She - Avatar of Mystery

Evening. This is a scene set later in the Unpromised story line.

pages ∙ words

"Who are you?" she asked suddenly, as if seeing him for the first time. The candlelight gave her eye a distracting glint, transforming the shock and uncertainty in her expression into a look that was indefinably alluring. He regarded her in the dim light with calculated quiet. Only nineteen year old, she was already an exotic young woman. The candle light transformed her mane of red hair into a blaze. Reflecting in prismatic grey eyes—which he knew to shift according to her moods. Her face had a feline cast and a mother of pearl complexion. Her lithe frame, sculpted by a lifetime of athletic and acrobatic activity held a perfect balance between strength and suppleness. Muscles that would be sharply defined in motion now lay smooth and unobtrusive, at rest. Only enough bodyfat to suggest youth and femininity of contour lay under her taut skin. She unabashedly wore a skin tight body glove of pristine white that sheathed her from the tips of fingers and toes to the top of her elegant throat. Light weight, and breathable, on her it was literally a second skin. Naturally, she had the most practical of reasons for almost always wearing it.

The weight of her question pressed on him. He had known her for several months, intimitely for more than a few of those. Why had she asked that question now? He held her eye and watched as confusion and alarm tried to veil what had really been behind her inquiry. He tried to frame an answer, but words suddenly failed him. He lifted his glass to his lips and sipped, carefully maintaining eye contact. Darkness devoured her irises as her eyes dilated. The wine was cold and sour as he swallowed. *Who am I?* he pondered. How could he seriously answer that? He was tempted to respond with the question: *Who do you think I am?* But he really wasn't sure if he wanted to hear her answer.

She seemed to read the difficulty she had imposed on him and demured, "I'm sorry. That was a ridiculous question."

He still held her gaze; passing her a quick smile he responded, "Perhaps. Perhaps not. In any case, it is not an easy question to answer."

She raised an eyebrow.

He leaned back and collected himself, casually. Given the hour, and the turn of conversation, he felt rather out of place with reality. No doubt she did too. He fished abstractly for a line of reasoning, "It is easy for us to grow used to a name or a face and think that we can know the person behind them. But, as perhaps you have felt, we never really know. It is scary to look at a friend or lover and suddenly *realize* you don't really know who you are dealing with. To suddenly find yourself alone with a stranger. I wish I knew why it happens; but I don't."

She shifted and glanced away uncomfortably. The pause began to grow long. "Maybe that happens sometimes. That's not the way I felt, though," she murmured, seeking out his eyes again. There was something challenging and dangerous in the look.

He looked down, his eyes shaded by dark eyelashes. "I was afraid of that," he breathed.

"Why?" she pried. Sliding closer to him she was able to lean in and look up into his eyes. He could feel the weight of her body on his legs.

He boldly matched her gaze, "You asked me who I was. Not because I suddenly seemed alien to you. Rather, you suddenly felt that you knew me too well, no?"

She maintained an even gaze and felt that strange feeling again—something like a subsonic reverbrating within her; unmooring sense of balance. Or stranger still, an ominous plummeting within her like the onset of panic. It came up suddenly. More menacingly. Stronger. She fought inwardly to maintain her grip on herself.

She nodded timidly.

His expression became more resigned. He smiled; it felt ironic and bitter, but not ugly. She extended one of her long fingers to his lips and her look became a touch worried. "I was afraid of that; because I think... maybe... I know why you would," he declared softly.

She frowned. Allowing herself to consider more completely what she had only intuitively gathered. Gradually, yet all at once, it fell together. While it made an incontestable amount of sense, it did—for a fleeting eternity—frighten her out of her mind.

*You tried to kill me...*

"Avonlea."

The voice was very far away. She stirred, but her body felt leaden. Sluggish.

"Av, come on. Wake up."

She moaned. The world was tumbling around her. She realized that someone was shaking her. Opening her eyes, she saw mostly darkness. "It was a dream," she heard herself say, the sound deep and distant even to her.

He responded with something born of a huff and a short laugh and said, "If so, look around, the dream is still going on."

She sat up and saw him silhouetted by the candle light. He was taller than she, she knew, but kneeling beside her like that, it was hard to tell, really. He had a slim and supple body, the kind either acrobatics or martial arts create. His features were plain, but strong. The anonomous quality that is simply male. She had no idea how old he really was. "Kevin?"

"As good a name as any other," he answered. "Are you all right? What do you remember?"

She glanced around. The room was familiar, in fact it was all too real. His question sank in and she returned her eyes to him. What did she remember? She concentrated, but a wash of images engulfed her. Too much. She shook her head, to clear it, and very distinctly heard him sigh. "What?" she asked him a bit sharply.

"Nothing," he replied, gathering up the wine glasses and getting up.

Why did he sound so relieved? He held out a hand to her to help her to her feet. All at once, she did remember. She remembered why she passed out. To both their surprise, she flinched away from him rather violently. Kevin was instantly alarmed.

"You do remember."

"Yes," she barked, her voice unsteady.

He lunged quickly, catching her by the arm and hauled her to her feet. She writhed to break his grip, and he had to shake her and growl, "Stop it. Don't be foolish." She felt her body turn to water in the joints and fire in her gut. Tensing in his grip, her mind fought for equilibrium. He caught her eye, "I'm not going to hurt you. Okay?"

*Trust me.*

With some effort, she relaxed and nodded.

He noted this and finally let go of her. "I think we have a lot to talk about."

Again she nodded.

Leading the way, he passed through the ante-kitchen of the casual room to drop off the glasses, and they went out onto the balcony. The early morning air was sharp and cool and helped clear her head. Her fright passed into an odd bewilderment. They stood near the railing and gazed over the city skyline for several long, quiet moments. Like all cities, this one did not sleep; rather, it fitfully emulated its daily business like a fading echo of itself. Bedecked in rainments of light, the sight did not manage to absorb her attention as it usually did. It only reminded her of nights when she woke up from dreams so intimate and yet so frightening in their implications that she had to call them nightmares. Nightmares the likes of which had dominated her nights for longer than she had known Kevin. Though not by much. Nightmares that did not always deign to remain her sleeping companion, but which occasionally caught her in her most intimate moments. Such as she had shared with Kevin. She closed her eyes and hugged herself tight, trying to force this turn of thought out of her mind.

Eventually, Kevin began to speak again.

"We were both a bit distracted, when we first met. There was something odd between us even then. It is a shame we didn't talk about it then. Or at any point up until now. Things might have turned out better, perhaps," he mused. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her turn to face him at that last part.

"How do you suppose?" she issued, sort of skeptically.

He shrugged. "You remember what we did talk about, don't you?" he returned.

She tilted her head, and her eyes narrowed. They had talked mostly about her job that first night. That was what they usually talked about afterwards, too. It was not exactly a narrow topic. At this time, it was not a comfortable topic, either. Then she caught herself. No. They had not just talked about her job, specifically. They had talked a bit about the research project that she was indirectly involved with as part of her job and through the association of several of her friends. Or professional acquaintances. Now that she had an idea where this was going, she nodded, "I think I know what you mean."

He smiled, "I'll never understand your intuition. Sometimes you understand the strangest things with the most unnatural certainty, and other times you can't even see what's right in front of your face."

She gave him a disparaging look.

"Well, what was it we talked about that first night? Seriously talked about?" he prodded.

She set her shoulders. He really meant to tackle this issue. The question that had escaped the brightest minds available. Well, if she was going to touch it, she intended to take it by the throat. "The Upstart Theory," she answered edgily.

**This is too much. Tone it down.** The upstart theory was an attempt to explain how such an impossible situation could plausibly exist.

She had been here for almost a year before the theory had come into being. Until that point she, and countless others, had wondered if reality itself had gone insane. Like many others before her, she had woken up one day to discover herself in an impossible and unfamiliar world. So impossible, she thought it a dream—except it never ended. The oddest part was that the world was only impossible when you sat down and really thought about it. It seemed natural enough, just looking at it and living in it. One could easily take it for granted. Save for one jarring flaw. The people; their cultures, their knowledge and practices all defied reason. There was no way to explain or account for the presence of such people as she met, in any plausible manner.

Because of this incongruity Av had unwittingly blundered headlong into chaos. The main reason it took a year for anyone to even think of the Upstart Theory was because almost everyone was at each other's throats. This world—unnamed and unknown to anyone in it—was a virtual smorgasbord of exotic power. There was everything; wealth, technology, magic, knowledge. All one had to do was wrest it from someone else's hands. Naturally, people did so quite exuberantly. While some called it armageddon, it did not even make that much sense. It was simply uncontrolled, mindless, violence. A free-for-all. Fortunately for her, Av was drafted by a faction solely interested in getting out of it. Sort of a mean fortune, though. It only got her more deeply involved. She was young. Imbued with almost inexhaustible raw talent, she rose rapidly into the fighting ranks; to lieutenant commander of an air strike wing. The fleet she had joined was strong—nigh undefeatable; save for one weakness. There was nothing supernatural or paranormal about it.

Originally that is.

Av was part of a growing group of paranormals—called *upstarts* by the fleet science staff—that had been press ganged into service. Ironically, the fleet scientists had not been able to figure out what sort of power she had before the fleet engaged—of all things—a god. At least, what they confronted was so devastatingly powerful, the only appropriate thing to call it was a god.

Less than half of the fleet survived. They did not win. The entity seemed on the verge of wiping everyone out when it simply turned away and vanished. In the aftermath, the survivors suffered a complete breakdown of their suspension of disbelief. Reality had simply become too strange. Faced with a sinking feeling of unreality, people began to ask the questions they should have long ago. *What the hell was really going on here?* No one knew who said it first, but an idea started going around. Given that one's connection to existence is through the mind, individually each person *could* come to the conclusion that he or she has gone insane. What seemed to have happened certainly lacked plausibility. However, no one could support the notion of consensual insanity. Especially since it had not taken much effort for the survivors to corroborate their stories. They had all shared these experiences. So much so that they had to conclude that they were real; in spite of being arguably surreal.

This did not cheer anyone up.

No one felt like celebrating the fact that their sanity had been firmly established.

Only one group really managed to avoid sinking into despondancy. Fleet medical technicians and research scientists, probing the boundaries of paranormal abilities, and the world itself—especially the mystery of the various people they had encountered in it—went on with their work with professional alacrity. Which was a good thing. In each case, interesting patterns turned up. In the case of paranormals, research firmly established that—while certain special modifications seemed apparent in the physiology or psychology of a paranormal—in almost every case the actual articulation of paranormal abilities seemed to be subconscious. This was considered intriguing, but would later become an important detail. In the study of the world, and its culture phenomena, it was discovered that most groups fell within certain lingual and social families. With only a few exceptions. In studies of the past and ongoing appearances of of culture and civilization fragments, each ironically arrived in a part of the existing environment that was capable of supporting the ecological and agricultural burden of the sudden population. A detail that seemed to suggest a deliberate influence. The ideas bandied about for a while; until someone was heard to comment:

"If you ask me, this world is an *upstart* that has gotten locked into its subconscious and created an all too real dream."

That was about all it took. The Upstart Theory was born. It was quickly refined. The mind, a veritable labyrinth, is the envelope of human existence. The argument hinges on the tremendous, unmeasured faculties of the subconscious mind, acknowledged even in the most mundane views of reality. In very complex terms it explained that the mind is what creates reality as humanity knows it; an image which is superimposed over a material construct in time and space. This construct, the universe, is essentially just information in a state of constant iteration. The theory described an immense field equation that has, as a componant, assembler constructs which help resolve the equation through its ongoing iteration. Minds. A psychically passive process of perception and interpretation allows an organism to translate that information into reality. Paranormal abilities, for the most part, are more advanced, or more active interactions with the field of information that is the universe. For a mind to control any psychic or paranormal gift, the bulk of the process would undoubtedly be subconscious. So, an evolution of the mind would, in almost any case, result in a transformation of the reality it creates. The conscious mind, like in dreaming, would be plausibly submerged or distorted by such an experience, meaning that those who had accomplished such an evolution might have no idea that they were anything other than what they thought themselves now.

At the very least, that was the way Av understood it. There were only a dozen individuals who could be said to understand it completely. But what the idea implied shook people up. Anyone could understand its consequences in real terms.

A mind, evolved to the point where it could alter reality, was an alarming prospect. For such power to be *subconsciously* driven was frightening to consider. It was not hard to imagine what might come from an individual projecting his or her subconscious desires into reality. Worse, the theory suggested that this world was the project of this, and anyone, or perhaps everyone, was actually doing it. Naturally, a moral question was raised. If it were true, perhaps the one thing each person wanted—namely to go home—would be the worst thing they could possibly do. By returning to `reality' they might put whatever world or race of origin they returned to at risk. At the mercy of accidental `gods'.

All the survivors remembered their recent desperation; the horror of confronting an entity with a casual ability to manipulate the reality they existed it. It was an experience that most of them had been unable to get over. For entirely human reasons, it turned out, the theory gained an almost unanimous following. To be able to call that entity an *upstart* allowed most of them to resurface from the hopeless apathy that had traumatized them since.

Because these people were essentially human, they just wanted to be themselves. They wanted to go home, or start over. So, an ongoing project was established to research into the Upstart Theory. The aim was to either disprove it, so that there would be no doubts about going back to lost realities if a way could be found, or to prove it and justify an effort to train individuals to bring the ability under conscious control so they could safely exist here or find out who and what they once were and try to recalim it. Incidentally, both options created a need for stabilizing the situation they were presently in. This is Av herself was involved in. On one hand, she was part of an effort to analyze the Nexus Phenomenon, to find out what was pulling people to this world; and more actively involved in efforts to stem the violence and unite the factional, abducted populous into a politically neutral economy. But of course, ther were not talking about that part this time.

"Yes. The Upstart Theory," Kevin answered. His voice had the same weight as Av's sudden reverie. She looked at him more carefully, trying to pierce the surface of this intense yet casual attitude he maintained. "You explained the basics to me, and I admitted that it might be possible. I remember making some comment about the predicament of scientists; always so shy and afraid of the ideas they sought to pierce. I had to explain myself—you thought I was being insulting. That wasn't what I meant, of course. I only meant that they had an idea that might be dead on, but they would dance around it forever before they ever knew it. You asked me what I would do about it and I told you. I would assume it is true and analyze my situation from that perspective to see how well it fit what I could personally experience. Which is what we started to do. We talked about the possibility that none of us are who we think we are. We talked about how very difficult it was to imagine being someone else to whom our entire life is but a dream; a delusion," he reflected.

"I remember that," she stated calmly, glancing off into the night.

"We were so close to it, really. As it is, either of us could consider ourselves *upstarts.* That was easy enough. But there was something else there that we sort of allowed ourselves to overlook," he argued. She shifted while he paused; tilting her head a bit. "Did you ever consider that maybe the reason we feel so familiar to each other is because we are? This is something we both have felt, whether you admit it or not. In a way, it might be proof that the theory is true; if you are willing to consider that in our real lives we actually knew each other," he suggested challengingly.

She shuddered, "But our backgrounds are totally irreconcilable. If there is a single example of unrelated points of origin, you and I are it."

"Oh, I don't know. Each person has their own inner image of him or herself. We don't know which of the worlds sampled here on Nexus is closest to the one we are derived from. The memories we have of our origins are probably just subconscious fabrications to support the personality we adopted to cope with the disruption of our old reality. We could have been fast friends or lovers, and that is the one part that this subconscious warping would not change. That is not important, now. I was just saying that because neither of us was willing to consider it, neither of us looked into the possibility. Now both of us are even deeper into the situation here," he argued.

She thought about this. She had inexplicably closed the topic that night and it hadn't come up again. "We would have. It was my fault we didn't, wasn't it?" she asked.

He nodded. "You confided to me that you found it so strange to consider, that you would rather not wake up," he recalled. "And yet, all of the time I have known you, you have been one of the greatest assets to the research that frightens you," he illustrated wonderingly.

She shrugged, "It is hard to be asked to question my own existence, but once there is a question posed it is that much more important to get an answer. We have had to learn the hard way to not take what is happening to us for granted, but it is exhausting paying attention to everything constantly. I had a life until I came to Nexus. If that life was a dream, and arriving here was the beginning of waking up, all I want to do is survive the process so I can have my life back again."

She realized that he was staring at her in bewilderment. "Who *are* you?" he asked softly, almost with awe.

"What?" she challenged, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

He grinned and turned to go back inside. Just at the door he said over his shoulder, "I have only known you for a few months, so why is it I feel like I have always known you. Always watched you and followed you—always from a distance. Why do you have this power over me?"

She blushed and looked down, demurely murmuring, "I... I don't know."

He went in, and the drape flapped down behind him leaving her alone on the balcony. To herself she wondered, *Why is it that whenever I am near you... whenever I even think of you, I can feel your touch around me? Why do you have this hold on me?* She shivered and followed Kevin inside.

He was not in the ante-kitchen, so she continued on to the casual room where they had been lounging, celebrating. The evening had started so innocently. The candles were almost burned out, so she sought out the room lights and raised them to one of their lower settings. The room was unusually large for one person's comfort. Kevin lived alone, but his home was quite expansive. She wandered back to the low table where the candles languished in their last moments beside the wine in its bed of ice. Gazing into the flames, systematically hunting down each one and extinguishing it with long breath, she waited for Kevin to show himself. While waiting, she tried to determine what the exact nature of their relationship was. They had made love many times, and yet they made no claims to each other. No engagements. No commitments. Yet they possessed each other. They made extraordinary confidences in each other, yet they were not exactly friends. They fought and tested each other so often they seemed more like fond enemies. He was a master of several arts and practices she was studying, but he would not teach her. He eagerly listened to her research group and critiqued their work, but he would not participate in their studies. He would introduce her to the elite circles of the city's high society, but did not interfere in her job. He was protective, like an older brother. Responsible and advising, like a father. Sometimes, he seemed devoted and helpless, like a son.

He was an impossible man to hold on to, but so natural for her to find intimacy with.

It seemed almost as if he was an artist and she was his muse.

Her keen ears picked up the crunch of synthetic fibers as he stepped onto the carpet. She turned and casually looked up at him. He could disguise it, but she could see that he had been enraptured watching her killing the flames. Maybe she *was* his muse; she wondered, then, what his art was. What did she inspire in him? She remembered her shocking realization then, and blanched. Fascination. Not love. Obsessed fascination. But, then, that simply did not make any sense. Maybe she was just confusing him with someone else. She could not even remember what he had done that had struck that particular chord. His face had clouded as he watched her's pale.

"Please, it's nothing. I am tired. A lot has happened recently, and I don't know for sure what is bothering me. Don't take it personally," she implored, gesturing for him to come to her. He ran a hand through his hair, sighing. Quietly, he moved over and kneeled down next to her.

"Would you like to go to bed, then?" he asked gently.

She hesitated before taking his hand, "I... cannot make love tonight. It's just..."

"Shhh. It's alright. I know. I wasn't going to ask," he soothed, pulling both of them to their feet. "Come on. We can finish our conversation later," he offered, as they left the room.

Avonlea awoke to find the sheets warm, but herself alone. That more than anything brushed away the impulse to lie and bask in the twilight of sleep. Dreams, such as she had them, had missed their recent flavor. This too served to remind her of how much had changed in the short span of a day. Like a mistress calling to her servants, she called together her thoughts and restored that ellusive perspective that humans are fond of calling consciousness. So it happened that she remembered the day and evening before. Now, in the light of a new day, she felt foolish for the suspicions she had entertained against her sometime lover, Kevin. Dashing the frightful and unspoken notion, she gratefully forgot it and took possession of her body and slipped out of the bed. It was like her, she mused, to turn a night of celebration into something dark and brooding. That innocence that men had never taken from her had been raped by a year and many months in this impossible world. In the place of that loss, she had become a creature that acted with the weight of thought. Responsible.

She strode across the room and into the bath. This room adjoined the bedroom, and forced her to confront her nude reflection. Naturally familiar with what she saw in the glass, she looked for something else. It was not easy to find, but it was there. The ghost of remorse. Today, if she could not heal the wounds dealt by her own too hasty tongue, she would lose as much as she had gained scant more than a day ago. She turned away from herself and quickly washed under the shower. Then she stepped into the bath and simmered while collecting her mind for the day. Kevin, she assumed, had his own business to attend to. Unless she saw him before she left this morning, she would probably not see him again until evening—if she remained free to return to his home. That, she would only know after obeying the letter of her own responsability.

A while later, she lifted her scalded flesh out of the pool, and scrubbed herself dry. Upon finishing the rest of her toilet, she returned to the bedroom to dress where she discovered she had a visitor. Unconsciously, Av tried to apprehend this person's appearance. Unexpectedly, she found herself unable to classify what she saw. She thought this was a young woman in a loose, translucent dress. She had a pleasant face, a slightly amused and intriguing expression visible through a veil of unbound hair. But the youth was like a perfect mask over ancient features. The dress shimmered and reflected colors and hues, anddetails around her but refused to assemble itself into a recognisable form or style. Even this person's femininity seemed suspect; she stood with the strength and assurance of a man and appraised Av's own naked body with a hungry male appetite. All at once, Av's vision cohered and she realized that this person was as naked as she and familiar to her in a way that the unfamiliarity of her form made Av's mind whirl.

This was the creature that had claimed her soul. Her god.

"Amaranth," breathed Av in recognition.

The being smiled in answer and approached her. Av bowed her head and seized her will. She did not know what her god wanted, but she knew that she would oblige. This was the casue of her celebration last night. By giving herself body and soul to this creature, she had escaped the embrace of fate and destruction. Now she was a slave to the unknown—the unknowable. Amaranth had drawn close. With a light touch, she clasped Av's chin and raised her bowed head. Forcing her to make eye contact. Gazing deep into the soul of Mystery, Av was utterly mesmerized.

"You are so unhappy," the god murmured. "Is it so horrible to you to become my chosen?"

Unable to break away, and compelled to answer, all Av could manage was a single tear—racing down over her wide cheekbone and turning at the line of her jaw to run to her chin where it met and was drunk by Amaranth's hand.

The god's smile turned wry, "Cheer up, my poor slave. I have not damned you, and you have not damned yourself. You were such a loose cannon; you would be wise to learn from submission. You were mine from the moment you tampered with Fate. You will be my favorite servant," she cooed.

Avonela, feeling confused and ashamed, felt the same overpowering sense of awe she had when Amaranth had first approached her. Her will bridled. An insubstantial part of her grabbed ahold of the awe, the mesmerism and pulled them deep into her—swallowed them and abased her in them so that her will could rise and slip out against the tide. Becoming the iron in her voice as she spoke, "I am aware of what I have had to do. I can regret only the price—and you cannot deny that I have cause. You have my soul, my lady; my inviolate self. That is coin without equal or recompense. I am now a thing. Do with me as you will; I cannot complain. I have already lost. But I had no choice." Av spoke true, and the god stared at her inexplicably, so she went on, "But, tell me, true; without a soul, can I actually be happy? Or am I merely resigned to play the part?"

The god pulled back a pace and regarded her sadly. "Ah, my child, you have so much to learn. Yes, your soul is mine. But, it is still yours as well. In possessing you, I cannot describe what I have gained, but I can tell you this. There is now a part of me within you. Learn from it. Master it. Use me well, child. You are now my eyes and ears here. Banish all doubt. You are my flesh in this troubled world. You are still you. You are me," she explained plainly.

Avonlea listened to this, stunned. *"What* am I?" she asked incredulously, unable to quite comprehend what Amaranth had revealed to her.

*"You* are my avatar. The Avatar of Mystery," the god laughed playfully.

Av was totally chagrinned. "What does that mean?" she asked after a long pause.

"You will have to figure that out," Amaranth said enigmatically, dissolving like a mist as a burst of light pierced her through the morning cloud cover and the glass door leading to the balcony off of the bedroom. Stunned, it took her a minute to remember her appointments for that day. Hastily, she found her body glove and other belongings, dressed and rushed through the house.