Avatars Initiation - 1

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The world went dark. The sudden flash of light and the sensation of falling had lasted just an instant. It only felt like it took forever. Her body slapped the cold stone platform in a boneless sprawl. She barely noticed the pain as she blinked her eyes fiercely. Her hands were rising to her face as she finally brought the world into focus. The image was dim, and she peered about her in shock. A moment ago, the world had been painted in the brilliant colors of morning. Now it was plunged into the dead of night. As she flipped over and looked up, she could just make out the familiar form of the Goddess—the statue that she had been examining when the burst went off. In the distance, she could hear the sounds of fighting.

She had no idea who was attacking.

No idea what had just happened, either, but it did not seem immediately fatal. As she forced herself to her feet, she tried to gauge the distance and direction of the fighting. The sound of conflict surrounded her, woven through the abandoned city like a tapestry of chaos.

She allowed her mind to open, compensating for her blindness with the all-seeing inner eye. It was a risk—an open mind invited far more dangerous assaults than a naked, defenseless body could—but she had to take it. In a heartbeat, she confirmed she was alone in the place her guide had called the Eye of Paradox. The blinding strike had not been meant for her then. No assassin would go to the trouble of arranging an atmospheric nuclear detonation and fail to be properly placed to take advantage of the moment of vulnerability it would create.

The guide had vanished, she noticed. His mind had been slippery to begin with—impossible to read and difficult to even feel. The very reason she had chosen him. A quick sweep of the area could not detect him. The minds that she could touch were hostile and unfamiliar. Somewhere over the horizon, she could sense more familiar minds, but was shocked to find that they were closed to her; walled off like she had never made contact with them before. She could not penetrate the mantle of their thoughts, which meant she could send them no cry for help. She wondered for an instant if that too was part of her damnation. They had crippled her mind, stolen her past and banished her into the wilderness. Did they have to take away even the hope of contact with her friends and loved ones? A hungry vortex ripped through her thoughts as she felt death of a nearby mind. This was no time to bemoan her fate. She had to accept that she was on her own. Not that help could reach her in the shadow of the gates anyway. No one could teleport in, and she would not be able to teleport out.

Navigating by feel, she began to creep along the iris of the master gate. She was at the very center of the ancient city. All around her, like a ring of pearls, were the active gates. Her initial sweep had determined that the bulk of the fighting was centered on those gates. The avenues between the gates were not free from strife, but a single naked exile might be able to slip through the tide of the fatal dance. Of course, once she left the Eye of Paradox, she would lose control of her power again. Far from leaving her blind, her vision would suddenly become overwhelming as the shields and filters she used to protect her naked thoughts crumbled once more. The idea left her chilled.

From the moment she had been robbed of her psionic defenses, to the moment she had entered the Eye of Paradox, she had been unable to frame a coherent thought. A handful of days had hardly been enough to figure out what had happened to her exactly, or why. She had already learned that once she moved beyond the shadow of the central gate, her mind became trapped in the moment. That did not prevent her from thinking exactly. But the instant and complete understanding of everything her mind could encompass—which in her case had turned out to be more than she had ever imagined—made thinking about any of it utterly redundant. It essentially left her nothing to think about. Omniscience reduced her to an animal level of consciousness. She needed to make a plan, but she had no more time. Already, she could feel people approaching. She darted between the columns supporting the outer rim of the iris on silent feet. A large group of armored people stormed in through the main arch to her left. They marched imperiously past her and came to a juttering halt, casting suspicious looks around the circular plaza.

She was peering at them through the columns when a globe of light appeared in the air above them. The sudden illumination stabbed into her eyes. As she flinched away, she realized that she had not been blinded. A sense of unreality accompanied the mental adjustment that fact provoked. Her mind resisted coming to the obvious conclusion.

It was night.

Disorienting, but not impossible if whatever started this riot had rendered her unconscious. A part of her mind wondered how she had survived the major portion of the day, as she risked another peek at the group. Most of them had their backs to her. The light had moved toward the center of the platform, and the group had edged forward until they formed an open ring around the statue of the Goddess. She studied the ones that were more or less facing her direction. They were all Avon. Even through the armor, she could tell that. From their expressions, they were surprised to see the statue of their Goddess.

She could feel their minds probing the invisible structure of the gate. As she was edging towards the exit, one of them cursed and declared, “She closed it! We’re cut off!”

“Which one of them is it?” another voice asked.

“It has to be her daughter. The Goddess need only speak and this conflict would be over. Only her daughter would have the nerve to close the Eye just to protect humans. It would have been wiser to kill us, Little Phoenix,” the leader of the avon warriors declared, never taking her eyes off the naked statue.

Little Phoenix.

The exile froze at that. A single memory escaped from behind the wall in her mind. Her mother had called her that when she came home. One brief moment, just a snapshot really, but the memory was laced with a cognitive and emotional context. As she grasped the implications, a surge of joy washed through her. Her mother was the Goddess, and she had a name! Phoenix, Phoenix, Little Phoenix. It resonated to the depths of her soul, but no more memories surfaced. A sound brought her attention back to the present. Phoenix realized that she must have broadcast that triumphant emotion. She looked up in embarrassment. The entire platoon of avon had turned their attention to her. She felt their minds harden against her, and several lances of thought came her way. The last impression that escaped their minds was the image of her, standing in the archway. That reflection in their minds was the first reflection of herself that she could consciously remember seeing. As she stepped toward the group, she made a quick correction. It was the second reflection of herself that she had seen. The first was the statue in the Eye of Paradox.

The discovery and confirmation of her identity had taken only a heartbeat. Surviving to pursue the matter would be a little more complicated. Behind her, she could hear cries as reinforcements rallied to a telepathic alarm. Phoenix took a deep breath. It was too late to run, but in here, she could fight. She summoned her defenses and calmly raised her guard.

Autumn Phoenix Dawn lay gasping for breath in the wide bed. Tears of agony still streamed down her face. Once again, she tried to command her shaking limbs. The seizures that had marked her twin’s death had made rising impossible before now. It took several minutes to lever herself up to a sitting position. Aside from the constant quaking, she did not move again for some time. Awake now, with the exhausted clarity of mind that the most terrible nightmares bring, she probed the freezing abyss that was once her other self. If she did not move, if she did not rouse herself from the cloying web of sleep and shock, her mind would descend into that abyss and never return. She fought that bitter temptation, hating herself for wanting to live, hating herself for dying, but ultimately she simply could not go into oblivion without knowing what had happened and why.

She was struggling to her feet when the door to her room exploded from its hinges.

Dawn cringed, and tried to rouse her mind enough to form a shied. A rain of splinters stinging her skin revealed how devastated her mind really was. Still trembling with weakness, she tried to stand erect in the face of this new threat. Even with her powers spent and dormant, she could feel the terrible presence surrounding the approaching figure. As she retreated unconsciously in the face of that menacing advance, she suddenly recognized the figure.

Autumn Phoenix Dusk, her mother’s twin—the shadow of the Goddess—came to a stop before her. The ancient dragon’s face was a mask of pain and horror. No words needed to be said. Dawn collapsed in despair as the realization hit her. In spite of her own pain and shock, Dusk flowed forward and caught Dawn on her way down. The two of them eased to the floor of the bedchamber. Dusk held her close, and took a deep breath. To say it was unthinkable, but time was of the essence. “The Goddess is dead,” Dusk declared quietly.

All her life, Dawn had known that one day the mind and soul of her mother would descend upon her and on that day she would announce that the Goddess was reborn. The time had finally come and those words could not be uttered in truth. “The Goddess is dead,” Dawn whispered in terror—words that should never have passed her lips. “The chain is broken,” she confirmed in a desolate voice. There could be no doubt. There was no other explanation. The deaths of her mother and her dragon twin on this night were no coincidence. They were related in the most terrible way. The Goddess had only one known weakness. Only one dragon, born in her mind and in her image, was safe for her to embrace. Dusk. To embrace any other, even her own daughter’s compliment, would be—had been—fatal. For both Eve and Twilight.

Anger suddenly overwhelmed grief. The impossible, the unthinkable had happened. In spite of every precaution, including sending her dragon away. The potential threat to her mother simply could not be risked. Just as Dusk had been created in Eve’s image, so too had Twilight been the perfect reflection of Dawn. Dawn was identical to her mother, ergo; Twilight could only too easily be mistaken for Dusk. Dusk presented the same threat to Dawn, but she—unlike her mother—was expendable. Twilight had agreed it was safer—simpler—for her to excuse herself. What could have possibly brought those two together? What could possibly have motivated Twilight to return home without even checking with her first? The questions mounted as fast as her racing mind could think, but one thought stood firm.

Eve’s loss was inconceivable. One expected the world to end first.

“We know what has happened,” Dusk said, once she could speak again. “We don’t know how it happened or why. We need to come up with some answers before morning. I simply can’t believe that this was some kind of accident.”

Dawn looked up in confusion. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“I’d rather not say. All I know is chaos is sure to greet the news,” she confided. That was just like Dusk, to be calmly assessing the disaster even as it unfolded. “You are certain to be blamed, but I am sure that humans will be the real target for retaliation. The whole reason the Goddess was here was because of the trouble over humans, and because of the accusations that have been made against you. I doubt humans could have arranged this assassination—and yes I believe it was an assassination. Humans know nothing about our true strengths and weaknesses. It would never have occurred to them to plan this. I hate to think that avon could do this, but the Goddess has many enemies among the Host.”

“What do you plan to do then?”

“First thing we have to do is find out if anyone else knows about this yet,” Dusk told her. Dawn had finally gotten herself under control and the two of them rose to their feet. A quick scan of the house reveled that no alarm had been raised. Yet. Together, they slipped out of the suite Dawn had moved into for the duration of her mother’s stay. Neither of them wanted to see what remained of their other selves, but if there was a chance they could remove the evidence it might be possible to avoid revealing the horrible truth. Hiding the death of the Goddess would be looked at as an abomination by future historians, but right now they were more concerned with having the current war turn into a jihad. Deception could not possibly weigh as hard on their conscience as genocide would.

The leader was an extremely fair avon with, deep blue eyes and jet black hair. An intense and imposing individual. But when she turned, and saw Phoenix for the first time—impossible as it was for her complexion—her face paled perceptibly. She had never seen the Goddess with her own eyes, but she had encountered her image in countless courts and temples before this. The Ideals she had known paled beside her. She was magnificent. Without a doubt, she was perfectly naked, but she was so well dressed in her attitude that one almost did not notice. For a long moment, their eyes were locked together.

When the fight started, the leader had stood back, studying her, looking for a weakness. If she had been right, Raven mused, she was now most likely going to die. She had been too stupid, voicing her thoughts too openly and the Goddess had heard. Watching her as she casually flung her armored attackers out of her way, like helpless children, Raven bared her teeth and drew her sword.

Ember opened her eyes. The world had not changed. Only she had. Everything she was before, she was now, but she was new. Death had set her free. She had existed for one eternal moment in a world of doubt and then her life had begun. It was only natural that her first act had been making love. It was only natural that Ash would want to make love. That was how the old life had ended, it was the perfect way for the new one to begin. It gave them a sense of continuity. It postponed the questions and paved the way for acceptance. That was essential. Just an instant of doubt had seemed like an eternity of hell when her entire existence was poised on the edge of death. A taste of passion was just the thing to banish the last specter of doubt. Realizing she had been holding her breath, she exhaled loudly and finally relaxed.

Ash sat up and looked down into her eyes.

Ember smiled up at her other self. There were no doubts now. Just a mystery that begged to be explored. A mystery she had understood while she struggled in the embrace of doubt. What had then been a naked intuition was now supported and reinforced by the memories of Eve and Twilight. Her mind had risen from the ashes of theirs. Her soul had been forged in the furnace of their fusion. The two bodies that came attached to that fatal union—and the brilliant inspiration that had transformed the destruction of the Goddess into an utterly selfless act of creation—had made for an interesting puzzle. The duality of the human spirit had plunged her awakening mind into a frustrating and terrifying paradox. Her identity had formed in the understanding of Eve and Twilight. A phoenix and a dragon, they had both been avon—androgynous. With a human inspiration, she was able to conceive of being a dragon and a phoenix all at once, but even with two bodies, she had no idea how to be male and female at the same time. It took her too long, subjectively, to realize that male and female were innate potential. Anima and animus. What she had been struggling with was a matter of identity. The madness had finally ended when she realized that her identity was already formed. She was androgynous, and given a choice between being male and female she had to pick female—it was the closest a human could come to being avon. Which, in her own understanding, she still was.

Waking up in two bodies had been the next challenge. If she searched the memories of her precursors, she could find explanations for the physical metamorphosis, and the consequence of giving a single mind full access to two separate bodies. Her mind struggled with coordinating itself between the perceptions of both bodies. She found that if she relaxed, she had access to two independent nervous systems and that each neural net supported a fully resolved worldview. Each body had it’s own attention. Now it was possible for her to lay back looking up at herself, while sitting up and looking down at herself. It was a kind of mental ambidexterity, and she did not have to do anything special to make it work. It simply came with the package. Besides, there was a precedent for it in her memories. Eve and Twilight had both been co-ordinate minds. Not to each other, but to—

Ember sat straight up and said, “Dusk and Dawn!”

Ash straightened in unison. Ash had been following Ember’s train of thought, marveling at the notion of observing her own thought processes. Ash did not have to ask what the sudden exclamation was about. “It must have torn them apart,” Ash said, anticipating Ember’s next thought. An intense exchange passed between them, thoughts forming, questions answered challenged and corrected too fast to even sub-vocalize. They broke off at the same time, giving each other a look of shock. “Damn. That was intense,” Ash murmured. Holding her thoughts in check, she made a deliberate statement. “You do realize that we can’t just tell them? We are not Eve and Twilight. Just coming out with it would sort of make it sound like we killed them—“ she held up a hand, forestalling Ember’s instant objection, and forced her way on, “—not because we could possibly be at fault, but because they had to die in order for—well, either or both of us—to exist. They may suspect at some point, but if we simply tell them they will see only what they have lost and hate us for it.”

“But how do we explain ourselves? For heaven’s sake, we’re in her bed making love moments after her death—this is where they died!—how can they not hate us for that?”

“Ember, you know the answer,” Ash reminded.

“Oh,” she paused. Ash had a point. “Right.” The two people who understood Dusk and Dawn better than they even understood themselves had been Eve and Twilight. It was a tremendous resource, and if she bothered to tap it, she did not even have to ask how either of them would react to a given fact or situation. It was fortunate that Ash had reminded her of it, because just then the door to the bedroom opened.

She took a deep breath, savoring the quiet at the center of the storm. Before she could release it, though, the conflict resumed. A new group of warriors had filed in behind her, ringing the circle of light cast by the hovering orb. The weight of attention was her only warning. They struck from behind. Whipping around, she deflected the first blow.

They said nothing, and their thoughts were held tight. Her mind was a knot of apprehension, as she followed her instincts through the forms of combat dance. The witch light cast slanting shadows across the floor, and filtered through the forest of columns—the vast open air architecture of the sprawling gateway complex. The complexity of the dance, so deeply ingrained in her body, kept her at a meditative distance from the hard eyed contempt that flared from the warrior’s minds.

As the last of them completed her initial assault, she slid to a stop, pivoted and raised her guard. They simply stood there, breathing heavily. One of them stepped forward, and pointed at her. “She’s a naked dancer,” the leader, obviously, observed. Turning to the others, she commanded, “Armor gives the advantage to her.” Without further comment, the leader of the warriors stripped down to bare skin. Her lieutenants gathered her clothes and armor and retreated. The leader waited until her people withdrew completely from the circle of light, then tossed a sheathed blade to Phoenix. She caught it, and slid into the attached harness.

The leader took up her guard. At a gesture the others faded back from the edge of the circle. Phoenix cautiously advanced to the center, studying her adversary. She had a disciplined mind. All of them did, but it was clear why this one was their leader. Phoenix could think of no immediate explanation for this change in tactics. In melee combat she would have eventually lost, but in a duel only one person could stand between her and freedom. Her enemy had already given her one hell of an opening, and Phoenix could not help but wonder at her motives. There was no point trying to search her mind for it. It took a great deal of effort to pry even a name from her opponent’s guarded thoughts.

Raven.

Phoenix paused in her approach as the fang of steel glinted in the conjured light. Raven studied her intently. The first two bouts with Raven’s guard had warmed her up. Dismissing the tension Raven was allowing to build, Phoenix relaxed into a four thousand year old fighting stance. A flicker of recognition lit Raven’s eyes, a mild shock that betrayed far more of her thoughts than she would have believed. Aside from herself, Raven had met no one in this life time who knew the style that went with it. Phoenix almost smiled. Her bare hands were a declaration Raven could not miss. If she met her with a sword, one of them would end up dead.

One of her lieutenants dared to question, “Are you sure you want to do this alone? If you are right—“ She cut herself off. If Raven was right, this was the Goddess herself. It was not a sin, exactly, to fight her—just suicidal. Raven glanced at her lieutenant. A flash, and then her eyes were once more riveted to Phoenix. Her mouth set in a firm line. There was a glint of terror in her eye, quickly leashed.

“If I fall, let her go,” she declared. If she fell, none of the others would stand a chance. Phoenix felt a twinge of relief. She did not have to kill Raven to escape. Before she could change her stance, however, Raven acted.

A wave of crushing force spiraled out of her thoughts, striking at Phoenix. Phoenix felt it coming, recognized the technique, and countered it. Gritting her teeth, she held her ground as the others behind her went flying. Instinct took over. A cloud of dust was rising from the ground, Raven vanished from her field of view. Phoenix turned. Kicking out, she caught Raven in the gut, as she whipped in with the following attack. Phoenix’s leg snapped in, her body arched back extending under Raven’s recovering slash. Continuing her arc, she planted her hands, kicking her feet up under Raven’s chin. Raven absorbed the impact, flipping backwards. Before her feet reached the ground, she was twisting, blade flashing around again. Phoenix dove away from the stabbing blade. Both of them completed their motions, riding the momentum, opening the range. Phoenix regained her feet as Raven tried to flank her. Phoenix reversed, exposing her back for a split second. As the strike came, she twisted on through, slipping inside Raven’s guard. With two rapid strikes, the blade went flying out of Raven’s grasp.

A flurry of blocks and blows spat between them, fists, elbows and knees seeking vital targets on each other’s bodies. Each of them looked for the other to overextend herself. Each of them fought to slip invisible fingers through the other’s telekinetic guard. Phoenix yelped in surprise, as Raven latched onto a striking arm. She was forced to concentrate her telekinetic defenses to keep the avon from ripping her arm right out of its socket. Raven continued driving her face into the ground, so she lashed out. A snap kick backwards into Raven’s hip. Raven’s leg went out from under her, and she crashed to the ground in Phoenix’s wake.

Phoenix rebounded from the dirt. Snaking her legs under her, she whipped around. Her hands braced against the ground. Extending her entire body, she drove her feet once more into Raven’s flank, as she attempted to roll clear. The opposing force of tangible thought vanished, and Phoenix seized Raven’s body in the crushing grip of her mind.

Remembering, just, that she did not intend to kill her, she concentrated her psychic assault on pressure points and ligature. There was a jarring crunch, as Phoenix dislocated her shoulders and hips with the ruthlessness of her grip. Raven gave a final cry and blacked out from the pain.

Rising to her feet, Phoenix wiped the blood from her mouth and staggered over to her unconscious foe. Dropping beside her, she checked her injuries, none of which were mortal, and sighed. Who ever she was, she had done her best to kill her. There had to be a reason for it, but she was in no condition now to answer questions. As Raven stepped up beside her, she turned around in shock. The dragon twin took immediate advantage of the gaping hole in Phoenix’s defenses. Phoenix twisted desperately to evade the flashing blade, cursing herself. Her opponent had manifested her shadow.

Phoenix did not stop moving until she managed to put some distance between herself and the dragon. Raven’s natural body lay in the dust between them. Raven’s shadow had paused to check on her split twin, but that was the last advantage she intended to give Phoenix.

Phoenix had time for a deep breath before the onslaught continued. The dust raised by their combat was adhering to the wet film coating her body. Part of her attention was devoured by the sensation of hot blood coursing down her side. She had no clear memory of being cut. In a moment the shock would pass and she would feel the sting of the long slash cutting her open from ribs to hip. Somehow managing to keep the dragon’s blade from getting another bite out of her, she concentrated on folding the edges of her wound back together, willing the parted flesh to seal. She resisted the urge to wipe the sweat from her eyes. That was all she needed, muddy vision. The wound vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared, and again she was in motion.

Skirting the edge of the terrace, she got out into the open. Raven was still pressing her, so she fell back to the center of the circle. Raven kept her distance, flexing an injured leg. The dragon still presented the sword, but the exile’s hands remained empty. She did not want to draw her blade yet. She would not even know if she could use it effectively until she did. Her memory was so messed up she had not known what she was capable of doing until her reflexes showed her. As things stood, she knew she could use her body and her mind for attack and defense. If she touched the sword before her instincts commanded it, she would only handicap herself. She kept a sharp eye on Raven as she started to close again. Raven still limped from combined kicks to knee and hip. *A bit too cocky, that—took the slash on the way out*, she guessed. It had cost her a pint of blood, but soft tissue healed faster than bones. Much, much faster than joints.

The tickle touch of alien thoughts scurried along the edges of her mind. She readied herself for the dragon’s attack. She could feel Raven trying to break her concentration, but to her surprise her mind was wholly shielded against telepathic attack. Another flash of memory slipped free. An instructor advising her, “Against another telepath, or a person with a sufficiently disciplined mind, telepathy is not enough of an advantage. You are just opening your own guard. Save it for the counter attack.” Case in point. Stabbing into Raven’s mind with the edge of her thoughts, Phoenix punched through her defenses. Almost as quickly, her sword leapt from it’s scabbard and darted through a flashing series of strikes that crippled Raven’s defenses. In the space of a breath she landed three crippling and two killing blows. Raven slumped to the ground, almost too shocked to hold her body together. Phoenix stepped back from her, flicking the blood from her sword, and looked up at the ring of warriors who had attacked her before. Several of them broke the circle rushing to Raven’s side.

Phoenix backed cautiously away from the dragon laying bleeding on the ground. A number of eyes remained on Phoenix. As Phoenix probed the assembled minds for potential threat, one presence in particular caught her attention—she went rigid. Carefully, she turned around. There she was. Raven’s phoenix-half had recovered and walked right up on Phoenix’s unprotected back. Looking into her eyes, she probed for Raven’s intentions. She had been standing behind Phoenix, a lieutenant’s blade in her hand and at the ready. Raven met her eyes for a moment, then her gaze shifted to the body on the ground. Phoenix nodded and moved aside. Raven stepped into the opening between Phoenix and Raven’s shadow.

Phoenix held on to her discipline with a firm grip. It had happened so fast. She could hardly believe she had killed her. To her shock, Raven’s dragon pulled herself together, shoving her adherents off and rose to her feet. Phoenix watched as the dragon and phoenix aspects of Raven embraced, and then fused into one. Raven, whole once more, turned to face Phoenix. She collected her own sword from her people, while handing over her lieutenant’s. Very formally she bowed, eyes never leaving her opponent’s. Phoenix quickly wiped down her borrowed blade and sheathed it, then returned the bow and the gesture of respect.

“Cleanly done,” Raven said, as she cleaned and ran her blade home in it’s scabbard, “You are free to go.” Another of Raven’s lieutenants, apparently acting as mediator, received their final bows, and sheathed her sword. Phoenix chided herself for neglecting that particular threat. Blinded by the formalities of the duel, she had simply ignored her. She had been prepared to strike down either one of them from the moment the fight ended, had either one attempted to re-engage the other. With the close of duel formalities, the mediator moved away from them to reprimand the warriors who had broken the Circle. Raven instructed the first lieutenant to escort Phoenix to the perimeter. Before leaving, Phoenix slipped out of the sword harness and returned the sheathed weapon to Raven. As her escort guided her out of the shadow of the Eye of Paradox, the whole event took on the quality of a dream, and coherent thought abandoned her.

Dawn entered in Dusk’s wake, thankful that the dragon had calmed down enough to open doors as opposed to simply blasting them off their hinges. Dawn came up short as Dusk went rigid, and glanced in the direction Dusk was staring. Her mind had immediately prepared her for gore so appalling as to shock the ancient dragon, and that left her unprepared for the sight that lay before her. Two young women sat upright in the wide bed, looking over their shoulders at the open door. Their true sex did not register at first. It was too easy to mistake the girls for avon, and with every other feature true to the Goddess herself, her mind believed for a moment that she was looking at Eve and Twilight. A painful moment of hope, but her racing mind could come up with no explanation for the vacancy in her mind and soul, and her eyes were already searching for the expected flaw. Every Ideal had at least one, but in this case the flaw was so obvious she overlooked it twice. It finally registered when she found she had been staring at them for a full minute.

“Breasts!” she exclaimed in surprise.

“And very nice ones at that,” Dusk commented casually, as she turned and pushed Dawn back out into the hall. Dawn was simply stunned by Dusk’s bizarre reply. Her mouth worked as she struggled to find words—without coherent thoughts to support them. Dusk put a hand under her chin and gently closed her mouth. Before Dawn could open it again, the dragon whispered fiercely, “Think! There are things in motion of which we know absolutely nothing. Unless someone comes to us with news of Eve’s death, we must appear innocent of concern. We dare do nothing to raise suspicion. What we say and do can save or damn this situation. Little Phoenix, I know this sounds terrible, but I urge you. Forget that she is dead or you will be announcing it with every word and action!”

Dawn hesitated, and realized that Dusk was up to something she had not grasped yet. Blocking out the loss of her mother and twin seemed impossible, but it was true that she would betray her knowledge of it with every unmitigated thought. She struggled with that line of logic until it started to make sense. Dusk hoped that by refusing to disclose anything, whoever may have been involved would unconsciously betray themselves. Dawn nodded and Dusk continued.

“Obviously, that was not Eve and Twilight,” Dusk said. “I had never even considered the possibility of human Ideals, but *anyone* who looks like that eventually ends up here. We both know that. Whoever they are, I am sure they must have some explanation for what they are doing in your bed. I assume from your reaction you were not aware of their existence prior to this, and I can assure you I had no knowledge of them. There is a mystery to explore, but we have to approach it in that context. Now, let’s see if we can start finding answers without giving away our only advantage.”

“So,” Dawn replied, “what do you suggest we do?”

“I seem to recall that this is your house. I imagine that entitles you to inquire about the well-being of your guest’s—and, of course, how they happened to become guests in your house in the first place,” Dusk stated. Dawn had forgotten how sarcastic the old dragon could be with people who failed to think.

Ash had turned to Ember and said, in a strange voice, “Did she say ‘Breasts!’?” Ember had been more or less facing in the direction of the door. Her eyes had followed the avon pair until they disappeared through the door, and now were fixed on the door itself. Ember nodded in reply, but continued looking in the same direction. Ash looked down at her chest, noticing that the sheets had slipped down and pooled in her and Ember’s laps when the two of them had sat up so suddenly. Her hands were rising to examine this manifestation of womanhood when Ember finally looked at her and spoke.

“Yes, breasts. They’re real, but do you really want to look like you just discovered you had them?” Ember raised an eyebrow as Ash blushed. She was sorely tempted to explore this new condition of her existence, but she finished the movement she had started by simply crossing her arms. Ember felt a little guilty. Ash had more than established the reality of breasts for Ember with all the attention she had so recently lavished on them. She made a mental note to repay the favor when the opportunity presented itself. For now, she returned to the thoughts that had occupied her since the door opened. Thanks to her understanding of Eve and Twilight, she had managed to come up with a fully justifiable explanation for their existence—and their presence in this particular bed. It was not perfect, but the truth eventually had to come out, so it was enough for now. She called her twin’s attention to the idea—an entire argument with relevant history and precedents included—simply by sharing the understanding of it. When the door opened again a moment later, they had their story straight—and more importantly convinced themselves of the essential truth behind it.

Autumn Phoenix Dawn entered the room alone this time. She introduced herself as the head of the House of Phoenix and a Lord of the Autumn Court. “I apologize for my outburst. I must confess the sight of breasts on an image of the Goddess came as a bit of a shock to me. Even the best of us have prejudices, I suppose.” The girls smiled back and assured her that no offense had been taken. Dawn returned the smile and eased herself onto the edge of the bed. Dawn looked at each of them carefully and became very serious. “Do you, either of you, know who I am?” she asked softly.

Ash and Ember exchanged a quick glance, as Ash nodded, Ember replied, “As the head of this household, you can only be Autumn Phoenix Dawn, the daughter of the Goddess.”

“That is correct. Do you know why the two of you are here?”

“Because we look like her,” Ash answered promptly.

“Look like who?” Dawn pressed for a more specific answer.

“We look like the Goddess,” Ember clarified. “We look like you too.”

“Too,” Dawn emphasized the word. “Am I to understand you have already been acquainted with my mother?” Dawn asked, sensing an air of familiarity in their responses.

“Well,” Ash began, and looked to her twin to finish.

“She is the one who brought us here,” Ember added gamely.

“Here?” Dawn asked, gesturing with an open palm to indicate the surrounding household. Ash and Ember exchanged a look and Dawn could swear something passed between them, but she could not sense any telepathic activity. Admittedly, the mental ability was rare in humans, but the potential was there and she had seen it realized no few times in the past two hundred years.

Almost as if there had been no pause, Ember elaborated, “Right here. She brought us directly to this room and left us here.”

“May I ask how long ago?”

Ember gave her a wan smile, “It feels like forever.” She reached over and caught Ash’s hand and pulled it into her lap as she added, “We, um, were a bit preoccupied you understand. We really weren’t paying attention to the time.”

Dawn raised an eyebrow. Human sexuality was unpredictable, but the impression she had of these two suggested a relationship on the very fringes of human acceptability. “I hope you don’t mind my saying this. I mean,” she paused and gave each a studying look, as she went on, “you have to be twins—or clones—to look so much alike. I have to say I have not met many humans who are so open about what they consider socially acceptable sexual relationships. Are you really implying that the two of you are mates? I mean intimate?”

“I suppose this is kind of forward,” Ember began, “but you are avon, and if I understand avon culture correctly, you do not have taboos against incest or homosexuality.” Ember did not have to mention that avon were all the same sex, and had practiced controlled line breeding for millennia. “If this were a human household, I can assure you I would not be so cavalier about disclosing my relationship with Ash,” Ember confessed.

Dawn let that sink in, and pounced on the part that almost slipped by. Turning to Ember’s twin, she said, “Your name is Ash, like the moon?” Ash nodded, and Dawn turned to the other girl. “So, you have to be Ember. Native born, correct? You really are familiar with our culture aren’t you?” Dawn smiled.

Ember offered a pained smile. What was next had to be said, and depending on how Dawn’s mind was working, it might just give the whole game away. “It is safe to say we were born here, but we really don’t have any official identities. I mean, we named our selves—we’re twins, so yeah the names of the twin moons were an obvious choice. As far as anyone but the Goddess is concerned, we just appeared out of nowhere. The Goddess helped us understand what we were getting involved in. I don’t know if that counts as being familiar with avon culture. I expect this is all going to be very strange. Possible very difficult to get used to,” Ember confessed.

Dawn gave that some consideration. “So,” she said after a moment, “are you aware of what you were brought here for? I mean,” she hesitated. “Are you aware of the expectations that our people have of the Goddess, and by extension those who share her image?”

“Speaking from a human perspective,” Ash volunteered, “it is a little difficult adjusting to a culture where priests and prostitutes have the same job description. When you add to that the fact that in this culture, looking like this,” she indicated her own face and body, “obligates you to fulfill those expectations with the grace of a goddess—“ Ash broke off laughing. She simply could not finish her statement.

Dawn sighed. “There are limits, you know,” she told them. “Even as a child I faced that same problem. Humans learned about the Ideals quickly enough, and I am not surprised that they would hide any of their daughters who resembled the Ideal from avon attention to protect them from those expectations. Even drive them into the wild, as I suppose must be the case with you. In this house,” she assured them, “you will not face those expectations. You may accept the mantle of an Ideal if you choose and any training and preparation you need—to help you determine if that path is possible for you—will be provided.” Dawn did not mention what choices they would have to make if they rejected the obligations of an Ideal. It was much too soon to scare these human girls. “At any rate, I am pleased to know that you are aware of the reasons for you presence here.” She smiled and held out her hands to each of them. “I don’t typically barge in on my guests in the dead of night. My mother probably left you in here to avoid inconveniencing me. When she returns, do tell her I wanted to speak to her, and let her know I have accepted you into my home.”

Ash and Ember took her outstretched hands and allowed the avon to pull them into her embrace. Dawn clasped them tight. Once the girls had returned the hug, Dawn pulled back and rose to her feet. She smiled a bit more impishly at them and repeated her apology, “Again, please forgive me for the outburst. I was not informed of your arrival, you understand. I might have been more prepared for the sight if I had been forewarned.” Her eyes dropped for a second, “Dusk was correct, they are very nice.” Dawn blushed and changed the subject, “These days I have been very busy, and I apologize for not welcoming you into the house personally before now. I see to it you are brought into the house with proper courtesy. A human who fulfills the Ideal—two of you in fact—will go a long way towards strengthening the relationship between our two races.” Potentially. Dawn could imagine the conservatives back in the home galaxy throwing fits at the idea of human ideals. If there was not already a war in progress, this development could well have started one by itself.

As soon as she was gone, Ember turned toward her twin. As Ember saw it, they would probably remain undisturbed for the remainder of the night. She smiled in anticipation. Ash gave her a curious look and then squealed as Ember launched herself at her. The poor girl simply melted as Ember made good on her silent promise.

On the edge of the abandoned city, Phoenix parted company with Raven’s lieutenant. There was something wonderfully different about her state of mind, something she had not felt the last time she had been out in the open. To be certain, it was still extremely difficult to think, but at least now she had something to think about. She had a name, and she had a relationship—her mother—that she could focus upon. She also knew that she had the ability to take care of herself. That made stepping back into the untamed wilderness a far less haunting prospect. For the first time since oblivion she had confidence. A nice asset to compliment the one thing she had never lost. Hope.