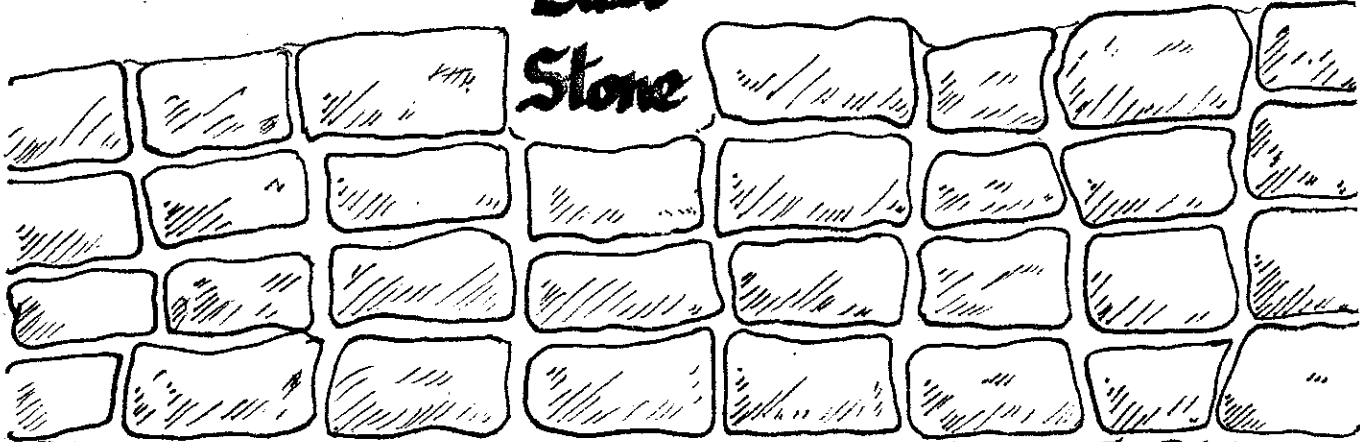


The Last Stone



by Mary A. Fall

Avon stopped short at the edge of the clearing, staring at the smoke that spiralled from the entrance to the living quarters. He closed his eyes momentarily, sure that once again he was too late. Then a groan assured him that someone had survived the blast. "Vila?" he called, his eyes searching through the debris that littered the area. "Vila, where the hell are you?"

"Oh my ..." Dayna had finally caught up and stared at the disaster with horror openly revealed in her eyes.

"There," Avon had spotted the huddle of clothing that had to be Vila. He ran, schooling his face to its usual cold mask. No one would be allowed to see the relief that filled him that Vila at least had somehow lived through this hell. "Vila," he turned the smaller man over, and found Tarrant underneath. A slight smile touched his face that Vila had protected the man who had so often bullied him into danger. "Are you alright?"

Vila opened his eyes reluctantly, still feeling echoes of that last explosion in his head. "Oh no," he muttered, "Not again ..." Visions of Avon swirled before him.

"He's alright," sighed Dayna, sitting back on her heels. "It's a good thing he's got such a thick head."

"What about Tarrant?" Avon gently laid Vila back against the ground, reassured as to the man's survival.

"I ... pulled him out, Avon," muttered Vila. "He'd better be alive or I'll kill him."

Eyebrow raised, Avon looked at Vila with surprised respect. Even after all this time, the former thief could show unexpected sides to himself.

"What about Cally?" asked Dayna, her relief at finding the two men buried by the fear that rose as she realized that the Auron was nowhere to be seen.

"What?" Avon looked up, his mask suddenly

askew. He rose, carefully searching for any sign of Cally. She had to be out of ... that ... he glanced at the ruined entrance to the underground quarters. But even as he tried to argue with himself, Vila fought his way to a sitting position.

"She didn't get out, Avon," he said urgently, memory surging back as he regained his wits. "We were all heading out when she went back for ORAC. Then the whole place started going up all around us and I got Tarrant out." Tears started at Vila remembered what happened next. "Cally called me, she did and I tried to go back for her, but then the explosions started again and I couldn't go back. I couldn't." Grief filled his dirty face as he sat back, what strength he had left burned away by the painful memory.

"What are you going to do?" asked Dayna, placing a hand on Avon's arm as he stiffened.

"We need ORAC," was all the man said, but Dayna knew that something in Avon was dying as he faced that smoking ruin. The eyes, that they all knew revealed the part Avon hid, were wide and lost.

"I'll come with you," she didn't want to see him go into that place alone.

"No." Avon knew that this was something he had to do alone. He had gotten them all into this trap. He had destroyed the Liberator. Now, most likely, he had killed Cally. "Stay with them, they may need protection."

And what of you, Avon? thought Dayna, will you be safe alone down there with what you most certainly will find? She had no expectation of the miraculous rescue this time. Cally had to be dead. Aloud, all she said was, "Be careful."

Avon made no reply to that as he walked up to the entrance. Some thought the ladder remained, although the door itself had blown away in those last moments. For a moment he hesitated, glanced back to where Dayna hovered over Vila and Tarrant. Then he started the climb back down.

Each step seemed to be a reproach. The events of the last hours replayed themselves in painful exactitude, from his "finding Blake" to learning that Servalan had played him for a fool and won. From seeing Liberator blown to pieces before his eyes, to the silent accusing looks each of the others had given him after that. He had tried to comfort himself with the thought that they were all still alive and had a vague chance of getting off Terminal. Now even that false comfort was gone with the destruction of the ship and Cally's ... Why couldn't he bring himself to think it? He'd always been able to face death before, to accept its reality, why not now? Because he had caused his? "Cally!" he shouted suddenly, needing to do something to escape the blame that seemed to be heaping itself on his head. "Damn you, Cally, where are you? Answer me!" He wiped his sleeve roughly against his face, refusing to accept the tears that were falling freely now that no one could see. A hand ... he spotted the hand, reaching toward him, and scrambled through the debris, praying for life, for movement.

Instead, he found death, Cally lying on her side, one arm wrapped protectively around ORAC, the other reaching for the help that never came. Avon wiped dirt from the quiet face, staring into those wide eyes that had always seemed to read him a shade too deeply. "Cally ... no." Gently he closed them, unable to face that look any longer. "Cally." He sat that way, still as death himself, willing the pain away, wanting it all to be gone, another nightmare. Too much death surrounded him. Gan, Jenna, Blake, Cally ...

A piece of metal fell, skittering across the tilted wall, waking Avon from that meditation. He had to leave now before the rest of the walls came down. "I must leave now, Cally," he said softly, letting her go at last. He looked at her face again, then lifted ORAC from her side and turned to go. Silent once more, Avon made his way back to the surface with ORAC held tightly under one arm. Cally had died trying to bring the computer to the others. He would at least finish that mission for her. Avon glanced down one last time, imagining that he could somehow see Cally's approving nod as he stepped out to face Dayna and Vila's questioning eyes. "ORAC's been damaged," was all he said, but they both understood what remained unsaid. Why the hell did they have to understand

so much? Avon sat down by the fire Dayna had started and began to sort through ORAC's circuitry. He would not have them know him. He would not let them reach him as Cally had, and Blake and Gan and even Jenna in her own way. No more pain. "We need ORAC."

"Whatever you say," Dayna almost physically recoiled, not sure what to make of Avon's reaction. She concentrated instead on the fire and on Tarrant, who was showing signs at last of returning to consciousness.

For his part, Vila sat and watched Avon's hands. An expert with his own, Vila had always used hands as a way of reading people. Avon couldn't stand anything more coming close right now or he would break. The way his hands hesitated on the circuits proved that. So, he wouldn't say anything. Not now, or even later when Avon would start being nastier than ever. That was Avon's way of dealing with pain ...

Tarrant had finally regained consciousness. "What happened?" he asked.

"Vila pulled you out," replied Dayna, helping the pilot to sit.

"Yes, and got no gratitude for it," mourned Vila. "Seems I should have brought ORAC back instead. Avon says we needed him more."

"We still do," Avon threw down the tools in frustration. His hands were still trembling too much to even attempt the repairs that were needed.

"Where's Cally?" Tarrant's eyes widened as he realized that there were only four of them around the fire.

"She's dead." With those words, Avon slid the last stone in place in the wall he'd been building around himself since returning to the surface. Cally was dead and gone. There would be no more pain. No more love. Ever.

end.