NORTH

North. The beginning. Long Nights and bitter days.

“Fugue” by Jane Baron is set in the Blake’s 7 universe. Parts one and two of the tale are presented here; the third section—as long as the first two combined—will be published in the next volume of Pæan to Priapus.

The second story, “Alone and Palely Loitering,” is the first of our docklands settings, a Professionals tale in the northern city of Glasgow. By the Glaswegian. How appropriate.

FUGUE

JANE BARON

PART ONE: NOCTURNE

Nocturne: in music, a piece relating to or evoking the feelings of the night.

Blake felt the familiar nudge at his back, tentative but demanding. Sleepily, he stirred and rolled over.

“A’right, a’right; hold on.” he muttered, settling into a more comfortable position, gathering the pliant, insistent body to him. “Good enough?” he added drowsily, resting his chin on the smooth, sleek head.

There was no answer. He hadn’t expected any. In fact, he thought he might’ve damn well had a heart attack if there had been.

Not much of a conversationalist, are you? he thought. But extremely cuddly.

He grinned and allowed himself to lapse back toward sleep.

Liberator had dropped them off on instareth three days ago to organize the reconstruction of a rebel base abandoned these past fifteen years. Avalon’s people would maintain the base once it was again operational, but Liberator’s technology and the expertise of her computer pro were needed to restore the ruined communication center and clean up the disused data banks. In the interest of safety Jenna had taken the ship out-system, to rendezvous in six days for pick-up. Meanwhile Blake and the others were working with Avalon’s group by day and sharing the somewhat primitive native accommodations with them by night.

This meant camping above the underground base until the generators were mended and it was safe for occupation. Vila and Cally had been absorbed into the communal group dwelling at once, leaving Blake with a tent of a size commensurate with his exalted position. Leaving him also with Avon. Upon first viewing the arrangements, Blake had ignored the sinking feeling in his stomach and shrugged. Even Avon couldn’t drive anyone mad while comatose, he thought hopefully.

He should have known better.

That first night, after a grueling 18 hour ‘day’ buried in dismembered circuitry, the man had lain calmly on his blanket bundle reading a perspex printout by torch. Groans and pointed ‘good night, Avons’ proving ineffective, Blake had finally rolled over, buried his face in what the guerilla fighters lightheartedly called a pillow, and started doing mental relaxation exercises one after another. Shortly afterwards there were stealthy noises of settling a few feet away, a sigh, and then soft, regular breathing.
Bastard, thought Blake. You were just waiting until you were sure you couldn’t bother me anymore, weren’t you? In spite of his annoyance he had to smother a laugh. It was so like Avon: the casual perversity for its own sake when no more valid excuse could be found. I’ll bet you snore on purpose, too, he thought resignedly.

But Avon didn’t snore, and soon enough Blake dropped off into a pleasant dream.

He was awakened very suddenly, in near darkness, by something attacking him.

Instinct threw him backwards, adrenaline surging through his veins. The guard which he could never entirely let down with Avon, despite all his noble words and good intentions, was screaming that the time might have come at last to fight for his life. He was about to lash out with brutal force into the darkness, when he realized that the assault had stopped and his assailant was lying almost perfectly still.

Almost still. Edging forward just enough to maintain body contact as Blake leant away. Fear and rage shifted into shock and indignation. Now what the hell…?

His second thought was that perhaps it wasn’t Avon after all. But that was patently ridiculous. He had no need of sight; he knew Avon by weight, by shape, by smell—by the electromagnetic field of tension which always surrounded the man. Given a hundred clone Avons, he could pick out the original without pause. And this…was…

Or was it?

Blake reached back and tugged at a flap of the tent, allowing a wedge of pale light inside. The movement shifted him away from the intruder, who promptly rolled forward until he was once again resting against Blake’s chest. Blake, just as promptly, rolled him back, and found himself staring at the crescent shadows Avon’s lashes cast on his cheeks in the moonlight.

Eyes still shut, the tech twisted over again, this time securing his quarry with an entwining arm. He buried his face in the hollow of Blake’s neck and was still.

Blake, feeling the brush of fine hair beneath his chin, lay balanced precariously on his side, frozen in astonishment.

“All right,” he muttered, pushing slightly at the body which yielded obediently and then surged insubordinately back. “Enough, Avon. Come on, now. Wake up.”

He was torn between shock, embarrassment, and the nearly irresistible desire to burst into laughter. Off balance, he realized—and physically as well as mentally. He couldn’t maintain this position much longer without putting an arm forward for support.

He found himself getting angry again. Not annoyed: angry. A moment’s analysis told him why.

Unconsciously, he had been perceiving Avon’s actions as a rather bizarre and clumsy sexual advance. Now, realizing that they were not, he found himself amused…and touched.

So this is what happens when you cap a steam boiler, he thought. I always wondered. You poor bastard; we haven’t had a proper fight for weeks, have we? Not since Exbar. I suppose in a way I’ve been expecting something to happen—though I must say this wasn’t it. And, to be honest, lately I’ve found it easiest just to ignore you completely…

Don’t much like being ignored, do you?

He let the floor take his weight again, easing his cramped muscles. Avon relaxed into the motion, accommodating himself to it. Blake’s arm was now draped over the other man’s side, hanging unnaturally limp. Awkwardly, he bent it at the elbow until it encircled Avon, palm open on Avon’s silk-clad back, moving with the slight rise and fall of Avon’s breathing.

There, he thought, satisfied. With anyone else the act of embracing would have been simple, instinctive. With Avon it was a maneuver as complicated and delicate as a midflight shuttlecraft docking. And probably, Blake thought wryly, as dangerous.

Difficult, though, to reconcile this knowledge with the soft relaxed weight in his
arms.

“I suppose it’s pointless to hope you’ll respect me in the morning,” he told the darkness, whimsical.

Murmuring unintelligibly, Avon burrowed further into his shoulder. An unexpected wave of affection washed over Blake. In spite of everything, in spite of all the pain and frustration and grief, in the deepest recesses of his heart he was honestly fond of the technician. There had been a time when he’d felt he would have done almost anything to secure Avon’s friendship. Only when it had become clear that two years of battering at the man’s walls had come to nothing (“You wouldn’t understand.” “Wouldn’t I?” “I doubt it…” ) had he given up the siege.

That and the fact that his mind was fully occupied these days with the search for an expatriated cyber-surgeon.

Warmth bled from the inert body into his. It was pleasant, for once: the human contact, the tactile satisfaction that he denied himself with Jenna. Shutting his eyes against the absurdity, he patted Avon’s shoulder benevolently and let his mind drift. Within minutes, without meaning to, he had drifted into sleep.

Fortunately, he was the first to wake the next morning. His right arm, trapped under Avon, was dead. Avon himself was deep in REM sleep, lips parted, lashes fluttering. He put up no resistance and showed no signs of consciousness when Blake slid him off the arm and then across the short distance onto his own blankets.

Well now. As long as you don’t remember, you won’t find anything suspicious about being on top instead of underneath. I have a hunch that normally you’re a restless sleeper. The thought of Avon’s reaction if he did remember made Blake first wince, then bite his lip and shake silently. Rubbing his tingling arm, he barely managed to escape the tent before the laughter choked him.

At midday Avon swept into the central office where Blake was directing clean-up and salvage operations, eyes like the dark ice at the bottom of a glacier, body knife-poised for battle. He launched into a series of complaints, demands, and threats about the workers (incompetent), the equipment (barbaric), and the time-schedule (preposterous) in his section. Blake, with bland equilibrium, agreed with everything he said, then released his breath and rubbed a hand over his eyes as Avon prowled out again. Safe. Thank god. The man didn’t remember a bloody thing.

The next night, he was more prepared. He was not so very much surprised to wake and find Avon nestling against him, and he found it less awkward to return the embrace. The technician was a most tractable bed-mate, willing to do anything Blake urged as long as it didn’t mean breaking body contact. Immediately they were settled, Blake went straight back to sleep.

The third night he hardly opened his eyes. When the intrusion came he reacted automatically, mind skimming the surface of consciousness and then re-submerging once Avon was safely stowed. He was, he realized the next morning, getting spoiled. Even in slumber the computer expert was a fast learner, and somehow managed to get cuddlier by the hour. He didn’t kick, seemed to have no sharp edges, and never trapped Blake’s arm anymore. And he was warm.

“You know, I think I’m going to miss this when we get back,” Blake informed him solemnly on the fourth night of their stay. The rebel had an impulse to ruffle the immaculate brown hair, but quelled it, feeling it somehow unkind. It was at times like this, when Avon was unconscious or otherwise utterly incapacitated, that Blake’s latent protectiveness for him came out. He felt Avon wanted taking care of.

His second waking that night was abrupt and unpleasant. Feeble gray light showed under the edges of the tent. Avon’s breathing was quick and shallow, his head tossing, limbs strained wire-taut. Blearily, Blake hitched up to look him in the face, then moved a hand to Avon’s shoulder and shook gently.

“Avon, wake up. It’s only a nightmare.”
Avon thrashed and muttered. His hand struck Blake’s, but at random.


Dark eyes snapped open wide and gazed into his without recognition. Strange how disconcerting that was. Then Avon broke the locked gaze and blinked, reason clearly returning. His eyes darted around the room.

Oh damn, thought Blake.

The technician sat up all at once, freeing himself like a spring uncoiling, knocking Blake’s hand away. This time, on purpose.

“What the hell…?"”

“Strange,” Blake muttered, whimsy overtaking him once more as he found no other inner resources equal to the situation. “That was precisely my own first reaction.”

“Have you finally lost what’s left of your mind? Or have the aliens been at it again?”

Blake, massaging his collarbone for comfort, was briefly distracted by annoyance. “Avon, that is uncalled for—”

Avon’s teeth made a brief appearance. “You haven’t answered the question.”

Blake, massaging his collarbone—perhaps Liberator-ward, even he wasn’t quite sure—then looked pointedly at the empty pile of blankets on the other side of Avon. He then turned his gaze to his own blankets, scrunched up blamelessly against his side of the tent, and onto Avon himself, well within enemy territory. He finished it up with raised brows and a slight inclination of his head toward his companion.

Avon glared back. No I did not.

Blake spread his hands and tilted his head to one side, lips quirming. Sorry, but I’m afraid you did.

Avon replied with a searing look which commented briefly but vividly upon Blake’s ancestry, his intelligence, his habits of personal hygiene, his reason for existence, and the probable destination of his immortal soul; then he rose in one fluid motion.

“Look, Avon,” said Blake, aloud this time. “I could have just let you go on having the nightmare. It was only out of the goodness of my heart—”

He was, of course, by now talking to a flapping tent door.

“Bloody sod,” he muttered, meaning both the man and the situation. He had the distinct feeling he’d be saying it again, and soon, and often.

That evening found him sitting in HQ, doing a slow simmer and fully justified in his prediction. He’d forgotten how vicious Avon could be when in an ill-humor. He had no idea where the man had spent the few hours before the start of the next work ‘day,’ and he wondered what Avon proposed to do that night. Sleep with Cally or Vila? Unlikely. He’d already driven Vila into stuttering fury with a few well-chosen barbs over breakfast, and had even conjured a smoldering look or two from Cally during the afternoon. Knowing Avon, Blake thought, clenching his teeth on the dozen-and-a-half things he could think of to say to the tech, and on the picture of holding Avon very tightly by the throat against a wall whilst he said them, the technician would spend the night with his computers.

Except, of course, that that would be tantamount to admitting he was afraid of Blake.

And so, that evening when Blake entered the tent, Avon was already wrapped in his bed-roll, lying perfectly still, to all appearance dead to the world.

Blake, for his part, lay down resolutely and tried to sleep. He had only indifferent success. His subconscious was uneasy about rendering himself helpless with an undomesticated Avon in the vicinity. There were times when the man seemed not so much cryptic as just plain bloody barmy, and who knew what he might take it into his head to do during his next noctivigilant fit?

But, for tonight at least, the latter point was moot. Which Blake suddenly realized when
he came out of a fitful doze and heard Avon’s breathing. By now he knew well all the different rhythms of the tech’s somnolent respiration, and this wasn’t any of them.

The man was wide awake.

So. Don’t trust yourself, eh? No…that isn’t really it, Blake thought. Deep down, on a gut level, you genuinely don’t trust me. You’re convinced that I’m somehow responsible for what happened, and you aren’t going to let anything so trivial as the evidence persuade you otherwise. So here you are, keeping vigil until dawn over your chastity like a knight over his sword. At worst it will demonstrate that you’re in control, that yesterday was a unique aberration. At best…at best, I think you hope to catch me sneaking over for a quick cuddle whilst I suppose you to be unconscious. A Blake trap.

And perhaps, Blake mused wryly, the man was right to be suspicious—if not of Blake’s actions, then at least of his intent. He did wish Avon would let him get closer. Wished it with a renewed fervor because if the last week wasn’t proof that Avon needed some closeness from someone, he’d like to know what it was. Even in the tolerant darkness he found it hard to believe Avon found him personally irresistible.

It had been hard enough trying to relax before. The knowledge that Avon was lying a meter away in ambush made it well-nigh impossible. When he finally lapsed back into a restless half-sleep, his dreams were so bad that the gentle nudging was a welcome interruption—until full awareness came.

Oh, hell, he thought, rousing with a start and blinking down into the pillow. Damn you, Avon; this time I swear…

But when he turned to confront the trespasser he softened. That adamantine will had submitted at last to the only thing in the universe capable of conquering it…Avon himself. Eyes tightly shut, face shadowed, the man’s need was still clearly apparent.

“All right, Avon. All right.” He relaxed and drew the smaller body in close, settling it against him. “Just no nightmares this time, hmm? Or I send you out to cuddle with the black beetles.”

Curious that his anger at the daytime Avon didn’t seem to carry over to this midnight companion. Curious, too, that the sleep which had eluded him before was now so easy to find.

He came awake a few hours later out of sheer necessity. Avon’s opinions to the contrary, Blake was a survivalist. He scooted the unconscious tech across the room, straightened his own blankets into pristine order, and departed the tent before Avon could so much as flicker an eyelash.

Safe again.

He sighed.

Though he saw Avon from a distance, they had no chance of conversation until the rendezvous with Liberator, at which time the man was cool but civil. Blake puzzled a few minutes over this, then understood. The night Avon had awoken in his arms had never happened. It had merely been an hallucination on Blake’s part. Avon was willing to forgive such an unfortunate delusion—especially coming from a man who had, after all, had a mindwipe—just as long as Blake had the good sense never to mention it again.

What Avon didn’t know, of course, was about all the other nights which had also never happened. And Blake, jumping at the chance to restore even a precarious status quo, had no intention of undeceiving him.

After the hard-packed earth and chilly, whistling winds of Instareth, the narrow Liberator bunks should have seemed like heaven. But Blake, finally approaching Cally after three nights of tossing and turning, discovered from her that Avon had been along not an hour ago for the same reason.

“Just nothing too strong, please. Soma makes me groggy the next day,” he said in conclusion.

Cally had heard it all before. “Lethe is as potent in its own way as some—but it is derived
from a substance which occurs naturally in the human body. The effect is quite specific.”

“Addictive?”
“Not physically.”
“Harmful side effects?”
“I do not think so. It was created by the Spaceworlders, but Zen and Orac have approved it for human use. It should help you re-adjust to your normal circadian rhythm. As I told Avon, that is all I can promise.”

Well enough satisfied, Blake twirled the little vial of bilious orange liquid thoughtfully between thumb and forefinger.

“The proper dose is twenty milliliters. About a fourth of that vial. And, Blake…it takes effect almost immediately. I wouldn’t drink it until you are actually in bed.”

“Yes, Nanny.”
“And should the problem persist I would advise a daily routine of exercise and meditation instead of drugs. My people have—”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure they do,” said Blake hastily. “But I’ve bothered you enough already—best be getting on to bed.” And vial in hand, he beat a strategic retreat.

The galley first, he thought, as he emerged into the corridor. A small late-night snack would not come amiss and he wanted something to wash the medicine down in case it tasted as vile as it looked. At the rest room door he paused. Sitting at a table, head on folded arms, was Avon.

The tech had permitted only minimal contact between them since returning to the ship, and Blake had not pushed him. But now seemed as good a time as any to call a truce.

“Surely a bed—even a Liberator bed—would be more comfortable,” he said, using the wryly indulgent tone which occasionally got past Avon’s barriers.

The figure stirred, but did not otherwise acknowledge his presence.

Blake’s good humor disappeared. Lack of sleep had thinned his patience and shortened his temper.

“I would never ask you turn around and actually look at me,” he continued, striding forward, “but an occasional grunt of recognition would be quite—” He broke off, frowned, and leant forward. Then, hesitantly, he pulled at Avon’s shoulder to lift him and peer into his face. The reason for the even-greater-than-usual rudeness was immediately apparent.

Blake picked up the little vial which had dropped from Avon’s nerveless fingers. Half-empty. Tch. The man’s ego was beyond belief.

“Can’t do things like the rest of us, can you?” he chided gently. “Normal rules and restrictions don’t apply to Avons, I suppose. Except tonight I’m afraid they do.” He pursed his lips, considering for a moment whether his conscience would allow him to leave Avon like this, to waken the next morning stiff, chagrined, and possibly even rumpled. The messages his conscience sent back were not encouraging, so he pulled Avon’s arm over his own shoulder and hauled him to his feet. The tech’s eyes remained slitted, but he was able to partially support his own weight.

“This way, old boy. Your Uncle Blake is putting you to beddy-bye.” Avon accepted the support and guidance without demur—and without awakening.

Inside the tech’s cabin, Blake sat him on the bed and knelt to remove his boots.

“You don’t need these. Or this…or this…or this either, I shouldn’t think.” Disposing of belt and outer tunic, he tugged the high-necked sweater over Avon’s head, clicking his tongue at the sight of a sleeveless black undershirt beneath.

“The wonder is you don’t roast,” he said conversationally, undoing the first two buttons at the waistband of Avon’s trousers to loosen them. “Perhaps you’ve got some obscure vitamin deficiency you ought to see Cally about. On the other hand, perhaps when we call you cold-blooded we are just speaking more truly than we know…”

Good temper restored, he started to urge Avon down flat, reconsidered, and guided him to stand instead.
“Haven’t tucked anyone in for a long time,” he admitted, turning down the bedclothes with one hand as he steadied Avon with the other. “All right, Sleeping Beauty. Down you go. Sweet dreams.”

Avon sat but resisted the continued gentle pressure on his shoulder to lie down. Instead, he put up his lips for a kiss.

The gesture was so natural, so unself-conscious, that Blake had bent halfway down to oblige before he realized what he was doing. He froze in shock, not breathing, feeling heat explode in his face. He stared.

Avon’s eyes were closed, all the chiseled lines of his features smoothed over, making him look very young indeed. His face was still upturned expectantly.

“All right. Just lie down now,” Blake muttered, forcing himself to take a deep breath and straighten up. His stomach was knotted in embarrassment. He pushed hard on Avon’s shoulder and the slighter body yielded, but a hand came up unerringly to capture his and hold it fast.

Blake, after one or two tries at extricating himself, did not have the heart to pry those clasping fingers open by sheer force. His embarrassment was fading as he realized that there was no one here to observe him, to judge, to mock. Not even Avon. He was quite alone.

“Oh, hell.” Looking down at the sleeping man, he stood for a bit, then he sat for a bit; then, finally, he lay down awkwardly beside him, crowding Avon against the wall.

He could not exactly decipher his own emotions, but he recognized protectiveness as one of the major components. Ridiculous to feel so protective of someone who was always bent on threatening him…except that this Avon was no threat. This Avon needed him—and showed it.

Just for a minute or two, he promised the Greek chorus in his head which was debating vigorously as to how many different kinds of fool he was. I’ve still got my boots on, he explained to them reasonably; and this seemed to be a definitive point because the voices grew fainter and he settled into a velvet darkness in which there were no troublesome, demanding stars.

His dreams were pleasant, and getting pleasanter all the time. Quite a drug, that Lethe, he thought languidly, glad he was half-awake to appreciate the feeling of well-being—almost of euphoria it provided. Vila would love it.

Except that he hadn’t taken any. He was suddenly sure of that, if nothing else. His head was clearing, but he felt disoriented, floating as he was on a sea of sensations. Pleasant sensations, yes, even delicious, but still—

He was fully awake. In Avon’s cabin. In Avon’s bed. His boots were still on, but this previously important fact was now immaterial, because everything else was different. They had changed position; Blake was now lying on his side, with Avon’s body spooned to his so he could feel a warm pressure against his back and legs, and Avon’s hand was inside his shirt. The touch was not at all fraternal.

“Avon!” It came out in an undignified croak. The feeling uncoiling in his stomach must be shock, must be mortification—but it was sweeter and more fierce than either. Something hard and hot was pressed between his buttocks. Unable to stop himself, he tensed and moved his hips back slightly against that hardness, suddenly, excruciatingly aware of nerves he had never fully realized existed before. The hand inside his shirt was moving in unhurried ellipses, leaving the hairless skin sensitized and tingling as blood rushed to the surface where it passed. A flattened palm centered on one nipple and made a smaller circle and Blake drew in his breath sharply.

“Avon, stop it. Stop.” Still hoarse. He reached a quelling hand behind him only to discover how sensitive his own fingers were to the feeling of silky material stretched tautly over rigid flesh. He should, he thought dimly, be angry, but what he felt was closer to panic.

“Avon, you don’t know—” He lost his
breath in the middle of it, but the cliché was none
the less true for all that. This was something
caused by the drug, or stress, or lack of sleep.
Avon didn’t know what he was doing.

The hand exploring under his shirt
begged to differ, proceeding in purposeful
strokes down to his navel, causing his abdominal
muscles to flutter in anticipation. Helpless,
Blake moistened his lips with his tongue. The
hand paused at the waistband of his trousers,
then slipped beneath, working its way under the
elastic of his briefs to dig into wiry curls. Every
sinew in Blake’s body went taut as he realized
where the next move would take it.

“Please…” he whispered, but he no
longer knew what he was pleading for. His own
hand was cupping the tight but resilient mound
of a buttock and the urge to squeeze, to knead it,
was nearly unbearable.

It took an incredible effort of will, but he
managed to move that hand, to send it snaking
down to intercept Avon’s and pull it out before
it reached its goal. He turned over to face the man
behind him, shifting his grip, snagging Avon’s
other wrist to pin it.

“Oh, Avon.” What he’d subconsciously
known all along, ever since waking to that sweet
insidious touch, was clear. The brown eyes
which had so often pierced him with ice or fire
were heavy-lidded, half-closed, and utterly
soft—the gaze unfocused. Avon did not see him.
Perhaps he would hear him, though.
Blake spoke, voice low and unsteady. “Avon,
listen to me. I’m going to leave now. This isn’t
like either of us. We can’t…”

But Avon could, and meant to. Like a
puppy starved for affection, he could be pushed
away—but he wouldn’t stay away. Hands im-
prisoned, he simply changed tactics, surging
forward with all his weight so that Blake sud-
denly found himself lying on his back with soft
lips nuzzling just under his ear. His legs parted
as Avon’s knee pushed between them, and he
could feel that enticing hardness pressed against
his hip. He groaned.

He released the tech’s hands to try and
pry him off, but even as it first occurred to him
that this might have been a mistake he felt the
nuzzling lips reach his ear, and then the hot wet
thrust of a tongue inside it. The room rocked and
he went weak with astonishment, eyes unfocus-
ing, will draining away.

The freed hands were touching him inti-
mately beneath his shirt now, running up his
sides to his armpits, riffling through the damp
hair, making him shiver. Claiming him. And
Blake’s body responded at last in mute accep-
tance of that claim, his breath coming short and
fast, his heart pounding.

The mouth now open on his cheekbone
began to move downward, lingering over the
task, tasting him. Blake felt that heat and wet-
ness on his jaw, lightly chafing. It slid down his
windpipe, tonguing the leaping pulse, nurturing
it, until despite himself he closed his eyes, arch-
ing his neck up for more kisses. Some rational
part of his mind acknowledged the gesture as
one of surrender even as it stared in horror at the
prospect of giving Avon the freedom of his bare
throat. He half expected to feel the sudden rend-
ing pain of teeth.

Instead, there was a deep tantalizing
suction and then a train of hot kisses as Avon
moved lower, spreading open his unbuttoned
shirt. Feeling the damp rasp of tongue along his
ribcage and side, Blake shivered again in re-
sponse, fine hairs on his neck and arms rising,
skin goose-pimpling. He clenched his teeth and
squeezed his eyes more tightly shut. He had to
stop this…except that he couldn’t stop it and he
couldn’t even pretend that he wanted to any
longer. He wasn’t like this, Avon wasn’t like
this, but it didn’t matter. What was happening
was happening.

The admission made things easier. This
time when those searching fingers inched under
the waistband of his briefs, he let them have their
way. Seconds later he heard a whisper of metal,
felt his clothing being deftly parted, drawn down
and away. The rush of cool air on his fevered
groin was followed by a grazing touch which
snapped his eyes wide open, breath exploding
sharply from his lungs.

Such a tiny sensation to cause that violent reaction—the feathery brush of Avon’s hair on his exposed inner thigh. Aghast and rapt, he stared.

Avon was doing this, was holding his thighs apart, face so close to his straining genitals that he could feel warm breath caressing them now. From this angle the eyes half-closed in sleep could just as well have been lidded in passion, in a connoisseur’s appreciation as he relished the moment before taking Blake into his mouth.

A flash of sanity showed him his vulnerability, and Blake again felt something akin to panic. But the sight of that angelic face, those sculpted lips, hovering above him held him mesmerized. Frozen, he watched the lips stretch to encompass his swollen, dark red cock and then sensation struck. With a groan he fell back, hips jerking upward to sheath himself in beautiful heat.

Hazily, at some level still capable of coherent thought, he worried now about Avon’s vulnerability, about giving him more than he could take. But he sensed no recoil or withdrawal in the other man, only a voracious ripple of throat muscles and a rhythmic tonguing that set his senses reeling.

The tongue discovered a particularly sensitive spot and started to tease it and Blake found both his hands tangled in soft hair as he panted harshly. He tugged blindly to bring Avon up once more, not to stop him, he had no thought of that any longer, but to touch, to try to return some of the delight he was receiving. Clumsily, he fumbled with the tech’s clothes, impatient of fastenings. But even as he pushed the last of them aside, he felt himself being carefully, relentlessly overridden.

That incredible mouth was ravishing him again, almost hurtful tender kisses, and this time, when it reached his groin and took him in, Blake moaned tearfully and clasped Avon’s head to keep it there. Small sounds escaped him as his whole body vibrated in response to the delicious moist friction. There was no trace of reluctance left in him now; fingers woven in warm silk, he groaned his pleasure and prayed for it to go on. For Avon to keep doing exactly what he was doing...for just another minute. Just a little longer...please, Avon...please...

He heard himself cry out in acceptance. And then he was soaring, effortlessly, on wave after wave of pure elation, emptying himself in long slow jets into the other man’s mouth. Oh, exquisite. And Avon, no longer shuttered, a receptacle to oblige him...

He fell back on the bed breathless and drained. Blinking through the mist of sweat and bliss he saw Avon lying on his side, head pillowed on Blake’s thigh, lungs laboring. A rush of bruising tenderness swept through Blake—and swiftly after, a flood of renewed concern.

It had not occurred to him to give Avon the chance to pull away at the end. He had, in fact, been all but holding Avon prisoner. With hands that still trembled slightly from the strain of release he stroked sweat-damped hair, then gently pulled the other man up beside him.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that. I stopped thinking…” He found himself talking to the top of Avon’s head as Avon resumed his customary position buried against Blake’s neck. “I didn’t hurt you...?” He cupped a hand under Avon’s chin, forcing his face up.

Those chestnut eyes were still half-closed and wholly unseeing. The sultry look caused things to happen in Blake’s stomach, even dead in the middle of a refractory period as he was. There was semen on the pretty lips. Shakily, Blake wiped it away, and then kissed the lips as he sent a hand gliding down Avon’s back. The feel of the warm, sweat-slick bare flesh was intoxicating and now all he wanted was to give pleasure in the same degree as he had taken it.

Gently, he lowered Avon again, the smaller body offering no resistance, trusting him. His lips parted in appreciation as he lost himself in the pleasure of touching, eyes devouring the sensuous responses as his fingers roved
up the length of first one inner thigh, then the other. Extraordinary, the feel of it—such softness stretched over the lithe hardness of muscles. When he reached the flushed, half-roused flesh at the junction, his appreciation deepened, and almost without thinking he leant down, cupping it toward his lips. Then he stopped.

He wanted to please Avon and he was keenly aware of how much this act had just pleased him. But he was also keenly aware of his own inexperience. However much he had liked having it done, he was not at all sure he would like doing it.

That, he decided, was beside the point. He had at least to try. He owed Avon that much. Gently, somewhat awkwardly, he cupped once again, and bent.

The head was warm against his lips; the skin, with its delicate latticework of raised veins, thin and silky-soft. Tentatively, he let his tongue trace around the corona, and then along the ridged underside. Avon’s cock stirred and lifted itself in his hand, as if seeking further attentions. Endearing—and intriguing. All at once it seemed quite natural to take the head fully in his mouth, and he was surprised to find how good it felt there, just the right size and shape to fit him—and to lure him into wanting more.

He relaxed and pulled it in deeper, then, emboldened, began to suck. Shudders rippled through Avon, and Blake heard the sharp, distinct intake of breath. He felt a surge of responsive pleasure in himself and almost laughed, his qualms evaporating. How could he have been so foolish as to fear this? He, of all people. Far better than gnawing a fist or finger, far more satisfying and distracting. In fact, he was stunned at how good it was—by how much he enjoyed the feel of the slick hardness moving in and out of his mouth, how much it excited him.

Avon was fully erect now, his hips rocking very slightly in counterpoint to Blake’s bobbing motion. Looking up, Blake drank in the sight of those heavy-lashed eyes tightly closed, those molded lips parted and quivering with rapid shallow breaths. When the sighs became longer, more vocalized, verging on moans, when the dark head began rolling from side to side on the pillow, he quickened his pace. Sucking hard, insistently, he found himself holding Avon’s hips to restrain him, then reaching behind to do what he’d not let himself do before, fondling the firm curve of a buttock. Exploring blindly, one finger slid into the crevice to encounter a tight-drawn bud of flesh. Before he knew it, the finger had pressed in slightly to encounter the plush texture of velvet ribbon.

Avon froze.

For a long moment he held himself still, unbreathing. Then his whole body trembled, and the next minute he was gasping in ecstasy. Recklessly, he thrust down to impale himself further, and Blake felt a twinge of alarm. Avon had not done this to him, no one ever had, and he wasn’t sure he understood why it should bring pleasure. He flexed the fingertip, stroking as gently as possible, but sensing that Avon wanted motion. Inner muscles gripped at him demandingly, like a small hungry mouth, and he slowly advanced another centimeter, and another. His sucking and fondling had slowed to a stop, and Avon too had ceased moving, both of them concentrating on this painstaking invasion of Avon’s body.

After the initial concern Blake found that he liked this too—liked touching Avon this way. It was not at all like penetrating a woman; there was nothing routine or facile about it. Fortunately, his finger had already been slippery with his own spilled saliva and Avon’s sweat, or even this careful invasion could have been terribly painful. He still needed to be cautious: the tight passage felt so fragile and his own finger so large.

Tentatively, watching Avon’s face, he quirked the buried finger again. Avon remained motionless, transfixed, his attention still engaged in analyzing the feel of Blake inside him. Blake flexed a little harder and dared try a shallow circling motion. Avon’s head fell back. His lips opened and shut, as if blindly seeking to
take Blake in his mouth. Blake, identifying the
gesture, found himself changing position, dizz-
ily grasping the back of Avon’s neck with his
free hand and pulling him up on his knees for a
kiss.

If it wasn’t what Avon wanted, it was
close enough. He pressed his open mouth to
Blake’s, more aggressive than at any point be-
fore, drawing Blake’s tongue in to suck on it as
if he were sucking on Blake’s cock. The sensa-
tion was riveting, and Blake felt himself start to
go wild inside, his erection swelling again. He
accelerated the circling motion, noting dimly
how the tight ring of muscles had loosened and
relaxed to him. As he felt Avon’s fingers dig
painfully into his shoulders, he reached down to
pump the man’s rigid shaft with his other hand.

Avon’s whimpering was continuous,
now, a near-sobbing deep in his throat, as he
sucked on Blake’s tongue and thrust into
Blake’s hand. A new pleasure, fierce and pos-
sessive, blossomed inside Blake at the knowl-
dge that he was responsible for this astonishing
loss of control. He had made Avon this hot, and
he was going to finish it for him, going to make
it good.

He found a firm knot of flesh buried in
the silken wall around his finger and pressed it
and Avon cried out sharply into his mouth. Breathless, he massaged it briskly, and the
whimpers came helplessly higher, as Avon
wrenched his head back away from the kiss. The
dark eyes were wide open but glassy, the fair
skin flushed and mottled from throat to thigh. It
was time; Avon needed to come now. Further
delay would bring not pleasure but pain.

With a ragged breath, Blake pushed
Avon flat on his back again, then bent to hover
over his straining cock a moment before drop-
ning on it suddenly and swallowing the head. His
sheathed finger moved rhythmically against the
sensitive gland, while his supporting arm
pressed into Avon’s abdomen, holding him
down, triggering deep, involuntary reflexes.
The whimpers rose sharply in pitch, wildly
beseeching, and then were suddenly cut short.

Avon’s legs stretched out, his head fell back, lips
opening and closing soundlessly. Then, with an
almost inaudible wail, he surrendered to the
spasms, body going lyrically mad before
Blake’s eyes.

The first convulsion sent a gout of slick
warmth against the back of Blake’s throat. Taken unawares, he pulled back, then moved
quickly to recapture the organ. He swallowed
automatically, half his mind busy admiring the
sight of Avon lost in passion, another part noting
incidentally the surprising strength of the con-
tractions around his finger. The last mouthful he
held under his tongue, considering. It was
piquant and faintly salty. The taste of Avon’s
skin, he supposed.

He should, he realized belatedly, have
withdrawn his finger before the climax was
over. Avon trembled slightly, as if in discomfort,
as he slipped it free now. Otherwise he lay
motionless, lashes casting violet shadows on his
cheeks, heaving chest slowly quietening.

Blake swallowed hard. He could still
feel Avon is his mouth, along his tongue and
palate and at the back of his throat. The sensation
was not unpleasant, but unusual. The whole
experience had been exciting, electrifyingly so,
and now he ached once again with unreleased
tension. Avon’s reaction to his gentle invasion
had fueled a fire in his imagination, and just now
what he wanted more than anything was to lift
the smaller man’s legs in his arms and ease
himself full-length into the tight sheath of
Avon’s body. To feel that moist clinging chan-
nel around his cock, to feel the trembling and the
contractions firsthand, with that most sensitive
part of himself, to be inside Avon...he wanted it
so badly his gut churned.

And he couldn’t have it. Even if there
had not been the question of policy, of respect
for the waking Avon’s rights—he couldn’t. His
companion was not merely exhausted, he was
annihilated; head falling to one side, limbs
asprawl, each weighted with their own intrinsic
heaviness. His cock, still glistening damply and
rosily from Blake’s attentions, rested soft and
crumpled against one thigh. He could not possibly enjoy, or even participate in, another bout of any kind.

Blake set his teeth. Avon could not possibly resist, either, no matter how Blake might choose to make use of him. He probably would not even try. His very vulnerability was inexplicably, horrifyingly tantalizing, as if inviting Blake to improve the opportunity, to take advantage of it.

Instead, carefully, Blake took the spent body in his arms, gathering it to him. Face pressed into Avon's neck, he gently began to thrust between the warm tunnel of those sweat- and seed-silked thighs, drinking in Avon's smell and the feel of his nakedness. Fantasy and memory and the immediacy of Avon against him combined to send him over the edge in a matter of minutes.

With a sigh, he felt the wetness flow out of him, while Avon lay heavy and unmoving, utterly relaxed in his arms. Blake turned them, then, for comfort, and they remained like that for a long time afterward, Avon's body molded pliantly to him, Avon's head resting on his shoulder, Avon's heart beating against his. He stroked the damp hair for a while, then simply held him, sodden with voluptuous peace.

The one thing in all the worlds he did not want to do was think. But he couldn't help it. What had just happened here? Of all the places to end up…Avon's bed. He raised heavy lids to glance at the still form beside him. Avon was at peace, now. Surrounded by an aura, not of tension, but of tranquility and strong contentment.

Closeness—yes, Avon had needed closeness. Not for a minute did Blake believe this was something as simple as sex. Carnal desires could be satisfied through more conventional means, and he could not imagine Avon being loath to indulge them. No, what Avon had required was something Avon could not admit, even to himself—especially to himself. Something buried so deep that it could only emerge when all conscious defenses were down.

You got it too, didn’t you? Blake thought with a mixture of affection and dismay. Bedding Avon had been the last thing on his mind when he’d entered this room. But it had worked…marvelously, he could not deny that. Good for both of them, and he doubted if either of them was going to be insomniac tonight.

But now…what? He longed to simply give himself up to this luxury, to lie replete and satiated until sleep joined him with the drowsy lover in his arms. And he couldn’t. He didn’t dare. Because this lithe and biddable creature pressed so tenderly against him was going to turn into a demon from hell at the figurative crack of dawn.

His emotions rose to war with the lethargy. How was he supposed to sort out his feeling about Avon now? It wasn’t simply this startling hiccup in their relationship; it wasn’t even his gratitude and his new feeling of appreciation, of attraction. It was the need he could still sense in the sleep-drowned body he held. Emotional need, hungry affection, even love. But how to square that with the knowledge that tomorrow Avon would rip himself—and Blake—to bloody shreds rather than admit the least of these things? He could do it, Blake realized, with a sickening lurch in his stomach as he recalled other times when the tech had felt exposed or threatened. Avon would make it his business to ruthlessly exterminated any tender feeling, any hint of weakness this night might have revealed. And he would ruthlessly exterminate Blake, too, if necessary for his emotional survival.

Hard facts about a hard man. Who just at the moment was snuggled up to him like a sleeping baby jaguar. Blake could feel the brush of eyelashes on his throat, like the wing of a moth.

There was really no question about what had to happen.

Gently he disentangled himself from Avon. The technician’s lashes fluttered once more and were still; he seemed to be quickly sinking into unconsciousness. Blake started to
kiss him, then made himself stop.

“It’s as much for your sake as for mine,” he whispered, leaning over Avon, knowing the words went unheard. “Because you’ll hurt yourself, too, trying to run from this. And I’m not sure I can stand to watch you do that.” Rising, he was surprised to find his knees weak, but the feeling passed quickly and he went into the lavatory, returning with damp towel in hand.

And then, methodically, he set about erasing every sign that he had ever been in the room.

He maneuvered Avon—a heavy but unresisting bundle—so he could strip off the sheets and replace them with fresh ones. He cleaned sweat from Avon’s body and the traces of spent passion from Avon’s belly and thighs, and zipped him securely back inside his clothes. He even smoothed the ruffled hair and arranged the discarded tunic and boots neatly by the bedside, in what might safely be assumed as Avon-ish manner.

At the door he paused, and then moved back to look down once more on the sleeping figure. Sleeping a true sleep at last.

“You won’t remember in the morning,” he said softly, somehow certain of this. Avon would not remember—and he himself would never forget. Tonight had changed nothing, and yet nothing would ever be quite the same.

“I think I understand.” It was all he could offer in parting. This odd tryst had given him some insight, not into Avon’s mind, but into his heart. From now on, in the depths of Avon’s most bitter diatribes, in his most searing indictments, Blake would see the shadow of something else. He’d had a glimpse of what went on behind the walls.

And it was possible that though Avon never did remember, something inside him would not entirely forget. It could be that some trace of warmth and trust might linger, and speak to him when Blake was near. In some far distant future Blake might even be able to tell him about it.

Looking at that lovely face, waxen with heat and utterly distant, Blake felt his own shoulders slump.

The man asleep was not the one who was dreaming here. And, Avon’s comments notwithstanding, Blake could recognize dreams.

With one last glance around the room for disorder or betraying evidence, he left.

PART TWO: FUGUE

Fugue: In music, a piece consisting of two harmonizing melodies.
In psychology, a state in which a person performs acts which are not remembered upon returning to normal consciousness.

The only thing for it, Blake told himself the next morning, was to go on as he’d begun.

This immediately started up the chorus of voices in his head, this time all yammering different things. He cut short the ones doing the wet-eyed pleading.

Of course it was good, he told them harshly. I hadn’t ma—had sex for god knows how long. It was good because I needed it.

He dealt as savagely with the others which pointed accusing fingers. Perhaps he shouldn’t have allowed it to happen—but he had not taken advantage of an innocent. He had practically been raped. And he was damned if he was going to have trouble looking Avon in the eye because of it.

Which was all very well in theory, but when the actual moment came on the flight deck, his stomach churned. It wasn’t until he was certain that the computer expert was regarding him without suspicion and resentment—or at least with no more than the usual degree of suspicion and resentment—that he was able to relax.

Actually, Blake thought, massaging one shoulder reminiscently inside his shirt, Avon looked quite fit today. Very…alert. He couldn’t ask it, and he was half-glad and half-horrified when Cally did.

“You slept better last night, Avon?”
Blake held his breath.
“Passably. Why?”
“I wanted to know if the Lethe helped. I am glad it worked...passably.” Behind his back she rolled her eyes at Blake, who had a cold flash before he realized it was merely in conspiratorial amusement over Avon’s negative genius. Relaxing once more, Blake eyed the tech again thoughtfully. Avon seemed rejuvenated, energized...hell, almost jaunty.

A voice spoke in his ear. “You’re looking awfully pleased with yourself, Blake. Someone give you Travis’ new address?”

Startled, Blake waved Vila off, and then hastily began to give orders before Cally could ask him how he’d slept. For one wistful moment he envisioned how she might look were he to give her an honest answer.

Surrounded by people, with a hundred niggling problems vying for his attention, and a hundred minor tasks waiting to be done, it had been easy to keep his mind off Avon. But now, lying on his bunk, damp body wrapped haphazardly in a shabby robe, he had no defense against the memories. Pictures, sounds, smells...and always the sensations: fine-grained skin under his fingertips, a soft mouth gnawing gently on his aching flesh...

He gave in to the arousal, letting the robe fall apart, imagining that it was Avon’s hand instead of his, allowing the images to swim before him. Amazing how swiftly the fire flared, how soon he heard his own breath coming harshly.

There was a chime at the door.

He started guiltily, then flushed and quickly stood and pulled the robe closed, straightening it. “It’s unlocked.”

The door slid open to reveal Avon. There was no reason for Blake’s original guilt—at least, all he’d been doing nothing wrong, nothing shameful—but at the sight of the computer tech he flushed more deeply than ever, discomfort and unnamed fear rising to close his throat.

“Well?” he said roughly around the obstruction, not moving any nearer as the door slid shut behind the tech.

Quite calmly, Avon walked over and laid his head on Blake’s shoulder.

Blake could only stand paralyzed as the blood swept through his face and neck in waves, as the smell in his nostrils finished the job his hand had begun, leaving him fully engorged and erect, craving to press himself against Avon. He was dumbfounded.

Soft hair tickled his chin as Avon nestled closer.

Suspicion—no, certainty—flashed through him at once. He pried Avon loose and leant back to look into his face. And nodded.

“You took the rest of it, didn’t you?” he demanded of the downcast eyes shielded by heavy lashes. “So you could sleep passably again—’passably,’ my aunt! But how the hell did you get all this way by yourself?” Holding Avon off with one hand, he chewed a knuckle of the other, finally adding, “I suppose, compared to what you did last night, navigating a few corridors is easy. And so you liked it, did you? And you’re back for more. The question now that you’re here is: what in space am I going to do with you?”

His visitor had definite opinions on that. Blake intercepted the hand creeping inside his robe and the one stealing around his neck, then staggered as Avon suddenly went limp against him, a deadweight, forcing him to throw his arms around the tech’s body in support, or let him fall.

Blake’s erection, rising from the loosened robe, pressed into the cool tautness of quilted leather, the head snagging on tiny protrusions as Avon, still pendent, moved suggestively. Whether because of that or because the tech was heavy, Blake didn’t know, but quite abruptly his knees gave way and he fell backwards onto the bed with Avon on top. The fall winded him, but the weight was perfect; the urge to simply clamp Avon’s hips there and thrust between those slender thighs, was nearly irresistible. It would take him only moments to reach climax like that.
One final effort: “Avon. Oh, damn you. If I could just believe you really—” …and heroism whimpered and yielded.

“All right, then, all right,” he said huskily, his arms tightening around their limber burden as he sat up. “Have what you want, but—this time we’ll do it my way.”

It was indescribably erotic to peel layer after layer of cloth armor off Avon, revealing pale luminous skin and small nipples which hardened at his touch. Avon’s body was a sculptor’s dream of planes and curves and pure lines, a spare, economical work of art. To Blake’s eyes everything about it was pleasing: the supple limbs, the flat belly, the neat thatch of dark hair surrounding an elegantly proportioned cock. Blake felt the tenderness well up again, driving back his fierce arousal, and something close to awe at the way every inch of that smooth flesh responded to his lightest touch.

Meanwhile, an infant tiger was nuzzling and suckling at his neck, imperiously butting a sleek head against the hand Blake raised until Blake petted him as he wished. Below, curious fingers cupped and measured, sending electric shills up Blake’s spine.

Rapt, he held Avon’s face between his palms, looking into dazzled eyes which already seemed lost in passion. He bent to touch that mouth with his own.

Avon met him willingly with lips moist and parted, inviting entry. Entranced, eyes shut, Blake lost himself in the pleasure he was giving both of them, in the hungry response he was able to elicit. The power of it was overwhelming.

Pulling back for air, he smiled down at the sight of flushed skin and kiss-swollen lips. He whispered, “Shh. Just be still.”

Any fear he’d had, any discomfort over experiencing such intimacies with another man, had been banished last night. His hands knew what they wanted: to stroke the length of this tantalizing body that was so unexpectedly put at his mercy, to make Avon tremble for him, to lay his own ineradicable claim. His mouth followed, ragingly eager to discover all the different tastes and textures of Avon, the salt of sweat, the smooth resilience of pale flesh, the prickle of chest hair. He worked his way down from throat to groin and back up again, meaning to tantalize, to draw out pleasure until the smaller body was stretched trembling-taut beneath him, breathless and aching for release. But as he lapped gently at a nipple he realized he’d badly miscalculated Avon’s powers of endurance. The first wracking shudders took him by surprise and he pulled back uncertainly to look.

What he saw stopped his breath. He’d known, intellectually, that Avon was beautiful since that first day on the London. But he had never seen him like this. At the moment of climax Avon was transformed, skin suffused and glowing, eyes shut, lips parted in rapture. In wondering joy. That face, usually so unreadable, was utterly open.

He whispered, “Blake.”

Blake’s heart gave a violent lurch and leaked out his fingertips. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he clawed the slighter body into his arms, pressing kiss after kiss to those half-open lips, across those trembling eyelids, longing to capture that beauty and hold it forever. As the spasms eased he regained enough volition to stroke carefully down the heaving sides, across the quivering thighs, his touch soothing as he alternated whispers and kisses. At last, spent and sated, Avon collapsed bonelessly in his arms.

They lay together a while after that. Blake thought the other might drift into normal sleep as he had the last time after orgasm. And he would have allowed it. But presently there was a sigh, then a stirring, then the touch of light, precise fingertips. Letting out a hiss of pleasure as they reached his groin, Blake released Avon and shifted to prop himself up, needing, as before, to look, to gaze fascinated as those clever hands fondled him with the same meticulous care they gave a computer circuitboard. They seemed to seek out his most sensitive places by instinct, wringing gasps of startled pleasure from him. And so he obeyed willingly when they urged him to change position.
Yes, this was a good vantage point, looking down into that haunting face still tinged with the glamor of orgasm. He murmured in delight as Avon parted his own legs, causing Blake to slide between, exquisitely responsive flesh against hardening flesh. And when Avon then drew his knees up almost to his chest, maneuvering so that Blake was kneeling between his thighs, the rebel merely accepted the new placement as he had the other, acquiescing without thought. It wasn’t until hands were gripping and guiding him that he understood exactly what was going on.

“Avon, no.” Recalling just how efficacious verbal commands had been before, he followed this one up physically, trapping Avon, holding him still. “No, Avon. Please. I don’t know how. And you’re not prepared and I don’t want to hurt you—” Despite himself, the picture came to him as it had last night: Avon’s body open to him, suppliant, shuddering in ecstasy as he entered. He imagined sinking himself into that fragile, forbidden portal, groaning with the effort to hold back, watching Avon’s head begin to rock mindlessly from side to side on the mattress as Blake reached up into him, touching his deepest pleasure-places. Imagined thrusting into that pliant softness, so gently at first, and then harder as Avon rose greedily to meet him, finally spilling his seed in the secret recesses of Avon’s body as they both sobbed in release. And Avon wanted it, was willing, even eager for this ultimate trespass. He would not only allow it, he was begging for it, desperate for Blake to take him…

“No.”

Avon ignored this completely, and merely continued undisturbed about his business of trying to make the anatomical conjunction work. Blake wrestled with him, pulling him flat, grunting in surprise at the new flair of pleasure when sex once again bumped rigid sex, trapped between their straining bodies. Neutral territory. His mindless urge to grind himself against Avon proved to be exactly what was needed to distract them both from the contest.

Avon arched suddenly against him, mouth wet and open and seeking his blindly, and this time he gave in gladly, having no desire to deny Avon anything else. Friction did the rest. Minutes later something like sheet lightning hit him and he forced his own breath into Avon’s lungs, crying out uncontrollably as he came.

Afterwards they lay in glutton content, Blake cradling the smaller body, holding Avon, holding the moment. Gentle fingers strayed through his wet and disordered curls, carding out tangles, and he smiled at the lush sensation, and then smiled again at the way Avon kept doing it, seemingly captivated.

“And how long have you been wanting to do that?” he said, his own voice blurred with pleasure. “And how long have I been wanting to do this,” he traced the curve of Avon’s lips which parted responsively, trying to take his finger in, “and never daring to even think about it?” He took another kiss from those molded lips, feeling quite comfortable soliloquizing. Avon, though showing no sign of comprehension, seemed to enjoy the sound of his voice as it was now, pitched low and velvety-rough with emotion. “Gods, I don’t believe this. If anyone else knew you could be this damned sweet… You don’t mind if I call you Kerr, do you? Under the circumstances it does seem rather appropriate. Feel free to call me Roj, or anything else you like…”

Suddenly, he did mind the soliloquy, minded it dreadfully. Pulling Avon’s hands down from his hair he sank his fingers into Avon’s upper arms and looked into those dazzled brown eyes, making the achingly beautiful lines of Avon’s face look so fragile, so young.

“Look at me, damn you! Look.” He shook Avon hard and then harder, but the only response was a slight quickening of breath and of the axillary pulse which beat beneath his fingers. When he eased the pressure Avon re-
laxed and at once burrowed back into the hollow of his shoulder. All forgiven and forgotten. Blake was ashamed.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. That was wrong of me.” He stroked the reddened imprints of his fingers on the white skin. “It’s just…what in hell’s name am I going to do with you, Kerr? Tomorrow, when you start trying to swap insults with me on the flight deck, what am I going to do then? And what, god help us both, am I going to do tonight if you wake up here, like this?”

In the end, again, there was only one solution.

Avon—Kerr—seemed to be lapsing back into that semblance of ordinary sleep. Gently, apprehensive of truly wakening him, Blake shook his shoulder and urged him out of bed.

“I would love,” he said, steering his stumbling but unprotesting partner to the bathroom, “to have you stay the night. But considering we’d both end up wearing our guts for garters, tomorrow, it’s just not practical.” Leading a freshly scrubbed and squeaky-clean tech back out he added, “And now, on with the bunny suit.”

Minutes later, Avon was encased in his second skin of leather, safe and snug. Presumably warm.

At the door, Blake paused to look at him. “Go straight back and get some proper rest, hmm? No detours. And try to make sure none of the others see you, and try—” His voice failed in mid-sentence. “Just go now, Kerr.” He finished it with a kiss, because that seemed to be expected, and—as Avon went out the door—with a pat, because he just couldn’t help himself. There was no backward glance.

Well now, Blake thought, leaning against the doorway, it seems your problem is solved. But what about mine? Am I really capable of carrying on tomorrow as if all this was just a dream?

I expect, for both our sakes, I’d better be. Whatever the future brought, this memory was safe. No one could take it from him. He slept.

He was still in his cabin, drowsing softly and deeply, when the message came. He reached the flight deck at a run, but Jenna looked up and shook her head at him.

“We’ve lost it again,” she said, replacing the headphones she had been holding, one-handed, to her ear. “But it was Instareth. A distress call, I think.”

Blake cursed and picked up the headphones himself, hearing only the clash of interstellar static. “Orac. Get a fix on this signal and try to augment it.”

*Liberator possesses equipment perfectly adequate for the purpose—*

“Just do it, Orac.” And, presently, through the hiss and crackle, Blake could distinguish a voice. He could make out only fragments of sentences at first, sometimes only single words, but from the start the import was grimly clear.

...scoutship Cantor...spacials above the planet Instareth. ...of the base there...due to a massive generator explosion. Damage is... We do not expect to find...but...to the surface anyway. The level of radiation... This warning is to...from the area. Stay away! ...repeats. This is the scoutship Cantor, in orbit one thousand spacials above the planet Instareth. We are reporting the total destruction of the base there...

“Blake, is it a distress call?”

“No, it is a warning.” Above them, at Gan’s station, Avon had another set of headphones and was listening intently. Blake hadn’t even noticed him come in.

“There’s been a failure of the generators.” Blake gave the phones back to Jenna.

“A massive failure,” corrected Avon from above, still listening. “A runaway nuclear chain-reaction, resulting in the annihilation of the base.”

“The whole base?” gasped Jenna, turning to Blake. He nodded, feeling an ache begin at the base of his skull.
“Zen,” he said. “Estimate time to Instareth at standard by nine.”

+Twelve point three hours.”+

“That’s too long.” Blake chewed his lip. “Calculate a course for maximum efficiency, diverting all power to the main drive if you have to.”

+Confirmed. New estimate nine point two hours—+

“Wait a minute, Zen.” The two voices sounded together. Avon left Gan’s station and advanced down the stairs on Blake. “You heard that report. It specifically warned us to stay away.”

“And in their place I probably would have done the same. But they could use our help.”

“At what? Counting bodies? Blake, those generators were ancient, scarcely shielded, and powered by fission, not fusion. You know what that means.”

“Well, I don’t,” said Jenna, when it became clear that Blake wasn’t going to answer. Avon barely spared her a glance as he said, “The fission process is notoriously unstable. When one section blows there’s no way to contain the reaction. That entire base is nothing but a blackened crater by now, a crater crawling with lethal radioactivity.”

“The generators were far below the surface,” Blake reminded him. “There might be survivors above.”

“Survivors at ground zero?”

“The scoutship said they were going down to search.”

“Then the more fool them!” said Avon savagely. “Once they step out of their ship, they’re dead, too.”

“Which is why we have to help. Jenna, get a message to the Cantor, tell them to wait for us before proceeding down.” He turned back and looked at Avon intently willing him to understand. “We have the protective gear, the medical equipment—”

“—and the requisite stupidity.” Avon paid no heed to Cally and Vila as they entered the flight deck; his attention was fixed on Blake. “Not even the tissue regenerator can heal chromosomal damage. Everyone at that base is a corpse. Some of them may yet be walking, but they’re corpses all the same.”

This was probably true, but Blake could not leave it at that. As long as there was any chance, any hope, he could not let it go. So he ignored Vila’s plaintive, “I’d always hoped to save being a corpse until after I was dead,” and Avon’s direction to Orac to calculate the odds of any life-forms remaining visible after nine hours, and looked at the computer fascia.

“Zen, put us on course to Instareth, maximum speed,” he said.

Jenna looked up, frowning, from her transmission. “Blake—you do realize that an explosion of that kind will alert the Federation to the rebel presence there.”

“Alert them?” Avon turned from Orac, sharply. “It’s an advertisement any pursuit ship in the eighth sector can read. And that message Jenna’s sending is an engraved invitation to every squadron in the vicinity. Why don’t you just sign your name to it, Blake, and make it complete?”

Blake glared, trying to rein his anger, and addressed Jenna. “We have a better chance against pursuit ships than the Cantor does. If nothing else, we can cover them, and if we have to run, we run. But at least we’ll have tried.”

She hesitated, then nodded briefly and bent her head to the transmission again. He knew she’d stifle any further doubts she felt in the name of unity.

He added to Avon, speaking each word distinctly, “Trying—in and of itself—is important.”

“How? Why put ourselves in danger, perhaps run into a Federation trap, for heroics that are utterly pointless? Why bother?” He seemed genuinely bewildered as he demanded an answer. “To assuage your guilt?” Blake started to make a dismissive gesture at him, then stopped and looked, looked hard into the chestnut eyes.
He was searching for a trace of the man he’d seen last night, for a hint of the warmth and tenderness that had lit Avon’s face then. For any sign of compassion or grief.

There was none.

He could sense nothing at all of the vulnerability, the complaisance, the—humanity—of Kerr. The entire episode last night might indeed have been a dream, for all the evidence it had left. Avon was as steely and self-sufficient as ever, and looking at him now, Blake felt the picture of the sleep-drowned lover he’d held in his arms fade away. He could not keep Kerr in mind while watching Avon.

“Doesn’t it mean anything to you, what happened back there?” He continued staring into that basilisk gaze, hoping against hope for some reaction.

“Oh, you’ve grasped that, have you? Very good. After only a year and a half of constant repetition.”

“Of course it means something. Nearly seventy hours of work blown up in a second. Scattered to Instareth’s winds by what may very well have been your zealot friends’ impatience.”

Slowly, Blake said, “You mean that. You really couldn’t care less about what becomes of those people, as long as you are safe.”

Avon stared back at him. “Oh, you’ve grasped that, have you? Very good. After only a year and a half of constant repetition.”

Two different people, two separate beings. And nothing was as real as the reality before him, which meant that the other—the gentle one—had been an illusion.

He’d remember that. That was important.

Clenching his teeth on something like pain, he turned to Cally. “Get an estimate from the medical computers about what equipment we’re likely to need. And run a check of the protective gear; we’ll need suits for possible survivors as well as ourselves.”

She nodded. Then, as she turned to go, hesitated. “I am afraid—the protection will come too late.”

Looking into her clear, regretful eyes, Blake felt mourning uncoil in his stomach. Cally’s own group on Saurian Major had died for lack of protection the Liberator might have given—if it had not been over before they arrived. “If we had only been there when this happened—"

“—we’d have been dead, too,” the biting voice cut in, “all of us that were on the ground. Or did you plan on halting the firestorm with a wave of your hand?”

The firestorm inside Blake reached flashpoint. “Avon enough!” he thundered, aware that he was looming over the technician as if his three inches advantage were three feet. Avon never backed away on such occasions; if anything he seemed to bask in them, but this time after several seconds of defiance, he dropped his eyes.

Blake held onto the anger, knowing it was the only power he had over Avon at such a moment. He kept it hot as Avon turned away and went to his post; and only when the man was scrutinizing detector readings, making every move a studied insult, did he let it go.

Long, weary hours later, he sat staring dully at the reports of the last scans they’d made before leaving Instareth. They did not paint a pretty picture.

There had been no survivors. A blackened crater, Avon had said, but in reality it had been a window into hell, a fused and molten hell still steaming in the noxious energy of its own destruction. The scoutship, whose crew had stood unprotected in that energy under the clouded stars, had left before Liberator’s arrival, still broadcasting its message of despair.

So there had been nothing to do after all. No magic to save Avalon’s group. Mourning was a familiar feeling to Blake, but tonight he seemed to be grieving for something else besides his dead comrades. Some other…loss…which made him both morose and restive.

He didn’t want to be with anyone. The thought of company was abhorrent. But he didn’t want to be alone, either.

When the door chimed, his breath caught
in his throat, and he realized, suddenly clear-headed and calm, that this was what he’d been waiting for. If anything, this was what he wanted.

But should he even answer? The memory of Avon’s face on the flight deck was still far too vivid. Anything else was an illusion; he’d sworn to remember that.

At the second chime, his knees unlocked and he found himself moving forward, his hand reaching out of its own accord as though to palm the door open.

An illusion, he reminded himself, snatching it back. And heard the answer, ‘Very well, then, shatter the fantasy. Open the door, break the spell. See the truth and send him on his way.’

The door whispered smoothly open. And the man outside stepped in and laid his head on Blake’s shoulder.

Blake simply held him for a time after the door shut again, face pressed into the liquid silk of warm hair, unable to think. Any impulse toward turning this intruder away had disappeared at that first delicate touch. He could no more move than he could fly.

Two people, then. All right—but this one was as real as the other. As benign as Avon was malignant, as gentle as Avon was harsh. And full of need.

Blake pulled back a bit, to look into the peaceful, heavy-eyed face. There was no sign of the walls that had been so high earlier. No disturbance either, no indication of uneasiness or apology. No regret, or desire for solace, or longing for truce. It was as if Avon’s actions and attitudes had no effect at all on this man.

“So we’re going to pretend it never happened, is that it?” His only answer was nimble hands drawing him closer. But his mind supplied the words. For Kerr, it was not a pretense, because for Kerr it hadn’t happened.

“And how did you get here tonight, anyway?” he added, not meaning how Kerr had found the way to his cabin. He knew the answer to that, too, after a moment. “Ah. So you turned the charm on Cally, did you? ‘Insomnia’ again, am I right?” He sighed, allowing himself to be embraced once more, feeling warmth flow into his body as resentment and frustration flowed out. It couldn’t last. Avon wouldn’t keep drugging himself to sleep forever. And Cally wouldn’t go on dispensing a drug that powerful, no matter what Avon did. But, for now, it was real, and that was good enough.

He took Kerr to bed.

By the fourth night he realized that Avon was no longer relying on Cally as a supplier. The man was clearly manufacturing the drug himself. And by the fifth, Blake had done some investigation of his own.

“I had a chat with Orac today. About you. It really was very interesting,” he told Avon, voice slurred and gravelly with satisfaction and torpor. Kerr seemed to enjoy the cuddling afterward as much as Blake did; at least he stayed awake for it, only descending into sleep when Blake had finished indulging himself, finished toying with his body at leisure. And though he never spoke again, not even to say Blake’s name, he seemed responsive to Blake’s voice. Especially to the rich, vibrant growl which Blake consciously employed to confide or to seduce, and which was quickly getting to be the only tone he used with this night-Avon.

“Orac says you’re not sleep-walking. Stop that, now; you’ll make me lose my train of thought.” The order had precisely the expected results. “He says,” Blake continued, forcibly capturing both of Kerr’s hands in one of his own, “that it is something called a fugue state. ‘A state of psychological amnesia during which a normal person seemed to behave rationally, but upon return to normal consciousness remembers nothing.’ I memorized that lot. And do you know what it means? It means you need this and you can’t have it, so you’re doing it behind your back. Which still leaves us in a bit of a quandary, doesn’t it?”

Kerr made no attempt to disengage himself. He lifted Blake’s hand between the two
of his and rested it against his own cheek. Then, eyes shut, he began to softly lick at each finger. Blake lost his train of thought.

“You’re not remotely interested, are you?”

Kerr inserted the tip of one finger in his mouth and tasted it meditatively, swirling his tongue around it.

“I take it, then,” —Blake could hear the growing strain in his own voice— “that I have your unconditional approval and support, no matter what my decision?”

Kerr removed the finger, dabbled it and its fellows in the viscous whiteness on Blake’s belly, and conveyed them back to his mouth, this time sucking hard enough to exert pressure.

“Even,” said Blake hoarsely, utterly fascinated, “if it means tying you up, donating your share of the treasure room to the Cause, and selling you to the Amagons?”

Having cleaned the hand thoroughly, Kerr placed a kiss in the palm, then folded it and nipped the loose skin on the back of a knuckle with sharp teeth, hard enough to make Blake start. Tiring of this, he tucked it under his arm and crawled up Blake like one of the smaller jungle cats, searching for some new section of anatomy to devour. Reaching Blake’s face, he bent his head in a soft lingering kiss, tongue tracing the contour of closed lips and then pressing gently as they parted, to probe between the barrier of teeth.

There was, thought Blake hazily, eyes losing focus, only one possible thing to do. He did it. They both enjoyed it very much. The double life had begun.

Whatever qualms of conscience Blake had originally had died quietly that night in Kerr’s arms. Kerr needed him—Orac had said it. And he needed Kerr, needed him as much as he’d once needed a crew from Vargas. Once he had fully realized that, there was little else to be said. The difficulties would just have to be got round somehow.

Once arranged it was as simple as this: he spent his working hours fighting with Avon on the flight deck and his leisure hours sleeping with Kerr in his cabin. Locked in combat, locked in passion, all the livelong day.

Not passion. By the end of the second week he could no longer cloak the feeling in words like ‘protectiveness’ or ‘affection’ or even ‘desire.’ However this had started, in whatever vein of pity or confusion or lust it had begun, it was different now. This was love and about as real as it was ever likely to get for him. What that implied he did not care to think about, but the feeling, the raw emotion, was unmistakable. This rush of tenderness and intoxication was what he’d seen in other people when they talked about ‘being in love.’ He’d looked on then in mild bewilderment, sometimes stifling impatience or jealousy, but now he could step back and, with wary awe, regard the symptoms of it in himself.

It was amazing what Avon could do to him these days. His heart quickened at Avon’s footsteps, his body tensed and his attention fixed immediately at the sound of Avon’s voice. The first sight of him on any given day always caused a pleasurable jolt to Blake’s stomach, which did not seem to diminish as time went on, but rather grew stronger. In between seeing him, Blake often convinced himself that Avon was not, could not be, as beautiful as he’d imagined. Each rediscovery was exquisite torment.

He found a new hobby in just watching the man. Watching that sleek brown head bent over some electronic gadget or other as talented finger worked magic on insensible circuitry. Blake would fix his eyes on one part of the compact body, the tender nape of the neck, perhaps, or the faint blue shadow in the hollow of a temple, and think, tonight my lips will be there; you’ll feel my breath on your skin and you’ll shiver. It was a dangerous game, he knew, but the wicked pleasure was worth it.

Other times he could imagine that it was Kerr bent over the components, Kerr who might at any moment raise his head and smile a small
languid smile just for Blake. And that was best of all—unless by chance Avon really did look up, those mahogany eyes meeting Blake’s with cool unconcern or icy mockery, depending on his mood. Then in the night Blake would cling to Kerr and kiss him hard, deliberately feeding the fire until the air shimmered between them, sending the conflagration perilously higher, as if longing to create a heat that would fuse them together permanently.

Separating after that was always hardest.

Kerr seemed to accept it as a fact of life that Blake could not keep him. When wakened minutes or hours after the last kiss, he never resisted or made any attempt to stay. He suffered himself to be dressed, embraced, and pointed in the right direction with good grace.

As a matter of fact Blake strongly suspected that he was perfectly capable of dressing himself, and merely delegated the task for their mutual enjoyment. Certainly he was aware enough, clever enough, to get to Blake’s cabin night after night without being detected by any of the others. Without that, they could never have sustained their deception. Even with it, they needed help.

The co-conspirators in their intrigue were three. The first was Zen, who at Blake’s command arranged it that whatever shifts the rebel and the tech drew, their sleeping hours would coincide. The second was Orac; threatened and cajoled by Blake into silence about Avon’s condition. And the third…was Avon. He obligingly continued to dose himself with Lethe every evening, leaving Kerr in clear possession of the field every night. He was, in fact, so obliging that there were days when Blake couldn’t help but wonder if at some level he knew.

The day of the flutterby flower. Their search for Docholi had led them to Arfael, a world washed in blue-green tones like a watercolor whose tints had run. On the way to their informant Blake spotted something growing out of a dappled rock: a sword-like stem topped by an iridescent multi-petalled blossom. Fascinated, he’d squatted down to watch it pulse gently in the breeze. Avon, typically, was not impressed.

“Did you come here for information or merely to commune with the local fauna?”

“Flora, surely.” He looked up to see blue highlights dancing on Avon’s hair and smiled.

“I wouldn’t bet on it.”

As they left, the petals went on pulsing gently in the absence of any breeze at all. But for once Avon was wrong, as their native hosts soon informed them. The flutterby was a plant, or at least it was most of the time. It did have a tendency to send its blossom off sailing about now and then, but usually only in mating season.

Blake, ushered out of the bunker along a different route after determining that the informant was useless, was disappointed to see no more of the flowers. Solitary, they were, he was told. Beautiful, sensitive, and unwaveringly antisocial. Blake smiled again at that, and wished all the more to have one.

That night, while painstakingly shelling Kerr, he found something wrapped in damp cloth thrust through a loop of belt. Opening it, he was catapulted without warning into one of those moments of blinding tenderness that made his knees tremble. How like Kerr—

Only, had it been Kerr? Had his gentle lover really popped out just long enough to snatch him a posy, then darted back again before Avon was any the wiser? Unlikely as it sounded, the only other solution seemed to be that Avon had taken to bringing him flowers. Now that was a thought to boggle the mind.

He put the half-dead plant in the bathroom, where it quivered ecstatically at the access to water, and then came back to thank Kerr. But even in the midst of love-making he found his mind drawn back to the enigma. Who? And how? It was disconcerting: not merely the thought that Avon might be aware of them, but his own reaction to the thought. Beneath the anxiety and alarm was a thrill which ran like adrenaline down every nerve.

A power play? Some need to dominate
Avon even as he cherished Kerr? He hated to believe that of himself. But otherwise why should it distract him so? Why should it…excite him? Certainly, he had no need of proud, unreachable Avon now. In the blithe and irrepressible spirit that was Kerr he found more delight and satisfaction that with any other bed-partner in his life.

What more could anyone want? Kerr was interested only in bringing joy to both of them. He accepted anything Blake did without qualm, and seemed to take his greatest pleasure in pleasing Blake. As time went on, he seemed more concerned with Blake’s responses than with his own. Perhaps most meaningful of all, he adjusted himself to Blake’s moods and needs as if in telepathic rapport.

And because of that the fabric of Blake’s life was changing. The Federation was no less persistent, the search for Star One no less frustrating. But at the end of each day was a haven of warmth and peace where he could sink into receptive arms and drink comfort until he was full. And that…made all the difference in the worlds.

The night after attempting to weave an alliance between two warring revolutionary cells on Voltara—twenty two hours of walking-on-eggshells negotiations which ended in abyssmal failure—he’d stumbled into his room exhausted, falling onto the bed wearing everything but his boots. He roused to fuzzy awareness some indeterminable time later by the mattress sinking as it took weight.

“Kerr,” he slurred, eyes lidding shut again even as he stretched out a gathering arm. “I’m sorry. Too tired t’ even sleep properly…” But the explanation was not needed; already he himself was being clasped in a comforting, comfortable embrace. He relaxed into the undemanding arms with a sigh of gratitude and slept sound and warm—to awaken the next morning alone. That settled once and for all the question of whether Kerr was able to ‘wake’ himself and do whatever else was necessary to keep them safe. The thought brought a slow smile to Blake’s lips and he had trouble keeping himself from turning it on Avon the next day and thanking him for his consideration.

Orac had said that in a fugue state Avon became almost exclusively right-brained, leaving left-hemisphere abilities such as deductive logic, formal operations, and linguistic skills far behind. What remained was motor memory, intuition, and a sensitivity to affect—emotion—that was almost preternatural. Kerr did not understand words but it was impossible to lie to him. Focusing only on tone and stance, he felt the emotion under the strings of phonemes and responded to it. Though he did not always retain what he learned, he was in many ways extraordinarily competent, gifted. A classic example of what had once been called an ‘idiot savant.’

Sometimes Blake wondered just how far that competence extended. There was the day the door chimed while he was fiddling unsuccessfully with the intercom, which had broken.

“I didn’t realize it was this late,” he said, after the traditional greeting had been exchanged. The routine never altered; Kerr walked up and laid his head on Blake’s shoulder, no other parts of their bodies touching. It had a vaguely mystical quality, returning to haunt Blake at odd moments.

“Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back.” Tossing the probe onto the desk in disgust, he strode to the bathroom. He emerged, minutes later, to find Kerr lying peacefully with closed eyes on the bed—and the intercom fixed.

“Did you do that?” He bent over the recumbent form trying to pierce through the wall of those long lashes. “My inter—” He was cut off as strong slender hands caught two fistfuls of his robe and pulled him down.

After some indeterminate time he removed his tongue from Kerr’s mouth and finished the question, more out of stubbornness than anything else. “My intercom. Did you mend that?”

But Blake had nothing on out-stubborning Kerr. Those slender fingers got hold of one end of the tie to Blake’s robe and pulled as
if to see if anything interesting would happen, and then reached out eagerly when it did. The inquiry was ignored.

Well, of course you did it, Blake thought wryly and a bit incoherently, yielding. I'm a little old to believe in space elves. But it was just one more enigma, one more mystery about Kerr that in all likelihood would never be explained.

Avon’s own attitude toward Blake seemed to have changed, if only slightly. He was a little quieter these days, a trifle less abrasive. Blake might have worried that it was withdrawal or weariness—after all, the man was only getting perhaps two thirds of his normal sleep—but he suspected it was mellowness instead. Avon’s physical and emotional needs were being satisfied as they had not been for years. After all, when one spends an hour or so at night in ecstasy ending with complete physical release, followed by another hour of feeding the emotions, listening to whispered endearments, lying under fond caresses, and when one routinely finishes with the descent into sated sleep in the arms of a lover...well, it might be understandably difficult to call up withering sarcasm first thing the next morning. Avon might not share Kerr's experiences, but he was living in the same body and reaping the benefits of all Kerr’s acts.

Living in the same body...Blake was all too aware of that. It was something that popped up at odd moments and bothered him. Though he trusted Kerr completely and no longer feared a sudden midnight awakening of Avon, the fear of discovery was always there. He had no illusions about Avon’s reaction to such a discovery. Yet, in his way, he also tried to protect Avon, to consider his feelings as well as Kerr’s. Though he loved to indulge Kerr in almost anything, there was one issue he would not yield. He would not take Kerr.

It was the least he could do—all he could do, truth to tell, all he was capable of doing—to protect Avon’s dignity. Avon’s...sanctity. The waking Avon obviously could not consent to having his body used in such a manner, and would not, Blake strongly suspected, if given the choice.

But Kerr wanted it, and Kerr agreed, and Kerr didn’t understand why that wasn’t enough. He could be, as Blake well knew, extraordinarily stubborn, and this was one issue on which he wouldn’t yield, either. He simply tried, every time they made love, to get Blake inside him. And Blake continued to resist and continued to win, by main force more often than not.

He did attempt, once, to reverse the procedure. Kerr was sweetly agreeable to having the aromatic cedarwood lotion stroked onto him and he seemed to enjoy working it indiscriminately into every inch of Blake’s skin, until the mellow woody fragrance filled the air around them, dizzying. Nor did he object when Blake, ruddy and sleekly glowing from these ministrations, drew him with awkward care into what he hoped was a suitable position.

After several moments of fumbling and a distinct delay in comprehension on Kerr’s part they got themselves organized. Once Kerr got the idea he was eager, and replaced Blake’s guiding fingers with his own, his cock pressing impatiently at the first obstruction.

Blake, who had done his best beforehand to prepare himself, did his best now to relax. But it was impossible to relax against what happened next. Kerr’s instincts made no differentiation between this virgin male partner and an experienced and thoroughly aroused woman. Innocently enthusiastic, he thrust and then let his weight fall forward, sinking in full length at one stroke.

The pain was unbelievable, tearing Blake in two. He cried out, sharply and involuntarily, his eyes squeezing shut, muscles spasming and sending new bolts of white-hot agony up his spine. He sucked in air past clenched teeth and waited for it to moderate.

It did not. If anything, it got worse. He felt as if he were strangling, and his own uncontrollable spasms were making relaxation or adjustment that much more impossible.

Kerr could not be still, either. Although he had frozen at that first unrestrained cry, he
was now trembling all over, held rigid with horror and dismay. Dimly, through his own torment, Blake felt sympathy for him: Kerr would hate nothing so much as seeing his lover in pain, and just at the moment there was nothing either of them could do about it. A sudden withdrawal would be as bad as the entry. They were trapped, welded together in a cycle of agony.

Desperately, Blake willed himself to relax, to go with the pain, calling on techniques developed long ago, during his first bout of interrogations. And, slowly, sinew by sinew, he succeeded. The benefits were twofold; first, it went some way toward easing the immediate torture, and second, without the stimulation of vise-like confinement, Kerr’s arousal plummeted. The white heat in Blake’s gut abated suddenly as Kerr’s erection collapsed inside him, and gradually, carefully, he was able to work them free of the predicament he’d got them into, easing Kerr out and away.

He did it without much more than numb and automatic cooperation from his partner. Kerr seemed not merely dismayed but soul sick, and he clearly no longer trusted himself to take any definitive action. When they were finally lying side by side again, Blake shivering in the sudden chill of sweat that had broken out on his body, he was struck by the reproach radiating from the smaller body. Reproach and something like bitterness. Something Blake had never sensed before from this quarter.

It was his own fault, he had engineered this and he should have anticipated the result. He gathered Kerr to him, helplessly, the lingering physical pain dwarfed in comparison to the haunted look on Kerr’s face and the unprecedented stiffness and resistance in Kerr’s body. Kerr was angry with him, hurt and angry and confused, and he had no way to explain.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, and then said it again, stroking over the smoothly muscled back as much for his own comfort as Kerr’s. And, eventually, the taut resistance began to fade and Kerr’s arms slipped around him, his body gentling, resettling to lie against Blake’s and offer what consolation he could. He pressed his forehead to Blake’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry.” One last time. There was nothing sexual in the touching now; it was merely tenderness and comfort as the two of them tried to soothe each other into sleep. It was fortunate, thought Blake, as a wave of weariness swept over him, that desire had left them both at once. He could lie here and take what he needed, without guilt.

Kerr, as always, forgave him. But this time he did not forget. Their parting kiss that night was lingering and tinged with sadness. And nothing, Blake knew, would induce his lover to try that particular act of love again.

After that, the cedarwood lotion stayed in the bedside drawer, and Kerr’s attempts to drag Blake on top of him became almost perfunctory. Blake, relieved did not question too closely what connection had been made or whether Kerr could really extrapolate from another’s experience to his own. What he did know was that Kerr was unlikely to be bothered by anxiety or recrimination, because Kerr lived entirely in the present. Like a primitive hunter-gatherer—or a small child—he focused his energies on the moment. Blake grimaced at the unwanted intrusion as he finished the thought.

Why did such unsettling phrases spring up now, when his original doubts and fears had finally faded? When Kerr had been integrated into his life at the most fundamental level, meshing with the threads of Blake’s very existence? There was no going back at this point, and bar Avon discovering them, no reason to worry about the future. Kerr needed him and he…

Needed Kerr. In a way that would have been terrifying if he had not learned to trust so completely.

In fact, he needed Kerr badly at this moment, Blake thought, shifting impatiently on his bed. The wall chronometer was four fifths blue, shading to deep amethyst, a Spaceworlder message he had long ago learned to interpret. Once Avon had set the chronos to an optimal 25-
hour cycle, all the crew had become proficient at the conversion to ship’s time.

And this clock was telling Blake that Kerr was late. Over an hour so. Tomorrow they would be skirting the edges of a Federation system in a new test of Avon’s augmented detector shields; it wasn’t a day for sleeping in. And where was Kerr anyway?

Blake frowned at the twilit chrono and bit at his finger while he mused. When he found himself brushing his tongue back and forth over the joint he decided it had been long enough. With a sharp sound of impatience, he stood.

Kerr, Blake knew, paid attention to neither Spaceworld chronometers nor Terran watches; he lived by his own internal clock. Tonight something had obviously happened to throw that clock off, and Blake was tired of waiting. He needed Kerr now.

Thrusting his arms into the sleeves of a robe, he yanked the belt in tightly and stepped out of his cabin. More discreet to dress fully, of course, but he didn’t plan to be wandering the corridors for long. In fact, having woken Kerr, he just might stay with him in Avon’s cabin. The thought brought an involuntary grin as he turned the corner—and a rush of blood to his groin. He had not been back, to the place where it all had started, since that first time when he had been seduced. Kerr came to his own room every night like an incubus or a dream and departed alone every morning, in an arrangement satisfactory to both of them. Just now, though, the thought of doing it there, in Avon’s cabin, in Avon’s bed…held appeal. It had the same spice of forbidden pleasure as looking at the soft leather over Avon’s crotch by day, letting his eyes linger importunately over the sweet line of inner thigh when he knew Avon wouldn’t catch him. Yes, definite appeal. He and Kerr would have to be very careful, of course—the inherent danger was great. But the picture of it, of exchanging moist clinging kisses in the sanctity of Avon’s spartan quarters, of lowering Kerr onto that narrow bed and letting him come all over Avon’s sheets, was too exciting to be easily put aside.

And perhaps, though the evidence was erased by morning, Avon would wake up and be stirred carnally without knowing why. An indefinable electricity left in the air, a spot or two of dampness on the coverlet, which when brushed yielded the sudden perfume of musk and male sex. Avon might ponder that, trying to connect it with the languor of his body, lying all the while in the very place where Blake had caressed that body into ecstasy the night before…

Blake’s thought pulled up short in shock. This was madness. Did he want Avon to find out? Of course there would be no clumsily concealed evidence as grist left for the ice-cold mill of Avon’s intellect. The idea was just as mad as standing here outside Avon’s door, with the chill of the metal floor seeping into his bare feet, and a hard-on threatening to burst through his robe.

Angry with himself, he fumbled for the keypad, glancing uneasily over one shoulder. He side-stepped into the room quickly, still looking out as the door slid open. As it began to slide shut, he turned gratefully to smile at—

Avon.

Shock robbed his senses, made him lightheaded. Avon. Still wearing the same chaste gray outfit he’d worn all day, he was sitting at his desk with a gutted detector shield before him. Astonishment and disbelief held him as frozen as Blake, his face curiously open in its blank disconcertion.

And that worked in Blake’s favor, gave him the seconds he needed to mentally scramble for an explanation, to think of something—anything—to say.

What he lit on finally was that the best defense was a good offense. He therefore made his voice as offensive as possible and his face as pointlessly belligerent.

“I’d been wondering where that had got to.” Flat and antagonistic, he jerked his head toward the disassembled device. As he’d hoped, Avon’s eyes dropped to it, then raised, along with his hackles.
“I’m making some minor adjustments. It will be ready when we need it—”

“It had better be.” He’d succeeded in his bid to distract, shifting Avon’s attention from his own astonishing entrance and extraordinary state of undress to his current obnoxiousness.

“I said it will be, Blake.” Muscles stood out in Avon’s jaw. Blake, still giddy, watched him without really seeing, tiny details of Avon’s appearance impressing themselves raw onto his memory, to be taken out and given meaning later. Avon’s hair needed cutting. The gentle waves curled over his forehead to brush the skin just above his eyebrows. The eyes themselves were smudged with shadow, and just now beginning to narrow with anger.

“All right, Avon,” sharply. “Be sure that it is, and that it’s in working order. Minor adjustments are a luxury we can’t afford if it means a delay.”

“Why the sudden rush? What makes this system so special?” Slitted eyes added, What are you up to now?

Relief eased the fist clenching Blake’s gut. Avon’s own ceaseless suspicions were leading him astray.

“You’ll never know just what I’m ‘up to’ right now, he thought, gaze fixed incongruously on a wisp of Avon’s hair that was anchored damply out of place. There was a loose thread in the embroidery of the high collar.

“Routine reconnaissance. That’s all,” he said in what he hoped were suitably unconvincing tones. It was time to leave. He’d recovered a difficult situation, but to stay longer would be pushing his luck. Somehow, though, he couldn’t make himself turn, couldn’t wrest himself from mindlessly cataloguing Avon’s every eyelash, every pore. He was suddenly struck by the sensation of his own nakedness under the robe, by the gentle airflow up his legs, the graze of cotton on his cock. Still lightheaded, under Avon’s brooding gaze, he felt the surreal indifference one does in dreams, as if nothing that befell here would matter. As if he were standing outside himself, asking strangely, ‘What would happen if—’

Madness. Taking one last picture with him—Avon’s hand, oddly elegant among the secret inner workings of the shield—he swiveled to the door.

His indecision had given Avon sufficient time for a parting shot. “By the way, it is customary to knock, Blake.”

“Next time, lock your door.” And without waiting to hear Avon’s acid analysis about the possibility of there being a ‘next time,’ he was out and away.

The whole thing had been a scene out of a nightmare, out of Blake’s own particular and individual nightmare. On the flight deck the next day, long after Avon’s improved gadget had passed its test, he sat alone and let his mind worry at it as his teeth worried at a thumbnail. Had he really stood there, pulse hammering and cock swelling under the harsh artificial light of Avon’s cabin, thinking it didn’t matter?

It was the physical reaction which continued to nag at him like an aching tooth, even now when it was clear that he and Kerr were not discovered. Why had his arousal not been quenched in the ice-water of Avon’s shocked regard? It wasn’t Avon he cared for, wasn’t Avon he wanted to bed. So why the thin chills of excitement shivering through his nervousness, last night, why was the memory of chestnut eyes—alert and frighteningly cognizant—etched into his brain with obsessive precision?

One thing was certain. From now on he waited in his own cabin. Avon should be tired this evening; by his own admission he had scarcely slept the night before, but Blake was taking no chances. Kerr would have to come to him.

The deserted flight deck bore no resemblance to the turbulent place it had been a few hours ago. Blake, trying to let go of the tension which gripped him, found it restful. Behind him dawn-colored panels shone rose and green; in front, Zen was a rich umber lit by an occasional flicker of gold. The room, not built for human
comfort or aesthetics, was both spacious and surprisingly beautiful. Blake had finally managed to relax and lose himself in the rainbow radiance of the systems monitors when a footstep made him turn.

Avon stood in the white hexagon of doorway. Blake straightened automatically, feeling impatience and a familiar tightening of stomach muscles. He’d taken Jenna’s watch after his own precisely because he’d wanted to be alone to wind down. Besides, if Avon was planning to spend another night wakeful…

Kerr.

How he knew he could not have explained, but even before he saw the face he was certain. The slight tilt of head, the languorous ease of body, the untroubled rise and fall of chest beneath the black silk shirt…all said ‘Kerr’ to him.

Nonplused, he stood and struggled to put his mind in gear. A bubble of irritation was rising in him, as much at Avon’s unaccommodating behavior last night as at this new difficulty, and he remained still, unyielding, as Kerr laid a damp head on his shoulder. Nor did he move when arms slipped slowly, almost tentatively, around him.

“You gave me a hell of a scare,” he said to the back of Kerr’s neck, which, rather touchingly, was not yet dry. Avon had showered and gone straight to bed, then—and Kerr had wasted no time in coming after what he wanted.

By way of rejoinder, Kerr leaned farther into the one-sided embrace, giving Blake a little of his weight. And Blake thought, No, you didn’t, did you? He did, and you were probably just as miserable as I was the whole time. We are both at the mercy of his whims.

Kerr made a soft sound as Blake’s arms came up to cradle him, everything right with his world once more. Blake shook his head, feeling his vexation dissolving. It was good to hold and be held like this, so easy, so uncomplicated.

Kerr’s hands slithered down to his buttocks.

Blake came out of that reverie in record time, tingling with alarm as he cast a hunted look up at the doorways. He and Avon hugging on the flight deck could possibly, through some gymnastic stretch of the imagination, be explained. This could not.

“Enough, Kerr.” He reached behind to detach the hands and forced Kerr lightly away. “We’re both going to have to wait.”

And do what? On occasion, Kerr might amuse himself for a few minutes tinkering with familiar machinery, but for the most part the outside world did not exist for him. The prospect of trying to keep him decorously entertained for nearly two hours was staggering.

And Kerr intended to have none of it anyway. Catlike, he would perform only when he wanted to, and he refused even to consider the circuit board Blake put under his nose. He pushed it away without looking at it and closed in on Blake again.

“No, Kerr.” Blake knew he was radiating discouragement and disapproval. Kerr, however, apparently chose to take this to mean he just wanted convincing. And by now Kerr was an expert at convincing Blake.

He came docilely enough when Blake led him to his station—to Avon’s station. But he wouldn’t look at that, either. Instead, he leaned against Blake and let Blake look at it. And Blake, enervated by the last twenty hours and grateful of any respite, let him rest there, ready to spring away at the sound of footsteps behind him.

He should have known better.

In the hope that one of them might catch Kerr’s capricious interest, he began calling up systems check after check, but every time his hands were occupied Kerr found something new to do. He ran a thumbnail down Blake’s inner thigh. He let the side of one hand brush Blake’s lower abdomen. When Blake turned to look at the doorway directly behind them, he swabbed the back of Blake’s ear with his tongue. Each time returning to obedient stillness when Blake rounded on him.
It might not have been so disturbing except that Blake was in a moderately precarious position to start with. The smell of freshly washed Kerr, the warmth plastered indiscriminately along his flank, the brush of fine, light hair on his cheek, all were evoking conditioned responses from him. And he’d been aching since last night—in the aftermath of that debacle he hadn’t had the heart to masturbate.

Nor had he been able to sleep. It had taken a long time to wind down from the experience, and, at last, turning to what had been his usual panacea before Kerr, he had buried himself in work. Now, he fought the stimulation, and fought the temptation to relax, to let Kerr’s warmth soak in and ease tired muscles.

Kerr would have to be wearing his black lounging outfit, of course. No cold, unyielding leather tonight, but raw silk which caught Blake’s finger fast whenever he tried to push an encroaching hand away. It tempted Blake to stroke the length of that enticing body, to move the whisper-thin fabric over the bareness of Kerr underneath. In spite of himself he wondered how it would feel to tease each nipple erect through the fragile barrier, rubbing the material in a circle around it, then stepping back to admire the effect. Kerr would hold still for that.

And, he added mentally to the companion who was leaning more and more heavily on him every minute, you must have dressed yourself, because you aren’t wearing a thing under it, are you? The swell clearly visible between Kerr’s legs attested to that. Bemused, he daydreamt about stroking Kerr firm and then—then what? He’d have them on the flight deck couch next. And that was sheer insanity, unless he really did want to be found out. Resolutely, he took Kerr’s hand, which was at this moment slyly investigating the clasp of his trousers, curled it firmly into a ball, and held it that way. Simultaneously, he shifted Kerr’s weight away from him to rest on the back of the flight chair.

He’d expected Kerr to be grieved, possibly even to look piteous and accusatory. But such manipulation was far beyond Kerr’s scope. Direct action—what Avon had once told Blake he was good at—was the only way he knew. And Blake had forgotten how strong the man was, forgotten for an instant that beneath that enticing silk outfit were the sinews of a lean and hungry predator. Quite suddenly he found himself pinned against Zen, balance compromised, mouth covered in a devouring kiss.

Exasperation—and embarrassment, for Zen seemed to count as a spectator here—put the necessary steel in his will to resort to sheer strength. A surge and jerk later he had Kerr’s arms securely pinioned from behind, with Kerr’s body safely turned away from him. At which point that body simply went completely and utterly limp in a gambit that had worked very well once before…

It was the last straw. Blake let go so as not to dislocate both Kerr’s shoulders, hauled Kerr back up almost before his knees could hit the ground, and had him bent forward over the flight deck couch before either of them knew what was happening. It wasn’t until his free hand was raised, flattened, ready to make stinging contact with silk-encased buttocks, that he came back to himself.

What was he doing? Kerr wasn’t a child. But Blake realized that that was exactly how the last twenty minutes had played out, as if he were with a recalcitrant two-year-old, a little hellion bent on mischief and utterly intractable. The impulse to get in a couple of good whacks now, and save the regrets for later, was strong. Stronger, however, was the prickling uneasiness which rose at the vision of doing such a thing, and the sudden rush of calm which swept over him like a cool breeze.

He’d been the one in the wrong here, to expect things of Kerr which were beyond Kerr’s ken. He’d accepted the joy and contentment this liaison had brought him; now he had to accept the occasional frustration. If he meant to love Kerr he would have to be the one to adapt.

Gentling the grip on that silk-clad shoulder, he lifted the unresisting body to an upright
position. Far from looking agitated or downcast, his feckless lover seemed pleased by all the attention, and leaned against him in perfect trust.

“You wouldn’t have been smirking in another minute,” Blake said, wondering suddenly with a quiver if it were true. He looped an arm around Kerr to keep him still and reached to touch a button on the console in front of him.

The response came almost immediately, and, to Blake’s relief, in wakeful tones. “Jenna.”

“Blake,” he said. “Jenna, do you think you could take the last hour of your watch yourself? I’m sorry to bother you, but—”

“You want to get some rest?”

Blake considered that. “I’d…rather like to go to my cabin. Do you mind?”

“No; it will give me something to do. I’ll come right up.”

“Good.” He released the button, straightened, and steered Kerr toward the steps practically in one motion. A moment later they had left the flight deck, heading for Blake’s quarters, which were off the opposite corridor from Jenna’s.

He’d meant to drop Kerr off, lock him in if need be, and hurry back to see Jenna safely in charge before returning. But on second thought he realized that he probably couldn’t find a lock that would hold Kerr—and anyway, two steps into the room he started to lose articles of clothing. He settled for calling her on the intercom.

“So everything is fine, now, is it?” he said, turning to Kerr afterwards. “You got your way, and it’s that simple.” But the sternness melted under the warmth of Kerr’s embrace. He was free at last to explore the mysteries of heated flesh under thin silk.

He wanted to go slowly, to savor it, but Kerr was already in haste, pressing himself against Blake ardently. So Blake only grasped here and here and here, trying to touch all of Kerr at once, letting his fingers send the messages of how good this was—better than mere nakedness—to his inflamed cock. Then, lest he be tempted to tighten the hands which cupped Kerr’s buttocks, and help Kerr thrust against him until climax, he stepped back and set to work on buttons. Avon’s outfit, at least, would remain undefiled.

The pale nakedness woke a driving hunger in him—as if he’d never seen, never had Kerr before. Abruptly he was as eager as Kerr, as filled with urgency. They fell in a tangle on the bed before the black shirt could be entirely removed; it had slipped down Kerr’s shoulders, pinioning his arms at the elbow. Blake scarcely noticed; he could heed only the passionate imperative he felt in ever cell to penetrate Kerr immediately and by any means possible.

His tongue pressed between Kerr’s lips, licking over the hardness of teeth, the smooth ridges of the roof of the mouth. When he pulled back he found that he had reached some high plateau of stimulation, all his senses sharpened, so that he was almost painfully aware of Kerr’s breath on his lips, of Kerr’s inner thigh welded to his.

He was still receiving that urgent, insistent summons from his body. So he twisted them for balance, bringing Kerr on top of him, sending one hand back to part Kerr’s nether cheeks. And then, with deft, tender probes, his finger was storming the little gathered ring of muscle.

It elicited a gasp, then a continued sound almost like a purr. Blake crooked the finger, working it in, confident now after so many weeks of schooling, remembering with a distant flash of amusement how frightened he’d been the first time.

Kerr still couldn’t move his arms, but since he was getting exactly what he wanted he didn’t seem to object. No longer in haste, he licked delicately at the side of Blake’s mouth for encouragement, relaxed, and gave himself up to it.

“Wanton, that’s what you are,” Blake said throatily into the fine skin under the jawbone. “You’d have let me do this on the flight deck, wouldn’t you?” Kerr purred what might have been agreement and lapped at the corner of Blake’s eye when he tilted his face up.
The feeling started liquid heat seething in Blake’s groin. When he moved away and down, Kerr made a faint sound of protest, reaching with his limited mobility and catching only a handful of disordered curls. But he quietened when Blake made an o of his lips and sucked him smoothly, sweetly in.

Just doing this was a ferocious pleasure: Kerr soft around his finger, hard inside his mouth. He broke off to nibble at the flushed, heated testicles, compressing them with his lips, trying to stave off the final moment. But though Kerr was sighing and submitting, running his fingernails along Blake’s scalp, soon he began to thrust forward helplessly against Blake’s face.

Mischievous, Blake pretended to ponder the question for a time, depositing tiny dry kisses on whatever flesh was nearest, driving Kerr nearly frantic by degrees. When at last Blake relented and caught the blindly seeking cock, the grip on his hair tightened almost painfully, easing quickly as if Kerr had just then remembered his own strength.

The thought filled Blake with stinging gratification and pride as he proceeded to torment Kerr, slowly, to orgasm. All that lean power held hostage to love. And presently he sucked hard, hard, keeping it up until Kerr’s cries came broken, until Kerr fought the fabric which restricted him, trying uselessly to get free. Until Kerr struggled and arched his back and jerked in Blake’s mouth and came.

Blake crouched up to watch the last of it, as Kerr finished, knees jerking, loving as always the rapture that lit those carven features from within, beatific, transfiguring. As if orgasm were not earthy pleasure but some mystery beyond definition.

Afterwards, as the glow gradually faded, he looked simply beautiful and lazy and very, very much self-satisfied. When Blake released him he sat up, neatly and deliberately shed the shirt, and moved forward to rub his cheek against Blake’s chest. As if to say, now aren’t you glad you listened to me?

“Wanton and smug,” muttered Blake into the ruffled sea of hair. But he was glad; he felt irresponsible and unfettered and young. Like a child eating cake before supper, and scattering the crumbs, laughing. Kerr filled him with life and joy and a passion that took his breath away.

And then Kerr was moving, leisurely but precise, not kissing but rubbing his face on Blake’s belly. And Blake was speaking to him softly and fiercely and it was hot and sweet and satisfying all night.

He woke briefly when Kerr left, and wrapped himself in bedclothes against the chill.

“…Garth, not Goth, Blake. The star charts and Orac’s information are quite specific.”

“And quite old, Avon. By all accounts it’s been nearly a hundred years since anyone from outside has visited this system. The early explorers weren’t always particular about recording names in primitive languages; there are dozens of examples of their mistakes. Don’t you think there’s a chance that this could be one?”

“What I think is that you’re grasping at straws.” Self-possessed and immaculate, Avon paced the few feet between Zen and his station. Jenna, Vila, and Cally looked on from the couch, while Blake stood before the main screen, arms folded across his chest. He was not about to be dissuaded on this, not by anyone, especially not by Avon. It was Avon who’d taken Kerr away last night. But for him, they could have lain close and warmed each other until morning.

“I think,” Avon was continuing, now, “that you are so eager to find what you want that you are losing your sense of reality—modest as it is under the best of circumstances. You’re seeing mirages in the desert, and you’re dragging the rest of us with you while you chase them.”

Jenna stirred, half turning her head over her shoulder. “Avon, does it really matter? If it’s not the right planet, it’s not the right planet. We’ve made mistakes before.”

“Oh, we have—?”

“I have, Avon.” Blake was flat, seeing
the discussion going off course. “But the question is valid. We lose nothing by going down and making inquiries. Where’s the harm in investigating?”

Avon swung around fast, stabbing two fingers at the blue-green spheroid floating behind Blake. “There’s the harm. That was reported by the first surveyors as being a world hostile to all other races. A primitive theocracy which makes Cygnus Alpha look like a garden spot. Even if their priest-chieftains have information, how likely are they to give it to us?”

Blake grinned. “They might do. There are ways to take advantage of a theocratic attitude, if I recall.” He tilted his head slightly toward Avon in reminder. Avon made a sharp sound and turned away.

“We have been to hostile worlds before,” put in Cally reasonably, without heat. “Haven’t been to anything else,” added Vila, and then subsided into his glass under the gazes of the women on either side of him.

“And,” Avon snarled, looking at the far wall, “we’ve suffered the consequences before. When you” —wheeling on Blake again— “have decided to see what you want to see.”

This reference was unmistakable, and Blake felt a slow smoldering kindle in his stomach. He remained obstinately obtuse, arms a barrier between himself and the needle jabs of the man who now crossed to face him.

But Avon, scenting blood, only moved in closer, leaning forward. “Your obsession is blinding you, Blake,” he hissed. “It’s in control. And when that happens we are the ones who pay.”

He was flushed with suppressed excitement, eyes narrow, chest rising quickly and lightly. Enjoying this. The electric tension virtually a palpable aura all around him. Blake watched it dispassionately.

Stolid, he said, “You’ve made your point. My decision remains the same. I’m going.”

Avon moved in the last half-step, thrusting his face to within a handspan of Blake’s. “And which of us—which of them—do you choose to accompany you this time? Who is expendable now?”

Blake was annoyed and harassed and bone-weary of all this argument—or at least he should have been so. But the strange thing was that with Avon this close, close enough that Blake could smell the faint suggestion of his sweat, and feel the tenor of his body heat, his own reactions were bewilderingly inappropriate. He found himself relaxing, noting the lashes weighing down those chestnut eyes, the subtle curve of upper lip. The immediacy of that slim strong body both soothed and stirred him, and the argument—Avon’s objectionability—no longer seemed very important.

He was reacting to Avon as if he were Kerr. It had never happened before, and he had no idea what to do about it.

Avon was persevering at being objectionable, being abusive really. Throwing himself into it with a vigor Blake hadn’t seen for weeks—for just over five weeks, to be precise. Spoiling not just for a fight but a knock-down, drag-out battle royal. Idly, Blake wondered what Avon would do if he kissed him.

This frivolous ripple of thought was enough to make him blink and turn away, looking down his own shoulder at the floor and putting Avon’s warmth and his own baffled musing out of his mind. It would have been easier if he could call up a sense of real alarm.

“I suppose you’d better be the one,” he said absently, apropos of nothing because he hadn’t been listening to the tirade for several minutes now. “After all, I can be quite certain that you, at least, will take care of yourself.”

Avon, his stride broken, looked affronted and piqued. Blake noted that much with the one glance he spared as he wandered away. “Better talk to Orac about their religious system,” he added, vaguely helpful, from the stairs. “Find out what deities are supposed to do. And run a climate check.”

And that sound was Avon’s teeth snapping shut. The last Blake saw of him, he was...
shaking his head speechlessly.

“Why the hell did you jump on me like that? I know,” —following Avon’s gaze to the blistered rock behind him. “But a simple ‘duck’ might have sufficed.”

“And it might not. I hesitated to take any risks with your sacred life—”

“—and it probably was just too good a chance to pass up.”

“Probably.” Avon glanced around, but Blake’s Garthian escort group had scattered. Keeping well to one side he swung the door of the shrine a little farther open with the tip of his blaster.

“A mini laser cannon. Rusty but obviously still functioning—and set to activate when the door opens. Small wonder no one can look the Great God in the face.”

Blake was looking back over the mountain path. “I’m still not satisfied that they don’t have any information—”

“Oh, come on, Blake. Don’t be more stupid than you can help. They’ve seen that you’re human enough to get knocked flat, and I’ve just taken a potshot at their God. How much information do you think they’re going to give a couple of apostate pretenders?”

Blake put a skinned knuckle to his lips and sucked it reflectively. “I gave them my teleport bracelet,” he pointed out, making it not quite an accusation.

Avon simply gave him a patient look and pushed up a silver sleeve to reveal two bracelets. He snapped one off with a flick of his wrist and proffered it.

“Nice,” said Blake dryly. “Taking lessons from Vila, are you? Lift anything else?”

“I brought it down with me from the ship.” At Blake’s expression, he added, “A standard precaution.” Before Blake could ask ‘since when?’, the other man had put his lips to his bracelet. “Vila, teleport now.”

Vila goggled openly at the sight of Blake. “What’s that get-up supposed to be?”

“It has finally happened, Vila. Our fearless leader is no longer merely a saint. He has transcended into his true semi-divine status.”

Vila mulled that over. “Why is it,” he said to Blake in tones of compassionate comradeship, “that when he gets to be a god it’s all prophecies and pretty women, and when you do it’s all muck and bother?”

“One of those small mysteries which make life so intriguing,” said Avon. “The muck can be washed off, at least. As the delicate aroma of camel is another story, I suggest we hold your next prayer service in the open air.”

Blake vanquished the robes at last and threw them across the room, panting. “I’m considering re-instituting the practice of human sacrifice,” he said meaningfully, and then, under Avon’s eye, he grinned. “Avon. I don’t recall whether I said thank you before.”

“You did not. As usual, you took it as your divine right to be rescued.” But as he returned his bracelet to the rack, he cocked an inquisitive eyebrow. Blake realized that he himself was smiling at Avon without the edge of tension which usually accompanied his gratitude. Usually thanking Avon meant conceding a point, incurring a debt. But just now all he felt was affection and appreciation. He’d forgotten how good it could be to just be with Avon, during the rare interludes when the two of them were not jostling for position. The rare moments when they were in tune.

Avon, none the wiser for Blake’s continued beaming, raised a shoulder and went his way. But Blake stared after him, grin slowly fading. The good feeling was gone now, and in its place a coldness, a sense of dread. Of impending doom, even.

What could be so terrible? Nothing had happened. If anything, today had proved that they could still work together, perhaps better than ever before.

But his stomach was ice. He did not want to question why, to examine it. He did not want to think at all.

He had no choice.

Advising Vila he would be unavailable
until his next watch, he made for his cabin. The maelstrom was already whistling in his ears as he stepped through the door. Once inside, it hit him.

When the door chimed, he was sitting on the edge of his bed, elbows resting on his knees, hands dangling uselessly between. He couldn’t stir as he watched it slide open, any more than he’d been able to stir since he’d first lowered himself down here hours ago. Instead, he watched neat black boots move until they were directly in front of him. Then he looked up at Kerr.

It had been a while since he’d taken time to fully appreciate the heavy-eyed beauty, the unabashed sensuality, the sweetness he now saw so clearly. Or at least that was how it suddenly felt. He’d forgotten to be grateful, to savor, and now…

Kerr, adjusting to this new greeting position, knelt on one knee between Blake’s splayed legs and leaned his head against Blake’s arm. He sighed. Without haste, Blake curled his hand to work fingers into downy hair.

He’d thought they would make love, thought that that would be important. It wasn’t. He felt no sexual response at all, only the unbearable tenderness which had terrified him at the start.

And rightly so.

Blake slid off the bed to kneel, himself, drawing Kerr into the protective valley of legs, encompassing him with shielding arms, holding Kerr against his heart. And then he simply held on, as if he could save them both, as if he could stop what was about to happen, if he could only stay like that forever.

Avon was a dark silhouette at the rest room table, his back to the door. In the doorway, Blake traced with his eyes the sleek line of bent head, the brown hair nearly touching the discreetly high collar, the studious set of shoulder.

And felt nothing.

That wasn’t right; surely there should be grief or anger or trepidation, some visceral reaction, some sense at least of regret at an unpleasant task to be done.

Nothing.

He was only very tired.

“Avon.” He stopped a few paces away, thinking for a moment with a kind of hushed delirium that Avon was not going to respond to him, was not going to turn around. And then Blake would move forward and find him asleep, and would leave him there, peaceful on the cheoplastic table, and none of this would have happened.

Avon turned. He’d simply been absorbed in his perspex readout. “Yes?”

There were dark circles under the dark eyes. No, neither of them had got any sleep last night. Did Avon even realize that much?

“I want you to come with me, please.” Vitality enough to form the words appeared out of nowhere. He would be able to say whatever needed to be said. “I’m afraid it’s important.”

“What’s gone wrong?” —sharply.

“Noth—” Blake caught himself and gazed into the dull gloss of the table, almost smiling. Oh, there was irony for you.

Avon was staring at him, lost as he was in the contemplation of bits of alien furniture. “Avon, I need to speak to you now, in private. Please come with me.”

And Avon weighed the printout in his hand, then tossed it aside resignedly, and followed.

The vial of Lethe was on his desk, an island in a sea of clear space. Blake could not detect any change in Avon’s expression when the brown eyes rested on it, and when they lifted to his they were unconcerned, unspeculative.

Avon showed only a composed and mild curiosity as he glanced around the room—that of a man surveying a room he’d never seen before.

With that, in that instant, emotion returned to Blake. Muted but entirely recognizable, a hurricane outside the door. And it was pain, an ache that went deeper than bone or
muscle, into the very center of himself. Words were suddenly easy; there were going to be a lot of words before this was done.

“Do you recognize anything?” he said, driving the hurt in deeper.

Avon made a show of looking around, tilting his head to eye each corner. “Should I?”

Oh, the walls were very high today. But Blake had the battering ram. After so many weeks of lies he would now speak nothing but the absolute truth.

He said, “Yes.”

Avon waited for the follow-up, first patient, then impatient. He made a gesture of turning to the door. “Blake, if you brought me here just to ask me about your interior decoration…”

“You really don’t know, do you?” Blake looked away and spoke quietly, hearing for the first time the strain in his own voice. “Odd. There were times when I hoped that at some level we had at least your…tolerance, if not your cooperation. But that wasn’t the case, was it? You really don’t have the first idea of what I’m talking about.”

“Do you?”

“Oh, yes,” said Blake softly, and sighed. He thought for a minute carefully. Only the truth—which meant that Avon had a right to understand about the ache, about the cost of this.

He met Avon’s eyes again. “Before I explain, there is something you must know. I doubt you’ll believe it, but I have to say it anyway. Right now I’m…rather distraught. Offhand…I can’t remember anything that’s hurt quite as much as this, or—or that’s been quite so difficult to do. So if that vaunted resentment of yours is real, if you really do hate me as much as you say—well, you needn’t look any further for revenge. You’ve had it already, Avon. In full measure.”

“Am I to infer from that that you are off on another bout of martyrdom? Or are these merely the ravings of a noble mind destroyed by drugs?”

“Funny you should say that.” There was no humor at all in Blake’s voice. He gestured toward the desk. “That isn’t mine, Avon; it’s yours.”

The composure was breached at last. Black fury welled up in the hooded eyes, a tidal wave of menace and repudiation.

“I still cannot fathom what you are talking about,” he said evenly, giving fair warning. No demon had ever looked more menacing.

Blake was unaffected. “I don’t know when I’ve ever heard you lie before,” he said dispassionately. “Not outright lie. And something important enough to lie about must be very important indeed.”

Avon bared his teeth briefly, back on balance again and ready to rejoin the dance.

“Well now, we can’t all have your sterling character, can we? But disregarding that for the moment, I’m curious as to why you insist the vial is mine.”

“Because I got it from your room, of course,” said Blake quietly. “Last night.”

There was no mockery in the dark eyes now, only a killing light. “You broke into my quarters to—”

“Of course I didn’t. Even you know me better than that. I was let in—by you—as I was escorting you back from here.”

A pause. Then Avon rose. “I have been expecting this for some time…”

“Well, if it has happened, if I have gone mad, there’s no harm in hearing me out, is there? No danger. Sit down, Avon. All right, then, stand—”

Avon sat. Blake sighed. When he spoke again it was flatly and slowly. “You’re not going to like this. Avon, I know that you have been drugging yourself to sleep every night for the past month. I know this because I have seen it. Because, Avon, when you take Lethe, you sleep-walk. No, that’s not quite right; when you take Lethe you enter a fugue state. A state in which you do things you don’t remember afterward.”

Avon had settled into perfect stillness. Blake looked at him, then away, still speaking levelly. This was as bad as he’d imagined it, and
worse.

“In that state, you come here. And that is why I know about the drugs, that is why I have seen it, because I have seen you every night for the past five weeks.”

He looked back now, into a face that was drained of color, and felt a brief gratitude that the eyes were so opaque, reflecting his own image back to him, revealing nothing of what was going on beneath. He wasn’t sure he could stand to see that. He answered the question that Avon would not ask, quickly, to get it over with. “Yes, you come here, to me, Avon. For sex.” Quietly he added, “Not sex. That’s unfair to us both. For lovemaking, I should have said. I think the—caring—is more important than the physical side. Though that—has been satisfactory as well. The whole relationship has been…satisfactory. It’s very difficult to think of losing it. God, you’re so damn sweet, so gentle—”

He had dropped his eyes during the last few sentences, gazing unseeingly at the floor, lost in the host of images that rose unbidden to fill his mind. He had no warning of the fist until it slammed into his mouth. Caught off guard, he rocked backward with the blow.

He made no attempt to retaliate. Feeling the numbness and then the pain, tasting copper, he was relieved that one thing at least was settled: he could not hurt this man. He'd won—dered about that, knowing Avon, anticipating this reaction. But now, looking into that drawn white face, those eyes that burned like dark ice, he saw also the fine-etched beauty and heavy-lashed gaze of his gentle lover. Hurt Kerr? Smash a fist into that trusting face, shatter that velvety brown gaze? Easier to say just cut your own hand off and be done with it. He was glad of the knowledge that he was worthy of Kerr’s trust.

“I told you you wouldn’t like it,” he said, ignoring the trickle of blood from his split lip. “You don’t have to stand there like that. I won’t touch you. I don’t even blame you for hating me.”


“It isn’t a lie, Avon. You know it isn’t, or you wouldn’t have struck me. You’d be laughing at me right now.” Then, as the other man simply continued to stare at him: “Think, Avon. Can you remember anything you’ve done on any night after you’ve taken Lethe? Or do you merely wake up in the morning with eight blank hours behind you?”

Avon’s eyes were wide on his, dilated and almost sightless. “This is—a ruse to get me to admit the drug.”

“Oh, Avon. No. If anyone is guilty of encouraging you to take it, I am. I let myself think…it would all come right somehow. I believed that…the benefits were worth the risk. You needed love so much—needed to give it as well as to receive—”

“You’re lying.” But in that instant he saw that Avon believed. That Avon knew. Perhaps the diamond-bright mind was putting together a hundred little anomalies from the past month, a hundred little mysteries suddenly solved, or perhaps the truth was too terrible to be denied. But Avon knew.

And so, Blake simply shook his head mutely in answer to the accusation, and waited.

It took some time for the last desperate defenses to fall of their own structural weaknesses. For the last doubts to slip through Avon’s grasping fingers. And then Avon went very still again, leaning back with a gut-wrenching composure.

“I’ll kill you for this, Blake.” He said it quite calmly. And with that, even through the numbness, Blake felt a sudden shiver of fear. Because, just then, looking into eyes as dark as black pools under a new moon, he realized that no act would be too extreme to erase this. His death, Avon’s own, the destruction of any living being who had witnessed the violation…nothing was beyond bounds. As if those eyes saw an abomination that could not be tolerated.

“You don’t understand,” he whispered,
stunned. Outrage for what he and Kerr had shared fired him. "It wasn't like that. There was nothing shameful in it, nothing dishonorable. We gave each other love, tenderness. It was good, Avon."

"Oh, quite good for you, I should imagine." Avon's voice was a breath, his eyes fixed some distance through Blake.

A surge of misery welled up sluggishly. He had known what this would look like, thrust under the light of Avon's bitter judgement. But he hadn't been prepared to actually see it this way, because when he had been with Kerr it had always been full of joy and gentleness.

"Damn you," he said slowly. "How can I make you understand? Yes, it was good; it was good for both of us. It was what you wanted, what you needed. And there was nothing one-sided about it. Avon, whilst in a fugue you become a different person. You don't think with that damnable heartless logic of yours, you don't even use words. You just feel. It's as if all the need you've been suppressing so long comes out. And all the...softness, too. All the tenderness, all the yielding..."

He knew in the moment he said it that it was a mistake, but there was no way to snatch the words back. And Avon's eyes widened.

"All the yielding. And was I...yielding, Blake? Was that...good?"

"Oh, Avon," he whispered helplessly. "Just how yielding," the subtle hiss continued, "was I? Did I do everything you wanted? Did I perform satisfactorily?"

"Avon, no. This is madness."

"Yes, but whose madness, Blake? I was asleep. And, as you just said, silent. Perhaps deaf and blind as well? Just a body with no mind. But you were awake, you were aware of everything. And yet you say you let it go on, you encouraged it to go on. The true madness is that I still almost can't believe it. You allowed me to do that? Night after night, without ever saying a word to me? Without even trying to speak to me about it?"

Blake fought down the bright sickness. 

"I spoke to you—then. But you didn't understand the words." He realized, hearing that, how it sounded. "Avon, I did try."

"You spoke to someone who didn't hear, who couldn't reason or talk back. But not to the person who could comprehend."

"Yes—no. I—"

"Because you liked it." Avon was on the offensive now, breath coming quickly, pressing his advantage. "Oh, it's difficult for you to think of losing it, all right. You had your own personal slave, your own tender, yielding slave. You could use him as you saw fit. And you enjoyed that, didn't you?"

"I never used you, Avon. Never."

"Then what do you call it? One person who couldn't protest, couldn't resist, couldn't even think rationally about what was being done to him. The other in full possession of his faculties, with every advantage of strength and reason. Even if he—your bedwarmer—submitted to anything you suggested, even if he enjoyed it, does that make the word 'use' less apt? Tell me, Blake how would you like some of your darkest sexual fantasies carried out on you? How would you like them turned into reality without even your conscious consent?"

Blake twisted as if trying to get away from this. He was used to Avon's needle-sharp acerbity, he should have been inured to Avon's attacks by now. But the needles had become daggers of ice, piercing him, impaling him. Even though what Avon was saying was a lie, a lie.

"The truth, Blake," said Avon, with vicious triumph. Blake hadn't even been aware he'd spoken aloud.

"And that is what you call a 'satisfactory relationship,'" Avon continued, venomously. "I was your catamite!" He spat out the word.

Blake spoke without looking at him. "We were lovers. We loved."

"Ah, yes, we 'loved'...every night, if I remember correctly. What about the days, Blake? The days when we fought, when I could fight? After one of those days, did we still 'love'?"
Blake’s throat was swelling, choking him. “Yes! Damn you yes, even after that.”

The voice that returned was midnight itself, terrible, seductive. It mesmerized Blake, forcing him to turn and look at Avon, forcing him to listen to the horror which came next. Avon’s eyes were wild and black, but his expression was almost ecstatic. “And those nights…were especially good, weren’t they? It was best after we’d fought, after I’d resisted you, wasn’t it? Because then I stopped resisting, and you could do whatever you wanted. The conqueror Blake, with his enemy lying at his feet. Or was I on my knees, Blake? How did you like me best?”

Blake said slowly, as if through congealing blood, “You have no right.”

“I have no right? After what you’ve done to me, I have no right even to remind you of it? You kept me as a slave when you were the only person who could have freed me.” Avon tilted back his chin and smiled in a devastating travesty of amusement. “It’s odd, I didn’t know your tastes ran that way. You really should have tried Vila—he’s much more used to the idea of being owned. Or perhaps you could have had both of us. Made us do each other while you watched. I might not have minded that. I have—noticed Vila. If I were going to take a lover on this misbegotten ship, he would have been the one. You are the last person I would choose.”

Blake whirled and smashed a fist into the wall. Jealousy and rage tore through him as if trying to rip muscle from bone, trying to rend him in half. He’d broken something in his hand, but the pain was far too dull, nothing to express how he felt inside. He struck the wall again.

“Avon…”

There was another starburst of pain as the wounded hand came up automatically to fend off Avon’s lunge. The force of it set off colored lights behind his eyes, but he gave way, stumbling backward, using his other hand, not to strike Avon but to grasp him, to stop the headlong rush. Absorbing the impact of Avon’s attack, he simply held on.

And Avon struggled once and collapsed on his shoulder, panting. Blake had his good hand locked beneath Avon’s arm, gripping Avon’s own shoulder from behind.


“I know,” Blake whispered, a dreadful, wistful tenderness surging in him. Avon was trembling so hard. “And I don’t blame you.” He could feel the torture in the body which was heaving against his, as if some wracking force was trying to tear Avon in two as it had tried to tear him.

Then—he felt something else. Pressed against the join of Blake’s legs, stifled in cloth, Avon’s cock was hot and hard.

Squeezing his eyes tightly shut on the wetness which stung behind his lids, Blake gently lifted the broken hand and stroked Avon’s hair with the side. He was cradling Avon now, not restraining but embracing him. And Avon, exhausted, slumped against him, the shaking beyond his control.

“I never wanted to hurt you like this.” Blake’s voice was almost inaudible, even to
him. “Please believe that, at least. I never meant to hurt you.”

Avon yielded to the pressure as Blake pulled at him, shuffling a quarter of a pace back so that only their upper bodies were in contact. His head still sagged forward, and Blake coaxed it up, one-handed.

“Avon. Please let me make it stop hurting…”

Avon’s moan was the sound of defeat, of despair, and there was no resistance left in him. His eyes were glazed, half-slitted. And Blake took his mouth gently, so gently, because it was the first time. The sourness, the scald of bile he encountered, were the taste of a sick man, a man who’d been ill a long while. Blake drank it in and stroked Avon’s tongue with his own. He drew Avon’s hips to him, felt that hardness again pressing low into his belly. When he rocked Avon’s pelvis, he made that gentle, too.

A new scalding met his lips, and he felt Avon thrust helplessly back at his tongue. Avon’s hips had taken over the flexing motion. There was another sound, a broken one. And Blake realized suddenly how close Avon was, about to orgasm just like this, standing on his feet, fully clothed in Blake’s arms. His whole body was rocking slightly back and forth in rhythm with his breathing. His face was burning with blood, his eyes shut.

Oh, yes…Avon, do it, Blake thought. Come for me, spill yourself. Prove it was you all the time.

Dazedly, as if in a dream, Avon continued to pleasure himself, as if he had forgotten the existence of anything but his need and the means to fulfil it.

And Blake simply held quite still and let him, let everything go but the feel of Avon against him. He wanted so much for Avon to achieve release this way.

Just a little longer, he thought. You’re almost there. Almost…yes. Now. Now, if you try; try and it will be so easy…

The taste of Avon’s mouth changed again, unmistakably. Through the moan that went up and up, just before the peaking of passion, there was a peaking of fury. Of repudiation and bitterness and pain beyond endurance. Blake was careening backwards before he even grasped that it was Avon who had sent him flying.

Uncomprehending, vertiginous, he stared at that familiar face, now unfamiliar in its dreadful weltering of emotions. Avon’s lips were swollen with kisses, Avon’s face was feverishly flushed. But the eyes that should have been yearning and heavy-lidded were poisoned—blazing too bright with anger and anguish and hatred.

“You will never use me again,” Avon whispered raggedly. The rejection was complete.

“Not even if we both suffer?” said Blake, reaching out to him, trying to bridge the chasm between them.

“Not if we both die of it,” said Avon harshly, as if completing a curse. His face altered, the sensuousness twisting and freezing, becoming cruel and bitterly hard. “This is the end, Blake. We will never speak of it again.”

He turned to the door.

Blake had one last chance, and nothing left to lose. “Avon.”

Avon did not turn back. But he was listening.

“In all the time that I have known you,” said Blake, carefully, deliberately, weighing each word, “I have never known you to be a coward.”

Avon came near to striking him a third time, even with the perils of such close contact fresh in both their memories. But he was fighting again, he was facing Blake once more. “There is absolutely nothing further to be said.”

“Oh, but there is, Avon. We were in the midst of a discussion. I had just pointed out to you that you did know me. And that’s what’s unbearable, isn’t it; not just that you loved, but that you loved me. That you love—”

“Nothing,” Avon hissed.

“Why should I be so important, so threat-
ening to you? Because I’m everything you hate? It’s not a good enough reason anymore, Avon. Or is it because underneath you still know? Whatever you may think, I never touched you that you didn’t touch me first, never reached out to you that you weren’t already reaching. Something caused you to come to me that first night. A part of you that’s been lost, I think, perhaps for a long time.

“That was never part of me. That was a creature of your imagination.” Avon made the words into obscenities. “An unconscious drone you endowed with the characteristics you like best in followers—servility, blind devotion—”

“Part of you, Avon. And if you can ever forgive—”

“I will never forgive you. You violated me.”

“I loved you—”

“You never knew me.” In the silence which followed this mayhem, he added, very quietly, very coldly, “You do not know me.”

Blake let seconds pass, while the other stared, empty eyed. “I was going to say, ‘if you can ever forgive yourself, Avon, you may find that part,’” he finished.

He saw the answer to that on Avon’s face. In times of utter despair, of insupportable desolation, Avon turned to mockery, jeering at the universe which had betrayed him and at his own vulnerability both.

“Why, Blake,” he said, smiling poisonously again, “if it was so very good—so good for both of us—whatever made you end it? Perhaps it was something I did need—and now I’ve lost it forever. Unkind to do that to someone you love, isn’t it?”

For a moment Blake was overwhelmed by this, his guilt-ridden mind accepting it and all its implications. Warped as the source might be, there was truth in the statement. How could he have done this to Avon, taken away the only chance for comfort and affection the man had, robbed him of the human contact he so desperately required…?

White-hot rage seared through him and exploded outward. In two strides he had crossed the distance to Avon, seizing the tech by the arms with one furious motion, lifting him off the ground to slam him into a wall and hold him there. He never even noticed the pain in his hand. “Damn you, Avon, for the cold, selfish, controlling bastard that you are!” he shouted into a face which shock wiped clean of any expression.

“What would you have had me do?” He was still shouting as he continued. “What, Avon? Watch you drug yourself every night of your life so you didn’t have to face the fact that you love me? Make my life a lie, fighting with you every day as if you were a stranger, never able to exchange even a look of affection? And at night making love to someone I know will never speak to me, never stay past morning, never be seen by anyone else?”

Avon twisted away, but Blake caught him and held him easily, flinging his anger into that averted face. “Is that what you would want? How long do you think I could live like that and stay sane? Damn you, Avon, for being such a tyrant that you have to tear yourself apart to be human. And damn you, Kerr, for being so weak, so spineless, that you can’t even put up a fight for what you need.” He released Avon so abruptly it was almost a shove. “Damn you, Kerr Avon, damn you both to hell.”

He never actually saw Avon leave, the colored lights and the mists veiled his eyes. But he knew by the silence and by the emptiness that he was alone.

And…damned.

TO BE CONTINUED…