



A particular strength that the Blake's 7 characters have always had is their distinctive speech patterns and rhythms. M. Fae is a master at putting those voices on paper. Note here, in this powerful ending story, how finely constructed Avon's language is, how it is and is not the Avon we all love.

Whirlpool of disorientation, pain and churning nausea, lights, sounds, retching helplessly, cool hands upon him counterpointing his agony, voices, speaking, fading, fading, everything fading apart from the horrible, horrifying smell and the painful darkness consuming him.

The stench in his nose again, cloying, obscene. Dizzying thought, swirling him round and round

CLEAN SLATE

M. FAE GLASGOW

until he cried out, and immediately, there was someone there, someone murmuring quietly, strange sounds making unknown words, but the tone soothed him, soothed him like the hand gently brushing the hair back from his forehead, and the coolness of water trickling into his mouth. Ease, then, softness under his head, comforting warmth over his body, and more comforting still, someone there, still touching him, making him not alone. Darkness once more, but painless, a gentle eddy into the eiderdown softness of the dark.

Oddness, something strange, voices of strangers speaking over him, hushed conversation, and he knew instinctively it was about him. Couldn't understand it, too difficult to concentrate, headache pounding again, reach, reach, find sleep once more...

Light leeching the darkness away, no voices

now, soft thrum of—something. Couldn't quite think what, would come to him later, when he was properly awake. Pleasant smells, with the bitter tang of medicine underneath. A whisper of fabric, an indrawn breath, someone moving beside him.

"Are you awake?"

Nice voice, a woman, caring, but anxious too. Awake? Not quite, he thought, not quite awake, he'd sleep for a little while longer...

Coolness, drifting through his sleep like snow, waking him slowly. Someone—the woman with the pleasant voice from before?—was rubbing a soft cloth over his body, faint scent arising: a bed-bath then. Eyes still closed, he reached down and stilled the offending cloth, his other hand scrabbling for some sort of covering to pull up over himself.

"You're awake!" No melodic tones those, but

sheer joy and exhilaration. "I thought you were never going to wake up—I mean, what does that bloody Orac know, eh? I never thought I'd be grateful for a chance to let that bugger gloat, but you're awake." A pause, audibly indrawn breath. "Aren't you going to open your eyes? Orac says they're all healed, and the medical computers agree with him for once. Here, hang on a minute, let me turn the lights down a bit—and I suppose I'd better let the others all know, hadn't I? I'll never hear the end of it if I keep you all to myself, will I?"

The jabbering voice hurt his head, his brain as tender to thought as muscle was to bruise. Hurried movement from the chatterbox, then a few words, muffled. He lost track of it all for a moment, distracted or dozing, he was too tired to much care. More noises then, drifting louder and quieter as he drifted half in and half out of sleep again. It was so comfortable, so lovely and warm and comfortable—

Someone was speaking to him again. "Are you awake?"

Well, of course he was bloody awake with them all asking him that.

A different voice, pleasant, feminine, a twist of accent to set it aside from the demanding one.

"There's no need to shout at him—"

"I wasn't shouting—"

"He's been unconscious so anything above a whisper probably sounds like shouting to him."

"Sorry," whispered now, of course, a sibilance in the dark. In the semi-dark, he ruefully admitted, light dancing dimly on his eyelids, changing the black to dark red, with shots of gold gleaming through it like dreams.

The man's rich voice was whispering to him again, asking him things, sounding worried. Pity, that. He didn't want to upset anyone. Carefully, he tried to listen to what the man was saying, brought it slowly into focus, heard and understood. Open your eyes. Should be so simple, but he didn't really want to, wanted to stay here, where it was dark and warm and cosy. But perhaps he should at least let these people know he was all right. These people. Comfort withered and his mind shrivelled, pain pounding him into a bleeding pulp. Desperate, he thrust all thought of these people aside and stretched out to reclaim his dark and his warmth and the comfort those voices stole.

He awoke to darkness again, but knew, some-

how, that he was not alone. Someone else there, someone breathing in the lightless room. Not lightless, just his own eyes tightly closed. There was a pain in his head, as if his brain were too big for his skull, the tender matter swollen against unyielding bone. Nausea threatened again, but he pushed that aside. He had been hurt, he remembered that much, remembered bright flaring light, burning pain, slamming into a wall—

Not the best of things to think about, if one wished to recover. Carefully, he opened his eyes the smallest fraction, peering through eyelashes to defuse what little light there was in the room. There, in the corner, chin drooped to chest in deepest sleep sat a man, a man he knew—

The pain hit him hard, destroying everything in its path until he was nothing but a knot of agony scrabbling frantically to regain the painless dark.

The two voices were back again, and they had brought others, anxious murmurings like children scared in the dark. So much pain—he didn't want to hear it, but he couldn't shut it out, all that upset and worry in the voices. And they were keeping him awake, stopping him from floating free again. One of them was wishing he'd open his eyes, and another one was all but demanding it, concern tight in his voice. Why on earth were they so desperate for him to open his eyes, when he was still so tired? Now another voice was adding to the conversation, arguing about some machine not being right all of the time, and still going on about if only he'd open his eyes. Might as well. Just look at them for a minute, open his eyes for them, and then he could go back to sleep.

Vague shapes, coming clearer as he blinked, one of the voices leaning forward to wipe his eyes, and that helped. He could see them now, although the light was too low to really make out details. The pleasant woman's voice: surprisingly harsh, thin face, nothing at all the way she sounded, no ripe-bodied matron she. Curls, nondescript, pale skin, thin, ungenerous features so at war with her voice and the tender touch of her hands. Behind her, a man, as generous of body as she was of voice, curls like her, but darker, and there lay the full mouth that belonged with the concern in her voice. Large eyes, frowning now with worry, broad nose, a dolorous face, a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders. And over there lurking at the

edge of his vision, almost invisible, a mouse of a man, quick eyes, nervous, jittery hands fluttering, fidgeting, darting forward to touch him, just for a second, as if he expected his hand to be cut off at the wrist for his temerity.

He closed his eyes for a moment, his ears awash in the cacophony of their relief. Obviously, he had been seriously ill—injured? Not the melodic voice, but the other man's voice, had to be the jumpy one, something about his eyes being healed now. These people, obviously, had taken care of him, perhaps even saved his life. What the hell did one say?

Not that it mattered, going by the croak his own voice had become. The nondescript one had a glass of something poised and ready almost before he'd finished his first attempt at speech.

"Drink this," the woman with the cruel face and the gentle hands said, and he did as he was told, linctus slipping sweet and soothingly down his throat. "Now, don't force anything, just take your time, Avon."

Avon?

"Yes, don't you go rushing back to your precious computers the way you usually do," the man with the worried face said, patting him—Avon? He rolled it around in his mind, trying to make it fit, finding only hollows and depressions where no such name belonged, panic beginning, slow, becoming faster, choking him.

"We can manage without you for as long as it takes you to get well again, Avon."

That name again, not his, surely, surely he would know his own name, they must have mistaken him—

The timorous one, creeping forward, bright brown eyes staring at him. "Are you all right, Avon?"

The name still didn't fit, but he couldn't find another, searching and searching and finding nothing—random thoughts, how to connect some microwires, the size of the—couldn't think of the name, knew its dimensions, specifications, but not the name, only the functions—the coordinates of a planet—which one? which one?—nothing else, blurs, thoughts running away from his frantic, searching, clutching fingers, too fast, making him dizzy, his head hurting, the light too bright—

"Cally, we need to calm him down, he's going to make matters worse, thrashing around like that," he heard a man say—did he know this man? what was *his* name? friend? doctor—no, not arrogant

enough for a doctor, but if he didn't even know his own name, how could he know that doctors were arrogant?—the woman's voice arguing, the twined sounds driving him mad with not-knowing, the sounds of voices raised in argument over him tantalisingly familiar, teasing him with his own past.

Voice ragged as poverty, he shouted at them then. "Who are you? And what the hell have you done to me?"

The knowledge was there, just out of reach, beyond the blackness and the oceans of pain. He struggled, fighting nightmares and demons and ignorance, fingertips scrabbling at the pitted wall of knowledge, dislodging tiny pebbles, bits and bytes of knowledge. And as he looked at them, truth snarled cruelly, painfully, hurting him until, as suddenly as falling off a cliff, the darkness embraced him once more and he was unaware.

All too painfully aware, the three people he did not remember but who remembered him stood there, each one avoiding the others' eyes, not one of them wanting to be the first to say what was so appallingly obvious.

Now he had a reason for not wanting to wake up. Fiercely, he tried to cling on to sleep, where there was an excuse for ignorance and freedom from the pain of knowledge. But there was a voice again, and it was more worried than the other man had been before.

"Avon?"

The name still did not belong, a refugee in his mind, but that's what those people knew him as. "What?" he muttered, and at least his own voice worked this time.

"Thought you were awake. Are you hungry?"

Automatic denial, but his body intervened, the smell of food making his mouth water and his stomach rumble. Impossible to sleep then, and so he opened his eyes, adjusting to the dim light, wincing only slightly as the mousy man turned the light up. "Sorry," the man said, "but you wouldn't want me spilling any of this on you, now would you? It's nothing very exciting, a bit bland, really, but Cally says..."

Obviously, he wasn't to hear what Cally—the thin-faced woman? Or someone else? Not a man's name, but he couldn't explain to himself why he was so sure of that—had to say about him, and

judging by the way the man's face was twisting unhappily, he—Avon? Better get used to it. Avon—probably wasn't going to want to hear it. Slowly, and with help, he sat up, the man tucking pillows behind him to make him comfortable, touching him as little as possible, apologising for every contact, almost flinching every time Avon looked at him.

What kind of man was he, that an act of kindness was offered like penance? And what had he done to warrant such nervousness from this man?

Eating the food given him, he worried the corners of his mind, trying to find a name, a fact, something, anything to attach to this man hovering so uneasily around him. Obviously, he was known to this man, and just as obviously, the knowing had not been entirely pleasant. There was something, tickling his memory, a will-o'-the-wisp, this man's hands, something about this man and his hands... But it was gone before it was even fully there, dancing from his grasp like bogfire. This was ridiculous. If he didn't know, then he should ask—after all, it wasn't as if his lack of memory was a secret, was it?

The man was staring at him intently, an odd way of staring, out of the corner of his eye as if he weren't looking at all, but missing nothing. "My name's Vila. You used to know me.

Avon stared back, putting the name to the face, accepting it if only because he couldn't come up with anything that fit better. "Vila."

"Yeh. Vila Restal. And the woman who was here last time you woke up," another flicker of unhappiness scudded across the man's—no, he had a name for him—Vila's face, making Avon wonder if he had been delirious and cruel during his...infirmity.

"She was kind to me, wasn't she?"

A melancholy smile for that, and Avon thought that perhaps Vila would have liked to touch him then, some offer of reassurance. "Yeh, that's our Cally. We all pitched in, of course, but that was Cally—don't know if she has another name, or if that's all there is. She's not like us, you see," Vila was prattling on, pouring information into the parched desert of Avon's mind, "she's from Auron, you know. Well, you don't know, but you did, if you see what I mean..." He paused for a breath, took another look at Avon, plunged on. "And the other bloke that was here, he's Blake, and I don't

think you were with us when Jenna came in—Jenna Stannis, she's our pilot—"

"Pilot?"

At that one question, Vila looked stricken, his face crumpling miserably, as if abstract knowledge had just taken on a horrible reality. "You don't remember even that? Avon..." Pause, tentative, and Avon could tell just from Vila's reaction that he hadn't always been kind to this man in the past, for Vila was as forthcoming as a child at the dentist. "Do you know where we are?"

Fumbling for an answer, another wave of panic threatening him, act of will forcing it back, forcing his breathing back to normal, yet unable to disguise his fear. "No," he said, scarce above a whisper. "I thought it was a hospital of some kind..."

Vila, either bless his tact or curse Avon's past treatment of him, busied himself tidying the neat array of equipment. "We're on a ship—a space ship, called the *Liberator*." Another pause, another of those cautious glances that were already getting on Avon's admittedly strained nerves. "Does that ring a bell?"

Liberator? Space ship? At least that would explain the almost subliminal sound, the barely perceptible vibration, the metallic look of the walls, as opposed to—

Nothing. He had nothing with which to compare this single room. He must have had a home before, knew that this ship couldn't always have been his home, but there was nothing else to fill in a single detail.

The nervous man—Vila—was waiting for some sort of reaction, some sort of response, but too obviously wary to prod. "The name doesn't mean a thing to me. None of the names do."

"Not Cally? Or Jenna?" A darting, furtive glance, and Avon felt his temper rise: so he was an impatient man. Perhaps that would explain Vila's reactions to him. "What about...Blake?"

"Nothing. What's his last name?"

"Last name? What d'you mean—oh, of course, I told you about Jenna Stannis, and my name, and Cally's, but I said Blake instead of Roj and that would make it sound like—" Something akin to alarm and pity in those brown eyes, and Avon wanted to turn away from that. "Here, you do realise that Avon's your last name, don't you?" Took one look at Avon's face and raced on, his spate of words flooding the aching emptiness of Avon's eyes. "Kerr, that's your first name, Kerr

Avon, don't know if you've got any other names—come to think of it," in the tone of someone thinking of it for the first time, "for all we know, it might not even be your real name, cos a lot of you Alpha types change your names before you go for trial, you know, save the family name and all that—" Vila broke off abruptly, took in a huge breath and then he was off and running again, "Not that I suppose that's what you want to hear, is it, not when you can't remember anything." Another screeching halt, another one of those sharp glances from the corner of Vila's eyes. "You can't remember anything, can you? Nothing at all?"

The suspicion and distrust in that were almost as un reassuring as the notion that what little he knew might, in its turn, be false. "You make that sound as if a protest of—" There was a reluctance in him to actually use the word.

"No, no, nothing like that, really," Vila paused, his briefly hopeful look quickly extinguished, and Avon wondered what kind of life he led where a reference to honesty should expect denial. "You're just bloody brilliant at answering questions with another question. You've never been much one for out and out lying—"

Then perhaps he should be grateful for small mercies, he thought to himself sarcastically, wishing this unending yattering would go away.

"Not that that means you've always told the truth—or not all of it, at any rate. No, you always like to keep a bit back for yourself, you know, in case you need it."

A life where truth was a formidable weapon, or at least barter. Ignorance was becoming more appealing by the second.

"Especially with—no one, really, no one particularly." Too bright a smile, not enough to hide the conflict of expressions, the change of subject as clumsy as the sudden swerving from naming names. "D'you need help with this, or d'you think you'll manage?"

Oh. Yes. The food. His appetite had faded in direct proportion to the sordid hints this Vila had dropped. "I'll manage," he said, with not the faintest idea how he would, his hands feeling an awfully long way away from his brain. Slowly, he edged himself farther upright, only half surprised at how drained so little activity left him.

Vila was still watching him, fidgeting like a man on an exceedingly sharp cusp. "I could give you a hand," Vila said almost diffidently, a verbal echo of

the near flinching earlier. "If you don't mind, that is, cos Cally said I was to help you, and you know how Cally is if we don't do what she thinks is best for her patients, don't you?"

"Actually," he said, tiredly, "I don't."

Vila squeezed his eyes shut, opened them, his face a rueful mask. "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that, well, I did and I didn't—"

"Vila."

"Yes?"

"Shut up, Vila."

And why the hell had *that* elicited so heartfelt a smile?

"Shut up, right, I'll do that. I'll just shut up and concentrate on lending you a hand with this grub, and then I'll settle you all nice and comfy and let you get some rest, eh?"

Avon didn't bother to reply to all those words, simply lay back and ate what was put into his mouth, the bland, liquefacient food slipping over his tongue the way Vila's words slipped over his mind, warm, comforting, soothing in a way. Food fed, Vila eased him back down flat on the bed, tucking the covers up around him, dimming the lights, then moving slightly to one side to sit on a chair that was almost out of Avon's field of vision. Sat there, remarkably still in contrast to his flutterings and bustlings before, simply sat there and watched.

It was nice, Avon decided, to have someone sit there and keep watch over him. Reassuring. Comforting that whoever he was, these people—or this one person—cared for him enough to not leave him alone, as if aware that the darkness was both best friend and worst enemy. There—that triggered something, something—someone—important, something he should know. But it was gone, will o'the wisp, out of grasp before he could do more than identify that here was something else he'd forgotten. An entire life misplaced, he thought, years lost. If it didn't hurt so much, he'd laugh—he couldn't remember how many years were lost. Couldn't remember his birthday. Or his mother, although the thought of her made his soul shrivel.

So. He knew his (probable) name. Knew the names of the ship and the people on it. Knew that he had treated this Vila fellow so badly that any offer of kindness or affection was hedged and disguised, and expected to garner rejection or worse. And he knew that there was something seriously wrong between him and his mother.

Wonderful. Not much to show, for a lifetime.

He should ask Vila to fill in the blanks. Should. Found that he didn't really want to. Didn't want to know, didn't want to ask. Wanted to sleep, to forget how much he had already forgotten. He turned on his side, away from his silent watcher, and escaped once more into sleep.

Waking, and with it, knowing. His name was Kerr Avon, he was on a ship called *Liberator*, with Roj Blake, Jenna Stannis, Vila Restal and Cally-from-Auron.

And that was it.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, expecting another bustle of activity, but this time, it was a blonde woman—presumably Jenna Stannis—who was regarding him with warm smile and worried eyes.

"I see you've decided to rejoin the land of the living," she said breezily, rising gracefully to check various readout screens. "How are you feeling?"

He really wished she hadn't asked that: now that his mind was clearing, every muscle in his body was demanding equal time. "Sore," he replied, wincing as his back agreed loudly with him.

She looked at him sharply, looked back at the data flashing across a screen. "Just physically, or does your head hurt?"

"Physically, and the headache's down to one military band."

Another one of those warm smiles—and he wondered about his relationship with her. And wondered, suddenly, if he was attractive. If he was dark or fair, if his eyes were the same colour as hers, if—the pain behind his eyes turned itself a notch higher, making him wince, driving out all attempts to dig into his memory.

"I saw that," Jenna said, looking at him over the peaking pain graph. "I wish I could give you something for it, but..."

"But with head injuries caution is indicated." Well, well, another thing he knew. Had he been injured like this before, had he— The pain dug into him like a spike, and he flinched from it, leaving the memory alone. The clashing lights receded, taking the pain with them, and he lay very still for a moment, catching his breath, lolling in the lack of pain.

He heard Jenna murmur, "Now *that's* interesting," and couldn't be bothered asking. Unprotestingly, he let her prop him up, slowly ate the food put in front of him, drank the foully

medicinal drink, allowed himself to be lowered until he was midway between sitting up and lying down. Like an invalid, he thought, and couldn't find the energy to care. So much better to close his eyes, drift, thinking little, aware only of the sounds and smells around him. Sinking, finally, after one final prodding and checking from Jenna, into the wildness of dreams.

A field, fallow, furrowed, the soil dried and dusty, rising in clouds around his feet as he turned, and turned again, whirling round to face the unnamed dangers dancing behind him, always behind him. There was no sun in the sky, only featureless greyness of banked clouds, threatening rain. The ground underneath his feet thrummed, the vibration clawing its way up his body until it lodged in his head, his teeth aching, jaw clenched too tightly, head pounding and pounding. From the corner of his pain-narrowed eyes, he caught sight of something, someone. His head felt as if it would fall off or explode, so he was slow and careful as he turned round.

Astride some great hairy creature, Blake sat in full regalia, the costume of an age long gone and a Crusade as forgotten as Avon's own past. A banner hung from his lance, a banner tattered and blotched with gore, but still it glowed golden and bright. Smiling sweetly, Blake lowered the lance, and the creature he rode gathered its strength.

No, Avon thought, refusing to panic. He won't do it. He won't.

Thunder beneath his feet now, and the beast charging forward, coming closer, coming faster. He tried to run, tried, but could not, the ground swamp beneath him, sucking him down, holding him still as a painted target for the lowering, gleaming lance hurtling towards him.

A bright red splatter, and more gore to festoon the banner. Astonished, Avon looked down to see the blood pulsing from his chest, red blossoming from him like flowers in spring. He looked up, and Blake was still there, and still smiling as sweetly, his armour as shining, his lance as pointed and glinting as brightly with the pureness of gold.

And stabbing more deeply than the sharpness of the lance was the love in Blake's smile.

He sat bolt upright in bed, his head a heavy mass of pain, his heart pounding painfully fast, chest a burning agony. Restraints held him fast, and he fought them, mouth stumbling again and again over Blake's name.

"It's all right," he heard, and recognised the

restraints as someone's arms. He looked up, and saw Blake, not smiling, thankfully, but frowning in concern. "I think you had a nightmare," Blake's mouth was saying, and Avon focussed on the shape of Blake's lips as the words were formed. He was eased back onto the pillows, Blake withdrawing to a polite distance.

"I..." his throat was parched, and he gulped at the drink proffered him.

The silence was awkward, Blake breaking it while Avon was still sating his thirst.

"You were calling my name."

"You were killing me."

The brutally honest words struck Blake, his expression twisting. "Avon, I'm sorry—"

"It was only a dream, nothing to do with you."

"Wasn't it? You don't remember that either, do you?"

"It would seem that there's a lifetime I don't remember."

A pause, an odd look from Blake, then the question offered as if prelude to a massacre. "Do you remember me?"

Avon looked at him hard, trying to find something to go with this face, something that would explain the pain hiding behind the other man's eyes, something to fill the gap in his brain that gnawed like toothache. "Only my dream," Avon finally said, fingers rubbing his temples where the pain gathered, heels of hands pressing against his eyes where the sharp daggers of memory pricked him. "And before—"

Preternatural stillness from Blake, even his breath stilled.

"Before," Avon said, opening his eyes, "when I wasn't entirely conscious. You were there then, weren't you?"

An explosion of movement, Blake on his feet, pacing, one hand rubbing the back of his neck in a way that made Avon's mind itchy.

"You have to know," Blake was saying. "You have to know, but gods help me, I don't want to tell you." Abrupt volte face, skin pallid, eyes intense. "This—" a gesture encompassed the room, the medical equipment, Avon lying in bed, "it's all my fault."

"Then my dream—"

"No, that was definitely a dream, not a memory," Blake told him, reading his mind with more ease than Avon could muster. "It was an accident. We were—" He broke off, backed off.

"Let's just say that my timing was off and you came to my rescue."

"And?"

"And didn't get out in time yourself."

Avon raised his eyebrows at that. "Well now, that's one memory I won't be in a hurry to regain."

"Actually," Blake said, perching himself on the side of the bed as if this were just a pleasant chat between chums, "as that is the memory immediately prior to and part of the traumatic injury, you might never regain it."

Even a complete stranger could tell there was more, and that Blake approached this with all the joy of the condemned nearing the gallows.

Avon took pity on him. "I doubt you could tell me anything worse than I've already discovered for myself."

And this time, Avon found himself wondering why a kind comment from him should elicit so odd a reaction.

"Tell me," he asked, the pit of his stomach hollowing, "was one of my hobbies biting people's heads off?"

An unexpected roar of laughter. "Not to mention chewing them up for breakfast and spitting them out afterwards."

"Charming," Avon murmured.

"That, too," Blake whispered conspiratorially, and then caught his breath on the smile Avon threw at him.

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing at all, just something occurred to me—" Blake said too quickly, not wanting to explain himself. "And that something is what Cally threatened me with if I stopped you from getting the rest she says you need."

"She hardly strikes me as a harpy in full flight," Avon said tartly, the edge of humour fading completely. "But then," he added, bleakness showing through, "I'm hardly the resident expert." A measured pause, a sharp glance. "Or was I?"

"Our ever-mysterious Cally. Look, I really must be going—" It was Blake's turn to pause, to give Avon a sharp look. "I don't know," he said, hands spread as if to show that despite the sting of his words, he meant no harm. "That's something I'm afraid you'll have to ask her."

"But surely, on a ship this size—"

"We tended to be rather careful not to step on anyone's toes. Especially on a ship this size."

"So we are a ship of people carefully dancing around one another—to the exclusion of gossip?"

Blake grinned at that. "Never so much as a single word."

"Yes, well, it's usually the couplets that cause all the trouble."

"Exactly. And on that note, I think it's time for me to leave you to your rest."

"You're too kind," Avon replied, sarcasm dripping like balm. "One last thing before you go."

"Yes?" Blake asked, eyes cautious.

Avon lifted his chin, haughty as ever, not even the scantest measure of anything but pride showing. "Is there anyone I should know about?"

"To be honest," Blake finally replied, "I really couldn't tell you. Good night, Avon."

"And a good night to you," Avon muttered, sinking back against the pillows, his mind a kaleidoscope of faces and features, snatches of words and memories with all the permanence of sand. He snatched at a passing memory-face, and half-expected though it was, the pain still took him by storm, the sheer, slicing impact of it taking his breath away. Deliberately, Avon let the face from the past go, not regretting its loss at all, concentrating only on ridding himself of this eviscerating pain. Carefully, Avon banished all the half-formed memories from his mind, and one by one, went through those things he knew—those things that had happened today.

When sleep came, he welcomed it with more warmth and passion than he would greet any lover. Sleep, at least, was something he knew. And something that caused no pain.

In the night, Cally came to him again, her voice incredibly soft, with a tantalising hint of echo and of remembering. Gently, she took him through the now familiar pattern of checking his reactions and going through the medical readings, and not quite fully awake, he watched her. Something about Cally, and this room... Someone, restrained—no, someone ill, himself ill, sick and weak, poisoned—Blake? Had he seen Blake lying here, pale as death? Had he?

She soothed him when the pain began, soothed him and calmed him and settled him like a child. He tried to object, but his own need for comfort defeated him, and he yielded to her, closing his eyes and flowing back into the

perfect oblivion of sleep.

His body knew it was morning, ship's time, before he opened his eyes. A too-bright voice, all but chirping away, nattering on and on and on. There was a name to go with that voice, it was on the tip of his tongue—

"Course you remember," the squirrel was saying. "Vila Restal, that's me, as if you'd forget that, eh, Avon? Cally says you've to have this, and that bloody Orac agrees with her, but that's only because he doesn't have to take this stuff. Disgusting, isn't it? Really foul, and they won't even let you have a drop of soma to wash it down with. Pity, that. A drop of soma would—"

"Vila." Avon slitted his eyes open, only to shut them again when confronted with Vila's preternatural cheerfulness.

"Yes?"

"Shut up, Vila."

Vila's idea of shutting up, apparently, was to talk just as much, only more quietly. "I never thought I'd be glad to hear you say that! But I tell you, after we got you back, the mess you were in—we almost lost you, you know. Literally, I mean, as well as you almost dying on us."

It really was too early to deal with all this, but his past was dangling in front of him like a carrot. "Tell me. All of it."

Interesting. A command to shut up resulted in more chatter, and a request to tell all garnered silence. Vila, it seemed, was nothing if not perverse.

"Cally says we're not supposed to tell you—"

"Cally isn't here."

"Yeh, but she will be, later, and then where'll I be?"

Avon closed his eyes, considered making another assault on his own memory, but the one thing he could remember with utter clarity was the agony of his mind exploding inside his skull. His own memories out of reach, then—so Vila's would have to do.

"And this Cally," he said, mildly surprised at the soft seductiveness his voice proved capable of, "does she have such a claim on me that she can dictate what I can and can't know about myself?"

The very silence was uncomfortable, and then he heard Vila shifting uneasily.

"Do we still practice slavery—or is that an Auron speciality?"

"No, it's nothing like that, it's just..."

Avon didn't help, not the way he had with Blake.

"It's just..."

Another hesitation, and the continuation, voice ever so bright and cheerful. "Well, what it is, is that Cally's our medical expert, you know."

But hadn't they all referred to Orac deciding on his treatment?

"What about Orac?"

He opened his eyes in time to see the joy blossom all over Vila's face. "Should've known it'd be Orac you'd remember. It's going to be all right, isn't it?"

"I thought Orac was the expert. What does he have to say about this?"

Now what the hell had he said? Vila looked an inch away from tears, or running away.

"Orac..."

"Yes?" Avon prompted. "Orac?"

"You always used to moan at me when I called Orac a him."

That gave Avon pause: obviously, if Vila couldn't tell whether Orac was a him or a her, then this current confusion wasn't entirely a new thing.

"Orac's a computer, you see," Vila was saying, his words adding data to Avon's meagre store of knowledge, but doing nothing to reduce the much too generous store of confusion. "And it used to really piss you off whenever any of us'd anthropomorphise him. It."

Which explained them not mentioning Orac as one of the people on the ship. And the way Vila had said it didn't exactly disprove the theory that Avon's main hobby had indeed been biting people's heads off. Not to mention chewing them up and spitting them back out again.

"I wasn't the pleasantest of men, was I?" he asked, the pain beginning again, somewhere at the back of his mind, where the darkness lay deepest.

"Well, I wouldn't actually say you weren't pleasant..."

"No, but you'd think it. Tell me," he asked as he struggled, briefly, before conquering gravity and managing to sit up amidst the cloying of the bedclothes, "just how much of a bad-tempered bastard was I?"

Vila visibly squirmed. "Let's put it this way," he finally said, "you've never been one for doing things by halves. And if I don't get these tests started when I'm supposed to, Cally'll be after my blood."

And so they slid uncomfortably into this new routine of Vila telling Avon what to do, and left the past to its own devices.

The better he felt, the more the indignities of his situation impressed themselves upon him. First to go were one or two tubing arrangements, Avon insisting over Cally's protests that he was quite well enough to get up and go to the bathroom, and what's more, no he did not need her holding his hand—or anything else, for that matter.

Next went the sponge baths with their efficient but unsatisfying towelettes, and after that—

After that, Avon had to deal with his body's recalcitrant infirmities.

He was trying, with many a curse and calumny, to persuade his body that it really was well enough to get up and walk, when a rich voice interrupted the flow of invective.

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Avon," Blake said, the picture of ease, leaning against the door-jamb, such a sight making Avon's head begin to pound. Something, about Blake, leaning on the frame of a doorway—injured?

Blake was there to catch him as he fell. A few moments, Blake wonderfully discreet, acting as if everyone fell when trying to get out of bed, not a single platitude to embarrass either one of them.

Settled once more, Blake perched on the edge of his bed, the pain receded, and Avon could think again. "Thanks," he said, "I hadn't realised quite how difficult it would be to get out of bed alone."

Blake was quite beautifully impassive. "Of course, it's not back into bed you needed to go. Here, let me give you a hand."

And Blake kept his face very, very still, as Avon accepted the offered help with nothing more deadly than a smile of quite devastating charm.

The necessary taken care of, a proffered shoulder so readily accepted it was very nearly Blake who needed added support, and then Avon was back in bed, pallor more pronounced, sweat beading his forehead like all the best clichés, and Avon's hands clenching and unclenching on the bedcovers in a rhythm that betrayed the pattern of his pain.

Blake made a point of not noticing, leaving Avon at least that much of his pride intact.

The acerbic voice, at least, was familiar, Avon's tone bringing a near smile to Blake. "Well, if you're just going to pretend there's nothing wrong at all,

at least call Cally or Vila to help.”

“You’d let me help you—”

It was a most unAvonlike sound, that sigh, and it was repeated as Blake raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“All right, so obviously I am a bad-tempered bastard too stubborn to ask for help—but for the time being, I’d much rather we pretended I was a mere mortal and need all the help I can get. Would you either call one of the others or get the analgesic—please?”

“Mere mortal it shall be,” Blake replied, far more cheerfully than Avon thought was warranted. “And as much help as you can bear.”

“Then why don’t we start with the analgesic? Or would you rather sit there gazing raptly at me until mummification sets in?”

Gaze raptly? Hell’s bells, if that’s what Blake’d been doing, he’d better get his martyr mask back on: it was one thing for this oddly appealing Avon to see through him, quite another thing indeed when this Avon disappeared back into wherever he’d sprung from, and the *real* Avon, all poisoned thorns and tearing barbs, came back to haunt them all. Blake settled for smiling politely, a bit distractedly, and fetched the tube.

Avon looked at the outstretched hand, up at Blake’s impassive brown eyes, back down at the hand again. “Thank you,” he said dryly, taking the analgesic cream. “You’re too, too kind. Now if you could perhaps call for someone physically able to put it on for me?”

“Oh, of course,” Blake snapped, annoyed with himself for being so obtuse—see what happens, he told himself, when Avon is *nice*? “Allow me.”

Avon didn’t answer, simply leaned back a little farther into the pillows and closed his eyes.

I should be thankful for small mercies, Blake told himself, somewhat unconvincingly, glancing up at the unseeing eyes. Denying his hands any possibility of a tremble, he reached out, loosening the fastenings on the medicinally white bedclothes. Avon’s chest was a myriad of colour, startling against the bland whites and neutral greys of everything else in this room. Blake breathed in deeply, demanding calm, insisting that he was going to be very cool, calm and collected about this. But still, his fingers weren’t entirely steady as he reached out and touched the cream to the first of the welted scars. Reddish, almost purple, a cross between old blood and new bruises, raised and

thick, following the lines left by the shrapnel that had come so close to killing Avon.

Very quietly, talking to himself, to his own guilt: “This should be mine.”

Avon’s voice as quiet, as intimate. “So you’re the possessive sort—that must have made for some entertaining arguments.”

“No!” But then again—“Well, yes—but not the way you mean.”

A lazy eyebrow lifted, a half smile enriched the beauty of the mouth. “A yes and a no—almost exactly what I got from Vila, too.”

“What you got from Vila when you asked him what, precisely?”

“When I asked him if you and I were lovers.”

As soon as he had picked his jaw up off the floor and reined in his rank astonishment, Blake could actually imagine trading in this nice new Avon for the cutting, nasty and above all, secretive, old Avon. “Lovers?”

“Were we?”

“No. Well, yes, but—”

“Oh, how I love a definitive answer.” The eyes were very bright now, sharp as ever, only the faintest echo of pain still lingering. “No, yes, well and but. That just about covers every possible combination, doesn’t it?”

“Well, it is a difficult question.”

Avon’s expression was worth a thousand words, every single one of them sarcastic. “And which part was difficult? The word were? Or perhaps we? Or perhaps lovers?”

Avon took another look at Blake. “I’m sorry,” he said easily, ignoring the flicker of pain that told him there was a memory about this somewhere, lurking, in the dark. “I shouldn’t have been so awkward. It’s just...”

Not a sight to which Blake or any of the others were accustomed: Kerr Avon, in white, chest naked and exposed, shrugging in a combination of regret and apology.

“Your memory—”

“Is about as much use as Vila’s.”

And Blake was there to catch him, again, as he crumpled forward under the weight of the pain in his head.

Much later. Much, much later, hunger eating a hole in his belly, throat aching and dry, bladder protesting. Hands there to help him, a woman’s hands, strong, a cascade of blonde hair, steadiness

at his side, guiding him, helping him do what he needed to do, until those strong hands pulled the blankets up once more to cover him, and he slept.

It was hunger that woke him this time, not that much later. He recognised the smell, he thought, reluctant to try to actually snare the name and the memory and the pain that would come with it. But the name was there, unattached to anything but the food itself and the sure memory of enjoying eating this.

"Oh, good, you're awake."

Jenna, then, still. Stupid of him to feel embarrassed at what she'd helped him do, so he ignored such stupidity, opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Thank you—for earlier."

"Don't mention it," she told him, with that same edge of intensity that was making him very, very tired of whoever he had been. "Hungry?"

"Famished."

"That's a good sign. Now look, don't bother arguing, you need to eat the right sort of food, so here, just have some of this, it's good for you."

And he refused, point blank, to wonder why something as simple as helping someone eat should be regarded as combat training.

"I don't bite," he finally said.

"That's not what Blake's said."

Something in that... "Tell me," he began, quite conversationally, "were Blake and I lovers?"

She almost dropped the bowl, and there was an off-note to her too casual tone as she said: "Why don't you discuss that with him?"

"Because I've already tried and he didn't seem to be entirely certain himself."

That raised the wryest sort of smile from her. "Yes, well, I suppose it depends on what you mean by lovers."

Avon resisted the temptation to roll his eyes heavenwards. "I mean lovers, as in two people who fuck each other."

She did drop the spoon that time.

"What the hell was I?" Avon demanded as she fished it up out of the folds of the blanket. "An ogre?"

She had quite the charming smile when she was amused. "Something like that."

"A prude as well, it seems."

"Not a prude, just... discreet."

He was beginning to really dislike whoever he'd been. A bad-tempered bastard, an ogre, 'discreet',

vicious and a prude to boot. Oh, he must have been the catch of the year.

"So discreet that even Blake couldn't tell if we were lovers or not? Surely that's taking things to the extreme."

"You did tend to be a bit...intense about some things."

More and more wonderful with every second. It was a miracle none of them had tried to kill him.

"How was I injured?"

A quick flash of a glance from her, then she was tidying up, buying time. "I really think you should discuss that with Blake."

"Which would be useful advice if Blake were willing to discuss anything with me."

"Oh, come on, Avon, don't try that old trick with me. I'm sure Blake told you the truth, he wouldn't lie to you about something like this."

Which implied that Blake might indeed lie to him about some other things. And told him even more about his old self. Time to add deceptive and manipulative to his list of self-inflicted adjectives, obviously.

"Jenna, Blake hasn't told me anything at all. Which leaves me with healing burns, a rather interesting pattern of deep wounds, assorted cuts, sundry bruises and some sort of head injury. I think I deserve to be told something, don't you?"

"Well, obviously, but I'm not the person to tell you."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because Blake—"

"Damn Blake!"

She grinned at that, which was just what he really needed. Terrific. So in the past he'd been known for damning Blake. Wonderful. What a happy life it must have been.

"Jenna," he said again, making a show of his forbearance, "I have been half-killed, I'm in pain and I can't remember a damned thing. Surely that's worth more than making sure you don't contradict anything Blake might say on the matter?"

She looked at him for a long time, then. "Do you remember Docholli or Star One?"

He shook his head, regretted it immediately as the pain was souging back, chewing on his mind.

Jenna took in all the details, every small shift of expression, and when she spoke, was brisk, cutting everything down to the absolute essentials.

"We were trying to destroy a place called Star One. Travis was already there, he shot Blake..."

Like the sea devouring the shore, the pain washed in and over him, eroding his body out from under him, light beginning to dim, her voice fading.

"We found out Travis had betrayed us all to the Andromedans..."

Green slime, fizzling, pain in his head, pain in his chest, he was on fire, his body exploding.

"There was a battle, and even though Blake was injured, he insisted on staying on the flight deck—"

For what it's worth, he could hear someone saying that, again and again and again—

"One of the consoles blew up, you shoved Blake out of the way—"

Fire, ripping him, metal, slicing him, and Blake, Blake's face—

Trust.

I have always—

No. No. Not that—

Trusted you.

You.

Jenna grabbed him just as he started to scream.

A long silence, the dim, dark silence of a soul asleep. It was pleasant, soothing, as secure as the womb, but so much quieter. The only heartbeat was his own, slow and steady, and the rhythmic shushing of his blood through his veins, and the pump and whoosh of air through his lungs. But all of it quiet, serene, the natural way of things, no thought required.

He liked it here.

Something bright and hard shaking him, voices deafening him, whispers as loud as shrieks.

He hid from the pain they brought, found a nice, deep well in which he could curl himself up in safety. But there was something else in there, or someone else. People he knew, a life, decisions, options, paths chosen, choices bitterly regretted, people dead, people suffering, nothing he could do about them, himself, hurting, battered, attacked, locked up, her—he could remember her, Anna, his Anna, dead, dead, dead—and Blake, and Vila, hovering over them like a shroud, Servalan, in her white dress and malice. People shooting at him, monsters after him, doubts, doubts, doubts. Too many questions, no answers, none, just Blake muddling through, getting them all killed, wading up to his armpits in blood, Avon spilling Blake's blood, every bitter remark, every caustic comment—and Vila, look at Vila, wincing like a kicked

dog, and Cally, so disappointed, and behind her, his mother, oh, and what a long story it was with his mother, all of it laid out in front of him, a patchwork quilt of pain and words, hurts and failures, successes turned to ashes, people laughing at him, making fun of him, mocking, mocking, but there, again and again and again, there was Blake, not laughing but always looking at him, finding him wanting, failing Blake, failing them all—

Outside, bright lights, voices, hands shaking him.

He'd tell them to go away. Didn't want them. Wanted the people inside his head even less. His life, stretched out like a tattered ribbon, dragged through the mud. Muck and mire, that was his life. Base, debased, dark, hurt, hurt, hurt before they could hurt him.

For what it's worth.

But how could Blake trust him when he couldn't trust himself?

They were talking to him again, voices and voices and voices, enough for a choir, as cacophonous as hell itself. Go away, he wanted to tell them. But to talk to them would be to be noticed, for them to notice him, pin him with their honest stares and see just how much he had failed them. He would tell them to shut up, go away.

But later, when it didn't hurt so. Later, when he could face them with who they were and not hear them laugh. Later, when he could stir himself that much. For now, there was the pulse in his veins and the sweet darkness of his mind.

This time, he knew his name. Kerr Avon. Knew who else was on this ship, knew their names. Knew, too, that he knew very little, that his memory was all but gone. Gone, perhaps, but not necessarily forgotten.

No.

Gone.

The past was gone.

All of it.

Every last day of it.

Gone.

He woke up with a smile on his face.

"Find a good morning to you an' all," Vila said, the usual 'I'm a fool what do I know?' expression slipping a little.

"Thank you," Avon replied, all but grinning.

"But you look as if I've given you cause to worry. What's the matter?"

"Cheerful and concerned?" Vila squeaked, not entirely falsely. "My God, he's gone mad!"

"Oh, no, Vila," Avon said happily, "not mad. Not mad at all."

From the look on his face, Vila didn't believe him one little bit.

"I think I'll get Cally," he said, backing slowly away from the bed, the usually steady hands actually fumbling as he keyed the intercom.

Moments later, and it wasn't just Cally who arrived, but Blake, and behind him, Jenna. All of them, crowding into the small room, and Avon sitting in the bed in the centre, face positively cheerful. The others all stopped dead in their tracks, staring at him as one would at a vampire or some other creature of legend.

"Avon?" Cally said, gentle, her gaze steady as she checked his pulse and the readouts of the various machines. "How are you feeling?"

"Perfectly well, actually. Well, a touch of pain across my chest, but apart from that—"

"The readings are good. How is your head?"

"Clear as a bell."

"No pain? No confusion?"

Not now. Not ever again.

"Not a bit of it. Really, I feel quite fit."

The charm was just pouring off him, Cally responding with a smile, Vila positively blooming. Even Jenna relaxed, but Blake stared, frowning, almost afraid of this new version of the man he had never been able to truly know.

"The diagnostic computer agrees with you. The pain you are feeling is from scar tissue pulling healthy tissue, but that's nothing a few sessions with the regenerator can't cure."

"Excellent. So. Am I cleared to get up?"

Blake strode into the room, frowning fiercely at the readouts as if they could explain it all. "Not until we can be sure these problems with your...headaches are really cleared up."

"But I assure you, Blake, I'm perfectly well. And anxious to get out of here."

"Avon," Blake was very calm, gentling him as if he were an unstable child, "you have been very, very ill. We can't just let you waltz out of here the second you open your eyes. You've been in a coma for almost a week! You can't just open your eyes and...and pick up as if nothing has happened."

There was a dim echo, of pain remembered,

but Avon pushed that back, gazed fixedly at Blake's eyes. "A week? I was unconscious for that long?"

"Not unconscious. In a coma. You had some sort of attack when Jenna was in with you. You screamed, clutched your head, and that was it."

"Straight out of a bad drama. That doesn't happen in real life, Blake. There must have been something."

"There was." Jenna, stepping forward, expression hard. "You insisted that you wanted me to tell you what had happened. I did, you turned pale, I told you a little more, and then you fainted dead away."

"To lie here in a coma for almost a week? Oh, don't be absurd."

"If you don't believe us," Cally said, and Avon couldn't help but notice that they were all so much more comfortable dealing with his disbelief and his ill-manners than they had been his good cheer, "then you can check the medical logs."

"No, no, I'll take your word for it. But you must admit, it sounds absurd, simply ridiculous."

"I insist, Avon," she said, pushing the medical computer over towards him. "Go on, check the records."

There was more to this than just her wanting him to see for himself, that was obvious. But what would it cost to humour someone who had nursed him to health? Politely, he reached out, flicked the necessary switches, heard the appropriate responses, all of which completely agreed with what his shipmates had told him.

"Final diagnosis of condition," he asked, and heard the four sudden intakes of breath, felt the sudden pressure of them, waiting for the answer. No, they would know the answer. Waiting, then, for his response.

He really didn't think he was going to like this. *Further testing required for final analysis.*

He swallowed, hard, and did the only thing he could. "Proceed."

Through it all, he could feel four pairs of eyes on him, watching every movement.

Diagnosis, the flattened computer voice intoned finally, is voluntary post-traumatic amnesia.

Avon did not want to look up at them, did not want to see the expression on their faces nor the pity or contempt in their eyes. "Elucidate."

Patient suffered a severe head injury causing temporary loss of memory function. Patient recov-

ered from said injury, however, patient has not recovered full memory function. Only those memories of past personal life are nonfunctional. Before falling into a coma, patient experienced extreme pain when regaining memories of past life. All learned skill memories are currently present and remain in full order. The retention of all learned skills and the loss of all personal memories indicate that patient has voluntary post traumatic amnesia.

"In other words, my mind was damaged, and seized this opportunity to forget that which I did not choose to remember."

Correct.

Blake, moving, speaking. "Turn the damned thing off."

Automatically, Avon did as Blake told him, and sat there, staring at the machine rather than look at the man.

"And was my life so dreadful—was *I* so dreadful—that losing all of that would be a blessing?"

Jenna speaking, filling Blake's silence. "I don't think so. Although there are one or two moments in the past year or two that I wouldn't mind being able to forget myself."

Cally jumping in, offering comfort. "There are several times all of us would prefer to forget, Avon, it is not only you."

"But it is me. To all intents and purposes, I erased myself like a bad computer programme." He stopped then, looked at Blake. "I do remember that much. Computers, programmes. Two computers on this ship: one called Zen, and Orac's the other. I could tell you how to reprogramme them, how to create a voice override, any number of complicated procedures. The thing is," and he didn't quite smile, "I can't remember where or how or why I learned any of it."

"I'm sorry," Blake, softly.

"Oh, but I'm not. Not in the slightest."

"But surely," Cally said, "to have lost everything that made you who you are..."

"But that was the whole point, wasn't it? Get rid of all that, and you get rid of the Avon we all knew and loved. And *he*," Vila nodded in Avon's direction, "gets to start all over again. A clean slate."

"Exactly," Avon said, and did smile, this time. "Oh, come on, it's hardly my funeral. For whatever reason, my mind jumped at the chance to forget everything that ever happened to me, which proves that there must have been consider-

able misery and very little of anything else."

"Yes, but Avon—"

"No, Jenna, leave it. Losing a memory isn't always the worst thing to befall a man." Blake again, not softly this time, but with a bitterness that was all the worse for being turned inwards. "Sometimes, remembering is far worse."

"That," Avon said, eyes narrowing, "sounds like the voice of experience."

"Let's just say that I have one or two memories I wouldn't mind forgetting myself."

"Tell me."

"Not now."

They stared at each other, like that, for a long moment, and Blake was still staring at Avon when he spoke to Cally. "I'll stay with him, see that he gets some rest. Why don't you take a sleep cycle, Jenna can stand watch on the flight deck."

"What about me?"

"You, Vila, can have an entire bottle of soma."

"Getting rid of us all then, are you? Not that I'm complaining, soma's a nice way to go, especially when you get to wake up in the morning. Just makes a person sleep like the dead, not like some people I could name, who used to be as happy to—"

"That's quite enough, Vila," Cally was saying, taking Vila by the arm and pulling him out the door with her, her voice clear but fading as she hauled him off down the corridor.

"Very tactful of her," Jenna said, and Avon might not know the salient facts behind it, but he could read the emotion in her voice and on her face. "And I never could bear to be outdone by anyone, so I shall withdraw with grace and tact myself. I'll be on the flight deck for a while." She paused at the door, looked at them, at the taut emotion between them. "I'll arrange the rest of the watches between myself, Cally and Vila, so you needn't worry, Blake."

But it was Avon who thanked her, kindly, at that.

Just the two of them now, and the aftermath of Jenna leaving. "Is she simply fond of you, or is she in love with you?"

"That's one of the details I wouldn't mind forgetting."

"And some of the others?"

"Are ones I don't think I quite want to tell you about just yet."

"So." Avon lay back against the pillows, watched as Blake came over and sat on the edge of the bed. Watched even more intently as Blake traced idle patterns on the sheet beside Avon's hand. "What scintillating topics of conversation shall we cover whilst I lie here being useless for the next eon?"

"We could start with why you're so damned unconcerned about losing an entire lifetime."

"Ah, but have I lost a lifetime, or gained a new one? Isn't this more off with the old, on with the new, rather than a terrible loss?"

"It's your life, why don't you tell me."

"Because as far as I know, that life never existed. It's gone, Blake, completely gone, every last bit of it. Apart from the things I need to survive."

"That's what made us wonder at first, you know. You had no trouble with language or using the plumbing—you could remember how to read, what to use for localised body pain when a head injury made a systemic analgesic impossible. Not the sort of thing the average person knows to begin with."

"All of life's little advantages, none of its disadvantages." A beatific smile. "Seems rather clever, really."

"Is it?"

"For me, certainly." And then that honesty which still seemed so alien coming from this man. "I'm not so sure that the lover I'd forgotten would feel quite the same way."

"I'm not sure they would either."

So much camouflaged by that bland, disinterested tone, and so much revealed by the tension fluttering the tensed muscles of Blake's jaw. "Are you going to tell me," Avon said, by now almost accustomed to the surprise in others when he was gentle, "or are we going to go through the yes, no, well maybe routine again?"

A deep breath, a steady gaze, but the betraying muscle dancing still. "Yes, we had sex together. As for being lovers—no, I don't think so. Well, maybe, if—"

"Yes, no and maybe. If that's an example of my life, small wonder I chose to dump it. All right, so we had sex. I presume that the doubt over us being lovers has to do with me, rather than any uncertainty of emotion on your part?"

"My god, you're asking me if I love you!"

For the first time, the brightness of this new life tarnished, uncertainty and insecurity beginning

their corrosion. He had thought himself inured to the surprise of others, but this, and coming from Blake, was surely excessive. "Why should a simple question be greeted with such horror?"

"Avon, to ask me if I love you..." He shook his head, at a loss for words. "Ask me something else."

But only for now. "All right. Why are there so few of us on board?"

"Because... There was one more, Gan, but he was killed."

"On one of these...raids. Like the one that almost killed me."

"More or less."

"More in Gan's case and rather less in mine, it seems. Tell me, is getting killed a habit around here?"

"It's not one we like cultivating."

"But it seems to thrive regardless."

"Not through any desire of mine."

Low, seductive, enough to kindle heat in Blake's eyes. "And what are your desires, Blake?"

"Well, that's one thing that hasn't changed a bit," Blake said easily, getting up from the bed, finding something to fiddle with on the tray beside it. "You were always doing that, asking difficult questions, changing the subject, lulling your victim into a false sense of security, then you'd leap from one painful—but manageable—topic back to the original torment."

"Then why don't you regard this as an experiment? Discover just how much personality is dependent upon life experience and how much on the genetic hand we're dealt."

"No need. Orac could find that out simply by tapping into the Federation's medical computers."

"Are you saying..."

"What? That at least your memory loss was voluntary? Or that you should pick through my records like a crow through carrion? Why not? Or have you discovered scruples to fill in the gaps left by your memories?"

That hurt far more than it ought, and the nastiest of retorts leapt and strained on the tip of his tongue, until Blake turned, just a bit, and Avon could see the pain etched into his face.

Perhaps he should concede that not being able to remember wasn't an entirely good thing after all. "Blake, I don't know what the hell I've done to you in the past, but that's literally gone, as far as I'm concerned. Tell me: why should the Federation computers have data like that?"

An explosion of movement, to hold the emotions in. Blake, striding, stopping, striding again, caged. "I'm sorry. I simply assumed... But if you've lost as much as you say—"

Patience sat on his shoulders, stiff as a new coat, but Avon held his tongue and his breath, and waited Blake's silence out.

Blake arrayed the various bits and pieces of medical clutter neatly on the tray, ranging them by size, grouping them by function, adjusting the positions minutely. "There are rooms," he said, oblivious to the flash of pain and the bitter ache that his voice caused, "deep in the lower levels, where they take people. Rows upon rows of rooms, all of them exactly the same shade of grey, not one of them with visible numbers, names, anything. The staff have special trackers and locaters so they can find their way around, but the poor prisoners—it's the first of the disorientations for them. Then come the treatments, the ones that leave you not knowing what's real and what's false, or with half your life buried behind a wall so thick you don't even remember that you've forgotten something."

The reality of the memories drowned out the present for a moment, and Avon sat there, still and silent, watching, as Blake was lost in the maze of the past, waiting until the memories were shaken off, visibly, Blake shrugging.

"A few years ago, it was even worse. They weren't quite sure how all the new gadgets worked. Wanted to 'improve performance', and so they took political prisoners and other pariahs, took them down to those corridors and those rooms, and they played with their minds."

"Until?"

"Until they all went insane or committed suicide."

"And if they're all dead or mad, then how do you know this?"

"Research records that Orac's hacked."

"No, Blake," Avon said, and the softness of his voice was velvet against abraded hurts, "I meant, how do you know what those rooms look like?"

Easy to tell Avon this, now, after so very long, easy because this was no Avon he had ever known. "Because I've been in them. Or something like them. I've had memories removed and memories implanted like a fucking plant pot."

"And can you tell them apart?"

"Now I can." Hollow, aching pause. "Not at first."

"In which case, I must commend you for being so reasonable about my...condition."

"What else do you expect? A lecture? A temper tantrum?"

Avon didn't reply.

"Of course," Blake muttered, sitting down heavily, head in hands, "that's one of the things I suppose you can't remember."

"One of the very many things. It was nothing personal—"

"And how the fuck do you know that? You can't remember, Avon, you can't even remember whether or not we were lovers. You can't remember who I am, or what I am—why we're here, why you were almost killed yourself. All gone, just disappeared, because it was inconvenient for you, unpleasant—"

Deep ragged breaths, Blake's eyes scrunched shut, and Avon sitting there, staring at him.

"I should hit you for that. Do you know what it was like when first I awoke? The pain, ripping my mind apart every time so much as a hint of my past came back to me. Oh, I think it was for more than the sake of convenience that my mind wiped my past."

"Then what? Was life with me truly such a nightmare you had to erase it—that you had to erase *me*—from your mind?"

Teeth clenched, chaos threatening, the pain hinting and mocking at the fringes of his mind. "I. Don't. Know."

"But we have our suspicions, don't we? And you wonder why I hesitate to tell you how I feel about you."

"Actions speak louder than words."

A plasma bolt would have hit him with less force. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Surely the meaning's obvious? Look at you, Blake, look at the way you are with me, the things you're saying—and not saying."

"But don't forget the other old saying: you can't judge a book by its cover."

An intrusion, slicing cleanly through him.

"Books—I remember books. A huge room, books from floor to ceiling, dark bindings, someone there, someone..."

But then it was gone, only the faintest sneer of pain left to remind him of what would happen to those foolish enough to seek memories in this minefield.

"Now why would I remember that and not the rest?"

"Because," dry as ice, colder than space, "remembering books was...providential. Convenient, for a memory to rescue you just then, don't you think?"

"You don't believe me. My god, you don't believe me! What the hell is this?"

"Of course I believe you. On the whole."

"Another one of those yes, no and maybes of which you seem so very fond."

"Under the circumstances, can you blame me?"

Weary now, wishing he could just pull the covers over his head and sleep for a year. "No. Not really, and certainly not if I were to be fair. I seem to have been rather..."

"Ruthless. Creative with the truth."

"Cruel?"

"Sometimes."

"And you doubt that I wiped all that away? But of course, it would be unnatural to willingly give up such flattery."

"You always hated flattery. You used to say that flattery was worthless, you'd stick to fervent declarations of adoration and sincere compliments from qualified individuals."

"Modesty was obviously another of my many charms."

"But perhaps you were right to refuse flattery."

"So you think I had one or two redeeming qualities?"

"Yes. Oh, yes, you did. Still do."

"You hope."

"I know."

Which was said with rather more certainty than Avon could muster.

"Tell me... Were you to find yourself in my shoes, would you do as I did?"

"Sometimes. Not often, but sometimes. Avon—"

"Yes?"

"Will you answer a question for me?"

"That depends on what the question is. Or more, that depends on what the answer is."

Blake was staring at him now, intently, feasting on him. "Why are you so calm?"

"About what?"

"Infantile evasion does not become you."

"Why am I so calm?" He sort of laughed over that, a question he had not asked himself because it had seemed so obvious. "Because it's infinitely quieter than screaming my head off."

Blake's expression was telling.

"Because," Avon conceded, "I have no panic

within me. The memories are gone, and I don't find myself regretting them. I look around me at people I don't know, a life that is no longer mine, and feel—relief."

"And what of us, Avon? When you look at us, are we something from your past, or do we have a place in your future?"

Honesty begets honesty, and clutching its tailcoats, suffering. "I don't know."

"Well," Blake said far too heartily, "that's at least as clear as my answers to you. When you *do* know—be sure to tell me, won't you?"

"Would I do otherwise?"

"Before? Without doubt."

"And now, if I don't know, then how can anyone else."

"Oh, you'd be surprised at what I knew about you."

"But not whether or not I loved you."

Blake grimaced over that, an expression that had essayed a smile and failed bitterly. "I don't know that I shall ever get used to you actually saying that word out loud. If I should mention it—before—you would call it the dread I-word and change the subject. And be that as it may—" hastily, over Avon's indrawn breath, Blake's words filling all the gaps and leaving no room for Avon to say anything else, "I really must be getting on. With you out of commission, we're rather short-handed. I'll pop in later."

"Thank you, you're very kind," Avon replied, his very politeness sarcastic.

"Not often, Avon. Not often at all."

And Avon was left alone once again, to ponder the mysteries of a kind man who would not confess kindness, and himself unwilling to even speak the dreaded I-word.

Boredom drove him to it. It took very little persuasion—for some reason, a mild glower and raised eyebrow guaranteed Vila's instant co-operation—before Vila skulked through the door once more, this time, arms overflowing with clothes.

This time, both of Avon's eyebrows rose. "What the hell have you brought me?"

"Your clothes, just like you asked me to."

"These—" one hand lifting a black leather sleeve dripping silver studs, "are *my* clothes?"

Darting looks at him, Vila laid the clothes across the bed, covering everything in brooding black

leather and sumptuous silk.

Even the exercises Cally had enforced were no real match for being up and about, so Avon stood rather unsteadily in his sleepwear and stared at the embarrassment of riches displayed in front of him. "Either I was a hedonist," he said almost to himself as he fingered the heaviness of the jacket, "or a specialist in certain...esoteric sexual practices."

"Or maybe you were just a tease."

"Blake doesn't seem to think so."

Bright eyes, head canted to one side in interest. "So he told you then, did he?"

"So you already knew then, did you?"

"Well, I had my suspicions. And there's not much you can keep secret on a ship this size, not really, is there?"

"Ah, I rather think Blake would disagree with you on that."

"Only because Blake never gossiped. Unnatural, that, a person not gossiping. Well, at least the rest of us made up for him."

Avon was still touching the clothes, a scientist puzzling over an unearthed artifact. "Did I gossip, or was I holier-than-thou also?"

"Oh, Blake's not like that. Well, not when it comes to gossip. He just didn't join in if it didn't actually have something to do with his bloody Cause."

"But I had no such compunctions."

"You didn't have any such Cause! Not you—always slagging Blake off about it, getting at him, making all these digs..."

"But if I didn't believe in it, then why did I stay?"

"Who said you didn't believe in it? All I said was you'd get on his case no end, and it wasn't a Cause for you, not the way it was for Blake."

Under cover of Vila's chatter, Avon lifted the jacket, felt the weight, smelled the leather, ran his fingers over the metal smoothness of the studs. Put the jacket down again, picked up the heavy belt. "What is this Cause anyway?"

There was another one of those appalled, stunned silences, and Avon turned round almost quickly enough to see the dismay in Vila's eyes, but Vila was obviously getting used to this, recovering quickly. "Blake's Cause? Freedom for the oppressed masses, overthrow of the Federation, total destruction of Servalan and all the other evil hordes."

"A minor hobby in other words."

"Very minor."

"Safe and easy, too."

"Less exciting than cutting your toenails."

"And it was during one of these boring forays that all this happened to me?"

Vila perched himself on the edge of the bed just the way Blake had, busied himself with smoothing out the creases in the silken shirt. "Everything would've been fine, if Servalan hadn't turned up. Then everything just fell apart. There were troopers everywhere, shooting at everything, and when we tried to get away—"

There wasn't even a receding echo of memory for this. It was gone, as if it had never existed, blinked away like dust in God's eye. "Jenna gave me the bare facts. I want the details."

"You would."

"So tell me."

"Do I have to?"

"No. But if you don't..."

"You'll get your memory back and remember what you said when you thought you'd never remember and then where would I be? Right. The details. There's a space installation, Star One where the Federation have their top tactical people and the computers that run everything, all herded together—easier to stop any of 'em running off that way. Or any gifted thieves getting in there and lifting any interesting bits and pieces he might find. Anyway, Blake decided to put a stop to their plotting and planning, you said it was stupid, it would get us all killed, but you said that every time anyway, so no-one paid you the blindest bit of attention."

The featherweight of the silk shirt on his shoulders laded him down, jaded echoes of misery mocking him with every faint sigh of the silk moving against him. Teeth set, he pulled the trousers on slowly, discovering, as if anew, the feel of the leather against his skin, the coolness slowly warming, the gentle, erotic tug of leather on his body hair. He reached for the belt, but couldn't quite bring himself to pick it up.

Fingering the heavy weight and the pattern of metal studs, Avon wondered if ostentation had not been the purpose of this belt, what sorts of marks it had left, and on whose skin. And whether or not he had enjoyed it. "And once Blake had ignored me, we landed—"

"Emm, not exactly. Y'see, we have this thing called the teleport that I couldn't explain if my life

depended on it. You weren't much better either, for that matter. Anyway, we teleported down to the installation, get a message from Jenna that there's a herd of pursuit ships coming after us. We hurry up to get things finished, then one of us tripped some alarm, and before we knew where we were, the guards and troopers and all sorts of people were swarming all over us. By the time we'd got away from them, Blake was hurt, bleeding all over the place, and he had to take his teleport bracelet off to stop the bleeding. Or was it to pull a bit of shrapnel out of his arm? Anyway, he's standing there holding the bracelet, and about a million troopers come barging in on us. One of them was going to shoot Blake, and you shoved him out of the way. Well, of course his bracelet goes flying as well, and he's scrabbling about trying to get his bracelet with one hand and shoot the baddies with the other, while you're putting paid to the rest of them. Then just when Blake found his bracelet, and he's getting the thing back round his wrist, one of the troopers comes up with the bright idea of setting off one of those grenade things they like."

He had the belt folded in half now, so heavy in the palm of his hand. "And I put myself between Blake and the blast."

"That's what it looked like, but that's just not you, is it?" Avon had gone as pallid as his voice, his atrophied muscles far from normal strength. "Here, are you all right? You shouldn't be up, should you? Oh, that's great, that is, you pick my turn to watch you to have yourself a relapse, and when Cally finds out I'm the one who brought you your clothes, what'll she do? I'll tell you what she'll do, she'll blame me, that's what she'll do."

Amusing to note, Avon decided, that through this babbling brookism, Vila had neatly taken charge, the chatter covering a distinctly efficient disappearance of the clothes from the bed, and Avon himself edged back into bed, feet lifted up and tucked under blankets before Avon had the chance to do much more than look pale and interesting.

"There, that's better," Vila announced, pleased with himself, a glass appearing in front of Avon, a cloth wiping the sweat from his face, his neck, even dipping quickly down to dry his chest.

It was better, as Vila had said, and for now, Avon was willing to give in to the weakness of his body. It was, after all, far better than looking too closely at precisely why the mere thought of

donning the rest of those clothes had brought a cold sweat to his skin and a churning heat to his stomach.

The worst of the wounds on his chest were healed now, thanks to the advanced technology they'd stolen along with the ship. The pain in his mind no longer troubled him, gone as surely as his memories. The fatigue had lifted, the hours of careful exercise had undone the damage of so long abed, he was well.

Even Cally agreed, and with Cally no longer breathing fire and brimstone down Vila's neck, Avon was finally able to get his hands on his clothes again.

He refused to think about the last time, blaming it all on physical weakness, understandable ill health, that was all. Nothing to think about, really, just shrug the clothes on, let his hands do those automatic tasks his mind had chosen to remember.

For a moment, he simply stood there, knowing that Vila was waiting for him outside that door and that the others were all there, all waiting. That the rest of the ship was there, too, waiting for him to set eyes on it for what amounted to the first time. Everyone and everything waiting, and all of it to the rhythm of his heart, thump, thump, thump, faster and faster, sweat beginning a slow, itchy trickle down the hollow of his spine.

He stood straighter, gathering up what felt unnervingly like courage, and opened the door.

Which prompted Vila to open his mouth, an endless stream of words flooding out in full spate, stopping Avon from having to think, stopping him from hearing the beating of his heart. He walked along beside Vila, looking at the walls, the floor, the odd pattern of the lights, and the odder shadows they cast. He knew it was absurd, but the ship felt almost alive, looking at him; he could almost hear the whispers as he passed, corridors stretching out at intersections like arms spread in invitation, and whispers, whispers, whispers.

It was, he told himself firmly, only his imagination. That was all. Nothing and no-one else.

His footsteps echoed behind him like a threat.

Imagination. Nothing more, he promised himself.

But he whirled round, trying to catch the eyes before they closed and hid.

"My room—which is it?"

A place to catch his breath, surely, somewhere

comfortable and best of all, private. The others might cheerfully walk into the medical room with little more than a cursory knock, but they wouldn't come barging into his room. Especially not judging by the man he'd been before.

"It's down here, this one," Vila was saying, Avon belatedly realising that Vila had been talking to him the entire time, leading him down this corridor and that, all of it unnoticed, drowned out by the whisperings in his ear.

The door opened on a room he had never seen before. A bed, neatly made up, along one wall. A table, with neat stacks of parts, several reading tapes, a few tools. One chair for that table, and over there, an entertainment unit, glittering piles of music disks filling the storage areas.

Almost, almost, something there, he'd know what, if only the whispering would just stop.

He turned round, caught sight of Vila's concern, turned away from that, caught sight of someone else.

No. Not someone else.

Himself, reflected back in a mirror.

Strange, he thought, that he hadn't once asked for a mirror before now. He was hardly ugly, although the nose could do with improvement. Dark, of hair and of eyes, neither too tall nor too small, neither too fat nor too thin, competent, compact, perhaps, one might say.

Fading round the edges too.

His jacket was heavy, heavier by the second, and the belt was a noose round him, cutting him in half, slowly, notch by notch, and he needed to take this stuff off, get rid of it, shed it like old skin, get rid of it—

Realised, appalled, that he was yelling.

Couldn't stop. Couldn't stop until he'd ripped this hideous skin from him, the blackness making him dissolve into the darkness, the darkness reaching for him, the whispers rising to screams and laughter, arguments and pain, voices he knew, people, people, all around crowding him, suffocating him—

And this time, it was Vila who was there to catch him when he fell.

He did not ask how much later it was: hours, days, what did it matter?

The black leather had been taken away, other things left lying on a chair in their place, tacit invitation for him to rise and dress, for

him to rejoin the others.

If he could.

Carefully, he brought the memories of that abortive time out, watched the memory replay, the soundtrack out of sync with the image, but that was all there was to it. A relapse, the computer had said, Orac sounding almost sympathetic in explaining away his breakdown.

Nothing much, really, he told himself. To be expected, that the redonning of the costume of his past, the reacquisition of his face, should combine to undermine his own mind's attempt to wipe the slate clean.

It came back to haunt him again: what kind of man had he been that he would erase himself? And if offered the truth, would he even want it?

The clothes were still there, still folded as neatly, still as redolent of invitation as before.

Lying here wasn't doing him any good.

Going out there might do him even less.

But one thing he did know about himself: he was no coward. Not him.

They had wanted him to call one of them if he decided to venture once more into the breaches. Well, he would venture once more into his breeches without any of their help.

Without any of them there to witness his humiliation if he should fail. Again.

He forced himself to smile as he got dressed: these were probably the brightest things in his wardrobe, which was almost as telling as the previous leather fetish gear had been. A very dark green polo neck this time, and trousers so dark a charcoal as to be almost black. The belt was black, but this one was not the weapon that the other had seemed. Socks, shoes, not boots, no jacket.

This, this he could bear.

The corridors, too, were easier this time, no whispers to follow him when he was dressed like this, and alone, no memories muttering into his ears as he walked along the paths of his past.

He wasn't sure where he was going, realised he could find his way around by thinking about what needed to be repaired where, which circuit lay behind which panel. Mechanical things, or those things necessary to his survival. Oh, small wonder Orac had been so impressed by the perfect selectivity of his memory loss.

Another corner, and with it, knowledge. Technical, thus far, and therefore painless, still no whisperings, but tension crawled up him and

settled on the back of his neck.

Flight deck. They called it the flight deck.

He could, almost, remember that he'd forgotten, but he pushed even that away, denied even that last, faint awareness of the people with whom he had risked his life.

With whom? Or *for* whom?

"Avon!"

"Are you sure you should be up here?"

"Why didn't you ask for one of us?"

"Glass of soma for the wanderer returned?"

He chose to acknowledge the last comment, taking the large glass with its small amount of green liquid. Smelled foul, but tasted reasonably fair. The others had stopped chattering at him now, had taken on that unpleasantly careful quiet reserved for the mentally unstable.

"Well?" he asked, raising his eyebrow. "What did you expect me to do? Leap into the air, a joyous clicking of my heels? Or perhaps another collapse?"

"You should not chastise us for being concerned," Cally said, the frown doing nothing to cover the smile of relief in her eyes.

"You're right, I'm just taking my own uneasiness out on you."

Which statement had Blake sitting down rather suddenly, Jenna literally agape, Cally visibly taken aback and Vila looking as if Death had just walked in and asked him to tango.

"You know," he said, refilling Avon's glass and topping up his own, "I thought I'd got used to all this. But it seems a bit much here on the flight deck, doesn't it?"

"Probably because Avon's never been civil to you on the flight deck before, Vila," Jenna commented tartly, leaving her position to come down and help herself to a healthy dose of soma. "I'm surprised the shock hasn't killed you."

"Be typical, that, wouldn't it? Blake's spent two years tossing us at Federation troops, Travis is after us and Servalan wants my teeth for a necklace—and my cause of death ends up Avon being nice to me."

"It was never that bad," Cally stepped in, drawing attention to herself, taking over the conversation. "Don't you remember the time when Blake himself said—"

But of course, Avon wasn't listening, not to the here and now. Their voices receded, and the past pressed in on him. No details, no memories, but they were there, whispering again. This time,

though, he had promised himself it would be different. This time, he was expecting the whispers, and the crush of his old life encircling him.

He leaned back against the sofa, eyes closed, so as not to see when the others looked at him, as they must, as they should. He listened, to their voices, and to the ghostly echoes of what once had been. If he let it happen, then perhaps the memories would come back, tiptoeing in whilst his attention was elsewhere.

The fascia he'd seen: it had a name, some ancient philosophy, something to do with Jenna's first hours on the ship... A name he had forgotten, remembered and forgotten again.

Zen. And *Liberator* had come from Jenna.

So. What else was there, lurking?

Himself, here, sitting like this. His body remembered, even if his mind did not. He knew precisely how far away the table was, should he decide to put his feet up. Knew how long it would take to get from here to the console that was the back-up control for the force wall. He distinctly remembered repairing some hardware, wiring that had come undone when—

When—

Nothing.

The wiring was there, all the colours, all the complexity, tools even. There had been a voice talking to him, his own voice answering, but— who?

What had they said?

The others were talking now, just general conversation, all quite supremely casual, as if it were everyday that one of their closest associates should turn up on deck with nothing to show but a handful of days remembered and a lifetime of computer skills catalogued like spare parts in a cabinet.

Decent of them, really, to be so kind to him. He should thank them. Would, were it not that they would feel awkward by having him draw attention to something they were so considerately ignoring.

Orac could fill in a lot of the gaps, or Zen could. Tap into either machine, and some of the data would be there. Zen was there on the flight deck at all times, Orac tended to be taken along with the people, so both machines must have recorded large chunks of his life. He could retrieve it, if he wanted to.

If.

Such a big word. If. If he wanted to. If he chose to. If, if, if.

He could hear Blake talking to Jenna, her answer sharp, a nearly inaudible shushing coming from Cally to shut her up. Blake again, murmuring, too low for Avon to catch the words, but the very quietness of it stirred his memory, made the pain stretch and yawn and threaten to swallow him whole. Blake's voice was very low, the intensity quite daunting, as he argued—

No.

Avon slammed the door shut on everything, all of it, it didn't matter, none of it mattered. Not when the pain was there. Not when remembering felt like torture.

He had been right to wipe the slate clean, and was he a greedy child to want the remembrances without the pain?

He opened his eyes, and conversation stopped, stuttered, started up again. No-one stared at him, no-one fussed, they just carried on as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

His head hurt. His chest, too, and sundry other bits and pieces. A good enough excuse.

"I need to take something for this headache. I'll be back later."

"You should be in bed, Avon."

"No, Blake, Avon's right to be up and about. It will do him far more good now than lying in bed could. Do you want me to come with you to help?"

"Thank you, but I think I need to practise coping for myself."

Slowly, body troubling him almost as much as mind, he left the flight deck and the others behind, and refused to acknowledge the pregnant silence his departure engendered.

They had settled into a routine, of sorts. Subtly, or blatantly in Vila's case, they would try to jog Avon's memory. Subtly, or obviously in Vila's case, Avon refused their aid. Around and around they danced, a minuet of memory and forgetting, finding and losing, the ballet slowly becoming battle.

And then the inevitable happened.

A rebel group needed help. Only the rankest of fools could expect Blake to deny succour to those in need.

The argument grew louder as Avon approached the flight deck, the discord rising and falling into discrete words, voices scarcely reined in.

"—mollycoddle him forever."

"And I wouldn't try such a thing. But we don't

need him to teleport down this time. I can manage perfectly well with you and Cally—"

"Only if you destroy the complex. If Avon were to go, then he could reprogram the computers—"

"Which the Federation would know immediately and simply go back to the original programming—"

"That's not what Orac said and you know it. You just don't want to risk him being hurt the way he was the last time. Come on, Blake, you can't let guilt and fear rule your life."

"He's not going down because the situation does not require him."

Avon descended the stairs, silence his wake. "How much destruction will there be if I go down?"

Blake, mulish, daring Avon to risk arguing with him. "That's really not the issue—"

"Then what is?"

"Jenna thinks my original plan is better than my revised plan."

"And the differences are?"

"In the original," Jenna beat Blake to the punch, "you went down with the rest of us, we made it look like a routine raid, while you reprogrammed the computers to feed false data to the Federation and to sabotage the research readings, you finish your job, we all leave, making the Federation think that it was the experimental weapons' store we were after all the time."

"And the revised plan?"

"We blow everything up."

"You propose," Avon said to Blake quite calmly, on the surface at least, "to blow up an experimental weapons research facility? Whilst having limited knowledge of exactly which weapons they have down there?"

"Do you have a better plan?"

"No, but I think you did. The first plan has the benefit at least that it will kill far fewer people."

"When have you ever cared about the body count?" Jenna demanded.

That shut him up.

To not care—about a body count?

What sort of people were these? What sort of man had *he* been?

Not something to be examined too closely, that was certain.

"Blake—"

"All right, all right, I admit, I would much rather Avon reprogramme their systems. But I can't take

the risk of him having another one of those black outs, and I can't risk his life."

"It's *my* life. The choice of whether or not to risk it is *mine*. And I say I'm going down."

Jenna and Blake started arguing both sides of the argument, Avon caught neatly in the middle.

"That's enough," Avon said, but they ignored him, amidst excoriations of guilt and accusations of callousness. "Has it occurred to you, Blake, that I might *want* to participate in this? After all, I've been on this ship for two years—you're obviously not the only one to believe in this cause."

And he had the great satisfaction of leaving the two of them in stunned silence and gaping widely enough to land a ship in.

Suiting up, and the pleasure of shocking both Blake and Jenna had long since worn off, replaced by the revulsion engendered by hearing Orac's detailed report of just exactly what sort of weapon was being developed down there.

Blake, creeping up behind him like a ghost. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Are you?"

"Always. But you..."

"A leopard can, it seems, change its spots."

"Can it? Or can it just blend with the herd long enough to find a bolthole?"

"Listen, Blake, I don't know what the hell I was like before, but I can tell you right now that if I say that I'm going down there to reprogramme their computers, then that is precisely what I will do," said viciously, his finger jabbing into Blake with all the force that memories had once used on him.

"And if you think for so much as a second, that I would find a home amidst people who build some of the foulest weapons known to inhumanity, then I'm very, very glad that I'm not you. And that I'm not what used to be me either."

"That's not what I meant—"

"Then what did you mean? That I'd find arid land, dangerous levels of chemical pollution and UVB levels high enough to fry a man an alluring bolthole? So you think I'm either stupid or amoral. You really should ease up on all this flattery, else it shall surely go to my head."

"I meant," Blake began with the air of a man who'd been through all this before, "that..." He hesitated, conceded that he could either bluster or tell the truth. No less brave than Avon, he said: "It's just an old fear of mine, that you would one day leave without even telling me first."

The fury left Avon abruptly, astonishment covering the flood of very real affection he felt. "Old habits die hard, hmm? Then I give you my word, Blake. If ever I should decide to leave, then I shall tell you so. Before, rather than after, the fact."

"Thank you."

And for the first time since Avon's painful rebirth, the old fire began slowly to rekindle.

Flawless, the plan went off without the slightest hitch. On the flight deck after, glasses in their hands, the relaxation of a good job well done, Avon sat in their midst, and basked in belonging.

Scarcely had they caught their breaths from that than Avalon had asked them to provide transportation and firepower to a small group of guerrillas willing to exile itself on a miserably cold, wet planet the better to harry the Federation Flight Academy's attempt to train yet more pilots to replace those lost with ever increasing rapidity. Another raid after that, a week of flurried activity, of hurried conversations, hasty meals. Then came Blake's next idea, one that Avon was more than willing to abet.

"And after the medical changes are made, they call them mutoids?" Avon said in disgust.

"Oh, I dunno," Vila said, parking himself on the flight deck sofa beside Avon, "Travis likes them enough."

"That's obscene, Vila."

Vila paled, obviously envisioning Travis, with a mutoid. "I think I'm going to be sick," he said.

"Then don't sit so close to me," Avon said tartly and knew, immediately, from the expression on Vila's face that he had, for a moment, sounded exactly like his own late, unlamented self.

And just how much is a man defined by genetics, he wondered uneasily, and his environment?

"This procedure," he asked, "exactly what is involved?"

"Don't say anything! Make him read it or have Orac tell him all the sick bits later. Or at least wait until I'm out of earshot. Preferably on a different ship in a different quadrant of a different galaxy."

"Point taken, Vila," Blake said, "but it's still not going to get you out of taking your turn on the flight deck. Avon, why don't you come with me and I'll give you the details."

Automatically, Avon turned towards the galley, but Blake took his arm, steered him elsewhere.

"Well now," Avon said quite blandly, a tone that would once have sent even Blake ducking for

cover, "at least this saves me having to ask the traditional cliché."

"My place because this is where I have the printouts," said with as much dignity as Blake could muster, and it still wasn't enough to disguise either his embarrassment or his desire. "If you'll just have a look at these..."

Avon's intended response to that laughably businesslike tone was lost the instant he glanced at the papers in his hand, words leaping out at him like assassins.

"This is impossible," he breathed, turning the pages, going back to re-read a detail that was inconceivable. "This is—"

"Beyond description?"

"If only it were. Some of these descriptions are more than graphic enough."

"That," Blake said, taking some of the papers before they fell, "is the bowdlerised version. I destroyed the original."

"Keeping things from us?"

Blake nibbled on his thumb, and Avon looked away, knowing that he should recognise that trademark gesture, refusing to be discomfited by his lack of recall.

"Well? Are you going to tell me all of it or do you believe that ignorance is bliss?"

"No, Avon, it's you who seems to think ignorance is bliss."

That made him wince. "It still rankles, then, that I forgot you?"

"It still..." a too brief smile, "rankles, yes, that you forgot me."

"If it's any consolation, I've forgotten everyone else too."

"Oh, that's no consolation at all. And—" breaking in even as Avon opened his mouth to reply, "that's not why I brought you here. Just leave it, will you? This report..."

And Avon granted him the lifeline, and perhaps even admitted that Blake wasn't the only one grabbing the lifeline of work.

Over an hour later, and Avon was wishing he hadn't asked for any details, not the least little one of them. But there was one more detail he wanted. "You still haven't told me why you're withholding information from us."

"I'm not withholding information. I'm just not giving it to you."

"And I've left my credit disk at home. Perhaps I could owe you for it?"

"Don't be facetious."

"You'd prefer me obstreperous, perhaps?"

Beyond his will, Blake's face showed exactly how he'd prefer Avon: in bed, waiting, willing and ready.

"This report—you won't give me the original because you're protecting me, am I right?"

The lust written all over Blake's face was emended by a stricken look.

"Given my recent mental state, that's probably the wisest thing."

Now it was astonishment all over Blake's face. "I thought you'd rip my head off for doing that."

"You really must remember not to expect the same reactions as before."

A long pause, Blake staring at Avon, Avon returning the gaze measure for measure.

"You still want me," Avon said. "Why do you keep such a distance between us?"

"I wasn't entirely sure of my welcome. And it seemed...churlish to approach a man who had already cut me out of his life once."

"Churlish—now there's a charming, old-fashioned word, to go with a charming, old-fashioned motive," Avon snapped angrily. "You'll be taking me shopping for a chastity belt next."

"Certainly an interesting image, but I've no desire to force you into celibacy."

"No desire? Oh, I think you have every desire. I think you want me so desperately it's killing you. And I think that if I dallied with anyone else on this ship, you would be hard pressed to keep your hands from round their neck."

"Don't be ridiculous. That's hardly my style—"

"No? And yet the others were never actually certain whether or not we were sleeping together, but not one of them has made a move toward me."

"That's not *my* intimidation, Avon. For that, you'll have to look far closer to home."

"Am I so unapproachable?"

Blake ran his hands through his hair, let out a gusty sigh: this Avon was still as predictable as shifting sands, and twice as hard to cross. "You can be, yes."

"And if I weren't? What would you do then?" Asked with such benign curiosity, only the glitter in the dark eyes displaying any emotion at all.

"It would take more than that."

"Why? It's obvious you loved me, and I think you love me still."

"As you were so fond of saying, what has love

got to do with anything.”

“You could say,” dry humour, a hint of a smile, “that I’ve changed my mind.”

“What if I say that you’re not the only one?”

“You can change your mind, Blake,” Avon said softly, and he was far closer than Blake had expected, “but men like you can never change their heart.”

Blake’s eyes closed, giving Avon all the opportunity he needed. He closed the distance between them, and kissed Blake.

Who opened his mouth to Avon, deepening the kiss, his hunger a palpable thing, a rising hardness against Avon’s body.

“I shouldn’t,” Blake said, lips against Avon’s hair.

“Why the hell not?”

“Well, it could be argued that you’re not in your right mind.”

“The same could be said of you. And I could argue, Blake, that I am in my right mind, now, more so than I have been for years.”

Blake stroked his hands down Avon’s arms, his own strong hands relishing the meeting of equal strength. “The others will be looking for us,” he said.

“The others,” Avon replied drily, “aren’t quite as naive as you would have them. You and I disappear from the flight deck together, using a spurious excuse along the lines of come and see my etchings and you expect them to be looking for us?”

“I was giving you a chance to withdraw without drawing blood if you didn’t want to do this.”

“If I didn’t want to do this, then I would hardly still be here, now would I?”

“But you weren’t exactly falling all over me, were you?”

“And did you always talk this much before sex? If you did, it would go a long way to explaining why you weren’t sure if we were lovers or not.”

Blake erupted into that unexpected laughter of his, laughter that Avon found quite astonishingly attractive. “On the verge of falling asleep, are you, Avon?”

Avon pressed his hips forwards, just once. “Does that answer your question?”

The response was a groan, and Blake kissing him again, tongue thrusting into his mouth, hands grabbing him, holding him tight, as if Blake never wanted to let go ever again.

“Miss me?” Avon asked, lips still touching Blake’s.

“One thing you always credited me with was my perfect aim.”

“Care to refresh my memory?”

And it mattered to neither of them what had gone before, what either one could or could not remember, what either had needed to forget, or couldn’t manage to forget no matter what.

It didn’t take much for them to end up on the bed, clothing scattered here and there, clothes still being shed like masks as they entangled themselves in each other, legs interlocking, coming apart, Blake’s knee slipping between Avon’s thighs, Avon’s legs strong around Blake as he rolled them over. Astride Blake now, Blake’s hands clasped tightly in his fists, Blake’s arms stretched out taut over Blake’s head, the hardness of muscle a direct contrast to the softness of pillow.

“Is this what it was like?” Avon asked, sliding his rump back and forth across the demand of Blake’s cock. “Is this why I wore all that leather?”

“Sometimes.”

“And other times?”

“Other times,” and the voice was as much seduction as the words, as the evocation of times past, atavistic desire rising in Avon, “I was the one on top of you. You liked to be tied up, sometimes.”

“And the belt? What did I use that belt for?”

“Nothing you ever told me about.”

No answer that, not the absolution he was looking for, but it was something. “Did I ever hurt you?”

“Not physically,” said stoically, not even the eyes betraying the depth of pain.

“But otherwise... What I must have put you through if you couldn’t even trust me enough to tell me what we were in the past.”

“I wasn’t exactly a saint myself.”

“Do you always take on all the guilt?”

Avon’s erection was flagging, his expression troubled as the deeds of the past threatened the hopes of the future. “Don’t, Avon,” Blake said, flexing his arms in tacit enquiry, “don’t let this slip away from us.”

“Could it?”

Blake closed his eyes then, and was glad Avon was holding him back. “I thought the truth would have to come out sooner or later.”

“And the truth is?”

“It slipped away from us before. Long before

you were hurt. Shortly after Gan was killed.”

The sudden cold shocked him, Avon’s absence a torment after such hope.

“What did I do?”

“You? Oh, it was nothing you did,” Blake said, hearing his own cutting emphasis.

A bitter smile for that, one Blake hated to see reappear. “Then what did I not do?”

“You wouldn’t forgive me.”

“For Gan’s death?”

“For putting ‘that damned, bloody Cause’ before you. And me, for that matter.”

Blake rolled over, raised himself on one elbow behind Avon. The bowed back was cool to the touch, and tense. “It wasn’t just you, or me. Neither one of us would give the other an inch.”

“But now, of course, I’m a different man.”

“And I’ve learned my lesson.”

“Have you?”

“We won’t know until we set the exam, will we?”

“And whom shall we ask to mark your results?”

“Anyone you want.”

“Hardly the witty repartée of my dreams.”

“So that’s what you’re calling it today.”

“As opposed to fucking?”

Blake’s hand was very warm as it traced his spine. “Is that all it is?”

“Right now, all it is is a lot of talk and no action.”

“Do you want me to change that?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, will you stop treating me like an invalid? I am perfectly capable of putting an end to anything that isn’t what I want.”

“Then I shall make sure,” Blake said between the kisses he used to map his way up Avon’s back to the sensitivity at the base of his neck, “that I am always precisely what you want.”

“Right now, what I want,” Avon said, and turned round, manoeuvring them until they were both lying down, “is sex. After all, you still have the advantage over me—you know my body, better than I do myself in fact, while you...” His fingers, light as thistledown, followed the pulse in the heavy vein the length of Bodie’s cock, “You are a mystery to me.”

And stole Blake’s breath clean away by leaning down and taking him in his mouth. As with so many other details, his mind had forgotten, but his body remembered still. His throat knew how to open, how to accommodate Blake’s girth and

length, and the sensation dizzied him. He used his tongue, would have smiled at the response had his lips not been so tightly stretched. Sucking hard, the cock leaving his mouth with an audible pop, Avon let Blake go, but only for the barest second, taking him in again, consuming him, the power intoxicating. Inches from his eyes, Blake’s thighs were trembling, the long muscles flexing as Blake struggled with the imperative to thrust.

Even now, Avon wasn’t entirely certain what he wanted—everything, all of it, nothing omitted, nothing unexperienced, certainly—but the details of this, the rediscovery of his body’s fond memories, he was faced with an embarrassment of riches, Blake’s cock in his mouth, Blake’s arse a temptation, his own body hollow with the need to be filled.

With a luxurious lick, he emptied his mouth of Blake, and kissed his way up the lush body, tempted to linger by the enthusiastic response of small brown nipples. Eventually, Blake a writhing mass of pleasure under him, Avon rested, full body, atop of Blake, his arms comfortably folded on Blake’s chest. “So tell me,” he said quite conversationally, as if his own cock were not seeping need onto Blake’s hardness, “what did I like best?”

Blake groaned at that, and enveloped Avon in his arms, cocooning him, rolling them over until Avon was pinned under him, his arms spreadeagled by Blake’s hands, his legs spread by Blake’s, his cock nudged aside by Blake’s.

“What you liked best, not that you were ever willing to admit it, was to have me fuck you through the mattress.”

“That should do for now,” Avon remarked, pushing his hips upwards, his cock trailing through the hair on Blake’s belly, Blake’s cock dipping downwards, between Avon’s cheeks, the full, rounded head dabbing against his hole. “And next time, perhaps, I shall fuck you.”

“I’ve always been—” the words broke off for a moment, Blake’s eyes closing as Avon’s body opened, “—a great believer in equality.”

Avon shifted a bit, lifting himself up, relaxing back down onto the pillow Blake had put under him, one that raised him just the right amount. Unlike Avon, Blake had obviously forgotten not a single detail of their sexual encounters. There was a slickness sliding into him, Blake’s wet finger, and then Blake had him lifted up, shoulders braced on the bed, his backside where Blake could reach it,

Blake's tongue entering him with devastating intimacy. Blake laved him there, his curls teasing Avon's cock, as his tongue sundered Avon's will.

Why the hell had he chosen to forget this? It was surely nirvana, pure bliss, to feel Blake's tongue fucking him like this, but then that paled to nothing, superseded by the sensation of cock pressing against him, into him, filling him completely. No longer inviolate, no longer alone, but joined, completed, and the pleasure of it all was unbearable. Every thrust deep inside him stroked along his prostate, and every withdrawal stretched him. As Blake pushed into him, the crisp curls caressed his balls, and Blake's firm stomach rubbed his cock, almost enough, but before that could become a need, it was taken care of too, Blake's large hand encompassing him, cock held in a tight tunnel of warmth and perfect friction.

He could lose himself in this, and yielded to the pleasure of it, gave himself up to the binding of his strength and Blake's, the rhythm the pulse of his blood pounding through his veins. The sensations built and grew, so much better than the pallid imitations his own right hand had given him of late. He stretched downwards, and his fingers could just reach where Blake's body went into him, the large cock slick and hot as it slid from him, feeling even bigger as it went back inside him.

The cock in him swelled, and Blake thrust harder than before, and went still, pouring his essence deep within Avon, and Avon was transfixed by the expression on Blake's face. Inside him, Blake was no longer completely hard, and Avon's own need began to howl and wail. But Blake knew him as Avon no longer knew himself, and withdrew from his body, eager mouth coming down to suck Avon inside. A matter of seconds then, and Avon was coming, the pleasure of it turning him inside out, draining him into Blake.

Afterwards, Blake lay at his side, tracing idle patterns in the sparse hair on Avon's chest.

"I must be a fool," Avon announced calmly.

"For what?" Blake asked, as if it were every day that Kerr Avon called himself a fool without adding 'for listening to you, Blake' to it.

"To forget all this, to give it all up—proof of complete insanity."

"Or perhaps," the small voice of hope just stirring, "you had to give up the good to get rid of the bad. There's only so much the mind can do, even a mind as convoluted and twisted as yours."

"At least that's better than being a complete idiot."

Blake couldn't help himself kissing Avon then, sighing as he was welcomed, encouraged, Avon's hands roving Blake's back, stroking him, exploring the mass of muscle and bone that he had once known so well.

And Blake certainly wasn't about to ruin it all by telling Avon that this would be the first time, ever, that the sex had not ended in an argument, with Avon getting up out of bed and storming off—on those nights when he didn't kick Blake out himself.

The next morning, in the teleport area, Vila took one look at them, broke into the largest of grins and said: "So when's the happy day then?"

Blake winced in anticipation and waited for the thunderbolt at his side to erupt. And waited.

"I don't know about the happy day, but last night wasn't exactly miserable," Avon said mildly, although his eyes were bright, and shockingly, there was an incipient smile threatening.

"What are you talking about?" Jenna, clattering down the corridor in boots that had no place on a raid, but that she seemed to manage in, in spite of gravity, physics and common sense.

"Avon's just telling us about his and Blake's sex life," Vila piped up.

Blake sat down, Jenna looked as if her jaw were going to go through the floor, and Avon smiled, amused in spite of himself. "You're exaggerating again, Vila," he said, moving past the other man to set the teleport co-ordinates.

"More's the pity. At least it would give us something to chat about during the long, space nights, wouldn't it?"

"Not to mention it being the closest you're going to come to a sex life of your own," Avon put in tartly, but there was still that hint of a smile there, something tremendously puzzling about his expression.

And then he looked down at Blake and it was obvious: Kerr Avon looked like a man in love.

While the others were still trying valiantly to cover their shock, Avon set the co-ordinates and checked his weapon. "Shall we?" he said, gesturing to the teleport deck, refusing to speculate on what he had been that simple co-operation should garner so extreme a response.

Cally arrived then, throwing them back into routine, breaking the spell that this pleasantness

was causing. The usual procedure, and they were down, if not safe.

Quietly, they found their way along corridors Orac had mapped out, old architectural plans never the best guarded of secrets. Round a corner now, and ahead, they could see the nerve-centre of the installation, an ant hill crawling with white coats and black uniforms, weapons and gadgetry abounding.

Silently, Blake gave the signals each team needed, Avon coming with him as Jenna went off to the right, Cally and Vila to the left. A few moments only, and then the chaos began, troopers and mutoids running right and left to the sources of explosions.

Avon wanted to thump Blake, going first like that, but it was too late to stop him now, even though it was against the plan for Blake to be the first through the door. But first he was, and Avon was hard pressed to keep up with him enough to offer any real cover. The computers were in front of him, and he put one weapon down to take up his weapon of choice, nimble fingers darting over controls, tools unhooking hard drives, the storage wafers making satisfying, brisk snapping noises as Avon broke them into tiny little pieces. He heard it behind him then, the thunder of approaching footsteps, booted feet coming at a dead run, a woefully appropriate phrase, it turned out, as the first of the mutoids skidded into the room.

Instinctively, Avon raised his gun and fired, smoothly, bodies tumbling like ten pins, Blake at his side, the two of them cutting a swathe towards the door. A quick movement from Blake, and then the deafening roar of an explosion in a small room, Avon and Blake thrown against the corridor wall, a rain of blood and body parts flooding them.

Into the charnel stench came Jenna, her face twisting in repugnance as her boot heel skidded in bruised meat that was still vaguely recognisable as a human body.

"Don't you think this is a bit of overkill?" she asked, not that Blake or Avon could hear her, not after the impact of the explosion.

Hand signals again, then, the three of them pelting down the corridor to help Cally and Vila finish their side of things. More mutoids and more troopers coming at them every time they rounded a corner, giving them no time for thought, no time

even for any reaction beyond those basics necessary for survival.

But back on the *Liberator*, in the awful quiet, the ship running as fast as they could make her to some planet where there wasn't a sea of blood in their wake, there was time and time enough for reflection, and not everyone liked what they saw.

In front of Blake's door, waiting for it to open, impatience setting in. Another imperious peal of the door intercom, but still no reaction. Well, it wasn't for nothing that he'd had Vila reteach him the fine art of breaking and entering.

The main room was in darkness, light spilling from the bathroom, Blake's solid form made amorphous by the shower wall.

Avon moved the chair, seated himself, and waited.

The shower finished, and Blake emerged, naked, hair still dripping. As he sat there watching, Avon wondered how many times he'd waited for Blake like this, how many times he had seen this.

Blake turned round then, and without so much as the scantest hint of surprise that there was someone sitting in the dark in his once-locked bedroom, gave Avon a welcoming smile. "I'm glad you let yourself in—can't hear a thing in there."

"So I noticed. I also couldn't help but notice that you couldn't hear anything down in that installation."

Blake gave him a look for that, one Avon knew now punctuated his every relapse into his old self. "Couldn't you offer the condemned man a drink? Or at least make a pretense of small talk before going for the jugular?"

"Thanks, but I've already had my quota of jugulars and condemned men for the day."

"Well, I shall have a drink. A large one, as you're obviously in one of your more difficult moods."

"With which you are more familiar than I."

"Into each life a little rain must fall."

"Judging by the amount of alcohol you're presently pouring down your throat, I'd say it's more a monsoon."

"You're the expert."

"I was the expert. Now the only thing I know for sure are computers."

"Doubts, Avon?" Blake asked him grimly, his hands less than entirely steady as he poured himself yet another glass.

"Can you expect anything else? What we did down there—"

"Will set back production of standard mutoids by months, and quite possibly permanently derail the development of the new, improved models."

"What a joy such blinkered vision must be."

"Why, what else should I say?"

"How about a reference, in passing, naturally, about the people we killed?"

"Is *that* what's worrying you? *You*? Amnesia as conscience. You should tell Orac, he could spend months doing research on that."

"What I was in the past is dead and gone. What I'm concerned about is what I am here and now."

"Oh, come, now, Avon, a man as sophisticated and intelligent as you, surprised that we killed a few people? How do you think revolutions are usually won? By lofty arguments in the halls of academe with people politely taking turns to express their opinions?"

A twist midstream, Avon watching Blake. "How many times have you bathed since we regained the ship?"

"No more often than you."

"So the blood did trouble you."

Blake turned on him then, the polite, disinterested mask slipping to reveal the murk within, sarcasm sharpening his voice to stiletto sharpness. "Trouble me? Oh, no, Avon, I enjoy having bits of people stuck in my hair and under my fingernails. I'm ecstatic that my clothes and skin stink of death and dying. I wake up with a smile on my face every morning just thinking about it."

"Then why the hell are you doing this?"

"Because..." Calming, for a moment, both hands coming up to tug at his hair, smoothing it back thereafter, those same hands coming down to cover his face as if he could wipe even the memory of the blood away. "Because that's the price and the penance I have to pay."

"Other people give their lives and all you can say is that it's *penance* for you? You didn't mention that megalomania was one of your hobbies."

"For once, just for once, would you stop trying to pick me apart like a fucking vulture and just listen? Penance, Avon, yes, because I suffer when those people die. When I kill them. I've had their blood on my hands before and I will again, and that, Avon, *that* is a horror I have to live with every single day."

"Then why don't you stop?"

It was supposed to be a laugh, sounded more like a sob. "Easier to rip my heart out and still live than give in and leave everyone else at the mercy of the Federation."

"Everyone else? Pardon me, but I don't see 'everyone else' rallying behind you and joining the fight." Or sharing your blood price.

"The food is drugged, the water is drugged, the very air is drugged—how are they supposed to resist?"

"You seem to have managed."

"Only sometimes."

Orac had given him enough dry facts for his imagination to fill in the bilious details, sympathy softening his attack. "If you could resist, if even only sometimes, then why do you forgive them for never resisting at all?"

"Because I wouldn't wish my experiences on my worst enemy. And because they're not me."

"And there we have the crux of the matter, don't we? Ego, pure and simple. I don't have many personal memories yet, but one of them is a dream, where you were dressed up as a knight in shining armour and you were tilting at me, killing me. You, of course, remained untouched."

"Why blame that on me? It could just as easily be your fear of me because I really am your hope, your knight in shining armour, and you're terrified of finding yourself tilting at windmills right by my side. Or two paces behind me."

Avon's eyes narrowed, and the nastiest of retorts danced on the tip of his tongue. But then he took in the state Blake was in, the amount of alcohol he had downed in so short a time. "Be that as it may," something he would definitely not be thinking about later, "it doesn't answer why you insist on wading up to your armpits in blood."

Oddly enough, that made Blake smile. "You said that to me once before. You said that I could wade up to my armpits in blood if I wanted to, but as soon as we destroyed Star One, you wanted it to be over."

And absorb that easily and quickly, Avon told himself, rather taken aback. "You mean, I was going to leave?"

"From the day you set foot on *Liberator*."

"And would you have let me?"

"You never actually got round to departing, did you?"

"And of course, after Star One, I was in no condition to do anything."

"Apart from forget."

"That's why you've never seriously questioned why I forgot, isn't it? You knew better than I."

Blake just took another mouthful of alcohol.

"Tell me, Blake, what would you have done were you in my shoes?"

Blake came over to him then, standing right in front of him, the heaviness of his genitals within a hand's span of Avon's mouth. "Why did you come here tonight, Avon?" he asked softly, leaning down now, hands on the arms of Avon's chair, his body entrapping Avon. "Was it for absolution? I grant it you. Was it to play messiah to the lepers in your head? I name them healed. Was it to torment me? Then mission accomplished and you can," leaning in even closer now, lips so very close, his breath touching Avon's skin, "just fuck off. All right?"

Blake retreated, crossing the room, heading back to the depleted bottle of booze. "No, you're not all right, are you?"

"Oh, how the mighty are fallen. Time was, Avon, when you would have had me flayed and filleted by now and hung up to dry."

"While you would stand there and take it stoic as a martyr. And take that as punishment for what you'd done. More penance, Blake, so that you could forgive yourself enough for what you'd done so that you could go out and do it again. And again."

"Today was the exception. It's not usually so..."

"Messy?"

"It's not usually so tragic."

"Then why even risk such disasters?"

"Because I've told you, I can't *not* fight! How can I stand aside, knowing what I do, and let the Federation continue?"

"But how can you expect anyone else to come with you? How dare you expect us—*me*—to wade in that blood with you?"

"I can't," said with monumental sadness.

"Oh, but you do. You expect us to fight right beside you—"

"I expect you to leave one day. That's one of my life's few certainties, Avon. And that's about the only thing I expect from you."

Considering what he'd been thinking since this afternoon, there really wasn't much Avon could say to that.

"There has to be a better way than blowing things up installation by installation."

"Which is why we are establishing rebel groups on every inhabited planet, in every Dome—and

why else do you think I've been talking to the Free Traders about moving large amounts of matériel?"

"But that's still doing it piecemeal, with one minor raid after another. There must be a way to destroy the Federation without killing so many people."

"No there's not."

"At least consider the idea instead of dismissing it so cavalierly. Some of us, Blake," said with some of the old fire and brimstone, "can't quite get the blood off our hands. It doesn't matter how many times I scrub myself, I can still smell their blood on me."

Dry as wine. "And it upsets you?"

"No, and I suspect you know that that is the *real* problem."

"It had crossed my mind."

"Not that you would say anything to precipitate my departure."

"Can you blame me?"

"All too easily. You have us wading through blood when there must have been a way for Orac to do some damage to those computers from up here, a long way from the blood and spilled guts of other people."

"I said there's no other way!"

And therein lay Avon's answer. "There's no other way—for you. That's it, isn't it, Blake? You have to do it this way, hands on—why? Do you get some sick kick from it? Did you and I get together after one of these little raids and lick the blood from each other's bodies and—"

The blow knocked him from his seat, and Blake made no move to help him. "You've always been a sick bastard, Kerr Avon, but that's going too far, even for you."

"But it doesn't alter the truth, does it? You need to fight the Federation this way because if you don't—what? You'll sink back into the soporised mire you escaped from 'sometimes'? Is that what worries you?"

"No, Avon," and Blake's voice was dangerous and quiet, "it's because I don't enjoy the killing, because the sight and smell of blood makes me sick and because seeing people dead at my hands makes my soul ache. But what would it make me if I could simply give Orac a nice, clean dispassionate command that would wipe out lives, without me even seeing a single one of their faces? I almost ended up like that, Avon, over Star One, and I won't risk it happening again."

"Not even for me?"

"Especially not for you."

"And if I were to tell you that I refused to take the risk that I might well end up enjoying killing with my own two hands, would you give up your Cause for me?"

"Avon, Avon, you just don't understand, do you? I can't even give up my cause for *me*."

"Which leaves us—"

"Precisely where we've always been. Me, locked into something I have to finish, you on the verge of leaving."

"And nowhere for us to meet in the middle."

"One of us will have to give in."

"And it won't be you."

"It never has been before."

On that cheerful note, Avon went over and helped himself to a hefty drink.

So quietly Avon wasn't entirely sure he'd heard it, Blake said, "Stay with me tonight?"

And remembering everything that he did, how much courage had it taken for Blake to ask such a thing of him? And how much more courage would it take to turn him down—to deny both of them?

"Why not?" Avon said easily, the rest of his drink disappearing in one long swallow.

It was slower tonight, much slower, and every caress was a goodbye.

The last of his various bags were piled in the teleport area when he heard the footsteps coming. He didn't need to look up to see who it was.

"I was just about to come and tell you."

"Orac told me. Said you were bringing your valuables to the teleport room."

Avon stacked and restacked all these things that he could and almost certainly would replace at some point. At least it was better than turning to look at every embezzler's biggest nightmare, the

perfect mark that got away. "And when has Orac ever been wrong? I've taken some things from the treasure room, and I shall keep my weapon, I think."

"The teleport bracelet?"

"Do you want it back?"

"Don't be stupid, Avon."

"If I weren't to be stupid by your standards, I wouldn't be leaving."

"If you didn't want me to think you were being stupid, you would have left two years ago. Before it hurt so much. For both of us."

"Good point. Well, obviously, Vila's stupidity was far more contagious than we thought."

A heavy silence, Avon finally standing up. "There's nothing else we can do, is there?"

Blake turned away from him then, rechecking the settings on the teleport console. "When this is all over..."

Avon did not change the 'when' to 'if': they could both hear it just as clearly unspoken.

"When this is all over, will Orac be able to find you?"

Avon thought about the blood on his hands, and the exhilaration of surviving while one's enemy died. Thought, too, of Blake dripping gore, his shining armour tarnished and stained. "I don't know," he finally said. "I honestly don't know."

"When it's over, I'll look for you."

"A possessive bastard like you?" said smilingly, to take the sting from the words and the pain from Blake's eyes. "You won't look for me, you'll come after me."

"I will, you know."

"Yes," was all Avon said.

And the last he saw as the teleport exiled him from the *Liberator* was Blake's eyes as the leader of the revolution fought the hardest battle of all and set Avon free.