M. FAE GLASGOW

RAPERE III: RAPTOR

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

Blake slowly lowered his hands and looked up, not at Avon. "Why?" he asked, completely levelly.

"To continue with our research into the Human Condition. You will begin the Ceremony now."

Blake smiled, an odd little smile, with more of pain in it than amusement. "That might prove difficult. You see," he spread his hands in the age-old lie of 'see? I do not intend to fight you', "there are no females of our species here."

"The presence of females is not required in this instance. We require an example of what your Histories name 'Male Bonding'."

"Ah," said Avon, "that is something else entirely." An entirely sour look at Blake, and then he went on: "And you certainly have the wrong males if you want to see *that*."

Calmly, no anger showing, Blake stared at Avon for a moment, an imp of perversity dancing on his shoulder. "Really, Avon?" he asked, quite sharply, instantly seeing Avon's comment as challenge as well as insult. "Then the failure is entirely on your side, isn't it?"

"I would hardly call not bonding with you a failure, Blake. In fact," and he smiled his best sneer, "I'd call it sheer genius."

"Not surprising, for a man who spends his entire adult life wrecking a simple embezzlement and then looking for somewhere to run away to."

"It was an extremely complicated plan—"

"So you don't deny you ar*e* running away?"

It wasn't often Blake managed to outmanœuver him so thoroughly, and Avon's hands clenched in simple fury. "You were, as always, too hasty, jumping in—"

"Where angels fear to tread? I would have to, if I wanted to call you 'friend'." Blake turned back to the screen and shrugged. "As you can see, Avon can't participate in any sort of bonding ceremony, so I suggest you let us go back to our ship—"

"Then we shall eliminate this male and provide you with the other male from your pack."

The completely dispassionate voice was unnerving in its disinterest, chilling in its callousness.

"Eliminate? From this study or…something rather more radical?" Avon, sounding not at all scared, for all that Blake could see the unease in his eyes.

"A non-functional unit serves no purpose and will be eliminated."

"I rather thought that's what you had in mind," Avon said drily. "Well now, Blake, this puts a new complexion on the entire absurd situation, doesn't it?"

"Is there no other data we could provide for your records in return for our freedom?" Blake asked, ignoring Avon for the moment.

"We require the Human Bonding Ceremony in all possible variations."

"And if they get their hands on Vila, that could take them quite a while," Avon muttered.

"So we have no options?" Blake was standing now, in the middle of the room, arms akimbo, the wonderfully appropriate pirates' sleeves billowing in the faint zephyr from the air vents.

"You will provide the Human Bonding Ceremony, Subset: Males, Participants: two."

Blake looked at Avon then, shrugged, and began unbuttoning his shirt. "Well?" he demanded, when Avon stood staring at him. "You heard them. If we don't provide them with what they want, you'll be 'eliminated', as they put it."

The shirt was gone now, and Blake was sitting on the bed, taking off his shoes and socks.

"And what proof do we have that they won't eliminate both of us as soon as we have pandered to their perverse interests?" Avon said, cynicism not quite covering his unease.

"Surely you're not nervous, Avon?" Blake said with spurious concern. "It's only sex, so what does it matter? Oh, come on, man, don't just stand there looking foolish. Get your clothes off and let's get on with it."

Avon didn't move a muscle. "I refuse," he said, with great dignity, "to put on some sort of cheap sex show for blue aliens with sick tendencies!"

Blake smiled at him then, and it did nothing to put Avon at his ease. "So you *are* nervous! This is quite a turn up for the books, isn't it? The sophisticated Kerr Avon shy about some meaningless alien seeing his little bottom." His voice and his gaze hardened as he stood and snapped open his trousers. "It really doesn't make the blindest bit of difference to me, Avon, whether I do this with you or Vila or Gan. But according to our sick blue friends, it makes quite a difference to you, doesn't it?"

Reluctantly, Avon began to unseal his jacket. "Playing martyr for the Cause again?"

Blake's hands stopped for a moment, his underpants low enough that Avon could see a few stray strands of dark brown hair curling over the whiteness. "Martyr? You're a hard-hearted, sharp-tongued bastard, but no, fucking you isn't martyrdom." He paused for precisely the right degree of insult, to remind Avon who was the leader here. "Not quite."

Avon raised an eyebrow, elegantly, a picture of insouciance as he peeled his black surplice shirt off and left himself half-naked in front of Blake. "I shall take that as the compliment it was no doubt intended to be."

Blake pulled his underwear off and stood, casually, uncaringly, naked in front of Avon, his hands on his hips, his cock limp and uninterested. "You can take it any way you want to. Just get a move on so we can get this over and done with."

"By all means." Deadpan, blank-faced, he turned his back and slowly shed the many layers of his clothes, and Blake would have found that blankness very revealing, had he bothered to look. But Blake was arranging the bunk, spreading the soft cover, opening drawers and finding lubricant, and more besides. "If you're this worked up about plain fucking," he said without turning to look at Avon, "then you should count yourself lucky they don't require the blasted bonding ceremony with the gadgets they've got in here."

The mention of esoteric gadgets bothered Avon not at all: it was the being naked in front of Blake, the having Blake so naked and blasé in front of him. Or at least that was a convenient enough excuse for a man who had been brought up in a crowd where personal privacy was an absolute premium. The excuse, however, didn't last anywhere near long enough, faltering the instant he unwillingly crossed the room and found himself too close to a very businesslike Blake.

"Doesn't this bother you at all?" he asked, postponing the moment.

Stark disbelief, and a frown greeted that. "Avon, I have been a…guest of the Federation. I have been a plaything for puppeteers and guards alike. They raped my mind and stole everything I had from before, and all they left behind was a bovine mindwipe and under that, horrors I wouldn't wish even on you." He could feel the old anger burn in his gullet, wanted, abruptly, to rend and tear and destroy. But that was what the puppeteers wanted, that was what they had programmed him to do. Instead, he took a deep breath, and forced his vision outwards, away from his own woes to look, really look, at Avon. And was very taken aback by what he saw. Avon was obviously on edge, which was relatively natural, but there was a hint of fear concealed behind the habitual condescension. "I apologise," he said heavily, seating himself on the bed. "It's not your fault. It's just…when you've stood up in front of the Galaxy and renounced your beliefs and your friends and your family, it's a bit difficult to give a damn about performing sex for the amusement of aliens."

"For you, perhaps."

And from Avon, that was an admission indeed. "It'll be all right, Avon, I promise you. I'm not Don Juan, but that's hardly the issue here anyway. I know what I'm doing, so I'll be careful and it won't

hurt—"

"And what," Avon hissed, "makes you think yo*u* will be the one doing the fucking? Or are you claiming *droit du seigneur*? Who's next in line for this remarkable honour? Oh, yes, you wouldn't mind if it were Vila or Gan. Are we to assume, then, that you don't care for ladies?"

Blake was placid, all the better to display his control. "Why are you making such a fuss about this? It's only sex, what does it matter?"

"Nothing," Avon said with a lupine grin. "Nothing at all." And then, unexpectedly, he was leaning in over Blake, hand reaching down to grab Blake's cock and balls and hold them, too tightly, too fiercely, his mouth coming down to feast bitingly on Blake's chest.

Blake had expected to feel some degree of desire, lust even, spurred by Avon's darkness and his beauty, but this flooding neediness caught him by surprise. "For fuck's sake," he gasped, grabbing Avon's head, pressing it lower, his wet nipples caressed by the suddenness of cold air after the heat of Avon's mouth. There was no resistance to the pressure of his hands, Avon's open mouth sliding farther and farther down, closer to Blake's goal. This was so much more than the sterile, utterly meaningless and mechanical recitation he had expected. This was…

Avon's mouth sucked him in, and he stopped thinking, letting himself feel and watch and enjoy, fingers combing through silky brown hair, hands sliding down to stroke the sensual lines of back muscle. "Oh, that's it, Avon, that's it. Put that mouth of yours to some use for once…"

And for that, he was abandoned, cock swaying in the constant airflow, so cold after such heat. "For once?" Avon's hand fluttered, too lightly, too briefly, on Blake's aching cock. "You think that this," a contemptuous sweep of his hand to encompass the room, the screen and Blake himself, "is the only use I have?"

Masterful, remembering that odd brightness in Avon's eyes every time Blake had laid down the law, Blake linked his hands behind Avon's head and pulled him inexorably forward. "Right now," he whispered, an inch from Avon's face, "this is the only use I'm interested in. Do it, Avon," and he could see the desire war with rebellion in Avon's dark eyes, "do it now." And he tugged again, bending Avon's will to his own, and Avon's body to his. Blessed heat engulfed him once again, and he groaned in purest pleasure. It had been such a long time, too long a time, since last his body had known caresses the likes of these, Avon's tongue exquisite on him, as gifted with this as it was with words. "Harder," he muttered, holding Avon's head firmly, thrusting harshly into the soft depths behind the hard suction of Avon's lips. "Come on, come on, you can suck all of me, go on, swallow me whole…"

He was falling or flying, he neither knew nor cared which, for there was only the disorienting pleasure singing through his body. Until the sweet delight was shaken by the faintest discord, the slightest dismay poisoning his pleasure. No, he wasn't going to let memories of the past ruin this unprecedented moment with Avon. "Deeper," he said, grinding the coarse hair of his groin into Avon's face, his cock head touching flesh far inside Avon. "You can take more of me, Avon, eat me alive…"

Then he knew the discord for what it was: fear, the self-same fear that Avon had so tried to conceal. *Eat me alive*, he'd said. *Consume me*. The unspoken: make me part of you. No. He did not—could not possibly—mean that. He didn't even particularly like Avon, although he confessed to lust. But he could not want more than simple sexual gratification. He simply could not…

Vicious in his fear, he pulled Avon up, leaving his cock lonely, but promising it, promising himself, that it would have a tighter, hotter hole to fill in mere seconds. "On your knees," he growled, hands callous on Avon's pale skin, "get on your knees and let me fuck you."

And was stopped, Avon's knee hard up against him, threatening to unman him. "Give me," Avon rasped, breath heaving fast, his own cock as rigid with arousal as Blake's, "one good reason why I should."

Blake shifted, just enough to turn the threat into hard caress. "The Ultras will kill you if you don't."

"The Ultras will kill me if they don't get their damned mating ritual. But for all they know," and it was Avon's turn to shift, caress once more becoming threat, the power and the conflict blushing across the spacer's whiteness of Avon's skin, "we could already have done the ritual. Which means that I let you go, and you get your hands off me."

"They've seen others, Avon," he flexed, twisted Avon off balance, landing on top of the sprawled

figure, his weight trapping Avon on the bed. "They'll know we're not finished. But I have a better reason than the Ultras."

"Well now, this is hardly the time to play coy with me, is it?" Avon's voice gave him away, a tremor there, a shiver to match the taut erection caught between his belly and Blake's. "Tell me, Blake. Now."

And Blake knew, with all the unsolved puzzle pieces clicking tidily into place, exactly what Avon wanted him to say. "We're doing it because we want to. Because *you* want to."

"Because you," Avon's arms and legs were suddenly around Blake, enveloping him in strength, Avon possessing him even in apparent surrender, "*need* to fuck me. You need me, Blake. You need me more than you need to breathe."

And Blake, helpless, laughed. "Need you? *Need* you?" He shoved his hips forward, cock scraping against Avon's, Avon's gasp of arousal music to Blake's ears. "I need you about as much as I need a knife in the back. And as this is you," he fumbled for and found the pristine tube, a clenching of his hand and the valve was open, the lotion spilling out over his fingers. He kept his fingers stiff, stabbing them into Avon's arse, all consideration for possible inexperience in this one thing completely subsumed by the rush to possess, to dominate—to make Avon submit to him and finally belong. "As it's you, I'm as likely to get a knife between my ribs as I am to get my prick up your arse, right, Kerr?"

"Shut up!" A controlled shout, huge violence poured out into a smallness of sound, and Avon was spitting himself upon Blake's fingers, twisting his hips this way and that, fucking himself on Blake's hand. He was a maelstrom of conflicting emotions and desires, and he hated himself for yielding to Blake as much as he…hated…Blake for doing this to him. But then he closed his eyes, shutting Blake out, so that all Blake was to him, once more, were hard fingers to be used, a hard cock to be consumed for Avon's own pleasure. "If you think I'm going to stab you in the back, then perhaps you should have me up against the wall. Then," and he lost his breath for a moment as Blake's fingers found and seared his prostate, "our little aliens could add," teeth gritted against the insidious pleasure, words forced out to make Blake distant from him, a dildo that required no batteries, only battery, "rape to their list of studies."

"Rape, Avon?" Blake asked, dangerously softly, his fingers pulled viciously from Avon's body, the liquid sound too loud for the room. "How can it be rape when this is what you've been after from the very beginning. Flirting with me," he snarled, wrapping both hands round Avon's cock, squeezing him so hard the flesh purpled and viscid pearls dropleted from the slit. "Flashing your eyes and your arse at me." He released the abused flesh, Avon's continued erection inflaming him even more—how dare Avon not be deflated by Blake's anger, by Blake's strength?—and now his hands went to Avon's nipples, pulling hard enough that the paps distended and Avon's back arched in an agony of ecstasy. "And so wild, my Avon, I can see it in your eyes when I put you in your place, when I shout 'enough!' and force you to obey me. That's what you like, isn't it?"

Blake released Avon then, knelt back away from him, left Avon bitterly separate in his own skin. Blake waited, stroking his own erection, the burning arousal alive on every nerve, and himself, exhilarated beyond anything he remembered. Avon, he admitted, was not the only one who fed on their battles, and this, the most private of all, was exciting to the point of self-destruction. His own eyes more than a little wild, Blake stared as Avon lay spread wide on the bed, chest heaving, Blake's fingerprints red round his nipples. Suddenly, achingly, Blake wanted to mark that body, to make it belong to him, to force the allegiance Avon so stubbornly refused him. He raised his hand, and struck, the slap drowned out by Avon's gasp and groan of pleasure, Avon's beautiful face bearing now the sign of Blake's dominion over him. "Is this what you've been trying to get me to do all this time? Is this," sharp bite to Avon's left nipple, beadlet of blood lingering behind, "what all those petty arguments have been about?" Hand now on Avon's balls, spreading them until the skin was shiny and taut, until Blake's hand was flat against the underlying hardness of body. "You should have said, Avon, because the Federation trained me well."

Avon was whimpering now, pain become the most exquisite of pleasures, and Blake knew how fulfilling the fantasy of castration could be to a man so self-repressed as Avon. But that wasn't enough for Blake. He wanted Avon to be truly afraid, so terrified that he would break under Blake as Blake had been broken. Kneeling between

Avon's open legs, he brought his other hand up and gathered Avon's cock and balls between the palms of his hands. Awash in pleasure, locking Blake out, Avon writhed in pleasure, and then Blake twisted, corkscrewing Avon's genitals until the balls were pressing into the softness of his belly and his cock was trapped between his legs, Blake's big hands forcing it there. Now Avon's breath was hissing from him, teeth clenched, sweat erupting on his forehead, across his cheek, drops of light to highlight the marks Blake had left on him.

"Like this?" Blake demanded, twisting a little more until Avon actually cried out, the sound a fanfare of victory to Blake. "I could rip them off you, right now, and with no effort at all," Blake whispered, leaning down low so that his breath was a caress on Avon's skin, so soft a contrast to the vice clamping Avon's cock and balls. "I could," Blake tasted Avon's throat, bit it hard, as if he could consume Avon's lifeblood and make Avon his liegeman, "make you a pathetic eunuch, give you an excuse for following me like a lost sheep. Shall I do that, Avon? Give you an excuse?" He was half an inch from Avon's mouth, and Avon convulsed away from him, a strangled scream coming from him as the movement made Blake's grip on him a real Inquisition and not the sweetness of sexual torture. "Oh? Don't want me to kiss you? Fucking's all right, but not kissing?" He licked the corner of Avon's mouth, was rewarded by another convulsion of escape, which made Blake smile: he knew now how to break Avon. First the abuse that Avon craved, and then the tenderness to chain him to Blake. Just as…Blake didn't know the man's name from the Treatment Centre, knew only that He had come in the dark and the night, clad in black, invisible until Blake knew he was going insane and cried and wept and wanted to die…

He shook the memory off, focussing everything on Avon, his own lifeline, of a very twisted sort. He would use softness now, reward after punishment, perfect for an old hand at all this, as Avon obviously was. Blake released Avon's cock and balls, and watched as that relief etched agony on Avon's face. He waited then, until Avon was free of the pain of release, and then, with extreme tenderness and a vicious smile, he cradled Avon's face between his hands, thumbs rubbing so gently across the arching cheekbones. "Look at me," he murmured, the merest breath of sound, the very quietness making it compulsive.

Avon's eyes opened, and Avon wanted nothing more than to be able to run away and hide, find a bolthole, even if it were a grave. He made his eyes blank, hiding his secrets inside, where he and Blake would never be able to find them. "Are you going to fuck me or not?" he asked laconically, pretending that his nipples weren't hard peaks and that his cock wasn't pulsing desperately against the pressing softness of Blake's belly.

"All in good time, Kerr," and now the smile was tender as it ought to be, but Blake's eyes were as unyielding as Avon's, filled with banked resentment. "But first," he nudged Avon's legs a little higher, and Avon lifted them, wrapping them around Blake's waist so that Blake's cock was slick against his arse. "Oh, no, boyo," Blake laughed, shifting Avon to his pleasure so that Avon's rump was on his lap, and Blake was once more in complete control of the situation, "not before I decide to. But before we were so rudely interrupted," breathless, voice catching on the excitement constricting his throat, "I was about to do something that I don't think you're going to like at all, Avon." He reached out, arching over Avon's prone body, once more cradling Avon's face in his hands. "I'm going to kiss you," he whispered.

"Try it, and I'll bite your tongue out." Snarled, an animal at bay, and fear writhed in Avon's eyes.

"Oh, I doubt that, Avon. You see, if you were stupid enough to do that, then I would be vengeful enough to rip your balls off and feed them to you."

Avon managed a laugh, undermined by the fine tremble in his hands. "Quite a threat."

"I'd have thought it was quite a promise. For you." He saw the fight in Avon's eyes before Avon could move, and simply moved so that he was lying completely on top of Avon, his weight holding the other man down. "But I thought you liked it kinky?" Which was why, amongst other reasons, Blake had the perverse desire to give Avon no more of that, simply because the games of power and pain were what Avon desired. "But this is about what *I* want, what *I* need. You, my dear Avon, don't enter into it at all."

He pressed downwards then, his nipples brushing the taut peaks on Avon's chest, and gently, oh, so cruelly gently, pressed his mouth to Avon's and traced, lightly, his tongue around the bow of Avon's lips, Avon opening to him, absorbing his tongue inside, and the kiss was deeper

than it ought. Blake heard a groan, as if something inside were breaking, and saw the nightmare in Avon's eyes, saw the misery there. And knew. Completely, whole, entirely. He *knew*. Avon loved him. That was why Avon stayed, that was why Avon followed, that was why Avon provoked him so.

Avon loved him.

It frightened him almost as much as it did Avon.

"Oh, Avon," he said before he could stop himself, and saw when the love was shuttered away by coiled fury and the beginnings of hatred as Avon heard the unwitting pity in Blake's voice.

"Oh, Blake," Avon mocked cuttingly, thrusting his hips up sharply, demandingly. "I thought you were keen to fuck me into submission. What's the matter? Afraid you won't be able to meet my standards?" Another jolt of his hips, hard cock grinding against Blake's erection. "Too afraid that it's not merely on the flight deck that I find you woefully inadequate?"

And Blake was in him before he had time to think, before he had time to savour the possessing of Avon, before he had time to wrest control from this loving harpy under him. For all that Avon's taunts had spurred him into haste, nothing was going to make him hurry through this. Avon's vicious words, his callous rejection of even the possibility that loving Blake might not be the depths of degradation, all combined to drive the last remnant of pity from Blake. If Avon didn't want his sympathy, then Blake would offer him no quarter either. He withdrew from Avon's body, and then slowly, slowly, he pushed in again, the muscle dilating before him, opening Avon up to him. He thrust in, inch by inch, making sure that Avon could not deny that Blake was on top, that Blake was impaling him.

Silent, Blake fucked Avon slowly, refusing to surrender to his own body's scream for satisfaction. No, he could hold off, he could wait. He was going to make Avon come first, he was going to make Avon scream with ecstasy, and then Blake fully intended to fuck the cold-blooded bastard's heart out. Avon's eyes were closed, and Blake didn't want that: he knew how Avon hid from him, and he wanted Avon completely exposed for what he was. He pulled out until only the very tip of his cock was stretching Avon. "Look at me," he hissed.

Avon kept his eyes closed, safe in the bolthole of his own body.

Blake withdrew all the way, his cock barely touching Avon's hungry arse. "Look at me!" he shouted.

Avon turned his face away.

"Look. At. Me." Each word measured, a full breath between, and every word was accompanied by the sweet tease of Blake's cock sinking an inch into Avon's arse, and each breath brought the aching hollowness of abandonment. "If you don't look at me," said coldly, "I shan't fuck you."

Still turned away, still with his eyes closed, Avon gave his answer to the inanimate wall. "If you don't fuck me, then I'll simply use one of the toys in that drawer."

"And what will you tell the Ultras?"

Avon had actually forgotten all about them, and their damned research. "I shall tell them that this is how we do it, where I come from. And you can tell them anything you damned well please. After all, *you* will be the one failing to…perform."

Blake fucked him for that, deep and hard, driving the breath from both of them. Ramming into Avon, uncaring of tender flesh, half hoping that tender membrane would tear just enough to make Avon bleed and remember Blake for days, Blake whispered softly, "If you don't look at me, I shall kiss you again."

Avon opened his eyes, and turned, and looked.

And Blake wished he hadn't. No love there now, only hatred and fury and bitter, bitter pain. He almost said it again, Avon's name laced with pity, and more, but held the words inside, where they could calm the ravening beast of Blake's own darker side. Where the pity could remind him why Avon did as he did and said as he said. Where it could remind him that he knew a terrible secret, the darkest secret Avon owned. Love. He slowed his strokes, changed the angle, so that it was perfect pleasure for Avon, and then he let himself go, let orgasm build deep in his balls, fucking Avon all the while with all the compassion and sympathy in him.

Under him, staring up into those eyes filled with what to Avon was cruelty and what to another would be sympathy, Avon let Blake fuck him, let Blake possess his body, let Blake bend him to his will by making Avon look at his tormentor-lover. Mouth pulled tight, teeth bared, Avon pushed up, fucking Blake harder, consuming the other man, making him work for their pleasure and Avon's

emotional pain. So much for protecting himself from Blake, and so much for his pathetic delusions of insularity. Avon had lost everything, bar bleak survival and the fragments of his pride. Blake, so full inside him, would think that Avon had lost everything. So. If he had, in appearance anyway, already lost everything, then he was going to take all he could get, wring every last ounce of guilty pleasure from this once-only and oddly solitary encounter. He closed his arms around Blake's shoulders, bringing Blake down to where Avon could reach him, his mouth fastening on Blake's, devouring Blake as Avon had been devoured by his own emotions. "Fuck me," he said, his words filling Blake's mouth. "Fuck me," he said again, and didn't care if Blake knew he meant 'love me'. He pressed downwards as Blake thrust into him, cock stretching him, Blake's smoothly sweaty chest rubbing his nipples, Blake's hands holding him with delicious strength, Blake fighting to kiss him back, to invade Avon's mouth as he had conquered Avon's arse. For once in his life, Avon surrendered. He let Blake kiss him, luxuriated in the strength of the other man, wallowed in the freedom to simply feel. He would suffer the price later, but for now, he had Blake all around him, in him, filling all the empty, lonely spaces. All he could see was Blake's face, too close to focus on the details. Then Blake broke the kiss, was moving him, bending Avon's legs up against his chest, his feet over Blake's shoulders, Blake all the more deeply inside him. It was purest heaven. He could feel the kiss of Blake's balls against his arse every time Blake filled him, could feel the tremor in Blake's arms where they were braced either side of Avon, and if he looked down, he could see Blake being consumed by his body, his own cock weeping against his belly, pulsing every time Blake disappeared into him, as if his cock were Blake's, piercing him so deeply they were all the one body.

There were things he wanted to say, things that terrified him, words of love and need and forever. Perhaps, he thought, mind hazy now with encroaching orgasm, body supreme with pleasure, I could say it to Blake…

Then Blake thrust into him once more, and he was dissolving, dissolving, rushing away on ecstasy, body tensed then boneless, aware of nothing but his own orgasm. Mere instants, and the pleasure faded enough for him to float in the amatory haze of Blake so frantic still, inside him, fucking him desperately, Blake strung taut with the tension of not coming. Avon could smile now, stroking his hands across Blake's chest, feeling the pounding of his heart and the constriction of his nipples. He didn't mind, generous in the afterglow, content to let Blake find release in him. He gazed upwards at Blake. And remembered. Blake pitied him. Blake didn't love him, and pitied him, doubtlessly because Blake couldn't conceive of ever loving him.

"Aren't you finished yet?" he snapped, pushing Blake off, heaving him over. "I thought it was only your mind that was retarded." He loomed over Blake, curving his body so that Blake couldn't see him. So that Blake couldn't see the self-contempt and despair in his eyes.

"Avon!" Blake shouted, so frustrated he could kill or maim. All he could reach was Avon's back, and his hands, fingers like claws, dug into the clenched muscles. He felt a hand cup his balls, rolling them, another hand pumping his cock, fast, as fast and hard as he needed it. He had been only seconds away when Avon had rejected him, and now this uncaring blur of sensation on his cock was enough, sending him over the edge in orgasm, all his tension erupting from him in white streamers to land, glistening, on Avon's chest. Who turned fully then, letting Blake see him, and picked Blake's hand up and used it, disdainfully, to wipe Blake's seed from him.

"Now that that's finally over," Avon was saying, looking somewhere to the left of Blake's face, "do you think you could be quicker about dressing yourself? I would like to get out of here before the next millennium."

Avon stood then, his back to Blake, eyes therefore hidden, once more, therefore, a mystery. Half-dazed, rocked by Avon's emotions and the beast in himself that he had so delusionally thought well-chained, Blake lay where he was, the small pillow pressed over his face.

"It won't work." Avon. Cold, chill, amusement burning Blake like vitriol.

"What won't?" Blake asked, expecting a nasty comment about his performance, his cock, his life.

"Suffocating yourself."

"Is that what you think I'm trying to do?"

"It's what I wish you would try."

Blake sat up then, stared broodingly at Avon's back whilst Avon methodically redressed, item by item, layers of protection gradually hiding the

flawless skin and the planes and sinews of his body. He felt so terribly guilty for what Avon must be going through, for the suffering Avon must be enduring. It couldn't be easy to love and be unloved, but it would be harder still for Avon to know himself pitied. "I don't believe you mean that," he said, quite conversationally, but noticing that Avon hesitated, a snap fastened wrongly and redone, clumsily.

"You believe a lot of stupid things. Exhibit A, your pathetic faith in your stagnant revolution."

"Which is, of course, supposed to divert me from talking about us into arguing with you about my Cause."

"You have already displayed more than enough stupidity for one afternoon," Avon replied. "There is no 'us'."

"Isn't there?" Pushing, trying to make Avon bring it out into the open, telling himself that it was his guilty conscience driving him to prevent Avon from brooding on this until it became a cancer that ate them both alive. "Even after this afternoon?"

"Especially after this afternoon. Anyway, this has changed absolutely nothing."

"Oh, but I think it has," Blake said, remembering love in Avon's eyes, and fear, and his own chaotic reactions. Pushing that unpleasant self-knowledge aside, to be dealt with later, much later, when it wouldn't terrify him so… "Knowledge always brings change."

Avon whirled round then, fully dressed, his gaze contemptuous as it took in Blake's damp and rumpled nakedness. "Knowledge? Of what? Of something in me of which I am ashamed? But I already knew about that, so there can be no impetus for change. And as for knowledge of you! You give away nothing, and you *give* nothing. You simply take and use, whatever suits your Cause best."

"Another deflecting tactic?" he asked, mildly.

"If you choose. And here's another." Avon crossed the room, and now he was back fully in control of himself, his expression shuttered, his smile a grim line of anger. "Let the subject drop, or I shall kill you where you sit."

"You have no weapons," standing, refusing to be intimidated, proving to Avon that he was still leader here, still the Alpha Prime.

Avon, however, simply stepped even closer, crowding Blake, and grinning at him like a skull. Then, unyielding, he brought his hands up, displaying them, turning them this way and that, until Blake couldn't tear his gaze away. "No weapons, Blake?" Avon asked, his voice a parody of seduction. "Then what do you call these?"

A blur of movement, Avon moving away from him, staccato, sharp, quick. "Ultra!" he called, facing the display screen. An impassive face appeared. "The ritual is complete," Avon announced. "We have given you what you required. I want to go back to my ship—now."

"This is not possible."

"What do you mean?"

Near panic in that voice, Blake noted as he threw his clothes on, readying himself for fight or flight. Near panic, and he did not for one second believe that it was fear of captivity. It was, he was certain, fear of being confined with Blake.

"The others have not yet completed their rituals. When all rituals are complete and stored, you will be returned to your ship."

"And how long is that going to take?"

"This question cannot be answered."

Then the face was gone, the screen blank, and they were alone with each other. Avon went round Blake, sprawled uncharacteristically on the bed, making a display of how little recent events meant to him. After all, how could any of it be important if Avon could take his ease here and wait so casually?

Because, Blake thought, if he didn't, then Avon would have nothing left: no pride, no self-respect, no secrets. And no man could live without those. He offered an olive branch to brush away the too-close memory of pity. "D'you think the alien can be trusted?"

Avon glowered at him. "I don't think *anyone* can be trusted. Present company included."

"So you don't trust yourself?"

"I said that I don't trust the company I'm keeping." Nasty, said viciously enough to draw blood.

Stung, Blake snapped back: "Then why don't you give yourself a change of scenery? Give us all a pleasant surprise."

Avon leaned back even more comfortably, smiling. "Perhaps I shall. But I think it is *you* who needs to leave. And not," he added, "for a brief change of scenery."

It was the old argument, honed sharp by the knowledge of love and pity morassing between them. "The ship is mine."

Avon arched an eyebrow at him. "Yet more

droit du seigneur?"

"No. Legitimate claim. Look, we've been over and over this—"

"Only because *you* refuse to see sense. Or perhaps I should say, only because you are incapable of seeing sense. We three of us have claim on that ship, and you may be able to fuck Jenna into relinquishing her share to you, but it would take better than *you* to do that to *me*."

"Would it?" Blake leaned over him, echoing his position when he'd been so deeply inside Avon, and Avon had been so naked in his love. "You're a very poor liar, Avon."

"My only poverty is a direct result from your absurd altruism and self-sacrifice—which always seems to involve the rest of us giving up rather more than you."

This wasn't getting them anywhere, and Avon could talk them in circles for hours. Annoyed, Blake demanded: "Are you going to listen to me?"

Avon glanced over at the locked door. "Do I have any choice?"

"If that's how you're going to be, then there's no point in me talking to you, is there?"

Avon grinned. "Oh, what a lovely thought. You should have it more often."

And silence fell, as the *double entendre* registered.

They stared at each other for a long moment, and then Avon looked away, and Blake's shame was renewed.

"Avon, I'm—"

"Don't you dare apologise to me!" Fierce now, blazing, coiled on the bed, serpent poised to strike. "I neither need nor want your pity. Now, if you want to be in one piece to get back to *your* precious ship, I suggest you shut your mouth and keep it that way. Do you understand me?"

Better than you think, Blake wanted to say. Better than I want to…

But he said nothing, walking away, going over to lean on the opposite wall, as far away as he could get in the smallness of the cell. Not another word was spoken, as they neither one of them looked at the other, or conceded that there was another human being in this cell. But Avon was thinking, mind racing, going over plans that had fallen fallow. Now—now, he needed to find somewhere to run to, a place where Blake would never find him, where there would be no reminders of this humiliation. He wanted to shout the roof down—that *Blake* should find out his feelings, that Blake should dare pity him… It was too much, simply too much. He would *not* put up with pity. He would go, and go soon, the loss of the *Liberator* a small price to pay for being free of Blake, for having all this over, and finished, and not one more second of Blake's pity to endure. Oh, yes, he would be gone, the instant he found himself a safe sett where he could run to ground and lick his wounds in peace and privacy and away from the emasculating pity in Blake's eyes.

And Blake? Blake was appalled, wondering what he had done, what sort of Pandora's Box he had opened today. Not only had he dared pity Avon, but he had let Avon see it, and let Avon know that his secret was safe no more. Dangerous, that, and foolish. He would have to be on his guard now, and there would be more fights than ever before, and more arguments, disputes over policy disguising the bitter battle underneath. It was, he decided, going to be a nightmare. But like Pandora, he saw a hope: destroy Star One and get it over and done with, then he and Avon could go their separate ways. Let Avon have his damned *Liberator* if it really meant that much to him. With Star One gone and the Federation defeated, Blake would be needed on Earth, and the *Liberator* wasn't going to be much use there. Yes, that was what he would do. Make an end to all this, so that he and Avon could end up on separate edges of the Galaxy, for otherwise… Otherwise, to silence forever the poisoned secrets they held between them, Avon would surely kill him.