





Avon, and what the Federation had done to him. What the Federation, he thought, had stolen from him. With unwarranted viciousness to a defenceless little camp-fire, he jabbed it with a stick, a flurry of sparks shimmering up to the sky like would-be stars. He followed the sight, experience telling him that the handkerchief of sky between the tree tops held rain and probably lightning too. Time to go back to base, back to Deva and back to the run-of-the-mill problems. Time to relegate Avon back where he should leave him: in the past.

Yet, he stayed where he was, hunched before the atavistic comfort of a fire, thinking of Avon's supremely sophisticated complexity. He could lose himself inside Avon for a week and still be no closer to fathoming the man. For every action, there is a reaction, or, in Avon's case, for ever action, there is a contradiction. Never the same thing twice, for even if the same words were used, the intonation would be different, the subtle nuances would have changed, and god help the man who didn't notice. Avon would have you verbally hung, drawn and quartered before you could draw breath in self-defence. Which was all, he knew by the stirring of interest in his groin, part of Avon's addictive charm and dark beauty. Although that beauty had new lines now, not so many as Blake himself had, but enough to remind them both that time was passing at a double-quick march, hurtling away from them, beyond any and all efforts at recall.

He considered the desirability of staying dry over the penalty of returning to civilisation with its prying eyes and interminable questions. Naturally, getting wet became a minor inconvenience. There was so much still to think about. Was it, for instance, time to allow Avon to find him? It had been difficult to avoid, but it was Avon's own tricks that had made it possible: it was Avon who had let slip about being able to put prior-to-the-event voice-lock commands into Orac. Even as he'd lain on his bunk in the *Liberator*, the bunk he'd had sex with Avon in so many times, he'd known that if anything were to happen, he wasn't coming back to the ship. Or Avon. If the Andromedans didn't get them, if some

over-zealous Federation ship didn't take a pot-shot at them, if they managed to survive intact, then he had known he would still have to leave.

To think that he'd been willing to destroy billions, all to keep the upper hand with Avon. And, to be honest, to keep his own mind firmly in thrall to his chosen course of action. He was no longer so scared of losing himself and who he was if he were to fail. He had, after all, failed and rather spectacularly at that, yet here he was, surer of who and what he was since...in fact, since long before the mindwipe. The adolescent's need to prove himself a man was gone, the brain-rape victim's need to prove himself in control was gone, the clay-footed hero's need to be right at all costs was...

He shoved a stick through the rabbit-thing he'd caught, skewering it as neatly as his own conundrums had him. Face set, twisted by the scars that he explained fully to no-one, least of all himself, he propped the raw meat over the fire, listening as the crackle of the fire gave way to the hiss and spit of fat meeting flame. That was a sound that struck a chord in him, reminding him of how many times his fat had been in the fire, as they said, these two years past. It was then, perhaps, that he'd first begun his yearning to have Avon back. There was always the awareness that there was nothing at his back, as if he were standing on a cliff: he didn't need to look behind himself to sense the chasm. At his base, sometimes, he swore he could hear the wind whistling behind him every time he turned a corner and was confronted by his spacecraft-like command centre. Or the rest room, or the bedding that had been 'borrowed' from spacecraft. 'Liberated', as his people were so fond of saying.

He turned the cooking meal, half-smiling as the flesh seared in the heat from the fire. Not even Deva, bless his intellectual but simple mind, had had the insight to notice how much Blake hated the use of that word. It always, and he knew he was being foolish for this, seemed to be a sully of what *Liberator* had been to him. In retrospect, of course. A few more twigs added to the fire, the redolent ones from the low bush that was so









oed round this room. The instant his feet landed on the stone floor, he could hear it, although his ears swore there was not a sound in here, apart from the thud of his boots and the rasp of his own breath. There was a niche, over there in the far corner that could have been shaped for him—or for the unfortunates that Dorian had forced to be his Creature. The sin in this place was palpable, and soothing for that. His own iniquities shrank in comparison, sinking without trace under the oily miasma left behind by the eternity of Dorian’s corruption. Seated on the stone, with stone around him and leaden overhead, stilled pendulum of time fossilised forever, he could look at himself without flinching. Well, perhaps that was too optimistic an assessment, but he could, at least, manage it without having to lie to himself in self-preservation. Which, he conceded with a touch of his old ruefulness, was about all he had left.

And look, he recalled with a flash of the new defeatism, where it has led me—into almost as invidious a position as Blake would have. Or as Blake had, if accuracy were of interest. He was stuck here because of Blake, because Blake had had enough, because Blake was too big a coward to shoulder his own burdens and clean up the mess he’d made. So very like his own brother—the ‘blond bombshell’ as Vila had so aptly dubbed him, Dru being one for either exploding at the slightest trigger or being as much use as a dud—who had made a second career of getting out of stews by landing them on someone else’s shoulders. So like Blake...

But then, if he were going to tar with that particular paintbrush, then he really ought to include himself, ought he not? After all, who was it who had donned the mantle of leadership, not altogether reluctantly? It was the cause, not the power he had objected to, the obligations, not the responsibility. All he’d truly wanted was for it to be over, finished, dead and gone, and Blake with it, so that he himself could have taken the ship—his ship—and gone off to...

No point in crying over spilled milk, was there? No purpose could possibly be served by going over it again and again, unless he

were going to finally reach some kind of decision. Such as, for instance, what he was going to do if that obsolete machine ever managed to find Blake. Now there was a puzzle indeed. What was he to do? There was no *Liberator* to hand over as symbol of what he, Avon, was renouncing. There was no badge of office, no title, no proclamation, only his own revulsion at this möbius strip of failure leading to failure. There wasn’t even a crew to hand over, as Blake had done to him, saddling him with the ones that didn’t get away. He could always put Vila on a silver platter and hand him over, but after Malodaar, the worm had turned. Strange, how much that had hurt, seeing Vila standing always at a distance, no longer allowing him close. Oh, they had, after a briefly antagonistic pause, managed to progress to the stage of being in the same room as each other without un-sheathing the cutting comments and wounding words, but all the rest had gone by the board. If he were to even suggest sex now! The one time he had tried... Well, perhaps Vila might have come around, but it had horrified Avon, on a moral footing he denied ever having even met, that he had used the same old voice of seduction that he had prostituted into attempted...elimination. Not murder. Murder was what one did for profit or pleasure, or out of blind rage, and he had done those, which was something he chose to live with. But the simple, unvarnished truth was that he had been out to survive, and it was tough that Vila was the one who had to die for Avon to live.

The room whispered around him, the susuration of silken guilt, of liquid agony, of grating grief for lives wasted. He could hear his own voice, whispering to Vila on that damned shuttle as if they were home in bed rather than Vila skulking and him stalking in a flying coffin. Had he not found Egrorian’s little piece of treachery, he would have given up his own charade and flushed Vila out, even though he would have regretted that. But then, life is full of regrets... But one must make them small ones, which was why he wanted, quite fervently, to shove this mess of a crusade back on Blake’s plate. Avon had already lost more than enough to this point-









core of the truth, the real reason why he wanted to see Blake again. Not for the sex, nor the vitality nor even the hope and freedom from responsibilities, but it was because Blake was the one loose end in his life that insisted on getting itself ensnared with every other thread of his life, until all he had was a bundle of tangled strands.

Yes. That was the truth, and it was one he could live with. He was resolute now, and relaxed as we all become when we fully realise that our chosen course of action is the right one. There was still Vila to deal with, but he could take care of Vila when they found Blake. One problem at a time, that was the best way for one to untangle life. Yes, he could sort the Vila problem out later. For the moment, he had to get back upstairs and remind that machine of who served whom and that answers were expected immediately.

His face was the most relaxed it had been in weeks, his eyes clear and bright, a definite spring in his step. He was pleased with himself for having confronted the truth, for all that there was a lot of it he would rather not have seen. But he did pride himself on being a pragmatist, and with just cause. Face the facts, deal with them, get on with life. That was a part of his philosophy, and a part that worked very well.

For an honest man. And it would have worked well for Avon, had he been an honest man. But it was still there, in the darkness of his mind, that tiny, bright kernel of knowledge, growing and growing, lying in wait for its chance to germinate. And perhaps, just perhaps, if he had known that, he would have realised that he was not sorting a scattered skein but instead, was weaving a very tangled web indeed.

NOT EVEN AVON KNEW ABOUT THIS PLACE, VILA WAS SURE OF THAT. It stood to reason that Avon didn't know—if he had, he'd've nabbed Vila's collection of booze by now, not to mention confiscated the fur bedspread for his own use. But this was Vila's secret place, the hidden nest where no-one but him ever came to. It was overflowing with creature comforts: soft mattress, plump pillows, food dispenser, vid-player, music outlet, stacks and stacks of

books, everything a man could want. He loved coming here, to lie under the fur spread, the softness tickling his face ever so sweetly, to drink one of Dorian's good wines (he used the muck for the daily consumption of those who couldn't tell the difference between plonk and good hock and excellent port) and read one of the wonderful books he'd found. Some of them were even on paper, and although the archaic script was really difficult at first, you got used to it quick enough, and it was worth it. There was something about the smell of the real books that was extra special, and that was one of the things he liked best about this room. As soon as he lifted the access panel off, the redolence of the books would waft out and one good whiff of that and he'd be in heaven.

But this morning, mind, he wasn't looking for the escapist magic of book or tape, but for the privacy in which to get gloriously, rip-roaringly drunk. There were enough bottles in the coolant unit in here to get even him to the point of oblivion and god, didn't he need that. All the lights were on bright and fearless as he crawled into his room, but he dimmed them immediately, down to just enough to see by. Building himself a comfy cocoon didn't take very long, everything always left lying there, in case of emergency, sort of. And this, he thought, was definitely an emergency. Avon was down in that fucking room again and that always gave him the absolute willies. Mean to say, Avon was getting weird enough at the best of times these days, god only knew what was happening to him Down There. Enough to make a man believe his old granny's tales of Hell, wasn't it? Course, Avon'd laugh if he ever mentioned how scared he got when Avon went down there like that. Well, maybe not actually laugh, not out loud like, but he would be so very, very amused. Sneering bastard. Always had been, always would be, but it'd been getting worse lately. And as for what he'd done on that sodding shuttle...

All right, so everyone knew Avon was a survivor, survive at all costs and all that crap, but that didn't mean he could go taking it out on Vila, did it? Mean to say, he'd got no right to do that, coming after him like that, with his gun and that voice. Probably what was hardest to forgive him for, truth be told. He'd





they were dirt beneath his feet. Mind, if Avon'd tried, he'd bet that Blake would come running. Nah, that wasn't Blake. He'd have Avon come running to him, so's they could start their lord of the jungle crap all over again. Pain in the fucking neck, was Blake. Not that he'd always thought that, he admitted, taking a slug of good brandy instead of his usual savouring sip. Used to think Blake was the bees knees, but that was before he left. Walking out on them like that. Walking out on Avon like that. Bastard. Rotten fucking bastard. Why couldn't he have stayed, eh? Why'd he have to go and leave, cos then Avon never stood a chance of getting bastard Blake out of his system. Now, every time they went to bed, him and Avon, when they actually did manage to end up in bed, when they didn't end up in an argument instead with one of them going off in a temper, well, when they did manage to get to bed together, who was in there with them but Blake. That's right. Bastard wouldn't share when he was here, now he won't share when he's not either. And where did that leave Vila? Left him with an Avon who couldn't forgive himself for all the stuff he'd done to Blake. Left him with an Avon who couldn't ever work out what the hell had been going on between him and Blake. As if Blake had ever actually loved Avon. Bloody stupid idea that. The only thing Blake ever loved, and now the booze was warming his belly and his toes, bringing him back to life, the only thing Blake ever loved was himself. Not even his fucking Cause. Never loved that. If he'd loved that, he'd never've left it, right? Right. So the bastard never loved that. Never loved people neither. Don't destroy their lives if you love 'em, do you? Mean to say, he, Vila, would never dream of going after Star One to blow up all the people he said he was trying to help, would he? And he'd never claim it was for their own good. He'd seen people die before, and they never seemed to think it was much good. Same went for being hungry or sick without any of the medicine getting through. Course, Blake had all his airy-fairy ideas, didn't he? Obvious the bastard had never spent even five minutes down the Delta levels. Not that he'd've survived five minutes

down the Delta levels. What Big Jak would've done to Blake! Oh, that was a good laugh, that. Almost as good as thinking what Big Jak would've done to Tarrant!

Course, if Avon'd gone down there, he'd probably've had Big Jak fetching his slippers and his tea for him, wouldn't he? Always could charm blood out of a stone, could Avon. Never failed. One of them smiles, and that was it, they were putty in his hands. Apart from Blake, of course, and if you asked him, that was all it had been between the pair of them. A contest, a stupid fucking contest to see who needed who most, to see who was going to end up on top and to see who was going to give in and fall for the other one first. Right pair of stupid pricks they were. As if what either one of them felt had spilt to do with love. But these Alphas were all the same. Thought love had to be fireworks and candle-lit dinners five nights a week, and pining away from loneliness the other two. Stupid. That kind of thing never lasted, that's why it was a mug's game, best left to the very young and the very stupid.

But he was tired of it, so fucking tired of it. Couldn't go to bed with Avon without Blake, or Blake's stupid memory, coming in between them. Couldn't have a game of chess, without Avon thinking about Cally, and then that always takes us back to when Cally got killed and guess who was there? That's right. The great and glorious Blake rears his ugly head again. Vila couldn't even come in here, to his special room these days without Blake following him in. Every time he tried to think, it always came back to Blake, didn't it? Prick.

He'd had it, he'd really had it. He wanted out, he wanted it done, he wanted it over. He wanted Avon back, to him and not to some ghost that never even cared enough to send them a message. Never cared enough to let them know if he was alive or dead, or stuck in one of the 'rehab' centres somewhere, kept quiet until the Feds had managed to mindwipe him again. First few months, him and Avon'd held their breaths, waiting for the news to show a fresh new Blake, even more empty-headed than before, eyes filled with Federation tears as he apologised to the public yet again for the error of his ways. Mind, he

