T H A D B E E N W O R T H W A I T I N G F O R. Avon, standing before him, eyes like embers, slowly, so excruciatingly slowly, undressing. For him. Such delight, such joy, in watching Avon carefully, with such carefilled caution, unpeel the layers of his shell, garment by garment, leather tunic and linen shirt, until the stark black yielded to the harmony of tones that made his skin so alive, so...touchable. Helpless to resist, he reached out, only the very tips of his fingers brushing the nuance of hair on Avon's chest, ruffling the darkness, smiling in the light as he saw Avon's sudden intake of breath. Not unmoved, no. So a heart did beat beneath that igneous exterior: he had begun to think Avon nothing more than fire and bluster and a rock-hard core that would never soften to him. But his first impression was right: Avon needed love, and as is so often true of the desperate, he was too afraid to grab it when proffered him. Smiling still, Blake let his fingertips wreak havoc on Avon's left nipple, playing with it until it peaked, the flesh clustered round it rimpling. Oh, yes, Avon needed this. Needed the love, needed the passion, needed to be needed, but most of all, needed to be coerced and cajoled until he conceded the point. Not that he had cried pax easily—what was there about Avon that could be called easy, apart from his wit? And if one were to look, to peer behind the theatre mask, one would see that Avon's wit was perhaps the hardest of all. The original double-edged sword could not have cut more deeply, especially to the man who wielded it.

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

"Take off your trousers for me. There's no need to be shy, Avon, we're all boys together." "I rather more saw myself as a man. But then, perhaps you prefer to think of us as
Blake stared at him with enough tolerance that it bore the weight of rectitude. “Wasn’t that a bit unnecessarily vicious, even for a man trying so desperately to prove that he doesn’t need this at all?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Avon stared at him, and Blake gazed back, all warmth and twinkle, all confidence and certainty. “Or is is that you need to teach me to love? And I’ll tell you this right now, my ‘friend’. Love is the last thing I need to learn.”

He took a step back, breaking the simmering touch of their bodies, turning away from the magic of Blake’s eyes. “Love is something I mastered a long time ago.”

“Is it, Avon?” Blake reached out again, knowing what Avon needed, loath to leave Avon trapped in a world of lovelessness and distrust. If only Avon would lean on him, if only Avon would allow himself to trust, then what a vista would be opened before him. Blake stroked the knotted muscles that lay shadowed, little pools of tension, on the long leaness of Avon’s back. He remembered love, Blake did, although it was dimmer than it ought, and vaguer than he hoped. But he remembered the sweet pleasure, the singing happiness, the belonging that went hand in hand with love like the lovers it created. Remembered too, less dimly, the fury of the arguments that would lead to the searing heat of the recompense that always followed so quickly behind. There were no faces to go with these memories, but an occasional sound would haunt him, or the colour of an eye, or the way the light gleamed on hair. His breath would stop then, just for a second, whilst the pain thundered through him, jeering and screaming in chorus with his outraged fury and atavistic rage. It was those moments, those rare moments, when it was a toss of the coin whether he would want to kill, to destroy the Federation down into the rubbish it was—or whether he would throw it all over and run away, to look for the love he no longer knew, apart from the bitter ache of its absence. But he had Avon now, Avon of the dark eyes and darker humour, of dark clothes that hid such
exquisite whiteness of skin. Contrast, that was Avon, endless contradictions that swirled together in a maelstrom of fascination and potential. Oh, he had Avon all right, but the man standing with his back to him didn’t know it, not yet. There were cynics in this world, he thought, who were that way because they basically hated people. But his Avon, in him, it was something else entirely. Too little love, Blake saw, as if it were writ large and bold on Avon’s back, right down the centre of his yellow streak. For he was a coward, in Blake’s eyes, for as long as he refused love, for as long as he refused trust—and a beaten-down victim, for as long as he refused his freedom.

Blake kept his hands on Avon’s beautiful skin, caressing it in sweet gyres, in ellipses and cosine waves, the engineer adoring the perfect creation. Muscles were alive under his fingers, skin warm, blood beating, all of it living, all of it life itself. He, who’d lost so much of his life, thrived on it, inhaling the smell of it, the sharpness of sweat, the bluntness of soap, the elusiveness that was Avon himself. His lips found the alluring line of spine, and his mouth opened, tasting Avon, tasting his living flesh, Blake’s eyes closing, his breath cold and damp on the heat of Avon’s back.

“Stop it,” Avon said, without moving an inch, without freeing himself from the fragile embrace. “Don’t do this to me.”

“Bit late to come the frightened virgin, don’t you think?” Blake murmured against skin, smiling as it shivered. “But I suppose, in a way, you are. You may have had sex before, Avon, but I’m going to show you love. And it’s not, you know it’s more than that and that’s what terrifies you, isn’t it, Kerr?”

“Only if it were nothing more than common brotherhood, but it’s not, is it? You know it’s not, you know it’s more than that and that’s what terrifies you, isn’t it, Kerr?”

“Are you trying to tell me you love me?” So much shock, so much disbelief.

Blake heard that, and more, knowing in his bones that it only displayed how bleak and miserable a life Avon had led that the thought of someone loving him was so terribly astonishing. “Of course I do, Avon, of course I do.”

And Avon laughed. Outright, and loud. “Don’t be preposterous, Blake. What an incredibly stupid thing to say.”

“And why’s that?” Blake questioned, an upwelling of pity for this lonely and unloved man flowing through him, filling all the empty spaces left by the departure of his own love. All Avon needed was to be taught, to be shown that he was entitled to love and able to love. He’d be a different man then, set free in every way—apart from one, and with the two of them standing truly united, the Federation didn’t stand a chance. “You,” he said, kissing his way down Avon’s spine, lavishing attention on every disc and hollow, “are a very lovable man.”

“Oh, I couldn’t agree with you more. But as for you being in love with me—or when you say ‘love’, is it nothing more than the largesse messiahs always reserve for the masses?”

“Never thought you’d put yourself amongst the common herd.”

“But I didn’t—it is you who are trying to put me there.”

“I undressed myself, Blake, just as I came to you on my own terms. Fucking, that’s all it is. Nothing more, nothing less, but plain, old-fashioned fucking. Preferably without the proselytising, else I shall take my pleasure elsewhere.” He looked down at himself, to where his cock jutted from his body, stretching out to the tented front of Blake’s trousers, going back to look at the hunger in Blake’s eyes. “And I shall take yours with me, too.”

“Sorry,” Blake answered him, smiling at him, eyes crinkling with good humour and fingers tickling over sensitive skin, “but my prick’s rather attached to me.”

“Which I suppose makes sense, of a sort. You are a bit of a prick after all, aren’t you? But you’re obviously lacking in a certain ability to understand basic language, so I shall explain it to you. I shall leave, and find
someone else with whom to take my pleasure, and by doing so, I shall take your pleasure with me, because if all you have to have 'fun' with is yourself, then you are going to be a very disappointed man."

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

“I won’t forgive you anything.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Tell me something. Why is it that you are so ashamed of yourself? Why do you hate yourself so?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That it will never, ever go beyond fucking?” A bucket of cold water, dousing him, making him hard with anger, not lust. “Don’t try to manipulate me, Blake. You shall push me too far if you do.”
And then what? You’ll leave, so that I shall be no worse off than I am now? You’ve got me absolutely terrified, Avon. In fact, I think I shall have to lie down.” But before he did, he stripped, uncovering the smoothness of his skin and the arch of his cock, the heavy fecundity of balls and the richness of flesh. “In that case, I suppose,” he went on, becoming all the more conversational, as if lying naked, cock tapping the pit of his belly was worthy of no more mark than what was for dinner, “I shall have to do without then. Not entirely, of course,” and with this, his hand settled round his cock, teasing it, then gripping harder, the other hand coming to roll his balls and tease at his own rump, “I’m sure I can think of something to do with myself. After all, I’m not afraid of having a bit of pleasure with someone I care about, even if that is me.”

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

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

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

“But you won’t rule out the possibility of seeing the light at some point in the future?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“T’m no hero, Avon and—”

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

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

Blake saw the resolve in those transforming brown eyes weaken, saw when the battering ram of his endless words began first to dent the great doors that kept Avon shut in and trapped. “Me. But that’s because what I have to say is worth repeating.”

“And what I have is not?”

Another smile, but this time it was not his own cock that Blake touched, but Avon’s; it was not his own equilibrium threatened by desire, but Avon’s. Oh, his love was so close, not just to the sex, but to the realisation that love was what mattered, that without it, life was only what the oppressors dictated it to be. Without it, the ego was only who the tyrant declared you to be. “I learned something from the Federation, you know,” he said, thumb causing havoc in the slit of Avon’s cock. “They taught me that what I thought I was didn’t really matter, because they could take me away and wipe me clean and then plant their own thoughts in me and the worst of it, Avon,” and he didn’t know that his hand stilled or that his eyes went as dead as pebbles on a bleak and abandoned winter’s beach, “the very worst of it was that they could do it as often as they wanted to, and I’d never be any the wiser. I don’t know how many times they did it to me, did you know that?” But he wasn’t looking at Avon, couldn’t look outside himself, when there was so much inside himself that might be fiction or fact, all tangled together in an insoluble mess. “But what I learned from them is what broke their control over me in the end. The ancient philosophers used to say that because we think, we exist. No Federation in their day, I suppose. But for me… I thought whatever they told me to think and thought that I was being me, that I was being original. I didn’t know… But then I found a way to break them, Avon.” He glowered upwards suddenly, hand tightening again, other hand coming up to stroke over erect nipples and swathe over stomach, “I realised that it wasn’t cogito ergo sum, it was amo ergo sum. That means—”

“That I wish it were,” said the esoterically educated Alpha, “cognito, ergo sum.”

“What?”

“Cognito—I know myself. And I do, Blake, I heartily wish you knew yourself even half as well.”

“Oh, Avon, I know parts of me that you don’t even know can exist in man.”

“Do I not indeed? Your ignorance stands proved.”

Lying there, with a naked and aroused Avon poised over him, Blake felt the blow to his stomach—the horrible realisation that he was a breath away from losing Avon. And that was not in the cards, not at all. He couldn’t lose Avon, simply couldn’t. If he couldn’t free Avon from the yoke the Federation had placed round his heart, then how the hell was he going to free the rest of the Galaxy from the noose around their neck? “Avon, Avon,” he whispered, instantly relegating the cerebral to where it belonged, bringing the carnal back into their bed, “don’t fret so. There’ll be time enough for all that. If you want it as just sex, then fine, that’s what it’ll be. And very good sex too, you can trust me on that.”

“And is there room for any more trust than that?”

“Oh, yes, there’s always room for trust.” He lifted his head, his hands urging Avon forward, until his mouth was filled with the hard delicacy of Avon’s cock, the scratch of pubic hair against his nose, the snub nuzzling of balls against his chin. He could hear Avon, the stifled sounds that were being strangled before they could betray Avon to Blake, and that made him smile. Only a matter of time, such a short time, before Avon wouldn’t feel that he had to remain silent, before Avon wouldn’t feel that he had to hide. Only a matter of time... But for the present, the future was all amorphous promise, whilst in this moment, Avon was heavy on his chest, pressing into his heart, and Avon was heavy in his mouth, pressing into his soul. He loved this, the intimacy and the closeness. He wanted so much more, and he knew that if they had it on the physical plane, then the emotional would surely follow. With yearning reluctance, he let Avon go, his head flopping back on the pillow, neck muscles complaining, mouth still salivating with pleasure. “I want to fuck you,” he said.

“And I don’t want to be fucked,” came the immediate retort and Blake could hear the
fear in that. Poor Avon, his poor Avon, to be so scared of vulnerability, of needing, of love. No matter. They had time enough.

“Then you shall fuck me.”

“Won’t that be a novel change.”

It would be so easy, he thought to himself, as they maneuvered themselves round on the bed, to get furious with Avon, but that was something he wasn’t about to do in here. The flight deck and everywhere else was the place to vent his spleen, to tell Avon a thing or two, to keep him in check. But in here, this was where their hearts had to lead. Or considering how emotionally crippled Avon was, where Blake’s heart had to lead them. No words then, for he might well make a sharp and nasty comment, might forget the lines of battle demarcation between them. Later, he told himself, later, later, later. Now it’s love, that’s what we’re working on here, that’s where I’m leading him here. Lose him now and you’ve lost him for good, in here and out in the world. Just love him, that’s all he needs.

No words, so he stole Avon’s weapons from him with the subtlety of the lamb, gone before Avon could even detect the soft touch. But his hands weren’t soft on Avon’s flesh, kneading and squeezing, moulding and rubbing. Marauding all over Avon’s skin, taking command of the powerful passion that erupted between them, all those banked fires exploding into a single conflagration, a burning heat Blake welcomed with open hand and greedy mouth, feasting on Avon. Sex was the coin of the moment, and he paid it willingly, feeding his love whilst he fed what Avon so deludedly thought was nothing more than lust. But, oh, how much more it was, how much more than anything Blake had ever imagined, even on the long nights of waiting for Avon to yield that last inch so that Blake could take that urgent mile. After this, how could Avon possibly deny that it was nothing but sex? You didn’t have this incandescent pleasure from just sex and you—

He thought he would dissolve from the delight of it. Avon was turning him, positioning him to plunder the body of love that was offered him. But there wasn’t the expected bluntness of cock cauterising its way into him. There was, instead, the wetness of tongue, of lips, of fine teeth nipping delicately, with such exquisite care, all around his buttocks and there, oh yes, there, at the bud of flesh that led inside him. Avon was—his heart threatened to stop: So it’s just sex, is it, Avon? D’you do this for everyone you tumble, my friend?—rimming him, tongue softening the tight muscle, pushing in, bringing light to the dark, making him so wet inside, so shiveringly, wondrously ready to be fucked. The tongue stayed there, fucking him, then there were sucking bites on the sensitised arsehole, hard enough to sting, soft enough to drive him half insane with need. He was a gibbering idiot, cock dribbling, arse drooling, empty inside, void, devoid, needing, needing—

And he was filled. Whole. Complete. United. All the fractured parts pulled together to form a whole, and he knew who he was. He had a name again, he had found his soul, and it was inside him, hot and alive. Moving, moving, as if breathing, as if panting after racing back into him from an eon away. He shoved backwards, wanting Avon deeper into him, wanting to feel Avon’s chest plastered to his back, surrounding him, swaddling him back to rebirth. This, oh, this was love, this was what it was all about, this was what would keep him sane and keep him strong and this was what would finally defeat the Federation and pay them back for what they’d done to him and all the others. But this was the perfection of his life, this was his heart come home to bring vitality back to the catacombs that he had wandered in, alone and grey, throughout his past. Now he had Avon, now he was complete. Now he had love, and could give it. And that love was plunging into him, pointed heat spearing him, gutting him, splitting him open and then salving the gaping hole, easing all the pain of a lifetime’s hurt, loving him.

He had known what Avon hadn’t known: he’d known that Avon could love, and did love, him. He’d known that all Avon needed was to be shown the right path and then he—Avon, Blake, with Avon in him, each was the other and both were one—would be free and alive.
Love plundering him, love stealing into his every cell, Blake keened his ecstasy, body singing the praises of the cock and the man joined to him. He could feel every jolt of hipbones into his upraised arse, every thrust that sent his prostate to heaven and turned his spine to jelly. And Avon was in him and over him, chest pressed to Blake’s sweating back, and Avon was around him, strong arms banding Blake’s chest, forearms pressed so hard and right on nipples that were screaming his pleasure. He knew — knew — the moment Avon came inside him, knew the moment when Avon’s seed, Avon’s life-force erupted into him, rebirthing him. Then, and only then, when he had his lover’s cum inside him, could his own cum splash from him in abrupt streamers of glory, all of him streaming from his own cock, as Avon streamed into him, endless circle, endless cycle of life and love and perfection.

There was a time that passed, unnoticed, unremarked, but existing nonetheless, while Blake lay sprawled and insensate on the bed, limp of body and spirit, sated and havened as no time in his living memory. The awakening was slow, languid, comfortable, an easing from one world into the next, from sleeping to waking, from dream to reality. Blake smiled, his first thought one of how much of a difference it was going to make to life to have a happy and loving Avon at his side. With that kind of backing, practical and emotional, what could possibly stand in his way? And if he did that, then he would, without the shadow of a doubt, pass this trial that Avon was putting him through. He should, he thought, running his hands through his hair as he went to cool off in the bath, have expected this kind of routine from Avon. There would have to be elaborate tests and constant questionings, like a child always asking ‘but why?’ And in love, he reminded himself, as he bathed and smoothed his hair, Avon is nothing more than a child. He dreaded to think what kind of childhood Avon had had, but he was willing to bet his life’s blood that it was abusive of the worst sort. Poor Avon, to have to carry that kind of thing around with you. Perhaps there was something, with a bitter humour that neither amused nor convinced him, to being mindwiped. But still, and this as he was putting clean clothes on, finalising the eradication from himself that Avon had ever been there, it was only a matter of time before Avon saw the light. Only a matter of time before Blake himself had passed all the tests and proved that Avon could trust him. The bed wanted making, so he started on it, dumping the covers on the floor so that he could fit fresh sheets to the bunk. And there it was, lying on the pillow, so quietly, so small, that at first he almost missed it. A single hair, straighter and darker than his own. He picked it up between thumb and forefinger, holding it up to the light. It was, he thought, an omen of a sort. No matter how silently Avon had slipped away, no matter how careful he had been to leave as if he’d never been there, no matter how hard he had tried to deny that any of this had ever happened, he had left a bit of himself behind. Only a strand of hair, true, but symbolic all the same.

Blake liked that, the fact that Avon had been powerless to make sure that all traces had been eliminated. A single strand of hair, but proof. Not even Avon could wipe the slate entirely clean, not when love was involved.

By the time he went through that door after Avon, Blake wasn’t foaming at the mouth to bring Avon back, he was whistling. If Avon had left a part of himself behind, it served to remind Blake that it was only a matter of time...
before what was left behind was Avon’s heart in Blake’s own capable hands.

It was an old tune he was whistling as he went towards the day and the flight deck, with Avon standing in the middle, and there was a spring to Blake’s step and a twinkle in his eyes. Oh, yes, it was only a matter of time. He knew he’d been right.

“Blake get tired of you then,” were the first words spoken when the door closed and Avon was inside.

“Shut up, Vila.”

“Give me one good reason why I should.”

“Because I’m too tired for any of your crap. Will that reason suffice?” He knew the reason itself wouldn’t, but the expression in his eyes would. Vila wasn’t a fool—well, not quite all of the time—and anyway, not even a fool would cross him in this mood. Bone weary, and not from physical exertion, Avon sat down on the room’s only chair, tugging his boots off, taking a moment before he pulled off his socks. Getting to his feet, he got rid of the rest of his clothes, looking again at the man who was lying in the bed. He half-smiled to himself—he knew that rightfully suspicious and wary look of old. And he deserved it, he thought to himself with habitual honesty. After this past year or so, I should consider myself lucky that Vila argues so little with me. After a bout with Blake, this dumb insolence is a welcome rest.

“Coming to bed are we?” Vila said to him.

“Hardly. In case you hadn’t noticed, you’re already in bed. I’m merely joining you.”

“What for?”

Avon did smile at that, rather fond of such uncomplicated suspicion, that came with no strings attached and none of Eros’ pointed barbs hovering in the wings. “Not the usual. He half-smiled to himself—he knew that rightfully suspicious and wary look of old. And he deserved it, he thought to himself with habitual honesty. After this past year or so, I should consider myself lucky that Vila argues so little with me. After a bout with Blake, this dumb insolence is a welcome rest.

“Coming to bed are we?” Vila said to him.

“Hardly. In case you hadn’t noticed, you’re already in bed. I’m merely joining you.”

“What for?”

Avon did smile at that, rather fond of such uncomplicated suspicion, that came with no strings attached and none of Eros’ pointed barbs hovering in the wings. “Not the usual. I’m too tired for athletics.”

“You’ve come here to sleep?” Well-practised, the shocked outrage rang true, even though both of them were well aware of how often Avon had come here for nothing more than precisely that—well, something considerably more than that, but that subject was taboo, verboten and Not Discussed.

“What else?” was the weary answer, his tiredness taking the usual snap out of his voice. Knowing Vila’s opinion of people who refused the luxury of never having to be in darkness, it didn’t even occur to him to put out the light, instead pulling the bedclothes back, oblivious to the natural way Vila slid out of the way, leaving him enough room to settle himself comfortably. The sheets were warm from Vila’s body and held a trace of the scent that Avon could—and did—recognise in the dark. Everyone, he thought sleepily, covers up under his chin, as he lay on his left side then tossed to his right, covers coming up to his ears, had their own unique smell and some of them were quite nice, really. Familiar. Like home. Like Mummy bringing me in a warm drink before I went to sleep or Daddy when he came home from work still smelling of the archives.

The source of the familiar scent was wrapping himself around Avon, as always and Avon, as always, relaxed into it, muscles limp and heavy, body shifting slightly to accommodate the arm that came round to encircle him. He was so tired, so terribly tired, and all he wanted to do was sleep in peace and quiet with no one to disturb him or bother him. What he wanted, was a respite from complication personified: Blake. He squirmed a little, not quite able to drop off, not quite able to let go. And then he heard it, the sound that signified security and safety and no questions asked. Vila, at his back, snoring softly. Half-asleep, Avon smiled to himself, amused by the gentle irony. He could never think with Vila snoring away in the corner, but he always dropped off the minute he heard that sound behind him. Habit, he supposed, with the last few thoughts that meander round before they get hopelessly lost in Morpheus’ maze, been doing it for so many years, it’s probably a conditioned reflex. Had he had the energy, he would have chuckled: and to think Mummy and Daddy thought he was my servant from University. If only they’d known… Best thief in the business. Quickest hands. Best hands. And never asks any questions. Never makes any demands. No strings. Not like Blake. Hang me one of these days with all those strings he’s got attached…
having to check his clock. It was there, in the feeling of the time, in the lifeless stillness of the ship. It was there in the feeling of solitude. It was there, in the utter silence that lay behind him. Now why the hell was Vila awake? Avon stayed as he was, not giving himself away, knowing Vila well enough that if he lay in wait, Vila would speak.

“You awake, Avon?”

“With you rattling on? What else could I be?”

No response to that, and Avon began to drift back to sleep, deciding that if Vila wanted to speak he would, and nothing Avon could do would either prod him or silence him. But then, there was something else he knew about Vila, and that was that the thief used words mainly when he wanted to obfuscate the issue, but when he wanted to really communicate, well, that was best of all. There were small kisses on the nape of his neck, and a gentle hand roving his belly, tangling in hair, dipping into his navel. There were whispered endearments, all of them about how wonderful he was, and how beautiful. And strangest of all, when Vila said them, he believed him. His own perceptions of his faults seemed to be nothing more than the mist of false modesty, when faced with the obelisk certainty of Vila’s love for him. For it was that, pure and far from simple. He’d had years of this, basking in this reflection of his own glory, of refuelling in the arms of someone who was always so careful never to ask anything of him—even tacitly. It was balm, albeit clothed in guilt, and one he was never quite able to refuse. Nor one he ever wanted to refuse, until the pricklings of his conscience bothered him.

Still, for all it was a guilty pleasure, it was still purer and simpler than the quicksand treacle he was always on the verge on drowning in. Blake. How he wished he’d never met the man—and how he wished he would never see him leave. But Blake was on the flight deck, poring over yet more plans for what they would do now that Docholli had told them the what and the where, setting them upon the helter-skelter slipperiness of their long road to Star One. Not something that he himself had mutated into, that he would consider sitting back whilst the lives of billions were destroyed and all because of—

He didn’t know.

Blake knew, and when he heard it from Blake, it made such flawless sense, such perfectly emotional logic, but away from him...

Away from him, he had Vila, who was warm and loving and undemanding. Who was willing to let him bury his doubts in the heat of flesh without demanding emotional brouhahas before, after and during. Avon flexed his back, well aware of how sexy Vila found the play of muscle, knowing with the reassurance of long practise that Vila would push coverings aside and then slide—like that, perfectly—down his back, nibbling and sucking and kissing. He loved being rimmed, which was handy, he always thought, for Vila loved rimming him. Said he loved the intimacy which, despite Blake’s convictions to the opposite, was something Avon understood consummately. Still, there had been too much of a tangled web ensnaring his feet today, too many months of the running emotional battle between himself and Blake for this silent worship from Vila’s mouth to be enough.

“Get up here, Restal,” he said, being very deliberate to keep his own dark mood from his voice: the last thing he needed was a maudlin Vila. “No, not like that, stupid, over here, on top of me, where I can kiss you. Ah, the penny drops, does it?”

“That’s not a penny, Kerr” Vila answered, smiling although his eyes remained as sombre as the room. “That,” he went on, settling himself more perfectly over Avon, until they were chest to chest and cock to cock, “is my dick. And I haven’t dropped it. Not that I’d noticed anyway. Should check though,” he said with the proper edge of comical melancholy, undulating his hips. “You planning on picking it up for me?”

“Oh, I might be persuaded. What’s in it for me?”

“Three gallons of spunk. Fancy some, do you? Or’d you rather make a deposit?”

“I’m getting rather low—”

“Getting? Hah! You’ve been low—”

“Since I started to follow your example.”
Avon dropped the kidding, his heart far from in it, preferring this night to be spent on something a sight more important than chatter. He framed Vila’s face with his hands, staring up intently at the man over him. “I could kiss you forever,” he said, meaning it, as long as he didn’t think about Blake, as long as he didn’t think about the inadequacy of his feelings compared to Vila’s. But Vila understood, didn’t he? Didn’t he always? “I could eat you up,” he said, the compliments easier to pay than the penalty of love. “Devour you.”

“Yeh, right,” Vila sneered at him, smiling properly now, slipping into the old game with an ease he’d thought forgotten in the drear time since last they’d played this happy routine. “You know what you are, Kerr? A tease. A fucking prick tease. You’re just all mouth and trousers.

“Would you rather all I did was hold your hand and keep my mouth and the contents of my trousers to myself?”

“I’d rather,” Vila said, sounding dauntingly like Avon himself, “that you’d shut the fuck up and let me fuck you, that’s what. And we’ll start with the kissing, if it’s not too much trouble, Kerr, you lazy Alpha snob.”

“You’re always trouble, Vila,” Avon told him, annoyed with himself when he saw the effect his words had. Stupid of him to stay away for so long and then think a couple of compliments would usher his way back in to the sexual side of things. If he were going to try bribery, he’d be better off crossing Vila’s palm with silver. Or perhaps not. That kind of thing could still cut Vila to the quick, and then where would he be? Stuck on the ship with no-one to turn to but Blake. Not a happy prospect, not when he was so…afraid of Blake. Oh, not for the man’s zealousness, although that should be enough to terrify any other—sensible—man. No, it was the way it was becoming so appallingly difficult not to tell Blake all the heart-shaped insanities he demanded every time. And so difficult to keep their…sport with each other from getting completely out of hand.

And Vila, he noted, was tired of waiting for him to finish his thinking and was leaning down to kiss him. He opened his mouth, inviting Vila in, giving him intimacy where he couldn’t give love. Love had been something that had belonged with Anna, and for all he’d always been fond of Vila, there were neither doubts nor misapprehensions between them. He provided the sex and the friendship, Vila provided the love. It was enough, usually. Had always been enough. Until Blake. First time there’d ever been some doubt that he would return to Vila after the current passion burnt itself out.

“You’re thinking about Anna, aren’t you, Kerr?” Vila whispered against his cheek, tongue flickering out to lick him.

Actually, some of what he was thinking about was how much Vila relished using his given name. ‘Kerr’, coming from Vila, always sounded suspiciously like ‘love’. But not that Vila would say it, and not that Avon would ever express his opinion either. “I was thinking about how I never stopped sleeping with you even when I was in love with her.”

It was fascinating, really, to watch the unspoken words be heard by someone who would never answer them. Illuminating, to watch the way that vague compliment hardened under the danger of Vila’s youth. But then, he had been wrong. The unspoken was being spoken about. “I don’t want to talk about Blake, not now. D’you hear me, Kerr? You want to talk about Blake, you can just fuck off and find Cally or Jenna, all right? If you want me, you leave that bastard outside that sodding door!”

“Shh,” he soothed, willing to let the subject of Blake drop—Blake was the last thing he felt up to dealing with these days. Even imploding Star One was a more comfortable topic right now. “I won’t mention him if you won’t. Let’s make it just the two of us, as usual.”

“It was fascinating, really, to watch the unspoken words be heard by someone who would never answer them. Illuminating, to watch the way that vague compliment hardened under the danger of Vila’s youth. But then, he had been wrong. The unspoken was being spoken about. “I don’t want to talk about Blake, not now. D’you hear me, Kerr? You want to talk about Blake, you can just fuck off and find Cally or Jenna, all right? If you want me, you leave that bastard outside that sodding door!”

“Shh,” he soothed, willing to let the subject of Blake drop—Blake was the last thing he felt up to dealing with these days. Even imploding Star One was a more comfortable topic right now. “I won’t mention him if you won’t. Let’s make it just the two of us, as usual.”

“If you want it.”

“If you want it.”

“If you want it.”

“It was to his credit, Avon thought, that he doesn’t even begin to hint at how big a lie that is. “Then we’re all settled then.” He spread his legs, enjoying the simple pleasure of feeling Vila’s hardness settle between his cheeks, wonderful promise rubbing at him. He cradled Vila’s face, joining them at the mouth, kissing him, as he had said, as if it were forever. There were fireworks, of a sexual sort, with Vila, but
never the emotional bonfires that marked his time with the Annas and Blakes of this life. But it was sweet, and Vila was sweeter, but not yet so sweet as the gathering glow of pleasure in his cock. He lifted his hips higher, wrapping his legs round Vila, making it abundantly clear that this was one night where there would be no need for long drawn-out advances. Simple and plain, that was how he wanted it. Uncomplicated, or as uncomplicated as anything in his life could be, these days. Just him and Vila and their delight in each other’s bodies, and Vila’s love gift-wraping it all up for special, adding a luminosity to the passion. He had Vila’s tongue in his mouth, and Vila’s cock knocking at the back door of his body, the slickness of pre-cum wetting him, whilst the sure strokings of Vila’s hands on his flesh whetted his appetite for more.

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

“Don’t say it,” he told Avon. “Don’t say anything at all.”

Would the fool never learn?

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

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

Avon’s eyes fell closed and his head fell back, rubbing, rubbing on the pillow as the cock inside him rubbed and rubbed on his prostate. He knew if he moved just—so—his cock would be caught between his own belly and Vila’s, pressing it tight, pubic hair caressing it, flesh squeezing it. Perfect, it was perfect, and all the ecstasy was enfolded by the endless stream of words, by all the things that Vila always told him. Everything, apart
from the few words that they both knew were a modern Pandora’s box. He didn’t want to think, had to do too much of that with Blake, but this was Vila, no Blake in here, no Blake’s games, no Blake’s demands. Just Vila, who was in him and around him and all over him, keeping him safe, keeping him buoyed up on all that love. His cock was throbbing, cum oozing from the slit, his balls curled up tight and cosy and snug at the base of his cock. Orgasm was pooling in his belly, and he knew that Vila was almost there. Could feel it in the cock that was in him, could feel it in the uneven rhythm of Vila’s fucking him, could feel it in the tension of the tendons under his hands. He grabbed Vila, pulling him in even closer, wrapping his legs a little more tightly around lean hips. Close enough, now, to breathe each other’s breath. Close enough, now, to kiss. And how he wanted to. To kiss, whilst they came, feeding one into the other. To give back, that way at least, some of the love Vila lavished on him. Mouth to mouth, tongues brushing each other, orgasm rushed through them, cum erupting from them, both stiffening, helplessly, for an instant, then moving, Avon yearning upwards to meet those last, deepest thrusts, holding Vila inside tighter and tighter, unwilling to let him go whilst the incandescence of orgasm rippled through him.

Like everything, it ended, and with its passing, melancholy was heralded in. Vila was still on him, but no longer in him, their bodes no longer a part of each other. Nothing now, save a lingering thrum of pleasure, here, and here. Nothing to show how much love had been spilled inside Avon, and how much of that love had been accepted the same way it had been given: no strings attached. With a gentleness that would have shocked Blake, Avon stroked Vila’s hair, pampering him shamelessly.

“Nice, that.” Vila said, and Avon wasn’t sure if he meant the sex or the…oh, go on, admit it…the cuddling after.

“Yes,” meaning either, or both.

“Very pleasant.”

“Yes.”

And let’s just leave it at that, shall we, Vila, he thought, even though Vila never had. He’d just become so used to Blake and all that went with him, that something akin to reticence was pearl beyond price right now. But the skin under his hands was covering tense muscle, not the almost liquid satiation that was usual for Vila. In fact, Avon had lost count of the number of times he’d joked about Vila being so relaxed, he was in danger of falling right out the bed. Which was when Vila would tell him that he’d better hold on tight to him then... The gentling sweeps of his hands never paused, while he lay there on his back, contemplating the ceiling and Vila. The last thing he needed was more complications. After all, wasn’t that Blake’s sole purpose in life? Vila shifted, settling more comfortably, curling up around Avon, nuzzling into his shoulder, getting cosy for the night. No different, on the surface, from any of the other times they’d shared together. No different, apart from the fact that it had been so long since they’d done this, and no different from the fact that Vila was lying on top of him, not in the more usual limp sprawl, but in this tense holding on tight.

“I’m not going to leave,” Avon said on a sigh that was supposed to be irritated.

“Aren’t you?” burst out of Vila before he could stop it. Then: “Sorry. Shouldn’t’ve said that, I know better than to ask you for that kind of thing. Just ignore me, I’m just being stupid as usual.”

And what was he supposed to say to that? Agree, and not only would Vila be wounded, but he’d probably be thrown out on his ear—well, Vila would start a scene and I would end it by stalking out of here on my dignity, would be a better way of putting it, he thought. And were he to argue the point… False hopes, yet again. There were so many things they never spoke of, but at least they told no lies, at least they had no illusions. So best then, as always, to say nothing, to let the words hang between them, to lie here and contemplate the ceiling and Vila’s weight on him and Vila’s hair where it tickled his throat. Lie there and let his mind wind down until he could sleep again.

An elbow in his ribs, a knee on his inner thigh, a hand on his belly, and before the discomfort could fade, Vila was gone, curled
up like a mollusc in the bed beside him, all protective shell and 'don't look at me'. Separate now, they lay there, Avon listening to the silence, contemplating what had to be the most boring ceiling he had ever seen. As if it were mere chance or purest happenstance, his left hand moved a couple of inches, just enough for his little finger to touch Vila's warmth, the tip of his hand tracing soothing circles in the small of Vila's back.

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

"You're babbling, Vila."

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

"Oh, you can ask anything you want."

"As long as I don't expect an answer, eh?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But I don't stay with him," Vila said, rather surprised. "I stay with you."

"Ah." Not quite what he had wanted to
hearing. “Yes.” Not quite what he had expected to hear. “Well.” And how blinkered and stupid of him not to have known. “If I were to leave?”

“Blake wouldn’t see me for dust. I think.”

“You think?”

“Sometimes, yeh, actually, I do. Not when it comes down to sex with you, mind.”

“But,” Avon went on, nimbly side-stepping any reference to his relationship with Vila, “even were I to leave, you might stay?”

“Don’t know, really. I think I’d stay to see Star One to the end. If what we’re going to do there’s right, that is. After that... Well, it’d depend on you, then, wouldn’t it?”

Here it came, like a mutoid taking careful aim.

“If I had to go on my own, then I wouldn’t, I’d stay. If I could go with you, then I wouldn’t stay, I’d go.”

“And if I left without telling you?”

“I’d do Blake in. Or steal some treasure from the store room and pay some big bloke to do it for me.”

“Now, now, Vila, you mustn’t say such nasty things about our Fearless Leader and Great Hero, must you?”

“Why not—you do.”

“Ah, but I was thinking about doing it myself, instead of wasting perfectly good money.”

“But you don’t want to do away with him at all, do you?”

“If it got me this ship? Of course I would, and without a second’s hesitation.”

Vila didn’t actually say anything, but they both heard the ‘why don’t you?’. But of course, Avon himself didn’t know why. Perhaps his perversity was showing, perhaps he liked the battle with Blake more than the sweetness of life with a lover. Or perhaps he liked the idea that Blake, of all people, was trying to teach him how to love. The absurdity of that never failed to amuse him—apart, of course, from the times when it depressed him.

“You’re thinking about Blake again, aren’t you?”

The last thing he needed was Vila becoming philosophical on him. A philosophical Vila was a dangerously perceptive Vila. And if Avon hadn’t admitted the answers to himself already, then hearing them from Vila was too unnerving for words.

“Shut up and go to sleep,” he said, wanting this conversation and this topic ended now, before it went too far. Before it made him think, before it made him feel...

He felt Vila start to pull away from him, warmth and comfort being tugged from his embrace. “Why don’t you stay where you are, it’ll save time in the morning. Unless you don’t think you’ll be up to another round then?” Vila sank back into his arms, closer than before, a sigh gusting damply into the crook of Avon’s neck. If there was one certainty left in this world, he thought, it’s Vila. Just say the right words, push the proper buttons—and his hands kneaded Vila’s buttocks, fingertips dipping to brush promise against anus—and he comes to heel with his tongue hanging out. Which was more than he could say for Blake. Or was it less than he could say about Blake? Either way, there was no controlling Blake, no predicting him. No understanding him, or himself, for that matter. He turned the problem over and over in his mind, looking at it again and again, trying to unravel the cipher of why he stayed with Blake and allowed himself to be led. All the usual answers were there, of mutual protection, of the ship, of the money in the store room, of the absence of a suitable bolt-hole. More answers, lesser answers also, but none of them—quite—rang true. There was something else...

It lay gleaming in the unfrequented dark caves of his mind, pearl before swine, sitting there waiting to be picked up and seen. It was noticed, by Avon, who approached it, drawn by the light of its revelation. As he neared, he began to see its form and—

He turned away from it, resolute, unwilling to find that gem of wisdom. He didn’t, he discovered, want to know. The hint was horrifying enough. Vila was snoring again, somnambulant and soporific, dragging Avon away from his thoughts. Automatically, he held Vila a little tighter, melting into the warmth that was canopying him, rubbing his cheek on the softness of Vila’s hair. Now what was it he had been thinking? But he was sleepier than ever, with Vila snoring so gently, as hot summer afternoon a sound as a cat...
purring. Impossible to think, with Vila snor-
ing like that, so obviously utterly content in
the sweetest of dreams. So hard to stay awake
and think about Blake and all the rest of it…

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

He was entitled to resent Blake as much as he
wanted to, in his opinion, not that anyone but
himself ever listened to his opinion. Which just
went to show what stupid bastards they all
were, didn’t it? In his opinion, which didn’t
matter.

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

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

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

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

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

But perhaps there were safeguard controls
on Earth, to take over if Star One failed?
Maybe there would still be a planet left when
Avon got his fucking ship and dumped Blake.
There was an expression of stupidity on his face and a sneer in his mind as he thought about that. Just went to show how stupid Jenna was if she had to ask how come Avon got the ship and she didn’t. Because you, my dear, didn’t fuck Blake on a regular basis. Shit, if that’s all it took, he would’ve fucked Blake. And once he had the ship, then watch Avon try to leave him.

That was what was next, he was positive about it. Even with Avon back in his bed, on and off, even with Avon shouting about how he couldn’t wait to get rid of Blake—of how he wanted it ‘over’ and wanted to be ‘free’ of Blake—ha, bloody, ha. Avon couldn’t leave Blake, not for love nor money. And Vila knew—he’d tried both. At least Avon hadn’t laughed at him. But he hadn’t come to him as often as he had before. He’d even seen more of him when Bitch Queen had been on the scene. Going on at him like that—Vila had never seen the like. So everyone—well, a couple of people—knew that Kerr Avon was one of what used to be the Avon family, before the Federation had nobbled his grandfather. Or was it great-grandfather? Whichever one it was, the rest of them had all seen sense, and so had Avon, more or less, until Princess Anna had got him all worked up about taking what he had been cheated out of. Vila was willing to bet every credit he could steal in his life that Anna had been more interested in how Avon was going to get round the Banking computer system than she was in Avon’s inheritance. She’d hated her, but not as much as he hated Blake. These days, anyway.

“Any chance of some soma, Cally?” he asked. “I’ve got a shocking headache.” “Oh, all right, Vila,” too distracted to pay much attention.

“Thanks very much,” for your condescension. Wasn’t fair, was it, that he was the only one who had to ask for the stuff. Wasn’t fair that no-one would listen if he said anything. Wasn’t fair that his whole family could be gone.

Wasn’t fair that Avon didn’t know love when he saw it. Typical stupid fucking Alpha. Thought love had to be all fireworks and Wagner. Now Vila, he couldn’t stand opera, he much preferred a nice tune that you could hum to, a nice tune that you could whistle cos you were happy. None of this dramatic crap. Look at them, doing the same mating dance round each other that they’ve been doing since the word go. Didn’t either one of them realise that they were supposed to stop that once they’d done the mating bit? Arrested development, that’s what it was. And macho bull-headedness. Digging at each other, all those nasty little comments, fighting over who loves who and how and how much, and not batting an eye that they’re using the whole fucking galaxy for a game-board. Why couldn’t they just play chess, like sensible people? Or why couldn’t they just agree to differ, split up and go their separate ways.

Vila would like that. But Avon would hate it and Avon wouldn’t be able to do it. Worst case of sexual obsession he’d ever seen—until he looked at Blake. Fuck it, but he wouldn’t want to be in Blake’s shoes when he woke up and realised what he’d done. And to think he was claiming to do this out of ‘love’
and for ‘their own good’. Sounded just like Servalan, that did.

Avon’s family would be gone too, he supposed, although that might not be such a loss. They were such a boring bunch, Avon the only one with a bit of life to him. The only dark one, too. The rest were all that in-bred, washed-out paleness, limp blond hair, watery blue eyes, receding chins. Not a backbone amongst them, apart from Avon. Real throw-back he was, spitting image of his grandfather—or was it his great-grandfather?—the one that’d got himself killed fighting the Federation when they framed him to get his inheritance. Rotten old bastard he’d been, from all accounts, but at least Avon had a human streak in him. Could be so affectionate when the notion took him. Generous, too, if you ignored all the camouflage crap that came out of his mouth. Not that he couldn’t be as bad as he said he was going to be, mind, but look at what happened at Horizon. Came down like a fucking angel and got them all out of there.

And then he’d been too wrapped up in Blake to give poor Vila any real attention. Why the hell do I have to love him. Vila thought for the nth time. Bloody stupid thing to do, really. Wish I could stop...

But he couldn’t, and there was no use crying over spilt milk, or the spilt blood of millions, was there? Not when you know no-one will listen. Not when you know no-one will really care.

And Avon and Blake were still at it, he noticed, with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. He wondered, idly, the soma seeping through his mind, if either one of those prats realised that they might be shouting at each other, but that in their own twisted little way, they were making love. Loudly. Bang, bang, bang, they go, fucking each other with words when they can’t use their cocks. Bet that’s what this is all about. Bet Blake doesn’t give a flying fuck about the people. Bet all he wants is one person, the one person that if he convinces him, then it’s all all right. Piles and piles and piles of bodies, just so Blake can say ‘I told you so’ to Avon. And Avon letting him do it, just so he can say the same thing to Blake. If it hadn’t been so horrific, he would have laughed out loud at that. He turned his drink this way and that, drunk enough to be fascinated by the beauty of the light flickering greenly. Maybe he should tell Kerr how lovely the soma looked, Kerr liked pretty things. But he was with Blake, so there wasn’t much point in him trying to interrupt, was there?

No use in much of anything, really.

So he turned his back on Avon and Blake and their endless love-making and went off to make friends with another wonderfully numbing bottle of soma, whilst the Universe went to hell in Avon’s and Blake’s handcart.