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VERSION 6.0

Welcome to the sixth issue of *Oblaque*. It's been a year and a half since the last one, but with luck number seven won't take so long to produce. Meanwhile, for your pleasure *Sextus* has nine stories from Sebastian, Jane Mailander, and the wee Scot. Several of the pieces are lovely, dark, nasty, and concerned with still slightly taboo subjects. However, on the whole, this zine has quite a number of love stories and happy endings—M. Fae surprised herself at how positively upbeat things turned out. And speaking of turnings: the one linking theme throughout the issue is “turnings” and “turning points”.

Particular thanks to LDM, M. Fae, and Coda. All tried to be helpful in one way or another.

—Caroline K. Carbis,
editor

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The fiction word count for *Oblaque Sextus* is
101,500+.



AVERSION

—act of turning away or aside; strong feeling of dislike, repugnance, or antipathy. This is Sebastian's brilliant view of that darkest, bleakest, and most destructive of relationships: that between Avon and Blake. Here is a chain of events, of interlocking actions that, once begun, lead to a promised ultimate doom. Following this piece is a companion story (by M. Fae Glasgow) which should be read second.

VIRTUAL REALITY

SEBASTIAN

I dreamed this story, so cannot be held responsible.

The man reclined on the black leather couch in the near-dark: he was very still, in another world, his eyes drawn in by the screen in front of him where the pictures flashed. From time to time one in particular caught his attention, and his thumb slicked the button of the device he held, freezing the image—then thumbing it on. He made few other movements. He was not undressed.

When a nightmare later the screen went blank, the man stayed there for many moments, deep in thought, or some nameless emotion. And, after a while, he smiled, a savage creasing around his fine dark eyes: because after all there really was a bitter, cynical amusement to be had from it, the depths a civilised man might have within.

Depths no-one would ever reach.
Nor ever would want to.

Things were so bad for so long afterwards that Vila never did remember why he had gone into Avon's cabin in the first place. Well, to steal something; that much was clear. But what... that was the question. Could anything, anything, have seemed worth it, at the the time?

Not that it mattered. He would never, to his dying day, pry into Avon's secrets, ever again...

"I know you keep it here somewhere," Vila muttered, riffling at top speed through Avon's clothes, piles of neatly folded things spiced with a faint scent of Avon—disturbingly so, so that he kept whipping

his head around to look nervously behind him, "I like a bit of a challenge, mind you," he addressed the room as he knelt to peer under the bed, "No point in talent like mine if it's all laid out for you, is there?" This survey, however, yielding nothing but a pair of shoes, he turned his attention to the shelves beside the video console, pulling out the video discs and looking behind them, shoving them back in again with a little grin for himself— "Blue movies, eh, Avon?"

He resumed his search elsewhere in the room, but the notion remained of curiosity: just what did Avon choose to watch, here in the privacy of his own room?

He had rejected blockbuster movies in favour of technical manuals by the time he got to Avon's bathroom and began a hunting there. When he returned (nothing) the niggles of curiosity won its battle: casting an eye at the clock—Blake would have Avon in thrall to the latest post-mortem of the latest disaster for at least another quarter—he picked up the three discs, made himself comfortable on Avon's couch, and chose the unmarked one to slot into the viewer. Feet up. *All I need no's a drink*. He thumbed the remote to //ON.//

Hoping for something salacious: well, who would not have been. Like any man Vila had his private fantasies, his secret heats, some of which he felt guilty about even as he thrilled to them, and thus he was in constant search of hints or proof that other men were just the same as he was.

Besides which, Avon gave nothing away, ever, armoured in the chill of extreme self-composure. The idea of some secret sexual life intrigued Vila intensely. Irresistible. //START.//

And he grinned at first, because it was from the moment of its beginning obvious that this was just exactly what he had hoped for. Hugging himself with nervous glee, he settled down to enjoy this stolen insight into Avon's psyche.

His eyes widened, very early on, and he whistled to himself: to think, Avon, of all people—but although it was not his thing at all, he stayed with it, his thumb hovering on the off-button for just one more moment: and that was when he nearly fell off his chair.

Oh sweet Jesus. Sweet— In his turmoil of emotion it took him several minutes to realise

that what he was watching was not reality, so that his first thoughts were repetitive, over and over—*not Blake. Not Blake...*

And then, when he did realise that the images were not real, were nothing more than a clever visual mock-up, a Virtual Reality scenario set up by a technological master, it was too late to stop: by then he was drawn into it.

He wanted to stop. He knew he should stop: but it was impossible, the thing was rolling along by now, inexorable, unmissable. The dark bleakness of Avon's vision scrolled before him, and he found it depraved. It went further than anything he had ever dreamed of before, and it roused in him things he knew nothing about, violent emotions and a curious longing and a deep disgust—at himself as much as anything, for by now his body was going along with it, thrumming with a sweet and terrible excitement—erupting helplessly—

And then it was truly time to stop. In his haste, with shaking fingers, he stilled and froze the frame of Blake crucified when he had meant to clear it from the screen, and he scabbled desperately at the control. Too late: he sixth sense picked up on footsteps, and next the door opened.

To relief so great it weakened his knees, at last his stabbing fingers got it right and the screen went blank. But as Avon stepped behind him into the room there was a little, betraying sound as the disc whirred to a rest.

"Well now," Avon's voice was frighteningly soft already, "And just what—" And then Vila saw it: saw the moment when Avon's brain identified the sound his ears had caught a split second before.

Such a terror as he now knew made his bowels turn to water and his hands shake; he opened his mouth to bluster some inanity but he was mute. Avon's eyes flicked to the screen, then to Vila's face. He knew.

He set down what he carried, quite gently, his eyes never leaving Vila.

"Before you say anything, Avon—" Ridiculous, his voice just would not stay steady. If only Avon had not been standing between himself and the door—and Avon had not said a word yet, but he looked ghostly, coalblack eyes blazing forth from the ivory of his skin. "I won't tell a soul," Vila gabbled, throwing the last, slender-

est of chances away, "I swear it, Avon, I swear on my life I won't."

Avon smiled at that, and dread drenched Vila's guts in a rush; he really did need to find a bathroom very badly.

"Tell them what?" was all Avon said.

"That's exactly how I see it," Vila said in a hurry, "exactly. Nothing at all. So if you'll just excuse me—" and he made as if to dart past Avon, but Avon caught him by the lapel as he ducked under Avon's arm, and held onto him in fingers which closed like a steel vice.

But as Vila hung there, shaking in his grasp, he saw that Avon was in shock, and did not know still what to do. With a swift jolt and a wrench he freed himself, cannoned against the door with a sob of breath, fumbled for the control. He saw freedom unfolding before him like a vision of Paradise, and he ran.

It was Blake who noticed it first, that there was something wrong with Avon and Vila. Not that they had ever been particularly close, of course, but there was a difference now, a real anger there behind the endless scraps and snarls. Blake had himself largely given up trying with Avon, who resisted even the subtlest offerings of friendship; he seemed armoured against any and every attack. There had been a time, perhaps when he had first heard about Anna Grant, when Blake had felt he might be on the verge of a breakthrough, but nothing had come of it. Avon had retreated again into that discomfiting poise. Watching. And waiting.

A pity, because Blake sensed that behind the coldness and the conflict was a sensitive and cultured man of the truest intelligence, and perhaps the nearest thing to a friend that he could have. But it was no good: they had got off on the wrong foot, somehow, and everything they would ever say to one another seemed likely to have a scorpion's edge to it.

Vila, however, was a different matter: Blake had a lot of time for Vila. The man was good to have around, a refreshing change after the sultry brooding affected by the other members of the crew. Avon, Jenna, and Cally; all three seemed permanently on the edge of some dark and troubling storm within. Vila might mope

and moan and bluster like a windy day, but his nature was essentially uncomplicated.

But at the moment, *something* was going on, and Blake didn't like it. Secrets, except his own of course, were bad for cohesion, and Blake believed in cohesion. He was keeping any eye on Avon and Vila. Just to see.

And at present they were all three of them working on an access tunnel deep in the bowels of the ship: Vila was not at all happy about it, because of its proximity to the central drive, which he appeared to perceive as some fearsome thing just lurking around, ready to lash some noxious tentacle of vapour or radiation or machinery around his fragile neck. He had complained quite a lot. Vila had the gift of eloquence, but not the blessing of restraint. Even Blake was fed up with him.

"Pass me that, Avon. The laser light." Blake reached out.

"What do you want with that?" Avon's voice came, thin with scorn. "The infra-red strobe would do much better in here. Unless, of course, you yourself are blessed with unnatural powers of vision."

Which is quite possible, oh Leader. Blake bit his tongue and said calmly, "All right, Avon. The infra-red. If you say so. There, look. Can you see the problem?"

"No. Yes—give me some room."

It was hot and cramped in the tunnel, and tempers were short.

"Vila—can you—"

"No, I can't. I'm not putting my fingers in there."

"Vila." Blake was still patient. "It's perfectly safe. You've just seen both Avon and myself do it."

"That may be, but then your fingers aren't worth much. If you'll pardon me."

Avon's sigh of contempt drifted audibly past. "I don't know why you brought him at all, Blake. He'd have been more use set to work counting the tiles in the corridor."

"Oh yes, that would suit you very nicely, wouldn't it? You and Blake on your own. Much cosier. So why drag me along?"

Blake frowned at the quickflung bitterness, and Avon was silent. "Vila," Blake said at last, "Just give it a try, will you? Your fingers are nimbler than mine. Or Avon's."

“Oh, leave him,” Avon cut in, suddenly angry. “I’ll do it myself. If he wants to be a dead-weight, then have some sympathy. It’s about all his brain fits him for.”

“Vila,” Blake still asked him, but with a little hint of steel, watching Avon struggle with the fiddly components.

“You know as well as I do we don’t understand all the circuitry in there,” Vila pleaded—and ducked as a timely blue bolt of electricity sped jaggedly across the tunnel. “See what I mean? There could be booby traps.”

“You mean they knew you were coming?” Avon was smooth and vicious and quick.

Vila jumped nervously, and ducked something invisible. “I’m sure that’s a circuit overload. Can’t you hear it?”

Blake laughed, amused despite himself at Vila’s paranoia. “That’s just your imagination.” And again was shocked as Vila’s soft tongue turned steely and bit:

“Don’t look at me. Avon’s the one with the vivid imagination.”

There it was again: the sound of some sub-conversation Blake had been hearing from these two all week.

“Get out of here, Vila,” Avon hissed, fire and ice in his voice. “If you won’t help—just get out.”

There was still delicate circuitry to reach and treat. Blake laid a restraining hand on Vila’s arm. “Look, what the hell’s the matter with you two? Can’t you just get on with the job in hand?”

“I am getting on with the job in hand,” Avon said with chilly venom, and it was true; Avon was concentrating as steadily as he always did, working on persistently even as he talked, sorting and parting wires. “Send him away: he’s a useless fool.”

“Oh yes, you would want me to go,” Vila whined. “Wouldn’t you, Avon? You don’t very much like having me around these days, do you? Afraid I might—”

Something delicate shattered: Avon threw the laser probe to the floor. Blake stared at it in silence, stricken by the realisation that it was the action of a man with his nerves in tatters. Vila stared at it too, dumb.

Avon said, “Tell him or don’t tell him: but this is a game I won’t play.”

Vila scrambled away, backwards out of the

hole, and left in a hurry.

To which Blake had only one reaction, only one thought, but it haunted him for days: *tell me what?*

Vila nursed a bottle in the privacy of his quarters, mourning to himself.

The shock of his secret had not yet worn off: still he could not look at Avon without fear, without contempt; and yet he knew he himself was not unstained. After all, who could say that his own deepest, darkest dreams might not be as stark a shock if unfolded and flapped before the world? Avon’s vision was a vision of power: it was awesome, but not shabby.

And now time had cleared his eyes a little he could see the unsavoury truth, that he would not be in possession of this unpleasant secret had he not himself opened the box and stolen it out. It was not something Avon flaunted, after all; on the contrary, in matters personal he was as quiet and self-contained as you could get. In fact, it was the easiest of things to imagine him sexless.

He had put Avon in one hell of a position. Which, it must be said, Avon was standing up to with intense courage. His eye did not flinch away when it met Vila’s reproachful one, he did not avoid him, he did not try to be unusually nice to him. It was the sort of inner core of courage he had always guessed Avon to possess, and it dragged an unwilling admiration out of him. In fact, by now he would have been desperately disillusioned had Avon begged him, by word or look, not to disclose the whole nasty truth to Blake.

Not that he would do that.

The truth was, it had been bitterly sweet, for a while, to have Avon in his power; Avon who humiliated him daily with his arrogance, his superiority; yet the whip of power did not suit Vila, he was not they type to wield it.

And to think, he had once harboured the small and secret hope that Avon might become his friend—! He might be wrong, oh easily, but he had always had the feeling that Avon might like him a little, better than he liked the others, beneath the veneer of contempt; might even be moved by some emotion he would never voice

to protect Vila from the myriad of things in the universe which always seemed out to get him.

He laughed, sadly, into his glass. *Well, that idea just flew out of the window, didn't it...* Because Avon was never going to be his friend now. Never. He had stamped that one into the ground and left it for dead.

And maybe that was just as well, considering the games Avon liked to play.

But it was Blake Avon desired to play them with.

And Blake didn't know.

Well, it was none of his business. Never had been.

It took him a bottle and a half before his courage reached a sufficient level to take him to Avon's cabin; and then it drained away again the instant Avon answered the door. He started to tiptoe off—but was brought up short by the sound of Avon's low voice saying, "Come in, Vila."

"Well all right then, I will," he cried belligerently, and entered, breathing heavily and glaring.

Avon looked neat, as always, and dark, and sharp. Try as he might, Vila could not keep his eyes from flicking to the shelf where the discs were. All three were still there. He returned his gaze to Avon quickly, and was surprised to find his vision blurring as he moved—

"You're drunk," Avon said at once, with no particular censure, and Vila stared at him, acutely aware that Avon was fiendishly goodlooking, aristocratic even, and brave in the face of humiliation; and he felt an annoying prickle of tears at the back of his eyes. "You're all right, Avon," he said thickly, "Just wanna say—you're all right. No business of mine what you—do."

One elegant eyebrow rose in a sardonic arch. "I'm glad you realise it."

"I mean—you can't help it," Vila said all in a rush, "Some funny things get to people, you know, turn them on... Did I ever tell you about that friend of mine with the jelly and the stockings? No? Well, I can see you're not interested, Avon, and really what I came to say is that what you do is your own business, I mean, it doesn't hurt anyone, does it? At least," he laughed nervously, "not when it's not for real it doesn't, and in any case, it's no business of mine and I just came to tell you that I wouldn't, well, I

wouldn't tell anyone—"

He drew in a deep, gulping breath, and in the pause Avon smiled, a cold and inexorable smile that froze the blood. "Wouldn't you? Well now, Vila, I think that's exactly what you *would* do."

"No," Vila stammered, "I swear it, Avon, I—"

"So you said before," Avon said, "and yet every time I'm with Blake you drop so many damn hints I'm surprised you don't write it down for him." He spoke in a distant tone, his eyes far-away; one might suppose him to discuss some minor concern not of his own.

"I know, Avon," Vila said, shamed, "don't know what came over me. It's none of my business, I know that. I should never have found it. Should never have watched it. Not all the way through, not when I could see what it was—" Avon's eyes shot into narrow slits: Vila continued hurriedly, "Look, Avon, we've all got our little quirks. Me and the next man. I like a blue movie as anyone, no-one can call *me* a prude. Maybe I don't understand it, but—"

"No," said Avon, breaking a silence of sheer ice, "you don't understand it, do you? You don't understand it at all."

Vila's round eyes surveyed him uneasily. "Well, maybe I don't Avon, but live and let live, that's what I say. You won't be hearing any more on the subject from *me*. Maybe we could just forget it and be friends?" And at the look of Avon's face, "Well, not friends, then, all right. But back to how we were—?"

"Get out of here," Avon said with a kind of weary distaste.

Vila backed towards the door. "At least say—"

But Avon said nothing at all, just stood there, electric, hostile, and Vila left, cowed under the brooding storm of his gaze.

This time Vila stuck to it. Avon treated him exactly the same as he had always done, with a mixture of contempt and distrust, and it was tempting, so tempting sometimes for Vila to play the one decisive and dramatic card he had, and force Avon to the most humiliating of defeats. Or, even, to make some subtle hint of knowledge dearly bought, something to make the others' ears prick and their hair stand on end—without exactly knowing why.

But, heroically, he refrained.

Too late in any case, had he but known it, because Blake was onto it already, and he was not the man to let it go; he was simply biding his time.

After two drinks Vila was lively and cheerful, after six he began to run the line of emotion from A). increasing loquacity, all the way to Y). tears, and Z). coma. The trick was to catch him at exactly the right point, which Blake did adroitly, producing a bottle of his own in the room where Vila reclined, joining him, sitting down.

Vila was quite pleased to see Blake, more pleased to see the wine, and determined not to pay for it with Avon's secret, since he guessed at once that was why Blake had come. Indeed, Blake raised the subject in the first few minutes.

"What's wrong with you and Avon?" He regarded Vila with one brown eye as he tipped back his glass and dismissed the contents with a gulp. A large man, Blake tolerated alcohol extremely well on the rareish occasions he drank it.

"Nothing," Vila said in a flat voice.

"Come on, Vila. You've been snapping at each other's tails for days."

"Don't we always," Vila prattled glibly, "Me, I like a quiet life, but Avon—"

"This is different."

"Allright," Vila abandoned pretence in favour of half the truth: Blake was too acute to be deceived. "Maybe we have had a sort of—difference, but it's over now."

"It was—something Avon didn't want you to tell me?" Blake guessed, better than he knew; he was thinking, of course, of Krantor's wheel.

Useless to deny it entirely: Vila remembered with the clarity of shame all those heavily dropped remarks. "Well, yes, but—Blake. Don't keep on at me. I'm not going to tell you."

Blake laughed and changed the subject. There was still a full bottle and a half to go. He had a pleasurable sense of excitement, a hound on the scent of something rare and thrillingly rotten in the woods—

And he assumed, as anyone would, that Vila was making a big deal out of some peccadillo,

some slight thing which would amuse him, give him a little edge over Avon without doing Avon any real harm. That he might uncover a real darkness here, a nightmare to haunt any soul save that of the dreamer of it, did not for a moment occur to him. How could it?

And so Blake led Vila on, down into the subject of Delta low-life, and let him jabber on—very entertainingly at that: amused at some tale of Vila and his friend visiting a brothel on Orion where huge-breasted whores did the trick with stockings and a bowl of pink jelly, Blake was still chuckling when he refilled their glasses, and then he moved smoothly and without warning back to the subject in hand.

"Avon didn't hurt you in some way, did he?"

"What?" Vila said, off guard. "Of course he didn't. Oh no, Blake, it was nothing like that."

"Didn't try to force you into something you didn't want to do? I mean," Blake grimaced at the innuendo he had not meant to impart, "What I meant is, he isn't planning some mutiny, some bank fraud perhaps, is he—and trying to make you part of it?"

"Oh, no," Vila said. "Honestly, Blake, you're on the wrong track completely." His round brown eyes swivelled towards Blake uneasily.

"He upset you," Blake guessed. "Insulted your low breeding and lower-grade brain once too many times?" He was grinning as he said it, and Vila grinned haplessly back at him.

"Sticks and stones, Blake, it's all sticks and stones to me. Matter of fact," he said thoughtfully, after three glasses beginning to be profound, "I don't think Avon would say them if he thought they'd really hurt—see?"

So Vila did still like Avon, did still perceive him as a man of honour. Blake felt puzzled; he seemed to be getting nowhere. He changed tack immediately.

"Is it something to do with Jenna?"

"Jenna?" Vila looked completely blank.

"Or Cally?" Blake hazarded, suddenly sure he had it: of course. Vila had found Avon in some compromising situation with Cally, and Vila was jealous. Vila would certainly like to compromise Cally. If not Avon.

Vila was shaking his head emphatically. "Nothing to do with them. You couldn't be further wrong, Blake. I tell you, you're wasting your time, because you'll never guess. No-one

could. So don't try, Blake. Please."

Blake seemed to be making rapid progress down his mental list of possibilities without actually getting anywhere. "Well, let me think," he said, frowning affably down, for all the world as if this were some game he was playing with Vila's willing cooperation, "What's left? Let me see. Avon's done something, obviously. Something to do with money, knowing Avon, and he doesn't want *me* to know about it, am I right?"

But Vila was staring at him unhappily. "Don't keep on at me, Blake. I'm not going to tell you, so don't keep on. Believe me—" Vila took a deep breath—"you don't *want* to know. It isn't—funny, and it isn't very—nice. You wouldn't get a laugh out of it, believe me. I wish I didn't know it. I *wish*—"

And he really did. Looking at the bowed head, the clenched fists of the other man, Blake saw the moment had come to desist: and in fact, though he was still more determined to know, it was beginning to sound as if Avon's secret was concerned with the sort of things about Avon Blake did not concern himself with. No, he spent too much time trying to drag some vestigial fibre of goodness and humanity out of Avon to be surprised, or even intrigued, by some revelation of his darker side.

And so he did desist, half expecting Vila to go now, but Vila never left a room where there was still something left in a bottle, on principle. Silence fell, but not an unfriendly one; Blake mused over his glass and looked out into some private world.

Vila was taken unawares by this change of tactic: and did not quite know what to do. He risked a glance at Blake every now and then, to see if Blake was cross with him, but nothing showed. He was muzzy by now, his brain two degrees insulated from his emotions; and it came to him with blinding perception that he really *wanted* to tell Blake. Share this horrible burden, pass it on to someone who could judge it properly, see it in its right perspective: for Vila, sweated nightly by fevered dreams and daily, as he glanced at Avon at his various duties, struck by little flickers of memory, a naked limb, a nipple, shining trails of scarlet running along bare skin, cruel torment, but the sweetest of rapture—and other things. Worse things, things that Vila didn't really want to

consider at all, but which his mind kept throwing up at him, making him wince as he walked around: for after all, what pleasure, what possible pleasure could there be in those strange dark desires?

And yet... as he saw it again, and again, in his mind's eye and shuddered, again his body began a sweet thrum of delight, and seemed to yearn, disloyally, for what his mind shunned in horror: for Avon's mastery, no less.

His eyes came wide open and he yelled, "I hate him!"

Blake, drowsing pleasantly, came fully awake and stared at him. "Why?"

"No, I don't hate him," Vila contradicted himself in a grouchy mutter. "I hate knowing—wha' I know. I shouldn't—shouldn't know it. It isn't right..."

Blake, soberer, tried to sort out this muddle and failed. He kept quiet, his manner mild and questioning. Perhaps it was coming.

Vila's senses were soaked now and sweetly spinning. He gave Blake a quirky, lopsided grin. "And you? Do *you* like Avon, Blake?"

Blake considered. "Yes," he said at last. "I like him. I could wish—" here he grinned—"he wasn't quite so difficult."

"Do you think he's goodlooking?" Vila persisted slyly. Not seeing any further than the question, Blake gravely prepared to give the matter some thought.

"Yes," he said; for of course Avon was striking, with those eyes, that beautiful voice. *Hair like a raven's wing...* He chuckled to himself as the unlikely imagery popped into his mind; and while he was still thus contemplating Avon in his thoughts, Vila leaned towards him, his voice very quiet now, very serious.

"I can't tell you," he whispered against Blake's arm, and wetted his lips nervously. "I would tell you, Blake—but I promised. It would—" he struggled for the words—"hurt Avon if I told you."

"Would it?" Blake murmured, looking down at the mousy head resting on his shoulder. He stroked a strand or two of it between his fingers, slowly, persuasively. "Would it really hurt him? After all, he'd never know that I knew."

"I can't tell you," Vila whispered again; clearly he was in anguish over this.

Blake nodded, understandingly. "All right,

you can't tell me precisely. You could give me some vague idea—just so I can satisfy myself it isn't something—well, something I ought to know." In the face of Vila's obvious distress, prurience had briefly given way to wild fantasies wherein Vila had found some proof that Avon was planning to murder them all in their beds; and Vila was still staring up at him with haunted eyes.

Blake filled up Vila's glass with the last of the wine, settled an arm around his shoulders in a comforting sort of way.

"I found something," Vila said in a low-voiced rush, "something in his cabin."

Blake waited, cautious.

"Something Avon wouldn't have wanted anyone to find."

Blake gazed at him, offering no help.

"Something—you know!" Vila said, agonised. "Something to do with—you know." He lowered his voice as his lips framed the word: "Sex."

Blake stared at him, his eyes as round as Vila's: for some reason, into his mind had come the image of a huge and artificial cock in leather—upstanding on a plinth.

A hysterical chuckle left him, and then another. Absurd, the things your mind came up with under stress. As if Avon—

Something sexual. Without his knowing why, his heart had begun to pound, thumping the walls of his chest from within. "Pornography?" he suggested, and Vila gaped at him, gave at last a little, embarrassed nod, a duck of his head, and peeked up at Blake to see how he was taking this.

Blake laughed out loud. So *that* was it... all the furtive glances and the heavy air of doom and the hushed-up hints, the air of scented black-mail—nothing but this.

"Is that all?" he expostulated. "God help you, Vila, I was beginning to think it was something serious."

Vila didn't smile back. He looked worried. Poor Vila, Blake thought, to have Avon on such a pedestal he could not imagine the man ever needing the furious relief of sex at his own devices, some pretty pictures to help his hand along.

"Come *on*, Vila," he said, amused, "don't tell me *you* never masturbate." For Blake it was a

daily ritual, somewhere between the first morning urination and brushing his teeth.

Vila actually flushed, his skin burning. The lower classes, Blake thought, fascinated, probably had taboos on mentioning such a thing. He clapped him on the shoulder. "Well, then, I'm sure *you* don't, Vila," he said reassuringly. "But forgive the rest of us poor celibates if we occasionally indulge. Even, it seems, Avon."

Only a few weeks later, but the world had changed its face. Gan was dead, and thus came the inevitable conclusion that Blake's followers had begun to die. The charmed life was over: now there would be more deaths to come. Blake was sunk in a depression so deep and so black he seriously doubted his ability to continue.

But then, if he didn't continue... Gan's death would be seen in the context of—*Nothing*. And Blake's rebellion a nine-day wonder that went nowhere and killed a good man for nothing at all.

But it took such energy, to drive them on, to rouse them into purpose; and energy, right now, was the last thing Blake had: it seemed to have drained out of him along with Gan's life.

The others had tried in their various ways to comfort him: the others, except Avon. Avon lost no chance to scourge him with a whip of contempt, to turn Blake's guilt around and flog him with it. It came to Blake, sitting alone in his darkened cabin, that Avon hated him, more than he had known...

"Blake."

"Go away, Vila."

"Yes, in a minute maybe. Are you all right?"

Blake didn't answer that, just lifted his head wearily from his folded arms to look straight ahead. Vila didn't like the look of him. "Get some sleep, Blake."

"I will," Blake said: anything to get rid of him.

Of them all, Gan had been perhaps closest to Vila. But it had happened. It was over. Nothing was going to bring Gan back. "Go and talk to Avon," Vila suggested, knowing that the task of salvaging this was beyond him.

Blake laughed, bitterly. "I've talked to him enough, thank you. For the moment."

And yet it was, as Vila sensed instinctively, Avon's rationale that Blake longed for. To set him right on the ethics of it all, even if it was only to confirm what Blake suspected: that Gan's death was his own fault, no excuses, no disclaimer.

"Avon hates me, Vila. I've only just realised it. He really hates me..."

Vila came nearer, hesitated. The terrible knowledge he had burned and boiled away inside him; Blake had it all wrong. "He doesn't hate you," he said cautiously.

"Oh, not personally, perhaps. He's indifferent to me personally. He hates everything I stand for—everything I think is important."

Avon's shining vision of Blake had not dimmed with time, intensified rather in Vila's mind: he wasn't sure if Avon wanting to do all those terrible things to Blake was evidence of some romantic affection, but he was damned sure it wasn't the product of indifference.

"You're wrong, you know. Look, Blake—in a way, I think Avon—"

Blake looked up and away restlessly, sick of Avon, sick of himself.

"—in a way, I think he has a sort of—fixation—on you."

Blake laughed, hugely, bitterly amused; at least diverted. "Avon has? You're dreaming, Vila. Been at the soma again?" He said it not unkindly, but with absolute rejection.

Maybe he should leave it at that. And yet, Vila knew more than he let on, saw how things were falling so rapidly apart around them. If Blake collapsed, so would they all.

He said robustly, "All right, then. Let's say I know it for a fact."

Blake looked at him. "How could you?" Then he got it, just like that.

He stared at Vila hard. "This has to do with whatever it was you found in his room, am I right?"

And Vila nodded, hapless, but meeting his eye. "Just go and talk to him, Blake. It might help."

On the other hand, it might be the last, the final thing: the thing to bring it all down.

When Vila left, Blake stayed there for a little while, thinking. Then he got to his feet, and walked down the long corridors to Avon's door.

Avon let him in without making anything of it; from the look of him, tensed and detached and cool, Blake knew he was expecting a resumption of the day's hostilities. He threw up his hands and turned his back wearily on Avon.

"All right, all right. I haven't come for a fight...can I sit down?"

Avon said nothing, but watched him sit, the leather couch creaking beneath his weight. The room was very neat, bed stark as a bier, floor bare except for its dark red carpet. One closed cupboard for clothes, a VD screen and a terminal, disc console, a few discs neatly stacked on a shelf. No clutter, characteristic of Avon's mind and his lifestyle.

"Will you stay?" Blake asked abruptly, turning his head to look at Avon.

"Why not?" Avon asked slowly, almost wary.

Blake stared at him. "I thought, according to you, I might as well have killed Gan with my bare hands." And he saw, but did not understand, that Avon was half a step behind; had, in fact, been expecting Blake to say something quite different, but being Avon he caught up quickly.

"At least that would have had a certain honesty about it," he said with a hint of a sneer. "Gan believed in you, he believed you were invincible—but then, he was never the brightest of fools. I, however—" he smiled, briefly and unpleasantly— "am not a fool at all. Of course I shall stay. Surely, in fact, the question you should be asking is—"

Blake looked at him soberly. "—Is?"

"Should *you* stay?" Avon said, very quietly, and nicely, and it stung Blake like a dagger in his heart. He was on his feet in an instant.

"Thank you, Avon. I knew I shouldn't have come."

Avon watched him go with darkness in his eyes, a skilled serpent poised behind the creep of some prey. Blake stood by the door, but did not go through it, nor turned as he said, testing: "'Come back Blake, I didn't mean it?'"

"Oh yes, I did." Avon's voice had the slightest of smiles in it, a creamy vein amid the sour. Blake swung slowly around to face him. "But don't worry, Blake, you won't take any notice of me. Do you ever? Have a drink."

"Hemlock, perhaps?" Seeing the olive branch there, Blake grasped it firmly, beginning to be

happy, a vast weight lifting off his chest. He came back and sat down on Avon's black leather reclining couch, and watched Avon opening a cupboard, getting out a bottle and two glasses, and he remembered now why he had come.

"I told you I wasn't here for a fight," he said abruptly. "I came to be entertained. Thank you." He took the ruby red drink Avon held out to him, letting his eyes dwell on Avon's face.

"Entertained?" Avon tilted his head a fraction.

Blake grinned at him, rakish. "Vila said you had something interesting in here."

He was totally unprepared for the look that stabbed Avon's eyes from within; the terrible silence which followed took his breath away.

"Did he, indeed," was all Avon said, in a very quiet voice; but the narrowed eyes never left Blake for a second, searching, searching.

Blake patted the couch next to him, said crisply— "Sit down. Look, Avon. Deltas may have a whitehouse attitude to pornography, but it has its place. If ever I felt like being—diverted, then tonight is the night."

"Pornography," Avon said, half to himself; then his gaze, sharp as needles, raised to Blake's face. "Is that what Vila told you he found in my room?"

So it wasn't true. Blake's heart began to knock uncomfortably. "He seemed to say so. But forgive me if I misunderstood."

Avon smiled, a peculiar smile, the smile of a wolf in the phase of the moon. "I see. And do you like such things, Blake? They—*entertain* you?"

Blake met the eyes which laced so intricately with his, refused to be thrown. "As I said, they have their place."

"So," Avon said—he still had not sat down—"You came here—correct me if I am jumping to conclusions—with the intention that I should show you this—pornography—which Vila told you he had found in my room." He spoke in a precise, and exact, way. Blake felt he was expected to answer. He shrugged.

"Why not?"

Avon looked pensive. "'Why?' would seem to be a better question. So, you would have me believe that you want to look at this—material with me. With a view," Avon smiled ferally, "to what?"

Blake's heart stepped up its rate, punching and joggling inside him like a mad thing. For the first time he began to believe that Vila might have it spot on: perhaps Avon did have some sort of—interest—in him. He matched Avon's stare with a boldness of his own. "The usual things."

"Which are?" Avon gave him a cool, assessing little look. "The circles you moved in were probably a little different from mine. You'll have to forgive me if I need the aid of specifics."

"Well," Blake said, and thought, *to hell with it*. "You help me and I'll help you—how does that sound?"

"It sounds—interesting," Avon said, and this time he did not smile.

"Come and sit down, Avon. You make me nervous, standing over me like that." And this time Avon did choose to sit, close enough for Blake to catch the characteristic scent of him. Astoundingly, Avon was leaning nearer him, touching his glass to Blake's.

"To us," Blake said firmly, and took a hearty swallow.

"Well now," Avon said delicately, "exactly what are you expecting, Blake? As your favoured viewing material, I mean."

Blake laughed. "Well, it's all much the same, isn't it?"

There was a silence, then Avon stirred a little beside him, and took another small sip of his wine. His voice when it came held a rich timbre Blake had never heard before:

"No, it isn't all the same, Blake. And I'm really not sure that what is to my taste—would also be to yours."

His hand slipped along the back of the couch, laid itself lightly on Blake's shoulder. Blake felt the pressure like the burn of a brand. "I'll take the chance," he said, turning his face towards Avon; he guessed now that, Delta prudishness aside, whatever Avon had here to watch was not going to be ordinary, but that only fired his interest and his excitement. "Try me. I guarantee I'm unshockable." Even talking about such things here with Avon, had given him an erection; it had been such a long time. He shifted in his seat, hoping that Avon might catch a glimpse of it.

"So Vila—" Avon paused, and turned his head, and smiled, "didn't tell you about it?" and

the note in his voice made Blake open his eyes wide: the deepest of emotions was held back there somewhere.

“No,” he said, and then immediately thought again, and everything fell neatly and precisely into place. “Or—yes. He seemed to suggest—” Blake put out a lazy hand, extended one finger and traced it down Avon’s cheek— “that it involved me. In some way.” Almost fondly he considered what it might be; some photograph, perhaps, himself in some revealing pose; strange to think, after all these months of hostility, that this had been going on behind the lines. Avon’s narrowed gaze continued to search his face intently; and then, abruptly, a smile creased his face, the hard glitter of his eyes softened, moonlight chasing off the shadows of night.

And so it began.

Avon lolled on his leather couch, the scene of so many recent, and real, encounters with Roj Blake, and watched his screen with a hard assessing eye.

He was reviewing what he had created over the past weeks; he had added some, and taken some away, all in the dark hours of the night when such things as this seemed appropriate.

At this moment Blake, his wrists bound in thin leather, kneeled before him, leaning slightly backwards, his muscular thighs tense with effort. Avon’s careful eye had missed no detail: the solid beauty, for example, of Blake’s chest and arms he had redrawn now that he was no longer working from imagination.

“No. Please,” Blake said, eyes proud, yet desperate, and Avon’s thumb hovered over the delete button: on the whole he preferred Blake stormy but silent, suffering all Avon’s chosen pleasures because he knew he must. Pleading did not excite Avon. Yet sometimes it pleased him to have Blake beg.

And Avon’s eyes narrowed at the next point, the terrible, wonderful moment when Blake realised he could not hold it, the worst and final humiliation—and the way Blake lifted his head to gaze out with the hauteur of pride, even at the moment of release, the golden stream flooding out of Blake, running wetly and quickly across the floor towards the silent

watcher on the couch, as Blake sighed.

With a hissed sigh of temper and frustration, Avon threw the control to one side.

The truth was, however extreme he made it, it no longer worked for him. Reality had stabbed it in the back: the magic had fled and left it cold.

Avon grinned, with savage lack of humour. *Pity*. He had lost on both counts: what had been for Avon a magical talisman of pleasure and power was lost to him for good. And worse than that: he had never expected to find himself a victim. Delivered out of the hands of one obsession into another. One far more dangerous. Anger excited Avon, but tenderness slayed him.

Sentiment is a weakness. Let it once get a hold of you, and you are dead...

Avon’s brow darkened, and his hand clenched on the drink he held. Blake, like it or not, was going to have to go. One way or another.

He had wanted Blake inside him last night.

So much so that he had had to fight himself not to ask for it.

And that was a very disturbing thought, here in the cold light of day.

Evidence of just how very far things had already gone. Before he knew it he’d be Blake’s panting yes-man just the way the rest of them were. Perhaps that was what Blake, a puppeteer in all but name, had intended all along.

He leaned forward, flipped the disc out of the viewer, transfixed it with a pinpoint gaze. Clever Blake, then. The man had an instinct for possession. Already Avon glimpsed in himself some disloyal yearning to rewrite the story, with himself in Blake’s role.

In a flurry of violence he hurled the disc across the room so that it skidded into the wall, spun, and lay still. Then he turned on his heel and left.

Blake entered the room on the balls of his feet, fairly pulsing with energy. Disappointed to a ridiculous degree not to find Avon there, he paced around a little, letting himself unwind from the taut energies required on the flightdeck, arms locked behind his head, stretching every muscle and every sinew, letting himself, already, anticipate the night to come.

He had manoeuvred the watches so that he and Avon could be alone again together. Jenna

was suspicious, but the truth was so bizarre she had not guessed even near it.

Who could? Who could have known, for instance, how dark and sweet a fire raged inside Avon, beneath the ice?

Alongside the bed he straightened the covers obsessively, saw Avon's head on the pillow as he wished it to be, thrashing from side to side, his sweat-soaked hair and darkened eyes like a vortex for Blake to drown in, as he thrust home to the deepest depth inside Avon and died the sweetest and most violent of deaths—

A fantasy. So far.

Blake shivered, and threw himself around the room again, pacing. The toe of his boot caught something, sent it skittering along the floor. He bent to pick it up—a video disc—and inside him, a light went on.

Oh yes, he knew what this was: it was Avon's blessed secret, the one that had so unsettled Vila. Started all this in a sense, too. He had wanted Avon to show him, had asked him once or twice, but Avon had always demurred, without stress, but in a way that made it clear the matter was not up for negotiation. *Embarrassed*, Blake supposed now, fondly: well, he would take it out of Avon's hands and watch it without him. If it was Avon's favourite fantasy, well then. Maybe he could make it come true for him.

Blake slotted the disc into the viewer, threw himself onto Avon's black leather couch, and settled down to watch.

He was still there when Avon came back, but the screen had long since gone dark and dead.

And so Avon faced him out, just the two of them across the wide chasm which lay between them, under the harsh glare of the cabin lights. Blake lifted his eyes to Avon's face, dispassionately curious as to what he would find there. Shock, at the very least. Horror. Shame...

But he had forgotten, just how close the curtains over Avon's soul could draw. Avon simply looked like a cold stranger, nothing more. A million miles away from him.

"You surprise me, Avon." The words came with difficulty.

Avon smiled without humour. "Oh, I can imagine." His breathing was well under control,

and also his voice.

Blake got to his feet, his voice rising. "You—really—have—surprised me. No two ways about it—this is sick, Avon. Sicker than I could ever have guessed." He waited, but Avon did not leap to his own defence. "Haven't you got anything to say?" he asked.

Avon stirred then, took his hand off the back of the couch. "Yes," he said. "Get out of here, Blake."

"Oh, I suppose there's not much you *can* say." Blake was simmering on a violent flame of anger, seething with nervous energy as his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. "Even you would find it difficult to explain it away." He shook his head. "At least I know now why you didn't want to show it to me."

"Yes," Avon snapped, his lip curling back in a snarl. "I didn't, did I? At least you remember that much. As it happens, I might as well have put it up on the main screen and arranged a group viewing."

Blake stared, arrested. "Of course. It's only just struck me. *Vila's* seen this too? Oh that's marvellous, Avon. Just marvellous."

"Nobody would have seen it," Avon hissed, in a fine temper of his own, "if you both had been able to keep from prying into my affairs."

"I can see why you'd want to keep it to yourself," Blake agreed. "Or were you coming around to it? What was last night about, Avon—just softening me up for the real thing?"

Avon's throat moved rapidly as he swallowed, a sign of nerves which gave Blake some chill satisfaction. But Avon's voice was pitched in superb irony as he said: "Hardly. I didn't really think you were up to anything more—sophisticated."

Blake swung himself around, fists balling, pacing away from Avon. "Well, but not many people are quite that sophisticated, are they, Avon? I can see why you might have had some trouble attracting sexual partners in the past." Avon's sudden, quick smile, he ignored. "I suppose it's naive of me not to have guessed you might have a yen for sadism. Not a pretty thing, but maybe I could have lived with that. But the rest..." It was Blake's turn to swallow, over the tightness in his throat as he stared at Avon in contempt, and dislike. "Avon, I—just don't know what to say to you."

"Why say anything, then," Avon said boredly, turning away. "You don't seem to be afflicted by dumbness to me...on the contrary, I'd say you were being irritatingly verbose."

Blake stared in disbelief. Then leaped at him, grabbed his arms, gripping tight, tighter. "Avon. Surely you can see we have to talk about this."

A black glitter compromised him. "I don't see why. What can there possibly be to say? Unless, of course—" a demonic flash of amusement—"despite the show of moral outrage, it excites you to talk about it?"

Blake sought out and held his gaze, quite deliberately. "—excites me? Avon, it sickens me. A little bondage, I can live with that. A little blood. Maybe we could laugh it off if it were just that. But—" he reddened in anger, and fairly spat the word out, "*pissing* games." His voice had gone low: now he raised it again. "In god's name, Avon, whatever sort of sexuality do you have to have to be turned on by pissing?"

While Blake had flushed, Avon had gone quite white; but you would not know from his voice that he was holding himself just barely upright in the wreckage of his dignity; his words came out as eloquent and precise as ever.

"You'll never know, will you? Now shut up, Blake, and *get out of here.*"

But Blake stayed where he was, though his hands sprang away from Avon's arms as he gazed at him, more in sad fascination now than anger. "Oh Avon..." he said with genuine regret, "how could you do it?"

Avon's teeth showed in a brief, robotic smile as he moved his head impatiently. "Don't let's forget what we're discussing. I didn't—*do*—anything."

"You thought it though, didn't you? Every bloody detail."

"Thought isn't yet a crime, Blake. And never will be, if your precious revolution ever drags itself off the ground, isn't that right?"

Blake stayed there in front of Avon, swaying on his feet, looking at Avon in deep puzzlement. "All the time—I never dreamed you hated me so much. This must have been festering inside you for years."

Avon opened his mouth to speak, breathed instead, and seemed to lose himself in thought as he gazed past Blake. Detaching himself swiftly and ruthlessly, from Blake and from it all.

Blake grabbed him again, shook him, shook him hard. "Avon. Believe it or not—I'm trying to understand. It went beyond—porn, or what I've always believed porn to be. Pissing, Avon? Is that what sex is really all about for you?"

Avon shook his head slightly, an onyx gleam alight in his eye. "A minor detail. You seem to be missing the point."

"The point—!"

"—but then, you so often do," added Avon.

He wore a silver shirt, open a little at the neck; he looked the proudest and most handsome of men. Even beautiful, Blake thought, fascinated and repelled; the thin-lipped, wellshaped mouth, the darkest of eyes: and a soul it seemed to match.

He let go of Avon, dropped his arms, shook his head. Avon had still offered no line of defence, no explanations. Blake decided to push him, push for it. "In that—performance—you hurt me. Goddamn it, Avon, that was abuse, whichever way you look at it. Is that really what you want to do? Watch me bleed?"

For the first time Avon seemed to hesitate, watching his face. "Pain, pleasure, Blake...it's all part of the same thing, whether you know it or not."

Blake didn't argue the point, although he did not agree with it. "Oh. I see," he observed sarcastically. "I was supposed to be *enjoying* it, was I?"

Avon sighed, the smallest of gusts touching Blake's skin. "Didn't it look as if you were?"

"Oh yes," Blake said bitterly. "Yes, I suppose you might say that. At least, until I wet myself, that is."

Avon wore a little, distracted frown, as if considering an aesthetic detail. "Yes: on retrospect, perhaps that was an aberration."

"I'm glad you can still see it that way." Blake looked at him again; how could Avon stand there and take this, full in the face without flinching? Unwillingly you had to admire the courage of him. He carried on without preamble, "To torture me and humiliate me: that's your idea of joy, is it, Avon?"

Avon managed another monumental deep breath. "No doubt it all seems so simple to you, doesn't it? A fantasy you find unpleasant, which you reduce to a rather facile psychology. But remember this, Blake: I never intended you to

see it. I hardly expected your prurience to drive you to deceit. Perhaps you might call *me* a fool. Should I have locked up all my possessions?" He paused, seeking in Blake's eyes some sign; he spoke for the first time with less than perfect command. "I won't insult your intelligence by making excuses you would not believe. Except—" again that swallow—"to ask you to consider if your own mind would look so pure if anyone could scan it inch by inch. As you, unasked, have scanned mine."

Blake considered this for a moment. "Avon, I think I can honestly say there's nothing in my mind I'm afraid of anyone seeing."

A silence settled between them. "Then you're lucky," Avon observed, thinly and clearly.

Blake stared at him, unable to bridge this gap between them, unable to make Avon see how far apart they were. "I'm *normal*, Avon."

"How wonderful for you. Do you want congratulations?"

Damnit, he hadn't meant to come across all high-handed morals. Perverted Avon might be, but it was hardly a case for smug comparisons: perhaps Avon could not help it. Yet Blake could not lose the conviction that it was something Avon would choose, anyway; and not that he simply could not help himself.

He dropped his hands, looked at Avon without overt hostility. "Avon...you don't seem to understand. How difficult it is for me to accept that you could have the desire to—well. Whatever I've done to you, or you think I've done to you, do I really deserve treatment like that? Is that what you really believe?" He stopped, as Avon made an impatient noise, a widespread gesture:

"It was a fantasy, Blake. Don't you understand the difference between fantasy and reality?" Sharp, pinprick pupils homed in on him. "No, perhaps you don't. But you, for example, would not deny that you have wondered what it would be like to sleep with Jenna. Without, necessarily, ever intending actually to do so."

"At least that would be—" Blake caught himself, but not in time, and Avon finished it for him, eyes ablaze:

"*Normal?*" and there was a silence, Blake transfixed in the black magic of Avon's merciless glare. Finally Avon looked away, breaking it; Blake let out the breath he had not known he

was holding. "If it makes you feel any better, try even the most elementary psychology," Avon's quiet voice came back to him. "However it looks, it is not so much a fantasy of power, but of inadequacy..."

The idea of Avon having any notions of inadequacy struck him as decidedly offkey. If Avon was trying to make him some sort of apology, he could well do without it. He stretched out a hands towards Avon's back. "Give me the disc, Avon."

"Why?" Avon asked, without turning.

"Why?" Blake expostulated: but Avon did not reply, turning around to face him, his expression hard to read. "Isn't it obvious?"

"I can't think why you should want it." Avon said, his face set in bitter lines of cynicism. "Unless it's to provide some—inspiration? It's all a little tedious, isn't it, Blake—your performance?"

Of all the things Avon had said, that seemed to hurt the most, though he couldn't think why; it was unimportant, after all. Blake held his head up high, a splash of colour along each cheekbone. "You didn't complain at the time. But having seen what you consider the height of stimulation, then no wonder I fell short. The disc, Avon."

Avon looked at him then, his head a little tilted, his eyes chill and dead; and for a moment Blake was as still and silent as he was. Then Avon snapped his gaze away, down to the disc he still held; lifted his eyes to Blake again as he pinched it in half, crumpled it, screwed it up like a piece of paper and dropped it to the ground.

"Are you happy now?" Avon asked in that same dead tone.

Blake laughed. "Hardly. Short of murder, I can't destroy the source of it." He saw the red flash of damage creep across Avon's palm; Avon did not look down at it. "No, every time I look at you in future, I'll be wondering what you're creating in that sick mind of yours." He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, a new and terrible resolve creating itself, waiting to be acted upon.

"Isn't it time you went, Blake? I hardly think we can have any more to say to one another."

"Oh no," Blake said, grimly, "don't think I'm going to let you get away with it this lightly." One hand rose to rub the side of his nose; the anger inside him rose to flashpoint.

Avon gave him a glance of dark complexity. "What more do you want? Blood?"

"That's more in your line, isn't it?" Blake asked, gathering himself. In the split second which followed he saw Avon tense himself, as if expecting a blow, but the assault Blake let fly with was not that kind at all.

"You've had your fun, Avon," he whispered in his ear as Avon twisted violently in his arms. "I think you owe me mine, at least. Even you would have to say that was fair."

With a massive effort Avon broke free, only for Blake simply to seize him again. "Fair? What's fair, Blake?" Avon hissed, short of breath; struggling and twisting. "Do you think *my* life has been fair?"

He tightened his grip on Avon, cruelly pinching his arms. "Oh, I don't know, Avon. I'd say intelligence, looks, class and money is about as fair as it gets." Manhandling him without fear for tender flesh, he was backing Avon slowly but surely towards the bed.

Avon spat full in his face: "What are you trying to do, Blake, prove you're as sick as I am?"

Blake only shook his head. "It could have been so different, Avon...but you've fought me every step of the way."

He meant, in everything. From the moment they had met Avon had opposed him, taunted him, struck conflict with him on ever possible issue. He had wanted to win Avon's friendship, but earned only this endgame of perverse powerplay.

With a violent shove he pushed Avon backwards onto the bed, began to jerk loose the buttons of his own cuffs, glaring coldly down at Avon all the while. At the first flicker of movement he hurled a fist down onto Avon's chest, growling: "One way or another Avon, you *are* going to do this. Conscious—or otherwise. Which do you choose?"

That silenced Avon, though his eyes glimmered fiercely as he watched Blake through every breath and every heartbeat. "We'll only have this once, Avon," Blake said, stripping off his shirt at speed, "so I want you to remember it. Conscious would suit me much better. And you too, I imagine. At least that way you'll know what happens."

"I think I can guess," Avon said, his eyes

contemptuous, malevolent. "You haven't that much imagination."

"Unlike you."

He saw Avon draw breath to hurl some venomous retort at him: then, too, saw Avon remember that he had no defence. That whatever Blake did to him could not be as bad as what he had done to Blake. At a stroke he acquiesced, gave up the struggle, limp as he lay back on the bed. He did not resist as Blake stripped him, and did not watch as Blake stripped himself, his head turned to one side, his eyes open yet blank.

Blake remembered then how difficult it was to be one step ahead of Avon: how difficult, and how necessary. But he told himself he did not care that Avon hated him, hated this, and as his hand ranged over taut brown nipples, through the pelt of hair on his chest down to his belly, Avon's cock swelled lightly in his hand, growing to fit inside his grip comfortably. But it was no true victory. Looking at Avon's averted head, the shuttered eyes, it was not difficult to guess at Avon's stance here: *whatever you make me do, Blake, I'm really not here at all.*

It made Blake want to slap him. Beat him back to attention, make him face it out. But even when he produced the lubricant and applied it to himself and to Avon the other man's disinterest did not alter. Dark lashes wavered a little on his cheek as Blake gathered his legs and pushed them back, a little sigh left his parted lips as Blake roughly entered him and began to thrust, but other than that he did not move, and made no sound.

So here he was, screwing Avon, and feeling—nothing. It was ridiculous, Blake knew as he pushed and panted, a simple matter of friction in the right places; a simple solo effort would really be more efficient and probably more pleasurable than this joyless coupling.

And yet—

It could have been different. Even special, perhaps.

Instead here they were, simply going through the motions, a sad small dance of finality. In a moment he would come and Avon would not, and there would be an end to it. Not much of a finale.

His thrusts were quicker, shorter now as from the plateau his body sensed the peak approaching. He opened his eyes and focussed

down on Avon's face beneath his.

Avon was smiling.

Detached, cynical—a smile that roused violent feeling in him, which fed on Avon's words: "Not a very glorious affair, is it, Blake?" whispered to him.

His heart thudded violently in his chest. So Avon believed it was over. Believed he had won.

Withdrawing was not easy, because he had been close enough that every nerve in him screamed as he pulled himself out of Avon, but he had to do it. For a moment he rested his head, gasping, on his arm, battling for control; and at that moment, like a sunburst the idea broke over him and made him blink with surprise. But that was it. He had it now.

"What's the matter?" Avon blatantly eyed Blake's cock, erect still and pulsing from the purple head to the strong upholding root of it. "You can't go through with it, O Fearless Leader?"

Blake didn't reply to that. He reached for the lubricant and began to oil his hand, taking his time over it, over his wrist and his forearm right to his elbow, spreading more oil over the knuckles of the fist he balled, before flicking his fingers out and examining his nails.

Avon was watching him now with his full attention. Blake still didn't say anything. He leaned on Avon's thighs again and examined the small rose-red aperture, stretching it with finger and thumb.

"What the hell are you doing?" Avon rasped at him, and Blake's heart leapt at the note in his voice. He pushed one finger inside Avon's body, relaxed and easy after his fucking; one was quickly joined by another and then a third. He withdrew them then, swirling in and out and in again, and as a fourth finger joined the others Avon caught the idea.

"No, Blake."

"Just lie nice and still for me," Blake urged gently, "or you might get hurt."

And now Avon's eyes were wide and dark with horror, but his voice spat fire. "I can't believe even you could be so stupid. It's difficult enough even with a partner who is—willing." He twisted, trying desperately to throw Blake off, but Blake had a key grip at the very centre of him.

"Then I'd be very, very, willing, if I were you." The viscous oil made it easy; a gentle sliding motion forwards and backwards was all it took, and Avon's body, seduced by his touch, was opening for him. "You see? You're going to like it, Avon, I promise you."

Avon's nostrils flared viciously as he realised that it was going to happen. That in a sense it was already too late, the very idea was enough. Something dark and terrible was taking shape between them, a change in their relationship they could never turn back from. His voice held a dreadful inevitability as he made the promise: "You'll pay for this, Blake. I swear it."

"I've already paid," Blake shot at him, hard and implacable; and Avon's head fell back on the pillow, his hands clenching at his sides. Blake did not worry; he knew that Avon would not stop him, would not fight.

The inner passage was tender around his fingers, smooth, even silky, shyly opening to let him in. Avon's body was sweet, even though Avon was not. A twinge of odd feeling gripped Blake's belly as Avon's muscles gripped his fingers; this was the most peculiar and most intense sensation he had ever experienced, entering deep within another man's body this way.

"Do you want to kill me?" Avon's voice was a whisper now as he experienced the deepening pressure of Blake's invading arm, and his eyes were wide, and black as night; he was not trying to hide anything now.

And there it was at last: the vulnerability from Avon he had been trying all along to elicit.

Blake laughed, breathless. "Not at the moment." He watched his wrist enter Avon's body, sink in through the opening stretched wide around it. The sight of it gave him the oddest feelings he had ever had in his life: the most power, the most control; and yet a savage, almost hurting tenderness. With his free hand, he reached up and brushed the sweat out of Avon's eyes, the dark hair curling there. "But I just bet death's the biggest thrill there is to a man like you, am I right, Avon?" He lowered his voice, and his fist slipped another inch inside the tender channel. Avon felt new inside, and very fragile. "Well, flirt with death for all you're worth, Avon." The clutch of Avon's gut gripped his wrist in spasms, another peculiar, shocking sen-

sation which he found very excitin; he was in right up to his forearm now, easing it in with slow and sure pressure. "I could reach your heart, Avon, and rip it out," he whispered, and closed his eyes, because he could *feel* Avon's heart, alive and throbbing deep within him, the sweet thrumming pulse of his mortality.

Avon whimpered a little. He looked lost; the hazy drift of his eyes dwelling on Blake troubled and unsure. Intensity of emotion was making Blake lightheaded, coming over him in waves, a force very sexual in its power and yet which went very far beyond it, into another realm entirely. Inside Avon's body, to the very heart of him, he felt an adoration almost religious in its fervour: he *adored*, Avon, that was it, with a passion both religious and sexual, a great golden light surrounding his heart and his mind.

"Avon," he said softly, that fantastic heat around his hand, his arm, Avon caught and pinioned on his will like a broken bird. He gazed into Avon's black, open eyes and met, at last, what he was looking for: his answer. A shared rapture, the sweetest and darkest of harmonies, himself penetrating to the core of Avon's last defences, Avon's tender, quivering warmth surrounding him. He did not take his eyes from Avon's, and Avon's dwelt in his, so that they

seemed to be speaking to one another at the deepest and truest of levels. As if in a dream he knew that he understood everything now, about Avon: and that Avon knew without need of words everything about himself. Avon lay so calmly now, still and trusting, accepting Blake's advances; however could he once have thought that Avon hated him? For this was love. An evil, twisted sort of love perhaps: but love for all that.

When it was over, Avon slept and Blake watched him.

He stroked dark hair away from Avon's marble temples, and his thoughts raced on and on faster than the beat of Avon's heart against his own.

For too short a time it seemed that all their conflicts had dissolved along with their separate existence; but now Blake could see that it was not over yet, and might never be over at all.

In fact, this new world they had broken into seemed no more and no less real than Avon's Virtual Reality.

He lay his head near to Avon's and closed his eyes, worrying.

Wherever could they go from here?

Sebastian, October 92



PERVERSION

—act of overturning, of turning away from the right course; means of attaining sexual gratification that is considered abnormal or unnatural; seduction, corruption. A companion piece to Virtual Reality, this is one scene, one part of the video disc that so drives Sebastian's tale, the electronic creation that tempts the reader but is only seen in barest glimpses. E-Male may be read independently, but its context will not be fully appreciated without having first completed Virtual Reality.

E-MALE

M. FAE GLASGOW

All was black, save for the pale gleamings of light: feet, face, hands, cock. Even the pallor was infected by the blackness, dark eyes in an untanned face, black hair at his cock, the shadows his erection cast over his white hands. Minimal movement, the stillness of a cat waiting for its prey.

Blake stared at him, every word used up, defiance an ebbing ache in his soul. His own defeat welling, pain burning into him, muscles cramping with the effort, yet he knelt there, and held his head high. Spine arching with the strain, groin thrust forward by the aching in his back, his weakness spotlighted by the single bulb that cast only the meanest glow of light onto Avon. It might have been the one thing that joined them, but it was merest background, another means to an end, the method by which Avon bound Blake to him by the darkness of his gaze.

The pain flared brighter, Blake's breath hissing on the upsurge, throat unable to contain the faint groan as the cramp passed. Agony threatened, his will no match for his body's incessant, howling needs. His face twisted, briefly, the spasm of pain matched by the involuntary twitch at his groin. The pain flew through him again, threatening to burst him into a million shards of humiliation, and he bit down on his cry of pain, a whimper bleeding from him instead.

And Avon smiled. He took a glass from the table at his side, a sparkle catching on the crystal as he brought it into the circle of light, his throat rippling as he swallowed, his movements unhurried, calculated, as he put the glass back out of the way. Slowly, with languid pleasure, he stroked himself,

hands encountering the suppleness of leather and the silkiness of skin, the hard edge of clothing and the harder edge of arousal, his cock thick and heavy in his hands. Hands very white against the black leather, he splayed his fingers, there, and there, just so to frame his cock which stood, prouder yet than Blake, and pulsed, once, twice, the upswelling matching the visible agonies on Blake's face.

Blake shifted, his shoulders strained backwards by the thin leather strips that caught his wrists so tightly behind his back, his hands with nowhere to rest but upon the cleft of his buttocks. He shivered, not from the other pain, but from what Avon had threatened to do. Fingers flexing, he glanced, quickly, at Avon's hands, trying not to see the rapacious erection, measuring instead the size of Avon's hands. Avon's words slithered coldly through his mind, making him swallow, making him wish for mere rape. Abruptly, another shaft of pain pierced him, and the first drops fell. Defeat, then, was imminent, his humiliation guaranteed.

Avon smiled, again. His hands left his arching cock, moved slowly instead to remove the blackness from his body, until he was all pale light with only shadings of darkness: eyes, chest, groin. He dappled his fingers across his body, following the pattern of hair, from right nipple to left, pausing to tease each one, then sliding slowly down the narrow ripple of hair to his crotch, skimming past his cock, dragging his fingers through the fine hair on his inner thighs, then upwards again, his hands tugging, ungently, on his nipples, pulling them out from his body, making the small peaks red and swollen.

Transfixed, desperate enough for distraction that he would stare at Avon making love to himself, Blake forced himself not to look away. The throb of pain was almost distant now, a sawing ache that churned deep in his belly, but better, oh, better by far than what Avon had in mind for him. Involuntarily, he shifted again, threatened by the simple memory of Avon's cold voice caressing his skin as his hands had been pulled so painfully behind him and locked away, as useless as the rest of his strength. His glance flickered sideways, to where the barest hint of shape was visible: Avon's gun rested there, an instant away from those terrifying

hands. That had been another of Avon's little promises: death, delivered from inside his own body. Another shiver, and another spasm threatening to unman him, another grimace of pain.

Avon did not smile. He spread his legs, fingers dipping in between his thighs, pressing under until Blake could see Avon's fingertip disappearing into his anus. Blake shuddered, looked away: and then Avon smiled. A small tub of clear gel was beside him, and he used it, fingers glistening in the light, the small bud of his rectum gleaming, morbid horror making Blake stare. Avon twisted, one leg hooked over one arm, the other hand free to press two, then three fingers into his open hole. All the while, he stared at Blake, his silence resonating with his promise to possess Blake, to take him in the greatest act of trust possible to a man. Slowly, he allowed his fingers to slide free of his own body, and settled himself once more, the viscid gel from his hands sliding wetly along the length of his cock. He was getting close, could feel orgasm building sweetly, his balls rising up tight and hot against the base of his cock. He stroked them, lightly, shivering as the delicate pleasure trembled through his nerves, his heart thudding with anticipation, Blake's debasement unfolding before his ravenous eyes.

Blake was breathing more heavily than Avon, his lips parted, mouth gasping in air, bitterness filling his eyes as Avon—mocking or moved, Blake neither knew nor cared—copied him; every gasp and moan made in pain echoed from Avon in pleasure. Even biting the inside of his mouth didn't help, physical pain being the least of it now, even that great agony overwhelmed by the mental anguish of losing control of himself, here, in front of Avon, the one man he dared show no weakness. But his body was only human, no matter what his will called itself, and time and nature were conspiring against him. Another drop caught the light, shining brightly as it dripped, demeaningly, from his body. Blake caught his breath, holding it, but still, his body betrayed him to Avon's unflinching eyes. Another drop followed the first, then another, more quickly, that all the warning Blake had that his control had failed him utterly. His urine streamed from him, running down his thighs, hot as blood. Humiliation crowded into him, but he refused

to add that to Avon's pleasure. Face set, implacable with a false pride, he knelt there at Avon's feet, piss pouring from him, acid burning his cock as it came from him in gushes.

Avon's lips were pulled back from his teeth, feral pleasure pulsing through him. One hand, white-knuckled, blurred on his cock; the other tugged on his balls, pulling them lower, defraying the imminent press of orgasm. His hands slowed, moved away from his rigid cock, the reddened flesh stark against the whiteness of his belly. With measured tread, he diminished the small distance between himself and Blake, slow-motion approach of his blindly seeking cock coming ever closer from Blake's clenched face. He stopped, the tip of his cock against Blake's determinedly closed lips, the pulse of his desire brushing him against Blake's mouth, the knowledge of what he was about to do written large upon Blake's hollowed visage.

Almost casually, Avon stepped back, crouching down, his hand unexpectedly gentle as it lingered on its way down Blake's belly to the softness of his cock and the last spattering bursts of fluid. He held Blake's cock, letting the piss run over his fingers, caressing Blake all the while, his affectionate sharing of this a worse debasement for Blake than the wetting himself had been. Stoic, he stared off over Avon's shoulder, distancing himself from the humiliation Avon was using his own body to mete out to him. As the final drops slid from his cock, Avon stroked it, his hands wet with Blake's own piss, rubbing him until heat and friction had dried the last traces away. And until tears threatened Blake at this, what surely had to be the worst betrayal of all: his body's mindless stirrings of response. Faint, yes, but unmistakable, and there for Avon, cruel and beautiful Avon, to see.

Under Avon's tender hands, his cock was slowly lengthening, still merely tumescent, but separate from him, against his will. He did not look down, did not look at Avon, but found some limbo to stare at. Until the cold touch of a blade shocked him, his panicked glance meeting Avon's superior pleasure. Blake looked down then, at the sharp tip of the knife that hovered, menacingly, just under the head of his cock. The blade circled him, never drawing blood, never doing more than whisper against his shrivelled

flesh. Under him now, where the flange cast its shadow and the frenum kept his foreskin tight against the shaft of his cock, the blade lingered there, toying with him, Avon's other hand coming up to stretch Blake's foreskin out, pulling it painfully over and beyond the head of his cock. With only the very tip touching, Avon pressed the point of the blade down. Blake's eyes closed in horror, expecting the worst. A tiny dot of pain, and then the flat side of the knife was being caressed along his cock. Avon stroked the palm of his hand down the side of Blake's face, eyes afire as he watched Blake lower his head and look, downwards, to see the relief of a single drop of blood slowly drying on the skin of his cock.

The blade smoothed a path up Blake's stomach, stopping at the tiny peak of nipple. Avon turned the knife again, rekindling Blake's panic as the razor edge threatened him there. And all the while, Avon's other hand caressed Blake's face gently. Small kisses were dropped upon Blake's skin, as Avon knelt in front of Blake, sucking on one nipple while he held the flat of the blade against the other, the metal no longer cold, warmed by Blake's body itself. A hint of relief as Blake realised that this was yet more of Avon toying with him, another hors-d'œuvre before the main course Avon had promised for himself and threatened Blake with. The knife was thrown aside, too far away for Blake to hope to reach it, but that mattered less than it being gone, one less temptation for Avon to yield to. Blake sighed then—and arched, crying out, as Avon's sharp teeth fastened on him, biting hard against his nipple, pain screeching through him.

With the blush of Blake's blood on his lips, Avon smiled.

Blake pulled at his restraints, even though his mind told him it was useless. The pain in his chest coruscated, blinding him almost as much as his fear. He struggled, twisting and turning, whilst Avon, impassive, rose to his feet and stood there, watching. Less than a minute, and Blake wrested himself back under control, his breath heaving in his chest under the singing pain. A hard stare at Avon, and then he looked down, relief flooding his face as he saw that he had merely been bitten not disfigured. A small smear of blood beaded his skin, and he flinched

when Avon reached down, wiped it off with a single finger.

Standing over the kneeling Blake, Avon brought his finger to his mouth, and licked Blake's blood from his hands. A graceful movement, the long lines of his back and legs limned in light, the high curve of his buttocks sheer perfection as he stepped out of Blake's field of vision and into the darkness beyond. A sound, and then Avon was once more in front of him, taunting Blake with his indifferent calm, taking the time to have a long drink of clear liquid, the classic symbol of every Inquisitor and tormentor to every prisoner in history. For a moment, Blake was alone again in the light, and then Avon was in front of him, and Avon's cock was pressing at his mouth. Quite casually and with supreme confidence, Avon reached down with both hands, one pressing at the hinge of Blake's jaw, the other pinching his nose shut. Furious with helplessness, Blake struggled for an instant, and then his mouth was open, and overfilled with Avon's erection, cock thrusting past his teeth, past his tongue, down into his throat. He tried to breathe in, got little but the musk of Avon's groin, pubic hair pressed against his nose, Avon's balls, faintly damp with gel, clinging to Blake's chin. Blake couldn't move, hands tied behind his back, head clamped in place by Avon's strong hands, his world filled with Avon's cock suffocating him. Then a movement, a blessed moment of air, and then it was back, thrusting into him, a rapacious hardness demanding satisfaction. With a skill born of the desperation to get this over and done with, Blake sucked as much as he could, moving his tongue, redoubling his efforts as Avon bucked into him when Blake scraped the burgeoning cock with his teeth. Avon's breath was loud, Blake's louder, made rhythmic by Avon thrusting into him, Avon's hands painfully hard as they held Blake steady, a haven for Avon's need. A roaring shout, and Blake was pulled in tight against Avon's belly, the cock in his mouth pulsing as semen spurted hotly down his throat, Avon thrusting even deeper as orgasm claimed him.

Blake was choking, unable to breath, begging with wordless whimpers, survival defeating pride. The cock in his mouth softened, Avon easing back slightly, far enough for Blake to

breathe but not so far that Blake could look up to see the bitter ache in Avon's eyes.

Avon's hands were treacherously tender as they smoothed Blake's curls back off his forehead, and again, when they touched the damp circle of Blake's mouth around his cock. The complexities of his own response were no surprise to Avon, but he did not want them showing on his face. He frowned, erasing all traces of any other emotion that might have been lurking there, but still, his hands were gentle as they explored Blake's flesh, the skin under his fingers soft, the paleness inviting Avon's mark upon it.

Later, he would do that. Later. For now, there were still pleasures to be had, and then, there were pleasures to be forced. He withdrew his cock from Blake's mouth, thrust his fingers in there instead, all four fingers jammed in at once. Oh, yes, there were pleasures to be had later, no matter how much Blake might refuse them at first; that would be the ultimate defeat and the ultimate trust. His cock twitched hopefully then subsided, his body too sated to respond to the titillations of his mind. His cock twitched again, but the reason was a very different sort of pleasure.

Blake gasped in relief as the fingers left his mouth, another layer of horror to build upon the foundations Avon had already laid. He knew, now, the measure of Avon's hands and his bones weakened at the thought of what Avon intended for him later. Anything was better than that, any humiliation a joy compared to the fear of yielding his body to such an invasion, to such total vulnerability, literally at the hands of another man. He sat back on his haunches then, and looked up at Avon, meeting the other man's gaze with a levelness that belied their positions. Blake would not cower, would meet this with pride, albeit dumb, for he did not dare trust his voice any more than he dared trust Avon after this.

With meticulous care, Avon reached down and opened Blake's mouth again, the only resistance this time the defiant glower in Blake's eyes. Cock soft and flaccid, it fitted easily inside Blake's mouth, teeth neither threat nor challenge, Blake's outward passivity a tacit, defiant claim that no matter what Avon did to his body, Blake himself would be untouched by it all. Avon stepped back a fraction, tilted Blake's head to

the precise angle, the tip of his cock in Blake's mouth, Blake staring up at him in silent rebellion. Avon gazed down at the other man, waiting, a flutter of anticipation going through him. A familiar sensation, and Blake's shocked surprise. Avon's hands were ready, holding Blake immobile, Blake's instinctive struggle completely in vain, only the smallest trickle escaping to run from the corner of his mouth, down his chin and on to his chest. Blake's face mirrored his every emotion, his deepest degradation, his utter humiliation.

And Avon smiled, a brief flicker of emotional ecstasy as he emptied himself into Blake. As he poured himself into Blake, he held the other man's gaze, held him to the last, forcing another forever-secret bond between them, forging another link in the twisted chain that bound them.

Finished at last, he wiped his cock on Blake's fiercely-closed lips, a single drop lingering like a kiss. Blake's glower was contemptuous on his back, but Avon was undisturbed: before the glare had concealed them, Avon had seen other, more complicated emotions toiling behind Blake's eyes. Progress, it seemed, was being made, step by slow step, Blake's indomitable spirit proving that even it could be compromised, if never fully defeated.

Blake refused to let it show, but the very stillness of his face gave hint of his tense fear as Avon walked towards him, a brimming glass in his left hand. Right-handed, Avon reached down, unmoved by the unwilling pleading in Blake's eyes. Quite delicately, using only his thumb and forefinger, he pinched Blake's nose shut; waited patiently until even Blake would give in and breathe. He permitted one great, gulping breath, and then he tipped the glass, the water pouring into Blake as Avon's piss had just done, as Blake's piss had poured out from him. The fury in Blake's eyes melted into Avon, and his face softened at Blake's useless courage, de-

fiance no longer anything but a fond delusion.

Still spluttering from the water, half choked, Blake opened his mouth to give vent to his outrage. And found it stoppered, a leather strap being deftly tied around his head, some sort of circular tube forcing his teeth apart and his mouth endlessly open. His eyes widened, following as Avon walked away from him, across the room, almost into the darkness again. Stared, in ever rising despair, as Avon neatly redressed and tidied the unseen table, one thing clinking against something else. Blake strained to keep Avon in sight, but couldn't, deprived of everything but the sound of Avon moving, and then, intimidatingly, the sound of water running. Avon once more, the light gilding his dark beauty, the tall glass scintillating in his hand, until it too was placed on the table with all the rest of Avon's toys.

Preparations complete, Avon reseated himself on the low reclining chair, his hands stroking his cock gently through the tensile skin of leather. He stared at Blake, holding the other man to him with the darkness of his gaze, and this time, Blake's resistance lasted a minimal moment less. All in black, save for the whiteness of his feet, his hands, and his face, Avon watched Blake, and waited.

The sound of clothing unfastening was loud, startling Blake into moving, setting the cramps in his arms off like alarms, and reminding him of the heaviness in his belly. He winced, shifted, tried to ease his pains. Avon's light hands reached within the darkness of his trousers, and brought his cock out, the pale skin caressed by the dim glow that bled from the brightness flooding Blake. Hands moved slowly, slowly rising cock held tight in a handmade fist. Blake stared, and swallowed, and tried not to think about Avon's glistening threat.

It began all over again.

And Avon smiled.



REVERSION

—act of turning something the reverse way; return to a former practice; reversal. Being a “foot soldier” in the Rebellion isn’t all it’s played up to be. While the high and mighty “Avons” are out getting the glory, the low and bored “Vilas” are becoming more and more, well, bored. And then, just when things finally go Vila’s way, there appears to be a slight reversal of fortune...

HEY DIDDLE, DIDDLE

EMMA SCOT

And what would have happened if Zukan had not betrayed them and the course of their history had been forever changed?

Not that there was ever over much to do at Xenon Base, but things had to be dire when even Vila was wishing there was work to be done.

“Oh, I’m sure I could find you something,” Tarrant replied without looking up from the vistape he was flicking through. “We could always switch off some of the servos and let you clean the toilets, if you’re really stuck for something to do.”

“I didn’t mean I actually wanted to do *work*. I was more...I was being more metaphysical.”

“Metaphysical?” Tarrant looked up then, baiting Vila patently less boring than re-reading *Techno* for the millionth time. “You’ve been reading Avon’s books again, haven’t you? Best be careful in case he catches you sneaking round his room, sounding out the big words.”

“You mean big words like ‘Tarrant’s head’? Only joking, only joking,” the latter in a rush as Tarrant seemed on the verge of deciding that thumping Vila was even less boring than baiting him.

Silence.

“God, I’m bored,” Vila said, yet again.

“The servos...” Tarrant replied.

Silence.

"I used to know this brilliant place. I wouldn't be bored if I was there, I can tell you that for nothing."

"I suppose this is one of your brothels? I swear you've seen the insides of more brothels than the entire 3rd Fleet." A long look, taunting rather than out-and-out hostile. "Are you sure you were never on the game?"

"Of course I was never on the game!"

"True," Tarrant replied, giving Vila a thorough look-over. "You don't have the looks for it."

"Looks aren't everything, curlytop, looks aren't everything. Skill, that's what counts."

"Listening to you, I'd've thought it was more the credits in your pocket than skill."

"It's not just pros I've had, Tarrant, although I have given great satisfaction even there," he said, polishing his fingernails on his grey tunic. "Even if I do say so myself."

"You'd have to say it for yourself—no-one else would."

All outrage and high voice, Vila sprang to his feet, crossing the living room to sit right next to Tarrant on the small sofa. "There's a list as long as your arm who'd say I was positively gifted between the sheets."

"Oh, I believe you," Tarrant said sarcastically.

"God, I'm bored!" Vila exclaimed, falling back against the sofa. That last remark made him miss Avon: no comments about being ungifted between the ears, or how most men preferred to be gifted between the legs, nothing. Not a bloody word that he could have a comeback to. Just a flat comment to stop the entire bloody conversation dead in its tracks. "When's Avon getting back?" he demanded, aggrieved and resentful that it should be Tarrant sitting here boring him and Avon off with Dayna talking to some revolutionary bloke. Would serve the rotten bastard right if he got lost and never found his way back. Then they'd see how much Avon liked being left somewhere boring, wouldn't they? "He was said it was only going to take another couple of days, didn't he, which means he's late, isn't he? Typical, that. He gets to run off to a different planet—and I bet its rotten with interesting people, *Tarrant*—and what do I get? Stuck here with you and Soolin the Invisible."

Tarrant, aggravating to the end, flicked si-

lently through his magazine.

"I said," Vila did indeed say, and loudly, "when's Avon coming in?"

"You also said he was late, so I didn't see much point wasting my breath telling you something you actually knew. Anyway, I don't know why you're in such a hurry for him to come back. It's rather pleasant with him gone. Peaceful."

"More like dead bloody boring."

Silence.

"God, I'm bored."

"Vila, if you say that just once more, then I shall tell Soolin who's been spying on her in the sauna this past week."

"I have not been spying on her!"

Tarrant used the vulturish smile he had stolen from Avon. "And do you think she's going to believe you?"

"But I haven't!"

"That's not going to stop her cutting you into tiny little pieces."

"And eating me for lunch," Vila said gloomily. "But it just might be worth it!" he went on, brightening. "I mean, think about it. Soolin, in the sauna, all naked and pink..."

Judging by the semi-glazed state of Tarrant's eyes, he was thinking about it. Thinking very hard. "Think about being in there with her..."

"And all her weapons outside."

"No need for that," Tarrant murmured, wistfully, "she'd be willing."

"Yeh, it is only an imagine, isn't it? Soolin in the sauna." Vila was dreamy-eyed, contemplating some of life's sweeter thoughts. "Reminds me of this time... I knew a girl, and she had a twin. Both of them had lovely blonde hair and legs—you've never seen better legs than the pair that pair had. Gorgeous!"

"Twins?" Quick interest, the virstape tossed down, the old magazine holding absolutely no appeal whatsoever now. "Identical?"

"Not even close. But you could tell they were twins. Tall, slim, shoulder-length blond hair, and the legs, god, those legs..."

"You're a leg man, then," Tarrant grinned conspiratorially. "I'm a breast man myself."

"Oh, I *like* tits," came the reply, showing Tarrant what Vila sounded like when he was being heartfelt and honest. "Big ones."

"Prefer them small, myself. All pert and

pretty—”

“Bouncy. Much better bouncy. Yes,” Vila said with reminiscent pleasure, “I like tits, big ones.” A huge sigh as he contemplated more of life’s more fleshly joys. “And big cocks as well.”

“Yes, I rather thought you weren’t particularly fussy,” Tarrant said drily, and this time it was Avon’s tone of voice he had borrowed.

“I am too fussy!” Vila propped his feet up on the table, crossing his legs ever so casually and ever so discreetly while he was at it. “I only fuck the best, which is why,” he added sharply, “I’ve never fucked you.”

“You’ve never fucked me because I wouldn’t let you!” Tarrant was all wounded pride and offended masculinity, all of it undermined by the way he was blushing.

“Oh, like that, is it?” Knowing, and insinuating, with the pity of the older, more experienced man for the untried, and the first lickings of sexual interest. Avon was a long way away, and, if he were to tell the truth, a long time gone. They hardly ever had sex any more, and when they did, it was hurried, almost impersonal, Avon getting it over and done with too quickly usually for much more than a wank or a bit of frottage.

Tarrant was squirming under Vila’s direct stare. “No it’s not—whatever it is you’re implying.”

“I’m implying, Tarrant,” Vila leaned over to whisper in Tarrant’s ear somewhere beneath all those curls, “that you’ve never been fucked.”

“Well of course I haven’t!” Genuine outrage that time, and Tarrant sat up very straight and as far away from Vila as he could get without making it look as if he were running away. “What do you think I am, a catamite?”

“Now don’t go getting all upset,” Vila said, playing Tarrant like a fish on the line, the old skills not forgotten, not even dusty from their long disuse. “I never said you were an animal.”

Tarrant, bless his straight-from-the-FSA-to-combat heart, was doing half Vila’s work for him. “Not a cat, Vila, a catamite.”

Vila, who wore his ignorance like a badge of honour at the best of times, frowned in very convincing puzzlement. “Then what’s a catamite when it’s at home?”

“A catamite is... Well, a catamite’s a man—or a boy, but then, if one of the...erm...participants

is a boy, then that’s something else as well, but—well, if one of them, you know, always, just, well, *takes it*, if you know what I mean, then, well, then he’s what we call a catamite.”

“Oh,” Vila said, unimpressed. “I always just called him fucked. You know,” he added, gazing at the flushed and fidgeting Tarrant, “you’re not half bad when you’re all shy like this. Did you,” he leaned forward just a bit closer, all the better to let his thigh brush Tarrant’s, “really mean it when you said you’d never been fucked?”

“Vila, what man would let himself be...fucked?” Tarrant shook his head at Vila’s folly, obviously amazed that anyone could think that.

“I could name one or two,” Vila said meaningfully, his right hand travelling even more meaningfully from Tarrant’s left knee up his thigh.

“Oh, yes?” Tarrant said, lifting Vila’s hand away from his crotch and then just sort of holding on to it. Shoving it back into Vila’s lap seemed so final, such a definite no, and Tarrant wasn’t averse to a little dalliance, as long as Vila understood which one of them would be the one being fucked. And as long as Avon wasn’t around. Tarrant still wasn’t sure what the set-up there was: he could never make up his mind if Avon was utterly contemptuous of Vila and wouldn’t care if Vila disappeared in a puff of blue smoke, or if the two of them had stayed together all these years because of a deep and abiding (and a deeply hidden) affection for each other. “You could name one or two?” he hinted, this not the time for subtlety, going by what Vila was doing now.

“There’s me, for starters,” Vila replied, so distracting Tarrant with the way he was licking Tarrant’s hand where it held his that Tarrant didn’t even think to dispute Vila putting himself in with the real men. “Then there’s Blake.”

“Blake?” Wide-eyed surprise over that, no doubt abetted by the fact that Vila was now sucking, so suggestively, so wetly, on Tarrant’s fingers. In amongst the slow peaking of sexual interest, inspiration peaked as well. “Which means he and Avon—”

“That’s right,” Vila mumbled round a mouthful of Tarrant. “And me as well. Sometimes it’d be two of us and the other would

watch, and sometimes it'd be all three of us."

Tarrant's breath was coming faster now, and he had reclaimed his hand and claimed one of Vila's, pressing them both onto his hardening groin, rubbing himself against Vila's strong hand. "The three of you? And Blake let Avon fuck him?"

"Let me fuck him an' all." Vila's eyes were narrowed, seductive, his breath hot as he came in close to kiss Tarrant. "You like hearing all this, don't you? Turns you on something fierce, doesn't it?"

The slow whisper of trousers being unfastened was Vila's answer, that, and the hiss of breath as Vila's bare hand found Tarrant's cock and encircled it in heat. "Yeh, we'd all be in there together, in Blake's bed..." A pause to kiss, his tongue invading Tarrant, the latter not complaining, too busy imagining and too caught up in this unexpected sexual experience to really pay attention to the way Vila wasn't so much pleasuring him as mastering him too. "And in Avon's bed as well, sometimes," Vila whispered against Tarrant's damp skin, their faces so close he could see the flecks of grey amidst the blue. The pulse thudded through the cock in his hand as he mentioned Avon's name, and Vila's intuition was as right as usual. He played on that reaction to Avon's name as he played with Tarrant's cock, his own body responding more quickly now. Tarrant wasn't ugly, and his body felt beautiful, but it was a thrill, a deep, forbidden thrill, to be talking about Avon like this. "All three of us, Avon fucking Blake, his cock inside him." He could picture it too, Avon curved over Blake's bent back, his hair curling damply with sweat. "He's big, is Avon, and he's all pale, till he gets really worked up. When he's hard, he can keep it up for hours and hours, or," he nibbled on Tarrant's ear, blowing into it after, trailing his tongue along his neck as he whispered on, "at least it feels like hours when he's inside you. Fucking you. Fucking you so hard, his cock all big inside." He shivered then, remembering Avon inside him, back when they could never get enough sex with each other, back when Avon would come seeking him out and they'd try everything either one of them had ever heard about or could imagine. God, how he missed those days... Tarrant shifted under him, and Vila moved, manoeuvring them until Tarrant's

trousers were down round about his knees. "There," Vila said fondling Tarrant's exposed cock, "that's better. You're lovely, aren't you? Nice and thick, and you've got gorgeous balls. Never seen such smooth balls," he muttered, sliding down Tarrant's body until his mouth was overflowing with the tenderness of Tarrant's flesh, smooth ovals in liquid skin. "Beautiful," he whispered, pulling Tarrant's boots off, the trousers following after, unnoticed by their owner. "Oh, yes, you're beautiful," Vila said again; then was quiet, save the wet sounds of him sucking Tarrant right down into his throat and Tarrant groaning with pleasure. Vila caressed Tarrant's balls, then slid his hand lower, there, down to that tiny hole that Vila knew could open—*would* open—wide and take a cock inside. His cock. Virgin arse, that was what he was touching, and it was his for the taking, he knew it, just knew it. Tarrant was ripe for the picking, too randy and too deprived to worry about it until it was all over. The pleasure would hit him too fast, would simply carry him away, if Vila was even still half as good as he used to be. Oh, yes, this was going to be good. And it'd serve Avon right. If Avon didn't want him any more, well, a man was entitled.

Fumbling one-handed, his other hand and his mouth still busy, Vila managed to get his own trousers and underwear down and out of the way. He sucked hard, raising his mouth until only the head of Tarrant's cock was still inside him, and he flicked it with his tongue, smiling round it as Tarrant groaned and bucked. Time, definitely time. He let Tarrant slip from his mouth with a loud wet sound and knelt back on his heels, his hands still busy, one on Tarrant's cock, the other playing with the tiny arsehole. Frantically, he tried to think what he could use for lubricant, spit not quite up to a first time. He wet his finger and pushed the tip inside, talking again, keeping Tarrant so caught up in the whole thing he couldn't form a protest. "It's great having a cock up you," Vila said, trying to remember if Dayna had put that hand cream into the same cupboard Dorian had kept the wine in. He kept his hands moving, stroking Tarrant on the inside of his thighs, tugging very gently on the hair the way Avon liked. "A terrific feeling. Makes you feel full, all full and hot, and it's right there, inside you—can't explain

the feeling. Best feeling in the world, though," he whispered, remembering, "being fucked by Avon, and him kissing you while he's inside you..."

"I want you to," Tarrant almost shouted, defiant and proud and voice unsteady with nerves.

"You want me to what?" Vila asked him quietly, stroking him gently, easing the caresses.

Tarrant swallowed, twice, before he could say it, and neither he nor Vila stopped staring at each other the entire time. "Fuck me. I want you to fuck me."

And as Vila grinned in triumph, they heard it: Avon, sounding so unlike himself, his voice calling Vila's name.

Tarrant and Vila flew apart as if greased, both of them fumbling for their clothes, the instinct not to be caught deflating their interests in sex. His trousers somehow tangled with his underwear, Vila was jiggling on one leg, backside bare, back to the door, when Tarrant's sudden immobility struck him. "Oh, fuck," Vila said, gulping.

"That certainly would seem to be the plan," Avon said, so coldly that Vila didn't want to turn around. Especially not when he saw the expression on Tarrant's face.

"Avon, it's not the way it looks," Tarrant had given up trying to get his clothes on and was clutching the untidy bundle in front of him. He was smiling deprecatingly, his voice conciliatory, apologetic, and strangely, unnervingly; his eyes were gentle, real regret colouring everything he did. "Really, it isn't."

"It hardly matters what it *looks* like, does it?" Flat, as dead as when Cally had died, that same peculiar emptiness to it.

"Yes, well, however it looks..." Tarrant trailed off, and his face softened into something dangerously close to pity. "It—it was my fault, Avon. It's been a long time and Vila was here and—"

"And you decided to avail yourself of his shopsoiled charms."

Vila still didn't turn round, but he could feel Avon looking at him, could see the trajectory of that bitter gaze by watching Tarrant watching Avon.

There was a momentary silence, Tarrant searching for words, Vila waiting to see what

was coming next and Avon... Who knew what was going on there? Looking at Avon wouldn't help, Vila knew from long experience and many a painful event, but letting Avon look at him could get him kicked out.

"No, really, it was my fault," Tarrant was saying again, smiling his most charming smile. "I'm afraid I—" He broke off, his glance going from Avon to Vila and back again, and whatever he saw there made him risk his neck for something he hadn't even thought was real. "I bullied him," he said, standing up straight like a soldier at his own court-martial. "I forced him into it. Scared him, you know how easy that is—"

"So you scared him? Shall I tell you something about Vila, Tarrant?"

Behind him, Vila could hear the measured tread of Avon coming into the room, could sense him drawing closer, was waiting for the axe to fall.

"Vila plays the fool and he plays the coward, but he has survived more than you or I ever have. He has a talent for making other people think he's so terrified he'll do whatever they want him to."

Vila closed in his eyes in sheer misery. Oh, god, he'd forgotten, lost it in the day-to-days of living with Avon and running from the Federation: that was how he'd got himself into Avon's bed. Pretending to be terrified, pretending that he assumed that as the only Delta on a shipful of Alphas, he'd be fair game, taken by whomsoever had a whim for sex. Had cried and sobbed and clung, and thus, seduced Avon. Seduced him and kept him, even if it had gone stale of late.

"Avon..." he whispered, but no-one heard.

"And afterwards, one realises that Vila has precisely what he wanted in the first place. You, however," he was still speaking, still with all the life of autumn leaves, "may well find that you have nothing at all."

"Avon—" Vila said, louder, impossible to ignore.

Avon merely looked at him, raised an eyebrow very slightly and then turned away.

"Avon!"

"Oh," Avon turned back to them, his dark eyes, sharp gaze blunted by something nameless, "in future, do try to control your rutting until you are at least not in public rooms? It can be

such a..." a darting, darkling glower at Vila, "...messy procedure."

"Now, Avon, don't you go going off like that," Vila began, stumbling over his entanglement of clothing to follow Avon. "Avon! Wait for me! I need to talk to you!"

Avon strode on, head very high, back stiff as a poker.

"It wasn't what it looked like!"

Still nothing, and Avon was rounding the far corner.

Vila, too far behind to catch up, too thoroughly cut out to have a chance of a hearing now, hadn't—quite—given up. "Why were you shouting for me?"

"Presumably not for some emergency," Tarrant said from behind him amidst the rustling of clothes and the subliminal sounds of terminal embarrassment. "I don't think even Avon would let us get blown up because of what he saw."

"Not when he'd need you to do your fancy-dancer flying to get him out of here. Oh, god," Vila moaned, sitting down, trousers pooling round one foot, misery pooling in his eyes. "Oh, god, god, god..."

Pristine and good as new, Tarrant knelt down in front of him. "It'll be all right," comfort offered awkwardly but sincerely by the looks of him. "He'll calm down, especially when he realises it was only a spur of the moment sex thing."

Vila just looked at him.

"Well, won't he?" Doubtful, now, and guilt rising with it.

"Two or three years ago, I'd've said yes, absolutely, no problem. Ten minutes ago, I'd've said he wouldn't've given a flying fuck and would probably've been glad to be shot of me. But after that little explosion..."

"But he didn't even raise his voice."

"He never does. It's the way he looks at you..."

"But...but he can't be too bothered by it. I mean, after all, just look at you and him and Blake—"

A sly little smile, unlike the subservient or cheeky Vila to which Tarrant was accustomed. "Believed that, did you? Like riding a bicycle."

"You mean that was all a lie?" Annoyed now, guilt giving way to anger. "All of it?"

"It's called pillow-talk, where I come from.

You say anything you can think of, if it gets your head on their pillow."

"So it's always been..." and you could see the wheels turning, could see how slowly Tarrant could accept something he had never thought of before. It was one thing to suspect a hidden affection between the two, but a bond strong enough to keep them together through four years of hell?

"Yep," Vila replied, muffled by the way he was cradling his head. "It's always just been me and Avon."

"Then you had best get after him, hadn't you?"

"Suppose suicide is the best option, given the circumstances, eh?" He clambered to his feet, almost fell over his clothes, Tarrant catching him just in time.

"I've never seen you all fingers and thumbs like this, Vila," Tarrant offered, kneeling down to solve the one aspect of the problem he could actually do something about. "Don't worry so," he added, giving Vila one of his best smiles. "Once he calms down..."

"Hardly the time or the place," Soolin said from the doorway where she stood, surveying the scene of a half-naked Vila with Tarrant on his knees in front of him.

"God, yes," Dayna put in, sounding more than a little disgusted. "And you had better count yourself lucky, Tarrant, that Avon's plans to bring all the others back here fell through. I don't think your Zeeona would be too pleased to come all this way to find you getting ready to do things to Vila."

"You mean Avon's plan worked?" Vila demanded, hauling his trousers up with scant regard for his very tender genitals.

"Worked like a dream," Dayna told him.

"Apparently, it could all be over in a matter of just months. So now you know, you boys can get back to your celebrating." She traded grins with Dayna as Tarrant blushed and Vila fumbled with his rumpled clothes. "Although you'd better find somewhere more private. Avon's looking for you, Vila."

"Yeah, and he found me an' all, and I don't need you rubbing my nose in it, all right?" Vila positively snarled, shoving his way between the two women, not even flinching when he brushed against Soolin's ever-present

gun. "And don't you tell them a fucking thing, Tarrant!"

He could find Avon's room with his eyes shut, but it took him a while to do it this time. Every lock, every alarm, every defence was switched on, and he spent several minutes getting past these, the first of Avon's formidable defences—or weapons, if one were on his wrong side. Which Vila was, presently, and perhaps for the future as well. Vila could usually trust Avon to see reason, eventually, but he'd been odd when he'd found them, odd enough that Vila had no idea what was going on.

The door hissed open, and Vila half-expected to be greeted with a shot to the head, but all he got was a dirty look that was almost as lethal.

"Hello," he said, sidling in, locking the door behind him: if it were locked, he could still get out quickly, but at least this way, no-one would be able to repeat the last little scene and walk in on him. "Nice to see you." Inane, he knew, but it gave him time to try and gauge Avon's mood, Avon's attitude. "Hard trip, was it?" he asked, only now noticing how dishevelled Avon was, unshaven, shirt crumpled, jacket undone.

"Not as hard as some things," Avon remarked, casual but for the cutting stare.

"Yes, well, I can explain that..." Vila muttered, easing himself farther into the room, sitting down on Avon's computer chair. "I was surprised you didn't have your gun out, when I came in the door," he added before Avon could get any ideas about guns and Vila and Tarrant. "You know, what with someone breaking through all your safeguards and defences like that."

"But who else could it be but you?" Avon said, some shading of his voice talking not at all about the door but about other things never before mentioned. "That system—the door—" he put in quickly, as if there was some doubt as to which system was under discussion, "was set up with you in mind. Difficult enough for you to enjoy the challenge, easy enough not to defeat you."

"Oh. That was nice of you. Thoughtful, you know." Vila licked his lips, picked up a stylus to give his hands something to fiddle with. "Fancy being thoughtful about something else?"

"What is there to be thoughtful about?" No

pretence, no beating about the bush, something Vila normally rather liked about Avon. "You and Tarrant were obviously so caught up in each other you were beyond thinking about such social niceties as locked doors. I think it's all very clear. In fact, it's so clear, I'm not sure why you're here at all."

"Well, you see, it's not as clear as all that. I mean, it *looks* clear, looks like you can see right through it, right? But it's not really clear at all. In fact, it's so unclear, it's like, it's like... Well, it's like Orac's casing, right? You can see right through it, and what do you see? Mechanics and flashing lights and wires and weird stuff, but that's not really Orac, is it?"

"Oh, but it is."

"It is?"

"Orac's a machine and I can tell you what every one of those flashing lights signifies and I can tell you every detail about every wire. It's as clear as it seems."

"Yes, well, Orac's just a thing then, not like people. People are more complicated, and if you look through us, what do you see? Skin and bones, that's all, and we're more than that, aren't we?"

"Ah." Avon smiled at that, a worrying, impersonal expression. "You are under the misapprehension that I'm...affected by your having sex with Tarrant. I'm afraid you flatter yourself, Vila. Quite a bit, in fact."

"Oh, no you don't, I saw you in there—"

"You didn't even *look* at me in there!" The first hint of the serious anger underlying the civil and civilised surface. "You were too busy gazing at your current infatuation. He is, I presume, a mere infatuation, or have you finally found love?" A wicked smile, sharp-toothed and vicious, but not quite enough to mask the twist of pain in his eyes. "But I think it only fair that I should warn you: he'll be no more able to provide you with 'a wife, a whole pile of kids and lots of lovely locks' than I was."

"When did I say that's what I wanted?"

"When have you ever said anything else? Oh, yes, your palace with its thousand virgins in red fur—and how could I forget the diamond floors? And your own personal brothel, complete with blonde twins with 'big tits'." Avon was pacing now, tight, controlled steps round the small room, circling, circling, now in front of Vila,

now behind him, invisible, intangible, but for the inexorable sound of his voice. “Eight wives, one for each night and one ‘spare’. ‘A flotilla of females’—”

“All right, all right, I get the message. But they were only fantasies, Avon. You knew I didn’t really want any of those. Well, apart from the diamond floors, maybe. Oh, c’mon, Avon, they were just make-believe!”

Avon sat on the other chair, the low recliner that reminded them so of the *Liberator*. He leaned back, lines of tiredness limning his eyes and mouth as he stared, unblinking, at the ceiling. “I swore I wouldn’t be absurd or unreasonable. I apologise,” he said, shockingly.

“Apologise? You? But you never did anything. I’m the one who—”

Avon wiped Vila’s protests away with a weary gesture of his hand. “The only thing you are guilty of is indiscretion. The communal living room really is hardly the place.”

“That’s what Soolin said as well.”

“Soolin saw?” He sat up suddenly, then subsided again, but not before Vila had seen humiliation mingle with everything else. “And that didn’t stop you?”

“We’d already stopped. She came in after you.” He played with the stylus, twisting his fingers round it in a complicated madrigal of movement. “Wish she’d been the one to come in first.”

“What difference would it have made?”

“You wouldn’t have found out, that’s a good enough difference for me!”

“But I would have found out. Oh, I admit to being...blind. But even I would have noticed eventually.”

“You think this’s been going on for a while, don’t you?”

“Hasn’t it?” Genuine amusement, of the hell-bent sort. “Amusing, isn’t it? The cuckold cuckolded in his own nest.”

There was only one thing Vila could think of to say to that. “Eh?”

Avon’s eyes were openly affectionate, the expression showing now, as if it didn’t matter any more. “Nothing worth worrying over.” He was on his feet again, moving slowly now, his touch light and delicate as he traced over the bits and pieces on the shelf above his terminal. “May I ask you something?”

“I don’t like this,” Vila blurted out. Avon turned, looked at him, so much the same man as he’d been when first they met. “You being formal like this, and all polite. I thought you’d be nasty and cross and sarcastic.”

Whimsical, Avon’s fingers reaching out to Vila’s cheek, hand clenching as he pulled back without touching. “Why, don’t you like me being nice?”

“Well, it’s not natural, is it? If you want to ask me something, you just do it—same as me with you. Strangers get asked nicely for permission, not you and me.”

“Aren’t we strangers, you and I?” A tender smile, and eyes so sad. “I rather think we are. But I did want to ask you,” he said, whirling round, his back to Vila, his voice becoming monotone, hiding what had so briefly been displayed. “Why Tarrant? Of all people, why did you pick Tarrant?”

“Well, there’s not much else about, is there? Who else could it’ve been?”

“Dayna, Soolin—Zeeona even. And if had to be male, there were any number of Zukan’s people you could have had.”

“Cept they were there and I was here, being stupid.” But he wasn’t being stupid now. He could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times Avon had been this open with him: he wasn’t going to let this opportunity slip. “Why does it being Tarrant bother you so much? I mean, it can’t be because I know him, because you wouldn’t mind if it was one of the girls, so it’s not that you’re put out because it wasn’t anonymous fucking.” Avon tensed, an abortive gesture of his hand telling Vila that he was bothered that it hadn’t been anonymous: which meant that maybe he didn’t mind about the girls because the girls hadn’t happened. “Is it because it was another bloke?”

Avon looked at him, briefly, inscrutable, turning away again almost immediately. “If it were girls... A man can offer another man some things women can’t truly provide.”

“But since I was diddling about with Tarrant, you think I want him instead of you? For fuck’s sake, Avon, when did you turn stupid, eh? I was messing about with him, having a bit of sex, not marrying the prat. You been takin’ funny pills again? What has Tarrant got that you haven’t, eh? What’s he got better than you? Go on, you

just try to tell me that, and then you'll see how fucking stupid you're being."

"And what attributes does Tarrant possess that exceed mine or that I lack completely?" Avon sat back down, crossing his legs at the ankle, the movement drawing attention to the fact that his feet were bare, dirtied from pacing the floor. Arms crossed behind his head, he began calmly enough. "Let me see. He is younger. He has curly hair, and you are inordinately fond of curls. He is more handsome—he lacks my wrinkles, for one thing. Taller. Slimmer. Better physique in general. More easily fooled, more easily manipulated. Better endowed."

Avon sat up, meeting Vila's eyes. "Nothing to say? Then that proves I haven't been taking drugs, doesn't it? And I confess to many things, but I'm not entirely stupid. Merely blind."

"You know, you're right about our Tarrant's charms. No two ways about it. Younger, taller, handsomer, thinner—and he does have a bigger cock, doesn't he? But the same's true about me, isn't it? Not comparing to Tarrant, I mean." Vila swallowed, trying to dislodge the knowledge stuck in his craw. But this was probably the only chance he was ever going to have with an Avon this willing to actually tell him things. Might as well know for a fact, instead of just thinking he knew. "All that, about me being not much compared to Tarrant—or almost anyone else, if you wanted to be brutal about it, which you probably would, being you—but all that, is that why..." He hesitated, making the stylus spin and dance before going on. "Is that why you got fed up with me? Or was it one thing in particular?"

"Fed up with you?" Avon sounded truly confused, which was miraculous as far as Vila was concerned, considering it had all been a bit bloody obvious as far as he was concerned. "What the hell made you think that, idiot?"

"How about the minor detail about you not having sex with me any more? I'd've thought you'd think that was clear enough."

Avon laughed at that, laughed too hard and too loud for it to be entirely honest. "You mean you really had no idea? Oh, Vila, you are a fool."

"Thanks for the compliment. Care to tell me how come I was such a moron, then?"

"What happened the last few times we had sex?"

"Not a lot," which was, unhappily, true.

"Is that how you saw it? I remember more than that. I remember me felling you."

"Yes, but that was it. We'd usually do other stuff after that, not just you getting up and leaving like that. Thought I'd done something awful, been dirty down there or something..."

"And the time after that? Do you remember that?"

Vila shifted uncomfortably. He didn't mind reminiscing about past lovers or current fantasies, but it was discomfiting to be dissecting their sex life like this. "Well," he said, feeling really inadequate, wondering when Avon was going to tell him that Vila wasn't the lover he'd always thought himself to be, "all we did that time was wank. And kiss. I mean, I'm not complaining about that, it was really nice, but it was, I dunno, mechanical. As if you weren't really enjoying yourself." He shut his eyes then, waiting for the bombshell to land right on him.

"And the last time?"

Funny, he hadn't thought about the last time for days now. It was an odd memory, unsettling, something almost final about it at the time, a finality that had been borne out by the way Avon avoided him after. "I fucked you," Vila said baldly. "Doggy-style." His voice cracked with a pain he had managed to pretend hadn't been real. "And you didn't want me touching you."

"No, I didn't, not that time. Haven't you realised what those last few times all had in common? And the way things had been going before?"

"Things had been a bit frantic, a bit on the desperate side, before that—and that's what made it worse, Avon! All of a sudden, it was as if you didn't want me any more." A deep breath, then: "You got any booze in here? I could do with a drink."

Avon rose to get the drink from its newest hiding place, and all his movements were slightly off, as if he were drunk, or exhausted.

"How did me apologising to you for having it off with Tarrant in the living room turn into us talking about where it all went wrong with us, eh?"

"I never intended it to be anything else."

"You what?" He gulped down most of his drink, all this emotional stuff thirsty business.

“But weren’t you furious?”

“No—yes, but only with myself for not seeing it coming. As for why I wanted to talk to you...” He took his own drink, holding it between his hands, staring into it as if he wanted to drown himself instead of drink it.

“Avon? You all right?”

“As well as can be expected. Have you seen Dayna?” he asked, throwing Vila off balance.

“Only for a second and I didn’t stay to chat. I had other things on my mind at the time. Look, we can talk about all that later—”

“Zukan agreed to manufacture the antidote. He has an alliance of sorts, with enough troops and materiel to take care of any Federation unit that stays loyal to Servalan.” He was bland, repeating the report as if it meant nothing, as if it weren’t the emancipation of the Galaxy. “In six months at most, it will be over. With Zukan, his allies and the various rebel groups in place, there will be no shortage of people willing to take over the running of a newly drug-free population.”

“Which means we’ll be out of it, won’t it?”

“If we choose to be. We can disappear, go anywhere, do anything we please.” Intense, suddenly, his eyes fierce, bright. “Can you imagine it, Vila? Free, of all this.” Exuberantly, his single gesture encompassed Xenon Base and everything it stood for. Avon’s face was alight, changed, as if the past four years had never existed. With his hair once more falling over his forehead, with the deep lines of tension erased from round his mouth, he was more like the man he had once been than the tense, near-sociopath he had been slowly becoming just to survive an ordered world gone mad. “Think about it—when I left here, I expected Zukan to be another useless lead—at best. I expected the situation only to worsen and I honestly couldn’t see a way for any of us to survive this. And now?” He slumped back in his chair, relief making him limp, the predatory, primitive tension needed to survive already bled from him on the long flight back from Zukan. “The end was in sight, and it wasn’t a disaster. My promise to Blake, my duty to the stupid bovine masses, my debt to Cally—all of it, wiped clean. All that pressure gone, in a moment. I was—me again. Not just a rebel leader, not a terrorist or strategist or criminal. Simply Kerr Avon. Reborn.

Made anew.” A cynical laugh to protect from the disillusion and disappointment within. So I came rushing back here,” self-mocking, laughing at something Vila was still only suspecting, “full of myself and the joys of life. And found that I was too late. Tarrant was finally in my place.”

“It was only sex, Avon. Didn’t mean anything,” Vila was saying, dealing with the one part of all this he fully understood. Avon was hinting at other things, but in the mean time, Vila could at least clean up the Tarrant mess. “We’ve never said it was just the two of us. Never said we couldn’t have sex elsewhere.”

“But then, Vila, we never said anything at all, did we?”

“Maybe we should’ve.”

“Perhaps we ought.”

Vila looked at this man who had been his lover longer than anyone else, the one man who never tried to change him. “I don’t want Tarrant. I was going to fuck him because I was pissed off at you not wanting me any more and well, because he’d never been fucked, and I was randy, and you know I’ve got a bit of a thing about virgins...”

“Tarrant’s never had sex? Well, well, well!”

“You can wipe that smirk off your face. He’s had sex, just never been fucked. And he was there, and you weren’t...”

“And you never have been able to resist temptation, have you?” Change of subject again, Avon awkward, his uneasiness palpable. “Didn’t you wonder why I didn’t want you touching me? Why I was so careful to make sure that I sucked you, that I was the one fucked?”

Vila shrugged, not entirely happy to go back to this discussion of his own inadequacies. “Just thought you’d gone off me, that’s all. It does happen, you know. And there was Dayna swooning all over you, and Soolin being gorgeous and Tarrant panting after you...”

“If I wanted a change, then why didn’t I have one of them?”

“Look, Avon, we can circle around this all night, or you can just come out and say it. I’ve had it,” he snapped, patience abruptly broken. Avon could go on like this for hours, and at the end, Vila knew he’d be no farther forward than when he started. “You make it sound as if you think I’m the one who’d gone off you, but a

bloody genius couldn't've told that from the way you were behaving. You were the one who pushed me away, so why don't you stop playing with me and come right out and tell me what was wrong with me, all right?"

"In simple words? Brutal, even?"

"Brutal's fine, as long as it doesn't take a month of bloody Sundays."

"Nothing. There was absolutely nothing wrong with *you*."

Which meant... Vila rifled through their conversation, Avon's stupid notion that Tarrant was more appealing than him, that stuff about being free, all that about the sex being his problem.

"No," he said out loud. "It couldn't be that."

"Couldn't it?" Said calmly enough, but with more shame than Avon normally exhibited in a year.

But it would make sense. It would take something bloody extreme to make Avon feel inadequate next to Tarrant, even if it were only in the arena of sex. And the feeling of freedom meant having a huge strain taken off him. The sex being Avon's problem, not Vila's. "God, it all makes sense. But if that's all it was, then why didn't you just fucking *tell* me? I went through agonies, and all the problem was, was that your plumbing had gone wonky? Kerr bloody Avon, I could murder you for that."

"I hardly think impotence is nothing, Vila. And what was I supposed to do? Say, by the way, I'm impotent, yes, I've tried all the usual remedies and nothing works, and it's the pressure of this damned revolution I never wanted in the first place and everything that goes with it?"

"And what's wrong with saying any of that? I'd've understood, Avon, any man would. We'd've just—"

"Just what? It's only ever been the sex. Without that, what was there?" Such bleakness there, an avalanche to crush them both.

"I thought we were friends, more or less. And I knew you were fond of me. More or less."

"More or less, hmm? Not much to say for four years. Well," he said briskly, rubbing his hands together, unexpectedly casual and unmoved, "I think all the salient points have been taken care of. Now, if you start making a list of planets or space stations you would like to settle on, I'll

make Orac begin infiltrating the systems to set things up. Go and have a word with the others, tell them to get started. I want this finished as quickly as possible."

Vila stared at him, absolutely dumbfounded.

"You're supposed to be telling the others, Vila."

"But...but..."

"My chair, Vila?"

"No, I won't give you your fucking chair. We sit here talking about four years together and you're hinting all over the place and then out of the blue, you tell me to bugger off and start a new life on my own somewhere?"

"Shut up, Vila. Get started on your list."

"No. You can't go ordering me around, just because you've been doing it for four years. Do you know what happened last time I did what you wanted me to? We ended up hardly even talking to each other because you were fucking impotent!"

"And what else could I have done? Oh, Vila, don't make this any worse. Just go and decide where you're going to have your damned wife and your damned brats."

"That's it, isn't it? That's what all this's been in aid of, isn't it?" He got to his feet, Avon not backing off an inch, facing him with typical, unflinching pride. "You think I've only been fucking you until I can run off with the little woman and settle down. And you call me a fool, eh, Avon old friend?"

"Don't think I'm pining for you—"

"No, pining's not your style, is it? You cut yourself off, push everyone away because you think you won't feel anything any more, don't you? But you were rushing back here to tell me about this Zukan, and you said you were full of yourself. All that pressure off you, the plumbing start working again? And you came back here thinking we could pick up where we left off." He smoothed the collar of Avon's shirt, allowed his hand to stray to the warmer skin beneath. "At least until I went off to father a hundred babies and settle down. But you forgot something, didn't you?"

"Will you go to bed with me?"

"Using sex to get you off the hook again? I'm not going to let you, not this time. And you can't blame me, you're the one who started all this talking." But still, he didn't complain when

Avon started undoing Vila's shirt, nor when Avon's mouth fastened on his nipple. He stroked the dark hair, spoke to the averted face. "I had my chance, back with Kerril." Avon's mouth stilled, frozen in place, the tongue wet and hot. "But I came back to you, didn't I?" The suckling began again, and there was a difference this time, Avon's hands firmer, his mouth more avid, a smile curving his lips. "Settling down's as much a fantasy as the thousand virgins. Obvious, isn't it?"

Avon kissed the fine skin of Vila's chest, kissed a path all the way up his throat to his mouth, pausing for a moment to stare at him. There was a whole future in those dark eyes, and something missing for too many years: hope. Smiling widely, murmuring in his throat, Avon leaned forward to kiss Vila, only to be stopped.

"Oh, no, you don't. I know you, Avon, and if I don't get it out of you now, I never will, and then where will we be? You'll kick me out so that I can't leave without even finding out if I want to leave in the first place. So you tell me, and then you can kiss me, and then you can fuck me."

"Whatever happened to your bedroom skills? Surely you want me to suck you first, and caress you, like this—"

"Gerroff! Do that and I'll let you away with anything, and we're going to get this settled—"

"Couldn't we settle it later? I promise, I'll tell you anything you want to know, but later." He pulled Vila close again, his cock hard beneath his trousers, his hands moving swiftly, baring Vila to his touch. "Much later," he breathed, hands filled with Vila's cock and balls, mouth filled with the taste of Vila's skin.

"Not later," Vila mumbled, "now."

On his knees, his breath a tantalising caress on the head of Vila's cock, Avon looked up at him. "Later, Vila?" His tongue flickered out, teasing the slit, his hands strong and knowing on Vila's shaft. "Much later?"

"Now!" Vila moaned, pushing his hips forward, thrusting deeply into a mouth that met him with perfect knowledge. He was consumed by desire for Avon and by Avon himself, Avon's touch welcomed with a hunger that frightened, only for the fear to be smoothed away by the way Avon looked up at him, or by the way Avon

touched him with a longing undisguised by any veneer of mere lust.

"Come on, you," Vila muttered, gathering Avon up into his arms, pressing them together, squirming to try to get closer, Avon the one to push them backwards without warning Vila, the unexpectedness tumbling them into a skelter of limbs.

Clutching Avon to him, Vila was torn between laughter and groaning from the way Avon's chin had clipped him on the collarbone, and Avon was chuckling, sorting them out, arranging Vila this way and that until he could fit himself comfortably on top, his legs between Vila's spreadeagled limbs, his cock perfectly aligned against Vila's. "Thought that would stop you giggling," he murmured, laving the red mark his chin had made, his cock sliding slickly and smoothly against Vila's. "Is this what you had in mind for right now?"

Vila lifted his legs, wrapping them round Avon's waist, his arms wrapping round Avon's back, moving him until they could kiss, lips parted, tongues joined, mouths so open, emotions flowing rushingly like passion. "It's been a while," Vila said into Avon's mouth.

"Do you want to? We could wait, do it another time?"

Vila withdrew then, staring at Avon in sheerest disbelief. "What the hell happened to you? Thinking I don't want you fucking me when I've already got my knees up and my arse open, and then you offer to wait? You've gone mad, stark staring mad." He brought Avon's mouth down to where he could reach it, kissed him thoroughly, tasting him, memorising him all over again. "But I like it. I definitely like it. The stuff in the same place?"

Avon didn't say anything, simply reached out, long-armed, scrabbling round in the bedside cabinet until he found an extremely old and very dubious tube, the colour flaked off, the cap askew. He held it up for Vila to look at. "It should be all right," he said, unscrewing it.

"Easy for you to say, you're not going to have that stuffed up inside you. Oh, go on, it's not going to hurt me, is it? And I'm not waiting for you to bugger off to the medical room to get a new tube. Go on, Avon. Put it inside me..." His voice trailed off and his eyelashes trailed shut as the cool slickness slid inside, the feeling almost

new. It really had been too long since he'd had this, and he couldn't remember a time when Avon had been more tender. "Oh, 's lovely," he whispered, raising his hips a little and twisting back and forth, working Avon's fingers deeper inside.

"Ready?" Avon asked him, withdrawing his fingers and spreading Vila's cheeks.

"More'n ready. C'mon, Avon, c'mon, want you to fuck me."

Vila's legs were raised up onto Avon's shoulders, a snub hardness pressing against him for a moment, and then the muscle stretched, dilated, and Avon slipped inside, an inch, three, more, but slowly, giving Vila time to adjust to the invasion of his body, the penetration sure and steady, with the thrill of inexorable strength held in check for Vila's protection and pleasure. Faster now, deeper thrusts, harder, no need now for measure caution, calls now for Avon to measure his length inside Vila. Friction shuddering sweet pleasure, Avon's hand stroking hard, hard on Vila's cock, Avon's cock stroking hard, hard, inside Vila's body, the hardness of flesh surrounded by the softness of palm, the hardness of flesh surrounded by the soft inner surfaces of Vila's body clinging on tightly, refusing to give up the pleasure of Avon being part of him.

Together now, moving faster, Vila spilling his joy over Avon's hand, slickness covering hardness, hardness becoming soft, deep pleasure groaning from Vila's open mouth. And on and on, Avon inside him, hard, demanding, insisting on union, not letting go, never letting go

until deepest, stillest moment, Avon poured himself into Vila, filling him to overflowing, collapsing them both in the boneless aftermath.

Aching, muscles in the small of his back protesting, Vila grunted, using his hands and knees to push himself upwards, dislodging Avon with some effort. "Oi," he muttered, hoarse, only then realising how much noise he must have been making when Avon had fucked him. "Oi! You awake, Avon?"

A slumbering murmur, incoherent, words not quite formed, Avon's real answer being the instinctual movement closer to Vila's warmth and embrace.

"Typical," Vila said into Avon's hair as he gathered the other man into his arms. "Always were one for falling asleep right after, weren't you? Wham, bam, snore, that's you." He pushed Avon's hair out of the way, baring the forehead for him to kiss, his hands dreamily tracing the dips and hollows of Avon's back, fingertips following the rise and fall of muscle and spine. "Probably think that's it, all sorted out and nothing more to be said, eh?" A yawn ambushed him, and he settled himself a little more deeply into the pillows, a stray thought wondering if he should try and get the covers out from under them or leave it for now and wake up later, when he felt cold.

Wake up later, he decided, smiling to himself as he covered himself with the luxury of Avon's solid warmth. Later, when he'd have a sleepy, satisfied Avon right where he wanted him. Later, just like Avon said...



SUBVERSION

—act of turning, subverting, or being subverted, of overthrowing or causing downfall, ruin, or destruction; corruption. This is a moody piece told from Blake's perspective—a brooding Blake whose lack of self-knowledge is shockingly destroyed, and a cold, calculating Avon whose supreme confidence in his own omniscience is broken by Blake. Two men subverted by needs, wants, and desires they cannot control. Two men subverted by the key to themselves and each other. Two men subverted by love.

ROSETTA STONE

M. FAE GLASGOW

Even seated at the opposite end of the table, Avon was still a distraction Blake couldn't afford. Blake forced himself not to stare, not even to look, refusing to yield to such handsome temptation. He hoped, quite fervently, that familiarity would dull the fine edge of Avon's beauty, but every time he managed to convince himself that today was the day he would become accustomed to Avon's translucent skin and bright eyes, that same today would be yet another day of Avon moistening his lips, or talking to himself as he worked, or bending over, innocuous grey tunic finally riding up high enough to give Blake a glimpse of what he so desperately craved. It didn't seem to matter what fine, celibate resolutions Blake swore in the morning, his hands sticky with his own semen: there was always something Avon would do to tug at Blake's desires and, he admitted reluctantly, his emotions as well. Something as simple as the childish glee Avon enjoyed when he scored a point over Blake, or the way he indulged in the endless game of insulting Vila, yet another moment when Blake glimpsed the once boyish dreamer walled in behind the cynic's face.

But this was neither the time nor the place to be cataloguing Avon's charms—not to mention that it wouldn't do the revolution much good if Blake couldn't keep his mind on the job at hand and out of Avon's trousers. All this would fade, he was sure, when he had recovered from the sheer novelty of having not only a libido again, but a functioning body. Still, it was embarrassing to be as unreliable as a teenager just discovering sex. It was a rediscovery: it would end soon, just another aftereffect of the trial and the mindwipe and everything else. Rubbing his eyes

as if fatigue had finally caught up with him, Blake interrupted the local leader's monologue. "I'm sorry, Eryn," he said, skin tinglingly aware that Avon was staring at him now, "but I'm afraid I'm more tired than I thought. You were going over the details of tonight's attack..."

Eryn van Deke gave him a filthy look but let the slight of Blake's distraction pass relatively lightly. "As I said," she began quite sharply, "my group are attacking the main barracks tonight, when the main Federation battalion should still be exhausted by their latest round of atrocities against my people." She looked at Blake, obviously skilled at assessing people, and just as obviously unimpressed by Blake's battle readiness. "But I think it best that you reconsider your decision to join us on the raid."

Time to smooth a few very justifiably ruffled feathers, Blake thought. "Oh, no, not at all. I'd be honoured to—"

"And we would be equally honoured by your presence. But," she said silkily, and the distrust in her voice reminded Blake of how tentative his position here was and how far he himself was from forgiveness, "you did say that you were so terribly tired and that was why you couldn't follow tonight's discussion."

Dismissing the transparent politeness of her voice and looking instead into the hard glitter of her blue eyes, Blake knew that there was more behind her unwillingness to trust than merely her straightforward intelligence and cautiousness. The Federation hadn't succeeded in staining him as well they hoped, but they had done far better than Blake would ever wish them to. Finding his way back into the Rebel fold was going to be difficult and painful, and not a task Blake relished. He nodded his acquiescence, started on the well-practised words he had sweated over, and trudged through the slow process of forcing acceptance from those with more than enough reason to suspect him.

Whatever his aspirations, he was still on probation with this group, as the looks and the whispers had so sharply reminded him when he had walked through the long stone corridors of the base. All those faces, all those suspicions, all those nasty wonderings; everything and everyone all made it very clear: what he did here could be his ticket to a welcome in the rebel network, or it could get him branded as too

damaged by the Federation treatments to be trusted. Not that he could blame them. He had seen the tapes of himself, the horrible, nightmare viscasts when he had so rabidly denounced his fellow rebels. Renounce, his past self had screamed at his present self from a screen too small to contain such ferocious passion. Renounce. Turn the traitors in. He wasn't sure he even deserved a probation. Traitor, he had called them, but he was the traitor—

Calm, he reminded himself. Be very, very reasonable and very calm. He forced a smile, made his voice smooth and melodic, his home-world accent slipping through quite intentionally for once. Anything to distance himself from that fervid lunatic who had borne his face.

He blinked, only then realising that the smoky room had faded, unfocussed, while his mind had wandered amidst the pellucid, cutting shards of his memory. Van Deke was talking policy, some minor aspect of tonight's plan, some small rôle for him to play: small, yes, but still, it was a beginning, and he was a man starved for new beginnings. "Whatever you think best, of course, Eryn. You're the leader here and I'm only here to advise." He made the smile charming, a feat possible only when he caught sight of Avon still staring at him, eyes wide and lips slightly parted. "With your knowledge, experience, and skill, I shall be more than happy to—"

A commotion at the door interrupted him before he could add to the veiled contempt with which she met his flattery. The thin voice was rushing, tumbling over the words excitement was pushing out too quickly. "Mum, Mum, look what Vila taught me!"

Van Deke twisted round in her seat, and the initial flash of love in her eyes was well and truly hidden behind genuine fury. "How many times do I have to tell you not to interrupt me when I'm in a meeting?"

Blake's heart went out to the crestfallen child standing there clutching the tools of his magic trick, but he said not a word. Did not dare, not with the amount of foul suspicion that still clung to him. He watched the boy, felt the wrench as the lower lip trembled and the bright eyes brightened all the more as tears threatened. It hurt Blake, particularly now, particularly after his own sorry, short history, to see all that joy

and hope tarnished by a grown-up's barbed words.

"I'm sorry, Mum, I was just—"

"I don't want to hear any of your 'justs'! We are at war and I am trying to make sure we win. How am I supposed to do that with you running in here every five minutes?"

Blake bit the inside of his mouth to stop himself from speaking and clenched his hands on the table to prevent any misinterpretable gesture to the child. He looked away, only to meet Avon's overly-intelligent eyes and too suggestively raised eyebrow. What a bastard, Blake thought, what a right royal bastard! To suggest, even tacitly, that there was something sexual in the way Blake was watching that poor boy. Bastard, he wanted to shout. Bastard, bastard, bastard...

He had to regain control. A deep breath, then he stopped looking at Avon, and those questions Avon never—quite—voiced, turning away from that knowing half-smile and the casual, almost languid sting of Avon's suspicions. The familiar, helpless rage boiled up inside him again, and there was nowhere for it to explode. Not that there ever was, not unless the Federation stood in front of him. They were the ones he should rage at, they were the ones rank with the guilt of what had been done to him. Blake repeated it to himself, trying to convince his heart that his head was right on this. Avon shouldn't be blamed for half-believing: Vila had told him how convincing the interviews with suitably tearful children had been, not that Blake could yet bring himself to face his accusers, no matter how false. Those poor boys believed, thought it true, had even had bruises on them as manufactured proof. No, Blake was not quiet ready to face children who called him a monster. But Avon would have seen those 'casts—for that matter, Avon must have been living in the Central Dome when Blake had recanted, and would have seen every sordid, soggy confession, live on the news as he ate his dinner. Small wonder the man refused to trust him. It was hard enough for them each to trust himself.

Van Deke had wound down, the lecture to the child over for now, leader's ire conceding to parent's tolerance. "Oh, for goodness' sake, don't take on so!"

Blake hid a smile as the boy—Jak, wasn't

it?—gave his mother a melting glance from under spiked eyelashes.

"D'you think I don't know what you're up to?" she asked, coming perilously close to smiling at her offspring and completely ruining her image of tyrant. "If you promise to be quiet and wait patiently until I'm finished, you can stay. But only because we've finished all the important discussion and only if you keep quiet. One sound and you're out! Clear enough?"

"Yes, Mum," Jak murmured obediently, but he was grinning widely, completely unscathed by his lecture and his mother's ire, too busy staring around excitedly at all his rebel heroes. "I'll be good."

A quick swat, affectionate rather than punishing, and then van Deke's attention was back to the meeting, with Jak sitting behind her near the door, the boy gazing at Blake with what could only be described as hero worship. It jolted Blake, taking him off-balance, the pain of everyone's veiled revulsion hitting him only by its sudden absence from the boy's eyes. Jak's adoration made sense, in a way, for political matters wouldn't be explained to him and no one would have told a six-year-old what the Federation had claimed Blake had done, would probably only have been told that Blake had been sent to prison for being a rebel and had overcome the mindwipe. Too young for the adults to want him to understand what molestation was, Jak would only have been given dark warnings about strangers who might do bad things to him.

Unlike those three boys back on Earth. Blake knew he hadn't so much as laid a finger on them, but he also knew, too painfully, just how real implanted memories could be. The suffering wouldn't be any less, nor the trauma. Nausea was souring his stomach, the way it always did whenever he thought of those poor boys and how badly damaged their lives must be. He couldn't even begin to think about the details of what the boys must believe had been done to them: the very thought of it sent him spiralling off into near panic, too horrified to face the sick facts of what those three remembered as truth.

It was the pressure of Avon's gaze on him that brought Blake back to the meeting. Judging by the weight of the silence around him, he had

missed what van Deke had been saying—again. Not a good way to convince her and the rest of the rebels that he was *compos mentis* despite all the Federation had done to him.

“There’s no point in asking Blake that,” Avon was saying, amazing Blake by coming to his rescue instead of smiling sweetly while Blake hung himself on the rope provided. “He might be just about able to programme himself a cup of tea, but I’m the one with computer expertise and I am the only one capable of understanding the teleport system on *Liberator*. Blake,” and now the voice was that unique Avonesque blend of dryness and rich plumminess, “confines himself to being our great and fearless leader and destroying the Federation and all it stands for.”

Van Deke turned back to Avon, letting Blake off the hook for the time being. “Well, in that case,” she began, and the discussion was off onto the rehashing of logistics, with the Rebels proposing ideas and Avon disposing of them.

Blake didn’t make the mistake of not listening, but he gave the ensuing discussion only half his attention. He couldn’t keep his eyes off Avon, couldn’t get over the fact that Avon had actually hauled his chestnuts out of the fire. Not typical, not typical at all—and did that mean that there might be hope of their chilly relationship warming up to something better than armed neutrality? God, but he hoped so!

With so many people around, he didn’t shake his head in bemusement, nor did he sigh dramatically. Face impassive, he permitted himself a glance at the root of this irrational attraction. And nearly indulged in a public display, if not of affection, then certainly of rampant desire. Avon was being... He tried to find a suitably manly term, such as attractive or handsome, but there was more to it than mere physical appeal. There was that emotional current, that underlayment of something, something Blake couldn’t quite name: perhaps it was beyond naming, simply that intriguing mystique which made Avon so addictively alluring. Avon chose that moment to cant his head, the habitual gesture one of the many capable of sliding through Blake’s defences. There was no doubt about it, Avon was definitely being adorable again, quite unintentionally, and Blake swore to himself that he would never, not even under the worst torture either imagined or experienced, ever tell

Avon that he had used such a word to describe him. But adorable was the one term that insistently leapt to mind. Perhaps it was the vulnerability of the mouth, or the schoolboyishness of the hair cut, or the seductive blend of hardness and softness, or the mix of supreme confidence and air of being...lost. Avon always seemed so displaced, so alone, so... Quick on the uptake he reminded himself before any wayward expression might betray him to Avon. Now certainly seemed a good time to concentrate more on Avon’s pointed defences and less on the sweetness which made the defences so vital—before Avon impaled him with yet another of those knowing glances and left Blake squirming with embarrassment. Leaning back in his seat as if he were completely at ease, Blake decided he had been right in his choice of word to describe this attraction he felt for Avon. Irrational. Definitely irrational, and downright suicidal, if Avon ever found out he had once been described as ‘adorable’. In fact, Blake could only too well imagine Avon selecting the proper gun with which to show Blake just how far from ‘adorable’ he actually was.

Time, Blake decided, to get his mind fully back on the job at hand, even if all the sparkle had gone out of it now that he knew he was to sit and wait. The meeting dragged on, brightened only by Avon’s presence and the balm of hero-worship exuding from young Jak. It was nice to be impressive to someone, even if it were only a child. Perhaps especially from a child, for Jak wasn’t old enough to have the attention span necessary to keep mere flattery going for this length of time. Blake fought off his own fatigue and distraction, saying all the right things at all the right times, being rewarded by cautious acceptance, but still not so much that van Deke was about to trust him at her back. Or with all the secret details of tonight’s attack. Trusted with no more knowledge than she gave her child. Sobering, to be thought of as so unreliable, so easily taken and more easily broken.

“So that’s it, then,” van Deke announced, accepting Blake’s final assurances on Avon’s and Vila’s skills, although Blake noticed that she had been watching Avon closely enough to have formed her own opinions of the man’s basic intelligence. “We’ll take your men with us, strike hard and fast, while Jenna and Gan on the

Liberator will use the teleport to send our people down inside the complex where they can do the most damage.”

Blake stood as van Deke did, aware of the different stares pinned on him. Avon, of course, chilly and hot at the same time, typical push-me/pull-you, so that Blake couldn't tell if he were being invited or warned off. He wasn't about to chance his arm there anyway, not until he understood this man far better, and not until he was quite sure of his welcome. And then there was Jak, gazing up at him raptly, stars in his eyes. To think it had been boys like this he had been accused of molesting, boys like this who had had all their dreams ripped away just to frame a retired rebel... Enough! he screamed at himself. The Federation had won those three battles, but only because Blake's mind had not been his own: this time, he wasn't going to let a single molecule of optimism die.

Blake bent down, until he was face to face with Jak and the bustle of adults around them faded upwards. “Tell you what,” he whispered, desperate to make up for broken dreams, “once this attack is all over and done with,” and before the Federation sends in troop reinforcements on armoured ships, he added silently to himself, unable to fend off his darkest fear, “would you like to come up and see my ship?”

Jak swallowed, hard, overcome by his hero speaking to him and literally offering him the stars.

Blake smiled, warmed and made a little less guilty by the happiness he was bringing to one small boy. “We could ask your mum to teleport with us.”

“And she could see the weapons controls stuff that your ship's going to blow up the Federation ships with!”

So much for innocence, and so much for dreams. Another childhood destroyed, another reason to erase the Federation as if they'd never existed. But it wasn't only with violence that he could sabotage the Federation, was it? A single dream could lead to a rebellion. “The pair of you can have a guided tour of the whole ship, all the holds, all the special rooms. Even,” he made his voice suitably dramatic, “the treasure room!”

“As long as I check your pockets before you leave.” Avon, of course, sere as ever. “Enjoying the company, Blake?” he added, archly sug-

gestive as only Avon would dare.

Blake straightened, the unfocussed rage hotly narrowing to a very sharp focus indeed, threatening to cut Avon to shreds with a few well-honed words.

“Before you burst a blood vessel,” Avon interrupted quite politely, “I would like to make sure that you were still actually with us when van Deke so charmingly took you hostage?”

“What? Took me hostage? Avon, don't be ridiculous. Not only is she an ally, but I think I would notice if someone kidnapped me.”

Avon smiled, mockingly, a scant millimetre away from insolence, but still, barely, within the bounds. “Would you? What a reassuring thought. But I was referring to her polite request that you remain here on her base—purely for the purposes of morale, of course.”

Then again, perhaps he wouldn't notice if someone kidnapped him, Blake realised. He hadn't actually thought twice about it, certainly hadn't looked at her pleasant request as holding him ransom for *Liberator*'s help and Avon's good behaviour. Not that he would ever reveal that to Avon, either. “Then you had better make sure that morale is very high around here, hadn't you?”

“Oh, I'll take care of the morale,” Avon replied, smooth as a snake gliding in for the kill, “if you'll take care of the morals.” And there it was, the briefest flicker of a glance downwards, at the boy and therefore, a look at Blake's past—or at least the one created for him by the Federation.

“There are times,” Blake said in a remarkably calm voice, “when I could honestly hate you.”

A grin that should have been threatening but was, unnervingly, flirtatious, and then Avon was moving away, adding, over his shoulder: “So you could actually be honest. Oh, I shall look forward to *that* novel experience.”

It was at times like these, Blake thought, when it was impossible not to see what a spoiled brat Avon must have been. He started off after his callous beauty, but someone was talking to him, and Jak was still staring at him, so he pushed the anger away, and went back to being polite and charming and utterly, reassuringly, normal, even while visions of battered Avons danced in his head.

There was nothing for him to do. He had been

told in no uncertain terms that his presence was not required in the control room. Jenna and Gan had their hands full, as they had informed him on his last three communications, and Avon... After snarling, "I'm in the middle of a battle, what the hell do you think the situation is?", Avon had cut him off and that was it. Almost arbitrarily, Blake turned right at the next corner, treading slowly down yet another of the old stone corridors. This place had once been a national monument of some kind, a restored historical site visited by families and groups of bored and misbehaving schoolchildren. The recessed power lighting was off, of course, but a few of the old-fashioned sconce lamps were lit, just enough that people could see roughly where they were going, and just enough to show the vivid friezes. Blake paused to look at one, but that only passed a few moments of the endless time filling his hands, and then he was moving on again, walking slowly, going nowhere, unwilling to think, because he was helpless right now, and useless. Those two feelings led to nothing but more wasteful anger and a splitting headache. Not to mention his old friends, depression and self-loathing. He could kick all of that out of the way most of the time, but late at night, when he was alone, with nothing and no one to distract him, his mind would settle on the well-worn groove of whom he had been, of his life before the puppeteers had buried it—or erased it, if he were truly unlucky and this lack of past should prove permanent. In the quiet and solitude of his bed, he would speculate on what his family had been—all those vistapes, the ones he had believed sent to him by his family back home. He hadn't even realised the faces belonged to people he didn't know.

What else was he wrong about? If he couldn't remember the family he had grown up with, had loved and been loved by, then what other precious, hoarded memories were merely the cancer of lies?

Another corner, another unthought choice, and he was walking in an area he recognised by the rural friezes on the walls. He turned left next, following paintings of fields ripe with grains, then took the corridor that had been painted to give the illusion of walking a country path between arching trees. It must have been beautiful here, before the Federation imposed

itself. Back when there had been energy for full lighting and children didn't think about weapons controls and blowing ships up.

The room they had given him was on an outer wall, in some sort of tower. Sheer rockface falling below him for several hundred feet, and a window too small to climb through. Oh, yes, they were taking no chances with him, were they? Stripping out of clothes reeking with the smell of lamp-smoke, he took a proper look at the room around him. It was, he decided, sitting down abruptly on the bed, a gesture worthy of Avon: van Deke had put him in the nursery wing. The walls were painted with what were obviously local fairy tales, in pretty pastel colours. The built-in cupboards and desk were child-size, and there was an empty bed-alcove with a child guard-rail still in place. As with the rest of the castle, most of the original furniture had been moved out to make way for whatever utilitarian furnishings that were still in one piece, so Blake supposed he could, were he to be charitable, decide that the rebels had simply put him in one of the free rooms that had a bed already in it—and a window he couldn't slip through to betray them to the Federation.

But he didn't feel particularly charitable, not tonight, not when his hands were tied behind his back and he felt completely, totally and utterly useless. Had he not already been half-undressed, he would have gone out walking again, but the depression settled heavily on his shoulders, and it didn't seem worth the effort to get dressed just to go and wander aimlessly.

Stop being such a fool, he told himself sternly. Stop feeling so damned sorry for yourself. Get a grip. Pull yourself together. You can't expect anything else, can you? Give them time.

Give them time. He felt as if that was all he was doing. Time, for him, was finite, water pouring from a broken glass, each drip trying to carve a path through granite, blind to its own defeat.

He lumbered to his feet, went to look out from this infant cell. There was little breeze from the window, no matter how high he turned the air permeability, and the room pressed in harder. Distantly, he could hear the beginnings of battle, the thrumps and dim booms of explosions, the fluting whine of laser weapons. No voices, thankfully, nothing to proclaim that people were

both the sources and victims of all that destruction.

His hand snagged in hair already made tangled by the restlessness of his hands. Downstairs, he knew, there would be carefully controlled mayhem to match the battlefield: numbers and statistics shouted, data sped from one module to another, endless consultations. While he was stuck here, helpless, useless, not yet to be trusted.

He did sigh, then. And almost groaned when he allowed himself to think of Avon. Not a safe topic, that, and not the best course of thought when Avon was in some peril, putting himself at risk for a cause he swore he did not believe in. Which led Blake back to something as resolutely irrational as his own spiralling emotions for Avon: the other man's willingness to stay and fight, in defiance of all cynicism and practicality.

The battle was extreme enough now that there was a false dawn rising, a sight worthy both of exultation and despair. But the despair was proving the victor, all the beauty of the sky no consolation for the fear that Avon might be one of the missing or dead or part of the devouring fire itself. Blake turned his back on the window, dialled it closed so that not a single mote of sound could pass through it, and then he went to bed. Not to sleep, for sleep would bring dreams, not something to be invited when Avon was in the thick of things. Eyes closed, mind wide awake, Blake lay there to wait for morning, or news, whichever arose first.

He had lost track of the time when he heard it. A small sound, faint, but coming nearer. A guard? Blake wondered. No, too much noise for that. Then someone on their way somewhere else. But the steps were too light for that and anyway, he was tucked well away, presumably where he could neither get up to mischief, get in the way nor corrupt any innocents.

His door, now, mild click, whisper of sound, another click, then silence as carpeting swallowed footsteps. An assassin would make less noise, so it was not—for better or worse—someone come to murder him in his bed. An admirer, perhaps? he thought, self-mockingly. Someone lusting after the image of Rebel leader, or someone kinky enough to be snared by a man whose mind had been raped.

Or something else entirely, something heart-warming in its innocence and breathtaking in its trustfulness. An unstified 'ouch!', then the covers were being lifted, a quick slither of movement, and then the child—it had to be Jak van Deke—was in beside him, small, over-warm body tucked in against him, bony knee digging into one of his soft bits, stick arms clenched awkwardly round his neck and then, tears wetting his shoulder. He should toss the child out of bed instantly, he knew—god, they'd crucify him if they found out, regardless of how innocent the whole thing was—but how could he be so cruel to a child crying his eyes out?

"There, there," he said, patting the thin shoulders, his other hand stroking fine hair—hair as fine as Avon's—while he crooned reassurance over and over again. He had to get the boy out of here, fast, before someone decided to check on him, or had a message to give him or any one of a million stupid things that could bring someone in here at the worst possible moment. Or what if someone had seen Jak? Or gone in to make sure he was all right with his mother gone again? If someone saw his bed empty, they'd think the worst, tarring and feathering Blake on the grounds of nothing more substantial than cold sheets. The injustice of it devoured him, the sheer wrongness that made him want to push a child away when that child was in such desperate need of comfort.

Jak was mumbling, sporadic words made difficult by sobs and the way the boy's face was pressed into Blake's neck. But wasn't that something about his dad, and how much Blake looked like him? Or was it how much Jak wished his dad was like Blake? Hard to tell, and this wasn't the time to insist on improved diction. Instead, Blake soaked up the child's tears, and soothed him as best he could, his own pain assuaged by the easing of another's. "Your mum'll be all right, you'll see. It's all right, it's all right," he said, falling back on tried and tested words. But this wasn't some pampered Alpha brat brought up in the cloying safety of a Dome, no, this was no Avon. This was a boy who knew all about weapons controls and had sat there listening to discussions on strategy and stayed there, forgotten, when talk had turned to the logistics of transporting the dead and wounded. "She's not going to be hurt, no-one's going to kill her."

Blake whispered, heart-rent by poor Jak's suffering. He could empathise, could actually remember crying like this himself, but there had been no-one to come into his cell and tell him it would be all right.

"But what if she's not? What if she doesn't come back?"

No pabulum here, not for so deep a fear. "Even if she doesn't come back—and she will—then the people here will take care of you. Your aunts and uncles, or your parents' friends, the grown-ups will work it all out for you."

"But I've only got one aunt and uncle and they're horrible and they eat weird food and their rooms smell funny."

That got a wry smile, and a tender hug, and another reminder to himself that he had to get this child out of here before someone misinterpreted the whole situation and shot him. "You'd get used to it, and anyway, I bet they think you eat weird food and smell funny as well. But if you really didn't want to go to them, then someone else will want you. Someone will always give you a home, Jak."

The sobs had stopped, and the tears were lessening, although Blake suspected that not all of the wetness had the distinction of flowing from those trusting eyes. "But you're worrying over nothing. Your mum'll be back, and she'll be moaning at me for letting you stay up so late." Always providing she doesn't hang, draw and quarter me before I have a chance to explain, he added to himself. Jak, oblivious to the machinations of the Federation and the lies they had spread, simply gave himself up to the things he wanted to here, and hugged his hero a little bit tighter.

And Blake found parts of his own body grow a little tighter. His breath caught in his chest, and he stopped, not breathing, not thinking, not wanting to know what his body was telling him. But his lungs protested, and he breathed in, his heart pounded and his blood thundered its nightmare message. Revulsion exploded in his mind, the sheer overwhelming power of knowledge stunning him again for a minute, making him numb, blessedly, unfeelingly numb. But the anaesthesia wore off too quickly, and the horror flowed in too fast to be stopped. He swallowed, hard, unwilling to believe the evidence his own body had pushed at him. Un-

willing, unable, he couldn't, simply couldn't, it wasn't true, he could never, never, ever... He wasn't like that, he hated people like that, thought men like that should be shot or locked up so they could never do anything like that to a child. He wasn't like that. Couldn't be. He had never thought of a child like that. Had never responded, had never wanted—

But he had. Tonight. And if he had, tonight, then had he, before?

Were the Federation lies truly lies? Or were they the truth, wrapped up in lies?

Had he?

Could he have done...that...to children before?

Was he really such a monster?

And if he were, then how could he allow himself to live?

His flesh had subsided, cooled by his own icy thoughts, and by the fear that the boy might move over, even just a little, and feel that nascent erection. Jak was whimpering now, not yet convinced that his mother wasn't going to disappear the same way his father had, only worse this time, for after his mother, there was no-one left. All the childish words and all the childish fears, tumbling and spilling, soaking Blake in sympathy and drowning him in affection. He tried, head throbbing with the effort, to keep it at sympathy, but other things, darker things intruded, corrupting his best intentions, laying them bare for the self-delusion they were. It wasn't difficult to understand, not at all, which was half the shame: he had been blind to this in himself because he couldn't face that part, did not want to know that he was capable of something he thought vile and unsupportable.

Or did he? Was that just another smokescreen, an excuse to lie here, holding this perfect, flawless innocence to him, caressing a smallness that so devoutly needed his protection? His body threatened him with its desires once more, flesh tumescing, blood pounding through him, hot, heavy, settling in his cock and balls, betraying him, betraying his own goodness, until he was becoming what the Federation had said he was.

A straw, but he clutched at it, clinging until his panic began to subside and rationality returned. Perhaps he wasn't a paedophile at all. Perhaps the puppeteers had implanted that in him, twisted his natural desires into an abomi-

nation, made him this monster.

Jak moved, his feet sliding across Blake's knees, another reminder of how small and needy the boy was. Arms hugging Blake as close as those undeveloped muscles could manage: a reminder of how lonely the boy was, and how grateful he would be for some sop of affection. Of how a cuddle, or a soothing hand across his skin, or even a kiss wouldn't be unwelcome, the blissful innocence of childhood accepting it all—accepting Blake, unquestioningly. Loving him, without need for explanations or excuses from Blake and nothing required of him save that he should keep Jak safe.

Blake turned his head to whisper more reassurances, his mouth slightly open as he pressed his lips against the boy's flawless brow. "It'll be all right," he murmured, tongue briefly tasting the cleanliness of a child's unsweating skin, the moment stolen, secret, their secret, locking them together against the rest of the world. "I promise you, I'll take care of you." He held the child's face between his own large hands, watched as adoration filled the brown eyes, smiled as he felt himself viewed as the biggest, the best, the strongest man in the whole wide universe. Leaned closer, ready to give a chaste kiss to the unlined brow, there, between the bright eyes, look at them stare as he came closer, all that perfect trust just waiting to be harvested. Blake felt the sweet thrill of arousal deep in his loins, his balls stirring, his cock lengthening seductively, reaching out to touch the untouched, the innocent, the ultimate in virginity. "Shh, don't cry, I'm here. I'll make it all right." So special, so uniquely special, and it would be his forever, for he would be the first, he would be the mentor and the father and the protector, all beings rolled into one. "I'll kiss it all better for you—"

He pulled back, reeling as if from a physical blow, hating himself, his desire turning acrid in his stomach, bile rising. He had come close, so terrifyingly close! To even think such things—and to come within an inch of doing them... Repulsed, Blake hauled himself out of the bed, lurching to the window as unsteadily as a drunkard at dawn. He fumbled and failed, then fumbled again, the window finally allowing fresh air to pass through. Hair as wild as his eyes, Blake gulped, breathing deeply of air tainted by nothing worse than the faint smell of

death and destruction, sweet indeed after his own fetidness. He hit his head once, twice, then again, and again, on the rounded edge of the window frame, the stone not sharp enough to cut, the pain too dull to blunt the agony in his mind. He had almost done it. He had almost been as bad as the Federation had said he was—as the Federation had tried to make him actually *be*.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it!" Childish treble risen to piecing shriek, small boy's being expelled in anguished cry.

"Shut up!" Blake roared. "Get out of here!"

No shrieks now, tiny voice, muffled by misery. "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, I didn't mean it. Oh, please, don't be angry with me, don't send me away. I won't do it again. Honest, I won't, really I won't."

More tears, words punctuated by sobs, and Blake didn't dare go to Jak to soothe this pain.

"You didn't do anything," he said, voice strange to his own ears. Was that the voice of a child molester? Was that how he'd sounded when he'd inveigled those boys? But no, he told himself, the images of true memory struggling against the haziness of Blake's past and the bright sharp edges of implanted memory. He hadn't done anything to those boys. That evidence was fake, his counsel had told him that, had found out that much for him. So he hadn't molested anyone. But the response had been there, the desires and the reactions and the temptation, oh, the temptation! To have all that unformed sweetness in his hands, that blank slate, that soul as clean as virgin snow...

Those boys weren't his victims, but this boy might be, sitting there like that, weeping for him, crying so pathetically, so needy of Blake. "Get out of here," Blake rasped, the scream barely leashed. "Go away," he shouted, because if he didn't, he was afraid he would say something sweet, something soothing and, for Blake, something seductive. Something that would warm the unwelcome desires in him, something so right for that poor lost child... "Don't ever come into some strange man's bed ever again, d'you hear me? Don't you ever dare do that again..." Because you might not be so lucky, next time, he thought, hands clenched so tightly that his nail broke against the pastel plaster. Because if you don't get out right now, I'm

going to come over and kiss it all better for you...

"I said, get out of my room. Go back to your own bed and wait there. Your mother will be home in a few hours, she'll take care of you then."

And who will take care of me, he thought, listening as the little boy tried to swallow his tears manfully. Listened still, until the door closed, and he was alone. Steady now, his face a mask of concentration, Blake crossed the room, then wedged the door shut. Not much, but enough, if he should awake insane and seek the child out. He felt strange, disoriented, the past and the present colliding, evil truths about himself hissing at him like snakes, hopeful truths whispering goodness, conflict, coiling, twisting, a barrage of lies and truths and horror.

Only a few steps from the door, the pain started. Slicing into him, backing off, then whirling round and cutting into him from a different angle. He fell to his knees, hands coming up to clutch at his temples where his brain was pounding frantically to get out. He could actually feel the blood vessels over-fill, thought that his brain was swelling, physically too large for the confines of his skull, and the pain was dissecting him, slicing paper thin, until he was all bleeding edges and screeching dislocation.

Words pummelled him, and memories, and faces, and remembrances of touching bodies—and not touching bodies, of biting his knuckles so that he wouldn't touch, wouldn't destroy that innocence, wouldn't do what he thought was wrong. But then it was there again, Skin fresher, smoother, more tensile than adult skin could ever be, and sweeter smelling, oh, that smell, too young to sweat properly, but with hints of chocolate and dirt, commingling with a needfulness to be nurtured and protected and made safe. Had he? Or were those moments stolen during a completely chaste meeting with his niece and nephew? Chaste moments brought out later to be fondled and caressed into something he would never do—was that what those were?

Or had he? Had he done it?

He was hunched on the floor, forehead ground into the carpet, and he was biting on his knuckles just as he remembered—he hoped, prayed, begged that he remembered and wasn't

lying to himself—doing in the past, biting so hard that the blood was on his hands as well as in his mind, and he thought he would surely be sick for what he had done, and for what he had not done, the desire and core-deep need in him unanswered, unsatisfied, denied, denial always, always denial, with nothing ever for him, never, ever—

He heard himself scream on the last word, heard his own bellow, wounded, uncomprehending animal crying for the moon. But he was not uncomprehending, he knew, he understood, some of it, anyway. Knew that he wanted children—a little girl, blonde, the one he used to pass on his way to work (which job? which project? On Earth? Or on his homeworld?), playing piercingly with her friends, their cacophonous voices ripping the air, their shrieks shivering in his ears—but didn't know if that were a true part of him, inborn and inbred, or if it were another little time-bomb the Federation had left planted in him.

And had he touched? Had he allowed it to go beyond pure affection with some child? Had he overstepped his own self-limits? But if it were all implanted...

He hammered his head on the floor, hurling words at himself, abusing his mind until it was as battered as his body. There were too many answers, too many truths that might be lies, too many facts which might be nothing more than protective smokescreen so that he could face himself in the mirror each day. Too many answers, and not enough, leaving him curled on the floor, tears drying on his cheeks and his soul desiccating in his mind.

And then darkness fell within him, and he lay still and silent on the floor.

He had awoken some time ago, not that he'd bothered to check the time. Hadn't looked out the window to see the sky. Hadn't registered the light or dark of the room. Had room for nothing but his doubts and his hopes and his fears. Reluctantly, he heard the transports coming back, a steady rumble of traffic, no sporadic bursts of frantic speed, just a very orderly return, which meant success.

He found no enthusiasm for that. Didn't care, for it didn't seem important. Not after last night. Not after his body had betrayed him. Not after,

he corrected himself, hollow-eyed, after his body had betrayed certain truths much better left buried.

More time passed, not that he paid much attention to it at first. But then the needs of his body reasserted themselves, differently from the night before, but just as insistently. The hunger, he ignored. The thirst, he welcomed as penance, guilt fed and pacified by his own suffering. But then he had the choice of lying here in the humiliation of his own waste, or getting up, moving, coming back to life. And found that he did care, a little, about what happened to himself. Did care, a little, for what became of him. He wasn't ready, not quite, to lie there like that, with the risk of someone—Avon? a dark fearful hope whispered somewhere from the torn places in his mind—coming in here. Coming in here before he was finished dying.

He pulled himself to his feet, cramping muscles stabbing him with welcome pain, for it shut his mind down, stopped him from feeling anything but the agony of his poor muscles. The toilet, his body protesting even as he relieved it. Finished, he stood for a moment, sinkingly aware that there was a mirror behind him; there, if he wanted to turn and look, he would see himself. Monster. Scum. Wicked, evil, reviled thing that he had once thought a man. Better off dead. But he wasn't, and it was one thing to die, another to kill himself. He wanted, dully, to be dead. Some cold lump of lard that could be dumped into the ground, his sins—had there been any? No, none, only sins of thought, of desire—covered over so that no-one would see them. But he couldn't think of how to kill himself. His mind went blank, nothing there but the wish to be dead. Weaponless, then, and useless. Alive. Like it or not, he was alive.

He moved, slowly, taking care to keep his back turned, always, to the large mirror, his chest made cold by the plaster of walls as he pressed against them so that he would not see what he had become. Into the small cubicle, curtain drawn, then a shower, long and hot, nail-brush scrubbed over every inch of his skin, the pain in his cock nothing more than his due, he told himself. A twisted mote of humour, a flicker of life, a picture of himself as penitent, walking along the corridors of the *Liberator* scourging himself with specially fabricated

rushes. More hot water, then the hard rub of towel, no soft jets of warm air for him, not while the self-hate and the culpability burned in his blood.

Body dry, clothes on, hair under some semblance of control, and then he did it before his loathing could stop him. He was looking at himself, seeing that mirror image of himself, and astonished. How could it not show? Oh, there was redness round his eyes—but that would be explained away as a sleepless night. The lump on his forehead? An unfamiliar place, an encounter with a cupboard door in the dark when he had got up to find something to ease the headache the lack of sleep had caused. The tension crackling around him? To be expected, after a night spent worrying about his colleagues and crew, fretting over whether they were going to be all right, etc, etc, etc. Answers for everything. Even, it seemed, how to face himself in the morning.

But then, he told himself, that was because he hadn't done anything. Hadn't done anything at all, save offer comfort where it was most needed. Was as sure as he could be that he had never actually done anything to any of the beautiful children his mind—or imagination—provided. Hadn't done anything then, hadn't done anything last night. "But what about the next time?" he asked his own face, watching his lips move as the words appeared in the air and hung there, waiting for their answer.

"I'm not a child molester," he told himself, trying not to listen to the doubts whispered by what the Federation had done to him. "I am..." He couldn't actually say the word, couldn't get his tongue to form the word 'pædophile'. "I am drawn to children. I love children." But not as I should, he wanted to weep. Not as I should.

But what about next time? he asked himself again, unable to go out into a world containing children until he knew the answer. What would he do next time? "Next time," he told himself, saying out loud a promise he had to keep if he wanted to stay sane, "next time I won't do it either. Next time, I'll stop before it starts."

He wished he could believe himself. Weary beyond redemption, he went to find Avon.

Avon was, of course, bad-tempered, sharp-tongued, smudged, ruffled, and altogether

fuckable. Which hit Blake hard, puzzling him, tying him up in knots he had thought unravelled if yet painful.

“Ah,” Avon was saying, a steaming cup of whatever in his right hand, “the Great and Fearless one returns. Sleep well, my hero? Or was the bed just a touch too soft?”

Blake wanted to make Avon’s head soft, right there, where a good thump could fracture the skull seams. Instead he gathered himself, wrapping himself in normalcy, proud that he could hide so well the monster he had discovered in himself. “I slept the sleep of the just,” he answered levelly, adding, just for good measure and as some recompense for not murdering Avon: “Not something you know about, I expect.”

One of those rare, precious smiles, when Avon conceded and loved Blake for beating him. “Only what I’ve read, of course. I leave all that sedateness to those who lead those of us who choose to follow.”

Avon’s eyes narrowed on the last few words, and Blake cringed inside, knowing what was coming. He made his face quite placid as he helped himself from the heaping platters of food, only then noticing that he and Avon weren’t the only people in the mess hall. For all that the others mattered, though, he and Avon might well have been alone.

“What did you do to your head?” Avon asked. Well, of course Avon would ask that. Anyone else would ask what had happened, or who had done that to him. But Avon, with his darkling nature and his incisive mind would ask the question that had already half-answered itself. Usually the part of the answer Blake least wanted to give.

“You don’t want to know,” he mumbled round bread, some part of him not quite wanting to lie about this to Avon. Needing Avon, perhaps, to recognise his pain.

“Oh, I don’t, do I not? Or do you just feel like playing daddy?”

Blake snapped his gaze upward, the force of it slamming into Avon. But not, unfortunately, hard enough to wipe that knowing smirk off his face.

“What the fuck was that supposed to mean?” His voice, miraculously, was low, not bouncing off the walls the way Blake felt he was, the way

he wished Avon and that knowingness would. “Just precisely what are you trying to imply?”

“Imply?” Avon said with innocence so sincere it had to be false. “Imply? Me? I wasn’t implying anything.” Avon leaned forward, bringing with him to this current war the lingering smell of death and destruction of the battle previously fought. “I was only asking a question. And you, Blake,” an odd inflection to his voice, an even odder expression in his eyes, “have answered it far better than you ought.” A twist of a smile, a flicker of amusement in the very dark eyes. “In public, at least.”

Drowning, flailing in the mire of his own inner truths, unaware that none of it was visible to anyone but his too, too clever Avon. “You had better not be saying what I think you’re saying.”

“Not if I wish to be coherent, no, you’re quite right.”

“And you,” Blake said with what he hoped was demolishing confidence, “are quite, quite wrong.”

But as he walked away, torn by too many emotions to feel any one of them, he could feel Avon’s eyes on him, could feel the speculation eating away at his backbone.

Later, with the base in a frantic flurry of mayhem that was actually a beautifully orchestrated relocation to the main Federation, now Rebel, stronghold, Blake had found himself a nice, quiet corner where he sat now, nursing his head and a hot cup of caffeine.

“Well, well, well,” Avon’s voice said from on high. “Fancy meeting you here. Or should I be asking, do you come here often?”

“That depends whether you’re looking for a polite fuck off or a very impolite beating into a pulp.”

That arched eyebrow, and that expression, and the innate rage of helplessness churning in Blake blurred into the desire to hold Avon down and fuck him, whether that really was what Avon was after or not.

Out of the blue, upending Blake’s already tattered world: “And if I wanted the polite option, without the ‘off’ at the end?”

Stung by disbelief, Blake could only stare for a moment. “I don’t believe you,” he said, shaking his head. “You have just been through a battle—”

No smile at all, merely the seductive heat of

lust in dark brown eyes. "All that adrenalin has to be used up for something."

"—where you've probably killed someone, if only by the pleasure of your company, and now you're coming back here to proposition me? With the Rebels moving base, with the Federation probably sending a few pursuit ships to investigate why their main base has suddenly turned against them, and all you can think about is where to shove your prick?"

Murmuring words, drawing Blake into Avon's aura of vibrant life. "Perhaps you'd rather I think about where you could shove yours?"

Seductiveness, here, of all places, and after what he'd been through last night—too much, simply too much, when he was so filled with anger and rage and hate. Too much of a chance that Avon's little romp would turn into rape. Or would be rape, in Blake's mind, regardless of how loudly Avon screamed 'yes!'

"Oh, go away," he said, protecting them both, for all that Avon would belt him for his concern, "just leave me alone until we have to go back to *Liberator* and I can't avoid you any longer."

He was, vaguely, aware of the absolute shock that held Avon so still.

"What?" he asked, nastily amused. "Surely this isn't the first time someone's turned you down?"

"It is—from someone who wants me."

Blake laughed at that, and at himself. After last night, to think that Avon was so sure that Blake harboured so minor a kink as lusting after Avon. "Wants you? Oh, Avon, how can you be so sure when I don't even know what I want."

"Accomplished in the field though you may be, you're still not a good enough liar to convince me of that. Not after last night."

"And what do you know about last night?" Avon's expression telling him just how revealing his own voice and face had been, and mind-bogglingly, how unshocked and undisgusted Avon was. But then, that was because Avon only had the slimmest of suspicions, dredged up by a mind fond of innuendo and licentiousness. "No," Blake said, half disappointed that not even Avon knew, that not even Avon would be still undisgusted were he to find out, "you can't know, not really. If you knew..." If you knew, he thought, you'd hate me as much as I do.

"I know better than you think," Avon whispered to him, tendrils of a dream reaching out to take him, promises of heaven in that voice and in the barest brush of fingers on Blake's forehead where the bruise was. If he hadn't wanted the physical affection so bitterly, Blake would have laughed. What could Avon honestly believe?

There, in an empty corner of an empty room, melancholy debris of the departing rebels littering the ground, Avon said the unsayable right out loud. "You wanted that boy, didn't you?"

"Don't be obscene," Blake muttered, knowing he had to deny it, should fight against Avon believing that and perhaps telling others. But he was tired, already defeated by Avon's bland honesty and aching for the minute hope that perhaps Avon was sick enough to not mind that the great and fearless leader had just discovered why he had kept his libido so severely subdued..

"Am I obscene?" Avon demanded, refusing to retreat, forcing Blake and all his tarnished secrets into the open. Voice hard, biting into Blake, pushing, pushing, pushing. "Is what you wanted obscene?"

Disbelieving that even Avon would need to ask such a thing, fighting not to yield to the temptation to refuse the wrong of what he wanted. "Of course it is. To think that about a child, a mere infant—"

"Six years old is surely childish, but infantile is a term I think we'll reserve for you. But I ask you again," and Avon was crouched down beside Blake now, the cupid's bow of his lips a mere breath away. Irrelevantly, a momentary refuge from the bitterest of truths, Blake noted that Avon had drunk the sweet chocolate of which the local rebels seemed so fond, the scent still there, under the sweat and stour of last night's fighting.

"Blake!" His name broke through and he blinked, dragged his eyes away from where they were feasting on Avon's lips.

"I was asking you," and now Avon's knee brushed Blake's leg, and Avon's hand rested on Blake's thigh, there, where a little boy's pyjamas had pressed so trustingly.

Sharp voice asking blunt questions: "Is what you wanted obscene?"

"Molesting children," Blake answered, too eroded to do anything but tell the unpretty

truth, “is something I can’t stand. It’s something...” He shook his head, at a loss for words, at a loss to explain the emotions inside himself. “I can’t think about what it would mean to the child, after, if I... If I were to actually *do* something to one of them, god, Avon, I feel sick and I could kill myself, if I had the balls to do it.”

And all Avon did was smile, ungently, and with a wealth of victory.

“You can wipe that look off your face!” Blake snapped, pushing Avon’s hand away, almost toppling the other man over. “You twisted bastard, wanting to do that to a child...” He stopped, choked by the newness of the knowledge that he was twisted too, because he wanted to do that to children. Pretty children, with innocent eyes and a treasure-trove of trust just waiting to be drunk in. Avon, whose brittle façade hid just such a wealth. Avon, the only person who dared know him in spite of it all. “Avon, what am I going to do?” he asked the man in front of him, the man who seemed so sure of himself, who had lost that air of being set adrift. So strong now, such a bastion, such a battlement to hide behind. Temptation, again, but one Blake could afford: being weak seemed so luxurious a thing after the disinterring of the night before. “I don’t even know if this is something the Federation planted in me, but I don’t think so. It... fits me, it doesn’t twist around inside my head the way the false memories do when I pick at them. But what if this sickness I feel about *doing* it to them really was implanted, a straightforward adjustment like any other sex offender? What if I would do it if I could?”

Avon reached out, unexpectedly gently, and touched the brand of self-hate that was on Blake’s forehead, brushing curls out of the way so that he could see it better, making Blake feel all the more exposed. “I can understand why you asked me, but not even I know everything.” Avon shrugged, dismissing Blake’s tangled confusion, moving them back to where Avon wanted to go. “So you like little boys. Unless the Federation has started using children to fight their battles, I hardly think that’s going to be much of a problem. The interesting question, Blake, is not whether you like little boys.” Avon stood up, and Blake craned his neck to look up at him, breath held, listening, waiting for an Avon-made salvation. “The question is whether or not

you like big boys.”

“Get out!” Blake roared, leaping up, catching Avon backhanded across the face. “I find out I’m a monster, and all you want to do is indulge your sick fantasies? Get out of here, Avon, before I make you regret the day you met me.”

A contempt-filled sneer flickered over Blake, measuring him, dismissing him utterly, the fingers of one hand touching the red mark on Avon’s cheek with something too closely akin to sensuousness for Blake to contemplate. “Regret the day I met you? Oh, but you’re too late for that. Too late by far.”

Then he was alone, with only the echo of Avon’s footsteps for company. Zombie-like, he went through the motions for the next few hours, saying things when people said things to him, smiling when someone smiled at him, frowning in polite concentration whenever anyone addressed him seriously. None of it registered, of course, none of it able to pierce the fog of chaos and actually lodge in his memory. Eventually, the diffused light of the commandeered historical monument was replaced by the impartiality of shipboard light, glare biting into everything, striking glancing blows off Avon’s hair and the glitter of his dangerous eyes. Jenna was there, and Gan, chattering voices and exultant delight in an unstinting victory. Alien, all of it, to Blake’s own defeat. Worse for him, it was defeat at unknown hands. Oh, he knew the enemy—all of them, including himself. He simply didn’t know which one had beaten him.

Late, very late, and exhausted sleep had lasted only long enough that his eyes were physically capable of staying open, and his body capable of staying upright. He was wandering again, more corridors, but these ones were impersonal, metal without adornment, doors with nothing to distinguish them from any of the other doors. A few had markers beside them, things that he and the others had put up so that they could remember where to find this or that, but nothing else to make them any different. Like himself, with only the marker on his forehead to show that he was not the same as the others.

But then again, there was Avon, and the things Avon had said, and the things Avon had seemed to be offering. Things Blake was almost afraid of looking at. He paused, his feet having

carried him where his mind had obviously wanted to go. Avon's door. Beyond it, Avon would be asleep, lying on his side, perhaps, or curled up in a neat ball. Perhaps Avon was as untidy in sleep as he was tidy in waking: maybe he was sprawled on his back, one naked foot dangling over the side of the bunk, his mouth slightly open, eyes flickering behind delicate eyelids as he dreamed. Of what, though, that was what worried Blake. Himself, and Avon, having sex, fucking each other hard, or dreams of Blake doing unmentionable things to a child?

The question arose again: was the revulsion in his stomach something truly him, or was it the result of an adjustment intended to make children safe from him. He supposed, standing there leaning his head on Avon's cold door, that the Federation wouldn't have wanted to suppress his molesting desires, not considering what they had used to frame him. He was far more useful to them, far more manipulable as a sexual miscreant, as the whispered monster of parents' fears than as a man who hated himself for his pædophilia. Much more useful to them if he were uncontrolled, amoral—

And that was the answer! He almost whooped with joy, as he finally was able to sift through the sludge in his mind and realise that if he had, if he actually had, abused a child, then the Federation would simply have used that against him. They wouldn't have had to find some poor little boys—oh, god, they had been so young!—to plant terrors in. There would have been no need for those boys all to go into the clinic the same day to have the same nightmare given them. So he hadn't done it. He could take off one layer of sackcloth and ashes, and stand a little bit straighter. He had an orientation that was anathema, but honestly did love children enough that he would do nothing to hurt them.

But that still left him with the problem of what he'd felt, when Jak had crept in beside him and cuddled up to him. The feel of his hair, his skin, his smallness... He slammed his fist into the wall.

Avon said, "There are easier ways of breaking in, you know. You should talk to Vila some times."

"Avon," Blake said to the man who had come upon him all unannounced. He couldn't think of anything else to say, at a loss, put completely

off-balance by Avon's blasé response to Blake's explosion of frustration. "I didn't expect to see you..."

Avon's eyes widened. "I *am* surprised. I thought you were merely practising for my arrival."

Attack, he told himself. It reveals so much less than defence. "So you admit that what you did to me was wrong."

"I admit no such thing," Avon replied, leaning casually against the wall, his skin so pale in the harshness of ship light. "I was simply prepared for a continuation of this morning's irrational temper tantrum."

"Irrational?" Why did it always seem to be Avon speaking so politely and him shouting in response? He modified his tone, becoming just as well-bred as the Élite standing there with such insouciance. "Considering what you had said to me and about me, I think my reaction was a model of restraint."

"Yes, well, you would, wouldn't you?" Verging on coy, well within the realms of flirtation, it set Blake's teeth on edge—and stirred his blood with more than anger.

Standing on his dignity now, pomposity meeting flirtation, Blake drew himself up tall. "Being on the receiving end of a vicious character assassination does tend to make me somewhat annoyed. I can't think why."

"Neither can I," Avon answered drily. "One would think you were acclimatised to that by now."

"It never gets any easier, and it never hurts any less."

With the merest change in expression, Avon turned Blake's comment around completely. "Then either you have been terribly unfortunate in your lovers—or you yourself are terrible at fucking."

The worldliness, the coarseness repulsed Blake, making him cold, destroying the nascent arousal. "You'll never be in a position to find out, will you? And I'm not stupid enough to let you prove the first part right."

He turned on his heel then, walking away, refusing to look behind him. He wanted nothing from Avon now, nothing but for Avon to just go away and leave him alone. To just shut up and let Blake forget, pretend it had never happened.

“Then,” Avon’s voice sabotaged him on the threshold of safety, “I shall have to find out about the latter, shan’t I?”

Teeth gritted, Blake walked on, far away from Avon’s knowing carnality.

So much had happened, and so little had changed. Cally had joined them, over Avon’s habitual distrust. Blake had led, bombastically, Avon had followed, mutinously. They had fought, each other more than the Federation. They had been hurt, but inflicted more. They had destroyed one thing, only to see it replaced by something bigger, better, more efficient. In other words, they were going round in circles, and Blake could feel the desperation settle a little more deeply each day. He had to do something—had to. Had to find some way to prove that he wasn’t wasting his time—hell, he had to prove that he wasn’t wasting his life. Orac was tweeting away in the corner, no doubt working on some project or other, not that the blasted machine would deign to tell him what the hell it was doing. Vila was off sleeping or drinking, Cally was squirrelled away painting her nihilistic visions of the future, Jenna was... Well, Jenna was becoming more and more of a problem as her impatience grew. Gan was solidly asleep and Avon...

Avon was a torment and a temptation, often both at one and the same moment.

“I’ve finished with the re-calibrations,” Jenna said, interrupting his thoughts. “They should last this time—as long as we don’t let Vila anywhere near them.”

“Oh, fine,” he said, and knew immediately that his boredom was too evident for Jenna to let it pass without some sort of comment.

“Thanks for the enthusiasm.” She crossed the flight deck, her boot-heels clicking louder as she drew nearer. Blake engrossed himself with the printout on energy levels, hoping against hope that he could put her off without having to drag it out into words. No such luck. “I suppose it’s a waste of breath, but would you care to join me in my cabin tonight?”

More challenge than invitation now, he noted, well aware that she was losing all patience and that his continued indifference was something she found insulting. “Not tonight,” he began, “I have these printouts—”

“Well, I suppose it’s as good an excuse as any. Especially as you can have your darling little Avon come up and ‘help’ you with it later.”

He didn’t want either of them thinking about him and Avon. “Now, you know that’s not how it is...”

“Do I? I know how it looks to me, and the others,” she snapped. “You’re fawning, Blake, and when you’re not fawning, you’re being a bully. D’you think we don’t know what’s going on?”

“There is nothing going on,” he repeated doggedly, as if she would believe him this time, wishing he could ask her what the hell was going on, because he wasn’t entirely sure himself. “I’ve told you again and again, there’s absolutely nothing going on between me and Avon.”

“But I bet there’s a lot coming off,” she said, quick as a whip and twice as cutting. “Such as clothes?”

“That’s unnecessary—”

“Oh, so it’s just a quick wank together?” She laughed then, mocking him. “I’d’ve thought you’d managed to be a bit more grown-up about it by now.”

He shut his mouth on every comment he wanted to make: he needed to keep Jenna on this ship more than he needed to shout at her. But Avon was going to get it later. The bastard had probably been telling tales behind his back, making things up, implying by omission...

“Oh, I give in!” Jenna said, making him realise that his attention had drifted, leaving her alone. She turned and left abruptly, a string of invectives billowing behind her.

He’d have to go out of his way to be decent to her tomorrow. Flatter her a bit, flirt a bit, praise her skills, trot out the usual tricks that she was barely playing along with. But for now, he was alone, alone and free to think. About Avon, about himself, and about sex. Such as why he was dead as the proverbial dodo below the belt—unless Avon was in his mind or in his line of sight. Sometimes. Yet there were times when he could look at Avon and feel nary a flicker of interest, balanced against the times when a simple gesture could make him rock hard and aching in a matter of seconds. None of the others, no matter what they did, and Jenna and Vila had both been blatant and extreme, managed to do a thing for him. Even lying in his

bunk alone, thinking about them didn't stir his flesh. As for when he masturbated... If he started thinking about, say, Jenna, with her lush figure and glorious hair, it was bloody difficult to get an erection, impossible to maintain it.

Unless he thought about what she must have been like as a child.

A guilty pleasure, one he tried desperately not to indulge, but sometimes he needed to, too painfilled and lonely and scared not to. He would imagine her needing him, in all her naïveté, and him taking her under his wing, protecting her, giving her everything she needed, and her looking up at him in trust and unquestioning adoration—and it wasn't her, it was some version of what she might have been two decades ago. Vila didn't appeal at all, too masculine, too self-contained for all his display of child-like vulnerability, all that patent innocence unable to conceal the depth of his experience. In fact, he couldn't imagine Vila as a child: with what Vila had let slip about his past, Blake doubted if Vila had ever been a child in anything but chronology.

And then there was Avon.

Avon struggling with a probe, muttering at the machinery, his eyes lighting up as he finally mended whatever needed mended—that could bring Blake off with just the attentions of his own hand and nothing more sexual than the memory of Avon's triumph at mastering the machine. Or perhaps it was simply seeing pure pleasure infuse Avon's face. He missed that, these months past, as Avon's face had hardened, new lines forming. He was losing that pampered look, the sleekness of the overindulged Alpha being slowly replaced by the hollowed cheeks and lines of a harried rebel. What Blake wouldn't give to go back to the days when Avon's eyes had been so wide and filled with wonder and speculation over his new toy, the *Liberator*. And he hated the way Avon was cutting his hair now. The leather jackets and stern black clothes weren't welcome, either.

But that old grey tunic Avon used to wear, the one that was so reminiscent of University togs... And the tentative way Avon would stick a probe into the inner mechanics of the ship before he had any idea of how the thing worked. The smile that would peep out, almost shy, not quite coy, when Blake praised him, and the way

his breathing would come fast and furious when they were having an argument, and Avon's cheeks would flush and his chest would heave as if he had been running...

Idly, his hand had strayed down to his crotch, rubbing himself there, fondling his cock and balls through the soft looseness of his trousers. He thought about the fineness of Avon's hair, and the softness of his lips, and the tentative delicacy of the time he had touched Blake, back on van Deke's base. He could have had Avon, then, could have pressed him down and spread his legs, could have parted those rounded buttocks and exposed Avon utterly. Could have wet him there, made him slick enough for Blake to slide home nice and tight and smooth. Could have—

"Thinking of me? How touching."

Guilty, jolting upright, hauling his hand away from himself only to cover himself with both hands, trying to hide the erection pulsing there.

"I see your opinion of yourself is as high as always," Blake answered, not entirely steadily, his breathing uneven and tell-tale.

Avon, basking in the security of his own attractiveness. "It has nothing to do with conceit and everything to do with experience."

"Really? Then why was it that I turned you down?"

"Bad taste, Blake. What else could it have been?"

And there it was, the conversation Blake had been avoiding for months. "Disgust."

Avon made a great display of examining himself, gazing then at Blake with patented confusion. "And I thought my clothes were so tasteful. Or perhaps it was the stench of blood I had brought from fighting your battles—"

"Don't start on that again, Avon. It's always the same, you going on as if you were some sort of pacifist, but you never refuse to fight, do you? I've never seen you so much as hesitate before killing someone, so why don't you just stop pretending?"

"In other words, follow your own sterling example?"

He wasn't going to back down, not this time, with Avon glaring at him like that, all macho bull and even more bullshit. And this acrimonious battle was better, far better, than Avon talking to him about sex, and Blake and offering something

that Blake didn't want to examine too closely "All right, I'll give you an example—"

"Oh, hello, Avon, I did not expect to see you here. Have you been keeping Blake company?"

Cally. God, he had forgotten that she'd asked to swap shifts with him. "Yes, he has," Blake put in before Avon could land them both in trouble. "He was," he stumbled, thought of what Jenna had said, "helping me with these hardcopies." And nearly choked at the expression on Avon's face.

But no betrayal, no wicked words to expose him. "A paragon of virtue, one might say."

"Couldn't agree more, Avon," Blake said, edging the other man round Cally, intent on getting him away from her and where he couldn't say anything that Cally would demand an explanation for. So intent on doing that, in fact, that it wasn't until Cally smiled at him with motherly indulgence that he realised how it must look to her, him so obviously suffering from interrupted arousal and now hurrying himself and Avon off to somewhere private.

To hell with it, he thought. They all think that anyway.

By tacit conspiracy, they ended up in Avon's quarters, facing each other over the orderly clutter of work things and valuables. "You were about to give me a sterling example of honesty at work," Avon said without preamble.

"Yes, I was," Blake answered, finding it so much more difficult now that the edge of his anger had dulled.

"Well then?" Avon prodded, pouring them both drinks, his every move a study in arrogance, a habit of his that drove Blake to gibbering fury in a matter of seconds.

And it was suddenly easy, very easy now that Avon was standing staring at him with that challenging glare. The dammed and damned words burst from him, pus from a boil, pressure immediately relieved, a sort of burning comfort flooding in. "I'm a paedophile, a man whose sexual desires are focussed on children."

"Thank you for the lesson in semantics," Avon said coolly, sipping from his drink. "All children?" He added with clinical curiosity. "Or only boys?"

"Paedophiles aren't fussy." Bitter that, with the sour wind of self-loathing.

The tiniest of smiles, the scantest warming of

cold eyes. "But you are."

"You think so?" Disbelief, as raw as the old anger that was rising all the hotter with every inch of seeping wound Avon laid bare.

"You must be. You didn't do a damn thing to van Deke's boy."

He wanted, fiercely, for Avon's—for anyone's—forgiveness, but he couldn't afford such a dangerous indulgence. "I'm surprised that you have so much naïveté left."

"Not naïveté, simple logic. Had you done anything to him, he would have told his mother. She would have killed you. You are in fact still here, ergo, you did nothing to the boy."

"I had him in my bed," Blake said, some dark part of him enjoying the shock on Avon's face. "I held him in my arms and I stroked his hair. I even," he paused, disgusted and aroused by Avon's lack of horror, "kissed him."

He watched Avon swallow, felt like a vulture circling for the kill. "And then," he stopped, watched as Avon took a gulp of his drink, stared fascinated at the complexity of reactions struggling to cover the studied blankness of Avon's expressions. "And then I sent him back to his own bed before I could do anything worse than that."

"A man of principles," Avon murmured with scarcely a hint of mockery and more than a dash of genuine respect.

"What choice do I have?" Blake cried out, ashamed of himself and his pride in Avon respecting him for such a murky reason. "Oh, don't try to tell me you advocate going out there and raping small children. I won't believe that, not even of you."

"Interesting," Avon said with a sophisticated smile, "that you think some things are beyond even me."

Blake would cheerfully wipe that sneer off Avon's face—had, once before, and even lived to tell the tale. And for all Avon's bombast at the time, there had been no retributions. If anything, there had been a distinct warming of the atmosphere between them. Slowly, against all of Blake's best intentions, details insisted on slotting into place. "You enjoy this, don't you? Sexually, I mean."

"Chatting to you?" Arch, so arch: if he were a whore, he'd be fluttering his eyelashes. "Oh, hardly."

“No. Arguing. Making me angry.” Blake paused, watching Avon all the while. “Making me angry enough to hit you.”

Avon spread his hands, carefully charming, perfectly insolent. “Now why would I do a thing like that?”

“Because you’re a devious, deviant bastard!”

Avon laughed, a surprisingly light sound from so dark and strong a man. “Oh, there is that, isn’t there?” Serious once more, the glitter of his eyes both lure and warning. “But what’s that old adage? It takes one to know one. And are we?”

“Are we what?” Blake asked, knowing what Avon was pushing for, refusing to make it easy, fighting himself for some time to sort this out, to clear his thoughts before he was in deeper than his worst nightmare.

“Devious,” Avon replied. “But considering the way you manipulate us all—yes, even me, I’ll admit in the present circumstance.” Quick flash of a smile, that odd combination of guile and innocent glee. “But only because there’s no one here but you. So we are agreed that you are devious—”

“You can concede what you want, and you can call me what you want, but that won’t make it any less false.”

A raised eyebrow, silent incredulity, and it was another morsel of fuel to stoke Blake’s ceaseless, helpless rage. He had been looked at, precisely in that way, by the puppeteers, and the interviewers. Had had that expression shown him by rebels and parents alike, too many unwilling to trust him because of lies broadcast by worse bastards than Avon.

“Well now, good as it is for the soul, I shouldn’t have expected you to confess. Let us move on now, to ‘bastard’.” A considering stare, encompassing not only Blake standing there fuming, but all his pasts, all his histories, both the real and the crafted. “I don’t think even you, saviour of the masses, would deny *that* particular charge—or compliment, depending upon who said it.”

“Look, I didn’t come here to discuss semantics with you. I came to...”

Avon simply looked at him, and Blake’s spine shivered, not with cold, but with something dangerously, chillingly hot. Burning him, tingling along his nerves, prickling in his mind as

he saw, as he knew, that this was the moment. Whatever he had been building to—since he had met Avon, since he had been born, since the Galaxy had formed, this was it.

“Yes?” Avon asked, silk over malice so pure it could be love, or love so impure it could be poison. “You came here to what? Confess to your love of boys? But I already knew that. So what did you come here for?”

“To stop you from saying anything in front of Cally.” Feeble, it sounded so feeble, so patently false, even to himself. But it was a lie he could live with: he was not sure that he could live with Avon’s truths.

“Ah, I see.” The slightest nod, as if no more than a polite hello. Then Avon was moving, Blake’s eyes addicted to the man, to the way he moved, the clench and flow of his buttocks, the invitation there. “You came here so that I would not, as is so obviously my wont, reveal everything to Cally.”

“Don’t mock me, Avon,” Blake said, dangerous now as Avon was dangerous, sitting there on the bunk with his shoes off and his feet bare. Stripping, slowly, without the usual blandishments of seduction, and all the more appealing for it.

“If you don’t want me to mock you, then stop handing me your head on a silver platter.” Avon was standing, tunic dropped to the floor, shirt buttons coming casually undone, each revealed inch of skin caustic, eroding Blake. It would have been so much more resistible, if Avon had been making a striptease out of this, but it was nothing like that, only the removing of clothes, as Avon must have done every night of his life. Casual, meaningless, absolutely sexless—and therefore innocent, sexy beyond belief to Blake. He could feel his pulse racing, hurtling through his body as his blood flooded into his cock, making him hotter and harder, filling him, lengthening him, until the cloth of his trousers was a soft caress. Avon flexed his shoulders, his chest muscles moving, nipples small and pale in the smoothness of his chest: Blake’s trousers were as tight as a fist, pressing his cock against his thigh, crotch seam splitting his balls, pulling them tight. Blake was dizzy, from arousal and from the rollercoasting of his emotions. He knew there was an answer to why his reactions to Avon were an endless seesawing, but it was

an answer that sneaked in during the night, to be cast out and forgotten by morning.

"So," Avon was saying, stretching, scratching absently at his waist where Blake could see the pink creases left by his trousers, "we have dealt with devious, and we have certainly dealt with bastard. Which leaves," he looked at Blake, wide-eyed, innocence personified, "deviant."

"Don't—" He had to stop, cough, clear his throat of the passion lodged there. The way the light was tickling over Avon, the unconscious beauty of the lithe body, the way white skin surrounded pale pink nipple... "Don't think you can use my perversions against me. I may have desires which I can't control, but I'll damn well control my actions."

"How noble," Avon replied, fumbling with the tight button on his waistband, the clumsiness of his fingers obliterating the sting of his words and making Blake itch to reach out and do it for him, to help, to take charge, to guide those pretty fingers "How terribly noble. But you are a deviant, Blake, as much as I am. Tell me, for all your lofty ideals, what will you do next time you are left alone with some pretty child?"

"Walk away." The way he should be walking away from Avon, but he was addicted, couldn't peel his eyes away for wondering if that were shadow he could see in the cusp of Avon's trousers, or if it were the secret darkness of hair.

"Really? As I said, how noble. But think about it, Blake, actually think about it. Imagine the child. A girl, a boy, which do you prefer?" No pause, no time for Blake to recover from the words thudding into him. "Or doesn't it matter, as long as they are innocent and you can 'protect' them?" Avon's hand poised on zip, easing it fractionally, not far enough, lust tangling in Blake's mind with the guilty pleasure of what Avon was saying, and the pain it all brought. "Think about his little hand in yours," Avon said, voice a velvet caress the length of Blake's hard cock. "Think about him holding on tight as you take him somewhere, making him laugh, making him happier than his too-strict parents ever would. Taking him away from misery and pain, because you could make him happy. Because you love him."

The words caught Blake, honey-trap to snare him, and he was entangled, eyes riveted to Avon, to his mouth, his body, that deeply

shadowed place where Avon's white fingers dabbled.

"What would you do then, when that child, that perfect innocence, threw his arms around your neck and said you were the most wonderful person in the world? Would you be able to do it?" Sharper than a serpent's tooth, indeed. The venom, produced within Blake's own mind, dripped into his blood. "Would you be able to walk away and truly protect that child? Or would your own sexual needs colour your thoughts, convince you that a little kiss wouldn't do any harm? Hmm?"

He couldn't answer that. Didn't want to answer it.

But Avon never permitted cowardice. Frailties and foibles he would countenance, but never cowardice, and never from Blake. "Tell me. Where would it end, Blake?"

Blake knew where it would end. Knew where it *should* end, but the seduction of Avon's voice was leading him astray, taking him down paths he never wanted to find again.

"I can tell you where it would end," Avon whispered to him, breathless, the intimacy of secrets shared in the dark, when he'd been away at school, with his best friends, things done in the night...

"It would end with you satisfied, and that little boy scarred for life. It would end, Blake," and the snap of his voice was a whip across Blake's back, "it would end with all your fine, noble intentions nothing more than another child violated, another life ruined. It would end with you being no better than the Federation said you were."

He couldn't bear it. Couldn't, couldn't, couldn't. "Stop it! Shut up, Avon, just shut up, or I'll—"

"Or what? You'll hit me? When you know that is precisely what I want?"

"You sick bastard—"

"Thus spake the child molester."

Blake hit him then, hard, another backhander, Avon tumbling over, landing on the bed, sprawled on his back, legs wide-splayed, utterly vulnerable, totally defenceless, and Blake wanted him voraciously.

"Why, thank you," Avon smiled, coming up off the bed, one hand checking to see if there was any blood. "Can I have some more, please?"

Deep inside, one of Blake's demons stirred, and smiled, a demon Blake knew instinctively that he had fought all his life. An old lust was licking his groin, an old need, and Blake felt his feet slide out from under him. "Why are you doing this to me?" Begging, now, pleading to be freed from this thing they both wanted and should both fear.

Avon smiled, the personification of Blake's own demon. "Because it's what you need—and it's what I want."

No, too much, much too much like the truth. He needed to back away from that, turn his back on it so that it wouldn't be true, so that he could find a nice comfortable lie to lean on. "I *need* to slap you around? How the hell did you come to that conclusion?"

"Oh, no, that's the part I *want*. What you need..." Avon knelt on the bunk, slouching, making himself small so that Blake was still looking down, if only slightly. "Look at me, Blake," Avon said.

As if Blake could do anything else. Helpless, defeat crowding his shoulders and firing his loin, he stared.

"What do you see?"

"Believe me, Avon, you really don't want to know the answer to that."

"I think *you* are the one who doesn't want the answer. Don't you know why I excite you so?"

Grasping at straws, postponing the moment. "Sometimes—it's usually a sure sign that I want my head examined."

"Which, demonstrably, is most of the time. Certainly right now."

He couldn't deny that, not when the adrenalin rush of anger was singing through him and his lust was stoked and made ready by Avon so willing in front of him. On his knees, looking up, submissive for all his aggressive words. Even his voice, soft, light, not as deep as usual...

Avon was looking at him with the damnation of self-knowledge. "You really don't know, do you? Oh, Blake, you poor, confused bastard..."

Too much, to hear sympathy and affection in that voice. "You can take your pity and—"

"Yes? I can take my pity, and? You've no more answer for that than for why you came here in the first place, have you?" Avon lay down then, arms and legs artlessly arranged in complete vulnerability. "Isn't there something

about me that you notice, Blake? Something unusual, something that excites you terribly, even if you refuse to acknowledge it?"

"There's nothing about you—" But there was, and the palms of his hands were sweating, and his hackles were prickling, his body wanting to fight or flee. His conscious mind had been denying it, but his body had known. And wanted to taste, to run his tongue there, learn what it would feel like, own that innocence of flesh...

"Nothing?" Avon asked, almost pouting.

Blake didn't want to deal with any of this, simply did not want to get into this. Wanted to run, but his feet had set down roots, in the loam of those desires he had damned to perdition.

"Nothing at all?" Avon asked again, a sing-song cadence creeping in, the sound of it sucking on Blake until lust warred with anger and fear was pushed to the background where it whimpered, ignored, the heated emotions consuming everything.

"Well, Blake?" Avon murmured, stretching his arms above his head. "Can't you see what I've done? What I've done—" voice shifting, becoming a light whisper, "for you?"

"Yes," Blake groaned, eyes closing against what lay presented in front of him. But the darkness was not so welcoming as Avon, nor strong enough to blot out the need in Blake, the need that Avon recognised so well in him and was feeding. Blake opened his eyes again, leaving himself unarmoured against the beauty spread before him. "Yes," he whispered, leaning forward, trembling fingers reaching out to touch, there, where the skin was baby smooth, where there should have been hair. "Why?" he asked, because he could not face the answers himself, but Avon could. In his own unique way, Avon was almost innocent, for he knew no shame, he admitted no guilt. Indulged his senses with the appetite of a man, and with the irresponsible immaturity of youth.

"Because I can give you what you need, and you can give me what I want. Here," Blake's fingers were taken in cool ones, caressed across the slight bump of nipple to the satin skin on Avon's chest. "Bare. Completely bare, because that's what you need. And here," Blake's hand smoothed down Avon's belly, to where the trousers lay slightly agape, naked skin disappearing into darkness. Blake's cock jolted, and

his mind shuddered. If Avon had removed the hair there, if he had done that, it would be too much, far too young, too much what he had feared he had done...

Or worse, would it be the only thing that could keep Blake aroused?

"But not here," Avon was saying to him, and Blake could feel the brush of hair, and then the softness of skin over hardness that begged his hand to hold it, to squeeze and stroke and bring out into the light where it could be seen and adored. He splayed his hand, his fingers coming down tightly on each side of Avon's cock, his palm pressing into the slight groin hair, his fingertips touching Avon's balls.

"Oh, yes, I want you to do that again," Avon groaned, the greedy whine in his voice exciting to Blake. "I like when you do that..."

Blake pushed the trousers down out of the way, exposing Avon, all the way to the lightest down of hair on his thighs. He took Avon's balls in one hand, and his cock in the other, covering the crown with the wetness of his mouth. Avon shuddered in him, pulse strong and heavy against Blake's tongue.

Avon's hands grabbed him, forcing him down, the thickness of Avon's cock gagging him. Blake pulled away, shoving Avon's hands away. "Don't do that."

"I'm sorry," Avon said, very quietly, his demeanour denying the manliness of his cock, the expression on his face that of a little boy trying to get out of trouble. "I'm really sorry."

"Just don't do it again," Blake muttered, lowering himself once more to Avon's cock. It should have worried him, that he needed no instruction in this, but the hunger was too deep, the famine gone on for too long. He knew precisely the old, standard game they were playing, knew how dangerous it could be for him, but that would be later. He had no strength left to pretend anything to himself, too wearied to keep all the old knowledge and desires locked away. Oh, yes, there would be penalties, but not until much later, in a future beyond his imagining. But right now, at this moment, he had Avon pliant under him, Avon willing, and Avon, his clever, clever Avon, knowing exactly what Blake needed and more than willing to provide it with the safety of his adult body.

The hands descended upon him again, forc-

ing him again, demanding rather than strong.

"I told you not to do that," Blake snapped, pushing at Avon, a pulse of desire as he registered how perfectly Avon was playing his part.

"I'm sorry, I can't help it." Huge eyes gazed up at Blake, and Avon's lips stayed parted, giving Blake a glimpse of the wet darkness inside. "It's just... I just want it so very much..."

He was playing it too well: and were those real memories he was stirring, or was he merely fantasy brought to life? Blake didn't know, had no way to know, and so he stared at Avon, and crawling fear threatened to unman him. Almost, almost he pushed Avon and his games aside; almost, almost he did the sensible thing and walked out before he could give in to something he feared could eat him alive. But then Avon blinked so slowly, looked down, and temptation struck again, so that Blake did nothing.

"I've been terribly naughty," Avon said, one hand rubbing at his eye.

And for that gesture of perfect innocence, Blake wanted to kill him. Avon—no, he couldn't think of him as Avon, not lying there like that. Kerr...yes, it was Kerr, lying there, with his hairless armpits and naked chest. With only smooth skin where a line of hair should arrow down to the black hair nested 'round his cock. Kerr, with his childlike innocence, and his adult's lust, and his adult's sex. But Kerr, who was offering him what he needed, but which he had thought he could not have. Oh, yes, he could kill Avon for giving him this.

But he could love Kerr. And most frightening of all, he could love Avon too.

He took a deep breath, trying to fend off the seduction of Kerr lying there in such exquisite, forbidden nakedness. But he couldn't fight it, couldn't turn down such expiation of his needs. To feed the demon in his soul, that was what was on offer here. And the price?

But he had already lost that battle, had already decided to pay the penalty later. After...

After he had tasted this flesh.

After he had made this body belong to him.

He should fight it, he knew he should. But he wanted this so much, needed it so much, and to give it up, when this would be his only chance of fulfilling himself without destroying some innocent's life... So was that, perhaps, what Avon was giving him? This chance to pretend

that he was with some naïveté called Kerr—was that not to feed his demon to make it stronger, but to keep it caged within this room, between the two of them, two grown men who could each play the rôle the other needed so terribly?

And with such perfect beauty and such perfect need lying in front of him, did it honestly matter? Would the reason make a difference to what he was going to do? He had to believe that it would. Had to believe that if he were not to hate himself after.

“Yes, you have,” Blake finally said, giving them both what they wanted, making Avon’s eyes sparkle with anticipatory delight. “You’ve been a very bad boy, Kerr.”

He stood up, bringing Avon with him. “Go and stand in the corner till I’m ready for you,” he said, watching Avon’s strong back and wondering at how so solid a man could make himself appear so fragile. With Avon turned away from him, Blake stripped, then put on the dressing gown that had lain, crumpled by their movements, at the bottom of the bunk. He tied it, but carefully, so that it would come undone with but a single twist of his hand.

He settled himself on the edge of the bunk, checking to make sure that the mechanics of this would work. He supposed, dispassionately so that he would not begin to think again, so that his doubts would stay quietly locked away, that he would one day reach the stage where all this would be automatic, the game so well-established and the rôles so familiar that they would simply walk in and be ready for what they had to do.

“Kerr,” he said, very stern, that such a part of this game they were playing. “Come over here.”

Avon, spectacularly, shockingly obedient, did as he was told, coming towards Blake with his head bowed and his lashes lowered, hands crossed modestly in front of his genitals.

“This is going to hurt me more than it’s going to hurt you,” Blake said, from the rippling memory of some book he had read and buried deep in his mind. “Bend over.”

He opened his legs as Avon positioned himself, then closed them around Avon’s erection, trapping the hot flesh between his thighs. Avon’s legs were slightly spread, and Blake understood what Avon wanted. One forearm digging into Avon’s shoulders, he brought his

free hand up, then down, hard, handprint blossoming red on white arse. Avon moaned, wriggling, and Blake pressed his thighs more tightly together, giving Avon the sensation he wanted and himself the joy of keeping Kerr there, owning that part of him, controlling every sensation. Again, Blake spanked him, and again, until his mark was on every inch of Avon’s arse, until there was none of Avon’s white skin left, only the red aftermath of Blake’s possession.

“Are you sorry, Kerr?” he asked, one finger rubbing the tight hole of Avon’s arse, his finger promising as his words set them up for the next part of their scene.

“No!” Avon shouted, invitingly recalcitrant, pushing his backside up so that Blake’s fingertip penetrated him.

“Then we shall have to make you see the error of your ways, won’t we, Kerr?” Blake shoved Avon’s legs wider apart, lifting and moving him until Avon’s cock was crushed between Avon’s belly and the top of Blake’s thigh, and Avon’s balls were lying, exposed and helpless, Blake tugging on them, not quite gently. “Hold yourself open,” Blake demanded, and Avon immediately reached one hand round, doing as well as he could. Blake released his hold on Avon’s balls, using that hand to spread Avon’s other cheek, a small darkness opening as Avon’s arse was stretched. There was no need to hold Avon down any more, so Blake lifted his arm from Avon’s shoulders, raised it over Avon’s back like a panoply, and then spanked Avon, there, on the runnel of flesh between Avon’s buttocks, the palm of his hand slapping onto Avon’s arsehole, his fingers just touching Avon’s balls. Then a caress to soothe the sting of the blow, a light stroking across the bud of pink flesh and the tender swell below.

Between them, Avon’s cock thrummed his appreciation, and Blake smiled down at him with feral pleasure. He shifted them again, his cock now across his thigh and kissed sweetly by Avon’s. He held them together like that for a while, until Avon’s naughty, struggling schoolboy act was more than mere pretence, Avon’s frustration and impatience a taut reality between them. Then, and only then did he begin the spanking again, every harshness followed by contrasting softness, hot slaps by cool caresses, anger by conciliation. And Avon was loving it,

mewling his pleasure, his mouth wet and wide on every inch of Blake's flesh that could be reached, his cock grinding against Blake's. He was, Blake could tell by the flush of his skin and the frantic rubbing of his body, getting close to the point of no return. But it was up to Blake when that happened, it was up to Blake to be in control of their desires and their bodies. It was all for him to decide.

"I think that's enough for now," Blake said, rubbing his hands soothingly across Avon's red buttocks.

"But I've been so naughty," Avon pouted, squirming round so that he could look over his shoulder at Blake.

Blake pinched his bottom, no caress, but serious warning, a reminder that Avon had put himself in Blake's hands and had to trust him with their pleasure. "Up you get."

"Don't want to," Avon whined, still watching, hands clutching at Blake, his cockhead damp against Blake's skin.

"Get up!" Blake roared, resisting the temptation to throw Avon to the bed and fuck him into next week. That wasn't part of the game, not yet, and this was going to cost him too much to throw the fantasy away on mere lust.

"Please," Avon whimpered, pushing, giving Blake no choice in what he would have to do next.

Blake raised his hand, promising punishment for such disobedience.

"Oh, please," Avon's voice so small and light, his breath a faint caress, his body speaking the language of a child.

A pause, with Blake staring at Avon, locked into place by some expression in the brown eyes, some hint of what Avon was asking for holding Blake there, simply staring. Waiting, for something he knew he needed, for something he feared Avon might know also, and worse, bring out to where it was seen, and heard, and welcomed. Breath caught in his chest, Blake waited for Avon to say it.

Avon's eyes were very wide and very, very bright, his voice the barest of whispers. "Oh, please, Daddy."

For a long moment, several thudding heartbeats, Blake stared, appalled and aroused and torn to pieces. He had known he wanted this, had thought he could have it and still pretend

that he wasn't, quite, giving in. And now Avon had said it. Daddy. Both rôle-playing and reality, heaven and hell in the one word.

Trust. That's what Avon was asking for. Trust in him that he wouldn't allow Blake to destroy himself, trust in him that he would free Blake from the fear of taking what he needed from an innocent.

Could he? Trust Avon? And even if he didn't, could he deny himself the pleasure of Avon's trust in him now that it had been handed to him freely?

Even dazed as he was with lust and confusion and guilt, the tremulous voice cut right through Blake's scant defences.

"Please, Daddy," Avon whispered, taking Blake's hand and kissing the palm tenderly—chastely. "I'll do whatever you say, Daddy..."

And the lust and the desire and the fierce, fierce need seared through him. Blake wrenched free of Avon's tender grip and hit him, the *crack!* of his hand meeting flesh ricocheting through the room. His voice was thick, struggling to get past the aching hunger in his throat, his cock pulsing strongly as he finally, irrevocably, yielded to this blessing of his darkest secret. "I'm sorry, but you need to be taught a lesson."

Across Blake's lap again, Avon was afire, squirming and struggling, crying and pleading, his cock rubbing hard against Blake's, giving Blake the control and power he needed the way he needed air. He grabbed Avon by the hair, pulling him up until they were only a kiss apart. He waited until Avon was still, until Avon was waiting, dependent on Blake, until they were looking at each other with the unnerving, exciting intensity of honesty. He wanted to drag this moment out, make it last, to feast on this knowledge of what Avon was begging him for. He didn't want to look away from the perfect innocence of Kerr's eyes. "This is for your own good," he said, giving unto Avon what Avon had given him, losing himself completely in the sweetness of his fantasy. "I'm doing this for your own sake." And he made them both wait, made the pleasure sweeter, sharper, made them wait until he couldn't wait another second. He said it, out loud, with all the pleasure the galaxy could hold. "I'm doing this for you. Son."

And felt the sweet heat of Avon's cum on him, and stared into Avon's eyes as Avon cli-

maxed, and kissed him, deeply, possessively, as the final waves of orgasm claimed Avon, just as Blake claimed him for his own. Blake kissed him again and again, his hands taking their pleasure wherever his whim led him to touch Avon.

“On my lap,” he said when Avon had calmed from his orgasm and was melting nicely into his kisses. Quickly, he was obeyed, Avon’s arms twining round his neck, Avon’s bottom lush on the hard thrust of Blake’s cock, Avon’s mouth open to Blake’s. “Up,” was all Blake said, and Avon was astride him, poised, ready. Practised, Blake recognised, and shoved the thought from his mind as the expertise threatened his fantasy of perfect innocence. “Down,” he whispered, eyes closed, not wanting to look into Avon’s eyes as he penetrated him, as that hot flesh parted for him, as that satin interior swallowed him in. Tight, too tight, pressing into him, a ring of muscle round the base of his cock, embracing flesh down the length of him. He moved, a fraction, then lifted Avon up, lowering him, controlling the movement, the burning friction of Avon’s arse loving him. Enveloped by his own illicit dreams, he allowed himself then the luxury of touching Avon there, under his arms, where the flesh was so sinfully naked, where there was such satin smoothness, such ageless perfection. Pulled Avon even closer against him, to savour the bare chest, the tiny nipple-buds. And the joy, the extremity of sexual pleasure was in the way Avon’s arms were clinging round his neck, in the way Avon was holding on to him so tightly with such needfilled hunger. He felt a ripple of muscle against his cock, the adult, knowing movement ameliorated by the way Avon whimpered against his neck, murmuring words that touched the secret places inside Blake just as his cock touched the secret places inside Avon. It was perfect, utterly perfect, made more so when Avon turned round, still impaled, and wrapped himself around Blake, arms and legs clinging, smooth, smooth skin pressing against Blake, and that flawless mouth whispering all the right things, every sound, every touch shivering down Blake’s spine, overflowing to fill his body, bringing him closer and closer to orgasm.

Avon, enveloped in and around Blake, sitting on Blake’s lap with a combination of profoundest carnal knowledge and most perfect innocence,

was all Blake needed, this filling of every need in the only way that might possibly be safe. He hugged this pliant version of Avon, kissing him, covering his face with tiny kisses, closing those eyes with the brief caress of his mouth, hearing himself murmur all the things that could be said here and nowhere else.

In his arms, Avon shifted, squirming charmingly, the movement of his body a delight to Blake, and he was close, so close to coming, needing something, just something, one more thing and he would be there...

Avon, of course, his salvation and his damnation, knew precisely what it was and gave it, eyes glittering, flesh sweet and tight, skin so smooth and soft.

Brown eyes gazed into Blake’s, arms tightened round him, Kerr’s small voice speaking. “I love you, Daddy.”

And Blake came, great rushing waves of pleasure, destroying his mind, body flying apart on a million shards of most exquisite sensation. All the while, he heard it, Avon’s voice playing little boy for Blake, Kerr telling him all the things he craved to hear, all the things his heart and mind and libido were focussed on, Avon gave him all these things.

Doing so, Avon, pretty, passive Avon, showed that it was he who was made of steel and iron and immutable strength, that it was he who held the upper hand. It was he, not Blake, who led, here.

And Blake, lying there on the bed, unsure of when he had moved, or how he moved, knowing only that he had found some sort of heaven for that brief time, Blake knew that he was going to follow.

Catching his breath, gathering his scattered wits, he slowly propped himself up on his elbow. His dressing gown was tangled round him, the belt trailing, so he sat up, taking his time to sort his clothing out, stealing some time to sort his cover out. A deep breath, and then he looked Avon straight in the eye. There wasn’t the faintest trace of Kerr, no hint at all of how small Avon had been, nor of how he’d clung, nor of how he’d needed to be made safe.

No hint, either, of what he had said. I love you. He had, Avon had said it—but when he was playing at being someone and something else. That, perhaps, explained the dark

glimmerings Blake saw now, that miasma of emotion, unreadable, behind Avon's polite face.

"I see you've decided to rejoin the land of the living."

Unrevealing, no more expression than if they were on the flight deck passing round one of Vila's concoctions. "I'm sorry," Blake answered automatically whilst his mind whirled with wonderings and speculations and doubts, "did I fall asleep on you?"

"Under me, actually," Avon replied, a wealth of meaning lading the simple fact, turning it into a metaphor for who had gained power here. It was, Blake thought, time for the payments to come due, complete with penalties, points and collateral.

"Was I?" Blake asked, refusing Avon's balance of payments, offering his own deal. "Not that the actual positioning matters over much, does it?"

An unexpected peal of laughter, Avon's odd sense of humour flooding the room with its brightness, the silence after carrying a hint of threat in contrast. "Oh, but position is everything, Blake, or so the manuals would have us believe."

"Surely you don't believe everything you read?"

"About you?" Sharp look, peeling Blake's skin off to reveal the man within. "At the time, yes. Now..."

The words left Blake hanging, swaying gently in current of Avon's gaze. All the self-loathing and self-doubts came back to disembowel all Blake's hard-won certainties, the intellect no proof against the dismaying fear that perhaps the mind was wrong, pretending to itself, and all those emotions, those forbidden, unwanted emotions and desires were stronger than the man who held them. And Avon sat there, at the very foot of the bed, staring. Blake swallowed, did as Avon was so silently demanding he do. "And now? Do you believe it now?"

Was that a smile in those dark eyes? Or was it merely the glitter of triumph? "Now? Now it doesn't matter. What matters, Blake," and he leaned forward, one hand stretching out to trace a pattern of pleasure across Blake's chest, Blake's eyes feasting on the naked skin under Avon's arm, "is that now you know the truth about yourself—"

"Do I?" Blake demanded, and was ignored,

Avon's hand lowering to where Blake's lax sex lay, sticky amidst its forest of hair.

"Oh, you do. And if you don't, well, you'll find out eventually. Or it will cease to be important. What is important, now—" his hand closed tightly, too tightly, threatening Blake's manhood with its barely leashed strength, "is that you know you can have what you need without harming anyone, and I can have what I want with the fewest possible complications."

Blake started to laugh, hysteria colouring the edges. "With the fewest possible complications? Oh, Avon, you would have fewer complications if you took up with Servalan and Travis combined."

"But they," sibilant voice, serpentine caresses on Blake's sex, and lower, between his legs, his balls pressed into his body, Avon's finger flirting with the entrance to his body, "neither one of them could give me what I want."

Blake's large hand took Avon's in his, stilling the other man, regaining control. He stared until Avon stopped looking away and met his eyes. "And what is it that you want, Avon?"

A sophisticated smile, meaningless enough to hide a multitude of truths behind. "I rather think we've just gone through all that."

"Have we?" He leaned back, away from Avon's threatened kiss, keeping himself distant enough that he wouldn't lose himself in the carnal promise of Avon's body. "And which part of that was what you wanted? The spanking?"

Unspeaking, Avon moved in closer until he was kneeling astride Blake, and had Blake's hand upon him, mapping where the skin had been so hot and red.

"And the being told you were naughty?"

Avon lowered his eyes, black eyelashes casting crescent shadows on an unbelievably smooth face.

"And the being fucked?"

Dark eyes opened, and burned with sexual lure, enough to distract anyone other than Blake.

"And the telling me you loved me?"

Gone, in an instant, a flurry of motion and dismay and rage, but the voice, when it came was perfectly controlled, a monotone of boredom. "All these amateur athletics have tired me out and I'm going to bed," quick, hurried, before Blake could take advantage, "—alone. Good night."

Then Avon was gone, a dignified retreat into the bathroom. Taking his time, Blake got dressed to the soothing drone of the shower. At the door, he paused, looking for a moment at the other door, the locked one Avon was hiding behind. It had had all the hallmarks of politely withdrawing whilst one's casual sexual partner left, but Blake recognised a rout when he saw one.

And what was interesting was what had caused it.

He had, almost, put together all the conflicting emotions and insights of that night with Avon, untangling the skeins of Avon's intended powerplay that was supposed to be disguised as sex-play, but was, Blake was sure, more love disguised as sex-play within powerplay. Exhibit A, he decided, was the way Avon was behaving at this very moment. Obstreperous to the point of inciting murder, strung so taut with tension that a single word would make him vibrate with fury; appetite gone, humour a brittle exercise of form, and under it all, the constant, endless glancings at Blake, the ones slipped in between the barbed comments and the vicious expressions of dislike. Oh, yes, only one thing could possibly explain Avon being in such a state of total disarray: love. Had to be, Blake thought. All the evidence pointed towards that. And Avon had actually said it.

Love, Blake mused. Love, between him, and Avon. Was it possible? Oh, the feelings were plausible, even likely, given how much they could hate each other at times. He could, he knew, love Avon. Probably already did love him as Kerr—but that was something to be thought about later, the sweet inferno that was Kerr.

But Avon? To invite the viper into his heart and hope to contain it? Just look at what had happened when Blake had given Avon what he wanted—or allowed Avon to give Blake what Blake needed. Now he had Avon glaring and glowering at him, endless posturings of hostility, anything to prove that those flaying words had never been said.

I love you.

And Blake wondered if it were true.

Do you love me? he asked Avon silently. Avon, equally silently and all unknowing, answered him in that moment with a covetous

glance from under the veil of eyelashes.

Oh, yes, it was all there for anyone with eyes to see and the secret knowledge so misered by Blake: Avon loved him.

The question now was how they could both survive this revelation.

Avon was a fulcrum, ever balanced on a single point, with no-one but Avon knowing what that one thing was. Woe betide the person who guessed wrongly, who neglected whichever imperative Avon harboured. A palimpsest of multiple levels and ever-changing meanings, it was taking Blake time to decipher this man, but that night could be the one definitive clue.

Of course, it could prove the one definitive clue to Blake himself, not a thought he wanted to dwell upon. Knowledge of oneself was never as comfortable as knowledge of others, and Blake was still breathless from the tumult of emotions and discoveries he had made about himself. Better, for now, to concentrate on Avon, and if any self-knowledge should arise, well, it would be all the easier to assimilate if it came drip by drip rather in the suffocating deluge of a child creeping into his bed.

He still did not want to believe that of himself. Still could not believe that he was that basest of creatures, an abuser of children.

But I'm not, he reminded himself yet again. The Federation had to falsify evidence that I had touched them, and I did nothing that Jak would remember as anything other than innocent comforting.

And the memory crashed into him: of Avon sitting on his lap, Blake's cock deep inside his body, those arms clinging round his neck, the deliberate innocence, the calculated child-likeness, yet the unmanufactured, raw need. A hand wiped across his face wiped away the sudden rain of sweat, but did nothing to erase the flood of arousal. Safety, temptation whispered in his mind: the safety of a man's mind in a man's body, with all the careful imaging of a child superimposed over what could not be denied to be a man.

Safe.

But "Avon is safety" was an oxymoron, two antonyms he could not believe made a synonym. Although it could certainly make a sin...

Opposite him and in opposition to him, Avon was stalking Vila, sharp-tongued mastery dis-

played for everyone to see, although Blake understood the display to be for Blake himself and no other. Or perhaps for Avon alone, antidote for the cloying need and sweetness of that night, a repetition of the brutish rejection that followed the most intimate of moments. Blake engrossed himself in his work, affecting a disinterest in Avon and his performance, ignoring it even as it grew louder and more demanding, even when the insistence on attention was too strong for anyone to legitimately ignore, Blake gave Avon not the slightest note. Waiting, instead, to break another of Avon's secret codes: waiting to see if Avon would, in his need, come to Blake.

A time passing, and it was Vila coming to him, complaining of Avon, making noises about how Avon was being a 'right and proper bastard', tales of woe and discrimination, of jokes gone sour: all of it background muzak for Blake's thoughts, mere jingles discarded when Blake rose to seek the quiet privacy of his own room.

"Well, that's just charming," Vila shouted after him, Jenna and he both staring after Blake with concern. "As bad as bloody Avon, that's what you are."

And a hysterical bubble of desperate humour rose inside Blake at the taunt: Perhaps Avon, he thought, is rubbing off on me...

Another day, another argument, the otherwise empty flight deck echoing with crack of electric emotion. Avon, staring at him, meeting his eyes with leashed and threatening hostility, a knowing, contemptuous smile never far behind the sly and secret taunts.

"I said," Blake thundered in the quietest of voices, "get back to your position."

A raised eyebrow, a quirk of the lips, the merest flicker of Avon's glance down to Blake's crotch. This time, he chose to obey, but every inch of body language laughed at Blake, made mockery of Blake's command.

"And would this be my position?" Avon's voice slid delicately between Blake's ribs, cutting right into his heart. Avon, on his knees, head bowed, hands clasped behind his back. Then to his feet, the movement endlessly, achingly graceful, Avon canting his head in perfect reproduction of childhood's uncertainty and shy approach to the adult, his hands twisting and fiddling like a boy's. Eyes wide and wickedly

innocent, gazing up at a man who was actually a scant measure taller. "Or is this my position?" The pose changing completely with little more than the rearranging of Avon's attitude, his height restored by his arrogance, the wringing hands arrayed, clench-fisted, on his hips. "If you want me on my knees, Blake," he hissed, body too close, far too close for Blake's comfort, "if you want me hanging on your every word, then you come to me, behind locked doors, and you play the games you need and I want. Otherwise," a flash of movement and Avon's hand was locked round Blake's throat, main strength lifting Blake onto his toes, taller now than Avon but lesser than the other man, "remember that I choose not only to follow, but to allow you to lead the others. Remember that, Blake, and remember that I have as much claim to this ship as you. And that I, unlike you," charming smile, quick hands smoothing down Blake's clothes while Blake rubbed at his throat to get his voice back, "can programme and control this ship's computers. Think," and Avon stroked a finger across Blake's lips, there, where they parted for breath, "voice command override." Avon leaned forward just a fraction, until Blake could not keep Avon's face in focus and could not keep his mind free of the sensations of Avon's body so close to his. Open mouth coming ever closer, and he opened automatically, closing his eyes as Avon's tongue invaded his mouth, kissing him deep and hard and demanding. Blake clutched him, grinding against the hardness of Avon's cock, desperate for a heat to match that passion, so bitterly jealous of Avon's easy lust. Avon pulled free, shoving Blake backwards, his man's body taut with sex, trousers tented and tight with the thrust of his cock. Casually, contemptuous, Avon caressed himself through the sleek newness of leather that displayed his manliness and his distance from childhood. Blake couldn't tear himself away from staring at that rampant, ostentatious masculinity, made all the more devastating by his own unnerving, terrifying lack of arousal from such sexually charged intimacy, such an insurmountable contrast from that night when he had lost himself completely in passion.

Avon smiled at him once more, a world of meaning in his eyes. "I suggest you think. You never know, you might actually," one last glance

at Blake's unresponsive groin, "like it."

Ever one for the dramatic, well-timed exit, Avon was gone, before Blake could reform himself, before Blake could find a single answer for Avon—or for himself.

The threat gnawed at him like guilt. Blake was not so sure of the others that he believed Avon's threat to be idle or aggrandised. Vila would probably go with Avon: the thief had an instinct for finding survivors and sticking with them. Gan? Gan would follow whoever would be best for the group. Jenna? Jenna just might choose to make her own demands, her own tilt at command. And Gan and Vila would go with her, if she decided she wanted it. And if Avon misplayed his hand.

And if Blake faltered, even for a second.

Avon.

The name came to him constantly, when he worked, when he made plans, when he checked computer schematics, when he ate, slept, dreamed...

When his hand would find his cock, and stroke it, mind the master of the hand, fantasy and lust the master of the mind and at the centre, always there, the hub of the wheel, was Avon, smiling at him in just the right way, the tone of voice perfect, the body language perfect.

The hairless body, with but one trace of manliness remaining. Smooth skin, silken soft, inviting, waiting to be tasted, savoured, marked with the rosy glow of Blake's hand, of his sucking mouth, of his nipping teeth...

Restless deep in the marrow of his bones, Blake turned over, making a truth of the old cliché, tossing and turning in his bed. He was too hot, pushed the covers down. Now he was too naked, revealed wanting Avon.

Wanting Kerr.

That kiss on the flight deck had proved that he didn't want Avon, didn't want the man. Wanted the child hidden inside.

Needed the child inside.

Needed to be inside the child, needed Kerr needing him, loving him, protected by him. One being made safe, one being unharmed, coddled, loved, nurtured—the Universe in one body, the hope of his future contained in that one...

Love.

He had pretended he had forgotten that. Had

pretended that he did not love that vulnerability that was Kerr. But he did, and had, and could again.

If he could pay the price Avon demanded.

If he knew the price Avon demanded. Kinky sex? Could it be something so...mutual? An equal give and take, a balance of needs? Yet it was Avon who insisted that Blake needed it and Avon merely wanted it.

But it was Avon who had said "I love you". The key? It was too obvious, too easy to find, which was, perhaps, its secret. Who would think that a complexity the likes of Avon could be unravelled, revealed by so obvious a human need?

I might, Blake thought, wondering, remembering Avon as he had been when he said those words. I love you.

Daddy.

Blake groaned again, rolling over on to his stomach, a bad idea, his cock blindly seeking the pressure of the mattress to rub against, his flesh crawling with the need for Avon—the need for Kerr.

All right, he told himself, accept it. Pædophile. My orientation is towards children. Who are untouchable, inviolate, who must never, ever know. Where else can I go, but to Avon, and through him, to Kerr? A boy who is a man, a boy who can never be hurt by my passions. A boy who understands the twistedness of everything I have ever wanted, whether I was born like this or made to be this, by Federation puppeteers, by my own childhood, by my own nature: none of that matters. It is, that's the only answer I have.

Avon, a maze of a man who could, perhaps, love only when he played at being a child again.

Kerr. Kerr Avon, beautiful and dangerous and too easy to love.

Redemption and damnation, two sides of a single coin. Either the way to protect children and himself, or the slippery slope, the feeding of an obsession that could overcome him.

But there were no children on this ship, merely infantile behaviour. There was no-one at risk, save himself. And Avon, who was risking more than Blake believed Avon realised. Love. So small a word for so large a meaning, entangled in so much and yet intangible.

Redemption, or damnation. Save his soul with purity of thoughts and the reburying of his

libido, or hide it away, pretend none of this existed...until the next time he saw a child. And then what?

Redemption, or damnation.
There was only one answer.
Kerr Avon.

Days had passed, and nothing had changed. The knowledge was there, simmering, ready to boil over between them, or immolate them. Avon, still taunting, still mutinous, rebellious in the one arena Blake needed an appearance of loyalty if he could have nothing else.

And every night, every morning, no matter where, no matter when, there was the stinging lure of Kerr Avon drawing him, festering inside until he was toxic with desire.

Redemption or damnation.

Blake didn't care any more. He couldn't know the answer in advance, and it no longer mattered, made moot by the coiling emotions between them. Hand raised, he paused for one last second, one last chance to back out before he committed them both beyond hope of escape. He breathed deeply, steadying himself, and pressed the intercom.

"Yes?" Tinny and tiny, all of Avon compressed into an inadequate speaker.

He had thought about this. Had planned it, had dreamed it, had fucked his fist more times than he could bear. "Kerr," he said, one word saying it all.

A long hesitation, and then the door opened. Avon was standing there, dressed now in some too-adult clothing taken from the store room, the gleam of black leather unappealing to Blake and seeming nothing more than an exaggeration, a flaunting of bullish manliness.

"I want you naked," he said to Avon, demanding the appearance of Kerr.

"You want," Avon asked, "or you *need*?"

"We both need, but you can call it want, or whim, or mere fancy if you have to." He stepped forward, made a point of locking the door, then faced Avon once more. Balance, counterbalance, Avon ever poised, weighing the unknown against the unfathomable. "All right," Blake said, coming that bit closer. "I'll give you this much." He reached out, unsnapping the first of the silver studs. "I hate this," he murmured. "It doesn't suit you at all. I..." he looked up, in time

to catch Avon staring at him, rapt, before the dark eyes once more became shining reflections of nothing but Blake looking at Avon. "I need you out of this," Blake whispered. "I need you naked."

A smile of triumph, arrogance fading with every snap unfastened, with every scrap of the leather trappings of male pride, until Avon was as discarded as the black clothing, and Kerr stood there, shyly revealed to Blake's hunger.

"I said naked, Kerr." Blake's voice was very soft, very gentle, all the more commanding for its quiet confidence. They were playing Avon's game, but the rules were Blake's, the old game formed to his needs. Redemption.

Kerr stared up at him, limpid-eyed, hips cocked, his expression supposedly incomprehension, but reeking instead of anticipation. Oh, Kerr might be every inch the innocent, but Avon knew what, precisely, was coming.

"Naked, Kerr," Blake said again, and this time his fingers brushed the black hair at Avon's groin. "Completely naked."

Wordless, Avon went into the bathroom, glancing over his shoulder as Blake followed him in.

"It's up there, on that shelf," the voice more delicate than minutes before, the attitude submissive and small. "Would you get it for me?"

The mirrored door opened silently, the shelves within cluttered with bottles and tubes, dentifrice cheek by jowl with depilatory. Blake reached for that, a tiny sound from Avon stopping him. He looked more carefully, and saw it, on the top shelf beside sexual objects he chose to ignore lest they ruin the fantasy they were creating. A rectangular box, heavier than expected, covered in genuine leather. Small gold or brass catch, a slight *snick* as it opened, moiré silk covering the specially moulded interior. A round cake of white soap, a fine, gilt cup. Black handled, the profusion of bristles beige and incredibly soft to his touch. Something else, the likes of which he had never seen, although its function was obvious: slender black haft, carved and made beautiful, and at its head, shiny sharpness encased in a mouth of metal. Blake took time to finger all this, to know it, then he passed it to Avon to complete the ultimate transformation into Kerr.

Water into the cup, the brush wetted, soap swirled until it frothed. Whiteness covering blackness, more and more until Avon's penis peeped out from the soap, occasional gatherings of bubbles clinging to his cock. Delicately, his hands more careful and more obviously skilled than usual, Avon began to slowly scrape the soap away, the black hair swallowed up by the whiteness, rinsed away in the sink. He was perched on the edge of the toilet, groin thrust forward, the light dancing on the soap and the virgin whiteness of skin newly laid bare. Slow, small movements, more and more revealed, Avon's strong fingers so tenderly, so carefully lifting his balls up and out of the way to make naked the line that drew Blake's eyes to the bud of flesh that had already been made utterly smooth. The metal flashed in the light, harsh, unnatural, even as the pale skin glimmered wetly in that same light, satin, more natural and unnatural than anything Blake had ever known. Very careful now, movements incredibly steady, the hands very sure, proof of how familiar a ritual this was, Avon scraped the soap from his balls, not a trace of hair to be found, only a blot or two of white marring him.

Silently, Blake handed him a wet towel, watching the drips of water running down Avon's legs—smooth also, Avon so sure of him, so prepared—then looked upwards, to where the towel was rubbing with such sensuousness.

"That's enough," he said, surprised by the hoarseness of his own voice.

The towel dropped into the sink, and Kerr, perfectly naked for Blake, stood bathed in light, his bare skin still gleaming damply. Hands trembling, Blake touched him, feeling the man's muscles under the virgin skin. "Time for bed," he whispered. "Time to tuck you in."

"Can't I stay up late tonight?"

Oh, he was perfect, perfect, every inflection exactly what Blake craved.

"No, not tonight, Kerr. Come on, to bed with you." Standing aside, following Kerr's white bottom all the way to the bed. Pulling the covers aside, giving a playful swat to that delectable rear as Kerr climbed into bed. Tucking him in, sheets up under Kerr's chin, big, brown eyes gazing up at him.

"I'm scared, Daddy," Kerr whispered, and Avon managed to make his chin tremble as if

tears weren't far away.

"There's nothing to be frightened of," Blake told him, smoothing dark hair from pale forehead, dropping a tender kiss there.

"But I'm still scared, Daddy."

Blake murmured to him, "Shh, close your eyes," a kiss on each translucent eyelid, "and go to sleep. Good night."

Wide eyed, hands clutching, pulling Blake where they both wanted him to be. "Please don't go, Daddy. Don't leave me. Stay with me until I fall asleep..."

Clever, clever Avon, taking those secrets uncovered on a planet a lifetime ago, and making them over into this perfect fantasy.

"Oh, all right," Blake said, as if he were impatient. "But just," as he kicked his shoes off and got in under the blankets, "until you fall asleep." Kerr was immediately in his arms, nestling in as if he belonged there. As Blake felt he did.

"Ouch! Your buttons are digging into me. And your trousers are all rough," said petulantly, lips pouting.

"You're such a nuisance, Kerr." But of course, Blake was quick to get out of bed and strip, quicker yet to get back into bed with an Avon who was the stuff of dreams. "There, is that better?"

"Yes, Daddy."

Blake gathered Kerr into his arms, cradling him close, thinking about all the plans he had made for this night, of all the things he had imagined doing, all the scenarios they had to share. He stroked Kerr's back, come to terms enough with his own desires and his own limitations that the muscles he caressed did not put him off. He concentrated instead on the softness of the skin, and the heady aroma of soap and nakedness. Against his own hairiness, Kerr was unbelievably smooth, the sensation shiveringly exciting. He had entire conversations worked out for this, but now that he was here, with Kerr in his arms, the innocent body pressed so trustingly to his, he could scarcely think.

"Daddy," the voice was damp on his shoulder, "I think you've given me a rash."

"Where, Kerr?" he asked, unable to resist kissing the unflawed cheek.

"Down there, Daddy." Oh, heaven! A blush,

on that cheek he had kissed, where the down-cast eyelashes cast their shadow.

"Down where?" he asked, moving back farther so that his erection wouldn't spoil the game this early.

"You know," a flicker of a shy gaze, "down there."

"Why don't you," Blake murmured, drowning in love, "show me? Take my hand..."

His hand was taken, inched forward, then stroked, so lightly, against the most beautifully bare skin. "Here?" he said, kissing that tender face again. "I can't feel anything. Perhaps I should look."

He eased the blankets down, exposing nakedness once more to the light, his own arousal increasing as he saw that lovely penis rising not from thick pubic hair, but the unprotected, exposed groin. "I can't see anything either."

"But it's still sore, Daddy."

"Shall I kiss it better for you?" He didn't even pretend to wait for an answer, lowering himself immediately, tongue tasting the remnants of soap and a cleanliness that went straight to his cock. He laved where the hair had been and where only innocence remained, his mouth lingering luxuriously. Lower still, his mouth opening, taking in the small beginnings of passion, nursing them until he could feel the growth, from boy to man, and in his mind, it was the natural rites of passage, of boyhood discovering pleasure. He remembered, or thought he remembered, himself at seven, and the delight in touching himself there, discovering that his body could stand out straight from his belly, and oh, how wonderful it felt! He was doing the same thing all over again, but this time, he was doing it for Kerr, giving him something sweet and precious, something new and unforgettable. He sucked a little harder, smiling around the filling flesh as Kerr wriggled under him.

"There now," he said, his large hand, so dark against the white skin, covering the heat of Kerr's pleasure, "all better?"

"Now I'm cold, Daddy. I need a cuddle."

How could Avon, cold, hard, vicious Avon look so vulnerable? Because, Blake thought to himself, inside Avon, Kerr still sits and cries because no-one loved him enough. "I'll cuddle you, Kerr," he said as he lay himself gently atop Kerr. "I'll cuddle you." Arms came round him,

legs wrapped round his hips, and Kerr rocked against him. Blake cradled him close, Kerr's pleasure hard against him, his own cock so hairy, so manly, against the fragile softness. One handed, he touched Kerr's penis, pressing it between Blake's thighs, until the hardness rubbed against his balls and perfect smoothness caressed his cock. Tighter, he hugged Kerr, rocking them gently back and forth, murmuring nonsense words of comfort, affection, the sorts of things said in the night to soothe an upset child. His nipples were aching, craving touch, and so he pushed against Kerr's head, until that mouth was suckling wetly against him. His cock, seeping damply, was pressed against soft belly now, digging into it, a shining trail left behind as he moved. He pushed Kerr's head lower again, groaning as a tongue dallied in the hair that arched alongside his frantic erection.

"Suck it," he said, thrusting up against the mouth suddenly made small. "Suck me!"

As if reluctantly, Kerr's mouth opened, taking only the head at first, then widening, widening, until Blake was all the way inside him, fucking Kerr's face, fucking Avon, hard, so hard, pubic hair grinding into Kerr's face, Blake's balls clinging to Kerr's chin briefly, longingly, every time Blake shoved into him. "Oh, yes," Blake hissed, hands tangling in Kerr's hair, the strands damp between his fingers. "Oh, yes, that's it, Kerry-boy, that's it. Take Daddy all the way inside you..."

He thrust, again and again, throat tight against him, tongue pressing into the underside of his cock, Kerr's hands playing with his nipples. "Harder," he groaned, making Kerr pinch the small nubs, "that's what Daddy likes."

Another jolt of his hips, Kerr gagging, pulling away, Blake grabbing him, pulling him forward. "Don't be naughty, Kerr," voice gasping, his cock wet and glistening as he slapped it across the red, sex-swollen lips. "Now, open up," rubbing the heavy thickness of his cock across closed mouth, "open up for Daddy," pushing forward, shoving his cock in Kerr's mouth, fucking him as far as he could. Deep, so deep, heat and wetness all around, then cold, chill air. "Say it, Kerr," he demanded, teasing the hungry mouth with the tip of his cock. "Tell Daddy you love him."

For a moment, it was Avon looking up at him,

Avon with the wet smear of Blake's precum all around his mouth. Then the moment passed, brown eyes closing, and the voice, whispering, "I love you. I love you, Daddy."

And then Blake was thrusting home, fucking a willing mouth, his body curled over Kerr's, hands reaching, reaching, twisting, scrabbling, until Kerr rolled onto his back, Blake turning round until he was looking down the length of the hairless body. He thrust harder, legs splayed awkwardly on either side of Kerr's head as his cock plunged into Kerr's throat. A last lunge, and orgasm claimed him, his semen pouring down Kerr's throat in streaming spasms.

Slowly, he withdrew, once more gathering Kerr into his arms. "I'm sorry," he whispered, playing the game, giving the guilt and the remorse and the love Avon craved. "I'm didn't mean to hurt you, Kerr."

"But it still hurts, Daddy." The voice was tight-drawn, strung as taut as the body in Blake's arms.

"I'll make it better for you, Kerr," he said, cupping a hard penis in his hand, hairless groin against his fingers. He stroked the flesh, doing precisely what he liked best himself, this cock an extension of himself, blood of his blood, flesh of his flesh. Only a few movements, a few caresses to fulfill the last fraction of need, and his words, his key to this cipher: "I love you, Kerr."

A spume of semen over his fingers, two, three, splatterings of wetness fading into heavy laxness in his hand and on his shoulder where Kerr—Avon? Now that the sex was over, was it Avon already?—rested his head. The man in his arms stirred, flinching as if to pull away and then sagging, defeated by something Blake could

guess at, an emotion that was probably a greater revelation and larger fear than for Blake himself.

It was Avon, undeniably, hard, armoured Avon, staring out at him from eyes bruised from the unexpected blow: Blake, loving Avon. Blake, offering what was most wanted, and most dreaded. The dark eyes closed upon bitter self-knowledge, and Blake owned a moment of purest malice, knowing that Avon was now going through what Blake had suffered with: discovering that love and desire were realities, no matter how much a man might loathe himself for where that love and desire attached itself. Weary, terribly weary, with a defeatedness Blake was sure would not be long turning into fury, or hate. "And where do we go from here?" Avon asked, more to himself than to Blake.

But it was Blake who answered him, as best as either of them could answer: "I don't know, Avon," he said, astonished amongst all the other astonishments that he was being permitted to stroke Avon's hair even though Kerr was hidden away once more and even though Avon himself had had to face the possible treachery of love within himself. "I really don't know."

There was always a time when a lie is the kindest act of all, for Blake did know, and it all balanced again on that fulcrum, Avon himself. There was love, of a sort, already between them. There could be love, of a more traditional mien, between them also. Or this could corrupt them, corrupt Blake with its illusion of absolute power, corrupt Avon farther with the knowledge that he held such sway over Blake.

Oh, yes, Blake knew where they were going: redemption or damnation. It was going to be one or the other, for better or for worse.



CONVERSION

—act of turning round; transformation or change. A sendup of our propensity to have Avon leap into bed with every Tom, Dick, Tarrant, or whomever...at the slightest, flimsiest excuse. Blake, too, thinks Avon wants exactly that and he's ready to make all of Avon's dreams come true. What he doesn't reckon on, is converting Avon to his point of view...

ROMANCING THE STONE CALLY FORNIA DONIA

It might well have been the unqualified success of the campaign that did it, but it was probably the fact that even Avon admitted that the campaign had been an unqualified success—and did so without one single sneer about Blake's own lack of qualifications, success or anything else. Avon was, in fact, heard to say that Blake's plan had had some modicum of brilliance to it. Well, if the plan had a touch of brilliance, it had nothing on Blake's smile which had Vila threatening to wear sunglasses.

"Nonsense, Vila," Blake beamed, clapping Vila heartily round the shoulder, the smaller man almost losing his footing under this unexpected gesture of affection. "The only place you'll need eye protection is Akbar IV."

"Akbar IV?" Vila repeated, just to make sure that he'd misheard the man who made the average monk look dissolute.

"That's right," Blake replied, Vila's jaw dropping open in sheer shock. "I've decided that after our success, we should let some of the others have their share of the glory. Anyway," he was beaming again, the thought of all those exploding battle cruisers warming the cockles of his heart, "it's a planet by planet job now, best left to the locals who know the terrain."

"It's gone to your head, hasn't it?" Vila asked, sidling cautiously out from under the too enthusiastic hug that was threatening his ribs—and he was none the wiser what Blake had in his pocket that was digging into him like that, and he didn't much want to find out.

"What's gone to my head?"

“Destroying the main fleet, blowing up Central Command and bugging the suppressant production factories. It’s all gone straight to your head,” Vila said. “Either that or you’re on something,” he muttered, making good his escape as Avon came on the flight deck and Blake’s attention was immediately and completely transferred.

“Avon.” Even his voice was beaming, not to mention booming, and Avon had already started to think fondly of the good old days when all Blake did was brood and try to get them all killed. Blake watched as Avon came down the steps. “Ah, Avon, it is you.”

“Well, it was when last I looked in the mirror,” Avon said in the tone of a man humouring the dangerously insane.

“Don’t be so glum,” Blake chided him cheerfully, giving Avon even more cause to be concerned.

“He’s all yours,” Vila muttered in passing, sliding past Avon at the foot of the stairs. “And good luck to you—you’ll need it. He’s gone stark, staring mad. Just you wait till you hear where he says he’s taking us next. Mad, I tell you, he’s gone bloody bonkers.”

If it weren’t for the fact that he’d taken a solemn vow to never, ever allow Blake to get the better of him, Avon would have turned tail and left, right there and then. Fortunately enough—from Blake’s point of view anyway—he did no such thing.

“So we’re going to Akbar IV,” Blake told him and stood back to wait for Avon’s delight.

“Akbar IV? Have you taken leave of your senses?” Avon asked, perfectly serious and perfectly straight-faced, a fact which disappointed Blake no end.

“No, I have not,” he replied, manfully hiding how deeply wounded he was that Avon would think the same thing as Vila, a real disappointment for someone who admired intellect as much as Blake did. “I thought you’d be pleased.”

“Oh, I am, I am,” Avon said, the frown creasing between his eyebrows making him look anything but. “I’m simply...stunned that you should suggest Akbar IV.” A thought occurred to him, one that revolved around Vila’s talent for disinformation and Blake’s occasional and deeply regretted bouts of gullibility. “You do know the sort

of place Akbar IV is, don’t you?”

“Of course I know exactly what it’s like,” Blake replied, his beaming enthusiasm rapidly disappearing under Avon’s polite bemusement. Not even the joy of using Orac to sabotage all the engine computers of an entire fleet could withstand Avon’s lack of enthusiasm, and if Avon kept this up, all those sharp glances of his would surely burst Blake’s bubble. “I would hardly take us there if I didn’t.”

Avon wasn’t so sure of that. “Akbar IV is not exactly renowned for nature rambles, museums, libraries, things of that ilk,” he said carefully, referring to the appallingly wholesome activities Blake usually thrust upon them, whilst wondering which particular lies Vila had fed Blake about Akbar IV. A few months ago, he’d left Vila to it, enjoyed Akbar IV to the fullest, and then sat back and watched the fireworks when Blake raked Vila over the coals for leading them all astray. “Intellectual and rustic pursuits are hardly its speciality.”

“I was aware of that, Avon. Akbar IV,” he said, actually grabbing Avon by the arm and hauling him off to sit down on the flight couch, Avon’s glimmering glare bouncing harmlessly off his thick hide, “is famous for its casinos, bars, gaming rooms, sports gambling, virtual reality clubs, racing, boxing, fighting, drugs—” Blake paused for breath, held his hand up to silence Avon before that worthy could speak, “let me finish—and its nude beaches, brothels, sex-shows and all-round permissiveness.”

Avon decided that Vila was right: Blake really had gone bonkers. Either that, or Servalan had slipped them a clone when they weren’t looking. “I confess to being surprised that you want us to go to Akbar IV even though you’ve heard all that.”

“Heard it, Avon?” Blake murmured, leaning unnervingly close to an Avon who was suddenly wondering Vila’s same question about what the hell Blake kept in his pockets. “Avon, I’ve been there.”

There wasn’t an awful lot Avon wanted to say to that, for fear that Blake might decide to elucidate, graphically, which parts of that list were from personal experience. It wasn’t the sort of thing one normally associated with Blake (not that Avon thought associating with Blake was exactly normal itself), but the other man

had been downright peculiar since he'd started shutting himself away with Orac, a recent habit that had sunk Vila to new scatological lows, most of which are far too rude to repeat in these demure pages.

Blake, not privy to these somewhat unflattering thoughts, was still waiting for some sort of answer, and wishing he'd recognised a good exit line when he'd said one. "I've been there," he repeated, in case Avon had forgotten what he'd said.

"How terribly nice for you," Avon murmured politely, trying to come up with a way out of this situation before those imminent confessions burst forth, no doubt messily.

"Yes, it was," Blake replied, annoyed that Avon hadn't shown at least a bit of interest. Never mind, he told himself, no need to be downhearted: Avon would come round eventually. "That's why I thought it would be the perfect spot for all of us. Cally can go to one of their spiritualists' communes, Jenna can go to the pirates' private clubs, Gan can go to their restaurants, Vila can do everything else..."

Avon did not at all care for the way both his and Blake's names were absent from that list. If the megalomaniac thought he was going to moulder on this ship while Blake gallivanted through Akbar IV's fleshpots— "And where will I be whilst all this is going on?" he asked, a few pithy comments ready and waiting to be hurled at Blake's head.

Blake hadn't spent all those hours watching the snazzy brochure transmissions for nothing. "We'll be staying at the Golden Orbs, the best accommodation on the planet."

"We?" Avon asked pointedly, whilst resisting the temptation to goggle at the place Blake had chosen.

"My treat, of course," Blake purred, gazing seductively into Avon's eyes.

Avon took one look at the look Blake was giving him, and wondered what he'd done to make Blake angry this time. Not that he minded Blake staring at him with that fixed fury again: he simply preferred to know what had triggered it so he could do it again. "Your treat," he replied belatedly, realising that Blake was still waiting for some comment from him, more's the pity. "That's very kind of you," he said pleasantly, edging away from Blake's ever increasing en-

thusiasm. "But one of Akbar IV's greatest pleasures is that I will be far, far away from you and everyone else from this damned ship."

Blake just loved it when Avon played hard to get like this. "All right," he murmured "I can take a hint." For now, he thought to himself, happily contemplating winking Avon out of his thorny shell. He smiled again, inching closer to close the distance his diffident and inhibited Avon had put between them: no-one could flirt as well as Avon. Putting every ounce of charm into it, he murmured, throatily, "But surely you could at least have a drink with me."

Hearing the hoarse voice and noticing the decidedly glazed condition of Blake's eyes, Avon wondered if Blake would be well enough to even make it as far as Akbar IV. "Are you coming down with the flu?" he asked, using that as a cover to slide another few centimetres away from Blake.

"Do I have to be ill to want to have a pleasant chat with you over a drink?" Blake asked, sliding the same number of centimetres closer and Avon decided that what he thought Blake was doing couldn't possibly be right. After all, the man had shown no signs of anything like this until well after all those private sessions with Orac: perhaps it was another one of those little time-bombs the puppeteers had left behind, like that nonsense with the mind-control carrier wave.

Blake's left hand brushed Avon's outer thigh.

But then again, Avon thought, perhaps it was nothing more than cabin fever brought on by too long in space and nowhere for a man to spend himself. A trip to Akbar IV was beginning to appeal more and more, because he didn't really want to beat Blake up, if only because he needed his hands for his computer work.

"Well?" Blake asked.

Avon was seriously tempted to impersonate Orac, but instead he said: "A drink would be fine. I'll contact you later, set up a firm time."

"Why don't we make plans now?"

Because I don't want to see you until after you're back to what passes for normal, Avon thought to himself, making a mental note to interrogate Orac as to what the hell was wrong with Blake. "This isn't another raid, Blake, we don't have to synchronise our watches."

And Avon, who did recognise a good exit

line when he said it, made good his escape.

The sedate, peaceful run to Akbar IV had turned into a nightmare for Avon, a major malfunction in Zen's circuitry wreaking havoc on the ship and Avon's sleep schedule. So busy trying to persuade Zen that no, they weren't intruders—well, not any longer—he had no time to do anything with Orac but mend what passed for Zen's main core banks. Once he'd stopped Zen from blowing them all up, he began on the painstaking task of uncovering the root of the problem and mending it, whilst the navigation computers sailed on serenely towards Akbar IV.

He hadn't been in bed anything approaching a decent number of hours before Vila was hammering on his door (having once bypassed the locks and learning why he never, ever, even if they were being attacked by great hairy aliens, wanted to pick Avon's lock again, Vila stuck to less life-threatening methods of rousing Avon) and shouting through the intercom about how they were all teleporting down now and did Avon want to come.

Avon, ever the soul of sociability, rolled over and went back to sleep.

Or tried to. He finally admitted defeat, muttering under his breath dire retribution when he got his hands on Vila. At least all was not lost nor miserable: by the time he reached the teleport, the others were long gone. Nagging Orac into coughing up the information, Avon carefully set the co-ordinates for a place a long, long way from anywhere that already had its share of *Liberator's* crew. A smile crept onto his face as he ran through the advertised details in his mind: oh, yes, he was going to enjoy himself this time.

Less than fifteen minutes later, he was beginning to wish he'd never even heard of the damned planet. He ducked as someone tried to crown him with a stool, swerved to avoid a hefty boot, winced as his fist discovered that not all big bellies are pillow-soft. The 'companion' he'd selected had quickly disappeared at the first sign of the brawl, her departure spilling the drink that had embroiled Avon in all of this. He was sorely tempted—actually, parts of him were simply sore—to pull his gun and put a few of them out of his misery, but he'd never been able to get the hang of this random killing routine.

Instead, he ducked again and tried to weave his way to the nearest unblocked exit. Something collided with his head, a hand mauled his arm, whirling him round, and if his reflexes had been even a fraction slower, he would have made Blake a soprano.

"This way," Blake said a bit tightly, which was hardly surprising considering that at least three juggernauts were thundering towards himself and Avon. "In here," he hauled Avon through a door, slamming it shut in the nick of time. "Teleport *now!*" he shouted into his bracelet while Avon discovered that it wasn't sweat running down his forehead after all.

The teleport effect took them, *Liberator* wavering into view, Blake immediately bustling off to fetch the first-aid kit from behind the teleport desk. Avon flinched as Blake, somewhat overenthusiastically, cleaned the cut on his forehead.

"Fetching though you'd look in the uniform, I don't need a nursemaid," he complained, staying perfectly still while Blake used a fine-line sealer to take care of his cut: it didn't do to wriggle when someone was using a sealer this close to one's eyes, especially when that someone was Blake, and Blake's hands were less than entirely steady.

"Shut up and stand still," Blake muttered, trying not to let Avon's unnerving proximity end up in Avon having his eyes lasered shut. "There," he said, satisfied, medically at least, "that should take care of it."

Blake smiled, gave an avuncular chuckle, all of which conspired to remind Avon of all the questions he'd been meaning to ask Orac.

"I think you should have that drink with me now," Blake went on, taking the first aid kit back to the teleport console. "Not only is it the least you can do after I came to your rescue, it's a hell of a lot safer."

Avon agreed very grudgingly, promising himself that it would be one quick drink and then Blake could go find himself a nice little straitjacket and Avon would slip into something considerably more comfortable, such as that rather sumptuous bordello he'd seen in the tourist infocasts.

"I know just the spot," Blake said, delighted that Avon had finally succumbed, and with just the right touch of reluctance too—the man really

was a consummate flirt.

"Fine, fine," Avon mumbled, wanting to get this over and done with, and best of all, get back into a very public place, preferably with lots and lots of the public in it, instead of being completely alone on the ship with a Blake who was exhibiting all the symptoms of either space fatigue or lunacy.

The teleport effect took them, and Avon blinked. He looked around, took in his surroundings, and looked back at Blake.

"Incredible, isn't it?" his host commented, wandering over to some cavernous object that looked like a pile of rough planks nailed loosely together.

Incredible was the kindest word that anyone could possibly use to describe this place. Avon turned slowly, his disdainful stare making his opinion abundantly clear. The place was unbelievable, a pastiche of a Wild West log cabin, complete with a cow-hide sofa and patch-work quilted brass bed. There was even a black, pot-bellied stove with quaintly angled flue going up to the ceiling. A sheepskin rug in front of the redundant fireplace, cowboy hats hanging on wooden pegs, a metal pump over a stone sink. It was rustic, it was cute and Avon despised it immensely.

"Here," Blake said to him from his spot on the sofa, extending a glass of what looked like ale, of all things.

"Beer?" Avon asked, not taking the tankard.

"Yes, isn't it perfect? There's even bourbon and those odd little glasses if you'd rather."

"As long as there aren't hostile natives circling outside, I couldn't care less."

"Then sit down and have a drink," Blake said easily, casually stretching his arms out across the back of the sofa.

Avon suddenly remembered the last time he'd sat on a sofa beside Blake: as it was either the sofa or the bed, he draped himself, with every appearance of ease, as far from Blake as he could possibly get without actually landing on the floor.

Blake eased a little closer, his hand brushing Avon's shoulder. Avon, purely by coincidence of course, leaned forward to pick up his glass. He twisted sideways a little as he sat back again—and still ended up with Blake touching him. Blake shifted a bit nearer, and Avon grew a bit

tenser, being literally backed into a corner. Blake turned sideways on the sofa, his knees touching Avon, his free hand coming to rest on Avon's thigh.

"Get your hands off me!" Avon hissed, grabbing Blake by the wrist.

"Oh, come on, Avon," Blake murmured, freeing himself rather more easily than Avon cared for and putting his hand back on Avon's thigh, considerably higher than Avon cared for. Blake chuckled as Avon made another grab for him, taking Avon's hand in his and using the two of them to gently caress Avon's groin. "There's no-one here to see us, you can relax here. Let down your guards."

"Blake," Avon said with commendable calmness, all of it faked, "let go of me now and I'll pretend this never happened." He tore his hand free of Blake's, made a move to shove it out of the way, realised that he'd didn't dare let Blake go again.

"You don't have to pretend with me, Avon," Blake said gently, heart overflowing with empathy for the torture Avon must have gone through. "I understand..."

"That's more than I do."

Blake smiled sweetly, moved by Avon's obvious confusion and inexperience in this. He raised their joined hands so that Avon looked at them. "It's always the same with you and me. Look at what you're doing right this very minute."

Avon did, and as far as he could see, all he was doing was keeping Blake out of mischief and himself out of a very sticky situation. Blake, however, obviously saw something that was going right over Avon's head. So Avon upheld his family's ancient motto: When in doubt, employ supercilious boredom. He sneered, perfectly.

Blake simply smiled, so sure now that he could see through all of Avon's masks and façades to the insecure, wounded man within. "You're protesting and kicking up a fuss," he said very gently, still smiling soulfully into Avon's eyes, "but you're holding my hand. I know you want to, Avon, you don't have to be scared with me."

Avon was willing to dispute him on that one, not that he'd ever admit it, of course. Delicately, he tried to disentangle their hands.

Blake held on tighter.

Avon tugged, hard, pulling himself free with such force that Blake landed full upon him, much to Avon's dismay (what the hell *did* Blake have in his pocket? An oversized statue of Priapus—or was it a tribute to his own ancestors, assuming that they'd all been horses?) and Blake's rampant joy.

"Oh, Avon," he breathed.

"Oh, Blake," Avon gasped, ribs crushed by the weight of Blake lying full on him.

"Oh, Kerr," Blake gasped, rubbing, none too discreetly, at Avon's nether regions.

"Oh, fuck," muttered Avon.

"I thought you'd never ask," said Blake.

That shut Avon up. Either that or it was Blake's tongue in his mouth.

A passionate moment passed, filled with writhing and undulations until Avon arched up and finally managed to fling Blake off. Still panting for breath, Avon clambered to his feet and stood, chest heaving, well out of Blake's reach.

Blake was still panting as well, but he just lay there, sprawled in generous invitation.

Avon, needless to say, declined. "What the hell are you playing at?" he demanded, standing there on the sheepskin rug, hands on his hips and a flush on his cheeks.

"Who's playing?" Blake asked, gazing up at his livid love, admiring the way Avon's eyes flashed, trying very hard not to become angry himself. After all, he reminded himself, Avon must have gone through absolute hell, so he would need some extra care, some very special handling—which Blake would be delighted to provide.

Avon shook his head, as much to make sure he still had a grey cell or two running around in there as to express his bemusement at Blake. He stared at his supposed leader, and wished, not for the first time, that he could work out why the hell he was always willing to give Blake another chance or the benefit of the doubt or any of the dozen insane things he did for this man. Perhaps Blake wasn't the only one around here who'd been conditioned. Perhaps that was some puppeteers idea of a sick joke and vengeful torture: make Avon susceptible to starry-eyed, vulnerable idealists who wore their hearts on their sleeves, complete with affixed target. He took a

deep breath and tried to think of how best to phrase this without making *Liberator* too hideously tense for words. It wasn't that he wanted to hurt Blake: after all, the man had only made a pass at him. He just didn't want to have any more little—or rather, absolutely, mind-bogglingly huge—surprises. "Blake, I should probably have made my position clear when I first suspected you were out to seduce me—"

Blake gave Avon the most seriously libidinous smile he'd seen since Servalan's last attempt to kill him.

"Let me rephrase that," Avon said a trifle too quickly. "I'm not that way inclined—"

"I've told you, Avon," Blake said, coming to his feet and slowly unbuttoning the rest of his shirt, "you don't have to be scared with me. This is one place where you don't have to pretend."

Now, Avon was the first to call Blake mad, lunatic, hasty, ill-considered, thoughtless, lacking foresight, gullible, hypocritical, megalomaniac and a bully, but this one obviously came under 'suffering from delusions' (not, however, of grandeur, if that swelling in his trousers was anything to go by). But what the hell had triggered *this* particular delusion with its attendant...unsettling behaviour? "You thought I was...interested in you?"

Blake laughed, the sound filling the carefully fabricated genuine reproduction cabin. "I'm not entirely stupid, you know. I admit," he said deprecatingly, awkward about admitting this to sharp-minded Avon, but knowing that if he didn't say this off his own bat then Avon would hit him with it, "that I was a bit slow. But it did finally dawn on me—"

"Why?" Avon asked, absolutely flummoxed by this bizarre development. Insanity he had been prepared for, confessions of anything from unbridled lust to unrequited love to Blake's machiavellian manipulations to keep the Galaxy's best computer expert blackmailed to his side were to be expected, but...thinking that *Avon* had started it? That Avon was the one who wanted this? The one who put the idea in Blake's empty head in the first place? "What the fuck made you think *THAT*?"

If Avon had been prepared for everything but what he got, he was in excellent company. Blake could hardly believe his ears: from what Avon was saying, he shouldn't have believed

his eyes either, let alone any of his other organs. Now he knew how those three monkeys felt and the only thing stopping him from covering his eyes, ears and mouth before they got him in more trouble was a sad shortage of hands. Blake stared at Avon in rank disbelief as a very nasty thought gave him a kick up the backside, which though painful, was still heaps better than the kick in the goolies that accompanied finding out that he was deaf, blind and quite embarrassingly dumb. "Are you trying to tell me that you did all this on purpose? You set me up! Did you, Avon?"

The cheek of the man! As if Avon would stoop to such a thing when he had a perfectly well honed tongue in his mouth. "Were I to set you up, Blake, it would more likely be with a noose than a spurned romance."

"But everything you did, everything you said... If those weren't command performances to deceive me, then how could you *not* want me? Wait a minute," he said, suddenly seeing light at the end of the tunnel, albeit a very faint light and a very convoluted tunnel. "I think I understand. You *do* want this, but you're afraid of it. Too much guilt, Avon?" he whispered, coming closer.

"Not about this," Avon said loudly, circling round the low table as Blake came closer. He really should just deck the man and be done with it. But then again, Blake was bigger and did Avon *really* want to end up wrestling with Blake on the floor? His heel caught in something, and Avon looked down. The thick, lush, tawdrily romantic sheepskin rug. Writhing on a sheepskin rug in front of a fire would tend, somehow, to undermine Avon's own protestations that romance, lust and carnal knowledge were the farthest things from his mind. That decided it: he wasn't going to roll around on that rug with Blake. Shooting Blake was out, much to his own chagrin. After all, Avon might not want this, but it was hardly a fate worse than Blake's death. So there was only one obvious way out, no matter how truly hideous it was. Get Blake talking. Distract Blake into doing the one thing he loved more than pulling down a government by violent means: talking the hind leg off a donkey, or in this case, talking until a certain other, donkey-like appendage had gone off the boil and Blake's brains could once more do their stuff. Plastering on the most sincere smile he could manufacture, Avon positively dripped gracious interest.

"What, precisely, are these...things you say made you think I was..." As he was a bit unsure as to what Blake actually did think, and as there was considerable doubt that Blake was currently thinking, Avon broke off there. He also managed to get off the rug and round behind the sofa without making it look like either a rout or a virginal retreat.

Pity about it looking like a come-on: Avon had traded the discreet sheepskin for the looming ostentation of the bed. It was round about then that Blake started smiling again, convinced that this was definitely Avon fighting his own true nature, the one stifled and twisted by Federation brainwashing.

"Where do I begin?" Blake asked, gazing fondly at his poor, nervous Avon, standing there as defensive as a spider in a room full of cats.

Steadfastly refusing to so much as glance at the bed lurking treacherously behind him, Avon gave up on graciousness and went for the jugular instead. "Break with your own tradition: try the beginning."

Now this was ground Blake was very sure of. Many's the long night he'd spent running these memories over and over again, examining them from every angle, discovering new, minute details that thrilled him. And Avon's acerbic attitude didn't fool him at all: it was delightful to see the other man come out of his shell, no matter how tentative this first show of open interest might be. Of course, this plea for Blake to explain it all to Avon was just Avon's excuse to have it all laid out logically in front of him so that the entire thing became ineluctable. "It was on the *London*, of course," he said.

On the *London*? Now there was a thought to boggle even the finest of minds, although Avon was beginning to wonder if Vila hadn't somehow managed to pinch his brains along with everything else. "Blake, all I did on the *London* was argue with you—and a few of the guards."

"That's hardly all you did," Blake told him with just an edge of asperity: really, Avon's insistence that all his little lures had been purely subconscious! He reined his temper in just before it galloped loose and buggered up the race before he could bugger Avon. Just because Avon did such a good job of covering himself with acid cynicism didn't mean that Blake had to fall

for it like everyone else. “Oh, yes, you argued with me,” he said quite gently considering the fact that he really did want to strangle Avon sometimes, now being a prime example in spite of all his intentions of saintly tolerance. “And then you did exactly what I wanted you to.”

“I concede that that could lead someone to thinking I was insane, but I’m afraid I can’t quite see how that could possibly make even *you* think I...desired you.”

“It was in the way you looked at me, Avon!” Blake ejaculated, which his cock thought would be a bloody good idea itself, and the sooner the better. “You would stand there, your eyes wide, fiery, your chest heaving—”

“This isn’t a romance novel, Blake, spare me the purple prose, please.”

“It’s not purple prose, but it is a simple statement of fact.”

Avon actually harrumphed, a habit he thought he’d broken when he’d finally finished the last of his post-graduate degrees and seen the last of his advanced students.

“No matter how much you deny it, it won’t alter the truth.”

“Did it ever occur to you,” Avon said musingly, gradually working his way back round to the relative safety of the sofa and the sheepskin rug, “that those reactions just might have had something to do with the fact that my life was at risk and I was in danger of having to kill another human being?”

It hadn’t, actually. This was not, strictly speaking, the sort of response Blake had always imagined his list of proofs eliciting from Avon. A bit more embarrassed revelation and a lot more rampant enthusiasm was what he’d had in mind, if only the obstinate little bugger would co-operate for once in his life. “There’s a good excuse,” he said, stalking slowly after Avon, “if I wanted to protect your delicate sensibilities. But how do you explain your behaviour when Travis attacked *Liberator*?”

“Well now,” Avon said smoothly, rapidly calculating the distance between himself and Blake and the length of Blake’s reach, “that would depend on which particular attack. Thanks to your...” he paused with exquisitely insulting timing, added just the right spin of contempt to his voice, “leadership, there are so many to choose from.”

Blake was growing very, very tired of Avon’s coy obfuscations. The excuse of how badly he’d been treated was wearing even thinner and if Avon didn’t pack this in soon, Blake was going to go just the teeniest smidgin berserk. “The time I went down to the planet and fought him in a duel.”

“Oh, how *gallant*. Why don’t you press your suit,” and other, more pointed aspects, Avon thought, uneasily eyeing the ever-decreasing space between himself and Blake’s piercing enthusiasm, “with him. Going by the way he dresses, he would probably welcome you.”

Had he been a more common man, Blake would have shouted *Gotcha!*, thrown himself upon Avon and cast them both upon the sea of passion. Being far better bred than that, he grinned like the Cheshire cat and took another step forward. “I don’t ‘press my suit’ with Travis,” he explained, delighted at the way the phrase revealed what he called Avon’s hidden romanticism and what Avon called his blatant sarcasm, “because Travis tried to kill me. You, on the other hand, stood there on the flight deck and cuddled me.”

“Cuddled you!”

“Oh, all right. Hugged me, then. And as for what Travis wears—isn’t that a case of the pot calling the kettle black, hmm, Avon?”

In dawning horror and with a growing desire to kick himself, Avon looked down at his own outfit. Skin tight black leather. Hundreds of silver studs. Boots. Silk underwear. He swallowed, hard.

Blake throbbed, hard.

“But you can’t judge a book by its covers,” he said hastily, making a mental note never to wear leather around Blake ever, ever again. “As for hugging you—Blake, you were the largest, most solid object within reach and as such—and *only* as such—you were preferable to being thrown off my feet.”

Blake decided that now was not the moment to give credence to what were obviously desperate graspings at straws. In fact, he steadfastly refused to believe Avon. Absolutely. Would not entertain a single doubt. At least, that’s what he told himself. “An answer for everything, Avon?”

I certainly hope so, Avon thought fervently while smiling wolfish condescension. “I do my best.”

Now wasn't that a lovely thought? Avon doing his best, spread out on the bed... Blake got a grip on himself, metaphorically speaking at least. "So I presume you have some flimsy excuse for holding my hand when that explosion went off on *Liberator*?"

"Embarrassing though it is to admit it," Avon said painfully.

Ah-ha, here it comes! thought Blake, triumphantly.

"I confess that we did become...entangled. But I hardly think I can be held responsible for the force of an explosion."

Oh. That did put a different complexion on it, and Blake's complexion was slowly turning bright red. It hadn't crossed his mind that that little gesture might have been completely inadvertent. And if that had been truly innocent, then bang went his example of Avon putting his arm round Blake when that other explosion had thrown them both to the floor. "Yes," Blake said slowly, backing away, putting more distance between himself and Avon's caustic tongue that was surely about to go into warp drive any second now. "Well..." Edging away from that damned bed, he backed off another step, and another.

Avon moved forward, and forward again, the scent of blood sweetening his mood no end. "Well, well, well," he murmured, the glee in his voice making Blake very uneasy indeed. "So it is true. Life is stranger than fiction—Roj Blake is capable of rational thought."

Blake knew he should apologise, as good manners dictated, but right now, survival was dictating that he keep his big mouth shut and get out of here as fast as he could.

Blake's rudeness was obviously catching, as Avon speared a glance at where Blake's spear was no longer lancing. Emboldened by the shrivelling of that implacable lust pointing to Blake's desire, Avon took yet another step forward until Blake, deflated in more ways than one, tumbled over the side of the sofa to land, in an undignified sprawl, across the cushions. Needless to say, but admittedly to the surprise of that one last atom of stubborn hope that this was all another Avon ploy, the man of the moment did not follow through to tumble upon—or indeed, to tumble with—Blake. Legs planted in a macho stance, Avon stuck his hands

on his hips, only to move them quickly as he reminded himself of the impression he was trying so hard not to create. "Now that we've got that sorted out," referring presumably to Blake's confusion over Avon's orientation and not to Avon's predilections of posture that led to such confusions, "I don't suppose your martyr-complex runs to confessing all?"

"I thought I had," Blake replied blandly, lying there trying to look as if this were a pose of greatest ease and absolutely intentional. With Avon standing over him like a predatory Colossus of Rhodes, Blake was feeling more than a fraction insecure, thoughts of Avon's revenge running plasma bolts up and down his spine.

"Oh, come now, Blake," Avon said with singularly unnerving good cheer, "surely there's more."

Having misjudged Avon entirely on one matter didn't mean Blake was about to risk his neck on assuming that he'd been wrong on every other count. As far as he was concerned, an Avon exuding *bonhomie* was about as safe as a virgin in Servalan's boudoir. Time to at least pretend that he hadn't just made a complete fool out of himself while passing Avon every trump card in the deck, not to mention a few aimed and loaded weapons. He barely contained a groan at the thought of Avon, on the flightdeck, relating this particular bedtime story. Offense being the best form of defense, Blake opted to be as offensive as possible. With a disgusted glare, he raked the leather-clad, posturing Avon. "Careful, Avon, else I just might think you were doing this for kicks."

Entirely unrelated to what Blake had just said and having nothing whatsoever to do with Avon having suddenly realised he was standing there like something out of an SM club, Avon casually perched himself on the arm of the sofa.

Blake, yet another suspicion dawning yet again, stretched his legs out straight, neatly scissoring them around Avon. Who stood, ever so casually, and in fewer nanoseconds than light would normally take to cover the same distance. "Try that again, Blake," he growled, such butchness making Blake positively tingle, "and I'll blow your balls off."

"Promises, promises," Blake said, archly facetious, looking not at Avon's holstered gun but at Avon's parted lips. "And after trying so hard

to convince me I was wrong about you.”

“You were and are, and will no doubt continue being as wrong about me as you are everything else.” Fortunately for his virtue, or his credibility depending on how one views it, Avon stopped himself before he added: Don’t tempt me. He meant that killing Blake was becoming a remarkably attractive notion, but Blake would probably take it as an engraved invitation. “The only thing I’m interested in from you is finding out what the hell brought all this on.”

“Your charm, good looks and fine physique, of course,” Blake said, intrigued by the way Avon was backing off from him. Perhaps Avon knowing about this might not be the disaster he had thought. Play his cards right, and he might end up able to keep Avon in line just by threatening a quick kiss and a grope. Now wasn’t that a lovely thought? He could have his cake and eat it too.

“I know all that,” Avon replied with unflinching modesty. “But what possessed you to try to...” unfortunately, there really was no other word for it. Or at least, none that sprang into his battered brain, “seduce me.”

He could, of course, pretend total ignorance and incomprehension, but Avon was beginning to look a bit frayed around the edges, if one knew which edges to check, and Blake thought he still did. “After we went through Orac deactivating the subconscious command the puppeteers had implanted in me...”

And a thoroughly miserable time had been had by all, both during Blake’s little episode of being mind-controlled and the protracted treatments after. Not an experience Avon would ever want to repeat.

“I was curious what else they had left behind.”

Not a lot, as far as Avon could see. Not a lot. “But Orac said there were no other controls.”

“Orac said there were no other controls that would threaten *Liberator* or the lives of the crew.”

“Which means, of course,” Avon said, interested in spite of himself, “that there were other types of controls still in place.”

“Exactly. Can you blame me for wanting to find out what they were?” He smiled again, cataloguing yet another one of Avon’s subtle signals that he was very uncomfortable with the newly revealed designs Blake had on his body. Just wait till the other man found out Blake

wanted him for his mind as well!

“And I presume,” Avon was saying, to the casual observer every inch the suave urbanite, although Vila would have been agog, “that you found at least one control...”

Blake said not a word, on the grounds that a thinking Avon was a non-killing Avon. Plus, if he couldn’t bugger Avon, he was going to have fun screwing him, and it certainly was amusing watching Avon stew in the heat of Blake lusting after him.

“And that control was no doubt the suppression of your sexual orientation?”

“That was one of them, Avon. There were other more...esoteric revelations,” he purred smoothly, hinting at nothing at all but knowing that Avon’s fertile imagination would fill in more details than Blake could ever dream of.

“I see,” Avon replied, wonderfully non-committal as he ran through the programmes that would lock his door against anything Blake—or a coerced Vila—could come up with. Of course, if Blake subverted Gan, then Avon was up the creek without a paddle, but he preferred not to think about that right now. “Armed with this new knowledge—”

With bells on, Blake thought to himself, delighted with having finally found Avon’s Achilles’ heel, especially one that would be such a pleasure to use.

“—you decided that I would be your first victim.”

“Oh, no, Avon,” Blake replied, enjoying himself enormously and giving not a single thought to how twisted a past poor Avon must have had to be so unsteady by the focus of male desire upon him, “I have no intention of victimising you. That’s why this was supposed to be a seduction, not a rape,” that, and the sure and certain knowledge that Avon would kill him if he were stupid enough to attempt rape. “And there was no ‘first’ involved either. I have considerable experience,” he lied blithely, his memories being more than even Orac could find, “and you’re the only one I want.”

Avon paled, dramatically. “Oh,” he said. “I would be honoured, had I the least respect for your taste.” He glanced, scathingly, at Blake’s Pirate of Penzance outfit. “As it is, I think I’ve just been insulted.”

Blake was really beginning to hit his stride on

this one. "You haven't been anything yet, except a prick-tease."

Drawing himself to his full height, hands making unerringly for hips, Avon snapped: "We established that I had done nothing whatsoever to foster your stupid delusions."

"So we had," Blake replied, smooth as a spiv and just as trustworthy. "How soon we forget, hmm, Avon?"

What was that they said about discretion being the better part of valour? "See that you don't forget so quickly next time, Blake," Avon snarled, wonderfully threatening, positively rife with danger.

Blake loved it when Avon came on strong like that. "And if I do? You'll have to come up with a better threat than 'or else'. I shall expect you to stamp your foot next."

"If you try anything like this again," Avon enunciated very clearly for the mentally disadvantaged, "I will not be either so restrained or so tolerant."

"Oh, you *are* going to stamp your foot," Blake replied, smiling. Avon, he had decided, was protesting just too much. A simple 'no, thanks all the same' would have sufficed, but strutting around with his hand on his gun? His holstered, ever-so-phallic gun? Oh, yes, Avon was protesting so much Blake was tempted to overpower him then and there. And there, on the bed, and there, on the rug...

"I promise you, Blake," Avon snarled, "try anything like this ever again, and I'll kill you."

"Do this and die?" Blake enquired mildly. The only dying that would be involved between them would be of the *petit mort* sort, and that was one death he was willing to hasten along. "I'll keep it in mind, Avon," he went on, coming to his feet, bristling with what Avon would see as barely leashed strength. And sure enough, there it was: Avon's eyes

were fiery, and his chest was heaving, and he was staring at Blake. Couple that with the whole display with fondling the gun, the hands on the hips, the sitting down on the arm of the chair, 'not noticing' that Blake's legs were there... It was only a matter of time, Blake told himself happily.

"See that you do," Avon snapped, holding his ground even when Blake came and stood so close Avon could feel Blake's breath on his cheek. He was damned if he were going to back off or let Blake intimidate him, although now he couldn't pretend that it was something in Blake's pocket digging in to him again. Staring Blake down and refusing to admit that Blake was making him decidedly uncomfortable, Avon raised his wrist. It wasn't easy, what with Blake all but plastered down his front, but with a bit of squirming that brought him into unnerving proximity with that which made Blake such a fine upstanding figure of a man, Avon finally managed to get his teleport bracelet up to his mouth. With a final, lethal glower at Blake, he spoke. "Orac, teleport me up *now*."

If the damned machine had lifted the inhibitions on Blake's ludicrous libido, then it could damned well find a way to put them back on. Orac hefted easily, Avon stomped off to his cabin to begin solving this latest problem. Either that, or he was going to find himself the plushiest bolthole known to man.

Blake poured himself another drink, stripped off and lay on the bed, languidly stroking himself to satisfaction to the accompaniment of Avon's revelatory posturings. The hands on the hips, the black leather, leaning, so briefly, against Blake's thighs, not killing Blake for daring to kiss him...

By the time *Liberator* left orbit, Avon was all but whistling, and Blake was laying in a stock of lubricants.



INVERSION

—a turning the wrong way round; a turning upside down; a reversal in position, direction, or relationship; a change to the opposite or contrary. A topsy-turvy tale of tail acquisition where correct positioning is everything. But be warned: what seems up could easily be down, what might be right may be down, and as for who'll come out on top...

THE PILOT'S TAIL

JANE MAILANDER

He knew Avon was watching him even more closely than ever, cold dark eyes never moving away even when he turned and glared back at the man. The features never changed; were in the same set repose. The eyes practically expressionless.

Of course, he had told himself at first, when he was settling into what passed as routine life aboard the *Liberator* along with Dayna. He hasn't forgotten me trying to claim the ship when I first came aboard. The lead stallion's making sure the rival doesn't forget who's in charge; first one to drop eyes loses. So he tried staring back; and within 30 seconds the ridiculousness of the endeavor would hit him and he would drop his gaze, if only to keep from smiling in self-mocking. A snicker from Vila or Dayna also defused the situation neatly. If Avon felt any amusement at the powerplay he never showed it.

But Tarrant did not let that stop him from trying. Avon might have his reputation and his association with Blake behind him, might be one of the most wanted people in the Federation—but beneath the legend of the terrible Kerr Avon was a mere computer tech. No discipline but his own; no plan. Avon might have cowed Blake and his fellow terrorists with his ways; they would not work on an FSA graduate and the best pilot in the Federation.

Direct confrontation did not work. Civilian Avon might be, but Tarrant had to admit that most career Federation officers would trade their families to have the man's discipline and iron spine.

When it came to matching verbal blows with Kerr Avon, Del Tarrant quickly and freely admitted to himself that he was an infant battling an anaconda.

When he saw the archaic deference Avon showed both Cally and Dayna, Tarrant had tried his hand at the oldest method of provoking a male rival. The results had been disastrous...

Before *Liberator*, Tarrant's experience of women had mostly been of the barracunts, girls that hung around FSA barracks looking for husbands, whom the cadets pawed and fucked and passed around after hours; barracunts were good for relieving stress and were just above mutoids in the cadets' esteem.

Cally had let Tarrant know very bluntly that she was not interested in his games—let him know, mind to stunned mind, when words had not worked. And when he assumed it was only an Auron version of barracunt cock-teasing and pressed the issue, Cally rectified Tarrant's mistake immediately; Avon had worn the first genuine smile Tarrant had ever seen on him when he'd hobbled onto the flight deck with a black eye and tender testicles. "Turn you down, did she?" Vila said casually, eyes never leaving his console; Dayna had whooped so hard at the remark she'd had to leave the flight deck to change her pants.

Avon had only smirked when he saw Tarrant flirting with Dayna. The joke had once again been on Tarrant; Dayna had no sexual rudder at all, was absolutely guileless in her whole-hearted lechery. She had jumped into bed with Tarrant as freely as any barracunt—and afterward had asked if he liked her tonguing of his anus as much as Vila and Cally liked it. Tarrant had never bedded her again; as a pawn to make Avon jealous, Dayna was worthless...

But Everyone has a weakness, Colonel Dakkler always told his cadets; find that weakness and use it to make your way up. If he only studied Avon long enough, Tarrant would find where the iron discipline was soft and corroded—and there he would place his first foothold.

In the meantime, Tarrant did his level best to annoy the commander of the *Liberator*—something that Vila seemed to do just by breathing. Perhaps a constant, low-level attack would do the job rather than a mighty bugling and flourishing of antlers. It was a victory of sorts every time the cold voice sharpened just that little extra bit when he contested Avon's decisions, or when there actually was heat in the response

when he acted against Avon's orders. But it was not the kind of victory he wanted—Tarrant was young, with all youth's impatience at long slow sieges.

He was back to direct dealings with Avon. Avon, who was looking at him more and more, sizing him up, making a decision. Go on, you bastard, he thought angrily, staring into his tea in the deserted rest room, just off the late watch. Make your move, I'll be ready for you. I'm bigger than you, I'm stronger, I'm younger—"Tarrant."

That sounded like Avon's voice from behind him. But his name had never been spoken so softly by that voice before.

"Come with me. Now."

Not a command voice. The words were laced together with the silky panther-purr. A request. An urging? What the hell was his game now?

Tarrant lifted his head from his cup, turned to face the doorway where Avon stood. Anything he would have wanted to say died in the back of his throat.

Not clothed and not naked, babbled a line from an old fairy tale in Tarrant's suddenly-emptied brain.

Tarrant stared at the studded black collar around Avon's neck. The plain black leather harness, straps and buckles crossing Avon's torso and groin that contrasted porcelain-white Avon skin with gleaming black animal skin. The pale length of cock and balls spilling out over black bindings. The black leather bands trailing from his fingers...

No, Avon was certainly not naked. Except for his eyes, large and dark and hot and full of an unsayable need.

"Come with me," Avon said in the same soft tone as before. His voice softest silk that hid no iron at all. "I will not fight you any more."

Tarrant's own eyes felt hot and dry. So did his throat. So did his cock. No game, no, not a game at all...

"We have both acknowledged, have we not," Avon said softly, "that you are the bigger and stronger of the two of us." There was a slight hesitation in the voice, a residual weariness. The remnants of a mighty internal battle.

Tarrant felt as if all his birthdays had happened at once. This was the corroded place in Avon's armor. And Tarrant had

thought Avon non-sexual!

No wonder Avon had fought so hard to maintain supremacy over Tarrant; he was fighting against his own perverted nature, his need to surrender, to submit to a dominant male, a bigger stronger male. His need to be used like a woman.

Avon, a cunt. But not even a barracunt shackled herself like a slave and gave herself up as if surrendering to an enemy.

And Avon had come to him. Avon had broken first.

The lead stallion felt his cock rising hard and high, chafing in his black clothes, as he swaggered over to where Avon stood barefoot. He glared into the dark eyes, unmoving.

And the proof that this was no trick of Avon's appeared. The brown eyes lowered before Tarrant's insolent gaze.

Tarrant felt it in every jolting pulse of his cock. It was done. It was done at last. His victory made him drunken with power.

"So," he sneered, one hand rising to caress Avon's jawline, stroke the back of the neck, pluck at the collar. "The great Kerr Avon is a twat in men's clothing." The fingers laced into the fine brown hair at the back of Avon's head and pulled his head backward, back, bowing the entire body till Tarrant was able to look straight down into the painfilled eyes. "It's too bad for you that a real man showed up, isn't it," he breathed into the open mouth. Those parted, lush, woman's lips—Tarrant succumbed to the lust he had viciously suppressed from the first time he had seen them, open mouth covering Avon's, crushing down, puffed-out cheek sealing the nose tight, taking his breath, making him weak, making him suffer—

Not a trick, not a trick—Avon gave no resistance...

Tarrant pulled away, gasping for air, one hand still gripping Avon's hair; Avon's gasps for breath—and his erecting cock—filling his veins like sweet wine. "You hid it well, you little cunt," he whispered, licking his lips. "You fooled Vila and the girls. You fooled me for a while. But things are going to be different between us from now on, aren't they?"

"They will be different," Avon said quietly.

Tarrant gave a cruel squeeze to the hair, Avon drawing in a breath at the pain. "What did

you say?" he hissed.

"They will be different, sir."

Sir. No. No, not from Avon. From Avon, it would be...

Tarrant bowed Avon back again over his arm, yanking hard. "What?" he snapped, yanking again. "What?"

Pain-filled dark eyes, wide with pain, met Tarrant's. "They will be different—Master!"

And Tarrant relaxed everything at once, going limp against the bound figure, rolling lazy eyes over the rapidly-hardening cock amid its leather harness, feeling his own erection beat frantically against his trousers. It was established, then.

A great corroded hole in Avon's iron—but his foot was not the first thing that Tarrant would put into it, oh no. If Avon thought he would be satisfied by this humiliating show, after everything he had put Tarrant through—

Tarrant pulled the black dangling objects from the unresisting hand. Thongs, a blindfold, a gag. The slave had brought the implements of his own subjugation to his master. And there was a short lead attached to the collar. Better and better. Tarrant took hold and yanked. "Hands behind your back," he snapped, enormous with power.

The cunt complied, his eyes never lifting to meet his master's. Tarrant turned him around and roughly bound the wrists together. But no blindfold, and no gag. He had plans for that mouth—and he wanted Avon to watch every moment of this. With that he walked briskly out of the rest room, tugging the harnessed creature along by the lead.

Into his quarters. The door closed, and a swift palming locked it. Tarrant flung the lead and sent the bound, barefooted man stumbling across to the bed, falling across it.

Tarrant walked over to the bed and planted his feet, straddling the floor before Avon, fists on hips, feeling the dark power rise up inside him, cruelty boiling to the surface. "Kneel, cunt."

Avon slid from the bed and knelt, head bowed, before the young man. A little laugh escaped Tarrant; a little groan as his cock strained at his trousers. "Ah, your true colors fly at last, Kerr. All it needed was a real man to wave his prick at you, and you lift your arse for it." He raised one booted foot and shoved a shoulder, sending

Avon sprawling on his back. He planted his feet and towered over the harnessed man. "You enjoyed humiliating me in front of the others. I'm going to enjoy this." He nudged the slave with one boot. "On your belly, bitch."

He stood, one hand rubbing his trapped bulge, as the slave licked his boots. For a moment he contemplated a good kick to the cheek—then shook his head. No permanent damage; he'd need Avon on the flight deck tomorrow to deal with Orac. And he ought to show some clemency; Avon was, after all, a member of his crew...

His crew. For Avon would not dare lord it over Tarrant again on the flight deck, for fear of him revealing Avon's twisted secret.

"Stand. Undress me." And Tarrant held still as Avon's mouth pulled at zips and fastenings, teeth tugged at snaps. Tarrant groaned as his cock finally sprang free of his clothing. Avon had gone back to his knees to deal with the lower clothing.

"Stop," he ordered, and Avon meekly obeyed from his mouth-tugging of his trousers down to his knees. "Straighten up a bit." One thumb traced around Avon's lips as Tarrant's cock grew harder at seeing the lowered gaze and submissive posture of the bound man. "I think I'll use this cunt of yours first," he said coolly, his fingers pushing into the parted lips. "Wet it for me." He drew his fingers out, wet with saliva, and began to slick down his cock, gloating at the sight of Avon's tongue moistening his lips. "Enough." Taking himself in hand, Tarrant began rubbing his cock against Avon's face, prodding and poking into both eye sockets, ears, and nostrils before nuzzling it up towards the parted lips. "Just to let you know how much worse it could be for you, if I wished it," he hissed, pushing his cock into the pliant mouth. He was enormous with his power, sighing in pleasure as the hot mouth gave before his invasion, feeding Avon his prick. "That's it, slut. Swallow it down. Suck all the cum out of it and drink me."

Tarrant's knees nearly buckled as the wet sucking began. He fondled the soft brown hair of the head pressed to his groin, hands taking the shape of the skull and caressing lightly, feeling the throat muscles work around his own swollen prick. Avon had obviously done this before; no doubt Blake had kept him in line this

way. Now he had won the battle between them; he would be the one who decided what happened; he would command the *Liberator*...

That sent the lightning down his back—he groaned and clutched the dark head hard to his groin, fucking his way down the mouth and throat. Fucking his way to the top, he thought with an incoherent ripple of wild laughter. Then laughter flew out as the imprisoned mouth and tongue gulped at him, throat muscles clutching him. "You slut," he hissed, thrusting. "Whore. Cunt. Hag." That word exploded in his brain; Tarrant gave a sharp cry as he emptied down Avon's gullet. When he finally withdrew, he sank to his own knees and then to the floor, taking deep breaths. Enervation beckoned, swirled around his mind with the promise of exhausted sleep...

But no. Avon wasn't getting out of this with a mere blow job. Not till he gave Avon the full taste of his domination would Tarrant succumb.

Tarrant rolled onto his back and lazily regarded the trussed, still-kneeling Avon from half-shut eyes. Avon took deep breaths from parted semen-smears lips; his eyes were lowered, half-lidded.

Suddenly angered at what he saw as a smug look on the man's face, Tarrant abruptly sat up and slapped Avon's cheek. "Clean yourself up, bitch!" he snapped. He pulled himself to his feet and stared as Avon licked the seed and extra saliva from his mouth. "Now do me." He winced at the tenderness of his swollen genitals, but did not move as the soft tongue licked his cock, balls and pubic hair clean.

He could do anything with Avon in this state. Anything. The possibilities unrolled like a velvet carpet before Tarrant, beckoning... Lazy and sated, lust once again beginning its swirl in his bloodstream, he shook his head, smiling. Plenty of time for that and many other things; for now he only wanted one thing, one thing to finalize the transition of power from Avon's hands to Tarrant's.

"Up." Tarrant emphasized the hissed word by taking hold of the lead and pulling up hard, making Avon stagger to his feet; he did not raise his eyes or his head. "On the bed, slut. Belly down. Now spread your legs. More. There."

A tingle went through Tarrant's groin at the sight of the white buttocks bared for him, beau-

tifully framed by the black leather straps that rounded and delineated each cheek; the dark puckered mouth was just visible through the parted cleft. But it was still too soon after his last orgasm for Tarrant to finish teaching Avon who was in charge now. But another lesson was ready. His hands were damp with sweat; he clenched his fists, then opened them again.

"Now keep that position," he gloated, large hands laying hold of the displayed ass, one kneading each buttock, squeezing them together around his thumbs like a small cock, pinching them largely. The bully remembered the sweetness of the barracks-games played with the youngest and smallest plebes, the games that made him feel bigger and taller than before. He sank his fingers cruelly into one cheek, gripping and twisting the resilient muscle—and felt the jolt of lust in his cock at the gasp of pain from the prone Avon. Compulsion wriggled in his belly at the sight of that white smooth unmarked flesh. It was time Tarrant put his brand on that flesh.

He leaned over to the still-wrenched buttock muscle, open mouth tasting; sank his teeth deep. Then the other buttock, perfect white teeth marking perfect white flesh, marring it. The quivering in the body under his mouth began to revive his cock in earnest.

Tarrant straightened and once again caressed the round reddened cheeks with his bare hands. "You have a pretty arse, Kerr." A sharp, open-handed crack on one cheek. "And it's all mine, isn't it?"

"Yes, Master," whispered the muffled voice.

Another hard slap to the same cheek. "Isn't it?"

"Yes, Master!" said the voice, clearly and a little more loudly. Crack. Avon squealed as the same buttock was smacked, harder than the previous times.

"Isn't it!" Tarrant shouted. He raised his hand for another

whack—

"YES MASTER!"

Tarrant relaxed, kneeling on the bed between the spread legs, feeling his cock reviving. He slapped the other cheek hard. "Just because I want to, slut," he said, and hit him again; continued to spank the man's ass for a time, first one cheek then the other.

During a breather to rest his aching hand, Tarrant caught sight of the black leather bands of gag and blindfold, lying on the chair where he'd tossed them. Labour-saving devices... He grinned as he took them up, whacking them lightly against his own palm to test their sting, first singly then doubly. He raised his arm and brought both leather strips down across Avon's back with a whack! that sent a jolt along the prone, bound body, and an answering jolt along his cock.

His arm rose and fell again. Crack of leather on flesh. Another jolt to both bodies. Sweeter and sweeter still...

Slowly, deliberately, Tarrant retaught the lesson learned as a plebe, the lesson inflicted on him which he now inflicted in the same way. Nothing escaped his steady, thorough ministrations; shoulders, back and sides, lightly-haired thighs, sweet swell of calves. When he finally finished, Tarrant stood back, breathing heavily and wiping the sweat from his forehead, and smiled as he surveyed the red mottled flesh from neck to heels where there had once been porcelain perfection, snugly bound in black. The buttocks were still spread wide; the dark hole peeped. Giving in to an impulse, Tarrant knelt on the bed between the spread welt-covered legs. His cock nudged at the dark wrinkled opening, pushed at it, dry and hard. The body stilled beneath him, going limp, orifice widening at his touch.

"Very revealing, Kerr," Tarrant said huskily, pulling back from him and fingers moving in, dibbling into the dark mouth. He wanted to speak coldly but his voice would not be controlled. "Offering me your arse dry. You'd let me fuck you dry, wouldn't you, slut? Let me split you open like a trout, just to have a man in you again." And his cock would rip to shreds in that dry tight opening... "You've been a very good little cunt. So I'm going to make sure you're properly greased up before I teach you your final lesson."

"Thank you, Master," whispered the little pain-threaded voice. Tarrant removed the jar of cream from his nightstand, the one he'd used the other night when the only thing he'd fucked was his right hand while lying there, teeth clenched, not thinking of Avon's lush mouth, Avon's strong hands, Avon's round arse—

Tarrant chuckled out loud and slapped the cream against the wrinkled dark entrance, fingers wriggling in. Avon's mouth that he had just thoroughly fucked, tongue and fingers and cock; Avon's hands, bound and immobile, fingers waving slightly; Avon's—he giggled wildly, cruelly—seat of power...

And now that he was so close to finishing the job of conquering Avon, Tarrant felt a surge of almost-pity for the pathetic old queen. He couldn't deny that Kerr had done a good job at hiding his true nature, had almost succeeded...but a few exercise sessions, a few confrontations, and the older flesh had capitulated in favor of the young blood that would fill it.

Tarrant gripped the slippery buttocks and pulled them wide open; rose over Kerr to his full height, his full weight, his full strength: "Your day is over, Avon," he hissed.

And sank down into his throne, the breath expelling from his lungs in one smooth charge at the hot electric slide into power.

Liberator was his.

It was all over but the fucking, and Tarrant fucked. He fucked Kerr into the bed till the bouncing rhythm of the mattress held Avon prisoner as surely as the leather bonds and the prick up his ass held him; fucked till his balls were slapping merrily at Kerr's, sending a thrill of pain up Tarrant's own spine; fucked till his mind boiled away and he was only an immense cock conquering his rival, vanquishing him, subduing him... Ripe, ready words tumbled off Tarrant's lips, all the words that let Kerr know he was the lowest of the low: a convenient hole for the biggest strongest man to use when he needed; a piece of easy meat; all the ancient terms dating back to when anything feminine was equated with all things disgusting and evil.

The charge was building, the inevitability of orgasm layered with the delicious thrill of hurting Kerr, mounting him—the indescribable exultation of having won the battle of wills—

Tarrant's back arched, and a cry of triumph shot from him as his seed shot into his rival.

With the battle over, leaden exhaustion dragged at him with heavy fingers, pulling him down on top of the bound body, his weight pinning the beaten man. Sleep rose up and covered him as one last incoherent thought

escaped: Now I have you where I want you—

Kerr was gone when he awakened the next day—gone, along with the few small accoutrements that had been brought to the room. Must have wriggled his way out of the bonds finally... Replete, smug, Tarrant rolled over, grimacing at the feel of dried semen on him, and at the slight soreness of the hand he had used on Avon's ass.

Gone, was he? Without his permission? He'd have to settle that little account with Kerr tonight.

No, a wicked voice cackled. Today. In front of everyone.

A long slow grin took over Tarrant's face at the thought. Ah, now that was an improvement. If Kerr couldn't bear the shame of facing him alone this morning, after being thoroughly beaten and cowed the night before, how much worse for the dear thing to have it out in public...

Ah, well, he mustn't stay abed. He had a ship to command now. Tarrant whistled a merry ditty in the shower, remembering snatches of the verses and refrain as he dressed himself. He took a moment to admire himself in the full-length mirror he had acquired, and swaggered out of his room towards the flight deck. His hands and his mouth and his cock were imprinted with Kerr's surrender. Now that Avon was out of the way, dealing with the others would be nothing. Perhaps he'd start with that little bastard Vila...

"You are relieved, Cally," he said to the Auron as he strode onto the flight deck. "Zen, plot course and speed for—"

"That has already been done."

No. No, he'd finished that fight. How dare he?

Tarrant whirled around, anger knifing through him at that cold voice. "Kerr, what do you think you're—"

It was Avon. Dressed in his black leather armor, standing at his post like a king leading a charge into a breached wall. The lips that had sucked his cock were now twisted with sardonic humor, revealing a flash of teeth. His cold dark eyes met Tarrant's with nothing but amused contempt. "I do not believe I have given you permission to use my first name," he said.

Played right into my hand. Tarrant grinned at the older man, feeling the ugliness rise up in him as it had done the night before. "I didn't

need your permission last night, Kerr," he drawled sweetly. "In fact, your first name is not the only thing of yours I used last night, is it—cunt?"

Without turning to see, he knew that everyone's eyes were on him. "You revealed your true self to me last night, Kerr," he continued, enjoying the attention. "You told me you would not fight me any more. And you were harnessed up like a Space City whore." He grinned widely—to cover the beginning unease at the unwavering heavy-lidded stare. "I used you like a woman last night, Kerr."

"That is the third time you have used my first name without my permission." Avon's eyes and his smile were the same.

Humiliation, Tarrant had wanted. Helpless anger, he would have enjoyed seeing. But not this—this indifference to what had transpired the night before, as if it had no effect—

"You were a nice little slag last night," he sneered, his own fury boiling. He did not spare a glance at the others, looking at each other and at him. "I see you're standing—can't sit, can you? Your poor little arse still hurts from me fucking you? Or was it the spanking that did it?"

That is quite enough, Cally sent sternly.

"Isn't it, though?" Tarrant said, smiling serenely and turning to see the uneasy, angry faces of the other three watching him. He barely held on to his temper at the sight of Avon's smile on Vila's face. I'll get you later, Delta filth. What I did to Kerr last night will be nothing compared to what I'm going to do to you. I have no compunction against inflicting permanent damage on you. And if you think your precious Avon can save you from me now— "To think that the man who's been commanding you lo these many months isn't a real man at all." He laughed. "Avon sucked my cock last night, because I ordered him to! He lay down and spread his legs when I told him to. I beat him! I fucked him in the arsehole!" He didn't realize he was nearly screaming now. "He surrendered to me! The ship is mine now!"

Puzzled stares. Angry faces.

Tarrant drew breath to begin again.

Which was when Dayna said, in a voice of puzzlement, "Well, yes, Tarrant, Avon likes that—of course Cally and I use the dildo to fuck him, and I have to use the crop; my hands aren't

big enough to spank him properly—but why are you talking about it on the flight deck? That's dangerous—we have to keep our minds on our work. You didn't want me to talk about what you and I did the day after we fucked; why are you doing it now? And what's this about commanding the *Liberator*? You just said you were having sex last night, not discussing command transfer." She frowned, thinking. "Or did you do that after the sex?"

The breath stayed in Tarrant's lungs; the words would not come out of him. He could not think.

Vila shook his head, still smiling. "You know, Tarrant, I'll let you in on a secret. Avon breathes and eats and shits, too. But we don't talk about those either." He chuckled. "You mean you actually thought all that had something to do with who gave the orders on the flight deck?"

Child, Cally reproved him, almost-pityingly. *Do you also think that someone cannot pilot a ship or use weapons if that person has a vagina instead of a penis?*

Tarrant looked at all of them; and all the disapproval in their faces was for him. What kind of sick—

"Tarrant."

Cold, unyielding as the leather jacket he wore. Worst of all—amused.

He turned, made one last effort to stare down the cunt of the night before—

And looked into a basilisk's eyes. Any ability to think withered in the ice of that stare.

"Perhaps you recall a story from your not-so-distant childhood." Avon's voice was as iron and resonant as a bell. "The barnyard cock who believed that he made the sun rise with his crowing."

"Things will be different between us."

No trace of that cunt of the night before, no trace— He looked frantically for any softening, any degree—

And it was Tarrant who quailed before the iron stare; Tarrant who, bewildered and sick, lowered his gaze.

"You said," he whispered, not daring to look at the others, "you said..."

His whisper trailed off as he realized what Avon had meant when he said, "I will not fight you any more." Avon had told the truth; there was no more need for Avon to fight

Tarrant. The fight was over.

Tarrant had spanked Avon till his hind end was red, had fucked him into next week—

But there was another creature with a red tail, wasn't there; a creature that was anything but

afraid of a powerful cock...

One last time, Tarrant tried to find his cunt—

And young Chaunticleer stared, disbelief and horror warring, into the cold brown eyes and pitiless grin of the old dog-fox.



OBVERSION

—act of turning towards something to show a different angle. Also obverse: the principal face of something (as opposed to reverse); a counterpart. For all his cynicism and black perspective, Avon can be sentimental, needy, honorable, and terribly vulnerable. Confronted by his past, looking ahead to his future, how will he cope with his present? Can a different angle, a different outlook on the situation lead to happiness? Here is an intriguing view of Avon and the forces that shaped him.

PHILADELPHIA*

M. FAE GLASGOW

With a single declaration that this place was ‘paradise’, Vila had disappeared into the swarming hordes of people, Cally and Jenna quick to follow his example. Gan, next, melting away quite impressively for so large a man. Then Blake, his striding off completely ruined by that last guilty glance over his shoulder before he skulked into the room where the live-sex show never ended. Which left Avon, quite happy in the absence of his shipmates, but restless in the continuing absence of the pleasures the others had all found so quickly.

He leaned against the glittering gleam of the onyx bar, the flashing lights synchronised to the pounding of the music, the beats of darkness almost more dazzling to the eye than the bright colours of the lasers. Everywhere he looked, he could see flesh, waves upon waves of it, of every shade imaginable, and some he had not expected to see in a purportedly human space station. But then, Traveller’s Haven wasn’t exactly a typical space station, nor did it follow any of the standard laws, so it was hardly surprising that the Separation of Species Act would be upheld here. To be expected, really, that this, the largest and least fussy of all the jump-off transit points in this sector should have its share of illegal aliens. No, neither laws nor morals were of any interest to the people who policed and profited from this place: as long as nothing proved bad for business and their outstretched hand was filled, they’d turn a blind eye to anything. Including, Avon was pleased to note, this club. Heaven, indeed, if of a rather tacky and tawdry nature, and sin prized over virtue—unless the virtue was for sale, illicit pleasure of deflowering tantalising his tongue. Overhead, suspended in clear grav-bubbles were dancers in various states of undress, in

varying combinations and in varying states of arousal. In fact, Avon wondered why Blake was bothering to pay for the sex show when he could have precisely that here for absolutely nothing. Over there, against the wall and more or less in a private booth a couple—gender unspecified, the light in here making such details suspect anyway—were bouncing around in a most entertaining manner. On the dance floor, in the pulsing darkness and the sparkles of light, there was a cluster of bodies, morphing from one pleasure into another, all of it syncopated to the driving music vibrating through the floor and down the walls, the sound a physical caress dripping onto Avon's skin, seeping into him as the sights aroused him, until his back was tense with desire and his own pulse thrummed with the darkness between the light and the sound living in his nerves. Eyes narrowed, tongue instinctively moistening his lips in echo of the man and woman standing next to him, Avon searched out his own goal, his own reason for choosing this club above all the others crowding this tarnished outpost of humanity. And there, away in the far corner, was the place Avon intended to go, as soon as he had savoured this rather fine drink—purchased, not that he'd bothered to mention to Blake yet, by the treasure room. As, indeed, all of Avon's little trip was going to be. Another sip of the perfect amber fluid, another slow gaze around the huge cavern of a room. He shifted his weight, bringing his cock more tightly in contact with the leather suppleness of his trousers, foreskin drawn back by the hungry caress. Anticipation, aphrodisiac second only to power, coiled in Avon, his body coming more and more alive, all his senses heightened, nipples shivering with the soft slither of silk shirt under the heaviness of his black jacket. He watched, impassive without, excited within, as yet another man entered the distant room, and his imagination tingled.

Definitely an improvement over the sterile comradeship and fragile civility of the ship, he decided, especially since it had taken what amounted to a mutiny to get them here, Blake being deliberately obtuse and obstreperous when they had demanded a break from the cloistered prison the *Liberator* had become. Avon buried his grin in his drink, such an expression of hilarity seriously out of place on a man in

black leather and studs. But it had been terrifically amusing, watching Blake, great Saint Blake, master of morals, suggest they should have sex with each other. As if they hadn't! As if it hadn't caused more problems than it solved. As if all of this hadn't gone on right under Blake's nose without their so-called leader noticing any of it. And how anyone could have missed the three-way fight between Jenna, Cally, and Vila was absolutely beyond Avon: unless, of course, such blindness from Blake was carefully cultivated.

But he had better things to do than think of lumpen, leaden Blake with virtues so cruel that watching a sex-show could be done only with the furtiveness of guilt. Regardless of anything else, they were here now, and in the place of their choice—not that Blake knew that. He thought they'd simply agreed to come here because it was closest. Amazing what Orac would say when ordered to in precisely the right way, wasn't it? So here they were, the others, including the—perhaps deliberately—obtuse and oblivious Blake, off having their pleasures, and Avon still propping up the bar like a shrinking violet. Or a dangerous man choosing his pleasures.

His drink was almost finished now, but he made it last, enjoying the tingle of anticipation at what was coming next. Idly, Avon looked around, allowing himself the luxury of appreciating the sexual attractions of complete strangers: this place was so well-policed in its own, peculiar way, that even wanted rebels were as safe as they could be anywhere. More pleasant still than the obvious pleasure parading in front of him was the endless staring aimed at him, all that hunger focussed on him, all those people desiring him, wanting him, fixated on him; with a slight movement that gave a brief glimpse of his erection cradled against his thigh, he thought about how many fantasies would centre around him tonight, how many faceless bodies would be his, just for the moment, just to fulfill an untouched dream. With the heat of the whisky, he washed down a small capsule, the contents guaranteed—and proven, more than once—to deliver multiple hours of arousal, a never-failing response to whatever his mind willed and frail flesh might otherwise fail. Another sip, and his whisky was gone, the glass clinking inaudibly onto the bar as another cre-

scendo assaulted his ears and vibrated through his bones.

It was time, and more than time, to visit a very special room, a place that this club was famous for in certain circles, and that the very reason Avon had chosen this transit point for their little spot of rest and relaxation.

Walking very slowly, he crossed the room, taking the time to appreciate the wonderful views available, even stopping occasionally as a mouth was offered for kissing, or breasts were pressed against him. Tempting, yes, but perhaps for later. For now, there was a greater pleasure, a rarer treat, one he refused to miss. Through the conflicting darkness and light, and then he was in the antechamber with its steady glow of recessed lights and anonymity of lockers secured with palm print, freeing the attendees from carrying anything at all. Aware, deliciously, arousingly aware of all the eyes staring at him, of all the desire focussed on him, Avon made a subtle show of stripping, turning, oh so casually, this way and that, as one might when removing layers of leather and silk to reveal the lithe body underneath, every movement a promise of skill and beauty.

There was a towel provided for the shy or the underendowed, and Avon being neither, he ignored it. Proudly naked, engorging cock making other mouths water, he strode through the last door, into a room of only the faintest light, and all of that consumed by the sheen of sweat on skin. Wall to wall, literally, naked flesh everywhere he looked, and lust a heavy, heady scent in the air. He breathed in, deeply, his nipples pulling taut as he filled his lungs with the musk-laden air. He looked around, sinking into the pleasure of a roomful of naked men, all of them strangers, the thrill of anonymous, unpredictable sex shivering through him. This was what he loved, what he so rarely could have. As many men as he could want, as much sex as he could handle, no repercussions, no entanglements, no mornings-after. Just sex, pure and pristine and perfect, as often as he wanted—or none at all. He could simply watch, or watch while he recouped his strength. He could fuck or be fucked, and everything in-between. Anything he wanted, with anyone he wanted, and never see any of them again. What more could even he ask for? Nothing. Nothing at all, and his

eyes were heavy with desire as he stepped forward, his cock filling already, rising up and out from his body. It took only a heartbeat, and then hands were touching him, anonymous, unknown, some smooth and unused to work, some rough from physical labour, and some with the tell-tale calluses of those who depended on their skills with weapons. Oh, yes, definitely something for everyone here. A mouth pressed against his and he opened to it, sucking in the other man's tongue, filling each of his hands with someone's cock while some stranger used his own mouth to devour Avon's cock into endless wet heat. There was a tongue teasing his backside, and he spread his legs, giving it access, allowing that part of him to be taken and used as the man pleased. The man kissing him moved away, sucking on his nipples instead, and another man took his place, the blondness of his hair scarcely hinted at by the warm dimness.

Fingers were entering him now, wet, warm fingers, slicking into him without hesitation, his slow anticipation of arousal catching on fire, licking through him in harmony with the tongues licking the length of his body, and the mouth sucking on his cock, and the fingers on his balls. He closed his eyes, giving himself over completely to the hedonism of the moment, turning wherever hands wanted him to turn, smiling under the kissing mouths as he heard whispered compliments on his looks, his body, on the sheer sexual excitement that was pouring off him. The blond was no longer kissing him, but was behind him, biting lightly at his neck as a cock, long and thin and quite wonderfully hard, slowly pushed into him. He let his head fall back, leaning against the shoulder of the blond, his arms wide akimbo as he was sucked and fucked and kissed, every inch of his body adored or plundered by one of the men he did not know and never would. His blond was taller than he, and as that slender cock pressed home, Avon was lifted up onto his tiptoes, the gentle prickle of pubic hair sweet contrast to the hard cock fucking him. With every thrust he was lifted up, his cock pushed into a welcoming throat, a cock pushed up inside him, a tongue fucking his mouth, and with every withdrawal, he was lowered, and the man sucking him breathed, and there was the slide of skin against his. Arms came round him from behind, hands flat against his nipples,

then fingers pinching tight and hard as the blond thrust into him. Avon groaned, the skilled mouth on him drawing him to a hot, tight point of pleasure, the cock in him rubbing perfectly across his prostate. One last thrust of cock deep within him, his own cock buried deep in the heat of a man's throat, and his cum erupted from him, spilling forth from him in gorgeous pulses.

He didn't even have time to catch his breath, the cock inside him being withdrawn, the hands all leaving him to seek out new meat, new arousal, a new cock. He found a wall to lean against, and with it a man interested in caressing and kissing, then later, there was more, with others, fucking and sucking and stroking and being fucked all blending into one long night of sexual excess, the Universe subsumed by mindless, emotionless passions.

Unsurprisingly, he was less than bright-eyed and bushy-tailed when Blake called him back on board ship the next morning, a full three days before he was actually due back to the monastery.

"This," he said as he stepped off the teleport pad, "had better be worth it, or not only will I kill you, but I'll take great delight in it and do it very, very slowly."

Blake, unmoved by yet another Avon threat and made more than buoyant by his own, more moderate, night of pleasures, simply beamed at him.

Avon glared at him suspiciously. "You can smile at me all you like, it won't do you any good. Whichever suicidal scheme you've come up with, I'm not going. The only death I'm interested in is yours."

"Very morbid this morning, aren't we, Avon?" Blake grinned, his off-world accent more pronounced than usual, soft against Avon's clipped voice. A twinkle in the eyes, an unexpectedly forthright attitude making Avon all the more untrusting. "Didn't you have a good night last night?"

Avon's answer to that absurd suggestion was a supercilious raising of his eyebrow and an expression that spoke volumes. "I'm still waiting to hear why you have such an unappealingly cheerful expression this early in the morning."

"Morning?" Blake went from beaming to laughing, a factor that did absolutely nothing to help Avon's headache. The pill might work

wonders, but such exertion and such lack of sleep demanded a certain amount of regret the next day. Especially when one was woken at some ungodly hour to be grinned at inanely. A tall glass filled with one of Vila's more effective green potions was shoved into his hand and as he downed it, he realised that Blake was still burbling on with that suspicious good cheer.

"...so it being well after lunch time—"

Lunch time? The pill had worked well, hadn't it? Avon thought rather smugly.

"—be up and about, and under the circumstances..."

"Ah, now we're finally getting to it. What, exactly, are these circumstances that make it worth interrupting my hard-earned holiday?"

"I found something," Blake grinned again.

Avon was growing very tired of that grin: no matter how appealing it normally was and no matter how late in the day Blake claimed it to be, Avon was in no fit state to appreciate beaming *bonhomie*. "Obviously whatever you found was neither your brain nor your tact."

"Better than either of those, Avon."

That set alarm bells off all over Avon's aching brain. Blake, not rising to an insult? Blake, not getting up in high dudgeon or even standing on his dignity? "What the hell is going on?"

"Not what, who."

"Blake, the only games I'm interested in right now involve being between the sheets of a comfortable bed and sleeping, neither of which I intend to involve you. Now, why don't you stop prancing around like a flea on heat and simply tell me."

"Your brother, Avon."

Avon stared at him, absolutely dumbfounded.

"I've found your brother."

Avon swallowed hard, and found himself sitting in one of the teleport seats. "My brother?" he whispered, not believing it. "Which one?"

It was Blake's turn to gape: it was shocking enough to discover Avon's brother, but to find out that he had more than one, that there were at least three Avons wandering an unsuspecting galaxy... "Ian"

And was even more surprised by the warmth that lit Avon's face, the softness of his smile, the hint of moistness in his eyes. "Ian" A shake of his head, bemusement overwhelmed by delight. "Where? When—how?"

“There’s hope for you yet,” Blake said at this so human a reaction from a man who preferred not to so much as blink when confronted by horrors. “I literally bumped into him in the club stationside—he recognised me and simply walked up to me. Of course, I had no idea who he was at first—you don’t exactly resemble each other, do you?” The question was there, the curiosity about the family history that would lead to two—or three—such dissimilar brothers, but Avon wasn’t interested in Blake’s questions only his own.

“Ian in the club? What the hell was he doing there?”

“The same as the rest of us, I should think,” Blake said drily.

“But Ian, there, out of all the Galaxy...” Avon actually laughed, the sound uncharacteristically merry coming from a man who so carefully cultivated cynicism. “Well? Don’t keep me in suspense. Which hostelry is he in?” Moving quickly, resetting certain controls, stopping to look at Blake. “What are his co-ordinates?”

“Funny you should ask that,” Blake said kindly, eyes crinkling, enjoying seeing Avon happy, enjoying being the one to bring him that. “But I thought, as he is your brother, and Orac did vouch for him...”

Avon stared at him, his natural caution augmented by having the entire Federation snapping at his heels. “You brought someone you don’t know—”

“I told you, Orac vouched for him,” not that he was about to mention that he’d taken an instant liking to Avon’s brother and brought him to the ship so that Orac could corroborate his instincts. “I’m not entirely stupid, Avon. So, as he’s your brother and as Orac said it was safe...”

“You brought him here—he’s on board *Liberator!*”

“Where else?” A voice new to the conversation, but it was old, familiar to Avon.

“Ian!”

“None other, Avon.” The tall blond man stepped down into the teleport area, as Avon rose to his feet and came forward, face wreathed in smiles. “Well, well, well, little brother mine, I could hardly believe it when I saw you on the news, but it’s true,” the blond said, his words exploding all expectations of a happy family reunion. “It really is true.”

The chill disapproval stopped Avon dead. “And what is it that’s true?” he demanded, showing nothing but the cool façade with which Blake was so familiar, all traces of joy eradicated.

“About you. I can see the point of changing your name, breaking with the family and so forth, but a thief, Avon?”

Avon stared at him, his expression utterly blank, but his eyes, oh, his eyes were tempestuous.

“A thief, and a terrorist?” The man’s gentle face was creased with dismay and disbelief, his hands spread in front of him as if waiting for the answers to be given him. “What happened to you, Avon? What happened that you could become *that?*”

“Life, basically,” Avon replied, tight with control. He shrugged, propped himself against the edge of the console, folded his arms, and perhaps it was only Blake who noticed the tremble in his hands and the sudden way he sat down, a marionette with all his strings vandalised. “Isn’t that what you would tell me when you came home from the School? ‘Oh, it’s just life, the Universe and everything?’”

“But that was when we were boys—”

“That was when I was a boy and you didn’t want to tell me why I’d caught you crying. If it was a good enough answer then, why,” and he smiled that infamous smile, the one that could make a grown man weep, “it shall have to do now, won’t it? Or are you going to pretend that life, the Universe and everything have all transformed themselves into Pollyanna?” Without warning, he was on his feet, all brisk and businesslike, the urbane host at a cocktail party, all hint of emotion walled away where the other two men couldn’t possibly see it. “I believe we are disappointing poor Blake who obviously thought he was in for a charmingly touching family reunion. If it won’t outrage your morals to breathe the same air as a terrorist and a thief, would you care for a drink?”

Confusion swept over Ian’s face, the soft grey of his eyes darkening to slate. He was staring at Avon, seeing a stranger with his brother’s face letting him down when he’d expected someone else entirely. “At this time of day? I take it you’ve gone to drinking as well. Any other vices I should know about—”

“We stick to ship-time, Ian, makes it easier to

maintain a schedule,” Blake interrupted the fast flow of words, stepping right in the middle of the sibling rivalry, “so as far as we’re concerned, it’s actually late evening. And if you don’t care for a drink,” he added, ushering the two brothers ahead of him, desperate to stop this degenerating into blows, “I certainly need one.”

Ian was clearly impressed by the flight deck, and by the way Avon moved around it. In fact, he couldn’t take his eyes off his younger brother, staring at him as if to make up for all the years when they’d been so far apart. Ian sat down on the large sofa, his pale forehead creased with thought, his eyes troubled. He glanced at Blake, looked around the flight deck, went back to staring at his little brother sitting so tensely far from him. “Tell me,” he said as Blake handed him a drink, his voice very quiet, an obvious attempt to plaster over the previous cracks, “why did you choose Kerr Avon?”

Blake sat down, trying to be as invisible as Vila when work was to be done, hoping that Avon was too shaken by his brother’s reappearance to kick him out before all these interesting details were revealed. A pointed look from Avon, but no demand that Blake absent himself. It seemed that even the caustic Kerr Avon was in occasional need of moral support. Or, Blake decided, taking in the atmosphere of tension, perhaps Avon just wanted someone bigger than Ian around in case things became nasty. Nastier, he added, listening to Ian’s tone of voice as he repeated his question, Avon’s silence being taken for hostility.

“I would have thought it was obvious enough,” Avon eventually replied quite calmly, although half his drink was gone in a single swallow. “Avon because I’ve been that all my life and would respond to it automatically, and Kerr from KerPatrik.”

Blake swallowed all of his drink in a oner. KerPatrik? Of the KerPatriks? He had a KerPatrik on his ship and hadn’t known? Hadn’t used that?

“You’re right, it is the obvious sort of pun you always did enjoy.” Ian was under control again, or perhaps his disappointment at what his brother had become was ameliorated by the memory of what his brother had been. “But what I don’t understand is why you decided to become a *thief* of all things. What was wrong

with the family money?”

Avon gave him a decidedly old-fashioned look for that one. “Probably the same thing that made it wrong for you.”

“Avon, my dear boy,” and Blake almost choked at hearing Avon called, ‘my dear boy’, “you tried to steal money that didn’t belong to you and now you run around the Galaxy killing people. I hardly think your conscience would have bothered you about Father’s money.”

There was a long pause, whilst Blake looked from brother to brother and Ian stared intently at Avon. That ‘dear boy’ rose to his feet, poured himself another drink and poured it even more quickly down his throat. He kept his back to them as he began. “You know,” he said in an odd voice, “you and Blake should become fast friends. You have each of you declared yourselves experts on conscience. And my lack thereof. Now,” he went on, smoothing his tunic down, his every word, his every gesture parlour-perfect, right down to the briefest glance at the other two men and the slight nod of his head in formal greeting, “if you’ll excuse me, I have a previous engagement.”

And left Blake sitting there, wondering why the reappearance of Avon’s brother should unnerve the other man right back into the parroted phrases of childhood. And wondering what the hell he was going to say to Ian now—and if Avon would mind if he garrotted Ian for being such a callous, self-righteous bastard.

Quietly, and quite thoroughly, Avon disappeared for the rest of the time *Liberator* was in orbit round Traveller’s Haven. He made it back on board by the skin of his teeth—after Vila, in fact. And considerably ahead of Vila in the dissolution stakes. He had, painfully clearly, been drinking, carousing and otherwise proving that he really didn’t give a damn that his brotherly reunion had turned so bitter.

Vila and Jenna were sitting behind the teleport console when he coalesced from light into flesh and bones. They looked at him, he looked at them, defying them to so much as comment on what Blake had obviously told them.

“Avon...” Vila began.

“Shut up, Vila,” Avon stopped it right there.

“You may not want to hear this—” Jenna said, not put off at all.

Avon slammed his teleport bracelet into place, not paying attention to what Vila was saying over the intercom. He felt the sudden surge of acceleration surround him: they were on their way then, and in a hurry. “No, Jenna, I definitely don’t want to hear it. We are underway at a ridiculous speed, which means that Blake has come up with some insane and useless plan. Not something I want to hear about at all.”

“It’s not that—”

“Well now,” he said, smiling cruelly, interrupting her on nothing more than the corrosive suspicion devouring his belly, “who’s been telling tales? Let me guess. Ah, yes, Blake.” He leaned on the console, fingertips pyramided, muscles bunched with tension, eyes crackling with contained rage, crowding over her. “Whatever Blake blabbed and blubbered about, is an exaggeration, a fabrication or an hallucination. Regardless, I don’t want to hear about any of it. Is that understood?”

“Oh, quite,” she replied, her tone matching his for crispness and nastiness. “And your wish is my command.” It was her turn to smile, sweetness thinly masking anger. “Just remember, Avon, that it’s your own fault.”

“Isn’t it always?” He started towards the corridor that led to the flight deck. “I assume Our Hero is on the flight deck leading his minions into battle?”

“I thought you didn’t want to hear anything to do with Blake?” she asked, dripping saccharine.

Never one to enjoy witnessing murder, Vila piped up: “Yeah, he’s on the flight deck. With— with...other people.”

“Well, at least he’s not with the half-wits.”

He could hear Cally, explaining something by the sounds of it: probably another lesson for poor, rural Gan. The lights on the flight deck were too bright, making him blink. And what he saw made him splutter with something he preferred to call rage. “Blake! Is this your idea of a joke? Or do you see yourself as a bleeding heart?” From anyone else, it would have been a shout, a scream: from Avon, it was barely a whisper, and the more dangerous for that.

Blake, well warned by Vila, was already standing protectively in front of a certain blond. “Avon, calm down. There’s no need—”

“Oh, you’re right, there’s no need at all, but

that doesn’t seem to have stopped you, does it? What the *hell* is he doing here?”

“Enough, Avon!” Blake roared, the only man who could shout Avon down. “Ian is here because I asked him to help us with the engineering problems we’ve been having with those bio units Zen doesn’t seem able to self-repair and that my own training doesn’t even touch. Your brother is, in case you’ve forgotten, a medical researcher—”

He was staring at Blake, not even blinking, not looking at his brother standing at Blake’s shoulder. “I know perfectly well what my brother is—”

“And I know what you are,” Ian broke in, tone modulated, peaceable, “but I’m still here. Avon—” he took a step towards his dark-haired brother, not quite reaching out to him. “Look, it’s been a long time. If I stop preaching to you, can we at least attempt a civil reunion? It’s probably going to be the last chance we have.”

“Why?” Avon sneered, stepping back. “Because the likes of me will get their just desserts in the end?”

Blake caught only the nimbus effect of Ian’s smile, but it was enough to warm him, and hopefully, enough to melt Avon. “You always were a snotty little brat, weren’t you?” Said, though, with such enormous affection, that the words were more endearment than criticism. “And you never did take too kindly to being criticised. Or, for that matter, punished for something you didn’t do.”

Avon, unfortunately honest in this, handed the olive branch right back. “But I have done it, all of it.”

Ian stood there for a moment, simply looking at this man who had once been his little brother. He shook his head, frowning. “I can’t believe that you could change so much, Avon. You were so... In between the tantrums, you were the sweetest boy...”

And Avon blushed, bright red, the colour rising up his neck to cover his face, even his ears displaying his embarrassment. “And you always were prey to foolish delusions. But life—and people—do move on, brother dearest.”

The last of Ian’s good intentions fell by the wayside of his incomprehension. “But the way you are now, the way you dress, your attitudes, everything—I don’t see how you could have

turned out this way! You—”

Rescue, for Avon, came from Cally. Goodness knew what she, with those telepathic skills she had never fully defined for them, had sensed in Avon, or even in Ian, but she swept forward, taking control of the entire situation with all the ease of the guerrilla commander she had been. “I’m sorry to interrupt your reunion, Avon, but if we are to get all this work done before we drop your brother off, then we had best get on with the back-up medical systems and find alternatives should the main system fail.”

Avon, unprotesting, went with her, his face back to its normal shade, his sharp tongue blunted: not once, not even by hint of expression as he left the minefield of the flight deck, did he question when a minor, rarely used bio unit had become so stunningly imperative, either for his brother to be brought in to help, or for Avon to back-up right this very instant. Running away like a child was better, by far, than backsliding into the child he had been.

He wasn’t about to skulk, not on his own ship—and regardless of Blake’s notions, this was as much Avon’s ship as Blake’s or Jenna’s. His suit gleamed in the overhead lights, his hair burnished and shining, the natural wave, bane of his existence, completely tamed for once. Face smooth, and not just because he had depilated immediately before dinner: there was no expression to betray him, nothing more revealing than the slightly-bored air of polite interest donned by dinner guests the galaxy over. The others were already seated, as he had intended, when he made his entrance. He smiled at them all, setting them quite on edge, although only Vila actually turned to look at Ian. “Good evening,” Avon murmured, ever so politely. “I’m afraid re-routing that system took rather longer than I had thought. Were you able to find those schematics for me, Cally?”

She looked at him, then pointedly, at his brother. Avon raised an eyebrow and waited.

“Not yet,” she said, giving in gracefully and temporarily. “Perhaps you should try again yourself. It’s quite amazing what you can see if you’re willing to open your eyes and look at something from a new perspective.”

“Really?” he said. “How fascinating. But then, blind optimism is an Auronæ trait, isn’t it? I

think I’ll leave the searching to Vila.”

“What? Who, me? Oh, no, Avon, I’m keeping well out of this one. You want any looking or not looking done for schematics or anything else, you can get someone else to do it.”

“Perhaps I could help you,” Ian put in.

A very cool gaze, one with a perfectly calculated edge of puzzlement to it. “You? But how could you? You don’t know a thing about the *Liberator*, do you?”

“No, but Cally’s right” Ian replied, his calmness showing just how unlike these two brothers could be, “which is why I offered to help. I thought you could explain the *Liberator* to me.”

“How generous of you,” Avon said, and his voice was fractionally unsteady under the onslaught of his anger, hearing all the many undertones in what Ian had said. “In fact, how magnanimous of you. Now that you’ve already passed judgement, you will allow me to mount my defence.”

No-one appreciates having their every overture so vigorously rejected. “Oh, for goodness’ sake, Avon, grow up! We’re not children any more—”

Avon applauded, slowly and insultingly. “How terribly clever you are to have finally noticed. No, we’re not children any more. And although you are undoubtedly my considerably older brother, you’re not my big brother any more. Which means, Ian, that you have no right whatsoever to set yourself up and make judgements on my life.” He was standing now, Ian rising across the table from him, the two brothers almost perfect opposites of each other. “I’m sure you’ve regaled all of them with tales of when I was a boy, of what I was like then—” There was enough guilty shifting round the table to back him up on this, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Blake, a speech prepared, slowly coming to his feet to step in and play god, making everything all as it should be. Or all as this lot of sentimental twits thought it ought to be. “Oh, yes, what was it you said? My tantrums? And what a snotty little brat I was? And how you can’t believe that I turned out as I did?” There was something behind the anger, something he didn’t want to know about, certainly didn’t want to feel. Words spilled from him, kicked out by anger, fuelled by those things

he didn't want to live through again. "What could you possibly know of what I've become or how I got here? How can you even claim to have any idea what I was like before?"

The barb struck home, bearing blood. "For god's sake, Avon, I'm your brother! I was with you—"

"—hardly at all." So politely said, so angrily meant.

For a moment, the resemblance between the two brothers was astonishing: the same blank façade donned to hide the hurt boiling inside. Ian's mouth firmed, his chin raised slightly, pride a protective mask.

Avon barrelled on, too caught up in his own defensive attack to witness the effects on his own brother. "There's ten years between us, and you were always just coming home from School or just leaving for School or just off for a more advanced degree. You, my dearest big brother, don't know a damn thing about me."

Stung by a lie too close to the truth, Ian snapped out: "I know more about you than you think!"

"Then you'll know," Avon replied smoothly, once more perfect counterpoint to his brother, "how intensely I dislike public scenes."

Avon whirled round, going out of the room at a barely controlled rush, temper clogging his throat and stinging his eyes, fury making his fists clench and his jaws ache from holding more vicious words inside. Behind him, he heard his name, first Ian, and then Blake calling him, Blake trying to help, no doubt. He didn't stop, didn't want to listen, couldn't bear either sympathy or platitudes about how blood was thicker than water: he knew that well enough, having spilled enough of it. He didn't want to hear any more arguments, didn't want to deal with this bitter disappointment he was to his brother, nor the slithering pain his brother brought with him, so cleverly disguised as hope for sibling closeness. The corridors echoed with the fleetness of his feet, his stride long and harried, one step short of running away. Again.

His cabin, safe harbour, but not now: Blake too close behind him, Blake's large body sliding through with that unexpected grace. The door hissing shut. The two of them, standing there, Avon not looking at Blake, not looking at anything at all save the protective blank where his

brother used to be.

Eventually, Blake broke the silence. "Are you all right?"

"The ever dependable Blake," Avon said with laudable sarcasm, but his voice had a tremble to it, and he used that to fuel his temper, furious that such an annoying tremor of anger would undoubtedly be mistaken for upset and the threat of childish tears. "Still the master of the cliché I see."

"It was a serious question, Avon," Blake replied, more gently than was wise, and wiser than Avon thought him, Blake more aware of how little true anger there was and how much real pain burned, "and you might as well not bother starting. It really doesn't much matter what you say: I refuse to be angry."

Avon turned to look at him then, unaware of the hectic colour in his cheeks or his too-bright eyes, the sight of him shaking Blake. No-one, not for years anyway, was used to seeing so vulnerable an Avon. "So nothing I can do can make you angry, can it? And you honestly believe that?" A not-quite laugh, a not-quite smile. "If it weren't such a bore, I'd do it just to prove you wrong. I take it, if you're not going to succumb to anger, then you don't intend to leave?"

There weren't many who would beard Avon in his den, but Blake wasn't interested in anything but the simple fact that what he had done in good will had brought nothing but ill will, and more pain for a man who might, in a way, be his truest friend. "No, I'm not leaving. Not until I know you're all right."

"With the way you throw us at the Federation, I don't think we have enough years left for you to know that."

Blake sat down, heavily, on the edge of the bed, a bed that was, most uncharacteristically, unmade and rumped. He took a deep breath, ran his fingers through his hair. He wasn't really sure how to deal with so brittle an Avon, an Avon who obviously had been pushed too far. "I'm sorry," he finally said, meaning it. "When I met Ian, and he told me who he was..." He shrugged, looked up at Avon apologetically. "I'd give my right arm to find someone from my family, someone who knew me from before—" his eyes darkened with his own oft-measured pain. "Someone who could tell me who I was.

And then out of the blue, I'm handed the opportunity to do that for you." He laughed at himself, at his own optimism, at his own rose-tinted dreaming. "I thought it would be wonderful for you. And I thought that bringing Ian with us would give you back some of what you've lost because of me."

The faintest of laughs, but there was only the blackest of humour there. "Disappointing though this might be to you, you are not the centre of the Universe and cause of all things." Honesty, and the loneliness of finding a brother who despised him now, ambushed Avon. "I had lost my family long before ever I encountered you."

Being very casual about it, careful not to ruffle Avon when the other man seemed so willing to allow something of himself to show, Blake went about getting them drinks, on the grounds that anything that would lower Avon's inhibitions and/or render him insensible couldn't be all bad. "Is that why you changed your name?"

"Ah, I was wondering when you would get to that. I've been very impressed by your restraint, Blake. I half expected to be chained to the med-couch and fed drugs till I confessed all."

Bottle in hand, Blake turned then, gazing uncompromisingly at Avon. "Not funny, Avon. Not funny at all."

"What?" Frown, incomprehension, then realisation dawning, rememberings of Blake's time chained to a med-couch and fed drugs till he confessed more sins than any man ever contemplated committing in a lifetime. "I..."

It was a rare sight indeed, Kerr Avon at a loss for words. It mollified Blake, and coddled him that Avon should actually regret a cutting remark. "Oh, don't apologise. We wouldn't want to go ruining a perfect score, would we?"

Avon lowered himself into the desk chair, obviously somewhat taken aback by the mild response to his own sharp tactlessness. "You really are determined not to lose your temper and storm out of here, aren't you?"

Blake merely smiled with the most benign of challenges and handed Avon a very stiff drink. "Absolutely hell-minded and bloody determined."

"In that case," Avon muttered, abruptly retreating back into his usual insular indepen-

dence, "I'm perfectly all right. There, now you've heard what you came for." A craven mouthful from his glass, and then he was coming to his feet, unbuttoning the top fastener of his jacket, actions speaking even more loudly than his words. "You can leave now, thank you."

Blake stayed precisely where he was, drinking very slowly, fully intending to outlast Avon and do something to ease the poorly disguised pain.

"Ah," Avon finally said, jacket dumped on the bed, fingers stilled on the buttons of his shirt. "I can see that was too difficult for you. That large rectangular object over there, Blake, is called a door. It opens, you pass through the empty space, it shuts behind you and *voilà*, you will have left."

"Really?" Blake replied in a very convincing impersonation of Avon himself. "Fancy that. But I'm not leaving yet. This is all my fault—"

"Oh, don't be a fool, Blake," Avon said with wearied patience, abandoning his clothes and reclaiming his drink. "Yes, you were the one who brought Ian here in the first place, yes, you were the one who thought it would be just absolutely spiffing to bring him with us so that he and I could sort our little spat out." He paused, looking at the glass he had nearly emptied already. "If I'm not careful, I'm going to look in the mirror one day and see Vila." He put the glass aside without finishing the dutch courage within, took the time to put the bottle away in the cupboard above his computer, reseated himself. Only then did he look at Blake again. "All right, all right, as you're obviously not going to leave without your pound of flesh..."

Blake didn't risk saying anything: for all that Avon supposed himself to be doing this because Blake wouldn't leave, Blake himself knew better. It was easier to make a mutoid laugh than get Avon to talk, which meant that Avon, even Avon, might just need a friend, and that was a rôle Roj Blake wanted very much to fill.

"Any problems that might exist between myself and Ian started a long time ago. It's not your fault, it's not your problem," Avon said with atypical gentleness before his voice and his stare hardened. "But it is *my* business and nothing at all to do with you. If you want a source of cheap gossip, excavate Vila's past, not mine. I think

that just about covers it, don't you?"

Blake was still very controlled, deliberately calm when he answered. "I don't think that even begins to cover it."

Sounding terribly bored, ennui covering up the stabbing edges of sadness. "Do I really need to explain what a door is again?"

"What you really need is a friend, Avon," Blake said, recognising an immutable object when he saw one. So much for Avon reaching out, so much for Avon being willing to talk, or confide—or allow Blake closer. He stared at Avon's face, at the closed expression, at the tension in the shoulders, and had the words ready to blast Avon's false pose to smithereens. Then he stopped, looked again, and saw the desperate clutching at pride, Avon's defences his only protection against something Avon probably didn't even dare name. When he did speak, Blake was devastatingly gentle. "The pity of it is that you don't even realise how much you need people."

"Oh, spare me the sentimental pap!"

The door hissed open, Blake turning just before he left. "There's one thing I suppose I really should ask."

"I'm fine, Blake, I'm on top of the world, I'm perfectly all right. In fact, I've never felt better."

"Then I feel very sorry for you. But I wanted to ask you—now that we know your real name, are we permitted to call you Avon still?" Not even Blake was entirely proof against Avon's haughty hostility. "Or would calling you Avon imply that we're all friends?"

The only answer to that was the door shutting in Blake's face.

Avon really was quite proud of himself: apart from one or two rather awkward encounters, he had managed to almost entirely avoid his brother, secondary control units and obscure electronics proving most useful for once. This was one of his favourite spots on the entire ship, down where there was nothing immediately recognisable as useful, down where the ship was truly alien to them. Doors in odd places, cupboards set at odder heights, peculiar mechanisms with familiar functions made strange by the alienness of the equipment. He came here often, whenever he wanted to be away from the others, and he had basically lived

down here in the two and a half days since his brother had shown up. Well, he thought as he cleaned his hands off preparatory to going back to his own cabin, it couldn't possibly be for much longer. The *Liberator* was simply too powerful a ship to take the length of time Blake seemed to be aiming for: the next jump-point for Ian's journey couldn't be so far away that it would take them much longer to reach there. Then Ian would be gone, and forgotten once more.

Well, almost.

Back creaking, vertebræ popping unpleasantly, he showered and did all the usual sorts of things one did before going to bed. All without once managing to question why he was behaving like this. Without once questioning why he would finish a gruelling—and self-inflicted—work period and then simply go to bed. No dinner, no supper, not so much as a cup of tea. Just work, with cold rations eaten on the run, and then sleep. Long, blessed hours of sleep, dream-free, for he hadn't remembered his dreams since...

Yes, well, those had been more nightmares than dreams and quite natural, given the timing. Yet, not quite nightmares, not the sort with headless monsters and falling headlong, but filled instead with unnerving feelings and strange images, all of it too fuzzy by morning to be remembered. As for the timing, with Ian going off to School or his new work, why, that was nothing more than any child's reaction to a brother going off again. Nothing more significant at all. He stifled the insidious embarrassment that reminded him that he hadn't been a child, not when those dreams had so plagued him. Puberty had already claimed him, and the morning sheets declared that it was not fear that made him so restless in those unsettling dreams. The small phial was in his hands without him giving it any thought, the soporifics palely blue within the plastic. He'd started out with one, occasionally, when the only risk of attack came from the pressures this new lifestyle piled on top of him. Since Ian, it had been one every night. Two, last night.

Sighing, Avon put the phial away, tucking it in behind the bottle he hadn't touched since Blake's little visit. Addiction was too easy a path to tread, and he'd be damned if he'd need any-

thing that much. Which went double for his brother.

The sheets were cool at first, gradually leeching warmth from his body, then returning it, until he was comfortable, painkillers slowly erasing the pain in his back, and the headache that had taken up residence with Ian's first appearance and would probably hang around until he left. Tension, that was all, the sort of headache Avon was well used to. He made himself lie still, refusing to toss and turn or indulge in any such clichéd behaviour. Slowly, he controlled his breathing, consciously relaxed his muscles, and forced his way into sleep.

He was dreaming, he knew that much, and was aware of how odd it was, his dreams not usually something he acknowledged. But it was a dream, he knew that much, and this strange person he was, walking through the haziness of his own sleeping mind, knew this to be a dream triggered by his memories, by his own dwelling upon a past he had forgotten for a reason. He strolled through himself, marvelling at how real everything seemed, and his body stirred, protesting being locked motionless in sleep when it wanted to be up, doing all the things his dreaming experienced. His hand, curled under his cheek, twitched, as if to reach out for images made so real.

Real, because based upon reality, dream, because this had never happened. The room was the same, that anonymous place filled with anonymous men, the one he'd been in the night before Blake's monumental mistake. The same men were there, but there were others too, some from various projects he'd worked on, one man he'd seen every day for six months on the transits to work, two men who had been young with him, naked, but still, in the illogic of dreams, recognised by their school uniforms. There were still more, past encounters, glimpsed fantasies, schoolboy crushes, men all around him. Blake, for one, standing there in the corner staring at him hungrily, his body naked, his cock aroused. Not something Avon wanted to explore, too dangerous even in a dream to think about what might lie beneath Blake's overtures of friendship and endless challenging. He turned away, noticing that this time, there was no smell to this room, no aroma of sex and semen, no hint of masculine sweat and cologne. In fact, he wasn't

even breathing, didn't need to. No gravity pulling him down, either. Floating, floating weightlessly, without a care, but his feet still on the soft ground, perfectly acceptable because this was a dream and physics had no place in the dreamworld. He could feel himself smiling, and his real-body smiled in its sleep, rubbing against the luxurious sheets, one hand stroking, stroking, just like the man in his dream was stroking him, long fingers, teasing him, heat and warmth and comfort and wrapped in with the sex and the passion. He was being touched, inside and out, bodies blending and merging and fusing to form new delights, new pleasures, more intense than he'd ever known, unhampered by the limits of the physical world.

And he was a teenager again, back in his old room which was within the room at the club, the wide bed with its plump pillows and that little bump on the mattress from the special books he hid underneath. The men from the club circled the bed, a slow moving wall of cocks and nipples and heartbeats of lust. Murmuring, all of them, words of desire, of praise, of promise. Over it all, he could hear a voice and it dissolved the club away, the men melting into nothingness, only the disembodied desire remaining. The voice spoke again, more insistent this time, and he was a teenager again: Ian must have received his com, must have come back early, perhaps even to stay this time. Oh, yes, Ian was back, listen to him in the shower, the water running down him, all wet and warm, steam on the tiles, slickness on muscles, blond hair darkening the way it did when it was drenched. Ian would be covered in soap now, lather white on his legs, frothy on his chest, under his arms, all the white washed away by the running water, leaving him so clean and naked, his cock cradled by the fine blond hair, so different from his own.

He was himself again, in his *Liberator* cabin, but he was himself years ago also, and that was all right, that made sense, for this was a dream, and there at the centre of it all was his brother. His brother was with him in both places, all of it together, everywhere, everywhen, two lifetimes compressed languidly into this one dreamed world. His brother and him, both naked, his brother damp from the shower but his hair dry, not dripping on Avon at all as Ian leaned over him, kissed him, loved him and Avon could

have wept from the joy of it. And now there were men all around him again, in that room, in this cabin, in his old bedroom, all of the places together, three in one, and he had a man in him and he was in someone, hands all over him, mouths kissing him, a body pressed so close behind him, smooth chest, long cock, fucking him, loving him, and Blake was there again, his clothes too harsh in this place of pleasure. Avon smiled at him, forgiving Blake his clumsiness, remembering only that Blake had tried so hard to be nice, to be kind, and in this dream, he could allow himself the indulgence of appreciating someone else caring for him, all of the warmth and security and safety embodied by his brother, so blond, so beloved, so completely everything Avon had ever adored.

His sleeping face frowned as some version of reality tried to impinge itself upon the eden of his dream: Blake's lips weren't moving, but he was talking to him, voice so unattractively real, speaking of a world Avon didn't want to be in, far too happy in this re-creation of the past tinged with the carnal maturity of the present. Avon couldn't quite hear Blake, too distracted by the voice murmuring in his ear, speaking of love and devotion and being together forever and a day, and the pleasure was too hot in him, hard cock, soft words, perfect pleasure.

Blake again, closer, closer, hovering, as Avon was lifted up on to his toes by the tall blond fucking him.

I met your brother, Blake said without speaking.

Avon whirled away, swept by touch, hurrying on to orgasm.

Blake was once more in front of him, Blake's voice snaking through his bones, unavoidable, inescapable. Not wanting to, Avon heard him, understood the words unspoken. I met your brother in the club.

And all the past and present coalesced into a single experience, Avon's body alight with it, rubbing hard into the sheets in mindless rut as his mind rutted in the safety of dreaming. Blake's voice repeating endlessly, again and again, mingling and harmonising with the endearments whispered in a voice Avon had longed for without daring to admit it waking. Around him and in him, it was Ian. It was Ian, fucking him, fucking him, Ian's thrusting forward,

Avon's body, dream and real, arching and writhing in the ecstasy of it, Ian fucking him again and again and again—

He was dripping with sweat and sticky with his own cum, and rancid with dreams. Out of bed, quickly, quickly, sheets stripped, tossed out of sight, bed remade into impersonal perfection. Thence to the shower, soap, lots of it, washing away the guilt, although he mocked himself all the while: it had been years since he'd felt the need for a shower to instantly wash away the traces of a wet dream. A damp flannel was usually enough, but this—an absurd reaction from a grown man. It wasn't as if it were written all over him, Ian would never find out, not ever. He was safe, as far as the sex went, and that was, after all, only sex. He really wasn't too bothered that he had imagined sex with his brother: he had had stranger, far more unsettling waking fantasies than that. The troublesome aspect was that it had been in a dream, a place where he had no control, a part of him he had long thought suitably becalmed. But he had dreamed, and not of mere sex. The sticky details of the fucking didn't matter: all beings were fair game in the harmless pursuit of fantasy gratification. But this had been love. Real love, making him whole, complete—and unnervingly needy, the way he had been years and years ago. Needing his brother, the only person other than Anna who had ever truly loved him. Needing Ian again after so long without him was not the problem. It was knowing that Ian would soon be gone, and Avon would once more be left to mourn.

Hauling his clothing on with vicious temper, he seethed, preferring that to dwelling on those other, more treacherous emotions invading him.

Ian. After all these years, when finally he had eliminated all the complexities embodied in his brother, why the hell had Ian shown up now? Unaware, uncaring of the hour, Avon strode off down the corridor, hands clenched ready to take his rage out on the metal guts of the ship. But later, when he could control the invidious emotions in check, when Ian wasn't around to understand more than Avon wanted him to, he was going to take the matter to its source and have his revenge upon a certain do-gooder. He was going to kill Blake and watch the bleeding heart genuinely bloody bleed. Why had the fool

had to bring Ian on board? Why reopen all the old wounds?

Why reopen Pandora's Box when Hope wasn't going to stay?

Normally, the slightest sound and he was awake, weapon to hand: new talents for new times. But it had been another long day, constantly circling round the dream of the night before, the hours since Ian came on board longer than hours had any right to be. Tonight, it took him a while before the noise at his door registered, longer still before he realised who it was.

"Go away," he said into the intercom.

"Do you realise how old you sound?" Amused, gently affectionate, unchanged from so many years before. "You used to sound just like that whenever I came to drag you out of your latest bolthole. Let me in, Avon."

"I've grown up considerably since then, I know better now. Get lost, Ian," he muttered, but he was struggling, trying to get into his dressing gown without leaving the generous warmth of his bed.

"Oh, yes, I can hear how all grown-up you are. Let me in, Avon."

His finger hovered over the door opener, the small black button both threat and lure. He swallowed, hard, chastising himself for being such a fool, such an emotional, confused fool. "I don't see what purpose it could serve."

"That's because you won't let me in," Ian said very reasonably. "How are you ever going to know anything if you don't listen?"

That brought a bittersweet smile, a cavalcade of childhood memories, of times with his brothers, of how Ian was the only one who could snap him out of one of his moods—or one of his sulks. "Am I sulking again?" he asked almost whimsically, permitting himself some of the old pleasure of having a family.

"Sulking? You're in a Force Nine Huff! Come on, Avon, let me in. I'm leaving soon, so I'd like to at least spend half an hour on our own."

So would Avon. It was the criticism and his brother's disappointment he didn't much fancy spending so much as a second with. But still, it really couldn't be long now before Ian left. And what harm could it do? Knowing that it was purely temporary, he could keep his distance, protect himself before the hurt started again.

"Oh, all right," he said, sounding for all the world like a bear disturbed mid-winter. "I suppose having you in here is the only way the entire ship won't hear the family secrets."

Haloed in the door, a nimbus of light caressing his blond hair, Ian stood for a moment, his eyes adjusting to the dark of Avon's room.

And Avon lay back down on his bed, only just resisting the temptation to pull the covers up over his head. It was his dream all over again, with the light and the dark and his brother...

"Avon? What's the matter?"

"Nothing." I'm reliving fucking my brother, that's all, Avon thought, smiling distantly at his brother. He fussed with his pillows, giving himself an excuse not to look at Ian.

"I can't really expect anything else, can I?" Ian came closer to him, approaching as carefully as if Avon were still the little boy Ian had read stories too in the middle of the night. "It's been a long time, Avon."

Avon was barely listening to the words, his attention only on the warmth of the tone and his brother sitting so close to him on the bed. It was all too close, the dream, the sex—don't think about the love, he told himself. That was the danger, that was the hook that would catch him, and then what, when Ian had to leave again? He moved to put a light on, Ian stopping him.

"Let's not, shall we?" Ian said, proving that he knew Avon far better than Avon liked to think. Secrets were better shared in the dark and confidences came more easily when Avon couldn't see his confidant. "D'you remember, years ago, we used to build castles?"

A flood of memories, happiness overlying the pain. "What was it we called it? Oh, yes, we 'commandeered' the extra sheets from the linen cupboard."

"And made them into a tent over the bed. Except we never called it anything so common as a tent. It was always our castle."

"With battlements," Avon whispered, the old, forgotten feeling of safety creeping over him, no matter how much he fought the fear of losing Ian all over again. "And arrow slits, a moat with a dragon in it... Nothing could touch us in there." A hesitation, before the memory completed itself. "Because you would protect us. Because you would protect me."

"I would bring my study light under the

sheet and read you stories." And hold you, Ian didn't say, protecting Avon still.

"That was when I was very little, wasn't it? You know, I can't remember much about then, apart from the castles and the stories."

"Probably just as well," Ian said, stretching his legs out on the bed, his shoulders leaning against the wall at the foot of the bed. "This is almost as good, isn't it?"

"Any good stories to tell me?" Avon asked, not quite acidly.

"Not many. I suppose the one you want to hear is why I disowned the family?"

Actually, Avon didn't give a damn why Ian had disowned the family: he was only interested in why Ian had abandoned him. "Might be quite a nice place to begin," Avon answered very drily, shifting slightly so that his legs weren't pressed alongside his brother's: one thing to have wet dreams that confused love with sex, quite another thing entirely to respond when that brother was actually there.

A huge sigh, and fidgeting, barely visible now that their eyes had adjusted to the dark. "I disowned the family so that I could get in there before Father kicked me out and disinherited me. Well, that was partly it."

Nothing Avon had not already worked out for himself. "And the rest?"

Ian moved again, shifting around until he was sitting beside Avon, the pillows soft and comfortable, the darkness soothing. "There was the family business."

"You disapproved." No question, just a statement of fact.

"Didn't we all? But it wasn't just that. It was too—I don't know. We never had to work for anything—"

"We never had to work for anything *material*," Avon put in, sudden, sharp remembrances of Father's endless business trips and Mother's constant meetings.

"And had we been Baby," Ian said, bringing back their spoiled and resented much-younger brother, "we never would have had to work for anything."

"Apart from a brain."

"Or a personality," Ian added, falling back into the old game.

"And looks. How could we ever leave out appearances?"

"But appearances aren't everything, Avon darling, don't you realise that?"

Avon grinned wickedly at the flawless impersonation of their mother. "She did always say that, didn't she?" The small frivolity fell away, leaving the loneliness of never-having behind. "Have you heard anything from them?" Avon asked, not entirely sure of whether he wanted to hear or not.

"Not since I joined the protest groups. And I was still living at home then."

Avon laughed at that. "They must wonder where they went wrong, mustn't they? You running with the wrong crowd at School, then disappearing quietly. Followed by my sterling example..."

"You always did have to go one better than me, didn't you?"

It was so much as it had always been, this sitting here in the dark, cocooned from the world, just himself and Ian, and all the worlds' pain couldn't touch him, not with Ian right here beside him. Castles in the air, all over again. "It wasn't intentional, not this time. It just...happened."

"Just happened? To you? Avon dear, you were the only person I knew who scheduled illnesses! How could something like *this* 'just happen'?"

It was back in Ian's voice, the disgust, the disappointment, and for the first time, the battlements of his castles were nothing but delusions.

"I'm sorry, that was rather...bald," Ian hastened, jumping in to redo the harm he could feel in Avon. "It's only that—I always thought you really would find a way to— Well, break free from the family and be happy. With your mind and the research you were moving towards, I thought you'd be some sort of popular hero of the sciences. Not..."

"A terrorist?" Avon snapped, Ian's apology not yet enough. "It's not quite what I had in mind myself. But it happened, and what can I do? Take it for what I can, then move on."

If Ian was shocked by the bitter cynicism in his younger brother's voice, he hid it well, his own voice calm and measured in response. "And is that all life's become to you, Avon? Something you take for what you can and then move on?"

"Only fools think it's anything else."

"Then you and I were both fools."

"Once upon a time, in one of your stories."

A silence, stretching, whilst each one of them bled a little from their pasts. Ian was the first to break it, always the one willing to see through someone else's eyes. "I don't suppose you see yourself as a terrorist, though—none of the others do. And there are a lot of people out there who call you a hero."

That genuine willingness to stop passing judgement was balm to Avon's turmoiled emotions, and it was only when he heard the tentative approval that he discovered how desperately he still craved his brother's admiration. "And it could be worse," he offered, doing his part to mend certain bridges.

"Hmm, yes it could, couldn't it?" Ian replied, relieved that Avon was no longer retreating, hissing, from him. "You could have joined the Space Academy."

"I could have married Servalan."

"Oh, worse than that—you could have married Frannie!"

"And been Daddy's right hand man, right there under Baby."

"Fate worse than death, definitely."

"Yes," Avon said, bringing them back to sombreness. "That's pretty much what I thought. Then I met someone—"

"Who?" Ian sat bolt upright, lying down only when pulled back down by his brother. "When? Did I know her?"

"Anna Grant—I think you might have known her brother." It was most peculiar talking about Anna to his brother, the usual stab of pain her name brought singularly absent. "I thought it would be...quite nice to get away from the family..."

Ian chuckled at the understatement, second cousin Frannie alive and well in his memory.

"...but I knew from watching you that meant going a long, long way from Earth."

"And unlike me, you wouldn't do it on a wing and a prayer."

A short laugh, recognition of so many past discussions, fiscal versus faith, neither one ever winning. "Anna wasn't the type to go less than first class either. So I decided to 'borrow' some money..."

"Avon, Avon, Avon." Ian shook his head, his tone half-teasing. "If you can't be proud of it—"

"—then don't do it at all, yes, I know," Avon answered, the easing of the disapproval most welcome. He swallowed a mouthful of pride and made the effort to explain himself. "But it really wasn't stealing."

"You tried to embezzle five million—"

"Actually, five million is what they never could trace. Fifty million is what they think I stole." A dramatic pause, a tinge of little brother showing off his triumphs for his big brother. "Five hundred million is what I would have had, had all gone according to plan."

"Five *hundred* million?" Ian almost squeaked. "We are talking Fed credits here, aren't we?"

"Would I bother with some paltry little world currency?"

Ian chuckled over that one, his arm automatically going round Avon, hugging him close the way he had since Avon had been let out of the crèche. "Never one to do anything by halves." Another hug, the reassurance always so readily given, becoming habit once more, now that Avon had pulled in a few of his claws. "And I'm beginning to have the faintest inkling of where that money might have come from, and why you might have called it a—shall we say, an unsecured loan?"

A wide smile for that, and the slow birth of pride that his brother was willing to accept him once more, crimes and all. "Or a tax-beating inheritance."

"Oh, Avon, Avon! That is truly brilliant. To break the company by taking your inheritance—and mine, I suspect... Father must have been beside himself." He laughed again, giving Avon yet another hug in sheer glee, all his moral and ethical scruples forgotten with the exhilaration of what Avon had done. Even Ian couldn't resist the temptation of what Avon had tried. "And afterwards, when Baby found out—I suppose that explains why an Alpha was transported to a Class 1 planet for mere electronic theft. Or attempted embezzlement, I should say."

Avon grinned with reminiscing malice. "The little monster probably foamed at the mouth."

"And jumped up and down."

"Stamping his feet. I wonder if he still cries with temper?"

"Probably. It's about the only thing all three of us have in common." A hesitation, his hand stroking Avon's. Abruptly, Ian pulled away,

moving until they were weren't touching at all. "I'm sorry I hurt you so much."

Avon became very still, holding his breath for a second, then letting it hiss out, slowly, very much under control. "I was angry, Ian, that was all."

"You always did get nasty to hide that you were upset. You'd shout and yell and break things, and then you'd cry—"

Testy, defensive, still not quite daring to trust just yet. "You said yourself that we all cry when we are angry—"

Ian was apologetic, but inexorable, undaunted by Avon's present persona, influenced more by their shared history. "But I didn't say the temper had nothing to do with being upset, did I?"

"Ian, don't confuse simple resentment—" Avon began, uncomfortable, torn between confessing all to his brother as he once had and protecting himself against Ian leaving again.

"This might be the last time we ever see each other, Avon," Ian said, as if he could still read Avon's every nuance, as perhaps he could, seeing beneath the mask. "Do you honestly want to spend it pretending that we don't really matter to each other?"

A child again, suddenly, in the dark, alone, his brother going away again, always going away, leaving him alone, taking all the good things with him—Avon sucked in a shaky breath, the sound loud in the quiet room. "I had forgotten—"

"No, I don't think either of us ever forgot anything. It was just...survivable if we pretended to forget."

Unsteady, in voice and in spirit, Avon gathered his courage in both his hands and risked the pain. "I would be so furious when you had to go back to school."

"Furious?" Insistent, demanding honesty for now, at least.

"Oh, yes, I was furious with you—it wasn't only hurt." Avon laughed, a deprecating sound, as he thought of himself then and looked at himself now. "There, I've said it," he continued, surprised by how much telling that one thing had unburdened him. "Happy now? Can we move on to something else?"

"Name it," Ian said huskily, crossing his arms to stop himself from wrapping them around Avon. "Your wish is my command."

But the question Avon heard himself asking wasn't moving on at all, but going back, farther and farther, and asking about the present and the future as well. "Why did you stop coming home? Why did you leave?"

Ian moved again, a convulsion of his muscles, the guilt in him palpable. "It was for the best," he said, evading the truth he himself had demanded.

"Oh, no, I'm not going to let you get away with that," Avon replied, squinting his eyes to catch a glimpse of his brother in the dark. He fumbled around, eyes widening as Ian flinched away when Avon stretched across him to the controls. The light raised slightly, not enough to break the confessional atmosphere, but enough to reveal more than either one might want. "It was for the best? Surely you can do better than that."

"Yes, I can," Ian said unsteadily, "but what good would it do? Leave it, Avon, let it be. Please."

Avon crept forward, offering solace to the one person who had comforted him. "What did they do to you?" Suspicion erupting, dark worries, things he'd been too young to put name to or too scared to face. "Did Father...do anything to you?" Avon asked delicately, automatically thinking the worst of his own father. "Did he molest you, Ian?"

Ian's face twisted at the irony of it. "That would have meant spending time with me, so no, Father didn't molest me."

"Then what was it? You came home for years, every holiday, every school break, even when you'd started work and Father knew all about you and those blasted protesters of yours by then." Not that their father ever mentioned it, their proof that he knew the ever-lengthening silences that stretched between father and eldest son, spilling over to isolate Ian's only in-house ally. "Ian, tell me. What happened?"

Evasive, tense, the words sticking in his throat. "Nothing, Avon."

"Don't tell me 'nothing!'" Avon shouted, refusing to allow Ian to hide in the evasions denied Avon himself. A deep breath, temper leashed, voice modulated, he went on: "There had to be something—"

"There was nothing, absolutely nothing!"

Something in that voice, something in the way Ian said it triggered old instincts long since

rusted. "But there might have been something if you'd continued coming home?" Avon asked sharply. "What the hell were you afraid of?"

"Leave it, Avon," Ian pleaded. "Just leave it, please. It's over now, a long time in the past. Let it lie."

Avon's eyes narrowed, wondering, bits and pieces coalescing into an insight that chilled and thrilled him. His chest heaved and he was dizzy, too many things clambering all over him all at once, too much, too much but all of it—right. Like going...home. Like going back to the absolute belonging he had known so long ago. "Last night," he began, watching his brother, waiting for the sky to fall or heaven to open, "I dreamt about you. I was in that club, the one where you met Blake."

Ian stared at him, transfixed, muted dismay struggling behind his eyes, the fear of discovery leeching the blood from his face.

"I went into one of the private rooms in the club," Avon continued, unblinking, "and in my dream as well."

Ian swallowed hard, looked away.

"You were there."

A muffled noise, a stifled word of rejection.

"Oh, no, not in the back room at the club. In my dream...it was entirely different. I had allowed myself to be fucked, some blond man I didn't know. But in the dream, when I felt him inside me, I looked around, and it wasn't him, but you. You made love to me, Ian." He did not turn away, not even when he saw the agony of being revealed kindle in Ian's eyes nor when he realised what he himself had said: made love, not some euphemism of ruttish sexuality. "It's true," Avon whispered into that dismay, denying it a place in either of them. He could see the truth in Ian's response, found there the proof of what instinct had told him. "In my dream, you made love to me and I think now that's a dream I've had for years, although I never remembered it in the morning. Wonderful, isn't it, the way the mind protects itself? But I did dream it, I did feel you inside of me." Moving closer, kneeling now, face to averted face with Ian, Avon a halo of calm with chaos at his core. "Is that why you stopped coming home?"

"I never laid a finger on you!" Tortured, tormented, hoarse with honesty.

"Yes you did," Avon replied steadily, casting

caution and reason to the winds. He was going to lose Ian again anyway, and better to be damned after tasting the forbidden fruit than be left in unfulfilled ignorance. "You did make love to me. In my dream."

"But not in real life, Avon, I swear to you." Ian was looking at Avon now, paler than before, tiny beads of sweat decorating his forehead. "I never once touched you."

"But you wanted to, didn't you?" Avon asked, the beginnings of a smile in his eyes. Contained in that fraught guilt there was unwavering hunger, so here was a way to get all that love back: the currency of sex was one he understood very well, and used with considerable skill. Gently, devastatingly, he leaned forward and licked away the tiny bright droplets of sweat, Ian shivering at his touch.

"Not until you were older," Ian whispered, voice breaking, the way it had when adolescence had hit. Avon remembered that, Ian going from boy to what had seemed to him a man, a whirlwind of baffling change, with hair growing in unexpected places, with muscles thickening and finally, with Avon being banned from Ian's bed, castles in the dark a thing, sadly, of the past.

Avon trailed a fingertip down Ian's neck, right to the rim of his collar, stopping at the juncture of flesh and fabric. "How much older?"

Ian scarcely breathed, afraid that if he did so, then that finger would slip from its safe perch to slide, seductively, from the public to the private. "I came home once—I was still living at home, it was when I was working on that vaccination project..."

"Hmm," Avon said, licking the smooth skin again, tracing it down to where the very first pricklings of beard roughed against his tongue, his fingers toying with the collar fasteners. "I remember. It was the last summer you were home." He moved slightly, gathering another droplet of nervousness on his tongue, tasting the tartness of fear. Under his touch, Ian was trembling, but not withdrawing, not running away. Avon pressed his lips in an almost chaste kiss against parted lips. Smiling, he allowed himself a moment of glory: Ian was his, to have fully. Even if it were only for tonight. He trampled on that thought, refusing misery admittance. "Go on. You were telling me when first you wanted me..."

Avon's mouth moved across his skin, and Ian could feel the heat of Avon's tongue against his Adam's apple as he forced the words out. "I thought the house was empty." He stopped, not wanting to go on, wishing this had never started. But it had begun, and his reluctance was pushed aside by the sibilant whisper that spoke of Avon not pulling away, that rejoiced in Avon's touch, Avon's caress, Avon's kiss. Ian's head was reeling, buffeted by his desire to have Avon and the competing desire to do what was right. "You were supposed to be at schools—exams, I think," he managed, although his voice sounded so very strange in his own ears, for his pulse was pounding through him so hard, he could hardly hear himself think for the thudding of his heart.

"Exams? Well now, that really narrows it down. There were a lot of those, for both of us," Avon murmured against Ian's arched neck, kissing him there, where the Adam's apple bobbed with every word and nervous swallow.

"Finals, I think, I'm not sure." Extraneous details, blurred by time and distance, but all the salient facts shone diamond bright and just as hard. Avon, as he had been, every inch, every pore, unforgotten. "You were upstairs, in my bed—"

The one where they had always built castles, the place where Avon could always recapture that feeling of safety, where he could wrap himself in the warm, amorphous sensations of love.

"You had your clothes half-off, and you were—"

Avon smiled against his brother's cheek, rubbing their faces together before he spoke. "Oh, go on, you can say it. We're neither one of us shy. Not with each other." The years dropped away—together again, safe, completed by love—and other years piled on—knowing, experienced, love and sex commingled. With one sure movement, he unsnapped Ian's jacket, the placket seam sliding open. Another smooth movement, and his hand was inside in the dark, where Ian's nipple peaked into his palm with reassuring haste. "No secrets, not between us. Remember?"

And of course Ian did, many years of Avon coming to him with all the woes and joys of life, and himself, telling Avon things he dared tell no one else. Not so different then, this day from

those before. "You were masturbating," Ian murmured, arms coming up to hold Avon close, not hugging him as before, but embracing him, caressing Avon's back with his hands, their heat sliding between the satin of Avon's dressing gown and the silk of his skin. "I almost walked in on you, but I heard something when I was at the door..."

"So you stopped, and you watched me, didn't you?"

Stilling hands, pounding heart. "You knew?"

He hadn't, or not consciously, landing all the blame for that long-ago tension that had grown between them on his own, inconsiderate hormones. "Not at the time, but given what you've been saying..." He stopped for a moment, the corner of Ian's mouth too tempting to resist another second. "It's pretty damned obvious, isn't it?" he said, leaning back just far enough that he could see his brother's face, that his brother could see him. "We were always...close. And now, we shall simply be closer still." He smiled, reached out with steady hand to cup his brother's face. "It's time, isn't it? More than time." Smiling faintly, eyes heavy with desire, lips parting in anticipation, he brought himself and his brother together, mouths meeting, the fleetness of tongue a wet caress against his.

And was abruptly, chillingly, alone.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded, made fierce by rejection and banked desire.

"Avon, we can't—I can't—"

"Ah, so I have become a thief and a terrorist, whilst you, brother mine, have become a prick tease. Won't Father be proud?" Avon said, with all the cruelty at his disposal, none of it enough to disguise the rank pain in his eyes.

"Don't take on like that," Ian said, stumbling half a pace forward from his hastily gained haven from the bed. "It's not you—"

"Oh, I know it's not any lack in my charms or in my...assets, shall we say." But he had a wounded look to him, pinched tightness around his mouth, the tendons of his neck strung like hangman's rope. Most telling of all, he was tugging his dressing gown around himself, hiding his body away.

"Avon, it has nothing to do with sex—"

A slow, simmering sneer greeted that, and a pointed glance down at the arching denial in Ian's crotch. "No? You could have fooled me.

But then,” and now he was vituperative, the sophisticated veneer stretched to translucency, “you did, didn’t you? For more years than either of our egos care to contemplate. And more fool me for thinking that this time would be the slightest bit different.”

“Different from what? There was never any sex between us.” He met Avon’s incredulous, interrogating stare. “No *overt* sex,” he corrected, collapsing onto Avon’s computer chair. Long-fingered hands ran shakily through blond hair, were rubbed slowly over pallid skin, were pushed into pockets to hide their nervousness. “I admit I used to...think about you, and now you tell me you did the same—but that doesn’t mean we can throw ourselves together like animals on heat!”

“Whyever not?” delivered archly, the flirtatiousness a deliberate insult to his brother’s fraught morality. “Oh, but of course, we’re brothers. We should be best friends, we should nurture and care for each other, we should love each other perfectly. But we shouldn’t touch, absolutely not. After all, what would Daddy think?”

“I don’t give a damn what he’d think!”

“Perhaps not. But you care what his sort would think. What ‘society’ would say.”

“Don’t be so bloody patronising, Avon. If I cared what people said, do you think I would have joined the protest groups? Cut myself off from my parents?”

“Or walked out on your brother?”

Ian erupted from the chair, paced anguishedly round the small room. “I’ve explained about that. Avon, I didn’t leave to hurt you—”

“You left to save me from a fate worse than death. How terribly noble of you, Ian. But didn’t it once occur to you to ask me what I wanted?” Avon was on his feet now, stalking his brother, giving the other man no respite, nowhere to hide. “Didn’t it even cross your mind that I might not need to be mollycoddled like a child?”

“You *were* a child—”

“I was sixteen, almost seventeen. Tell me, Ian,” he murmured, too close for Ian’s peace of mind, their bodies almost touching, “how old were *you* when first you had sex?”

Ian looked away, looked back again, made another attempt to explain. “You can’t oversimplify it away. It would’ve been incest, Avon.”

Avon hurled the words like a weapon. “It would have been love, Ian.”

They stood there, in the near dark, staring at each other, each with his own needs, the common ground between them their greatest enemy. “And what would have happened if I’d done something then? How long before it turned very nasty? It wasn’t healthy.”

“The only unhealthy thing about it is other people’s dirty minds.”

“I’m not talking about that. You were only sixteen, and every time you looked at me...” He had to turn away, to escape the way Avon was looking at him now, so bitter a mirror of what once had been. “You worshipped me. I was some sort of hero to you—”

Overly quick in his denial, Avon swept that objection aside. “My knight in shining armour come to sweep me off my feet and they all lived happily ever after? Don’t be a fool, Ian.”

“Are you trying to tell me it wasn’t like that? Avon, I could have done anything to you and you would have let me.” He was pleading now, unsure of whether he was begging Avon to forgive him for feeling as he had, or for protecting Avon himself. “You would’ve followed me off planet, into the Protests, anywhere.”

Avon shifted uncomfortably, less than pleased by this reminder of his doe-eyed self. “Be that as it may,” he finally said, “and we shall give you the benefit of the doubt and concede that you were concerned that you might be corrupting me,” he took a deep breath, pushed on before either Ian could speak, or the feared loneliness of the future could cower him, “but we are both men now. I don’t need a knight, in shining armour or otherwise—”

“Don’t you?” Ian asked him quietly. “Then how else do you explain Blake?”

“Blake is an anomaly beyond explanation—”

“No.” Softly spoken, implacably intended. “You can’t waltz around me that way. Why are you still with Blake, when you could settle on any number of worlds—”

“My fabled bolthole. If it’s so easy, then perhaps you’d be kind enough to list a few of these worlds?”

“The Rim Worlds, or the Outer Planets. Then there are unallied planets—and space stations! My god, Avon, you could have your pick of stations, they’re all desperate for

people with your training and your background.”

“Would that be my background as a thief, or my background as a terrorist?”

“Can you honestly blame me for being disappointed that my little Avon grew up to be a killer?”

“And can you,” Avon asked, all sibilant threat and whispering hurt, “honestly blame me for being disappointed that my big brother is too busy polishing his ivory tower to actually *look* at me?”

“I have looked at you,” Ian said, his brother’s fierce hurt drawing him closer with the need to offer some sort of comfort. “I don’t like what you do, Avon. I dislike it intensely. But I accept that you are a grown man now, even if you have been behaving exactly the same way you did when Father wouldn’t let you keep a pet.”

“Ah, yes, my immaturity,” Avon said sweetly, a well-remembered warning of nasty things to come. “Or rather, the fact that you refuse to acknowledge that I am no longer your little brother.”

“Give me a chance, Avon. The last time I saw you—” Ian broke off, literally backing away, putting distance between himself and Avon.

“The last time you saw me,” Avon said quietly, his words dropping gently into the abrupt welling of sexual tension, “I was sixteen and in your bed. Waiting for you. Thinking about you.”

“Were you?” Ian demanded, his voice unsteady, his eyes never quite meeting Avon’s gaze. “Or looking back now, does it suit you to remember it like that?” A deep breath, the visible stiffening of a backbone, and then he was looking Avon clearly in the eye. “Why do you want to have sex between us?”

“Why do you pretend that you don’t?”

Ian laughed over that one, the underlying tone enough to make even Avon feel like a heel. “Was that what I was doing? I thought I was trying to stop my little brother—sorry, my *younger* brother...”

“Still over-protecting me? Even after all these years—”

“Oh, shut up, Avon. Can’t you curb that sharp tongue of yours long enough to listen? Or better yet, long enough to sort this out? God,” he said, holding his hands out in front of his face, “look at me. My hands are shaking, my head’s

spinning, my balls are in knots...” A resigned smile, exasperation well mixed with love. “Now I know I really do have my little brother back.”

“Temporarily, of course.”

Ian had intended to be casual, to make it sound light, an off-hand half-invitation, the ‘oh, come along if you have to’ he had muttered so many times before. It came out, instead, intense with need and underlined by loneliness. “Only if you decide to stay with Blake.”

The ultimatum and offer caught Avon off-guard, leaving him more vulnerable than he cared to be while Ian was still so uncommitted to him. “And only if I agree to sweep the other matter under the carpet, right, Ian” He waited for the answer, gathering himself, cat-like, for the attack. “Or are you only saying that so that I can push you into it?”

Ian groaned, his face buried in his hands, blond hair fallen in a heavy swathe across his forehead. “Oh, Avon, don’t tempt me!”

“Why not?”

“Because, Avon,” Ian said harshly, staring up at his brother, “you have no idea what you’re doing. You’re still a little boy playing games, trying to keep your big brother from growing bored and leaving.”

“Now, Ian, I leave such stupidity to Vila—unlike you and him, I learn from past mistakes.”

“No, that’s still too facile, Avon. That’s just you not thinking about it, trying to get this conversation all twisted away from what we need to discuss.” He came slowly to his feet, eyes narrowed in a way any one of Avon’s friends, or most likely, Avon’s enemies, would recognise. “Do you know what you’re trying to do here? Or are you just trying to get me to not leave you again?”

“I’m not a child—” Avon blustered, listened to the bravado in his own voice, stopped. Began again, more measuredly, his back turned so that his face wouldn’t reveal even more than his words would. “I’m not a child,” he repeated, hands dusting nervously together. “But I confess, I would do more than I ought to have you stay. But not because of some childish hangover, so I won’t be needing a teddy bear, thanks all the same.”

“If it’s not because of that, then why do you want me? If you’re telling the truth, it’s more than finding a long-lost brother.”

“Shall we make a deal?” Avon asked, turning round and smiling urbanely. “I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours?”

“Typical. That is just absolutely typical of you, Avon. Some things don’t change, do they?”

“No, and that, my darling brother, is precisely my point.”

Ian sifted that through, sorting amongst all the comments and all the unsaid, important details. “Are you trying to tell me,” he said carefully, “that you were in love with me?”

A scintillating grin, but Avon’s eyes were grim. “Brilliant as ever. Some things don’t change, do they?”

“But you were only sixteen—”

“And too young, yes, I know. But I was only too young to know what I wanted, in anything but the vaguest of terms, not too young to be given the answers.”

The air around them was as laden as the confessional, the heavy swell of truths about to break. “And now?” Ian whispered, not sure that he was ready for this.

“And now,” Avon replied, absolutely certain he was far from ready for this but knowing it was a gamble he could not postpone, “I know what I feel and what I want...” He broke off, ambushed by the very things for which he was so ill-prepared. Amazed, he looked over at his brother. “I actually do know what I want. Not just to stop you from leaving,” he admitted, to himself as much as Ian, a lifetime’s puzzle pieces slotting neatly into place, “but I want to stay with you.” He laughed at himself, ungently mocking. “Embarrassingly rose-tinted, but I want to live with you.”

“As man and wife?” Ian snapped, unnerved into Avon’s usual casual cruelty.

“I didn’t know you wore frocks,” Avon replied unruffled, more at ease now that it was his brother struggling to deal with the unimaginable whilst he himself had just uncovered a treasure-trove of answers.

“Don’t be facetious, Avon, you know perfectly well what I mean.” Fishing for time, trying to pull himself together now that it had actually been said flat out, now that temptation had been given its full name.

“Earlier,” Avon murmured, coming round to stand behind his brother’s chair, his gaze falling on the pale vulnerability of nape, “you thought

I was selling myself to make you stay. Well now, I believe I shall re-instigate an old family business. You want me, we have established that rather firmly, wouldn’t you say? I will come with you—and leave Blake and this lifestyle you *so* admire—if you will live with me, fully, and without pretence of platonic siblingry.”

“Have you any idea what you’re asking me to do?” Ian demanded, anguish breaking his voice. “Have you any idea at all?”

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” Avon said, utterly calm now that that was true: he might fight and scream all the way there, but once he had faced himself, no matter how dark the image, it was never as awful as he’d feared. “I’m asking you to stop seeing me as your little brother and start seeing me as what I am.”

“Oh, yes, the ‘fully grown man’ speech.”

“Well, that saves my breath, doesn’t it?”

“No, it doesn’t. Yes, you’re all grown up now, yes, the situation between us is different. But—” he broke off, searching for better words than the ones chosen when he’d been so dismayed at where all Avon’s shining promise had led him. “Look, it’s up to you, if you choose to live your life running around the Galaxy killing people—and yes, I’ve heard all of Blake’s arguments, and I don’t care. It’s still killing, it’s still war, and I can’t believe that a man of your intellect has to play Neanderthals to change what he doesn’t like.”

Put in quite those words, what little lustre was left peeled off from Avon’s life. This, perhaps, was not the best time to tell Ian that he didn’t even believe in Blake’s damned and damning cause.

Ian kept going, the words streaming from him before he could dam them up. “So I do have to accept that you’re your own man now. But one thing I won’t accept, though, Avon, is you trying to turn this into some tawdry transaction better suited to the street corner than a meeting of equals.”

“Then you do accept,” Avon immediately seized the advantage opened to him, “that what I want for us is good—”

“I said no such thing! And you,” he jabbed a finger at Avon, and it was as if the years had all stood still, “had better stop twisting my words. I’ll speak for myself, thank you.”

“But what I want for us,” Avon tried again,

“is better than casual or meaningless sex, right?”

“No, it’s not right, it’s wrong, and that’s the problem. I can’t see past the wrong I’d be doing my brother.”

Avon pondered this, weighing the benefits of protecting himself against the possible jackpot of telling the truth, the novelty of his own admissions egging him on. “The only harm it would do me,” he finally said, stomach tying itself in knots as he put the words out there for both of them to pick over, “is that I could lose you again. Oh, not now, after these few days. I could overcome that. But once we’d been together, once I’d had a home with you again...”

Ian twisted round in his chair to see his brother, could discern little from the stoic profile presented to him. “Are you sure?” he whispered.

“I’m sorry to say that I am. More than I wanted to be ever, and certainly since Blake turned you up like the proverbial bad penny.”

“Or black sheep.”

Avon smiled at that. “Oh, no, I think my exploits have earned me *that* title.”

“No doubts, Avon?” Ian asked him, his own doubts storming round his mind.

“Just because I’m in this absurd position, there’s no need to assume I’m a complete idiot, Ian. Of course I have doubts. Probably,” he added, turning to look at his brother, “more than you.”

“Not much chance of that, Avon.” He shook his head, the implications and ramifications of what they were discussing inundating him, a cacophony of choices, none of them right, none of them easy. “But what you’re asking me to do...”

“It’s only guilt,” Avon murmured very softly, kneeling down behind the chair until his face was on a level with his brothers. “It’s nothing but guilt and outdated conventions stopping us.”

“But you’re my brother, Avon. My little brother.”

“One you’ve wanted more than half my life.”

“And that’s the problem in a nutshell. I can’t just...stop.”

“Who’s asking you to stop? I’d rather prefer you to start.”

“Don’t...” Ian groaned, unable to move back, away from Avon’s approach, away from that

illicit promise of parted lips.

“Don’t stop? Oh, I shan’t,” he murmured. “I shan’t.”

He leaned forward, the chairback preventing anything but their mouths touching. His brother’s lips were soft against his, closed, faintly moaned protests quickly buried by the flicker of Avon’s tongue against those tight-pressed lips.

“No...” Ian breathed.

“Yes,” Avon said, too loudly for the room, and slid his tongue into the wetness of his brother’s mouth, learning the texture of his tongue and the smoothness of his teeth.

“No!” Ian shouted, pulling away, rushing to his feet, almost stumbling in his hurry.

“Don’t be a fool,” Avon snapped, following him, wrapping his arms around his brother until they were groin to groin and Avon could feel his brother’s pulse. “There’s nothing wrong in what we’re doing—what we’re going to do. We both want it, we’re both adults now—why not, Ian?”

“Because I don’t know why you’re doing this.” Torn from a mouth that ached to know Avon, that watered with the desire to taste Avon’s skin, his mouth, his cock. “I know you, Avon, and I don’t trust you like this. You’re offering me everything I’ve ever wanted—handing it to me on a silver platter. Right down to saying the magic words, home and love and forever—” Reluctance oozing from him like sweat, his body hurling abuse at him, he dragged himself free of Avon. “It’s too sudden and too damned convenient. What’s the real reason behind all this, Avon? What your scheme this time?”

“I honestly wish I had a scheme. Or rather, I wish I still had a scheme,” Avon admitted with a ruefulness that might have been deliberately endearing, or might simply have been the unasked for joy of seeing Ian being emotionally naked.

“So what was that scheme?” Ian asked, shoving his hands in his pockets before they declared unilateral independence from his brain.

“To fuck you,” Avon said simply. “Fuck you and have you.” His amusement was self-deprecating, brought on by the blatant disbelief on Ian’s face. “Don’t forget, unlike you I have no sexual inhibitions at all. It seemed quite natural to take this situation for what I

could and then move on.”

“Your philosophy of life. And if I believe that’s all you intended, then how am I supposed to believe all the rest of it?”

“Because it’s too absurd to be a lie.”

“I’ll second that,” Ian said with feeling. He was drained, run dry by this outpouring. “I never could keep up with you. I need time to think about this, Avon. And even if I can get over this...guilt. What about Blake?”

“In other words, if I want you, then I have to give up gadding round the Galaxy killing people? Settle down on some dirtball with you, give up all the excitement, limit myself to my computer skills and behave like the well-brought up man I used to be?”

Blunt question begat blunt answer, delivered in the sure and certain knowledge that Avon would reject such a scenario out of hand. “Yes.”

“Well, in that case,” Avon murmured, stepping forward, still refusing Ian his escape, “I do.”

“You do? I mean, you’re agreeing?” Flabbergasted, Ian stared at him for a minute, the pertinent details beginning to really dawn on him. “You’re really not just winding me up, are you? This is serious...”

“I know,” Avon almost chuckled, “wonderful, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but...” Ian stepped back, trying to keep away, knowing that he had no chance of resisting Avon a third time. “But this is too important to rush into—”

“And how long did you spend deliberating over whether or not to leave home?” Avon demanded, keeping the pressure up, ‘forcing’ his brother into this. Avon’s shoulders were broad enough to carry Ian’s guilt for him.

“I didn’t think about it at all. I just ran.”

“And now,” Avon said, backing his brother up against the bed, “you don’t have to run any more.”

“But you’re my brother—”

“And if either of us turns blind or is struck by lightning, then we’ll stop, won’t we?”

“Will we?” Ian asked, his body dictating its needs to his mind, the simple need to have Avon overwhelming guilts and doubts and all the problems he foresaw, the sheer force of Avon’s desire undermining his own, ever-weakening resolve. “It would take more than the wrath of

every god in the pantheon to stop you, Avon.”

Responding only to Ian’s tacit capitulation, Avon didn’t reply, using his mouth instead to claim his brother’s in a deep kiss, exploring him with tongue and hands, clothing falling away, shoved aside by his urgency and his need. Mastery was in his every move, tactile proof that he was, indeed, all grown up now, man enough to know what he wanted, and take it, even if it were love for his brother. There was a wealth of knowledge in his touch and a surfeit of skill in his caresses, and Ian responded to him, the lithe body arching up into Avon’s embrace.

They were twined together, Avon’s dressing gown dropped somewhere, the blankets rumpling under them. Knowing what he himself liked, Avon lowered his head to take his brother’s nipple into his mouth, sucking on it hard, teeth nipping, tongue laving the sting away until Ian was writhing, pulling Avon’s head down towards the other nipple, a wide swathe of dampness capturing the light. Avon learned the feel of his brother’s body, finding it much as he had imagined, the delicacy and the strengths, the heart-stopping fragility of his balls pressing up into his palm. Avon ran his thumb between them, fingers following through until he had reached the hinting hair round Ian’s anus, the taut bud relaxing already, sucking Avon’s finger in hungrily, clinging to him, begging more. Ian’s cock was rigid, stabbing into Avon, demanding some attention for itself. One hand still claiming his brother for his own, Avon wrapped his hand round his brother’s erection, so entranced by it that he abandoned that other devouring mouth. With one hand, he held the cock, pale blue veins throbbing their need into his palm, and with the other, slid the foreskin all the way back, exposing the last of the flange, a seeping drop of precum glittering, the slit an engraved invitation. Teasingly, high on the sounds coming from his brother, Avon dallied his tongue in the slit, smiling as Ian arched up off the bed, a deep groan bursting from him, hands coming down to press frantically into the back of Avon’s head. The demand was permitted, Avon opening his mouth to swallow his brother, the taste of his flesh an agony of delight.

Murmuring around the hot neediness filling his mouth, Avon moved around on the bed, positioning himself until he was poised over his

brother, and Ian's hands were flat on his rump, pushing him down and into a heat that perfectly matched his own. Down he thrust, a throat welcoming him, just as he echoed Ian, sucking him down, swallowing as his brother did, each of them giving and receiving pleasure in perfect resonance. His balls were drawing up close to his cock, orgasm threatening him, but it wasn't, quite, enough. He wanted more, wanted to prove to his brother that he was no longer the sheltered teenager his brother had first desired. The needs of his mind overcame the needs of his body, and he withdrew, reluctantly, the chill of ship's air helping to slow the onrush of sensation. It was more difficult to relinquish his brother, the flesh so sweet in his mouth. He shifted himself around, one hand brushing his brother's lips to keep him silent: this was not the time to permit words and their emasculating doubts and prejudices. He moved his hand, covered his brother's mouth with his own and kissed him, slowly, learning every millimetre of the mouth that opened under his. Unhurriedly, none of his ratcheting sexual tension betrayed by his touch, he positioned his brother, lifting his legs up until Ian's knees were over Avon's shoulders and Ian's calves warm against his back. He stopped for a moment, looking at his brother, giving Ian this one chance to refuse, to change the path they were going to take together.

Ian laced his fingers in Avon's hair, drawing him down for a small kiss. "We've gone this far, Avon," he murmured, lips almost chaste against Avon's. "I think I'd die if we stopped now..." He raised his hips a little, until his cock was kissing Avon's belly and Avon's cock rested heavily between his cheeks.

Breathing deeply, struggling for control, Avon spat into his hand, used it to make his brother wet, spat again, mingling that with the precum seeping from his cock. "Ready?" he whispered, voice barely functioning.

"No," Ian said, not referring to his body. "But do it anyway."

Carefully, with infinite tenderness, Avon began, penetrating his brother slowly, savouring every inch: the stubborn tightness of sphincter yielding, becoming passive strength clutching at Avon's cock; the vulnerability of the delicate inner tissues, so easily riven; the profound emptiness at the head of his cock, nothing be-

tween him and his brother's heart. He was completely inside Ian now, holding still for as long as he could, giving his brother time to adjust to the invasion of his body. A small movement, a mumbled groan, and Ian was writhing under him, undulating upwards, trying to push Avon in even deeper.

Gazing down into his brother's eyes, Avon began to thrust, setting the rhythm, controlling their pleasure. He had intended to use every ounce of skill at his disposal, but seeing his brother like this, feeling him, being inside him—it was too much for rationality, and his emotions took over for once, and even that was right: Ian was the only person he had ever felt truly safe with. Deeper and harder, giving in to the sensations, unafraid of the words that spilled from him, for they were echoed, in voice and touch and need, by his brother.

Ian enveloped Avon with his arms, even as he enveloped Avon with his body, their sweat commingled, their breathing ragged with lust. Avon pierced him deeply, Avon's cock a hard caress against his prostate and Ian came, his brother inside him, holding still, as orgasm exploded in him. Not even a breath's pause, and then Avon was moving once more, pounding into Ian, flesh welcoming flesh, Ian smiling as he felt the sudden slickness of Avon's orgasm inside him.

With a wet sound, Avon slid free from his brother, collapsing at his side, gratified when Ian gathered him up into his arms, so much as in his childhood and unutterably, irrevocably, different. Kisses were being pressed into his hair, onto his forehead, his closed eyes, words whispered into his mouth, Ian's tongue following them with languorous warmth.

"Still so certain this was right?" Ian asked him, an unreasoning anxiety threatening to curdle their pleasure.

"Still so certain it was wrong?" Avon replied, stretching luxuriously, enjoying the feel of his brother lying alongside him, their skin touching moistly.

"No, but right now you could tell me time's running backwards and I'd believe you."

"Proof positive that loves renders man irrational."

"And is that," Ian asked, knowing he had no right to doubt, but that he was, still, unsure, "the

voice of experience? Or only what you've heard?"

"Definitely the voice of experience," Avon told him, somewhat shamefacedly. He tugged at his brother, settling Ian comfortably so that his brother lay half over him, their arms round each other. "It's rather unnerving, isn't it?" he confided, turning his head to kiss his brother, gentling his hands over cooling skin. "And I thought the only buried feelings I had for you were filial devotion and hate."

Taken aback, Ian propped himself up on his elbow so that Avon couldn't avoid looking at him. "Filial? Really?"

"Well, what else did you expect?" Avon touched his brother's cheek, traced the outline of lips swollen from kissing him, the memory of how he'd looked in his brother's mouth stirring him in a way he would have once labelled as simply sexual. "Although I think it was far more complicated than filial. Unless of course," he smiled, utterly reassured by the undeniably soppy expression on Ian's face, "you cared to call it *Cedipal*?"

"Frocks again, Avon? Is there something you're trying to tell me?"

It was wonderful to laugh with his brother again, especially here and now, with Ian's semen drying on his belly. Another, untidier thought occurred to him, but he and his brother were obviously fully in sync once more, Ian shifting around suddenly, grabbing at Avon's dressing gown.

"Sorry," Ian said, unapologetically but with a hint of embarrassment on his cheeks.

"Given the momentous events of the past few days, do you really think I give a flying fuck about a dressing gown?"

"No, I don't suppose you would. Avon..."

Avon remembered that tone of voice all too well. It was usually followed by a 'listen' and then a list of worries.

"Listen—"

"No."

"What d'you mean, no?"

"I mean that I'm not going to listen to you line up every problem that might perhaps just possibly if the circumstances are strange enough happen to us. Not now."

Ian lowered himself, cocooning his brother, wishing desperately that everything would be

as right and as feasible as Avon thought. "We can't just jump into this, Avon."

"I thought we just did." He turned onto his side, entangling himself with his brother until they were indistinguishable, a contagion of arms and legs. "Whatever happens, we will deal with it."

"Still trying to hold on to me?"

Avon hugged him a little tighter, pressing them so closely together it was painful. "Whatever gave you that idea?" he whispered, closing his eyes and leaning forward, losing himself in kissing his brother.

"Avon, stop it. We have to talk, we have to think—"

"If there's one thing I have learned from Blake, then it is that every day has enough problems of its own without borrowing tomorrow's. At least enjoy this once."

"But we will discuss this?" Ian insisted, disbelieving that it could all be so easy, having no faith that Avon really did intend to follow him.

"Yes," Avon replied, having no such intention: it had all been said, and Ian would go over and over it until it disintegrated in front of them. As bad as Blake and his brooding, but this mattered far more. He fumbled for the duvet, covering them with it, pulling it right up over their heads, creating another castle, complete with battlements of his own design. "Go to sleep," he whispered, the way his brother had once done with him, "go to sleep, I'm here beside you."

Ian started to say something, thought better of it. Instead, he settled himself more comfortably, and gave in to Avon's certainty.

He pressed the buzzer, his veneer of calm firmly in place as he walked through the door.

"Yes, Avon, what can I do for you?" Blake asked him as if there was nothing unusual whatsoever in Avon coming to his cabin in the small hours of the morning.

"We agreed that *Liberator* would eventually be mine, correct?"

"Yes, we did," Blake replied, mind racing with the implications, none of them pleasant. "May I ask why, or were you planning a cosy mutiny with the others?"

Avon had honestly thought this would be easy, a nice tidy cutting of ties that he preferred

to pretend didn't really exist. But when he looked back on things, he had been through a lot with this man, and if the circumstances had been different, they might even have been friends. "I'm leaving," he announced baldly.

"With your brother," Blake said, not visibly surprised. "I half expected that, once you and he seemed to patch up your differences. Are you going with him, or have you persuaded him to go to a livelier spot?"

That very topic had produced a few energetic discussions of its own over the past two days. "He has promised his medical services there, so we will start off there. Beyond his contract..."

"Beyond his contract, you could both come back here. We could do with a fully fledged doctor, especially one with all his additional specialisations. Better yet," Blake went on, making it all seem so much more casual than it was, "you could stay here with the rest of us and we could pick Ian up once his stint is over."

"I said I was leaving, Blake, so don't waste your breath and my time trying to talk me out of it." He didn't want Blake getting into this, didn't want to take the chance of Blake becoming sentimental, talking of how much they'd all been through together: he simply wanted to leave with as little fuss as possible. "You can have *Liberator*, I will take Orac."

It was fair enough, as it went, although Blake was inclined to argue. He looked, thoughtfully, at Avon. "None of this is even open for discussion as far as you're concerned, is it?"

"I'm merely following in your footsteps, Blake."

"Then why did you even bother to tell me? We're already in orbit, everyone is expecting Ian to leave in the morning. You could've slipped off with none of us any the wiser."

"That did occur to me, but I decided not to skulk off like a thief in the night." It had surprised him how many scruples he still had left, especially for the people on this ship.

Blake rose ponderously to his feet, unselfconsciously naked as he got out of bed and began pulling his clothes on. "So this is a courtesy call."

"That's one way of describing it."

"Why won't you even consider coming back to the *Liberator*? I can see that Ian wouldn't break his promise, but there would be nothing to stop

you returning. A doctor of surgery—especially one with Ian's additional training—would be an invaluable asset to us." Blake, in the middle of tucking his shirt in, paused, gave Avon an assessing stare, went on regardless. "Everyone on the ship likes him—even you, so it's not as if fitting in would be a problem."

"But Ian doesn't want to fit in. He's an oddity in our day and age, Blake. He's a pacifist and doesn't think too highly of us playing Neanderthal games. Even if he were willing to break his contract," which he wasn't, Avon having already tried that particular tack, "he is not willing to join you."

"Then he could go to one of the Bases. Avalon—"

"Would no doubt be eternally grateful to have a doctor of surgery. But not, I think, quite as grateful as you would be to have a KerPatrik rallying under your banner."

"I don't deny it," Blake said calmly, much to Avon's disappointment, which was exactly the way Blake wanted it. "But to be honest, both of you are so..."

"Beyond the pale?" Avon supplied, rather fond of his notoriety.

"Both of you are so skilled in your own rights that I wouldn't want to lose either one of you."

Avon drew Blake a really filthy look for that one. "You certainly pick your moments, don't you? Anyway, none of this can make the blindest bit of difference. I'm leaving, and that's all there is to it."

"Oh, come on, Avon. You've survived this long without him, surely you could manage?"

"I could, but I don't want to. You've had your pound of my flesh, Blake, and now I'm leaving."

"For god's sake, Avon, we *need* you!"

"And is that supposed to make me stay?" Avon demanded. "*You need me?* How quick of you to notice."

"I'm sorry," Blake said disarmingly, and shocked Avon by actually meaning it. "I've taken you for granted, we all have. But you've said it yourself, Avon, what chance do we stand without you?"

"None at all. You just might have to think for once."

"If you walk out on us without so much as a by your leave, then we might not survive long enough to think about it."

This was not quite the time Avon would have chosen for Blake to finally come round to his way of thinking. “You’re the leader,” he said impassively, “I suggest you lead.”

“In other words,” Blake retorted, never slow on the uptake, “call the whole thing off, sit around like an old man and make endless plans. Just run off with my tail between my legs.”

“And survive to fight another day.”

“I’m touched by your concern,” Blake said sarcastically. “Look, if you can’t bear to be separated from Ian, then can’t you at least persuade him to travel with us? He wouldn’t be expected to fight. Or we could compromise: let him settle where he will, and *Liberator* will take you there to visit him.”

“You’re wasting your breath, Blake, and none of this is what I came here to talk to you about. Are we agreed? You take the ship, I take Orac.”

“We’ll need Orac even more if you leave. Anyway, Orac was bequeathed me.”

“Then you have Orac and I’ll take *Liberator*.”

It was obvious that Avon was not going to stay, and that he wasn’t going to leave empty-handed either. Avon propped himself up against the wall, making a display of just how unmoved he was by both Blake’s arguments and the man himself. “Well?” he finally asked as Blake stood there thinking, one nail thoroughly chewed. “I don’t have all night.”

“Afraid you might bump into the others?”

“The very thought of Vila makes my knees knock.” Suitably sarcastic, but there was just the slightest off-note to it.

“But?”

“But,” Avon began reluctantly, “I detest sentimental scenes. And I would rather not be on the wrong side of Jenna’s blaster.”

“You really are going, aren’t you?” Blake said, the full impact of it slow to hit him, Avon such an integral part of the ship and the crew. “You’ve threatened me with that so many times, I had stopped believing you.”

“Then I suggest you recapture your faith.”

“I think I’d prefer a replacement. And the jump-off port is as good a place as any to start looking. We’ll keep *Liberator* here for a few days—”

“Setting yourselves up as a sitting target and all for nothing. I won’t be coming back.”

“Why the hell not? Just because Ian doesn’t

believe we should fight the Federation with their own tools, I don’t see why you have to go with him nor why he couldn’t stay with you. Look, I can understand—”

“Oh, I don’t think you can,” Avon murmured, thinking about Ian, blissfully unaware of the change that came over his expression.

“But I think I can,” Blake said slowly, recognising love in even so unexpected a place as Kerr Avon. “You and Ian—it’s not strictly platonic between you, is it?”

“What the hell do you mean by that?” Avon snapped, his attitude telling Blake everything Avon didn’t want him to know.

“So I’m right, you are lovers,” Blake said, voice heavy with satisfaction.

Avon knew what had to be coming next, Blake’s ethics tiresome at the best of times. “Spare me the moral lesson—”

“What moral lesson? Do you think I care who you fuck, as long as it’s not me?”

Avon looked at him, expecting falseness, getting sincerity where he least expected it.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Blake told him, miffed. “With my life, do you think I’m going to object to love, no matter how unconventional I might find it?”

“Actually, I rather thought you would. I didn’t think you’d be all that keen on incest.”

“I’m not, but I’m not the one fucking my brother, so that’s neither here nor there. As long as you’re not hurting someone who doesn’t want to be hurt, Avon, I wouldn’t care if you fucked Orac.” It was the simple truth, but more than a bit insulting that Avon was so obviously amazed. “So if you and Ian being lovers is all that’s keeping you from staying—”

Avon sighed, heavily. “Ever the ulterior motive. You haven’t listened, have you? I’m leaving, I’m taking my brother and I’m taking Orac. I’ll leave you the rest.”

“And if I refuse?” Blake asked, negotiations failed, and now the unpleasant prospect of having to force Avon to leave Orac behind.

“Then you’ll have to do what you’ve been trying to do since we met.” He smiled, thoroughly unpleasantly, his body language shouting a challenge. “You’ll have to kill me.”

With that, Avon turned on his heel, presenting his back to Blake, absolutely confident that Blake might rage and rail, but that Blake would never

hurt him. Not intentionally, any way.

“Did you talk to him?” Ian asked as soon as Avon showed up at the teleport.

“We had a positively lovely chat,” Avon said as he added Orac to the very small pile of belongings they were taking with them. “Do you have everything you need?”

“Yes, and I still want to know how he took it.”

Avon busied himself with checking his new identity and credit-ratings disks. “As well as can be expected.”

“I told you he was going to be upset.”

“Yes you did and yes he was,” Avon said with finality. This part of his life was over: the sooner he closed and locked all the doors the better it would be. “Stand over there, beside that case. I’ve almost finished this timer-delay—”

“Don’t bother,” Blake said.

Avon whirled, hand going for his weapon, stopping when he realised that Blake was unarmed, his shirt still only half-tucked in, his hair a bird’s nest of disturbed curls.

Blake reproached him with a look, went past him to Ian. “I’m sorry you won’t stay,” he said, shaking Ian’s hand. “Are you quite sure there’s nothing we can do to persuade you to stay?”

“I have a contract—”

“Yes, but after that. You could stay here with Avon, purely as a medic.”

“That goes without saying, but still, I really don’t think...” Ian said, trying to be polite, hoping this wasn’t going to turn nasty. He shuddered just thinking about how naturally Avon readied himself to kill, even here on his own ship. It was, as Avon had said, going to take them some time to iron out all the wrinkles.

“If the problem is your relationship with Avon,” Blake was as mild as milk, “we none of us would have the slightest difficulty with that. In fact, there’s a large cabin three corridors along from Avon’s that would be perfect for the two of you.”

“Avon told you?” Ian demanded, such revelations not being part of the agreement. A glance at his brother, a conscious decision not to jump to conclusions this time. “No, I think you probably guessed. But not even the best cabin would persuade me to stay on a ship that is used for nothing but killing.”

Blake cast a look over his shoulder at Avon, gauging the other man, intrigued that Avon was

willing to allow Ian to speak for them both. “But we can offer you safety. How pleasant do you think your life will be when people discover that you and your brother are also lovers?”

“That’s the beauty of it,” Avon interrupted, stepping to his brother’s side. “Look at us. We’re as different as night and day, there’re several years between us and where we’re going, not a single person even knows that either of us even has a brother.”

“We’ll be living as lovers, not brothers,” Ian said, glancing at the one who had come up with a workable compromise between them. “So, no problems. And I won’t have to watch my brother—or my lover—kill for something I don’t think he even believes in.”

“No problems?” Blake asked, refusing to give up even now. “Then you don’t know Avon.”

“Why, thank you for your blessing and felicitations,” Avon said, interrupting before Blake could hit his stride. “And say good-bye to the others for me, won’t you?”

He had, naturally, timed it to perfection: the time-relay switch kicked in, teleporting them safely down before Blake even had time to reach the console and see that the co-ordinates had zeroed, effectively disappearing Avon and Ian from any chance of Blake tracing them.

“Well, Avon,” Ian said as they stood on the steps of the hotel they were staying in until they had found themselves more permanent accommodations. “Two days until I start work and before you start to look for something to keep yourself amused. Where do you want to start? We have a whole planet to explore.”

Avon looked out over the small plaza, at the crowd and the individuals that formed and reformed into ever-changing groups. An open air bistro was doing a roaring trade, a street-performer was gathering a small audience, a couple were leaning against the bole of a large tree, oblivious to the world around them. The place overflowed with life, the morning sun brighter than the ship’s light he was more used to, the muted racket of so many people surprisingly loud to a man more accustomed to living with a mere handful of people. In one way or another, it reminded him of the club where this had all started, such a long way away.

Avon turned, grabbed his unsuspecting

brother and kissed him, hard, not one of the passers-by giving them more than a glance. "I think we'll start with that."

"And I think we'll finish that later," Ian

laughed, putting one arm round his lover's shoulders and leading him off towards the bistro.

Avon, never one to forget the important things in life, made sure they did precisely that.

*—*Oh yes, the title of the story, Philadelphia. Well, actually Philadelphia is the City of Brotherly Love, and that was the working title of this tale. The author and the editor apologize for the bad pun.*



DIVERSION

—act of turning aside, diverting; distraction, entertainment, amusement. A diversion in which the always diverting Vila succeeds in diverting Avon from his headlong plunge towards death and destruction with a forward plunge of different sorts of heads. Blake and Terminal can wait...

ONE IN A MILLION

GAEL X. ILE

He would recognise those footsteps and that cheerful whistle anywhere. Unhurriedly, he lowered his hands from his face and busied them at his flight console, nothing at all in his demeanour revealing his inner turmoil, Vila's presence barely denting his concentration on the unsettling transmission.

"Still here?" Vila asked brightly, coming right up beside Avon.

"More to the point, what are you doing here?" Avon muttered absently, running yet another check to make sure that the message source really was who he claimed to be. Unlikely though the source might seem, Zen and Orac were convinced, a fact which did little to relieve Avon's suspicions. "I told you I'd stand your watch."

Sidling ever closer to the object of his affections and carnal intentions, Vila said, "Just thought I'd come and keep you company."

Avon, who knew Vila better than most, gave that all the credence it deserved. "If you want to sell someone fairy tales, then I suggest you find Tarrant."

"Nah," Vila said dismissively, "he's too butch for that."

Avon caught himself moments before setting himself up for whatever Vila had in mind. Much better to trace this message back to its point of origin, see if that would shed any light on the veracity of the identity given. He satisfied himself with a cutting look and scathing sneer, the combination usually more than enough to dampen even Vila. Not tonight, however, it seemed.

His first opening a dismal failure, Vila blithely moved on to number two. "Anyway, I thought, you know, Vila old pal, Avon's being really nice, self sacrificing even, taking your watch, all alone

on that big lonely flight deck for hours and hours." He glanced at Avon who was ignoring him, studiously. "And then I said to myself, a man could get lonely, all alone on the flight deck. Very lonely. In fact," he added conspiratorially, a fact Avon ignored, predictably, "a man might end up lonely enough to need a bit of company. And who, I ask you, is better company than me?"

"Travis?" Avon asked with all the delicacy of a hatchet.

"Nah," Vila said in much the same tone as he'd used to dismiss Tarrant. "Not with that arm of his—never know where it might be when it goes off. Could be very embarrassing, that, not to mention painful. In fact," he lowered his voice to a whisper and then lowered his head so that his hair whispered against Avon's cheek for a second, "a man might end up not very happy about sitting down for a while, if you get my drift."

Another obvious lure Avon wasn't about to let hook him. He gave Vila another one of his patented stares, turned up a notch or two from the last one.

"So anyway, I was saying to myself about how there you were, needing a bit of company," Vila burred on happily, giving no sign that he had read Avon's glaring signals and paying no attention to the fact that Avon was obviously working on something, "and there I was, needing a bit of company, and I thought, well, there's the obvious solution to that, isn't there? I'll just go up to the flight deck—"

"Where I am supposedly alone, if not palely loitering."

"—and keep Avon company. Until the ever lovely Dayna turns up, of course."

"At which point you will throw yourself upon her mercy and hope she'll take pity on you—"

"Don't be stupid, Avon," Vila said with such appalled disbelief it might even be genuine. "She'd as soon deball me as ball me. No, when Dayna shows up, I was going to invite you down to my cabin."

"For a bit of...company, I presume?" Avon said drily, looking slowly at Vila.

"Got it in one," Vila beamed happily. "So as you're coming, I don't need to hang about here, do I? I'll have a kip—"

"And that is all you'll be having."

"Oh, come on, Avon," Vila said in his best, most appealing whine, "don't be a spoilsport. It's been ages since you came to my cabin." He gave Avon an altogether too sharp look. "Been ages since you came *in* my cabin as well."

That was one comment Avon decided would be best left unanswered.

"You gone off me, then?" Vila demanded, braggadocio carefully measured so that Avon would hear the underlying hurt, Vila being a past master at wielding the whip of guilt.

"You are presuming, Vila," Avon replied with an excess of dignity, "that I was 'on' you in the first place."

"Are you trying to imply you never liked me or even fancied me?"

"I never merely try," Avon lied, trying like mad to cross-trace that damned signal.

"Oh, so if you never liked me or fancied me or anything, then what you're actually saying," Vila said amicably, crossing his arms and leaning himself against Avon's console, "is that you're such a slut you'll fuck anything in trousers?"

Avon frowned slightly over that, spared Vila a speaking glance. "That's not quite how I would have phrased it." He went back to his futile attempts to wring more information out of Zen when what Vila had said actually fully dawned on him. "Slut?" he demanded, stopping what he was doing to glare at Vila. "Are *you* calling *me* a slut?"

"Well," Vila said, casually examining his nails, all the better to avoid bursting out laughing at the expression on Avon's face and the high-octave outrage in his voice, "I might've been around a time or two—"

"Is that in thousands or millions?"

"—but at least, it's always been with people I've really fancied. Unlike," he added archly, "some people I could name."

"Fishing for compliments? What a waste of a life."

"I don't know about that. I've had more than my fair share of compliments in my time—one or two from someone who shall remain nameless, seeing as how he says he's never fancied me."

"I knew I would regret this," Avon muttered into his console. More loudly: "Things said in the heat of the moment shouldn't be

held against a man.”

“Fair enough,” Vila replied, ostensibly dusting lint from Avon’s jacket. “I’ll hold other things against you then, shall I?”

Understandably wary, Avon eyed Vila with open suspicion, less and less of his attention on Zen’s fruitless search, more and more on all the delectably rude things he’d been too preoccupied of late to do to Vila. “I don’t think I want to delve any deeper into that.”

“That’s not what you usually say, is it though? Not that I’m complaining, no, not a bit of it. Well, I am complaining, but only because there hasn’t been a bit of that or a bit of the other either, has there?”

They did tend to...delve rather deeply when they got started, and a few unbidden mental images of exactly how deeply and where got Avon started, a distraction sufficient to make him switch his console off before he started making mistakes. Another mental image, very much bidden, not to mention biddable, Vila the most accommodating of partners, sprang into Avon’s mind and right on its heels, a date, one which put paid to Vila’s whines of neglect. “If I can understand your mindless babble, you are here to complain that I have been less than virile in my attentions, right?”

“Wouldn’t put it in those exact words, maybe...” Vila temporised, being cleverer than a rock and therefore too intelligent to insult Avon’s masculinity.

“But that is the essence of this little scenario?”

“I wouldn’t say that either,” Vila said, perfectly honest for once.

“Then that guarantees I’m right.”

“Cept you’re not, are you? This ‘little scenario’ was actually to persuade you to come down later for a fuck.”

He always did like it when Vila talked dirty like that, a habit that he was in grave danger of picking up himself. “Subtle and elegant as ever, I see.”

“Faint heart never won fair lady,” Vila said and seeing Avon’s face, added with considerable haste, “or something like that, anyway.”

“Well, you can take your faint heart and try to win Dayna or Cally,” Avon said with just the perfect mix of wounded hero and butch bastard, “but just leave me alone.”

“Oh, come on, Avon,” Vila moaned, hiding

his smile now that Avon was playing the game, “what’s wrong with a bit of sex, eh? It’s been ages—” Another one of Avon’s looks, and the usual, predictable result. “All right, so it hasn’t been ages, but it *feels* like that. Come on,” he wheedled, running one hand up and down Avon’s nearest arm, “let’s go down to my cabin.” A rather deflating lack of interest, so Vila added one of life’s great pleasures. “You could be a bastard and wake Tarrant up.”

“Excluding the pleasure of making Tarrant’s life a misery,” Avon demanded, leaning back in his chair, his body making its opinion felt and Avon now inclined to be persuaded, “can you give me one good reason why I should consent to come down to your pit of a cabin for a quick grope and a fumble?”

“Oh, Avon,” Vila said, all spurious sympathy and twinkling eyes, “you’re not *that* bad. But I can give you more than one good reason,” he went on before Avon could take either genuine or fake offence at his little dig, “in fact, I could give you a dozen brilliant reasons.”

Avon could think of at least a dozen himself, not least of which being the one thing Vila’s mouth did better than the telling of tall tales. “I seriously doubt that, even given your talent for lying.”

“Ah, but it’s my other talents you want. Or you would, clever clogs, if you’d think with your prick instead of your brains for once.”

“And if you could think with your brains instead of your prick,” Avon said, a small part of him thoroughly enjoying even this small rebellion against the stuffy staidness of being a Domebred Alpha, “then you would actually manage to come up with just one good reason to stop what I was doing and come down to your cabin.”

“Let’s see,” Vila said chattily, stepping snugly between Avon and the console, grinning when he felt the increasing interest at Avon’s groin, “there’s my hands. Good at opening more than just locks, aren’t they?” He planed them across Avon’s chest, glad that Avon had already dumped his jacket on the couch, gladder still when he felt responsive nubs pressing up through the fine fabric. He rubbed at them, smiling all the while at Avon, his voice rich and warm as brandy. “And my hands are good on other bits as well,” he whispered, sliding his hands all the way down Avon’s torso and then

past the waistband of too-tight trousers. He cupped and moulded Avon, the response immediate and obvious. "That's two reasons," he said, sliding first one hand and then the other round to massage Avon's luscious rump, "the right," and he squeezed, hard, the way Avon liked it, "and the left."

Grabbing a couple of handfuls of his own, Avon pulled Vila in closer until they were pressed hard, so to speak, against each other. "I thought you were going to give me a dozen reasons for fucking you?" he said, savouring the sound of the Delta-class rolling so trippingly from his tongue.

"Two down, ten to go. After the hands," Vila brought the appendages in question round to another, more singular, appendage, and fondled Avon to within an inch of his life—well, to within an inch of his seams giving way, "then there's the mouth."

Familiarity, in this case, bred not contempt, but a quite knee-weakening foreknowledge of just what that mouth could do: Avon unfastened his trousers and waited.

And waited.

"You still back at the hands?" Vila asked, putting his digits to the sort of manual labour they most enjoyed. "Then there's my mind," Vila added, just when Avon had decided now would be an excellent time to move on to a more oral proof than mere words.

"Vila, I'm interested in far more intellectual pursuits than your mind. Animal rutting, to be getting on with."

"Ah, but if it wasn't for my dirty mind, there wouldn't be any of the other, would there?"

"All right, all right, I concede the point. Anything you want, just let's get on with it."

"You were the one who wanted convincing," Vila whispered wickedly, nibbling on Avon's left ear, the other man shivering and writhing as Vila's hands proved that all those finger exercises were good for more than dear, departed Blake had ever come up with. "So there's my hands, and my mouth," the polo neck was pushed out of the way, Vila's mouth feasting on the delicate skin of Avon's neck, "and my mind. There's my body," he plastered himself full length against Avon, anything else he might have said swallowed—literally—by Avon plundering his mouth, kissing him so hard Vila was leant back

across the console, buttons beeping and squealing in protest, which was far more virginal than anything Vila was doing.

Mouth still glued to Vila's, Avon displayed a few lockpicking skills of his own: Vila's trousers peeled neatly open. Needing to come up for air, Avon grinned at his favourite moral degenerate and filled his hands with the other aspect of Vila's assets. "Trying for our latest merit badge, are we?"

"If you think I'm prepared now," Vila said in between fighting Avon's polo neck and the confines of the small space between Avon, chair and console, "you just wait till you get to the other end. I give being prepared a new meaning."

"One I shall fully explore. Now, you've given me six good reasons," he murmured, catching his breath as two of those reasons fingered his nipples, "to which we can add this prodigious attribute," his hands framed Vila's cock, wrapped themselves around Vila's erection, one thumb skimming teasingly over the head. "And how could we possibly forget this?" Abandoning the heat of Vila's cock, he took his time groping his way round to Vila's rear, his palms flat against Vila's buttocks, fingertips pressing into the centre seam of light brown trousers. That wasn't enough, too much fabric between him and one of his favourite parts of Vila. He slid his hands down inside Vila's trousers, the skin inside incredibly smooth. With Vila pulling his head down for another kiss, Avon spread Vila's buttocks, his fingertips pressing down in there, reaming the opening arse, the beckoning slickness showing him just how prepared Vila was. And how sure he was of Avon.

"I should thrust you from me and go storming off in offended pride," he said between kisses. "But I'll leave the stupidity to you."

Vila had no idea what the hell Avon was going on about, but as Avon had shut up again and got back down to some serious kissing, he wasn't about to ask him about it. Avon's finger was inside him, pulling a bit because of the awkward angle, but the stab of Avon's cock into his belly was more than enough to keep him happy. It occurred to him that they really should either pack it in or clear off to his cabin, but then his filthy mind stepped in, reminding him of one of Avon's little predilections.

With some difficulty—Avon being as single-

minded in sex as he was in everything else, obsessive-compulsive that he was—Vila managed to get Avon out of his mouth long enough to get a word in edgewise. “D’you realise what we’re doing—or more to the point, *where* we’re doing it?”

The haze of sexual heat clearing rapidly from his mind, Avon did, in fact, realise precisely what they were doing and where they were doing it. He made a snatch at his own trousers, stopping mid-move, mainly because Vila had grabbed his hands and stopped him.

“One of the others might come up on to the flight deck,” Vila murmured, staring intently at Avon. “They might see us.”

Avon always had had a weakness for having sex in public. The illicit desire kicked in, the thrill of being caught jolting through him—especially since he knew perfectly well that everyone was asleep, apart from himself and Vila. Still, it was, technically speaking, a risk, and there was, in theory at best, the chance that one of the others would indeed, catch them at it. “Cally,” Avon said, no longer interested in fastening his trousers and much more interested in getting rid of Vila’s. “Dayna.”

Vila clasped Avon’s backside and pulled the other man deliciously close. Time to play his trump card—or the joker, depending on Avon’s mood. “Might be Tarrant.”

Regardless of what Avon’s intelligent, rational mind might think in its calm, logical and reasonable manner, Avon’s cock definitely liked that idea, shoving itself demandingly at Vila.

“Tarrant might come up that corridor there,” Vila whispered, weaving images with his words whilst his hands were involved in somewhat more tactile pursuits, “and when he saw us, he’d just stand there.”

“Watching us,” Avon breathed against Vila’s skin, his cock liking that idea even better than the one before. In fact, Avon’s cock liked that so much, it was positively weeping for joy, a detail that wasn’t lost on either its owner or on Vila. “He’d see us. See me, kissing you, fucking you...”

Not up here across a sharp-edged console he won’t, Vila thought, not that he’d ever ruin his reputation for wild and inventive sex by ever saying such a namby-pamby thing. Instead, he took Avon’s cock, measured it against himself (being careful, of course, to make sure that Avon

looked a good inch longer than Vila himself: sleight of hand another of his many talents), then wrapped his hands around them both, holding them tightly together, their hard flesh slicking smoothly through the tight tunnel of his hands.

Avon hissed with pleasure, eyes narrowed with the pressure of Vila’s hand and cock on him. “Would you like to have someone watch us one night?” he asked, shoving Vila’s shirt up under his armpits so that he could get at the tender skin.

Now that was an idea Vila’s cock liked almost as much as his other brain did. “A whole crowd of people, all watching us, getting excited and hard...”

Avon couldn’t resist the thin skin at the base of Vila’s neck, sucking on it, knowing that he was going to leave a telltale redness behind.

“Oh, yeh, mark me,” Vila moaned, hands twining in Avon’s hair, cock rubbing against cock, Avon’s mouth wonderful on him. “Was in a brothel once that had that. Public rooms where you could have sex and everyone watched.”

“And did they join in?” Avon asked, licking his brand on Vila’s skin. “Did *you* join in?”

“Never got a chance. Was in the back room with a cock up my bum so quick, I don’t think my feet even touched the ground.”

“And what else do you like, Vila?” Avon whispered, kissing lightly all round Vila’s mouth. “What else arouses you?”

“You do,” Vila said quietly, breaking their unspoken rules.

Avon pulled back then, separating them for a moment, then thrusting forward, hauling Vila into his arms, kissing him hard. When either one of them was capable of speech again, it was Vila, hoarse-voiced, egging Avon on, pushing him to confess something so illicit it would take both their minds off what Vila had almost said.

“I saw a man once,” Avon paused, distracted by the feel of Vila’s cock in his hand, the delicate caress of Vila’s body hair against his wrist. “Tattooed.”

“Nothing special about that—”

“Not even when he was tattooed here?” Avon asked, his fingers tracing a winding pattern down Vila’s groin, along his cock all the way to the head. “He had a winged serpent, the wings here—”

“He was shaved, down there?” Vila demanded, wondering where the hell Avon had seen all this and finding new respect for his partner.

“Smooth as silk,” Avon told him, retracing the pattern of the snake again and again, “and the serpent’s body was coiled along here.” He looked up suddenly, bright gaze catching Vila by surprise. “Until he was hard, of course, and then the snake was straight as an arrow—”

“More’n you can say about a bloke who likes shagging blokes—”

“And the teeth of the snake, Vila,” Avon whispered into Vila’s less than shell-likes, “can you imagine what they were?”

Vila could, and preferred not to, thank you very much, the mere hint of it making him want to shrivel up and tuck himself away before Avon got one of his wilder ideas. “Very nice,” he said, deciding that now was the perfect time to get Avon back on track. “Think about him watching us,” he murmured, rubbing his cock against Avon, his hands caressing every inch of Avon he could reach, and being of a limber bent, that was quite a considerable area. “Watching us fucking,” he went on, his words stealing Avon’s breath all away. “Tarrant,” he murmured, tongue laving Avon’s neck.

Avon thrust against him, their rhythm speeding, the motion of his hips coming faster, which was pretty much what Avon had in mind for him and Vila as well.

Vila was having trouble catching his own breath, Avon rocking against him like that a delight, the imagining someone watching him with Avon an aphrodisiac all its own. “Just think about it,” he said, drifting into one of his own cherished and secret fantasies. Secret, that is, until his cock did some more thinking and opened his big mouth. “Standing there, wanking, his cock all hard and big, wanting us, and all he can do is watch. Blake coming...”

And Avon froze, just for a second, and then he was thrusting all the harder against Vila, his passion driving Vila along with him, Avon coming to the sound of Vila talking about Blake watching them.

If it hadn’t been for the fact that they were wedged, rather uncomfortably in Vila’s opinion, against the console, they would have collapsed. Or at least, Avon would, but Vila was still tight-

coiled with tension, his cock rigid and raging, covered with Avon’s semen.

“Avon?” Vila demanded, none too kindly. “A quick knee-trembler’s fine, but this is a bit one-sided. Gerroff, let me get at it...” He managed to get his hand down between them, had got as far as touching himself when Avon levered himself away, removing Vila’s hand—and nearly Vila’s cock, but he had the sense to let go in time.

“Here,” Avon said, voice as unsteady as his legs, “allow me.” Sinking none too slowly to his knees, he slanted a smile up at Vila. “Fair’s fair, after all. We each have our fantasies, don’t we?”

And Vila remembered the words he’d been pouring into Avon’s ears even as Avon had been pouring his semen all over Vila. Words about how he’d always wanted to have Blake see Avon doing this, for Vila.

Taking pity on the poor aching thing pulsing in front of him, Avon sucked Vila inside, doing every single thing he knew drove Vila to distraction, and better yet, drove him to orgasm. With gentle touch, he fondled Vila’s balls, rolling them in their sac, holding them as he took Vila right into his throat, letting Vila do some of that deep delving they had been talking about. He couldn’t get a syllable in, never mind an entire word, but that didn’t matter: Vila didn’t need words the way he did, vocal though he was. In fact, it occurred to Avon that with the racket Vila was making, there was a distinct chance that they actually would end up getting caught in the act. He sucked harder, pressed a finger inside Vila, found the prostate and rubbed, the movement keeping pace with the suction of his mouth. A moment of utter stillness and perfect quiet, then Vila let rip, the flood of semen being the least of it.

Wiping his mouth delicately on Vila’s trousers, Avon got to his feet, looking at Vila with what was supposed to be disapprobation but actually came out as affection. Fortunately, there wasn’t a mirror in sight, because Avon would undoubtedly faint dead away if he’d seen such a soppy expression on his own face—worse, even, than seeing it on someone else’s. Although he was, for some inexplicable reason he didn’t care to examine too closely, rather as one would with something icky that had just come out from under a rock, inclined to let it pass when it was

Vila's face bearing such soggy sentiment.

With a few deft movements, albeit with hands that weren't quite entirely steady, Avon redid his clothes, not a trace of his little amatory exercise left on view. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said of Vila. "You," Avon said with something suspiciously like fondness, "look as if you've been thoroughly fucked."

"I feel like it an' all," Vila managed.

"But you haven't." A perfectly timed pause, wasted on a wasted Vila. "Yet."

In view of both Vila's extreme state of disrepair and the glazed expression in his eyes, Avon tidied Vila's clothes up, leaving them neater than when their wearer had first appeared on the flight deck. That done, he found himself with nothing much to do, unless he went back to the message he had actually forgotten about in the heat of the moment: fairly understandable, given his position at the time. Being hard against Vila was enough to take anyone's mind off their work. Even if it were something as...unsettling as the cypher sent to him.

Vila, having got a grip on himself, metaphorically if not currently literally, was having all sorts of imaginative thoughts, most of them relating rather directly to Avon's last comment. "Why don't we get Tarrant up here so that we can go down to my cabin. Have a nightcap, get into bed. See if we can manage to get me thoroughly fucked in the end?"

"I wouldn't dream of fucking you anywhere else," Avon responded, giving Vila what he wanted. But then he went and ruined it completely. "However, we are going to stay right here. Separate, Vila, so wipe that look off your face."

"Staying here? What for? Tarrant's young, he can cope with an interrupted night. Let him come up here—"

"Shut up, Vila."

"No, I bloody well will not. I don't see why—"

"Seeing has nothing to do with it," Avon said, deciding that nothing was still nothing, and Zen was going to need more information before he could unravel his mystery. He kept talking as he came round to sit, a decorous and safe distance from those octopus tentacles Vila called hands. "The flight deck smells like a brothel. Not even Tarrant is dim enough or inexperienced enough not to put two and two together—"

"And come up with sixty-nine. Or half a sixty-nine, really, which would make it—"

"—beyond your mathematical capabilities. I don't want Tarrant on the scent, as it were."

"No, don't suppose you would," Vila replied unfazed, too used to Avon's peculiarities to be put off by the obsessive privacy. Of course, he wasn't one to be put off by that obsessive privacy either. "So what were you poking round Zen for?"

"Surely you're not actually expressing interest in routine maintenance?" Avon asked by way of not telling Vila a thing.

"No, I'm not, so why won't you tell me what you were up to with Zen?"

"How about: it's none of your damned business?"

"How about, you've got shifty eyes when you're up to something, Avon." The warm aftereffects of the sex were fading a bit too rapidly for Vila's taste: Avon was never what could be described as over-affectionate, but he was usually good for a cuddle, never mind this chilly evasion. "Here," he demanded, a horrible thought hitting him right between the eyes, "you're not leaving us, are you?"

Later, he never could work out why, but for some reason, Avon found himself telling the truth. "I don't know."

"What d'you mean, you don't know?" He was panicking, he knew he was, but he didn't see any reason to be calm about Avon leaving. "You can't just bugger off and leave me with Tarrant and Dayna."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry, Cally would look after you."

"And I suppose that's supposed to make me happy, is it? Is that supposed to make it all better? The bloody cheek of it, thinking you can just pass me on like an old shoe! Well, I'll have you know—"

"Vila," Avon said, somewhat taken aback. He'd meant that comment to be teasing, not the opening salvo in a Vila diatribe.

"I'm my own man, it's not as if I'm a service grade any more, so don't you go thinking—"

"I wish you'd think, just this once." Avon abandoned caution to the winds and shifted over until he was sitting right beside Vila, shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh, although he folded his arms when Vila reached for his

hand. It was one thing to have a quick tumble on the flight deck, that could always be put down to the serendipity of sex and opportunity, but holding hands? That was taking it a bit too far in Avon's book. "Vila," he said, making a point of not noticing Vila's sour-faced glower, "I'm not going to disappear without you—"

The sourness was abruptly showered with sugar, Vila's face lighting up into a smile. "You're taking me with you—"

"I didn't say that." He probably meant it, but saying it would be even worse than hand-holding. Vila didn't seem to think so, and Avon cursed the fact that out of all the people in the Universe, he had to be saddled with someone who knew how to make him feel guilty. Worse than bloody Blake, he thought. And then he did something else he never could come up with an excuse for. "There was a message," he muttered.

"Oh?" Vila asked neutrally, but if Avon had looked at him, he would have seen the wheels turning.

"Yes. It's an offer, of sorts..."

"That's nice. And who's this sort of offer from, then?"

"Blake."

"Blake? Blake! But isn't he dead? Or disappeared anyway."

"So I thought. But the message claims to be from Blake. Zen and Orac both confirm his identity."

Vila pondered this for a while, and not with the brain between his legs, although his fierce possessiveness of Avon did put in its tuppenceworth. "What is it this person who claims he's Blake is offering you?" he asked, jealousy making him sharper than even the edge of Avon's tongue.

Avon leaned back against the couch, put his feet up on the table, considered lying to Vila. A waste of time, that, Vila having talents that usually ended with Avon saying more than he had intended, tonight being a case in point. "Oh, very well," he said ungraciously. "The message reads: 'Have found way to make us both rich and invincible.'"

"And that's supposed to be from Blake? Doesn't sound much like him, does it?"

"It does in the transmission."

"Well, it might sound like his voice, but it's not the sort of thing he'd offer, is it? You've

already got the *Liberator*, and we've got all the stuff in the treasure room, so what else do you need?"

"Freedom?" Avon asked, not quite joking.

"Which Blake could give you by showing his bloody face and leading the rebellion. I mean to say, it is *his* cause, isn't it? So why's he still hiding like a rat in a trap then?"

"That is what I want to ask him." Reassuring, in a way, that Vila had precisely the same doubts as he had himself. Still...

"And that's always supposing it is him. And if it's not, it'll be a bit late to say, oops, sorry, made a mistake, I'll just be leaving now." He stopped, had a quick look at Avon, liking what he saw even if he didn't much care for the expression of the moment. He wasn't going to let Blake have another go at Avon, not even if it meant thumping some sense into Avon. "If it's Servalan..."

"If it's Servalan, she might have Blake."

If it's Servalan, she's welcome to him, Vila thought. "And if she's got him, she'll've had his mind wiped again."

"What there was left of it."

"Yeh, don't suppose it would take that long. He was as scrambled as dropped eggs to begin with." A sly little glance, to see how Avon took that last comment. With a pinch of salt, apparently, which was appropriate, given the metaphor.

"However, if she has him..."

"Oh, you're not thinking of going in there and rescuing him, are you?" Vila demanded, the complaining very real this time. "You are, aren't you? Bad as bloody Tarrant," he muttered, just loud enough to make sure Avon heard, just quiet enough to let Avon ignore it.

"I don't like it any more than you do—"

"So why even think about doing it?"

Avon wouldn't mind knowing the answer to that one himself. "When I find out, you'll be the first to know."

Vila tutted in sheer disgust to match his transparent annoyance. "And I thought I was the only one who could make you feel that guilty."

"It has nothing to do with guilt," Avon lied easily, it being a habit of his when emotion stuck its nose in. "It's an obligation, a debt..."

"Like I said, it's guilt. And guilt's not healthy,

you know. Especially,” he poked Avon’s thigh for emphasis, “when it leads you on a merry dance right into one of Servalan’s traps!”

Avon decided that holding Vila’s hand was better than ending up with potholes in his leg. “We don’t even know if Servalan is involved—”

“And we don’t know that Blake’s involved either. Just because it sounded like him...”

“Orac and Zen agree that it is definitely Blake’s voice—”

“Zen,” Vila suddenly announced, shouting because he wasn’t about to get up and leave Avon’s hand behind and he didn’t think Avon would be too happy about being dragged across the flight deck, “I want you to put together a voice tape. Subject:—” he squinted sideways, and risked it anyway. “Kerr Avon. I want you to search your memory banks and find Avon’s voice saying the following words, then patch it together to form a single message.”

Avon always had suspected Vila of hidden depths. That was probably why he probed him so deeply...

“Message is: Vila, I need you desperately. Come at once and I’ll make us both rich and invincible.” He had thought about making it a lovey-dovey sort of thing, but he honestly wasn’t sure if such words had ever passed Avon’s sweetly arched lips.

It only took a second, not even long enough for Avon to give vent to a single one of the comments jumping up and down on his tongue.

Vila, he heard himself say despite the fact that his mouth was still shut and anyway, he never spoke so loudly. *I need you desperately. Come at once and I’ll make us both rich and invincible.*

Vila was insufferably smug. “Orac’s key, please,” he said, smirking quite infuriatingly.

Avon handed it over in what he hoped was a supercilious silence, when he was actually trying to remember just exactly what he’d said when he’d been having sex with Vila on the flight deck. In front of Zen.

“Orac,” Vila said, giving the clear box a friendly thump, “analyse the message Zen just relayed and tell us who said it.”

Either Orac had been indulging in whatever vice it is that heats up computer circuits or he’d been listening to Avon and Vila indulging in the vice that heats up human circuits, because the

normally crotchety voice was positively mellow and the usual sniping was conspicuous by its absence. *The voice is Kerr Avon’s.*

“There, I told you so, didn’t I? It might not even *be* Blake.” So there, he wanted to add, and thumb his nose at Servalan, Blake and anyone else who tried to muscle in on his Avon.

“Yes...” Avon said, dripping doubt, not giving in simply because he wanted so much to simply wash his hands of the entire affair and cast Blake into some bottomless pit where he and his idealism would be very happy together.

Vila wasn’t one to let the tone of someone’s voice stand in the way of the answer he wanted. “So that’s it then, isn’t it? Servalan’s obviously got her mitts on Blake’s voice, and she was setting him up as a whatchamacallit, a siren.”

“Possibly,” Avon replied, his mind dwelling on several other ‘possiblys’, none of which were exactly appealing. Apart from the one where it was true, he got what Blake had on offer and then cleared off before he ended up tied to Blake’s apron strings again. “Zen,” he said, letting go of Vila’s hand and getting to his feet. “Follow all instructions as per the transmission. Notify me of any course changes, deviations or problems, also if any further messages are received. Transmit requests for more information and more confirmation. There’s a codeword Blake should know: if we get that much, then at least we’ll know it’s Blake and can assume that he’s found himself another disaster.”

Confirmed.

“There, happy now?” Avon asked, turning back towards Vila.

Vila spread his legs, another fine example of his subtlety and elegance, not to mention his groin. “Will be. In a while.” Purely by chance and absolutely, definitely unintentionally, he just happened to have an itch that just happened to be right where a faint dampness still marked the spot where Avon had dried his mouth. “That is, if you were to call Tarrant and get him up here, and you and me were to go down to my cabin...”

Avon looked at Vila. Vila looked at Avon. Vila rearranged himself in his trousers and licked his lips. Avon rearranged himself in his trousers, and reached for the intercom.

“Cally, this is Avon.”

As if it could be anyone else, Vila thought, amused that after almost three years on a small ship with never more than five people, Avon still felt he had to identify himself.

Eventually, a very sleepy voice answered. "Yes, Avon? Is there a problem?"

"Nothing serious," Avon replied in what Vila thought of as his smarmy snob voice. "I have a terrible headache and want to go to bed."

"First time a headache's ever been used as an excuse to *have sex*," Vila muttered.

"I'll be right there," Cally said, generous as ever. "Do you want me to get you something from the medical supplies?"

"No, no," Avon told her, knowing perfectly well that Vila had appropriated more of that gel stuff than even they would ever need. "All I need is some sleep."

Not that Vila intended letting him get much of that, not tonight at any rate.

"If you're sure..."

"Yes, absolutely. I..." he glanced over at where Vila had draped himself so decoratively. "It's very quiet, so I probably won't be here when you come on deck. Zen will fill you in."

"Are you sure you're all right? It's not like you to leave the flight deck..."

"No, no, I'm fine—"

"Oh. Yes, you are, aren't you?" Cally said rather more warmly than she ought, and Avon wondered, yet again, just how far those telepathic powers of hers actually did stretch. "Well, I'll be there in five minutes."

"Thank you," Avon said, switching the intercom off either before she could say anything else or before Vila could put his foot in it. "Shall we?" he asked, almost giving in to the irrational urge to offer Vila his arm.

"Dead bloody right we will," Vila replied, making a bee-line for the corridor. He wasn't

about to get stuck in a conversation with Cally and Avon about Blake, and he wasn't about to let Avon think about Blake more than he could, either. In fact, his plans for Avon were something else entirely.

Half way to Vila's cabin and therefore at least two corridors away from any route Cally might take, Vila started on his own plans for Avon. "I'm going to fuck you legless," he announced without preamble as they ambled along.

"I'd like to see you try," Avon replied in what might once have been serious challenge and was now husky invitation.

"Want to keep the lights on then, do you? No problem. You can watch as I put my cock in you."

Avon stopped, Vila halting at his side. "Give me," he said, smiling his most charming smile, "one good reason why I should."

"For the biggest reason of all," Vila had his answer all ready, polished and waiting, "I'm one in a million."

Avon pinned a very willing Vila to the nearest wall, swooping in for a thorough kiss, letting Vila go only when they were both breathless. "The biggest reason of all is this," his hand grabbed Vila's cock through his trousers, Vila rising to the occasion. "However, I won't dispute that you are one in a million."

"See? What did I tell you?" Vila replied, absolutely delighted, his cock not exactly complaining either.

"Oh, yes," Avon said with a farewell pat to Vila's enthusiasm before he started off once more for Vila's cabin. "Definitely one in a million. I'm thankful for small mercies."

"Hey," Vila shouted, chasing after Avon, "who're you calling small? I'll show you—"

Which is precisely what Avon had in mind anyway.



EVERSION

—a turning or being turned outward or inside out. Life is not fair—at least not for Vila and certainly not for Avon. Vila loves him desperately, he loves Blake just as intensely and passionately, and Blake...? Everything always seems to come back to Blake. Poor Avon! Heart and mind, body and soul, he's being turned inside out. What will he do?
Part 5 of the Dome Cycle.

THE DOME CYCLE: OH L'AMOUR

M. FAE GLASGOW

The noise cut through him like a serrated blade, jolting him upright in the bed. Outside, the daylights still weren't full on, half-dimmed to ease the pampered elite from the comfort of bedtime to the daily stresses of the usual round of luncheons, dinners and croquet, perhaps even a sojourn at the spa for the truly brave. Inside, it was darkling, the sheets glimmering faintly, the porcelain ornament on the mantelpiece sheening quietly. The sound came again, and this time, he was able to identify it: a child's voice raised in nightmare, a familiar sound in this house where once he'd been a child himself, uncaring monsters come to get him in the night. He waited, promising himself that he would get up if he heard the noise again, but there was, instead, the dim shuffle of someone else, the muted hiccupping of a calmed child, the far-off sound of the kitchen door closing.

The pillow welcomed him, still warm from where he'd lain and he settled himself comfortably into it, pulling blankets up to protect himself against the chill. Mind slowly switching itself off again, he registered that the Upstairs heating must have been turned off to redirect the energy down to the Bowels for such Delta luxuries as ventilators working at full capacity and lights bright enough to see by.

Downstairs. Last night. Vila. Blake. All of it hitting him with all the delicacy of a sex-starved gorilla. Which might not be too far from what he and Vila had been last night. He turned onto his side, whispered instructions for the lights to come up, just a fraction, enough to let him see Vila. Carefully, unwilling to wake the other man—my mate, he reminded himself. My spouse—he traced the new lines, appalled by the depth of the frown lines, by the lines of bitterness that had all but

replaced the laughter lines. Small wonder Jak had wanted to kill Avon: Jak would have known, simply by watching Vila, that there was less to it, and more to it, than Avon staying Upstairs to speak for the Delta interests. Poor Vila, Avon thought, surprising himself with his tenderness, poor, poor Vila.

Still being so careful, he slid his hand lower, not in caress, but to investigate, to see if the vague impressions he'd garnered last night in the midst of passion had been accurate. Fingers following the dips and curves, he could count Vila's ribs, and there, on his back, every knob of his spine was outlined, the delicacy and vulnerability quite terrifying. Avon shifted slightly, his hand travelling back to the fascination of Vila's face. He'd never noticed before, but Vila had perfect cheekbones, or at least that's what too much time apart told Avon, when it blended with pity and guilt over the deep hollows where Vila's cheeky little grin used to hover, just waiting to come out and sabotage Avon when least he expected it.

Tomorrow, Vila had said, we'll talk tomorrow. But between yesterday and tomorrow there are the dark hours of the night to survive, and hope can be a most fragile part of a man's soul. When hope departs, only the poisonous dregs of distrust are left in its stead.

"What time is it?" Vila suddenly asked, the normalcy of both tone and question reminding Avon that it was going to take more than a few declarations and one earth-shattering fuck to make Vila completely forgive him for the past couple of months.

"Too early to get up. The lights haven't even gone on yet," he murmured, making his voice a lullaby, wanting to erase those grey circles beneath Vila's eyes.

"Yeh, but you lot don't 'ave your lights go on till elevenses almost, so I'd better get up then, hadn't I?"

"Shouldn't I be the one who's nervous here?" he asked, stopping neither the soothing of his voice nor of his fingers.

"Oh, yeh? An' who is it who gets to run an entire fuckin' dome and deal with the Outer Planets and the Rim Planets and the Unaligned Confederation of Planets, not to mention the fucking Fleet, the other Domes and everyone in them? And that's only before breakfast."

"I could help you," Avon said to Vila's departing back, unwillingly noting the way Vila's too-thin back tensed as he spoke, Vila's hesitation obvious. So much for kissing it all better.

"Best help you could give me is making sure that there's no trouble Upstairs with all the Deltas coming in. People'll need help, you know, with everything from finding a place to stay to learning how to work food processors an' everything."

"Vila, don't be stupid. That's a complete waste of my talents—"

"Yeh, well your talents didn't do us no good afore, did they? You up 'ere, Lord Bloody Muck an' us down there, up to our 'ips in shite." Back still turned, eloquently, towards Avon, Vila took a deep breath, his tight muscles standing out in bas relief. Clothes in hand, he sat on the edge of the bed and began dressing as he spoke. "I've already got meself 'alf a dozen computer types wot're willin' to lend an 'and, bu' you're the only one wot knows wot it's like Upstairs an' down in the Bowels, so yer the one wot knows all the problems our lot'll be 'avin', won't yer?"

"In other words," Avon said into the silence left by Vila's doubts, "despite last night, you don't trust me as far as you can spit."

"Can you blame me?" Vila replied, perfectly modulated voice betraying his nervousness as nothing else quite did.

There was even, Avon noticed, a difference in the way Vila was moving, something of the old scared mouse creeping back in to undermine the air of confidence Vila had worn down in the Delta warrens. But could he, as Vila had asked, blame the man? In all honesty, there were only two men Avon could blame, and one of them was himself. "What about Blake?" he asked, knowing that this was something that couldn't be left undone to fester between them.

"What about Blake? That's up to you, in't it?"

"I made my choice last night, Vila, in front of everyone." And he had, a fact that held the power to unnerve him mightily, his every foundation shaken by the remembering of what he'd done last night—of what he'd said.

"You'd made yer choice before an' all, 'adn't yer? Didn't stop yer none, did it? One look from 'im, an' you come runnin' like a bitch on heat, pantin' at 'is fuckin' feet."

The bitterness should not, as it did, have come as a surprise. "And what would you have me do?" Avon demanded, pride and other, deeper feelings, stung. "What I did was a mistake, but surely even I am entitled to have a human failing?" Vila didn't respond, his faded tan shirt disappearing as he bent down to tie his shoelaces. "I have already apologised," Avon snapped, furious that Vila should treat him like this after what Avon had said and done not ten hours before. "What will it take, Vila? Me down on my knees, begging your forgiveness in public?"

"Wouldn't mean anything, would it? Jest like our Affirmation wasn't worth a fart, was it?"

"And you think that last night is just as meaningless?" Avon demanded, his outrage and his own hurt and guilt blinding him to Vila's exhaustion and Vila's depression that one night of loving had done nothing to expunge.

"An' wot 'ave you said to me, eh?" Vila asked wearily, accent wandering hither and yon between the Alpha heights and the Delta lows. "Nothin' wot you 'aven't said to Blake."

The ugly truth and all its implications lingered between them, an intangible barrier but all the more insurmountable simply because it wasn't something Avon could put his hands on to move or destroy.

Vila's laugh was a heartwrenching commingling of misery and hopelessness. "What," he said, voice a caricature of the frivolous banter they'd once indulged in, "not leaping to your own defence? Not shouting out a denial? Oh, I am shocked," Vila went on, clambering slowly to his feet. "And here's me thinkin' you've been faithful to me all this time. Jest goes ter show you, doesn't it?" he said from the doorway. "I can always take you at your word."

The door closed very quietly, the slightest *snick*, Vila's undramatic control more chilling than any display of jealous temper could ever be. Shivering slightly in what his past weeks of pampered ease now called cold, Avon too left his bed, unwilling to stay there any longer, alone but for the bitterness of Vila's words and the insidious smell of last night's sex.

Dressed, not a hair out of place, impassive mask firmly in place, Avon proceeded, surreptitiously tugging at the collar of his polo-neck, instinctively hiding the love bite he had acquired

at some point last night. Not that he remembered the moment when it had happened—would, in fact, have said that Vila had done no such thing—but obviously, somewhere amongst all the ravening hunger, Vila had marked him. For all his lofty ideals and renewed promises, even in the face of all his emotional declarations, the idea of Vila marking him made Avon uncomfortable, fidgety, the collar being tugged at several times as he made his way down towards the ever-rising caterwauling of displaced children and decanted adults.

"...leave 'im there ter rot fer all I care," Avon heard Vila saying as he walked into the dining room, or what was left of it. All the delicate ornaments and fine art had been removed, curtains taken down and away from exploring, endlessly grubby fingers, the antique furniture replaced by the utilitarian folding chairs that had been used in what Mother had called an arboretum when she had been enamoured of the fashion of having living plants as a setting for one's soirées. The great table was still in place, draped with a heavy tarpaulin under an unfavourite tablecloth, and the ancient, ostentatiously threadbare rug had quietly disappeared. Avon took in all the details, marking each and every way that this so familiar room had been turned upon its head to match his life. It was, after all, so much easier to note the passing of things than to deal with the press of people, all of whom seemed to be turning, falling silent, staring at him. Even Vila, a leader amongst his own, a leader when he was private with Avon, here, Vila verged on the deferential, his speech fading off into forgotten indifference when Avon appeared in the doorway.

It occurred to Avon then that he was wearing what he thought of as 'old' clothes, the likes of which even Vila, with his considerable out-Dome experiences, had never seen, certainly not on Avon. Polo-necks, of course, for he had never given up his penchant for their discretion, but on the *Liberator*, those had, of necessity been workaday, unlike these things from his previous life, made of natural fibres and designed by those whose names were more famous than many Dome leaders. A far cry from the carefully refabricated clothes he had worn when he'd been nothing more to these people than Vila's snotty wifey. Elegance, they say, is bred in the

bones, and Avon moved forward with a grace that disguised his own inner sense of discomfiture: he was at home neither with the past this room represented, nor the recent times shared with these people.

"Good morning," he said politely, going over to help himself from chafing dishes, making a point of showing by example how this new branch of his family should behave in their newer home.

"An' a good mornin' ter *you*," Vera boomed, slapping him on the back and punctiliously following his deft movements with serving tongs. "'Course, a room full've mutoids wouldn'a spoiled the mornin' fer our Avon, would it, son? No' after wot we all 'eard you an' our Vila doin' in the wee sma' hours, eh, Don Juan?" Vila groaned and Avon turned away in patent embarrassment: normal though such a comment might be down below, it was too public, too revelatory for the filigreed cornices of this old room. Vera gave them one of her loudest, heartiest laughs, following Avon to the table, one of the indiscriminate brood clamouring at her to be scooped up and balanced on her hip. "Yer'll be blushin' yet, if yer keeps tha' up. Mind you," she went on, shovelling bits of bread and fruit down the voracious child's throat, "after wot we 'eard last night, it'll be a fuckin' miracle if yer can gets it up a' all!"

"Mam," Vila began, a warning tone in his voice, an apology in his eyes as he looked at Avon.

"Don't you 'mam' me, young fella-me-lad," Vera snapped, mopping genuine orange juice from a child shocked by the orange stuff's acid sting, "jest cos yer livin' in the lap o' luxury don't mean yer better than the rest o' us. Yer eat, sleep an' go to the toilet jest like every one o' us in 'ere, an' don't yer go fergettin' tha', Mr. 'Igh an' Bloody Mighty. Yer still not so big's I can't put yer across my lap an' give yer a right wallopin'."

"Let him be," Avon said, automatically setting a startlingly clean Shela on his lap so that she could reach the toast without pulling the tablecloth and its contents down on her head, "he's only trying to stop me from being embarrassed."

"Oh, hoity-toity, are we?" Vera sniffed, but the glance she canted at this newest son was warm with tolerance and understanding. "No'

tha' it's easy on any o' us," she said round a mouthful of a strange, soft fruit, "Bu' we all 'ave ter make adjustments fer each another, don' we?"

"Yeh, well, the only adjustments I'm interested in is where we shove Blake an' if we don't stick 'im somewhere else, who gets ter watch 'im cos I'm fed up ter the back bloody teeth sittin' on my arse watchin' 'im," Jak complained loudly, sucking coffee up through pursed lips against the thinness of the finest china he'd ever seen, the cup tiny in his great hands.

"Blake," Vila said, flatly, no inflection to give away anything he might be thinking. He looked over at Avon, but wouldn't meet the other man's gaze, turned instead to help stop Dev from choking on too big a piece of muffin. "Ge' 'old of a couple of the other blokes, an' 'ave them 'elp you see 'im over ter 'eadquarters. I want ter talk ter 'im, bu' no' till after I've got a few things set up, all right?"

"After elevenses do yer?" Jak asked, mollified that there was, at least, an end in sight and he might yet have the opportunity to crunch a few Alpha heads, since he obviously wasn't going to have the chance to give Avon his just desserts.

"Yeh, fine," Vila muttered, sidling quietly from the room while Avon was occupied with persuading Shela that she really didn't want to spill that scalding hot cup of tea all over Avon's lap.

"Right," Vila said from the doorway, "I'm off. You know what you have to do, don't you, Avon?" he asked, disappearing before Avon could say yea or nay, an uncomfortable silence wriggling in his wake.

Two children arguing over the jam broke the awkwardness, natural chatter replacing the unnatural quiet. But Avon felt himself excluded, more apart from this family than he had been since the very beginning when it had all been a life-saving charade. "Right, you lot," he said briskly, beginning the daunting task of organising the entire Delta caste with this one family, "let's get this place cleared up and see about setting up proper sleeping arrangements and making sure this house is going to run smoothly. Then Vera, I want you to go round all the Delta families already Upstairs and see what medical attention is needed."

"I'm no' a bleedin' nurse, an' who are yer ter

be orderin' me aroun', eh?" she complained, wrapping her arms round her considerable bosom. "No' tha' I mind, mind you. An' after I find all this ou' fer yer—wot'm I supposed ter do then?"

"Come back and tell me so that I can arrange to have a clinic set up." He even knew who he could trust to oversee the Deltas medical treatments without any 'spare parts' being quietly harvested: Cally would intimidate the snottiest of Alpha doctors into servile obedience in a matter of seconds. And those she couldn't, she was well able to take care of in other, less verbal, manners.

One problem down, another million to go. A whirlwind of activity and energy, Avon set about organising the shotgun intermarriage of two social strata. Vila might think he had relegated Avon to the domestic arena where he could be trusted and ignored, but Avon was damned if he were going to hang around waiting for the great man to come home.

The situation well in hand, Avon was turning his attention to the next level of delegation to make this transition work, the setting up of practical training in the niceties of modern gadgetry, the likes of which the average Delta had never seen anywhere but on viscasts. Striding along the corridor to the morning room, he heard an almighty racket. Not being a stupid man, he did a complete u-turn to avoid the conflagration between his father and Vera insisting, by the sounds of it, that his study was the perfect place to turn into a playroom for the children. Barely restraining the urge to tiptoe, Avon made his escape, only to run, almost literally, into his mother.

"Ah. Good morning, Mother," he said, more than politely considering the expression on her face.

"Good?" she blustered. "There's nothing good about it. What good could there possibly be with these...these...*people* hurtling around my house, putting their dirty hands all over my things?"

"Their hands aren't dirty, Mother," he replied with grit-toothed restraint. "The children were all bathed last night and believe me, after the conditions they've been forced to live under, the adults were only too happy to use the hygienes themselves."

His mother actually sniffed, her face twisted in revulsion. "I don't dare sit down in my own house for fear of what I might catch."

Avon bit his tongue, refusing to allow his mother to provoke him as she had when he was a child or a hormone-riven teenager.

"One can only guess," his mother went on, pushing Avon's patience, "what these *people* have carried in on their persons." She shuddered, elegant in her real silk dress that had cost more than the average Delta family could earn in a year but that she wore as a 'housedress'. "Lice, all manner of parasites..."

"Mother," Avon said with wearied impatience, wondering anew at how a woman like her had produced a man like him, "the only parasites in this house are you, Father and Geoff. And if you can't bear to have these *people* here, then you are perfectly welcome to leave."

"Well! How dare you speak to your own mother in that tone of voice!" she demanded, translucent lawn handkerchief brought out to flutter delicately at the corner of her eyes.

Oh, god, Avon thought, wishing he was anywhere but here, she's going to start to cry.

Right on schedule, the first drops appeared to drip, artistically, down the unlined cheeks of an Alpha matron on first-name terms with her reconstructive surgeon. "How could you say such a thing to *me*?" she wailed, but carefully, her voice controlled to perfect pitch.

"Because, Madam," a cheerful voice came from behind her, "it's nothing but the truth."

"Nanny!" Lady Waylz screeched, shocked into commonness. "You may consider yourself dismissed. I shall speak to the arbiter immediately, and I assure you, without references, you shall be hard put to find another position at your advanced age."

"Dismissed, am I?" Nanny inquired with velvet vitriol. "Throw me out at my age? I'm afraid you can't. You see," she went on with open, insubordinate glee, "I no longer work for you. I am now a full employee of the transitional government."

"Yes, she is," Avon put in, knowing no such thing but determined that it would be true as soon as he got his hands on Vila again.

"Don't be preposterous, woman," Lady Waylz reprimanded, hauteur going full blast. "You are not permitted to change employers

without my arranging the transfer of documents.”

“As of half an hour ago, oh, yes I am,” the former indentured servant gloated. “All contracts are now null and void and I’m free to go wherever I want to.”

Another thing he had given less thought to than the softness of his sheets and the luxury of his bath: where the hell had his brain been since he’d come back Upstairs? It was no excuse that indentured servants were as much a mundane part of his life as furniture. He had no more excuse for that than he did not following up on the reallocation orders. His mother still blustering, the din from his father and Vera rising geometrically, the servants no longer required to remain...

“Nanny, dear,” Avon broke in on his mother’s apoplectic fit, his best smile burnished to a blinding brightness, “I don’t suppose I could persuade you to do me the great favour of joining my employ to run this house, just until we iron out all the kinks?” The unprepossessing vision of Dev popped into his mind, along with some of the less savoury details of Dev’s little perversions. “Well, most of the kinks,” he amended, taking his old Nanny by the arm and moving, uncaring, away from his birth mother.

“Kerr!” she shrieked from behind him, the stridency breaking his stride.

“Yes, Mother?” he said, politely enough.

“Have you forgotten to whom this house belongs? Your father and I—”

“Father and you have no say in the matter,” Avon butted in rudely, this brief encounter cementing the complete lack of mother-son bonding between them. “In case you haven’t noticed, there has been a revolution, Mother. The old rules no longer apply.”

“So now we are to be ruled by thugs and greedy riff-raff come to steal our homes—”

“And when was this ever anything but a showpiece? A place for you to show off your belongings? Oh, look, there’s a genuine Chippendale. And there’s a Monet.” Years of buried bitterness overtook him, darkening his voice, all the old angers of his unwanted childhood flooding his face, his fury enough to frighten his dragoness of a mother. “And look, how quaint, over there’s the child genius at his computer.”

“Kerr, I—”

“Don’t say a word,” he hissed to this woman he had never dared love. He stood there for a moment, until a tug on his arm turned him, pulling him away from the temptation to inflict wounds on someone who, uncaring for him, was impervious to his barbs.

“Come along, dear,” Nanny was saying, taking him as firmly in hand as when he’d been five and on the verge of tears at something his parents hadn’t said or cared to do. “Why don’t we have a chat with Cook and Thatcher and see if we can’t perhaps persuade them to stay on until we get ourselves sorted out?”

“Of course,” he replied, allowing himself to be gently eased away, a lifetime’s curses corroding him like heartburn.

“I’m sure Cook will stay—if her husband can join her. He’s a handyman and general factotum over at—”

Details, more details, until Avon was drowning in the minutiae of running homes and hostels and clinic, the details for schools, remedial classrooms, exercise facilities, crèches, aptitude testings, adult education and retraining, feeding an indeterminable number of new mouths—and finding a way to make sure that the lower levels were kept running properly before the upper levels had another systems failure.

And amidst it all, tumbling through him like dice, merest chance guiding which facet would land when, were thoughts of Vila, and darkly, threateningly tempting, thoughts of Blake.

One thing, it seemed, to decide to give Blake up as one would a drug and as he had, before. Still another to resist the urge for another fix, to cauterise the need for just once more, the ache to find out what was happening.

Nighttime, the daylights dimmed into Dome twilight, and then lower, into full night, only the automatic guide-lights flaring briefly, dimly, with the passing of footsteps. Children, overtired and over-excited carried screaming to bed, the very last scream of ‘but I’m not tired!’ unfinished before sleep won the battle. Adults, moving around quietly, furtive, fierce discussion heard from behind his parents’ door, Geoff whining, Sian gone since this morning, her new-found freedom more intoxicating than the designer drugs she and her friends had smoked behind the science labs at school.

Vera, somewhere, singing to herself as she

walked through this marvellous palace that was now, unbelievably, her home. Jak, next door, talking quietly, his bedroom door left open so that he and his wife could hear the children who had never before slept apart from them. Nanny, her footsteps light across his ceiling as she settled in for the night, then silence from there as well. Jak stopped murmuring, and Meri tiptoed back from one last check on the children. A toilet flushed, and then Vera closed the door of her very own, private bedroom behind her.

Silence.

And not a sign of Vila. Not a word, not a message, gone as if it were the horrible night of that raid again. Avon lay in bed, the soft sheets and abundance of blankets across his chest, his arms folded behind his head. Abruptly, he moved, pushing himself out of his bed, an old woollen dressing-gown pulled on to cover his nakedness. He was not, he told himself firmly and with more than a tinge of self-disgust, going to lie there staring at the bloody ceiling again. There were ways for him to find out where Vila was, and what had happened to Blake. There might even, a twinge of guilt pricked him, be a way for him to find out when Jess had had her baby, the one whose feet had pressed so alive against him when he had thought Vila dead.

He could find his way around this house blindfolded, the faint glow of the nightlights making it easy for him. Father's study, where the most powerful of the house computers sat squat upon a desk of real wood. The screen lit his face with glimmering glow, words and codes flashing rapidly, marching before him in mathematical precision. He accessed what he could, hacked what was barred him, read everything he could get his hands on. There were no finders for Blake, nothing to automatically load the information he needed, but Avon finally found it, buried away under a mountain of unrelated documents.

Blake, it seemed, was to be held for trial, but not the clean, impersonal justice of the Alphas and their Arbiters, computers to weigh a man's soul. This was to be 'by his peers', the Delta system, inaccurate, prey to whim and emotion, but the only thing the Deltas and even the Gammas would trust. The charges made for unpleasant reading, the list of transgressions longer than even Avon would have made. There,

the very last of the hidden text, was the information Avon had preferred not to admit he was looking for. Blake's location. Vila's idea of poetic justice, perhaps, to put Blake back in the same complex that had held him for his transportation on the *London*.

Avon knew the area well, knew precisely which corridors would take him there, which ones would then lead to the spaceport, and a ship, and freedom. For Blake, definitely, but not for himself. He had, after all, made not one, but two promises. But still, it was there, whispering to him, the same subliminal note of a ship around him, taking him between the stars, and all he had to drown the siren song out was the daily mundanity of life sorting out the problems and squabbles of a horde of family.

Not exactly the life he had dreamed for himself so many years ago, when he had risked parental displeasure to sneak in here and read the forbidden books on the grown-ups' computers.

But then, he had hardly dreamed of having not one love, but two, and both of them men. He had excelled at design, although his tutors never knew that his skill was the result of hours spent drawing men, erotic images he would hold in his mind as he held his cock in his hand. Later still, even as late as University when he'd put such things behind himself and forced himself to grow up, to mature into a man, he had assured himself with all the fervour of the truly afraid, that he was not a catamite. But then, in his youth and his not-so youth, it had all been sex, fumbings in the dark, skilled manoeuvres in hostelries, anonymous encounters on business trips. And now? Now he suffered from an embarrassment of emotional entanglements, two very different men pulling him in two very different directions, but neither one leading him towards anything his own class would consider normal.

He could replay the scene in his mind, Blake admitting that he was no more 'normal' than Avon, whispering it low so that none but Avon could hear. And Vila, declaring it to the world, kissing and loving him in front of his family, putting everything he valued up as collateral for Avon's safety.

How could Avon possibly resent Vila after all that?

How could he not?

A swipe of his hand, then fingers blurring, Avon accessing and hacking, jumping across codes, uncovering the hidden texts with an ease that belied so-called computer security. It didn't take him long until he found it, the notations of where Vila had been and what he'd done, his schedule for today, tomorrow and more days than Avon could contemplate.

The stars, or food distribution.

Romance, or the promise he had made Vila.

Distantly, a sound rippled along the corridor, drawing closer, the steps familiar, instantly recognisable. Vila, tired from the sound of him. The computer idled into silence and Avon was equally as quiet as he followed Vila's retreating footsteps along the hallway to the kitchen. The hiss and click of fridge and cupboard, the splash of water loud in the preternatural calm of the night.

"God, Avon!" Vila gasped, clutching at his chest with one hand, the other putting the spilling glass back on the countertop. "You gave me a hell of a fright. What are you doing still up?"

"Would you believe waiting for you?" Avon asked lightly, intently watching this man he had promised to spend the rest of his life with.

"Chance'd be a fine thing," Vila muttered as he leaned against the counter and mechanically spooned the soup he was too tired to warm into his mouth. "The only reason you'd be waiting up for me is because you know where I've just been, right?"

"Partially. But I couldn't sleep even before I found out where you were going."

"Yeh, you an' yer bloody insomnia." A short hint of laughter, Vila mocking himself with cutting humour. "Lissen to me," he said. "Accent's all over the place—wotcher make of that, then, eh, Avon? 'MI too tired to keep up the posh accent, or do I just not give a flyin' fuck any more?"

Avon eyed Vila warily, the other man's behaviour odd, something seriously off-key. "What's gone wrong?" he demanded, pushing another plate of food towards his mate, the too-thin face nagging him with guilt.

"Nothin' I want to talk about, so jest leave it, will yer? All I want is some grub an' then a bit of sleep." Bleakness flew fleetingly across Vila's eyes, soured his mouth, the food shoved, unwanted, aside. "Sorry I won't be up to any

amorous adventures tonight," he said in a flawless, cuttingly Alpha accent. "But I'm sure you're more than capable of blanking the security screens down at the holding cells if you want a spot of privacy."

"What did Blake tell you?" Avon asked, a few rather horrible ideas springing energetically to mind.

"Nothin' I wanted to hear," Vila mumbled into the last of his drink. "Nothin' you wanted him ter say. Anyway, he's been an' gone an' said it now, so yer c'n relax. I've already found out, y'see, so yer don' 'ave ter worry abou' it all comin' out in the wash, does yer?"

"I have already—"

"Yeh, yeh, I know. Yer've apologised, yer've let me fuck yer, even said the magic words, in't yer?" Vila replied, exhaustion leaching any expression from both face and voice. "Yer've done yer bit, so why 'ang around now, eh?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Do you honestly think—"

"Right now," Vila interrupted, shoving past Avon, "I think we've both done more'n enough thinkin' an' all I want now is my bed."

"Vila!" Avon snapped, grabbing at the other man.

"Le' go! An' keep yer voice down—you'n me's the only ones awake."

"I want to talk to you, Vila."

"Yeh? 'Ow nice fer yer. Well, I don' wanner talk ter *you*, Kerr old pal old chum. An' I already told yer everythin' I 'ave ter tell yer. So good night."

Avon wasn't about to let Vila away with that, not after his oblique references about Blake. He wanted to know what Blake had said, in detail, although he could probably guess. Tales, no doubt, of what they had done when Vila was suffering down in the Delta Warrens: Avon had a sudden, vibrantly clear picture of Vila's face when the other man had found out what Avon had permitted Blake. And when Vila had woken up this morning and found, apparently, that he needed more than another of Avon's promises to keep him happy.

Their bedroom door closed behind them, ablutionary noises coming from their en suite bathroom, Avon got into bed, aware that Vila was too tired for the effort to kick him out. The whoosh of a toilet, a brief splatter of light before

that, too, was switched off, and then footsteps, reaching the bed before Avon's eyes had readjusted to the dark. The bed, dipping, sheets pulling tight, then falling lax, Vila moving as if Avon weren't there.

"I want to know," Avon said into the slow-breathing darkness.

"Wouldn't we all."

"Just tell me what he said, Vila," Avon murmured, lowering himself until he had Vila cradled in his arms, his own groin to Vila's buttocks, his chest to Vila's back, the shoulder blades pressing too sharply.

"Don't, Avon," Vila whispered, and the devastation in his voice was too much for anyone to ignore, least of all a man who admitted to loving him.

"Don't be such a bloody idiot," Avon whispered affectionately, rubbing his cheek against Vila's soft hair. "For all we know, everything Blake told you is another one of his wild imaginings of Roj Blake, Saviour of the Universe and Fearless Leader." Not that Blake would have to fabricate very much: the truth was more damning than any lies could be, but there was a chance, admittedly slight, that Blake had held some of the truths in abeyance. Weapons, naturally, to be used later or used now to hold Avon hostage, but either way, it would at least be something to know that Vila had been spared the worst of it.

"Blake said..." Vila had to stop, refusing to betray any of the old weakness this man had once been witness to. "He told me all about you an' 'im, an' about 'ow you let 'im fuck you."

Avon suppressed a groan, that revelation worse here in the intimacy of darkness than in the bustle of daytime.

"About 'ow you'd come round 'is 'ouse an' stay till he kicked you out. An' about tha' time you couldn't wait to get somewhere private like an' you locked the door ter 'is office an'..."

"Don't," Avon said, regretting all of this, not wanting to hear any more of Vila's pain.

But the words couldn't stop, lanced from Vila, seeping from him. "Kept on tellin' me about 'ow you'd jest go on an' on about 'ow much you was in love with 'im, after he'd fucked you an' you'd be lyin' there wiv 'is cum still in yer..."

Avon's hand covered Vila's mouth, shutting

the sounds off, leaving them in beaten silence. He placed small kisses on the nape of Vila's neck, the other man smelling of Avon's own soaps and lotions. "I wish I could tell you that everything he said was a lie."

"Yeh, I know," the reply as much a sigh as words. "Bu' none of us can mend the past, can we?"

No matter how much we might want to. No matter how much we might wish ourselves to be different.

"You're really in love wiv 'im, aren't you?" Vila, asking the unaskable.

Avon tightened his grip around his mate, pulling Vila in until his own warmth bled into the other man's enervated chill. "A lamentable lack of taste, I admit."

"None of us get to choose who we love. No point in hittin' yerself over the head for that, is there?"

"A congenital defect."

"Somethin' like tha'. Speakin' of congenital, did yer know Jess 'ad 'er baby?"

"I thought she must have," Avon replied, displeased with how long it had taken him to wonder about Jess and that baby he had felt. "Was it a boy or a girl?"

"Boy." A pause, Vila swallowing audibly once, twice, before trusting himself to go on, Avon unsure if it were misery or fury that had threatened Vila's voice. "She's named 'im after you. Called 'im Kerr. Said she didn't want none of us ter forget where you came from an' where we'd all be goin' one day, thanks ter you."

And meanwhile, I was drugging myself with the opium of sex with Blake, drunk on my own emotions. At that moment, Avon was far from proud of himself, and less proud still when he acknowledged what he'd been doing when Vila had come home not half an hour before. But still, he had to know, and then he would put it from his mind, never ask again. "What about Blake?"

"Saw the notice abou' 'is trial, I s'pose?" He didn't have to wait for Avon to agree, continued knowing more than he wanted to. "It'd 'ave ter be a Delta trial, an' yer know wot we do ter traitors."

Death, no transportation for the trapped grades. "Yes," he said for something to say, something to fill the ashen silence between them.

"Well," Vila began, had to stop, went on

again. "I'm probably goin' to regret this, wot with one thing an' another, Servalan as well, bu'..."

"But what?"

"Bu' I couldn't face watchin' you seein' 'im go through a trial. An' I knew you'd 'ate me if Blake was guilty an' we offed 'im."

Avon thought of his own tangled, treacherous emotions, his own very mixed feelings for Blake. "I don't know that I would."

"Yeh yer would, believe me. So I let 'im go."

"You what?" Avon shouted, sitting bolt upright in bed, the lights coming on full. "You let him go? Why the hell..." But he didn't need to finish, his answer right there on Vila's face, the damning traces of tears scrubbed at by hands that shook, fierce pride scowling to erase the last of the visible misery.

"Wot else was I supposed to do, eh, Avon? You've made a proper charlie out of me up 'ere—what's everyone gonner say when it comes out that Avon Restal was sneakin' round to Blake half the time, not leavin' till jest before daylights? 'D you expect me ter stand there an' such while you rescued 'im? Cos you wouldn't le' 'im be put to death, I c'n tell yer that right now."

And Avon couldn't deny it. Had been thinking about it, even as Vila had come home. Had been considering, abstractly perhaps, going with Blake, back to the stars, and adventures. Back to the *Liberator*, where he belonged.

"Will yer put the bloody lights out?" Vila complained, one sinewy arm coming up to cover his eyes.

No, Avon was tempted to say. Was tempted to demand that Vila look him in the eye and say whatever it was that was yet to be said, whatever it was that made Vila crave the balm of darkness.

"Lights out," and he heard Vila's sigh of relief. "There's more," he said, absolutely certain, unable to believe that even Vila would have done what Avon was unwillingly beginning to suspect. "Tell me," he whispered softly, gathering Vila into his arms, suspicions stretching towards certainty with the way Vila clung to him, with the way Vila buried his face against Avon's neck for a long moment, mouth wet and warm and fervid, pressing a kiss where Avon's pulse beat strongly.

"I leaked word to some of the Alphas who'd

want to help Blake, so they'll rescue him, instead of it looking like I just unlocked his door and let him walk," Vila told him, every breath, every word carefully controlled, a monotone of fact, recited as if it meant nothing to either of them, as if their fates didn't hang on this. "Once they've released him, they'll make straight for the spaceport—Blake promised that he'd leave Earth, let the rest of us get on with it. I don't think he had any idea of what had been going on down with the Deltas," the calm voice went on, while Vila shivered with repressed shudders, his arms locked tightly around Avon. "He was quite horrified, really. Anyway, he's going to go off and help the outer planets fight off the Federation fleet, which is useful, because Servalan's been regrouping since the first Rebellion."

Avon waited, less than calm, more suspended in the moment, not thinking, absolutely refusing to feel, one hand absently stroking Vila's hair.

"So I told 'im..." Vila's voice broke, the accent shattering and abandoning him. "I wasn't goin' ter tell yer," he muttered unevenly. "Bu' I can't no'. I told 'im ter wait fer yer till an hour before light-up." A deep, shaken breath, and words that cost more than Avon cared to imagine. "E's waitin' fer yer, Avon." An attempted laugh, all the more painful to hear. "'S more yer style, in't it? Hurtlin' round the Universe, shootin' the baddies. More like yer than stuck 'ere playin' 'ouses, in't it?"

"And is that your opinion, or Blake's?"

"Oh, we agreed on tha'," the scything bitterness hinting at other disputes, other unsettled arguments. "Bu' wot me an' 'im think isn't wot matters, is it?" A suspiciously damp sniff, a squaring of the shoulders, Vila resolutely releasing Avon, setting him free of more than just Vila's embrace. "You don't have to stay, you know," Vila was once more the polite, the uninvolved pseudo-Alpha. "If you want to go, I'll understand. And it's not as if a Delta ceremony has any legal weight, is it?"

"But it has a moral weight. I gave you my word—"

"And d'you think I want yer stayin' with me because it's yer fuckin' duty?" Vila turned on him with a snarl, eyes dangerously bright. "Wot're plannin' on doin'? Lyin' there, lettin' me fuck yer, wishin' it was 'im? Tellin' me yer

loves me cos yer know I need ter 'ear that? Cos you know 'ow much I love yer? Is tha' wot yer goin' ter do ter me? Well, Kerr Avon, you can just keep yer fuckin' pity—"

Vila was up and out of the bed before Avon could stop him, leaving him tangled in the bedcovers Vila had shoved aside.

"So you have my entire future mapped out for me, do you, you and Blake? Fighting over me again. Tell me, was I a bone of contention or was I the prize pot for the winner?"

"Wasn't like that," Vila said, seemingly unaware that his precipitous movement had put the lights on again and every ounce of his agony was there on his face for Avon to see. "Honest. I only wanted ter do wot was right fer yer. Give's yer another chance."

"And all this from the man who spurns *my* pity, yet is so generous with his own. Oh, for god's sake," he burst out, not even his pride enough to make him add to Vila's anguish. "Get back in here before you turn blue from the cold."

"No."

Exasperated, hanging on to that to insulate him from his own pain, his own confusion. "I won't touch you," he snapped sarcastically.

"S not you I'm afraid o'." Almost a whisper, laden with more longing than anyone should have to endure.

"Oh, Vila," Avon said, ambushed by tenderness. "Get back in here."

Vila climbed slowly back in, huddling himself against Avon's warmth, touching him here, and here, with all the wonder of the first time, with all the melancholy of the last. "This was never somethin' you wanted, yer didn't 'ave any choice, trapped... Those promises yer made."

"Yes."

"They were given ter me, so they're mine now, in't they?"

An odd way of looking at things, but true, on some levels. "You could say that."

"Well, I'm givin' 'em back to yer. All promises're null an' void."

"I never go back on my word—"

"Yer fuckin' will this time, d'yer 'ear me? No more 'avin' ter live like us, wiv everyone knowin' yer business, an' no more 'avin' ter lie about where yer sleepin' at night."

"That still doesn't mean either one of us has

to leave, does it?"

A long silence, marked by the beating of their hearts. "Do yer love me?" Vila said against Avon's mouth, not meeting his eyes, willing to let Avon lie to him on this, even if he needed the truth in everything else.

"Yes," Avon told him. "More than you believe."

"S'pose that's summat, eh? Avon..."

"What?"

"If yer'd never met Blake..."

Oh, please, don't let him ask me that.

"Would yer've fallen in love with me? Instead of lovin' me like a pal, would yer've been in love with me?"

"It's not exactly hearts and flowers. No romantic bouquets of red roses," Avon temporised, hoping that would be enough, knowing Vila too well to depend on it.

"I'd've given yer roses," Vila whispered against Avon's neck, slow, loving kisses pressed to the smoothness of skin. "I'd give yer anything yer wants."

Including my freedom, Avon thought, cradling Vila's head close to him, wishing desperately that he could control his emotions the way he could his mind. How much more sensible to adore Vila the way Vila adored him. How much more reasonable for his heart to pound with excitement at the sound of Vila's voice instead of Blake's. Vila loved him, respected, admired, even doted on him. As for Blake... From there he had lust, and love, of a sort, if always to be hidden and never given voice for fear of so dangerous a truth to Blake himself.

He felt Vila push himself free, let him go to find that Vila was not leaving after all. "Avon..."

"It's all right," he murmured, lying still and passive under Vila's aching loneliness, knowing too well the pain of being in love with someone who cannot return such pyrotechnic adorations. Knew how strong the need to tell the idol how much love there is for them, if only they would take it. "Whatever you want to say, it's all right."

"There's hours yet before lights-up," Vila said carefully, distractedly playing with a lock of Avon's hair that curled, too long, just behind his ear.

Avon felt it was the least he could do, in this painful twilight of indecision. He spread his legs, tacit permission given.

"No, tha's not wot I want. Will you fuck me? Please, Avon? It's been a long time..."

It had been, longer than any time since they'd begun all this.

"Why are you so certain I'm leaving?" he demanded, needing to know when he himself was still ensnared by the opposing possibilities, both of which led to pain and disappointment, albeit of very different natures.

"There's nothin' ter keep yer 'ere, that's why," Vila told him sadly, any further comments stifled by Vila's mouth on Avon's, his tongue pressing into Avon's mouth, his hands caressing Avon in the ways that man liked best. Guaranteed response, touches that had never failed, and so Avon permitted them. If Vila needed this so much, then he would have it.

Avon didn't stint on his response, giving Vila even more than he had the night before, throwing himself into this, abandoning them both to the mindless, painless pleasure of loving.

"Come here," he murmured, stopping Vila's descent, drawing the other man up for more kisses, determined to make this last. He kissed Vila deeply, taking his time, lingering over this texture, returning for that caress. He enveloped Vila in his arms, felt the tensile strength of Vila returning the embrace, the sensation so similar and yet so profoundly different from his times with Blake. Vila's cock was slow to harden, his mind and body too tired to react with the sprightliness of youth, his response sluggish, reluctant, as if his body felt guilty about taking such pleasure from so painfilled a time.

"It's all right," Avon whispered again, kissing his way down Vila's chest, sucking sweetly on Vila's nipples, nipping at them, laving them, his hands so busy with Vila's cock, the mobile pleasure of his balls. He licked his way lower, not minding that Vila was so passive. It was appropriate that this time should be for Vila, Avon's gift to him.

Vila still wasn't hard, his penis still a small, sad thing in Avon's hand. Avon took it in his mouth, sucked on it, caressed Vila between his legs, there, where Avon would enter him, later, when Vila was flying high on pleasure. The cock in his mouth pulsed, grew a little, pulsed again, gradually taking up more of Avon's mouth, the taste filling him. He eased away, his hands replacing the heat of his mouth, pulling the

foreskin back to reveal the sensitive head, Avon's tongue flickering into the slit the way that never failed to drive Vila wild. Tonight, there was a surge of blood, Vila's cock almost hard, Avon working harder to give Vila enough pleasure to overcome Avon's lack of assurances, to overcome Avon's own doubts.

This, he thought as he licked the length of vein along the underside of Vila's cock, his cheek pressed gently against Vila's balls, this could be the last time I do this. He kissed the tip of Vila's cock, took the near-hardness into his mouth, nursed it with every ounce of skill he'd mastered in all those months with Vila.

If only, he thought, it was only a simple choice between Vila and Blake. Or if only it were Vila 'stealing' the *Liberator*. If only, if only... In his mouth, Vila's erection was fading slightly, and Avon knew a moment of dismay: Vila would be humiliated if he couldn't maintain an erection, would always wonder if disappointment had pushed Avon away or if pity and guilt had made Avon stay. Oh, no you don't, he thought, sucking harder, doing magical things with his tongue that usually made Vila groan and buck, you won't let him down tonight.

One finger stroking across the tight pucker of Vila's arse, Avon used his mouth, kissing and licking his way from Vila's cock to the cleft of his backside. He couldn't do what he wanted to do, shifted Vila around until the other man was on his knees, presenting himself in a way that reminded Avon of how he'd been with Blake, of the wantonness he had displayed for his one-time leader.

There had never been the slightest hint of shame in what he'd done with Vila, because he'd never felt vulnerable with him. Only with Blake, Avon's heart too near the surface to endure the casual, unintended cruelties of a man who was not in love with him.

And how many times had Vila known that? Avon remembered Blake penetrating him, giving him no time to adjust, and remembered anew all the times he'd done that with Vila, carried along by his own lust, Vila's lust and the callousness engendered by his perception of Vila's vast experience with this.

Of course, he had preferred not to dwell on how hide-bound Delta moral habits were, with their obsessions of fidelity and serial monogamy.

Just how much experience had Vila had before him? It stung him that he'd never even bothered to ask before he'd used Vila like a slag.

"I'm sorry," he said as he kissed his way down Vila's spine, the bones too prominent, so different a terrain from the days when they'd lived together as Deltas.

"You can't 'elp it," Vila's voice broke in on him, an answer given when none had been expected. "That's just the way of it."

Delta fatalism, the only armour Vila had left, and Vila was using it to protect Avon. Typical, Avon thought, wrapping himself around Vila, so bloody typical of the little fool. Under him, he felt Vila shift, knew the other man was trying to reach the lotion in the bedside drawer. A movement of Avon's hand, and Vila was in his palm, lax, unaroused, but still wanting Avon in him. It was the sort of emotional need Avon understood only too well. Lying facedown on the bed, Avon positioned himself so that only his hands were touching Vila and only his mouth could reach him. Gently, soothingly at first, he licked the tight pucker of Vila's arse, hearing the other man's gasp of shock. This was not something Avon had ever done, was not something he had given much thought to doing. But Vila had done this to him, perhaps in the hope that it would endear Avon to the idea of being fucked, or perhaps only because it could be such an acute, liquid pleasure. Under his tongue, the clenched muscle was slowly relaxing, opening little by little, and in Avon's hand, Vila's cock was firming, each caress of Avon's tongue being rewarded by a slow throb from it. Delicately, only the barest tip at first, Avon penetrated the dark hole, surprised that there was no unpleasant taste, grateful that Vila was obsessive about cleanliness, given half the chance. The muscle eased a little more, and Avon thrust in deeper, eliciting a moan, and another as he thrust again, ever deeper, until he was stabbing his tongue inside Vila, making Vila wet and slick and ready.

Vila's cock was hot and hard in his hand, the foreskin drawn all the way back, precum damp against Avon's palm. He pushed his tongue in as far as it could reach, then withdrew, his fingers immediately sliding home, probing more deeply within, finding the gland, rubbing on it with perfect pressure. Vila's back arched, and he cried out, Avon's name filling the room as

Avon's fingers filled Vila.

"Ready?" he asked, hands coming to a standstill, fingers still deep within the heat of Vila's body.

"On my back," Vila muttered, trying to turn without loosening Avon from inside him.

"Need to see me again?" Avon asked, understanding more than Vila would ever want him to.

Vila didn't reply in words, using his body to speak far more eloquently. He placed himself on his back, legs spread wide, knees lifted upwards, Avon's fingers keeping him stretched and ready, the pinkness of the hole edging the darkness that led to the heart of his body. Avon scissored his fingers wide open, slowly pushed in one finger from his other hand, even more slowly spread Vila until Avon could actually see where he was going to press his cock home. He glanced up from the beautiful sight, caught a glimpse of the love in Vila's eyes, frowned as Vila turned away, hiding himself even as he willingly exposed himself sexually. The hard-won erection wilted a little, Avon swooping down to suck it within himself, Vila responding with some of his old enthusiasm. Satisfied with the response, Avon eased Vila into precisely the right pose and positioned his cock, erect and ready with no more attention than the need to make Vila happy, this time if no other.

"Ready?" he asked again, a droplet of precum oozing from his cock to slide, easily, inside Vila's arse. Avon didn't need Vila to say anything, couldn't possibly mistake the hunger in Vila's body, nor the way Vila was arching up to him, Vila's legs closing round Avon's waist as Avon sank, quicker than he'd intended, into Vila's exciting heat. It was Avon who moaned, and Vila who ran a soothing hand across him, and Vila who pushed upwards, drawing Avon all the way inside him, until they were skin to skin, Avon so deep inside Vila he thought he would surely drown. He tried to slow down, but Vila refused, setting the pace himself until Avon yielded and pounded into him, fucking him hard and fast, carrying them both towards orgasm, a rivulet of sweat running down Avon's spine, a rivulet of tears running from Vila's eyes to disappear, unseen, into the hair at his temples.

Avon leaned over him, canting Vila so that he could get deeper inside him, Vila's legs bent

double. Eyes opening in defiance of the onrushing pleasure, Avon bent down a little, his mouth merging with Vila's in a kiss that was almost brutal in its hunger, Vila devouring Avon, consuming him as if this way, he could never completely lose the other man, no matter how far apart they might be.

Avon could feel orgasm threaten, reached his hand between their bellies, grabbing Vila's cock, milking him, kissing him, fucking him, giving Vila everything he possibly could, until he felt the liquid burst over his hand and Vila's arse spasm round him. Avon held himself perfectly still, gazing as Vila was lost in his pleasure, listening to Vila croon his name. Then it was over, too fast, Vila staring up at him, then moving again, encouraging at first, and then demanding, giving Avon no choice but to fuck him, to take his pleasure from Vila's willingness, Vila's hands so busy on him, Vila's arse so tight around him, clenching and unclenching, better than any hand, the sensation utterly exquisite. Avon dissolved, his seed pouring into Vila, splashing hot and wet deep inside him, salt enough to replace the tears.

Time passed, and Avon was aware once more, his limbs being arranged so, and so, Vila's mouth licking clean the few traces of Vila's own semen where it lay on his skin, mixed with the sweat of their lovemaking. Loving hands, reverently touching him, covering him with blankets, soft lips kissing his eyes closed.

"Go to sleep," Vila told him, and Avon fought not to listen.

"Computer," Vila's was saying, and Avon could have wept for him, "set alarm for two hours before lights-up."

Then Vila was pulling him into the tenderest of embraces, and whispering to him, things that had been said before, in passion and in the heat of anger, endearments hurled as

weapons, love used to wound.

Avon allowed himself to be petted and pampered, permitted Vila the luxury, drifted in the glow of so much love, both that which he felt for this dearest of friends, and the abiding passion with which Vila adored him.

And somewhere, a token of Vila's love would even now be escaping, would even now be making his way to the port to wait, for a minute or an hour, for Avon to come to him, for Avon to reach for the stars and yield to his own abiding passion.

Eyes closed in a pretense of sleep neither man believed, Avon felt the soft press of kisses, knew the precise moment when Vila couldn't hold back the humiliating tears any more, for he was abruptly let go, and Vila turned from him, leaving Avon feeling alone, for all that there was someone not ten centimetres from him. In the dark, once more facing the blank unhelpfulness of a ceiling, Avon lay and thought of the future, and the past, and of Vila, and of Blake and the miseries of unrequited love.

He felt the tremble of Vila's body, knew the other man was lying there, fighting the emasculatory urge of tears, knew that Vila was making this as easy on Avon as anyone could. So much love, Avon thought, moved more than he could say by Vila's strength and Vila's generosity. Reaching out, he tried to take Vila in his arms, to help ease at least the worst cutting edges of the pain, but at the first touch of his hand on Vila's hunched and tensed back, Vila bolted from the bed, running unclothed to the bathroom, naked even more in spirit than in body.

And wished, enough to make a pact with any devil in any hell, that he knew what his decision would be two hours before lights-up, when Blake would be waiting for him and Vila would be setting him free.