“We require,” the Ultra said, “for our library purposes, the Human Bonding Ceremony.”

With varying degrees of unease, all three men in the small grey cell stared at the communications screen in the corner.

“Then I’m afraid you’re going to be disappointed,” Avon said urbanely, draping himself casually across the plump divan.

“Specify,” the Ultra said in the same monotone it used for everything from statements of fact to emergency warning announcements.

“The human bonding ceremony,” Avon intoned, a lecturer in a hall of half-wits, “requires one female and one male. As you can see,” his gesture encompassed himself and his two unmistakably male companions, “you have what could be called an embarrassment of riches.” A small, very sophisticated smile, a deprecation of the two men with him. “If one were accustomed to abject poverty, that is.”

“This is false,” the Ultra replied without looking up from the console in front of it. “We require the Human Bonding Ceremony. You will now proceed.”

“Don’t be stupid! You heard him, he says you need a woman and a man and for once in his life, Avon’s actually telling the truth!” Vila, from the corner where he was close-pressed to the wall, arms crossed protectively, right hand drifting down to cover his groin.

“This is false,” repeated, without inflection, without any interest in the beings it was addressing. “A male and female are required only for the Terran and/or Federation marriage ceremony and/or the reproduction of the species. We do not require this ceremony nor breeding at this time. We require only the Human Bonding Ceremony. You will now proceed.”

Fleeting baring of teeth, and then Avon was back to his usual controlled self, an expression of patient charm covering the truth of his emotions. He speared Blake with a glance, then went back to rationalising with an alien that was as literal and implacable as a machine. “This…Human Bonding Ceremony you seem in such dire need of. What is it…exactly?”

The alien attended to a light flashing on its console before it answered the subjects in Holding Cell 392. “It is the mating of humans.”

A half laugh, Avon not looking at either man in the room with him. “I rather thought you might say that. This mating you require—whom do you require to perform it?”

The question was unexpected; the alien withdrew, consulted, returned, all without the slightest flicker of expression.

Blake shuddered, felt the sweat prickle down his spine, memories crowding his mind. So much had been forgotten—why the hell couldn’t he forget what they had done to him when they were making him forget all the goodness in his life? None of his happinesses survived, but he could remember being surrounded by machines, and bland faces, bland voices, people as uncaring as this Ultra as they drove him mad with pain. Technicians discussing the small details of their
lives as they tore his mind to shreds—

The Ultra interrupted his thoughts. “You are the leader of this group.”

“See, Blake?” Avon, mocking him, but with a flicker in his eyes that Blake recognised as a snowflake of his own terror. “I told you they were intelligent.”

“You are required to perform,” the alien said, as if it had not even noticed the subject of its study had spoken, “with one other member of your group.”

“So you wish me,” Avon said carefully, with just an edge of complete disbelief, “to have sex with one of these two, and to do so while you not only watch me, but record all the details.”

“That is correct.” Another beep from the console, the alien giving that the bulk of its attention. “You are wasting time. Proceed.”

Silken voice, but with the sharpness of violence threatening to rip through. “And if I refuse?”

The voice was just as disinterested as it had been from the very start, cool, unperturbed by what it was doing, the extreme blandness adding weight to the threat. “You will be absorbed and the other subjects will perform instead.”

Don’t panic, Blake repeated to himself, don’t panic, don’t panic, don’t panic, don’t let them see the fear…

“And if I do as you…request?”

“You and your companions will be returned to your ship when full data has been gathered.”

A moment to stare at the image on the screen, and then Avon was on his feet, standing in the middle of the room, Vila and Blake watching him. His eyes held the beginning of wildness as he turned on Blake, words hissing from him. “You weren’t exactly helpful, were you, Fearless Leader? Or do you lead only when you will be fêted and covered with glory?”

Blake swallowed hard, made his face hard, showed none of the distress boiling in him as the Ultra stared down on him the same way the puppeteers had, as they destroyed him and then left without rebuilding the rubble. “You weren’t exactly helpful, were you, Fearless Leader? Or do you lead only when you will be fêted and covered with glory?”

Blake swallowed hard, made his face hard, showed none of the distress boiling in him as the Ultra stared down on him the same way the puppeteers had, as they destroyed him and then left without rebuilding the rubble. “You’ve been trying to usurp me from the very start,” he said, voice calmly hostile. “Now’s your chance.”

Avon stared at him, for once unable to think of so much as a single word for the occasion. Blake left him, a few measured steps taking him to the small ledge that stuck out from one wall.

Blake folded his arms and settled himself down to outstare Avon. And all the while, his heart was pounding and his palms were sweating, and he was thinking about what had been done to him…

“Well now,” Avon finally said, “depending on how you look at it, this is either a fate worse than death, or our ticket out of here.” With debonair ease that did not—quite—mask his own unease, Avon began slipping the seals on his black leather suit, hanging the jacket on a hook, sitting on the edge of the divan to begin working his boots off. He glanced quickly, almost nervously, at Blake. “If you don’t mind,” he said, and there was the smallest tremor in his voice, a betrayal of mingled fear and unholy, unspoken, desire, “I’d rather get this over and done with.”

Helpless, the panic clenched behind his teeth, Blake glowered at him. “No.”

Avon startled as if stung by the whip of that single word. “No? What the hell do you mean, ‘no’?”

“I think I made myself clear, Avon. No.” And Blake was proud of himself, the way none of his fear bled from him, how he betrayed none of the panic rotting his belly. Avon was attractive, enough to cause the familiar lick of desire in his belly. Even the power-play between them brought heat to his balls, his cock responding to the situation. But he knew better: too many humiliations after his ‘adjustment’, too many times his body had teased and tricked him and then let him down. Not with Avon. Never with Avon, who would laugh at him, or worse, pity him. And then rip him to shreds on the flight deck, what little power Blake held destroyed by his impotence. He drew himself to his full height, looked down on Avon, and said it again, stark, bare, cruel, as if it were absurd that anyone would choose to have sex with a man like Avon. “No.”

Eyes narrowed dangerously, Avon almost whispered: “A fate worse than death?” Not-quite laughter, a skeleton sound of unbirth. It was only then that Blake saw what had died between them: that forlorn trace of trust, a trust he had no idea Avon had ever harboured for him. He wanted to say something, but the moment was gone before he had time to do more than recognise what he had lost. Avon, quicksilver and darkness blended, had moved on, turning his back on Blake and any small goodness that might have been between them. “It seems,” Avon was saying grandly, “that this is your opportunity to be a hero, Vila. Even
you can do what our great leader couldn’t quite manage. It’s your chance,” and he looked, menacingly handsome, over his shoulder at a man he would never now choose to follow. “It’s your chance, Vila,” he said, but it was Blake he was talking to, Blake he was still looking at, “to prove that you have more…” and the vulgarity dripped from him like poison, burning Blake, “balls than he.”

“But in public, Avon?” Vila, whining, never a wise thing to do around Kerr Avon, and most especially not when his eyes were glittering with a complexity of emotion that was razor sharp and could be turned inward or outward with equal lethality.

Perhaps it was that he had been looking at Blake: today, Avon turned none of his anger on himself, immolating his companions instead. He snapped around, pinning Vila with his stare. “Surely you’re not going to pretend to be shy?” Now he was sneering, expression as nasty as his words, and the contained tempest of his emotions dominated the room. “I would have thought that you, Delta that you are, would be more than used to performing sex in public.” He ignored Vila’s flinch, stalked over to the divan, and began peeling off shirt and trousers, blackness folding away to unveil soft, white skin.

“Avon—” Blake’s voice cracked across the room, a protest, a rejection, a plea.

“Don’t say a word!” Avon whispered, his quietness more dangerous than any other man’s shout. “You’ve made your… a pause to display that he was sophisticated and confident enough that Blake’s rejection was nothing more than mere gauche inadequacy, “shall we say, position clear. You got us into this fiasco in the first place, and as usual, I shall be the one to get us out of here in one piece.” As coolly as if this were an everyday occurrence—and suddenly, absurdly, Blake found himself wondering if it were, if there were some secret between these two—Avon bent the full force of his leashed anger on Vila. “Haven’t you managed to master undressing yourself, or should I ask the Ultras to come in and help you?”

“Don’t remind me, Avon. I’d just started forgetting about them.” But he was pulling his shoes off, then his socks. Unlike Avon, there was nothing graceful about this, simply Vila standing, wobbling, in the middle of the room as he lifted first one foot and then the other. “Hate having to do this,” he was muttering to himself. “Not that it makes any difference round here, though, does it? Doesn’t matter how I feel about this or what it does to me. Oh, no, got to take care of poor old Blake, with all his delicate Alpha sensibilities, haven’t we? Never mind poor old Vila, well, not that I’m that old, any way.” He stopped, having run out of both words and clothing. Naked, swallowing hard, he walked over to Avon, appallingly aware of how limp his sex was, and how small in the cool air, and how absurd and unattractive he must look to Avon. Ah, Avon, now there was a sight for sore eyes! At the edge of the divan, Vila dithered, not quite sure what he should be doing next, and not sure if Avon wasn’t going to rip his head from his shoulders if Vila spent too much time staring at him.

“Well?” Avon said.

Not wanting to be accused of either staring or gazing raptly, Vila looked away from Avon, then wished he hadn’t: he had enough to think about without worrying about that tangled expression on Blake’s face. He shrugged, trying to be casual about all of this. “So how do you want me?” he asked.

“Precipitous and co-operative,” Avon answered drily. “Although you’re hardly likely to be either if you stay there. Absence,” he slanted a look at Blake, “may make the heart grow fonder, but it plays havoc with copulation.”

“Oh, right,” and Vila clambered onto the divan, cursing himself for his unusual clumsiness and all too frequent inanity. He should be saying witty, entertaining things, making this just another transaction. He’d had sex to keep him safe before, hadn’t he? So what was he making all this fuss about this time? He knelt beside Avon, leant down to take Avon into his mouth, and hesitated, an inch away. This is bloody stupid, he told himself. It’s not like it’s something you’ve never done before, and it’s not like it’s someone you don’t fancy—in fact, he’d had a thing about Avon from the second he laid eyes on him. So what was so different from any other time?

A shiver along his spine reminded him: there hadn’t been another time like this one. Before, it had always been for pleasure or gain, pure and simple, with none of this laden atmosphere pressing down on him, with Blake looking as if someone had finally told him Santa Claus isn’t real and Avon looking as if he’d bitten an apple and found half a worm. And this was the first time he
had felt like he was going to be fucked to rub salt in someone else’s wounds. Which didn’t make sense, he thought, not really. Wasn’t as if Avon and Blake had had a thing going, was it? Or was it? Maybe they’d been building up to something, and maybe they just hadn’t got round to realising that yet, and then here they were—

Avon’s impatience interrupted his prevaricating thoughts.

“Either do it or don’t, but don’t just sit there gaping. I want to get this over and done with, so either fellate me or let me get myself ready, just make up your mind.”

Vila lowered his head and opened his mouth, and filled himself with Avon. He sucked hard, feeling the immediate response, Avon growing quickly larger, his penis thickening against Vila’s tongue. He thought, for a second, of the Ultra watching and recording and analysing, but pushed them from his mind: he had been handed Avon on a silver platter and he was going to make the most of it. He cradled Avon’s balls, separating them with his thumb, fingers daring to caress the cleft of Avon’s arse. And retribution did not fall from the sky. In fact, Avon was pulling him in closer, fingers tangling in his hair, pressing him down, then lifting him again until only the very tip of Avon’s prick was in his mouth.

So that was something Avon liked, then, he thought hazily, flickering his tongue around the head, pressing his tongue-tip against the slit. Pressure on the back of his head, and he swallowed Avon inside, tongue rubbing the heavy vein that snaked along the underside. He could hear Avon, could hear the excitedness of his breathing, and the faint shush of skin moving on the divan coverlet.

“That’s enough,” Avon said, catching his breath, lifting Vila away from his cock. “It’s eminently satisfying for me, but I think our hosts want a little bit more than that.”

Vila grinned at him. “Yeh, but if we got it wrong, we could always do it again, couldn’t we?”

“No, watching this once is once too many.”

Blake, hoarse, as if a noose were tightening around his neck, the unexpected harshness of his voice dousing the rosy glow of sex.

“What?” Avon, of course, sharp and brittle and altogether too amused to be believed. “So not only are you incapable of forcing yourself to actually save my life because it would mean the horror of actually touching me, but now you can’t even bear to watch? Well then,” and he was whispering, seductive, skin flushed with temper and rising arousal, his hands lingering caressingly on Vila, “why don’t you turn your face to the wall for the dunce you undoubtedly are. Now, Vila,” and the charm was on full force, the smile bent on Vila intended as a slap to Blake, “where were we?”

Not nice, Vila thought, not nice at all. But he didn’t argue, didn’t complain: he was getting what he wanted, albeit under unpleasant circumstances. That was all right: he’d had sex in worse places than this, and enjoyed many an encounter less. “I think you were about to get me on my knees so you can fuck me,” he said clearly, catching sight of Blake out of the corner of his eye. He moved, so that he could no longer see Blake, and most importantly of all, could no longer see that haunted, tortured expression.

“Lubricant?” Avon asked.

“Yes, please,” Vila answered, smiling, moving Avon so that Avon had his back to the screen and was sideways to Blake. Making it just him and Avon, making the best of this, whatever it took to see it through. “Got anything on you? Apart from the obvious,” he tapped Avon’s erection with his finger, “the very obvious.”

Avon knelt over him, staring at him, for just a second, and then: “Why don’t you make yourself useful, Blake, and find the lubricant like a good little boy.”

“Enough! Damn you, Avon, stop pushing me.” Chest heaving, cheeks a hectic red, angry and dangerous enough to give even Avon pause. “Just do what you have to do—”

“And leave you out of it?” He ran his thumb down Vila’s spine, lower and lower until it disappeared into the shadow of Vila’s rump. “But isn’t that precisely what I’m doing?” For a long moment, Avon and Blake stared at each other, neither speaking, neither one backing down, and the tension grew, coiling between them, lethal promise overwhelming the fading spice of sex.

“Ehm, I’ll just get the lube then, shall I?” Vila, absurdly polite, his nervousness deflating his voice dousing the rosy glow of sex.

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we’re the first they’ve required this mating ritual from, do you? No, of course you don’t. I wonder how many races they’ve recorded? Oh, yes, scores of them, you’re quite right.” His bright babble dulled into silence, and still Avon and Blake were facing off, ridiculous as two tom cats, given the circumstances. “Soonest begun, soonest ended,” Vila said hopefully, wishing that he could have got Avon alone, a long, long way from Blake. “Or is it soonest finished? Or is it soonest begun, soonest mended?”

Very deliberately, yielding nothing, Avon turned his attention from Blake and on to Vila. “Shut up, Vila, and hand me the lotion.” A flicker of his eyes to gauge Blake’s reaction: “I believe Blake needs to be shown how it’s done.”

“Oh, right. Ehm, how do you want me?”

A wicked smile, flaying Blake. “What is your preference? Ah, but I forgot, you’re not interested in all this debauchery, are you, Sainted Leader? Or can you simply not remember what two people can do together for pleasure?”

“This is a side-show for aliens, don’t try to dignify it.” But familiar desire uncurled in Blake’s belly, made his balls heavy. He wanted, shamefully, to stroke himself, to make himself hard, but he wouldn’t give Avon the satisfaction of seeing his need or worse, of seeing what the ‘adjustments’ had done to him. More humiliating than even this, to have his erection falter and fail when any other man would be giving and receiving pleasure. Avon was looking at him with eyes that were too good at piercing façades, and Blake forced himself to lean, nonchalantly, against the wall. “It’s animal rutting for the amusement of aliens, and if you think this is easier than talking your way out of here…”

Avon bared his teeth, not in a smile. “But I thought you said actions speak louder than words?”

Bitter barb, the final justification he had given after Gan had been killed on a mission Blake had once thought so necessary. On the flight deck, toe to toe with Avon, those brown eyes alight, Avon’s breath rapid, his cheeks slightly flushed, and himself, deliberately towering over a man not much smaller than himself, speaking, being every inch the leader: but Avon, don’t you realise that actions speak louder than words?

“Get on with it,” he snarled, forgetting to pretend cool control. He turned away, face to the wall, as if he were the dunce Avon had called him. Behind him, there was only silence, and then, crawling down his spine with sharp fingernails of temptation, Avon’s voice: “Shall we?” and then slippery sounds, skin on skin, and breath sighing, and wet sucking noises and he remembered—had never been completely unaware of Avon’s startling nakedness—that Avon’s erection had faded during their argument, and how Vila had made him hard in the first place. Now he had details to colour the pictures in his mind: the rosiness of Avon’s cock when Vila peeled the foreskin back, the black hair of his groin, the line of it pointing up to Avon’s chest, and his pink nipples, and his white skin, and his beautiful mouth… His own breath was coming in gasps now, and his body was hard and hungry. He struggled, fought what he knew would be nothing but disaster, but then he heard Avon’s voice murmur, too quiet for Blake to hear, and he thought, convulsively, of Avon manoeuvring Vila, positioning him so that Avon could slide that perfect cock deep inside yielding flesh and—

Blake turned, helpless to resist the needs of his body and his mind. On the divan, Avon was canopied over Vila, Vila’s legs bent upwards, over Avon’s shoulders. And Avon, oh, Avon was sliding his fingers inside Vila, and Vila’s eyes were closed, his mouth open, his pleasure only too visible. With his free hand, Avon was taking Vila’s cock and rubbing it, rolling it against the fine, fair hair that was so lush around his cock. Avon’s hands, those exquisite, strong hands, had gathered Vila’s balls now, pushing them up against the base of Vila’s cock, caressing them, distracting Vila from the moment of penetration.

And as the first, wide inch of Avon’s cock was consumed by Vila’s arse, Blake fumbled with his trousers, his own fears of dysfunction swamped by the erotic vision in front of him. Fingers clumsy, he pushed his trousers open, his cock pulsing as soon as he touched it. The air was cool at first, but then his hand was moving on his own hard flesh, precisely matching Avon’s hand on Vila. Long slow strokes, Avon’s hand on Vila; long slow strokes, Avon’s cock inside Vila. Blake moved, until he was barely a metre from the head of the divan, his back to the wall, his feet wide-spread, bracing him as he freed his balls, rolling and squeezing them as Avon did to Vila. Every movement Avon did to Vila, Blake did to himself, too lost to the moment to think clearly about what
he was doing. It had been so long since his body had responded like this, usually failing before now, leaving him aching and lonely and emasculated. But here, now, watching Avon, watching Vila, the two bodies intertwined now, as Avon lifted Vila’s rump higher, fucking Vila deeper, Blake was aware of nothing but the sex and the power and the pleasure.

And then Avon looked up. Eyes blind for a moment, and then he focussed, and saw. Blake, staring at him, with his cock in his fist and his face contorted with helpless lust and...something Avon did not care to acknowledge.

“Enjoying yourself?” he rasped out, shifting position, until his hands were either side of Vila’s head, his arms stiff as he fucked Vila harder, his cock sliding out almost completely, only to plunge all the way in. Blake wasn’t looking at his face, but at his body, where he was joined to Vila, at where his flesh was buried in another man. As if he were some sort of video to be used for Blake’s solitary, untouched pleasure. Untouched? No, Avon decided, hot with the passion of fucking Vila and still burning from Blake’s rejection. Physically untouched, perhaps, but not unaffected. Not if Avon could knock Blake from his ivory tower, and he knew precisely how to do it. He slowed his pace, very deliberately, Vila’s arms and legs coming up to encircle him, and he shifted angle a fraction, giving Vila the sensation he wanted. But only part of him was focussed on Vila: he was watching Blake now, and every time his cock took control of Vila’s body, he saw Blake’s reaction to that as surely as if it were Blake himself Avon were fucking. “Decided you want it after all?” he said, smiling tauntly as his words hit Blake. “Or is it just that this is a safe way for you to have me? What are you thinking, Blake?” he asked, burying himself inside Vila and circling his hips a little, Vila’s moan of pleasure punctuation for the pleasure of impaling Blake with the power of his words. “Are you pretending that I’m Vila and you’re fucking me?” Full withdrawal, Blake’s eyes almost glazed as he stared at Avon’s exposed flesh, an involuntary gasp revealing more than mere passion as Avon slowly sank back into Vila’s arse. “Or is it exciting to pretend that you’re me?”

Blake didn’t answer with words, but his hands moved faster, almost blurring, and his cock was glistening from where pre-cum and spit made him slick and ripe for pleasuring.

“Slow down,” Avon whispered, his voice a seduction in and of itself. “Look at me.”

Silence between them, but for the small, devastating sounds of flesh in flesh and hand on cock. Vila reached up, sucking on Avon’s nipple, the sound preternaturally loud, until drowned by Vila’s encouragements, dirty words thrust at Avon, hips canted and undulating, fucking himself on Avon’s cock.

“Look at me,” Avon said again.

Blake couldn’t answer. He was looking at Avon, devouring him, but he didn’t want to actually say so, no matter how blatant the action was. Words would somehow make it real, something that couldn’t be politely ignored once they were back on the ship. And he couldn’t, didn’t dare, answer Avon’s request by looking him in the eye, the way Avon wanted him to. No, didn’t dare do that: too dangerous, far too high a risk of seeing something in Avon’s eyes that he didn’t want to know about. Hate. Contempt. Betrayal. Love aborted almost before conception.

Don’t think about it! he shrieked at himself, desperately concentrating on the sensations in his cock and balls, coruscating from his nipples, battering his heart and making his lungs hollow. He was frantic, so close to orgasm, so close to the goal that had eluded him too many times and left him useless and unmanned. Too close, so don’t think about what Avon’s saying, just watch his body, look at the way he’s fucking Vila, look at the way Vila’s licking all over his chest and his neck—

“Look at me!” Almost a shout, and Avon went still, staring at Blake. Under him, his own cock hard and aching, Vila tipped his head back as far as he could, until he could see Blake. Unfair, that Blake didn’t want Avon—was too scared to risk having Avon—and Avon wanted Blake so much. But Vila was a survivor: he knew how to get the best he could no matter the circumstances.

Still looking at Blake, his own throat exposed in ultimate vulnerability, Vila said, “Avon. Kiss me.”

Avon looked at him. Really looked at him, Vila’s lone comment giving Avon more insight than Blake would ever want him to have. Now, the involuntary movement of Avon’s hips became deliberate again, faster and faster, until he was fucking Vila hard, and they were both on the spiralling race to orgasm. Avon speared Blake with a vicious, knowing stare, taking in Blake’s shuttered expression and the way his hands were
so desperate on his reddened cock, squeezing and rubbing it, tugging at his balls to tighten the skin to add even more sensation.

And then Avon yielded to the pressure of Vila’s arms hugging him in close, and subsided, until he was flat on top of Vila, Vila’s arms and legs tight around him, Vila’s cock caught tightly between their bellies, his own cock held even more tightly by Vila’s arse. There was nothing for Blake to see now, only the movements of Avon’s hips, the swell of his buttocks, the shadow that protected an arse Blake was never going to have. Avon looked up, and saw: Blake watching him, Blake caught painfully on the precipice of orgasm, so close that Avon would have long since come.

“Look at me,” he said, and Blake did, his eyes dark with lust and pain and barely hidden fear. Then, carefully, Avon leaned down and kissed Vila, decisively shutting Blake out, telling Blake that he wasn’t wanted, he wasn’t needed: he didn’t even exist.

But then Vila’s tongue was in his mouth, and that cock was rubbing against him beautifully, and that arse was clenching him perfectly...

And Vila was ecstatic. He had Avon, in him and over him and all around him, and Avon was kissing him, not even looking at Blake any more, not even thinking about Blake, and this was the most exciting thing Vila had ever known. He was whimpering in his throat, and his heart was ready to burst. Then Avon was fucking him deep, straining to get even deeper, his body shuddering and tensing, then abruptly, relaxing, collapsing, and Vila swore he could feel Avon’s cum wet and hot inside him. He could hardly move, but he didn’t need to, Avon’s hand snaking between their bellies to grab his cock, doing wonderful things to it, and Avon was kissing him again, and it was enough.

A moment, and then Avon was moving again, the thrill of the chase leaving him nothing more than rather cold and very sticky. He didn’t look at Vila, simply rolled off him and began, immediately, to wipe himself off with one of the pre-moistened towels so thoughtfully provided. Like so much else, he thought bitterly, still not looking at Blake. In the end, he considered, he had lost far more than he had gained: after all, Blake had remained untouched at the end, out of reach, affected by nothing more than physical gratification. His conscience nagged at him, and he proffered Vila another cloth to mop up the visible aftermaths, to erase those aspects that could be erased and not merely put behind locked doors to fester and peek out as barbed weapons on the flight deck.

Somewhere during the whole sordid display, his clothes had fallen from the end of the divan where he’d left them, and he gathered them, began dressing. And glanced, quietly, at Blake.

Blake stared and stared, unable to look away, almost weeping with frustration and fury and resentment that could too easily turn to hate. He stuffed himself back inside his trousers, trying to ignore the too familiar painful ache of his heart. He wanted, quite passionately, to kill Avon. He had been so close! Only seconds away, he knew that, was sure of it, so close to coming and only seconds away from being able to function like a man again!

But Avon had ruined that. He had taken Blake’s moment of triumph—a man again, for the first time since the Federation treatments—and ruined it, turning the triumph to ashes in his mouth. Avon had kissed Vila and it was in a misery of being excluded that Blake had come. To feel like a man again, and still be made to feel useless, unnecessary, unwanted. To see Avon kissing Vila with such intensity, such pleasure, such...

And that was something Blake didn’t want to explore. He had no feelings for Avon, he reminded himself, watching the play of muscle as Avon stood to fasten his trousers. Nothing more complicated than fellow-feeling and that continuous hum of admiring irritation that Avon inspired wherever he went. Nothing more than that. There had been no jealousy in him when Avon had kissed Vila like that, and done it because Vila had asked him to. After all, it wasn’t as if Blake particularly wanted that sort of attention from Avon, was it? Of course not. Nothing more than the warmth that one feels for a fellow colleague, someone with whom danger has been shared and enemies defeated. It was Avon who had obviously harboured secret emotions, secret possibilities, things that would have to be handled with delicacy and tact, a gentleness so as not to cause Avon any more pain, he told himself, pushing uncomfortable emotions back into nice tidy boxes where they could be made comfortable by completely ignoring them. Yes, he thought, concentrating on Avon and how this would affect the Cause, he would have to handle this very carefully indeed...

“This completes the Human Bonding Cer-
emony,” Avon was saying very sarcastically.

Blake and Vila both started, all alertness to the discreet grey screen in the corner of the bland grey room long since subsumed in the heat of the moment.

“It’s time for me to leave now.”

“What about me?” Vila, of course. “I did my bit, didn’t I? Don’t I get to come with you?”

And Avon turned, very slowly, and looked at Vila, then, just as slowly, just as deliberately, looked at Blake. “Yes,” he said, “you do ‘get’ to come with me.”

Blake had the first stiletto touch of the implication: Avon had made that sound far more important than merely returning to the ship with him as at the end of any routine—or otherwise—planetfall. “And what the hell was that supposed to mean?” Blake asked, not being gentle, not handling this situation very carefully indeed.

“Obviously,” Avon said with such a spurious smile, “your brain is as useless as your body. It’s quite simple, really. So simple, in fact, that even someone as severely impaired as you obviously are should be able to comprehend.” The door hissed open, the Ultras apparently satisfied with their information gathering and ready to let the lab rats out of their maze. Avon stepped aside, pushing Vila through the door ahead of him. “Vila is coming with me. Back to the ship to which I have at least as much claim as you do. And,” the civilised veneer was peeled back, revealing just how truly unwise it was to reject and humiliate Kerr Avon, “if you’re a very, very, good boy, I shall even permit you to come with me also—oh Great and Fearless Leader.”