Hollow, the words echoed.
“You could have told me. I’ve listened.”
Empty, the stillness swallowed them up.
“I’d’ve believed you.”
The darkness did not answer.
“I’d’ve trusted you.”
The silence shivered.
“I’ve always trusted you. From the very start.”
The curtain of silence was rent, the flimsy fabric tearing into tattered strips of voice and echo, wordless, visceral, studded with pain.
Vila reached his hand out, fingertips touching the tarnished metal that studded the leather. “I would’ve,” he whispered again, using the warm sound of his own voice to bandage up the pain in the other’s. “I always have.”
The silence crept in between them once more, a balm to embalm them, binding them together, as it always had.
“I always will.”
“Will you?” Rusty enough to poison, it grated between them.
“You know I will.”

“You admit it?”
“Yes.”
“Why bother to deny the truth? It’s easier to admit to it than lie. Anyway, there are worse things than trust, Avon.”
“Name one.”
A bitterly whimsical laugh. “Love.”
Another silence, biting deep like winter’s breath on icy morning. “Oh, yes, there is always that.”
“You can have it, if you want.”
“No thanks, you can keep it.”
“No, no, it’s all right. Don’t mind sharing.”
“Keep it.”
“Only my half of it, Avon. You can have your share, too.”
“I don’t want it.”
“What’s that got to do with it? You can’t make it happen, and you can’t get rid of it once it’s there. Got a mind of its own, has love.”
“Which is just as well, because you certainly haven’t got one of your own.”
“Pretty feeble, that one, Avon. Lacked a certain vigour, didn’t it? Really not up to your
usual standards at all, if you think about it.”
“Yes, well, you won’t think about it, so I
shan’t lose any sleep over it.”
“Why didn’t you tell me?”
An avalanche of silence to bury the words.
“I’ve understood.”
Silence choking him.
“I would’ve helped. Been there, been with
you when you had to face him again.”
“It was only a tranquilised dream, Vila. He
was never even there.”
“Wasn’t he?”
“I was drugged. They played their
mindgames inside my head. I saw nothing,
only dreamed their nightmare for them.”
“Then why did we hear Cally’s mindvoice
shouting his name?”
Silence thick enough to murder.
“She would’ve known, Avon. Better even
than you or me, she would’ve been able to
tell.”
“Would she?”
“You’re the one whose mind she kept
wandering around in. You tell me.”
Thoughtfulness, keeping the words at bay.
“C’mon, Avon, if I heard her, then you
must’ve heard her, too. She called his name,
and she wouldn’t be tricked by any of
Servalan’s machines, would she?”
“But she would have been tricked by a
telepathic device, which is what some of
those machines were.”
“Yeh, but by the time you heard her, the
explosions were already going full blast—
sorry, didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”
“Don’t bother apologising. It never made
any difference before and I’m long past needing
anyone’s sorrow.”
“But,” Vila went on, sticking to the point as
if he knew his life depended on all this, “she
did ‘shout’ to you after the explosions, which
means the machines would’ve been out by
then, so—”
“So there is no point whatsoever in
going over and over this. We don’t have the faintest
idea of why Cally said what she did that day.
For all we know, she said it because she
finally realises who was to blame for the
whole fiasco, or because she was in love with
him.”
“In love with him? Cally?”
“Weren’t we—weren’t you all? It was either
that or suicidal stupidity that made you
follow him. And no-one can accuse me of
stupidity, can they?”
“But maybe they can accuse you of being
suicidal, is that what you’re saying, eh, Avon?”
“Now would I say a thing like that?”
“No. but you’d think it, wouldn’t you?”
“Would I?”
“I know one thing, though.”
“And what is this one, single thing sitting
in solitary splendour that you know?”
“You’d have us sitting here going round the
same thing again and again until we’re both
dizzy and you’ve convinced me that I don’t
know anything about you at all which is why
I was wrong about you in the first place.”
“And what did you think in the first place?”
“That you were quite a bloke, but you’d
taken a bit of stick, had a few hard knocks,
but you could still be reached.”
“Shouldn’t that be ‘got at’?”
“Only if we’re talking about Blake.”
“We are not talking about Blake. We are not
going to talk about Blake. Subject closed and
changed.”
“To what? What we’re going to have for
breakfast? Not much choice round here, and
what there is doesn’t bear thinking about,
does it? So what d’you want to talk about
then?”
“Silence would be quite nice.”
“Would it?”
“Yes.”
Dismal silent lifelessness responded.
“Very well, perhaps I wouldn’t appreciate
silence quite as much as I had thought.”
Not so much as the hiss of breath to break
the void left by the absence of the other’s
voice.
“Come now, Vila, don’t be such a spoiled
brat. I’ve said I was wrong, what more can you
possibly want?”
“How ’bout an answer?”
“How about a question?”
“I get to go first. I asked first, so it’s my
turn.”
“If it will keep you amused.”
“Oh, I’m long past needing to be amused,
Avon. I still want to know: why didn’t you tell
me?”
“Are you sure you want to hear the answer though?”
“Dead bloody sure.”
“As always, you pick the perfect words for the occasion. As to why didn’t I tell you… Simple, rather, like you. I didn’t want you to know.”
“Why the hell not? I’d been with him from the start as well, I deserved to know if you’d heard from Blake!”
“Precisely.”
“You what? Oh, I get it. You weren’t sure, were you? Not enough to risk anyone else’s neck on it, anyway. But you’d go on your own, take your chance, see where it led. And do it without any of us running around behind you, seeing what we ought not to.”
“And what is that supposed to mean?”
“You never did like anyone seeing behind that bloody armour of yours, did you?”
“Armour? Oh, would that I had been so lucky.”
“Yeh, armour. Ten feet thick and just as stinking. No need for you to keep me at arm’s length like that, Avon. No need at all.”
“Wasn’t there? Look what happens when I don’t.”
“What—you mean you can’t just crawl off and hide? Listen, everybody’s always called me a coward cos I was bright enough to be scared of blowing things up and being shot at, but you’re the real coward.”
“Well, they do say it takes one to know one.”
“Different thing altogether. I’m petrified of things that can blow up in my face and hurt me, you’re just terrified of feelings, that’s all.”
“And they can’t blow up in my face and hurt me?”

Long silence, whilst the barbed words struck home and buried themselves in flesh, piercing all the way to the festering sore that was at the heart of Vila. “Oh, if anyone knows how feelings can hurt, it’s me, Avon. Degree cum laude, that’s me, laureate master of pain. Loved you for years, ’aven’t I?”
“I never asked you to.”
“But you never asked me to stop neither.”
“And what was I supposed to do? Invite you round for a drink and say, by the way, Vila, be a good fellow and stop loving me?”

“Might’ve helped. Been a damned sight better for me than reeling me in every time you thought I might be getting loose.”
“Is that how you saw it?”
“Of course that’s how I saw it. It’s how everyone saw it.”
“Everyone being?”
“Gan. Cally. Jenna—she used to get some really nasty digs in when your back was turned, I don’t mind telling you.”
“If you don’t mind telling me, then why are you waiting until now to mention it?”
“Because it doesn’t matter a toss any more, does it? You can’t do anything about it, so I can’t be hurt if you don’t bother your back-side, can I? And what does it matter if you feel sorry for me? I could do with a bit of pity round about now.”
“What’s this supposed to be? Such pathetic pleading… You sound like a beaten dog.”
“That’s not too far from the way I feel. Been beaten anyway, haven’t I?”
“Who hasn’t?”
“I don’t know, Avon, I just don’t know. I just… I’m so tired, ’d you know that? Bone weary. Don’t know that I care if it all stops now. Don’t think I’d miss it.”
“Whatever happened to the man who was going to live forever—or die trying?”
“He found out that sometimes living is nothing more than just dying very, very slowly. That’s all it is now, isn’t it, Avon? Dying slowly and painfully, another step at a time. One foot in front of the other, until you’re in the grave. Beginning to look quite good, that is.”

The darkness breathed, but did not speak, there being no words to follow what Vila had confessed to this stark lightlessness.
“Avon…”
“What now?”
“Why didn’t you tell me about this last time?”
“This last time what?”
“About finding Blake.”
“I’ve already told you.”
“That was about before.”
“Was it?”
“Yes, it was and don’t you try going and denying it.”
“The answer’s the same this time round, Vila. I didn’t want you to know.”
“Didn’t want me to know? After we’ve spent two fucking years hunting after Blake, chasing him as if he was a carrot on the end of a stick? Oh, that’s rich, that is.”
“I’m glad something is.”
“That’s all you ever wanted, isn’t it? To be rich.”
“Oh, yes. To be so rich no-one could ever touch me again.”
“And so rich, no-one could complain when you restored your family name and took over the old lands, either, eh? Always stuck in your craw, didn’t it, that you had one of the oldest and best names and not two brass farthings to rub together.”
“It was the lack of money that irritated me, that’s all.”
“Not your sense of honour? Oh, yeh, right, you couldn’t care less about what the Federation had done to your family to get the land and the money and the power, however could I possibly manage not to see that?”
“Because you’re as blind as you are stupid.”
“Look, Avon, it’s just the two of us in here, don’t you think you could stop the ‘stupid’ comments?”
“My comments aren’t stupid, you—”
“You know what I’m getting at, Avon, so don’t give me that.”
“What would you have me give you?”
“A bit of affection.”
“You’re asking for something I don’t have to give.”
“You’re lying again, Avon.”
“Again?”
“When you said you didn’t love Blake.”
“I have never so much as mentioned myself, Blake and love in the same sentence.”
“That’s what I mean.”
“And if guilt is proved by omission, does that also prove that I don’t have a mother, never having mentioned her?”
“You never did have much of a mum, and I recognise that breath. Don’t you start, Kerr Avon. I’ve met your mum and your brother and don’t you forget it.”
“I hardly think crashing a party counts as meeting them.”
“If you’ve invited me, you...”
“I what?”
“Would’ve been bloody stupid. I didn’t fit in, did I? I’ve never fitted in with your proper friends.”

The sadness in the voice demanded a response and the darkness was hide enough and balm enough to allow the rebirth of something once forgotten. “Proper friends, Vila? And what are you, if not one of my ‘proper’ friends? If not my only friend, perhaps...”

“D’you mean that, Avon? D’you really mean that? I mean, I know you don’t mean their proper manners nor nothing, but are you really and truly saying that I’m one of your real friends?”

“Oh, do calm down, fool, else I shall regret my lapse into sentimentality.”
“And we wouldn’t want you to do a thing like that, would we? Not unless it’s for Blake, eh?”
“I said, we are not discussing Blake.”
“You might’ve said that, but I didn’t. Under the circumstances, Avon, I think I’m entitled to discuss Blake. In fact, I think I want to.”
“You think? What a miracle. There must be hope yet.”
“Don’t be wide, you. You know I can think—better than you, sometimes.”
“The dark has made you brave, Vila.”
“Nah, just got you to sit still long enough to tell you what I think.”
“It’s hardly the dark that’s keeping me here.”

“Are you still bleeding?”

The flurry of sound was as inappropriate as a butterfly, skittering around in the heavy air of the darkness. It faded away, killed by the bitter words that hunted it down. “I believe there’s very little left.”

“I could come over to you, share our body heat?”

“Don’t be so stupid, Vila. Are you really so idiotic as to believe you could get this far, in the dark and over all that débris?”

“It’s all right, Avon, it’s all right. No need to blame yourself.”

“And what the hell makes you believe I would do such a thing?”

“I can hear it in your voice. You feel as guilty as sin, don’t you?”
“Don’t be absurd, Vila.”
“I won’t be if you won’t. Why don’t you want me to come over to you?”
Silence congealing like the blood that dripped down Avon’s leg.
“Go on, Avon, give me one good reason why I shouldn’t at least try to get to you?”
“Oh, you’re getting to me more than you know. But you’re welcome to try, if you think you can make it all the way without becoming stranded. Or have you forgotten what’s lying on the ground between us?”
“Bodies. Oh, god, the bodies. All them rebels and all them troopers and oh, no, no, Dayna and Soolin. Where did Tarrant land, Avon? Would I have to crawl over him? Would I? I couldn’t, you know. Never liked dead bodies, ‘specially not when they were people I knew. I even liked them, ’d you know that? Especially Dayna. Such a pretty girl. Beautiful…”
“That’s what she said about me.”
“When’d she say a thing like that?”
“When first we met. I had been knocked unconscious and when I awoke, I was being kissed by this terribly pretty girl who said I was beautiful…”
“D’you sound surprised because she said it or because you just told me? If it’s cos you told me, well, it’s only to be expected, isn’t it? And if it’s cos she said you’re beautiful, well, you are, or are you going to tell me you didn’t know?”
“Beautiful is soft and pretty and worth something.”
“You’re worth something, sometimes. And you can be soft—don’t go denying it. I’ve seen you, with Cally sometimes and even with Blake a couple of times. Remember that time in Control Central?”
“No, of course not. When was that?”
“No need to be so bloody sarcastic, you know. Only trying to make a bit of conversation.”
“Then... Then why don’t you speak for once, instead of trying to get me to talk?”
“Because everything I want to say, you don’t want to hear.”
“Oh, don’t start that again—“
“I’m not. But I do still love you. Always will.”
“That’s not saying very much, is it?”
“Don’t suppose it is, not now. Unless Orac—“
“I have its key in my pocket.”
“Oh. Well, that puts paid to that then, doesn’t it? Not much left to say, really.”
“For once, I couldn’t agree with you more.”
“You never did answer my question, Avon. Why didn’t you tell me about Blake? Either time.”
“And I have already told you!”
“All right, all right, no need to go biting my head off. I think Servalan’s arranged for that, thank you very much.”
“I…”
“Yeh?”
“I’m...sorry, Vila.”
“What for?”
Laughter, with a maniac sitting on its back egging it on. “You are sitting in what’s left of the control room, in the dark, sealed in by several tons of rubble, with no hope of escape, with nothing around you but dead bodies, and you ask me what I’m sorry about? You must be mad.”
“It’s not me what’s mad, is it?”
“Are you saying that I am? Is that the comfortable little excuse you’ve come up with to explain this horror?”
“Seems reasonable to me.”
“Oh, you’re so very certain I can’t see you, aren’t you?”
“Stands to reason, don’t it? There’s not a bit of light in here, darker than a baboon’s armpit it is. Anyway, don’t forget, I only got hit by the tail-end of that gun, and I was half-awake when you went down. Doubt if you could move more’n an inch.”
“Ah, but that’s where you’re wrong, I could.” The statement hung between them, swinging slowly in the silence. “Why didn’t you tell me, Avon?”
“I presume you’re going on about Blake again? I’m not going to get any peace until I tell you, am I?”
“Not much.”
“Very well. Oh, very well...If I told you, then it would make it real. It would make it fact and then Blake might actually still be alive. And I wanted him dead, Vila. I needed him to be dead. So that he would be dead and gone and I could be free of him.”
“But he wasn’t, was he? Not until you murdered him anyway.”

“Ah, at last, bitterness commensurate with the situation. But think, think about this, Vila. If this is how you feel now, then how do you imagine I felt? Two years of it, two solid years of him being gone, but not dead. Him, out there, ready to come back into my life, taking away all my control, taking charge again, taking my ship, my life—everything. And without a word. I knew he was out there somewhere, did you know that? I used to dream, that he was sitting somewhere, over a camp-fire, in some paltry forest, stirring the flames with a stick the way he was stirring my soul. Oh, he was there all right. And I knew it.”

“Avon, are you all right?”

“Considering the circumstances, I couldn’t be better. What the hell do you think? But I forget myself. You obviously don’t think at all.”

“What are you taking it out on me for?”

“Because you’re there and still alive and the former is more than I can say about Servalan and the latter more than I…”

“Avon? Avon!”

Sounds, strangled, tearing, ripping sounds.

“Avon, are you crying?”

Silence, ever more strangled, smothered in time.

“Crying? Don’t be stupid, Vila. I never cry—and even if I did, why should I cry now?”

“Because you’re going to fucking die, that’s why!”

“And that’s something to shed tears over?”

“Oh, Avon, don’t sound like that. Is being alive really so rotten? It can’t be, can it? Isn’t there anything you want to do? Nothing you want?”

“Nothing I don’t have right here in this room. And you can take that any way you want. I no longer care.”

“Did you ever?”

“Yes. Oh, yes, I cared.”

“When?”

“Don’t sound so hopeful, Vila. You don’t want to hear my answer.”

“Oh, don’t I? Well, I’ve got news for you, so there. I do so want to hear your answer. Well, go on. Tell me.”

“Blake. That bastard! That unmitigated bastard, Vila. Oh, he always said he was going to make me care. Time and again, he would say that. I was his pet cause, right there after freeing me care. He was going to teach Kerr Avon how to truly love. And the bastard did, Vila. He did. And then he turned into a monster and walked away from me. He left me, Vila, he just walked away from me, even when I asked him to come back, he wouldn’t. But I knew he was out there, Orac told me so. He made me love him…”

“Don’t cry, Avon, don’t cry. He’s not worth it, no-one’s worth it.”

“Are you saying you never cried over me?”

“I never did, you know. No point, was there? And I knew how to bend, Avon, so I never broke.”

“Unlike me?”

“Now, I never said that.”

“Not in so many words, perhaps. But I don’t care, Vila. I really don’t care. Not any more.”

Breathing now, become audible as the air grew thicker, as the rankness rose from the bodies and the stench of their own blood filled the air.

“Not much oxygen left, is there?”

“Not much at all.”

“I don’t want to die, Avon. Don’t let me die!”

“If it’s any consolation, I would let you go. Not much, I know, but it’s the best I can offer, for Malodaar.”

“I thought I was going to die then, Avon. I thought you were going to kill me.”

“And have you miss this?”

“Don’t sound like that, it frightens me. And I’m terrified enough already.”

“Why? All death is is the ending of all this…crap. It’ll be over, Vila. And then there shall be nothing, nothing at all. No pain, no fear, no betrayals, nothing. You won’t even know you ever existed.”

“And that’s supposed to be comforting?”

“Oh, but I think it is.”

“I’d rather believe in Heaven. Have you heard about that? There was this sect once, took over half Earth it did, before the Government did something about it. But they said that when you died, you became this thing—had something on it…”

“Angel. With wings.”
“You’ve heard about it?”
“Another sign of my dissolute youth.”
“But doesn’t it sound wonderful, Avon? Sitting on clouds, making love all day to the most beautiful people ever born. And that means you’d be there.”
“Perhaps. After all, my life surely counts as the other side of their legend.”
“You don’t think for a second that Heaven exists, do you?”
“No. Not for a second. But for your sake, I hope I’m wrong.”
“That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me, you know that?”
“Stop snivelling, Vila. Oh, all right. Yes, I like you, yes I’m fond of you and yes I love you. Will that shut you up?”
“How much of that was lying, Avon?”
“Must you throw every gift back in my face?”
“Thank you, Avon. Means a lot to me.”
“I rather gathered that, over the years.”
“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?”
“Not as long as it feels.”
It was harder now, to breathe, and to think, the living amidst the dead beginning the slow spiral downwards. But one question, one more question, before the nightmare could be over.
“What are you sitting on, Avon?”
“What do you think?”
“Tell me, Avon!”
And into the rasping stillness it came, on wings of hideous vision.
“Blake.”
“You can’t be! How can you sit on him, when he’s dead? You are mad, aren’t you?”
“But where else should I sit, but on Blake’s dead body? Rather appropriate, don’t you think? After all, I always did say my death and his would be linked. I just didn’t know that killing him would be the death of me.”
But shortly, as the last of the oxygen died, he was proved right.