III

...OF OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE

And so we come to fortune, specifically outrageous fortune and a wealth of meanings to the phrase. Consider fortune as luck, pure chance. Jane Baron has. Change the movement of a molecule and you change the direction of a universe. Jane admits she wanted an optimistic ending for a Blake/Avon story, but that she could not see beyond the doom and destruction of the series. So she altered the paths the characters' lives would take. What would happen to Blake and Avon if…?

And then, of course, there’s M. Fae Glasgow’s perspective on fortune, her sweetly dark and perverse approach to Blake’s 7. Here is an author who prefers the pessimism of the series. What does she do with fortune? She thinks in terms of bloodlines and inheritance. We are, she says, ultimately, the sum of our early teachings. There is no avoiding the heritage of blood. We can never completely overcome who we have been brought up to be. And if our names are Vila, Blake, or Avon…

THE BLINK OF AN EYE

JANE BARON

A dustmote danced in the air next to Jenna Stannis’ thick fringe of eyelashes. Almost invisible to the human eye, it hung there, bobbing slightly. The number of molecules colliding with the dustmote on one side or another was totally random, thus relegating the question of the speck’s immediate future to the strange world of quantum mechanics. In an infinite number of possible universes the dustmote swept boldly on to impinge on Jenna’s sclera, where, impudently irritating the tender moist membrane, it forced her to blink.

In at least one universe, it did not.

Jenna was at the flight board, lazily punching in corrections to the course Blake head set, waiting for Blake himself to appear. She wore a peacock blue gown which plunged down in the front, nipped in at the waist, and fit sleekly all over.

“All well?” At Blake’s voice she looked up.

Then, gracefully, she straightened, her eyes fixed on his. She smiled.

Blake smiled back, pleasantly. “All well?” he repeated.

Jenna’s smile slipped a little, but she nailed it back in place. “Yes, Blake.” She leaned forward the least bit, resisting the temptation to wet her lips.

“Good, Cally?”

From the lower level of the flight deck, Cally had turned to face them. “All systems functioning normally; status is firm,” she said in a credible imitation of Zen. She added firmly, “That is a lovely outfit, Jenna.”

“Thank you, Cally.”

“So it is. Lovely. But then you always do look lovely, Jenna.” Blake’s voice was rich and warm, full of good-humor and camaraderie. Jenna’s hands clenched into fists. Why, why, why? This time she wasn’t going to be able to stop herself, wasn’t going to keep her temper…

Why? Why—?

“Hasn’t Orac finished those interpolations yet? I’d like to get some sleep before the next crusade.” In sharp contrast to Blake’s tones, the voice behind her was dry, clean-edged, and impatient. Blake and Cally glanced up.

It was at this point that the destiny of the dustmote was decided. By purest accident, it did not drift into Jenna’s eye. It went the other way entirely. She did not blink. Her gaze remained fixed on Blake, as it had been, with an almost fierce concentration. And so she saw, in the barest fraction of a second, the change in his expression.

She turned.

Avon stood in the doorway, wearing a loose tunic of woven silver over black leathers which encased his lower body like a glove. His expression was one of abstracted arrogance. Nothing unusual about that. Nothing disturbing.

But she had seen.

The universe had changed.

“So that’s it…” Drawing the words out sib-
lantly, she looked with slitted, burning eyes from Avon to Blake and back again. The tiny fire in the center of her being that she had tended so long with so little blazed up, turned all in an instant into a conflagration of hate.

“I beg your pardon, Jenna?”

“That’s it, isn’t it, Blake?” She managed to pack a year of frustration into one short, jagged laugh. “That’s why you don’t want me. Because you want him.”

Blake’s brows came together, more in puzzlement than in anger. “Jenna, what are you talking about?”

“He?!” She spat the word out. “Don’t pretend it isn’t true, Blake. All this time, all your fights…lovers’ quarrels, were they? Kiss and make up afterwards did you?”

Blake, after his initial look of shock, had flushed dull red. “I don’t know what you’re implying—”

“I’m not implying; I know. You want to take him to bed.” She turned her brittle smile on Avon, the viciousness of it dazzling. “Or has he done it already, Avon?”

The technician stood as he had before, only the slight narrowing of his eyes and the curl of his lips betraying any reaction. “And what do you think?” he asked smoothly, his voice matching her smile.

“I think that if he hasn’t it isn’t for lack of you trying. No wonder you’re so cold to women. So obvious—I should have seen it before. Dressing like that, always standing so close to him. Provoking him…to do what? To hit you? Or—take you?”

A dangerous light shone in those hooded eyes. “You really shouldn’t judge others by what you want yourself, Jenna.”

Her laughter rang out harshly. “Oh, you needn’t worry; I won’t spoil your little game.” She whirled back on Blake. “I always wondered why you put up with him. Simple, isn’t it? So you can watch him all day, dream about him at night…”

Avon looked more amused than outraged—which was an outrage in itself. He relaxed suddenly, resting his hips against the desk, soft black boots stretched out in front of him. “Why do you think?”

Blake’s face was on fire. “I can’t believe I said that. Truly, I didn’t mean that you—that you would—”

“What? Go to bed with a man? Or with you? I’m sure Jenna would feel vindicated to know that I’ve at least done the former.” A deliberately inflammatory smile crossed his face. “Frequently.”

Blake had no way to cope with the conflicting emotions which arose in him. His body’s reaction threw him into confusion.

“Yes, well, that doesn’t mean—what she said. And it’s hardly as if I wanted—” Blake ran into the truth twisting to mean the exact opposite of what they said.

Avon murmured, “Can’t you?”

Blake shook his head, mortified at the way the blood continued to rush to his face. He forced himself to keep a veneer of calm, but he could not meet the other man’s eyes. He felt the silence lengthen, knew the exact instant when it became remarkable. And then the truth lay between them, like a solid object, irrefutable. In plain view.

“I suppose,” said Avon, softly, “that you also believe I provoke you?”

Blake felt himself burst out of the thin bubble of calm. “Well, why the hell do you dress like that if you don’t want to lay the whole galaxy?” he shouted, dumbfounding himself.

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“Yes, well, that doesn’t mean—what she said. And it’s hardly as if I wanted—” Blake ran into the truth again and fell over it. “And, in any case, it’s not what you want. I know you neither like nor trust me…”

“Have you ever given me any reason to do either?”

Blake stiffened. “Clearly not. And since this disturbs us both so much I’ll just leave. I didn’t come here with any—ulterior motives.” He made a slight motion toward the door. “Which I’m sure will be a weight off your mind.”

“Don’t try to manipulate me, Blake. It won’t work.”

To his own astonishment, Blake heard himself saying:

“Then…what will?”
He stepped back to examine this incredible utterance, and, astounding himself even more, decided to stand by it.

The air in the room was suddenly charged with tension. Blake met Avon’s eyes directly; neither looked away. Then the tech broke the silence, laughing aloud. Mockery shone behind that fey smile. “Well now, if it’s so important to you, I’m sure we can come to an...arrangement.”

Blake flushed more deeply at the open contempt. “Whoring, Avon? Sex for money? Not exactly what I would have thought of you. But that is what you’re talking about, isn’t it?”

The mocking smile merely grew sweeter. “Of course. As you always say, anything for a reasonable profit. Besides, you can’t possibly imagine you have anything else I want.”

The desire to hit, to hurt, rose in Blake. But there was another desire, too: an ache in his groin which had been increasing minute by minute, taking no heed of fastenings. His desire grew with every item of cloth—unbuckling the belt which clasped the silver tunic. By the time the technician lay stretched out on the bed, naked, languorous, and all-too-obviously unaroused, Blake was in a sort of pleasurable agony staring at the other man. Gorgeous. Naturally. So beautiful. Oh godgodgod…

Blake found himself frozen, tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth, the hardness between his legs filling and thickening. His desire grew with every item of clothing Avon draped with casual precision over the chair. By the time he was planning to do, Avon stopped him. Cold. By unbuckling the belt which clasped the silver tunic.

“Avon.”

“Do you prefer to stand there staring until you come in your trousers?”

Blake flushed more deeply at the open contempt. “After you’ve sampled the goods,” said Avon, nastily. As Blake stepped forward, anger uppermost, unsure himself of what he was planning to do, Avon stopped him. Cold. By unbuckling the belt which clasped the silver tunic.

“Avon.”

“We can discuss price later if you prefer. After you’ve sampled the goods,” said Avon, nastily. As Blake stepped forward, anger uppermost, unsure himself of what he was planning to do, Avon stopped him. Cold. By unbuckling the belt which clasped the silver tunic.

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“Well? Are you going to join me? Or would you prefer to stand there staring until you come in your trousers?”

“I will not let you win, I will not let you make me lose my temper. That is exactly what you want.

Then:

What do I want?

The answer came, a visceral thing which drove him to strip off his own clothes heedless of fastenings. Strangely, the answer also bound him into a kind of manic gentleness, so that he could not, could not throw himself on Avon and pin him down by sheer weight, taking by force what had been jeeringly offered for sale. Instead, he knelt by the bedside, almost trembling.

The tech had closed his eyes and turned away at the sight of Blake’s expression. His own face was shut away. Then the tech broke the silence, laughing aloud. Mockery shone behind that fey smile. “Well now, if it’s so important to you, I’m sure we can come to an...arrangement.”

Blake reached out a hand to brush the curve of Avon’s jaw. Now that he was doing it he knew exactly what he wanted to do. Anger had drained away, forgotten. With something like reverence he traced that achingly beautiful line, not touching the lips yet, not oh-my-god-that-mouth, but flattening his hand to slide down the smooth column of throat to the firm, lightly muscled plane of chest. His fingertips grazed a rosy-brown nipple and something leapt inside him as he felt it harden responsively. He bent, scarcely knowing what he was doing, to kiss Avon’s forehead.

“Kerr…oh, god…”

Avon’s snapped open. Some divine force had invented sovereign contempt especially for those sculpted lips—and then broken the mold. “You will not call me that, Blake. And if you don’t get on with it I am going to be asleep before you start. So unless you should wish to add hypnophilia to your list sexual eccentricities, you had best do something.”

Blake scarcely heard the words for the cool music of the voice. “Let’s both do something,” he murmured, trying to draw the technician’s arms around him, to gather him in an embrace. “Just hold me…”

“You are not listening,” Avon snapped, shrugging off the hands and twisting away. “Blake, take off the blindfold, pull the plugs out of your ears, and try to get one idea into that vast wasteland in your head. We are not lovers. I have agreed—for appropriate compensation—to lend you my body for the few minutes it is going to take you to ‘get off’. That gives you the right to fuck me, not to drool all over me crooning endearments. And although you are paying to touch me, you surely can’t imagine I should want to touch you.”

Blindfold off, ears open, mind clear. The rage scalded him, coursing through his body, twisting his mouth into bitterness. “It’s just sex, then, is it?”

“It is not anything remotely resembling sex yet. All you’ve managed so far is some heavy breathing. I am about to drop off through sheer boredom.”

“Really, Avon? What about this?” His hand, rough now, slid down the flat belly to grip a hardening shaft of flesh.

Scorn melted into something softer, more sensual—and far more frightening. “Yes, well, I must admit that seeing you out of control, shaking like a fourteen-year-old virgin ready to explode at the touch of my hand, does do something for me after all. Although not, obviously, quite as much as it does for you.”

The red haze of anger and the red haze of desire surged together in Blake’s head, sweeping away thought. “Sex, then,” he grated, seizing Avon’s upper arms deliberately, sinking his fingers into the muscles. “Whatever you say.” Roughly, he took the other man’s mouth, forcing it open with the pressure of his own. It was the old primal battle between them now, all excuses suffocated under the
rush of power. He felt Avon’s recoil, and ignored it, thrusting his tongue in hard. There was, in any case, nowhere for Avon to recoil. He was now lying trapped beneath Blake’s body, one arm pinned above his head. Blake sank his teeth into the softness of a lower lip, then reached between Avon’s legs. No softness there. He felt a cruel delight at the way the jutting erection thickened and swelled in his hand. Delight, too, at the sudden, undistinguishable response in the tech’s mouth, the yielding, the involuntary tremor that passed through his body. The taste of pleasure.

“So this is what you like, how you like it,” he grated in Avon’s ear, using his teeth, roughly, to do what his fingers had done so gently before: biting and sucking his way down the length of that smooth throat. He was making marks, marks Avon would not be able to hide later, and he was fiercely glad of it. He rasped a damp tongue and scraped with his teeth at the sensitive mound of a nipple and felt rather than heard the gasp this elicited. Felt, also, the sudden helpless thrust of hot flesh into his encircling fingers. Avon at once disciplined his hips into stillness, pride lending him the strength to wrest one arm free and lash out. A waste of energy: the larger man had the advantages of weight and power—and he also had a steel of sable response in the tech’s mouth, the yielding, the insidious sweetness forcing him to receive it. Circling and teasing, the tongue delved ever deeper, drawing his own tongue into Blake’s mouth, wresting helpless waves of response from the depths of his being. Blake had once been an expert at this, and now he was combining the unremembered skill of years with a devastating tenderness to break through layer after layer of Avon’s defenses.

He kept on doing it.

A long time.

He did it until the man lying under him was shaking, hips writhing uncontrollably in rhythm with the now-gentle hand which clasped him, breath sobbing into Blake’s mouth. Until every lightest stroke caused a shudder of reaction, until there was no resistance to anything his hands urged. He did it until, looking up, he saw what he had never seen before: Avon’s mask shattered. The tech’s pale skin was deeply flushed, eyes slitted, head rolling mindlessly from side to side in rapture at the continued caresses. Small sounds worked their way out of his throat.

In the midst of realizing that he had won, triumph blossomed into something else, something so much deeper it was almost frightening. Blake put his lips to Avon’s ear.

“It can be good this way, Kerr,” he breathed. “It doesn’t have to hurt. Let me do it for you; let me make you happy. Please. Relax and let it happen.”

Avon jerked away from him. “Lights down,” he gasped, his voice hoarse but much stronger than Blake would have expected. Then, hissing raggedly into the sudden dimness: “Rape is rape, Blake. I may not be able to stop you—but at least I don’t have to look at your pious hypocritical face whilst you do it.”

The lights would only respond to Avon’s voice, but Blake felt more amused than thwarted. “I don’t need to see you,” he whispered, “to know how much you enjoy it.”

“Did those three children—enjoy it?”

The ground dropped from beneath him and fury and desire both blazed white-hot. Blake jerked back and delivered one stinging slap, then reached down in a
merciless, hurting caress, feeling a savage satisfaction as Avon’s back arched, breath exploding from his lungs, rampant flesh pressing into Blake’s marauding hand.

“You like it well enough, don’t you? Don’t you, Avon? Say it!”

Sufficient light reflected off the curve of those perfect lips to show they were closed defiantly. Though Avon’s head was flung back, nostrils flared, neck corded, though he was breathing in rapid, shallow pants, it was clear he did not intend any cry of passion—or pain—to escape him.

“Say it, damn you!” Blake took his mouth again, bearing down on the smaller man with his full weight, grinding his erection between Avon’s thighs, against the throbbing flesh. Avon shivered, hips lifting involuntarily. He whimpered once, then was silent, denying Blake in the only way that he could.

Hit you, I should hit you. Don’t you know what I can do to you? God, I could slap you silly, half-unconscious, make you beg, make you cry, break you. And then…take you.

Yes…take you…

It was not pity which induced Blake to leap straight to the second part of this plan, forgoing the first. His own control was breaking, and he could feel the first irresistible stirrings of orgasm.

“Turn over,” he snarled, and when Avon, predictably, did no such thing, he wrestled him onto his stomach. Slamming a hand onto Avon’s neck, he pushed his head down, pressing his face into the pillow. With his other hand and his knees he roughly forced Avon’s legs apart, hips raised in offering.

Avon was fighting desperately now, heedless of what pain or damage Blake might inflict in revenge. Blake overpowered him easily, forcing him back into place by brute strength. He did not even think of using threats. Rationality was gone, usurped by a sexual desire beyond brute strength. He did not even think of using threats.

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shuddering violently in his arms. Then rushing blackness swept toward him and he fell into it.

Some time afterward he became aware of his own slowly calming breath. Avon lay partially pinned beneath him. They were both soaking with sweat, Avon’s hair dark with it, plastered to his head. Blake lay stunned, his brain moving sluggishly, trying to comprehend what had happened. And failing.

“Get off me,” said a ragged voice, and he thought: that’s Avon. Avon. With whom you fight ever day, who makes you furious enough to kill him at least once a week, who always seems to be on hand to keep you from getting killed. Avon, whom you just tried to rape. Or did rape.

He had rolled off long before these tangled thoughts wound to their conclusion, obeying mechan-ically. He was sick with self-disgust. Dully, eyes shut, he felt Avon get off the bed, then heard, from the bathroom, the indistinct noises of cleansing.

He was grateful the lights were still down. Bad enough to face what he saw in himself in this semidarkness; to look at his soul in the light would send him off screaming.

There was only one way to fight the utter panic which rose at this thought, and that was with anger—and denial. He hadn’t really hurt Avon. Avon had provoked it, had almost compelled him to do it. And he wouldn’t hurt Avon, would never really hurt Avon, because he—

A second panic, exactly equal to the first, burst out from another direction and between the two the threatening words were sent spinning into void. He would not hurt Avon, he corrected himself careful, because…he cared for Avon. He…respected him, even…admired him, And, in any case, Roj Blake was not a man who enjoyed hurting anyone.

Armed with this certain knowledge, he actually sat up when the bathroom door opened and Avon appeared in the doorway, framed with the light behind him. He sought to find words which would give him what suddenly seemed the most important thing in the universe—Avon’s forgiveness.

“What are you still doing here?” The tech’s voice was dispassionate, as if commenting on a household pest seen scuttling into a corner.

Blake found it very hard to swallow. “I thought… I needed…”

“Well, think and need elsewhere. Get off my bed.” The voice was utterly emotionless. Blake rose, feeling clumsy, then stood, feeling unclean. Inside and out. All at once it was more than he could bear to stand beside this immaculate stranger who was stripping off the sheets without so much as a glance at him. He bolted for the bathroom, afraid he was going to be sick.

Sometime later, skin stinging, he felt…well, not human, but at least cleaner. At first he had tried to reflect on what he had done, but the dull pressure in his head soon made thought impossible. He felt drugged—or drunk. He could barely walk straight.

Re-entering the dark room, his light-dazzled eyes could just make out the impassive features of the man seated on the chair. Blake walked slowly—lumbering, he thought, with uncharacteristic self-derogation—to the bed. His clothes had been thrown into a corner with the used sheets. He made no attempt to retrieve them.

“I don’t know what to say, Avon.” His tongue felt thick, awkward. The words of penitence were so shallow as to constitute insult. “I never meant to hurt you. I swear that.”

“But, Blake,” said Avon musically, “you mean so little of what you say or do.”

Blake did not even flinch, just let the blow sink in, receiving it.

“I think that may be true.” He sat and put his head in his hands, wishing he could massage away the crushing pain in his temples. Wishing he could find some way, not to make excuse for what he had done, but to express how he now felt about it. “I also think…I must be mad. I almost had myself convinced that you wanted it. To have done that…to you…” The sentence trailed off, dissolving in the acid mists of his pain and self-hatred. “There aren’t words, Avon.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll find some. You’re too fond of martyrdom to enjoy it in silence.”

Blake did not look up. He had no resistance left. Avon made a sharp sound of disgust.

“Pull a couple of stakes out of your bleeding heart, Blake. You were right the first time. I did provoke it. I’ve wanted it for a long time, and as always I got exactly what I wanted.”

“No.”

“Yes, Blake. I can face the truth even if you can’t. Everything went according to plan—except that you couldn’t quite go through with it at the end, could you? Robbed me even of that.”

Blake did manage to look up then.

“Why?”

“To be rid of you. Finally. To prove that you’re no better than any other man. To—exorcise you. And I was willing to destroy you to do it. I want you to remember that the next time you pull out your hair shirt.” In the clouded depths of Blake’s mind he recognized something in the tone, and he thought: You have nothing to be ashamed of. It was me, all me...

“Now we have that settled, would you be so kind as to vacate my bed? Or do you feel inclined to try a little more forcible sodomy? At your leisure, of course.”

Blake was no longer listening. Avon’s admission had pulled out the last stay from under him and he was unbalanced, lost in his own constricted world of pain. It
was me, my fault, my responsibility… His body slumped until he was supported against the wall but the waves of vertigo continued unabated. He sensed, rather than heard, Avon move to stand before him.

“What’s wrong?”

He heard that, if only dimly. “Just—dizzy. Can’t—get up. Rest…”

“Here? And you expect me to let you? Not even you could be that stupid, that deluded…” The voice broke off abruptly. Blake had no idea how much time passed before he felt hands shaking him, pulling him up, then releasing him to fall back on the bed where he lay inert.

“Very well.” Avon’s voice was bloodless, drained, and seemed to come from a great distance. A chair squeaked as it took weight. “I certainly can’t carry something a fifth grade Delta toddler wouldn’t know.”

Perhaps there was expiation in this. Perhaps Avon was entitled to see his private hell. Shivering, rationality balking, he did what he had never done before: made an effort to translate the nightmare images into words, laying his penance at Avon’s feet.

“I remember lights…faces. All around me. Never leaving. Hurting me. Wearing me out. Finally…breaking me.”

“Tell me.”

“I can’t remember!”

“Tell me!”

“God damn you, Avon!” Terror woke a spark of self-preservation. “You’ve been going on about rape; well, this is just as bad. You want to tear into me, to violate my soul! You want to rip my mind open—”

“You sanctimonious bastard.” Blake suddenly felt the technician’s full weight on him, felt a searing pain in his shoulder as one arm was twisted above his head, felt, to his shock, Avon’s breath on his lips, in his mouth. “You dare to talk about emotional rape? You? You’ve raped me daily since first we met, and what’s more, you’ve enjoyed it, quite safe, because of course it’s not for you, it’s for your bloody Cause. Your all-consuming Cause which excuses any crime, any sin you want to commit. Which allows you to gratify your endless need for self-destruction. You bastard, you are the greatest spiritual rapist in the galaxy now tell me what the bloody hell happens next!”

Pain. Encompassing him. Inside and out. A shattering in his head and a feeling as if his internal organs were tearing loose along with the words he flung, shouting, into the darkness.

“And next they kill me! Are you satisfied, Avon? Is that enough for you? They kill me. They take me from me, and I’m conscious all the time; I can feel it. They tell me what they’re going to do and then they do it and I can feel myself dissolving. You want to know why I hate the
Blake shut his eyes, overcome by a great weariness. “There’s the obvious solution.”

“Yes, and I’ve finally accepted it.”

“It should be easy enough now. I won’t fight you.”

“No, I don’t think you will.”

“I can’t. Avon. After what I’ve done…”

“What you have done, you bastard, is what you should have realized you would.” The tone was brisk, businesslike, the dark eyes level. But Blake, staring, gasped.

“Oh, Avon. Oh, god. Oh, damn, damn, damn…” His hand reached out of its own accord to touch that livid discoloration on the cheek, the red marks of his teeth on the neck, the lips bruised and swollen from his brutal kisses. The tech’s arms were bruised, too, and welts ran down his side…

Blake, shaking uncontrollably, tried to turn away, tried not to see. He couldn’t cry anymore; his stomach muscles were cramped with agony, his throat scraped raw.

“How could I do that? To you? How could I do that to you when I love you, when I’m in love with you?” The words he had been unable to frame even to himself in the darkness now flooded out openly in the relentless light, dwarfed to nothing by the immensity of his deeds. Once he said them it seemed clear that they had both always known. “What kind of abomination does that make me?”

“One that enjoys sniveling. Leave it, Blake. It’s true you’re a complete bastard, so much so that only another complete bastard could ever hope to deal with you. But has it occurred to you to ask what I’ve done to you tonight?”

“No. It was my crime. My—sin, if you want to call it that. And this time I don’t even have the Cause as an excuse, do I? I acted out of entirely selfish motives. And I’ve succeeded in destroying something I’ve…wanted…for so long…before I ever actually had it. That’s—a bit funny, don’t you think?” He began to laugh.

“Shut up, Blake. I have had enough tonight; I refuse to deal with your hysterics as well. And before you drown in that morass of guilt, there are some things about me you should know. Since the day you manipulated me into joining your unholy jihad, I have been trying to rid myself of you. Most of the time without much regard for your well-being. I have tried everything from ignoring you to abandoning you to breaking you…and nothing has worked. You just won’t let go. As long as you are alive I will never be free.”

The grip on his wrist had eased; all the pain came from inside now. He heard the terrible choking sounds, but for a time could not grasp their meaning. He had not cried like this since…well, since the death of Blake, anyway. He did it very badly, retching with the raw agony of it, lungs afire, body racked with the violence of his sobs. At last it became easier and he wept freely and silently for a while, then slowed to a stop. He lay still for some indeterminable time as awareness crept back to him.

The warm, wet shoulder suddenly seemed the safest place in the universe. But he had asked too much of Avon already. No, not even asked; he’d forced too much on Avon. Shamed, he willed strength into his muscles, trying to rise.

“Now what do you think you’re doing?”

“Leaving. Avon…you’ve had enough of me. Forgive me—for everything. You need rest, and I need…to think.”

“I doubt if you can learn the knack this late in life.”

“What?”

“Oh, never mind, Blake. I’m thinking and I do it considerably better than you. Shut up and lie down.”

Blake, obeying the hands which guided him back down to that shoulder, subsided for a while. It was astoundingly easy to turn his brain off and just lie and be. At last, he roused himself from stupor to ask, “What are you thinking about?”

“Us, idiot. All right. Lights up full.” With a lithe twist Avon was suddenly on top of him, straddling Blake’s hips, looking down as the larger man blinked up at him. “Well, you’ve finally managed to do it, haven’t you? I should have realized you would.” The tone was brisk, businesslike, the dark eyes level. But Blake, staring, gasped.

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few wits the mindwipe missed and join me in reality for a minute. We are not discussing your assassination. We are discussing the terms of my surrender.”

“We—what?”

“I can’t get rid of you. It’s useless. And I can’t keep fighting you forever. I’m too tired. Therefore, my only option is to join you, to save you if that’s possible. I don’t know if it is. But since the alternative is letting you sail on to your grand and glorious destiny—dragging me behind all the way to the funeral pyre—I’m compelled to try. You need someone you can trust when your own judgement is faulty, someone to keep you sane, someone to support you. You need me. And you can have me—but on my own terms. Without them there’s no hope for either of us. Are you ready to listen?”

Blake had frozen. A man blind from birth might fear to believe in light. He whispered, “Yes.”

“This is the…arrangement I am offering; these are my terms. Take them or leave them.

“First, there will be a bloodless mutiny on board Liberator. You will no longer make plans to suit yourself and then machinate the rest of us into carrying them out. We are going back to the old ‘thorough discussion’ routine—not that we ever actually had any discussions, but it was a nice thought. And I hold absolute veto over anything patently suicidal. The reason for that should be obvious.

“Second, you may well need a new pilot. Jenna’s loyalty to you may be seriously compromised. If so, she won’t trust either of us—and we cannot trust her. In an emergency that could be fatal.

“Third, if it can ever be done with reasonable safety, you will seek professional help. I don’t favour spending the rest of my life as your personal, unpaid psychotherapist. And before you say it,” he continued softly, deliberately, “psychotherapy is not what I need. I know exactly what I am, and I won’t burden you with it now, especially since most of it is beyond the narrow range of your comprehension.”

“Oh, it is, is it?” —stung

“Yes, it is, judging by the quality of that dazzling riposte. I told you, shut up.

“Fourth, if you want this…personal relationship…of ours to continue you will have to make some other minor concessions.”

Personal relationship. Blake felt strangely winded. “Such as?”

“Learn some manners. Give me a little privacy. Stop trying to dominate me in public. Get me a bigger bed…” The most fleeting hint of a wry smile tugged at the corners of his lips. Blake blinked, tried to sit up, then lapsed back down again.

“By ‘relationship’ you mean—having sex.”

“If we can find someone brave enough to teach you how, yes.”

Blake felt bewildered, almost overwhelmed—yet oddly bereft. Avon understood him, was offering to help him. But why? There was no softness in those brown eyes and the technician had more than enough reason to hate him.

“And those are your…terms.”

“Yes. In return for which, I will do what you’ve been maneuvering me to do all along. I will stay with you as long as you need me, provide you with sexual companionship, and try to keep you alive and sane. No easy task, that last, but one in which I have a certain amount of experience.”

“Fair enough.” There was an odd ache in his throat. He had hoped—what? It didn’t matter now. He opened his mouth to speak but Avon stopped him.

“One more thing.” The elusive flash of humor had disappeared and the dark eyes were narrowed. “Before you decide. This is probably the only time you will ever hear this, Blake, so I advise you to listen closely. I am in love with you. I have been so for quite some time, and it has played merry hell with my psyche. No,”—as Blake actually did manage to lurch up, a wild joy in his chest—“I do not want you whispering blandishments in my ear and making cow’s eyes at me. At the first sign of such behavior I shall promptly depart for the nearest paradise planet—with my share of the spoils from this common-law mindfuck. Is that quite understood?”

Blake nodded, slowly. He was the same man he’d been two minutes ago, the man the Federation had killed and resurrected to a half-life of angry confusion. He was the same, it was merely the universe that had changed. He settled back, wondering dizzily what cows were and whether they ever grinned like idiots. He hoped they didn’t.

“Those are my terms. Do you accept them, or not?”

“Avon. I accept them.”

Avon shook his head, disparaging this rashness.

“Think.”

Blake laughed a breathy sound with the echo of hysteria to it. “Oh, I’m beyond that for the present. Anyway, you’re the expert. You think, then you can tell me what to do. Just as always, Avon.”

A slight twitch of the lips, and then, suddenly, the whole thing, the full smile, with bubbling, helpless laughter behind it. A rush of delight—and a surprisingly strong response of the flesh. Blake lurched up again, reaching.

Avon raised a hand to quell him. “Then we’ll consider it settled. And before you even ask, the answer is no, Blake. I’m exhausted, I’m in no mood for dalliance, and you need about three months of practice before I let you lay a hand on me again.”

“With whom,” Blake managed in a strangled voice, “do you suggest I practice?”

“I’ve no idea. I expect we shall have to hire a professional, since no amateur would stand for it. At least,
no sane amateur would do. H’mmm…maybe Vila…” Heavy lids suddenly drooped, hooding the dark eyes. “I am going to sleep now. Move over.”

Blake moved. There was something new inside him, frighteningly fragile and yet so real, so substantial, that he needed to test it, to see how much weight it would bear.

“You don’t hate me after all?”
“Blake, I have already told you, I won’t say it again. Probably ever. So stop fishing and go to sleep.”
Not so fragile after all. It held him up, supporting him. “Yes, Avon.”
A snort. “Blake, you are about as servile as Servalan and as tractable as Travis. Don’t even try it. You’re not fooling anyone.”

“No, Avon.” But, although the other man had turned his back, he did not shake off Blake’s hesitantly encircling arm.
Blake lay and basked in the glow.

After a moment, very softly: “One thing…”
“No.”
“Not that.” He lifted back and away, utterly serious. “Before, you said I said something when I was—dreaming. What was it?”
He felt muscles stiffen. “I wasn’t taking notes.”
“Avon, please, damn it…”
A hiss of breath, then the slighter man turned in his arms to face him. “Very well,” he said quietly. “Here it is. I will tell you and then we are both going to sleep. You did talk about the mindwipe. More or less incoherently. I came over to you and tried to shake you awake but you fought me off. Then you said that you were dying. You clutched at your head, then at your chest. Then at me. Your eyes were open, but I don’t know what you were seeing. You just wouldn’t bloody wake up. Then you said—” he paused as if hearing some distant voice, then went on tonelessly, “You said, ‘Oh, Avon…I didn’t take any of them on trust. Except you. Only you from the very start…’ Then you shut your eyes and started screaming.”

Ice down his back, the fine hairs on his arms rising. “What did it mean?” he whispered.
“I don’t know. I’m not sure I want to know. I want to go to sleep.”
Blake realized, with a pleasurable shock, that Avon was stroking the back of his neck, absently, with a circular motion of his thumb. It was soothing, comforting. In spite of himself, in spite of everything, he lapsed back into peace. Into bliss. Examining his new store of wealth like a miser fingering hoarded gold.

Comforfrom you, Avon? You in my arms? You in love with me, protecting me…?
As I will protect you. With all the resources at my command. You think you don’t need tenderness; maybe I can change that. You also think I am a madman. Maybe I can change that, too. Perhaps not, perhaps our destinies are fixed, immutable; and, whatever I do, I can change nothing…

He was going to give it one hell of a try.
“I am after all, the resident optimist around here,” he whispered. The desultory caresses had stopped.
His battered, unbreakable tech was fast asleep. Eyelashes longer than Jenna’s. Disgusting, Blake thought.

“Disgusting,” he whispered, leaning to just touch his lips to the other man’s forehead, weak with tenderness. “Sleep well, Kerr,” he added, in an even softer whisper, the barest breath.

“Shut up, Blake. Lights off.”
Blake fell asleep grinning in the darkness.

THE FIELD OF HUMAN CONFLICT
M. FAE GLASGOW

“Blackmail, Blake?”
“Oh, I’d hardly call it that, Avon.”
“No, you wouldn’t, would you? Just another master-stroke in pursuit of your damned Cause.”
“Rather an unfortunate choice of phrase, that.”
He cast a quick glance over his shoulder at the rabidly pacing Avon. “Given the circumstances, certainly.”
“The circumstances. How very delicately put. I would have thought heavy-handed bullying would have described the ‘circumstances’ better, wouldn’t you. Oh, but of course not, you wouldn’t,” he raced on, too livid to