THE DOME CYCLE: OH L’AMOUR

M. FAE GLASGOW

The noise cut through him like a serrated blade, jolting him upright in the bed. Outside, the daylights still weren’t full on, half-dimmed to ease the pampered élite from the comfort of bedtime to the daily stresses of the usual round of luncheons, dinners and croquet, perhaps even a sojourn at the spa for the truly brave. Inside, it was darkling, the sheets glimmering faintly, the porcelain ornament on the mantlepiece sheening quietly. The sound came again, and this time, he was able to identify it: a child’s voice raised in nightmare, a familiar sound in this house where once he’d been a child himself, uncaring monsters come to get him in the night. He waited, promising himself that he would get up if he heard the noise again, but there was, instead, the dim shuffle of someone else, the muted hiccupping of a calmed child, the far-off sound of the kitchen door closing. The pillow welcomed him, still warm from where he’d lain and he settled himself comfortably into it, pulling blankets up to protect himself against the chill. Mind slowly switching itself off again, he registered that the Upstairs heating must have been turned off to redirect the energy down to the Bowels for such Delta luxuries as ventilators working at full capacity and lights bright enough to see by.

Downstairs. Last night. Vila. Blake. All of it hitting him with all the delicacy of a sex-starved gorilla. Which might not be too far from what he and Vila had been last night. He turned onto his side, whispered instructions for the lights to come up, just a fraction, enough to let him see Vila. Carefully, unwilling to wake the other man—my mate, he reminded himself. My spouse—he traced the new lines, appalled by the depth of the frown lines, by the lines of bitterness that had all but
replaced the laughter lines. Small wonder Jak had wanted to kill Avon: Jak would have known, simply by watching Vila, that there was less to it, and more to it, than Avon staying Upstairs to speak for the Delta interests. Poor Vila, Avon thought, surprising himself with his tenderness, poor, poor Vila.

Still being so careful, he slid his hand lower, not in caress, but to investigate, to see if the vague impressions he’d garnered last night in the midst of passion had been accurate. Fingers following the dips and curves, he could count Vila’s ribs, and there, on his back, every knob of his spine was outlined, the delicacy and vulnerability quite terrifying. Avon shifted slightly, his hand travelling back to the fascination of Vila’s face. He’d never noticed before, but Vila had perfect cheekbones, or at least that’s what too much time apart told Avon, when it blended with pity and guilt over the deep hollows where Vila’s cheeky little grin used to hover, just waiting to come out and sabotage Avon when least he expected it.

Tomorrow, Vila had said, we’ll talk tomorrow. But between yesterday and tomorrow there are the dark hours of the night to survive, and hope can be a most fragile part of a man’s soul. When hope departs, only the poisonous dregs of distrust are left in its stead.

“What time is it?” Vila suddenly asked, the normalcy of both tone and question reminding Avon that it was going to take more than a few declarations and one earth-shattering fuck to make Vila completely forgive him for the past couple of months.

“Too early to get up. The lights haven’t even gone on yet,” he murmured, making his voice a lullaby, wanting to erase those grey circles beneath Vila’s eyes.

“Yeh, but you lot don’t ‘ave your lights go on till elevesemest almost, so I’d better get up then, hadn’t I?”

“Shouldn’t I be the one who’s nervous here?” he asked, stopping neither the soothing of his voice nor of his fingers.

“Oh, yeh? An’ who is it who gets to run an entire fuckin’ dome and deal with the Outer Planets and the Rim Planets and the Unaligned Confederation of Planets, not to mention the fucking Fleet, the other Domes and everyone in them? And that’s only before breakfast.”

“I could help you,” Avon said to Vila’s departing back, unwillingly noting the way Vila’s too-thin back tensed as he spoke, Vila’s hesitation obvious. So much for kissing it all better.

“Best help you could give me is making sure that there’s no trouble Upstairs with all the Deltas coming in. People’ll need help, you know, with everything from finding a place to stay to learning how to work food processors an’ everything.”

“Vila, don’t be stupid. That’s a complete waste of my talents—”

“Yeh, well your talents didn’t do us no good afore, did they? You up ‘ere, Lord Bloody Muck an’ us down there, up to our ‘ips in shite.” Back still turned, eloquently, towards Avon, Vila took a deep breath, his tight muscles standing out in bas relief. Clothes in hand, he sat on the edge of the bed and began dressing as he spoke.

“I’ve already got meself ‘alf a dozen computer types wot ‘re willin’ to lend an’ and, bu’ you’re the only one wot knows wot it’s like Upstairs an’ down in the Bowels, so yer the one wot knows all the problems our lot’ll be ‘avin’, won’t yer?”

“In other words,” Avon said into the silence left by Vila’s doubts, “despite last night, you don’t trust me as far as you can spit.”

“Can you blame me?” Vila replied, perfectly modulated voice betraying his nervousness as nothing else quite did.

There was even, Avon noticed, a difference in the way Vila was moving, something of the old scared mouse creeping back in to undermine the air of confidence Vila had worn down in the Delta warrens. But could he, as Vila had asked, blame the man? In all honesty, there were only two men Avon could blame, and one of them was himself. “What about Blake?” he asked, knowing that this was something that couldn’t be left undone to fester between them.

“What about Blake? That’s up to you, in’t it?”

“I made my choice last night, Vila, in front of everyone.” And he had, a fact that held the power to unnerve him mightily, his every foundation shaken by the remembering of what he’d done last night—of what he’d said.

“You’d made yer choice before an’ all, ‘adn’t yer? Didn’t stop yer none, did it? One look from ‘im, an’ you come runnin’ like a bitch on heat, pantin’ at ‘is fuckin’ feet.”
The bitterness should not, as it did, have come as a surprise. “And what would you have me do?” Avon demanded, pride and other, deeper feelings, stung. “What I did was a mistake, but surely even I am entitled to have a human failing?” Vila didn’t respond, his faded tan shirt disappearing as he bent down to tie his shoelaces. “I have already apologised,” Avon snapped, furious that Vila should treat him like this after what Avon had said and done not ten hours before. “What will it take, Vila? Me down on my knees, begging your forgiveness in public?”

“Wouldn’t mean anything, would it? Jest like our Affirmation wasn’t worth a fart, was it?”

“And you think that last night is just as meaningless?” Avon demanded, his outrage and his own hurt and guilt blinding him to Vila’s exhaustion and Vila’s depression that one night of loving had done nothing to expunge.

“An’ wot’ave you said to me, eh?” Vila asked wearily, accent wandering hither and yon between the Alpha heights and the Delta lows. “Nothin’ wot you ‘aven’t said to Blake.”

The ugly truth and all its implications lingered between them, an intangible barrier but all the more insurmountable simply because it wasn’t something Avon could put his hands on to move or destroy.

Vila’s laugh was a heartwrenching commingling of misery and hopelessness. “What,” he said, voice a caricature of the frivolous banter they’d once indulged in, “not leaping to your own defence? Not shouting out a denial? Oh, I am shocked,” Vila went on, clambering slowly to his feet. “And here’s me thinkin’ you’ve been faithful to me all this time. Jest goes ter show you, doesn’t it?” he said from the doorway. “I can always take you at your word.”

The door closed very quietly, the slightest *snick*, Vila’s undramatic control more chilling than any display of jealous temper could ever be. Shivering slightly in what his past weeks of pampered ease now called cold, Avon too left his bed, unwilling to stay there any longer, alone but for the bitterness of Vila’s words and the insidious smell of last night’s sex.

Dressed, not a hair out of place, impassive mask firmly in place, Avon proceeded, surreptitiously tugging at the collar of his polo-neck, instinctively hiding the love bite he had acquired at some point last night. Not that he remembered the moment when it had happened—would, in fact, have said that Vila had done no such thing—but obviously, somewhere amongst all the ravening hunger, Vila had marked him. For all his lofty ideals and renewed promises, even in the face of all his emotional declarations, the idea of Vila marking him made Avon uncomfortable, fidgety, the collar being tugged at several times as he made his way down towards the ever-rising caterwauling of displaced children and decanted adults.

“...leave ’im there ter rot fer all I care,” Avon heard Vila saying as he walked into the dining room, or what was left of it. All the delicate ornaments and fine art had been removed, curtains taken down and away from exploring, endlessly grubby fingers, the antique furniture replaced by the utilitarian folding chairs that had been used in what Mother had called an arboretum when she had been enamoured of the fashion of having living plants as a setting for one’s soirées. The great table was still in place, draped with a heavy tarpaulin under an unfavourite tablecloth, and the ancient, ostentatiously threadbare rug had quietly disappeared. Avon took in all the details, marking each and every way that this so familiar room had been turned upon its head to match his life. It was, after all, so much easier to note the passing of things than to deal with the press of people, all of whom seemed to be turning, falling silent, staring at him. Even Vila, a leader amongst his own, a leader when he was private with Avon, here, Vila verged on the deferential, his speech fading off into forgotten indifference when Avon appeared in the doorway.

It occurred to Avon then that he was wearing what he thought of as ‘old’ clothes, the likes of which even Vila, with his considerable out-Dome experiences, had never seen, certainly not on Avon. Polo-necks, of course, for he had never given up his penchant for their discretion, but on the *Liberator*, those had, of necessity been workaday, unlike these things from his previous life, made of natural fibres and designed by those whose names were more famous than many Dome leaders. A far cry from the carefully refabricated clothes he had worn when he’d been nothing more to these people than Vila’s snotty wifey. Elegance, they say, is bred in the...
bones, and Avon moved forward with a grace that disguised his own inner sense of discomfiture: he was at home neither with the past this room represented, nor the recent times shared with these people.

“Good morning,” he said politely, going over to help himself from chafing dishes, making a point of showing by example how this new branch of his family should behave in their newer home.

“An’ a good mornin’ ter you,” Vera boomed, slapping him on the back and punctiliously following his deft movements with serving tongs. “Course, a room full’ve mutoids wouldn’a spoiled the mornin’ fer our Avon, would it, son? No’ after wot we all ‘eard you an’ our Vila doin’ in the wee sma’ hours, eh, Don Juan?” Vila groaned and Avon turned away in patent embarrassment: normal though such a comment might be down below, it was too public, too revelatory for the filigreed cornices of this old room. Vera gave them one of her loudest, heartiest laughs, following Avon to the table, one of the indiscriminate brood clamouring at her to be scooped up and balanced on her hip. “Yer’ll be blushing yet, if yer keeps tha’ up. Mind you,” she went on, shovelling bits of bread and fruit down the voracious child’s throat, “after wot we ‘eard last night, it’ll be a fuckin’ miracle if yer can gets it up a’ all!”

“Mam,” Vila began, a warning tone in his voice, an apology in his eyes as he looked at Avon.

“Don’t you ‘mam’ me, young fella-me-lad,” Vera snapped, mopping genuine orange juice from a child shocked by the orange stuff’s acid sting, “jest cos yer livin’ in the lap o’ luxury don’t mean yer better than the rest o’ us. Yer eat, sleep an’ go to the toilet jest like everyone o’ us in ‘ere, an’ don’ yer go forgettin’ tha’, Mr. ‘Igh an’ Bloody Mighty. Yer still not so big’s I can’t put yer across my lap an’ give yer a right wallopin’.”

“Let him be,” Avon said, automatically setting a startlingly clean Shela on his lap so that she could reach the toast without pulling the tablecloth and its contents down on her head, “he’s only trying to stop me from being embarrassed.”

“Oh, hoity-toity, are we?” Vera sniffed, but the glance she canted at this newest son was warm with tolerance and understanding. “No’ tha’ it’s easy on any o’ us,” she said round a mouthful of a strange, soft fruit, “Bu’ we all ’ave ter make adjustments fer each another, don’ we?”

“Yeh, well, the only adjustments I’m interested in is where we shove Blake an’ if we don’t stick ’im somewhere else, who gets ter watch ’im cos I’m fed up ter the back bloody teeth sittin’ on my arse watchin’ ’im,” Jak complained loudly, sucking coffee up through pursed lips against the thinness of the finest china he’d ever seen, the cup tiny in his great hands.

“Blake,” Vila said, flatly, no inflection to give away anything he might be thinking. He looked over at Avon, but wouldn’t meet the other man’s gaze, turned instead to help stop Dev from choking on too big a piece of muffin. “Ge’ old of a couple of the other blokes, an’ ave them ’elp you see ’im over ter ’eadquarters. I want ter talk ter ’im, bu’ no’ till after I’ve got a few things set up, all right?”

“After elevenses do yer?” Jak asked, mollified that there was, at least, an end in sight and he might yet have the opportunity to crunch a few Alpha heads, since he obviously wasn’t going to have the chance to give Avon his just desserts.

“Yeh, fine,” Vila muttered, sidling quietly from the room while Avon was occupied with persuading Shela that she really didn’t want to spill that scalding hot cup of tea all over Avon’s lap.

“Right,” Vila said from the doorway, “I’m off. You know what you have to do, don’t you, Avon?” he asked, disappearing before Avon could say yea or nay, an uncomfortable silence wriggling in his wake.

Two children arguing over the jam broke the awkwardness, natural chatter replacing the unnatural quiet. But Avon felt himself excluded, more apart from this family than he had been since the very beginning when it had all been a life-saving charade. “Right, you lot,” he said briskly, beginning the daunting task of organising the entire Delta caste with this one family, “let’s get this place cleared up and see about setting up proper sleeping arrangements and making sure this house is going to run smoothly. Then Vera, I want you to go round all the Delta families already Upstairs and see what medical attention is needed.”

“I’m no’ a bleedin’ nurse, an’ who are yer ter...
be orderin’ me aroun’, eh?” she complained, wrapping her arms round her considerable bosom. “No’ tha’ I mind, mind you. An’ after I find all this ou’ fer yer—wot’m I supposed ter do then?”

“Come back and tell me so that I can arrange to have a clinic set up.” He even knew who he could trust to oversee the Deltas medical treatments without any ‘spare parts’ being quietly harvested: Cally would intimidate the snottiest of Alpha doctors into servile obedience in a matter of seconds. And those she couldn’t, she was well able to take care of in other, less verbal, manners.

One problem down, another million to go. A whirlwind of activity and energy, Avon set about organising the shotgun intermarriage of two social strata. Vila might think he had relegated Avon to the domestic arena where he could be trusted and ignored, but Avon was damned if he were going to hang around waiting for the great man to come home.

The situation well in hand, Avon was turning his attention to the next level of delegation to make this transition work, the setting up of practical training in the niceties of modern gadgetry, the likes of which the average Delta had never seen anywhere but on viscasts. Striding along the corridor to the morning room, he heard an almighty racket. Not being a stupid man, he did a complete u-turn to avoid the conflagration between his father and Vera insisting, by the sounds of it, that his study was the perfect place to turn into a playroom for the children. Barely restraining the urge to tiptoe, Avon made his escape, only to run, almost literally, into his mother.

“Ah. Good morning, Mother,” he said, more than politely considering the expression on her face.

“Good?” she blustered. “There’s nothing good about it. What good could there possibly be with these...these...people hurtling around my house, putting their dirty hands all over my things?”

“Their hands aren’t dirty, Mother,” he replied with grit-toothed restraint. “The children were all bathed last night and believe me, after the conditions they’ve been forced to live under, the adults were only too happy to use the hygienes themselves.”

His mother actually sniffed, her face twisted in revulsion. “I don’t dare sit down in my own house for fear of what I might catch.”

Avon bit his tongue, refusing to allow his mother to provoke him as she had when he was a child or a hormone-riven teenager.

“One can only guess,” his mother went on, pushing Avon’s patience, “what these people have carried in on their persons.” She shuddered, elegant in her real silk dress that had cost more than the average Delta family could earn in a year but that she wore as a ‘housedress’. “Lice, all manner of parasites...”

“Mother,” Avon said with wearied impatience, wondering anew at how a woman like her had produced a man like him, “the only parasites in this house are you, Father and Geoff. And if you can’t bear to have these people here, then you are perfectly welcome to leave.”

“Well! How dare you speak to your own mother in that tone of voice!” she demanded, translucent lawn handkerchief brought out to flutter delicately at the corner of her eyes. Oh, god, Avon thought, wishing he was anywhere but here, she’s going to start to cry.

Right on schedule, the first drops appeared to drip, artistically, down the unlined cheeks of an Alpha matron on first-name terms with her reconstructive surgeon. “How could you say such a thing to me?” she wailed, but carefully, her voice controlled to perfect pitch.

“Because, Madam,” a cheerful voice came from behind her, “it’s nothing but the truth.”

“Nanny!” Lady Waylz screeched, shocked into commonness. “You may consider yourself dismissed. I shall speak to the arbiter immediately, and I assure you, without references, you shall be hard put to find another position at your advanced age.”

“Dismissed, am I?” Nanny inquired with velvet vitriol. “Throw me out at my age? I’m afraid you can’t. You see,” she went on with open, insubordinate glee, “I no longer work for you. I am now a full employee of the transitional government.”

“Yes, she is,” Avon put in, knowing no such thing but determined that it would be true as soon as he got his hands on Vila again.

“Don’t be preposterous, woman,” Lady Waylz remonstrated, hauteur going full blast. “You are not permitted to change employers...
“As of half an hour ago, oh, yes I am,” the former indentured servant gloated. “All contracts are now null and void and I’m free to go wherever I want to.”

Another thing he had given less thought to than the softness of his sheets and the luxury of his bath: where the hell had his brain been since he’d come back Upstairs? It was no excuse that indentured servants were as much a mundane part of his life as furniture. He had no more excuse for that than he did not following up on the reallocation orders. His mother still bustling, the din from his father and Vera rising geometrically, the servants no longer required to remain...

“Nanny, dear,” Avon broke in on his mother’s apoplectic fit, his best smile burnished to a blinding brightness, “I don’t suppose I could persuade you to do me the great favour of joining my employ to run this house, just until we iron out all the kinks?” The unprepossessing vision of Dev popped into his mind, along with some of the less savoury details of Dev’s little perversions. “Well, most of the kinks,” he amended, taking his old Nanny by the arm and moving, uncaring, away from his birth mother.

“Kerr!” she shrieked from behind him, the stridency breaking his stride.

“Yes, Mother?” he said, politely enough.

“You have forgotten to whom this house belongs? Your father and I—”

“Father and you have no say in the matter,” Avon butted in rudely, this brief encounter cementing the complete lack of mother-son bonding between them. “In case you haven’t noticed, there has been a revolution, Mother. And when was this ever anything but a showpiece? A place for you to show off your belongings? Oh, look, there’s a genuine Chippendale. And there’s a Monet.” Years of buried bitterness overtook him, darkening his voice, all the old angers of his unwanted childhood flooding his face, his fury enough to frighten his dragoness of a mother. “And look, how quaint, over there’s the child genius at his computer.”

“Kerr, I—”

“Don’t say a word,” he hissed to this woman he had never dared love. He stood there for a moment, until a tug on his arm turned him, pulling him away from the temptation to inflict wounds on someone who, uncaring for him, was impervious to his barbs.

“Come along, dear,” Nanny was saying, taking him as firmly in hand as when he’d been five and on the verge of tears at something his parents hadn’t said or cared to do. “Why don’t we have a chat with Cook and Thatcher and see if we can’t perhaps persuade them to stay on until we get ourselves sorted out?”

“Of course,” he replied, allowing himself to be gently eased away, a lifetime’s curses corroding him like heartburn.

“I’m sure Cook will stay—if her husband can join her. He’s a handyman and general factotum over at—”

Details, more details, until Avon was drowning in the minutiae of running homes and hostels and clinic, the details for schools, remedial classrooms, exercise facilities, crèches, aptitude testings, adult education and retraining, feeding an indeterminable number of new mouths—and finding a way to make sure that the lower levels were kept running properly before the upper levels had another systems failure.

And amidst it all, tumbling through him like dice, merest chance guiding which facet would land when, were thoughts of Vila, and darkly, threateningly tempting, thoughts of Blake.

One thing, it seemed, to decide to give Blake up as one would a drug and as he had, before. Still another to resist the urge for another fix, to cauterise the need for just once more, the ache to find out what was happening.

Nighttime, the daylights dimmed into Dome twilight, and then lower, into full night, only the automatic guide-lights flaring briefly, dimly, with the passing of footsteps. Children, over-tired and over-excited carried screaming to bed, the very last scream of ‘but I’m not tired!’ unfinished before sleep won the battle. Adults, moving around quietly, furtive, fierce discussion heard from behind his parents’ door, Geoff whining, Sîan gone since this morning, her newfound freedom more intoxicating than the designer drugs she and her friends had smoked behind the science labs at school.

Vera, somewhere, singing to herself as she
walked through this marvellous palace that was now, unbelievably, her home. Jak, next door, talking quietly, his bedroom door left open so that he and his wife could hear the children who had never before slept apart from them. Nanny, her footsteps light across his ceiling as she settled in for the night, then silence from there as well. Jak stopped murmuring, and Meri tiptoed back from one last check on the children. A toilet flushed, and then Vera closed the door of her very own, private bedroom behind her.

Silence.

And not a sign of Vila. Not a word, not a message, gone as if it were the horrible night of that raid again. Avon lay in bed, the soft sheets and abundance of blankets across his chest, his arms folded behind his head. Abruptly, he moved, pushing himself out of his bed, an old woollen dressing-gown pulled on to cover his nakedness. He was not, he told himself firmly and with more than a tinge of self-disgust, going to lie there staring at the bloody ceiling again. There were ways for him to find out where Vila was, and what had happened to Blake. There might even, a twinge of guilt pricked him, be a way for him to find out when Jess had had her baby, the one whose feet had pressed so alive against him when he had thought Vila dead.

He could find his way around this house blindfolded, the faint glow of the nightlights making it easy for him. Father’s study, where the most powerful of the house computers sat squat upon a desk of real wood. The screen lit his face with glimmering glow, words and codes flashing rapidly, marching before him in mathematical precision. He accessed what he could, hacked what was barred him, read everything he could get his hands on. There were no finders for Blake, nothing to automatically load the information he needed, but Avon finally found it, buried away under a mountain of unrelated documents.

Blake, it seemed, was to be held for trial, but not the clean, impersonal justice of the Alphas and their Arbiters, computers to weigh a man’s soul. This was to be ‘by his peers’, the Delta system, inaccurate, prey to whim and emotion, but the only thing the Deltas and even the Gammas would trust. The charges made for unpleasant reading, the list of transgressions longer than even Avon would have made. There, the very last of the hidden text, was the information Avon had preferred not to admit he was looking for. Blake’s location, Vila’s idea of poetic justice, perhaps, to put Blake back in the same complex that had held him for his transportation on the London.

Avon knew the area well, knew precisely which corridors would take him there, which ones would then lead to the spaceport, and a ship, and freedom. For Blake, definitely, but not for himself. He had, after all, made not one, but two promises. But still, it was there, whispering to him, the same subliminal note of a ship around him, taking him between the stars, and all he had to drown the siren song out was the daily mundanity of life sorting out the problems and squabbles of a horde of family.

Not exactly the life he had dreamed for himself so many years ago, when he had risked parental displeasure to sneak in here and read the forbidden books on the grown-ups’ computers.

But then, he had hardly dreamed of having not one love, but two, and both of them men. He had excelled at design, although his tutors never knew that his skill was the result of hours spent drawing men, erotic images he would hold in his mind as he held his cock in his hand. Later still, even as late as University when he’d put such things behind himself and forced himself to grow up, to mature into a man, he had assured himself with all the fervour of the truly afraid, that he was not a catamite. But then, in his youth and his not-so-youth, it had all been sex, fumblings in the dark, skilled manœuvres in hostelries, anonymous encounters on business trips. And now? Now he suffered from an embarrassment of emotional entanglements, two very different men pulling him in two very different directions, but neither one leading him towards anything his own class would consider normal.

He could replay the scene in his mind, Blake admitting that he was no more ‘normal’ than Avon, whispering it low so that none but Avon could hear. And Vila, declaring it to the world, kissing and loving him in front of his family, putting everything he valued up as collateral for Avon’s safety.

How could Avon possibly resent Vila after all that?

How could he not?
A swipe of his hand, then fingers blurring, Avon accessing and hacking, jumping across codes, uncovering the hidden texts with an ease that belied so-called computer security. It didn’t take him long until he found it, the notations of where Vila had been and what he’d done, his schedule for today, tomorrow and more days than Avon could contemplate.

The stars, or food distribution.

Romance, or the promise he had made Vila.

Distantly, a sound rippled along the corridor, drawing closer, the steps familiar, instantly recognisable. Vila, tired from the sound of him. The computer idled into silence and Avon was equally as quiet as he followed Vila’s retreating footsteps along the hallway to the kitchen. The hiss and click of fridge and cupboard, the splash of water loud in the preternatural calm of the night.

“God, Avon!” Vila gasped, clutching at his chest with one hand, the other putting the spilling glass back on the countertop. “You gave me a hell of a fright. What are you doing still up?”

“Would you believe waiting for you?” Avon asked lightly, intently watching this man he had promised to spend the rest of his life with.

“Chance’d be a fine thing,” Vila muttered as he leaned against the counter and mechanically spooned the soup he was too tired to warm into his mouth. “The only reason you’d be waiting up for me is because you know where I’ve just been, right?”

“Partially. But I couldn’t sleep even before I found out where you were going.”

“Yeh, yeh, I know. Yer’ve apologised, yer’ve let me fuck yer, even said the magic words, in’t yer?” Vila replied, exhaustion leaching any expression from both face and voice. “Yer’ve done yer bit, so why ’ang around now, eh?”

“What the hell are you talking about? Do you honestly think—”

“Right now,” Vila interrupted, shoving past Avon, “I think we’ve both done more’n enough thinkin’ an’ all I want now is my bed.”

“Vila!” Avon snapped, grabbing at the other man.

“Le’ go! An’ keep yer voice down—you’n me’s the only ones awake.”

“I want to talk to you, Vila.”

“Yeh? ’Ow nice fer yer. Well, I don’ wanner talk ter you, Kerr old pal old chum. An’ I already told yer everythin’ I ’ave ter tell yer. So good night.”

Avon wasn’t about to let Vila away with that, not after his oblique references about Blake. He wanted to know what Blake had said, in detail, although he could probably guess. Tales, no doubt, of what they had done when Vila was suffering down in the Delta Warrens: Avon had a sudden, vibrantly clear picture of Vila’s face when the other man had found out what Avon had permitted Blake. And when Vila had woken up this morning and found, apparently, that he needed more than another of Avon’s promises to keep him happy.

Their bedroom door closed behind them, ablutionary noises coming from their en suite bathroom, Avon got into bed, aware that Vila was too tired for the effort to kick him out. The whoosh of a toilet, a brief splatter of light before...
that, too, was switched off, and then footsteps, reaching the bed before Avon’s eyes had readjusted to the dark. The bed, dipping, sheets pulling tight, then falling lax, Vila moving as if Avon weren’t there.

“I want to know,” Avon said into the slow-breathing darkness.

“Wouldn’t we all.”

“Just tell me what he said, Vila,” Avon murmured, lowering himself until he had Vila cradled in his arms, his own groin to Vila’s buttocks, his chest to Vila’s back, the shoulder blades pressing too sharply.

“Don’t, Avon,” Vila whispered, and the devastation in his voice was too much for anyone to ignore, least of all a man who admitted to loving him.

“Don’t be such a bloody idiot,” Avon whispered affectionately, rubbing his cheek against Vila’s soft hair. “For all we know, everything Blake told you is another one of his wild imaginings of Roj Blake, Saviour of the Universe and Fearless Leader.” Not that Blake would have to fabricate very much: the truth was more damning than any lies could be, but there was a chance, admittedly slight, that Blake had held some of the truths in abeyance. Weapons, naturally, to be used later or used now to hold Avon hostage, but either way, it would at least be something to know that Vila had been spared the worst of it.

“Blake said….” Vila had to stop, refusing to betray any of the old weakness this man had once been witness to. “He told me all about you an’ ‘im, an’ about ‘ow you let ‘im fuck you.”

Avon suppressed a groan, that revelation worse here in the intimacy of darkness than in the bustle of daytime.

“About ‘ow you’d come round ‘is ‘ouse an’ ‘stay till he kicked you out. An’ ‘bout tha’ time you couldn’t wait to get somewhere private like an’ you locked the door ter ‘is office an’…”

“Don’t,” Avon said, regretting all of this, not wanting to hear any more of Vila’s pain.

But the words couldn’t stop, lanced from Vila, seeping from him. “Kept on tellin’ me about ‘ow you’d jest go on an’ about ‘ow much you was in love with ‘im, after he’d fucked you an’ you’d be lyin’ there wiv ‘is cum still in yer…”

Avon’s hand covered Vila’s mouth, shutting the sounds off, leaving them in beaten silence. He placed small kisses on the nape of Vila’s neck, the other man smelling of Avon’s own soaps and lotions. “I wish I could tell you that everything he said was a lie.”

“Yeh, I know,” the reply as much a sigh as words. “Bu’ none of us can mend the past, can we?”

No matter how much we might want to. No matter how much we might wish ourselves to be different.

“You’re really in love wiv ‘im, aren’t you?” Vila, asking the unaskable.

Avon tightened his grip around his mate, pulling Vila in until his own warmth blended into the other man’s enervated chill. “A lamentable lack of taste, I admit.”

“None of us get to choose who we love. No point in hittin’ yerself over the head for that, is there?”

“A congenital defect.”

“Somethin’ like tha’. Speakin’ of congenital, did yer know Jess ‘ad ‘er baby?”

“I thought she must have,” Avon replied, displeased with how long it had taken him to wonder about Jess and that baby he had felt. “Was it a boy or a girl?”

“Boy.” A pause, Vila swallowing audibly once, twice, before trusting himself to go on, Avon unsure if it were misery or fury that had threatened Vila’s voice. “She’s named ‘im Kerr. Said she didn’t want none of us ter forget where you came from an’ where we’d all be goin’ one day, thanks ter you.”

And meanwhile, I was drugging myself with the opium of sex with Blake, drunk on my own emotions. At that moment, Avon was far from proud of himself, and less proud still when he acknowledged what he’d been doing when Vila had come home not half an hour before. But still, he had to know, and then he would put it from his mind, never ask again. “What about Blake?”

“Saw the notice abou’ ‘is trial, I s’pose?” He didn’t have to wait for Avon to agree, continued knowing more than he wanted to. “It’d ‘ave ter be a Delta trial, an’ yer know wot we do ter traitors.”

Death, no transportation for the trapped grades. “Yes,” he said for something to say, something to fill the ashen silence between them. “Well,” Vila began, had to stop, went on
again. “I’m probably goin’ to regret this, wot
with one thing an’ another, Servalan as well,
but’…”

“But what?”

“Bu’ I couldn’t face watchin’ you seein’ ‘im
go through a trial. An’ I knew you’d ‘ate me if
Blake was guilty an’ we offed ‘im.”

Avon thought of his own tangled, treacher-
ounous emotions, his own very mixed feelings for
Blake. “I don’t know that I would.”

“Yeh yer would, believe me. So I let ‘im go.”

“You what?” Avon shouted, sitting bolt up-
right in bed, the lights coming on full. “You let
him go? Why the hell…” But he didn’t need to
finish, his answer right there on Vila’s face, the
damning traces of tears scrubbed at by hands
that shook, fierce pride scowling to erase the last
of the visible misery.

“Wot else was I supposed to do, eh, Avon?
You’ve made a proper charlie out of me up
‘ere—what’s everyone gonna say when it comes
out that Avon Restal was sneakin’ round to
Blake half the time, not leavin’ till jest before
daylight? ’D you expect me ter stand there an’
such while you rescued ‘im? Cos you wouldn’t
gle ‘im be put to death, I c’n tell yer that right
now.”

And Avon couldn’t deny it. Had been thinking
about it, even as Vila had come home. Had been
considering, abstractly perhaps, going with
Blake, back to the stars, and adventures. Back to
the Liberator, where he belonged.

“Will yer put the bloody lights out?” Vila
complained, one sinewy arm coming up to cover
his eyes.

No, Avon was tempted to say. Was tempted
to demand that Vila look him in the eye and say
whatever it was that was yet to be said, whatever
it was that made Vila crave the balm of darkness.

“Lights out,” and he heard Vila’s sigh of
relief. “There’s more,” he said, absolutely certain,
unable to believe that even Vila would have
done what Avon was unwillingly beginning to
suspect. “Tell me,” he whispered softly, gather-
ing Vila into his arms, suspicions stretching
towards certainty with the way Vila clung to
him, with the way Vila buried his face against
Avon’s neck for a long moment, mouth wet and
warm and fervid, pressing a kiss where Avon’s
pulse beat strongly.

“I leaked word to some of the Alphas who’d
want to help Blake, so they’ll rescue him, instead
of it looking like I just unlocked his door and let
him walk,” Vila told him, every breath, every
word carefully controlled, a monotone of fact,
recited as if it meant nothing to either of them, as
if their fates didn’t hang on this. “Once they’ve
released him, they’ll make straight for the
spaceport—Blake promised that he’d leave
Earth, let the rest of us get on with it. I don’t
think he had any idea of what had been going on
down with the Deltas,” the calm voice went on,
while Vila shivered with repressed shudders,
his arms locked tightly around Avon. “He was
quite horrified, really. Anyway, he’s going to go
off and help the outer planets fight off the Fed-
eration fleet, which is useful, because Servalan’s
been regrouping since the first Rebellion.”

Avon waited, less than calm, more suspended
in the moment, not thinking, absolutely refus-
ing to feel, one hand absently stroking Vila’s
hair.

“So I told ‘im…” Vila’s voice broke, the accent
shattering and abandoning him. “I wasn’t goin’
ter tell yer,” he muttered unevenly. “Bu’ I can’t
no’. I told ‘im ter wait fer yer till an hour before
light-up.” A deep, shaken breath, and words
that cost more than Avon cared to imagine. “’E’s
waitin’ fer yer, Avon.” An attempted laugh, all
the more painful to hear. “’S more yer style, in’t
it? Hurtlin’ round the Universe, shootin’ the
baddies. More like yer than stuck ‘ere playin’
’ouses, in’t it?”

“And is that your opinion, or Blake’s?”

“Oh, we agreed on tha’,” the scything bitterness
hinting at other disputes, other unsettled
arguments. “Bu’ wot me an’ ‘im think isn’t wot
matters, is it?” A suspiciously damp sniff, a
squaring of the shoulders, Vila resolutely re-
leasing Avon, setting him free of more than just
Vila’s embrace. “You don’t have to stay, you
know,” Vila was once more the polite, the
uninvolved pseudo-Alpha. “If you want to go,
I’ll understand. And it’s not as if a Delta ceremony
has any legal weight, is it?”

“But it has a moral weight. I gave you my
word—”

“And d’you think I want yer stayin’ with me
because it’s yer fuckin’ duty?” Vila turned on
him with a snarl, eyes dangerously bright.

“Wot’re plannin’ on doin’? Lying there, lettin’
me fuck yer, wishin’ it was ‘im? Tellin’ me yer

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loves me cos yer know I need ter ‘ear that? Cos you know ’ow much I love yer? Is tha’ wot yer goin’ ter do ter me? Well, Kerr Avon, you can just keep yer fuckin’ pity—"

Vila was up and out of the bed before Avon could stop him, leaving him tangled in the bedcovers Vila had shoved aside.

“So you have my entire future mapped out for me, do you, you and Blake? Fighting over me again. Tell me, was I a bone of contention or was I the prize pot for the winner?”

“Wasn’t like that,” Vila said, seemingly unaware that his precipitous movement had put the lights on again and every ounce of his agony was there on his face for Avon to see. “Honest. I only wanted ter do wot was right fer yer. Give’s yer another chance.”

“And all this from the man who spurns my pity, yet is so generous with his own. Oh, for god’s sake,” he burst out, not even his pride enough to make him add to Vila’s anguish. “Get back in here before you turn blue from the cold.”

“No.”

Exasperated, hanging on to that to insulate him from his own pain, his own confusion. “I won’t touch you,” he snapped sarcastically.

“S’not you I’m afraid o’.” Almost a whisper, laden with more longing than anyone should have to endure.

“Oh, Vila,” Avon said, ambushed by tenderness. “Get back in here.”

Vila climbed slowly back in, huddling himself against Avon’s warmth, touching him here, and here, with all the wonder of the first time, with all the melancholy of the last. “This was never somethin’ you wanted, yer didn’t ’ave any choice, trapped… Those promises yer made.”

“Yes.”

“They were given ter me, so they’re mine now, in’t they?”

An odd way of looking at things, but true, on some levels. “You could say that.”

“Well, I’m givin’ ‘em back to yer. All promises’re null an’ void.”

“I never go back on my word—”

“Yer fuckin’ will this time, d’yer ‘ear me? No more ‘avin’ ter live like us, wiv everyone knowin’ yer business, an’ no more ‘avin’ ter lie about where yer sleepin’ at night.”

“That still doesn’t mean either one of us has to leave, does it?”

A long silence, marked by the beating of their hearts. “Do yer love me?” Vila said against Avon’s mouth, not meeting his eyes, willing to let Avon lie to him on this, even if he needed the truth in everything else.


“S’pose that’s summat, eh? Avon…”

“What?”

“If yer’d never met Blake…”

Oh, please, don’t let him ask me that.

“Would yer’ve fallen in love with me? Instead of lovin’ me like a pal, would yer’ve been in love with me?”

“It’s not exactly hearts and flowers. No romantic bouquets of red roses,” Avon temporised, hoping that would be enough, knowing Vila too well to depend on it.

“I’ve given yer roses,” Vila whispered against Avon’s neck, slow, loving kisses pressed to the smoothness of skin. “I’d give yer anything yer wants.”

Including my freedom, Avon thought, cradling Vila’s head close to him, wishing desperately that he could control his emotions the way he could his mind. How much more sensible to adore Vila the way Vila adored him. How much more reasonable for his heart to pound with excitement at the sound of Vila’s voice instead of Blake’s. Vila loved him, respected, admired, even doted on him. As for Blake… From there he had lust, and love, of a sort, if always to be hidden and never given voice for fear of so dangerous a truth to Blake himself.

He felt Vila push himself free, let him go to find that Vila was not leaving after all. “Avon…”

“It’s all right,” he murmured, lying still and passive under Vila’s aching loneliness, knowing too well the pain of being in love with someone who cannot return such pyrotechnic adorations. Knew how strong the need to tell the idol how much love there is for them, if only they would take it. “Whatever you want to say, it’s all right.”

“There’s hours yet before lights-up,” Vila said carefully, distractedly playing with a lock of Avon’s hair that curled, too long, just behind his ear.

Avon felt it was the least he could do, in this painful twilight of indecision. He spread his legs, tacit permission given.
“No, tha’s not wot I want. Will you fuck me? Please, Avon? It’s been a long time…”

It had been, longer than any time since they’d begun all this.

“Why are you so certain I’m leaving?” he demanded, needing to know when he himself was still ensnared by the opposing possibilities, both of which led to pain and disappointment, albeit of very different natures.

“There’s nothin’ ter keep yer ‘ere, that’s why,” Vila told him sadly, any further comments stifled by Vila’s mouth on Avon’s, his tongue pressing into Avon’s mouth, his hands caressing Avon in the ways that man liked best. Guaranteed response, touches that had never failed, and so Avon permitted them. If Vila needed this so much, then he would have it.

Avon didn’t stint on his response, giving Vila even more than he had the night before, throwing himself into this, abandoning them both to the mindless, painless pleasure of loving.

“Come here,” he murmured, stopping Vila’s descent, drawing the other man up for more kisses, determined to make this last. He kissed Vila deeply, taking his time, lingering over this texture, returning for that caress. He enveloped Vila in his arms, felt the tensile strength of Vila returning the embrace, the sensation so similar and yet so profoundly different from his times with Blake. Vila’s cock was slow to harden, his mind and body too tired to react with the sprightliness of youth, his response sluggish, reluctant, as if his body felt guilty about taking such pleasure from so painfilled a time.

“It’s all right,” Avon whispered again, kissing his way down Vila’s chest, sucking sweetly on Vila’s nipples, nipping at them, laving them, his hands so busy with Vila’s cock, the mobile pleasure of his balls. He licked his way lower, not minding that Vila was so passive. It was appropriate that this time should be for Vila, Avon’s gift to him.

Vila still wasn’t hard, his penis still a small, sad thing in Avon’s hand. Avon took it in his mouth, sucked on it, caressed Vila between his legs, there, where Avon would enter him, later, when Vila was flying high on pleasure. The cock in his mouth pulsed, grew a little, pulsed again, gradually taking up more of Avon’s mouth, the taste filling him. He eased away, his hands replacing the heat of his mouth, pulling the foreskin back to reveal the sensitive head, Avon’s tongue flickering into the slit the way that never failed to drive Vila wild. Tonight, there was a surge of blood, Vila’s cock almost hard, Avon working harder to give Vila enough pleasure to overcome Avon’s lack of assurances, to overcome Avon’s own doubts.

This, he thought as he licked the length of vein along the underside of Vila’s cock, his cheek pressed gently against Vila’s balls, this could be the last time I do this. He kissed the tip of Vila’s cock, took the near-hardness into his mouth, nursed it with every ounce of skill he’d mastered in all those months with Vila.

If only, he thought, it was only a simple choice between Vila and Blake. Or if only it were Vila ‘stealing’ the Liberator. If only, if only… In his mouth, Vila’s erection was fading slightly, and Avon knew a moment of dismay: Vila would be humiliated if he couldn’t maintain an erection, would always wonder if disappointment had pushed Avon away or if pity and guilt had made Avon stay. Oh, no you don’t, he thought, sucking harder, doing magical things with his tongue that usually made Vila groan and buck, you won’t let him down tonight.

One finger stroking across the tight pucker of Vila’s arse, Avon used his mouth, kissing and licking his way from Vila’s cock to the cleft of his backside. He couldn’t do what he wanted to do, shifted Vila around until the other man was on his knees, presenting himself in a way that reminded Avon of how he’d been with Blake, of the wantonness he had displayed for his one-time leader.

There had never been the slightest hint of shame in what he’d done with Vila, because he’d never felt vulnerable with him. Only with Blake, Avon’s heart too near the surface to endure the casual, unintended cruelties of a man who was not in love with him.

And how many times had Vila known that? Avon remembered Blake penetrating him, giving him no time to adjust, and remembered anew all the times he’d done that with Vila, carried along by his own lust, Vila’s lust and the callousness engendered by his perception of Vila’s vast experience with this.

Of course, he had preferred not to dwell on how hide-bound Delta moral habits were, with their obsessions of fidelity and serial monogamy.
Just how much experience had Vila had before him? It stung him that he’d never even bothered to ask before he’d used Vila like a slag.

“I’m sorry,” he said as he kissed his way down Vila’s spine, the bones too prominent, so different a terrain from the days when they’d lived together as Deltas.

“You can’t ‘elp it,” Vila’s voice broke in on him, an answer given when none had been expected. “That’s just the way of it.”

Delta fatalism, the only armour Vila had left, and Vila was using it to protect Avon. Typical, Avon thought, wrapping himself around Vila, so bloody typical of the little fool. Under him, he felt Vila shift, knew the other man was trying to reach the lotion in the bedside drawer. A movement of Avon’s hand, and Vila was in his palm, lax, unaroused, but still wanting Avon in him. It was the sort of emotional need Avon understood only too well. Lying facedown on the bed, Avon positioned himself so that only his hands were touching Vila and only his mouth could reach him. Gently, soothingly at first, he licked the tight pucker of Vila’s arse, hearing the other man’s gasp of shock. This was not something Avon had ever done, was not something he had given much thought to doing. But Vila had done this to him, perhaps in the hope that it would endear Avon to the idea of being fucked, or perhaps only because it could be such an acute, liquid pleasure. Under his tongue, the clenched muscle was slowly relaxing, opening little by little, and in Avon’s hand, Vila’s cock was firming, each caress of Avon’s tongue being rewarded by a slow throb from it. Delicately, only the barest tip at first, Avon penetrated the dark hole, surprised that there was no unpleasant taste, grateful that Vila was obsessive about cleanliness, given half the chance. The muscle eased a little more, and Avon thrust in deeper, eliciting a moan, and another as he thrust again, ever deeper, until he was stabbing his tongue inside Vila, making Vila wet and slick and ready. Avon’s fingers filled Vila.

“Ready?” he asked, hands coming to a standstill, fingers still deep within the heat of Vila’s body.

“On my back,” Vila muttered, trying to turn without loosening Avon from inside him.

“Need to see me again?” Avon asked, understanding more than Vila would ever want him to.

Vila didn’t reply in words, using his body to speak far more eloquently. He placed himself on his back, legs spread wide, knees lifted upwards, Avon’s fingers keeping him stretched and ready, the pinkness of the hole edging the darkness that led to the heart of his body. Avon scissored his fingers wide open, slowly pushed in one finger from his other hand, even more slowly spread Vila until Avon could actually see where he was going to press his cock home. He glanced up from the beautiful sight, caught a glimpse of the love in Vila’s eyes, frowned as Vila turned away, hiding himself even as he willingly exposed himself sexually. The hard-won erection wilted a little, Avon swooping down to suck it within himself, Vila responding with some of his old enthusiasm. Satisfied with the response, Avon eased Vila into precisely the right pose and positioned his cock, erect and ready with no more attention than the need to make Vila happy, this time if no other.

“Ready?” he asked again, a droplet of precum oozing from his cock to slide, easily, inside Vila’s arse. Avon didn’t need Vila to say anything, couldn’t possibly mistake the hunger in Vila’s body, nor the way Vila was arching up to him, Vila’s legs closing round Avon’s waist as Avon sank, quicker than he’d intended, into Vila’s exciting heat. It was Avon who moaned, and Vila who ran a soothing hand across him, and Vila who pushed upwards, drawing Avon all the way inside him, until they were skin to skin, Avon so deep inside Vila he thought he would surely drown. He tried to slow down, but Vila refused, setting the pace himself until Avon yielded and pounded into him, fucking him hard and fast, carrying them both towards orgasm, a rivulet of sweat running down Avon’s spine, a rivulet of tears running from Vila’s eyes to disappear, unseen, into the hair at his temples.

Avon leaned over him, canting Vila so that he could get deeper inside him, Vila’s legs bent
double. Eyes opening in defiance of the onrush-
ing pleasure, Avon bent down a little, his mouth
merging with Vila’s in a kiss that was almost
brutal in its hunger, Vila devouring Avon,
consuming him as if this way, he could never
completely lose the other man, no matter how
far apart they might be.

Avon could feel orgasm threaten, reached his
hand between their bellies, grabbing Vila’s cock,
milking him, kissing him, fucking him, giving
Vila everything he possibly could, until he felt
the liquid burst over his hand and Vila’s arse
spasm round him. Avon held himself perfectly
still, gazing as Vila was lost in his pleasure,
listening to Vila croon his name. Then it was
over, too fast, Vila staring up at him, then moving
again, encouraging at first, and then demanding,
giving Avon no choice but to fuck him, to take
his pleasure from Vila’s willingness, Vila’s hands
so busy on him, Vila’s arse so tight around him,
clenching and unclenching, better than any hand,
the sensation utterly exquisite. Avon dissolved,
his seed pouring into Vila, splashing hot and
wet deep inside him, salt enough to replace the
tears.

Time passed, and Avon was aware once more,
his limbs being arranged so, and so, Vila’s mouth
licking clean the few traces of Vila’s own semen
where it lay on his skin, mixed with the sweat of
their lovemaking. Loving hands, reverently
touching him, covering him with blankets, soft
lips kissing his eyes closed.

“Go to sleep,” Vila told him, and Avon fought
not to listen.

“Computer,” Vila’s was saying, and Avon
could have wept for him, “set alarm for two
hours before lights-up.”

Then Vila was pulling him into the tenderest
of embraces, and whispering to him, things
that had been said before, in passion and in
the heat of anger, endearments hurled as
weapons, love used to wound.

Avon allowed himself to be petted and pam-
pered, permitted Vila the luxury, drifted in the
glow of so much love, both that which he felt for
this dearest of friends, and the abiding passion
with which Vila adored him.

And somewhere, a token of Vila’s love would
even now be escaping, would even now be
making his way to the port to wait, for a minute
or an hour, for Avon to come to him, for Avon to
reach for the stars and yield to his own abiding
passion.

Eyes closed in a pretense of sleep neither man
believed, Avon felt the soft press of kisses, knew
the precise moment when Vila couldn’t hold
back the humiliating tears any more, for he was
abruptly let go, and Vila turned from him,
leaving Avon feeling alone, for all that there was
someone not ten centimetres from him. In the
dark, once more facing the blank unhelpfulness
of a ceiling, Avon lay and thought of the future,
and the past, and of Vila, and of Blake and the
miseries of unrequited love.

He felt the tremble of Vila’s body, knew the
other man was lying there, fighting the
emasculatory urge of tears, knew that Vila was
making this as easy on Avon as anyone could.
So much love, Avon thought, moved more than
he could say by Vila’s strength and Vila’s gen-
erosity. Reaching out, he tried to take Vila in his
arms, to help ease at least the worst cutting
edges of the pain, but at the first touch of his
hand on Vila’s hunched and tensed back, Vila
bolted from the bed, running unclothed to the
bathroom, naked even more in spirit than in
body.

And wished, enough to make a pact with any
devil in any hell, that he knew what his decision
would be two hours before lights-up, when
Blake would be waiting for him and Vila would
be setting him free.