



by Sophia Mulvey

Hope for a new tomorrow

Vila lay in one of Scorpio's sleep cubicles and tried to relax. 'Relax, huh!' he thought to himself as he sipped at the last of his wine. He hadn't been able to relax in months, not since that mess with Zukan, or that other incident, the one he tried his dammedest not to think about.

He took another sip of the potent wine and sighed at the warm feeling it sent rushing through him. That was better. Not good, mind you, but better. Good would be getting so drunk he couldn't remember his own name. There hadn't been the opportunity or the liquor for that for quite some time now. With Xenon Base gone he doubted that there would be in the future either. Especially now that Avon had announced his intention to go after Blake.

It didn't take a genius to realize Avon knew more about Blake being on Gauda Prime than he was letting on, but if the others weren't calling him on it, far be it for Vila to do so. Up-ending his glass, Vila drank the remnant and resisted the impulse to lick the glass. 'All gone', he thought, looking forlornly at the empty bottle.

Resting his head back against the cushion he closed his eyes and tried to block out the near constant bickering of the others. Seems that was all any of them did these days, snip and snigger at each other, except for Avon. Though he was never big on conversation, lately Avon had been practically mute, only talking when it was absolutely necessary to do so. As for himself, Vila kept away from the others as much as possible, seeking only the company of his bottle. Now his bottle was empty. Empty, like his dreams, his hopes. Empty. Like his life.

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Vila came to with a start as he felt the pressure of someone sitting on his flight couch. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and tried to focus on the man at the foot of his couch. It wasn't Tarrant or Avon, yet the funny looking little man was vaguely familiar.

"Hello, Vila. It has been a long time," the little man said.

Vila scratched at his head and looked around the flight deck. Seeing the others, apparently frozen in place, only made the thief more confused.

"Is this a dream?" Vila asked.

"Sort of."

"Do I know you?"

The little man chuckled, which set off the most amazing chain reaction of ripples along his rotund abdomen. "I would be offended that you don't remember me, except I know you were meant to forget."

Before Vila had a chance to ask what he was talking about, the stranger snapped his fingers and Vila remembered everything.

"Claron. You're my guardian angel, Claron."

"Yes, that's right," Claron smiled.

"Never thought I would see you again," Vila said somewhat belligerently.

"Neither did I."

"Not sure I want to either," Vila said, pouting. "This is all your fault. I had a chance to get out of this mess, a chance to start over with a totally new life. You talked me into staying."

"You made your own decision, Vila. When you wished you had never been born, I merely showed you what would have happened to your companions. You are the one who changed your mind and decided to stay with your friends."

"Only because you told me my life would count for something. You lied."

"Did I?" Claron asked.

"Blake left us, Jenna is probably dead, Cally is dead, and Avon is crazy. He tried to kill me, you know?"

"Yes," Claron agreed, "but I didn't lie, Vila. Your being here has helped. In fact, that is why I came again."

"What do you mean?"

"You and your friends are approaching a crossroad, Vila. You, my dear little friend, are in the unique position of being able to influence the future course of events."

"I can what?"

"Change the future, Vila, but you must act quickly."

"Act how?"

"Let me show you something," Claron said.

"Wait! What are you going to do?" Vila asked anxiously. "Oh no, not again," the thief moaned as the flight deck took on a surreal quality.

Re-animated, the Scorpio crew, including an image of Vila, sat at their battle stations.

"Power dive the atmosphere. Fake it. Make it look as though we're out of control," Avon ordered tensely.

"I may not have to fake that!" Tarrant returned through clenched teeth as he fought to control the damaged ship.

"Do it!" Avon rasped.

"All right, everybody, stand by for a rather sudden visit to Gauda Prime," Tarrant cried out.

Vila watched as the tableau unfolded before him. He saw himself, Dayna and Soolin teleport off and land safely on the surface of Gauda Prime. He saw Avon reluctantly teleport with Orac, leaving Tarrant to attempt a landing. He watched Tarrant go down with the ship and be rescued by a much changed Blake, using the assumed name of Olag Gan. His fear built as he watched Avon find him and the girls as they hid in a crumbling shack.

The thief's anxiety was little appeased as he watched his group as they tracked Blake back to his base, then snuck inside. It was all wrong! Even his image self could see that it was wrong. Blake couldn't be a bounty hunter. Not Blake!

The scene before him shifted again and he was now watching the disfigured Blake argue with a man named Deva, who was apparently his second in command. So, it was all a ruse. 'Thank God,' Vila thought, breathing a sigh of relief. Everything would be all right.

But if everything was going to be all right, then why did he still have that painful lump in the pit of his stomach? Sneaking a peak at Claron did little to reassure him. "Claron?"

"Watch, Vila."

Vila watched. He watched and his feeling of dread grew, as a misinformed Tarrant broke away and reunited with Avon and the others.

Avon stood, slightly apart from the others. The ancient projectile weapon he had stolen had already been fired. His victim, a pleasant-looking young woman lay on the floor, dead and bleeding.

Then Blake was on the stairs, as impressive and imposing as ever.

"Is it him?" Tarrant asked.

Vila's image-self nodded. "It's him."

"He sold us, Avon. All of us. Even you," Tarrant said viciously.

"Is it true?" an anguished Avon asked, lowering his rifle and stepping forward.

"Avon...it's me, Blake..."

"Stand still!" Avon put his hand out to warn the rebel off. "Have you betrayed us? Have you betrayed me?"

"Tarrant doesn't understand," Blake started, moving forward.

"Neither do I, Blake," Avon said, disbelief written on his tortured features.

"I set this all up!" Blake said moving closer.

"Yes!"

"Avon, I was waiting for you," Blake said.

Vila watched in horror as Avon raised his weapon and fired, three times, first into Blake's chest, each successive shot hitting lower as Blake, single minded as ever, continued forward. Avon stood immobile, his forgotten weapon now aimed at the floor. Blake reached out, his hands sliding down Avon's arms as he slipped to the floor.

"Avon...", Blake's final gasp echoed through the room.

"Blake! They've found us!" Deva cried as he ran into the room. The place is under..." Deva paused in shock as he noticed Blake, lying immobile and bleeding on the floor, at Avon's feet. "What happened?"

A young woman, who had entered with Blake, stepped forward. "He happened," she said angrily, pointing at the stone-like Avon, who still stood, frozen over Blake's body. The woman, Arlen, Vila realized, not sure how he knew her name, then raised her own weapon and shot Deva.

"Be so kind as to drop your guns - all of you. You and this nest of rebels are now prisoners of the Federation. Your friend Blake said he couldn't tell anymore who was Federation and who wasn't - he was right, he couldn't."

"You're a Federation agent..." Tarrant said.

"I'm a Federation officer!"

Vila watched his image slowly inch forward. "Ah, now, look, I've never been against the Federation. I mean, I've only been along for the ride," he heard himself say as his image quickly sidestepped around the oblivious Avon, and went to stand face to face with the young woman. "I'm not even armed. You can't kill me - I'm completely harmless and armless."

Dayna tried to reach for her weapon and was shot for her efforts. Shocked into action, Vila then knocked Arlen unconscious with a well placed blow to the side of her head.

"Sorry," Vila mumbled as he bent to pick up her gun. Any pride the thief may have felt faded as he watched the room fill with Federation troopers and saw himself fall, shot in the back.

Soon they were all dead, lying where they fell. All, save Avon, who swung a leg over to straddle Blake. Vila stood, numb with shock and anger, as he watched the insane smile grow on Avon's face. If the computer tech had talked, Vila knew that he would once again hear the mad, honeyed voice he had first heard on Egrorian's shuttle. The voice, which more than anything, had warned him to run and hide.

Avon raised his weapon and Vila closed his eyes against the sight. Unnerved by the silence he opened one eye a crack to see what had happened.

He was back in his cubicle, the others once again frozen in their positions on the flight deck, and Claron, a sad expression on his round face, sat at the foot of his bed.

"That is the future?" Vila asked weakly.

Claron nodded. "If you do not change it."

"When?" the distraught thief asked.

"All I can say is soon."

"But what can I do?"

"I can't tell you that, Vila. I have already broken all the rules by giving you this warning. All I can say is that you, and you alone, can change what will be. You are the cornerstone, Vila. You must do something, and quickly, before it is too late."

Vila looked back at his friends. Tarrant leaning over his controls, Dayna and Soolin caught in mid-argument, Avon at his superior best, conversing with Orac. He looked back to ask Claron one last question, but the angel was gone.

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"Claron, wait!" Vila cried out as he abruptly sat up.

The two women stopped their argument to look at him. Tarrant snorted derisively and glared at Avon. The computer tech studied Vila for several moments, an odd expression in his eyes, then returned to his work.

"I told you we shouldn't let him drink, Avon. Now he's having D.T.s," Tarrant snickered.

Avon looked up again, his eyes moving from the pilot to Vila then back again. "Vila has his reasons for drinking, Tarrant, and I am not about to stop him."

"How about telling the rest of us, then?" Soolin demanded.

"No, it is none of your affair," Avon said sharply as he stood and started toward the back section of the flight deck and the limited privacy it provided. "Let me know when we are in orbit around Gauda Prime," he called back over his shoulder.

Within a few moments the women went back to their argument, and Tarrant went back to his piloting. Once again forgotten, Vila slid out of his cubicle and followed after Avon.

"What do you want?" Avon asked sharply. He was not at all pleased at being disturbed.

"We need to talk," Vila ventured.

"About what?"

"You know," the thief said vaguely.

Avon put down the sheaf of printouts he was wading through and studied the thief, his conscience assigning a specific meaning to Vila's vagueness. "I didn't think you would ever have the nerve to bring that up," Avon said. "So you are tired of sulking quietly, are you?"

"What? Oh, that's not it, Avon," Vila said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"No?"

"No. Look, let's forget about Malodnar, for now."

Avon was surprised enough to let it show. "Why?"

"Because this is more important, that's why." Vila said in exasperation. "I don't suppose you have noticed, Avon, but you haven't exactly been thinking clearly for sometime now."

Avon arched an eyebrow at Vila. "That is a disturbing critique coming from the greatest thinker of our time."

"I am serious."

"Really?" The computer tech's eyebrow threatened to disappear into his hairline.

"Yes. Besides, I've just about forgiven you anyway. I know you never really meant to kill me."

"What?" Avon exclaimed incredulously. "Vila, you really are a fool. That is the stupidest thing I have ever heard you say. Of course I meant to kill you."

"Then why am I still alive?" Vila asked quietly.

Avon paused, nonplussed. "Once I found the neutron particle there was no need to kill you," Avon said hesitantly.

"But you were already leaving me, alive, before then. Come on, Avon, you knew where I was. You had to -- there wasn't anyplace else for me to hide, yet you never even looked in that storage compartment," Vila insisted, clinging tenaciously to the subject.

Tired of trying to bluff his way any further, Avon decided to try another approach. "Perhaps I was trying to lure you out."

"Why?"

"Perhaps I wanted to give you a chance to die like a man."

Vila snorted. "Huh! Know what I think? I think you were unconsciously giving me a chance to jump you, if I could. You were heading for the airlock. Once you were inside, I could have jettisoned you easily. That's what you were really up to, wasn't it?"

"Seems I was a bit hasty before, Vila. Without a doubt, that is the stupidest thing I have ever heard you say."

"Come on, Avon, admit it. You have been trying to get yourself killed ever since you found out that Grant bitch betrayed you."

"Shut up, Vila."

"Sure, that's always the answer, isn't it? 'Shut up, Vila'. Well I won't, not this time. There is too much at stake." In an unprecedented move Vila reached out and grabbed the astounded computer tech by the shoulders. "Avon, you have to listen to me!"

"Do I?"

"Yes, I insist," Vila said.

"In fact," Soolin added from the doorway, "we all insist."

Dayna and Tarrant nodded in agreement from behind her.

"This is between Vila and myself," Avon growled. "It is none of your concern."

"We think that it is," Dayna said.

"They have a right to hear what I have to say," Vila agreed.

"Fine," Avon said, brushing off Vila's hands as he stood. "If they are interested in what you have to say, by all means, tell them. I will be on the flight deck."

"Avon, shut up and sit down and listen to me, now."

Amazed by Vila's outburst, Avon did as he was told, giving the thief a sly smile. "Very well, Vila, you have our undivided attention," he said in a voice smooth as glass.

"All right, but I want you all to promise you will hear me out, without interruption. That means you, Tarrant."

Affronted by Vila's snapping at him, Tarrant opened his mouth to hurl an insult, then thinking better of it, he nodded in agreement.

"We are going to find Blake," Vila began.

"That is no revelation. I have already said as much," Avon interrupted.

"I said no interruptions, that means you too, Avon." Vila stood up and paced in agitation. "Blake pretending to be a bounty hunter is just that, a pretense. What he is really doing is rounding up resistance fighters on the run and absorbing them into his own resistance group."

"If that is the case then our joining up with him will be to our mutual benefit. What's the problem?" Tarrant asked.

"You are interrupting, Tarrant, and the problem is that if we continue on the way we are going, our initial meeting will be a disaster and end with our deaths," Vila informed him.

"What are you talking about?" Soolin asked.

"What I am talking about, my lovely Soolin, is that if we don't start doing things differently we will all be dead within 48 hours, and the countdown has already started. I've seen the future. If we continue on to Gauda Prime on our present route we are going to run into a pirate ambush. Scorpio will be badly damaged and plummet into the atmosphere."

Vila continued on relating the events Claron had shown him. As he spoke his normally fear-filled voice took on a new authority. The others watched and listened in horrified fascination at Vila's eloquent and graphic recitation. When he was finished, Vila sat beside a pale and quiet Avon and hung his head in exhaustion.

"You make it sound so real," Dayna said in awe.

"It is real! It is what will happen," the thief said.

"How do you know?" Tarrant asked.

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Try us," Soolin said.

"Claron told me."

"Who?" Dayna asked.

"Claron, my guardian angel," Vila said in a whisper.

Tarrant, Dayna, and Soolin exchanged doubtful looks but Avon studied Vila thoughtfully.

"Is this the same Claron who visited you once before?" Avon asked.

"You remember that?" Vila asked in surprise.

"Yes, Vila, I remember," Avon said.

"Look, all of you, it doesn't matter if you don't believe me, just agree to do things differently. Tarrant, change our course so we avoid the ambush. If Scorpio isn't damaged then we won't crash. That may be all it takes. Better yet," he said excitedly as he turned back to Avon, "use Drac to contact Blake's base. Talk to his second in command, a man named Deva, to set up a meeting with Blake away from the base. Avoid the Federation trap." Seeing only the continued, doubtful looks on the faces of his crewmates Vila pleaded, "Even if you don't believe me, just humor me, please."

"All right, Vila," Avon said softly. "Tarrant, change course. Let's approach Gauda Prime from the other side, shall we?"

Before Tarrant could object, Scorpio's alarm went off. As the crew rushed onto the flight deck Scorpio rocked under the impact of a laser blast.

"Slave, activate force wall!" Avon barked.

+I am sorry, Master. I did attempt to warn you earlier but no one responded to my signal. We are under attack by three vessels of undetermined origin.+

"Yes, Slave, we know that," Avon said.

"Now tell us something we don't know, like how we get out of this?" Dayna asked.

"Soolin, arm neutron blasters," Tarrant ordered.

"No wait!" Vila shouted. "That is what we did - do - you know, do something else!"

"There is nothing else!" Tarrant shouted.

"Tarrant, how about putting Scorpio into a roll?" Avon suggested.

Tarrant stopped, mid-objection, a beautiful smile breaking out on his face. "That just might work. Everybody strap in!"

Tarrant executed the roll with consummate skill. Scorpio spun out of the way just as the pirate vessels on either side of her fired their blasters, catching each other in the crossfire. Freed from the trap and relatively unscathed, Scorpio pursued the remaining craft and made quick work of it.

"Well, Vila, how was that?" the pilot asked.

"Better, much better. Now contact Blake, please, Avon?" Vila asked.

"Do it, Tarrant," Avon ordered.

"Why me?"

"Let us say I want to find out just how accurate Vila's vision is," the computer tech answered smoothly as he engaged Drac's activator key. "Drac, open communications with Blake's base, you have the coordinates."

"Must I remind you that it is a waste of my valuable resources to use me as a simple communication device."

"Consider it noted, now make contact and relay visual to the pilot's station," Avon instructed.

"This is Hagon Base to unidentified space going vessel. Please identify yourselves and state your business."

"This is trading vessel Cygnas, Captian Travers here. I would like to speak with the person in charge," Tarrant said, studying the face of the pretty young woman who filled the screen.

"My name is Klyn, I am the duty officer. How may I help you, Travers?"

"I would like to speak to your superior. I am trying to contact one of your bounty hunters and I need his assistance," Tarrant said, giving Klyn one of his most charming smiles.

"Watch Commander Deva is in conference at present. Which of our people were you interested in?"

Vila tugged at Tarrant's sleeve, winning the pilot's aggravated attention. "Ask for Gan, Olag Gan," Vila prompted in a whisper.

Tarrant gave Vila a 'you had better be right look' before speaking. "I am interested in contacting a man known to you as Olag Gan. I have some crewmembers on board who believe they might once have known him, under another name. They are most anxious to renew their acquaintance."

Klyn paled. "One minute, please," she said hastily, blanking out her transmission.

When the picture returned Klyn had been replaced by a thin wary-looking man. "I am Deva, what is your interest in Gan?"

"As I told your duty officer, some of my crewmates believe he might be an old friend," Tarrant told him calmly.

"What are the names of these crewmates of yours?" Deva asked.

Avon's hand shot out to activate the mute switch before Tarrant could answer.

"I wasn't going to tell him," the pilot said, giving Avon an offended look.

"Of course not," Avon said with a tight smile. "Just tell him that we met him under the auspices of the Federation and once shipped out on the Federation ship London together."

Tarrant disengaged the mute switch and looked into Deva's worried eyes. "My crewmates prefer to remain unidentified, however you may tell your man Gan that the Federation brought them together and they served together on a Federation ship called the London. They have been searching for him since the Andromedan invasion, when they lost contact with him."

"I have heard enough, Deva," a deep baritone voice said out of visual monitor range. The ruffled Deva was pushed out of the way and replaced by a face which was only vaguely familiar to Tarrant. "You must be Tarrant. We have been hearing a lot about you. Let me talk to Avon."

Taken aback by the brusque manner of the man on the viewscreen, Tarrant felt himself moved aside, much the way Deva had been. Avon stood in his place, glaring in anger at the monitor.

"Hello Gan. Funny how you have changed," he said drily.

"Have I? You look much the same, my friend. Long time, no see."

"Well now, it hasn't been for lack of trying on our part."

"I wasn't sure you would want to see me again, not after the way we parted company. I also needed some time to myself, to reassess my priorities."

"And have you?" Avon asked.

"Yes," the scarred, embittered image of Roj Blake replied. "Oh, I still feel strongly about my cause, but I no longer put it before people."

"That must be a refreshing change."

"Ah, Avon," Blake laughed at the disconcerted frown which appeared on the computer tech's face as he used his name. "Don't worry, this is a protected transmission. I have missed you, Avon."

"What about me?" Vila asked as he stepped into camera range.

"Vila!" Blake said with fondness. "Oh yes, I have missed you as well. In fact I set this whole operation up in the hopes of luring you in."

Avon's jaw clenched as he searched Blake's image for any indication of betrayal. Vila looked from the monitor to Avon and nervously edged forward.

"Ah, Blake, do you think you could explain that last comment?"

"Explain?" Blake asked, confused.

"Well, you know, you posing like a bounty hunter and all ... we wouldn't want to misinterpret anything you said," Vila explained.

"Misinterpret? Oh yes, I see what you mean," Blake chuckled. "I have been posing as a bounty hunter to pick up Federation dissidents, and have been very successful, I might add. We are over 400 strong and growing daily. I have been more visible lately in the hope of attracting your attention. I need you, Avon. I need your sharp mind and your sharp tongue. We used to be quite a team. What do you say?"

"I am not convinced, Blake," Avon growled.

"When were you ever?" Blake laughed. "Come on, I need you, all of you."

Avon quickly glanced at the faces of the others, noting the hope in their expressions. "We would be willing to discuss it."

"Thank you, Avon. I knew I could trust you."

"Did you, Blake? Then you are still a fool."

"And I put it to you, Avon, who is the bigger fool, the fool who leads or the fool who follows him? Why don't you teleport down? Orac can get the coordinates from our computer."

"No!" Vila shouted practically in Avon's ear, making the computer whiz wince. "Blake, have you recently picked up a young woman named Arlen?"

Puzzled by the thief's outburst, Blake nodded. "Yes, just this morning, in fact. Do you know her?"

"No, and I don't want to. She is a Federation spy, your base has been compromised."

"How could you possibly know that, Vila?" Blake asked, a frown on his face.

Vila stammered, unsure of what to say.

"How Vila knows is unimportant. Suffice it to say he seems to have a very reliable source. If he says this Arlen person is a spy then you may rely upon it that she is."

Blake turned away from the monitor momentarily and shouted some orders to his subordinates. "I've seen to it, Avon. It seems I need to relocate my base," Blake said wryly.

"Do you have a back-up?" Avon asked.

"Yes. I don't suppose you would care to give an old friend a lift? We could talk over old times, and maybe, if you are interested, the future," Blake asked.

Avon looked up. "Well?" he asked the others, seeking their eyes in turn.

One by one they nodded in agreement.

"Vila, how would you feel about teleporting down to Gauda Prime to bring Blake a bracelet?" Avon asked.

Vila looked more enthusiastic than he had in years as he bolted for the bracelet storage rack. "Ready," he announced in record time.

"Yes, I can see that you are." Avon nodded to Dayna at the teleport controls. "Vila is on his way to you with a bracelet. We'll be looking forward to seeing you."

"Likewise," Blake returned, breaking off communications with a smile.