





“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 backside, 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.”







