"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single person must be in want of a partner. On Gauda Prime, the conviction had hardened into fact."

Roj Blake leads the Freedom Party from Gauda Prime, an agricultural commune with a harmless fetish for public assemblies and gossip. Kerr Avon, a free trader with an incredible ship, a fabulous supercomputer and no tact whatsoever, manages to get on Blake’s bad side almost immediately.

**Gauda Prime and Prejudice**

by x_los

**Summary**

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Chapter 1

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single person must be in want of a partner. On Gauda Prime, the conviction had hardened into fact. However little known the feelings or views of such single people might be upon their first visiting the planet, this truth was so well-fixed in the minds of the local families that visitors were almost considered the rightful property of some one or other of their children or neighbours. Thus when a new group of free traders established a base fifteen miles north of the colony's central settlement, speculation about them immediately occupied the townspeople. Wildly varying reports about the type of work they did and the size and gender composition of the company were passed over the baker's counter along with the daily ration-loaf, shouted over the bone-shatteringly loud thrum of terraforming equipment, and muttered over the small, downy heads of the infants in the communal creche – though the infants were perhaps the only people in the settlement who remained genuinely disinterested in these developments.

These newly arrived free-traders made arrangements with local building-contractors. The contractors accepted some elegant and expensive prefab components from said free traders and assembled these according to the complicated instructional diagrams they had also been provided with. And so, fifteen miles away from town, a large and quite stately house took shape, and then began to look a part of its environment – like something that had been there for years.

Despite the prevailing local attitudes, the residents most interested in these goings on were, curiously enough, perhaps also the people least inclined to view the newcomers in terms of their matrimonial prospects. Roj Blake wondered about their ship; Doctor Wyn Blake wondered what sort of medical supplies they had in stock; and Deva wondered what kind of security risk they might represent to the Freedom Party, and accordingly hacked into the relevant Federation databases and ran the information on them.

"The Liberator seems an unusual vessel with extraordinary capabilities," he informed the Blakes over the family dinner table, to which he was often invited. "No one seems to know where it came from. All we can say for sure, based on the reports of Federation ships that have come into contact with her, is that she's resilient and fast."

"What about her crew?" Wyn asked.

"Ah, now them we do know rather more about." Deva gestured with a roll from the basket Rees had handed him. "To begin with, three prisoners escaped a convoy headed for Cygnus Alpha."

"Political?" Ushton asked.

He himself had been confined to a penal world for a political crime, and had suffered a great deal on Exbar before the Federation had given up the place for good. He and his daughter Inga, along with the other prisoners, had then been rescued by Amagon traders and given passage to Gauda Prime. The Amagons had collected payment for their rescue efforts from the grateful former-prisoners in the form of billeting, and had then stayed on when the debt was paid, establishing a base that they used between jobs. Relations had since become more involved and mutualistic due to intermarriage between the Amagons, the former prisoners, and the Gauda locals.

"Hm, no, no, I don't think so." Deva shook his head. "One of them was a petty thief named Vila Restal. Another, Olag Gan, killed two Federation troopers——"

Inga snorted, acting as a barometer for the table's general sympathy for the dead in this case. In the Blakes' experience, any attack on Federation troopers was likely to have been provoked and richly deserved.
"And the other," Deva continued, "was a top computer expert. Kerr Avon. Something of a celebrity in my field, actually. Then he tried his hand at bank fraud, on a massive scale, and the Federation brought him in."

"Doesn't sound promising," Ushton huffed.

"Oh, I wouldn't discount the Liberator just yet." Roj Blake pushed his empty stew-bowl slightly away from himself and settled his elbows on the table, propping his chin on his hands. "I'm not inclined to assign much virtue to abiding by the law under an unjust system and an illegitimate government. Personal and political resistance get tangled up in messy, unseemly ways."

Wyn caught his eye, looking at him with an edge of remonstrance, and Roj smiled ruefully and obliged her by removing his elbows from the table, settling his forearms on it instead.

"Besides, that's in the past. A lot of people have made a new start here. It seems unfair to deny the same opportunity to newcomers, and before they've even arrived."

Ushton grunted assent, more as a mark of respect for Roj's authority and judgment than because he actually agreed. While he and Roj's parents, Lewell and Wyn, were technically the senior members of the family, the children – his own Inga, and Lewell and Wyn's boys, Roj, Davi and Rees, and their daughter Ang – were all adults now. Ang and Rees even had wives – Amagon women, Arwa and Bilal (who was currently 'out to sea', as the local parlance had it).

Roj Blake was a grown man, and sensible. More than that, he was the leader of the Freedom Party, and his family tried to be good about not countermanding his authority in those spheres, especially not in front of his people (even a family friend like Deva). Of course this didn't stop Lewell from having a go at Roj over rushing off before finishing a meal, or for getting distracted by his other work and leaving a job around the house half-done (Lewell had yet to let Roj hear the end of the half-sheared sheep incident – even, he pointed out dryly, as Roj had failed to get to the end of the sheep). Having lived on Gauda Prime for too long not to have absorbed its mores, at times Lewell also wondered, with loud laments, when Roj would get himself married to someone a bit more diligent than he was, who would force him to think things through and take his time; someone equal to Roj's immense assurance, who would give him a bit of his own back. But Lewell didn't push it – too often.

The family debated political matters voraciously, and would have considered it a failure of duty not to tell Roj when they thought he'd made the wrong decision. But they let matters rest after they'd said their piece, and outside the family sphere everyone kept their mouths shut with parliamentary solidarity. Roj had won his office, and no one could say he didn't perform it credibly, dedicating all his considerable passion, intelligence and willingness to work hard to his cause. The Blakes were proud of Roj – of what he'd done, what he was in the community now, and of what he was trying to do for the future.

"Some time after acquiring the ship, these three were joined," Deva continued, "by an Auron woman called Cally – suspected of being formally affiliated with resistance groups. And then later by Dayna Mellanby—"

"Not Hal and Iffany Mellanby's daughter?" Wyn asked.

Deva checked his records. "Yes, that's right."

"Oh, I knew her parents! I held that girl as a baby – I wonder if that means Hal made it out, then? We hoped, but it didn't seem likely, not after they caught and butchered Iffany. But he must have done, if Dayna's all right. Who else?"
"Just one more – a former FSA officer, Del Tarrant. They seem to have gone shopping for a pilot. Some of our most valuable defectors have been ex-military," Deva observed to Roj.

"Two confirmed dissidents isn't bad – a Mellanby could hardly be anything less," Wyn said. "It augurs well for anyone keeping company with them."

"And what are they all doing now?" Roj asked.

"Keeping out of danger, it looks like," Deva said. "They broke into and destroyed an important Federation communication facility on Saurian Major – presumably to stay on top of their pursuers. And since then they've taken contract work – or so the Federation suspects. I'm afraid it's not quite clear. They seem to be a relatively low priority for Space Security forces. The Federation cares enough to keep tabs, and would quite like a better look at that mysterious ship, but Avon's people are keeping their heads down."

"Are they Avon's people, then?" Roj asked.

"Oh yes – unless this report has it quite the wrong way 'round."

"Pure waste," Ang groused. "Why call it 'the Liberator' if you don't plan on liberating bloody anything? A ship like that, and all they're doing is free trading!"

"And what is wrong with free trading, my love?" her wife Arwa asked sweetly, with a sharp edge that indicated a readiness to defend her profession from the slights of ideologues.

"Nothing," Ang said, "it's just a damn shame Roj doesn't have the thing, and some coward who likes to spend his days playing 'dodge the pursuit ship' does. You don't need a unique craft for that game – a refitted crate would do the job better. No one wants to come looking for it, for a start."

Roj raised an eyebrow at his sister. "And how would this incredibly fast, attention-catching ship help me build a secret network of dissidents and coordinate their activities? Would I win supporters in a race, do you think?" He took a desert cup and pulled the pudding bowl to him. "No, I've quite enough to be getting on with, as it is." The serving spoon clacked against his cup, as though to enunciate the point. (Though everyone assembled knew it would have taken Roj a mere day to come up with 30 good things he could use a ship like that to do, and that he was trying not to think about it.)

"Yes – someone has to half-shear the sheep," Lewell said calmly, and Roj groaned.

"Yes, thank you, Da. Let's keep that cherished memory alive forever, shall we?"

"I think we should call on them," Deva said, taking a desert cup himself and letting Roj hand him the pudding. "We should establish contact, determine their capabilities. Besides, it's friendly – they're new in the area."

"And we can see whether any of them fancy marring Roj, Davi or Inga, while we're about it," Lewell (probably… possibly) teased. Davi, out with a friend, wasn't at dinner to defend himself, but Inga rolled her eyes for all three of them.

Deva grinned. "It certainly couldn't hurt – from all reports, it's a very fine ship. Blake should aim for the captain, I think."

"Yes, aren't people who don't know you supposed to find you charismatic or something, Roj?" Ang reached over him to grab the pudding bowl off Deva. "And if that fails, Da will get the shotgun—"
Roj shook his head. "My own family and my tech lead, conspiring to sell me into matrimony against my will." He gave his father a this is good pudding sort of look, and Lewell nodded to indicate that yes, he knew. Lewell didn't believe in pudding-related false modesty.

"Our poor gothic heroine," Inga sighed, throwing a theatrical hand over her heart. "But think of his prospects!"

"Oh, I do. For my honeymoon, I'd like to take a tour of and then blow up Central Control," Roj intoned dryly.

"You could do worse," Ang pointed out. "Arwa and I went to Freedom City – her idea – and got mugged."

Everyone was excessively familiar with this grievance, except Deva. Thus Deva didn't know better than to give Ang a sympathetic look. Which he then quickly stopped giving her, because Arwa swivelled the poisonous glare she'd been giving her wife onto Deva, who, less equal to it, coughed and took refuge in his glass of water.

"So, we'll call on them," Roj decided. "And not mention Da's cherished hopes, such as they are." Lowell sighed wistfully, and Roj ignored him. "When are they due back? Someone in this hive of gossip must have reliable information."

Deva shrugged. "Thursday, quoth the contractors."

"Who have good reason to know, given that they'll have to be done by then or else. I'll go on Friday, then."

"You can't call yourself, Blake," Deva said, surprised that Roj was contemplating it. "You're the leader of the Freedom Party – it'd look, well, a little desperate. Besides, who's to say these people are safe?"

Roj huffed, exasperated. "Your own reports, for one. It's not as if the Federation's thought to spend good intelligence hours mocking up complicated, plausible profiles to trip us up yet. Besides, I'm perfectly capable of undertaking an errand. All our prattling about equality and suddenly I'm too important to talk directly to people? Surely that looks as bad."

"No, Deva has a point, Roj," Wyn said. "I'll go. That's less obvious, isn't it? And it gets the job done just as well, to my mind. I can invite them to the Assembly into the bargain. They'll be expected as it is."

"So I'm supposed to send my own mother into this situation Deva thinks is potentially dangerous, am I?"

Wyn chuckled. "If we're jumping at shadows, I'll take Soolin Janss – she's the fastest draw in the village. Now let's have no more about it." She cast a glance at Deva, and moderated her peremptory tone. "If you think it's best, Roj."

"As it happens, I don't. But I'll bow to Deva's wishes, as usual." Roj grinned wryly at his friend. Deva snorted at the idea that Roj Blake was prone to bending, or that he himself usually got his own way.

And so on Friday, when the Liberator's crew had been given time to settle into their new and newly built abode, Deva, Wyn and Soolin called, spoke to the crew about their services, and invited them all to the Assembly on Monday night.

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Roj Blake had taken to Gauda Prime well, but like the rest of his family, he’d actually been born on Earth. As a teen, Roj had been given outer-world clearance to visit his uncle Ushton and cousin Inga. He had taken a variety of planet-hoppers to muddle the fact that said family members no longer lived in low-security penal facilities on Exbar, but instead on a well-set-up little farming planet. In fact Roj Blake had been on Gauda Prime when the Federation had decided they wanted to re-grade the planet for mining. Gauda Prime had boasted a considerable and established agrarian population, but under new probability models, these settlements had looked slightly less likely to make the Federation a profit than mining would. That had been that.

In order to re-grade the world, the Federation had classed Gauda Prime as an open planet and withdrawn their troops. The Federation’s action permitted, even actively encouraged, marauders to despoil the undefended, remote colony. When the farmers were dead, the Federation could steam in and claim the valuable resources for itself.

This plan had not played out quite as the Federation had expected. The settlers, political dissidents, and Amagons had collectivised to fight back, and Roj Blake, among others, had been instrumental in their successful resistance. After Independence, when things had settled down slightly and Roj Blake’s year-long exit visa was close to expiration, he’d taken another series of ships (so the Federation would never know where he’d actually wound up spending his Gap while all his peers had done respectable internships) back home and rejoined his immediate family. If he hadn’t, the Blakes back on Earth wouldn’t have been safe – and besides, he’d wanted to finish his education and to try and instigate political change on Earth.

Blake had been forced to return to Gauda Prime at about 30. The Federation had moved on the Freedom Party. Only the fact that Blake knew exactly where its most implicated members might safely escape to had enabled his family and close associates to make contingency plans and get off Earth when the time came. They’d lost only a few Party members – four lieutenants whose interrogation and mindwipes Blake bitterly regretted, and had promised himself to avenge. Blake had barely escaped the same procedure himself and, if he’d been caught, he knew his unlucky associates would have fared even worse. They’d have been killed, rather than made to publicly denounce the Freedom Party, mindwiped, and paraded around as model citizens. Only the Federation’s failure to catch and try the figurehead of the Party had ensured the survival of four next-best-things. That would have been him, glass-eyed and swearing that he’d been mistaken, terribly mistaken – going back to do his job as best he could from inside a cocoon of suppressants, forced to live out his days in that drugged haze, thoroughly supervised.

The Federation didn’t know where the Freedom Party’s upper echelons had gone. The skilled free-trader who had flown them off Earth had made sure of that. Captain Jenna Stannis had subsequently come to be almost a part of their organisation (while still undertaking her own commissions). She’d made GP her base of operations for much the same reasons the Freedom Party and the Amagons had. It offered her steady business and trading connections. Presumably, if a skilled psychostrategist had dedicated time to the problem of the Freedom Party’s escape, they could have worked out what had happened, but the Federation wasn’t actually that worried about Blake. As far as they knew, he was a ‘protests and leaflets’ sort of dissident – and while they wanted nothing of that sort to occur on Earth, wherever he’d gone, Blake had effectively exiled himself, and there was an end to it.

Sometimes Blake though that, politically, the Freedom Party’s expulsion from Earth had been an opportunity disguised as a setback. Freedom Party members no longer had to constantly look over their shoulders, or spend a good chunk of their time sorting out where to get undrugged food, or eat drugged food in grudging moderation and lose productivity as a result. True, the Party had lost the opportunity to foment dissent at the heart of the Federation, but now they could turn their concentration towards the outer worlds, which were more vulnerable, if less crucially important to
the Federation's power base. Gauda Prime was an ideal place to plan operations, safe and remote. Bran Foster had travelled from GP to give information about corruption on Earth to Governor LeGrande and returned safely. From GP Blake had made contact with resistance leaders like Avalon, as well as forged ties with other rebel cells and neutral governments.

The existence of Gauda Prime made conclaves and coordination possible. Now widely respected in rebel circles for his work on Earth, and as a strategist and negotiator who could merge the priorities of disparate people standing against the Federation for different reasons, Blake felt he was getting more concrete work done here than he ever had living in the London Dome. Occasionally he went on missions himself (though not as often as he would have liked), but largely he worked from GP, gathering resources, processing and assigning recruits, and planning actions. Around this work, Blake contributed proportionally to the commune and helped out on his family's farm (even as they helped him keep the Freedom Party running). Blake was frustrated by the severe technical limitations on his sphere of action, but did everything he could with what he had.

The citizens of Gauda Prime were so doggedly anti-Federation, and sufficiently committed to Blake himself, that they considered the Freedom Party a chunk of the local government. They had even handed over some of their defence operations to the newcomers. The Freedom Party was housed in the same suite of offices as the local authority (the same handsome building that had housed the Federation's provisional government before the withdrawal, and where the bulk of the Assemblies were now held). Blake and the Council Leader worked as close associates, making, for the most part, cooperative decisions about domestic and extra-planetary policy.

For all they'd been relatively-privileged Alphas on Earth, the Blakes had adapted to the new situation with gusto, integrating into the community thoroughly over the course of the last four years, with marriages and all. Roj Blake in particular liked his life here. After all, he had a lot of friends around him – Bran, Deva, his family, little Soolin Janss (whom Blake had known as a girl during the Independence struggle, and who was now a young woman with a sharp tongue and a celebrated draw), and Jenna, whom he'd become very close to. The locals respected and helped promote the Party's work, and Blake liked being part of a free community, dedicated to working things out together and living as they themselves decided they should. So Gauda Prime's denizens had a fixation with community meetings, which included dancing and gossip, that most Dome-bred Alphas would have thought appallingly backwards and dull. Well, let them think it – their byzantine intrigues and behavioural intricacies weren't half as interesting as they supposed them to be, and didn't mean anything, played out as they were in Earth's filigreed bell-jars of surveillance and control.

If only Blake could dissuade the locals from their persistent attempts to see him married, life on Gauda Prime would be, so far as anything could be while tyrants were still at large in the galaxy, ideal.

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"They're expensive," Deva muttered under his breath to Blake as soon as Blake greeted him in the Assembly room. Blake had been busier even than usual the past few days, and hadn't yet had a chance to discuss the interview. The character of the new traders wasn't, after all, a terribly high priority for him just now.

"As you'd expect," Blake said, with a tinge of regret. Some free traders gave the Freedom Party something like mates' rates, but Avon's people weren't necessarily ideologically motivated, despite what Deva had heard about Cally and Dayna Mellanby.

"Very expensive, from what I could make out," Deva persisted, "though they seem to negotiate fees on a case-by-case basis, depending on the work."
"And how badly we need it, I suppose," Blake said wryly. "As well as whether we have any other options."

"Possibly," Deva agreed. "Mister Avon was not inclined to give me very clear answers. Ah—" Deva had spotted a short man enjoying the party and waved him over. "Here, let me introduce you. Mister Vila Restal, this is Mister Roj Blake, leader of the Freedom Party."

"You missed out my profession!" Mister Restal protested. "I'm quite proud of that. Vila Restal, master thief. At your service, Blake. Provided the price is right of course – Mister Blake, sorry, I've forgotten how you do things here already."

The idea of a free planet had called to many rootless people searching for a sanctuary. A number of refugees who had formerly been classed as slave grade had made Gauda Prime their home. In an environment made up of people from all grades living communally, it had been necessary to radically reinforce a new equality. Gauda Prime had adopted formal modes of address. Former slaves, with the most reason to feel their independent personhood malleable and fragile, in need of affirmation, had introduced the custom of calling everyone Mister, Misses and Miss. Blake had been a little surprised to find himself addressed as 'young Mister Blake' when he returned to Gauda Prime, but had then reflected on similar linguistic turns in colonial South America after slave revolts, and supposed it was quite natural, a custom to be embraced.

"I don't mind, Mister Restal." Blake smiled, finding he liked the thief already.

Mister Restal winced. "No – I can't get used to it. Everyone on the Liberator calls me Vila – I think you'd better as well."

"Feel free to call me Blake, if it comes easier to you." That should have been a little confusing, given that Blake's whole family lived in the neighbourhood, but people generally seemed to get the gist.

"Blake it is, then. Let me introduce my shipmates – well, I'll do a stationary sort of introduction. They look busy, and I'm lazy."

Vila indicated Miss Cally and Miss Mellanby getting punch; Mister Tarrant flirting with a local girl and trying to secure one of the first dances; Mister Gan in a circle of farmers listening seriously to a discussion about crop rotation in the age of super-nitrate topsoil importation; and the man himself, Mister Avon, standing by the mantelpiece with a drink in hand, seemingly pretending not to be in a room full of other people – with limited success, judging by his irked expression.

Blake's mother entered, and Blake told her where Miss Mellanby could be found. He smiled as he watched her introduce herself to the girl, whose small, expressive face reflected obvious surprise and pleasure at meeting an old friend of her mother's.

"What brings you to GP?" Blake asked, and that was all talkative Vila needed to extol the virtues of the plan, which sounded rather like it had been his idea. The Liberator crew took all sorts of jobs, and people on GP seemed to need all sorts of jobs. GP was a nice, safe, neutral place to meet clients, with a good mix of civilisation and a bit of privacy. (Blake made a mental note to talk to Deva about the possibility of these free traders bringing trouble or notice to the citizens of GP, particularly those directly involved with Freedom Party, via their meetings.) Plus, Vila continued, it was a bolt hole, wasn't it? In case they ever needed one. You know, if things went south. A good backup plan – Avon loved backup plans. Not to mention how dull and exhausting it could get on the ship, avoiding Federation patrols, always on edge. Everyone needed relaxation and recreation somewhere neutral from time to time, didn't they? Bit of a change of scenery.
Blake, feeling as though Vila had rehearsed these arguments a great deal and had been itching to get more use out of them, even after having carried his point, smiled and allowed that this was probably the case.

How, he asked Vila, had they acquired the Liberator? She was like no vessel he recognised, and given that he'd trained as an engineer, he was passingly familiar with most major forms of ship design.

Vila said the prison ship that he, Gan and Avon had been on had encountered an alien vessel drifting through space. Rather than risk more of their own men after losing their initial survey party, the London's crew had asked for volunteers from among the prisoners. Avon had piped right up and argued that his computer skills might well be vital to their beginning to understand the strange vessel. He'd listed Vila, who he knew to be a talented thief (having already had to rescue some of his possessions from him), and Gan (who seemed like the strongest and most reliable of the prisoners) as his personnel needs. Vila remembered having said, "Thanks a lot, Avon", and Avon having smiled nastily and replied, "Don't mention it – then again, perhaps we won't live to regret this."

Vila, veteran of several reconditioning attempts, had fought through the defensive psi-weapon that had taken out the previous team (he was just that good, he assured Blake), and Avon had touched the Liberator's console and, smooth as you like, got acquainted with her somehow. He'd taken them out, spacing the nasty pieces of work that had come after them in the process. Now they'd met Cally—

"Isn't that rather enough for one conversation?" said a voice with a distinctly Dome-Alpha accent, puncturing Vila's heroic tribute to his own exploits. "Or would you like to convey every detail of our personal histories to a man you have only just met?"

Blake turned to find they'd been joined by the man who Vila had indicated as his nominal boss. Mister Avon was lean and sharp, like a wolf in a long winter, and dark haired. Handsome. Like the rest of his party, he was dressed in a high Terran style that looked ridiculous amidst the natural linen shirts and the best frocks and frock-coats that comprised Gauda-Prime Assembly-costume. Due, again, to the influx of former slaves, Gauda Prime took its fashion cues from some of the more exotic slave-grade costumes. The citizens opted for lighter, brighter versions of those rather Gothic looks. Against this backdrop, the Liberator crew's melange of jumpsuits, leather and plastic looked a bit… cheap. Like they were trying terribly hard.

Still (Blake eyed the black leather ensemble discreetly), Mister Avon made cheap and trying too hard look… fairly good.

"I wouldn't want to pry too deeply into these highly mysterious personal histories of yours," Blake said mildly. "Would you prefer to discuss business?"

Mister Avon smiled, his eyes a touch too hard. "Not your sort of business, Blake." He sneered Blake's name like an insult, and if he'd heard about the honorifics, he wasn't choosing to abide by the custom. "I remember you from Earth, of course, and that memory has been thoroughly refreshed throughout these last days. I've heard more than I could wish to about you from your intermediaries – the locals generally seem very happy to proclaim their sycophantic attachment to you to a fresh audience."

"As far as I know, the only creature on the planet with a particularly sycophantic attachment to me is my dog," Blake said with a raised eyebrow. "I'm very sorry her conversation isn't up to your usual standard. Someone won't be getting a biscuit."

Mister Avon's grin got a little sharper at this weak attempt to deflect him. Not a wolf, Blake
changed his mind. Try a shark, smelling a drop of blood in the water and mindlessly careening after it.

"I've heard – from the citizens – reports that have enabled me to surmise rather a lot about your narrow escape from Earth and your willingness to dispatch your minions on dangerous missions. So you and I may as well clarify the matter from the beginning – my people are only incidentally political. We are not among your orderlies. Unlike the other free traders who have settled here, we have no intention of being absorbed into your army, either entirely or in part. We are here to do business, not to conduct charity runs for your benefit."

"I didn't ask for your help," Blake pointed out, quite calmly. "And I begin to think I wouldn't particularly want it."

Mister Avon's face twitched slightly, but he covered this with a deeper smirk. "So long as we understand each other."

"Oh, I think I understand you perfectly." Blake took a sip of his drink and waited for Mister Avon to go away.

Mister Avon seemed to want to say something further, but to not quite have a good enough reason. Blake had deliberately not given him much to hang a barb on.

"Do try and remember what 'discretion' means, Vila," Mister Avon said as he left.

Vila whistled low when Mister Avon returned to his former position, leaning back against the fireplace with, Blake thought, the air of a sulky child.

"Rare to see him set down like that," Vila commented.

"Too rare for his benefit, I expect," Blake chuckled. "Some people need to be smacked down like proving bread – hard, and at regular intervals." Too late, Blake realised the metaphor was inexact – you pounded bread to develop the strength inherent in the flour, so it would stretch itself and rise. Odd, that the language he'd gone for suggested that Mister Avon had it in him to prove.

Blake certainly hadn't seen any evidence of it.

With a wry (and slightly speculative) look, Vila retreated to the punch table. Miss Janss, who Blake knew more than well enough to call Soolin, slipped over to Blake to take Vila's place.

"What did you think, when you went over there with Deva and my mother?" Blake asked her, softly.

Soolin shrugged. "The ship looks as good as the Federation thought it might be, and the crew seem as skilled as they claim. They also have some sort of super-computer, and so much money I wonder they need more."

"I expect Mister Avon is the sort of man who believes you can always have more money," Blake said dryly.

"Probably," Soolin said without judgment. "It's quite a sensible thing to believe."

Blake bit his knuckle in the way Wyn would have told him off for if she had seen it. "Why are the two rebels with him?"

"I imagine the Liberator takes enough jobs that run counter to the Federation's interests to appease their inclinations." Soolin shrugged. "Who knows? Perhaps they like him."
"That," Blake said, "doesn't seem likely, given what I've seen of his winning personality."

"It's clear you weren't charmed to make his acquaintance, but there are reasons not to annoy Mister Avon more than you can help," Soolin said.

Blake sighed, adjusting the sleeves of his frock coat and pulling the elaborate cuffs of the billowing shirt he wore underneath it into better order. "He didn't come here intending to be pleased."

"Then why did he come?"

Blake shrugged. "To scope out contacts worthy of his exalted time and conversation? For the pleasure of telling me to go to hell to my face? As you said – who knows?"

"Who cares?"

Blake grinned at her and would have tousled her hair, if it weren't done up in elaborate braids. "Exactly. You look lovely, by the way."

"Yes," Soolin acknowledged with a cursory glance down at her long blue gown and a nonchalant nod that made Blake laugh. "You look all right yourself – you clean up decently, I'll say that for you."

She gave him a quick peck on his cheek and walked off to greet Jenna, who'd just come into the room.

In the lull, Blake heard Vila's voice distinctly.

"Look, come on Avon – why don't you try dancing? I hate seeing you standing around in this stupid way, really I do."

"I'm sorry to inconvenience you," answered Mister Avon in a nasal deadpan that Blake found off-putting. "But I would find it more of a punishment than a recreation to dance full-stop, let alone to do so with anyone in this room."

Vila persisted. "Blake seems really decent – I bet he'd be willing to show you the ropes. You know, how they do things around here. There was a pause, during which Mister Avon presumably delivered a withering glare, but Vila wouldn't let it go. "I mean it, Avon, he's nice. He's got real personality, you saw that. We've been working together over a year, and I've yet to see you make a particular friend on a single planet we've landed on. Why not here? Blake's handsome enough, if you like that sort of thing, which I don't, but we're not talking about me. Go on, ask him to dance. What've you got to lose, eh?"

"I have no interest in being 'shown the ropes' of this backwater. As for Blake, he's not handsome enough to tempt me," Mister Avon sneered. "I don't find crazed fanaticism a good look on anyone."

Blake thought he'd let this go on long enough. "You do realise," he said, raising his voice slightly without turning in their direction, "that there's this strange thing called earshot that enables people not fifteen feet away from you to hear everything you're saying?"

Vila coughed.

"Perhaps you were meant to hear it," Mister Avon said.

"No," Blake said cheerfully, still surveying the room at large with a placid expression, "I'm fairly
sure it'd have been a better insult, if I had been. 'Crazed fanatic' surely isn't the most damning pejorative you can dredge up. After all, it just means I care about something – an accusation which is perfectly true, and which I don't find insulting in the slightest. You'd be better off sticking with comments on my appearance.”

"Ample fodder, there," Mister Avon said, seemingly automatically.

Blake finally turned towards them and gave Mister Avon a particularly winning smile, amused to see that Mister Avon lost a shade of the little colour he had. Meant to hear it indeed. "The eyes, for example, go baggy like old leather when I don't get enough sleep. Not much to be done about it, as I never do make the time. Still, it could be worse. I could be the sort of arse who audibly insults strangers at parties."

Mister Avon grinned at him. "You flatter yourself."

Unfortunately Deva, a little star-struck by Mister Avon and eager to promote good relations between the Freedom Party and these new contractors, saw them all talking and chose this moment to come over. He gave Blake a pointed look, and with a sigh, Blake withheld his retort and joined the group properly.

"Enjoying yourselves?" Deva asked hopefully, and Vila, bless him, said it was a great little party, nice snacks, nothing like this in the Domes.

"There's a proper dinner in an hour, but the core activity's really the mingling and the dancing," Deva explained. "Do you happen to—?"

"No," Mister Avon said, absolutely.

"Yes! I've always loved a knees up," Vila said, rescuing a baffled Deva. "Hallmark of any civilised society, isn't it?"

"And every uncivilised society," Mister Avon couldn't help sticking in. "Any savage can dance."

"So you can't, then," Blake said coolly.

"Obviously I don't," Mister Avon returned. "Neither would you, if living in the back of beyond for four years hadn't addled your brain as thoroughly as the mindwipe you barely escaped would have done."

"Oh, true," Blake said (thinking that had been a low blow), "dancing isn't a popular activity in the Domes. Therefore it follows that it's utterly devoid of interest and merit. Thank you, Mister Avon, for reminding us – we'd all forgotten, somehow, that the culturally engineered opinions of people from the capital are the only legitimate arbiters of taste. One does wonder, since you're so interested in complying with social norms, why you bothered becoming a criminal."

"I wanted to be tremendously rich and safe," Mister Avon countered. "It doesn't follow that I should go in for rhythmic jumping."

"How interesting," Blake said of Mister Avon's motives, in a tone that implied they were excruciatingly banal. Mister Avon flinched slightly, almost imperceptibly, at having been dismissed as a bore, and Blake clocked it, feeling a slow grin spread over his own face.

"And I'm sorry – I should apologise," Blake continued. "As you say, you can't dance. And that must embarrass you." He had to work quickly to take the measure of Mister Avon from slight cues, but he could feel that he was landing it, pinning the other man. "After all, it's obvious you're not comfortable with anything anyone else can do better than you. I can see why you're being so
inappropriate about the subject."

"I am not embarrassed." Mister Avon's eyes had widened and then narrowed and Blake thought, *Oh you're easy, I've got you*, with a surge of pleasure.

"Well, if you're just nervous," Blake corrected himself sweetly, "I'm sure someone here could teach you, if you could find it in yourself to ask—" And because that had been a little too nice, too like a genuine offer, and if the arrogant bastard turned it back on him it would only be *Blake* who'd have to instruct him, Blake twisted it around. "We could even put you in with the children's courses, if you like."

Mister Avon's eyes darkened, and he stepped into Blake's personal space and opened his mouth to say something. Between them, Vila and Deva conspired to suddenly find urgent things for their respective bosses to do.

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Blake had good night, overall – he danced with Misses Inga Blake, Janns, Stannis, Cally, Mellanby, and even with Vila. Mister Tarrant, young and energetic, bounded up to him and asked for a go with a flourishing bow that made Blake laugh and Tarrant grin harder, but Blake waved him off with a raincheck for the next Assembly. He was panting and fatigued after the fastest whirl Miss Mellanby could manage (she seemed to view it as a personal challenge, and her partners as a sort of handicap). What she lacked in training she made up for in enthusiasm, athleticism and natural grace.

Mister Avon had watched the dancing intently, Blake especially, and took the floor once with Miss Cally at the end of the night, glaring at Blake as he did it. Mister Avon's study had paid off, a little – he didn't disgrace himself, though no one would have called him a natural. Blake suspected it was largely Miss Cally's easy grace and Auronar telepathic abilities (which she must be using to help him without obviously appearing to do so) that allowed Mister Avon to get through the measure unscathed.

There was something in Mister Avon's mannered movements that might mature into skill with practice – he definitely had a sense of display. Blake realised he was watching, and pandering to that sense. He caught Mister Avon's eye and gave him a deliberately unimpressed look, turned his back on the proceedings, and left, going out onto the balcony for some air. When he came back he glanced at the couples breaking up, which meant that Mister Avon, still glaring at him, caught his eye again. Blake raised an ironic eyebrow and went into the adjoining room to watch the card tables, where Vila was gaming the low-stakes whist for all he was worth. He had already garnered three seed bags he'd just have to give back, having little inclination to plant soybeans himself.

Despite the Assembly coming off quite well, and most of the Liberator crew showing a pleasing willingness to get on good terms with Blake's people and the colonists more generally, Blake found he was disappointed with how the evening had gone. He found, in retrospect, that he'd expected more from Mister Avon – he found he'd *wanted* to like him. And why not? Mister Avon was handsome, in a strange, mercurial way (enough to tempt him, Blake admitted to himself). More to the point, Mister Avon was endowed with incredible resources, skilled, and generally clever – by reputation, and as was evident from his acerbic conversation. Politically and personally, it would have been good to make a friend of him.

Blake had plenty of friends, but Mister Avon wasn't just anyone, and if he had united any of his qualities with agreeability, Blake would have been very happy to come to know him better. Instead he'd found that Mister Avon was just a stuck-up arse who was out for himself and/or whatever he could get. He'd managed, somehow, to drag some capable, nicer and more interesting people into his orbit, but even capable people could have lapses of judgment. Mister Avon was
easy to figure out, and Blake hadn’t liked what he'd discovered. An exceptionally generous mouth (which Blake thought at odds with his decidedly ungenerous nature) and dark, intelligent eyes couldn’t make up for that.

Blake vowed to himself never to dance with Mister Avon if the man should ask him. Not that that was likely.
By the time the next Assembly came 'round, the Liberator had gone and come back again. The settlers had warmly received her crew (Miss Mellanby and Soolin were soon particular friends) – with the exception of Mister Avon. The opinion of the neighbourhood had damned him as mean, mercenary and not worth thinking of, despite his personal advantages. This was due to his coldness at the Assembly and in commercial dealings, and the mocking, amused report of Roj Blake. Blake had repeated "Not handsome enough to tempt me" in a nasal voice to his friends and relations, who'd laughed at the impression and abused Mister Avon's bad taste with partial fondness.

Despite this censure, Jenna had managed to get on good business terms with Mister Avon. She even talked of performing a particularly difficult run with the crew, involving two days' solid navigation through an asteroid field. To accomplish this, the Liberator would need two expert pilots, working in shifts. Blake didn't particularly like the idea of his friend putting her safety in the hands of a man like Mister Avon, but knew Jenna could take care of herself.

This fortnight's Assembly was held in a family compound – not the Blake compound, but one like it: a cluster of self-sufficient private houses around a commonly-held hall, which had larger, communal kitchens and recreation rooms. You'd never get something like this on Earth, Blake thought as he entered the main hall. So much space and freedom to move, and such a wonderful ability to be close to the people you loved, to share parts of your life with them while still having a bit of privacy for yourself.

Vila (dressed this time, like everyone from the Liberator but Mister Avon, in some local gear for the occasion) had called Blake's name upon his entering the room. Blake went over to him and asked him what he'd been getting up to.

"Nothing interesting. A few more sure things. Not that I object to playing it safe, mind, but I do like chances to stretch myself professionally," Vila admitted.

"Which is why you're trying to pocket our hosts' paperweight," Blake said.

Vila shrugged. "I'll give it back – just like keeping in practice, that's all."

"If you're that keen, I'm sure I could find you a few independent, sideline projects, if I thought about it," Blake offered. His casual tone disguised the fact that he'd already arranged a few scenarios based on what he thought was the strong probability of Vila being up for it.

"High-skill, low-risk?" Vila asked. "I'm interested in some excitement, but not necessarily of the deadly variety. That's a little too much in the way of thrills for me."

"We could work out something along those lines," Blake agreed with a smile. Mentally, he pushed the two projects that weren't low-risk back until such time as he could free up additional security personnel to devote to the tasks, and until Vila felt more comfortable with the Party and more confident that they'd have his back if anything went wrong.

"I'll have to talk to Avon," Vila admitted. "He'd only find out if I said I was off on a fishing trip and didn't come back with anything to show for it. And thinking about it, he might not mind, so long as the timing was right. Say, Blake, are you seeing anyone?"

Blake laughed outright. "Is that an offer?" he asked, faux-flirtatious, knowing it wasn't. He was typically decent at reading sexual interest, and Vila struck Blake as more interested in spending the
evening with Deva's special punch than with him. Besides, Vila had said Blake wasn't his type to Mister Avon.

"Well," Vila leered playfully, "I'm afraid I'm not that keen, but it was kind of you to proposition me – really, I take the compliment to heart."

"Did I proposition you?"

"Oh, you practically begged," Vila assured him. "No," he dropped the act, "it's just that I don't know the score around here."

"How can you have managed to escape the local gossip? It's omnipresent!" For all Blake wished it weren't.

He was updated on a regular basis about which of this year's crop of local youths had crushes on him (or rather, Blake thought, on his position as Dashing Rebel from Exotic Earth). He'd made his disinterest in hearing anything about this subject clear, but the favourite local pastime would not be repressed. In Blake's opinion, being told this sort of thing only made it awkward for all involved when he had to ask one or another of them to run Party errands about town. The only pleasure the gossip mill had ever brought Blake was when he'd been told that Honna, the butcher's attractive daughter, had moved on from him to Deva, and he'd been able to watch Deva's facial expressions as he processed this information. (Deva had given the gossiper an awkward, formal 'Thank you' for the progress report, apparently at a loss as to how else to respond.)

"Well, by not visiting your shops, I suppose," Vila said. "Occupational hazard, for a thief – joking, joking. We have our own food stores. Though I'll take that under advisement, if I ever want to know anything else. For now, why don't you just tell me? Maybe I want it straight from the horse's mouth. Come on, Blake. Fill me in. I like a bit off the rumour mill – we live in such unvarying company up on the ship that I've already speculated wildly about everyone, and nothing's come of it. I've looped around to me and Gan twice. Gan's as straight as they come, and I'm in a position to know I'm not interested."

"Depressingly enough, I don't have anything to hide," Blake told him. "Everyone here is like family to me at this point – either literally, or by dint of long acquaintance."

Vila opened his mouth to get the joke in, and Blake preempted him.

"And despite what you may have heard about frontier worlds, I don't feel much like dating my family or the farm animals. Hardly original, Vila."

"So you've pledged celibacy until you take back Earth for the common man?"

Blake rolled his eyes. "Have you been talking to my father? I did have a girlfriend, a couple of years ago – we tend to say 'I courted her', here – but it wasn't serious. Then she met someone she thought it might be serious with, so we agreed to let it go at that. Now they're married and living in the next settlement over."

"No one else?"

"Not since since Earth – you know, it might not be obvious to you, Vila, but I'm actually kept fairly busy around here."

Blake didn't mention that Jenna had tried to flirt with him a little, at first. He'd been too confused by and upset about his near escape from Earth and the scattering of the Freedom Party to feel much interest just then. By the time he was calmer, Jenna had decided he was too intense for her, and Blake had decided she wasn't quite intense enough for him. Fortunately, the differences that
would have made them a bad romantic match made them good friends who balanced each other's tendencies rather than feeding off them. Thus they'd settled into a comfortable alignment of interests and personalities, rather than the generative, exponential, dynamic exchange that Blake thought of as love (and which Jenna would have thought of as 'dangerous' and 'a lot of work'). This non-affair was private, trivial and long over, and Blake would never have embarrassed Jenna by mentioning it to her or anyone else.

"No boyfriends?"

"Are you sure you're not angling?" Blake teased. "Not since Earth, no."

The arrival of Ang and Arwa, neither of whom had yet met Vila properly, cut off that line of inquiry. After they'd accomplished their introductions and had a bit of a chat about Arwa's work (she and Vila had some overlapping professional experience, largely of the sort Ang didn't approve of), Vila left to speak to his sulky boss, who was (inexplicably, to Blake's mind) here again. Why did he go out in company? For the pleasure of scowling at people and making them uncomfortable?

Blake turned away to help himself to refreshments, but glanced back, feeling the peculiar pressure of someone's gaze on his back. Vila was still talking to Mister Avon, who had jerked his head away when Blake had turned. Blake frowned. Were they talking about him? Mister Avon had made it inescapably clear that he was utterly disinterested in Blake in every possible capacity, so it hardly seemed likely. An accident, then.

That, or he was afraid Blake would make off with the best sandwiches. Blake deliberately took another. It would serve Mister Avon right.

Again, it was obvious that the entertainments bored Mister Avon, who had found a new fireplace to skulk around (Blake wondered whether, if he built one free-standing in the forest, Mister Avon would find his way there and glower next to it). Blake, who had himself groused about the Assemblies in his heart and found them a little embarrassingly provincial, especially when he'd first arrived, was angry that Mister Avon could see and judge them. Mister Avon didn't understand or want to understand how harmless they were, what they meant to the settlers. Worse, Blake's sense of embarrassment about the whole affair had been reawakened by considering the Assemblies through a stranger's eyes. He resented being ashamed of his own people, and he disliked Mister Avon all the more for bringing the feeling about in him – and for, no doubt, witnessing Blake's embarrassment with smug condescension.

Realising he'd been remiss, Blake went to greet the hostess, a plump matriarch named Misses Harrad.

"Why aren't you making that boy welcome?" She nodded towards the Liberator's captain, who had been abandoned by Vila, and was now standing alone awkwardly again.

Blake snorted. "Hardly a boy. And I didn't realise it was my job. I thought I had a rebellion to organise."

Misses Harrad took one of his sandwiches for herself without asking, and Blake rolled his eyes and didn't fight it. They were, in a larger sense, her sandwiches.

"You usually do it," she said, taking a bite and chewing before continuing on. "Bring new people into the fold. You're a brilliant negotiator, and as manipulative as a child angling to push back bedtime. If Mister Avon were a recalcitrant warlord and you wanted a protection agreement, you'd have bullied him into doing what you wanted a month ago."
"What, before he even got here?"

Blake was still slightly huffy about the sandwich (why couldn't she have appropriated the cucumber instead of the salmon?); about being assigned some sort of morale-officer duty (he had a real job, dammit); and about how Mister Avon was managing to occupy an undue portion of his thoughts and his evening (which was to say, any portion thereof).

"What I want," Blake told Misses Harrad, "is nothing to do with selfish, entitled, arrogant smugglers who think that having lucked into a good ship makes them better than other people. You're the hostess – if it's important to you, you sort it out."

Misses Harrad's eyes glinted. "In eighteen years I have never heard such sass out of you!" Blake thought that unlikely – he knew he was often obstinate. Perhaps she rated his unyielding resistance to tyranny rather differently than she did his unyielding sulkiness. "Just for that, Roj Blake, I will. You're too big to take over my knee, but that cheek needs repaid with a little embarrassment."

"Now hang on—"

Misses Harrad wasn't listening. She sailed over to the fireplace. "My dear sir, why are you not dancing, as a compliment to the occasion?"

All politeness. Why didn't he merit that, Blake wondered? Probably because she'd known him eighteen years, and Mister Avon hadn't recently personally annoyed her. Yet. Give him five minutes.

"It's a compliment I never pay if I can help it," Mister Avon said, smiling at his hostess in a way that was technically civil, but which Blake found somehow pointedly rude in its thin insincerity.

"Why here's our Mister Blake—" Misses Harrad pretended to notice Blake (transparently, Blake thought, given that they'd literally just been speaking), and physically hauled him over. Blake winced – farm work had put quite an arm on her. "Oh, he's quite talented, you know. Half the people here learned to dance from him. Good with the newcomers, our Roj. You can't refuse, I'm sure, with the opportunity of learning from such an able teacher before you."

Taking Blake's hand, she would have given it to Mister Avon who, though extremely surprised, seemed not unwilling to receive it. Blake instantly drew back, like he was afraid Mister Avon might bite.

"Come on," he said, trying to laugh. "Let's not bother the poor man. Why don't we—?"

"I looked this up, after the last Assembly," Mister Avon interrupted. "If I am going to continue to be subjected to these rituals, I thought I might as well understand them thoroughly. It was easy enough to master. And your eyes aren't that bad. I'm certain I could endure the sight of their bagginess, for the requisite four minutes."

"As charming as that proposition is, I'm afraid I'm already committed to dance with your Mister Tarrant," Blake said.

Mister Avon raised an eyebrow. "All evening?"

Blake smiled at him. "Well, he's not made it precisely clear when he'll need me. Excuse me, I'll just go and settle that now."

Later in the evening, having danced with Mister Tarrant twice and no one else at all, and having declared himself not much inclined to dance within Mister Avon's hearing (proving that he, at least, understood the mechanics of earshot), Blake arrested Mister Avon with a crooked finger en
route to dinner. Everyone else flowed into the bright dining hall. The two of them were left standing in the darker passage between the salon and the room beyond, a crack of light spilling back through the dining hall's just-parted doors.

Blake kept his tone casual. A raised voice, and someone would be back to see what was the matter.

"Vila intimated you might be bringing contacts here – using GP as a meeting place."

"For a career criminal, Vila couldn't keep his mouth shut if he were muzzled."

"And yet of the two of you, he seems so much more likely to say the right thing in social situations," Blake mused.

"Perhaps he puts more effort into it," Mister Avon said.

"Mm. Perhaps," Blake agreed, letting the 'perhaps' rest in a way that indicated that he suspected the problem was actually a lack of ability, rather than a lack of effort. "What I wanted to say was that your meeting clients here might attract undue attention to our colony."

"And to your presence here in particular," Mister Avon said in a silky, insinuating voice that Blake didn't like.

"All right," Blake said, pacing a bit while Mister Avon stood enviable still and straight, "and to my Party. The fact remains that it would be better for everyone involved if you met any guests you weren't sure about elsewhere; if your people, Vila included, tried not to talk about ours off world; and if Deva screened any contacts you want to bring down to the surface."

"You don't own the planet, Blake." Mister Avon was clearly annoyed. He was speaking through his teeth.

"No, Mister Avon," Blake said evenly. "The settlers do. They fought for it. We fought for it."

When Federation central planning had decided to leave the settlers of Gauda Prime to die, they hadn't realised that the planet's population had been augmented by political dissidents from Exbar, hardened by exile, and an Amagon contingent eager to preserve their far-flung stronghold. Ushton Blake had at first been skeptical of the possibilities of collaboration, but his young daughter and visiting teenage nephew had talked him around into believing that the settlers' only hope lay in collective resistance.

The settlers had formed a militia that had repelled opportunists. With the Federation gone, they had declared Gauda Prime a free planet and had started, on a small scale, to mine their own resources as a commune.

By the time the Federation took Gauda Prime's claims of emancipation seriously, it was too late. Funds from mining had enabled the planet to purchase passable, if elderly, perimeter ships, a planetary warning system and ground defences – to properly equip a guard force and pay for regional defence- grids and shielding. Oh, the Federation could have taken the planet back at that point, but the operation would have required a small fleet. Besides, Gauda Prime was remote, and its mineral wealth so marginal that it had initially been designated for agricultural settlement. The settlers' defiance was hardly creating a PR problem – almost no one knew the planet existed, and nobody who mattered did. All in all, the Federation had bigger problems than Gauda Prime. So they'd let it go.

Blake's first real experience of political action had been on Gauda Prime, as an adamant sixteen-year old trying, with his uncle and cousin and a few other former political prisoners, to convince
scared families not to run or begin looting in panic.

At first, some boy thinking he knew their business better than they did annoyed many of the settlers. Blake was going back to Earth, after all. This wasn't his fight, and he had less to lose than they did. But he'd reminded them that his family was on the line, too. He'd saved two of the Janss children at the risk of his own life and to the immense gratitude of their parents, and he'd thrown himself unstintingly into the work. Blake had been admirably willing to man security stations, to carry out dangerous raids on bandits who'd come with the intention of attacking the settlement.

He'd participated in every administrative discussion, and had listened, in his brusque way. He'd spoken well in his turn. Blake's confidence had been especially attractive when people were panicking and no one knew quite what to do. He'd been more committed than some of their own, who'd run out on them, and he'd been clever, turning his early prep-school engineering training to rigging up some of the perimeter defences and teaching colonists to maintain these in his absence. He'd said it was nothing, but for the most part the settlers had nothing like his Terran Alpha education, and to them it was a great deal.

Blake's sincere commitment and bloody-minded belief that they could do this had ultimately given the settlers results and even helped carry the day. Blake's status as a favourite son of the colony had been both hard-earned and unshakably established since Independence.

And Gauda Prime had developed quite an independent culture in response to all this. They kept to Terran calendars (with an extra 'dog week' – six days at the end of the year) and spoke Standard, but their lives didn't have much in common with those of people living in the Domes, and consequently neither did their attitudes. Always agrarian and marginal, the inescapable proof of the Federation's complete disregard for their lives and the active resistance that defence had necessitated, along with the presence of dissidents in their midst, had made the planet solidly radical as well.

Social harmony had become immensely important on GP after a few among the citizens had defaulted on the collective and its responsibilities. During the troubles, on two occasions individual settlers had not just run out on them, but had actually tried to grant bandits access to the communities' security nets in exchange for false promises of money and safe conduct to other worlds. The people of Gauda Prime thus now tended to think in terms of resources and trust. Marriage and family were important in any agricultural environment, as economic arrangements and for the construction of social units, but on Gauda Prime families who worked well with other families were vital to personal and communal survival. Questions of what skills and resources a newcomer could bring to a family unit, and how well they'd get along with a spouse and everyone else, were the subject of endless discussion. These qualities were, after all, all that had prevented the people of GP from becoming the victims of a state-sponsored genocide.

Blake wasn't about to let Mister Avon destroy all of that through sloppiness or perversity. It wasn't Mister Avon's to spoil, and unlike him, these people had nowhere else to go, no easy means of flight.

"If you carelessly exploit the fruits of our labour, you'll ruin a bolt-hole for yourself, as well as a lot of other people's lives. You have no right to do that."

"I screen our contacts myself." Mister Avon tilted his head up. "In fact, I'm already taking all the precautions you propose, as far as discretion and vetting our clientele are concerned. I'm not an idiot."

"I'd prefer if you also liaised with Deva, Mister Avon. It won't take long, and you could use another set of eyes. Think of it as free labour, if you like. A precaution." Vila had suggested Mister Avon liked those, and Blake had remembered.
Mister Avon looked like he was going to keep fighting it on principle, but he suddenly changed tacks. "Why not?"

He shifted on his heel. As Blake turned to go, Mister Avon asked, "Why do you call Deva – just his name, without the honorific?"

"We've known each other a long time," Blake said. "He doesn't use mine either."

"Ah. So it is a question of reciprocity, in a way. But—" A smile at odds with Mister Avon's tight, fixed posture flitted across his face, and Blake was disconcerted to see it wasn't a bad sort of smile (though he chased the thought from his mind). "I call you Blake."

"I've noticed."

"Whereas you call me—"

Blake raised an eyebrow. "You're foreign, so it can't be helped, but around here we consider dropping the honorific to be taking a liberty."

"Well, then. I give you permission."

Blake waited. Mister Avon eventually yielded and continued, looking irritated at not having won the stand-off.

"I'm certainly not calling you 'Mister Blake'. You can call me Avon, if you like." Blake could tell from the slightly insistent way he said it that, for some reason, the fact that Blake didn't already call him by his untitled name bothered Mister Avon. Perhaps Blake should pretend a comfortable informality he didn't feel, because it wouldn't mean anything to the other man – they were both Terran, from the same Dome even, unless Blake was much mistaken. What Mister Avon was suggesting was only how they'd have addressed one another on Earth.

But Blake found he didn't feel much like obliging him. He pushed open the door to the dining room.

"Coming, Mister Avon?"

He went in himself, and a moment after Mister Avon followed.

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Over the course of dinner, Blake occasionally noticed Mister Avon looking at him. The next several times they met in company, he noticed Mister Avon looking at him and listening to his conversations.

"Perhaps he's a Federation agent," Soolin suggested when Blake asked if he was imagining it, going mad.

"Not that I know of," Miss Mellanby pointed out.

"Maybe he's attracted to you?" Jenna tried, and Blake snorted, utterly dismissing the idea.

"I tried snogging him once," Miss Mellanby informed them. "Mind you, I'd only just met him. He sort of – let it happen. Perhaps he's hate-sexual. Or just common garden ace."

"Which doesn't exactly answer our question," Blake mused, chewing on his knuckle in thought (while Mister Avon watched). "Perhaps he's cataloging my faults and weaknesses?" Blake
suggested. "Plotting an epic revenge for some imagined slight?" Surely he wasn't still annoyed about Blake's refusal to address him without an honorific.

"Now that does sound like him," Miss Mellanby agreed.

* 

Jenna took the Liberator's double-piloting job, as much for the opportunity to see what the vessel could do as for the money. Like Vila, she was keen to push herself – and this was work only someone as good as she was could do.

Unfortunately, during the course of their mission Jenna had gone down planet-side. While there, she'd breathed in some sort of alien pollen that the Liberator's sophisticated medical facilities didn't know how to instantaneously purge from her system. She had a hideous allergic reaction to it, all the more remarkable because Jenna generally had a hardened spacer's constitution.

Orac (Mister Avon's super-computer) diagnosed the problem, and the ship's computer Zen synthesised a drug treatment. Jenna had made her situation worse by claiming to feel better than she did and taking some of the piloting shifts on the way back (a good thing, too – Tarrant couldn't have managed without her). She would be fine, but she needed a week's bed-rest to recuperate, drug therapies Zen could manufacture, monitoring, and access to the Liberator's relatively sophisticated space-medicine facilities in case her condition changed. GP's own clinics could handle all the common spacer maladies the Amagon's were liable to contract, but not this.

Mister Tarrant informed Blake of all this early in the morning. Jenna had asked the young man to call, knowing Blake would be concerned if he didn't get any message from her on the day she was supposed to return. Given the percentage of the population that was engaged in quasi-legal, sometimes-dangerous space flight, Gauda Prime could feel a little like a port town. The residents always kept an eye out for their returning sailors, collectively aware of who was absent, when they were due home and how long various forms of delay might hold them up.

Mister Tarrant had a wealth of praise for Jenna's performance and grit – his loyalty and professional competence showed him in his best light. Ruefully, Blake was forced to admit that this was another member of Mister Avon's crew he rather liked. In fact, barring Mister Avon himself, he liked everyone from the Liberator he'd got to know thus far.

Still, Blake couldn't quite see Mister Tarrant being an excellent nursemaid. It also seemed hard to leave his best friend in the care of relative strangers, without even coming to visit her when she was so ill. Blake asked his brother Davi to feed his dog, packed several datapads in a satchel, and went to borrow some means of transportation.

There, he ran into trouble. It was a Seeding Day (one of many in Gauda Prime's agricultural cycle), and every hov-bike, every light flyer, every convoy and every skim-rover, hell every piece of mobile farm equipment was claimed. Twice-claimed. Claimed to the hilt. Blake himself had only escaped being commandeered because his communal work-quota was over-full for the month already and his position admitted of other concerns. A few people, out of fondness for Blake and Jenna, looked like they might budge, but Blake demurred, knowing they really did need the vehicles. Besides, the Liberator crew's compound was only fifteen miles away, which meant there was another option.

Because fuel was expensive and difficult to transport this far out, and the community's power-production through solar grids and the like was stretched relatively thin, the settlers of Gauda Prime sometimes relied on a more natural solution to the problem of transportation. The commune stable kept a few horses, and if you needed to visit the next settlement over, you just signed one of these out.
Blake selected his favourite, the anxious but affectionate dark-grey mare called Fuss, and rode out. Fifteen miles was a good morning’s ride, and Blake was hot and sweaty by the time he turned Fuss around a corner and the Liberator crew’s compound came into view. Suddenly Fuss reared, kicking the air. Blake, managing to keep his seat, reined her in and soothed her before glancing around to see what had occasioned the upset.

Mister Avon had walked out onto the bridleway, apparently without looking to see whether it was in use or hearing the approach of a bloody great laden horse. Fuss had almost mown him down, and had pulled back to avoid it. Blake felt a flash of irritation, but smoothed it down. How would someone raised exclusively in a Dome know what a horse sounded like? Mister Avon had probably never so much as seen one. In fact, he probably had heard Fuss, and had come in search of whatever was making that racket so near his property – the laser-gun in his hand indicated as much. Blake narrowed his eyes. At least Mister Avon had held his nerve and not shot him, or shot poor Fuss out from under him.

Blake pulled Fuss back, continuing to make soothing sounds and to stroke her neck and mane. Fuss shook herself, breathed hard, and stilled. Blake had a bit of a knack for calming her.

He glared down at Mister Avon, whose expression was distinctly odd. His eyes looked particularly large and dark, and his mouth was slightly parted. He must be shaken up from the near-collision, Blake decided.

"This is a bridleway," Blake explained. "We tend to—"

"Ride through here," Mister Avon cleared his throat. "Yes, I – see that now." He seemed to refocus. "A horse, Blake? Are there any other absurd throwbacks on this planet that I should be told about, preferably before they run me down?"

Blake rolled his eyes. "It saves on fuel, and all the mechanical transports are busy on the farms today. You're an easy ride, from the settlement."

"Am—Are we?" Mister Avon's eyes widened for a moment and then narrowed. "You look filthy."

"Good morning to you too, Mister Avon. Riding on a hot day tends to do that," Blake agreed, relaxing his thighs and giving Fuss a little license to shift her weight.

"Those ludicrous Regency clothes can't help," Mister Avon noted, looking Blake over thoroughly with (Blake assumed) disdain. His gaze seemed to linger on a bead of sweat dripping down the open neck of Blake's shirt, running over his chest. "You must find living in fancy dress terribly inconvenient."

Blake laughed, a little embarrassed that someone as fastidious as Mister Avon should see him looking like what he was – a man who sometimes served as a farmhand.

"Says the man perpetually dressed all in black leather, like the back half of a cow in a panto. Except today – what is this red ensemble, a lobster costume? Branching out, are we? How many animals do you intend to represent for us before the year is out?"

Mister Avon's eyes narrowed. "What brings you to my property?"

"The immense pleasure of your company," Blake said sarcastically. "Jenna, obviously. Mister Tarrant said she wasn't well."

Fuss shifted nervously, picking up on Blake's annoyance, and he sighed. Best to get on with it –
he'd had enough of prancing around being mocked by Mister Avon for a lifetime, let alone for one day.

"Look, well before you came here, this place was a homestead – it belonged to some people we lost in the Independence struggle. That's why it was wired up for grid power in the first place, and had the foundation blocks you used already laid in. That shed on your lawn," Blake gestured towards it with his riding crop, and Mister Avon whipped his head in the direction Blake was pointing, "is an old stable, in fairly decent condition. We use it for storing hay from the furthest-flung fields. There should be some feed and tack in there. I'm going to take Fuss and brush her down. If you want to continue this conversation, we can do it when I'm not on a tired horse."

Blake patted Fuss's side. "Come on, girl – run for me."

Ears pricking up at the suggestion that, for this last bit, she was going to be allowed a good hard gallop, Fuss sped past Mister Avon. There was a closed gate in the way, but Blake smirked at it. "We can manage that," he told Fuss. He indicated what he wanted with the reins. Obediently she put her head down, jumped, and they sailed over the gate, Blake's back straight, his body smacking the saddle hard as he came down. Fuss gave a delighted whinny, wheeled (Blake glanced over his shoulder, he could see Mister Avon watching), and headed towards the stable. Apparently she remembered where food was to be found.

Mister Avon caught up with Blake as he was brushing Fuss down. Blake stopped singing low to Fuss when he heard the door swing open, surprised that Mister Avon apparently wanted to continue their discussion. Perhaps it had been phrased a little too much like an invitation – or like a dare. Mister Avon didn't seem the type to back down from a dare.

Silently, Blake worked a hand through Fuss's mane, dislodging a burr she'd picked up from a hedge along the path. He smoothed the brush along her hot, quivering flank.

"Can you get out the food?" he asked Mister Avon, jerking his head towards the crated, preserved blocks. If Mister Avon was going to condescend to observe the process (no doubt storing up caustic remarks about Blake's rustic pastimes), he might as well make himself useful.

"Which—? Ah." Mister Avon handed him the right brick. Blake took it, the fingertips of his riding gloves inadvertently skimming Mister Avon's palm.

"So what else do you amuse yourselves with here?" Mister Avon asked, his voice low. "Fencing? Sailing tall ships? Public executions?"

Blake was tired, hot, dirty, and not in a mood to be baited. He turned to Mister Avon, pinning him with a properly annoyed glare.

"Making an arse of yourself about cultural differences isn't as amusing as you seem to think it is. This isn't some joke of a planet, here to furnish the urbane Kerr Avon with cheap opportunities to exercise his wit. People do what they do here for reasons that make sense, or that at least arise from historical contingencies. No one needs you to play amateur cultural anthropologist. If you don't like it, leave."

A slow smile uncurled across Mister Avon's face. Blake's temper typically cowed people, but Mister Avon apparently reacted to it quite differently. "Do you want me to?"

"Do I want you to what?"

"Leave, Blake." The stable? The planet? Was he offering?

Some shift in the wind, or perhaps (though Blake didn't allow himself to think of it) the effect of
another of those strange, genuine smiles on Mister Avon's face made Blake's mood suddenly shift. Blake found himself laughing, not knowing quite what had amused him. He closed Fuss's stall door behind him.

"As though you'd do anything to oblige anyone but yourself."

Mister Avon grinned at him. "True."

"Come on then." Blake gestured with his riding crop, which Mister Avon's eyes again followed, seemingly without his volition, like a cat watching dangling string. "Let's see the patient."

Mister Avon left Blake alone with Jenna. In another room of the house, he shoved a key into his computer and demanded,

"Orac, what is a 'panto'?"

He listened to the explanation, and requested further information about the cow. His lip twisted sourly, and he forced Orac to send an expensive order to the settlement's chief tailor, along with his measurements and a delivery request.

Blake, meanwhile, was rather surprised to find Jenna so weak. He'd never seen her ill before—it seemed at odds with the cool unruffleability of her personality. She was resting in one of the handsome, high-ceilinged bedrooms of the new compound, and her face was nearly as pale as the sheets. She beamed at him and generally seemed pleased he'd come to look in on her, but she wasn't up to much conversation. Miss Cally came in with some water for her, and Jenna slipped into sleep.

Miss Cally beckoned Blake out of the room, and he followed her, shutting the door gently behind him. She led Blake to a sitting room. Mister Avon, who walked in a minute after they did, took a seat at a desk therein.

"She's worse than I expected," Blake admitted.

"Orac's prognosis is that she'll make a full recovery, and he is very accurate." Miss Cally put a sympathetic hand on Blake's arm, gesturing towards a seat.

"Perhaps you'd like to stay and nursemaid her?" Mister Avon suggested, slightly sarcastically.

"I think that's a very good idea, Avon," Miss Cally countered him, smiling warmly at Blake. "Indeed, you would be most welcome. I could use the help, and you are her friend – she might find your presence comforting. The others mean well, but they're not well-suited to treating an invalid. Poor Gan tries, but he doesn't know how to walk quietly in a sick room, and his voice booms whenever he tries to cheer someone up. It can give me a headache even when I'm healthy."

"Whereas Tarrant could annoy the dead," Mister Avon put in. "Speak of the devil—"

Mister Tarrant, Vila and Miss Mellanby had all come in to say hello to their visitor.

"How did you get here?" asked Mister Tarrant. "I didn't hear a motor. Surely you didn't walk all this way."

"As a matter of fact," Blake glanced at Mister Avon, who wore a sardonic expression, "I relied on organic transport of a different kind."

"You rode?" Miss Mellanby exclaimed.
"What, a horse?" Vila asked.

Miss Cally frowned. "Isn't that rather cruel to the animal?"

"No, no," Miss Mellanby explained. "Listen, the locals rode all the time on Sarran – that's the planet I'm from," she said for Blake's benefit. "I was never able to try it myself, but my sister explained the whole thing to me. The animals are bred and trained for it. As long as you use them properly, they actually like the exercise and the company, not to mention the regular feeding. Some of them form really deep bonds with their riders. It's all about trust and treating them respectfully and knowing how to manage them, isn't it, Mister Blake?"

"Yes, that's right. Though Fuss – the mare I came on – isn't mine per se. She belongs to the whole commune. Though I'll admit, she's by far my favourite of our horses."

"Then they are companion animals?" Miss Cally asked.

"In a sense," Blake agreed. "She's in the stable now – why not give her some oats and introduce yourself, Miss Mellanby?"

Needing no more encouragement, Miss Mellanby raced out, followed by Miss Cally at a more sedate pace. The men, minus Mister Avon (strangely silent at his desk – Blake wouldn't have thought he could go five minutes together without issuing some impertinent remark), watched Miss Mellanby pelt across the lawn.

"Women," Mister Tarrant said, trying to be blokey (Blake could have told Tarrant he was wasting his time, as Blake didn't really do 'blokey'). "Irrationally excited about—Oh my god, what is that?" Suddenly Mister Tarrant was pressed to the window, and his voice had a note of wonder in it.

Blake pretended to survey the scene outside, amused. "Ah – that is Fuss. They're leading her out into the paddock so she can have a run."

He opened the window. "Managing all right?" he called.

"She's gorgeous!" Miss Mellanby shouted back.

"I can talk to her, a little!" Miss Cally added. "She said she wanted some more exercise – is it all right?"

"Of course," Blake called back. He turned back to the party in the room. "You're sure you don't want to meet the horse, Mister Tarrant?"

"Shut up, Mister Blake," Mister Tarrant said good-humouredly, already heading for the door.

"Call me Blake," Blake called after him with a laugh in his voice.

"Likewise." Tarrant grinned back. "Though obviously I'd prefer you to call me 'Tarrant'. More than enough Blakes around here as it is."

Blake rolled his eyes at the weak joke as Tarrant darted out to join the women. Vila said he didn't go in for animals bigger than he was, friendly or no, and settled down on the couch with a drink.

"Wait, Tarrant can call you 'Blake' now? Does that extend to us?" Miss Mellanby shouted back.

"Why not?" Blake answered.
"How do you ride her though?" Tarrant called from halfway across the lawn.

"Hold on, I'll come out in a minute and show you," Blake shouted back.

"So you are staying with us, then?" Mister Avon asked, and Blake wondered again why Mister Avon had been so quiet – what he’d been thinking. True, he obviously disliked Blake, but it wasn't as if Blake wouldn't try and keep out of his way, and it was only for a few days.

"If it's not too much trouble," Blake answered him while still watching the proceedings out on the lawn. Blake pulled out a datapad and double-checked his calendar – he had no major meetings coming up this week. No one was visiting from off world, and everything else could be handled with a conference call or electronic letters and chats. "Jenna looks like she'll need all the help she can get."

"As you like," Mister Avon said stiffly, darting an almost wary glance at Blake, which annoyed him. What had he ever given Mister Avon to be afraid of?

"Thank you, Mister Avon," Blake said cordially.

"Still 'Mister', then?"

Blake gave him a thin smile. "Oh, it wouldn't do to get careless with you, would it?"

He went to show the others the basics before Tarrant got ahead of himself and started experimenting.

*

Cally and Dayna took Blake to the Liberator's surprisingly extensive wardrobe room the next morning. There he picked out some things for himself so he wouldn't have to go back home, or ask them to send something out to him (the vehicle pool was probably still overstretched). Mister Avon tried for some jibes about Blake's Robin Hood ensembles and how they proved it wasn't just the effect of GP – Blake had terrible taste even given free range. Blake had looked over the silver tunic Mister Avon had chosen to wear that day, and asked if he was to be baked later on. Dayna awarded the point to Blake.

"My father had better clothing taste than either of you, though," she'd said, to keep them both in their place, "and he was literally blind."

Blake would have liked to look around the ship more thoroughly, but he had a feeling the crew would have felt the need to ask Mister Avon whether he minded, and Blake didn't want to give Mister Avon the satisfaction of knowing Blake was fascinated by the craft. Or worse, to give Mister Avon a chance to show off the damn thing, smugly gliding over it and pointing out its every feature.

Generally, the Liberator crew seemed pleased to have a guest. There was a slight staleness to the atmosphere – as though they'd been confined together too long and didn’t mind being shaken up, wanted something other than themselves to think about. Cally engaged Blake readily in a discussion about the work that had taken her off her own planet, and Blake listened attentively, asking questions about the motives and methods of the Saurian group, and how the Auronar generally felt about anti-Federation action. Mister Avon, of course, listened to the conversation, interjecting caustic remarks at every turn. Blake was particularly annoyed on one occasion – he'd been telling Cally about an action his own people were considering, and Mister Avon, with a seemingly careless joke, had hit upon a weakness Blake had never before seen in the plan. Blake had turned and dedicated himself to a proper row with Mister Avon on the subject.
Not content to let it lie there, Mister Avon apparently went away and did his research, because the next night he was back with some choice comments on the Freedom Party's Terran activities as well.

"What did you do, look me up?" Blake demanded.

"Well, now," Mister Avon smiled, "it's not illegal, is it? If one is going to be neighbours with a zealot, one might as well familiarise oneself with the sorts of mistakes he's likely to make."

*  

By the third day, Jenna had gotten a little better – enough to join them for a few hours in the evenings. Blake and Gan got on a no-honorific basis when Gan cheerfully helped Blake muck out Fuss's stall. Gan loved animals. But then Fuss was very likeable. Blake even caught Mister Avon sneaking her lumps of sugar – and pretending he hadn't been, snarling, "What?" at Blake when Blake caught him leaving the stables with a furtive expression. Blake had just given him and oh really look, murmured, "Don't spoil her," and walked on. From anyone else Blake might have found the display endearing, but from Mister Avon it was just another proof that the man was so bunched up and repressed he couldn't even let himself experience a normal human reaction to a cute animal without making a damn production of the thing.

Throughout the week Blake worked in the main study for most of the day, and found that Mister Avon apparently did too. He also found that they could work fairly peaceably together, provided neither of them talked. Initially he'd offered to relocate, but Mister Avon had said rather sharply that it wasn't necessary.

After lunch, Blake had politely chosen a different room, only to find that Mister Avon seemed to need the desk in there that afternoon for some reason. Short of hiding in his bedroom, there didn't seem much he could do to stay out of Mister Avon's way. Blake had given it up for a bad job and contented himself with awkwardly sharing the space.

When they did talk, they debated everything under the sun – whether Tarrant was being arrogant when he claimed he never thought his decisions through (Tarrant had been in the room at the time, and had had his own opinions on the matter, which neither of them had bothered listening to); whether Blake's interest in people and their characters was 'inherently manipulative' (Blake thought this was ridiculous, while Mister Avon seemed to mean it almost as a compliment); whether anyone ever actually liked getting love letters (Tarrant had idly said he might write one to the local girl Blake had first seen him dancing with – Blake, to his surprise, had a far more negative opinion of the enterprise than Mister Avon did); and whether it was a character flaw to yield readily to friends' opinions (poor, obliging Gan).

"Can't you two talk about something you agree on?" Dayna teased one night.

Blake arched an eyebrow at Mister Avon."Can we?"

Mister Avon took it up like a gauntlet, and didn't stop until he'd confirmed that they had very compatible taste in novels.

"I doubt we read the same books, or not with the same feelings," Blake had demurred initially.

Mister Avon's eyes had glinted. "Try me."

With a sigh, Blake had made some tentative salvos, only to find Mister Avon well-read and not totally without an understanding of why what was excellent was so. Mister Avon seemed to count this as a personal victory. Blake didn't quite understand his scoring system.
At the time, Blake found the constant challenges annoying. But when Jenna was well and had been safely picked up on a now-free hov-bike, and Blake himself was riding home, he felt a curious sense of deflation. A release of the electric tension that had threaded through him over the past days, making him hyper-aware, vigilant, and poised to answer anything.

He looked back over his shoulder at the compound and saw someone moving away from the drawing-room window. A dark line, turning into the room.
By the time Blake returned to his base, there was a slight backlog of recruits for him to sign off on. Fortunately no one had been much inconvenienced by this – there was plenty of low-security work for the recruits to do before Blake ratified their clearance and assigned them to their next positions. Among the new arrivals was a delicate blonde woman named Anna Grant.

"Not our Del's sister?" Blake asked, looking up at her over the intake form.

"Yes, that's right."

"Well then we're especially glad to have you. I've worked with Del, of course." He checked his watch. Lunchtime. "I don't know about you, but I'm famished. I spent the morning riding back into town, and I've only just had time to shower and change. If we speak discreetly, do you mind if we continue our conversation en route to the mess?"

"Not at all," Miss Grant said, standing and offering Blake his cloak off the peg – it was raining lightly. She looked very handsome in her own dove-grey affair.

"I haven't entered it into the official dossier you have there because I expect it's sensitive information," Miss Grant said to him in an undertone as they walked, "but you should know, I used to work for Central Security."

That gave Blake pause. He drew to a stop under an eave, and she stopped with him. "Why did you get out?" he asked, in a voice he could hear hardening. Miss Grant's past made her both potentially more valuable to their organisation and less trustworthy. Miss Grant smiled bitterly, like she knew as much, and had chosen to tell him anyway.

"Del's work gave me hope. The things I had to do, Mister Blake—I have so much to atone for. It's a debt I can never repay, but I can't not try. I left – years ago now. It wasn't easy."

"No, it couldn't have been. How did you manage it?"

"The first time I tried, I had a partner. I was married to someone in the Administration, but I fell in love with a man who had a way, he said, to break the Federation banking system. He represented himself as political, claimed to be interested in undermining confidence in the government. We were going to take enough to escape with. He went to get some exit visas he claimed he'd lined up. And then he—" she swallowed, "he never came back for me. I went out looking for him, and I was taken and interrogated. I was barely able to use my quite minor position with Central Security to justify my actions – I said I'd been looking into him. It was two years before I was able to get off-world. No one wanted to give me a vacation permit after that lapse. I don't think they entirely believed me – it's hard to disguise it, when you're in love." Her lip twisted. "But I didn't give him up. He left me for dead, and I never told them anything about where we'd planned on going, where I thought he might be." She took a shaky breath. "I, at least, was faithful."

"What happened to him?" Blake said, putting a sympathetic hand on Miss Grant's shoulder. She leaned into it, slightly.

"I don't know." She shook her head. "I heard he tried another version of his scheme not long afterwards, and got caught. Which shows the sort of man I put my faith in. Love is blind, as they say."

She took a sharp breath, and stared at something through the curtain of rain. Blake looked over his
Mister Avon had come into town for something after Blake had left his compound, and was staring at Blake and Miss Grant from beneath the awning of the bakery. His hair was drenched, and he looked a little pathetic. Not enough sense to wear a cloak in the rain, Blake thought, pulling up his own hood.

Miss Grant laughed, faintly. "Well. Now I know what happened to him." She looked away. "Mister Blake, I – think I need to sit down."

Realisation dawned, and Blake looked over at Mister Avon, who was standing stock still, chalk pale, his expression a wreck. Like he'd seen a ghost, Blake thought with a lash of anger. It served him right. He'd probably never expected to see poor Miss Grant again.

Blake offered his arm to Miss Grant to support her and guided her into the mess, getting her a cup of something warm and settling.

"I'll be all right," Miss Grant said. "I'm sorry, I just wasn't expecting—But how could I have expected—after all this time?"

"There's nothing to be sorry about," Blake told her firmly.

"Oh, there is, but it's him who should be sorry," Miss Grant said with a trace of viciousness. She took a long breath and shook her head. "No. It was years ago. I'm past that, now. I'll meet – Avon," her voice cracked slightly, but she pressed on, "with perfect composure. Just so long as you know what he's done, Mister Blake. The sort of man he is." She took a sip of her drink, then broke the silence again. "I don't think there's anything there, under that façade. He used to joke about not having a heart. I should have listened. He was only being honest."

Blake felt angrier and sadder than hearing about someone else's heartbreak quite justified, as well as a sliver of vicious triumph at having his worst opinions of the man confirmed.

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A week passed, and Blake hadn't yet found an ideal placement for Miss Grant. The Freedom Party allowed new people to access sensitive information and work on high-security missions only after several months' proving-period. These precautions were part of a more elaborate system of tiered access. Thus Miss Grant did low-level work on the base while Blake waited for Avalon to get back to him about her current staff needs. He didn't mention Miss Grant's presence on the base to Del – apparently Miss Grant didn't want her brother knowing that she was involved in the Freedom Party's work just yet. "Not while I still have so much debt left unpaid," she'd said, leaving Blake a little impressed with the peculiar honour of her character.

At the next Assembly, Mister Avon and Miss Grant cornered each other in a salon no one was using. Passing the closed door, Blake was arrested by the sound of raised voices. Mister Avon sounded relentlessly, heartlessly unmoved, while Miss Grant sounded upset, close to tears. Blake wondered if he should intervene, if she was safe from the man. Hadn't he already hurt her enough? Perhaps he was the sort of person who enjoyed twisting the knife. Yes, that seemed to fit with his general inclinations.

Blake didn't exactly put his ear to the keyhole, and so only heard a little of it. Mister Avon was asking how she'd escaped that night, how she'd managed to get free. (Was he really demanding to know why his abandoned lover hadn't died under interrogation? Blake's low opinion of Mister Avon sank further still.) Something about having looked into her and started to put things together, about it having been obvious when he'd let himself question it. How he'd been a fool to care for...
Miss Grant laughed nastily, with some justification, Blake thought. She told Mister Avon to believe what he liked, whatever helped him sleep at night, and to see who around here believed him. Miss Grant stormed out, eyes wet, seeming to miss Blake entirely in the hall.

Blake began to follow her, intending to ask whether she was all right. But on walking past the room, he paused for a moment. Through the now-open door, he caught sight of Mister Avon's back. Mister Avon was facing the window, and his breathing was audible. There was something wretched in his posture. The shuddering line of his body didn't express the emotionless viciousness of a self-interested psychopath.

Even bastards can feel sorry for themselves, Blake reminded himself, walking on again after Miss Grant. Who was, after all, committed to his cause, and a member of his organisation. The wronged party, who his interest and pity should rightfully be expended on.

*  

Mister Avon went over the usual arrangements with Deva and, as he was leaving, turned back.

"A word of advice, Mister Deva – I'd keep Miss Anna Grant on a short leash, if I were you. I have reason to suspect she's not quite what she says she is, and that she may have misrepresented herself to Blake. It isn't difficult to come up with highly probable reasons why."

Deva looked at him evenly. "She's already admitted that she used to work for Central Security."

"Did she?" Mister Avon's lip twisted. "How interesting. She never admitted as much to me. I don't know everything yet – I don't have the evidence I'd need to make a public case against her. But believe me, Blake would be a fool to trust her. And since I rather suspect he can be, you'll have to be prudent for him. I am not protecting my reputation. I care nothing for that. Nevertheless – be careful, Mister Deva."

The set of Mister Avon's eyes convinced Deva this was serious. Deva cared deeply about the Freedom Party, and about Blake, and thus it seemed natural to him that even someone as outwardly disinterested as Mister Avon might well be invested in their well-being and success. Probably sound business-sense, for a man on the run. And in his own dealings with the man, Mister Avon had never actually impressed Deva as a bad sort. Deva had rather come to like him, despite what everyone said. Deva suspected that perhaps people read Mister Avon wrong. He was rather reserved himself, and he knew very well how it could happen.

"All right," Deva agreed. "Consider me on my guard. I'll bring it up with Blake, when I can find the right moment. Is that all?"

"Yes, I—No. No, I'll look in on Blake before I go. Let him know the good news, and extend him his invitation." His ironic expression dropped into something guarded but sincere. "Thank you, Mister Deva."

"Oh, any time."

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Blake had finally managed to assign Miss Grant to a reconnaissance mission that would occupy the team off-world for some weeks. She'd requested an extra-planetary detail. His people were processing what she'd told them about her work with Central Security. Unfortunately, it seemed to largely agree with what they already knew – Miss Grant hadn't been a particularly elite operative.
Blake was glad that she wasn't around for it, but otherwise annoyed when Mister Avon made an appearance in his office. Blake's Alaskan Malamute, Jasper, napping on a big cushion beside Blake's desk, looked up at the newcomer with interest.

"Did we have an appointment?" Blake asked, knowing they didn't, and that if they had, he would have tried to weasel out of it, in an appropriately dignified, ‘Leader of the Freedom Party’ sort of way.

"I was in the building, passing our list of contacts over to Mister Deva. So nice to have a social secretary."

"Glad we could help," Blake said ironically. So Deva merited a title and not him. Lovely.

"Well, Blake?"

"Well, what?"

Mister Avon spread his arms, and Blake noticed that, for the first time, he was dressed – well, normally. In a flattering black frock-coat and breeches.

"Have you taken up work as an undertaker?" Blake asked politely. "Or perhaps become a Terra Nostra frontman?"

Mister Avon chuckled, and Blake realised he'd been looking the other man up and down, appreciating the tailoring (he could guess the shop, but not the price, other than that it must have been very steep). Mister Avon had no doubt taken this observation as a compliment to his taste. Blake rolled his eyes.

Jasper got up and trotted over to Mister Avon, who automatically offered her his hand to sniff. Surprising Blake, Mister Avon knelt to caress the dog's head. She nuzzled his palm enthusiastically and flopped down on her belly for him. He obliged her with a brisk rub.

Jasper was a friendly dog, but she was also family-oriented, as was the nature of her breed. Generally she didn't invite a lot of affection from humans she didn't know. Jasper was protective, and she had good instincts about people. She liked Mister Avon more than she normally liked strangers (whereas she'd shied from Miss Grant's awkward attempt at a pet – clearly not a dog person, or at least unused to the large working dogs common on GP). Maybe it was the leather – Mister Avon hadn't been able to give it up entirely, and his boots were still substantial. Jasper probably thought the man was an oversized chew toy.

"They say the English can only show affection to dogs and horses," Blake commented (the Blakes nursed a deep Welsh partisan streak, themselves).

"Animals are easier than people," Mister Avon agreed, straightening up, though he kept a hand out to ruffle Jasper's ears when she agreeably shuffled up and twined around him. "Though, rather inadvisably, I've also come to issue a general invitation that will ensure that I have to deal with a great many people very shortly. My compound is going to host the next Assembly. We've just arranged it with the civil councillor down the hall. Vila and Cally's idea, naturally. They thought it'd be polite to 'give back'. You'll come?"

"I try and make all the Assemblies," Blake said evenly, wondering if he couldn't fake an illness. No, he had an excellent constitution, and if he missed an Assembly pleading indisposition as an excuse he'd positively drown in well-intentioned visits and gifts of chicken soup and grapes and the like.

"Good." Mister Avon smiled, standing up. "Then I'll expect you."
"Unless I have other engagements, of course."

"So likely, in the social whirligig that is Gauda Prime," Mister Avon agreed.

"Well, exactly, Mister Avon." Blake watched the other man wince at the 'Mister' with pleasure. Why did it bother him? Oh, who cared, so long as it did.

Mister Avon took his leave. Blake listened to the clack of his boots (who, on Earth or on Gauda Prime, wore thigh-high boots to a business meeting?) on the hall's wooden floors, the flagstone-clip of them on the entry way on the floor below, and the heavy swing of the door shutting behind Mister Avon.

Jasper bounded to the window to watch him go, wagging her tail.

"Traitor," Blake accused her, before sighing and taking her for a walk – in the opposite direction to the one Mister Avon had gone in.

* 

The Liberator crew seemed determined to do the office of Assembly-host credit. They operated a full reception line, with Mister Avon stationed at the end. He shook Blake's hand, and, without letting his hand go as Blake had expected, before Blake could pull away, said,

"Are you engaged for the two dances preceding supper?"

It was a clever move – if Blake had been engaged, it would have been for the first two dances, or for a given set. The twilight period right before supper was when any young person was at their most vulnerable. Mister Avon was learning.

"As it happens, I'm not," Blake had to admit, because his father was standing next to him and would just have told Mister Avon the truth if Blake had tried to prevaricate.

"Excellent." Mister Avon gave him a particularly nasty grin. "I'm quite proficient now—"

"If you do say so yourself."

Mister Avon laughed. "Precisely."

"But suppose, despite your newly acquired mastery, that I still don't want to dance with you?"

Mister Avon tutted. "That would be rude, Blake. And you are, apparently, loathe to flout the local customs. Thus if I issue an invitation, you will feel obliged to accept. And I am issuing an invitation." No one should be allowed to grin that smugly.

"Then I suppose you leave me no choice."

Irritably, Blake pressed Mister Avon's hand to his lips as formality dictated, dropped it and turned to go. From the corner of his eye he caught Mister Avon rubbing his knuckles with his thumb. Blake felt both annoyed that Mister Avon should be so disdainful and fastidious as to resist even the forms of address common on Gauda Prime, and slightly amused at having apparently unintentionally one-upped him. It lessened the sting of Blake's overall defeat, slightly. Blake had sworn never to dance with Mister Avon if he should ask him – Blake wasn't stupid, why hadn't he thought of anything fast enough? Insufferable man.

Unfortunately, it seemed Mister Avon wasn't stupid either. Having out-manoeuvred Blake, he
came punctually upon his hour to claim his designated turn. Waltzes, too. Blake sighed. You were close in waltzes, there was no escaping conversation. They were easy, as well, Blake thought grimly. No wonder Mister Avon had homed right in on them. No feats of athleticism required, no complicated memorisation of a turn sequence or teamwork with the other couples in the room necessary. Intimate, sultry, bloody waltzes that gave you too much time to whisper and think.

"You can lead," Mister Avon said as he stepped into position with surprising neatness. "I expect you like that."

Gritting his teeth, Blake curled a hand around Mister Avon's waist and extended his palm, meeting Mister Avon's eyes when he laced his fingers through Blake's and completed the circuit. Blake felt a slight frisson and wondered if the room was perhaps prone to static electricity.

The music started, and he pushed Mister Avon back two steps, finding that Mister Avon had been expecting it and went willingly. When Blake stopped, Mister Avon offered a firm resistance that let Blake pull him into a loose, swirling box without gracelessly over-balancing and losing the elegance of the figure. Almost annoyed at Mister Avon for having somehow become as competent as he'd promised and better (he must have practiced – who with, when, and why?), Blake pushed them a little faster. Mister Avon only smiled and pushed back, keeping them locked, moving in perfect time with the music. He seemed aware of every shift in it, to vibrate with each chord.

"Do you dip?" Blake asked Mister Avon, and had the pleasure of seeing the other man's eyes widen with uncertainty before they narrowed, glinting.

"Try me."

Without further warning Blake did. Mister Avon slid with him and let Blake gather him back to his chest with an elegant snap. Blake liked a dip and recovery – it reminded him of slowed-down nature-vid footage of a flower wilting, bending, breaking, falling away. The vids then played backwards, and the flower was pulled inexorably and remorselessly back to vibrancy and health.

"Not bad," Blake admitted, because Mister Avon's weight and tension and his deliberate, mannered movement felt good, and Blake wasn't going to lie about it outright. In recovering from the dip they'd shifted in such a way that, instead of having a hand on Mister Avon's hip, Blake's arm now encircled his back, pulling Mister Avon flush against him. Their faces were nearly pressed against each other, cheek to cheek.

"I didn't think the waltz included dips," Mister Avon said.

"It's an extraordinarily adaptable dance," Blake countered. "Like so—" Knowing it wasn't what a good person would have done, he raced Mister Avon through a series of unpredictable turn-outs and twirls, keeping it up even as the tempo shifted from andante to allegro. Blake's dances with Dayna hadn't been so technically demanding – they'd been faster, but their rhythm had been less punishing.

"Having trouble?" Blake asked, tucking Mister Avon's back against his chest and Mister Avon's head under his chin, keeping his hand splayed over Mister Avon's stomach, pressing him into what was, for Mister Avon, a backwards box-step.


"Good," Blake purred, whipping Mister Avon around to face him with an easy swirl and a moment of broken contact that should have left Mister Avon reeling on his feet or sprawled on the floor, if there was any justice in the world. Instead Mister Avon turned the lurch into an easy fall into Blake's arms. Blake caught him automatically, and resented that that ploy had worked, and
well. Blake settled on a last dip and ended the dance bent over Mister Avon, with both of them breathing raggedly into each other's faces. Blake swallowed hard with exertion.

"You looked great!" Dayna called.

"Yes." Mister Avon grinned up at Blake triumphantly. "I know."

"All that practicing definitely paid off. Mind you, I'm still sore from how many times you made me—"

"Thank you, Dayna," Mister Avon said through his teeth.

"No no," Blake called to her, pulling Mister Avon up. "Do go on, I suspect this might be interesting."

"You are, as it so often transpires, incorrect," Mister Avon informed him. "This time I'll lead, Blake."

"Whatever you like, Mister Avon."

"Whatever I like?"

"Within reason."

Mister Avon laughed. "And if there's nothing reasonable about what I would like?"

"It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest."

Blake noted, as Mister Avon drew him into the next figure, managing to hold Blake tighter than he himself had been held, that he'd never dropped Mister Avon's hand. It made it more natural to progress into the next dance, and it was what he would have done with anyone else, but Mister Avon wasn't anyone else. Blake had allowed his knowledge of the sort of man Mister Avon was — what he'd done — to slip from his mind. Mister Avon wasn't a garden-variety irritating arse. He was cruel, and he was dangerous. Blake kept silent for a minute, concentrating on the movements, not quite looking Mister Avon in the face.

"What's wrong, Blake?" Mister Avon asked after a moment.

"Nothing at all," Blake said crisply.

"Doesn't dancing with me entail looking at me?" Mister Avon asked, his voice slightly tight.

Blake supposed he was spoiling the other man's triumph, that the other man was concluding unpleasant things about Blake being sulky if he couldn't lead every figure. Far from it — Blake had let Vila lead, just three dances before this. Such a misconception would bother Blake, if he cared about Mister Avon's opinion of him. He didn't.

"When we met in town the other day, you didn't stop to say hello," Blake said pleasantly, looking Mister Avon full in the face. "I was just forming a new acquaintance."

The effect was immediate. Mister Avon stumbled slightly, and his hand tightened on Blake's back, almost in a compulsive clutch. He recovered his footing, but his movements took on a stiff, mechanistic quality. A strange, emptied-out look spread over Mister Avon's features, but he said nothing. Blake, inwardly disgusted with his own weakness, found he couldn't continue speaking when it so obviously upset his partner.

At length Mister Avon spoke.
"Anna has always found it easy to make friends – she's less capable of keeping them."

"She seems to have rather dramatically lost your friendship," replied Blake with emphasis, "and I think she still suffers from it."

Mister Avon laughed bitterly. "Does she indeed? Why so curious, Blake?"

"Just trying to make out your character," Blake said, endeavouring to shake off his gravity. What did sulking at Mister Avon help Miss Grant? True, Mister Avon should be shamed for what he'd done, but was he capable of feeling it, and was it Blake's place to try and make him?

"And how are you getting on?" Mister Avon asked.

Blake shook his head. "I don't get on at all."

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear. Not a habit conducive to a long life, for someone in your line of work."

"As I think you've said yourself, gossip is all we have on Gauda Prime."

"Well, I wouldn't want to suspend any pleasure of yours," Mister Avon replied coldly.

Blake said no more. When the measure ended they parted in silence, on each side dissatisfied. Blake was left confused and surer than ever of Mister Avon's misconduct, because Mister Avon had offered no defence or justification. Blake hadn't even realised that he'd doubted Miss Grant's account, or wanted to, until Mister Avon's behaviour had snatched the possibility away from him.

They had not long separated when Tarrant came towards Blake, and, with an expression of civil disdain, accosted him.

"So, I hear you've welcomed Anna Grant into your ranks. I expect she forgot to tell you that she used to be a Central Security agent. Let me recommend, as a friend, that you don't trust her too far. She treated our Avon terribly."

"Did she really?" Blake raised an eyebrow. "And what is she supposed to have done to him?"

Tarrant was brought up short. "I don't know, precisely – you know Avon, he doesn't exactly volunteer personal information. But I do know it wasn't his fault. We were all glad to hear she hadn't turned up tonight. I don't know why she came to GP in the first place, but no harm done yet, is there? I'm sorry you have to find out your woman's a fraud like this, and that you've been made a bit of a fool of, but it's better for it to come out now than later. And really, considering her history, you can't expect much better."

"Her guilt and her history appear to be synonymous, by your account," Blake said, with rising anger. "You've accused her of nothing worse than having been a Federation officer, and that she told me herself. Where did you train, Space Captain Tarrant?"

"Now hang on—"

"No, I don't think I will. You said I was careless – my people are still screening her thoroughly, as we screen everyone. Meanwhile, you're prepared to believe your committed felon of a leader without even hearing his side of the story. I think Mister Avon would be first in line to lecture you about blind faith."

"I apologise for interfering," replied Tarrant, turning away with a sneer. "I was only trying to help."
Insolent idiot, Blake thought to himself. There was nothing to Tarrant's comments but his own wilful ignorance and Mister Avon's malice.

Still, the next day Blake told Deva to have Miss Grant's supervisors keep a very close eye on her. Deva confirmed that he'd wanted to suggest as much to Blake, and had already taken steps in that direction. Bolstered by Deva's support, Blake decided to post Miss Grant only to peripheral positions, for the time being. Better safe than sorry, he told himself.

There just might be more to this than met the eye — exercising prudent caution in no way suggested that he believed Mister Avon's lack of a story, or held the man in anything other than complete contempt.
“What is this?” Blake asked, storming into the Janss residence a few weeks later. He found Soolin and her father sitting at their kitchen table, mugs of tea gone cold in front of them. Both of them looked harassed. Or at least he did, and Soolin looked as harassed as she ever looked.

"Good," Soolin's father said with a snort as he stood up. "You tell her. I'll give you some privacy. See if you do any better than I did."

"Blake—" Soolin began as her father closed the door behind him.

"Are you defecting?"

Soolin rolled her eyes. "Don't be so dramatic. I'm not leaving the Party."

"What are you doing, then?"

"Taking a job. Getting off the farm."

"You love it here!" Blake protested, almost angry on behalf of GP and her family.

Soolin drummed her fingers on her mug. "That isn't the point. I'll be on call if you need me. I've told my new employer that too. But you don't need me, not all the time."

"I'll find more for you to do," Blake promised her, pacing. "You don't have to go and work for him. If I'd known you were chaffing here, if you'd told me—"

"I don't want make-work. I want to get off-world. Not just on a couple of compound-raids," she said dismissively when Blake opened his mouth again. "I want to see the galaxy – to find out what's out there in it for me."

"And you think Mister Avon will help you do that, do you?" Blake said the name like an insult. "Soolin, I know what's out there for you – it's what's out there for all of us, especially on a ship like that. Danger, and lots of it."

"There's plenty of danger on Party missions. That's usually why I'm there – to deal with it. I'll take my chances on the Liberator."

"I admit, I've sent you on some dicey runs – with your full knowledge and consent. But only with Party members, people I was sure would protect you if things fell apart. I've never sent you into any situation where, if something happened, I wouldn't have felt able to look your parents in the eye afterwards. And it was always for something."

"I'll have people who'll protect me. Cally will watch my back, and Dayna. Avon—"

"Oh, is it Avon now?" Blake sneered.

"It has been for a while."

"Tell me you and he—"

"Don't be ridiculous. I wouldn't do that to you, and I don't exactly like the idea myself."

"What do you mean, you wouldn't do it to me?"
"Nothing, if you don't want to talk about it." Soolin pulled her hair back into a high ponytail, staring out ahead of her. "This is about me, Blake. This is the right choice for me. Yes, it's mercenary work, but I'm not above that – I don't see you having this conversation with Arwa or Bilal."

"They're grown women—"

"So am I. Being a farmer isn't for me, Blake, and you know damn well it's not for you either, so you can stop lecturing me."

Soolin took the mugs to the sink and started to wash them up, addressing Blake with her back to him.

"If you thought about it, you'd see I'm lucky that Avon's agreed to take me on," she said. "The pay's good, and I can save in case of emergencies. Keep some money secure, off-world. Can't you at least try and be happy for me?"

"Happy?" Blake asked incredulously. "Happy that you're throwing your lot in with the most irredeemable, untrustworthy, arrogant git it's ever been my displeasure to meet? Happy that you're throwing yourself away on mercenary work? I accept it's your choice, of course. But I'm damned disappointed, Soolin. I hoped for better for you. I thought better of you."

"That's not fair," Soolin said, her voice flat and low, as it always was when she was deeply upset. Blake felt a pang of remorse. He thought everything he'd said had been true, but that somehow, even though this was an awful idea, and even though he believed in candour and thought she had a right to his honest opinion, he'd still been in the wrong for saying it.

"I'm sorry," Blake said, not knowing how to resolve this – the first major difference he'd ever had with a girl he thought of as a younger sister. A difference of opinion that might well cost Soolin her life.

"Yes. I'm sorry too," Soolin said, and Blake left. He shook his head, No, at Soolin's father in the yard on his way out. Mister Janss clapped Blake on the shoulder and went back to chopping logs.

* 

Without intending to, and certainly without any deliberate intention to punish Soolin, Blake caught himself shutting her out. He didn't feel the same understanding could exist between them any longer. Instead, he confided more in, and spent more time with, Jenna and Inga. He asked himself what was so different about Jenna's position, why he didn't feel that as a betrayal, and came up with a host of partial reasons that didn't quite add up to the sum of his feelings. He knew that although Soolin was always tightly guarded, she was hurt by his continuing coldness, but not why he was doing it and thus not how to fix it.

On her fourth mission with the Liberator, Avon cornered Soolin.

"Something’s troubling you," he said rather than asked.

"Yes," Soolin said, not bothering to deny it and not volunteering further information. She was in the galley, making herself a cup of coffee. Avon let the topic rest for a few moments. She gestured to ask if he wanted a coffee as well – he nodded to indicate that he did. Eventually, Soolin banged down the spoon she'd been stirring with and said,

"No one is disappointed in you like Blake is disappointed in you."
Avon's eyes narrowed. "You knew he'd be put out, if you signed on with us."

"Oh, Blake's not put out, he's livid. That's the trouble with Blake. He wants so much from people. He's totally committed, and he thinks everyone has that in them. He doesn't understand any kind of smallness, from the necessary things we do to carve out space for ourselves to grand cruelties. Every time he pushes and gets his own way, it's about something more than him. He has such a forceful personality, he feels so much, that his disappointment—I feel like it could crack my ribs. I didn't realise this would cost me his good opinion – and I don't like that I need that from him. But there it is. It's just as stupid not to acknowledge it. Blake is one of my best friends, and I can't stand him hating me."

Avon leaned back against the counter, raising an eyebrow at her. "Is this your letter of resignation?"

"No," Soolin said sharply. "Blake can go to hell. I'm not that little girl he saved when he was sixteen. I'm not my sister Kari, either."

"Your sister?"

"We lost her to bandits."

"Ah. I'm – sorry."

"I barely remember her. But I do remember Blake marching my brother and I over miles of ground. I remember him throwing us down in the corn to take cover, with himself over us. He was just a child himself. He did more than anyone could have expected, and he still feels like he failed. I don't think he even knows that that's why it bothers him that I'm out here."

Soolin drank her coffee, mulling it over.

"Blake's probably brilliant, you know. But he's never understood his own frailties much better than he understands other people's."

Avon's face jerked. He looked as though he'd got a calculation terribly wrong. "Interesting. I thought he was simply – reasonably protective."

"Reason has nothing to do with it. That's what all the formalities are for." Soolin snorted into her mug. "To make us forget we were meat to those people who declassed us, and the bandits who came after the troops pulled out. Blake even said it, once. We were at an Assembly, and out of nowhere he started telling me about this Italian book, from the Middle Ages or something. The rest of the country is being ravaged by a plague, and these rich people hole up in a palace. They eat and dance, because it makes them feel like things might be all right. They're still people."

"Decameron," Avon said, after a moment.

"Yes, that was it. Strange, that you know it too."

"It's a common core text, in certain Terran education programmes. Perhaps because that's what the Federation wants Alphas to do with their privileges. If personhood is in short supply, if some people are more people than others, and if it's a state you can lose, you're rather inclined to cling on to what marks of humanity you have. You are more likely to ignore what happens outside the palace and keep dancing." He smiled sharply. "Exclusively metaphorical dancing, of course."

Soolin's lip quirked. "Yes, let's not get carried away."

"I didn't realise quite how angry hiring you would make him."
Soolin could well believe Avon had only intended to pull Blake's pigtails, and had wound up going for his throat on instinct. He didn't seem to know how to play-fight, for all he wanted to roll around like a puppy with Blake.

"Would you still have done it if you had?"

"Oh, yes," Avon said with a laugh. "You are, after all, an excellent shot."

*

Upon coming into work a day after the Liberator's return to GP, Blake was highly irate to find Mister Avon at Deva's side. Apparently Mister Avon was orchestrating a massive overhaul of Blake's computer systems, strutting about like he owned the place.

"I suppose you authorised this," Blake muttered to Deva.

"Hm? Oh, yes, leapt at the chance," Deva agreed. "And don't worry, we're observing all normal protocols. It's securely sourced, new equipment, and I can follow what he's doing well enough to understand that what he says is a monitor isn't a virus-laden bomb. Hackles down, Blake. He's doing us a favour."

"And just what will this favour cost us?" Blake had the idea that nothing Mister Avon gave came without a price.

"Nothing at all," Mister Avon said, joining them. "Consider it a gift. Or the natural manifestation of my annoyance with how long it takes Deva to run our clearance protocols."

"*Our* clearance protocols?" Blake asked.

Deva coughed. "They do live here too. And you *did* tell him to work with me on this. He had some very good suggestions, Blake."

"I'm sure he did. He also poached my best shot – perhaps you remember Soolin?"

Deva held up his hands and melted away to direct the ongoing, actual work.

"Still harping on that, I see. I thought you believed in free choice," Mister Avon said to Blake, giving him a sharp, quick grin. "Which is, of course, never entirely free. It's logical for Soolin to act to ensure that she and her family can buy themselves protection in the wider world, should anything go wrong here. She has reason to know how quickly safety can be ripped away from her. Are you, of all people, in any position to criticise her choices?"

Blake winced. Mister Avon pressed his advantage. "If I told you about a man who exercised the force of his disapproval to police the choices of a younger woman in his life, even in the name of protecting her, I expect I can guess how you'd feel about him."

"All right, A—Mister Avon. I'm not trying to bully her."

"*Don't try* harder, Blake," Mister Avon said archly, with a glint in his eyes that showed he hadn't missed the slip.

"*Fine."

Blake sulked off to his office. He emerged a few hours later, having arranged another contract with Del Grant and feeling more like speaking to Soolin honestly than he had in the month since she'd signed on with the Liberator.
He found Mister Avon walking around a bank of computers, methodically adjusting some component or other.

"Try it now," Mister Avon called up to Deva, checking the monitor relay. "Yes, that's right. It should be—" He swung the instrument he was holding around in a circle. "Right. Just there. Blake, if you are standing around uselessly because you have no pressing business, I could do with your help. You do still remember how to do basic engineering?"

"Yes," Blake said, although he did actually have relatively pressing business. The sneer had caught him off guard.

"All right, then. These new components need to be wired into the grid in a sensible manner, with backups. Can you manage that?"

"Of course I can," Blake snarled, like it hadn't been a fairly reasonable question. It was a relatively fiddly task, and many in-practice engineers would have found it challenging. Blake did it quickly and well, just to spite Mister Avon.

Blake handed him the excess wire and snapped,

"Next?"

"I'm impressed," Mister Avon said.

"As it happens, I don't care," Blake said pleasantly.

"Of course not," Mister Avon soothed him in a patronising manner. Blake involuntarily looked at what Mister Avon was doing and studied it for a few moments. Something wasn't quite right. Or not as he expected, anyway.

"Whereas I do," Mister Avon said.

"What?"

"It isn't important. What aspect of my excellent work confuses you? Or is it just computer-based functions generally?"

Making a face at him, Blake pointed out the strange wiring configuration that had distracted him. Mister Avon proceeded to explain to him that this was not an error, but in fact an improvement. He took Blake over everything he'd done with an air of relish.

"So that you won't accuse me of sabotage, if anything goes wrong," Mister Avon offered. "Or at least, you may – but not with plausible grounds."

"Not, then, because you're a massive show-off?"

"Well," Mister Avon drawled, allowing himself a grin. "There is that."

*

Soolin didn't show it, because she was Soolin, but she was relieved when Blake wrote her a note asking how she was. She was even more relieved when he followed that note up with a few more messages, and accepted Soolin's invitation to have tea at her stand-alone. Over cake, she explained the next mission the Liberator was taking – a supply run to a little-known world in the back of beyond that was protected by a Federation force-wall. The Liberator crew had been contacted, via a chain of intermediaries, by a woman named Selma. Her people were being held in slavery. She
wanted weapons and food. In return, Selma had a consignment of ore (useful in experimental spaceflight technology) to trade – valuable stuff, especially for scientists working outside Federation controls.

"What's the name of the planet?" Blake asked, ears pricking up.

"Horizon."

"Horizon, that used to be Silmareno?"

"You've heard of it?" Soolin asked. Blake looked placid, but that didn't mean much. Blake concealed information he didn't think you needed to know easily, because he didn't even think of it as lying.

"Oh, in passing. Tell me more about what you're doing there."

Soolin let it drop. "It's good work. Cally thinks so. Distributing the ore and the supplies both undermine the Federation."

"Yes, it sounds all right – though I wouldn't leave my delicate negotiations to Mister Avon."

"Actually we could use your help, brokering the exchange. It's a good chance to make contacts. Avon said it would be fine, if you came."

"You mean he wants free labour. Well, if Avon said—" Blake teased, and Soolin groaned.

*

The mission did not go quite as planned. For a start, Blake had been processing rumours about Silmareno for years—rumours passed by locals sent out to 'reeducation' camps. He knew far more about the planet than he'd let on. Soolin just rolled her eyes and muttered, "Typical" when she realised Blake had probably agreed to come the second he'd heard their destination – would have found a way to do it, if she hadn't gone and asked him.

What followed was something of a debacle. Through no fault of Blake's, their visit had coincided with a visit from a Federation vessel – and it transpired that Selma hadn't told her fiancé Ro or his guards about her plan. The Liberator crew had been tempted to blame the woman, until they found Selma herself working in the mine they were dumped in and fairly embarrassed and apologetic about the whole mess. Blake, Avon, Vila and Cally had all been forced to labour in the mine (Avon seeming peculiarly discomforted by Blake's sensible decision to strip to the waist while working) while Tarrant, Gan and Soolin waited for them up on the ship.

It hadn't taken five minutes for Blake to go off-script – figuring out how to implement Selma's instructions about the force wall defences; marshalling the mine workers into a system of equitable food-distribution by sheer force of will once they were captured; arguing with King Ro about his allegiance to the Federation and appealing to his better nature; and, finally, after that had all somehow worked and they were back on the Liberator, revealing that he'd suspected all along that the planet's force wall would protect them from the additional Federation pursuit ships sent in as backup. He'd over-ridden Avon there (which absolutely shouldn't have been possible on Avon's own ship) without stopping to tell him why. And then Blake had negotiated for access to the force wall technology, and practically ordered Avon to take a look at it with him.

"It could keep everyone on GP safe. Last I checked, that includes you," Blake said, turning on his heel and heading for the teleport room, just expecting Avon to follow him. Which Avon did, railing at his back.
Soolin couldn't help laughing the second the two of them were back down on the planet.

"Is Blake always like that?" Dayna asked, grinning.

"That's something like a master-cut of his Greatest Hits, yes. It serves Avon right for asking me to invite him and trying to get Blake to work 'for exposure' – he should know Blake better than that by now. I'd say Blake over-stepped his authority, but Blake tends to make his own authority."

"Oh, but I don't think Avon greatly minds," Cally said, and Dayna raised her eyebrows significantly. Soolin thought that was true enough. Avon had let it happen, after all, and seemed equally enraged and entranced by Blake's out-maneuvering him. It wasn't obvious, but then neither were her own expressions. Avon watched for what Blake would do next like a rapt audience at a play, and rushed to meet Blake's cues like he was terribly keen on interactive theatre.

"Besides," Cally added, "Blake was perfectly right. We exceeded our mission. We got everything Avon wanted, and more to his advantage than he'd hoped for – and I believe we truly helped those people. I am glad Blake was with us."

Down on the planet, King Ro asked why Blake referred to Avon with a title. "Do you work for him?"

"Hardly," Blake said, rolling his eyes.

"He thinks it's amusing." Avon addressed himself to Selma, as though he expected sympathy from that quarter. "His sense of humour, as you see, leaves much to be desired."

*

Soolin tested a thesis during one dinner on the way back to Gauda Prime. Jokingly, she reminding Blake of the childhood promise she'd extracted from him – that he'd marry her, when she grew up. Blake laughed, remembering it, and said that he was, of course, a man of his word – even if that word had been tricked out of him by a viciously manipulative six year old. Was she finally ready to set the date?

Avon seemed distinctly unamused, until the conversation took a turn that indicated that Soolin was now totally disinclined to hold him to his promise. At which point Avon visibly relaxed. Well. That was that, then. If something as absurd as this could ruffle Avon, he was about as far gone as it was possible to be.

Which made sense of the fact that Avon couldn't seem to stop bothering Blake the entire way back.

In Soolin's opinion, Avon flirted outrageously. He certainly visited Blake constantly, dropping by his room (Avon had, conveniently enough, assigned Blake quarters en route to his own) or coming to sit with him on the Flight Deck. He'd assigned Blake a watch that, again, conveniently, coincided with his own work period.

In Blake's opinion, Mister Avon was like a bad penny. Once, talking a solitary walk through the uncanny, lovely ship at 'night' (Liberator did make the engineer in him swoon--she was so sleek and powerful. Would she were his,.) he unexpectedly met Mister Avon. Blake felt all due annoyance at the bad luck that brought Mister Avon here, where no one else was. To prevent this ever happening again, Blake took care to inform Mister Avon that this walk, this route specifically, was a particular favourite of his. How it could have happened a second time, Blake didn't know. And yet it did, and even a third. It seemed like wilful spitefulness on Mister Avon's part. Mister Avon didn't make a few formal inquiries, pause awkwardly and go, as any decent
person who hated any other decent person would in such a situation. No, he actually thought it necessary to turn and walk with Blake – he was just that dedicated to annoying him.

It struck Blake, in the course of their third rencontre, that Mister Avon was asking some odd, unconnected questions – about what Blake thought of the Liberator, Blake's habit of night-time walks, and his opinion of Soolin's happiness here. When they spoke of Orac and the Liberator, neither of which Blake perfectly understood yet, Mister Avon pressed knowledge of them, seeming to expect that Blake would need to understand how they worked, would be staying on the Liberator again. His words seemed to imply it.

Was Mister Avon simply glorying in having won Soolin? Or in his possession of technology he knew perfectly well was impressive, and which Blake could have desperately used and didn't have? Was he postulating about some occasion on which Blake would need to hire him? (Surely he realised that the Party's budget could hardly support that?) Mister Avon had bragged about his work on Blake's base, so it made sense, but this crowing seemed a degree more malicious – all the more so for being so dwelt upon, in a tone of seeming calm. Mister Avon was really grinding it in, and to no purpose Blake could see. Blake was always glad to find himself at the door of his own cabin again, exhausted enough to sleep.

* 

On the last day of their flight homewards, two things greatly to Avon's disadvantage occurred. Unfortunately for Avon, he didn't know about either of them.

Blake reentered message-range, and his deputies, Bran and Deva, set his communicator pinging so consistently with backlogged messages that Soolin said it sounded like a kettle coming to the boil. Among these missives, Blake found a note from Miss Grant. She didn't want to trouble him, but she thought she should say that Avon had threatened her. Quite pointedly. Told her to get away from Blake's organization and said he'd 'expose' her if she didn't. He was a computer expert, she reminded Blake. One of the best in the Federated worlds, or so they said. Who knew what he could mock up?

*I'll handle him*, Blake texted back grimly, resolving to have a pointed discussion with Mister Avon when they were back on Gauda Prime. *Thanks for telling me.*

He'd let Miss Grant's situation slip his mind, or rather allowed it to be crowded out by the numerous mundane annoyances Mister Avon furnished him with daily – how he seemed to light up when he spotted Blake, and thus an opportunity to torment someone; the annoying way he lounged on the frame of Blake's door at the end of their walks, prolonging the conversations and keeping Blake from politely going to bed; the way he was often right, but unfailingly awful about being so; how utterly in contempt he held Blake's most cherished beliefs. Blake chided himself for not keeping the *worst* of Mister Avon at the forefront of his thoughts. He had to bear in mind what Mister Avon was – not a rake, but an outright bastard.

Blake also discovered, via a hesitant, carefully-worded report from Bran, that a deal he'd sewn up had come unravelled in his absence. He'd hoped to develop a satellite resistance cell on a neutral planet in the third sector, as well as to purchase a commission of cluster bombs from the warlord in charge of the planet. Talks had progressed well, and on Gauda Prime preparations for who and what would migrated over had already begun. But it seemed that the government he'd been speaking to had been warned off the enterprise. They would need a lot of assurances from Blake personally in order to consider his proposal any further. Apparently the person who had warned them off had been another trading partner of Blake's – one Kerr Avon, who had told them some unflattering things about the Freedom Party's capabilities in response to direct questioning.

These two events, combined with Blake's lingering sensitivity about Mister Avon's having
seduced Soolin into work Blake had himself seen was dangerous, sent Blake into a ferocious mood. He skulked about the ship like a bear with a sore head.

"Someone's not happy to be going home," Vila said on the flight deck as they approached the Gauda system.

"Shut up, Vila," Mister Avon said, looking at Blake with something like sympathy – the last thing Blake wanted, from the last person he wanted it from.

"Don't tell Vila to shut up," Blake snapped, before getting a hold of himself. This was, after all, Mister Avon's ship, and these were his people. Blake would have resented it if someone tried to undermine his own authority like that in public.

"I apologise, Mister Avon. Vila. I'm tired, and my head is killing me. I'm going to take a shower before we get back in orbit."

"Only another ten minutes," Tarrant pointed out.

"Good," Blake said. He wanted to leave, to be off the ship and away from these people. Too late he remembered that he couldn't just teleport down to his own stand-alone. "Oh, I left some things in your house, in the bedroom I slept in before we left." (Mister Avon had wanted to leave early, the day they'd started for Horizon, and it had made logistical sense for Blake to be at the house and ready to depart with the rest of them.)

"Of course," Mister Avon said, his eyes narrowing as though something were passing between Blake and himself. Blake was honestly too tired to figure out what. He was unused to the erratic schedules of space flight, and the deviation from GP-standard day-lengths.

"I'll stay behind and let you in," Mister Avon concluded, darting another look at Blake as he retreated.

* 

Back in Mister Avon's residence, feeling much improved for having taken a shower and used a pain-patch from the Liberator's well-equipped medbay, Blake changed into GP-style clothes after a week of wearing things he'd borrowed from the Liberator's wardrobe room. (He'd asked whether he should put them in the laundry, somewhere, and Soolin had said you just hung them up in your designated clothing alcove and the ship took care of all that. Handy.) His kitbag was packed, and he'd picked up the items he'd left – Blake had a tendency to scatter possessions wherever he stayed that he had to work hard to counteract.

He was inspecting the room for anything else he'd missed when he heard the sound of the door chime.

"Come," Blake said automatically. He was a little surprised when Mister Avon, who Blake hadn't seen since the other man let him into the building and left to change himself, walked into the room.

"Are you feeling better?" Mister Avon said, in a strange, hurried voice. "I – came to see. If you were feeling better." A perfectly reasonable question from anyone else, but from this man it surprised and unsettled Blake. Cautiously, Blake said he was, thanks, and Mister Avon nodded jerkily. Blake knew he needed to have it out with Mister Avon over Anna and his interference with the warlord, but this wasn't the ideal time or place to do it. It would keep, at least until they could speak in an office rather than in Mister Avon's own house.

Mister Avon surprised him further by sitting down on the bed. Blake waited for him to say… whatever it was he'd come to say. Mister Avon stood up again and paced the room. Just when
Blake had opened his mouth to suggest this was getting a little ridiculous, Mister Avon whirled on him, and the expression on his face stopped Blake in his tracks. Mister Avon's eyes were wide, the pupils large and black. His face was pale, with a feverish flush. Had he caught something on Horizon? He looked absolutely wild.

"I tried not to—" Mister Avon started and stopped. Shook his head. Laughed, short and sharp and a little mad. "It doesn't matter. It didn't work. Obviously. You see I am not — able, to stop myself. Though I certainly struggled. I told myself it was a passing, physical interest — anything but what it was."

His lip twisted cruelly, but then it smoothed, and he was grave, and Blake realised with surprise that under certain conditions, Mister Avon was beautiful, actually. Not merely handsome, but something startling. Strange, that such an ephemeral, seemingly inward thing as that should be wasted on a man Blake had always thought incapable of feeling.

Mister Avon took a deep breath and looked up at Blake, properly. Blake felt his own breath catch.

"You must allow me to tell you—" Mister Avon swallowed, as if choking on the breath he'd taken. "Blake. I love you. Ardently."

Blake's astonishment was absolute. He stared, coloured, doubted, and was silent. Mister Avon apparently considered this sufficient encouragement to continue.

"It has been going for on some time, of course. As you must have suspected. But now — I need you." That had nearly been snarled, but Mister Avon pulled back, recovering himself a degree. He crossed his arms over his chest, and put on a singularly nasty, condescending smile.

"Oh, it's mortifying, naturally. Your work here is foolhardy, suicidal and naive. You're hardly a suitable candidate for a one-night stand, let alone anything more. At least — that is what I thought when we met. Back then, our philosophies and priorities seemed so utterly incompatible that I assumed our affinity was a strange accident."

His smile dropped into a bitter, mirthless expression. "But my objections are, it seems, insufficient. I understand that I should have to be involved. It would be all or nothing, with you. To be with you is to throw away all of the rationality and self-preservation I have cultivated over the course of a lifetime. You — degrade me. I know I'm a ruin of myself, completely out of control. I can't even stop myself from going into rooms, without any purpose, simply because I know that you are in them. I have tried to conquer this—" He swallowed again, his voice having grown harsh and raw as he was speaking, and redirected himself onto safer ground.

"I have a ship, as you know. And Orac. I'm not without certain—I could be very useful to you. You see that." His tone was insistent, demanding. "And to be honest," here his expression acquired a sharp, lascivious edge, "I'm relieved you chose to have this conversation in a bedroom, because I'd like to finally—" He shook his head, catching himself. "But I — understand you marry, here, which is acceptable. Actually, that is — what I want. Will you, Blake?"

In spite of his deeply-rooted dislike, Blake wasn't insensible of the compliment of such a man's affection — to the extent to which he could believe this utterly bizarre conversation was actually occurring. When the confession began, Blake had been tempted to stop him somehow, and had been prevented only by the violent flow of Mister Avon's speech.

At first, he'd been sorry and embarrassed that he would have to wound Mister Avon (if indeed he would wound him). But roused to resentment by Mister Avon's subsequent language, Blake had lost his compassion in his anger. Blake could easily see that Mister Avon had no doubt of a favourable answer. He spoke of anxiety, but along with its wildness, his countenance expressed
utter conviction. Real security. The man clearly thought Blake would do anything he had to in
order to secure the use of Mister Avon's resources, and would thank Mister Avon for the privilege.

His lips parted, and he breathed raggedly. He looked like a man Blake had seen take a gut shot on
a raid. A man who, for an instant before he'd crumpled, had known something was wrong, but not
that he was dead.

Good, Blake thought, with a viciousness that, at the time, didn't alarm him as it should have done.

"I'd like to thank you for that speech, but I'm afraid I can't. I don't want your good opinion, I have
never wanted your good opinion, and you've clearly given it to me against your own will and your
better judgment." Blake said the last with the hint of a sneer. "If you're even serious about any of
this – though if this is a joke I can't pretend to guess your objective – then I'm sorry that I've hurt
you. I don't do it on purpose. But presumably the 'scruples' that prevented you from speaking up
earlier will more than help you recover."

Mister Avon had, throughout his own declaration, been leaning against the wall as though for
support, with his eyes fixed on Blake's face. Now he pushed himself away from it to stand
upright. His otherworldly, quivering assurance drained away as he'd become angrier, and
now his countenance was painted with his distress. He had a disturbingly expressive face, Blake
realised with some discomfort. Strange, that he'd never seen that before. Perhaps that was why
Mister Avon kept his features so tightly controlled, so fixed in an expression of cool mockery – to
avoid exposing this appalling, vulnerable responsiveness. Mister Avon was struggling for the
appearance of composure, and Blake saw that he would not open his lips until he believed himself
to have obtained it. Blake found the pause itself awful.

At length, with forced calm, Mister Avon said, in tones of biting sarcasm,

"And this is all the reply I am to expect. I'd ask why, but I suppose it isn't important."

"Or I could ask you why you chose to offend and insult me," Blake retorted. "To tell me that you
liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character." Blake spat the
last word, indicating his impression of

The first night he'd met Mister Avon, Blake had sensed the sort of thing he'd need to say to affect
– no, to hurt the other man, and he'd gone for the right words without compunction. With that
same unerring aim, Blake landed this blow, and was rewarded with Mister Avon's visible reaction
to Blake dismissing the very idea of his having character.

"But I suppose that question isn't important, either," Blake finished.

"I didn't tell you I liked you," Mister Avon snapped. The tepid word appeared to offend him. His
face seemed to spasm, and his mind almost to skip a track. "Didn't you expect this?" he hissed.
"Didn't you ask me to come here?"

"Ask you?" Blake almost laughed. "Mister Avon, we loathe each other. What in hell made you
think—?

"I—thought you understood what was going on," Mister Avon interrupted, his words infused with
a strange, panicked blankness, as though a doctor had just informed him he was mad. "You—We
spent—"

"No," Blake said shortly. "No, I didn't intend – any of this. Certainly not—Look. I take marriage
seriously. It's not a joke to me. I want it. Badly. I want to love someone like that, and for them to
love me enough to want to be my partner, despite all the disadvantages you dwelt on so lavishly. And you're just—Well, I don't know what you're doing. Offering a formal union because, in your eyes, hating me is perfectly compatible with what, wanting to fuck me? And then you'll have won, is that it?"

"No, that's not it—"

"No? Well, perhaps you think I need to placate some pre-Atomic sense of morality," Blake scoffed. "Oh I know we 'court' and it all must look quaint and ridiculous to you, but no one here gets married so they can have sex without offending the Lord. That's never been what any of this is about. Christ, do you respect these people at all? Because they have tried to be kind to you."

Blake gave a hard huff of laughter. "I suppose I know my answer. You essentially only respect yourself." He rubbed his face in his hands. Looked up.

"If it's – sex," he continued, "just sex, and all that business about the fucking ship and the fucking computer and your own damn abilities you're so bloody proud of, then – if that's what you want, a trade for services rendered, then – yes, I'll do it, of course. There isn't a lot I wouldn't do for the Party, though god knows why you want it. We could even endeavour to be civil and decent to each other about the transaction. I wouldn't feel diminished by it, if that's what you're after. I'll call you 'Avon' or 'husband' or whatever the hell you like – you'd have purchased that much. But that's what it would be. A transaction. There'd be nothing unclear about the nature of the exchange. I wouldn't do that to you."

Mister Avon looked like he'd been slapped. "What a generous offer."

Blake's rage, which had ebbbed enough to allow him to make his counter-proposal, based on what he thought Mister Avon wanted, flared right back up. How dare Mister Avon sneer at this and make Blake feel as though he were being petty? How dare he reject this?

"That's exactly what it is," Blake snarled, "under the circumstances. You've never helped me, Mister Avon. You've never been anything other than a thorn in my side. I have every reason to think poorly of you. You took Soolin away from her family and her friends, and expose her constantly to danger. Just today I got word that you ripped away a political contact I needed, for no purpose beyond satisfying your own endless, tedious doom-mongering.

"You're a mercenary, and you care for nothing but yourself," Blake concluded. "And I certainly don't want to end up like the last person you claimed you loved – utterly betrayed by a man with no conscience. A man who used her and left her to be tortured to death without so much as saying goodbye. A man who then threatens her when she tries to make a new life for herself – I heard that last today, too, though I've known what you did to her for some time."

"It seems I've been kinder to your contacts than I have been to myself," Mister Avon said. "And as for Anna—" He spat the name with a level of loathing that made Blake subconsciously start calculating whether he could protect himself from the other man, if it came to a fight. "You take such an interest in Anna's concerns."

"How on Earth could anyone who hears what she's suffered not feel for her?"

"Her suffering!" Mister Avon repeated contemptuously. "Oh, Anna's suffering has been profound, I'm sure."

"You abandoned and threatened her," Blake said, almost with wonder, "and yet you can still treat this as though it's a joke."
"It is a joke," Mister Avon snarled. "Just not one I expect you to get. So. This is your opinion of me then, is it? Thank you for explaining it so fully, Blake."

Mister Avon gave him a sick little smile, which Blake found himself staring at with a commingled horror and attraction. The sentiment vanished in an instant, but Blake had felt it deeply. A quick cut could stab to the core of you and kill, just as surely as the prolonged blow you saw coming. Sometimes Mister Avon's expressions filled Blake with a flickering, awful sense of something like enchantment.

"Though I can't help wondering whether you might have overlooked some of these objections if I hadn't hurt your pride," Mister Avon pressed, angling for scraps of dignity, even now when it was all over. "If I hadn't told you why it was difficult for me to come to you. After all, where was this bitter bile, these past weeks?" Mister Avon gave Blake a knowing look, which Blake disliked immensely. "Perhaps if I'd flattered you, if I'd lied and said the thought of participating in your endeavours filled me with rapture, I might have done better. But I'm not ashamed of my concerns – any sensible person would have had them. Do you honestly expect anyone sane to rejoice at the prospect of becoming part of this terrorist organisation?"

Blake didn't know that he'd ever been so angry. Every word came out like a burr that had been lodged in his throat.

"Now there you're wrong. The way you spoke, the sensible concerns you chose to tell me of, just saved me any embarrassment I might have felt in telling you to go to hell. I might have been sorry for you, if you'd ever once shown yourself to be someone I could trust. So don't trouble yourself with recriminations on that account. You couldn't have offered yourself to me in any way that would have tempted me in the slightest."

Mister Avon's face was a picture of mortification, but Blake felt past the point of stopping, and he pressed on heedlessly.

"From the beginning, from almost the first moment of knowing you, you impressed me with your arrogance, your conceit, and your utter disdain for other's feelings. This laid the foundation for such an immovable dislike that I hadn't known you a month before I was convinced you were the last man in the universe I could ever come to care for."

"Really," Mister Avon hissed. Blake's eyes widened as Mister Avon took a few steps closer to him. Without warning, he shoved Blake against the wall, crashing into him, pushing his tongue into Blake's mouth, clutching Blake's shoulders and pinning him there. Blake didn't think, he just responded, letting Mister Avon in, and stranger still, kissing him back, anchoring him where he was with a hand on his hip. Mister Avon's mouth slid across his, slick and sudden, and Blake even pushed his tongue into Mister Avon's mouth when Mister Avon drew back, eliciting a shaky sound from the other man.

Coming to himself, Blake shoved Mister Avon away from him, clamping his own mouth shut, breathing hard.

"That's not the impression I got," Mister Avon sneered with contempt, and Blake slapped him, open-palm, across the face.

Mister Avon stumbled back a few steps, looking shocked. Blake realised that for all his pretence at dangerousness, Mister Avon was actually totally unused to some forms of physicality and violence. He could and probably would shoot someone, but give him a knife and he wouldn't know how to so much as slit the throat and drain the blood out of a pig. Blake felt keenly justified for having slapped him, but also like he'd shot a civilian or hurt a child.
"I suppose that concludes our discussion," Mister Avon said, rubbing his face with his hand. "I understand your position perfectly. I'm only ashamed of what my own has been. Forgive me," he said with an ironic smile, "for taking up so much of your time."

He left the room. Blake listened to the sound of Mister Avon's footsteps taking him out into the corridor, down the stairs, and then even away from the house, the front door slamming behind him. Blake sat down on the bed and commed for a ride from the settlement.

When Blake got back to his family compound, he collected Jasper, went back to his stand-alone without a word to his family, and collapsed onto his own bed from actual exhaustion, the fight having pummeled him like a day's hard labour. He wanted, for some obscure reason, to cry. Didn't. Wondered whether Mister Avon was letting himself do it. Wondered if the man cried vinegar and spite.

He also wondered at himself. Had he led Mister Avon on? Had he really? Looking back there was a great deal he couldn't quite explain, or justify. Perhaps not enough to merit this, but – he could almost see the other narrative, through the looking glass. And if he'd done it, he'd done it because he was attracted to Mister Avon, on some level. He had kissed him back. It had been natural, automatic – like his body, at least, had expected this. But why? He didn't respect Mister Avon. Not – in a way that mattered, though his technical skill was inarguably impressive. He didn't like him –

No. That might be wrong. Maybe he did like him. But that made no sense. How and why did he like someone who was consistently awful to him, and wasn't even a good person? What was wrong with him?

Why the hell had it hurt when Mister Avon had said wanting him was degrading, had called him an idiot in so many words and seemed to really mean it? And there again, the fact that he could be disappointed in Mister Avon was itself frightening.

Why, personally as much as politically, was Blake angry that Mister Avon hadn't gone for his offer of a trade of services? The suggestion itself seemed to have been Mister Avon's: "I have a ship, as you know. And Orac. I'm not without certain – I could be very useful to you. You see that. And to be honest, I'm relieved you chose to have this conversation in a bedroom". And it had made Blake furious. Yet he was still, nevertheless, also disappointed in and angry with Mister Avon for not allowing for an arrangement where they both got what they wanted.

Now that he thought about it in this harsh light, part of what Blake wanted was to fuck the smugness out of the man who'd said he couldn't possibly be good enough.

Well. If Blake had unhealthy compulsions, then the best he could do would be to distance himself from the man that occasioned them. Luckily, he had a feeling Mister Avon would be avoiding Assemblies for a while.

Still, with all its attendant horribleness, there had been aspects of the proposal that had been— No one had ever looked at Blake like that. Like having him, him personally, would really mean something (though god only knew what it would mean to Mister Avon). People had liked and even loved Blake before, but often what they'd liked or loved was the idea of him. Blake had never, to his knowledge, evoked from anyone the kind of feeling that Mister Avon's expressions had appeared to testify to. His previous relationships had lacked something in intensity. His partners hadn't given it, and Blake hadn't felt it himself.

When Blake had given thought to what love should be, what the love of his life would look like when (if) it came, it had been – like this, in part. Over-riding any impediments, shatteringly passionate, demanding everything of him. It wouldn't eclipse his commitment to his Party, but
only because in Blake's mind work and love were on separate planes. The Party wasn't about him. This would be. This would be the thing in his life that, whatever other work they engaged in together in the outside world, could be totally about him and this one other person. Of course his ideal had also included fondness, ideological compatibility, and, most crucially, mutual devotion. It was a pity that the only man who'd ever looked at Blake like that was the last man in the universe he could ever be prevailed upon to marry.
Late that night, or early the next morning, Blake broke. He couldn't take lying in his bed any longer, trying to sleep when no sleep was in him. He'd just have to exhaust himself. For the past two weeks on the Liberator he'd had someone to walk with and talk to when he felt like this, and no matter how poor the company, he suspected that it had helped.

Still, he'd always liked solitary walks, too. Two weeks surely hadn't altered the habit of a lifetime. The cool darkness pulled him out the door. He was dressed only in a loose white shirt, soft brown trousers and worn brown leather boots. No waistcoat or coat – terribly informal for GP, but then who would he meet in the woods at this time of night?

"Blake."

Shit.

Mister Avon was lounging against a tree like some kind of puck, still in the clothes he'd worn during the day. He hadn't slept either, Blake thought, before wondering why it mattered.

Mister Avon smiled, thinly. "I thought you might stick to your usual pattern." His expression changed, severe again. "I didn't want to send this over data-stream. It contains potentially sensitive information. Be so good as to read it." He dropped something, a small disc, into Blake's palm without touching him, and raised his own wrist to his mouth. "Incidentally, it appears you need a better personal security system. Orac – teleport." And then he was gone, and Blake was left alone.

Blake found that he wanted to know what the hell he was holding more than he wanted to trudge himself to exhaustion, alone. He turned back.

Switching on his computer, he found the disc contained a file marked 'Blake' and what looked like some appendices. He thought he'd better start at the beginning.

The document was rather direct:

"Don't worry, Blake. This letter contains no repetition of the sentiments and offers you found so disgusting this evening. I am not, as it happens, writing to hurt you or to make myself abject by dwelling on things both of us wish had never been felt or said, and which we cannot forget quickly enough. I'd hardly have taken the trouble to write this or put you to the trouble of reading it if that were the case.

"There are, however, several other points that demand clarification. You will have to pardon me for claiming your attention once more. I know giving me this opportunity will run counter to your feelings, but I trust your vaunted sense of justice will prevail, as usual. And it is your sense of justice, ironically enough, that I demand a hearing from. If, in the course of offering the explanations I feel I owe myself, I must relate yet more material you find offensive and insulting, I can only apologise.

"Earlier today, you accused me several things. These crimes were, of course, not of equal magnitude. For one, you called me a mercenary. That is true enough, and what my situation has made me. But it is interesting that this lies so heavily with you, when you are perfectly willing to forgive it in Vila or Jenna.

"You accused me of having no belief in your cause. That is also true – though in a rather different way than you might expect. I believe you are correct in almost everything you say about the
government's corruption. It is too obviously true to deny, and I have agreed with you on that score since I knew of you initially on Earth, where I admired your clear-sightedness and boldness – if not your intelligence for publicly saying as much, or indeed your survival instincts. I have simply stopped believing that much can be done about this state of affairs, and I do not know that I have ever shared your faith in people's ability and willingness to help one another.

"We have both been shaped by our experiences. At sixteen you were helping to forge a small revolutionary commune, and it is somewhat reasonable that you thus believe the universe is Gauda Prime, writ large. I have, perhaps, seen more of the universe, and I might suggest that you do not know quite how unusual this place that you have helped make, in part in your own image, is. You managed to beat back bandits and murderers and what is perhaps ultimately more threatening – the easy, infinite callousness people feel for the suffering of anyone different from themselves, or far away. But what will you do when the centre shifts and all of that becomes a part of what you are trying to protect? When the outside gets in? You've set yourself the labours of the damned, and you waste your life pushing a boulder up an incline. You must also know that, sooner or later, the Federation will come for you. Sooner or later, they will manage to kill you. You can only hope they don't destroy everyone you care for in the attempt. I will not say I am afraid for you, because I haven't any right to be.

"I warned your contact away because I was directly asked for my honest opinion, and I wasn't aware you expected me to lie for you. If your arrangement with them truly is to your mutual satisfaction, then you will be able to reassure them that it is. And even if it isn't, of course. Your powers of persuasion are certainly up to the task. In part those powers compelled me to be more strenuous in my objections than I might otherwise have been. I feel almost a kinship and a sympathy with anyone turned against their own interests and undone by you, and if I can't save myself, then it does afford me some small pleasure to set free another of your victims. Perhaps there was even something of jealousy in it, at the time – how demeaning, to be turned and used in just the same fashion as some scrabbling warlord who could supply you with cluster bombs that you hadn't thought to ask me for. I would have given you twelve gross of cluster bombs, Blake. I would have given you anything. I think I should have preferred to be your only victim.

"If I had known you needed that contact desperately, then I probably would have lied for you. But, as has become terribly clear, I have never really understood how you and I relate and what it is you want of me. And I find it rather presumptuous, to be asked for my personal integrity and my own professional reputation in exchange for your total contempt.

"As for Soolin, we have said, I think, everything there is to say on the matter. I believe (though I do not know, and I begin to feel I do not know you, anything about you) that you yourself consider the question settled, really, and that in anger you grasped at any weapon that came to hand. There is but one part of my conduct in the whole affair that I cannot reflect on with satisfaction. I knew taking her would bother you (though admittedly, not quite how much, or why). And as valuable as Soolin is, that is why I did it. I thought, you see, that this was how you and I interacted. Almost a game we were playing. And perhaps I wanted to run an experiment – to bring someone from your world into mine, so that you could see yourself doing something along those lines.

"Perhaps all this was beneath me. It is, however, done. On these subjects I have nothing further to say. No other apology to offer. If I have hurt you, it was unknowingly done, and though the motives that governed me probably appear petty and insufficient to you, I have not yet learned to condemn them.

"And now we come to the worst of it. Anna. After months of wrestling with the question, I can think of no way to refute your accusations but to tell you (undoubtedly the last person in the universe I want to relate this to) the whole of it. There is, perhaps, no point in concealing any of it
"I don't know exactly what she told you, though I have, from your words, some horrible suspicions. If they were true, Blake, I should not be able to live with myself. No matter what you think of me. This, then, is what did happen – and I have furnished what additional proofs I can provide for your inspection.

"Here again I shall give you pain – to what degree, only you can tell. But whatever you feel for Anna, whatever sentiment she has created in you, will not prevent me from unfolding her real character – it even furnishes me with another motive.

"I met and fell in love with a woman who told me her name was Anna Grant. She was perfect. Whatever she said, I agreed with. Whatever I thought, she'd been thinking just the same. We were like mirrors of one another, and it was intoxicating not to feel alone, to feel as though I could never be wrong or misunderstood or shameful. Perhaps that sounds limited, as easy as a child's game, and not much like love at all. If that is what you are thinking, then I begin to think you may be right. But that came later. Suffice it to say, I loved Anna more than life. Or at least, I believed I did.

"When I was sure of her (when she'd made me sure of her), I told her I'd thought of a way to unravel the entire Federation banking system. That I'd begun to test it, on a small scale. The universe is built on irony, and so ironically enough, it was your escape from Earth, the capture and public mindwiping of your lieutenants, that made me wonder if perhaps something couldn't and shouldn't be done, some answer given to a world eating itself alive. You, Blake, had escaped. You'd spoken out and defied them and lived – though perhaps I'd have felt a different, commensurate urge to act if they'd taken and broken you.

"I had spent rather a lot of time criticising what I knew of the Freedom Party and the way it operated – answering back to a person who couldn't hear, I suppose. Perhaps it was time to prove I could do better. What might I do? What might I do while securing safety for myself? And, when Anna came along, for her, too? I won't lie to you, Blake. Self-interest was at least an equal motive.

"Someone was on to us, though – one of my experiments must have attracted their attention. I planned to execute my final program moments before we left. To that end, I had arranged to buy some exit visas. I had to go right across the city to collect them. It was safer for Anna to stay out of sight. There were patrols out everywhere looking for us – though luckily we weren't on Earth, and they had pictures but not our real names to chase up. Escape was still theoretically possible. It was also our only chance.

"But due to the patrols, I was late at the rendezvous. And then the man from whom I was buying the visas increased the price. He wanted ten times what we had agreed. He said he could get even more if he turned me in and collected the Federation reward. He shot me, and I had to kill him. I started back, but I was losing a lot of blood. Somewhere along the way I passed out. I was lucky. Some people found me and got me under cover. I was unconscious for more than thirty hours. Anna, meanwhile, came looking for me, and the patrols found her. It was only a week later, after we got definitive word that she was dead, that I left. If there had ever been a time when I could have given my own life to save her, I would have done it. The only grain of consolation that I had was that Anna must have known that.

"That would be a sad story, wouldn't it, Blake? Unfortunately this isn't a tragedy. Not something I can feel a shred of real, satisfying grief about, now. It's a farce.

"There never was an Anna Grant, sister of the insurgent Del Grant. The records are good, and so is Del's memory implantation, I presume. Six months before I met Anna, Del Grant was captured. Three days later, he was released. Extraordinary luck, perhaps. Or enough time to seed him with
memories. You see killing Del Grant would certainly help the Administration, but not quite as much as establishing a useful agent who could ride on his credibility by claiming to be his blood relation. Del remembers Anna's death well enough – he's threatened to kill me over it. I wonder if he remembers her life as clearly? Strange, that she never told him she hadn't died. That she let her own dear brother go on believing that.

"Anna is listed as having enrolled in various schools at the right ages. There are excellent marks on file, but no other evidence that she attended – no comments on her reports, no group photographs, no association records. She has a birth certificate, but there is no hospital manifest in that city for the month of her birth which lists her mother's name. She has an employment history, but no annual reviews. When they have remembered to file terminal performance reviews, these are perfect. Glowing. They are also familiar – or, at least, I find them so. They are always burnished mirrors of my own. Intended to impress me, and to inculcate a feeling of sympathy and likeness if I became suspicious and went looking, I presume. Perhaps soon they'll change to mirror yours.

"I've given you all of these documents and outlined the discrepancies via notes therein. Mister Deva can confirm that the files have not been altered in the last few months, if you must involve anyone else in this.

"Anna never told me she worked for Central Security. I rather think the situation was more complicated even than the story she must have given you. To have been accepted onto Gauda Prime and into your ranks, she must have said she was only a contrite, former low-grade operative. I don't believe that.

"I have always wondered how my experiment gave us away. I had been, after all, perfectly careful. There were no loose threads. The fact is, I could only have been betrayed by an accomplice. My only accomplice. I didn't realise it until I saw her again, here of all places. I never wanted to see the truth. I suppose you think me incapable of feeling. If you'd called me a trusting idiot, you would have been closer to the mark.

"I suspect that before I even ran my first experiment, I had been placed on a watch list, so that the slightest tremor of unusual activity activated surveillance. The next tremor called down an agent. Was it my training that necessitated this initial scrutiny? Perhaps, again ironically, it was the amateur interest I took in you – searching your name one too many times, to see what you were saying, what you were up to. Oh I'm not blaming you. It was, like all the rest, entirely my own mistake.

"I believe, now, that Anna was running me from the beginning – that it suited Central Security to let me do a great deal of what was effectively white-hat work for them, gratis. By the end of the process they would know the vulnerabilities in their system, and they would lose nothing. Overcoming the system was terribly difficult and terribly different, the next time I tried – after Anna had been captured. That attempt also failed, due, I expect, to my having been watched the entire time, and thus having been checked at every step. I only believed I had escaped after my initial attempt. I suspect they wanted me to try a second time, to test their improvements. Why worry about me? After all, they had me thoroughly under observation. After my second attempt they did bring me in, and it was only luck and the incapacity of the officers of the London that allowed me to escape to the Liberator.

"The extent of my humiliation is perhaps more profound than you realise. You'll find in the appendices a photo of a woman named Sula Chesku. She is married to a Federation Councillor. I expect you'll be startled by her resemblance to someone you know. You will also find (and this, Blake, took me a great deal of time to track, even with Orac) the personnel file of an elite Central Security agent named Bartholomew. There is, of course, no photo. But there was, among the
associated records, an extensive case file on me, created by Bartholomew, in consultation with a psychostrategist and various other technical specialists. That, too, I have given you. The rather intimate contents don't leave a great deal of doubt in my mind as to the identity of its compiler. That profile is, I suspect, imperfect as well as out of date. Hopefully even knowing what it contains will help me guard against its ever being used in a similar manner. Even so, I am trusting you with this information. It is hardly flattering.

"Anna betrayed me more thoroughly than I had quite understood it was possible to betray another person. She used her skills to make me believe I loved her. She used my abilities totally, and without my knowledge or consent. She tore my self-respect from me. She let me mourn her for years. She left me to die. She told a man whose opinion I valued that this was her story, and perhaps exercised her skills on him. And it hasn’t even the dignity of a personal vendetta – Bartholomew had so many marks. Her revenge on me, if you still believe she deserves it, has been more complete than any I have known.

"This, then, is a faithful narrative of every event in which you and I have been concerned together. If you don't absolutely reject it as false, you will, I hope, acquit me of cruelty to Anna (or whatever her name actually is, given that she apparently has at least three to choose from). I don't know precisely what lie she told you, but I'm not surprised at her success. You thought so little of me that whatever she said must have made perfect sense. You lacked my database resources, namely Orac, and thus you couldn't have found her out. Besides, it is not in your nature to suspect people of lying to you where personal matters are concerned. That is very sweet, Blake, and it will see you very dead indeed.

"Perhaps you wonder why I didn't say this before, or this evening. But I did try to warn Mister Deva about Anna, discreetly, and this evening I was hardly in a position to gather salient arguments and command myself well enough to give them. Nor were you, I expect, ready to hear them.

"For the truth of everything I've related, I can appeal more particularly to the evidence of the appendices. I shall endeavour to find some opportunity of putting this letter in your hands in the course of the night.

"I will only add, good luck.

"Kerr Avon"

*

Blake had had no idea what to expect from the communication, and his feelings while reading it were at first enormously unclear to him. Blake was initially amazed (and yet unsurprised) by the extent of Mister Avon's egotism – after that horrific proposal, how could Mister Avon think he could give any apology? Thus, with a strong prejudice against everything Mister Avon might say, Blake began looking over the man's account, reading almost too quickly to understand what was being said.

Mister Avon's regret on the introductory points didn't satisfy Blake – his style was haughty and insulting, like his earlier address. But when these subjects were exhausted and succeeded by Mister Avon's account of Miss Grant – when Blake read an account that, if it was true, utterly undermined the woman, and that bore such an alarming similarity to her own history of herself, Blake grew bewildered. Astonishment, worry for his organisation, and even horror at what he'd said to Mister Avon on the subject oppressed him.

"It can't be true," Blake murmured aloud, catching the incredulity in his own tone.
He got up from his computer, paced the house, and settled back to reread the section about Miss Grant. He commanded himself to examine the meaning of every sentence. The account so mirrored Miss Grant's own – each recital seemed to confirm the other, even as they were inverses.

One of the parties was lying, and for an instant Blake performed a thought experiment, supposing it was Mister Avon. He weighed every circumstance with what he meant to be impartiality and deliberated on the probability of each statement being false, but with little success. Again he read on, but every line proved more clearly that the affair, which he had believed so absolutely proved that Mister Avon had behaved infamously, was capable of a turn that would make him entirely blameless (if, as Blake did, one looked on an audacious attempt to undermine the Federation banking system as something rather to Mister Avon’s credit than otherwise).

As to Miss Grant's real character, her story and manner had passed with Blake for virtue. He saw that now. Blake tried to recollect some distinguished trait of integrity or benevolence that might rescue her from Mister Avon's attacks. No such recollection came to him. Blake could remember nothing more substantial to her credit than her supposed relationship to Del, whom he knew and respected, and the general, casual approbation of the people who'd worked with her thus far. After pausing to chew on this point for a considerable period, Blake once more returned to the letter. He checked the appendices – not, however, Mister Avon's profile. Blake was impressed by the other man's decision to share it, but felt it would be wrong to look – wrong to let the Federation tell him what to think of a man he suspected he might have already done a substantial disservice.

The circumstantial case built by the rest of the documents heaped high around Miss Grant. Blake was now struck with the strangeness of her telling him such a personal story, in such a way. It hadn't quite been the answer to the question he'd asked. He wondered that, until now, it hadn't seemed even a little odd, or like an unbelievable coincidence, that she should arrive in Mister Avon's wake. Blake remembered that she had boasted of having no fear of seeing Mister Avon – she'd said that Mister Avon might leave the planet, but that she would stand her ground. Yet she'd avoided Avon as much as possible, requesting extra-planetary details.

Every lingering struggle in Miss Grant's favour grew fainter and fainter, leaving Mister Avon more thoroughly justified. Mister Avon had good friends – and they were friends, rather than just his employees. Would Cally keep company with a monster? Would Soolin fail to notice such a failing of character, or long put up with it? The idea was ludicrous. Proud and repulsive as Mister Avon's manners were, Blake had never, in the whole course of their acquaintance (an acquaintance that had seen them spending rather a lot of time together) actually seen Mister Avon do anything that showed him to be ultimately unprincipled or unjust.

The more he thought about it, the more Blake grew ashamed of himself. He couldn't think of either Miss Grant or Mister Avon without feeling he'd been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd. He had, and he had always hitherto congratulated himself on his ability to see the truth of situations, his willingness to give people a chance. His ability to read people – oh, he'd read the other man well enough to wound him, but he seemed to have missed everything of importance about Kerr Avon. Mister Avon had offended him at the beginning of their acquaintance over mere trivialities, and Blake had nursed that initial dislike into a grudge that glutted on sheer bloody-mindedness and drove away his reason. He felt as though he'd never before known this ugly, brutish part of himself.

Blake reread the first section of the letter, now with a very different effect. How could he doubt Mister Avon here, when he believed him a few paragraphs hence? There was some justice in Mister Avon's remarks and concerns, and perhaps even in his own ideas about what Blake's conduct towards him had been. Mister Avon was an awkward man, but not a bad one – perhaps he was even a good man, according to a definition Blake didn't fully understand the shape of just yet. Blake saw that he had been grotesquely awful in the face of a person's genuine feelings,
however poorly expressed those feelings had been.

For now he was convinced that Mister Avon's sentiments had been genuine. How could he believe Mister Avon about Miss Grant, and believe him about his dealings with the third-sector warlord, and not acknowledge that, at least this evening, Mister Avon had been what he'd claimed to be? Strange as it was, difficult as it was to believe, Mister Avon had been in love with Blake. Ardently in love, he'd said. And Blake had offered, essentially, to fuck him for money. What in hell was wrong with him?

The suggestion that Blake might have been romantically interested in Miss Grant was a little ridiculous – but it also confirmed to Blake that Mister Avon felt strongly about him. He was afraid of Blake's being practiced upon, just as he had been. Furthermore, he was jealous.

Blake wrote an urgent, secure priority note to Deva's designated night-shifter. Miss Grant's team should be told to cut her off and return to the base, where Blake himself would explain the situation and reassign them. He blacklisted Anna Grant thoroughly, so that no rebel group they had any dealings with would touch her. They'd had spies before, in various cells – people knew the drill. Miss Grant would have a tough time getting transportation off the uninhabited rock she'd be marooned on, but Blake supposed her masters would come for her. She undoubtedly had ways of contacting them. Perhaps he should order her killed, but Blake had never done that unless it was absolutely necessary, and killing her would just result in someone different, unknown to them and possibly better at it being sent to do her job. Whatever information Anna had learned, she must have already passed along. Blake was thankful for Mister Avon's earlier warning to Deva, which must have, in combination with his own security protocols, prevented her from learning much.

Gauda Prime's security was compromised. They'd have to prioritise the adaptation of Horizon's defence shield and augment their existing planetary-defence forces. Although Miss Grant's cover had been thoroughly blown, it would take the Federation time to contact her, marshal and send over a suitable fleet. Most Federation ships were outfitted for space combat, not for aerial planetary pacification, and those that were so prepared were in high demand in certain known trouble spots – a fact Blake knew well, and relied on. Those ships would only be taken off their regular deterrent patrols and sent to GP if the scant information Miss Grant could have obtained had been enough to make the Federation think Gauda Prime a worthwhile target. Given her experience and background, Miss Grant had very likely been sent more after the Liberator and Mister Avon than the Freedom Party.

Blake fell into a nightmare sleep in which he was pursued relentlessly around a city he didn't know. Memories of 'Crime and Punishment' and 'Our Mutual Friend', Mister Avon's letter, and Earth and his own flight from that planet bled into a mélange of narrow streets and thin bridges over canals filled with blood. And always he heard steps, right behind him, growing faster as he walked more quickly to escape them. Guilt catching up with him.

Blake woke up in the morning and gave all the information he had on the shield to the tech team, telling them it was top priority. Once they'd analysed it and collected materials, he could help them construct the thing. Having got them started, Blake dealt with the backlog of work that his seconds wanted his opinion on. He added discreet notes to Anna Grant's blacklisting – a highly trusted source identified her as a top, probably active Central Security agent, operating under a cover identity. She was extremely dangerous. He asked the division-handler working with Del Grant to get Del to one of their mindwipe-recovery specialists immediately. There had been a breech, he explained. Who knew what else they'd done to Del when they'd given him memories of a sister?

This meant pulling Del off the Albion mission – which was so vital that Blake knew he would have to step into Del's shoes himself. He didn't have the time, and he probably wouldn't manage
as well as Del, who had already done extensive prep work, but compromised was compromised. Del knew that.

And all day long, and for weeks to come, Blake could think only of the letter, and of how disappointed he was in himself. Blake's disappointment, as Soolin had observed, was a hard and heavy thing. With it lining the pockets of his mind, Blake sank down into a river of thick, churning dislike of himself. But all of that had to be pushed under, rather than aired and dealt with, because there was a great deal to do.
Chapter 6

After a few weeks the situation on the Liberator reached crisis point.

The crew made sure Avon had gone into his room. They checked the galley for bugs. They told Zen not to report the conversation. Gan physically sat in front of the door, keeping it shut with his weight.

"I'm this close to marooning him," Dayna groaned, collapsing into her chair.

"I didn't think it could possibly go on this long!" Vila's tone indicated he might be remonstrating with providence. "I mean at the end of the first week I thought, maybe it's karma. Maybe I'm paying for all my sins, right now. But at this point I'm so far into indulgences that I could do just about anything with impunity."

"Why don't we just kill him?"

"That isn't funny, Tarrant," Cally said, massaging her temples.

Tarrant grinned. "It wasn't meant to be."

"I mean Avon's always – Avon," Vila said, and the rest gave soft groans, as though they granted that. "But this is—"

"Unrelenting emotional abuse," Cally suggested.

"Four insanely dangerous missions in a row," Tarrant said.

"An incredibly reckless, just about insane series of decisions," Dayna added.

"More leather and metal on one man than I've seen outside of hardcore BDSM clubs," Soolin finished.

There was a moment of silence.

"Surely they don't have that sort of thing on Gauda Prime!" Gan said after a moment, as though defending the planet's honour.

Soolin snorted. "They don't. After all, where would we put one? The stables are largely in use. But Blake's sent me on missions to Freedom City and Space City in the past. I was curious. Obviously, if he asks, I went to bed at ten every night."

"Oh, why lie?" Dayna said with amusement. It seemed as though she'd heard about these trips before. "You're an adult. You can do what you like, you know."

"I know. And I do. But the fact remains that Blake won't think of me as an adult when I'm forty," Soolin said.

"Perhaps we need to find out what's wrong with Avon?" Gan suggested, drawing the conversation back to where it had begun.

"I want to beat our Glorious Leader to death, not get him a psychoanalyst," Tarrant said. "Besides, all the money in the treasure room couldn't buy enough therapy to fully work out what's wrong with Avon."
"No, Tarrant – Gan is correct," Cally said. "The way to fix this problem is to determine its source."

"When an Avon's mother and an Avon's father tolerate each other very much—" Soolin began faux-patiently.

"Thank you, I do understand your primitive biological reproduction."

"I'd say it started with Horizon and him losing control over the situation," Tarrant said, rather more sensibly. "Only he seemed to take it rather well at the time. That wasn't like him."

"No, I think the trouble started when we last left GP. So just afterwards," Gan said.

"We haven't been back since," Dayna observed, nodding at Gan, who was more observant than she tended to give him credit for.

"He was quiet that day," Vila said musingly. "I remember thinking he might be sick. He went to bed all right – or at least he knocked off early and I didn't see him again. But then the next morning he was hustling us back up and plunging us into that shambles with the android."

"Is he sleeping?" Dayna wondered.

"He's not eating. Not really, anyway. Protein supplements," Gan said.

"He might be possessed?" Vila suggested.

"That's more in my line," Cally said dryly. "Physically, he's fine, as far as Orac can tell. Barring of course the sleep- and food-deprivation and the extreme stress, all of which he is inflicting on himself."

"But we think it happened then?" Soolin said, seeking confirmation from the group. "After we returned to GP – that was the start of it?"

Dayna's eyes widened in alarm. "You don't think he talked to Blake, do you?"

Tarrant gave her a strange look. "He talks to Blake all the time. Why should that matter?"

"What?"

"Tarrant – he's absolutely mad about Blake."

"What? Avon's not gay!" Tarrant protested.

"God, you're so FSA sometimes," Dayna said, rolling her eyes. "My father told me the military was weird about this."

"All right, it's a force of habit, I admit. And it's not as if it means anything if he is, I just assumed he wasn't."

"I tried to set them up right at the beginning," Vila said. "Avon wasn't having it. Then Blake told him off for making an arse of himself, and the next Assembly we went to, Avon was all 'Find out if he's single, Vila. There's a bonus in it for you, Vila. Oh and make sure he likes men, Vila. No, I'm just curious, Vila.' Curious my arse. Or Blake's."

Gan coughed awkwardly. "I was honestly surprised when I found out Avon had ever had a
female partner. But it happens, you know. We used to raise cows – you keep them separate from bulls much of the time, and there's a lot of homosexual behaviour. Then occasionally estrus will come along and they'll pair up with a bull, but afterwards it's back to normal for them. I suppose it's much the same."

Tarrant blinked. "And you're comparing Avon ... to a lesbian cow?"

"Well," Gan said without missing a beat, "if the leather fits."

Dayna pulled them back to the topic at hand. "So let's suppose he talked to Blake – what happened there? We can see it didn't go well, but how badly did it go?"

"I don't think Blake knew," Soolin said suddenly.

"What do you mean?" Cally asked, frowning. "How can he not have known? I realise humans don't have the relationship my people do to interpersonal vibrations, but surely such things are impossible to miss when you are one of the parties?"

"Blake's clever, he's not Tarrant," Dayna added, and Tarrant wondered if he was ever going to hear the end of 'Avon's not gay'.

"Something he said when I joined up," Soolin explained. "I called Avon just that, no honorific, and Blake asked if we were 'close'. I said no, I wouldn't do that to him – besides, Avon is Blake's flavour of mental, not mine. Then Blake said 'what did I mean, I wouldn't do that to him?' I let it go at the time. It wasn't what we were fighting about, and I assumed he didn't want to talk about it. But Blake's not very good at understanding himself sometimes. I don't think he even knew why he was angry with me for signing on. I honestly think – Blake didn't know at all."

"So Avon went to speak to him – assuming otherwise," Gan said.

"Right, and because it's Avon—"

"He was very intense about it," Cally said diplomatically.

"He was really weird," Dayna translated.

"And you think Blake didn't know anything about it – but I'd have said Avon was in love," Gan said.

No one else would have used the term, but when Gan did it it seemed – simple. Obviously correct. Whatever circumlocutions they or Avon might have cloaked it in, that had been what it was. Even Tarrant was easily re-framing what he'd thought of as a sort of homosocial adversarial closeness and ideological attraction and seduction along slightly different lines, and finding the new term made sense to him.

"That must have made for an interesting chat," Tarrant said ruefully, feeling, against his better judgment, slightly sorry for the bastard.

"I think it might have been worse than that," Soolin said.

"What's worse than that?" Vila said, with a flicker of loyalty towards poor old Avon, who he knew would hate to be embarrassed and wrong-footed.

"We're from Gauda Prime," Soolin reminded them. "Avon's been trying to impress Blake with his willingness to go native. Dancing. Frock coats."
"He asked me for fencing lessons," Dayna said.

"What's that got to do with anything?" Vila asked.


No one seemed to be getting it.

"We marry," Soolin said, rolling her eyes at how thick they were being. "Avon courted Blake assiduously, from his point of view. He thought that was what Blake wanted."

"He'd have proposed," Dayna said. "Oh my god."

"And Blake declined?" Cally asked.

"I think it was worse than that," Soolin said. "I don't know exactly what Miss Grant said to Blake about Avon, but Deva indicated it was awful. Blake protects his people, and he doesn't forgive treachery easily. I don't think Blake just said no. I think Blake made a tit of himself."

"Oh for god's sake, now I feel sorry for Avon," Tarrant said, disgusted.

"I was enjoying hating him!" Vila protested. "Now I've got to acknowledge that he has human feelings! Not even Avon acknowledges that Avon's got human feelings!"

"It's not surprising," Cally shrugged. "Avon has always been—the Auron expression is something like—Oh, I can't explain. He shows a limited register of reactions much of the time, but his aura is melodramatic, with great sweeps and busy activity and fine calculations and sudden shifts. Avon is driven by emotion, and he talks a great deal about logic to hide that, or rather, to balance himself. I'm sorry, sometimes I don't know how you get by with English. It's an incredibly frustrating language when you want to talk about anyone."

"So since the conversation took a turn he didn't expect, Avon's had us avoiding Gauda Prime like the plague," Vila concluded.

"And Blake's been avoiding me," Soolin said, "though he did text me the other day when we were in range to ask if everyone was all right. He meant Avon. He's guilty, and probably regretting whatever his temper made him say. The Party channels all read that he's blacklisted Miss Grant – something Avon said about her stuck."

"Are we barking up the wrong tree? I mean, Blake does like him?" Tarrant said.

Dayna snorted. "We've seen them together."

"I think Blake's always wanted someone as clever and wilful as he is," Soolin said. "Ideally that person would be as interested in him as Blake is in anything he cares about, so Avon's pretty much made-for-purpose. Even better, he's a challenge. I expect that would make him almost irresistible to Blake, if Blake properly considered it."

"So we get them together and we let Blake say sorry – Avon'll listen to him." Dayna said it like it was a fait accompli.

"Right," Vila said. "And then a few of us can do our bit about how Avon's only mostly an arse – nothing insincere, and not too many of us, or it's not subtle. People who've been with him a while." Vila considered this. "Cally and Dayna and me. Not you Gan – you'd just explain the whole plan and say 'sorry' at the end."
"Fair enough," Gan agreed.

"And then maybe things will be well," Cally finished.

"And we can avoid a mutiny. Sounds all right to me. Where's Blake now?" Tarrant asked.

"Headed to Albion," Soolin said, aware that this was privileged information and that the rest of them weren't technically Party. But she trusted the lot of them, and this was an emergency. If they didn't fix this situation immediately either Avon was going to get them killed or they were going to kill Avon. "Del Grant was assisting the planet with a major coup. But when Anna Grant got blacklisted the FP realised Del was compromised and had to pull him in for memorywipe clean up. Blake nearly cancelled the entire mission, but Albion wanted to go ahead, and Blake authorised it because they were desperate. To pull it off, he had to go in Del's place."

"Then we tell Avon about Albion's wonderful—" Vila waved his hand.

"Wonderful, suddenly-accessible, resalable weapons technology from a top-line Federation base," Soolin said. "Technology that is ours to pick up, as long as we offer Albion a little help in her hour of need."

"Perfect," Tarrant said.

"It gets better," Soolin said. "There are surprisingly few troops on the planet. It should be easy. Del was even going to collect a fee. Obviously Blake won't take it—"

"But that doesn't mean that we have to refuse it," Dayna said brightly.

"Even I like this plan," Vila said. "So we tell him all that, and about how it's a shame Blake's going to throw himself right into the action, under-prepared, we're really going to miss that guy – and I would, too, you know. Then we let Avon race in to pocket the fee, show Blake what he can do, and keep Blake from doing something stupid and depriving the revolution of a leader and Avon of a boyfriend. Let Avon pick a motivation and the sentiment behind it."

"If he can," Soolin says. "Much like Blake, half the time I doubt even Avon knows why he really does things."

And so the next morning, Avon, in a black and brutal mood, walked in on a tense conversation between Soolin and Vila, heard the word 'Blake' and snapped,

"What's going on?"

So Soolin explained from the beginning, and Avon had a new course and a new job for them. Orac ran the reports on the planet Albion. Avon bothered to sleep, eat, wear something a little more normal, and to calm the hell down. He even seemed to be practicing basic courtesy in advance of the meeting – trying to give himself a sort of crash-course in the ordinary forms of civility Blake had found him so deficient in.

"That's a lovely dress, Cally," he said flatly one morning.

She patted his arm. "Oh, Avon. Don't try too hard."

* 

The Albion team burst into the control room. "We've done it!" Blake crowed, exultant. Caulder, Ralli and Jenna moved in with him.
"Stop him!" Caulder said suddenly, indicating a man who, before Blake could get to him, activated some sort of device and collapsed. The jubilant mood evaporated almost instantly.

"Whatever it is has started," Blake said, voice tightening as he looked at the device and the long countdown ticking away on its screen. What was it? What hadn't they told him?

Caulder was staring at the same screen in horror. "I always thought they were bluffing," he muttered. "I never thought that when it actually came to it, they'd really activate!"

"What's going on Caulder?" Jenna asked. She hadn't been told either, then, despite having been assigned to this mission since it was Del's.

Cauder swallowed. "We – told Grant. But Grant thought it best not to tell you lot, and we agreed, and then he was pulled out so suddenly— It's a bomb, and it's going to kill everyone on this planet if we don't act fast."

"What?" Blake growled. "Why didn't you say something?"

"The Federation was bleeding us dry!" Caulder insisted. "They levied impossible demands on our economy, gave us no voice in our own government. We were little better than slaves on our own planet. We were under martial law!"

"It must've been like living with a gun against your heads," Blake conceded, with a voice still shot through with anger.

"And that is why we were finally driven to act. We knew the enormity of the risk, but we had to take it. I believed they wouldn't detonate. I was wrong. Now, unless we can deactivate that, millions will pay for my mistake. But we chose this, Blake. And there's still enough time for you and your people to get out."

Blake grit his teeth against further argument – against pointing out that if he had known about this, he could have looked up the specs for the device beforehand and planned accordingly. He briefly longed for the presence of the most technically competent, ruthlessly logical person he knew – but that was just as pointless as recriminations. The clock was ticking.

"Right," Blake said shortly. "Let's move."

Cauder nodded, turning to his second. "Ralli, get Vetnor up here – I want to know exactly what we're up against. And then put out a general call for anybody who can give help."

"Get Deva too," Blake said to her. "And when you've done that, let's get some Federation prisoners in for questioning. We want Provine, if possible – for this and our own problems."

"Blake, I'm going to check on those bays we saw on the plans and see if there are any fliers," Jenna told him. "If I were a Federation officer, that's where I'd go."

"So you might find Provine headed there," Blake said. "All right. Take some men. Leave a few guards on anything you find."
"If there aren't fliers to hand, I'm going back for ours and bringing it as close to the compound as possible," Jenna said in an undertone.

Blake nodded. Jenna hadn't signed up to die here, none of them had.

Vetnor (the Albion resistance's tech expert), Deva and Blake all looked at the device together. "I don't think this is the device itself," Blake offered.

"It's a remote transmitter," Deva confirmed.

"Which means the real device could be anywhere," Blake said grimly.

Vetnor paled. "It's beyond me, I didn't even see that much. There's a main rotonoid link. If I cut through its primary impulse vein, it might break the circuit. Then again—"

Deva shook his head. "I'm afraid the damage has been done. The activation signal has been transmitted, and we don't know the deactivation frequency. Unfortunately it isn't transmitting anymore, so we can't trace it, either. It's a well-set up little system," he concluded grimly.

Blake straightened up, rubbing his temples with his hand. "If there is any information on the location of the device—"

"But there must be!" Caulder said.

"Then the obvious place for it is the safe," Blake concluded. "What I'd give for Vila right now. Or better still, for—"

"It seems we've arrived a little late to help you take out the Space Assault Force," a very familiar voice said from the doorway, behind Blake, "but judging from the general call for technical assistance you're broadcasting, our presence might not be entirely useless. And, of course, we heard something about Del Grant leaving a fee uncollected…"


"Hello, Blake." Avon's expression was guarded, his body held tense as if in anticipation.

"Avon, thank god you've come," Blake said, stepping towards him, stopping and feeling his face heat. He set his jaw and ploughed on in a more business-like tone. "Can you get Vila down here? We need that safe open now."

"What's wrong?" Avon asked, and there was concern in his voice – how could Blake have thought it was nasal? Well, it was, sometimes, but it had a variety of registers, and there was such firmness and consolation in those two words that it made Blake grin ruefully as he answered back,

"What isn't?" This was what he'd wanted – Avon's skill and steadiness against a situation where he felt out of control, reminding him of what they had to do.

Blake took a breath and pressed on with it. "After we took the compound, I was informed that Albion has been wired with a radiation bomb capable of destroying all life on the planet."

"Here," Deva said, indicating the device and handing Avon his own probe. Blake started at the sound of his voice, and remembered belatedly that there were three other people besides himself and Avon in the room.

Avon used his bracelet to call Vila, and told him to bring down three more bracelets.
"Jenna told me where to find you," he explained, leaning down over the device, smacking the probe against his hand in thought as he looked the thing over. "Solium," he mused. "Quick and lethal. If we find the bomb itself—" and of course Avon understood already what it had taken the three of them a minute to process "—perhaps I can do something about it."

"If you did, we'd be enormously grateful," Cauder put in.

Avon grinned. "That's what I like to hear from people with money."

Blake heard the remark properly this time – it was made mostly in jest, although the man who'd spoken it wouldn't mind being paid for his work. Blake knew he'd have hated Avon for saying it a month ago, and stamped down on his guilt. It wasn't the time for that, either.

Vila came down with the bracelets. He chucked one to Blake, who caught it, and one to Deva, who fumbled, rolled his eyes, and crawled after it under the table.

"Cally, get me Orac," Blake said into the bracelet. "No time for pleasantries, it's urgent. Orac, I need everything you have on Solium timing-devices. Specifically on disarming them. It's not my field. If you can send the data through to my pad, that's ideal."

"A most trivial request!" Orac said, seemingly insulted by the implication that it might not be able to override Blake’s pad. "The information is with you – now."

"Thank you," Blake said with a trace of irony. Sure enough, when he pulled the pad out of his jacket the diagrams were there. He moved so that he and Avon could bend over them, heads together.

Avon looked up at him, very close. "So. We locate the installation, find the device itself, and—"

they studied the diagram for a few minutes, "—cut that wire," Avon said, suddenly.

"Extractor—" Blake murmured.

"And separator, I think. We are going to need tools for this."

"Right."

"A link clamp."

"Then pliers, and— Look at those plungers." Blake chewed his hand in thought. "They're the last bit, the real issue. Once we get at them— Could we, if we widened the apertures, and shoved rods through, could we really just – stop the compression, like that?"

"Yes," Avon almost hissed. "That's it. It's crude – I wouldn't have thought of it."

"No, of course not." Blake grinned, rolling his eyes a little.

"But it will work."

"And then we dispose of the whole thing."

"Provided, of course, that we can first discover the device in question. Vila, how are you getting on?"

"It's a tough one," Vila said, looking his task over, "but I've got the combination."

Vila got into the safe, and Orac decoded the data chips after Blake wrestled them away from Avon's amateur cryptological efforts ("I can do this, Blake!") "I know you can, but so can Orac,
and faster. You told me as much yourself last month."). The chips revealed that the device was in the planet's polar region. Blake and Avon grabbed thermal suits and the necessary equipment from the Liberator and teleported there.

"Shouldn't that be you?" Vetnor asked Deva. "I mean Blake's an engineer, and they seemed to have worked it out all right, but you're the other technical expert."

"As it happens, I have no interest in getting in the middle of that," Deva said mildly.

"Lucky Blake's husband showed up when he did!" Vetnor said, wiping the sweat off his brow. Deva rolled his eyes. "Oh no, don't you start!"

"What?"

"Come on," Deva straightened up. "Let's see how Ralli and the others are getting on finding Provine." Blake had already offered the Albions transportation (on Avon's ship) and been declined.

"And get Jenna her bracelet," Vila said. "Just in case Team Moon-Eyes doesn't pull out a miracle."

*

Carefully, with a space heater and lances, Blake and Avon got through a block of ice they hadn't expected to find covering the bomb (evidence of poor maintenance, Avon had bitched to a sympathetic Blake – apparently they both had strong ideas about project management) and were able to pull out the device itself.

"What happens if we teleport the payload into space?" Blake asked, suddenly aware of the possibility.

Avon shook his head. "I worked on Aquitar, the Federation's teleportation project. We discovered that teleport fields work erratically around primed radioactive components. If we tried anything with the device, it could detonate immediately. The Liberator's teleport is also short range – sending the charge out to explode in space might create a poison cloud, which would lodge in the atmosphere. That could easily kill everyone on the Liberator, and on any evacuating Albion vessels, as well as everyone on the planet. The Liberator is radiation-shielded, but we've never tested her against Solium emissions. This would seem a rather dramatic trial."

"The ice, though—" Blake shook his head. "It's taking longer than we thought it would. And they're pulling us out, when the countdown drops below fifty."

Those had been Avon's instructions. They worked while they spoke, Blake getting out the equipment Avon would need and helping where he could; Avon using the tools in sequence.

"Can we do it, Avon?"


Blake met his eyes. "Yes, I'm willing."

Avon tossed his bracelet to the floor, looking at Blake. Blake took his own bracelet off. Let it drop.
"Now they can't pull us out," Blake said with a measure of finality.

"It's my choice, Blake," Avon said in response to an unanswered question. Nothing to do with you.

"I know," Blake said, looking at him evenly. "Nevertheless. Thank you, Avon."

"We might not manage it."

"The effort itself is important."

Avon nodded tightly. "All right."

When they were nearly finished the ceiling gave. Avon moved to extricate Blake from under a beam that had pinned him down, unhurt but immobile, but Blake waved him away. They weren't going to make it. Avon had to get himself out, while there was still time.

"Over my literal dead body," Avon had growled. "I am close, and I can do this. Hold on, I'm going to crawl in over you."

Avon scrambled to find and insert the final rod and heaved himself up, panting, over Blake. They watched the countdown reel out the very last numbers. And stop.

"You did it," Blake said with a rich satisfaction, realising that some part of him had never really doubted that Avon would manage, somehow.

"Yes, we did, didn't we?" Avon said, almost laughing, dazed with success.

"Get your bracelet," Blake murmured like an endearment.

"Right," Avon answered in kind, smiling indolently at him. He slipped Blake's bracelet over Blake's wrist as well, moving his hand away just before it could be accused of having lingered. "Liberator," he purred with something like post-coital languor, "bring us up." His voice sharpened as he looked down at Blake. "Blake needs the med-bay."

"I do not—"

"So get it ready for a compression injury and have Orac on hand," Avon persisted. "Don't be stupid," he said crisply to Blake, and they teleported up with Blake lying on his back and Avon crouching over him. Without the bar between them it was rather more intimate than it had been, and Avon got to his feet quickly.

Meanwhile Blake found, to his chagrin, that he had some trouble standing. Perhaps Avon had been right about the beam, his chest, and erring on the side of caution. Glancing over his shoulder, Avon rolled his eyes and offered Blake his hand in lieu of saying, 'I told you so'.

"I take it things went all right in the end?" Deva asked from behind the teleport controls, where he was seated with Jenna.

"There's still a planet," Avon said dryly.

"Though it was a narrow thing. Avon was magnificent," Blake said solidly, half in triumph and half with something like an unearned but irrepressible pride in the other man. He had to lean against the wall while he talked, as the room was spinning slightly.

"It wasn't a particularly complicated device," Avon said in a voice that was almost annoyed,
looking away. But his colour was distinctly up.

"I've prepared the med-bay," Cally said from the mouth of the corridor leading onto it.

"I'll take him," Avon said brusquely, slinging Blake's arm over his shoulder and starting to walk him in that direction.

"I can manage," Blake protested.

Avon stepped back very abruptly, and Blake swayed on his feet.


"You should come regardless, Avon," Cally said, turning to address her shipmate. "I need to check you over for exposure as well."

Avon's face twisted elaborately with displeasure.

"A taste of your own medicine," Blake said smugly. "Literally."

"That was a terrible pun," Avon said with distinct fondness.

*

Blake availed himself of the Liberator's quick-action med-pads and, like Avon, changed out of his bulky thermal suit. Jenna brought the small flier they'd come to Albion on into the belly of the larger ship. Back on the planet, finishing up with Caulder, they discovered that the people of Albion were incredibly grateful for their assistance. Dayna consulted with Ralli about what of the Federation military hardware the Albions hadn't any use for. Avon collected Del Grant's fee, which he gallantly offered to split with Blake.

"I did a lot of work too, you know," Vila protested.

"Yes," Avon said, "and you can have some of Blake's half when he inevitably declines."

"Actually," Blake said with a smile, knowing Vila would be paid regardless, "if the Albions are able and willing to give us the money, the Freedom Party might be able to use—"

Vila groaned.

"Blake, I've something I think you'll like even better," Caulder told him. "Ralli found him."

"Provine?" Blake said sharply.

Avon glanced over at him. "Who?"

"Oh," Blake said darkly, "someone the Party's been tracking for a while, now. Let's see him, then. Avon, are you coming?"

Vila saw to the fee, and Blake and Avon made their way to the area where the Federation prisoners were being held.

"There's our man," he said, spotting Provine. "We've been so looking forward to meeting you."

Provine pulled a concealed gun out of his sleeve – it was one of the rebels', rather than a Federation-issue blaster. He must have killed a guard and taken the gun off her, then gone back willingly, waiting for this chance to take an important hostage and make his escape. Unfortunately for Provine, another guard had been standing behind him watching the important prisoner carefully, and tackled him to the ground as soon as he drew. Provine shot wildly at the wall behind Blake's head, still struggling as though he might rise.

Without thinking Blake drew the gun he'd picked up on the Liberator, and which Avon had shown him how to use during one of his spates of bragging about the ship. He fired directly into Provine's gut. Provine screamed. His fingers spasmed and he dropped his gun, which Avon kicked clear of both him and the other Federation prisoners. Blake knelt next to the fallen man, who was being held by the rebel guard who'd tackled him. Provine's body jerked in spasms.

"Gut wounds bleed out slowly, Space Major," Blake informed him, conversationally. "I expect you know that. So you and I can still have our talk."

"Go to hell," Provine hissed, gasping, clutching at his wound.

"You first. I expect you also know that Kasabi's raid on Central Control failed rather dramatically, not long ago. It seems there was no Central Control. Do you know anything about that, Space Major?"

"Go—" Provine panted, eyes wide and growing glassy.

"I think you do," Blake continued. "The raid had one survivor, Kasabi's daughter. Before she escaped her torturers she heard your name. Apparently you're the man to ask. You may still have a chance, if I can get you to our surgical unit. Now where is Control, Provine?"

Provine twisted under Blake’s unrelenting gaze, writhing, seeming to be pinned and flayed by it. "Star One." It slid out of Provine's mouth, seemingly without his volition, and once he'd betrayed that everything began to slip from him, with his blood and his ebbing life. "It's called Star One now. Docholli. Cybersurgeon. Only Docholli knows!"

"Where is Docholli?" Blake hissed with rising anger, grabbing and shaking Provine, wanting the words, trying to rip them out of death's hands. "Where is Docholli?"

Provine collapsed and was still. Blake let him go, slowly.

Blake stood. Stumbled back a step. Took a shaky breath. Brought his wrist to his mouth.

"Get us out of here," he growled. Back on the Liberator he slammed his bracelet back into the box and headed towards the cabin he'd used during the trip to Horizon.

"What happened down there?" Vila asked. "He seems pretty shaken."

Soolin put away the gun Blake had been carrying, which he'd dropped onto the table as though it were diseased.

"Blake was almost shot," Avon said crisply, "interrogating that prisoner he was after. Though he might consider the information he received worth the exchange."

*Central Control itself* – or rather, Star One. Blake wasn't dreaming small. Avon liked the idea – but then, he would. The entire computer infrastructure of the Federation, laid bare. His professional heart skipped a beat.

"Did it turn out all right?" Vila asked. "With Provine?"
"Blake killed him instead of the other way ‘round, if that's what you mean."

"Blake killed him?" Soolin started.

"Seems reasonable," Vila put in. "He tried to kill Blake, after all. Him and six million other people. Seems a right piece of work."

"You don't understand." Soolin shook her head. "Blake has never killed anyone."

"Never?" Vila gave her an uncomfortable look. "But – how? He's not in an easy business, and he's not exactly risk-averse. Even I've killed a few people, when I've had to."

"And you are one of nature's cowards," Avon said, finishing the thought.

"Exactly," Vila said without embarrassment.

"He's never had to," Soolin said. "His rebellion on Earth was fairly passive, and even in the Independence struggles and on raids it wasn't necessary. He's been in firefights and he's injured people, but not killed them."

"So, it was his first death," Avon muttered. "I did wonder whether it was, from the look of him. Though he went through with it admirably." Terrifyingly, really – Avon had been blackly compelled by the sheer power of Blake, forcing the secrets out of the dying man, more with the crippling weight of his will and need than by threats or promises.

"He should be left alone for a while," Soolin said. "He'll come out when he's ready. He likes to brood."

Avon smiled, thinly. "Now why doesn't that surprise me?"

* 

A chime at the door made Blake look up. He was sitting in a robe on the bed, his head in his hands. His hair was still wet from the long, scouring shower he'd taken, after he'd thrown up until he was just vomiting acid that burned in his throat and left a sour vileness in his mouth.

He debated answering. Stupid not to. Whoever it might be knew he was in here. He could pretend to be in the shower. Still. It would only be adding cowardice to the day's tally of crimes.

Maybe the person at the door had gone. Half-hoping it was true, Blake said,

"Come?"

If someone really needed something and he didn't help because he was wallowing, he'd have yet another reason to be annoyed with himself. The rolling anger of his conversation with Provine bled into how sick he felt over having killed someone. His stomach clenched painfully on nothing. The door slid open.

Avon. Of course it was. Bearing an armload of laundered clothes – the ones Blake had worn last time. Shouldn't they be hanging in the closet, auto-cleaned? Perhaps Avon had cleared the room out for another passenger in the interim. Or Avon had cleaned the place or had someone else do so, liking order or wanting to scrub every trace of Blake off his ship. Any of these options seemed just and likely.

"Thank you," Blake said as Avon set the clothes down and then stood before Blake, slightly hesitant. Not leaving, as Blake both wished he would and hoped he wouldn't.
Blake wanted to say sorry for having been an absolute jackass, but he couldn't summon up the energy to do justice to the apology at the moment, not with so much else crowding his mind. He wanted to give it his proper attention – he owed Avon and himself that. And that was impossible, when he'd been hollowed out, emotionally and literally; when he and Avon were exhausted under the adrenaline, near crashing; when Avon wasn't in a state to properly accuse Blake of things and Blake wasn't in a state to take his just deserts. Springing the conversation on Avon now would be about attaining a pardon for himself, not offering a meaningful apology. It would be manipulative, compounding his earlier offenses by eliding their consequences.

"I suppose you were sick," Avon said, voice matter-of-fact.

Blake nodded, taking a ragged breath and staring fixedly at the wall behind Avon.

"I told you that, back on Earth, I once had to shoot a man who'd shot me."

Blake (surprised that Avon was bringing up the subject) looked up at him, and found Avon's own gaze fixed on the carpet.

"What I neglected to mention," Avon continued, "was that that was the first time I had ever killed anyone. The first time I'd handled a gun, in fact. I barely knew how to use it. Simple enough. Still, I – wretched all over myself, in the alley behind his pawn shop." Avon's lip quirked. "You at least appear to have made it to an appropriate facility. I might suggest it was a medical condition – shock, as a result of my injury – but that would be dishonest. I disliked, back then, the sight and smell of blood. I disliked the idea of having done it. It felt—Well." Avon's mouth twisted grimly. "We have previously ascertained that we both liked 'Crime and Punishment', in our youths."

Avon was trying to tell him, then, that he'd made Raskolnikov's mistake – that he'd thought of killing as an intellectual problem, and of himself as capable, in that light. But it had descended into a horrifying mess. Avon had suddenly, inconveniently realised that he, too, had a body, and a soul, and had managed to make both sick, even killing in self-defence.

"It was almost – comically like. I thought that, at the time. He didn't die quickly. As I said, I didn't know how to handle a gun. I'm afraid I made a mess of it. I don't know if I was sorrier for him, then, or for myself. No – I was certainly sorrier for myself. Ugly emotions. Yours are, I am sure, comparatively forgivable. They both deserved it, but yours far more so."

"Does it get easier?" Blake asked. "It must."

He didn't know quite who he was sorry for either. Avon was wrong, to impute him with better feelings. He and Avon were both just – human. Though Avon couldn't know that Blake also hated that Avon had watched him do it, watched him brutally insist on his point, watched him cope badly. He didn't question how Avon knew it was his first time – clearly he might as well have it tattooed across his face. Though Blake had seen violence before. He'd shot to disable, and that had helped, if you wanted to use the word. Immersion by degrees.

"Yes," Avon agreed, looking at the wall, now, instead of the floor. "It does become easy. Terribly easy. It's expedient, you see. And once you've managed it the first time—" Avon shrugged. "Well. I suppose you've 'transgressed', as Dostoevsky would have had it."

"We went to Siberia first," Blake pointed out, no humour in the joke. "The plot's out of joint."

"That section's awful. Ours was better. At least something happened." Finally, Avon looked at him properly. "The fact is, you have already committed yourself to a higher mercy than preserving your own innocence could accomplish. You have already decided that not opposing the Federation is a sin of omission, and that allowing a man like Provine to live is too great a danger to
the lives of others. To fight the Federation, you must kill. It is as unavoidable now as it was during Gauda Prime's Independence. Do you judge the farmers who killed bandits? Are they terrible men?"

Blake thought of Soolin's father, with rage and vengeance in his eyes. Ushton, with cold determination.

"No," he said.

"There you are. And, of course, you will regret it nonetheless. But regret is a part of life."

Blake nodded. "Thank you, Avon." It seemed too small a recompense for such a cool weight of consolation – words like hands smoothing out a disturbed bedspread, tucking away stray items in a room, leaving it clean and right again.

"Well – you did save mine, didn't you?"

Blake knew it. He'd always managed to shoot to disable, before. With Avon next to him, almost in the path of the killing pulse, even as Blake had been, shooting to incapacitate and *kill* had come automatically. He wasn't quite ready to think about what that meant.

The door chimed again. Blake raised his eyebrow at Avon.

"Come," Blake said, and Soolin walked in.

"I thought you said he'd want to brood alone," Avon said to her.

"And so you waited an hour to do your errand," Soolin said in a tone of agreement, taking in the decidedly unsexual blocking of the figures in the room. "I waited an hour and ten minutes. I've brought you tea, Blake. Don't be a child about something I've done a score of times." She spotted the clothing on the table. "And for god's sake, get dressed – don't mope about in a bathrobe."

Blake rolled his eyes. "Yes, mother."

Suddenly aware of the awkwardness of being undressed in front of Avon, he got to his feet, took an outfit's worth of clothing, and walked towards the bathroom door.

"Wyn Blake would be much worse," Soolin called after him.

When Blake had disappeared into the bathroom, Soolin said to Avon in an undertone, "You know how he normally takes it – standard, strong, dash milk – but when he's upset, you add a sugar. And if you want something, it's assam or darjeeling or lapsang. Chai if you're desperate. Indulgence begets indulgence."

Avon gave her a *look*. "You seem to be labouring under the delusion that I'm likely to go around making anyone cups of tea."

Soolin shrugged. "Why not? He'll make yours. Being someone's family largely consists of making each other cups of tea. Getting the timing and kind right is simply a means of achieving desired results."

Soolin left, leaving Avon to consider whether he should follow her out, but then Blake was back, drinking his tea. He noted the taste and smiled, the expression private and grateful.

"And I can't bloody believe the Albion contingent and Del pulled that utter bullshit," Blake said suddenly as Avon was wondering if he'd outstayed his welcome. "The sheer idiocy of keeping the
device from me. They had their backs against the wall, I can see that, but we needed to know. Not having a contingency plan damn near cost us everything. You'd think they'd see it was to their own advantage to give us all the information."

"I find people are least to be relied upon to act rationally where it is most important. It is one of humanity's less appealing traits."

Blake groaned expressively, then sobered. "God, Avon, if I had got six million people killed—"

"You wouldn't have. Provine, or Caulder, would have been responsible. Don't over-estimate your importance."

Blake saw the justice in that, but still shook his head. "I should have done better research, should have known something was wrong just from how few ground troops there were. Taking this off Del at the last minute almost scuppered the entire affair. And the way he took this decision on himself, when it should have been a matter for general debate and planning, and still didn't say anything when he was pulled off— Oh, Del will be hearing from me," Blake said darkly. "Independent contractor or no."

"I'll leave you to contemplate your vengeance," Avon said. "Blake – thank you for trusting me on the matter of the Grants." He walked to the door, and looked back. "And for finally calling me Avon."

And he was gone, and Blake realised for the first time that he'd dropped the 'Mister' back on Albion and was probably never going to find it again.
Chapter 7

Blake wished he knew what was passing in Avon's mind – how Avon thought of him, and whether, in defiance of everything, Blake still meant something to him. Perhaps Avon had only been civil on Albion, and now on the Liberator, because he felt himself at ease. Blake had seen him properly engaged in his job, master of his own ship, and more worldly than Blake himself was when it came to some things. But his posture in Blake's room hadn't spoken of ease. Nor had the way he'd greeted Blake on Albion. Whether Avon had felt more pain or pleasure in seeing Blake, Blake couldn't say, but Avon certainly hadn't seen him with perfect composure.

Now convinced that Avon had a lot of valuable qualities beyond the resources he'd flaunted, Blake had come to respect Avon. He'd admitted it grudgingly after first reading Avon's letter, but now he did so without any trace of his old bitter repugnance. Avon's actions on Albion and his kindness to Blake in the face his distress made Blake feel a stronger version of the hope he had entertained when he'd only just heard reports of the man – as though having Avon's friendship would truly be something. Above burgeoning respect and esteem, Blake felt gratitude to Avon for having loved him, and for still liking him well enough to have apparently forgiven Blake's awful, petulant rejection and the incredible injustice of Blake's accusations during that exchange. Blake didn't know if he'd have been nearly as magnanimous in Avon's place.

Blake tried to recapture a little of his own sense of civility that evening in the galley. Everyone save Gan (who was on watch, with the controls on automatic) was seated at the long table eating something Cally and Deva had made.

Blake was awkward with Avon, didn't know quite what to say to him. "I'm so goddamn sorry", "You know, you actually have quite a nice voice", and "Are you still in love with me, by any chance?" were all more than a little inappropriate, in company. He had to say something.

Should he comment on the weather? That always bought a bit of time – no, they were in space, not on GP. Oh, hell.

When Blake tried inane small talk, Avon gave him an evaluative glance and asked if he was ill.

Blake grit his teeth. "I'm trying to be polite."

Avon raised an eyebrow at him. “You're not very good at it."

Blake rolled his eyes, and decided to just treat Avon normally. Or at least their version of normally. Or rather a less-tense-than-previously, better-humoured variation on the theme.

At some point during the meal, Blake realised he'd spent most of dinner talking to Avon. He then realised he'd spent most evenings they were in company together largely talking to Avon, even before he'd known he liked Avon. He then realised this was a little embarrassing, and tried to vary the pattern by talking to Tarrant instead, only to get drawn back into conversation with Avon without quite knowing whether he'd drifted there or whether Avon had reeled him back.

That night, en route home to GP, Blake lay up thinking – unable to sleep, as was so often the case. He'd assumed Avon would avoid him like the plague after that debacle with the letter. Avon certainly hadn't set foot on the planet since their conversation – perhaps that had nothing to do with Blake, but it was the longest the Liberator had been away since they'd taken the house, so Blake suspected it might not be a complete coincidence. Avon would have been well within his rights to treat Blake coldly when they'd met again, crisis or no. But on this accidental meeting, Avon had seemed perfectly willing to treat Blake as something like a comrade. Avon hadn't had to give Blake, Jenna and Deva a ride home, either, although it had cut down their journey time
significantly and was much appreciated. Perhaps he'd been planning to return to GP roughly now anyway—but perhaps he hadn't.

Blake felt a real interest in Avon's welfare, and began to wonder about the extent to which he wanted Avon's welfare to depend on him. He began to wonder to what extent either of them would be made happy if he employed the power (which he suspected he might still possess) of getting Avon to repeat something along the lines of the statements he'd made back at his house. At the very least, it was worth considering.

It was tempting to ask Avon for his opinion, but Blake decided he should work out what his own stance was before speaking to Avon about any of this. To do that, he'd need more time and thought. He couldn't just suggest a casual, experimental date with a man who might still be in love with him, and might even want to marry him. That would lead Avon on, and besides, by now they knew each other too well for that. Blake thought of Avon giving him his 'small talk' look over a cup of coffee in a cafe back on Earth and snorted.

Well. There was still a week of space travel before they arrived back on GP. He didn't need to fall in love with the man in a week, just—determine whether he could see himself falling in love with him. On a practical rather than a theoretical basis, because he'd always thought Avon looked good on paper. And even in his series of ridiculous leather ensembles. And very good indeed in a proper frock coat. Blake hadn't liked to admit how good when he'd thought he hated Avon, but there it was.

Perhaps, Blake thought, he was being stupid, presuming far too much. Perhaps Avon had snapped out of it, or was too disappointed in Blake to ever consider a relationship with him again. Perhaps, Blake thought with a strange twist of unhappiness, Avon thought he'd made a lucky escape. But in a week, Blake thought he might be able to ascertain that as well.

He still couldn't sleep. It was three am, ship's time. Blake customarily went for a walk at about this hour, if he was restless. On his previous visit to the Liberator he'd found Avon in the halls, patrolling what was his. Tentatively, Blake stepped into the corridor and started his usual round. No sign of Avon. Blake felt obscurely disappointed by the prospect of doing this alone.

He passed Avon's door and hesitated, but didn't want to wake him, if Avon were asleep. He looked in on the flight deck, and felt a strange sense of relief—there Avon was, taking the watch. As Blake stood stupidly in the entryway, Cally brushed past Blake, touching his arm in a friendly manner as she did so. She announced herself, evidently taking over from Avon. Blake wondered, slightly, about the timing (there wasn't normally a break at 03:10), but stopped thinking about this coincidence when Avon glanced over his shoulder at her, and thus also at Blake. His expression was absolutely neutral.

"Care for a turn about the ship?" Blake asked, inviting the other man to accompany him for the first time, and Avon said,

"Why not?"

Afterwards they lingered at Blake's door, talking, as usual. When Avon had finally gone, Blake drifted off to sleep thinking of what it might be like to have such a conversation in bed instead of in the liminal space of the doorway to his bedroom. To have Avon there, occupying the other pillow. His neat dark hair mussed in sleep, his pale eyelids with their dark lashes closed over his deep, dark eyes. To have Avon as part of the rhythm of his day, their schedules lapping against each other, their words and their actions sliding into a configuration that was theirs. Odd hours kept together. It wouldn't be easy—but it wouldn't be dull, either. Blake wanted passion, and to break the world and make it better, and to live up to and exceed his own limits. If he'd wanted things because they were easy, he might have been married years ago.
He thought of how Avon had looked the morning he'd proposed, wild and verging on sublime.
Watching Avon's control slip away from him in sex or sleep must be something like a violation, or
something nearly holy. And Blake could have that in some form, every night they were together.

It had a definite appeal.

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Blake observed that Tarrant, Jenna and Avon had quite different relationships with the Liberator.
Tarrant handled her like a careful steward who kept good books. Jenna worked her like a
housekeeper, who knew the whole rhythm of the place and the needs and tensions of her crew.
Avon moved through her like an owner who'd inherited the place and felt responsibility to and for
it, who directed its projects and maintained its staff and amenities, adding improvements
judiciously where he could. His tools were usually at hand, like the chatelaine bouncing on the hip
of the mistress of a house, and he seemed to incorporate Tarrant and Jenna's knowledge into
himself, to know everything that was going on. He talked to Zen briskly – but then that was how
he talked to Blake, to whom he had once professed an ardent attachment. Blake smiled as he
watched Avon idly run a hand over the rim of a console with something like fondness. How did
Avon experience whatever bond the ship had initially established with him? Was it, Blake
thought, possible to ask such a question without it being blatantly intimate? Would Avon mind the
liberty?

"What?" Avon snapped when he caught Blake watching him.

"Nothing," Blake said innocently.

Avon was grumpy and suspicious for the remainder of their shift (Blake and the people who'd
come with him having been folded into the duties' roster), and Blake experienced it with a kind of
pleasure. He found he enjoyed the texture of Avon's feelings, good and bad: their richness, and
the way they looked different from different angles - like light refracting off a cut stone. Blake
found even Avon's bad moods compelling, even as he found them exhausting and exasperating or
took them seriously, in due course. There was something, too, in Blake's having been able to
misread Avon so thoroughly at first. Not many people were quite so particular and complex, quite
so open to multiple interpretations.

Avon presented himself (and probably thought of himself) as thoroughly independent – a man
who needed no one. And yet he had a lot of friends around him. He might not quite think of them
as such, but Dayna had taught Avon to dance and Cally did him favours and Vila didn't like him
standing by himself at parties. Gan ignored Avon's moods with easy cheer, while Avon and
Tarrant bickered companionably, though with less intensity than Avon argued with Blake. Soolin
and Avon seemed to understand one another. He and Deva worked well together, and he and
Jenna clicked into an easy mutual respect. A man who could form and, more importantly, maintain
solid relationships might well be a good partner.

Oh, they all grated on one another at times, and Blake was sure that when Avon was in high
dudgeon the rest of the crew fantasised about marooning him on the worst planet within a day’s
travel. Avon could be – and simply was – difficult. No amount of romanticism could blind Blake
to that, the truth he'd started off with. But that was the first step with him, and there was so much
further to go. Dealing with Avon would never become simple or unrelievably saccharine-sweet,
but it certainly became something rewarding. He repaid your effort in unexpected ways – a
sudden sharp smile; a joke given just to you, like a casually delivered gift; a challenge that sliced
you open and hurt until you understood that it had cut you free of an obstruction you'd been
struggling against; a sudden answer to a question you hadn't quite realised you were asking.
After a few days' journey, Blake was willing to think of Avon as a friend, without compunction or qualification. If the thought produced in Blake some undue warmth, and if Blake didn't think that warmth at all incompatible with Avon being or becoming more to him, well – he didn't fight against that.

Cally, Vila and Dayna all found time to have casual conversations with Blake – conversations that happened to highlight some of Avon's better features. Vila went for a playful anecdote about a casino heist that suggested a healthy sense of humour. Cally opted to point out to Blake that Avon had never really been unkind to her, and had even shown surprising sensitivity when she was distressed. Dayna informed Blake that she basically trusted Avon to make quick, tough decisions that weren't fundamentally immoral, not in ways that really mattered, and that Avon kept his people safe, to the best of his ability.

Contrary to what Avon might have suggested, Blake actually could spot a conspiracy when he saw one – but he didn't mind this stitch-up much. After all, he liked these people. Avon's friends were fast becoming his, and three of his own close friends were in various stages of building a rapport with Avon. That must say something about whether he and Avon could build something together; whether, if it was necessary, they could lead people together.

Looked at in a more measured light, Blake could see that in Avon's proposal and in his letter, Avon had offered Blake not a mercenary trade, but a place on the Liberator – a position in its configuration, in relation to Avon himself. Gauda Prime valued social networks, and Avon had tried to offer Blake one that was compatible with Blake's notion of what partnership and family entailed.

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In the midst of a bustling 'day' shift, Blake and Avon sat on the couch of the Liberator with Orac. Blake was explaining that the force shield they'd obtained from Horizon was about to be installed over GP. He snagged Deva, passing through, and asked him to tell Avon where they were on the tech-team side. Deva went into the specifics, but essentially said the problems left were soluble, but engineering related. The shield should, by now, be ready for and need Blake's attention, as well as a bit of his own. They'd been thrown off by the Albion affair, but the two of them could start as soon as they got back in comms range.

Cally called Deva away, and it occurred to Blake that Horizon's shield might be applied to a moving object like the Liberator. It was obvious why the Federation hadn't done it (their top-line drive concepts had nothing on this ship), but with resources like the Liberator's it could be possible. He said as much to Avon.

"We do already have a force wall," Avon said, but he was clearly chewing the idea over.

"Ah, but why not have a backup?"

"The force wall's key issue is the power drain – I told you as much, coming back from Horizon. The Liberator could support a device like the one you suggest, but it couldn't be used concurrently with the force wall."

Blake smiled at the memory of Avon's cryptic orientation session, how he'd taken Blake over the property and essentially outlined his prospects, and at Avon's slightly sulky rebuke now.

"And I was listening," he told Avon, "but the force wall is simply a defence."

"Whereas, you're suggest, this shield might be considered more along the lines of an offensive weapon?"
"Mm. Say if you were pinned by – three pursuit ships, wasn't it?"

Avon allowed himself a slight smile at Blake's demonstrably having listened to him and retained his information about the ship's vulnerabilities. "Are you seriously suggesting using the Liberator as a battering ram?"

"More of a bumper car."

"But with a bumper of electricity – it is neat, Blake."

"It's a pity we can't adapt the Liberator's power reserves to other ships – but they simply wouldn't withstand the force. Like putting a massive engine on a little fighter. We could build something suitable, but that would take shipyard resources, which we don't have. Even buying a strong enough shell or renting an equipped shipyard from a neutral planet would be prohibitively expensive. Perhaps if we could grow some of the organic polymer the Liberator's made out of …" Blake trailed off, considering it.

"Engineering isn't my field," Avon admitted, "but I can grasp the problem."

"Isn't it? I thought you knew everything," Blake teased without rancour.

"No," Avon said, "but I have always admired your ability to catch at a problem outside your areas of expertise and readily grasp its parameters. You generally follow me on subjects far afield from your own training."

Blake was surprised and pleased by the compliment, so plainly delivered as to sound as though Avon thought it was simply a factual statement.

"You explain things well," Blake murmured (and had to look away from the bright flare in Avon's eyes, strangely affected by how legible it was). He cleared his throat and said, more briskly, "When you can be bothered, of course."

Avon grinned. "Of course." His smile dropped a little. "I have another idea of my own, but you're not going to like it."

Blake sighed and gave him a 'Well?' expression.

"I think we should consider adapting Solium radiation for offensive weaponry. Dayna is a skilled weapons' designer – she could run scenarios, consider the shielding issue. It is unpleasant, but so is taking a ship in battle. Dead is dead, and this way you'd have a ship to salvage at the end of it. Why buy or build a ship yard when you could take prizes?"

Blake paused, holding the awfulness of the idea in his hand. The comparative awfulness of conventional battle, and of not acting.

"Perhaps in practice it would be more used as a threat than as a practical weapon," he said, thinking the hope weak even as he voiced it.

"Blake," Avon said, and there were several sentences in it.

"I know, and I know there isn't anything noble about conventional weaponry. We owe the Federation nothing – there can be no rules of combat, when the entire idea of such rules rests on the principle that the combatants are equal, that certain humanitarian standards are universally respected."

"An utter impossibility, in this case."
"Yet we don't condone torturing prisoners."

"No. It isn't even a reliable means of gathering information. Pointless cruelty is, if anything, even less tasteful than self-serving forms."

"Then what did I do on Albion?" Blake muttered.

"That wasn't torture," Avon said dismissively. "I've been through Federation interrogation. You haven't. Don't create any self-indulgent false moral-dilemmas to torture yourself over. They'll only obscure the real problems."

Blake made a gesture with his hand that conceded the point. "Though I don't accept that as an entire exoneration."

"You never accept anything."

"Prepare to be surprised," Blake said, looping back around to pick up a dropped stitch in the conversation. "If Dayna wants to look into it, we should at least explore the possibility of Solium weaponry. We need an edge. And we can make a final determination once we've worked out whether weaponisation is even feasible."

"Blake—" Avon paused a moment, then pressed on. "Tell me what you want to do with Star One."

Blake was suddenly aware that he'd let Avon know everything he knew about vital, high-security rebel business. He, Avon and a dead man were the only people who knew how to track the location of the most highly-guarded computer complex in the galaxy. Blake also realised this didn't bother him at all, because he did, actually, trust Avon now. If he hadn't before, his feelings had changed to the extent that his initial opinion was no longer important. It was a triviality – like a long-married couple trying to remember the first place they'd held hands. Anyone who said that such a couple's dissonance on that point mattered more than the weight of years or how they felt now would misunderstand what love was. Blake hadn't always trusted Avon, but now he trusted in him. Blake trusted him to ultimately live up to his own potential; to be a good man, differently than Blake could or would be in his place. It was simple. Thus he could tell Avon the rest. Thus he must do just that.

"If we destroy Star One, it will slow down the Federation's military transit and shipping – notably goods manufactured in centralised, secure locations, such as arms and pacification drugs. The Federation will struggle to deploy troops to trouble spots, especially more remote ones – which will increase GP's security, among other things."

"Planetary economies are largely self-sufficient, and with Federation trade monopolies in disarray, free traders will blossom and keep people in off-world consumer goods. Local weather grids will shift onto the older backup systems, restoring autonomous control. There will be some natural disasters during that transition, but our estimates actually indicate that the death toll should be lower than what we see in the course of 'business as usual' under the Federation – and there won't be any more punitive 'disasters', like the Chai-ri quakes or the Subrai ethnic cleansings. Incidents reminiscent of what had almost happened on Albion."

"Perhaps most fundamentally, destroying Star One will result in the eradication of the Federation's military computer infrastructure. You of all people, Avon, understand how materially this will damage them, and how many windows it will open for resistance groups. It's a calculated risk. But there are reasons why Kasabi and so many before her thought the risk was worth taking."
"You do intend to destroy it, then," Avon said.

"Yes."

"Have you given thought to the prospect of controlling it?"

"Frankly, we don't have enough sophisticated tech operatives to consider the option. Deva is excellent, but he couldn't do what you suggest alone."

"I could."

Blake raised an eyebrow.

"No, I'm not boasting, Blake. I could do it. With technical support from your people, it would even be easy. Which presents you with a choice. Consider what you could do working with a system like that. I am not necessarily convinced the advantages outweigh those of your initial plan, but they must be weighed."

Blake shook his head. "That much power would make anyone a tyrant. The whole point of this operation is to restore regional autonomy, not inhabit the current system. No government not premised, legislatively and fundamentally, on free choice, can be legitimate. It isn't a question of federalism, but of achieving social and political conditions that make choice, for people or for planets entering into associations with one another, actually possible. How do we dismantle the master's house with his own tools?"

Avon scoffed. "How else? They are the best tools for the task at hand, and often the only ones available. Think, Blake – would your goals be better served by operating from a position of strength? Besides, you underestimate yourself, and the people around you. You are supported by sound infrastructure and ensconced in rings of people who feel it their duty to question your decisions. Even if you were to be tempted – and that is not your vice, Blake – would Mister Foster let you betray yourself? Mister Deva? Soolin? Your family? Would I? Will you at least agree to evaluate the option? To consult with Orac, and your strategists?"

Blake gave him a direct look. "Will you come to those consultations?"

"For technical advice?"

"Yes, and more generally. We can't possibly consider this course without your direction as to how it's to be done, and what we could achieve. I need you there."

Blake said it without emotional appeal, without attempting to win Avon over. As a frank evaluation of Avon's worth.

"Well, now." Avon favoured him with a slow grin. "If I am asking you to take my advice, I can hardly refuse to give it."

"And do you think controlling Star One is the best option?" The possibilities started to firm up for Blake, to take on the shape of an alternative.

"I don't know," Avon admitted. "And I am, of course, not unbiased. I would relish the chance to work with a system of that complexity. It's the challenge of a lifetime."

Blake barely held back a joke along the lines of 'And here I thought you felt that way about me.'

"Getting quite political, aren't we, Avon?"
Avon bristled slightly. "There is nothing particularly political about survival."

"You know," Blake said, considering, "it's interesting, when you say blatantly stupid things. It doesn't happen often, and when it does, it always reveals something about your personality."

Avon laughed outright. "I thought you left off sketching my character."

"I discarded the early drafts," Blake admitted, "but I do have to have a hobby, Avon."

He watched Avon visibly eat an inappropriate comment about being Blake's hobby – a twitch in his cheek. Avon caught him watching, and they grinned at one another.

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The warm ball of potential Blake felt expanding in his chest carried him through the next days. Blake (selfishly, he realised) didn't want to spoil things by rushing into a conversation about how awful he knew he'd been.

Then the buoyant mood was suddenly, brutally punctured by a frantic signal from home, received as soon as they were in communications range.

Blake was on watch – he'd taken this particular shift so that he could deal with the correspondence he expected to come in. When it did, he skipped to the most recent communication from Deva's deputy, Miss Klyn, with a stirring of worry, seeing that it was flagged as urgent.

With growing alarm, Blake read that in his absence (probably taking advantage of that slight vulnerability) his base had been attacked. It seemed the agent calling herself Anna Grant, having failed to infiltrate the organisation, had used what knowledge of the Party she'd gained to raid their headquarters. Fortunately Blake's people had been thoroughly on their guard against her, and she hadn't been able to plant her timing devices in their base. But that wasn't the worst of it.

Miss Inga Blake had been on watch. In order to get off the planet, Miss Grant had been forced to disable Inga and take her as a hostage. Miss Grant had taken Inga off-world in that capacity, and retained her, they suspected, as a possible information source. Miss Klyn didn't put torture past Miss Grant.

Ushton was apparently frantic, and only the efforts of his family were holding him back from doing something wild, like charging after Miss Grant's well-armed ship in nothing but a flimsy planet hopper. Three people had been shot in the escape, Bran Foster among them. His age was complicating his recovery. The doctors were guardedly hopeful, but it would be a long and painful process at best. Miss Klyn was so sorry they'd let Blake down in his absence. About Inga. About everything. She could only hope all would be well, and that he, Miss Stannis and Mister Deva had had better luck on Albion, and were safe.

Blake reeled, listening to the message. He staggered over to the flight-deck couch and almost fell onto it, burying his head in his hands. After a moment he struggled to his feet – there was so much to do, but he had no idea where to start. He only realised what his expression must be when Avon walked in the room and immediately said,

"What is it? What's happened?"

"I have to—"

"Sit down, you aren't well. What do you need, Blake?"

"Soolin should know about this. Could you call her?"
Avon spun over to a wall comm. and essentially demanded Soolin's presence on the flight deck.

"Deva, as well. Jenna. They should—"

Avon nodded and called them as well.

"News from home?" Avon asked once he was done. Blake nodded, and after a moment spoke again.

"Why bother concealing it? The base has been attacked, by Anna Grant. No real damage there we can't fix, but three of my people have been shot, and Bran Foster, one of my chief lieutenants, has been critically injured. She—" Blake swallowed. "When the attack failed, she took Inga, my cousin, as a hostage. Miss Klyn is afraid Inga will be tortured for information and killed. Inga knows almost everything there is to know. Miss Grant couldn't have chosen a better hostage. And Inga—" He broke off as his voice failed him.

"When I think," Blake said at last in a yet more agitated voice, "that I might have stopped it! If I'd just listened! If I'd questioned Miss Grant's account, if I hadn't been so determined to spite you by believing her. If I'd had the courage to have her killed, before it came to this. No, I had to keep my conscience clear. And now Inga will suffer for it. She'll die, for my mistake. How could I have let myself be taken in by—"

"That is Anna's job, Blake," Avon said sharply. "She is very good at it. You aren't above being manipulated by a professional. No one is."

Blake acquiesced with a ragged breath. Soolin pounded into the room, wearing hastily thrown-on clothing. Jenna and Deva arrived a moment later, almost on top of one another.

"Sit down," Blake suggested, and he played them the recording. The general call and the sound of people running through the halls had attracted attention. Dayna and Tarrant drifted in before the message had quite finished.

"How do we trace her?" Jenna asked.

Tarrant looked at Avon, who nodded, and with that permission Tarrant pushed the ship into its top speed.

"I'll do it," Blake said solidly. "I'll—"

"Blake – Anna doesn't act alone," Avon said, the upset hiss of his voice at odds with the supporting hand he put on Blake's arm.

"You right. They'll go for a general attack, now that they think we're worth fighting," Blake realised. "They'll pull those air-to-surface bombers off the Corridor. So our priority has to be—"

"—the shields." Deva nodded, getting it. "Without them, the planet's vulnerable. Blake, we can't do that without you. As I told you – it's an engineering problem at this point."

"I'll go," Jenna said. "I'll do it, for Inga. We know exactly where the nearest Federation base is. That's most likely, isn't it?"

"You'll need back up," Blake told her. "Ushton will want to go, and he's still reliable in a fight."

Jenna nodded. "Ang's pregnant, so give me one of your brothers, as well. I'm going to prep the flier for immediate departure, and we can start just as soon as we get back. Deva, I could use a hand."
"Right." The two of them left.

"Blake," Soolin said, speaking for the first time. "About Ushton. I think he might try and make a deal. You have to talk to him about it. You have to make sure he doesn't try anything stupid."

Blake regarded her, weighing the incredibly disloyal thing she'd just said against the probability, and against some of the unthinkable things that had happened during the Independence. He nodded, tightly, and broke away from Avon, noticing with a flicker of undefined emotion that when Avon had touched his arm in comfort, Blake had wildly, unthinkingly gripped the other man's jacket to steady himself. He'd been holding onto Avon throughout his conversation with Jenna, Deva and Soolin.

"Get him on screen."

Soolin patched a signal through on her personal communicator, and they stood together.

"I've heard," Blake said immediately when Ushton answered. "We're on our way back. We'll be there—"

"—inside a day," Tarrant answered. Blake nodded.

"A lot can happen in a day," Ushton said. "I'm going out now."

"Don't be a fool," Soolin said coolly. "You need back up, and Jenna's on her way. Do you want to rescue Inga or die for her?"

"She could be dead in a day," Ushton snarled. "Don't pretend experience you don't have, girl."

"I never need to. Let me make something clear, Ushton. If you panic, if you try and do any kind of deal, Inga won't thank you for it. She'll probably die anyway. Your living family will understand. Blake will forgive you. He'll even take you back into the fold, after he's cooled down. But I won't, and Inga never would. She'd rather die, and you had better let her, if it comes to it. I grew up with Inga, and I would take her vengeance for her. You know all this. Don't let yourself forget it."

"Everything we said about holding together during the Independence is still true," Blake said in his most absolute voice. "Now we have to live up to it. Now it's our turn. All right?"

"Suppose you want to go with me?" Ushton said sullenly.

Blake shook his head, feeling like a traitor. "I can't. I have to get that base shield up and running, or we're all in danger. But Jenna will fly you to the nearest Federation base, and you and Davi can see if you can trace her. Tell him to be ready. We will try to bring her home. We won't give up until we know absolutely what's happened to her."

"We're acting in your interests," Soolin told Ushton levelly. "Stay as calm as you can, and think about what Inga would want if she were here to tell you. This is about her, not you."

Soolin backed Blake to the hilt. The unified front of them caused Ushton to crumple – and before them stood a panicked, aching man instead of a bristling, defiant one.

"All right," he murmured. "I do know it, Soolin."

She nodded.
"We'll be home soon," Blake said. "Ring Davi. Take something to help you sleep, and get some rest. You'll need it, if you're going to make yourself useful on that raid. Roj out."

The hologram clicked off, and Blake sagged. Soolin's shoulders drooped, slightly.

"That's handled then. I hope. Why did you say I'd forgive him?" Blake asked, voice rough. "I don't know that I would."

"Do you remember when Jenna brought you back to GP?" Soolin said. It seemed unrelated, but Soolin didn't really believe in non sequiturs. "It was right before my sixteenth birthday. I got drunk at the party—"

"Soolin," he said sharply – they didn't have to remember this.

She shook her head, smiling tightly at him. It was necessary.

"I told you about what happened before you found me, the day Kari died. About how it had been hours, and I wanted them to stop hurting me. I'd have done almost anything. And I didn't say where she was, but I looked at the cabinet she was hiding in, and that was enough. I did that, to her. And ever since I'd thought you'd wasted your time, saving me. And you said I'd been a child, and it hadn't been my fault. That I'd never betrayed her in my heart. And you said I'd been brave, that I'd grown up so brave. That nothing they did had touched me, and that you loved me, you'd always love me, no matter what I did. And you always have.

"You don't know what it is to be weak like that, but you allow for it in others. If there's anything real in someone to forgive, you find it. Idiot. How could I not know you'd forgive a desperate man for doing something stupid out of love and fear? Don't I know you better than that? Aren't you my brother?"

Her eyes were bright, and her voice soft and serious, unwavering.

Wordlessly, Blake pulled her to him and found some comfort in holding her hard against him. He felt his chest heave and his breathing slip into something erratic, and knew he'd started to cry.

"If Inga—"

"Then it will be like Kari, and it will always hurt. But you'll never have betrayed her in your heart – that isn't in you. That's what matters. And I will always love you."

"I've been so stupid," Blake hissed, rage and tears in his voice.

"Everyone makes mistakes, Blake. Inga chose to be part of this. If Inga's gone, then she did it how she wanted – doing something she thought was important. Don't demean her. Lie down, and I'll make you tea. We'll start on the shield when you're ready. You can tell me what to do to help. The rest of us need you now, so you have to pull yourself together."

Like an old-fashioned doctor bleeding a patient, Soolin had pulled grief out of him. She’d known he needed the release, needed to burn off his anger with himself and settle into determination in order to face the work ahead of him.

Blake walked out of the room, unable to look at Avon, with Soolin almost supporting him. Later, he was embarrassed that Avon, Tarrant and Dayna had seen him like that.

Now that they were in range of GP he could get the data he needed to work on the shield, and he threw himself into that work rather than think about why he was doing it. Soolin, Deva and Jenna swapped around, helping him where they could and talking through their planned raid on the
Federation base with him. He didn't see Avon again before he left the Liberator. Though thoughts of him intruded on Blake's otherwise single-minded concentration, leaving him with a grim conviction as to what Avon must think of him now.

Every positive feeling Avon had maintained for Blake in the wake of Blake's awful reception of his proposal must now sink again under this proof of Blake's weakness. It was exactly as Avon has said – the scruples he'd voiced when making his proposal had been just, and had proved correct. Blake had rushed to deal with the Albion crisis and left his base under-defended. He couldn't protect the people close to him. He wasn't safe to be involved with. What was more, Blake had allowed Miss Grant (the person Avon had the most just reasons in the universe to despise) to get away, to seriously compromise the security of their shared home.

Blake couldn't be surprised at or condemn Avon for the fact that the other man didn't so much as come take his leave of Blake, but Blake did deeply regret it. He was forced to admit to himself that he cared about Avon. The situation was exactly calculated to make Blake understand his own wishes. He had never so honestly felt that he could have loved Avon as now, when any such love must be vain. And where did feeling that he could love Avon, being able and willing to imagine himself in that state, end and the actual fact of loving him begin? Had he crossed that line (if such a line could even be identified), and to what degree? Though he supposed it couldn't matter, now. Among Blake's many bitter recriminations about the affair, this was the most selfish – and still, he felt it keenly.
Chapter 8

Blake and his people left the Liberator at GP, Soolin with them. If they did have to defend the
planet against an outright assault, she wanted to be there. The ship departed immediately. Blake
didn’t ask where they were going. Possibly GP no longer counted as a safe bolt-hole. Blake didn't
know if he could expect to see the Liberator's crew again, and if he did, in what capacity. Blake
was lucky to have other problems, because it hurt almost past bearing that Avon should be out in
the universe, far from Blake, thinking so ill of him. But he supposed turn about was fair play.
Cally thought Good luck to Blake as he left the ship, and they surprised each other – he heard her
easily, and she caught hold of his diffuse sense of thanks.

Unbeknownst to Blake, Dayna and Tarrant, watching the exchange between Blake and Soolin,
had essentially decided that Blake himself was worth risking everything for. They'd always
believed in his cause, but they went from liking him to granting him an authority over them equal
to the loyalty Avon commanded, perhaps greater. Tarrant explained the conversation, in strangely
halting terms unlike his usual brash tones, to those of the crew who hadn't been there. He watched
something that had always been present clench and lock for Gan and Cally. For Vila, just liking
Blake had always been enough.

For her part, Dayna sought out Soolin before Soolin left for Gauda Prime. She'd explained, in a
voice that, like Tarrant's, was uncharacteristically hesitant, how her own sister Lauren had been
lost. She ventured understanding, Soolin took it, and their friendship went from a casual liking to
something rough and strong as braided rope, that clings together more tightly because its sharp
edges catch and hold.

Avon's loyalty had some of that same briarish, catching quality, but it was more difficult to read,
and more complicated where Blake was concerned. For his part, he made a plan.

Inga wasn't at the Federation base. Blake didn't know how to begin to fix this mess, or where to
look for her next. Jenna, Soolin, Davi and Ushton returned to GP a few hours before the force
wall was activated for the first time, allowing the residents to successfully defend themselves
against a Federation bomber. When the bomber had burned up, Jenna went back out into space
and left signal buoys, warning people of the danger and instructing traffic to ask permission from
the Civil Authority before coming in.

Two weeks after the Liberator had dropped Blake and his people back home they were still
running frantic searches for Inga. They were tracing all the data networks they could and locking
down plans she'd been aware of. Blake had lost hope, and the bone-breaking crunch of depression
threatened. Ushton had his brother and the rest of the Blake family to rely on, but he was drinking
more than he should.

Blake nearly fell off his chair when he looked up at the words "Hello, Roj" and found Inga there
in his office, looking tired but – all right. Alive.

"Am I mad?" he blurted out.

She laughed. "No more so than usual."

He could hear commotion in the base now. The sounds of celebration and passed gossip indicated
Inga wasn't a ghost – she'd come in through the front door, and the news was spreading.
"Inga, what happened?" he asked.

She hesitated. "I can't say, Blake. I gave my word, and I can't break it. I'll sit down with Wyn or any of the other doctors right now and go over what I told the interrogators, which wasn't anything, and the conditioning I didn't ultimately have to go through – I think that's best. But I can't tell you how I got out. I wish I could."

Blake tried to press her on the point, but Inga was as wilful as he was. He went back to her father's house with her and had the satisfaction of seeing Ushton desperately pleased by her recovery. Of watching Inga say she was proud of him for having borne up in the face of loss – Ushton cried when she said she'd expected nothing less from him. Of watching Soolin, Jenna and Deva hug her, as though she'd been returned from the dead.

The next day, Blake heard the Liberator had returned. He wanted to call on them (on Avon) immediately, but he didn't know that he'd be welcome. Luckily he ran into Vila in the bakery, chatting up the girl who made excellent Indian pastries. Vila was asking her about the rose water she used, telling her that he had a sweet tooth and had sampled delicacies from Earth to Space City, but her stuff was some of the best he'd found. She laughed and said she didn't throw in freebies just for flattery, then did it anyway as they left, Vila having accepted Blake's offer to stand him a drink at the local pub.

Blake made innocuous inquiries about everybody's health, and Vila humoured him.

"What have you been up to lately?" Blake asked, casually.

"Nothing, no, not a lot!" Vila said too quickly, and Blake wondered why it was a secret. If Avon was drug running or something equally dubious (which Blake didn't think was likely), was it even his place to disapprove?

"Inga's back," Blake said.

"Yeah, I know. I mean, it's everywhere, isn't it? Talk of the town."

Blake gave him a look. "Yes. But evidently, that isn't how you know. Vila – do you actually give away information by accident, or do you cultivate that image and let things slip pretty much when you intend to?"

Vila flashed a sudden grin at him. "That'd be telling, wouldn't it?"

"Vila."

Vila downed his cider. "Can't say more, he'd kill me. And if you can't guess who I mean, I'll think you're simple. Thanks for the drink, Blake!"

* 

There was an Assembly that night. Over the buffet, Blake and Avon exchanged a few halting, inadequate sentences, which made Blake want to die. Unable to ask the things he wanted to, Blake fell into politeness; Avon let him. Hopeless. And Avon was watching his crew too closely for Blake to select and target a weak member of the herd. Blake was fairly sure he wouldn't be allowed to talk to any of them. Avon looked tense, poised to interrupt anything of the kind.

Seized by a sudden idea, Blake asked Cally to dance. 

Can you hear me? he asked her inside his head. They'd managed to communicate before over a distance of several yards as Jenna's ship had pulled away from the Liberator – it seemed likely that
they would be able to speak more easily in such close proximity, with touch augmenting Cally's natural abilities. Blake danced easily enough to manage doing so while talking, and this was a long, simplistic set.

*Of course,* she returned. *Oh, Blake, that is clever.*

*So you know what I want to ask, then?*

She smirked. *And he told me not to say anything to you about it. But I'm not saying anything, am I? And it seems you already know some of what occurred.*

*Tell me the rest.* He turned her out and drew her back. Cally was graceful. Not as much fun as Avon, with whom he'd only danced twice, but probably technically better, if you liked that sort of thing rather than incredibly charged, too-intense, ludicrously ambitious—

*I can hear all of this, you know,* Cally informed Blake. *I think the human term is 'earshot.'*

Blake winced.

*Shall I continue?* Cally asked, amused, and Blake nodded.

*Avon set out from Gauda Prime with a resolution to hunt Anna Grant,* Cally told him. *He professed that personal embarrassment had prevented him from laying his private actions open to the universe. If he'd blackened her character as much as it deserved, it would have been impossible for our allies to place the slightest trust in her. Avon said he felt he'd compromised the security of Gauda Prime in his arrogance—Blake, don't get upset and fall out of rhythm, he'll work out what we're doing—Yes, of course he's watching you, he's always—No, don't turn your head!* Blake, *listen.*

*He said it was his duty to fix a problem he'd caused in the first place by letting Anna make a fool of him, and which he had exacerbated with his silence and inaction, by allowing Anna to remain at large and hurt other people. If he had another motive, I am sure it would be no disgrace to him.*

*We tracked Anna not to the Federation base, but to the nearest Central Security installation. There, Avon … attained access to Anna.*

Blake pushed back against Cally's vagueness and caught an image of Avon, worn and ragged, pushed past his limits. Blake caught Cally's feeling that Avon had left it far too long. The screams of other prisoners echoed dimly in the background. He caught the cold conviction in Avon's voice, the rasp of certainty when he said he'd been waiting for her to be called in, and now he had her, didn't he?

*Anna, held at gunpoint, took him to Inga, who had thus far held out against torture (like Avon, Cally didn't send, but Blake heard it nonetheless) and said almost nothing. We were lucky to arrive before they grew truly impatient, and lucky that this far-flung Central Security outpost was not so well-equipped as one on Earth would have been. Though we helped things along by taking out what interrogation machines they had before Avon infiltrated the facility, making it look like damage from an electrical storm.*

*And then?* Blake asked, turning her neatly, determinedly not looking at Avon.

*Avon is very obstinate. He has been accused of many faults at different times, but this is the true one. Nothing was to be done that he did not do himself, though I am sure (and I do not tell you to be thanked, therefore think nothing of it), that all of us would have willingly done much for you,*
had he allowed it.

You all put yourselves at risk even going, taking him there, Blake said, with thanks in his mind.

Cally shrugged, which must have looked odd in the course of the dance. In the end, he could not entirely prevent us from assisting him. We all care about him.

So then: with Inga rescued, the matter of Anna remained. And Avon dealt with it, for it was his affair.

In Cally's memories, they were in a dark, subterranean cavern, and Anna was screaming that Avon was a coward. There was pain on Avon's face, and anger, because he knew it shouldn't hurt. He should feel nothing for her now. Her hatred shouldn't be able to touch him. What had been between them was a crumbled, grotesque edifice constructed on a foundation of lies. As a telepath, whose connections were premised on a sharing of minds, Cally felt a special revulsion for Anna's sort of concealment. Cally despised Anna for Avon, and hoped that Anna died alone.

Avon's trust was rare. To see it so betrayed made Cally remember every loss she herself had ever suffered, even as it made the feeling of protectiveness she had for Avon (based on how vulnerable he was in some ways) harden.

Anna sneered that Avon couldn't kill her, not in cold blood.

That's right, Avon said with a small, peculiar smile. No, he never could. He commed Dayna, and she brought down two swords, handing him one. He kicked the other across the cave floor to Anna. She looked down at it and said she had no idea how to use that. Avon said he wasn't a professional torturer and killer with military training, so he felt he was still the one at a disadvantage. A literal duel seemed an appropriate way to settle the matter, to him. One of them wasn't getting out of here alive. His people would let her go, if he lost. Cally didn't say anything, but actually she'd decided to kill Anna if it came to it. She'd decided that Anna deserved that, that it was the decision she owed Blake and would owe Avon, if these foolish heroics cost him his life.

It was a merciless fight. Anna was smaller but faster, and had physical training on him, whereas Avon had apparently taken to the weapon with some degree of affinity. Avon could be physically awkward because he was too self-aware, but that awareness seemed to be on his side now, and Avon had always been able to use the tools he had to get what he wanted.

While Anna was distracted by their locked swords, Avon brought up his free hand to punch her in the face. She screamed with rage and fell back at the sheer unexpectedness and physical brutality of the manoeuvre.

"I loved you," she insisted, her nose bleeding, saying it either to trip him up or because it was true. "I let you run."

"Not enough," he panted, barely avoiding having his throat slit by a wild flail of her sword. "Not as much as you loved yourself."

"Once you'd have called that sanity," Anna said, using the terrain to get a bit of height on him.

Avon grinned at her unpleasantly. "I'm not feeling particularly sane of late."

A part of the conversation seemed to have been snipped out at this point. Blake wondered if he might have come up, and if Cally didn't think it was her place to repeat what Anna and Avon had said of him.

When the memory resumed, Avon and Anna were in a new position, circling one another. Anna was saying that his profile hadn't indicated he had it in him. Perhaps she should pass those
flattering reports on to his new friend.

Avon's mouth twisted into a rueful smile. "I already gave them to him."

The genuine surprise this confession caused made Anna pause for a moment, and in that moment, Avon sliced across Anna's wrist, right above the hand holding her sword. Anna screamed and recovered the sword in her other hand, her chest heaving with rage. Her hand wasn't cut through, but the damage was severe, and she clutched her wrist to her torso, smearing her tunic with pulsing arterial blood.

"Loved me?" Avon hissed derisively. "You never knew me. Transference affects the practitioner, even as it does the patient. You had to love me a little, to do your job well. It was a side effect. But oh, Anna. You loved hurting people best of all. Even better than you loved yourself."

"Avon," she implored him, "Avon, please." Her desperate, needful tone seemed to call him to her. To Blake's alarm (he was too caught up in the scene to remember that Avon was all right, his body moving with muscle memory and Cally's guidance), Avon took a staggering step towards Anna, and then another.

"Do you really want to see me dead?" Anna whimpered. "Avon, how could you hurt me like this when I trusted you?"

Suddenly Avon knocked the sword Blake hadn't seen her lifting out of her hand. With a final vicious jerk Avon stabbed Anna through the heart. His face was devoid of all expression.

"That was in the file too," he told the gurgling, dying woman. "If you remember. Under 'Means to ensure compliance.' Nice try."

With a wrench of his wrist, Avon pulled his sword out of Anna's body. She slid to the floor.

This was worse, Blake knew, more personal and bloodier than anything Avon had ever had to do. And he'd made himself do it, for all it must have horrified him. Avon might have told himself he'd enjoy vengeance, but Blake could have told him he wouldn't, not like this. And the look on Avon's face showed that whatever he'd imagined, he knew that now.

Avon handed the blade to Dayna, who'd already collected Anna's.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Avon said, and Blake blinked, back in his own body.

Cally's mental voice was silent for a moment, and then she pushed Blake towards a different consideration of the whole affair. What was done was done, and she wanted Blake to think about what it had meant rather than the pain and awfulness of it. Cally was very practical, and always concerned with what ought to come next, with how to help the living. *I thought him very sly - he hardly mentioned your name throughout the whole affair.*

Cally broke from Blake, and he gave her a bow of thanks.

"You're most welcome," she murmured.

Avon slipped out of the hall before Blake could get to him, apparently having tired of his vigil over his crewmates. Well, of course he was tired. He must still be exhausted from the physical and emotional strain he'd endured.

Cally's revelations threw Blake into confusion. The vague and unsettled suspicions Vila's disclosure had given him had crystallised into something he could hardly believe – an exertion of incredible, superlative decency beyond anything Blake might have imagined. He owed Avon
more than he could ever repay. Blake was ashamed to think how much. Avon had taken it upon himself to suffer torture in order to confront the woman he most wished to avoid, and whose very name he must consider it a punishment to pronounce. He had done all this for a girl he barely knew. Blake's heart did whisper that Avon had done it for him. But it was a hope shortly checked by other considerations, and Blake lacked the vanity necessary to credit his own virtues with an ability to overcome Avon's very natural abhorrence against going through with this desperate plan.

And Avon had given a reason for his interference that asked no extraordinary stretch of belief, if you considered his character. It was reasonable that he should feel he had been in the wrong; not reasonable for another person, but reasonable for someone as proud and controlled as Avon, as ashamed of lapses as he was. Only Avon had the resources to accomplish this, and he delighted in doing what only he could do. Though Blake would not rate himself as Avon's principal inducement, he could, perhaps, believe that remaining partiality for him might have prompted Avon's endeavours, given that Inga's recovery (personally and professionally) meant everything to Blake. There was also the fate of Avon's allies to consider – the security of GP, and the loathing and guilt Avon must have felt about Anna Grant.

Blake heartily regretted, all over again, the ungracious feelings he'd once had towards Avon. He was humbled, but he was proud of Avon. Proud that in a cause of compassion and honour, Avon had been able to get the better of all his reservations. Blake thought of Cally's evident commendation of Avon again and again. It was hardly enough, but it pleased him. He was even sensible of some pleasure, though mixed with regret, on finding that Cally believed that affection and confidence existed between Avon and himself.

Pain and embarrass Avon though it must, Blake had to thank him. And to finally answer the substance of Avon's letter, at the earliest opportunity.

* 

The Liberator started to leave orbit on a relatively unimportant mission as Vila ran over the gossip he'd heard in the butcher's, the pub, and the bakery. As Blake had predicted, Vila had become prodigiously connected to the local news, almost by accident.

"Oh," Vila said casually at the end of the recital, "and Blake got into a fight over you, Avon."

The noise on the busy flight deck dropped to a total lull. It took a moment for Avon to collect himself enough to ask,

"Did he?"

"Yeah. Well, you know you're not really popular with the locals, because you're stand-offish on a good day, and somewhere as sociable as GP, that translates to 'utter bastard'. That makes the days when you are an utter bastard a bit difficult for them to overlook—"

Avon grit his teeth. "Vila."

Vila took pity on him. "Anyway, a few settlers were making some comments in the pub about how you'd just walked out of the last Assembly, and were the most uncivil bugger they knew. Blake was around, and he said you'd saved Albion, actually, and that he thought pretty highly of your civility. He called you a gentleman. Someone said he'd really changed his tune about you, and Blake said it had been some time since he considered you one of the finest men of his acquaintance. Someone said if he liked you so much, why didn't he marry you? Someone else said 'not our Blake, bachelor for life, never would', and Blake said he didn't make any promises. Said he was resolved to act in a manner that suited his own opinion and would constitute his own happiness, without reference to what anyone but the people involved thought about it. Didn't
really get that bit, to be honest, but you know Blake – goes in for speeches. Then everyone made ‘ooh’ noises and Blake told the lot of them to stuff it, and Shelia from the bakery told me all about it."

"Turn around," Avon said distinctly.

"What's that, Avon?" Tarrant said, pretending not to have heard.

"Turn around now. Get us in teleport range."

"I thought you wanted us to pick up the food bars?" Cally said innocently, suppressing a grin.

"Do it without me," Avon said shortly, heading to the teleport room. "No," he said, stopping suddenly, then turning in the direction of his room.

Soolin (back with them again) didn't laugh when she put Avon down in a frock coat, but it was a very near thing.

*

Blake was in the middle of eating dinner with his family when they were interrupted by a knock at the door.

Wyn got up. "Who could that be?" Blake heard her say. "Why, Mister Avon, what an unexpected —" And Blake shot out of his seat, standing uncomfortably as Avon was shown into the room.

"Hello," Avon said to those assembled, with, Blake winced to note, his most awkward, unpleasant smile. Blake's sister Ang gave Avon a particularly sour look. His brother Davi looked confused.

The light of Possible Matrimony shown in his father Lewell's eyes.

"Right, I forgot I'd promised to give you that – computer," Blake finished lamely. "It's in my stand-alone. We'll just go and—"

"—fetch it," Avon said, catching at the excuse like a drowning man finding a life raft.

Blake coughed. "Yes."

"Will you be back soon?" Arwa asked sadistically. "Or shall we put away your—Ow! Lewell, really!"

Blake and Avon beat a hasty retreat.

"Isn't that the jerk who said Roj was ugly?" came faintly from the company (it sounded like Davi). They both pretended not to hear it.

"I've been meaning to talk to you," Blake said as soon as they were well away from the house. They'd headed into the fields rather than to Blake's stand-alone. It was a long, late summer night, and gold harvest light still covered the high, stirring grain. "It must be selfish of me, since I know the lengths you went to in order to conceal the information, but you must allow me to thank you for what you did for Inga."

"Vila." Avon hissed the name of his betrayer.

"Not – entirely. Try and recall how you got through your first dance here."

"You were never to know." Avon's expression went through a series of changes. "I thought I could trust Cally."
"She didn't say anything to me," Blake pointed out. "As you asked."

Avon gave him a sour and speaking look.

"It's my fault. I couldn't rest until I knew everything – that shouldn't surprise you. Avon. Please, let me thank you, for all of us, for the generous compassion—" Avon made a sound like half a laugh, but Blake soldiered on, "—that caused you to take so much trouble and bear so much, to do this for us. I misjudged you. Entirely. You are, without doubt, one of the best men I know."

"If you will thank me—" Avon said.

"I am," Blake said. "There's no getting away from it."

"Let it be for yourself alone, then. I'm nothing like a good man – you've seen those reports, you know that. No one owes me anything – certainly not the Party or the planet. Much as I wish them success, for their own sake and for mine, I know I thought only of you."

Blake's breath caught, and he met Avon's eyes with his own. Avon was afraid and Blake wanted to reach out to steady him, to say you're all right, I'm here. But Avon was afraid of him, and until he stepped forward and declared his position, Blake couldn't go to meet him.

Avon swallowed. "You're too generous to trifle with me. I'm in hell, Blake. I want so much to— But," he caught himself, swallowing, "if your feelings are still what they were when we last discussed this, then tell me. If you are merely grateful, that isn't what I want. My own wishes – are unchanged. But one word from you will silence me on this subject forever."

Blake smiled at him, slowly. "Oh, Mister Avon. I find I feel – quite differently. And that I'm rather sorry we didn't have this conversation in a bedroom."

"This will do," Avon said immediately, pulling Blake to him and kissing him hard. His mouth slid over Blake's with desperate hunger, and Blake felt touched and aroused.

"You're so beautiful when you're delighted," Blake said with a little wonder, pulling back to look at him. "It washes over you. I didn't expect it. Though I should have."

"Blake," Avon said with a slight hitch in his voice.

Blake put his arms around him and clutched Avon to him, felt the span of his back under the softness of the velvet coat. Learned the shape of the body he'd watched and danced with, the dimensions and the heft of him, felt with awe the slight tremor in Avon's arms.

"Come here," Blake murmured, drawing Avon down to the dry ground, into the furrow between the high rows of grain. He pulled Avon on top of him, shielding him from the hardness of the earth. "Just as good as a bed," Blake said, eyes glinting.

Avon almost didn't seem to register it. He scrambled to his elbows and knees and held Blake's face in his hands, kissing him insistently.

"It's strange," Blake murmured, "and perhaps I shouldn't say—"

"Don't keep anything from me," Avon hissed, and Blake laughed at his greed, running his hands over Avon's back and through his hair.

"You'll think it's stupid," Blake said, obliging him, "but I feel I love you better with every moment, now. With everything you say and do. I wonder if it's finally letting myself feel it, or if
you're at your best like this – which is not to say you're not impressive in your other capacities."

Avon's expression was tender, but there was a vein of mad misery in it.

"I suppose I must be the last man in the universe, then," he said. "For a time, when I was at my worst, I thought I might willingly bring an end to everyone but you and I, if that was a promise or a precondition. If when I was done, you'd—"

He couldn't finish it, and he twisted his fingers through Blake's in a clenching, desperate hold. Blake soothed him like a panicked animal, wanting him badly, wanting to know if he could make Avon happy with his body. It seemed possible, wonderfully possible that fucking Blake would give rhythm and purpose to the palpable churning of Avon's heart, tucked just where it was under his shirt, under Blake's hand. Avon couldn't seem to stop touching him, with a more evident desire for sensual gratification – and to prove Blake was present, and that he could do this with impunity – than for sexual satisfaction. Blake ran his free palm over Avon's chest, along his sides, down the length of his spine, feeling the words rumble through Avon when he said anything.

"I'm so sorry I hurt you," Blake said. "I abused you terribly. How you don't hate me, I don't know."

Avon laughed, sharply, releasing Blake's hand and ducking his head to murmur into Blake's ear. "I don't think I could ever hate you enough to balance out the rest. What did you say that I didn't deserve? What accusation didn't I lay myself open to? How did I go about conveying that I adored you?" Avon pulled back to favour him with a wry expression.

"We both were mistaken, then," Blake said, brushing Avon's hair back from his face. In his other hand, he cupped the defiant chin he had sometimes watched for small, barely intelligible signs as to Avon's mood, and brushed a thumb over the often-sneering, now parted lips. Avon closed his eyes and shook his head and Blake felt his own heart judder and his cock swell. So much. He loved Avon this much. How was it even possible that he hadn't understood this?

"I can't let you reconcile me to it just like that," Avon said, opening his eyes again to address Blake matter-of-factly. "Since that conversation I've recollected everything I said to you with pain. You aren't a fool. You are inexperienced in some capacities, but you are not naive. You have never degraded me. I did everything to myself. I understood that I wanted to be the person I could be at your side, and yet I chose to try and half buy you. To let myself believe simplistic, idiotic things about what you wanted. I disrespected your intelligence as you never did mine, even when you thought the worst of me."

He nuzzled the hand still cupping his face, then sighed and pressed on, his voice ironic. "And I did it all in the guise of loving you. It would have made you something less total and terrible, someone I didn't have to consider quite my equal. As though that might make what I felt for you easier to bear. As though you were supposed to be Anna, always known and easy, rather than she the thinnest prediction of you. You don't know, you can scarcely conceive, how your words that evening have tortured me – before and after I admitted that, misunderstandings aside, they were rather true."

Avon was a warm weight on his chest, and every time he took a shaking breath, Blake felt it trembling through him.

"I had no idea they would cut you so deeply," Blake said.

Avon laughed. "I can easily believe it. You thought me entirely devoid of feeling. The way you looked at me when you said I couldn't have offered myself to you in any way that would have tempted you in the slightest – like you had time for and some measure of faith in everyone in the
galaxy but me."

"God, Avon – please, forget all that. I was wrong, and I'm here with you now." He caught Avon's shoulders in both his hands, insisting on the point.

Something about Blake's face made Avon grin down at him. "I don't think I've ever said I find you beautiful. Don't smile like that, I'm perfectly serious – the way your eyes glint when you feel anything. Your every expression. When you turned around to tell me off for audibly calling you uninteresting – could you tell I had never felt stupider in my life? The way you show me up is intoxicating, when it's not maddening. You can see for yourself how I'm reduced to babbling. I judge everything by how you might think and feel about it, I—"

"I think you'll find you called me 'not handsome enough to tempt you,'" Blake corrected him sweetly.

Avon laughed wretchedly. "Will it satisfy you to know how tempted I was, the second after I said it? Or that I've hardly stopped thinking of having you since, and don't know that I could have stopped thinking about it, if you'd refused me again?"

"Oh yes," Blake said with a rumbling chuckle. "It does, actually. Perhaps you should have put that in your letter."

"My letter – did it soon make you think better of me? No," Avon corrected himself. "No, I hope you've destroyed it. And I sincerely hope you've forgotten the opening. When I wrote it, I believed myself perfectly in control. But at any remove, it is obvious how bitter I was."

"Perhaps at points," Blake said, running his hands from Avon's shoulders down his back. "But then you're never entirely without salt. I wouldn't know how to recognise you in its absence, and it made the concern you felt unable to claim and your farewell all the more infinitely kind. Don't make me destroy the letter. I think I fell in love with you in it – you so wanted to explain everything perfectly. You had so much to say to me. The profile I have destroyed – and without reading it. Why bother, given that it falls apart in the face of your own actions, your decision to rescue Inga? I refuse to credit a word of those reports, and neither should you."

"Oh, but I do credit them." Avon adjusted himself in Blake's hold. "I have been a selfish being all my life, and terribly limited. You showed me how insufficient my pretensions were to please someone worthy of being pleased."

"Please don't – when I think how I drew you on, desperate for your attention and not understanding how I wanted you, you'd every right to be angry—"

"Well. I was angry. But not, for long, at you. Did you blame me, for following you to Albion?"

"You followed me?" Blake laughed.

"I take it back, you are naïve. I wanted to show you I was better than you thought me. And to keep you from getting yourself killed. And I admit, the instant I saw you, when you said my name, I also wanted to suck you off. But it hardly seemed the time."

Blake filed that image away, mentally editing out spectators. "I thought – correction, I hoped you might still be interested," he told Avon. "But I stopped thinking it at all likely when you didn't so much as say goodbye to me, after I heard from Miss Klyn."

"Ah." Avon brought up one of Blake's hands to kiss it, and when Avon relinquished it Blake brought it back to Avon's chest again. "I couldn't risk you realising what I intended to do. I had to carry it out alone. You're too perceptive. You'd have seen what I was planning, and why, and you
couldn't have let me."

"I'd let you do a lot of things, Avon – I'm quite looking forward to giving you your hero's reward. But would you prefer to make love here, or to wait four weeks and do it when we're married?"

Avon's eyes grew very large, like this was the single best sentence he'd ever heard. Blake traced his palm down from Avon's chest to cover the other man's cock, to rub it through the breeches.

"Waiting has its downsides, of course," Blake admitted in a murmur, blatantly tormenting Avon now. He noted that Avon seemed to particularly enjoy Blake saying his untitled name, and so pressed the advantage. "For one, Avon, we might be making a terrible mistake – what if we're not at all sexually compatible? Though I suppose we could always get a divorce."


Blake laughed at the ready lie. "Then I suppose you'll want to wait, as well. I can see the appeal, if you like that sort of thing—" He moved to draw his hand away and Avon snarled, pinning the hand between Blake's body and his own with his hips and grinding into it.

"You weren't hard, just a minute ago—" Blake observed, like it hadn't been a little insulting. He'd been half there since they'd first kissed. The serious conversation had distracted them both from the effects of a lot of petting and stroking, but they found their bodies hadn't been quite so inattentive, and that the extended foreplay they'd hardly needed had them both twitching with anticipation. Blake pulsed with insistent want at just the brush of Avon's breath against his face.

"Do Catholics wait?" Avon asked, horrified. Blake nodded solemnly, and Avon skipped to the next point. "I was too overwrought and distracted by the conversation to quite register I was on top of you. If you have any concerns about our sexual compatibility, I submit that I'm willing to work through literally anything but watersports."

Blake gave him a mock-disappointed look.

"Oh, for god's sake, yes, I'd do it for you, but you aren't even interested. You just enjoy giving me hell."

"You make it so easy," Blake purred. "I suggest I get you off now in your very expensive clothes, and then we wait four agonising weeks for the banns to clear. During this period, I will, naturally, torment you."

"Naturally," Avon gasped as Blake used his hands to force down Avon’s hips and lazily rolled Avon's tightly-bound erection against his own. His responsive face flushed. He buried his hands in Blake's hair and gave him wild, open-mouthed kisses.

"Then someone reads something out of the Book of Common Prayer, though I think we should ask them to skip the awful St. Paul 'duties' sermon—"

"Oh, fuck this," Avon snarled. "What's a—" His breath hitched at a thrust from Blake's hips, and at another, something like a rhythm building, "duties sermon, I—"

"And then, sometime after the wedding breakfast," Blake leaned up and licked the rim of Avon's ear, then spoke softly into it, even as he roughly clamped his hands over Avon’s cloth-covered arse, digging his nails in, and dragged Avon's erection forcibly against his own in harsh pumps, practically fucking him through his clothes, "Avon, my love, you can fuck me like you own me. You will. I'll want you so much. I'll do anything, say anything. I'll beg you, I'll—"
Avon properly screamed, and Blake breathed his own climax out with dazed pleasure. He let his head drop back and his expression go smug as sin. God Avon was satisfying.

Blake felt a flailing smack on his chest, and he grinned harder.

"You bastard," Avon said, inspecting his ruined trousers with dismay.

Blake properly laughed, mussing Avon's hair and fending off the resulting assault.

"Oh, like you're not going to sit on the other half of a courting couch for the next fortnight and whisper threats and propositions at me when my parents' backs are turned, and pretend to be very interested in Star One whenever they are looking. I had to get in first. It was an act of self-defence."

Avon didn't deny it (though he was also fairly interested in Star One).

Sated, triumphant and pleased with the world and everything in it, Blake grinned up at the corn. Since childhood, whenever he'd looked at these fields at this time of year, beautiful as they were, he'd only been able think of lying in a furrow like this one over people he had to protect – of hiding for hours, terrified for himself and the other children with him. Now, when he saw silken tassels, he knew he'd always think of Avon, mouth slack and grip fierce on his arms, coming for him, loving him. Avon was his future, the chiefest part of his family, now. What had this union been but a marriage, and what was everything public that would come after but a celebration of it? There would be new memories, better and richer and stronger memories. The discordant notes of the past would never fade entirely, but this would be the louder song.

For his part, Avon saw himself surrounded by the endless, unrelenting gold he'd dreamed of. Gold transfigured into something vital, something that would change and grow and yield more than itself; Blake a Midas who transformed what he touched, and better still, left it quick. Blake was his fate, better than he'd expected or even hoped for.

He kissed Blake tenderly. "What the hell is a courting couch?" he asked, amused, and Blake laughed and explained.

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