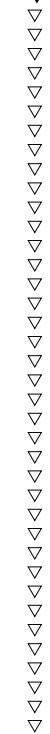




EST QUAEDAM FLERE VOLUPTAS

There is in weeping a certain pleasure. Two pieces from Sebastian, that writer of darkly, bittersweet tales, who refuses to see easy resolution to the Avon/Blake relationship. Here there is the initial discovery of desire, of venery, and a probing of the idea that imminent danger or death can be a sexual turn on. The second story continues with what the first one has set in motion and leaves us waiting for more.

CAT'S CRADLE I SEBASTIAN



THE MAN SAT VERY STILL, HIS HEAD delicately tilted as if concentrating on some exquisite task: the table however was empty, save for his hands laid there, fine hands, the fingers laxly curled. His profile was calm, the long straight nose and sculpted mouth a giveaway to the darkeyed and darkhaired Roman ancestry buried many generations deep in his heritage.

Long, darksilk lashes stirred gently as he breathed in, and out, quite peacefully.

No clues here to the fires within, the vivid passions lodged between flat belly and lean thigh, the dark turmoil in his heart and the anger pulsing in his blood: the words which rang in his head over and over.

"Get to your position"

His head came up and his eyes opened wide, then narrowed as the deadly sting of it seeded itself and grew, a twisted hemlock root of gnarled and ignoble descent.

He knew what to do now. Perhaps he might even enjoy it.

"WHERE'S AVON?" Blake said peremptorily. "I need him." He swung round as if Avon might

materialise at his will, coming swiftly down the steps to the flightdeck; but the entrance framed nothing but emptiness.

With a brittle laugh Jenna said, "I should think he's sulking in a dark corner. You pushed him just about to the limit."

There was no condemnation in her tone; respect, rather; she was proud of Blake, whom she admired, for putting Avon, whom she did not, so crushingly in his place.

"I had to. He'd argue night was day if I said the opposite." A wide strong type with tight brown curls and ruffian's clothes, Blake took a pacy turn around the couches, eyes set forward. "Let Avon get out of hand and we've lost. I need Avon. God help us all, I wish I didn't."

Brilliant and complex, Avon seemed to have an energetic devil inside him: with *Roj Blake* inscribed on its wickedly-pronged fork. Difficult wasn't the half of it: Avon seemed hell-bent on perverting Blake's every move and motive, arguing his way at every turn, his predatory tongue twisting every way to wear Blake's purpose down.

His was a lone voice, though Blake sensed



that didn't trouble him: the man was clearly born to be a loner with his contrary nature, where darkness conflicted with his sweeter urges—and usually won. The others neither liked, nor trusted Avon. They seemed happy enough to follow Blake, who was large, warm, passionate in belief and purpose: everything Avon was not. Blake held them in the palm of his hand and ran them ragged. They didn't seem to mind.

Avon, however...

Avon was, so far, resisting the trumpet-call of glorious Causes.

Jenna said, with sympathy: "He never lets up on you, does he?"

Blake smiled at her, a dimple dancing in his cheek and a light in his eye. "Don't worry. I think I've got the measure of Avon."

He ran Avon to ground in his cabin. He said, folding his arms and leaning against the door, "I need you to start work on getting through to those defence computers on Epsilon 9."

Dressed in greys and blacks, with his usual meticulous attention to detail, a leather belt at his waist and his hair groomed and shining, Avon looked up at him with brilliant dark eyes.

"Yes, you do, don't you?" he observed, and he gave Blake a smile. It wasn't a pleasant smile, and his tone was not precisely what Blake was expecting.

"So get started," he said curtly, and turned to leave. Exchanges with Avon were best kept to a minimum: get in fast, strike low, leave while Avon was still thinking about it.

"Just a minute." Avon's cool voice reached him before he got through the door and Blake halted his steps but didn't turn. "That's today's order, is it?"

"That's right," Blake said crisply.

"Well, now I have one for you. Come back here at 2200."

Blake turned a wintry stare on him. "Whatever for?"

"I'll tell you then," Avon replied: no emotion.

"That's the middle of my sleep period."

Avon gave the ghostliest of smiles. "Miss it," he suggested.

This had the scent of a childhood adven-

ture book of Blake's; a shadowed tower in the moonlight, a secret, dangerspiced tryst to watch some mysterious dance of the planets.

He shrugged as he made for the door. "Frankly, I'd rather have the sleep." Behind him, Avon's voice did not rise, but every word was clear as ice.

"Either you come, or I won't touch the Epsilon 9 computers. It's up to you, Blake."

"Blackmail, Avon?" he said, lip curled. He wasn't worried. He could handle Avon. It was tricky and time-consuming and required strong nerve; but he always won, in the end. Blake leaned on Avon with all his force of will; and sooner or later Avon shut his mouth on acrid dissent and buckled into line, however sour the taste on his tongue.

Of course, forcing a creature such as Avon to swallow such bitter stuff had its price: namely that he could never turn his back on Avon and be sure; never leave him behind on *Liberator* with any certainty that that miser's hoard of resentments might not surface and Avon take the sweetest revenge of all.

"Call it what you like," Avon said, with that same, greyish detachment. "But if you're not here, then nothing and no-one will get you what you want from Epsilon 9, for I certainly won't and no-one else can."

Blake left the room, untroubled: for when had Avon not carried out his every demand? Avon might flicker viciously as a serpent's eye, but there was nothing to back it up, no real power to put up against Blake's own.

But time drew on, and something about Avon's lack of anger, his cool, uninflected tone of voice, his very stillness, stayed with him more forcefully than Avon's snapping temper would have done. At 2200, or a little after, he found himself at Avon's cabin door: curiosity, he told himself. Maybe Avon was going to unfold some mysterious wonder before his eyes.

Avon answered his quiet knock promptly, the door sliding open. He looked neat and spruce and unsurprised; there was, Blake noted with some disquiet, a blaster strapped to his waist.

"You're late, Blake. But then I expected that. Always the little psychological thrust with you, isn't there?"



“Well?” Blake said coldly, stepping inside. “What’s all this about?” Behind him the door swished shut. Avon stepped past him with a polite ‘excuse me’ and touched his palm to the lock. Blake’s eye was caught by the action. He frowned.

“I think I should just tell you,” he said with utter cool, “that Jenna knows where I am.” He eyed Avon’s weapon once, and looked up.

Avon lifted one eyebrow. “Really. Do you want her to spectate? By all means, call her.” He actually indicated the intercom, seemed to be waiting for a reply. Blake gave him the coldest of looks, took a turn around the room and sat down, throwing one leg over the other and leaning back in the chair.

“I’m waiting,” he said with sarcastic boredom.

“Yes: and patience is not one of your shining virtues, is it?” Avon regarded him with dispassion, the black arch of his eyebrows narrow and demonic above the dark, enigmatic glitter of his eyes. He leaned against the desk and watched Blake.

“Avon, I’m tired, I want to get to bed,” Blake said roughly. “Get on with it. That’s if you have anything to say.”

Avon flipped a light on, unexpectedly. It shone directly into Blake’s eyes. He shifted a little, shielding them from the glare.

“What rating did you have as a member of the Federation, Blake?” Avon asked him, inconsequentially.

He lifted his chin and answered sturdily: “Alpha A,” without hesitation; part of one’s life, ratings stuck and could never be entirely shed. He moved restlessly, out of the main beam of the light.

“High,” Avon mused, narroweyed. “But that’s about what I would have given you. Perhaps a little higher than I would have given you. You must have met the assessors—” he smiled downwards, dusting his sleeve with one hand— “on one of your better days.” His head snapped up and met Blake’s eyes. “What was mine, I hear you ask?”

“No, you don’t,” Blake said; because Avon had Alpha-Elite stamped all over him from the dark harmony of feature and form to the beautiful voice and prettiest of wits. Avon laughed at him, a sudden, sharp white

showing of teeth. “I see you don’t need to. I wouldn’t argue with your rating, Blake; and nor, I think, would you argue with mine.” For one brief moment, his tone was rich with contentment; but it left him as the smile fled from his lips and he leaned back a little, the better to concentrate his gaze on Blake.

“And if you think about it, which I don’t suppose you ever do, the most elementary psychology will tell you that, by treating me like you would the lowest grade of lifeform, you are simply ensuring that I will leave you. And on the unhappiest of terms.”

“You haven’t left yet,” Blake growled.

“Don’t push it,” Avon said, snapping up abruptly. “Because that’s the one thing you don’t want, isn’t it Blake? You can’t afford it. Your precious Revolution needs me, and you know it.”

“Oh, get to the point, Avon.” Blake’s bored voice did not reflect his feelings, gave no voice to the trouble growing inside him, the uneasy feeling that he was not, for once, a step ahead.

“The point?” Avon said, calm. “I thought you knew the point. It’s obvious, isn’t it? After your little display of power-hungry ego today, it’s finally happened. I’ve reached my limit. I will not and shall not take any more from you without certain provisos of my own.”

Blake lounged back with ready insolence. “So what do you want?” he asked with fine contempt. “A kiss to take the sting away?”

The room seemed suddenly very still.

“I was thinking more of reciprocation theory,” Avon said, with an odd, dark chill in his voice.

Surprise and disquiet flowered in Blake’s mind: the very word sent a shiver down his spine, a fingertip grazing on his nerves as he remembered... Reciprocation. Another of the Federation’s little tricks to ensure tractability. Blake remembered as if it were yesterday the little enclosed room, the bright, harsh lights, the disembodied voice of the questionmaster who hated your guts: sometimes your boss, sometimes the man beneath you, forcing upon you a ritual psychological humiliation intended to purge grudges and frustrations before they got anywhere near the point of threatening the efficiency of the work force. Blake’s mind shied away from the

memory of some of those sessions, flatly rebelling.

"Not a chance," he said, forcefully. "That sort of thing is one of the reasons I'm fighting the Federation: civilised men don't need to be brought to heel like mindwhipped dogs."

"No?" Avon said. "I rather thought you might say that. In that case, Blake, I've finished with you, and your very noble Cause: it can shrivel up and die as far as I'm concerned and you with it. You can set me down at the next habitable planet."

Blake reconsidered.

He could see that Avon meant it. That quiet, unstirred certainty bespoke a limit passed. He hesitated, thinking: steeping his hands and watching Avon over the top of them, yet not seeing him, seeing visions instead, the death of his hopes, the crumbling of ambition.

"There's no other way, Blake," Avon said as coolly as if this weird deal were credible, even possible: "I can't live with your unashamed manipulations and your derisory bullying by day and by night without *some* return of my own. It's not psychologically viable—even you can see that. You won't give me reasoned discussion and mutual decisions and a sharing of responsibility. So you must give me something else."

Blake thought of his glorious cause, a universe wide, a bigger concern than personal vanity; the ambitious plans he would need every scrap of help to have a chance of carrying out. He thought of Avon's brilliance and Avon's knowledge like a storehouse of invaluable treasures there for his rifling: all lost to him should Avon leave.

He took a deep breath. "All right."

Avon's expression gained a little satisfaction. "Very sensible of you."

"Childish though it is," Blake bit back.

Avon's half-smile deepened, darkened. "Oh, don't worry. It won't be childish."

Blake felt a faint shiver of apprehension at Avon's quietness; there was a stillness and a calm about him which seemed quite unnatural. Determined not to let Avon psych him, he rose to his feet and stretched, deliberately turning his back, hands locking behind his neck.

"No time like the present, is there, Avon?"

"This is a deal then—is it?"

"It's a deal," Blake told him, carefree. He yawned; his joints clicked.

"Turn around, then, Blake."

Blake did so, slowly, and his pupils shrank to tiny pinheads as the light arrowed into his eyes and dazzled him.

"Sit down," Avon said, and all Blake could see was the nozzle of the blaster swinging up and aiming straight at him. His heart plummeted into his stomach at a speed which disoriented him and made him dizzy with a sense of nauseous starvation.

"I don't recall reciprocation ever went this far, he said with a dry mouth.

"Then you were lucky," Avon said gravely.

Blake felt chilled to the soul, water churning painfully in his bowels as he stared at the weapon balanced across Avon's wrist: Avon was a good shot, the best besides Blake himself, better even. Besides, even Vila could hardly miss from a distance of five feet.

"Avon—" and Avon's voice leapt out at him like a flame in the dark—

"Shut up Blake; and sit down."

Blake dropped into the chair. He watched Avon steadily and wondered whether to chance it and dive for the door. Then he remembered that slick palm-press as he entered; after all, he would have to see it through.

"That's better," Avon said, his tones cool and clear. "What a fireball you are, Blake; all fine ideals and heroic energy whirling around a zero core of common sense. Take off your clothes."

Blake bolted upright and stared hard across the room. "What?"

"You heard me."

"I damn well didn't," Blake growled, getting to his feet. "For your sake as much as mine."

"One chance," Avon warned him, his voice harsh as a nail snagged on silk. Over the blaster he consulted his watch, timing some unknown limit.

"You're sick," Blake told him bluntly, and he made for the door purposely. Avon shot him, with no hesitation and perfect aim.

The jagged yellow fireball zipped past him. Blake gasped in shock and pain and clutched at his side. The naked heat had seared his



clothes away and singed tender skin; the wall behind the chair was still smoking, blackened steel and wires protruding. He heard, but made no sense of it, the hum and click of *Liberator's* auto-repair unit come into automatic operation. He took two or three deep breaths, to counteract shock, steady himself so he could stand on his feet.

“Not only sick,” he said when he could, between clenched teeth, “mad as well.”

Avon's eyes shone oddly in the dim light. “And here you are, alone with me on the wrong side of a gun. It must be worrying.” He swung the gun back up again, rested his forearm across his thigh and balanced the barrel across his wrist. “Well now. Let's try again. Take off your clothes.”

Blake had a feeling of madness, of shock; unable to recall at what incautious moment he had shut his eyes, fallen straight into this nightmare world of Avon's. Avon half sat, half stood, with one hip hitched up on the table, and watched Blake with half-shuttered eyes: Blake rallied, and pulled himself together, setting his mouth grimly.

With a show of defiance he came to stand in front of Avon, near, as near as he dared. He looked into Avon's eyes all the time. He undid the buttons of his fullsleeved white shirt, down to his navel, slipped it off his shoulders and threw it to the ground. It was ruined, stinking of burnt cloth. He kicked off his shoes. His hands went to the buckle of his leather belt, unfastened it, drew it slowly through.

“Be very careful, Blake,” Avon warned him with uncanny foresight. “Don't make me—misunderstand. Even a miss would be very uncomfortable at this range.”

Blake abandoned, for now, plans of insurrection; and contented himself with a smouldering stare of intensity right into Avon's sardonic eyes as he unzipped his trousers and kicked them off to join the untidy heap. It looked strangely out of place in Avon's neat cabin, committing an impropriety all of its own.

“And the rest,” Avon said indifferently.

Blake stripped off his underwear and his socks and put his hands on his hips, with utter defiance. He was damned if he was

going to let himself be fazed by Avon's perverted twists: he'd always suspected Avon of a streak of deviance and now he had the satisfaction of being right.

“Now what?”

“I'll let you know,” Avon said, with low, low intensity.

Blake began to feel a fool, standing there under Avon's scrutiny. Part of Avon's strategy, no doubt. He tipped his head up and stared Avon down staunchly, seeing no light at all in the dark gaze which dwelt on him searchingly. After a while Avon broke the tense silence.

“All right. Lie down, now. No, on the floor will do.”

Blake lay down on his back and stared up at the ceiling with studied indifference. It was uncomfortable, the fibres tickling his bare skin. The fingers of one hand drummed the carpet in insolence. Avon walked around him, black boots creaking. “Not childish, Avon?” Blake taunted him, neck craning, bold under Avon's narrowed scrutiny. “But it seems to me that this is the sort of thing most of us get out of the system at six years old. I'm sorry for you.” Avon said nothing, just walked away from him, back over to the desk where he took up his position again and watched Blake quietly. Blake felt an uneasy desire to talk, break the tension he could feel pricking at him like a web of static; he opened his mouth and heard himself say: “It's easy to humiliate someone, isn't it? Strip them naked and stare; the Federation would be proud of you, Avon.”

Avon's silence, the strange black glitter of his eyes unnerved him more than any words could. He sighed, very obviously, and closed his eyes to feign relaxation.

“Yes, humiliation is easy,” Avon's voice leapt softly at him, out of the dark. “Delivered daily in small doses you use it on me like a drug. You intimidate Vila; you fill a yawning gap in Cally's life—family and spiritual adviser all in one, something for Cally to believe in when she has lost everything else: Can you dazzle with mental fireworks he couldn't hope to follow and so swallows as the only certainty there is: Jenna you bewitch with your body so that she is happy to be led by



your mind. And all this in the name of the only right, the only possibility... Are you proud of all this, Blake?"

"And you, Avon?" Blake said, without opening his eyes. "Which is it with you—are you bewitched by my body, or am I something for you to believe in?"

"*I don't believe in you,*" Avon hissed. "You're a dangerous man, Blake. Don't think I haven't met your like before; starry-eyed idealists who want to change the world. They have everything in common, including the fact that they all die, very young and dragging a hell of a lot of their friends screaming with them onto the glorious pyre of lost causes. It never occurs to them to change the world from within instead of trying to crack it from outside like a nut; oh no, nothing but large gestures of massive revolution suit their style and their little power complexes which demand huge, bloody sacrifices to feed it, yet they do it all in the name of—justice, and *that is you, Blake.*"

"I know I'm right in what I'm trying to do, Avon," Blake warned, low and quiet. "You won't get through to me this way. So why waste your breath?"

Avon's lip curled in a sneer, his voice a thin whine of contempt. "All fanatics know that they are *right.*"

"And some of them are."

Avon was looking at him as if he had lifted a dirty stone and found Blake lurking damply. "The trouble with you, Blake," he said, with quick, measured judgement, "is that you're really not very bright. You conceal a basic lack of foresight and intelligence with loud-mouthed commando tactics and personal charisma. Perhaps you even believe in your—'Cause'—yourself. I wouldn't know about that. I think perhaps you do believe it. So—you are not a fraud. But that doesn't make you the honest man you set such store by being. What you are building of your character is a cardhouse of illusions: watch your followers' faces when it all comes tumbling down. As it will. That is, of course, if they're still alive to watch."

Blake didn't like that, didn't like accusations of pretence and illusion when truth and honesty mattered to him more than anything.

"All right, Avon, you've got me here and you're damn well not going to waste the chance of telling me just how low your estimation of my character is. I'm awed by your insight and duly chastened," he said with icy sarcasm. "Are you feeling better now you've got that off your chest?"

His head snapped upwards as the blaster jabbed into the soft underside of his chin. He opened his eyes in shock and looked straight into Avon's, very black and close, shining with a peculiar intensity.

"No, I'm not feeling better," Avon whispered to him with hatred. "The truth might help you, that's if you'd listen to it, but it doesn't help me at all." The silky voice caressed him like a lover: the gun scraped hard along his skin. "Punishing you is the only way I can come to terms with travelling your thoughtless path to the screaming bloodbath and ensuing chaos you've set your great big loving heart on; and all the while you treat me as if I'm really not quite fit to tread in the marks left by your saintly feet."

"How else can I treat you, Avon," Blake asked, sweatily conscious of the blaster jammed under his chin, ready to fry his brains if he pushed Avon too far, "when you admit yourself that you can be bought? I have belief: but you, you're available for purchase," he said, putting his finger nicely on the cause of Avon's inner disturbance, "and knowing you, the price is something unpleasant. You know I'll pay it, and you don't care how much I despise you for it. So why not get on with it?"

For a moment he thought he really had gone too far, his heart leaping with fear as anger flared like a flame of insanity in Avon's eyes, dark as death; the gun trembled at his throat and he knew he was going to die at Avon's hands, here and now. Ridiculously, like a hanged man leaping out into the void, he felt lightheaded and dizzy, the terrible fear melting into a rapturous lack of resistance, a honeyed conviction that Avon was actually going to do it, actually going to kill him and there was nothing at all he could do about it; there was a strange and delicious feeling spreading warmly inside him as he tasted his own death and found it oddly sweet.

He closed his eyes, curled lashes wavering



shut.

And felt the gun lift away from him.

He looked again, sweat cooling on his skin, his throat choked and all his body hairs erect and tingling. Avon's pallor was extreme; kneeling beside Blake he stared down at the man who was naked save for the dark brush of hair at chest and groin. It was startlingly obvious that Blake's cock liked danger: up hard, it was rigid as iron, wavering over his belly and pointing up at his chin; Blake could see the flared head of it, weeping proudly. Embarrassing, to say the least. This happened to him on the flightdeck regularly, battling with Avon on a flashtide of fury, adrenaline surging, skin electric with tension. Sexual though the feeling was, it was absolutely impersonal; he was sure the same was true for Avon. Avon had no sexual interest in men, any more than Blake did. Conflict, now: the thrill of power: that was what lit the sudden fires of lust.

Blake saw the truth in a flash, and his eye brightened as he saw his own advantage in this peculiar pause, a suspension of time: he saw that, interestingly enough, responding to this encounter in a sexual way had made Avon lose his grip on it.

Blake smiled at Avon dangerously. Oh yes, very interesting indeed. He did not like this peculiar sexual thread which had run so suddenly and so unexpectedly between them, but more than that, he sensed that Avon did not like it. He had not intended it and it disquieted him: for sexuality to cloud the clear-cut issue of domination that Avon was trying to impose upon him was not part of Avon's plan at all.

Blake smiled secretly to himself; for whosever flaw it was which had given way to let this surge of forbidden feeling through, he knew well enough which of them was going to make the most ground out of it.

All right then, Blake thought, come on. Let's see what you can do with this.

"What's this doing for you, Avon?" he asked him, with dark, smiling innuendo. His voice was amazingly steady for a man who had just faced his own death, who was still on a tightrope in the grasp of a psychopath who hated him. Balancing, but only just, and the

drop as deep as ever.

He stared at Avon with bold-eyed challenge.

Your move.

For a moment, just a few heartbeats of time, it seemed as if Avon had really lost his way, and for good: in his stark silence Blake read reluctance and tasted triumph.

And then, all at once, Avon found it again, whatever nerve he needed to outplay Blake; his eyes narrowed and his lips tightened, to reform in a smile both charming and perverse.

"Not as much as it is for you, from the look of it." And, looking into Blake's eyes all the while, he let the point of the gun fall down to touch Blake's erection; Blake felt the thrill of it like an electric shock shooting up his spine, more and more of them as the smooth warm thing moved on him, causing little lightning rills of pleasure. The feeling was both terrible and wonderful, shifting the encounter onto a new plane altogether: from this diffuse contact, the gun a go-between for his cock and Avon's fingers, it was a small step to—

"Death's the biggest thrill of all, isn't it, Blake?" Avon's voice murmured. "You have a deathwish; and I'm playing to your perverse fantasies."

The gun, rounded and smooth like a woman's touch, caressed Blake again and he shut his eyes as he inhaled sharply. "You're sick, Avon," he managed, his cock pulsing a hard and desperate rhythm it was difficult to ignore.

Well, Blake, he said to himself, *you've certainly thrown yourself to the lions now:* Avon would punish him for this. Better by far to have bowed down gracefully, let Avon extract whatever penance he needed, listen to him, even act a little humble as if Avon's words had given him food for thought: so that Avon would go back to work feeling that he had won a round, that it was worth fighting on. That was what a sensible man would have done, and Blake rued his own nature even as he smiled a diamond defiance up at Avon and watched the spring coil tight, tighter: and the light in Avon's eyes burn, and burn.

Abruptly Avon rose to his feet, sheathing the blaster as he did so, and stood astride him. "Turn over."

Well now.



A *frisson* of fear struck into Blake at a new and horrible thought; his erection, over-sensitive to every precarious twist in this knife-edge scenario, dwindled palely on his thigh. He stared up at Avon with dark suspicion, and forced the words through dry lips:

"No deal, Avon."

Creating a sexual undercurrent was one thing—Blake had no objection to flirting with Avon if it looked likely to disturb him—but he was suddenly afraid that Avon had fewer inhibitions than he had reckoned on.

Surprise, then anger, flittered in Avon's expressive eyes, before all emotion was erased by a smile of amusement which twisted his mouth and creased the skin around his temples, beneath the dark hair clustering there. "You should be careful, Blake. Let me know your real fears, and you could be in a lot of trouble. Turn over."

"How would Del Grant take it, I wonder?" Blake lashed out. "His precious sister, screwed by a frustrated queer."

That scored, unwisely and too well. A new tension scented the air, rank with their sweat. Resisting to the last, then giving in as Avon's eyes burned blacker and the gun aimed at his heart, Blake turned over and felt his heart thudding and tried desperately to look for some way out of this. He could not believe that even Avon—

The blaster nudged its way between the cheeks of his bottom and touched him there, gentle as woman's finger.

His skin crawling with horror, Blake let out an exclamation and tried to roll. Avon thrust him down easily, one hand between his shoulder-blades and a knee in his back.

"Go to hell, Avon," Blake snarled, flinging all the force of his personality into it.

Avon's voice held a smile and a fury in it. "Oh, I intend to."

"Now I know you're perverted," Blake whipped at him, sweat pouring from him as the round snub point of the gun rested against him, politely still, a snake asleep before striking. When it jerked a little his heart thumped once and quickened, and he cursed himself roundly and silently. He was too good at it, finding the right needles to slide in under Avon's bloodless skin to reach his

heart: but he would pay for it: Avon was sharpening swords right now.

"This is what you need, Blake," Avon hissed to him, behind him. "You screw your followers into the ground and stake them daily on the flagpole of revolution. How does it feel to be staked yourself? *Don't even think about it, Blake.*"

Seizing his chance, Blake had moved; but Avon was quicker. The blaster rammed into the tender opening, the tight mouth resisting this rude parting. Despite himself Blake gasped in shock and revulsion, his stomach turning over and his guts twisting.

"I've got it now," he whispered bitterly. "What you want is to put your cock in me; but you haven't quite got the nerve."

He heard Avon's breathing, hard and fast behind him.

"Don't tempt me, Blake."

He might do it, Blake thought, madly amazed, he really might: and fear flashed through him: he had taken Avon past the point of no return.

Oh Christ, what have I done.

And then, in the tense and sweating silence, he thought about the other side of the story; about what it would do to Avon. Afterwards, when the urgency for orgasm was slaked and you couldn't quite remember why you had wanted it so badly, so fiercely that you would pay any price: what would happen to Avon then, in the bitter silence and the iciest aftermath of all time?

And now Blake exulted, because victory was his, and very sweet it was; Avon would never be able to look him in the face again. Oh, what a marvellous reversal of fortune; turning the tables had never been more richly satisfying as he contemplated the joy of it, the devastating sword he could forever wield over Avon's head while he kept Avon's dark and nasty secret in return... And all he had to do was keep on. Make Avon give in to the sudden urge he was struggling with; and rape his leader, here and now and violently, on the floor.

He moved sensuously, pressing his cock down into the rough carpet and parting his legs in invitation; his sweaty buttocks unstuck slowly and bared his anus to the air.



Immediately, Avon hit him. The flat of his hand smacked solidly into Blake's buttocks, a stinging thrill rather than a pain.

"Stop that," Avon hissed. "Don't think I can't read you, Blake. You haven't got where you are without being a prime manipulator, quite inspired at times. Why do think I'm not a convert? *Because I can see inside you, Blake, the beast inside the saint.*"

Undaunted, Blake stayed where he was, head turning more comfortably to one side, speaking low and crudely, the veneer of politesse stripped away now they were down to this:

"Come on, Avon, do it: why not? I'll bet it feels wonderful: they say it is. Revenge is what you want, isn't it? Well, here's your chance. If you want to fuck me, do it now: *you'll never get another chance.*"

"I'm not so sure of that, Blake." Avon's voice was the merest, darkest whisper, very close to his ear, and resounding in the hollows of his head like the swell of an ocean booming in a cave. "I never thought it before—never dreamed—but maybe a master is just what you've been looking for."

Something nagged at Blake; he tried to pin it down but it slipped away from him as Avon continued, bleak with disgust: "You're worse than I thought, if that's possible. You don't think I'm going to give you what you want, do you? I wouldn't touch you if you begged me, which, don't tell me, is going to be your next move."

"No thanks, Avon," Blake whispered. "I'd probably enjoy the gun more."

The tension between them took on life. Stirring into sentience, a black, stinking dark thing pulsing with every heartbeat, an erotic intensity sweeping over the skin like static, a deep deep yearning inside ready to flower. Eyes shut, Blake felt the room beat in some great sensual rhythm around the two men at its centre, linked beyond reason in some unspoken metre of shared sexuality, Avon the ringmaster cracking the whip which drove them on. And just when Blake most yearned for Avon to touch him the only caress on offer was the roughness of wool against the frenulum of his cock; and at that, it was nearly enough to bring off the flashflood of

ecstasy he felt gathering in his loins.

Suddenly, shockingly, he felt a hard kick thunder into his ribs. Blake winced and lay still. He heard the clatter of the gun as Avon kicked it to one side.

"Lie on your back."

Slowly Blake rolled and lay there, in a beautiful state of arousal. Avon stared down at him, hard and dark and menacing. His eyes glittered with contempt, with anger, with hatred.

"You disgust me, Blake."

"Then walk away," Blake said. His gaze laced delicately with Avon's, weaving black magic. Avon dragged his eyes away. He kicked Blake's hard erection with the toe of one leather boot. Blake shut his eyes, his head dropping back and turning to one side. Avon's voice floated down to him:

"I doubt, I really doubt, that your loyal followers would continue to admire you, knowing you have such—propensities."

"Aren't you going to tell them?" Blake asked sarcastically. He added, eyeing Avon's darkclad figure, "Do you always have sex with your clothes on, Avon? Sadists like you always have such *little* cocks." He flaunted his own, leaning up on his elbows.

Avon watched his movements, frowning: then his eyes lifted to Blake's, darkly a gleam, and he seemed abruptly amused. "Do you think so?"

"Of course. You get no pleasure so you'll settle for pain. Preferably someone else's. Isn't that right, Avon?"

If not, prove it.

His cock stretched blindly and longed for the touch, even accidental, of Avon's fingers. He could imagine, what it would be like, how the skin touching his would feel, how Avon's hand would move... He balled his own into fists and dug his nails into his palms.

Avon knelt beside him, and Blake opened his eyes to see him there, a dark excited glitter to his eyes, a stain of rare colour along his pale cheekbone. Avon spread his hands.

"No gun. You see? Just the two of us."

He spoke it like a statement, a little triumph.

Blake cleared his throat and said, very low, "You brought this on, Avon. You think I'm going to hate myself after this, don't you?"

That'll make it all worthwhile for you, you don't care what you do, what depths you sink to, just so long as it scores a few points off me." He gave Avon a rogue's grin, knowing and complicit. "But you're wasting your time, because this isn't going to cause me one second's grief, I've had more worries over whether to swat a fly than I'll have about this when this is over."

"I made you do it, is that what you mean?" Avon hissed, eyes bright. "But I'm not making you do anything, Blake; not any more." At that moment his eyes ran down Blake's chest, an insolent catalogue, down to his cock, his dark, velvet gaze lingering there like a caress.

Lust crept warmly and blissfully over Blake as Avon looked at him: a vision opened in his mind and for a moment, staring transfixed into Avon's eyes, he saw him as he had never seen him before.

Avon was not so bad, not really; not quite the example of insurrection Blake made of him when it suited him. There were moments—

Moments when he was glad of Avon by his side: he was pleasant to look at; he had an icy composure Blake admired when his own failed him; and a courage which was not in doubt. There were moments when Avon's eyes met his and they shared a joke the others did not see: and many times he was glad, quite simply, to have Avon around. All right, so they fought; but he *liked* Avon, goddammit; welcomed their confrontations: because, after all, Avon was an exciting stranger, a bright spark for his tinder with a verve and a passion all his own...

His hands lifted of their own volition and went out to Avon and he waited, tense, barely breathing—

Then Avon smiled frighteningly at him, the vampire at the window sighting maidens within—*Got you*—and the pretty mood vanished like a dream. But his lust remained, a burning iron bar in his loins: he stared at Avon with hatred, angry that his body should obey Avon's will rather than his own, angry that he had nearly been misled: but he could still break Avon's game at a stroke and leave Avon with nothing but the difficult taste of

failure for company throughout the long, sour night to come.

"Aren't you?" he said, in the low, iccold voice which controlled Avon so well at his most skittish, his most contradictory: "Then goodnight, Avon, I'll leave you to fantasise. What might have happened next?"

And all he had to do was leave.

Get to the sanctuary of his own room, and jerk off—there—

Avon's eyes burned brightly, compellingly, into his

—Instead of here, where Avon wanted him to.

He could not get up without pushing Avon aside. Blake thrust a hand at his chest and Avon caught it.

"Before you go—"

"What?" Blake said, and the sound was thin, as if he spoke into a sudden vacuum as he stared deeply, fatally into Avon's eyes, and lost himself.

Avon took his other wrist, pinning them both above his head, leisurely. "This," he said, and leaned down to kiss his mouth, his clothes rough against Blake's bare skin, his breath warm and sweet. His fingers brushed exquisitely across Blake's nipple, and rested there.

Dazzled by sensation Blake felt love invade him treacherously, a spear of pain and joy twisting deeply inside; he held onto Avon desperately, his hands gripping folds of his clothing, and suckled from his mouth like a bee from a flower, eager for the moist roughness of his tongue, the scrape of his teeth, the softness of his lips. After a while, Avon drew away a little, to murmur to him; he encouraged Blake sweetly, gently, with a tenderness easily seen for travesty, belied as it was by the passionate savagery of his eyes.

And yet Blake could do nothing: nothing save what Avon demanded soundlessly that he do: every sense clamoured for it insistently and it was already too late—he could feel himself melting, spilling over, just one moment more and one more touch—

"That's right, Blake," Avon soothed. "There. There..."

And it happened: Avon watched the entire thing, careful to miss no detail, and the last



thing Blake saw before closing his eyes under helpless glory was the bitter, triumphant blaze of Avon's.

And when he opened them again Avon was on the other side of the room a million light-years away from him, looking at him dispassionately. Reality sharpened and the dream slipped away; the beautiful sensations still gripping him echoed faintly and were gone. Love turned to hate, lust to ashes in his mouth and the sick taste of disgust, at himself mostly.

So Avon had won, after all. Because that was exactly what he had wanted.

For once in his life Blake was without words.

Avon dragged his eyes away from Blake and walked off crisply into the bathroom, returning with a towel which he threw, hard, at the other man.

"Now get out of my sight."

The warm scent of his own naked body, the saltmarsh smell of his sex and the tang of sweat curled around Blake, embarrassing him. He used the towel in silence and threw it into a corner. Avon, regarding him in a speaking silence all the while, removed the towel and dropped it into a laundry chute. Blake began to get dressed. Despite Avon's hard, unwavering gaze, he didn't hurry. The ruined shirt he left where it was without touching it.

He felt weary, and sick with himself. How easily life led you, and promised you something fiercely sweet! Temptations arose from the darkest, most unexpected quarter so that, dazzled by the light, you did not see the ominous shadow looming behind: and if you

let yourself be seduced by passions unsuspected then the shadow took hold and darkened the world for you, forevermore.

For he knew that Avon was not going to let this go.

Some black, blighted star, watching their fates entwine, had conjoined this thread of their lives in a cat's cradle of twists and turns; each strand a perversity, a dark line of sick passions and unhealthy feasts of emotion, all entangling in a Gordian knot they would never get free from now.

Blake did not think these things consciously; he simply looked at Avon, standing silently there, and knew with a leaden sense of doom that henceforth Avon, in a personal sense and for Blake alone, was going to be big trouble.

Fastening his belt he looked up from under his lashes at Avon, his hands weaving the leather deftly through the buckle. His chin tilted, then jutted defiantly.

"Well?" he said, sweet but strong. "How was it for you?"

Avon smiled; sharp, provocative to the end. "Really quite good. Perhaps it could have been better."

Blake's eyebrows rose. His eyes dwelt on Avon's bruised and swollen mouth, marked by Blake's kisses as he said:

"Until the next time, then?"

Little lines of amusement creased around Avon's eyes; his lips quirked in sarcastic response to Blake's impudence.

"Perhaps."

No, Blake thought on his way out, not perhaps at all: definitely.

Only next time, things would be different.

Sebastian, 7/90