

A CHOICE CUT OF FOOL

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"Let us know when you're ready to leave," Tarrant said to Vila.
Avon gave him a short nod, then activated his teleport bracelet. "Bring us up, ORAC."

"What makes you think he will come back?" Cally asked Avon. She had waited for Tarrant and Dayna to leave to save the young pilot from saying something he'd soon regret.

Avon paused, wondering at her question. With Cally, such things were not always mere words. Her alien capabilities could oftentimes pick up things better left unsaid. "Vila is a survivor," he advised. "On that planet he found, he would have to work. Vila does not like to work." He sat down behind the teleport, certain that the thief would be calling in at any time.

"You're forgetting Kerril, Avon. He seemed quite fond of her."

"Vila is fond of any female," Avon snorted with a faint smile.

"True," Cally agreed. "But I sensed he felt something more for this woman."

"Was it enough to convince him to stay with her?" Avon asked, suddenly watching her intently.

"I am not sure. What I felt could have been mere concern for her, but..."

"But you're not sure," Avon returned, relaxing a bit. If Cally wasn't sure, then it might not mean anything. He stood up and decided to go to the flight deck and see how much more he could harass Tarrant. The damned young idiot might well have led them all into a trap, and he was not about to let Tarrant off with one mere hand-slapping.

When Avon arrived there, Dayna broke off what she was saying. He hadn't caught all of it, but it was evident she was quite upset with Tarrant. Surely she didn't care for the thief as well.

"Am I interrupting something?" Avon enquired in a solicitous tone.

"No," Tarrant spat, his eyes snapping at Dayna. "Has Vila come up yet?"

My, my, what a/c I miss? Avon wondered to himself. "No, not yet. Worried, Tarrant?"

"Aren't you, Avon? After all, without your precious thief, you're out of luck if Blake should be in a Federation security cell."

"Tarrant!" Dayna half-rose in her chair, but the icy look Avon gave Tarrant set her right back down.

"I don't need any of you, Tarrant. Nor do I need Blake."

"Then why all this running about every time ORAC picks up some mention of him?"

"That is my concern. Yours is to pilot this vessel. A skill anyone can master. Dayna, I'm sure, could manage with Zen's assistance."

"Fine. Let her, then. I'm sick and tired of all of you." He stomped off the flight deck.

Avon gazed after him, mildly surprised. "Tarrant must be suffering from an extreme attack of conscience," he surmised.

"Avon, why do you do that?"

"Dayna, do not try my patience with empty questions."

"Oh, you're as thick-headed as Tarrant," she exclaimed and headed out the opposite corridor Tarrant had taken.

"I do wish I had come in at the beginning of whatever that was about," he mused to himself. He activated the ship's intercom and punched up the teleport station. "Anything yet, Cally?"

"Nothing, Avon. Do you think he's all right?"

"I shouldn't want to bring him up if he's, uh, involved with other things, Cally. We'll give him another few minutes, then inform him we're leaving. He'll be ready then. I assure you."

Avon closed down the intercom and sat at his station, his fingers drumming a soundless beat on the console. A voice at the back of his brain kept telling him *perhaps Vila will not come back*. After all, what was there here for him? Safely? Hardly, if what had nearly happened was any proof. Vila would have to be a fool to believe that. *Ana he is not that*. Avon unconsciously nodded. He knew full well that Vila was neither the fool he played nor as drunk as he often appeared. He had kept a careful eye on the ship's liquor cabinet as well as forbidding Zen from making any inordinate amounts of the mixture Vila liked so well, soma.

What then was there to keep him? Loyalty? Hardly. Vila's loyalty lay with the winner, and Avon could scarcely blame him for it. In the Delta Domes, or for that matter anywhere in the Federation, it was always the wiser of the two.

The intercom chimed. "Avon?"

"What is it, Cally?"

"Vila's called for teleport. He sounds in trouble."

"Bring him up, Cally. Now!" He headed for the teleport on the run.

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Dayna was headed back for the flight deck when she spied Avon. "What's the matter, Avon?" Avon said nothing, just sped on by. "Damn, something must have happened to Vila," she mumbled under her breath and headed after him.

Tarrant heard the commotion and poked his head out his cabin just as Dayna went by. "What's..."

"Don't know. Come on."

Tarrant joined in the rush. When he and Dayna arrived, Vila was leaning against the teleport console, breathing heavily and shaking with fear.

"I told him not to do it," Vila muttered. "Stupid man, very stupid man. Brought the complex down on top of himself."

"Did Kerril make it all right?" Cally asked gently.

"Must have done," Vila replied. He took a deep breath to steady himself. It had been too close a thing down there. "The barrier came back up. Norl and Kerril had to have crossed onto the planet to do that. At least, I hope so."

"I'm sure she's all right, Vila," Dayna said in comfort.

"Hope so."

"I'm sure she's safe, Vila."

Vila lifted his head and looked at Avon. Something was in the other man's eyes, relief that he had come back? Well, what else could he have done, given the circumstances? Still, there had been time. He could have jumped through the opening and maybe made it to Homeworld. Their world, his and Kerril's. Maybe they would name it Vilaworld after him. Maybe. He sighed. So many maybes which now would never be.

"Vila, I'm sorry."

Tarrant's words shattered Vila's image of Kerril laughing and holding out her arms for him. "That makes it all worthwhile, doesn't it?" the thief mumbled.

"We're still out the crystals," someone grumbled. Who, Vila wasn't sure. He took out the handful he had collected on the planet and plopped them on the console.

Avon collected them, his eyes still resting on the thief. "I'm impressed," he said with no hint of mockery in his voice and left.

"Hmmm," Vila mumbled back.

"I'm glad you stayed," Cally told him, giving him a quick hug.

Vila's melancholy lifted slightly and he managed to smile. "Glad somebody's happy."

"So is Avon."

"Who cares what Avon thinks," Vila sighed. "Who cares what I think? Who cares about anything!" He left for his cabin.

Cally looked after him and shook her head. She had been right. Vila had felt something for Kerril, and now she was lost to him.

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Avon felt eyes staring at him and turned about. Vila Restal was standing in the doorway, eyes partially glazed, no doubt by the rather large and half-consumed glass of soma in his hand.

"Well?" Avon inquired.

"Just wondered what you were doin'," the thief replied in a slurry voice.

"I thought this was your watch period." Avon stood up and stretched. He had been working at the installation of the crystals for nearly six hours.

"Dayna told me to go away so I went." Vila giggled suddenly and sat straight down on the floor.

He's never been this drunk before. Avon realized. "Vila, what are you doing?"

"Doing? Nothing. Same as I'm always doing when I'm not opening things or getting shot at or being used as bait or..."

"I get the picture," Avon interrupted with a frown. Surely what had happened on Keezarn had not brought this about. No, surely it couldn't be that.

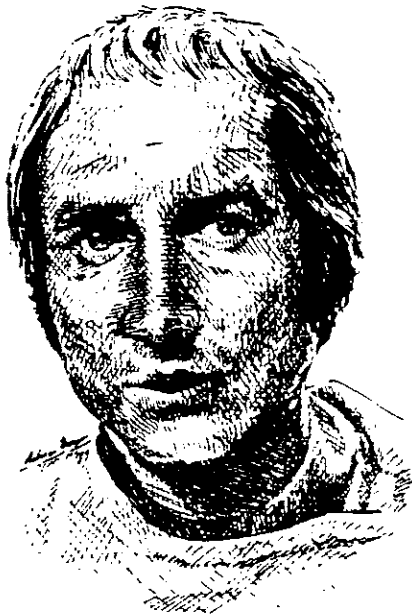
"So there you are," Cally's voice announced from the corridor. A minute later and she peered at Avon. "Has he been pestering you, Avon?" she asked, helping the thief to his feet. At the same time, she sent Avon a telepathic message. *Dayna called me. Vila was acting very strange when she came to the flight deck. That's why she relieved him.*

Avon blinked in acknowledgement and then stared intently at the thief. Something was definitely not right. "No, he just arrived."

"Come on, Vila. Let's get you to your cabin." Cally put an arm around his waist to help support him.

The thief giggled again, then went very solemn. "Don't do anything but cause trouble, do I, Cally? Don't deserve any cabin. Don't deserve anything!" He burst into tears.

Cally didn't know what to make of that. A glance at Avon told her he didn't either. "Hush now. You're tired, that's all. Things will look better after you've slept."



"Nothing look better. Maybe Tarrant was right. No one cares what happens to me. No one." He ventured a teary-eyed look at Cally. "cept maybe you, Cally." The tears began again.

"Let's get him to his cabin," Avon advised.

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"Stay with him, Avon, while I get something from the medical unit."

"Is it wise to give him anything while he's drunk?" Avon asked.

"What I have in mind will not harm him."

"Wish...wish Cally was my girl," Vila mourned, looking up at Avon. His eyes were now almost entirely glassy.

Avon said nothing in return, merely waited for Cally.

"But...but she's not. She belongs to you, Avon. I know that. Everybody knows that."

"Cally belongs to no one," Avon denied.

"Huh! She...she does so." Vila hiccuped noisily.

"Don't you, Cally?"

Avon glanced over his shoulder. Cally had paused inside the doorway, caught off-guard no doubt by Vila's drunken remark. At least that was the impression he received by the strange look on her face.

"This will help you sleep, Vila, and when you wake up, you will be yourself again."

"Never be myself again," the thief muttered, trying to sit up. Avon forced himself

back down. "Let me go, Avon, please. Don't keep me here. If I stay, I'll die."

"Don't be ridiculous," Cally informed him. She injected him with what she'd brought from the medical unit.

"Will...will so." The thief's voice faded and he was asleep.

"How long will that keep him out?" Avon inquired, pausing in the doorway to look back in at the sleeping thief.

"Eight hours," Cally reported. "Why? What is it?"

"I'm not sure, Cally."

"If it's what Vila said, Avon, don't let it bother you. I know it is not true."

Avon refused to comment on it.

"Then what?"

"I don't know," Avon muttered. He could not put what he was feeling into words, as it was something he'd never experienced before.

"You sensed something about him, didn't you?"

Avon with obvious reluctance nodded.

"Avon, I have been sensing something since Vila teleported back up from Keezarn."

"And you said nothing?"

"What could I say? It was so vague an impression, I put it down to worry over Vila."

Avon accepted that. "What did you sense, Cally?"

"He is very unhappy, Avon. He wants to leave, but he's too frightened to do so."

"Quite sensible, considering what would happen if Servalan caught up with him," Avon returned.

"Avon, he is afraid!"

"Of what, Cally?"

"I don't know," Cally replied, feeling helpless.

"Cally, Vila has always been afraid, for as long as I've known him, he's been afraid."

"Not like this, Avon. This is more than fear. It borders on self-destruction."

That got Avon's attention immediately. "I think you misinterpret what you feel, Cally. Vila would no more suicide than I would."

Cally stared intently at Avon. "Would you risk being captured by Servalan, Avon?"

Avon stared right back, answering without hesitation, "Not if I could prevent it, no."

"Even if it meant suicide?"

Avon answered a bit slower this time. "Perhaps. It would depend on the circumstances."

"Why don't you admit it, Avon? You'd prefer being a prisoner than being dead."

"Most sane people would," he returned. "What are you getting at, Cally?"

"Vila would not let himself be taken, Avon. He would rather die."

"You're being a little melodramatic, don't you think? Vila has been 'taken', as you call it, on a number of occasions. Have you forgotten Horizon?"

"That's not what I mean, Avon, you know that!"

Avon frowned at her. He was tired and in no mood to argue with Cally over Vila's drunken ravings. "I'm tired," he stated. "I'm going to bed. If you'll take my advice, you'll do the same." He turned to leave, but Cally stopped him with a touch on the arm.

"We cannot pass this off, Avon. You know we can't."

Avon glanced back at Vila and shrugged. "We'll see how he is in the morning." He rubbed his eyes. "Hopefully, we'll all have a clear head then."

"But one of us will also have a terrible headache," Cally added with a sudden mischievous smile.

Avon smiled too. "Yes, he will, won't he?"

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Vila woke up with more than a mere headache. In fact, his head woke him up with an angry roar which frightened him into consciousness. A few seconds later, he realized what it was and let out a horrible groan which only added to his pain.

"It's...it's...ow, quit it, will you?" he moaned to the shower. He stepped into the stall and turned on the water, letting it drench him, clothes and all, in its cold fury. It did not drive away the pain, however. And he staggered back into the room flinching at every step. *Surely goosebumps ain't hurt like that all the time.* he wondered, as he started to shiver from the cold. At least he'd never noticed them hurting before.

"And how are we this morning?" Cally's greeting sounded like she was using an amplifier the size of his cabin.

"Please," he begged in a half-whisper, "please don't shout."

I'm not... Telepathy made him grimace in agony and she quickly finished aloud. "I'm not shouting, Vila."

He nodded carefully, half afraid his brain might choose this particular moment to try an escape. It certainly felt as if it was trying to beat its way out using everything from a concentrated forcewall to one of Dayna's explosives.

"What...what happened? Did we get caught by Servalan?" Cally's face wasn't really green, was it? He blinked and the green disappeared. *Must have been on the eyelids of my eyes,* he decided.

"No, Vila," the Auron replied quietly in an amused tone. It was very apparent that Vila remembered nothing of the last eight hours. "I think you did a little celebrating, that's all."

"Celebrating?" He started to scratch his head and immediately stopped, jerking his hand in front of his face. When was the last time he had cut his fingernails? They seemed so long and sharp. "Me?"

"What's the matter, Vila?"

"Nothing. Guess I'm just really supersensitive this morning, all over it appears."

"Well, here's something that should help." She held out a glass of pale blue liquid.

"What is it?" he asked, hesitating. The very colour of the stuff sent his stomach into a frenzy.

"Something to ease your headache."

Vila took the glass in a shaking hand and started to drink from it. As it touched his lips, he froze, staring at Cally. She was green! In fact, she was fast becoming more than that. Her face was swelling all out of proportion, and her eyes had acquired a sudden burning intensity which terrified him to his soul. He dropped the glass and backed away from her.

"Vila, what is it?" she asked, taking a step towards him.

"No, get back!" he screamed. "Whatever you are, go away! Leave me alone." He crawled as far into the wall as he could and covered his head. A claw touched him, sending shivers of terror through his body. "No, don't hurt me. Please!"

Cally withdrew her hand and stepped back. What was wrong with Vila? Why was he acting the way he was? Then she felt it, the aura she had sensed at Keezarn. The faint trace of something which had engulfed Vila before he had teleported down. Fear, no, sheer terror held the thief in its grasp and she did not know what was causing it.

Avon, you must come to Vila's cabin at once!

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Avon was at that moment engaged in a rather heated argument with Tarrant and snarled aloud, "Not now, Cally, I've no time."

"Cally? Avon, what are you talking about?" Dayna had been privy to the uproar since she had been on the flight deck at the time Avon arrived. She had deemed it better to remain to keep a watchful eye on Tarrant, since he had more times than not of late managed to put his foot in his mouth in front of Avon.

Avon glared at her, then at Tarrant. "Nothing, damn it. Stay on this heading, Tarrant. I'll be back!" He walked stiffly off the flight deck and far enough down the corridor so he wouldn't be seen, then ran for Vila's cabin.

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"What was all that about?" Tarrant demanded angrily.

"Don't shout at me, Tarrant," Dayna snapped back. "I'm not mad at you." She paused, pursing her lips. "Yet!"

Tarrant took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Sorry. Avon makes me so damn angry that I could almost kill him." He clenched his fists in exasperation. "Me, too," Dayna chuckled. "But don't let it get to you. It only makes him worse. Or hadn't you noticed?" Tarrant glared at her, then snorted. "I guess I hadn't, now that you mention it." He stood up and walked over to her, bending down to look her squarely in the eyes. "Thanks for watching my back, by the way." "Is that what I was doing?" Dayna asked him in all innocence. "Dayna, you can be almost as irritating as Avon, do you know that?" Dayna smiled and winked at him. "Thanks."

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Avon heard screams from within Vila's cabin and quickly opened the door. Cally turned as he entered, looking both puzzled and worried. "What's the matter with him?" Avon demanded. "I don't know. I came in and found him suffering from his hangover and brought him something to ease the pain. He took the glass, then screamed and crawled into that corner. He's not moved since."

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'Not moved' was not exactly true, since the thief was moving, every inch of him was moving in terror. Vila heard the door to his cabin open and ventured a look. Something else had entered, a black-headed demon with cold black eyes. The eyes caught his and held him trapped. "Vila, what is it?" it growled. "What is the matter with you?" "No," Vila whimpered. "Please, please let me go. Please, please." The demon blinked, releasing the thief from its horrible spell and Vila quickly ducked his head back under the protection of his arms.

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"Avon, there's something else. The feeling I had when he came back from Keezarn, it's here. I can feel it now." "Where is it, Cally?" He stared hard at the cringing thief but saw nothing. "It is there, surrounding Vila. Avon, what do we do?" *A very good question*, he thought to himself. Obviously, he had to do something, but how did one fight something intangible and invisible? "I don't know," he advised, without turning to look at her. Vila's cries had softened now to sobs, he had to be nearing exhaustion. "Has there been any fluctuation in the 'aura'?" "None that I can sense. It seems to have gotten stronger, in fact." "And Vila weaker." "You think it is draining him?" "I'm not certain. I think we should withdraw and consult ORAC." "But Avon, we can't leave him like this." "I did not say we would, Cally." Avon turned to face her. "But our presence here might harm him more." He took her gently by the arm and steered her to the doorway.

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Vila heard the door slide shut and dared to peek out from under his arms. Alone, he was alone. The horrible monsters were gone. Vila started to relax, then caught himself. They might come back. He hurried to the door, popped open the panel containing the locking device and set about jamming it. "There, that's that," he sighed after a few seconds of poking about. "No way anything will get in now. I'm safe."

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+INFORMATION+ Zen intoned on the flight deck a few seconds after Vila's alteration to his locking panel. +LOCKING MECHANISM ON CABIN OCCUPIED BY VILA RESTAL HAS MALFUNCTIONED. REPAIRS WILL REQUIRE ONE HOUR AND FIFTEEN MINUTES.+

"Damn, I might have known he'd do that," Avon muttered to himself. "But you didn't, did you, Avon?" Tarrant responded. "Not now, Tarrant," Cally ordered, stepping between the two men. "You can kill each other after we've helped Vila." "Don't you mean if, Cally?" Dayna put in. **Such questions are pointless in view of what I have just learned**, ORAC spoke up. "Well?" Avon demanded. **It is my belief that the person in question is suffering from extreme stress.** "Caused by?" Avon asked.

Unknown, but certainly the mounting pressures present aboard this ship might well have contributed to it.

"What do we suggest we do about them?" Tarrant inquired.

The answer is quite simple. Locate a planet of suitable safety and leave him there.

"No," Cally protested. "We will not discard Vila."

"No, Cally," Avon agreed. "We will not. There is another reason for Vila's condition, ORAC. Find it and do it quickly."

He switched on the intercom. "Vila, can you hear me?"

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An angry growl came from the intercom in the thief's rooms, garbled horrible noises which sent him scurrying back to the safety of his bed. "Go away," he cried.

"Vila, it's Avon. Listen to my voice, Vila. Listen!"

The growl became more intense, terrifying the thief more. He whimpered, pulling the coverlet up around himself for protection. "Please," he pleaded. "Please go away."

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"It's no use, Avon," Tarrant spoke up. "He doesn't recognize you."

"Maybe you should try, Tarrant," Cally suggested. "And you, too, Dayna?"

Avon opened his mouth to veto her suggestion, but didn't follow through. Something had to be done to free the thief from his predicament.

"Vila, it's Tarrant. Can you hear me?"

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A voice spoke from the intercom, a young voice, almost childlike. "Vila, it's Tarrant. Can you hear me?" it said.

"Tarrant? You'd better look out. There's monsters loose on board. They might come after you, too."

"Vila, there are no monsters," Dayna's voice came through the intercom now. She sounded juvenile, too.

"Are so monsters," Vila argued back. "Two of them were in my room, uh, cabin just a few minutes ago. Horrible things."

"Vila, Avon and Cally were just in your cabin. They were your monsters!" Tarrant went on.

"Avon and Cally? No, they...monsters were here."

"Vila, this is Avon. What do you hear?"

"You see," Vila exclaimed. "One of the monsters is listening in. I can hear him growling."

"That was Avon, Vila," Tarrant explained. "He asked you a question. You answered it for him."

"It really was Avon?" Vila asked after a few seconds.

"Yes, Vila, it really was."

"What's going on? Why did I see...Oh, no. No, stay back, please stay back." The thief's scream sent everyone running from the flight deck toward his cabin.

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The door had been most effectively jammed by the thief. Even Zen's auto repair circuits were having trouble ascertaining the problem and remedying it. From within, Vila's screams were increasing.

"What the hell is in there?" Tarrant exclaimed.

"We don't know," Avon replied, his eyes darkening at the thief's cries.

"Whatever it is, we've got to destroy it before it kills Vila," Dayna stated.

"If it can be destroyed," Cally amended. "Avon the essence is..." The cries from within ceased abruptly, cutting her off.

"Call him, Tarrant," Avon ordered.

"Vila? Vila, it's Tarrant again. Can you hear me?"

-AUTO REPAIR CIRCUITS HAVE NOW REPAIRED LOCKING MECHANISM+ Zen announced, startling everyone. The door slid open.

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For an instant, all they could do was stare in horror at the carnage in the room. There was blood everywhere and yet no body. Where was Vila? What had happened to him? The door to the bathroom moved slightly, then a bit more until it was wide enough to allow a battered and slashed Vila Restal to slip through and fall to the floor.

Cally started forward immediately, but was stopped by Avon's quick grasp at her arm.

Something else was exiting the bathroom. A gleaming white shape which slithered across the thief's body towards them. There was no distinct outline or form to the

creature. Rather, it appeared like an immense amoeba, its nucleus pulsing a bright red as it moved towards them.

More food it sang aloud. ***More...*** It stopped. ***Food and yet not food.*** It turned itself slightly, looking as if it were studying first Vila, then the others. ***that one, food. Not much, though. Need more.***

"What is it talking about?" Dayna asked with a shudder. The creature immediately took a step towards her, then stopped again.

Food? It sounded almost pathetic in its query.

"Cally, can you communicate with it?"

"No, I've been trying since it first began speaking."

"What do we do, Avon?" Tarrant whispered.

Avon didn't have a clue, but one thing was for certain. They had to get Vila out of the cabin. "Cally, try to contact Vila."

To see if he is alive. Cally knew as she nodded. *Vila, can you hear me? Vila, it's Cally.*

The thief did not respond, but lay perfectly still. The creature, however, did. It slid back until it again covered the thief's body. A predator protecting its kill.

Stop, it snarled. ***My food, not yours.***

"It can receive your thoughts, it seems, Cally," Avon spoke up.

Leave our friend alone, Cally snapped.

Not friend, the creature returned with an equal mental fierceness. ***My food.***

He is not food, Cally persisted. *He is our friend. He is a human being. You are hunting him.*

The creature pulsed a little, sending a little aura of light over the thief's body.

Food not hurt. Go away. Mine!

"Damn it, Avon," Tarrant exclaimed. "We've got to do something."

"No one is stopping you, Tarrant," Avon replied. "If you have a suggestion, let's hear it."

"Please, no more!" Vila's anguished cry put an end to the argument and brought everyone's attention back to him. The creature had engulfed him again and tiny flashes of light struck the thief time and again, each one opening a new wound on his body.

"At least we know he's alive," Dayna murmured.

"So it would seem," Avon agreed. "But he won't be for long at the rate that thing is hacking at him."

"Avon, what about if one of us distracts it, while the rest grab Vila?"

Avon stared at Tarrant as if he were a total imbecile. "Are you that fond of suicide, Tarrant?"

"Of course not," the young man protested. "But it's a chance." He gestured to the thief, whose cries were growing weaker. "He hasn't much time left."

Indeed, Vila looked as if he were being physically diminished with each passing moment. His moans were barely audible.

Good food, the creature exclaimed in delight, slicing at the thief again and drawing a feeble groan.

Stop that, Cally demanded.

Go away. Find own food.

"Avon, it is a chance!" Tarrant insisted.

"A chance at getting yourself or one of us killed. No, Tarrant, I think not. Dayna, fetch ORAC. I need his assistance on this." Dayna sped off. "Cally, continue harassing the beast. Whatever you do, don't let him concentrate fully on Vila or it will finish him."

"Ah, good," he smiled as Dayna came hurrying up the corridor. "What kept you?"

"Avon!" Dayna all but dumped ORAC into Avon's arms.

"Gently, Dayna. Damage him and we're all finished." He activated the computer.

"ORAC, I've something for you to study."

Study? What are you... From the flickering of its lights, the computer had evidently detected the creature. **My word,** ORAC exclaimed. **Fascinating. Simply fascinating.**

"Avon, something's happening," Cally advised. "The creature is leaving Vila."

Indeed it was, but it was headed directly for them! ***Food?*** it called. ***Food?***

What? ORAC sputtered. **Most assuredly not.**

The being paused on the threshold, the nucleus swirling in a myriad of reds. ***Not food?***

Of course not, ORAC snapped back.

The creature gave an audible sigh and started back for Vila.

"ORAC, do something!" Tarrant exclaimed. "Keep it away from Vila!"

How exactly am I to do that? the computer demanded.

"What is it?" Avon snapped.

I...am not sure at this time. Further study...

"Time is of the essence," Avon advised coldly. "I want to know what it is and how to destroy it, ORAC. **Now!**"

I cannot comply with such a demand, ORAC retorted in an equally cold voice.

"You'll do it, ORAC," Dayna threatened, "Or we'll tell that little monster that you are 'food'."

ORAC sputtered and gasped at that but set about securing the information it needed. Meanwhile, the beast had returned to its 'food'. This time, there were no protests of any kind from Vila. The thief was either dying or very close to it.

"Come on, ORAC," Avon muttered. "Come on."

Very well, the computer announced. The creature which is currently occupying Vila Restal's cabin is a form of parasitic life.

"Tell us something we didn't already know," Dayna mumbled. "How do we kill it?"

My suggestion would be to use the vacuum of space. Seal the room and evacuate the air from it.

"Vila is in there, too," Cally protested.

Vila Restal's life signs are nearly extinguished, ORAC replied matter-of-factly. Once the creature has finished him, it will proceed to another of your party. The computer's lights flickered for a moment. Most interesting. The creature feeds on pain and fear, converting the emotions into actual protoplasm. This creates a new field of exploration to be dealt with.

"How do we kill it, ORAC?" Avon cracked.

I have already told you, the computer exclaimed.

"I think you had an excellent idea, Dayna," Avon went on. "Here, creature, here's more 'food'." He shoved ORAC quickly into the room.

Food! the beat cried happily and slid over and around ORAC.

Here now, I'm not food, the computer snapped and sent a violent electrical shock through the creature's membrane. That did nothing but excite it, however.

Good food, it told Avon. *Take old thing. Not good. All gone now.*

"Do we trust it?" Tarrant asked Avon.

"We don't have a choice, do we?" came the reply. Tarrant hurried into the room and pulled the thief over his shoulders and ran back out.

"The medical unit, Tarrant, quickly," Cally ordered.

Avon, meanwhile, sealed the cabin. "Zen, evacuate the air from Vila's cabin immediately.

-CONFIRMED.+

For a few brief moments, there was nothing, then a terrible keening began which nearly shattered Avon and Dayna's eardrums. The sound continued for several minutes, then gradually faded away.

"Do you think it's gone?" Dayna asked Avon.

+THE ONE CALLED ORAC WISHES TO ADVISE THAT HE IS GREATLY IRRITATED THAT YOU HAVE INTERRUPTED HIS STUDY OF THE PARASITE,+ Zen suddenly informed them.

"I'd say that means it's gone," Avon chuckled. "Pressurize the cabin, Zen."

-CONFIRMED.+

* * * * *

Vila was attached to every piece of life support the medical unit had when Avon and Dayna arrived. Cally and Tarrant were each engaged in trying to seal the countless bleeding holes in the thief's skin.

"How is he?"

"The wounds are not as severe as they appear," Cally advised, sealing yet another one. "The creature inflicted them to frighten and create pain, not serious injury."

"But he's lost a lot of blood," Tarrant went on. "Maybe too much, according to the med computer. It's trying to synthesise some now. Seems he's got a rare type."

-SYNTHESIS HAS COMMENCED,+ the med computer chose that moment to announce.

"How long before total collection is obtained?" Cally asked.

-TWENTY-THREE POINT FOUR MINUTES.+

"What about the creature?" Tarrant asked, yielding his place to Dayna.

"Dead, I assume, since ORAC was most displeased with my removing his prize specimen before he was finished with it."

"I don't understand, Avon, where did it come from? Why did it choose Vila?"

"I don't know, Tarrant, but I intend to find out. Cally, I'll be on the flight deck, questioning ORAC."

If it is his time, Avon, Vila will not be alone.

Avon held her eyes for a moment. *Was Vila really that close to death?* his gaze asked.

He is very weak, Avon. Very weak. I don't know if he can hold on long enough for the blood to strengthen him.

Avon dropped his gaze to the thief. Weak was an understatement. A piece of paper held more life than Vila appeared to. "The life support will keep him alive, Cally. The rest is up to Vila."

She nodded, knowing that his words were true. If the thief wished to live, he would not yield to Death. But at the same time, she sensed an overpowering weariness coming from Vila. He was tired of fighting, tired of running. Perhaps tired of living as well. The Auron shook her head slightly. No, such thoughts were nonsense. Or at least she hoped they were.

"Cally, if there's nothing more?" Tarrant asked.

"No," she said quietly. "Dayna can help me finish up. Thank you."

"Then I'll join Avon. I want to find out where that creature came from, too."

* * * * *

"That's got them all, Cally," Dayna advised. "What a mess. Once that synthetic flesh starts growing, he'll be scratching everywhere." Dayna smiled mischievously. "That should be fun."

Cally managed a wan smile in return. "He won't think so."

Dayna reached over and squeezed her hand. "Don't worry, Cally. Vila's a survivor. Avon told me that. He'd have to be to survive the Delta Dome. My father told me about them and the horrible things that went on in there." Dayna shivered. "Made the Saurons look civilized by comparison."

"Vila has never spoken much about his life there, but I have sensed his pain at times. There are things he will not share with anyone."

"Avon's like that, too," Dayna stated.

"I know. He keeps too much inside."

"I wish Vila would do that. His complaining drives me crazy sometimes."

"Only sometimes?" Cally teased. "I wonder how Vila would react if Avon began complaining as he does?"

Dayna rolled her eyes at the thought of it. "It'd be hell to pay and back for anyone who heard them."

"But it might be worth it," Cally chuckled.

"It might at that," Dayna agreed with a grin. "It might at that."

* * * * *

ORAC was none-the-worse for wear after his experiences with the alien life form, though he was in very bad humour when Avon removed him from Vila's cabin. There was no sign of the alien. It had been destroyed exactly as ORAC had said it would be.

I find it extremely distasteful that you should have placed my person in such a hazardous situation, ORAC snapped at Avon.

"It can't have been any worse than what that creature thought when it tried to devour you," Tarrant laughed.

Devour is not what it intended to do, ORAC sputtered. **Rather, it sought to frighten me. Hah, the very thought of such a thing.**

"Were you frightened, ORAC?" Avon asked, curious.

Of course not.

"Then why did you object so strongly to my placing you inside the cabin?"

I had no idea of your intentions at the time.

"Meaning you were worried and perhaps a little scared when he did it," Tarrant furnished.

Fear and worry are terms which have no possible basis for existence with myself. Now kindly leave me alone.

"Not quite yet, ORAC," Avon smiled. "We need to know what that thing was and if there are others yet about."

Others? For a computer incapable of fear, ORAC had a touch of hysteria in his voice. **Oh, others,** he repeated a few seconds later, sounding more secure. **I do not believe that possible. The parasite was bisexual in nature. No others were needed to propagate its species.**

"Its origin, ORAC," Tarrant pressed.

No doubt the planet Keezarn, the computer went on.

"If that were true," Avon replied, "why weren't the rest of us infected as well? We were all down there."

As to that, I have no immediate answer. That should require further study of the parasite, which is no longer possible. ORAC still sounded upset about that.

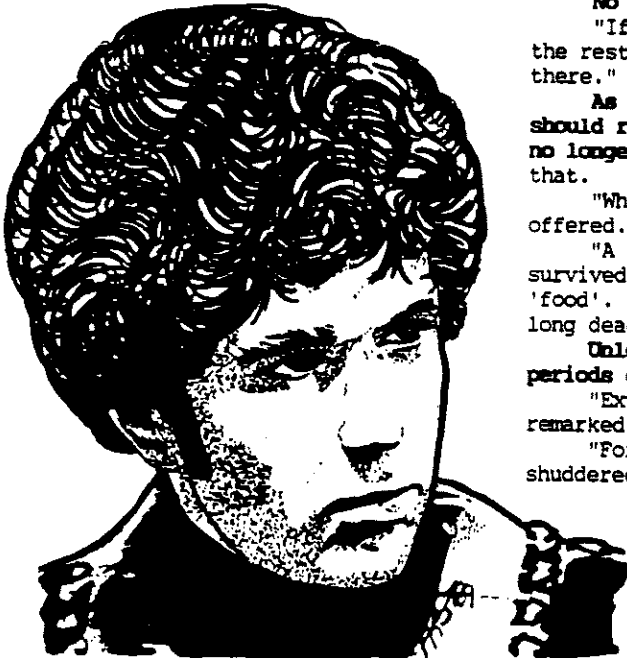
"What about the ship Vila found, Avon?" Tarrant offered. "The one with the transmat mechanism?"

"A possibility, though for the parasite to have survived there, it would have required a source of 'food'. Vila said the only beings on the ship were long dead."

Unless it was capable of hibernation over long periods of time, ORAC interjected.

"Extremely long periods of time, ORAC," Avon remarked. "There is always the planet Vila found."

"For their sake and Vila's, I hope not," Tarrant shuddered.



Avon did too, mentally. "Let us proceed on the principle that the parasite came from the ship. And that it had some type of hibernation. Why didn't it infect the woman with Vila?"

I can only theorize, ORAC advised.

"Then do so," Avon ordered.

Vila Restal is a human of unstable emotions. It is entirely possible that the parasite sensed this.

"Very probably," Tarrant agreed. "Vila was no doubt extremely nervous when he found himself on a ship a million or so light years away."

Avon nodded. "And having identified its target, it broke its hibernation and invaded him?"

Yes, and began its growth toward adulthood, its development causing the behavioral changes in its host.

"I don't believe it," Tarrant said, shaking his head. "How could something that small affect a person's mind?"

"A virus is small, Tarrant, and look what it can do," Avon pointed out. "And if I'm not mistaken, there have been documented cases where chemical discharges from certain insects have created temporary euphoria in their victims."

Tarrant stared at him in surprise, then thought about it a few minutes before saying anything. "But Vila was not euphoric, he was hallucinating."

"As the creature wanted him to," Avon reminded Tarrant. "It needed his fear and pain to feed upon. Different needs bred by different creatures."

"Well, it got more than enough of that from him," Tarrant replied grimly.

"Yes, it did." Avon punched up the medical unit. It had been an hour since he and Tarrant had left there.

"Dayna."

"Where is Cally?"

"She's busy right now, Avon. Is it important?"

"Has Vila come round yet?"

"No, but he looks better than he did. The med computer says it's still too early to tell, though."

"When Cally is finished, have her call me."

"Right."

* * * * *

Cally was very busy indeed, using every ounce of her telepathic ability to try to counter the horrible effects the creature had had on Vila. Since they had finished the treatment of his physical injuries, the Auron had been sending reassurances of safety to Vila. For a while it had seemed he had not heard them, but now Cally felt certain he had. Vila had merely been too frightened to acknowledge them.

"Cally, you have to rest or you'll collapse yourself," Dayna scolded. "Here, drink this."

Cally took a taste, and recognized it immediately. A vitamin mixture which she had prepared herself on several occasions when the others had needed a boost in energy. She downed it and handed the empty glass back. "Thank you, Dayna."

"Do you think he heard you?"

"I think so. His color is much better and there is less tension in his body. Yes, Dayna, I think he heard me."

Dayna smiled at the relief in Cally's voice. "Avon called. He's worried about him, too, though he didn't exactly say that."

Cally smiled. "I think it would kill both of them if they admitted how much they liked each other."

"Me too." Dayna yawned.

"You are tired, Dayna. Why don't you get some sleep?"

"You need it more than I do," Dayna quickly protested. "You should see the rings around your eyes."

"Telepathy is not an easy thing for me, Dayna," Cally sighed. "Zelda has always been far stronger than I."

"Is she really your exact twin?"

Cally nodded.

"Dayna, is Cally still busy?" There was a slight note of irritation in Avon's voice. Cally and Dayna looked at each other and suddenly giggled.

"What is it, Avon?" Cally answered, smothering her mirth.

"I wondered if the med computer had found anything in Vila's blood samples. ORAC believes the hallucinations were caused by chemical discharges into his system."

+THERE ARE FAINT TRACES OF SUCH IN THE SUBJECT'S BLOOD+ the med computer confirmed upon questioning.

"How's Vila, Cally?" It was Tarrant.

"Improving, Tarrant," the Auron advised.

"That's good," Tarrant replied, sounding very glad indeed.

Perhaps he still blamed himself for what had almost happened on Keezarn, Cally thought to herself. "Anything else, Avon?"

"No," came the reply, then the click of the intercom being closed down.

"Just once," Dayna ventured, "just once I'd like to see him act worried about someone."

"And have him appear human to us?" Cally chuckled. "No, that would never do." She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to relax and let the vitamin mixture do its work. But it didn't seem to help. She still felt very tired. The Auron swayed slightly.

"That does it, Cally. Off you go to your cabin this instant!" Dayna ordered.

Cally started to protest, then stopped. "You know, you do a very good imitation of Avon."

Dayna grinned at her. "Thank you very much. Now go!"

"Yes, Avon," Cally laughed back. "If Vila comes around..."

"I'll let you know."

* * * * *

The monsters were all gone, the woman's voice had reassured him countless times. It was safe for him now. Everyone was all right and he would be too. But Vila was afraid to come out of his hiding place. It had always sheltered him before, kept him safe from the Federation torturers who had tormented his poor body with their devices and narcotics. How did he know he wasn't back in their clutches? How did he know that being with Blake and Avon had even happened at all? Maybe somehow they had broken through his non-conditioning and had been playing with his mind.

There had been one occasion when they had nearly succeeded in doing just that. He had been nine at the time, caught pinching an Alpha's identification pass. They had taken him to a special building in the Delta Dome, one from which few Deltas ever returned. The horrors they had inflicted on him still haunted his dreams sometimes.

On the verge of breaking both Vila's mind and body, the psycho-therapists suddenly came up against a wall as solid as anything physically built. They had battered at it with electronics and sound, doused it with chemicals and narcotics, tried everything they could come up with, including several experimental techniques, and failed.

But they did not admit defeat easily. Unable to condition him, they did the next best thing, they sentenced him to three years treatment in the Andros Clinic for the Criminally Insane. The wall served to protect his mind but not his body as the youngster was beaten and attacked by both personnel and his fellow prisoners. By the time his term was up, there was nothing left of his innocence and very little left of his spirit. He crept and scurried about after his release, ducking if anyone so much as lifted a hand. He heard and saw everything. That had saved Vila's life on more than one occasion in the Sanitarium and he used it well on the outside. Or rather, had used it until Blake had appeared on the scene.

Was Blake a real person? he wondered. Was Avon one too? Not that Avon ever pretended to be a human being. The thief laughed. Avon was almost as great a pretender as Vila was. Pretending to be so hard and unyielding. While I am the timid, easily terrified coward. Well, it beat charging headlong into battle like Tarrant and Dayna always seemed anxious to do. Youthful idiots, the pair of them.

And Cally? Well now, she was different. A very nice, very lovely lady for all she was an alien. She certainly didn't look all that different from the other human women he had encountered, and he had encountered quite a few in his time. Vila smiled to himself. Quite a few. No, Cally was a special to him as...as Kerril had been. That is, if Kerril had been real at all. Once again he grew afraid. Was this all just some illusion of the Federation's? Was his safe haven an illusion also? Was he an illusion? Vila didn't know, just hugged himself tighter. He hoped it wasn't all some dream. He had never felt as safe as he had with Blake, for all he had complained constantly of the risks Blake was taking. Blake would never leave any of his people behind. Look how he had gone back to rescue Cally. Vila knew that Blake would have done the very same thing had it been the thief or Avon or any of them. Blake cared for all of them. Or rather, had cared for them.

And yet, if that were true, why hadn't he tried to contact any of them? It had been almost a year since Star One. Where was Blake? Vila wondered. Was he dead? Or a prisoner of the Federation? No, Servalan would have announced that and used him as bait to get **Liberator**. Maybe the Andromedans had gotten him. Vila shivered. He hoped not. They didn't seem like nice aliens at all, after what Avon had said they did to those technicians on Star One. But if Blake wasn't a prisoner and he wasn't dead, where was he?

Vila sighed deeply. It was all very well to be safe here in his haven but it was also very lonely, especially since Cally had left. That it had been her voice reassuring him, he had known but chosen to ignore, still too frightened to respond to her. *I wonder what she is doing now. Maybe if I do just a quick reconnoiter and then hurry back here. It will be all right.* A small part of him shook with fear but he shushed it, promising everything would be all right. He was only just going outside for a second and would be right back.

The thief opened to door a crack and peered out. There were no more monsters that he

could see, only the pulsing grey mist which he recognized as his mind. Nothing moved in it, no flashes of anything harmful. No, it seemed he was alone. He took a step outside, looked about and heard voices talking in the distance.

* * * * *

"Avon, you needn't have come," Cally murmured. "He's in normal sleep now according to the med computer."

"Normal sleep but not awake, Cally," Avon countered. "A brain damaged idiot can have normal sleep."

"Vila suffered no such damage," the Auron reassured him, suddenly realizing what Avon was afraid to say. "The chemical traces were all but gone when the med computer first checked him."

"Having been bled out of him, no doubt," Avon growled.

Cally nodded. "His blood count is up now. Everything is beginning to return to normal."

"Except he's not regained consciousness, damn it." Avon didn't need to shout to make his concern known.

Avon, Vila is a survivor. He survived the Federation's toys, he will survive this.

Avon blinked at her silent words. "Let us hope so." He paused, studying her a moment. "You've been using your telepathy on him?"

"Yes. I think it helped him when he needed it most. How did you know?"

Avon smiled faintly. "It drains you quite a bit, using it on humans. I can tell by your eyes."

"Dark, horrible rings, Dayna said. Are they still there?"

"Barely, but still visible if one looks closely enough."

"As you are looking now, Avon?"

He caught himself walking towards her and stopped. "I'll send Tarrant to relieve you," Avon advised and left.

Cally smiled. *Too bad, Dayna, she thought to herself, you just missed your chance to see him as he really is.*

* * * * *

Vila paused, listening to the voices. It could not be, but it was. Avon sounded very worried about him. Very worried. And he was clearly indicating it to Cally. She might be an alien, but she had been around humans long enough to recognize such an emotion.

Avon never had revealed any part of himself to anyone but Vila, and then it had been but a very brief flash. That time when they had robbed Freedom City. What fun that had been! At least up until Vila had been drugged and then duped into playing chess. It was very good luck that Avon had been with him or else he would have been one very dead thief. When they had planned the escapade and then when they'd hurriedly teleported back aboard, both he and Avon had been closer than ever before. Fellow thieves as it were. Vila grinned to himself.

He heard Cally say something which clearly made Avon pause before he answered. Then his answer had been pure evasion.

Trying to proposition him, are you, Cally? the thief wondered. No, not Cally. She wouldn't have to do that to any of the men aboard. A friendly gesture and any one of the men would be happy to hop in her bed. At least Vila would know he would be. Except for one thing. Cally obviously preferred that someone to be Avon.

Vila sighed again. Such a waste and Vila was sure he could show Cally a few tricks and she could do likewise for him. Oh well.

Vila, it is safe now. The monsters are all gone.

I know that, Cally, the thief thought. He turned about and looked at his haven of safety. It was battered and dark with stains, but it still held strong. The little piece of himself he'd left inside pleaded for him to come back.

No, he told it. *Time to get on with living again. Hopefully not dying. Tarrant won't even get me to do his bidding again,* Vila swore. Then again, that affair hadn't been totally wasted. He had met Kerril and discovered a new world and helped a whole civilization survive. And he had single-handedly eliminated the Federation's No. 2 criminal--Bayban the Butcher. Surely that meant something to someone somewhere. All he had to do was find the right someone to tell it to.

Vila, you are safe. It is all right now. You may come home now.

I'm coming, Cally, he called out to the grey mist. *I'm coming.*

* * * * *

Vila Restal opened his eyes and managed a lop-sided smile at Cally. Had he really been that far gone, he wondered. He felt very weak and when he tried to talk, the result was simply horrid.

"Slowly, Vila," Cally soothed, holding a glass of something pink to his lips. He



sipped it and made a face. "I know, you hate vitamin mixtures, but your body needs this. Drink it all." She spoke quite sternly and he obeyed.

"Ugh," he managed to get out after the liquid had cleared his throat. "Could have put some soma in it or something to deaden the taste."

"Don't be silly." She stepped to the intercom. "Vila is awake, Avon."

"So are the rest of us," Avon answered after a moment. "Tell me something I am not aware of."

"Avon!" Dayna said in the background in an exasperated tone. "Vila, welcome back."

The thief smiled at Cally, who smiled right back. He had been right about her. Alien she might be but she could read Avon almost as well as he could.

"He says thanks, Dayna," Cally relayed for the thief, whose throat still was resisting any loud speech.

"Take it easy for a while," Tarrant advised. "Get your strength back."

The look Vila gave Cally was a questioning one.

He was worried about you, too, Vila. To Tarrant, she answered, "He intends on it."

"I'll bet he is," Tarrant laughed.

"I suppose he expects to hear something similar from me," Avon announced.

"Avon, he has been through a great deal," Cally replied.

"Haven't we all?" Avon retorted. The intercom clicked off.

Vila wanted to laugh, but his throat would not permit it. In fact, the giggle he settled for nearly choked him to death.

"Rest is what you need, Vila," Cally advised, serving him another cup of the pink stuff. "That and plenty of fluids."

"But no soma?" he whispered with pleading eyes.

"No soma."

He knew he would have to be content with that, especially since she was reaching for another glass of that vitamin mixture. He managed to down it, then was told to go back to sleep. "Bully," he muttered half-heartedly, then closed his eyes.

* * * * *

Avon stopped by on his way to his cabin, appearing tired but relieved at the thief's recovery. Or at least that was what Cally thought.

"A few days rest, Avon," the Auron advised quietly, "and he'll be back to normal."

"Vila has never been normal for all the time I've known him, Cally," Avon said quietly, but there was a hint of a smile about his lips.

"Must you always pick on him?" Cally inquired.

Avon's smile vanished. "I do not 'pick on him'."

"Do so," mumbled a voice from the general direction of one Vila Restal.

Cally nearly burst into laughter at the quickly concealed look of surprised on Avon's face.

"And how long have you been awake?" Avon demanded.

"Not long," Vila replied hastily. "Avon, what was that thing, anyway?"

"A parasite you picked up somewhere."

"A what?"

"Avon, maybe you should wait before telling him," Cally said.

"He asked for an explanation, Cally," Avon pointed out.

"And I want one," Vila seconded.

"Very well," the Auron conceded. "I'll be in my cabin."

"She always seems to know when a person wants to be alone," Vila stated.

"Yes, she does," Avon agreed. "Now, as far as ORAC can ascertain..."

An hour later, a frightened, angry and very confused Vila Restal lay staring at Avon in utter shock.

"So you're saying this...this bug liked my looks and jumped in me?"

"Crudely put, but yes, Vila, that's exactly what I'm saying."

Vila shivered. "How horrible."

"Yes, I imagine it was." And since Avon felt like teasing the thief, he added something more. "With one type of parasite finding you so attractive, it's entirely possible that others might as well."

"You didn't have to tell me that, Avon," Vila exclaimed. "I'm not going downworld for anything any more."

"What a pity," Avon replied with a faint twinkle in his eye. "Tarrant and I had some business to transact in Space City. I had hoped you might want to accompany us."

"Space City, why that's..." Vila stared at him a moment, then smiled. "Maybe I'll postpone my quarantine until after Space City."

"I wouldn't want to force you into anything," Avon advised with a straight face.

"Oh, you're not, Avon." The thief flexed his fingers in anticipation. "You're not."

AVON'S THOUGHTS ON SHERVALAN
by Melissa Mastoris

Now that I'm all alone
With no one left even to care
Whether I live or die,
I lie in my cold, lonely cell
And I think of you.

You are all that I despise.
A vision of what I could become
If I let you corrupt me
And drag me down with you
Into the dark abyss of your world.

You are all that I admire,
Depending on no one but yourself
Not taking anything on trust
There is no limit to what you will do,
And you succeed no matter what.

You are all that I desire
With your soft lips against mine
And your husky voice in my ear
Promising me the entire universe
As if it was yours to give.

Your caresses draw blood,
But they leave me wanting more
And cursing myself for it.
Even though you've hurt me so much,
I keep coming back to you.

And now, at the moment of my execution,
I wonder if you cared for me.
Was I just a stepping stone
In your rise to power?
Or did I mean something to you?

I like to think that I did,
Maybe...just a little...