THE FIELD OF HUMAN CONFLICT
M. FAE GLASGOW

“BLACKMAIL, BLAKE?”
“Oh, I’d hardly call it that, Avon.”
“No, you wouldn’t, would you? Just another master-stroke in pursuit of your damned Cause.”
“Rather an unfortunate choice of phrase, that.” He cast a quick glance over his shoulder at the rabidly pacing Avon. “Given the circumstances, certainly.”
“The circumstances. How very delicately put. I would have thought heavy-handed bullying would have described the ‘circumstances’ better, wouldn’t you. Oh, but of course not, you wouldn’t,” he raced on, too livid to pause for breath, the words hurtling out of him at the same devastating pace Blake’s had steamrolled him. “After all, if we called it for what it was, it might tarnish your messianic halo, it might dent your shining armour, it might even,” he dragged air into his tortured lungs, forcing himself to slow the landslide of cutting words bouncing so ineffectually off Blake’s calloused hide, “remind you that you are as mere a mortal as anyone else and don’t have the damned right to dictate a man’s life.”

The applause was caustically slow. “Oh, bravo, Avon, that was an excellent performance. You almost had
me believing your outraged honour. However, the simple fact of the matter is this: I need your skills, and I need Vila’s skills. If I lose you, I lose him. If you two leave, Cally will follow, because telepaths must be with people they care for. She’s fond of me, yes, friends with Jenna, too, but the pair of us are neither one of us enough to keep Cally stuck in space, away from empathetic minds. Therefore, if you go, they all go. So, Avon, I’m afraid, you’ll simply have to stay.”

“Whether I want to or not.”

Blake nodded gravely, not allowing even himself to see how much he was enjoying this particular skirmish. “Whether you want to or not. But I will give you this, though. I will insist you stay only long enough to do your duty to your people. After we find and destroy Star One, all debts will be cancelled, and you will be free to do as you choose.”

“Young generosity is overwhelming. You will give me my freedom? Who the hell do you think you are to take it in the first place? And more, Blake—” he stalked over to the flight deck, looming over Blake, vengeance personified, “do you honestly think you could take it from me?” He leaned his hands on the back of the couch, knuckles knotted bleached-skull white, danger glinting threateningly in his eyes. “Do you honestly, in your poor, deluded fantasies, think you can force me to bow to you?”

Blake rose to his full height, emphasising his own bulk, one hand stretched out. Avon stared at the package resting so innocently on that broad palm. He swallowed, hard, hypnotised by that one small object like a worn stone, all the life fled. “It would seem that it’s… quite simply, actually. You really should have thought of it, though. I’ve already answered that particular question. It’s your turn now.”

“Oh, you’ve given me leave to speak, is it? Given me back one of my freedoms, or is it merely on loan?”

“I’d never even dream of taking away your freedom of speech, as well you know.”

“I don’t know anything, Blake, not a bloody thing.” He turned on his heel, presenting an eloquent back to the judiciously silent Blake. “But you know, don’t you? Tell me,” he snapped, turning viciously on Blake, bitterness and anger vying to stake their claim to his face, “that memory cube—how did you manage to it? And what the hell makes you think it could possibly be true? It’s nothing but a fiction, fabrication from start to finish and surely only Vila could be stupid enough to be convinced by that load of twaddle.” He broke off abruptly, realising that his protestations of innocence were just a touch too much, suspicious in and of themselves. Changing tack, he drew all his considerable dignity and breeding, flicking a disgusted finger at the innocuous cube in its pale peach cover. “So, tell me, where did you find…that…that…”

“Voice from your past?”

“Well, that will do as well as any other name for it.”

“Quite simply, actually. You really should have thought of it, and certainly before I did. I asked Orac.”

“You expect me to believe that? Orac is programmed to dispense only my version of the past, not the…” He trailed off into silence, his own words convicting him.

“Not the what, Avon? Not the truth, is that what you were going to say? Orac can be a very obedient little machine, if you know the right questions to ask. Of course, I was curious about you, about all the others too, so I asked
Orac about you all, right off. Nothing too surprising in any of it, but then, as time went on, I started to wonder. Just idly, at first, then I began to really watch you. And I started to wonder what went on under that façade of yours, what ‘made you tick’, as they say."

“So you asked Orac.”

“I asked Orac. But I asked a far more interesting question this time, Avon. I asked Orac to retrieve every piece of information Kerr Avon had ever excised, edited or erased from the records. And that was when he came up with this.”

Avon stared as the pastel cube was tossed in the air with a fine disregard for Avon’s sensitivities. To see such a time bomb tumbling through the air so cavalierly, as if it were only a meaningless bit of plastic, as opposed to bytes that could devour Avon, engulf him, destroy this fragile life he had pieced together for himself…

“Well, what a surprise that comes with this.”

Avon flushed, turning aside, patrician profile suddenly griven with age and defeat. “I didn’t do any of it, Avon.”

Avon gave a slight bow, the gesture of the gentleman, not the man. "No need to shilly-shally, Blake, a straight answer would do.”

“Now that really is an unfortunate choice of phrase, isn’t it, Avon?”

Avon shivered, obviously haunted by words beyond Blake’s hearing and by sights beyond Blake’s vision.

“Shall I tell you the truth?” he murmured, not wanting an answer from Blake, addressing his own conscience where it lay, somnolent. “Not that it will do me any good, though, will it? But at least, then, I’ll have tried. This time, I would have tried, spoken out...” He fiddled with one of the controls, brightening the lights from their mid-night shallowness. His fingers twisted again, plunging them into darkness. Threading its way along untried paths, his voice reached Blake. “I never intended to hurt anyone, you know, certainly not kill them. In fact, I never did. I was as much victim of the crime as they...”

The silence lingered for a moment, thoughtful, a sarcasm was laid on with a shovel, a trowel being unequal to the task.

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The silence lingered for a moment, thoughtful, a faint whisper of beseeching hovering like a cloud. And then, Blake laughed. Heartily, and with the bitter edge of a man who must laugh, else humanity would drive him to despair, the hate-filled gorgeous of flailing Avon. “Oh, I believe you, Avon,” he said, finally, words of faith, but the harshness of his tone pouring salt into the suppurating wound that was Avon.

With an almost audible snap, Avon’s shields crashed back in to place, crushing him beneath their weight, but keeping him safe, keeping him whole, holding the past at bay...

“Oh, I believe you.” Blake repeated, quite deliberate in his cruelty, as Avon had been in his, as the memory cube had displayed with such nauseating clarity. “Thousands wouldn’t, but as you say, I’m a fool. So I believe you.”

“Stop saying that!”

The agonised sound shut even Blake up. “Avon?” he asked, unsure, incredulous that such an vulnerable noise had ever come from guarded and bastioned Avon of all people.

Silence. And darkness.

“Avon?”


“Stop playing bloody games, Avon! It’ll take a better man than you to win my sympathy after what I saw on this damned cube.”


“Far be it for me to want anything from you, Blake. So, let us see where we stand, shall we? You have my ignoble past on memory cube...”

“With another held securely where only I can access it.”

Avon gave a slight bow, the gesture of the gentleman, not the man. "No. I’ll need the

Liberator

and go wherever the

Liberator

will take me. Without you. Without a word from you, without contact from you, without ever seeing your face again. Agreed?”

“No. I’ll need the

Liberator

to defeat what will be left of the Federation Space Fleet and as my flagship. I will give you another ship, your choice of the Federation.”

“I want the

Liberator.”

“I need the

Liberator.”

For a moment, Avon was lost in thought, then he faced Blake once more, face a mask, binding everything behind dead brown eyes. “I will take the

Liberator,

or I will tell the survivors that it was you who destroyed their ecostructures and that you are up to your armpits in the..."
blood of the people they loved. And what, Blake, will they
do with you then? Even the masses are not so insane as to
follow the man who destroyed their homes.”

Blake nibbled at his thumb, plans and counterof-
fers running through his mind. He needed Avon, of that
there was no doubt, for if Avon were to leave in protest of
the immorality of Blake’s plan, then not even Jenna would
remain. Cally would leave, for Avon was the only one on
ship who could mindspeak with her at all, if only rarely,
and Vila… Despite all disclaimers, the thief would jump
off a cliff, were Avon to tell him he’d be along right behind
him. For a moment, Blake toyed with the idea of bedding
Avon, keeping him that way, his own charisma and talents
all the bonds usually necessary, but tossed the thought
away. He had tried that before, and all Avon had done was
walk away from him, a tight, cold smile on his face, as tight
as the semen drying on his belly… no, sex was not the
answer to the Avon cipher. The ship, then. Give him
that much, to salve his conscience and seal his mouth.

“Very well. Liberator is yours, as soon as we
have defeated the Federation.”

“Oh, no, that was never part of the so-generous
deal you offered me. The ship is mine after Star One—or
what we believe to be Star One—is destroyed.”

“After Star One and after you return me to Earth.
I think that’s your best option.”

“You mean I actually have one? What a mag-
nanimous despot you are. The Galaxy should flourish
under you. Almost as well as it has under the Federation.”

With a shrug of his shoulders, Blake rolled the
bitter indictment off like water off a duck’s back. He had
won—he could allow the decent side of his nature to come
through. After all, the Cause would be well-served, free-
dom had a much better chance with Avon on its side,
regardless of how reluctantly he stood there. “If there were
another way, Avon, believe me, I would take it. We have
simply run out of choices…”

“Sounds familiar.”

“If I may go on?”

“Oh, do, please. I’m surprised you would let me
stop you.”

“I admit, people will die when Star One is de-
stroyed, but if you think our hands are bloodless at present,
then you are lying to yourself. Don’t you think innocent
people have died when we’ve sabotaged power generator
plants? Or the food synthesiser on Avtaron? And what
about when we destroyed the last supply of Shadow? How
many people died then, Avon, and in how much agony?
No, my friend, we are already up to our armpits in blood,
and if we do not destroy Star One, then we shall have even
more deaths than that on our hands. Think, Avon! Several
million will die, all at once, all over the Galaxy, but there
will be billions set free. But, if we should let Star One
continue to enslave the Galaxy, to give power to the
Federation, then hundreds of millions will die over the
years, and the rest will still be slaves and subjugated and
when we die, Avon, nothing will have changed. Not a
single blessed thing will mark that we ever even existed,
apart from a few bodies and some meaningless guerilla
strikes. No, Avon, we must win. No matter how high the
cost. I must be right.”

Blake stood, heaving in breath, towering on his
righteous indignation, fired by his democratic fervour.
Avon stood, stunned, appalled, amazed that Blake could
have gone so far over the edge and that no one had even
seen it. For a moment, he toyed with the possibility of
trying to talk some sense into Blake, but discarded the
thought as useless. Talking sense into Blake had never
worked when the man was in full possession of his
faculties; talking to him now would be an exercise in
stupidity. Not to mention dangerous. Megalomania was a
dodgy thing, and something with which Avon was only
too familiar. And that familiarity bred not one atom of
contempt, but rather, several tonnes of healthy fear. Later,
perhaps, after he had consulted with Orac, after he had
spoken to Cally, he would duel with Blake’s bulbous ego,
but for now, deal with the present problem, the one Blake
would be willing to see.

“One small matter remains, Blake,” he said with
impressive calm.

“Which is?” Blake answered wearily, disappoint-
deed even though he should have know better than to
have thought he could talk some sense into Avon. Really,
the man did pick the most inconvenient of times to wear
his conscience like a cloak.

“The memory cubes.”

“What about them?”

“Don’t add deliberate obtuseness to your reper-
toire of failings, Blake. You know perfectly well what I
mean.”

“I shall give it to you as soon as you have taken
me back to Earth.”

“And the other? Or others, as the case may be.”

“Those shall remain safely tucked away. I’m
afraid,” he smiled, genuinely regretful, “that you’ll have
to trust me on that. I can’t take the risk of the people finding
out that I had to…persuade my right hand man to stay with
the Cause.”

“So of course, you’ll keep however many copies
you’ve made, expecting me to trust you not to reel me in
when next you have a favour needing done.”

Blake’s spurious calm exploded, ricocheting
to every corner of the flight deck. “I don’t have any
choice! Do you think I like having to do this? Do you think
I’m proud of it? No, and if there were another way, I’d leap
at the chance. But I’ve run out of places to go, Avon, it’s
this way or not at all, and I will not let my life and the lives
of everyone who has died because of the Federation be
completely wasted.” His fury and fear made him tremble,
leeching his breath from him, leaving him panting in the

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OBLAQUE IV: to be taken intravenously
grips of his unholy passion. He sucked in a great lungful of air, the better to feed his bellow. “I have no other choice!”

Blake’s ire inflamed Avon’s own incendiary temper, precipitating him into speech, regardless of how wise it was—or was not—to beard the lion in its den. “How very convenient, Blake, how very nice for you. Oh, you poor hero, backed into a corner, no other choice, driven to blackmail and bullying for the sake of the greater good. And I am supposed to go, singing gaily, to my doom, is that it? Well, Blake, sorry to shatter your fond dreams but there is another choice, there is another way.”

“Then tell me. Tell me, and I’ll do it.”

“Don’t destroy Star One.”

“Oh, for…” Blake jumped to his feet, running one hand frenziedly through his disordered hair. “You haven’t listened to a word I’ve said, have you? Why the hell do I even bother?” This last was muttered, darkly, as he started up the stairs, as wearily as if he were scaling a slate cliff.

“There is one other option, then.”

“No doubt equally as wonderful as the first.”

“If you cannot forego destroying Star One, then I will agree to help you. If you agree to give me all the memory cubes. That, Blake, is the real choice. You could trust me.”

The words sank heavily into Blake’s unwelcoming arms. He turned then, facing Avon, studying him closely, examining the still figure carefully. There was an edge of hunger lying just beneath Avon’s refractory surface, but not one that Blake recognised readily. Sexual hunger, that he knew, that he had already seen in Avon. Hunger for power? No, that was as familiar as the sound of Avon’s voice. Quickly, Blake scanned every iota of memory the Federation had left behind after they raped his mind, and there, suddenly, it was: like a child, or a man driven to blackmail and bullying for the sake of the greater good. Blake glanced down at the memory cube where it rested in the dark cave of his pocket, the sharp edges digging into him, cutting him open with the putrid memories down beside the silent scream that always lingered in his mind. Better this, working, better than thinking, better than remembering, better than going back, better than going forward… He absorbed his work, driving himself out of his own thoughts, leaving nothing behind but Avon the machine, feeling nothing, thinking nothing and hurting only a little. But when the work was done, when he heard Jenna’s steps coming along the corridor, he went over to where he had stood when Blake left him. Unerringly, too acutely aware of it to have misplaced it, he found the pastel pretty cube, picking it up without looking at it, hiding it in his pocket, the sharp edges digging into him, cutting him open with the putrid secrets of his past.

“Morning, Avon,” Jenna murmured, stifling a yawn.

“Good morning, Jenna,” he answered with careful courtesy. Jenna stared at him. “There was a slight problem with the navigational programming, but I believe I have corrected it. There shouldn’t be any more problems with it, but keep an eye open for slight drift. If you need me, I’ll come back up and re-adjust the system.”

“Thanks, Avon,” she said, eyeing him suspiciously, unused to such a pleasantly polite Avon so early in the morning. “I’ll do that. The instant anything comes up.”

“Right. Well. Fine, I’ll be off, now.”

But still he hovered, almost, Jenna thought unbelievingly, as if he wanted to say something, as if he wanted to tell her something, but simply didn’t know where to start. Quite deliberately, and very pointedly, she busied herself at the console, checking data, looking at the latest improvements Avon had made, cutting the man himself out. She’d let Cally play earth-mother, for she was having none of it herself. She had enough trouble playing simpering female for the sake of Blake’s fragile ego, she was absolutely not going to add holding Avon’s hand to her list of chores.

Avon took the hint of her downbent head, frowning the cube where it rested in the dark cave of his pocket, leaving with all the words unsaid. How, after all, could he possibly bring up the subject of Blake’s mental equilib-
“You got off early,” Vila piped up in lieu of greeting, “Jenna on time then, was she? Makes a pleasant change, not that Blake’ll be pleasant, ‘cause if Jenna’s on time, then that means she didn’t spend the night with Blake and you know what that means. Misery loves company and old Misery Guts won’t be happy till we’re all keeping him company being miserable.” Deft hands dancing, he threw together a quick breakfast, his chatter covering Avon’s silence, his absorption in domesticity blinding him to the darkness lurking in Avon’s eyes. “I suppose,” Vila went on, popping everything on to the table, pouring the boiling water into the pot, rearranging the cups and spoons and knives, tsking at Blake, “he’ll be after us to save the Galaxy again today. Wonder what it’ll be this time?”

He took the serviettes from the drawer, laid them on the table and stopped then for one last look to check that everything was in its place, finally going over to the cabinet to fetch the jam, bleading on with pause, “Probably be that bloody Star One again, always going on about that, isn’t he?” He glanced over at Avon, not even mildly surprised that Avon was standing in the doorway like a ship listing wearily in the Sargasso Sea. Avon always was a moody bugger, so Vila gave it no thought at all, just accepting it and the man for what he was.

And then, Blake hove up behind Avon, a privy looming on the horizon of Vila’s cozy routine, sheer force of personality threatening to appropriate the Galaxy for his very own. Without turning, Avon stiffened and paled, sensitised to the point of immobility by the little contretemps which tangled around his feet, just waiting to trip him. He closed his eyes, wearily, just for a moment, just for a breath, a respite, a dream…

“Avon?” Vila murmured, confused. Seeing Blake standing there like the echo of thunder made him actually see Avon, notice how turned in upon himself he was, how terribly quiet, how terribly small… Avon straightened, dispelling the illusion, cowing the emotion within him to the darkness lurking in Avon’s eyes. “I suppose,” Vila piped up in lieu of question in Avon’s voice.

“How could he ever begin to explain that to her? How could he ever begin to face that himself? Slowly, he walked off, head lost in thought, feet automatically following the path of habit, leading him, eventually, to the Galley.

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“Who else?” he said, belatedly answering the question in Vila’s voice.

“Me, for one,” Blake responded, pushing past Avon, seating himself at the table, taking one of the place-settings, helping himself to the meal, inviting himself in where he had no welcome.

And Avon, Vila noted with unvoiced shock, was letting him. Was simply sitting down at the other place, calmly beginning breakfast, face shuttered and dark.

Blake glanced pointedly at Avon, whilst speaking at Vila. “Aren’t you going to join us, Vila?”
there’s no learning without suffering, is there, Avon?”

Avon snapped his gaze up to impale Blake. “In that case, no doubt you’ll be awarding me my Honour’s Degree any second now.”

“Honour? Perhaps I should. You could certainly do with some.”

“And you think you have enough to spare to so magnanimously dispense some to me? Your version of honour, Blake, is something I am far more likely to die by than live by.”

“Then that should make you feel quite at home, shouldn’t it?”

The blow was telling: Avon flinched drowned white from the words, from the memories they raised like howling ghosts to drag their chill bones through him. And the expression on Vila’s face, oh, how that cut him. There was incomprehension there, naturally, for the thief had no idea why these oblique remarks were proving such telling blows, but the ignorance would not last. Not if Avon refused help to Blake. If he were to do that…

“You all right, Avon?” Vila, of course. Blake would know, to the very last millimetre, just how far from all right Avon was. And Vila? Vila would simply guess, would simply try to heal even when he could see neither wounds nor hurt, would cavalierly ignore Avon’s beautifully crafted battlement of sanguine capability and casually just happen to be there with whatever Avon just happened to need. Be that need fulfilled with sex, or boozed or biting humour, Vila would find the perfect panacea. And as for now, this shard of a moment, would there be more solicitous words? No, not from Vila. Vila would leave well enough alone, would draw not one atom of attention to Avon, would save it all for later. Would, in fact, attract all the flak to himself, allowing Avon to retreat in good order. Any second now…

“Obvious what you haven’t been getting, Blake. Jenna pissed off with you, is she?”

A good try, but Blake didn’t lessen his stare at Avon.

“Listen, I’ve got a great idea!”

Avon smiled faintly, directly, at Blake, carrying their dispute on under the umbrella of Vila’s cheerful chatter.

“Why don’t we just forget about this Star One business and go off and find ourselves a nice little pleasure planet? Luscious women, lots of booze and great food…”

“Oh, I don’t think either Avon or I would be able to forget about Star One just to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh, though, would we? Not quite what we’d choose.”

Avon stared at him, then allowed his hatred to curve his mouth into a smile. “In my case, that’s rather a moot point, isn’t it, Fearless Leader?”

A small point, but enough to draw a pinprick of blood, blemishing Blake’s seraphic robes. “Oh, I don’t think I could lead you anywhere, Avon. You’ve gone farther than I would ever care to.”

“So you concede that you don’t deserve your position as our supposed leader then.”

“I concede no such thing. I’m simply saying that I wouldn’t walk a mile in your shoes for love nor money. Nor even both combined.”

“Then perhaps you should bloody well refrain from passing judgement on me!”

The force of his leaving left a chair clanging to the deck and shock clanging through the two men rocking in his wake. Vila looked at Blake, looked at him hard and long, then, without another word being spoken, gathered food together on a tray, turning his back on Blake and going off in search of Avon. Ostracised, losing even more, giving up ever more for his voracious Cause, Blake bowed his head in shame and loneliness. It lasted but a moment, then he stiffened his backbone, rammed some more steely determination in there to bar him from buckling and running after Avon, telling him that it was all right, he wouldn’t force Avon to help at Star One. But the very thought of the name was all the rigidity he needed. He wouldn’t bend like a willow. He would break before he would yield. Surely, willing as he was to die for his Cause, he should be willing to give up his life for it? Avon—and Vila—would understand, once it was all over and they were free. Once it was all over. Finished. And he could rest… He thrust his outraged morality back under the rock from which it had crawled. The ends justified the means. They had to—otherwise it was all meaningless, as was he.

Avon, had, of course, gone to his own cabin, knowing that no one would disturb him there. Oh, Vila would come in, but that could hardly be described as disturbing. It would soothe him, to have that caring ban-daging him, nannying him, accepting him. He laughed out loud, bitterly, achingly painfully, at the irony of it all. That a service grade should be the one and only person in his entire life who had ever loved him enough to accept him as is, without trying to make all those little changes that everyone—even Anna—had wanted… Delectable irony indeed. A service grade to service his needs, but freely… No, that was a poor choice of word. Service grades always provided their services free of charge, but Vila did it willingly. Gladly, even. And all unknowing… A shudder ran through Avon, jarring his body as much as his mind. If Vila should ever find out, if the truth were ever to rear its ugly head, it would devour Avon whole. Would destroy what he had with Vila, would leave him cold and alone. Dead, once more. Nerve-wracking though it was to admit it, he did not think there could be anything left, were he to lose Vila, for it was Vila who was the Prometheus of his life, bringing fire to warm his mind and body. And although Vila knew Avon not one fraction as well as he believed he did, Avon knew him, thoroughly and well. There should be footsteps in the corridor shortly, bringing
Vila bringing food. Guaranteed, as sure as breathing.

The door opened, allowing Vila ingress, light spilling in with him like a chuckling friend. “Bit dark in here, isn’t it?” the chatter began, amidst the clatter and clutter of breakfast being distributed on the work table, Avon silently rescuing projects from hands that were more concerned with the importance of the moment than with the possible fruits of the future. “Stick the light on, will you? Or have you finally bothered to tell Zen to respond to my voice in here as well?”

“Try it and see.”

“Let there be light!” Vila declared. And light was, flooding the place, revealing Avon in all his distress. Vila cast one quick, assessing glance his way, and gave up all thoughts of playing Monopoly with Cally and Jenna later. Avon would need him today, would need sex, and by the looks of him, would need it repeatedly. He made a mental note to pick up more lubricant from the medical supplies tonight, after Avon went back on shift: he had a feeling the half-full tube would end up completely empty before the day, and Avon, was done. “Brought you a bite of breakfast—or is it dinner? It’s getting confusing, doesn’t it, what with you staying up all night and sleeping half the day. Never could work out what I was supposed to eat after I got in from a night’s work, myself. Well, I’ve made breakfast, but I suppose, when you actually look at it, that could double for supper, it’s almost the same kind of food, so…”

Avon would have been surprised indeed, had he been able to see the expression on his own face, would have claimed that it was not a mirror reflecting him but a glass through which some other face claimed his: he would have denied to his dying day that such sop could ever survive a collision with his features. But there it was, for Vila to see, and treasure. Avon might not be much one for words, not when compliments or affection were due, but, oh, how he made up for it with the warmth of his smile and the way his eyes enveloped Vila in the safety of his affections. “Em,” Vila stumbled, losing the thread of his monologue, the tickle of arousal in his groin distracting him no end, “er, anyway, as I was saying, em…”

“Something about eating, wasn’t it?” Avon said in a disconcertingly normal tone of voice whilst reaching one hand to cradle Vila’s face. “The question, of course,” he went on, leaning in closer and closer, until his breath warmed Vila’s lips, “is exactly what you intend to eat. I have one or two suggestions…” A kiss then, brief, sweet and electrifying.

“Oh, oh, I think I’m going to like what’s on the menu.”

“Really? So you’ve given up being vegetarian, then, have you?”

“Who said anything about me being the one to do the eating?”

“Ah. Variety is the spice of life.” Fingers stroked Vila’s earlobe, memorising the softness of the skin, whilst Avon’s other hand took a very firm grasp of the situation, not to mention the thickening at Vila’s groin. For his troubles, he got an armful of lax thief, heavy and warm and smelling faintly of soap. Avon held him, hands squeezing rounded buttocks, fingertips straying to the back seam on the beige trousers, pressing home, barely grazing the puckered nerves, poised for perennial pleasure, that exploded into life at the merest hint of Avon’s presence. “I’ll tell you what. I will allow you to select the appetiser, and I,” his fingers pushed in, rubbing cloth against Vila’s anus, beginning the opening process, promising penetration, “shall choose the entrée.”

“Sounds wonderful. But who gets to pay?”

The shadow dimmed Avon’s face then, making him serious and sad. Melancholy drifted in softly, whispering of secrets best left unsaid, crying of truths never spoken. “I’ll pay the price, Vila,” the words soughed against Vila’s lips, filling his mouth, “I’ll always pay.” And then he kissed him, casting a pox on Blake and his misguided, messianic Crusade that could cheerfully destroy freedom to build Utopia. Vila melted into him, letting Avon take his weight, knowing instinctively that Avon needed to play protector again, for the first time in so many years.

But amidst the kisses, there was sorrow, slowing Avon, making him awkward, giving question to his right to do this to Vila, the past being what it was. So he let the thief go, with a small smile of reassurance to ease the unexpected sting. “I need to have something to eat, first,” he said, playing for time, stripping rapidly.

“Oh, yeh, been ages since you last had a bite. Must be knackered and all, “Vila replied, giving him all the time he might need, shrugging his own clothes off.

“Join me?”

“After all the hard work I put in to getting this spread done? An’ you expected me to just stand back and watch? Nah. Anyway, didn’t you notice? Set everything for two. So sit yourself down, and I’ll zap this lot in the unit—you did remember to fix it, didn’t you?—and I’ll hop in beside you and then when we’re finished with the food, we’re already nice and cozy in bed and if you just want to go straight off to sleep, well, you’ll be all set and…”

“Vila.”

“What?”

Avon picked up a forkful of egg and shoved it into Vila’s still flapping mouth. “Shut up.”

They sat, side by side, in companionable silence, the covers bunched up between them, keeping them from actually touching. If the silence were companionable, their thoughts were far from that. Vila, he of the pleasant face and guileless smile, was plotting ways of killing Blake, preferably extremely slowly, if not in revenge for
upsetting Avon, then in prevention of whichever noose
that was slowly strangling Avon. And as for Avon
himself...the very domesticity of the scene, its sheer
banality, ate into his soul like a canker. Oh, he had already
realised, a long time ago, just how much he needed Vila’s
humanity to keep him sane, but sitting here like this, a
small, hysterical part of his brain screaming at him to
memorise every last second for this—or this, or that—
might be the last, the very last, the dawn before the dark...
He sighed into the dregs at the bottom of his cup, drawing
a sharp-eyed glance from his companion. Oblivious,
Avon kept on staring, thinking, wondering when this
nondescript coziness had become more important than
mere material wealth, when this comfortable closeness
had become more satisfying than faceless, mind-boggling
lust. And wondering when Vila had superceded Anna, and
his family, and his ambitions... Ousted, the lot of them, for
one mouse of a thief. Who seemed somewhat less than
mousey when his cock was deep inside Avon, or when
Avon was joined to him. Who seemed far less than mousey
or bland when the wickedness of his humour could reduce
Avon into silent hiccoughs of hysterical laughter. Not a
mouse, then, nor a fool, but certainly a Fool. Which would,
rather appropriately, crown Avon King...

"Penny for them?"
"Hmm?"
"I said, deafie, a penny for them. Looked like
they were funny, in their own way, mind you."
"Oh, I never sell myself cheap, Vila. If you want
my thoughts, you’ll have to offer far more than a penny."

"Now what do I have that you could possibly
want, eh?" And he let his fingers do the walking, taking
them for a stroll from one of Avon’s pink nipples to the
next, making mountains out of molehills.

Avon shrugged him off, setting the dishes aside,
being just a touch too ostentatious in his brushing off of
crumbs. Vila refused the hint. If he backed off every time
Avon went a bit funny on him, they’d never have got to bed
in the first place. He let his fingers take a nice little hike
from the hill of one pap to the next, pausing for a paddle
in the beginning of a dance down his spine, then Vila’s wet
tongue lapped its way back up, shiveringly.

"Remember?" Vila asked, hoping to hell Avon
would at least tell him the question so that he could give
the answer Avon needed.
"Why do you sleep with me?"
"You know perfectly well why."
"Tell me again."

A long, slow smile then, for this was a game they
played often. Avon never returned the words, but he never
seemed to tire of hearing them. And what did it matter if
it were only that Avon revelled in having someone so
much in his thrall? He still wanted to hear it, still wanted
to hear it from Vila, who had never expected an Elite to
allow him to do more than merely service his needs. Vila
had travelled that particular path before, in the old days;
had heard the demands for ‘service’, as it was so euphem-
istically called, knew perfectly well what it was to bend or
kneel in unnoticed obedience, the fear of the Elites’
punishments far outweighing the fear of their pleasures.
Sometimes, still, the old waking nightmares would grab
hold of him again, until his body ached as it had in the old
days and in the old ways, the memory imprinted on him,
kneeling, cowering, whimpering in pain and fear... But
not with Avon, never with him. With him, there were
kisses, and caresses and equality. And love, oh, yes,
always the love. Even if it were only one-sided, if decla-
rations could be believed. And Vila believed Avon’s
protestations and silences not one whit. His eyes were too
sharp for that, and Avon too transparent... He was inter-
rupted by the suddenness of Avon turning aside from him,
throwing the duvet off, back muscles clenched and
screaming.

"Where’re you going, eh?" Vila asked, arresting
all Avon’s movements by a word and a touch, his hand
strong and warm on Avon’s spine. "Take too long to
answer, did I? Well, you know why, don’t you?"

Avon sat very still, not leaving, not coming back,
simply waiting. A kiss on his nape startled him, the
beginning of a dance down his spine, then Vila’s wet
tongue lapped its way back up, shiveringly.

"Remember?" Vila said, a wealth of meaning in
that single word, conjuring up so many nights out of the
mists. "‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways’. Just
takes a hell of a long time when it’s me counting up for
you. Could take weeks, Avon. Months, if I wanted to go
into details..." And then the speech stopped and a differ-
ent language began once more, as Vila’s hands began their
knowledgeable search for all the places that drove Avon
to distraction.

And again, Avon stopped him, coming back into
the bed, enveloping them in the covers, pulling Vila in
close and tight against him. “Say it,” he whispered, not
quite demanding, nor quite begging either. “Just say it to
me.” Hands held Vila’s face firm so that Avon could stare
into Vila’s eyes, searching for what Vila knew he could
give.
“I love you, Kerr Avon. To bloody distraction, at that.”

“And you don’t let me fuck you because I intimidate you?”

A quickly reminiscent grin then. “Only when we’re playing games, love. And don’t forget, you let me fuck you as well.”

That seemed important tonight, for some reason, soothing some of the worry out of Avon’s face. “Yes, I do, don’t I? It’s not just me using you, is it?”

“D’you honestly think I’d let you? What d’you think I am?”

Service grade. The words hovered on Avon’s lips, poisoning him, almost leaking out into the abruptly still air of his bedroom. Unspoken though they were, Vila heard them, perhaps thought them himself, acknowledged them, dismissed them for the old wounds they were. “Tell you what,” he whispered, conspiratorial as a child with a bright, pretty secret, “if you’ll forgive me for being a Service Grade, I’ll forgive you for being an Elite. Just don’t,” he leant forward, kissing the tip of Avon’s nose, quietly casting out the last of the demons that strove to haunt them, “expect me to forgive you for being an arrogant bugger who always beats me at chess.”

“Perhaps I should stop playing with you?”

Again, the unvoiced words, the unsaid offer, the unasked-for reassurance.

“Do that, an’ I’ll knock your bloody block off. Or shove you out the nearest airlock, whichever’s easier. Speaking of playing with someone, d’you think you could see your way to playing with me, right about now? Only, I’m beginning to get a bit,” he dropped his voice lower again, dripping coyness, “you know, randy, like. Old Peter’s feeling a bit neglected, what with one thing and another, just hanging around like this.”

“Well, if Peter’s feeling neglected, then perhaps you should toddle off to meet him.”

“No, Avon,” Vila began, ready to deliver yet another lecture on language, Delta variety, “not Peter, peter.” And then he saw the incipient smile colouring Avon’s eyes. “You bastard,” he snapped affectionately, “you’re having me on again.”

“I’d rather be having you.”

“Yeh?”

“Yeh.”

Vila laughed out loud at that one. No matter how hard Avon tried, he never, ever, even came close to sounding like a Delta. That brief word had managed to come out like an invitation to cocktails. Which, actually, now that he thought of it, sounded like an awfully good idea. He reached for one of the cocks and tails in question, his right hand gripping Avon hard, his left squeezing supple buttock. “This what you’ve got in mind, eh?”

“Oh, certainly for starters.” Breathless, eyes closing to lock the sweet feelings up inside where he could savour them slowly.

“Still up to me to choose the appetisers and for you to pick the main course, then?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Then suck me.”

Avon’s eyes flew open, almost as astonished as Vila himself. Neither one of them had been expecting to hear that. Oh, Avon had sucked, and been sucked, many times before, but always by his own choice, always at his own instigation. Vila had never actually demanded that of Avon before, and not in that tone, certainly not with that much arrogance. But there was a reason for it, Vila knew, and that was his instinctive knowledge of what Avon needed, of what Avon wanted in bed, if not out of it. And going back over their odder-than-usual conversation, his mind recognised what his instincts had already perceived: Avon needed reassurance not only of Vila’s loving him, which was a standard routine between them, but of the fact that Vila was no victim here, in the privacy of the bedroom. So Vila would give him that, would tell him, not quite in so many words, that he was more than happy with their little arrangement. He said it again, husky this time. “Suck me.”

And Avon did. Closing his eyes, thick black lashes fanning his pale cheek, voice barely murmuring his anticipation, he toured his way down Vila’s body, paying intense attention to all the vibrant areas that aroused Vila most, pressing his face against the softness of Vila’s belly, the hardness of an upthrusting hip. The duvet was cast off, leaving their skin bare to the air, the ventilation breathing softly over them, a man-made zephyr in contrast to the man-made tempest that was gaining strength on the bed.

Legs asprawl, Vila lay passively dominant, enjoying the ministrations being lavished on him at his command. There was no need, in the wording of his demand, for all this luscious loving, only for the quick release of a good hard suck. But Avon, although he’d die before he’d let the words escape his lips, had no such compunctions about allowing them to escape his fingertips and tongue and body, worshipping Vila with his touch, with the generosity of the pleasure he was pouring over his fellow thief. A light scraping, just enough to send delight shooting stars through Vila, and then the thought exploded in his mind: the exquisite eroticism of the masculinity of the whole thing, as the shadow of Avon’s beard rubbed along Vila’s inner thighs, teasing the hair, taunting his balls with a promise.

“Oh, that’s lovely, that is. God, what you can do with that mouth of yours. You know something? You’re absolutely bloody wasted as a curmudgeon.”

“So that’s what I am, is it? And all this time I thought I was…”

“Full of hot air and time-wasting. C’mon, Avon, you can blow your own horn all you like, but later.”

Avon stroked a smoothly manicured fingernail
from Vila’s anus all the way up the rimple of flesh, between the delicacy of his balls, along the ridge of vein, right up to the flanged head, sliding up and over, down to tease the foreskin, cowled and coiled, leaving the head so delicately naked. “Blow my own horn?” he asked whimsically, flickering a sharp tongue into the bared slit. “Why bother, when I have you?” The words stopped him in his tracks, Blake rearing his ugly head again. “I do have you, don’t I? But what, I wonder, would it take to make you leave me?”

“Oh, I dunno. Probably cite you for cruel and unnatural punishment, one of these days.” Avon’s fractured flinch pierced Vila, who had no direct guess as to why the phrase hurt, but knew precisely how he could make the pain recede. He stretched up to kiss Avon again, sliding his tongue into Avon’s mouth, claiming him, pulling the heavier body over to cover his own, fitting them together just so. “And you’d deserve it, too,” he whispered into the warm mouth pressed to his, “teasing me like this. Cruel and unnatural, that’s what I call it, getting a man all worked up then blowing hot and cold. Although I suppose with you right now, it’s more a case of you not blowing at all, innit?”

“Subtle hint, Vila?”

“Nah. Wouldn’t know subtlety if it jumped up and bit me on the bloody kneecap, would I?”

“But what would it take to make you leave me?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Avon! What’s it going to take to get you to get on with it? Look, I’m not going to leave, not now, not bloody ever. If I haven’t left you after some of the crap you’ve landed on me, then I’m not about to run screaming just cos you didn’t give me flowers on my birthday, am I? I hooked up with you in the first place that time in prison, even though you were being a miserable bastard because Tynus got you sent up. I stayed with you even when you started seeing Anna Bloody Grant and I’ve stayed with you even though you keep on letting Blake lead you by the nose, just cos it eases your guilty conscience. So, no, I’m not planning on leaving you and there isn’t a single, solitary thing that will ever persuade me to leave you, up to and including you trying to dump me. There! Now is that all settled? And can we get on with it? Please?”

“And it’s not just sex for you, not just a way to survive?”

“Oh, Avon! No, no, no. D’you hear me? I’m an idiot, right? So I love you, I want you, I’m going to stay with you and sometimes I even like you. When you’re not being a fucking pricktease! And that’s it. Not another bloody word will you get out of me, so why don’t you just shut up and fucking well fuck me.”

And with a smile, and hands hard with passion, and body hot with need, Avon began to do just that. With exquisite care, he set about bringing Vila to the very edge of orgasm, stroking him, hooidding the foreskin over the head of his penis, setting the sensitive nerves screaming with delight, bending down, licking wetly, then blowing cool air over the trembling flesh. His hands were never still, caressing muscle and tingling through hair, rubbing and pinching peaked nipples, racing over Vila’s body in a flurried erotic storm. Groaning with his own lust, Avon couldn’t keep still, body restlessely seeking, blindly, for its own touch of Vila’s body, ever atom of his skin struggling for its own moment of pleasure. Vila was egging him on, breathless swear-words working their magic of illicit titillation, hands planing over the smoothness of skin, kneading the firm flesh of Avon’s buttocks, finally admitting the defeat evident in the husky voice, gathering Avon’s cock up in a greedy embrace, tugging at him, the perfect nuance of strength guaranteed to set Avon up on the pinnacle, pulling him down between Vila’s spread legs, guiding him in, guiding him home…

And Avon, curse his black soul, stopped.

Bleary eyed, dazed with his own lust, Vila stared up at Avon in sullen reproof. “What’d you go an’ do that for?” he asked, for once in his life the whine real and not manufactured for best effect.

An intense stare met Vila’s fuzziness, burning the ebullient mist off into the clarity of coherency. “You do want this, don’t you?”

Pointedly, Vila looked down at the arching peak of his body, his gaze lingering on the clear fluid seeping in lonely pulses from the head of his cock, waiting until Avon was looking at the same thing he was. “Actually, to be perfectly honest,” he said in his best Alpha voice, the one that sounded remarkably like Avon himself, “I don’t really go in for this kind of thing, usually. I’m not sure I want to…”

Avon stroked a single finger down the curve of Vila’s cheek, his hand slipping round to cradle the vulnerable nape, remembering when he himself had said those particular words, lying with his trousers flapping open, shirt shoved up out of the way, belly quivering with his desperate attempts to control his lust whilst his body was quite happily betraying him in Vila’s hands. Remembering, also, what Vila’s reaction had been…

And he leaned down, action giving lie to words, swallowing Vila whole, taking him inside, letting the heat and the hardness fill him, the slickness salty and seductive on his tongue. Hands tangled in his hair, pulling enough to persuade him to let Vila slide from his mouth, his lips drawing the foreskin up to hood Vila’s cockhead before setting him free.

“Already sucked me once tonight, Avon. Want you to fuck me now.”

“Are you certain?”

“What the fuck’s wrong with you? D’you want it in bloody writing then?”

A piquant smile then, as the weight of Blake’s damned information cube lifted from his shoulders, as his
cock grazed the gathered hole that promised so much.  
“Writing? No, thank you. I really don’t want to have to wait until you finally finish Primary One. Now, why don’t you get the gel and put some on yourself.”

Vila squirmed, muscles rippling beautifully, the sight flooding Avon’s senses. “Why don’t you get it yourself?”

“Because I need to keep my strength—and some other things—up. And I want to watch you.”

Silently seductive, Vila stretched up to grab the tube from the headboard cupboard, bringing it down, stroking the starkly white tube over the warm brown of his nipples, using the sharply cramped edge to part the hair on his chest, a faint pink line rising in its wake. He rolled the tube down his stomach, letting it come to rest in the lushness of his pubic hair, leaving it there whilst he uncapped it and squeezed some of the clear gel out. It lay coiled on him, glistening in the light, as his fingers dabbled through it, spreading some into smooth skin, making his belly slick for his own cock later, taking the rest of the gel and trailing it, shining and succulent, down over his restless cock, between his tight-drawn balls, down, down, to his backside, a long, gimmering line, like the aftermath of passion glistening on his skin. With one finger, he circled his hole, teasing himself and Avon, then that one finger pressed inwards, just up to the first joint, flesh enveloping flesh. Deeper, then, harder, a second finger coming to keep the first from loneliness, the two fingers rubbing together then scissoring apart. A third finger, come to join the couple, the menage spreading, widening the orifice, opening Vila up to Avon’s eyes, giving Avon the sight of where he would soon be, of where Vila so desperately wanted him to be.

Avon stared down at it, seeing the wanton display for what it was: acceptance. Complete and utter acceptance radiated from Vila, promising Avon that it was all right, would always be all right, making this act beautiful and right and good. Taking, incredibly, all the sin from Avon’s shoulders, all the guilt and all the disgust. The past was past, here, and with Vila, there could be no wrong. Vila wouldn’t let him. Vila kept the choke chain firmly on all the nasty little secrets that tried, snarling and biting, to subvert Avon, to make him into the man his father had been. And his brother… He shook his head at the thought, shoving it aside. He had left his entire clan behind years ago; there was no need to let them aggravate his face and the hand hiding his genitals protectively.

“Oh, don’t be a fool, Vila, you know perfectly well I’m not going to be put up by a bit of whorish…” That word shut him up, but not before he had time to wish Vila temporarily deaf. “I didn’t mean…”

“You never do. And I never mind. Some of us aren’t prudes, you know, and I’m not ashamed of what I’ve had to do to survive. Whoring’s just another part of being a service grade, you know that. The only thing that was bothering me was you going away again, and you haven’t done that in ages. Puts me off, lying here like a lump of lard, all naked and hard and you’re not even with me. I mean, it’s not exactly encouraging, is it, me sticking me fingers up my bum and you off thinking about what to have for your dinner, which doesn’t look like you want it to be me and…”

“If you were to stop for a breath to save your brain from dying of oxygen deprivation, we could get on with it, you know.”

“Oh, that’s nice, that is. Put all the blame on me when…” He sucked a deep breath in, whole body going still to concentrate on the sensations Avon was suddenly drowning him in. “Oh, that’s nice,” he whispered, in a very different tone, meaning a very different thing. This was how he loved it best, this give and take. He was the one to listen, and he listened even more closely to what Avon didn’t say, and then gave whatever it was that would lay Avon’s conscience to rest, whatever would still his restless temper. And Avon? Avon would fuck him, suck him, rim him, practise any of a million skills on him, all of it bright with those unspeakable things—emotions—leaving Vila replete with the tacit and tactile feast. Both of them feeding, one from the other, in the endless cycle of nature, using each other in the best possible way, making the past dead, the present bearable and the future less bitter. Happiness? If you limited it to this sandcastle they had built themselves… And Vila was absolutely happy, not caring that the tides of lust would wash this particular castle away, with nothing but long livid marks as monument that it had ever been anything other than blank blackness. And so he gave himself up to Avon’s side of the bargain: strength, protection, pleasure. And such pleasure… Avon’s smooth hands were spreading Vila’s cheeks, exposing the readied hunger once more. One hand left him to cradle his balls up and out of the way, concentrating his erotic awareness into two small circles: the lower arch of his balls meeting the upper arch of his cock in heated confluence, the sucking circle of his anus, pulsing in concert with his heart. And then Avon was there, the heavy head splitting him open, stretching him so far, so terribly wide that there was pain, for just an instant, just for the fraction of a second that made the pleasure sing such a sweet aria as it soared in from the wings, ambushing him with such familiar glory.

Beneath Avon, Vila grinned as he felt the entirety of Avon slide into him, reaching all the way inside, leaving no part of him unbathed in the febrile heat of Avon’s body. Above Vila, Avon smiled as the tight flesh held his cock so tautly amidst tensile flesh, the gel-slicked moistness kissing him, bringing him forward to add his
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own kiss, tongue touching tongue, skin touching skin, cock touching heart. Avon’s muscles bunched and flowed with the pulse of his arousal, following the rhythm of him thrusting into Vila, each almost-withdrawal clinching his muscles, each deep stroke lengthening his muscles out in lupine litherness. His skin, so pale, now pinked with passion, bringing a flush to his cheeks, making his eyes all the darker and warmer in comparison. He sank into Vila, relishing this moment, reveling in this belonging, this uncomplicated rightness. Faster, he pumped, taking Vila with him on his odyssey of arousal, a husky laugh of pure enjoyment bubbling up from him as Vila wrapped his legs around Avon’s waist and Avon sank even more deeply inside his man. Oh, the unmitigated joy of it, a delight prolonged a lifetime by sheer intensity. Vila’s hands were in Avon’s hair, and he tossed his head, adding his strength to Vila’s, his movement making Vila tug at him. And then the last touch, almost, was there, the brush of Vila’s hardened nipples against Avon, that part of Vila tugging at Avon’s chest hair, setting his nipples flaming with desire. And then the penultimate touch: the seeping steel of Vila’s erection digging into Avon’s belly, such a wondrously hard shaft of pleasure, the equal of Avon sunk deeply inside Vila. And then, amidst the heat and the smell and the moaned sounds, the final touch. Vila came, sphincter spasming, milking Avon until the cream erupted from him to be drunk hurriedly and voraciously by Vila’s body.

As they lay trembling from release, the rôles were reversed once more, as was their wont. Emotionality satisfied by sex, now was the time for comfort, for languid ease. Avon lay there, quiet and replete, with Vila combing his fingers through sweat-curled hair, a palpable aura of peace enveloping the two men. In this limbo between sex and the world outside the truth would come to Avon, making itself known, undeniably cheerful in its blatant disregard for his insecurities. In this limbo, the safely blasé ‘sex’ was replaced by ‘making love’. Even if it were with a Service Grade, and one from the Home Dome at that. Oh, the irony of it survived even the hazy afterglow, tiny sharp kitten-claws embedded in Avon’s spine, all over his skin. But like kittens, they could be ignored. It was only later, when he was once more amidst the real world that the kittens became panthers, with teeth and claws to rend…

Vila shifted under him, settling them both a little more comfortably, obviously slipping into sleep. Avon left him to it, the flat of his hand idly stroking one small brown nipple in its halo of hair. He’d drift off himself soon, also, buoyed up by the feelings engendered by this man who was pillowing him.

Pillowing…yes, that was the way to describe it. Vila pillowed him, all warmth and softness and the sleepy inviolate harbour of childhood’s bed. Well, in Avon’s case, it was more the imaginings of the safety childhood’s bed should have proffered him. And that, of course, brought his father and his brother and his aunts and uncles and mother and cousins and the entire overindulged horde of them, with their voracious callousness that didn’t even recognise Service Grades as people. Would never do to see them as that, now would it? For if you saw them like that, then you might hesitate before using them for your medical experiments or your labour or your personal vices. Far better to see them for what the Wintzer family had made them: genetically altered Delta 5th grades, and therefore property, to be used and discarded upon a whim. And if they should die satisfying a whim…well, these things do happen, and it is such an inconvenience. But just call in another one to clean up the mess and let the House Breeder know to increase the birthing rate over the next year, because of the rate the bloody serfs were dying off at. Oh, yes, Avon had heard it all before, many times, had grown up in the foremost household in the Dome. Had been dragged up in a ‘home’ where dissipation and corruption and vice were the norm that they were no longer even recognised as sins. Not even when the Family’s children were initiated into the pattern… He turned away from that thought: he refused to regurgitate the details for the sickness they were and the sickness they brought. Best leave them avalanched under a mountain of self-disgust. That would, at least, hide them from sight. Out of sight, out of mind. Slowly, he relaxed again, wriggling, unaware of dignity, into Vila’s warmth and sleep-filled embrace, sinking into the kindness of sleep.

Blake.

The chill that brought doused him awake, driving all Vila’s carefully cultivated comfort from him, chaff before the wind, all the goodness and warmth turned to waste by that one damned memory cube. And what Blake was willing to do with it.

Worse. What Avon was willing to do to get his hands on it, just to protect what he had with Vila. The murder of millions, balanced against one man’s frailerly found haven, Vila the fulcrum to seesaw the issue back and forth. To kill millions—but all unknown, all unknowing. And doing nothing to them that the Federation wouldn’t do eventually, and nothing that Blake wouldn’t do in his incompetence, no doubt simply ripping the insides of Star One’s computers out, to leave them gutted, the red and green and yellow intestines writhing on the floor, as planets writhed in their death throes too. And for what? This, Avon thought, hand on Vila’s heart, inchoate with the balm that Vila gave, the ending of the pain he had carried from birth. He would, he would kill with his bare hands to keep this, would sunder limb from limb. So why not simply flick a few switches? No one but he and Blake would ever know.

And add that sin to the compost heap that festered in him, ripening, growing more potent, threatening to combust and engulf him. If Vila were to find out… And he

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OBLAQUE IV: to be taken intravenously

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would. Blake, having once done the undoable and blackmail for his Cause, wouldn’t even hesitate for a second before doing it again. Even if Avon were to keep him sweet, distracting with compliments and concern and caustic wit, there would come a time when Blake had to hound him for some great goal or other. If he could keep Blake sweet, it wouldn’t solve the problem, but it would still give him time, to have this life that he had built for himself. He could buy himself time enough to find a resolution and evict Blake from his life, whilst still keeping Vila. Ah, yes, Vila. It always came back to Vila, a need beyond reason, intellect always running along behind, trying to catch up to the emotions and rationalise the whole thing. A sigh of utter frustration filled the room, loud enough to make Vila ruffle in his sleep. Avon stroked the back of his hair, soothing them both, calming himself with the ritual caress, until, a plague declared upon all moral—or in this case, immoral—dilemmas, he finally fell asleep. Deep sleep, until the nightmares tossed him awake, to lie sweating and shivering in silent alarm, with only Vila to keep the horrors at bay.

Eventually, enough hours had passed to give him an excuse to give up all attempts at sleep. He nudged Vila awake, nagging him up out of bed, getting up with him. He couldn’t even face the prospect of being alone in that bed with all its nightmares just waiting to get him on his own. And it was comforting, in a way, to go through the daily routine, with the usual comments and chat, the very familiarity so reassuring. Perhaps, if he were able to concentrate on the mundanities, Blake would fade from his mind and take his damned blackmail with him. Protesting, as usual, Vila slouched his way off to do his turn on the flight deck, leaving Avon to seek something to do to keep his hands and mind busy. He decided on food first, his trousers, an erotic charge, an indictment of his motivations. He needed Avon. Now. Regardless of cost, regardless of repercussions, regardless of…The Cause. Freedom. Avon’s freedom, usurped for the Cause of Freedom itself. And Blake’s own needs, the ones he couldn’t even face in himself for what they said about him, for what those needs revealed in their greedy, all consuming hunger.

Walking down the corridor now, every step a death knell for his own ideals and morals, he struggled with himself, trying vainly to convince the recalcitrant, sticky morass that was sucking him down that going to Avon like this, demanding sex of Avon simply was not on. And that no matter how he may wish it, Avon did not, could not, would not, love him and no amount of coercion could change that for the better. Forcing Avon, however, stood a very good chance of converting the man’s ambivalence to out and out hate, unmitigated by any shadings of whatever oblique draw Blake had for him. But, the thought suborned Blake, even hate would be better than that casual indifference of the lone time they had had sex together. Even hate would be better, for hate burned, hate...
was alive. Hate would be strong enough to flow from Avon and fill the unbarriered barrenness in Blake. He had his hand raised now, ready to press the door lock, ready to commit himself—and Avon—to the crooked path so bitterly marked out for them. The hand trembled, second thoughts slithering in to undermine him. But then the ignominious desire rose up again, replaying the sight of Avon, hard and harsh, rutting, fucking, submitting, dominating, pounding into body after body, muscles rippling and bunching, cock pulsing white banners onto the blackness of belly hair... His own body ambushed him. There was no denying it, no fighting it: he wanted Avon, even if all he could have was the man’s body for a while. His hand, like his mind before it, descended.

As the door slid open, the voice spilled out into the corridor, covering Blake as he took the first step. “I thought you were supposed to be on watch. Who did you trick into covering for you this time? Oh.” Avalanche turning sunshine ice blue. “It’s you.”

“May I come in?”

“I presume that was a rhetorical question, as you are already well over the threshold. What do you want?”

“You.”

“Yes, well, I had rather gathered that. You can’t have me, so you might as well leave now and let me get on with something of some importance.”

“You weren’t really expecting him, were you?”

“He is supposedly on watch.”

“And I know that both Jenna and Cally refused to have me, so you might as well leave now and let me get on with something of some importance.”

So you’ve decided to add mind reading to your gifts, have you? Keep this up and you’ll have made every last one of us redundant. You can pilot the ship, marginally and in a pinch; you can pick the odd lock; you can now apparently read minds.

“And what quality of yours have I usurped, Avon?”

“Complete amorality. And I concede you surpass even me.”

“Oh, come on, Avon. If you were willing to do the decent thing, I wouldn’t have to sink to... subverting you to doing what we both know is right!”

Weary, so weary he looked as he slumped on his bed, black shirt limp and bedraggled, a cloud on a drizzly day. Even his eyes seemed rain-swept when he finally looked up at Blake. “We have, unfortunately, been through this before. Repeatedly, ad nauseam and completely unproductively. I cannot see that killing millions, destroying the system that keeps the entire Galaxy in order is...”

“But that’s precisely it! Star One keeps the Galaxy in order. Don’t you see? Star One is the whip, the Federation the hand that holds it.”

“Of course I see that. I’m not entirely stupid. Unlike the others, it’s taking you blackmail to get me to follow on this grandly insane crusade. No, Blake, I know Star One for what it is. The problem is that I know you for what you are. And seriously, Blake, do you honestly think the people will thank you for destroying their worlds? Or are they supposed to be so overwhelmed with joy at their new-found freedom that they don’t mind starving to death?”

“Better free than on their knees.”

“Have you asked them?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

A raised eyebrow, a twitch of the lips that could have been smile or sneer. “I rest my case. Do you want me to check the treasure room to see if I can find you a suitable crown for your coronation, or would an Orb suffice?”

The closer they came to Star One, the harder he had to press Avon with the knowledge of the cube, the more his need for this man burned him, the farther from patience Blake strayed. He could see calmness and serenity, floating off somewhere into the great dark outside this ship, when all he himself could grasp was the amorphous, devouring cramps in his soul that left him adrift. “If,” he said, patently displaying a patience he had no claims to, “I were interested in becoming a despot, I’d have you reprogramme the computers, not help me destroy them.”

“And if,” Avon bit back, “if you were serious in your concerns for humanity, you would have me reprogramme only those functions which control Federation control and leave the atmospherics and travel and all the other little things that make the Galaxy even marginally safe for the idiots you purport to protect!”

“Such as Vila, perhaps?” Quiet, smooth as a laser, and just as cutting, cauterizing as it stabbed him in the back.

“Leave Vila out of this.”

“Whysy would I want to do that? After all, isn’t he what you’re doing all this for?”

“I said, leave Vila out of this.” Dangerous, that, harsh shell coming up promising to deflect the laser, to turn it back on Blake and burn him in his turn.

“Can you?”

“My... situation with Vila is not a topic of conversation, most certainly not by you. You’ve seen that bloody tape, do you honestly think that I would want any human being to see it?”

“And have you seen it, Avon?” Voice warm and rich, not now with the intent to wound, but with the intent to impale, carnally and emotionally. Sex, a two edged sword, yet another weapon in Blake’s armoury, another tool to be used to bring Avon to heel. And all for the betterment of the Galaxy. Or at least that was the excuse he used to silence his moribund conscience. “Well? Have you seen it? Or are you too shy?” Not sex then, but perhaps a complexity disguised as sex. Lust, certainly, but just more for possession, lust for being able to keep and to
hold, as if Avon were a collection of stolen art, for Blake’s eyes only. And it was that self-same desire to own, to contain, that was what gave birth to Blake’s actions and words and this degeneration into blackmail. And Avon couldn’t see it, for once too blinded by the welter of emotions careening through him like a greased helter-skelter, catapulting him precisely where Blake wanted him.

“Shy? Don’t be stupid, you’ve seen the family records. Oh, yes, I know to which records you gained access. Like you, I asked Orac, and the disloyal bucket of bolts informed me that it had invaded the family’s locked and supposedly secure video documents. That means you’ve seen it all, and going by your current standards, no doubt repeatedly. So shy? Hardly.” A pause, a moment to open the peep-hole of memories door. “Not then. Not before…”

Calculatedly, telling himself it was for the sake of the millions who needed him, Blake set his blinkers firmly in place, blinding himself to Avon’s chaos and pain. “Does that mean you haven’t looked at it? Haven’t wanted to see yourself in all your…glory?”

“I supposed that with your decidedly skewed view of things, that all that crap would look like glory. Tell me, Blake, when you look at a man, do you ever consider anything beyond his fucking cock?”

“Not when it’s fucking, no.” Vulgarity, especially when deliberate and for effect, especially when intended to deflect attention from the soft underbelly, had never done anything other than send what felt like a surge of adrenalin straight to his balls. “When you look at a man, Blake, when you look at me, do you ever look beyond the image of him on his knees?”

Like a broom brushing off droppings from the street, Avon’s gaze swept Blake, from the ends of his hair to the tips of his boots, with one pause of insolent contempt at his middle. “The only way I’d want you on your knees for me is licking my boots.”

Blake’s hand, heavy and hot and faintly damp, on his shoulder stopped him, preventing him from whirling round and leaving in good order. “Yes, you always did like leather, didn’t you, Avon?”

The words hung there, fetid and rank, jungle fecund. The two men faced each other off, their heartbeats pounding in unison, rhyming against all reason. Finally, it was Avon who broke the dark equatorial spell. “Is that supposed to be an offer?”

“Did it sound like one?”

“I don’t know. I’ve no idea what you consider seductive behaviour.”

That stung, short and sharp, the sliver of poison taking up residence under his skin. “I can remember one occasion when you obviously considered me seductive.”

“Ah, yes, that one, infamous night when I caught a bad dose of your stupidity and ended up in bed with you. Rutting, Blake, pure, unadulterated rutting. I was curious, and you were available. To coin a phrase, I came, I saw, I conquered. And then I left. Quite frankly, you weren’t worth the sweat.”

“You certainly seemed to enjoy it at the time.”

“And as you are so fond of reminding me, I am a very deceptive person. Now let go of me. I wish to repeat myself and leave you again.”

Blake merely shifted his grip, altering the offensively aggressive grab of Avon’s shoulder into a far more undermining circling of his wrist. So much more delicate a grip, but one with so much more leverage. For Avon to get out of it, he would have to risk injuring the joint and rendering his hand useless. And Blake knew his Avon well enough to know there was not the slightest possibility of the tech taking that chance. “Leave me, would you? Interesting choice of phrase, that, Avon. To ‘leave me’ implies that you were once with me. So it was more than unadulterated rutting. And tell me, what will Vila’s reaction be to knowing that you…indulged your curiosity?”

A pointed glance down at the hand manacling him with such obfuscated threat. “What would Vila say? I can tell you what Vila did say. Delta to the core, he wanted to know what it was like.

When I told him, well, that naturally put his mind at ease.”

“So he just sits there and takes it while you go off and bugger your life away?”

“He’s not my keeper, nor I his.”

“And.” Blake leant forward, forcing Avon to breathe his expelled breath, forging a link between them as his words chained them together, the intimacy of a lover, the venom of a viper, “what did he say when you told him who you really were? What did the Service Grade say when you told him that you were a member of the Wintzer family, hmm? What did he say when you told him that it was your great-grandfather, the man for whom you were named, who first did the genetic engineering? What did he say when you told him it was your family who won the legal battles to make the gene-altered property instead of Federation subjects? Tell me, Avon, what did he say to that?”

There was, of course, no answer. Not to that.

“Speechless? That sharp tongue of yours dulled into silence? Now there’s a rarity.”

“What the hell do you want? You’ve condemned me to help you with Star One, you have that damned Procrustean tape to keep me dancing on the end of your rope. What else do you want? To destroy what lies between Vila and me? Why—when that would negate the threat of exposure itself?” Before Blake could even draw breath, recognition dawned on Avon, turning his eyes to sharpen flints with which to spear Blake. “But you’ve said it already, haven’t you? You’ve said what it is you want. Me. You want me. That one night was enough to prove to me that we would burn each other out in a matter of weeks,
but you got hooked, didn’t you? Quite frankly, I can do without this particular compliment to my prowess.”

“Hooked? As I said before, you have an interesting choice of words, Avon. You are implying that I was addicted by that one night of your charms, but I think it more likely that you were fishing for me, and now that you’ve reeled me in, you just don’t know what to do with me.”

“Oh, I know exactly what to do with you, but the others might object. It would, after all, be terribly messy. But you flatter yourself unconsciously if you think that I would waste the effort of chasing after the likes of you. Dangerous megalomaniacs I can do very well without.”

“But you can’t do without a certain Service Grade thief, can you?”

“I told you to leave Vila out of this. After all, that’s what I’m paying for.”

“Paying? With what, precisely? Family wealth?”

“More like family debts.”

“I didn’t see you as some Atlas to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

“Not the world, only my own share of it.”

“And what do you know of guilt, Avon?”

“Absolutely nothing, of course. That’s why I’m giving in to you. I’ll leave the guilt for your hands.”

“I concede that my methods may lack a certain moral rectitude, but given your attitudes…”

“Oh, shut up! We’ve been through this far too many times already. If you’re here for is to try and convince yourself of your own innocence, then just go away and leave me in what little peace you haven’t been able to corrupt.”

“Oh, that’s ironic, don’t you think, coming from you? Corrupt? What I’ve done, what I’m doing, isn’t even a tenth of what I’ve seen on that tape. And as for corrupt…as I’ve said before, Avon, what do you think Vila will do if he finds out that you weren’t born Kerr Avon, but Kerr Avon Wintzer? What will the service grade do when he finds out that your family grew fat and gross on the creation of the service grades? And what services you had them perform…”

Avon flinched again, wincing with fractious control at that needling emphasis. Blake was certainly a master at wielding the whip… “Well, well, well,” he muttered, face once more impassive, control back in his own grip. “I do believe I’ve uncovered what this is all about. Star One, the freeing of the masses, the breaking of the Federation chains, those are merely convenient excuses, aren’t they, oh great and fearless leader? You were quite willing to let our one night of illicit and ill-conceived lust languish in the past. Until, that is, you saw that tape. Until you saw what you had been missing. When all I was to you was a talented but basically quite normal screw, you were too wrapped up in your Cause to pursue me. Now you know the kinds of kink in which I so frequently indulged, you’re too wrapped up in me to pursue your Cause. You really are completely insane, aren’t you?”

“Defence through attack? Yes, I suppose that is the easy way out. I shouldn’t have expected any better of you, should I? After all, you do have a habit of running away.”

And the hand on Avon’s wrist with such loosely held menace tightened, focussing the attention of both men on the bond. Avon stared at Blake’s hand, mesmerised. From his point of view, it looked almost as if Blake were holding his hand, not chaining him to the clay feet of a hero he had convinced himself was never needed.

“I won’t let you run away this time, Avon. I won’t let you hide from yourself. Face it, all of it, then you can conquer it. But don’t run away.”

“From what? From killing millions? Or from letting you experience true, unhindered debauchery? Oh, I can give you both, if that’s what you want. You, you contemptible pinprick of a man, have the audacity to talk about cowardice and courage, when you can’t even come right out and simply say what it is you want. Well, coward you may choose to call me, but I’m not afraid of giving name to demons, my own or yours.” He clenched his fist, and brought his balled hand up between them, a symbol of their strife, held aloft where Blake couldn’t deny it. Blake’s pulse throbbing frantically against his palm. “You see this?” Avon demanded, face seconds away from seeing Avon’s laughter ring out, bright and clear, lightning through storm clouds. “Order Vila?” he exclaimed, lowering an octave, becoming feline, a tom on the prowl, his voice lowered an octave, becoming feline, a tom on the prowl, wrestling control the only way he had left him, using the lessons begun in childhood, “you would risk that, wouldn’t you, Blake, for you’ve no idea what you’re getting yourself into. It’s true what they say, you know.
Absolute power corrupts absolutely. And believe me, you won’t be over fond of yourself when you’re finished. So. I’ll give you what you want. I’ll give you what you think you need. And you will give me all copies of that cube. Every last one of them. A deal, then, Blake? Star One and me, in exchange for my past.” His unbound hand slipped between them, sliding, sharp as a shark, to squeeze Blake, moulding fabric around tumescence, coating him with coarse stimulation. “Well?” he asked again, staring at the rapture on Blake’s face, undoing his fly, hand snaking in to hold hot flesh to moist palm. “Is it a bargain?”

“You past in exchange for you now? Oh, a bargain at twice the price, Avon.”

“Twice the price? You fool, you haven’t the faintest idea of just what the price is. Is it a deal?” He stilled his hand, finger and thumb pinching Blake’s foreskin to hood the crown of his cock.

“Oh, yes, yes, you have a deal. All of it, for Star One. And this.”

Avon didn’t deign to answer, now the contract was struck. Prostitution held no fears for him: he had, after all, learned it at his mother’s knee. Submitting cost nothing but pride, and that, only if you were over-full of it and unsure of yourself. Avon was sure of very little in this Galaxy: all he knew he could count on was himself, and Vila. And the perfidy of life and the living. So he sank to his knees, turning submission into conquest, opening his mouth to suck Blake, making ‘cocksucker’ a title of honour.

“No.”

So soft a sound, hardly worth the hearing. Avon flicked his tongue into the weeping slit of Blake’s body, tasting the salt of life.

“No.”

So hard a sound, irresistible. He stopped, tongue still warmed by the flesh under it. “You would prefer me to strip first?”

“No. Me. I want me to…” Avon raised an insolent eyebrow at Blake’s lust tangled speech, sitting back on his heels, hands resting loose and relaxed on his thighs. Silently, curiously, with a flawless façade of indifference, he watched as Blake discarded his clothes with unseemly haste; watched, as Blake’s hands trembled with his arousal; watched, basilisk-eyed, as realisation bloomed full and fertile in his mind. A small part of him was quite proud of his calm demeanour, whilst the rest of his mind was reeling in inchoate horror. He knew now what Blake could be once again… His throat closed on the words that would betray him, and he brow-beat his muscles into relaxation, one by one, not unclenching his will until he was the very picture of aloof Avon. No one, not even Vila, would be able to see through this pyrrhic shell. Only Avon, and he was trying very hard not to look. Was trying even harder not to let his mind think the unthinkable: had he known that this was what Blake was after? Had he allowed himself to be manoeuvred into this? Oh, those were questions he didn’t even want asked, let alone answered. For if answer there were, it would surely be in his father’s voice, ringing through him as it had reverberated through the halls of his home. You’re one of us, Kerr. No matter what feeble, do-gooder notions you have in your head, you’re one of us. You’ll be back. If not for the money, then for the power of what we have here. You have a taste for all this, and you’ll never shake the addiction to power and the sin. It’s in your blood. Kerr. It’s your legacy, your heritage. It’s your bloodline.

And if it were true? If it were in his blood? He almost laughed, the irony rustling his soul. If it were in his blood and Blake awoke the ravening beast again, then all his prostitutions and all his protestations and all his willingness to kill for contentment would be for nought. For he would sink again, and this time, it would be Vila who would bear the brunt…

A gasp exploded from him as Blake prostrated himself before Avon, spreading himself out on the floor to bow his head on Avon’s seated lap. Teeth, perfect, white, omnivorous, snapped at the leather: tongue, pointed and wet and limber, lapped at his groin. Blake, before him, supplicant before omnipotent, eyes closed, murmuring deep in his throat, naked rump writhing, pressing cock painfully into floor, light glancing off the dancing globes of his rear. And all of it for Avon. All of it belonging to Avon. His, for the taking. If he could bear the price…

He started the struggle to his feet, to stalk from this den of iniquity, this charnel house of passion, but Blake was with him, every inch of the way. Hands darting to part fasteners, tongue darting to whet skin, teeth a nipping whiteness, leaving pinkness in their wake. On his feet now, Avon grabbed Blake’s shoulders to shove him away, but the touch of skin was his undoing. So smooth, so terribly smooth, like the silk of… No, that was one predilection he would never allow to take breath again. Grasping at straws, one step back in the grave of his heritage that waited to swallow him, he thought of only the feel of the body beneath his hands and the feel of the body rubbing over his own. Flesh, Hot, living flesh, skin stretched pregnant by the passion within, and all of it desperate for Avon, for his touch, for his ownership, for his mastery. Master. It had been so long since he had last heard that, so long since he had last allowed himself to want it.

Master.

“Master…” Blake’s voice, or Avon’s, it didn’t matter. They were both lost now, the acolyte and the Master, the innocent of body and the dissolute of flesh. It had taken so little, merely the opening of a door Avon had
thought locked, the key turned by something as petty as another man’s ignorant desires. Oh, how they would both pay for this. As his father had said, generation upon generation, his blood was tainted beyond redemption. Avon’s blood, the blue blood that had flowed through the veins of rulers for so long that what had once been benign and good had corrupted into clots of debasement. He took in a deep breath, one last lunge at freedom. And all he could smell was Blake, the primal surge of aroused male. He breathed again, more deeply. Himself. Primal male, arousal flooding him, flooding from him, skin flushing, musk rising, cock hard and aching. With a snarl, he went under for the third time, coming up clawing, reverting to what they had tried to make him, reverting to what he had once thought was right and natural and the best way in the world. He lifted his hand and brought it down, striking Blake on the face. Blake smiled, and turned the other cheek, inviting, inciting, insisting, living what he had watched only once, but which had haunted him awake and asleep, turning his life into a tarnished dream.

Avon twisted the next blow, reddening Blake’s shoulder, the next bringing a spring flush to the long back muscle at his ribs, the next, hovering, taunting by its absence, until Blake buried his head in the blackness of Avon’s trousers, suffocating himself in the smell, drowning in the desire to feel that hand descend upon him. Nothing, no blow, no touch, no Avon. Blake used his teeth to peel the leather away from Avon’s cock, revealing him, begging to be allowed to give pleasure to earn his own. He sucked Avon into him, using his tongue to press the veins and to fill his mouth with Avon’s taste. It was better this time, than that once they had had before, with its pleasant passion and profound possibilities. So much better, to be here, like this, pliant before the unyielding, forced to do the one thing he wanted more than anything else, but didn’t dare admit to. And Avon’s hands were pressing his face into Avon’s groin, the bulk of Avon was filling him, cutting off his breath, making his life dependent upon Avon’s whim. The glory of it, this utter submission of responsibility into the capable experience of the man who had been born to it. And now his decision was being made for him, he was being made to breathe, deeply, and to turn, just so, to get to his feet, to kneel, head and torso on the bed, seeping cock pressed into the covers, bare backside arched and bright in the light, delectably demeaning, exactly as he had hoped it would be.

Then it began. The cold hand, bringing heat. The white hand, bringing rosy afterglow. The delicate instrument of tormenting pleasure. With absolute perfection, Avon indulged Blake in what was even now called the ‘English vice’, giving him what he had wanted for so long, the coherent knowledge of it only slowly fighting its way out of the murk of memory loss. Almost, almost, Blake could remember this from Before; almost, almost, his body knew this. Almost, it gave him back what had been ripped from him. That would have been enough, in and of itself, even had the pleasure not been so exquisite. And exquisite it was. He could feel the heat radiating from his red-blushing arse all the way down to the tip of his cock and all the way up his spine to explode in his mind. Oh, Avon certainly knew his business and Blake surrendered to that knowledge and that strength of purpose and that clarity of vision. No confusion here, only the convolutions of human sexuality celebrated in the dark of night and dark of mind. Blake felt orgasm threaten, wondered if he should warn Avon, or if he should ask permission.

“I’m going to come!”

Quick as a lightning bolt, the hand flashed between his parted thighs and grabbed him, pinching hard, dispersing the upswelling of orgasm. “No, you’re not. Not until I tell you. Now, stay still. Move, and I won’t do anything to you at all.”

And then there was nothing, only the faintest of sounds on the edge of his hearing, the vaguest of glimpses on the edge of his sight. He didn’t even dare turn his head, and that sent another surge of enjoyment through him. Oh, how he was relishing this!

Clothes dispensed with, tub of gel in hand, Avon turned back towards the bed, unscrewing the cap as he went, thinking of screwing Blake. He glanced down to look at the tub before he dipped his fingers in, and the shock of it deflated him completely. There, quite clearly, were the grooves left by his fingers, from the time before last.

Vila.

He wasn’t answerable to Vila, they had no exclusive commitments, for to commit Avon was to lose him, but to do this? And then the voice whispered again. Better to do this to Blake than to Vila… But still, he hesitated, wrestling with something he denied having: his conscience. Wrestling, that is, until Blake moved, a wanton wriggle of his hips, a spreading of his legs that spread his arse wide, exposing the pink puckered hole to Avon’s devouring gaze. God, how Avon wanted to fuck him, hard, selfishly, to punish him for bringing the skeletons out of Avon’s cupboard to dance with such macabre glee. Yes, better to do this with Blake than with Vila. Just as he had with Tynus, for that brief time he had yielded to the gyre that spiralled down inside him. “Yes!” the sibilant hiss escaped him at the moment his control slipped from his grasp. “Yes.” And unspoken, hanging between them, the agreement that there were no holds barred here, no limits, no recriminations, nothing but hard, dominating sex. Blake, under Avon. Submitting as he never could on the flight deck or before the others. Blake, on his knees, the champion of freedom willingly in chains. And Avon was the one who held them. Toyingly, he flicked them lightly, doing what he had wanted, and that sent another surge of enjoyment through him. Oh, how he was relishing this!
see where I’m going to shove my prick.” He was obeyed with an alacrity and anxiety that swelled his chest with pride. “Now move, show me how you’ll move when I’m inside you, fucking you.” And Blake gyrated, twisting his hips, breath coming in shorter and sharper puffs. “No, no, not like that.” The body stilled, completely. “I said, as if I were fucking you. I won’t ponce around with anything like that. Think of my prick up your arse, think of me ramming into you. Now show me.” And Blake thrust forward, thighs slapping audibly against the side of the bed, balls swinging between spread legs, backside red and puffy from Avon’s spanking. “Ah, that’s better. Now you at least look like you’ve got a man up you. And that’s what you want, isn’t it? A man up you, none of this mutual masturbation crap, none of this frottage rubbish. You want me, in you, treating you like the cunt you are. Don’t you, Roj?” A heavy hand cracked across Blake’s arse, just at the crest of his undulation.

“YES!” Blake all but screamed. “God, yes…” the last dying on a sigh of need.

“Do you want me to fuck you, bitch?”

“Yes, oh, yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes…Master.”

“How do you want me to fuck you, cow?”

“Hard, Master, hard. Just ram it up me, make be belong to you, take away the guilt…”

“You want me to wash the blood from your hands, is that it, object?”

“Yes, oh, please, yes. I’m begging, Master, I’ve given in to you, you’re the one in complete control, please take it off my shoulders.”

Avon hesitated, just a breath’s worth, the self-made man warring with his birth. And then Blake groaned and slid his own finger inside himself, fucking himself for Avon to see. With a snarl of lust, Avon gouged his fingers into the gel, coating them, then digging them into Blake and coating him too, transferring the viscosity from himself to Blake, transferring heat from his own being to his, glorying in the power of it all. He smacked him again, and again, until there wasn’t an untouched fragment of Blake’s rear left white, Avon’s heat glowing from the base of Blake’s spine to the crease at the top of his thighs. Another smile claimed Avon’s face, a smile his family would have recognised gleefully.

A pièce de résistance, a coup de grâce perhaps, if they were lucky…

Avon forced his knee sharply between Blake’s straining thighs, spreading them wider, then moving himself around quickly, out of the way. Blake spread-eagled and exposed, arse red and hot, Avon’s white fingers still thrust deep into him. Now turned to stand at Blake’s side, staring down at the body that quivered so ecstatically at his overweening touch, Avon felt his cock buck, frantically tapping at his belly, the exposed crown taunted by the line of hair up to his navel, the skin dampened by the precum oozing from him, fuelled by his uncontrolled passion. He smiled, yet again, loving this, the submission and the domination, the freedom and the slavery, the simple sight of his flesh becoming one with another. Blake was whimpering now, and Avon struggled to hear.

“Hit me!” was the plea. “Don’t stop, don’t leave, hit me, make the pain feel good, make me take it, fuck me, oh, please fuck me, hit me, Avon, spank me again, it feels so wonderful…Hit me…”

For once, Avon was happy to oblige. He lifted his left arm, flexing the muscle, pumping himself up, getting ready, revelling in the anticipation, lingering, waiting, enjoying it to the full, until the whimperings coming from Blake were desperate enough. Then his hand cracked down, not on Blake’s backside, but between the cheeks, down low, where his legs joined his body. Where his balls sat, taut and tight and agonised with lust.

Blake moaned as the heel of Avon’s hand impacted with the rimple that arrowed to his balls, screamed as, a mere instant later, Avon’s fingers slapped into his balls, pain and erotic fire flaring through him, lifting him up to a new level of pleasure. He collapsed forward onto the bed, whole body trembling with the intensity of his arousal, mind completely oblivious to any questions. It never even occurred to him to wonder when his body had learned that pain was pleasure…

Inflamed by the overextended lust written all over Blake’s sweat-damp body, Avon withdrew his hands, sliding them up over bunched back muscles, the
lubricant shining so beautifully on Blake’s reddened and white skin. His groan echoed Blake’s as he braced himself on the broad back, his palms filled with the intimacy of feeling Blake’s every breath, skin sliding on skin. Even as his hands kneaded Blake’s back, fingernails scratching, his cockhead laved its way up Blake’s inner thigh, a shimmering trail tingling behind, his whole cock trembling with every brush of body hair, the lush sensation increasing as the hair grew denser, up there, higher, where it thickened, where Blake’s balls nestled, fecund and full.

Onward Avon’s cock travelled, past the miniscule clinging of hair and onto the smoothness of glutinous muscle. And then down, inward, to more hair, a mere hint, an echo of the forestation elsewhere, this delicacy framing the yielding pucker, mouth opening, lying agape, panting with Blake’s pulse, wet with the gel Avon had unlocked him with. Wide, flared head, pressing, pausing, repelled by the body’s instinct, that instinct overcome by the needs of the mind, and with a solitary, vicious lunge, Avon was in Blake, up him, mounting him, possessing him, fucking him, fulfilling Blake’s fantasy of rape. He felt the muscle give, felt a flicker of heat drip onto him, virgin blood for his dowry price. Pounding now, hard, long, deep strokes that brought crisp pubic hair to grind into soft anal hair, pendulating balls, each forward lunge plunging them wildly between Blake’s legs to hammer against his own, the painful pleasure almost unendurable.

And Blake had seen Avon doing this, on the tape. He knew how Avon would look, the feral expression on his face, the bare teeth. Knew, too, how he himself would look, back bent and bowed under Avon’s lithe strength, the white body covering his, in blinding contrast to the rosiness of his arse where Avon’s mark still glowed. He arched up into the annihilating force, orgasm rushing up to destroy him with the ecstasy of it all. Avon’s hands gripped him, hauling him upwards and back, angling him so that Avon could sink into him that fraction more, reaching up inside, leaving no atom inviolate. Teeth sank into Blake’s shoulder and he could feel the wetness of Avon’s mouth mingling with the wet drip of his own blood. A keening sound, animal pleasure, and Blake was shocked to realise it was him. Oh, this was familiar, this is what his body knew, deep in its bones and what he craved, deep in his soul. And it was Avon giving it to him, Avon of the dark and light, Avon, with this burning flesh embedded in Blake, Avon, grunting, shoving, driving into him, spasming, coming, a Vesuvius exploding in Blake’s guts. All he knew was Avon’s cock stroking into him, wet heat bathing him, the step that kicked him over the edge, the last moment, and then the oblivion of pleasure. For a blessed moment, neither man existed. There was only what they felt, only what they shared.

Avon was lost, completely beyond thought, the power and the pleasure flooding him and pouring from him to fill the vessel of flesh that was wrapped around him. And then awareness crept in on leaden feet, bringing weariness along for company. His body freed itself from Blake, his cream oozing slowly from between the upturned buttocks, a rivulet of life between the stamp of his hands. The old feelings were still in him, yet not yet dispersed after the fury of fucking, the old corruption of power rising up to join the new, compounding it, multiplying it. He whacked his hand down on Blake, just for the lazy enjoyment of inflicting pain and watching the body leap and quiver at his whim. One finger returned to the firm flesh, following the outline the entirety of his hand had left, then slithering forward to delve into the dark, swollen hole that was the centre of Blake’s existence for the moment, while Avon wished it so. The finger slid inside, past the droplets of blood, awash in Avon’s own slickness, his sperm clinging to him as if to be reabsorbed into him, to be given another chance.

As Avon had given himself another chance, once upon a time. Half a lifetime ago, when he had run from his family and met up with a precocious thief. A second chance he had just squandered on a second-rate hero, his bitterness whispered. A man Avon dare not judge fairly, lest he find himself being led, as he had allowed his father to lead him… Grimacing, he pulled his finger free, dragging a moan of protest and pain from Blake.

“Shut up,” Avon muttered, stamping on the urge to belt Blake one. “You got precisely what you wanted, so just shut up.” Desperate, at the last, for he feared what Blake could say. Feared more, the truths Blake could use flagellate him. The truths Blake could use to tie them together, linked forever in this symbiosis of sin. For sin it was, for all its mildness when compared to what he had done when younger. Lacking the accoutrements of the discipline did not lessen it, the intent being the definition of the act. And this was sin, the willful desecration of another for one’s own pleasure. It mattered not one whit that Blake had wanted this more than Avon, had manipulated until the scenario was inevitable. All that mattered was that they had both found truths neither was entirely equipped to deal with. Blake now had his cross to bear, the mockery of knowing that his fight for freedom was based, at his very core, when all the niceties were ripped away, upon the need to be enslaved. Small wonder he had never truly rid himself of the conditioning. Despite all his brave rhetoric, he had never truly tried.

And for Avon? Nothing. Nothing at all. Only an old truth, and a bitter one, the sharp barb buried so deep that obscurity blunted it. Blood, his father was fond of saying, is thicker than water. And it burbled like sludge in his veins, all the generations of the past, layer upon layer, amorality built ever higher on amorality, a veritable tower of turpitude, and that was his inheritance. From father to son, with the name they carried, came the moral torpor. And Avon had sunk back into the slime, on the filthiest of excuses. His own debasement left him feeling unclean,
eroded by leprosy of the soul. Without a word, not daring speech, daring even less Blake’s answers, he gathered his dressing gown around him, walls in place, typical Avon-control his shroud. Still silent, only the movements of his body betraying him, he walked out, Blake left behind, still spread-eagled, still with Avon’s juices bleeding from him.

After some time, the chilling of his skin and the ache of his bladder forced Blake to move, to regain some semblance of self-control. Stumbling only a little, already beginning the deceptive weaving of crusading intent around him, he made his way into the bathroom. Where there were reminders of Avon with every breath he took, and with every glance. Distinctive smell of soap and after-shave, shampoo and dentifrice. Avon’s jacket from this afternoon, hung on the rack where he had left it. Avon’s depilatory, from this morning, when he had smoothed his skin as soft as a woman’s. It was then that it dawned on Blake, that apart from sucking him all too briefly, apart from a few hurried strokes of his hand, he hadn’t been allowed to touch Avon. That despite the devastating revelations coerced upon Blake, Avon had remained literally untouched. He remembered the quick glimpse he had stolen as Avon had left the room. So. Avon had remained emotionally untouched as well… That was not part of the deal Blake had made with himself, that had never been part of the equation. Untouched? He’d see about that. Let Avon remain untouched as this became a part of him once more. Just let Avon try to keep Blake at arm’s length then. Just let him try… Untouched? Condensed as he was into his own misery, not even Blake would have thought Avon unscathed. Sundered, perhaps, but not unscathed.

And as for Avon himself… Avon felt raped. Felt violated, ravished, torn apart, all the sins of his sex piled in his belly, warming him even as the heat faded from his arse, all anger at Avon’s abandonment driven out, serpents before the saint’s hand. Avon had abandoned him, yes, and that was part of the pleasure and pain too. It soothed the bloodlust in him, fed his need for martyrdom, to wallow in this pain, to suffer so. It was glorious, to be freed from freedom… Patient, he waited, breathing the amorphous dream.

The ship changed, an altered thrum vibrating infinitesimally through the bone structure of Liberator, the surge of energy disturbing Avon in his cycle of dream and nightmare. Slowly, hand going to the small of his back, he struggled to his feet, made ancient by his heritage. He took a moment, breathing deeply, leaning heavily on the very image, a trick mirror to deflect the vision of others. He walked through the halls of the ship, as he had walked through the halls of his home, aching from indulgence, but with his mind distressingly clear. No soft bandaging of drug to dull this pain… Patient, he waited, breathing the amorphous dream.

The ship changed, an altered thrum vibrating infinitesimally through the bone structure of Liberator, the surge of energy disturbing Avon in his cycle of dream and nightmare. Slowly, hand going to the small of his back, he struggled to his feet, made ancient by his heritage. He took a moment, breathing deeply, leaning heavily on the very image, a trick mirror to deflect the vision of others. He walked through the halls of the ship, as he had walked through the halls of his home, aching from indulgence, but with his mind distressingly clear. No soft bandaging of drug to dull this pain…

His cabin. Blake. Inside? He could not face it. Could not go to Vila to get some of the clothes he had left there. Could not go on the flight deck dressed as a refugee from an orgy. Although the marks were none that any could see… He walked on, pace measured and sedate, an academic covering up a satyr, his cock filling with his blood, hardening against the softness of the fabric dressing gown. The thought of Blake, still waiting for him, made his head pound and his cock throb. Blake, who had seen the tape. Blake, who would know his every predilection, desire, peccadillo. Blake, who wanted to receive what Avon burned to give. Resolute, he turned his face away from his temptation and continued to the store...
rooms. He would find clothes there. Black, of course, but not leather. Leather was the signal that he was sinking again into his passions... Black, but fabric, loose shirt, soft trousers that did not caress like a hand every time he took a step. No, not that, not if he were to face Blake. Resolute, indeed. For now. Until he yielded to temptation again... Dressed, undeniably, unaltered, untouched Avon, he walked back to the flight deck, to take his watch, and to take his accustomed place, as if nothing in the world had changed. And that, he feared, was the unvarnished truth. He could still smell Blake's subjugation...

Routine, then, that tried and true method for dealing with the unbearable, all of them maintaining their nice, tidy little rôles. There were a few funny looks from Cally, but nothing that a smile or a sneer couldn't defuse. Concerned, furtive glances from Vila, but all that brought was an increase of comfort for Avon. He passed through it all, Avon did, keeping a lid on both himself and what he had unearthed in Blake, refusing to rise to the taunts, refusing to respond to what was, in a twisted way, a courtship. He would not submit to Blake's submission. Would take power some other way, in some other form. Not living, no. He would take what was his, the ship itself, and reject that which wanted to be his. And which, by being owned, would possess utterly.

Blake.

The man was the personification of Chinese water torture, wearing shirts open, white fabric gleaming, the shadow of a nipple tantalising, making Avon's fingers twitch with the desire to twist the erectile flesh. Trousers, once so loose, always seemed to be worn a little tighter this time, always something new, something changed. And that, he feared, was the unvarnished truth. He could still smell Blake's subjugation...

"Oh, h'lo. Here, come and look at this, then. Amazing, innit? See? The way this balance works there, and the lever fits in there, so that..." He stopped, Avon's tongue filling his mouth. "Feeling randy, are we?"

"Oh, yes. Come to bed?"

"Need you ask?"

"Not with you."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go on, sweep me off my feet—Avon! Don't! You'll do your back in and then where will we be? Come on, put me down."

He was dumped on the bed, Avon's hands blurry as they moved towards him. The sound of fabric ripping was loud, and louder still was the thud of shoes and boots being tossed aside. Avon grabbed the waistband of Vila's trousers, fumbling in his haste, finally able to get the fastener undone, but the fly stuck. Inarticulate, he made a noise deep in his throat and tore the trousers open, a red welt blossoming where the fabric scored delicate skin. The sight inflamed him...

There was an edge of worry in Vila's eyes, but he knew Avon, knew that the games never got truly rough, just a little wild, a little over the top. The thought thrilled him, all that barely leashed passion directed at him, a reservoir from which to drink his fill. He opened his body to Avon, arms and legs going around him, pulling Avon in tight, hindering the other man's frantic strip. Abruptly, Avon shoved him aside, making him lie there, impaled by the hunger written on Avon's face. Vila's cock rose, firming, crown darkening, as he watched Avon toss his clothes off, but not entirely. Like a tinge of brown, a luxuriant patch to cradle the hardness of his cock in a nest of redolent softness. And Avon stood over him, all contrasts: white, white skin of alabaster, black, glossy hair, making his chest and groin so dark, wine-red cock standing straight and blatant. So strong, so very, very strong. Vila smiled up at him, spread-eagling himself, hot and ready, incited by Avon's need. God, he loved this, when Avon lost control and came to him desperate. Made him feel terribly important, to know that Avon needed him that much, that he was willing to leave off all the trappings of blasé worldliness. Vila arched his hips, age-old invitation, age-old declaration: to the victor the spoils. And he was so looking forward to being spoiled rotten.

So vulnerable, he seemed to Avon, so unprotected, lying there on display like a Servicer at the meat market. So tempting... No, not that, not here. Not with Vila. If he must, then go to Blake, use him. Not Vila. He repeated it endlessly, a charm to ward off harm: himself. He gathered his will together, gentling his hands, softening his mouth, surprising Vila who had been expecting a good hard fuck. Slowly, Avon kissed him, putting all the wordless feelings into the gesture, saying it all with the caresses of his hands as they smoothed every available inch of Vila's skin, aware of every pore and every delicate hair as it brushed his palms. He kept on kissing Vila, tongue deeply within the other man's mouth, breathing with him, stroking him, re-exploring the inner sanctum. He clutched Vila close, adoring him with his body, wor-
shipping at the altar of pleasure. Painstakingly, he circled his palm lower and lower, following every line of muscle until he reached the indentation, that delightful dimple just above the swell of Vila’s rear. He fondled him there, fingertips trailing a line of fire to the other dimple, kindling a network of heated nerves. Taking his time, Avon traced the cleft that divided the well-muscled backside, tickling lightly, fingers memorising the feel of skin on skin as Vila clenched down tightly, trapping Avon, demanding more satisfaction and less titillation. Avon pressed one finger home, going in dry to a place that relaxed so easily to his presence. Another finger, then Vila was squirming under him, wriggling around until a battered tube was fiddled into Avon’s hand. Emollient oozed out, water filling a creek, until the cleft was completely moist and slick enough for anything. Groaning, Avon gave one hand to each buttock, squeezing hard, pulling the cheeks apart, making room for his cock. He pushed forward, and pressed Vila closed again, a wet tunnel of hot flesh for his erection. With every withdrawal, he spread Vila, with every inward thrust, he closed him up tight as a virgin, revelling in the feel of it. The sounds of Vila in passion, the sounds of Vila in love, cascaded into his ears, deafening the voice of reason, leading him farther and faster on the road to ecstasy. He heard himself echo Vila, his own mutters of lust and love harmonising with him, weaving a nest of sound around them. He was warm, so warm, so safe… The hunger began, deep in the pit of his stomach, the tunnel of flesh not quite enough, he needed tighter, he needed harder, needed to feel Vila all around him…

“Leggo a minute,” Vila, husky, indistinct, mouth open and wide against Avon’s neck, “need to move.”

And Avon let him go, almost, keeping both hands still on him lightly, unwilling to lose contact. As Vila turned, his cock brushed Avon’s and both men shuddered as hard heat connected. There was a tiny crack of pain amidst the pleasure and it erupted in Avon, exploding just as Vila rolled over and presented himself for Avon’s pleasure. As Blake had presented himself for his Master. As the Servicers, rank after nameless rank of them, had knelt. His hand rose, slashing down, Vila’s arse becoming rose instead of white. A jolt of silence then, and before Vila could react, Avon’s mouth was on him, tongue swathing pleasure over the sting, overstimulating the flesh, making it—and the man—forget the pain. The flesh was ripe and lush under his lips, and Avon nipped it, a tiny, tantalising nibble, resurrecting memories of times when he had bidden hard enough to taste the salt-sweet blood…

Avon drew back, horrified, mind aghast at what he was on the verge of doing, to Vila, of all people.

“Avon?”

He couldn’t allow Vila time to think, couldn’t allow Vila to doubt him, for if Vila doubted him, he was lost. Mouth shut tight as a mousetrap, closing out the insidious temptation, he used his hands again, silent communication as always, telling Vila that it was all right, everything was all right, just relax… Riveted, he stared at his hands, seemingly tanned against the rose and white of Vila’s bum, stared at the rosette of flesh waiting for him, so wonderfully tiny. And thought of it stretching to take his hand, as he had thought of Blake, as he had done before, to others, as he had had done himself… A thumb rubbed there, trembling, terrifying in its appeal, disappearing inside the glistening hole as Vila arched up onto it, swallowing it inside, sphincter clenching and easing in promissory rhythm. Avon gulped, taking a deep breath to calm himself, wondering, for a moment, if Vila had learned to like any of the more… esoteric pleasures of his Service years. Avon had never dared risking finding out, but now, with Blake fresh in his mind, with Blake eroding his self-imposed barriers, it was so ensnaring a thought.

Before he gave in to his own weakness, he withdrew the thumb, his own voice groaning at the same instant as Vila protested. A rain of sweat broke out over Avon’s skin, drenching him, flushing him as pink as Vila. He rose up to cover the other man, over this lover of his, this one person who had always remained. The one person who had always stayed Avon’s hand… Head hanging, forehead resting on Vila’s neck, nipples kissing Vila’s back with every pass of his body, Avon slid his cock up between Vila’s cheeks, felt his cockhead catch against the wetted muscle, felt Vila suck him in, taking in everything he had to offer, devouring everything Avon had to give, demanding more, body surging and undulating, voice moaning, words gutter-sex and hungry. Spurred by it, Avon clenched his arms around Vila’s middle, hands hanging on tight, feeling the belly muscles tremble.

“C’mon, Avon, c’mon, do me. Fuck me, ’arder than that, really do me. C’mon, c’mon, that’s it, ’arder, really shove it up me. I’m yours, all yours, an’ you c’n do wot ever you want to me, so c’me on, fuck me, take your pleasure, use me…”

The well-remembered phrases streamed out of Vila and into Avon, sending him slamming into Vila, losing control completely, going too hard and too fast to make it last, taking Vila every inch of the way with him, hearing Vila, going on and on and on, the voice dropping to the caste-less urchinese of the Service grades.

Avon felt his insides gather into a knot, love and lust and power and fear commingling, congealing, hardening in his guts, filling his balls, one last keening surge from Vila toppling him over the edge, his cock spasming as Vila’s arse spumed around him, as Vila’s cum splattered Avon’s clutching hands.

And then it was over. Silence descended upon them, who had never been silenced before as Avon withdrew both physically and emotionally. It had happened before, and Vila remembered, every single time acid-etched into his brain. Always when he reverted to Service level, always when he forgot that Avon had fixed it so that
his grade read “Delta-Level 5”. But Avon couldn’t un-
make what he had been born. He crept out from under the
Alpha, sidling off into the bathroom to clean himself
before returning to his fastidious partner.

Bereft, Avon lay still for a while, listening to the
drumming of the water, imagining Vila standing under the
weir. There would be bruises on him by tomorrow, per-
fectly conforming to the pattern of Avon’s hands. And not
a word of reproach, either. There never was, never had
been on those very few occasions when they had gone
berserk like this. Only this time…this time, Avon was
dreadfully aware of a difference. His control had been
sliver-thin, a splinter trying to keep him afloat. He had
come so close, so horribly close…

Damn Blake and his passions. Damn Blake for
stripping Avon down to basics and bringing all the old
lusts back to the surface where they stood, laughing in his
face, mocking, taunting, daring him to deny them. And he
barely had. This time, he barely had. And how long before he
couldn’t? How long before he lost, and losing, lost
Vila? How long?

A moment hit him like a blow to the solar plexus,
knocking the wind from him: Blake, today, on the flight
deck, bending over in front of Avon, seducing him with
submission… Not long, then, before he faded in face of
temptation. Not long at all… And where did that leave
him, if not caught between a rock and a hard place, being
ground to gravel between the two? The horns of a moral
dilemma: if he followed where Blake led, to Star One, he
would be guilty of the murder of millions and the freeing
of millions more. As for not following—he was already
guilty of so much, most of it, no doubt, captured on that
bloody memory cube.

The water was still running and the realisation
struck him, that Vila must feel soiled indeed to be taking
so long to scrub himself clean. Avon knew that feeling of
inner filth. And to have caused it in Vila… Oh, yes, it was
more than escaping air, arid and dead. “No…” he said again,
trying to give it life, make it true. “No…” But he couldn’t
silence that gnawing truth. His only regret
was to put everything on Avon’s strong shoulders, give
him the responsibilities and the guilt for the dead and leave
Blake his punishment and pleasure. No, he wouldn’t let
Avon go. Not for money, not for freedom, certainly not for
love. Determined, he rose to his feet, repeating the last
chance on truth, almost trusting Vila enough… But he
stopped, hand outstretched, Vila’s unseeing back never
knowing what it had killed with its blindness.

As he left, Avon didn’t dare look back.

Whirlpool, that was what Blake had churning in
his belly, his desires warring with his ethics. To have
wanted that, to have manipulated Avon into giving him
that—oh, that was hardly what a freedom fighter should
have done. But, and it was this that dug poisoned talons
into him, ripping him as it swirled around, would he have
changed it?

“Yes,” he whispered out loud, “I would change
it, of course I would.”

Yes, his conscience whispered within the
guarded room of his closed mind, yes, you’d chance it. You
would have made it last longer, made it harder. You’d’ve
made him do to you what you saw him doing to that sandy
haired man in the tape. Wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t you?

“No…” the word breathed from him, no more
than escaping air, arid and dead. “No…” he said again,
trying to give it life, make it true. “No…” But he couldn’t
silence that gnawing truth. His only regret was that it had
been so little, so unsophisticated, so far from the depths of
depravity he had seen and craved. He wanted to wallow in
it, cover himself with it, use it to cover the blood staining
his hands. Out, out damned spot… And the only thing he
could think to take the nightmare voice in his head away
was to put everything on Avon’s strong shoulders, give
him the responsibilities and the guilt for the dead and leave
Blake his punishment and pleasure. No, he wouldn’t let
Avon go. Not for money, not for freedom, certainly not for
love. Determined, he rose to his feet, repeating the last
time, motion for motion, walking with ponderous grace to
Avon’s cabin…

Finally, the recycler warning came on and Vila
turned the shower off. Water wouldn’t take it away any-
way. The psychs understood it, and Vila was a hell of a lot smarter than anyone but Avon had ever given him credit for. It was Avon who had—in strictest privacy, of course—given Vila access to all the courses he had ever dreamed of taking, all the knowledge, and thus, power, that he had ever longed for. So he knew from anguished experience that what the psychs said was true: abuse, done ‘properly’, was eventually learned as pleasure. And submission eventually became a state of grace, the giving-up of responsibilities and fears. With someone to take care of you, your fears were limited, reduced to worry over keeping your keeper happy. Such a small fear, compared to the daunting terror of facing an entire Universe of hostile decisions needing made and hostile people needing removed. Better, surely, to revert, go back to what he had been born, what they had made him. Alpha élites, Avon’s own family… And perhaps, now that the being forced into it was over, now that there had been enough time to heal, now that he was sure of love softening Avon’s hand—perhaps now would be the time to go to Avon, tell him what he needed, what he wanted Avon to do. Take the burden from Vila’s shoulders and place it on his own. Be what he was born to be. Vila could feel the familiarity of it settle like silk on his shoulders, warm and light and deceptively fragile. To be Servicer to an élite again, when that élite was Avon…

Determined, he threw his clothes on. He knew where Avon would be, and what he would be doing. It was, after all, Vila’s own fault for slipping into the old ways without asking first. They would discuss it, of course, Vila manipulating and manœuvreving Avon round and round and round until the right answer came out. He started out for Avon’s cabin, going through it in his mind. For, perhaps, it would even be easier on Avon to be able to go back to being an Elite. It couldn’t be easy, to give up all the power and indulgences, not the way Avon had for years. If you didn’t count the time he had fallen off the wagon and hooked up with Tynus. He’d seemed a bit happier back then, certainly less stressed, and so wonderfully, erotically charged up all the time. And it had been so lovely for Vila, to have Avon masterful in bed and out, making decisions, protecting him, dominating, without bringing pain. Avon had saved that particular quirk for elsewhere, and Vila hadn’t asked. Hadn’t even let on that he knew about Avon’s family secret, just swept it under the carpet where Avon seemed to want it. He wondered, sometimes, what would happen if Avon ever found out just how much Vila knew about those skeletons of his. Wondered too, what would happen if Blake were ever to find Avon’s little secret out. Although, truth be told, recently he’d been more worried about this whole Star One thing, and what Blake was doing to Avon with the whole mess. Something funny going on there, and given time, Vila was going to get to the bottom of it. But before that, he had something more urgent to take care of: his Avon. Oh yes, he’d made up his mind. He’d have Avon take care of him, make what the tech had been doing for years official. He’d revoke his 5th grade status, for Avon. For himself…

Deep in the hold, Avon tinkered with a ship the others had probably completely forgotten about, the one those bizarre aliens had been sealed in, the one he had piloted Liberator to rescue, to give Jenna and Blake air to breathe. He closed that door with a clang, mentally bolting and barring it too, just to make sure. He didn’t want to think, but simply do. With thought lay temptation, with temptation lay concession, with concession lay disaster. He frittered his energy away, packing supplies into the ship, stocking up for every eventuality he could think of, up to and including Orac making sure his escape would be unchallenged. He fretted, brow furrowed, going over, again and again, where he stood with Vila. And with Blake, Vila, with his need for Avon to take up the responsibilities his family had bred for him, Vila with his temptation to go back to his old habits, with someone who knew the game so very well. And Blake, of course. All he wanted was for Avon to take on the charge of genocide, destroy his Galaxy and take the blame for Blake’s little sexual foibles. The weight upon his shoulders was burying him, stifling him. And all the while, both of them were appealing to his basest nature, both of them tantalising him, one calculatively, one because of the same curse that loomed over Avon’s head. Genes. It was all in the genes. It was in his blood, in Vila’s. And who knew what was in Blake’s past… Were he to give in to temptation, as his body and mind both longed to do, he would lose his fine veneer of humanity, descend into what he refused, utterly, to be. He had left once, to escape. He could leave a second time. After all, it was hardly much of a loss. All he’d be missing would be the murder of millions and the watching of love die. And, quite frankly, he’d been through the latter before and he was no idiot. He learned from his mistakes. When Vila turned to hatred, Avon would be a million spaciaws away, safe.

Well, away, anyway. Not even Orac could guarantee safety, not in this pathetic excuse for a ship. But at least it was a way out, at least he had found a bolthole. Of sorts…

Blake, lost in thought, neared Avon’s cabin, completely unaware that Vila was doing the selfsame thing. The only difference was that they, as usual, were approaching the whole thing from completely different angles. Physically, at any rate. Mentally, they were each one of them, contemplating the other, and Avon. Thinking about the burden the other was levying on Avon, thinking about how the other was making life so hard for Avon. Blake, only too aware of Vila’s emotional demands, Vila, only too aware of Blake’s unethical demands. It gave them both a very convenient whipping boy… It wasn’t until
Blake turned the corner that he saw Vila, saw the thoughtfulness that matched his own, wondered at it. With just cause, they were each as suspicious as the other, and both just as right. They were getting closer, almost abreast of each other, both of them with mouths filled with hot words just waiting to be hurled, ready to fight over Avon, neither one concerned with much more than how much he himself needed Avon and how good he himself would be for him. And they were both right, in their opinions, but their isolation rendered it all wrong. Apart, they would split Avon down the middle, and as for together... neither one of them could even conceive the inception, the actuality far beyond their grasp. The words drew ever closer, girding up loins, readying the two could-be friends for enmity.

And then the ship lurched, a small dip, really, but in a craft as fluid as Liberator, the staccato snap was shocking. Battle postponed till later, Blake and Vila raced for the flight deck, never a word spoken.

"Blake!" Jenna yelled at him, "Where the hell have you been? You were supposed to be on watch!"

"Zen," Blake ignored her, ignored her intrusion of her world into his obsessive globe, "what's going on?"
+Ship has been launched from the storage hold.+
+Ship? What bloody ship?+
+The ship brought aboard by Kerr Avon.+
"Those aliens..." Vila muttered, collapsing into the chair at his station, not even bothering to check the equipment. There was no point, instinct suppurating the truth. He didn't need any machine to tell him what he had done, what he had helped force Avon to do. He already knew what had happened. His heart sank into his stomach to set up home with his guilt, building a nice big ulcer.

"Avon. He must be leaving..."

Blake turned on him then, bringing his impotent fury to bear on the thief, the handiest scapegoat, his own guilty conscience hearing accusation where none had been made. "What do you know, Vila?"

Before the thief could utter either condemnation or reprieve for Blake's guilty conscience, Zen interrupted, stentorian voice thrumming through the deck.
+Information. Alien ship launched and running.+
+Liberator on locked course to Sector 3.+
"But that's the wrong end of the Galaxy, completely opposite to Star One! Zen, abort course change, resume heading to the co-ordinates of Star One."
+Unable to comply.+
"What do you mean, you can't do it? Resume heading for Star One."
+Cannot override voice lock. Return of Liberator control shall occur in approximately 73.95 hours, upon completion of locked-in flight plan.+
"Orac..." It was at that precise moment that it all hit him like a ton of bricks and he felt his world fragment into sand to run between his fingers, racing, racing, an avalanche out of his control. Orac was gone, with Avon. In a craft that was barely space worthy. Outwards, out there, close to the very edge of the Island Galaxies. Avon. Alone. Driven to that by Blake, by Blake's needs, Blake's coercion, Blake's Cause, Blake's reflected tarnish. He looked up, catching sight of Vila...

Who was staring at Blake with dawning horror, Blake's guilty expression making two and two add up to five. If Blake knew, if Blake had somehow been able to use Avon's past against him... He watched, icily calm, too shocked by Avon's departure to feel anything at all, except hate for the man who had driven Avon to it. He and Avon had been doing so well, so very, very well; he ignored his own worries of so recently, when he had reverted to Servicer and had silenced Avon. It is, after all, always easier to see the mote of dust in thy neighbour's eye... For the first time in his life, Vila Restal contemplated murder. Or wearing the black hat of a hanging judge while his talented fingers wove a noose...

Jenna and Cally looked at each other, at the two men who stared at each other so fixedly, then the women looked back at each other again. Jenna slowly walked over to confront Blake, hostility in her every breath. "As we're going nowhere slowly, I think now would be a good time for an excellent explanation, don't you, Blake?"

He ignored her, slumping back in his seat, head in hands, the thoughts circling around and around in his mind, howling dervishes all. With his eyes closed, he could see the void, the great dark that crept the edges of the Galaxy. Avon, alone, out in that, running, hiding, refusing to bear the blood that Blake wanted spilled. Willing to risk his own, to avoid it. To avoid Blake himself...

Effacingly, Vila simply got up from his seat and wandered, barely coherent, to a cool, soothingly dark cabin. Avon's cabin. He crawled into the bed, bringing covers up to cocoon him, enveloping him in the lingering traces of Avon. If only he had said something, if only he had helped more, if only he had been enough...

Hemmed in by the hull on one side, the supplies stacked behind and Orac crammed on the other side, Avon stared out the view screen at the unspeckled darkness beyond. Not much of a ship, but he did have one hell of a computer, which gave him a 50-50 chance. As he had said to Vila, death was the greatest kick of all. He had just never included himself with the gamblers before, that's all. At least, not until Blake had demanded a billion heads on a silver platter, and Vila had started tantalising him with Service again... And certainly, never worth gambling when the stake was his own life, until Blake had whetted his lust again, the taste of blood savoury sweet on his lips. He closed his eyes then, shutting out the view outside the screen and his own reflection staring at him with such bitterly suspicious wariness. The thought invaded his mind again, of himself as he had been, of what he would...
become, were he to have stayed with Blake and Vila, of what he had as his heritage…

His reflection staring back at him, he looked out at the great unknown again and smiled.

*Oh, yes,* he thought with something akin to relief, *better the devil you don’t know than the one you do…*