It might well have been the unqualified success of the campaign that did it, but it was probably the fact that even Avon admitted that the campaign had been an unqualified success—and did so without one single sneer about Blake’s own lack of qualifications, success or anything else. Avon was, in fact, heard to say that Blake’s plan had had some modicum of brilliance to it. Well, if the plan had a touch of brilliance, it had nothing on Blake’s smile which had Vila threatening to wear sunglasses.

“Nonsense, Vila,” Blake beamed, clapping Vila heartily round the shoulder, the smaller man almost losing his footing under this unexpected gesture of affection. “The only place you’ll need eye protection is Akbar IV.”

“Akbar IV?” Vila repeated, just to make sure that he’d misheard the man who made the average monk look dissolute.

“That’s right,” Blake replied, Vila’s jaw dropping open in sheer shock. “I’ve decided that after our success, we should let some of the others have their share of the glory. Anyway,” he was beaming again, the thought of all those exploding battle cruisers warming the cockles of his heart, “it’s a planet by planet job now, best left to the locals who know the terrain.”

“It’s gone to your head, hasn’t it?” Vila asked, sidling cautiously out from under the too enthusiastic hug that was threatening his ribs—and he was none to sure what Blake had in his pocket that was digging into him like that, and he didn’t much want to find out.

“What’s gone to my head?”
“Destroying the main fleet, blowing up Central Command and buggering the suppressant production factories. It’s all gone straight to your head,” Vila said. “Either that or you’re on something,” he muttered, making good his escape as Avon came on the flight deck and Blake’s attention was immediately and completely transferred.

“Avon.” Even his voice was beaming, not to mention booming, and Avon had already started to think fondly of the good old days when all Blake did was brood and try to get them all killed. Blake watched as Avon came down the steps. “Ah, Avon, it is you.”

“Well, it was when last I looked in the mirror,” Avon said in the tone of a man humouring the dangerously insane.

“Don’t be so glum,” Blake chided him cheerfully, giving Avon even more cause to be concerned.

“He’s all yours,” Vila muttered in passing, sliding past Avon at the foot of the stairs. “And good luck to you—you’ll need it. He’s gone stark, staring mad. Just you wait till you hear where he says he’s taking us next. Mad, I tell you, he’s gone bloody bonkers.”

If it weren’t for the fact that he’d taken a solemn vow to never, ever allow Blake to get the better of him, Avon would have turned tail and left, right there and then. Fortunately enough—from Blake’s point of view anyway—he did no such thing.

“So we’re going to Akbar IV,” Blake told him and stood back to wait for Avon’s delight.

“Akbar IV? Have you taken leave of your senses?” Avon asked, perfectly serious and perfectly straight-faced, a fact which disappointed Blake no end— from Blake’s point of view anyway—he did no such thing.

“So we’re going to Akbar IV,” Blake told him and stood back to wait for Avon’s delight.

“Akbar IV? Have you taken leave of your senses?” Avon asked, perfectly serious and perfectly straight-faced, a fact which disappointed Blake no end.

“No, I have not,” he replied, manfully hiding how deeply wounded he was that Avon would think the same thing as Vila, a real disappointment for someone who admired intellect as much as Blake did. “I thought you’d be pleased.”

“Oh, I am, I am,” Avon said, the frown creasing between his eyebrows making him look anything but. “I’m simply…stunned that you should suggest Akbar IV.” A thought occurred to him, one that revolved around Vila’s talent for disinformation and Blake’s occasional and deeply regretted bouts of gullibility. “You do know the sort of place Akbar IV is, don’t you?”

“Of course I know exactly what it’s like,” Blake replied, his beaming enthusiasm rapidly disappearing under Avon’s polite bemusement. Not even the joy of using Orac to sabotage all the engine computers of an entire fleet could withstand Avon’s lack of enthusiasm, and if Avon kept this up, all those sharp glances of his would surely burst Blake’s bubble. “I would hardly take us there if I didn’t.”

Avon wasn’t so sure of that. “Akbar IV is not exactly renowned for nature rambles, museums, libraries, things of that ilk,” he said carefully, referring to the appallingly wholesome activities Blake usually thrust upon them, whilst wondering which particular lies Vila had fed Blake about Akbar IV. A few months ago, he’d left Vila to it, enjoyed Akbar IV to the fullest, and then sat back and watched the fireworks when Blake raked Vila over the coals for leading them all astray. “Intellectual and rustic pursuits are hardly its speciality.”

“I was aware of that, Avon. Akbar IV,” he said, actually grabbing Avon by the arm and hauling him off to sit down on the flight couch, Avon’s glimmering glare bouncing harmlessly off his thick hide, “is famous for its casinos, bars, gaming rooms, sports gambling, virtual reality clubs, racing, boxing, fighting, drugs—” Blake paused for breath, held his hand up to silence Avon before that worthy could speak, “let me finish—and its nude beaches, brothels, sex-shows and all-round permissiveness.”

Avon decided that Vila was right: Blake really had gone bonkers. Either that, or Servalan had slipped them a clone when they weren’t looking.

“I confess to being surprised that you want us to go to Akbar IV even though you’ve heard all that.”

“Heard it, Avon?” Blake murmured, leaning unnervingly close to an Avon who was suddenly wondering Vila’s same question about what the hell Blake kept in his pockets. “Avon, I’ve been there.”

There wasn’t an awful lot Avon wanted to say to that, for fear that Blake might decide to elucidate, graphically, which parts of that list were from personal experience. It wasn’t the sort of thing one normally associated with Blake (not that Avon thought associating with Blake was exactly normal itself), but the other man
had been downright peculiar since he'd started shutting himself away with Orac, a recent habit that had sunk Vila to new scatological lows, most of which are far too rude to repeat in these demure pages.

Blake, not privy to these somewhat unflattering thoughts, was still waiting for some sort of answer, and wishing he'd recognised a good exit line when he'd said one. "I've been there," he repeated, in case Avon had forgotten what he'd said.

"How terribly nice for you," Avon murmured politely, trying to come up with a way out of this situation before those imminent confessions burst forth, no doubt messily.

"Yes, it was," Blake replied, annoyed that Avon hadn't shown at least a bit of interest. Never mind, he told himself, no need to be downhearted: Avon would come round eventually. "That's why I thought it would be the perfect spot for all of us. Cally can go to one of their spiritualists' communes, Jenna can go to the pirates' private clubs, Gan can go to their restaurants, Vila can do everything else..."

Avon did not at all care for the way both his and Blake's names were absent from that list. If the megalomaniac thought he was going to moulder on this ship while Blake gallivanted through Akbar IV's fleshpots— "And where will I be whilst all this is going on?" he asked, a few pithy comments ready and waiting to be hurled at Blake's head.

Blake hadn't spent all those hours watching the snazzy brochure transmissions for nothing. "We'll be staying at the Golden Orbs, the best accommodation on the planet."

"We?" Avon asked pointedly, whilst resisting the temptation to goggle at the place Blake had chosen.

"My treat, of course," Blake purred, gazing seductively into Avon's eyes.

Avon took one look at the look Blake was giving him, and wondered what he'd done to make Blake angry this time. Not that he minded Blake staring at him with that fixed fury again: he simply preferred to know what had triggered it so he could do it again. "Your treat," he replied belatedly, realising that Blake was still waiting for some comment from him, more's the pity. "That's very kind of you," he said pleasantly, edging away from Blake's ever increasing enthusiasm. "But one of Akbar IV's greatest pleasures is that I will be far, far away from you and everyone else from this damned ship."

Blake just loved it when Avon played hard to get like this. "All right," he murmured "I can take a hint." For now, he thought to himself, happily contemplating winking Avon out of his thorny shell. He smiled again, inching closer to close the distance his diffident and inhibited Avon had put between them: no-one could flirt as well as Avon. Putting every ounce of charm into it, he murmured, throatily, "But surely you could at least have a drink with me."

Hearing the hoarse voice and noticing the decidedly glazed condition of Blake's eyes, Avon wondered if Blake would be well enough to even make it as far as Akbar IV. "Are you coming down with the flu?" he asked, using that as a cover to slide another few centimetres away from Blake.

"Do I have to be ill to want to have a pleasant chat with you over a drink?" Blake asked, sliding the same number of centimetres closer and Avon decided that what he thought Blake was doing couldn't possibly be right. After all, the man had shown no signs of anything like this until well after all those private sessions with Orac: perhaps it was another one of those little time-bombs the puppeteers had left behind, like that nonsense with the mind-control carrier wave.

Blake's left hand brushed Avon's outer thigh. But then again, Avon thought, perhaps it was nothing more than cabin fever brought on by too long in space and nowhere for a man to spend himself. A trip to Akbar IV was beginning to appeal more and more, because he didn't really want to beat Blake up, if only because he needed his hands for his computer work.

"Well?" Blake asked.

Avon was seriously tempted to impersonate Orac, but instead he said: "A drink would be fine. I'll contact you later, set up a firm time."

"Why don't we make plans now?"

Because I don't want to see you until after you're back to what passes for normal, Avon thought to himself, making a mental note to interrogate Orac as to what the hell was wrong with Blake. "This isn't another raid, Blake, we don't have to synchronise our watches."

And Avon, who did recognise a good exit
line when he said it, made good his escape.

The sedate, peaceful run to Akbar IV had turned into a nightmare for Avon, a major malfunction in Zen’s circuitry wreaking havoc on the ship and Avon’s sleep schedule. So busy trying to persuade Zen that no, they weren’t intruders—well, not any longer—he had no time to do anything with Orac but mend what passed for Zen’s main core banks. Once he’d stopped Zen from blowing them all up, he began on the painstaking task of uncovering the root of the problem and mending it, whilst the navigation computers sailed on serenely towards Akbar IV.

He hadn’t been in bed anything approaching a decent number of hours before Vila was hammering on his door (having once bypassed the locks and learning why he never, ever, even if they were being attacked by great hairy aliens, wanted to pick Avon’s lock again, Vila stuck to less life-threatening methods of rousing Avon) and shouting through the intercom about how they were all teleporting down now and did Avon want to come.

Avon, ever the soul of sociability, rolled over and went back to sleep.

Or tried to. He finally admitted defeat, muttering under his breath dire retribution when he got his hands on Vila. At least all was not lost nor miserable: by the time he reached the teleport, the others were long gone. Nagging Orac into coughing up the information, Avon carefully set the co-ordinates for a place a long, long way from anywhere that already had its share of Liberator’s crew. A smile crept onto his face as he ran through the advertised details in his mind: oh, yes, he was going to enjoy himself this time.

Less than fifteen minutes later, he was beginning to wish he’d never even heard of the damned planet. He ducked as someone tried to crown him with a stool, swerved to avoid a hefty boot, winced as his fist discovered that not all big bellies are pillow-soft. The ‘companion’ he’d selected had quickly disappeared at the first sign of the brawl, her departure spilling the drink that had embroiled Avon in all of this. He was sorely tempted—actually, parts of him were simply sore—to pull his gun and put a few of them out of his misery, but he’d never been able to get the hang of this random killing routine. Instead, he ducked again and tried to weave his way to the nearest unblocked exit. Something collided with his head, a hand mauled his arm, whirling him round, and if his reflexes had been even a fraction slower, he would have made Blake a soprano.

“This way,” Blake said a bit tightly, which was hardly surprising considering that at least three juggernauts were thundering towards himself and Avon. “In here,” he hauled Avon through a door, slamming it shut in the nick of time. “Teleport now!” he shouted into his bracelet while Avon discovered that it wasn’t sweat running down his forehead after all.

The teleport effect took them, Liberator wavering into view, Blake immediately bustling off to fetch the first-aid kit from behind the teleport desk. Avon flinched as Blake, somewhat overenthusiastically, cleaned the cut on his forehead.

“Fetching though you’d look in the uniform, I don’t need a nursemaid,” he complained, staying perfectly still while Blake used a fine-line sealer to take care of his cut: it didn’t do to wriggle when someone was using a sealer this close to one’s eyes, especially when that someone was Blake, and Blake’s hands were less than entirely steady.

“Shut up and stand still,” Blake muttered, trying not to let Avon’s unnerving proximity end up in Avon having his eyes lasered shut. “There,” he said, satisfied, medically at least, “that should take care of it.”

Blake smiled, gave an avuncular chuckle, all of which conspired to remind Avon of all the questions he’d been meaning to ask Orac.

“I think you should have that drink with me now,” Blake went on, taking the first aid kit back to the teleport console. “Not only is it the least you can do after I came to your rescue, it’s a hell of a lot safer.”

Avon agreed very grudgingly, promising himself that it would be one quick drink and then Blake could go find himself a nice little straitjacket and Avon would slip into something considerably more comfortable, such as that rather sumptuous bordello he’d seen in the tourist infocasts.

“I know just the spot,” Blake said, delighted that Avon had finally succumbed, and with just the right touch of reluctance too—the man really
was a consummate flirt.

“Fine, fine,” Avon mumbled, wanting to get this over and done with, and best of all, get back into a very public place, preferably with lots and lots of the public in it, instead of being completely alone on the ship with a Blake who was exhibiting all the symptoms of either space fatigue or lunacy.

The teleport effect took them, and Avon blinked. He looked around, took in his surroundings, and looked back at Blake.

“Incredible, isn’t it?” his host commented, wandering over to some cavernous object that looked like a pile of rough planks nailed loosely together.

Incredible was the kindest word that anyone could possibly use to describe this place. Avon turned slowly, his disdainful stare making his opinion abundantly clear. The place was unbelievable, a pastiche of a Wild West log cabin, complete with a cow-hide sofa and patch-work quilted brass bed. There was even a black, pot-bellied stove with quaintly angled flue going up to the ceiling. A sheepskin rug in front of the redundant fireplace, cowboy hats hanging on wooden pegs, a metal pump over a stone sink. It was rustic, it was cute and Avon despised it immensely.

“Here,” Blake said to him from his spot on the sofa, extending a glass of what looked like ale, of all things.

“Beer?” Avon asked, not taking the tankard.

“Yes, isn’t it perfect? There’s even bourbon and those odd little glasses if you’d rather.”

“As long as there aren’t hostile natives circling outside, I couldn’t care less.”

“Then sit down and have a drink,” Blake said easily, casually stretching his arms out across the back of the sofa.

Avon suddenly remembered the last time he’d sat on a sofa beside Blake: as it was either the sofa or the bed, he draped himself, with every appearance of ease, as far from Blake as he could possibly get without actually landing on the floor.

Blake eased a little closer, his hand brushing Avon’s shoulder. Avon, purely by coincidence of course, leaned forward to pick up his glass. He twisted sideways a little as he sat back again—and still ended up with Blake touching him. Blake shifted a bit nearer, and Avon grew a bit tenser, being literally backed into a corner. Blake turned sideways on the sofa, his knees touching Avon, his free hand coming to rest on Avon’s thigh.

“Get your hands off me!” Avon hissed, grabbing Blake by the wrist.

“Oh, come on, Avon,” Blake murmured, freeing himself rather more easily than Avon cared for and putting his hand back on Avon’s thigh, considerably higher than Avon cared for. Blake chuckled as Avon made another grab for him, taking Avon’s hand in his and using the two of them to gently caress Avon’s groin.

“There’s no-one here to see us, you can relax here. Let down your guards.”

“Blake,” Avon said with commendable calmness, all of it faked, “let go of me now and I’ll pretend this never happened.” He tore his hand free of Blake’s, made a move to shove it out of the way, realised that he’d didn’t dare let Blake go again.

“You don’t have to pretend with me, Avon,” Blake said gently, heart overflowing with empathy for the torture Avon must have gone through. “I understand…”

“That’s more than I do.”

Blake smiled sweetly, moved by Avon’s obvious confusion and inexperience in this. He raised their joined hands so that Avon looked at them. “It’s always the same with you and me. Look at what you’re doing right this very minute.”

Avon did, and as far as he could see, all he was doing was keeping Blake out of mischief and himself out of a very sticky situation. Blake, however, obviously saw something that was going right over Avon’s head. So Avon upheld his family’s ancient motto: When in doubt, employ supercilious boredom. He sneered, perfectly.

Blake simply smiled, so sure now that he could see through all of Avon’s masks and façades to the insecure, wounded man within. “You’re protesting and kicking up a fuss,” he said very gently, still smiling soulfully into Avon’s eyes, “but you’re holding my hand. I know you want to, Avon, you don’t have to be scared with me.”

Avon was willing to dispute him on that one, not that he’d ever admit it, of course. Delicately, he tried to disentangle their hands.
Blake held on tighter.

Avon tugged, hard, pulling himself free with such force that Blake landed full upon him, much to Avon’s dismay (what the hell did Blake have in his pocket? An oversized statue of Priapus—or was it a tribute to his own ancestors, assuming that they’d all been horses?) and Blake’s rampant joy.

“Oh, Avon,” he breathed.

“Oh, Blake,” Avon gasped, ribs crushed by the weight of Blake lying full on him.

“Oh, Kerr,” Blake gasped, rubbing, none too discreetly, at Avon’s nether regions.

“Oh, fuck,” muttered Avon.

“I thought you’d never ask,” said Blake.

That shut Avon up. Either that or it was Blake’s tongue in his mouth.

A passionate moment passed, filled with writhing and undulations until Avon arched up and finally managed to fling Blake off. Still panting for breath, Avon clambered to his feet and stood, chest heaving, well out of Blake’s reach.

Blake was still panting as well, but he just lay there, sprawled in generous invitation.

Avon, needless to say, declined. “What the hell are you playing at?” he demanded, standing there on the sheepskin rug, hands on his hips and a flush on his cheeks.

“Who’s playing?” Blake asked, gazing up at his livid love, admiring the way Avon’s eyes flashed, trying very hard not to become angry himself. After all, he reminded himself, Avon must have gone through absolute hell, so he would need some extra care, some very special handling—which Blake would be delighted to provide.

Avon shook his head, as much to make sure he still had a grey cell or two running around in there as to express his bemusement at Blake. He stared at his supposed leader, and wished, not for the first time, that he could work out why the hell he was always willing to give Blake another chance or the benefit of the doubt or any of the dozen insane things he did for this man. Perhaps Blake wasn’t the only one around here who’d been conditioned. Perhaps that was some puppeteers idea of a sick joke and vengeful torture: make Avon susceptible to starry-eyed, vulnerable idealists who wore their hearts on their sleeves, complete with affixed target. He took a deep breath and tried to think of how best to phrase this without making Liberator too hideously tense for words. It wasn’t that he wanted to hurt Blake: after all, the man had only made a pass at him. He just didn’t want to have any more little—or rather, absolutely, mind-bogglingly huge—surprises. “Blake, I should probably have made my position clear when I first suspected you were out to seduce me—”

Blake gave Avon the most seriously libidinous smile he’d seen since Servalan’s last attempt to kill him.

“Let me rephrase that,” Avon said a trifle too quickly. “I’m not that way inclined—”

“I’ve told you, Avon,” Blake said, coming to his feet and slowly unbuttoning the rest of his shirt, “you don’t have to be scared with me. This is one place where you don’t have to pretend.”

Now, Avon was the first to call Blake mad, lunatic, hasty, ill-considered, thoughtless, lacking foresight, gullible, hypocritical, megalomaniac and a bully, but this one obviously came under ‘suffering from delusions’ (not, however, of grandeur, if that swelling in his trousers was anything to go by). But what the hell had triggered this particular delusion with its attendant…unsettling behaviour? “You thought I was…interested in you?”

Blake laughed, the sound filling the carefully fabricated genuine reproduction cabin. “I’m not entirely stupid, you know. I admit,” he said deprecatingly, awkward about admitting this to sharp-minded Avon, but knowing that if he didn’t say this off his own bat then Avon would hit him with it, “that I was a bit slow. But it did finally dawn on me—”

“Oh?” Avon asked, absolutely flummoxed by this bizarre development. Insanity he had been prepared for, confessions of anything from unbridled lust to unrequited love to Blake’s machiavellian manipulations to keep the Galaxy’s best computer expert blackmailed to his side were to be expected, but…thinking that Avon had started it? That Avon was the one who wanted this? The one who put the idea in Blake’s empty head in the first place? “What the fuck made you think THAT?”

If Avon had been prepared for everything but what he got, he was in excellent company. Blake could hardly believe his ears: from what Avon was saying, he shouldn’t have believed
his eyes either, let alone any of his other organs. Now he knew how those three monkeys felt and the only thing stopping him from covering his eyes, ears and mouth before they got him in more trouble was a sad shortage of hands. Blake stared at Avon in rank disbelief as a very nasty thought gave him a kick up the backside, which though painful, was still heaps better than the kick in the goolies that accompanied finding out that he was deaf, blind and quite embarrassingly dumb. “Are you trying to tell me that you did all this on purpose? You set me up! Did you, Avon?”

The cheek of the man! As if Avon would stoop to such a thing when he had a perfectly well honed tongue in his mouth. “Were I to set you up, Blake, it would more likely be with a noose than a spurned romance.”

“But everything you did, everything you said… If those weren’t command performances to deceive me, then how could you not want me? Wait a minute,” he said, suddenly seeing light at the end of the tunnel, albeit a very faint light and a very convoluted tunnel. “I think I understand. You do want this, but you’re afraid of it. Too much guilt, Avon?” he whispered, coming closer.

“Not about this,” Avon said loudly, circling round the low table as Blake came closer. He really should just deck the man and be done with it. But then again, Blake was bigger and did Avon really want to end up wrestling with Blake on the floor? His heel caught in something, and Avon looked down. The thick, lush, tawdrily romantic sheepskin rug. Writhing on a sheepskin rug in front of a fire would tend, somehow, to undermine Avon’s own protestations that romance, lust and carnal knowledge were the farthest things from his mind. That decided it: he wasn’t going to roll around on that rug with Blake. Shooting Blake was out, much to his own chagrin. After all, Avon might not want this, but it was hardly a fate worse than Blake’s death. So there was only one obvious way out, no matter how truly hideous it was. Get Blake talking.

“Where do I begin?” Blake asked, gazing fondly at his poor, nervous Avon, standing there as defensive as a spider in a room full of cats.

Steadfastly refusing to so much as glance at the bed lurking treacherously behind him, Avon gave up on graciousness and went for the jugular instead. “Break with your own tradition: try the beginning.”

Now this was ground Blake was very sure of. Many’s the long night he’d spent running these memories over and over again, examining them from every angle, discovering new, minute details that thrilled him. And Avon’s acerbic attitude didn’t fool him at all: it was delightful to see the other man come out of his shell, no matter how tentative this first show of open interest might be. Of course, this plea for Blake to explain it all to Avon was just Avon’s excuse to have it all laid out logically in front of him so that the entire thing became ineluctable. “It was on the London, of course,” he said.

On the London? Now there was a thought to boggle even the finest of minds, although Avon was beginning to wonder if Vila hadn’t somehow managed to pinch his brains along with everything else. “Blake, all I did on the London was argue with you—and a few of the guards.”

“That’s hardly all you did,” Blake told him with just an edge of asperity: really, Avon’s insistence that all his little lures had been purely subconscious! He reined his temper in just before it galloped loose and buggered up the race before he could bugger Avon. Just because Avon did such a good job of covering himself with acid cynicism didn’t mean that Blake had to fall
for it like everyone else. “Oh, yes, you argued with me,” he said quite gently considering the fact that he really did want to strangle Avon sometimes, now being a prime example in spite of all his intentions of saintly tolerance. “And then you did exactly what I wanted you to.”

“I concede that that could lead someone to thinking I was insane, but I’m afraid I can’t quite see how that could possibly make even you think I…desired you.”

“It was in the way you looked at me, Avon!” Blake ejaculated, which his cock thought would be a bloody good idea itself, and the sooner the better. “You would stand there, your eyes wide, fiery, your chest heaving—”

“This isn’t a romance novel, Blake, spare me the purple prose, please.”

“It’s not purple prose, but it is a simple statement of fact.”

Avon actually harrumphed, a habit he thought he’d broken when he’d finally finished the last of his post-graduate degrees and seen the last of his advanced students.

“No matter how much you deny it, it won’t alter the truth.”

“Did it ever occur to you,” Avon said musingly, gradually working his way back round to the relative safety of the sofa and the sheepskin rug, “that those reactions just might have had something to do with the fact that my life was at risk and I was in danger of having to kill another human being?”

It hadn’t, actually. This was not, strictly speaking, the sort of response Blake had always imagined his list of proofs eliciting from Avon. A bit more embarrassed revelation and a lot more rampant enthusiasm was what he’d had in mind, if only the obstinate little bugger would co-operate for once in his life. “There’s a good excuse,” he said, stalking slowly after Avon, “if I wanted to protect your delicate sensibilities. But how do you explain your behaviour when Travis attacked Liberator?”

Blake decided that now was not the moment to give credence to what were obviously desperate grasping at straws. In fact, he steadfastly refused to believe Avon. Absolutely. Would not entertain a single doubt. At least, that’s what he told himself. “An answer for everything, Avon?”

Blake throbbed, hard.

“But you can’t judge a book by its covers,” he said hastily, making a mental note never to wear leather around Blake ever, ever again. “As for hugging you—Blake, you were the largest, most solid object within reach and as such—and only as such—you were preferable to being thrown off my feet.”

Blake decided that now was not the moment to give credence to what were obviously desperate grasping at straws. In fact, he steadfastly refused to believe Avon. Absolutely. Would not entertain a single doubt. At least, that’s what he told himself. “An answer for everything, Avon?”

I certainly hope so, Avon thought fervently while smiling wolfish condescension. “I do my best.”
Now wasn’t that a lovely thought? Avon doing his best, spread out on the bed… Blake got a grip on himself, metaphorically speaking at least. “So I presume you have some flimsy excuse for holding my hand when that explosion went off on Liberator?”

“Embarrassing though it is to admit it,” Avon said painfully.

Ah-ha, here it comes! thought Blake, triumphantly.

“I confess that we did become…entangled. But I hardly think I can be held responsible for the force of an explosion.”

Oh. That did put a different complexion on it, and Blake’s complexion was slowly turning bright red. It hadn’t crossed his mind that that little gesture might have been completely inadvertent. And if that had been truly innocent, then bang went his example of Avon putting his arm round Blake when that other explosion had thrown them both to the floor. “Yes,” Blake said slowly, backing away, putting more distance between himself and Avon’s caustic tongue that was surely about to go into warp drive any second now. “Well…” Edging away from that damned bed, he backed off another step, and another.

Avon moved forward, and forward again, the scent of blood sweetening his mood no end. “Well, well, well,” he murmured, the glee in his voice making Blake very uneasy indeed. “So it is true. Life is stranger than fiction—Roj Blake is capable of rational thought.”

Blake knew he should apologise, as good manners dictated, but right now, survival was dictating that he keep his big mouth shut and get out of here as fast as he could.

Blake’s rudeness was obviously catching, as Avon speared a glance at where Blake’s spear was no longer lancing. Emboldened by the shrivelling of that implacable lust pointing to Blake’s desire, Avon took yet another step forward until Blake, deflated in more ways than one, tumbled over the side of the sofa to land, in an undignified sprawl, across the cushions. Who stood, ever so casually, and in fewer nanoseconds than light would normally take to cover the same distance. “Try that again, Blake,” he growled, such butchness making Blake positively tingle, “and I’ll blow your balls off.”

“Promises, promises,” Blake said, archly facetious, looking not at Avon’s holsterd gun but at Avon’s parted lips. “And after trying so hard on his hips, only to move them quickly as he reminded himself of the impression he was trying so hard not to create. “Now that we’ve got that sorted out,” referring presumably to Blake’s confusion over Avon’s orientation and not to Avon’s predilections of posture that led to such confusions, “I don’t suppose your martyr-complex runs to confessing all?”

“I thought I had,” Blake replied blandly, lying there trying to look as if this were a pose of greatest ease and absolutely intentional. With Avon standing over him like a predatory Colossus of Rhodes, Blake was feeling more than a fraction insecure, thoughts of Avon’s revenge running plasma bolts up and down his spine.

“Oh, come now, Blake,” Avon said with singularly unnerving good cheer, “surely there’s more.”

Having misjudged Avon entirely on one matter didn’t mean Blake was about to risk his neck on assuming that he’d been wrong on every other count. As far as he was concerned, an Avon exuding bonhomie was about as safe as a virgin in Servalan’s boudoir. Time to at least pretend that he hadn’t just made a complete fool out of himself while passing Avon every trump card in the deck, not to mention a few aimed and loaded weapons. He barely contained a groan at the thought of Avon, on the flightdeck, relating this particular bedtime story. Offense being the best form of defense, Blake opted to be as offensive as possible. With a disgusted glare, he raked the leather-clad, posturing Avon. “Careful, Avon, else I just might think you were doing this for kicks.”

Entirely unrelated to what Blake had just said and having nothing whatsoever to do with Avon having suddenly realised he was standing there like something out of an SM club, Avon casually perched himself on the arm of the sofa.

Blake, yet another suspicion dawning yet again, stretched his legs out straight, neatly scissoring them around Avon. Who stood, ever so casually, and in fewer nanoseconds than light would normally take to cover the same distance. “Try that again, Blake,” he growled, such butchness making Blake positively tingle, “and I’ll blow your balls off.”

“Promises, promises,” Blake said, archly facetious, looking not at Avon’s holstered gun but at Avon’s parted lips. “And after trying so hard
to convince me I was wrong about you.”

“You were and are, and will no doubt continue being as wrong about me as you are everything else.” Fortunately for his virtue, or his credibility depending on how one views it, Avon stopped himself before he added: Don’t tempt me. He meant that killing Blake was becoming a remarkably attractive notion, but Blake would probably take it as an engraved invitation. “The only thing I’m interested in from you is finding out what the hell brought all this on.”

“Your charm, good looks and fine physique, of course,” Blake said, intrigued by the way Avon was backing off from him. Perhaps Avon knowing about this might not be the disaster he had thought. Play his cards right, and he might end up able to keep Avon in line just by threatening a quick kiss and a grope. Now wasn’t that a lovely thought? He could have his cake and eat it too.

“I know all that,” Avon replied with unflinching modesty. “But what possessed you to try to…?” unfortunately, there really was no other word for it. Or at least, none that sprang into his battered brain, “seduce me.”

He could, of course, pretend total ignorance and incomprehension, but Avon was beginning to look a bit frayed around the edges, if one knew which edges to check, and Blake thought he still did. “After we went through Orac de-activating the subconscious command the puppeteers had implanted in me…”

And a thoroughly miserable time had been had by all, both during Blake’s little episode of being mind-controlled and the protracted treatments after. Not an experience Avon would ever want to repeat.

“I was curious what else they had left behind.”

Not a lot, as far as Avon could see. Not a lot. “But Orac said there were no other controls.”

“Orac said there were no other controls that would threaten Liberator or the lives of the crew.”

“Which means, of course,” Avon said, interested in spite of himself, “that there were other types of controls still in place.”

“Exactly. Can you blame me for wanting to find out what they were?” He smiled again, cataloguing yet another one of Avon’s subtle signals that he was very uncomfortable with the newly revealed designs Blake had on his body. Just wait till the other man found out Blake wanted him for his mind as well!

“And I presume,” Avon was saying, to the casual observer every inch the suave urbanite, although Vila would have been agog, “that you found at least one control…”

Blake said not a word, on the grounds that a thinking Avon was a non-killing Avon. Plus, if he couldn’t bugger Avon, he was going to have fun screwing him, and it certainly was amusing watching Avon stew in the heat of Blake lusting after him.

“And that control was no doubt the suppression of your sexual orientation?”

“That was one of them, Avon. There were other more…esoteric revelations,” he purred smoothly, hinting at nothing at all but knowing that Avon’s fertile imagination would fill in more details than Blake could ever dream of.

“I see,” Avon replied, wonderfully non-committal as he ran through the programmes that would lock his door against anything Blake—or a coerced Vila—could come up with. Of course, if Blake subverted Gan, then Avon was up the creek without a paddle, but he preferred not to think about that right now. “Armed with this new knowledge—”

With bells on, Blake thought to himself, delighted with having finally found Avon’s Achilles’ heel, especially one that would be such a pleasure to use.

“—you decided that I would be your first victim.”

“Oh, no, Avon,” Blake replied, enjoying himself enormously and giving not a single thought to how twisted a past poor Avon must have had to be so unsteadied by the focus of male desire upon him, “I have no intention of victimising you. That’s why this was supposed to be a seduction, not a rape,” that, and the sure and certain knowledge that Avon would kill him if he were stupid enough to attempt rape. “And there was no ‘first’ involved either. I have considerable experience,” he lied blithely, his memories being more than even Orac could find, “and you’re the only one I want.”

Avon paled, dramatically. “Oh,” he said. “I would be honoured, had I the least respect for your taste.” He glanced, scathingly, at Blake’s Pirate of Penzance outfit. “As it is, I think I’ve just been insulted.”

Blake was really beginning to hit his stride on
this one. “You haven’t been anything yet, except a prick-tease.”

Drawing himself to his full height, hands making unerringly for hips, Avon snapped: “We established that I had done nothing whatsoever to foster your stupid delusions.”

“So we had,” Blake replied, smooth as a spiv and just as trustworthy. “How soon we forget, hmm, Avon?”

What was that they said about discretion being the better part of valour? “See that you don’t forget so quickly next time, Blake,” Avon snarled, wonderfully threatening, positively rife with danger.

Blake loved it when Avon came on strong like that. “And if I do? You’ll have to come up with a better threat than ‘or else’. I shall expect you to stamp your foot next.”

“If you try anything like this again,” Avon enunciated very clearly for the mentally disadvantaged, “I will not be either so restrained or so tolerant.”

“Oh, you are going to stamp your foot,” Blake replied, smiling. Avon, he had decided, was protesting just too much. A simple ‘no, thanks all the same’ would have sufficed, but strutting around with his hand on his gun? His holstered, ever-so-phallic gun? Oh, yes, Avon was protesting so much Blake was tempted to overpower him then and there. And there, on the bed, and there, on the rug...

“I promise you, Blake,” Avon snarled, “try anything like this ever again, and I’ll kill you.”

“Do this and die?” Blake enquired mildly. The only dying that would be involved between them would be of the petit mort sort, and that was one death he was willing to hasten along. “I’ll keep it in mind, Avon,” he went on, coming to his feet, bristling with what Avon would see as barely leashed strength. And sure enough, there it was: Avon’s eyes were fiery, and his chest was heaving, and he was staring at Blake. Couple that with the whole display with fondling the gun, the hands on the hips, the sitting down on the arm of the chair, ‘not noticing’ that Blake’s legs were there... It was only a matter of time, Blake told himself happily.

“See that you do,” Avon snapped, holding his ground even when Blake came and stood so close Avon could feel Blake’s breath on his cheek. He was damned if he were going to back off or let Blake intimidate him, although now he couldn’t pretend that it was something in Blake’s pocket digging in to him again. Staring Blake down and refusing to admit that Blake was making him decidedly uncomfortable, Avon raised his wrist. It wasn’t easy, what with Blake all but plastered down his front, but with a bit of squirming that brought him into unnerving proximity with that which made Blake such a fine upstanding figure of a man, Avon finally managed to get his teleport bracelet up to his mouth. With a final, lethal glower at Blake, he spoke. “Orac, teleport me up now.”

If the damned machine had lifted the inhibitions on Blake’s ludicrous libido, then it could damned well find a way to put them back on. Orac hefted easily, Avon stomped off to his cabin to begin solving this latest problem. Either that, or he was going to find himself the plushest bolthole known to man.

Blake poured himself another drink, stripped off and lay on the bed, languidly stroking himself to satisfaction to the accompaniment of Avon’s revelatory posturings. The hands on the hips, the black leather, leaning, so briefly, against Blake’s thighs, not killing Blake for daring to kiss him...

By the time Liberator left orbit, Avon was all but whistling, and Blake was laying in a stock of lubricants.