He was beginning to wonder if anything was worth anything at all. In fact, he was quite sure that nothing was worth very much, but there were still a few faint scraps of meat clinging to the bare bones of his idealism. And those few, faint scraps had a name: Avon. An anti-hero if ever one had been born, but a man who was still fighting the good fight, struggling to make inroads into the Federation. Blake scratched at the scar over his eye, the flesh bothering him in the forest’s damp. He didn’t particularly like to remember how he had come by that scar, so much of the latter two years of his life best left unremembered, for they were more than mourned enough. Two full years, two entire years, wasted. By him, he admitted, shouldering his burden of guilt, and with no-one else to blame. It was his own fault that he’d done nothing: after all, he could have contacted Avon any time he had wanted to. An easy man to find, was anyone with Orac as his ears.

But he hadn’t wanted to face Avon, had grabbed the rescue from that life—and the man he’d been—with both hands. It had been a healing, apart from assorted scrapes and close shaves, to wander round world after world, unknown and not responsible for any life but his own. Purest luxury, purest freedom, even though there was a price on his head and a shackle on his heart. He had missed Avon, and all the others, but not enough to lose this precious freedom, and certainly not enough to take the risk of degenerating once more into the man he’d been towards the end. He shuddered every time he thought of what he had planned, and why. At night, sometimes, when most of the forest noises had gone to sleep, his own voice would come into his dreams, with an endless recitation of what he had said that day when they had been preparing to teleport to Star One itself. Endless recitations and endless variations on the same theme: I have to be right, otherwise it will all have been senseless killing and destruction. And to think that he had been so over the edge that killing and destroying on an even grander scale had seemed like the answer.

But it hadn’t really been about that, though, had it? It had all been about himself and
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 every 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, hurling 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 sullying 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
hard to find these days. He got back down on his hunkers, watching the fire, drawing more than physical comfort from it. Rain scented the air and the ground felt damp in anticipation, but he ignored that. After that time the bounty-hunter had caught him, he could still find it in him to enjoy such minor discomforts. Nothing like a good sadist to teach a man to appreciate the mundanity of small aches and pains.

His fists clenched with the effort not to break something or hurl something or kill something. But then again, look at the carcass on his spit—he’d already succumbed to those 3 temptations today. Primitive hunting for very sophisticated needs that were, in themselves, nothing more than the basic human drives of survival and revenge. One half of his face twisted in a grimace to match the permanent damage of the other, giving his face a mask of feral pleasure. Oh, how he had avenged himself upon that bounty-hunter. Taking his name and identity, taking over his reputation and luring all the other bastards to their dooms, what sweet vengeance that was. He still savoured it, though not as often now as before, since he’d erased so many names from the rosters of those who sold others out to the Federation. And what better way, as he was wont to argue, was there to repay that sort than by doing unto them what they’d been doing unto others? Find them, snare them, interrogate them. If they were useful, bring them into the flock. If they were useless to anyone, then set the small fry free to lure in the big fish. And if they were scum, then sell them to the Federation for as much money as possible. Perfect, really. They all got what they deserved—and things he wouldn’t do. He wasn’t going to devolve into what she was. All of a sudden, the mossy hummock struck him as terribly uncomfortable and he moved, abandoning his dinner, getting up to walk away from the domesticity of the fire. She was too close, in some of the things she’d done, to what he’d done himself. Especially where Avon was concerned. Most especially there, if his spies were to be trusted. If what that turncoat from Servalan’s own staff said was true…

He dreaded to think what it would have done to himself, to have suffered as Avon had done at Servalan’s hands on Terminal. But it told Blake something, something that was, in its own way, worth Avon’s pain. It told him that he, Blake, mattered so much to Avon that to Servalan, Blake was the greatest weapon of all to use on Avon. His feet were leading him back to his fire and his eyes were smiling as he thought of that. There was a warmth spreading from his heart to his balls, just from thinking about how much he must mean to Avon, for Avon to lose both Liberator and Cally. As for the message Servalan had used to bring Avon in, the claim that it was from Blake, asking Avon to come back, to join him at the base he’d set up…

And Avon had come running. Scurrying back because he believed Blake to have
crooked his little finger. Seating himself in front of the snaking flames, Blake’s expression was one of profound satisfaction, as he contemplated the image of Avon, running to him; of Avon, needing him; of Avon, missing him. He hugged his knees in lieu of Avon, whilst he stared into the beauty of the fire, reliving the beauty of a very different kind of fire. A bonfire, a conflagration, a never-dying torch of flame, that was what they’d had together. Heat curled through him, as if Avon’s hands were on him again, as if Avon were prostrate in front of him, a salaam to love. He could have all of that again; Servalan had shown him that by the bait she’d used to sweeten her traps for Avon. After all, if Avon were to come racing for a set-up, then how much more likely was he to hurry to the truth? This time, the message could be real; this time, the base would be genuine, not some trap to rip at his mind. This time, the words of love would be nothing less than the truth. And this time, his course of action, his deeds, would honestly be for the good of his people, not a side-show to impress Avon. Not this time.

It would be different, this time. He lifted the meat from the fire, burning his fingers in the process, gasping and blowing as he began eating, too impatient these days to waste a single second. Too many near-misses to throw time away, or to waste it on existing instead of living. Leaning back on the hummock, fingers and face dripping juice from his dinner, lips gleaming in the firelight, eyes glinting with decision, he knew that yet again he was exonerated in his need to come out here where the planet was tamed but the people were still undomesticated. It freed his mind in a way the stiff metal confines at the base never could. It opened him up to himself, and that was something he could never dare do with all his people around him, looking to him for decisions and leadership. No, coming out here was perfect for him. No matter how depressed he might be, give him a few hours out here where he was completely alone, with nothing to prop him up, nothing to distract him, and he’d find his way back to a level mind. As he had today.

So nothing was worth anything? Avon was worth rather more than Blake had ever cared to admit, so there was something in life that was of value. If he was taking a second shot at dethroning the oppressors, then why not take a second chance of making Avon and himself happy? After all, Servalan’s nasty little trick had shown him just how the ground lay with Avon. He could make it a wonderful surprise, take the bitter taste of that treacherous defeat out of Avon’s mouth. Make him smile, that wonderful, glorious smile.

Yes.

That’s what he would do. Have Avon at his side again, standing up to Servalan—or Sleer as she called herself these days, not that anyone was unaware of the truth—together, fighting an enemy that wasn’t each other. It thrilled him to the bone that Avon, after Terminal, would surely accept that he loved Blake. Add to that the fact that Avon already knew that Blake loved him, and the sum of that was happiness. They could be together, truly together. There was an abundance of space at the base, and no-one there would bat an eyelid if Blake were to live with a man—well, none of them would object if they ever for a second thought that Blake would find out. He believed in discipline, and so did they, seeing the necessity of it in such a closely woven community who had so much cause to distrust outsiders. No, it would actually be easier to live with Avon at the base than on Liberator—no Jenna poking her nose in, no Cally eavesdropping their minds, no Vila hanging around like a streak of misery.

The carcass was thrown into the fire, the remnants of meat charring blackly, the last of the blood consumed. Not that he was going to get rid of Vila, of course, nor these other three that Avon seemed to have taken up with. They were useful, obviously, else Avon would never have them around him. There would be jobs for them, probably helping to set up other bases and the like. But Avon would stay here, with him, on Gauda Prime. Together. The two of them. Nothing to come between them. Oh, that would take all the grey out of his life, that would put the sparkle back into his campaign. That would put some love back in his life.
The fire died under the weight of dirt kicked over it, one small flare leaping out through a gap in the soil, until another flurry of muck suffocated it. Automatically, as he did every time he came out on one of these walks, Blake scattered all traces of his passing, leaving the clearing looking as if any careless tramp had paused there. Whistling, he set back of towards his base, laughing out loud with his joy for life as the skies opened and drowned him in great plashing drops of rain. Instantly, the rich soil beneath his boots became black and viscid, sucking with every step he took, reluctant to let him go. But not even that could darken his mood: the pull on his muscles told him that this was him firming up again, and he’d have to do that for Avon, wouldn’t he? Couldn’t have a man come back after two years and let him see just how low he’d sunk. And he’d have to make up for this scar, so if his face couldn’t be worth looking at, then he’d make his body a work of art.

His mind was teeming with enthusiasm as he worked out the details of his plan. Contact Avon—but not through Orac, that would bring Avon here long before Blake had time to prepare himself and get everything set up the way Avon would like it—ask him to come to the base, offer him love and riches, just as Servalan had in his name before. But this time would be different. This time it would be real, and it would be a second chance.

He was still whistling and smiling as he entered his base, going to take care of business before he contacted Avon. He had things to do before he had Avon come here. Things to set up for their new beginning.

Oh, well that made it all worth while, he supposed, gloowering at Orac, furious with the machine for taking so long to do so simple a task. It was hardly as if it had been told to do anything difficult, was it? Find Blake. That was all. Surely it should be simple enough to find a man who had such a propensity for trouble? Not to mention glorious speeches that always seemed to inspire so many to race in where the insane were too damned sensible to tread. So why was finding him so beyond Orac’s admittedly impressive capacities? Xenon Base was pre-dawn silent, even Dayna tucked up in bed out of his way. He picked at his snack, for once indulging his sweet tooth, the confection smooth and creamy in his mouth. He drew Orac another dirty look, caring not a damn that the infernal machine couldn’t see it. After all, he was venting his spleen for his own benefit, not a pile of flash components.

But still, his sweet was not quite so heavenly as it had been before Orac had informed him that it knew where Blake had been, but could not find him as yet. It could, and did, give him a recital of every rumour spread about Blake, both pro and con, giving special attention the less salubrious tales. Now, at least, Avon knew that Blake was reputed to be a perverted voyeur who liked to watch two men have sex whilst Blake sank his teeth into leather. Wonderful. Tell him something he didn’t already know. Such as where the bastard was.

The hexagonal whiteness of the plate was streaked with the blood red of raspberry and the brown of chocolate when he pushed it away, already completely dismissed from his mind and the sweetness in his mouth replaced by the bitter taste of defeat.

He was tired of losing. Very tired of losing. In fact, tired to the point where he wanted to shove it all back at Blake, to dump it on his shoulders and let himself simply walk away—to disappear as effectively as Blake had. And with more cause. That damned shuttle... Vila’s damned attitude... His own damned soul...

The flimsies on his desk whirred in the sudden gust of air, resettling only when their maker had rushed from the room, leaving them in a tiny pool of lamp-light, with Orac buzzing and blinking in the dark. Footsteps did not echo, although they should, given the acoustic dynamics of this corridor. The trapdoor was unnaturally silent also, giving notice of the careful maintenance it now received. Light from the corridor spilled hesitantly into the hole, seeping down to curl round the spiral staircase, limning the mist that roiled there in permanent unease. Yet, it was here he found the closest thing to peace of mind, for nothing he was feeling seemed to be worth much anguishing over, compared to the subliminal scream that echoed and ech-
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 mòbius 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 unsheathing 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 terrified 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-
less struggle, and it was time to give it back where it belonged. He was neither hero nor saviour of the people, had never claimed to be any such absurdity, but here he was trying to forge alliances with small-minded provincials who could hardly contain their glee when it came time to sell him out. Tawdry, tarnished rebellions that were going nowhere, succeeding not at all, that were giving him nothing but a life where a dank cave was his only respite.

No-one knew he came down here and had they known, none of them would ever follow him. Even Soolin had an almost superstitious dread of this room, while Dayna had declared it evil. Those two—and Tarrant, for that matter—were horribly young and terribly naïve. They none of them seemed to see that the evil in this room was purely human, was nothing more than the darker side of one man, trapped and contained for several life-spans, true, but one man nonetheless. This was the kind of evil Avon could understand very well: the Dorians and Servalans and Travises of this race were far easier to comprehend than some supernatural fancy that could supposedly strike from nowhere. No, human ‘evil’ he was as familiar with as his own face—no difference, really, considering what he had come to do in order to simply survive. Another reason for finding Blake, yet another reason to add to the tottering mountain of—

Excuses. Sitting there in the echoing sorrow of a soul suborned to human evil, it was churlish to lie—it was also a habit he would far rather not slide into. After all, look at what lying to oneself had done to Blake. He was, actually, going to look at what it had done to Blake. Something he had to consider, something he had to think about, clearly and honestly, instead of this gadflying about from one topic to another. Tiredness made his eyes ache and he covered his face, keeping the outside world completely at bay. He needed that now, far more than he ever had before, even when the wound in his life where Anna had been was still oozing blood. He was, he knew, going to face Blake again. To give him back this waste of a Cause. To hand over the reins. To... But he wasn’t supposed to lie to himself, was he? He had already conceded that there was no symbol of the rebellion to be given back to Blake, nothing tangible, nothing that could even be put in words, not really. To say that he was tired of the struggle could not even begin to cover it, nor could it ever begin to explicate what he was feeling. And what, honestly, was he feeling? A weariness that was of the mind more than the body, although the years were taking more than their fair toll there, too. A depression that should never have been his lot in life. A burden that he wanted to lay on someone else.

He kept his face covered and his eyes closed, as if not seeing it would make the world go away. If there was nothing to actually give back to Blake, then why not simply stop? Why not simply go as thoroughly underground as Blake had, doffing the cause and the fighting as if they were a pair of worn-out shoes that no longer fit comfortably? Because, oh, because he wanted to see Blake, to hand him not the cause but himself, to say to him, ‘let me lean on you, let me borrow from your strength, let me breathe in some of your faith’. He wanted, desperately, to find Blake again, for Blake had believed not only in justice, but in Avon himself. Blake had believed that love was their lot, not this enervating erosion of self. Perhaps he had been wrong—in fact, Avon knew Blake had been wrong—but it was still there in Avon’s mind, neatly covered by rose-coloured glasses and festooned with the glowing patina of selective hindsight: all the hopes, all the lofty ideals and sweet promises. He knew, perfectly well, why those hopes lingered, why they had stuck in his mind while the memories of the rancorous arguments and the slow development of Blake’s clay feet had faded. He needed the hope. So simple, so mundane, so pathetic. He needed to hope.

Hope. That this—his life—was not all there was, that there could be happiness and success and comfort. That there could be more freedom than running from the Federation and being self-imprisoned on a lump of rock in a base that was, for all its luxury, still nothing more than a collection of prison cells. Hope, that what Blake had promised was still there, could still be claimed. Hope,
that what Blake had professed to be might be true, that the slow putrescence Avon had seen had been only his own jealousies and insecurities dancing with his cynicism. Hope. There was precious little of that round this base now. Vila would say that there was none at all, he supposed, and quite rightly, too. There was none there any longer, all their years together come to nothing, and for no reason but Vila’s foolish sentimentality. Idiot. What else had he expected Avon to do—go against a life-time’s practice and lay down his life so that he could die with his fellow man? He never should have introduced the ignorant bastard to those vis-tapes of Shakespeare—or at least Romeo and Juliet. Trust Vila… He had, actually. Trusted Vila, with more than he had realised until Vila was no longer there to trust. No Vila to listen to him, late at night when life seemed so much darker than anything Nature could conjure. No Vila to make him laugh with his deliberate or accidental foolishness. No Vila to ease the stresses away with massage or sex or even just tea and company. No Vila telling him terrible jokes, or following him around, or fetching things, or making him feel important and special. No Vila to ease the stresses away with massage or sex or even just tea and company. No Vila telling him terrible jokes, or following him around, or fetching things, or making him feel important and special. And loved. Peculiar how rancidly he missed that. How many times had he complained to Vila for gazing at him as if he were god and orgasm all rolled into one? How many times had he stopped Vila before Vila could proclaim love? And how many times had he abandoned Vila because someone else had snatched his affection or his lust? Too many, obviously, for it seemed that even Vila had a limit. And the unfortunate incident on the shuttle had been it. Rather like himself and the unfortunate incident of Star One. His fist hit the wall, skin scraping and blood smearing, and Avon watched in repulsed fascination as the wall breathed and his blood was absorbed, not a cell left behind. A shiver climbed the steps of his spine, but he sat back down anyway. The only thing in this room that had ever harmed him was Dorian, and he was long dead. Although, there was one other thing that had hurt him in here and that was his own thoughts. How some of those had stung, as he sat here in honesty and solitude, reviewing his past. Reviewing his relationship with Blake. All right, all right, and he was on his feet, pacing, pacing, pacing, going into the darker depths of the cave, where the eternal fog was the only light, the phosphorescent glow lending the place a magic in Avon’s eyes. He stopped to run his fingers over one of the odd…sculptures cut into the rock in flawless bas-relief. He could actually feel the stone eyelashes on this one, and the roughness of skin where the…model…had needed to shave. He suspected that he knew what these…sculptures…were, was quite sure that they were, in some way, the people Dorian had used as the receptacles to wash away his sins. Sometimes, Avon wished he could have such a convenience, but only if it took some of the memories with it. There was so much of the past five years that he would much rather forget, and some of it he had, mislaying some of the bleaker aspects of his time with Blake. And he had tried, so frightfully hard, to hold onto the negatives of that era, to hang onto the harsh truths and not to yield to the softness of dreams. But he found himself, now that the rest of his life was unrelenting, rain-slicked granite, wishing for the past with the blind hopefulness of a child. A retard child, he thought, smiling bitterly at himself, but he couldn’t deny the need.

He wandered back to where he had been sitting as his mind wandered back to what he had been thinking, conceding that his reasons for seeking Blake had nothing whatsoever to do with the Cause, which he could always abandon with as little fanfare as he had taken it up with. No, there was nothing he wanted to give to Blake, but so much he wanted to take. Some of that glassy-eyed idealism would do for starters, fair recompense for the dark and drear life he’d been living for so long. But most of all, he wanted some of that obsessive love back. It would be worth the clinging and the soothsayer proselytising to have the fireworks back, to have some brightness to leaven the dull grey that was all he seemed to see these days. Unless, of course, it was the shimmering shriek of danger and the addictive thrill of adrenalin. Fingers stroking the supple leather of his trousers, he pondered over just how ‘hooked’ he was on the high that came hand in hand with risk taking—or more to the
point, the ecstasy that was the end result of danger, when the risk had been taken and he had survived yet again. He was, without doubt, getting too, too fond of that and if he weren’t careful… But if he were careful, the risks would be gone, and the highs with them, leaving behind nothing but the deep troughs that were so easy to slide into and so very hard to climb out of.

Ridiculous, really, that he of all people should be suffering from depression. That, surely, had been his father’s forte, as Avon’s had been holding his head high and damning the world to deny his lineage the way they had denied him his heritage. Not that any of that mattered very much now, sitting in the hollow of a cave, a spiral staircase wending its way back upstairs where there was a wealth of light and a small group of people. Whom he would be quite happy if he never saw again. He was tired of them, sick and tired of them, piled on top of one another as they were. Their faults grated on him like broken bone on bone, an endless grinding of teeth and tenseness of muscle, for that was all they were to him now. Tarrant, moping around over that idiot girl—why, when it was her own stupidity that had killed her? Dayna, all erupting enthusiasm, a new method of killing to be shared in minute detail over breakfast each day. Then there was Soolin, who thought herself so tough and hard, but whose cynical witticisms were nothing more than whinges against an unfair world.

And not to forget, of course, Vila. Who would stare at him with an irritating mixture of loathing, mistrust and ‘why’d you kick me?’ hurt-pet look on his face. As if Vila had ever had cause to expect anything else. It was hardly as if Avon had misled him, or pretended that their relationship were more than it was. Good sex, good companionship, a fellow thief and thus, someone who could offer understanding. Even, for that matter, a fellow Dome-bred Terran, albeit from absolutely opposite classes. There was a certain worldliness that came from being brought up in the Domes and he was, he knew, avoiding the issue yet again. But it was always, even after the shuttle, easier to think about Vila than it was to think about Blake. Vila was safe and always had been, to the point where Avon was certain that it was only a matter of time before Vila put Egrorian’s little trick behind them. In fact, there were distinct signs of a thaw already and he was still avoiding thinking about Blake.

He knew he was going to find Blake. He knew he was going to decline to lead Blake’s useless cause any longer. He knew he was going to abdicate completely to Blake.

And that he was going to abdicate himself to Blake, on a personal level? Did he know that, or was that merely something that populated his dreams with weird and twisted visions of himself on his knees to someone? The wall was warm when he leaned back against it, but that no longer surprised him. He was well accustomed to the semi-life of this room, far more sanguine about it, in fact, than he was to the brutal honesty of his own mind.

Avon needed to find Blake because he had lost his conscience and because he had lost his vision and because he had lost his way. He needed Blake, and finally, finally, was willing to admit it. After Terminal… Well, after Terminal it had become ever more difficult to deny the need he had for Blake to be his balance. And yet…he could not, quite, bring himself to trust Blake. Perhaps it was not so much that he needed Blake to be his conscience or to give him love. Perhaps all he needed was to have Blake to stand before him again, a mirror in whose reflection Avon had always seen himself most clearly. Perhaps, truly, it was nothing more than that.

Fingering a loose stud on his jacket, one small section of his mind making a mental note to see to the repair, he searched the rest of his mind to find the truth about himself and Blake. All he found was the feeling that if he were to turn everything over to Blake, if he were with Blake again, if none of it were his responsibility and everything were Blake’s fault once more, then there would yet be hope. If he could simply take all this weight and guilt and pain, mould it into a ball and then throw it at Blake… He would be free. It would be over, it would be done, it would be finished and he would be free—of Blake himself. And that, he recognised, was the
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 spread 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
always known that if push came to shove, Avon'd pick survival, even if it meant him, Vila, taking a long walk out a short airlock. But to use that voice... It’d always been special, always been something only he ever got to hear: Avon, sounding all soppy and friendly. Then to go and use it to kill him, oh, that was something he couldn’t hardly forgive, was it? Not that Avon’d expect him to do anything else—anything else bar forgive him, that was, egotistical, big-headed bastard. But the rotten sod was right, of course. He would forgive Avon, sooner rather’n later, knowing how much of a great fool he was when it came to his Avon. But it’d be worth it, always was. For that smile, for that giggle, for that funny little noise he made when he came, for that voice...

Fucking hell, couldn’t he get past that? He’d been surprised and hurt—all right, all right, wounded to the quick—that Avon’s used that voice like that. But there was no point in holding grudges, was there? Stuck together on this tiny base or stuck together in that fucking cupboard of a ship, they had to bury the hatchet, didn’t they? And Avon, give credit where credit was due, Avon had actually sort of apologised, in his own way, of course. Not often Avon came to his door bearing wine and a smile and his shirt half undone. Mean to say, anyone could’ve seen him, not that they’d’ve been surprised, what with everyone knowing everything about everyone else, living all crammed together the way they did. But it wasn’t like Avon to go public with any of his private stuff, not like that. Been too soon, though. Every time he shut his eyes, he could still hear him using that voice to come after him and as for what he’d do if he heard it again, well, that didn’t bear thinking about, did it? Not but that he’d not been able to stop thinking about it...

Settled now, bottle to reach and heat turned up nice and high, he ordered the lights out, sighing in relief as complete darkness fell. One of the things he hated most about this lifestyle of theirs: it was as bad as prison, this never being in total darkness. Always a bit of light on somewhere, always someone somewhere up and awake, doing their monitoring bit or just walking round to make sure every-

thing was all right. Hated that, he did. Too much like prison and a man learned to appreciate his luxuries once he’d been in prison a time or two. Funny, Avon always thought he slept with his lights on, just a bit, mind, but still on. Rubbish, that. He’d had it set up so that if his door opened, the lights’d go on enough that he wasn’t dazzled, and enough that he could see whoever it was that came in. Keeping the lights on was for security all right, but not the kind Avon’d thought it was. And as for after, when they’d made love, that was for letting him see Avon, when Avon was all asleep and everything. The man was unbelievably gorgeous when he was asleep and that wicked tongue of his couldn’t get you for gazing at him with about as much wit as a lovelorn mutoid. Not that mutoids could love, so they couldn’t be lovelorn, but they were given to staring and they really were completely witless, so he supposed that would do. But it was lovely, being able to watch Avon like that. And he’d bet his last bottle that Avon never even knew a thing. Silly bastard, trusting someone was asleep just because he’d started snoring. First thing a man learns when he goes into prison is how to pretend to be asleep for when the guards come round. Or when the big boys come round looking for a bit of active bait to be played with. Always after the fear they were, and if you didn’t wake up, you couldn’t give it them. Course, if they did something that no-one could ever possibly manage to sleep through, then you had to wake up. Best to be a really snivelling coward then. Got them so’s they were so busy getting off on you being scared shitless, they never got round to hurting you as much as they did if you were all stiff upper lip and Tarrant-y. Now there was a right wally. Del Bloody Tarrant, king of the wild frontier. That’s what Little Willy thought he was, always out there trying to prove he was a bigger man than Avon, and if that didn’t work, hoping that all his showing-off would sweep Avon off his feet. Bad as bloody Blake.

Blake. If there was one man he would cheerfully spit on, it was Blake. The bastard went and walked out on them, just like that, never answered when he’d used Orac to try and find the rotten sod, ignoring them as if
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. 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 spit 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
thought Avon was more worried about the means than the end: he’d spent hours, he had, researching techniques. And then Vila had gone in behind him and read every word of it as well. Enough to give a man nightmares, some of that ‘rehab’ stuff. Made re-adjustment look like a great party So maybe he was being unfair. Maybe the Federation had got Blake and he hadn’t survived the torture.

But Orac would’ve found that out, wouldn’t he? And according to Orac, the Federation never ever saw hide nor hair of Blake after the slime-blobs had gone back under their galactic rock. Which meant the bastard was still out there somewhere, while he was stuck with an Avon who was going so far over the edge, his favourite relaxation these days was communing with the spirits of the dead. Of which Vila had almost become one himself. Not a pleasant thought. He shifted under the weight of bedspread, delectably overheated. He never tired of being too warm, that being a luxury of the same order as utter darkness: the tangible proof of freedom.

Course, he’d been freer in some of his prisons than he was stuck here these days—and whose fault was that? Blake’s, of course. It was his fucking Cause, his fucking mess, why should they be stuck cleaning up behind his fat backside? Why couldn’t Blake take care of his own crap, eh? Bloody cheek, going off like that, leaving Avon trying to take care of everything. Probably made Avon give his word as well, that was the only reason Vila could think of that Avon stuck it out the way he had. Be just like Blake to do something like that, so that they were shovelling shit while he was off sunning himself under a shower of beta particles. Hoped he got burnt, serve him bloody well right.

The bottle tipped alarmingly, threatening the last few drops, but Vila caught them on the tip of his tongue, licking up the ones that had escaped onto his arm. Had to do something about it—not the booze, but Avon. And Blake. And this whole fucking mess. Time to sort it out, it was, and he was going to do something about it. Tomorrow, when he wasn’t quite so happily fuzzy. Liked being fuzzy. Fuzzy was nice. Fuzzy was comfy and safe and Avon couldn’t hurt him with that special voice coming to kill him. Yeh, he’d sort it all out. Get on at Avon, give him a good kick up the arse—not literally, mind, not that stupid—get him to give Orac a good kick up the arse and find Blake so that they could all give him a good kick up the arse. That’s what he’d do. Tomorrow, when his head was clear. He’d get Avon back, he knew he would. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, his mum used to say, and when Avon set eyes on Blake again, Vila’d bet that familiarity would breed contempt the way it always had. Remember some of those lovely, nasty fights they’d have on the flight deck, Avon and Blake? Avon’d just forgotten all that stuff. Avon’d just forgotten what a pompous, over-bearing bossy prick Blake could be, that was all. Get him to where he could actually see one of Blake’s famous raised-eyebrow, knuckle-chewing—disgusting habit, if you asked Vila, really disgusting habit—looks that he was always giving you as if he was the headmaster and you were the boy what had been caught copping a feel of the girls’ gym teacher. Bastard. Stealing his Avon when Blake wasn’t even here. Not fair, that. Do something about it. Tomorrow. When he wasn’t so sleepy and he wasn’t so comfy and he wasn’t so pleasantly pickled.

His last thought before sleep claimed him and before his conscious mind could stifle it as it usually did, was the upswelling of resent-filled hatred that he preferred to pretend wasn’t in him. But it was, and it escaped its prison for a few precious seconds on the formless plateau between sleep and wakefulness.

If Avon doesn’t kill the bastard for what he’s done, I will.

And in that moment, in that time of echoing hollowness where Avon used to be, he meant it. He honestly meant it. And he’d tell that idiot Tarrant a few home truths about his big hero, Blake. Tomorrow, when he was awake, when Tarrant would listen and stop him from being alone for a time, whilst Avon was off communing with ghosts.

Yes. He’d tell them all about Blake, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Tomorrow...

And he was asleep, not knowing why he would live to regret that tomorrow, in this case, actually came.