

BLAKE'S 7 (Avon/Blake)

THE ANGEL, THE SAINT, THE REBEL, THE DEAD MAN AND ME

by

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Avon surfaced, sputtering. An arm caught his, lifting him free of the salty surf. In the lifeboat, Blake sat, half-clad, his sun-bronzed skin gleaming.

Then Avon was falling. Stars whirled past him. Suns bloomed and wilted. The filaments of time and gravity merged. Like an angel, Blake waited at the edge of the universe, arms and wings spread. He caught Avon the way a child catches a ball.

Avon woke, unimpressed with his subconscious mind, and unconvinced it was trying to tell him anything of value.

He'd already nearly proved to himself that Blake was a rival at best, a friend when he needed a favor from Avon, an angel only to the masses who hero-worshipped him as a symbol of attainable freedom. Avon didn't think those qualities made Blake all that interesting as a human being, and it was even less exciting as the center of subconscious dream experiences.

And yet this had been one more night among dozens where Avon helplessly dreamed of the man as some kind of personal savior, a saint with a penchant for sarcastic computer experts.

He tried to forget the dreams. But trying was not the same as succeeding.

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Whenever Blake became too exasperated with Avon's churlishness, his sour lip, his caustic tongue, Avon always gave in. Avon wasn't so much a sadist as he was a realist, and felt it his duty to keep Blake's feet, however graceless, firmly on the ground. Blake had wild ideas, and unrealistic aims. For all Avon cared, Blake could fall hard on his face. But Avon had no desire to follow, and where Blake went, he and the others went, and where Blake failed, so they all failed.

It wasn't the most pleasant of lives, but Avon wanted to keep his, and so watched Blake closely for safety's sake.

And Blake actually didn't seem to mind, as long as Avon didn't push the limits and resort to excessive sarcasm, or constant pessimism. He allowed Avon to go only so far before letting him know his opinion was no longer appreciated. And Avon knew exactly how far that was, and took advantage of that length of leash daily.

On the flight deck, Blake had been studying readouts at a terminal by Jenna's station for quite a long time. Avon had been ignoring him, sitting on the couch on the sunken viewport below. He'd been fiddling with a game box and thinking. But mostly, thinking. And dozing.

"Avon, I'm considering going to Telvan. The Fed base there. What do you think?" Blake approached the couch, sitting at one end, strategically placing himself not too close, but not too far from Avon.

"What do I think?" Avon asked, eyebrows rising. "What do I think?" He set the game box aside.

"Yes, I know you have an opinion."

"Telvan is heavily guarded. They have a training base there. And mutoid farms. It's not exactly safe, but at the same time an eminently valuable target." He crossed his legs, facing Blake more fully.

"Sabotage might be difficult but worth it."

Avon felt his insides harden. It was instinct around Blake. The man was either too easy to read, or too difficult. Today he seemed casual, off-guard, and too lackadaisical about this plan. "Worth a life?" Avon questioned.

"I was thinking of going alone."

Avon scowled. "Worth your life then?"

Blake smiled gently. "You tell me."

"I shouldn't have to." Avon didn't like that smile. Either Blake was fishing for compliments, or he was suicidal. Which Blake was he talking to today? The saint? The rebel? The angel of mercy? Or the maudlin husk of the man which was all the Federation left after their brutal brainwashing of him?

"I'm asking your opinion," Blake finally said. "Would you risk your life for this plan? Is it good? Or is it stupid?"

"We've never surpassed stupidity," Avon surmised. "Luck seems to help us on occasion. Taking these factors into consideration, I'd say fifty-fifty."

“With the teleport, my odds are always better. You can pull me out of just about anything.”

“You’re trusting yourself to stay conscious on this mission. I can’t watch your back from the teleport room. I can’t monitor the other guy lurking in the shadows with a gun pointed at your chest. Do you really want to do this?”

Blake nodded. “It’s a strategic outpost. We have the tools. I can’t not try.”

Avon nodded, turned away facing the cold, bright stars. “Of course.” His tone came out clipped.

“You won’t have to go so you won’t have to worry.”

“About my life, no,” Avon agreed.

“Don’t tell me you’ve ever worried about mine,” Blake countered.

Avon frowned. “Your stupidity is your own right. If you don’t care, that’s your right, too. But don’t assume the same from others.”

Out the corner of his eye, Avon saw Blake smile again. He seemed soft today, a little tired. But different, too, from the usual personalities Avon observed as various Blakes emerged in the burly body at various times. This wasn’t the angel or the saint. Neither was he particularly rebellious or maudlin. Was there a fifth personality somewhere in the multiplex of this man? Avon was curious.

“I think,” he said, “you’re bored.”

“Bored? I hardly have time to think, to just be,” Blake replied. “Ever since we got this ship, I feel the pressure to use her constructively, for the cause, for good. I can barely sleep at night.”

“Dangerous. Obsession kills.” Avon leaned back. “But you know that.”

“I can’t help it. There sits Telvan, just waiting for us. I won’t be able to sleep until it’s done.”

“You’re bored. You need something to fill your time. So you obsess on being super-rebel. And you’ll die for it, Blake. Or kill one of us in the process. You don’t have to prove anything except to yourself. But give yourself credit for what you have done. Stop dragging yourself through the trenches. Find a second hobby. And I don’t mean tracking Servalan.”

“You’re nice today. Where’d that pep talk come from? Is Cally projecting at you?”

“Hmmpf,” Avon snorted. “Not likely. I’m just indulging my second hobby. That of trying to figure out the puzzle of you. It’s not easy, and not always pleasant.”

“Should I be insulted?”

Avon didn’t reply.

“Actually,” Blake continued, “I think I should be disturbed. I don’t know if I want to be anyone’s hobby.”

“Then get out of the rebel business,” Avon suggested.

“Right. How?” But it wasn’t a question to be answered. Blake didn’t wait for a response. He continued. “If I’m to be the object of your observations, wouldn’t it be fair if you were the object of mine? A second hobby, you suggested. Well now,” he said in his best imitation of Avon’s surliness, “I think you should go ahead with your project and I’ll thank you to leave me to mine.”

Now Avon felt uncomfortable. He hated it when Blake turned the tables.

“Don’t favor me,” he quipped.

Blake actually laughed. “Oh but don’t you see that I do?”

Avon looked up at him suddenly. His heart skidded in his chest, but he said, “And Vila and Cally and Jenna and Gan.”

“It never occurred to me to ask them about Telvan,” Blake said quietly.

“Why not?” Avon wanted to know more now. This was too much.

“You’re the one who’ll take over when I’m gone, Avon. You know that.”

“What?” And he was sputtering, now, drowning, the dream-Blake lifting his arm so that his head cleared the surf.

“You’re the only one I trust,” Blake was saying.

Avon closed his eyes. Anger clung there, in the dark. Anger at Blake. But mostly at himself for having placed himself in this position.

But there was another emotion, too. A kind of warped terror that reminded him of his dream, of falling, of being left behind, left alone.

There was only one answer. Blake must not leave. And more, must never die.

“I don’t want to job,” he said.

“Sometimes I don’t, either,” Blake replied.

“Well now, sounds like a mutual retirement party is in the offing.”

“No,” Blake said, his voice too soft now. Strangely empty. “That will never happen.”

“Now you’re a prophet, too.” And Avon made a mental note to add that character to his list of Blake Traits.

“I just know,” Blake answered.

Avon sat, hunched into himself, dreading Blake’s vision, feeling it settle into his bones with a dry, insubstantial warmth. A hand touched his elbow.

“Are you afraid of that future, Avon?” asked a voice like Blake’s yet unlike.

“What future would that be?”

“The future of burdens. The future of all that dark out there wrapping your soul, and you trying to free yourself from it always, along with those you meet on the way. And all the while realizing you’re still alone, and never free.”

The maudlin Blake had come for a visit now. Avon withdrew from the hand on his elbow and leaned into his upturned palms. His elbows balanced his upper body weight on his thighs. “Oh, that future.”

“Yeah.”

Avon opened his eyes and the stars assaulted them. “You mean the one that’s already here.”

“Yeah.”

Avon swallowed hard. After a long pause, he said suddenly, “Leave Telvan alone, Blake.”

“Why?”

“Please. For now, at least.”

“Why?”

Avon faced him. The angel looked out of Blake’s brown, soft eyes now. The angel rebel. The maudlin saint. The prophet. Unbidden, Avon’s left hand reached out and

touched the balloon sleeve of Blake's fancy shirt. "Because you're real. You're human." He couldn't believe his own words. This was so unlike him! "Because no one should have to take a risk like that, to fight like that. Not even you, Blake." He tugged the sleeve. "Damn, why aren't you off raising a family on some colony world?"

"Because I'm here. Because the Federation put me here. Because they took away my family and left me nothing but this!" Blake watched Avon's fingers on his sleeve with a look of disbelief. "You pretend you don't understand, Avon. You pretend everything's a choice. You know better. You always have."

Avon gave him a wicked smile. "Permit me my few remaining fantasies, if you will."

"But you're the realist."

"And you're the idealist."

Blake tilted his head up at that. "Does that make us enemies, then?"

"Counterparts," Avon decided, tugging the sleeve hard.

Blake pulled back. "Your fantasy ends there," he said firmly.

Avon allowed a half-smile. "Does yours?"

Blake got up then, and walked to the viewport. Avon watched him, not considering that his quick wit might have hit upon a deeper truth. A truth he was beginning to recognize from some of his dreams, and his own strange behavior while in Blake's company. He rarely tugged at sleeves of noble rebel leaders like a kid wanting to be picked up and coddled. But Blake had touched him first, his mind accused.

From far away, Blake's voice sailed on the nonexistent ship's breeze. "I said earlier I favored you. But Avon, love is no small matter for me."

Amazed, stunned, Avon watched Blake turn and lean against the sloping bulkhead. The words insulted him, in a way. Blake was assuming Avon wasn't serious, or wasn't equally as interested in the still unspoken suggestion that came unraveled in his cryptic remark. Well, he thought he hadn't been all too serious, but now... The more his mind played with the idea of touching Blake, even seducing this man who played opposite his dry fear, his suspicious nature, the more it greatly appealed. He felt himself respond.

"What have I ever taken lightly concerning you, Blake?" Avon asked.

Blake stared at him. "Not a thing," the rebel said. The angel danced away. The saint was probably praying. And the maudlin husk was aching, no doubt, in phantom pain for a life forgotten that might have included a little love, so that the man no standing there

recognized it when he saw it beyond the cool dark shelter of a technician's eyes. "I just never expected..."

"What?" Avon looked away, impatient, tired already with this game. He knew how to love. But he didn't know how to talk about it. And how did one go about courting a husk, a saint, a legend? He stood. "I need a drink."

As he turned to go, Blake said a little too quickly, "I'll go with you."

All right, Avon thought, again recalling his dreams, aware that he was playing into those scenarios an unfair image of a man who might never be able to meet the expectations he had of him.

Still, he couldn't help but feel a private thrill as the rebel moved up alongside him, filling the space his shadow normally contained.

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"I thought we were getting a drink," Blake stated as they approached Avon's cabin door. "In the kitchen."

"We are still getting a drink. I keep the best stuff in here, hidden from Vila's meticulous addiction." He opened the door and stepped inside, trusting Blake to tread where no one else ever had.

Blake stepped into the room as Avon turned up the light to a rustic, gold glow. He glanced at his perfectly made bed, the nearly ordered bedside table, the equipment he was reprogramming stacked in one corner. His cabin was all angles and clean line, all too suddenly technical and cold. The floor was hard. He'd thrown a white rug by the bed that he'd found in Liberator's stock rooms. It was the only softness, aside from the bed's mattress and his two pillows, that occupied the room.

"Not as homey as it could be, I suppose," Avon commented, going to his closet.

"I've never been in here before," Blake said.

"I never invited you."

Blake took a step back, still glancing about. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

Avon looked up from the shadows of his closet, his hand filled with a large, silver flask, corked and full. "What can't you take, Blake? My quarters? The fact that we're not arguing for once? I suppose it's off-putting." He narrowed his brows.

Blake let his lips curve up slightly. His eyes sparkled behind his taut facial muscles with something furtive. A hidden joy? Avon hoped. Desire?

Desire wrestled in Avon like an alien thing. He wasn't used to it. And he certainly hadn't expected it with Blake, though it had to have been coming a long time. He tried to ignore it, remain casual. There was so much between them that kept intimacy awkward and stilted, kept it from just happening because it could. He stood and pulled out two glasses from a dresser drawer and held one out to Blake.

Avon poured.

"It's blue," Blake observed.

"Never had demon-elixir before?"

Blake shook his head.

"Try it."

Blake took a sip. His brows narrowed, his lips moved. Then the muscles in his throat tightened and took the liquid all the way down. For a moment, there was no reaction. Then Blake did a double-take and that familiar but rare, warm smile lit his face. "That's great!"

"Thought you might say that." Avon poured himself a glass.

They sat on the white rug, their backs supported by the bed.

Blake had visibly relaxed. Avon felt the liquor doing the same job on him. Inhibitions needed to be removed if they were going to travel to the heart of their condition for each other, if they were ever to breach the abyss that always seemed to stand open between them.

For awhile they talked only about the drink, about its flavor, its texture, its color.

The talk was a foot in the door. But the earlier conversation, about fantasies, about the undeclared statement that maybe they could dare, in the face of their resentment, their opposing intellects, their emotional barriers, to find pleasure, had retreated to a difficult distance again. Two people talking over a drink required more than just hints to get them to make more than subtle, seductive moves.

"Do you know, in that get-up you look like a pirate, Blake?"

Blake laughed. It was a warm rumble. Something in Avon stirred to hear it.

"That flamboyant nature of yours used to irritate me."

"And now?" Blake asked.

“Now I’ve re-thought my first impression. I thought you were hiding behind all the billows and folds. I learned otherwise. It suits you.”

Blake frowned and took another sip of his drink. He swallowed, enjoying it. “Drinking makes you talk too much,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“It does,” Avon agreed.

“It also makes you too agreeable. Why haven’t I discovered this with you before?”

“We were too busy.”

Blake stared at him. “I guess.” A faraway look glazed his eyes. Avon hated that look. Hated when Blake got distracted into God knew what fantasy to rip the Federation to shreds.

“What kind of childhood did you have, Blake?”

“What?” His brown eyes cleared.

“I’m still trying to figure you out. My hobby, remember?”

“My childhood?” He shrugged. “Nothing particular.”

“Well, if this elixir loosens my lips, it surely tightens yours.”

“No,” Blake replied. “I really don’t remember all that much, that’s all.”

“What do you remember?”

Blake started to smile again, turned to him. “Tranquilized dreams.”

Avon raised an eyebrow.

“Really, Avon. I can’t trust any of my memories to be real. You know that.”

“Surely you have instinctive knowledge…”

“The things I remember that probably really did happen are not pleasant.”

“Such as?”

“Oh gods, drinking and dredging. Not what I thought we came here for,” Blake said softly.

“All right.” Avon sighed. But he couldn’t imagine what Blake had actually been through. It seemed too far-out, too ridiculous even, to be sitting here with a man who’d been through restructuring and retraining while still retaining a semblance of self that wanted, needed to continue the rebellion. The fact that he wasn’t a zombie meant either Blake was too strong for them, or his intact survival was planned.

His brow wrinkled.

“I know you don’t understand me,” Blake began.

“Oh, but I do, better than you might think” Avon interrupted. He topped off their glasses and both of them gulped more elixir.

Now the maudlin Blake peeked out. “Ever been mind-probed? It’s like needles in the eyes. Ever had electric shock treatments all over your body? Ever starved? Ever been raped? Ever slept naked on a cold, wet floor for a week? Ever been beaten half to death with a wire?”

Avon held up his hand. Blake stopped. Their eyes met, wary, hard, elixir-fogged, challenging.

Blake gave him a sour smile. “Hmmp. You’re not so tough. Not like me. You don’t want to look at me, that’s why all these games. I dare you to understand me. No, I challenge you to open yourself up and really look. I don’t have any insecurities left. All my fears have been faced. That’s why I’ve let you get away with your scowls, your tone, your hate. I’ve already fought. I’ve already won.”

Avon nodded slowly. “All right. Go on.”

Blake’s eyes never left his, but there was something more in them than posturing, than challenge. Something like longing, possibly, or...envy?

“Have you ever slept in the same room with a dead, rotting corpse? Have you ever been so thirsty you’d drink your own urine? Have you ever felt so worthless that you’d grovel for one moment’s gentleness, one touch, one sip of wine? Have you ever felt your mind leach from you into a dark that is thicker than steel?”

Avon held up his hand again. “I don’t want to make light of all this, Blake, but maybe you shouldn’t drink anymore.”

“Have you ever...”

Avon interrupted again. “I have a question. Have you ever made love with a man?”

Blake blinked. “You’re failing at your hobby. You’re the one who told me to ‘go on.’ Now answer your own question for me.”

“I...have not.”

“Why?” The eyes changed again, a curious challenge, and still that background of...what... surging... lust?

“Well now, you always seemed so busy.”

Blake tried not to smile, failed. He slid down until he lay flat on the rug, looking upside-down at Avon. “Me? Busy? Doing what?”

“Oh, this and that. Burning buildings. Fleeing pursuit ships. The usual.”

Blake chuckled and Avon scooted down until he lay beside him. Their drinks sat forgotten at the edge of the rug. Now the angel spoke. “Maybe you were too busy yourself, Avon.”

“Doing what?”

“Fighting me.”

“And losing, according to you.” Avon found himself laughing. It was amusing. He never would have thought it until now, though. It didn’t feel bad, either, losing to this man. This man who’d been through so much. They were, after all, on the same side. And maybe Blake deserved to win one for once. But Avon knew Blake had been winning for a long time now. He’d survived. That was winning.

“You don’t laugh like that very often,” Blake mused.

“True. And especially not in front of you.”

“I like it.”

“Misery loves company and all that.”

“I’m not miserable,” Blake said. “Not right now.”

“Good. That elixir’s some magic stuff.”

“I can see why you hid it. Everyone, not just Vila, would be after it if they knew it was here.”

The ceiling they stared at was bulkhead gray and smooth as marble. It was gentle on the eyes, soothing.

Blake chuckled again.

“What?”

“I feel like a kid lying here.”

“I used to lie on a rug and stare up through the skylight in my childhood home,” Avon said. “It was huge. At night, the stars shown through. Most dome homes didn’t have them.”

“You were a rich kid, then.”

“I suppose.”

“And is money all that’s important to you now?”

“It’s freedom. The same thing you want, Roj.” He surprised himself, using Blake’s given name without even thinking about it.

Blake’s voice came out soft. “It’s a form of freedom, but not what I’d settle for if there was more.”

There was a long pause.

Avon said, “Gods, I’ve forgotten what it’s like to be young.”

“I don’t believe people ever truly grow up. Our bodies grow, but our minds, our personalities are still that core, that child-heart of ourselves.”

“Perhaps. I always thought I’d lost that part of myself, though.”

“Maybe you need to find it again,” Blake suggested.

“I’m not as good at being an idealist as you are.”

“I’ll help you, then.”

“Right.” Avon turned, staring at Blake in profile. Blake turned to stare back. There was something there again, something deep and glimmery, an urge, a wanting. Avon couldn’t name it.

Blake sat up suddenly, reached out and touched Avon’s chin with his fingers. Avon felt himself grow hot at that simple gesture. His blood sang in his veins.

He waited. Just as suddenly as he sat up, Blake leaned forward. As their lips started to brush, Blake turned aside and completed the placement of the kiss on Avon’s right cheek.

It was almost too tender, too shy of a gesture to comprehend. From this rebel, this angel, this saint.

But it was perfect.

And Avon was left wanting much more.

Blake stood, half facing the door.

Avon sat up on his elbows. “Roj?”

“Hmmm?” Blake looked down at him, then sent him a smile so huge it threatened to engulf Avon. He offered his left hand. Avon took it, pulling himself up.

Avon’s brows narrowed, still confused. Their hands still clutched.

“The answer to your earlier question is yes and no,” Blake began.

“What?”

Blake’s hand tightened on his. “When I was very young, I had sex with a man. But I’ve never made love with a man.”

“Oh. Well, there’s a difference.”

“I know.” The eyes looked melted now. Not the rebel. The angel?

What was happening here? Avon felt his skin practically lift from his bones at that look. His body surged. He felt himself lean forward as Blake leaned forward. This time their lips met and Blake didn’t turn away.

A dizzy ache. A fever. A rippling of pleasure and thrill and some distant pain Avon recognized as emptiness waiting to be filled.

Their mouths opened, pressed. When they retreated from each other for air, Avon said, eyes too warm: “So this is how it’s going to be.”

“This is how it always was between us,” Blake said.

Avon pressed his lips together, still tasting Blake’s mouth on them.

“We wouldn’t settle for anything less, you and I,” Blake added.

But Avon had thought he would, had never expected... This was sort of like... like falling in love. But certainly not actually that. Confusion was making him think that.

Before Avon could analyze further, Blake's hands moved over his shoulders. Their second kiss lasted longer, left them far drunker than could be blamed on the elixir. They moved, fully-clothed, onto the bed, which made it much more difficult to undress.

Avon managed to get all his clothes off, just as Blake kicked off tight trousers. He undid his shirt and started to shrug it off, but Avon pulled him, shirt and all, into a loose embrace. "Leave it on."

"My shirt?"

"Your shirt."

They gazed at each other, on their sides, Avon nude and pale and fully erect, Blake half nude, his body reclining, glistening, his penis hard and flushed an appealing bronze.

Blake's face was almost pained with yearning, still smiling, the eyes deep and full.

With simultaneous sighs, they moved together, the embrace more intimate now, bodies coming together fast, smooth, tight. They explored.

Avon ran his hand down Blake's back to cup one rounded buttock. His hand moved lower to outer thigh and caressed, surprised to find ridges and dents there, a lot of them. He frowned until he realized what they were. Scars. He pulled Blake closer and moved his hand back up the curve, to the soft flesh, the muscle rippling beneath. He felt large hands make a similar quest of their own. His skin enflamed. He took a deep breath, pressed Blake's buttock firmer under his palm, and heard the rebel (or was it the saint?) moan.

Avon smiled, hugged him hard and whispered, "Lie back."

Reluctantly, Blake let go.

Avon hadn't planned to get Blake on his back, but now he wanted to touch him everywhere, with full concentration. And his technician's concentration demanded no distraction.

The hairless chest was a treat. While he explored, Blake kept reaching for him, touching Avon's face, his hair.

Avon loved the feel of Blake, the hardness and softness, the delicate nipples, the broad, wide ribcage, the jutting erection that was not what Avon imagined. He'd expected nothing spectacular. But this was perfection sculpted from rose-gold and silk. It was smooth as Blake's chest, as well, and the head was fat and satiny. Lovely.

Avon touched it, watched it bob. Blake squirmed, hummed, closed his eyes. Then Avon looked lower and saw what he had felt earlier. White lines and discolorations on the

thighs, crisscross scars, welt scars, scoop scars, jagged scars. Both thighs were covered. For a moment he couldn't breathe. His hand automatically kept caressing the aroused genitals, and Blake was moaning happily, unaware of Avon's hesitation. Then Avon let go. Blake's eyes snapped open. Their gazes met. And while Blake watched, Avon reached down and ran both his hands up and down the scarred, bumpy skin.

Blake closed his eyes again. His smile had faded, but he spread his legs, giving himself, unabashedly, to Avon.

Yes, Avon decided, Blake was lovely. All of him.

He bent and kissed the already damp penis-tip, a gesture he'd never done with another man but felt perfectly comfortable doing to Blake right now. Holding the base, caressing the balls, he placed his mouth all the way down on the shaft. It was hot, and tasted of sweat and wet skin and musk. His own body blazed.

Blake moaned, and after only a bit more urging with both hands and mouth, came, the bedspread clutched tightly in his hands.

Then Blake was on top of Avon, pushing between his thighs, kissing him everywhere. Avon could barely keep up. Panting, he felt his groin ripple at touch of palm and tongue, at the probing of one gentle finger against his anus. He had had great orgasms before, wonderful mind-wrenching ones, but on one had ever made him gasp or beg... no one until now.

"Blake... Roj... please!"

The hot mouth on him moved, tongue-prodded, but refused to suck. He thrust up. Blake's strong hands held him down. Then Avon sat up as Blake's mouth moved away from him, and grabbed the curly head with both hands.

Blake broke into laughter. "What are you trying to do, Kerr?"

Avon winced. "Damn..." And yanked in frustration at an errant curl. Blake's laughter didn't last. He bent down and finished the task properly, while Avon lost control altogether, nearly passing out when Blake finally made him come.

Avon's breathing was still ragged as Blake moved up for a kiss, an embrace. Their teeth clashed and Blake giggled. "A live wire, that was."

Dots of sweat tickled Avon's forehead. He still couldn't speak.

Recovery took only minutes. They lay facing each other, propped on elbows, bodies inches apart. Avon's gaze ran the length of Blake, settling again on the disfigured skin of the thighs.

Blake's eyes followed the gaze. Hardened. "The first time I was reprogrammed, the alphas in charge insisted we were not to be physically harmed. But the betas and deltas liked to punish us, and they found ways. Every day the alphas would check us for abuse. They checked us only from...buttocks on up. Our legs were always covered. And we were not allowed to speak to tell them we had been hurt."

Avon leaned forward and kissed Blake's shoulder.

"They used wires, chains, razor rope." Blake pointed at the various shapes on his skin as he listed the implements of torture.

"How do you remember that and not other things?" Avon asked, touching Blake's nude hip, running his hand along the smoothness to the scars.

Blake shrugged. "They let us keep certain memories... certain bad memories. As a lesson, they said."

Avon clicked his tongue against his teeth. "I think I'm just beginning to figure you out."

"Only now?"

"Perhaps I was a bit blind before." His eyebrows narrowed. His eyes heated in a rush of unexpected emotion, much to his chagrin. "A bit blind," he repeated, his voice roughening. He gripped Blake's hip hard, caught his breath.

"Well, now you're not." Blake tilted Avon's head up, forcing Avon to reveal the raw pain in his shimmering eyes. Blake smiled slightly, and they kissed. Avon pushed him onto his back again and covered him with his body.

"I don't want you to go to Telvan," he said, rising up slightly. "But I know you have to. So I'll go with you. Just to watch your back."

Blake smiled. "Why the change?"

"Because I understand you now. And I want those bastards to pay. As much as you do."

"Good enough." Blake ran his hands down Avon's back, cupping the narrow buttocks, delving into the crevice between. It was the rebel who spoke now, who touched him so intimately. But the angel and the saint were there, too, in the eyes, in the heart. The only one who wasn't there in bed with them at that moment was the maudlin husk. The dead man. That Roj Blake had gotten left far behind when they entered the bright world of love. And both men were truly grateful for that.