No Introduction Needed
by Pat Jacquerie (Pat Nussman)

Summary

A companion piece to "A Marketable Commodity."

Notes

Author's Note: I will not lie to you. There is no sex in this story. But it is a short companion piece to "A Marketable Commodity", so it has to be in the same archive. It was original published in Jo Ann McCoy's zine, Dark Fantasies.

Late afternoon: The Spacer's Head Tavern

No one paid the slightest heed to the man at the bar, which was precisely as the man at the bar intended. Expediency sometimes demanded that he be conspicuous, but not with Federation troops gathering in force for a planetary takeover and Sleer expected onworld any moment.

He was no beauty, he reflected wryly. He could play the vagrant with minimal effort: unkempt and ragged enough to discourage thieves of coin, big and rough enough to warn away those who snatched bodies for the transplant trade. The scar tended to repel those in the market for sex toys.

"'Tender." He rapped on the bar with a credit token. Drinking too much in the enemy zone was a bad idea, but...well, he was big enough to be able to carry quite a bit, and cold enough at the moment that internal fuel seemed better than none at all. He'd find another line of rationalization when he visited a warmer climate.

"Blake."
The voice in his ear made him jump. A part of him always expected a heavy hand on his shoulder, a gun muzzle in his ribs to accompany any voice uttering his name, be it ever so friendly. "Not so loud." He spoke automatically--in fact, the man had said his name quietly enough, especially considering the din around them.

"Sorry." Prada slid onto the stool next to him. A distant cousin of Deva's, his only genetic marking of that relationship was an unruly lock of dingy blond hair hanging onto his forehead. Otherwise, he seemed like a clone of every other rebel contact on every other world Blake had touched in the last few years, hung somewhere between awe, fear, and fading hope. It made Blake itch to switch the viscast to another channel, to find a drama stocked with actors who had more than this small store of expressions.

Perhaps if the hope were not always failing. Perhaps if the faces were not always so weary...

His, too. And not just with the growth of beard, or the grime smeared on hastily in the alley. The base of fatigue was more convincing than any of his additions, and it convinced not only his enemies, but those he was trying to help. "Have you found me a way offworld?" He spoke casually, exchanging the battered credit token for another pint of the vile drink popular in The Stews: half home-brewed cider, half cheap gin, with a bit of sweetener thrown in to make it more palatable.

Prada handed over his own credit token and gulped at the brew in his glass without even wincing, nodding as he swallowed. "Got a ship in the trading line--"

Smuggler, that meant.

"--called the Pride of Aurora."

Aurora. A non-Federated world, but just a couple of solar systems away from Thompson's Hope, and likely to be swallowed up next. Very likely there was a considerable Federation presence there right now, setting down the groundwork for the takeover. There could be informants on that ship. Or not. Impossible to tell. Once he would have...

"You trust them?" ("My people have a saying, a man who trusts can never be betrayed, only mistaken." "Life expectancy must be fairly short among your people.") He cut short the voices, tried to listen:

"Yes, of course." A sideways look, a beat of hesitation accompanied the statement, then Prada buried his face in the vile brew.

Avon would've stood and left right then. ("Life expectancy must be fairly short...") He should. Prada hadn't necessarily betrayed him, but neither was he certain about the crew of the Pride. But (what other way do you have offworld) and (what does it matter, anyway?)... "Where is it docked?"

Prada looked a little relieved, a little guilty. "On the west side of The Stews, the Giryon Terminal."

Someone had a sense of humor and a taste for forbidden literature both. The transport to the depths of hell, was it? Well, Blake knew that territory. All too well.

"What time?" Yes, why not? It was a chance, of course, but then what wasn't?

"It'll take off at 1400 sharp." Prada swallowed the remainder of the pint without pausing and slid off the stool. "Good luck, then. It was good of you to come to Thompson's Hope, Blake."

And even better of me to be leaving. But he just nodded, turning to watch the other man walk out of the bar, brushing shoulder to elbow against a taller patron on the way in, not bothering to even
mumble an apology as he escaped to the outside.

Blake started to turn back to his drink, then glanced again at the door. The boy who'd just entered was well worth a double take. Tall, yes. Curly-haired, yes. But there any resemblance between the newcomer and Blake stopped with ludicrous abruptness.

All right. Not a boy, precisely, more a young man, mid-twenties, perhaps, by Earth years. And not only did he not resemble Blake, but he looked like no one else in the bar, no one else in The Stews. Clearly, he was far out of his usual element.

*Be careful, boy. You are pretty enough for a sex toy.*

And arrogant, another trait that would lure slavers. For an instant, the arrogance reminded him of Avon, but then he dismissed the fancy. Avon's arrogance had been studied to the last degree and this boy's was as natural to him as the intensely blue eyes or the startling flash of teeth as he smiled at a grubby smuggler who appeared to be an acquaintance. Nothing artificial about this boy, in appearance or manner.

Still, the boy *did* seem somehow familiar. He couldn't quite make out why, because surely if he'd met him before, he'd remember. He didn't have the sort of looks one easily forgot. And he was much too young to have been running loose before Blake's mindwipe at Federation hands.

At that moment, the younger man's gaze swept over the bar, hesitated at Blake's face for an instant, then moved on. He shrugged, exchanged a few more words with the smuggler, then moved toward the door.

Time that Blake moved on, too. He had a ship to catch in less than an hour, no time to ogle beautiful young men. Pushing the empty glass aside, he pushed toward the entrance. Then, between one step and the next, he remembered, remembered just as the boy's back was disappearing through the door.

"Do you want to see who your friend's running with these days?" A hand dealt out photographs like a deck of cards. "Must be picking them for their looks, eh?"

True. Just looking at them made Blake feel homely, and he seized on Vila's picture with something like relief. The others were two women, one blonde and one dark, both as beautiful and deadly-looking as expensive weapons. And "...deserted from the Federation...can fly any ship, so they say...lucky bugger, having him as a pilot...not bad to look at, either."

"Del Tarrant." A bump from the rear and a drunken curse pushed Blake out into the street and he looked around. "Avon's pilot. Damn." But the boy had disappeared down one of the dark alleys surrounding the bar.

For a long moment, Blake stood in the middle of the street, undecided what to do. He had a ship to catch, and besides, he'd avoided Avon these past few years. It had seemed best, after Star One.

And yet...and yet... Suddenly, he felt not quite as tired or adrift or hopeless. Odd that a simple connection to the past could do that. Taking out a credit token, he examined it for a moment, then flipped it in the air with that slight twist of the wrist he'd learned from Vila, looking down at the shiny new depiction of the Federation president's face. Heads. Fancy that. "Well, there'll always be another ship offworld, after all."

*Midnight: Shale's Coffeehouse:
Blake had cleaned off much of the grime, but kept the beard, his current guise being that of a manual worker stopping for coffee on his way home. Picking up his cup, he carried it to a seat beside the window, where he could look up into the clear night sky. His hand shook a bit, spilling black liquid onto the grimy saucer.

Understandable. Not everyone got pulled back from death by pure chance--a glimpse of a half-remembered face, a flip of a coin. And the destruction of the *Pride of Aurora* had been quite spectacular--the explosion had lit up the evening sky like a particularly lethal display of fireworks. Sleer should be pleased...until she discovered he hadn't been on the ship.

Not that Blake was entirely sure he wanted to live, but on the other hand, he definitely didn't care to be part of Sleer's evening entertainment and perhaps he wanted to have a chat with Avon before he decided to quite check out.

However, since Avon's pilot had disappeared, the chat might be postponed indefinitely. Tarrant could have gone offplanet...or again, he could have been run into trouble in The Stews. Blake absently added three teaspoons of sugar to his coffee--a habit that had never failed to make Avon wince--and considered his next step.

Perhaps he should make another round of the bars. He might find word of another ship offworld...or the whereabouts of a rather conspicuously attractive young pilot.

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*Mid-morning: The Spacer's Head Tavern*

No one knew who'd allowed the story to escape the expensive and exclusive walls of the slavers' establishment--certainly, the story was embarrassing enough for the management to want to repress--but within the hour of two men's escape, the story had circulated throughout The Stews. Blake was satisfied that in the essentials the information he'd gathered was accurate: A gorgeous young man had been snatched in The Stews the previous afternoon (oddly enough, right outside The Spacer's Head) and sold to an elegant stranger for a vast sum of money. But somehow the credit account the stranger had turned out to be false, and both parties disappeared from the penthouse suite of the slavers' establishment that morning in what might as well been a puff of smoke...no one had the least idea how it had happened.

Of course, that was much less mysterious if one knew about Avon's computer skills and, yes, he must have teleport on that ship of his. It pleased Blake to have the answers for what seemed like the first time in many months.

Blake pushed aside the half-filled glass. *But you went to a lot of trouble and danger for that young man, Avon. I wonder why? Ah, yes, of course, he's a skilled pilot and useful to you.* It made a nice change to deal with Avon's rationalizations again rather than his own. *But I wonder what Tarrant was doing here in the first place?* He'd like to talk to that boy; he wagered they could exchange some interesting stories about Avon.

But first, since it seemed that Avon and Tarrant had left Thompson's Hope, he should think about doing that himself. Looking around, he spotted a middle-aged woman yawning over a cup of spiked coffee, her dress that of a Kretscsm free-trader. Kretscsm was well out of the Federation controlled area and the natives were known for staying as far from the political arena as they could.

Leaving his glass at the bar, Blake went over to her table, smiling easily. *"I've been meaning to visit some friends on Kretscsm and I was wondering if you knew of a ship...?"*
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