the world as if we were simply playing one of our little games and I the ardent suitor. Unnecessarily cruel, and for that alone I ought to apologise.

But there was the rub, wasn't it? To apologise would display so much more than mere words. It was only polite to apologise, the sign of the well-bred and the well brought up, and he was nothing if not both of those. But it was hardly manners that were urging him to say that he was sorry. It was misery that was doing that. Misery, and the loneliness that was driving him back to sleeping draughts and sticky beds, waking up with his chest aching from the effort to finally fall asleep and to manage it without the ignobility of tears. Stupid, really, for a man of his age, and something so much more appropriate for a spotty teen of the Gamma levels, with their emotionalism and lack of propriety. But still... Apologise. He really ought to. Really should. In fact, were he to apologise, were he willing to lay it all out before Vila as if it were a bloody picnic, then perhaps...

Hope stole through him, bringing the frown back to his face and the tremor to his hands. Meticulously, ignoring the all-too apparent signs of his own nervousness, he re-ordered his tools, checking them for cleanliness, making sure that there were no flaws that



even Blake's... And it frightens me, Vila. It terrifies me until I wake up shaking and reaching for you. Do you know how horrid it is to wake up alone, when you've seen yourself die? But then, you were on that shuttle. You will have nightmares of your own. Will you let me take them away for you? I could get rid of them for you, erase them, give you happier things to dream of, if you'll be there when I waken in the night.

To say all that... The thought both exhilarated and terrified him. To say all that, and the only words he would have to actually speak would be the simplicity of 'sorry'. All of that, encapsulated in one word. Vila would understand, Vila had always understood his verbal shorthand. For that matter, Vila had probably understood better than he had himself when he had let Vila fuck him. Yes. Vila would understand, as always. All he had to do was actually go after him, and say it. That was all. Just lay his soul bare and hand it to Vila on a silver platter. He almost laughed at that. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad idea at that: silver platters were valuable and Vila the magpie would at least want the platter if not what it held.

He opened the door, taking a subtly calming breath, not an ounce of his turmoil showing on his blank face, his eyes the dark brown of silence. He wasn't about to let his feelings be seen. One thing for Vila to know, quite another to have Soolin chuckle derisively or have Tarrant clumsily trying to use his weakness to dethrone him. Enough for Vila to know. Vila he could trust. Vila loved him, had loved him from the start, never hiding it once they were private. He would let Vila see, ask Vila to come back to his cabin with him, tell him there. Seduce him on the bright beauty of Dorian's rainbow bed, love him madly, surrender his body to him, watch Vila's face transform in orgasm, hold him close and safe afterwards. And later, when they were both limp with satisfaction, when neither one of them could bear another second's stimulation, he would turn over, so that he could have Vila wrapped around him, warm and secure and keeping the horrors at bay. He could sleep then, with Vila around him like that. He always had slept best like that...

Bring him home, then apologise. As soon as I find the little idiot. Ah. There, light from the kitchen and at this time, it's unlikely to be anyone but Vila. Despite the best of his intentions, his expression was warm and hopeful, the tired lines softened by the anticipation of having Vila back. He opened the door and the glaring light startled him for a moment, his face going utterly and abruptly blank. Stupid of me not to have heard Tarrant's voice as I came along the corridor, he thought, liking not at all what he was seeing. Vila, at the table, slumped as always, but over tea, not soma, Tarrant at his side, unendurably somber and ostentatiously mature. Perhaps the Wonderboy was growing up after all.

"Vila," he said into the brittle silence, "I need to speak to you. In my room."

He had not been prepared for such a face-twisting hostility. Nor silence. Vila—not saying anything? How terribly strange, he thought, not yet got beyond the moment.

"Now, Vila," he added, in case Vila hadn't heard him, hadn't understood how important this was.

Tarrant looked up from his tea, butting in where Avon thought he had no right. "That may be what you need, but I doubt it's what Vila needs."

"And I doubt that even Vila requires a performing baboon to speak for him." He hadn't, for a second, taken his gaze from Vila's down-turned face, willing the other man to pay attention, to stop being such a fool. Didn't Vila see what he was trying to do? Typical Vila, to make a simple thing so complicated. "Vila," he began again, "I dislike repeating myself. I need to speak to you. Now."

"It seems to me that Vila," Tarrant said, slowly rising to his feet, young buck challenging the stag, "has made it perfectly clear that he doesn't need to talk to you. Good night, Avon."

"Vila?" he said again, this time differently, his own voice a stranger to him.

Vila turned away, turning to face the wall, cutting Avon off with the shrug of a shoulder.

Well.

Well indeed.

He became aware that Tarrant, at least—



at all?

Pity his thoughts didn't ring true, even to himself.

But he'd be damned if he'd let it be true any more. Vila had made a fool of him, had manipulated and manoeuvred him and then betrayed him. Just like everyone else. Just like Anna...

Somewhere, out there, he thought, fingers tracing idle paths on the chart, Blake is living a life of utter luxury, lying low whilst I chase around the galaxy being shot at, because he manoeuvred me into this unenviable position. If this is what being leader of a Rebellion brings one to, then it's hardly surprising that even Blake had the sense to get out of it. Leaving me stuck holding the bag, of course. Bastard. He and Vila would make the perfect couple, wouldn't they though? Perhaps I should get them back together and then sit back and watch Tarrant's face.

Not that I care what goes on with Vila, not now that I've woken up properly from that ridiculous dream. Preposterous what the subconscious comes up with when one is otherwise occupied. Me, loving Vila! How silly. All I need is a proper rest. He leant forward, the firm leather of his trousers caressing him, reminding him of how long it had been since he'd had anything more substantial than dreams and his own left hand. That was probably from whence this whole embarrassing incident stemmed, he reassured himself. Nothing more than enforced abstinence turning me upside down, until I fancy myself in love with Vila. What I need, his gaze

sharpening as his finger landed unexpectedly upon a small blue dot with a smaller name recorded beside it, the name famous—or infamous—the Galaxy over, a place that he remembered rather fondly. No. He wasn't going to relive those memories. None of it mattered anyway. All in the past. Water under a bridge. Dead and buried and gone.

The name was still there. Freedom City. Home of the best gambling dens—no, he wasn't going to think about that. He began again. Home of the best brothels in or out of the Federation. The best money could buy. Yes, that should do the trick. Get Vila out of his system, along with all this bottled-up frustration. A proper rest, some excellent no-strings sex, and he'd be back on his usual even keel. And that would show Tarrant and Vila both.

"Soolin," he said, making sure that he smiled charmingly, "we are going on a little jaunt. Start getting Scorpio ready. I believe it's time for me to show you some of the...pleasanter things this Galaxy has to offer. We could all do with the beneficial effects of some time away from here." He smiled all the more sweetly, willing her to see nothing in him but normality. No pain, no loss, no bereavement. Nothing but an attractive man suggesting a pleasant holiday, with the hint that she just might get to know him far more intimately than she had before.

He could see in her eyes that she believed him. Good. He needed someone to believe him, for he knew perfectly well just how many lies were living inside him.



CAVEAT EMPTOR

M. FAE GLASGOW

THE NOISES WERE MUSIC TO HIS ears, a cacophony of harmonies, of tenors and sopranos and basses, all commingling into a leitmotif that bespoke passion. All around him, there were people, each one of them contributing their own sound, willingly or not, every one of them part of the horde, even if they were ostentatiously alone.

As he was.

With his usual supercilious ease, he approached the desk, the queue melting away in front of him, as it had done all his life. Breeding, as they say, will out. Voice as bored as her job had become, the clerkess said, "Next customer, please. We offer three options for your pleasure. You may be a paying customer, you may be a 'working' client or you may be a free agent. A temporary tattoo will be applied to your left shoulder to indicate your status. This tattoo will wash off with any cleanser or abrasive. Prices are commensurate with chosen status and number of hours selected. An additional fee will be charged for any pursuit involving the inflicting of bodily damage upon others and all breakages and/or injuries will be charged to your credit account."

Avon threw his credit disk down on the counter in front of her. That got a reaction. Seeing him standing there got even more of a response. "Oh, good evening, sir," she breathed at him, suddenly remembering why she had taken this job in the first place. "Welcome to the Pleasure Dome. What's your pleasure, sir?"

Avon gestured at his disk, gleaming in the seductive ambience of the crowded lobby. "That," he said, not even noticing how dangerous he sounded amidst all the carefully cultivated 'riskiness' of the brothel, "should pay for anything I want."

"Ooh, yes, sir, it will! Not often we see one of these." She picked it up as the valuable

artifact it was, running it through the computer, eyebrows rising when she saw the credit limit. Tremendously impressed, it was probably just as well for her fond dreams that she didn't know anything about Orac and its ability to create false readings on her computer screen. "Well, Mr. Strat—oops, sorry, almost forgot. Not used to seeing one of these, you see. The thing is, though, that even though you can have anything you want, I've got to let the attendants know which kind of customer you're going to be, you see. Legal action," she mouthed at him. "Get to see a lot of that, you see, what with people asking for more than they can cope with. So our legal people say we've got to go by the book and get customer authorisation and keep the records, just in case, you know. So which shall you be tonight, sir?" she said, batting her eyelashes at him and leaning forward so that her firmly ample charms could be revealed in all their cleaved glory. It never hurt to try, did it? And Marj had met her Dev on the job, hadn't she? And she wouldn't mind landing this bloke, even if for the night. The strong, silent dark type, the hurt ones needing comfort, had always been her weakness. But this one, unfortunately, was either blind, not buying, or another Plato. Oh, well, the best ones always were.

The best one had already thought about this on the flight here, in between trying to get some sleep and steer his way out of the corner he had talked himself into with Soolin. Pretty and cold though she was, he didn't need the complication. Also didn't need her regaling everyone with the scurrilous details over breakfast the next morning. Although that had been rather pleasant the time she'd had Tarrant. And he wasn't going to think about the time she'd had Vila, was he? He was here for fun, he was here to forget, he was here to have something the absolute opposite of the preposterous infatuation he had with the

thief. To think he'd actually imagined himself in love! With Vila, of all people. He had better taste than that, surely. But the blonde scrubber was watching him and he realised that he was back amidst the masses again, that he wasn't Avon here, he was Will Stratford, and here, he would have to actually speak, to detail and perhaps even justify some of the things he said. But not, he thought, the fact that he wanted to be fucked. It was important, that, and more important that he didn't give himself away to her prurient curiosity. He had his reasons, and they were his alone. "I don't want to be labelled at all, but if that's what your absurd system demands, then I shall comply. Mark me a worker and slate me for 12 hours."

"12 hours?" she squeaked, unable to resist the temptation and staring at his crotch in amazement. "12 hours? Most people only go in for two or three, sir. Are you sure—" she remembered herself just in time, closing her mouth with a firm click of her teeth. If the gentleman thought he was up to it for 12 hours, then the gentleman was entitled to think whatever the gentleman wanted. Mind, with that tunic on, covering all the interesting bits, there wasn't much to see. So maybe there wasn't much to see anyway. For that matter, she thought, inputting his data, probably the reason he wanted 12 hours was because he was one of those typical ones, all leather machismo and studs, and as limp as a rag. Takes some of them a week to get it up hard enough, she thought, vicious in her disappointment. He's probably one of them ones that wants enemas and nanny to spank them. All the best ones are either taken or kinky. And with the way he's standing there, he's probably covering up a prick that could hide behind a toothpick, poor lamb. That black leather suit and the gun and the way he's poseur-ing there like a hired mercenary, yeh, he probably can't get it up unless he spends 10 hours getting the fantasy set up. Oh, well...

"Your credit disk, sir," she said, back to being as bored as her job was, not looking at Avon as she sent the information through to the changing room attendants. "Go through the red door on the left, someone will be

waiting for you there. You will be given an implant that will signal when your time is up. We hope that the Pleasure Dome will fulfil your every desire and that you'll come back soon. Next customer, please."

There was, indeed, an attendant waiting for him in plush silence, tattoo gun at the ready, implant all set, locker open for him to place his personal belongings in and seal with his hand-print. The opulence that had begun in the lobby continued in here, an elegance that catered to the customer's every whim. It would be different the second he stepped through that black door though, he knew. Very different indeed. After all, wasn't that what he had paid for? If he'd wanted anything else, he could have followed up on his implied offer to Soolin, or given Tarrant what that toothy upstart needed most in life. Or he could have gone to one of the nicer houses of very good repute, there to indulge himself in some good, anonymous sex. There were plenty of places in Freedom City where he could pay for sex, and thus avoid even the faintest hint of personal involvement. This way, it would be a purely physical thing, nothing but his body involved. The way he wanted it, after that stupid situation with Vila. Proof of what happened when one stayed with the one person for too long a time. One becomes lazy, and foolish, and deluded. One starts convincing oneself that emotions are involved, when one knows perfectly well that love was deleted from one's life a long time before. No, he wanted nothing that hinted at the personal. And nothing that hinted at the nice. Hence, this place. Nothing was forbidden here, not a thing. The staff, and the customers who had paid to be labelled staff, were here at the beck and call of the other customers, who could do as they pleased. The word 'no' was unheard in this place, unless it were part of someone's fantasy. His shoulder itched for a few seconds while the temporary tattoo took, then he could no longer feel it, apart from in his mind, where it burned as if radioactive. Once he stepped through that door, he would have no say over what he experienced, apart from the fact that he had chosen this place for the needs it could fill, no question asked, no judgements made.



he turned to watch the expression of profound trust on the man who was lying in the leather swing, his lover's hand up the elbow in his arse. Avon drew closer, fascinated, his cock heavy with desire. Now this was something that appealed to him, this ultimate in confluent trust and domination and submission, where the roles might be so intermingled as to be but a single strand in a complicated skein. He knew what it was like to have that much trust directed towards oneself, knew what it was like to have so much control and yet, to be so commanded by the man absorbing his hand. Oh, yes, he liked this...

"You."

He ignored the voice as nothing more than another participant in another game.

"I," the voice said in his ear as a tattooed fist closed on his arm, while he watched the closed fist disappear into the wide-spread arse, "am talking to you." He turned, to face a man several inches taller and several stone heavier than himself, smooth skinned and barrel-chested, leather straps criss-crossing his nakedness, balls in a tight-fastened stretcher, cock circled by three silver rings. "Yeh, that's right, you, pretty boy."

Oh, how delightful: he hadn't been called 'boy' in years.

"Think it's funny, do you? Well, you can come with me, laddie, and I'll show you just how un-funny it really is."

He was dragged, with his full co-operation, away from the tableau that had so entranced him, pulled past men in body slings made of thin strips of leather, past a man tied to a stake in the pose of a martyr while his cock was pierced and the man quivered with masochistic joy. He found his young man again, suspended on his back above ground, a cock up his arse, a cock ramming down into his throat and white teeth nipping at the whiteness of his skin until it turned red.

Still he was led on, never allowed to linger, not even when the man who had claimed him shifted his grip, letting go of Avon's shoulder and taking him by the balls instead, tugging at him, making Avon stumble in his haste to keep up. Without warning, they stopped and he bumped into the man, getting cuffed

across the mouth for his mannerlessness. He was hauled forward, big, rough hands grabbing his face, prying his mouth open, and then he was being kissed, tongue forced so far into his mouth he couldn't swallow, the man's curly hair covering his face in softness and his mind in the incongruously sweet scent of the man's shampoo. Careless, Avon thought, to slip like that, it works much better if one hasn't bathed before the fantasy begins.

Hard fingers were digging into his arse, probing him viciously, abandoning him to return with slithering coarseness, ramming into him, as he tilted his hips to let the fingers get in him deeper. There was a mouth on his cock, teeth nipping, lips sucking, and another mouth on his right nipple, pinching fingers on the left. He heard someone groan, probably himself, but it was impossible to tell if the sound he felt in his throat was able to escape past the mouth that was raping his. His back was arched for him, and the mouth sucking him was replaced by hand pumping him, pulling at his foreskin, stretching it out to form an envelope for the shiveringly sweet attention of a tongue that slid into him there. A bristle of moustache and unshaven chin raked his shoulders, a rampant cock rubbed damply up and down his thigh, rolling against him as some man humped him like an untrained dog. He grinned when his arms were stretched out, away from the touch of flesh, lifted up to where they could be chained, with the delectable chill of metal closing around the heat of his wrists, to the wide-spaced bars in front of him. He was pulled closer and closer until his belly was cold from the kiss of metal and his cock was hot from the sucking of a mouth on the other side of the barrier. The man who had chosen him was muttering in his ear, telling him what was going to be done to him, what he was going to do to earn his money and what was going to happen to make up for his sorry performance so far.

With a smile of fond recognition, Avon heard the swish, the wonderfully familiar swish of leather scourge, the faint whistle as it arced gracefully through the air and then—jolt, it was on him, heat radiating from every caressing sting of its touch. He jerked forward,

burying himself in the face of the man sucking him, feeling the involuntary swallow of all the length of his cock. Then another sibilant sting of leather on flesh, and his shout echoed the halls, his voice crying out his pleasure. Another blow, and another, so that his arse was a red flag displaying his arousal. Then the scourge was gone and there were warm hands gentling him, soothing him, stroking and squeezing, until it changed and he was being kneaded, harder and harder, every clench of the hands on his buttocks stretching his arsehole open, displaying him for the prurient curiosity of others. But not Vila, he screamed inside his head where no-one could hear, where no-one could wonder whether it was the cry of jubilation or utter desolation. But he couldn't think about Vila, couldn't dare the pain any more. Hard slickness pressed at him, pushing, pushing, forcing its way home, sliding in easier and easier, until he was smooth and wet and clutching at the cock as it pummelled his insides. His cock was seized by someone's mouth—he looked down in idle interest and saw that it was a blond—whose face he was fucking, thrusting forward every time the big man behind him thrust into him. Pleasure was cavalcading through him, but there was still one more thing, one more that he had to have to make it perfect and he saw, out of the corner of his eye, the sheen of light on mahogany skin, long, lithe muscles rippling as the owner of a huge cock clambered up to stand on crossbar, his feet on either side of the blond's shoulders, his cock plunging deep into Avon's mouth, the musk rising to mingle with Avon's own, and with the men's around him, so many of them and so many cocks, so much smooth skin, so much raw sexuality surrounding him, inundating him. He was cock, nothing but cock and sensation and pleasure. Cock in his mouth, cock in his arse coming right out his belly into the mouth of the blond kneeling in homage at this personification of priapus. Endless cycle, cock to cock to cock, mouth to arse to cock, all of it neverending, neverceasing, the rhythm of life, the pulse of his heart echoing in three cocks, ricocheting through his arse, white-water rapid through his blood. Endless, endless, endless, he had

no beginning and no end, no edges, no pain, no pain, nothing, pleasure, pleasure and he was going to come, with cock in his mouth and up his arse, fucking and being fucked, sucking and sucked, giver and receiver, lover and loved, wanting and wanted and he was going to come—

He was bereft, arse empty and aching with the loss, blond pushed away, cock deserted to the coldness of air and the bitter pain of abandonment, head pulled pack and left gaping, wanting something to fill the loneliness of his heart. He opened his eyes, head whipping from side to side to see what the hell was going on, who the hell had done this, and knew a moment of profound confusion: the man who had chosen him was wrenching his hands free of the manacles, giving him a freedom he didn't want. Then the man turned round and it wasn't his man it was—

“Blake. I should have known,” he sneered, voice as low and bitter as his loneliness and his hurt fury. “I might have known that it would be you insisting on freeing someone who was more than happy in his own particular bondage. I might have known you would finally show your face when least I wanted to see it, you bastard, you stupid bastard, you prick.” A glance at Blake's groin, then vitriol enough to castrate, “But then, *obviously* I'd have to take that back, I see.”

And then the words were over, leaving them standing there, matador and bull in a circle formed by the bloodthirst of the crowd: two naked men, one still hard and taut, one drooping and limp, both on fire with anger and betrayal and other things they never would name, even when their lives depended on it. The other men lingered for a couple of minutes, then realised that this was going to turn into an emotional scene, that this wasn't going to be a fantasy rape come to life. This, it seemed, was going to be a lot of boring chat, so they drifted off, one by one, leaving Avon and Blake standing alone, both of them bearing the marks of these years that lay between them like graves.

Avon's chest was heaving, breath hard, eyes harder, cock only now beginning to lose its pride. “My god, look at you,” was what he finally said, speaking only when Blake took



breath to give voice to whatever it was one said to one's former friend. "What have you been doing?"

"Fighting," Blake began.

"Losing," Avon snapped. He stepped closer, his musk filling Blake's nostrils, the sight of him filling Blake's mind, Avon's bright eyes examining every new wrinkle, every new scar, every half-healed wound, noticing most of all the seeping wounds to the soul that dimmed Blake's eyes. "What have you been doing?" he said again. "You look like something the cat would refuse to drag in. Found yourself a new Servalan, have you? Alice through the looking glass, perhaps—without me fighting your battles for you, she's about all you could survive. And you look as if you barely managed that."

"I've been living rough—"

"Really? Oh, do tell, I'd never have noticed."

"—starting up new bands of rebels, fighting the Federation on the quiet, flanking action whilst—"

"While I took the full brunt of it. Or rather, considering that I let myself be set up by an aging, overweight and overwrought martyr who can't even die properly, I should probably call it the 'fool' brunt of it. Should I spell that for you, Blake, or is what you so fondly refer to as your brain still up to such complex wordplay?"

"Don't you think it's faintly ridiculous that two naked men are standing in the middle of a brothel arguing semantics?"

"Oh, no, I don't think that at all. I think it's hugely ridiculous, and all of the ridicule belongs fairly on your shoulders, Blake."

"Ever gracious as always, I see. But did your mother never teach you to share? Some of the blame is doubtlessly yours, Avon."

"Is it? Only for being fool enough to help you. Only for being fool enough to let you live when I had ample opportunity to kill you, and ample reason to." Another scathing glance from the top of Blake's head to the tips of his toes. "Yes, ample does rather seem to fit the bill, doesn't it? Living rough? You look as if you've had a table a pasha would envy."

"Or a knee so badly damaged by torture that I could barely walk for over a year."

A raised eyebrow, denial of any faint hint of

sympathy that might try to show face. "As good an excuse as any, I suppose. Who did it? Mary or her little lamb?"

"Travis."

Avon laughed at that, not a pretty sound at all. "I've finished playing your fool, Blake. Try another answer."

"I don't care if you're still too narrow-minded to see the truth when it stares you in the face, Avon. Yes, yes, I know we saw Travis die. But we saw the second Travis die. Think, man, think! When Travis appeared with a new face, we assumed his mind-patterns had been put into a new body when the old one had been damaged beyond repair. Which was incredibly stupid of us. I remember that night on the flight deck perfectly well, and so must you. You and I, middle-watch, everyone else asleep, discussing what might have happened to Travis' old body. But it didn't occur to either of us, did it, that if they were going to be giving him a new body, then they'd give him one that wasn't flawed, wouldn't they?"

And to his surprise, Avon found himself listening, as if they were back on the *Liberator*, Cally off meditating, the two of them gnawing at things the others had no time for, as opposed to standing naked and conspicuous by their lack of libidinous activity. "But why bother doing it in the first place? Unless—" characteristic Avon, from the days that seemed so bright in retrospect, when held up to the darkling mirror of today. "Unless it was by presenting this new Travis to be the brunt of the whole mess, she freed the original Travis to do—what?"

"Come after me, for starters, by infiltrating and destroying more than half the organised rebellions in the galaxy."

"That's either preposterous nonsense or you've been listening to her publicity."

"I'd actually quite like to be wrong—"

"Even at the cost of making me right?"

"Even at so high a price. But in getting into the upper echelons of one group, he would get access to literally dozens of other ones and then send in someone else, whilst he moved on to 'help' another group."

"Which is all very nice and really quite pretty, if you look at it from Servalan's point of view, but it doesn't for one second explain,"

and his voice hardened now, as the old patterns of the flight deck were sloughed off as nothing more than a bad habit to be resolved against, “where the hell you’ve been or what the hell you’ve been up to.”

“Interesting choice of word, that,” Blake said, and Avon felt a sudden pang of—homesickness?—regret, for Blake was standing in front of him, the old combination of darkness and wryness, knuckle being gnawed, hair dishevelled—

“But a very good choice,” Blake was saying. “Hell is as good a name as any for the past two years.”

—and naked, standing in the middle of a brothel, spouting some crap about having spent the last two years in hell and Avon was furious, every hurt, every insult, every defeat that happened because of the absence of this man erupting through him, all his sexual tension rising up to strangle him. “Oh, yes, that’s obvious. But how very strange—I didn’t realise this...establishment was called ‘Hell’. I thought it was the Pleasure Dome. But ‘Hell’ it shall be, with you in it. Come here often, do you?” The words were venom-veiled, dripping acid from their barbed points, summing up the feelings of two entire years spent suffering in the pit of Blake’s revolution.

But Blake didn’t know that, did he? Two years of hell obviously hadn’t done anything to help him understand Avon, nor to help him read between Avon’s lines. “Actually, no, I don’t. This is my first trip here in almost four months, surely not an excessive record—”

“Well now, but that depends on which excesses you indulge in whilst you’re here, doesn’t it now?”

“—or do you demand celibacy from your icons these days, Avon?”

“Icon? You dare— Icon? No, never that. You were never anything more than a false idol with feet of clay up to your armpits.”

“Then why did you follow me?”

“I let you lead—” the old steel, the old tempered independence, “me, because it suited me. It was, if you care to remember the less halo-ed details, the only way I could get the Liberator from you. It was, in the end, the only way I could get rid of you.”

“Now that’s another interesting choice of

words. You followed me and stayed with me so that you could be rid of me?”

“Twisting things always was one of the few things you were good at, wasn’t it?”

“Something I picked up from you, obviously.”

“So you can’t even take credit for your one and only talent. Mind wipe again?”

“That was never an excuse and you know it!” Hissed, Blake leaning forward, his anger making him tower over Avon, heat coiling between them. “You were always one for dismissing other people’s suffering though, I should hardly have expected to find you changed.”

“You hardly expected to find me at all! Did you, Blake? Did you honestly expect to find me here? Oh, but of course not, what a stupid question for me to ask. You,” he snarled, shocking Blake with the acid hate that burned them both, “didn’t expect to find me here, for if you had, you’d be at the other end of the Galaxy, wouldn’t you? You never wanted to find me, so this can hardly be called a happy happenstance, can it? Certainly,” he said, drawing himself to his full height, so heavily clothed in dignity that he forgot his own nakedness, “not for me.”

“What, Avon? Aren’t you glad to see me? Then who’s that for?” a condescending nod at Avon’s groin, where his cock had begun to rise again, adrenalin and power and anger making him hard. “Vila?”

It was the last sneer that did it. “It has been. More often than it would ever be for you.”

“So you did want me, then, after all.”

“No need to sound so smug, Blake. Yes, I did want you—then. But as you were so fond of saying, the past is dead and gone and we must look to the future. A future which seems all the rosier for you not being part of it. Although I must admit, I rather preferred it when I thought you were dead. It was such a...comforting thought.”

“I don’t believe that, not for one second.”

“You always did have a problem with the truth—you couldn’t recognise it even when it bit you.”

“The way you did?”

“Oh, but I never bit you, Blake,” shark’s smile, glacier eyes, “I left all the cannibalism



to you. After all, you did such a good job with Gan.”

“That was...”

“Unavoidable? For the great and glorious Cause? For the great unwashed?” He smiled again, scenting blood, going in for the kill. “Or was it that you wanted to give him the honour of laying down his life for his friend? You always did have a penchant for sacrifice for the Cause—as long as it was someone else’s head on the block, of course.”

Blake shuffled his feet, a haunting shadow darkening his eyes. “No, no...that’s not what I was going to say. I was going to say...”

“What? That you wept crocodile tears for Gan whilst making plans for the rest of us?”

“No. That it was the beginning of the end for me. Gan dying...I didn’t realise it at the time, although I think you did. It did something to me, Avon. Changed something in me. That’s when the rot set in.”

“You’re wrong about that, you know.” A flare of hope in Blake’s eyes. “The rot set in the day you thought you had killed Travis. The day you enjoyed killing Travis.”

The death of hope, the beginning of the end. “Voice of experience, Avon?”

“Yes! And who was it who taught me that, Blake? Oh, do let me tell you, Fearless Leader. It was you. I had gone against society’s rules before, but I’d never killed to salve someone’s ego before. I had never killed just to shut someone up from his incessant self-doubts. I had never killed to just to prove someone right before. For you—because of you, because I was stupid enough to listen to you, to care—” he spat the word out for the curse it had become, “—for you, I let my barbarity rule my head. I was willing to destroy the *Universe* for you! I was willing to blow up Star One like a vengeful schoolboy, and why? Because I had fallen under your charismatic spell. Because I had let myself be blinded by your vision. Oh, yes, it’s the voice of experience, all right. And you are the one behind it.”

“Now who is it,” Blake blustered, mind reeling and body shaking from the shock of it, unwilling and unable to take it all in, to face it and deal with it, “who’s refusing to take responsibility for his own actions?”

“Not me, Blake, not me. I know what I’ve

done. I *know* what I was willing to do. I have nightmares about it, did you know that? Did you know that I have nightmares about losing Cally because I couldn’t keep away from *your* siren song?”

Blake looked abruptly as if someone had kicked him in the stomach, as if he were going to be sick. “I’m sorrier about that than you can ever know.”

“Oh, really? You hardly have exclusive rights to guilt, Blake.”

“I...” Blake didn’t hear Avon, didn’t hear the hollowed out sorrow of anguish, didn’t even notice the words. “I... They had me drugged, you know. Helpless. And after the torture, I couldn’t even walk. Day after day, lying in that bed, hooked up to the drugs I needed just to stay alive, knowing that all the while, they were pumping me full of the drugs they needed to get the information out of me.”

“You were there?” Avon hissed, eyes wide, all the past come crashing forward to bury him. “You were there? It really was you? Did you betray us, Blake? Did you betray *me*?”

“I didn’t mean to!” A bellow, to disguise the pain, to hide the self-loathing. “I had no choice, Avon. They had me, for *months*, Avon. Gods, man, who the hell do you think it was who picked me up?”

“She had you for that long?” Dawning horror, memories of what those few paltry days waiting for Shrinker had done to him, what existing in that charnel house of torture had done to his soul, hearing the endless screaming and sobbings. “That long?”

Blake was at the railing now, hands clenched on the bars, head dropped forward, forehead pressing painfully into the metal to dull the pain of the memories. “They had Jenna. It took... She was braver than ever I was. I think they knew that, I think that’s why they kept her in front of me to... D’you know how she died?”

“I can guess,” and Avon’s voice was very close behind him now, breath warm to mar the chill of the metal.

“Can you? Images of me killing her myself to put her out of her misery, to stop her agony? Big brave Blake, heroically easing the helpless suffering of his friend? Oh, gods, you’ve no idea how much I wish that was true!

But it wasn't me. They broke me, Avon, broke me into so many little pieces I didn't know where to start to put me back together again." A shuddering breath, carrying the sounds of tears on it like the wind carries the rain. "I didn't even want to put myself back together. I was too afraid, too shit-scared... An orderly, one of the slaves they had brought in with them, she was the one that killed Jenna. She... She couldn't even talk any more, they'd got her beyond that. But the woman had heard Jenna screaming and...and... Tightened something too much, pressed a switch, I'm not sure. I'd stopped looking by then, couldn't take it. Only looked when they made do it... They made me do things, oh, Avon, the things they made me do..."

And what was he to say to that? What words could possibly be said after the words that had spewed from Blake? That he was sorry? When it was so difficult to feel anything at all with nervous breakdown and insanity nipping at his heels? When it was so difficult to feel anything when he had been miserable and hunted for so long that he had begun to lose sight of who he was? And yet... When they'd got back to the *Scorpio*, when he'd made that last, vicious crack at Vila... He remembered how that felt. Remembered how much he'd regretted it since then. Remembered how much he'd wanted to heal that pain, but it was Vila who wouldn't let him.

He could heal some of the pain here, surely? A kind of penance for some of the past. And if he were to help Blake, perhaps he would continue to reap what he had sowed and Vila would be willing to at least listen... "No-one can survive the Federation centres without breaking," he offered, finally, to the broad expanse of Blake's back. "No-one."

"Jenna did! Oh, god, Avon, Jenna did. It was me who told them everything, it was me who gave them all the access codes. It was me... I almost killed you, all of you, more times than I know. I told them *everything*. Don't you understand?" he screamed, whirling round, grabbing Avon by the arms, shaking him. "It was *me*, Avon!" His voice dropped to a whisper and his hands dropped to his side, eyes going dead and lightless. "I betrayed you..."

Somehow, the hearing of it was less than the fearing it. Better the devil you know? Avon didn't know, would work that out later, but... Hearing it, actually hearing it said and confirmed—it was a weight from off his shoulders. He knew it now, knew the worst, knew the nadir of the whole disgusting business. Blake had betrayed him. And then he knew the answer, knew why the knowing was not so dreadful as he had expected: the worst was over. Blake *had* betrayed him. Had. Past tense. Over and done with, dead and gone. Blake *had* betrayed him. So if he were to do it again, well now, the damage was already done. Trust, after all, can only be destroyed once.

"Did you know," Avon said almost conversationally as if they were having a nice chat over tea instead of swimming in the surreality of their reality, "that I trusted you? Stupid of me, I know, but true nonetheless. I actually trusted you—an unfortunate bleed-over from Anna, no doubt. She betrayed me too, you know."

"Yes, I know."

That brought the sharpness back and the smell of old pain that festered in the cellars of his mind. "How? How the hell did you know that?"

Blake straightened, wandered over to the trestle, changed his mind when he realised that it would take him to the very lip of their cul-de-sac and put him where he could see the rest of the human race going about its business. "Bartolomew," he said heavily, sitting down just as heavily on the floor, back to the metal bars, face towards the blankness of the wall that separated them from the other people in this place. Behind him, they could hear some of the noise, could see occasional glimpses of light on flesh, of flesh on flesh, but that reality was but a dream to them, cut off from them by the very normality of the lives those people led. Such normal, petty little lives, full of normal, petty little hurts, having no connection whatsoever with Avon and Blake, cut adrift as they were by the tortures and torments that had warped and twisted them beyond easy recognition. But the old selves, those were still there, buried under a mountain of ordure and ardure.

"Bartolomew?" Avon's voice shivered,

Blake still remembered when to ignore Avon. “So you’re telling me that you would have had an affaire with me, given half the chance?”

“Blake, if I had thought I could have had you without you screaming in outraged virginity, I would have shoved you up against the nearest wall and fucked you on the *London*. Without a second’s hesitation.”

That quite took the wind out of Blake’s sails. He rather liked the image of Avon loving him, but the image of himself being sodomised gave him pause. Too many memories crowding in on him, black uniforms, white science smocks, doctors’ uniforms, in the dark and the pain and... “They raped me. Quite often.”

“And I just made it sound as if that was what I had in mind. Don’t be stupid, Blake. I was talking about a long time ago, about the people we used to be, if—and I mean if—you were willing. But you weren’t, you’re not, close the subject.”

“If it’s what you need, I could give it to you.”

“Like the *Liberator*?” nasty words, nastier words, their pain rolling off Blake. “So now you’re willing—in a manner, after a fashion—but I’m not. I’ve had it, Blake, had it up to here with all that nonsense, all that crap—”

“Avon, why don’t you tell me? What the hell’s wrong?”

“Shall I refer you to my answer of a few minutes before, Lord Arbiter?”

“No, but you could just tell me. You know me, Avon, I won’t let it go until I’ve wormed every last detail out of you.”

“Do I know you?” Avon asked soberly. “Do you even know yourself any longer, I wonder?”

“I wonder too. And no, I can’t answer that. Oh, I think I know why I’m doing what I’m doing, but it comes back again and again... They’ve planted subliminal programming in me once before, why shouldn’t they have done it again?”

“I remember then. That was the time you tried to convince Vila that I had taken up with Cally.”

No hint in the soft voice, no indication of whether or not Blake was going to have his head in his hands to play with. “Well, you must admit, it did work.”

Silence. Blake let it wind its way down,

waiting in the anonymous near-dark to hear what Avon was going to say.

“I tried to kill him, you know.”

“What? You tried to kill Vila? Why the hell did you do that?”

“We were in a shuttle—booby-trapped, of course. I had to lighten the tare, and Vila... He was the right weight, and not attached to the walls of the shuttle.”

Blake was staring at him in utter disbelief. “I can’t believe you would do a thing like that. I used to be able to get you to leap through hoops to protect Vila—”

“Yes, well, I’ve obviously come to my senses.”

“Have you? Killing Vila doesn’t strike me as being the kind of thing you would do—in your right senses.”

“Think I’ve gone over the edge, do you? I suppose you are qualified. After all, don’t they say that it takes one to know one?”

Such wicked humour to pull the sting of horror, but it was not quite enough, never had been, as was betrayed by the lines around Avon’s eyes and the furrows on his forehead. It was hardly a bolt of light, but rather a dim surprise, telling him something that he would have known, had he seen Avon just once recently: Avon was unhappy, taut-stringtense and ready to snap. And he, Blake, had for once, the string to lead them out the minotaur’s maze. “Why don’t the two of you come to Gauda Prime with me? I’ll be going back tomorrow, latish, so that should give you time to talk to each other about it.”

“Ah, I’m afraid there’s just a teeny little problem there.”

“And are you going to tell me what this teeny little problem is, or should I start guessing?”

“Has it ever occurred to you to wonder why you and I would claim to fight over everything, yet would tell one another things we would never dream of telling the others?”

“Because we’re each as bad as the other? Because the only way we could co-exist was to have our complicated set of checks and balances over the other? Because we had to have equality in all blackmailing possibilities so that neither could extort the other?”

“What—no words of undying friendship?”

“Why bother, when all you’d do is deny it?”



You, my friend,” Blake smiled dryly, “will confess to any sin and any vice—whether you’ve done them or not—but you’d die rather than admit to any virtue. All part and parcel of being the man in black, I thought. And all part of making sure that you never let anyone down. If none of us had any expectations of anything but the worst from you, then we could never be disappointed, could we? That way, you could never break your word to us, could you?”

“But you, by your own admission, have betrayed me.”

“Only under duress, Avon, and I think—hope—I’m free now. With luck, my escape took them so much by surprise that they didn’t have time to implant me. Either way, I’m acting on my own—for the time being, if nothing else. And I’m not asking you to trust me, not this time. I can’t trust myself, Avon, so I’m hardly going to ask you to do it for me.”

“What a pity you never showed such laudable restraint the first time round.”

“So you will come, then?”

Avon, unpredictable as always, looked around and grinned, saying, “Well now, I’m certainly in the right place for that, aren’t I?”

“Why did you pick here?”

Ashrug, then honesty. “No questions asked, no limits. And too much pain and bondage in here for Vila to even consider coming here.”

“I thought you loved him?”

“And when has love ever been enough? Not,” he hurried on, almost tripping over his tongue in his haste to deny to himself more than Blake, “that I actually *loved* Vila. But...one becomes accustomed to someone over the years...”

“How many years, Avon? Go on, tell me. I promise I shan’t breathe a word.”

“Unless the Federation get you again. I’m sorry, I take that back, that was rude of me.”

“Oh, how I’ve missed you!”

Genuine surprise at that. “I beg your pardon?”

“Only you, Kerr Avon, would make a reference like that an apology not for your cruelty or anything else, but for being rude.”

“Living proof that breeding will out. As for Vila...” In a sense, he owed Blake an answer after the reflexive viciousness of that comment.

Plus, in a strange kind of way, it was rather pleasant sitting here chatting to Blake in a setting so bizarre that it couldn’t possibly be real. Cocooned in the semi-dark, in an area off the beaten track, all the action going on elsewhere, all around their little oasis, leaving them time out of place, no connection to reality, just this little hiccup of life for them to sit together and talk, as if none of the bitterness still gnawed at his belly. “I’ve been with Vila for... On and off, about eleven years.”

“Good god, how long? No, no, I heard. But I thought you two met on the London?”

“There? Hardly. That particular fraud was our third together. And I used to buy interesting things that Vila...found.”

“That’s a long time, Avon. To give it up without a fight.”

“And how can I fight silence? Always supposing I wanted to, of course.”

“Make him listen.”

“And you are, of course, quite the expert on successful relationships. What happened—decided to hide your light under a bushel when you met me to protect my poor, fragile ego?”

“Don’t be such a bitch it doesn’t become you. I admit my ‘track record’ is appalling, what little I can remember of it. But I could manipulate you, couldn’t I, Avon? So make him listen to you.”

“Is it just me, or is this a truly preposterous situation? You and I, sitting in the middle of a brothel, discussing my private life.”

A laugh as bitter as almonds, then: “It’s hardly any more preposterous than any of the rest of it, is it?”

A longish pause, whilst Avon sat himself down on the floor, back to the wall, shoulder to shoulder with Blake. It was refreshing, in its own odd way, to be able to talk to someone who knew him well enough from before that there was nothing for him to explain and nothing for him to wade through, all the blood from the old wounds dried and flaking. Time did, after all, heal all ills. Or at least let the living bury the dead.

“And what would the master manipulator suggest?”

“Offer him a way out. Offer him a home

base. Offer him freedom, or as much as any of the old group can have.” He stopped short, his words hitting him. “We’re all that’s left, Avon, from the old days. The three of us, Servalan and the original Travis. That’s it. Avalon—”

“Spare me the sentimental details. The last thing I need is a roll call of the dead.”

“I am honestly sorry about Cally.”

“At least now I know why it was your name she called out as she died. But—” and his eyes sharpened, some of the wounds and suspicions not quite as dead as he had thought, “how did you get off the planet yourself? Cally called your name after Servalan had left, and she took Liberator. If you were there, how did you escape, Blake?”

“Surely you’re not that dense, Avon? Two ships. The one Servalan left for you, the old rickety one, and the one she herself came in. The one I left in.”

“And then?”

A much-too casual shrug, the recitation of facts as if they were from someone else’s story. “Another so-called medical centre. More so-called treatment.” His voice was rising, the thin sheen of agony colouring it. “More mind-fucking, more pain, more—” he took a breath, filling his lungs with the spurious warmth of the air. “Anyway, after some time, how long I honestly can’t say, there was an opportunity and I took it. A fluke—I was on my way for a treatment when the power cut out. I was able to down my guard and crawl out of the lift into the shaft. Made it out, lived rough, dodged the patrols by sheer good luck, made it to the space port. Used some of the tricks Vila taught us, fiddled with the ticket computers the way you taught me, then eventually jumped ship where Servalan couldn’t get me.”

And it was then that the real suspicion rose, coiling around Avon’s throat and strangling him. Too easy, it had been too easy for Blake to get away. As for Servalan not being able to get him—Avon didn’t believe such a place existed, not in the realms of the living, anyway. Too easy, too pat, too neatly done.

And now here was Blake, turning up like the proverbial bad penny, asking Avon and

Vila to rejoin him. The only remaining survivors of the original group that had humiliated Servalan, that had shown off her weaknesses. Too easy, too convenient...

“My base is a good one, Avon—all the comforts of home. Well, my home, anyway. Not quite up to your standards, I don’t suppose.”

“So you are offering me all the comforts of a substandard home for the dubious benefits of setting myself up to be betrayed by you again. What do you think I am, Blake—a masochist?”

Blake, with more point than tact, looked at the metal bars where he had found Avon, hanging, chained and restrained.

“Oh, no, you can’t get me on that one. What I do for sex has got nothing to do with the rest of my life. I used up all my stupidity in allowing you to lead me.”

“I’ve already told you, Avon, I’m not asking you to trust me. Just think about it. You and me and Vila, the three of us back together again. Look, neither one of us is accomplishing much on our own, are we? But together... We could be a brilliant team. And I would listen to you this time. I’ve learned a lot, most of it unpleasantly, and I won’t be so unwilling to listen to common sense this time. Just think about it, Avon. The three of us. You know Vila would jump at the chance to join up with me again. If he were to do that, and you were with him, it wouldn’t take any time at all to sort the pair of you out again.”

“Still using Vila to get me to leap through hoops?”

“Quite frankly, yes, I hope so. Damn it all, Avon, I need you. I’ve been looking for you, trying to get in touch with you again. We neither of us stand a chance of doing it on our own. Together...”

“Together we can be killed just as easily.”

“No. It won’t be like that. You’d be on base, Avon, taking care of all the computer systems and running the administration side of things. All the power and none of the ‘running round the galaxy being shot at’. D’you remember the night you told me that? About how much you wanted to be able to go back to a sane life and research? That’s what I’m offering you, Avon, and Vila to boot.”



Avon cringed at that, the faintest shrinking away, but Blake noticed. “Obviously, you’re not the only one with an interesting choice of phrase. Does he...do you...”

“No he doesn’t, which is why I don’t. Keep out of my bedroom, Blake or else—” he laughed suddenly and genuinely, the sound a glorious rainbow in the salacious gloom. “Another interesting choice of phrase, considering we’re sitting in a brothel and I was somewhat...occupied when you found me. By the way, how did you find me, Blake?” Such subtle suspicion in that melodious voice, but sharp enough to flay.

“I..” and Blake blushed, which was rather startling considering where they were and what Avon had been up to when Blake had seen him. “To be honest, I heard you scream and I thought you were in pain, and danger...”

“And you came racing to the rescue like the saint in battered halo that you are. Well, I was in pain, but only the nicest sort and as for danger...the only danger I was in was being fucked to death and considering how I’m probably going to end up going, that doesn’t seem like such a bad idea after all, does it?”

“There’s no reason why you shouldn’t survive to a ripe old age if you come to my base. No danger for you, Avon. No risks, no fighting any more battles, never being shot at again...”

“You make it sound like Eden. So who is it who’s the Serpent, Blake?”

Blake grinned at him, as if the years had never been between them. “I was rather hoping that you would take that rôle on, Avon.”

“What? An invitation from the messiah to play Satan? Tut, tut, Blake, really. You’ll have the Federation after us for illicit religion.”

“Chance would be a fine thing! But think about it, Avon, don’t turn me down out of hand just because of the past. After all,” the master manipulator said, going on things half-said and hinted at, adding in his knowledge of Avon and of Vila, stirring the whole thing up, “how can I make the past up to you if you won’t even listen to me? If you won’t give me a second chance? At least talk to Vila about it...”

“And if I agree, I’m letting you lead me again and if I don’t—”

“Then you’re cutting your nose off to spite your face.”

“Getting bloodthirsty in your old age, aren’t you?”

“No, only paranoid. I try to avoid blood these days. I’ve seen my fill of it.”

“Not to mention having more than your share of blood on your hands.”

“Enough, Avon! I’ve paid for my past, more than paid and in ways I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy. Your pettiness isn’t worth the air it takes to say. Just leave it alone.”

“One more question, Blake, and then I’ll be finished. Would you destroy Star One, if you had the chance?”

The eyes may be the window to the soul, but Blake’s opened straight into hell. “Not if my life depended on it.”

Avon believed him, and found a jagged relief in that, as comfortable and as painfilled as going back the home of one’s childhood. “And would you betray me again?”

“Only one question, Avon. But I’ll answer you anyway.”

“Generous as ever, I see.”

“I didn’t even want to betray you the first time, Avon. What they put me through, what I endured...but in the end, I couldn’t help myself. I told them, Avon, every blessed thing they wanted to know and a lot besides. Can you imagine what it’s like, to be so broken that you look forward to the next interrogation because it might kill you? Or sinking so low that you look forward to the next interrogation because at least it’s human contact? Of looking forward to pain because it means that someone is paying attention to you, that you still matter?”

It was Avon’s turn to look at the metal bars looming at their back. “Oh, I can do better than imagine. I know, Blake, and I know what it is to do penance. And before you fall over any of your half-cocked psychoanalysis, I also know what it is to look forward to pain for no other reason than it feels rather pleasant.”

“You never were one for a simple response when contradictions could work, were you?”

“If you mean that I’m not a simpleton like you or Tarrant...”

wants me, how hungry he is for me to fuck him. Hear him? Groaning and moaning and carrying on. Touching me, grabbing my cock, stroking me, pulling at me, and sucking on my nipples, biting me, hands all over me, tugging my balls, stroking me, stroking me, hands covering all of me, wetness on my cock, ohfuckinggodd, he's sucking me! Feel that? Would he do that if he didn't want me? All the way down his throat, swallowing, ohgod he's wonderful. And now he's got me wet, you see what he's doing? See him—

—see him what? See him present himself like a bitch on heat? See him show his arse like a well-trained slave? Or like a man who wants to be fucked. Don't pretend, you can't pretend to me, you are me and we both know what it's like to kneel like that, with the floor hard and digging into my knees, and someone's hands on my backside. But it's better for him, don't you see that? After all the times they abused him, I'm showing him what it can be when it's not done out of hate, when it's—

—don't even think it. You can't pretend to me, either. It's not love and you know it. It's something, close, but not what you felt for Anna, not what— Don't you even think his name. Vila's got nothing to do with this. He's not here because he chose not to be. But Blake is and he wants it. He wants me to fuck him. Look at him, look! He's spreading himself for me, look at the way he's trying to reach me to shove my prick up him. Oh feel him, feel his hand grabbing me. Feel how tight he is, ohh, he's so tight, so fucking tight and feel him heave and shove under me, ramming me into him harder. Clutching at me like that, tighter than a glove, so smooth, incredibly smooth and so fucking strong, and hot, ohgod he's so hot and smooth and he wants me, oh, god, oh, yes, yes, yessss—

And Avon was sprawled over Blake, chest plastered to Blake's sweating back, cock gradually fading to limpness within the satin glove of Blake's body. A ragged breath, disbelief slithering in to shiver along his spine. He had just fucked Blake. Straight Blake, who was the only man who'd ever had the chance to turn Avon down more than once. The only man he'd ever pursued, the only man he'd considered letting fuck him. Oh really, his

conscience asked, interestedly, reminding him of Vila and of his need when he came in here to be fucked, repeatedly and often, by any man who wanted him. Anything to free himself from that tacit bond with Vila. And instead, he'd tangled everything up, hanging himself on too much rope. What the hell was he supposed to do now? Help Blake up, for starters, he thought, suiting action to thought, lifting Blake to his feet, even if he couldn't quite meet his eyes. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Blake collapsed to the floor, cradling his head in his hands, sobbing and sobbing as if he could force his soul out of his mouth to let him die. "I don't want to do this, I can't do this," the words were breaking from him. "Please don't make me do this!"

Horrified, Avon staggered back, hand going to his mouth in an instinctual gesture of self-revulsion. My god, I've raped him. I was so wrapped up in me, I've raped him, ohgod—

"Avon! Kerr, don't you leave me too. Not you. Hold me, Avon, hold me, don't let me go. Don't let them make me..."

Before he knew it was going to happen, he was there, on his knees, holding Blake in his arms in present echo of past loss. Then, it had been in the empty gullet of Control Central, now it was in the deserted island of brothel cul-de-sac. Not that it made much difference: he was still holding Blake, cradling him, watching him with wall-eyed concern, protecting him not from the enemy, but from the quisling that lived inside Blake. But now, away from eyes that pried, away from those who would jeer, away from those who would be jealous—away from the barrier of Blake's own heterosexuality—he was free to cuddle as well as hold, to stroke curls that sprang up to entrap his fingers in their tangle. As Blake had done him...

Trapped. Oh, he was trapped, definitively and irrevocably trapped, and by something he could never escape from: his own emotions. And who said it was lying that wove a tangled web? Telling himself the truth seemed to be tying him up rather tightly. But Blake, the stupid, idiotic maniac, was far worse off than Avon could ever be. At least what had happened to Avon had been just 'one of those



things', not some malicious collusion—unless you chose to blame Fate and the Universe. Just one of those things. What a mindlessly small phrase to describe something that was going to change his life so very much. Which was going to change Vila's life so much... He looked inside himself, expecting—hoping—to find nothing more than an ashen infatuation being subsumed by the greater love he'd been harbouring, all unspoken, all unseen, for all these years for a man who had wanted it only insofar as it helped his Cause or gave him friendship. And now?

And now there were possibilities, now there were hopes, now there were doors open and paths stretching out towards—

—Gauda Prime. Servalan. Whatever nasty little surprise Servalan had waiting for them. "Blake," he said, urgently, breath weaving into the lushness of curls, "we don't have to go to Gauda Prime. You could come with me, to Xenon, then we could take my ship and go anywhere in the Universe, somewhere where no-one could ever find us. We could—"

"No. I have to go to Gauda Prime. I...have to. There's so much for me to do there, so many people waiting for me—"

—I'll just bet there are, Avon thought bitterly. And I know what her name is.

"So much to do, I really must go back," and Blake's voice was changing, losing its confused child tone, sounding more and more like his old self with every word he spoke. "Deva is expecting me back—we have several new people coming in to discuss possible alliance with us. We even have some Federation deserters on their way, with information and resources that could decide what the fate of the Rebellion will be."

I'll just bet there are, Avon repeated the thought, this time with a weary depression that enervated him. Oh, yes, they'll be coming, hiding in plain sight and you shall welcome them in, my poor deluded fearless leader, and they shall surely kill you. Unless, of course, they decide to keep you alive as bait to try, try again to get me. How often, I wonder, will I find you on my doorstep and in what kind of a state? Look at you, all battered and scarred and bowed. What will they do to you next time? You weren't in this mess on

Terminal—was this what she did to you in a fit of temper for not snaring me thoroughly? Or was it out of pique because I ultimately escaped and she lost the *Liberator*? Oh, what will she do to you if you go back without me?

Blake was standing, slowly, hand going to the small of his back, eyes crinkling in a smile. "I'm not used to this kind of thing, you know. Although I don't suppose I'll be able to say that for long, shall I?"

And if he had thought he had an escape before, in that moment, with that smile, with that openness, Avon knew he was lost. So what if it were programmed? What if it weren't? What if he were to run now, wouldn't he just be doing the impossible—running away from himself? And even if he were to run, how long would it be before he was waking up from dreams in which Blake loved him and he was able to love Blake back? Just like his dreams with Vila...

We are condemned to repeat our past, unless we learn from it. Avon was no fool: he knew what would happen if he walked out on Blake now. Knew the loss he would suffer. Knew the nightmare it would be, waiting for when he was least expecting the spectre. Knew that it was only a matter of time before Servalan found him, before she had him in some trap he hadn't seen before it snapped shut. He knew it all... No choice, really, apart from to go into the valley of the shadow with his eyes wide open and fore-warned and fore-armed. With Blake where he could see him, not creeping up behind him to betray him again. With Vila, perhaps, with them both. There was room for Vila, wasn't there? If Vila would ever so much as speak to him again...

"I'll see you tomorrow, then," he said, not noticing that he hadn't answered Blake's question, not seeing the sudden concern flare in Blake's eyes, unaware of Blake's worry that Avon didn't seem quite right... "The others can follow in the *Scorpio*, but if I can, I'll bring Vila with me."

But not Orac, he was thinking. I won't let her get her hands on Orac, she got the *Liberator*, she got Cally and she can try to get me, but I won't let her loose on the Galaxy with that amoral machine to play with.



VENERY



Before death. Separated in space, Blake and Avon and Vila remain inexorably tied to each other. Who desires whom? And who is hunting whom? The third of the Venery tales. Before the death of venery.

ANTE MORTEM M. FAE GLASGOW

HE WAS BEGINNING TO WONDER IF anything was worth anything at all. In fact, he was quite sure that nothing was worth very much, but there were still a few faint scraps of meat clinging to the bare bones of his idealism. And those few, faint scraps had a name: Avon. An anti-hero if ever one had been born, but a man who was still fighting the good fight, struggling to make inroads into the Federation. Blake scratched at the scar over his eye, the flesh bothering him in the forest's damp. He didn't particularly like to remember how he had come by that scar, so much of the latter two years of his life best left unremembered, for they were more than mourned enough. Two full years, two entire years, wasted. By him, he admitted, shouldering his burden of guilt, and with no-one else to blame. It was his own fault that he'd done nothing: after all, he could have contacted Avon any time he had wanted to. An easy man to find, was anyone with Orac as his ears.

But he hadn't wanted to face Avon, had grabbed the rescue from that life—and the man he'd been—with both hands. It had been

a healing, apart from assorted scrapes and close shaves, to wander round world after world, unknown and not responsible for any life but his own. Purest luxury, purest freedom, even though there was a price on his head and a shackle on his heart. He had missed Avon, and all the others, but not enough to lose this precious freedom, and certainly not enough to take the risk of degenerating once more into the man he'd been towards the end. He shuddered every time he thought of what he had planned, and why. At night, sometimes, when most of the forest noises had gone to sleep, his own voice would come into his dreams, with an endless recitation of what he had said that day when they had been preparing to teleport to Star One itself. Endless recitations and endless variations on the same theme: I have to be right, otherwise it will all have been senseless killing and destruction. And to think that he had been so over the edge that killing and destroying on an even grander scale had seemed like the answer.

But it hadn't really been about that, though, had it? It had all been about himself and



Avon, and what the Federation had done to him. What the Federation, he thought, had stolen from him. With unwarranted viciousness to a defenceless little camp-fire, he jabbed it with a stick, a flurry of sparks shimmering up to the sky like would-be stars. He followed the sight, experience telling him that the handkerchief of sky between the tree tops held rain and probably lightning too. Time to go back to base, back to Deva and back to the run-of-the-mill problems. Time to relegate Avon back where he should leave him: in the past.

Yet, he stayed where he was, hunched before the atavistic comfort of a fire, thinking of Avon's supremely sophisticated complexity. He could lose himself inside Avon for a week and still be no closer to fathoming the man. For every action, there is a reaction, or, in Avon's case, for ever action, there is a contradiction. Never the same thing twice, for even if the same words were used, the intonation would be different, the subtle nuances would have changed, and god help the man who didn't notice. Avon would have you verbally hung, drawn and quartered before you could draw breath in self-defence. Which was all, he knew by the stirring of interest in his groin, part of Avon's addictive charm and dark beauty. Although that beauty had new lines now, not so many as Blake himself had, but enough to remind them both that time was passing at a double-quick march, hurtling away from them, beyond any and all efforts at recall.

He considered the desirability of staying dry over the penalty of returning to civilisation with its prying eyes and interminable questions. Naturally, getting wet became a minor inconvenience. There was so much still to think about. Was it, for instance, time to allow Avon to find him? It had been difficult to avoid, but it was Avon's own tricks that had made it possible: it was Avon who had let slip about being able to put prior-to-the-event voice-lock commands into Orac. Even as he'd lain on his bunk in the *Liberator*, the bunk he'd had sex with Avon in so many times, he'd known that if anything were to happen, he wasn't coming back to the ship. Or Avon. If the Andromedans didn't get them, if some

over-zealous Federation ship didn't take a pot-shot at them, if they managed to survive intact, then he had known he would still have to leave.

To think that he'd been willing to destroy billions, all to keep the upper hand with Avon. And, to be honest, to keep his own mind firmly in thrall to his chosen course of action. He was no longer so scared of losing himself and who he was if he were to fail. He had, after all, failed and rather spectacularly at that, yet here he was, surer of who and what he was since...in fact, since long before the mindwipe. The adolescent's need to prove himself a man was gone, the brain-rape victim's need to prove himself in control was gone, the clay-footed hero's need to be right at all costs was...

He shoved a stick through the rabbit-thing he'd caught, skewering it as neatly as his own conundrums had him. Face set, twisted by the scars that he explained fully to no-one, least of all himself, he propped the raw meat over the fire, listening as the crackle of the fire gave way to the hiss and spit of fat meeting flame. That was a sound that struck a chord in him, reminding him of how many times his fat had been in the fire, as they said, these two years past. It was then, perhaps, that he'd first begun his yearning to have Avon back. There was always the awareness that there was nothing at his back, as if he were standing on a cliff: he didn't need to look behind himself to sense the chasm. At his base, sometimes, he swore he could hear the wind whistling behind him every time he turned a corner and was confronted by his spacecraft-like command centre. Or the rest room, or the bedding that had been 'borrowed' from spacecraft. 'Liberated', as his people were so fond of saying.

He turned the cooking meal, half-smiling as the flesh seared in the heat from the fire. Not even Deva, bless his intellectual but simple mind, had had the insight to notice how much Blake hated the use of that word. It always, and he knew he was being foolish for this, seemed to be a sully of what *Liberator* had been to him. In retrospect, of course. A few more twigs added to the fire, the redolent ones from the low bush that was so

hard to find these days. He got back down on his hunkers, watching the fire, drawing more than physical comfort from it. Rain scented the air and the ground felt damp in anticipation, but he ignored that. After that time the bounty-hunter had caught him, he could still find it in him to enjoy such minor discomforts. Nothing like a good sadist to teach a man to appreciate the mundanity of small aches and pains.

His fists clenched with the effort not to break something or hurl something or kill something. But then again, look at the carcass on his spit—he'd already succumbed to those 3 temptations today. Primitive hunting for very sophisticated needs that were, in themselves, nothing more than the basic human drives of survival and revenge. One half of his face twisted in a grimace to match the permanent damage of the other, giving his face a mask of feral pleasure. Oh, how he had avenged himself upon that bounty-hunter. Taking his name and identity, taking over his reputation and luring all the other bastards to their dooms, what sweet vengeance that was. He still savoured it, though not as often now as before, since he'd erased so many names from the rosters of those who sold others out to the Federation. And what better way, as he was wont to argue, was there to repay that sort than by doing unto them what they'd been doing unto others? Find them, snare them, interrogate them. If they were useful, bring them into the flock. If they were useless to anyone, then set the small fry free to lure in the big fish. And if they were scum, then sell them to the Federation for as much money as possible. Perfect, really. They all got what they deserved that way—and he got money for weapons and food and shelter. He had money to buy the information they needed to set this base up, to get the ground forces in place. All right, so they weren't quite ready yet to move—no more lightning stings that made no difference in the long run for him, not after *Liberator*—but they would be, eventually. Once he'd cemented the deal with the Nostra and once he'd persuaded that recalcitrant lot back on Earth to come back to the fold, then they could make their move. Single, fast, decisive, bring the

Federation to its knees and with the minimum of bloodshed. Step in, take over the existing reins and start running things the way the ought to be: for the benefit of the people.

Gods, but he missed Avon. Of all the people that he was doing this for, the only one that had a face was Avon. And to be honest, the others didn't matter quite the same way, not on such an intense personal level. Hardly surprising, of course, for you can't love someone the way he loved Avon and simply stop doing things to make life better for him. But the doing was going to be different this time round. This time, there'd be no wholesale destructions, no lives lost that didn't deserve to be lost, no-one removed who hadn't earned it over and over.

Servalan. He poked at the animal on the spit, piercing the skin, a gush of fat shooting out to flare, briefly, before the flames consumed it. The things that woman deserved—were things he wouldn't do. He wasn't going to devolve into what she was. All of a sudden, the mossy hummock struck him as terribly uncomfortable and he moved, abandoning his dinner, getting up to walk away from the domesticity of the fire. She was too close, in some of the things she'd done, to what he'd done himself. Especially where Avon was concerned. Most especially there, if his spies were to be trusted. If what that turncoat from Servalan's own staff said was true...

He dreaded to think what it would have done to himself, to have suffered as Avon had done at Servalan's hands on Terminal. But it told Blake something, something that was, in its own way, worth Avon's pain. It told him that he, Blake, mattered so much to Avon that to Servalan, Blake was the greatest weapon of all to use on Avon. His feet were leading him back to his fire and his eyes were smiling as he thought of that. There was a warmth spreading from his heart to his balls, just from thinking about how much he must mean to Avon, for Avon to lose both *Liberator* and Cally. As for the message Servalan had used to bring Avon in, the claim that it was from Blake, asking Avon to come back, to join him at the base he'd set up...

And Avon had come running. Scurrying back because he believed Blake to have



crooked his little finger. Seating himself in front of the snaking flames, Blake's expression was one of profound satisfaction, as he contemplated the image of Avon, running to him; of Avon, needing him; of Avon, missing him. He hugged his knees in lieu of Avon, whilst he stared into the beauty of the fire, reliving the beauty of a very different kind of fire. A bonfire, a conflagration, a never-dying torch of flame, that was what they'd had together. Heat curled through him, as if Avon's hands were on him again, as if Avon were prostrate in front of him, a salaam to love. He could have all of that again; Servalan had shown him that by the bait she'd used to sweeten her traps for Avon.

After all, if Avon were to come racing for a set-up, then how much more likely was he to hurry to the truth? This time, the message could be real; this time, the base would be genuine, not some trap to rip at his mind. This time, the words of love would be nothing less than the truth. And this time, his course of action, his deeds, would honestly be for the good of his people, not a side-show to impress Avon. Not this time.

It would be different, this time. He lifted the meat from the fire, burning his fingers in the process, gasping and blowing as he began eating, too impatient these days to waste a single second. Too many near-misses to throw time away, or to waste it on existing instead of living. Leaning back on the hummock, fingers and face dripping juice from his dinner, lips gleaming in the firelight, eyes glinting with decision, he knew that yet again he was exonerated in his need to come out here where the planet was tamed but the people were still undomesticated. It freed his mind in a way the stiff metal confines at the base never could. It opened him up to himself, and that was something he could never dare do with all his people around him, looking to him for decisions and leadership. No, coming out here was perfect for him. No matter how depressed he might be, give him a few hours out here where he was completely alone, with nothing to prop him up, nothing to distract him, and he'd find his way back to a level mind. As he had today.

So nothing was worth anything? Avon was

worth rather more than Blake had ever cared to admit, so there was something in life that was of value. If he was taking a second shot at dethroning the oppressors, then why not take a second chance of making Avon and himself happy? After all, Servalan's nasty little trick had shown him just how the ground lay with Avon. He could make it a wonderful surprise, take the bitter taste of that treacherous defeat out of Avon's mouth. Make him smile, that wonderful, glorious smile.

Yes.

That's what he would do. Have Avon at his side again, standing up to Servalan—or Sleer as she called herself these days, not that anyone was unaware of the truth—together, fighting an enemy that wasn't each other. It thrilled him to the bone that Avon, after Terminal, would surely accept that he loved Blake. Add to that the fact that Avon already knew that Blake loved him, and the sum of that was happiness. They could be together, truly together. There was an abundance of space at the base, and no-one there would bat an eyelid if Blake were to live with a man—well, none of them would object if they ever for a second thought that Blake would find out. He believed in discipline, and so did they, seeing the necessity of it in such a closely woven community who had so much cause to distrust outsiders. No, it would actually be easier to live with Avon at the base than on *Liberator*—no Jenna poking her nose in, no Cally eavesdropping their minds, no Vila hanging around like a streak of misery.

The carcass was thrown into the fire, the remnants of meat charring blackly, the last of the blood consumed. Not that he was going to get rid of Vila, of course, nor these other three that Avon seemed to have taken up with. They were useful, obviously, else Avon would never have them around him. There would be jobs for them, probably helping to set up other bases and the like. But Avon would stay here, with him, on Gauda Prime. Together. The two of them. Nothing to come between them. Oh, that would take all the grey out of his life, that would put the sparkle back into his campaign. That would put some love back in his life.





oed round this room. The instant his feet landed on the stone floor, he could hear it, although his ears swore there was not a sound in here, apart from the thud of his boots and the rasp of his own breath. There was a niche, over there in the far corner that could have been shaped for him—or for the unfortunates that Dorian had forced to be his Creature. The sin in this place was palpable, and soothing for that. His own iniquities shrank in comparison, sinking without trace under the oily miasma left behind by the eternity of Dorian’s corruption. Seated on the stone, with stone around him and leaden overhead, stilled pendulum of time fossilised forever, he could look at himself without flinching. Well, perhaps that was too optimistic an assessment, but he could, at least, manage it without having to lie to himself in self-preservation. Which, he conceded with a touch of his old ruefulness, was about all he had left.

And look, he recalled with a flash of the new defeatism, where it has led me—into almost as invidious a position as Blake would have. Or as Blake had, if accuracy were of interest. He was stuck here because of Blake, because Blake had had enough, because Blake was too big a coward to shoulder his own burdens and clean up the mess he’d made. So very like his own brother—the ‘blond bombshell’ as Vila had so aptly dubbed him, Dru being one for either exploding at the slightest trigger or being as much use as a dud—who had made a second career of getting out of stews by landing them on someone else’s shoulders. So like Blake...

But then, if he were going to tar with that particular paintbrush, then he really ought to include himself, ought he not? After all, who was it who had donned the mantle of leadership, not altogether reluctantly? It was the cause, not the power he had objected to, the obligations, not the responsibility. All he’d truly wanted was for it to be over, finished, dead and gone, and Blake with it, so that he himself could have taken the ship—his ship—and gone off to...

No point in crying over spilled milk, was there? No purpose could possibly be served by going over it again and again, unless he

were going to finally reach some kind of decision. Such as, for instance, what he was going to do if that obsolete machine ever managed to find Blake. Now there was a puzzle indeed. What was he to do? There was no *Liberator* to hand over as symbol of what he, Avon, was renouncing. There was no badge of office, no title, no proclamation, only his own revulsion at this möbius strip of failure leading to failure. There wasn’t even a crew to hand over, as Blake had done to him, saddling him with the ones that didn’t get away. He could always put Vila on a silver platter and hand him over, but after Malodaar, the worm had turned. Strange, how much that had hurt, seeing Vila standing always at a distance, no longer allowing him close. Oh, they had, after a briefly antagonistic pause, managed to progress to the stage of being in the same room as each other without un-sheathing the cutting comments and wounding words, but all the rest had gone by the board. If he were to even suggest sex now! The one time he had tried... Well, perhaps Vila might have come around, but it had horrified Avon, on a moral footing he denied ever having even met, that he had used the same old voice of seduction that he had prostituted into attempted...elimination. Not murder. Murder was what one did for profit or pleasure, or out of blind rage, and he had done those, which was something he chose to live with. But the simple, unvarnished truth was that he had been out to survive, and it was tough that Vila was the one who had to die for Avon to live.

The room whispered around him, the susuration of silken guilt, of liquid agony, of grating grief for lives wasted. He could hear his own voice, whispering to Vila on that damned shuttle as if they were home in bed rather than Vila skulking and him stalking in a flying coffin. Had he not found Egrorian’s little piece of treachery, he would have given up his own charade and flushed Vila out, even though he would have regretted that. But then, life is full of regrets... But one must make them small ones, which was why he wanted, quite fervently, to shove this mess of a crusade back on Blake’s plate. Avon had already lost more than enough to this point-



core of the truth, the real reason why he wanted to see Blake again. Not for the sex, nor the vitality nor even the hope and freedom from responsibilities, but it was because Blake was the one loose end in his life that insisted on getting itself ensnared with every other thread of his life, until all he had was a bundle of tangled strands.

Yes. That was the truth, and it was one he could live with. He was resolute now, and relaxed as we all become when we fully realise that our chosen course of action is the right one. There was still Vila to deal with, but he could take care of Vila when they found Blake. One problem at a time, that was the best way for one to untangle life. Yes, he could sort the Vila problem out later. For the moment, he had to get back upstairs and remind that machine of who served whom and that answers were expected immediately.

His face was the most relaxed it had been in weeks, his eyes clear and bright, a definite spring in his step. He was pleased with himself for having confronted the truth, for all that there was a lot of it he would rather not have seen. But he did pride himself on being a pragmatist, and with just cause. Face the facts, deal with them, get on with life. That was a part of his philosophy, and a part that worked very well.

For an honest man. And it would have worked well for Avon, had he been an honest man. But it was still there, in the darkness of his mind, that tiny, bright kernel of knowledge, growing and growing, lying in wait for its chance to germinate. And perhaps, just perhaps, if he had known that, he would have realised that he was not sorting a scattered skein but instead, was weaving a very tangled web indeed.

NOT EVEN AVON KNEW ABOUT THIS PLACE, VILA WAS SURE OF THAT. It stood to reason that Avon didn't know—if he had, he'd've nabbed Vila's collection of booze by now, not to mention confiscated the fur bedspread for his own use. But this was Vila's secret place, the hidden nest where no-one but him ever came to. It was overflowing with creature comforts: soft mattress, plump pillows, food dispenser, vid-player, music outlet, stacks and stacks of

books, everything a man could want. He loved coming here, to lie under the fur spread, the softness tickling his face ever so sweetly, to drink one of Dorian's good wines (he used the muck for the daily consumption of those who couldn't tell the difference between plonk and good hock and excellent port) and read one of the wonderful books he'd found. Some of them were even on paper, and although the archaic script was really difficult at first, you got used to it quick enough, and it was worth it. There was something about the smell of the real books that was extra special, and that was one of the things he liked best about this room. As soon as he lifted the access panel off, the redolence of the books would waft out and one good whiff of that and he'd be in heaven.

But this morning, mind, he wasn't looking for the escapist magic of book or tape, but for the privacy in which to get gloriously, rip-roaringly drunk. There were enough bottles in the coolant unit in here to get even him to the point of oblivion and god, didn't he need that. All the lights were on bright and fearless as he crawled into his room, but he dimmed them immediately, down to just enough to see by. Building himself a comfy cocoon didn't take very long, everything always left lying there, in case of emergency, sort of. And this, he thought, was definitely an emergency. Avon was down in that fucking room again and that always gave him the absolute willies. Mean to say, Avon was getting weird enough at the best of times these days, god only knew what was happening to him Down There. Enough to make a man believe his old granny's tales of Hell, wasn't it? Course, Avon'd laugh if he ever mentioned how scared he got when Avon went down there like that. Well, maybe not actually laugh, not out loud like, but he would be so very, very amused. Sneering bastard. Always had been, always would be, but it'd been getting worse lately. And as for what he'd done on that sodding shuttle...

All right, so everyone knew Avon was a survivor, survive at all costs and all that crap, but that didn't mean he could go taking it out on Vila, did it? Mean to say, he'd got no right to do that, coming after him like that, with his gun and that voice. Probably what was hardest to forgive him for, truth be told. He'd



they were dirt beneath his feet. Mind, if Avon'd tried, he'd bet that Blake would come running. Nah, that wasn't Blake. He'd have Avon come running to him, so's they could start their lord of the jungle crap all over again. Pain in the fucking neck, was Blake. Not that he'd always thought that, he admitted, taking a slug of good brandy instead of his usual savouring sip. Used to think Blake was the bees knees, but that was before he left. Walking out on them like that. Walking out on Avon like that. Bastard. Rotten fucking bastard. Why couldn't he have stayed, eh? Why'd he have to go and leave, cos then Avon never stood a chance of getting bastard Blake out of his system. Now, every time they went to bed, him and Avon, when they actually did manage to end up in bed, when they didn't end up in an argument instead with one of them going off in a temper, well, when they did manage to get to bed together, who was in there with them but Blake. That's right. Bastard wouldn't share when he was here, now he won't share when he's not either. And where did that leave Vila? Left him with an Avon who couldn't forgive himself for all the stuff he'd done to Blake. Left him with an Avon who couldn't ever work out what the hell had been going on between him and Blake. As if Blake had ever actually loved Avon. Bloody stupid idea that. The only thing Blake ever loved, and now the booze was warming his belly and his toes, bringing him back to life, the only thing Blake ever loved was himself. Not even his fucking Cause. Never loved that. If he'd loved that, he'd never've left it, right? Right. So the bastard never loved that. Never loved people neither. Don't destroy their lives if you love 'em, do you? Mean to say, he, Vila, would never dream of going after Star One to blow up all the people he said he was trying to help, would he? And he'd never claim it was for their own good. He'd seen people die before, and they never seemed to think it was much good. Same went for being hungry or sick without any of the medicine getting through. Course, Blake had all his airy-fairy ideas, didn't he? Obvious the bastard had never spent even five minutes down the Delta levels. Not that he'd've survived five minutes

down the Delta levels. What Big Jak would've done to Blake! Oh, that was a good laugh, that. Almost as good as thinking what Big Jak would've done to Tarrant!

Course, if Avon'd gone down there, he'd probably've had Big Jak fetching his slippers and his tea for him, wouldn't he? Always could charm blood out of a stone, could Avon. Never failed. One of them smiles, and that was it, they were putty in his hands. Apart from Blake, of course, and if you asked him, that was all it had been between the pair of them. A contest, a stupid fucking contest to see who needed who most, to see who was going to end up on top and to see who was going to give in and fall for the other one first. Right pair of stupid pricks they were. As if what either one of them felt had spilt to do with love. But these Alphas were all the same. Thought love had to be fireworks and candlelit dinners five nights a week, and pining away from loneliness the other two. Stupid. That kind of thing never lasted, that's why it was a mug's game, best left to the very young and the very stupid.

But he was tired of it, so fucking tired of it. Couldn't go to bed with Avon without Blake, or Blake's stupid memory, coming in between them. Couldn't have a game of chess, without Avon thinking about Cally, and then that always takes us back to when Cally got killed and guess who was there? That's right. The great and glorious Blake rears his ugly head again. Vila couldn't even come in here, to his special room these days without Blake following him in. Every time he tried to think, it always came back to Blake, didn't it? Prick.

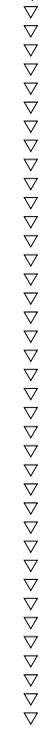
He'd had it, he'd really had it. He wanted out, he wanted it done, he wanted it over. He wanted Avon back, to him and not to some ghost that never even cared enough to send them a message. Never cared enough to let them know if he was alive or dead, or stuck in one of the 'rehab' centres somewhere, kept quiet until the Feds had managed to mindwipe him again. First few months, him and Avon'd held their breaths, waiting for the news to show a fresh new Blake, even more empty-headed than before, eyes filled with Federation tears as he apologised to the public yet again for the error of his ways. Mind, he



THE DOME CYCLE

Which means ‘ad infinitum’ according to the editor or ‘ad nauseam’ if the Glaswegian is to be believed. This is the fourth in the series and as much as M. Fae Glasgow thinks it’s the last, the editor knows better. When we last saw Avon, he was in quite a pickle, his Delta and Alpha families ‘meeting’ for the first time...

SHOULD AULD ACQUAINTANCE
M. FAE GLASGOW



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“KERR!”

His mother, of course, voice high with outrage and shock, but then, one could hardly blame her, given the current circumstances. In fact, given the current circumstances, Avon felt rather inclined to join her.

“As these...these...” she spluttered, her upbringing unequal to the task of bringing up a suitably foul expression to describe these unutterably vile creatures.

“People?” her younger son supplied, her attitude catching him all the more rawly because it had been his own, not too long since.

“Oh, is that what they are? You must forgive me, I couldn’t tell. But—” loudly, as loudly as Lady Waylz would ever speak, hand raised to forestall all the other mouths that were so anxious to babble forth, “—as these...people...seem to be connected to you in some way, then might I suggest that you have them removed forthwith. Right now, Kerr.”

Oh, how he remembered that voice, echoing at him about homework and friends, clothes and hair. Leaving that voice behind had been

the greatest luxury of all the luxuries the expensive flat had afforded him, and now facing her again in all her tea-rose and jasmine glory, he regretted not a single credit. “Mother,” he began, stepping forward, trying to think of the magic phrase that would resolve this mess without someone—probably himself—getting killed or his mother erupting into guilt-inducing tears.

“The middle of a revolution is hardly the time or place to interfere with your son’s life, your ladyship, especially as I need him right now. In case you hadn’t noticed, the Dome is on the verge of falling under the control of the Deltas.”

She did the impossible: she managed to look even more shocked, horrified and outraged. The mere thought of this appalling state of affairs becoming permanent was enough to give her nightmares. “Kerr,” she said with the firmness that was tempered to mere arrogance in her son, “I shall speak with you later. I shall be expecting some answers from you then. Please, President Blake, do go on.”

“Not half as many answers as I’m expecting



right now, Avon,” Blake almost shouted at him. “What the hell are you playing at? You come back here, rescue me, become my right hand man—”

Oh, yes, I was quite the suitable substitute for masturbation, wasn't I, Blake? he thought quite nastily, less than keen on the way Blake was treating him. He had more than enough of that from his mother, thank you very much indeed.

His lack of interest obviously hadn't dawned on Blake, who was still going strong. “—and before I know where I am, there's a rebellion by our own people, the Deltas, and you seem to know all about it. In fact, it's all your plan, isn't it? So tell me,” and this a lesson in danger and threat, “what the hell are you up to?”

“Me? Nothing, Blake, absolutely nothing. All this was out of my hands the day I left the Bowels to return Upstairs,” and it never occurred to him to explain the terms to Blake, not surrounded by his Delta family, who were busy outnumbering his Alpha family. “If you want to know what's going on, then I suggest you ask Vila. According to my plan,” he lied slightly, promoting Vila a notch and quietly ignoring his own anticipated role, “Vila is the leader. Aren't you, Vila?” And he turned then, daring to actually look at Vila for the first time, shocked by what he saw. Not even when first they'd ended up down the Delta levels, had Vila been so filthy. Nor so hard, nor so unloving. To be rejected so silently and so thoroughly caught him by surprise and it...hurt. Quietly, as yet, but building up the pressure by gathering increments, so that he could feel it grow, even as he took the time to actually look at the brood. They were all incredibly filthy, again, even more so than before. As for recently, well, since he'd given them the knowledge they had traditionally been banned from, they had been the most enthusiastic of recyclers and thrifty by generations of necessity. There was no need for such disgusting back-sliding. Unless... Mentally, he reviewed some of the figures on the files he'd accessed that very afternoon. My god, he thought, more shocked than his mother had been, their supplies were actually cut...

“So yer wants ter know wot's goin' on then, does yer, Blake?”

Avon grinned, a sudden moment of glee amidst the horror: just look at Blake's face as Vila played Delta to the hilt!

“Well, I'll tells yer wot's goin' on. We're sick of it, is wot's goin' on. Sick an' tired an' 'ungry. 'Ad it up ter 'ere, an' when those fuckin' raids started up agen, we decided it was time ter come up 'ere an' show yous lot wot for.”

“Vila, you are an idiot,” Blake snapped at him, and almost every hackle in the room rose. It didn't do to insult a Delta in front of his family like that, it didn't do at all. “Don't you realise that it takes time to change centuries of tradition? That it takes time to re-allocate limited resources?”

“You jest take a look around yer, Blake. This wot yer calls limited resources, eh? There's enough in this one room ter feed an' clothe an' buy med'cine fer me family. You wouldn't know this, Mr. 'Igh an' Bloody Mighty Alpha, bu' me granda jest died,”

“Vila, I'm sorry.”

It was as if he hadn't spoken. “D'yer know wot me granda died from? We calls it lung-rot, an' we lose 'undreds to it every year. Every year wivout fail, we lose old folks an' littl'uns, go down like flies, sufferin' summat awful. Well, one of our bright girls foun' a book in one of them 'istory places, an' it told us wot lung-rot is. It's tuberculosis, Blake, a mutant strain of tuberculosis. And do you want to know what the treatment is?”

Don't be nervous Vila, don't let him intimidate you. Let him think you're slipping into Alpha just to show that you can, and not because you always do that when you're scared.

“It's common, everyday anti-infectant. Just the same stuff you can walk into any chemist's and buy, but that we can't get our hands on. He's dead, Blake, and you and your lot killed him as much as if you'd shot him yourself.”

“All right, so there is obviously some kind of discrepancy between raising certain standards and providing the basic necessities, which you are supposed to be getting by now. I can look into it immediately, get the whole thing sorted out, but I can hardly do anything with your Deltas controlling every computer,



now can I?"

"You," Vila said, going up on tip-toe, facing Blake off, "ain't gonner do nuffing. Cos I'm goin' ter do it, yer 'ear me? Me an' my lot's goin' ter come up 'ere an' take wot's ours, whether you lot like it or no'. See wot I'm gettin' at, do yer?"

"I can see how stupid you're being. Deltas can't run computer systems, you can't run the entire Dome. You—"

"We're jest as good as you are, tha's wot we are, an' we're tired of workin' our guts out while you lot sit up 'ere on your fat arses an' live like fuckin' royalty off our sweat. An' our blood. It was yesterday wot did it. You shouldn't ought to 'ave started the raids up again, Blake."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Oh, well done," Avon butted in, slow hand-clap insulting Blake better than words ever could. "You do *such* a good impersonation of outraged innocence, don't you? But then, you are *very* good at faking things, aren't you? What Vila is talking about," he went on, leaping in before Blake could respond to the rather personal bite of sarcasm, "are the 'live donor' drives. The ones where mutoids—by the way, weren't you going to get rid of mutoids, or is that yet another thing you haven't quite found the time for yet? But I digress," he smiled, as charmingly as if they were having tea, the tension in the room fraught enough to make those old enough to understand it silent, and those too young loud with fear. Someone was crying and screaming in the background, but Avon did not even register the sound, too focussed on Blake, too stung by the state his Delta clan was in. To see the children look hungry again, after all his work to the contrary. And after he'd given his word... Oh, Blake was going to pay for this, starting right now, with a pound of flesh carved out by words. "The donor drives," he went on, pacing slowly in front of Blake, his hands clasped behind his back the way he had done so often on *Liberator*, the way he did so often at meetings, "are the worst of a very bad lot, Blake. A cry will go up, then a shout, and all of a sudden, everyone is running as quickly as they can to the nearest 'safe house'. Of course, it's not safe at all,

merely marginally less dangerous than their homes. And everyone goes in there, Blake, old and young alike. Apart from those who are too sick, of course. They have to be left behind in their beds, while everyone hopes that the sick won't be taken, for who would want diseased organs? But everyone else, Blake, and I mean everyone, huddles together in the smallest of rooms and it gets so hot and so crowded that you can barely breathe." He was right in front of Blake now, almost shouting at him, unleashing some of the impotent rage that had haunted his time on the Delta levels. "Oh, yes, I've been there, I've lived through more than one raid. But not everyone lives through them, of course. There are the unfortunate ones who are captured and taken off to have their organs harvested from them when they are still alive."

"That's impossible, Avon!" And Blake looked sick, shaken by something he had never suspected could exist, not even under Servalan, and most especially not under him. "Tell me it's not true, Avon."

"Oh, it's true enough," Vila piped up, coming to stand at Avon's side, automatically supporting him, all differences cast aside to be dealt with later, as was the Delta way. That was one class who knew all about what happens when people allow themselves to be divided. "Ave you any idea 'ow many people we lose in the safe rooms every year? Dozens. Old folks 'ave 'eart attacks, babies..."

"Babies cry, Blake," and he could feel the fury and the rage roiling inside, desperate to be vented on someone who could make a difference but who had chosen to be blind instead. "And when they cry, do you know what their mothers or their fathers have to do? Can you imagine, even begin to guess what it is they have to do? They suffocate them, Blake. They have to murder their own children, for it's better to sacrifice one child than lose the fifty or more who are trapped in there with it. I stood there, Blake," and he was shouting now, right into Blake's shocked and appalled face, "and I watched as someone who was barely a woman herself had to murder her own infant. And you've started that up all over again. For the sake of fat bastards like you who don't want to give



anything up, ever.”

“Don’t you dare, Kerr Avon, don’t you damned-well dare. You accuse me—me!—of ordering that kind of thing? I might be a bastard, but don’t judge me by your own standards.”

“Oh, I would never elevate you to such lofty heights—it might go to your head and then what would we do?”

“I dunno wot we’d do, bu’ I know wot we’re goin’ ter do right now. You, Blake, are gonner get yer people ter stop fightin’. We’re no’ usin’ killin’ force, we’re only stunnin’ your lot, bu’ they’re killin’ my folk. An’ you’re gonner stop them, ain’t yer? An’ then yer gonner make a start on gettin’ us wot we’re entitled to. You,” Vila said, poking Blake in the chest, “are going to authorise us Deltas to live Upstairs. Cos if yer don’t, then we’re jest gonner take over anyway. ‘Cept we’ll start usin’ our guns on full force, won’t we?”

“Look, Vila,” said Blake, ex-revolutionary and now leader of the establishment, “I can understand why you’re so upset, but there are better ways than this to solve problems.”

“Oh, yeh? Well, this was good enough fer you, wasn’t it? Was good enough fer you when yer ’ad us runnin’ round the fuckin’ Universe blowin’ things up an’ killin’ people. Wot is it, Blake, don’t yer like it when I take a leaf out of yer book?”

“This is different from what I was doing—”

“Only because you are the one on the receiving end,” Avon said, publicly, adding on his own private codicil, “in matters of the rebellion any way.”

“You keep out of this,” Blake snarled, his own considerable anger eructating forth. “Unless, of course, you lied about having nothing to do with this now, just as you have lied to me about everything else.”

Avon raised an eyebrow at that, becoming ever more the elegant Alpha on the outside, although verbally, in this public spatting, he was slowly sliding into Delta. “Tut, tut, Blake, didn’t Daddy ever tell you not to hit below the belt? But then, you were never adventurous enough to do such a thing, were you?”

“Kerr!” His mother, again, shocked from the soles of her expensive, hand-made, en-

dangered-species shoes to the ends of her dyed, coiffed and root-implanted hair. “What’s the matter, Mother?” he asked with spurious sweetness, for once uncaring enough of her disapproval that he could turn on her. Strange, how the lingering oppression of childhood was disappearing behind the wall of support provided by a family that owed him nothing, but chose to give him so much. “I wonder what offends you more: that I should refer to such things in polite company—”

And here his mother snorted, impolitely, at the motley Delta horde cluttering up her sitting room.

“—or that your darling little President is as perverted as I? Well, mother darling, you might be interested to know that President Blake is actually rather more perverted than I. Oh, not because I can finally admit who and what I am, but because I, at least, am interested only in those who are old enough to make their own choices. Right, Blake?”

“You bastard! How dare you throw that up at me? When—”

“—when now’s not the time or place to start muck-rakin’, right? Look, Blake, while you an’ Avon are whisperin’ sweet nothin’s to each other, your Alphas are murderin’ my people. An’ I want it stopped. You’re gonner get on tha’ comm-link, an’ yer gonner tell your lot to drop their weapons an’ come along nice an’ quiet like. All right?”

“You’re ordering me to surrender?” And he laughed. He actually dared to laugh in Vila’s face. “Don’t be preposterous.”

“Preposterous, eh? Well, in case you ’adn’t noticed, you’re my prisoner, Blake, an’ you’ll do wotever I fuckin’ well tell yer to do, d’you ’ear me?”

“No, Vila, I don’t, and you had better stop this foolish game before it goes too far and you regret it.”

“So Avon’s right, you are all prick an’ no brains.”

Oh, nicely done, Vila. The fine art of lying so that it rings like the truth. I may never have actually said it to you, but Blake’ll never know that, will he? Especially not when it is so painfully close to the truth.

“You, my old friend,” Blake said, leaning in very close, intimidatingly large, “are treading

on very thin ice.”

“Old friend? Is that what I am? Is that why you were always calling me up, inviting me over for your dinner parties and to your fancy galas and all that stuff? Oh, yeh, you’ve shown just how good a friend you are, pal, and if that’s the best you have to offer, then you’re poorer than I’ve ever been. Now, just to make sure this gets through your stupid thick skull, I’ll say this slowly. You are my prisoner. Got that?”

“Don’t be stupid, Vila. How can you possibly say that I am your prisoner?”

“This is how,” Vila answered quite casually, pulling his gun out from his waistband and digging the point of it into Blake’s chest, right on the spot where Blake’s heart beat faster and faster, until his chest was fluttering in reaction to the coldness of metal pressing into him. “See? Funny ’ow easy it is ter explain some things, isn’t it? Now, old friend, you once told me you wanted to hear all the details of wot I had been up to, while you were locked up by the Federation. An’ I’m gonner tell you them, ’specially,” and here he looked at Avon who was standing, arms crossed, keeping well out of this, “the bits you don’t want ter ’ear. Bu’ in the meantime, yer’ve got a job ter do, ain’t yer? Yer gonner get yer folk ter drop their guns an’ stop killin’ my lot. I’m goin’ ter count to five, an’ if you ’aven’t done it, then I’m goin’ to kill you.”

“Don’t be stupid, Vila,” and Blake looked at Avon with the triumph of hope, realising that Avon was on the side of the Alphas, where he belonged.

“If you kill him,” and the truth came out, making Blake frown ferociously, “then all you’ll have done is finally give him his bleeding heart’s desire and made him a martyr. However, if you were to begin by taking him apart, a finger at a time, for instance...”

“God,” Vila looked at Avon as if he had seen a devil, not a deity, “you Alphas are a sick lot, aren’t you? But it’s a good idea, isn’t it, Blake? I’ll count ter five, an’ if you ’aven’t got your lot on the comm, then I’m gonner take the first finger of yer right ’and off.”

Blake drew himself to his full height, glowering down at Vila, ignoring the rising chant of the children, who were joining Vila in

this wonderful counting game, racing along ahead of him.

“One,” cold and implacable, counterpoint to the raucous fun of the children.

*One, two, three four five,
once I caught a fish alive,*

“Two.”

“Do you honestly expect me to fall for your bluff, Vila?” So proud, head held so high.

*six seven eight nine ten,
then I let him go again.*

“Three.”

“I really think you ought,” Avon said, torn between so many camps that there was no right way left for him, only the anger he felt for Blake and the fury he felt for the suffering of his Delta family—and the aching sweetness of Blake, standing there, his lover, a man he was in love...

Why did you let him go?

“Four.”

Because he bit my finger so...

“Five.”

“All right, all right, all right, I shall order a cease fire. That should give us time to negotiate, if nothing else.”

“I’m not interested in negotiating,” Vila said, himself and gun following Blake over to the comm unit, standing over him while the other man made the necessary connections and said the necessary passwords.

It was, finally, done, and with as little grace as Blake could possibly manage with a gun kissing the nape of his neck. Silent, keeping his own counsel, Avon stood watching as Vila made a parody of everything he had ever had with Blake. Correction: of everything he had ever *thought* he’d had with Blake. And looking at him now, with those words still burning his mind (action delayed until resources available, writ large and pyre-bright), all he could think about was the skulking around in the small hours of the morning, or in mid-afternoon when they were ‘in conference’, and Blake might never find as much time to spend with him as Avon wanted, but they always managed to actually discuss business on their little trysts, so that no-one would ever be the wiser. No-one, obviously, including himself. Nothing he had said had made the blindest bit of difference, had it, judging by the state



the family was in. Look at Vila, so much weight fallen from him, hollows under cheekbones where there had always been smiles before. What the hell had been going on down there whilst he'd been up here living above the salt? He came closer, and with one speaking glance, Vila stepped aside for him without saying a word, making a point of becoming engrossed with sending the elder members of his brood off to make sure that everything was going as it should, to take the personal touch to the various cells of Deltas trying so hard to run a place they had only ever read about or dreamed of. When he was done, the room was almost empty, all the Alphas 'escorted' off to their rooms, leaving Avon and Blake and Vila with a space away from the children.

"Blake," Avon said and it was gratifying to see how quickly Blake whipped round to look at him, and to see how much hope and dependence and need was in those brown eyes. Only then, seeing it, did Avon realise how much he had missed it, burying the disappointment under his reasons for keeping on with Blake. Reasons which were somewhat moot with Vila on the scene.

"Yes, what is it?"

And now Vila was looking at him, now turning away in disgust. *Expecting more betrayal, Vila? And perhaps you are wise to. After all, even I'm not entirely sure where I stand on all of this. In the middle, I'm afraid, sitting on top of the fence. Not the most comfortable of positions...*

"Did you ever do any of the things I demanded?"

"Oh, Avon," Blake answered, referring to nothing so public as the revolution, "I gave in to far too many of your demands."

A raised eyebrow and a cold stare answered him. "Really? Do tell."

"Here?" and the shock and shame in that voice stung him, for all that he could understand it. After all, what they had done simply wasn't the done thing, was it? Not between two grown men who were long out of school and supposedly beyond such schoolboy foolishness. Oh, yes, what they had done was perfectly all right, if one did not stray beyond the lonely confines of school. But they had,

and nothing Blake could say was going to change that.

"And why not? Ashamed, Blake?"

"For keeping you on an even keel by whatever means it took? Of course not. Although I do rather regret the methods."

"So that is to be the story. Why begin it now? Or are you simply getting some practice in before your officers arrive? Quite the politician, aren't you now."

"It's not a dirty word."

"What—poof? Oh, but of course, you were referring to the other 'p' word, weren't you. Politician. The word might not be dirty," he leant over Blake, his hands covering Blake's on the arms of the chair, "but the man certainly is."

"Am I, Avon?" Blake sniped back, voice an intense whisper. "Or am I doing the same thing you would?"

Staring into brown eyes that he knew in love, Avon glared at him. "Cowering? Hardly."

"And you didn't? You hid up here and from what little I've heard in here, you had...commitments on the Delta levels. As for what we did..." A gulp, and Blake was gazing at him, pain and regret vying with necessity in his eyes. "This," and he swept his hand round the elegant room with its genealogy of history, "is where you were born and bred. You know how our people regard that sort of thing. How long do you think I would last as leader if they even suspected me of being a deviant."

Now that shocked Avon. "You admit it?"

"Surprised? Now that surprises me. Oh, be reasonable. We," and his voice dropped even lower, so that Avon had to lean in even farther to catch it, "fucked each other. How much more deviant could we be?"

"We fucked?" He could, quite suddenly, feel Vila's eyes on him, even while the steady drone of Vila giving orders never paused, and while he was raging at Blake, there was a part of him revelling in the sight of Vila being in command, instead of sleeking round doing what the nearest Alpha told him to. "Your memory is as faulty as your brain. You fucked me," and he could feel the blast of pain and anger all the way across the room, as Vila turned his back, face hidden away. What's



guing over me like a pair of fishwives over the day's catch. And I," he stepped between them, looking from one to the other, "do not like it. In fact, I refuse to put up with it. Whom I choose to sleep with and *how* I choose to sleep with them, is not open to discussion. It is also not a topic for public discussion in front of my mother and small children! As far as I am concerned, it is not a topic of conversation *at all*. Now, this may come as quite a shock to you both, but I am more than capable of making my own choices and my own decisions. Preferably without two idiots fighting over me."

"Sorry, Avon."

"How sweet, Vila," Blake sneered, refusing to budge an inch, fearing that in his position, any sign of weakness could be the beginning of the end.

"Blake," Avon said with transparent calm, coming over to sit, apparently casually, on the arm of Blake's chair, "I've already told you: I am not a bone of contention to be fought over by you two. And in addition, although you both seem more than willing to forget this, I'm afraid I have to remind you that there is this minor matter of a rebellion. Of people killing other people. Of buildings being damaged. Of innocents being murdered. Did you feel that tremble, either one of you?"

"Explosions," Vila said succinctly, having been brought up with the occasional rumble as one of the power plants had another 'interruption in efficiency' as the reports called it, or fatal explosion as the Deltas called it. "An' that means someone's not 'eard or someone's no' listenin'. Get on the comm link again, Blake, an' get your lot to pack it in."

"That depends on what your intentions are."

"Sorry, but I'm already married. My intentions," he added, going back to the important public issue, leaving the important private issue aside for the moment, "is ter get equal shares fer equal work. That's all we're after. We don't want ter kill anyone, we don't want ter steal yer home nor nothin', we jest want wot's comin' ter us. We jest want wot we deserve."

"What do you think we were trying to do? But these changes can't take place over

night, can they?"

"Can't they, Blake?" Avon said, absently picking up a stray baby that had begun to cry, handing it unthinkingly to one of the cousins. "I've already written all the programmes that would make that possible."

"And if I implemented those programmes, Avon? How long," and Blake sounded weary beyond belief, disillusion colouring his voice the bleakest of greys, "do you think it would be before we had an Alpha and Beta level backlash against the Gammas and the Deltas?"

"Longer than it took for them to have a Delta backlash against the Alpha and the Beta levels."

Blake glowered at Avon for those particular words of wisdom.

"We'd've been patient," Vila put in, "but there was no need to cut wot we were already gettin'. An' as for startin' the raids again... That was wicked, Blake. No other word for it but wicked."

The personal still permeated the professional, and for all Avon's protests, they were still like two stags fighting for supremacy of the herd. Which was as true, in a way, of their public roles as it was of their private ones. "I didn't know a thing about that, Vila, and anyway, surely it would have been more reasonable—cleverer, you might say—to have spoken to me about it, told me what was going on, instead of starting a war and killing people?"

"We 'aven't killed a soul, it's your lot wot's doin' that. Which is why you're gonner get on ter yer high-ups an' tell 'em ter give up. An' no funny business this time, or I won't bover wiv a finger at a time."

"There's no need to threaten me, Vila."

"Oh, there isn't, is there?"

"When there are lives at stake? Don't be a fool, man. But then," and it was obvious that he couldn't resist the dig, sparing the time to make a telling glance at Avon, "I don't suppose you can help it much, can you?"

"Why you—"

And Avon was actually rather proud of him, the way he swallowed the words and stuck to the task at hand, which was to get the fighting and the killing stopped. Avon was

smiling, self-deprecatingly, as he watched Vila take over, egging Blake on to do more, to accomplish more and faster. As Vila rattled out orders to his own group, the room became a sudden hive of activity again, as runners came back and more went out. So many leaders, and all of them being led by Vila. Avon called himself all sorts of fools, for falling so quickly and so witlessly into the same old trap of Alphaism that had taken so much hard work to free himself from before. But then, it was always far easier to have a revelation than to actually live it. His attention went from Vila to Blake, watching the interplay, ready to decapitate the first one who started their wrangling over him again. As if he were the spoils of war... As if he'd just stand there and let them. But they were, for the time being at least, behaving themselves, getting the job done, leaving him free to think about this whole mess. For an outsider, he supposed that the scene he'd walked in on had been quite funny, in a way, not that he saw it that way yet. Although the expression on his mother's face... He glanced over, but whichever cousin had been tugging at her had obviously prevailed and she was gone. Out of sight, out of mind: he went back to the major chaos in his life.

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Blake, and Vila. Neither one of them even seemed to be aware of him, being more properly wrapped up in what was happening outside than in the hallowed halls of the Avon-Waylz house. They were, he considered, so very different for all their similarities. And they were, regardless of how much he did not want this to be true, part of his life. His eyes narrowed as he stared at Blake's back, furious and hurt and wounded that Blake had led him such a merry dance—and that he'd been blind enough not to see what the bastard was doing. So it had been more than 'all old boys together', had it, right from the start? Well of course—think of that kiss when first they'd met up again. Then there was the fact that Blake hesitated not one second whenever Avon had suggested adding something new to their sexual repertoire. And of course, there was the humiliating memory of words that should never have been said being repeated over and over again. The worst of it all

was that he had meant it then and still did now. Not a reassuring thought, especially as Blake was apparently determined to 'fight' for him. Now that it was obviously too late of course, which begged the question of precisely how sincere Blake actually was.

Politician. He'd had more than his share of politics, that being the family hobby—no-one other than he being recalcitrant enough to actually work. The mere thought of sharing his life with a full time politician made his blood run cold, for he had already had his taste of the skulking around like the proverbial thief in the night, stealing whatever treasure-trove of affection he could. It was also abundantly clear that Blake was offering him nothing more than what had gone before. And that, as many foul-tempered strolls in the small hours of the morning had proved, was not even barely satisfactory. Perhaps, he conceded, if he had gone from *Liberator* back to the Alpha levels, if it had been a smooth continuation of Alpha lifestyle to Alpha lifestyle, then what Blake could give him would have been enough. But for a man who had grown beyond the initial horror of public displays of affection, every avoided touch, every aborted embrace was an insult that ate a little more deeply into the soul than the time before had, until it gathered like strychnine, beginning its slow poisoning.

And as for Vila... What had Vila to offer him?

Who knew? Would Vila be willing to remain Upstairs, or would it mean another bout down in the Bowels? Even the one thing he had always thought of as being bed-rock certain—Vila's adoration of him—was now suspect. There hadn't been a single affectionate glance from Vila to him, and not the faintest hint of love. So much for Affirmation and vows. Which thought made him feel hypocritical to the point of shame. He was, after all, a fine one to cast aspersions, wasn't he? Another look at Vila, and he began to wonder if aspersions would be the least of the things Vila cast at him. If looks could kill, he'd be in cryogenic suspension right now, with torture to follow later. Well now, at least he knew why Vila had left him to his own devices. What was it Vera was always saying?



Give a man enough rope and he'll hang himself. In this case, it appeared that Vila was going to do the hanging for him. Despite his open declaration, he had no doubts whatsoever that Vila believed his choice to be nothing more than self-preservation, as it had been the first time. After all, the circumstances hadn't changed, only the setting.

"Right," Vila was saying, walking over towards him, not looking him in the eye but several inches over his left shoulder, "I'm off to see what the situation is outside and to make sure the food and medicine distribution is going according to plan. Blake here," a quick, contemptuous nod at his erstwhile leader, "is going to be kept in your wine cellar, with Jak guarding him. The rest of the family are going to stay here as well, and it's up to you to make sure that everything here goes smoothly."

"Why are you so nervous, Vila? Your accent is giving you away again."

"M not nervous."

"No?" and he could hear the purr in his own voice. "Then why won't you look at me?"

"Because," Vila snarled, looking at him, making Avon abruptly think the better of his idea, "I'm so fucking furious with you that if I look at you, I'm either going to murder you or fuck you. That satisfy your thirst for knowledge, does it? Good, that makes me so fucking happy I could spit. Now, I'm going now, but I'll be back, and I expect you to make sure this lot don't kill each other while I'm gone."

It was one thing to be guilty enough to keep quiet on the personal level, another thing altogether to hold his tongue when his pride was at stake. "Don't be stupid, Vila," which was, perhaps, not the best way to go about it. "We have Thatcher, Cook and Nanny here to play nursemaid. I'll take over the computer re-programming—"

"You'll stay here, Avon, cos you're a fuckin' Alpha an' you jest might get yerself killed if yer wanders. Now, you remember the drill, doncher, about stayin' in where yer can't get yerself 'urt? Cos I'll tell 'em ter shoot yer if yer so much as sets a foot outside of 'ere. Your fuckin' programmes are already up an' runnin', so you jest take care of wot I tell yer,

all right?"

"Or dear Cousin Jak will rearrange my face for me?"

"Give the boy a lolly. Well done, Avon, there's 'ope fer you yet."

And he was gone in a swirl of fury, Avon standing burning in his wake. The little bastard, to speak to him that way! Avon took a step to follow him, and cousin Jak left Blake, coming to block Avon's path.

"Wouldn't, if I was you," he said, none of the old affection visible. "Mind, if you was ter want ter make me a very 'appy bloke, yer'd make a run fer it. I'd like ter kill yer, I would, fer wot yer've done ter our Vila. Never seen 'im so un'appy in me life afore, an' I'd love ter takes it out of yer ugly 'ide. So go on, Lord Avon sir, go after 'im."

"I'm not Lord Avon, that's my father. But that's beside the point, Jak. What if I were to go after him to apologise?"

"I'd tell yer tha' the best way ter apollygise ter 'im is if yer was ter do wot yer was told fer once."

Avon seriously considered going through Jak to get to Vila, and then realised that what he was contemplating amounted to suicide. "Very well," he said, conceding defeat not at all, merely beating a tidy retreat to live to fight another day, "I'd best be getting on then, wouldn't I?"

Jak didn't deign to reply, turning his back to the very satisfying task indeed of taking President Blake—former President Blake—downstairs to where he belonged, in a room as small and as claustrophobic as the hole Jak himself had hidden in the day before, when the Raids had come back.

With a confluence of emotions, Avon stood back to let Blake pass him, refusing to give anything away. Not until he knew himself what there was to give away...

"So this is what it's come down to then, Avon?"

"Yes," Avon answered, a pointed glance going to the jerry-rigged ties binding Blake's wrists, "our sins do tend to catch up to one, don't they?"

"If living publicly with a Delta man is going to be your lot in life, then I'm afraid I have to agree with you, Avon. Whilst wondering what





the hell it is that you could possibly have done to deserve that.”

“Freed myself from narrow-minded inane so-called thinking like that!”

“Well, you’re certainly a libertine, I can’t deny you that.”

“But you could, and did, deny me my liberty, didn’t you?”

“You were always free to opt out at any time. Although I would have expected you to choose something a bit better than an uncouth, ignorant Delta male, no matter how... ‘charming’ you might find him.”

It really didn’t do to insult a Delta with the family around, as the smallest one—the blonde whose name no-one could ever remember—was proving, sitting down at Blake’s feet and calmly lifting his trouser leg up to bare the limb for biting.

“Now, now, dear,” an unknown woman of grey eyes and greyer hair said, coming in to sweep her up and away from temptation, “if you’re really so dreadfully hungry, Nanny shall find you something far nicer than a yucky hairy old leg. How about some nice ice-cream? Perhaps not,” she amended, feeling how unnaturally light the child was. “It would never do to have you throwing rings up around yourself, now would it?”

“But me wants ice-sseam! Nivver ’ad none ice-sseam. Wants it, wants it!” The sound of a child screaming at the top of its lungs was something Avon had managed, quite successfully, to put out of his mind. Not any more he wasn’t...

“Now that’s quite enough, dear. You shall have soup first and then some lovely ice-cream.”

“ates fucky soup. Wants ice-sseam!”

“Language, dear, language. You shall have your ice-cream, but we have to make it first. Until it’s ready, we shall all have some delicious soup, shan’t we? And,” she said, giving Avon an extremely old-fashioned look, “you shall help me bathe your little friends, shan’t you, Kerr?”

“I tell you what,” he answered, smiling in spite of himself and the mess his life was at present, “I shall bow to your superior experience in the matter, Nanny dear, and allow you the honour of bathing the sweet cherubs,

whilst I tell Cook that we shall be...” he did a quick calculation in his head, manfully refraining from gulping as all the implications began to sink in, “thirty-two for dinner.”

“Kerr dear,” his old Nanny and now châtelaine said, with all the implacable steel that he remembered so painfully well, “I shall have Thatcher inform the staff to make the necessary arrangements, whilst you help me bathe the children. As you well know, it’s never too late to learn.” She tucked a spare child under her left arm and hefted the little blonde up to balance the load. “Superior experience indeed,” she muttered at her former charge, eyes twinkling. “I shall show you superior experience, my laddy. Now,” she said to the little blonde, “what’s your name, dear?”

“Shela,” came the surprisingly polite reply. Typical, Avon thought, snaring a couple of children himself, trust bloody Nanny. Two minutes, and she’s not only got me on my best behaviour again, but she’s found out what that young’uns name is. It wasn’t until he was wading in bubbles up to his armpits that it dawned on him that he hadn’t even noticed Blake leaving. Well, well, well, perhaps there was hope yet.

WHO WOULD EVER HAVE THOUGHT THAT BATH-TIME COULD BE NOT ONLY SO EXHAUSTING, BUT SO INJURIOUS TO ONE’S HEALTH? Of course, if he’d stopped to think about it, he never would have tried to persuade Dev to get into such a huge bathtub, but how quickly we forget. Dev had never seen anything bigger than one of the old tubs that would be hauled out on bath-night and filled with water heated in basins and then poured in, the cleanest—and that was always a relative sort of term down in the Bowels—going first, the others reusing the water until it was grey and covered with a fine skin of grime. But with the water and fuel rations they had, that really was the best that had been available. And now he, in his wisdom, had tried to get poor Dev into a bath that was big enough to swim in. Hardly surprising, he thought to himself, wincing as Nanny poured a rather too liberal amount of disinfectant into the bite mark.

“Don’t be such a silly,” she said to him, as





if he'd never grown up and left home. "Better a sting now than the doctor later."

He smiled down fondly at her, the black hair long since faded to grey, the buoyant step still spry but slower, more careful now. "You have a saying for everything, haven't you, Nanny? Well," he added, thinking about the situation he found himself in, "almost everything."

"I've a saying for you, Kerry my boy," and her voice was as sharp as it had been when he'd told boyhood's lies or when she'd caught him indulging his passion for owning what belonged to other people.

"I don't think there's anything that can apply to my problem, Nanny." Unlike with his mother, it was easy to tell Nanny. After all, she was the one who had caught him with that boy from the language club and not said a word, apart from giving him a ticking off for being so careless.

"The right words apply to any situation, Kerry."

"I really wish you wouldn't call me that."

"Getting a bit big for your boots, aren't you, if you think you're too good for your old nanny. Don't you forget, I remember changing your nappies and cleaning up after you when you wet your bed. So don't you try that tone of voice with me, young man."

"Yes, Nanny," he heard himself saying, smiling with it, tolerant of the foibles of the woman who had, more or less, brought him up.

"That's better, Kerry. Now, my lad, you listen to me. I don't know who they are, and I don't know how you got mixed up with either one of them. But don't you go playing them off against the other the way you were today."

"I? Playing them off against each other? Nanny, they were doing that without my help—"

"But you didn't exactly hinder them, did you? Oh, listen, listen, Kerry, I don't want to nag you, not with all this going on, the world set on its heels and your mother throwing fits all over the place. But no-one else ever talks sense to you, so I'll have to." She came up to sit beside him on the bed, as she had when he was little and the world had seemed so big and callously confusing to an overly sensitive

boy, but this time, it was he who put his arm around her, it was he who protected, even as she gave him more of her advice, most of which he'd never listened to anyway.

"I know it wasn't easy for you, not being loved as you were,"

Oh, thank you, Nanny, for confirmation of that cheerful fact. Tell me more, do.

"But it was never your fault. Your mother and father should never have had children in the first place, and they only had Geoff so that there would be an heir. And then..."

"They had me, so that they had a spare, should anything happen to Geoff."

"Yes, well, as I say, they're not the kind of people who should have children. But you're here and they at least left you basically alone, compared to poor Geoff. Small wonder he's such a drip, really. You, on the other hand... Nothing but trouble, but at least you had life to you. You were always my favourite."

"Well now, there wasn't much competition, was there?"

"Now there you go, doing it again. You've always been like that, and I don't like it. Someone offers you affection, and what do you do? You laugh it off or make it seem unimportant. That's what you've done with this Delta boy, isn't it? I'm not saying that I approve, but if you've given your word, then you ought to be holding up your side of the agreement, shouldn't you?"

"Nanny dear, I'm very fond of you," he said, shying away from a discussion that was treading on too many tender spots, "but I'm a big boy now. I make my own decisions."

"Stupid ones by the look of them. What possessed you to get involved with a Resistance man? Everyone knows that they're all obsessed."

"Oh, they certainly are that."

"Well," she said, sighing into his shoulder, "you never would listen to sense when you were younger, I don't know why I should have expected you to have changed. Stubborn and obstreperous and over-proud, that's you. And you haven't changed much, have you, Kerry?"

Avon sat beside her, on the huge bed he had bought with his birthday money from his grandmother, and thought back to today,

when he'd stood by silently when so much was going on, so much that once he would have automatically had to take control of, things that once he would have gone for the jugular over. "Actually, Nanny dear," he murmured, consciously realising for the first time that Nanny smelled of tea-rose and jasmine, a small comfort to an even smaller boy, "I have changed rather. In fact, I've changed more than I ever thought possible." *And we shall have to see if it's for the better, shan't we?*

"Time will tell," she said, one of her favourite phrases that had echoed throughout his youth. "Time will tell, Kerry-boy."

"I feel as if I should ask you for a story," he said with a smile in his voice.

"And I think I'm far too young and innocent for the kind of stories you'd be wanting these days! But," she whispered wickedly, making him laugh again, the old house shivering with the ghost-steps of time replayed, "if you want, my boy, I'll stay and tuck you in."

"Oh, I think I can manage that all by myself, Nanny. Good night," and he went to the door with her, kissing her the way he used to when he was young enough to be unafraid of showing affection to those he cared for.

"You have changed, haven't you?" she said fondly, patting him on the cheek. "My boy's finally growing up. Well, big boy or not, see that you don't stay up too late. If we're going to cope with all these extra people, you've a long day in front of you."

"And on such a cheerful and fortifying thought, good night, Nanny."

But when she was gone, he half-wished her back. After all, when she was here, he could distract himself from the fact that Vila wasn't. There was no spring to his step as he readied himself for bed, the familiar routine doing nothing to blank his mind as he wove from Vila to the uneasy knowledge that Blake was held, to all intents and purposes a hostage, in the cellar below his house. It took him a long, long time to sleep that night. A long, long time indeed.

PITCH BLACK, A SLICE OF LIGHT FRAMING THE OLD-FASHIONED DOOR, RIPPLING SILENCE AND HIS FIRST THOUGHT WAS THAT IT WAS THE OPPRESSIVE NUMBER OF

PEOPLE CROWDING THIS HOUSE THAT HAD WOKEN HIM UP, ONE OF THE MANY GETTING UP TO USE THE TOILET, PERHAPS, OR ONE OF THE CHILDREN UP CRYING IN THE STRANGE PLACE WITH ITS STRANGE NOISES AND STRANGER SMELLS. There was no movement outside, but there was movement inside.

Vila.

It had to be Vila. He sat up, ordering the lights on—only to have Vila order them right back off. So it was going to be like that, then. No matter, he could talk just as well, if not better, under cover of darkness. And if there was one thing they needed right now, it was to talk. Or at least, for Avon to apologise and begin to make it better.

"Vila—"

"You've got a choice, Avon," the voice came from beside the bed, accompanied by the slithering of clothes to the luxury of carpeting. "You can either talk at me and end up sleeping on the floor in someone else's room, or you can shut up and let me fuck you."

"Why?"

"After what you've put me through, you can ask me that? I thought I was the one who was supposed to be a stupid Delta—and don't you say anything. If you start, you'll talk me in circles and I'll agree to anything and I won't have that, Avon, I won't. After what I did for you, after what we went through, and then you go running to Blake and get down on your knees like a bitch on heat, and you can ask me why? God, you must be absolutely mad."

And you must be incredibly nervous. You sound decidedly plummy, Vila, and you know how your accent gives you away these days.

"Well? What's your answer?"

"Do I honestly have any choice?"

A shuffling of feet, then the response, as pedantic as an Alpha. "Actually, yes. The worst of the trouble's over, and all the important things are under control. You could walk out of here right now and no-one would bother you, apart from the security patrols, and you could even go to an hotel if you wanted to. Nothing to keep you here."

"Apart from my word, which I gave you."

"Didn't stop you with Blake, did it?"

"Ah, but that was different, Vila. I—"

"Shut up! Just shut up, I don't want to hear it, not right now. Just," and Avon could hear



him gulp, and remembered how many nights he'd been held close because he needed a bastion against the strangeness and danger of the new world he'd been thrown into, "either go and sleep somewhere else, or let me fuck you."

He answered by turning back the covers, a sudden gleam of white to their dark-adjusted eyes. Vila said nothing, perhaps fearing, as Avon did, where words would lead them. All at once, his arms were full of warmth, Vila straining against him, holding onto him as if his life depended on it. He stroked the muscular back, appalled by how much thinner it was, by how dry and under-nourished the skin felt to his own pampered hands. But that was nothing to the starvation in the mouth that was kissing him, Vila's tongue plunging into him, Vila's murmured moans flowing into Avon. The hunger was aggression itself, burning and fiery, fingers on his nipples, tugging and pulling and soothing after, hand coming round to knead his buttocks, a callus rough on the delicate skin. Fine hair was brushing his face and onto his earlobes, tickling him not to laughter but to shivering arousal, and he filled his own hands with the lean muscles of Vila's arse. Such masculinity, where Blake's lushness was almost feminine in comparison. But Blake had never needed him like this, had never been so desperate for him. For all Avon's passion in bed, Blake was lukewarm compared to Vila. Compared to Vila, a super-nova was merely tepid.

Avon gasped aloud, not giving a damn that his mother was in the next room. Let her hear him, let her know what kind of son she had produced. Let her know that her son had finally found someone who actually loved him. Vila's mouth was on his chest, soft satin of tongue, hard satin of teeth, all of it smooth and wet, licking and kissing and biting, teasing him, catching a single strand of chest hair at a time and tugging at it, hard enough to bring his skin to life. He grinned in feral pleasure, pushing up as he pulled Vila down, his legs scissoring to hold Vila tight. His own cock was turgid and heavy, pressing into his belly, pressed into by the hardness of Vila's ribs, every ridge a caress. He undulated, playing

himself against Vila, throwing himself into giving Vila every dramatic response that he had always kept from him before. It was, after all, the least he could do, and the most. Vila was whispering his name over and over again, a litany or a hymn, an endless singing of Avon's praises, his breath souging over Avon's tender skin.

A movement, and the hairs on his leg were tingling with the blunt shove of Vila's cock, growing damp with the seep of precum, all of it driving Avon to distraction. This was all very nice, this frantic kissing and touching, but he wanted more—and Vila deserved more. There was hand-lotion on his bedstand, left there by Nanny with strict instructions in its use after giving so many baths—but he doubted if it had occurred to her what other use it might have. He arched up to reach for it, and Vila took that as invitation to suck him, shockingly without warning, into the wet depths of his throat, all those murmured words transformed into humming caress on the tactile wealth of his cock. He bucked, once, involuntary submission to pleasure, wondering if tonight was going to be sucking and not fucking. Then he felt the hand stroking his inner thigh, and the finger-tip tracing the faint dusting of hair round his arsehole, and then the unfamiliar familiarity of a finger entering him shot through him. Blake had done this to him, of course, but never with such single-minded obsession. He had never, in his entire life, been made love to with such ruthless tenderness, nor had his pleasure ever been dictated so sweetly. The finger in him was whetted with saliva and wordlessly, he handed Vila the crystal flacon of cream. His cock was released to the chill of the air and he let his hands flow around it, lying flat on his back in complete abandon, letting Vila watch him pleasure himself, never for one second looking away. While he lay there, Vila dispensed some of the cream, the scent bursting forth with the redolence of rare and ancient herbs. Vila's cock glistened with the slipperiness of the cream and Avon's mouth watered, surprising him with his own hunger for this man. He had been so busy using lust to expiate his guilt, he had lost track of his own passions, and of how much he cared for

this man who was kneeling over him, too thin, hair too long, eyes too sad.

“Oh, Vila,” he said, “it can only get better.”

“That’s what you said the last time.”

“Ah, but I’m older and wiser now, aren’t I?”

“And Blake’s out of your reach, so I’m all that’s on offer, right?”

“I could have said no, and would have, had I wanted to. But,” and he sat up, kneeling in front of Vila, taking both their erections in his right hand, holding them tightly together, until he could feel the pulse of Vila’s blood through his own cock, “I want you.” He kissed Vila then, holding them cock to cock and mouth to mouth, his free hand becoming enslaved to the liquidity of Vila’s hair. “I had forgotten how much I want you,” he whispered, kissing, lightly, the disbelieving flutter of Vila’s eyelid, “and I was too much the coward to remember how I feel about you.”

“No’ tha’ you’ll say it, though.”

He pulled back, letting go of Vila so that he could frame Vila’s face with his hands, left thumb tracing the shape of lips that parted for him, sharp white teeth nipping on him, warm lips sucking him in. “I can say it. Do you want to hear it?”

Vila looked at him with cold-water clarity. “Depends on ’ow much it’ll cost me, don’ it?”

“The price,” he said, resuming the delicate kisses, letting the fire slowly build higher again, “is that you’ll give me a second chance. I’m not usually so fickle, I assure you. It’s just that Blake took me by surprise.”

“So if I want to ’ear you tell me wot I want to ’ear cos I want to ’ear it an’ not cos you want ter say it, I ’ave to set meself up for another fall?”

“Well now, that’s not quite how I would phrase it myself.”

“Then ’ow would you phrase it then?”

“I’d say that it was time for us to start all over again, for us to finish what was started at our Affirmation. I’d say that it was time for you to let me say what I wanted to say that night.”

“An’ wot’s that?”

“I suppose I deserve that suspicious tone. All I want to say is, that I won’t lie to you and tell you that I’m head-over-heels in love with you, but I do love you, Vila.”

It was worth it, to see the expression in Vila’s eyes, to see hope spring eternal in those well-loved eyes. To see some semblance of forgiveness on that face. “You mean it, don’t you? You really mean it?”

“Would I lie to you?”

And he found himself loving Vila a little more, when not one word of accusation was thrown at him for the things he *had* done.

“Say it again, Avon,” Vila whispered to him.

So he held them close, his belly touching Vila’s with every breath, their lips brushing so that his words would go from him into Vila. “I love you.”

Then he was being kissed and lotion-slick hands were on his cock, stroking him, squeezing him, loving him back. It would be so simple for him to retain the balance of power between them, for all that he’d confessed love. But he wanted, instead, to feel Vila inside him. He wanted, with a quiet desperation, to feel all that love inside him, filling up all the empty places doubt left him. He sank back, bringing Vila with him, letting Vila’s weight press him into the bed, spreading his legs so that Vila could sink between them, cocktip pressing into Avon’s balls. The heat was incredible, and the hardness exquisite. Avon groaned and writhed, pushing up towards the teasing cock, doing his damndest to get Vila inside.

He was kissed, thoroughly and breathlessly, and while his mouth was overflowing with Vila, slick fingers slid inside him, opening him up, unlocking him with consummate skill. He was aching with need, devouring Vila with his mouth, hands marauding all over Vila’s body, ravening to touch and to hold. Hips pulsing, he fucked himself on Vila’s fingers, demanding, demanding more. The fingers eased from him, then he held himself perfectly still as cock slid into him. He could feel the flange spread him wider, then it was in him, the raised ripple of vein stimulating him even more as the hardness of cock filled him. His hands locked together round the back of Vila’s neck, as his legs locked together round the small of Vila’s back and he was rocking back and forth, fucking and being fucked. It was more than he had ever expected, this having Vila inside him. So



very much more...

There was so much love and so much lust in every deep thrust, he wanted to scream. But he couldn't, not with so many people ready to come running at the least sign of trouble. But it was building in him, a wall of sound to match the wall of pleasure as Vila filled him again and again. Not so big as Blake, but oh, the way Vila caressed him inside, the way his balls kissed Avon's arse, the way his mouth was so voluptuously hot on his. Eyes closed, Avon let his head drop back as he lost himself utterly to the ecstasy of having Vila in him, of having so much love to feed on. And such skill, gods, how could he have lost sight of how good Vila was, and of how he made Avon feel? He could hear their skin slapping together, and he could feel each tiny droplet of Vila's sweat as it dropped on him. His whole body was alive, nipples radiating pleasure, cock pulsing with it, arse on fire with it.

And Vila... Vila was gasping now, body straining and Avon grinned at him, opening his eyes so that he could see, so that he could share the second when it all proved too much.

"Open your eyes, look at me," he whispered. "Let me see you when you cum in me. Inside me, Vila, you're inside me. And I love you, oh, I love you. That's it, love, fuck me hard, harder, go on, fuck me..."

He was shaken with the force of the thrusts, but thrilled to distraction by them. Short and uneven, warning him that Vila was on the verge and he reached between their bellies to grab his own cock, the palm of his hand filled with the smoothness of his cock, the back of his hand rubbed by the roughness of the long line of hair that led from belly to Vila's cock. It was building inside him, Vila wild in him, fucking him so hard. His own cock was ripe,

ready to explode but he waited, squeezing himself, keeping the cum inside until Vila thrust into him hard and held still, oh, heavenly still, and the first burst of cum bathed his insides, making him even wetter when Vila pulled out to thrust back in again, another spasm of cum jetting into him, again and again, whilst his own hand blurred on his cock and his cum splattered white, hot and wet on Vila's belly.

And all the while, they stared at each other, eyes wide open, locked together in emotion as well as body. The last arc of semen slipped from him, and he smoothed it into Vila's skin. Vila stayed in him, with Avon refusing to move until Vila was soft enough to slip from him.

"Vila," he began.

"Shh. Don't say anythin'. Jest sleep, le' me sleep... Tomorrow, talk tomorrow..."

With Vila heavy and sleeping atop him, Avon lay in what had once been his own bed and stared at a ceiling he had once known. This ceiling was not old plastic, stained and marred by years of use. This was genuine plaster, moulded and painted into the kind of art most people only saw in museums. But for all its beauty, it didn't have any answers, and Avon stared at it for a long, long time, wondering.

Wondering if he could succeed this time. Wondering if he had bitten off more than he could chew. Wondering what the hell he would do if Vila expected him to go back down to the Delta levels—wondering what the hell he would do if Vila expected to stay up here with Avon.

And most of all, wondering what the hell he would do once Blake was no longer out of reach...



usual standards at all, if you think about it.”

“Yes, well, you won’t think about it, so I shan’t lose any sleep over it.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

An avalanche of silence to bury the words.

“I’d’ve understood.”

Silence choking him.

“I would’ve helped. Been there, been with you when you had to face him again.”

“It was only a tranquilised dream, Vila. He was never even there.”

“Wasn’t he?”

“I was drugged. They played their mindgames inside my head. I saw nothing, only dreamed their nightmare for them.”

“Then why did we hear Cally’s mindvoice shouting his name?”

Silence thick enough to murder.

“She would’ve known, Avon. Better even than you or me, she would’ve been able to tell.”

“Would she?”

“You’re the one whose mind she kept wandering around in. You tell me.”

Thoughtfulness, keeping the words at bay.

“C’mon, Avon, if I heard her, then you must’ve heard her, too. She called his name, and she wouldn’t be tricked by any of Servalan’s machines, would she?”

“But she would have been tricked by a telepathic device, which is what some of those machines were.”

“Yeh, but by the time you heard her, the explosions were already going full blast—sorry, didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“Don’t bother apologising. It never made any difference before and I’m long past needing anyone’s sorrow.”

“But,” Vila went on, sticking to the point as if he knew his life depended on all this, “she did ‘shout’ to you after the explosions, which means the machines would’ve been out by then, so—”

“So there is no point whatsoever in going over and over this. We don’t have the faintest idea of why Cally said what she did that day. For all we know, she said it because she finally realises who was to blame for the whole fiasco, or because she was in love with him.”

“In love with him? *Cally?*”

“Weren’t we—weren’t you all? It was either that or suicidal stupidity that made you follow him. And no-one can accuse me of stupidity, can they?”

“But maybe they can accuse you of being suicidal, is that what you’re saying, eh, Avon?”

“Now would I say a thing like that?”

“No, but you’d think it, wouldn’t you?”

“Would I?”

“I know one thing, though.”

“And what is this one, single thing sitting in solitary splendour that you know?”

“You’d have us sitting here going round the same thing again and again until we’re both dizzy and you’ve convinced me that I don’t know anything about you at all which is why I was wrong about you in the first place.”

“And what did you think in the first place?”

“That you were quite a bloke, but you’d taken a bit of stick, had a few hard knocks, but you could still be reached.”

“Shouldn’t that be ‘got at’?”

“Only if we’re talking about Blake.”

“We are *not* talking about Blake. We are not going to talk about Blake. Subject closed and changed.”

“To what? What we’re going to have for breakfast? Not much choice round here, and what there is doesn’t bear thinking about, does it? So what d’you want to talk about then?”

“Silence would be quite nice.”

“Would it?”

“Yes.”

Dismal silent lifelessness responded.

“Very well, perhaps I wouldn’t appreciate silence quite as much as I had thought.”

Not so much as the hiss of breath to break the void left by the absence of the other’s voice.

“Come now, Vila, don’t be such a spoiled brat. I’ve said I was wrong, what more can you possibly want?”

“How ’bout an answer?”

“How about a question?”

“I get to go first. I asked first, so it’s my turn.”

“If it will keep you amused.”

“Oh, I’m long past needing to be amused, Avon. I still want to know: why didn’t you tell me?”





“Don’t be absurd, Vila.”

“I won’t be if you won’t. Why don’t you want me to come over to you?”

Silence congealing like the blood that dripped down Avon’s leg.

“Go on, Avon, give me one good reason why I shouldn’t at least try to get to you?”

“Oh, you’re getting to me more than you know. But you’re welcome to try, if you think you can make it all the way without becoming stranded. Or have you forgotten what’s lying on the ground between us?”

“Bodies. Oh, god, the bodies. All them rebels and all them troopers and oh, no, no, Dayna and Soolin. Where did Tarrant land, Avon? Would I have to crawl over him? Would I? I couldn’t, you know. Never liked dead bodies, ’specially not when they were people I knew. I even liked them, ’d you know that? Especially Dayna. Such a pretty girl. Beautiful...”

“That’s what she said about me.”

“When’d she say a thing like that?”

“When first we met. I had been knocked unconscious and when I awoke, I was being kissed by this terribly pretty girl who said I was beautiful...”

“D’you sound surprised because she said it or because you just told me? If it’s cos you told me, well, it’s only to be expected, isn’t it? And if it’s cos she said you’re beautiful, well, you are, or are you going to tell me you didn’t know?”

“Beautiful is soft and pretty and worth something.”

“You’re worth something, sometimes. And you can be soft—don’t go denying it. I’ve seen you, with Cally sometimes and even with Blake a couple of times. Remember that time in Control Central?”

“No, of course not. When was that?”

“No need to be so bloody sarcastic, you know. Only trying to make a bit of conversation.”

“Then... Then why don’t you speak for once, instead of trying to get me to talk?”

“Because everything I want to say, you don’t want to hear.”

“Oh, don’t start that again—”

“I’m not. But I do still love you. Always will.”

“That’s not saying very much, is it?”

“Don’t suppose it is, not now. Unless Orac—”

“I have its key in my pocket.”

“Oh. Well, that puts paid to that then, doesn’t it? Not much left to say, really.”

“For once, I couldn’t agree with you more.”

“You never did answer my question, Avon. Why didn’t you tell me about Blake? Either time.”

“And I have already told you!”

“All right, all right, no need to go biting my head off. I think Servalan’s arranged for that, thank you very much.”

“I...”

“Yeh?”

“I’m...sorry, Vila.”

“What for?”

Laughter, with a maniac sitting on its back egging it on. “You are sitting in what’s left of the control room, in the dark, sealed in by several tons of rubble, with no hope of escape, with nothing around you but dead bodies, and you ask me what I’m sorry about? You must be mad.”

“It’s not me what’s mad, is it?”

“Are you saying that I am? Is that the comfortable little excuse you’ve come up with to explain this horror?”

“Seems reasonable to me.”

“Oh, you’re so very certain I can’t see you, aren’t you?”

“Stands to reason, don’t it? There’s not a bit of light in here, darker than a baboon’s armpit it is. Anyway, don’t forget, I only got hit by the tail-end of that gun, and I was half-awake when you went down. Doubt if you could move more’n an inch.”

“Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong. I could.”

The statement hung between them, swinging slowly in the silence. “Why didn’t you tell me, Avon?”

“I presume you’re going on about Blake again? I’m not going to get any peace until I tell you, am I?”

“Not much.”

“Very well. Oh, very well...If I told you, then it would make it real. It would make it fact and then Blake might actually still be alive. And I wanted him dead, Vila. I *needed* him to be dead. So that he would be dead and gone and I could be free of him.”

