WITNESS
JANE BARON
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No harm in it, Vila thought, sidling round the corner after a cautious glance in either direction. A bit of fun, that’s all. No real mischief. But his normally deft fingers trembled slightly as he slid aside the access hatch and slipped into the dimness of the shaft it guarded.

Tch. He frowned at those fingers as he maneuvered the hatch back into place. What a fuss. It wasn’t as if he were doing murder. Wasn’t even, he thought with a brief grin, as if he were doing anything illegal. Not that he’d heard anyway.

But—the grin faded—if they ever found out…

Ah, Vila. C’mon! Be a devil.

With a deep breath he made his stealthy way onward.

He could not help but think, wistfully, of the nearly full vial of soma back in his cabin. Of course, he’d had the better half of another and a swallow or two out of that one before he started—or else he wouldn’t have started, that’s all. But just this minute he felt he could do with a bit more. Especially when a vision of Avon’s eyes at their darkest and most menacing suddenly floated before him.

Another vision stung him, propelling him onward. Avon’s eyes as they mostly were these days, when he looked at Blake. He and Blake…oh, those two had plenty of time for each other, now. And precious little for anyone else. It was ‘oh Vila, take care of this,’ and, ‘by the way, Vila, see to that,’ and, ‘give us a call, Vila, if anything unexpected happens…’

And otherwise, Vila, stay the hell out of the way.

The thief glowered into the dimness, realizing foggily that there was more behind this night’s venture than mere devilish whim. Of course it was no good at all to think: well what’s so special about Blake, then, what’s he got that…other people…don’t? Because what Blake had got was all too obvious, too readily apparent to everyone. Courage, for one thing. And charm. And that damnfool idealism that ought to’ve got him killed a hundred times over but somehow hadn’t. And character. And self-confidence. And intelligence. And Avon.

Vila winced, feeling his face harden. Useless to even think it, laughable, really; but he’d seen Avon first.

Wanted him first. Even, though Blake maybe didn’t know about it, had him first.

Well. That was stretching a bit. He couldn’t pretend Avon had really wanted him that night. Done it just to shut Vila up, to keep him from babbling. He’d said as much. Earlier he’d tried other ways to silence the terrified, trembling, pathetically grateful thief. But Avon’s threats—yes, even Avon’s—had seemed utterly
inestimable next to the reality of what those four Gammas had been up to when the Alpha toff wandered into the cell.

Naïve, the Alpha’d been. Ignorant of prison ways. Blissfully ignorant, as it turned out, because it had worked for him, that unstudied, inimitable Elite manner. That inbred self-assurance which had sent him striding into the middle of the group without hesitation, eyes narrowed, jaw tight, a hint of dangerous smile about the lips. Demanding that the four veteran cons, the smallest of whom stood centimetres above him and a quarter again his weight, vacate his room immediately. Not for Vila. For his convenience. Because he was tired and did not care to be distracted by a noisy rape.

And they had obeyed, Gammas in their blood and bones. Obeyed without reflection that this intruder was nearly as slight as their Delta victim, besides being unarmed and much, much, prettier. Later they would have time to reconsider their decision and reverse it, and later still they would find better cause than an accident of birth to fear this man. But for now they simply dropped their victim and left, heading for the common room on this free cell-block. Backing out, some of them. Practically, remembered Vila, in the safe amusement of hindsight, bowing out, some of them.

He’d not felt safe then, not even when the dark Alpha with the cat-like stance and the eyes that could sear your soul had helped him remove the gag and the bonds. He’d known other Alphas, as elegant as this, as genteel, as aristocratic if not as gorgeous, with tastes that would turn the stomach of a Delta dockworker. Often the quiet ones were the worst. Palates jaded by a lifetime of unrestrained indulgence, they sometimes got…ideas. Innovations far beyond the feeble imagination of ordinary Gamma thugs.

But this Alpha, after releasing him, seemed to want nothing more to do with him. Ignored him. Walked away.

What, so confident, then, that everything was arranged already? Expecting Vila to somehow know just what was wanted, and when? Vila was tired, bruised if not actually injured, and still keyed up—all right, then, still almost beside himself—from his narrow escape. No matter how many times it happened it never hurt any less.

He was tired enough to snap, at last, once his healthy tension was going to be any minute now for Vila. But by ‘shut up.’

And no women—nobody else in your grade, even, that he might have gone differently. The thief might have retired to nurse his wounded pride and been well enough satisfied to let the matter rest. But, as fate would have it, Vila’s explanation of a particularly abstruse Delta cant term struck the fancy of the Alpha, who had first grinned and then laughed aloud. When Vila got his breath back several minutes later the issues of pride, convict law, and reciprocity were all moot. Even his gratitude was no longer the driving force. He simply wanted the Alpha.

In a Federation detention cell there is no tomorrow, so Vila merely waited until the Alpha was asleep, or mostly, and then quietly crept up and put a hand on his thigh.

Equally quiet was the voice which bade him remove it or lose it. It then took a fair amount of sniffing, the best lost-puppy expression the liquid brown eyes could muster, and a temerity based on the hopeful conviction that the Alpha really wouldn’t do any of the dreadful things he was threatening, before Vila got his way. It was the talking that did it finally. Delta comrades and even a few upper-class one-nighters had told him he had quite a good line of sexy chat. But his cell-mate seemed not so much aroused as unsupportably annoyed by the unending flow of verbiage—or so Vila guessed by the fact that presently every sentence was punctuated not by ‘let go,’ but by ‘shut up.’

“You don’t have to do anything; just lie there. I’m good, honest. Really, I am. It’d be paying you back, like. I know what you said before, but I was just thinking—I mean, how long is it to Cygnus bleedin’ Alpha, anyway? And no women—nobody else in your grade, even, that I’ve seen. You’ve been under a lot of stress; I can tell. All that nasty unhealthy tension…”

The Alpha made a comment about how unhealthy his tension was going to be any minute now for Vila.

Vila allowed himself not to believe it. If the man hadn’t hit him yet, he probably wouldn’t.

“You can just shut your eyes, don’t even need to know I’m here,” he encouraged. “Won’t bother me any, honest. I’m used to it. You’ve got to think of your health, you know. I mean, a high-class tech like you, so gorgeous and all, and that smile—you can’t be used to going without

how to blame for the entire system. The Alpha’s disbelief and distaste were that clear.

Vila had ended up feeling defensive, all right—and something else. By the time the conversation had gone round a few times it was completely unnecessary for the Alpha to vocalize his lack of interest. But by then Vila had stopped feeling put upon, and, perversely, had begun to feel put out. This Alpha with the hooded eyes and the sensitive mouth was floating prison law. He was not playing by the rules. And damned if he wasn’t laughing in his sleeve at the very notion of bedding Vila.

If the laughter had stayed in the sleeve matters might have gone differently. The thief might have retired to nurse his wounded pride and been well enough satisfied to let the matter rest. But, as fate would have it, Vila’s explanation of a particularly abstruse Delta cant term struck the fancy of the Alpha, who had first grinned and then laughed aloud. When Vila got his breath back several minutes later the issues of pride, convict law, and reciprocity were all moot. Even his gratitude was no longer the driving force. He simply wanted the Alpha.

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for very long…”

He did, as a matter of fact, understand the Alpha’s polysyllabic reply. He turned the plead on higher and pretended he didn’t. In retrospect, though never entirely clear on what he’d said, he thought he’d dwelt for some time on the vicissitudes of being an orphan…

The Alpha was weakening, Vila could tell. Bar carrying out his threats, by this time had waxed so extravagant that their execution would probably have meant another trial and a second life sentence, there really seemed to be no other way to keep Vila quiet.

“If I agree, will you stop talking?” he hissed at last.

Vila grinned, his most harmless and appealing grin, the effect of which was rather lost in the darkness.

“Have to, don’t I? he whispered gleefully. “I mean, I can’t talk and do it, least never have yet, no, I don’t think I could…”

“Then for god’s sake prove it and shut up.”

Vila, very sensibly, did not wait for a second invitation, or, indeed, give the Alpha time to reflect on the first. His deft thief’s fingers already knew the whys and wherefores of prison jumpsuits and all that chat—including the really inspired bit about being an orphan—had aroused him. As he nimbly began his explorations, drawing feathery circles on the warm skin he had exposed and bending quickly—to quell any further temptation to babble—to tease and stimulate with his equally skilled partner’s response.

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He sucked vigorously, using his tongue going for a blitz effect rather than a slow tantalizing introduction, and looking eagerly up after a few minutes to gauge his partner’s response.

He was disappointed. The Alpha was doing exactly what Vila had told him to do, lying with eyes shut, one arm draped over his forehead. There was nothing to be gleaned from the features that remained exposed. His expression was completely neutral, aloof. He might have been asleep.

Mentally, Vila shrugged off the disappointment, concentrating on the task at hand and his own enjoyment of it. Yet his pride was piqued, and he found himself wanting to do his best—better than his best—for this enigmatic Alpha. He threw himself into it with a natural enthusiasm and a skill honed by the uninhibited practice of years. Deltas did not have so many recreations that sex was taken for granted.

The lack of expression, of overt reaction, only spurred him on. And presently, utilizing other senses than sight, he realized that the Alpha was breathing very quickly and shallowly, and that tension was shimmering through all his limbs. Must be hard to keep so cool and careless all the time with that inside, thought Vila, a genuine sympathy tingling his bewilderment. That much control couldn’t be good for you in the end…

The control in the body, at least, was breaking. Every caress, every brush of Vila’s fingers, every swirl of his tongue, drew its own individualized response. And the supine man’s breathing was now not only quick but ragged, his contained but unsuppressible thrusting more rhythmic.

Bet you don’t get it this good all the time, thought Vila, unsure himself of the basis for this opinion. He was finding his own response to the Alpha shockingly strong. Pride mixed with a genuine desire to ‘do him right,’ and he felt a rush of pleasure as the beautiful, disciplined body suddenly stiffened, went rigid, trembling in an almost painful release. But it was the other thing that almost undid Vila, almost triggered his own orgasm. As the man came he made a sound, very soft but somehow arresting. Not a gasp or whimper, exactly, at least not like any Vila’d heard from a bed-partner before. It was the faint, plaintive sound of a child in sudden swift pain. After the uncanny silence, it was extraordinarily erotic, and surprisingly heart-wrenching as well. The thief had the sudden desire, absurd and perilously near fatal, to fling his arms around this hurt Alpha and comfort him. Rock him to sleep, maybe. Say silly soothing nonsense things…

There were no more sounds, but when the trembling spasms had stopped and Vila had reluctantly pulled up and let go, he was mildly appalled to find that the impulse to comfort had not entirely fled. It caused him, though he knew it was lunacy, to put that same hand on that same thigh and start to whisper—

— he could never for the life of him remember what, and he certainly never got to the end of it. His hand was struck away, and an icy and thoroughly-composed voice snarled at him to leave it and be off.

“As if it’s not enough to be raped by a scruffy Delta pickpocket the first night, or even to lose hours of sleep on that account, but to have to listen to any more is absolutely—”

He never got to finish his sentence either. Vila, whose nerves must have been more shredded than even he realized, had snapped up on the earliest part of the utterance. Now, to his utter mortification and astonishment, he burst into tears.

It was, perhaps, Avon’s finest hour, or anyway the finest that Vila was going to see for quite a while. Instead of knocking the blubbering Delta across the room, which surely must have seemed his inalienable right by then, he merely snarled—in a voice which Vila was later to realize was at the edge of losing control:

“What the hell is it now?”

“I didn’t rape you—didn’t mean nothin’ like that. Only just wanted you—Didn’t mean no harm by it. I’m not like them—You’ve got no call to say that…”
There was a long pause. Avon, Vila decided in retrospect, most likely had spent it doing differential equations, or whatever else Avon did to keep his temper under the slings and arrows of utterly outrageous fortune. Or perhaps he had just suddenly decided that Vila was deranged and not responsible for his own actions. Though, to be sure, Avon had never been known to suffer fools gladly—or at all...

“Come here,” he hissed, in a voice of dogged, if tenuous, calm. Vila, bawling, obeyed, without questioning why. The bawling did not noticeably interfere with his monologue.

“Just wanted ter be nice— ’m not like them...never hurt nobody...just feelin’ lonely...wanted a friend...and you had ter go an’ say...”

“Shut up.” The voice was now one of unhesitating authority. “What are you called?”

“...Vila...I never thought...”

“That, at least, is painfully obvious. Shut up, Vila.” The hands, strong for all their delicacy, fixed abruptly on his shoulders, pulling him down on the bunk.

Vila’s sobbing became uncontrolled as he abandoned himself to grief. Now he’d done it. The Alpha was going to carry out his threats after all. He muffled his tears as best he could. They didn’t like you to make noise when they did things to you; it just made them angrier. The last coherent thing he said was one final hopeless attempt at explanation.

“I liked you...never forced nobody...never meant no harm...”

“Shut up, Vila.” There was an almost tangible feeling of decision from the Alpha, a sense of join-girding. Vila, in the midst of trying to whimper more quietly, was suddenly shocked out of a year’s growth by the feel of warm lips on his.

The kiss was not gentle, but neither was it intrusive or hurtful. In fact, to Vila, its authority and firmness felt just about perfect. The pent-up arousal which had not been enough. So the great Kerr Avon thought he didn’t need anybody—well, the more fool him. Nobody could live their whole life like that. Avon’d get his one day, see if he didn’t. He’d find out he did need somebody, and then Vila would be there—just long enough to laugh in his face before striding out and leaving forever...

Paradoxically, this thought triggered a wave of resentful, defensive rebuttal from the thief who now had been driven to the crammed ventilation shaft, not on the London, not on the Liberator. There had been times, watching Avon stalk and capture and evicerate Blake with no apparent effort and a very obvious pleasure, when Vila had wondered if the whole thing hadn’t been some kind of stress-induced hallucination. To think he’d ever imagined, even for a moment, that Avon needed comfort from him. Needed anything from him. Needed anything from anybody.

Only, Vila remembered wretchedly, as cold reality washed over him again, Avon had someone already. He had Blake. Blake the hero, Blake the compassionate conqueror, Blake the bloody space saint. When that day finally came and Avon realized how much he needed someone, Blake would be waiting with open arms...

Or maybe not. Heroes have a lot of work to do. Saints keep to a busy schedule. And Blake—well, of course he loved Avon, be pretty stupid not to, really...but was just loving enough? Blake came ready-assembled with a capital E ego of his own. It was hard for Vila to imagine the iron-willed rebel leader ever giving way to Avon, ever relaxing his dominance. It was equally hard to imagine Avon submitting to him. That was the problem with relations between Alphas, and especially Alphas like Blake and Avon, he thought. Their whole life together was
bound to be one long fight for supremacy.

And Blake probably wasn’t even good in bed. Too pure. Enthusiastic maybe, (unless he spent his time there as elsewhere, with half his mind on the revolution), but dull. No technique. No artistic appreciation.

Well, whatever their fearless leader was or wasn’t, these days he and Avon shared a cabin. A cabin with a big, wide, single bed. While maintaining their separate quarters the two Alphas had also commandeered the only room on board with proper sleeping accommodations for two. And all that fuss they had made—that Blake had made—about refitting the quarters. So smug. Putting it under a voice-activated lock controlled by Zen—well, if that wasn’t just bloody asking for it, what was? Acting like they were afraid somebody might just accidentally happen to walk in on them...

As he wriggled round the final corner, Vila permitted himself an alcoholic grin. Well, maybe somebody might just have walked in accidentally—out of a perfectly natural curiosity. To see what kind of war games those two Alpha antagonists got up to when they were alone. But that somebody also knew better than to risk discovery and open confrontation. That somebody knew that if curiosity really had to be satisfied there were safer means of doing it. Because that somebody habitually memorized the locations and courses of ventilation shafts and such wherever he went, just in case one day it might become necessary to hi—that is, to temporarily absent himself from action.

Well, tomorrow he’d be the one laughing in his sleeve. Or, not laughing, maybe, but just wearing a pleasant expression that’d make everyone wonder. He would have a secret to be smug about. And sometime when Blake was giving one of his lectures about freedom for the masses Vila would just look at him, picturing Blake standing in front of the masses with his trousers down.

He’d reached his destination. Switching off the torch and inching forward on his stomach, careful not to make a sound, he probed with cautious fingers for the ventilation grill. He blinked owlishly in the darkness as he worked, merely to adjust his eyes, of course. Serve Avon right, he thought, if the burly rebel was imaginative, with a penchant for whips and chains and leather boots. All the more for Vila to chuckle over.

There. That had done it. The louvres eased open under his touch.

But now, with success literally within his grasp, Vila was seized with an inexplicable reluctance. It wasn’t that he felt it was wrong—he was not troubled by any such moral inhibitions. It wasn’t even that he was worried about the danger. It was just—well, it was just as if his body were balking at the orders his mind gave.

Stupid, stupid, his mind sneered at him. Did you come all this way only to lose your nerve at the last minute? Going to crawl back without even a peek?

Slowly, under that scathing instigation, he lifted his head to the grill. Probably, he thought with something oddly close to relief, they were asleep already. Or not in there at all. He couldn’t hear a sound over the faint hiss of the air circulation system.

Asleep, yes, they must be. His eyes, used to the guiding beam of the torch, had still not adjusted fully to the dark, but what he could see seemed to confirm his suspicions. The room was dim and there were shapes outlined on the disgracefully big bed, but all seemed utterly still.

Well. There. Now, Vila, you bloody fool, go back and finish off that bottle that’s been calling to you. You showed you could do it if you wanted, you’ve proved yourself. There’re no secrets from you on this ship, and nobody can keep you out. Now go.

He had carefully reversed position and was fine-tuning the louvres, when he heard the sound.

It tore at his heart now just as it had done the first time, but for a different reason entirely. He bit down onto his arm to muffle the whimper that rose in his own throat. Damn Avon anyway, and a hundred thousand times over damn Blake. That sound was hix; the big rebel had everything else. It wasn’t fair.

Still biting his sleeve, he lifted his head as if compelled to look. His eyes were adjusting, but at first he could see only through a haze of tears. After a few moments he was able to blink them away, anguished jealousy succumbing to confusion. What the hell were they doing, anyway? Playing statues?

He could make out the entwined bodies, see the manner of their joining. But the longer he watched the more bewildered he felt...

The picture Vila had not been able to imagine, of Avon yielding, submissive beneath Blake, was laid out in raw detail before him. But was it submission? It was as if time had frozen in that cabin down there. The figures were motionless as a tableau.

It took Vila the space of several more breaths to see the movement. Blake, above, buried to the hilt in Avon, uncompromisingly interlocked with his partner, was rocking slightly. So very slightly, such a very small rotation. The barest minimum of activity, the most economical of motions. And it was putting Avon into ecstasy.

That was the image that would remain printed on Vila’s mind when the night was over; not the tangled, trembling-taut bodies, not the scattered bedding or the sweat-sheened limbs, but the expression of Avon’s face. On both their faces. The lovers were gazing at one another over a distance of a handspan, gazing open-eyed, unwaveringly, as if they would drown in one another’s eyes. Although he had never seen it before Vila recognized it instinctively. Utter trust. Utter abandon. All defenses down, all shields lowered, all barriers breached. The feeling flowing back and forth between them almost...
palpably.

Without realizing it, Vila had stopped crying. He was now clenching the vent grill with numb fingers, as lost in the lovers as they were lost in themselves. Avon’s face...like that. He wouldn’t have been able to imagine it. Hard angles softened by utter rapture, by utter devotion. Softened? Melting.

And Blake. Looking at Avon as if he were the most precious thing in the universe. Cherishing. Treasuring. A bruising tenderness Vila had never seen before.

Neither spoke. The silence was broken only by that softest of cries. With each tiny unhurried movement of Blake’s hips Avon made it, his lips parted, his eyes never leaving those of his lover. It was just as Vila remembered, a sound almost faint as a breath, but shattering in its intensity. And obviously beyond Avon’s ability to control, or perhaps he liked it, perhaps they both like hearing it. For a long time, as Vila watched, the brief rocking motions grew no stronger or quicker. It was as if that little sensation was already as much as either could bear, as if they both stood poised on the edge of ecstasy and any gross movement would send them toppling. But at last the little thrusts came closer together, and the soft cries came just as softly, but more quickly and rising in tone. In no hurry because they were both absolutely certain of their destination.

It was the most shocking and lovely thing he had ever seen in his life.

Go away, he told himself fiercely. But once again his body simply would not obey. Louvres cutting into his fingers, teeth clenched, he went on watching. The ache in his own loins was almost unbearable but he ignored it completely, letting that pain weld and fuse with the other, more terrible pain that racked him.

All his cautious silence had been unnecessary. Those two wouldn’t have noticed if he stood over the bed with a Federation hand gun. They were moving together, drifting, perhaps, on the sensations. And Blake. Looking at Avon as if he were the most precious thing in the universe. Cherishing. Treasuring. A bruising tenderness Vila had never seen before.

The vial of soma there was waiting for him when he returned. Blake leaned down close, close enough to kiss Avon, but he did not kiss him; instead he simply gazed straight into that upturned face, those widened eyes. Vila knew how Avon must be seeing Blake at this moment, haloed through the glamor of near-orgasm. When the first shudder took him, Vila expected him to shut his eyes or thrash and turn away.

Avon did neither. His body, securely held by Blake, convulsed—and again and again. But though his neck and shoulders were quivering with tension he clutched Blake’s arms and remained looking open-eyed at his lover’s face all the while the long slow tremors ran through him. Finally, with the last spasm, his control broke and he arched his head back, eyes half-shut, lips parted in a soundless cry.

It seemed to be what Blake was waiting for. Letting Avon partially support him, he wound his fingers in Avon’s hair and—so gently—turned his face back toward him again. Eyes heavy-lidded now, Avon smiled, a very secret smile. He pressed his hand over Blake’s, fingers intertwining.

“Kerr. Yes.”

And those were the only words, that was all Blake said, just Avon’s name over and over and over while he trembled and strained until he finally collapsed like a bird shot out of the sky. He turned as he went down, keeping his weight off Avon, so that they ended up lying on their sides, separate beings once again, connected only by their gaze.

Avon’s hand slipped off Blake’s chest. Blake stopped stroking Avon’s hair, his big hand going to frame Avon’s forehead. Then they lay motionless for a time, drifting, perhaps, on the sensations.

Avon’s hand slipped off Blake’s chest. Blake stopped stroking Avon’s hair, his big hand going to frame Avon’s face.

No, thought Vila, and he found the volition to move after all. He’d seen enough; there wasn’t wealth in the galaxy to make him watch that kiss. But it was over and done before his cramped muscles could save him, just the lightest touch of lips to lips, with nothing of lust or desire about it. Blake sighed and smiled and turned on his back to go to sleep.

Vila crawled away.

You had to do it, didn’t you? Wouldn’t be satisfied with what they told you, you had to see. Well, now you’ve seen. Now you know. Nothing’s what you’ve had of him, nothing ever. Blake’s got it all. And now that you’ve made sure of that you can go back and do all the laughing you feel like.

The vial of soma there was waiting for him when he returned. He clutched it with desperate affection, the comfort of an old friend. Here’s to you, Avon, he thought,
and your dark eyes. And here’s to Blake, who doesn’t need to look behind him to make sure his followers are still following. And here’s to all the Alphas everywhere who hurry on past, only seeing each other.

A picture rose up before him of the storage cabinet in the medical unit, where stronger draughts than soma were kept. Among those shining bottles were some that would help you forget forever.

Ah, no, thought Vila. No.

The pain was less, now, anyway. And he was tired; he wanted to sleep. And after all, he’d lost nothing, because in order to lose something you have to have had it in the first place.

He squinted at the dregs of soma in the glass. Started to raise it to his lips, then raised it in the air instead.

One more for you, Blake, he thought. And some-day, maybe, the luck of your charmed life will run out. Or maybe not. And maybe whenever, wherever it finally does, Avon will follow.

But if Avon didn’t, and if he looked around, he’d find a Delta waiting behind him. Vila knew that now, at last. He’d be there, always. Waiting for a second chance at that lock he could never open. Or maybe just waiting for Avon to ask him to open the gates of hell.