No matter how many planetfalls he made, Blake could never quite get used to the light. It was pervasively different from shipboard or Dome illumination, the natural seeming so very artificial to him. It always struck him deep inside, a bizarre truth that light could be warm, that it could be felt on the skin, that it could change with such irresponsible frivolity. He walked slowly through the copse, touching the tree boles as he passed, fascinated by the rough texture of living growth. Ground springy beneath his feet, he found himself walking almost flat-footed, bracing himself against so unreliable a surface. He laughed out loud at the thought, at the very absurdity of considering a planet’s surface to be less stable and still than the floor of a ship hurtling through the uncertainties of space. The smorgasbord of smells thrilled him, flora and fauna inundating his senses. A sweet smell hovered around him: honeysuckle. Before he disappeared off for a solitary break, Avon had informed him that the initial colonists had imported as much of Earth’s natural and extant life as was possible. For the first time ever, Blake found himself thanking the Federation for their thoroughness. Coming to a particularly lush patch of grass, garlanded by buoyant clover, bordered by reeds, he realised that he had finally reached the stream the Rebels had mentioned. It was small and slow, almost completely silent, no tumbled stones, no loamy moss, no darting fish—hardly a respectable stream at all. At least the water was fresh and cold when Blake sipped some from cupped hands. He took off his boots and socks, standing up to his ankles in the chill flow. He stayed there for a while, thinking, regaining some sense of calm and balance, after the frantic pace of the past five weeks. Eventually, toes whitened, numb and wrinkled, he retreated to the bank of the stream, lying down on the disconcertingly pliant ground, pillowing his head on his arms.

The sun was very warm on him and he thought of the banned literature he had read such a lifetime ago. His great-aunt had been a rebel, or merely rebellious, he was never certain which, corrupting both the father and the wide-eyed idealistic child named Roj. One of his favourite passages was the fragment that survived about a child in the now-uninhabitable North American Desert, in a naïve era when a boy could steal off to lie in the sun by a great river. This might not be any great river, but it was the closest thing to innocent childhood Blake had been free enough to have. Gleaming sunlight and bright-winged insects flitted across his face, their shadows chasing the troubled shades from his mind. He began to drift away, thoughts sliding gently from topic to topic, idea to idea, until, finally, he eased into the realms of daydreams.

Smiling, enjoying his unaccustomed irresponsibility and foolishness, he placed himself in the shoes of the mysterious boy from the past, casting himself as Huck, idly wondering whom he could cast as Tom. A delighted chuckle bubbled from him, imagining Avon, sitting on a raft, fishing, complete with a raggedy rustic, woven straw hat. The more he thought of it, the louder he laughed, until the tears streamed from him. The hilarity ebbed weakly, leaving hiccupping giggles in their wake. Sighing, Blake eventually calmed himself, relaxing back into the lullaby of the woodland sounds. Most of them were totally unfamiliar to him, but he had been assured that not one of the creatures in the woods could or would harm him. Unless of course, as Avon had said to him, one of the inhabitants turned out to be a Federation spy… Blake smiled at the memory, of Avon so unexpectedly relaxed and at ease, strolling off into the bucolic landscape, defiantly non-conformist in black leather, studs and heavy boots. Blake wondered at him, at the contradictions so tightly contained in Avon’s compact body and manner.

Realising that he was about to start brooding again, he deliberately turned his mind away from Avon and on to any other subject he could think of, refusing to tie himself up in emotional bondage to a cypher he didn’t really think he wanted to solve. Bathed by luxurious sun, tickled by fragrant breezes, his mind conjured up thoughts of sex, images of how Jenna’s looks matched the smell of the breeze, how Cally’s long, long legs were like the slim lissome branches of the young trees. Knowing himself to be alone, unencumbered by either Cause or Halo, Blake slipped out of his shirt and threw his trousers off to lie tangled on the grass beside him. He stretched in the unexpectedly heady gloriousness of being nude with natural sunshine gilding his skin. Smiling hap-
pily to himself, he began to slowly indulge himself, with stroke of hand and image of mind.

The parlour-polite sound of a genteel throat being cleared stuttered his hand to stillness. Grabbing his shirt to cover his embarrassment, he twisted over onto his side, raking the surrounding copse for his well-mannered voyeur. Well above the ground, veiled by leaves, reclining on the long, thick branch of a spreading oak tree, Avon lay leaning against the aged trunk, shirt and boots discarded, milk-white skin pinking in the dappled sunshine and shifting shadows. “I thought you might prefer to know that you had an audience, before you gave your impromptu performance, Blake,” he said, voice quiet and missing its usual cutting edge.

“Well now, I don’t suppose I should be surprised by such lack of imagination, not considering the source is a self-admitted messiah.”

A slight chuckle came from Avon’s perch, the sound merging with the melancholy call of a nesting bird. “Well now, I don’t suppose I should be surprised by such lack of imagination, not considering the source is a self-admitted messiah.”

“Ah, but I certainly hope so.” A breeze quickened, rustling the leaves noisily, blossoming goosepimples on Blake’s exposed nakedness. “Tell me, messiah, are your carnal thoughts limited to such infantile imaginings, or are you capable of sophistication, in this area at least, as it is so woefully lacking elsewhere?”

“Why do you ask? Can’t come up with any ideas of your own? Shame on you, Avon. You had me thinking you were a genius.”

Blake seized the opportunity to have the nagging, aching question at the back of his mind answered at last. “Only me? Not the mysterious, elusive Anna?”

There was a long pause between them, then Avon spoke again. His voice was defenceless and sad, hesitant in its revelations. “You want to know about Anna? Then I shall tell you, Blake, and I wish you more joy of the knowledge than I have ever had. She was...very important to me, possibly the most important person in my entire life. I can imagine only too well what happened to her, what they must have done to her, how she must have died...”

Blake conceded to the teasing attitude, deliberately responding to Avon’s unaccustomed openness: the why and wherefores behind it be damned, and his own instinctive uneasiness at becoming too involved with the man could be damned along with them.
beauty and vulnerability. I was drawn to her like a moth to a flame…but it was not I who was burned. No, it was my Anna, arrested and tortured to death for information she never gave them, information that would have captured me, but freed her. She died for me, Blake, for my greed, for my driven need to provide her with wealth and comfort beyond that which her husband could give. She died because I would not be satisfied with what she gave me—I wanted to make her leave him, to take the risk of being a renegade, just for the…pleasure of being with me.”

Cautious, moved by the emotion in Avon and the story he told, Blake spoke softly. “She obviously loved you as much as you loved her.” He paused, waiting for the expected denial of emotional commitment. Into its absence, he continued, “why, then, would she not leave her husband for you?”

“Because, dolt, her husband was on the High Council and had the power—and malice—to make accusations of treason against both of us. He had the influence and he had the necessary access to the Security Forces. She stayed with him to protect me.”

Blake pondered this for a moment, wisely deciding to say nothing about married women having affairs, who managed to come up with a reason to stay with their husbands—especially when the given reason was the protection of their lover. “And when you think of love, is that all you can see? The pain and the loss?”

“Oh, no, you don’t, Blake. I’ll not allow you to practice your amateurish psychoanalysis on me.”

“Then what do you imagine, when you…”

“Masturbate? Surely so innocuous a word cannot sully your brightly shining halo. Surely even fearless leaders are allowed to experience sexuality? Or is a virgin sacrifice what your bloody Cause demands?”

“If that’s the case, I had better renounce my leadership, then, because I most certainly don’t qualify!”

The pseudo-horror and mock shock in Blake’s voice tickled Avon’s unpredictable sense of humour, just as the rebel had intended. He had no desire to waste this precious day of freedom on Avon’s darkness. As the laughter dimmed, Blake went on, twisting them onto a brighter path. He glanced over at Avon perched up a tree, idly swinging his legs, plucking leaves and dropping them to the ground below. “If you could only see yourself, Avon, the man in black, up a tree, like a stranded kitten.”

“If you could only see yourself, Blake, the man in halo with his…assets hanging out all over the place.”

Blake blushed, hurriedly looking down at himself, twitching the brown shirt over to cover his tu-mescent manhood. “Touché,” he muttered.

They maintained their separate silences for another moment, then Blake threw caution to the winds and asked his question again. “What do you think about when you masturbate?”

“What should I tell you?”

“To save me from that bottomless pit of ignorance with only Vila for company, of course.”

“Well now, I think I would prefer it if you satisfied my curiosity first and told me what you, an exemplary, gleaming icon of the Rebellion, fantasize about.”

“Oh, I see. You tell me yours and I’ll tell you mine?”

Avon smiled at the amusement in Blake’s voice. “It does seem somewhat…immature, when phrased like that. Very well, I shall go first.” He paused, giving Blake the impression that he was weighing whether or not to tell the truth, and, of course, how much. “I think of Anna. Of the times like this, when we would come to her country estate and escape the drudgeries of reality, to dwell in ‘bucolic bliss’, for a brief time.” The bitter sarcasm in his voice made Blake wince, but then the tone was gone, replaced by wistfulness. “I would climb a tree, just as I did in my childhood, at home, when I needed to escape my tutors or brothers or all the long list of things expected from me. I’d sneak into the garden and hide in the trees and dream…Anna shared that with me, in a way. She has…had a fondness for living, natural things. I simply liked to evade the pressures foisted on me by other people’s demands.”

“And?”

“And I would spin her tales, erotic stories, and she would laugh with delight, until she called me to her, to make the stories true…” Avon stopped and Blake left him his solitude, gave him time as a balm. “You haven’t quite answered my question.”

“No, I haven’t, have I?”

“And you’re not going to, are you?”

“Tell you my deepest, darkest secrets? Not on your life, Blake. Not on your life.” He sat for a moment, adrift in thoughts of the past. He stirred, bringing his mind back to Blake. “Well,” the tech said, businesslike, humour forced back into his voice, “now it’s your turn. What do you fondly imagine, on those precious few occasions when you allow yourself that most human of vices?”

“Me? As I said, I think of Jenna and Cally, of how
beautiful they are…,” he murmured, leafing through his catalogue of fantasies, “and about Vila…”

“Vila?” Avon spluttered. “You think how beautiful Vila is?”

Blake laughed uproariously. “No, no, not how beautiful he is. How skilled those hands of his must be!”

“That’s better. You had me worried there, Blake. For a moment, I feared that it might actually be possible for you to be even stupider than I had already thought.” For the first time, Avon looked at Blake as he spoke, keeping his attention on him, waiting for Blake to answer his question. “And what of me, Blake? Do you think of me?”

Blake stared up at him, mesmerised by the deep eyes, held by the unspoken words locked within them. “Oh yes,” he breathed, turning over to face Avon, letting his shirt drop at the sexual willingness written in those eyes, “oh, yes, indeed.” He gave in to his second greatest weakness: wanting Avon. “I think of how your hands would feel on me, your mouth open under mine, your hardness pressed against me…”

He rose to his feet, walking naked and pale towards the tree, his erection firming and rising before him, seducing Avon with words and image. “I think about how you would nip and bite me, your lips tracing all over me, opening to take me inside you, tongue stroking me as I take you within me. I think,” he said, as he reached the bough cradling Avon and reached up, calling Avon down into his arms, watching with undisguised happiness as the man succumbed to him, his eyes enraptured by passion, painful cynicism suspended by hopeful homecoming. “I think of how you would feel inside me, fucking me, of how you will sound when you thrust into me, of how you would feel inside me, fucking me, of how you would nip and bite me, your lips tracing all over me, opening to take me inside you, tongue stroking me as I take you within me. I think,” he said, as he reached the bough cradling Avon and reached up, calling Avon down into his arms, watching with undisguised happiness as the man succumbed to him, his eyes enraptured by passion, painful cynicism suspended by hopeful homecoming. “I think of how you would feel inside me, fucking me, of how you will sound when you thrust into me, of how you will sound when you come inside me…”

Avon grabbed him, drowning them in a desperate, ferocious kiss. Blake was shocked to his core by the frantic need in them both, at the strength of the long-denied and carefully unacknowledged feeling between them. He saw the root of his uneasiness with Avon, recognised the cause of their pyrotechnic push-me-pull-you relationship. In that single, searing kiss, he saw his fear and knew its name: love. Moaning, from lust, love and terror at the fire burning them, he knelt before Avon, a needy acolyte. Slowly, with lingering fingertips and laving tongue, he peeled supple black leather from lithe thighs, unleashing the long, slender cock, revealing its translucent skin and pulsing blue veins. Gracefully, Avon stepped free of the pool of night at his feet, a single kick arching the unwanted trousers. Blake stood, picking Avon up, hoarding him in his arms, clenching him tight against reason and common sense, against the sensible, passionless warnings to let go now lest he, like Anna before him, was consumed by the brilliant candle in the dark that was Avon. The mouth open beneath his withdrew, making them both breathe, allowing reason a glimmer of its vicious knowledge to part them. Then, deliberately, with infinite care and boundless comfort, Avon soldered them back together, joined at the mouth, breathing, one for the other. Blake surrendered his soul, gladly sacrificing at this altar. He lowered Avon to the pliant, yielding grass and lowered himself onto the pliant, yielding flesh beneath him. He lost himself in tactile heaven, stroking and kneading, needing and loving and filling empty places in his life with this living, pulsing passion surging beneath him. Avon rolled them over, kneeling over Blake, hair falling into his eyes, cheeks flushed rosy, eyes sparkling with love. “Well, now,” he gasped, “does this improve on your mental meanderings, or shall I leave you to your fantasies?”

Blake growled up at him, hauling him down to press their cocks together, rubbing against the exquisite hardness. Avon slipped from his grasp, sliding slowly down Blake’s body, strong hands squeezing and shaping smooth muscles as he went. He grinned at Blake, eyes heavy with lust, licking his lips in anticipation. Watching Blake watching him, he lowered his head, stretching his mouth wide and engulfed Blake with a single swallow. The rebel bucked under him, almost undone, and Avon granted him mercy. Leaving him heaving in great lungfuls of air, he bent Blake’s legs at the knees, exposing his goal, his haven. Still watching the febrile brown eyes staring at his, at the speechless, quivering man at his fingertips, Avon licked his palm and slowly stroked the wetness over the smooth skin of his penis, licking and wetting again and again until Blake was cursing with frustration. Then, slowly, with exquisite control, he moved forward between Blake’s bent knees, sliding down until he was almost completely prostrate on the ground, the lush grass caressing his erection as a forest of trees caress the wind whilst it snakes its sinuous dance among them. He lay one hand on Blake’s dewdropped cock, fingertips feathering the length of veins pounding under the silken soft skin. Distracting Blake with his delicious touch, he moved forward, easing himself into the rebel, pushing quickly past the painful ring of muscle into the need-
ful warmth beyond. He groaned, thrusting, burying himself in Blake. His eyes closed, losing sight of Blake writhing under him.

Blake still watched, savouring each moment and movement, gazing with rapt adoration at the transforming love etched on Avon’s face. He couldn’t withhold the words any longer, he had to share his discovery. “Avon,” he whispered, hoarse with emotion. “Avon…” The dark head raised, almost-black eyes meeting Blake’s. “Avon…” he breathed again, needing to hear the name on his lips, to feel his mouth forming his feelings. He swallowed back his inbuilt, still-lingering wariness of those, the three most powerful words he had ever known, part of him awaiting the stinging rejection the damning phrase would unleash on him. “Kerr, I love you.”

Avon smiled at him, lying flat on him, leaning down to kiss his mouth as deeply as his penis kissed him inside. “I know…” Avon whispered softly against Blake’s lips. “It became rather obvious, didn’t it now?” Avon knelt, bringing Blake up onto his thighs, curling Blake under him, opening him up to even deeper penetration, pumping faster and harder, sweat dripping from the two of them as passion flared, as climax approached, as they lost themselves in the culmination of lust and denied love. Blake’s whole body spasmed once, twice, a third time, exploding his seed from him, garlanding the hair on Avon’s chest like a tree with winter’s snow, plummeting Avon over the precipice of driven need to the blinding pleasure of orgasm.

Blake felt Avon’s weight drop onto him, constricting the rebel’s legs, bent between their two bodies. Reluctantly, he eased Avon off, gently cradling the spent man in his arms against the slowing beat of his over-full heart. Languidly, ready for this moment to continue forever, he stroked the dark hair, smiling at the way it curled, laughing inside at the man’s vanity in never allowing the waviness to show. Avon settled into the embrace, gentle hands stroking, soft lips bestowing little kisses on damp skin, tasting the fruits of both their efforts, rubbing Blake’s cum into his own skin and onto Blake’s. Gradually, he stilled and Blake thought him asleep. The rebel’s own movements grew more lethargic as sleep crept up on him also, sending him drifting on the cloudy river of dreams.

The motion of Avon twisting out of his embrace and sitting up roused him. He watched indulgently as the tech smoothed his hair, got to his feet and moved off to the side of the clearing. Blake stretched, enjoying the luxury of sun and zephyr on his skin, giving Avon privacy while he went about his business. The sound of a zipper rasping made him bolt upright.

“Avon?” he said, not wanting to understand why the tech was getting dressed.

“Yes?” he answered, utterly blank, a typical Avon non-expression defacing him.

“Why are you getting dressed?”

“I wanted to go back to the camp for some lunch. It’s getting rather late.”

Relief washed over Blake and he jumped up to gather his own clothes. “I’ll come with you.”

“No, don’t bother. I know you brought a picnic and you did say that you wanted a whole day away from the Rebellion with all its stress and worry. So, why don’t you just go on with your plans and I’ll go on with mine.”

Blake felt himself chill. “No, no, it’s quite all right. I’ll come back with you.” Fear crept up his spine, making his voice cold and unfriendly. “We could go straight back up to the ship...if you want to.”

Avon looked at him, apparently puzzled. “Why would we want to do a thing like that? Honestly, Blake, you do get worse. You spend weeks complaining about having no free time, no rest, no privacy, and as soon as you get what you’ve been snivelling for, you’re racing back to the ship. Well, not I. I shall go for lunch and then meet that computer expert they told us about. If it isn’t mere coincidence that the names are the same, then she’s someone I knew at University and I’d rather like to renew our...acquaintance.”

“Enough, Avon! Look, I don’t know why you’re trying to do this, but I won’t let you…”

“And what, precisely,” Avon said, voice dangerously calm, “is it that you won’t allow me to do?”

“Destroy this. Deny what happened between us…”

“Ah,” Avon said, as though a great revelation had descended upon him. “You are, of course, referring to our little...tryst.” He smiled. Blake shuddered, girding himself for the battle to make Avon live with his feelings, to accept the possibilities of love. “You foolishly think I’m going to pretend that it never happened.”

Relief washed over Blake.

“Don’t be absurd, Blake. It was the best fuck I’ve had in months.”

Horrified, struck speechless, Blake watched as Avon finished pulling on his boots and turned back
to the path. “You can’t diminish it like that. It was far more than mere ‘fucking’ and you know it!”

“Do I indeed? And I thought Cally was the only one who could read minds.”

“Avon, stop right there. Listen to me,” Blake said, rushing over to grab Avon by the shoulders, barely resisting the temptation to shake some sense into the man. “What we had there was very special…”

“Oh, I’m not denying that.”

“It was more than sex, Avon. That was making love.”

Avon sneered up at Blake, dusting the offending hands from his shoulders and the offending words from his mind. “You may tell yourself whatever tales you wish, if that will keep your halo untarnished in your own eyes, but I deal with reality. It was sex, very good sex, I admit, but only sex. That is all, and nothing more.”

“Avon, I saw how you responded to me. I saw how you reacted to me!”

“Just like in your fantasies, Blake? To the very last detail, by any chance?” Avon said, dripping acid into Blake’s opening wounds. “You know what they say. Delusions of grandeur. You are trying to magnify a fleeting fuck into something far grander.”

“No,” Blake shouted, again grabbing Avon. Again the tech brushed his hands off. “No,” he continued, quieter, wary of pushing Avon further away, watching helplessly as the man withdrew to an even more daunting emotional distance. “It was more than that.”

“Perhaps, if you should say it often enough, you might convince me, but I doubt it. Unlike you, I’m hardly likely to confuse lust with love. As I said, I deal in reality, not romantic and stupid dreams. I’ll leave that to you and Vila.”

“Oh no you don’t, Avon. If you try to pretend that what happened between us was just, as you so crudely said, ‘fucking’, then you are the one who is refuting reality. Tell me, why are you so afraid of love?”

“I’m not afraid of love, Blake,” Avon snarled, turning contemptuously on his heel. Blake gripped his upper arm, quite painfully, knowing that he had already lost this round and had no reason, now, to tread delicately around Avon’s over-developed sense of dignity.

“Then what are you afraid of?” Blake asked. He stared at Avon’s unresponsive, shuttered eyes. “Shall I tell you what I think frightens you? What I think terrifies you?”

“Well now, until you condescend to let me go, or until I decide to allow this unpleasant little scene to degenerate into a brawl, it seems that I really don’t have much of a choice, now, do I?”

“I think—no, I know—what scares you so. It’s the vulnerability, the loss…the responsibility for someone else’s pain. Is that what’s wrong here, Avon? Does this remind you too much of Anna? Did you feel too much of that with me? That’s the real problem, isn’t it, that it was anything but just ‘fucking’.”

Avon glared at him with supreme contempt and perfected disbelief. “You, Blake,” he sneered, “are precisely what I’ve always said you were: an idealistic fool. Now, let go of me. I have had more than enough of your inane prattling.” Blake held him, leaning down to kiss him, to reopen the feelings between them. Avon stood rigid under him, mouth clenched shut. Blake increased the intensity of his kiss, pouring all the love boiling inside him into the simple embrace. Suddenly, elatingly, Avon’s mouth opened under him. Blake thrust his tongue into the welcome warmth and shocking unexpectedness, Avon bit him. Hard. Bleeding, Blake pulled back, astonished and utterly shocked. “I told you to let go of me, Blake. Try that again, and I shall bite it off.”

Spitting blood from his lacerated tongue, Blake could only watch in lonely, helpless defeat as Avon stalked off into the sylvan beauty around him, the singing of birds and soughing of trees masking the sounds of his leaving.

Blake’s tongue mended, of course, but the wounds to his spirit lay deep and suppurating, like the chasm that suddenly yawed between him and Avon…all the way to Horizon.