

None Goes His Way Alone

by Mary A. Fall

"Avon," Blake glanced up from the hard-print he'd apparently been studying since entering the flight deck a quarter hour before.

Relieved that Blake had decided to stop trying to be devious, Avon looked up from the navigational checks he'd been running while on watch. "What do you want, Blake?"

Blake bit back the smile that threatened to form at the typical reply from Avon. It was certainly a relief from the hostility he'd received much of the time since Gan's death. "Have you ever considered having another go at the Federation Banking System?"

"Have you ever decided whether or not we are actually going after Star One?" Avon dodged the question with another question.

"There's been no word on Docholli's location," replied Blake, dodging the question in his turn, still torn between the pain of Gan's death and his need to complete the destruction of the Federation. "What about the banking system? Haven't you any need for revenge?"

Avon forced back the image of Anna that rose at Blake's words: He had put her and all of his softer feelings behind him long since. "I have no need for the system's wealth so long as you can be kept from destroying the Liberator in some foolhardy raid. Why should I risk my life for more?"

Although aware that he was being unfair to Avon, Blake pressed on, knowing that he had to pique the man's interest to fit into his plans. "Not even to prove that you could have succeeded? Or," Blake pretended to return his attention to his hard-print, "Perhaps you never could have succeeded in the first place."

The computer tech's normally pale face went ruddy with barely suppressed rage as he stepped from his station to confront Blake by the flight deck couch. "What do you want me to say, Blake?" he hissed, clenching his hands furiously, "That I never intended to finish what I started, that I didn't want..." He bit down hard on that last, not ready to speak of Anna. Staring blindly at Zen's screen, Avon fought to regain control of his temper, while Blake wondered if he hadn't gone too far already.

In a more even tone, Avon continued at last, "I should never have begun if I couldn't take the job through to completion. We were betrayed by someone we trusted..." He revealed a great deal to Blake in those painful words. "Now it would be simpler than before merely because I've had time to develop my skills further."

"How long?" asked Blake softly, hesitant to restore the fury to Avon's thoughts once again.

"How long to complete the job?" Blake nodded as Avon turned to face him once again. "A week standard time, perhaps less."

"Two days?"

"Two..." Caught unawares, Avon realized that Blake had won again, breaking through his defenses as always. Why did he stay with the man? Curiously he answered, "Perhaps. Where? Not Earth?" Even Blake would not have the audacity to pilot Liberator to Earth to tamper with the banking system there. At least not until after he decided whether the destruction of Star One would create the chaos necessary for success there.

"No, not Earth." Blake rose from his seat so that they were able to face each other levelly. "Noroton."

"Noroton?" Knowing that he had lost this round to Blake, Avon leaned against the force wall generator and asked, "Why?"

Delighted to have won Avon's assistance without escalating the hostilities between them, Blake plunged into his explanation. "Noroton is a major center in the resistance movement. Rebel activity has stepped up in recent months so that the government has had to place more and more restrictions on the population. This has, in turn, led to increasing numbers of volunteers for Avalon's forces."

"Naturally, the rabble don't realize the rebels are causing the difficulties in the first place," muttered Avon sourly, sure that the words would aggravate the other man.

Determined to keep his own temper, Blake continued as though Avon hadn't spoken, "The governor of Noroton has reported to the Federation Council that his planet is in a state of rebellion and requested military support of his government."

"Which would cause Avalon to lose much of the support which she has so recently gained."

"Yes, many will submit out of fear of retaliation from the Federation," retorted Blake, stung by the barb.

"But you feel that a timely disruption of the monetary system will prevent this return to normalcy?" Avon considered the idea, unconsciously playing with the finger which had once worn Anna's gift. Did he want revenge badly enough to take the risk Blake suggested? It was a challenge. But would accepting the challenge raise too many ghosts? "Why only two days?" he asked abruptly, banishing Anna from his conscious mind once again.

"Servalan has already ordered Space Command to move on Noroton. According to Avalon's informants the fleet will be there

within the next six days. And it will take us at least two days to reach the planet if you agree."

"You mean we aren't already on course for Noroton, Blake?" asked Avon, amused by the sudden shift in tactics by the rebel leader.

Blake rubbed his throat tiredly. "I wanted your agreement first, Avon. There is no chance for success without your participation." And he had noted the increased reluctance of his crew to follow him of late, particularly since the governor's conference which had failed so tragically.

"I should thing not," murmured Avon, enjoying the look of annoyance that flashed across Blake's face. "Two days. I can't give you any guarantees."

"All I ask is that you try." Blake sat again, sure now of his victory.

"Very well. I will give your rabble a chance. It should be interesting to see what they do with it." Avon retreated to his station, needing time to completely subdue his ghosts so that he would be able to make realistic plans.

"Thank you." Blake turned to face Zen's screen, saying, "Zen, initiate previously calculated course for Noroton, standard by ten. Confirm with arrival time."

+Orbit will be achieved in 47.3 hours.+

Avon flashed a quick smile towards Blake, relieved that the man hadn't changed too much. "Congratulations, Blake. I'm glad to see that you are not slipping after all."

"With you to keep me on my guard, how could I?" Blake grinned as Avon took offense and retreated into dignified silence. Life seemed almost normal aboard Liberator once again.

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"I will take Vila with me or no one." Avon faced Blake stonily when they all met to discuss final plans for the raid on Noroton's banking computers.

"It's far too dangerous," spluttered Blake, caught off-guard by this determination after Avon's earlier capitulation.

"You've convinced me," muttered Vila, unhappily aware that Blake would have to give in to Avon on this as he did most times lately.

Avon ignored Vila's comment as he continued to stand up against Blake. He'd thought through his plans very carefully and would not tolerate any deviations considering the tightness of the schedule. "It would be far more dangerous with you along to play nursemaid, Blake."

Aware that Blake was about to explode, Jenna intervened, "Why, Avon? As you are so fond of saying, give us an explanation." Without conscious effort, the woman managed to imitate Avon's tones with deadly accuracy.

"And why is it less dangerous with me along? You're always saying I'm useless." Vila protested again from his corner of the flight deck couch.

"Very well. I will explain, although I should have thought my reasoning clear enough for even Vila to follow." Avon stood stiffly, a little apart from the others, wondering why no one could ever accept his plans as blindly as they accepted Blake's. "You have several points against you, Blake. The banking official intercepted by Avalon is of middle rank, correct?"

"Correct." Blake kept his tone neutral,

unwilling to escalate the discussion into a shouting match.

"At that rank I am allowed a single assistant. You are many things, Blake, but you are not the stuff of which subordinates are made. We would be spotted as a plant immediately by any security forces we might meet within the banking building itself."

"And they'd accept me as a subordinate, of course?" complained Vila, sure he had been insulted.

Avon flashed the other man a slightly amused smile as he continued. "Vila, as he has said, is ideally suited to the role. Plus his peculiar talents may be of use if we must go through any security programs in the system."

"That's not your only reason though, is it?" asked Cally, her eyes searching Avon's face as she tried to read the truth behind those carefully blank eyes.

"It is not." Avon acknowledged Cally's perception with a slight nod. "Blake's face is too well known. Servalan will have agents in the bank, even on the skeleton schedule during the period we will be there. He would be recognized."

"Your face is also known," countered Blake, remembering the way Servalan had memorized Avon's face during the search for Imipac. "They will be watching for you as well."

Shaking his head, Avon relaxed as he realized that victory was within his grasp. "That is unlikely if I am not in your company. My face was never in the viscasts, nor Vila's, as our trials were far more private affairs. Without you we have a far better chance of success than with you."

"He has a good point, Blake," said Jenna before the rebel leader could marshal any further arguments.

Blake knew when to admit defeat and yielded to his united crew. If even Jenna supported Avon, he had no chance of winning them over. "Very well. I'll notify Avalon to have someone meet you and Vila when you teleport..."

"No!" Avon opposed Blake adamantly once more. "You will tell Avalon only that we are handling the problem. She is to continue to hold the Federation man until she hears from you. I want no well-meaning assistance from any of her amateurs."

"You may need back-up..." Blake began a protest that died unspoken as he caught a glimpse of pain in Avon's brown eyes. Avon had been betrayed back on Earth, but by whom? Del Grant had hinted at much, but Avon had never offered any more information.

"I failed before because I trusted people I couldn't be sure of. That almost cost me my life and did cost me..." he stumbled over Anna's name and substituted, "...cost me my freedom. Vila and I will go in alone, do the job and get out. Then Avalon can tell her people what she pleases. Not before. Agreed?"

For a moment Blake considered fighting Avon on this, but both Cally and Jenna's demeanor indicated that they would find another method of giving Avon the back-up he didn't want. "Very well. I will say nothing more to Avalon until you return, but in exchange, I insist that you give me regular reports of your progress. At the least sign of trouble I intend to pull you both out. Agreed?" He wanted no repeat of Albion where Avon had nearly thrown his life away by removing his bracelet.

Following Blake's thought easily, Avon

nodded. He knew how far he could push Blake. "Agreed."

"Good." Blake turned to safer ground, aware that the mission had very nearly been lost before they'd ever begun. "Cally, how are you coming with the identisks for Gar Logan and his assistant?" The Auron had displayed an unexpected flair for forgery in her deft production of proper documentation for her friends.

Smiling, she handed Blake a packet which held two disks which contained vital statistics for Avon and Vila. Avon would be Gar Logan, a name close enough to his own that he would not be too likely to stumble over it. Vila became Jared Ushton. "You knew who would go?" asked Blake after running through the information.

"As Avon said, Vila was the logical choice." Cally enjoyed the startled look Avon gave her as he wondered once again if she couldn't read minds.

"I see." Blake's good humor restored by Cally's action, he handed Avon the disks, asking, "Your detector shield will protect us while Liberator is in orbit around Noroton?"

"Of course." Avon pocketed the disks, wondering if Blake wouldn't try another ploy to accompany them to the surface.

Blake surprised him by saying simply, "Good. We'll be able to approach Noroton undetected by the Federation. That should be in approximately ten hours if Zen has done his sums right. I suggest that you and Vila get all the rest you can meanwhile. You won't have much time for it once you've teleported down. Cally, you and Jenna also, for the same reason. I'll take the watch." He needed time to consider a way to keep Avon under surveillance without bruising the man's pride. As the others filed from the flight deck, Blake heard Vila still protesting and Avon coolly putting down each excuse. "It isn't fair," wailed Vila as they stepped out of earshot and Blake was left alone with his own confused thoughts.

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"You're certain that you want only Vila?" asked Blake once again as they approached the teleport deck after Liberator had reached Noroton.

"Quite certain, Blake," repeated Avon, avoiding Blake's gaze, afraid that the man would spot his hidden fears about the whole mission. "We will check in with in six hours and every four hours thereafter as you requested, providing we can do so without arousing suspicion. A sudden heroic attempt at rescue could blow the entire mission."

"Some leeway, Avon, but don't tax us either. We have no way other than your reports to be certain that you and Vila are safe. Remember that."

"I will." Avon refrained from mentioning that Blake himself was frequently guilty of falling out of communication during missions and Blake found himself grateful for the restraint. As they entered the teleport deck, they could still hear Vila protesting the trip to Noroton.

"It's an alien planet, Cally. It'll have alien bugs. I'm very susceptible to alien bugs. I could get sick and give us all away while I was raving in a fever." His hopeless eyes revealed that the protest was more a formality than any real effort to escape his fate.

Cally confirmed his hopelessness as she said with a smile, "I thought of that, Vila, and checked into the local medical history." She lifted a tray to the teleport console,

revealing two glasses filled with a milky-white liquid. "This will give you both an immunity to any effects the local food and water might have on you."

"What is it?" asked Avon distastefully, hating to put anything he didn't understand into his system.

"Vitamins and minerals mixed with soma. It should do the trick," promised Cally with an odd look in her eyes.

"I'm convinced." Vila brightened at the mention of soma and gulped down the contents of his glass with only a slight grimace at the taste. "Not bad, although it could do with a bit more soma to kill the taste."

Avon watched the process to see if Vila had any overt reactions to the mixture, then took his own glass and drank the contents. "Better than your last concoction," he commented, placing the glass on the tray.

"Thank you." Cally took her place at the console. "Are you ready now?"

"We might as well get it over with," sighed Vila as he and Avon stepped into place.

"Good luck," called Blake as they shimmered from sight, then he turned to Cally. "Did it work?"

"I'll let you know in a moment," replied the Auron as she studied a new piece of equipment beside the console.

"Well?" demanded Blake impatiently.

"Yes, there they are..." Cally pointed at the two blips which had appeared on the screen, a scale map of the city. "Your idea worked perfectly, Blake. Avon need never know that we monitored his mission unless it becomes necessary for us to intervene. The drug itself will wear off in a few days."

"Good," Blake grunted with satisfaction. Avon would have back-up whether he wanted it or not. "I'll be on the flight deck with Jenna if you want me for anything."

"Very well." Cally settled into a more comfortable position for the first watch over the teleport and the new tracing screen. One of them would have to remain at this station until the mission was completed.

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Vila trailed Avon through the crowded spaceport, wondering why they had teleported to such a public area. What if someone had spotted them when they appeared? As he worried over what might have been, the answer to his question appeared. "Commissioner Logan? queried a thin, nervous-looking young man.

"Yes." Avon took a perverse pleasure in the quickly suppressed start of surprise that came from Vila. Had the fool really believed they could casually drop in at the headquarters of the Noroton Bank and help themselves to its computer facilities? Then he slid smoothly into the role which had once been his back on Earth. "Your superiors received the message from Earth Central, then. Excellent. There was some concern that communications might have been disrupted by the recent high levels of rebel activity here."

"Things have not reached that point yet, sir," replied the young man, reaching out a hand which Avon ignored. "I'm Brent Dumas, and I've an aircar waiting outside to take you to your quarters. I assume you'll want to rest and freshen up after your journey." His hand dropped back to his side as a brief look of annoyance crossed his face.



"Later." Avon had no intention of wasting time of pleasantries. "I wish to go directly to the bank's computer center. The Supreme Commander does not care to be kept waiting for reports." Avon watched Dumas, trying to discern where his loyalties lay by the mention of Servalan.

"As you wish, Commissioner," replied Brent, trying desperately to hide the anger that surged through him at any mention of Space Command. Damn you, he thought, how can I get word to Avalon of your arrival if you keep me busy escorting you around? As they reached the aircar, Brent added, "We should be at the bank within a half hour."

"That's very efficient of you," offered Vila as he scrambled over Avon's feet to sit as far away from Dumas as possible. The man had an aura of anger against them that the one-time thief wanted to avoid at all costs. When neither Avon nor Dumas replied to his remark, Vila sighed, then stared down longingly at the city he would never have the time to visit.

For his own part, Avon found himself pondering why he hadn't refused the mission. It had every chance of failure, and practically none of success. Dumas was most likely one of Avalon's people from the anger that had flushed his face at the mention of the Supreme Commander. Once he reported to Avalon and learned their identities, he would be underfoot, destroying what little hope remained that this mission could be completed successfully. Unless Blake could be counted on to keep Avalon out of the way. And why had he insisted on Vila as a companion? An assistant wasn't necessary and Vila was as likely to get him killed as Dumas. And he had always worked best alone, hadn't he? Avon glanced down at his hands and frowned

to see that he was playing with his ring finger once again.

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As they entered the computer center after being led through the maze of corridors in the banking complex, Avon began to relax. On first glance the basic technology of banking hadn't been greatly altered since his own days within the system. His estimate of their chances rose and his mood improved considerably. Blake would never say anything if he failed, and that would be far worse than open sarcasm. He had to succeed to prove that he could have done it before.

"All business, isn't he?" asked Brent, trying to draw information from Vila as Avon bent almost lovingly over the computer console. Perhaps he could learn Space Command's timetable since these two were so obviously in a hurry.

Vila shrugged, a slight smile on his lips. "That's Av...uh...Logan for you. Hates to waste a minute." He paled in dismay, realizing that he had almost admitted their real identities right at the very beginning of the mission. Maybe Avon was right and he was an idiot.

"Ushton." Avon had heard the slip and called Vila over to give him a chance to recover what wits he possessed. "I could use some assistance."

"And that's what assistants are for, isn't it?" muttered Vila, rolling his eyes at Dumas, trying to convince the man he was simply a much put-upon helper and not a dangerous saboteur.

Brent watched curiously as Logan gave Ushton a mild rebuke and put him to work on an auxiliary system, away from the main console. Odd, considering Logan's rush to report to

Servalan, that he would choose to work alone like that. Still, the man was obviously an expert with computers. He decided to stay around and see if he could learn exactly which programs Logan pulled. There was always time to report to Avalon later.

The young man busied himself at his own console with work he'd been saving for his next regular duty period. With a bit of care on his own part he might be able to check on the Federation men periodically without their being aware of him.

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Jenna stopped off at the teleport deck on her way to her quarters for a rest. "I thought you might like this," she said, handing Cally a mug of tea.

"Thank you, I was getting a bit thirsty." The Auron sat back, her dark eyes never leaving the two blips on the screen. They'd been stable now for well over an hour and there was still some time left before they were due to report. "What's Blake doing?" she asked as she sipped the hot beverage.

"Going through all that Federation data he had ORAC pull from Space Command, hoping to find any clue to Docholli's location." Jenna sighed as she leaned against the wall.

"You were hoping that Blake would give up after learning that Central Control had been moved from Earth?" asked Cally, knowing that she had also entertained such hopes after Gan had died so uselessly.

"He seemed to have until this whole business on Noroton came up. Now he's adamant about continuing his mission, finishing what he set out to do." Jenna tried to change the subject as Cally's eyes strayed back to the tracer screen. "Don't worry about them so much, Cally. Avon isn't the type to take crazy risks and Vila certainly isn't."

"Perhaps not, but Avon is very much like Blake. He likes to take a project though to completion, regardless of the danger. And there was..." she hesitated, "There was something Avon didn't tell us during the briefing. I'm afraid he might get careless."

"That's what that," Jenna pointed to the screen, "is supposed to prevent. Besides, you should know Avon well enough by now to realize that he never tells everything he knows about anything." She turned to leave.

"Do any of us?" asked Cally, catching the other woman off-guard.

Jenna found herself smiling at the way the alien woman always saw through them all. "No, I guess we're just as guilty as Avon when you think about it." She continued through the doorway. "Blake will relieve you in a couple of hours."

"Thank you." Cally's voice was vague as all her attention centered once again on the two men down on Noroton. "Sleep well."

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Time passed rapidly for Avon as he busied himself studying the intricate programs and planning the first changes required to divert credits to the coffers of the rebels. Let Avalon deal with the angry citizenry later, he thought sourly. It would be an interesting test of the rebels' ethics to see what happened to the funds once the crisis was over.

Long finished with his assignment, Vila was all too aware of the passing time and his growling stomach. Avon might be willing to go without food and sleep to play with a new set

of computers, but he wasn't. But how could he get Avon to listen to reason with that skinny bastard trying to find out if they were more than they appeared to be? "Damn..." he yelled as the probe he'd been using to trace security circuits slipped from his hand.

"What is it, Ushton?" asked Avon, diverted from the close work that had absorbed him so deeply.

"Nothing, sir," began Vila, then as inspiration struck, he continued, "But I'm afraid we'll be making careless mistakes if we continue much longer without some rest. You didn't sleep too well on the cruiser."

Dumas watched the two men, wondering what game they were playing at. He'd managed to check a few of the programs Logan was studying and they were not just research on the bank's soundness. He was doing something more. But what that was, the young man hadn't been able to ascertain. Perhaps if he came back once he'd left Logan and Ushton at their quarters, he'd be able to learn more.

Avon considered Vila's words, checking his own chronometer, and feeling the stiffness in his own body from staying in one position too long. And Dumas was still watching them, seething with curiosity no doubt. "You're quite right, Ushton. I should hate to bring the system down through simple exhaustion." In a lower voice he added, "And our friend there must be impatient to be rid of us so that he can try to learn what we are doing."

"He can't though, can he?" Vila's anxiety broke through the mask of calm he had mustered for the last few hours. "I mean you haven't gone and left a calling card or anything like that?"

"Of course not. Unlike other people, I know how to keep my activities quiet." With the snide reference to Blake, Avon closed down the program he'd been working on, sure that his locks would keep out any probing until it was too late to stop them.

"Like last time?" Vila wished immediately that he had kept his mouth shut as Avon stiffened reminded once again of the cost of his earlier failure.

Before Vila could make things worse by trying to apologize, Avon called Dumas, a falsely genial smile on his face. "I am sorry to have kept you here so long, Dumas. I tend to get overly involved in my work and forget the passage of time. If you will be so good as to show us to our quarters now, you'll be free of us until morning."

"It's been no problem, Commissioner," replied Brent with an equally false smile. "I had work which needed to be done anyway." He quickly closed down his terminal to keep the other man from learning that he'd tried to follow his work. "This way..." He led them through the maze of corridors once again, to an adjoining building where VIP suites were kept for important visitors. At least until the revolution, he thought as he hurried back to the computer center. With luck he'd soon have something concrete to report to Avalon.

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Brent turned from his private communicator with as much frustration as he had done when he discovered that Logan had locked his work against any probing. But why had he done that if he were simply the Federation expert they'd been expecting at the bank? A quick check of the programs selected by Logan had proved them to be deposit records. So why lock off what was being done with those records? It made no sense, unless one were altering... "That's it," thought Brent, "Logan has to be changing records, moving funds from one account to another. And I can't even get through directly to

Avalon," he added, wondering again why her aide had taken his report and then told him merely to keep alert. Had matters gotten worse since he had last met with the rebels? Was Servalan coming in sooner than expected? His excited mind leaped again, putting that thought together with the records Logan was studying so avidly. Servalan had expensive habits, personal and professional. Was she taking funds and diverting them to her personal use before the takeover and more direct Federation control of the bank? It seemed logical to the agitated, young man who found himself opening the secret storage space where he'd been hiding a gun since joining the movement. If it became necessary, he would use it on Logan and his toady.

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"Blake, I need more from you than 'the matter is well in hand.' What is going on? I just received a report from one of my people that the Federation man is there and is acting strangely. He wasn't placated by the same excuses you keep giving me."

"Trust me," said Blake tiredly, glancing at the chronometer. Avon was late with his first report, but that didn't surprize him at all. Damn the man and his need for secrecy.

"I do, Blake, but many of my people don't know you and they are dangerously near panic." Avalon ran a hand through her short, reddish hair. "We've just gotten word that Servalan may appear at any time. The timetable we had seems to have been a deliberate leak to put us off our guard."

"What?" Blake found himself standing as the woman's words sank in. "Trust works both ways, Avalon. Why didn't you tell me this at once?"

"I didn't know Avon was already on Noroton until now," Avalon shook her head. "We've both been at this too long, Blake and we're getting tired and suspicious. I'm sorry. Now, back to business. Can Avon pull it off in a single day? I don't think we can give him any longer than that as we'll still need two or three days to consolidate our position."

"He's due to report in shortly. I'll check with Avon and get back to you." Blake sat again, wondering if Avon would believe that he hadn't been the one to tell Avalon of his presence on Noroton.

"Very well. I've got to end this. We've been on this frequency too long as it is and I have no desire to be traced by the government at this time. Out." Her image flickered from the screen, leaving Blake alone with his thoughts once again. He glanced down at the hard copy of the reports he'd been studying with ORAC's assistance. He knew approximately where Docholli had been six months before. Now he had to make the same choice he'd forced on Avon, whether or not to take his task to completion. Well, that decision would have to be made later. For now, there was Noroton and the delayed report from Avon and Vila. Tiredly Blake left the bridge after having had Zen put up the long-range detectors. Perhaps they'd be able to give a little warning when Servalan arrived.

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"Don't you want anything to eat, Avon?" asked Vila, leaning back from a low table that filled the center of the main room of the VIP suite. If this was how computer geniuses lived, thought Vila, he'd have to look into becoming one.

"Later," replied Avon, hardly looking up from the hand calculator on which was figuring rapidly. With any luck he should be able to complete the job within the two-day time limit Blake had given him, perhaps earlier. A look of triumph touched his eyes as he imagined the look on Blake's face when he gave his report.

"Your loss," shrugged Vila, sipping the local wine. "By the way, the security system to the private storage boxes would be very easy to bypass."

"What?" Totally distarcted by those casual words, Avon put his calculator aside and joined Vila at the table. "Explain."

"Well, that little job you gave me took about five minutes and I had to do something to keep myself occupied. So I started tracing the security systems. I mean, you never know when that kind of information is going to be useful," he added defensively. "Besides, that Dumas was staring at us the whole time we were there. I had to look busy."

"I wasn't criticizing you, Vila." Avon mentally revised the schedule he had planned to give Blake when he called in. A little harmless larceny would fill in the time saved by the quick solution to the bank's computer switch. And Blake wasn't with them to hand out lectures on morality. "On the contrary, I am very interested. Show me what you've discovered so far. There's no reason we shouldn't make a little profit out of this job."

Vila quickly sketched out the system he had traced with the location of the private boxes, demonstrating how simple it would be to get inside the chamber. "Providing, of course, that we can shake free of Dumas long enough so he can't call in the security guards."

Avon grinned suddenly, the first genuine look of pleasure Vila had seen from his companion in a long time. "We'll do it. I doubt Dumas will be very difficult to put out of commission for the length of time that we'll need."

"If Blake isn't there to interfere," muttered Vila as he caught the time on his chronometer. "We're late calling in. He just might teleport down and ruin the whole thing."

"I'll call him now." Avon's voice was deceptively mild as he pulled his bracelet from its hiding place in his jacket. The thought of success plus the added bonus of a profit had mellowed his mood considerably.

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"You should get some rest, Cally," urged Blake as he checked his chronometer for the fifth time since joining the Auron on the teleport deck. Avon was late.

"I'll go as soon as they call in," replied Cally, having no intention of budging from her seat. Blake's report of his conversation with Avalon had only served to make her more jumpy as far as this mission was concerned.

"Knowing Avon, that could be quite awhile. I suspect that he is determined to demonstrate his independence by stretching my patience to the limit."

"Perhaps, but Vila will undoubtedly remind Avon that it is in their best interest to remain in contact." Before Cally could say any more, Avon's calm voice echoed through their receiver.

"Avon to Liberator. Do you hear me, Blake?"

"We were getting a bit concerned, Avon." Blake watched the still blips that represented his friends. "Have you run into any problems?" He wondered how best to tell Avon of the change in the timetable.

With a slight smile to Vila, Avon replied, "Not really. I have checked out the basic programs in use here on Noroton and they are far less complicated than back on Earth Central. Two days should be more than enough time to complete diversion of the funds according to plan."

"Would you be able to complete the job in one?" Blake's hesitance came through the transmission.

Avon and Vila exchanged questioning looks as Avon asked, "Why? What has happened Blake?"

"Avalon checked in. It seems that the informa-

tion she received on Servalan's timetable was a deliberate leak. The Federation may arrive at any time. Can you finish the job in one day, or at least sabotage the computers so the Federation can't get its hands on the credits?" Blake could just imagine the look on Avon's face and felt a sense of relief that the man was spacially away. Distance might blunt his diatribe somewhat.

"Is there anything else you might want of me, Blake? The access code to Space Command headquarters or perhaps the President's office? Of the location of Star One from thin air?" Avon found himself pacing across the room while Vila watched him from the couch with a look of fear in his eyes.

Blake closed his eyes, feeling all the bitterness that filled Avon. He had coerced the man into trying again with the banking system, raising what ghosts haunted him from that disaster. Now he was telling him that he must almost certainly fail again, short of an outright miracle. "No, Avon," he replied at last, "Just a simple answer will do. Is it possible for you to complete either of the options in less than a standard day?"

For a long moment only static echoed through the receiver as they awaited Avon's reply. Cally put a sympathetic hand over Blake's while on Noroton Vila waited for the familiar companion to return from the fury-driven man who stood before him. Then, "I can do it, Blake."

"Good. I'll plan to bring you both up at..."

"We will not be wearing the bracelets, Blake. I will call you when we are ready to come up. Not before. Do you understand?" Avon's voice was cold as he spoke. He would finish his task one way or the other. But he would finish it.

"Wait a minute..." Vila began a protest that died as Avon turned a cold look on him that promised mayhem if he didn't hold his peace.

"Very well, Avon. But I want you to call in when you go back to the bank in the morning. Understood?" Blake shook his head at Cally's protest.

"Very well." Avon closed down the transmission suddenly, needing time to recover from the anger that had swept him at Blake's news. Failure again, or at least an even greater possibility of it. His mind started racing again, now that he gave it a chance. Time was the factor working against them. There had to be a way around it. There was always a way. "Vila," he said abruptly, turning to face the smaller man.

"What?" Vila looked ready to jump if Avon took so much as a single step in his direction.

"Get your bag of tricks, we're going back to the computer center." Avon retreated behind his normal mask, relieving his companion greatly of the fear that had risen during the conversation with Blake.

"Now?" squeaked Vila, wondering how they would find their way through all those endless winding corridors, not to mention how they would deal with any security guards they might run into on the way.

"Now. The only chance we have of success is if we get back to work immediately. With luck, we might even have time for your storage boxes." Vila perked up at the mention of the lockpicking assignment as he found himself following Avon out the door of their quarters. Still, he did look forlornly as the fine wine they'd never have a chance to finish. "Give me your bracelet, Vila." Avon's quiet order brought the other man's attention back to the moment.

"What do you mean?" he asked, although quite sure of the reasoning behind the order. This was going to be Albion all over again and he wanted no part of it.

"Vila, give me the bracelet, now." Avon stopped

short, so that the man collided with him. In one deft movement, Avon relieved Vila of his bracelet, tucking it in the depths of his jacket.

"What if we get separated and I have to get back to the ship?"

"We'd better not get separated." Avon led the way quickly across to the main building. After Vila got them through the security locks, he took the lead once again, taking them almost directly to the computer center with only a few misturns in the maze. Mindful that Avon carried their only link with the Liberator and Blake, Vila stayed close behind, plotting the revenge he'd have once they were safely home.

* * *

"Blake, they're moving." Cally glanced up from the screen in time to catch a pleased look cross the rebel leader's face. "You knew he would do this," she accused, trying to understand this man who had changed so much from their first meeting on Saurian Major.

"Avon always finishes what he sets out to do," agreed Blake, sitting back.

"And he's removed his bracelet again. And Vila's no doubt so that we can't bring them up even if something goes wrong."

"That's why we put the tracer on them." Blake found himself wondering if he would interfere unless called upon by Avon. He watched the blips closely, hoping they would arrive at the center undetected. He needed Avon's success more than he would ever confess to the angry woman before him and for very personal reasons.

"I'm going down. In the middle of the night, when no one expects them to be there Avon and Vila will be in great danger." Cally started for the weapons' rack only to have Blake grab her arm and pull her around to face him. "Blake, they are alone down there."

"If Avon wants help, he will call us. If they stay out of contact too long, then, and only then will we go down."

"My people have a saying, Blake, that no man need go his way alone." Cally pulled away from the man, trying to find the man she called friend.

"Avon's not alone, even though he doesn't realize it yet, Cally. He chose to take Vila with him. Vila will stay to the end, in spite of his fear." Of that Blake was certain. He only wished that he was as certain of his own staying power.

"I hope Vila will be enough," said Cally, yielding to Blake's determination, wishing, not for the first time, that she could read the minds of her friends as she could those of her people.

"So do I," said Jenna from the doorway, "But will you tell me what's going on so that I'll understand what I'm agreeing with?" She entered the teleport chamber to lean against the console.

Glad of the chance to break from the intense confrontation with Cally, Blake turned to the pilot to explain the changed situation on Noroton.

* * *

"Mutoid, how long until the fleet reaches Noroton?" Servalan swept into the control cabin of her command ship, eyes automatically checking conditions on her ship. As much as she enjoyed the glory of her position on Earth, there were times that the immediate power of commanding a ship satisfied her cravings for control.

"Planetfall will be made in approximately ten hours, Supreme Comamnder," replied the expressionless pilot.

"Excellent." Servalan took her seat, punching

in the interfleet communications system. "Servalan to all ship commanders. We are within ten hours of the rebellious planet of Noroton. When we reach the planet, you are to deploy according to your individual orders, taking the targets designated vital. Norotonis to be made an example to the rest of the frontier worlds that open rebel activity is not to be tolerated. The attack will continue until I, personally, give the command to desist. Are there any questions?" Wisely, none of the veteran commanders of the other vessels questioned the wisdom of firing on a planet which had requested their presence. Servalan found herself almost missing Travis and wondered where he had gotten himself to in the search for Blake. "Very well," she turned her attention back to her briefing. Hold speed and course for Noroton. Servalan Out." She stared at the screen, wondering if this would at last be the opportunity she needed to root out the cancer of rebellion that threatened the security and order of the Federation.

* * *

Brent stared down the corridor at the computer center. Light showed from under the closed door, telling him where the two Federation men had gotten to. He'd gone to their quarters to force information from them, only to find the suite empty. After a quick search of the suite to make sure nothing vital had been left behind, he had gone back to the bank, sure that Logan was not a man to sample the nightlife of the city. Avoiding security guards had slowed him down, but the young man knew he could not afford to waste even more time giving explanations of his presence after hours. Besides, the guards were hired from the Federation. All Logan would have to do would be to provide proof that he worked for Servalan and Brent would be the prisoner. But how was he to get through the locked doors of the center without giving the two Federation men warning of his arrival?

A quick memory surfaced, from the days when he'd first been assigned to the computer center, of connecting doors between suites, to be used only for emergencies. And opened by the regular passes used for daily entry to the bank. Brent smiled slightly, this certainly qualified as an emergency. Anything to help the cause would.

Using his pass to enter the accounting section, Brent started to move through the suite, hoping his memory would guide him to the proper doors in the dark. He still needed to avoid security guards and Logan to make this work. Touching the gun, hidden in his jacket for comfort, Brent continued through the area. Soon he would have real information for Avalon, information that wouldn't be passed through just another assistant.

* * *

"Avon, you should rest. We've been here for hours now," pleaded Vila, frightened by the exhausted look that whitened the other man's face. "Besides, you promised to call Blake in the morning."

"Before we came to the bank, actually," Avon wiped his damp forehead as he looked up from the terminal he was in the midst of reprogramming. "I didn't do that, why should I do the other?"

Vila searched quickly for a reason that Avon might accept. "Because Blake might come looking for us and ruin everything if we don't? Not to mention stop us from looting the storage boxes."

"Without our bracelets activated, Blake can't zero in on our co-ordinates. I doubt he would be so foolish as to go charging into a bank full of guards to find us." Avon thought about that for a moment, and changed his mind. Provoked enough, Blake might just do that. "If it will reassure you, however..." he covered his own change of mind as he pulled out one of the bracelets. "Avon to Liberator, are you still there, Blake?"

"This is Jenna, Avon. Are you all right?" She spoke softly, aware of Blake's sleeping form beside her. He'd refused to go to his quarters once she'd relieved him on watch.

"Yes, things are progressing rapidly here. Tell Blake I won't be calling in again until I'm ready to teleport. And that we will not be wearing the bracelets so there is no chance to call either Vila or myself. Do you understand?"

"I'll tell him," replied Jenna, settling back as Avon cut off transmission once again.

"You needn't bother," muttered Blake, stretching cramped muscles. "How long was I asleep?"

"Nearly seven hours. There wasn't much I could do about making you comfortable since you would insist on remaining here." Jenna sat back. "Cally's on the flight deck keeping an eye on the long-distance scanners with Zen."

"Good idea, if Servalan is about to arrive sooner than expected," Blake stood. "Do you think you can stay here a while longer? I'd like to have a look at the scanners myself. Somehow I can never quite get accustomed to depending on Avon's gadget."

Relieved by Blake's apparent return to normalcy following his extended brooding of late, Jenna teased back, "Don't let Avon know how you feel. He'd be highly insulted."

"And an insulted Avon would be impossible to live with," returned Blake, with a grin on his face. "I'll be certain never to mention it to him." Feeling unaccountably better than he had in a long time, Blake walked up to the flight deck.

* * *

The last door Brent stood with his pass, wondering just what one did in a situation like this. He'd never been a fighter, even before joining the rebel movement, and since then he'd simply been a messenger, passing on information as requested. How did one get information out of Federation agents in the first place? He touched the weapon secreted in his jacket. Could he kill anyone?

Deciding that any action had to be better than this endless circle of thought, the young rebel slipped his pass through the sensor and watched the door slide open. He stepped through, pulling his gun free, relieved that Logan sat at the central console, back towards him. Optimism flooded through him with that bit of luck. Maybe this wouldn't be so difficult after all.

He stepped forward, gun ready, as Logan continued to sit still at the console, so still that Brent thought the man might have fallen asleep.

* * *

Avon slumped forward, realizing just how tired he was by the long night's work. His hands and eyes ached, but both of Blake's options had been programmed in, just waiting for the final command sequences to make them operational. Switch accounts or bring down the system altogether. Surely now he could afford to rest for a few minutes while Vila completed his pilferage of the storage boxes.

"Avon, duck!" Vila's voice came from the doorway, full of fear and warning, causing the older man to obey instantly as a box came sailing over the console towards something behind him.

"No!" Brent Dumas' voice echoed through the chamber as the box caught his gun hand, sending the weapon flying towards a corner. He started for Logan only to find a strange weapon aimed at his midsection by the computer man.

"Stand very still, Dumas," ordered Avon as he regained his feet to find Vila by his side. "I should dislike very much killing someone on the rebel side."

"I'd kill you," muttered Brent, humiliated by the sudden turnaround. Some rebel. He'd allowed



himself to be beaten by a common thief. Or was he? The name the small man had given Logan sounded vaguely familiar.

"I'm sure you would. Avalon's people are always remarkably bloodthirsty. Vila, keep an eye on our friend while I complete the programming. We'll have to get out of here quickly in case his shots bring any guards."

"And not a word of gratitude out of him for saving his life," muttered Vila, taking the gun from Avon, who turned silently back to the computer after giving him one of those damned enigmatic smiles which might or might not mean that he was grateful. "You," Vila gave Brent his attention, "Get over here where I can watch you. I've shot a hundred men in my time," he added, trying to sound properly dangerous.

Avon. Vila. Those names stirred memories as Brent reluctantly obeyed orders. He concentrated on the names, to avoid dealing with his own sense of failure. Then the memories clicked. Blake. They were Blake's people. But if so, then why the nearly fatal charade with him?

* * *

"Blake, look at the screen!" called Cally, interrupting the man as he studied the reports on Docholli one more time.

The Auron's urgent call coincided with a report from Zen. +Twenty Federation cruisers have taken attack positions around the planet Noroton,+

"Have they begun firing yet?" demanded Blake, as he studied the instruments wondering how long their presence could remain a secret. Avon's invention was a shield, not a force field. Liberator could very easily be damaged by fire meant for other targets.

"Firing has not yet begun," reported Cally, her dark eyes filled with anger as she monitored communications from the Federation fleet. Servalan's voice came through an uncoded channel with a carefully worded statement.

"The planet, Noroton, has been declared in rebellion by the planetary government. Therefore Space Command has responded in force to pacify the insurgents and restore the planet to its rightful place in the Federation. The pacification is to begin," Servalan paused for effect, then added the final word, "Now." Blake could well imagine the Supreme Commander's satisfaction in having an open invitation to kill rebels without any fear of retaliation from her enemies on the civilian High Council.

"We've got to get Avon and Vila out of there," gasped Cally as the Federation ships began their descent from orbit and the pacification of Noroton.

"How?" asked Blake harshly, hitting the intercom switch. "With their bracelets off, we can't even warn them of the attack. Jenna, get up here immediately. I need you at the controls in case any of the Federation ships get too close to us and we need to leave orbit in a hurry."

"On my way," replied the blonde pilot, rising from her seat. As she left the chamber she glanced down at the still blips on the screen, wondering if Avon would have the good sense to get back into contact with them once the attack reached the city. Or, indeed, if he would be able to do so.

On the flight deck Cally wondered the same thing. "Blake, we have the tracer. This is what we designed it for. We can go in and bring them out before it is too late."

"No," Blake surprised even himself, not aware that he had come to any such decision. "Avon will let us know when he wants to come up. Until then we must give every chance to complete his work on the computers."

Reblliously, Cally glared at Blake, but settled for tracing the flight of the Federation ships. She would try again when the attack reached the city. And hope that it wouldn't be too late.

* * *

Vila stirred, painfully reaching up to touch a cut on his forehead. What had happened? One moment he'd been peacefully guarding Dumas and urging Avon to hurry, the next he had found himself in the middle of chaos as blasts rocked the building. Servalan! That figured, give the witch an invitation to come in and she'd takeover with a vengeance. That thought jarred the one-time thief to full consciousness. The Supreme Commander must have arrived even earlier than Blake had thought she would. "Damn," Vila looked down at his wrist and swore, remembering that Avon had taken his bracelet when they had returned to the bank to keep him from panicking in just such a situation. Avon, where was he?

"Avon," he called, struggling to his feet. "Avon, where are you?"

For a long moment Vila got no answer other than the sparking of the ruined computer consoles. Then faint voice came from the next section. Vila...here."

Vila stared down at his friend, the blood slowly flowing from a cut on his cheek, his hands curled protectively against his chest. "Avon, what happened?" he asked crouching by the other man. "Let me see your hands."

"Servalan attacked, what do you think happened?" For an instant Avon's eyes cleared of the pain and he was able to speak normally.

Delighted by the response which meant that Avon was, at least for the moment, in no danger of dying, Vila retorted, "I mean what happened to your hands?"

"P-power surge, when the blast hit. They're burned." Avon looked up with that vulnerable expression he wore in the rare moments when he let his shields down.

"Here, you might want this." Vila whirled, startled by Dumas' voice. In the shock of the attack and finding Avon injured, he'd forgotten his erst-while prisoner. Shaking his head at Vila's suspicious look, Brent sighed. "I wish you had told me you were Blake's people from the first. We might have been able to find enough time working together to complete whatever it was that you were doing. We are on the same side after all."

"I am on my side," muttered Avon, trying to rise without using his hands.

Vila easily pushed him back to the floor. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I am going to complete what I set out to do here before we go back to the Liberator. I will not fail again." Avon tried to fight against Vila's strength, but found himself helpless without the use of his hands.

"There isn't enough time, Avon," pleaded Vila, his face twisted in fear. "Servalan's troops will be combing the city now, rounding up anyone they can find. It's just too late. Where are the bracelets? We've got to get back to the ship."

Avon shook his head. "Not until I finish. Only the command sequence is unfinished. Servalan should not get those credits, Vila."

"He's right, you know." Dumas looked down at the gun he had retrieved. He had thought himself able to kill these two when he thought they were Servalan's agents. Now he would have other targets, human beings who would be trying to kill him. His fears faded as he realized that his death could mean something. "Look, get your friend bandaged up and finish the job if you can. I'll keep watch in the corridor and hold off the troops as long as possible."

Vila glanced from Avon's stubbornly set face to the earnest one of the young rebel and knew he'd never talk sense to either man. "All right, but if we all get killed, I'm never going to talk to you again," he threatened with a resigned look in his eyes.

"I'll hold you to that," laughed Brent as he started for the door. "Work quickly. I imagine the bank will be one of the first areas marked for control."

"Believe me, we will," promised Vila, turning back to Avon with the small aid kit. "Now, let's see about getting you fit to finish so we can get the hell out of here."

* * *

"They're still in the bank building, Blake. Shouldn't we pull them out now?" Cally's eyes smoldered as their sensors followed the attack on Noroton.

"They haven't replaced their bracelets yet." Blake's eyes were bleak as he wondered why he had pushed Avon into this mission, knowing the man would do something like this. Avon had pointed out all the pitfalls right at the start.

"Then can't we go down after them now? The scanner is still giving us their co-ordinates. Blake, are you listening to me?" Cally looked to Jenna for help, but got a helpless shrug. The pilot didn't know what to do either. But plunging into the center of a war zone sounded suicidal to her practical nature. Avon wouldn't thank them for dying with him.

"Not yet," repeated Blake, "We will give them another hour. If we've heard nothing by then, or they begin to change location we will go in after them. And yes, Cally, I know that the tracer was my idea." He couldn't explain to himself the rationale behind giving Avon more time, he didn't want to waste time trying to explain it to the angry Auron.

"I'll get our guns ready in case you decide to go down." Cally marched away from the flight deck stiffly, wondering if Blake weren't losing all humanity with his growing fanaticism to his cause. That gave the Auron pause, for when had their cause become his alone? Shaking her head in an attempt to clear her doubts, Cally went back to work. Meditation was a luxury Avon and Vila might not be able to afford right now.

* * *

"How does that feel?" asked Vila once he had doctored Avon's burned hands and wrapped them in the soft gauzy material he had found in the aid kit.

"It will do until we can get to the medical unit," Avon rose from the floor with Vila's assistance. "Thank you."

His fears revived with Avon's uncharacteristic gratitude, Vila looked nervous once again. "What do we do first?"

"Help me over to the main console, then get your bag of tricks. The bracelets are there." Avon's eyes glowed with a brief hint of mischief as he noted Vila's annoyance. The expert thief had been fooled by the amateur. Then he sombered as Vila left him in a seat by the console. There was so much to be done in so little time. From the sounds of gunfire in the corridor, Dumas was already meeting the first of Servalan's people.

"Now what?" asked Vila, placing his bag beside Avon, having clipped a bracelet around his wrist. With that in place he felt a little better, although not much. Avon took the one Vila offered him without comment, but only placed it on the console beside him. He was not leaving until they finished the program.

"I need your help, Vila. With these bandages I can't work the final command sequence."



"You can't work! Then let's call Blake now! Avon, we'll be killed for nothing!" Vila's panic bubbled over as he raised his bracelet to his lips only to find his wrist caught in Avon's grip, the other man ignoring the pain it caused in his injured hand.

"There is time, Vila, if you do not waste it in panic." Avon struggled and finally forced the word out, "Please." For Anna, for all the others caught in that other attempt, for himself.

Vila didn't want to agree. He could think of any number of reasons not to, but found himself agreeing after all. He pushed away the panic as best he could, then asked, "What do you want me to do?"

Instead of frightening the other man more with a repeated expression of gratitude, Avon faced the console. "I placed two possible sequences in the computer. One would simply transfer all the funds to accounts of known rebels, Avalon's main agents on Noroton."

"And the other?"

"The other will wipe the memory banks clean. The system will be completely bankrupt. It will take months to even trace the program." Avon spoke with a hint of pride in his own work.

"Show me what you want done." Vila bent over the console with Avon, his skilled hands easily following the instructions on the sensitive machinery. Although he would never admit it, Avon was grateful for whatever impulse that had made him insist on Vila as a companion on this mission. The thief was a more-than-adequate pupil for the job. From the corridor the sound of gunfire grew heavier, but the two men in the computer center simply concentrated on the job at hand.

"I've got a reading on one bracelet,"

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called Cally who had gone back to the teleport deck. "Should I bring him up?"

"Hold on, Cally. I'll be right there." Blake rose from the flight deck couch where he'd been following events on the planet with ORAC's help. Servalan had found the job rather more difficult than she had imagined as many of Noroton's people joined the rebels in resisting her heavy-handed troopers. But in all the reports Avon and Vila had not been mentioned, giving Blake hope that they were safe. After all, Servalan would insist on immediate notification if any of Blake's people had been found. But what about Avalon's suspicious young rebel who had thought Avon and Vila to be Federation agents? Might he not have tried something once his planet was attacked? Blake's fists clenched as he hurried to join Cally at the teleport.

Brent glanced over his shoulder towards the center wondering how Avon and Vila were doing and if he could possibly hold out long enough to finish. Only the narrowness of the corridor had saved him so far. One trooper at a time could advance toward him, an easy mark even for a first-time fighter. A blast from a paragun brought his attention back forward. He raised his weapon and fired, idly noting the blood that spurted from the trooper's shoulder as he fell backward. How much did that hurt? Would he even have the time to feel it when his turn came to die?

An odd, buzzing sound caught Brent's attention and he faced the doorway of an adjoining room in time to meet the paragun blast of a trooper who had cut between the rooms to get around the crazy rebel who had slowed their progress. In the instant before he died, Brent wondered why he felt no pain, then darkness rushed in claiming him forever.

"Avon, Vila, can you hear me? Avon, this is Blake, come in." The chiming of the bracelet

broke the tense concentration of both men as they neared the final adjustments to the system.

"Damn." Avon grabbed his own bracelet, ignoring the pain that flared in his hand as he did so. "One moment, Blake."

In the teleport chamber, Blake exchanged a relieved look with Cally. At least Avon and Vila were alive and free for the moment if Avon was able to react like that.

Brent's scream of pain reached through the closed door of the center, causing Vila's hands to slip with the probe. "We've got to go now, Avon. They'll be in here next."

"Be careful, Vila. It will take them a few minutes to cut through the door. If you don't make any more stupid mistakes we can finish and be out of here in time." Avon clipped on his bracelet, well aware that he was cutting things fine, but counting on his well-honed survival instincts to get them out in time.

"I don't make stupid mistakes," retorted the smaller man even as he corrected the error his slip had caused and went on with the final adjustment.

* * *

"We don't have to wait for their call, Blake. We can override them and pull them out of there," argued Cally, tensely, afraid that they would lose both men at the last.

"No," Blake, his own warring emotions at peace finally. "We'll give Avon his minute."

"What good will it do now?" demanded the Auron. "Noroton is lost to the Federation."

"Avon needs to finish his task," said Blake firmly, adding silently, as if must finish mine. His decision was made. They would complete the search for Star One using Provine's clue.

* * *

Vila watched nervously over his shoulder as the buzzing from the corridor grew louder. The troopers would be through any time. "Avon..." No answer. "Avon, we've got to get out of here," he repeated for what seemed the thousandth time.

"What?" Avon looked up from the terminal screen where he'd been studying the results of their work.

"This is no time to get buried in a computer, Avon, or you might get us both buried for good. Let's call Blake and get out. Please."

Avon checked the figures on the terminal screen once more, satisfied that he had been correct in his calculations, then pressed a button Vila hadn't noticed before. He called the ship, "Teleport us now, Blake."

"And not before time," groaned Vila as the door finally gave way and a trooper burst into the room, his paragon firing through their fading forms. An explosion rocked the room, bringing the roof down on the trooper, destroying any vestiges of their tampering. Servalan would be a long time rebuilding the banking system on Noroton.

As they materialized on board Liberator, Vila was still shaking. "They almost killed us, Avon. You almost..." words failed the man as Cally helped him to a seat.

"Is it done?" asked Blake, noting the disheveled appearance of his friends and the bandages that covered Avon's hands.

"Did you ever doubt that I would finish?" countered Avon, tiredly leaning against the teleport console.

"Of course not." As you know I must finish what I set out to do. That is the source of your anger, my friend, thought Blake as Cally undid the bandages

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to check on what damage had been done to them. You know where it will lead and you hate it. But you will stay to the end as you did today, as Cally said, no man need go his way alone. Not you, not me. He stepped to the intercom, "Jenna, get us out of here. We've got them back safely. Cally, check Avon and Vila out in the medical unit." Once alone, Blake set himself to the task of dismantling the tracking device. He smiled, imagining Avon's rage if he ever learned of its existence. The smile faded as wondered once more what was happening down on Noroton.

* * *

As Liberator broke orbit, Avon, Cally and Vila joined Blake and Jenna on the flight deck. Nodding a welcome, Blake continued to speak with Zen, "Boost the transmission, Zen and put it on the screen"

+Confirmed.+

Avalon's tired face filled the image, her shoulders slumped with exhaustion. "Blake, I'm glad I reached you before you got out of range. I just wanted to say thank you for your assistance, especially Avon's. The banking system has gone down completely, driving even more people to our cause. The Federation will have a hard time reclaiming this planet."

"Hit a man in his credit balance and he will always fight back," muttered Avon from his station.

"Perhaps, but at least he'll fight. That's the important thing. We're grateful, Avon, but I do wish you'd allowed Blake to keep me informed. We had a man in the bank who might have helped..."

"Brent Dumas. He did...help, Avalon and died for your cause. I hope it is worth it." Avon's eyes were hooded as he remembered that once again he had escaped with his life by the death of another.

"Freedom for the man is worth it, Avon," retorted the woman, "But I haven't time to debate with you. Servalan is most likely to be monitoring our transmissions and I want to be long gone when she traces her way to this headquarters." Avalon's signal ended, leaving silence on board the Liberator.

"Course, Blake?" asked Jenna breaking the silence that threatened to continue indefinitely while both Blake and Avon struggled with their thoughts.

"Set course for Freedom City, Jenna, standard by eight." Feeling Avon's eyes on his back, Blake turned and met them. "We've a job to complete and our path lies that way." Avon's eyes reflected reluctant understanding. Like it or not, they had to continue.

end.