I dreamed this story, so cannot be held responsible.

The man reclined on the black leather couch in the near-dark; he was very still, in another world, his eyes drawn in by the screen in front of him where the pictures flashed. From time to time one in particular caught his attention, and his thumb slicked the button of the device he held, freezing the image—then thumbing it on. He made few other movements. He was not undressed.

When a nightmare later the screen went blank, the man stayed there for many moments, deep in thought, or some nameless emotion. And, after a while, he smiled, a savage creasing around his fine dark eyes: because after all there really was a bitter, cynical amusement to be had from it, the depths a civilised man might have within. Depths no-one would ever reach. Nor ever would want to.

Things were so bad for so long afterwards that Vila never did remember why he had gone into Avon’s cabin in the first place. Well, to steal something: that much was clear. But what…that was the question. Could anything, anything, have seemed worth it, at the the time?

Not that it mattered. He would never, to his dying day, pry into Avon’s secrets, ever again…

“I know you keep it here somewhere,” Vila muttered, riffling at top speed through Avon’s clothes, piles of neatly folded things spiced with a faint scent of Avon—disturbingly so, so that he kept whipping
his head around to look nervously behind him,
"I like a bit of a challenge, mind you," he ad-
dressed the room as he knelt to peer under the
bed, "No point in talent like mine if it's all laid
out for you, is there?" This survey, however,
yielding nothing but a pair of shoes, he turned
his attention to the shelves beside the video
console, pulling out the video discs and looking
behind them, shoving them back in again with
a little grin for himself— "Blue movies, eh,
Avon?"

He resumed his search elsewhere in the room,
but the notion remained of curiosity: just what
did Avon choose to watch, here in the privacy
of his own room?

He had rejected blockbuster movies in favour
of technical manuals by the time he got to Avon's
bathroom and began a hunting there. When he
returned (nothing) the niggle of curiosity won
its battle: casting an eye at the clock—Blake
would have Avon in thrall to the latest post-
mortem of the latest disaster for at least another
quarter—he picked up the three discs, made
himself comfortable on Avon's couch, and chose
the unmarked one to slot into the viewer. Feet
up. All I need no's a drink. He thumbed the remote
   //ON.
   //
   //

Hoping for something salacious: well, who
would not have been. Like any man Vila had his
private fantasies, his secret heats, some of which
he felt guilty about even as he thrilled to them,
and thus he was in constant search of hints or
proof that other men were just the same as he
was.

Besides which, Avon gave nothing away,
ever, armoured in the chill of extreme self-
composure. The idea of some secret sexual life
intrigued Vila intensely. Irresistible. //START.//

And then it was truly time to stop. In his
haste, with shaking fingers, he stilled and froze
the frame of Blake crucified when he had meant
to clear it from the screen, and he scrabbled
desperately at the control. Too late: he sixth
sense picked up on footsteps, and next the door
opened.

To relief so great it weakened his knees, at last
his stabbing fingers got it right and the screen
went blank. But as Avon stepped behind him
into the room there was a little, betraying sound
as the disc whirred to a rest.

"Well now," Avon's voice was frighteningly
soft already, "And just what—" And then Vila
saw it: saw the moment when Avon's brain
identified the sound his ears had caught a split
second before.

"And then you identify the sound his ears
had caught a split second before.

Such a terror as he now knew made his
bowels turn to water and his hands shake; he
opened his mouth to bluster some inanity but he
was mute. Avon's eyes flicked to the screen,
then to Vila's face. He knew.

He set down what he carried, quite gently,
his eyes never leaving Vila.

"Before you say anything, Avon—" Ridicu-
lous, his voice just would not stay steady. If only
Avon had not been standing between himself
and the door—and Avon had not said a word
yet, but he looked ghostly, coalblack eyes blazing
forth from the ivory of his skin. "I won't tell a
soul," Vila gabbled, throwing the last, slender-
est of chances away, "I swear it, Avon, I swear on my life I won’t."

Avon smiled at that, and dread drenched Vila’s guts in a rush; he really did need to find a bathroom very badly.

"Tell them what?" was all Avon said.

"That’s exactly how I see it," Vila said in a hurry, "exactly. Nothing at all. So if you’ll just excuse me—" and he made as if to dart past Avon, but Avon caught him by the lapel as he ducked under Avon’s arm, and held onto him in fingers which closed like a steel vice.

But as Vila hung there, shaking in his grasp, he saw that Avon was in shock, and did not know still what to do. With a swift jolt and a wrench he freed himself, cannoned against the door with a sob of breath, fumbled for the control.

He saw freedom unfolding before him like a vision of Paradise, and he ran.

It was Blake who noticed it first, that there was something wrong with Avon and Vila. Not that they had ever been particularly close, of course, but there was a difference now, a real anger there behind the endless scraps and snarls. Blake had himself largely given up trying with Avon, who resisted even the subtlest offerings of friendship; he seemed armoured against any and every attack. There had been a time, perhaps when he had first heard about Anna Grant, when Blake had felt he might be on the verge of a breakthrough, but nothing had come of it. Avon had retreated again into that discomfiting poise. Watching. And waiting.

A pity, because Blake sensed that behind the coldness and the conflict was a sensitive and cultured man of the truest intelligence, and perhaps the nearest thing to a friend that he could have. But it was no good: they had got off on the wrong foot, somehow, and everything they would ever say to one another seemed likely to have a scorpion’s edge to it.

Vila, however, was a different matter: Blake had a lot of time for Vila. The man was good to have around, a refreshing change after the sultry brooding affected by the other members of the crew. Avon, Jenna, and Cally; all three seemed permanently on the edge of some dark and troubling storm within. Vila might mope and moan and bluster like a windy day, but his nature was essentially uncomplicated.

But at the moment, something was going on, and Blake didn’t like it. Secrets, except his own of course, were bad for cohesion, and Blake believed in cohesion. He was keeping any eye on Avon and Vila. Just to see.

And at present they were all three of them working on an access tunnel deep in the bowels of the ship: Vila was not at all happy about it, because of its proximity to the central drive, which he appeared to perceive as some fearsome thing just lurking around, ready to lash some noxious tentacle of vapour or radiation or machinery around his fragile neck. He had complained quite a lot. Vila had the gift of eloquence, but not the blessing of restraint. Even Blake was fed up with him.

"Pass me that, Avon. The laser light." Blake reached out.

"What do you want with that?" Avon’s voice came, thin with scorn. "The infra-red strobe would do much better in here. Unless, of course, you yourself are blessed with unnatural powers of vision."

Which is quite possible, oh Leader. Blake bit his tongue and said calmly, "All right, Avon. The infra-red. If you say so. There, look. Can you see the problem?"

"No. Yes—give me some room."

It was hot and cramped in the tunnel, and tempers were short.

"Vila—can you—"

"No, I can’t. I’m not putting my fingers in there."

"Vila." Blake was still patient. "It’s perfectly safe. You’ve just seen both Avon and myself do it."

"That may be, but then your fingers aren’t worth much. If you’ll pardon me."

Avon’s sigh of contempt drifted audibly past.

"I don’t know why you brought him at all, Blake. He’d have been more use set to work counting the tiles in the corridor."

"Oh yes, that would suit you very nicely, wouldn’t it? You and Blake on your own. Much cosier. So why drag me along?"

Blake frowned at the quickflung bitterness, and Avon was silent. "Vila," Blake said at last, "Just give it a try, will you? Your fingers are nimble than mine. Or Avon’s."
“Oh, leave him,” Avon cut in, suddenly angry. “I’ll do it myself. If he wants to be a dead-weight, then have some sympathy. It’s about all his brain fits him for.”

“Vila,” Blake still asked him, but with a little hint of steel, watching Avon struggle with the fiddly components.

“You know as well as I do we don’t understand all the circuitry in there,” Vila pleaded—and ducked as a timely blue bolt of electricity sped jaggedly across the tunnel. “See what I mean? There could be booby traps.”

“You mean they knew you were coming?” Avon was smooth and vicious and quick. Vila jumped nervously, and ducked something invisible. “I’m sure that’s a circuit overload. Can’t you hear it?”

Blake laughed, amused despite himself at Vila’s paranoia. “That’s just your imagination.” And again was shocked as Vila’s soft tongue turned steely and bit:

“Don’t look at me. Avon’s the one with the vivid imagination.”

There it was again: the sound of some sub-conversation Blake had been hearing from these two all week.

“Get out of here, Vila,” Avon hissed, fire and ice in his voice. “If you won’t help—just get out.”

There was still delicate circuitry to reach and treat. Blake laid a restraining hand on Vila’s arm. “Look, what the hell’s the matter with you two? Can’t you just get on with the job in hand?”

“I am getting on with the job in hand,” Avon said with chilly venom, and it was true; Avon was concentrating as steadily as he always did, working on persistently even as he talked, sorting and parting wires. “Send him away: he’s a useless fool.”

“Oh yes, you would want me to go,” Vila whined. “Wouldn’t you, Avon? You don’t very much like having me around these days, do you? Afraid I might—”

Something delicate shattered: Avon threw the laser probe to the floor. Blake stared at it in silence, stricken by the realisation that it was the action of a man with his nerves in tatters. Vila stared at it too, dumb.

Avon said, “Tell him or don’t tell him: but this is a game I won’t play.”

Vila scrambled away, backwards out of the hole, and left in a hurry.

To which Blake had only one reaction, only one thought, but it haunted him for days: tell me what?

Vila nursed a bottle in the privacy of his quarters, mourning to himself.

The shock of his secret had not yet worn off: still he could not look at Avon without fear, without contempt; and yet he knew he himself was not stained. After all, who could say that his own deepest, darkest dreams might not be as stark a shock if unfolded and flapped before the world? Avon’s vision was a vision of power: it was awesome, but not shabby.

And now time had cleared his eyes a little he could see the unsavoury truth, that he would not be in possession of this unpleasant secret had he not himself opened the box and stolen it out. It was not something Avon flaunted, after all; on the contrary, in matters personal he was as quiet and self-contained as you could get. In fact, it was the easiest of things to imagine him sexless.

He had put Avon in one hell of a position. Which, it must be said, Avon was standing up to with intense courage. His eye did not flinch away when it met Vila’s reproachful one, he did not avoid him, he did not try to be unusually nice to him. It was the sort of inner core of courage he had always guessed Avon to possess, and it dragged an unwilling admiration out of him. In fact, by now he would have been desperately disillusioned had Avon begged him, by word or look, not to disclose the whole nasty truth to Blake.

Not that he would do that.

The truth was, it had been bitterly sweet, for a while, to have Avon in his power; Avon who humiliated him daily with his arrogance, his superiority; yet the whip of power did not suit Vila, he was not they type to wield it.

And to think, he had once harboured the small and secret hope that Avon might become his friend—! He might be wrong, oh easily, but he had always had the feeling that Avon might like him a little, better than he liked the others, beneath the veneer of contempt; might even be moved by some emotion he would never voice
to protect Vila from the myriad of things in the universe which always seemed out to get him.

He laughed, sadly, into his glass. Well, that idea just flew out of the window, didn’t it… Because Avon was never going to be his friend now. Never. He had stamped that one into the ground and left it for dead.

And maybe that was just as well, considering the games Avon liked to play.

But it was Blake Avon desired to play them with.

And Blake didn’t know.

Well, it was none of his business. Never had been.

It took him a bottle and a half before his courage reached a sufficient level to take him to Avon’s cabin; and then it drained away again the instant Avon answered the door. He started to tiptoe off—but was brought up short by the sound of Avon’s low voice saying, “Come in, Vila.”

“Well all right then, I will,” he cried belligerently, and entered, breathing heavily and glaring.

Avon looked neat, as always, and dark, and sharp. Try as he might, Vila could not keep his eyes from flicking to the shelf where the discs were. All three were still there. He returned his gaze to Avon quickly, and was surprised to find his vision blurring as he moved—

“You’re drunk,” Avon said at once, with no particular censure, and Vila stared at him, acutely aware that Avon was fiendishly goodlooking, aristocratic even, and brave in the face of humiliation; and he felt an annoying prickle of tears at the back of his eyes. “You’re all right, Avon,” he said thickly, “Just wanna say—you’re all right. No business of mine what you—do.”

One elegant eyebrow rose in a sardonic arch. “I’m glad you realise it.”

“I mean—you can’t help it,” Vila said all in a rush, “Some funny things get to people, you know, turn them on… Did I ever tell you about that friend of mine with the jelly and the stockings? No? Well, I can see you’re not interested, Avon, and really what I came to say is that what you do is your own business, I mean, it doesn’t hurt anyone, does it? At least,” he laughed nervously, “not when it’s not for real it doesn’t, and in any case, it’s no business of mine and I just came to tell you that I wouldn’t, well, I wouldn’t tell anyone—”

He drew in a deep, gulping breath, and in the pause Avon smiled, a cold and inexorable smile that froze the blood. “Wouldn’t you? Well now, Vila, I think that’s exactly what you would do.”

“No,” Vila stammered, “I swear it, Avon, I—”

“So you said before,” Avon said, “and yet every time I’m with Blake you drop so many damn hints I’m surprised you don’t write it down for him.” He spoke in a distant tone, his eyes far-away; one might suppose him to discuss some minor concern not of his own.

“I know, Avon,” Vila said, shamed, “don’t know what came over me. It’s none of my business, I know that. I should never have found it. Should never have watched it. Not all the way through, not when I could see what it was—”

Avon’s eyes shot into narrow slits: Vila continued hurriedly, “Look, Avon, we’ve all got our little quirks. Me and the next man. I like a blue movie as anyone, no-one can call me a prude. Maybe I don’t understand it, but—”

“No,” said Avon, breaking a silence of sheer ice, “you don’t understand it, do you? You don’t understand it at all.”

Vila’s round eyes surveyed him uneasily.

“Well, maybe I don’t, Avon, but live and let live, that’s what I say. You won’t be hearing any more on the subject from me. Maybe we could just forget it and be friends?” And at the look of Avon’s face, “Well, not friends, then, all right. But back to how we were—?”

“Get out of here,” Avon said with a kind of weary distaste.

Vila backed towards the door. “At least say—”

But Avon said nothing at all, just stood there, electric, hostile, and Vila left, cowed under the brooding storm of his gaze.

This time Vila stuck to it. Avon treated him exactly the same as he had always done, with a mixture of contempt and distrust, and it was tempting, so tempting sometimes for Vila to play the one decisive and dramatic card he had, and force Avon to the most humiliating of defeats. Or, even, to make some subtle hint of knowledge dearly bought, something to make the others’ ears prick and their hair stand on end—without exactly knowing why.
But, heroically, he refrained.

Too late in any case, had he but known it, because Blake was onto it already, and he was not the man to let it go; he was simply biding his time.

After two drinks Vila was lively and cheerful, after six he began to run the line of emotion from A). increasing loquacity, all the way to Y). tears, and Z). coma. The trick was to catch him at exactly the right point, which Blake did adroitly, producing a bottle of his own in the rec room where Vila reclined, joining him, sitting down.

Vila was quite pleased to see Blake, more pleased to see the wine, and determined not to pay for it with Avon’s secret, since he guessed at once that was why Blake had come. Indeed, Blake raised the subject in the first few minutes.

“What’s wrong with you and Avon?” He regarded Vila with one brown eye as he tipped back his glass and dismissed the contents with a gulp. A large man, Blake tolerated alcohol extremely well on the rareish occasions he drank it.

“Nothing,” Vila said in a flat voice.

“Come on, Vila. You’ve been snapping at each other’s tails for days.”

“Don’t we always,” Vila prattled glibly, “Me, I like a quiet life, but Avon—”

“This is different.”

“All right,” Vila abandoned pretence in favour of half the truth: Blake was too acute to be deceived. “Maybe we have had a sort of—difference, but it’s over now.”

“It was—something Avon didn’t want you to tell me?” Blake guessed, better than he knew; he was thinking, of course, of Krantor’s wheel.

Useless to deny it entirely: Vila remembered with the clarity of shame all those heavily dropped remarks. “Well, yes, but—Blake. Don’t keep on at me. I’m not going to tell you.”

Blake laughed and changed the subject. There was still a full bottle and a half to go. He had a pleasurable sense of excitement, a hound on the scent of something rare and thrillingly rotten in the woods—

And he assumed, as anyone would, that Vila was making a big deal out of some peccadillo, some slight thing which would amuse him, give him a little edge over Avon without doing Avon any real harm. That he might uncover a real darkness here, a nightmare to haunt any soul save that of the dreamer of it, did not for a moment occur to him. How could it?

And so Blake led Vila on, down into the subject of Delta low-life, and let him jabber on—very entertainingly at that: amused at some tale of Vila and his friend visiting a brothel on Orion where huge-breasted whores did the trick with stockings and a bowl of pink jelly, Blake was still chuckling when he refilled their glasses, and then he moved smoothly and without warning back to the subject in hand.

“Avon didn’t hurt you in some way, did he?”

“What?” Vila said, off guard. “Of course he didn’t. Oh no, Blake, it was nothing like that.”

“Didn’t try to force you into something you didn’t want to do? I mean,” Blake grimaced at the innuendo he had not meant to impart, “What I meant is, he isn’t planning some mutiny, some bank fraud perhaps, is he—and trying to make you part of it?”

“Oh, no,” Vila said. “Honestly, Blake, you’re on the wrong track completely.” His round brown eyes swivelled towards Blake uneasily.

“He upset you,” Blake guessed. “Insulted your low breeding and lower-grade brain once too many times?” He was grinning as he said it, and Vila grinned haplessly back at him.

“Sticks and stones, Blake, it’s all sticks and stones to me. Matter of fact,” he said thoughtfully, after three glasses beginning to be profound, “I don’t think Avon would say them if he thought they’d really hurt—see?”

So Vila did still like Avon, did still perceive him as a man of honour. Blake felt puzzled; he seemed to be getting nowhere. He changed tack immediately.

“Is it something to do with Jenna?”

“Jenna?” Vila looked completely blank.

“Or Cally?” Blake hazarded, suddenly sure he had it: of course. Vila had found Avon in some compromising situation with Cally, and Vila was jealous. Vila would certainly like to compromise Cally. If not Avon.

Vila was shaking his head emphatically. “Nothing to do with them. You couldn’t be further wrong, Blake. I tell you, you’re wasting your time, because you’ll never guess. No-one
Blake seemed to be making rapid progress down his mental list of possibilities without actually getting anywhere. “Well, let me think,” he said, frowning affably down, for all the world as if this were some game he was playing with Vila’s willing cooperation, “What’s left? Let me see. Avon’s done something, obviously. Something to do with money, knowing Avon, and he doesn’t want me to know about it, am I right?”

But Vila was staring at him unhappily. “Don’t keep on at me, Blake. I’m not going to tell you, so don’t keep on. Believe me—” Vila took a deep breath— “you don’t want to know. It isn’t—funny, and it isn’t very—nice. You wouldn’t get a laugh out of it, believe me. I wish I didn’t know it. I wish—”

And he really did. Looking at the bowed head, the clenched fists of the other man, Blake saw the moment had come to desist: and in fact, though he was still more determined to know, it was beginning to sound as if Avon’s secret was concerned with the sort of things about Avon Blake did not concern himself with. No, he spent too much time trying to drag some vestigial fibre of goodness and humanity out of Avon to be surprised, or even intrigued, by some revelation of his darker side.

And so he did desist, half expecting Vila to go now, but Vila never left a room where there was still something left in a bottle, on principle. Silence fell, but not an unfriendly one; Blake mused over his glass and looked out into some private world.

Vila was taken unawares by this change of tactic: and did not quite know what to do. He risked a glance at Blake every now and then, to see if Blake was cross with him, but nothing showed. He was muzzy by now, his brain two degrees insulated from his emotions; and it came to him with blinding perception that he really wanted to tell Blake. Share this horrible burden, pass it on to someone who could judge it properly, see it in its right perspective: for Vila, sweated nightly by fevered dreams and daily, as he glanced at Avon at his various duties, struck by little flickers of memory, a naked limb, a nipple, shining trails of scarlet running along bare skin, cruel torment, but the sweetest of rapture—and other things. Worse things, things that Vila didn’t really want to consider at all, but which his mind kept throwing up at him, making him wince as he walked around: for after all, what pleasure, what possible pleasure could there be in those strange dark desires?

And yet…as he saw it again, and again, in his mind’s eye and shuddered, again his body began a sweet thrum of delight, and seemed to yearn, disloyally, for what his mind shunned in horror: for Avon’s mastery, no less.

His eyes came wide open and he yelled, “I hate him!”

Blake, drowsing pleasantly, came fully awake and stared at him. “Why?”

“No, I don’t hate him,” Vila contradicted himself in a grouchy mutter. “I hate knowing—wha’ I know. I shouldn’t—shouldn’t know it. It isn’t right…”

Blake, soberer, tried to sort out this muddle and failed. He kept quiet, his manner mild and questioning. Perhaps it was coming.

Vila’s senses were soaked now and sweetly spinning. He gave Blake a quirky, lopsided grin. “And you? Do you like Avon, Blake?”

Blake considered. “Yes,” he said at last. “I like him. I could wish—” here he grinned— “he wasn’t quite so difficult.”

“Do you think he’s goodlooking?” Vila persisted slyly. Not seeing any further than the question, Blake gravely prepared to give the matter some thought.

“Yes,” he said; for of course Avon was striking, with those eyes, that beautiful voice. Hair like a raven’s wing… He chuckled to himself as the unlikely imagery popped into his mind; and while he was still thus contemplating Avon in his thoughts, Vila leaned towards him, his voice very quiet now, very serious.

“I can’t tell you,” he whispered against Blake’s arm, and wetted his lips nervously. “I would tell you, Blake—but I promised. It would—” he struggled for the words— “hurt Avon if I told you.”

“Would it?” Blake murmured, looking down at the mousy head resting on his shoulder. He stroked a strand or two of it between his fingers, slowly, persuasively. “Would it really hurt him? After all, he’d never know that I knew.”

“I can’t tell you,” Vila whispered again; clearly he was in anguish over this.

Blake nodded, understandably. “All right,
you can’t tell me precisely. You could give me some vague idea—just so I can satisfy myself it isn’t something—well, something I ought to know.” In the face of Vila’s obvious distress, prurience had briefly given way to wild fantasies wherein Vila had found some proof that Avon was planning to murder them all in their beds; and Vila was still staring up at him with haunted eyes.

Blake filled up Vila’s glass with the last of the wine, settled an arm around his shoulders in a comforting sort of way.

“I found something,” Vila said in a low-voiced rush, “something in his cabin.”

Blake waited, cautious.

“Something Avon wouldn’t have wanted anyone to find.”

Blake gazed at him, offering no help.

“Something—you know!” Vila said, agonised. “Something to do with—you know.” He lowered his voice as his lips framed the word: “Sex.”

Blake stared at him, his eyes as round as Vila’s: for some reason, into his mind had come the image of a huge and artificial cock in leather—upstanding on a plinth.

A hysterical chuckle left him, and then another. Absurd, the things your mind came up with under stress. As if Avon—

Something sexual. Without his knowing why, his heart had begun to pound, thumping the walls of his chest from within. “Pornography?” he suggested, and Vila gaped at him, gave at last a little, embarrassed nod, a duck of his head, and peeked up at Blake to see how he was taking this.

Blake laughed out loud. So that was it…all the furtive glances and the heavy air of doom and the hushed-up hints, the air of scented blackmail—nothing but this.

“Is that all?” he expostulated. “God help you, Vila, I was beginning to think it was something serious.”

Vila didn’t smile back. He looked worried. Poor Vila, Blake thought, to have Avon on such a pedestal he could not imagine the man ever needing the furious relief of sex at his own devices, some pretty pictures to help his hand along.

“Come on, Vila,” he said, amused, “don’t tell me you never masturbate.” For Blake it was a daily ritual, somewhere between the first morning urination and brushing his teeth.

Vila actually flushed, his skin burning. The lower classes, Blake thought, fascinated, probably had taboos on mentioning such a thing. He clapped him on the shoulder. “Well, then, I’m sure you don’t, Vila,” he said reassuringly. “But forgive the rest of us poor celibates if we occasionally indulge. Even, it seems, Avon.”

Only a few weeks later, but the world had changed its face. Gan was dead, and thus came the inevitable conclusion that Blake’s followers had begun to die. The charmed life was over: now there would be more deaths to come. Blake was sunk in a depression so deep and so black he seriously doubted his ability to continue.

But then, if he didn’t continue… Gan’s death would be seen in the context of—Nothing. And Blake’s rebellion a nine-day wonder that went nowhere and killed a good man for nothing at all.

But it took such energy, to drive them on, to rouse them into purpose; and energy, right now, was the last thing Blake had: it seemed to have drained out of him along with Gan’s life.

The others had tried in their various ways to comfort him: the others, except Avon. Avon lost no chance to scourge him with a whip of contempt, to turn Blake’s guilt around and flog him with it. It came to Blake, sitting alone in his darkened cabin, that Avon hated him, more than he had known…

Blake laughed, bitterly. “I’ve talked to him enough, thank you. For the moment.”
And yet it was, as Vila sensed instinctively, Avon’s rationale that Blake longed for. To set him right on the ethics of it all, even if it was only to confirm what Blake suspected: that Gan’s death was his own fault, no excuses, no disclaimer.

“Avon hates me, Vila. I’ve only just realised it. He really hates me…”

Vila came nearer, hesitated. The terrible knowledge he had burned and boiled away inside him; Blake had it all wrong. “He doesn’t hate you,” he said cautiously.

“Oh, not personally, perhaps. He’s indifferent to me personally. He hates everything I stand for—everything I think is important.”

Avon’s shining vision of Blake had not dimmed with time, intensified rather in Vila’s mind: he wasn’t sure if Avon wanting to do all those terrible things to Blake was evidence of some romantic affection, but he was damned sure it wasn’t the product of indifference.

“You’re wrong, you know. Look, Blake—in a way, I think Avon—”

Blake looked up and away restlessly, sick of Avon, sick of himself.

—“in a way, I think he has a sort of fixation on you.”

Blake laughed, hugely, bitterly amused; at least diverted. “Avon has? You’re dreaming, Vila. Been at the soma again?” He said it not unkindly, but with absolute rejection.

Maybe he should leave it at that. And yet, Vila knew more than he let on, saw how things were falling so rapidly apart around them. If Blake collapsed, so would they all.

He said robustly, “All right, then. Let’s say I know it for a fact.”

Blake looked at him. “How could you?” Then he got it, just like that.

“Avon let him in without making anything of it; from the look of him, tensed and detached and cool, Blake knew he was expecting a resumption of the day’s hostilities. He threw up his hands and turned his back wearily on Avon.

“All right, all right. I haven’t come for a fight...can I sit down?”

Avon said nothing, but watched him sit, the leather couch creaking beneath his weight. The room was very neat, bed stark as a bier, floor bare except for its dark red carpet. One closed cupboard for clothes, a VD screen and a terminal, disc console, a few discs neatly stacked on a shelf. No clutter, characteristic of Avon’s mind and his lifestyle.

“Will you stay?” Blake asked abruptly, turning his head to look at Avon.

“Why not?” Avon asked slowly, almost wary.

Blake stared at him. “I thought, according to you, I might as well have killed Gan with my bare hands.” And he saw, but did not understand, that Avon was half a step behind; had, in fact, been expecting Blake to say something quite different, but being Avon he caught up quickly.

“At least that would have had a certain honesty about it,” he said with a hint of a sneer. “Gan believed in you, he believed you were invincible—but then, he was never the brightest of fools. I, however—” he smiled, briefly and unpleasantly— “am not a fool at all. Of course I shall stay. Surely, in fact, the question you should be asking is—”

Blake looked at him soberly. “—Is?”

“Should you stay?” Avon said, very quietly, and nicely, and it stung Blake like a dagger in his heart. He was on his feet in an instant.

“Thank you, Avon. I knew I shouldn’t have come.”

Avon watched him go with darkness in his eyes, a skilled serpent poised behind the creep of some prey. Blake stood by the door, but did not go through it, nor turned as he said, testing: “Come back Blake, I didn’t mean it?”

“Oh yes, I did.” Avon’s voice had the slightest of smiles in it, a creamy vein amid the sour. Blake swung slowly around to face him. “But don’t worry, Blake, you won’t take any notice of me. Do you ever? Have a drink.”

“Hemlock, perhaps?” Seeing the olive branch there, Blake grasped it firmly, beginning to be
happy, a vast weight lifting off his chest. He came back and sat down on Avon’s black leather reclining couch, and watched Avon opening a cupboard, getting out a bottle and two glasses, and he remembered now why he had come.

“I told you I wasn’t here for a fight,” he said abruptly. “I came to be entertained. Thank you.” He took the ruby red drink Avon held out to him, letting his eyes dwell on Avon’s face.

“Entertained?” Avon tilted his head a fraction.

Blake grinned at him, rakish. “Vila said you had something interesting in here.”

He was totally unprepared for the look that stabbed Avon’s eyes from within; the terrible silence which followed took his breath away.

“Did he, indeed,” was all Avon said, in a very quiet voice; but the narrowed eyes never left Blake for a second, searching, searching.

Blake patted the couch next to him, said crisply— “Sit down. Look, Avon. Deltas may have a whitehouse attitude to pornography, but it has its place. If ever I felt like being—diverted, then tonight is the night.”

“Pornography,” Avon said, half to himself; then his gaze, sharp as needles, raised to Blake’s face. “Is that what Vila told you he found in my room?”

So it wasn’t true. Blake’s heart began to knock uncomfortably. “He seemed to say so. But forgive me if I misunderstood.”

Avon smiled, a peculiar smile, the smile of a wolf in the phase of the moon. “I see. And do you like such things, Blake? They—entertain you?”

Blake met the eyes which laced so intricately with his, refused to be thrown. “As I said, they have their place.”

“So,” Avon said—he still had not sat down—“You came here—correct me if I am jumping to conclusions—with the intention that I should show you this—pornography—which Vila told you he had found in my room.” He spoke in a precise, and exact, way. Blake felt he was expected to answer. He shrugged.

“Why not?”

Avon looked pensive. “‘Why?’ would seem to be a better question. So, you would have me believe that you want to look at this—material with me. With a view,” Avon smiled ferally, “to what?”

Blake’s heart stepped up its rate, punching and joggling inside him like a mad thing. For the first time he began to believe that Vila might have it spot on: perhaps Avon did have some sort of—interest—in him. He matched Avon’s stare with a boldness of his own. “The usual things.”

“Which are?” Avon gave him a cool, assessing little look. “The circles you moved in were probably a little different from mine. You’ll have to forgive me if I need the aid of specifics.”

“Well,” Blake said, and thought, to hell with it. “You help me and I’ll help you—how does that sound?”

“It sounds—interesting,” Avon said, and this time he did not smile.

“Come and sit down, Avon. You make me nervous, standing over me like that.” And this time Avon did choose to sit, close enough for Blake to catch the characteristic scent of him. Astoundingly, Avon was leaning nearer him, touching his glass to Blake’s.

“To us,” Blake said firmly, and took a hearty swallow.

“Well now,” Avon said delicately, “exactly what are you expecting, Blake? As your favoured viewing material, I mean.”

Blake laughed. “Well, it’s all much the same, isn’t it?”

There was a silence, then Avon stirred a little beside him, and took another small sip of his wine. His voice when it came held a rich timbre Blake had never heard before:

“No, it isn’t all the same, Blake. And I’m really not sure that what is to my taste—would also be to yours.”

His hand slipped along the back of the couch, laid itself lightly on Blake’s shoulder. Blake felt the pressure like the burn of a brand. “I’ll take the chance,” he said, turning his face towards Avon; he guessed now that, Delta prudishness aside, whatever Avon had here to watch was not going to be ordinary, but that only fired his interest and his excitement. “Try me. I guarantee I’m unshockable.” Even talking about such things here with Avon, had given him an erection; it had been such a long time. He shifted in his seat, hoping that Avon might catch a glimpse of it.

“So Vila—” Avon paused, and turned his head, and smiled, “didn’t tell you about it?” and
the note in his voice made Blake open his eyes wide: the deepest of emotions was held back there somewhere.

“No,” he said, and then immediately thought again, and everything fell neatly and precisely into place. “Or—yes. He seemed to suggest—” Blake put out a lazy hand, extended one finger and traced it down Avon’s cheek— “that it involved me. In some way.” Almost fondly he considered what it might be; some photograph, perhaps, himself in some revealing pose; strange to think, after all these months of hostility, that this had been going on behind the lines. Avon’s narrowed gaze continued to search his face intently; and then, abruptly, a smile creased his face, the hard glitter of his eyes softened, moonlight chasing off the shadows of night.

And so it began.

Avon lollled on his leather couch, the scene of so many recent, and real, encounters with Roj Blake, and watched his screen with a hard assessing eye.

He was reviewing what he had created over the past weeks; he had added some, and taken some away, all in the dark hours of the night when such things as this seemed appropriate.

At this moment Blake, his wrists bound in thin leather, kneeled before him, leaning slightly backwards, his muscular thighs tense with effort. Avon’s careful eye had missed no detail: the solid beauty, for example, of Blake’s chest and arms he had redrawn now that he was no longer working from imagination.

“No. Please,” Blake said, eyes proud, yet desperate, and Avon’s thumb hovered over the delete button: on the whole he preferred Blake stormy but silent, suffering all Avon’s chosen pleasures because he knew he must. Pleading did not excite Avon. Yet sometimes it pleased him to have Blake beg.

And Avon’s eyes narrowed at the next point, the terrible, wonderful moment when Blake realised he could not hold it, the worst and final humiliation—and the way Blake lifted his head to gaze out with the hauteur of pride, even at the moment of release, the golden stream flooding out of Blake, running wetly and quickly across the floor towards the silent watcher on the couch, as Blake sighed.

With a hissed sigh of temper and frustration, Avon threw the control to one side.

The truth was, however extreme he made it, it no longer worked for him. Reality had stabbed it in the back: the magic had fled and left it cold.

Avon grinned, with savage lack of humour. Pity. He had lost on both counts: what had been for Avon a magical talisman of pleasure and power was lost to him for good. And worse that: he had never expected to find himself a victim. Delivered out of the hands of one obsession into another. One far more dangerous. Anger excited Avon, but tenderness slayed him.

Sentiment is a weakness. Let it once get a hold of you, and you are dead…

Avon’s brow darkened, and his hand clenched on the drink he held. Blake, like it or not, was going to have to go. One way or another.

He had wanted Blake inside him last night. So much so that he had had to fight himself not to ask for it.

And that was a very disturbing thought, here in the cold light of day.

Evidence of just how very far things had already gone. Before he knew it he’d be Blake’s panting yes-man just the way the rest of them were. Perhaps that was what Blake, a puppeteer in all but name, had intended all along.

He leaned forward, flipped the disc out of the viewer, transfixed it with a pinpoint gaze. Clever Blake, then. The man had an instinct for possession. Already Avon glimpsed in himself some disloyal yearning to rewrite the story, with himself in Blake’s role.

In a flurry of violence he hurled the disc across the room so that it skidded into the wall, spun, and lay still. Then he turned on his heel and left.

Blake entered the room on the balls of his feet, fairly pulsing with energy. Disappointed to a ridiculous degree not to find Avon there, he paced around a little, letting himself unwind from the taut energies required on the flightdeck, arms locked behind his head, stretching every muscle and every sinew, letting himself, already, anticipate the night to come.

He had manoeuvred the watches so that he and Avon could be alone again together. Jenna
was suspicious, but the truth was so bizarre she had not guessed even near it.

Who could? Who could have known, for instance, how dark and sweet a fire raged inside Avon, beneath the ice?

Alongside the bed he straightened the covers obsessively, saw Avon’s head on the pillow as he wished it to be, thrashing from side to side, his sweat-soaked hair and darkened eyes like a vortex for Blake to drown in, as he thrust home to the deepest depth inside Avon and died the sweetest and most violent of deaths—

A fantasy. So far.

Blake shivered, and threw himself around the room again, pacing. The toe of his boot caught something, sent it skittering along the floor. He bent to pick it up—a video disc—and inside him, a light went on.

Oh yes, he knew what this was: it was Avon’s blessed secret, the one that had so unsettled Vila. Started all this in a sense, too. He had wanted Avon to show him, had asked him once or twice, but Avon had always demurred, without stress, but in a way that made it clear the matter was not up for negotiation. Embarrassed, Blake supposed now, fondly: well, he would take it out of Avon’s hands and watch it without him. If it was Avon’s favourite fantasy, well then. Maybe he could make it come true for him.

Blake slotted the disc into the viewer, threw himself onto Avon’s black leather couch, and settled down to watch.

He was still there when Avon came back, but the screen had long since gone dark and dead.

And so Avon faced him out, just the two of them across the wide chasm which lay between them, under the harsh glare of the cabin lights. Blake lifted his eyes to Avon’s face, dispassionately curious as to what he would find there. Shock, at the very least. Horror. Shame...

But he had forgotten, just how close the curtains over Avon’s soul could draw. Avon simply looked like a cold stranger, nothing more. A million miles away from him.

“You surprise me, Avon.” The words came with difficulty.

Avon smiled without humour. “Oh, I can imagine.” His breathing was well under control, and also his voice.

Blake got to his feet, his voice rising. “You—really—have—surprised me. Not two ways about it—this is sick, Avon. Sicker than I could ever have guessed.” He waited, but Avon did not leap to his own defence. “Haven’t you got anything to say?” he asked.

Avon stirred then, took his hand off the back of the couch. “Yes,” he said. “Get out of here, Blake.”

“Oh, I suppose there’s not much you can say.” Blake was simmering on a violent flame of anger, seething with nervous energy as his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. “Even you would find it difficult to explain it away.” He shook his head. “At least I know now why you didn’t want to show it to me.”

“Yes,” Avon snapped, his lip curling back in a snarl. “I didn’t, did I? At least you remember that much. As it happens, I might as well have put it up on the main screen and arranged a group viewing.”

Blake stared, arrested. “Of course. It’s only just struck me. Vila’s seen this too? Oh that’s marvellous, Avon. Just marvellous.”

“Nobody would have seen it,” Avon hissed, in a fine temper of his own, “if you both had been able to keep from prying into my affairs.”

“I can see why you’d want to keep it to yourself,” Blake agreed. “Or were you coming around to it? What was last night about, Avon—just softening me up for the real thing?”

Avon’s throat moved rapidly as he swallowed, a sign of nerves which gave Blake some chill satisfaction. But Avon’s voice was pitched in superb irony as he said: “Hardly. I didn’t really think you were up to anything more—sophisticated.”

Blake swung himself around, fists balling, pacing away from Avon. “Well, but not many people are quite that sophisticated, are they, Avon? I can see why you might have had some trouble attracting sexual partners in the past.”

Avon’s sudden, quick smile, he ignored. “I suppose it’s naive of me not to have guessed you might have a yen for sadism. Not a pretty thing, but maybe I could have lived with that. But the rest...” It was Blake’s turn to swallow, over the tightness in his throat as he stared at Avon in contempt, and dislike. “Avon, I—just don’t know what to say to you.”
“Why say anything, then,” Avon said boredly, turning away. “You don’t seem to be afflicted by dullness to me…on the contrary, I’d say you were being irritatingly verbose.”

Blake stared in disbelief. Then leaped at him, grabbed his arms, gripping tight, tighter. “Avon. Surely you can see we have to talk about this.”

A black glitter compromised him. “I don’t see why. What can there possibly be to say? Unless, of course—” a demonic flash of amusement—“despite the show of moral outrage, it excites you to talk about it?”

Blake sought out and held his gaze, quite deliberately. “—excites me? Avon, it sickens me. A little bondage, I can live with that. A little blood. Maybe we could laugh it off if it were just that. But—” he reddened in anger, and fairly spat the word out, “pissing games.” His voice had gone low: now he raised it again. “In god’s name, Avon, whatever sort of sexuality do you have to have to be turned on by pissing?”

While Blake had flushed, Avon had gone quite white; but you would not know from his voice that he was holding himself just barely upright in the wreckage of his dignity; his words came out as eloquent and precise as ever.

“You’ll never know, will you? Now shut up, Blake, and get out of here.”

But Blake stayed where he was, though his hands sprang away from Avon’s arms as he gazed at him, more in sad fascination now than anger. “Oh Avon…” he said with genuine regret, “how could you do it?”

Avon wore a little, distracted frown, as if considering an aesthetic detail. “Yes: on retrospect, perhaps that was an aberration.”

“...I’m glad you can still see it that way.” Blake looked at him again; how could Avon stand there and take this, full in the face without flinching? Unwillingly you had to admire the courage of him. He carried on without preamble, “To torture me and humiliate me: that’s your idea of joy, is it, Avon?”

Avon sighed, the smallest of gusts touching Blake’s skin. “Didn’t it look as if you were?”

“Oh yes,” Blake said bitterly. “Yes, I suppose you might say that. At least, until I wet myself, that is.”

Avon opened his mouth to speak, breathed instead, and seemed to lose himself in thought as he gazed past Blake. Detaching himself swiftly and ruthlessly, from Blake and from it all.
see it. I hardly expected your prurience to drive you to deceit. Perhaps you might call me a fool. Should I have locked up all my possessions?"

He paused, seeking in Blake’s eyes some sign; he spoke for the first time with less than perfect command. “I won’t insult your intelligence by making excuses you would not believe. Except—” again that swallow— “to ask you to consider if your own mind would look so pure if anyone could scan it inch by inch. As you, unasked, have scanned mine.”

Blake considered this for a moment. “Avon, I think I can honestly say there’s nothing in my mind I’m afraid of anyone seeing.”

A silence settled between them. “Then you’re lucky,” Avon observed, thinly and clearly.

Blake stared at him, unable to bridge this gap between them, unable to make Avon see how far apart they were. “I’m normal, Avon.”

“How wonderful for you. Do you want congratulations?”

Dammit, he hadn’t meant to come across all high-handed morals. Perverted Avon might be, but it was hardly a case for smug comparisons: perhaps Avon could not help it. Yet Blake could not lose the conviction that it was something Avon would choose, anyway; and not that he simply could not help himself.

He dropped his hands, looked at Avon without overt hostility. “Avon...you don’t seem to understand. How difficult it is for me to accept that you could have the desire to—well. Whatever I’ve done to you, or you think I’ve done to you, do I really deserve treatment like that? Is that what you really believe?” He stopped, as Avon made an impatient noise, a widespread gesture:

“It was a fantasy, Blake. Don’t you understand the difference between fantasy and reality?” Sharp, pinprick pupils homed in on him. “No, perhaps you don’t. But you, for example, would not deny that you have wondered what it would be like to sleep with Jenna. Without, necessarily, ever intending actually to do so.”

“At least that would be—” Blake caught himself, but not in time, and Avon finished it for him, eyes ablaze:

“Normal?” and there was a silence, Blake transfixed in the black magic of Avon’s merciless glare. Finally Avon looked away, breaking it; Blake let out the breath he had not known he was holding. “If it makes you feel any better, try even the most elementary psychology,” Avon’s quiet voice came back to him. “However it looks, it is not so much a fantasy of power, but of inadequacy…”

The idea of Avon having any notions of inadequacy struck him as decidedly offkey. If Avon was trying to make him some sort of apology, he could well do without it. He stretched out a hands towards Avon’s back. “Give me the disc, Avon.”

“Why?” Avon asked, without turning. “Why?” Blake expostulated: but Avon did not reply, turning around to face him, his expression hard to read. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“I can’t think why you should want it.” Avon said, his face set in bitter lines of cynicism. “Unless it’s to provide some—inspiration? It’s all a little tedious, isn’t it, Blake—your performance?”

Of all the things Avon had said, that seemed to hurt the most, though he couldn’t think why; it was unimportant, after all. Blake held his head up high, a splash of colour along each cheekbone. “You didn’t complain at the time. But having seen what you consider the height of stimulation, then no wonder I fell short. The disc, Avon.”

Avon looked at him then, his head a little tilted, his eyes chill and dead; and for a moment Blake was as still and silent as he was. Then Avon snapped his gaze away, down to the disc he still held; lifted his eyes to Blake again as he pinched it in half, crumpled it, screwed it up like a piece of paper and dropped it to the ground.

“Are you happy now?” Avon asked in that same dead tone.

Blake laughed. “Hardly. Short of murder, I can’t destroy the source of it.” He saw the red flash of damage creep across Avon’s palm; Avon did not look down at it. “No, every time I look at you in future, I’ll be wondering what you’re creating in that sick mind of yours.” He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, a new and terrible resolve creating itself, waiting to be acted upon.

“Isn’t it time you went, Blake? I hardly think we can have any more to say to one another.”

“Oh no,” Blake said, grimly, “don’t think I’m going to let you get away with it this lightly.” One hand rose to rub the side of his nose; the anger inside him rose to flashpoint.

“That’s more in your line, isn’t it?” Blake asked, gathering himself. In the split second which followed he saw Avon tense himself, as if expecting a blow, but the assault Blake let fly with was not that kind at all.

“You’ve had your fun, Avon,” he whispered in his ear as Avon twisted violently in his arms. “I think you owe me mine, at least. Even you would have to say that was fair.”

With a massive effort Avon broke free, only for Blake simply to seize him again. “Fair? What’s fair, Blake?” Avon hissed, short of breath; struggling and twisting. “Do you think my life has been fair?”

He tightened his grip on Avon, cruelly pinching his arms. “Oh, I don’t know, Avon. I’d say intelligence, looks, class and money is about as fair as it gets.” Manhandling him without fear for tender flesh, he was backing Avon slowly but surely towards the bed.

Avon spat full in his face: “What are you trying to do, Blake, prove you’re as sick as I am?”

Blake only shook his head. “It could have been so different, Avon…but you’ve fought me every step of the way.”

He meant, in everything. From the moment they had met Avon had opposed him, taunted him, struck conflict with him on ever possible issue. He had wanted to win Avon’s friendship, but earned only this endgame of perverse powerplay.

With a violent shove he pushed Avon backwards onto the bed, began to jerk loose the buttons of his own cuffs, glaring coldly down at Avon all the while. At the first flicker of movement he hurled a fist down onto Avon’s chest, growling: “One way or another Avon, you are going to do this. Conscious—or otherwise. Which do you choose?”

That silenced Avon, though his eyes glimmered fiercely as he watched Blake through every breath and every heartbeat. “We’ll only have this once, Avon,” Blake said, stripping off his shirt at speed, “so I want you to remember it. Conscious—or otherwise. Which do you choose?”

That silenced Avon, though his eyes glimmered fiercely as he watched Blake through every breath and every heartbeat. “We’ll only have this once, Avon,” Blake said, stripping off his shirt at speed, “so I want you to remember it. Conscious would suit me much better. And you too, I imagine. At least that way you’ll know what happens.”

“I think I can guess,” Avon said, his eyes contemptuous, malevolent. “You haven’t that much imagination.”

“Unlike you.”

He saw Avon draw breath to hurl some venomous retort at him: then, too, saw Avon remember that he had no defence. That whatever Blake did to him could not be as bad as what he had done to Blake. At a stroke he acquiesced, gave up the struggle, limp as he lay back on the bed. He did not resist as Blake stripped him, and did not watch as Blake stripped himself, his head turned to one side, his eyes open yet blank.

Blake remembered then how difficult it was to be one step ahead of Avon: how difficult, and how necessary. But he told himself he did not care that Avon hated him, hated this, and as his hand ranged over taut brown nipples, through the pelt of hair on his chest down to his belly, Avon’s cock swelled lightly in his hand, growing to fit inside his grip comfortably. But it was no true victory. Looking at Avon’s averted head, the shuttered eyes, it was not difficult to guess at Avon’s stance here: whatever you make me do, Blake, I’m really not here at all.

It made Blake want to slap him. Beat him back to attention, make him face it out. But even when he produced the lubricant and applied it to himself and to Avon the other man’s disinterest did not alter. Dark lashes wavered a little on his cheek as Blake gathered his legs and pushed them back, a little sigh left his parted lips as Blake roughly entered him and began to thrust, but other than that he did not move, and made no sound.

So here he was, screwing Avon, and feeling—nothing. It was ridiculous, Blake knew as he pushed and panted, a simple matter of friction in the right places; a simple solo effort would really be more efficient and probably more pleasurable than this joyless coupling.

And yet—

It could have been different. Even special, perhaps.

Instead here they were, simply going through the motions, a sad small dance of finality. In a moment he would come and Avon would not, and there would be an end to it. Not much of a finale.

His thrusts were quicker, shorter now as from the plateau his body sensed the peak approaching. He opened his eyes and focussed
down on Avon’s face beneath his.

Avon was smiling.

Detached, cynical—a smile that roused violent feeling in him, which fed on Avon’s words: “Not a very glorious affair, is it, Blake?” whispered to him.

His heart thudded violently in his chest. So Avon believed it was over. Believed he had won.

Withdrawing was not easy, because he had been close enough that every nerve in him screamed as he pulled himself out of Avon, but he had to do it. For a moment he rested his head, gasping, on his arm, battling for control; and at that moment, like a sunburst the idea broke over him and made him blink with surprise. But that was it. He had it now.

“What’s the matter?” Avon blatantly eyed Blake’s cock, erect still and pulsing from the purple head to the strong upholding root of it. “You can’t go through with it, O Fearless Leader?”

Blake didn’t reply to that. He reached for the lubricant and began to oil his hand, taking his time over it, over his wrist and his forearm right to his elbow, spreading more oil over the knuckles of the fist he balled, before flicking his fingers out and examining his nails.

Avon was watching him now with his full attention. Blake still didn’t say anything. He leaned on Avon’s thighs again and examined the small rose-red aperture, stretching it with finger and thumb.

“What the hell are you doing?” Avon rasped at him, and Blake’s heart leapt at the note in his voice. He pushed one finger inside Avon’s body, relaxed and easy after his fucking; one was quickly joined by another and then a third. He withdrew them then, swirled in and out and in again, and as a fourth finger joined the others Avon caught the idea.

“No, Blake.”

“Just lie nice and still for me,” Blake urged gently, “or you might get hurt.”

And now Avon’s eyes were wide and dark with horror, but his voice spat fire. “I can’t believe even you could be so stupid. It’s difficult enough even with a partner who is—willing.” He twisted, trying desperately to throw Blake off, but Blake had a key grip at the very centre of him.

“Then I’d be very, very, willing, if I were you.” The viscous oil made it easy; a gentle sliding motion forwards and backwards was all it took, and Avon’s body, seduced by his touch, was opening for him. “You see? You’re going to like it, Avon, I promise you.”

Avon’s nostrils flared viciously as he realised that it was going to happen. That in a sense it was already too late, the very idea was enough. Something dark and terrible was taking shape between them, a change in their relationship they could never turn back from. His voice held a dreadful inevitability as he made the promise: “You’ll pay for this, Blake. I swear it.”

“I’ve already paid,” Blake shot at him, hard and implacable; and Avon’s head fell back on the pillow, his hands clenching at his sides. Blake did not worry; he knew that Avon would not stop him, would not fight.

The inner passage was tender around his fingers, smooth, even silky, shyly opening to let him in. Avon’s body was sweet, even though Avon was not. A twinge of odd feeling gripped Blake’s belly as Avon’s muscles gripped his fingers; this was the most peculiar and most intense sensation he had ever experienced, entering deep within another man’s body this way.

“Do you want to kill me?” Avon’s voice was a whisper now as he experienced the deepening pressure of Blake’s invading arm, and his eyes were wide, and black as night; he was not trying to hide anything now.

And there it was at last: the vulnerability from Avon he had been trying all along to elicit.

Blake laughed, breathless. “Not at the moment.” He watched his wrist enter Avon’s body, sink in through the opening stretched wide around it. The sight of it gave him the oddest feelings he had ever had in his life: the most power, the most control; and yet a savage, almost hurting tenderness. With his free hand, he reached up and brushed the sweat out of Avon’s eyes, the dark hair curling there. “But I just bet death’s the biggest thrill there is to a man like you, am I right, Avon?” He lowered his voice, and his fist slipped another inch inside the tender channel. Avon felt new inside, and very fragile.

“Well, flirt with death for all you’re worth, Avon.” The clutch of Avon’s gut gripped his wrist in spasms, another peculiar, shocking sen-
sation which he found very exciting; he was in right up to his forearm now, easing it in with slow and sure pressure. “I could reach your heart, Avon, and rip it out,” he whispered, and closed his eyes, because he could feel Avon’s heart, alive and throbbing deep within him, the sweet thrumming pulse of his mortality.

Avon whimpered a little. He looked lost; the hazy drift of his eyes dwelling on Blake troubled and unsure. Intensity of emotion was making Blake lightheaded, coming over him in waves, a force very sexual in its power and yet which went very far beyond it, into another realm entirely. Inside Avon’s body, to the very heart of him, he felt an adoration almost religious in its fervour: he adored, Avon, that was it, with a passion both religious and sexual, a great golden light surrounding his heart and his mind.

“Avon,” he said softly, that fantastic heat around his hand, his arm, Avon caught and pinioned on his will like a broken bird. He gazed into Avon’s black, open eyes and met, at last, what he was looking for: his answer. A shared rapture, the sweetest and darkest of harmonies, himself penetrating to the core of Avon’s last defences, Avon’s tender, quivering warmth surrounding him. He did not take his eyes from Avon’s, and Avon’s dwelt in his, so that they seemed to be speaking to one another at the deepest and truest of levels. As if in a dream he knew that he understood everything now, about Avon: and that Avon knew without need of words everything about himself. Avon lay so calmly now, still and trusting, accepting Blake’s advances; however could he once have thought that Avon hated him? For this was love. An evil, twisted sort of love perhaps: but love for all that.

When it was over, Avon slept and Blake watched him.

He stroked dark hair away from Avon’s marble temples, and his thoughts raced on and on faster than the beat of Avon’s heart against his own.

For too short a time it seemed that all their conflicts had dissolved along with their separate existence; but now Blake could see that it was not over yet, and might never be over at all.

In fact, this new world they had broken into seemed no more and no less real than Avon’s Virtual Reality.

He lay his head near to Avon’s and closed his eyes, worrying.

Wherever could they go from here?

Sebastian, October 92