







you can do what our great leader couldn't quite manage. It's your chance," and he looked, menacingly handsome, over his shoulder at a man he would never now choose to follow. "It's your chance, Vila," he said, but it was Blake he was talking to, Blake he was still looking at, "to prove that you have more..." and the vulgarism dripped from him like poison, burning Blake, "balls than he."

"But in public, Avon?" Vila, whining, never a wise thing to do around Kerr Avon, and most especially not when his eyes were glittering with a complexity of emotion that was razor sharp and could be turned inward or outward with equal lethality.

Perhaps it was that he had been looking at Blake: today, Avon turned none of his anger on himself, immolating his companions instead. He snapped around, pinning Vila with his stare. "Surely you're not going to pretend to be shy?" Now he was sneering, expression as nasty as his words, and the contained tempest of his emotions dominated the room. "I would have thought that you, Delta that you are, would be more than used to performing sex in public." He ignored Vila's flinch, stalked over to the divan, and began peeling off shirt and trousers, blackness folding away to unveil soft, white skin.

"Avon—" Blake's voice cracked across the room, a protest, a rejection, a plea.

"Don't say a word!" Avon whispered, his quietness more dangerous than any other man's shout. "You've made your..." a pause to display that he was sophisticated and confident enough that Blake's rejection was nothing more than mere gauche inadequacy, "shall we say, position clear. You got us into this fiasco in the first place, and as usual, I shall be the one to get us out of here in one piece." As coolly as if this were an everyday occurrence—and suddenly, absurdly, Blake found himself wondering if it were, if there were some secret between these two—Avon bent the full force of his leashed anger on Vila. "Haven't you managed to master undressing yourself, or should I ask the Ultras to come in and help you?"

"Don't remind me, Avon, I'd just started forgetting about them." But he was pulling his shoes off, then his socks. Unlike Avon, there was nothing graceful about this, simply Vila standing, wobbling, in the middle of the room as he lifted first one foot and then the other. "Hate having to do this," he

was muttering to himself. "Not that it makes any difference round here, though, does it? Doesn't matter how I feel about this or what it does to me. Oh, no, got to take care of poor old Blake, with all his delicate Alpha sensibilities, haven't we? Never mind poor old Vila, well, not that I'm that old, any way." He stopped, having run out of both words and clothing. Naked, swallowing hard, he walked over to Avon, appallingly aware of how limp his sex was, and how small in the cool air, and how absurd and unattractive he must look to Avon. Ah, Avon, now there was a sight for sore eyes! At the edge of the divan, Vila dithered, not quite sure what he should be doing next, and not sure if Avon wasn't going to rip his head from his shoulders if Vila spent too much time staring at him.

"Well?" Avon said.

Not wanting to be accused of either staring or gazing raptly, Vila looked away from Avon, then wished he hadn't: he had enough to think about without worrying about that tangled expression on Blake's face. He shrugged, trying to be casual about all of this. "So how do you want me?" he asked.

"Precipitous and co-operative," Avon answered drily. "Although you're hardly likely to be either if you stay there. Absence," he slanted a look at Blake, "may make the heart grow fonder, but it plays havoc with copulation."

"Oh, right," and Vila clambered onto the divan, cursing himself for his unusual clumsiness and all too frequent inanity. He should be saying witty, entertaining things, making this just another transaction. He'd had sex to keep him safe before, hadn't he? So what was he making all this fuss about this time? He knelt beside Avon, leant down to take Avon into his mouth, and hesitated, an inch away. This is bloody stupid, he told himself. It's not like it's something you've never done before, and it's not like it's someone you don't fancy—in fact, he'd had a thing about Avon from the second he laid eyes on him. So what was so different from any other time?

A shiver along his spine reminded him: there hadn't been another time like this one. Before, it had always been for pleasure or gain, pure and simple, with none of this laden atmosphere pressing down on him, with Blake looking as if someone had finally told him Santa Claus isn't real and Avon looking as if he'd bitten an apple and found half a worm. And this was the first time he









