“We require,” the Ultra said, “for our library purposes, the Human Bonding Ceremony.”
Blake looked blank. “What’s that?”
He’s going to pretend he doesn’t know, Avon thought, and then a flash: he doesn’t know…

There was Blake standing there, chin lifted; such a large man, purposeful and strong, he could engulp this pale slip of an alien in a vortex of vitality.

And yet it was the pale alien, currently, who held every whip and every card.


Avon studied Blake briefly, then the wall. Blake was in charge here, or so he liked to think; let him act as if he were. Blake was frowning, restless. The alien delineated it again, with a cold patience which echoed many past encounters with beings of lesser intelligence. Blake interrupted the speech quite early on: “Yes, yes. I’m familiar with the process.”

The way Blake said it, with a sort of tetchy sarcasm, amused Avon, though he saw that Blake hadn’t intended to be funny. Blake was saying sharply, “I’m afraid you need to check your facts. There are two sexes of human: one of each is necessary.”

“No,” the alien said, with that utter impassivity which made Avon suspect some machine element in its makeup: “It is the Male Bonding Ceremony which we require. The reproduction ritual we already have in our library.”

Blake stared. “The Male—?” He uttered a short laugh, ran fingers through his hair. “I’m afraid there’s no such thing.”

“You are in error,” the alien said gravely. “Many are the references to it in your literature. Shakespeare, James Kirkup, Gordon Merrick.”

Blake, one pace in front of Avon, representing his own gang; he faced the alien in utter puzzlement. “Well, I’ve never heard of it.” He swung around. “Avon?”

Avon regarded him with irritation, uncertain from Blake’s cues whether this was the voice of bluff or naïvety.

“He means the practice of homosexuality, Blake.”

Blake stared, then he clapped a hand to his head. “Of course.” He even grinned. “Stupid of me. I thought he was on about some peculiar tribal ritual.”

Well, if Blake could find something to laugh at, all well and good. He certainly could not. Butterflies stirred in Avon’s well-schooled belly and a frisson of apprehension stung his skin like insects’ wings as he looked at the alien standing there, so similar to a machine, so implacable in its dedication to its programme, so unmovable, unreachable.

Then Blake understood.
“You can’t mean, you want me and Avon—”
No-one answered.

Blake exploded into futile action. “It’s absolutely out of the question,” he snapped, and began to pace up and down, up and down. “You don’t understand the implications. It’s quite impossible.”

“Then you will die,” the alien said simply.
"I'd rather die—" Blake began hotly, and then he stopped, glancing at Avon, clearly wondering just how far Avon's instinct for survival would take him.

"Would you, Blake?" Avon said to him harshly; "Would you really?" and Blake was silent, shook his head, for once in his life utterly at a loss. It was a neat dilemma. Even if he felt strongly enough to expire rather than comply, should he force the consequences of that choice on Avon, who might not?

The alien switched on a viewscreen. "The woman too will die."

And of course, that decided Blake as he gazed up at the wall, at golden Jenna, all unaware. Standing staunchly in her cell, looking doggedly for an escape, not knowing that it was in their hands all along.

They were left alone in a different room, a purpose-built specimen cell by the look of it. It contained a medicine shelf, a sink, and a bed.

As the door shut behind them, Blake glanced at Avon and turned away, his voice low. "I'm sorry, Avon."

"Don't be," Avon snapped, unaccountably irritated by Blake's assumption of responsibility; he watched the broad shoulders hunch defensively. With the deliberate intent to shock he said: "Shall we get on with it?" And turning one palm to the ceiling he flicked open the fastener of his suit, began to strip.

Blake turned, and looked and leapt, to stop him. "Wait a minute. Avon."

"What's the point of putting it off?" Avon rasped, an unpleasant smile shaping; he shook Blake's hand off.

"A moment, Avon," Blake said, one degree more forceful; the voice of his leader. Avon sighed and desisted.

"Don't tell me: you wanted to wait till you were married?"

Sarcasm was his way of coping; Blake's was somewhat different. Brushing off Avon's hostility as he so often did, he sat down on the bed, elbows on his knees, and looked up. "I'm not sure I can do it at all." His tone was open, confiding, as if he spoke to a friend: someone he liked, someone he trusted. Avon knew it was an act; Blake neither liked nor trusted him, or if he did he was a fool.

"What's this?" he sneered. "A mountain you are not prepared to scale? I'm sorry the view is not more to your taste." He stared at Blake with as much insolence as he could muster; he himself had strange, fleeting sexual whims and hatred would help him. Already, viewing Blake's panic, he felt a dizzying rush, adrenalin surging to his nerve-ends.

"I'm sorry, Avon," Blake said, calmly enough. He examined his palms, dried them on the soft cord of his trouser-legs. "I don't—" He veered off the subject abruptly. "What the hell do they want from us?"

Avon regarded him through hooded eyes. "You heard him. They've read the books." He smiled nastily. "Now they want to see the pictures."

Blake was still looking at him, hiding nothing, even, perhaps, Avon fancied, appealing to him to take the lead. "It's all very well letting you in for this—myself in for—" He stopped, then resumed—"without any real idea of whether we can—"

Avon did not help him out. Blake looked up at him again, his rugged Robin Hood face mild and curious. "How do you really feel about this, Avon?" was all he said, in the end.

Avon said, "What do you expect me to say, Blake, I've been waiting for the chance all along?" Making his point, his eyes flicked over Blake's dishevelled form with clear disinterest. "What I feel, precisely, is that this is something we have to do to get out of here alive. Nothing more, nothing less."

Blake was off in a world of his own. "I wouldn't do it—wouldn't make you do it—if it wasn't for Jenna."

"Oh really," Avon said tightly.

"She doesn't deserve—"

Bitter, Avon put himself nearer Blake and glared down. "Understand this, Blake. You're not making me do this. I'm not doing it for Jenna. I'm doing it for me. Because I want to get out of this place." Perversely, the dark eyes widened, a ripple of black humour softening the Stygian effect as an amusing thought occurred: "What a pity their file on human sexual reproduction is closed. Myself locked up in solitude. You and Jenna—forcing yourselves into a coupling distasteful to both of you—for my sake." His gaze, malicious, teased Blake: Avon had seen too many looks from one to the other, seen Blake too often visibly strain for the decision that it wouldn't work, that he and Jenna must deny themselves for the good of them all.
There was a little silence. Blake, his brow furrowed, looked down. “Or might that have been,” Avon mused wickedly, “a rather less—painful—sacrifice?”

“Shut up, Avon,” Blake said with the stirrings of violence. “I’d do the same for Cally. Or Vila. Any of you.”

The argument might well have continued, Avon being entertained by such things, and Blake unable to resist a spirited defence, but at that moment an alien voice billowed into the room, making them both start: “Is continual discussion a necessary part of the ritual? Recording has begun some minutes ago.”

Silence once more, and with it Blake’s rising temper smoothed out. He looked again at Avon with something approaching concession. “Well?” he said with a glimmer of humour. “That’s the time bell, I think.”

Avon nodded briefly, began again to attend to the fastenings of his clothes. He did it neatly, automatically, actions he had performed a thousand times before in the privacy of his room: his eyes were distant and shuttered.

Blake simply watched him. Trying—looking at the slender musculature of his thighs, darkly downed; the extreme white curve of his buttocks, the dusky outline of genitals suspended slackly beneath. Blake looked away abruptly, sharply gripped by revulsion. “I can’t—” he took a deep breath and said, quieter, “Avon, I’m sorry.”

Avon stared at him, naked and substantial, at the swell of his buttocks: a reclining cherubim awaiting his piercing. Probably an inspiring sight, for those that way inclined. A m I that way inclined? Avon wondered, his own nature a mystery to him, and it said nothing to him now.

Moving with instinct he put out one hand to touch Blake—withdrew it as if his skin was hot; then settled it, tentatively, on the small of Blake’s

“Use your imagination, Blake,” Avon snarled. But imagination seemed, on second thoughts, to be a force Blake had never exerted in this area. It seemed that Blake was a novice. A virgin, even. The thought of that was quite—something.

“Have you ever done this before?” Blake asked him calmly enough.

Avon smiled at him; a strange smile, almost sweet. “I don’t think that’s any of your business.” Blake eyed him; seemed about to say something, changed his mind. Avon moistened his lips delicately with his tongue; stared at Blake.

“Shall we get on with it?”

Blake started, then collected himself. “Yes... Yes, of course.” He began to strip, almost absentmindedly.

“What exactly—”

“Yes?” Avon enquired sarcastically, hungry for the contrast of his own cool with Blake’s floundering: such things fed so well the darkest, sweetest place inside himself. Blake shrugged off his white shirt, started on the fastenings of his trousers.

“—what, exactly, are we going to do?”

Avon sat on the bed, swung up his legs, and leaned back. “It depends, doesn’t it, on what they’re expecting.”

“Well?” Blake said sharply, not missing the way Avon was playing with him now, the way he was enjoying the rare sense of control. “You seem so damn sure of yourself, Avon, you tell me.”

“I’d say,” Avon said precisely, “that what they are expecting— is an approximation of heterosexual intercourse.” He grinned, ghostlike. “Wouldn’t you?”

Blake’s last garment fell to the floor; he strode to the bed and seized Avon by the upper arms. “Then you’d better get started—hadn’t you?” Avon looked at him, eyes narrowed, assessing Blake’s frame of mind. “I’m sorry,” Blake added, curtly. “I couldn’t.” And he let go of Avon, lay down on the bed, face down in complete and utter rejection.

Avon stared at Blake, naked and substantial, at the swell of his buttocks: a reclining cherubim awaiting his piercing. Probably an inspiring sight, for those that way inclined. Am I that way inclined? Avon wondered, his own nature a mystery to him, and it said nothing to him now.

Moving with instinct he put out one hand to touch Blake—withdraw it as if his skin was hot; then settled it, tentatively, on the small of Blake’s
back.

“Not just like that, Blake…”

After a moment Blake turned his head, one large brown eye appearing through the frame of his arm. “You too?” There was a definite softening; as if to discover that Avon shared his doubts was in some way a help to him.

“Just give me—” Avon managed, and then—“time.” With one hand on Blake’s shoulder he nudged him, gently enough, to lie on his back. Blake rolled willingly enough and lay propped with one hand behind his head, watching Avon’s face.

Conscious of time running out, all in a blur and a hurry Avon touched Blake; the satin softness of his skin, the ridged delicacy of bone beneath. His palm brushed over Blake’s breast, rubbing nipples; stroked down to his stomach. His eyes drifted from there to Blake’s cock lying there, as large as he might have imagined but drooping; his throat moved rapidly as he swallowed over sudden dryness.

“Avon,” Blake said softly, “you don’t have to—we’ll think of something else.”

“Like what,” Avon said, suddenly vicious. “Like what, Blake? What else have you to offer them?”

“We’ll wait. Stall for time. Maybe Vila—”

“—Vila won’t be back for 72 hours at the earliest.” Avon’s most disagreeable smile put in a fleeting appearance. “That’s a lot of foreplay, even for amateurs.”

“What’s the matter with you, Avon!” Blake said, angered as always by defeatism. “Anyone would think—” But he stopped himself.

Avon had caught it. “Well, they’d be wrong,” he said, low and dark and quiet. “You can hardly believe this is something I would choose.”

Oddly enough the statement calmed Blake; he nodded. “I think what we must do—is explain to them that it isn’t going to work. That humans of a certain sexual orientation are necessary. That it can’t be—”

“And what will the reward for that be, Blake?” Avon cut in, snipping. The answer to that was obvious. Blake said nothing. Avon continued, softly, with an odd little smile: “So if I were you, I think you should begin to consider—my finer points.”

“It’s not that I—”

Avon pushed Blake, with a trembling hand. “Lie down, Blake.” And, helpless, Blake did what Avon said, watching him through wide brown eyes, shutting them as Avon began to caress him, stroking his cheek, his chest, his thighs. Maybe, Blake thought, maybe it will be all right…

But the truth was, he had only ever felt a mild revulsion at the thought of another man’s touch: he fought an inner battle to subdue it which he seemed to be winning. Until he felt the brush of Avon’s mouth on his belly.

His mind flying, his eyes opened wide: he stillled the instinctive motion of his hand and brought it, instead, to rest, gently on the dark head hovering at his groin. “Avon—no.”

He could barely meet Avon’s eyes. “I couldn’t bear it,” he said simply. “I’m sorry.”

Avon’s eyes hardened and he lifted his head, sitting up, away from Blake. He looked—stiffened with dislike, with pride. Blake noticed the difficulty he was having to keep his breathing even, the stain of colour on his pale skin.

“This isn’t going to work for me,” he said, as gently as he could. “Nothing to do with you. I just can’t. But if you can—” he hesitated— “you go ahead.”

Such a delicate issue: but Avon merely stared at him, eyes filmed with thought.

Struggling in Avon’s silence, “Do you think you can?” Blake asked, but Avon didn’t reply. He got up, left the bed and went to the wall where he pressed a sensor to open the cupboard there. Looking into it he retrieved something and threw it towards the bed. Blake stared at it: it was a tube of some emollient cream. A cold sensation drenched the inner walls of his stomach, but he forced himself to be sensible. It really was the only way, and he should be grateful, relieved that Avon was taking things in hand: yet the flash of resentment took him by surprise, and took more quelling than it should.

Avon sorted quickly through the contents of the unit: medical supplies, obviously, for the use of the various specimens who had been coerced into performing for library purposes. Lubricants such as he had tossed to Blake, some drug-strips he guessed were contraceptive in purpose (one problem they wouldn’t have), a few packages he didn’t recognise; and one he thought he did. Because he was looking for it, or something like it.

He took it out and opened the little vial, sniffing it. He inserted a little finger and tentatively touched the point of his tongue to the white powder ad-
hering to it. Then he simply held it in his hand for a moment, thinking.

Eventually he went over to the bed and sat down again, next to Blake. He looked into the other man's face, a strange, searching look which made Blake frown.

“What's that?” he asked Avon, nodding at the vial.

“I believe it’s a derivative of one of the phyloxygen compounds, vaporous hydroxide most likely,” Avon answered him, precise as ever, adding: “But you might know it under another name. Have you heard of Rapture, Blake?”

“No—yes,” Blake said, recalling. A drug beloved of pleasure palaces, of (particularly) homosexual dives, which fact he knew only because habitual use had been the centre of a health scare some years ago.

“A useful prop,” Avon said, smiling faintly, “for when desire—or necessity in this case—outstrips performance.” And as he looked at Blake, an invitation, a suggestion, alight in his eyes.

Blake grabbed at the chance. “Yes, let’s do it.”

And Avon nodded once, took the stuff over to the sink and found the other things he needed in the cupboard.

“How do we take it?” Blake asked, brisk and purposeful now there was something positive to do. “Swallow it?”

“Intravenously is the traditional method,” Avon said with his back to Blake. “Phyloxygen compounds are partly destroyed by the action of digestive fluid.”

“If you say so,” Blake said. He did not ask Avon if he were sure that what he held was a harmless physical stimulant; an astonishing omission, Avon thought, since it might equally well be strychnine, almost identical in colour and texture. How Blake trusted him! It was almost amusing.

He mixed the substance with a little water and shook it vigorously to mix it. As he did so, it foamed and turned blue, thereby changing at a stroke the odds of it being a phyloxygen compound into a much greater likelihood that it was, instead, a simple sulphate of some metal salt, and thus of no use whatsoever for the purposes of sexual stimulation. No, it was most likely a simple hygiene preparation for scouring alien skins.

A setback, indeed. Avon stared at it in disgust. He opened his mouth to tell Blake, so content in the knowledge that a practical solution to their problem lay at hand—and then he shut his lips tight on it and said nothing. His back was to Blake. The mixture he poured down the sink, and rinsed away. He took out of the cupboard another, sterile vial, put into it a small amount of plain water. Then he took up a hypodermic syringe and went over to Blake.

“Give me your arm.” Blake extended it without hesitation and watched curiously as Avon searched with the pad of his thumb for the tender blue vein which lay in the crook of Blake’s arm. “Ready?” he asked, holding the spot with one hand, rubbing and pressing the vein to encourage it. He made a quick, trial shot with the syringe. A fine spray of drops went flying into the air.

Blake looked down at Avon leaning over him, noting the dark shine of his hair, the long straight nose, fine eyes shadowed by lengthy lashes. He did not blink as the sharp, glinting needle approached but watched steadily. Avon found the blue bulge of the vein with the tip of his needle and quickly eased it in. He looked up into Blake’s eyes as he pressed the tab on the syringe; the water flowed into Blake’s bloodstream and Avon smiled a little. Blake did not, just watched him soberly, trustfully.

Exhaling sharply, Avon withdrew the needle quickly. A bright red bead of blood appeared on the spot at once; Avon snatched it off with a scrap of lint and folded Blake’s arm back on itself. The fact that Blake would certainly be unaware of the erotic significance of all this rather amused Avon; it was not lost on himself.

He rinsed the needle and filed the vial again. A charade: and yet, the success of sexual function being largely lodged in the mind, he had the notion that placebo would serve very well. And afterwards, what a very handy scapegoat to pin the essential guilt upon.

He handed the equipment to Blake, and was gratified to see a flicker of alarm inform Blake’s eye. “I’m out of practice. Don’t want to hurt you. Would you rather do it yourself?”

“No,” Avon said, though he could perfectly well have done: he wanted Blake to do it. to force him to it, if necessary. But Blake took the syringe, handling it experimentally, getting the feel of it.

“Just make sure there’s no air in it,” Avon added, watching Blake through black, black eyes. “Unless, that is, you want to kill me.” And he smiled, a perverse humour dancing through his
gaze and out again, leaving it cold.

He extended his arm, and after a moment’s hesitation, scratching him, Blake’s needle pierced his skin roughly. It slid in, probed his vein for a moment of exquisite pain; and then the fluid flowed. He didn’t flinch, watched the last detail, just as Blake had. He could see the needle, darkening the vein from inside; and then it was pulled out, a disquieting sensation which caused him to shiver. He took a deep breath, watched his own blood flood to the site of invasion.

Blake had lain down on the bed, had his eyes closed, apparently meditating. As Avon tipped the equipment into the disposal chute, he wondered what the alien watchers would be making of this, the ingestion of pure water into their mutual veins, and he rehearsed the perfect answer—There is often an element of ritual sadism in human male bonding—but the question never came, so he supposed that they were free to get on with it, that there was no more reason to delay.

Blake was lying there, slow calm breaths lifting his broad chest, rocked now in the cradle of a fallacy; a sense that it was out of his hands now, that it would be all right. “I’m sorry, Avon,” he said, warm and affectionate. “To put you through all this—”

Avon shook his head and sat down beside Blake on the bed, turning over Blake’s hand to expose the tender crook of his arm; a little crust of blood topped the tiny pinprick hole. His own was slower to stop: trust Blake to have more robust defences.

“How long does it take to work?” Blake was asking.

“A minute,” Avon answered, touching his shoulder, and leaving his hand there. He smiled down at Blake: a disconcerting smile, the smile he must use, perhaps, to a woman in his bed. “But I think we should—get acquainted?”

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“Definitely,” Blake said as Avon touched him; he could feel the stuff beginning to work already, flowing fire through his veins like brandy. He sighed, and stretched under the gentle passes Avon’s fingertips made on his naked skin: it was intensely relaxing. As Avon’s delicate touch sent a thrill shivering across his ribs he closed his eyes, every nerve in his skin tingling sweetly, and it was easy, so very easy, with Rapture coursing through his blood to his heart, to accept the pleasure offered him from another man’s hand…

Avon massaged Blake’s thighs with the palms of his hands, watching with a detachment almost clinical the enlarging of Blake’s cock, stirring now, rearing as it made a blind search for the pleasure-giver; Avon wrapped his hand around it and held it tightly, silken skin moving over an iron shaft, velvet head nudging on his thumb. He settled into a more comfortable position beside Blake on the bed, lying on his side, finding an instinctive rhythm to please Blake, making his cock weep slick shinning drops onto his moving fingers. His emotions, fickle, flitted here and there: why was he doing this without resentment, without revulsion, for a man he did not like. And then the answer came. It was because his instincts told him that somewhere along the way there might be something in this for him, something he couldn’t quite define, some edge it might give him over Blake perhaps…

His eyes, narrowed and pensive, travelled over Blake’s face; a well-used face, carrying its baggage of stresslines, brown and springy curls ranged along the broad forehead, and a large and generous mouth. A curious face; the face of an honest man.

Avon’s gaze darkened as he looked upon Blake, troubled.

Everyone had the odd prick of conscience at times, gazing at a beggar in the street, a child who dully starved while your belly groaned with food; Avon, who considered himself to be an honest man also, knew that to act upon such stirrings was the mark of an idealistic fool.

Ah, but. The fact that some men—that this man—did not take the easy path of self disturbed Avon; it made him want to crawl into Blake and search out the truth of the man, so that it would no longer haunt him: purge the faint longing from his soul.

Perhaps this was the way.

Lost in his thoughts, he hadn’t noticed Blake’s eyes come open and dwell upon his face. It made him start, to look down and see it. A smile creased little lines around Blake’s eyes; and Blake’s hand went down to cover Avon’s on his shaft, urging a little more, a little harder. Then he reached out, wrapped a firm and capable hand around Avon’s cock, and squeezed.

Such an invasion: Avon stiffened in shock, glaring into Blake’s face. Then he shut his eyes slowly as Blake’s strong fingers wormed a sweet and willing flash through his cock; and something
he had never imagined began to happen to him.

Blake leaned towards him, quite naturally, as if Blake was a different person from the man who argued with him coldly and contemptuously; and kissed him.

Blake’s lips felt warmer than his own, and Blake’s tongue was gentle, hesitant, on his. Avon dragged his mouth away, and away again as Blake followed him: “No,” he said, violently and simply, and Blake watched him. A little sad, a little puzzled; Avon was a mystery to him.

Breathing rapidly, his mind a swirl of anger and longing, Avon looked down at himself, his cock an elegant dagger, rising high and searching. Then he looked up into Blake’s face again, and what he saw there stilled the words on Blake’s lips, even as Avon made the dreadful request: “Turn over.”

And after a moment Blake did so, rolling away from him and onto his stomach, settling himself comfortably. He turned his face to one side just as he had before, pillowed it on his arm. “Be quick, Avon,” the tense words floated back across to Avon.

Avon picked up the tube of gel and smiled sarcastically, grimly, to himself. Be quick. Fortunate Blake, to think it was going to be so simple. At this moment Avon would have given a great deal for a large shot of Rapture, or the like: he dreaded the humiliation of failure. He unscrewed the tube. The cream was scented: exotic stuff.

He looked at the cleft of Blake’s buttocks, forced himself to keep looking as he parted the crack with his thumbs.

But it really was nothing so very much to dread, just a secret valley hidden deep, and a small dusky-pink pucker, impossibly small and tight.

He covered his fingers with cream, stroked it softly into the place, heard Blake’s sigh of nerves. And as he pressed into the silky opening with a fingertip, a tremendous surge of feeling took him by surprise, seized his belly in a grip of anxious desire: failure might have been humiliating but this was almost a deeper shame, the boundless delight of his cock at the sight of Blake’s hidden opening, the terrible need to put it there.

He smiled tightly, grimly, to himself. Well, at least it was going to be possible.

More cream spurted from the tube and he eased it inside with one finger, two, silken walls gripping him; Blake sighed and shifted.

“All right?” Avon murmured to him.

Blake’s voice was gruff, reluctant, as if he didn’t want to talk. “Yes, it’s—go on.”

Avon covered himself densely with scented cream, took a deep breath. Blake lay on his stomach, a little to one side. Avon used his hands to part Blake’s buttocks again, and to position himself, the tip of his cock nudging the little wet ring of muscle, whipping up within him a strange and fierce delight: oh, there was no doubt now, he could do what Blake shied away from, his cock eager and almost desperate for what it sensed lay near.

For a moment a purely intellectual revulsion flickered through his mind again, but it could not take hold amid the stronger signs of joy pulsing upwards from his groin; and as he pressed his body against Blake’s his cock found passage suddenly and the thing was done.

Shock opened his eyes to their fullest extent; that and the terrible strain of holding himself back, as he knew he must. But he managed to stop, stopped all movement, dipped his head for a moment so that his face brushed the roughness of Blake’s hair. “All right?” he whispered again, hearing his own voice ragged and hoarse.

“Be—gentle, can you?” Blake said again, muffled; and this time it had a peculiar effect on Avon. In holding Blake thus, vulnerable and helpless, he felt a strange and hurtful tenderness for him. Like a mortal wound, it went very deep. And hit him very hard, the pleasure sweetened a thousandfold; Blake so very much in his hands and at his mercy.

“Oh—gently, Avon….”

It was hurting him: Avon could imagine it, his own feelings turned inside out, the knife in your guts. With that new and painful care for Blake Avon thrust in gentle rhythm and breathed in the savage glory of it: himself, screwing Blake. Their panting breaths, the slick sound of his skin rubbing on Blake’s as he moved, the warmth of Blake’s thighs around his own, the tight, tight honey creeping up his cock. After a little while Blake gasped, turning his head to one side—"Avon—" whether in pain or pleasure Avon couldn’t tell: but it brought into his mind from somewhere the words—I want to hurt you—to hurt Blake—just to hear you screaming my name… Pity for Blake burst over him like a wave, a deep and savage pity which only sharpened his own exquisite joy: he wanted to make Blake sweat, to cause him untold hurt: and then to soothe him, make him feel the
terrible wonder of it all; images danced before his eyes and Blake’s moans came to his ears like music…

With a stifled sound he reached around Blake’s body, his hand ranging restlessly over Blake’s nipples, his belly, then down to his poor sad cock, curled up afraid; thrusting into him from behind even as he worked on it swiftly, sweetly, handling Blake now with a rough, sure arrogance. And Blake responded to that, was beginning to thrust back against him in a rhythm all their own, the sweetest of harmonies, so that Avon felt himself fall into a black vortex at the very heart of Blake’s body: touching now all the secret places of Blake he had yearned without knowing to touch.

Love and terror and delight overwhelmed him: he heard the song again in his head and the rhythm went on and on. He kissed the sweetness of Blake’s skin and rode, exulting, on the wings of a terrible, terrifying desire: to hurt, to have, to own.

Inside his fingers Blake’s cock stiffened, and kissed his palm with something warm and wet, two, three…little pulses, dying away. It was the ultimate thing… Moved beyond thought Avon clasped Blake to him hard and thrust once more, breaking through some depth undreamed of, pouring all of himself out and into Blake in a rush of the purest and sweetest ecstasy he had known.

He was awakened from deep sleep by Blake’s voice—

“Excuse me.”

Avon opened his eyes, half awake, and looked into Blake’s face, very near to his own. “Sorry,” Blake said, with crisp apology, “Had to move—getting cramp in my arm.”

Instant remembrance now: he remembered that they were on a different planet, another world entirely, and he tracked Blake with his eyes before closing them.

The mortal wound he had suffered moved again inside him. He understood something now about himself.

About himself, and about Blake.

Blake was rolling away from him, beginning to sit up. “Blake,” Avon said, and laid a hand on Blake’s arm, traced the line of dark hair there. He wanted Blake to touch him as he had touched Blake, pay some service to this tremendous thing which had sprung into life: it would be difficult, of course, more difficult even than—Anna, but Blake was worth it just as she had been. Blake was as brave as he, and as strong: somehow, they would manage…brought together across the universe by impossible odds. He opened his eyes, and the world was in them.

Needling to wash, but hesitating to be so discourteous, Blake looked down into Avon’s eyes, and was dazzled by what he saw there, the deep softness of them. He smiled to himself; Avon’s dose of the drug must have been larger than his own, cobwebs still lingering in his system, making his eyes shine that way, his mouth a tender curve. Blake himself felt alert and clear, his mind sharp and the grip of Rapture completely gone. His body felt a little sore, but that was all. Not marked for life in any way. Funny, that he had thought in the depths of it he might be.

He shook his head. That had really been quite something!

“Certainly did the trick, eh Avon?” He patted Avon on the shoulder and got up.

Behind him Avon said slowly, “What?”

“That Rapture stuff. Certainly sent me to the sky and back.” He laughed, and shook his head.

Water ran into the sink. Blake buried his face in his wet hands and rinsed the sweat and salt away, but he was not insensitive, was suddenly uneasily conscious of the stillness of the man who lay on the bed. And, Blake decided, looking back on the sensual depths they had sunk to, no wonder. Avon was a civilised man: naturally he would be embarrassed. Best go easy on him for the next few days, give him a chance to forget, make it clear that he, Blake, was never going to remind him of this, the worst of times.

He swung around from the sink and began to put on his clothes. Try as he might he could think of nothing to say. The silence began to feel strained. What comfort had he to offer? Avon must be going through hell.

“You couldn’t help it, Avon. It was the drug…we both got carried away.”

For a moment he thought that Avon would not reply. He busied himself with dressing and did not look Avon’s way.

Then Avon said, “Of course.” It was Avon’s voice, and yet not Avon’s voice: an odd note rang in it. Desperately anxious to reassure him, Blake added: “I swear to you, Avon, it won’t make any difference. I do swear that.”
“Naturally,” Avon said. He was getting dressed, at highly efficient speed. Finished, neatly belted, he straightened himself up.

“Avon.”

Blake stopped him, looked into his face, saw how it had changed. No trace now of the drugged dazed softness of his eyes: vanished like smoke in the wind, Blake doubted now that he had ever seen it. Instead, they were cold, and black as death; the eyes of a daemon from Hell.

Shocked, frozen, for a moment Blake stood transfixed in the glare of the look those eyes flung at him; and then he shrugged it off, turned away, prepared to leave.

It was a look he was to see in Avon’s eyes just one more time.

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