

No Exit

by Deborah M. Walsh

"He's been like that since Gauda Prime," a deep male voice, with a touch of a lilting accent, said softly, sadly. "Not a flicker of recognition."

The visitor shook his head. "A waste," he commented automatically in the tone of voice used by neutral and untouched observers. "Such a great mind ..." he added, making a notation in his hand-held memowriter.

"Yes," agreed the first man, his voice full of genuine compassion and personal pain.

"Still," the visitor added uneasily as they lingered before the reinforced window, the naked display of real emotion leaving him feeling a little brittle, a little less human in his inability to share it, "you know what they say -- 'where there's life, there's hope'."

"Hmm. They also say 'where there's life, there's threat'," reminded the guide with a haunted glance over his shoulder as he nodded faintly, recognizing his visitor's discomfort, and leading him away from the observation window.

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The stunbolt hit him square in the back, wrenching him down to his knees. He fell leadenly to the floor, his eyes dropping to stare, mesmerized, at the bloody, lifeless face of the man he once thought to call friend. A curious chill began to spread out from the point of contact, and he welcomed the sense of life draining slowly away. It was fitting somehow ... I have always felt our deaths were somehow linked ...

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The guide leaned heavily on his cane, sighing. To his visitor, he looked careworn, tired beyond imagining. As though suddenly remembering his role as host, he brightened slightly, a fragile sort of merriment that would shatter into darkness at the slightest provocation. With a desperately jaunty gesture, he led the visitor further down the hall.

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Fragments caught at the edges of awareness, ephemeral, bright images, too soon gone to be caught and understood. He sighed in frustration. In his mind, he sought to reach out, to capture one of the flitting, brilliant images, hold it close, draw warmth from its fading light. He was so cold, so very cold ...

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"Like a child," breathed the visitor, his brows drawn together in a curious mixture of simulated compassion and genuine relief -- that he was not the bent little figure with the childlike face in the room beyond the door, that he was not the man who played listlessly with bright-painted objects and toys without sharp edges.

"Like a child," repeated the guide, nodding his head in agreement, blinking his one good eye: to halt the flow of tears too often shed here, in front of this door. Abruptly, he urged the visitor on.

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Sounds, growing stronger, more distinct. That was odd -- surely he was dead. Scuffling, moaning, the rasp of fabric dragging across a rough surface ... Was this hell? This strange floating behind the edge of understanding, beyond the edge of sense?

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"She refuses to see," explained the guide gently, his attention drawn to the dark-skinned woman who pressed her fists, tight balls of gnarled flesh, against eyes that would never open again. "She's seen too much ..."

The visitor had no words at all, the chill vision before him reaching in to touch him where he could not remember having sensation at all ...

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A voice, a memory from a distant past. "Avon?" No, there's no one here by that name, you've dialled the wrong number. Everyone has gone ... "Avon? Can you hear me?" Yes, damn you, I can hear you -- can't you leave me be, even in hell? "Vila -- Tarrant? That must be Dayna. And who --"

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The figure vibrated with the force within its muscles, straining, fighting, every last erg of human energy directed into those two powerful arms gripping a wheel of scarred and dented plastic. The head tilted back occasionally, the mouth opening to emit a soul-searing, animal cry of frustration and denial.

"Caught, in a moment of time," said the guide in a voice full of pity. "Trying to turn back the clock, change the course of history. Always trying, never succeeding ..."

The visitor nodded, open-mouthed. Too much to bear ...

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"Avon, damn you, wake up! You're not dead -- you can't be dead!"

"Blake?" another voice asked, querulous and confused. Vila? "Blake? How?" the voice dissolved into a sob.

A low gasp from somewhere, a cry of pain -- an anguish he'd heard once before, rent from the depths of hell. "Soolin!" it cried.

"So that's who she was," the Blake-voice answered.

Heartbeats, growing closer, the stink of blood, the grating sound of bones moving one against the other... "Is he ...?"

"No. Not dead. Never dead," the Blake-voice said softly. "Never."

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"And she ...?" the visitor asked in a low voice, a voice that seemed to have never known laughter.

"Crushed. She'll never walk again."

"Never is a long time," the visitor answered, trying to recapture the self he'd lost along this corridor.

"So is forever," replied the guide, his face hidden in shadow.

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"Why aren't we dead? Why aren't you dead?" demanded a voice, high-pitched and searching. The Vila-voice.

Somewhere, someone shifted, sighed a tired, lifeless sigh. "I can't die," the Blake-voice said at last. "No more than you."

"What do you mean?" growled another voice, a voice new to the dream. "Why can't you die?" The Tarrant-voice. Why couldn't he see them in his dream? Why was there only darkness, filled with tantalizing sounds?

"I found a drug, a serum, on the Liberator. ORAC identified it as a kind of immortality drug --"

"The fountain of youth!" barked the Tarrant-voice, its tone disbelieving -- and desperate.

"Yes," the Blake-voice admitted. "After Gan died ... I injected it into the food processors. I didn't want to be responsible for the deaths of my crew again, I ..."

"We cannot die?" another voice, the voice that had so lamented Soolin, asked, awestruck, frightened.

"No one who spent time on board the Liberator, no one who ate from the food processing units ... no, you cannot die," the Blake-voice answered softly, leaden, old, infinitely weary. "We can never die."

"Cally," breathed the lamenting voice. He had it pinpointed now ... it was Dayna's voice. "Cally died on Terminal --"

"No," said the Blake-voice. "She cannot die ..."

"But ... we left her there ... under the rubble ..." choked the Vila-voice.

"And there she has remained," the Blake-voice replied, the voice full of indefinable anguish.

From deep within him, the cry began, screeching, panic-stricken, clawing up from the depths, deeper than hell itself ... it reached his lips to erupt out of his mouth unuttered, a desperate cry of silence as his eyes shot open to view the world through an unending haze of madness perfected ...

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The guide stood with the visitor, staring over the windswept surface of the artificial planet Terminal. The Links had passed into history, like everything else on Terminal. Well, not everything, the guide thought bitterly. Some things don't pass ...

The visitor extended a slightly shaking hand to him, his face pasty, as he tried to reassemble it into something approaching normality. He fumbled with his memowriter with the other hand. It always affected visitors this way, mused the guide, even journalists who think they've done their homework before the fact. Nothing could prepare them for eternity ...

"Thank you, Blake," said the visitor in a low, tremulous voice. For an awkward moment, they stood there, staring at each other, and then the visitor turned toward his ship.

The man who had once been Roj Blake turned, leaning heavily on his cane, and returned to the living museum of his shattered dreams to resume his eternal vigil.

Forever is a long time.