

Reunion at Terminal

by Kathy Hintze

Reunion at Terminal

The shots had ceased echoing, and the players had all been withdrawn with the exception of a solitary figure lying on the floor. The drama was over, or was it?

"Get up, Vila, you're not hurt," a voice said disgustedly.

Vila groaned and lifted his head to find Avon glaring down at him. "What happened? I thought I was dead."

"Well, you're not, so get up."

Vila moaned again and climbed slowly to his feet, looking around. "Where is everyone?"

"Come on, the guards will be back soon. You have to get out of here." But Vila wasn't listening. He was staring at a pool of blood which lay nearby. Avon followed his gaze and said, "The guards had orders to take us alive."

"Then whose..." Vila let the question hang as he saw Avon's face. "Blake?" he whispered. Then a sound coming from the corridor drew the thief's attention.

"The others have already been taken on board the transport. Will you get moving?"

"Get moving where? Avon, I don't understand any of this," Vila said, turning around. "Avon? Avon!"

From an adjacent hallway, Avon's voice beckoned. "Come on!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming," mumbled the thief, disappearing around the corner just as two men dressed in Federation garb entered the room.

"He's gone," exclaimed one of the guards.

"You know, you should have been an officer, Ed," remarked his partner.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of your powers of observation."

"He must have come to but he can't have gone far," the irritated guard snapped. "Let's check that way." Motioning to the hallway taken by Vila, the guards had scarcely entered when the ceiling caved in on them, sealing the corridor and covering Vila's escape.

* * *

Onboard the transport, the effects of the stunrays were beginning to wear off and Tarrant, Dayna and Soolin were coming around.

"Oh, my head," Dayna moaned. "What happened?"

"The same thing that happened to all of us," groaned Soolin. "Our luck ran out and we got caught."

Tarrant stood up slowly, supporting himself against the wall. "At least we're still alive."

As his equilibrium steadied, he looked around. "Where's Avon and Vila? They're not here."

"What do you mean? They have to be," Dayna murmured, getting up.

"See for yourself," Tarrant shot back.

Her eyes searched the room, but came up empty. "You don't think they're..."

"Dead?" Tarrant finished. He shrugged. "What other explanation is there?"

"Maybe they were hurt. They might be in the Medical Unit," ventured Soolin.

"Maybe. But if we're still alive and apparently unharmed, why aren't they?" Tarrant questioned.

"I don't know," replied Soolin. "I wish Vila were here to get this door open, though."

"Getting that door open is definitely a priority," Tarrant confirmed, "if we're to escape."

* * *

"Avon, where are you?" cried Vila. "I'm a thief, not a cat. I can't see in the dark."

"Over here, Vila," Avon answered impatiently.

Vila could just barely make out Avon's outline against a viewport and moved over beside him. Peering out, the thief saw two Federation transports, toward which guards were carrying two body bags. One body was taken to the first ship, and soon after the vessel lifted off. The other body bag was delivered to its sister ship. "Why can't they leave Blake in peace?" murmured Vila. Looking up at Avon, he added hastily, "You know what I mean."

"I know," Avon answered quietly. "Now, unless you want to end up in one of those, you've got to get on that ship and free the others."

"Me? Why me?" Vila cried. "Why can't you do it?"

"Because I have something else to do!" Avon snapped. "Now pay attention. There's a supply tunnel running directly under the ship. You should be able to get on board through there."

"Got it all figured out, haven't you? And what will you be doing while I'm risking my neck?" Vila demanded.

"Creating a little diversion. Now, move!" he ordered. As Vila slipped back down the hall, Avon smiled and called after him, "Be careful."

"What?" asked Vila, turning around. "Avon?" he whispered. But his companion was gone. "Well, might as well give it a try. What do I have to lose?"

* * *

Tarrant could get no information on their missing crewmates no matter how much he tried. When the evening meal was served, three guards stood silently watching until the rebels were finished, then withdrew.

"Why won't they tell us?" demanded Dayna.

"Maybe they were ordered not to," Soolin suggested. "Some game Servalan's playing with us."

"Perhaps. Or maybe they don't know," Tarrant murmured, thoughtfully. "Soolin, what's the last thing you remember?"

"After Vila was hit, I tried to make a break for it, but didn't quite make it," she mused ruefully. "What about you?"

"I remember seeing Avon staring down at Blake's body. I tried to warn him, but I got hit."

"You think Avon might have gotten away," offered Dayna, hopefully.

"That has to be it," Tarrant said. "That's why we haven't left for Earth yet. Servalan would not be pleased if Avon had escaped her little trap."

"But that still leaves Vila," Soolin pointed out.

At that moment, the cell door slid open, revealing a Federation guard who motioned them back against the wall. Walking toward the wall monitor, he gazed at it for a moment, then reached up and inserted a tiny crystal disk in front of the lens.

"That should keep them occupied," he said and took off his helmet.

"Vila!" exclaimed Dayna and Soolin who each took a turn at hugging him.

"Maybe I should rescue pretty ladies more often," he laughed.

"Have you seen Avon?" Tarrant asked.

"Who do you think sent me in here?" answered the thief, smiling.

"But where is he?" inquired Dayna, glancing out the cell into the empty corridor.

"I wish I knew. I'd like to tell him a thing or two," Vila muttered angrily. "Making me risk my neck while he's out there safe and sound. You just wait..."

"Vila!" Tarrant snapped. "You can settle with Avon later, after we're out of here."

"You know, Tarrant," the thief answered, "you're beginning to sound just like him."

"What exactly did he tell you to do?" Dayna asked.

"To get you all loose so we could escape," Vila answered. "What else?"

"Escape? How?" retorted Soolin.

"If we could take over the main command cabin, we might be able to escape in this ship," Tarrant said.

"You call this a ship?" Dayna was clearly not impressed.

"Old, battered, but still a ship, Dayna," the pilot replied. "Or would you prefer one of Servalan's Starbursts?"

The girl glared at him. "All right, you made your point."

"First things first," Tarrant said, looking at Vila. "How many guards did you see?"

"Four, not counting the ones who left the ship."

"Good." Tarrant smiled confidently. "Then if you will follow me, I'll show you how to steal a Federation transport."

"This I've got to see," the thief laughed. Putting the helmet back on, he peered out the doorway. "All clear, Tarrant."

Halfway up the hall, the thief stopped dead in his tracks. Tarrant came up behind him and looked over his shoulder. A guard sat leaning against the wall, dozing.

"He wasn't there before," Vila murmured.

"Probably just came on duty," Tarrant whispered. As quietly as possible, he slipped up beside the trooper and knocked him out. Then he picked up the unconscious man and carried him back to the cell while Vila kept watch. With the guard's weapon in his hand and the others behind him, Tarrant moved up behind the thief. He tapped Vila lightly on the shoulder. The thief jumped, whirling around in fear, then relaxed as he saw who it was.

"Don't do that!" Vila muttered softly.

"Come on," Tarrant ordered and moved further along the hallway. As the party drew near the central corridor leading to the command cabin, they heard voices and ducked into an adjacent alcove as two guards rounded the corner.

Fortunately, the men were engrossed in their conversation and not paying the slightest bit of attention as they walked past it.

"Did you see his face?" one guard asked the other. "He acted insane. And that look! I'll remember it for as long as I..." He never finished the sentence as Tarrant opened fire, killing them both.

"Three down and one to go," he said, watching Dayna and Soolin strip the dead men of their weapons.

Reunion at Terminal

That one, however, proved to be in the command cabin itself. "Leave him to me," Vila said. He walked nonchalantly into the room and looked around. The guard glanced at him, then went back at his monitor.

Vila moved up behind him and poked him in the back with his gun. "Don't move," he ordered.

"Well done, Vila."

At his words, the thief began shaking and had to sit down. Dayna looked at him in wonder. "Are you all right, Vila?"

"I...I think so. I don't know what got into me. I might have been killed," he stammered.

"Put this one with the other one in the holding cell while I fire up the engines," Tarrant told Dayna.

"With pleasure," she answered and escorted the guard from the cabin.

"Can you fly this thing?" Soolin asked.

Tarrant ran a quick check and smiled. "Of course. It's just like my old trainer. It'll be easy. Let's see, this should seal the hatch."

"Wait," Vila cried. "Avon's still out there. You can't leave him."

"We have to get out of here, Vila. We can come back for him."

"What's going on?" Dayna asked, returning from her errand.

"Tarrant's going to leave without Avon," the thief told them.

"Look," Tarrant explained, "he told Vila to release us so we could escape." Staring at Vila, he continued. "He doesn't want to leave, Vila, don't you understand that?"

"You're not leaving without him," repeated Vila. "I won't let you." Then he turned and ran for the hatch.

Tarrant gazed after him a moment, then looked at Soolin and Dayna. "We have to get out of here," he said again, flipping a switch on the console.

* * *

Although Tarrant had sealed hatch, the manual override was accessible. But as Vila started to turn it, a voice behind him asked, "What do you think you're doing?"

The voice brought Vila up short. "Avon, how did you get on board?"

"I walked," he answered. "What about the others? Are they safe?"

"Yes." Vila smiled. "You know, it was pretty easy."

"You can pat yourself on the back later, when the ship is well away."

"Vila," Tarrant's voice called from a nearby wall communicator. "I'm lifting off. We can't wait any longer."

"I didn't expect he would," Avon remarked.

Vila smiled and activated the wall comm. "It's all right. Avon made it on board."

"How did he..." Dayna began, but Tarrant cut her off.

"No time for questions now. Just hold on." Tarrant engaged the transport's engines, the vibration knocking Vila to the floor. Avon considered him a moment, then walked away.

The ship rose slowly, its speed increasing as the transport groaned and struggled against the gravitational pull of Gauda Prime. Only when the planet had faded behind them, did Tarrant breathe a sigh of relief. "Anything on the scanners?"

"You mean this antique has them?" Dayna asked dubiously.

Soolin ignored her comment and checked them. "All scanners are clear, Tarrant. Looks like we made it."

"At least for the moment," Tarrant amended, looking at Dayna and Soolin. "Why don't you two get some rest?"

"I want to talk with Avon first," replied Dayna as Vila walked in. "Vila, where's Avon?"

"Checking the ship probably. At least he was headed that way when we took off."

"I think you had better leave Avon alone right now, Dayna," Tarrant advised. "After what's happened, he probably doesn't want company."

"I'll find him if you want," Vila offered, much to everyone's surprise.

"Vila, are you all right?" Soolin asked in a curious tone.

"Course I'm all right. It's just that well, after what happened, I mean..."

"We know what you mean," Dayna murmured.

"No you don't," the thief shot back. "Anyway, he could have gotten me killed. You don't think I'm going to let him forget that, do you?" Vila added and left the cabin.

"What's gotten into him?" Dayna wondered aloud.

"I don't know," remarked Tarrant. "He's definitely not acting normal."

"When was Vila ever normal?" Soolin laughed, the others joining in.

Vila worked his way nervously through the transport's cabins. "Avon?" he called. "Come on. I know you're here somewhere. You can't just get off. Stop fooling around."

His search finally led him to the main cargo hold. He opened the door and switched on the light. "Avon?" he called. His voice echoed eerily in the empty hold. No, not quite empty.

There was no cargo occupying the vast room, only a lone body bag lying on the floor. A chill ran down Vila's spine as he walked slowly toward it.

"We searched so long looking for you, Blake and then..." He suppressed a sob as he knelt beside it. "At least, Blake, we can give you a proper burial," he began, opening the bag. The hands which had never failed him when opening locks, failed him now as the face of the body within came into view. Vila jumped back as if it had shot him. "No," he whispered in a shaking voice. "No," and collapsed.

* * *

An hour had passed since Vila had left on his errand and he still had not returned. The others began to wonder.

"Maybe he found a bottle and is curled up somewhere?" Soolin ventured.

"No, I don't think so. Something is wrong, Tarrant." Dayna's voice carried more than mere concern.

Tarrant looked at her and nodded. "I think we'd better do some looking of our own. For both of them."

Putting the ship on autopilot, they began searching the ship. Their check of the cabins and compartments yielded nothing. "No sign of either of them," Tarrant muttered.

"But we've looked everywhere," Soolin pointed out.

"Not quite. There's still the cargo hold," Tarrant told her.

"But why would they go there?" Dayna asked, looking at her two companions.

"When we find Avon and Vila, you can ask them," Tarrant answered. "Come on."

* * *

The door to the hold stood open, light streaming out into the corridor. "Vila?" Dayna called.

When no one answered, Tarrant drew his weapon and said, "You two stay here."

"But..." Soolin began.

"If there's trouble, I'll call you. Now stay here."

Tarrant, gun in hand, crept cautiously to the doorway and peered in. Vila was kneeling next to an oblong bag. There was no one else in the room. "Vila, what..." Tarrant's words trailed off as the thief lifted a tear-stained face.

"I don't understand," he sobbed, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I talked to him, I saw him. But he's dead, Tarrant, he's dead."

Tarrant moved to the thief's side and saw the partially open bag. Within, Avon's pale, serene features gazed out at him.

"Tarrant? What's he talking about? Who's dead?" Dayna called fearfully from the doorway.

* * *

On board her starship, news of the rebels' escape was announced to Commissioner Sleer. "What do you mean they've escaped?" demanded Servalan, glaring at the image on the viewer.

"Somehow, they escaped from the holding cell, Commissioner, and overpowered the guards on board the transport."

"So, Avon and his band are loose again," she muttered. The young officer cleared her throat and looked distinctly uneasy. "What is it?"

"Kerr Avon is dead, Commissioner. He was killed resisting capture."

"Killed?" she exclaimed angrily. "I gave orders they were to be taken alive. Alive!"

"The others were, Commissioner," Lt. Arlen explained hastily, cursing the stupid fool who had placed her in the situation. "But Kerr Avon managed to elude us and escape from the complex. The outer perimeter guards had no such orders and when he made for the ship..."

"They killed him," Servalan finished, her face grim. "What about Blake?"

"Dead," Arlen said with a note of triumph. "His body is already on its way to Earth."

At least that much was saved, Servalan thought to herself. "Very well. Notify all Federation ships in your area. I want the remaining members of Blake's group found."

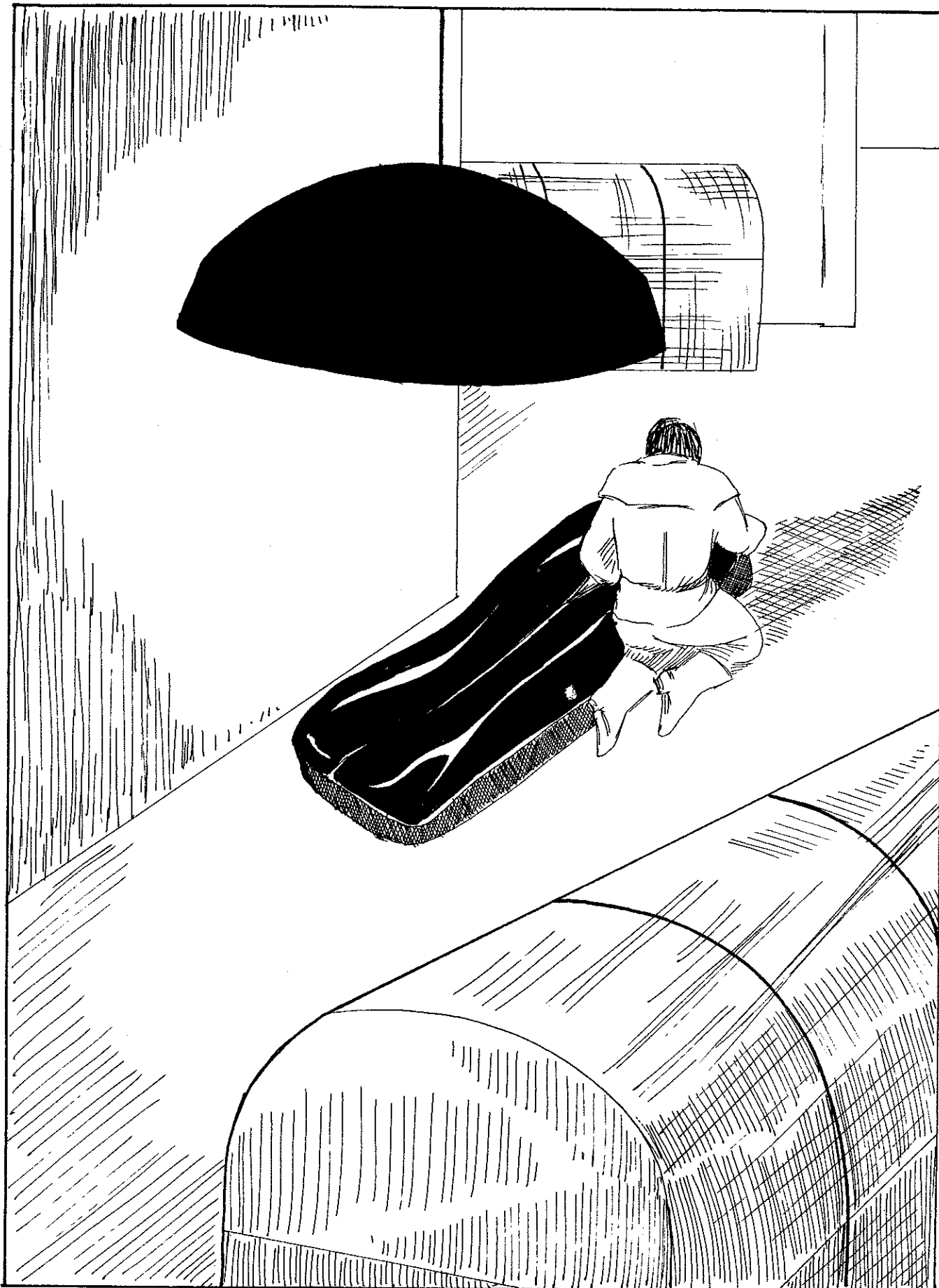
"Yes, Commissioner." The image faded.

Slowly, Servalan got up, walked to the viewport and stared out into space and for the first time in a very long time, tears came to her eyes. "I did not want it to end like this, Avon," she murmured. "Not like this."

* * *

Tarrant glanced over at Dayna, his face white with shock. "It's...it's Avon, Dayna. He's dead. And has been for sometime."

"But Vila said he'd talked to him," she said, tears rushing to her eyes.



"I know," he replied, looking at the now quiet thief. Vila had drawn close to the body, staring down at Avon in silence, his tears spent.

"Vila?" Tarrant said gently, at the same time reaching out to close the bag. His hand was intercepted by the thief's who held it in an iron grip.

"Leave him alone, Tarrant," he murmured quietly. "Leave us both alone."

"Vila," Soolin soothed, drawing up beside him. "I know he was your friend but..."

"He was more than that, Soolin, much more," Vila answered slowly. "Please leave us alone." He looked up them and said, "Please."

* * *

"I don't like it, Tarrant," Soolin remarked. "We should never have left him there like that."

"What else could we do, Soolin? You didn't feel his grip. I didn't think he was capable of that kind of strength."

"Look what I've found," Dayna called from the doorway.

Her eyes were still red from crying. She had mourned Avon for the better part of that day, but knew what his reaction to an extended period of grief would be. Sentimentality was for fools, he had often remarked and Dayna agreed. Knowing that somehow lessened the pain. Maybe that was how Avon had been able to endure Cally's death.

"ORAC?" Soolin and Tarrant exclaimed in unison. "But where did you find it?"

"In the captain's quarters," she explained. "I think he was planning to use ORAC as a sort of peace offering to Servalan."

"Peace offering?" Soolin asked.

"Yes, peace offering," Tarrant echoed. "Whoever was responsible for Avon's death would need something to keep Servalan from killing him. Not that she wouldn't have once she had ORAC." He looked expectantly at Dayna. "Let's have the key."

Her eyes went wide. "I don't have it. I thought maybe you did."

"Great. We have the most advanced computer in the universe but can't activate it." Tarrant was clearly annoyed.

"Isn't there some other way?" Soolin queried.

"No. Avon installed some safety device inside right after they acquired it to prevent anyone tampering with his programming," he explained. "Vila told me about it."

"Speaking of Vila, where is he?" Dayna asked, wondering at the sudden change in her companions' faces. "He's not still there, Tarrant?"

"We tried to talk to him, Dayna, both of us." Tarrant shook his head dejectedly. "He won't leave him. I don't think he's moved an inch since we found him there."

"But you're stronger than he is. Why didn't you just drag him out?" the girl demanded.

"You won't believe this, but I tried and he wouldn't budge." Tarrant was still puzzled over that phenomenon.

"Then I'll get him," Dayna snapped, storming from the cabin.

"Good luck," Soolin called after her.

"Better her than me," Tarrant commented. "You know when I looked into his eyes, somehow, it wasn't Vila looking back."

"You don't think he's gone mad," Soolin prompted.

"No. At least I hope not," he responded, running his fingers through his hair. "Though this whole business is crazy enough to drive anyone mad."

The communicator on the console sputtered into life. "Tarrant?"

Dayna sounded upset. "Yes, Dayna, what is it?"

"It's Vila," she answered. "He's locked the door. I can't get in."

* * *

"Vila, I know you can hear me," Tarrant called through the wall comm. "Open the door." There was no response. "Vila, you're acting crazy."

"Oh, that's a wonderful thing to tell him," Soolin remarked. "Just what a madman would want to hear."

"No one said Vila's mad!" Dayna snapped at her. Then, "Vila, it's Dayna. Please open up the door. Vila, I loved Avon, too. Please, he wouldn't want you to act like this. You know that, Vila. Please open the door." But there was no answer to any of their pleas.

"One of us had better stay here, just in case he does come out," Tarrant ordered.

"And if he does?" Soolin asked.

"We do whatever we have to," Tarrant replied. "But we don't let him back inside."

"You sound worried about him, Tarrant," Dayna remarked. "I thought you claimed he was worthless."

"None of us are worthless, Dayna," Tarrant fired back. "Especially now. We need each other more than ever if we're going to elude the Federation and Servalan."

"All right. I'll take the first watch," Dayna said. "Why don't you two get some sleep?"

"A good idea," Tarrant responded. "Call me if anything happens."

"Don't worry, I will," she said, watching them walk down the corridor. She looked at the closed door and shook her head. "Poor Vila!"

* * *

In the command cabin, a figure approached ORAC's metal case and opened it, revealing the crystal computer. Seconds later, it sputtered to life.

"All right, ORAC, I have something I wish you to do," a quiet voice invoked.

+Do? I am always doing something for you.+

"And you will again," answered the voice.

The computer sensed the uselessness of its argument and sniffed. +Oh, very well, what is it?+

* * *

Tarrant was dreaming contentedly when his world was suddenly turned upside down. He awoke to find himself lying beside the bunk on the floor. "What the..." he snarled and grabbed his tunic, hastily putting it on.

Soolin staggered out of the cabin across from his and exclaimed, "What is it? What's going on?"

"I don't know," he answered and ran for the command cabin.

Dayna was already there. "What the hell did you do?" he accused, pushing her back from the controls.

"Me?" she cried angrily. "Look, Tarrant, I'm not the one who wanted to take this bucket in the first place."

"We didn't have much of a choice," he shot back. "Or did you forget?"

"Stop arguing, you two," Soolin broke in, drawing their attention. "Tarrant, what's wrong with the ship?"

Turning his attention to the controls, the pilot began checking, then sat down with a puzzled look on his face. "That's impossible."

"What's impossible?" Soolin asked.

"The navigational computer has been changed. We heading for deep space."

"Well, can't you change it back?" Dayna demanded. She was still angry at him for thinking it was her fault.

"No," he answered. "The manual override isn't working."

"Well, I know something that is." As the pair turned to regard her, Soolin pointed at ORAC, whose twinkling lights were flashing.

Tarrant jumped for the computer before anyone else moved. "The key!" He twisted round to face his companions. "Enough is enough, Dayna, Soolin. Cancel whatever order you gave ORAC and get us back to our original heading."

Dayna and Soolin looked at each in surprise. "I don't know what you're talking about, Tarrant," the blonde murmured. "I was awakened just like you, if you recall." She glanced at Dayna.

"Oh, no. Don't look at me," the girl responded.

"Then who?" Tarrant demanded.

"I...I found ORAC's key in Avon's pocket," murmured a frail, trembling voice. They whirled about to find a pale and swollen-eyed Vila leaning against the doorway behind them.

The thief was immediately ushered into the comfortable co-pilot's seat. "You had us all worried, Vila," Tarrant told him gently, taking in the hollowness around the thief's eyes.

"I...I'm sorry," Vila stammered in apology. "It's just finding Av...Avon. After I had talked to him. I don't understand." Tears began welling up in his eyes again.

"Don't think about it," Soolin soothed, putting her arms around him. "It's over now."

"Come on, Vila, let's find you a nice cabin," Dayna added. "You've got bags under your eyes big enough to hide a Sarran sand rat in."

As the thief got to his feet, his legs buckled. Tarrant caught him before he touched the floor. "Go on," he told Dayna. "I'll bring him."

Cradling Vila in his arms, Tarrant followed Dayna to an empty cabin. While Dayna pulled down the covers, he studied the thief. The great dark hollows about his eyes and pallor of his face worried him. As much as he hated to admit it, he was afraid Avon's death might well have driven the thief into madness.

As gently as possible, Tarrant lowered him onto the bed, pulled off his boots and drew the blanket up to cover him. Dayna sighed, brushing the hair from Vila's forehead. "I think he'll sleep now."

"Do you think it wise to leave him alone?" Tarrant whispered. Vila had not explained where ORAC was taking the ship.

"We could lock the door," Dayna replied.

"Very funny," Tarrant countered. Then looking down at the sleeping thief, he smiled. "I guess you're right. He wouldn't be going anywhere." But they were wrong.

"Tarrant, Dayna," Soolin's voice erupted over the communicator. "Vila's not in his cabin."

"We'll be right there," Tarrant answered, glancing at Dayna who nodded. They knew where to find him.

Whatever was driving the thief, it was not good, Soolin mused, waiting for the others. Loyalty to one's friends was one thing but what Vila was doing was...was insane.

She turned as Tarrant and Dayna arrived. "I looked in right after I got up," she explained. "And he was sleeping peacefully. But when I came back from eating, he was gone."

Tarrant nodded, looking at the carefully arranged covers. Strange that Vila should make his bed up so neatly as if... The thought stuck in his mind. As if he wasn't coming back. "Dayna and I think we know where he went."

"Back to the hold?" Soolin queried.

"Yes. This has got to stop. Vila has to let go of him and there's only one way he can do that."

"You're suggesting what, Tarrant?" Dayna demanded.

"Avon is dead, Dayna. We've waited far too long. We should have buried him as soon as he was found," he explained, hoping for her support but finding only renewed pain.

"But, Tarrant, what if Vila's locked himself in again?" Soolin questioned.

The look he gave her was anything but reassuring. "Let's worry about that if we come to it, all right?"

With Dayna and Soolin following, he walked to the cargo hold, but the door was not locked, it was wide open. Vila was sitting where he had been before, his face locked on Avon's with a strange intensity.

Not knowing the thief's mental stability, the trio entered quietly and moved to stand beside him. Tarrant dropped to his knees. "Vila?" No answer. He reached out and gently turned the thief's face toward him. "Vila?" There was no recognition in his eyes. If anything, they looked empty, as empty of life as Avon's.

Tarrant turned frantically to his companions for help, but before they could move, a siren went off, startling them.

"What is it?" exclaimed Dayna as Tarrant ran past her.

"Collision alarm," he called over his shoulder. "Something is on a collision course with us." Soolin looked at Dayna, then the two followed Tarrant to the command cabin, leaving Vila alone.

* * *

Tarrant was staring in shock out the viewport when they arrived. "I don't believe it," he exclaimed, sinking slowly into his chair.

"It's not possible," Dayna added, as the dark, elliptical shape of Terminal appeared before them, flooding their minds with unwelcome memories.

"What is it?" Soolin asked. She had never seen the manmade world before, just heard stories from Vila and Dayna and what had happened there.

+Orbit is now complete,+ ORAC announced, startling the trio.

"What? ORAC, who gave you the coordinates for Terminal?" Tarrant demanded.

+That information is classified and cannot be divulged,+ the computer replied smugly.

"Tarrant, wait," Dayna cried as he ripped the key from the computer. "What good will that do?"

"I can take the ship on manual, and get us out of here."

"But how did ORAC know the coordinates?" she asked. "Avon never told anyone. Don't you remember? He said Zen would explain it if he failed to return."

Tarrant stared at her, his mind flying back to that first encounter with the manmade world. "That's right. Then how..."

No one heard Vila's silent approach until he asked, "Tarrant, can we land there?"

Tarrant twisted his chair around to look at the thief. "What?"

"Can we land there?" Vila repeated.

"Possibly, Vila. But...."

"Do it." The thief's voice sounded strange, harsh and commanding.

"But Vila," he began, then stopped. Vila was gazing at him intently but somehow the look wasn't his, but Avon's.

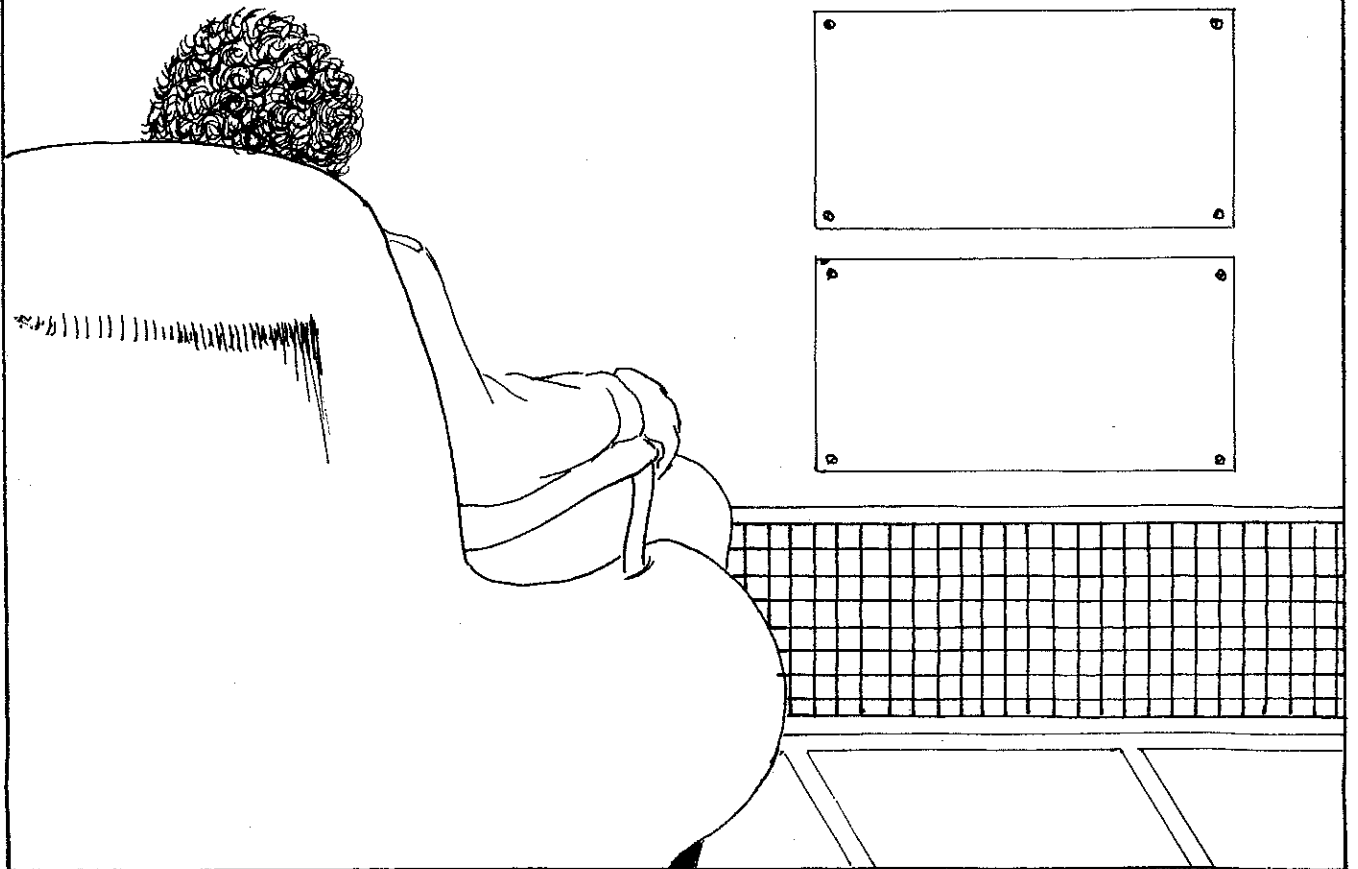
"Vila, what do you think you're doing?" Dayna asked, wonderingly.

"Something I must do, Dayna," he replied quietly. "Tarrant, bring the ship down near the ruins of the base."

Tarrant glanced at Dayna and Soolin, then adjusted the controls for an approach. Vila stood by, saying nothing, only waiting until the ship touched down.

"Now what?" asked Tarrant uneasily. It wasn't Vila he was talking to. It was someone else.

"Help me with Avon," Vila said. "Dayna and Soolin will remain here to watch the scanners."



©1984 DMWalt

"I'm going with you," Dayna snapped.

"All right then," Vila sighed with a strange half-smile which suddenly made her uneasy. "You never could take orders, could you?"

Dayna glanced at him in wonder.

* * *

With Dayna watching for Links, Tarrant and Vila carried Avon's body to the ruins which marked the entrance to the underground base and Cally's grave, and gently lowered it to the ground. Scattered remnants of molten metal and twisted support girders lay strewn around it.

"There's no way we can get in there," Tarrant protested, looking at the wreckage. "No way at all."

"There is, if you know where to look for it," Vila responded and led him to narrow passageway partially hidden under the shadow of a concrete slab. "How do you think Avon recovered ORAC?"

"But how did you know where it was?" Dayna murmured, feeling more and more uneasy.

"There's no time for questions, Dayna," the thief told her. "Stay put. I'll go and make sure it's still clear."

"But what about the Links?" Dayna asked. "There could be some living down there."

Vila eyed her and smiled. "Trust me, Dayna. There are no more Links."

Dayna caught her breath. That smile, the way he had looked at her, so like... She shuddered.

Turning his back on his surprised companions, Vila made his way carefully down into the dark passage, testing each foot and handhold to make sure they were safe before resting any weight on them. At the bottom, he moved against the wall and felt around until his hand closed on a raised metallic switch. He turned it and a low hum grew audible and a faint light pulsed into life.

"The generators are still partially functional," he advised his companions after returning to the surface. Then looking at Tarrant, he added, "Help me with Avon, will you?"

Tarrant was uncertain what he should do. Vila was acting so strangely, his mannerisms definitely not his own. Should he help him or simply overpower the thief and take him back to the ship?

"I doubt if you could," the thief announced, further alarming Tarrant. "I know what I'm doing, Tarrant. Please, help me." And the voice was suddenly Vila's, pleading for his help and understanding.

"All right, Vila," Tarrant replied. "I don't understand any of it, but I'll help you."

Vila picked up the bottom of the bag and led the way. "The ladder is old but it will hold

us," he cautioned as they moved down it. Dayna came last, her weapon in her hand. She was not as sure as Vila there were no more Links.

Once they were inside, the thief gestured to a mass of fallen concrete which lay near the bottom of what had been their original escape route. "There."

Tarrant looked uneasily at the ceiling as they deposited their burden near the debris. Cracks riddled the structure and dust loosened by the sound of their voices drifted down. "Vila, this whole place could go at any time."

But the thief was not hearing him. He was gazing sorrowfully at the rubble. Then in a low voice, he murmured, "Go back to the ship, Tarrant. Please."

"Vila, he's dead. Let him go," Tarrant urged.

Dayna moved up beside the thief. "Vila, Avon would not have wanted you to suffer like this."

"Tarrant, Dayna, please," the thief pleaded.

Tarrant gazed into his eyes and shrugged. "We'll wait for you at the ship."

Silently, Vila watched them leave, then faced the pile of debris, and murmured aloud, "Cally, I've brought Avon."

"I know, Vila," came her familiar voice, breaking the stillness of the air. "I've been waiting."

"When I left, I said I would come back, Cally," echoed Avon's voice.

Twisting around, Vila tried to find his lost companions but could see no one. "Can I stay here with you?" he asked tearfully.

"No," Avon replied, sounding amused. "Someone has to take care of the others, remember?"

"But I'm tired of running, Avon," muttered the thief, slumping to the ground dejectedly. "Besides, Tarrant doesn't need me."

"He needs you more than he knows, Vila," rumbled another voice and the thief jumped.

"Blake?" he asked, looking around the empty chamber in disbelief. "How...how did you get here?"

"I told you he would want an explanation," Avon remarked.

"Shut up, Avon," Jenna's voice cut in. Then she added gently, "We're all here, Vila."

"But how?"

"The 'how' is not important, Vila," Cally told him. "We are together as we were before."

"I don't understand," the thief cried. "I don't understand."

Reunion at Terminal

"Vila," Blake said compassionately, "as Cally said, it's not important. What is important is that you must go back to Tarrant and the others. You must keep on fighting."

"But without you, Blake, we're nothing," the thief wailed.

"I once told someone that everyone was expendable, even me," Blake answered thoughtfully. "Vila, the Federation has to be stopped."

"Servalan has to be stopped," corrected Avon with a note of anger in his voice.

"I won't leave," the thief replied stubbornly, facing the direction of Avon's voice.

"Come on, Vila," Gan laughed, his voice startling the thief. "You know you can't stay."

"But the others...they're not...it's not the same with them," Vila said determinedly. "No, I won't go. And...and you can't make me."

The silence which followed was broken by Tarrant's voice calling urgently down the passageway. "Vila, the scanners have picked up a ship headed this way. Vila, we have to go."

"You can't stay, Vila," Avon told him. "There's nothing here for you."

"Vila? We have to take off now, Vila." Dayna's voice now joined the pilot's.

"You must go or you will endanger the others," Cally murmured softly.

"I know, I know," Vila said, wiping the tears away and standing up. "I'm coming," he called.

Invisible arms steadied him as he stumbled toward the entrance and climbed out onto the surface. In the distance, Tarrant was motioning frantically for him to hurry, Dayna was already on board. Vila signaled he was coming, then turned around, removing his blaster. There was still something he had to do. Aiming it at the entrance, he fired and kept firing until the entire passageway was sealed.

With a heavy sigh, he started back towards the ship, then stopped and looked back one last time, his eyes widening in surprise. Cally was standing there, looking as lovely as ever. Then Avon materialized beside her, his arm around her waist, and looking at Vila with an expression the thief had never seen before.

"Stay out of trouble," Avon murmured with a smile.

And Gan was there, too, smiling shyly, somehow lifting Vila's spirits as easily as he had when he had been alive.

Finally, Blake and Jenna appeared on either side of him, their expressions full of affection and encouragement. "Go on," Blake told him, pushing the thief gently toward the waiting ship. "They're waiting."

Vila turned and ran to the hatch. Glancing back, he waved and the ghostly apparitions waved back, then faded slowly from view. Vila locked the hatch in place, then walked quietly to the command cabin.

As he entered, Tarrant glanced at him warily. "Vila?" he asked.

"Who else would it be?" replied the thief, a smile lighting the planes of his face. "It's all right, Tarrant," he added quietly. "We can leave now. The reunion is over."

Dayna and Soolin exchanged worried looks but said nothing. They were as puzzled as Tarrant as to what had happened.

"Well, come on, you great big oaf!" Vila said as Tarrant continued to stare at him. "Get us moving or do you want me that incoming ship to see us?"

"What?" Tarrant said in a startled voice as the thief's words sank in. "Yes, of course." His hands flew over the controls and with a shudder and a groan, the old transport lifted off.

* * *

On board the incoming Federation ship, the captain beamed with pride. When he had received the broadcast concerning the escaped prisoners, he had been sure his chances at finding them were nil. But suddenly his luck seemed to have changed as there they were. He could almost taste his promotion to the main fleet.

"Sir, the transport appears to be lifting off," reported one of his junior officers.

"Good. We'll take them as they leave the atmosphere. That old ship is too heavy to out-manuever us. They'll be sitting ducks."

The captain turned to watch the isolated dot on the forward scanner which was the transport. It was fast approaching escape velocity.

"Stand by." He turned to his weapons chief. "Remember the orders. Commissioner Sleer wants them taken alive."

"Understood, sir." The man moved to his forward position and prepared to fire.

The captain watched the dot as it drew closer to the intercept point. It was nearly there and...smoke started pouring from the scanner, obliterating the captain's view.

"They must be in range," he shouted. "Fire!"

The weapons chief tried to comply but found his controls suddenly too hot to touch. "The panel's burning up, sir. I can't touch the controls."

Somewhere on Terminal, a familiar voice said, "That was not very ethical, Avon."

"Ethics had nothing to do with it, Blake," Avon's voice shot back. "Tarrant is going to need all the help he can get. In fact, it gave me an idea."

There was a long sigh. Then, "Do you know how long eternity is, Cally?"

"Haven't a clue, Jenna. Why do you ask?" came the Auron's voice.

"Because I have a feeling we're going to find out."

end.

Hoopy!

This cool frood knows where his towel is ... and yours!



"What this universe needs is a Pan-Galactic Gargle Blaster in every mega-hot tub!"

- Zaphod Beeblebrox,
Galactic Entrepreneur

Vote Beeblebrox for Galactic President