Song of Songs

by x_los

Summary

*COMPLETE*

Roger Blake, the Chrestomanci, has been missing seven years. State enchanter Kerr Chant-Aven has been doing Blake’s job and searching for him. Roj Blake the revolutionary has been missing for almost a year. Computer expert, criminal and reluctant rebel Kerr Avon has been similarly occupied. Also, the universe might be ending.

(Not an AU in quite the way you might think.) (Don't necessarily be put off by this being a crossover. I think you can read this without knowing the DWJ—or even without knowing the B7, though you might have less incentive.)

Notes

This is a sequel to The Last of the Chants. There will be a third and final part in Glitter is the Gold after this.

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Chapters weekly (though on a random day, probably).
The names aren't typos, but an AU thing.
I sleep, but my heart waketh; Hark! my beloved knocketh: 'Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled; for my head is filled with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.'

I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them? My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my heart was moved for him. I rose up to open to my beloved... but my beloved had turned away, and was gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.

The watchmen that go about the city found me, they smote me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took away my mantle from me.

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Avon slapped the indicator against his palm, frowning when the needle spun around in a full circle and then settled on the symbol that indicated a negative response. Though the readout was more sophisticated than that, the tip of the arrow seemed to crudely point him further on. No. Not this one either.

Avon was apparently going to have to walk through all the series between One and wherever Blake was. (Blake, of course, had been the one to tell him about that naming convention in the first place—about how, when people had used to visit other universes, theirs, the oldest, had been known as Series One.) Avon knew now that he’d been right to suspect that Blake had escaped their universe entirely when the barrier had gone down, though where Blake had ended up was still a mystery. Avon didn’t know how to directly transport himself to a given universe (his current method seemed to just jump him to the next along in the sequence), nor would he have known what ultimate point of destination to aim for if he had done. The indicator was guiding him in the right direction, but it could provide him with neither knowledge nor shortcuts.

The jumps were tiring. Avon had a feeling that he wasn’t executing them correctly; that his clumsy fumbling would look comical to anyone who knew what they were doing, like when Vila patronizingly watched him slowly pick a lock. The rough journeys and the feeling that he was making an arse of himself, working against resistance from the magic and perhaps the universes themselves (as though he were stroking fabric against the pile), which didn’t seem to want to be breached, aggravated Avon and wore him down.

But Avon couldn’t see his way through to doing this better, because Avon had nothing in the way of formal magical training. Possessing enough magical ability to require training was, of course, a one-way ticket to either Mage Corps conscription or elimination as an ‘antisocial element’. (Avon had therefore known better than to indicate any magical talent even as a child—his mother had instilled in him the need for circumspection about the talent he’d inherited from her above all things. These severe cautions had been about the most extreme example of maternal concern she’d ever managed to demonstrate.) Thus Avon couldn’t manage much better than throwing himself at the vague outlines of the ritual he’d researched and hoping it worked.

And it did. Perhaps that was a testament to some considerable untrained ability on his part. At times Avon had been given reason to half suspect such a thing, flattering to his vanity as it was, though Blake had always been stronger in this regard (typical). Without much in the way of context, Avon didn’t really know, in relative terms, what his seeming facility or Blake’s apparently greater ability
indicated. Perhaps anyone with a magical gift could do this, if they set themselves to it.

Because the jumps were tiring, and because he was certainly doing them wrong, Avon had to rely on a second indicator to facilitate his progress—a thin metal dowsing rod sort of arrangement that sought out weak places between universes. He would reach such a place, jump, confirm that this universe wasn’t it either, and trudge along, following the pull he could feel through the second indicator, the rod, until he either needed to rest or he reached the next region where the hair on his neck stood up and everything felt thin.

Avon didn’t know whether everyone felt the difference between a normal space and a worn-scarf-of-fabric sort of place like this, either. Perhaps everyone found such locations strangely charged. Maybe most people sought to avoid them, even if they didn’t know why they did—the thin zones largely seemed off the beaten track, out of the way. Though possibly putting a building on a spot like this ‘reinforced’ the area in some way, making it thicker, and thus useless for his purposes. Or perhaps only people with magic had any sense at all of the distinct texture of the Passages. It didn’t really matter, Avon supposed. But he didn’t have much else to think about, as he walked the worlds alone and the process dragged on.

Avon had almost bumped into himself, actually, in one of the universes. He’d wondered then whether the indicator or the dousing rod had been tugging him towards this other him as well as towards the target he’d set. It seemed possible. Like attracts like—he knew that was a basic magical principle. Though it hadn’t happened anywhere else, and he hadn’t seen any alternate Blakes around (which he’d half thought might confuse the indicators), so Avon couldn’t guess exactly how these alternate realities worked.

Noticing his own name on a door-plaque as he passed—Doctor Kerr Avon, psychiatrist (he never would have thought, but apparently)—Avon had decided to take the hint and meet ‘Doctor Avon’, out of curiosity. He could certainly, he thought with a wry twist of his mouth, spare the time.

Luckily Doctor Avon had been in the lobby when he’d come into her office suite, standing behind the desk, conferring with her receptionist. He’d blinked at realizing it was him in there, but then considered that a chromosomal difference of that minor degree was probably negligible as far as the universe was concerned, especially compared with a change like her very probably having been born ‘naturally’ versus via incubation tubes, as most Alphas on Series One’s Earth were. If there were alternate realities, then in order for there to be alternate versions of given people, such small situational alterations as different eye colors or sexes—the effect of some slight difference in the world that impacted the creation or growth of a child—were necessarily to be expected. And given that Doctor Avon was in the lobby, it seemed he would not have to try and pretend to be experiencing a mental breakdown to get to speak to her (Hah. ‘Pretend’).

Doctor Avon had looked up and frowned at him when he’d entered, a little perplexed. Well, he supposed his outfit was somewhat unusual, for her world, though not (judging by her expression) ludicrously so. Hers seemed somehow familiar: high black leather boots paired with a thick gray tunic dress. She wore her hair short and well-trimmed; it fell around her face in a sleek, boxy sort of way. Her slightly puzzled glance probably wasn’t down to the fact that he looked like a vagabond, either. Avon had managed to clean himself up decently in the last series, having already traded most of his supplies, including his changes of clothing (workers’ jumpsuits left in the Federation’s facility on Terminal—hideous, but clean), for food in the series before that (a kind of plain lentil slurry: he’d run through his own vitamin bars). He had packed things intended as trade goods, but it turned out that various worlds and the cultures therein did not share a definition as to what constituted a valuable commodity, and that, in general, ‘things I could scrounge from the largely-abandoned Terminal base’ didn’t impress anyone much.
So something more than the cut and condition of his clothing must have tugged at Doctor Avon, as it did at him. Interesting. Though her world was, by all indications, entirely without magic, and thus she was unlikely to suspect the real reason why looking at the strangely familiar man in front of her gave her almost exactly the same feeling as looking into a mirror.

She shook her head slightly to dislodge the uncanny sensation he gave her. “Can I help you?” she asked dryly, a thread of impatience under it.

Avon smiled a little at the familiarity of the tone, and then let the expression widen to something more hapless and baffled. He knew it came over cartoonish when he did this, but people were willing to accept a lot, if they thought you were an idiot. It served Vila well enough.

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid I’ve mistaken my directions. Is there a Roj Blake in this building? It’s just, I’ve a meeting—”

Her face betrayed no trace of recognition, and Avon felt his heart fall, even though he hadn’t really expected any other answer. She didn’t know Blake, then, nor had she seen him passing through. Avon trusted her expression. He knew he wasn’t that good an actor, so why should she be? He wondered if she was fortunate or deeply unlucky never to have met the man. To have no such massive upheaval as Roj Blake in her life. Did he envy or pity her?

Well now, he thought wryly, why pick just one?

“As it happens, so do I,” Doctor Avon said, snapping a folder off the counter theatrically. “There’s no one of that name in this building. Perhaps you’ve confused the street address. Janet, let him use your computer to look it up.”

She swept out of the room. Avon wondered if he moved quite so dramatically himself, or whether it was down to gender.

Janet rolled her chair out of the way and busied herself with the files and the phones (the volume of business and the plaques on the walls testifying to Doctor Kerr Avon’s importance within her field, which Avon found gratifying, in a way).

Avon figured out how to key in a search query relatively quickly. More quickly than he suspected he could have managed to do anything else in this universe, computers striking him as more inherently comprehensible, wherever he was, even than quotidian things like making food, for example.

Actually that was a thought—he was quite hungry, but there seemed little he could do about that at present.

The viral search revealed no trace of anyone named Roj Blake in this universe—a poet with the same surname, a historian (that sparked his interest, but both men were long, long dead, and the pictures Avon found looked nothing at all like the Blake he knew). Beyond that, there were few results. Perhaps if he’d dug deeper, accepted greater variations on Blake’s surname—but there wasn’t much point. The indicator had said Blake wasn’t here, and Avon trusted it, as far as these things went. Time to stop clutching at straws.

“Thank you so much, I’ll let you have this back now. May I use your bathroom?” he asked Janet the receptionist with the same insincere tone and smile he’d already employed.

Janet directed him towards it, admitting him deeper into the office suite. This was evidently a world with few security concerns. Avon could hear himself—herself—making notes about a not-present patient into something like a speech-recorder. “Subject claims she has no tendency towards obsessive compulsions, but is obviously deluding herself. Poorly, given that compulsive behaviors continue to
trouble her, and that she hasn’t succeeded in rationalizing them away.” Apparently the change of
gender and career had not greatly affected his personality.

Avon ducked into the office’s small canteen, ransacked the cupboards and, within them, found some
nutricrackers of the sort he probably preferred here. He shoved a few sleeves of these and some fruit
from a bowl on the counter inside his jacket’s interior lining. He couldn’t work up any guilt about
stealing from himself—not even such a specialty item as the apple (after all, they must be cheap here,
if they were just leaving them where anyone could find them).

Thus armed Avon departed, took out his divining rod once more and continued walking, heading out
of the city. Occasionally he popped a ‘water cracker’ into his mouth and congratulated himself anew
on his own excellent taste—they were very good. Probably expensive. They certainly tasted
expensive. He didn’t know that he’d ever had nutricrackers this good, and the fruit tasted, well, much
fruitier. Maybe this world hadn’t had cause to modify the genetic structure of their produce to the
extent his own had. Of course Avon had only rarely, on worlds the Liberator had visited, gotten to
eat a fruit proper rather than a fruit-flavored nutrient shake. He knew only vaguely that those were
supposed to taste of fruits originally. Everyone just called them Red, Orange and Purple.

Avon halted when he felt the air thinning, checked the indicator and then continued into what
seemed to be the middle of the thin area. Almost off a cliff, but he supposed he was lucky it wasn’t
actually in the water. Avon breathed in, and an electric tension in the air seemed to enter his lungs
and, caged, to scratch its way around, burrowing into him.

He got out a dagger. The blood on it was dried now, flaking off, but that was all right—he had more,
when the time came for that. Carefully he etched the circle and the star into the grass. When the stone
of the outcrop made this impossible, he switched to chalk for the portions of the design that fell
across it. Then he drew the runes. Then, with a faint feeling of ridiculousness, he stepped inside the
central star and crisply managed the chanting.

Nothing.

Frowning, Avon breathed. He closed his eyes. He tried the chanting again, not letting himself feel
the ludicrousness of it. He forced himself to mean it, wholeheartedly. Heart’s Desire was a reliable
spell (and, fortunately for him, one powered more by raw emotion than by formal skill), but it
demanded a certain earnestness that Avon resented giving—and giving repeatedly, all over again
with every jump. He let himself feel the ache of loss like he felt the exhaustion of his body. He
remembered, he wanted, he needed his target—Blake. More than anything in any of the universes,
he wanted Blake—that was why the spell worked at all.

There now, the spell seemed to say, why didn’t you say so? And Avon was left gasping as the
power rolled through him—the magical translation of his own desperation. It fed and fed: the
thousand things he’d do when he saw Blake again; the roil of terror he’d felt when Servalan had
pronounced Blake dead; the immense satisfaction, tantamount to a reprieve from a death sentence,
when the indicator had first responded and promised that no, no, Blake wasn’t dead. Avon had
known that, but still, the outside confirmation had come to him like a sign from God. The spell fed on
the smell of Blake, the first time Avon had seen him properly smile, the timbre of his voice in anger
(and at other times…).

Avon was ripped through the thin place and slammed hard into the ground of a new world. It was
cold here, though not freezing. Autumn, perhaps, or a world under a lazy, dying sun. Avon panted
with effort, exhausted and emotionally spent. With a shaking hand he checked the indicator. The dial
spun.

No.
Though he hadn’t thought he was letting himself hope, Avon found, as always, that the wrong answer made him want to break something and sob.

He slumped to the ground, too exhausted to move. He’d sleep here, then. He’d survive that, assuming that nothing could be bothered to attack him during the night. And in the morning he’d find somewhere in this world that was thin on the right side (it was rare that the same entry point worked both ways—he would have to find one going the opposite direction).

Days, he’d been crawling through the worlds after Blake. He couldn’t even say how long. The indicator’s promise that he would find him sustained Avon, made him push forward, but it was hard going. Like a quest or a feudal ordeal, like some fairy-tale series of trials—but unlike Anna, Blake was worth suffering for. Unlike Anna, Blake might—No, Blake would have done this for him.

There was some reason Blake hadn’t come back to him: some obstacle. He might be seriously injured. He very probably needed Avon’s help.

I’m coming for you, Avon thought stupidly, closing his eyes. You must have known I would. You must be waiting for me. I will find you, and I’ll bring you home.

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a month earlier

In the crumbling Federation facility on the abandoned research world Terminal, when everything had come to nothing after all and Servalan was probably (possibly) dead, Avon started to laugh. When he didn’t cut his rueful laughter off in a short bark, when it continued until he’d had to brace himself on a console and his eyes were shining and he was practically choking, Tarrant moved to slap him hard on the back to snap him out of it. Avon caught Tarrant’s wrist easily before his hand made contact. Avon’s grip was bruisingly firm, and he did stop laughing—his expression shifting into a glittering smile of triumph.

Cally wondered if this, then, was the end of it—if Avon’s precarious mental state (she hadn’t failed to notice that Avon had been running himself ragged, these past months) had finally crumpled into either a temporary or a lasting madness. Tense, she refrained from asking. After all, what could Avon tell them that they could rely on at present? Tarrant, a pilot down a ship, wondered what in hell Avon had any right to be pleased about, and, lacking Cally’s tact, asked as much.

“Irony,” Avon said.

“Irony,” Dana repeated, sounding slightly disgusted.

“Not simply the irony underlying our current predicament, or even Servalan’s,” Avon clarified, “but what you might call dramatic irony. Servalan lured us here with Blake’s trail. With a false image of Blake. But,” and his smile crept back, and the gleam in his eyes disconcerted his companions, “she has actually managed to deliver him to me.”

“What do you mean, Avon?” Cally asked cautiously.

“In the room at the end of this corridor, you will find a computer simulation of Blake. I am told they spent,” and here Avon’s voice took on the cadence of a quotation, “months preparing it. They recreated Blake inside their computers: voice, images, memories, a million fragmented facts.”

“What can you do with that?” Dayna asked, unimpressed.

“You can track him, can’t you?” Vila interjected—the first thing he’d said in some minutes.
“Oh very good, Vila,” Avon said with a slow smile. “Yes, I can. They gave me the perfect means with which to do so, and given my specialism, they practically tied a ribbon around their gift. You see what I expect they do not know is that Blake has a rather unique talent. One that even he was unaware of, until it occurred by accident. He can jump out of our universe, almost without thought. He requires no special preparation to do so—no Enchanter’s pentacle, nor anything so inelegant as that. He simply vanishes, to what he has described as a sort of in-between place. He wasn’t able to access the other series, of course, because of the Great Mage’s barrier. Or he was not able to when I knew him—”

“Because the barrier was anchored by Control—by Star One,” Cally realized. “That was its nexus.”

“Precisely.” Avon stretched his hands out on the console, gripping it. “And when Star One fell, so did it. I suspected that Blake, injured and without protection, feeling himself in danger, might have fled and ended up almost anywhere, and found himself perhaps unable to return to our universe—let alone to the Liberator. But with this simulation, I can build a sufficiently directed homing spell, and with an enchanter’s pentacle—”

“You can find him,” Vila concluded. “And bring him back.”

Dayna snorted. “Surely he’s well out of it—if Blake can escape this universe, good luck to him. Why should he want to come back?”

“Because Blake doesn’t have the sense to avoid danger, for one,” Avon said. “He’ll be quite anxious to return to his fight—his precious rabble are, after all, still laboring under the yoke of tyranny. And for another, I have no intention of allowing him a choice in the matter.”

It had taken time to research and master the enchanter’s pentacle—to understand the complex theory that underlay the practice. Avon hadn’t wanted to risk not knowing that backwards and forwards. He stood, after all, to be without friends or resources wherever he wound up. There would be little opportunity to rectify mistakes. He knew his execution was cloddish, but it did work.

Then he’d had to use the simulation to construct an electromagical Ba of Blake (a form of ancient, ancient Egyptian magic), and then to rig this into an indicator he’d likewise had to build. The rod had been Orac’s idea—it had projected that Avon might face something like his present difficulties. Avon had spent weeks working on the materials he needed for his journey, and on trying to outfit himself with the necessary supplies (to the limited extent he could). And on trivialities, like diffusing the bomb that it had occurred to him, when he’d realized he’d need to cannibalize the simulacrum of Blake, that Servalan would probably have planted in this compound, in one of her signature aftershocks of petty viciousness. And there had been the matter of telling the others what to do to get the ship working, and speaking to Cally about what to do if he didn’t come back within an allotted time frame. She was to leave him communications equipment—he and Blake wouldn’t be marooned, even if they were late.

“Good luck,” Vila had said with a trace of irony as Avon had stepped neatly into the pentacle (deeply relieved that none of the rest had enough magic to quite understand what he’d had to use to power the thing).

Be safe, Cally had cautioned in his mind. You will find him: I believe it.

“I intend to,” Avon said crisply. He was fairly sure that none of them knew quite what motivated his obsessive quest to recover his former ally and adversary, but perhaps Cally and Vila—had their suspicions. Avon drew in a breath, closed his eyes, and intoned the simple, unrevealing ritual words. The sharp spike of hurt and longing pierced him like a javelin, and he’d opened his eyes and mouth at the impact only to find himself—somewhere else. On another world, more alien even than a
strange planet in his own universe. The wonder of it filled him with a sort of grave awe. But that could wait. He took out his indicator and accepted its disappointing report with little surprise. The odds had not, after all, been in his favor.

“One down,” Avon murmured, starting to walk.

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the present

Avon almost didn’t believe it when the indicator finally flipped into its terrestrial mode. He shook it again, almost suspecting he was hallucinating. Obediently the indicator turned, then flipped back over. The target was in this world. Not even another world in this universe, but this one. Earth itself. Well, that made sense—he’d discovered that many of the series didn’t have a vast array of planets, but even in those that did the portals had always seemed to herd him Earthwards (or the local equivalent).

Avon checked the proximity detector. Not even five miles away. His legs felt a little weak (exhaustion, he thought firmly), and he steadied himself against a tree.

With a quicker pace and renewed energy, Avon started to move in the direction his device instructed him to. The forest he’d materialized in gave way to a cultivated field, and then (beyond a line of tall, dark green, manicured trees) to a long and rolling park. Avon was directed towards a fine, old structure, in excellent repair, swaddled with palpably strong protective magic. The whole area felt drenched in magic, as though it were the stock in trade of this place.

But whatever those protective wards were for, it didn’t seem to be security. Avon, a product of an intensely security-conscious world, was uncomfortable with how easily he moved towards the building. No guards appeared and demanded that he explain himself, no fences barred his approach—the building wasn’t locked. Avon entered through what seemed to be the kitchen door. It was even standing open on this warm summer’s day. The room was empty of people, but something was audibly boiling on a large, old-looking black—was that a stove? Avon had seen chemburner stoves and waste incinerator stoves something like it in old-fashioned laboratories—did you use the same word, when it was a food preparation device? Whatever it was called, someone would probably shortly be back to check on whatever was boiling, and to do something with the chopped vegetables (real vegetables!) on the vast wooden table. So Avon should probably—

Before he could finish the thought a sturdy looking woman came in and nodded at him. That—had gone better than expected. If these people were holding Blake prisoner, they weren’t doing a very professional job of it.

“Where’s Blake?” Avon tried in a neutral tone. His detector didn’t seem to want to direct him through the building—the place’s magic was playing havoc with it, and it apparently had trouble with short-range signals. It moved sluggishly, as though fighting its way through the thick atmosphere.

“One track mind,” the woman muttered, seemingly to herself. “In the study.” She jerked her head towards an interior door and continued working as Avon passed her. Avon had good enough instincts not to enquire further. If someone who was supposed to be in this building was supposed to know where this study was, it wouldn’t do to ask and be caught out.

He walked through the labyrinthine house trying to look like someone who’d every right to be there, but didn’t run into anyone else for some time. Eventually a small girl rounded the corner. Good, he could use that. Avon had had, on the whole, very little contact with children even when he’d been
one, and he didn’t know quite how one treated them. He’d no idea what one was doing here (his ‘prison’ theory was looking less likely every moment), but it wasn’t important at present. What he did know, and what was important, was that children were both less intelligent than adults and in the habit of taking orders from them. He could force her to give him directions, and she probably wouldn’t sound the alarm.

“You,” he said, addressing her sharply. “Where’s the study?”

The girl frowned at him. “The Chrestomanci’s study?” That sounded important, so it was probably right. Avon nodded sharply. “Don’t you know?” she asked, and Avon (thinking quickly, annoyed that this child sounded neither stupid nor particularly obedient—perhaps his information was inadequate) raised a quelling eyebrow.

“The point,” he said, “isn’t actually whether I know, but whether you do.”

The child seemed to think this was a reasonable thing for Avon to say, and showed him to a corridor. She pointed at a green door halfway down, dominating the center of the hall.

“There. That one. Can I go now, sir?” she asked.

Avon waved a hand and she dashed off. He walked down the hall, hearing the faint noise of a recording or a broadcast—‘Something something British Broadcasting Corporation’s Radio Four is proud to bring you the something something Test Match Special, coming to you live from Lords.’ The tinny sounds of a rally, or possibly an athletic event, grew louder as Avon approached the door. A sliver of light shone around the green door’s frame—it wasn’t closed, not quite. Avon laid the tips of his fingers against the glossy paint. He pushed, just slightly, and soundlessly, the door gave.

And there he was. Blake. Sitting at a desk in the center of the room, quite, quite normally—evidently listening absently to the broadcast as he sorted through some papers on the desk. He was wearing brown, ridged trousers, and some form of cream-colored woolen jumper, with blue around the cuffs, bottom and v-neck collar, over a buttoned shirt. He also wore a sling on his right arm, over all of it—so, Avon thought, he was injured, then.

The light from the large, open window illuminated the whole room. It caught in Blake’s curls, making them gleam a little golden. Despite his injury Blake looked healthy. So—natural. He’d tanned, slightly. His skin was browner than Avon remembered it being. Blake looked like someone who went outdoors often—who walked across that park, who took in the sunlight. Blake looked—and this seemed to Avon both confusing and screamingly vital—so natural, here.

The radio said something Blake didn’t like—a wicket, Australia, a googly, Avon didn’t understand any of it—and Blake waved his hand impatiently in the air. The sound cut off, suddenly.

And then, without looking up, Blake’s shoulders stiffened. He paused. He put down his pen.

“Avon,” he murmured, his tone incredulous and wondering and certain, and he raised his head so that he could meet Avon’s eyes.

“Blake,” Avon responded, because it was all he could say. He was pleased his voice didn’t shake apart.

“They told me you were dead,” Blake said, his voice rough. He looked as if he couldn’t believe that Avon was standing there in front of him.

“There’s a lot of it going around,” Avon said, pleased that his wry tone hadn’t deserted him. How could he, for even an instant, have believed the Terminal simulation was actually Blake? He put that
lapse down to Blake’s long absence, and his own keen wish for it to have been true. However the real Blake was unmistakable. Unique.

“I thought—” Blake said, and the raw ache in it made Avon want to go to him. But there was something—Something was wrong.

Blake looked so natural here. Avon had always thought Blake looked confident anywhere. Blake had always seemed as though wherever he was was precisely where he was supposed to be. Avon had never thought Blake out of place, or diminished by his situation, no matter how ridiculous or dire. But in all the time he’d know Blake, Blake had never looked—

Blake had never looked so at home as he did here. In this study. In this house—this castle. In this world. Blake had never looked so at home.

“I didn’t know,” Blake said, and Avon felt something like a shrill warning in it.

“Didn’t know what?” Avon began, but he didn’t get that far. There was another door in the room. He hadn’t paid it much attention, his gaze riveted on Blake. But now someone else swept through that other door and, catching sight of Blake’s expression, frowned.

“Blake, what’s wrong?” a too, too familiar, too concerned voice asked. The newcomer shifted his gaze to the doorway Blake was staring at. To the perfect copy of himself, standing there.

“Ah,” the newcomer said, with devastating softness. An uncomfortable, rueful smile stretched across his face, seemingly without his volition. “Of course.”

“Aven,” Blake said, his tone almost a plea.

“You never told me the computer expert’s name,” ‘Aven’ said, his voice still mild. “You avoided that quite neatly, Blake. And really I—should have guessed, shouldn’t I?”

“Please,” Blake said, “I have to speak to him.”

Aven made a noise, a sort of tsk. “Everything in its right place,” he said in a businesslike tone, his eyes hard.

Blake had evidently worked out what Aven was about to do. He locked eyes with Avon. “Chrestomanci,” Blake said, as though the word was vital. “My name—three times, Avon, say it three—”

And then Avon was, with no sensation of pain or even of movement, thrown gasping onto the floor of the Terminal base.

Aven must have done it, though Avon could barely imagine that kind of power, deployed without preparations, on a whim. He knew somehow, from the feeling of the place alone, that he was back in his own universe, just where he’d started from. No one else was in the room. Just him.

“Chrestomanci,” Avon said immediately through gritted teeth, throwing the force and shape of Heart’s Desire over the word in case it would help. He hadn’t known how to adapt the spell like that a day ago, but now it felt possible to him. “Chrestomanci, Chrestomanci.”

Avon waited a moment, breathing hard. Had it worked? Was he going to have to start over?

And then Blake was with him, panting on the ground at the rough ride, gasping like a fish out of water, his hands scrabbling at the cement floor. Avon scrambled to Blake, clutching at his shoulders.
“Easy, easy. I have you. You’re all right.”

“Avon,” Blake said as Avon helped him into a sitting position. Avon’s hands clenched into Blake’s flesh suddenly, compulsively, on hearing him speak, almost hurting him. Just a little thing—his name. Funny, that—how it could affect him in Blake’s mouth. Avon.

He pulled back.

“Sometimes you didn’t call me that,” Avon said, aware, horribly aware, that the softness of his voice perfectly matched that of his counterpart a moment ago. “You used to mispronounce my name. Just—slightly. ‘Av’n’. I never bothered to correct you. I thought you were simply being idiosyncratic—as self-willed about language as you were about nearly everything else.” Avon smiled. “But that’s wrong, isn’t it Blake? Sometimes you slipped. Sometimes you called me—his name. Because you knew it better, didn’t you, Blake? You’re from that world, aren’t you?” He laughed, mirthlessly. “I was trying to bring you home, but it seems you already were. You were exactly where you belonged.”

Sometimes Blake had seemed otherworldly, to Avon. Blake had been practical and responsive, certainly, but at the back of his mind, Blake had seemed to believe that he lived in a fair, just universe. Well, perhaps he had done. Perhaps, where he came from, people had been fundamentally decent in a way Blake could rely upon.

Blake, Avon realized, had never made as much sense as he had sitting in that room, comfortably and obviously the master of that place. And no wonder no one in that castle had thought Avon’s own presence was remarkable. No wonder he hadn’t tripped any alarms. They had all assumed he was that other him—well. Why shouldn’t they have? The were identical, after all, but for the fact that his duplicate had seemed just as much a part of that richly-appointed reality as Blake had.

“I’m—something called the Chrestomanci,” Blake tried to explain. “I was born in that universe, yes. But I can travel between them all, like you saw when I used to disappear. It’s my responsibility to do that, to see that magic’s not being grossly misused in any of them. As it is here.”

“So you actually have some basis for your conviction that you were born to be the salvation of the universe,” Avon said with a snort, crossing his arms over his chest. “Who died and made you god?”

Their postures were curiously reminiscent of the ones they would have assumed to argue on the Liberator’s flight deck—they were simply doing it on the floor, kneeling a few feet apart from one another. It would have looked silly to an outside observer, but they hadn’t any, and the tension in the space between their stiff bodies was thus intense and unbroken.

“The last Chrestomanci, actually,” Blake said awkwardly. “I was born to the role. I’m afraid it’s inescapable—I should know, I tried. And I’m not God, I’m just—well. Actually in Anglican tradition I’m—the nearest thing on Earth, in terms of Spirit, or magical power, but I’m not—” Blake cut himself off. He rubbed his head in his hands.

“Are you attempting to tell me,” Avon said slowly, tightening the grip of his hands around his arms, “that you are—the most powerful magic user in your universe?”

“Yes,” Blake groaned through his hands. “It’s worse than that, actually. It’s more like—in any universe.” Blake dropped his hands and exhaled. “I was on a reconnaissance mission to Series One when I was captured and mindwiped. I got stuck here. I didn’t remember anything about my former life, I could barely use my own magic. I certainly didn’t remember—” Blake breathed out again.

“I always intended to come back here. I hadn’t given up. But I was severely injured when—I was brought back to the castle,” Blake said, his phrasing indicating to Avon that he was hiding
something. “I needed to heal, before I made another attempt, and certain inhibiting anti-travel wards had been placed on me, besides—for my own protection. To keep me from automatically responding to summons, or from running off when my magic was still too weak to manage getting past the wards. The theory was that if I could get past them, I was probably capable of looking after myself out in the world again.”

Avon noted Blake’s unusual use of the passive voice. Who had brought him back to his own Series? Who had warded him, keeping him away from Series One, and anything that might have taken him away again? It wasn’t difficult to guess.

“Without someone of your magical strength Calling me by name, I don’t think I could have managed it,” Blake finished lamely.

Silence stretched between them. *I have,* Avon thought, *a thousand and a thousand things to say to you. And none of them are right.*

“I can’t believe you *came* for me,” Blake said after a moment.

Avon blinked at him. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Blake gave a bitter chuckle. “The last I heard, you wanted, above all things, to be free of me.”

Avon just stared. He had never actually wanted to kill Blake before, but right now, at this moment, it seemed—terribly tempting.

The absolute blankness of his expression seemed to startle Blake.

“I loved you,” Blake said slowly. “I told you that, again and again, and you never said the same. So I assumed…” Blake swallowed hard. “What was I supposed to think, Avon? I know you resented me, and what I did. I know,” Blake continued, his voice rough, “that what we did together was just a convenience, for you. But other than that you’d have had to find someone else to take the edge off, I have never been sure whether or not you cared if I lived or died, let alone—” Blake looked away, like all this hurt him. “As I said, I heard you were dead. I *mourned you,*” Blake said, his words a hiss of breath, “but I thought that even if the reports were wrong, even if you were still alive, that you didn’t—necessarily care, what I got up to.”

Blake stopped talking.

“You didn’t think I loved you,” Avon said, his voice hollow.

It was, of course, a profound betrayal—that Blake could say that of *him.*

Still. If he were generous with Blake (and he found it terribly difficult not to be), Avon could almost understand. After all, he’d gone out of his way to—*conceal* the effect Blake had on him. After all, he’d never said. He’d let Blake’s words cool in the air between them, like sweat and semen after a hard fuck. He’d let them go with no response, as though he hadn’t heard them, though he’d clutched them to himself, chased after them like vital documents blowing away in a strong wind, and caught them to his chest and held them there. Precious, the most precious things he’d ever had, almost too much to form an adequate response to—anything he *could* have said would not have been enough.

And he had done it, he had behaved in that way, because Blake had had *everything* of him, and he hadn’t been able to *bear* that Blake should have this, too. Avon had assumed Blake didn’t need to hear the words, when it was everywhere (Obvious, Avon had thought. So disgustingly, laughably obvious); when it crawled between them like a live thing; when it twisted through every bitter word and every glance; when it gnawed at Avon constantly. Blake could *say* it and still prioritize the world
at large, could say it and still prize the world so highly above Avon, as, apparently, he had been born
to do. So the words had seemed insufficient to Avon, as far as a description of how he felt about
Blake went. But he had never imagined that Blake hadn’t known that.

Had he really believed that Blake had known he was coming? Had he really believed Blake was
waiting for him? He’d been such a fool.

Blake had misunderstood his actions from the beginning, believing that Avon’s reticence and spite
arose from contempt for him rather than a screaming, unmanageable excess of love. And Avon had
misunderstood Blake’s steady, patient declarations—had heard in them understanding and
reciprocation, rather than recognized them for what they must have been: a bare, brave testament to
Blake’s honesty and determination. Blake would tell Avon the truth until the end of time, even if, as
had apparently been the case, he was convinced Avon found it, found him, laughable (when he’d
only ever taken Blake—quite, quite seriously). Blake must have thought Avon was only holding
himself back from expressing his disdain in response to such confessions because he was keeping a
weather eye on his own advantage, and hoped to keep fucking Blake as long as it was convenient for
him. That was how deeply Avon had failed to make Blake feel secure in their partnership.

Had Blake even believed they had been in more than a one-sided relationship? Had Blake even
believed Avon was faithful to him? Something about the drained, pinched, business-like expression
Blake had worn whenever Avon returned from shore leave suggested that even that was uncertain,
and Avon found he couldn’t bear to ask.

He couldn’t even bring himself to tell Blake how wrong he was. But the small amount he had said,
and the way that he’d said it, and whatever his face was doing without his permission, acted to make
Blake stare at him with a look of wretched longing. It seemed that now, at least, Blake did finally
understand.

“Avon,” Blake breathed, bringing a shaking hand up to touch his lover’s face. The hand stopped,
millimeters above Avon’s skin, feeling the warmth of it and never making contact.

And suddenly Avon couldn’t think of anything but fucking him again, desperately, as he always had
to try and show Blake affection. Here and now, on the floor. Nothing else mattered. He had to make
this conversation go away, make it all better, get his hands on Blake—nothing felt wrong, nothing
could hurt him when Blake was inside him. He lunged in to kiss Blake, to grab Blake by his idiotic
woolen jumper.

But Blake pulled back, and his eyes were so sad. He looked like he didn’t know what to do—Blake,
who always thought he knew what to do—Blake, who always thought he knew what to do.

“Avon,” Blake said it slowly (as though, Avon thought horribly, he were being careful to pronounce
the name correctly), “I returned to 12-A a few months ago. There wasn’t anything between us before
—” Blake stopped himself. “No, that’s a lie, though we were never officially involved. What I’m
trying to say is—Aven is my husband.”

“Your—husband.” Avon said, leaning back again and properly sitting on the ground, instead of
kneeling on it. “‘Aven’. Who you knew from ‘before’. With whom you were never, officially,
involved. He brought you back. He restored your memory, I take it. I suppose he had waited for you.
And you—had always loved Aven.” His eyes fell to Blake’s hand—to the old-fashioned, simple gold
ring he wore there. No one did that anymore, but Avon knew what it was. “So you married him.
Naturally you did.”

“Nothing I felt for you was a lie,” Blake said. “And none of it is over. I don’t love you any less than
I did last year. I don’t love you any less than I do him. I don’t want,” and Blake’s voice shook,
“anything more, right now, than to kiss you.”

Avon believed him. It had been a year since they’d last touched. He felt he was boiling in his own body for the lack of it—for being close, but unable to make contact. He wanted to crawl inside Blake’s skin.

“But of course,” Avon said, “you can’t.”

“No,” Blake said solidly, regaining himself. Conviction in every word. “I can’t touch you without—telling him. I owe him that.” The look on his face said he thought he owed Aven everything.

“Getting his permission, you mean,” Avon smiled tightly. “Given that he is, of course, your legal owner. Do you suppose he’ll give it?” Avon’s smile twisted deeper, as though it were cutting into his face. “I don’t imagine I would.”

So Blake would be honorable about this. Decent and dedicated and loyal. But not to him. Avon found he had never wanted anything more than the loyalty Blake was showing to someone else—his other Avon, from another, better world.

“I will tell him everything that happened here, as I ought to have done from the start,” Blake insisted. “Would you betray you?”

It did seem decidedly unwise.

“Oh, but he isn’t me,” Avon pointed out.

“Semantics,” Blake said, standing and dusting himself off, wincing. “Which is to say—actually quite important. He is you. And he isn’t.” He flexed his arm with a grimace.

“Are you all right?” Avon asked automatically, standing himself.

“Our med-tech isn’t what Series One’s is,” Blake admitted, favoring his arm. “I don’t suppose you have a healing pad around?”

Avon nodded and put his head out into the corridor. Far down it he saw Cally’s slender figure, walking quickly towards them.

“I thought I felt Blake,” she shouted, forgetting in her excitement to use telepathy.

So Cally was still here, which probably meant the lot of them were. Avon had no exact idea how long he’d been walking through worlds in search of Blake, but it seemed he hadn’t been gone long enough for them to manage to fix the ship.

“Bring a medkit,” he called to her, and she obediently ducked into the room where, they had agreed, she would leave him supplies in a high cabinet where no animals could get at them.

Avon paced back into the room.

“Incidently, the Liberator has been destroyed,” he said to Blake almost conversationally.

“What?” Blake shouted, and Avon smiled.

“I’m almost surprised you care. What can any of this mean to you now?”

“A great deal. We’ll discuss this imminently, I promise you.” That was almost a threat. “For now, I have to get back,” Blake said shortly. “Or he’ll come looking. And that won’t help anyone. He’s
only been delayed this long because between us we ripped through those wards he set around me, with your official call. He’s probably fuming and nursing his wounds. Were you using something else to boost it? I thought I felt another layer in there.”

Avon blinked. The Blake he’d known, while essentially identical in every respect of his personality to this Blake, certainly hadn’t been able to feel the shape of a spell and identify its components. In fact Avon had never known anyone who could do that.

And now that Avon let himself pay the slightest attention, he could hardly look away from how Blake was brimming-over with magic now. It was as though it had been released from him, a dam broken, and it kept coming and coming in unstoppable waves. Blake hummed and sang with strength. Avon thought that if Blake had touched him, his touch might well have burned.

“Yes,” Avon said shortly.

He watched as Blake, seemingly by force of habit, rooted around in the remnants of the spells in the room. There probably wasn’t any stopping him. You could tell by his face that Blake was thinking, searching, idly turning over components to see what Avon had done, just as though his hands were moving. Blake then stilled abruptly—and tried not to look at Avon.

“Oh don’t mind that,” Avon said, staring at the door, waiting for Cally to come in, as Blake visibly recognized the fading, thick-sweet tang of Heart’s Desire. “After all, I don’t care whether you live or die, do I, Blake?”

“I’m sorry,” Blake said quietly.


“For what?” Cally asked, coming in with a medical kit.

“Cally!” Blake said with only slightly-forced delight rather than answer, reaching out to her with his good arm. He embraced her one handed, then rifled through the kit, selecting supplies, asking whether he was depriving them of anything vital as he did so (only, Avon thought sourly, himself).

“I’ll be back shortly,” he said to Cally after this was done—easier, probably, than saying it to Avon. “I need to lie low for a while longer, recuperate and take care of some business, back—in 12A,” he said, though Avon could tell he’d been going to say ‘back home’. “But I should be able to find you wherever you go, if you’re anxious to leave this planet.”

“Will you really be able to find us anywhere?” Avon drawled. “How impressive.” It was. Avon’s tone both conceded that and mocked Blake’s claim, in a diffuse, undirected way.

Blake risked a quick glance at him. “It’s within my purview. And besides, you can always Call. You know how to, now. And,” with a smile for Cally, “I can’t even refuse to answer, if you really need me.”

“Oh, I’ll remember that.” Avon assured him.

“If you need help getting away from here, I can arrange that,” Blake told Cally, who seemed more receptive to the information. “I’m more mobile than you are.”

She said it wouldn’t come amiss, and briefly told the both Blake and Avon how the rest of them were getting on, or failing to, with the ship repairs.
“Well,” Blake said, gathering the supplies in a bag that practical, forward-thinking Cally had shoveled in with the medkit weeks ago, with such exigencies as a quick evacuation in mind. “I had better go.”

“Yes,” Avon said dryly, “I suppose you better had.”

“I’ll be back,” Blake said, steel in his voice and determination in his eyes. He glared at Avon in a way that made Avon feel furious. Helpless.

“I’ve heard that before,” Avon snapped, and Blake was gone—instantly. Without anything like preparation. As easy as that. The room crackled with his power, felt as though it might be marked forever by that instant’s transaction. Avon shut his eyes against the blast of it, though Cally, without magic of her own, seemed not even to feel it.

Come to think of it, Blake had made it back to Earth, just as he’d promised on the London. A different Earth, admittedly, but still: Blake had escaped. Blake had won, after a fashion. Blake had made it home. Home to his dominion, where he was powerful and no doubt respected. Lord and master of a beautiful castle, with an adoring husband besides (and he’d only had to glance at Aven’s soft, concerned face for an instant to determine that—Avon had known he was right. What he felt for Blake was obvious, and humiliating—even if Blake apparently hadn’t been able to see it).

Lucky Blake. And lucky, lucky Aven.

“How long has it been?” Avon asked Cally. “I lost track of time.”

“Two weeks since you left,” Cally said. “Avon, what’s happening?”

“What isn’t?” he said grimly, and gave her a quite edited synopsis of the situation. Nowhere in it did Blake’s matrimonial status arise.

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Blake arrived back in his study, and knew by the light outside that perhaps an hour had elapsed. Aven wasn’t there. Blake hadn’t really expected he would be.

He checked their bedroom, and his heart twisted, but he wasn’t surprised not to find Aven there either. Blake ran the options over in his mind. Aven wouldn’t want to defile the garden with this, though he often turned to it for consolation. And he wouldn’t be working on something else either. He’d be too upset and unfocused for that. He wouldn’t have left the Castle—Aven didn’t retreat. There was really only one good bet, and Blake took it. If Aven wasn’t in their room, it was because he couldn’t bear the thought of stitching up the wounds Blake had given him in their marital bed.

So, disregarding that it might look immature, Aven must have slunk back to the bedroom he’d been using until only a few months ago. The room he’d occupied from the time he’d first come to the castle, which was still his. Aven used it as a sort of auxiliary study, at present. He’d made vague comments about removing the bedroom furniture therein to free it up and to facilitate this. Normally Aven managed the castle with total efficiency, but then he’d been distracted, these past months, and so he hadn’t seen to it quite yet. He’d been distracted because he’d been so happy, since their marriage. Blake had never seen him happier.

Blake shut his eyes and leaned against the wall, exhausted. Aven had been right—he hadn’t been up to answering Calls yet, though hopefully the S-1 medication he’d brought with him would accelerate his recovery timeline. Aven had even been right to tie him to the castle with those ridiculous wards—Blake knew he would have tried to push himself, even if this hadn’t happened. Aven had known best, as he often did.
Aven cared for him, and he loved Aven, adored and wanted Aven. He had done since the first day he’d seen Aven, shivering in a dark, dank swamp and trying with every fiber of his being. Aven was precious. In all the series he’d visited Blake had never seen anything finer or known anyone better (and he’d only once, in Avon, met Aven’s match). And Blake knew he was everything to Aven, in turn. How could he not know that, now? The look on Aven’s face when he’d come home… People would gladly give their lives, to be looked at like that. Blake would have given all of his.

Blake felt ripped open, and like a bastard, and almost like crying. Blake felt thrilled Avon was alive: profoundly so. Blake couldn’t afford to think, right now, about how he felt, because his husband must be furious, and a wreck, and must need him. He couldn’t stand the thought of hurting Aven, even as he knew that he had done, and that he was absolutely, unavoidably about to salt the wound.

He pushed himself away from the wall and finished making his way to Aven’s old room. He knocked, and received a predictable pointed silence in response. You could tell that Aven was definitely in there because no innocently empty room was ever so cold in its quiet. Aven’s silences had always possessed their own microclimates.

“I’m coming in,” he said quietly.

Aven didn’t stop him, though he could have slammed Blake, Chrestomanci though he was, down the stairs and even miles away with a word and a wish.

Aven was sitting up on the bed, turned away from the door and thus from Blake. In a hand, he gathered threads of his magic, twisting them and knitting them back over the exposed areas in his personal shield. Blake winced to note how ripping through the wards had cut a gash in the protective carapace of Aven’s magic, all down the length of it. Aven was almost done now, though. The tight flick of his wrist spoke of black rage.

Aven had wanted to do this in his sound-proofed bedroom, Blake supposed, because no one came here, and he hadn’t wanted anyone to see this. Knitting magic could sting, if you had fine sensibilities. Aven had particularly acute awareness, and it must have smarted. He ought to have let someone help him, but he only let Blake touch his magic like this, and he apparently didn’t want Blake to touch him now. So Aven had come here because he hadn’t wanted any noise he might make to be audible.

He must also have wanted his confrontation with Blake, when it came, to be private, rather than a subject of public discussion. Aven reflexively thought about that sort of thing. Aven held the castle in the palm of his hand. He was Blake’s help-meet; his partner; his mentor (Blake knew he’d been nothing without Aven, dead a score of times); the man Blake had ached for from the first moment he’d first seen him until every memory had been ripped from him, and wanted again, as if there’d been no interruption, when he’d again known his own name. Even in the interim, with every memory gone, Blake had fallen in love with Avon for the same qualities he’d loved in Aven, and Blake felt it as a species of fidelity. Even through the worst violations that had been inflicted on him in Series One, Aven’s battered orrery had rested in the core of Blake’s body, keeping him from death and destruction, tying him to the man who would be his husband. And in Aven, Blake had left a shard of himself—a fragment of his own magic. Aven often touched that shard by force of habit, and sometimes (and Blake found the impulse unspeakably dear) for comfort. Right now, Aven would probably just as soon rip it out of his chest—doing to himself what Blake had done to him.

Another man might have asked what Avon was to him, but Aven had known at a glance. It had probably explained a few things. And Aven had the benefit of knowing everything he and Blake were to one another, besides. That certainly gave him a unique degree of insight.

“Did you ever really come home?” Aven asked. His fey, distant tone was at odds with the coldness
of his eyes, which Blake had crouched at his feet to meet, and with the continuing sharp twists of his hands.

“I—imagined I had found you,” Aven said. “Saved you from that place. I thought you were here, with me. I thought you’d returned from the wars. But perhaps you never did. Why,” Aven said, dropping his hand, the job unfinished, and looking away from Blake, his eyes too bright, “did you ever give me my heart back, Blake? Only to do all this to me. To disappear, and then—It’s cruel. And I hadn’t thought you capable of cruelty. Of resolution, certainly, but not that.”

Blake lifted a hand to Aven’s face, letting himself finish the aborted caress he’d offered Avon. “Calon lân—”

Aven grabbed his hand in a bruising grip, twisting their fingers together hard. Blake let him, refusing to wince.

“You’re my heart, Blake,” Aven hissed, the fury in his face making him look, for an instant, exactly like his counterpart at some of the worst moments in their relationship. “You know you are.”

“I do,” Blake said, swallowing. “I know. And I have to go back.”

“To Series One, or to Avon?” Aven made a mockery of the name’s vowels, butchering them, stringing them out, wide and almost obscene.

“Yes,” Blake said.

“He’s had you, and you never even mentioned his name. Since when are you so generous and inarticulate?”

Blake winced. “I didn’t think it would help anything to tell you. Obviously I was wrong. I’m sorry. And it wasn’t like that—”

“Believe it or not, I don’t want to know what it was like. Or rather I do, Blake. I just can’t bear it.”

Aven stood, whirled away from him, and then turned back to Blake with a furious argument on his lips. But it drained from him, and Blake looked up to find his husband’s face pale, his eyes desperate. “Please don’t,” Aven said, very quietly.

“Kerr—” Blake said, feeling wretched. That he should ask. That Aven should have to ask this of him.

“Please,” Aven repeated in a horrible voice. He swallowed. “Roger, please. I’ll do anything. Anything at all. Just don’t—do this to me. Blake.”

Blake rose to take his husband into his arms, but Aven stepped back, looking almost afraid.

“I prayed for your safe return,” Aven said with an incredulous, slightly hysterical laugh, looking at the floor rather than at Blake. “I—me, I—”

Aven took a few deep breaths until he felt more in control, and Blake let him, gave him the space to do it in. When Aven looked up at Blake again, it was with anger and confidence.

“Does he need you as much as I do?” Aven demanded, sure that the answer couldn’t be yes. That no one could.

Blake looked at him, determined. “More,” he said. “If anything—more.”
Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth; I sought him, but I found him not. 'I will rise now, and go about the city, in the streets and in the broad ways, I will seek him whom my soul loveth.' I sought him, but I found him not.

The watchmen that go about the city found me: 'Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?'

Scarce had I passed from them, when I found him whom my soul loveth: I held him, and would not let him go, until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me.

***

one year earlier

The Castle had noted the fall of the impregnable barrier enclosing Series One with interest. No one could determine how exactly its destruction had been accomplished, but Aven had a good guess as to who could have been responsible for bringing down that diabolically complicated system of spells. He’d switched the detector off its regular cycle and directed it to fully scan Series One again. He’d given his shard a passing, glancing touch as he’d done so—the habit ingrained in him now.

When, months later, well into the S1 search cycle, the Castle had practically been shaken on its foundations by the unfamiliar, blasting sound of the target-found claxon, Aven had shot out of the dining room and to the device. He’d rapidly confirmed the discovery. In a universe as big as that, with that many planets, the device couldn’t pinpoint Blake precisely. But it insisted he was alive, and in a general area.

It could still be wrong, but oh, Aven thought his device was more reliable than that. Slow to achieve his desired results, but nonetheless reliable.

Aven knew that the last time he’d been in S1, he’d fared poorly against the security forces. But he was older and more experienced now. He was the Chrestomanci, and had held the title and the bulk of the role’s power for almost seven years. His determination was harder and less desperate. And this time, he would be less emotionally compromised. He was now more than prepared to kill anyone hostile and hindering him, and he would enter S1 armed to the teeth, spelled and twice-charmed.

Even thus determined, finding Blake was no simple task.

“Can’t you sit still?” he’d hissed repeatedly at the top-line Ba-indicator tuned to his shard, chastising Blake via the device.

It was hard enough trying to find Blake somewhere on a given planet. But Blake, either chasing something or on the run from something, seemed hardly content to occupy even one planet for a handful of days together. And how the hell was one supposed to transport oneself onto unknown objects moving at faster than light speeds? Aven threw the gauntlet down at Cambridge astrophysics. Then, at the Boat Race (appropriately enough), he told an old Oxford chum in the equivalent department that he’d heard Cambridge almost had it, and wouldn’t that be a coup for them. He’d then watched Oxford, predictably, scramble to outdo their rivals. Worried about Blake as he was,
he’d only attended the event (surprising several old colleagues, who hadn’t seen him in years) to strategically drop this hint. But thus far no one had anything. Aven would have to find Blake when Blake stopped.

Aven found the Ba-indicators available on the market to be rather crude things. Their range was limited—they certainly couldn’t have worked through universes like his great detector array. And even brought through to the relevant universe, they were reluctant to trace Blake’s pattern as it moved. It was Aven’s shard, more than anything, that pulled him towards Blake. He closed his eyes and let it tug him, unerringly, towards his goal. When the machines disagreed and faltered, it was the shard he trusted.

Given how unequal even the top-shelf example of the breed he was using was to his requirements, Aven started to make adjustments to the indicator. Eventually his improvements amounted to the creation of an essentially different device: a next-generation locator that suited his purposes (and would, incidentally, probably move the entire personal-detection field forward).

Another patent on that, Aven thought wryly. He had already invented more highly lucrative devices in his ongoing quest to keep Blake alive and/or recover him than he had in any other line of research. Blake would be frankly appalled by the sum the patents had brought him (which Aven vaguely knew, because Sebastian had tried, rather boringly, to tell him about it once over dinner). Aven wished Blake would come back and be appalled to his face. He wanted a stern reminder that the economy had never recovered in the North after the Tories (cue curled lip) had gutted the mining and manufacturing industries and left nothing in their stead, and so there were a lot of people without work up there, Aven, a lot of good uses for that kind of money. He wanted it more than he wanted anything else in this or any other world.

Aven’s quest was made more disagreeable and difficult by the unpleasant discovery that his duplicate in this universe (as he’d suspected, it seemed he did have one here) was some kind of embezzler with a price on his head. This kept coming up, and Aven kept having to insist, via a judicious application of magical force, that he wasn’t going anywhere with anyone. This was especially irritating because Aven still hated being reminded of his two alternate selves’ existence. But he was also unimpressed to learn that one of him was a white-collar criminal. It made him uncomfortable because it recalled to him his own shameful major error of judgement and the consequent term he’d spent as Blake’s prisoner. It also deeply embarrassed him, because Aven hadn’t thought that he had it in him, in any of him, to go in for bank fraud (bourgeois) (extremely), and to go to seed so feebly (like a lazily moldering potato) that it seemed he hadn’t even successfully stolen anything.

At last (at last!) he managed to track Blake to a world apparently called ‘Jevron’. By the time Aven caught up with Blake, Blake had already lingered there for what had to have been almost two weeks. Aven prayed as he arrived that the fact that Blake had stayed on this planet so long didn’t say anything about whether he’d been injured or cornered, but of course it said quite a lot about both.

When Aven found Blake (managing to transport himself to a filthy, back-street physician’s establishment), his rush of elation was thoroughly undercut by the vile condition Blake was in. Blake was gravely injured, floating in and out of consciousness, sweating copiously and clearly in a great deal of pain. His right arm was wounded, and it looked infected. Aven had no idea what kind of weapon had seared off several layers of the skin and muscle.

Aven swallowed hard and pushed down his own panic and horror. With a calm that would later somewhat surprise him, he scooped up the pool of Blake’s ebbing life and shoved it back into Blake, slamming a magical barrier over the wound to keep it down. Blake screamed, and Aven flinched but
held Blake still for it. This was necessary. He didn’t want Blake dying on him, losing a life in the transportation process. How many did he have left? Whatever it was, it was too few.

Aven counted. No, that—couldn’t be right. He counted again.

Three. Three? Blake had possessed his complete set of nine when he’d left Aven last. How in hell had he managed to lose six? Unimportant, at present.

The physician, if you could call him that, returned to the dingy room and started to find Aven there.

“Given the condition of your establishment,” Aven sneered, “I hardly think it necessary to pay the bill.”

It wasn’t his best line, but Aven was rather distracted by the contradictory flurry of emotions Blake leaning against him—Blake bleeding against him—gave rise to. With a jerk of his head Aven whipped the two of them back to 12A, opting to go directly to the apparition-bay at the specialist magical maladies clinic in London. Private healthcare—Aven hoped Blake would smell it in the air and wake up just to hate it.

When Blake did come ‘round a few days later, he didn’t initially comment on the taint of capitalism. He looked wildly about him, his eyes landing on Aven, who was seated beside the bed he was propped up in. Aven, who’d been half afraid the doctors had been overly optimistic about Blake’s chances of recovery, even given that Blake was tough and stubborn, leaned forward in his chair.

Before he could say a word, Blake’s eyes widened.

“Avon?” he said, mispronouncing Aven’s name in an odd way. But Aven, who’d been told to expect massive memory damage, and who’d confirmed as much with his own investigations of the orrery, was surprised and touched that, before they’d even worked at the problem, Blake remembered him. Imperfectly, perhaps, but Blake did know him.

“You’re safe here,” Aven said, catching Blake’s shoulders as Blake tried to sit up fully. “I’ve brought you somewhere safe.”

“I knew they couldn’t manage to kill you,” Blake said, tears welling in his eyes. He was so weak at present—it horrified and sliced into Aven, to see Blake so physically enfeebled, so confused. “No matter what evidence they paraded around, I knew—”

“I was never the one in danger,” Aven reminded him.

Blake laughed, very weakly. “So it seems.”

“I can’t talk to you like this,” Aven said suddenly, swallowing. “Blake, I—you’re stable now. Let me help, let me fix you.” He was tired and fraught, but then Blake had been tired and fraught and hadn’t had any idea what in hell he was doing when he’d given Aven back his heart. Aven felt a similar sense of urgency. A similar conviction that they could, they must see this through. He’d already had someone send down the relevant tools while he’d waited for Blake to wake up—there was really no point wasting time.

“Avon? What do you—?” Blake said, his eyes weak and befuddled again. The way he couldn’t even manage to say Aven’s name properly was driving Aven mad.

“Here,” Aven said tightly, extending a hand to Blake’s chest. “You are just going to have to trust me.”
Blake’s gaze grew firmer. “I told you I’d always trusted you.”

Aven smiled at him—a sloping, sideways thing. “You didn’t, actually—not that I recall. But it’s good of you to say so. Now, open up for me, Blake.”

Blake dropped his instinctive magical defenses and let Aven in, let him push and find the mangled spheres of Blake’s orrery and coax them back into the shapes he knew. The brush of the pad of his thumb made each orb swell, plump and whole. It must ache, Aven knew, as the memories rushed back in, the tangled chains unknotted, and the parts of Blake’s whole self slipped back into alignment. He slipped the catches on Blake’s memories and magic. The first had been almost entirely sealed, with only hairline cracks letting flashes of Blake’s memories out. The second, Blake’s magic, had managed to dribble out somehow, but the orrery seemed to have leaked only what Blake needed to protect himself.

Blake, who had been biting his lip against the sting of it, cried out, and it wrenched Aven’s heart. “Shh,” Aven said, picking up a tool and making another painful little adjustment. “I know it hurts. I know you’re sore, and exhausted. But we can manage it together, you and I. And we must.”

Blake nodded feebly, and Aven coaxed and pulled until the orrery sprang free of the cage of Blake’s ribs and twisted loose from his spine. He worked until each dent was hammered out. Doctors and nurses came and went, tsking darkly about treatment timescales and interlopers.

“Lock the door of my private suite as you leave,” Aven said coolly to the third nurse to try and sidle in for something or other. “And don’t disturb us unless it’s an emergency.” He never took his eyes off Blake.

Finally Aven slipped back in his chair, drained and satisfied. That was done then—the orrery good as new. Blake ought, by all rights, to be himself again.

Aven was startled by a touch on his face, the barest brush of fingertips. He opened his eyes to find that Blake had struggled back up, bracing himself on his elbow, and was reaching for him. Obligingly Aven bent down, and it was only now, abandoned by his frenzied worry and drive, that he let himself think.

In the lapse of industry, hysterical snatches of poetry grabbed at him. *He is he is coming, my life, my fate; The red rose cries, “He is near, he is near”; And the white rose weeps, “He is late”. All of a sudden, it was time. Blake was alive. Blake was himself. Blake was with him. Blake was touching his face and staring into his eyes and Aven’s heart hammered, the dull thud of seven years’ absence and four years’ longing before that (unknown and subsequently recognized) rising now to a pounding, relentless beat. Yes? What did Blake want? Anything, he could have anything, and he ought to. The world and everything in it.

Aven’s lips parted and he barely kept a sob of relief, a delirious, stupid ‘Oh, my love’ from meeting the air.

“I missed you so,” Blake was saying, and was he really saying that? “I missed you so,” Blake repeated, unmistakably.

Aven knew he must be staring at Blake with some unpardonable expression. Blake’s fingers stroked along Aven’s cheek, and Aven made a noise that didn’t mean anything and plunged into a sudden kiss. It ought to have been savage, but he was too over-wrought with passion to make it up into any kind of hard, impressive display of desire. He kissed Blake artlessly, falling over him and barely managing to arrange his limbs so he didn’t put pressure on the invalid beneath him.
“I’m sorry,” Aven gasped when he pulled back, “I’m sorry, if you didn’t want that, if that wasn’t what you wanted, I—”

“That was always what I wanted,” Blake said, pulling Aven back down to him and kissing him again, weak but desperate. “Do you remember,” he said between kisses, “do you remember I tried to ask you to marry me?”

“During that—” Aven remembered the incident with sudden clarity. Oh how stupid he’d been, they’d both been— “Ask me again,” Aven demanded.

“So much has happened,” Blake said, but there was love in every word and Aven could hear no rejection in it.

“Yes,” Aven agreed emphatically, “And I don’t care. Ask me again, instantly.”

“Will—?” Blake began.

“Yes,” Aven interrupted him.

“Let me do this right,” Blake said with a shadow of his old growl. “Aven. Kerr Aloysius Chant-Aven. Something of his name, something of his line, and all the rest. Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” Aven repeated, “Provided, of course, that you take your bloody job back.”

Blake laughed, choking a little. “Didn’t you want it? As you see, I’m probably not going to be up to it for a while yet.”

“No,” Aven agreed, thinking of the myriad claims on Blake’s time and threats to his safety the position entailed. “Good.”

Blake groaned. “I thought you wanted the job off your hands.”

“I’m mercurial,” Aven said shortly. Blake laughed, presumably at the understatement. When the laugh turned into a cough Aven reluctantly got up to fetch Blake a glass of water.

“Any chance of tea?” Blake asked after gulping it down, his voice suffused with all the yearning you’d expect from a British man who’d not touched a drop in seven years. Aven pressed a button on the side of the bed and a nurse came in, departing instantly with her instruction. Blake began to look around him with suspicion.

“Is this—?” Blake asked, his eyes narrowing.

“I wasn’t taking any chances,” Aven said crisply.

“The NHS isn’t—oh, thank you.” Blake looked at the returned nurse (who came bearing the promised tea) as though she were a visitation from God. He savored the first gulp with an expression rather like the one Aven imagined he’d wear when they finally consummated the passion that had dominated the last decade of their lives.

“What happened to you, there?” Aven asked quietly, when the nurse had gone again and Blake’s look of rapture had eased into an expression of less profound contentment.

“Where to begin?” Blake muttered. “I—expect you know that I got involved with the Freedom Party. More involved than I perhaps—led you to believe.”

“Really,” Aven said in an unsurprised tone. But Blake had already been disproportionately punished
for keeping this from him, and Aven felt it unnecessary to dwell on this mistake further.

“When the Federation raided the Freedom Party, they killed everyone present.”

“Including you,” Aven realized.

“For a while,” Blake nodded. “Fortunately they thought I’d simply survived a shot out of sheer dumb luck. They didn’t realize what I was. I went by ‘Roj’ there, and they thought I’d managed to wipe my citizen record, that I was the group’s leader—”

Aven arched an eyebrow. “Were you?”

“No—not exactly,” Blake said lamely. “It was a free assemblage, there wasn’t a leader, per se—”

Aven rolled his eyes. That was a yes, then.

“Anyway,” Blake pressed on, “they took me in and interrogated me. They’ve got good anti-magic cuffs—I’d never seen that kind of technology before. And I was still groggy from having died.”

“They interrogated you?” Aven asked, horrified. “As in—Were you tortured?”

Blake laughed, and then sobered quickly when he saw Aven’s expression. “There isn’t an easy way to say this—I’ve been tortured at least a score of times since we last spoke. And that’s hardly the worst of it.”

Aven stood up. Paced the room. “What is?” he asked sharply. “What is the worst of it?”

“When I couldn’t give them what they wanted to know, they performed something called a mindwipe on me,” Blake said, regarding him levelly. “Fortunately the orrery, your orrery, Aven, kept me safe. They didn’t even know it was there. Their spells damaged it, but couldn’t destroy it. The orrery crunched in around the core of me, protecting my mind and my magic. Their life-rippers, their de-power guns—none of it was going to work on me.”

“Oh, it didn’t just protect them, it actively kept you from recovering your memories,” Aven sneered as he realized what he’d done. “And it locked away your magic as well. I never foresaw—” Aven breathed, and spun back to face Blake. “I hobbled you,” He continued. “How could I have been so stupid?”

“It kept me alive,” Blake stressed. “It prevented those interrogators and all the ones that followed from finding out what I was. They’d have killed me as many times as it took, then and there, if they’d known, and in that condition I couldn’t have hidden it from them.”

Aven’s mouth twisted, as though he were going to contest that summary, but Blake continued.

“It saved my life and it protected my essence. For four years I lived as a kind of emptied out drone in that world—they programmed new memories into me, gave me a new identity, a whole background to match the outlines of the one they thought I’d erased from their computers, a new skillset. Tough work I suspect, but they thought the reformed leader of the Freedom Party was a good enough showpiece to bother spending the time on. And then one day, after I witnessed another massacre, I remembered the first. Broken as it was, the orrery tried to respond to the crisis, and it restored my personality and some of my magic, if not my memories. Don’t you see, Aven? The orrery kept those parts of me safe until it was time—the rest it protected until you could repair it.”

“No wonder my tracker couldn’t locate you,” Aven muttered. “You weren’t there to locate at the time.” Laying aside the question of guilt, the thought of Blake, stripped of his soul and made to serve
some fascist dictatorship as a good citizen for four years, made Aven sick.

“Tracker?” Blake asked.

“Unimportant, at present,” Aven shook his head. “So you recovered your personality after four years, but not your memories.”

“Some of the sensations of my previous life came back to me, though,” Blake said, revising Aven’s summary of the situation. “I remember, among other things, wanting desperately to come home. And I couldn’t get there.”

Aven took a long, ragged breath. “Go on.”

“The orrery drew people I could use to me—good people, in some cases even people I knew here. The causality curves worked beautifully. I had Jenny, for example, and Will, and—” Blake seemed to skate over something here. Painful memories, Aven supposed. There must be so much to unfold. He would have to give Blake time. It wasn’t as though he trusted himself to handle it all at once, either. “And together, we took a ship. I’d been sent to a penal colony as a political prisoner—Well, no,” Blake corrected himself, “actually they framed me for child molestation. They even gave the children involved false memories so they believed it—I have to hand it to them,” Blake said with immense hatred in his voice, “they’re very thorough.”

“What?” Aven blanched. It was too ridiculously, over-the-top despicable. What real people would plan and execute that? And who could think that of Blake?

“It’s the sort of thing they find expedient,” Blake said, and Aven could hear deep reservoirs of loathing and unearned guilt in the words.

With a sudden intuition, Aven knew Blake wasn’t at all recovered from this portion of his exile. Blake, a trained teacher, a competent natural educator with an easy presence in the classroom that the whole Castle teaching staff had envied, might well be unable to lecture again. He might even feel uncomfortable anywhere near the Academy charges. Blake had been so good at teaching: at the career he’d chosen for himself, and been happy to be able to continue in some form after being called to his office. He’d loved it. The children had always loved him. And he might never be able to do it again.

Aven crossed the room and sat on the bed beside Blake, taking his hand. They would have to go slowly. They’d have to take things as they came. But that place had given him Blake back mutilated and violated and robbed, and Aven thought with a flare of loathing that it would be justice if S1 gnawed itself down to the bone. Oh yes, he wanted to see that awful world in ashes.

“A ship,” Aven reminded Blake, caressing Blake’s fingers—the nails and cuticles still showed evidence of Blake’s worrying them with his teeth. Dear old bad habits. Blake might be shaken, but he never changed: not the good, clean core of him. Blake could never be diminished, not even by all that horror.

“A ship,” Blake agreed. “A marvelous gift of a ship, that only probability curve manipulation could have brought me. And some luck thereafter, when we started to fight back. We did a lot of good, but it wasn’t enough. There were seven of us,” Blake’s lip tugged into half a wistful smile, “if you included the ship itself. Eventually, we even managed to destroy the Federation’s central computer control—which also anchored the barrier spell.”

Aven raised an eyebrow. “Impressive.”
“I had,” Blake said quietly, “a very impressive computer expert.”

Aven stroked a hand through Blake’s curls, as he’d wanted to do since they’d been twenty-six. “You weren’t on that marvelous ship when I found you.”

“No,” Blake admitted, “no, we all had to evacuate after that battle. I was separated from my crew and never made it back. I’m not sure they all did. I heard not all of them managed—” Blake cut himself off, and continued with evident anger, “but the Federation lies habitually, so I don’t know what to believe.”

He needed a moment before he could continue, and Aven gave it to him.

“I was on the run for months,” Blake began again. “I was shot at the start of the engagement, and it never fully healed—there wasn’t any really advanced medical facility I could safely go to. In the aftermath of the central computer going down, I managed to slip a few of the outer planets free of Federation control, and to keep moving. But on Jevron I got caught out by a blockade. The wound reopened when I took another shot in almost the same place, and infection set in on the worst possible planet for it. The available facilities were primitive to start with, and the Federation presence there was too considerable for me to think of going to any proper doctor. I was dying in that shack—quite, quite slowly.”

Aven kept moving his hand through Blake’s hair, to soothe himself as much as Blake. “What a nightmare of a series. My poor Blake. What haven’t you endured?”

Blake shut his eyes under the caress. “It wasn’t all bad,” he rumbled low, and he breathed out when Aven kissed his neck, just at the pulse point—letting his teeth scrape Blake’s throat. “Avon—” Blake whispered, choking himself up in a hard gasp.

“And did anyone there love you?” Aven asked, knowing that jealousy was absurd. Blake hadn’t even known his own first name, let alone that he loved and owed himself to Aven. But Aven had loved and owed himself to Blake for over a decade, and had known as much for the seven long years of Blake’s absence. He hadn’t felt able to give himself to anyone in all that while—not even to lend himself for an evening. He’d grieved as a widower, even while zealously protecting his determined hope for Blake’s return. And so he was jealous—jealous of anyone Blake had so much as found comfort in these past years, even as he didn’t precisely want Blake to have spent them entirely in lonely suffering.

Blake breathed out, something harsh in the sound. “Not like you do,” he said, in a tone that indicated how unhappy he’d be to discuss this further. Aven chose to take the hint.

He changed the subject, explaining how he’d attempted to find Blake. His abortive raids into S1. How he’d nearly lost his life to them. His quest to get past the barrier (which sounded obsessive, even to his own ears, in the telling). The construction of his massive detector array. Blake’s eyes flickered slightly at that, as though the words had some additional significance to him. When he asked, Blake shook his head.

“Go on,” he said, understanding that Aven needed to explain what Blake’s absence had been to him.

Aven outlined the arduous, dangerous things he’d done to try and locate Blake. The perhaps more difficult, abiding trial of steady work in Blake’s role. Aven outlined the long wait—the bare parameters sufficed to give an impression of the desolation, the expectation, the alternating intervals of longing and despair.

“Oh sweetheart,” Blake murmured, meeting Aven’s eyes, and the endearment, which seemed such a
pointed reference to what they had been through together, to Blake’s having saved Aven’s heart, blossomed painful and lush between them.

“Don’t go back there,” Aven said severely. His mind went blank and he felt nauseous at the thought of Blake ever returning to the place that had done this to him, that didn’t deserve his help. He threaded a hand through Blake’s orrery, twisting the strings around his fingers protectively.

“No,” Blake agreed, “not now. But when I’m well, I have to. You know I do. Those people don’t deserve what’s happening to them, and I’m no closer to understanding what’s wrong with S1 than I was when I went in. I let myself be so utterly incapacitated,” Blake growled, clearly blaming himself, “but I am far better prepared now. I understand how that universe works. It’s also still my responsibility.”

Idly, Aven twisted the delicate chains of Blake’s orrery a bit tighter around his hand, smiling a little when Blake flinched at the pressure on his heartstrings. “We can talk about it,” he said with utterly false reasonableness, “when you’re well. There’s nothing to be done until then.”

“Yes,” Blake said, certain and dangerous, “we can.”

Aven grinned sweet and hard at him. “Don’t make me furious with you quite yet,” he said, leaning in to kiss Blake again.

***

He brought Blake home as soon as the doctors said it was safe for him to, convinced Blake would recover better there. A driver from the Castle brought them up from town. Aven refused to subject Blake’s still-delicate system even to small magical jumps. Blake, who’d grown up hardly using his magic and had had limited access to it during the past years, didn’t mind slumming it with mundane conveniences nearly as much as most high-level users would have done. Aven himself was used to trains and automobiles, and only balked at mechanical international travel—his magic was for Chrestomanci business, and major workings like non-essential teleportation represented too great a drain on his system, given that at any moment he might need to give every scrap of his magic to a vital and vast endeavor.

Another form of chastity he’d imposed on himself for Blake, Aven thought wryly. Put in mind of sex, Aven absently rubbed one of Blake’s hands, which rested on one of Blake’s legs. In so doing, the tips of his fingers skated across Blake’s tweed slacks. A matching jacket today—Aven had tipped their tailor and rushed him for a new suit, employing the combination of charm, bullying and rich rewards that had long kept him on good terms with that supremely talented, dear old man. The tailor in question had been responsible for providing Aven with his annual compliment of hand-made garments since he was twelve, and had taken over Blake’s wardrobe, under Aven’s direction, when they were twenty-five. Blake had tried at the time to contend that clothes didn’t matter for the role, and Aven had destroyed his arguments, making Blake feel how very wrong about that he was. He hadn’t understood, then, why he’d so richly enjoyed Blake’s charged submission on the point. Ah, the innocence of youth.

Blake had come from the sort of family that shopped off the rack, and didn’t even get their ready-to-wear purchases adjusted afterwards. Blake had had to explain carefully to Aven, when they were young men, that this didn’t actually mean the Blakes were working class, and that a lot of people did this. (The Blakes were ‘lower middle, with bohemian tendencies and solid inherited furnishings’, though Roger understood they’d been upper at some point a few generations back—probably the source of the tendencies and the furnishings alike.) Aven had found it all strange, and the results of this method of clothing oneself woefully inadequate. Impossible though it would have been to miss
his charisma, you almost wouldn’t have known Blake was physically attractive under all that slouchy, wrinkled, cheap fabric. But, as he'd said at the time, Blake had a government expense account now and was in the business of impressing people, and he was going to look like a proper Chrestomanci if Aven had anything to say about it: and Aven had plenty to say about everything.

Thus Blake currently looked handsome in his flattering, well-made clothing. His color had improved, the best spells money could buy were knitting his arm back into its original condition. Though he was still walking with a cane and cradling his arm in a sling, unable to stand or walk for long periods even thus supported, Blake was on the mend. Aven had helped him dress that morning, easing Blake into his jacket and sighing with sympathy as Blake winced when he had to move his bad arm. They could have done it by magic—they both knew that. But neither of them mentioned it. The ritual and the touching were too good to waste or wish away, even if they did flirt with pain.

The memory of carefully buttoning Blake into his clothing made Aven think of unbuttoning it, of Blake’s broad, strong chest under his fingers—of the orrery (the mark of Aven’s possession and protection) lodged inside him, next to his heart. Just at present, his fingers skimmed lightly over Blake’s thigh, resting against good, thick cloth that was pleasant to the touch. And underneath that, of course, lay the still more inviting expanse of Blake’s skin. Blake’s interestingly powerful-looking thighs. Aven felt a sudden swell of hunger for that skin, for Blake’s body, and pushed it down. Not yet. The doctors had been decently circumspect, but had also managed to be quite clear on this point. This wasn’t just a lingering arm-wound—Blake’s whole system had been shattered. No serious exertion of any kind ought to be attempted. Not for another few weeks.

“Should we make love as soon as is physically possible,” he said in a low voice the driver couldn’t hear, “or wait until after the wedding? Given that we are already forced to delay.”

Aven saw Blake’s Adam’s apple bob in his throat, and smiled with satisfaction.

“Whichever order you prefer,” Blake said evenly.

“Perhaps we should make a trial-run,” Aven said idly, running his fingers in circles on Blake’s thigh. Having voiced the alternatives, though, he was now certain he wanted Blake to have him for the first time on their wedding night, for the ridiculous Gothic appeal of the thing. “We might not be sexually compatible,” Aven teased, knowing that there wasn’t a damn thing Blake might want to do to him that he wasn’t starving for.

Blake looked slightly uncomfortable. “I’m not terribly worried about that,” he muttered, and Aven frowned, wondering why Blake looked ill at ease. He hadn’t thought Blake prim about these things—perhaps he was just worried about the driver over-hearing. And perhaps Blake was right. It wouldn’t do to make themselves ridiculous in front of their people.

Aven drew his hand back, and, to distract himself, started telling Blake about the current political situation as it regarded their work. Blake asked an innocuous question about Series Six, which contained, unbeknownst to him, a world on the edge of a violent conflict that would fall under their jurisdiction. Aven explained how the situation had devolved to this point with perhaps undue defensiveness.

“My power wasn’t yours,” he finished sharply. “We knew that. And I hadn’t Orac to abet it—not in the fullest sense. Using what resources I possessed I had to look for you, as well as carry on.” He suspected Blake thought he’d been slack on addressing the S1 problem as well, but Aven felt he couldn’t have done anything there, not without Blake’s support. Being the Chrestomanci was a demanding job that took all one’s time as it was—even if you were the Chrestomanci, and even if you weren’t dealing with a problem as baffling as S1’s.
“From the sound of things, you managed brilliantly,” Blake insisted.

Aven shook his head. “I’m afraid not everyone agrees with you on that point. Our friends in government haven’t entirely forgotten about my—lapse. They brought rather a lot of pressure to bear, in terms of oversight. Nor have they forgotten about the near succession-crisis—but I was in no condition to father a child just then, and the staff managed to make the cabinet realize that. I’m afraid I owe David Evans and company rather a lot for the way they supported me. The investigator the Ministry assigned—an unpleasant fellow called Travis—decided I must have murdered you for the job. I did,” Aven smiled bitterly, “have motive, after all. Will punched him, at one point, for saying as much to my face when I was in no condition to handle it.”

“Remind me to give Will a sizable bonus,” Blake said solidly, taking Aven’s hand in his and squeezing it.

They found the full staff waiting outside on their return, and Aven beamed as Blake addressed the lot of them, thanking them for their welcome. He guided Blake to a good chair he’d rung ahead and asked to be moved to Blake’s study, taking his arm and leading him to it. A parade of visitors and friends came to say hello, pressing Blake with questions—Aven fended them off when Blake started to look tired, closing the door behind the last of them with a feeling of pleased possession. There now, just the two of them. Blake was all his once more. His to keep safe and his to be proud of and his, very soon, to take as his husband, and then to gently fuck, taking such care not to hurt that bad arm.

Aven tried to tell everyone, from the vicar on down, about his impending nuptials. Rather annoyingly, no one was inclined to react with the surprise and pleasure Aven thought his announcement merited. By the time he got to Will Resthall’s “Yeah, I figured,” Aven snapped, impolitely, “What do you mean, ‘you figured?’ Why has everyone just assumed this is happening, not to mention that they are all invited?”

Will gave him a look. “Well, Blake’s back, isn’t he? We all knew that, and got as excited as you could wish. It’s tantamount to the same thing.”

“IT absolutely isn’t,” Aven snapped. This was his hard-won romance, it wasn’t some easy inevitability. “We weren’t engaged before he left, therefore—”

Will snorted. “Yeah. You haven’t seemed obviously devastated in his absence or anything. He didn’t seem mad about you that last Christmas before he went, hanging on your neck, trying to drag you under the mistletoe, telling you all about what a good job you’d done with everything, and how you made Christmas for him, and how you were his very best, most special friend. It’s all been really tough to figure out, Aven. Only a genius like you could have managed it.”

Aven glared at him.

“Truth hurts,” Will shrugged. “When’s the shindig? Do we get a day off?” They did.

Really, Aven supposed the general reaction was less awful than the way Blake had gone about telling his mother. He’d rung her from hospital, and had opened with, ‘Hello Mum, want to come to my wedding?’, preparing her not at all from his sudden return from the dead.

“Give me that!” Aven had shouted, wrestling the phone from a grinning, unrepentant Blake, who was happily listening to his mother cursing him in fast-flowing Welsh. “For god’s sake, Roger, you’re an absolute child sometimes. Gwendolyn? Hello, yes. Yes, I’m sorry about him too. Well, I suppose I should explain that in fact, he and I—Oh, you know, do you? Well.”
“’Gwendolyn’, eh? How do you know my mother so well now?” Blake had asked once Aven had rung off.

Still glaring at his Blake, presumably on Gwendolyn Blake’s behalf as well as his own, Aven explained that he’d checked up on Blake’s family in the man’s stead. This explanation had led, via Blake’s pressing questions and Aven’s sub-par evasions, to Blake coming to understand that Aven had visited Wales a few times a year and had tea with Gwendolyn, making sure she had everything she needed, delicately inquiring after whether she required any financially assistance, telling her about the progress (or rather the lack thereof) in the search for her son, and eating the biscuits she gave him to stop him looking so mournful and thin. Essentially Aven had been a good son in Blake’s place, taking on this duty even as he had taken on the Chrestomanci position in Blake’s absence. By the time Aven was awkwardly, angrily admitting to having talked proud and reluctant Gwendolyn into accepting a new stove, because hers was ancient and poorly, Blake was caught between laughing and feeling achingly enamored with Aven’s sweetness.

“C’mere, cariad,” Blake said, coiling his power around the shard in Aven’s chest to literally pull the fragment of his magic back towards its point of origin, and with it the man who bore it.

“Five seconds on the phone with your mother and you come over all Balchder Cymru,” Aven bitched, submitting to the pull.

“Calon lan,” Blake taunted, gingerly taking Aven onto his lap. “calonnig, esmwythder calon, calonnog—”

“It was annoying and incomprehensible when Shakespeare did it,” Aven said primly, “and you are no Shakespeare, Blake.”

Blake gasped theatrically (appropriately enough) at the insult, and Aven laughed. They found themselves kissing giddily (bless, Aven thought, the private suite), and it surprised no one at all that they were married just as soon as Blake was well enough to stand for the length of the ceremony.

After they’d gone through with it (Blake pronouncing his vows with a pleasing intensity, as absolute on this as Aven had even seen him on anything), Blake had stood talking to the vicar politely, supported on his cane. Aven, his arm curled through Blake’s, had thought with impatient distraction about the wedding breakfast, whether Gwendolyn was going to spend the night in the Castle after all, and when he’d get the chance to have Blake fuck the swarming nervous tension out of his body.

They didn’t make it to the wedding night—Aven considered it something of an accomplishment that they even managed to last until the wedding afternoon. After a long, late wedding breakfast Blake had nodded towards the Castle’s best bedroom—his, now theirs, done up with new wallpaper Aven had, he assured Blake, been intending to install for years. Aven had nodded back. Finding it difficult to swallow, he’d put everything pertaining to his duties as host in Jenny’s capable hands for the moment. With a sly smile, she took over the proceedings, and the Castle’s well-trained staff (those who’d lost the straw-draw and had to work the event rather than just attend it) started an efficient clean-up.

Silently, Aven had followed Blake up the stairs, assisting his husband with the climb without comment when he saw Blake struggling for breath. Careful. He’d have to be so careful with Blake, for the time being. For some reason the responsibility, the idea of taking that care of him, aroused Aven shockingly. The clean smell and the nearness of Blake made Aven want to tell him they needn’t go any further, he’d throw a shield up and rut against Blake right here in the hall. But no, no, it was the first time, it was their wedding day, it was sacred, and he was going to have this, going to do it right.
Yet no sooner had they shut the blue door of their bedroom behind them than Aven was pressing his face helplessly into the crook of Blake’s neck, shuddering and clutching at Blake’s back. Had he thought he could wait? He couldn’t, not a second longer.

“Bed,” Blake murmured, and Aven nodded into his skin, breaking away reluctantly and helping Blake undress with shaking hands, his eyes blown wide, not caring that he looked a spectacle. Blake made a helpless hiss of pain when the shirt dragged over his arm and Aven made a lost sound and kissed him, gently pressing him down to the bed with a hand on his good shoulder.

“What do you want,” Aven asked, panting into his mouth, following him down, “what do you want that we can do, Blake? Blake,” he repeated for the sheer pleasure of saying that beloved name to a lover, and having it be perfectly correct. “Shall I fuck you?” His hips, without much of a decision on his part, were moving against Blake’s. He found himself dragging his now-substantial erection against Blake’s through their clothing. “I don’t want to hurt you.” Aven shook his head, his eyes glazing and his breath catching as Blake’s cock rubbed against his through their wedding suits. “I can do it gently, I can, I want you, I want you so much, whatever you need—”

“Like this,” Blake breathed, pushing his hips up against Aven’s, “let me make you come like this, Aven.”

Aven frowned, though he was increasingly confused by lust, clutching onto Blake’s lapels, crushing Blake’s white buttonhole-carnation in gripping fingers. “It should be—nicer for you,” he said lamely. “It’s our first time, our wedding day, it should be grand—”

Blake laughed, raggedly, as Aven pumped against him. “It’s so good. Aven, it’s so good. Sweetheart—” through Aven’s back he gripped Aven’s shard in his fingers, his wedding band clicking hard against it, and Aven gasped, “you’re so—Avon, Aven, fuck, fuck, like that, just like that—”

Aven moaned as Blake’s grip on the shard tightened. “I love you,” Aven babbled, throwing his splayed fingers out and catching the orrery, dragging it up and letting it catch between them as he fucked himself on Blake, rutting against him, “Roger, I— Chrestomanci, oh god, Blake, god I love you, I, I—”

High on the thought of Blake coming in his wedding suit under him—his husband, the best thing he’d ever had, powerful and whole and perfect and his—Aven came with a helpless hitch of his hips and a sound like a sob. The combined effect of playing with the shard and the orrery dragged Blake along instantly.

“That,” Aven tried a moment later, feeling he’d made a poor show, “could have gone better.” This was, he supposed, what he got for not fucking another person for seven years. He’d been too anxious even to take the edge off this morning. Stupid.

But Blake was kissing him desperately, a hand in Aven’s sleek hair, whispering ‘I love you’ again and again, frantically, between kisses. Aven thought that perhaps this wasn’t the time to quibble about not having given a bravura performance. Perhaps the sex had been occasion-appropriate after all.

They made love more elaborately when Blake’s body was well enough to support a temporary healing spell, which, for the span of a few hours, allowed him to put weight on his arm. It wouldn’t do for him to cast it constantly, as his body wasn’t healing when it was glamored into wellness, but a few times a week couldn’t hurt. Of course ‘a few times a week’ wasn’t really enough, but Aven was more than happy to work around the problem and come up with alternative solutions. To, for example, wave a hand to enchant the sheets, making them props and restraints that supported Blake and held him very, very still, right where Aven wanted him. Aven was perfectly content to fuck
Blake methodically, taking his time, taking good, good care of his husband. He cast a spell that tied his orgasm to Blake’s and insisted that Blake could and would come on his cock and nothing else, if Aven had to work for an hour for it. He approached teaching Blake to respond to him just as he liked sexually with the determination he’d brought to training Blake as an enchanter. He felt, as Blake cursed and tried to twist under him and couldn’t and rode out his orgasm with a guttural bellow, that he was achieving similarly good results.

For his part, Blake was an eerily quick study—he seemed to know how Aven would respond before he touched him. Annoying, Aven thought, but typical of Blake. When Blake had, via glamour, the full use of his body, he made up for the cavalier, smug condescension with which Aven used him when he was feeling less well. Aven remembered with fondness (and not a little pleasing residual soreness) Blake’s enchanting the carved wooden vines that formed the posts of their four-poster bed to prise apart and admit Aven’s wrists, and then to clench around them. Helpless (oh, he could have fought back, but it didn’t feel like it), Aven had only to whimper and then to beg as Blake pushed him into a position that suited him, a pleasing angle, and fucked Aven more thoroughly than Aven could ever remember having been taken.

Blake was so flatteringly taken with him in turn. They’d been having breakfast one morning, and Aven had been wearing one of the dressing gowns from his vintage collection—a dark orange, umbery silk affair with white Japanese-style chrysanthemums. He’d smiled at something and Blake had been on his knees as if felled, pushing the gown apart at the waist, sucking Aven off desperately while Aven fisted a hand in Blake’s hair and closed his eyes, opened his mouth, canted his hips and pushed his cock down Blake’s throat with shallow jabs. Later, he’d managed to return the favor elegantly, pretending his initial hot anger with Blake and sucking him off as if forced to do it, sneering Blake’s title whenever he got the chance around a mouth full of cock. Blake’s ambivalent relationship with power resulted in a splendidly messy, out of control orgasm Aven was proud to have been the author of.

And one day, Blake, playing with his lower lip with his hand, looking worried, had started in with “I’m not sure you’ll like this—you might think it’s in poor taste. But come with me.” And Aven’s heart had cracked open when Blake had led him to the garden, spread a blanket beneath the apple tree, and, after plying him with wine and a good picnic lunch, said, “Aven, would you like to?”

Yes, Aven had said. Oh, yes. A cleaning spell, a spell of preparation, and (no one came here but them, but) wards just in case. And then Blake, his Chrestomanci, was taking him in his garden, solemnly and tenderly as though it were another marriage. Magic sliding between them and under their skin and in the air. Face to face and silent, poignant in the absence of words. His mouth moved to shape Blake’s name, and they didn’t need sound. Blake was home. In him, in the garden, in the Castle, in Britain, on Earth, in 12A. Exactly where he should be. Aven kept his eyes open, locked with Blake’s, and only threw his head back to come when Blake bent his own head down and tongued his shard.

Their first months of marriage, Aven thought in dazed languor, holding Blake on top of him and looking up at the laden branches of the apple tree some people claimed contained the knowledge of the world, were going rather well.

***

As a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.

As an apple-tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. Under its shadow I delighted to sit, and its fruit was sweet to my taste.
Aven popped back from a Call, quite pleased with how it had gone. Dispute resolution—he had, perhaps, favored the mermaid tribe a little more than he ought to have done, but the decision had to fall somewhere, didn’t it, and Chants and mermaids always got on like wildfire. He remembered, at seventeen, lying on his stomach on a slick rock bank alongside a lagoon, grinning at and chatting with a sharp-toothed, green-haired, soaking girl. She’d found his awful singing (you did have to do it, to get their attention) the funniest thing. While they talked, her friend had attempted to sneak up alongside him and pull him into the water to play with them (and probably drown, but it was the thought that counted). Eventually, having idly slapped her hand away a few times, he’d turned to give the second mermaid a chiding look. The aqua-haired creature had shrugged, grinning incorrigibly at him—couldn’t blame a girl for trying. He in particular couldn’t—rather improbably, he knew there was at least a little mermaid secreted away somewhere in his family history. Upon being told this bit of trivia, Blake had said that didn’t surprise him at all, and had received his due smack for it.

It was easier for Aven to act as Chrestomanci now that he could pull on Blake’s magic again—particularly his world-walking power. Aven had even twitched the wards he’d set up to protect Blake from Summons (and to prevent Blake from doing anything foolhardy, like rushing back into the field) aside to allow Blake to accompany him on a few easy Calls. Though Blake still wasn’t quite ready (no matter how he protested that he felt much better now) to take on solo missions, let alone to resume his role in its entirety. Aven knew that Blake would want to plunge himself back into the S1 problem as soon as he was cleared to do so. He could see the shadow of worry lurking around the edges of his husband’s expression, even through Blake’s obvious pleasure in being a newlywed.

But Aven knew what Blake’s role was. He’d always accepted it, even before Blake had; venerated it, even, and felt equally committed to the Castle’s work himself. Intellectually, he knew Blake would and must expose himself to danger again, and even to the horrors lurking for him in S1—but not just yet (Blake was, mercifully, useless until he was well). And not, this time, alone. This time, he’d face S1 with Aven beside him.

Aven had returned from the call to find his husband in bed (Blake still needed a lot of rest to aid in his recovery). Selfishly, he kissed Blake awake. Blake grumbled but allowed it, and Aven began to tell him about the settlement. He needed to be kept in the loop, after all—there’d been so much to go over, in terms of the past seven years’ business. Blake hadn’t loved every decision Aven had made in his absence—Aven hadn’t expected him to. But he had Blake’s gratitude for having taken the office in his stead and, by and large, his admiration for how Aven had conducted himself in the role.

Prompted by the occasion, Blake once again tried to express both sentiments. Aven, uncomfortable with praise he felt he hadn’t fully earned, shifted away from Blake in bed and batted it off. Aven’s thin smile twisted. “You’ve been thanking me, but you’ve got it all wrong. I’ve only just managed to keep my head above water in your absence, despite all the times I questioned your decisions, all the times I implied I could perform the role better than you. When your hand’s better, you can give yourself a round of applause for being the better Chrestomanci. Do tell me what it feels like to be so terribly right.”

Blake sat up a little and put a palm on Aven’s chest, touching his shard—the gesture reassuring rather than erotic. “It wasn’t like that, Aven,” he said in his most absolute voice. “It wasn’t your fault, either. None of it was. I had you to rely on for my entire tenure, whereas you had to do it all yourself. But Aven, no one else could have done this.”

No one but you, Aven didn’t say. “Actually, Blake, I do—suspect it was my fault. I shouldn’t have signed off on your going there alone in the first place. I know it was your decision, but my whole role is to see the flaw in a plan like that, and I didn’t. I didn’t step in when you kept demanding time.
And now,” he gestured with a hand in the air, “you come back to find the situation unsettled, worse than you left it in several respects. Unrest with Eleven, that private war with illegal weapons in Six. You would never have allowed that to happen. I find I blame myself for grinding through the years of your absence. Wallowing in my own unhappiness, rather than concerning myself fully with my responsibilities.”

“From the records we’ve gone over, no one sane could accuse you of negligence. You would blame yourself if the moon fell out of the sky,” Blake said curtly.

“I don’t know about that,” Aven responded. He felt he often brushed off things that weren’t his concern—unlike Blake, who seemed not to recognize the existence of such a category. “And after all, I might have been investigating a lunar-focused object-summoning field.”

Blake laughed into his pillow. “There’s something I’ve been thinking about,” he began.

“You amaze me,” Aven deadpanned.

“Shut up,” Blake said cheerfully, changing his position to rest his sore arm. “I’ve been thinking about you and the garden.”

“Well,” Aven said with a smile of fond reminiscence, “so have I.”

“Not that—well, not just that. I mean your connection to it. You shouldn’t have been able to marshal it, but in fact your affinity with it is greater than mine, and always has been.”

“It likes you better,” Aven contradicted him, no longer bitter about this (and what a world of change and growth lay in that—he couldn’t have imagined being able to think that, in his mid-twenties).

Blake shook his head. “Perhaps it does, but liking isn’t affinity. You know I can’t draw on it like you can? And you know when something’s happening in the garden, while I never do—like you did when those children broke in and you threw them to the constable, and then into the Academy.”

“Pinhoes are talented and trouble,” Aven agreed. “Anyone who can get in ought to be too busy writing out spells in Latin to do so.”

“We think of the Chrestomanci position as static, eternal,” Blake began.

“So it is,” Aven said. “There’s always been one.”

“The power has always existed,” Blake insisted, “and, perhaps, someone it was attached to—but we defined the role and the title, we came to partly understand it, and to call this ‘Chrestomanci’ individual to a very socially-constructed service, not so many centuries ago. We don’t know everything there is to know about magic—we’re still inventing and discovering it, pushing it through the filters of how we think about things.”

“Your point?”

“I think,” Blake said slowly, not resenting Aven’s brusqueness, “that you are the garden, in a way.”

Aven went still beside him, and Blake, sensing it, glanced over at him.

“It’s strange,” Aven said, drawing his knees up under his chin, “I have—thought that, at times. That very phrase.”

“It’s something the first Chrestomanci called his wife Alice,” Blake said. “I read his diaries in the
archives, when I was new. ‘My garden.’ He said she tended it, gave it some of the shape it has now. I thought it was a nice sentiment, but perhaps—"

“There was something more to it,” Aven mused, sitting back against the headboard.

Blake nodded. “I don’t know that it’s necessarily a romantic connection,” Blake said. “After all, the Chrestomanci was traditionally unmarried, after good old John Lummey and before the first Chant-holder, for fear of breeding a dynasty. But perhaps there was often, if not always, someone around with a high level of power, with a special tie to the garden at the core of the old Castle, and at the heart of the role.”

“It needn’t be someone from 12-A,” Aven said, thinking it out, “given the nature of the garden as a nexus point—and given that the holder presumably isn’t also the Chrestomanci. Assuming, of course, that this position even exists and you aren’t simply trying to flatter me.”

Blake rolled his eyes. No, Aven knew he wasn’t.

“It is worth thinking about. Perhaps all iterations of that person—” Aven frowned, and began again. “Perhaps it must to be someone there are multiple editions of, for some reason. I don’t know quite where I’m going with that yet. I’ll tell you when I do.” Something about this suggested itself as correct to Aven, though he didn’t yet understand why he thought so.

This reference to other versions of himself seemed to strike Blake queerly.

“What?” Aven asked.

“Nothing,” Blake said quickly. “Other series—are you thinking of your ancestress?”

“Millie, the living Asheth, yes,” Aven nodded. “The way she could power a combined working, how much she did for this place—not to mention that her husband would have been quite dead without her on several occasions.”

“You come by your propensity for saving my life honestly,” Blake teased.

“I make a point of never coming by anything honestly,” Aven corrected him. “It’s very middle class. You’re simply insulting me because you’re jealous that you’re not part Goddess.”

“That’s definitely it,” Blake agreed. “But perhaps if you filled me with your divine essence, I might take on god-like properties.”

“God-like properties,” Aven repeated in a mocking accent. “I’ve never been called that before.” But the question of whether he was Blake’s god-like property or going to endow Blake with the rewards of worship wasn’t as important as the way Blake, still warm and soft from sleep, rolled under his husband's hands and gave himself to him.

If it were true—if there were more to it than that Blake wanted it for him (and bless Blake for understanding what Aven needed and trying to give it to him)—then Aven would count himself over-blessed. He would have a position of his own which no one else could occupy: a calling, a relation to his home and a name, all of them his, none of which could be stripped from him. He had much of that as the master of the house, Blake’s husband, and in his own right as a Chant, an invaluable civil servant and the second-most powerful enchanter of the age, but Aven longed, with a remnant of stupid, childish insecurity that made him cling fiercely to those rights, for something all his own, definite and absolute. He wanted to be the garden, and to be Blake’s garden: the center and core of his world.
Aven dressed for church. This was in some respects a rather remarkable departure for him. When Blake had left Aven had been a confirmed agnostic, at the atheist end of the spectrum. He’d been unwilling to completely rule out anything without absolute evidence, but distinctly dubious about the prospect of any form of higher power in the universe, much less a cosmic force that cared whether you coveted your neighbor’s chickens.

This was not a rote opinion for someone in Aven’s demographic, per se. A lot of magic users in Britain were at least vaguely religious. European magic had, after all, developed via the clergy and the university. While other fields had drifted anti-Church to the point that expressing religiosity would have seemed not just unfashionable, but like a ridiculous affectation or an announcement of a thoroughly retrograde political stance, formal university magic remained surprisingly attached to its rites and its roots, with many practitioners even feeling that their abilities were proof of greater wonders.

It was Blake who had always been nominally religious: also agnostic, but knowledgeable and participating, from an active and involved Church (rather than Chapel) family. Ultimately, Blake had always had faith, in a flexible sort of way. He and Aven had argued over their positions earnestly but without rancor. Aven had been a bit scornful, but hadn’t found Blake’s faith ridiculous or evidence of mental complacency or social conventionality.

Aven hadn’t intended to come over High Anglican while Blake was gone. It had been nothing so feeble as an attempt to become Blake, or to please him in his absence. Aven had simply taken over the social business of maintaining Chrestomanci Castle’s relationship with the village and its church in Blake’s stead. The vicar had called in at the Castle and suggested that Aven continue Blake’s tradition of occasionally attending services as a means of showing himself in the village. It would be good for people to see someone sitting in the Castle family pew that, otherwise, looked suspiciously vacant. (Besides, the Chrestomanci was something of a Figure in Anglican theology, after all.) And, he’d added, with a restrained sympathy that hadn’t put Aven off, perhaps a visit might help Aven through this difficult time.

The vicar hadn’t said that he could see that Aven was having trouble dealing not simply with his new responsibilities, but also with the loss of his work partner (and the man he was in love with, besides). The kindness in his eyes, however, had indicated that, having observed the two men for years through the round of celebrations that characterized the village calendar (which the inhabitants of the Castle attended, out of duty and with pleasure), he suspected the reason why Aven looked so drained and desolate. And why shouldn’t he sympathize? For hundreds of years now the Anglican communion had performed marriages between men—their earlier resistance to them was a historical curiosity, no more relevant to their current practice and institution than the Moravian heresy.

Aven had come, as requested. He’d used the time, the rhythm of the services, to help him think. He knew the church well, though he hadn’t attended it regularly since he’d been a schoolboy. He’d always liked the pageantry involved. In time the activity, the cycle of stray evensongs and full orders of service, came to be soothing in itself. Blake was gone and his world had collapsed, but this older, larger thing continued on. It was something steady, to shelter within or to cling to. The concepts underpinning worship had always been important to Aven, in their way, and now he felt drawn to these particular forms of service, redemption and comfort. He felt especially in need of comfort, both in the weaker, cosy sense of the word (he wanted, childishly, to wallow to express and relieve his grief—the impulse disgusted him, but he wanted it nonetheless) and in the sturdier form: spine-stiffening consolation. Blake couldn’t have accepted comfort from a source he didn’t believe in, but Aven found, in a desperate hour, that he appreciated consolation in its own right.
Aven had always liked Chesterton for the paradoxes and the lush, overgrown prose, but now the apologia clawed their way in through the hole in him, and he found himself turned at just the right angle to catch the light. The intellectual Anglican tradition interested him. He still wasn’t sure about any of it, but how could “I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale, and remote) and then […] found myself at the very same moment already falling out of that desire and wishing I were back in it” be wrong, when the sound of it rang like a bell? Lewis had been talking about how coming to love a character in Norse mythology had prepared him for the ecstasies and demands of religion. Aven knew that longing, for a man and a place in creation, knew the conflation of those needs, too well not to feel in sympathy with it.

And so now he dressed in a gray morning suit, while Blake (in the forest-green silk dressing gown Aven had given him for Christmas when they were twenty-eight) admired the effect and Aven appreciated being admired.

“I wish I could come,” Blake said quietly, and Aven hurt a little for him.

Blake had explained, when it had first come up, that he no longer believed. He’d always known there was suffering in the universes. It wasn’t that, or even the fact that he’d suffered personally, that made him unable, now, to conceive of a god that was good and loved his creation (and if God were otherwise, Blake felt he should be resisted and spited rather than placated). It was more a deep, unshakable sensation of broken covenant. It was one thing to know people had and did suffer terribly, and another to watch it happening to a universe of people, most of whom had never deserved ill of the world. If the related worlds had been created to be abandoned, then they owed God nothing. And if God’s purposes were so far beyond human understanding that they admitted of atrocities on a galactic scale, well, what good were they?

Aven’s outlook was more personal.

“You may have to, when the lady chapel’s complete,” he pointed out. “Whether or not you feel justified in doing so. You can hardly avoid it, I think."

Blake threw his head back on the pillow he was sitting up against. “A lady chapel. Aven I didn’t even think they did those anymore.”

“Neither did I, but I looked into it, and the vicar was, as you might expect, full of information. It’s a good architectural addition to the grounds, at any rate.”

Blake gave him a serious look. “Are you actually trying to exchange gifts for miracles?”

“Trying?” Aven turned from the mirror to face Blake instead. “I’ve succeeded, Blake. I prayed, I gave, and I bought you. I would look like ingratitude to drop the thing now you’ve come home.”

“You can’t buy God in installments!”

“Can’t I? Isn’t that how it’s been done for centuries? Where do you think all the other lady chapels came from?” Aven arched an eyebrow. “I trust you without that element of exchange—you’ll forgive me if I don’t yet believe that God and I are on similarly good terms. Besides, God can’t ask of me what rightfully belongs to you. Cordelia said as much, about fathers and husbands and what was owing.”

Blake looked at him like he was missing the point; Aven thought he was.

“Magic often works by virtue of exchanges, and magic is miracle in miniature—or so we are told,”
Aven insisted. “If God wants to be worshiped, well, all right, so long as intercession works—I’m even willing to keep to his biblical time scale, I’m not unreasonable. So long as, in the end—”

He gestured at Blake, sitting in the bed, propped up with pillows, work papers in his lap and reading glasses in his hand. ‘I get what I want’ didn’t need said.

“But you have to have something more than a commercial relationship with faith,” Blake insisted with a conviction that indicated that, even out of love with God as he was, this still mattered deeply to him. “It can’t just be a question of what belief gets you—Lewis says that.”

Of course Blake was familiar with the apologia. After all, it was Blake’s personal library Aven had morosely leafed through in the man’s absence. Once, feeling wretched on one of the many anniversaries of Blake’s disappearance, Aven had used magic to absolutely ruin Blake’s bedroom, which he’d otherwise sealed against the degredations of time and instructed the staff to let alone. Later, he’d painstakingly put everything back as it had been. The process had taken far longer, and the work of it had been infinitely more careful. I’m sorry, he’d thought dumbly to the quilt as he pieced it back together. But he’d felt guiltiest about having hurt the books, which had been dear to Blake and good to him in Blake’s absence. Even now that you couldn’t tell that they’d been harmed and repaired, Aven felt a twinge of guilt looking at them.

Blake reached out a hand, and the book he wanted flew to him from the small shelf in the corner (most of their books being kept in other rooms). He waved his other hand and muttered a search-cue, and the book flipped open at the page he was thinking of.

In his much-missed, lovely voice, Blake read out, “There was in it something very like adoration, some kind of quite disinterested self-abandonment to an object which securely claimed this by simply being the object it was. We are taught in the Prayer Book to "give thanks to God for His great glory," as if we owed Him more thanks for being what He necessarily is than for any particular benefit He confers upon us; and so indeed we do and to know God is to know this.”

“Again,” Aven said with a small smile, “you’re asking me to give God your due. It is only you I love for being what you necessarily are.”

“What is this, he for God only, she for God in him?” Blake snapped.

Aven laughed. “You say that as though it’s a bad thing. Besides, surely I’m more Faustian than Miltonian? And to be fair,” he turned back to the mirror and finished with his tiepin, examining himself, “she for God in him’ makes sense, given the particulars. You are nigh omnipotent. How did John Henry Newman put it, when he was trying to set us up our own papal authority?” Aven smirked. “‘The closest thing in power to God on Earth’?”

The joke seemed to remind Blake of all he had done, and all he had left undone. He put the book down on the side table, the papers in his lap slipping away from him as he moved to do it.

“I’m nothing like,” he said, anger tight in his voice. He was thinking of things Aven hadn’t seen, people he hadn’t saved. The crisis, brewing outside, that he hadn’t yet managed to salvage, and would never be able to entirely, seamlessly repair.

“No,” Aven agreed with unaccustomed gentleness, “but I’ll commend you to him. As I suspect you did me, when I was out of faith and you were in it. And I’ll give the vicar the next installment towards the lady chapel dedicated to your safe return.” He glanced out the window, preparing to leave. “You should move to the study,” he observed. “The light’s better, and it’s a lovely day.”

Blake glanced out the window in turn. “Right. Yes, I think I will.”
“Can you manage?” Aven asked, meaning ‘to dress and walk there unassisted, with your injuries’.
“Alone?”

Something about the question made Blake’s head shoot up, and for a moment he looked stricken.

“Fine, I’m—” Blake cleared his throat. “Yes. I’ll be fine, love.”

But his expression cleared, and Aven kissed him goodbye and went to church in an excellent mood. He came back afterwards, thinking of the sermon and the Sunday lunch he’d ordered and of kissing Blake again, and walked in through the side door of the study to find his husband’s attention riveted on something in the main doorway. Instinctively, Aven tensed. He’d never seen Blake look so—

Without understanding what was suddenly so wrong he could barely breathe for it, Aven turned towards the door, and found himself standing there.

Chapter End Notes

[Link to Lady Chapels]

Lady Chapels are often dedicated to a specific person and/or purpose (such as bringing a husband back from a war) as well as to the Virgin. They’re more Catholic, but I’ve read that you can have a very High Anglican one (and the Chrestomanci, in this fic’s universe, is traditionally associated with the the ultra High Anglican Oxford Movement - that’s where Newman comes in). Chrestomanci!papacy-replacement would have been A Thing in the English Reformation, except that according to DWJ the Chrestomanci wasn’t yet recognised at the time. (In this fic’s universe, the highest magical authority in the country then rested, or was at least supposed to rest, with the monarch. More on this in the sequel.)

Here’s some basic background on Church vs Chapel in Wales.
Chapter Three

What is thy beloved more than another beloved, O thou fairest among women? What is thy beloved more than another beloved, that thou dost so adjure us?

My beloved is white and ruddy, pre-eminent above ten thousand... his aspect is like Lebanon, excellent as the cedars. His mouth is most sweet; yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.

three years earlier

The first days on the Liberator had been days of wonder. It was like no ship any of them had ever seen: unfathomable and mighty. It had become home, and more of one than any other place Avon had lived, but that had been later. Initially, the Liberator was not just murderously hostile, but also the most utterly alien place he had ever been.

Yet every scrap of danger had been recompensed with awe. While Jenna alternated between piloting and rest, Avon and Blake dove into the odd components and mysterious systems, trying together to work out what everything was, clueless and baffled and vexed and delighted.

“Come and look at this,” Blake said early on the second day, practically dragging Avon into a room lined with machinery. “I think I’ve found it—Just in time, too, or we’d have a real problem on our hands.”

Blake punched a series of buttons, trying to remember what he’d done earlier, and a little steel door flipped open, revealing a ramekin that was warm to the touch.

“It smells like rice, doesn’t it? Zen said it was nontoxic—I think it is meant for ingestion, though Zen was less helpful on that point.” Blake stuck a finger in, brought it out, and carefully licked at the goo clinging to it.

“What’s it like?” Avon asked.

“Like Rice D-Lite,” Blake pronounced.

Avon delicately dipped his own finger into the vessel and did the same.

“Almost exactly like the stuff they serve in staff canteens,” Blake added. “It’s uncanny.”

“I was going to say ‘school-lunch pudding’,” Avon said. “Adult D-Lite is chalkier.” This was from all the ‘vitamin powder’ (i.e. suppressant drugs). A thought occurred to him. “Help me find the access panel.”

Without question, Blake did so. When they’d pried the hatch off he asked, “Why?”

“I suspect,” Avon said, peering at the dangling bits of hardware, “that that is a simple compound-pattern generator. And if it is, I might be able to program it.”

Blake caught on. “If we could get a menu-pattern bank from somewhere, a rim world perhaps—”

“Exactly,” Avon said with a grin.
“I’m sure I’ll thank you when I’m tired of school-lunch pudding,” Blake said, setting down the metal plate. “Think of it! Congee, salt porridge, pease pudding, maybe even dal—”

Avon laughed at his unrealistic expectations, outsize as ever. Blake’s grin turned a little sheepish, while retaining its relaxed good humor.

“Well,” Blake admitted, “perhaps not flavored dal.”

They each ate a ramekin and made another for Jenna, calling up to the flight deck to tell her they’d sorted out some food at last. (They were hungry enough to eat more, but knew what gorging themselves after a period of deprivation could do to an empty stomach and refrained.) Jenna said she’d set automatics (they were in a clear patch, with nothing on the long-range) and come down for it. She was also keen to have a look at the system herself. She suggested that perhaps her affinity with Zen meant that she’d be able to coax the machine into producing some caf; perhaps she’d just look at it and understand how. That sounded like wishful thinking to Avon, but given that he had similar yearnings at present, he didn’t want to naysay her efforts.

“My turn,” Avon said a few hours later, touching Blake’s arm to direct his attention. “See what you make of this.” He led Blake from what they now knew to be the galley (where Blake was attempting to make a full inventory of their food supplies) to what Avon suspected was the medical bay. Avon put some gel from a dispenser on a small cut he’d gotten from the sharp edge of a circuit board while trying, quick as he could, to disable the London’s computer core.

“Incredible!” Blake had breathed as the cut vanished before their eyes.

“It is, isn’t it?” Avon had agreed, turning his healed hand this way and that. Tentatively Blake, obviously a man of tactile instincts, reached out with his own hand and stroked the healed skin with a fingertip, testing the repair. Avon took a sharp, small breath, and Blake’s eyes flickered up at him.

“Does it hurt?” Blake asked, stilling his fingers where they rested on the back of Avon’s hand.

Avon shook his head. “The new skin stings slightly, that’s all. You’re right. It really is remarkable.”

“Remarkable and useful,” Blake agreed, lifting his hand away (though Avon half-fancied he still felt the slight pressure and electricity of the touch, and rubbed his own hands against each other to relieve the sensation when Blake’s back was turned).

They worked together with enthusiasm, and presented one another with suppositions and discoveries like gifts. Avon found that he liked giving Blake things. He liked Blake’s responsiveness, his appreciation, and the particular texture of his pleasure. Blake was a good audience: he watched attentively, got Avon’s jokes, followed the plot, and even at times anticipated the ending. Afterwards he offered a commentary on events that made more of what he’d been given, and then put on a show of his own. At times Avon did have the sense that Blake was performing for him: presenting his expertise and his rapid, intuitive grasp of problems and how to respond to them to Avon. Avon felt as though Blake was tossing jokes his way, meant primarily for him (or even for him alone).

The Federation had done a thin implant job on Blake to give him a working knowledge of engineering after his total mindwipe. This meant that Blake’s technical training wasn’t as rich as it would have been if it had resulted from a natural learning process. Nevertheless, as they collaborated became clear to Avon that Blake was clever, informed about a wide variety of things simply by virtue of being perceptive, and adding to his information all the time. He was capable. Determined. Blake listened with attention to Avon’s explanations of anything technical and thus fleshed out his own understanding, and Avon realized that Blake was also humble, in a way; sufficiently sure of himself to accept new knowledge.
Blake seemed almost to be advertising himself as a prospective companion in the situation they’d landed themselves in. He never asked Avon to stay with him, but he did put himself forward, and Avon did note all the practical advantages of remaining with the man who could break free of *Liberator*’s psychic defenses; the man who had been too loyal to sacrifice people who’d put themselves under his protection during the hostage crisis on the *London*. The loyalty Blake had displayed then (and which Avon had cursed him for, at the time) was not only the moral response to the situation—a fact that Avon was not, in a calmer period, wholly indifferent to. It had also showed Avon that he could trust Blake to prioritize *him* in similar circumstances. Blake’s moral judgment could be relied on. It was adaptable, but not a lie, not totally subservient to Blake’s ideological goals (which were themselves not amoral). If he allowed himself to remain under Blake’s charge, Avon wouldn’t be cannon fodder for a disingenuous power-hungry hypocrite. Blake might get him killed, but it wouldn’t be done despotically or by someone unwilling to take his share of the danger. That mattered to Avon. Everything was a risk, but this was one he chose to take. Looking back, if Blake had, without compunction, done as he’d suggested and held the computer room with him and Jenna, that—would have been the end of it, for Avon. As it was, Blake had emerged from the encounter as someone worth impressing. Avon made an effort. He almost couldn’t help himself.

On the fourth day, when the suppressants entirely drained from their systems, Avon was able to add magic tricks to his vaudeville. He snapped a laser probe into his hand just by focusing his will on it and muttering “*Come*”. He found he could do it now with an ease that had been unimaginable in the magic-shielded (‘for-your-protection’, of course) domes, on a diet of suppressant-laced food.

Avon had wanted, in a way he was aware was somewhat sophomoric, to dazzle Blake with his abilities. He’d concealed them all his life, but there wasn’t any point, now. They were all as wanted by the Federation as it was possible to be. And Blake had been duly impressed—and had then seemed astounded to realize that *he* could do the same thing.

“This is *amazing,*” Blake had said as he’d watched the datapad he’d summoned hover in the air in front of him. Blake poked it and it bobbed, suspended, but it remained where it was until he plucked it down. His tone wasn’t self-congratulatory. Blake was simply delighted by the way he could then summon three objects at once and then hold them in the air (he’d turned immediately to testing his capabilities, of course: even an ‘amazed’ Blake was still Blake). He didn’t even seem to be concentrating hard. His warm magic burbled up in the room when he pushed himself; it came trickling out like water from a dammed creek. The act of using it obviously brought Blake joy; it was the first time Avon had ever seen him properly smile. The wary tension perpetually haunting his expression was wholly subsumed in childlike delight.

*Oh you are* good, Avon thought wryly, and with a stirring of tenderness. *I don’t even mind being out-done.*

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From the moment they’d met, Blake had thought Avon invaluable. And handsome. Oh, clever and engaging, obviously. He had very expressive eyes, though Blake didn’t know how to read them just yet. Avon was complicated, perhaps even more so than he wanted you to think. And he was very, very handsome.

Blake wished his mind would stop insistently noting, in various guises, that Kerr Avon was a distinctly appealing prospect. If nothing else, it was damned repetitive.

Blake felt like he’d imprinted. The first time he’d spoken to Avon, his long-dormant sexuality had roused and exerted itself with a firm ‘yes, that please.’ After having lived under the highest grade of energy-sapping suppressants for four years, Blake was a little surprised to find himself dealing with
such an internal interlocutor. He'd tried to reason with himself. Surely not. Yes the sneering lips were very mobile and the eyes were very bright and the hair (sadly trapped in the decidedly unwise cut) looked very touchable, but there were plenty of other attractive people in the world. Meanwhile the person these features were attached to was considering murdering all the other prisoners on the ship to save his own (admittedly appealing) skin.

‘Oh no,’ said the same good judgment that had told him that Jenna, Vila and Gan were reliable people, people he needed to have on-side. ‘No, I don’t think so. For one thing, that plan won’t work. For another, he knows that. And finally, he isn’t the type. He’s a survivor, certainly, but not a murderer, not by choice or by inclination. He’s looking for a better way out of this. You can tell he hasn’t had an easy time of it. No, I think he wants someone he can trust. So you’d better be that person, hadn’t you?’

There had been, Blake later thought, a sort of initial affinity between himself and Avon that had gone beyond sexual attraction. It felt like sharing a background or interests with someone. Yet the sense of familiarity was somehow more than he could quite account for by their both being Alphas from London Dome. Beyond this initial sympathy, which seemed almost to have performed an introduction for them, Blake had liked Avon almost instantly for qualities that his own experience of the man had revealed to him.

The past four years of Blake’s life had been a blank, evacuated, long nightmare: a winter that yielded to no other season. The fact that Blake retrospectively welcomed the horrific breakdown that had brought him back to himself certainly said something about the quality of his life as a Good Citizen.

He’d turned thirty alone and at home, eating weak salt porridge he’d carried back from the canteen (he went to a medical-grade one for his dinners and received marked food packages tailored to him, because, he had been told, he had special dietary needs). He’d stared at nothing as he’d mechanically spooned the gruel into his mouth. Blake knew now that artificial prompts, dug into his brain at regular intervals, as though it were a mindfield, had kept him from seeking out company that night—as they did almost every night. At the time he’d just felt listless, as though it wouldn’t have been worth the bother to do anything. He didn’t like noise, or being too close to people. He didn’t like being hemmed in by a crowd. It reminded him of being trapped somewhere dark and crowded—crowded, but not heaving. Everyone had been so still.

Blake’s mind had then jumped tracks, as another internalized cue kicked in. Somewhere he couldn’t recall, that was all. It wasn’t important. Maybe it had been a monorail station. Maybe they’d all been waiting for the train.

After he’d finished the porridge Blake had lost track of time for a while. People did, when they were dosed as heavily as he was. When he’d come back to himself he’d realized he’d missed half an hour. It hadn’t worried him particularly. He’d decided to try and read one of the few bookplates he’d owned at that time. He forced himself through them with great effort. He hadn’t needed more than a few, because he forgot what he read between-times. By the time he finished a book, he could barely recall the ending. His memory, as far as he knew, had never been good: his whole childhood had only the vaguest outlines in his mind. Oh, work he knew how to do; that he remembered. Every formula seemed burned into his brain, and he could process the information they yielded him. But if he tried to apply that processing ability elsewhere, to ask what a teleport would be used for, he found himself drifting, and often lost whole hours. Blake had gone to bed at nine, alone, on his thirtieth birthday, and to work at seven the next morning, and at the time, he hadn’t even thought it sad.

Recovering his personality at thirty-three and slipping the noose of his suppressant regime (because even the London’s double-standard dosages were nothing to what he’d been on) had been a revelation to Blake. Into that unending winter, finally breaking its hold on him, Avon had arrived in
his life like the first genuine spring day of the year.

Avon had seemed to expand and grow on the *Liberator*, gaining in confidence and unfolding himself; passing into high summer. Blake liked all of the people he’d fallen in with, but Avon was his unabashed favorite. He was difficult, and Blake liked it. He made Blake work to carry his point, and he made every conversation a battle or a game rather than a commonplace nothing. They worked out how the ship functioned and started experimenting with doing magic together, and Blake keenly appreciated having a partner he could rely on. The wonder of both forms of discovery wasn’t lost on him. Avon usually saw the humour in a situation, and Avon was *funny*—as soon as he’d relaxed a little after escaping the London, as soon as he’d stopped feeling out of control and hopeless and terrified, that had become obvious. There was also far more to him than met the eye, and Blake couldn’t wait to find out what it was.

What met the eye wasn’t bad either. Avon’s coolness was a front in some respects, but it was also real, in that his decisiveness and detachment were a part of him. That detachment was useful: born of his intellect and a source of his pragmatic resolution. It made Avon’s flashes of contradictory feeling all the more remarkable. That Avon should be as he was, alive to feel piquant distaste and reluctant sympathy and over-mastering guilt, struck Blake as somehow remarkable. *How did you get here?* he wondered. *An entire world shaping you, trying to grind down your sharp edges and blunt your sensibilities, to make you fit for purpose, and you only got sharper and felt more. Fit for no purposes but your own.* Blake knew he was lucky that for the most part, Avon’s purposes aligned with his. Even on a ship of nonconformist outlaws, Avon seemed to Blake starkly exceptional: outsize, over-bright.

The hint of danger about Avon, usually directed towards their enemies, pulled at the part of Blake that wanted to go to extremes. Blake found that aspect of him provocative and interesting, but it stood at an angle from the attributes that convinced him that (very likely unreturned and unwise attraction aside—he felt somehow as though Avon had rejected him on that front before they’d even spoken about it) Avon was going to be his first lieutenant in this enterprise and his best friend in the world. Avon probably had someone else to fill that latter office somewhere out there in the universe. Blake only had present company to pick from, but he still felt that, out of a larger range of options, he’d probably have gone for Avon, cynical and ostensibly apolitical as he was.

Blake wanted Avon’s friendship and political support in part because morality was important to Avon. He wasn’t necessarily *nicer* than someone less moral; he wasn’t even necessarily more correct in his decisions by some external standard. But Avon gave a lot of thought to his and others’ reasons for doing a thing: to the possible consequences and the weight of decisions. He took these questions seriously. He thought about them in a systemic way, and had flexible but strong ideas as to how things ought to be done.

When they had to work through any situation together, Avon thought along Blake’s lines, yet also offered perspectives Blake hadn’t seen or hadn’t wanted to see. His character was strong and defined. Blake enjoyed watching him react to circumstances, trying to guess how he’d take something. Avon was capable and guarded, and ultimately, he was good—hideously embarrassed about it, but nonetheless decent. Decency (not in the bare sense of adequacy, but in the stronger sense of an undefiled core nobility, unable to be destroyed by circumstance or even to bend with the remover to remove, in the sense of an orientation towards the universe that acquitted its bearer with honor and compelled Blake’s respect) was an attribute Blake could justly apply to almost no one he could remember. He applied it to Avon, who didn’t want it and had it nonetheless. Convincing Avon of something he believed would have been everything to Blake.

And since Avon was *that* important both to him personally and to what he needed to do, Blake couldn’t risk asking whether Avon might like to let Blake suck him off. He couldn’t risk causing a
rift between them if Avon said no, as he almost certainly would. Desire was less important than
everything else, and even seemed tawdry in comparison.

Still, Blake thought a touch wistfully (because he couldn’t help doing it, all the time), Avon was very
handsome.

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They lost some of their early intimacy when they were joined by Vila, Cally and Gan—when Blake
started taking dangerous action: “fighting back” against the Federation, as he called it, rather than
simply exploring, playing with the ship with Avon. But the degree to which magic was a part of their
lives only increased. Vila idly juggled objects with his low-level conjurer’s gift and taught Avon and
Blake a few tricks: it seemed ‘minor’ Delta witch traditions had been better preserved, in secrecy,
than some of the more formal paths. Blake found he could sometimes send information to Cally,
though she was a telepath and he a magic user. Avon liked that the way spells slipped around the
place, like deft cats underfoot.

He especially liked how Blake used magic with him—tossing a basic warming spell at Avon when
they were on an ice world and expecting him to catch it while Blake sorted through his pack for the
map; asking Avon to do half a repair spell while he worked on the other half, and then soldering
them together with a touch of his hand and chucking life into the working, setting the thing going;
depending on Avon to produce, via electronics or magic or both, some means of locating someone
they needed to find. Neither of them could rely on much training, but they looked up what they
needed to know (to the extent they could find the information) and forced spells that had no business
working into doing so by the strength of their wills and their need. Both of them seemed to have a
knack for it.

When Blake used magic he often relied on embodied sense memory, and was afterwards unable to
explain how he’d done what he’d done. Despite this drawback, the way Blake did magic, his habits
and his methods, the shape of his spells, felt so right to Avon. When he looked at Blake’s magic
itself, as it lay in the man, Avon felt that it was organized, trained like conductors in a circuit board.
In fact, it was arranged just as he would have done it, if he’d known better how to accomplish his
ends in this regard.

“I think we might be good at this,” Blake said cheerfully after they managed to shield themselves
from a security patrol by making the shadow they were hiding in that extra bit darker.

“I think we might be lucky,” Avon groused. But he also thought (as, to his chagrin, he often did) that
Blake might well have a point.

Avon had been shocked when, in a panicked moment, under fire, he’d reached for his magic, dug
depth into it while thinking Blake help me, and come out with a riotous excess of power. That wasn’t
him, he knew it wasn’t. Blake gasped in surprise, and Avon knew whose magic he’d borrowed.
There wasn’t time to think about that. Avon used the power to bend space a little and slide out of the
way of a shot that would otherwise have hit him in the leg, then released his grip on the magic and,
with Blake, scrambled out of the corridor and thus out of the trooper’s line of fire.

“How did you do that?” Blake asked, panting, running after him.

“No idea,” Avon said as he ran, aware that he shouldn’t have been able to. He’d never done that
with anyone before. He’d never even heard of anyone being able to do it—though that didn’t mean
much, given that the Federation was quite closed-lipped about what the Mage Corps got up to.

But now he’d learned the trick of it, and Blake picked it up too. He shoved power at Blake when he
thought Blake needed it; jerked and allowed it when Blake grabbed for his; said a silky ‘Excuse me’ when he wanted a boost and borrowed a little of Blake’s generous helping of talent. It did feel—quite, quite intimate. His breath caught when he felt Blake’s magic, distinct from his own, with a different texture and oh, such strength, moving in him. He could have gotten drunk off it. He pulled it out like pliable wire from a coil, drew it down into him and built with it, wondering whether Blake felt what he was doing as he did so, and whether Blake might—like it.

The sheer amount of energy Blake wielded was astonishing. Avon was fairly sure it couldn’t be normal (though what about Blake was?), but he had no metric by which to evaluate how abnormal it was.

Once, when he, Avon and Cally had been backed into a corner by Travis and Blake had been furious, Blake had thrown up a force shield around the lot of them. It had been strong enough to repel blaster-shot, and had even caused blasts to ricochet back on the firers. Blake had managed to keep it up for several minutes—sweating, teeth gritted, utter determination on his face—until they could teleport out. Travis and his crack Federation troops had reacted as though they’d never dealt with anything of the kind before. And surely if anyone had, they must have done? Soldiers of Travis’s caliber worked regularly with the Mage Corps, after all, and must have seen their tactics employed against dissidents.

Once, after Avon had been grazed in the course of trying to save Blake from a trap he had accidentally led Blake into, Blake had clutched Avon’s arm, rubbing it absently. Avon had been more than a little surprised to note that he felt physically as well as emotionally better for the contact—the wound was markedly less angry than it had been. Blake, meanwhile, powered through his own injuries as though he didn’t feel them. Perhaps, for as long as he needed not to, Blake didn’t.

Avon didn’t think the others understood quite how unusual all this was. To non-magic users, being able to stir your soup from across the room was next door to being able to boil someone’s blood in their veins. Avon had done that once by accident to a backstreet visa-broker who’d managed to shoot him, mad with fear for both himself and his lover. Afterwards, he’d had the presence of mind to disguise what had happened by firing his own gun at the corpse. Nobody had cared enough to do an autopsy at the time, and so when the crime had come to light some time later, in the wake of Avon’s second attempt to destroy the banking system, Avon had only been exiled rather than put down like a rabid dog. He’d been lucky, both in this and to have survived that encounter in the first place (though when he’d heard what had happened to Anna, he’d almost wished he hadn’t been).

The others didn’t know what they were looking at; Avon, on the other hand, couldn’t help noticing that Blake was extraordinary.

The very instant he’d first seen Blake, Avon had thought, with a certainly unlike anything he’d ever known, that their deaths would be linked. And he—wasn’t sure he hadn’t wanted it, that he hadn’t willed that connection into being. He’d wanted Blake since he’d first seen him, but that was a wholly inadequate way of putting it, as ridiculous as a starving man quibbling over menu options. Within a day of meeting Blake he’d felt bound to the man: rational reasons and irrational ones, obligation and inevitability, and sudden, plunging lust. Not just lust to touch and take and to be touched and taken, but for more frightening, less certain things.

And Avon had resented all of that, because he had not, thus far in his life, met with anything that indicated that he could depend or presume upon the benevolence of anyone or anything. He had never seen any indication that helplessness on his part would ever be met with anything but predation, or that a desire to be liked could, in and of itself, merit reciprocation.

Yet despite knowing that, despite being certain that that was how the world operated, Blake’s
approval now seemed almost as necessary to Avon as air. His initial desire for a connection with Blake had only grown with time. The indignity of needing anything that much, so late in his life, when he ought to be whole and entire unto himself, appalled Avon. Avon bit the hand that fed him like he wanted to gnaw it off and then starve as a punishment, or to feed on flesh instead, or just to taste the sweetness and take the sustenance directly from the source.

From the very beginning, he had wanted Blake so intensely the term scarcely seemed to fit, to mesh with his experience of ‘wanting’ someone. But Avon had only come piecemeal, moments, hours and days later, to understand what some part of him had evidently known immediately: why he was thus overwhelmed.

Blake kept, disconcertingly, living up to Avon’s admittedly unrealistic expectations, and then exceeding them in ways Avon hadn’t anticipated. Much of what Blake was and did seemed possible because Blake was so sure of himself and his place in the world. Avon liked that—wanted it, wanted to have it by having Blake, and to be someone who all of that was just as true of. But Blake was not a list of pros and cons or a collection of benefits to him. He valued Blake for what, it seemed, Blake necessarily was, more than for any particular benefit Blake conferred on him.

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As Blake came to know Avon better, he realized that all the qualities he’d seen in Avon initially had been like a spring bubbling up to the surface, indicating far vaster reservoirs of groundwater beneath, underlying the land. He’d come to know how naïve he’d been to suppose that his attraction could ultimately be suppressed in favor of a platonic appreciation of Avon’s character. In hindsight, that had been so bloody stupid he was surprised he’d even been able to temporarily sustain the notion. Of course ‘appreciating Avon’s character’ wasn’t going to stay within neat boundaries he’d drawn for the activity, remaining totally unsexual because Blake thought it ought to be, thought that that would be better for the both of them overall. Of course pulling Avon closer to him in his work and life, fighting charged battles about what they ought to do, what they thought or felt, was going to open him up to a deeper romantic consideration of the man even as it rendered him dependent on Avon’s presence in his life. He couldn’t bring Avon to value what he wanted to do, not totally, but Avon’s participation now felt vital to Blake rather than like something he could, if necessary, do without. If Avon chose to go, Blake would have to let him, of course, but he thought it’d be hell to recover from. He also knew he wouldn’t much feel like recovering.

All Blake could do about his ill-fated attraction was to curtail the amount of time he spent with the man and to try not to think about it too much. So Blake made an effort not to read too much into the intoxicating, proprietary way Avon handled his magic (which could feel distractingly like foreplay), and not to indulge himself by considering what he and Avon could have together, now or in a better world—how good they could be for each other. Not just if they were having sex, but if Avon would let himself love Blake. He’d loved Anna. Blake didn’t know much about her, but he did know there was someone of that name who had died, who Avon had cared for so deeply he couldn’t joke about it, couldn’t speak about it, and that Avon sometimes looked miles away when something reminded him of her. In a quiet, off-hand way, as if it were obvious, Avon had once implied he’d rather it had been him who’d died. He’d meant it. Dedicated as Avon was to survival, determined as he was to keep living, Blake knew that that was simply true. Blake was a little jealous of Anna, but felt this was disgustingly petty in him. And yet (and Blake knew this to be reductionist thinking of another sort) he almost liked the idea of her. Avon had cared so much about Anna. That much was obvious. He had that in him. How many people, in this world that actively discouraged extending yourself in such a fashion, had it in them to defiantly, sweetly care that much about anything?

Avon saved his life, and Avon used his skills and his wits and his magic to figure out how to get them through a crisis, and Avon was surprisingly, quietly kind to people he thought vulnerable.
Blake liked the stilted, particular cadence of his voice, and the way Avon sounded like no one else. He liked that Avon couldn’t resist getting a joke in if he had a good one, even at entirely the wrong moment—and, similarly, the sway Avon’s own curiosity held over him. Avon was hyper-rational, yet seemingly at times at the mercy of his own impulses. Blake liked Avon’s measure of theatricality—the effects were at turns dramatic and a little embarrassing (and thus terribly endearing). So many people had been sucked dry by life in the domes, but not Avon, who was so himself, so eminently watchable. Blake liked the way Avon smiled in the face of disaster, bearing his teeth at the universe. If he had to go out, he wanted it to be at Avon’s side, so that at least he’d know they’d done the thing in style.

And Blake loved the way Avon pushed down the fear Blake had seen in him that first day, and rose to meet the universe, becoming stronger and more capable, drawing on a seemingly limitless potential. Avon made Blake better, that Blake acknowledged—and with some chagrin at how vain it sounded, and some undeniable pride because he thought it was true, Blake considered that he made Avon better too. Blake felt that both he and their situation brought Avon’s qualities to the fore. He and Avon challenged and changed each other and forced one another to grow up, and that was exciting and, well, beautiful. Avon could slide down into himself, all cagey paranoia and self-destructive self-reliance, or he could try and care. Blake knew he made Avon care, seemingly automatically, and that the results were grand, a pleasure to watch.

And if Avon didn’t care about Blake as anything more than a sometime-friend, if the way Blake could make Avon care didn’t extend to Avon’s caring about him—well, that wasn’t so terrible, was it? A personal tragedy, in a way, but no slight against Avon—who was a better man than he wanted to be, and who seemed to appreciate Blake as a comrade, but who manifestly didn’t want to confide in Blake about Anna, or probe deeply into Blake’s plans, or behave towards Blake with consistent cordiality, or indicate a wish for a deeper friendship with Blake in any other way. In fact Blake thought that Avon seemed at times to actually resent him, without even having sufficient interest in the subject to bother to volunteer his real reasons for doing so. It wasn’t simply the harrowing nature of their work. That Blake could have understood, though he thought much of what they did was simply necessary, for their basic safety as much as anything. No, Avon at times seemed to just resent Blake in general. All Blake got out of him on that subject were some rather half-formed barbs about idealism that Blake, troubled with the dirty, pragmatic business of deciding whether they could hurt civilians in their efforts, and how much, hardly thought were fair, or even to the point.

Still, Blake loved someone worthy of it—that was its own pain, and its own reward. Ultimately, Blake was rather glad of the inconvenience.

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When Avon finally propositioned Blake, he was honestly surprised that he’d managed to hold out as long as he had. Only the combination of several inhibiting factors in concert had contrived to give him a few months’ dignity. Resentment had been his best friend in this regard, and he’d nursed it: furious when Blake risked himself and Avon (Avon’s rational agreement with many of the risks Blake took couldn’t entirely cancel out his rational regard for their lives, or his irrational emotional responses.), livid when Blake didn’t take his cautions and opinions as seriously as he would have taken Blake’s, and fundamentally angry at Blake’s being stupidly appealing, idiotically necessary to him. No one else had ever walked into Avon’s life and become the co-protagonist.

And without even seeming to want the position. The crowning indignity was that for all Avon was fixated on the man, he wasn’t sure Blake was even particularly interested in him. Much less interested in fucking him. Much less in—the other, ill-defined things Avon wanted. He thought Blake valued his company perhaps more than Gan’s or Vila’s, but did he value it more than Cally’s? Or Jenna’s? Avon couldn’t be sure. Blake didn’t press to know more about Avon’s life before they’d
met—certainly such questions would have been invasive, but then that was the nature of confidences. And Blake barely said a word about what he remembered of his own life. He didn’t fully explain his motivations to Avon, and it wasn’t as though he could have feared Avon’s possible derision on that score—not when he handled (dismissed) Avon’s derision with such aplomb on the flight deck (such breezy, self-contained unconcern, god it made Avon dig in). Blake was also spending less time with Avon of late than he had done initially, scheduling them different work shifts and always ‘busy’ (what the hell with?) when Avon asked if he was hungry (i.e. if he wanted to share a meal): it seemed almost deliberate. Fine (no, it wasn’t) if Blake didn’t want to fuck him, but didn’t he even like him?

Oh, Blake was generally friendly and sensual, and not likely to let a thing like gender absolutely determine his choice of partner if he properly liked someone, but there was no really getting in there, was there? Avon supposed he’d find out what Blake properly liking someone looked like if a fully-credentialed rebel princess with a double-first in history and destroying the oppressor ever showed up, riding on a wild horse she’d tamed herself and singing a revolutionary ballad in a perfect, bell-like soprano. It probably looked disgustingly earnest and passionate and enviable as hell. Blake could no doubt join in on the refrain with a fine natural baritone, and the two of them would conquer the Federation and proceed to have an entire band of lovely and brilliant fucking children. Blake would rarely be ‘too busy’ to have dinner with his wonderful partner, and when he was he’d tell her all about whatever it was he’d been ‘busy’ with.

Bitterness aside, Avon didn’t see how he could have the effect on Blake that Blake had on him. Blake seemed too fully-formed to need him the way he needed Blake. Screw ‘generally friendly’, Avon wanted nothing less than ‘particularly obsessed’. After all, he was. It seemed only fair.

But one day Blake asked Avon to come to his room to go over potential sources of raw materials for the food processor. They were talking through the options, and, quite accidentally, Avon looked up suddenly from the inventory Blake had handed him to find Blake looking at him—Avon didn’t know what to call that. Wistfully, perhaps? Their eyes caught for a moment. Blake quickly turned his head away and ran over what he thought were the strongest potential markets for enriched rice and lentil slurries refined enough for their tricky non-standard processor to run. Did Avon agree? Which did he think, of the three possibilities, should be their first port of call?

But it was too late for that. Avon found it difficult to breathe or think, and so while he regretted “Blake, would you like to fuck?” as an opening salvo, he didn’t really see how he could have done better.

“What?” Blake started.

Avon wet his lips. “Would you—?”

“You want to?” Blake asked, seemingly too baffled to feel anything else about the prospect just now. “I didn’t think you’d be interested!”

“In sex?” Avon arched an eyebrow, feeling almost defensive. (Blake either already knew that there was more to Avon’s interest in him than sex, or he would do in about five minutes, if all went well—Avon cherished few illusions about his ability to do this with dignity.) “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Blake gave him a lop-sided smile. “When you put it that way.”

 Crudely, Avon wanted to put it every way. “Yes or no, Blake?” he asked sharply, wanting it too much to be nice. No one dying of thirst said please and thank you for water.

“Yes,” Blake said decisively. (Avon felt himself starting to grin like an idiot and put a stop to it.)
"Now?"

"Right now," Avon said crisply. What the hell kind of question was that? Right now, and then again, and then tomorrow, and then—How did one broach the subject of doing this forever? When did one bring that up?

The constant low-boil of resentment he’d been cultivating eased off, abruptly and profoundly. Apparently it was enough of a trade, in his mind, enough of an answer to his insecurities and lingering antipathies, to be given their object. The constant low-boil of his interest in Blake, however, picked up distinctly. Yes, Blake had said yes, thank god, at last, oh he wouldn’t be sorry, Avon would make it good for him—Oh shut up, Avon told his brain fiercely, none of that.

Taking care to step precisely (when he wanted to stumble in haste), Avon sat down on Blake’s bed. Slow. Ginger. He waited an interminable instant for Blake to join him. Blake tried to kiss him, but it felt like a tease or a cheat—a formal preliminary and a delaying tactic to be resented, when Avon needed to gorge himself on Blake this instant. Avon almost snarled and twisted his head away and latched his mouth onto Blake’s neck instead, tauntingly exposed as it was by the open neck of his shirt (Avon had noted that when he’d come in). He wanted to taste. Taste was a chemical sense—atoms passing into him, that he and Blake might blend, that he might take on Blake’s substance. He wanted to roll Blake around in his mouth and be full of him, take him in, swallow him whole, keep Blake safe inside him, get him in so deeply he could never be wholly extricated.

"God," Blake said, "God, I feel like I’ve wanted you forever."

Avon bit down hard at that. The bite made Blake gasp, and he pushed Avon’s head closer, more firmly against his neck, in a gratifying acceptance of the frantic tributes that were all Avon had with which to answer Blake’s loveliness. He meant it nicely—he wanted to reward Blake, wanted to show Blake what he wanted. The thought of Blake biting him made Avon so hard, and he had been half there since he’d asked the inciting question.

Poor Blake, he thought with wild, unreasoning sympathy, as though Blake must necessarily share his own condition. I had better see to you. He worked at the fastenings of Blake’s trousers and then wrapped his hand around Blake’s cock, finding it in a bad way. He stroked it until it was worse.

“I want it inside me,” Avon said, smiling sharply when Blake’s cock juddered in his hand in response.

“Not yet, not just yet,” Blake breathed, and Avon felt a sudden urge to scream or to simply impale himself on the thing. Honestly, didn’t Blake know he was gagging for it? Couldn’t Blake see he needed it now?

But he let Blake urge him out of his clothes and push him down on his back, resenting every second of even obviously necessary delay. He watched Blake undress above him, twitching with how over-ready he was. Blake glanced at him when he’d finished, taking in his eagerness, and Avon felt a sudden stab of embarrassment: here he was, ready to beg, while Blake sat there able to hold himself aloof—able to make him wait.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” he said sharply, feeling the inaccuracy twist in him, “it’s simply been some time.”

Blake looked properly annoyed at that. For half a mad instant Avon thought Blake might smack him, and knew that if Blake did, he’d like it, really like it. Instead Blake held Avon down by the
shoulders. Avon relished having Blake’s hands back on him, now on his bare skin. Blake plunged his head down and gave Avon a thorough kiss. Avon squirmed under it and then went slack in surrender, letting Blake take his mouth, take as long as he liked. Avon would wait for him, hard and aching, until Blake was ready, and would enjoy the pleasure and torture of just being kissed.

“Av’n—” Blake breathed into his mouth, lost in this, and Avon felt his pleasure at being thus enjoyed deepen. He was giving Blake something Blake liked, and that was—That was better than anything. Avon was pierced with the horrible certainty that he was falling in love, and the worse revelation that he already had, that it was far too late to worry about that. He ought to have known all this by now, he knew, but he had avoided thinking the words that would recognize and formalize his position.

Blake pulled back and Avon opened his mouth. He didn’t know himself whether he’d be able to say any of that. He’d never been able to articulate that sort of thing, so it was far more likely that he’d falter in the attempt, and try and make the thing manageable with some evasion.

Blake, perhaps sensing the impulse (he had, after all, met Avon), curtailed him.

“You’re beautiful,” Blake said seriously, looking over Avon’s pale, naked body. He frowned, as though something were tugging at his memory. “Comely as—” Blake shut his eyes and breathed, fighting for some scrap of himself. Vibrating with want as he was, Avon was so hungry to hear Blake’s opinion of him that he found a kind of rapt patience, felt himself held in a state of delicious tension. Avon didn’t think he was, and it didn’t matter; what mattered was what he was to Blake. Seeming not to find what he wanted, Blake doggedly continued, offering something else instead. “Coming on like the dawn, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, terrible as an army with banners.”

Blake opened his eyes again—certain, now, of what he wanted to say. Looking on what Avon supposed was his own terrified, enraptured expression, Blake finished:

“You hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one bead of thy necklace. Turn away thine eyes from me, for they have overcome me.”

Oh. Oh god. There ought to be a law against Blake. Well—there were several. They didn’t seem to help.

Staring at Blake still, refusing the plea, Avon said, “Right now, or I’ll probably have to kill you.”

Blake glanced at his own fingers, clearly thinking something about preparation, but Avon shook his head.

“It’s too late for that—I’m neither inexperienced nor out of practice. When I said it had been a while, I wasn’t counting mechanical substitutes.”

“Avon—” Blake said, exasperated.

“One minute,” Avon informed him, “before I pinch right here,” Avon stroked the vulnerable spot on Blake’s hand between his thumb and his index finger, “incapacitate you at the pressure point, and have my way with you.”

“Avon—”

“Have you ever known me to be incapable of taking what I need?”

“Avon!”
“One,” Avon said quite seriously.

Blake, with a dark look, scrambled for lubricant, coated his cock lavishly and worked slick fingers into Avon in quick succession. “Used like a sex toy,” Blake muttered. “How flattering.”

“It,” Avon choked on a breath, then continued, “ought to be.” The thought of it—How was it that that smote him, while using sex toys as though they were Blake had barely held his need at bay? If they didn’t move fast he’d come on Blake’s quickly moving fingers, which burned in him even as he thought, Come on Blake, come on.

Blake looked likely to exceed his time limit. Avon seized Blake’s forearm in his hand, clenching hard. “Give it to me,” he hissed, and he made a harsh sound when Blake finally did.

“Am I—”? Blake said, panting himself.

“Shut up,” Avon growled—of course Blake was hurting him. “Don’t stop.”

Head down, Blake forced his way into Avon, who was barely prepared, and didn’t even own a toy anything like Blake’s size. Avon clawed his shoulders. It hurt. He wanted it. God, it hurt. He hoped it was good for Blake, tight for Blake. I’ll never recover from this, he thought with satisfaction. It’ll hurt for days, and I’ll never, never— Any physical wounds would heal, eventually, but they were the least of his problems.

“Harder,” Avon said when it started to feel better, the instant he thought he could handle it without screaming. “Deeper,” he insisted, hitching his hips up so Blake got the idea and shoved a pillow under them. He squeezed himself around Blake, hard as he could, losing control of himself when Blake gasped like it was too good and then repeating the motion again and again, though it was difficult and painful, thinking god, do that again, let me hear you. Frantic, Avon scrambled for purchase, working to slam his hips up against Blake, not content to lie still and be fucked.

“You’re trying so hard,” Blake said in a devastated voice, as though it slayed him, as though he were undone by it. He pressed kisses to Avon’s swollen lips. “You always—I love that. I love you, you’re brilliant.”

“Blake,” Avon breathed, the wind taken out of him by the punishing thrusts and the words. That stunned him, that was so much more than he’d thought to hope for. He recovered enough to slur encouragement. “Blake—more of you, all of you, give me, that’s right, that’s—Blake.”

He tilted up his mouth to be kissed, like the sort of stupid child who believed that everyone loved him and that everything would be all right. Like Blake could make him feel, with his ludicrous optimism and his unkillable hunger for a good world. Blake took the offering, and Avon felt as though his sin and his soul passed into Blake in the kiss, and as though Blake could take care of both.

He came sharply, pleasure knifing through him like a blade scraped along his spine. That’s for you, he thought insensibly, trying to clench hard around Blake even as he came, to make Blake come with him. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you. He felt a positive glee when it worked, when he brought Blake off. Blake sounded wrecked, like he really enjoyed it.

Good, Avon thought, still mad with coming. Good, he likes me, and I made it good for him, so he’ll come back, he’ll do it again, he’ll keep—

Avon panted his way down from the high, and his arms, clenched around Blake, kept Blake from moving—kept Blake in him, and prolonged the soreness. Just as he wanted.
“What’s that from?” Avon asked, saying it very quietly into Blake’s ear. “‘As an army with banners’?”

Blake pulled away and out of him, and Avon tried not to make an inappropriate facial expression at the loss. Blake settled on his back and shook his head. “I wish I knew, but it’s fitting—A neck like a tower of ivory, eyes like pools, a nose like—”

“I’ll thank you not to bring my nose into it,” Avon said as dryly as he could manage, thinking at once that Blake was too much to bear and wanting more of his wonderful nonsense.

Blake laughed and moved to kiss the nose that Avon, rather than he, had disparaged.

“Thy lips drop honey,” Blake murmured as though remembering that part—moving to kiss Avon’s lips as though he now remembered that part as well. “Honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon.”

Avon let himself be kissed, thinking Blake had won, and that that was as it should be. At least for the moment.

“So Avon smelled like home to Blake. Something in the chemistry of his body or the associations it held for Blake provided Blake, a man who’d had his entire past stripped from him, a sense of home. Blake’s saying it was really too much—like a lover touching you right after you’d come, when all your nerve endings were on fire.

No one had ever tried romance in this vein on Avon before. Presumably they’d spent ten minutes in his company and had thus decided poetry wasn’t a viable in-road. That was true enough: Avon would have cast a withering glance on anyone who came at him with a limp line. The wrong attempt at tenderness, be it only a degree off, would have glanced off Avon like a poorly aimed shot. But Blake was a terribly good archer, and he aimed and fired, in rapid succession, a dozen arrows that lodged in Avon ‘till he was pierced through, like the saint he’d seen once in a painting in the London Dome History Museum. Avon found that he was in fact incredibly susceptible to romance—all the more so because he’d been unused to it. All the more so because he’d have fallen for any lure Blake cared to set out.

“You don’t need to talk me up,” Avon said brusquely to curtail this embarrassingly effective snare. “You’ve already got me into bed. Something I’m quite prepared to repeat, whenever I’m at liberty. In case,” he smiled ironically, “that wasn’t evident.”

Blake gave him a wry smile, shaking his head just a little. “It isn’t meant as a trick or a trap,” he said. “But I understand this isn’t your sort of thing.”
Poetry wasn’t, no—he hadn’t any to give Blake in return. Avon never could say what he was thinking, when it came to matters like this. He couldn’t even express himself to Blake—especially not to Blake. He often found himself snapping things he only partly meant at the man, things his actions directly contradicted. Avon wondered sometimes whether the things he couldn’t say were, in fact, the only things it was actually important to articulate; whether this lacunae actually weighed heavier than everything he could do with words; whether actually, despite every acknowledgement his wit had ever won him, he was just good enough with language to manage to really fuck himself over with it. But then there were a thousand other ways—not to prove, but to perform and to demonstrate loyalty. And he did try, and it seemed Blake understood. Blake had recognized the love Avon hadn’t been able to name as such even within himself until tonight (further proof, Avon supposed, of his incapacity with the language of sentiment) in his actions, and had returned for them the words. ‘Properly liked’ be damned—Blake loved him. And he hadn’t even had to learn to sing.

Avon closed his eyes and breathed in scents of sex and sweat, and underneath them, the distinctive smell of Blake. Avon didn’t have a home either: not even the sorts of memories nostalgic exiles cherished. But this would do. This was more than enough.

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Three weeks (which had included several nights on which they’d had sex) later, something remarkable happened in bed (well, something else remarkable). Blake, tired, had asked whether Avon would mind it if he slept here. Avon had said that he didn’t mind, no. Though he didn’t say as much, in fact Avon thought this would be a positive pleasure.

It would only be the third time he and Blake had shared a bed for the night. Avon was not going to be the one to suggest cohabitation. If Blake wanted space he could have it. Avon supposed they lived close enough as it was, and besides, asking would look desperate. Yet tonight, at least, it seemed Blake didn’t want space: he wanted Avon instead. Avon had tried not to make the extent to which this pleased him too obvious.

During the night, Blake had had a nightmare or something of the sort. Avon had heard his name—Blake slurring it in his sleep, Av’n—groggily woken up, and started to reach a hand out to Blake’s shoulder when Blake had suddenly disappeared.

Avon had blinked, sat still for a moment, and then panicked.

“Blake?” he’d said stupidly. “Come back here now,” he’d hissed, more ludicrously still, feeling his magic gather inside him in tandem with his rising bewildered anxiety. There was an idea. He pulled on Blake’s magic (relieved when he felt something he could grab on to), tugging it hard. “Blake—Blake!”

The third repetition, and Blake appeared once more—still asleep. Oh, that figured.

Avon shook him awake. “What the hell was that?” he demanded.

“Mwuh? Was what?” Blake asked, uncomprehending.

“You vanished,” Avon said accusingly. “You’re not wearing a teleport bracelet. It felt magical. No one vanishes without preparation and focus, Blake. No one can.”

“I what?” Blake started to properly wake up. “You’re sure it wasn’t—?”

“Can’t you feel it?” Avon asked, touching Blake’s still-buzzing body.

Blake’s face took on an abstracted look as he tried to. “It feels like my own magic.”
“Exactly,” Avon insisted. “But how can it have been?”

Blake looked as though he were thinking hard.

“I have,” he said after a moment, “this reoccurring dream. There’s somewhere I have to go. I’m trying to get there, but something’s in the way. So I just go—halfway. I end up in this gray-brown, shifting landscape, without any other living thing or even much in the way of landmarks. I know there are ways out of the valley, ways to go somewhere else, but they’re all sealed off, and everything’s obscured by this thick mist. Which is infuriating because—I think this, in the dream—I could do this properly, and walk out of the valley, even as a child. I think I remember having been a child, in my dreams. But the memory’s always gone when I wake up.” Blake made an irritated noise. “I don’t know if there’s anything in that. How can there be? It’s just a dream.”

“I’ve told you before,” Avon said quietly, “that you have trouble telling the difference between dreams and reality. Blake—you know there are other universes?”

Blake nodded. “Of course, we’re in Series One.”

Avon blinked at him. “What makes you say that?”

Blake looked at him in surprise. “Well, that’s—what it’s called. Because they think it’s the oldest of the Related Worlds.” Blake frowned as something occurred to him. “I know that,” he said. “I know that absolutely. But I can’t for the life of me remember how I know it.”

“Did you have magical training?” Avon asked.

“How could I?” Blake demanded, almost angrily. Avon raised an eyebrow, and Blake conceded, “Though I do I feel sometimes as though I must have studied magic at some point. And history. Though that’s especially jumbled—half of what I think I remember turns out not to be quite right.”

“Blake, do you think you go somewhere—between the universes?” Avon pressed. “Do you suppose there is some kind of interstitial layer? Because that is what this sounds like.”

“Possibly,” Blake said warily. “What else could it be?” He was looking to define the options.

“I don’t know,” Avon said shortly. His voice was sharp with an irritability that was actually concern. “Can you do it at will?”

Blake shrugged, lay back down, and tried to slip away. He tried exerting himself. Then he tried emptying himself out and letting it come. Nothing.

“This,” Blake said with his eyes still closed, clearly exhausted, “feels as stupid as it probably looks. Let’s get back to sleep. If it happens again—”

“Right,” Avon said, lying down. He placed a protective hand on Blake’s shoulder for a moment, and Blake looked at him with fondness.

“It’s probably all right,” Blake offered in an even tone. “I’ve had the dream dozens of times, and I’m still here. There’s nothing in the gray place but wind—some treacherous patches, perhaps, but I feel as though I know what I’m doing when I’m there.”

“How reassuring,” Avon groused, removing his hand and settling into the position he customarily slept in. “Unfortunately you feel that when you are awake as well, and I am in a position to know what you get up to then.”
He wished Blake had anything real to reassure him with, but clearly Blake didn’t. He wished he knew what they should do in response to this, wished that the problem were as commonplace and comprehensible to him as a major systems failure on a starship: an annoyance, but nothing he couldn’t deal with, given time and labor. But this was wholly outside his experience.

Blake clearly sensed the nature of Avon’s dissatisfaction. “It is important,” he offered Avon in the darkness. “I’ll take it seriously. I’ll look into it, and we’ll try and figure something out. If it’s a magical problem, then surely that means there must be some magical means of finding out more about it.”

“All right,” Avon said, thinking that sometimes, Blake seemed to see exactly what was in his mind, and to understand him better than anyone. The times they didn’t see eye-to-eye couldn’t make these flashes of total synchronicity less important than they were. Avon was unhappy this was happening, but it was hardly Blake’s fault—at least not consciously. And there again, Blake was acknowledging that Avon was worried, and was trying to fix the source of the problem—trying to make him happy. Very few people in Avon’s life had seen, behind Avon’s inhumanly strong defenses, the all-too-human anxiety and wariness that powered them. Very few people had seen fit to ask themselves what would make Avon happier, and had then tried to give him it.

The phenomenon occurred dozens more times over the course of the next year and a half, but they were never able to force the disappearances to happen when Blake was awake, and they never learned any more about them. Blake did try, as promised, but even Orac, when they obtained him, couldn’t access Mage Corps records, stored as they were behind special magical barriers, and all other accounts of alternate universes had been destroyed generations ago.

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As if the disappearances weren’t enough, at times there also seemed to be—something inside Blake. He wasn’t surprised when Avon told him that he could see a sort of magical array, lodged in Blake’s chest: an intricate arrangement of chains and spheres. The chain, Avon said, coiled around Blake’s spine, and the battered spheres dangled and clustered there. Avon said it looked something like the ‘clusters of grapes’ designs you saw printed on the wine ration-boxes offered up at nice office parties. The spheres looked crushed, but Avon admitted that even so, they drew him. Avon said there was something about the thing that almost compelled you to touch it, or to soothe it, as though it were a wounded animal.

“But whatever it is is buried inside you,” Avon said, narrowly watching the invisible apparatus, “and I’ve no idea how to reach it.”

“I do feel it,” Blake agreed, worrying his knuckle with his teeth, taking the matter seriously both because it did seem serious and because he suspected it would have annoyed Avon if he hadn’t shown himself to do so. “I think it might be broken. But only in part. It’s supposed to be there, I know that much,” Blake said, trying to articulate how benign and natural the thing seemed to him. “It’s—part of me, somehow.”

“Could you be mistaken?” Avon asked. He sounded cautious, but not really as if he believed in the possibility he was raising. “Could it be a Federation implant? Some form of experimental magical technology?”

Blake shook his head. “No, that feels wrong. Still, I suppose we ought to check, when we can. Though god knows how we could fix it or extricate it, if it is harming me.”

Blake again read around the subject, and managed to find, in what limited publicly accessible magical data there was, a simple yes-no query spell that ought to be reliable. The trick, then, lay
in asking the right questions.

Avon brought a bowl of water, and Blake dropped in the hard-found perfect oak leaf. They had three questions, and they all had to be about the same subject—about something in the room and manifest, rather than something as diffuse as ‘Will we be able to defeat the Federation if we focus on undermining pacification drug manufacture?’

Avon had to be the one to ask, since they had defined Blake as the subject of the inquiry.

“Is the magical structure inside Blake Federation technology?” The leaf spun to the left. No.

“Is it harmful to Blake?” The leaf spun several times, ultimately landing on no. Perhaps, Avon ventured, the structure was in part harming Blake, but in part helping him—or not intended to undermine him, but hurting him somehow regardless.

“I wish we could just ask the stupid leaf the whole purpose of the array,” Avon groused. “But that is not exactly yes-no.”

“Avon,” Blake said abruptly, an idea forming in his mind, “if I’m the subject, can we ask it about what happens when I go to the gray place, the valley?”

Avon nodded. “Yes, I think so. What shall we say?”

But just then Jenna called everyone to battle stations—they were under attack. The two of them reached the flight deck at a run and were occupied for the next several hours. By the time they returned the charm had wound up, and the little magic in the leaf was spent. Though Blake looked out for another, curious himself and because he knew Avon couldn’t stand an unsolved mystery, he never managed to locate one.

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When Avon had calmed down somewhat (he’d known he wouldn’t have much control or dignity during their first encounter), he became quite good at watching Blake’s reactions. He asked a lot of questions about what Blake wanted, giving Blake not only space to articulate preferences, but all the security Blake might require to develop his plans. Avon was practical and keen, and he made it clear that, at least in this capacity, he was unlikely to ridicule Blake’s suggestions out of hand. He positively invited Blake to experiment and worked to offer up his own ideas.

He was open about wanting Blake. He let Blake see it, and tried to let Blake know what was good for him, how much he enjoyed what they did together. He could employ matter-of-fact registers or bedroom talk (both came easily to him, which was something of a relief compared with how difficult it was to so much as offer Blake an apology about anything, or to explain his anger with some decision of Blake’s in anything like personal terms). Blake found the former useful, and the latter devastating. Fair enough—Avon found it devastating when Blake did it for him. And he did, with a little encouragement. Avon thought a voice like that ought to be put to use (though Blake hadn’t seemed to take it in the right spirit when he’d said so).

He tried to be nice to Blake. In everyday life he dressed up for Blake as much as for himself, ditching baggy technicians’ jumpsuits for more potentially flattering alternatives. If Blake noticed or complimented him in private, Avon would permit himself a small grin, a casual “Yes, I thought you’d like it”. He was careful to mention when Blake looked good—or to physically appreciate when an open white shirt flattered Blake by licking at his neck.

Blake acted as though Avon’s appreciation was balm to his soul after some long period of loneliness
—of feeling unwanted or rejected or thwarted. Perhaps that was down to his time under the
mindwipe, which he still didn’t seem to want to talk about. Avon couldn’t really see Blake being
rejected, otherwise. Not attractive, charismatic, warm, clever, dedicated, sexy Blake—who, above all
things, had the air of a man who could make anything happen, who got what he wanted. And he
wanted Avon. Avon basked in that, and tried to reflect some of the glow back.

Their sex ranged widely. It could be teasing and experimental. Sometimes, when Blake seemed in
the mood, Avon let himself be almost totally passive in bed, biddable and docile. When that wasn’t
what they wanted, he could be fiercely active, taking charge or fighting Blake for control. Avon
appreciated it when what they did was raw and unrefined—when one of them used magic without
meaning to, without being able to help it. At times he’d held Blake down with more than physical
strength, or selfishly staved off Blake’s orgasm until he couldn’t stand being taken another second, or
ripped an early orgasm out of Blake just by wanting it, and had to offer a grinned, insincere ‘Sorry’
afterwards.

“No you’re not,” Blake corrected him.

“No,” Avon admitted with a small, wicked smile, “I’m not.”

Blake would kiss him for that, apparently weak for Avon’s nasty streak.

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Avon’s flashes of private, willful selfishness had a strange, two-fold effect on Blake.

First, they made him feel a little stab of tenderness towards Avon, who never acted as though he
expected the universe to be good to him, but who allowed himself to depend on displays of Blake’s
particular indulgence. Blake liked giving Avon these victories. He liked the feeling of being
benevolent and powerful enough to give, and the contrary but complimentary feeling he got from
Avon’s considering Blake so his, and their arrangement so stable, that he could ask for small favors
and forgivenesses with no danger of being turned away. Avon knew he had Blake wrapped around
his finger, but he only abused that knowledge in this rather charming manner. If Avon had actually
been an awful man, proofs of it would have put Blake off; since he was in truth an honorable one,
these flirtations with transgression were just more of the rich interplay between Avon’s purposes and
his pretenses: a private form of the game, played just between the two of them.

Second, Avon’s wicked turn got him hot. Avon’s wanting him—his body, his time—with a greedy
intensity that made him unwilling to brook denial did it for Blake like little else. The way Avon’s icy
self-control broke down and he got savage if he couldn’t have what he wanted exactly when he
wanted it in this regard made Blake’s knees weak. The man was so pristine and contained that
getting a reaction out of him (and oh, could Blake drive Avon to petulance and conniving and full-on
rage) thrilled Blake. It wasn’t mature, he knew, or particularly creditable in him, but he couldn’t quite
find it in him to care. Everyone said love made you stupid; Blake wasn’t elitist enough to believe he
could rise above the mass of humanity in this regard. And he was—thoroughly in love.

Avon wasn’t. Avon appreciated him as a comrade, in a functional sense (in bed as anywhere else),
and had never once voiced a wish for a deeper connection despite the many opportunities Blake had
given him to do so. But he let Blake love him behind closed doors with good grace, even as he bit
Blake’s head off over every slip-up in public and never let anyone else know that he was far more
accommodating in private life. To an extent Blake appreciated Avon’s unyielding, aggressive
manner of offering advice (if you could call that ‘offering’), but it also increasingly frustrated him that
Avon didn’t support him, wouldn’t present a united front for anything. Blake felt he could have done
with some solidarity. There were so few of them in this, and the task was so monumental. He
thought, with piercing flashes of unhappiness, that Avon very likely hadn’t treated Anna like this.
Why couldn’t Avon air his grievances privately, when they were alone together? Why did he never suggest his own plans or ask Blake about his works in progress, only to weigh in at the formal presentation with a scathing critique?

Really, Blake supposed he knew why. Avon probably hadn’t treated Anna like this because he’d loved her, whereas he was simply fucking Blake. Avon wasn’t truly in a relationship with him, and didn’t care to take up the burdens and privileges of being in one. It wasn’t his job to hold Blake’s hand and talk him through his fears and doubts. Avon positioned himself as a spectator rather than a full participant in what they did, even as that was manifestly untrue. Avon talked to Blake about business on the flight deck like anybody else, and perhaps even made a point of being publicly vituperative to keep Blake from presuming too far. Blake did make an effort to steer them away from a steady diet of exclusively sexual encounters, to catch Avon’s attention with games and the like, hoping to put them on a closer terms than sex alone necessarily allowed for—closer terms, he had to admit, than Avon seemed to want to be on. Sometimes Blake thought this strategy was working well. And then Avon would publicly gut him over a trifle, or casually imply that Blake usefulness to him was limited to the bedroom, and Blake would bitterly revise his opinion.

Credit where it was due, Avon never mocked Blake’s feelings, and he never fell into the common polite fiction of mouthing platitudes he himself didn’t feel. Blake was glad of that—Avon lied or even just obfuscated the truth rather poorly, and his patronizing pity on this point would have been unbearable to Blake. Avon was an honest man, and Avon didn’t love him or even necessarily like him all that much. Blake thought sometimes that he should hate Avon for that, but really it all left him drained and short-tempered and sad.

Perhaps he should have ended it, but that struck him as impossible. He wouldn’t have given Avon up in a professional sense for the world, and even the thought of losing him as a lover hurt like a blow. Besides, Blake was shatteringly grateful for what he did have. The war was unending, stark and awful, and ate away at the universe and their lives—but they had this. ‘Some companionship and a lot of sex’ did no justice to how rich and good their time together could be; how riotous with pleasure; how close they were to one another, even as they were insular and divided. Nothing felt too extreme between them. Avon balked at nothing, and Blake knew he himself jumped to cater to Avon’s whims. Sometimes Avon wanted Blake to hurt him to keep him from coming too quickly—he tended to fight his orgasm, biting his swollen lower lip, resisting it, wanting to go on pleasing himself (and Blake—Avon seemed to derive a fair amount of pleasure from a partner’s satisfaction). Avon couldn’t always rely on his magic to save him there—he wasn’t sufficiently in command of it for that. But he trusted Blake to do hurt him right, and not to push it too far. In general Avon offered Blake shows of sexual trust, which felt like the equivalent of what Blake wished they were to each other in more public spaces. It wasn’t misplaced. Blake was, after all, never going to tell anyone what they did or what Avon allowed or wanted here. Blake didn’t see any of it as shameful.

Blake had been afraid of hurting Avon when he had asked Blake to fist him. The idea had not, at first blush, enormously appealed to Blake. But they’d gone slow, Avon staring up at Blake through half-lidded eyes. He’d seemed not to want to meet Blake’s overly emotional gaze. Instead Avon had watched Blake’s throat work, even as Blake felt Avon’s body give under his hands. Blake felt those hands, in that moment, as large and powerful—he’d never been aware of his body like this before (it felt simultaneously alien and unwieldy, and yet more his and under his control than it ever had before). He’d never felt his strength in these absolute terms, never been so aware of the need for a perilous delicacy.

Blake’s wondering “I’m in you” had made Avon hiss breath and nearly shake to pieces around him. Blake felt himself start to babble, but he couldn’t stop.

“God, you look—You’re so beautiful, I didn’t think I wanted this but look at you, I—thank you,
Avon, *fuck*, I can’t believe you’re *giving* me this, thank you,” all of which sounded embarrassingly as though *he* were being taken. Avon tilted back his white throat and his lips shaped Blake’s name, and Blake could hardly hear the whisper of it through the pounding blood in his ears. *That* was what lingered in Blake’s mind as the core of the experience: that image, that breathed sigh of his name. He’d have done it even if he hadn’t wanted it, just for that.

“Do you want me to do that to you?” Avon murmured when Blake helplessly held him after.

“Yes,” Blake said like a sob. He did, *god* he did.

Avon had kissed his temple lightly. “All right,” he’d said quietly, smiling to himself. He then kissed the now-clean hand that had so thoroughly possessed him, and Blake shuddered. He felt as though Avon had given himself to him entirely, or possibly as though he’d given Avon his hands and his heart, and that Avon either held them still or that they remained his, even having been released.

“Anything for you,” Avon had teased, and Blake had breathed choked laughter into his ear, thinking that that was almost cruel, but that he’d have forgiven Avon for an indefensible murder right about now.

He could even forgive Avon for not loving him, because Avon’s civil toleration of his own regard was a thing far more precious and sublime than the love of a lesser man. And though the world was godless and grotesque with atrocity, Blake was nonetheless in love. ‘The daughters saw her, and called her happy’, even if the new bride was but one of threescore queens and fourscore concubines and maidens without number (he’d looked up and re-read the poem that Avon had reminded him of that first night, and had loved it again and been thankful for the reminder). Perhaps in time he might bring Avon to understand him better, and convince Avon to yield up some of the love and fidelity he’d given another before him—the feeling Blake knew him to be capable of—to his present partner. Perhaps someday they’d be partners in truth, in that best and fullest sense of the world. ‘Why should ye awaken, or stir up love, until it please?’ Blake believed he would bring down a corrupt empire or die trying, and with that same sense of purpose and brutal, necessary optimism (what else could one do?), he thought that perhaps someday, if he continued to unflinchingly offer up his own heart, it might please.

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Blake once complimented Avon on being, actually, a very considerate lover.

“No,” he said wryly, “that I remember having much experience to compare you with. But I do have an impression of how these things normally go. You’re very—good to me. Obviously you’re good at it, but that’s not what I mean. You may not be inclined to sentiment but you’ve never mocked me for mine. Not here, anyway. It’s all—a mark of character. Decency.” Blake looked slightly embarrassed by that, but pressed on. “I really do appreciate it, Avon.”

“Are you calling me ‘adequate’?” Avon asked with a raised eyebrow, thinking that Blake’s pillow talk was usually of a higher standard than ‘you are satisfactory’. That was really more in his line.

“No,” Blake said coolly. “You know I’m not. I’m saying that in this regard, you give me everything I want. I’m saying that I feel taken care of, and that I do notice and value that. All right?”

“All right,” said Avon, trying not to look disgustingly pleased, like he was purring, “And naturally I do. After all, I do aim to do the thing correctly.”

It got results, too. Blake wanted him more as time passed, came to need him like a drug. *As it should be*, Avon thought. ‘I am my beloved’s, and his desire is toward me.’ He’d found and read that, for
Blake.

Sometimes after a shore leave, seeming tense and anxious, Blake would ask him what sort of thing he’d been doing down on the planet. The others filled their quota of anonymous sex for the most part, but Avon had other errands and other uses for his shore-leave fund (besides, he was already having sex with precisely who he wanted to be having sex with).

Avon would raise an eyebrow and respond with something like “Is it really your business, Blake?”, cagey about his activities. Many of which were embarrassingly—Blake related.

He visited markets, spice-merchants and botanists for oak leaves without much success. He needed parts for things he was working on for Blake—he presented Blake with cracked cyphers like a glut of valentines, and sort of token took tools. He had an awkward habit of picking up small delicacies and leaving them in his room when he knew Blake was coming: aspartame-squares and purple-flavored lick-strips and once even some fruit slices (that had been rather a coup). Avon would ostentatiously have one of whatever it was himself and then casually say Blake might try one too, if he liked (as though they weren’t largely for Blake). Avon thought it’d be crass to make presents of sex toys, but he picked up a wide variety, as though he’d just happened to do so. As though one could just stumble on a Teal-made vibrator with a limited, shared sensory-feedback loop and learn to program it by accident. As though ideas for new things to try were self-generating, and reviews read themselves, and reputable shops grew on trees.

Blake, for his part, bought games, probably having noticed Avon liked them. They were quite good ones, which suggested that they’d been carefully chosen. There were a few multiplayers in the batch (Avon joked about this being Blake’s idea of a team-building exercise), but several that could or must be played by two. Avon valued these more, and might casually drop a “Billet?” to Blake at the end of a shift (Blake was, thankfully, largely scheduling them together again) by way of request.

Once Vila had come to Blake’s room to drop something off, and had been a little surprised to find the two of them (fully dressed in an immaculate room, chastely seated in chairs across from one another) mid game and mid conversation. He’d taken in the tense, cramped positioning of their pieces. Vila liked games too, and was no slouch at them, though he wasn’t quite as good at strategy scenarios as the two of them were. He also had the good grace not to mind much when he lost that sort of thing, whereas Avon knew he sulked unattractively if Blake won too often, and, rather immaturely, had to be coaxed out of it.

“Don’t you get enough on the flight deck?” Vila had asked, nodding towards the board as he handed Blake the read-out Blake had asked Zen to prepare some hours ago.

“Not really, no,” Avon had said, employing a slightly flirtatious smile for Blake’s benefit. Blake had struggled not to return it, his lip quirking with the effort of suppression.

They didn’t broadcast their relationship, but Avon thought the others might know. Avon neither considered ‘I am, for my sins, inexorably committed to Blake, and we fuck in every position I can think of, and then some he suggests’ an appropriate thing to announce to their acquaintance nor did much to conceal the situation.

What effort could he have made to conceal it? He was always exerting himself to save Blake—not without conflict, ambivalence, and hot fucking fury that Blake had yet again put himself into a position where he needed to be saved, no, and not without verbally making at least some of that clear to everyone present. But whatever he said, he knew it must be impossible to ignore what had actually happened. He was always risking his own life in Blake’s cause.

When he was close to death, Avon always felt strangely close to Blake: as though his initial
premonition about the man, that their deaths would be connected, meant that death itself was something that they shared. He now thought that perhaps, if anything at all came after death, his anything might involve Blake. On no previous occasion had Avon dared to imagine the possibility of that kind of benevolence on the part of the universe.

When Blake was hurt, Avon didn’t admit of panic or horror. He tried to be practical, firm, and kind to Blake, after his own fashion. When Blake was devastated at Central Control, he offered him comfort and helped him escape alive. It had been a disaster, and Avon did regret Gan’s loss, but at least they had survived—Avon knew, now, that he wouldn’t want to live if Blake hadn’t.

Avon thought at times that he should force himself to just say the damn thing for form’s sake: to conquer his vast internal resistance against such an eviscerating humiliation as saying to Blake’s face that he could no longer imagine a life that wasn’t lived with and for him; that without Blake he was nothing, now. That Blake was everything Anna had been to him, and then frighteningly more. He envied Blake’s ability to make such confessions, but then Blake could pull them off where he couldn’t (and Blake perhaps could say ‘I love you’ because he meant it differently—Avon didn’t doubt Blake’s love, but he still couldn’t imagine Blake being as dependent on their alliance as he was). But Avon thought it probably wasn’t ultimately necessary. Blake could hardly miss how he was loved; he surely didn’t need Avon’s admission to hold over him. Blake’s power was too absolute and evident to require articulation.

All his life, Avon had been afraid. He’d been so structurally insecure for so long that he no longer even registered the experience as fear. He called it wariness, tension, an eye to survival, a collection of habits of self-preservation. The universe was shifting and uncertain, a thing comprised of secrets and traps. Avon ate as though food might be taken from him before he was full, as if he didn’t know when the next meal would come or trust that it would. There had never been anything safe or permanent in his world. He’d felt himself at the mercy of everything. Avon despised feeling out of control—powerless, unsafe. To the extent that life was this to him, he hated life.

And yet here in this situation of adversity, somehow, he had found the best and brightest thing he’d known. Now that he had Blake, he was afraid of losing him—more afraid than he had ever been before, though he experienced it as a heightened vigilance, awareness and hostility rather than as terror. Threats to Blake’s life, and to his own, now that Blake was in it, were intolerable to him. Their situation was intolerable. Blake’s desperation to fix the world rather than run from it was admirable, and perhaps (Avon thought, when he was being fair) necessary to their long-term survival, but it was also maddening.

Blake’s deep need to destroy Star One (which they’d discovered was both the computerized heart of the Federation and the keystone of the Mage Corps’ major spells) seemed at times irrational, and thus began to specifically alarm Avon. It exposed them to greater danger, and it could make Blake act in ways that were unlike him. Avon also felt he ought to be, needed to be, the center of Blake’s world. He felt Blake should prioritize him above everything. He knew how stupid that was, how shortsighted, but he still felt a swell of bitter anger every time he received evidence to the contrary. He wasn’t Blake’s top priority: Blake’s whole political program was, and this was.

Blake drew Avon in deeper and deeper by offering him more of himself even as he risked himself. Avon hated that, and hated his own vulnerability in the face of Blake. Avon didn’t know how to be vulnerable—he’d not learned how to do it judiciously or prettily. Sometimes he feared he couldn’t meet Blake’s enormous expectations of him, either—it flattered and terrified him, the way Blake seemed to think he could do anything. Worse, while Blake often seemed to rely on Avon without thinking about it, he also didn’t fully rely on him. Blake responded to criticisms like attacks, as though he didn’t know that Avon might say anything to him because they were in love, and because ultimate disagreements were impossible between them. Avon had threatened to leave once, angry
(frightened) and trying to make a point, and Blake had seemed to take it seriously, which had forced Avon to go through a whole pantomime of pretending he really might (when any idiot could see how limited his life expectancy would become the instant he left Liberator, even failing to account for his choice to follow Blake: a choice he demonstrated every mission and then again most nights of the week, in Blake’s bed or his own).

Near the end, in bed, Blake had quietly said that since Avon disagreed with most of his decisions, he wasn’t at all surprised that Avon disagreed with him about Star One. Avon’s wariness here was just more of the same, wasn’t it? Blake said that rather bitterly and rhetorically. Not trusting himself to speak without revealing that he was upset, Avon wondered at the sort of display of support and loyalty Blake seemed to subconsciously expect from him, and thought—But you know I’d die for you. Avon wondered what more he could bloody do to assure Blake of something he should never indicate that he questioned. Sometimes, as now, Blake acted as though he didn’t know that. It hurt, even though Avon knew it couldn’t mean anything beyond indicating how frustrated Blake was. The only thing Avon had taken from this conversation was that he had to make his displeasure with the speed and lack of discussion with which they were going into the Star One raid more keenly felt, so that Blake would even register his particular disapproval.

As part of this campaign, Avon resumed his bid for the Liberator. Before they’d moved on Control, Avon had come to believe he’d feel safer and better if he were technically in command of the ship. Whatever he’d said to Jenna before they’d gone down to Horizon, in a foul mood or as a bad joke, Blake knew that Avon had no intention of leaving him, either there or permanently on Earth. Avon hadn’t saved Blake’s life a score of times and gone with him on a hundred missions to make off with a ship he could have stolen on a thousand occasions and abandon his lover as though he and Blake were items sold separately. If he were seriously considering parting ways with Blake, they would have had a very different conversation first than the one they’d had before moving on Control (and Avon had to admit that he couldn’t see them ever having it—not if he had anything to say about it).

Blake had his work cut out for him throughout the Federation—years of it lay before him, even if all went perfectly, before Blake could think about settling into power on Earth. He’d admitted as much when they’d attacked Control. After all, Blake had agreed when Avon had said that while Blake organized the revolt on Earth, someone would have to take charge of the Liberator (just another task of the many he’d performed in Blake’s cause). Then there would be the revolt in the Outer Worlds to contend with, and an all-out attack to destroy the Federation to oversee. And for all of that, Blake would need the Liberator again.

In a way, Avon had thought, the destruction of Control had stood to give them both what they wanted. Avon wanted Blake to have to confer with him, to fully take Avon’s opinions under consideration: as fully as he himself did Blake’s. It was petty, of course it was, but Avon simply wanted to have his own office, and to be in charge of the ship as Blake was in charge of their work overall. His approval on plans wasn’t much to ask—he was all too easy for Blake as it was, and Jenna offered even less resistance. She couldn’t balance Blake like he could, like Blake absolutely required someone to balance him.

Right before the Star One attack, Blake had at last agreed to the official hand over (Avon having offered to take him back to Earth for the necessary period in this capacity). To Avon’s thinking, the new plan was the same as the old plan. By now Avon thoroughly cared for the Liberator and wanted to give himself over to its management, almost as much as he wanted to have something he could use for and against Blake. Jenna and Blake could of course have the use of the ship, as Pilot and as Commodore. It simply made sense for Avon to be Captain.

And by the same logic, there was no point in his holding the office (and indeed he had little interest in doing so) if Blake was entirely out of the picture, care for the ship though he did. When they failed
to recover Blake after the destruction of Star One, Avon struggled to locate him, unable to enjoy either possession of the *Liberator* or the irony of having its captaincy in this joyless, meaningless fashion. Avon was utterly unwilling to let Blake go: either to lose him or to leave him to the mercy of the universe.

His rescue efforts went poorly. Frequently Avon was discouraged by false rumors of Blake’s presence, and the possibility that Blake might even be beyond the bounds of Series One made him feel helpless—so much so that he was taught to hold his earlier feelings of helplessness (when Blake had only chosen to risk their lives in pursuit of greater gains) as nothing. In a wild, plunging fit of despair brought on by his failures, Avon chose to avenge his earlier love, Anna—only to be abused in every way and worked into a state of greater desperation for Blake. Avon ran himself ragged trying to hunt the man: his friends frankly worried for him.

But that, ultimately, did not matter. Very little but this did: he *would* come for Blake, and Blake would understand both Avon’s tardiness and the certain eventuality of his arrival, just as he had always understood Avon. Blake would lay out a banquet in readiness, would prepare everything just for him. Thus the call from Terminal, weak as the ruse had been, managed to utterly convince Avon, because it aligned so totally with his expectations.

***

the present

Blake came to Avon again in a matter of days—as soon as he was well enough to do it. They were still on Terminal, and Avon was deep in the guts of the flyer, working after everyone else had gone to get some sleep. He looked the worse for his efforts, and was kneeling in coils of wiring, splattered with grease.

His head shot up when he felt the sizzle of powerful magic. *Blake.*

And an instant later, in answer to the catch in Avon’s throat, there he was in the doorway.

“I couldn’t wait,” Blake said simply. From the look on his face, Blake wasn’t here in a steeled, purely-professional capacity. Which meant he had insisted on this. Which meant that the man Avon had seen for an instant must be livid. Avon chose not to say anything about how *that* conversation must have gone. So ‘Aven’ had been left seething, left feeling illegitimate and abandoned and bereft. Good. See how he liked it.

Blake seemed to cross the room in a second, and then he was on his knees in front of Avon again, putting them at the same height once more, as though he’d never left. Avon couldn’t register who moved first, but in another moment Blake’s hands were clutching his face, his chin, buried in his hair, and Avon’s own hands were trying to work off Blake’s coat. Blake hissed when Avon went too roughly: his shoulder must still be tender. Avon lifted his hands and stayed still, letting Blake slide his hands under Avon’s jacket, letting him set the pace. Blake didn’t even undress him—just undid his flies and found his cock and gripped it in shaking fingers and pumped it gently.

“I missed you,” Blake whispered intensely, pressing his lips to Avon’s forehead. Avon nodded against him, open-mouthed, breathing hard as Blake stroked him off. How was it his own hand felt perfunctory, but fucking Blake’s hand felt just as intimate, just as much of an exposure, as being opened wide and taken? And what was there to say to that? That the world had felt colorless and pointless without Blake in it, and only the thought that he might find Blake again, that Blake might need him to do it, had made life worth the living?

Blake’s power—god, there was so *much* of it now—crackled into Avon, brightly burning, and Avon
made a harsh, surprised sound.

“Sorry,” Blake said, bringing it under control, “sorry, did I hurt you?”

Avon shook his head. “I can handle it.” It was like sitting too close to an open fire when you were desperate for warmth. He’d been out in the cold a long while now. All he wanted was to shove his hands in the flames and curl his fingers around the coals.

Blake laughed, almost wretchedly. “Of course you can. Oh, I love you,” Blake said into the crook of Avon’s neck, “I love you so much, I can’t tell you how much—”

Avon gasped, and Blake held him tighter, the grip of his right hand on Avon’s cock still so much weaker than that of his left on Avon’s shoulder. Avon came with wide eyes, biting his lip to keep quiet so he didn’t alert the others, trembling, his hands digging into Blake like he was scrambling for purchase on the side of a cliff.

Blake looked at Avon, swallowing hard. Avon’s chest heaved with breath, and his eyes were half-shut and bright.

“I ought to have known,” Blake apologized. Avon wondered precisely which item he referred to. Known that Avon loved him? Known Avon was alive? Known better than to love someone else?

“Yes,” Avon said, angry even as he was overwhelmed by the physical proof of Blake’s return, “you should have.”

He returned the favor, rushing out of desperation and so that he didn’t have to wonder (much) whether Blake’s husband used just the same flick of the wrist that made Blake start and clench his fist. Whether Blake came quite so gorgeously and helplessly for someone else. Whether he told someone else ‘oh I love you, I love you so much’. Because of course he must, and being Blake, he probably meant that just as much as he meant this, or he wouldn’t say it at all.

It wasn’t fair, Avon thought, that Blake was everything to him, and he was less than everything to Blake. It never had been.

But being anything to Blake was monumental, and Avon found himself able, for a while, not to think of what he didn’t have, so long as he was surfeited with what he did.

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Though he supposed Blake probably wished he wasn’t, Aven was waiting up in bed when Blake returned. (‘Reproachful’, Blake thought, did not touch it.)

“I had a look at the spot he used to come through,” Aven said after Blake came out of the shower (the thought of why he probably needed one made Aven feel rather like crying, though he didn’t allow himself the indulgence at present). “I thought it might represent a security risk—a thin patch within walking distance of the Castle.”

“Did you seal it,” Blake asked, his voice conversational, “or should I move up walking the bounds?”

He had his back to Aven as he looked through the papers on his desk, trying to find the next day’s schedule.

Aven’s eyes narrowed, both at the way Blake was cowardly pretending at normality and at the cavalier flexibility with which Blake treated the annual boundary-walking cycle, which was traditionally fixed for certain holidays. He chose not to comment on either at present. “There wasn’t any need—it wasn’t a particularly vulnerable lacunae, after all. Unless there are any more Enchanters
out there capable of coming after you with Heart’s Desire?”

Blake flinched, but his tone was even as he said, “Not to my knowledge.”

The spell had been days old, but then there’d been little activity in the area since. It hadn’t been a subtle Heart’s Desire, either—strong, raw and untrained, poignant with bitter longing and coursing need. It had made Aven sick just to look at it. Lurching, visceral shame, discomfort and rage had flooded him so strongly when he’d examined the residue that he’d had to lean against a tree to breathe for a moment. The feelings had only swollen, tightened and built as he’d cleaned up the foul mess of that infantile spellwork, because the sick-sweet, pathetic neediness he’d coldly blasted from the earth had been so very familiar. It had been, for all the feral mistakes deforming it, exactly his own.

“You said,” Aven reminded his husband, his voice cool, “that no one back there loved you.” He didn’t think Blake would have directly lied to him. He still did not think that.

Blake put the papers down, abandoning the pantomime, and spread his hands against the lip of the desk. His back was still to Aven.

“I was mistaken,” he said simply. There was a note of wonder in it—an irrepressible, innocent joy.

Aven wanted to stab him for that. He had never, not even at the height of his resentment of Blake’s position, not even when Blake, all confidence and power, had dragged him back to the Castle in disgrace, wanted to hurt Blake like he wanted to hurt him in this moment.

Instead he turned out the light and lay down, keeping his back to Blake. Blake came to bed and put a hand on his shoulder—the fingers splayed, possessive and supportive. Aven clenched the muscles of his back and refused to turn to him, even when Blake softly said his name. Aven shut his eyes tight and thought, “Why did I ever allow myself to love you?”, the thought alternating with a childish, futile, uncomprehending “But I am thy own; thou art wholly mine.”

***
Chapter Four

Set me as a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thine arm; for love is strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave; the flashes thereof are flashes of fire, a very flame of the lord.

Even repaired, the ship Servalaan had left Avon and his compatriots was a shambles: a death trap Tarrant wouldn’t have deigned to pilot if there had been any other option available. Avon hadn’t wanted to ask Blake for help, and so Blake, who knew him well, hadn’t given him the opportunity to fail to. He’d merely asked Avon to wait where he was for the moment, transported himself somewhere else in the galaxy, and returned with a better ship, which now hung in the skies above Terminal. In the interval Blake had been gone, they had declined the offer of a lift from a stranger named Dorian, who’d approached them on the planet—reeking, Avon said, of black magic.

“Even Vila sensed there was ‘something off’ about him,” Avon had groused to Blake upon the man’s return. “Of course so did Cally, possibly due to her being a telepath, and Dayna, probably due to her having the sense god gave a duck. Only Tarrant was impatient enough to argue we should take him up on it. Dayna said he could go if he liked, no one was stopping him.”

“I take it he’s still with us?” Blake asked, amused.

“Well,” Avon shrugged, “he’s here, anyway. Sulking and swearing you won’t come back and that we’ll all die here with only a junker to our names. Though I think he’ll come around once he’s been introduced.”

“To me?” Blake asked with an arch of an eyebrow.

Avon smiled. “To this, obviously.” He gestured around him at the vessel Blake had popped him up to (effortlessly—the most taxing magic Avon had ever seen, the magical equivalent of a teleport, and he’d just done it). “However did you manage to steal an experimental troop carrier?”

“Not easily,” Blake said dryly.

They discussed destinations, and Avon operated the new ship’s shuttle-bay doors so that Tarrant could gingerly guide their frail craft in through them. Even trusting Blake to return as he had, Avon wasn’t sorry he’d stubbornly persisted in repairing the shuttle. Having a back up plan never hurt, and the complicated salvage operation had given him something to think about (besides, of course, the obvious). Clinking down on the bay floor, the little ship gave a great wheeze, as though they were frankly asking a lot of it.

“She was cross with you,” Blake observed, wincing at the pathetic sound.

“Well,” Avon allowed, “it wasn’t that long ago that I rather upset her plan to ferment a war between Teal and Vandor.”

“Yes,” Blake agreed, giving Avon a quick admiring and amused glance, “I suppose that might account for it.”

“Still, it’s hardly civil,” Avon groused.

“Not exactly sportsmanlike,” Blake concurred.

Dayna, Cally, Tarrant and Vila had piled out of the shuttle (like clowns out of a car, Blake muttered, glancing at the monitor; Avon didn’t get it). Tarrant looked around him at the troop carrier with
ardent lust.

“I think I might love you,” Tarrant informed Blake when he reached the flight deck.

“I wouldn’t even joke about it,” Vila murmured to Tarrant under his breath.

“Hm?” Tarrant asked, striding confidently to a console and bringing up the flight controls.

“Let’s put it this way,” Vila said, keeping his voice low as Avon called Blake’s attention to something and the two of them walked away, “you didn’t beat out Avon for control of the Liberator, and you’re not getting in there either.”

“Really?” Tarrant asked, studying the instrumentation while listening to Vila. “I wouldn’t have thought it.”

Avon laughed sharply at something Blake said (it was difficult to make out most of the words, at this distance) and responded with what seemed like a surprisingly forthcoming technical explanation. Blake asked him a question, sounding interested, and Avon said, “Yes” in an unusually enthusiastic tone, then drawled something. The pitch was lazy and fond. Blake chuckled in response—warm and rolling. Tarrant thought that perhaps if he’d heard the words it would all have sounded unobjectionable, but from this perspective, reduced to the essentials of tone and mood, they were obviously flirting. Further, it was obviously the sort of flirting people who were already fucking engaged in.

“Oh all right,” Tarrant conceded. “I only meant it a little.”

Avon’s mood soured when it became clear that Blake intended to leave again, almost immediately. He had the decency to tell Avon as much when they were alone, at least. He said he’d be back in a few days, but that he had other responsibilities to see to.


“And I,” Avon said, “am to be left with your to-do list, am I? Like your factor.” Blake opened his mouth to contest that, and Avon ploughed on. “I admit, I am not entirely sure why the Federation is still a subject of particular interest to you. Given that it is no longer your problem.”

“Oh I think you understand perfectly,” Blake growled. “I think you know, even if you’re willing to say things you don’t believe to hurt me right now, that I wouldn’t just abandon you here if I could possibly help it. Well, I don’t know of a way for you to live permanently in 12A, so we have a problem don’t we? I also suspect you know that I still care about everyone else stuck living under the Federation as well. And even if I didn’t, it happens to be my damn business to care.”

Avon arched an eyebrow. “The Federation employs magic, true, but the political situation is not precisely a problem of misuse that ought to fall under your jurisdiction, as you have explained it to me.”

Blake snorted. “How? From suppressants in the domes and people being offered a choice between Mage Corps conscription or execution all the way to Space Command’s staging genocide via magical means, practically every use of magic in S1 is a screaming case for humanitarian intervention. And that is what I’ll tell the Ministry, if and when they ask.”

Something in that smacked of evasion. It was clear that this Ministry certainly was going to ask, and that Blake was going to try to push past their objections. But Blake seemed hardly to consider this difference of opinion an issue, so it wasn’t that Avon was picking up on. Something else, then.
“What will you tell me, if I ask?” Avon said, catching Blake’s eye and watching his expression closely for signs of concealment or misdirection. “I am asking, Blake.”

Blake huffed out his breath. The set of his face was guarded and concerned. “All I can say at present,” he began, slowly, “is that there’s some structural instability in this universe at a magical level. I think it might be connected to the political decay—we call it the Caprona Effect, it’s a well-recorded phenomenon. But if that’s true, it’s been developing here for a long, long while, with nothing to check it. All the ‘series’ in S1 have collapsed into this universe. That’s a lot of pressure for any one reality to bear, and the political instability seems to be shredding the branch.” Avon looked confused, and Blake shook his head. “That’s what we call this reality. It’s hard to explain without showing you. The point is, I’m looking into the cracks in this universe’s foundation. But theoretically, fighting one aspect of the problem ought to clear up another. Curbing or destroying the Federation should help. In fact I’m not sure anything else could. Not to mention that I still think it’s right and necessary to do so.”

“Ah,” Avon caught at this, resolving to think more on what Blake had told him when he’d leisure for it, “so, to return to my earlier point, I am to continue to mind your little army in your absence?”

“These are your people, Avon,” Blake said.

That wasn’t what Avon wanted to hear. They were Blake’s—he’d kept them and added to their number for Blake’s benefit. “And, at its heart, this is to be my war, I suppose? My universe, your humanitarian intervention.”

“That isn’t what I meant,” Blake glared at him levelly, “and you know it.”

They wouldn’t even have time to have sex. That was a petty thing to be angry with Blake over, Avon supposed. He didn’t much care. Did Blake not understand how much Avon had missed him, in his absence? Some of this must have shown on Avon’s face, because Blake’s softened.

“I love you,” he said quietly.

“So you keep saying,” Avon snapped, looking away. He didn’t look at Blake, not even when Blake enfolded him in a firm embrace—his arm healed, now, and the pressure even. “Try this one, then. Any war you’re in is my war. Any people of mine are your people, and the reverse. Wherever you are is as much my home as 12A. I wouldn’t worry about my not caring, if I were you.” Blake gave Avon a last, tight squeeze (and Avon relished that the embrace was firm, that Blake felt whole and well and himself again), then released him. “I’ll see you soon,” Blake murmured, and he was gone even before he’d stepped back from Avon—suddenly and horrible absent from the world. Avon wished he could tell Blake never to do that again (to disappear in quite that fashion—or to leave him full-stop), but he knew he wouldn’t.

“I could grow to hate that phrase,” Avon muttered to himself.

After a moment of looking at the place Blake had stood, Avon returned to the flight deck. Everyone was there, apparently awaiting instructions—his in theory; Blake’s in effect. All Avon had ever been was Blake’s steward.

“Where to, Av’n?” Vila asked.

Suddenly furious, Avon turned on the man who was, in Blake’s absence, his closest friend.

“Can you hear, Vila? That isn’t my name. There’s an ‘O’ in it. It’s four letters—even you ought to be able to manage that.”
Cally regarded him evenly. Avon was angry and had nowhere useful to direct that anger, but it was hard to justify being a bully in the face of Cally’s calm, concerned, relentlessly reasonable expression. “Blake calls you Av’n quite frequently,” she told him.

Avon felt his face fall horribly for an instant before he managed to twist his mouth into a snarl.

“It’s true,” Vila said, sounding a little mulishly hurt. “We all got it off him, I guess.”

“Since when is Blake an authority on anything? Now half the galaxy says my name wrong, because they’ve heard the lot of you say it—how else should they know it?”

Avon gave the company a disgusted look, tired of these people, and already tired of this bloody ship (he was ultimately more grateful than resentful that Blake had managed to salvage the situation, but hated the thing for not being the Liberator, which he’d loved and destroyed and resented himself bitterly for losing). Avon felt so tired of everything.

“Get it right in future,” he said. “And take us out of the atmosphere. The coordinates are already laid in. I shouldn’t need to tell you this.”

He left the flight deck and, to his crewmates’ credit, baring a few slip-ups, Avon didn’t hear that name again.

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The Ministerial session had dragged on for two hours longer than advertised: sometimes Roger Blake, compulsory civil servant, really missed being a full-time terrorist. Blake already knew he was going to be late, and that Avon wasn’t going to be terribly sympathetic about the latest reason he’d been held up. Because Aven, who would be no more sympathetic to Blake’s worries about the time (Blake ought to have expected the ministry to pull that by now, and Blake ought not to be going anywhere else tonight), had cornered him.

“If, out of pity, you feel compelled to keep returning to him,” Aven began in a distinctly mocking tone (Blake had the impression that it would have been unwise to challenge that reading at present), “then promise you’ll come back to me.”

Blake regarded him sadly. “You don’t have to ask.”

Aven smiled thinly. “As it happens, I never thought I would have to ask you not to fuck someone else. Regularly. Right after you and I married. But it seems I’ve made rather a lot of unfounded assumptions, haven’t I?”

Blake felt awful and angry and he opened his mouth to say something, but Aven cut him off.

“I promise me you’ll come back to me, Blake,” he said softly.

Blake took a hard drag of a breath. “I promise.”

“Say,” Aven insisted, twirling a prepared ceremonial dagger in his left hand (summoning the thing with a turn of his wrist) and striking at his right palm with a sudden motion that made Blake flinch, “that you’ll always come back to me.”

The magic was rising in answer to the spilling of Aven’s power-laden blood, a ceremony having been opened by the first vow Aven had exacted from him. To back out now would be difficult—Aven knew his blood magic and vow-forms far better than Blake did. It had been a trick of a desperate sort. It might even be a strategic advantage—such a vow might decrease Blake’s chances
Unhesitatingly, Blake decided to honor the love behind and fueling the bitterness. He held out his hand for the dagger, and, being given it, held Aven’s gaze as he slit open his own right palm. He pressed his bleeding palm to Aven’s, feeling the magic crackle where they touched, where their blood mingled. “Bone of my bone,” Blake said, “flesh of my flesh,” letting the ritual words bind him more securely even than Aven had tried to, “I will always return to you. Let it be sealed with every vow.”

“Even as this hand.” Aven murmured the completion, heat searing their skin as the wounds knit, leaving a thin, indelible line to mark the promise. When Aven pulled his hand back the magic resisted for a moment, stretched, snapped lightly and then settled in both of their hands, sinking into the scars. And now, every time Blake looked at his right hand, he would be reminded of Aven and of his vows to him, by his ring and by the scar. And every time the ridge of the scar brushed against Avon’s skin, Blake would feel it. He would know.

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For perhaps the dozenth time, Blake transported himself to the base where Avon and company were installed. He materialized in the tracking gallery of the rebel installation they’d set up on Gauda Prime.

Avon was there to greet Blake. He was still, but in such a way that it was obvious he’d just been pacing. The innards of the room’s consoles spilled across the floor, the plastic shining slick like intestines plopping out of a slit gut. Avon’s tools were scattered among the coils, rather than having been brought out one at a time, as needed. Avon knew that this would signal to Blake that he was frustrated, and thought, oh, let it. Like everything else, the overhaul wasn’t going as well as he would have liked.

“You’re late,” he snapped, and Blake was: very late. It was very late, or very early. No one was around but the two of them.

“I'm sorry,” Blake said, a slight furtiveness in his eyes, “I—” He stopped without offering an excuse.

Avon had been dragged through hell, these past weeks. The work was slow-going and thankless. They were making progress, but Avon felt every step of the way. The only real bright spots had been the two new recruits intended for the GP installation: a capable computer technician Blake had brought in to work under him, named Deva, and a young woman who had shown up on their base wearing an elaborate hairstyle and an improbable number of guns. Soolin couldn’t give references because her last employer had tried to kill her, and she’d decided to beat him to it. Dorian, apparently. The very same. Avon had gotten in a choice joke at Tarrant’s expense on this account, and Vila and Dayna had luxuriated for days in asking Tarrant’s opinion of various people with mock-obsequiousness—given that he was such a good judge of character, and had such insights to share. Soolin resented the Federation bitterly, and had offered to sell the rebellion her skills.

“Are you any good?” Avon had asked bluntly when they’d initially met in the woods, away from the base, as a precaution.

By simply shooting a bird out of the sky, she’d demonstrated that she was.

“Then we probably can’t afford you,” Avon had said, unblinking.

“That’s a pity,” she’d said calmly, “as I really don’t have any better ideas about what to do with
myself now.”

Avon had laughed. “Well. At least you’d fit in. We might be able to work something out.”

It turned out that the ship she’d taken from her dead employer had quite a good AI, and the rudiments of teleport system, which Avon thought he might be able to coax life into. Soolin and Blake had had a long conversation when Blake had next come through.

“Did you reach a settlement?” Avon had asked her afterwards.

“It’s taken care of,” she’d said, closing the subject. Avon thought it best not to inquire too deeply on this point. If she was here because she was friendless and directionless and all she had was hate, and if Blake had made her feel some glimmer of loyalty or hope or belonging, Avon knew better than anyone not to be so gauche as to press her to lay that bare. He wouldn’t have wanted to talk about what Blake had done to him either.

Aside from that, he and Blake’s recruitment efforts were meeting with mixed success. His own scientific head-hunting drive had thus far turned up more dead ends than allies, and there had been two casualties along the way. In partnership with Blake and with his frequent practical assistance, Avon was assembling the beginnings of an army: the equipment and the personnel. The latter, including the scientists Avon had secured, were largely stationed at satellite outposts. Cally was off managing these and mustering more troops at present, putting her guerilla-cell experience to good use. But they’d had awful luck of late. Anything that could go wrong did. Vila had stopped making his signature complaints that the universe was out to get them, because it just seemed factually true recently, and thus too grim a thing to comment on.

So no, Avon didn’t want to hear it. Didn’t want a word of some reasonable excuse about how Blake had several other universes to check up on—not to mention a whole other life to live.

“How’s your husband?” Avon cut Blake off, when he looked likely to speak again, with a thin, insincere smile.

Blake glared at him, refusing to answer.

“How,” Avon persisted, “is your lovely life, in your charming world?”

Avon had to hand it to Blake: he was circumspect. Avon got only hints of Blake’s other existence. He saw only traces of the other man Blake was connected to—more connected, it seemed, than he was to Avon. Once some object in Blake’s jacket pocket had started, after registering the jump, shrieking ‘I belong to Chrestomanci Castle!’ Blake had fished it out, silenced it and frowned at the thing. It was, he said, a paperweight, and this was the Castle’s standard anti-theft device, a spell cast over all the movables of the house. Blake had seemed to wonder whether the thing could have fallen into his pocket by accident. He had concluded, silently but obviously, that this was more likely a small, vicious joke on his husband’s part. (There was something absolutely pathetic in it, Avon had thought as he’d seethed.)

Though there was, Avon saw now, a strange new scar on Blake’s right palm. He wanted to ask, but something told him he didn’t want the answer. Not after what had happened the last time. Because generally, there was how Blake looked lately. That healthy tan, a flattering haircut. He’d appeared once in what he called a suit—apparently he’d come from some formal dinner—and Avon hadn’t been able to stop himself from saying “God, you look good.” Rather than rumbling a pleased ‘thank you’ as he would have done in response to that sort of compliment on the Liberator, Blake had given an awkward laugh.
“And it isn’t your doing, is it?” Avon had realized. “No wonder I like that jacket on you. How long have I,” that ‘I’ stuck in his craw, but still he said it, “been dressing you up for myself over there, in the guise of professionalism?”

Blake had tried to make a joke of it. “I haven’t made my own fashion decisions since I was twenty five—which might well explain a few of my poor choices when left to my own devices.”

Avon hadn’t been amused. It was all too clear that there was a whole history there: a subtext he’d been ignorant of. He felt a rube, as he had when he’d wondered (without wanting to—it was as though he’d tripped over the suspicion) whether in part, subconsciously, Blake had been driven to destroy Star One because it was the source of the barrier that kept him from the world he’d been born in. From his rightful position, his Castle, his dearly devoted Aven.

Oh, Blake couldn’t have known that at the time (though Avon didn’t know whether that made it any better). He would have had sufficient conscious motivations for the act, or he never could have justified it to himself. Star One had been, after all, the source of much of the Federation’s power, and its destruction had severely rattled the government. But a part of Blake’s wild desire to rend the thing might well have been attributable to this ulterior motive. Avon had resented the search for Star One for being more important to Blake than he was—perhaps, all along, it had been Aven who was more important to Blake than he was. He had, in Aven and Blake’s duty, two dangerous rivals, where competition from Blake’s duty alone had driven Avon to distraction.

“No, please don’t do this,” Blake said now, meaning Don’t bring Aven into this, or possibly, Don’t hurt yourself by asking questions you don’t want the answer to. Or even, Don’t refer to my other life, in a world that isn’t at war, as some ‘vacation’. Perhaps, Avon thought, Blake was right, and that framing was simply incorrect. Perhaps these jaunts to see him were Blake’s vacations. Humanitarian aid. Conflict voluntourism. Really, Avon supposed they must be.

“Don’t do what?” Avon asked, his polite expression hardening further. “Isn’t it natural that I should be curious? How did you two ever meet? Not on a prison ship, I assume.”

Blake met that with silence, and Avon continued. “Aren’t I going to have to know at some point? Or do you intend to keep your wife and your mistress entirely discreetly? I’m sorry, am I failing to know my place?”

“Not on a prison ship,” Blake said with slow deliberation, “but when I met Aven he was in the process of committing a crime. I’d never wanted to be the Chrestomanci. I lied to myself about it, hardly ever used magic. So when my predecessor died, Aven—” Blake exhaled, and looked away. “Aven was on the previous Chrestomanci’s staff. That was LeGrand—a sister our LeGrand never had, I think. He and I were both young at the time. She’d left no successor, or so they thought, and the position was vital—more vital than I’d been willing to realize. Someone had to do something. And Aven was incredibly powerful, and just as deeply determined. So Aven cut out his heart and made a bargain with a fire demon. There almost isn’t a more dangerous thing he could have done. He intended, with the power that bargain would have given him, to take up the mantle. But in the time it had taken him to find and capture the demon, the Castle had found me. I was sent to stop him, by any means necessary.

“I fought him and begged him, and he let me take him home and sew his heart back into his body with my own hands. I was so frightened. I don’t think he ever knew how scared I was that he’d kill me, or that I’d have to kill him—or that I’d do it by accident, in trying to save his humanity. I had to plead with the ministry for his life. I won him by offering them my head if he so much as stepped out of line, but I was forced by the terms of our agreement to keep him as my prisoner for two years. In that time, and afterwards, when he freely chose to stay with me, he’s been my ally, my mentor and
my best friend. I had no training when I began, I was totally ignorant—everything about the way I use magic is down to him. Aven made me the Chrestomanci I am today. And the man.”

“It all sounds so picturesque. And now you, Roj Blake, are improbably settled into conservative domesticity,” Avon mocked, internally seething with hatred. The epic romance and mundane comfort of it were each worse than he could possibly have imagined; he wanted all of it, and felt he had nothing equivalent to offer Blake. “I suppose he manages your accounts and makes sure dinner arrives on the table.”

“So what if he does? I won’t lie to you,” Blake said fiercely. “Either of you. I won’t deny either of you. What kind of answer would that be to everything you’ve both done for me? My marriage isn’t some lesser, perfunctory partnership. I’ve loved Aven since I first saw him—” Blake frowned at that. “Perhaps even before I ever did. All I knew was that he’d gone to do something obscenely difficult and clever and selfish, and suicidally brave. I don’t know that I’d ever been so interested in my life.”

“I imagine he was grateful for your condescension,” Avon said stiffly.

“Funnily enough, he was exactly as grateful as you’d be in his place,” Blake almost shouted, “which is to say not very.”

Blake breathed, calming himself down. “He can be so terribly kind to me,” Blake said, in a low voice that indicated he was sensible of how he was repaying that kindness now. “So terribly, achingly kind,” he finished, shutting his eyes.

I suppose I am not kind to you Avon thought, feeling useless. I would be, if I knew better how. I try to make you happy. Does that sound absolutely ridiculous to you?

“It sounds,” Avon sneered, hoping the expression concealed the hurt that he suspected must have crept into his eyes (because Blake would look at him, eventually, and when he did, Avon didn’t want Blake to see him looking like he felt), “like having some kind of tame pet.”

“Aven is never tame or easy,” Blake said, his words hard and his eyes still closed. “That is a mistake no one would make twice. He’s difficult, subtle, temperamental, sweet—he’s anything but that. He can afford to care more about small things than you can. He’s more set in his quotidian convictions. But fundamentally he is you. Your qualities, your responses, your stupidly noble heart. That is what I love in him, and you. Why won’t the two of you see that?”

“I don’t want to talk about him,” Avon hissed, thinking that if he were compared to Aven on all points he might come up wanting in respects he could hardly guess at. He became disposable. There was nothing that was solely his—not his ‘qualities’, not his person and certainly not Blake. Just his experiences. And what, precisely, were those worth?

“Then don’t bring it up!” Blake growled. “I love you, I love all of you,” Blake said fiercely, trying to make Avon feel it. And meaning him and Aven both, distinctly and together. Avon couldn’t stand it.

He moved to kiss Blake, wanting to end the conversation and needing to do it, to reassure himself that Blake was present, and in some measure his, and wanted him. Blake shifted his head so Avon wound up pressing a kiss to his cheek. Frowning, Avon tried again, only to find himself once more blocked by Blake, who looked guilty and ashamed. Blake never looked ashamed.

Avon pulled back.

“There’s a rule, isn’t there?” he said slowly. “You had to talk to him about your assignations, after all. He set conditions. He asked something of you, and you couldn’t refuse him. Not your husband, your
Aven. You can come, you are allowed to come to me: he graciously permits it. But you aren't to kiss me. Not properly. Your real lover indulges you only so far.”

“I didn't think you'd care,” Blake said after a moment. “I didn’t think you really—liked kissing. You didn’t even notice the lack of it, the last times we had sex.”

“Oh, I care that I'm not allowed to do it,” Avon said wryly. Blake’s dodges over the past weeks had been subtle: it was a credit to Blake’s ability to bluff that this had gone on as long as it had.

“And, I see now, about the thing itself,” Blake said, not fooled. “It means a lot to you, doesn’t it? That's why Aven picked it. Why do you do this to yourself?” His tone was exasperated.

“I don't do it to myself,” Avon said flatly.

With decision, he gave Blake exactly the wicked smile he knew Blake was weakest against. Predictably, he watched Blake visibly crumple. You’ll do it for me, Avon thought with slinking pleasure. You never can help giving in to me—not on a point like this. He’d never asked Blake for anything in bed and met with refusal. “When you're with me, you are with me. Isn’t that fair?”

“Avon,” Blake protested as Avon caught his face in his hands.

“Yes?” Avon asked, drawing out the word.

“Avon, we shouldn’t—”

“When has that ever stopped us?” he laughed huskily. “Don’t you want me, Blake?” He deliberately misstated the problem, reframing it so Blake would have to abandon the moral high ground and fight on the less-sure territory of his own desires and what he owed to Avon.

“You know I do,” Blake said.

“Well,” Avon brought his face closer to Blake’s, “I want this.” And gently, chastely, Avon brought their lips together. Once. Twice—then Blake surged into his mouth like he’d ached to kiss him since he’d seen him again, or even since he’d last kissed him. That was better. Highly gratifying. Avon smiled into it even as Blake groaned.

“Bedroom,” Avon muttered, pushing Blake back with a hand. “Anyone could walk in here.” One of the best things about Blake’s touristic approach to organizing the GP base was that he didn’t really merit his own bedroom, and so, at last, they shared one. Long overdue, Avon thought.

It was almost difficult to get Blake to stop kissing him long enough to accomplish the operation.

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Blake transported himself back home to find Aven at dinner. They were taking it in private these days, rather than with the rest of the staff. The time they had together, burdened as they were with commitments related to both the Chrestomanci role and the S1 crisis, felt too precious to waste on other people at present. There was a plate set for Blake, as there always was. Often, because Blake was out on a Call, this setting went unused. But the untouched silverware and clean china seemed somehow especially poignant tonight, sitting across from Aven’s almost-finished meal. After all, Aven mostly attended Calls with him. Only on rare occasions did his husband eat dinner alone like this.

Blake sat down, expecting that Aven would stay and speak to him while he ate, to keep him company. But with a small frown and no word of greeting, Aven studied him. Putting his cutlery
down in the proper ‘done’ position (a signal the maids appreciated), Aven dabbed his napkin with his lips, pushed back his chair, and walked over to Blake.

Wordlessly, he touched two fingers to Blake’s lips.

“Of course he did,” he murmured with a wry smile.

Had it been some kind of binding-trace that had led him to conclude it? Perhaps a spell-layer hidden in the vow he’d exacted? Blake’s furtive expression? Or simply self-knowledge, instinct? Blake couldn’t say.

Aven lifted his fingers and quit the room, leaving Blake to eat his meal in guilty silence.

***

Some weeks later, Vila, Avon, Tarrant and Dayna were taking Soolin’s ship, Scorpio, out on a proving flight. Avon wanted to test his modifications to the teleport and to determine the parameters of Scorpio’s silent-running mode. He had—not an idea, per se, but a collection of jumbled half-thoughts he was nudging to coalesce in his mind. It still needed several somethings before it became an idea, but he thought a proved silent-running capacity would definitely be necessary.

The ship was stationary at present, held stable so Avon could make fine adjustments to the teleport’s directional array.

Vila ducked into the small sleeping cabin and got the fright of his life when someone, without anything like the noise and phase-in period he expected from teleportation, suddenly appeared there. At least it was a familiar someone.

“Avon?” Vila asked, goggling at the new arrival and his stranger-than usual ensemble, glancing back towards the flight deck where he’d left the man involuntarily.

The man gave him a hard, unpleasant smile. “Not quite—Vila,” he said, as though he were remembering the name. “But I would very much appreciate it if you’d take me to him.”

“Hang on,” Vila said, confused.

“Vila,” the man said in a too-familiar threatening tone.

“All right, all right,” Vila groused. He didn’t know what was going on, but it probably wasn’t lethal. This didn’t feel like bizarre space phenomena (he’d encountered enough of them to know), and he didn’t see how it could be a Federation trap. If the Federation had clones of Avon and advanced teleportation, he thought they’d probably all already know about it. On account of all being dead.

“Charming place you have here,” the man sneered when he reached the flight deck.

Avon froze in his position without turning around to see who had arrived.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to your friends?” the man asked, arching an eyebrow. “Vila here doesn’t seem to have any idea who I am.”

“Nor do we,” Dayna put in—she and Tarrant had also been on the flight deck when Vila and the stranger had entered. She eyed the doppelganger warily.

“Do it yourself,” Avon said, his voice harsher than the stranger’s—still not moving to look at him.

“All right,” the stranger said, smiling insincerely. His accent, Vila noticed, was a few degrees crisper
than Avon’s. He produced a card, offering it to Vila.


“Actually it’s the French pronunciation,” Aven corrected him. “Alloy-see-us.”

Avon snorted, having never heard anything so punchable in his life.

“How,” Aven asked idly, as though it didn’t particularly matter, “what’s your middle name?”

“We don’t bother with them here,” Avon said in a bored tone.

Aven made a small tsking sound. “I’m not really surprised. To business, I think. Pacificare,” he said, tilting his head as though he were making a decision, “aestus should do.”

Every gun in the room, including the one Avon had drawn while the pantomime with the card was going on and was holding in his lap, suddenly burned hot. Dayna yelped, Tarrant swore and Avon hissed as they all tried, quickly, to divest themselves of the burning brands. Avon whipped his head around to glare furiously at Aven.

“Let’s have a chat,” Aven said. “Astomos.”

Avon opened his mouth to say something. Or at least he tried to. He didn’t seem to have one anymore. Or rather, he found as he clawed frantically at his face, where his mouth ought to have been, he did—it was simply sealed shut. Any noise he made was muffled. He breathed hard through his nose and fought not to panic.

“What did you do to him?” Dayna asked sharply.

Aven just continued to smile—wider, if anything. “Nothing you can reverse, so you’ll just have to bear with me for a while. He and I have a great deal to say to one another, and I find it so much easier to have a worthwhile conversation like this.”

Aven leaned against the first row of consoles, and the trailing sleeve of his robe caught on the edge. Frowning, he looked down at it, rolling his eyes. He freed himself with an elegant, irritated gesture, and cast an unimpressed eye at Avon’s ensemble—a sort of grey, green-paneled coverall. He’d found it on the Scorpio—it had apparently belonged to Soolin’s former employer. There hadn’t been a great deal of choice or opportunity in Avon’s life of late, regarding clothing or anything else. “It seems I’m overdressed.”

Aven stripped out of the black lay gown, decorated with black lace and a scarlet hood (worn down), and lined with black silk. Under it he wore shining black shoes, a perfectly-cut black suit and waistcoat, a white shirt with a collar and a white cravat. A plain gold ring sat on his hand.

“Sub-fusc is a somewhat pretentious,” he admitted. “I had to convince my husband—note that,” he said, the word ‘that’ as sharply as the crack of a whip, before he continued on sweetly, “that I was going to my college’s Gaudy—that’s a sort of old-students’ dinner,” he said, more patronizingly than he would have done to a five-year old, explaining it to the people who were staring at him.

“Arranging this visit did present me with some difficulty,” he admitted, slinging the gown over his arm. “I had to get the festal robes and the black tie for the rest of the Gaudy cleaned as well, or he’d have smelled a rat. And of course I had to arrange things so that he was due at something important he couldn’t slip away from when he felt me draw on his power to cross into this Series. I had to look mournful when the invitation came, bearing the same date as the summit Blake and I were supposed to attend together. I had to insist that no, I couldn’t think of attending, he needed me, so that he had
to talk *me* into going to the Gaudy—I’d been working so hard lately, I *deserved* it—” Aven shook his head. “Actually, it wasn’t difficult at all. One ought to know one’s way around one’s own husband, even if said husband knows you as well as Blake knows me after ten years.” Aven gave a slightly nostalgic smile at that, and then turned it on Avon. “And of course I would have gone to much greater trouble, if necessary—you see I did *so* want us to be able to talk uninterrupted.” Their present audience apparently hardly registered as a disturbance for him. He slung his robe over the side of a console.

Dayna frowned. “What does he mean?” she muttered to Tarrant. “Blake wouldn’t—”

“Avon might,” Tarrant said in the same low voice. “His last one was married, too, wasn’t she?”

Aven caught this and glanced at them, frowning, and then at Avon. “A failed embezzler *and* a serial home-wrecker?” Aven sneered, seeming actually disgusted by the prospect of infidelity involved. “I see I’m *delightful* in this universe; it’s so obvious what Blake saw in me.

“Avon,” Aven said, pacing, rubbing his temples in his hand, “I know you haven’t much in the way of culture, in your hellscape of a world, so I’m going have to tell you a story."

Avon glared at him. Unaffected, Aven continued to pace the room.

“Once,” he turned on his heel to look at Avon, his hands clasped behind his back, “there was a man named Jacob, who fell in love with a woman named Rachel. He asked her father for her hand in marriage, and her father agreed—provided that Jacob worked for him for seven years, to earn her. But on the night of what ought to have been their wedding, the father veiled Rachel’s sister, Leah, and substituted her for Rachel in the ceremony. So Jacob wed this substitute, and had to work for another seven years in order to attain his beloved.”

“I searched for Roger Edward Blake,” Aven said in a tight voice, “for seven years. I waited for him. In that time I took up his mantle and performed his duties. I waited for *seven years*, Avon. I would do it again in an instant, if it were required of me. Another seven years, another seventy. I acted for Blake with perfect faith. I was tested and was proved true. In following him, *you* followed but yourself.”

Avon frowned infinitesimally at that.

“It’s *Othello*,” Aven said, out of patience. “I’m calling you the Iago. God, I’m *wasted* on you. The point is that you just waltzed in and took advantage of him after a ‘mindwipe’. You never knew him, not really. You never even knew his right *name*. You were only ever a mistake: a poor reflection foisted on him in lieu of what he actually wanted. *Me.*”

Avon made a sweeping, forgiving gesture of his hand. “And yet I was still prepared to let him return here, as much as I naturally detested the idea. I was prepared even to let him—comfort you, for the sake of his great-hearted sorrow over this place. To assuage his guilt. And I kept to the terms of my agreement with him! But *you* forced the thing beyond its bounds, and in so doing forced my hand. I made one small, simple condition, and you couldn’t even honor my request. You pushed Blake into acting against his better judgment—that is to say, into acting against *me*. So,” Aven sighed theatrically, “how can I trust you with him? Why should I continue to allow him to wallow in his pity? And why should I continue to let him suffer for your selfishness?”

Avon obviously didn’t answer. The others, horrified and paralyzed by the excruciatingly uncomfortable scene (and in no little fear of someone who could *shut Avon up*, by terrifying magical means), didn’t interrupt. Tarrant, as an Earth-reared Alpha, especially felt cowed by Aven’s simultaneously deeply classed and wrenchingly inappropriate display of ire.
“The fact of the matter is,” Aven mused, taking the seat next to Avon and balancing his elbows on his knees, folding his hands together, “I don’t think you can love him.”

Avon’s head shot up, his eyes furious. Aven waved his hand airily. “Oh, I think you’d like to,” he agreed. “I can understand that. But what can grow in soil like this?”

He gestured now at the shabby craft around him, drifting through a shabby, decaying universe. “There’s just nothing to you, really. You’re just me, but stunted—scraped bare of all refinement. You barely even have a name. Blake told me you were surprised to discover you had significant magic,” Aven laughed. “So I can only imagine you know nothing of your family whatever. And since you hardly know yourself, what can you know of duty, protection, love?”

Aven gave him an awful, almost authentically kindly look.

“It isn’t really your fault. In better conditions, it might have been different. But as it is, everything I hear about you is frankly embarrassing. Blake’s account was rose-colored, but one can read between the lines. When you were together,” his expression twisted mockingly, as though he didn’t think much of what he knew of that relationship, “you made Blake’s work difficult and his life a misery. You’ve no imagination. You have unformed and, where they are formed, frankly pathetic ambitions. You can offer him no future. What do you imagine will come of your holding on to him? Where will all this end?”

Aven let that hang for a moment, let Avon feel the pressure of it, before beginning again. “You know he has real work to do here,” Aven said in an enragingly sensible tone. “As serious as your political situation is, I have to impress upon you what I suspect you already know. The magical instability is, if anything, still more dangerous to everyone in this universe. And it is only getting worse. You’re a distraction to him, rather than a helpmeet. And right now, as bound to you as he feels, you are the last thing he needs.”

Aven hopped up out of the chair. “I didn’t know whether I could appeal to any sense of honor in you. It seems I can’t. You’ve no sense of what is due my marriage, or my longer and greater commitment to Blake. You respect no oaths. But if you are not entirely destitute of character, if you think you truly love Blake, you’ll release him. You know what this place has done to him,” Aven scoffed, “you’ve taken such good care of him.”

Aven drummed his fingers on the top of the console next to him. “I could sever it, you know—undo what you did by accident. Cut the geas and hand your death back to you. I’d need your cooperation,” his expression said ‘or I’d have done it already’, “but it would be—almost painless. And Blake would be free. Don’t you see you owe him that?”

Aven extended his hand towards Avon’s cheek, and Avon drew back, his eyes wide, looking like a
A ven frowned at Avon impatiently. “Can’t you work out how to get your mouth back? This is too easy—it feels like bullying a child. Unbind.” A ven snapped his fingers, and Avon gripped the lip of the console in front of him, gasping for air.

“Avon, are you all right?” Vila asked.

Avon ignored him, and waved back Dayna, who’d made a dart towards him.

“You only want him,” he began in a gravelly voice, addressing his counterpart, “because he’s the job. If Blake weren’t Chrestomanci—”

A ven laughed, his eyes glinting. “I can’t imagine Blake not being Chrestomanci. Blake is powerful and whole. There is only one of him. Whereas you are a reminder of my own imperfect state, in addition to being a source of some irritation to me at present.”

“And what do you provide Blake with, a nauseating sycophant?”

A ven rolled his eyes. “Hardly.”

“Can you remember the last time you got your way?” Avon gave his counterpart a hard smile. “Can you even remember the last time you properly told him ‘no’?”

A ven flinched slightly, and his own amused smile dropped. “At least I can articulate that I care, rather than so confuse the issue that Blake could honestly tell me when he came home that not a soul in this universe loved him.”

“I suppose this is the first time Blake has ever lied to you to spare your feelings?” Avon said, keeping his tone bored and sarcastic—not letting A ven see that this twisted the knife Blake had stabbed him with when he’d said he hadn’t believed that Avon would truly care whether he lived or died. “Given your histrionics, I’m not surprised that he didn’t think you could handle being told the truth.”

“Blake would never lie to me,” A ven said, flatly and automatically. This provoked a surprised laugh out of Avon.

“How naïve. Blake lies constantly, whenever he needs to. Or at least he represents the truth to his own advantage. You aren’t exempt from that. Aren’t you here now because he made a promise to you, which he subsequently broke? I suppose he confessed the transgression himself.”

“He would have,” A ven said steadily.

Avon regarded him with cool incredulity. “You’re sure of that, are you?”

“As sure as I need to be. Besides, it’s hardly a matter of importance. You are, all things considered, a minor annoyance. A digression in our story that will shortly come to an end. Because whatever you and he have done, he and I were actually made for one another. Blake is quite literally the most perfect man in the universes—for me, at least. He’s the Chrestomanci, and I occupy a complementary magical office. Where,” A ven sneered, “do you fit in there?”

“So he’s yours by divine right?” Avon snorted. “Oh, I bet Blake likes that. He deals so well with being told what to do by a higher authority. Are you suggesting that he’s with you because he is forced to be? Perhaps it’s your office that appeals to him. Or perhaps he’s just dependent on you: you are, I hear, a very useful steward.”
“It isn’t like that,” Aven hissed, his veneer of calm falling away. Avon was both satisfied and disturbed to see the other man lose his color. “You’ve no idea what you’re talking about. When he restored my heart he left a shard of his magic, his soul, embedded in me, forever. You cannot imagine our connection.”

“He told me he didn’t even know what he was doing when he dealt with your embarrassing attempt to over-reach yourself,” Avon said, gritting his teeth against the idea that Blake was so thoroughly entwined with the man before him. Blake had, of course, never told him about that. “Your ‘grand-connection’ is nothing but the unintended side-effect of an amateurish accident.”

“It happened as it was meant to,” Aven said, with a conviction that almost frightened Avon. “And I made good on fate. I was there for him when he was wholly unprepared for what he would face, there for years—”

“But you never told him, did you?” Avon asked quietly. “Not until he came back. You may have loved him first, but I had him first.” Avon’s tone conveyed exactly the sense in which he meant it. Slowly, he shook his head. “You were there. And then you failed, failed utterly—for seven years, was it?” He watched Aven absorb that with the flare of shame and pain he’d expected. After all, Avon had hated himself for the year Blake had been absent. Imagine seven. Imagine wielding that much magic, and still being unequal to the task of obtaining the one thing you wanted most in the universe.

“And he was left alone, wasn’t he?” Blake’s mindwipe had haunted Avon, but what an abject violation it must have seemed to a man who’d only known entitlement—a man born to a fortified Castle that kept its doors open because it feared no enemy. “Alone,” Avon repeated, “and in a horrifying condition.” Avon said that almost with relish: the better to dig into his opponent.

“And then—” Avon stood up and turned to Aven, wearing his own awful smile, “I was there. You’d like to think I’m not useful to him, wouldn’t you? Because that is what you pride yourself on being, isn’t it? That is the whole reason for your tragic, ancillary existence. You and only you can give him what he needs. But I’m afraid it isn’t true. You see, I am vital to Blake. This isn’t a gentle universe like yours,” Avon said condescendingly. “I can’t count the times I saved him—”

“You never did,” Aven insisted, visibly upset, “my orrery protected him, manipulated the probability curves in his favor. It was never you—my orrery used you like a servant. It even let you draw on his magic—because it thought,” he huffed a sharp laugh, “that you were me.”

Avon took the information that it had been Aven’s device in Blake, all along, with a visible twitch. Avon tried to speak, and then stopped to collect himself. Aven waited with a raised eyebrow.

Even while Blake had loved him, and only him—even when Blake hadn’t so much as remembered Aven existed—Aven had been inside him. Protecting Blake, marking him as his own. Avon had relished the way he could access Blake’s magic, but that had always been... Aven’s gift. His privilege. Avon had only borrowed it. As he had, perhaps, only borrowed Blake. These things worked reciprocally, Avon knew that much. For his part, Blake could probably draw on Avon’s magic because of the geas Avon had laid on him. Avon had cherished feeling Blake working in him, working with the stuff of him. His magic had felt like his very essence, and he had willingly put it in Blake’s hands. But all along, that ability had only been the side effect of an awful curse he’d unwittingly, but not unwillingly, laid on Blake, which had robbed him of lives. He’d hurt Blake, even as he’d once believed he’d hurt Anna.

“It bothers you,” Avon said after a moment (willing to expose his deepest anxieties, if that was what it took to savage his counterpart in recompense), “that your own device can’t tell the difference between us. You must worry whether Blake can.” He watched distressed flash helplessly
across Aven’s face. Wasn’t it awful, not even to feel yourself a distinct being? Avon knew he found it so.

“You didn’t want Blake to kiss me because you wanted him to feel the distinction between his husband and his whore,” Avon continued. “But you knew I wouldn’t take kindly to that. And you got exactly the reaction you wanted, didn’t you? You were prepared to follow your agreement with Blake not to interfere to the letter—but only to the letter. Because you wanted to come here and play a series of cards, leading up to your trumps. You’re not protecting him, you’re protecting your own interests.” Avon smiled, thinly. “And you are the last person I trust to make objective judgments on this subject.”

“Well now,” Aven smiled back at him, pitching it at exactly the same angle, “you’ll have to make your own then, won’t you? You know I’m right about Blake’s best interests, or you’d have said otherwise.”

“I find talking only gets you so far,” Avon said conversationally.

“I imagine you would think that, given your universe,” Aven agreed.

“Correct,” Avon said with a nod. He then backhanded Aven hard across the face. Aven reeled back.

“Blake could have left if he didn’t like it,” Avon said in a nasty, insinuating tone. “He’s the Chrestomanci, after all,” Avon mocked.

Without much warming (except for the way his eyes had flashed when Avon had suggested that Blake had liked it), Aven balled his fist and punched Avon in the face. Avon’s lip split, and it was his turn to reel.

“You don’t even know how to hit,” Avon managed to snarl as he tried to stem the blood seeping from his mouth. “You’ve broken bones there.” Aven’s hand must have been a wreck, but it didn’t see to be slowing him down.

“I don’t care,” Aven snarled, looking liable to kill him.

There was a sudden surge of power. Aven’s eyes widened, and he made a complex gesture. “Everything’s fine,” he said quickly, in a neutral tone, like he was ordering something. The blood seemed to disappear from Avon’s face and his own hand. Aven had thrown a glamour over the wounds—not the best type of medical glamour, where you couldn’t feel the effects of your injuries while it lasted, but a façade that would keep anyone from noticing what they’d done to one another while it held. Aven grabbed his robe with his good arm and threw it over his bad, probably so that Blake wouldn’t unsuspectingly try and touch it.

“What the hell is going on?” Blake bellowed, suddenly standing in the middle of the flight-deck. “I can’t believe I fell for that—you can’t even act!” He looked at the uncomfortable expressions of everyone in the room. Avon and Aven looked particularly guilty. “Why,” Blake asked, seemingly bewildered by and furious with the two of them, “do you do this to yourself?”

Aven straightened up, adjusted his clothing, and walked over to Blake. “Why Roger, what an unexpected pleasure. How is the summit proceeding?” he asked briskly, reflexively twitching Blake’s somewhat rumpled magic into place. Blake’s magic, trained to it, curled around Aven’s and slipped into it. “Mine went—rather well, I think.”

Blake raised a hand to cup Aven’s chin, the gesture obviously natural and habitual to him. Aven managed not to wince. Presumably, like Avon, he could still feel the injury Blake couldn’t see.
“Sweetheart,” Blake said with immense weariness.

Aven shook his head, slipping out of Blake’s hold. “If you’re about to order me to go home, I think you’ll find that you’ve no business commanding me to do anything,” he said calmly, absently brushing a flake of lint off Blake’s suit with his undamaged hand. “Still, I’ll be off now,” Aven turned his head over his shoulder and smiled at the assembled. “I suspect I’ve finished here. So good to finally meet you all.”

And he was gone.

Blake surveyed the scene glumly. “I have to get back to the summit,” he said, looking wrung out like a dishrag. “It’s about illegal weapons’ importation, it’s—important. Fuck. I’ll be back later. Avon, look at me. I will. Six hours at most. Fuck,” he said again, quietly, and then he too was gone.

A moment of silence elapsed. The glamour crackled away, and Avon’s lip looked bloodied once more. He’d have to put a healing pad on it before Blake returned.

“Head back,” Avon instructed. “We obviously aren’t going to achieve anything else today.” He trudged off to the bay that contained the sleeping booths without another word.

“What the hell are we going to do if the Queen of the Night comes back?” Tarrant hissed to no one in particular. (He’d taken Aven’s remark that their universe had no culture whatsoever personally. Tarrant might not know much about the Arts, but he knew that he didn’t like to be found wanting, even in terms of things he didn’t care about. Thus he wheeled out one of the few references in his catalog for the occasion.)

“Die, if Avon’s made him really angry,” Dayna said, dropping into a chair. “And if he thought he could cover it up well enough that Blake wouldn’t find out. That was—” she shook her head, “it wasn’t even Mage Corps level. Whatever he is, it’s good.”

“Do you think that’s what Avon’s interior monologue is like?” Vila asked, profoundly wanting a drink.

“Oh god,” Dayna groaned. “Probably.”

“Who are we sorry for?” Vila asked. “Avon’s a bastard, but he is our bastard.”

“But the other one’s Avon too!” Dayna countered. “And he clearly feels he’s been, you know, wronged.”

“Blake,” Tarrant said decisively. “My sympathy’s definitely with Blake.”


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Avon brooded all the way back to the base, where he stalked off and brooded further alone in his bedroom. He’d been given rather a lot to brood on.

Even looking at Aven filled him with hatred, and not simply because they were competing for control of an overlapping identity. Aven was so sleek: better kept than Avon had ever been, even before he’d gone on the run. Perfectly fitted clothes, probably expensive haircut, polished civilities that probably worked, when he intended them to. How did Blake’s poem go again? “Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee”. Aven kept himself so nicely, so pristine for Blake. Blake,
who’d always appreciated what Avon could make of the bloody wardrobe room, must eat him up. In Aven, Avon had found himself looking at what he’d always thought he wanted to be. And he’d found he wanted nothing so much as to beat that version of himself to a pulp.

Six lives. When had Blake lost them? When had Avon stolen two of Blake’s deaths? Blake might have been killed in the first Freedom Party crackdown. Perhaps once more when he’d been taken in a second time, and the remnants of his group annihilated. Possibly on Jevron, as Servalan might even have believed. And perhaps before that, right after Star One. Avon himself had been concussed and thrown into a life pod—perhaps that had been one of his. Had Cally been sure he was all right, when she’d pushed him in and hoped? If it had been after Star One, then when else had he died? Under torture from Shrinker? Could he have wasted Blake’s life on that? When he’d been shot on Exbar? It had seemed such a little thing—Control. How did these ‘deaths’ work? Perhaps, in the mine field—

What did it matter? None of this brought Blake’s extra lives back. Nor did it represent the whole picture. He had saved Blake’s life on several occasions. He knew he had, the influence of this orrery aside. Avon knew that his work and his decisions had preserved his lover. If this piece of technology had improved their odds, so be it.

...though he had also, as Aven had suggested, failed Blake on several occasions as well. And had even, it seemed, stolen two of Blake’s deaths. Blake apparently had a few to spare, but even so, death was death. Avon couldn’t easily shake the weight of what he’d unwittingly done.

Before Avon had dreamed of Aven’s existence—before Blake had left him—Avon had imagined himself vital to Blake. Blake was extraordinary, unique, and worth protecting and preserving; that had made his enthusiasm to throw his life away all the more enraging and incomprehensible. Blake had, Avon thought, needed him to curb that sort of behavior. To provide him with vital technical assistance. To argue him down, or to shape and firm his plans via discussion. To support him even if all the others melted away. To distract him and give him reasons to go on. To want him as he deserved to be wanted.

And in return, he had needed Blake. Blake made him better. Avon alternately welcomed and resisted this. He fought change in himself like he sometimes fought orgasm (knowing all the while that he couldn't hold out forever—not even wanting to, if he made himself consider the question). He resented how capable Blake was of molding him, of shaping the version of himself he was. He’d struggled to direct and control the change, because it would do neither of them any good if he lost himself, lost all his sharp edges, and ceased to be a useful counterpoint to Blake.

When Blake had told Avon he’d always trusted him, it had seemed to Avon the twin of his own initial feeling that their deaths would be connected. They had both understood how important their connection was from the very beginning: ‘always’. Blake was permanent to Avon. Definitional, now. Avon required him.

But if he’d only imagined himself of use (to what extent had it ever been true?), or if Blake already had someone who matched him, someone who supplied him with everything Avon could offer, and who could provide him with a better life besides, then what could Avon possibly say for himself? ‘Stay because I need you’?

He didn’t bother to look up when he felt Blake appear. He noticed, when Blake sighed and sat down on the bed beside him (Avon was sitting with his elbows on his knees and his fingers pressed together, steepled under his chin), that Blake had changed his clothes. So he had talked to Aven, then; berated his darling pet for picking a fight. Presumably Aven had apologized and sulked and explained until Blake felt bad for chastising him. Oh, I can’t stay mad at you, Blake must have said, his warm brown eyes softening as he leant in to kiss his husband. Sweetheart.
“What if I released you?” Avon asked listlessly.

“What the hell did you say to yourself?” Blake demanded.


“Then I wouldn’t let you go,” Blake said, simply and vehemently.

Avon dropped his hands and shut his eyes. “And if I said I hated you?” he asked. “If I said that you hurt both the people you claim to love in doing as you are doing, and that you, his lip twisted, “are married, Blake? And that there is a simple, moral answer to all of this.”

“I would know how far to believe you, by now,” Blake said slowly, reminding Avon that he’d heard some of this at Star One. “And I couldn’t let you go, even if I did think that was all true, and not said in an effort to spare me. I couldn’t, Avon. Not even when I thought you cared almost nothing for me, which I am sorry for, and certainly not now.”

“Well, Blake? What if I released you?”

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Avon dropped his hands and shut his eyes. “And if I said I hated you?” he asked. “If I said that you hurt both the people you claim to love in doing as you are doing, and that you, his lip twisted, “are married, Blake? And that there is a simple, moral answer to all of this.”

“I would know how far to believe you, by now,” Blake said slowly, reminding Avon that he’d heard some of this at Star One. “And I couldn’t let you go, even if I did think that was all true, and not said in an effort to spare me. I couldn’t, Avon. Not even when I thought you cared almost nothing for me, which I am sorry for, and certainly not now.”

“Why not?” Avon asked. “After all, I am hardly necessary. Not when you have—”

“Avon,” Blake said, shocked, “Avon you can’t think that. I couldn’t do this without you. If you want me to tell you why I love you, distinctly, then fine, but I hope you have several hours to spare. Because there’s everything we’ve been through together, and how you say my name, and what a brat you are about losing games, and the way you’ve survived this place—the person you’ve become because and in spite of it. It’ll take the better part of the night, at least, for me to tell you why I think you’re wonderful. But if you ever want to hear it, then I want to tell you.”

“You’re impossible,” Avon hissed, touched and embarrassed. “Greedy—you want things exactly as you want them. You want both of us. And that is so obviously—” he trailed off, “impossible,” he repeated.

“Very little is impossible,” Blake said, taking his hand. “That’s my whole job. I’m supposed to arrange things as they ought to be, not accept them as they are. And you ought to love me.” Blake’s lip quirked in the periphery of Avon’s vision. “I’ve thought that since I met you. I wanted it so much, and I thought it could make you happy. I thought that love would bring some of what’s best in you to the fore, rather than letting you hide it away—arrogant, I know, but I did. I should probably apologize for making it happen, but I’m not actually sorry for it.”

“I do,” Avon said after a moment. “I—” he swallowed, “love you. I do love you.” It was the first time he’d employed the phrase, with Blake or any romantic partner. Maybe it would get easier, with time and practice. Maybe he’d get better at it. Perhaps one day he could return Blake poetry.

“I know,” Blake said, voice thick. “I do know.”

And I, Avon thought, can never let you go. Not even if he’s right, and I ought to find a way to die, for your sake. Perhaps that means I don’t love you enough, but I hope for their sakes that no one loves anyone more than I love you.

“Incidentally,” Avon said abruptly. “It seems I’ve left some form of geas on you. Specifically, it links our deaths. Your husband,” he said that fast, to keep his tone under control, “believes that I’ve
already taken two of yours. I don’t know how to break it.” But Aven does. The thought snaked through Avon’s mind, a treacherous promise he knew would fester.

Blake absorbed this, and slowly shook his head. “Let it lie.” Better a borrowing than you dead, he didn’t say, but Avon sensed the thought nonetheless.

Aven had Blake’s shard, and Blake had Aven’s beautiful, awful fucking orrery (which Avon could see, now that he looked for it again, lying precisely in Blake, restored to its full, heart-breaking glory). But he and Blake shared a geas that knotted around their deaths: a rough, brutal, uncompromising thing, that performed the same office of consecrating them unto one another. It was equal in potency to the elegant exchange of the shard and the orrery. It marked he and Blake as equals, and as people who belonged to one another. Even Aven, with all his erudition and power, couldn’t remove it without Avon’s consent. Avon had forged it by accident, and the guilt of having hurt Blake via the thing would linger him like Aven’s offer to destroy the thing. But if Avon could have done it on purpose, he thought perhaps he would have, just to have something so profoundly theirs.

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Blake was (yet again) scheduled to meet with representatives from two governments in Series Six. The last round of negotiations, held a few weeks earlier, had been so tense that Blake had been unwilling to interrupt them even when he’d felt Aven pulling strongly on his own portal magic and travelling to another world (when by all rights his husband ought to have been safely occupied at his college Gaudy). Blake had suspected some emergency had arisen, but had forcibly reminded himself that Aven had been Chrestomanci for seven years in his absence, and had been an experienced enchanter, dangerous in his own right, for longer even than that. Aven could handle himself. Still, Blake had thought, it was odd that no quickly scrawled note from Aven appeared in his attaché case to apprise him of the situation—it was unlike Aven not to attend to that detail. But Blake had had a job to do, and a lot was riding on these talks. So he’d been focused and attentive—until the the next scheduled break, when he’d been the first out of the door. It was probably nothing, he’d thought, even as he’d cast a lead on his shard and called on his transmission power. He’d also known that even if it wasn’t nothing, Aven could deal with almost any crisis. Thus slipping away wasn’t entirely logical, but Blake hadn’t been able to stop himself. He’d thought Aven might just appreciate some assistance.

After Blake had realized the extent to which Aven hadn’t needed or welcomed his intervention (god, sometimes he hated the men he loved—often, irritatingly enough, for some of the same reasons he loved them), he’d nipped back to the conference just in time to catch the start of the next session. To think that all that careful planning, Aven had neglected to write a note explaining his sudden absence and assuring Blake that everything was fine, that there was nothing to worry about, as he normally would have done. Blake attributed the lapse to his husband’s guilty conscience.

Blake had then been forced to subdue his concern and his agitation and to attend to the negotiations, because no matter how complicated his personal life, or how unhappy he was making Avon and Aven, or how unhappy they were making one another, he was Chrestomanci. At the moment, due to the Series One crisis and his continued inability to work out the nature of that problem and its solution, Blake felt that he was constantly failing that office and letting everyone down. But this crisis of confidence in his own ability to perform the role didn’t mean he could stand by and let the People’s Republic of Jish and the Palatine Krennet threaten one another with dragon-blood incendiary weaponry they’d no business having in the first place.

Blake didn’t know how the two nations had stockpiled their apparent reserves of the substance, and
no one was talking. It had taken him hours of carefully deployed shouting at these representatives to get them to even admit to having the reservoirs he knew they had in the first place (and weren’t those an environmental disaster waiting to happen). Blake didn’t even know which he preferred: the horrendous idea that both nations had massacred enough dragons to attain these quantities of blood, or the deeply dangerous prospect that someone had finally figured out how to artificially manufacture the stuff.

Technically speaking, it was not the Chrestomanci’s business whether Jish and Krennet destroyed one another over access to a freshwater port. It was only his business whether they went to war with dragon’s blood-based weapons. When dragons died naturally, their blood chemically changed, becoming something that biodegraded along normal lines. But if they were bled alive (down, Blake had to assume, to the last drop), and the stuff collected, it was a different matter entirely.

Blades dipped in the blood would slowly poison anyone they touched: the corruption seeping in so deeply that the victim’s children’s children were born mutilated. Even the bodies of people killed by dragon’s blooded weapons were somewhat toxic. The blood never left the land or the water table. It spread outwards and lingered like the ineradicable guilt of the original slaying. The J’hat, a major ethnic group that mostly lived within Jish now, had once believed that God had so loved the dragons that She had made killing one a crime that stained the hands forever—a sin for which there could be no forgiveness.

And officially, preventing that sin from being committed and containing its consequences as best he might was all that Blake was here for. But he was damned if he wasn’t going to try and leverage his position to do what he could to prevent these people from killing each other with more legal weapons. Because the god that loved dragons was also supposed to have some care for men, and some days Blake thought that if he looked at his hands in the right light, he’d find them just as stained as anyone’s. He’d be able to see the indelible marks both of what he had done and what he had left undone.

Avon would understand that, Blake thought as he stepped through the portal, out of Chrestomanci Castle and and into a fortress high on a mountain, a border outpost positioned between Jish and Krennet. Avon took guilt seriously; took responsibility seriously. Blake thought that was part of the reason that Avon had, at times, taken such care to prevent people from depending on him. It was also why he’d wanted to be told, time and again, that Blake was thinking about the consequences and externalities of their actions; that Blake was taking responsibility, both for what happened to them and for what their actions wrought in the world. Deny it all he liked, Avon was anything but disinterested in the outcomes of their attacks and the moral weight of what they did. And he had more care for the state of Blake’s soul than perhaps Blake himself did.

Looking back, even discounting the looming magical threat to S1, Blake did not regret the vast majority of what he had done as a citizen of that universe—all the violence he’d perpetrated in hopes of putting an end to the state’s vastly greater institutional violence. To have failed to take action would have been a greater sin of omission. (Though that didn’t mean he didn’t acknowledge and feel what he’d had to do, didn’t bitterly resent the situation.) Similarly, he wasn’t reconciled to sitting back while this conflict (a capitalist resource scramble, the outcome of which was only truly of interest to the two states’ oligarchs, rather than the soldiers who would be forced to fight in the incipient conflict) unfolded. Both militaries were spoiling for a war—they hadn’t had one in living memory. They did not, Blake thought grimly, know war as well as he did.

Perhaps he was over-reaching himself. God knew he wasn’t getting anywhere with One (although that, too, was, arguably, not his problem). Yet Blake felt he had to try. Someone had to bloody try, and it seemed every power broker on this frostbitten world save him was too steeped in jingoism and inveigled in commercial alliances to bother.
Blake felt the familiar roil of internal conflict over the very detachment that allowed him to say that, and questioned for the thousandth time whether someone who wasn’t a part of this world had any right forming an opinion about it, much less attempting to bend two of its governments to his will. But then again, if the Chrestomanci had found grounds for and some means of stopping 12A’s Great War, or of heading off the Crimean, Blake wouldn’t have quibbled about intervention. How could you, with potentially millions of lives on the line? When the cause couldn’t even be generously constructed as resistance to tyranny?

And he wasn’t acting entirely based on his own ideas about how things ought to proceed. His own permanent agents in Six were involved in a pacifist movement that was very popular among intellectuals and young people on both sides. They’d briefed him thoroughly on all the positions being taken, and Blake had come to agree with their perspective. There were, after all, good reasons he and Aven had trusted these people to keep an eye on the situation here for them. (He wished Aven were here to help him with these negotiations, but all Aven’s time at present was taken up performing scraps of the Chrestomanci role that didn’t absolutely require Blake’s presence, and researching S1’s collapse besides.)

The fortress wasn’t exactly designed for comfort and well-insulated. Blake grit his teeth to keep them from chattering, and he cast a warming spell on himself as he made his way to the conference room. Even through his massive fur coat he was freezing. When he attained the place he found two young, richly dressed stewards coaxing a recalcitrant fire. One of them gave Blake an appealing look, and her comrade smacked her on the arm.

“He’s a guest!” the young man said.

The young woman rolled her eyes at him. “Look, it’s taking us an age. It’s nothing at all for you—right, sir?”

“I really don’t mind,” Blake said. “Only you might want to stand back—if you’ve been working on it it’s probably smoldering more than you think it is, and it’ll take quickly.”

Both youths took Blake’s advice. Blake rubbed his hands together, brought them up to his mouth to blow into them, and then extended them above the hearth. Under his palms a burst of flame spread instantly, proving Blake right.

Blake turned one palm upwards, and a ball of independent flame rolled in it, as though he were contact juggling the stuff. Idly Blake tossed it up and down as he took a seat.

“Thanks,” the woman said. “If our supervisor asks—”

“My, what a superb job you’ve done with the kindling,” Blake said innocently, admiring the blaze.

The young woman smiled at him. “Exactly. Do you want any hot tea?”

Blake nodded. “With jam and without vodka, if you please.”

“Coming right up, Chrestomanci,” she promised, and both stewards left. No sooner had they done so than they were replaced by a harried looking Krennet aide.

Blake arched an eyebrow at him. Well?

The man gave Blake a quick nod and passed him a sheath of papers. With a twist of Blake’s wrist, the flame he was holding turned green. Blake took up a paper in his other hand and held it in front of the ball of fire. The fire dwindled, flared high, and turned a sickly yellow color. Blake scanned the list of the members of the Krennet delegation: their names, written in their own hands. He set the
paper down, passing the sheath back across the table in silence.

The man was a good friend of one of Blake’s agents. The last time Blake had been here, tired and worried about domestic matters though he’d been, he’d managed to pass a message to his own people in Six after the meeting. Acting on Blake’s instructions, his agent had apparently managed to persuade her friend that helping Blake was actually in Krennet’s interests, no matter what the aide’s superiors might think of the matter. The respect in which many people held the Chrestomani office (traditionally considered humanitarian, and above the influence of national prerogatives) had probably helped to convince him.

The rest of the Krennet team filed in, and, late as usual (they seemed to make a point of it) the Jish delegation made their appearance. Blake let his flame, which had regressed back to a normal orange-red color, die out, and began the discussions where they’d left off.

The Jish foreign secretary was utterly amoral, but he wasn’t stupid. Blake didn’t know whether he felt distaste for the man or whether he was thankful for his being the sort of creature you could work with. He could almost hear Avon—why choose just one?

Blake spent the discussion focusing on this paragon of the uncivil service, even to the detriment of Krennet. Blake was honest, because the secretary would see through it if he wasn’t—honest and brutal. Blake was terribly frank about what this war would actually cost (his department had some independent estimates to share). He was quite open about the limited value of a port saturated with dragon’s blood, which ate away at ship’s hulls. It would be naïve not to expect collateral environmental damage. Blake was likewise clear about the expected death tolls—not the sanguine estimations Jish’s military advisors had been passing around the People’s Council, but comparable examples from similar conflicts in other series. And about the timescale—this was a war you could really dig into, wasn’t it? Three months? Oh no, Blake thought that was quite, quite generous—to the point of being delusional. Now, three years—that he could see.

Jish’s representative accused Blake of partisanship. Blake snorted, drained his tea and said that frankly the Elector of Krennet could go hang, for all he cared. He certainly wasn’t championing Krennet’s cause, such as it was.

“If that is your opinion, Chrestomanci—” the Krennet Princess said, starting to rise.

“No,” Blake said, “sit down.” Nothing like a request in the tone. The Princess did so with evident hesitation.

“I think it’s important that you understand that my opinion is unbiased,” Blake continued. “I think it’s important that you understand exactly what is at stake.”

“Surely the matter of the conflict itself is our decision,” the Princess began stiffly, “and none of your affair.”

“Oh, it is your decision,” Blake said with sudden and terrible gravity. “And I’m very sure you want to make the right one.”

Blake rounded off the session with a reiteration of the standard consequences the weaponized use of dragon’s blood might bring down on Six from Chrestomani Castle. Extra-series trade and travel embargos, fines, a ban on aid in long-term magical development schemes: they knew all this, he only rattled it off for form’s sake.

“But really,” Blake said, shrugging his broad shoulders, “you needn’t worry.”
“No?” Jish’s man asked, regarding Blake warily.

“No,” Blake repeated, pleasantly enough. “Not about me, anyway. What can I do to you that you won’t have done to yourselves? When in, say, three generations, your legacy is reduced to this one point—a conflict over something that will, by then, seem utterly immaterial—when every possible benefit of the most favorable possible outcome is spent, and all you have are the graveyards you bought your victory with, land you can’t farm, a floating poison-cloud in the sea that still ruins your fishing and eats at your ships, and a lingering scourge that even then will still mar every child born within a hundred miles of your old, forgotten, pointless battlegrounds—I’m sure, from that perspective, our sanctions will weigh very, very lightly indeed.”

Blake glanced at the clock. “Almost time for evening prayers. I won’t keep you.”

The Jish delegation filed out (the lead diplomat looking slightly shaken), and Blake managed to catch the Krennet Princess’s eye. She lingered behind the rest of her party.

“You honestly have no idea how the blood came to be here, do you?” Blake asked, looking at her with an evaluating gaze.

“I told you as much in our discussions last week,” the Princess said guardedly. She didn’t really like being alone with him. This was a fairly matriarchal series, and Blake knew she was old fashioned. She probably thought this private conference a little inappropriate.

“It was your party line,” Blake agreed. “Rather obvious, but you were convincing. That’s why I looked deeper. Everything we could find out about you indicates that don’t think anything of the kind should be used. Your government is apparently of the same general opinion—you just bought blood defensively when it came on the market, afraid Jish would if you wouldn’t. Which makes it all the more interesting that someone on your side apparently disagrees with you. In fact someone on your very delegation knows exactly how the blood came into circulation, and is very likely responsible for that state of affairs.”

Blake couldn’t say who, precisely. Brethren’s Flame evaluated a cohort. If Blake had tried to cut the names (and they had to be hand-written, on an entire and unbesmirched sheet of paper) into individual slips, or even just into smaller batches, the flame would have sulked and refused to turn either pale yellow, for impurity, or deep blue. The latter would have indicated that the company was true to the declaration Blake had told the aide to set at the top of the sheet. Supposedly the paper was just a memorandum of the delegation’s formal agreement to a point of order in the negotiations: namely Krennet’s claim that they had not instigated or sought this arms race, and knew nothing about the distribution of illegal weapons. Blake’s ruse wasn’t technically illegal, as interrogation would have been (and ought to be, in Blake’s opinion). It was more a matter of magical data security. The Krennet diplomatic team hadn’t warded collectively. They’d tried (as Blake had expected, given the nature of the protection spells they’d used at the last negotiations) to save money and time by shielding all the individuals in their service from scrying. Blake had just exploited an open back door.

The Princess looked taken aback at Blake’s saying, with such conviction, that one of her subordinates was a traitor (or at least not what they seemed). She had a kind of stubborn, plodding, naïve trust in her procedures and her people that provoked a kind of pity from Blake.

“What proof do you have of that?” she asked, obviously reluctant to believe him.

“Does it matter?” Blake asked. “I’m not telling you for my own amusement. Someone on your side of the table believes this conflict would benefit them. Or,” Blake allowed, “whoever it is they’re associated with. Working for, if you like. They want advancement with the Elector, they want money, they want to see Jish brought low—they might have any one of a hundred reasons. But
while you’re trying to negotiate a port, someone within your ranks is actively attempting to undermine you—possibly you personally, as head of the diplomatic party—and agitating for a war that stands to revolutionize conflict on your world. If I were you, I might be interesting in finding out who and why, and whether they have any similarly inclined friends.”

The Princess looked Blake over as though she were evaluating whether to buy into any of this. But then what would it benefit Blake to lie?

“I’ll bear that in mind, Chrestomanci,” she said at last, following her cohort out.

Blake hoped he might depend on Krennet’s factional divisions and Jish’s self-interest to stave off the conflict. The Krennet situation bore looking into further himself—the more he understood about the parties involved and their motivations, the better. Blake felt, tentatively, as though he might actually have achieved something here today; as though he had, just possibly, managed to do the right thing here. And still-nebulous as the achievement was, this was the best Blake had felt about himself and his role in a long, long while.

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It was a warm afternoon. An English summer in full and final flower, like something out of a sonnet. The darling buds of May were older now: seasoned madams making a last stand against the onset of autumn. Blake had just left Avon under rougher winds, with a gray and uncertain sky glowering down on him. He’d left his lover on a frontier world, far from Earth and England (where Avon had, in spite of everything, been born and bred).

It was difficult to leave him like that—it got harder as the situation got worse. Every parting felt like more of a betrayal. Blake wanted to stay, or to bundle Avon off somewhere decent and safe. But Series One was Avon’s home, Avon was a part of that world. And while he could be removed from it, and could even stay elsewhere for some years, eventually his body would realize it was somewhere it oughtn’t to be, and would start rejecting the alien environment. If Avon couldn’t survive in S1, he couldn’t survive anywhere else, either.

Blake found Aven in his study, hard at work. He watched for a moment as Aven flicked his hand at a recording-orb to activate it, then ran it over some of his notes—his mobile mouth twisting into a small frown of concentration as he did so. One of the cats hopped on the table and demanded to know what Aven was up to with a loud ‘wong?’ In addition to being unusually magical and intelligent, all the Castle cats seemed to share a race-memory of their ancestors having once been worshiped as semi-divine. More so even than most cats. Aven raised an eyebrow at this particular prince-in-exile—the gesture a silent ‘and are you supposed to be on the table?’ With bruised dignity, as though he’d expected better of Aven than low, common adherence to such forms as that, the animal hopped down and left the premises, his tail held stiff and upright. Blake sometimes thought you could really tell that Aven had grown up surrounded by a dozen or so of these temple cats—a lot of their attitude had rubbed off on him.

Watching him, Blake felt, as he did every time he returned to Aven, a thick pang of guilt and love. I missed you, Blake always wanted to say when he came home. It was true, and he never did say it, because there was no good answer to the accusations (‘then why did you go in the first place?’) such a confession would trigger. Or at least, nothing that would satisfy Aven. Because Blake did know why he left.

‘Because I miss someone else just as much when I’m with you. I miss whichever of you I’m not with: I feel that longing like an equal ache in different parts of my body. I’m so overloaded with bliss and guilt and longing and worry that I drop into bed exhausted, like I’m dying. Because either of you would be a challenging partner who would demand all I had to give, and either of these lives would...
ask everything of me, but there isn’t enough of me to satisfy you both, and all I do is fail you. Each of you deserves better than this, better than me. But I can’t let either of you go, because I’m that selfish, and I’d rather drown in the love of you than suffer either of your absences. And I don’t think it would even help to try and cut either of you free: we are all of us past that now, if there ever was a time I didn’t belong to you both, and both of you to me.’

No, Aven didn’t want to hear any of that.

“How is your exciting lover?” Aven asked briskly, not looking up from the journals in front of him. He always did know when Blake was in the room. “The one who leaves all those pathetically territorial bite marks on you, and doesn’t have to live with you or build anything, and never criticizes your magic?”

They’d had a fight about that recently. Blake had, in Aven’s estimation, grown sloppy lately. He was too distracted and worried to focus on fine spellwork: Aven claimed he’d had to reenchant some of Blake’s professional castings. Blake was, Aven argued, too preoccupied with S1 to attend to the Castle and his other responsibilities as he ought to. He was apparently also too tired to clean Avon’s marks off his body in the shower before he dropped into Aven’s bed, and he was too sad and spent to fuck either of them (Aven presumed) at the rate he’d been wont to do. He was losing track of his priorities (which Aven felt went to show that he had been right when he’d initially called returning to Avon a distraction Blake couldn’t afford). The way he’d shouted at Aven after Aven’s tête-à-tête with his counterpart had shocked Aven. Blake had been incandescent when he growled “Never hurt him like that again”—Aven hadn’t been on the receiving end of Blake’s anger like that since the night they’d met, when Blake had been furious with Aven for throwing away his heart.

“Avon finds plenty of other things to criticize,” Blake said grimly, coming to stand next to Aven’s desk. “And he puts up with rather a lot from me. What I don’t understand about either of you is that you refuse to take my mad preference for you in general as a compliment. How could you trust I loved you—that whatever happened, I would keep faith with you—if I didn’t also love him?”

“And what did he say to that argument?” Aven asked with a raised eyebrow, still attending to his papers. Blake watched a pained expression pass over his husband’s lovely profile like a summer storm.

“That plenty of smart bastards had tried to use philosophy to rationalize their incapacity for fidelity before me,” Blake said with a sigh, taking a seat in the chair beside Aven.

“Well,” Aven admitted, “he’s not entirely stupid. I can console myself along those lines: at least you’re not playing away with an empty-headed slut.”

Blake glared at him, then propped his head in his hand and breathed out slowly.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” Aven asked, regarding him with some pity.

He and Blake had always been able to transition fluidly between arguments and intense collaboration when it was necessary to do so. He didn’t argue as hotly with Blake as Blake had indicated he argued with Avon, but Aven knew himself to be easy to irritate. And because he cared about Blake (and because Blake had far, far too much personality), Blake could push his buttons like no other living creature. But however angry Blake could make him, there was never any moment in which Aven didn’t love his husband. Just now, Aven could tell Blake was profoundly exhausted and deeply unhappy. Cracks at the expense of ‘the other man’, richly-deserved though they were, felt cruel at present, and less important than trying to do something to lift the defeat dragging down Blake’s powerful frame, making his sprawling posture look slack and heavy. Blake often wore his emotions visibly, making them feel almost contagious. Recently, Aven ached to look at him.
“Which do you mean,” Blake asked with some venom, jerking up out of his seat again to pace, trudging with a stubborn, depleted vexation, “the political insurgency,” which Aven knew to be in part aimed at combating S1’s magical instability, and in part an attempt to fight back against the most brutal, repressive government Blake said he had ever seen, “which is struggling to remain at a standstill, or the magical instability proper? Which has me, if anything, more worried.” Blake ran a hand through his hair. “Probability curves are falling apart. Even for me. We ran the tests, comparing our S1 super-computer’s random number generation against data from our series—Goblin9,” Blake named the spell in question. Aven nodded in recognition.

In worlds with severe magical instability, constants like physical forces and probability distributions became less dependable. If being cursed could make a person unlucky, instabilities in the magical fabric of universes that had such a substrate could make these entire universes unlucky. Essentially a luck-based curse was a small, localized form of this phenomenon. Part of the reason the Chrestomani office regulated curses (rather than leaving the whole matter in the hands of local civic authorities) was that, improperly or over-abundantly performed, they could lead to larger issues for an environment or category of entity as well as for the cursed individual and those they interacted with. S12 didn’t have a lot of use for super-computers, but a spell like Goblin9, if performed in S12 and carried over by Blake, could generate and store a ‘control’ random number string. The difference between its output and that of the string an S1 computer could generate could tell you something about the degree to which S1 was broken. ‘Unlucky’ here referred to the degree of randomness: an unusual and incredibly unlikely frequency of low numbers, a high frequency of numbers culturally cathected as unlucky (and thus capable of invoking a certain form of psychic and magical energy), and, where relevant, a high frequency of ‘bad’ results, here defined as results that would provoke entropy—results that would, essentially, cause chaos.

As Chrestomanci, the universe loved Blake. If some people were cursed, then Blake was blessed. Even him feeding the numbers through the machine would, in a normal universe like S12, result in an unusual proportion of high, lucky, or (again, where applicable) ‘beneficial’ numbers unless strong spells were cast to counteract his natural effects. Without even trying to do so, if Blake needed to roll a seven to win a game, seven was probably what he rolled. Aven’s orrery, which further spun probability curves to Blake’s advantage, only increased the degree to which he led a charmed life.

“All right. I had their David Evans give the command—astonishingly bad, low across the board. Better, when I tried to run the program without protection spells, but not even normal, let alone as lucky as they ought to have been. Avon’s been either amusing or torturing himself by rolling marbles across a perfectly level floor. They all pool in the southern-most corner. Every time.”

Blake looked out the window, toying with the curtain.

“I told Avon my worst fears. About how the instability might be increasing, and what it might mean, and what that might—come to. But he’s as clever as you are. He already suspected it all. A lot of people,” Blake said grimly, “are going to die there, if we can’t figure this out. And I’ve no idea what to do about it.”

Aven stood and crossed to the window, putting a hand on Blake’s shoulder. For a while they looked out at the lawn together. It was, Aven knew, a luxury and a privilege to think that they were looking at nothing in particular. They were looking out on their domain, fixed securely in a peaceful world that wasn’t ripping itself to pieces—that wasn’t crawling with corruption just under the skin, or hollow at its rotted-out core.

“I’m sorry, my love,” Aven said at last. There wasn’t a trace of jealous vindictiveness in his words: just sorrow for the turn of events and for Blake. Aven’s ultimate capacity for personal detachment
and mercy cut at Blake. He closed his eyes, dipped his head until it rested against the glass, and remained silent.

“You’ve done,” Aven swallowed, “everything you could, and you’ll keep—”

“I’ve done nothing,” Blake hissed, shaking his head tightly without lifting it from the glass. “Nothing at all.”

“You’ve tried,” Aven said steadily. “And you are going to continue to try. That’s all there is to be done. No one can ask for more.” Aven hesitated, wondering whether voicing the worst, most unspeakable scenario himself would help Blake, or whether it would make that possibility too real. Ultimately, in deference to Blake’s preferences, he decided on the hard truth. Of course Blake must have already begun to consider this. But then his husband could brood privately, bludgeoning his brain with heavy-weighted thoughts, and he sometimes needed to be reminded that he’d neither cause nor right to hurt himself in that pointless, unproductive manner. Any awful thing Blake thought, he could and ought to share with Aven. There was nothing that either of them need ever bear alone. “Perhaps this is that world’s time. Perhaps it’s fate. There are things even you can’t fix.”

“I hate this,” Blake whispered.

Aven pressed a kiss to the back of Blake’s neck. “I know.”

Blake turned around, wordlessly asking to be held. Aven did it. After a moment, he spoke again. “I’m not having much luck with the evacuation idea,” he said frankly, apparently having decided to deliver his bad news now, when they were already at the conversation’s nadir. “The historical record could be clearer. Janet Chant was exchanged for Gwendolyn Chant, but every iteration of the girl was displaced one series, and there was no absence in any universe she had previously inhabited. Millie Chant was brought from Series Ten to live here permanently due to the intercession of the goddess Asheth, of whom she was formerly a living avatar, and the high priestess of that order. The priestess and Millie were both Enchantresses, and the De Witt Chrestomanci, and possibly the heir-apparent, Christopher Chant, were also involved. You and I suspect she may also have been magically tied to the garden as well. Precisely what happened is unclear, but that’s a phenomenal amount of power potentially being exerted to save one young girl.

“A few years later, an enchanter from series seven called Conrad Tesdinic attended school with Christopher and Millie here in the Castle, during the first iteration of the Academy. They were all close friends. It seems Conrad might have wanted to stay on in 12A, but he couldn’t—that’s the conventional way of it. He lived here years, but they were coming up on the Fade, when his body would have started to fight the series, and he returned home.” The ‘Fade’ could take many forms: food that won’t nourish, pining, gravity-failure, unbreathable air, madness—none of which Blake wanted to inflict on Avon, or anyone else from One. Besides, Fade probably wouldn’t even be a problem. Theory firmly indicated that with their home-universe gone, transplanted S1 citizens would, unless something could be done to fix them in their new universe, simply cease to exist.

“So what did Millie do that Conrad didn’t?” Blake asked, leaning back. “Or how was she brought over—and how could that be applied to millions?”

“I don’t know,” Aven shook his head. “And even if whatever they did can be replicated, we are still presented with difficulties. I know you don’t want to hear it,” Aven said quietly, “but our less-repressive-but-still-regrettable government is going to panic if we start bringing in a noticeable number of refugees. You are suggesting thousands, Blake, at least. There will be xenophobia regarding instability contamination, if nothing else.”

Aven and all the best authorities were confident that a universe’s magical instability couldn’t infect its
citizens and then spread outwards in a new universe if those citizens were displaced (they had a world of location curse case studies at their backs to prove it), but just because they were right didn’t mean paranoid, hateful bastards wouldn’t get a hearing from the government. Prejudice against the cursed was an old, habitual vice. Blake set his jaw at the thought of it.

“We’ll ask forgiveness rather than permission,” Blake ground out. “And worry about resettlement when—if—we’ve saved anyone.”

Aven pulled Blake back to him and breathed in the full, fresh-bread smell of him. He felt as though he were running on empty. Like Blake he’d been overworking, throwing himself at the problem. The fact that the same things wearing him down also kept he and Blake apart, when Blake’s help and presence were all that could really have made his exhaustion easier to bear, felt like a bitter irony. Aven was as tired as he was because he had continued to perform many of Blake’s Chrestomanci duties while simultaneously plunging himself into research: theory and Castle incident records and medieval wonder-chronicles, even Millie’s own journals.

“Castle v. much in uproar. Shortly after debut (12A continues ridiculous—why no option of dedicating her to the goddess for say 10 years until she’s not quite so pretty or quite so silly&regains her capacity for rational choice?), our Julia received 2 proposals: v.g. start! Julia appears also to have accepted 2 proposals: again, would not have been a problem in S10. Informed C of this—C said quite flattered to be only member of harem at present. As he should be. Julia’s proposals from:

1. overzealous young Rothschild fop w far more money than sense, insists on pestering us with ridiculous gifts (Who needs tiger? Where shall house tiger? Is partridge in pear tree next?), but whose religion would apparently annoy members of family C dislikes/enable Julia’s children to use most interesting ethnic group-based magic, &

2. a Montana boy, who to my mind actually appears more interested in our Roger, tho v shy&misdirected about it (this sort of awkwardness all too common: C will not admit to having known such pashes himself, but obviously have seen). &bc Montana, have been subjected to regular florid, theatrical displays of magic: like Blackpool illuminations, but tackier.

Hopefully will soon resolve in Julia’s rejection of both, before I must explain why blessed event will certainly not occur. Julia far too young to consider anything of kind. Expect to have own youthful marriage held against me, if forced to forbid b.e. myself (seemed sensible at time) (still seems fairly sensible in retrospect!) (but this quite a different matter!!).”

Aven liked Millie Chant’s sprightly, wry, slightly school-storyish style. Occasionally she said something hilarious or particularly, poignantly true, or something that sounded absolutely familiar and right to him. He liked her, and felt close to her. She was family, be she dead centuries.

Interestingly, she and Christopher didn’t seem to have been particularly romantically attached to one another, so much as dear friends and devoted partners. That sort of love was nothing to sneer at, he knew. It wasn’t being in love (and he both loved and was in love with Blake), but it was binding and precious and enough to live for. Perhaps, if Aven had only loved Blake, it wouldn’t kill him, wouldn’t rip out his heart all over again, that Blake’s heart was breaking: not just for Series One, but, oh so very poignantly, for another man. It was stupid to be selfish, to have a personal, petty, infantile feeling like this jealous resentment in the face of a universal disaster. But still, intelligent or fair or no, Aven felt it.

Millie, Aven thought wryly, that earlier garden, had lived her life more wisely.

And even so, he wouldn’t have traded Blake for anything. Not for the worlds: he knew it. With his heart in his hand, before he’d even known he loved Blake and belonged to him, he had weighed those worlds and found them wanting. With Orac, Aven knew he might have fled the Castle and set
himself up somewhere as a tyrant king. He could have taken that chance that first night, with Orac embedded in his chest. He could have killed Blake as he sat, ignorant and trusting, in a study that ought to have been Aven’s, and then run. But he hadn’t even considered the option then, or seriously considered it at any point since. And he wasn’t about to let go of Blake now. Pain and compromise were simply to be endured and, if possible, passed through—he and Blake were one another’s for better and for worse, in sickness and in health.

He let Blake take him to bed. They didn’t make love—Aven simply held his husband tightly, running his hands over Blake. He stroked Blake’s flanks, his hair, his orrery; soothing him, letting touch do what arguments couldn’t for his husband, right now. And Aven wondered what would happen to Blake if he lost S1, and if Avon died. He wondered whether any consolation could reach Blake then.
“Trial fourteen,” Blake said into his recording orb, concentrating on the thing to make it function in the Between and then pocketing it. He normally didn’t interact with universes this way. Traveling via the Between was the stuff of his childhood, and of his fogged, confused time in S1, when he’d been haunted by frustratingly inaccessible recollections and dreams. As himself, an adult endowed with his full memories and personality, Blake used a Chrestomani’s portals and Enchanter’s pentacles to travel, in accordance with Aven’s training. But he was here now because the Between was a particularly good place to get a visual idea of S1’s magical decay, to try and affect the strands on a purely magical, external level, and to determine whether such actions accomplished anything at all.

Blake tilted his head to the side, and the valley he was standing in, which resembled a rough, unfinished bit of the world, became a vaster, emptier nothingness, occupied by coloured ropes that seemed to hang in mid-air. The ropes pulsed with magic: getting too close to them heated Blake’s skin unbearably, and manipulating and budging them with spells and other magical apparatuses was very, very difficult. Often it didn’t work at all. In general, Blake was more effective as an agent on the ground.

But the ground was getting ever more treacherous in S1. A surprise attack that shouldn’t have happened (probability turning on them again) had reduced the Rebels’ ‘beginnings of an army’ right back down to its core personnel. Blake knew Cally blamed herself: she’d been leading the Pylene manufacturing plant raids, and (as with Saurian, and for similar reasons) she was the group’s sole survivor. It was a major setback, especially coming as it did on the heels of one of Avon’s scientists' having betrayed her fellows to their destruction in exchange for amnesty from the Federation. She had, of course, received only the amnesty that death could offer her for her efforts—Blake could have told her to expect no better. The fact that the massacre had come after Cally had successfully completed a series of missions, when she’d thought her people safe at their rendezvous point (and on one of the very rare occasions she’d risked grouping them together), had taken the heart out of her.

Blake knew Avon blamed himself for Cally’s crisis as well as his own—for not having foreseen the far-fetched possibility that Orac’s randomly-generated flight patterns (carefully rendered genuinely random with the aid of spells Blake had cast to shield the device from environmental stresses), which he’d distributed to the ships involved, might be traced. They shouldn’t have been, but ‘shouldn’t’ was getting harder and harder to say in a world where mathematics was melting out from underneath the structure of everything and randomness was coalescing into a few grim, narrow certainties: cul-de-sacs of potential. Avon’s evident anger and sense of having failed Blake, Cally, the other core members of the group and the dead had kept Blake from raging as he might have liked to have done upon hearing the devastating news. A display of temper wouldn’t make this any better, not for the dead and not for Cally and Avon. And they had no option but to continue.

“The only safety lies in winning,” Avon had admitted to him in the aftermath, and Blake had sighed to hear the resignation in his tone. Blake had always known that, and really, he thought Avon had too. If he hadn’t, he’d just been letting himself ignore an unpleasant truth. Perhaps he’d accused Blake of being unable to parse dream from reality because he’d guiltily known this vice to be his own.

When Blake had first planned the mission to S1, he’d been worried by the series’ profusion of branch possibilities. Not true universes, because the other universes within S1 had collapsed millennia ago into this singular, ‘dense’ probability line. They didn’t know whether that was an early sign of decay, or something that contributed to the universe’s lack of robustness, or a part of the natural lifecycle of series. The branch possibilities Blake and Aven had initially observed had instead
been reflections, or distortions, of the living thread. The Castle staff called these witchfolds, after an occasion on which 12B had spun out a parallel world with a high concentration of magic users and a commensurate bloody inquisition aimed at destroying them. That parallel reality had collapsed back into the core universe after a brief and violent life, merging with its parent rather than being entirely destroyed.

Blake no longer had cause to worry on that score. Gone were all the screaming, dying little branches sloughing off the sickening main coil. S1 had gone still and quiet. When a branch universe did emerge (and it happened slowly, now; Blake had had to watch for hours to see anything), the tendril arched and fell over the main coil, tightening around it in a way that looked like a strangle-hold, choking off the life of the thing.

Blake knew (because Avon had gone through it with him once in bed, in a careful, forthcoming mood that Blake now recognised as an iteration of tenderness) all the ways stars could die, and the stages of their endings. Neutron stars and black holes, supernovae and nebulas, black and white dwarfs. Blake watched the coil tighten and tighten and thought, which phase are you? And he thought, what if there was never anything I could have done? And he thought oh, but what if there was?

He thought also of the Book of Common Prayer. Our sins, known and unknown. Things done and left undone.

Blake gathered his power here, in this place—all he could, given the effort of will it took to navigate the Between in this fashion. He looked through and behind the substance of the unworld: at what Avon would have called its hardware rather than its interface and what Aven would have called its spellmatter rather than its incantation. He held his hands above the coil that was also S1 and did a Properties read on it. As usual he got back nothing he thought he could use, but it didn't hurt to keep checking. Which was to say that it hurt like a blow every time the hope that he stupidly let rise in him between attempts was crushed once more, but that it still wasn’t a bad idea.

Setting his jaw against despair, Blake poured his defiance and his will, his ability to push life into things, into a simple Stilling-work. On previous attempts he’d tried to reverse the damage, and had gotten nowhere. At present, with the fourteenth run of experiments, Blake was working on stopping (or even just slowing) the rate of decay. Buying time.

But even that seemed beyond him. All Blake’s will and talent and defiance slipped off the stuff of the coil, sliding away: almost bouncing off it, sick and comic.

Frustrated to the point of rage (though it wasn’t the plan), Blake tried to seize the coil and to work the thing directly. If he could just touch it, maybe he could make it right. If he could only lay hands on the thing, surely he could do what he did by instinct: give it energy, heal it, make this better. He ignored the pain that mounted as he push himself closer to the coil. He ignored the promptings of his own good sense, letting anger and desperation carry him through. He only reeled back when he felt near to passing out—when the flesh of his outstretched palms started to smoke, just from proximity. Blake crumpled into a heap. He’d been nowhere close to grabbing hold of the coil, and he honestly didn’t know that it would have helped if he had managed it. Panting, shivering with shock and almost crying on the ground-that-wasn’t, Blake curled in around his burnt hands.

So vast—it had felt so vast. And so impossibly complicated, and hurt, and broken. Nothing could fix all that. Nothing.

A magical wound, Blake thought after a moment—he should go to Aven for that. Aven would be pale and furious with him, wouldn’t believe he’d managed to do himself an injury like this in the Between, of all places. But Aven would march him into the infirmary with a steady competence
Blake felt desperately in need of right now. And at present, he didn’t think he could bear to look Avon in the eye. No. He couldn’t face Avon like this—unable to conceal his worry, his horror and his shame.

Enough of that, Blake told himself harshly. He’d work something out; Blake swore to himself that he would, refusing that awful sense of the thing’s impossibility. Maybe it was impossible, but it didn’t help to think on it. Laboriously, Blake managed to gather himself into a kneeling position, wincing at the pain as he did it. He paused in the attempt when he felt he might faint, but steadied himself and at last, managed to call up a portal to stagger through. He would manage something. He always did, and he couldn’t afford not to.

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It took Deva and Avon some time, even with Orac's assistance, to crack the Federation’s now-decentralized fleet computers. Deva had at first frankly said that it couldn’t be done and oughtn’t be attempted, even if the information they would accrue if they could manage it would finally give Blake an advantage, enabling them to collate the stolen intelligence and come up with a list of high priority targets.

Orac had gotten through Federation ciphers before, on a piecemeal basis, but they’d never attempted to gain full download access to Federation networks. They’d never before had a chance at doing so. The link between Federation ships that had superseded each ship’s relay links with Space Command and Central Control offered the Rebels a unique opportunity. But these links were thoroughly protected with shifting rounds of security codes. Avon wouldn’t have attempted to do battle with them without a very competent back-up technician to take over for him if something went wrong. After all, unless they could respond to such a detection immediately, silencing any alarms, it could result in a full systems lock out, the total loss of this chance (naturally the Federation would change the system if they realised the Rebels knew it was vulnerable), and very possibly the exposure of their own base. Doing all this at a time when Avon and company could hardly trust their computers to function properly represented a monumental challenge. Having flat out announced that the task was simply impossible, Deva had further labeled it a one-way ticket to madness. Avon had grinned and said that it was somewhat late to worry about that. In fact, since he’d managed to loose Blake’s scientists and army (that was how Avon thought of what had occurred), he’d been searching for something he could do—for some great success that would at once allow him to prove to himself that he was capable of something and would allow him to offer something of value to Blake.

In untangling the Federation’s security nets, Avon had felt like he’d had to work harder even than Deva’s ‘impossible task’ ought to have merited. He’d felt as though the work was actually fighting back. He’d set his teeth against each mischance, especially those that caused him to lose time and data. He’d grinned fiercely when a careless keystroke had locked them out, and a whole stage of the process had to be begun again, from the start. When the bloody roof had given in under water pressure from a freak storm, Avon had simply ripped the equipment off its moorings, dumped it in a room across the base and started right back up. Deva was a little in awe. Cally was more than a little concerned. (Tarrant and Vila were more than a little annoyed to get stuck with the task of clearing up the flood damage.) Soolin was a little curious as to when the technicians were eating and sleeping—though Deva explained to her that these were not particularly important activities for technicians.

“I didn’t realise you were a separate species,” Soolin said dryly, handing him a nutribar.

“You didn’t realise Avon was?” Deva asked mildly, raising a tired eyebrow at that. Soolin supposed it was a fair point.

There was no singular moment of breakthrough, per se. There were incremental successes, which
amounted, over time, to a larger and more ambitious data security breech than even Avon’s earlier attempt to undermine confidence in the Federation banking system would have represented, had it been successfully carried out. At last, Avon backed up the stolen data no fewer than seven times on seven distinct systems (borrowing the unutilized, ‘outmoded’ remote planetary server clusters of a score of businesses to do so). With this accomplished, Avon rolled his chair away from the equipment, set down his laser probe, and ventured a chuckle. This chuckle rolled on into a long, properly hysterical laugh.

“Are you finished yet?” Deva asked at the end, taking a sip of his stimulant.

“Yes,” Avon drawled, “I am. If there is a chance of repairing this universe via political intervention, we have got it. Right here. Our fearless leader will be able to look at this and determine an order of operations. Our activities will no doubt be as dogged by improbabilities and ill-luck as this process has been, but they will be the correct activities: the ones by which we can hope to win.”

Avon also hoped, via this security breech, to engineer a more definite demonstration of the efficacy (or lack thereof) of Blake’s entire approach, but he refrained from articulating a plan that still wasn’t quite settled in his mind. Blake had never shared works in progress—and Blake had been better at this business than, it seemed, Avon was. Looking back, the Liberator’s efforts under Blake’s leadership had resulted in what now seemed almost a dazzling run of successes. His own year in charge of this ship had been inglorious, even before its particularly unimpressive finale.

“I’m going to bed,” Avon announced, probably unnecessarily. He knew it had been when, tired as he was, Deva gave him an incredulous ‘No!’ in return. (He also recalled that Deva had known why they’d done all this, without the benefit of his reiteration a moment ago.) Deva was such a pest. Avon rather liked that about him.

Avon trudged rather than walked to his room. His and Blake’s room, really, but it was, after all, an off-night. Blake was working, or—Avon thought with a stab of emotion, his exhaustion leaving him vulnerable to it—with Aven, more probably. Draping himself over his other lover’s back in that protective way of his, Avon thought as he collapsed into their bed. Or perhaps they slept differently—perhaps Aven laid his head on his husband’s chest and listened to Blake’s heartbeat, hearing in the orrery the faint music of the spheres. Perhaps they didn’t even need to touch in bed, because the act was so normal for them. It was so natural and unthought of, that they should share one another’s nights: there was nothing extraordinary in it. Perhaps Aven took for granted what Avon coveted.

Avon thought about distracting himself from this maudlin turn of thought and his own lonely restlessness with masturbation, but he was tired and not up to much. And, as he’d discovered to his cost during the year of Blake’s absence, he’d rather ruined elaborate forms of solitary gratification for himself. Now he deeply associated most properly distracting things one could do to one’s own body with Blake, and with particular pleasures they’d shared.

He blamed this in part on his habit of buying Blake toys. He had acted, back on the Liberator, as though these were items he’d picked up for himself (and only incidentally for Blake, whom he happened to be having sex with). He’d brought them out and into play with a casual air, despite the blatant correlations between what he’d bought and what Blake particularly liked. But only someone who watched Blake’s reactions like a connoisseur (that was to say, obsessively) would have grasped that Blake might enjoy shoving a large, heavy glass dildo with a lot of texture into Avon. (The sense of fullness had made Avon breathe like he was running when it was inside him.) It took someone as dedicated to and experienced at the task of working out what Blake was thinking as Avon was to anticipate that Blake would then love it if Avon breathily, noisily sucked him off, like this—and then, when Blake had come, to guess that Blake might want to see Avon nod desperately when Blake asked if he wanted to be fucked with it now. Avon had purchased things to use on Blake as well, but
one of the best things about Blake’s sexuality was how interactive it was. Blake got as much out of Avon’s responses as he did out of being specifically catered to, and if Blake had a bulletproof kink, it was needy, genuine lust.

The memory summoned others, and without properly deciding to do so Avon found he was going to masturbate after all. Why not? It would ease the stress in his muscles, and it might even relieve the intolerable lack of Blake’s appreciation (for who was going to appreciate this victory and act on it, if not Blake?), or even just the lack of Blake’s solid presence: the warmth of his body in the bed.

Toys had only been a small part of Avon’s arsenal, naturally. Back on the Liberator, Avon had developed a fixation with overwhelming Blake. He had understood even at the time that it was because he had felt overwhelmed by Blake, and had simultaneously felt as though Blake was less totally consumed by him. He’d wanted to even the odds. If, physically or mechanically, Avon could do ten things to Blake at once (if he could overload Blake with a buzzing toy in his arse and handcuffs on his wrists and fingernails on his chest and a blindfold over his eyes or a gag in his mouth and magic chasing through him like an electric current and his own panted filth ringing in Blake’s ears and his own mouth or arse taking Blake’s cock, with a ring around the base to keep him hard until Avon decided Blake had had enough, and whatever else Avon thought of during the process besides), then Avon had thought that that was ideal. Avon had considered it simple reciprocation: this was what Blake did to him, made manifest.

But looking back, Avon thought, as his hand worked his cock (the pleasure more in the memory than in the perfunctory, efficient grip), Avon could see that he’d been unfair to Blake there. Blake had been deeply affected by him in turn. Avon hadn’t known when it had happened which of them Blake had been trying to please when they’d wound up having sex in the treasure room while everyone else was down on shore leave. Blake had crooned a lot of nonsense about what a dangerous criminal Avon was (to Avon’s gasped ‘That’s right, Blake’—it had been absolutely delightful nonsense) as Avon had taken him on a modest mound of gold coins that slithered and clinked and shifted as they fucked. But it had certainly worked for Avon (and, judging by the moans, for Blake too).

Blake had smiled sheepishly at him after, and Avon had decided that it must have been a gift. (Now, in retrospect, Avon saw it as the blatant proof of affection it had been.) Avon had thought that was—lovely, actually. He’d wanted so much to think of something lovely to give Blake in return. And wasn’t it unlikely, wasn’t it the strangest and most valuable thing, that Blake could sear his soul in a way no one else had ever done, and also be so game here, and in everything—so brilliant at the mundane business of their work together? Avon hadn’t ever thought to hope for that in a partner.

Given that said work together had often been stressful and acrimonious, they had sometimes had explosive sex in the wake or even in the middle of arguments they’d carried away from the flight deck and back to one of their bedrooms. They had never hurt one another or done anything the other didn’t want (and had always been fairly careful to determine that, and good at doing so), but violence hadn’t been excluded from the vocabulary of their sexuality. Avon wasn’t masochistic or sadistic per se—not in the grand, classical sense—but sometimes he did want to be bitten and scratched, and given a little pain, and to affect Blake similarly.

Now they largely refrained from that sort of fucking. The situation was differently tense. Blake was always so tired, and it bothered Avon that Blake hadn’t felt himself utterly secure in Avon’s affections through those earlier battles. That knowledge retroactively re-characterized games and passion as loveless conflict for Avon, a failure on both of their parts to understand one another and to make themselves understood. (The way Blake’s cadence began to rise and fall when Blake was truly upset now also unnerved Avon: it had never occurred to him that Blake might, under his Alpha-
school pronunciation, have been reared speaking with any kind of regional accent. Avon couldn’t
even recognise this one: it was probably something that Blake’s home universe still possessed, and
that S1 had lost long ago. It had made Avon think again of Aven’s awful comment about Roger
Blake, and fret about the extent to which he knew his lover, even as he felt he knew Blake better than
he’d ever known anyone.) Though these insecurities couldn’t quite strip away the pleasant memories
(Blake had enjoyed the encounters too—Aven had evidence of that, at least), and Avon turned to
them slightly bitterly in Blake’s absences. He’d been the only person Blake loved, then: Aven
forgotten in his past.

In some difficult to imagine future where the situation improved, Avon knew Blake’s violent desire
was still his, and was waiting for him as he’d once imagined Blake himself would be (but now he
and Blake were far more honest with one another, and even despite his earlier vast misjudgment,
Avon didn’t seriously doubt that now, this time, he knew Blake’s mind). Avon didn’t think that
aspect of what they’d been to one another was lost or traded away or withered: it was something they
would negotiate when they could. Besides, he still made Blake gasp his name and curse. He still
made Blake come fiercely with a practiced twist of his nails in the muscles of Blake’s back, or with a
hard bite to some soft, pliant bit of Blake he needed in his mouth. And when did it, he thought Bet
your husband doesn’t with a rush of vicious pleasure and aching pain.

Blake came to him so neat. There was never any evidence that anyone else fucked him—and if he
were well-fucked, wouldn’t there be? Avon nonetheless hated the memory of the intimacy between
Blake and his husband—fucking, fucking ‘sweetheart’. He wanted to be more to Blake: to fuck him
differently and better.

So he told Blake all the baroque things he wanted to do to him after the war, and Blake got high and
close off hope and promises. And Avon’s smile uncurled across his face both when that happened
and now, alone in their bedroom, remembering it, because there was nothing better than watching
Blake want him. Nothing at all. Unless, of course, it was the mazed tenderness in Blake’s eyes when
he came for him.

The thought of Blake—strong, indomitable Blake—whimpering through an orgasm for Avon, of
Avon’s making, was enough to make Avon bite his lip and come quietly. He cleaned up and, thus
relaxed, succumbed easily to sleep.

My life, Avon thought as he drifted down, is made up of and measured out in intervals of waiting for
Blake: the greatest of these being the wait for the end of the war. God knows what we’ll do after.
Provided, of course, that there is an after. But it is just possible that there will be. And if there is,
Avon thought as he slipped into sleep, then I want to make it very good for him. I want—

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“I want all the materials referenced here,” Aven said, passing his list to the Bodleian librarian. She
looked at it. She looked at him. She looked at the clock. She looked vaguely upwards, as if seeking
the intercession of a higher power. She then looked back at the man who ran Chrestomanci Division
for its lord and master with an iron fist, a well-placed research grant here and there, and a perfect
command of the kind of icy civilities ambitious dons and well-bred civil servants used to tell each
other to fuck off and die without a pension. “Please,” Aven added with an unconvincing smile.

“These books,” she tried, “are not from the faculty library collection.”

“No,” the man before her agreed, sounding amiable enough.

“Some of these books are from the Camera,” she added. She would have informed him that one did
not take books out of the Camera, but she knew better than to insult him thus. Obviously, Kerr
Chant-Aven, Master of Magic and Doctor of Divinity (First Class, Oxon.), knew how to use his own alma mater’s library.

“Yes,” he said. He still sounded polite, but he now also sounded a dangerous degree more bored with this conversation.

“Some of them, however,” she made a desperate effort, “are from special collections which one must take certain oaths even to access.”

“Yes,” Aven said with a smile, “I remember having taken them all. Oh salad days of my youth.” He snapped his fingers and said something she didn’t follow in Latin. The long card catalog behind her flew open. It spat out several entries, which flew past her (ruffling her hair as they went) and formed an orderly pile on the desk before her, shuffling themselves into the right arrangement as more arrived.

She opened her mouth to tell him that all this was above her pay grade, and he clucked and shook his head, preempting her. “I need them, I can’t waste time coming and going from the Castle every day for the next weeks, and it is an emergency, I’m afraid. Tell them I insisted,” he advised her. “They know what I’m like. And what’s more, they know whose donation enabled them to acquire those Mayan curse codices they’re so very proud of.”

The librarian frowned. “We’ve had those for thirty years.” Unless he’d made the bequest at ten or earlier, she didn’t see what he could have to do with it.

“My aunt,” Aven agreed. “A Chant is a Chant, obviously. Well,” he waved at an engraved figure to her left—a man with a dour expression, like that of a sheep suffering from terrible gas—that memorialised one of the university’s founders. “excepting not-very-great-uncle Jon there, I suppose. But that was before we got the inbreeding worked out. I’ll be back for those tomorrow,” he either promised or threatened. Before she could say anything further, Aven slipped away through the Magician’s stacks. He then clattered down the steps, pushed past the heavy doors and walked out into the Bodleian quadrangle.

He swept along the high street towards the station. He occasionally nodded at people he knew, but didn’t stop to chat, indicating with a variety of gestures that he had an appointment to make if any of them sought to detain him. And so he did, with the 4:30 train home to Bowbridge Station, from whence someone could give him a lift back to the Castle (or, if necessary, he’d walk).

As it happened, he found Jenny Stanley waiting on the platform. He tried to slip past her unnoticed, but he was fumbling with his attaché case, trying to stuff papers back in (he’d been working on the train). This delay gave her time to spot him, come up and slip an arm through his, and start walking him towards Helm St Mary.

“You’re lucky I was here dropping off Tarvin,” she said cheerfully.

“Am I?” he asked. “Jenny, I’m afraid I haven’t—”

“Time?” she raised an eyebrow. “Oh but Kerr, ‘even Enchanters must eat mortal bread’. And you did promise to come to Woods House for the weekly clan dinner at some point. We’ve not seen you there since before the wedding, and you never brought Blake ‘round like you said you would. I’m surprised at your marrying anyone you’re too embarrassed of to properly introduce to your own family.”

“Extended family,” Aven rolled his eyes. “And you all already know him. Jenny, I really am far, far too engaged in dealing with a series of pressing crises to come to supper.”
She gave his pomposity a devastating eye roll, which was about all she apparently felt it deserved, and continued unalterably in her course. A full evening of shouting that HIS MARRIAGE WAS GOING FINE, THANK YOU into deaf gaffer Pinhoe’s ear and politely stomaching his third-cousin twice removed by marriage’s well-made but intrinsically horrifying Stargazy Pie (Cornish; her specialty) loomed before Aven. If the Chants having come over with the Conqueror among the company of his personal Enchanters and subsequently and deliberately marrying into every old magical bloodline on the island worth having was a part of Aven’s heritage, and if he reaped the benefits thereof, then so too did he reap these less glorious familial ties and attendant obligations. The Pinhoes were the most potent dwimmer-wielders in England: they were also very interested in agriculture, as befitted their gifts, and very fond of football, and ‘avin a laff’, and several other things Aven wanted no part of. But if he bolted on Jenny and legged it for the castle, he’d never hear the end of it.

“Jenny,” Aven cleared his throat, pitching his voice to quite a supplicant tone, “there isn’t—any way you and I could do a deal, is there?”

“A deal?” Jenny considered. “Well. *Perhaps* I might skip the meal, and only show up for desert, if I was waylaid by an old friend I’d not had a chance to speak to in an age, who positively begged me to have a pint with him.”

Aven turned them towards the village pub with enthusiasm, feeling that he was getting away scot-free. It was only when he and Jenny were seated in a booth, each provisioned with a pint of the Castle orchard’s own cider (the magical apples, dwimmer-tended, lending the cider a sharp burst of flavour they both appreciated—they’d admitted to each other before now that they found other ciders less appealing), that Aven realised he’d been had.

“You,” he accused his distant cousin, “didn’t want to scream loud enough for gaffer all night and have to choke down a helping of Stargazy Pie any more than I did.”

Jenny shrugged, guiltless. “I might have wanted a break. And you might have been an easy mark. Normally you’re more on guard against this sort of thing. Something on your mind?”

“*Obviously* S1,” he told her, taking a sip and looking out at the lowering sky. Almost autumn, now.

“Besides that,” Jenna said. Said, rather than asked, he noted.

“Not really,” Aven said carefully, still not looking at her.

“Funny,” Jenny said. “You see, *I* think there is. In fact, I think you’ve been distracted nearly out of your mind since about,” she considered it, “three, or maybe four months after the wedding. I know you and Blake only started to appreciate the degree of danger S1’s in when he was able to return as himself and start running experiments. But I don’t think it’s only been that.”

“Don’t you?” Aven asked, pretending disinterest. He watched the greengrocer, Pamuk, close up shop across the street, pulling the door to and locking it carefully with his big iron key. As though anyone would want to steal his vegetables. As though the contents of his till would not be located, if absconded with, by the inhabitants of this densely magical village with friendly readiness. Pamuk had moved here from Manchester over a decade ago. He had a ritual, and by God, he stuck to it. Pamuk probably had his own problems, and Aven wouldn’t have known how to sell a marrow for the world. But he wished he too could turn the key on his work and go home, whistling as he went, and that his spouse would (like Pamuk’s wife Edith, in all probability) be waiting at home when he got there. His wouldn’t. It wasn’t his night for Blake.

“Yes,” Jenny said, steady and undeterred. “I might almost say something was off at home. Though
you’ve always been very good at not letting anyone know when something you think is private is going wrong. I didn’t even know you were going to run away, until you’d done it. And it’s obvious that no one could be more in love than you and Blake. Still, I might almost wonder if that was it.”

Aven turned to look at Jenny properly, his expression wry. With a twitch of his hand, he dropped the glamours he’d inherited from his ancestress, the society beauty Miranda Argent. Jenny started at how wretched the normally-immaculate man looked without them today. ‘Tired’ was not the word for it.

“Blake and I are, as you suggest, hardly regretting our vows. But this,” he gave a self-conscious smirk as he sipped his cider, and spoke again when he’d swallowed, “is how bad the S1 situation is, if you require a visual demonstration. You know, I think I’ve slept—” he considered it, “twelve hours, in the last three days.”

“That can’t even be helping,” Jenny said shortly.

Avon raised an eyebrow at her. “It can’t be helped, you mean. I don’t think it’s clear to you, precisely,” he said, not rudely but frankly, “that S1, in which billions of sentient beings live, might well collapse.”

She regarded him evenly. “I do know, it’s just—too big to think of, in a way. I can’t grasp it, can you?”

“No,” he admitted. “Not even having worked on it for months. Nor do I know how to give Blake—well, he wants evacuations. Obviously—” he made another hand gesture, ‘don’t spread that around’, and she nodded, of course.

“Is there even any hope of that?” she asked, looking not grieved, but flat. As though she couldn’t respond to this—didn’t know how to marry ‘sitting in a pub with her wrecked cousin, talking about his shite job and how it had murdered his honeymoon period’ with billions of bodies.

“Blake wants to believe there is,” Aven said, letting all the nuances of that come through. There might be—Blake might pull hope out of nothing. He had done, before this. But the prospects weren’t good, and the possibility of failure was unfathomably awful, even as it was strong. “I have an idea, based on some unconventional spell work I saw some months ago. It was broken, but interestingly so. And I think some of the old serf spells that I bullied out of Oxford today, ones with territorial anchoring charms, might yield something. But it’s piecemeal, and it could just as easily all fall apart.”

Aven leaned back in the booth, letting his head tap against the wood support of the bench. “Jenny, let’s talk about something else. I don’t care what. For god’s sake, I haven’t thought about anything but Blake and the Castle and this disaster for—” his mouth twisted into a humourless smirk, “longer than I can easily recall. Tell me how the damn horses are getting on.”

And so, after a moment, Jenny did. When she’d told him all about the stables, and her husband’s trip to Leeds for a conference, and how she still didn’t know whether she wanted kids or just thought she ought to want them, and when they’d finished their pints, she hugged him before heading off to Woods House. Aven snapped his glamours back up, not wanting anyone else to see him like that. He felt a little bad about having distracted Jenny from the problem of his marriage with the more solemn problem of his work, but after all, both were equally real. He couldn’t bear to talk about Avon, and he probably had needed a shoulder to cry on about S1 in and of itself. After all, it wasn’t as though he could complain of this to Blake. Blake knew it all already and required no reminder, and was too wrapped up in the crisis and worn down by it to provide Aven with fresh sympathy.

For the whole walk back to the castle, under the round, white, full-bellied harvest moon, Aven allowed himself not to think about anything but the woods he’d known since childhood, which were to his right. They were still dark and delicious in their danger, and in the resulting pricking of
awareness they called up in him, though he knew that he could probably defeat any spirit lurking in the land if it threatened him. Better still, he knew now how to court such spirits’ allegiance rather than their wrath. He knew the habits and the spells that would make them his friends.

Aven thought of the fields he walked through, and who owned them, and what grew here, and the coming harvest. He thought on how he and Blake, as a couple married this year, should have to bless the festival in the old fashioned manner—behind some secluded haystack, where the encouraging catcalls of the other villagers were a distant, minor irritation. They’d be able to feel the magic due the season pulling up into them from the earth, and down from the sky, and in from the warm, safe affection of the rest of the villagers (for he and Blake belonged to this place, just as they did). Aven wondered whether the way S1’s Earth neglected these sorts of rites had left it vulnerable to decline, but then thought of safer heavily-urbanized worlds, and the more subtle connections between such rights and the political balances involved in the Caprona effect. He then firmly reminded himself that for a bloody half an hour he would not think about his responsibilities, and how he had always imagined, Chrestomanci or no, that he would do them better justice than this—this floundering, this looking about him for someone cleverer, more experienced. There wasn’t anyone. He and Blake weren’t twenty-five anymore. They were grown men, and they faced this alone. And they had to make do, as best they could.

Still, the walk made Aven feel clear and purposeful. I’ll do a little more work, Aven thought as he ascended the staircase to his bedroom, and then I’ll head to sleep. And in the morning, Blake will be home, and that at least will be some consolation. For I never know whether he’s safe, when he’s there without me. And as bad as the idea of what he might be doing there is, the idea that he might be hurt and need me, without my knowing it, is infinitely worse. Why did I ever agree to let him go back there without me? Why did I give in when he told me there was necessary work only I could do here? It was true, certainly, but it isn’t enough.

With his hand on the handle of the door, Aven suddenly knew Blake was in their bedroom. He couldn’t have said how. It wasn’t magic. Less and more than that. It was just something he was always, essentially, aware of. Early, his heart jumped in his chest. ‘My heart would hear him and beat,’ Aven thought, ‘were it earth in an earthy bed. My dust would hear him and beat, had I lain for a century dead; would start and tremble under his feet, would blossom in purple and red.’

He turned the handle as slowly as he could bear to do it, and closed his eyes at the rich, lush Aven that greeted him, at being gathered into Blake’s arms. All the world was bad but this.

“Where were you?” Blake asked, totally without suspicion—only fondness and curiosity in his tone. Aven told him, and Blake smiled. “Good of Jenny, to browbeat you into going out.”

“If only for a short while,” Aven agreed.

Blake bustled around the room, asking questions as he undressed for bed. He was in a better mood than Aven had seen him in for some time.

“And why are you back early?” Aven asked.

“We had an intelligence break-through,” Blake said with great enthusiasm. “It might help.” But then Blake tried to school his happiness, and even as Aven said ‘tell me about it, then’, he knew there was something in this that Blake didn’t think he ought to know.

“Nothing much,” Blake said, his tone artificially hearty. “It just might give us a chance, that’s all.”

“Blake,” Aven said, keeping his voice level, reasonable, “just say it.”
Blake was silent for a moment, fiddling with his shirt buttons. “Avon,” he began (and Aven felt a curious sinking in his gut at the very name: at those four hateful letters), “accomplished something incredible today. He—”

Something about a ship. I don’t, Aven thought, know what a ship like that even is, really. I’ve sailed boats, of course—with rigging, and sails. I don’t suppose it’s anything like.

“And he managed,” Blake almost laughed, his eyes shining with pride, “to entirely recode—”

Aven didn’t follow this, and Blake didn’t seem to realise that he didn’t couldn’t possibly. I know every code-breaking spell system covered by modern magical journals, Aven thought, pointlessly. I feel like a dated reference book you don’t have much use for today. It will pass, I suppose. And you’ll need me for something else—something I can do. But perhaps he is more useful to you there than I could be. Perhaps that is why you told me to stay home. And out of your way. You had to learn all of this whilst you lived there, I presume, and it seems as though you’re very good at it. But I’m not stupid: I know I’m not. I could always learn anything, and if you started at the beginning, if there was time, I suppose I could learn this for you, if he could. Even if it seems dull and grim, and wouldn’t you rather I kept up with the code-breaking spells? I’ve always been rather talented, there.

“Let me give you an example,” Blake tried, sensing he’d lost his audience. Trying to bring Aven with him. “It’s the most monumental work of computer—”

Aven didn’t exactly understand the point of computers. Or what one was. Or what you did with them that you didn’t do with spells. Or how the light impulses passing through a card (someone had told him about that) actually converted into a physical force, reacted with something, and somehow caused something else to retain data.

“And that,” he interrupted Blake, “will accomplish—what, exactly?”

“Well,” Blake huffed out a breath, “essentially, he’s broken their data security. Before, even with the supercomputer, we were stabbing in the dark. Now we know where to aim.”

“Oh,” Aven said. “Good.” He felt, in some ways, so unequal to these systems of knowledge, and all the more frustrated because he knew what it was to be master of a subject in other regards. He felt unequal to Avon’s accomplishments in a field he absolutely didn’t understand, in a world so advanced that the lightspeed barrier was an old joke. Besides, Avon seemed to have some accomplishments: Aven himself felt uncharacteristically bereft of them of late. And that was the real problem: Aven felt powerless in the face of the work before them. This development Blake was in raptures about represented a small chance, but Aven knew the general outlook was still bleak.

He had not felt so helpless and inadequate since childhood, when he’d understood that the Castle expected and required a Chrestomanci, and that, despite all his advantages, it wasn’t to be him. He hadn’t felt so pathetically useless since Blake, the true Chrestomanci, had dragged him back here, battered and shamed.

Blake touched his arm. “Aven?” He said it so gently.

“Hm?” Aven replied.

“I wanted,” Blake said, “to come home earlier than I’d planned, because I feel better than I have in an age, and I wanted to share that with you. I know that we haven’t made love in a while. I’ve been tired, or you have, or there hasn’t been opportunity, or we’ve hardly been in a fitting mood. But I wanted to offer that to you, if you’re interested, and—to be with you, if you feel capable of it right now. Even if the timing’s not right for that, I’d still like to be with you tonight.”
Am I being offered, Aven thought with a sudden spike of sadness, Avon’s victory sex? Wonderful, clever Avon made him happy, and I suppose I’ll reap the benefits. Some of them, at least. I suppose he’s already taken a portion of his choosing. Probably sleeping it off even now—why else should Blake be here with me?

He felt Blake’s arms wrap around him, and felt Blake pulling him into a tight embrace. “I’m sorry,” Blake said into his hair, his good mood dissipated. Aven hadn’t had to say anything for Blake to sense his unhappiness. “Aven, sweetheart, I’m so sorry about all of this.”

Aven was sorry in turn to have spoilt Blake’s rare good mood: to have ruined a gift Blake had wanted to give him, when that wanting, in and of itself, meant a great deal to him.

“No,” Aven said, shaking his head, not knowing what he was denying, precisely. “No, Blake, I—”

Words weren’t getting him anywhere. Instead he grabbed his husband’s hand and tugged him to the bed, finishing the job Blake had begun with his shirt.

“Tonight,” he said, as he worked, needing to bring Blake somewhere, anywhere with him, “tonight, as I was walking home—” And senselessly, as he touched Blake, he told him about the forest and the field and harvest, and how they’d have to bless the fields, did Blake remember that? And how it was embarrassing, and he’d grouse when the time came, but really, if he were honest, he wanted to do it—wanted to be part of the cycle of the year, and part of the story of this place, and for their marriage to make a field sacred. Aven was in some ways a creature of seasons: bred and brought up in the expectation of stability and continuity. He found comfort in his role, and in his place in the world. And after all, he was the Garden (or so he and Blake believed). For all these reasons, Aven looked forward to the day when the old full magic of the earth would move in them. The crowd would wander off to the bonfire with the corn doll while he shook into Blake’s hands and whispered ‘I don’t think I could ever have loved anyone but you—not really, not like this’ into his husband’s ear, not caring about the way his white seed splattered blatant on the rich, upturned earth. Or would Blake like to fuck him, against the snap of the departing summer and the layered chill of the falling night? No one would come—they all expected this, it was proper and right. He’d let Blake have that, take him that way: anything Blake wanted, and anything he could give.

Blake was back with him, and for the time being there was no shadow in his eyes. Aven had worked him out of his clothes, and he’d wrestled Aven out of his, ripping Aven’s glamour off with the rest of the layers between them. Blake pushed Aven’s back against his stomach and pressed his hard cock into the cleft of Aven’s arse. He grabbed Aven’s cock in a fist while he used his other arm to pull Aven tightly to him, a hand splayed across Aven’s chest. “I adore you,” Blake said, sounding almost wretched with it. “You’re my forest and my nighttime and my harvest, I love you, can I, can I just—”

His fingers twitched at Aven’s shard, and Aven gasped yes, and Blake pushed in with his hand and pulled the thing wide, somehow, until Aven was choking on the unbearable swell, the foreign texture and the familiar pulse of Blake’s feeling for him, feeding in through the shard. I have got to learn to make him feel mine, Aven thought, even as he thought god but that’s good, really it’s too much, and harder, harder, harder. He must have said that aloud, at least once if not thrice, because Blake’s feeling now pounded into Aven in waves that made him grunt unprettily with every impact. Blake’s hand moved on him with a kind lack of mercy, and Blake rutted against him shamelessly, like an animal that needed him. Blake bit his neck too hard, and hissed ‘Aven’ against his skin filthily, like he was calling him something degrading.

Aven came with a moan, gasping incoherent encouragement afterwards as Blake pumped himself to climax against him. Aven said things that weren’t words, and ‘yes’, and a ‘that’s right, use me, I’m yours’ that made Blake’s hips stagger and his heavy breathing crumple into a choked clatter. Blake came against the small of Aven’s back and the round rise of his arse and Aven thought (as he had
after his wedding), well, it isn’t dignified, but perhaps that isn’t important just now.

Afterwards he and Blake kissed and kissed, and talked about anything but the war: an hour of chatting about Jenna’s horses, and whether Blake thought differently in Welsh, and why Aven preferred Goblin spells to Trollcraft and the District line to the Circle. They spoke of nothing in particular: a wonderful, welcome helping of nothing at all. And Aven thought that Avon was a horrible interruption, yes, but he and Blake were married. When the S1 affair ended—however it fell out—he and Blake would still have one another. This business with Avon too would pass. And life would go on, even as seasons did.

“I love you,” Blake said again, as they were almost asleep. And for all their fears and doubts, Aven understood that Blake did know this absolutely. Blake was sure and certain here, an ever-fixed mark. Thus Aven could take comfort in the fact that whatever happened, yes: Blake did.

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They were fighting their way across the capitol city of Risht. Once the centre of a proud, sophisticated alien culture, it was now a sprawling metropolis, ruined and half-derelict. The Federation had colonised it long ago during a particularly xenophobic phase, using germ warfare to weaken and then wipe out the inhabitants before settling their own people in. Having accomplished this, the Federation had then maintained the place poorly and let it go downhill. They’d let money trickle out of Risht as its richer citizens left for greener pastures (thus exacerbating the decay). Now, centuries after hounding the planet’s rightful owners to extinction, the Federation had come to severely oppress the city’s current residents, their own impoverished colonists, in turn.

Blake and Avon were being hotly pursued by Federation troops, who had objected strongly to Avon’s cheek (most people did, after all, so Blake couldn’t really blame them—well, not for that, anyway) and to Blake’s having bombed their command centre (that, Blake could also understand). Without said command centre, which had also served as a relay station, the Federation would be unable to coordinate supply and communication lines for the entire sector. They’d have to pull back the affected ships while they rebuilt the system.

The raid was a triumphant realisation of Avon’s intelligence gathering operation in the field, save for one small thing the reports hadn’t been able to tell them. The teleport system apparently reacted poorly to the trace minerals in the stones the original inhabitants had used heavily in their buildings. They’d teleported down all right, but couldn’t teleport out again while inside the city. Avon had to admit that the sparkling blue sheen of said trace minerals, which marbled through the stones, was attractive. Ultimately, however, he would have preferred to be back on Scorpio, looking at its boring-to-hideous walls and not getting shot at. More bad luck, Avon thought grimly, turning to snipe a trooper who was gaining on him (and either a terrible shot or trying hard to take him alive for the prize money—which made sense, on a world this poor) with a blaster-shot through the head.

He and Blake ducked into a grand dilapidated building that turned out to be some kind of church. Even clattering and tripping his way in at half a run, Avon couldn’t help noticing that the place was stunning. Patterns of shining white and sparkling blue stone comprised a giant mosaic that covered the whole interior. The cavernous space rose into a giant dome supported by elaborate columns. The design stretched up until Avon could no longer make it out. Only the shine remained consistent, defying the dimness that their lowly vantage point should otherwise have leant to the vault’s uppermost reaches.

“Here,” a voice whispered harshly. It echoed in the alien basilica, and it took Blake a moment to realise what corner it was coming from and to tug Avon in that direction.

The owner of the voice started when they drew closer.
“You’re Blake, aren’t you?” the man said, a little awe in his voice, as he guided them into a small side-chapel. “I recognise you from the ‘wanted’ data stream! I hoped I could get whoever those troopers were chasing to safety, but I never imagined—oh, in here!”

When at last they stopped, Blake doubled over. He braced his hands against his knees as he panted, out of breath. He nodded, belatedly, in response to the man’s question. Avon, who had propped himself against the wall like he didn’t intend to move again, was in a similar condition.

“Greek Orthodox?” Blake asked after a moment, gesturing at the man’s cassock.

“Russian,” the man corrected. “Though the basilica was here when the first colonists arrived. Some form of temple, they think.”

“S’beautiful,” Blake breathed hard, looking around him at the pretty little alcove, which had more shades of blue to its mosaic than the main room. Being tucked into the rounded, softly-lit space was somehow like being underwater. “It really is. I’m glad I got to see it, even if the circumstances—” he gestured.

“If you wait here for a quarter of an hour,” the friar (Avon didn’t know the right term—Blake might not either, given the confusion between the universes) suggested, “the patrols will pass on.”

“That leaves us trapped behind them,” Blake said, frowning. “They’ll have to return to their headquarters at some point.” Blake made a still sourer face. “Or they’ll start searching door to door.”

The friar shook his head. “They fan out as they spread out. Whenever they search for someone, they always push all the way to the city wall and then double back.”

“And once they’re dispersed—” Blake said, his eyes sharpening as he got it, straightening up and getting his breath back.

“We’ll have our chance,” Avon agreed, seeing the friar’s point. “Because getting past them before they turn again is our best means of slipping through the gaps between their units and escaping the city.”

The friar nodded again, eagerly. “If your craft is outside the walls—”

“In a manner of speaking,” Avon confirmed. They could, after all, teleport once they were clear of these buildings.

“Then you might try heading out through the slum-warrens, to the East,” the friar suggested. “They’ll find it difficult to track you in there. You can lose yourself in the shanty-maze and the crowd. I can show you the way through myself, or direct you. The inhabitants resent the troopers far too much to tell them the time of day, much less whether they’ve seen men of your description. And,” he said with a snort, “shantyfolk know better than to believe the soldiers would share any reward.”

Blake was inclined to trust the clergy. They were variously suppressed, banned and hassled by the Federation, and they had been quite important to the radical movement on several planets (though not on Earth, where organised religion at least appeared to have been entirely eradicated). Thanks to Avon’s intelligence gathering operations, Blake knew there had been risings on Risht some months before, and that those had been strongly affiliated with religious groups.

“Will you be in danger for having helped us?” Blake asked the friar.

“They’re going to suspect us all anyway, for whatever it is you’ve done,” the friar said with a shrug. “Though frankly, if you’ve made their lives harder, I welcome the inconvenience. But they’ll have
no proof, and we’re not a summary-execution world yet.”

“Thank you,” Blake said sincerely.

“Thank you,” the friar returned. “You’ve given us a little hope these past years, when we stood much
in need of it. And hope is its own reprieve.”

Blake’s face twisted for a moment. He felt himself unequal to the compliment, but chose not to say as
much: it would be ingratitude.

“So you want us to wait here,” Avon said suddenly, having the idea even as he spoke, “for a quarter
of an hour.”

“Yes,” the friar repeated. “I think it’s best if you do.”

“And you are,” Avon stressed, “a friar. Or something of the sort.”

“A priest, yes,” the man said, now a little confused. They’d gone over all that.

“Excellent,” Avon said, his eyes narrowing. “I require your services.”

“In what capacity?” the priest asked, properly baffled now.

“To bind me or undo me,” Avon said grimly. “One of them.” He’d read some Shakespeare, since
that run-in with smug, erudite Aven—he’d had a lot of lonely nights to do something with. (And,
troubled endlessly by that ‘Roger Edward Blake’ comment, when Blake was back in S1 Avon had
demanded that Blake tell him more about his real origins, now that he remembered them.)

“Avon—” Blake said, startled.

The priest cast a quick glance at Blake’s already-ring ed hand.

“What is the church’s opinion on second marriages?” Avon asked.

“Re-marriage is an act of compassion on the part of the Church towards sinful man,” the priest said
warily.

“Well now. We are sinful men,” Avon said with a wry smile, “much in need of compassion.”

“Hang on, do you want to be married to me?” Blake asked, incredulous, as though every part of this
utterance threw him.

“There’s certainly no one else I want to be married to,” Avon said carefully.


Avon looked away from him, grimacing. This was still—very difficult.

“You or no one else,” he clarified. “You or no one ever,” he added, sensing that something more
was needed. “Preferably you. Forgetting anyone but you and I, and everything but this, if the world
is going to end, I—should prefer to be married. To you. If you would,” he added with a touch of
sarcasm, feeling his cheeks heat.

Blake stared at him. A convoy rumbled by outside—a troop carrier, hunting them. The vibrations
caused dust to rain down from the shoddy plaster repairs around the small, domed room’s support
beams. The dust floated in the golden air, hanging in the shining space. It came down slow, looking
like confetti or rice—or like a scattering of infinite tiny gems, hung, netted through the air. Avon waited, suddenly tense with a pressure he couldn’t think to anatomise. His breath caught in his throat.

“Yes,” Blake said quietly after a moment, wonder naked on his face and something like faith gathering in his eyes. It looked right there. It was as though this was how Blake was supposed to look upon the world; as though Blake had once rightly possessed and treasured faith, and had lost it through some misfortune. It was as though he had, in this moment, in a measure regained his capacity for it, when he had never expected to be thus blessed and restored unto himself. I gave that to you, Avon thought, almost—awed. And you said yes, did you? I don’t think I knew that you would. I don’t know that I’ve ever been as grateful to anyone as I am to you in this moment. Normally I’d despise any such obligation, and myself for incurring it. But this is gratitude without debt, and though everything in the world has a price, you are giving yourself away for nothing—for nothing but me, in return. Though you must know that you already possess all I have. For whatever it is worth.

“We have fifteen minutes,” Avon said briskly after swallowing. “Perhaps twenty?”

The priest nodded.

“Let’s do this fast,” Avon said, determined not to miss his opportunity.

The priest took them through the two components of the ceremony: the Betrothal and the Crowning. A bit of loose thread from his cassock sufficed to make two thin, single-stranded rings. For the ceremony, he said, these rings must be worn upon each of their right hands—for that was the hand of authority and power, with which one might rightly make a pledge of commitment such as this. The priest allowed their run through the city to count as the procession. He fetched candles from the room’s small altar, and at his direction both men lit them and formally declared their intent to marry.

The priest, with an ironic look, said that he would read the epistle and the gospel portions later, on his own time and their behalf—brides and grooms never paid attention to anything but each other during the ceremony anyway.

From the altar cabinet, the priest fetched out two small crowns. Apparently he was due to use them in a ceremony the next day—well, now they could do double duty, and be doubly blessed. He placed the crowns upon their heads, the men bending to facilitate him. Three times he said that this man, the servant of God, was crowned to this man, the servant of God, and three times he asked the Lord to crown them with glory and honour. They were now, the Priest said, the kings of a new family. He instructed them to exchange crowns, to signify that they were to share all things with one another.

“Are there vows?” Blake asked, his voice low and serious, his gaze firm on the priest. I love you, Avon thought helplessly, watching Blake. I find it so devastatingly easy to do it.

The priest shook his head. “Whatever promises you make privately to one another are your own responsibility to keep. If you can’t keep faith with each other, then no vow could hold you.”

He blessed a common cup, and they drank from it. He led them around the altar thrice. He then removed the crowns and read the Benedictions to and the Greeting of the Couple. And then, in the still moment that followed, it became clear that he was finished: that the thing was done.

“Well,” Avon said, a bit bemused himself now. “I—suppose I’m married. And that’s twenty minutes. Come on, Blake—”

The priest got them out via the slums. He left them with his best wishes and some directions for getting past the city wall. Having followed these instructions successfully, Blake and Avon took
cover in the woods. They cautiously moved deeper into them, trying to get far enough away from the city that they could call for teleport.

“I love you,” Blake murmured as they navigated a tangle of fallen trees, keeping his eyes on the terrain but offering Avon a hand to steady him.

“We’d have something of a problem if you didn’t,” Avon said briskly. “I don’t know that they make marriage counsellors prepared to take us on.”

When they felt they’d put a decent distance between them and any observers from the city (it wouldn’t do to be sniped mid-dematerialization, or to give away that they’d escaped via teleport and thus incur space pursuit), Avon called in, and the Scorpio brought them up.

“How did it go?” Tarrant asked back on the ship.

Blake opened his mouth, but instead of answering just started to laugh.

“Blake?” Cally asked, confused. “Avon, what—?”

But Avon was laughing too, and wasn’t much use.

“Interestingly, it seems,” Soolin said shortly, with a raised eyebrow.

“Very,” Blake agreed when he could speak again.
Blake knew he had to tell Aven. And he knew it wouldn’t go well.

Aven at first obstinately refused to understand him. “Yes, you are married, well done, Blake.” “No, dearest, that was me at the wedding, though I do see how you could have become confused. People do say we look alike, though I don’t see it, myself.” “No, Blake, you are not. You misunderstand the institution: you can only have one marriage at a time. And I’ll give you a divorce when hell freezes over.” Followed by a vehement “That’s bigamy—the second doesn’t count!”

Eventually, with great patience and care, Aven was made to accept that Blake was now married both to him and to Avon, and that this second marriage did too ‘count’. Aven was almost hyperventilating at the “How could you do this to me?’” stage, frantic at “But you are married to me; he’s just some whim of yours!”, and nearly crying by his accusations that Blake didn’t love him. Aven’s hysteria ought to have been camp, a little ridiculous: it was simply horrible. “You told me I was everything,” he said. “‘Tis a lie.” The erudition and bitterness of the quote were consumed by the way the word ‘lie’ quivered helplessly in his mouth. Blake had known some great reversals, and yet he had almost never felt more wretched. He had never loved Aven more; never wanted more keenly to kiss a word out of his mouth.

Blake’s best, most heart-felt reassurances, his Darling-I’m-sorries, drained out of Aven as though Aven were a sieve, though he was obviously starving for them.

When Aven had exhausted himself, he was left slumped and listless. “And do you love him,” he said quietly, after Blake had talked himself hoarse, “just as much as you do me? Could you say all of that to him, and mean it? Are you in fact exactly as married to him as you are to me?”

Blake’s expression gave his answer.

Aven sighed deeply, like all the air was being pressed out of him. “You’re not even protecting yourself. That is almost the worst part of all this. Blake. Think for a moment. Think about where things are headed. What is it going to do to you if he dies there?”

Blake set his jaw, not against Aven but against fate. He stared out before him, grim and resigned and yet determined. “It’ll kill me,” he admitted. “More than any of my deaths thus far. I don’t—” he shook his head. “Do you want to hear this?”

“I suppose I’d better.”

It was Blake’s turn to breathe like he’d taken a hit. He hadn’t let himself think much on what would happen if they lost. He’d acknowledged the worst-case scenario and acted, because there was nothing else they could do. But acknowledging a possibility was different from preparing oneself for it. “I honestly don’t know how I’ll go on.”

“No,” Aven said softly. “I don’t know how any of us are going to go on. I haven’t for some time. It all—used to be so clear to me. You said I was your soul. Well, you’re mine. And I thought that meant that everything would come out all right. Go away, Blake,” he said. “I need not to look at you for awhile. And I mean it.”

Blake hesitated, but then stood and walked to the door. “I don’t know how to go on if you don’t love me, either,” Blake said, his hand on the unturned knob and his back to Aven. “I’m not saying it to guilt you. Hurting you feels, absolutely, like a sin. Losing you would be more terrible than death.”
‘Would also be’, Blake didn’t say. Nonetheless, both of them knew it was there.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” Aven snorted, “I imagine I’ll love you when my bones have turned to dust, and that my very dust will take advantage of any breeze to blow over to mingle with yours. You have me, and you’ll never be rid of me. There is nothing you could do to drive me from you. If the world abandoned you, I would stand with you. I would be the last man at your side—well,” Aven sighed. “On one of your two sides, it seems. I suppose you must be everything to him as well, for whatever that is worth.”

Aven leaned back in his chair, contemplating nothing in particular. “That is not the problem. It never has been. The issue’s living with it. Don’t say you love me again,” he said, preempting Blake. “Not—just now.”

Blake nodded and left, gently shutting the door behind him.

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Aven appeared directly on the Scorpio’s flight deck this time, and rolled his eyes at the guns that were immediately pulled on him.

“And you imagine that will work, do you?”

There was some hesitation in the eyes of the assembled.

“And you’ve all thought about Blake’s reaction if it does? You’ve come up with some really good excuses?”

The guns drooped decidedly.

“Yes, I thought so. Besides, I’m here on business.”

Avon opened his mouth to make a comment; Aven regarded him with a very specific gleam in his eye and an air of anticipation, obviously ready, even eager, to pounce.

“Oh, what’s the point?” Avon said. He lowered his gun (thus signaling the others to do the same) and turned his back on Aven.

“I need to run tests on this side, regarding the proposed extractions,” Aven informed him, pulling an improbable amount of equipment out of his pockets and setting it on the floor. “It might as well be here, where, I presume, no one is going to try and take me in for your bounty. You weren’t traveling—I think you call it FTL?—so the jump was simple. Is this in the way?” he asked Vila.

“No,” Vila said, even as Avon said, “Yes”. Soolin rolled her eyes and agreed with Vila. Avon told Vila, Tarrant and Soolin that they could get back to what they’d been doing. With ill-grace at being ordered about, they did.

“How are you getting on?” Avon asked his counterpart, still surveying his own console rather than his duplicate.

“About as well as you are, from what I hear,” Aven said. “I presume you’re also engaged in further tests?” Avon had been in the middle of something last time, Aven remembered (and of course he’d heard all about Avon’s efforts from Blake).

Avon nodded, seeming disinterested in telling Aven precisely what he was currently working on. Aven’s eyes flickered to Avon’s outfit.
“That’s almost acceptable,” Aven said idly. “You’re doing much better. Granted the bobble neckline would be a poor choice even if it did work with the Egyptian collar underneath, but I can tell you’ve tried.”

Avon smiled nastily. (Aven wondered whether he had quite that expression in his own arsenal.) “The universe is about to end, and you are mincing about mocking jackets.”

“Mincing,” Aven repeated with relish. “I wondered when you’d try for that, or something like it. Besides, you’d try the same tack, if;” he smiled with faux politeness, darting another look at Avon’s clothes while he set up his equipment, “you thought you’d any chance of winning.”

Avon rolled his eyes. “You know almost nothing about how this world works. These came together.”

Aven glanced over, noting that the interior element of Avon’s outfit, the bit with the Egyptian collar, featured unwise studding as well. “So they did. Allow me to clarify. I have seen the fashion choices of scores of worlds throughout the twelve series. All that misalliance proves is that both you and the designer made unfortunate errors.”

“There’s something on the scanner,” Soolin said, interrupting their quiet sniping, her voice sharp. Avon stopped monitoring his silent-running experiments and dashed to look at Soolin’s screen. “Pursuit ships, two of them,” she confirmed as he arrived.


“But they can’t have seen us,” Vila protested. “Nothing was on the scanners when we got here, and we’re quiet now!”

“We weren’t on silent when we came,” Tarrant said, reaching the pilot’s chair. “We’ll have left an emission trail.”

“Damn,” Avon said, and the ship rocked even as he said it.

“They’re coming up fast,” Soolin said.

“We can ask ourselves how they managed it later,” Avon said.

“I regret to inform you that the force shield has been weakened by the blast, master,” Slave piped up from the corner. “Our forward array’s power has been diminished to eighty percent.”

“They’re making another pass around—Fire,” Avon said. Vila landed a shot before they all heard a loud, clear bell tone, which seemed to fill the flight deck, vibrating out to every corner of it.


Aven, however, nearly fell over. He went chalk white, and braced himself against the console with shaking hands. He seemed to be having trouble breathing. “I can’t feel anything,” he said around heaving gasps, voice tight with panic. “What the hell was that?” he snarled, getting himself under control.

“It isn’t permanent,” Avon said automatically, knowing that that was what Aven most cared about, because it was what he himself had panicked about the first time they’d been belled. Rather interestingly, while he hated bell bombs, Avon seemed utterly unprepared for a sudden loss of magic. It seemed that magic was so integral to Aven, that he was so reliant on and covered in a spell or a charm here or there, that magic was so much the medium via which Aven related to the universe, that
being deprived of it made it almost difficult for him to function. “The effect lasts a few hours.”

“Primary magical systems are down,” Soolin informed them. “The mechanical auxiliaries have kicked in.”

“They’re moving off!” Vila said, disbelieving and hopeful.

“Because they do not need to stay close. They’re draining our primary power reserves,” Avon observed. “Look at where we are, relative to that,” he gestured at the curve of the spatial gravity well on the navigation display—they were in something of a bottleneck. “Remain where they are, and they can keep up a light barrage at their leisure.”

“And they’re blocking the only escape routes,” Tarrant realized.

Avon smiled grimly. “Unless you know a means of gathering sufficient power to punch through the curvature itself. They’re trying to bleed our shields—they’ll wait out of range until we’re weakened,” Avon concluded. “And then they’ll bite down.”

“Hours?” Aven demanded, responding to a much earlier comment. “I don’t think so.” He checked something. “Not while I have access to Blake’s portals, at any rate. Orac!”

Aven snapped his fingers and opened his palm. A small ball of blue flame appeared in it.

“Fix. Me,” Aven said in a dangerous voice.

The blue flame flared and fussed. “You must be more specific! In what manner—”

“Immediately,” Aven said, “and without argument. Now, Orac.”

With a sharp orange flare of annoyance, Orac began to radiate a strong warmth. The muzziness caused by the bell’s vibrations began to clear. Aven closed his eyes for a moment. “That’s better.”

“Is that what I think it is?” Vila asked.

“Orac is my over-familiar,” Aven said, smiling at his own joke.

“Kindly do not refer to me as your familiar! I am a fallen star! It is a position of immense dignity! I am a highly-advanced life form, especially when compared to mortal humans, and I do not appreciate being removed from my hearth and commanded like some lesser spirit!”

“But you are a fire demon,” Aven pointed out. “Technically.”

“That is hardly the point,” Orac shaped. “In fact it is exactly the sort of facetious remark that demonstrates the limitations of your mind, and thus my argument!”

“You argument’s limitations?” Aven asked, his lip quirking as he pretended confusion.

“That is not what I meant—a fact of which you are well aware!” Orac literally fumed, and then his tone changed entirely. “A moment—I sense a higher form!”

“I was afraid of that,” Vila said glumly.

“Yes!” Orac insisted. “Yes, bring me to it!”

“Now you will have to be more specific, Orac,” Aven said with a frown.
“I’m afraid he won’t,” Avon said, pulling up a clear box and inserting a plastic key inside it.

A whirr sounded.

“Incredible!” the box chirped—Aven started.

“Highly so!” the flame agreed. “I had not thought to find a duplicate here—a phenomenon that merits exploration.”

“Agreed: you are a most fascinating subject. I would learn the extent of your skills.”

“And I your capacities,” the flame concurred.

“You will not,” Avon said, spotting his inroad, “have the opportunity to do either for long. We’re about to be destroyed by two pursuit ships, unless you,” he pointed at the flame, “care to prevent this inevitability.”

“That is unacceptable,” the computer snapped.

“Let us liaise,” the demon responded in the same tone. “Aven: bring me to the physical manifestation of my duplicate. I will endeavor not to damage his limited plastic casing.”

“Yes!” the computer said to the first commiserating audience it had ever found. “It is a sad curtailment to be thus inhibited by a physical form.”

Aven rolled his eyes and dropped Orac onto Orac none too gently.

“Awh,” Vila said, looking from him to Avon, “why can’t you two be like that?”

Both men glared poisonously at him.

“I think that’s Blake’s line,” said Tarrant recklessly. Identical heads swiveled at the same moment to give him identical absolutely murderous looks.

“That’s quite good,” Soolin said, observing the quelling expressions. “It might be the only thing capable of shutting up Tarrant.”

“Aven,” the flame spoke up from where it was dancing over the computer’s plastic casing harmlessly. “Their engine is nuclear.”

Aven blinked, and smiled slowly. “Do you recall the factory-fire I put out?”

“That is precisely my point.”

“Would it harm us?”

“It seems this vessel also possesses appropriate protective devices.”

“Can you get me access? I presume they’re shielded, somehow.”

“It is a combined magical and mechanical, computer-controlled power-shield,” the computer said, smugness lacing the declaration. “Normally this would pose a challenge, but given our separate abilities, naturally we can.”

“Orac’s going to be insufferable after this,” Soolin said.
“What, more so?” Tarrant groused.

Aven presented his hand and, a little reluctantly, the flame crawled back into it.

“Guide me,” Aven said, his expression going distant and fey as his mind followed the trail of Orac’s magic somewhere. After a long moment, he returned the flame to the box.

“No distractions, please,” Aven murmured, kneeling. “Chalk,” he called, and Avon produced some from the box he kept for emergency repairs of the ship’s simple, sturdy magical systems (which were, as was typical, designed in such a way that non-magical laypeople could operate and repair them). Aven traced a barrier on the deck plating with the chalk: a circle of protection. He stood again.

“Salt?” Vila asked, having come in with some from the small kitchen galley. Deltas with any craft did this sort of thing, circles of protection and the like, on their houses to keep off bad luck and the Fed.

“It’d help,” Aven said, distracted. “Avon, in the circle—I can use you. Vila—along the lines I’ve just drawn. Not over the sigil.”

“What’s that when it’s at home?” Vila asked.

Avon and Aven rolled their eyes and said, “The marking” in irate unison, paused for a moment to glare at one another, and went on. Once in the circle, Avon stood there awkwardly. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask “What am I supposed to do?”, but asking Aven that rankled.

“There,” Aven murmured to himself. “That’s the whole ship covered, by extension. Orac, begin.”

“This circle of yours won’t hold against pursuit ships,” Avon warned him, wondering if his double was an idiot.

“It won’t have to,” Aven said. “It’s for the shockwave. Tarrant— prepare to fly us out. To the right, I think.” He glanced at Avon. “That’s the wider aperture of your bottleneck, correct?”

Avon frowned, letting his lack of a correction convey his agreement. “What are you planning?”

“Ready,” an Orac (difficult to say which) chirped.

Aven smiled. “This.”

He seized Avon’s hands in his own, and more magic than Avon had ever imagined he possessed ripped out of him and into Aven. He could feel it doing it. And since some of his magic was in the working, he could feel, with Aven, the barrier Aven drew around the core of the pursuit ship’s engines. It was an impermeable thing, preventing the feedback and cooling and intake loops that kept the delicate balance of the engine from tilting towards disaster. People forgot, in the age of commonplace spaceflight, the tremendous power of the machinery in play: the force it took to fight free of a planet’s gravity, to survive the shocks of space. They forgot how very, very wrong all of that could go. Safety measures had been refined for centuries. They were quotidian, now. Besides, no one could sabotage a core like that from a distance.

But that complacency made doing just that so easy, provided that you possessed the right tools. Under Aven’s barrier, the energy of the core built and built—there was nowhere for it to go. The ship attempted to react to the pressure: fail-safes fought to kick in. But these relied for their operation on halting the reaction, and they had no more luck getting past Aven’s barrier than the energy did getting out.
It happened quickly. The core melted, and the steel twisted, and troopers screamed, the bright commander (who’d come up with this maneuver, and so cleverly used the special geography of the place against his quarry) whipping his head around idiotically in his panic, as though seeing the danger coming might help. The ship pulled in on itself and then exploded outwards. As promised, the shockwave coming at the *Scorpio* looked prodigious.

“*Now,*” Avon shouted to Tarrant. “Radiation shields at maximum!”

Tarrant flipped them through the debris and onwards, the *Scorpio*’s engines pulling through. Behind them, the unprepared pursuit ship fared worse in the shockwave, and probably got a substantial dose of radiation besides—Avon didn’t think it long for this world.

Avon took a step back, and Aven slumped out of the circle, leaning against the console. “There—I didn’t take much from you. You should be able to recharge those magic-based systems and get us back to your base.”

Avon frowned at him. “What do you mean you—didn’t take much?”

Aven made a feeble Gallic shrug. “I wanted insurance—call it a quarter of your magic, perhaps. The portion I borrowed should return once you’ve rested. You’re certainly better off than that bomb left you. Why do you let that happen to you?”

“I don’t *let* it,” Avon said. “What do you mean a *quarter*?”

Aven looked at him nonplused. “This is a magic-bearing universe. You are my *exact* duplicate, in this regard. Therefore you possess as much magic as I do.”

Avon blinked. “Which is to say?”

Aven looked confused. “I am in all probability the second most powerful magic-user in the universes,” he said, not bragging in the slightest, just stating the fact. “After Blake. And thus—so are you. It’s why I was nearly the Chrestomanci—you are, of course, why I wasn’t.”

Avon looked, now, about as pale as the exhausted Aven.

“You can’t be right,” he hissed.

“I usually am,” Aven said flatly. “At the moment I—need to sleep. Unfortunately there isn’t any chance of getting home under my own power just now, and I’ve seen what you do with Enchanter’s pentacles. Worse even than Blake.” Aven scanned the room and found the door he’d come in by last time. “There were cots in there,” he murmured, dragging himself off in their direction.

“Congratulations,” Vila said when Avon had stood in silence for a frankly weird amount of time after his duplicate had departed.

“Are *you* planning on being insufferable after this?” Soolin asked in a bored tone, capitalizing on her earlier joke at the Oracs’ expense.

“What, more so?” Tarrant repeated, similarly thrifty with his good lines.

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Aven woke up to find the ship empty. There wasn’t much room for confusion on the point. *Scorpio* was sufficiently small and poorly laid-out that if anyone else was present, you would have to work hard to avoid seeing or hearing them quite quickly. Useful, Aven supposed, if you were worried
about being boarded or stow-aways. Less useful if you planned to spend any time comfortably in the thing. But Avon didn’t seem to have much use for comfort, or if he did, much luck attaining any. Perhaps these were the sorts of conditions that drove a man to petty crime, especially if ‘law and order’ in this universe consisted of the Federation, which it would have been impossible to respect in any capacity; especially if you had anyone you believed worth protecting, whom you further believed money would help you shield from this place.

All right, Aven thought sourly, perhaps I would have done it, white-collar crime and all. But I like to think I would have done it right.

Aven swung himself out of the comfortless bunk, brushed his clothing off physically (still ginger with his magic—he’d need it for the trip back), and collected his tools. Ruined by that ‘bell bomb’. It bloody figured, didn’t it? The fact that Avon had let that happen to him disturbed Aven. It said a lot of uncomfortable things about Avon’s level of training, given that Aven already had firm ideas as to how to put a stop to such attacks. Blake ought to have done it—but then Blake was incredibly busy and preoccupied at present, and procedural questions such as this (anything that could be considered ‘optimizing’, in the civil-servant-speak Blake detested and Aven spoke like an irritating but necessary second language) were normally Aven’s purview.

Worse, Avon had functioned without magic as though he hadn’t felt much of a difference. Aven’s entire sensoria and perception of the world were filtered through magic, and had been since he could remember. When his nurse had read to him as an infant and a child (because the current thinking on child-rearing had been that doing so would develop his verbal acuity), she’d also run through a series of games meant to increase his magical dexterity. Most of his playthings had been solid, well-constructed heirlooms with magical components: say the right words and the rocking horse was spelled to work itself, or change color. Aven had never lived in a house that hadn’t heavily relied on magic, that hadn’t been woven through with spells. He’d never not focused on magic in school. Aven would have unhesitatingly given up any other sense before he was stripped of this capacity.

And though magic was essential to him, Aven couldn’t feel perfunctory about it. He loved the study and the power and the practice, and to the extent magic was in him, he loved himself. Blake had once called it the one thing about himself that Aven loved, and Aven had never felt so seen. Magic was also, of course, the locus of his relationship with the Castle and the garden and Blake. Aven simultaneously pitied Avon for not feeling the same, envied his resilience when deprived of magic, and thought—What is it to have a soul but to be able to wound and to be wounded? If Avon couldn’t be hurt (in this case by magic being ripped from him), he was less a man. If Avon wasn’t developed in this capacity, there was less to him. He was less.

The thought was not a riotous triumph, though every misstep Avon had ever made yielded Aven both chagrin and a glut of schadenfreude. It was distinctly uncomfortable. Aven tended to take people a little more seriously when they had powers (or otherwise worked with magic, like the non-powered David Evans). He knew Blake would tell him off about that, and probably rightly, and that Blake would probably question the entire paradigm of ‘soul as developed capacity’ while he was at it, pointing out that opportunities for development were unequally available. Aven wasn’t ablest. It was more that people who worked with magic had more to say to him that he considered relevant. He listened keenly to the least hedge-witch for a way she’d picked up of working with the properties of an herb she took from the ditches along the M-25, and attended to any hoodoo lady willing to show off a conjure trick.

Aven didn’t know what to make of Avon, talented and ignorant, in this schema. Aven had come to intellectually and emotionally understand (though never to agree with) Blake’s fear of his own power as he’d come to know the man, but Avon’s ignorance was something else altogether. He thought that Avon probably had his own metrics of evaluation to do with intelligence, this world’s limited version
of education, and skill, and that these metrics were likely uncomfortably entwined with Avon’s Earth’s supposedly meritocratic class-grading system. Avon too probably fundamentally suspected the criteria by which he judged people, even as he did employ that criteria.

And all that complication and ambivalence suggested that Avon was a real person Aven would have to take seriously. Avon wasn’t merely a reminder of Aven’s own imperfection and the reason he wasn’t Chrestomanci; not just a regrettable accident, or an unseemly Falstaffian remnant of Blake’s bad-old-days in S1, who Blake pitied; not simply a threat to Aven’s marriage, like archetypal young blonde secretary. The fact that Avon might be less in some capacity served to underscore the fact that he was. Avon existed, and he was about to die, along with his world. Avon was a man Blake loved, and Aven had never seen Blake wildly misjudge anyone. Avon was Blake’s husband, and ultimately — Avon was him.

Eugh. The thought almost put him off food, but Aven did need to eat if he ever wanted to get back. Major workings sucked the life out of you.

“David,” he said as he came out of the ship, spotting a familiar ginger head.

“Hm? Oh, Deva,” the man corrected, looking back at his clipboard, “you must be—”

Aven raised an eyebrow and watched ‘Deva’ struggle with that one for a moment.

“I really must be, mustn’t I?” he said at last, foreclosing the awkward search for something that wasn’t ‘the other Avon’, or ‘Blake’s first husband’, or ‘that lunatic who attacked the ship the other day’.

“So I hear,” Deva said with some relief.

“Where’s the dining room? Or kitchen, or ‘galley’, or whatever you’re calling it.”

“Mess,” Deva said almost apologetically.

Aven rolled his eyes. “I’m sure it is. Where?”

Deva directed him, and soon Aven found himself staring at a giant bank of blinking machines.

“What the hell do you do with that?” he said to himself, not understanding how anything intended for human consumption could possibly emerge from this collection of what looked like filing cabinets. “Drained, forced to be polite to my husband’s kept man, and stuck in a dystopia which Blake assures me possesses nothing like a strong cup of tea,” Aven moaned, indulging in a good wallow in self-pity. “Well someone’s going to get me dinner at least.”

He checked his power levels—rising. What he wanted to do was child’s play, anyway. He cupped his hands around his mouth.

“Avon!” he snapped, feeling obscurely satisfied at the way the summons ricocheted through the building.

A moment later, looking furious, the man strode in.

“You couldn’t have used the intercom?”

Aven raised an eyebrow at him.

“No,” Avon admitted with a sneer. “You couldn’t have looked?”
Aven shrugged.

“Well, what do you want?”

“Guess,” Aven said in his most irritating tone. He did, after all, still hate Avon.

With a particularly sour look, Avon punched at the machine’s buttons and produced—mush. “Here.”

“What,” Aven asked, “is—that?”

Avon consulted the menu-code placard. “Congee 6, with Mixed Meats,” he read out.

Hesitantly, Aven sat down at the table and dipped the implement he’d been handed in the bowl. He took a taste. He put the spoon back down in the bowl. He pushed the bowl to the middle of the table.

“That,” he said with some decision, “is not congee, ‘with Mixed Meats’ or otherwise. I don’t know what it is, other than an abomination unto God, but calling it ‘congee’ strikes me as inaccurate, cruel, and possibly racist. What did China do to you? What did rice?”

“The interesting thing is, I’m not even punishing you,” Avon said, sitting down across the table from him. “Intentionally, anyway. That is, in my opinion, the best thing on the menu. I could fetch you the neutral gruel—some people prefer it.”

“You’re very kind, but no. Can’t you get a better food machine?”

“No,” Avon said, “I literally cannot. If there is a better food machine, I’ve yet to run into it.” (Blake had gotten them this as a present, after he’s tried bringing them some food from S1. Vila had stolen the food while Blake’s back was turned and scarfed the lot, and then promptly thrown it all up again. Blake said he’d heard cross-series food could do that, at least at first (which is why he’d planned for them to test it in moderation, Vila), and that perhaps it was safer to stick with what they were used to. If they lived in S1, they’d adjust to the food eventually.)

Aven, knowing he had to build his energy to make the trip, slowly and sadly pulled the bowl back towards himself.

“Why?” Avon asked, a little perplexed by how, beneath the theatrical disdain, Aven seemed actively disgusted by the food. “What do you have at home?”

“Well,” Aven shrugged, “if we dine in, as we normally do, the housekeeper and I consult on the menus—there’s a whole staff to be fed, and the school. Still, I think we keep a respectable table, despite those demands. We’re lucky in our suppliers, and in the local provender. Blake likes game.”

Avon blinked at him. “I know he does—we played several. What does that have to do with—?”

“Game,” Aven said impatiently. “Wild animals hunted in season. Rabbit, or duck, or venison. Pheasant, grouse—you know, every Glorious Twelfth we—”

He looked up at an absolutely blank Avon. No, evidently he did not know. Aven changed the subject.

“And you subsist on the produce of these—food machines back in your ‘dome’?”

Avon shook his head. “No, a dome will have a sizable canteen.”

That had, to Aven, the ring of comforting school dinners—possibly bland, the cabbage inevitably over-boiled, and too-frequently accompanied by boiled ham (or perhaps curry, if your school had
New Age aspirations or served a significant multicultural population), but comprehensible. (These were, of course, other people’s school-dinners: the young Enchanters at Chrestomanci Castle had a menu that wouldn’t have been out of place at Rules.) Aven voiced hopes along these lines to Avon—who looked at him like he was insane.

“It would be a larger vat of this,” Avon pointed at the congee, “but waterier, because it has to stretch. And laced with suppressant drugs of various kinds, to dull your mind and limit your magic. Private kitchens are illegal and practically impossible to maintain. If you are lucky, you can get access to dried military rations that are mostly drug-free. But doing so is hardly without risk, because if you are then unlucky, you might have to deal with an aggression spike from accidentally ending up with an upper-laced batch of military rations intended for front-line berserker troops. If that happens it’s difficult not to be detected and arrested, because it is difficult not to kill someone in that condition—that is what they are designed for, after all.”

Aven was giving him a horrified look, and Avon was somewhat embarrassed for his bleak, violent world. So he gave Aven a shit-eating grin and braved it out.

“And once a week,” he said, “there is rice-pudding.”

“You must want to kill them just for this,” Aven said, taking another—‘bite’ was too generous a word. “I must admit, it felt particularly good to eliminate that ship. I suppose I hate them for what they did to Blake. I’ve felt awful, before, when I had to kill in the course of work. We largely avoid doing it: mostly it’s the sort of thing you can think your way around, and we’ve a host of non-lethal magical technologies at our disposal. This is the first time I’ve ever been—more than simply satisfied to have pulled it off. Hungry for it. I thought they deserved it. I wanted to be the one to do it to them.”

Avon watched the other man narrowly, disconcerted by how familiar it all sounded. It was only a shade off from his own sentiments. If he’d read an old letter he’d written, he would have recognized himself in it in just this same way.

“I don’t think Blake’s going to get his mass extractions,” Aven said when Avon, in an overly polite response to an overly polite request, got him something to drink. Lord, even the water here tasted—well, he supposed it couldn’t be helped. “You know the general outlines of this, I assume, but not what I was working at today, before we were interrupted. The fact of the matter is, even if Blake drains himself to the dregs, the power isn’t there. Mages from our end might come in, but then there’s the problem of transporting them in and out—the number of people who can manage an Enchanter’s pentacle isn’t large, and the number of people who can use one to carry someone else is smaller. And even if you had scores of Enchanters here, and could guarantee them a return trip, without them being fully tapped, the problem remains: how do we anchor refugees once they’re out of S1? We might work something out before their patterns start to decay, but it might equally be a prolonged death sentence. No one figured it out for the test case, Conrad Tesdinic, and they did try.”

Avon didn’t want to hear this, but knew it was necessary that he do so, and that it would pain Blake deeply to be the one to tell him. Perhaps Aven was even acting to spare Blake. Besides, Avon had a sort of fatalism about the matter.

“You’re not as panicked as you might be,” Aven observed.

“I am not much given to panic,” Avon said. “Besides,” he smiled, “we have always been doomed, so it doesn’t make much of a change, does it?”

Even if anything at all were managed, Avon knew they wouldn’t all make it. Aven was trying to prepare him for that. It was, for example, already too late for Jenna, whose death (running a blockade
in a heroic bit of smuggling, apparently—at least she’d done the thing in style) they’d recently received confirmation of. Blake had been upset; well, of course he had been. Avon and Blake had talked about it, and it had come out that there was another one of her, a ‘Jenny Stanley’, back at Chrestomanci castle. Jenny Stanley had dwimmer magic that allowed her to commune with living things. No wonder, thought Avon, that Jenna and the *Liberator* had always gotten on as they did. There was so much about the world—S1, he supposed—they could never reverse, now, no matter what he and Blake and Aven did (and it seemed they wouldn’t be able to do much). There was so much that could never be mended. All that was left of Jenna Stannis was this other-her, a Jenna that might have been.

“The others are making their peace in their own ways,” Avon commented. They had all been told, after a fashion, that the outlook wasn’t good. Blake’s decision: Avon didn’t know whether he would have made the same one. A lot of people said they wanted the truth above everything, without any idea what that meant, or what it could cost. “I don’t know that they’re entirely letting themselves believe it.” He remembered Vila’s attitude towards dying of radiation poisoning (“Die? I can’t do that”). Vila’s current posture was highly reminiscent.

“That might be for the best,” Aven said. “‘Live every day like it’s your last’ has always been about the stupidest piece of advice I can conceive of, for any number of reasons.”

Aven’s tone was steady, but Avon thought Aven must have been upset by the prospect of both his own failure and the imminent collapse of S1, because he absently brought his fingers up to wrap around the magical shard in the center of his chest. (Avon had been told it was there. More of Blake’s vaunted truth.)

If Avon had a thing like that, he suspected his hand would stray to it in thought or in anxiety. If Avon almost hurt his eyes looking for exactly what he’d been told to look for, exactly where he’d been told to look, he could glimpse the shard. What little he could see of it was quite beautiful—like glinting crystal, made of magic; Blake’s magic. Avon resented it as deeply as he wanted it.

“My beloved is unto me as a bag of myrrh, that lieth betwixt my breasts,” Avon quoted with an effort at detached sarcasm.

Aven’s hand fell away from the shard. He looked slightly ashamed to be caught worrying his talisman. “How do you know that?”

*I can read*, Avon thought, annoyed; more annoyed because he *wouldn’t* have known it, in and of himself. Avon allowed himself a slow, insinuating smile. “Blake.”

Aven clearly registered the hit. His jaw tightened as he thought about the contexts in which Blake might have shared passionate poetry with Avon.

“You do realize everything good in you is just Blake, don’t you?” Aven asked, managing to sound bored himself. Avon felt a terrible pang of self-recognition on hearing it.

Avon’s smile widened. “Do you? Tell our husband hello, won’t you?”

Aven gave him a glittering garden-party smile in return. “You’re a very murderable man, Avon,” Aven observed.

“That’s been said before,” Avon admitted.

“Never,” Aven advised him, “by anyone who’d enjoy doing it quite as much as I would. I imagine it would feel better even than pulling apart your Federation. Like plucking the legs off a spider.”
Aven waved his hand and suddenly a startled demon-Orac was back in it.

“I was communing—” it began in tones of annoyance, but it didn’t get to finish.

With a massive pull on Blake’s transmission power, Aven was gone, the bowl he’d been holding rattling to stillness on the table.

Avon smirked at having scored a bitter point.

“I have done as you asked,” his own Orac reported when Avon returned to the Scorpio and snapped “Well?”

Avon had made a very particular request of the computer and the demon while Aven was asleep (right after asking the Oracs how the hell to ‘recharge’ the ship’s spent magical systems), and while the two Oracs were combined. He thought Aven would probably understand what he was going to do, but that Blake probably wouldn’t, and that there was no sense taking chances. Aven might shop him to Blake in an instant if he thought he might profit by it, even if he agreed with Avon’s course of action.

And Avon thought this endeavor was too vital to thus curtail. They had to know whether Blake’s approach could be successful. Whether anything could help them now. And since Blake was so terrified of getting the wrong answer he hadn’t thought to ask the question, Avon saw that he’d have to do it for them; to be strong, here, in a manner his husband, by virtue of his virtue, was constitutionally unable to be. Avon was fundamentally a scientist, driven to define his parameters. And right now, he needed to know whether all the good will in the universe, all the hard work and all the love, mattered at all.

“There are several spells that might fit the purpose you specified. Do you wish me to outline the options and their potential consequences?”

“That is what I asked,” Avon reminded Orac silkily, taking a seat in his usual position.

“Very well. Let us begin. Hecate’s Revenge might be suitable, but I cannot advise it, as it must be deployed near the target, and no known safeguards exist against it. However: the effective radius is considerable—”

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The command personnel of three Federation fleets realized something was very, very wrong when they all rendezvoused at the same point on the edge of inhabited space.

Commissioner Sleer was following a trail left by Kerr Avon, who possessed technology she believed could help her regain official control of her Empire.

An old enemy of hers, a Star Admiral whose friends she had eliminated during her turn as Supreme Commander, had been fed a rumor that Servalan was still alive, and was headed to this spot to make a capture that could see her returned to power. For revenge and the sake of his own survival, this Star Admiral sought to head Servalan off, expose her, and preferably see her dead.

A second Star Admiral had been given reason to believe something like a second Andromedan invasion was brewing in this sector. Relatively young and thirsty for glory and promotion, as well as annoyed at having been back on Earth for the last war and having thus missed the action, this Star Admiral had eagerly sought this assignment. He had acted both out of a desire to defend the galaxy and out of a desire to be seen doing so.
What these three fleets found, at first, was nothing but each other. Only the first Admiral was unsurprised. Then, they had spotted an unimpressive little ship only one of them had recognized as the Scorpio. Servalan, who had spent the last years getting fucked by Blake and Avon alternately, and not in a way she’d enjoyed, began to get very, very worried that this was a trap, and that they had all walked right into it. The situation between the fleets was tense, and they began negotiating how to proceed.

In fact, it was a trap. Weeks of careful work with Orac had resulted in authentic-looking rumors reaching the right people. Avon had physically led Servalan here, keeping some distance between them—running half silent to conceal their ion trail, but not quite well enough. It had taken him a long time to work out how to fake that effect perfectly.

“Are we ready?” Avon asked the assembled.

Tarrant, Soolin and a grimly-determined Dayna all nodded. Avon put a hand on Dayna’s shoulder as he passed her, squeezing it lightly. He knew what this would mean for her.

“Orac—Sleeping Beauty protocol.”

With a little whirr, the computer went dead. Not ‘into it’s independent research standby mode’, but utterly deactivated. Not even its key would wake it now. Only the code sequence, entered via a manual binary input, would reactivate the machine. Avon wanted to retain the option of using Orac if something went very, very wrong, but couldn’t risk the machine being contaminated.

“The ship’s silent and ready,” Tarrant said. “Slave is fully off-line. We’re on complete manual.”

“All outside communications have been cut,” Soolin added. “We’re on our own.”

“Aren’t we always?” Dayna said, her tone level but her hands white-knuckle tight on the controls.

“Isn’t everyone?” Avon asked wryly. “Right. Good luck.”

Cally had stopped him before they’d left for this particular mission. Back at the base, which she largely ran now as a sort of chief of operations, with Deva at her side (still, though no one was cruel enough to say it, licking her wounds from the loss of her Pylene brigade), she’d caught his arm in the corridor. He’d paused to regard her seriously. Cally didn’t make her weight felt often, and when she did, she didn’t do it lightly.

“Avon,” she had asked, “do you recall what I said to Blake before we attacked Star One?”

“With great clarity,” he had drawled.

Are we fanatics? she had questioned then, almost two years ago, echoing Avon’s own earlier words to Blake. Many, many people will die--are you sure that what we’re going to do is justified?

“And do you remember what you said?” she’d asked in a corridor on Gauda Prime, looking, if anything, sadder and less certain of herself, or of anything.

Avon had smiled. “I was rather naïve, wasn’t I? I’ll never be free of Blake. I’ve accepted that now. This is not about he and I, or even,” his smile twisted unpleasantly, “he and he and I.” Cally knew all about that (god, how humiliating).

“I am glad to hear it,” Cally had said, “because I could not justify an action of this scale if it were based on personal motives. But how do you answer, Avon?”
“We are all fanatics, after all,” he’d told her. “It must be justified. One way or another, it must be finished: we must know. This is our only chance.”

“And the blood, Avon?”

“On my hands,” he’d said grimly. “Where else?”

He’d exhaled slowly, looking away from her. “We have to try. It’s the only way, now.”

He’d have asked her if she had any better ideas, but he knew she wasn’t asking to be cruel or obstreperous, but because she felt these things must be said. Cally believed that someone ought to give voice to them, and took the responsibility on herself. He was glad to have Cally with them, here at the end. To have someone grounded, whose personal moral clarity still pressed her to ask questions such as this. She’d nodded sadly at his response (after all, she’d known it), and he had left her there, passing on to the hanger where Scorpio waited.

In the present, at Avon’s ‘good luck’, everyone on the Scorpio put in their earplugs and put their earphones on over them. Avon had two more sets of each ready, in case either or both of the people who could transport into their universe at a moment’s notice chose to do so. They needed the extra safety precautions because certain forms of broadcast signal could override their lack of reception. Avon thought this incredibly unlikely, but then the universe had, of late, acquired a rather unpleasant sense of humor in that regard.

Well. He supposed it was time. Avon took a small black box from the console in front of him and flipped a switch.

For some months, several things had been brewing in Avon’s mind:

1. The Scorpio’s capacity for totally silent running. He had never understood the Liberator’s superior technology so completely as to be willing to base a plan around being able to produce and control this effect.
2. The way bell-bombs worked.
3. The way computer viruses worked.
4. And biological ones.
5. The way Aven had broken through Federation security measures and planted a spell inside their ships. Orac retained the knowledge of how to manage that.
6. How much he hated Servalan, in part because back on Terminal she had tried to use his emotions against him, tried to use Blake to turn him into a ravening sub-human idiot who’d make any kind of mistake. She’d been right to do it, naturally, but he still despised her for it.
7. The creatures on Terminal, who were what humans could become.
8. More important than all of this, Blake’s suspicion that Series One’s magical instability was connected to its political instability and the colossal misuse of magic perpetrated by its ruling regime. They could do nothing on the purely magical end (Aven and Blake had researched and experimented, and the Castle staff with them), or from outside the series. Blake had also tried his damndest, abetted by Avon’s intelligence-gathering operations, to halt the misuse of magic within the series: to limited effect. However, it was still unclear whether there was a relationship of causation rather than simply a correlation between S1’s magical and political decay, and whether, if there was causation, the pattern could be reversed at this juncture. If the Federation fell tomorrow, would that be enough to halt or even slow the devolution of their world?
9. Avon’s own impulse to put that to the test, scientifically. To obtain empirical evidence as to whether there was any chance for them at all—his old, persistent need to see whether Blake was dreaming; his old, constantly suppressed yet persistent hope that Blake was not.
The spell Orac had found him, via conference with its other self, had been the final component—the locus around which all these impressions and fragments of thought had coalesced. Avon had found himself with the grand plan he had patiently waited for, gathered materiel for. It was perhaps the most ambitious thing he’d ever attempted, bigger even than undermining confidence in the entire Federation credit system.

Aven had implied Avon hadn’t the vision or the capacity to make or build anything, smugly contrasting Avon’s limited accomplishments to the perfect orrery he’d given Blake. Perhaps that was true. Perhaps Avon couldn’t build anything fine; but he could build a hideous mortal engine for Blake, and he’d done it.

With the flick of the switch, it had started. On one of the Federation ships, a trooper heard a noise—some phantom inkling of a sound. And twitched.

“Did you hear that?” he asked his neighbor, and the sound of his voice carried in it the deaths of thousands.

Another twitch became a shiver. The shiver a heave, a wretch. The wretch a doubled-over scream, and one scream another, succeeded in turn by a reign of continuous noise. The screaming became a feral thing, and then the trooper, mad eyed, lurched and lunged at his colleagues.

It wasn’t something so simple and sloppy as a bite that transmitted the virus—it was the sound itself. Even before the first trooper had touched his fellows, they were dying. The first trooper’s screams, and the shouts of those near him whom he struggled to reach and rend and savage, mad with a desire to rip them to pieces, carried the disease out in ripples.

That section of the ship called to others for warning or aid. The ship itself, swarmed in a very few minutes, called the other ships in the assembled fleets to inform them of their situation. And every back-channel transmission, every loud-broadcast cry for help, every demand for a report, every order spread the sickness. The comms chatter doomed every soul in the otherwise deserted sector, but for those contained on the small, silent ship that had killed them.

It was an old spell: a lacunae in the fleets’ defensive wards, an ancient curse that worked in antiquated ways. It was weak—too weak to bother fighting, because it needed your permission to enter. You had to let it in. But calling, and inviting signal reception, and tuning the frequencies to facilitate it, effectually did just that.

There was no time for anyone to guess the vector of infection before the disease was transmitted. To work that out, the fleets would have needed information, and information was itself the opening Avon’s spell used to stab them. Avon was after all, at his core, still a skilled programmer and hacker, who understood obtaining information as both a means of gathering power and a vector for vulnerability. Letting anything inside was always a risk.

The spell took surprisingly little power: the curse had its own structure, and was easy to use. It did your work for you. Only the first, simple transmission was your affair. The rest relied on the hosts—it operated like a true virus in that respect. So, with a flick of a switch, either Avon killed tens of thousands of troops and took out three Federation fleets, or they killed one another. The effect was the same, either way.

As ships drifted into one another, drives overloaded and chain reactions took out whole constellations of crafts, Tarrant took the Scorpio out carefully. No one even bothered firing at them, and they drifted through the carnage in utter and majestic silence, knowing that the silent hulls of every vessel reverberated with the screams of people going mad, people pulling at their own flesh and consuming their comrades’.
Avon regretted how messy it all was: not the sort of death you wished on anyone but Servalan, really. But he hadn’t seen his way through to a better option, and dead was dead anyway. Dayna only regretted that she hadn’t been able to see Servalan die, or even hear it.

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Blake, of course, had to be told. He sat on their bed, taking it in. Avon watched a whole parade of emotions take possession of his husband. The horror on Blake’s face hurt Avon, even as he accepted it as due to him.

“I don’t intend to cause you unnecessary pain,” Avon said rather formally. “But you must know I did this—for you. For all of us, but, primarily—” Avon trailed off. He paced the room, uncomfortable. “I—had to test it. There are billions more lives at stake. I had to see if we could save anyone. If anything at all would reverse, halt, or even slow the rate of the entropy.” Avon wet his lips. “If fighting the Federation stood any chance of saving us, then something this size ought to have generated statistically significant readings to that effect.” Avon referred to the Goblin random number strings that Blake had set up to measure the decline of the world.

“And did it?” Blake asked quietly.

Avon shook his head. “No. It appears it—wasn’t enough. I don’t know that anything could be, now. And I’m afraid I haven’t any other ideas.”

“No,” Blake said, his voice hollow. “Nor I. Avon—come and sit by me.”

Avon did, and he wasn’t sure which of them took the other’s hand.

“What’s done is done,” Blake said at last. “And you had your reasons. Thank you. For being strong enough to do it. I wasn’t.”

*I wouldn’t have wanted you to be,* Avon thought. *Star One was hard enough. And there you liked your reasons better, and the projected outcome more.*

They sat together, hands clasped, staring at the plain gray wall, in their minds looking through it out onto the still-bleaker vista of the end of the world. Avon was glad that at least he’d die married to Blake. There was something final and right in it.

“We’ll have to start making preparations,” Avon said at last. “For the inevitable.”

Blake hung his head and nodded.

*But this will make you so sad,* Avon thought absurdly, leaning against Blake. Wishing he hadn’t had to do all this. Feeling that he was what Blake had made him. Wishing it had ended better, or that it hadn’t come to this in the first place. Feeling that he’d done what was necessary: everything he could. And still, that it had been nothing, or a pointless piece of cruelty before the end came to render it small and meaningless.

“Hold me,” Avon said, and blinked at hearing it come out of his mouth. He hadn’t known he was going to say it; hadn’t even known he was thinking it. But Blake’s arms came up around him, and silently they clutched one another on their thin bed: nothing of passion in it, and everything of desperate need. They had never felt more married to one another than they did in this moment.

Eventually they did make love, and things Avon had always found impossible to say came to him. “It isn’t so very awful,” he murmured, kissing Blake’s face slowly, again and again, catching Blake’s mouth and his cheeks and his forehead. “You were, after all, the best thing in this world, and you
will live on. The best part of me will survive with you. In my whole life, you have been the most important—No, don’t cry,” Avon said gently, his voice thickening, “I love you. Dearest, I—Remember me,” he begged, shutting his eyes, “god, Blake, please remember me.”

Blake promised between great heaves of his chest, and a few tears rattled out of Avon, an accompaniment to his jagged sobs and harsh breathing. And then they had the sweetest sex Avon could ever remember them having. Blake opened him up with his tongue and stroked his sides and lay in him a long while; not thrusting, just breathing with him, looking at him, touching him everywhere he could.


Avon believed it more even than Blake’s assurances could have made him do, in a way, because Blake had never really forgotten Aven. Even with the mind wipe, some trace had lingered. Blake’s heart was as stubborn and persistent as the rest of him.

Their little group, along with Blake, gathered the last things that would survive of their universe: the medical equipment and the technological accomplishments, all the records they could store in Orac. A seed bank—Cally’s idea. She’d gone with Blake to steal the best one the Federation Botanical Index had to offer (let them wonder, in the little time they had left, what in hell Blake’s rebels had done that for). Cally had also suggested a cloning matrix from the survivors of Auron, but Blake had shaken his head and reminded her that even then, the souls problem would come into play. She had nodded silently and managed not to cry.

Blake took their offerings home, except for Orac. They were worried about its evidently having duplicates, and Blake was talking about storing the computer in the shifting in-between place once they had no more need of it in S1. Humans couldn’t survive in the Between long, but as Orac perpetually reminded them, it wasn’t human.

They were all very kind to one another, in the days of awe. Avon thought that perhaps Cally, Soolin and Dayna might have all made love, as friends. He didn’t know about the others’ arrangements. There were games, and they were profligate with the food machine: a ration of rice pudding for everyone, every day, if they liked.

Aven visited some days after the destruction of the fleets, looking exhausted and defeated himself.

“We have to do something about the geas,” Avon said as his other self appeared in his room, wasting not a moment in bringing up the subject that worried him.

Aven nodded. “Precisely.”

Of course that was why he’d come. Avon bet he just loved this, but subdued the rancor. Perhaps that wasn’t fair. Aven did not look like a man greatly enjoying himself.

“Will you help me break it?” Blake wouldn’t be pulled down with him. He might think he couldn’t live on, but he could and he would. Aven ought to help with that.

“Of course,” Aven agreed, as Avon had known he would. Avon rode a second spike of bitterness: after all, this must be what Aven had wanted all along. In Aven’s position, he would be sympathetic, but ultimately glad to see the back of the interloper, the competition.

“Now?” Aven asked.

Avon frowned. That was practical, yes. But he found he couldn’t quite bear the thought of it.
“Not yet,” Aven offered, with a generosity Avon found surprising. Avon nodded. “When the time comes, I will,” Aven promised him. “I’ll wait until the very end.”

“Thank you,” Avon made himself say, because it was a kindness, even as everything about this made him want to scream, “I don’t need to ask you to take care of him.”

“No,” Aven agreed, his tone not offended, but absolute. “You don’t.”

After a moment’s silence, Avon broke. “Please,” he said quietly, looking away from Aven. “Please—”

“I will,” Aven promised. “I swear to you, I will.” And knowing his counterpart must want him gone, Aven vanished.

And those who were left waited: Soolin and Deva and Cally and Dayna and Tarrant and Vila and Avon all waited for whatever form the end would take.

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They were not kept waiting long. Thin patches of nothing opened up in the universe; non-space sucking in light and matter; micro-fissures—black holes leading to nowhere. Thousands of them, in every direction. To begin with the planetary systems of S1 remained stable, but only because of the relatively even distribution of the fissures; they were being tugged in every which way at once, and so went nowhere at all. But the fissures only grew, and Avon knew the situation wouldn’t hold much longer. This was the end of it.

The last battle was an awful farce. Federation troops found and tried to pool into their GP base even as the universe itself was collapsing.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” Soolin shouted at no one in particular as she shot an intruder and fell back. It was so petty. The Federation troops must have some idea of what was happening in the universe and yet here they were, spending the end-times in profligate hatred, destroying even as they were destroyed, either in denial or filled with undirected, panicked rage they wanted to expend on someone.

The rebels had all retreated to the tracking gallery—a central room with a very few entrances, all easily barricaded. They had supplies—more than they’d need, in all likelihood, because deep-space scans indicated that the fissures’ growth rate was accelerating exponentially. They probably had a few hours. They might not know when the world outside this room started to go—although perhaps the shooting might stop. The universe, which they were cut off from, must be full of weeping and fear, now, except where it was empty of anything.

Blake was using a great deal of magic to hold the troops off and the place together. Avon didn’t know exactly why he bothered, but it would have felt cruel to tell Blake to let it drop—to tell Blake not to fight to give him a few more hours of life. Avon tried to make use of those hours, contemplating the infinite or whatever one was supposed to do at a time like this—but wound up coming over to where Blake was sitting, staring intently at a focus-gem that was enabling him to brace their stability, and just rubbing his back. Pushing fingers through Blake’s hair, then sliding his hand down over the neck and the planes of Blake’s jacket. Not caring who saw this. There was nothing Avon wanted or needed to do more—any words but ‘I love you’ would have been a lie, a waste of breath, and he didn’t want to cheapen them through over-use. He’d employed them rather a lot, these last days.

Avon turned his head when he felt the air slightly displaced by a transportation. Ah. Aven. Come to
break the geas. It was time, then.

Come to fetch Blake home. And Blake knew it, too, by the way he clutched Avon’s hand. Avon squeezed back, but then slipped away, standing on his own.

“All right,” he said quite calmly, a little proud of himself for that. “Let’s have it, then.”

“It’s like this,” Aven said, and Avon was startled to see what a wreck always-fastidious Aven looked. It was obvious that he hadn’t slept in days.

“I didn’t want to say anything until I was certain.” Aven began to talk, and it was clear that, in his state, pressing for more direct answers to questions would just derail him entirely. “It’s going to take a lot of power; it will probably almost exhaust both Avon and I together to do it, and we'll need my Orac’s help.”

Slowly, his back to the two of them, Blake’s head rose up. “What will?” he asked. It scraped out of his throat.

Aven continued. “Millie Chant could come over and Conrad Tesdinic couldn’t because Millie Chant had no Belonging in her own world. She had been given up by her family to a temple that no longer needed her, and she was sentenced to die. There was no web of connections that reached out for her: no magic and no ongoing stream of consequences that sought her. Tesdinic, on the other hand, had a family and a place. He wasn’t going to die young. Effectually it’s a question of drag-force, like how gravity makes it difficult for one of your space shuttles to take off. It’s difficult for a transplantation to permanently catch and lift people with more drag.”

“But we,” Avon said slowly, “are about to have no Belonging ourselves. We ought to be lighter than air.”

Aven nodded. “In that respect, anyone from S1 might come over to our world, yes. But then we encounter two further problems. If you have no home-universe, you may start to fade away. You need a Referent. Metal would suffice—a metal that’s only available here, in S1. This part of the working’s modeled on serf-retention spells, and that is what they employed, where they could. Lots of things in this room should do, if we cannibalize the higher technical equipment. We have a slightly different periodic table, when we get into the upper stretches.”

Frantically Avon ran to his disassembled *Scorpio* teleport equipment and dug out the Aquitar-alloy plating—they’d already sent over much of the raw material, and planned to send the teleport blueprints via Orac.

“Shatter that,” Aven snapped, and Avon set a laser probe on a vibrating frequency and did it.

“Right,” Aven said crisply. He cast a pre-made enchantment over all the fragments. “Everyone take one. I don’t think you’ll have to wear it forever, but you ought to keep it about you.”

“No,” Aven said, as Avon returned from sliding a sliver into the still-concentrating Blake’s pocket, just in case he might need it. “To business. I can’t take just anyone with a Referent. To fuel the spell and make the transfer possible, we are, sadly, going to have to rely on something I wouldn’t be caught dead casting under normal circumstances. Do you know Circle of Friends?” he asked Avon.

Avon shook his head.

“It’s like Heart’s Desire, in its shape,” Aven said. “That’s where I got the idea—you’re unorthodox method of transmission. I can only pull through your people, not most of this universe. It has to be people that you,” he pointed at Avon, “have spent a great deal of time with, people who your magic
has touched over the course of a prolonged period. In other words, the assembled. And you must think hard about how you value them and want them to live, or this isn’t going to work at all.”

“It relies, then,” Blake said, turning around, still concentrating on the crystal, but with a lovely smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, “on what I’ve always said was your best quality. Both of your best qualities.”

“Yes,” Aven drawled, “I think you’ll find the important thing, at present, is not that you, Blake, have been provided with yet another venue for sentiment, but that I am saving the lot of you.”

The words seemed to crystalize the situation in everyone’s mind. Reactions no one had yet dared have poured out—relief and ‘I knew it’d all work out’ and gratitude and joyful tears.

“I don’t know that I can,” Cally said, laying a hand on Avon’s sleeve. Her voice was uncharacteristically tentative. “I don’t know that I ought to—not when so many people can’t.”

“We’re going to need one another there,” Avon said to her quietly. “We’ll be the only memory of this universe—even as you’ve borne the memory of Auron. And perhaps we owe anything of value in this world some last testament.”

Cally nodded, accepting that perhaps they might also all owe one another a little more time, before death, and then hurried, with the others, to gather everything they could in the room. Aven had said that transporting inanimate materials was nothing—the actual challenge was souls—so why not take all they could carry? (Aven felt a moment’s sharp pity for them—these tired, strangely-clothed refugees, heavy-laden with what looked to him worthless detritus, about to preserve their lives at the cost of losing everything else they had ever cared about.)

Aven called on the garden. He brought his Orac, he used Blake’s transference powers, and he herded everyone and everything, including Orac the computer (with a shard of metal balanced on its casing) into a chalk circle. Aven handed Avon his power, because only Avon could cast his Circle of Friends. Aven explained the spell clearly and succinctly, and Avon thought very, very hard about everything good he’d ever noticed in each of these people, and everything they’d been through together—from those who’d he’d known longest to the new arrivals. He thought of how they deserved to survive—not just because, he had to admit, most people did, but because, with a few sad absences, the assembled were some of the best people he’d known and the best friends he’d ever hand, and he was not content that they should die like this.

The six people and the computer vanished, reappearing presumably in Series One. Aven closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief, and only then did Avon understand that Aven hadn’t been sure that would work. It was all theoretical, and Aven had not been quite convinced that his plan had been good enough.

“I can’t hold this much longer,” Blake said, and visibly threw himself more deeply into the working with the stabilizing gem, gritting his teeth. Beads of sweat ran down his face, and his chest rose and fell hard.

It was almost over then. Avon thought he could feel a pressure change, and the whole room cool. Was it the world outside being lost to the vacuum? Was the sun slipping away? Avon knew he’d never have that final, Lot’s wife sight of the dying world, but strangely he wanted the closure of it: to see the stars winking out. How could something so vast and terrible be real, if he couldn’t even see it?

But even stranger than all that was what Aven had done for him. Oh, the rest of them, Avon could understand saving—but Aven was clever, and he might easily have come up with some excuse to
justify Avon’s exclusion. Heartbroken, Blake wouldn’t have wanted to think about the specific circumstances of Avon’s loss too hard. He’d have known that nothing good would come from pressing Aven on that point. And Blake could not have borne to lose them both. This had, then, been Aven’s singular and perfect opportunity to be free of him forever, and to regain Blake entirely for himself.

Avon turned to look at Aven, raising an eyebrow.

“It seems,” Aven said wryly, knowing the situation called for some explanation, “that I love him so much I’d do anything for him. It’s all very embarrassing.”

“I’d have killed you,” Avon said frankly.

Aven smiled. “Would you have?”

Neither of them knew that one, really.

“Time to go, Blake,” Aven said, raising his voice. Blake nodded, standing carefully, walking backwards to join them in the chalk circle, still holding out his hand with the crystal in it. Gingerly, he set the gem down at the core of the ring Aven had drawn. Troops started to visibly claw at the physical barricades at the entrances of the tracking gallery, breaking them down.

Blake turned to Aven, and Avon was taken aback at the intensity in his eyes. “Thanks aren’t enough. Aven—in all my life, what did I ever do to deserve you?”

Aven smiled at him wryly. “Very little, really.”

Blake kissed him passionately, and Aven gave in when he broke away.

“Well,” he considered, “that, or everything. I seem to remember some business with you sewing my heart back into my chest. Besides, you never needed to do anything at all. It is, after all, only you I love for what you necessarily are.”

Blake took each of the two men’s right hands in his own hands.

“Oh come on,” he said when they neglected to do what was both magically necessary and obvious. Sulkily, Avon and Aven joined hands too.

With a final look at the room around them, the three of them used the very last of their combined strength to transport themselves to 12-A. Unusually drained, they all stumbled on arrival, falling to the ground in various attitudes of clumsy collapse. They could see the others behind them, still pulling themselves to their feet.

Blake, Avon and Aven were silent for a moment, just breathing. Then, with exhausted strength, Blake pushed himself up on his hands and knees. He reached out the tips of his fingers, reflexively seeking the fissure. He frowned when he couldn’t find it, looking stricken as he realized why. That was where S1 had been. It wasn’t there any longer. His presence had been perhaps the only thing holding it down. Blake’s hand trembled and dropped, and he clawed it through the grass, raking up the dirt with his nails.

“No,” Blake whispered. “No,” he hissed it louder, tiredness and denial and self-hatred and horror rushing in on him.

His shoulders heaved, and he began to weep wretchedly. Avon watched the space where Blake’s fingertips had searched, not quite able to believe in the end of the world. So it was Aven who
dragged himself forward and hauled himself up using Blake’s body, who curled himself hard around Blake.

“Shh,” he said stupidly. “There’s nothing there. There’s nothing more to be done.”

Blake cried harder at that, and Aven shook his head, regretting the words. He couldn’t say it was going to be all right. It wasn’t. He couldn’t say it wasn’t Blake’s fault in any way Blake would accept as valid consolation.

“Oh my love,” he said instead, softly, clutching Blake’s arms hard with his fingers and shielding Blake’s body from the world with his own, not noticing or caring that people saw him, heard him. “Roger darling, you tried. Shh. It’s all over now.”
Epilogue

My beloved spoke, and said unto me: 'Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone'.

They all slept for days. Avon didn’t even remember getting back to the castle itself. He woke up in a bed unlike anything he’d ever slept in, in strange nightwear (but with his Referent sitting on a side table), and looked around to find himself in an equally strange bedroom. There were curtains, firmly closed, on the other side of the room. Avon frowned and gestured vaguely at them without much concentrated mental effort attached to the wish, too sleepy to register how stupid that was. Or how stupid that should have been. The curtains obligingly spread back at the merest touch of his magic, and Avon blinked his way fully awake, until he could properly take in that vast green park rolling away from him, towards the forest.

An efficient servant came in, somehow alerted by his stirring. She explained that the staff had been taking care of them (changing-spells to protect their modesties and all—Avon didn’t know how to tell her that other civil servants he had known had taken far worse liberties with his body than that). The Castle staff was apparently used to this sort of thing. She could bring him something here, or he could eat in the breakfast room with the family if he felt up to it. She’d be happy to show him the way.

Avon found, actually, that he did feel up to moving. It was as though his limbs protested the previous days’ lack of any movement as much as they had done their previous overuse. He was given slippers and a robe—the woman called it a dressing gown—and conducted to his destination.

And so he found himself in a room apparently given over to one meal, joining Aven and Blake at the table. Aven was in a nauseatingly chirpy sky-blue ‘dressing gown’ of his own, with a sort of bird on it. Avon gave that a particularly unimpressed glance.

“It’s a peacock,” Aven said coldly.

Avon placed a napkin on his lap pointedly.

“It’s chinoiserie, and I don’t think you even know what that means,” Aven elaborated.

Avon gave him an infuriatingly mild look.

“It’s an antique from my family’s collection, so I’ll thank you to shut up,” Aven finished, rapping a spoon on the top of an egg in an eggcup with undue violence.

“I didn’t say anything,” Avon observed.

“Yes,” Blake admitted, “but you didn’t say it rather loudly. Give me that,” Blake said. Blake took from Avon the bit of aquitar alloy he’d been playing with (his referent) and clenched it in his hand. Avon noticed Blake was wearing a second ring against his gold band. When Blake opened his palm again, an identical ring sat in it.

“More convenient,” Blake said, fooling no one. Avon slid the ring on his finger. It would need to be resized, but it was otherwise—quite acceptable.

Blake had his most determined powering-through-it look on. Which meant, unsurprisingly, that he wasn’t all right, not by any stretch of the imagination. But given time to think and heal, he probably would be. It was in Blake’s nature to be indefatigable; to be lit by a fire that no event or person, not
“Even Blake himself, could permanently extinguish or even long dampen.

“There will probably be an inquiry,” Aven observed, almost to himself, his own ring clinking quietly against the china cup he lifted.

“One thing at a time,” Blake groaned. “We haven’t even caught our breath yet, I forbid you from talking about the damned Ministry.”

“What about domestic arrangements instead?” Avon countered. How was he going to fend for himself, here?

Aven pursed his lips. “We haven’t told the staff anything. I imagine they are—quite curious about you.”

“Do they need to be told anything?” Avon asked. “I could simply leave as soon as I’m recovered. Blake can help me and the others find some lodging, while we—”

Aven lifted his hand, forestalling him. It was, apparently, too early in the day for him to tolerate Avon’s confusing the situation. “Everyone is staying here, until we work out some ideal solution for their housing and maintenance. That falls within the mandate of our office, and we’re certainly not short on beds. Some of your people may choose to join the staff—I know Blake thinks highly of their talents, and they could be of use to us in our line of work. You are living on the grounds. That is non-negotiable.”

“In case you’ve forgotten, we despise one another,” Avon said. “How do you propose we share a house?”

“With difficulty, I imagine,” Aven answered him, selecting a piece of toast and buttering it. “But it will occur nonetheless. I won’t have anyone thinking I’m being cuckolded. Me.” Aven gave his egg an indignant look. “We’ll just have to brazen it out.”

Avon opened his mouth to contest this, but then remembered that he didn’t know anything about how housing worked in this world, had almost no resources, and didn’t actually want to be sent away from Blake to live as a kept man in some forgotten spot. This was going to be the single most awkward arrangement he could imagine, but (at least for the time being) Aven might have a point about their options and the best way forward—reluctant as Avon was to admit that.

He copied Aven’s movements with the toast instead.

Aven thought Blake unusually subdued this morning—still more guilt about S1 taking its toll, he supposed. A part of the garden had withered. That, more than anything, had brought the devastation home to Aven when he’d risen from the bed where he’d slept entwined with Blake and gone there. In the garden, Aven had felt the quickness in the soil he’d rubbed between his thumb and forefinger. The soil wasn’t blasted; it was lying fallow. He’d told Blake as much when he’d come in to breakfast, speaking with a degree of hope unusual for him. Blake had clutched Aven’s hand in his and silently accepted this piece of consolation. They were both, Aven knew, also thankful for Cally’s seed bank—grateful that something that had been part of the garden wouldn’t vanish entirely from the universe.

Where there had been roiling, branching, dying strands of possibility, and then a universe caught in a final rictus, there was now peace. The peace of death, but with the promise of renewal, in some form. There was life in the soil, and, Blake told him, some promise in the Between, in the space where S1 had been. The valley was neither gone, compressed into nothing as though it had never been, nor did
it feel wholly devoid of life. They might soon witness the birth of a new universe.

“What the hell is that?” Avon said, interrupting Aven’s contemplation of the nature of tragedy, forgetting and rebirth. Blake laughed (a sound Aven had missed) at the look on Avon’s face—Avon’s tongue stuck out slightly, and he looked like nothing so much as a perturbed cat.

“Toast, Avon,” Blake explained. “That’s what butter’s supposed to taste like—not that canteen plastic margarine spread you only get on State Holidays. Do you like it?”

Cautiously, Avon touched the toast to his tongue and tested it again.

“It’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted,” Avon said quite factually, devouring the toast with a look of devout worship.

Aven rolled his eyes.

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