He had known that from the very first instant. His eyes had feasted upon that instant. He knew, he saw, he believed. He could. He knew that he could. He knew it. Knew that he could take all that bitterness and pain away, make Avon whole once more, give him light to leaven the darkness, give him hope to make the road less long. He could do it. He would do it, even if Avon, in what Blake thought was surely pain and fear and festering wounds, fought him on this, even if Avon thought that crawling into a hole and pulling his skin taut around himself was the best way to deal with whatever tragedy had filleted him like this. Blake could mend him, could suture the gaping wounds, could ease the pain...

Amidst the hollow echoes of the prison ship, amidst the sussurous whispers of those trying to form new rules to fit this mobile purgatory, he would sit and watch, feasting on the hollow echoes of Avon's beauty, drinking in his profile and from the glistening tears that stained his face, as if they were rainwater and he was the well-bred, the gentleman to whom the well-bred had turned their back. Blake could change that. Blake could do it. Avon needed him. Avon knew it. Knew it with such depth and conviction that it went beyond reason, as far beyond reason as the chasms of the mind could take it. Nor had it been some sure and gentle knowledge seeping slowly into his bones, settling down into the empty spot so coldly prepared for it. Oh, no, it hadn't been like that at all. Staring at Avon, it had happened abruptly, between one breath and the next, a sudden shift in the Universe and his life and death were combined into the form that was Avon. Avon, cold, hard, shut, turned Avon, turning Avon, ignoring him as the well-bred turned their back on the plebeian masses...
and die. Or so he saw himself anyway, ignor-
ing the shining awe that brightened other eyes, that filled other faces when they stared
at him in the wake of defeated or diminished
guards.

No hero. That was not his sobriquet for
himself. There was no single word for him any-
more, not after the psychomanipulators had
done their jobs with such excessive zeal.
Cogito, ergo sum. His capable engineer’s hands
turned that over and over for him to examine,
reminding him to be grateful for that year’s
esoteric study which had supposedly been to
unlock the ancient secrets of engineering
once more. He had found no such secrets, no
lost skills that had not been rediscovered by
Man since those days of such simple
treacheries. No, not a single technical secret,
but so many glittering prizes of freedom and
thought. Cogito, ergo sum. But then, the Fe-
deration had made a mockery of that ancient
philosophy, proving how easy it is to change
the basic tenets of Mankind. He had thought,
but he had not been. More empty even than
Avon was now, although his brain had been
a veritable whirlpool of thought. So many
thoughts, but he himself had been long since
gone, buried and altered and hidden away.
No, he knew perfectly well that mere thinking
wasn’t enough. It was, he reflected, dredging
up yet another of the rusty old memories,
dusting off the old skill, searching for the
right word and smiling to himself when he
found it, yes, it was not cogito that mattered:
that could be said of a computer, of a ‘smart’
car, of an automatic investment brokerage
account. It was, he looked carefully at the
word and at the man who had reminded him
of it, amo, ergo sum. Amo. I love, therefore I am.

He looked at it again, carefully, measuring
it against Avon’s beauty, against the sweet
sadness of that mouth, against the bitter
dark eyes.

Yes.

I love, therefore I am. They couldn’t take
that away from him, not now, not ever. They
could take his thoughts, and they surely had,
filling his head with new ones; they could
break his spirit, make him as dull as the
drugged boys who had pointed the finger of
guilt at him. But they couldn’t stop him from
loving.

Not with a man like Avon in front of him.
Even dressed as the embezzler was, in the
same nondescript greyness that had almost—
almost—let him blend in enough to escape,
there was a fey beauty to the man that was
irresistible. The cant of his head, the arch of
his brows, the line of jaw, the long leanness of
leg, the shine of hair, all of it conspired to
make Blake search frantically for reasons to
make this man his own. And, of course, he
had to go no farther than the droop of lips and
the puzzled grief of the eyes to do that. No
farther than his own bottomless well of love,
all stored up for just such a man as this.

Yes. He would have him.

Soon.

The thief—Vila?—was chattering at him,
endless snakechain of words, useless infor-
mation guilelessly piled so high that one
barely noticed the indispensable truths
flickering quietly in the dark. Surrounded by
the metal of the London, inundated by the
smells of so much fear herded so closely
together, he gave his hearing to Vila,
memorisising every word, but gave all his sight
to Avon.

So heart-rendingly beautiful. And so ob-
vviously heartbroken himself. Still listening to
Vila, sparing a thought to what had caused
the irked bitterness in the thief’s voice, he
stared at the subject of the monologue: Avon.
Such melancholy beauty, such gothic despair,
how could Blake stop himself from wonder-
ing what had caused such depression. A
broken love affair? A lover left behind whilst
Avon was transported? A lover who had
betrayed him, trapping him, selling him to
the Federation, breaking the spirit of the man?

A sudden movement, and Avon was glow-
ergiong, staring, the haughtiness of the élite
polishing his features, his sneer a work of art,
a mere mortal slinking off away from him,
tugging forelock in instinctive subordination.
No, he thought, still daring to stare at Avon,
his own heart and mind focussed on that lone
hauteur sitting there in such elevated lone-
liness. Not broken, not this one.

Merely…bruised, Blake decided, noticing the
blueness that made the eyes look as sunken
as a corpse. Avon deigned to see him and then
there was a slightly, very insolently cocked eyebrow, the merest hint of attention, and Blake was firmly put in his place by a spirit that had yet to begin to bend.

But then, Blake was hardly a man of broken spirit either, was he, now? Before, oh, before when he had thought 'Blake' within the privacy of his own mind, there had been nothing, no answering image, no cohesive whole that said, 'this is who I am: Blake.' Nothing like that, just the taste of ashes in his mind, as he thought, cogito, ergo sum and knew that dogma to be nothing more than mere vanity, the frantic cry of Man in the night, clutching his lightning-lit club to ward off the snuffling beasts that threatened his tribe. Amo, he thought. Amore, amour, enamorata...strange, how despite the best efforts of Government oppression, the love-words had never died, had never simply gone away, unlike the words of freedom and honour and right. No, love always lingered, strong enough to give real substance to the frantic scrablings of one mere man to make a difference, to redefine himself—to make himself free. Sitting there watching Avon freeze all the offers made to him, whether they be clumsy or refined, flattering or barely humane, Blake knew that this man was his soul, come to replace with heat that which the Federation had stolen away with cold. He had his Cause, always that, but that was the shining mantra for his mind, his intellect satisfied by the loftiness of his ideals. But his heart could never be content with such a paucity of life. He needed more, needed to love and be loved, needed to be alive again.

Needed Avon. The first one to break through after the conditioning, the first one to make a libido he had thought long dead, sit up and take notice. Avon. He said the word in his mind again, even while Vila was muttering it, contriving to make the word sibilant, the hissing of suspicion in Blake's ear. As if anything could make him distrust Avon!

Well. Anything that wasn't Avon's own actions. Blake had been processed too many times, too many blood-dripping, nightmare-long times, to trust anything he didn't see with his own eyes. Of course, he had learned not to trust much of his own eyesight as well, but it was different with Avon. So very, very different. He could, he confessed to himself with a chuckle of his own, old rueful humour, analyse the truth into extinction, could examine his emotions with clinical care, could take it all apart and test it time and again, but when it came right down to it, he had no reasons, only justifications and rationalisations. What it amounted to, what it meant was, quite simply, that his mind had taken a second to catch up to his body, and then it was too late, over, finished, finito. He was hooked, addicted to the length of those eyelashes, to the rise and clench of buttocks as Avon walked, to the already familiar quirk of those lips.

And to the too familiar misery in the eyes.

He would have Avon. He would make him whole. I am going to heal you, he thought at Avon, watching as that worthy turned his attention inward, withdrawing from this metallic world of theirs. Blake looked down at his hands, imagining the Universe held there, with his words and his freedoms to lead it out of the Darkness, the blows from the hammer of justice giving people back their lives and right to think for themselves. And if I can heal a Universe, Avon, how much better can I heal one lonely man? You and I are right for each other, the perfect balance, all your ragged edges matching mine... I'll make you laugh again, I'll make you love again, for it's nothing more than what you need, what you must have. And I can give it to you. I will give it to you. I'll take care of you, my poor Kerr. There's enough of me to feed the Rebellion and you, too. You'll be all right. You'll learn—amo, ergo sum. You'll see the truth in that, I promise.

Avon turned his head once more to look at Blake, not bothering to stare, not really caring, cocooned in a lovely dimness of grey, where nothing mattered, where nothing had any effect, only cause, and it made Blake's heart ache for him. He would speak to Avon, begin the healing. Avon rose, stretching, flexing the glory of his body, closing his eyes to let the shadow of his lashes kiss his cheeks, arching his back.

And it exploded in Blake, casting his good intentions deep into the Abyss, the road there well-paved. Blake was going to have him,
now, here, throw him across the table, rip those trousers from him, plunge his burning cock into the tempering darkness of Avon’s body. The hunger frightened him, reminding him of the memories—the realities? ohgodplease, please let it all be a lie, please don’t make it true, he couldn’t have done those awful things to the children, he couldn’t, couldn’t, couldn’t—

A shaken gasp, and he was sitting on the bunk, hands clasped tight together, trembling for all his strength, shaking with fear. He threw the living horror out of his mind, telling himself over and over again—think! Just think clearly, clearly, in a straight line, don’t let yourself wander like this, take a deep breath, calm, calm down, think clearly, don’t let the bastards win—and then he raised his eyes. There was no surprise in him, when he found Avon staring at him, only the serenity of the inevitability of Fate settling into place.

Oh, yes, he was going to have Avon, was going to lay his hands as gently upon him as he was the Universe, guiding him from this morass of—self-inflicted?—misery, getting the dictator off his back, making him soar with freedom again, right there, at Blake’s side. He smiled, slowly, in no rush now that it was all so obviously clear, all so obviously mapped out. All that remained to be fixed were the details, to be carved out with fine-art skill, plotting every step on the path that Avon would tread. There would be no ham-fisted, cack-handed approaches to Avon, no. Delicacy was needed here, delicacy and sensitivity, he thought to himself, watching Avon watching him. But not, he decided, soppiness, our Avon would see that as weakness, wouldn’t you, Kerr?

He laughed out loud, convincing another couple of hapless criminals that they really were locked up with a raving loony. But Blake wasn’t insane, far from it. He took a deep breath, feeling it fill his lungs, hitting his blood, invigorating him. In the time since his—he found a word for it, liking the poetic, metaphysical hue of it—re-awakening, it had all been intellect and fire, burning bright and strong, but consuming him. There had been nothing for it to feed on, save his Self and the core of what he thought he had once been, before the Federation had turned him into a jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing.

But it was time and enough now, for him to break this silence he had with Avon. He asked, and Avon answered.

“I relied on other people,” he said to Blake who fell on it hungrily, hearing a wealth of meaning and pain behind those words. Re- lied on? he thought, not trusted? Do you ever trust, my Avon? Have you ever known that luxury, that delight?

“Why all the questions, or is it merely a thirst for knowledge?”

Oh, how you look at me, Avon. You’re drawn to me, aren’t you? You know instinctively that you can trust me, that I can be the one to set you free.

“Not exactly,” Blake said, taking great care not to scare Avon off by any excessive display or by a show of his hunger. “Having defined the problem,” and I know your problems, Avon, “the first step is the acquisition of data,” and I shall know all your secrets, all the things that keep you enslaved. “You should know that.” And you will know a lot more besides. I’ll show you, Avon, how to love and how to be free.

But Avon was looking at him with everything but trust and affection and devotion. “Define the problem.”

Oh, I already have, Avon. I have even defined the solution. “How to avoid spending the rest of our lives on Cygnus Alpha.” Or the rest of our lives trapped in lifeless, loveless servitude. There was more after that, none of it really remembered, victim of the short-term memory damage caused by the unholy alliance of mindwipe and remembering, with
prison medicine thrown in for good measure.

But he would never forget watching every step Avon took as that man walked—no, stalked—from the room. Now, he thought, a seraphic smile on his face, a comfortable, welcome heat curling in his groin, the future unfolding before him with something akin to a rosy glow, now I’ve got someone to live for. Amo, ergo sum. And I’m going to teach you that, Kerr. I’m going to teach you how to love…

Avon, pacing the same few metres of corridor that he had been pacing for the past hour, would have been less than best pleased, had he known of Blake’s intentions. Irritated beyond endurance by the mindless shufflings of the underlings he had been shipped with, offended by the years of unwash that clung to some of them, despite the ship’s sanitary tyranny, he escaped, finally, into one of the uncomfortable seats that the others all avoided like the plague. Attendant memories of misery at watching Earth diminish behind him bothered Avon not one whit. Why should they, after all? All that mattered to him was dead, tortured and tormented and—

He took a deep breath, looking down at his clenched hands, forcing himself to lace his fingers together in a façade of perfectly relaxed calm, thinking fiercely to himself to get a grip, to just think clearly… But he couldn’t let it go. To let it go was to betray her, to abandon her once more. And once had been more than enough. Far more than enough, and the sadness washed through him again, sucking out all his strength, eroding all his foundations, the hissing sigh all that remained.

He still, sometimes—oh, all right, he told his nagging conscience, every day, every single blasted day—hoped that the Federation investigators had been lying to him, had tricked him into believing she was dead. There were times when it seemed so blatantly obvious that that was what they had done. After all, it had become apparent, rather quickly, that he was not about to tell them how he had managed to infiltrate the banking system like that. Nothing had worked, but they had softened him up, how they had softened him up. His body and mind still bore the bites of that. How better, then, to get the information from him than to break his spirit? Tell him Anna was dead. Tell him Anna had died because of him. Tell him that it was Anna who had betrayed him, confessing to her captors everything she knew. Tell him that she had bled for him, screamed for him, died for him…

It just went to prove how little they had learned about him. As if he would give them their little details if Anna had died to keep all that secret! What fools they were, if they had truly believed that Anna’s death would make him confess all. As if he’d betray her a second time… But it had broken him, albeit briefly—and it would be brief, he thought with a sudden flare of fierce fire, it would be brief—to hear that she had died, and how she had died, and what she had said and screamed before she died… No, he thought with spurious calm, don’t think about the last moments—hours? days? weeks? his mind whispered with sibilant fear. You were injured, ill, cut off from day-time and night-time, no idea of how long they had you for before they told you about Anna, no idea how long after that you finally found out the date when they told you about the trial. It was all just one long coil of horror for you and they had you for months before they set you before the Arbiter so how long did they have Anna, how long did they make her suffer, how long did it take her to die for me?—don’t think about it, don’t think about it…

He took the flimsy out of his pocket, that shred of plastic one of the few things he’d been able to get back after…after the arrest. His thief had appropriated it for him, of course. Who else would have been able to get hold of it? And who else, he thought with a burst of fury, would have been clever enough to get it and then stupid enough to get caught? Typical bloody Vila. Half a loaf was better than none, the old adage said. Hardly true when your half of the loaf was an exit visa. Without ID papers to go with it… How Vila had managed to get the flimsy past the security checks Avon preferred not to know, but the idiot savant had managed, walking up to an unsuspecting Avon in the holding cell, chirruping, ‘fancy meeting you here!’ and waving the bloody flimsy at him. How had the fool managed it? To get an exit visa,
which was almost impossible to do with the current security hysteria in place, but then get caught picking up fake ID’s, which was something that even under-age drinkers managed to avoid. And to add insult to injury by ending up on the same transport as he...

There was, needless to say, the very real possibility that Vila had been sent after him to play spy. After all, the Federation would think nothing of promising freedom to a habitual, repeat offender thief if, in return for their empty promise, they could find out the secret of how Avon had managed to break the system. Vila knew that, probably knew that better than Avon did, but the idiot had been so absurdly hurt when Avon had grabbed the flimsy from him, walking away as if he had never seen Vila before in his life.

What else had the fool expected? A public display of affection? No, not even Vila was that stupid, he conceded. Almost, but not quite. Too much native cunning there for complete idiocy, but still, sometimes he wondered… He turned the sheer plastic over and over in his hands, then read it, code by code, the computer language as clear to him as his own handwriting. He stared and stared at it, this priceless document that was worthless on its own. Not even worth the plastic it was encoded on, without the matching integrated ID. Not worth a thing. A sound behind him and he stiffened inside, not letting his awareness of the outside world show. Better to let them think that he was an Elite stunned into defeat by his imprisonment. Better to let them think him harmless, until he had this new world of his fully comprehended. Then he would set about manipulating all this to what little benefit he could get from it. Ah, it was the monolithic moron and messiah, the great Rebel leader and child molester, Blake.

And if Blake thought he was going to free the universe and lead the great unwashed, he had better learn to manipulate better than that. “Don’t try to manipulate me, Blake,” he said, refusing to be either impressed or drawn, shrugging away from the enticing heat of the man. The fanatical are always appealing, he reminded himself. It’s their unswerving belief in something that they are convinced is true and that you would like to believe is true, but the facts keep getting in your way. Humour him, a little. It’s always wisest with zealots. “Why should I try?”

Oh, such sophisticated repartée, Blake. I’m so impressed I may fall asleep where I sit. “You need my help,” he replied with the simplicity of one who refuses to have a battle of wits with an unarmed person.

“Oh, now that’s interesting, he thought, betraying none of that interest to the starvation of Blake’s eyes, toying with the flimsy as he did the feelings of his would-be suitor. How quickly you doff the kid gloves when it becomes apparent that the soft treatment isn’t going to work. You’re so quick to display your machismo, Blake, that one might be forgiven for thinking that you are less…pacifically inclined than one was first led to believe.

“I can open every door and control the computer,” not to mention you yourself, minotaur. “Control the computer, and you control the ship.”

Look at you, hanging on to my every word. Do you have any idea, I wonder, of how incredibly stupid you look? Well, of course not. If you did, you’d wear a bag over your head. Not that it’s an entirely ugly head, of course, but you really should do something about those bovine brown eyes of yours, Blake. You look like a young girl meeting her first roué. Or a sycophant meeting his ticket out of here.

But there were other things to encroach on the spoken words, all the memories of the past and all the game-playing of the present. He had so little patience left for the pettinesses of others, for their power plays and their stupidities which they all seemed so convinced were sophisticated witticisms. Oh, stop boring me with your pedantic pronouncements, do. Can’t you see I have better things to do? More important things to consider? There are ways and there are means for me not only to get myself off Cygnus Alpha, but to never be left there in the first place. I can go back to Earth without once setting foot on that lump of rock and what’s more, by the time we get home, I shall have been able to create a completely new identity for myself. Comput-
ers are such wonderful tools. So conveniently obedient, unlike fate. You do realise, don’t you, that you are, in your own way which I fervently hope is inimitable, fawning all over me? And I’m not in the mood for it.

But then again—even if you are a sycophantic copy-cat, you are at least entertaining. That’s the first time I’ve felt like laughing since Anna was taken. I would never survive on Cygnus Alpha, you say, because I am a civilised man? The smile was trapped deep within, where it was a revelation to no-one but himself.

How little you know me. How precious little you know of me. And I think, in the interests of self-preservation, it should stay that way. You worry me, Blake, with your certainties and your ideals. Lofty ideas usually lead to nothing but a hanging, as my grandmother was so fond of saying, and she should certainly know. If she’s to be believed, she watched half her family hung or executed in some equally ‘uncivilised’ manner. And all for the sake of their power and their money. All because the Avons were the pinnacle of the old order, the family that had lasted longest and lost the least. We owned so much, in fact, we probably owned whichever planet you were born on, Blake. For you’re not Terran-bred, are you? He allowed himself an all-surveying and all consuming stare, summing Blake up in a matter of seconds, tabling him beside the mores and fashions of his own class, of his own clique. And certainly not from the home Dome class of Alpha, either. You give yourself away every time you open your mouth. Quite a charming accent, in a rustic sort of way. Almost familiar, but then, that is probably just the music of it…

Or is it… There was something knocking at the back of his brain, something that refused to be reasonable and lie down and die. Do I know you, Blake? he wondered, pillaging his own file of faces that he kept tucked away. I remember your trial, such an ugly public spectacle that was, but then, we must provide entertainment for the masses. According to your sentence, you’re the last person who could tell me if we met before. I don’t believe we have and yet...

But there were far more reasonable explanations, of course, than prior acquaintance, far more likely than him forgetting someone of Blake’s fire and innuendo. Perhaps I know your face from the broadcasts and nothing else. But still, I remember you normal size, not expanded for the public screens, not contracted for my home monitor. You… Ah. Yes. The Aquitar project. I have seen you before. In the halls of the Centre, bustling on to your own section. Was that why you were wiped, I wonder? Not so much for the rebelliousness, but for the knowledge you might give away to the rebels? Now there’s a distinct possibility, isn’t there?

Or did they wipe you for something else entirely? They rarely accuse a man of something that is completely baseless, or of something that can’t be linked to a vice that the accused is already known to have. And they usually use sex crimes against children on people whom they can prove to be homosexual.

There was another smile, safely ensconced in the privacy of his mind at that, possibilities opening before him and explanations coming at him thick and fast. If that were true, then life just became so much simpler. Using his body as a tool had always been one of his talents—and using someone else’s infatuation for him had always been a work of art in his hands. This, perhaps, was a game he was willing to play, regardless of any other development. He needed the reassurance, after Anna, that he was still alive, that he could still inspire liveliness. That he still deserved his share of pleasure. Is that what you are, Blake? Is that why you gaze at me with such limpid vacuousness? And is it that, and not some far-off corridors, which I recognise in you? You are such a puppy, Blake, all rank enthusiasm and even ranker amateurism. You must be a fool indeed, if all the Federation has done has yet to teach you when to just give in.

Or are you a hero, a true, genuine hero? Are you someone I could believe in, Blake? Someone who has enough dreams to let me steal some for my own? But then, look at you, he told himself, making sure that he could keep his distance even whilst collaring Blake and bringing him to heel. Clumsy, oafish,
lumpy. Hair that is unkempt, despite the ruthlessness of the prison barber. Clothes that would be more at home in a woodsman’s cottage—after they’d been slept in for several weeks. And muscle beginning to run to flab. No, a man who treats his body with such contempt doesn’t believe in himself at all, he is merely acting upon a stage and expecting the rest of us to applaud on cue. For if we do, if we believe in him, then he will be able to believe in himself.

No hero, then. Nothing much at all, bar an insurance policy lest my own plans come to nothing. But still, it would have been nice to have something to believe in. But I do have something to believe in. Human nature, in all its venality and pettiness. That’s what I can believe in, that’s what I can depend upon. For the baseness of people will never let you down, it will always be there to stab you in the back. And if not their viciousness, then their incompetence: witness Vila. Use before one is oneself abused. Take before one is stolen from. And destroy before one is destroyed oneself. That is what I can believe in. Unlike Blake’s effete and impossible dreams, there is nothing else. To think that after all he’s been through, Blake is still willing to trust strangers because he trusts human nature. The man is either a fool or insane.

Or a hero.

It always came back to that magic word of his childhood. But he would have none of that. None of that at all. Ignore him, unless he serves some purpose. And one purpose he might well serve is as a rather against-the-mould catamite. Vila is too complicated these days, demanding too much, which is preposterous, considering what his incompetence cost me. Anna…

I. Will. Not. Cry. I do not cry, and if I were to start now, it would be nothing more noble that self-pity, and I refuse to sink to such ignominy. No tears. She is beyond my pity and my sorrow. The only thing I can do for her now is avenge her suffering on the one who caused it. And I shall. Slowly. And with great pleasure. Oh, would you think me quite so intriguing if you knew that, Blake? Civilised man! You, moron, are confusing civilisation with breeding. And the latter is often nothing more than an excuse for complete amorality. A very comfortable background to have, I must admit. Very comfortable indeed.

As justice does her scales, and with as much even-handed fairness, he weighed Blake, assessing him with what he believed was a ruthless honesty, blissfully unaware of the lies that justice’s blindfold hid from him.

Yes, you’ll do. Blake, as someone I can use when my libido demands its due. And you’ll come running if I so much as crook my little finger at you, won’t you? You fancy yourself infatuated with me, no doubt. Well, more fool you. And how useful for me. Your plan has possibilities, if all else fails. So I will keep you on a rather short leash, I believe. And reelyou in when it suits me. Oh, yes, Blake, I rather fancy the idea of having my very own pet hero—as long as he spreads his legs for me. I shall play your game, Blake, and you shall think it your own, but it shall be none other than myself calling the shots, leading you where I want to be led myself. You may think I’m crippled and blinded by my breeding and by what you fondly imagine is my sheltered background—but I’m more than a match for you.

Look at them, the pair of ’em, fawnin’ all over each the other. The thinker was indescribable, for he was so nondescript, he merged perfectly with the crowd, nothing at all to draw attention to himself, this little nothing of a man. But he was watching, he was always watching from behind his blind of anonymity, cataloguing and analysing and taking people apart. Most of the time, he put them back together again, knowing then exactly what made them do what they did. And he knew one of the men he was watching, and was coming to unpeel the other. No better than they should be, that’s what they are. Right pair. An’ so fuckin’ polite, enough ter makes yer puke. Bloody Alphas. Got their big ’eads up their fat arses, so they ’ave. An’ too stupid ter notice it an all. Stupid fuckin’ wallies. I mean ter say, listen t’ them. All over each the other, both of ’em thinkin’ but wot a clever boy ’e is an’ ‘ow ’e’s go’ the over one by the short an’ curlies. An’ wot does they know? Nuffin’, tha’s wot. Not a fuckin’ thing, no’ a fuckin’ bit o’sense ‘tween
the pair of 'em. An' 'ere's me sittin' 'ere like a china bloody ornament, an' neiver one of 'em's go' the sense ter ask me wot ter do. I mean ter say, oo's the one wot's been in prison before? An' more times than they've 'ad 'ot dinners. He fed his aggravation, nurrting his sense of outrage that it might feed him long enough to get through yet another period of pain, yet another time of loss and loneliness. Behind his pleasant, ostentatiously harmless façade, he perused them as others would a book, knowing far more than the objects of his attention would ever want him to. No' that they'd care, would they? Don't give a toss, eiver one. Blake's too busy playin' at Robin Fuckin' 'Ood—another proper wanker if you was ter ask me, not tha' His Holiness an' His Highness would ever do tha—an' Avon's too busy wallowin' in 'is own misery. Never thought 'e'd be one of 'em sorts wot jest lies there moanin' abou' 'ow unfair life is. 'Course, 'e'd be the first one ter deny 'e's doin' that, mind, but don't they always? Fuckin' prat. An' wot's 'e think 'e's doin', treatin' me like dirt on 'is shoe for, eh? Wasn't my fault, was it, tha' the fuckin' Seccies were after anyone wat so much as breathed wrong. Security Forces—biggest bastards tha' ever walked. Or crawled more like, knowin' the soddin' seccies. Can't stand 'em, not many as can, I s'pose, but they're fuckin' vicious when they ge' started. An' they always ge' started on the likes of me, don't they? If Avon wants ter contemplate things wat aren't fair, 'e oughter think about wot's 'appened ter me, an' for wot? For 'elpin' a hoity-toity Alpha wot won't even admit 'e knows me. Oh, I'll give 'im wot for, when I gets 'im on 'is own. I shall give 'im a proper piece of my mind, so I will an'. 'E'll know all 'bout it, when I's finished wiv him, so 'e will. An' 'e'll be sorry for wot 'e's done ter me.

No' much chance o' a bit o' the old 'ow's yer father, though, no' wiv bloody Blake 'angin' around like a bit o' trade lookin' for a quick shag. 'E should be so fuckin' lucky. Avon's never been tha' simple in 'is life. Always all the games first. Yer've got ter prove ter 'im tha' 'e c'n trust you an' 'e's never go'nner 'urt 'im. An' then yer've ge' ter get 'im all ready an' rarin' ter go, afore 'e'll relax enough ter let yer up 'im. Mind you, if Blake's willin' ter spread it fer Avon, it'll be all over bar the shoutin', won't it? A quick leg-over, Avon'll pop off an' then walk away. An' 'ow's poor Blake gonner cope wiv tha', eh?

Fuck, bu' they're sickenin', starin' at each ovver like lovesick mutoids, they are. Disgustin'. An' they both think they're gonner be top man, don't they? Upper class fuckin' twits. Somebody's always gotter get up on the receivin' end, don't they? An' that pair are gonner 'ave a very nasty shock coming' when they find tha' out, ain't they? Fuckin' perverts. Not as 'ow they likes fuckin' men—fond o' tha' meself, bu' it's this way they 'as of makin' it look like it's a fuckin' battle, no' a bit o' fun. An' tha's all wat it oughter be. Bit o' fun, nice bit o' rumpy, none o' this circlin' round like dogs in a pit-fight. But if it was... Know oo I'd put me money on.

Me. I'll be 'ere, jest waitin' fer when the fireworks is over an' Avon's ready fer a bit o' real life again, none o' this snotty love-affaire crap.

They'll kill each ovver, or one of 'em'll get the ovver one first. An' tha's Avon. Vicious bastard 'e c'n be, when 'e needs ter be. 'E's no artsy-fartsy Alpha-rebel type, not our Avon. Cold as glass, 'e is. 'Less you catch 'im when 'e's lonely an' all sad, the way 'e gets. Then...mush. Tha's all 'e is then. Big mushy 'eart an' 'e 'angs on ter yer all night an' tells yer 'ow good yer 'ands are an' 'ow good yer fucks 'im.

Like 'im best when 'e's like tha', no' bu' tha' 'e lets many sees 'im then. An' such a fuckin' idiot when 'e goes an' falls fer somebody. Look at tha' precious bleedin' Anna of 'is. Nothin' but a bi' of baggage she was. An' 'I'll bet good money after bad tha' she's livin' it up somewheres, Lady Muck, shaggin' 'er stony little 'eart out wiv the feller wot was supposed ter interrogate 'er. Oh, no, our Anna, our sweet fuckin' Anna wouldn't've ended up in no cells, not 'er. Might've spoiled 'er 'air-do an' we can't 'ave that, can we? Fancy bitch, tha's all she was an' good riddance ter bad rubbish. Glad ter see the back of 'er. Never did Avon no good, she didn't. He could remember, with the same brittle clarity that marred Anna's beauty, the very first time he'd met her. At
Avon’s flat, showing him the plans he’d lifted from that Councillor’s private safe, and chuckling over the nefarious pornography that had been tucked in there, between the official documents and the Councillor’s famous speeches on morality. She’d hated him on first sight, but not half as much as Vila had hated her. Just another proof, in his eyes, of what a good judge of character he was. Nuffin’ but trouble, ‘er, prissy-mouthed miss, an’ so two faced, she needed an extra mirror jest ter put ‘er face paint on. An’ always on at ‘im abou’ ‘is famly an’ ‘is good name an’ ‘is money wot ‘e never got cos the Feds got it first. As if ‘e never knew all that crap. Never let it get ter ‘im too much till after she started in on ‘im. Was like she’d picked the scab off an’ then sat back ter watch ‘im bleed. No ‘eart ter the woman. Up-start bint tryin’ ter ‘ave my Avon, tryin’ ter pinch ‘im from right under me nose. Hah! As if ‘e’d go. Well, ‘e does, sometimes, if ‘e gets ‘is balls up where ‘is brains oughter be. Bu’ ‘e always comes back, mind. Never stays away fer long. ‘E needs me, yer see. Not tha’ ‘e’s got the sense ter see that, mind, bu’ ‘e really needs me.

An’ Blake’ll find that out soon enough. ‘E’s in fer a big fuckin’ shock, ‘e is. Can ‘ardly wait ter sees ‘is face when Avon dumps ‘im like a lead fuckin’ balloon an’ comes back ter me. An’ ‘e will.

Always does, don’t ‘e? He was frowning now, the expression on another inmate’s face warning him that his mask was slipping. Wiping his face thoroughly with profound inanity, he disappeared into the crowd again, a mousy man with a far from mousy spirit. But will yer take a look at tha’! Fuckin’ ‘ell, wot’s the matter wiv them two? All their brains ‘ave gone ter their bums an’ they’ve been sittin’ on their arses too long. Got no sense, no’ a bit o’ sense. Ter stare all goo-goo at each oever like tha’, an’ on a prison ship! Saddin’ ‘ell, don’t they know wot the guards’ll do, even if the maties don’t? Inmates get lonely an’ if they sees two men wot don’t mind ‘avin’ a cock up their arse, they’re gonner get more than they expected. Better ‘ave a word wiv’em—bu’ why bovver? They’re never gonner listen ter sense, are they? Playin’ coy wiv each the other, all them eyelashes battin’ an’ if Avon don’t watch it, all them pouts is gonner turn inter kissy-kissies. An’ where does tha’ leave me, eh? Beggar at the fuckin’ banquet again, tha’s where. Bloody Avon. Don’t know why I put up wiv ‘im. Part from the obvious, mind. He meandered around another few steps, never taking his eyes off Avon or Blake, never once seeming to look at them at all. Never seen ‘im like this afore. No’ even wiv Anna. At least wiv ‘er, ‘e kept ‘is distance a bit. Scared o’ fallin’ fer ‘er, I think ‘e was, but yer’d think ‘e’d ‘ave enough sense ter keep away from Blake fer the same reason.

Unless the fuckin’ sod don’t know. Oh, tha’s great, tha’s jest fuckin’ brilliant, tha’ is. Typical bloody Avon, jumpin’ in wiv both feet, jest cos ‘e thinks ‘e could never fall fer someone wot’s as stupid as Blake. Pride comes afore a fall, me old granny used ter say, an’ lookin’ at fuckin’ Avon, she’s right. Oh, this is jest wot I wanted ter cheer me up, ain’t it? Avon, takin’ a pratfall fer a bloke wot’s liable ter gets us all topped. Marvellous. Fuckin’ marvellous.

Course, Blake’s no better, is ‘e? ‘E’s droolin’ over Avon, near as spit. Oh tha’s a good pun, I like tha’ one. Must remember ter use it one day. But don’t make no difference, does it, cos Blake’s still droolin’ all over Avon, ain’t ‘e? Like a fuckin’ gigolo let loose in the girl’s remand ‘ome. An’ look at tha’, oughter be ashamed of ‘imself, walkin’ around in tha’ state, playin’ tents wivout poles. Big, though. Looks like a good fat prick, tha’ does—jest like Blake, I s’pose. Yeh, big fat prick ter match ‘is big fat ‘ead. Pantin’ after Avon, as if ‘e’s got any chance o’ gettin’ Avon. Got better taste, ‘e ‘as. Well, usually. Unless ‘e thinks ‘e can ‘andle Blake. Which is one thing wot ‘e can’t do. Least, not as much as ‘e thinks ‘e can. Always did ‘ave more balls than brains, never you mind wot ‘e says. Nobody knows themselves ‘alf as well as them wot sees them all the time. An’ I’ve been watchin’ Avon fer years now. Very easy on the eyes, ‘e is—but ‘ard on the ‘eart. God, but ‘e’s enough ter make a man weep, sometimes. So fuckin’ pretty, an’ so fuckin’ good tween the sheets, but ‘e never knows if ‘e’s comin’ or goin’ when it comes ter ‘is feelin’s. But ‘e always comes back ter me. Oh, all right, so ‘e don’t love me, but ‘e likes me, else ‘e wouldn’t never come back, right?
An’ I love ‘im, tha’ counts fer somethin’, right? Course it does. An’ if it didn’t, ‘e’d never ‘ave gone on at me like wot ‘e did, moanin’ an’ complainin’ at me till I learned ‘ow not ter drop me aitches and then sound so terribly, terribly much as one truly ought, if one wishes to better oneself. Load of old codswallop, if yer ask me. ‘Course, it’s stood me in good stead, I s’pose—not many as is in ‘ere, even, would know me now fer fer wot I started as. Sometimes forget meself, ceptin’ when I’m this fuckin’ knackered. An’ I am absolutely jiggered, no two ways abou’ tha’, is there? Always get out an’ out lazy in me thinkin’ when I’m tired. So c’mon, Vila me old pal, pull your socks up. Get yer mind out of yer arse—get your brain in gear, an’ star’ yerself ter thinkin’. Start thinking. Go on, lazy mind makes yer—you—careless. Think about it. Apply yerself. Those two are like two toms on ‘eat, but neither one of them’s stopped to think about wot’s goin’ to happen when they get down to the business of fucking. Fireworks, that’s wot it’ll be, an’ not the kind they were after, either. Fuckin’ hell, it’s goin’ to be a soddin’ mess, when them two get that far. An’ if we’re all stuck together on Cygnus Alpha with ‘em when the explosions start, I’ll be the first one to go bury me head somewhere. But I’ll be back, so I will. Avon’s not the only one wot comes back. An’ when all’s said and done, the old bastard needs me.

But his bones were aching from the side-effects of the drugs in the food, and he sat down, in the pose of habitual laziness that got him out of so much work. He could see it all coming, could see where this liaison of Avon and Blake’s was going to lead them. And he liked it not at all.

But wot c’n I do about it? ’S not as if they’re gonner listen ter me, is it? Nah, not them pair. Destroy each the other, if they’re not careful. Pushin’ and pullin’ ‘an’ never listenin’ ter wot the other ‘as ter say… Disaster, tha’s wot they are. As fer why Avon can’t jest stick wiv me, wot understands an’ loves ‘im, I’ll be buggered if I know. Stupid, really, but ‘e’s always been like tha’. Always afterwot ‘e can’t ‘ave. Although ‘e’ll be able ter ‘ave Blake, no fear about tha’. Bu’ tha’s jest like ‘im, ‘e elver wants wot ‘e can’t ‘ave, or ‘e gets wot ‘e shouldn’t oughter want. Restlessness crawled over him like lice and he moved, abruptly, an implosion of energy that brought him to his feet and halfway round the perimeter of the room before he was even aware of the need to move, to get away. Then, masochistically, in the manner of one who has to race to the scene of the accident, in the manner of one who goes over a nightmare again and again, he came back to where he could watch the two Alphas and their mating dance. An’ they’re still at it, the pair of them, talking backwards and forwards, as if they’re foolin’ anyone with their games. Only people they’re making fools of is themselves. Each as bad as the other, thinking they’re playing such fancy nancy games, and all they’re doing is skirting each other to find out who gets to do the fuckin’ and who gets to bend over and spread’em. Be interesting t’see if they get that far, mind. Be interesting to see if Avon’ll let Blake fuck him. Don’t see it meself. Not even Avon gets so besotted as to let someone like Blake ‘ave that much power over him. But then, Avon loves being fucked, not but that he’s ever going to admit as much. Still think tha’s why he wouldn’t marry that Sarah-fluff. Couldn’t give it to him, not hard enough—so to speak. Needs a firm hand, does our Avon, and I wonder if you’ve realised that yet, Blake. Wonder if you’ve got the faintest, foggiest idea what you’re lettin’ yourself in for, if you’re takin’ on Avon. He’s a handful, a proper handful and you have to know when to pull ‘im to heel and when ter let him go. Fuck, but I’m tired. Need a sleep. All the drugs in the food, always does this to me. Need to sleep. Tha’s all right. Them two won’t be doin’ nuffin’ nuffin yet. Not fer ages yet. He stumbled over to the bunk that he had claimed so wisely the second they had, en masse, set foot on the transport. He did a quick check of his hidden pockets, the ones that made him look permanently bedraggled, and all his little treasures were there. No matter what happened, he’d be all right. Still had his basic tools of the trade, still had marketable skills.

And he didn’t give a fuck what Blake thought, or what Avon thought either, for that matter.

He still had Avon.