



## SUBVERSION

*—act of turning, subverting, or being subverted, of overthrowing or causing downfall, ruin, or destruction; corruption. This is a moody piece told from Blake's perspective—a brooding Blake whose lack of self-knowledge is shockingly destroyed, and a cold, calculating Avon whose supreme confidence in his own omniscience is broken by Blake. Two men subverted by needs, wants, and desires they cannot control. Two men subverted by the key to themselves and each other. Two men subverted by love.*

# ROSETTA STONE

## M. FAE GLASGOW

Even seated at the opposite end of the table, Avon was still a distraction Blake couldn't afford. Blake forced himself not to stare, not even to look, refusing to yield to such handsome temptation. He hoped, quite fervently, that familiarity would dull the fine edge of Avon's beauty, but every time he managed to convince himself that today was the day he would become accustomed to Avon's translucent skin and bright eyes, that same today would be yet another day of Avon moistening his lips, or talking to himself as he worked, or bending over, innocuous grey tunic finally riding up high enough to give Blake a glimpse of what he so desperately craved. It didn't seem to matter what fine, celibate resolutions Blake swore in the morning, his hands sticky with his own semen: there was always something Avon would do to tug at Blake's desires and, he admitted reluctantly, his emotions as well. Something as simple as the childish glee Avon enjoyed when he scored a point over Blake, or the way he indulged in the endless game of insulting Vila, yet another moment when Blake glimpsed the once boyish dreamer walled in behind the cynic's face.

But this was neither the time nor the place to be cataloguing Avon's charms—not to mention that it wouldn't do the revolution much good if Blake couldn't keep his mind on the job at hand and out of Avon's trousers. All this would fade, he was sure, when he had recovered from the sheer novelty of having not only a libido again, but a functioning body. Still, it was embarrassing to be as unreliable as a teenager just discovering sex. It was a rediscovery: it would end soon, just another aftereffect of the trial and the mindwipe and everything else. Rubbing his eyes

as if fatigue had finally caught up with him, Blake interrupted the local leader's monologue. "I'm sorry, Eryn," he said, skin tinglingly aware that Avon was staring at him now, "but I'm afraid I'm more tired than I thought. You were going over the details of tonight's attack..."

Eryn van Deke gave him a filthy look but let the slight of Blake's distraction pass relatively lightly. "As I said," she began quite sharply, "my group are attacking the main barracks tonight, when the main Federation battalion should still be exhausted by their latest round of atrocities against my people." She looked at Blake, obviously skilled at assessing people, and just as obviously unimpressed by Blake's battle readiness. "But I think it best that you reconsider your decision to join us on the raid."

Time to smooth a few very justifiably ruffled feathers, Blake thought. "Oh, no, not at all. I'd be honoured to—"

"And we would be equally honoured by your presence. But," she said silkily, and the distrust in her voice reminded Blake of how tentative his position here was and how far he himself was from forgiveness, "you did say that you were so terribly tired and that was why you couldn't follow tonight's discussion."

Dismissing the transparent politeness of her voice and looking instead into the hard glitter of her blue eyes, Blake knew that there was more behind her unwillingness to trust than merely her straightforward intelligence and cautiousness. The Federation hadn't succeeded in staining him as well they hoped, but they had done far better than Blake would ever wish them to. Finding his way back into the Rebel fold was going to be difficult and painful, and not a task Blake relished. He nodded his acquiescence, started on the well-practised words he had sweated over, and trudged through the slow process of forcing acceptance from those with more than enough reason to suspect him.

Whatever his aspirations, he was still on probation with this group, as the looks and the whispers had so sharply reminded him when he had walked through the long stone corridors of the base. All those faces, all those suspicions, all those nasty wonderings; everything and everyone all made it very clear: what he did here could be his ticket to a welcome in the rebel network, or it could get him branded as too

damaged by the Federation treatments to be trusted. Not that he could blame them. He had seen the tapes of himself, the horrible, nightmare viscasts when he had so rabidly denounced his fellow rebels. Renounce, his past self had screamed at his present self from a screen too small to contain such ferocious passion. Renounce. Turn the traitors in. He wasn't sure he even deserved a probation. Traitor, he had called them, but he was the traitor—

Calm, he reminded himself. Be very, very reasonable and very calm. He forced a smile, made his voice smooth and melodic, his home-world accent slipping through quite intentionally for once. Anything to distance himself from that fervid lunatic who had borne his face.

He blinked, only then realising that the smoky room had faded, unfocussed, while his mind had wandered amidst the pellucid, cutting shards of his memory. Van Deke was talking policy, some minor aspect of tonight's plan, some small rôle for him to play: small, yes, but still, it was a beginning, and he was a man starved for new beginnings. "Whatever you think best, of course, Eryn. You're the leader here and I'm only here to advise." He made the smile charming, a feat possible only when he caught sight of Avon still staring at him, eyes wide and lips slightly parted. "With your knowledge, experience, and skill, I shall be more than happy to—"

A commotion at the door interrupted him before he could add to the veiled contempt with which she met his flattery. The thin voice was rushing, tumbling over the words excitement was pushing out too quickly. "Mum, Mum, look what Vila taught me!"

Van Deke twisted round in her seat, and the initial flash of love in her eyes was well and truly hidden behind genuine fury. "How many times do I have to tell you not to interrupt me when I'm in a meeting?"

Blake's heart went out to the crestfallen child standing there clutching the tools of his magic trick, but he said not a word. Did not dare, not with the amount of foul suspicion that still clung to him. He watched the boy, felt the wrench as the lower lip trembled and the bright eyes brightened all the more as tears threatened. It hurt Blake, particularly now, particularly after his own sorry, short history, to see all that joy

and hope tarnished by a grown-up's barbed words.

"I'm sorry, Mum, I was just—"

"I don't want to hear any of your 'justs'! We are at war and I am trying to make sure we win. How am I supposed to do that with you running in here every five minutes?"

Blake bit the inside of his mouth to stop himself from speaking and clenched his hands on the table to prevent any misinterpretable gesture to the child. He looked away, only to meet Avon's overly-intelligent eyes and too suggestively raised eyebrow. What a bastard, Blake thought, what a right royal bastard! To suggest, even tacitly, that there was something sexual in the way Blake was watching that poor boy. Bastard, he wanted to shout. Bastard, bastard, bastard...

He had to regain control. A deep breath, then he stopped looking at Avon, and those questions Avon never—quite—voiced, turning away from that knowing half-smile and the casual, almost languid sting of Avon's suspicions. The familiar, helpless rage boiled up inside him again, and there was nowhere for it to explode. Not that there ever was, not unless the Federation stood in front of him. They were the ones he should rage at, they were the ones rank with the guilt of what had been done to him. Blake repeated it to himself, trying to convince his heart that his head was right on this. Avon shouldn't be blamed for half-believing: Vila had told him how convincing the interviews with suitably tearful children had been, not that Blake could yet bring himself to face his accusers, no matter how false. Those poor boys believed, thought it true, had even had bruises on them as manufactured proof. No, Blake was not quiet ready to face children who called him a monster. But Avon would have seen those 'casts—for that matter, Avon must have been living in the Central Dome when Blake had recanted, and would have seen every sordid, soggy confession, live on the news as he ate his dinner. Small wonder the man refused to trust him. It was hard enough for them each to trust himself.

Van Deke had wound down, the lecture to the child over for now, leader's ire conceding to parent's tolerance. "Oh, for goodness' sake, don't take on so!"

Blake hid a smile as the boy—Jak, wasn't

it—gave his mother a melting glance from under spiked eyelashes.

"D'you think I don't know what you're up to?" she asked, coming perilously close to smiling at her offspring and completely ruining her image of tyrant. "If you promise to be quiet and wait patiently until I'm finished, you can stay. But only because we've finished all the important discussion and only if you keep quiet. One sound and you're out! Clear enough?"

"Yes, Mum," Jak murmured obediently, but he was grinning widely, completely unscathed by his lecture and his mother's ire, too busy staring around excitedly at all his rebel heroes. "I'll be good."

A quick swat, affectionate rather than punishing, and then van Deke's attention was back to the meeting, with Jak sitting behind her near the door, the boy gazing at Blake with what could only be described as hero worship. It jolted Blake, taking him off-balance, the pain of everyone's veiled revulsion hitting him only by its sudden absence from the boy's eyes. Jak's adoration made sense, in a way, for political matters wouldn't be explained to him and no one would have told a six-year-old what the Federation had claimed Blake had done, would probably only have been told that Blake had been sent to prison for being a rebel and had overcome the mindwipe. Too young for the adults to want him to understand what molestation was, Jak would only have been given dark warnings about strangers who might do bad things to him.

Unlike those three boys back on Earth. Blake knew he hadn't so much as laid a finger on them, but he also knew, too painfully, just how real implanted memories could be. The suffering wouldn't be any less, nor the trauma. Nausea was souring his stomach, the way it always did whenever he thought of those poor boys and how badly damaged their lives must be. He couldn't even begin to think about the details of what the boys must believe had been done to them: the very thought of it sent him spiralling off into near panic, too horrified to face the sick facts of what those three remembered as truth.

It was the pressure of Avon's gaze on him that brought Blake back to the meeting. Judging by the weight of the silence around him, he had

missed what van Deke had been saying—again. Not a good way to convince her and the rest of the rebels that he was *compos mentis* despite all the Federation had done to him.

“There’s no point in asking Blake that,” Avon was saying, amazing Blake by coming to his rescue instead of smiling sweetly while Blake hung himself on the rope provided. “He might be just about able to programme himself a cup of tea, but I’m the one with computer expertise and I am the only one capable of understanding the teleport system on *Liberator*. Blake,” and now the voice was that unique Avonesque blend of dryness and rich plumminess, “confines himself to being our great and fearless leader and destroying the Federation and all it stands for.”

Van Deke turned back to Avon, letting Blake off the hook for the time being. “Well, in that case,” she began, and the discussion was off onto the rehashing of logistics, with the Rebels proposing ideas and Avon disposing of them.

Blake didn’t make the mistake of not listening, but he gave the ensuing discussion only half his attention. He couldn’t keep his eyes off Avon, couldn’t get over the fact that Avon had actually hauled his chestnuts out of the fire. Not typical, not typical at all—and did that mean that there might be hope of their chilly relationship warming up to something better than armed neutrality? God, but he hoped so!

With so many people around, he didn’t shake his head in bemusement, nor did he sigh dramatically. Face impassive, he permitted himself a glance at the root of this irrational attraction. And nearly indulged in a public display, if not of affection, then certainly of rampant desire. Avon was being... He tried to find a suitably manly term, such as attractive or handsome, but there was more to it than mere physical appeal. There was that emotional current, that underlayment of something, something Blake couldn’t quite name: perhaps it was beyond naming, simply that intriguing mystique which made Avon so addictively alluring. Avon chose that moment to cant his head, the habitual gesture one of the many capable of sliding through Blake’s defences. There was no doubt about it, Avon was definitely being adorable again, quite unintentionally, and Blake swore to himself that he would never, not even under the worst torture either imagined or experienced, ever tell

Avon that he had used such a word to describe him. But adorable was the one term that insistently leapt to mind. Perhaps it was the vulnerability of the mouth, or the schoolboyishness of the hair cut, or the seductive blend of hardness and softness, or the mix of supreme confidence and air of being...lost. Avon always seemed so displaced, so alone, so... Quick on the uptake he reminded himself before any wayward expression might betray him to Avon. Now certainly seemed a good time to concentrate more on Avon’s pointed defences and less on the sweetness which made the defences so vital—before Avon impaled him with yet another of those knowing glances and left Blake squirming with embarrassment. Leaning back in his seat as if he were completely at ease, Blake decided he had been right in his choice of word to describe this attraction he felt for Avon. Irrational. Definitely irrational, and downright suicidal, if Avon ever found out he had once been described as ‘adorable’. In fact, Blake could only too well imagine Avon selecting the proper gun with which to show Blake just how far from ‘adorable’ he actually was.

Time, Blake decided, to get his mind fully back on the job at hand, even if all the sparkle had gone out of it now that he knew he was to sit and wait. The meeting dragged on, brightened only by Avon’s presence and the balm of hero-worship exuding from young Jak. It was nice to be impressive to someone, even if it were only a child. Perhaps especially from a child, for Jak wasn’t old enough to have the attention span necessary to keep mere flattery going for this length of time. Blake fought off his own fatigue and distraction, saying all the right things at all the right times, being rewarded by cautious acceptance, but still not so much that van Deke was about to trust him at her back. Or with all the secret details of tonight’s attack. Trusted with no more knowledge than she gave her child. Sobering, to be thought of as so unreliable, so easily taken and more easily broken.

“So that’s it, then,” van Deke announced, accepting Blake’s final assurances on Avon’s and Vila’s skills, although Blake noticed that she had been watching Avon closely enough to have formed her own opinions of the man’s basic intelligence. “We’ll take your men with us, strike hard and fast, while Jenna and Gan on the

*Liberator* will use the teleport to send our people down inside the complex where they can do the most damage.”

Blake stood as van Deke did, aware of the different stares pinned on him. Avon, of course, chilly and hot at the same time, typical push-me/pull-you, so that Blake couldn't tell if he were being invited or warned off. He wasn't about to chance his arm there anyway, not until he understood this man far better, and not until he was quite sure of his welcome. And then there was Jak, gazing up at him raptly, stars in his eyes. To think it had been boys like this he had been accused of molesting, boys like this who had had all their dreams ripped away just to frame a retired rebel... Enough! he screamed at himself. The Federation had won those three battles, but only because Blake's mind had not been his own: this time, he wasn't going to let a single molecule of optimism die.

Blake bent down, until he was face to face with Jak and the bustle of adults around them faded upwards. “Tell you what,” he whispered, desperate to make up for broken dreams, “once this attack is all over and done with,” and before the Federation sends in troop reinforcements on armoured ships, he added silently to himself, unable to fend off his darkest fear, “would you like to come up and see my ship?”

Jak swallowed, hard, overcome by his hero speaking to him and literally offering him the stars.

Blake smiled, warmed and made a little less guilty by the happiness he was bringing to one small boy. “We could ask your mum to teleport with us.”

“And she could see the weapons controls stuff that your ship's going to blow up the Federation ships with!”

So much for innocence, and so much for dreams. Another childhood destroyed, another reason to erase the Federation as if they'd never existed. But it wasn't only with violence that he could sabotage the Federation, was it? A single dream could lead to a rebellion. “The pair of you can have a guided tour of the whole ship, all the holds, all the special rooms. Even,” he made his voice suitably dramatic, “the treasure room!”

“As long as I check your pockets before you leave.” Avon, of course, sere as ever. “Enjoying the company, Blake?” he added, archly sug-

gestive as only Avon would dare.

Blake straightened, the unfocussed rage hotly narrowing to a very sharp focus indeed, threatening to cut Avon to shreds with a few well-honed words.

“Before you burst a blood vessel,” Avon interrupted quite politely, “I would like to make sure that you were still actually with us when van Deke so charmingly took you hostage?”

“What? Took me hostage? Avon, don't be ridiculous. Not only is she an ally, but I think I would notice if someone kidnapped me.”

Avon smiled, mockingly, a scant millimetre away from insolence, but still, barely, within the bounds. “Would you? What a reassuring thought. But I was referring to her polite request that you remain here on her base—purely for the purposes of morale, of course.”

Then again, perhaps he wouldn't notice if someone kidnapped him, Blake realised. He hadn't actually thought twice about it, certainly hadn't looked at her pleasant request as holding him ransom for *Liberator*'s help and Avon's good behaviour. Not that he would ever reveal that to Avon, either. “Then you had better make sure that morale is very high around here, hadn't you?”

“Oh, I'll take care of the morale,” Avon replied, smooth as a snake gliding in for the kill, “if you'll take care of the morals.” And there it was, the briefest flicker of a glance downwards, at the boy and therefore, a look at Blake's past—or at least the one created for him by the Federation.

“There are times,” Blake said in a remarkably calm voice, “when I could honestly hate you.”

A grin that should have been threatening but was, unnervingly, flirtatious, and then Avon was moving away, adding, over his shoulder: “So you could actually be honest. Oh, I shall look forward to *that* novel experience.”

It was at times like these, Blake thought, when it was impossible not to see what a spoiled brat Avon must have been. He started off after his callous beauty, but someone was talking to him, and Jak was still staring at him, so he pushed the anger away, and went back to being polite and charming and utterly, reassuringly, normal, even while visions of battered Avons danced in his head.

There was nothing for him to do. He had been

told in no uncertain terms that his presence was not required in the control room. Jenna and Gan had their hands full, as they had informed him on his last three communications, and Avon... After snarling, "I'm in the middle of a battle, what the hell do you think the situation is?", Avon had cut him off and that was it. Almost arbitrarily, Blake turned right at the next corner, treading slowly down yet another of the old stone corridors. This place had once been a national monument of some kind, a restored historical site visited by families and groups of bored and misbehaving schoolchildren. The recessed power lighting was off, of course, but a few of the old-fashioned sconce lamps were lit, just enough that people could see roughly where they were going, and just enough to show the vivid friezes. Blake paused to look at one, but that only passed a few moments of the endless time filling his hands, and then he was moving on again, walking slowly, going nowhere, unwilling to think, because he was helpless right now, and useless. Those two feelings led to nothing but more wasteful anger and a splitting headache. Not to mention his old friends, depression and self-loathing. He could kick all of that out of the way most of the time, but late at night, when he was alone, with nothing and no one to distract him, his mind would settle on the well-worn groove of whom he had been, of his life before the puppeteers had buried it—or erased it, if he were truly unlucky and this lack of past should prove permanent. In the quiet and solitude of his bed, he would speculate on what his family had been—all those vistapes, the ones he had believed sent to him by his family back home. He hadn't even realised the faces belonged to people he didn't know.

What else was he wrong about? If he couldn't remember the family he had grown up with, had loved and been loved by, then what other precious, hoarded memories were merely the cancer of lies?

Another corner, another unthought choice, and he was walking in an area he recognised by the rural friezes on the walls. He turned left next, following paintings of fields ripe with grains, then took the corridor that had been painted to give the illusion of walking a country path between arching trees. It must have been beautiful here, before the Federation imposed

itself. Back when there had been energy for full lighting and children didn't think about weapons controls and blowing ships up.

The room they had given him was on an outer wall, in some sort of tower. Sheer rockface falling below him for several hundred feet, and a window too small to climb through. Oh, yes, they were taking no chances with him, were they? Stripping out of clothes reeking with the smell of lamp-smoke, he took a proper look at the room around him. It was, he decided, sitting down abruptly on the bed, a gesture worthy of Avon: van Deke had put him in the nursery wing. The walls were painted with what were obviously local fairy tales, in pretty pastel colours. The built-in cupboards and desk were child-size, and there was an empty bed-alcove with a child guard-rail still in place. As with the rest of the castle, most of the original furniture had been moved out to make way for whatever utilitarian furnishings that were still in one piece, so Blake supposed he could, were he to be charitable, decide that the rebels had simply put him in one of the free rooms that had a bed already in it—and a window he couldn't slip through to betray them to the Federation.

But he didn't feel particularly charitable, not tonight, not when his hands were tied behind his back and he felt completely, totally and utterly useless. Had he not already been half-undressed, he would have gone out walking again, but the depression settled heavily on his shoulders, and it didn't seem worth the effort to get dressed just to go and wander aimlessly.

Stop being such a fool, he told himself sternly. Stop feeling so damned sorry for yourself. Get a grip. Pull yourself together. You can't expect anything else, can you? Give them time.

Give them time. He felt as if that was all he was doing. Time, for him, was finite, water pouring from a broken glass, each drip trying to carve a path through granite, blind to its own defeat.

He lumbered to his feet, went to look out from this infant cell. There was little breeze from the window, no matter how high he turned the air permeability, and the room pressed in harder. Distantly, he could hear the beginnings of battle, the thrumps and dim booms of explosions, the fluting whine of laser weapons. No voices, thankfully, nothing to proclaim that people were

both the sources and victims of all that destruction.

His hand snagged in hair already made tangled by the restlessness of his hands. Downstairs, he knew, there would be carefully controlled mayhem to match the battlefield: numbers and statistics shouted, data sped from one module to another, endless consultations. While he was stuck here, helpless, useless, not yet to be trusted.

He did sigh, then. And almost groaned when he allowed himself to think of Avon. Not a safe topic, that, and not the best course of thought when Avon was in some peril, putting himself at risk for a cause he swore he did not believe in. Which led Blake back to something as resolutely irrational as his own spiralling emotions for Avon: the other man's willingness to stay and fight, in defiance of all cynicism and practicality.

The battle was extreme enough now that there was a false dawn rising, a sight worthy both of exultation and despair. But the despair was proving the victor, all the beauty of the sky no consolation for the fear that Avon might be one of the missing or dead or part of the devouring fire itself. Blake turned his back on the window, dialled it closed so that not a single mote of sound could pass through it, and then he went to bed. Not to sleep, for sleep would bring dreams, not something to be invited when Avon was in the thick of things. Eyes closed, mind wide awake, Blake lay there to wait for morning, or news, whichever arose first.

He had lost track of the time when he heard it. A small sound, faint, but coming nearer. A guard? Blake wondered. No, too much noise for that. Then someone on their way somewhere else. But the steps were too light for that and anyway, he was tucked well away, presumably where he could neither get up to mischief, get in the way nor corrupt any innocents.

His door, now, mild click, whisper of sound, another click, then silence as carpeting swallowed footsteps. An assassin would make less noise, so it was not—for better or worse—someone come to murder him in his bed. An admirer, perhaps? he thought, self-mockingly. Someone lusting after the image of Rebel leader, or someone kinky enough to be snared by a man whose mind had been raped.

Or something else entirely, something heart-warming in its innocence and breathtaking in its trustfulness. An unstified 'ouch!', then the covers were being lifted, a quick slither of movement, and then the child—it had to be Jak van Deke—was in beside him, small, over-warm body tucked in against him, bony knee digging into one of his soft bits, stick arms clenched awkwardly round his neck and then, tears wetting his shoulder. He should toss the child out of bed instantly, he knew—god, they'd crucify him if they found out, regardless of how innocent the whole thing was—but how could he be so cruel to a child crying his eyes out?

"There, there," he said, patting the thin shoulders, his other hand stroking fine hair—hair as fine as Avon's—while he crooned reassurance over and over again. He had to get the boy out of here, fast, before someone decided to check on him, or had a message to give him or any one of a million stupid things that could bring someone in here at the worst possible moment. Or what if someone had seen Jak? Or gone in to make sure he was all right with his mother gone again? If someone saw his bed empty, they'd think the worst, tarring and feathering Blake on the grounds of nothing more substantial than cold sheets. The injustice of it devoured him, the sheer wrongness that made him want to push a child away when that child was in such desperate need of comfort.

Jak was mumbling, sporadic words made difficult by sobs and the way the boy's face was pressed into Blake's neck. But wasn't that something about his dad, and how much Blake looked like him? Or was it how much Jak wished his dad was like Blake? Hard to tell, and this wasn't the time to insist on improved diction. Instead, Blake soaked up the child's tears, and soothed him as best he could, his own pain assuaged by the easing of another's. "Your mum'll be all right, you'll see. It's all right, it's all right," he said, falling back on tried and tested words. But this wasn't some pampered Alpha brat brought up in the cloying safety of a Dome, no, this was no Avon. This was a boy who knew all about weapons controls and had sat there listening to discussions on strategy and stayed there, forgotten, when talk had turned to the logistics of transporting the dead and wounded. "She's not going to be hurt, no-one's going to kill her."

Blake whispered, heart-rent by poor Jak's suffering. He could empathise, could actually remember crying like this himself, but there had been no-one to come into his cell and tell him it would be all right.

"But what if she's not? What if she doesn't come back?"

No pabulum here, not for so deep a fear. "Even if she doesn't come back—and she will—then the people here will take care of you. Your aunts and uncles, or your parents' friends, the grown-ups will work it all out for you."

"But I've only got one aunt and uncle and they're horrible and they eat weird food and their rooms smell funny."

That got a wry smile, and a tender hug, and another reminder to himself that he had to get this child out of here before someone misinterpreted the whole situation and shot him. "You'd get used to it, and anyway, I bet they think you eat weird food and smell funny as well. But if you really didn't want to go to them, then someone else will want you. Someone will always give you a home, Jak."

The sobs had stopped, and the tears were lessening, although Blake suspected that not all of the wetness had the distinction of flowing from those trusting eyes. "But you're worrying over nothing. Your mum'll be back, and she'll be moaning at me for letting you stay up so late." Always providing she doesn't hang, draw and quarter me before I have a chance to explain, he added to himself. Jak, oblivious to the machinations of the Federation and the lies they had spread, simply gave himself up to the things he wanted to here, and hugged his hero a little bit tighter.

And Blake found parts of his own body grow a little tighter. His breath caught in his chest, and he stopped, not breathing, not thinking, not wanting to know what his body was telling him. But his lungs protested, and he breathed in, his heart pounded and his blood thundered its nightmare message. Revulsion exploded in his mind, the sheer overwhelming power of knowledge stunning him again for a minute, making him numb, blessedly, unfeelingly numb. But the anaesthesia wore off too quickly, and the horror flowed in too fast to be stopped. He swallowed, hard, unwilling to believe the evidence his own body had pushed at him. Un-

willing, unable, he couldn't, simply couldn't, it wasn't true, he could never, never, ever... He wasn't like that, he hated people like that, thought men like that should be shot or locked up so they could never do anything like that to a child. He wasn't like that. Couldn't be. He had never thought of a child like that. Had never responded, had never wanted—

But he had. Tonight. And if he had, tonight, then had he, before?

Were the Federation lies truly lies? Or were they the truth, wrapped up in lies?

Had he?

Could he have done...that...to children before?

Was he really such a monster?

And if he were, then how could he allow himself to live?

His flesh had subsided, cooled by his own icy thoughts, and by the fear that the boy might move over, even just a little, and feel that nascent erection. Jak was whimpering now, not yet convinced that his mother wasn't going to disappear the same way his father had, only worse this time, for after his mother, there was no-one left. All the childish words and all the childish fears, tumbling and spilling, soaking Blake in sympathy and drowning him in affection. He tried, head throbbing with the effort, to keep it at sympathy, but other things, darker things intruded, corrupting his best intentions, laying them bare for the self-delusion they were. It wasn't difficult to understand, not at all, which was half the shame: he had been blind to this in himself because he couldn't face that part, did not want to know that he was capable of something he thought vile and unsupportable.

Or did he? Was that just another smokescreen, an excuse to lie here, holding this perfect, flawless innocence to him, caressing a smallness that so devoutly needed his protection? His body threatened him with its desires once more, flesh tumescing, blood pounding through him, hot, heavy, settling in his cock and balls, betraying him, betraying his own goodness, until he was becoming what the Federation had said he was.

A straw, but he clutched at it, clinging until his panic began to subside and rationality returned. Perhaps he wasn't a paedophile at all. Perhaps the puppeteers had implanted that in him, twisted his natural desires into an abomi-



nation, made him this monster.

Jak moved, his feet sliding across Blake's knees, another reminder of how small and needy the boy was. Arms hugging Blake as close as those undeveloped muscles could manage: a reminder of how lonely the boy was, and how grateful he would be for some sop of affection. Of how a cuddle, or a soothing hand across his skin, or even a kiss wouldn't be unwelcome, the blissful innocence of childhood accepting it all—accepting Blake, unquestioningly. Loving him, without need for explanations or excuses from Blake and nothing required of him save that he should keep Jak safe.

Blake turned his head to whisper more reassurances, his mouth slightly open as he pressed his lips against the boy's flawless brow. "It'll be all right," he murmured, tongue briefly tasting the cleanliness of a child's unsweating skin, the moment stolen, secret, their secret, locking them together against the rest of the world. "I promise you, I'll take care of you." He held the child's face between his own large hands, watched as adoration filled the brown eyes, smiled as he felt himself viewed as the biggest, the best, the strongest man in the whole wide universe. Leaned closer, ready to give a chaste kiss to the unlined brow, there, between the bright eyes, look at them stare as he came closer, all that perfect trust just waiting to be harvested. Blake felt the sweet thrill of arousal deep in his loins, his balls stirring, his cock lengthening seductively, reaching out to touch the untouched, the innocent, the ultimate in virginity. "Shh, don't cry, I'm here. I'll make it all right." So special, so uniquely special, and it would be his forever, for he would be the first, he would be the mentor and the father and the protector, all beings rolled into one. "I'll kiss it all better for you—"

He pulled back, reeling as if from a physical blow, hating himself, his desire turning acrid in his stomach, bile rising. He had come close, so terrifyingly close! To even think such things—and to come within an inch of doing them... Repulsed, Blake hauled himself out of the bed, lurching to the window as unsteadily as a drunkard at dawn. He fumbled and failed, then fumbled again, the window finally allowing fresh air to pass through. Hair as wild as his eyes, Blake gulped, breathing deeply of air tainted by nothing worse than the faint smell of

death and destruction, sweet indeed after his own fetidness. He hit his head once, twice, then again, and again, on the rounded edge of the window frame, the stone not sharp enough to cut, the pain too dull to blunt the agony in his mind. He had almost done it. He had almost been as bad as the Federation had said he was—as the Federation had tried to make him actually *be*.

"Stop it, stop it, stop it!" Childish treble risen to piecing shriek, small boy's being expelled in anguished cry.

"Shut up!" Blake roared. "Get out of here!"

No shrieks now, tiny voice, muffled by misery. "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry, I didn't mean it. Oh, please, don't be angry with me, don't send me away. I won't do it again. Honest, I won't, really I won't."

More tears, words punctuated by sobs, and Blake didn't dare go to Jak to soothe this pain.

"You didn't do anything," he said, voice strange to his own ears. Was that the voice of a child molester? Was that how he'd sounded when he'd inveigled those boys? But no, he told himself, the images of true memory struggling against the haziness of Blake's past and the bright sharp edges of implanted memory. He hadn't done anything to those boys. That evidence was fake, his counsel had told him that, had found out that much for him. So he hadn't molested anyone. But the response had been there, the desires and the reactions and the temptation, oh, the temptation! To have all that unformed sweetness in his hands, that blank slate, that soul as clean as virgin snow...

Those boys weren't his victims, but this boy might be, sitting there like that, weeping for him, crying so pathetically, so needy of Blake. "Get out of here," Blake rasped, the scream barely leashed. "Go away," he shouted, because if he didn't, he was afraid he would say something sweet, something soothing and, for Blake, something seductive. Something that would warm the unwelcome desires in him, something so right for that poor lost child... "Don't ever come into some strange man's bed ever again, d'you hear me? Don't you ever dare do that again..." Because you might not be so lucky, next time, he thought, hands clenched so tightly that his nail broke against the pastel plaster. Because if you don't get out right now, I'm

going to come over and kiss it all better for you...

"I said, get out of my room. Go back to your own bed and wait there. Your mother will be home in a few hours, she'll take care of you then."

And who will take care of me, he thought, listening as the little boy tried to swallow his tears manfully. Listened still, until the door closed, and he was alone. Steady now, his face a mask of concentration, Blake crossed the room, then wedged the door shut. Not much, but enough, if he should awake insane and seek the child out. He felt strange, disoriented, the past and the present colliding, evil truths about himself hissing at him like snakes, hopeful truths whispering goodness, conflict, coiling, twisting, a barrage of lies and truths and horror.

Only a few steps from the door, the pain started. Slicing into him, backing off, then whirling round and cutting into him from a different angle. He fell to his knees, hands coming up to clutch at his temples where his brain was pounding frantically to get out. He could actually feel the blood vessels over-fill, thought that his brain was swelling, physically too large for the confines of his skull, and the pain was dissecting him, slicing paper thin, until he was all bleeding edges and screeching dislocation.

Words pummelled him, and memories, and faces, and remembrances of touching bodies—and not touching bodies, of biting his knuckles so that he wouldn't touch, wouldn't destroy that innocence, wouldn't do what he thought was wrong. But then it was there again, Skin fresher, smoother, more tensile than adult skin could ever be, and sweeter smelling, oh, that smell, too young to sweat properly, but with hints of chocolate and dirt, commingling with a needfulness to be nurtured and protected and made safe. Had he? Or were those moments stolen during a completely chaste meeting with his niece and nephew? Chaste moments brought out later to be fondled and caressed into something he would never do—was that what those were?

Or had he? Had he done it?

He was hunched on the floor, forehead ground into the carpet, and he was biting on his knuckles just as he remembered—he hoped, prayed, begged that he remembered and wasn't

lying to himself—doing in the past, biting so hard that the blood was on his hands as well as in his mind, and he thought he would surely be sick for what he had done, and for what he had not done, the desire and core-deep need in him unanswered, unsatisfied, denied, denial always, always denial, with nothing ever for him, never, ever—

He heard himself scream on the last word, heard his own bellow, wounded, uncomprehending animal crying for the moon. But he was not uncomprehending, he knew, he understood, some of it, anyway. Knew that he wanted children—a little girl, blonde, the one he used to pass on his way to work (which job? which project? On Earth? Or on his homeworld?), playing piercingly with her friends, their cacophonous voices ripping the air, their shrieks shivering in his ears—but didn't know if that were a true part of him, inborn and inbred, or if it were another little time-bomb the Federation had left planted in him.

And had he touched? Had he allowed it to go beyond pure affection with some child? Had he overstepped his own self-limits? But if it were all implanted...

He hammered his head on the floor, hurling words at himself, abusing his mind until it was as battered as his body. There were too many answers, too many truths that might be lies, too many facts which might be nothing more than protective smokescreen so that he could face himself in the mirror each day. Too many answers, and not enough, leaving him curled on the floor, tears drying on his cheeks and his soul desiccating in his mind.

And then darkness fell within him, and he lay still and silent on the floor.

He had awoken some time ago, not that he'd bothered to check the time. Hadn't looked out the window to see the sky. Hadn't registered the light or dark of the room. Had room for nothing but his doubts and his hopes and his fears. Reluctantly, he heard the transports coming back, a steady rumble of traffic, no sporadic bursts of frantic speed, just a very orderly return, which meant success.

He found no enthusiasm for that. Didn't care, for it didn't seem important. Not after last night. Not after his body had betrayed him. Not after,

he corrected himself, hollow-eyed, after his body had betrayed certain truths much better left buried.

More time passed, not that he paid much attention to it at first. But then the needs of his body reasserted themselves, differently from the night before, but just as insistently. The hunger, he ignored. The thirst, he welcomed as penance, guilt fed and pacified by his own suffering. But then he had the choice of lying here in the humiliation of his own waste, or getting up, moving, coming back to life. And found that he did care, a little, about what happened to himself. Did care, a little, for what became of him. He wasn't ready, not quite, to lie there like that, with the risk of someone—Avon? a dark fearful hope whispered somewhere from the torn places in his mind—coming in here. Coming in here before he was finished dying.

He pulled himself to his feet, cramping muscles stabbing him with welcome pain, for it shut his mind down, stopped him from feeling anything but the agony of his poor muscles. The toilet, his body protesting even as he relieved it. Finished, he stood for a moment, sinkingly aware that there was a mirror behind him; there, if he wanted to turn and look, he would see himself. Monster. Scum. Wicked, evil, reviled thing that he had once thought a man. Better off dead. But he wasn't, and it was one thing to die, another to kill himself. He wanted, dully, to be dead. Some cold lump of lard that could be dumped into the ground, his sins—had there been any? No, none, only sins of thought, of desire—covered over so that no-one would see them. But he couldn't think of how to kill himself. His mind went blank, nothing there but the wish to be dead. Weaponless, then, and useless. Alive. Like it or not, he was alive.

He moved, slowly, taking care to keep his back turned, always, to the large mirror, his chest made cold by the plaster of walls as he pressed against them so that he would not see what he had become. Into the small cubicle, curtain drawn, then a shower, long and hot, nail-brush scrubbed over every inch of his skin, the pain in his cock nothing more than his due, he told himself. A twisted mote of humour, a flicker of life, a picture of himself as penitent, walking along the corridors of the *Liberator* scourging himself with specially fabricated

rushes. More hot water, then the hard rub of towel, no soft jets of warm air for him, not while the self-hate and the culpability burned in his blood.

Body dry, clothes on, hair under some semblance of control, and then he did it before his loathing could stop him. He was looking at himself, seeing that mirror image of himself, and astonished. How could it not show? Oh, there was redness round his eyes—but that would be explained away as a sleepless night. The lump on his forehead? An unfamiliar place, an encounter with a cupboard door in the dark when he had got up to find something to ease the headache the lack of sleep had caused. The tension crackling around him? To be expected, after a night spent worrying about his colleagues and crew, fretting over whether they were going to be all right, etc, etc, etc. Answers for everything. Even, it seemed, how to face himself in the morning.

But then, he told himself, that was because he hadn't done anything. Hadn't done anything at all, save offer comfort where it was most needed. Was as sure as he could be that he had never actually done anything to any of the beautiful children his mind—or imagination—provided. Hadn't done anything then, hadn't done anything last night. "But what about the next time?" he asked his own face, watching his lips move as the words appeared in the air and hung there, waiting for their answer.

"I'm not a child molester," he told himself, trying not to listen to the doubts whispered by what the Federation had done to him. "I am..." He couldn't actually say the word, couldn't get his tongue to form the word 'pædophile'. "I am drawn to children. I love children." But not as I should, he wanted to weep. Not as I should.

But what about next time? he asked himself again, unable to go out into a world containing children until he knew the answer. What would he do next time? "Next time," he told himself, saying out loud a promise he had to keep if he wanted to stay sane, "next time I won't do it either. Next time, I'll stop before it starts."

He wished he could believe himself. Weary beyond redemption, he went to find Avon.

Avon was, of course, bad-tempered, sharp-tongued, smudged, ruffled, and altogether

fuckable. Which hit Blake hard, puzzling him, tying him up in knots he had thought unravelled if yet painful.

“Ah,” Avon was saying, a steaming cup of whatever in his right hand, “the Great and Fearless one returns. Sleep well, my hero? Or was the bed just a touch too soft?”

Blake wanted to make Avon’s head soft, right there, where a good thump could fracture the skull seams. Instead he gathered himself, wrapping himself in normalcy, proud that he could hide so well the monster he had discovered in himself. “I slept the sleep of the just,” he answered levelly, adding, just for good measure and as some recompense for not murdering Avon: “Not something you know about, I expect.”

One of those rare, precious smiles, when Avon conceded and loved Blake for beating him. “Only what I’ve read, of course. I leave all that sedateness to those who lead those of us who choose to follow.”

Avon’s eyes narrowed on the last few words, and Blake cringed inside, knowing what was coming. He made his face quite placid as he helped himself from the heaping platters of food, only then noticing that he and Avon weren’t the only people in the mess hall. For all that the others mattered, though, he and Avon might well have been alone.

“What did you do to your head?” Avon asked. Well, of course Avon would ask that. Anyone else would ask what had happened, or who had done that to him. But Avon, with his darkling nature and his incisive mind would ask the question that had already half-answered itself. Usually the part of the answer Blake least wanted to give.

“You don’t want to know,” he mumbled round bread, some part of him not quite wanting to lie about this to Avon. Needing Avon, perhaps, to recognise his pain.

“Oh, I don’t, do I not? Or do you just feel like playing daddy?”

Blake snapped his gaze upward, the force of it slamming into Avon. But not, unfortunately, hard enough to wipe that knowing smirk off his face.

“What the fuck was that supposed to mean?” His voice, miraculously, was low, not bouncing off the walls the way Blake felt he was, the way

he wished Avon and that knowingness would. “Just precisely what are you trying to imply?”

“Imply?” Avon said with innocence so sincere it had to be false. “Imply? Me? I wasn’t implying anything.” Avon leaned forward, bringing with him to this current war the lingering smell of death and destruction of the battle previously fought. “I was only asking a question. And you, Blake,” an odd inflection to his voice, an even odder expression in his eyes, “have answered it far better than you ought.” A twist of a smile, a flicker of amusement in the very dark eyes. “In public, at least.”

Drowning, flailing in the mire of his own inner truths, unaware that none of it was visible to anyone but his too, too clever Avon. “You had better not be saying what I think you’re saying.”

“Not if I wish to be coherent, no, you’re quite right.”

“And you,” Blake said with what he hoped was demolishing confidence, “are quite, quite wrong.”

But as he walked away, torn by too many emotions to feel any one of them, he could feel Avon’s eyes on him, could feel the speculation eating away at his backbone.

Later, with the base in a frantic flurry of mayhem that was actually a beautifully orchestrated relocation to the main Federation, now Rebel, stronghold, Blake had found himself a nice, quiet corner where he sat now, nursing his head and a hot cup of caffeine.

“Well, well, well,” Avon’s voice said from on high. “Fancy meeting you here. Or should I be asking, do you come here often?”

“That depends whether you’re looking for a polite fuck off or a very impolite beating into a pulp.”

That arched eyebrow, and that expression, and the innate rage of helplessness churning in Blake blurred into the desire to hold Avon down and fuck him, whether that really was what Avon was after or not.

Out of the blue, upending Blake’s already tattered world: “And if I wanted the polite option, without the ‘off’ at the end?”

Stung by disbelief, Blake could only stare for a moment. “I don’t believe you,” he said, shaking his head. “You have just been through a battle—”

No smile at all, merely the seductive heat of

lust in dark brown eyes. “All that adrenalin has to be used up for something.”

“—where you’ve probably killed someone, if only by the pleasure of your company, and now you’re coming back here to proposition me? With the Rebels moving base, with the Federation probably sending a few pursuit ships to investigate why their main base has suddenly turned against them, and all you can think about is where to shove your prick?”

Murmuring words, drawing Blake into Avon’s aura of vibrant life. “Perhaps you’d rather I think about where you could shove yours?”

Seductiveness, here, of all places, and after what he’d been through last night—too much, simply too much, when he was so filled with anger and rage and hate. Too much of a chance that Avon’s little romp would turn into rape. Or would be rape, in Blake’s mind, regardless of how loudly Avon screamed ‘yes!’.

“Oh, go away,” he said, protecting them both, for all that Avon would belt him for his concern, “just leave me alone until we have to go back to *Liberator* and I can’t avoid you any longer.”

He was, vaguely, aware of the absolute shock that held Avon so still.

“What?” he asked, nastily amused. “Surely this isn’t the first time someone’s turned you down?”

“It is—from someone who wants me.”

Blake laughed at that, and at himself. After last night, to think that Avon was so sure that Blake harboured so minor a kink as lusting after Avon. “Wants you? Oh, Avon, how can you be so sure when I don’t even know what I want.”

“Accomplished in the field though you may be, you’re still not a good enough liar to convince me of that. Not after last night.”

“And what do you know about last night?” Avon’s expression telling him just how revealing his own voice and face had been, and mind-bogglingly, how unshocked and undisgusted Avon was. But then, that was because Avon only had the slimmest of suspicions, dredged up by a mind fond of innuendo and licentiousness. “No,” Blake said, half disappointed that not even Avon knew, that not even Avon would be still undisgusted were he to find out, “you can’t know, not really. If you knew...” If you knew, he thought, you’d hate me as much as I do.

“I know better than you think,” Avon whispered to him, tendrils of a dream reaching out to take him, promises of heaven in that voice and in the barest brush of fingers on Blake’s forehead where the bruise was. If he hadn’t wanted the physical affection so bitterly, Blake would have laughed. What could Avon honestly believe?

There, in an empty corner of an empty room, melancholy debris of the departing rebels littering the ground, Avon said the unsayable right out loud. “You wanted that boy, didn’t you?”

“Don’t be obscene,” Blake muttered, knowing he had to deny it, should fight against Avon believing that and perhaps telling others. But he was tired, already defeated by Avon’s bland honesty and aching for the minute hope that perhaps Avon was sick enough to not mind that the great and fearless leader had just discovered why he had kept his libido so severely subdued..

“Am I obscene?” Avon demanded, refusing to retreat, forcing Blake and all his tarnished secrets into the open. Voice hard, biting into Blake, pushing, pushing, pushing. “Is what you wanted obscene?”

Disbelieving that even Avon would need to ask such a thing, fighting not to yield to the temptation to refuse the wrong of what he wanted. “Of course it is. To think that about a child, a mere infant—”

“Six years old is surely childish, but infantile is a term I think we’ll reserve for you. But I ask you again,” and Avon was crouched down beside Blake now, the cupid’s bow of his lips a mere breath away. Irrelevantly, a momentary refuge from the bitterest of truths, Blake noted that Avon had drunk the sweet chocolate of which the local rebels seemed so fond, the scent still there, under the sweat and stour of last night’s fighting.

“Blake!” His name broke through and he blinked, dragged his eyes away from where they were feasting on Avon’s lips.

“I was asking you,” and now Avon’s knee brushed Blake’s leg, and Avon’s hand rested on Blake’s thigh, there, where a little boy’s pyjamas had pressed so trustingly.

Sharp voice asking blunt questions: “Is what you wanted obscene?”

“Molesting children,” Blake answered, too eroded to do anything but tell the unpretty

truth, “is something I can’t stand. It’s something...” He shook his head, at a loss for words, at a loss to explain the emotions inside himself. “I can’t think about what it would mean to the child, after, if I... If I were to actually *do* something to one of them, god, Avon, I feel sick and I could kill myself, if I had the balls to do it.”

And all Avon did was smile, ungently, and with a wealth of victory.

“You can wipe that look off your face!” Blake snapped, pushing Avon’s hand away, almost toppling the other man over. “You twisted bastard, wanting to do that to a child...” He stopped, choked by the newness of the knowledge that he was twisted too, because he wanted to do that to children. Pretty children, with innocent eyes and a treasure-trove of trust just waiting to be drunk in. Avon, whose brittle façade hid just such a wealth. Avon, the only person who dared know him in spite of it all. “Avon, what am I going to do?” he asked the man in front of him, the man who seemed so sure of himself, who had lost that air of being set adrift. So strong now, such a bastion, such a battlement to hide behind. Temptation, again, but one Blake could afford: being weak seemed so luxurious a thing after the disinterring of the night before. “I don’t even know if this is something the Federation planted in me, but I don’t think so. It... fits me, it doesn’t twist around inside my head the way the false memories do when I pick at them. But what if this sickness I feel about *doing* it to them really was implanted, a straightforward adjustment like any other sex offender? What if I would do it if I could?”

Avon reached out, unexpectedly gently, and touched the brand of self-hate that was on Blake’s forehead, brushing curls out of the way so that he could see it better, making Blake feel all the more exposed. “I can understand why you asked me, but not even I know everything.” Avon shrugged, dismissing Blake’s tangled confusion, moving them back to where Avon wanted to go. “So you like little boys. Unless the Federation has started using children to fight their battles, I hardly think that’s going to be much of a problem. The interesting question, Blake, is not whether you like little boys.” Avon stood up, and Blake craned his neck to look up at him, breath held, listening, waiting for an Avon-made salvation. “The question is whether or not

you like big boys.”

“Get out!” Blake roared, leaping up, catching Avon backhanded across the face. “I find out I’m a monster, and all you want to do is indulge your sick fantasies? Get out of here, Avon, before I make you regret the day you met me.”

A contempt-filled sneer flickered over Blake, measuring him, dismissing him utterly, the fingers of one hand touching the red mark on Avon’s cheek with something too closely akin to sensuousness for Blake to contemplate. “Regret the day I met you? Oh, but you’re too late for that. Too late by far.”

Then he was alone, with only the echo of Avon’s footsteps for company. Zombie-like, he went through the motions for the next few hours, saying things when people said things to him, smiling when someone smiled at him, frowning in polite concentration whenever anyone addressed him seriously. None of it registered, of course, none of it able to pierce the fog of chaos and actually lodge in his memory. Eventually, the diffused light of the commandeered historical monument was replaced by the impartiality of shipboard light, glare biting into everything, striking glancing blows off Avon’s hair and the glitter of his dangerous eyes. Jenna was there, and Gan, chattering voices and exultant delight in an unstinting victory. Alien, all of it, to Blake’s own defeat. Worse for him, it was defeat at unknown hands. Oh, he knew the enemy—all of them, including himself. He simply didn’t know which one had beaten him.

Late, very late, and exhausted sleep had lasted only long enough that his eyes were physically capable of staying open, and his body capable of staying upright. He was wandering again, more corridors, but these ones were impersonal, metal without adornment, doors with nothing to distinguish them from any of the other doors. A few had markers beside them, things that he and the others had put up so that they could remember where to find this or that, but nothing else to make them any different. Like himself, with only the marker on his forehead to show that he was not the same as the others.

But then again, there was Avon, and the things Avon had said, and the things Avon had seemed to be offering. Things Blake was almost afraid of looking at. He paused, his feet having

carried him where his mind had obviously wanted to go. Avon's door. Beyond it, Avon would be asleep, lying on his side, perhaps, or curled up in a neat ball. Perhaps Avon was as untidy in sleep as he was tidy in waking: maybe he was sprawled on his back, one naked foot dangling over the side of the bunk, his mouth slightly open, eyes flickering behind delicate eyelids as he dreamed. Of what, though, that was what worried Blake. Himself, and Avon, having sex, fucking each other hard, or dreams of Blake doing unmentionable things to a child?

The question arose again: was the revulsion in his stomach something truly him, or was it the result of an adjustment intended to make children safe from him. He supposed, standing there leaning his head on Avon's cold door, that the Federation wouldn't have wanted to suppress his molesting desires, not considering what they had used to frame him. He was far more useful to them, far more manipulable as a sexual miscreant, as the whispered monster of parents' fears than as a man who hated himself for his pædophilia. Much more useful to them if he were uncontrolled, amoral—

And that was the answer! He almost whooped with joy, as he finally was able to sift through the sludge in his mind and realise that if he had, if he actually had, abused a child, then the Federation would simply have used that against him. They wouldn't have had to find some poor little boys—oh, god, they had been so young!—to plant terrors in. There would have been no need for those boys all to go into the clinic the same day to have the same nightmare given them. So he hadn't done it. He could take off one layer of sackcloth and ashes, and stand a little bit straighter. He had an orientation that was anathema, but honestly did love children enough that he would do nothing to hurt them.

But that still left him with the problem of what he'd felt, when Jak had crept in beside him and cuddled up to him. The feel of his hair, his skin, his smallness... He slammed his fist into the wall.

Avon said, "There are easier ways of breaking in, you know. You should talk to Vila some times."

"Avon," Blake said to the man who had come upon him all unannounced. He couldn't think of anything else to say, at a loss, put completely

off-balance by Avon's blasé response to Blake's explosion of frustration. "I didn't expect to see you..."

Avon's eyes widened. "I *am* surprised. I thought you were merely practising for my arrival."

Attack, he told himself. It reveals so much less than defence. "So you admit that what you did to me was wrong."

"I admit no such thing," Avon replied, leaning casually against the wall, his skin so pale in the harshness of ship light. "I was simply prepared for a continuation of this morning's irrational temper tantrum."

"Irrational?" Why did it always seem to be Avon speaking so politely and him shouting in response? He modified his tone, becoming just as well-bred as the Élite standing there with such insouciance. "Considering what you had said to me and about me, I think my reaction was a model of restraint."

"Yes, well, you would, wouldn't you?" Verging on coy, well within the realms of flirtation, it set Blake's teeth on edge—and stirred his blood with more than anger.

Standing on his dignity now, pomposity meeting flirtation, Blake drew himself up tall. "Being on the receiving end of a vicious character assassination does tend to make me somewhat annoyed. I can't think why."

"Neither can I," Avon answered drily. "One would think you were acclimatised to that by now."

"It never gets any easier, and it never hurts any less."

With the merest change in expression, Avon turned Blake's comment around completely. "Then either you have been terribly unfortunate in your lovers—or you yourself are terrible at fucking."

The worldliness, the coarseness repulsed Blake, making him cold, destroying the nascent arousal. "You'll never be in a position to find out, will you? And I'm not stupid enough to let you prove the first part right."

He turned on his heel then, walking away, refusing to look behind him. He wanted nothing from Avon now, nothing but for Avon to just go away and leave him alone. To just shut up and let Blake forget, pretend it had never happened.

“Then,” Avon’s voice sabotaged him on the threshold of safety, “I shall have to find out about the latter, shan’t I?”

Teeth gritted, Blake walked on, far away from Avon’s knowing carnality.

So much had happened, and so little had changed. Cally had joined them, over Avon’s habitual distrust. Blake had led, bombastically, Avon had followed, mutinously. They had fought, each other more than the Federation. They had been hurt, but inflicted more. They had destroyed one thing, only to see it replaced by something bigger, better, more efficient. In other words, they were going round in circles, and Blake could feel the desperation settle a little more deeply each day. He had to do something—had to. Had to find some way to prove that he wasn’t wasting his time—hell, he had to prove that he wasn’t wasting his life. Orac was tweeting away in the corner, no doubt working on some project or other, not that the blasted machine would deign to tell him what the hell it was doing. Vila was off sleeping or drinking, Cally was squirrelled away painting her nihilistic visions of the future, Jenna was... Well, Jenna was becoming more and more of a problem as her impatience grew. Gan was solidly asleep and Avon...

Avon was a torment and a temptation, often both at one and the same moment.

“I’ve finished with the re-calibrations,” Jenna said, interrupting his thoughts. “They should last this time—as long as we don’t let Vila anywhere near them.”

“Oh, fine,” he said, and knew immediately that his boredom was too evident for Jenna to let it pass without some sort of comment.

“Thanks for the enthusiasm.” She crossed the flight deck, her boot-heels clicking louder as she drew nearer. Blake engrossed himself with the printout on energy levels, hoping against hope that he could put her off without having to drag it out into words. No such luck. “I suppose it’s a waste of breath, but would you care to join me in my cabin tonight?”

More challenge than invitation now, he noted, well aware that she was losing all patience and that his continued indifference was something she found insulting. “Not tonight,” he began, “I have these printouts—”

“Well, I suppose it’s as good an excuse as any. Especially as you can have your darling little Avon come up and ‘help’ you with it later.”

He didn’t want either of them thinking about him and Avon. “Now, you know that’s not how it is...”

“Do I? I know how it looks to me, and the others,” she snapped. “You’re fawning, Blake, and when you’re not fawning, you’re being a bully. D’you think we don’t know what’s going on?”

“There is nothing going on,” he repeated doggedly, as if she would believe him this time, wishing he could ask her what the hell was going on, because he wasn’t entirely sure himself. “I’ve told you again and again, there’s absolutely nothing going on between me and Avon.”

“But I bet there’s a lot coming off,” she said, quick as a whip and twice as cutting. “Such as clothes?”

“That’s unnecessary—”

“Oh, so it’s just a quick wank together?” She laughed then, mocking him. “I’d’ve thought you’d managed to be a bit more grown-up about it by now.”

He shut his mouth on every comment he wanted to make: he needed to keep Jenna on this ship more than he needed to shout at her. But Avon was going to get it later. The bastard had probably been telling tales behind his back, making things up, implying by omission...

“Oh, I give in!” Jenna said, making him realise that his attention had drifted, leaving her alone. She turned and left abruptly, a string of invectives billowing behind her.

He’d have to go out of his way to be decent to her tomorrow. Flatter her a bit, flirt a bit, praise her skills, trot out the usual tricks that she was barely playing along with. But for now, he was alone, alone and free to think. About Avon, about himself, and about sex. Such as why he was dead as the proverbial dodo below the belt—unless Avon was in his mind or in his line of sight. Sometimes. Yet there were times when he could look at Avon and feel nary a flicker of interest, balanced against the times when a simple gesture could make him rock hard and aching in a matter of seconds. None of the others, no matter what they did, and Jenna and Vila had both been blatant and extreme, managed to do a thing for him. Even lying in his



bunk alone, thinking about them didn't stir his flesh. As for when he masturbated... If he started thinking about, say, Jenna, with her lush figure and glorious hair, it was bloody difficult to get an erection, impossible to maintain it.

Unless he thought about what she must have been like as a child.

A guilty pleasure, one he tried desperately not to indulge, but sometimes he needed to, too painfilled and lonely and scared not to. He would imagine her needing him, in all her naïveté, and him taking her under his wing, protecting her, giving her everything she needed, and her looking up at him in trust and unquestioning adoration—and it wasn't her, it was some version of what she might have been two decades ago. Vila didn't appeal at all, too masculine, too self-contained for all his display of child-like vulnerability, all that patent innocence unable to conceal the depth of his experience. In fact, he couldn't imagine Vila as a child: with what Vila had let slip about his past, Blake doubted if Vila had ever been a child in anything but chronology.

And then there was Avon.

Avon struggling with a probe, muttering at the machinery, his eyes lighting up as he finally mended whatever needed mended—that could bring Blake off with just the attentions of his own hand and nothing more sexual than the memory of Avon's triumph at mastering the machine. Or perhaps it was simply seeing pure pleasure infuse Avon's face. He missed that, these months past, as Avon's face had hardened, new lines forming. He was losing that pampered look, the sleekness of the overindulged Alpha being slowly replaced by the hollowed cheeks and lines of a harried rebel. What Blake wouldn't give to go back to the days when Avon's eyes had been so wide and filled with wonder and speculation over his new toy, the *Liberator*. And he hated the way Avon was cutting his hair now. The leather jackets and stern black clothes weren't welcome, either.

But that old grey tunic Avon used to wear, the one that was so reminiscent of University togs... And the tentative way Avon would stick a probe into the inner mechanics of the ship before he had any idea of how the thing worked. The smile that would peep out, almost shy, not quite coy, when Blake praised him, and the way

his breathing would come fast and furious when they were having an argument, and Avon's cheeks would flush and his chest would heave as if he had been running...

Idly, his hand had strayed down to his crotch, rubbing himself there, fondling his cock and balls through the soft looseness of his trousers. He thought about the fineness of Avon's hair, and the softness of his lips, and the tentative delicacy of the time he had touched Blake, back on van Deke's base. He could have had Avon, then, could have pressed him down and spread his legs, could have parted those rounded buttocks and exposed Avon utterly. Could have wet him there, made him slick enough for Blake to slide home nice and tight and smooth. Could have—

"Thinking of me? How touching."

Guilty, jolting upright, hauling his hand away from himself only to cover himself with both hands, trying to hide the erection pulsing there.

"I see your opinion of yourself is as high as always," Blake answered, not entirely steadily, his breathing uneven and tell-tale.

Avon, basking in the security of his own attractiveness. "It has nothing to do with conceit and everything to do with experience."

"Really? Then why was it that I turned you down?"

"Bad taste, Blake. What else could it have been?"

And there it was, the conversation Blake had been avoiding for months. "Disgust."

Avon made a great display of examining himself, gazing then at Blake with patented confusion. "And I thought my clothes were so tasteful. Or perhaps it was the stench of blood I had brought from fighting your battles—"

"Don't start on that again, Avon. It's always the same, you going on as if you were some sort of pacifist, but you never refuse to fight, do you? I've never seen you so much as hesitate before killing someone, so why don't you just stop pretending?"

"In other words, follow your own sterling example?"

He wasn't going to back down, not this time, with Avon glaring at him like that, all macho bull and even more bullshit. And this acrimonious battle was better, far better, than Avon talking to him about sex, and Blake and offering something

that Blake didn't want to examine too closely "All right, I'll give you an example—"

"Oh, hello, Avon, I did not expect to see you here. Have you been keeping Blake company?"

Cally. God, he had forgotten that she'd asked to swap shifts with him. "Yes, he has," Blake put in before Avon could land them both in trouble. "He was," he stumbled, thought of what Jenna had said, "helping me with these hardcopies." And nearly choked at the expression on Avon's face.

But no betrayal, no wicked words to expose him. "A paragon of virtue, one might say."

"Couldn't agree more, Avon," Blake said, edging the other man round Cally, intent on getting him away from her and where he couldn't say anything that Cally would demand an explanation for. So intent on doing that, in fact, that it wasn't until Cally smiled at him with motherly indulgence that he realised how it must look to her, him so obviously suffering from interrupted arousal and now hurrying himself and Avon off to somewhere private.

To hell with it, he thought. They all think that anyway.

By tacit conspiracy, they ended up in Avon's quarters, facing each other over the orderly clutter of work things and valuables. "You were about to give me a sterling example of honesty at work," Avon said without preamble.

"Yes, I was," Blake answered, finding it so much more difficult now that the edge of his anger had dulled.

"Well then?" Avon prodded, pouring them both drinks, his every move a study in arrogance, a habit of his that drove Blake to gibbering fury in a matter of seconds.

And it was suddenly easy, very easy now that Avon was standing staring at him with that challenging glare. The dammed and damned words burst from him, pus from a boil, pressure immediately relieved, a sort of burning comfort flooding in. "I'm a paedophile, a man whose sexual desires are focussed on children."

"Thank you for the lesson in semantics," Avon said coolly, sipping from his drink. "All children?" He added with clinical curiosity. "Or only boys?"

"Paedophiles aren't fussy." Bitter that, with the sour wind of self-loathing.

The tiniest of smiles, the scantest warming of

cold eyes. "But you are."

"You think so?" Disbelief, as raw as the old anger that was rising all the hotter with every inch of seeping wound Avon laid bare.

"You must be. You didn't do a damn thing to van Deke's boy."

He wanted, fiercely, for Avon's—for anyone's—forgiveness, but he couldn't afford such a dangerous indulgence. "I'm surprised that you have so much naïveté left."

"Not naïveté, simple logic. Had you done anything to him, he would have told his mother. She would have killed you. You are in fact still here, ergo, you did nothing to the boy."

"I had him in my bed," Blake said, some dark part of him enjoying the shock on Avon's face. "I held him in my arms and I stroked his hair. I even," he paused, disgusted and aroused by Avon's lack of horror, "kissed him."

He watched Avon swallow, felt like a vulture circling for the kill. "And then," he stopped, watched as Avon took a gulp of his drink, stared fascinated at the complexity of reactions struggling to cover the studied blankness of Avon's expressions. "And then I sent him back to his own bed before I could do anything worse than that."

"A man of principles," Avon murmured with scarcely a hint of mockery and more than a dash of genuine respect.

"What choice do I have?" Blake cried out, ashamed of himself and his pride in Avon respecting him for such a murky reason. "Oh, don't try to tell me you advocate going out there and raping small children. I won't believe that, not even of you."

"Interesting," Avon said with a sophisticated smile, "that you think some things are beyond even me."

Blake would cheerfully wipe that sneer off Avon's face—had, once before, and even lived to tell the tale. And for all Avon's bombast at the time, there had been no retributions. If anything, there had been a distinct warming of the atmosphere between them. Slowly, against all of Blake's best intentions, details insisted on slotting into place. "You enjoy this, don't you? Sexually, I mean."

"Chatting to you?" Arch, so arch: if he were a whore, he'd be fluttering his eyelashes. "Oh, hardly."

“No. Arguing. Making me angry.” Blake paused, watching Avon all the while. “Making me angry enough to hit you.”

Avon spread his hands, carefully charming, perfectly insolent. “Now why would I do a thing like that?”

“Because you’re a devious, deviant bastard!”

Avon laughed, a surprisingly light sound from so dark and strong a man. “Oh, there is that, isn’t there?” Serious once more, the glitter of his eyes both lure and warning. “But what’s that old adage? It takes one to know one. And are we?”

“Are we what?” Blake asked, knowing what Avon was pushing for, refusing to make it easy, fighting himself for some time to sort this out, to clear his thoughts before he was in deeper than his worst nightmare.

“Devious,” Avon replied. “But considering the way you manipulate us all—yes, even me, I’ll admit in the present circumstance.” Quick flash of a smile, that odd combination of guile and innocent glee. “But only because there’s no one here but you. So we are agreed that you are devious—”

“You can concede what you want, and you can call me what you want, but that won’t make it any less false.”

A raised eyebrow, silent incredulity, and it was another morsel of fuel to stoke Blake’s ceaseless, helpless rage. He had been looked at, precisely in that way, by the puppeteers, and the interviewers. Had had that expression shown him by rebels and parents alike, too many unwilling to trust him because of lies broadcast by worse bastards than Avon.

“Well now, good as it is for the soul, I shouldn’t have expected you to confess. Let us move on now, to ‘bastard’.” A considering stare, encompassing not only Blake standing there fuming, but all his pasts, all his histories, both the real and the crafted. “I don’t think even you, saviour of the masses, would deny *that* particular charge—or compliment, depending upon who said it.”

“Look, I didn’t come here to discuss semantics with you. I came to...”

Avon simply looked at him, and Blake’s spine shivered, not with cold, but with something dangerously, chillingly hot. Burning him, tingling along his nerves, prickling in his mind as

he saw, as he knew, that this was the moment. Whatever he had been building to—since he had met Avon, since he had been born, since the Galaxy had formed, this was it.

“Yes?” Avon asked, silk over malice so pure it could be love, or love so impure it could be poison. “You came here to what? Confess to your love of boys? But I already knew that. So what did you come here for?”

“To stop you from saying anything in front of Cally.” Feeble, it sounded so feeble, so patently false, even to himself. But it was a lie he could live with: he was not sure that he could live with Avon’s truths.

“Ah, I see.” The slightest nod, as if no more than a polite hello. Then Avon was moving, Blake’s eyes addicted to the man, to the way he moved, the clench and flow of his buttocks, the invitation there. “You came here so that I would not, as is so obviously my wont, reveal everything to Cally.”

“Don’t mock me, Avon,” Blake said, dangerous now as Avon was dangerous, sitting there on the bunk with his shoes off and his feet bare. Stripping, slowly, without the usual blandishments of seduction, and all the more appealing for it.

“If you don’t want me to mock you, then stop handing me your head on a silver platter.” Avon was standing, tunic dropped to the floor, shirt buttons coming casually undone, each revealed inch of skin caustic, eroding Blake. It would have been so much more resistible, if Avon had been making a striptease out of this, but it was nothing like that, only the removing of clothes, as Avon must have done every night of his life. Casual, meaningless, absolutely sexless—and therefore innocent, sexy beyond belief to Blake. He could feel his pulse racing, hurtling through his body as his blood flooded into his cock, making him hotter and harder, filling him, lengthening him, until the cloth of his trousers was a soft caress. Avon flexed his shoulders, his chest muscles moving, nipples small and pale in the smoothness of his chest: Blake’s trousers were as tight as a fist, pressing his cock against his thigh, crotch seam splitting his balls, pulling them tight. Blake was dizzy, from arousal and from the rollercoasting of his emotions. He knew there was an answer to why his reactions to Avon were an endless seesawing, but it was

an answer that sneaked in during the night, to be cast out and forgotten by morning.

"So," Avon was saying, stretching, scratching absently at his waist where Blake could see the pink creases left by his trousers, "we have dealt with devious, and we have certainly dealt with bastard. Which leaves," he looked at Blake, wide-eyed, innocence personified, "deviant."

"Don't—" He had to stop, cough, clear his throat of the passion lodged there. The way the light was tickling over Avon, the unconscious beauty of the lithe body, the way white skin surrounded pale pink nipple... "Don't think you can use my perversions against me. I may have desires which I can't control, but I'll damn well control my actions."

"How noble," Avon replied, fumbling with the tight button on his waistband, the clumsiness of his fingers obliterating the sting of his words and making Blake itch to reach out and do it for him, to help, to take charge, to guide those pretty fingers "How terribly noble. But you are a deviant, Blake, as much as I am. Tell me, for all your lofty ideals, what will you do next time you are left alone with some pretty child?"

"Walk away." The way he should be walking away from Avon, but he was addicted, couldn't peel his eyes away for wondering if that were shadow he could see in the cusp of Avon's trousers, or if it were the secret darkness of hair.

"Really? As I said, how noble. But think about it, Blake, actually think about it. Imagine the child. A girl, a boy, which do you prefer?" No pause, no time for Blake to recover from the words thudding into him. "Or doesn't it matter, as long as they are innocent and you can 'protect' them?" Avon's hand poised on zip, easing it fractionally, not far enough, lust tangling in Blake's mind with the guilty pleasure of what Avon was saying, and the pain it all brought. "Think about his little hand in yours," Avon said, voice a velvet caress the length of Blake's hard cock. "Think about him holding on tight as you take him somewhere, making him laugh, making him happier than his too-strict parents ever would. Taking him away from misery and pain, because you could make him happy. Because you love him."

The words caught Blake, honey-trap to snare him, and he was entangled, eyes riveted to Avon, to his mouth, his body, that deeply

shadowed place where Avon's white fingers dabbled.

"What would you do then, when that child, that perfect innocence, threw his arms around your neck and said you were the most wonderful person in the world? Would you be able to do it?" Sharper than a serpent's tooth, indeed. The venom, produced within Blake's own mind, dripped into his blood. "Would you be able to walk away and truly protect that child? Or would your own sexual needs colour your thoughts, convince you that a little kiss wouldn't do any harm? Hmm?"

He couldn't answer that. Didn't want to answer it.

But Avon never permitted cowardice. Frailties and foibles he would countenance, but never cowardice, and never from Blake. "Tell me. Where would it end, Blake?"

Blake knew where it would end. Knew where it *should* end, but the seduction of Avon's voice was leading him astray, taking him down paths he never wanted to find again.

"I can tell you where it would end," Avon whispered to him, breathless, the intimacy of secrets shared in the dark, when he'd been away at school, with his best friends, things done in the night...

"It would end with you satisfied, and that little boy scarred for life. It would end, Blake," and the snap of his voice was a whip across Blake's back, "it would end with all your fine, noble intentions nothing more than another child violated, another life ruined. It would end with you being no better than the Federation said you were."

He couldn't bear it. Couldn't, couldn't, couldn't. "Stop it! Shut up, Avon, just shut up, or I'll—"

"Or what? You'll hit me? When you know that is precisely what I want?"

"You sick bastard—"

"Thus spake the child molester."

Blake hit him then, hard, another backhander, Avon tumbling over, landing on the bed, sprawled on his back, legs wide-splayed, utterly vulnerable, totally defenceless, and Blake wanted him voraciously.

"Why, thank you," Avon smiled, coming up off the bed, one hand checking to see if there was any blood. "Can I have some more, please?"

Deep inside, one of Blake's demons stirred, and smiled, a demon Blake knew instinctively that he had fought all his life. An old lust was licking his groin, an old need, and Blake felt his feet slide out from under him. "Why are you doing this to me?" Begging, now, pleading to be freed from this thing they both wanted and should both fear.

Avon smiled, the personification of Blake's own demon. "Because it's what you need—and it's what I want."

No, too much, much too much like the truth. He needed to back away from that, turn his back on it so that it wouldn't be true, so that he could find a nice comfortable lie to lean on. "I *need* to slap you around? How the hell did you come to that conclusion?"

"Oh, no, that's the part I *want*. What you need..." Avon knelt on the bunk, slouching, making himself small so that Blake was still looking down, if only slightly. "Look at me, Blake," Avon said.

As if Blake could do anything else. Helpless, defeat crowding his shoulders and firing his loin, he stared.

"What do you see?"

"Believe me, Avon, you really don't want to know the answer to that."

"I think *you* are the one who doesn't want the answer. Don't you know why I excite you so?"

Grasping at straws, postponing the moment. "Sometimes—it's usually a sure sign that I want my head examined."

"Which, demonstrably, is most of the time. Certainly right now."

He couldn't deny that, not when the adrenaline rush of anger was singing through him and his lust was stoked and made ready by Avon so willing in front of him. On his knees, looking up, submissive for all his aggressive words. Even his voice, soft, light, not as deep as usual...

Avon was looking at him with the damnation of self-knowledge. "You really don't know, do you? Oh, Blake, you poor, confused bastard..."

Too much, to hear sympathy and affection in that voice. "You can take your pity and—"

"Yes? I can take my pity, and? You've no more answer for that than for why you came here in the first place, have you?" Avon lay down then, arms and legs artlessly arranged in complete vulnerability. "Isn't there something

about me that you notice, Blake? Something unusual, something that excites you terribly, even if you refuse to acknowledge it?"

"There's nothing about you—" But there was, and the palms of his hands were sweating, and his hackles were prickling, his body wanting to fight or flee. His conscious mind had been denying it, but his body had known. And wanted to taste, to run his tongue there, learn what it would feel like, own that innocence of flesh...

"Nothing?" Avon asked, almost pouting.

Blake didn't want to deal with any of this, simply did not want to get into this. Wanted to run, but his feet had set down roots, in the loam of those desires he had damned to perdition.

"Nothing at all?" Avon asked again, a sing-song cadence creeping in, the sound of it sucking on Blake until lust warred with anger and fear was pushed to the background where it whimpered, ignored, the heated emotions consuming everything.

"Well, Blake?" Avon murmured, stretching his arms above his head. "Can't you see what I've done? What I've done—" voice shifting, becoming a light whisper, "for you?"

"Yes," Blake groaned, eyes closing against what lay presented in front of him. But the darkness was not so welcoming as Avon, nor strong enough to blot out the need in Blake, the need that Avon recognised so well in him and was feeding. Blake opened his eyes again, leaving himself unarmoured against the beauty spread before him. "Yes," he whispered, leaning forward, trembling fingers reaching out to touch, there, where the skin was baby smooth, where there should have been hair. "Why?" he asked, because he could not face the answers himself, but Avon could. In his own unique way, Avon was almost innocent, for he knew no shame, he admitted no guilt. Indulged his senses with the appetite of a man, and with the irresponsible immaturity of youth.

"Because I can give you what you need, and you can give me what I want. Here," Blake's fingers were taken in cool ones, caressed across the slight bump of nipple to the satin skin on Avon's chest. "Bare. Completely bare, because that's what you need. And here," Blake's hand smoothed down Avon's belly, to where the trousers lay slightly agape, naked skin disappearing into darkness. Blake's cock jolted, and

his mind shuddered. If Avon had removed the hair there, if he had done that, it would be too much, far too young, too much what he had feared he had done...

Or worse, would it be the only thing that could keep Blake aroused?

"But not here," Avon was saying to him, and Blake could feel the brush of hair, and then the softness of skin over hardness that begged his hand to hold it, to squeeze and stroke and bring out into the light where it could be seen and adored. He splayed his hand, his fingers coming down tightly on each side of Avon's cock, his palm pressing into the slight groin hair, his fingertips touching Avon's balls.

"Oh, yes, I want you to do that again," Avon groaned, the greedy whine in his voice exciting to Blake. "I like when you do that..."

Blake pushed the trousers down out of the way, exposing Avon, all the way to the lightest down of hair on his thighs. He took Avon's balls in one hand, and his cock in the other, covering the crown with the wetness of his mouth. Avon shuddered in him, pulse strong and heavy against Blake's tongue.

Avon's hands grabbed him, forcing him down, the thickness of Avon's cock gagging him. Blake pulled away, shoving Avon's hands away. "Don't do that."

"I'm sorry," Avon said, very quietly, his demeanour denying the manliness of his cock, the expression on his face that of a little boy trying to get out of trouble. "I'm really sorry."

"Just don't do it again," Blake muttered, lowering himself once more to Avon's cock. It should have worried him, that he needed no instruction in this, but the hunger was too deep, the famine gone on for too long. He knew precisely the old, standard game they were playing, knew how dangerous it could be for him, but that would be later. He had no strength left to pretend anything to himself, too wearied to keep all the old knowledge and desires locked away. Oh, yes, there would be penalties, but not until much later, in a future beyond his imagining. But right now, at this moment, he had Avon pliant under him, Avon willing, and Avon, his clever, clever Avon, knowing exactly what Blake needed and more than willing to provide it with the safety of his adult body.

The hands descended upon him again, forc-

ing him again, demanding rather than strong.

"I told you not to do that," Blake snapped, pushing at Avon, a pulse of desire as he registered how perfectly Avon was playing his part.

"I'm sorry, I can't help it." Huge eyes gazed up at Blake, and Avon's lips stayed parted, giving Blake a glimpse of the wet darkness inside. "It's just... I just want it so very much..."

He was playing it too well: and were those real memories he was stirring, or was he merely fantasy brought to life? Blake didn't know, had no way to know, and so he stared at Avon, and crawling fear threatened to unman him. Almost, almost he pushed Avon and his games aside; almost, almost he did the sensible thing and walked out before he could give in to something he feared could eat him alive. But then Avon blinked so slowly, looked down, and temptation struck again, so that Blake did nothing.

"I've been terribly naughty," Avon said, one hand rubbing at his eye.

And for that gesture of perfect innocence, Blake wanted to kill him. Avon—no, he couldn't think of him as Avon, not lying there like that. Kerr...yes, it was Kerr, lying there, with his hairless armpits and naked chest. With only smooth skin where a line of hair should arrow down to the black hair nested 'round his cock. Kerr, with his childlike innocence, and his adult's lust, and his adult's sex. But Kerr, who was offering him what he needed, but which he had thought he could not have. Oh, yes, he could kill Avon for giving him this.

But he could love Kerr. And most frightening of all, he could love Avon too.

He took a deep breath, trying to fend off the seduction of Kerr lying there in such exquisite, forbidden nakedness. But he couldn't fight it, couldn't turn down such expiation of his needs. To feed the demon in his soul, that was what was on offer here. And the price?

But he had already lost that battle, had already decided to pay the penalty later. After...

After he had tasted this flesh.

After he had made this body belong to him.

He should fight it, he knew he should. But he wanted this so much, needed it so much, and to give it up, when this would be his only chance of fulfilling himself without destroying some innocent's life... So was that, perhaps, what Avon was giving him? This chance to pretend

that he was with some naïveté called Kerr—was that not to feed his demon to make it stronger, but to keep it caged within this room, between the two of them, two grown men who could each play the rôle the other needed so terribly?

And with such perfect beauty and such perfect need lying in front of him, did it honestly matter? Would the reason make a difference to what he was going to do? He had to believe that it would. Had to believe that if he were not to hate himself after.

“Yes, you have,” Blake finally said, giving them both what they wanted, making Avon’s eyes sparkle with anticipatory delight. “You’ve been a very bad boy, Kerr.”

He stood up, bringing Avon with him. “Go and stand in the corner till I’m ready for you,” he said, watching Avon’s strong back and wondering at how so solid a man could make himself appear so fragile. With Avon turned away from him, Blake stripped, then put on the dressing gown that had lain, crumpled by their movements, at the bottom of the bunk. He tied it, but carefully, so that it would come undone with but a single twist of his hand.

He settled himself on the edge of the bunk, checking to make sure that the mechanics of this would work. He supposed, dispassionately so that he would not begin to think again, so that his doubts would stay quietly locked away, that he would one day reach the stage where all this would be automatic, the game so well-established and the rôles so familiar that they would simply walk in and be ready for what they had to do.

“Kerr,” he said, very stern, that such a part of this game they were playing. “Come over here.”

Avon, spectacularly, shockingly obedient, did as he was told, coming towards Blake with his head bowed and his lashes lowered, hands crossed modestly in front of his genitals.

“This is going to hurt me more than it’s going to hurt you,” Blake said, from the rippling memory of some book he had read and buried deep in his mind. “Bend over.”

He opened his legs as Avon positioned himself, then closed them around Avon’s erection, trapping the hot flesh between his thighs. Avon’s legs were slightly spread, and Blake understood what Avon wanted. One forearm digging into Avon’s shoulders, he brought his

free hand up, then down, hard, handprint blossoming red on white arse. Avon moaned, wriggling, and Blake pressed his thighs more tightly together, giving Avon the sensation he wanted and himself the joy of keeping Kerr there, owning that part of him, controlling every sensation. Again, Blake spanked him, and again, until his mark was on every inch of Avon’s arse, until there was none of Avon’s white skin left, only the red aftermath of Blake’s possession.

“Are you sorry, Kerr?” he asked, one finger rubbing the tight hole of Avon’s arse, his finger promising as his words set them up for the next part of their scene.

“No!” Avon shouted, invitingly recalcitrant, pushing his backside up so that Blake’s fingertip penetrated him.

“Then we shall have to make you see the error of your ways, won’t we, Kerr?” Blake shoved Avon’s legs wider apart, lifting and moving him until Avon’s cock was crushed between Avon’s belly and the top of Blake’s thigh, and Avon’s balls were lying, exposed and helpless, Blake tugging on them, not quite gently. “Hold yourself open,” Blake demanded, and Avon immediately reached one hand round, doing as well as he could. Blake released his hold on Avon’s balls, using that hand to spread Avon’s other cheek, a small darkness opening as Avon’s arse was stretched. There was no need to hold Avon down any more, so Blake lifted his arm from Avon’s shoulders, raised it over Avon’s back like a panoply, and then spanked Avon, there, on the runnel of flesh between Avon’s buttocks, the palm of his hand slapping onto Avon’s arsehole, his fingers just touching Avon’s balls. Then a caress to soothe the sting of the blow, a light stroking across the bud of pink flesh and the tender swell below.

Between them, Avon’s cock thrummed his appreciation, and Blake smiled down at him with feral pleasure. He shifted them again, his cock now across his thigh and kissed sweetly by Avon’s. He held them together like that for a while, until Avon’s naughty, struggling schoolboy act was more than mere pretence, Avon’s frustration and impatience a taut reality between them. Then, and only then did he begin the spanking again, every harshness followed by contrasting softness, hot slaps by cool caresses, anger by conciliation. And Avon was loving it,

mewling his pleasure, his mouth wet and wide on every inch of Blake's flesh that could be reached, his cock grinding against Blake's. He was, Blake could tell by the flush of his skin and the frantic rubbing of his body, getting close to the point of no return. But it was up to Blake when that happened, it was up to Blake to be in control of their desires and their bodies. It was all for him to decide.

"I think that's enough for now," Blake said, rubbing his hands soothingly across Avon's red buttocks.

"But I've been so naughty," Avon pouted, squirming round so that he could look over his shoulder at Blake.

Blake pinched his bottom, no caress, but serious warning, a reminder that Avon had put himself in Blake's hands and had to trust him with their pleasure. "Up you get."

"Don't want to," Avon whined, still watching, hands clutching at Blake, his cockhead damp against Blake's skin.

"Get up!" Blake roared, resisting the temptation to throw Avon to the bed and fuck him into next week. That wasn't part of the game, not yet, and this was going to cost him too much to throw the fantasy away on mere lust.

"Please," Avon whimpered, pushing, giving Blake no choice in what he would have to do next.

Blake raised his hand, promising punishment for such disobedience.

"Oh, please," Avon's voice so small and light, his breath a faint caress, his body speaking the language of a child.

A pause, with Blake staring at Avon, locked into place by some expression in the brown eyes, some hint of what Avon was asking for holding Blake there, simply staring. Waiting, for something he knew he needed, for something he feared Avon might know also, and worse, bring out to where it was seen, and heard, and welcomed. Breath caught in his chest, Blake waited for Avon to say it.

Avon's eyes were very wide and very, very bright, his voice the barest of whispers. "Oh, please, Daddy."

For a long moment, several thudding heartbeats, Blake stared, appalled and aroused and torn to pieces. He had known he wanted this, had thought he could have it and still pretend

that he wasn't, quite, giving in. And now Avon had said it. Daddy. Both rôle-playing and reality, heaven and hell in the one word.

Trust. That's what Avon was asking for. Trust in him that he wouldn't allow Blake to destroy himself, trust in him that he would free Blake from the fear of taking what he needed from an innocent.

Could he? Trust Avon? And even if he didn't, could he deny himself the pleasure of Avon's trust in him now that it had been handed to him freely?

Even dazed as he was with lust and confusion and guilt, the tremulous voice cut right through Blake's scant defences.

"Please, Daddy," Avon whispered, taking Blake's hand and kissing the palm tenderly—chastely. "I'll do whatever you say, Daddy..."

And the lust and the desire and the fierce, fierce need seared through him. Blake wrenched free of Avon's tender grip and hit him, the *crack!* of his hand meeting flesh ricocheting through the room. His voice was thick, struggling to get past the aching hunger in his throat, his cock pulsing strongly as he finally, irrevocably, yielded to this blessing of his darkest secret. "I'm sorry, but you need to be taught a lesson."

Across Blake's lap again, Avon was afire, squirming and struggling, crying and pleading, his cock rubbing hard against Blake's, giving Blake the control and power he needed the way he needed air. He grabbed Avon by the hair, pulling him up until they were only a kiss apart. He waited until Avon was still, until Avon was waiting, dependent on Blake, until they were looking at each other with the unnerving, exciting intensity of honesty. He wanted to drag this moment out, make it last, to feast on this knowledge of what Avon was begging him for. He didn't want to look away from the perfect innocence of Kerr's eyes. "This is for your own good," he said, giving unto Avon what Avon had given him, losing himself completely in the sweetness of his fantasy. "I'm doing this for your own sake." And he made them both wait, made the pleasure sweeter, sharper, made them wait until he couldn't wait another second. He said it, out loud, with all the pleasure the galaxy could hold. "I'm doing this for you. Son."

And felt the sweet heat of Avon's cum on him, and stared into Avon's eyes as Avon cli-



maxed, and kissed him, deeply, possessively, as the final waves of orgasm claimed Avon, just as Blake claimed him for his own. Blake kissed him again and again, his hands taking their pleasure wherever his whim led him to touch Avon.

“On my lap,” he said when Avon had calmed from his orgasm and was melting nicely into his kisses. Quickly, he was obeyed, Avon’s arms twining round his neck, Avon’s bottom lush on the hard thrust of Blake’s cock, Avon’s mouth open to Blake’s. “Up,” was all Blake said, and Avon was astride him, poised, ready. Practised, Blake recognised, and shoved the thought from his mind as the expertise threatened his fantasy of perfect innocence. “Down,” he whispered, eyes closed, not wanting to look into Avon’s eyes as he penetrated him, as that hot flesh parted for him, as that satin interior swallowed him in. Tight, too tight, pressing into him, a ring of muscle round the base of his cock, embracing flesh down the length of him. He moved, a fraction, then lifted Avon up, lowering him, controlling the movement, the burning friction of Avon’s arse loving him. Enveloped by his own illicit dreams, he allowed himself then the luxury of touching Avon there, under his arms, where the flesh was so sinfully naked, where there was such satin smoothness, such ageless perfection. Pulled Avon even closer against him, to savour the bare chest, the tiny nipple-buds. And the joy, the extremity of sexual pleasure was in the way Avon’s arms were clinging round his neck, in the way Avon was holding on to him so tightly with such needfilled hunger. He felt a ripple of muscle against his cock, the adult, knowing movement ameliorated by the way Avon whimpered against his neck, murmuring words that touched the secret places inside Blake just as his cock touched the secret places inside Avon. It was perfect, utterly perfect, made more so when Avon turned round, still impaled, and wrapped himself around Blake, arms and legs clinging, smooth, smooth skin pressing against Blake, and that flawless mouth whispering all the right things, every sound, every touch shivering down Blake’s spine, overflowing to fill his body, bringing him closer and closer to orgasm.

Avon, enveloped in and around Blake, sitting on Blake’s lap with a combination of profoundest carnal knowledge and most perfect innocence,

was all Blake needed, this filling of every need in the only way that might possibly be safe. He hugged this pliant version of Avon, kissing him, covering his face with tiny kisses, closing those eyes with the brief caress of his mouth, hearing himself murmur all the things that could be said here and nowhere else.

In his arms, Avon shifted, squirming charmingly, the movement of his body a delight to Blake, and he was close, so close to coming, needing something, just something, one more thing and he would be there...

Avon, of course, his salvation and his damnation, knew precisely what it was and gave it, eyes glittering, flesh sweet and tight, skin so smooth and soft.

Brown eyes gazed into Blake’s, arms tightened round him, Kerr’s small voice speaking. “I love you, Daddy.”

And Blake came, great rushing waves of pleasure, destroying his mind, body flying apart on a million shards of most exquisite sensation. All the while, he heard it, Avon’s voice playing little boy for Blake, Kerr telling him all the things he craved to hear, all the things his heart and mind and libido were focussed on, Avon gave him all these things.

Doing so, Avon, pretty, passive Avon, showed that it was he who was made of steel and iron and immutable strength, that it was he who held the upper hand. It was he, not Blake, who led, here.

And Blake, lying there on the bed, unsure of when he had moved, or how he moved, knowing only that he had found some sort of heaven for that brief time, Blake knew that he was going to follow.

Catching his breath, gathering his scattered wits, he slowly propped himself up on his elbow. His dressing gown was tangled round him, the belt trailing, so he sat up, taking his time to sort his clothing out, stealing some time to sort his cover out. A deep breath, and then he looked Avon straight in the eye. There wasn’t the faintest trace of Kerr, no hint at all of how small Avon had been, nor of how he’d clung, nor of how he’d needed to be made safe.

No hint, either, of what he had said. I love you. He had, Avon had said it—but when he was playing at being someone and something else. That, perhaps, explained the dark

glimmerings Blake saw now, that miasma of emotion, unreadable, behind Avon's polite face.

"I see you've decided to rejoin the land of the living."

Unrevealing, no more expression than if they were on the flight deck passing round one of Vila's concoctions. "I'm sorry," Blake answered automatically whilst his mind whirled with wonderings and speculations and doubts, "did I fall asleep on you?"

"Under me, actually," Avon replied, a wealth of meaning lading the simple fact, turning it into a metaphor for who had gained power here. It was, Blake thought, time for the payments to come due, complete with penalties, points and collateral.

"Was I?" Blake asked, refusing Avon's balance of payments, offering his own deal. "Not that the actual positioning matters over much, does it?"

An unexpected peal of laughter, Avon's odd sense of humour flooding the room with its brightness, the silence after carrying a hint of threat in contrast. "Oh, but position is everything, Blake, or so the manuals would have us believe."

"Surely you don't believe everything you read?"

"About you?" Sharp look, peeling Blake's skin off to reveal the man within. "At the time, yes. Now..."

The words left Blake hanging, swaying gently in current of Avon's gaze. All the self-loathing and self-doubts came back to disembowel all Blake's hard-won certainties, the intellect no proof against the dismaying fear that perhaps the mind was wrong, pretending to itself, and all those emotions, those forbidden, unwanted emotions and desires were stronger than the man who held them. And Avon sat there, at the very foot of the bed, staring. Blake swallowed, did as Avon was so silently demanding he do. "And now? Do you believe it now?"

Was that a smile in those dark eyes? Or was it merely the glitter of triumph? "Now? Now it doesn't matter. What matters, Blake," and he leaned forward, one hand stretching out to trace a pattern of pleasure across Blake's chest, Blake's eyes feasting on the naked skin under Avon's arm, "is that now you know the truth about yourself—"

"Do I?" Blake demanded, and was ignored,

Avon's hand lowering to where Blake's lax sex lay, sticky amidst its forest of hair.

"Oh, you do. And if you don't, well, you'll find out eventually. Or it will cease to be important. What is important, now—" his hand closed tightly, too tightly, threatening Blake's manhood with its barely leashed strength, "is that you know you can have what you need without harming anyone, and I can have what I want with the fewest possible complications."

Blake started to laugh, hysteria colouring the edges. "With the fewest possible complications? Oh, Avon, you would have fewer complications if you took up with Servalan and Travis combined."

"But they," sibilant voice, serpentine caresses on Blake's sex, and lower, between his legs, his balls pressed into his body, Avon's finger flirting with the entrance to his body, "neither one of them could give me what I want."

Blake's large hand took Avon's in his, stilling the other man, regaining control. He stared until Avon stopped looking away and met his eyes. "And what is it that you want, Avon?"

A sophisticated smile, meaningless enough to hide a multitude of truths behind. "I rather think we've just gone through all that."

"Have we?" He leaned back, away from Avon's threatened kiss, keeping himself distant enough that he wouldn't lose himself in the carnal promise of Avon's body. "And which part of that was what you wanted? The spanking?"

Unspeaking, Avon moved in closer until he was kneeling astride Blake, and had Blake's hand upon him, mapping where the skin had been so hot and red.

"And the being told you were naughty?"

Avon lowered his eyes, black eyelashes casting crescent shadows on an unbelievably smooth face.

"And the being fucked?"

Dark eyes opened, and burned with sexual lure, enough to distract anyone other than Blake.

"And the telling me you loved me?"

Gone, in an instant, a flurry of motion and dismay and rage, but the voice, when it came was perfectly controlled, a monotone of boredom. "All these amateur athletics have tired me out and I'm going to bed," quick, hurried, before Blake could take advantage, "—alone. Good night."

Then Avon was gone, a dignified retreat into the bathroom. Taking his time, Blake got dressed to the soothing drone of the shower. At the door, he paused, looking for a moment at the other door, the locked one Avon was hiding behind. It had had all the hallmarks of politely withdrawing whilst one's casual sexual partner left, but Blake recognised a rout when he saw one.

And what was interesting was what had caused it.

He had, almost, put together all the conflicting emotions and insights of that night with Avon, untangling the skeins of Avon's intended powerplay that was supposed to be disguised as sex-play, but was, Blake was sure, more love disguised as sex-play within powerplay. Exhibit A, he decided, was the way Avon was behaving at this very moment. Obstreperous to the point of inciting murder, strung so taut with tension that a single word would make him vibrate with fury; appetite gone, humour a brittle exercise of form, and under it all, the constant, endless glancings at Blake, the ones slipped in between the barbed comments and the vicious expressions of dislike. Oh, yes, only one thing could possibly explain Avon being in such a state of total disarray: love. Had to be, Blake thought. All the evidence pointed towards that. And Avon had actually said it.

Love, Blake mused. Love, between him, and Avon. Was it possible? Oh, the feelings were plausible, even likely, given how much they could hate each other at times. He could, he knew, love Avon. Probably already did love him as Kerr—but that was something to be thought about later, the sweet inferno that was Kerr.

But Avon? To invite the viper into his heart and hope to contain it? Just look at what had happened when Blake had given Avon what he wanted—or allowed Avon to give Blake what Blake needed. Now he had Avon glaring and glowering at him, endless posturings of hostility, anything to prove that those flaying words had never been said.

I love you.

And Blake wondered if it were true.

Do you love me? he asked Avon silently. Avon, equally silently and all unknowing, answered him in that moment with a covetous

glance from under the veil of eyelashes.

Oh, yes, it was all there for anyone with eyes to see and the secret knowledge so misered by Blake: Avon loved him.

The question now was how they could both survive this revelation.

Avon was a fulcrum, ever balanced on a single point, with no-one but Avon knowing what that one thing was. Woe betide the person who guessed wrongly, who neglected whichever imperative Avon harboured. A palimpsest of multiple levels and ever-changing meanings, it was taking Blake time to decipher this man, but that night could be the one definitive clue.

Of course, it could prove the one definitive clue to Blake himself, not a thought he wanted to dwell upon. Knowledge of oneself was never as comfortable as knowledge of others, and Blake was still breathless from the tumult of emotions and discoveries he had made about himself. Better, for now, to concentrate on Avon, and if any self-knowledge should arise, well, it would be all the easier to assimilate if it came drip by drip rather in the suffocating deluge of a child creeping into his bed.

He still did not want to believe that of himself. Still could not believe that he was that basest of creatures, an abuser of children.

But I'm not, he reminded himself yet again. The Federation had to falsify evidence that I had touched them, and I did nothing that Jak would remember as anything other than innocent comforting.

And the memory crashed into him: of Avon sitting on his lap, Blake's cock deep inside his body, those arms clinging round his neck, the deliberate innocence, the calculated child-likeness, yet the unmanufactured, raw need. A hand wiped across his face wiped away the sudden rain of sweat, but did nothing to erase the flood of arousal. Safety, temptation whispered in his mind: the safety of a man's mind in a man's body, with all the careful imaging of a child superimposed over what could not be denied to be a man.

Safe.

But "Avon is safety" was an oxymoron, two antonyms he could not believe made a synonym. Although it could certainly make a sin...

Opposite him and in opposition to him, Avon was stalking Vila, sharp-tongued mastery dis-

played for everyone to see, although Blake understood the display to be for Blake himself and no other. Or perhaps for Avon alone, antidote for the cloying need and sweetness of that night, a repetition of the brutish rejection that followed the most intimate of moments. Blake engrossed himself in his work, affecting a disinterest in Avon and his performance, ignoring it even as it grew louder and more demanding, even when the insistence on attention was too strong for anyone to legitimately ignore, Blake gave Avon not the slightest note. Waiting, instead, to break another of Avon's secret codes: waiting to see if Avon would, in his need, come to Blake.

A time passing, and it was Vila coming to him, complaining of Avon, making noises about how Avon was being a 'right and proper bastard', tales of woe and discrimination, of jokes gone sour: all of it background muzak for Blake's thoughts, mere jingles discarded when Blake rose to seek the quiet privacy of his own room.

"Well, that's just charming," Vila shouted after him, Jenna and he both staring after Blake with concern. "As bad as bloody Avon, that's what you are."

And a hysterical bubble of desperate humour rose inside Blake at the taunt: Perhaps Avon, he thought, is rubbing off on me...

Another day, another argument, the otherwise empty flight deck echoing with crack of electric emotion. Avon, staring at him, meeting his eyes with leashed and threatening hostility, a knowing, contemptuous smile never far behind the sly and secret taunts.

"I said," Blake thundered in the quietest of voices, "get back to your position."

A raised eyebrow, a quirk of the lips, the merest flicker of Avon's glance down to Blake's crotch. This time, he chose to obey, but every inch of body language laughed at Blake, made mockery of Blake's command.

"And would this be my position?" Avon's voice slid delicately between Blake's ribs, cutting right into his heart. Avon, on his knees, head bowed, hands clasped behind his back. Then to his feet, the movement endlessly, achingly graceful, Avon canting his head in perfect reproduction of childhood's uncertainty and shy approach to the adult, his hands twisting and fiddling like a boy's. Eyes wide and wickedly

innocent, gazing up at a man who was actually a scant measure taller. "Or is this my position?" The pose changing completely with little more than the rearranging of Avon's attitude, his height restored by his arrogance, the wringing hands arrayed, clench-fisted, on his hips. "If you want me on my knees, Blake," he hissed, body too close, far too close for Blake's comfort, "if you want me hanging on your every word, then you come to me, behind locked doors, and you play the games you need and I want. Otherwise," a flash of movement and Avon's hand was locked round Blake's throat, main strength lifting Blake onto his toes, taller now than Avon but lesser than the other man, "remember that I choose not only to follow, but to allow you to lead the others. Remember that, Blake, and remember that I have as much claim to this ship as you. And that I, unlike you," charming smile, quick hands smoothing down Blake's clothes while Blake rubbed at his throat to get his voice back, "can programme and control this ship's computers. Think," and Avon stroked a finger across Blake's lips, there, where they parted for breath, "voice command override." Avon leaned forward just a fraction, until Blake could not keep Avon's face in focus and could not keep his mind free of the sensations of Avon's body so close to his. Open mouth coming ever closer, and he opened automatically, closing his eyes as Avon's tongue invaded his mouth, kissing him deep and hard and demanding. Blake clutched him, grinding against the hardness of Avon's cock, desperate for a heat to match that passion, so bitterly jealous of Avon's easy lust. Avon pulled free, shoving Blake backwards, his man's body taut with sex, trousers tented and tight with the thrust of his cock. Casually, contemptuous, Avon caressed himself through the sleek newness of leather that displayed his manliness and his distance from childhood. Blake couldn't tear himself away from staring at that rampant, ostentatious masculinity, made all the more devastating by his own unnerving, terrifying lack of arousal from such sexually charged intimacy, such an insurmountable contrast from that night when he had lost himself completely in passion.

Avon smiled at him once more, a world of meaning in his eyes. "I suggest you think. You never know, you might actually," one last glance

at Blake's unresponsive groin, "like it."

Ever one for the dramatic, well-timed exit, Avon was gone, before Blake could reform himself, before Blake could find a single answer for Avon—or for himself.

The threat gnawed at him like guilt. Blake was not so sure of the others that he believed Avon's threat to be idle or aggrandised. Vila would probably go with Avon: the thief had an instinct for finding survivors and sticking with them. Gan? Gan would follow whoever would be best for the group. Jenna? Jenna just might choose to make her own demands, her own tilt at command. And Gan and Vila would go with her, if she decided she wanted it. And if Avon misplayed his hand.

And if Blake faltered, even for a second.

Avon.

The name came to him constantly, when he worked, when he made plans, when he checked computer schematics, when he ate, slept, dreamed...

When his hand would find his cock, and stroke it, mind the master of the hand, fantasy and lust the master of the mind and at the centre, always there, the hub of the wheel, was Avon, smiling at him in just the right way, the tone of voice perfect, the body language perfect.

The hairless body, with but one trace of manliness remaining. Smooth skin, silken soft, inviting, waiting to be tasted, savoured, marked with the rosy glow of Blake's hand, of his sucking mouth, of his nipping teeth...

Restless deep in the marrow of his bones, Blake turned over, making a truth of the old cliché, tossing and turning in his bed. He was too hot, pushed the covers down. Now he was too naked, revealed wanting Avon.

Wanting Kerr.

That kiss on the flight deck had proved that he didn't want Avon, didn't want the man. Wanted the child hidden inside.

Needed the child inside.

Needed to be inside the child, needed Kerr needing him, loving him, protected by him. One being made safe, one being unharmed, coddled, loved, nurtured—the Universe in one body, the hope of his future contained in that one...

Love.

He had pretended he had forgotten that. Had

pretended that he did not love that vulnerability that was Kerr. But he did, and had, and could again.

If he could pay the price Avon demanded.

If he knew the price Avon demanded. Kinky sex? Could it be something so...mutual? An equal give and take, a balance of needs? Yet it was Avon who insisted that Blake needed it and Avon merely wanted it.

But it was Avon who had said "I love you". The key? It was too obvious, too easy to find, which was, perhaps, its secret. Who would think that a complexity the likes of Avon could be unravelled, revealed by so obvious a human need?

I might, Blake thought, wondering, remembering Avon as he had been when he said those words. I love you.

Daddy.

Blake groaned again, rolling over on to his stomach, a bad idea, his cock blindly seeking the pressure of the mattress to rub against, his flesh crawling with the need for Avon—the need for Kerr.

All right, he told himself, accept it. Pædophile. My orientation is towards children. Who are untouchable, inviolate, who must never, ever know. Where else can I go, but to Avon, and through him, to Kerr? A boy who is a man, a boy who can never be hurt by my passions. A boy who understands the twistedness of everything I have ever wanted, whether I was born like this or made to be this, by Federation puppeteers, by my own childhood, by my own nature: none of that matters. It is, that's the only answer I have.

Avon, a maze of a man who could, perhaps, love only when he played at being a child again.

Kerr. Kerr Avon, beautiful and dangerous and too easy to love.

Redemption and damnation, two sides of a single coin. Either the way to protect children and himself, or the slippery slope, the feeding of an obsession that could overcome him.

But there were no children on this ship, merely infantile behaviour. There was no-one at risk, save himself. And Avon, who was risking more than Blake believed Avon realised. Love. So small a word for so large a meaning, entangled in so much and yet intangible.

Redemption, or damnation. Save his soul with purity of thoughts and the reburial of his

libido, or hide it away, pretend none of this existed...until the next time he saw a child. And then what?

Redemption, or damnation.  
There was only one answer.  
Kerr Avon.

Days had passed, and nothing had changed. The knowledge was there, simmering, ready to boil over between them, or immolate them. Avon, still taunting, still mutinous, rebellious in the one arena Blake needed an appearance of loyalty if he could have nothing else.

And every night, every morning, no matter where, no matter when, there was the stinging lure of Kerr Avon drawing him, festering inside until he was toxic with desire.

Redemption or damnation.

Blake didn't care any more. He couldn't know the answer in advance, and it no longer mattered, made moot by the coiling emotions between them. Hand raised, he paused for one last second, one last chance to back out before he committed them both beyond hope of escape. He breathed deeply, steadying himself, and pressed the intercom.

"Yes?" Tinny and tiny, all of Avon compressed into an inadequate speaker.

He had thought about this. Had planned it, had dreamed it, had fucked his fist more times than he could bear. "Kerr," he said, one word saying it all.

A long hesitation, and then the door opened. Avon was standing there, dressed now in some too-adult clothing taken from the store room, the gleam of black leather unappealing to Blake and seeming nothing more than an exaggeration, a flaunting of bullish manliness.

"I want you naked," he said to Avon, demanding the appearance of Kerr.

"You want," Avon asked, "or you *need*?"

"We both need, but you can call it want, or whim, or mere fancy if you have to." He stepped forward, made a point of locking the door, then faced Avon once more. Balance, counterbalance, Avon ever poised, weighing the unknown against the unfathomable. "All right," Blake said, coming that bit closer. "I'll give you this much." He reached out, unsnapping the first of the silver studs. "I hate this," he murmured. "It doesn't suit you at all. I..." he looked up, in time

to catch Avon staring at him, rapt, before the dark eyes once more became shining reflections of nothing but Blake looking at Avon. "I need you out of this," Blake whispered. "I need you naked."

A smile of triumph, arrogance fading with every snap unfastened, with every scrap of the leather trappings of male pride, until Avon was as discarded as the black clothing, and Kerr stood there, shyly revealed to Blake's hunger.

"I said naked, Kerr." Blake's voice was very soft, very gentle, all the more commanding for its quiet confidence. They were playing Avon's game, but the rules were Blake's, the old game formed to his needs. Redemption.

Kerr stared up at him, limpid-eyed, hips cocked, his expression supposedly incomprehension, but reeking instead of anticipation. Oh, Kerr might be every inch the innocent, but Avon knew what, precisely, was coming.

"Naked, Kerr," Blake said again, and this time his fingers brushed the black hair at Avon's groin. "Completely naked."

Wordless, Avon went into the bathroom, glancing over his shoulder as Blake followed him in.

"It's up there, on that shelf," the voice more delicate than minutes before, the attitude submissive and small. "Would you get it for me?"

The mirrored door opened silently, the shelves within cluttered with bottles and tubes, dentifrice cheek by jowl with depilatory. Blake reached for that, a tiny sound from Avon stopping him. He looked more carefully, and saw it, on the top shelf beside sexual objects he chose to ignore lest they ruin the fantasy they were creating. A rectangular box, heavier than expected, covered in genuine leather. Small gold or brass catch, a slight *snick* as it opened, moiré silk covering the specially moulded interior. A round cake of white soap, a fine, gilt cup. Black handled, the profusion of bristles beige and incredibly soft to his touch. Something else, the likes of which he had never seen, although its function was obvious: slender black haft, carved and made beautiful, and at its head, shiny sharpness encased in a mouth of metal. Blake took time to finger all this, to know it, then he passed it to Avon to complete the ultimate transformation into Kerr.

Water into the cup, the brush wetted, soap swirled until it frothed. Whiteness covering blackness, more and more until Avon's penis peeped out from the soap, occasional gatherings of bubbles clinging to his cock. Delicately, his hands more careful and more obviously skilled than usual, Avon began to slowly scrape the soap away, the black hair swallowed up by the whiteness, rinsed away in the sink. He was perched on the edge of the toilet, groin thrust forward, the light dancing on the soap and the virgin whiteness of skin newly laid bare. Slow, small movements, more and more revealed, Avon's strong fingers so tenderly, so carefully lifting his balls up and out of the way to make naked the line that drew Blake's eyes to the bud of flesh that had already been made utterly smooth. The metal flashed in the light, harsh, unnatural, even as the pale skin glimmered wetly in that same light, satin, more natural and unnatural than anything Blake had ever known. Very careful now, movements incredibly steady, the hands very sure, proof of how familiar a ritual this was, Avon scraped the soap from his balls, not a trace of hair to be found, only a blot or two of white marring him.

Silently, Blake handed him a wet towel, watching the drips of water running down Avon's legs—smooth also, Avon so sure of him, so prepared—then looked upwards, to where the towel was rubbing with such sensuousness.

"That's enough," he said, surprised by the hoarseness of his own voice.

The towel dropped into the sink, and Kerr, perfectly naked for Blake, stood bathed in light, his bare skin still gleaming damply. Hands trembling, Blake touched him, feeling the man's muscles under the virgin skin. "Time for bed," he whispered. "Time to tuck you in."

"Can't I stay up late tonight?"

Oh, he was perfect, perfect, every inflection exactly what Blake craved.

"No, not tonight, Kerr. Come on, to bed with you." Standing aside, following Kerr's white bottom all the way to the bed. Pulling the covers aside, giving a playful swat to that delectable rear as Kerr climbed into bed. Tucking him in, sheets up under Kerr's chin, big, brown eyes gazing up at him.

"I'm scared, Daddy," Kerr whispered, and Avon managed to make his chin tremble as if

tears weren't far away.

"There's nothing to be frightened of," Blake told him, smoothing dark hair from pale forehead, dropping a tender kiss there.

"But I'm still scared, Daddy."

Blake murmured to him, "Shh, close your eyes," a kiss on each translucent eyelid, "and go to sleep. Good night."

Wide eyed, hands clutching, pulling Blake where they both wanted him to be. "Please don't go, Daddy. Don't leave me. Stay with me until I fall asleep..."

Clever, clever Avon, taking those secrets uncovered on a planet a lifetime ago, and making them over into this perfect fantasy.

"Oh, all right," Blake said, as if he were impatient. "But just," as he kicked his shoes off and got in under the blankets, "until you fall asleep." Kerr was immediately in his arms, nestling in as if he belonged there. As Blake felt he did.

"Ouch! Your buttons are digging into me. And your trousers are all rough," said petulantly, lips pouting.

"You're such a nuisance, Kerr." But of course, Blake was quick to get out of bed and strip, quicker yet to get back into bed with an Avon who was the stuff of dreams. "There, is that better?"

"Yes, Daddy."

Blake gathered Kerr into his arms, cradling him close, thinking about all the plans he had made for this night, of all the things he had imagined doing, all the scenarios they had to share. He stroked Kerr's back, come to terms enough with his own desires and his own limitations that the muscles he caressed did not put him off. He concentrated instead on the softness of the skin, and the heady aroma of soap and nakedness. Against his own hairiness, Kerr was unbelievably smooth, the sensation shiveringly exciting. He had entire conversations worked out for this, but now that he was here, with Kerr in his arms, the innocent body pressed so trustingly to his, he could scarcely think.

"Daddy," the voice was damp on his shoulder, "I think you've given me a rash."

"Where, Kerr?" he asked, unable to resist kissing the unflawed cheek.

"Down there, Daddy." Oh, heaven! A blush,

on that cheek he had kissed, where the down-cast eyelashes cast their shadow.

“Down where?” he asked, moving back farther so that his erection wouldn’t spoil the game this early.

“You know,” a flicker of a shy gaze, “down there.”

“Why don’t you,” Blake murmured, drowning in love, “show me? Take my hand...”

His hand was taken, inched forward, then stroked, so lightly, against the most beautifully bare skin. “Here?” he said, kissing that tender face again. “I can’t feel anything. Perhaps I should look.”

He eased the blankets down, exposing nakedness once more to the light, his own arousal increasing as he saw that lovely penis rising not from thick pubic hair, but the unprotected, exposed groin. “I can’t see anything either.”

“But it’s still sore, Daddy.”

“Shall I kiss it better for you?” He didn’t even pretend to wait for an answer, lowering himself immediately, tongue tasting the remnants of soap and a cleanliness that went straight to his cock. He laved where the hair had been and where only innocence remained, his mouth lingering luxuriously. Lower still, his mouth opening, taking in the small beginnings of passion, nursing them until he could feel the growth, from boy to man, and in his mind, it was the natural rites of passage, of boyhood discovering pleasure. He remembered, or thought he remembered, himself at seven, and the delight in touching himself there, discovering that his body could stand out straight from his belly, and oh, how wonderful it felt! He was doing the same thing all over again, but this time, he was doing it for Kerr, giving him something sweet and precious, something new and unforgettable. He sucked a little harder, smiling around the filling flesh as Kerr wriggled under him.

“There now,” he said, his large hand, so dark against the white skin, covering the heat of Kerr’s pleasure, “all better?”

“Now I’m cold, Daddy. I need a cuddle.”

How could Avon, cold, hard, vicious Avon look so vulnerable? Because, Blake thought to himself, inside Avon, Kerr still sits and cries because no-one loved him enough. “I’ll cuddle you, Kerr,” he said as he lay himself gently atop Kerr. “I’ll cuddle you.” Arms came round him,

legs wrapped round his hips, and Kerr rocked against him. Blake cradled him close, Kerr’s pleasure hard against him, his own cock so hairy, so manly, against the fragile softness. One handed, he touched Kerr’s penis, pressing it between Blake’s thighs, until the hardness rubbed against his balls and perfect smoothness caressed his cock. Tighter, he hugged Kerr, rocking them gently back and forth, murmuring nonsense words of comfort, affection, the sorts of things said in the night to soothe an upset child. His nipples were aching, craving touch, and so he pushed against Kerr’s head, until that mouth was suckling wetly against him. His cock, seeping damply, was pressed against soft belly now, digging into it, a shining trail left behind as he moved. He pushed Kerr’s head lower again, groaning as a tongue dallied in the hair that arched alongside his frantic erection.

“Suck it,” he said, thrusting up against the mouth suddenly made small. “Suck me!”

As if reluctantly, Kerr’s mouth opened, taking only the head at first, then widening, widening, until Blake was all the way inside him, fucking Kerr’s face, fucking Avon, hard, so hard, pubic hair grinding into Kerr’s face, Blake’s balls clinging to Kerr’s chin briefly, longingly, every time Blake shoved into him. “Oh, yes,” Blake hissed, hands tangling in Kerr’s hair, the strands damp between his fingers. “Oh, yes, that’s it, Kerry-boy, that’s it. Take Daddy all the way inside you...”

He thrust, again and again, throat tight against him, tongue pressing into the underside of his cock, Kerr’s hands playing with his nipples. “Harder,” he groaned, making Kerr pinch the small nubs, “that’s what Daddy likes.”

Another jolt of his hips, Kerr gagging, pulling away, Blake grabbing him, pulling him forward. “Don’t be naughty, Kerr,” voice gasping, his cock wet and glistening as he slapped it across the red, sex-swollen lips. “Now, open up,” rubbing the heavy thickness of his cock across closed mouth, “open up for Daddy,” pushing forward, shoving his cock in Kerr’s mouth, fucking him as far as he could. Deep, so deep, heat and wetness all around, then cold, chill air. “Say it, Kerr,” he demanded, teasing the hungry mouth with the tip of his cock. “Tell Daddy you love him.”

For a moment, it was Avon looking up at him,



Avon with the wet smear of Blake's precum all around his mouth. Then the moment passed, brown eyes closing, and the voice, whispering, "I love you. I love you, Daddy."

And then Blake was thrusting home, fucking a willing mouth, his body curled over Kerr's, hands reaching, reaching, twisting, scrabbling, until Kerr rolled onto his back, Blake turning round until he was looking down the length of the hairless body. He thrust harder, legs splayed awkwardly on either side of Kerr's head as his cock plunged into Kerr's throat. A last lunge, and orgasm claimed him, his semen pouring down Kerr's throat in streaming spasms.

Slowly, he withdrew, once more gathering Kerr into his arms. "I'm sorry," he whispered, playing the game, giving the guilt and the remorse and the love Avon craved. "I'm didn't mean to hurt you, Kerr."

"But it still hurts, Daddy." The voice was tight-drawn, strung as taut as the body in Blake's arms.

"I'll make it better for you, Kerr," he said, cupping a hard penis in his hand, hairless groin against his fingers. He stroked the flesh, doing precisely what he liked best himself, this cock an extension of himself, blood of his blood, flesh of his flesh. Only a few movements, a few caresses to fulfill the last fraction of need, and his words, his key to this cipher: "I love you, Kerr."

A spume of semen over his fingers, two, three, splatterings of wetness fading into heavy laxness in his hand and on his shoulder where Kerr—Avon? Now that the sex was over, was it Avon already?—rested his head. The man in his arms stirred, flinching as if to pull away and then sagging, defeated by something Blake could

guess at, an emotion that was probably a greater revelation and larger fear than for Blake himself.

It was Avon, undeniably, hard, armoured Avon, staring out at him from eyes bruised from the unexpected blow: Blake, loving Avon. Blake, offering what was most wanted, and most dreaded. The dark eyes closed upon bitter self-knowledge, and Blake owned a moment of purest malice, knowing that Avon was now going through what Blake had suffered with: discovering that love and desire were realities, no matter how much a man might loathe himself for where that love and desire attached itself. Weary, terribly weary, with a defeatedness Blake was sure would not be long turning into fury, or hate. "And where do we go from here?" Avon asked, more to himself than to Blake.

But it was Blake who answered him, as best as either of them could answer: "I don't know, Avon," he said, astonished amongst all the other astonishments that he was being permitted to stroke Avon's hair even though Kerr was hidden away once more and even though Avon himself had had to face the possible treachery of love within himself. "I really don't know."

There was always a time when a lie is the kindest act of all, for Blake did know, and it all balanced again on that fulcrum, Avon himself. There was love, of a sort, already between them. There could be love, of a more traditional mien, between them also. Or this could corrupt them, corrupt Blake with its illusion of absolute power, corrupt Avon farther with the knowledge that he held such sway over Blake.

Oh, yes, Blake knew where they were going: redemption or damnation. It was going to be one or the other, for better or for worse.