We open this section with Jane Baron’s “Rhapsody,” the third and final chapter of “Fugue,” a story set in the Blake’s 7 universe. “Fugue” is struggling to be that most stable and symmetrical figure: the equilateral triangle. And from the beginning of the tale, “Nocturne,” it has slowly rotated from its base of stability to stand poised on one vertex. Now, in “Rhapsody,” the triangle teeters, threatening to crash and splinter before finally settling back to an equality of relationships: aspects of Blake and Avon the vertices, and love the sides which bind them together.

If “Fugue” is an equilateral triangle, the “The King Who Would Be Man” is a scalene one—no two sides are equal. Although this triangle rests on its base, it looks as though the slightest touch will send it toppling. And here, in fact, we have a relationship that was never meant to be…

Take the triangle and spin it ‘round on one leg. You have a cone with a solid, anchoring circular base of love extending upwards to its lonely, isolated vertex: the Glaswegian’s “Lovers and Madmen: Ravelment.”

The last piece, Sebastian’s “Psebulen,” is our triangle made solid: the pyramid with its many sides and angles. And what is the truth asks Sebastian? Ah, but that is dependent on your perspective. One triangular facet may show you a future of sweetness and light, another only darkness and despair.

---

**FUGUE**

**JANE BARON**

**PART THREE: RHAPSODY**

*Rhapsody: In music, a composition of irregular form and improvisational nature.*

An exalted or impassioned utterance.

Avon shut his eyes, hearing Blake’s words again. “If your vaunted resentment of me is real; if you really do hate me as much as you say…” And the strangest thing was that he hadn’t hated Blake…until now.

Until now. He tried to calm his breath, to regain control, but the emotion was too strong. Helpless, he stood, feeling it wash over him again and again. Five days since it had happened and the wounds were still raw. Yes, now…he hated. Hated himself, hated the situation, but most of all hated the one who had done this to him. Blake.

After all those weeks and months of resistance. Oh, yes, he’d felt the lure of the man from the beginning, and there had been times when nothing would have been easier than to yield. Give in, Blake’s eyes seemed to urge. Give it all
to me; let me guide you; let me comfort you. I promise you I will make it sweet. And there had been times when Avon had faltered, but always he had recovered enough to reassert his independence, his pride. Even during their most savage fights, when the attraction played between them like lightning, he had kept his pride.

And now, he’d been betrayed. Had betrayed himself. He had gone to that forbidden bed, succumbed to the promise in those lying eyes. Worst of all, he had yielded not only his body but his will, his intelligence, his self.

And Blake...had let him. Had taken him, used him, glutted himself on Avon’s subservience.

Bile rose in Avon’s throat, and he choked back a wave of nausea. Blake’s bedwarmer. After all this time. And, oh, yes, Blake would have been gentle; and oh, yes, it must have been sweet. He must have been sweet, enslaved like that, in thrall to Blake’s every whim. What more could anyone want than a lover who existed only to please? Willing mouth and willing ass—and no thought, no soul, no volition.

Lethe had done it. Lethe. He gave a bitter smile at the word. How appropriate. Its namesake was a river in Hades, and if he had not been in hell these past weeks, he’d like to know what hell was. Those who drank the frigid waters of Lethe forgot everything, all their past, and became lost in oblivion, as he had been lost.

But they hadn’t had to reflect on what was happening to them.

He had wondered, this last month, about the little gaps in his memory. And he’d known, at some level, that the drug was responsible. There were nights he never even recalled undressing or going to bed, but simply awoke in the morning apparently having done so automatically. The uneasiness over what Lethe might or might not be doing to a mind he’d always kept razor-sharp should have given him pause, but, inexplicably, it had had the opposite effect. His urge—overwhelmingly strong—had been not to dwell on the worry, to turn away from it. To leave it alone.

There had been other urges, too. As elusive as lines of poetry long forgotten, or snatches of melody which dissolved when he tried to follow them. And now that he thought of it, most seemed related in one way or another to Blake. He had not felt the old need to injure Blake in quite some time; he had found Blake’s idiocies rather less irritating than usual. And the fine edge of tension which was simultaneously the linchpin and the bane of his life had softened.

Leaving him weak, he thought. And how Blake must have enjoyed that weakness. Seeing his opponent not merely subdued at night but drained on the field of battle the next morning.

The last thought ran cold through him, like swallowed ice. Even with everything he knew now, the darkest mystery of all still lingered. Just what had that...subjugation...involved?

What had Blake done on those long nights when no one was there to see? In that dim room, freed of all restraints, bound to no code of civilized behavior, what had he done? As with a pleasure machine or a sensory stimulator, no fantasy would have seemed too extreme. What had Blake not done...to him...on those long nights?

He knew then what he had to do.

∆∆∆  Nights were the hardest.

The wall chronometer before him was cerulean and turquoise, the colors of Arfael. Blake didn’t need it to remind him. Even though the flutterby plant was long dead, murdered by this alien environment, Arfael was never far from his thoughts. Arfael, where the blue light had played on Avon’s hair, where he’d once almost imagined Avon had looked the other way so that Kerr could bring him a flower. He could not repress the memory; neither could he bear it.

Because, for all his grandiloquence, something inside him still believed every word Avon had said. Every accusation, every denouncement. Every...damning...word.

The pain had become a constant background symphony of discord. He could not get away from it. Blake was no stranger to pain, but this emotional torment, this feeling of utter helplessness and shame, was beyond his experience. It seemed as if it must stop, but it did not. Sometimes he could immerse himself in work, in routine, and then it dulled for a while, but it sprang back with teeth and claws whenever he saw Avon.

And he did see Avon. The man was making no effort to keep out of his way. He spoke briefly when addressed, looking at Blake with eyes as flat and hard as unpolished agate. The un-
Alphan explosion of fury and hatred in Blake’s cabin might never have been. These days Avon treated him with vicious indifference, refusing to be enough affected by the ‘incident’ to run.

Because, of course, that would mean there was something to run from.

Blake tried to make himself hope that the other half of Avon, the part he’d told Avon lay just beneath the surface, was contributing. Was keeping Avon from simply leaving, refusing to let Avon let it go.

If that were true, then he was sorry for Kerr. Trapped like this, unable to reach his lover, unable even to express himself... he would be devastated. Blake could imagine Kerr’s desperate hunger, his frustration and need... perhaps even his anger at Avon for jailing him.

There I go again, he thought, gripping one shoulder and wincing. Thinking of Kerr as a separate entity. Which he is not. Kerr has no individual existence.

The question was, had he any existence at all?

Or was the most horrifying of all Avon’s horrifying indictments true? Had Kerr actually been a mindless creature, an automaton which Blake had endowed with human characteristics? Was it possible that Kerr had only seemed to think and feel, when all that time he had been an anencephalic monster?

Blake had seen a baby born like that after the spread of a Federation teratogen. A mutant which could breathe and eat, whose body functioned perfectly, but which had no brain. No cerebral cortex, only a brain stem and fluid-filled emptiness. The parents, turned rebel in their despairing efforts to save the child from discovery, had tried to read human motivations into its limited repertoire of action. But they had been wrong, as time had showed them to their horror. The veneer of humanity had been tragically thin.

Had he done the same with Kerr—with the unconscious Avon? Intent on what he wanted to see, had he twisted mechanical behavior and blind libido into the proof of a new personality?

He had never—quite—been able to tell what Kerr was thinking. Never been able to envisage what the world looked like to Kerr, to take on Kerr’s perspective. Now he wondered whether, if he had been able to get into Kerr’s head, he would have liked what he saw. Would he have found only emptiness there, emptiness and the instinct to rut?

If so, then all his gentleness, all his fond regard, would have been the greatest farce in the whole of his lifetime. Not even years spent living as the Federation’s model citizen could compare to it.

He remembered, suddenly, another piece of Avon invective. “How would you like it if your darkest sexual fantasies were carried out on you... without even your conscious consent?”

Your darkest fantasies—did Avon even realize what he’d said? What he’d admitted then?

And only you, Avon, would consider being loved and cherished the darkest of sexual fantasies, Blake brooded. Or was it specifically being loved by me that made it a nightmare?

The polyphony of pain started up again. Dear heaven, he’d embarked on this adventure so lightly. Now he wondered how he could have ever been so blind.

Nights were the hardest. It had been five days and six nights since he had led Avon into his cabin and confronted him with a small golden vial of Lethe. And still he woke again and again from exhausting dreams, groping into the tumbled covers for the warmth and weight that had to be there. Each time, when the full realization hit him, it was like being thrust into free fall, where there was suddenly no up or down, no way to get one’s bearings, nothing to hold onto. All that from the realization that Kerr was not beside him, that Kerr would never be beside him again.

And all this, all this hell, the price of a few weeks of pleasure. The cost of letting himself get involved, not with an ideal or a party, but with an individual, a single person who had come to mean more than any other single person. He had let Kerr in...

...and even now he could not entirely regret it. Despite everything, despite all the pain, those sweet nights together had been worth the price. Unless, of course, that sweetness had been an illusion; unless his imperious, selfless, enigmatic lover had been a figment of his imagination. A cloak of glamour he’d cast around the bare bones of Avon’s lust. If that were true, if Kerr had been a phantom, if the fugues had been merely a form of convoluted nocturnal emission...
Then, what? Blake bit off a laugh. How much worse could he feel than he felt already? What more could he do to Avon, or to himself, in punishment?

But if Avon truly hadn’t known him…if Avon’s subconscious had been indiscriminately reaching out for the nearest warm convexity….If Avon’s thoughts had been light-years away…with Anna, with Vila,…

The ache did not diminish over time, any more than the joy had done. Given scope, and with cultivation, it got worse.

ΔΔΔ “I said I didn’t care about the details.” From his bed, Avon stared with half-shut eyes at one blank wall, then, finally, rolled his head toward Orac. His tone was weary. “Well? Can you or can’t you?”

“I can. However, I am in no way able to guarantee the success, or, indeed, the wisdom of such an experiment. In my opinion the risks—*”

“Are mine, not yours, and therefore beyond your province. I didn’t ask for your opinion.” He sat up and reached for the two objects on the desk beside Orac, lip twisting as he studied them. “The…usual dose, I presume,” he said, and without waiting for an answer uncapped the small vial and drained half the orange liquid it contained. Better to get this over with before he lost his resolve. He remained upright for a minute, fighting off the dizziness deliberately. Then, with fingers less deft than usual, he replaced the vial and fastened one end of the sensory lead to Orac. The other, as he reclined once more, he secured at his temple with an adhesive pad.

“Very well. Begin. Everything I experienced while…in that state. In sequence.”

“The time to complete such a program would far exceed the available—*”

“A random sampling, then,” he said sharply. Narrow-eyed, he considered the wall, annoyed at himself for having forgotten this obvious detail. “And, Orac”—his voice was thickening but his tone as acerbic as he could manage—“no prejudicial editing. I want to know…exactly what happened. I want…to see…”

“You will not ‘see,’ but feel. I warned you previously that you cannot merely observe these happenings; you must experience them as they happened. Your perceptions will necessarily be limited by your pre-conscious state of mind at the time. If this is not acceptable I must ask you to promptly…*”

Oh shut up, Orac, thought Avon, as the dizziness overtook him. I was the last clearly verbalized thought he was to have for a long time. He fell a thousand spacialis and

ΔΔΔ Chill dark and pressure.

Alone. Alone.

Such cold. Weight outside bearing down on the inner void, crushing him, choking off his breath. He struggles against it, but it is all around him. A lonely candle in a dark abyss, squandering the few brief moments before the coming of the wind. Such a hopeless, desperate flame…and so alone. So lonely. So cold.

Warmth is near.

An amber glow on his skin like sunlight on closed eyelids. It pulls at him like gravity.

Closer. Closer…

Here.

He basks in it, embraced by its corona. Warmth pervades him. Need is assuaged.

Good.

When it withdraws it tears his whole front away with it and the cold rushes in. No! Bring it back! Trap it. Hold it.

There.

Now, stay.

The darkness is lit by banked embers now. The candle flares and then burns steadily, fueled. Warm and secure, he finds it possible to sleep.

ΔΔΔ Darkcolddarkcolddarkcolddarkcolddark

Reaching—
There.

Ah.

Now, stay and be good. Thank you.

Mmmmmm…

...This is easy. All one has to do is ask.

The scene shifts again. The darkness is the same; as all darknesses are. But the warmth…is closer tonight. So close already, touching close. No need even to reach.

The roughness of homespun scratches his cheek, the smell of smoky embers enfolds him. All that warmth and strength and solidity so near. Its bulk a felt presence in the dark. His for the taking.

It is a new concept: to do something with this presence. But perhaps there is some way…to have more of it. To...

He is not sure what he wants of it. But want fills him.

Why not?

Flesh smooth and firm, only slightly yielding under his palm. Coarse cloth grazes the backs of his knuckles as his fingertips stroke along supple curves and planes. Such a wealth to explore, so much of it. And all his. Warmth growing warmer as blood rushes to suffuse the skin. What to do is becoming more clear. The pull toward the softest, most tender parts is irresistible.

All opposition is met the same way: gently. There is no need for anything but gentleness here. No need for haste. Patience and persistence will win out in the end. Meanwhile, every movement yields a different pleasure.

In his nostrils is a rare and tangy smell like blackberry wine. On his lips, a taste like wild honey warmed in sunlight. It wakens a craving for more. Spurred by long-past memories of satisfaction, he sucks hard just where he is, feeling the heat and pulse of blood as the tender flesh at the neck is pulled into his mouth. It is pleasant, but not what he needs.

He tastes lower down, seeking. A nipple raises itself like a little fist against his tongue. Again, pleasant, but not enough. He moves past ribs, padded, comfortable. Here, a tincture of salt cuts the mellow sweetness, as sweat trickles down newly heaving sides. When he reaches the soft belly he finds skin that is vulnerable and unprotected, quivering unmistakably at his approach. Springy curls brush his chin, then his forehead, and the smell rises around him, rich and exotic and penetrating.

Yes.

Warmth beats against his cheeks as if radiator from a furnace. He revels in it, appetite voluptuously stirring. The delicate skin of inner thighs shifts against his fingers as he urges them apart, settling himself in place to feast. And here the hottest flesh of all unfolds to him like some slow-blooming tropical flower. The skin is satin-soft encasing the hardness, an almost liquid feeling. He meets it at first with equal softness, so gently, feeling it swell to fill his mouth, to nudge like a little blunt-nosed animal at the back of his throat. At that his hunger is unleashed, a black hole within him, driving him to suck more and more deeply.

Hands steady and guide him, taut with passion, shaky. An alien heartbeat inundates him, overriding his own. Interlocked this way, fitting so perfectly, he is no longer alone in himself. Chimerical, he has fused, merged with his prize. The moaning vibrations caressing the inside of his cheeks and throat may spring from either of them; he cannot tell which.

No more can he tell what is about to happen, but some end is being reached. Some goal is in sight. His body is awash with pleasure. The waves of sensation lift him and the other equally, locked together, riding the storm. Until at last hunger engulfs him utterly; and greedily, noisily, abandoning the last of his restraint, he works to sate it. Inner pressure...heat...tightening...and a culmination. Without warning he is pervaded by the sweetness, drowning in it, both the slick rush of fluid down his throat and the delicious answering surge in his own body.

This is…inexpressible.

Avidly, he feeds on the feeling, unaware of anything but bliss, sucking and drinking in animal enjoyment. When at last it is over and he slowly settles back, his belly is full and tight and the amber glow is inside him.

Warm. He is warm and satiated…and drowsy. The flesh he has released is damp and crumpled, soft again. When drawn up into nameless, cradling arms, he forsakes it without regret, want-
ing now only to sleep. The gentle touches change his mind, show him that there is more prolonged pleasure to be found, and sharper release. Yet nothing is quite as important as the warmth that has filled his core; release is less satisfying than fulfillment. At last he is free from pleasure and need alike and he can rest, ignoring the intrusive hands which stroke his hair, his face. Eventually they subside and leave him alone and peace envelops him.

Thank you.
Mmmmm…

∆∆∆  The same darkness. Another time.

Awareness of urgency and of promise emerge simultaneously. The warmth is nowhere near, yet somehow he knows it exists, feels its attraction from far away. It is as if a silver thread of light connects them, guides him to it. He follows the strand without question, through a labyrinth of twisting, meaningless dark. Even as he nears the center of the maze he has no clear picture of what awaits. The warmth has no form or name as yet.

Reaching it, however, joy and recognition flood through him. The presence draws him, bending his path like a star capturing a comet, and he yields and embraces it eagerly, thirsty already.

There is such comfort in this place. Here, with the rhythmic pulse of heartbeat against his cheek, galloping just now with his nearness but normally so slow and steady. Here, where tonight the curls at the nape of the neck are damp, teasing his temple and forehead with moisture, making him shiver. The warm, loamy smell, edged with sweet sharpness, enfolds him. He sighs in pleasure, bringing them both down on the bed.

Presently bare skin meets bare skin, all down his length. Rediscovering the half-wild, honeyed taste is pure delight, but it is nothing compared to what comes next. Soft lips touch his, move gently against them. The pressure is light, but instinctively he obeys it. He feels, almost with fear, this alien, newly-familiar breath in his mouth, first warm and then cool on the inside of his cheeks. And then the delicate probe of tongue tip between his lips, past the barrier of teeth, to press tenderly against his own.

Yes. Oh, yes. Writhing, trying to hold still, he opens himself to it, offering everything. His arms fling out, lax, his mouth is stopped with kisses, his body defenseless.

Utter trust and assurance. He has no need to defend against this presence…against this man. Only a fool would think otherwise. Of all places, he is safe here.

Is it this knowledge or the mouth moving over him, tasting him everywhere, that makes him tremble? The sensations ripple through him like waves on a still clear pond. He tilts his head back, limbs aspawl as if floating, wanting to open himself even further, to expose himself completely to this force. He wants this strength and power channeled inside him, quickening and completing him.

But just now he is too drenched in pleasure to pursue the need. He is willing—eager—for whatever his lover wants. The soft keening one of them makes is pleasant in his ears. Caress builds on caress until his body is thrumming with tension, until he feels he must discharge it or die.

No height any higher, no brightness so bright. At the peak, his body breaks open and everything within pours out in a shower of gold. At that moment he knows the name of the power, the warmth, the one who has conjured all this wondrous delight from him. It echoes through his mind, touching memories, reverberating somewhere deep inside. He is not surprised to find it already ensconced in the innermost reaches of his psyche, the center of the woven circle, waiting there.

Blake.

The discovery sweetens the physical pleasure to an almost painful level, a transport of spirit that he has never felt before. The rush of joyous gratitude explodes outward, and, dimly, he is amazed at the seemingly inexhaustible source from which it comes, for the flood goes on and on. With it, he is exalted.

In return, he is bathed in the radiance of answering love. It penetrates him, shines through him. Every dark place in his soul is lit up like the sun.

The sweet ebb leaves him breathless, sodden, and incapable of motion. Thought recedes. He is content now just to be, to lie lulled by the sound of his own breath slowing in this strong embrace. Mmmmm…

Sleep teases at the corners of his mind, but he resists it; the first act of his burgeoning con-
sciousness that is not in simple accordance with
his own desires. There is another to be consid-
ered now. The warmth has a name and needs of
its own.

He struggles from the chrysalis of womb-like
contentment and reaches out. The intoxicating
pleasures of touch and taste are still there. Pas-
sive no longer, he sets about creating joy.

For both of them. The tide of sensation is wash-
ing gently back. And gradually he becomes aware
of something else. Need. A new need in the core
of his being, so profound that it shakes him with
its intensity. The longing to enfold this lover com-
pletely, to be pierced by him, to fuse with him in
truth and be one…

It is a corporeal ache, a necessity, as real as
the need of a drowning man for air. It must be
satisfied.

But it will not be. For the first time he receives
frustration at the hands which before have
brought him only bliss. He cannot understand it.
Fortunately, his memory is very short.

∆∆∆ The universe is simple, and does not re-
quire much contemplation. There is this place, and
there is the other place. In this place cold and
darkness reign, and everything, when touched,
transmits a faint chill through his fingertips.
Smells are barren here, surfaces are hard and
sterile; nothing allures or gives comfort.

The other place is different. There, a refuge is
always waiting. The sheets are inviting, scented
with the promise of gratification, and heated by...the warmth. He has forgotten the name
again, but that may be as well. There is some
danger attached to it not to the warmth itself,
but to an intrusive presence in his own blood.
Connected somehow with the chill place and with
the denial and fear that belong there.

At the height of love, where no cold or evil can
touch him, he sometimes remembers the name,
but the rest of the time it is better to leave it alone.
No matter. He knows the warmth well enough. It
is the sun which pours light and love into him
unstintingly whenever he cares to lift his face
forward it; it is the radiance which sustains him.
There is no limit to what he can take from it; he
can drink comfort until he is swollen like a berry,
and then take more, for the sheer pleasure of the
moment when delight becomes insupportable and
shatters him. And, afterwards, at his leisure, he
can sleepily suck just for reassurance, until tor-
por overcomes him.

In response, every cell in his body joins in the
chorus of love. The joy he creates is returned to
him tenfold, so the only sensible thing to do is to
create more joy. His paean to the light is a tan-
gible thing, a composition played on nerves and
sinew, a concrete litany of gratitude and praise.
And there is no greater reward than seeing his
offering accepted, feeling the warmth flare
brighter under the persuasion of his caress. His
tribute is untutored, spontaneous, but he can
make the object of it tremble with rapture. And
that, after all, is the only thing which does matter.

∆∆∆ He likes the curls. They smell of his sweat,
of brambly fruit on a hot summer day, and they
coil so trustingly about searching fingers. No
matter how long compressed in a fist, they al-
ways spring back. It is amusing to try to make
them stay flat, or to wind them, until all the fra-
grant dampness is gone and they fluff up softly.
The texture is good, too, under cheek or chin, and
ticklish to sensitive lips.

There are so many things to enjoy about this
lover. The voice that is a physical caress, the arms
that house power so gently, the wide expanse of
torso. Good to tarry here and listen to the sweet
thick pulsing of heart, to hear the lungs pumping
air. It is an individual rhythm, one that could be-
long to no one else. Over time, the cadence has
become a lullaby.

The hands are also pleasing. Big and expres-
sive, blunt-fingered but capable of delicate ma-
ipulation. Craftsman’s hands. He likes the cal-
luses on the pads beneath each finger, on the
side of the thumb. They are rough, sometimes,
and catch on the puckered fragility of a nipple.
He likes the laborer’s strength of the hands, too:
fully extended they can encompass a buttock
each. And that is best. No…best is when one of
those long blunt fingers is inside him, feeling thick
as a little cock for that first moment. Each time, it
makes him want more.

Tonight he wants more. Impaled on a finger,
he writhes, flushed with joy as it touches secret
places deeply buried. Two is closer to what he
needs, but still not enough.

Instinct drives him, again, to try to arrange
the proper joining, but as always he is thwarted.
It is the one thing denied him. Yet he longs for it
so much, to have that radiance at his center, to feel the torrent of love and illumination pouring directly into the marrow of him. To be one with the light. Every encounter is marred by the refusal.

This night is no different. But the rest of it is sweet, the touching and kissing, and, as always, the warmth nurtures and satisfies. Like a white dwarf orbiting a red giant, he siphons strings of energy from his larger companion. Fortunately, the source seems to be illimitable; he cannot drain it, he need not share it, and there is always enough.

Names are difficult, and most objects he identifies by use. And though at times words are poured out before him, in a voice rough with affection, the words themselves remain incomprehensible, beyond his reach. Still, he likes to be talked to, likes the attention and the lilting sound of it, especially after love. If it becomes bothersome the voice can simply be ignored. And there is one word, one name, that does have meaning. It has been said often enough, and evokes enough sympathetic vibration from the web of his psyche, that he is sure. Kerr. He is Kerr, and he is separate from the darkness, and from the objects around him, and from the presence which warms him. Kerr.

The darkness tonight is a cowl blanketing his senses, but by now he is perfectly familiar with the way to the other place. Most objects in his path are still veiled, bewildering and uninteresting both. But tonight the sound of voices behind an open door gives him pause, makes him hesitate.

So there are other…presences. Other things with voices, perhaps with names. Curious, he considers exploring them, but decides against it. That which is not-Kerr and not-light is probably unimportant. And a flicker of disquiet inside him says it may be dangerous as well.

So he leaves these inhabitants of the fallow dark, treading carefully to avoid their notice, and continues on his journey. He would pity them if he could understand the concept.

Reaching his destination, he finds more to disturb him. The room is dim and hushed instead of bright and welcoming. There is no greeting. Worst of all, he is lying full-length on the bed, restless but unresponsive, forehead furrowed, eyes tightly closed. Asleep.

What to do now? He moves between door and bed unhappily, unsure whether to stay or go. Everything is amiss tonight.

Finally, in an attempt to put matters back on course, he undresses, doing what is usually done for him. The routine itself is comforting. Afterward, he bends over the sleeping man; and, when that elicits no reaction, sits down beside him.

Results at last. There is a stirring, and the room brightens as drowsy eyes open. Though the words are unintelligible as usual, the weariness in the voice makes them superfluous.

Just as another’s joy can be experienced, so can another’s pain. The voice rouses feelings of woe, and the need to…what?

There is sorrow here, and exhaustion, and loneliness. Those can be cured, and he applies the remedy he knows best. As he has so often reached out to the warmth for his own replenishment, he reaches now to replenish. Hold it close and shelter it and all may yet be well.

The tactic succeeds beyond his expectations. Curls brush his jawline; there is a sigh, and then all that strength yields to him, lying pliantly against him. Cloth in contact with his bare skin is not pleasant, but no matter. The breath on his neck comes softly and evenly, the limbs intertwined with his are still. Where there was turbulence there is now peace.

This is how it was in the beginning, before he discovered there were better things to do with the warmth than just cling to it. But now he is the one being clung to; he is strong and powerful himself, and he is giving. The embers which burned only sullenly when he entered the room are rekindled now.

Who would have believed that what eased him would also ease this other? And who else can compare with him? He can feed a star.

The vague worry that troubled him earlier has vanished. He is encompassed by limitless peace, like an ocean which stretches from horizon to horizon around him. In this boundless twilight he floats, content beyond measure, and knowing that it will last for

Avon sat up.

The noise which had snatched him back to awareness was not the blaring of ships’ alarms,
as he’d thought at first, but only Orac’s dissonant whir. He was in his own bed, in his own cabin, but for a minute or so after opening his eyes he could see another, more spectral image imprinted over it. A room less brightly lit but somehow rosier—

*(the other place)*

—and disconcertingly familiar.

The image faded as common objects around him were recognized, given names and meaning. Dreamlike, its memory could not coexist with ordinary awareness.

It faded so completely, in fact, that for several moments he sat there frowning, resisting the urge to blink or rub his eyes, wondering what the hell he was doing on his bunk fully clothed and attached by lead wires to Orac. And in such a state...A second whir and chirp brought the scintillating lights into focus.

*The allotted time,* Orac commented, after a ridiculous and manifestly unnecessary throat-clearing sound, *is up.*

Ah.

Recollection came back swiftly—but shallowly, at least as far as the last few hours were concerned. He was attached to Orac because he had been driven at last to find out what atrocities Blake had committed in the name of ‘a satisfactory relationship.’ Strange, but the expected rush of hatred and hostility at that name failed to appear. He was not used to being able to think Blake recently without wanting to do murder.

And now...the experiment was completed. Successfully? He tried to order his thoughts to decide.

He had experienced...something. But the experiences were hard to get hold of. They were composed of images: visual, auditory, and tactile; and each slipped away as he tried to pin it down and examine it.

Orac had warned him about his pre-conscious condition during the fugues. Apparently he had perceived and recorded events as sensory impressions—and had not necessarily put those impressions into words. Looking back, he found that although he could recall the feelings and sensations from many encounters, he could not describe, event by event, what had actually happened on any given night. It was not so much a case of inability to remember as of inability to translate the memory into symbols which made sense to him in his present state of mind.

It explained, though, his present state of *body.* The one thing that he did know was that he was sexually aroused to the point of eruption; every individual nerve was inflamed and screaming for release. He started to shift a cock that was agonizingly hard against strangling material, and then flushed and jerked at another throat-clearing sound.

It was only a machine. Nevertheless, he flipped the key out with savage force, cutting off whatever Orac had been about to say with pleasure. The key landed in a far corner and he yanked the lead wire from his temple and dropped it on the plastic casing.

Now. Small wonder he was so stimulated; he had just experienced a week’s worth of fornication in a few hours. Active fornication, too. Although the memories were wavering and distant—as if they all belonged to someone else—the feelings were clear. He could not make the visions seem a part of *him,* and he did not wish to, but he had watched them all the same. He had...vicariously participated in them.

He did not remember any atrocities. Perhaps there had been none. Probably Blake had realized that one day he would be caught and all his deeds viewed in the cold light of reason, and so had been cautious. But in any event, Blake’s motivations scarcely mattered now. Avon could think of only one thing; all else was secondary. The cold light of reason was being driven out of his head, because, very simply, he needed sex as he needed air.

He was halfway to Blake’s room before he realized what he was doing.

The sight of that door, exactly like every other cabin door on the ship, and yet completely and qualitatively different, brought him up short. What the hell was he thinking of? When, in the name of chaos, had he allowed mere lust to drive him into rashness, to govern his judgment and usurp his self-control?

But he could argue himself blue, and the truth would still be the same. Whether or not he wanted to admit it, this desire was past curbing or restraint, and far past sublimation. Nothing else, nothing less, than Blake gasping under him would do. And besides, what he was planning made a brutal sort of sense. He had
satisfied Blake before; now Blake must satisfy him. He needed—he had to have—what he had experienced in the visions.

Opening Blake’s door revealed the cabin beyond, and for one heartbeat the sense of \textit{déjà vu}, of recognition, almost overwhelmed him. But it disappeared just as quickly as it had come. What he saw then was Blake, fully-dressed and half-rising from his bed, surprise and exhaustion contending for supremacy on his face.

Avon noticed the expressions only incidentally. He wasn’t interested in what Blake looked like. He didn’t care whether Blake had slept since they were last here together, or why Blake was lying there dressed, or how Blake felt. The top two buttons of Blake’s shirt were undone, exposing a smooth V of chest, and the sight sent blood swarming to his groin. In the absence of any conscious decision to move he was suddenly using his weight to hold Blake down, while his fingers scrambled unkindly for other, lower fastenings on the shirt.

He was too impatient to work them properly and material tore. And this appeared to be what Blake had been waiting for, seemed to be the trigger needed to release Blake from his dumb-founded paralysis. Blake stopped staring and started struggling.

The fight was silent and unscientific, clumsy, and in deadly earnest. Avon had the advantage of single-mindedness; for whereas possibly Blake was concerned about damaging him, there was still only one thought pounding in his own brain. He would \textit{make} Blake submit. The image of how it all must look to Blake—this feverish man bursting into his room and leaping on him—did occur to Avon for an instant, but was promptly slapped away. He did not want Blake’s approval, did not care for Blake’s cooperation. He required only Blake’s acquiescence.

But he wasn’t getting it. Infuriated by the obstinacy, he pulled out of the iron grip that was hindering him to snarl down into his opponent’s face.

“Don’t play coy with \textit{me}, Blake,” he said viciously. “Orac showed me what went on; I’ve seen it all. You never objected before; why bother now?”

It worked.

He had, apparently, lighted on the one thing that would do the job. Without a word of protest, without another movement, Blake stopped grappling with him and went limp. It was so abrupt that he should have been startled, perhaps, but instead it only spurred him on. He didn’t give a damn why he’d won. The important thing was that without those big hands impeding him he was free to rip Blake’s trousers open and plunge in a hand to grasp the thick, soft cock.

The lack of responsiveness was annoying, insulting actually. Blake, having chosen to submit, was choosing to do nothing else. But Avon had neither the time nor the inclination to remedy that. The awkwardness of the first moment, sitting back to stare at what he had unveiled, considering what he wanted to do with it, vanished almost at once. His own clothes opened under hasty fingers. Then he pushed Blake down flat again, and, slanting an arm across his throat to discourage rebellion, fell on top of him.

The smooth warmth he encountered inspired him to thrust, to see if that would be enough, if that would satisfy the demands of his body. It was good. Good enough that he just kept on doing it, jabbing against Blake’s belly, plowing between Blake’s thighs, pleasuring himself. The room was as silent as it had been during the fight, the only sounds his own harsh breathing, and Blake’s gasps against his forearm, and the slap of flesh on flesh.

Blake himself lay quite still underneath, not giving, but rather as if he had given up. Which made it all the more strange that when Avon shifted the arm to allow him air, Blake began to help him. Not reluctantly, exactly, but haltingly, with something akin to sadness. As if this were some sort of last duty, some concluding task, like shutting the eyes of a corpse.

Nonetheless, it was all Avon needed to send him into the final throes of passion: Blake supporting him, Blake steadying him, Blake moving to his rhythm. He heard his own breath catch as he worked hard to achieve release, and felt his muscles tremble with strain as sweat blurred his vision. And then his tongue locked against the roof of his mouth and he stiffened, feeling the first surge of orgasm.

The pleasure was strong, but over too quickly, and there was a hollowness to it that disturbed him. As the last tremors of climax dwindled, awkwardness returned. In cold blood, it was...
almost embarrassing to find himself lying sprawled on Blake’s chest, glued to him by sweat and semen, with both of them half-naked.

Slowly, he pushed himself up and clambered off. When he forced himself to look back and meet Blake’s gaze he saw that Blake would not—or could not—meet his. Instead, silently, the other man shrugged out of the torn shirt, and, pulling together his trousers, lay back down. His face was drawn and weary.

And for all Avon’s heat and ardor, that thick soft cock had remained soft. It had lengthened only at the height of Avon’s frenzy and then withered at once as if ashamed of showing even that much of a response.

At the memory, resentment boiled up in Avon, displacing the awkwardness. He forgot he had earlier decided he didn’t care for Blake’s cooperation. Blake had liked it well enough before; he had no right to be indifferent now.

To punish Blake, Avon refused to look at him as he stood and straightened his own clothes. He took his time over it, securing each button precisely, keeping his back to the bed. Despite this display of pride and contempt, a void had opened above his stomach. What he had just done was nothing to be proud of. There was a name for it, and not an attractive one. Not one he’d ever thought to apply in connection to himself, with either man or woman.

But why couldn’t Blake have just participated, then? After all his talk of love and satisfaction and relationships, wasn’t Avon in his bed what he really wanted? Wasn’t that good enough?

Frustration closed Avon’s throat, and he felt a sting behind his eyelids of pure anger and unsatisfied need. Because it hadn’t been good enough, not even for him. This was sex as he remembered, yes; a bit rough, of course, and stripped of the formal preliminaries of flattery and seduction and wooing, but sex within the range of his experience. Yet it had been nothing like the dream.

Those experiences were misty, still hard to define. The pleasure, however, was unclouded and incontrovertible—and this had been nothing like it. He had been cheated, betrayed again by Blake. He’d wanted what he’d felt in the visions, and Blake had refused to give it to him. He’d come here for sex, but the sex was not enough. A random phrase floated back to him. “Not sex,” Blake had said, so softly, his eyes on the floor. “That’s unfair to us both. I think the—caring—is more important than the physical side…”

Bitter and agitated, he turned to look at Blake…and stopped. New rage swelled up sharply to engulf him, and then, slowly, died.

Blake was asleep.

True sleep, for in fraud he would have turned his face away, and Avon could see it clearly. Could see the black circles under the eyes, the chapped dryness of the lips, the sheen between eyelid and temple.

Déjà vu jarred him again, as it had when he had entered the room, but this time it was much stronger. He knew he had not experienced this situation before. There had been nothing like it even in the dream images. And yet...

He found he was staring into the empty space between himself and Blake. He should have realized this wouldn’t work: relying on Blake, using Blake to meet his need. Now he was just as frustrated as ever, and Blake—was hurt.

It incensed him that this should matter in the least, that he should care one way or another if the man who had used him lived or died. But it did matter. A great disquiet shimmered in him at the sight of that wan face, those hunched shoulders. Even in sleep, Blake looked wretched and restive and…lost.

The dizziness this time was so powerful that he put out a hand automatically to steady himself. It grasped only air, but he stayed that way for a moment, head swimming. He felt as if the floor had lurched beneath him, but as his vision slowly cleared he could see that objects in the room were still balanced, stationary. Not a sudden acceleration, then. Not the luminous penumbra foreshadowing migraine, either—he knew that perilous glitter all too well.

The first deep breath restored his sense of equilibrium, the second dispelled the grayness lingering in his side-eye. This was neither the time nor the place to develop some mysterious strain of vertigo.

The room smelt of sex. Well, that was hardly surprising. But, while the odor should have become less noticeable as time passed and his senses habituated to it, it seemed to be growing stronger, forcing itself on him. And, as if his
perceptions had suddenly been honed to predatore-keenness, he almost imagined he could discern two separate scents. His own and that of another. The second hung in the air, heavier and warmer than the first, mellow but with an exotic tang to it. Conjuring up memories of summers outside the Domes, the summers of his childhood, when it had seemed summer would never end. And familiar. So familiar...

No. He hadn’t even realized he had closed his eyes, had taken a blind step toward the bed, until he stopped himself. Startled, tingling with adrenaline, he shook his head to clear it, then drew in a long breath of Liberator’s recycled air. It still smelt of sex, but there was only one scent. And behind that was nothing but flatness, the stale flavor of a cabin that had been closed off too long.

What was happening here?

He should leave now. Leave Blake asleep, alone, and, if his miserable body still insisted on carnal indulgence, seek out some more amenable crewmate. Someone who could keep quiet about it afterward. Even Jenna was preferable to standing in Blake’s room working himself into olfactory hallucinations.

The fog hit as he stepped toward the door.

It had been hard enough to move that way in the first place; the air in that direction seemed to assume a treacly thickness, so that he felt a drag on his limbs and a smothering in his chest when facing it. Instinctively, as the gray wave broke over him, he turned back toward the bed, stumbling as if to get out of billowing smoke. His ears were ringing, a disagreeable high-pitched sound. His heart-rate had accelerated, his face was burning, and when he looked down at his hands he saw that they were clenched into fists.

Rage. He felt…seething rage. Except that that wasn’t quite right; he wasn’t seething, only irritated and thwarted and beginning to be a bit alarmed. But...someone...was very, very angry indeed.

And not at Blake.

He stood very still, thinking about that.

When in doubt, experiment. Fall back on the scientific method. So he took one of those compacted fists, absently noting the veins standing out in bas relief on top, and raised it over Blake’s sleeping face.

The wave of distress and repudiation from his own chest, from his gut, astounded him. The feelings were aversive in the extreme. He could no more hold the position than he could have held his hand in an open flame; so, jerkily, he yielded to the impulse to open the fist. After which he simply stood for several minutes, examining his outspread fingers, his palm, hanging steady in the air. He had never minded seeing Blake hurt before; he’d always felt dimly that Blake deserved it. In fact, it had been rather deeply gratifying to loosen a few of Blake’s teeth with this hand last week. But just now the picture summoned up only nausea, as if he were proposing to hit some wide-eyed child or feeble elder who had wandered into his path. As if he were considering doing a thing that was simply not done.

He saw the truth then. He was under attack. But not by Blake, nor even by those ubiquitous aliens whom he’d accused of directing Blake’s actions. He was under attack...by himself.

It felt extremely personal.

And it might have been diverting, it was such an extraordinary situation, except that the feelings were his. He felt not at all as if some outside power were feeding extraneous urges and emotions into his brain. On the contrary, it seemed as if an inner door had opened and he had stumbled onto a great pile of disused artifacts, long forgotten but undeniably belonging to him.

He’d stood on the flight deck once in a similar quandary, above the planet Horizon. Had stood there struggling with feelings that were unreasonable, unwanted, inappropriate, and his, until a trio of Federation pursuit ships arrived to put him out of his misery. Then he’d calmly slammed the door shut on that uninhabitable room, and got on with business, so happy to be certain of his course that he didn’t even care which side had won the interior debate. Nor did he need to justify his actions to an inner censor; he didn’t need to think at all. And no one could make him.

If pressed, he could always snap, “Why not?” He had become very good at doing things and then snapping “Why not?” afterward.

But just now the feelings—the very personal inappropriate feelings—were threatening something more important than mere survival. They
were swirling like a wrathful ocean around his pride, his sense of self. He would not feel kindly toward the man who had used him. Who had degraded him, if not by actual brutalities, then by the simple act of enjoying his body while he was not in it.

Open-eyed, with all his faculties intact, Blake had had every advantage. And that had allowed him to patronize Avon. It must have been entertaining for him, to watch Avon’s nocturnal antics as if watching a favorite pet. Blake had been at liberty to give or withhold, while Avon had been dependent on his sufferance.

The image of Blake sitting on high, bestowing his gifts of love and pleasure as he saw fit, turned Avon’s blood to acid. And it jolted his thoughts back to the present. He had almost forgotten that he was standing over Blake’s bed, staring sightlessly down at the figure on it, with one hand still upraised. Although it seemed like hours, it couldn’t have been long, for the sweat on Blake’s face hadn’t dried. He must have been gazing at that dampness for several minutes now without realizing what he was doing.

Of course it was sweat.

Avon rejected utterly the idea that his body could be controlled by any foreign intelligence—even by one which emanated from inside himself. And so it was with a kind of dreamlike fascination that he watched what happened next. Slowly, as if pulled by a wire, and entirely of its own accord, his hand moved down until the back was just brushing Blake’s temple, stroking by the corner of Blake’s closed eyelid. He only felt the coolness on his knuckles as he lifted them back up into the airflow.

Moisture shimmered faintly when he turned the hand this way and that. From one angle it looked like nothing. From another it emphasized the pores, threw back the light at him.

It would be dry in an instant. He could breathe on it once and dry it now. There was no reason in the known worlds for him to be standing here scrutinizing any of Blake’s secretions, appraising his knuckles as if they were dusted with goldspice worth a thousand credits a grain. As if he might discover the mysteries of the universe in a molecule of water.

Very slowly, he brought the back of his hand to his lips.

Oh.

Sweat was salty, too. But sweat did not taste of bitterness, of loss.

Indignation clenched Avon’s teeth, stole his breath again. Why didn’t you just let it go on, then? he flared silently at the unconscious man before him. Why not just keep your precious ‘Kerr?’ You had the choice; I did not. What excuse could you have to make yourself miserable—

(Lost)

It flickered up over him like a swirl of icy water, not a single sensation, but a full collage of images: sight, sound, and feeling combining to form a concept. An…immersio. It was as if, for that one instant, he had been transported to another place, another time. A place in which he was not himself.

He fought it off and forced a normal breath, trying to ignore the trip-hammer of his heartbeat. He had never been subject to fainting fits—or visions. Such things bordered on insanity.

He was not insane.

Laboriously, he reconstructed the thought that had been interrupted. What right had Blake had to make himself miserable, indeed? After all, it was all Blake’s own doing. And how dare Blake now lie in pain, how dare Blake agonize over it tonight, when just last week he had so easily—

This time the leaden wave of vertigo was stronger than all the others put together. They had been sea-spray flickering about the edges of his mind; this was a tsunami, drowning him in the taste of salt. A riptide, crashing about his ears and pulling him under instantly, as if to show that it had only been playing with him before, as if to mock his previous victories over it. Drenched and blinded, he went down without even a gasp of protest, and

ΔΔΔ (Lost. Lost. Cold that turns everything the color of ice, more terrible than the darkness and more lasting. The glacial color of despair. Sight, sound, and touch are crippled by it, muted almost into non-existence.

The amber glow which once fell on his closed eyelids like sunlight has guttered. Burning a sul len red, like old iron, it gives neither light nor heat. A yellow sun aged prematurely, eking out its last fuel before the fires die for all time. Soon it will be a frozen corpse, a black dwarf, sterile and
utterly insignificant in the vastness of the seas between the stars.

And he—

∆∆∆—had to get out. He struggled up from it frantically, fighting with every ounce of his will. This could not be happening. Never in his life had he felt anything like this wrenching of perception, this schism in his own psyche. He was being torn apart as if by the tidal forces above a black hole.

This was no longer a skirting of the borders of madness. Such shattering, such loss of volition, was madness. And he was losing it again already; all his efforts were not enough to keep his head above the surface. He could not see the cabin he knew was around him; he could not sense the ground underneath him. It was far too strong; it was overmastering him and he—

∆∆∆—is impotent to help.

It is the worst thing he has ever imagined. Though vision and hearing are maimed, one sense is still far too sharp. He is awash with the taste of salt. As deadly to a candle flame as to a dying sun, the frigid wave dashes against him, leeching off his warmth as if envious that he should have had it for so long.

Helpless. He is helpless. And utterly bereft. The brightness which has fed him, nurtured him, warmed him, is quenched. And all that he has taken...cannot be given back. Is refused. His desperate love and comfort turned away.

For the first time, he is conscious of his own inadequacy. Bewildered and dazed, he can make no sense out of what is happening. He has never before felt worthlessness, felt...shame. But he feels these things now. All that he can do is not enough. All that he is, is too little.

If only he could understand what is taking place. He has never realized how limited his perceptions are. And the discovery...is beyond endurance.

All he knows clearly is that there is pain, pain, pain, and that he can do nothing to stop it. The universe is filled with pain, and—

∆∆∆No.

Avon felt the floor beneath his knees, saw the artificial light of Blake’s cabin. Saw, too, the silver coverlet, the curving bulkhead, a chair. And had names for these things. He was himself.

That had been...that vision had been...

His breath came hard and he saw that one hand was pressed flat, white-knuckled, against the floor. Bright spots danced before his eyes.

Unwilling to test his equilibrium, he remained kneeling where he was. He had enough trouble just to think coherently, like an invalid putting out one slow foot before the other.

He had to get away from this. It was no longer diverting in the least. The force that was dragging him into—that place—was not playing a game with him. It was trying to destroy him.

His intellectual curiosity had vanished, leaving him no scientist, but a man fighting for his life. Fighting for his mind. And, though that mind was working slowly, still in shock, it was working. Desperately trying to plan ahead, to find a solution.

The first thing was to get out of here, out of this room which seemed to provoke the madness. Yes. Leave here. Get out and then find some way to make sure the disease did not catch him again before he was ready. Drugs might work for a while to suppress it. At least long enough to buy him time to think. And then—

—then more drastic measures; whatever was necessary. There was no need to panic. There were ways of dealing with such things. Whatever was inside him was malignant, like a growing cancer—and so, like a cancer, it would have to be excised, be isolated and destroyed.

That was it. He felt himself become a little calmer. He would root it out. Go into his subconscious, find it, and eradicate it completely. He knew it was feasible; he had the technology, had Orac to tap into the latest research. Federation research, of course; because the Federation was always on the leading edge of that field—

He was talking about mindwipe.

The realization stopped him short, brought all his plans to a halt.

It was true.

What the Federation had not done to him, what even they had deemed too risky, he was contemplating doing to himself. He was considering the mutilation of his mind. The dissec-
tion—the dismemberment—of his personality.

He had been thinking of doing that? He had? He must be mad already even to have entertained the idea. Easier to simply turn himself into the nearest Bureau of Renormalization and save everyone the trouble.

Very well, then. He tried to quiet the lurching in his stomach, to order his thoughts once more. Memory erasure...was clearly out of the question. He had long ago decided he would rather die than live with that horror.

But there had to be another solution. There had to be. At the very least, no matter what else, he had to get away from here. Not just from the room, but from the ship. The disease had never troubled him before; it was Blake who had wakened it. Perhaps, if he could put enough distance between them, he could lure it to sleep again.

It was possible. Anything was possible. He would do that, he would leave *Liberator*, leave Blake. Escape first; that was all he needed to worry about now, and later—

Later, what?

Again, his plans ground to a halt. Escaping was all very well, but he carried this sickness with him. It was *inside* him. And just how was he planning to escape from himself?

It had already proved it was stronger than he. In another atmosphere it might lie quiet for a while, but wherever he went, it would travel also. Lurking in the shadows. Waiting its chance. If he closed his eyes to that, he was simply tacitly agreeing to its existence. To its eventual victory. To its eventual victory.

Trapped. He was caught between Scylla and Charybdis. Uprooting the madness meant butchering himself. Ignoring it meant slavery. There was no other alternative, no other choice... *...save death.*

Anger fountained through him again, a renewed fury that rose to thrust back the fear. *No.* Not that. He would not allow Blake to destroy him, to make him destroy himself. He would fight this thing any way he could, with any weapon, anywhere...

*Anywhere*...

Even on its own territory?

The silver bedclothes, the join in the wall above them, faded before his eyes as his mind turned inward to consider. Bravado? Perhaps, but...why not? He could not excise this part of his mind, and he would not consent to it controlling him. But what if he could control it?

The memories locked behind that door inside him were distasteful. Were...extremely unpleasant. But they were not the memories of another person, another personality. They were *his* and he had a right to them. Once he had power over them they would no longer be a threat. Seize them, and he would have his destiny back in his own hands.

That was it, then. He would fight it on its own ground, on its own terms. And win, damn Blake, damn everything. And win.

With the decision made, he felt a sudden grim calm. It was the only choice possible for him. He could not live mad, or mutilated—or sunned. These last days of hating himself for what he could not remember doing had shown him that. He refused to be split into a bloodless intellect and a mindless hedonist by his own conflicting needs.

He wanted himself back.

Now the only question was how to do it.

He needed to open that inner door and let the visions flow out. And then—he needed to lay hold of them, to look at them, to examine them in *his* world. In...the cold light of reason.

So. There would never be a better time or place. He had already crossed the barricade more than once today, albeit most recently against his will. Now he would do it deliberately, with purpose.

He sat back and shut his eyes.

The dampness on his hand. That was as good a starting point as any. It seemed to have triggered these last episodes. He would concentrate on that, and on the images it had evoked. On opening that door...

Unhappiness. That was what came through most clearly. The night of this vision he had been unhappy. And...more than that, he had sensed...the deep unhappiness, the...

*(the despair, the white numbing cold, which now bleeds through what once was warmth)*

...which had *bled* through what once was warmth. Another's unhappiness.

He drew a long breath, tension easing. Apparently, he *could* tap into this well of memory.
He could crack the door and release something that he could understand.

That night—this night which for some reason he was able to access, had been unpleasant in so many ways. There were other feelings in the word-paintings. He had felt such...confusion...such perturbation...

\[\text{a panic which urges him to flee, but there is nowhere to flee in this swirling whiteness, there is nowhere to go that is safe. This place which has always been a haven is now a deathtrap and he is mired in ice and utterly lost}\]

...and fear. That was it. Ease off, now, and take this slowly. He had been afraid. Yes, but why? What images were connected with the fear?

He had been afraid because...

\[\text{because the wind is coming, the desolate nothingness that steals all thought, all meaning. Soon, quietly, one by one, the stars will begin to wink out until the sky is left black and silent}\]

...because he had perceived a sort of death. Yes. Senseless as it sounded, death was what he had been anticipating. And not just his own death. He had envisaged...an...ultimate destruction...

\[\text{the final ticks of the clock before the last light is gone and nothing is left but dark relics scattered throughout the enormity of space. Each immeasurably far from the others, doomed to evaporate silently into the void until not even a grain of cold sand is left and there is nothing nothing an infinity of nothing}\]

Gasping, Avon sat back and opened his eyes. His throat was dry, he was sweating, and his muscles were trembling more violently than when he had forced himself on Blake. Although the raw material kept coming, translating was surprisingly difficult, surprisingly draining. Not only were the visions themselves aversive, but he was fighting the force that had encoded the memories this way in the first place, that had created the fugue.

His own mind, again. A power within him beyond reckoning. But what he had done, he could undo. He was proving that now.

He took a moment to gather his resources. Then, letting his half-shut eyes lose focus once more, bracing himself, he went back in.

That night...he had been concerned about more than his own loneliness. He had sympathized with...had felt compassion for...

\[\text{the last charred embers of the warmth. His own storm of grief has done its part in dousing the fires, and now the end has come. Within his very compass, it goes out. And this is the most horrifying thing he has ever witnessed: the death of a star}\]

No, this was ridiculous. Beyond credence. Yet there was no doubt about how it had seemed to him. He had felt that...something...was being extinguished. That...

\[\text{light and radiant energy have been transformed into rubble. Scorched and shrunked, it will soon be a lump of dark ice, as cold as the wasteland around it. A derelict corpse in an endless abyss. Yet this same star had once poured forth life and vitality, had seemed deathless, had bathed him in luminance}\]

...that something was lost. And whatever it was, it was of great value. He had been filled with sorrow, and had wished...to comfort, but had felt...

\[\text{snowbound, mired fast}\]

...inadequate.

But why comfort, when the loss was his? Think about that, follow that strand. Because...

\[\text{because all life is linked and the universe is one vast interconnection. And the white death feels the loss of summer more keenly than he ever can, for it is the instrument of its own}\]

Hell.

Avon let out his breath sharply, leaning back in exhaustion—and exasperation. His original sense of triumph had dissipated. For all his effort, this was getting him nowhere. Riddles led only to more riddles.

Oh, he could retrieve the emotions, could even decipher them to a certain extent, but he still
could get no picture of what had actually been occurring. He was not some small forsaken light orbiting a collapsed sun. Entropy had not overtaken the universe.

If he could not wring more sense than this out of the memories he had no hope of making them his. No hope of being whole again.

He *would* be whole again.

Very well, then, he would go back in. But this time he would look for something specific. He already knew that he had been in this room on the night of the vision. But when had the experience occurred? He needed to anchor the memory in time.

Grimly, he let the silver folds of bedclothes blur before him, let the door open and the haze of irrationality and despair surround him. He gave himself to the vapors and let them take him to—

*(the last time, of course, the last of everything, the final turning. The night after which all sleep will be dreamless, all memory forgotten.)*

That wasn’t—

*(Lethe.)*

Meaning that—

*(All life and joy is behind him now and before him the ferryman waits. Time is meaningless for there will be no after. This is the stopping place.)*

He understood.

The last night, then. The last evening he had slipped into fugue. Now that he thought of it, there had to be one. He hadn’t enquired too closely into Blake’s decision to end it, but clearly Blake had made that decision before seeing him that night. And even—

*(especially)*

—in his primitive state of consciousness he himself had somehow understood what was about to happen.

And had…been deeply distressed by it. Well, he should have deduced that. All this pain and fear, then, all these images of obliteration, came from the thought of…terminating the relationship. There was no other answer.

He was succeeding, at last, in translating this puzzle. He knew where and why—now he would find how. How had he been standing, what facing? He needed to make those muddled perceptions work properly, to use them to sense his own body, instead of fantasizing about winter and dying stars.

A picture brushed the edge of his consciousness, an image which he seized and tried to wrestle into coherency. Standing…he had not been standing. Nor sitting, nor kneeling like this. No, he had been…

*(laid out as if for burial and embraced body and soul by the glacial white. The shrouding material cannot keep the frost from burning him everywhere he and the other touch but he makes no effort to get away. Nothing matters anymore, because this is the end of everything and)*

…lying on the bed, this bed. Fully-clothed, wrapped in a coverlet, but still shivering. As he shivered now. Because there was more. In this picture he could sense something concrete other than himself. Too excited to go carefully, he scrambled after the image, grasping for it. He had been lying there, very still, and...

*(the other, the one who brought life and now brings death and with whom he will go into the darkness uncaring)*

Yes! And...

*(the one who warmed him, whom he trusted, whose heartbeat lulled him to sleep)*

…and...

*(the presence which drew him, bending his path like a star capturing a comet, which guided him as if with a silver thread to itself)*

…and...

*(the one whose arms are rigid with the pain, whose voice in his ears is raw with it)*

…and...

*(the man whose name has been a danger but*
now all danger is past, the one who was at the center already, who had been waiting, who had always been there but always unknown)

…and…

(Blake.)

Blake. And Blake had been...

(brushing the soft touch of despair on his cheek and neck, the cold kiss of the river of the dead, the essence of oblivion)

…had been crying.

△△△ It was all very simple, in the end. Two perceptions, merging into one. Two disparate images, which together gave depth and meaning. Once you got the knack of it, you could never be confused again.

He saw it all now. Had all the pieces of the puzzle.

He had felt the wetness of tears here, and here. And this was where Blake had been holding him, and this was where Blake’s head had lain.

It had frightened him terribly, then, to feel that strong body shaking, to hear the grief in that always-steady voice. And his fear had been doubly great because he’d not been able to comprehend what Blake had been saying. He’d tried so hard, but it was like trying to read in a dream. The symbols could not be marshaled into meaning.

The words had seemed...so important, so momentous, at the time. And yet now, hearing them with other ears, re-shaping the sentences which had defeated him, he found they were nothing remarkable; nothing, even, that he did not already know. Just two phrases, repeated over and over. One was, “I’m sorry.” Which he, even in pre-consciousness, had grasped from the beginning. The other he had also known for a long time.

But...what had been momentous was the depth of Blake’s pain. Not the sorrow of a master losing a favorite pet. There had been no patronization that night. And though Avon, in the fugue state, had been incapable of grasping the truth of the situation, Blake had not seemed to realize that. Everything Avon had sensed, Blake had been feeling firsthand.

Blake had cared...that much.

Slowly, fighting the cramp in his muscles, Avon rose to stand beside the bed and look down.

Not a star, then. Not...an illimitable source of energy. Just another lonely candle.

Some candles burn brighter than others.

△△△ He turned slightly, to regard the room which for the last hour had seemed such a place of torment.

It looked different now. He’d feared and hated the thing inside him which had caused the fugues, which had sundered him in the first place. But now he could see that it was not a fatal defect, not some nemesis trying to destroy him. On the contrary, it was an extremely adaptive mechanism which had allowed him to survive—to cope—under circumstances which would otherwise have been intolerable.

It had allowed him to take what he needed, at a time when his conscious mind would unquestionably have stopped him. It was as if something inside him had permitted his isolationism to go so far, and then stepped in and calmly said, “Enough.” And it had even protected him from the consequences of his actions for as long as possible. Madness it might be, but it was a highly efficient madness, and it had served him well.

And, in the end, it had yielded to him, returning the control it had usurped. He had Kerr’s memories now. His memories, on his terms. He was no longer a stranger to any part of himself.

And now...he could also understand Kerr’s motivations in mounting this evening’s assault. Kerr had indeed been angry, as he had sensed. But Kerr had not been trying to destroy him. Because what Kerr had realized that last terrible night was that Kerr himself was not whole, was not...enough. That he was not competent to meet Blake’s needs—or his own—in times of great trouble.

For that, he needed Avon.

Gratifying, thought Avon wryly, to know that one is good for something.

But the cynicism, the humility, were not meant. Individually, he and Kerr had each been quite successful in their chosen spheres. Together...
Just now he felt he could do anything.
It took such a little motion to turn and look
at Blake.

The tell-tale sheen of moisture had evapo-
rated. Blake’s face was uniformly pale, now—
except for smutty thumb had tried to dry his tears. No way
to deny; Blake looked terrible. His skin was
chalky and livid, stretched unattractively tight
across swollen cheekbones. His hair had dulled
to a lifeless olive-drab, lackluster and matted.
Blake had not been built to look haggard; it sat
on him poorly.

Thoughtfully, Avon turned away.

Reaching into the well of memory was no
longer traumatic. It required only tenacity and
concentration. What he brought back this time
was an image of Blake, before. Blake as he had
been on one of those nights, alive with strength
and obstinacy and enthralled admiration.

It was a fine point which Avon liked more:
Blake’s strength or his own ability to conquer it.

With his back to the man on the bed, he be-
gan to meticulously undo what he had done
earlier. He undressed slowly, folding each sepa-
rate garment carefully as he removed it, setting
it on the desk. His boots went side by side be-
low. Then he crossed to a panel inset by the
violet chronometer and adjusted the lights to a
beckoning dimness, a cool and restful dusk.

Returning, he stood once more over Blake.
The one thing he could not do any longer was
rely on his unconscious mind to rescue him.
His destiny was in his own hands now—and he
would have to live with the consequences. This
was the last moment of choosing, when every-
thing hung in the balance. He looked into Blake’s
face for some sign.

Blake, oblivious to the drama of the moment,
did not so much as flicker an eyelash to influ-
ence his fate. He seemed to be deep, deep in a
sleep without dreams.

Avon smiled.

Then, very calmly, most deliberately, he leant
down to touch Blake’s lips with his own.

Blake’s mouth tasted of fatigue…and some-
thing else. Avon recognized it as he had before:
the metallic tang of lost faith, of bitterness. The
dross of hope destroyed. Blake’s lips were rough-
ened by stress and lack of moisture. Straight-
ening to gaze down into the inert face again,
away from Avon’s unclothed flesh as if it had scalded him.

Avon ignored all this.

With infinite gentleness, without hesitation, he bent down to caress Blake’s mouth with his own. To make love to it with his own.

And Blake reached his breaking point. He struck out wildly, flailing at Avon, trying to fend him off. He seemed panicked, unable to cope or to comprehend.

Indulgent yet totally serious, Avon raised one hand: curved, open. He let Blake’s flailing fist strike it, and then captured it and held it fast. He gripped hard, increasing the pressure, showing Blake his strength. But, simultaneously, he went on caressing Blake’s mouth, poring over it with the softest of kisses, the most velvety touches of half-closed lips.

And, slowly, as Blake faltered under these ministrations, seeming utterly bewildered and frightened, Avon carefully rearranged their hands without bothering to look at them. He reordered the fighters’ hold into a less warlike grip, fanning Blake’s fingers, slipping them through his own, sorting them until they interlocked like cog and wheel, until their hands rested palm to palm in a lovers’ clasp. What he let Blake feel then was the security and inevitability of their entwined fingers. The gentle destiny of their joined hands.

Resistance, he thought, comforting Blake’s mouth without pause, is useless.

ΔΔΔ Gentle dreams…Blake had always thought they were there, just around some inner corner. Or, at least, he had hoped they were, had longed for it, wishing for just a few minutes to lose himself in their embrace, to hold Kerr again. To escape, however briefly, from the wracking dread and desolation of being awake.

But he had never quite been able to reach them. Even asleep he had been awake to the pain, and dreams had been no refuge.

Until now.

He felt the warmth, the nearness, before he felt the first touch. And so tranquility had already begun to flow into him, to seduce him, before that first glancing contact made him tremble.

So gentle…but then Kerr always had been gentle, especially at the start, as if suddenness or undue fervor might frighten Blake away. It was easy to weave this tenderness into the tapestry of his dreaming. On one of those early, unearthly nights his incubus-lover might have kissed him like this. Healing the stinging pain where Avon’s fist had cut his lip with the softest stroke of tongue-tip, the briefest pressure.

‘Where Avon’s fist...’—the pang of memory drove Blake deeper into his dream-world. He would not give this up, not when Kerr was touching his mouth so sweetly. He would not lose it, he would not...

The waking, when it came, was very bad. He had no idea what Avon had said, but suddenly he was blinking in half-darkness, dazed and disoriented…and stricken.

At that instant, looking up into those shadowed brown eyes, all he felt was hatred. Pure and savage hatred for the man who had snatched Kerr away—again. Who had splintered his dreams once too often.

Mixed with the hatred and fury was a gut-wrenching fear. To sleep while another watches is to be vulnerable. He was afraid of Avon, of what Avon might do to him. He had to make Avon stop, to force Avon away, to hurt him. He could not bear to be used again; he would fight with all his strength to prevent it.

The problem was that all his strength didn’t seem to be enough. His struggles were feeble, pitiful. Partly to blame was the fact that he still felt drugged with sleep; his limbs seemed heavy and uncoordinated, enabling Avon to hold him down easily. But the other part was that, even while holding him down, Avon was not hurting him. Avon was...loving him. Kissing him almost chastely, but with a thoroughness, an intensity, that liquefied his bones.

And his own body was a traitor. Starved, not for sensation, but for this sensation—this weight on top of him, this smell in his nostrils, these fingers clamped on his hand—it was weakening. His palm burned where it had brushed Avon’s naked side. His loins ached and tingled, unsought pleasure building there.

It was the pleasure that finished him. Kerr had always known what to do, how to touch him, so that his insides crawled and melted and his head swam.

But this—wasn’t...

It didn’t matter.
He knew Avon could sense it when he stopped fighting. It was different from the first time tonight, when he had simply gone limp, feeling as if his spirit had vacated his body. This was a warmer, header yielding, an opening. And Avon lost no time in following it up, in prizing the crack wider.

But he did it subtly, with finesse. Teasing, touching Blake’s tongue tip and then retreating, stroking him through the cloth of his trousers, very lightly, over and over. Until Blake sobbed dryly and opened to him completely: mouth, legs, everything.

It had been so long...six nights in the world, perhaps, but an age in his own mind. And longer because he’d thought it was an age that would never end.

The light, inquisitive fingers were familiar—yet strange. The touch was not Kerr’s, but the resemblance raised gooseflesh on his skin. The realization of whose touch it was, of just who was exploring him, coaxing him, rousing him this way, sent a discharge of electricity down his nerves, down his vulnerable naked sides. Avon awake. Open-eyed, talking, presumably in his right mind. The thought of being loved...like this...by an Avon with speech and reason was terrifying and exhilarating. Exhilarating enough to bring him almost to crisis at once, before Avon permitted even an open-mouthed kiss. He wasn’t going to be able to take much more of the teasing anyway. Each tiny, swift touch of tongue-tip, followed by the inevitable retreat, boosted his desire for complete invasion. He was strangely reluctant—afraid, almost—to wrap his arms around this Avon and enclose him, but he needed more all the same. He needed Avon’s mouth open to him; Avon’s pliant solidity against his beseeching flesh.

Gratitude flowed through him when Avon’s fingers trailed up his crotch to the waistband of his trousers. He’d felt so violated, before, at Avon reaching in to take what did not belong to him. So exposed. He felt exposed now, but there was a hypnotic pleasure even in that, in submitting. And Avon was not rough with him; Avon’s fingers circled him gently, stroking underneath, cajoling him fully erect. His breath caught in his throat as desire finally overcame disquiet, and he reached with the hand Avon was not holding to cup the back of Avon’s neck.

He wasn’t sure what he expected; for Avon to pull away, to freeze in censure, to bite. But instead Avon simply held still, fingers brushing him encouragingly, lips moist and parted. As if he were...waiting. And after a time Blake could stand it no longer and he probed into Avon’s mouth, swabbing Avon’s tongue with his own, taking hesitant possession of it.

They were both breathing hard when he fell back. Avon’s fingers were not quite so gentle as they stripped him of his remaining clothing. Strange, but until this moment he had not consciously realized that Avon wore nothing. The sight of that pale, graceful body sharpened his appetite, as always, and when Avon moved toward him he reached out helplessly to touch it, to embrace it, relearning its planes and contours. His hands flowed down Avon’s torso and drew in to carefully enshrine the flushed genitals. He felt Avon quiver and then go very still.

He looked up. He’d forgotten, for an instant, with whom he was dealing. But Avon merely remained quiescent for a few heartbeats eyes half-shut; then he let out his breath in a long sigh. That was all. The more telling response was in the warm flesh Blake held so lightly, in the lovely dusky-rose cock which lifted for him. He fondled it as if mesmerized while Avon, eyes still almost closed, painstakingly arranged them for another kiss.

He wanted whatever Avon wanted now. And he tried to demonstrate this, to let Avon’s responses be his guide as the kiss stretched out, became deeper, lacing through with fire and mounting urgency before it lapsed into small broken nuzzlings. But he was not in the least ready for what happened next.

Avon disentangled himself punctiliously, almost primly, releasing Blake and sitting back. Blake could not tell what he was feeling. Though there was a faint glow to his skin, he looked thoughtful and remote, as if listening to some inner threnody, or trying to remember a phrase which eluded him.

Blake saw the change, the flicker of heavy lashes, when he got it. And then, with the conviction of utter certainty, Avon turned to the wall beside the bed and slid a finger under the panel to extract the top drawer.

Blake’s mouth went dry. His heart, which had been racing, plummeted to thud dully some-
where around his solar plexus. Anything, he’d decided anything Avon wanted…but the sick dismay within him would not be quelled. He sat, mutely, as Avon uncapped the tube and squeezed a small amount of lotion onto his palm.

Blake’s body was throwing memories back at him: jolts of blazing agony which clawed up his spine, white-hot torment tearing into him without respite. Lost in that raging, deafening misery, he scarcely noticed what Avon was doing until cool fingers closed around his cock, spreading the lotion on him.

Bewildered and no less horrified than before, he raised his eyes to Avon’s, shaking his head.

“Avon, no…”

But this was not Kerr, willful but uncommunicative. Avon’s eyes narrowed slightly, then dropped to the discarded tube. Still engrossed, intent, he picked it up again.

As he rubbed cream between thumb and forefinger, looking at or through it, the dry woody fragrance wafted to Blake, rising around them. Avon breathed deeply of it, then pulled his head back sharply.

Then he just sat for several minutes, impassive. When he finally glanced across at Blake, his lips twisted wryly.

“A case of the blind leading the blind, wouldn’t you say?” he murmured. “Never mind. I may not have had much experience—recently—but I do know how it’s done.”

Blake was too startled, at first, to speak. Avon…remembered that? He could not summon up any suitable reaction. He felt it must be significant, somehow, but just now, in this roar of confusion, his mind could not begin to grasp the implications. So he stuck to ground he was sure of, and was distantly pleased to hear that his voice was steady.

“No, Avon.”

But, again, he was not dealing with Kerr. Avon gave him an odd glance, heat and serenity mingled, and touched the back of his hand.

“It will be all right,” he said.

Blake shook his head again. He did not believe that; he remembered all too vividly the indignity, the pain… Wetting his lips, he looked quickly at Avon.

But Avon was not looking at him. And whatever Blake had meant to say was abruptly cut off by a second palmful of cream being applied.

He thought he had not quite cried out. If that was so, Avon clearly meant to remedy it. He stopped eventually when Blake caught his wrist with shaking fingers, hard enough to bruise.

Blake himself wasn’t sure if he’d done it to stop Avon or not. He watched wordlessly as his hand was detached and turned, the last of the cream squeezing sluggishly into it.

“Now,” said Avon, calm and self-assured, lying back. Blake, left sitting with a clenched fist of scented lubricant and an erection that echoed every beat of his pulse, knew then which of them was going to have his way.

He tried to be careful. When Avon went taut at the first tentative intrusion of a finger he paused, uncertainly. He couldn’t think properly anymore; it was as if vast portions of his brain had gone numb, but the strangeness of this, of Avon resisting what had been so familiar to Kerr, was borne in on him.

What Blake felt just then, in defiance of the cumbersome stiffness at his groin, was not eroticism. There was pleasure in touching this body he loved, true enough, but it was a pleasure that woke a slow sustained ache in his heart rather than a swift heat in his cock. Aesthetic rather than physical. Almost the tenderness he’d felt for Kerr, when comforting him in the beginning.

He stroked cream high into Avon’s body, making sure Avon could tolerate one finger and then two, fascinated to feel the plush velvet texture so silky with lotion under his touch. He loosened the tight ring of muscle until it parted like butter for him and Avon rocked slightly with his slight movements. And then he stopped.

All the preliminaries he had dispensed with; Avon was curled before him, open, ready for the taking. And Blake could not bring himself to take him. He was afraid, afraid of causing pain, of losing control, of shattering this fragile bubble of harmony which surrounded them.

Finally, it was Avon, still unhurried and reflective, who guided him, drawing Blake into position between his legs, himself placing the flaring cockhead against delicately puckered skin. The gesture, and the range of mute meaning behind it, scythed down the last of Blake’s doubts. Gods, how he wanted this. Shaking inwardly, he closed his eyes and applied pressure, feeling the slickness of the little mouth of
muscle, feeling its resistance, and then, incred-
ibly, feeling himself pushing in, his cock nudg-
ing inside and opening Avon completely.

And feeling Avon accept him. That was what
kept him wonderstruck, spellbound, as inch by
inch he gained ground. Avon was allowing this,
not simply tolerating it, but welcoming him. They
had to work at it together, in increments, Blake
restraining the leaping impulse of his own body
to give Avon time to accommodate, and still Avon
did not change his mind, or protest.

Which made it all the worse when, as the first
constriction was passed, Blake felt the sudden
spasm as Avon contracted involuntarily. He saw
the change in Avon's expression, the flash of
raw pain in those dark eyes.

He froze, arrested. Waited without breathing
until he saw Avon breathe, until he felt some of
the tension in Avon's frame ease. And then
waited longer. He was willing to remain like this
for as long as it took, or even to withdraw, but
after another deliberate, measured breath, Avon
again relaxed and urged him forward. Scarcely
knowing what he was doing, he groped over for
Avon's hand, twining their fingers together as
Avon had earlier, gripping hard. His eyes met
Avon's and Avon nodded. Then he began again.

It was difficult for both of them. He had to go
slowly and wait for Avon's relaxations. But his
self-control held, and though Avon's fingers
tightened bruisingly at several points, he did
not spasm or flinch like that again. When at
last it was done, when Blake was fully sheathed,
he looked up, blinking away sweat.

What he saw stopped his heart.

There was no discomfort in Avon's face now.
Instead, lighting those chiseled features, soft-
ening and altering them utterly, was the lush
look of hunger assuaged. Of...supreme satisfac-
tion. He himself couldn't pretend to understand
it, but no one seeing Avon could doubt Avon's
response. Though Avon's body was still, his
chest had begun heaving, a rhythm which grew
not slower but quicker as tiny shudders rippled
through the muscles which clutched Blake.

And while Blake watched, Avon wetted his
lips and swallowed, breath coming more and
more rapidly as his eyes, only half-open, turned
this way and that.

Whatever was happening inside him, what-
ever they had set loose here, was more power-
ful than either of them had expected. Just the
sight of it sent pangs of fear and rapture roiling
in Blake's gut. Suddenly, though desperate not
to hurt Avon, he could remain passive no longer.
Jerkily, his eyes never leaving Avon's face, he
pulled his hips back, withdrawing a bare centi-
meter or two. And then he schooled himself to
hang motionless, suspended, and wait for Avon's
need to spur Avon on to the next action.

He did not wait long. With another uneven
breath, Avon's legs tightened around him, hips
lifting to receive him. They both gasped at the
sensation, and Avon's face, flushing with the
return of gratification, blurred before Blake's
eyes. Abdominal muscles rigid, he slowly with-
drew again, farther than before, far enough to
feel the stinging cold outside of Avon. This time,
though, he could not hold back, and before he
could stop himself he thrust hard, frantic to bury
himself again, to re-experience the heat in Avon's
molten center.

Even as glory swarmed through him he made
a sound of apology, almost a moan. But the
twisted pain, the flinching, the tension he half
expected to see never materialized. Instead,
Avon's sharp breath was one of pleasure, and
his look one of disbelief and revelation.

It was almost too much for Blake, almost
enough to send his hips pistoning forward, fur-
rowing into Avon as hard as he had often
pumped into the artificial channel of those close-
held thighs. The first tug of separation, though,
reminded him of how different this was. He was
inside Avon, gripped glove-tight by clinging
muscles, and a hard enough thrust could kill.
Not as quickly as a neutron blast, perhaps, but,
if untreated, as surely. Avon had admitted him,
even knowing that; Avon had admitted him into
this most vulnerable and unprotected part of
himself. Avon had trusted him...that much.

Again, he let Avon control the speed and vigor
of the subsequent penetration, and again Avon
arched up to meet him, while impelling him
down with arms and legs to hasten it. Even when
they were wholly enmeshed, he continued to
work himself on Blake's cock, as if seeking
deeper union, as if trying to take more of Blake
inside him.

There was no deeper union. Blake felt already
that he was reaching up to touch some hidden
core of Avon's being. Though his only previous
experience had been one of agony, he could imagine, suddenly, how this might be for Avon. How it might be to have that smooth flaring hardness stretching up farther than would have seemed possible, feeling that arrow of invading flesh groping toward his heart. And embracing it eagerly, wishing for it to reach even higher, to fill him utterly. Oh, no wonder, no wonder...

Now that he understood better, he could allow his own instincts freer rein. He and Avon controlled the next movements in concert, parting and then surging back together smoothly. Blake found his eyes drifting shut at the luxurious sensation, the breath heaving out of his lungs.

This was...an intimacy almost too great to bear. The urge he had felt for so long, to know Avon completely, to be with him in every way possible, was being fulfilled. Avon was wrapped around his cock—around his cock, which just now seemed the essence of himself—absorbing and enfolding him without reserve. Avon’s fingers, sweaty and slippery, were tangled with his, writhing in his restraining grasp. His balls rested on the hot dampness of Avon’s cloven cheeks, his back muscles rippled against the demanding pressure of Avon’s calves. All his consciousness was focused on these places, as if he had existence only where he and Avon conjoined.

He was glad he hadn’t known how it would be. If he had, if he’d had any idea, he would never have been able to refuse Kerr. All his principles, all his concerns for Avon’s sanctity, would have melted like ice in the summer sun. As Avon was melting around him now, still clinging but growing more and more pliant, making his gliding thrusts even smoother. They had found a rhythm that pleased them both, that transformed this clumsy penetration into an act of grace and ease and delight.

It was their own discovery, and Blake saw a secret, heated smile invade the bliss-drugged face below him. The answering throb he felt caused him to surge, overcome for the moment by the clamoring in his blood—because he had wanted that smile so much, had dreamt of looking up to see it in eyes which knew him, on lips which could speak. Now he could return it, a shared joy at their private rhythm, a smugness at what they two had found.

There was a time, after that, of matchless content, as they explored together the sweetness and the potency of this act. It should not have been distinct from any other kind of lovemaking, perhaps. Men and women could unite in so many ways; and there was no reason why joining—enfoldment—transfixion—should be qualitatively different from all the others. And yet it was. In the short time since penetrating Avon a whole host of new feelings had blossomed in Blake, so he could scarcely contain them all. Communion, trust, humility, something like reverence...and protectiveness. Protectiveness in such measure as he’d never known before. Gods help the man—or woman—who tried to harm Avon now. The tender fierce-ness inside Blake demanded that he shield Avon from the rest of the galaxy and champion him against any evil. It wanted to guard and to nurture and to kill anyone who threatened Avon’s safety.

All that because Avon had welcomed him into his body for a few minutes. He could only guess as to whether Avon was feeling some reciprocal sentiment. He tried to tell himself that his own emotions were uncalled for, that they were inappropriate, some vestige of ancient heterosexual relations, hard-wired into the brain to see that primitive males defended females and their children—and it made not the slightest difference in the worlds. Avon was his, now. And anyone caught menacing—or encroaching—was his lawful prey.

Each swell of pleasure only sealed the compact. Their smooth, slow strokes were faltering, becoming irregular as need pressed them more insistently. Spurred on by the craving, he pulled back far and fast, and when Avon clutched and lifted, thrust in fully and much more rapidly than he had yet. It startled them both, the transition from near-complete disengagement to complete impalement, and Blake saw a glimmer of distress once again on Avon’s face. But it passed at once, and the appeasement and gratification which followed were unmistakable. Like that, then. This was how they were going to end it. Hard, but needful, and long anticipated by both of them. He gave Avon another minute to adjust, and then began, yielding to his body’s natural longing.

He glimpsed Avon’s cock, dark against the pallor of belly and straining above swollen tes-
ticles. The beauty of it hurt him, and he experienced a strange duality, as if it were this organ enshrouded itself and his own flesh receiving it. The abdominal muscles beneath the cock were vibrating with strain, and Blake knew then what Avon must be feeling; the inexorable gathering of pressure that heralded orgasm. He felt it, too, the charge of energy in every fibre of himself. Gasping, he rose up high and sank in deep and then discovered that he wanted only to do it again and again, and that he had almost no control over whether he did or not. It had become a necessity. All he could think was, oh...this. Oh, this...

And, thanks be to all the gods, there seemed to be no need for restraint. He had always been careful with Kerr, but Avon was his equal, and met him with equal strength, now. He had found his match.

With that, his mind left him. What happened after was recorded in fragmented impressions, frozen images which would return to illuminate him later. Droplets of his own sweat falling on Avon’s face. The harsh sound of his breathing as he fought for control, for a few more seconds of this. Waves of scalding heat coursing through him, and Avon’s fingers raised to wipe new wetness from his forehead. Musk drowning both of them, overpowering the cedarwood, and Avon’s head arching back suddenly as some ultimate nerve center was broached. Brown hair tossing against disordered silver sheets which glittered and glinted and dazzled the mind, and heavy-lashed eyes tightly closed, not in sleep, but in burgeoning ecstasy.

This was...

Avon’s fingers bit into his hand, twisting and dragging on him in a moment of anguished exertion.

...beyond...

And then it happened as he’d imagined it, that first time when Kerr had opened his legs and lifted his knees for him. His eyes clung to Avon’s face, thrown back and oblivious in sudden delirium, so he did not see the first tremor and spurt of the dusky cock, but he felt the violent contraction as Avon’s muscles snapped shut on him, spasming again and again. But this time the spasms were not of pain; quite the opposite. It was so good that he could do nothing but freeze and quiver, breath sobbing, gazing stupidly down at the beatific face below. Avon was transformed as always during orgasm, suffused with an inner light and so lost in rapture that Blake felt something outside of his understanding was happening, something Avon alone could comprehend.

Whatever it was, he could not share it. He knew only that Avon arched, and cried his name, and came.

And cried his name.
That was all it took.

It was still resounding in his ears as he withdrew through the contractions and drove in strongly, heedless, for the moment, of what new havoc this might wreak in Avon’s transports. He achieved complete penetration and then simply clung on, locking Avon to him feverishly, straining with all his might.

And then the long, slow climax ripped through him, forcing his head back, forcing his seed high into the guarded depths of Avon’s body. He knew they both could feel it, him jetting hot into Avon’s most secret places, and once again the intimacy, the immediacy of it, was almost too much to bear.

He was filled with such love, as if he were pouring himself out before Avon in offering, worshipping all this beauty and strength and perilous brightness, and wishing, in that instant, only to give himself to it totally. To surrender utterly, to relinquish himself. Loving this man was a danger beyond reckoning, but there had never been any help for it and just now he was filled with a sweetness he thought would kill him.

Stunned, he looked down into eyes which were dazed, blinded by the sword-sharp glory all around them, but seeing nonetheless. He saw himself reflected in those eyes, saw recognition, understanding. Kerr had been lost in such moments of glory, lost in himself, far from Blake and unreachable...but Avon knew him.

And the look on Avon’s face—all light and life centered here, in this one instant. Blake felt the same joy swelling inside him, piercing him, flowing through him in a torrent.

Dimly, as if from a great distance, he heard himself cry out, knowing that his body was still taut and trembling, transfixed by perfect pleasure as Avon was transfixed by his flesh. The glory held the two of them equally, penetrating
both, erasing such meaningless concepts as who was surrounded and who was there to surround. Blake had found the heat at last to fuse them into one.

The rapture abated slowly, so that ordinary things, like breathing, became possible.

They’d ended up all of a heap; limbs tangled, muscles collapsing in the aftermath of strain. Blake, curled over Avon like a man crumpled in grief, felt the last shimmering tension, the galvanic current, sigh away. The pleasure still reverberated, and he wanted to kneel there and steep in it, in the echoing throb of blood through sensitive tissue. But Avon’s own shudders were subsiding, and Avon’s cock lay still among the pearlescent streamers on belly and chest. It was over.

His body protested movement of any kind, and it was difficult to turn and fall to the side, difficult to let go Avon’s hand after so long. His own hand shook with the release of tension, pressure-numbed, still printed with Avon’s fingers. But it was good to lie still, to feel the myriad delicioussettlings in his body, to feel his mind returning, rational thought reasserting itself—and then it hit him.

In a silent, searing flash, all that he had been a moment earlier was wiped out. Cold washed over him, as if he’d stepped into vacuum, leaving him gasping for air, stunned. What had just happened here? But that was a stupid question. What had happened was that he’d just fucked Avon. Gods help him.

The ramifications were more than he could deal with at present. However, at present there was probably only one he really need worry about. And that was getting out of this room alive.

What mad nonsense had he been thinking a few minutes ago? Trembling, he tried to unearth the sentiments to scoff at them. Wild ideas about protecting Avon—Avon!—from anything with the poor judgment to menace him. Some notion that being allowed liberties with Avon’s anatomy made them eternal lovers. As if his inserting a dangling bit of gut into any of Avon’s orifices had spiritual meaning...

Embarrassing even for a peri-orgasmic insight, he decided, hugging the wounded fury close to him, fighting off the shock. And dangerous, dangerous because it left him vulnerable now; it gave Avon the element of surprise in any attack. Except that he wouldn’t allow that; he wouldn’t; he wouldn’t be fooled so easily. He knew very well what might happen next.

Because this was not Kerr, not the gentle, generous lover who’d lain so many nights in his arms. This was Avon; fickle and unpredictable; dagger-bright, perhaps, but unstable as cryo-explosive nevertheless. As changeable, as cold, as the winds of Instareth. Blake had seen that before, and had promised—had sworn to himself—to remember it. Those chestnut eyes had contemplated without blinking the scene of Instareth’s destruction, and afterwards Avon’s only regret had been the time and effort wasted there. That supple body had held him down in cold-blooded use, without compunction, just hours ago. Perilous beauty, indeed. This was not Kerr, with whom surrender had been a joy, and trust as natural as breathing.

Avon’s first movement sent adrenaline flaring down all his nerves, and made him wince as weary muscles tensed. But he was ready. He was ready for anything. As Avon sat up, he braced himself, made sure he was in a position to move quickly if he had to. What all this had been about he had no idea, and the lovely, unreadable face turned silently down to him gave no clue even now. The look of dazzled contentment, of gratification, had vanished, and the eyes under shadowed lashes were dark as a week of moonless nights.

He’d seen them like that before, when he’d realized Avon would go to any lengths to erase the memory of his violation. And how much greater was that violation now? And how much farther would Avon have to go to erase it? This was not Kerr. He told it to the shaking inside himself, told it again and again because to shut his eyes and lie back now would be more than foolhardy, it might well be fatal. This was not Kerr; it was proud Avon, who had always been out of reach, and of whom Blake had no need...

Lies.

The confusion and tumult in his brain suddenly folded closed and disappeared. The fear and anger he had been clinging to slipped away and vanished.

Because of course it wasn’t true.
He felt, emerging from the confusion, as if he’d risen from a deep pool of water, bursting through the surface to take a long breath under the stars. Because, now that he looked, he could not help but see the truth waiting for him. He still didn’t understand what had just happened, he couldn’t grasp what was taking place tonight. What he did know was the answer to the last question Avon had asked him five days ago.

The question that began, “Why?” And the answer was with him, here, now, in his bed. Why had he ended it? Because he loved Avon; not just Kerr’s sweetness, but all the dark things Avon took such care to flaunt before the world and the even darker ones Avon did not flaunt but tried to hide. Because he had always been fascinated by Avon’s midnight brightness and knife-edged beauty, and he always would be. If he had not loved Avon, he could not have loved Kerr so much. And he was greedy enough, ambitious enough, to want them both.

There was another truth before him as well. He saw, clearly at last, his own need. And was chastened by it. He’d thought of himself as a hard man, practical, but what had it taken for Kerr to storm his walls? Avon had crooked his finger and Blake’s carefully constructed barriers had come crashing down. He’d needed what Avon brought him, not as he’d needed a crew from Vargas, not as something that was his right; but with a quiet, aching desperation, with the heart-deep longing of a child.

He saw that now. And knew he was through fighting.

This was not Kerr bending over him, but Kerr Avon. And whatever Avon wished to do to him would be done. He’d had the one; now it was the other’s turn. Even as he thought it, he felt the painful tension bleed out of his sinews, and he gazed up at the unfathomable beauty above him without fear. If the man who looked down were to put a hand to his throat now, Blake did not think he would make a move to oppose him. Avon would kill him...or complete him. At this moment he had no idea which, and it didn’t matter. Because if he died here by Avon’s hand, it would change nothing. What they were, what they would always be, could not be altered.

He lay back and shut his eyes.

ΔΔΔ He should have felt cramped and sore, moving so soon, sitting up so quickly. But at this moment his mind refused to interpret the feelings, the lingering sensations inside him, as displeasure. No doubt, he’d be sore as hell tomorrow—he felt as if he’d been hollowed out to the gullet—but just now it was only the afterimage, the ghost-impression, of Blake’s flesh.

He found himself contemplating this idea quite calmly.

It was not, as a matter of fact, anything to get irrational about. He had sought sex beyond the range of his experience—and he had found it. Once, he’d argued that orgasm was orgasm, and it scarcely mattered who—or what—you used to induce it. Well, that barbaric riot of fear and triumph and revelation which had constituted lovemaking with Blake, that glut of tranquility and feral tenderness, had just proven him wrong. And to deny it would be the mark, not of a cynic, but of a fool.

It wasn’t something he’d be persuaded to give up easily.

He’d said Blake’s name at the end. Not in recognition, or out of a desire to acknowledge or to share, although he might have had that if he’d been able to think straight. He’d said it as he came, at that precise instant when the glory seared through him and he fell among the stars, for the simple reason that that was the sound orgasm made in him.

He was calm about that, too, considering what it augured for the future.

Not all the doors would open, he thought. He could not be Kerr for Blake. But he could do what Kerr could not.

Granted, it was a terrible thing, love between equals. The most they could ever hope to achieve was a delicate and precarious balance between the thunder of opposing wills. An agreement to stand together and fight each other fairly, rather than wreaking sublimated frustration on an innocent universe, apart. It was not safe; but then nothing worth having was ever safe.

Blake himself still wasn’t certain. He could see that; Blake’s body language was an open book to him now, and he could read it in Blake’s face and sense it in the tenor of Blake’s muscles. Or, rather, Blake was certain; Blake was closing his eyes and leaving himself defenseless, now, but he was doing it out of pure intuition, or pure fatalism. Blake didn’t understand yet.
Tomorrow, Avon might explain.
Then again, he might not. Anna had always demanded words from him, when he had not had the words to give. Perhaps Blake, who had accepted silence for so long, would not insist on words. Perhaps—he would not need them.
His eye was drawn seemingly at random to a broad blue vein in Blake’s throat. He knew the sound of that, the thick sweet murmur as familiar as his own heartbeat under his ear. But he had never seen it, that he could remember, never seen the pulsing of blood beneath skin so fragile that it was nearly transparent.
Against his fingertips it beat strongly, and the more strongly the lighter his touch. He felt the sudden shimmering of tension, although Blake’s heart rate did not quicken or falter by one iota, and then he felt that tension wane. Fatalism—or something Avon thought he’d seen in Blake’s face not so very long ago. A look he found curiously humbling—curious, because it ought to have produced just the opposite effect. After all, he did love to conquer Blake’s strength. And victory had never been more sweet than when he’d tasted it taking Blake’s mouth. But there was another joy to be had, as well. Blake might understand that.

His fingers fanned out against Blake’s neck, pale against skin still faintly passion-ruddy, and then they trailed down to rest on the sturdy vault of one shoulder. With his lips he touched the tender throb of pulse, and then he simply held there, just like that, until he felt it leap and tremble, until Blake’s heart beat fast and hard for him, a rhythm that infused them both. And victory had never been more sweet than when he’d tasted it taking Blake’s mouth.

But there was another joy to be had, as well. Blake might understand that.

His fingers fanned out against Blake’s neck, pale against skin still faintly passion-ruddy, and then they trailed down to rest on the sturdy vault of one shoulder. With his lips he touched the tender throb of pulse, and then he simply held there, just like that, until he felt it leap and tremble, until Blake’s heart beat fast and hard for him, a rhythm that infused them both. Until Blake’s breath was on his cheek, his own face buried in wet curls.

Blackberry wine...
And summer days that would never end.
Nothing should have disturbed this peace, this harmony. But gradually he became aware of a disturbance. An incipient disquiet which came from within, from the tangled web of his own psyche. A whisper of alertness, of anxiety, which was warning him, telling him it was almost time...

Bewildered, he raised his head toward the far wall, eyes focusing slowly on the chronometer bathed in indigo and rose.

Dawn colors...on Terra, and on Liberator. Night was nearly over and now it was time...it was almost time...

Understanding came so suddenly that he almost laughed. Instead he blinked slowly, letting the clock slip once again out of focus, and turned back to look down on Blake. And smiled.

There was nowhere he had to go.
Blake’s eyes were open, meeting his. Neither of them moved or spoke for a long while.

Then, carefully, with utmost deliberation, Avon settled down beside his lover and laid his head on Blake’s shoulder.

A taste like wild honey warmed in sunlight.
The deep and heady sweetness of hope fulfilled...of hope being fulfilled. Rising in him and becoming sweeter by the second.
Too easy to get drunk on this; not only intoxicated but instantly and incurably addicted, he knew. But there had never been any help for it, and just now, just at this moment, darkness receded and he wanted nothing more than to lose himself here. Within the sweetness memory blossomed, swelling and transforming, becoming...promise. Sensation rippling through him like waves on a still clear pond. The radiance of answering love. Delight insupportable, shattering joy...

Sunlight all around them...
No brightness so bright.

There was peace here, after all, and the promise of peace to come. So profound that it seemed not an interlude but an absolute. He did not remember the kiss breaking, but now Blake’s breath was on his cheek, his own face buried in wet curls.

Blackberry wine...
And summer days that would never end.
Nothing should have disturbed this peace, this harmony. But gradually he became aware of a disturbance. An incipient disquiet which came from within, from the tangled web of his own psyche. A whisper of alertness, of anxiety, which was warning him, telling him it was almost time...

Bewildered, he raised his head toward the far wall, eyes focusing slowly on the chronometer bathed in indigo and rose.

Dawn colors...on Terra, and on Liberator. Night was nearly over and now it was time...it was almost time...

Understanding came so suddenly that he almost laughed. Instead he blinked slowly, letting the clock slip once again out of focus, and turned back to look down on Blake. And smiled.

There was nowhere he had to go.
Blake’s eyes were open, meeting his. Neither of them moved or spoke for a long while.

Then, carefully, with utmost deliberation, Avon settled down beside his lover and laid his head on Blake’s shoulder.