

Scheherazade

written by Calle Dybedahl

2002 Freedom City birthday story. Which didn't at all come out the way I wanted it to, and I didn't have the time (or energy) to rewrite it better.

Featured fandoms: Blake's 7

Featured pairings: Dayna/Soolin

A.S.S Story codes: gen

Story rating: PG13

"Tell me," Soolin said. "Tell me a story."

The air on the Scorpio's flight deck was cold enough that her breath came out as a plume of white smoke, and it was cooling faster than she liked.

"A story about what?" Dayna said.

They were orbiting a gas giant in some forgotten planetary system, far off the space lanes. Somewhere near, a Federation pursuit ship was looking for them. Space is large, and small things are hard to find -- unless they radiate. It doesn't matter much what they radiate. Light, heat, radio waves, it's all pretty much the same. To hide in space, you must be dark, cold and silent.

Dark was easy. The Scorpio didn't have much in the way of external lights anyway. Just turn off the internal lights, to be on the safe side. Silent wasn't much harder. Turn off the communications system, after sending off a burst transmission with their status to Xenon base.

Cold was harder. Vacuum is an excellent thermal insulator. Some heat gets lost by radiation, but not much. To cool down, they shut down every system they possibly could, from the engines on down. They even shut down the life support system, relying on an independent rebreather system running off a power cell from a handlight. That, and a time distort sensor watching for the wake when the pursuit ship left, was the only machinery still active in the entire ship.

"Tell me something that happened on the Liberator. When you didn't have to hide. When you could outgun or outrun everything the Federation could throw at you."

"It wouldn't be a happy story," Dayna said. "The Liberator wasn't a happy ship."

"So it'll be familiar," Soolin said. "I haven't led a happy life."

Dayna smiled wryly. "Very well," she said. "Once upon a time, when we were flying from somewhere to somewhere else, I heard a voice whisper to me in the galley..."

"Avenge me," the voice whispered. "Avenge me."

It was weak, and she couldn't tell where it came from. Worse, she didn't recognize it. It was a female voice, but it wasn't Cally's or her own. And there were no other females on the ship, as far as she knew.

She stood absolutely still and tried to hear it more clearly.

"Avenge me. Avenge me."

She could hear it clearly enough. She still couldn't tell where it came from. She still couldn't tell who it was.

"Zen," she said.

"Confirmed," came the computer's voice from the intercom system.

"Internal scan. Report presence of any major life forms other than me, Cally, Avon, Tarrant and Vila."

"Confirmed. Scan negative."

"Avenge me," the voice whispered. "Avenge me."

"So what did you do?" Soolin asked. They'd both put on the thickest clothes they had on the ship, and still they were cold. The rebreather slowly blew the air around the cabin, moving stale air away from them and bringing them slightly less stale air to breathe.

"Nothing," Dayna said. "I just figured I was going spacecrazy. I decided to spend some more time with the others, just to have someone to talk to. I even ended up drinking with Vila. Once."

Soolin put her hands in her armpits, trying to warm them. Gloves hadn't been among the clothes available. "That was a pretty short story," she said.

"It's not finished yet."

"I just wanted to live," the voice whispered.

Dayna looked around, quickly, trying to see anyone.

All she saw was the Liberator flight deck, empty of anyone but her. Empty high-backed chairs, empty couch, empty consoles. Just her, standing in front of the main screen, alone.

Which was as it should be. It was the middle of the night according to the onboard time. The rest of the crew was sleeping, only she was awake, watching. In four hours she'd tell Zen to wake up Avon, and he'd take over. Probably without more than a grunt towards her.

For a moment, she thought about asking the computer to wake him now, to tell him about the voice she heard. But no, he'd just dismiss it unless she had proof.

"Zen," she said. "Start audio recording on flight deck, save under my personal files, codename 'Loony'."

"Confirmed," Zen said, and for a moment she thought it sighed.

She sat down on the couch and started fieldstripping her gun. Not that it needed it, it already was as clean and well cared for as her highly skilled hands could get it, but the movements calmed her. It was something she could do without thinking, but which still occupied her mind. She took it apart, put it together again. Apart, together.

"Just to live a little more," the voice whispered. "Just a little more."

Dayna started. "Zen, stop recording," she said. "Playback."

Silence.

There was nothing on the recording, except the faint clicking sounds of her taking apart and reassembling the gun.

So she really was going nuts.

She spent the rest of the night worrying.

The temperature kept dropping. Slowly but surely, the ship's heat bled into the universe. It would stop when it reached equilibrium with the tiny amount of heat it received from the system's distant sun. But that was days or weeks off, and far below any temperature at which two lonely humans could live.

"It's getting really cold," Soolin said. "Maybe we'll die from hypothermia before we die from carbon dioxide poisoning."

"I'd bet you which one comes first, if I could figure out a way to tell which one won," Dayna said.

"If we undress and lie down together under as much clothes as we can stand in a sleeping alcove, we can share body heat. That way, we'll probably last long enough that the carbon dioxide wins."

Dayna smiled. "I can think of worse places to die," she said.

Without speaking further, they started the procedure of climbing into the alcove and undressing without losing too much heat in the process.

The next time she heard the voice, it was again ship's night and Dayna was alone on the flight deck.

"She killed me," it said. "She killed me."

"Who are you?" she asked out loud. "Show yourself!"

"Avenge me!" the voice said, louder now. "Kill her!"

But she still couldn't see anyone, she still couldn't tell where it came from and she still didn't recognize it.

If this was what spacecrazy felt like, it was mostly annoying.

Her father had told her about ghosts. She'd dismissed it as old tales, something that was only relevant back on the Earth she'd never seen. But now she wondered. If there were such things as a ghosts, why wouldn't they exist anywhere where humans had died?

So who had died on the Liberator?

How many women had ever been aboard the ship at all?

"Zen, list all human females known to have been aboard the Liberator."

"Confirmed. Servalan, Dayna Mellanby, Councillor Le Grand, Hanna, Tyce Sarkoff, Avalon and Jenna Stannis are known to have been aboard this vessel."

Dayna looked up. So few?

"Which of them died aboard?"

"Hanna."

"Can I hear a recording of her voice?"

"Confirmed."

There was a slight hum, and then a female voice said "Here, let me."

It wasn't her ghost's voice.

"Let me hear the rest of them too."

"Confirmed."

One by one, she heard them speak. The hated voice of Servalan. Her own, sounding strange when coming from outside her own head. Le Grand, Tyce Sarkoff and Avalon, none of which she knew who they were. Finally, Jenna Stannis saying the single word "Beautiful".

In her ghost's voice. She frowned. She would've heard if Jenna had died aboard the ship. As far as any of the crew knew, she wasn't even dead.

"Zen, when did Jenna die?"

"Unknown."

"When was she last seen aboard the ship?"

"Unknown."

She stared at the computer's flashing front. "What?" she said. "How can you not know that?"

"Recordings were lost to battle damage during the Andromedan war. It is known that the lost recordings includes the time when Jenna Stannis left the vessel."

"But you have information about her from after she left, don't you?"

"Confirmed."

Dayna leaned back and frowned. Curiouser and curiouser.

"A ghost of someone who wasn't dead? Sounds a bit like Dorian and his creature," Soolin said. Dayna could feel her breath as she spoke. They lay under a large heap of clothes, blankets and what other soft things they'd found lying around the ship, face to face in the darkness. Occasionally, they'd lift a corner a little to let some fresher air into their little cocoon.

"Well, I hadn't met him then, so I just thought it was strange. Something I'd been told must be wrong, and the ghost asking to be avenged made me think that it was the parts about Jenna being heard from after she left the Liberator."

"If she ever really left."

"If that, yes."

Her arms were around Soolin, whose arms were around her. It was curiously comfortable, feeling her skin.

The next time she had the night watch she was ready. She waited for the voice to speak to her, and she wasn't disappointed.

"Avenge me," the voice said again.

Dayna closed her eyes, the better to focus on her hearing.

"How? On who?" she said.

"Avenge me," the voice repeated. "Punish her. Kill her. Avenge me."

Kill *her*. That rather limited the possible choices. As far as she'd been able to determine, Jenna vanished when the ship was not only deep in interstellar space, but also outside the galaxy proper. Ordinarily, someone sneaking aboard would be very unlikely. Out there, it bordered closely on the impossible.

Which meant that there was exactly one suspect.

Cally.

Dayna felt Soolin move, as if to find a more comfortable position. The corner of something hard briefly poked her in the back.

"How long is the rebreather going to last?" she asked.

"Another hour, perhaps," Soolin said. "It's a shoddy old thing."

"And then?"

"Might as well turn off the oxygen feed. Anoxia is a more pleasant death than carbon dioxide poisoning or hypothermia."

She moved her arm, felt her way among the layers of cloth until her hand reached the cold and hard metal of the handgun she'd placed there when they built their nest.

"It'd last longer if there was only one of us," she said, feeling the grip of the gun sliding comfortably into her palm.

"That it would," Soolin said. Her arm also moved.

She knocked on the door to Cally's cabin, but got no response. From inside, she could hear grunts and disconnected words.

"Kill her," the voice whispered. "Kill her! Avenge me!"

She opened the door and entered the cabin.

Cally lay in her bed, the blankets messed up around her. The alien woman was drenched in sweat, her breath came quickly and she thrashed about in her sleep.

"What did she do to you?" Dayna asked.

"Kill her!" the voice said, clear and strong now. "Kill her!"

Dayna knelt beside the bed, grabbed Cally's shoulder and shook her, hard, again. The fourth or fifth time, her eyes opened. She stared at Dayna, confused.

"You seemed to be having a nightmare," she said. "I could hear you from out in the corridor."

Cally sat up, rubbed her eyes. "Thanks," she said. "I was."

Dayna stood and started to leave, but stopped with her hand on the door's open switch.

"What was your nightmare about?" she asked.

Something painful and far away came over Cally's face. "Old things," she said. "Old mistakes."

Slowly, she moved the gun so the muzzle pointed up along Soolin's back towards the back of her head. It was loaded with a simple bullet clip, so a shot should burst open the blonde's head without hurting Dayna herself.

She was pretty sure that Soolin knew what she was doing, and was doing exactly the same thing herself behind Dayna's back.

"Old mistakes?" Soolin said. "That sounds a lot like a confession to me."

"That's what I thought too. And Cally had been on the Liberator long enough to have learned how to plant false information in Zen's data banks. Which is where all the information we had about Jenna after she left the ship came from."

"So what did you do to her?"

"I left," Dayna said. "I knew her well by then, and I couldn't imagine her as a murderer. I wanted more proof before I did something drastic."

She asked to take the night watch the next night as well. It was Vila who should've had it, and he was eager enough to get rid of it that he didn't even ask why. Which was just as well, because she didn't know what she would've said. "I'm trying to figure out if Cally murdered Jenna" really didn't sound like that sort of explanation that would pass unremarked.

After the others left, she sat on the semi-dark flight deck until she heard Jenna's disembodied voice again. It was stronger now, strong enough that she could no longer believe that it was just stray sounds that she interpreted as speech. Not that she'd done that for a few nights anyway.

"I'm coming," she said out loud. She got up from the couch and headed for the infirmary.

"The Liberator was a large ship, wasn't it?"

"Huge," Dayna said. "I don't know how long, really, but it was almost empty with just the five of us in it."

The gun had warmed to the temperature of her hand.

"I've never been on a ship bigger than that you could walk the length of it in a couple of minutes," Soolin said.

"It's not that interesting, really. Feels a lot like being in Xenon base."

"Still, I would like to see one before I die."

The trigger felt like a malicious entity under her finger. As if it'd depress itself if she even hinted at starting to squeeze it.

"You will," she said. "I'm sure you will."

She carefully opened the door to Cally's cabin and slid inside, closing it just as carefully behind her. The loaded drug dispenser felt heavier than it should in her pocket. The weight of guilt.

Cally was having another nightmare. She lay with her face pressed into her pillow, muffling the sounds she was making. She'd kicked off her blankets, and the muscles of her naked back stood out like thick skin-covered ropes.

"Kill her," Jenna's voice said. "Kill the bitch. Kill her."

Dayna sat down on the edge of the bed. She stroked Cally's sweat-streaked back. She liked the not-so-alien telepath, and really wished that it would all turn out to be a mistake or an invading alien or something else external. Something that she could shoot. She preferred problems that could be solved by shooting them.

Before she could change her mind she put the dispenser to the side of Cally's neck and triggered it. There was a short hissing sound. Cally jerked, but didn't wake up.

She threw the spent dispenser away. She kept stroking Cally's back as she waited for the drug cocktail to work its way into her brain and do its work. One part of the cocktail was a sleep inducer, to prevent her from waking up. One part was a dream enhancer, to make her nightmare clearer. The last part was an Auron telepathic enhancer. This time, she would know what Cally was dreaming.

"She killed me, you know," Jenna said.

Dayna looked up, startled. A blonde, curvy woman was standing next to the bed, looking down at Cally. She turned towards Dayna.

"I can't touch her. You will have to kill her for me. You will have to be the instrument of my revenge."

Her eyes were empty. She wasn't really looking at Dayna, just aiming her eyes her way.

"How did she kill you? Where? And why?"

She felt the muscles in Cally's back tremble under her hand.

"She killed me!"

The scream came both from the standing woman and, muffled, from the bed.

"Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!"

Cally threw herself around, sat up violently.

"She used her telepathic powers," Jenna said. "The Auronar can use those offensively, you know. It takes a lot out of them, so they only do it in dire circumstances. But they can."

Cally's eyes were open, but she didn't seem to be looking at anything.

"I just wanted to live," she said. "I just wanted to *live*."

The memory of the words echoed through Dayna's mind. Every breath she let Soolin take, every moment she didn't fire, was a moment she wouldn't get to live later on.

It wasn't just for herself, she argued. If both of them died, there wouldn't be anybody to bring the Scorpio home and the others would be stranded on Xenon. And she was a better pilot than Soolin. So it should be her.

Soolin moved. Dayna's mouth went dry as bone. She might be the better pilot, but the gunslinger was the better killer. She'd shoot while Dayna hesitated.

"What happened then?" Soolin said. "I know that Cally died on Terminal, so you obviously didn't kill her."

"Things went weird," she said. "I probably should've known better than to give a telepathic enhancer to an Auron having nightmares."

"I was opening an escape pod," Jenna said. "The Liberator was badly damaged. Life support was failing, and Zen was urging us all to abandon ship. Andromedan bolts kept hitting us, and it was all the autorepair systems could do to keep the ship structurally intact and the engines online."

"We had to leave," Cally said. Her lips didn't move. "We had to leave the ship. To get away. To *live*."

Jenna reached out a hand, and stroked Cally's hair. Dayna could see her fingers pass through the strands of the Auron's unmoving hair.

"She came running as I was opening the hatch. I didn't look at her. There were plenty of pods, I assumed she'd get her own. Had I looked up, I would've seen the panic in her eyes. I would've seen her reach for my head."

Cally hid her face in her hands. "I was so scared," Dayna heard her voice say, just as clearly as before.

"You have a gun, girl," Jenna said. "Be my avenger. She's a murderess. She shouldn't live. She bought her life with mine."

"Yes," Cally's voice said. "She's right. Kill me."

Dayna drew her gun, pointed it at roughly towards Cally's head and fired.

Cally screamed.

Soolin's body was warm and soft and a little like Lauren's. If she'd been able to see her, her hair and skin also would've been like her dead sister's.

Her bullet would tear through that skin and that hair. It'd splinter the skull, sever her brain stem and destroy her hindbrain. It'd turn her body no less soft but a lot less warm.

When she fired.

She felt muscles move under Soolin's skin. Felt her get her arm in position, not really hiding what she was doing any more. No more than Dayna was hiding what she was doing.

As long as none of them mentioned it, they could pretend it wasn't happening.

"So Cally killed her," Soolin said.

"That's what she said," Dayna said. "That she'd knocked Jenna out in order to take her escape pod."

"And the Jenna ghost was a telepathic projection of her guilt."

"Yes."

"Doesn't Vila usually claim he left the Liberator with her?"

"Yes. And Jenna was heard from afterwards. So maybe it just was a nightmare brought on by guilt over being alive when so many she knew wasn't."

"You get used to it," Soolin said, and Dayna felt her tense. Her own grip hardened, preparing to fire as soon as she really believed that Soolin was about to do it.

Moments away now.

Her mouth was growing dry, and her palms were sweaty. All the signs of flight-or-fight were coming on strong, when suddenly the time distort sensor chimed.

All the tension went out of her like from a deflating balloon.

"It left," she said, not really believing it.

She felt Soolin relax as well. "Seems like it," she said. She slid out from under the heap of clothes, pulling whatever was on top around her. She walked quickly over to Slave, turned it on.

"Scan and report," she said.

Dayna climbed out and started to dress.

"The scan is negative, madam. The Scorpio is the only ship my humble abilities can detect in this system at this time."

"Good. Turn on the life support systems, will you?"

"Yes, madam." The familiar noises of moving air started, and Dayna felt warm air blow against her from a vent in the wall.

She sat down at the pilot's console, still buttoning her jumpsuit.

"Slave, plot a course for Xenon," she said. "Take us home."

"Yes, madam."

She sank back in the seat, a deep sense of relief filling her. Alive!

Soolin was picking out clothes from their heap and putting them on.

"So that was it?" she said. "The end of your story? Cally was feeling guilty and projected it on you?"

Dayna smiled. "Maybe," she said.

"What do you mean 'maybe'? You can't stop your story there!"

Dayna's smile widened. "Of course I can," she said. "I may need to stall you again some time."

She'd ended up sitting on Cally's bed, holding the distraught woman to her chest. There'd been a smell of scorched plastic from where she'd shot the wall. The only sounds had been the gentle hum from the air conditioning and the desperate sobs from Cally.

As far as she'd been able to tell, Cally was neither sleeping nor awake. She'd seemed to be in some kind of inbetween state, not quite reality and not quite dream.

"I left you lying on the floor," she'd heard Cally's voice say, although nothing but sobs had came through her mouth. "You lay in front of the escape pod, and I saw what I had done. I wanted to open the escape pod, to get *out* -- but I couldn't get near you, my muscles just wouldn't *obey* me!"

Dayna had gently stroked her hair. "Hush," she'd said. "it's all right," pretending to be the woman Cally seemed to think she was.

"I killed you... I left you there to die. I ran and I ran and I left the ship with Vila and I never saw you again and *I'm so sorry* and I want you to come *back* to me!" the telepath had soundlessly screamed.

"Hush, dear," she'd whispered in her ear. "It's all right."
She'd felt her tears wet through her shirt, felt violent sobs wrack Cally's body.
"I forgive you," she'd whispered. "I forgive you."