THE MARKET WAS ENTERTAINING.

Brightly coloured, noisy; strange smells of spices, perfumes, roasting meats drifted on the air: in a chequered square gaily clad dancers whirled and stamped to the sound of odd instruments pounding out a lively tune. There was a long straight stretch of rough wooden stalls, offering a variety of wares: being easily recognisable as offworlders they were heralded on all sides by persuasive entreaties to buy.

“A ribbon-favour for your lady, my lord.”
“Sweets for the fairing, lady.”
“Baubets to make you beautiful for him, sen’chik.”

This last from a plump lady with bracelets from her wrists to her elbows: she drew one off as Vila passed beneath the canopies and held it out to him.

“Look at the craftsmanship, sen’chik.”

Vila slowed down, glanced, stopped. It was beautiful, silver tooled with copper, an intricate design of black-eyed snakes entwining.

“Perhaps your lord will buy it for you,” she said with a twinkle at Avon who had turned to see what was delaying Vila. “Bed-naked, save for yon wristlet, what a sweet sight he’d be for you: and a special price for lovers, walking together on a sunny day.”

Vila was nearly choking with indignation. He was tired of everyone here assuming he was Avon’s sexual plaything. (Why didn’t anyone ever assume the reverse? That really annoyed Vila.)

“How much?” he asked, because he did like the bracelet: but the price she named was more than he had.

Avon reached over and plucked it from his fingers, examining it.

“You like pretty things too much, Vila.”

Why else would I be here with you?” Vila returned smartly, and favoured Avon’s slanting look with an innocent smile. “Yes, it’s always been my problem,” he said to the would-be vendor. “Ever since I was a child, I’ve always had this great love for beauty. Sensitive, that’s what I am, and artistic. I need to have beauty around me. Look at it in that light, and you can see it’s hardly my fault that I’m a—”

Avon cut into this flow just in time. He had spotted something else on the stall.

“May I?”

He extended one hand for it, with that elegance of gesture innate in him. Cross at having been interrupted, Vila spared it hardly a glance: but then his head whipped back and he stared.

Vila’s life changed forever.

The object was a glass pyramid, perfectly planed and completely flawless. As Avon turned it gently in his fingers it caught different colours and glittered, metamorphosing the tawdry yellow of the woman’s dress into soft sparkling sunlight, and the blue of the sky into the most delicate shade of turquoise. Avon’s attention was complete: he was absorbed in his study of it and perfectly still.

“It’s beautiful,” Vila breathed, his hand stealing out towards it. Without seeming to move, Avon kept it just out of his reach.

“And how much,” Avon asked in his mellifluous, cultured voice, “would you be asking for this?”

Eyes crafty, she named another price. Avon offered much less. Eventually they reached a price which suited both of them, and Avon handed over coins from an inner pocket. Vila watched the transaction hungrily, eyes following every movement of Avon’s precise stashing away of the pyramid in a pouch he carried. When it was finally out of his view he sighed, shaking his head, snapping out of the spell the little glass trinket had cast.

“Would you like the bracelet,” Avon murmured into his ear.

“Avon.” Vila could hardly believe his luck. Avon gave the woman more money and she handed over the bangle with a broad beam, adding a benediction—and expressing a hope for the coming night so crude Vila’s ears burned.

Long fingers touched his hand as Avon slipped the coveted bracelet over his wrist: dark eyes gleamed a mocking smile. “There.” Avon
turned and began to walk on. Vila followed hastily, turning the pretty bracelet round and round on his arm.

At the agreed point of meeting Avon drew the pyramid out of his pocket and examined it.

The spell fell back on Vila: he forgot the bracelet he had been happily fingering and stared and stared. He stepped forward, one hand outstretched. “Can I—”

And as before, Avon easily evaded his grasp. He was looking through the crystal to examine its refracted images, eyes half closed in concentration.

“I wonder if she knew what this is. Probably not, or she would never have sold it for such a price. Or,” Avon mused, “for any price at all.”

Vila considered the price Avon had paid quite exorbitant: but then again, as Avon said, it did seem a paltry sum for so ravishing an artefact.

“It’s beautiful,” he said again.

Avon’s eyes lifted to his, studied him curiously.

“Don’t you know what it is?” he asked distantly.

“It’s a glass pyramid.”

Avon’s disconcerting smile briefly curved his lips. He closed his fingers tight upon it and spirited it away into some inner recess of his jacket.

“Is that what you think.”

“Isn’t it?” Vila searched Avon’s body with sharp thief’s eyes, looking for the place of concealment.

At that moment Dayna appeared, big-eyed with indignation, several feet ahead of a grinning Tarrant.

“Let’s go. This is the most archaic society: everyone we meet assumes I’m his bedmate,” she said, jerking a glance behind and positively snapping with fury.

Vila groaned in empathy. “Don’t tell me. I know.”

“What have you got there, Avon?” Tarrant spotted the glint as Avon emptied the pouch; and Avon turned his hand so that it was palm upwards. The little glass pyramid sat there, throwing out glinting rays of light which cast strange flickers on the walls. Seeing it, Vila felt again a sharp pang of utter yearning; a pit of loneliness and emptiness yawning wide within himself.

The others gathered round to look, their own purchases temporarily forgotten.

Tarrant’s expression was sharp with recognition: there was also a touch of accusatory fear in the way he looked up into Avon’s face.

“You shouldn’t have brought that thing here.
It’s dangerous.”

“What is it?” Dayna asked.

Cally’s eyes didn’t leave Avon’s face. Avon was looking only at Tarrant: he seemed slightly amused.

“I can control it.”

“Control it!” Tarrant exploded. “I don’t believe you.”

Avon tipped his head a little to one side. Absently, his thumb caressed the smooth glass surface of one triangular plane. The pyramid seemed all shades of soft green now. Avon’s eyes narrowed watching it, as he replied to Tarrant.

“Whatever you believe, Tarrant, won’t alter the truth.”

“But what is it?” Dayna asked again, half fascinated and half strangely repelled, but unable to tear her eyes away. She was again ignored.

“You know they’re dangerous,” Tarrant reiterated. “What’s your psi rating, Avon?” The question was uttered as a challenge rather than a quest for knowledge.

Avon’s teeth showed in a little, feral smile. “Point five,” he answered. The glitter of his eyes was definitely amused now as he surveyed his questioner.

“Point—” Tarrant was aghast. He stared at Avon as if he had never seen him before. “But that would make you at least an overlord.”

“Precisely,” Avon said, black eyes lit with gleaming. His fingers snapped shut around the pyramid, shutting off its light.

Vila blinked as if waking up. He edged a little closer to Avon. Tarrant was still staring at him with a mixture of reactions: wariness and distrust seemed most prominent.

“But as it happens,” Avon added, “I am not a practitioner.” His head turned towards Vila who was so close he was practically touching him. “Hello, Vila,” he said with a complete change of tone, almost amiable: “Is it my charm? Or were you, by any chance, thinking about picking my pocket?”

Vila jumped back. For a second, he looked shifty.
“If someone doesn’t tell me what’s going on,” Dayna interrupted, “Then I could get very nasty indeed.” She shoved her hand out at Avon. Surprisingly, he relinquished the pyramid to her.

As she took it, she fumbled with it: it dropped from her fingers. Avon leapt for it, but Vila was quicker. With a soft, incoherent cry he had dived at the ground and caught the falling prism. Crouching there, he cradled it to his chest protectively. He was experiencing an intense reaction to this his first sweet toughing of it: its cool weight, the hard cool sharpness of its planed surfaces. He wanted to rape it with contact, roll it over and over against his skin. He wanted to put it into his mouth.

Avon was watching him with curiosity. He dropped to his heels beside Vila, surveying the little thief intently.

“Well now,” he murmured, “that’s interesting.” He extended a hand, plucked the pyramid from Vila’s fingers, disregarding the whimper of protest torn from Vila as he was bereft of it.

“It’s very interesting,” Avon said again, and his eyes travelled over Vila with faintly malicious speculation, “that it should be you.” He didn’t say anything more, yet his statement had seemed vaguely unfinished. He continued to look at Vila.

Dayna flopped loudly into a chair, breaking the spell weaving between Avon’s dark eyes and Vila’s entranced ones. She examined her fingers curiously.

“I felt as if it gave me an electric shock. I don’t like it, Avon. It’s evil.” She shuddered.

“What is it, Avon,” Cally asked. “I would like to know.”

Avon awoke, dragged his eyes away from Vila and pulled himself gracefully to his feet.

“It isn’t evil,” he said, answering Dayna. “Nor is it good.” He set the pyramid down on a low table. One side of it looked green, two blue; and the peak shone transparent gold. “It is not one thing or another. It just is.”

“Do you mean it’s a life form?” Cally asked. “Not as we conceive ‘life’ to be.”

“Avon’s trying to blind you with rhetoric,” Tarrant said to the others with a sneer. “He doesn’t want to tell you what it is, because he knows you won’t like it. Isn’t that right, Avon?”

“It’s odd,” Avon mused silkily, “that you seem to know so much about me.” His gaze locked with Tarrant’s and said the opposite. Never in the lifetime of the Universe, Avon’s mocking black gaze seemed to avow, will you ever know me or anything about me. Never.

Tarrant retreated into attack, pointing a stabbing finger at the Voysian artefact on the table.

“That, my friends, is an Enchanter’s Lodestone. A nasty little power focus used by black magicians to arrange flashy special effects. Some say,” he directed a dark look at Avon, “much worse.”

Dayna screwed up her face. “Sounds horrible. Get rid of it, Avon.”

“It isn’t a lodestone,” Avon said. “Its real name is far older than that. Psebulen.”

Avon held it up to the light, “—is pure.”

“It must be worth a small fortune,” Tarrant said, diverted from his misgivings.

“Perhaps,” Avon said unmoved, “but I shan’t be putting it up for sale.” Again he vanished it into a pocket. Vila’s wide, unblinking gaze watched it go.

“That’s a pretty bracelet, Vila,” Cally said, and he held it out for examination.

But this time he did not forget.

Avon was in the rec-room, pushing around the pieces of a logic puzzle in a manner which looked haphazard but was in fact rigidly patterned. Vila approached him, edging nervously sideways like a crab: he coughed once or twice and generally just hung around until Avon should notice him.

“What is it, Vila,” came Avon’s voice.

“Nothing,” Vila said, agitated and restless: he was practically hopping from foot to foot. “That is, if you’ve got the time…”

“Oh, I think I can make the time,” Avon said, adding as he lifted his eyes to Vila, “for you.”

Avon had been behaving very strangely to him for a few days; ever since they had come back from the Voysian market, in fact. The tone he had used to Vila just now was almost—seduc-
tive, his dark eyes lingering on the other man. But Vila was living in another world; he noticed the strangeness in Avon and yet it was nothing to the strangeness in himself.

“The Psebulen,” he said all in a rush. “What have you—”

“It’s quite safe.” Avon waited.

Vila fidgeted. “Well. I was wondering. Could I…?”

“And I thought it was my company you wanted,” Avon said, with sweet sarcasm.

“Just let me see it. Just for ten minutes.” Vila heard the desperation in his own voice and did not heed it, carrying on, “Five minutes. I’ll give you something. Anything you want.”

Avon’s eyebrow lifted. “Now there’s an offer.”

“Please, Avon,” he pleaded.

But Avon turned him down and he had to go away empty-handed, a sick yearning deep inside for something he had never even dreamed of, although that was soon to change.

There was, of course, another course of action open to him.

Vila thumbed the lock on the door unit with a lightning movement and then just leaned against it for a moment, panting. Presently, when he was sure there was no pursuit, he unclutched his precious handful, bringing it out from where he had been pressing it against his chest.

The pyramid shone clear purple and blue and green to Vila’s entranced eyes as he held it up to the light. Trembling with the thrill of possession, he stood there holding it for a very long time.

It couldn’t last. He knew that, of course. As he turned it in his hand and admired it glowing all over with a soft green light, the door opened and Avon slipped through.

Vila jumped guiltily. His heart skipped a beat, then resumed, very fast.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that, Avon,” he complained when he got his breath back. “You scared me.”

“You have something of mine, I believe,” Avon said.

Slowly Vila extended the heavy little object towards Avon. As Avon took it, the pain of losing it wrenched at him like a physical force. He stared at the dark man in mute despair, but Avon left without a word: and it did not even penetrate Vila’s consciousness that he had stolen something from Avon—stolen something from Avon—and been lucky indeed to escape so lightly.

The second time he stole it he had longer. Sitting cross-legged on his bed with the pyramid set in front of him, he devoured it raptly and intently with his eyes.

Viewed from above it appeared complex, an emerald labyrinth of geometric planes and angles in different shades of green, reflecting endless diamonds and cubes up at him. In contrast, help up to the light it appeared to be clear glass: yet with the magical effect of prismatically edging everything viewed through it with a border of merging colours, soft rainbow fire. Other views and effects weaved their spells on Vila as he turned it different ways; he found it completely absorbing, satisfying to every sense.

He thought he’d never tire of touching it, running his fingertips greedily over its glassy smoothness. He brought it to his mouth and touched the sharp point to his tongue, then sucked the cool tip experimentally. Smiling with doped ecstasy, he held it up.

And nearly jumped out of his skin. Dark and hard and unmoving, Avon’s face blazed out at him from every planed surface.

“Avon,” he got out. “One of these days you’re going to scare me into an early death.”

“One of these days,” Avon returned equably, “I may teach you the difference between your property—and mine.” He moved round in front of Vila and retrieved the Psebulen from Vila’s unresisting grasp, without looking at it.

“It seems to fascinate you,” he said. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” Vila said, then added: “You know me, Avon. If it’s worth stealing, then I steal it.”

“Is that all it is?” Avon said, and Vila fancied he saw a hint of disappoint there: “Acquisitiveness for something which is valuable?”

Vila shook his head. “No, it’s more than that, I—” He looked away. “I can’t explain it. I just can’t, Avon. But anyway—” He stopped.

“Anyway?” Avon prompted. He passed the little pyramid from hand to hand, weighing it.

“Anyway,” Vila said in a rush, before he could change his mind, “you keep saying it’s yours.
Well, I don’t think it’s yours. I don’t think anyone could own it. And I think you know that too. In any case, if it’s so very much yours, why is it me it keeps calling to?”

His eyes met Avon in defiance, head held high.

After a moment, Avon smiled.

“Well now, Vila,” he said softly. “You see too much for me to keep secrets from you. And that makes you—”

The moment seemed timeless, even precious. Vila could not tear his eyes away from Avon’s: they seemed darker and richer and deeper than he had ever seen them before.

“That makes me—?” he managed, short of breath.

“—dangerous,” Avon said. “Very, very dangerous.”

Then he seemed to come to some sort of a decision. He held out the pyramid.

“All right,” he said, as if answering a question. Vila looked at the Psebulen, then at Avon. He made no move to take it.

“What—?”

Avon smiled at him again. Avon’s smiles, Vila thought, were not things of reassurance and comfort. On the contrary, it was when he smiled that it became time to run.

But Vila couldn’t run and didn’t want to.

“There’s only one way,” Avon said, “to stop so gifted a thief from taking what he wants.” The compliment was graceful and delivered with courtesy. “It’s yours. Have it.”

Vila stared. “Avon— I can’t—”

“Why not?” Avon said, and this time he looked genuinely amused, edging in with delicate irony: “No such reticence seems to have troubled you before?”

Heart pounding, he had to step very close to Avon in order to take the pyramid. He was trembling with the impossible joy of ownership; he was also, he realised, for some reason strongly sexually aroused, his nipples brushing sweetly against the soft silk of his shirt as he leaned forward. He shivered violently. His hand touched Avon’s as he took possession of the desired Psebulen.

“Thank you. Thank you, Avon, I—”

“There’s no need,” Avon murmured, eyes fixed intently on Vila, “to thank me.” He moved towards the door. Vila’s head dropped immediately to examine his treasure. He still could not grasp the astounding fact: Avon had given him the Psebulen, it was his to keep.

“Remember one thing,” Avon said from the door. “You think you want it. But, actually—”

Vila was anxious for Avon to go. “What?”

“—it wants you,” Avon completed, and this time he did not smile.

“Don’t disappear,” Avon said to the slinking wraith he discerned ahead of him darting into a recess. His steps unhurried, he followed Vila’s path and came across the little thief huddled against a wall.

“Why are you avoiding me?” he asked, eyes direct and hard. Vila looked tired, deep shadows under his eyes; but he essayed a weak smile at Avon.

“I’m not,” he tried hopefully.

Avon let that go without comment, much to Vila’s relief. “And the Psebulen? Are you looking after it?”

“Oh yes,” Vila said. He cast his eyes around, looking anywhere but at Avon’s face. “It’s very nice.” Conscious of inadequacy, “I—I look at it quite a lot,” he finished lamely.

Avon was subjecting him to an intense scrutiny. “Is something worrying you?”

Vila jerked as if he’d been punched from behind. He looked up guiltily. “No. Why should there be? I’d better go now, Avon. Cally, er Dayna, sent me to—get something.” He tried to slip under Avon’s arm but Avon restrained him.

“You’re lying to me, Vila.”

Yes, he was.

Vila wasn’t all right, at all.

It was the dreams: night after night, asleep and yet strangely awake he would tangle himself sweatily in bedding and fight, bravely and persistently, but the ending was always the same.

So too the beginning: as soon, it seemed, as he closed his eyes Avon’s were there, staring into his mind’s eye, pinning him; orbs like midnight opals growing larger and larger, holding him trapped in the wide dark sweep of them. And then Avon’s voice would sound in his ears, magical and musical, melting him hypnotically so that his senses spun dizzily; and he would look up from the puddled sprawl he had become to see Avon, about to kill him. Avon smiling, cradling a gun to his chest, which he
would slowly raise and aim, so Vila was forced
to stare up the black barrel, between Avon’s
dark, wicked eyes. And as Avon pulled the trig-
ger, white puffs of smoke left the gun and ex-
ploded full in his face; and he would wake up
with his heart pounding crazily and his skin wet
with sweat and his breathing desperate.

Then, the worst thing of all would happen,
there in the darkness; the greatest shame and
humiliation...

If Avon knew, he would surely kill Vila for
real.

Avon was nothing if not secure in his sexual
identity; not for him Tarrant’s macho swagger
or Blake’s bullishness; no, Avon had his own
style, wrapped in a cloak of leather darkness
and brooding; fascinating to women and delib-
erately repellent to all others.

So Vila lay trembling in the dark, night after
night, the bed linen soaked, his groin happily,
warmlly sticky, still pleasuring itself with little,
reminiscent throbings of bliss: as some shad-
owy, nightmare Avon plucked sweetly at his soul
and sucked the willing life in him away.

None of this, of course, could he tell to Avon.
Avon was looking penetratingly at him,
through him, to the very core.

“I think, Vila…”

Vila swallowed, dry-mouthed, and quelled an
annoying tremor in his legs; but Avon only
smiled at him, amiably enough, and patted him
on the shoulder.

“I think you’d better return it to me—don’t
you?”

“Well, it’s like this, Avon,” Vila gabbled. “I do
and I don’t—if you know what I mean.”

Because if he relinquished it, he knew the
whole black, bitter cycle would spawn itself
again.

“I think—”

“Yes?” Avon stepped very close to him, his
eyes intense and searching.

“I think you should destroy it.” Vila forced
the words out with an immense effort of will;
his soul curled up, tight and tiny, and mourned
with a bleak despair, because he loved the
Psebulen even as he knew it had to die.

“Oh Vila…” Avon said in his softest voice, his
blackest and sweetest, which had Vila scream-
ing inside with fear. “I expect pagan ignorance
from Tarrant. But not you.”

“Yes, and you said you could control it,” Vila
blurted out. “Then why the hell don’t you?”

“It’s odd,” Avon mused, still in that strange,
rich voice, looking far away, “how fear begins.
Superstitious dread of something which is in all
of us. Do you know what the Psebulen is, Vila?”

“No,” Vila managed, though he was sure it
was a witch: a hunched-up blackened crone of
evil locked and twisting inside a clear and frag-
ile form of beauty. “What is it?”

Avon stared at him, his eyes huge-pupilled
and opaque, reflecting no light at all so that Vila
felt all of himself reduced to a torrent of atoms
rushing to be absorbed there, in a black hole of
nameless horror.

“A mirror,” Avon said, and Vila fled from him.

When he next returned to his room the little
glass pyramid had gone. Vanished, its presence
lifted from his shelf, the pervasive atmosphere
it generated gone with it. Vila walked on air. He
did a cart-wheel across the room and bounced
on the bed, for sheer joy. Normality was restored
to him; now he could see, how dark a cloud had
shadowed him, weaving wicked thoughts and
dreams, unhealthy raptures. He crowed with
delight and fell back on the bed, kicking his feet.
It was over, it was a nightmare, that was all,
and now he had woken up. Zen was on the flight
deck and Servalan was after them and some-
where Tarrant argued with Dayna, and every-
thing was all right: Alice was back through the
mirror, the universe set to its normal scale again
after its bizarre and scary tilting.

Lying there, he fell asleep and dreamed of
ubile women: his fingers, lying on the cover-
let, began to twitch.

A different Hell was waiting for him.
He only had to see Avon these days and some-
thing dreadful happened to him. How Tarrant
would sneer, Dayna would laugh, if they knew:
that every time Avon’s dark gaze came to rest
on him he saw a terrible, dangerous beauty in
his eyes, every time he heard the quiet, clever
voice it seemed to him a clarion call of invita-
tion.

“It’s not right,” he sighed to himself alone in
his room, “Vila Restal, you’ve never been that
way in your life, never... Not even when you had
the chance to make a fortune in the holding cell,
all those blokes who’ve just realised there’s one woman between a hundred men…”

Not even at school, not Vila, not when it had been so easy to pick the lock of the girls’ dormitory and slip inside, sure of a welcome from at least one of the beds, Marlie for example… Vila’s eyes grew soft and misty with remembrance; Vila was nothing if not romantic.

Ah, romance! A pink satin heart with a single rose across it, a whisper of scented flowers at midnight, a secret message penned by quill on parchment, two hands pressing clandestinely, two hearts beating in passionate rhythm. That was romance. It was absolutely and finally nothing to do with the lust of one man for the sweat of another: Vila hated, hated these desires in himself, and yet—

And yet.

Here he was, reduced to shivering when Avon so much as passed him in the corridor: unhappily restless when Avon was not there, restless and disturbed when he was; wanting to watch him, feast his starved and hungry eyes on Avon’s presence. He wanted to rush to Avon, to be comforted for some nameless sorrow, press his head to Avon’s chest and have Avon stroke his hair… And if ever Avon met his eyes, that black enchanter’s gaze leaping out from across the room to transfix him and stop time in its tracks, then Vila would become weak with emotion as he returned the look frantically, the pit of his stomach fluttering with mad butterflies.

At such times he would have to, he simply had to, duck into the nearest quiet place and masturbate. A joyless experience, as he worked upon himself with swift and frantic fingers to produce the sharp spurts of relief; but necessary for his sanity.

And at night he would lie there, summoning sleep desperately, and then, when sleep eluded him, he tried fantasy: first, pastel dreams of fleshy females bathing nude, cavorting on grass, rosy knees and Reubens curves; and then, in mounting panic, lewd, widely-stretched pornographic images: but nothing worked. Nothing.

So he would give way, in the end, with a sense of Damnation; and let Avon in. His fantasy lover, alluring him with caresses and kisses, setting him afire with the first imaginary touch, right to the glorious finish; he would sleep then, an arm outflung around his pillow; but like some dangerous, beautiful phoenix it would crest all over again when he awoke.

He blamed the Psebulen. Of course he did. He had been all right before, hadn’t he?

In a strange way, he still yearned for it, too: but not, now that possession had burned his fingers, with the passionate need of before. He loved it and he hated it, because he hated what it had done to him, hated the creature he had become, who swooned at another man’s glances.

I’ll die before I tell you, Avon, he promised himself; you’ll never have to know, and I’ll never have to live with you knowing; so everything will be all right, won’t it?

But the words had a hollow ring, and all that answered him was a frail, mocking echo: won’t it? won’t it?

Dayna entered Avon’s cabin and looked at the dark head bent over the desk.

“Just a moment,” he said in his cool, cultured voice, and to fill in the time she sauntered to the shelf where the little glass pyramid sat, the one Avon had acquired on Voysi and Vila had taken such a fancy to. She picked it up and held it, determined this time to be sensible. The tingle she had felt before struck through to her skin at the first contact, but she held on; and soon a rich warm feeling spread through her skin at the first contact, but she held on; and soon a rich warm feeling spread through her skin at the first contact, but she held on; and soon a rich warm feeling spread through her skin at the first contact.

“What is this thing, Avon?” she asked him in wonder and pleasure. The feelings inside her were building to an embarrassing peak, and with horror she realised—

She set the little pyramid down in a hurry, and her loins slowly abandoned their headlong countdown to a thundering sexual crescendo.

“As I told Vila,” Avon answered her without lifting his head from the papers he worked on. “It’s a mirror. Perhaps—” he smiled— “a little bit more than that.”

“A mirror of what,” she said round-eyed.

“Your feelings. And,” Avon said, “mine, quite possibly.”

Dayna prepared to flounce out, offended. “I certainly don’t feel like that made me feel.”

“Don’t you?” he said amused, and she remembered once telling him he was beautiful, and teasing his icily sculpted lips with a first and last kiss.
Ah, but she didn’t know him, then.
For reasons of his own he had been a courteous guest, who had done what he could for her family, and it was not his fault that Death had shadowed him into the house. No, the other side of Avon had not shown itself so early, though even then she had seen that he was not ordinary. Now, any desire she felt for Avon was overlaid with a little fear, a little wariness that he was not quite sane, perhaps, or not quite as other people; stricter in the limits he imposed on himself than they were, and sometimes, shockingly and unexpectedly, without any limits at all.

She sighed. Avon was a riddle not for her solving; she knew that and accepted it. “Well, whatever it does, or doesn’t do to me, Avon, it’s Vila I’d be worried about if I were you. He seems to live in a dream these days.”

“Or a nightmare,” Avon murmured. “What have you brought me?” And her attention was thus skilfully redrawn to the reason for her visit; the new weapon she had shaped in her head and brought to life with her hands and brought here for Avon’s approval.

Ardent sexual desire roused into hard, throbbing life every time Avon’s scent tugged at his senses wasn’t Vila’s only newly heightened emotion: he was almost used, by now, to the sharpness of desire, the sweet pains of love.

He was helplessly in love with Avon, and yet he was also terrified of Avon.

He had always been wary of the man. Avon’s veneer of elite charm was transparent enough to give a glimpse of the perilous darkness shifting within; the most casual acquaintances, meeting Avon for the first time, would feel the slightest of chills, and shiver: as if, somewhere near, a rare doorway to Hell had yawned open, for one brief moment in Time.

But Vila, insouciant, street-smart Vila had always known when to leap back and when to step in; when Avon would be bleakly amused by him and when it would be dangerous so much as to breathe in his presence. Nowadays, since the Psebulen’s black fingers had stolen their way into his life, his terror of Avon was unrelenting; a shadow at his shoulder all the time. He could not walk ten yards along a deserted corridor without whipping round nervously to see if Avon was there, behind him. Stalking him, with a strange look in his eye.

In Avon’s presence desire warred with fright and won: out of it, fear stood to the forefront. Because he knew, beyond reason and beyond doubt, that Avon was his own death.

Vila was asleep. He dreamed...
Avon advanced on his heart with a crystal sword held aloft in his hands; the sword flashed down and pierced him like a point of light passing through darkness. Agony and ecstasy cleaved him with a shattering crash—Vila woke up.

His eyes searched the room frantically, in dread: nothing. Absolutely nothing. The usual nonsense. He was so annoyed that for once he felt firm, and strong, and determined, and so he threw back the covers and got out of bed, muttering. He was tired, resentful, and just plain furious; fed up with himself, fed up with Avon, fed up with mystical dreams and symbolic swords.

He was going to Sort It Out, and so he set off. Such ambition is all very well when one is alone; he found himself a little less indignant when he reached Avon’s quarters. In fact, he stood for a while, irresolute, outside the door; but as he stood there, it opened.

“Come in, Vila.” Avon’s voice coiled thinly through the air and encircled him; he was reminded helplessly and irresistibly of the spider and the fly as his feet carried him into Avon’s dark territory.

Tarrant was there.

Vila stopped dead.

“All right, I’m just going,” Tarrant intoned with that smooth suave nastiness which made Vila hate him. He rose to his feet and fronted Vila, standing just that bit too close, invading his personal space to discomfit him. “You’ve kept these nocturnal visits to Avon very quiet, Vila. Quite a dark horse, in your way, aren’t you?”

Mortified with indignation, Vila opened his mouth to reply. It stayed open as Avon’s voice spun a silky line in the gloom:

“Let him without sin… Are you in the mood for casting stones, Tarrant?”

Tarrant flushed darkly. “I was just leaving.”

“But you’ve only just come,” Avon murmured. With a delicately arched eyebrow, he watched
Tarrant’s stiffly retreating back. When the door shut behind him, he turned his attention to Vila, and smiled, spreading his hands.

“What can I do for you?”

Vila advanced into the abyss.

“Look, Avon…” Avon wore only a thin shirt, and that unbuttoned almost to his waist. A dark vee of hair between his nipples held Vila’s attention; he felt fluttery and unsettled, as if Avon was naked. Whatever he had meant to say to Avon, he knew he could not.

“You look upset,” Avon said, eyeing him tiltedly.

“Upset!” Vila could barely speak. The little exchange with Tarrant had birthed a thought so horrible that he buried it instantly, but it kept poking up its wormy head and making him squirm. Vila felt thoroughly unbalanced and panicky; he thought he might very well be going to pass out. “I feel like a fencing class,” he said through numbed lips, “bits of me keep feinting.”

He knew he had gone dramatically white because Avon got up came towards him, looking at him with dark-eyed concern. He put out one hand to take Vila’s wrist, pushing his cuff back with intimate ease, the pad of his thumb delicately probing for the pulse. From the bare skin inside his shirt arose a warm scent, shocking and thrilling.

The awful, terrible thing took place again, as Avon’s cool touch burned like fire on his own skin; as Avon held his wrist an electric current surged hotly through Vila and then it was happening, right there and then, the sweet waves of sexual feeling washing him to a swift, fierce climax, engulfing him and rocking him on his feet. There seemed to be no way of concealing what had happened; Avon was, after all, another man; would not miss the way his loins had shuddered, the moan and the grimace of ecstasy at the sweet swift release. Vila’s eyes lifted, hot with horror and shame; he met Avon’s look of polite, frozen surprise. Avon dropped his wrist unhurriedly.

Vila hoped and prayed and begged for obliteration, but his form stayed as substantial as ever. There was a spreading wet warmth at Vila’s groin; he crossed his hands over it.

“Don’t look,” he pleaded, desperate and pathetic, and Avon turned away from him, walking towards his desk. On it lay a glove which did not look like Avon’s. The wormy thought raised its head again and this time streamed out of him, forming itself into words Vila heard himself give voice to with horror:

“You haven’t ever slept with Tarrant? Have you? Avon?”

Avon gave it due consideration and finally answered, his voice a dark, dense vein of a mysterious story, never to be told.

“Slept—? …no.”

Vila fled the room, a devil dancing at his heels.

“What’s the matter, Vila?” Cally asked him gently.

Vila bent a look on her of fierce secrecy. “Don’t ask, you don’t want to know.”

“Why would I ask if I didn’t want to know?” Cally’s mind worked in literal ways. She smiled at him. Vila nearly melted inside. Cally was so sweet… Too sweet for the horrible reality of it. He hardened his resolve. “It’s personal.”

“Perhaps you should talk to Avon about it,” she said seriously. “Your low morale will affect all of us if it continues.”

Vila nearly choked. “I’m so sorry about that,” he said with dignified sarcasm. “Perhaps you’d all be happier if I took a two-minute walk in a one-minute airlock?”

Sarcasm was wasted on Cally. “There’s no need to be sorry, Vila. We don’t like to see you like this, that’s all. Avon wants you to go with him to the surface of Zenith Alpha; perhaps an opportunity may come to talk to him there.”

Vila repressed a groan. Zenith Alpha! An ice planet. The fact that rebellions always had to be conducted in dirty gravel-pits or icy blizzard landscapes instead of treasure islands with a tropical climate seemed uncommonly mean of Fate.

He went to put on a thick coat and fur gloves.

Trudging in Avon’s footsteps amid chunks of ice along a narrow path on the edge of a glaciated precipice, a biting wind freezing the flesh of his cheeks, Vila felt like nothing so much as Wenceslas’ page, but without, he suspected, the cheery optimism. Snowflakes flurried here and there around them; to the left the view was magnificent, a distant sun dazzling off the sheer sheets of crystalline ice which dropped jaggedly down thousands of feet to the bottom of the ice
canyon, cruel white mountain peaks rearing high above them. It was not a user-friendly landscape and Vila did not feel inspired.

“What are we doing here, Avon?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“I don’t really care,” Vila said to himself, gloomily, and then raised his voice defiantly. “I SAID, I DON’T REALLY CARE, ANYWAY. Not going to be many laughs around here, I can just sense it. A laugh a century, I should think that’s the legal maximum in these parts.”

“We didn’t come to be amused,” Avon said. “Does it really not matter to you? Surely it should. Or do you think that responsibility for your life and your well-being rests on my shoulders?”

About to reply, Vila experienced the startling realisation that yes, he did think exactly that. He opened his mouth and closed it again, and caught Avon looking at him.

In white fur his darkness shone with extraordinary beauty, hair and eyes like something exotic in a monastery; Vila could only catch his breath, and stand stock-still, and wait in dread, and hope... Avon moved closer to him, transfixing him like a rock caught in the wide sweeping orbit of the sun. “Is that what you want, Vila?” he murmured, low and quiet. “Do you want to belong to me?”

“Yes!” Vila howled; the sound, a keening screech, was absorbed by the blanketing landscape of snow; silence descended.

Avon took him by the shoulders, fingers shifting inside his gloves to get a better grip, then settling there. Vila watched his face with terror and desire: all those dreams, and now it was really about to happen, summoned by what word or thought or emotion he did not know.

“You want me to do this, don’t you?” Avon said to him, his voice quiet, yet crystal sharp in the clear air. This is me, Vila thought, I’m here, now, and that’s Avon, the same Avon I’ve been looking at for years, but never as close as this...

And then Avon kissed him, roughly and moistly; astonished and dazed by the warmth and sweetness of the man’s kiss Vila felt himself melting, beginning to succumb; he’d always been a pushover. He clung to Avon with hands and body and mouth and felt tears spring wetly from his eyes and roll down his cheeks, moved beyond words at Avon’s gentleness and the glory of being held by him, as he had wanted so much for so long...

His hands went around Avon to hold him tighter, urgently make him welcome: but that was when it all went wrong, the sweet feathers of intoxication falling into ashes, the pleasant hazy dream freezing into a cold and sharp-edged reality. He jumped back from Avon as if he was fatally burned, his fingers still clutching the object he had discovered and drawn from Avon’s pocket. Avon’s eyes sprang open as Vila pulled violently away from him; Vila opened his hand, breathing hard, to see there just what he had expected, the Psebulen.

As his fingers had spirited it from Avon’s clothes, the sharp tip had pierced his palm; one dark-red drop of blood trembled on its cool glass surfaces and rolled, reflecting itself over and over in an explosive poppy-red kaleidoscope. Vila stared at it in an agony of fear and revulsion. He had been kissing Avon, any man would be bad enough, but Avon; and loving him, no less, as if it was his only reality and all his being. His soul had surged into that kiss, and poured itself out to link with Avon in some unholy ritual, and it was all the Psebulen’s fault. He drew back his arm and let fly with a shriek of fear and anguish; and as the Psebulen flew and sparkled in the air it was like casting his very heart away and Avon’s with it; the little glass prism could not hold its arc long and it wheeled over and began a downward plunge. It bounced against the glacial mountainside, and then again, shattering into a thousand diamond sparklets which danced like spun sugar and spangled the crevasse with a little brightness, a twinkle here, and there, as a million glass pinheads mirrored the sun.

The Psebulen was gone.

Avon’s hand, which had risen too late, turned inwards to him and hit Vila, hard, across the face.

Vila cried out once, and then fell silent, because what he had done deserved more than physical pain.

“That was stupid,” Avon said evenly, and terrifyingly. “You now owe me the price of half a galaxy; in what coin are you proposing to pay?”

Vila’s mouth was dry, his throat tight as he tried to swallow, again and again. “It was evil, Avon...”
Avon’s voice leapt like a whip. “It wasn’t evil.” He grabbed Vila, thumbs pressing dangerously just above his larynx. “How many times do I have to tell you?”

Desperate to placate him, Vila gabbled, round-eyed, his teeth chattering, “I know, I know you told me. But—it made me feel—strange things. Wrong things, Avon.” His eyes eloquently pleaded with Avon to understand, that he had done this thing for both their sakes, to save them both from corruption and ridicule: but Avon was cold-eyed, unreachable, rockhard.

“The fact is, you are unable to face the truth. The feelings were your own.”

“Avon,” Vila begged. “I’ve never wanted—look, if you have, that’s okay, that’s fine by me, live and let live, that’s what I always say, I’m a tolerant man. But—it’s just not for me, always been a ladies’ man I have, from the day I was out of nappies and realised I had something women haven’t: I’ve got nothing against it, honest I haven’t, but I’m just not made that way.” His mouth made a foolish, unhappy smile as his words tailed into abject silence; the cant of Avon’s dark, bleak gaze burned him, then caressed his face as Avon’s lashes fluttered and he said softly:

“Well now. So that’s what you believe.”

As if he hadn’t enough to contend with, the pain of killing the Psebulen was gnawing at Vila like a live animal twisting inside him and mortally wounding his guts. He gazed at Avon sadly, but there was no comfort for him there. Avon’s expression was like a graven image etched in stone; he stared coldly at Vila and uttered the command that Vila follow him to the nearby caves where Orac had suggested dynamon crystals might be found.

Vila followed, head well down. The sun had gone in; the glitter that was all that remained of the Psebulen had gone with it.

Back on the Liberator Avon marched Vila along the corridors with one hand on his shoulder, the other clutching the handful of crystals they had found. Sunk in misery, and so used to obeying Avon that he went where he was pushed without question, it was not until the door closed behind him that he realised they had come to Avon’s quarters. He swung around but Avon had followed him in and was blocking the exit. A cold drench of sweat and the dry mouth of fear informed Vila that he had, quite possibly, just walked into a trap whose door he had opened himself and that wasn’t going to look too good on his obituary, was it? VILA RESTAL—NEVER A DOOR HE COULDN’T OPEN—PITY ABOUT THAT.

He panicked. His heart thudded like a rabbit bounding for cover, he swallowed convulsively, and his arms and legs began to tremble.

Avon looked at him, and it was the Avon of his dreams.

“Avon—no. No, Avon,” he pleaded, scrabbling backwards, but of course there was no exit and nowhere to run and his legs wouldn’t carry him anyway.

“Yes, Vila,” Avon murmured with gleaming eyes, “you want this. Or, if you don’t want it, you certainly need it.”

He had never before noticed how sharp Avon’s teeth were, like a wolf’s. “Avon, please let me go…”

“Let you go? Oh no, Vila, I’ve got a point to make: or have you forgotten? The Psebulen’s gone, a priceless, irreplaceable artefact smashed into a million tiny pieces by your ignorance and your stupidity; you destroyed it for nothing, because nothing, you will find, has changed.” He touched Vila, very delicately, running his fingers up Vila’s arm, bringing his fingers up to stroke Vila’s cheek, a desultory caress. “Are you running away, Vila? No, I don’t think you are.”

“The reason I’m not running,” Vila managed between chattering teeth, “is because I’m terrified.”

Avon showed his teeth in a smile. “That too, no doubt. But you’ve no need to be terrified, Vila, I’m not going to hurt you.”

Pain though not among Vila’s preferred pastimes, was not precisely what he was dreading. Avon was setting on him with an obvious purpose. “I’ll do it myself,” Vila said, in an agony of fright: he stripped off with wobbly defiance, backed to the bed and sat down on it, naked and glaring.

All Avon removed was his gloves.

He sat down beside Vila and touched him, looking into his eyes all the while. “And you’ve never done this before?” he murmured. “You’re too beautiful, Vila, to waste on women.”
“It’s odd I know, but that’s not the way I was brought up to look at it,” Vila said with trembling acidity. Avon coaxed him, quite gently, to lie down, and stroked his thigh, fingers coming to rest there intimately as his lips brushed sweetly up Vila’s arm, shockingly thrilling: it was when his mouth moved on, to caress the delicate skin at throat, cheek and temple, that Vila realised that more than anything in the world—more than anything—he wanted Avon to kiss him again.

Whatever Vila might have presupposed of this encounter—Avon pushing him roughly to the bed, perhaps, forcing him onto hand and knees and doing something unmentionable to a part of him Vila preferred left quite alone—it was not gentleness. Avon’s mouth took his hard and possessively and yet there was a tenderness there too, in the Avon broke off every now and then to smile at him, murmur something to him, touch him gently, just as if Avon knew all about his frights and fears and dreads and understood that they were not to be taken lightly.

Caressed and cared for, he was lingering pleasantly in the outer courts of delight when Avon’s hand moved on from petting his belly and touched him more intimately. Vila froze and opened his eyes. Avon considered him for a moment, lips pursed as if in thought. Then he smiled at Vila.

“Well, now. You look as if you’re expecting me to eat you alive.”

What could Vila do? What, indeed, did he want to do, but succumb gracefully to Avon’s warm mouth and quicksilver tongue?

No-one could resist this, Vila thought crazily as something wonderful began to happen to him, just no-one: and I never did have any self-control.

The trouble was, even as he gave in and let the pleasure come, the sweet sound of violins swelling poignantly in his mind and his heart thudding a fervent background harmony, the nagging thought persisted that the price for happiness as great as this might just be a little too high...

But it was a glorious night, for all that, the best; Avon quick at picking up whatever he hinted he might desire, Avon a connoisseur with the rarest of tastes and the most skilful of touches, so that in the end it came to seem to Vila that whatever he had done before, he had been merely playing: this was Passion, this was real life. As Avon kissed him, probed him and stroked him he came to life under Avon’s hands like a sculpture breathed on by a god: and found in Avon’s darkly passionate eyes all the romance he had ever craved.

“I think this is what I wanted, all along...” he said to Avon, lying like a prince in Avon’s arms, Avon’s fingers stroking through his hair. Damned he might be: but damnation was all he had, and he found it sweeter than salvation. He had killed Avon’s Psebulen: but Avon had been proven right, it was not a witch, not an evil force, just a mirror reflecting all things, for now that he had smashed it, still the vision remained. Already he yearned again for Avon’s touch, even for unspeakable things: Avon’s body deep inside his, for example, piercing him sweetly to the core.

“Of course you did,” Avon murmured to him. “You love me; naturally you want to be close to me.”

“I love you,” Vila repeated, half echoing Avon, half in wonder; for of course it seemed so obvious now. He had followed Avon for better, for worse, against all sense and reason, unable to tear himself away and seek a better life elsewhere; because he could not bear to leave Avon. Avon, with his dark eyes and darker secrets, who had come into his life with a sneer and an insult, and stood up to Blake when no-one else dared, and won his way into Vila’s heart.

Oh yes, he loved Avon.

And yet...

In this relationship, there was no question of equality: arrogant Avon calling the tune, Vila the dancer to fall exhausted at his feet.

Vila’s eyes flew open: he thought—of Tarrant. Of Blake. Of Cally, who loved Avon; of Jenna, who never had.

“I do have a choice in all this, don’t I, Avon?” he asked, bravely, unhappily.

“Of course you have a choice,” Avon snapped at him. Fire flew from his eyes and from his fingers touching Vila’s skin lightly, oh so lightly, a current sparked: Vila buried his face in Avon’s chest, so that he wouldn’t have to look into Avon’s eyes. Where once he had seen contempt for Blake’s lone stand, and now he saw Blake’s...
own deathwish fanaticism. And there he fell asleep.

The Psebulen had one more dream for him.

Naked, he fled from Avon along black corridors; Avon stalked him with a gun.

As he ran, Vila heard the rush of his own scared breath, the thudding of blood in his ears. Avon’s voice, milk-sweet, calling to him with an odd, lilting inflection he had never heard from Avon; at the tenderest moment of love you could not imagine Avon using this honeyed beguilement.

It was a voice which chilled Vila to the core, set a piercing snake of terror moving in his bowels, made him fall to his knees, gibbering inside with horror and fear.

At any moment, Avon was going to discover him. And then the deadly quiet waiting would become too much, and he would unclench his eyelids, to see—

The worst horror of all.

Avon, looking into his hiding place with something dreadful in his eyes.

Just as usual Vila woke up, a cold sweat of sickly fear on his skin, his panicking heart pumping relentlessly and too fast, blood knocking and thrumming in his ears as he gulped for breath; but this time was different, the nightmare had played itself out before its final curtain, and he was not alone. Avon breathed quietly beside him, warm and close, and for a moment Vila exhaled with relief, oh yes, he need not worry any more, he was safe in Avon’s arms...

Safe but not free. Like shards of shattered glass caught in a loop of time and reversed, his thoughts flew together and coalesced, reforming into a pattern neat and true and ultimately terrifying.

He stood at a crossroads, that much was clear: deadly and bright as refracted glass two paths veered off in front of him, a different city at the end of each. One beckoned him: for he loved Avon desperately, and Avon wanted him, so that he could grow close to Avon, weave his own gentleness and affection into the warp and the blackness of Avon’s personality. Down that way lay a short life chasing rainbows, chased by devils: a fleeting glimpse of happiness here, of success there, but life would take place in a neverending night, following Blake on the road straight down to Hell.

Or there was the other path, which he would take alone. He could turn away from Avon, deny the attraction and drive them apart; keep his distance and his options open, as he had done up to now, always nurturing that little, hopeful dream: a wife, five children, peace, love and comfort in a little house on a green and fertile planet where the sun always shone, in a town which housed the central vault of the world-wide Jewellers’ Guild...

And Avon would kill him.

It might be soon or it might not be, but it was written in Fate as surely as creation and the end of time: he was destined to be caught in the backlash of Avon’s insanity, stretched out on the stone altar of expedience and sacrificed.

Unless he walked the way Avon desired of him.

Vila lay awake, trembling; and deep in sleep Avon’s arm tightened around him, a grip of iron, a cage around his soul and his spirit, a trap about to spring and drop the net.

Avon came suddenly awake, lifted a sleep-tousled head.

“Vila?”

His voice searched softly, in the dark.

“I'm here, Avon,” Vila said.

For Bill and Ben: good friends.