

Epilogue: Remembering

Heroes Lost, part 7

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Another Space City birthday party story. I don't remember what the theme was, but this is what I wrote. It's written more than a year after the last installment of the main story, but it doesn't make any sense unless you've read *Heroes Lost* first. For starters, you'll probably wonder what the heck Ivanova and Marcus are doing on the *Liberator*.

Featured fandoms: Babylon 5, Blake's 7

Featured pairings:

A.S.S Story codes: gen

Story rating:

Liberator dove through space. At standard by six, the stars around her seemed to crawl by like glowing ants in the distance. Somewhere behind her lay the ruins of Space Command, somewhere ahead was Auron. In the middle, sitting on the hull near the middle forward point, was Marcus Cole, a human Ranger very far from home. He had been sitting there for quite a while, thinking. It had been only two days since he and Ivanova joined the crew, and already he could see that this bunch of sorry rebels were headed for psychosis and disaster unless someone did something to let them relieve their increasing tension. Luckily for them, Ranger training did touch on that. A bit. Not much, but better than nothing.

"Zen," he said. "Can you hear me?"

"Confirmed." The computer's calm voice came through the speakers in his space-suit.

"Good. Is there any way we could arrange a bit of breathable air out here, without blocking the view?"

"The force wall can be arranged for that purpose."

"Can it also be arranged so that solid objects can be thrown through it?"

"Confirmed."

"Great." He stood up. "The electronics workshop is by interior hold three, right?"

"Confirmed."

"A ceremony? As in a religious ceremony?" Blake looked at Marcus with some suspicion.

"Yes. It's not *that* strange, is it?"

Blake smiled. "Stranger than you might think. In this universe, all religion was banned by the Federation long ago. It still exists, of course, in hiding. But it is quite rare."

"Ah. Well, you can think of it as an exercise to improve mental wellbeing, if you like."

"You think we need that?"

"Yes I do! The tension on this ship is so thick you could scoop out a bit of it and use it for a coffee table. You *need* something to relieve it."

"He has a point, Blake," Jenna said from her flight console. "There's been too much death lately. We need to deal with it." She paused for a moment before she went on, her voice suddenly sounding much harsher.

"You know that's what Cally would say if she was still with us."

Blake sighed. "Let's see what the others say."

Blake, Vila and Jenna sat on the flight deck couch. Avon leaned against the nearest console behind it. Ivanova stood even further away, arms crossed and a grim expression on her face. Marcus picked up one of the six globes packed with circuitry that lay on the table before him.

"This," he said, "is a self-sufficient beacon. You open it like this, flip this switch--" he turned the top half, which came off, and indicated the switch, "--and talk to it. It records what you say, and later it starts broadcasting your words to all who want to listen."

"Why?" Vila said.

"You spend the night meditating on those you've lost. When you think of something about them you wouldn't want forgotten, you tell it to the recorder. Tomorrow at dawn, we gather and throw the globes into space, where they will float for a very long time, reminding the universe of whatever you told the recorder."

"We are a bit short on dawns here," Avon said.

"Well, yes. Actually, it's not just supposed to be at dawn, it is supposed to be at the precise moment when the sun's first rays enter a particular room in a particular temple on Minbar. But seeing as neither the temple nor Minbar exist in this universe, I suggest we just go by the clock and declare Liberator's dawn to be at six in the morning."

"Six!" Vila protested. "That's inhuman!"

Marcus smiled as he started handing out the globes. "Appropriate for an alien ritual, isn't it?"

Vila put the globe down on a free bit of his desk, closed the door behind him and sat down on the badly made bed. Meditate on those he'd lost. That could take some time. At one time or another, he'd lost just about everyone. Never mind if he'd cared about them or not, away they went. Sometimes alive. Sometimes not. Mostly not. So where should he start? At the beginning, with Old Man Elbows? He still remembered clearly how the tiny man had taught him to make his first set of lockprobes. And, of course, how he'd looked after he'd died from that batch of contaminated therazine. Old Man Elbows had had the smallest hands of any man he'd ever met. Very convenient, in the thieving business.

Or he could start at the end, with Cally. Much nicer to look at than Old Man Elbows, but just as doomed. From the moment he first saw her on Saurian Major, he knew she'd come to a bad end. Although being shot in the face wasn't really all that bad, as deaths go. At least it was quick.

Before Cally, there was Gan. Big, kind Gan. Crushed under tons of stone. Before him, Nova. Nova who they never really had a chance to get to know before he was freeze-dried on the London. Now that was definitely not a good way to go. Just thinking about it made his skin crawl. Sometimes it still gave him nightmares.

Vila got up from the bed, opened the lower left desk drawer and got out the bottle that happened to be lying on top. Opening first the bottle and then Marcus' globe, he started talking.

When he reached the door to his cabin, Blake changed his mind and kept walking. Too many distracting memories in there. If he was going to do this properly, he wanted to be able to think about it clearly. So he walked on through the ship, until he reached the end of the easily accessible parts. One could get further aft, but only by putting on a suit and crawling through the engines' access ducts. An exercise for another day. He turned and walked outward and into one of the outer cargo bays. The very one where they'd taken the alien pod aboard the day they first met Cally.

"Zen, open bay doors while retaining pressure."

"Confirmed."

The doors opened slowly, revealing the predictable view of stars on darkness.

"Zen, dim the lights, please."

"Confirmed."

As his eyes adapted to the darkness, more and more stars became visible. After a while, he could even see some nebulae and clusters. He sat down just inside the opening and looked out, with the recorder globe in his lap.

Those he'd lost. They were not few. Most of them he didn't remember very clearly, of course. Not that he didn't try, but between just meeting them a few times or seeing them in crowds and the Federation messing with his mind, it was difficult. Still, he felt that they deserved to be mentioned. All the small people, the brave citizens who really were the resistance. All the ones who were shot by Federation troopers in some forgotten basement and buried in unmarked mass graves. Someone should speak for them. Someone should remember them. And even if he didn't know their names any more, he still knew their deeds. Those he could speak of. The occasional few whose names he did remember, like Gan and Cally, he could speak of more clearly. But somehow he felt that they were less important. They had been well known, even famous, as revolutionaries. Rumours on planet after planet spoke about them and their actions, they didn't need his voice added to the choir. Not as much as the unnamed victims did, at least. He twisted off the top of the globe with a firm motion and flipped the switch.

Ivanova threw the globe on the bed and paced around her room. Remembering the dead. What a laugh. Oh, she remembered them all right. How she remembered them.

She picked the globe up again, looked at it. Minbari ritual! No, worse, *Ranger* ritual. Supposedly good for you. She wondered what Uncle Yossel would say about that. Most likely, the old rabbi would be aghast at the very thought of her participating in an alien religious ritual. He always wanted her to be a proper, faithful Jewess. In spite of that, she rather liked him.

And if he'd be upset, that'd be nothing compared to what the Genetic Path Counsellors on Auron would be if they found out Cally'd participated in one. She still remembered that time when Zelda painted...

Ivanova closed her eyes and willed the memories away. *Not* those memories. Not now, not yet. As she felt them sink away again, she opened her eyes. She couldn't go through with this ritual. There would be too much emotion involved, too much introspection she couldn't afford. Marcus would just have to do without her input. Still holding the globe, she left the room.

"Aren't you leaving?" Marcus said. "Not that I mind the company, but you're supposed to spend the night meditating alone."

Avon looked up from the slate he was scribbling on. "Only if I choose to go along with your little game. Which I don't."

"Why not?"

"It's a complete waste of time."

"Ah." Marcus looked at Avon for a while. "And if you don't waste your time thinking of the dead in your past, what will you do with it?"

"Work."

"Ah. And then?"

"Work more. Thanks to Blake, we're always on the run and it takes some effort to stay ahead of the Federation's pursuit."

"And you're going to do that all by yourself."

"What do you mean all by myself?"

Marcus sat down on the couch across the table from Avon and leaned forward.

"I belong to the Anla-Shok, the Rangers," he said. "We're a sort of dirty jobs organisation, we do all the things to defend our civilisation that nobody else wants to do. We watch a place for centuries without tiring, we go to the worst places imaginable to see if the enemy is there, we stand up to impossible odds to give others a chance to get away. When everyone else believes that the enemy is defeated and gone, we are the ones who stay on guard, ready for when it returns. In times of peace, we are ridiculed as useless dreamers, in war, we are relied upon to do whatever is necessary to do. What we do is not easy. Above all else, it is not easy on the soul. To lie still in a ship no larger than a coffin, for weeks, waiting to be blown away by something huge and black, to stand against an enemy you know you can't defeat just to buy someone else a bit of time, and more than anything else simply to *go on fighting* when everyone around you has already given up, isn't easy. We train for it. We make sure we are at peace with ourselves. We learn how to keep going. And, to get to the point, we learn what keeps *others* going. What breaks the spirit, and what keeps it alive. All my training, all my experience, tells me that this crew, on this ship, is heading for disaster. You've been hunted for a long time, you've lost friends, you've all been near death any number of times. But you haven't dealt with it. You all bottle it up in some way. Vila drinks. Blake is turning fanatical, caring more for the struggle itself than for what the struggle is about. Jenna is turning in on herself, as are you. If this goes on, the crew will disintegrate in some way, possibly with several of you ending up dead. Which will leave you, personally, alone to fight the Federation as best as you can. I don't think you want that. My little game is an attempt to draw you out a bit, to start you all on the way towards healing. And it's not going to work unless all of you participate. You don't have to do anything, really, just pretend to go along if you wish. But you will spend this night alone, and you will be there tomorrow morning to complete the ritual."

"I suppose you won't give up until I do as you wish?" Avon said.

"Right."

Avon grabbed his slate and globe. "I'll see you in the morning, then," he said as he got up and headed for the exit from the flight deck.

She never got used to it. Years of evading customs officials, running blockades, dealing with criminals and taking one insane risk after another, and she never got used to it. Jenna placed the globe carefully on the small table beside her armchair.

"You're too soft for this life, kid," her first captain once said. In most ways, he was wrong. She was quite hard enough to make it as a smuggler, as she had proved for years. But she still hurt every time she lost a friend. She'd always suspected that her old mentor felt the same, in spite of what he'd said, and that that was why he made so damn sure never to get any friends. Enemies and underlings are safer, you don't care so much when they die. Some day, she might go his way. But not today. Today, she still valued having friends more than she feared losing them.

She got up from the armchair and picked up a slate from a shelf. She activated it, and an image appeared. Herself, standing on the bridge of the first ship she captained. How young and determined she looked. She flipped past the few images Orac had managed to retrieve from the slate she'd used before she was arrested, until she came to the ones taken after they got the *Liberator*. The first of those was from the teleport bay: Blake in the middle with his arms around the shoulders of Vila and

Gan, with Avon standing a little to the side. All of them smiling. Except Avon, of course. A couple more pictures. Vila sleeping on the flight deck couch. Blake at the pilot's console, pretending to fly the ship. Gan cooking. And then, Cally. A picture from just minutes after she first came aboard. Blake was standing at her side, saying something about Zen, if she remembered correctly. Cally's head was turned to the side, looking straight at the visual sensor which had recorded the image. Her eyes were haunted, still frightened. Safe as she was there, she still had the look of a hunted animal. Something like the look a wounded wolf far from its pack might have, Jenna imagined. Not that she'd ever seen a wolf, dome-born as she was. She flipped further forward, trying to find the last picture she had of Cally. Found it, and almost laughed. It was from just after they'd returned from Freedom City. Cally was still dressed up in that outrageous outfit she'd worn there. She was looking with badly hidden amusement at Vila, who was grinning like a five-year-old boy, showing her the money he'd won in the casino. Nice picture, but not really appropriate as the last one. Jenna looked up from the slate.

"Zen, viewer," she said, and an oval appeared on the wall.

"Display recordings from internal visual monitors, time and place of Cally's death minus one minute."

"Confirmed."

The image was dark, lit only by the emergency lights. In the centre of it was Cally's back. She was embracing a dark-haired man, as if she tried to comfort him.

"Rotate viewpoint a hundred and eighty degrees centred on Cally."

Her face came into view. Her eyes were closed and she seemed to be concentrating. Over her shoulder, Jenna could see Ivanova's face in the shadows.

"Forward time, one fifth speed."

At first nothing happened. Then Cally's eyes suddenly opened and she tried to push the man aside. A moment later, there was an intense flash of light. When it faded, Cally's face was obscured by a cloud of blood and she was falling, taking the man down with her.

"Stop. Back up to just before the flash. Center on her face and enlarge."

As in the first picture, her eyes were open and looking straight out of the picture. But this time, for some reason, the look was calm. It wasn't the frightened, unbelieving look of someone just about to die. It was the look of someone at peace, of someone who was satisfied with her place in the universe. Jenna looked down at the picture on the slate. There, Cally still had her familiar slightly sad look. Up on the wall, seconds before she died, she didn't any more. Death wish? But no, if that had been it Cally would've died long ago. It was something else.

"Zen, zoom out, slowly. Stop."

There. Yes. Ivanova's face, not even remotely calm. Panicked, actually. Jenna's instincts told her she was on to something, but there just wasn't enough information to guess exactly what. Something for another day. Anyway, she had an appropriate image for her album.

"Download image to slate and cancel viewer."

"Confirmed."

Looking at the new image on the slate, she picked up the globe and twisted it open.

Marcus flipped the switch back to off and closed the globe. He held it like that for a few moments, still meditating.

"Marcus."

He turned and saw Ivanova standing in the entrance to the flight deck.

"I can't do this."

"Oh?"

"Not now. If we'd already been to Auron, maybe."

"Surely you can say *something*? It just has to be a phrase. A stray memory. Something you once heard that reminded you of someone. Something your mother used to--"

She stepped closer and raised her hand. "Stop!"

They looked at each other.

"I just can't, ok?" she said.

"Not *anything*? For the others? Please? Just the name of someone who died?"

She snorted. "The name of someone who died? Yeah, ok, I can do that."

With a few quick motions she twisted the top off the globe, flipped the recording switch and lifted it to her lips. She whispered something Marcus couldn't hear, then she reset the switch and closed the globe. She tossed it to him.

"Here. Have fun," she said as she turned and left. Marcus carefully placed her globe beside his own.

"Zen, you know where to take us and what to do once we get there," he said.

"Confirmed," said Zen.

"Place these along the edge of the bubble," Marcus said, and handed Blake a box of audio terminals.

"And you two, place these on the hull in a large triangle. I've drawn chalk lines on the hull to make it easier to get the lines right." He handed over a couple of boxes of candles to Avon and Jenna. The *Liberator* had come to a stop. She lay in orbit around a large red star, somewhere between its third and fourth planets. She was turned so that the bubble of air on her hull faced away from the sun. There was some light reflected from the undersides of the pylons, but as Jenna and Avon lit the candles the flames became the sources of most of the light. Flickering shadows played over the rough hull. The flames grew huge in the low gravity.

"Come, sit inside the triangle," Marcus said when all was in place, and he sat down in the middle. The rest gathered around him. The stars and nebulae around the ship were still now, bright eternal points on the velvet darkness.

"One at a time," Marcus said. "I go first." He closed his eyes. "I place these words between the star and the abyss. I place these words between the light and the darkness. I give these words to the Universe, so that they will never be lost." Taking the globe in both hands, he tossed it like a basketball, straight up. It flew through the force shield, out of the artificial gravity, and continued into the rays from the red giant. Suddenly, it sparkled in all the colours of the rainbow, and at the same time the speakers Blake had placed around the edge of the bubble came to life.

"She never backed down from a fight," they whispered. "Sometimes she was afraid of the dark, but she never admitted it. Her name was Delenn."

Marcus nodded to Jenna.

"I place these words between the star and the abyss. I place these words between the light and the darkness. I give these words to the Universe, so that they will never be lost," she said. She threw her globe, and it rose into the light.

"For Gan, home was wherever he went. For Cally, there was no home. Gan was safe in himself. Cally was a child lost in the woods," the audio terminals added over Marcus' words.

"I place these words between the star and the abyss. I place these words between the light and the darkness. I give these words to the Universe, so that they will never be lost," said Vila.

"Old Man Elbows had the smallest hands of any man I ever saw," was added to the whispers. "Gan laughed in his sleep. Sometimes, when she thought that no one saw her, Cally wrote poetry, and tears ran down her face."

"I place these words between the star and the abyss. I place these words between the light and the darkness. I give these words to the Universe, so that they will never be lost," said Ivanova.

"Susan Ivanova," whispered the speakers, over and over again. "Susan Ivanova. Susan Ivanova."

"I place these words between the star and the abyss. I place these words between the light and the darkness. I give these words to the Universe, so that they will never be lost," said Avon.

"Anna died in a Federation cell, where I could not help her. Cally died in a bare corridor, when I could not help her."

"I place these words between the star and the abyss. I place these words between the light and the darkness. I give these words to the Universe, so that they will never be lost," said Blake.

"This is for the small people," was added to the voices. "This is to the memory of those who are forgotten. This is in remembrance of those who serve bravely and gain nothing but death."

Marcus stood. He looked up at the string of glimmering spheres that was crawling away from them.

"Our words are one with the Universe," he said. "Pieces in the eternal puzzle. Let them ring from the light to the darkness, from now until the end of time."

Liberator dove through space. At standard by six, the stars around her seemed to crawl by like glowing ants in the distance. Somewhere behind her lay the ruins of Space Command, somewhere ahead was Auron. In the middle, on the hull near the middle forward point, was Marcus Cole, a human Ranger very far from home, calmly putting out candles in the silence and the darkness of outer space.