

# I SUFFER...

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

## BITTERSWEET SEBASTIAN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

any advances towards Avon, and failing that, inconceivable that Avon himself would make any moves. Avon probably didn't even recognise his own feeling, Vila guessed, and as for Blake, Vila didn't think he *had* any—not of that kind. Blake had too much to do to be sidetracked by love. He was in love with Humanity: individuals scarcely got any consideration at all.

Altogether then, Vila thought it extremely unlikely that Blake and Avon would ever manage to negotiate the enormous masses of inhibition, idealism, repression, etc., which lay between them: and being only human Vila was not displeased about that.

But it happened: and Vila himself was the agent of its occurring at all.

VILA LIKED BLAKE. YOU COULDN'T HELP BUT LIKE THE MAN. Some of the time Vila even forgot that here was his rival, the one who could have Avon's love if he so much as snapped his fingers. And Blake liked Vila in return: Vila, a skilful entertainer, could merge into any tenor of gathering and be amusing, a good listener, outrageous or discreet as the occasion required and he made himself into what Blake wanted of him a good drinking partner, with no trouble at all, so that some nights he would sit up with him sharing a flask of wine. They talked of many things seldom remembered in the morning: several times it was on the tip of Vila's drunken to tell Blake—

*“Blake I'm in love with Avon did you know”,* because he was indeed curious as to whether it showed: but he never did. Also, he was tempted to hint to Blake of Avon's fancy for *him*, but it was a temptation easily overcome: if you wanted something yourself, you didn't present your rival with a map and a pile of credits, did you? But Blake was so supremely unaware...as Vila watched Avon's eyes follow Blake, Blake kept his vision forward, firmly on the Cause.

Vila wondered if Blake, on one of their mellow nights, might make a pass at him: it was so common for Alphas to expect sexual service from Gammas and below and so much a part of Vila's upbringing that he wondered it hadn't happened already. Of course, some experiences were pleasanter than others, but he didn't think he'd mind it with Blake, Blake had a sort of rough-hewn charm and almost certainly wouldn't subject him to some of the nastier practices some Alphas seemed to favour. But Blake never suggested it. Until the night everything changed...

It had been at least a week since Vila had seen anything of Blake off-watch, which didn't cause Vila any grief, he and Blake had an easy relationship to be picked up and dropped at will. But this night Blake wandered into the rec-room bearing a bottle, and Vila looked up eagerly from the nest of scatter cushions where he was curled up.

“Just the man I wanted to see: you know, Blake, my supplies are dropping very low.”

“I'm not surprised, the rate you get through it.” Blake set the bottle down and worked at the seal. When it was open he poured some of the golden liquid into Vila's glass.

“Go easy on this,” he warned. “It's got some unusual properties.”

Vila's eyes twinkled as he lifted the glass in a toast.

“Aphrodisiac, is it?”

Blake twinkled back at him. “Oh, I don't imagine you need anything like that, Vila.”

Vila sighed as he shuffled his Tarot pack. “You can say that again. Do you know how long it's been since I had the company of something warm and friendly at night?”

“No, how long?”

“Three years,” Vila mourned, adding: “And *that* was a neighbour's tame rat in a cell on Luna 11.” He frowned. “Did I say it was friendly?”

Blake laughed at him, looking at the cards he held. They were large and brightly coloured in metallic shades.

“Tarot cards,” Vila explained. “I'll read your fortune. Choose a card. Let's see. What do we have—the king. Oh yes, very good, that's very Blake, isn't it? The noble king at the head of his army, battling against the Hand of Oppression. Take another.”

Blake, half humouring him, half intrigued, took another card, hesitated, put it back—then chose it again.

“That's right, always go with your first choice, don't change your luck,” Vila pattered; in lean times he did this for a living. He looked at Blake's next card.

Blake was staring at it puzzledly. “I don't recognise this one.”

The figure was clothed in a black robe, his head adorned with the thinnest circlet of silver: his ageless black eyes stared out of the card and seemed to see forever.

Blake must not see his pain.

“The Alchemist,” Vila said softly; he took the card from Blake's hand and cradled it in his palm for a moment. “That's the Alchemist...”

Vila's eyes looked faraway. “What does that mean?” Blake prodded. Vila appeared to snap out of it, sliding the card back among the others.

“Let me see, now. The king—and the Alchemist. Well, that's a very powerful combination, Blake: it means you have a strong future ahead of you.”

He did not tell Blake what else it meant.

“Do I take another?” Falling under the age-old spell of a hint of necromancy, Blake reached out and plucked another card from the pack. This time it was the Fool.

“That's me,” Vila said. He stared at it, the mournful prancing figure in red and yellow, bells on his long narrow slippers, his expression at once sly yet sad.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wrong on both counts," he said.

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

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

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

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

He smiled at Vila. "Tonight—"

"Yes?" prompted Vila after a heartstopped

pause.

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

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

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

The door slid open and Avon entered.

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

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

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

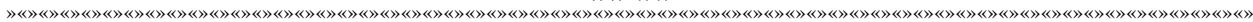
And if a little shiver of excitement stirred in Blake at the thought of what might occur, well, he was only human: and Avon a prize by anybody's rules.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell his fortune for him, Vila."

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

"Choose two, Avon."

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

Avon leaned over the cards with him.

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

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

The room seemed suddenly very still, very silent.

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

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

"What are you teaching him, Blake?"

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

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

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

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

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

"There would be more, only—"

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

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

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

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

There was nothing insignificant about Blake. Nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

“Wait.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Beautiful, isn’t he?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Excessively, it seems,” Avon said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What," Vila breathed, squirming.

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

on one arm, and waited.

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

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

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

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

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

Now for Avon.

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

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

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

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

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

This might be all he would ever have...

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

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

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

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

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

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

A chuckle. "He didn't mind."

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

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

"Before I arrived, you mean?"

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

"What's that supposed to mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You went too fast for him."

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

"He was in pain."

"Was he?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you hurt?"

Vila shook his head.

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

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

"All right." His sudden smile was charming.

Vila turned gratefully to go but Avon stopped him again.

"Wait a moment."

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

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

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

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

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

Avon had to shake him before he noticed his presence.

Vila lifted muzzy brown eyes to Avon, not sur-





valued Vila.

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

And yet...

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

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

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

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

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

"How are you feeling?"

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

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

"What did you say?"

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

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

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

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

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

Avon made his decision.

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

Things had been terrible lately.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you want now? A valet?"

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

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

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

"I see."

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

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

Avon's sardonic cynicism only made Blake smile.

"We're both bright, Avon."

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

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

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

Blake was thoughtful as they walked together

along the corridor.

"But you haven't managed to work out the teleport?"

"I doubt that I've even glimpsed a hundredth part of it. Let alone worked out how it might fit together to achieve the miracle of matter transportation."

Blake's eyebrows rose. Avon was clever: in some ways the most brilliant man Blake knew of. There was certainly no-one to touch him for technical genius; his mind had simply run away from the rest. If *Avon* didn't understand the teleport then it must be quite something. Quite something, indeed.

"Why do you want to know?" Avon watched him sharply.

Blake spread his hands. "I'm interested."

"So many interests," Avon murmured mockingly. They had reached the chamber and toured it; a short, dry discussion ensued and then they returned.

Blake wanted something from Avon, and he wasn't exactly sure what. The man stirred dark eddies in him which frightened as well as excited him; Blake was not looking for excitement, but he could not nonetheless suppress the compulsion.

There was more. He knew only too well that he was only just succeeding in keeping one jump ahead of Avon; holding down the lid on Avon's volatile hostility only barely. One mistake and he could lose everything. Avon was biding his time, not yet sure whether he had the measure of his opponent, or not: so far, Blake and taken every initiative and put up a bolder front. If Avon once suspected inferiority in Blake, Blake knew that would be it: they would be forced to play their hands in a final confrontation.

Blake rubbed his stomach absently with a slow hand and looked at Avon, only to catch Avon looking sideways at him. Avon snatched his gaze away.

Reckless, Blake tossed a possibility into the air. "Come in for a drink."

Avon accepted the invitation politely: at times of inner distraction Avon had a courtesy which seemed instinctive; Blake was certain it wasn't something he did consciously. Of course, at most times he preferred to employ the silvertongued vipers which came equally naturally to him. Blake imagined him as a dinner guest; his manners beautiful, his clever voice offering fluent phrases so you would think you had been complimented.

Or, as a host: neat poison in the velvet soup.

"A toast," he said mockingly, and raised his glass.

It was dangerous, to experiment with Avon. You had to be constantly on your guard: Avon, Vila's Alchemist, a dark-eyed enigma with sorcery at his command, so easy he wouldn't have to turn his head or snap his fingers for it; a restless, brilliant mind, tuned to outwit even the most seasoned of campaigners.

But Blake thought he could handle Avon. The glass dangling from his hand forgotten, Blake watched him. Sometimes he thought he dreamed it, but at others he was sure that Avon—

Well: to put it at its least complex, there was a part of Avon which responded to Blake, and all of Avon's instincts and rationale and logic which told him to oppose Blake, or leave him, could not wear that thin but persistent part down. So that Avon would always find some excuse for doing as Blake wanted him to: so that he could never be pinned down as to motive, by himself or anyone else.

Blake needed Avon. A pirate, and a young, unpredictable telepath; a thief and a slow, gentle murderer: these were the sum of Blake's co-resistors, his fellow warriors at the spearhead of intergalactic revolution. Good people, in their way: but Avon was different.

Not only did his talents set him apart, and his cynical predictive eye for the world and its trends; useful things to have on your side. But also he was a perfect foil to Blake; he could be relied on to prick out the flaws in Blake's enthusiasm with needling, often annoying accuracy.

Blake tipped his head back and dwelt his eyes on Avon, who seemed lost in his own reverie. He supposed that what he really wanted...

What he really wanted was for Avon to cease the rivalry and be his friend: in understanding, in culture, in expectation they were more nearly alike to one another than any of the other. To have Avon at his side, working with him, his companion—

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But Blake, realistic, could not imagine that ever happening. Avon followed, but only just: they walked a knife edge with Blake's the scant upper hand—how scant Blake hoped only he himself knew. Leadership was, after all, only another word for manipulation: something of which Avon never failed to remind him. The others didn't see it, but Avon did. Those sharp black eyes saw everything and kept their secrets: waiting. Until Blake should seem to be unsure, losing the firm purpose that swept them all along. Then, Avon would step in; judge.

So Avon could not be his friend.

*Autre temps, autre mores*: some other time and place perhaps they would have been close: but not here. Not on this tight ship of doubts narrowly led by convictions.

Snapping out of his thoughts, Blake smiled at Avon; he stretched out his legs in front of him and relaxed.

"Drink up, you look as if you need it. Let's talk, Avon."

"Why, have you anything to say?"

Blake grinned at him. "Plenty. You've never really forgiven me since we went to bed with Vila. I want to know why."

Avon froze. He stared at Blake with a kind of incredulity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So that was what Avon was expecting.

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

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

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

After a moment, Avon sat down without a word.

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

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

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

“I gave you my objection at the time.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And you?” Blake said, equally hard.

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

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

At last he got the response he was after.



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

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

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

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

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

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

"But not with Vila?" Blake asked.

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

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

"Then, why not again?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to it than that. Then Avon added, spittingly:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

"Watch me, Blake."

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

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

"Avon. Please."

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

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

"Well, I wish you damn well would."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Blake."

"Jenna. Is everything all right?"

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

"Fine. I was asleep."

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

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

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

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

"Any problems?"

She said no, and called off.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It really doesn't matter."

"No, tell me."

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

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

"Yes."

"And what did you promise *her*?"

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

"I didn't promise her anything."

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

Blake waited for him to ask about Cally, but he

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

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

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

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

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

It took a moment to sink in.

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

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

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

"Don't you believe me?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Blake."



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

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

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

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

"What?"

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

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

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

"Let's not hurry."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

joy and hugged Avon tight, tighter.

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

*would Avon let him?*

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

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

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

He covered Avon with grateful kisses.

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

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

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

That's where we're going."

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

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

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

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

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

Jenna ignored him.

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

"Category double-A rating." Avon.

"No," Blake said, to Jenna.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Taking every possible precaution," Cally said severely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Avon made a graceful gesture of acquiescence,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He felt Avon's lips curve against his cheek.

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

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

"No finesse, Blake?" Avon breathed.

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



with the eighteen rounds of chess I insisted upon to bolster my fading superiority complex. I just slipped out for something and came back to find you touchingly submerged under the wearisome burdens of godhood. I gave you a massage to ease your migraine and you fell asleep under my ministrations. There could be a thousand innocent reasons why. Don't worry about it."

He sounded so sweetly reasonable that Blake felt contentiousness rise in him again. He propped himself up on his elbows. "Don't feel you have to make any concealments on *my* account," he said acidly.

Avon's eyebrows arched. "Why? Have you told Jenna?"

"No." In fact, he had scarcely seen her.

"Then don't," Avon said.

Blake couldn't resist the taunt: "I thought you were all for openness."

Avon's tone was at its most aristocratic. "On reflection, I've decided the others would certainly misconstrue the situation."

This sounded fascinating. Blake, always eager for any insights into what made Avon tick, propped a pillow behind his head, scooted one knee up, and looked at him hopefully.

All wasted effort, for "Turn over," was all Avon said.

"Why?" Blake asked warily.

"Just do it, Blake." Avon poured more oil into his hands and waited, dropping it from one palm to the other.

Blake turned over and lay with his face turned to one side, his cheek on a folded arm.

Avon slipped oil onto his shoulders and began to knead it into his skin.

"That's nice." Through one open eye Blake caught sight of a hologram on Avon's bedside unit: he couldn't make out more than a pale blur. Avon made long slow strokes down his back. Blake sighed and stretched; he rather hoped Avon wasn't in too much of a hurry. This was the best he had felt in a long time.

Avon reached his buttocks and squeezed the hard muscles with oily hands; he did this a few times until it was almost painful, then parted the cheeks with his thumbs.

Nothing happened. Blake was experiencing an irresistible surge of erotic fervour, the exhibitionist in him aroused by such exposure: he pressed himself into the bed involuntarily. He also felt extremely nervous which, if anything, only added to the excitement, wondering—

He heard Avon sigh, hands pausing flatpalmed on his buttocks, nails digging in. Through dry lips Blake made himself say,

"Do you want to?"

There was silence, but he was sure Avon had heard; he was unnaturally still and quiet. Then:

"Want to?" Avon sounded as if the question were in some way odd.

Blake made the decision, reckless and quick.

"Do it if you want to." He lay clutching the bedsheet in tight fingers.

"Well now," Avon said slowly; "I'd have to think about it."

Blake's fragile control and his temper snapped. "Actually I wasn't proposing anything metaphysical." He rolled over and glared at Avon. Avon looked almost demonic in the low light, eyebrows pointed, eyes so dark they reflected no light at all.

"Get your bloody clothes off," Blake said roughly. "Unless voyeurism's enough for you tonight?"

The mood had fled like a dream; he couldn't think what had got into him, and, fuming, was only glad rationality had set in in time. After a moment Avon rose from the bed and stripped naked; wordless, he returned into Blake's arms, which welcomed him just as if there had been no rift; and the sex between them was as good as any.

But they were no closer.

BLAKE FINISHED FASTENING ON A HANDGUN DEFTLY AND SAID TO JENNA:

"All right. Four hours is what we've agreed." He squinted at his watch, to check it read the same as the *Liberator's* chronometers.

"I still think someone should go with you."

"I *don't* think so," Blake said shortly.

She moved closer to him and gave him a warm, tentative smile.

"When you get back—why don't you come to my cabin, tonight?"

She was so pretty and fragile, her cloud of soft blonde hair fragrant. But it was no good; at the moment he was utterly bewitched by darker moods, blacker magic than hers.

"We'll see." He smiled at her in a friendly but businesslike fashion. Disconsolate, Jenna watched him saunter towards the rack of bracelets. Used to being hard and self-sufficient, the depth and suddenness of her feelings for Blake had taken her by surprise. From being an honorary associate of the lads, tough and streetwise and fly as the rest, a lady who was no lady, in Blake's company she and reverted to the most feminine of stereotypes: she *wanted* to be weak so that he could wrap her up in capable arms and be strong for both of them...

He gave her a wink, a rough-and-ready hero with an unruly head of nutbrown curls and bold eyes. He had guts, and purpose, did Blake: a steady blunt determination which would not be worn away by the acid doubts of dissenters. And ideals which Jenna admired, even if she didn't yet share them; she was in any case prepared to try.

"What shall we do if you're not back?"

"Use your initiative. Or, do what Avon advises."

She gave a very small smile. "Even if what he *advises* is to leave you and run for it?"



“No, you haven’t even my excuse, have you Avon? *You* don’t like Blake... Or so you tell us, often enough.”

Avon’s sharp black gaze snapped onto Vila, very penetrating indeed. Vila felt a leap of fear and decided it was time to change the subject.

“Another game?”

What he *really* wanted was for Avon to sweep him away, roll him onto a big soft bed and make love to him passionately; but it didn’t look to be on the cards. Which was a pity, for whatever it was Avon was letting Blake do to him lately, it wasn’t doing him a lot of good: he had dark, haunted shadows under eyes which burned bleak fire. It looked as if Avon was drinking deep, very deep, from the cup he craved; but the draught therein was poisoned...

All right, Vila thought with bitter resentment, so you’re getting what you want from Blake at last, after all this time. But it isn’t what you want at all, is it? And since he’s not likely to give you that, or even if he did you wouldn’t know how to accept it...

You’d be a lot better off with me, Avon. I’d be good for you.

Something gentle and calming was what Avon needed, not something intense, and disturbing, rousing violent passions: he was highly strung enough.

Vila jumped as Avon’s voice broke into his frowning reverie.

“Blake won’t stay long.”

“On Z101?” Vila asked blankly.

“He’ll leave the *Liberator* just as soon as he finds a base, or, alternatively, he achieves his muddleheaded aim of creating anarchic chaos when he destroys Star One: he will be needed then to coordinate the tattered band of survivors. We will have played our part in Blake’s scheme of making himself universally indispensable: he will pat us on the heads and go on his way, content that we have become little seedling heroes under his influence...”

Vila was shaken at the raw hatred in Avon’s voice.

“You think he’d do that? Leave us?”

“Oh yes,” Avon told him, and his smile was the humourless, bare bones of a skeleton grinning: “Without a backwards look.”

“In fact, I’m looking for an old friend,” Blake said casually after he had bought his newest friend, a curlyheaded fellow who was a technician in one of the laboratories—“washing test tubes mostly—” a drink or two. Blake had identified himself as a visiting warfare expert, which he hoped was all-colour enough to escape any searching questions from more specific experts.

“—name of Docholli.”

“Docholli? Hm, name rings a bell—”

Xant Plante sank half of his beer with rapid

movements of his Adam’s apple. “Yes, I remember.” He fixed Blake with a piercing blue eye. “He was here a month or two ago. On a temporary basis, of course. He was moved out, a lot of the civilian contingent were, when the troubles began.”

Blake’s heart, which had picked up speed, began to slow again.

“Yes, you’ve missed him I’m afraid,” Xant continued, picking a handful of peeled nuts from a bowl on the bartop. “Had some handy tips on the management of mutoids suffering plasma deprivation...something insaniary was involved, as I recall.” The nuts went in.

“I don’t suppose you know where he moved on to?” Blake asked curtly: he was inwardly reviewing the waste of effort, time and goodwill *this* little jaunt had cost him.

Xant cocked an eye at him. “Probably classified.” Muffled.

Blake smiled at him, brown eyes crinkling in a friendly way.

“Well, I suppose I could find out,” Xant Plante said.

On the *Liberator* all was quiet. There had been a small scare when a fleet of pursuit ships had left the base on some military manoeuvre, but the shield had kept *Liberator* off their long-range detectors long enough for her to move out of range. Avon monitored the traffic while Jenna listened to the babble of communications; for some reason the whole base was on a state of black alert, but they could find no obviously threatening cause for this.

Blake was due to be collected in one hour, fifteen minutes.

As Blake and Plante dipped deep into their third glass of fermented hop-flavoured brew, Blake looked at his watch and discovered that there were seventy-five minutes to go until the *Liberator* returned for him; the safest course of action would undoubtedly be to return to the pick-up point. Slightly more attractive would be to remain here and have another drink—just one. Beer, always Blake’s preferred drink, was mostly unobtainable on the *Liberator* unless someone thought to bring some back from a planet-stop. Which was usually the last thing on anyone’s mind, given the sort of luck they had had lately.

It wasn’t, at least, a wasted trip after all: Xant had returned with the information Blake needed. His cheery companion had gone off to bed now: it was fourteen hours since his shift had begun. There were five or six people left in the bar, and one elderly barman slowly polishing glasses. Blake examined the rich brown liquid in his glass through narrowed eyes. He was looking ahead to the night to come.

Avon might be in a black mood when he returned

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

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

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

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

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

Blackclad guards poured in and began firing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

cohorts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I see. A traitor."

"Let's say—I'm a sympathiser."

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

"Don't waste my time."

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

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

"And where would you suggest, then?"

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



The trooper's eyes kindled. "Let me see it."

Blake pushed the gun out of the way, pulled the map out of his pocket and laid it on a nearby table. "Here. Here's the central communications unit. In these access tunnels surrounding it are all the circuit panels, wiring, that sort of thing. If you and your men get in there, you could cause a fair bit of havoc with the internal communications."

Ginger stabbed a finger at the map. "And look at this. That's the troop movements data link. If we get in there we could totally disrupt the deployment of reserve guards—"

"Well, don't waste any time then," Blake said. "I'd get on with it, if I were you."

The man snatched up the map and looked towards his fellow guards. Then his eyes came back to Blake, very searching.

"Wait a minute. Who *are* you?"

The truth was usually the simplest.

"Name's Blake."

"*Blake*. I thought there was something—" A smile of dawning recognition; not a pleasant one.

"I think you'd better come along with me. Blake."

The gun was back up again.

"And," Ginger continued, "I think I remember something about—" With one hand, he whisked up Blake's sleeve, discovered the teleport bracelet—"I think I'll take charge of this. Just for a while, you understand."

Avon's hand thumped down on the unresponsive console with the most aggressive frustration he was capable of. He turned away with a snarl on his lips. Everything had gone wrong. Just as it always did.

"Well, what shall we do now?" Jenna asked helplessly. She took a deep breath, tried to think sensibly.

"One of us must go down," Cally said decisively. She was desperate to avoid the scene which looked like developing, Avon brewing up a thunderous storm of trouble and Jenna all ready to fly at him if he said one sarcastic word about Blake.

Vila groaned expressively. "Didn't I just say something like this would happen?" This was undeniable as Vila had, many times and loudly. "Blake, I said, you mark my words—"

Avon jerked out the single, terse explosion, "*Shut up*," and Vila subsided.

Avon crossed the room to the intercom and hit it. "Zen. Any surface scans?"

The large, ponderous voice filled the room.  
+Negative.+

Avon's hand clenched and unclenched at his side. "Give me your best prediction on how long we have before they pick us up."

+Strategy computers predict a mean time of

eight minutes, seventeen seconds.+

"Just time for one of us to get kitted up," Avon said with odd pleasantry. "Who is exceptionally keen to get in moral credit with our fearless, yet stranded, leader today? I see you both are—" This to the two females; Vila was examining the ground and keeping quiet—"But as it happens, I think I'll go myself."

Jenna and Cally exchanged a look, then Jenna nodded reluctantly. Avon was the obvious choice to go, however much he might make them all suffer for it afterwards.

"I suppose we can trust him—?" Jenna said to Cally when Avon had gone to get ready. "You don't think—well, he will put his heart into it, won't he?"

"*Jenna*." Cally was shocked.

Vila gave her a look of freezing contempt. "You couldn't see a wall in front of you unless it knocked you on the head, could you Jenna?"

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded icily.

"Don't argue," Cally pleaded. "Not at a time like this."

Avon reappeared then pulling on a long pair of black leather gauntlets. He was wearing a black jacket with silver flashes on the shoulder, and a blaster was strapped around his waist.

"All right. Take *Liberator* out to the limit of communications and stay out of trouble until I signal."

"What if you disappear too?" Vila said glumly.

Avon gave him a hard look as he fastened a pair of teleport bracelets around his wrist with a precise click.

"Then there'll be three, won't there?"

Avon materialised at the same spot Blake had; there was, of course, no sign of him. He reported his safe arrival to Vila, kicked a bucket and a mop distastefully to one side and opened the access door cautiously.

From the start it was obvious there was something peculiar going on; a pall of smoke drifted hazily along, high in the corridor, and there were far-off noises: thumpings, shriekings, bangings. It sounded, in fact, like a riot. Avon frowned.

*Damn you, Blake, damn you. Tonight, I'll make you suffer.*

He went along quietly, gun drawn and ready. The first thing he encountered was a dead body.

A head of brown curls, pillowed on an outflung arm; powerful body slumped in the unmistakable laxness of death, and if there had been any doubt the man's blood and brains were spattered on the wall in a bizarre sunset collage.

*Well, I half expected this.*

On dead feet he approached, grasped the corpse's collar and turned it over, to gaze into glazed blue eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

"Avon!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And good luck to you."

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

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

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

right?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After that Avon, silent, did better.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Two women. And a fool. I left them—"

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

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

“Why?”

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

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

He said: “Is that hurting you?”

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

“Avon. Are you all right?”

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

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

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

“Vila.”

Vila turned back, all hope.

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

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

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

“Why should I?” Vila asked, affronted.

“Because I want to talk to Avon.”

“I’m talking to Avon.”

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

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

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

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

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

“What do *you* want?”

“To apologise.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

glared up into Blake's eyes.

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

"Well then: perhaps you're right. I must leave. Or you must."

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

"That seems the only possible solution."

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

"I suppose there's no great hurry," Avon said slowly. "I still have three untouched limbs."

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

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

If only all their hurts would mend so easily.

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

"Would that *really* be enough for you?"

Avon's voice was a lazy murmur. "What?"

"Obscurity on some backwater planet."

Avon's fingers stole through his hair. "Luxury, safety, and freedom on some backwater planet. Oh yes."

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

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

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

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

BLAKE HELD OUT FOR FIVE MISERABLE DAYS.

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

Ridiculously, the ache for Avon did not leave him.

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

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

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

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

"What are you doing?" he asked coldly.

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

"Thank you, Blake," he said with icy composure.

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

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

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

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



you hate me. I'd rather know."

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

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

So that was what Avon thought.

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

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

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

"Sometimes—I just need you so much."

Avon gazed at him stonily.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

vainglorious little game."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The same reason you do."

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

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

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

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

For it couldn't be long.

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

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

"Jenna?"

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

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

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

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

Blake twinkled at him. "Just about right."

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

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

"I will."

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

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

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

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

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

"How do I?" Blake demanded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When I finish."

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

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

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

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

"Not really. Put that down, Blake."

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

"Anna wasn't pretty."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blake grimaced. “Long enough. I hope.”

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

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

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

But Avon’s hands were gentle as he laid Blake

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

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

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

He *couldn’t* deny Avon this.

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

He certainly didn’t *want* to do it.

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

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

“All right,” Blake croaked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That was the other night. I wanted—”



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Avon kissed the nape of his neck, causing shiv-

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

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

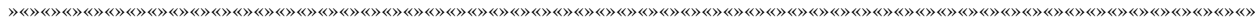
Avon drew him close so they were lying face to face, belly to belly. Blake opened his mouth eagerly for Avon’s kiss, wrapping his legs around Avon’s and rubbing the soles of his feet on Avon’s calves with slow, warm strokes. Avon stopped kissing him, and leaned up over him, his dark eyes gleaming. Blake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

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

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

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





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

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

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

“How are you doing?” he asked shakily.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Primitive,” came a new, thinly sarcastic voice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blake itched for Vila to go.

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

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

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

Down a bottle? Avon remarked.

And then they were alone.

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

“Gambling,” Avon replied.

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

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

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

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

Avon immediately backed off, violently.

“*Don’t*, Blake.”

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

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

Hurt beyond measure, Blake stared at him coolly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You overrate yourself."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Only one glass?" Blake pointed out.

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

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

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

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



frowningly serious. "I can't think of one, either. Don't have any more of that, you've had quite enough." He fended off Blake's groping hand and finished off the bottle himself. Blake yawned. Soon afterwards he was asleep. Vila put his feet up, propped his head on Blake's lap and shut his eyes.

Avon found them that way an hour or so later; he stared at them for a very long time before going on his way.

Blake rubbed his eyes, yawned—his mouth felt gritty and parched, his mind wrapped in a cloud. He felt totally unrefreshed by eight hours' sleep. He just couldn't hold his soma the way Vila could.

"Zen. Arrival time."

+Twenty-three hours and seven minutes,+ Zen said monotonously.

Oh, lord. Blake felt a tumultuous upheaval inside of fear and apprehension. He had to hold fast, stay firm: all of his beliefs were vested in this and if he could not follow those through then it had all been for nothing, every last minute of it, every drop of Gan's blood, ever bitter word exchanged with Avon.

So why did he never want the *Liberator* to reach its destination?

"Having doubts?" Avon enquired with nasty cynicism behind him; it was the tone he had come to expect from Avon these days and it no longer had power to hurt him.

"No," he replied. He turned to face Avon. In contrast to Avon's suave neatness he felt a physical wreck. Who cared? In loose trousers and a baggy sweatshirt he met Avon's gaze with all the usual defiance and more. This was the way Avon wanted it, the passion and the warmth and the wild sexual longings cast out into the wilderness. He heightened the contention between them deliberately, tilting his chin up and regarding Avon with the coldest dislike of which he was capable, until Avon's eyes narrowed sharply and he looked away. Blake followed him with his eyes, exulting. He could still handle Avon. Avon didn't know it was all just a façade.

"Cally and Jenna are on their way," he said, walking to stand by his station. Blake threw up his hands in mockery.

"Oh! don't worry. I wasn't going to touch you," he said with malice. "Once bitten, twice shy as they say." He wheeled round to smile a carrion smile. "And your bite, dear Avon, is poisoned."

"I meant, they are coming here to discuss Star One," Avon said. "Now."

"Star One's not open to discussion," Blake said curtly. A flash of pain went through his head; he winced and put up his hand to it.

Avon saw him, of course. "Drinking all night with Vila doesn't seem to suit your metabolism."

"I wasn't—" Blake started; then he wondered

how Avon knew. He wasn't going to give Avon the satisfaction of asking, so he said nothing.

"I was looking for you. What I found was two sleepers and an empty soma bottle."

If it was a question Blake didn't answer it, swinging away and pacing quickly. "That's good: I didn't particularly want another dissertation on the superior merit of all your previous bedmates. We'll be making Star One in a day. Have you anything to say?" His expression perfectly sketched the sentiment that this was a deeply regrettable thing.

"The others are restless," Avon said slowly. He seemed to be having difficulty with the conversation.

Blake made him a little bow from the waist. "But you, no doubt, are steadfast and loyal."

Avon stirred, his hand tracing a pattern on the black plastic console. "Oh, I'll do what you want me to do."

"Good: that's my reward, is it?" Blake applauded. "Quite a small price to pay, really. I must prostitute myself more often."

"The rights and wrong of it mean nothing to me—"

"Naturally not."

"—but for what it's worth, I believe you should be aware that, if you destroy Star One—"

The women and Vila were arriving, catching the tail end of this.

"If you destroy Star One, you—and *we*—will be the cause of millions of people's deaths," Jenna said, breathlessly. "We're not happy about that, Blake." She tossed her mane of blonde hair and stood in front of him, direct and challenging, a slender dream girl in red leather and black boots.

Himself against them all; even Jenna was kicking now. But he was used to that, welcomed it even. He was always at his best and most determined fighting the heaviest odds.

"I'm not happy about it," he was answering her. "But you have to weigh one evil against another."

"Define 'evil'," Avon said from the other side of the room.

"Someone treacherous," Blake shot back at him, pleased that Avon was offering his breast for arrows. Looking away from Avon he continued, "The Federation was voted into power and trusted to rule wisely and well, a trust it violated at the first possible opportunity. None of you, surely, would deny that the Federation is a force of evil. People must be freed from such a corrupt and oppressive regime."

"I agree with all of that." Cally spoke up at once, a slender child with her serious dark eyes and her fragile wrists and ankles. She reminded Blake of a fawn, shy but strong.

"The trouble is," Jenna began, and Blake could

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then you think we should go ahead."

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

"Blake knows my views on this—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"With—or *without*—the *Liberator*?"

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



touched.

“With it, of course. That’s what you’ve always wanted. Isn’t it?”

THE INTERCOM WENT. Rousing from weird dreams Blake sat up with a start and rubbed a hand over his eyes.

“We have to talk, Blake. Shall I come to your quarters?”

Avon’s voice was precise and well-ordered, as if he had gone to a very good school, which he undoubtedly had, and been taught the elements and inflections of beautiful speech. Blake didn’t feel he could face that sharp, acid presence at the moment; his flesh was raw and would sting.

“I don’t think there’s anything I care to talk about with you,” he said. Sleep made him brutal.

That silenced the thing, and Avon’s voice along with it. Blake rolled over in a hot tangle of bedding; he felt the dulling ache of another hangover pounding in his brain and the parching of his mouth. Alcohol abuse was, of course, only too prevalent; Alphas just as much as Deltas falling prey to its easy, soothing charm. He must stop drinking. As soon as he left the *Liberator*. Which might, come to that, be today. He checked his watch. Fifteen hours until they arrived, and he no longer felt reluctant, but eager to get on with it.

He buried his head in the pillow again but could not recapture sleep. He thought he might as well get up, pack what few of his things he might need.

He showered, in the hope it might clear his head; a little refreshed he dressed in baggy trousers and a shirt and looked around his room. There was very little he wanted to take with him; in the end, he just packed his most comfortable clothes into a holdall. Not much to show for two years but there it was.

He was just rolling the last jerkin into a sausage shape when the buzzer at his cabin door went. Damn Jenna, damn Avon: he didn’t want to see either of them.

Avon. Worse than Jenna.

He met him with his most boldly demanding stare. “Whatever can you want, I wonder?” Avon looked slightly deranged, for Avon; chalkwhite, his eyelashes jerking nervously, his shirt half-buttoned.

“We have to talk, Blake.”

Blake sighed, and turned away, prowling back into the room. “I suppose you mean, I’ve got to listen. Look, Avon, contrary to popular psychology, talking never solves anything. Because, no-one ever says what they mean; they’re always too damn scared they might put themselves at a disadvantage.” He turned around, caught Avon who was slowly stalking him further in, and thrust his face close to Avon’s. “It’s too late, Avon. If you were Cicero and I were Shakespeare we’d never find the words to put things right.”

He wandered away, a moody knight unarmoured

down to shirt-sleeves, brown strong forearms emerging from rolled-back cuffs of white, his head of untidy curls bent over as he considered the room. Avon’s eyes followed him, noted the signs of packing.

“Where will you go?”

“Anywhere,” Blake shrugged. “After Star One, you can just take me to some suitable neutral planet.”

“And you’ll do—what?”

“It’s really no longer your concern, is it?” Look, Avon, if by any chance you’re feeling belatedly sorry for me, don’t waste the emotion. You don’t have many to waste. I’m a free man, which is considerably more than I expected after my trial. I’ve no secret wish to remain here and no desire whatever to tie myself to *Liberator*’s apron-strings. In fact, the more I think about it the more I feel I’ve stayed too long as it is.”

He really meant it, too. To walk free again, out in the open air beneath trees, smelling damp grass and leaves; doing what he was good at, rousing fervour and motivations within a new circle of would-be seceders; whipping the rabble into an organised frenzy as he sprang to its forefront, one bold fist in the air. Happily, happily he would leave all this behind, this stuffy recycled atmosphere, this enclave of niggling doubters whose hearts he had briefly moved, but whose sluggish scruples he had failed to stir into independent life.

Avon paced around somewhat, hands folded into one another behind his back. Blake tried to ignore him but had lost the thread of his purpose; he couldn’t concentrate with Avon, prowling, coiling like a tense spring, his eyes afire with—something.

Avon looked at him then and said about the last thing Blake had expected him to say.

“Do you want to go to bed?”

Well, that must have taken courage. Not that he was receptive to Avon’s courage right now. Blake threw his head back and laughed bitterly. “Not unless you’re into necrophilia. Dead from the neck down, that’s me. Are you?” he added, peering at Avon with interest, “into necrophilia, that is? I thought I had the odd kink or two, but I’ve a feeling we barely touched the surface of *yours*.”

Something pithy and obvious about Anna came to mind which he bit back just in time.

“Everybody’s big brother...” Avon said, walking away from him. “So you can be vicious.”

“Yes, I’ve picked up quite a lot,” he allowed, pleased. He cocked his head to one side. “A mere amateur beside you, of course. I don’t overrate myself in *every* field, you note.”

Avon leaned one arm on the wall and laid his forehead on it, an odd, defeated gesture. “That hurt you, didn’t it?” he addressed the wall. “I didn’t mean you to take it so much to heart.”

Blake stared at him, astonished. “No?” he said with viperish flippancy. “Just a witticism? And good old

Roj didn't take it in the right spirit. Never mind, Avon—” he spun around and clapped him across the shoulders hearteningly— “you still got what you wanted, didn't you?” And when Avon looked around at him blankly, he added impatiently, “The *Liberator*, Avon.”

Blake wanted him to react, wanted it with every forceful beat of his heart, every pounding in his pulse; because the longer Avon held out the more he would go on being cruel, reaching inside himself to the store of bitterness held there and bringing it out a drop at a time. He had thought he would enjoy being cruel to Avon; it was certainly easy enough once he had started, the words flying along; but he wasn't enjoying it quite so much as expected, looking at Avon's white face, two dead eyes like black holes in the snow.

Avon looked askance, into space. “Is that what I wanted?” he said in a soft, odd voice.

“Yes, of course it was. Don't lose heart now!” Blake said with joviality. “Just when you've got your life's desire. How strange you are, Avon. Anyone else would be dancing a tango around the flight deck and stitching his name to the head chair.”

Avon said with some difficulty: “I don't find this sort of thing easy. But you might—give me a little help.”

“Why, what are you trying to do?” Blake asked, all amiability. He took another turn around the room, returned and pushed his face close to Avon's until Avon could not fail to look at him. “Make a nice little farewell speech?”

Avon turned away from him, brushing his arm aside. “All right! But I would like you to remember—”

“The beauty of your eyes? Don't worry. I'll never forget.”

“—that you turned down flat *my* plans for the future.”

“Did I?” Blake remembered. “Ah yes. The back-water retirement. You making a decent wage at the City databanks, me at home to cook the dinner.”

Avon's voice rose in anger, or anguish, for the first time.

“Oh, *that's right* Blake, other people's dreams are always laughable.”

That stopped Blake in his tracks. When he did go on he had dropped the cynical tone he had been affecting for days.

“*Avon*. You didn't want much, did you? You only wanted me to give up everything I believe in for you. Guarantees I don't need; but what exactly were you offering? You've never given me one damn hint about anything you feel for me.”

Avon said, after a pause: “Well, that in itself should tell you something.”

Blake stared at him. “Should it really? Like the dog that didn't bark, I suppose?” At least Avon seemed to have calmed himself down, settled. A while ago Blake had

been horribly sure Avon was on the verge of tears. He said wearily:

“All I know for certain, Avon, is that you didn't care enough to help me fight the things I think are worth fighting for.”

“What do you think I've been doing all this time?” Avon asked on a note of desperation. He took a deep breath, turned away from Blake to face the wall again, his voice quiet. “It's not that, Blake. I don't want you to be killed fighting for them, that's all. Nothing's that important.”

Blake threw his head back and laughed, a genuine rich laugh from the bottom of his chest. “From the sublime, dear Avon, to the ridiculous. *Nothing's* so important that you think I should die for it?”

He paced for a moment, fully expecting Avon to spot the absurdity of this, but Avon only said:

“No.”

Blake gazed at him in genuine rockbottom disbelief. “You can't mean that.”

“Of course I mean it,” Avon snapped. “I can address the particular even if *you* can only be magnanimous in general. I realise that this is heresy, but you matter to me more than the fate of the millions; I wouldn't waste one second's sleep on them whereas you would die to save them half an hour's slavery on a point of principle—how could we ever reconcile a difference like that?”

He looked so triumphantly angry; magnificent, flashing blackeyed fury. Blake wanted to laugh, and choked instead on a sudden rush of quite ridiculous emotion even as his mouth framed a smile. He felt the need to sit down and did, heavily, on the edge of the bed.

He supposed he had been pushing and pushing at Avon in the only way left, to provoke just such a revelation; such a pity, now it had been dragged out of him, that Blake didn't see how it could help anything.

He had been groping along like a child in the dark, muddleheadedly expecting that everything would come right if he only he could engage Avon's heart and his passions. But now he could see that it really made things much more difficult.

All he had done was create another follower, and this one, more guarded than any, was in fact the most vulnerable of all: Avon would neither understand nor be able to handle this new dependency. He, neurotic and mistrustful, walked a thin line between brilliance and breakdown; whether Blake left or whether he stayed Avon would not now be able to handle it.

He should have left Avon his defences.

Avon had stopped his pacing to watch him. Blake saw the signs of sleeplessness around his eyes.

“Do you think you could bear to sit down?” he said tartly. “Watching you fret is making me fray around the edges.”

Although nothing was right, some channel of



panse of Blake’s bare chest, his hands measuring, caressing. ing.

“I’m not going to wear it,” Blake said, smiling a secret smile at Avon’s low speed of uptake. He shut his eyes, and shivered as Avon’s warm hand ran lightly down his chest to his groin. He arched upwards impatiently, his cock thrusting in arrogant demand against Avon’s palm.

“Don’t think I’m going to make this easy for you,” Avon’s voice said, dark and impure. “You have never done one single thing to please me.”

Blake’s eyes flew open, remembering just when Avon had asked him to please him. Anticipating the remonstrance, Avon said:

“Not even that.” He leant nearer Blake, his murmur an exquisite draught across Blake’s heated skin. “My dearest fantasy, when I met Anna, was to rape her…”

Blake’s sharp intake of breath recalled Avon from his dreams; he shook his head impatiently and continued: “Perhaps, I might have done. Unfortunately for me, she was too willing…”

Blake was quite unable to take his eyes off Avon’s sardonic beauty, the melancholy deepness of his eyes; the cruel twist to his mouth. Avon was still stroking him, rhythmically, automatically, pleasuring Blake’s cock without needing to pay any attention to it. Blake burned and shivered with desire.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’d oblige you if I could. But I have the same problem.”

He took Avon’s face between his hands, tried to push him downwards.

With shocking unexpectedness his skin rang like gunshot as Avon hit him with the palm of his hand, his face snapping to one side with the force of the blow. Pain flashed along his nerves; his body curled foetally. Avon’s low, harsh words floated to him as if from a great distance away:

“You’ll kill me if you leave me, Blake: but that doesn’t matter to you, does it? Far less make you change your mind.”

Blake was only waiting for one thing, drawn out with the tension of wanting it, needing it, his nerves tight and strumming a relentless pattern of heat and lust and desire. Pain, pleasure…twisted darkly together as Avon hit him again, sending streaks of bright agony, sparks of electric sensation flying across his skin; he hunched over his own body and came into his own hands, coming and coming in beautifully relentless waves of pent-up excitement; a wounded, soft cry escaping him, punctuating the darkness over and over.

When at last he opened his eyes Avon was breathing harder than he was, a fierce look to his face; he met Blake’s gaze with narrowed, nightshade eyes. “Well,” Blake said, trying a few experimental breaths, a faint echo of pleasure still plucking sweetly and poignantly inside; “Here you are. Second hand, I’m afraid. But

you’ll be used to that, after Anna. Married, wasn’t she?” and he extended his cupped palm to Avon; the thin black glitter beneath Avon’s eyelids closed out altogether as Avon took Blake’s hand in his own, sipping at it, rubbing the palm clean with his tongue.

The he kissed Blake, his mouth closing in with exquisite care; Blake had been expecting this and did not flinch from the offering. Avon withdrew his mouth and murmured against his ear, “I don’t know why Anna provokes such perversity in you.”

“Don’t you? But you like it, anyway.”

“Anna is dead, Blake: she’s no threat to you.”

“And when I’m gone, you’ll be left with both of us,” Blake said. “Put my picture up alongside hers; alternate nights, perhaps, would be fairest.”

Avon was removing his clothes, his back to Blake. Bored with Anna’s supposed perfection and Avon’s silent loyalty, if that was what it was, Blake said: “Anna must have been way out of her depth with you.”

“Why do you say that?”

There was blood on his lip, a painful swelling over his cheekbone, his own semen bittersweet on his tongue. Blake threw his head back among the pillows and laughed derisively. “That’s very funny, in the circumstances… Anna couldn’t have handled you for five minutes.”

Her fragile grace came to mind, along with another, oddly distanced flash of insight, or knowledge half-lost, that all was not as it seemed. Anna… Kerr Avon, alpha grade AA, Anna—Grant? and another name—

He grabbed at it but it was gone, like so many memories from the time when he had had access to many Federation secrets; imperfectly wiped, some of them remained to haunt him, in dreams, mostly.

Anna betrayed you. I know she did.

And he did not want to share that knowledge with Avon.

Avon lay beside him, and for a moment did nothing. Blake’s eyes followed his profile, the line of the straight nose, the curve of his lips. Avon had the classic looks of a darkeyed aristocrat, quite unlike Blake’s rough-and-rugged rogue’s style. Blake appreciated Avon with a lazy, objective gaze; when he closed his eyes he could see a negative Avon inside each eyelid.

*I’ll never forget.*

Avon’s fingers slipped down his own chest, circling driftingly, then sought out and touched his own shaft, curving erect up over his flat belly. His eyes closed as he settled into a rhythm of stroking himself, his head turning away from Blake as he sighed a little. Blake watched this for a while, seeing how the soft dark hair on Avon’s forearms stood up as the exquisite pleasure of his own touch stirred him; the way his chest rose and fell as his quiet breathing quickened; watching the slow pull of his hands, slender strong wrists flexing as they moved.

He murmured acidly into Avon's ear: "Do you, in fact, need me at all?"

Avon's eyes shot open, revealing bright darkness. "Only peripherally," he said; an amused, ironic smile chased briefly across his lips and was gone.

"Don't stop. I like it."

"I don't care whether you do or not."

It was Blake's turn to smile. "Oh, I think you do, Avon." He turned on his side, and traced a fingertip around Avon's lips, letting Avon nip him, then he moved down to stroke his nipples, seeing a flush of arousal creep across Avon's pale skin, his hands tight, tight on his cock, not moving now. When Blake moved across to kiss him, Avon caught his wrist in an iron grasp.

"Now you do it," he said in a low rasp, pushing Blake's hand roughly downwards.

"But you do it so beautifully yourself," Blake said mockingly, pushing Avon's hands aside and taking hold of him.

"Harder," Avon only said.

Blake shut his eyes and pretended he was doing it to himself—which, interestingly, made him dare to handle Avon with far greater violence. Avon shuddered under him. It seemed only seconds before Avon, breathing fast and hard, stopped his flying hand with a punishing grip.

"Nearly there?" Blake asked him sweetly, looking up into darkly glazed eyes, seeing the droplets of sweat standing out on Avon's brow.

"Are you in a hurry?" Avon said, catching his breath.

"Me? No. I've got all night. You, however," Blake said, looking at him consideringly, "don't look as if you have."

Avon said, "I want—" and stopped.

Blake leaned his head nearer. "What do you want?" He rested his forehead against Avon's cheek. "Don't be shy. I won't say no." He was tense, strangely excited, strangely stirred emotionally by Avon's need. "But if you're going to hit me again—" Blake touched his cheekbone and winced—"how about somewhere that won't show?"

Avon lifted his head to stare at him. "Very intriguing." He laughed. "Nothing about sex strikes you as absurd, does it, Blake?"

Blake wiped the back of his hand over his mouth. "No, I love it." His wayward hand, outside his conscious control, wandered down Avon's torso to touch his cock again. "I suppose you despise me for that?"

"Not at all," Avon said amused. "Just reflecting on the very odd fact that you should share my low sexual tastes."

"Why odd?"

"When I realised you were sleeping with Jenna, I thought you must be very unimaginative."

Blake thought about saying that, on the contrary, sex with Jenna required plenty of imagination; a lingering kindness towards her stopped him.

He let go of Avon and turned himself around, laying his head on Avon's stomach and kissing the tip of his cock, licking delicately. "And Anna? Did she ever do *this* for you?"

Avon grabbed his head and thrust off the bed, forcing himself into Blake's mouth. The soft rasp of his voice filtered down:

"Suck hard."

Blake took him at his word, his face pressed close to the sweet musk of his groin. His hands stole underneath Avon's buttocks; finding the dry pucker between he stroked it and pressed inside. He wanted to speak, say riotously obscene things to fire Avon on, couldn't; heard Avon's own voice, hissing softly, deliver a phrase which burned in his ears and shot to his groin, lifting him with tension. Avon pulled on his hair in agonised distraction: soft, salt silk pulsed sweetly down his throat. Avon held him there, hard, until he was spent; then his hand let go of Blake's head, fell away onto the bed. Blake rolled onto his back, gasping and choking.

"No," Avon breathlessly continued the conversation as if there had been no gap; "Anna never did that for me." Blake opened his eyes and looked up into Avon's face, to meet his disagreeable smile. "Not quite like that, anyway."

Blake could imagine how it had been, Anna delicate and circumspect, kissing his cock as a great sacrifice, maybe using her tongue a little (but nowhere near the tip) while Avon politely lay and yearned to thrust it arrogantly down her throat. Women, very often, just had no idea.

"You seem obsessed with Anna," Avon said: he brought Blake up to lie level with him, a considering hand brushing the marks of abuse at his eye, the scratches on his cheeks.

"Only because you are."

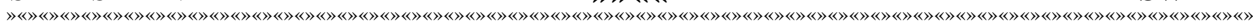
"I don't keep asking you about Jenna." Try as he might, he could not keep the lilt of curiosity out of his voice.

"You'd probably like to, but you're too polite," Blake offered sardonically. Now they were both in the limbo of between-times, he felt more tender; he drew Avon to him and explored the softness of Avon's skin with his lips, tasting his sweat.

"I really don't know how you can bear to let me go," Avon said cynically and lightly, a moment of despair yawning a desolate chasm into being.

Blake didn't know either. "What's the one thing I have to do to keep you?" he said between soft, moist kisses. "Sign the pledge of neutral pacifism?"

"I'll lower the price," Avon said with a sudden, rash hunger: he cleared his throat and stared into Blake's



eyes with a kind of eagerness.

“I couldn’t bear you to do that,” Blake snapped at him, surprised by the force of his own emotions wrung from him.

Avon stared at him, and gave a short, harsh laugh. “I see. On the grounds that any scruple is better than no scruple at all. You make me laugh, Blake; you really do. You despise and loathe my position, and yet you expect me to defend it with strength. You’d be disappointed if, after all, I lay down at your feet and agreed to worship you, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course,” Blake said, as if nothing could be more obvious. He spoke the absolute truth.

Avon traced a deliberate thumbnail down Blake’s cheek and seemed absorbed by the play of shadows across Blake’s battered face. “Well, seeing that I

should hate to disappoint you, in any way whatsoever...” he murmured with exquisite, poignant care, “it really does seem that there is nothing more we can do.”

The night seemed long, but could never be long enough.

“It needn’t be forever,” Blake said; the very last thing before they parted. He hugged Avon, whose body felt like his own, and smiled with overbright eyes into dark ones reflecting his. “We’ll meet up again one day.”

He was sure of it. some premonition—

“I know we will,” he promised, and like a dream saw his own death in Avon’s eyes: just before the image splintered and fell into a million dark crystal shards, each one arrowing his heart with deadly passionate joy.

*For Katharine, whose wonderful writing has given me more pleasure than any other.*