AND SO IT GOES: THE DOME CYCLE

The second installment, or, as the Glaswegian refers to it: “that monolithic, monstrous great lump.” To those who haven’t read the first part, the editor apologizes; this piece isn’t meant to stand alone. We can only hope that continued threats and blackmail will result in reasonable third installment by the next issue. Readers have permission to threaten the author.

On a more trivial note the title, ‘For A’ That, has been lifted and mangled from the original poem by Robert Burns. A Scot, naturally.

FOR A’ THAT

M. Fae Glasgow

Probably what surprised him most was how cold he was, the chill making his muscles shake with ague. Or fear. He wasn’t entirely sure which and he shied away from delving deeply enough to find out. He ached, abominably. His lower back screamed at him, his eyes like gravel and sinuses red embers of coal, stomach and chest pulsing, not with his heart, but with his pain. Even his lungs seemed reluctant, shallow, filled with ash. Ash. The bitter stuff of grief, crawling into the open spaces inside him, choking them off, choking him. Not tears, no never tears. He did not cry, that simply was not his way. Instead, there was only the pain, the bone-wearying suffering, this loneliness filled with nothing but the dregs of life. Grief. Hardly an emotion others would associate with him, but one he had experienced all too often in his time.

Recognising the position his body had subconsciously sought, he forced himself out of the foetal curl, arranging himself flat on his back, deliberately straightening out, as far from the symbolic shape of vulnerability as possible. He lay there, staring at the ceiling, listening to Jess crying upstairs, the sound increasing his guilt.

The old plastic above him offered neither solace nor distraction, serving only to remind him of nights before, spent here in this flat that was now his home, watching the ceiling, planning, listening to Vila snore. That damned name again. There was no escape, no respite from it. The name and the face to go with it. No matter how he tried, he always went back to the one conversation he most desperately wanted to forget.

“Me granda says it’s worse than just being caught for services Upstairs. If yer taken Upstairs for that, you live for a while, then get worn out. Once that ’appens to yer, they just give yer a jag, some lethal substance then yer gone, dead before you even realise what’s coming yer way.”

Avon stroked thinning hair, fingers straying down to trace the shape of Vila’s lips. “Your accent is slipping again,” he said softly.

Vila lifted himself up far enough out of Avon’s embrace to look at him in disgust. “You’re bloody ’orrible, you are. ’Ere I am, tellin’ yer a horror story, an’ yer only concerned with how Delta or bleedin’ Alpha-esque me accent is.”

“No, no, don’t be so stupid,” the answer came back, the tone placatory, edged only with a fine lace cuff of sarcasm. “It’s quite simply that I am capable of thinking about more than one thing at a time, so…”

“So you can afford to be bloody flippant to hide when someting bovers yer, right?” Vila settled back into Avon’s arms, pulling the worn old brown blanket more snugly around them. “Wot? Got nothing to say? Never have liked the truth, have yer?”

“Isn’t this rather a case of the pot calling the kettle black? You’re criticising me for digressing, yet you are doing the selfsame thing.”

“Getting away with it again, are you? Yeh, well, it’s not worth a fight, is it? Anyway, so’s me granda tells me, if yer gets caught in one o’ these raids, like wot the one we had today, then the mutoids haul yer Upstairs and yer harvested for yer organs. They only paralyse yer, keeps
yer conscious, something about anaesthesia damaging the ‘freshness’ of all those spare parts. So yer gets to see just exactly what they’re doing to yer.”

“And how often do these raids usually occur? In the time I’ve been incarcerated down here, there doesn’t seem to have been a regular pattern.”

“That’s cause it depends. Sometimes we get hardly any, then some other times, there’s one every day. ‘S like being in a war, then.”

Vicious, he slammed the door resolutely shut on that particular memory, refusing entry to the rest of their conversation, and the fight that had led, finally, to them making love. He turned the phrase over again in his mind, testing the bouquet of the words as he would a wine, finding them redolent with the fullness and body of truth. Admittedly, they had had sex before, but that night, he conceded heavily, had been the first time any true feeling had been expressed. On his part, that is, of course. Vila—Vila had always been one for wearing his heart on his sleeve, the red badge of courage indeed. And, his conscience whispered sullenly, more courage than you’ve ever had, right? It didn’t even occur to Avon to wonder when that intrusive little voice in his soul had become Vila’s, but as with so many other things, the thief permeated his life, a phrase, a gesture, a smile filed away, popping out to trip him at the most unexpected moments. *Such as now,* he thought wearily, *such as now.*

Lying here, in a bed in which he had never slept alone, on a pillow punched into the particular pattern of lumps Vila liked, under blankets enough only for the Delta born and raised. Of course, it had served as such a good excuse for sleeping pressed so closely together, Vila wrapped around Avon like a mollusc’s shell, knees fitting snugly in at the back of Avon’s, chest against Avon’s back. The warmth of his flesh. The warmth of his living flesh…

Still not cold, not even buried yet, but come to haunt me already, hrm, Vila? The memory of you, the need for you. The way you needed me so terribly much. Is that what’s going to be my final downfall? I have survived the Delta warrens, even learned how to pass as one of them, survived Servalan and mutoids, even Blake’s murderous idealism. But your death… that seems, somehow, the insurmountable barrier, the one thing against which even I am not proof. So was I wrong, Vila? I had always believed my death and Blake’s would be somehow linked, but was that simple conceit, an evasion, born of an unwillingness to admit that it could be a Delta, a Delta male, of all things, to whom I would finally tie myself?

Jess’ crying wasn’t easing, as he had assumed it would; it was simply changing, ebbing into liquid misery, the sobs finally purged from her. Rising from the too-large bed, Avon found himself more sympathetic than was wise, the sinews in his body resonating like the strings on a harp to the loss he could hear from her. He knew it too well, unexpected though that might be to him. He, too, when all was said and done, regardless of how he painted the situation, had lost a spouse, for surely, these past seven months had transformed Vila from friendly thief to partner, had changed him from someone well-liked to someone…well-loved. The words strangled his mind, stronger than the term ‘making love’, which was, after all, a popular euphemism, but to think of Vila in such a way was, to Avon’s background, nothing short of emasculating. And terrifying.

In a devastatingly normal tone of voice, he spoke the words aloud. “Well-loved. I love Vila. Vila is my…spouse.” The words sered him, leaving him as burnt and dry as the desert, the ash inside parting, opening a yawning chasm of chaos within. *Love? Vila?* And if he did, what did that make him, what did that do to his manhood? It was one thing to sleep with another man, to indulge in sex, for such activities do not a homosexual make, but *love!* Sex, a physical release for a recalcitrant body, a libido that did not know its place, a way of having some ease without complications. It was only sex…And what of Blake? His vicious conscience howled. *Does it make a difference when it’s with an Alpha, ‘old school boys’ together? Does that stop it from meaning anything?* A stringless puppet, confused and tangled, Avon flopped down onto the bed, collapsing back to once again study that unhelpful ceiling, his mind hurling his conscience out of the window, turning back to the unmitigated grief, bringing a face back into the focus of his mind’s eye. A much missed face, a much loved face. *Love—surely not, not for Vila. Fond, yes, terribly fond, but surely not love?*

Still, Jess cried, hiccupping into silence now and then, but never quite entirely finding ease.

Avon took his emotions and held them in his hands, twisting them this way and that, the unnerving, unmanning truth cackling in glee. *Love. For another man. Not as it was with Blake, who after all, had the breeding to understand the truths of such a situation. No. A Delta. A thief. A man who was barely literate when first I met him. A man the opposite of Anna, and of Blake.*

He couldn’t face those wraiths, not yet. How could he possibly deal with the self-knowledge that would proclaim him a man who loved easily, and deeply?
Where would the cynic be then, what shield could his armour then afford him? No, there would be time to face that, in the future, a time that can never be now.

But a man? he thought, playing back all the damning images, turning halogen lights to glare brightly as the differences were paraded before him with knee-weakening enthusiasm, showing him the contrasts of the times with Vila and the politely passion-kneeling enthusiasm, showing him the con-tate tumbles with Blake. And worst, the nights where he had not indulged himself sexually, but had instead, simply held Vila. No, you didn’t hold him. He held you, didn’t he? Here, in the Bowels, he’s the stronger of us.

Words from that very first night, all those months ago, came back to him like bile, the term used by the papyrus-old Ewan Restal. Wifey. A term most conveniently forgotten, relegated to the very back of his mind where he wouldn’t come across it, even by acci-dent. And that is what I’ve become, isn’t it? Vila is the one who brings in our income, while I teach children and other stay-at-homes to read and reason. I am the one who has taken on what is still the secondary role, the power behind the throne, as it were, the one who stays behind. Waiting, as I am now, for my man to come home. He bolted up from the bed, scalded by his own thoughts, driven by fears, his fragile emotional self a fulcrum, balancing the equally terrifying: Vila, dead and never returning, or Vila alive, with Avon sitting home im-potently—impotently!—waiting.

With deep breaths, he calmed, forcing his fears to back down a little, to let him breathe. He was a man, still; his feelings could not emasculate him—could they? He walked heavily back over to the bed, remembering the hysteria evoked when they had moved here, five months previously, their antics in getting this damned bed upstairs giving no end of amusement to their neighbours, all members of Vila’s huge extended family. And the comments, varying only in their degree of ribaldness, the ones that had made Vila blush and Avon glower. There was a hollow in the centre of the bed, where one would roll in the course of the night regardless of how one tried to keep one’s distance. That, basically, was the excuse they had used to begin having sex on a very regular basis. It is, after all, extremely difficult not to ‘help’ one another in the dozing fuzziness of morning, when both awoke with erections. Yet another excuse, just like the lack of blankets. No matter that they could have afforded to buy new ones, that wasn’t the issue. No, Vila had understood how much Avon had needed the delusion that excused their growing close-ness and Avon had simply refused to think about the whole issue, running from it as fast as he could. As long as it led straight into his arms.

And still, Jess’ misery could be heard, now no longer sobbing, the crying melted away into dry un-happiness, the steady tread, tread, tread of her feet marking her sorrow like a death-knell. The loss of life mouldered away inside him, compounding the shaking the recognition of love had given him. All the while, at the back of his mind slithered the worry, the nagging nightmare of what they would be doing to Vila now, at this very moment. Finally, he under-stood the Delta attitude: as soon as someone had been ‘taken’, they were dead, completely and irrevocably. Now, at this ebb of day, he would not have fought with Vila over the defeatism of that approach, would not have railed at him for not attempting rescue. He knew why. He felt the small scream howling in the back of his mind, that part of him thinking about what Vila was going through, how he would be feeling, what it would be like for him to watch them ‘har-vest’ him like some inanimate object, dehumanised to the point where he didn’t even deserve the kind-ness one gives to a dumb animal. The small scream was growing larger, threatening him, forming an unholy alliance with the dread of emasculation, looming and towering over him like an impending thunderstorm.

And still Jess suffered.

Avon grabbed his jacket and ran from his home and his chamber of horrors, racing upstairs to the one person with whom he had truly become friends—Vila’s sister.

A touch hesitant, he tapped on the door, half ex-pecting that Jess would be the typical Delta and have a houseful of relatives, but she ushered him into a silent tomb, not needing to speak, not to Avon, who always understood so well. It dawned on him, belat-edly, that she, also, had been unable to brave the wakes tonight, unable to thumb her nose at Death, just for this moment, just for this flood of solitary death inside. For a while, they simply sat together, his arm around her, her hands clutched together on the life kicking in her belly, the one unerring defa-mation of Death.

“Worst is,” the whisper fled from the stern cage of her self control, bleeding strength with it, “I jest can’t ge’ it out o’ me mind wot’ll be ‘appenin ter ‘im. Ter them both. Know I shouldna think o’ it, bu’…”

“But the nightmare won’t fade, will it, Jess? I am sorry, truly sorry…”
“Me, too. You really only jest go’ ‘im, didn’t yer? All tha’ talk abou’ yer bein’ mates fer years, load o’ lies, tha’, weren’t it?”

“Yes,” he admitted without pause, knowing that Jess would never reveal the truth, would never risk him, for his own sake, as well as her brother’s. Knowing too, bitterly, that now it didn’t matter, for only he would be asked to prove the truth.

“’E really loved yer, ’e did.”

A sudden, sharp intake of breath. “I know.”

“Makes it ‘arder, don’t it?”

Desperate, he clung to her words, minimising his own loss, denying his own pain, refuting his love.

“Harder, surely, for you. After all, you’ve lost husband and brother.”

“Vila’s so much older than me, an’ ’e was gone most o’ me life, so I don’ really know ’im, ’e’s too different from me.”

“Yet you look so alike,” hand stealing a touch of her hair, his fingers remembering Vila.

“So everybody says. Can’t see it meself.”

“Oh, it’s there. Jess... What will happen to you now that Mac is gone?”

“Wotcher mean?”

“Til I got preggers, was me wot brought the money in. After this ’un’s born, I’l jest go back on the game an’ me cousin Nell’ll take care of the babe fer me.”

It was a sign of the difference time can make, that he saw nothing wrong with her going back to prostitution, seeing it rather as a respectable way to make a living. Clearly better than the dope dens and thinking of it was certainly better than dwelling on Vila.

That name again. He lapsed into silence, dragging her down with him, each one wrapped in the frozen tundra of loss, their pain overlapping, mingled, compounded. Avon shuddered, his imagination forming memories, detailed pictures of things he had never seen: Vila, crying in fear, waiting for his turn under the knife; himself, continuing on with the revolution, but alone, a mere husk. He had had a taste of real life, recently, with vivacity and fervour all around, with someone who was completely unafraid to love and sanguine in his sexuality, unrestricted by class. Vila had never had to consciously open his mind to love between men, where Avon should have, but had, instead, merely hidden behind ‘sex without complications’, the fraternal fuck. And yet, Avon had been tied to him, restricted to sharing life with one person only, but he had never been freer, nor more filled with vitality. Despite the struggles and woes, he had known true elation as he mastered the first real challenges he had ever had, the first things which had not seemed simple mental exercises.

His mind was skipping around badly, like a faulty programme, as he jumped from one fear to another, the loss of life and love commingling with the skulking fear of emasculation to undermine him. _Joie de vivre_, he suddenly thought, a phrase Vila had mispronounced so badly that Avon had taken several listenings before he recognised it, but the meaning of it was clearer to Vila, here, in his own milieu, than to anyone else Avon had ever met. _Joie de vivre_, the art of living whatever life was available, to its fullest, finding the good under the dross and making it shine.

Horrified, he felt the tears threaten, Vila’s death at the hands of surgeons hitting him, blasting into his solar plexus, stilling his heart, a whirlpool of pain castrating him. He clutched Jess to him, fighting the tears and the horror, needing to touch the life she was.

“Avon?” she whispered.

The sound shuddered through Avon, the feminine echo of the man he had grown to love, despite all the taboos and interdicts to the contrary, a complex web of needs tangling them in their sticky fronds.

“How long’s it goin’ ter be till they come agin, an’ next time, they could ge’ me or you. They’d take me baby, they would. An’ maybe use me fer breedin’. Heard tales o’ tha’, I ’ave. Oh, god, Avon, we ’ad a great big row this mornin’. Afore ’e left, I told ’im to never bovver comin’ back!”

“Shh, Jess, don’t think of it. All we can do is survive and keep regret as a very small part of life. It was only an argument. He would have known that you didn’t mean it, that it was only said in the heat of the moment.”

“’E loved me, ’e did. An’ I keep on thinkin’ wot young Dave said. ’E saw them takin’ me Mac, so ’e did. Said ’e was screamin’...”

“Shh, my girl, shh,” he murmured helplessly, stroking her hair as if that would soothe her tears away. Moisture filled his own eyes, warring with the deathly stillness inside him. He was cold, so very cold, all the life fled from him as the bereavement claimed him. No one had seen Vila being taken, no one could tell him how it had been. But he knew, he knew, as surely as if he had seen it himself. Vila, the professional coward, would have been like a vixen
with cubs; cornered, the thief was fierce, when protecting his own, and those youngsters had been his, not by birth, of course, but by dint of the fact that he was training them to be his very own crime ring of gifted little thieves. The very same children Avon was teaching to read. Rigidity set in as that realisation dawned upon him with gut-twisting pain: the children. Vila hadn’t been seen since the raid, nor, as far as he knew, had a single one of the children. They must have been caught in some small safe-hole, huddled, cowering… The sheer volume of death threatened to overwhelm him and he cursed his weakness. All that death, all those faces marching before him to their graves…

Against his stomach he felt the thrust of tiny feet, the aliveness of it shocking, as it had been that morning in the safety-house. The feet pushed petulantly and his hand was drawn there like a magnet, his palm made large with the smallness of the feet fitting into it. Jess sobbed, once, into his shoulder, abruptly wrapping her arms around him, making him her lifebelt, the mooring keeping her afloat. He stroked his hand over her belly, needing to see those little feet, opening her clothes up, fascinated and repulsed and aroused by the life moving beneath the skin. He brought his face down to rest against the soft skin of her abdomen, closing his eyes on his pain, bottling it inside, reminding himself of his words to Jess, that regret had to be only a small part of living, that it was useless to feel guilt. It was not his fault, he told himself fiercely, that Vila had had to choose him and so give up the possibilities of his longed-for family. Condemned to end his line, by his own sense of honour—almost a contradiction when applied to Vila—but not in this. The commitment had been total, all-encompassing and Avon had barely returned it, and then only through default. Jess’ hands were in his hair, her body sliding lower to lie prone on the couch. He found himself on his knees on the floor, face buried in her fecundity, tears soaking his mind in their grey cloak, face twisted and dry. So much lost, so very much left undone…

He needed to be alive, to place the sigil on his brow, to warn the angel of death to pass over him. Slowly, he raised his eyes until he met Jess’, the honesty passing between them. An act of memorial, then, for our men and all the destroyed futures… Not infidelity, not betrayal, but a way to bring them back for a small, brief farewell, the good-byes that would fester forever unsaid.

He kissed her then, thinking of Vila, as he knew she was thinking of Mac. Tenderly, he loved her, careful with and worshipful of the life held safely in her, warm hand gently sliding over the taut, smooth dome of her belly. She reached for him, almost in echo of Vila, filling her hands with his hair, smoothing his face of the lines griven by a lifetime’s strain. Quiet, melancholy, he lay beside her, protecting her as he had never shielded her brother, no matter Vila’s needs, and he held her, holding Vila close this one last time. Together, they celebrated life with a measured seriousness, giving it honours, fanning the fragile flame. Jess fitted into the curve of his body, head cradled against his shoulder, her hand slipping inside his trousers to grip his turgid cock, his hand echoing hers, sliding in to stroke her. Their movements were in dirgelike harmony, a slow, mournful rise to poignant pleasure, orgasm so sad, there was no passion, only the thin cry that here, there was life still. And after their brief requiem was over, they lay motionless, one against the other, her child—the very embodiment of life—cradled between them. There were no words, for none had been invented to heal them and they had no desire to hear worn clichés and platitudes, where before they had had sharp truths and pointed humour.

Eventually, silently, Avon rose, helping her to bed, fetching a cover to blanket her with, stroking her forehead with the Delta ritual blessing for the dead. He left her solitary in the dark, returning downstairs to his own room, to the chittering cold of his solitude, there to battle with his dæmons alone. It had all gone unspoken, neither needing to say that this would be forever secret between them, their own wake, one that the Delta code would not allow, one that healed no more than the raucously defiant celebrations staggering to a close. He had looked down on her for a moment, as she lay there, lying on her side to accommodate the baby, her blue eyes closed, profile sharp as Vila’s, hair as fine. He had watched her for as long as he could, cherishing her and Vila until the chill cruelty of reality pierced him, the short flare of life extinguished, leaving them both more lost than before, sending him hurtling from her room.

Jak’s middle child was whistling as she crossed the street to the baker’s to fetch the morning rolls and milk, the tone-deaf tune quite murderous to the ear. Avon groaned and stretched, unsurprised that he had actually become prey to exhaustion and fallen asleep. As the grogginess clarified into a semblance of alertness, it was obvious that it wasn’t Jen’s whistle...
that had awoken him. There was another presence in the room. The floor creaked, protesting this misuse of its ancient skeleton, the noise coming closer, stopping only with the squeak of the bed as a weight was dropped onto it.

“Vila?” he said, leery of turning around, unsure of whether reality or nightmare would meet his eyes. A hand came to rest on his shoulder, tugging gently, rolling him over. A pale, weary face greeted him with a worn smile and his heart in his eyes.

“Where the hell have you been?” Avon yelled at the top of his lungs, surprising himself far more than Vila. He paused, grabbing his self-control with both hands, clearing his throat of the sudden, embarrassing lump.

“Oh, that’s nice, that is,” Vila said, climbing in beside Avon, hungering up close to Avon’s warmth, his skin chill and clammy. “Been out all night, hiding the kids, getting lost, finding our way back and then delivering every single bleedin’ one of them ‘ome and all you can say is ‘where the hell ’ave you been’? Didn’t Mac tell you wot I was doing? Or is it just,” a quick grin lit his face, “that yer missed me that much, eh?”

The only answer given him was the fierceness of Avon’s mouth on his, of the desperate hunger devouring him whole, fanning a surging thrust of excitement flying through his body. Avon locked them together, hands flurrying over every inch of Vila, stroking, kneading, squeezing, fingertips delving into hollows and tangling hair.

With straining intensity, Avon sought to regain Vila, to bring that essence back inside to dispel the ice that eroded him. His mate relaxed under him, opening up in welcome, hugging Avon back with all the strength he had, murmuring, whispering words of love and reassurance, renewing a bond that before had always been tacit.

Abruptly, as the words infiltrated his passion and filled his mind, echoing and reverberating through him, Avon stilled his body, bringing his hands up to frame Vila’s face. “Say that again!” he demanded.

Avon’s expression belied his tone, giving Vila courage, making him grin widely. “Going deaf in your old age, are you?” he said, slipping into the Alpha’s phraseology.

“Don’t tease, Vila,” the reply was firm, “just say it.”

“I…” a pause for a sweetly fleeting kiss, “love…” a quick nip on an enticing earlobe, “you…” and this time, the kiss came from Avon, devouring them, frantic, desperate, speaking far louder than words, shouting out all the lessons of the dead night, making speech an intrusion.

Avon abandoned Vila’s mouth, racing down his body to the straining erection standing there so forlornly, engulfing it, practised mouth and throat enveloping Vila in his heat, drawing back to kiss and nibble and lick, teasing droplets of cum from the slitted head, lips catching on the widely flaring neck. Slowing, he traced with wet tongue and trembling finger, the embossed blueness of veins, thrilled by the acts almost as much as Vila, drunk on the fierce arousal pulsing there, under his lips, the life-blood beating and flowing for him, no one else, but purely for Avon. His eyes were hooded and dark as he eased his way back up Vila, keeping close, pressing them together, his own hard cock dragging through the hairs on Vila’s legs, up on to his thighs, higher, to leave a trail of precum in the fine trailway of hair on the smooth stomach, higher still, cockhead bumping with minute flares of pleasure against the tiny hillyocks of nipple, finally stopping, poised and flushed with need, over Vila’s open mouth. Avon hesitated a moment, ignoring the insistent kneading at his buttocks, then he twisted, turning so that as he plunged into Vila, Vila surged up into him. They sucked, unconsciously matching rhythm and depth, hips moving in undulating unison, both feeling orgasm thunder towards them with all the subtlety of a tidal wave. There was no time, this dawning, for intercourse, no spare moment to prepare and ease, only starvation and thirst, hurtling them towards completion. Avon felt his balls jump, could feel that endless moment just before coming and pulled himself from Vila’s mouth with an agonised groan. The thief wasn’t ready yet, wasn’t completely in synch with him and, absurd though he would no doubt deem it in the callousness of day, in this moment of truth, he needed them to come together, in affirmation of their relationship: as confession to Vila of the power the thief had over him. Love. The strongest chains in the universe, and he had willingly handed them over to a fifth-grade Delta. Lips still stretched taut around Vila, Avon smiled, driving a gasp from his thief, a sudden buck from the cock in Avon’s mouth, bringing them, now, both of them, a fragment away from orgasm. Avon thrust back into Vila, pushing his own head down as far as he could, nose buried in the coarse spring of pubic hair, completely inundated with Vila, and they came, as a pair, in unison, as Avon had needed them to.
Slowly, he allowed the softened penis to slide from his mouth, holding the taste within, collapsing his body to lie heavily on Vila, face still pressed against the fragrance of hair. Gentle hands on him gradually persuaded him to move, urging him up and into cradling arms. “You all right?” he heard, the words breathed against his left ear, a small kiss punctuating them.

“Yes,” he answered, “perfectly all right.” It amused him how unmoved his voice sounded, how the breeding held true. He sounded no more excited than a man at the ballet.

“Didn’t realise how worried you were. If I had, I’d’ve come home straight away, but Mac said he’d… what is it?” Vila broke off, warned by Avon’s sudden tension.

“Mac…”

Silence. “Oh.” More silence. “Was a good pal, ’e was. ’Ow’s our Jess? She with cousin Nell?”

For a moment, temptation tripped Avon’s tongue and he almost told Vila of his time with Jess, but then he thought better of it. There was no need, for mention of their ‘wake’ would only distress the living, would mean explaining just how close Avon himself had come to breaking, and how driven he was, still, by the narrowness of his past. He would bring not even an echo of the shame dictated by the tyranny of his class; rather, he would take that final step and touch life. “Jess elected to stay alone last night. I checked on her to make sure she was all right, put her to bed and then left her to work things through on her own. That’s Jess’ way, Vila, as well you know.”

“Still…”

“Not everyone mourns the dead as you would.”

The seriousness of Avon’s tone tugged at the thief’s mind. “Avon…did you think I was dead?”

“After the way I greeted you tonight, no, this morning, you still need to actually ask that? Just how great a fool are you?”

“Judging by the way you came,” Vila cooed in even closer, bringing them length to length again, “I’d’ve said the best fucking greatest in the Galaxy.”

He felt Avon’s body laugh, heard the almost silent chuckle close to his ear.

“Well now, I suppose I should be grateful.”

“Cause,” the voice was as bluntly seductive as the tongue tingling around Avon’s ear, pushing the night’s fear and loss far behind them, “you’ve got the best fuck in the business?”

“No. Because you fuck better than you speak.”

“Not this time. Perhaps you should start coming to my classes, Vila. The ‘best fucking greatest’ indeed.”

Vila’s hand cupped the heavy weight of Avon’s balls, a fingernail delicately traversing the folds. “Who needs grammar? Anyway, If I start coming in your class, well, what would the neighbours think, eh?”

Laughing, Avon tumbled him over, pinning him underneath. “Oh, that you were the ‘best fucking greatest’, I assume.” His face grew suddenly serious. “You are, you know.”

“Oh, compliments now. I’ll be getting big-headed next.”

“I seriously doubt that. Should that happen, all you’d need to do is look in the mirror.”

“And if that’s the case, it doesn’t say much for your taste in men, does it?” Vila stopped still under Avon’s hands.

“Vila? Is there something wrong or did your body just join your mind in the realm of the never-used?”

The teasing words and even more teasing kisses were ignored, Vila squirming instead until he was lying side by side with Avon, not touching, but still close, rolled together by the old familiar dip in their bed. “But you’ve never had any choice, not down ’ere, anyway. Lissen, Avon,” he started to fiddle with the brown cover, pleating it with precise measured movements. He hadn’t planned on saying it at this very second, but it had to be said and the opportunity, damn it, had just jumped up and slapped him in the face. “Avon,” he tried again, gathering his courage and decency into a knotted lump, “some’thin’ I have ter say yer yer, an’ t’ain’t easy fer me, bu’ got ter says it anyways.”

“Shh,” Avon smiled at him, fingertips reaching out to brush a wonderfully responsive nipple. “I know perfectly well how you feel about me. And if you don’t say anything, then I won’t be sarcastic back, now will I?”

“God, you really pick yer moments ter get all palsy-walsy, doncher? Don’t touch me!”

Burned, Avon snatched his hand back.

“Can’t think when you touch me like that, get all selfish an’ all I c’n think abou’ is ‘avin’ you. Look, Avon, yer never ‘ad any choice abou’ you an’ me becomin’ mates. We both jest ‘ad to, right? Well, wot I’m tryin’ ter say is, tha’, now that you c’n pass fer one o’ us, when yer needs ter, you don’t need me as much. An’ I’ve ter say this afore the next big ‘do’—the big party, the one fer the start o’ the New Year.
If,” he swallowed, “if yer wants ter, yer c’n make the announce-
ment an’ stop bein’ me mate an’ ask the family ter accept yer as one o’ us, in yer own right. Won’t stop yer, honest. I’ll even be one o’ the two yer’ll need ter speak fer yer. Jess’d be the other, or Jak. Got a soft
spot fer yer, ’e ’as, an’ Jess thinks yer magic, so…”

“What you are offering me, then, is a way out?”
The answer was so muffled not even Avon could hear it, but nonetheless, he knew what Vila had said. He could read it in the tired misery of the thief’s face. “Well now, it’s certainly a generous offer.”

The face crumpled a little more with the effort of holding the tears inside.

“And there is, I’m afraid, only one possible an-
swer.”

“Well, say it! Ge’ it over wiv!”

Warm full lips pressed lightly, dancing over his face, rubbing softly on his unshaven chin, surprising him enough that he opened his eyes to look at Avon. And found him smiling, quite fondly.

“I shall even phrase it in a way you are capable of comprehending. Wot?” His whole voice changed, suddenly becoming Deltan shrill, “Dump yer? Wotcher fink I am? I’m no’ as bleedin’ stupid as yer, am I?”

“You mean that, Avon?”

“I said it, didn’t I?”

“And you are a man of yer word… Oh, Avon…”

Vila didn’t care to delve too deeply into the whys and wherefores of Avon’s decision to stay with him, too afraid that he’d find that it was for the power Vila had down here in the Bowels and the contacts he had with the other criminal clans. No, he’d wal-
low in the warmth and safety of Avon’s arms and snatch this happiness with greedy hands, to clutch it close to him and keep it preserved in the rosy glow of memory. The flesh pressing down on him was warm and heavy, redolent with the tang of their sex, the smell and heat fluttering around him like the fingers weaving lyrics of passion over every inch of his being. He gave himself up to it, spreading his legs, wordlessly asking that Avon take him and fill him and give him this one assured moment together, before the grimness of reality could intrude. This, too, was his wake, his memorial for the ones he had heard during the long hours, screaming and crying and scrambling to escape the Hell that awaited them Above. And the children…the smell of Avon masked and finally overwhelmed the scent of fear and lost innocence.

He grabbed Avon, hauling him in close to kiss him fiercely, to celebrate life and the living of it, sucking up the all-encompassing protective possessiveness flowing from his mate. This, more than anything Avon could have gifted him with, was what he needed: the belonging, the welcome. The love. Unspoken, naturally, which did not distress Vila in the slightest. After all, he had watched Avon for two years; he knew how to read this man—sometimes. A memory floated back to him, barely rippling the surface of his pleasure with Avon, rustling in his mind with less presence than the tongue snaking its way up the length of his cock, and that memory was of Avon, ostentatiously uncaring, ‘I have never seen why…one must even prove it at all’. Watching Avon’s head rising and falling like breathing, seeing his cock disappear into that willing mouth, Vila didn’t see any reason for Avon to become irration-
al. This, this feeling would suffice, and he would nurture it and make it grow.

“Avon, Avon, love, c’mere.” Elation corkscrewed through him when the endearment was accepted, a brief kiss of approval anointing the head of his cock. Eyes dark as the soul, Avon slid his body along Vila’s, settling comfortably into his mate’s embrace, his erec-
tion tapping a reminder on Vila’s thigh. “Want you inside me, love,” Vila whispered.

“I thought you would have been too tired for that.”

“Nah, all I ‘ave ter do is lie there an’ le’ yer ‘ave yer wicked way with me.”

“Mmh? I should have realised that sheer bloody laziness was at the root of this. However, as I am ex-
traordinarily fond of hard work, perhaps I might in-
dulge you.” His right hand squeezed Vila’s cock tightly, then moved on to tickle his balls, finally fol-
lowing the line that led to his anus. He rubbed there, gently at first, tantalising the raised nub, feeling the small opening widen under his eager finger. He re-
sisted temptation and waited until Vila had fumbled the tube of gel into his hand, using it to liberally coat the clutching tunnel. Slowly, he eased two fingers within, grinning as Vila arched up, body demanding more. A third finger joined the first pair, then he with-
drew, quickly bending Vila, helping him to brace his feet against the headboard, displaying the rosette of his intention. He positioned himself carefully, hands on either side of Vila’s head to take his weight, hips poised to plunger. “Ready?” he asked, as he always did, that gesture of respect and recognition that Vila so treasured.

In response, Vila reached up to grab him, fingers digging into firm buttocks, pulling him inexorably
down. Avon slowed their pace, bending his head to take in the sight of Vila taking him in. With all the hurry of a sleepy snail, he sank into the living flesh, the muscles clamping down on him, stroking him, heating him, as he moved in and out, dividing his attention between the love in Vila’s eyes, his cock moving in Vila’s body and the exquisite delight building in himself. So sweet a sensation, feeling his entire body refined down to the single spasm of pleasure growing in his belly, the cum rising, filling his balls, filling him with the irrecusable explosion of orgasm.

Vila stared up, entranced, as Avon’s face was transformed far beyond its usual schooled gentility into a twist of lust, then he groaned, deeply, as he felt Avon swell and then jolt inside him, as the liquid heat burst into him. His own cock quivered tautly as Avon collapsed onto him, one fist coming forward to grip Vila with exactly the right amount of strength. A mouth descended upon his, a tongue thrust into him, Avon’s need for him poured over him like rapids over rocks. The emotion of it fueled him, and he came, spiraling off into an extremity of pleasure.

Momentarily, Avon left the bed to fetch a towel, cleaning both of them off before he would return to Vila’s somnolent embrace. He settled comfortably, one hand gently rubbing Vila’s chest. His body begged him to sleep, but his mind couldn’t entirely cast away the thought of Vila and the children during the raid. “Where did you hide, earlier?”

“Wot? Oh, em, down the old streets and in the history places.”

Avon nudged him, bringing him back to some faint semblance of alertness. “And what are those?”

“Aw, Avon, ’m tired, been up all night, then all this, lemme sleep. I’ll tell yer later. Promise.”

The fair head burrowed into his shoulder, and Avon stroked it, dunting Vila to get him to move that sharp elbow, admitting defeat at the sound of a whistling snore. Finally managing to fit them together snugly, Vila’s smell filling his nostrils, soft hair tickling his cheek, warm breath smoothing over his clavicle, Avon struggled to stay awake to ponder his situation, to analyse how he felt and how the night had changed him. Or if indeed, it had at all. There was still, unfortunately, that nagging fear of emasculation, fed and fired by his Alpha past, united with the uneasiness over seeing himself change so much to survive here in the Bowels. It had been different, of course, with Blake. Then, he had remained fully Alpha, truly himself, and it was quite acceptable for ‘old boys’ to...’help’ each other. He was more than happy to ignore the details of his relationship with Blake, as he had aboard ship, clinging tightly instead to his fond delusion of himself as a hard-hearted cynic. Sleep washed ashore in his brain, gradually obliterating his thoughts until he had sunk into a half-awake limbo, smiling when a dreaming Vila suddenly pushed closer against him, whispering Avon’s name and kissing him. As he hugged Vila back, the faintly coherent part of his mind declared a pox on all questions and so, contented, he slept.

The next several days were taken up with the depressing task of consoling the living, making new arrangements to fill the gaps left by those taken in the raid and the burying of the dead. It was the way of it, down here, to ‘bury’ those taken by the mutoids. Thus, there was an end to it, a time when all the suffering could be over, a time to set the mourners free of their deathwatch. Their strength impressed Avon, adding to the grudging respect that had reluctantly built in the more than seven months he had been living here. Almost imperceptibly, he had begun to adopt their ways, at first to survive amongst them, then, gradually, to survive the hardness of life down here. This ‘losing’ Vila had been a watershed for him, the chrysalis of change slowly peeling from him as he shed more and more of his pre-programmed dogma. Without truly realising what was happening, he slipped more and more into the vitality around him, shedding inhibition like a useless hide. He was not prey to the numbing greyness of most of these Deltas: his background forbore that, the belief that one controls oneself and one’s future engendered in his very genes, it seemed. And it was contagious. His absolute certainty that this time—this time—they would be able to change things infiltrated all the others, the words of revolution growing and gathering like storm clouds, small rebellions against the system beginning to fall like the first shower of spring. Which is why old Restal himself demanded that Vila and Avon come and see him. NOW. Naturally, Avon had no intention whatsoever of obeying so peremptory a summons, but Vila managed to persuade him that such a decision would be less than wise. The way cousins Jak and Nell strong-armed him proved to be a very convincing argument also.

They stood together outside the door to old Ewan’s flat, Cousin Jak trying to fuss with Avon’s clothes, Avon succeeding in freezing him with one of his patented glowers. They waited, until it was
finally three precisely, when Vila knocked briefly then proceeded to breek in as though this were nothing more than the most casual of visits, and he had just happened to be nearby at tea-time. The sudden frailty of the withered man in the bed shocked him to a halt.

“Well, set yerself down, young scallywag. An’ yer mate an’ all.” He turned his bad tempered glare on his great-nephew and great-niece, and snapped at them, “Wot are you two ruffians doin’ ’ere? Ain’t yer go’ more important thing ter do bu’ ‘ang abou’ listenin’ ter yer betters? Away wi’ yer, give us some peace.”

“Oh, em, all right, Uncle Ewan. Em, well, see yer two later, will we?”

“Oh, shurrup, Jak. C’mon, ge’ off wi’ yer, an’ leave ’em ter their grand discussions. I’ll cook up a nice supper fer yer both, lads, so ye c’n jest come round my ‘ouse later, all right?”

With an ingratiating grin that didn’t even begin to hide her voracious curiosity and a hefty shove at her brother, Nell ushered Jak out of the door, leaving an awkward silence behind.

“Well?” Restal finally said. “Yer gonner sit there like a pair o’ doolally dips, or is one o’ yer gonner fetch the tea?”

Vila was halfway out of his seat when Avon stopped him. “I’ll see to it. Why don’t you chat to your grandfather?”

“Oh. Em, well, all right, Avon, if yer don’t mind…”

As soon as he had left for the kitchen, Restal turned to his grandson. “Diplomatic sort, ain’t ’e? An’ smart an’ all. Knows when best to disappear ter make things go the way wot he wants them ter. Got a bloody good idea o’ why I’ve got yer ’ere, ain’t ’e?”

Honesty—within their own code, that is—was the only safe policy with the patriarch of the family, so Vila preferred to lie as little as possible. “’E’s sure it’s cos o’ the way ’e’s got everyone an’ ’is granny up in arms. Bu’ yer can’t be too pissed off at ’im, granda. I did clear it wi’ yer first.”

“No need ter ge’ defensive, son. This tain’t no court, is it? Nah, I’m no’ pissed off at yer mate, quite like ’im, truth to tell. ’E’s no’ snotty, like wot I expected, jest helluva bleedin’ posh, bu’ ‘e can’t ’elp tha’, so we jest ’ave ter pu’ up wi’ ‘is fancy ways.” He coughed, spasm building to a cacophony of breathless hacking. It wasn’t until he’d had several sips of his beer that he could continue. “ear that?” he wheezed. “Yer knows wot tha’ is—lung rot. I’m no’ long fer this world, Vila old son, so’s I gotter make decisions, an’ choices.”

Unbeknownst to the elder Restal, Avon stood poised on the threshold, listening intently.

“Wot choices, granda? ’S’all decided, innit?”

“Nah, nuffin’s decided. No’ publicly, anyways. In me own mind, different story, th’at’s is, lad. I know fine who I wants ter take me place, bu’ ’e ’as ter prove ’imself. An’ I think yer can.”

“Me? Wot—me? Yer can’t be serious, granda. No’ me! Wot do I know ’bout runnin’ the family, eh? Wot do I know ’bout runnin’ wiv the Nostra?”

“Don’ be such a bleedin’ prat, Vila. Now lissen, I wants yer ter take over after I’m dead an’ gone, which won’t be too much longer now, no’ if I’m any judge o’ the rot. Seen enough die o’ it, an’ I’ll be goin’ soon meself. Anyways, I wants yer ter ge’ started on provin’ ter the whole brood that yer capable o’ fillin’ me shoes once I’m gone. An’ one o’ the things I need ter know, though, is jest ‘ow loyal is that mate o’ yours?”

Vila shifted nervously in his seat, looking everywhere but at his grandfather. His eyes came to rest on Avon, hovering in the wings. He met him, look for look. “Oh, ’e’s loyal, all right, granda. We might no’ end up stayin thegither, bu’, well, ’e ain’t gonner turn anybody in ter Servalan, I can tell yer that fer nothin’.”

“An’ wot abou’ this revolution o’ ’is?”

“Wotcher mean?”

“Will ’e lissen ter reason, if one o’ the older folks tells ’im somethin’ fer ’is own good?”

“Only if they c’n convince ’im that it really is fer ’is own good, an’ no’ jest some bee in their bonnet. Wotcher askin’ tha’ fer?”

“Because, despite wot yer fancy man thinks, ’e’s not the only one workin’ at ’avin’ a Revolution. Some o’ us ’ave been at it fer years. An’ that means we’ve got a structure in place.” He paused to cough up into the battered old spittoon. “Don’t it, Kerr?”

A raised eyebrow was Avon’s only reaction, then he came forward into the room, setting the tea things down on the small table in the centre between the three piece suite. “Yes, it certainly does. What form does this structure take, exactly?”

“Oh, never yer mind ’bout that, sunshine. Yer can jest wait an’ see if yer matey ’ere c’n prove ter me that ’e can fill me shoes, then yer can get yer grubby little paws on a’ that.”

Avon smiled his most charming smile. “Oh, but since I showed your brood how to refilter, reprocess, re-route and re-use the water supply, I haven’t had to go ‘grubby’, have I now?”
The old man cackled, making an obscene gesture with forearm and fist. “Bu’ I bet yer’ve been filthy, right?”

Avon’s best ‘who, me?’ expression only set Restal off into gales of hysterical laughter, culminating in a truly stomach-turning coughing attack. Restal’s breathing became more and more laboured, his lips blueing with the lack of oxygen in his overtaxed lungs. Finally, weakened and gasping, the coughing abated, leaving a brittle autumn leaf of a man, ready to crumble and blow away in the wind. All thoughts of tea were abandoned, deluged by the severity of Ewan’s illness and the billowing mothering of his wife fussing and clucking over him. Avon and Vila left the old man to Dora’s tender ministrations and quietly slipped out, returning in almost complete silence to their own flat.

In the quiet hour before dinner, Avon lay on their bed, the brown cover over him as usual, reading, while Vila sat at the table, adapting a perfectly respectable sonic screwdriver to superbly illicit talents. The thief didn’t hear Avon the first time, being too carefully engrossed in his work, knowing with complete certainty what Avon would want to discuss, but unwilling to talk about taking his grandfather’s place before the man was even in his grave.

“Vila!”

“Yeh?”

“Put that down for a moment, I want to talk to you.”

“I can listen and work at the same time. Not just bloody Alpha geniuses that can do that, I’ll have you know.”

“What is making you so nervous?”

“Who says I’m nervous?”

“I do. And so does your accent. You always adopt the Alpha tones when you are nervous or tense around me, even now. As is hardly surprising, when you are thoroughly relaxed, you are also thoroughly incommensurable.”

“That a fact, eh? Been making a study of the way I speak, have you?”

“I’ve been living with Deltas. Studying your accent is the closest thing to a mental exercise there is. Oh, do stop bristling. It was intended as a joke.”

“Well, before you ask, no I haven’t got the faintest foggiest idea what me old granda meant when he was talkin’ about the ‘structure’. Never mentioned it to me before. Mind you, he never mentioned me takin’ his place, before, either.”

“There’s no need to be so nervous, Vila. Amongst this flotilla of fools, you seem to be quite talented.”

“Thanks a bloody lot. High praise indeed. I mean, don’t kill yourself stretching over to pat me on the back, or anything.”

“Well now, if you gave me something to pat you for...”

“Look, Avon, I don’t know what he meant, I don’t know anything about the ‘structure’, don’t know anything about what he’s going to have me do. Avon, I don’t even know if I want to take his place.”

“Of course you do! Don’t be a fool, Vila, for god’s sake, try and act out of character.”

That stung. “Oh, too much of a fool fer yer, am I?”

he snapped, the Delta in him coming out, his anger at Avon freeing him from any diffidence he might have had. “It was me bein’ a right bleedin’ fool an’ takin’ the risk o’ bringin’ yer ‘ere wot saved yer rotten little life, you toffee nosed get.”

“And you shall never let me forget that, shall you? But then, that’s hardly surprising. It’s the one time in your life you’ve ever been of any use and you’re so lazy, it’s to be expected that you’ll want to rest on your laurels forever more.”

“Oh yeh? An’ wot’d be wrong with tha’, eh? Bu’ who is it wot’s been ‘elpin’ yer wiv yer revolution, eh? An’ why’re yer getting yer knickers in such a twist? I don’t know nothin’ at all abou’ old granda’s plans. If I did, I’d tell yer, yer know that.”

“Do I, Vila?” The voice was so smooth, it was deadly. “Do I indeed? Where, I wonder, do your loyalties lie in this? With your sprawling, thieving, lying, cheating family? Or me?”

“Don’t you talk abou’ me family like tha’! An’ in case yer’ve forgotten, they’re your family now an’ all. Wot’s the matter wiv yer, Avon?” He stopped suddenly and stared knowingly at man asprawl on the bed. “No, yer don’t ave ter tell me. It’s wot granda said, isn’t it? It’s the way ’e spoke about yer, as if yer were second ter me. That’s wot’s wrong, innit?”

“Don’t be absurd, Vila. I knew perfectly well what I was getting into when I decided to use you as a front.”

“But knowing it and living it aren’t the same, are they, Avon? It’s no’ easy, bein’ the power behind the throne, is it?”

Avon dealt with the difficultly insightful question the way he invariably dealt with all such questions: he walked away from it. In this case, literally. And he didn’t return until the wee hours of the morning, refusing even then to speak to a pacing Vila.
The tense silence gnawed away at both of them for several days, until it degenerated into a resumption, of a sort, of their relationship—of a sort. They worked in concert with the maturing children of Vila’s crime ring, they shared meals, they shared their bed with each other, but the sex had become precisely that: sex, no more, no less. Neither one was overly enthusiastic about instigating relations now, each fearing the chipping away of walls. An armed truce reigned over them, degenerating into brittle skirmishes every time Vila would go off to do old Restal’s work, leaving Avon home, in ignorance, fuming, learning precisely how ill-suited he was to this lingering in the shadow of another man.

Vila had left extremely early, before the daylights had come on, sneaking with silent subterfuge from the darkness of their room, Avon’s last sight of him the limning of his silhouette in the frame of the door, disappearing into the lighted stairwell. The anger started in Avon again then, anger made all the worse by the sure and certain knowledge that Vila was doing nothing more than was necessary and less than Avon himself was more than willing to do. Cursing under his breath—yet another Delta habit he had adopted—he threw the covers aside, storming off to have a wash, glowering at himself in the mirror with a self-contempt bordering on disgust. Dressed and ready to face the Delta warrens again, he realised the futility of it: tonight was the big party to celebrate the beginning of the new year and not a soul would be out, not one person would be available to ameliorate his tension. They would all be far too busy literally sweeping clean. Disparagingly, giving into the incipient despair, as in his mind, Avon watched the months parade before him in all their uselessness. Admittedly, he had made progress. Or rather, he thought with cruel honesty, I’ve enabled others to make progress. And all the steps forward I thought I was taking have been a complete waste of time. Restal and his ilk have been laying the foundations for years, all I have done is add another layer of brick work.

He scrubbed viciously at the mark on the kitchen counter, obliterating it as he could not obliterate the feelings welling up inside. It was nigh near impossible to maintain his polite, distanced Alpha sensibilities down here, where life was for the living of it and not for the presentation thereof. He came to a halt in the middle of the room, suddenly realising there was nothing left from which to wipe the painful disillusionment of the past year, and the more painful recognition of himself as secondary, here, amongst the lowest of the low, amongst the people that even the other Deltas looked down upon. The Service Grades. The last two rungs on the social ladder, the fifth and fourth grade Deltas. The ones marked like possessions to keep them in their places, the ones useful for only the dirty work and their body parts. And he was one of them now, until he could get himself out of here and free of the filth and the endless cycle of hopelessness and poverty. And yet…there was Vila. And the others to whom he had come to give grudging respect for their ability to survive and still love and laugh, when the price Avon had paid to survive the Alpha levels had been so much higher. He could feel the insidiousness of the Delta fatalism seeping into him, the attitude that this was just ‘the way of it’ and there exists no reason to try to change anything. Unless…unless he were to find the way to use the extant revolutionary structure that Restal and his cronies had, to force them into a rebellion, instead of this endless waiting ‘for the right moment’. He needed more data so that he had been thwarted in his attempts to bend his world to his will.

A tornado of coerced inactivity suddenly unchained from its enforced curbs, Avon submerged himself in physical activity, ridding himself of the past year as much as was possible: the mere accumulation of dust. Brow furrowed, he attacked the room with the same fervour he did everything else, but this time, the fine, restraining control was gone, the genteel outline blurred into a twisting of Alpha and Delta, of ‘male’ and ‘female’. And still his temper brewed, simmering away with the blackness of incipient despair, as in his mind, Avon watched the months parade before him in all their uselessness. Admittedly, he had made progress. Or rather, he thought with cruel honesty, I’ve enabled others to make progress. And all the steps forward I thought I was taking have been a complete waste of time. Restal and his ilk have been laying the foundations for years, all I have done is add another layer of brick work.

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The anger and the impotence fired each other until Avon became a kiln and his frustration a hard knot strangling him. He would make a difference, he would change things. He already had the best lever for power available down here: Vila. And he would use him, unhesitatingly. Loving was a weakness, one that could too readily drive a man on the paths chosen for him by others, but loving could also be a strength. Avon had never had any difficulty in exploiting his own weaknesses and thus transforming them into his greatest strengths. When one recognises those areas where the defences are at their slimmest, then one can shore them up, and by making a target of them, when the time was right, one defused them to the point where they could become a weapon. So, he took this weakness he had for Vila, this all-pervasive fondness and wrought it into a tool to unshackle them from this decrepit grimness. And by so doing, he made it possible to pretend that his feelings for Vila, while being love, were only one facet of the many-hued spinning top that made up that most disobedient of emotions. Yes, he justified to himself, I concede love, but surely no more that one has for friends with whom one shares the occasional companionable session in bed. It is, after all, aggrandised by dint of the simple fact that we are trapped here together and must present a united front if we are to destroy the Federation power base. It’s the only way I can be free again.

He took one last frowning glower at the dingy little room, hating it and all the multi-layered list of things it represented. He caught sight of something out of the corner of his eye. Glancing down, he grimaced and ripped his floral pinny off, balling it up, hurling it across the room, damned if he’d ever wear the thing again. Resolute, he set off in search of his main source of information and power, Vila, determined to get this whole thing at least partially solved before the damned family gathering later that night. He didn’t find Vila, Vila found him, hours later, unhesitatingly. Loving was a weakness, one that could too readily drive a man on the paths chosen for him by others, but loving could also be a strength. Avon had never had any difficulty in exploiting his own weaknesses and thus transforming them into his greatest strengths. When one recognises those areas where the defences are at their slimmest, then one can shore them up, and by making a target of them, when the time was right, one defused them to the point where they could become a weapon. So, he took this weakness he had for Vila, this all-pervasive fondness and wrought it into a tool to unshackle them from this decrepit grimness. And by so doing, he made it possible to pretend that his feelings for Vila, while being love, were only one facet of the many-hued spinning top that made up that most disobedient of emotions. Yes, he justified to himself, I concede love, but surely no more that one has for friends with whom one shares the occasional companionable session in bed. It is, after all, aggrandised by dint of the simple fact that we are trapped here together and must present a united front if we are to destroy the Federation power base. It’s the only way I can be free again.

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His train of thought broke off with the sound of Vila opening the door. Avon sat up, leaning back against the headboard. Arguments, thus far, had been worse than useless, threats counterproductive, so that left only one way to get the information he needed to be able to manipulate the Rebel structure to suit him. Seduction, he turned the phrase over in his mind, watching as Vila warily came in, obviously expecting yet another snarling match, the easiest of tasks with Vila, who so woefully eager to be wanted. To snatch some crumb from my table. Well now, this afternoon he shall have a veritable feast.

“The grapevine,” he said, reworking an old conversation to lead them to a different conclusion, “says that old Restal is very pleased with the job you’ve been doing. I’m impressed.”

“Oh, praising me again are you? Next time, you’ll be pattering me on the back.”

There was an extremely knowing, satisfied grin beaming from Avon. “Well now, all the way over there, it’s quite impossible for me to pat you on the back. Or anywhere else, for that matter. Why don’t you come to bed and we’ll see how much patting I’m willing to do?”

His libido and his heart never having said the word ‘no’ before, Vila came over to the bed, coming to a halt immediately beside it, willing to let pass, unquestioned, Avon’s reticence on the subject of the powerplay. The man in question stood up, stripping to a halt immediately beside it, willing to let pass, Avon’s reticence on the subject of the powerplay. The man in question stood up, stripping quickly and efficiently, bringing his hands up to divide him. Arguments, thus far, had been worse than useless, threats counterproductive, so that left only one way to get the information he needed to be able to manipulate the Rebel structure to suit him. Seduction, he turned the phrase over in his mind, watching as Vila warily came in, obviously expecting yet another snarling match, the easiest of tasks with Vila, who so woefully eager to be wanted. To snatch some crumb from my table. Well now, this afternoon he shall have a veritable feast.

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thus leaving him terribly vulnerable to the emotional appeal. “Tell me, why did you tell the old man that you weren’t sure if I would stay with you? It’s obvious, from the grapevine at least, that he would be unwilling to name you his successor if you don’t have an extremely stable home life. Some quaint notion he has about an unhappy or unsatisfied man opening his mouth in places it should never be opened. He seems to think it would make you a liability to the family.”

“Yeh,” Vila answered cautiously, acutely aware that Avon was playing him with all the skill of a highly trained psychomaneipulator, touching him in all the affectionate little ways that had always been his undoing. “Well, yer might not stay with me. I mean, yer can pass for one of us with them that yer need to, and so many other folk in the family know yer now as me mate an’ one of us, that yer don’t even need to hide, so yer don’t need me as much as yer used ter. Just like I said the other day there.”

“And just as I said the other day there, I am definitely staying with you.”

“Well, it’s wot you said, anyways. But the way we’ve been fighting this last while…” the words were mumbled against Avon’s neck as his hands busily moulded the firm hillocks of Avon’s ass. “An’ I never know how yer feel ’bout me. But then, I suppose, yer need me fer power ter keep this revolution going the way yer want it so’s yer can get back to yer own class, back Upstairs.”

“Vila, really…” the disapproving words were robbed of their sting by Avon’s mouth sliding open and wet down Vila’s throat, the Alpha proceeding with his sedition, continuing down, down, lower and lower until Avon was on his knees, sucking Vila’s cock up into his mouth, Vila’s hands tangling in the soft brown hair, pressing the willing head farther and farther down. He felt Avon push back against his hands and he let go, allowing Avon to come up for air and to speak.

Avon stayed on his knees, knowing full well what the sight of him there, mouth wet from sucking Vila’s cock did to the thief. He smiled, deliberately turning on the warmth of his eyes full blast, convincing himself that this was fake, merely for show. “Shall we continue this in bed? I can assure you,” he whispered the words low and vibrantly rich, “it’s far more comfortable.”

Uncaring of the tangled miasma of reason behind this banquet of sensuality, Vila tumbled them both onto the bed, landing heavily atop Avon, rolling over, pulling Avon over to blanket him. “Yer mean it ’bout stayin’ with me?” he asked, in spite of himself, needing to trust.

“Have you ever known me to lie?”

“Jest cos I’ve never caught yer at it doesn’t mean ter say that yer don’t do it, does it?”

“Your logic impresses me. Pity the truth hasn’t impressed you.”

And that was all the reassurance Vila would be getting. He responded, not bothering to dissect Avon’s version of the truth. No, he would simply accept what was given him and pay the price when Avon finally got round to presenting him with the reckoning. He poured all of himself into this, allowing the love and caged passion to escape into the strong arms holding him with such delicious ardour.

Avon smiled at the response his seduction was fertilising, setting about his task until he could reap the harvest. Sex as a tool: he was very comfortable with it. The niggling image of himself writhing in ecstasy, impaled on Blake’s cock came back to haunt him, intermingled with the almost equally disturbing memories of Tynus. But they were, he consoled himself, men of his own class, men who understood ‘an arrangement’ for mutual convenience. Not love. No, he did not love easily, neither was he led nor mastered by his emotions. Anna’s face blossomed at the edge of his mind, her blonde beauty hovering like a dawn cloud. With vicious decisiveness, he kicked that memory from his mind. Stoically, he turned his back on the past and turned his face to the future, settling down comfortably to enjoy himself with Vila, his false face of cynicism clutched to him like a child’s beloved teddy bear. He clutched Vila just as closely, and buried himself in the doubting, accepting love offered to him, pushing them quickly onwards, towards orgasm and away from thought. He pressed his belly to Vila, rubbing their erections hard and smooth together, escaping from one truth into a more welcome one, the sweetness of filling his hands and mind with the tactile glory of touching Vila. The man beneath him responded wholeheartedly, echoing every move, stealing Avon’s breath away with the skill of his fingers and the addictive sensuousness of his body. The moment quietly scaled the walls of his turret, and Avon didn’t even notice when he had slipped from seducing Vila for information into making love with a mere fifth grade Delta thief. The control passed smooth as a sheet of liquid mercury from an acquiescent Avon to a volatile Vila, all the Alpha’s anger balmed to si-
ience by the sheltering reassurance of being loved for oneself—warts and all.

“Want yer under me, Avon.” He heard the words, felt them breathed against his ear.

“Oh, you do, do you?” he murmured, a moment of private rebellion returning at the dominating words.

“Yeh,” Vila whispered, greedy hands squeezing Avon’s heavy balls. “Want ter see yer face when I fuck yer, when yer filled to the brim wiv me. That’s wot I want. Yer gonner give it ter me, eh, matey?”

His answer was being pushed aside, to allow Avon to raise his legs, bending them slightly, wrapping his arms around them at the knee. He grinned up at Vila, brimming with that seductive combination of mock-ery and lust that seemed to belong to Avon and no one else. “Well? Is this clear enough?”

“Oh, yer, it’s more’n clear. All right, give us ’alf a mo’, lemme get the juice. Oi!” he said, slapping Avon on the buttock, made masterful by the image of Avon lying there, like that, for him. “You jest stay where yer are, mate. Yer can ‘ang about like that, I like ter see yer bum all open an’ naked an’ waitin’. On yer back,” he spanked Avon again, a faint pinking lingering after the sharp caress of his palm, “where yer belong, Alpha.”

A vulpine grin fled briefly across Avon’s face, then he surrendered to the challenge, responding to the twist of it. “Really? Why don’t you,” he murmured, deliberately emphasizing the buttered bread smoothness of his accent, running the tip of his tongue over his lips, “prove it.”

Vila paused midstep, then returned to the bed, new tube of lubricant in hand, staring at Avon thoughtfully, giving warning, a recognition that this night might come after too many fights, after too many moments of malcontent. “Careful wot yer wish fer, Avon, yer did. Literally. Keep yer legs up out o’ the ways, Kerr. Kerr? Nah, don’t suit you none, can’t call yer that. Plain old Avon’ll do fer me.”

“From you? Hardly.”

The challenging gauntlet hung in the air between them. Thoughtfully, Vila picked it up, running it through his mind before slowly uncapping the tube. “All right. Yer asked fer it, yer did. Literally. Keep yer legs up out o’ the ways, Kerr. Kerr? Nah, don’t suit you none, can’t call yer that. Plain old Avon’ll do fer me.”

Avon’s astonishment was plain and unvarnished, an unguarded fragment from his past cutting them both. “You surely wouldn’t expect me to allow you to call me Kerr, would you?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Jest cos I’m no fancy bleedin’ Alpha don’t mean yer can take that attitude with me! Got no right to say that, got no right to pull class on me, not ’ere, not after wot I’ve done fer yer. Or is this jest a new twist on our old game, eh, is that it? Yer’ve always liked playin’ a bit rough, now an’ then, ain’t yer? Is that wot yer after, pal?” He brought his hand down sharply on Avon’s exposed buttocks, and not the playful sting of before, but a serious blow. Avon winced, suddenly, sharply, aware that this had gone out of control—out of his control—and he made a move to stop it. Vila’s full weight descended heavily upon him, pinning him on his back, arms trapped by Vila’s body and tangled painfully with his own legs.

“Get off me,” he hissed.

“Wot, tired of the game already?” Vila smacked him one again, keeping him in place with his body, freeing one hand to gag Avon’s too smart mouth. “Doncher want this? Wot is it, eh? ’S’all right for you ter use me, but no’ the other way ’round? Don’t try an’ deny it, that’s wot all the love an’ kisses were fer this afternoon, right? Ter get me ter tell yer wot me granda’s been up to, give yer a way ter take control. Well,” he went on, slapping Avon again, the flesh reddening now, “if yer wants the power, yer’ll ‘ave ter pay the price an’ that’s stayin’ wiv me.” His hand rose and fell again, this time catching Avon painfully on the balls, bringing fear to the man feeling the harshness of his hand. This was no longer one of their games, this was no longer Vila indulging Avon’s penchant for a little pain. “There’ll be no more of this crap yer’ve been hurtin’ me with, no more of this refusin’ ter understan’ that I ‘ave ter keep me mouth shut. Yer should know better, ‘stead o’ hurtin’ me the way yer ‘ave…” His words penetrated his own mind, shocking him with their accusing hypocrisy. “Oh god, Avon. Look at me!” He got up off of the other man, unfolding Avon’s legs, massaging them, trying to rub away the degeneration of what he had done. “I’m sorry, honest, dead bloody sorry. ‘Ere I am goin’ on ’bout you hurtin’ me an’ wot am I doin’ ter yer?”

“Avon! I didn’t really mean it an’ I stopped, didn’t I? Before it even got out of ‘and!”

Avon shoved him aside like so much flotsam, getting up from the bed with barely leashed fury, on the verge of turning his violent anger loose on Vila, hauling his clothes on with callous disregard for the weakness of mere leather.

“I never meant ter hurt you. I never mean ter hurt yer. Jest got so upset this afternoon, wot with yer usin’
me an’ all like I was a bit o’ nothin’. Avon!” he called to the retreating back, almost sobbing the word, the name, the agony. “I didn’t mean it! An’ I stopped, I never hurt yer, stopped when I realised it weren’t a game any more. Avon, don’t go, don’t leave… AVON!” The last word bounced unheeded off the slammed door and Avon was gone.

Vila lay there on the bed, staring up at the same unhelpful patterns that had so occupied Avon in his time of pain, almost three hours passing before he could even begin to think about dragging himself together for the New Year’s celebration. It was, he thought dispiritedly, going to be even worse than anything with which his imagination had so far been able to torture him. It had never occurred to him, including in his loneliest of nightmares, that Avon would not even be there tonight. Nor that he’d have to face his entire family, without his mate, jilted on his Night of Affirmation.

The hurting worsened before he had even left the block of flats. Jak, Vera and their four children came thundering down the stairs just as he opened his door to leave, a rollicking cascade of festive, excited children preceding their more staid parents.

“Ilo, Vila,” Jak said, craning to see before Vila pulled the door closed. “Where’s your Kerr, then?”

“Em…” To his shame, Vila felt the flush burning his cheeks as he fumbled for words. “’e’s, em, ’e’s gone off ter do something first. ’E’ll be over in a bit.”

Jak looked at him, a sympathetic questioning in his eyes. “Oh, yeh?” was all he said, keeping his nose out of other people’s business.

There was the sound of another door being closed and Jess’ heavily pregnant footsteps creaked down the stairs. Vila chased after the children, using that as an excuse to flee before his youngest sister could hit him with more awkward questions.

This was, without doubt, the most important night of the year. Now was the time to clear off all debts and to bandage all arguments, to bind couples and commemorate births. Death was not allowed here, nor was the spectre of the past and all its hardships. This was a night of glory, of joyous celebration, laughter and love intermixed equally with decisions decreed to last the year out. New Year’s Night. The most important festival down here, the only one for which all fighting and disputes were laid aside, the only one where even the bitterest rival clan could slap a man on the back and wish him well—and then turn the next day and strike him. Tradition ruled this night, old rituals and beliefs handed down from the days before the nuclear wars, when the Dome was first built to protect against the acid rains that fell burning from murky brown skies. Tonight, the old ways prevailed and this was the time to renew the vows, to take out the precious philosophies and have one’s breath stolen by their awe-inspiring glow.

And Vila was hunched in a corner, doing his very best to be ignored.

“Wotcher, sunshine! ’Aven’t seen yer in an age, been workin’ ’ard, ’ave yer?”

The friendly whack on his shoulder almost sent Vila precipitously into the next world, but he managed to catch his breath well enough to answer the too hearty greeting from his second cousin by marriage, four times removed. “Oh, ’lo, pal. I’m fine, how’s it goin’ fer yer, eh?”

“Mustn’t grumble, mustn’t grumble. Always some poor sod wot’s worse off’n yer are yersel’, right? C’mon, there’s young Jo, ’m gonner go talk ter ’er. Fancy ’er summat chronic, I do. See yer. Oh, ’ang abou’. Where’s yer matey, the dead posh bloke? Weren’t yer supposed ter ’ave yer Affirmation the night?”

“Um, yeh, we were, but, em, ’e’s no’ ’ere, right at this moment. ’E’ll, er, em, be over later, nearer the time.”

His cousin—the one whose name he could never remember—grinned with malicious glee. “Oh yeh? Given yer a dizzy, ’as ’e?”

“Wot? Dumped me on our Night o’ Affirmation? Don’t be stupid. ’E’s jest no’ well, is all. ’E’ll be ’ere later, if ’e’s up ter it.”

“Wot’s the matter wi’ ’im? Got a sudden attack o’ plague, ’as ’e, wot’s stoppin’ ’im from comin’ over? Come on ’im all o’ a sudden, like, did it? ’Appens sometimes, when yer matey’s tired o’ yer. Yer should lose a bi’ o’ weight, Vila old son, mebbe then ’e’d be more likely ter stay ’ome wiv yer.”

“Wot’s that meant ter mean? Eh?”

“Oh, nothin’, nothin’,” the bovine cousin smirked, thoroughly enjoying his revenge for what he saw as Vila’s usurping of his place in Restal’s affections. He was too stupid to realise that he had never had a place in the patriarch’s affections to begin with.

“Lissen, you cloth-eared, thick-headed prick, yer’ve wormed somethin’, now either come right out an’ say it, or shut yer stupid bleedin’ mouth up, befo yer feed yer yer balls fer breakfast.”

“You an’ whose army, eh?”

Borrowing one of Avon’s many tricks, Vila
grabbed the great lug by the throat, twisting the skin with painful viciousness. “Me all by meself, you plook. Now, yer gonner tell me wot yer meant, in’t yer now?”

Appearances can be deceiving. The cousin was not as stupid as he looked—he had enough sense to answer quickly and then run while Vila’s attention was focussed inwards. “Saw ‘im down at the new pub, over by the baker’s. Stone cold sober, ‘e was, though ’e did ’ave a bitter in front o’ ‘im an’ one o’ the lasses beside ‘im. ’E didn’t look like ‘e was in none too much o’ a hurry ter leave, ‘e didn’t.”

Vila sat as still as a rock, the implications pulling the legs out from under him. He paid no attention when Jess came to speak to him, waving off the concerned enquiries of his multitudinous family, gathering a becalmed silence around him.

“Vila? Vila!” Large hands grabbed him by the upper arm, dragging him in his befuddlement to his feet. “Vila, pull yerself together! Wot the ‘ell’s the matter with yer, eh? Anybody’d think yer’d jest been ter yer own funeral. C’mon, now, yer old granda’s gettin’ through the business at a fair old clip. ’E’s already done all the births and new matings and the business partnerships and the apprenticeships. ’E’s gettin’ ter yer bit, now. Where’s yer matey gone? ’E should be ’ere fer this. This is yer big moment, y’know.”

What could he say that would not worsen matters? That would not add to his humiliation and hurt? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. For once in his life, Vila Restal held his peace and the cutting shard of loss tatters before him and the horrible screaming banishment could not answers; doubts, not certainties.

Avon had spent the entire afternoon with his past in tatters before him and the horrible screaming banishment of trust knelling his doom. For that is what this afternoon’s débacle had taught him: he trusted Vila. Enough to have known no real fear at his hands in bed this afternoon, more than he had ever dared trust Blake or Anna, and certainly enough to come back to him. And that frightened him. To trust again, to hand someone those skewers of liquid fire and invite them to do their best…which for oneself, might be the worst. Trust. A more terrifying daemon than love, for love can be a weapon, but trust only an elusive shield built of nothing more solid than promises. There was trust there. The question now was—could he live with it? And if he were to choose to live with it, and Vila, what of the emasculation that came of being the power behind the throne? Could he deal with being the man in the shadow—instead of the mystique-laden man of shadow? Vila’s eyes were full of fears, not answers; doubts, not certainties.

The roar was deafening, the pats on his back crippling, and all Vila could muster in this moment of triumph was a faintly sick smile. And then that faded, as he saw the black clothed man staring at him from the doorway. Avon did not smile, nor did he make any attempt to cross the chaotic room to Vila’s side. He simply stood, staring, measuring, assessing, leaving Vila in the agony of ignorance.

“Now, before we get ter the last bit o’ business, me timin’ ‘s off, so if yer don’t mind, Vila, we’ll do the toast first, an’ then get ter yer Affirmation. That all right with yer, son?”

“Yeh, yeh, granda, that’s fine,” Vila mumbled, keeping his eyes on Avon, trying to decipher the thoughts barricaded behind those dark eyes.

Equally intense, Avon watched Vila, noting the clammy paleness of his skin, the tiredness around his eyes and the damnabley blatant evidence of tears. It was obvious how Vila had spent his hours since Avon’s departure, even if the Alpha’s face revealed nothing about his. Thoughts do not show, they are forever locked inside the mind, until the thinker opts to interpret them for the outside world to poke and prod and render into the meanings they choose. It was not written as plain as the nose on his face that Avon had spent the entire afternoon with his past in tatters before him and the horrible screaming banishment of trust knelling his doom. For that is what this afternoon’s débacle had taught him: he trusted Vila. Enough to have known no real fear at his hands in bed this afternoon, more than he had ever dared trust Blake or Anna, and certainly enough to come back to him. And that frightened him. To trust again, to hand someone those skewers of liquid fire and invite them to do their best…which for oneself, might be the worst. Trust. A more terrifying daemon than love, for love can be a weapon, but trust only an elusive shield built of nothing more solid than promises. There was trust there. The question now was—could he live with it? And if he were to choose to live with it, and Vila, what of the emasculation that came of being the power behind the throne? Could he deal with being the man in the shadow—instead of the mystique-laden man of shadow? Vila’s eyes were full of fears, not answers; doubts, not certainties.

The room fell silent, reverence replacing revelry, respect casting eyes downwards. It was the parent of the gesture of farewell to a martyred infant and child of the Code that ruled the family from cradle to
grave. Ewan Restal’s voice was uncommonly rich and deep as he spoke.

“Sometimes, youngones, it’s ‘ard ter remember that we’re all kin, that we’re all the same, no matter wot. None o’ us is any better than any other one o’ us, an’ that means none o’ us is any less. We’re all from the same seed, don’t matter one whit whether we’re male or female, when it comes ter The Words o’ Conscience, we’re all ‘men’. Jest remember, an’ yer knows which ones o’ yer I mean—doncher, Huw?—that yer can’t judge a man fer somethin’. T’ain’t fer us ter do ter each other. We’ve got enough enemies, enough folk tryin’ to keep us under their thumbs wivout us gettin’ uppity ourselves. Now, the year’s gonner begin, so will yer all join ‘ands.”

As the evening had progressed, people had gradually gravitated close to those they most valued and at Restal’s words, hands were clasped warmly, forming a living chain, link by living link, until all were joined, even Avon. He still stared at Vila, as if expecting his answers to be tucked away in one of Vila’s infamous pockets. Shuffling, Vila lowered his eyes, gazing down at the floor in symbolic humility, until only Avon stood with his head held high and his eyes wide open, blind to the simple truths he sought. Old Ewan Restal’s words made him see.

“We’ve never ter ferget, wot makes us better than the animals or the mutoids, nor ever ter feel shame fer wot we are. We’re still free, freer’n some ways than them wot lives Upstairs in all their finery, fer we’re not so stupid as ter think less o’ a man fer wot ‘e does ter feed the family, or fer wot ‘e chooses ter believe or fer who ‘e chooses ter love. An’ we daren’t ferget that, fer if we do, we’ll end up jest like them Upstairs. No matter wot we do, no matter wot we are, it’s wot we ‘ave inside an’ wot we do fer others that makes us Men. An’ so we never ferget the motto, the words to prick our conscience when it’s so easy ter ferget that we’re all jest the same. Join wiv me now in a toast, kith an’ kin, a toast ter the Incomin’ Year an’ ter all o’ us. Fer a’ that, an’ a’ that, A man’s a man, fer a’ that.”

Amidst the cheers and the roaring good humour, Ewan Restal’s voice was a drop of water indeed, but those closest to him settled down to listen. “All right, before yer gets dug in to the party, we’ve one more piece o’ business left from last year. The Affirmation of Vila and his mate, Kerr Avon. So,” he said, turning towards Vila who stood, transfixed, staring at Avon, “d’yer want ter stay wiv ‘im fer the rest o’ yer life, Vila? Think ‘e’ll be able ter put up wiv yer fer that long, eh? Well, c’mon, son. D’yer affirm yer choice?”

Those shuttered eyes still gave Vila nothing but Avon’s fascination of what he referred to as the pathology of love. But Ewan was waiting, there was no time to think about choices and the prices to pay.

“Yeh, granda.” He said it loudly so everyone could hear it: said it loudly and with courage, his pride striding full force behind his words. He had lost Avon, he knew, but he still had his feelings, still had the warmth of the nights to cherish. By letting Avon reject him, he was giving the other man considerable status within the family, as the one who was wanted but refused, as the one who had the power in the relationship. Vila walked partway across the room along the path cleared by relatives suddenly embroiled in this struggle, their fascination paving Vila’s way. He stopped at the foot of the laden table and picked up the glass Nell had set there, leaving its mate way. He stopped at the foot of the laden table and picked up the glass Nell had set there, leaving its mate. He took another sip, to show he drank fully of life. Vila turned to the still distant Avon and raised his glass to him, his own as warm and brimming as the whisky. He took a sip of the traditional ‘water of life’, signalling his bond, then held his glass aloft in the pregnant silent stillness of the gathering.

“Here’s to you,” he said, in Avon’s language but with the words of his own heritage, their almost magical significance dimming under the weight of his sorrow. With a wry twist to his mouth, he repeated the words of love, unerringly certain that this was the first time they’d ever been used to say good-bye. He took another sip, to show he drank fully of life. “Here’s to you, mate, and this night. May all my nights be with you.”

In a single quaff, he drank the rest of the whisky, the burning glow staving off the chill in him. The entire room held their breath, waiting.

Vila gave a half-hearted shrug and a watery smile, then turned his back to Avon, placing, with tender care, the empty glass beside the full. There was a gasp, a mingling of horror and pity, then a riffle of movement and chatter spluttered into abrupt high gear, trying to immolate the humiliating symbol.

The first of many hands of condolence came to rest on Vila’s shoulder and he shrugged it off, not daring to accept comfort until he would be able to show his grief in private. The hand returned, insistent, demanding, turning him back to the table. Vila turned to glower at cousin Jak, but utter disbelief crossed his face instead. Avon stood by the
table, eyebrow raised, glass in hand. He took a sip, and then another, proffering the glass then in mute declaration.

“Here’s to you,” Avon said, then grinned suddenly. “’Ere’s ter yer, mate. An’ may all our nights be long!”

There was a heartbeat’s pause, then Jak roared the cheer, setting the entire family into a cacophony of congratulations. Backs were pounded, hands were shaken even the occasional hug was stolen—but only by Jess, who dared share in Avon’s second reaffirmation of life. The party, then, was off tumbling and bubbling, the music loud and the laughter louder still. The younger ones started the dancing, bringing in everyone from grandparents to tots, whirling and spinning in raucous abandon.

Vila grabbed Avon by the arm and manoeuvred him into a relatively quiet corner, behind a couple busily engaged in showing each other the finer points of kissing.

“Wotcher do that fer?” Vila asked, crunched in close against Avon.

“Do what?”

“Stick with me.”

“You would rather I hadn’t?”

“Don’t be stupid, Avon, course I wanted yer ter stay with me. But after this afternoon, an’ that stupid prick o’ a cousin o’ mine seein’ yer over in the Hung Man wi’ one o’ mine seein’ yer over in the Hun’g Man wi’ one o’ their girls…”

“And it obviously didn’t enter your pea-brain that the ‘girl’ in question might be Sandy’s sister making sure that the little layabout was coming to his classes? The day of Affirmation, the day when old Ewan was going to name you heir apparent, and you think I’m as big a fool as you, to go out and cheat, publicly, with a very cheap whore. Really, Vila, surely by now you know I have better taste.”

Vila had the grace to be shamefaced, more in apology for the entire day than that one small misunderstanding. “Don’t know nothin’ o’ the sort. I looked in the mirror today, didn’t I? But Avon, after this afternoon, why’d yer stay with me?”

“Well now, it certainly wasn’t for your perspicacity and whip-sharp wit, was it?”

“Avon, come on, tell me!” He stopped, reconsidering, thinking about the expression on Avon’s face when he had come into the party. “Nah, on second thoughts, don’t bother. I know why, don’t I? Your bleedin’ revolution. Yer gettin’ as bad as Blake, you realise that, doncher? Anythin’ fer the friggin’ Cause. Even if it means stayin’ wiv the likes o’ me. Until yer gets back Upstairs, anyways. Well, yer’ve cut yer nose off ter spite yer face, Avon. Told yer already, I’d back yer, no matter wot. Yer didn’t need ter Affirm wiv me, could’ve jest gone off on yer own.”

“But then I would not have had your power to use, would I now?”

“Don’t come it, Avon. Yer’d ‘ave me ‘power’, as you call it, even if yer’d dumped me.”

“Everyone knows old Ewan’s attitude about ‘stable ‘ome set-ups’, don’t they?”

“’E’d already named me, before our Affirmation, ’ain’t’e now? Avon, why d’yer stay with me?”

Discomfitted, embarrassed and still less than comfortable with his own choice, Avon stared with entranced fascination at the toes of his shoes. “Well now,” he began, “my reasons for staying.”

“Ello, Avon, Vila, me old chums, wotcher mates?”

“Oh, ’lo, Stan. We’re fine, ta much.”

“Congratulations are in order, are they then? Double congratulations.”

Avon firmly saved his hand from the over-enthusiastic pumping it was being pummelled with, a very polite smile freezing Stan in his tracks.

“Thanks, Stan, dead nice of yer ter say that. I’ll be seein’ yer soon, down the pub, all right?”

“Yeh, all right…” Stan muttered, taking his lank hair and spotty skin as far from Avon’s sneer as he possibly could.

“Now, then,” Avon began, “I promised Jess that I’d talk to her tonight, so…”

“Ang on a minute, you. Yer ‘ave ter talk ter me first, matey. Yer not gettin’ away with it that easy. Lissen, why don’t yer jest tell me why yer stayed an’ then that’ll be it done, an’ I’ll never so much as even breathe a word o’ it anywhere. Won’t even think about it, from the second yer utter the words. Why d’yer stay wiv me?”

“Honestly?”

“Honestly.”

“Do you think your system could stand the strain?”

“I’m not afraid, y’know. I’ve heard the truth before. An’ it didn’t traumatis me then, it’s not goin’ ter do me in now, is it?”

“Very well. Why did I stay with you?”

“Yeh, yeh, we’ve already done that bit. Stop prevaricating, Avon. Think of it like one o’ Cally’s potions. Bitter and disgustin’, but there’s no way to avoid it.”

“Cally…”
“Yeh, remember ‘er? Tall, curly hair, alien, bad ‘abit o’ pokin’ around in yer brain when yer weren’t lookin’? Yeh, her.”

“Actually, I was going to say that she was one of the reasons.”

The music had come to an end and Jak’s eldest was all fingers and thumbs, none of them seemingly able to slip another disk into the slot. Rather rude and downright crude comments were flying, the couple beside Avon and Vila pausing in their lessons long enough to join in the friendly haranguing.

“Oh, so’s yer can rescue her, that it? Usin’ us Delta’s as yer bleedin’ cannon fodder?”

“Vila!”

Every head turned to stare at the posh off-worlder Vila had landed with, mouths agape at the ceiling-denting yell. Avon merely stared back at them, his sheer arrogance outnumbering them all.

Disguised by the music once more, Avon turned his attention loose on Vila. “Will you listen to me, you fifth grade idiot? I’m trying to explain something to you, which is a daunting task at the best of times. Now, what I was saying was that Cally always said something to me, and that was that the only true sin was cruelty. She didn’t, I’m afraid, understand our little bouts of badinage.”

“Neither did I!”

“Yes, well, no one’s going to be surprised by that. I did use words of more than one syllable.”

“Look, Avon, are yer gonner tell me, or d’you want me ter die of old age waitin’ fer yer?”

“I simply mean this. Yes, I affirmed with you because I want to be free of this squalor and the only way I can do that is by getting rid of my enemies. However,” he added, turning back the tide of black anguish flowing over Vila’s face, “I also did it because it suits me to have a steady, comfortable relationship and it would have been too cruel to ‘dump’ you tonight, in front of your entire family.”

“Yeh, I’d’ve lost too much face, wouldn’t I? Then wot use would I ‘ave been ter yer, eh? So it was gain an’ pity, was it then?” he muttered, straightening his shoulders, strong and unneeding of his coward’s mask here amongst his own kin. “Didn’t think yer’d opt ter stay wiv me. Not when I saw yer face when granda was talkin’ an’ I was makin’ me Affirmation.”

“…to be honest, Vila, I hadn’t intended to Affirm with you. I had planned on refusing that and being sponsored in by you and Jess. I had actually decided to do simply—to simply live with you, rather than make you my mate.”

Vila’s voice was breathless, hope battling with pragmatism. “Wot made yer change yer mind?”

“The things your grandfather said, about how ‘a man’s a man, for a’ that’. That no matter what, nothing I chose to do could emasculate me.”

“Avon,” he whispered, “takin’ me on as yer mate. Does that mean yer loves me?”

“I’m not in love with you, Vila. I would say that…”

“Vila me old son! Wotcher, mates.” They all waited until Restal’s coughing had stopped, Avon looking away nauseated, while the old man spat up into a metallic bottle, capped it and shoved it back into his pocket. “Yer really ‘ad me goin’ fer a minute back there, Kerr, honestly thought yer were gonner dump our Vila, an’ me jest after namin’ ‘im me second. Gave me poor heart quite a turn, yer did. Now, c’mere a sec, there’s somethin’ I fergot ter get yer ter do; wot wiv the scare yer gave me. Yer come an’ all, Vila. ‘E’s yer mate. Gotter stand wiv ‘im.”

With Vila still cursing the interruption, his grandfather, the Federation and all the gods in the Galaxy with egalitarian and liberal fury under his breath, the three of them went back to the head table, where Restal gathered everyone’s attention by the simple act of banging his shoe on the table. “All right, you lot, lissen ‘ere. We all fergot one very important thing. Now that ‘e’s an Affirmed member o’ our family, ‘e has ter pick ‘is name.” He motioned Avon forward, sidestepping to allow him the centre spot. “Yer’ve been known as Kerr Avon-Restal fer the time yer’ve been ‘ere. Now, if a body joins us, once they’ve been a part o’ the family fer a year, they gets ter choose their own name. Wot’s yer choice, son?”

He looked straight at Vila, and gave him his wickedest grin. “Avon.”

Vila’s face fell. Avon’s grin expanded. “Avon Restal. Well, Vila, I really have always hated ‘Kerr’.”

A drink was pressed into his hand, and Avon raised it in silent toast to Vila, whose eyes were brimming at him once more, but this time, for far better reason.

“Well,” Vila said, looking at Avon with wonderful warmth, completely oblivious of the family hordes around them, “that really does make it all worthwhile, don’t it? Yer loves me, don’t yer?”

“Now, Vila, do you honestly believe I would say a thing like that?”

“Nah, wouldn’t ‘ave believed it, but yer did, didn’t yer? Yer said yer not in love with me, an’ yer knows wot that means, don’t yer? An’ then, ter pick my name—my name!—well, it’s as obvious as the nose on yer face. An’ in your case, that’s pretty obvious!”
“Vila, I…”

“C’mon, sons o’ mine, grub’s up, an’ yer granda wants the pair o’ yer sittin’ beside ‘im at the top table,” Vila’s mother boomed, taking them under her wing and pulling them inexorably over to sit beside Restal. “An’ yer don’t want ter keep the old sod waitin’, do yer?”

“Tonight, Vila, I want to talk to you tonight,” Avon hissed around her ample bosom, half suffocated by the meaty arm wrapped around him.

Vera hugged them even tighter, coming perilously close to losing both of them to unconsciousness. “God, I’m so bleedin’ proud o’ yer, Vila me son. Yer’ve done well fer yerself, there’s none wot can gainsay that, go’ yersel’ the best job in the Warren, go’ yersel’ the gorgeousest man in all the Dome an’ yer the first to come back from bein’ gone. An’ ter think yer da thought yer was too much o’ a runt ter keep!”

“Mam,” Vila squeaked out around her forearm, “me an’ Avon need ter talk an’…”

“Yeh, right! D’yer honestly think any one o’ us is gonner believe yer wants ter talk? Yer’ll jest ‘ave ter keep yer paws off, paddington, until the party’s done. Now, c’mere an’ sit beside me an’ shut yer trap an’ get stuck in. ‘Ere, start wiv this stew ‘ere, it’s bloody good.” Restal grabbed Vila by the arm not pinned to his side by his mother’s girth and pulled him down into a seat. Vera took Avon off to sit opposite their grandfather, despite his surreptitious attempts to loosen her grip.

They were wined and dined, the party mutating from the usual beginning of the year ‘do’, to a celebration of the announcement that assured continuity in family leadership and promised some semblance of stability in a life where there were few dependable certainties, and all of those were better avoided. Food devoured and libations drank, the tables were cleared away, to open the room up for serious dancing. There was the usual scuffle to waylay Uncle Gordy before he could reach the impromptu stage and render, once again, his painful and murderous version of the old songs. The younger ones complained at the lack of ‘decent’ music, but Vila, high on the emotions and successes of the night, lacked that much sense.

“C’mon, Avon, it’ll be hours yet before we c’n leave an’ I really want yer. I’ll settle fer jest a quickie, no one ‘ll notice, jest think we’re dancin’ helluva close an’ yer c’n rub against me an’ I c’n ‘ave me ‘ands down yer front an’…”

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“Sorry. Didn’t mean no harm, Avon, just wanted you, that’s all.”

“Ey, look who I’ve found ‘ere! The newies! C’mon, Dec, bring the ‘toe over ‘ere an’ get a good luck kiss between these two.”

Avon’s glover darkened as the infamous and ill-loved nameless cousin grinned with malicious glee. A smaller man came over, a piece of indiscriminate
greenery in his hand and the bovine cousin snatched it out of his hand, holding it over Vila’s head instead. “Yer know this tradition, do yer, fancy man? Wiv a bit o’ the ‘toe over ‘is head, ‘e’s supposed ter be kissed by anyone wot likes ‘im.”

Avon stepped back, recognising the lout from the vague awareness he had had of the partying crowd down at the pub.

“Wot? Doncher like our little Vila ’ere? Mind, ‘e’s not so little as once ‘e was, is ‘e?” He patted Vila—hard—on his stomach, the grin widening with every passing second until it looked as if the malevolence of it would split his skull in two. “Told yer shoulda lost a bi’ o’ that lard, Vila me old pal. Mateys or no’, ‘e still don’t want fer anyone ter see what ‘e lets yer do in private. Good at gettin’ down on yer knees, are yer then?”

Avon’s fist shot out, knocking the witless wonder even farther into the realms of absolute lack of thought, the unconscious body hitting the floor with a resounding thump that drowned out even Uncle Gordy. Rubbing his knuckles, Avon passed a polite glance around the room, daring anyone to question him for bringing violence to this most peaceable night of the year. No one said a word, but the looks were disapproving, until Avon bent and picked up the weed from the floor and handed it to Dec. “We were in the middle of something there, weren’t we?” he said with studied mildness. “Shall we continue?”

Warily, Dec held the ‘toe over Vila’s head, both men waiting to see if they were going to be the next to be floored. Avon straightened his cuffs and jacket, then stepped forward, leaning the last couple of inches until his lips brushed Vila’s. Avon was suddenly hugged tight, Vila turning the traditional chaste embrace into a deepening kiss, which he refused to relinquish, milking the moment for everything he could. When Avon finally broke loose, Vila held on tightly to him for another moment, burying his face against Avon’s neck. “Yer’ve got me so’s I don’t know which way I’m turnin’, Avon. I don’t know if yer loves me, or if yer jest usin’ me, but when yer do stuff like that, stand up fer me an’ claim me in front o’ the family, I understand yer perfectly.”

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“That’s ridiculous, Vila. You don’t even understand simple arithmetic.”

“Oh, yeh, I do. But I understand people better, don’t I? Yer loves me, Avon, yer jest can’t admit it or show it, that’s all. But it’s there, an’ yer gonner stay with me, aren’t yer? Even after the bleedin’ Revolution, yer’ll still find a place fer me an’…”

Before Avon could respond or even free himself from Vila’s arms, a sudden silence descended upon the room, cutting the revelry off with the sharpness of a sword.

“Vila!” Old Restal’s voice cracked sharply. “Get over ‘ere, an’ bring yer Alpha. We’ve got trouble.”

“Wot is it, granda?”

“This ‘ere’s part o’ that structure yer mate’s been tryin’ ter find out about. ‘Er name is Fiona an’ she’s our contact from the rebel faction wot’s riddled the Terra Nostra.”

Avon and Vila shared a quick glance, both of them conceding surprise at Restal’s words. Neither one of them had had any idea that the structure was quite so widespread, nor so powerful. The contact was an average woman, completely nondescript from the tips of her mousey hair to the toes of her comfortable, practical shoes. She was also obviously a Gamma, her attention sidling nervously around the thronging horde of lower caste Deltas hemming her in.

“Tell Vila ’ere yer business, lass. There’s no point tryin’ ter keep any secrets now, is there?”

“Well,” she started, hesitant. She was prepared for revolution and to die for her cause. She was able to pick pockets and risk transportation with nary a flicker of the eye. But she couldn’t shake off the terror stories told her all her life: “Be a good girl or the big bad Delta will come and steal you and eat you all up.”

Avon automatically took charge, his native arrogance coming to the fore. “It’s perfectly all right, they don’t bite. Well,” he smiled charmingly, “not out of their grade, anyway. Now, why don’t you tell us everything you know?”

“Well, sir,” she began, responding unquestioningly to the authority of an Alpha, not even stopping to ask what an Alpha was doing here, “one of our contacts in Dome Administration sent down a message that there was an attempted coup in the Alpha section and that fighting was still going on. Our side is losing and they need help from all the levels.”

“Granda, is the system ready to go?”

“Been ready for years, son, we just been waitin’ till we could get all the levels ter agree on the right time ter strike.”

“I suppose then I should be grateful to Servalan for precipitating matters, otherwise we’d all be in our graves, waiting.”

“Oh, it wasn’t Servalan who started it. Well, it was, in a way, I suppose.”
“Would you care to repeat that? Preferably in a way that makes some modicum of sense?”

“It was Blake.”

“Blake!”

“Damn that man! Even in prison, he can still ruin everyone’s plans. What the hell has the idiot done this time?”

“He had some communications going with the Alpha sector faction and he was trying to speed the revolution up. Servalan found out and an hour ago, she ordered him and all the others from the Liberator to be executed and…”

“And of course, the mindless masses rose up onto their knees and rushed off to spill their blood for their great and fearless leader.”

“Yeh, but at least there’s still a chance the others are still alive, isn’t there, Avon? All right, granda, we’re gonner ‘ave ter move, an’ move fast, an’ get some help Upstairs. We ‘ave ter make this an all-out try, or nobody stands a chance an’ Blake an’ me other friends’ll be dead. An’ as soon as they finish mopping up Upstairs, the mutoids’ll be down ‘ere lookin’ fer every Delta they can find, cos they’ll need all the spare parts they can get.”

“Well, don’t jest stan’ there wagglin’ yer gums. Get on wi’ it. Yer’ve got all yer folks ‘ere already an’ I know exactly wot we ’ad planned fer all this time. Nell, yer the one in charge o’ weapons, ge’ them all up from Avon’s armoury an’ give them out an’ Stan…”

And that was the way of it. Avon’s revolution was taken out of his hands by plans laid down a generation ago, held secret under the deathly discipline of the Delta code, his control usurped by the actions of a man supposedly incommunicado in prison. A man whose very name plagued Avon, a man whose mere existence had complicated Avon’s life beyond conscience, from the first time they had met. There was no love in Avon now, as he took his place, fuming and boiling, in the great plan, only anger and annoyance and the lust for revenge. It was Blake’s fault, as usual, that he was here in a narrow, claustrophobic and filthy access tunnel, leading the spearhead group, not up to the computer control rooms where he belonged. No, that task was being left to Alphas already there. Avon, being one of the only two rebels who would recognise all four of the Liberator crew, was on his way to rescue the bane of his existence. The other man was crawling along behind him, cursing and sighing.

They finally were free of the access tube, spilling into the brightness of the Alpha level. Avon was disoriented for a moment: he had forgotten how brilliant the light was Upstairs, and how clean, and how fresh the air.

“Avon, move yer bum, fer god’s sake, it’s bleedin’ stiflin’ in ’ere!”

Vila clambered out behind him, the rest of their group following with rapid relief. They could hear fighting in the distance, coming from the opposite direction they intended to take. They raced down the corridors with as much caution as time afforded, meeting only a pair of mutoids, cutting them down without so much as a stutter in their stride.

The sign read: Section A. Cells 931-1069.

The two guards standing underneath the sign took one look at Avon’s group and turned on their heels and ran.

“Not much use, were they?” Vila muttered, dropping to his knees beside the door, assessing which tools he would need. His nimble fingers started their quick work, Vila chattering all the time. “I mean, ter jest run like that…”

“What would you do, if you saw six dangerous Deltas coming at you.” He stopped dead, unable to believe what he had just heard coming from his own mouth. “Five Deltas. One Alpha.”

“Well, saved us a lot of bother, didn’t it? ‘Ere we go, door’s open. Now let’s go rescue Blake. Again.”

“And when I do, Vila,” Avon muttered, pelting along the corridor behind Vila, trying to reach his colleagues from the past before any more guards came along, “I am going to take his revolutionary fervour and ram it down his throat until he chokes on his own idealism. I am,” he paused to shoot a startled uniformed gaoler, “also going to kill him for risking my life—in absentia—again, and taking a chance with an entire revolution just because,” he stopped to let Vila go in front of him to unlock the door to the cell the contact had said held Blake, “he has grown tired of having nothing to do but polish his damned halo. And furthermore…”

All his words died in his throat. He stumbled into the room, staring, rapt, at Blake, struggling desperately to wrestle his feelings back under his mask. This shocked him, this sudden, unsuspected well of emotion opening like a pit under his feet, annihilating his stability and his certainties.

“Blake?”

“It’s me, Avon, under this beard and these clothes. It’s me.”
“Yes, yes, I see…”

Vila, forgotten, stared in horrified fascination at the emotional interplay between these two men. It made all his moments with Avon pale into mere candle flickers in the shadow of the burning sun that was flaring between Avon and Blake. It was painfully obvious neither man had expected this, that neither one quite knew how to deal with it.

“You came for me.”

“Yes, well, rescuing you has become something of a habit.”

They both took an almost compulsive step forward, closing the mental gap as surely as the physical.

“Then I suppose that means waiting for you is a bit of a habit of mine, does it?” Blake murmured, not meaning the rescue.

“Yes…”

“I suppose that makes you a knight in shining armour then?”

“Only if it makes you the damsel in distress.”

Blake laughed, the rich, rolling sound of thunder in the hills and took the final step forward, resting his hands on Avon’s shoulders. “Oh, I’m no damsel, Avon, as well you know. Not after I met you.”

And then Vila’s world fell apart, utterly destroyed by uncaring thoughtlessness. Avon leaned up just that fraction, that distance he obviously knew so well from practice, and pressed his lips to Blake’s, melting into the bigger man, opening his mouth, letting passion play between them.

Vila tore his eyes away, wrenched himself free of the hypnotising horror unfolding before him. He turned, stumbled, then found the door and staggered through it. In the corridor, he looked back again, hoping that perhaps Avon had regained his senses, but the Alpha was still clutched to his fellow Alpha, the intensity and blatant lust making a mockery of the faint kiss he had given Vila Downbelow. Only ter prove a point, Vila old son. Only ter prove a point ter someone wot was doin’ somthin’ wot made Avon look bad cos it made a fool of his mate. ‘Cept, didn’t need that stupid bleedin’ cousin o’ mine ter make a fool o’ me. Nah, did that all by meself. Thinkin’ that Avon loved me.

Avon and Blake were still kissing, small sweet nibbles, so caught up in the passion of their reunion that neither one of them seemed to care that there was a Revolution going on around them. Vila started to leave, damning them, hungry to let them go to hell in their own handbaskets, but when all was said and done, even if Avon didn’t love him, he certainly loved Avon.

“Pardon me, don’t let me interrupt or anything, but you two do have a Revolution to take care of, if you can stop snogging long enough, the rest of us would really appreciate it.”

Blake and Avon turned towards him with choreographed grace, neither one fully letting go of the other.

“Yes, of course,” Blake said, moving forward, pushing past Vila. “And as soon as this is over and we’ve destroyed the pestilence that is the Federation, Vila, I shall take great delight in spending several hours with you, finding out just precisely what you’ve been doing this past year or so.” He stepped through the door, finally losing all physical contact with Avon. The last phrase came over his shoulder as he went off in search of his Revolution. “I won’t rest until I’ve heard every single last detail, my friend.”

The expression on Avon’s face when he hesitated before Vila said more than words ever could. Or should. They stood for a moment, staring at each other, neither knowing what to say. Avon opened his mouth to speak, but was forestalled.

“Avon? Come on, man. We have a tremendous amount of work to do.”

Avon hesitated a second more, then, driven by emotions he had yet to beat into submission, hounded by the fear that he had thought resolved by Restal’s words, he followed Blake.

As he always had.

As, Vila was miserably certain, he always would.