

The Invaders

by Sheila Paulson

"Well, I don't like it then," said Vila for at least the fifth time.

Avon looked up from setting the teleport coordinates and said with no trace of surprise, "Surprising."

"You don't like it either," Vila reminded him.

"No, but I, at least, have a good reason."

"And what reason is that, Avon?" Blake asked as he arrived on the teleport deck.

"You may be willing to play the hero and risk your life for your great cause. I, on the other hand, have much better things to do with mine."

"You're a computer expert," Blake reminded him. "According to you, the best there is. And that's exactly what we need. There's a computer down there on Thalassa, an abandoned Federation computer. And I want the information it contains. Only you can get it."

"It's so nice to be needed," Avon said without enthusiasm.

"Why don't we just ask ORAC then?" Vila wanted to know.

"We've already been over this, Vila," Blake said. "Because Avalon's intelligence reports indicate that the computer has been totally shut down and that it has been rigged with a self-destruct system set to go off if it is not activated manually down there on the base. Apparently they assume that no one from the outside can get in, but they didn't reckon on Vila." He turned to the thief, whose enthusiasm for the mission, never high, had hit absolute zero at the words 'self-destruct'. "Vila, can you get in there?"

"Of course I can. Not that I want to. Blake, this sounds too easy. Are you sure it's not a trap?"

"Vila, you amaze me," Avon said. "I was wondering the same thing myself."

"Great minds think alike," retorted Vila with relish.

Before Avon could respond with a withering comment, Blake said, "We can't be certain that it is not a trap, of course. But the base is deserted, and there are no Federation ships within detector range. Zen can spot them in time for us to get away if we must. No, I think maybe we got lucky for once."

"I doubt it," Avon replied. "Much as I hate to admit it, I think Vila is right. It sounds too easy." He fastened on his bracelet as Jenna and Cally arrived.

"Are you ready, then?" Jenna asked.

"No, but that won't stop anything," Vila replied as he joined Avon.

Cally moved to operate the teleport controls. Story copyright 1982 by Sheila Paulson

"Good luck," she said.

"Put us down," Avon instructed.

Her fingers moved over the controls, then she drew back as if stung. "Blake," she called, reaching for the controls again, just as Avon and Vila shimmered and disappeared.

"What is it, Cally?"

"Some sort of a power surge just as I activated. It burned my fingers." She displayed blistered fingertips. "Something has gone wrong."

Blake was already attempting to contact Avon and Vila. "This is Blake. Do you read me? Avon! Come in, Avon. Vila?" He got no response.

He looked at Jenna and Cally, who were trying to work the teleporter again. "Blake," Jenna looked up at him. "We can't bring them up."

"We can't find anything to lock onto," Cally said. "Surely they would not have taken off their bracelets."

"Not unless someone were waiting for them and removed their bracelets. But there's not supposed to be anyone down there. It must have been that power surge." He hit the intercom button. "Gan, come to the teleport immediately."

"What are you going to do?" Jenna asked him. She had a feeling that she was not going to like the answer.

"Go down after them," Blake said simply.

"Blake, you can't. If something is wrong with the equipment, you could be lost too. That wouldn't do Avon and Vila any good. Before you do anything at all, we need a lot more information. It wouldn't be safe to..."

Blake picked up ORAC's key and inserted it. "ORAC?"

"What is it now?" ORAC demanded peevishly.

"ORAC, we need to know what is wrong with the teleport."

"Nothing is wrong with the teleport."

Blake gave an exasperated sigh. "ORAC, it sent Avon and Vila someplace we can't pull them back from, and I want to know why."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place? A magnetic fluctuation in the planetary atmosphere at the precise moment of teleportation disrupted the power source and was channeled directly through the teleport system, temporarily disrupting the coordinates. The teleport is undamaged and will function correctly if such fluctuations are monitored and avoided in the future."

"But where did it send Avon and Vila?" Cally asked.

"Unknown. The most likely possibility is that they were transferred into a parallel

dimension, but without further data, exact information cannot be given."

"Can we get them back?" Blake asked.

"It is possible. A magnetic fluctuation of equal strength would be required and the teleport would need to be operated at that precise moment."

"Can you predict when the next one will occur?"

"Of course I can. It will occur in 28.32 hours."

"You mean we cannot get them back until then?" Cally asked in dismay.

"I believe that is what I said."

"Shut up, ORAC," said Jenna automatically and turned to Blake. "Now what?"

Gan arrived before Blake could reply. "What went wrong?" he asked when he saw their expressions.

"Teleport malfunction," Blake explained the situation. "And ORAC says it will be more than a day before we can try to bring them back."

"We mean we just wait?" Gan asked.

"If there's no other way to get them back. But I don't like the idea of just sitting here. ORAC, is there any way to duplicate the effects of the magnetic fluctuation artificially so that we could retrieve them immediately?"

"Such an attempt has a very limited chance of success. If it was not an exact duplication, it would find them, but would be unable to bring them back. They would be trapped between dimensions."

"We cannot take a risk like that," Cally objected.

"No," Blake agreed. "ORAC, I want you to start gathering all information possible on the phenomenon, but first, I want to know if we can be teleported down within the Federation base on Thalassa without triggering any alarms."

"Blake, you're not still going to go down there?" Jenna asked in disbelief.

"It's what we came here for, Jenna. Look, I want to get Avon and Vila back as badly as any of you do, but we can't do anything to help them for more than 28 hours. I don't know about you, but I don't fancy sitting here helplessly twiddling my thumbs until then."

"Neither do I," Cally agreed. "But we cannot be certain that we will not trigger some alarms down there. If it is a trap, there could be Federation ships waiting just out of detector range."

"We don't know it's a trap."

"We don't know it's not," Jenna said. "Cally's right. I think we should wait."

Blake frowned. Now that this had happened, he wanted to get the mission out of the way so that he could devote all his time and energy to planning a rescue. But on the other hand, the mission could bring the Federation down on them, and they couldn't get Avon and Vila back if they had to run.

"All right," he conceded reluctantly. "We wait."

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Avon and Vila materialized on a desolate plain, almost bare of trees but covered with thick hardy shrubbery. There were rows of gentle hills rising beyond them into distant foothills, and, beyond them, stark and bare, rose mountain peaks, jagged against the sky like broken teeth. "Down and safe," Avon reported, shivering as a chill wind swept across the plain, cold and carrying with it the promise of snow.

"They might have warned us about the climate," Vila complained, shivering too. He looked around him with a dismayed expression. "Is this where we're supposed to be?" he asked doubtfully.

Avon took a closer look and realized that, for once, Vila had a good basis for his complaint. "You're right, Vila. This is not the right place."

"Then how did we get here?" Vila asked in alarm.

"We teleported," Avon replied shortly, a sour look on his face, and added, "Something must have interfered with the teleport." He brought his bracelet up. "Liberator, this is Avon. Bring us up. Something's gone wrong." Nothing happened and he repeated, "Bring us up. Blake? Teleport now."

Vila tried his own bracelet, sounding decidedly panicky. "We're stranded here," he moaned. "I knew I shouldn't have come along."

"As I recall, you were given no choice."

"That makes it even worse, and it's your fault I'm in this mess," Vila accused him unfairly. "I imagine it's too much to expect that you should feel guilty about it."

Avon's expression made it all too clear that it was indeed too much to expect. "Put the blame where it belongs," he said. "On Blake," and he turned to study the terrain without enthusiasm. "It looks deserted," he said, "but looks can be deceiving. I think we'll need to be very cautious."

"Wonderful. And I thought it was bad enough already. You really know how to make a person feel comfortable, Avon."

"Making you feel comfortable has never been my objective."

"But what are we going to do?"

"For a start, you could shut up, Vila."

Vila gave him an aggrieved look, but he complied, glancing about him in dismay as if he expected to find hordes of Federation troopers advancing from all directions. But when a few minutes passed and nothing threatening happened he began to get a bit of confidence back. He looked at Avon, but his face was forbidding, so he remained silent, studying the barren landscape and wishing he was far away.

Avon said after a bit, "No doubt Blake will attempt to find us if it does not interfere with his mission. Perhaps he will be able to discover where the teleport went wrong."

"And if he doesn't?" Vila worried.

"Then we'll have to find our own way out." He looked around consideringly. "Pick a direction, Vila."

"Me?" Vila asked in astonishment. "How? There's nothing to choose from in any direction."

Avon nodded. "That is why I felt you could be trusted to make the decision."

Vila glared at him. "All right then. That way. But don't blame me if it goes wrong."

"You mean *when* it goes wrong?" Avon questioned blandly and turned to head in the direction Vila had picked before he could find the proper retort.

He had gone ten steps when disaster overtook them.

For Vila, trailing along in Avon's wake, it was like a nightmare. One moment, Avon was there in front of him, the next, he had vanished from sight as if he had never been there at all. "Avon?" quavered Vila nervously. It was bad enough with Avon here, but alone, it was likely to be far worse.

"Here." The reply startled him so much he jumped. "But watch where you step. The ground gave way under my feet."

Vila went down on his hands and knees, crawling toward the hole that had swallowed up Avon. It was an awfully small hole for someone to disappear into, but Vila was taking no chances with it. Creeping forward, he peered over the edge and saw that it widened out a bit underneath into a good sized cave. Where Avon had broke through was obviously the weakest point, but the edge where Vila was resting wasn't much better, and bits of dirt crumbled away from it as he leaned there. Avon was out of his reach. Vila leaned forward into the hole as far as he safely could, but it was obvious that he would need a rope to pull Avon out, and there was nothing at hand that he could use. He didn't think his jacket was strong enough to take Avon's weight, and his belt was too short to be of any use. Reluctantly he pulled back from the overhang.

"Well, don't bring it down on my head," Avon complained as a few clods of dirt struck him. He was lying in what looked like a very uncomfortable position, with one leg twisted under him painfully. Vila realized with dismay that it was probably broken. Knowing how touchy Avon could be at the best of times, which this wasn't, he said tentatively, "You're hurt."

"It's very perceptive of you to notice." The sarcasm in Avon's voice was threaded with pain.

"I don't know how to get you out of there," Vila admitted.

"No, but there might be another solution. Vila, there's a tunnel down here; part of it has collapsed and weakened the ground, and that's why I broke through. If you come down, we might be able to find a way out through the tunnel."

"Me, come down there?" squeaked Vila, but another look at Avon's face, white and drawn with pain, convinced him that he had no choice. "All right," he said. "But we won't be able to get out again."

"The tunnel leads somewhere." Avon didn't relish the idea of remaining down here alone and helpless. Even Vila's dubious companionship would be better than nothing, though he would die before admitting it. "It looks artificial," he added as an enticement.

"Artificial," Vila echoed without enthusiasm. "Wonderful." That could mean anything, even Federation, and he wasn't sure he liked the idea of exploring dark tunnels on his own. In fact, he was positive he didn't like it one bit. And with Avon incapacitated, the exploring was sure to fail to him.

"I presume you won't take all day to make up your mind."

"All right, all right. I'm coming. But the only way for me to get down there is to drop, and I don't think you want me to land on you. Can you move out of the way first?"

"Yes." Avon clenched his teeth and tried to drag himself back from the lip of the drop. The pain was excruciating; he could feel the bones in his leg grinding together, driving waves of agony through his entire body. Spots danced before his eyes, and it was all he could do to stay conscious and alert. Centimeter by centimeter

meter he pulled himself out of the way while Vila watched him with ill-concealed worry. When Avon was clear, he dropped a couple of sticks he had found to use as splints down into the tunnel, then began to lower himself over the edge until he was hanging by his hands. "Ready," he announced. "I'm coming down."

The drop jarred him more than he had expected, but he was unhurt. He sat up and went over to Avon who was lying still, eyes shut, a sheen of perspiration covering his face. He looked horrible. Vila eyed him with growing dismay. "Avon?" he ventured.

Without opening his eyes, Avon said, "I'm awake."

"Should I have a look at your leg?"

"I think you'll have to."

Vila made a wry face. "I'm not very good at this sort of thing, you know," he pointed out. "You should have Cally."

"I would much *rather* have Cally and the medical facilities on the *Liberator*," Avon replied, "But we don't have either. Unfortunately, all we have is you, so I think you will have to set it."

"I don't know how," Vila wailed. "Avon, I don't know how."

"Learn."

Vila groaned. "All right, Avon. But it'll hurt."

"It already hurts. Just do it."

So Vila did, slitting Avon's trouser leg to expose the fracture. He was relieved to find that the skin was not broken, but it looked red and inflamed, and Vila could see where the broken edges of bone pressed against it. He turned green at the sight of it, but waiting would not make it any easier so he went to work quickly before he could lose any *more* of his nerve. He was appalled at the one sound of pain that was wrenched from Avon before he lost consciousness; it made him sick. But it might be easier with Avon unconscious. It seemed to take years, but finally he thought he had the bones back in place. Carefully he bound his rough splints to the leg. Through the whole procedure, Avon did not revive, and Vila was glad. Avon yelling at him he could take; he was used to it. But Avon yelling in pain was something else again and he didn't like it at all.

It was half an hour before Avon came to, consciousness slowly trickling back. For a moment he couldn't remember where he was or what had happened, but then he felt the pain and everything came back to him. He opened his eyes with extreme reluctance. The sharp edge of agony was gone from his leg, but it ached with a deep throbbing ache that he felt with every heartbeat. He knew that if he moved, the pain would explode into something past bearing, so he lay perfectly still. The cave was silent and darker than he remembered it being, and he felt no sense of any presence other than his own. "Vila?" He was disgusted at the way his voice shook, but perhaps Vila would attribute it to pain.

There was a scrambling sound beside him and Vila said quietly, "Yes, Avon. I'm still here."

Avon masked his relief. "Unfortunately we are both still here. I should have known that you wouldn't be off exploring the tunnel on your own."

In fact, Vila had been watching the tunnel in nervous anticipation, half expecting some creature from his childhood nightmares to emerge from its dark mouth. The cave-in that had weakened the ground to allow Avon to fall had blocked the other entrance, so there had been only one way to watch, but one was more than enough. It was a colossal relief to hear Avon's voice again,

as much because of the tunnel's dark threat as because he had been starting to worry that Avon's condition was worse than he had feared. He said defensively, "Well, you wouldn't want to go in there alone either. Besides, I didn't dare leave you alone. If you started moving around, you could undo what I've done to fix your leg." His voice softened a bit. "Does it feel any better?"

Avon nodded slightly. "Yes, some. Have you been able to contact the *Liberator*?"

"No. I've tried, but there's nothing. Do you think they're just off station or..."

"I'm not sure what I think." The pain had dulled his mind so that it was not easy to think clearly. "This is not where we were supposed to be put down. There is no Federation base around here."

"This is the right world, though, isn't it?" asked Vila.

"I don't know, Vila," Avon said gravely. "I just don't know."

"But how could it not be?" There was a slightly hysterical edge to Vila's voice. "There wasn't anything wrong on the *Liberator*. And it didn't feel any different than usual."

Avon closed his eyes for a moment. "It's pointless to speculate without further information," he said flatly, wishing the pain would ease a bit so that he could think. "Is it my imagination, or is it getting dark?"

"I was hoping it was imagination," Vila confessed. "There's nothing to build a fire with." He made a wry face. "And it's getting colder too."

Avon hadn't really felt the cold down here sheltered from the wind, but now he realized that Vila's jacket was covering him. He didn't comment; he knew that in his injured state he needed the warmth more than Vila did. But at this rate, it was going to be a very long night.

Vila sat down and leaned back against the wall, clasping his arms across his chest to fight the chill. He tried to contact *Liberator* one more time without success and would gladly have flung his bracelet across the cave in frustration, but he could imagine the scathing remark Avon would make if he did it, so he refrained. "ORAC will probably figure out how to get us back soon now," he said.

"Are you trying to reassure me?" Avon asked. He didn't exactly sound enchanted with the idea, and Vila flushed and mumbled, "Well, you *are* hurt."

Avon looked at him a moment and didn't speak. Things must be pretty grim if even Vila was willing to offer him sympathy. Maybe his leg was more severely injured than he had realized. But speculation of that nature was unprofitable. He tried to shift position surreptitiously to ease his leg, but the movement caused a new stab of pain. He managed to keep from crying out, but he couldn't do anything about turning pale. Vila said, "It would be better if you didn't move around too much." He didn't look at Avon as he said it.

"Thank you, doctor," Avon snapped.

But Vila was watching the tunnel mouth. "Avon," he said urgently, "I think someone's coming."

Avon turned to look too. He couldn't hear anything, but there was a faint easing of the darkness as if someone had lit a torch. As he watched, it brightened, accompanied by the unmistakable sounds of movement. "You're right," Avon said quietly. "Someone is coming."

"But what are we going to do about it?" Vila demanded in alarm.

"What would you suggest? You could, of course, try to climb out of here and run away."

"Do you think I'd do that?" Vila asked, anger replacing his fear for a moment, mostly because the idea appealed to him so much.

Avon hoped not, but he didn't say so. "We can only wait," he said. "If it is Federation, we are about to become prisoners."

"You just had to say that, didn't you?" Vila drew his gun and waited.

But it wasn't a Federation officer who suddenly emerged into their cave; it was a young girl, not more than 14 or 15 years old. She wore a tunic made of some rough cloth, her arms and legs bare in spite of the cold, and she was holding a torch, its light flickering and dancing in the dimness of the cave. When she saw Avon and Vila, she jerked to a stop in surprise but not in fear and took another step toward them. *Oh,* she said, *I didn't think anyone would be this far out.*

Avon and Vila were accustomed to telepathic communication from their contact with Cally, and it only took them a moment to realize that this girl was communicating this way, as well as speaking. Her spoken language was incomprehensible to them, but she was able to project her meaning into their minds without effort. Her eyes travelled over them, came to rest on the splints on Avon's leg, then grew simply enormous with shock. *Oh,* she said again and turned to Vila. *You must be a deviant.*

"Eh?" said Vila, much surprised.

Well, why else would you be hiding here with one of the dead? she asked reasonably.

"One of the what?" Avon asked, startled.

She ignored him entirely. *The cave mother told us about deviants in lesson time,* she explained to Vila. *You don't look the way I thought a deviant would; you look quite nice, but then, it is a fact that sometimes people deviate. I suppose you were lovers.*

"What!" exclaimed Avon and Vila in unison, exchanging shocked, distasteful glances.

Well, why else wouldn't you have called the exterminators? She looked suddenly scared. *I never knew anyone who would deviate just for a friend, but I will help you if I can. I'll terminate him for you if you like.* Evidently this offer cost her some effort, and her voice shook as she made it. *I've not terminated anyone before, but if you can't bring yourself to do it, I'll try to do it right. Then we won't have to tell anyone that you deviated, and that would be much better.*

"You mean you want to kill Avon?" Vila asked. "Just because he's got a broken leg?"

Well, the exterminators will kill him if I don't, she said. *And they are not very nice. I'd try to be as painless as possible.*

"You're not going to kill him," Vila objected. "Nobody is."

But it is the law.

"It is not our law," Avon told her. "We are not a part of your culture and we are not bound by your customs. In our culture, it is murder to kill someone, even if he is injured."

You are from outside? the girl gasped. *Invaders?* She paled, then turned and fled back the way she had come, though Vila leaped after her to try to stop her.

"Shoot her, Vila," Avon cried.

Vila looked at him, revolted. "She's just a girl," he protested.

"Shoot, you idiot. She'll warn everyone that we're here."

But Vila had delayed too long. The girl was gone; she had extinguished her torch so that they could no longer see it to follow her. Avon stared down the tunnel a moment, then he turned to Vila furiously. "You may have just cost both of us our lives."

"No one was stopping you from shooting," Vila pointed out in an attempt to defend himself.

"Vila, she will bring back people with her, the exterminators she mentioned. If she thinks we are invaders, then I won't be the only one they try to kill."

Vila made a face. "Avon, we've got to hide. She'll be back as soon as she sounds the alarm."

"Exactly. The alarm that need not have been sounded. We'll have to follow her," he said, "and hope that we can find a hiding place before we meet her reinforcements coming back. With any luck, they'll think we've gone outside again."

"But you can't walk on that leg."

"Then you will have to carry me."

"I will?" Vila looked at Avon's face and added, "Yes, I will." He climbed to his feet to try to lift Avon. They wound up with him slung over Vila's shoulder, a method of transport Avon found distasteful, but better than being dead.

"They evidently have no way of coping with injuries in their culture," he reasoned as they moved into the darkness. "So someone injured is considered already dead and is 'exterminated.' And the 'deviants' are the ones who try to save their friends and relations. And lovers," he added wryly. He caught his breath sharply as Vila blundered into a turn in the tunnel, jarring his leg unmercifully.

"It's hard to see in here," Vila said. "Are you all right?"

"What do you think?" he hissed through clenched teeth.

Vila tried to be careful after that, but there was a sense of urgency upon them; they had to hurry. Once he stumbled, and they both fell. Sheer agony tore through Avon's leg, and he came close to blacking out.

"I'm sorry," Vila said as he managed to climb to his feet again.

Avon couldn't rouse enough to comment.

They had been moving for almost ten minutes when dim lights began to appear in the tunnel wall. "I think I've found something," Vila said. Avon didn't respond, and Vila called his name in alarm. He must have passed out again.

He reached a branch in the tunnel then and took it, noting that it looked disused and hoping that the floor was hard enough not to take footprints. Presently he came to a series of doors, some open but most of them shut. From the few open ones, it looked like a storage area, and Vila picked one of the rooms at random and carried Avon into it. A search of the place didn't reveal anywhere to hide at first, then he saw an air duct just above floor level that was covered by a screen. Vila decided it was the best chance they had, so he lowered Avon to the floor and pried the screen away. Inside was a dark tunnel, smooth and dusty, stretching away into blackness. It was wide enough for a man to get through, so he pulled Avon in, closing the screen behind them. At least it was warmer than the tunnel had been. Carefully he slithered down the duct drawing Avon after him until they were out of sight of anyone who might investigate.

Safe for the moment, Vila realized just how exhausted he was, his muscles sore, his body

aching with fatigue. He knew he ought to keep watch, but no matter how hard he tried, his eyes kept shutting. "Avon?" he asked, but met with no response. Well, he was going to have to get some sleep--there was no help for it. If Avon wanted to complain about it, he would just have to complain. Vila stretched out beside him in the tunnel and slept.

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Avon awoke hours later and wished he hadn't. His leg ached savagely, worse than before, and he felt hot and feverish, yet chilled at the same time. There was darkness and a sense of confining space and silence except for distant shouting that made no sense and the sound of breathing close at hand.

"Vila?" he asked.

Vila roused out of half sleep. "You're awake then. Keep very quiet. They're searching for us. I've been hearing them for some time now."

"Where are we?"

"In an air duct in a storage area. I don't think they'll find us here, but I wouldn't bet my life on it, so I think we ought to move. We've got to stay hidden until we can find out way back outside again. I don't think they'd follow us there."

"I hope you are right. Did you do any exploring?"

"No. I didn't think we should separate." The shouting drew nearer, and he fell silent. It sounded like a crowd of people ran past the

door to the room where they had hidden. As the shouting faded, Vila said, "I don't like the sound of that. We should move."

"And how are we to do that?"

"Well, I'll have to drag you." He made a face that Avon couldn't see in the darkness. "It won't feel very good, I'm afraid."

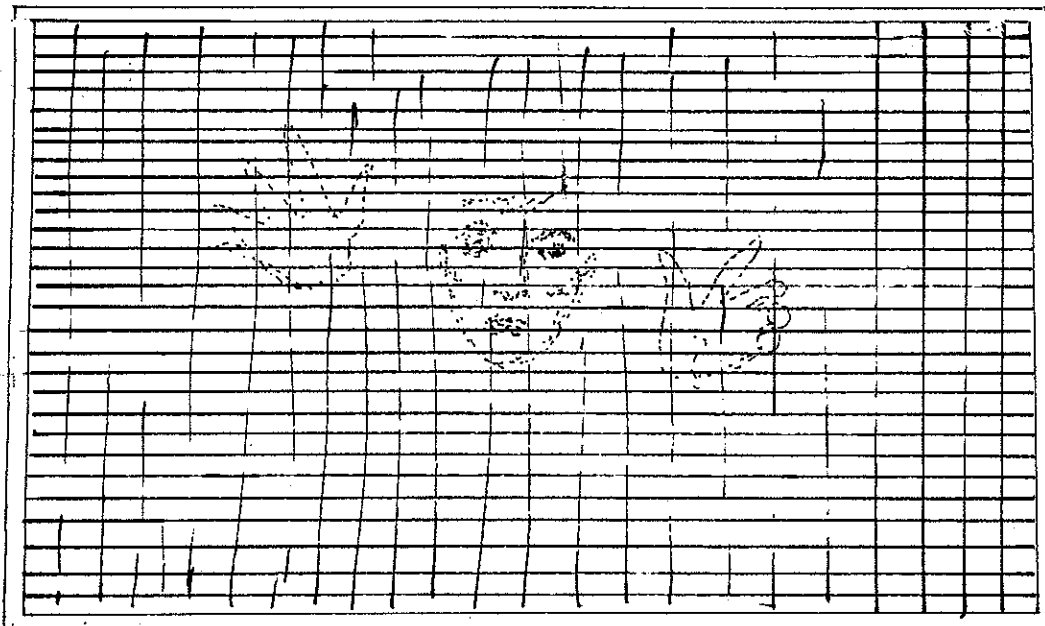
"You needn't sound so happy about it."

Vila hadn't, but he didn't object to Avon's words. There was no point. Instead he started to move along the tunnel, pulling Avon with him. It was going to take a long time to get anywhere that might lead them out of the underground complex, but they had no choice. They had to keep moving. As they went, they came to passageways that were dimly lit. That helped.

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It was while the air duct was passing through another room that they heard the natives again, this time much closer. Vila left Avon for a moment and crept forward to the vent, peering out cautiously.

This time, the vent was much higher in the wall, above eye level, so perhaps he would not be noticed unless someone made a point of looking. And these men did not seem to be looking. There were five of them, dressed in skins as the girl had been, but where she had carried a flaming torch with nothing about her to suggest technology, these men had weapons strapped to their hips that looked like lasers, and each wore a badge of some sort, a small metal disc. They



seemed to be arguing, and while Vila could not understand their words at all, he could pick up some of it telepathically. Not as well as when he and Avon had met the girl because she had been trying to talk to them, but enough. These men were arguing about "the invaders" and whose job it would be to terminate them. Vila shuddered. The girl had said that the exterminators were not kind, and it sounded as if she had been right. There was much laughter as various methods of slaughter were presented, each more gruesome than the last. Hanging was one possibility, being skinned alive was another. Vila closed his eyes and prayed for invisibility.

Drinks were being passed around in a rough flask, each man taking a swallow, then they put the flask on a table and left the room. Vila heaved a vast sigh of relief and crawled back to Avon. "Did you get any of that?"

"Enough," Avon replied wearily.

"They've got some kind of laser guns," Vila said.

Avon opened his eyes at that and looked at Vila thoughtfully. "Really? And how did they appear? Civilized? Primitive?"

"Primitive, except for the guns."

"I wondered. The way this place is not kept up suggests that the people here may have been more advanced at one time but have since regressed. That girl looked a savage, but this tunnel was made with a technology more advanced than she would suggest. I wonder what drove them underground."

"War?"

"Or an invasion from space," Avon theorized, "since they appear to be so afraid of invaders. Whatever the case, we are not welcome here."

"You don't say." Vila cast a longing glance in the direction of the flask the men had left and asked, "Are you hungry? I know I am."

"You would be." Avon frowned. "No, I don't seem to be hungry, but I am thirsty. Why don't you try to find us some food and water. We're going to need it if we have to stay here much longer."

"Go out there, you mean?"

"Exactly. You're a thief, Vila. Go and steal us some food."

Vila was sorry he had brought the subject up, but he realized that he had no choice. Without food and water they would be in a bad way. He suspected that Avon was feverish; maybe it would help him to eat something. "All right," he said reluctantly. "They've gone, but they've left a flask of something. It might be something we can use."

"Alcoholic, no doubt. No, Vila. You need to keep your wits about you--such as they are."

"Spoilsport."

"No, I simply wish to remain alive, and unfortunately, I am now forced to depend on you to do so."

"Why am I always indispensable?" Vila complained, but he took off the screen and climbed down into the room. Avon positioned himself in the opening to cover him in case the locals came back.

Despite Avon's objection, Vila went to the flask first, opened it, sniffed the contents, then brightened. Definitely alcoholic. Maybe it would be good for Avon, he thought. A hasty search of the room revealed a heartening array of food as well, a rough loaf of bread, some dried meats, bright purple fruit, another flask con-

taining water. Vila went about gathering them together and was stacking them on the table when he heard voices in the corridor. They were coming back, and from the sound of them, there was not time for him to get back into shelter before they arrived.

He drew his gun as four men came into the room. "The deviant!" they cried at the sight of him and went for their own weapons.

Vila fired first, ducking behind a table, hitting one of them in the arm. With a cry of pain, the man dropped to the floor. He tried to rise then sank back down, unmoving. Vila looked at him for a minute then tried to crawl further back out of range. His shelter was totally inadequate and he was sure that one of the others would get him. "Avon," he yelled. "Help!"

But even before Avon could fire, the remaining men had turned with shrieks of fear and fled the room. They hadn't even fired back.

Cautiously Vila opened his eyes, astonished to find himself still alive. He stared blankly from his gun to the man he'd hit. "Avon, they're gone," he said. He brightened. "They're afraid of me."

"Or perhaps of your gun. Come on, Vila. It won't take them long to come back."

"They aren't so frightening," Vila said, much cheered at how easily the enemy had been routed at this first encounter. But he knew they would be back, so he gathered the supplies together, tying them up in a bundle in his jacket for easy carrying.

Avon said, "Perhaps now they will spread your reputation as a savage fighter and come after you only in large groups."

Vila's face fell. "You just had to say that, didn't you?" He climbed back into the tunnel and pulled the screen shut after him.

"We had best move out of range of the room," Avon pointed out.

The man Vila had shot groaned suddenly, and Vila said, "You're right, let's go." And then, as he began to pull Avon back from the entrance, he realized something. "Avon, I know why they ran like that."

"In awe of your threatening presence?" Avon asked with a hint of amusement in his voice.

"In fear of being damaged," Vila corrected him. "If they 'exterminate' people who are injured, then they're not going to take any chances, are they?"

Avon gave an exasperated sigh. "You're right, Vila. I must be worse off than I thought not to have realized that myself. That gives us an advantage. If we can manage to avoid becoming sitting targets, perhaps we can stay alive until we can find our way outside."

"Or until *Liberator* finds us."

"Do you honestly believe that they will?"

"Don't you?"

"Let us say that I have my doubts."

"But they wouldn't abandon us. I know you don't have much time for Blake, but you know he wouldn't desert us."

"Yes, Vila," Avon replied with forced patience. "But that would imply that he had a choice, and we do not know that he does. The teleport obviously malfunctioned. We have no way of knowing if it is even repairable."

"You're just full of good cheer," Vila griped.

"Yes. I have so many reason to be." He drew in his breath sharply as they rounded a corner in the passage and his leg brushed the wall. "Carefully, Vila," he said through clenched teeth.

"Sorry," Vila said penitently. He guided Avon around the corner as carefully as he could, then stopped. "We're out of sight of that room now. Let's eat."

"I saw you bring that flask. Vila, I would prefer..."

"It was for you," Vila said simply. "I thought it might do you some good. Medicinal, you know."

Avon gave him a very skeptical look. "Well, it might be good for you," Vila defended himself. "On the other hand, it might not." He was a little hurt that his good intentions had been rejected, even if they hadn't been quite as pure as he would have liked to pretend.

"It might kill us," Avon said.

"Eh?"

"Alien food. How do we know it won't do us more harm than good?"

"That's a pleasant thought," Vila said. "Avon, we've got to have water anyway, and we'll need food before very long. I think we'll have to take the chance."

"Thankyou for your opinion."

"Well, I'm hungry. And what choice do we have? We can't test it. And I think you need it more than I do."

"So I'm to be the first victim?"

Vila hesitated, a little nervous about the food now that Avon had pointed out the risk, but for once, he was going to have to take the first step. He opened the water flask and took a cautious sip. Then he made a face.

"Is it bad?" Avon asked without evidence of interest.

"It's foul," Vila complained vigorously. "I hate water. I'd rather have the other stuff."

Avon actually laughed. "This trip might do you good, Vila," he said and held out his hand for the flask.

* * *

"It's been ten hours," Blake said as he paced back and forth on the flight deck. "Ten hours and nothing."

"No Federation ships in range, either," Gan reminded him. The two of them were the only ones there; Cally was at the teleport in case there was any change, and Jenna had been sent to rest. "The longer we remain here undetected, the better their chances are."

"If they're even alive," Blake said tiredly. "We have no way of knowing."

"If they are alive, then we can't take any chances that might endanger their recovery."

"I know," said Blake. "But grant me the right to worry."

Gan nodded. "ORAC still hasn't come up with anything?"

"Only that there is no way to guarantee the duplication of the magnetic fluctuation with any degree of accuracy. And that to try it without accuracy could be fatal." He swore suddenly, hating this helplessness.

"Well, at least we know that if anyone can take care of himself in a strange situation, it's Avon," Gan said in an attempt to offer comfort.

"I only hope Vila isn't being a liability," Blake worried. "Something like this might throw him. He wasn't keen on going in the first place."

"He never is," Gan said. "But he always goes. He can hold his own, Blake."

"I hope you're right, Gan."

"You know I am."

* * *

"Why are they waiting?" Servalan asked.

"They've arrived at Thalassa," Travis assured her. "We know that. They have been there for over ten hours. They'll have to go in soon. As soon as they do, they will trigger the alarm I've rigged in the computer section, and we go in. With some of them trapped on the planet, we'll have a better chance of getting the *Liberator*. And Blake," he added with relish.

"You had better be right this time, Travis. I have made all the excuses for you that I intend making. I had to go to a great deal of trouble to plant all the information about this base. It was necessary to use information of value to the Federation to make it worth Blake's time and risk. If it does not work; if Blake gets away with anything he is not meant to have, if he gets away at all, you will be in a great deal of trouble. I do not intend to share the blame with you, Travis. This is your plan. If it fails, it will be your failure."

"It won't fail," Travis insisted. "Not this time. I guarantee it."

"You had better," Servalan said coolly. "Or you will have cause to regret it."

* * *

Far from being the liability that Blake was worrying about, Vila was surprising even himself. He hated every minute of it, but he was coping, better than Avon was, and that was a surprise. Of course it didn't really count because Avon was in pretty bad shape, but Vila was getting a bit more confidence. They had eaten their meal; dry bread and meat was not exactly the best food for someone injured, but Avon had grimly forced it down, knowing that he needed the energy food would provide. He had even sampled Vila's flask, only to have the raw and bitter liquor burn its way down his throat. It was perhaps the worst alcoholic beverage he had ever tasted in his life but it warmed him through and seemed to ease the throbbing in his leg a bit. Vila saw how it helped him and reluctantly abandoned the idea of sneaking a sample when Avon was sleeping. Much as he wanted it, he knew that Avon needed it more than he did.

They moved on as soon as they had eaten. It was safer to keep going, and it might be possible to find a way out of the underground complex if they kept looking. Avon lapsed into semi-consciousness almost immediately, worrying Vila but he had to keep going. At least it wouldn't be as painful for Avon that way.

After what seemed like hours, Vila found himself looking into a room that interested him. It had once been some sort of computer control room, but now it looked abandoned and dusty, most of the machines non-functioning, with cobwebs covering everything. If this had been a control center when the underground city was first established, then it might help them find an escape. Surely they could dig some sort of blueprint out of the computer. Or rather, Avon could.

"Avon?" Vila said tentatively.

No response. Vila reached out and touched

Avon's face, alarmed at how hot it felt. He was definitely feverish, and he wasn't going to be up to much even if Vila could revive him, but he had to try. "Avon, please wake up. I need help, and you're the only one who can do it."

Avon muttered something, but when Vila shook his shoulder gently, his eyes opened and he looked up at Vila with a reasonable degree of alertness. There was a bruised look around his eyes, and his hair was plastered down on his forehead in damp strands. He looked utterly spent. "What?" he asked, his voice a little slurred.

"I found a computer room. It's shut down, but if we could get it working, maybe we could get out of here."

"And I'm the one to do it?"

"You're the computer expert, not me. Do you think you can?" And when Avon favored him with a scornful look, he corrected himself. "I mean, are you up to it?"

"I will have to be, won't I?"

Getting into the computer room proved difficult because the screen was set high in the wall, and in spite of Vila's attempts to be careful, he couldn't help bumping Avon's leg a bit in the descent, and the pain was incredible. He bit his lip hard enough to draw blood in an attempt to keep from crying out. When they were finally down and Avon established in front of the control panel, he looked totally drained, his face was dead white, and the hands that he lifted to try to activate the equipment were shaking uncontrollably. Vila hovered beside him making no attempt to hide his concern, and for once, Avon didn't even appear to notice.

"Are you all right?" Vila asked.

"That is one of your more stupid questions," Avon retorted but without enough energy to even sound sarcastic. He hit a couple of buttons and some of the machinery hummed to life. "Now if I don't set off any alarms," he began.

"Can you run it?"

"This primitive stuff? Anyone could, even you, Vila." He stopped for a moment and rested his head on his arms, but when Vila stretched out a tentative hand and rested it on his shoulder, he shrugged it off. "I'm tired," he said, not as a play for sympathy or an excuse for delay but simply as a statement of fact. "Give me a moment, Vila. Go and guard the door."

Vila went without a word.

It took Avon ten minutes to have the computer running. It wasn't up to full power but then some of the circuitry had gone, corroded with age and disuse. But presently he had a working screen, and he punched up a diagram of the underground city. "Vila."

"Did you find what we wanted then?" Vila asked, retreating from the door to peer over Avon's shoulder. "You did. Good." Then his enthusiasm died. "It's awfully big, isn't it?" he said.

"Always so observant." Avon too was staring at the screen in dismay. "We've been moving inward, Vila. We'll have to go back the way we came. It looks like the shortest route. Here," he pointed. "This room has an access to the outside." He pressed a few more buttons and got a close-up of the room in question. "If we can open that door, it will lead outside. It will be locked, of course. You will need to use your skill on it."

"It won't take much skill," Vila objected. "You've seen how primitive this place is."

"It might not be that easy, Vila. They must have needed an access to the outside world at first, but it would need to be the most complicated

locking system they could possibly devise. They may have concentrated all their technology on it."

"I'll get it open," Vila said confidently. "All we have to do is get there. Let's have another look at the routes."

An hour later, they were crawling through air ducts again. It was taking them longer than it should have simply because Avon was in no condition to make any kind of time. Vila was forced to pause for frequent rest stops and not only because of Avon's leg. Lugging someone bigger than himself through a series of narrow tunnels might not be the hardest thing he had ever done in his life, but it came close, and he was exhausted. He wasn't sure how much longer he could keep going.

They stopped to rest in a wider space in the passage, and Vila came to Avon's side to examine him. Avon's eyes were shut and he looked deeply unconscious. "Avon?" Vila asked; when he got no response, he reached out and touched Avon's forehead gently. It was burning with fever.

Vila peeled off his jacket again and wrapped it around Avon, then he took out the flask and tried to get him to drink. As the burning liquid ran down his throat, Avon choked and gasped, but he swallowed some of it. His eyes opened.

"Feel any better?" Vila asked, then his voice trailed off as he realized that Avon's eyes weren't really seeing him. Avon stared blankly off into space and didn't respond when Vila called his name in urgent alarm.

Avon muttered something to himself and suddenly reached out with his hands as if seeking something. Automatically Vila stretched out his own and found them clasped in a strong grip. The touch seemed to soothe Avon, but only for a moment. He held on tight as if to a lifeline, but he started muttering to himself. "Alone...where are you...don't go..."

Vila had a pretty good idea that Avon wasn't speaking to him, but he said anyway, "It's all right, I'm here," knowing what little comfort Avon would consider that under better circumstances.

"...alone..." Avon's voice was a thin thread of sound, strained and weak. "Blake?" he suddenly asked. "...Blake..."

"Blake's not here," Vila said. "He's on the *Liberator*. He'll be here as soon as he can."

Avon's hands tightened until the grip hurt, but Vila didn't try to pull away; he just let Avon hold on and wished they were both far away from here.

"Blake?" Avon muttered fretfully.

"He's coming," Vila promised and hoped it was true.

Avon's grip eased and his eyes closed again. He lay back weakly, shivering in spite of the added warmth of Vila's jacket. It wasn't warm in the air duct, but it wasn't that cold either; it had to be fever. He should be kept warm, but Vila's options were extremely limited. There was only one thing he could think of to do, and it was something that Avon would never even consider if he were awake and alert.

But he wasn't awake and alert, so Vila lay beside Avon and put his arms around him to try to warm him with his own body heat. He expected Avon to pull away with his customary distaste, but instead he relaxed gratefully. It shocked Vila that Avon would permit such a thing, even in his delirium. For the first time, he was faced with the possibility that Avon might die, and with it, the startling realization of how much he would mind.

Avon slept then, comforted by the warmth, and Vila was glad. He had been through far too much--he needed the rest badly. But Vila was

strangely moved at the vulnerability he saw on Avon's face as he slept.

* * *

Avon revived many hours later, reasonably clearheaded again, but abominably weak, his leg throbbing more fiercely than before. He lay there trying to control his reaction to the pain, only gradually becoming aware of the comforting warmth against him. Opening his eyes, he saw Vila and realized how he had managed to keep him warm. It had worked and it had helped him, he knew, but he still eased himself away from the contact, biting his lip to keep from crying out as the movement hurt. Vila didn't wake, but he murmured Avon's name in his sleep and stretched out his arm in a protective gesture. "Sleep, Vila," Avon said quietly, and Vila relaxed. He looked exhausted, and Avon knew he needed the rest badly, or he wouldn't be so deeply asleep now. Better to let him sleep a bit longer before they went on. It would give them a better chance of survival. No longer as cold as he had been before, he draped Vila's jacket over him and managed to pull himself along to the next screen which was a bit more than a meter past where they had been lying. It felt like kilometers to him in his weakened state and his leg shouted protests at the slightest movement.

The screen opened onto an empty room, living quarters apparently. Fortunately no one had come into the room and looked into the air duct while they had lain there unprotected.

"Avon!" Vila's alarmed cry was almost a shout.

"Here. Having a look around. And try to keep quiet, Vila. We don't need to announce our presence."

"Don't do that," Vila complained. "Sneaking off when I'm not looking." He crept forward to join Avon at the screen, vastly relieved to hear him sounding like himself again.

"You're not my keeper," Avon snapped, then relented. "I wanted to see if I could tell where we are. I think we are starting to get close. Do you have any idea of how long we have been down here?"

"It feels like a hundred years," Vila confessed.

"I doubt it's been a day."

"That short? It would be. And I wish they'd hurry and get the teleport fixed." He tried once again to call in, but all he got was a crackle of static.

"They will contact us if they do," Avon said with no degree of certainty.

At that moment, the door opened and someone came into the room.

There was no time to draw back, even if they had been able to do it silently enough to avoid notice; they could only lie there and hope that they were not as visible as they thought they were. Then Vila drew in a surprised breath because it was the girl who had first found them in the tunnel.

She was too far away to have heard him, but almost as if she had, her eyes lifted and she stared directly at them. It was obvious that she saw them because her eyes grew enormous and she paled. Avon reached for his gun, but Vila found himself grabbing Avon's arm to stop him. "No, wait." And to the girl, "We won't hurt you."

She crept forward, trembling a little. "You're not invaders then?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"No, we're here by mistake, and all we want to do is get back where we came from as fast as possible."

She said in wonder, "You're scared, too."

"You're bloody well right I'm scared," Vila said frankly. "I don't like being chased and shot at and crawling through tunnels for hours. All I want to do is get out of here. Anybody'd be scared. Even Avon's scared, aren't you, Avon?"

Avon favored him with a look that would have done great bodily harm if looks could kill. "Terrified," he said dryly. "After all, I have to depend on you."

Vila looked hurt but masked it immediately. "It's not as if I like hauling you for hundreds of kilometers through narrow tunnels," he retorted angrily. "You're not exactly light, you know, Avon."

"I don't recall asking for you help," Avon snapped.

"No, you never do ask, do you, Avon?" Vila snapped back, goaded by this sign of ingratitude, even though he would have taken it as a matter of course, even preferred it, if he had been less fatigued and better able to think straight. "Are you afraid that..." He caught himself there, even in anger unwilling to press his luck any further and aware of violating one of the unwritten rules that guided his dealings with Avon. "Never mind," he said. "I can tell when I'm not wanted."

Avon returned his look with total impassiveness. "I'm surprised to find you so perceptive," he said flatly. "It's not in character."

That was the last straw. Vila didn't reply for a moment, then he said, "Goodbye then," and crawled away down the tunnel as fast as he could go.

The girl stared at Avon in blank surprise. He looked back without speaking and she could find no clue in his face to his feelings about Vila's defection. Nervously, for she had never had dealings with an injured person before, she spoke. "Don't worry. He'll be back."

"Don't imagine I care," Avon replied.

She gave him a very hesitant smile. "I know he'll be back," she reassured him. "He's your friend, isn't he?"

"Friend?" Avon tested the sound of that and seemed to find it amusing. "Not exactly the word I would have chosen."

"Well," she said simply, "It doesn't matter what you call it, does it?"

Before Avon could decide on the appropriate response to that, there was a scrambling in the tunnel and Vila came back. "I forgot," he said with a slightly shamefaced look. "You're the one who knows the way out."

Avon looked at him until Vila was thoroughly uncomfortable, then he said, "Survival. The most practical of motives."

"If you like," Vila conceded and grinned brightly. Then he turned to the girl almost with relief. "We could use a little help to get out of here. I don't suppose you'd help us. Probably not."

But the girl was nodding, relieved that the strange quarrel seemed to be over. "I didn't think you looked evil before," she said to him. "I liked you. All right. I'll help, if you promise me you're not invaders. I don't want my people hurt."

"I won't hurt your people if they won't hurt me," Vila promised. "And the best way to be sure of that is to help us get away."

"We must get outside your city," Avon told her. "They won't pursue us there, will they?"

"Outside? Oh, no. None of us would ever go there. But you'll have to go to the Access Room."

"The way outside?" Avon asked. "Is it likely to be guarded?"

"No. It's not necessary. It's locked up and no one knows how to open it any more."

Vila brightened. "I can open it," he said.

"You can? You must be awfully smart then."

Vila looked smug and Avon gave a disgusted sigh. "I can get us out of here," Vila assured her. "What's your name?"

"Tavantry."

"Then, Tavantry, will you help us get to the Access Room?"

"Not all the way," she said. "I can't. I'll be missed if I'm gone that long. But I'll take you as close as I can."

* * *

"It's been over 24 hours," Blake said impatiently. "I can't wait any longer. I'm going down to that base."

"There are still four hours before we can get them back, Blake," Cally said. "Maybe it is still too soon."

"And maybe it will take us that long to get what we want without Avon and Vila to help us."

Gan frowned. "Maybe we should wait for them to do it."

Blake would have preferred that, but that meant that they would have to gamble on recovering them and recovering them intact. He was hoping that they could, but he had a feeling that it wasn't going to be as easy as all that; when had it ever been?

He turned to Cally. "You haven't been able to make any contact telepathically, have you, Cally?"

From the look on her face, it was apparent that she had been fearing for some time that he would ask her that and hoping that he would not;

now that he had, she was calm. "Not really," she said.

"But there has been something?" he prompted, a tinge of anger creeping into his voice. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Because there was nothing you could have done about it." Her face was a bit pale; she had been under a strain since the contact and had preferred to carry it on her own rather than share the burden with the rest of the crew. Even now she did not want to talk about it, but now she had no choice.

"What was it?" Blake asked her. "I wish you would have said something sooner, Cally. At least this means they're still alive." He considered that and asked, "Or does it?"

"I think they are alive, Blake," she said quickly. "But perhaps not well. What I felt was a sensation of pain." She bent and touched her leg. "Here."

"Severe pain?" Blake asked reluctantly.

She didn't look at him for a moment, then she raised her eyes. "Yes," she said quietly. "Very severe pain. I am sorry, Blake. I know I should have told you before, but telling everyone would have done no good. And there was no point in worrying everyone."

"It wasn't your right to make that decision,"
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he said angrily. Then in gentler tones, "Do you know who it was?" And knew the answer from the way she didn't meet his eyes. "Avon," he said.

She nodded. "I think so."

He was silent a moment, then he said, "Well, so we know that much. Thank you, Cally."

"At least he isn't alone," Gan pointed out. "Vila's with him."

Jenna looked up and said skeptically, "For what that's worth."

"Jenna," Blake began, then he shook his head. "Cally, maybe you were right after all. Knowing doesn't do any of us any good. We'll leave it for now. Jenna, I want you to stay with the *Liberator*. The rest of us will go down."

"ORAC can watch the teleport," she objected.

"You'd be faster. Besides, we need to know if there is any change in the schedule. We'll stay in close contact once we're down. All right?"

She nodded.

* * *

They materialized in a clearing outside the abandoned base. It was deserted, but looks could be deceiving, and they all had their guns out as they went toward the door. It was locked, as they had expected.

"We should have teleported inside as planned," Gan said as he examined the lock. "Vila could do it in less than a minute, but none of us could come close to that unless it was Avon, and he's not here either."

"We decided not to teleport inside in case we should trigger an alarm," Blake reminded him. "Do you think you can get the door open?"

Gan studied the door considerably. "I can break it down," he said. "But it may set off the alarms we wanted to avoid."

"We don't have a choice," Blake decided. "This may be an elaborate trap, but if it is, we'll have time to get out of here before any Federation ships can arrive."

"Even while we wait for conditions to be right to retrieve Avon and Vila?" Cally asked.

"As long as we can get out of here again, we should have time," Blake decided. "If I were baiting a trap for us, I'd know what speeds the *Liberator* is capable of. If they mean to get close enough to stop us, they'll have to find a way to delay us. What do you think?"

Cally looked at him levelly. "We may as well get it done," she said and added telepathically. "I know, Blake. I am worried about them too."

He smiled at her then turned to the door.

If it was triggered to set off an alarm, it was a silent one. Gan was able to force the door without difficulty; with so little trouble that Blake was reminded of Vila's original comment that it sounded too easy. Maybe Vila had been right. But they could hear no alarms, and with the door shattered, getting out again should be simple enough.

The place really did appear deserted. It looked like it had been abandoned in an orderly fashion too; there was no evidence of a hasty retreat. Blake led the way to the control center and they halted outside the door. "If this is a trap, we may not set off anything until we go inside," he said. He pushed the button to open the door and they all peered inside. It looked harmless, but then it would look that way

if it were a trap. "Well?" Blake asked.

"Let's do it," Gan said.

They stepped into the room.

* * *

"Supreme Commander."

Servalan looked up. "Yes, Travis."

"They've taken the bait. They're on the base."

"Then get after them, Travis. And prepare yourself for the fact that they might have had a very good reason for the delay, something that may prevent you from capturing them."

"There is no way they can escape me now," he said with a gloating smile. "As they will discover when they try to leave the control room."

"Travis?" Servalan called as he turned to go to his ship.

"Yes, Supreme Commander?"

"I want them alive, Travis. And I want the *Liberator* intact." She smiled and it was not a nice smile. "There will be no mistakes this time, Travis. No mistakes at all. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Supreme Commander," he snarled and stalked out of the room.

* * *

"And now," Blake said, "To activate the computer. Jenna, do you read?"

"Yes, Blake."

"Is ORAC standing by? We are ready to begin."

"Yes, ORAC is ready. Are there any signs of trouble down there?"

"Not yet," he said, and turned to the equipment. He wished for Avon's expertise; Avon could do this more quickly and accurately than any of the others, and Avon would be more inclined to spot any little traps built into the system to endanger the unwary. But Avon wasn't here; Avon was someplace far away, injured and in trouble, and even if it weren't for the mission, Blake would be worrying. He couldn't help it. He saw Cally's eyes on him and knew that she understood what he was thinking and shared his concern. Avon was on his mind, had been on his mind continually since his disappearance, but the computer had brought his absence home to Blake the way the locked door had recalled Vila. He made a wry face and stepped forward.

When it came to it, it was ridiculously easy, so much so that Blake was convinced that they really had walked into a trap. All he had to do was to flip a series of switches and the computer hummed into life. He looked at the others and saw that they too were surprised at its simplicity.

"*Liberator*, Blake," he called in. "Jenna, have ORAC tie into the computer and..."

He fell silent as a metal door slid smoothly into place in front of the entrance to the control room. It was a trap after all, but a trap to capture *Liberator's* crew? They didn't need a door, they had the teleport system. Or did they? He tried his bracelet, but there was no response.

"They must be jamming the signal," he said. "Try yours." Gan and Cally complied with the same results. "It looks like we're stranded," Blake said.

* * *

With Tavantry'said, Vila was able to make better time through the passages. She seemed to have overcome her fear of Avon and was willing

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to help Vila with him as they crawled along. "Can you people really mend a broken bone?" she asked with interest.

"Yes, we can," Vila replied. "If we can get back to our ship, we can have Avon all fixed up in no time."

"I wish we could," she said wistfully.

Avon seemed to have lapsed into semi-consciousness again, so it was Vila who asked, "Well, why can't you? Won't the bones mend? If you could do what I did with Avon and wait, it would heal, wouldn't it?"

"But it would take too long. We can't afford to support anyone who does not produce for the city."

"You mean to say that just because they'd be laid up for a bit they would be disposed of? What do you do when someone is sick? Throw him out too?" Vila decided he wouldn't like living here. Compared to this, life on board *Liberator* suddenly seemed very safe and secure.

"No. He has three days in which to heal," Tavantry replied. "If he doesn't, then he must be terminated. It is for the good of all."

"It doesn't sound very good to me. Sounds barbaric really. When your people lived on the surface, did you have rules like that then?"

"No, but they were not needed there. Supplies were plentiful in those days." She looked at him surprise. "How did you know we once lived on the surface? I never told you."

"Avon figured it out. Your people moved underground because of some threat on the surface, he said. Like war or invasion."

"Yes, it was invasion," she said. "They came from beyond the world and tried to destroy us, so we hid."

"How long ago?"

"No one knows. So long that we cannot remember any more." She gave a shrug. "It is the way things are."

"Will you get in trouble for helping us?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so. Not serious trouble. They don't terminate deviants, you see."

"Somehow, one would have expected them to do so," Avon said suddenly.

"Oh, so you're with us again," Vila said, much relieved.

"So it would appear. Must you always state the obvious, Vila?" He continued before Vila could respond. "Tavantry, why don't your people kill deviants?"

"They're healthy workers," she replied in surprise as if it should be obvious. "We need all the healthy workers there are."

"That's why they didn't shoot me then," Vila brightened. "That means they won't want to shoot me now." He added, "Of course they're still trying to kill Avon, but that's not so surprising. He asks for it."

Tavantry still found Avon and Vila's relationship puzzling so she ignored that and said, "They must try to kill him. It's our law."

The air vent opened out then into a much wider one. "The central channel," she explained. "This will lead directly to the Access Room. I cannot come any further with you. If I stay away longer, I will be missed." She leaned forward and startled Vila by kissing him on the cheek. "I wish you could stay here, but I know you can't. Goodbye and good luck." And she turned to

scramble back the way she had come.

"Well, come on, Vila," Avon said impatiently as Vila smiled after her. "Let's go. We're getting close."

* * *

Jenna was worried. The transmission from Blake had broken off in mid-sentence and she had not been able to reestablish contact or lock into their bracelets to bring the landing party up again. She was certain that they had somehow triggered the trap they had all feared.

"ORAC, did you establish contact with that computer?" she asked.

"Of course I did."

"Are you still in contact with it?"

"Yes."

"Do you know why I can't contact Blake and the others?"

"Yes. The computer was equipped with a device to jam all communication signals and to block out attempts to teleport."

"Can you nullify it?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then do so," she ordered.

"If I do so now, the computer will shut down. Therefore, I must first obtain the required information from it, then I will nullify it so that you may operate the teleport."

"How long will that take?"

There was a frustrating pause that could not have been longer than half a minute, then ORAC said smugly, "It is done. Attempt communications now."

Jenna hit the switch. "Blake, do you read?"

"Yes, we read you, Jenna," he replied at once to her relief.

"ORAC has obtained the required information," she told him. "Are you ready to come up?"

"More than ready," Blake responded. "Teleport now, Jenna."

* * *

"I think we're here," Vila said.

Avon forced himself to alertness. It took more effort to do so each time he tried. He opened his eyes, closed them briefly as Vila blurred before him, then opened them again. He knew that he could not go on much longer. "All right, Vila," he said wearily. "Let's get out there."

The screen in this room was at floor level, which made it easier on Avon than the one in the computer room had been. Vila was able to get him out without bumping his leg again, though it throbbed painfully enough at the slightest movement. He bit his lip against the jarring pain of being pulled into the room and managed not to cry out. Vila looked at him consideringly, then made him as comfortable as possible on the bare floor, covering him with his jacket again. He gave Avon a worried look that Avon didn't see and turned to check that the inner door was locked against the exterminators, then he turned to the access door.

"Will," Avon asked. "Can you open it?"

Vila looked dismayed. "It's a bad one," he admitted. "And without proper tools, it'll take a long time."

"How long is a long time, Vila?"

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"Three or four minutes."

Avon sighed. "That long? Vila, you're slipping."

"I'd like to see how well you think you would do," Vila said as he gathered miscellaneous small tools from his pockets. He'd had to abandon the rest of his kit when Avon had been hurt; there would have been no way to drag both Avon and the kit through the air ducts. But now he wished he'd thought to bring a few things with him. "Well," he announced, "I'm ready."

"Then why are you just standing there?"

"It's certainly not to get any encouragement from you," Vila retorted and turned to the lock.

At that moment, someone began pounding at the inner door.

* * *

"It won't be long now," Blake said. "ORAC, how long before you can teleport?"

"Three minutes."

"Do it at the first possible moment."

The intercom sounded then and he responded to it. "Blake."

"Jenna. Detectors have picked up three Federation pursuit ships heading straight for us."

"Time until they are in range?"

"Zen estimates twelve minutes."

"ORAC says we can have Avon and Vila back in less than three. Have Zen ready to take us out of here the minute we have them on board."

Cally and Gan arrived in the teleport room then, and in a moment Jenna came in too and sat down at the controls. The time seemed to pass with agonizing slowness. Blake paced back and forth, back and forth, his face grave and worried. Three minutes? It felt like three days before ORAC finally said, "Teleporting now."

* * *

"Vila," Avon warned as the sounds of pounding on the door intensified. "They'll be through that door before you can get the outer one open."

Vila's fingers flew as he worked the lock in a futile attempt to deny Avon's words, then as the inner door started to shudder under repeated blows, he said, "Well, if they do get it open, I'll just stand between you and them. They won't shoot me. It's against their laws to harm a well person. They'll have to go out and think about it and by then I'll have this door open and we'll be outside. They won't follow us there."

"Such confidence," Avon said in surprise. "Vila, it won't work. What's to stop them just pushing you out of the way?"

"I'll be shooting at them, won't I?" Vila asked. "They won't want to take a chance of being damaged. That's another reason why they didn't shoot at me before, even when they had a clear shot. Besides, what else is there to do? Let them kill you? Blake wouldn't let me back on the *Liberator* if I did."

"And of course we all know how fond you are of the *Liberator*."

"I'd rather be there than here any day," Vila replied with a gesture at the inner door.

"For once," Avon admitted, "I am forced to agree with you."

"That makes it all worthwhile."

Suddenly the lock gave beneath Vila's skilled fingers and the door swung open to reveal pale sunshine. "I did it," Vila cried enthusiastically. "Avon, I did it." But before he could drag Avon to safety, the inner door burst open and two of the natives came charging in. For a split second they froze as they saw the outside, their eyes widening in wonder and terror and superstitious doubt, then they recalled their duties and their guns came up to point at Avon. "No," yelled Vila, frustrated at being so close to safety and not being able to do anything about it. He jumped forward to stand in their way, levelling his own gun at them, perfectly certain that they would not fire. But in spite of the shock of the open door, their guns spoke, their reflexes slowed by the sight of the forbidden but fascinating world outside, and the first shot struck Vila full in the chest. He had time for one surprised grunt of pain before he dropped to the floor and lay still.

"Vila," Avon cried even as he looked up into the muzzles of their guns, certain he was about to die. But the natives didn't fire; they were staring at Vila with horror-stricken eyes. Vila had been right; to hurt him was to violate one of their taboos, and it was a serious one, so serious that they didn't even try to kill Avon, even though they had a clear shot. They turned stupidly and blundered out of the room.

"Vila?" Avon said again, for once making no attempt to disguise his worry. "Vila, they're gone. You can stop pretending now." But when he dragged himself painfully to Vila's side, he realized that he had been badly hit. Blood stained his chest and the wound looked ghastly. As far as Avon could tell, he wasn't even breathing. The room suddenly blurred before his eyes. "Vila," he said flatly. "You idiot, Vila. Only you could manage to get yourself killed by mistake."

There was nothing he could do for Vila now and nothing he could do for himself. The pain in his leg, the exhaustion and strain of the past day had finally caught up with him and he was at the end of his rope. With a sad sigh, he gathered Vila into his arms and waited for the natives to return. They would come back, he knew, once they had gotten over the shock of killing a healthy worker by mistake. If not those two, someone else would come to finish the job. Avon didn't care any more. He cradled Vila's head against his chest and waited. His eyes burned suddenly with unshed tears--being Avon, he would not allow them to fall, even now. It was only exhaustion and pain, he told himself and knew, though he tried not to acknowledge it, that it was not entirely true. Then he looked up in astonishment as *Liberator's* teleport picked them up and he found himself the center of everyone's attention.

For a moment that seemed endless to Avon, everyone stood frozen staring at him with varying degrees of shock and horror. Blake's face had drained of color, Cally's eyes seemed huge pools of concern and fear, Gan looked upset and worried, and Jenna, at the teleport, was eyeing him and Vila with an expression Avon couldn't begin to fathom. He tried, without much success, to shape his features into an acceptably impassive mask, but he was too drained and spent and Vila's weight against him was both reproach and torment.

He lowered his head quickly so that he would not give anything away that he might regret later, and the movement shattered the frozen tableau. Blake, Cally and Gan jumped forward.

From someplace far, far away, Avon found his voice and heard it speaking as if it were no longer his own. "Vila's dead," he managed to say with no trace of expression.

But Cally had knelt beside him to examine Vila, and now she raised her eyes. "No, Avon," she said gently. "He's still alive. Very badly hurt, but if we can get him to the medical unit immediately, I think we can save him."

Avon didn't lift his head, but he picked out the one thing in the blurred jumble of Cally's

words that penetrated the fog that was growing in his brain. "Alive," he echoed in the same dead tones as before. Cally wasn't even certain he had understood what she had said.

"Yes, alive," Jenna retorted. "One would think you didn't even care."

Avon's head jerked up at that, his eyes bleak and agonized. "I don't," he said in a voice so brittle that it threatened to shatter into a million pieces. His arms tightened convulsively around Vila as if he hadn't realized yet that he could relinquish his burden, and Gan had to pry them loose to take Vila to carry him off for treatment.

"Jenna," Blake said warningly and turned to Avon, resting a comforting hand on his shoulder. Avon tried feebly to shrug it off, but when Blake kept it there, he didn't protest further. He said wearily, "Leave me alone, Blake. I'm tired."

"I know," Blake replied, his voice carefully neutral. "But at least let us get you fixed up so that you can rest. Time enough for talking later."

If he had sounded the slightest bit sympathetic, it would have been too much for Avon to handle, but Blake was no fool and he realized that Avon couldn't take anything more. He was the one who carried Avon to the medical unit, pausing only long enough to say over his shoulder, "Jenna, get us out of here before those Federation ships get there," then he hurried out. When Avon passed out on the way, Blake was relieved. It would be easier on him that way.

* * *

"They got away? What do you mean, they got away, Travis? You assured me that the system was foolproof."

"It was. There was no way that they could have escaped."

Servalan gave the screen image of Travis a cold glare. "Well, they did," she pointed out. "You failed, Travis. You failed to take all factors into account. You may think you know Blake, but you didn't consider ORAC or the facilities of the *Liberator*. No, you failed, Travis, and there is no way that I am going to take any responsibility for your failure. You will bring me Blake, Travis. You will follow him wherever he goes and you will bring me the *Liberator*. If you do not, I will see your head roll. Is that clearly understood, Travis?"

"Understood," he snarled.

"You did track the *Liberator* as it escaped? Perhaps you could use your obviously limited intelligence to project a destination."

"Our predict that the *Liberator* might be heading for Earth Sector."

"Earth Sector?" echoed Servalan. "Now, why would Blake head for Earth Sector?" Speculation showed suddenly in her eyes. "Investigate it, Travis. There may yet be a chance to bring profit from this debacle of yours. Bring me Blake, Travis."

"You can rely on it."

"Oh, I do, Travis. I do."

* * *

Cautiously, the natives crept back into the Access Room, guns at ready. The invaders had gone, back where they had come from, but they had left the door open behind them. The two men looked at each other doubtfully, then one of them took a cautious step forward, and peered outside. The sharp coolness and the unfamiliar tang of fresh air drove him back for a moment, and he turned to look back at his companion hesitantly. It was so bright out there and so vast. It would be

easier to close the door and flee back to the safety of what he had always known. But as he raised his hand to close the door, he hesitated. Then, though he was terrified, he took a cautious step forward, another. Just one quick look wouldn't hurt, as long as he was careful and didn't get too far from the door. Perhaps there would be food out there, and other things that might be useful. For the first time in centuries, the door was open.

* * *

Vila's condition was grave, and at first Cally could not be certain that they had got to him in time, but the medical equipment on the *Liberator* was very advanced and presently Vila began to respond to the treatment. Blake had asked that Avon be sedated until they knew about Vila--he wouldn't be strong enough to wait for that kind of news yet--but even after they knew that Vila would live, Avon slept on. His leg had been reset and the bone knitting process was practically completed, but he still didn't wake. Blake wondered if Avon felt somehow that it was safer that way.

Oddly enough, it was Vila who revived first and lay there a long moment staring at the ceiling. He felt weak and tired but better than he had expected to feel. He wasn't quiet sure where he was yet, but after a moment, he said, "Those exterminators really shot me?"

"Did you think they would not?" asked someone nearby.

"Cally!" he squeaked in surprise. "I'm back then?"

"Barely. You were lucky, Vila. We got to you just in time."

He digested this in silence and chose not to reflect on his own mortality just then. "I was sure they wouldn't shoot," he said. "That's why I did it. Avon will never let me live it down."

"Avon?"

He turned his head at her tone and focussed on her blurrily. "Where is he?" he demanded, ill-disguised concern in his voice.

"He's still sleeping," she reassured him, pointing to the next bed. "Don't worry, he'll be fine."

"I didn't do his leg any permanent damage dragging him halfway across that underground city?" Vila asked.

"Nothing that isn't well on the way to being mended right now. Don't worry, Vila. He'll be all right."

"Who said I was worrying then?" Vila demanded, in the defensive. "And if I'm so bad off, why's he the one who's still asleep?"

"Possibly because it was exhausting being dragged halfway across that city," Avon's voice cut in dryly.

"Avon!" Cally and Vila said in unison, and Cally rose to go and stand by his bed. He looked up at her with a trace of defiance, and she said smoothly, "Well, at least you look more like yourself."

"As opposed to what?"

"Well, you were in a bad way when we found you--almost as bad as Vila, really," she explained. "Shock and fever didn't help, and by the time you were brought back on board *Liberator*, you were delirious."

Avon digested this in silence. He remembered vividly every moment of his arrival on the *Liberator* and he knew perfectly well that he had not been delirious, but if this was the interpretation that Cally and the others wanted to put

on his actions then, he would settle for it gladly. "Yes," he said thoughtfully. "I must have been." And couldn't help wondering if Cally believed that, or Blake. If they didn't, at least they would not say so now, and Vila had been unconscious and would not remember. Avon had to be satisfied with that. It was more than he had dared to hope for.

He turned to look at Vila. "You give an excellent impression of a dead man, Vila," he said. "Of course you are at your best when you are unconscious, so I should not be surprised. And, as usual, your judgment was at fault."

"What do you mean, my judgment was at fault?" Vila objected hotly. "It kept you alive, didn't it?"

Blake arrived then. "I see things are back to normal," he observed. "If the two of you ever sounded pleased with each other, I think the universe would collapse." He smiled. "How are you feeling?"

"That is not a good question," Vila decided. "Is it, Avon?"

"Not one of his best, no."

Blake grinned. "Still, it's good to have you back, both of you."

"That sounds ominous," Vila complained. "I wonder what dangers he's got planned for us next."

"Nothing for the moment," Blake assured them. "We got what we wanted on *Thalassa*--you were right, Vila, it was a trap, but we've left the Federation ships behind. When do we get to hear about what happened to you down there?"

Avon promptly launched into the story, telling it flatly, without expression and without much detail, but as he continued, he noticed that Vila was growing more and more uncomfortable, squirming a bit as he listened.

"So then what happened?" Blake asked as Avon came to the part where they reached the Access Room and the natives began to pound at the door.

Out of the corner of his eye, Avon saw Vila stiffen. He wasn't enjoying this one bit. It was bad enough to have saved Avon's life by taking care of his leg and pulling him through all those tunnels; he could explain that away into something that would sound reasonable. But the rest of it he didn't want known. Jumping in front of Avon and taking the shot meant for him was something he wasn't sure he could justify even to himself, though he knew he could have done nothing else. Only he didn't want the others to know.

Avon's mouth curled into a half smile. "What happened then?" he asked. "They broke in, but they couldn't get a clear shot. Vila was in their line of fire and when they hit him, they must have panicked and ran out again."

He saw Vila relax. That sounded a lot more believable than what had actually happened and it had the added advantage of being true as far as it went. "And then you teleported us up," Avon finished smoothly.

Blake looked from him to Vila and back again. "I see," he said, and there was a suspicious look in his eyes as if he knew he hadn't been told the whole story, but he didn't push it. "You had a bad time down there," he said. "I think you should both rest now. Come on, Cally, we'll let them sleep." He took her arm and led her from the room.

Avon and Vila didn't say anything for a minute, then Vila turned his head and sneaked a look at Avon, who looked back impassively. Vila grinned, Avon didn't smile; his expression didn't change at all, but somehow, Vila was satisfied. "Now what was that you were saying about my judgement being at fault?" he demanded.

They both enjoyed the argument that followed.