



# CAT'S CRADLE II

## SEBASTIAN

**N**O SPECIAL FLAIR FOR NECROMANCY was necessary to read Avon's thoughts: as the huge door swung shut on him with a depressing clang Blake staggered as he was shoved bodily through, put out a hand to steady himself, muttered an imprecation, and angrily met Avon's eye.

"Marvellous," Avon said bitterly from where he hung on the wall. "Are you the cavalry?"

Blake turned on his heel, bit a thumb and said with sweet venom:

"All right, Avon; but then you'd hardly expect me to have the wit to avoid the same trap you fell into, now would you?"

"No indeed," Avon snapped, his eyes a bright, feverish glitter beneath wavering lashes. "And now here we both are: at least solitude was peaceful."

Wheeling around to face him, Blake stopped short and took Avon in properly for the first time since being heaved into the room. "Peaceful it may have been, comfortable I don't believe," he commented, and came over to him. With sturdy fingers he worked on the bonds which strung Avon to the wall.

"Don't bother," Avon said distantly, head turning to one side. "Laser-bonded steel, which is what that is, requires cutting with a laser saw. Unless you happen to have one concealed about you?"

Blake grinned raffishly, shaking his stinging fingers. "Actually, it's my week for the ultrasonic file." He produced one like magic and pirouetted it in his fingers for Avon's inspection, but it had no effect on the limber steel. After a while he paused in his efforts, sweating.

"I told you," Avon said.

"And if only I listened to you, Avon!" Despite the twin set-backs of incarceration and the breakdown of his negotiations with some very mistrustful aliens, finding Avon, whom he had secretly feared dead or worse, had done a lot for Blake's spirits.

"What a pity I arrived first," Avon observed. "Handcuffs would suit your heroic style so much more than mine."

Blake grinned, a dangerous gleam in his eye. "I beg to disagree." For Avon made a pretty sight: darkly, sultrily angry, and chained to the wall with his wrists linked together. Picturesque indeed: and yet Blake noted too, the dry lips, the overbright sparkle to his eyes.

"Pity I can't offer you a drink," he commented, inserting a blunt finger between Avon's wrist and the steel bands surrounding it. "But I'll owe you one: stand you a pint next time we pass old Joe's Bar." He drew in a sharp breath at the raw skin he found chafing there. Avon, passive, did not move, gazed over his head to the wall beyond. A rivulet of bright blood, freed by Blake's action, rolled down Avon's wrist and disappeared inside his sleeve. Something of Blake's initial cheerfulness evaporated.

"I can't think why they've reacted to our presence like this," he muttered, frowning. From a pocket he extracted a large, cleanish handkerchief which he tore into strips beneath Avon's desultory eye and did a bit of mopping. "They simply wouldn't listen to reason at all."

"Perhaps their view of reason is not the same as yours."

"Reason is reason," Blake said obdurately. "There's nothing subjective about it."

"If you say so." Avon permitted himself a small, cynical smile, unseen over Blake's head as the man tied neatish bandages around his wrists. Blake's tunnel vision had its moments of unintentional humour. No doubt if Blake believed the earth was flat he'd argue the cause with utter conviction, regardless of the view from the moon. Glorifying silently in the new comfort around raw, sore flesh, he stretched a little. He didn't bother to thank Blake, who wouldn't expect it. Blake had left



him and was pacing.

“Avon, you can’t deny that it’s unreasonable to lock us up when we’re here on a mission of mercy.”

“Perhaps it’s not the first time they’ve been given the same impression—by less sincere Samaritans.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Blake said bitterly. He took a few more turns around the room, a large and vital man dressed in a flowing white shirt, dark trousers delving into wrinkled leather boots. Blake had not said it, but Avon knew he was perplexed, that the Mallians had not recognised the sincerity shining from his sober brown eyes, the passionate warmth of his need to help, the staunchly honest line to his character.

Blake returned from a fruitless search for an exit and sank down the wall, coming to sit beside Avon’s feet. He did not say anything. A light unease struck into the quality of silence. Impatient with it, Blake shook his head like a dog, running the fingers of both hands through his curls to dislodge knots, and said without moving his gaze from the sealed door,

“Avon. We’ve got to talk.”

“Have we?” Avon said coldly.

Blake half-turned and glanced up at him. “Of course we have.”

“Perhaps you must,” Avon said in a voice which froze the blood. “But I don’t share the urge.”

“I blame myself as much as you,” Blake offered, with a quite sickening nobility. Avon shuddered delicately.

“You have a yen for martyrdom, don’t you Blake? All right then: it was your fault. Now shut up.”

“I should never have agreed to go along with it,” Blake muttered, running a hand through his hair with that fine lack of care for order which drove Avon silently mad. He looked down at the parting of Blake’s thick, strong hair where Blake’s fingers trawled the restless chestnut strands, and fought down irritation.

“The theory of reciprocity is quite sound,” he said sharply, “as you would know if you’d studied any foundation psychology.”

Blake jumped in instantly. “It might be, Avon: but the fact is, it’s a theory open to wide

interpretation and a great deal of abuse.”

Yes, certainly that. And who had abused whom?

How very much more simple, if that was all that were necessary: to decide on the victim, the abuser, and mete out accordingly balm and penance. But the really shocking thing, Blake mused, was the inescapable and unpleasant fact that they had both jumped into the breach with such eagerness, seized upon the chance to experiment on one another with thrilling little sexual games, passed the sword of mastery back and forth in perfect complicity.

What Avon thought about it Blake didn’t know, though he was sure Avon had been as disturbed by it as Blake too was disturbed: there were times when he caught Avon watching him, saw bleak, unforgiving memory stamped across his face. Yet Avon would say nothing. Not a man given to patency, he remained tensely, darkly unimpeachable.

“I won’t discuss it, Blake,” was all he said now.

Blake was taking off again around the room, too much energy for such an enclosed space. Avon shut his eyes. He shifted his position and groaned soundlessly to himself. His arms were tired, and very soon he was going to have cramp in his left leg. Wonderful.

“What you did to me was terrible,” Blake said in a low voice.

Avon opened his eyes, incredulous. “What I did to you. What about what you do to me—every single day? Why am I here? Why am I ever anywhere in some illconceived fiasco? Why do I nearly get myself killed for your damned Cause so often when I don’t give it a chance in hell? What I did to you, Blake, was nothing, nothing, in the face of the profound sublimation I impose on myself every single day, just to do for you what you want.”

Blake planted himself in front of Avon and glared, hands on hips. “But I get the inescapable feeling, Avon, that you wouldn’t be too happy yourself about looking back through my eyes.”

“Of course,” Avon snapped. “That was the whole point.”

“You wanted to make me look a fool, at all cost. You didn’t care how far you went to get



that—”

“No!” Avon broke in, white and set with anger. “That isn’t true. You know as well as I do—”

“What?” Blake prompted.  
 “—what happened.”

Blake was pleased that Avon looked away, stared out with hauteur, over his head. He was still white around the mouth, his lips tight: Blake stared full into his face as he continued:

“Oh yes, I know what happened, all right. You decided a little dash of sexual humiliation would be a nice touch. It isn’t the first time I’ve seen it done. And then you had one hell of a surprise when it all blew up in your face. *That’s what happened*, Avon.”

Avon’s eyes flashed pure venom; he opened his mouth to snap out a reply. “Blake—” and then his eyes dwelt on the other man’s and he spoke his name again, in a very different tone of voice. “Blake,” and it sent a shiver down Blake’s spine. “It doesn’t matter now. Leave it alone. What’s the point of going over it and over it?”

Blake was immediately off-balanced by the unexpected softness of Avon’s voice, the drift of his eyes over Blake’s face. It unsettled him; he balled his hands into fists and turned away. He had wanted something resolved: the flightdeck tension between them had focussed down to such an extent that sometimes he knew the others were uncomfortable to be near them. That was no way to run a company. He faced the other way, stared without seeing at the dark walls. “And did you get what you wanted, Avon?” He turned around then, to stare hotly into Avon’s eyes. “Did it make you happy?”

Under Blake’s scrutiny, the demands of his eyes, Avon blazed back defiance at him. “Of course not,” he hurled at Blake, all of his bonds tightening as he tested them unconsciously. “Do you really need to ask?” and then he answered himself more quietly, sinking back against the wall: “Of course you don’t. Drop the subject, Blake. Forget it.”

Blake found this absurd. “How can I forget it? Am I really supposed to dust my hands off and say right, that’s it, let’s put all that behind us?”

“Oh yes,” Avon said, his voice low and terribly intense. “It’s the only way.”

Blake gazed disbelievingly into his eyes. “And nothing’s changed—? In that case, how do I know you won’t do the same thing again the next time I stir you the wrong way on a matter of policy? It happens so often, Avon, you’re hardly the agreeable type. Am I supposed to keep count of the guns in the weaponry deck?”

Something far off, unreachable, seemed to ignite in the depths of Avon’s eyes. “Again?” he hissed, his eyes roving over Blake with contempt. “You flatter yourself... Believe me, I would never have started it at all if I had only known—”

“Known what?” Blake demanded, facing him out aggressively, his body thrusting up against Avon’s. “What, Avon?”

That their touching would spark off dangerous things: exciting things, wonderful and terrible: a love unholy, a fury focussed by desire.

Avon turned his head wearily to one side, evading the question; then he looked back at Blake, his eyes still and calm, the surface of a sunless sea. “I had no desire for you, Blake. If that’s what you mean.”

Two men starved too long of touch reacting like a fireflash to the skilful catalyst of each other: they had not expected it, that much was true. Blake walked away, across the room to think. He had no doubt at all that Avon was telling the truth: Avon hadn’t wanted things to take the turn they had any more than he had: and when they did—

They had both tried to turn the escalation of events to their own advantage; Blake did not blame Avon for that.

He said, “One question, Avon: and I want you to answer it with the truth.” He came back to Avon and leaned his weight on one hand pressed to the wall, searching his face intently. “Will you do that?”

“I suppose so,” Avon said wearily. “If it will silence you on the subject forever.”

Blake’s eyes opened sharply, then narrowed; his nostrils flared a little as he concentrated unnervingly on Avon’s response. He said sharply: “That night. What did you do when I left the room?”



Avon's mouth tightened and his eyes widened even as his pupils shrank to nothing; he met Blake's gaze intently as his lashes flickered unsteadily. At last, nastily, he said: "I might have expected it... What are you trying to do, Blake, excite yourself again? There must be easier ways."

Blake moved suddenly, and for a moment Avon braced himself, certain that Blake was going to strike him; but Blake only said, "I'm just trying to get through to you, Avon, and it's damned hard work. So tell me. What did you do?"

He had left Avon alone and gone back to his cabin; but sleep had been slow to come as the images played themselves out again and again, and he had wondered, then, if Avon, too, found sleep hard to come by, on that night of all nights.

"It's important to me, Avon: just tell me," he said into the strained silence, and he turned away again, stared out over the room, and then swung back. "You know what I'm asking, don't you?"

"Of course I know," Avon's voice lashed at him from behind. "How naïve do you think I am?"

"I don't know," Blake answered him, his voice hollow, ringing like a bell in a vacuum. "I don't know anything about you."

"Well now: but you do know the answer to your own question."

Blake's heart missed a beat; he could not move. All of his muscles trembled as he stared at Avon until the image of the man wavered before his eyes: seeing an Avon crucified on the pinnacle of Blake's will, wrists bound, dark hair soft, and oh those eyes, burning like coals in the bleakness of his face.

He went over to him. He couldn't help himself.

"And yet you let me go?"

"What did you want me to do," Avon snarled at him: "make haste to follow your shining example?"

Blake said with scorn: "At least it would have been honest."

Avon's chin whipped around, making Blake jump with shock.

*"Don't think I wasn't tempted."*

Blake's lip curled, though he was shaking.

"But you always resist temptation: is that right, Avon?"

"A little more often than you do, it seems," Avon hissed at him, eyes violent. "And now, oh most noble leader, having given you the answer you wanted, I have a question for you: just how hard would you have fought me, Blake, if I'd done what you wanted me to?"

A flash of memory unfurled before his eyes; Avon, poised over his naked body with menace, a moment of tearing suspense—

A devilish grin lit Blake's blunt features as he stared at Avon provokingly. "Oh, all the way, Avon. All the way to the end..."

A sigh escaped Avon; restlessly fettered he turned his head to one side again and shuffled his arms and changed the angle of his legs. Blake catalogued the room again; he could see no chance for escape save the timely arrival of Cally bearing two spare bracelets. Avon's mind was obviously with his; from behind Blake he said, with an intensity on the edge of despair, "Where the hell has the *Liberator* got to? I want this over, Blake. I want to get away from you."

"The last I saw of the *Liberator*," Blake said, not caring, "Jenna was pressing very hard not to come back for you just yet."

Sauce for the goose, and all that, Jenna had said, or rather stormed. Do you think Avon would have gone back for you?

Yes, he did.

Futile to point out to Jenna that there were depths to Avon unsounded by her, by anyone at all; nor of his intuition that Avon would not abandon him. Not ever.

A smile nastily twisted Avon's lips. "Yes, well, no doubt her priorities will have undergone a miraculous reversal now that you are here."

Blake closed his eyes in pure irritation; but the image of Avon remained, flashing defiance before him, utterly resistant to Blake's purpose. Sometimes the urge to smack him annihilated reason like white lightning, charging every nerve cell in his body with the need to thrash the rebel out of him and throw Avon down at his feet at last, vanquished.

Or—

A shudder ran through him as the other

urge rose: to throw himself on Avon and kiss him until they were both breathless and desperate and unable to speak.

This one he gave way to, crossing the room in two paces and leaning in close as he took his mouth possessively. Avon smelt of warmth and of fear; he tasted exactly as Blake obsessively remembered and a rush of intoxication hit him. When he released him Avon's eyes were blazing, his lips moist; unable to wipe them or to move he spat at Blake:

"You must be mad. Didn't last time teach you anything?"

"Oh yes," Blake said, hard, his eyes inflexible. "And you?"

"Nothing useful," Avon snarled, like a trapped mink, exotic and violent. Such a paradox: the conflict excited Blake desperately, he wanted Avon to fight; and yet he wanted him to be a willing conspirator. He ran a gentle finger down the severe curve of Avon's face, brushed back his hair with both hands, smoothing it over and over as he stared into his eyes with serious attention.

"Don't, Blake," Avon said hoarsely. But Blake kissed him again anyway, his mouth covering Avon's deeply and thoroughly. As he leaned more closely against the other man he felt the beat of Avon's heart against his chest and the hot hard thrust of Avon's cock against his thigh, a glorious thrill as he pressed against him and it gave him all the certainty he needed. He kissed the corner of Avon's mouth, kissed it gently, teasing it with the point of his tongue.

"Why are you doing this?" Avon whispered, and Blake felt his insides twist at the look in Avon's eyes.

"Because you want me to." he answered him.

"No I don't," Avon said, in that still, quiet voice and Blake smiled at him strangely.

"I think you feel as guilty as hell about what you did to me. I'm going to make you feel—better—"

He fell to his knees in front of Avon and looked up, to see Avon's innocence dissolve, foreknowledge haunting his eyes and his voice was terrible to hear as he said, "No."

"Don't turn me down," Blake said. "I don't suppose it's an offer you get very often; or at

all, these days." Deftly he found the opening of Avon's trousers and undid them; Avon twisted and strained against his bonds but it was a futile effort. Sweat began to bead and cluster along his brow.

"I've always wanted to do this, Avon," Blake said, "and you're the only person in this world I'd admit that to."

"For both our sakes, Blake. Don't—"

The trousers slid down, revealing long-muscled thighs, lean and strong. This was the worst moment. He did not want to lift his eyes to Avon's face; and above him Avon's voice almost sobbed, from somewhere in the universe.

"I'll kill you, Blake. Make no mistake; I'll kill you for this."

The room seemed to slant and darken; Blake's hands clenched tight on tender flesh. But he recovered himself in no time: for he had to taste this side of the coin. Avon was impossible with guilt: and Blake could not bear to lose. Things would be better after this...

Despite himself a long shudder went through Avon as Blake pressed his hand over the warm sculpture of his body covered only by thin cotton, rubbing a finger across the head of his cock, back and forth.

With a sigh he pressed his cheek to Avon, turned his face slowly across the soft, swelled fabric. He undressed him with fingers that shook, and caressed him; the first cock he had ever touched save his own. The similarity delighted him: the same fragility of the skin over proud rigidity, the soft smoothness of it, inviting delicate stroking, the rosepink head and tracery of blue veins beneath. It took on a life of its own as his gently moving fingers pleased it, drawing itself up with proud tension; well, you'll like what's coming, he promised it, you'll like this. He had told Avon the truth: this had always been a fantasy of his, very nearly the worst, the most secret, the darkest dream you would admit to no-one: but he did not know, had never known, whether he would be able to go through with it.

He supposed it was the taste he was dreading, and yet at the same time it was the thought of that which made him tremble with

excitement; he wetted his lips with his tongue and glanced up at Avon's face, to find it shuttered, withdrawn, saying clearly 'I have no part in this'. Save that he could not help himself, his cock pressed itself touchingly against Blake's fingers, shyly seeking out his caresses.

Encouraged by the scent of soap and warmth Blake leaned forward, ran his tongue along satin skin: his stomach churned with shock and nerves, and he looked up to meet Avon's eyes which were sick, and shadowed.

But as his tongue made soft passes around the proud little rim of flesh he felt Avon shudder in his hands; and he could not stop now.

Lured into bolder caresses he dipped his tongue into the slit at the tip, finding a new taste there which suddenly flooded his belly with excitement. He shifted his hold on Avon and worked his tongue around the rim and under it, feeling Avon quiver, and gasp, too sensitive to bear it; with regret he glided his mouth down the living marble of the shaft to kiss lower. Love warmed his belly and swelled his heart: he was jolted out of his dreamlike state when Avon sighed again, and spoke in a harsh whisper: "Pleasant though it is, if you do it that way it'll take forever."

Stung by this, over-sensitive, Blake retorted, "Not good enough for you? I'll try and do better."

He looked up into Avon's face, saw irritation there, and scorn in the set of his mouth; yet, also, the dazed dark softness of his eyes: the bewildered inner delight. Deny it as he would, Avon was in a little private heaven; pride lit through Blake's emotions and with it that old, treacherous, headlong rush of love. In love with Avon! For the peculiar turbulence of emotion he experienced in Avon's presence, the intensity of feeling, there could be no other explanation.

Yet it did not make things easier: more frightening than fantasy, Avon's body in his hands was alive and vivid and real. A sudden panic seized him up with fear; and then Avon's voice was there to help him, set like stars in the blackest of nights, a whisper to lead him there gently:

"Haven't you ever heard the slang? You

have to suck, Blake..."

Blake slipped his hands around to cup Avon's buttocks, squeezing hard, harder... His lips parted again, and taking a deep breath he swallowed Avon down as far as possible. For a moment he hated it: this was the real thing and he couldn't breathe and the thing in his mouth was choking him; disgust curled thinly through his belly only to melt away when he heard Avon sigh, then make a small noise like a whimper, lost, entirely in Blake's hands. It was all too much. He felt Avon tremble, trembling on and on beneath his touch; removing his mouth, gulping in air, Blake pressed his hot face hard against Avon's quivering thighs, engulfing himself, pinching Avon's skin between his nails.

"Would you do this for me?" he whispered fiercely, desperately.

Avon was silent, save for his quick, panicky breathing; it rushed and jerked in counterpoint to Blake's own. Looking up at his face Blake saw that Avon's eyes were closed, his expression tense with some inner concentration; as he watched Avon's lashes lifted, revealing the dark, expressive depths of his eyes, and Blake knew that if his hands had been free, Avon would have reached down helplessly to touch his face. It moved him unbearably; but it hurt him unbearably too, because now he knew what he had done.

He would give anything to have it undone.

But it was already too late; even as the ache in his heart and the sinking in his guts and the punishing regret flayed at him, Avon was speaking to him, his voice quiet and beautiful, asking him—

Needing him to carry on.

Blake's skin prickled all over exquisitely, his spine tingling, sick with sudden lust; he mouthed Avon's slick cock again, then lapping at it, overwhelmed with the hungry desire of his dreams. With a choke he swallowed Avon again, lashed him with his tongue, sucked and sucked until Avon's hips lifted and thrust his cock into his mouth, and went still. Something silken shot down Blake's throat and he drank it convulsively, again and again. Avon slumped with a sigh and it was over.



AFTERWARDS IT WAS DREADFUL.

He did Avon's clothing up with rigorous control and took off for the other side of the cell. There he leaned his head on the wall and clenched one hand over the knotted cramps in his belly, at the same time sinking his teeth hard into the knuckle of the other hand.

Avon didn't long leave him in suspense. Restored to elegance his voice curled out across the void between them with a deadly malice.

"Well now, what can I say? Do you want marks out of ten, Blake? I suppose it did occur to you that Jenna might have appeared at any moment during your solo aria? But then," Avon mused aloud, black ice sheering dangerously, "when you sink as low as this, I suppose such things only add a thrill or two to the proceedings."

He said in a low voice, barely able to speak, "Stop it, Avon. Don't make things worse than they are."

Strange, that in a way his rebellious nature blamed Avon as much as himself, for responding to him as he had wanted: unfair, unfair, unfair.

"—Worse?" Avon continued, nasty with sarcasm. "Well, how could it be worse?"

How indeed. Blake tasted blood and stared at his hand without surprise.

"I suppose you mean you're going to repeat your performance of the other day. I'm afraid," Avon smiled unpleasantly, "that, constrained as I am, I can't offer to help. But I've nothing better to do than watch, so why not? Carry on. Entertain me."

"Enough, Avon."

"Well now, there's no need to be shy. I've seen it before, or had you forgotten."

At this moment, he needed more than anything to touch Avon, and it was a need which would not be denied; he crossed the room on leaden feet, closed the distance between them until he was looking into the demented mockery shining fiercely in Avon's eyes, a defiance which blazed and blazed and went on blazing until the image shattered like glass, and Blake swore—

"Christ, Avon—" He put his arms round him, awkwardly, then carefully: pressed trembling lips to each eye in turn, kissing away wet salt. Not misery; humiliation. Pride disembowelled by the cruellest of victories. He was in tears himself.

"Yes, you see it now, don't you," Avon whispered, staring, courageous to the last, into his eyes. "How you use us all in the way which hurts us most..."

"I didn't mean," Blake started, but could not finish it.

All there was to do was pick up the pieces.

"Where the hell is the *Liberator*?"

A terrible silence. Before Avon joined in.

"Most likely half way to Alpha Centauri, if Vila's navigating."

It was not yet Avon's voice; but it soon would be.

"Let's look on the bright side, Avon, he's probably too drunk to *find* Alpha Centauri."

They were both, before anything else, survivors.

And so it so would go on.

And the darkness did not lift.

*Sebastian 10/90*