IN VITRO

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

GLASS HOUSE
K. THOMAS & D. D. M.

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

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

Behind him, the door swung closed and locked.

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

Barefoot, Avon padded forward through plush sable black carpet. His owners usually left him some sort of costume, and he preferred to cover his nakedness as long as he could. Remembrance of months of futile struggle and failed resistance kept his face impassive. Somebody would be watching him, and he didn’t intend to let anyone witness his emotions.

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

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

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

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

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

“Avon.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Avon watched in mounting fear; abruptly he turned his back to Blake. “Don’t be difficult, Avon.” Blake’s hands slipped under the tunic, rubbing Avon’s stomach. “You have to respond,” he said under his breath, “that’s part of it.”

“I always do,” Avon said bitterly.

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

“No. They don’t need to drug me any more.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He flinched when Blake explored the fading greenish bruise on his right shoulder. He forced himself to meet Blake’s eyes, to confront the shock and pity he knew he would find, where once there had been respect and admiration.
Oh, yes, the strangers who came and went could hurt him, degrade his body in ways he hadn’t known existed, but of course Blake, who knew him, would inflict the most subtle of tortures: kindness.

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

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

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

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

“More, much more,” Blake said in a near-whisper, “but not less.” He bent his head and pressed his mouth to Avon’s, licking at his lips; remained unspoken. He wanted desperately to explain, to tell Blake how long and hard he had fought. No, it was no use saying anything at all, for in the end he had succumbed like every one else, hadn’t he? He’d learnt to live with the self-loathing, but that Blake should see how far he had sunk tore the crust of apathy from his humiliation and left it fresh and raw and bleeding.

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

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

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

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

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

“Blake. Hit me.”

“No.”

“Please.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is.”

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

“Do it.”

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

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

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

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

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

“You know what happens next,” Blake said, as if he’d overheard.

“Yes.”
Blake gripped his shoulders and whispered, “I’m going to get you out of here.”

“Of course you are.”

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

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

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

Uncomprehending, Avon recalled the madam’s cynical assessment. “But Avon, you suffer so beautifully.”

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

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

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

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

“But Avon, you suffer so beautifully.”

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

“You’re actually adjusting to the environment.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With a cry of pain, Blake grabbed at his wrist and squeezed his eyes shut. Punishment for any transgression was always swift and
inevitable. Blake relaxed again after a few seconds; clearly only a small reminder.

“That was pointless,” Avon observed.

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

“For the moment.”

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

“Then what?”

“Go back to the revolution. What else?”


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

“What good would I be to you—now?”

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

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

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

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

“Oh, I can.”

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

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

It seemed absurd that Avon—the quintessentially elegant Kerr Avon—should snore, but he did, albeit with delicacy and refinement, a display of the profundity of sleep, not the coarse abandonment of lesser mortals. He lay, asprawl and propped up on a pile of pillows, his only covering the darkness of hair that highlighted his body like kisses dropped with sweet profusion. The burnished light of the window followed the highways and by-ways of his body, drawing the eye to a curve here, a convexity of muscle there, the blush of summer’s heat where it lingered, there, and there, bringing a touch of rose to the alabaster skin. A glistering of sweat bejewelled his groin, the silver shimmering counterpoint to the darkness of curls and the pinkness of cock. It lay, drowsing lazily, in the hollow of Avon’s hip, that grooved valley which led the mind and eye down to the very centre of his body, defining the line between the breadth of torso and the beauty of groin. Deep within his sleep, Avon shifted, the subtle breath of fantasy moving him, left leg turning slightly, cock hesitating a moment behind. The dampness of his body clutched at his cock, holding it still for a second, trapping the foreskin so that the pretty pink mouth of his cock peeped out for an instant to pout, coyly, invitingly, before another restless breath freed the skin to flow back, whisperingly, like a lover, to hood the velvet cockhead once more. A flare of lightning twinkled amidst the glowing blackness of the gloaming clouds, the brilliance illuminating Avon as the work of art he surely was. Then came the hollow-belly rumble of thunder and with it, an irritated tightening of Avon’s lips,