Avatars Initiation - 2

comments

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In the morning, the great terrace overlooking the sea could be rather cold. It was quite different from her home in Phoenix Gate, where the ocean terraces had been designed to capture and covet the morning light. There were many other wonderful places in this house—and near-by within Dream Gate—to bask in the early sun, of course. Thus, it was possible to achieve a degree of privacy on the great terrace in the mornings. Knowing this, Dusk had sought Dawn out there as soon as she returned.

Dawn was cloaked in a thick woven robe, perched on a ledge and gazing out over the water. It was an impressive view this far up the cliff. The surf was foaming around the massive rubble that embroidered the Emerald Coast. Dusk took a moment to drink it in before hoisting herself up onto the ledge beside her true-self’s daughter.

They said nothing for several minutes, but each could sense that the other had some dire announcement to make. The first new developments to come up in the days following the tragedy. In a way, that was a mercy. They had grieved together in private and come to terms with their loss. Now they could face the task they had set themselves. Dusk sighed and simply started in, “Early this morning, I received word that you closed the Eye of Paradox. The report originated at Phoenix Gate. The army your admirers back home sent to arrest you has taken the inner city and settled in for a siege. Once the fighting stopped it did not take long for this complaint to filter back out to our forces.” Dusk grinned.

“I had heard a rumor about that,” Dawn laughed. “It does not sound like something I would want to take credit for,” Dawn added lightly. With a shrug, she began to dismiss it, “I would be inclined to think it an absurd excuse for laying siege to the only nexus serving this galaxy. Claiming they can’t go home won’t stop us from driving them out of Phoenix Gate.”

“It would be a rather weak excuse, if it were not true,” Dusk corrected. At the startled look she received, Dusk nodded. “I went at once to confirm it. Your friend Raven was there, giving the orders as you’d expect. She was happy to show me the evidence.” The dragon looked away and described the scene she’d met at the Eye. On the night the Goddess died, the Seventh Army of the Winter Court had been conducting an orderly retreat. Raven reported arriving at the Eye and finding it sealed off. Dusk went on to describe the sight of a perfect Ideal in static suspension at the focal point of the invisible architecture. “Closing the only gate between here and the twin empires is a master stroke, I must confess, but regrettably neither of us can take credit for it,” she commented. Dusk had examined the body as Raven reported her suspicions. “Now, it is conceivable that the person in the Eye is Eve or Twilight. But it can only be one of them,” Dusk argued. Even with that, she hesitated to think who might have perished in the threshold. She could not bring herself to say what she feared. That what stood in Phoenix Gate might be the frozen, mindless corpse of one of their compliments. “Raven is absolutely certain that it is you, however. You will be surprised to hear why she is so convinced,” Dusk assured her.

Dawn gave the dragon a lazy smile, “Don’t you think that after two and a quarter centuries I am old enough for you to dispense with the leading and suspense?”

Dusk chuckled. “Fine. Raven was not forthcoming with this information. I inspected everything and questioned her about the signs of a duel. I suspect she could have kept me in ignorance, but one of her lieutenants betrayed her with a careless thought. Apparently, they were not alone in the Eye. After a somewhat uncautious remark from Raven, they were startled by the sudden appearance of the Goddess.”

Dawn raised an eyebrow and turned to give Dusk her full attention, “What you’re saying is that Eve and Twilight can both be placed there around the time of their deaths.”

“Exactly,” Dusk confirmed, “Raven is one of the most talented individuals in your generation. She can beat you three out of five times, so when she committed herself to this duel, she figured it was the best way to confirm her suspicion that you were the one behind the severing. I suppose it helps us as well, because Twilight is only as good as you are. Raven and her unit all attest to the fact that the ‘Goddess’ defeated the combined units of Ravens elite guard in general melee, then soundly defeated Raven and Crow in a duel. From the memories I glimpsed, it was rather impressive. She never touched her sword until the very end.”

“That sounds like mom,” Dawn agreed.

“Up to that point, anyway,” Dusk cautioned. “As I left one of Raven’s lieutenants approached me and asked me what was wrong with her. Naturally I had to ask her to explain. According to Jet, she escorted the ‘Goddess’ out of the city. As soon as the two of them left the Eye, Jet says she simply lost her presence of mind. One moment she was standing next to the Goddess Incarnate, the next she felt like she was walking beside an animal. Now, I’ve known Eve to get primal, but I’ve never known her to betray the fact.”

“I am not sure what you are getting at,” Dawn complained.

Dusk sighed. “The evidence presents us with clear, undeniable sightings of Eve and Twilight. Or at least it appears to. I am positive that the body I examined was a true body of Phoenix. It could be you or me—and I am pretty sure it *is* Twilight. No, that’s not quite right. What I mean is, I am sure it is Twilight’s body, but I don’t think Twilight is still associated with it.”

Dawn gave her an incredulous look. “I am sorry. What!?”

“My suspicions are based on what Jet unconsciously betrayed to me. I am certain that it was the Goddess who fought in that duel. I am positive it was her body, and I am fairly certain it was her ability. I do not believe, however, that it was really her. I felt her die, as you did Twilight. By my calculations Raven must have arrived a few minutes *after* the moment of Eve’s death,” Dusk informed her.

“That’s ridiculous,” Dawn retorted. Her brow furrowed as she tried to put all the information together for herself. All at once, it sounded as if the whole notion of Twilight and Eve dying in a fatal eclipse had been disqualified. She realized now that she had blindly assumed, on the basis of coincidence, that Eve and Twilight’s deaths had to be related. The fact was, she knew it was a mortal weakness, and it was the first thing she had thought of to explain why her mother had not resurrected in her. Now that she confronted it, she realized that she had no idea what the consequences would be for her if her mother had died in eclipse. From what Dusk now proposed, neither of them had died. They had been destroyed. “We have sightings of Eve and Twilight,” she began, testing the idea, “physical sightings, and you are positive about the timing. Are you certain all the activity you described occurred after we felt their—what, was it their deaths, or merely the obliteration of their minds?”

“Psychic death,” Dusk replied. “The only part of death we would have experienced. It is the only way to explain her death in my mind without her resurrection in yours. Technically, they haven’t died—they just aren’t there anymore.” Psychic assassination was still assassination. A far more likely event than a fatal eclipse, and probably much simpler to arrange. If anyone was being set up for that fate it was the two of them. If they had simply killed the Goddess, she would have resurrected in Dawn. Dawn actually carried most of her mother’s memories and traits. They lay dormant within her waiting for the moment of transition. That transition would trigger a union of Dusk and Twilight, removing the walls between them as the Goddess awoke, preserving her resources and abilities. Now that transition was crippled, and Dusk and Dawn were reduced to half their effectiveness. An altogether more intelligent and aggressive plan than they had first assumed. Dragon and phoenix sat in silence for a while before Dusk prompted Dawn to share her bad news.

“I received a message this morning as well,” she began. “Now that I have heard your report, I know what provoked mine. The lord of the imperial court informed me today that the emperor has sued me for marriage. That official claims that the Goddess severed her bond with the emperor, and thus, it is my obligation to assume the role of concubine in my mother’s place.”

“What!?” Dusk was actually surprised.

“Until you told me what had happened at the Eye, I was concerned that this was our first confirmation that others had discovered my mother’s death. You know that I have maintained my appearances in court, so it is given that no one there would take the reports of my alleged activities at Phoenix Gate seriously. Still, as I said, the rumor had reached the court that I’d supposedly closed the Eye. I heard it first from the lord of the imperial court, speaking for the emperor. It was mentioned in passing,” she paused to recall the conversation. “While investigating the rumor of this event, it became clear to the emperor that my mother had withdrawn from her obligations, including her allegiance to the emperor herself. Being that she is entirely indisposed—I thought that a polite way of saying ‘dead’—it naturally falls to me to assume that obligation. For the good of the people, naturally,” she added. “I have to assume that someone went there and saw whoever it is—Twilight, you think?—and came to the conclusion that, since I am here, that must be my mother. I expect that will be the official position of the court within the day. That does an excellent job of covering up the deaths entirely. Who ever was responsible for this will be able to use it to their advantage,” Dawn concluded in disgust.

“Yes and no,” Dusk countered thoughtfully. “I don’t see how this outcome is advantageous to anyone but us. With the gate closed, the potential for conflict is virtually eliminated. It can not possibly be what the architects of this plot intended. The outcome *is* ripe for advantage, however, I see one major loose end. One of the bodies is still walking around. As soon as the assassin realizes that, she will have to see to it that no one gets their hands on her. The assassin and her accomplices will know that questions will be raised if she surfaces anywhere. From the evidence we have, a psychic assassination is probable, but clearly not entirely successful. The duel revealed that much. It was enough to render Eve and Twilight dead to us, but I suspect that enough of them remains to reveal that the deed was done, and possibly even memories that will identify the killer.”

“Dusk,” Dawn interjected, “is it possible that simply being locked in the Eye of Paradox could cut off contact—create the illusion of psychic death?”

It was a valid question. It had to be asked. “I am sorry, child,” Dusk answered. “I wish it were so, but there is a difference between stasis lock and death, and what we felt was death. Stasis does not cut off contact or seem to remove the mind. It just freezes it like a sculpture of thought. You would still be aware of Twilight if her mind was intact and in stasis.”

Dawn nodded and returned her thoughts to the matter Dusk had brought up. She took a deep breath and sighed. “All right. We have a body walking around, and we have reason to believe that an attempt will be made to do her in. Naturally, we want to get to her first. Any suggestions?”

“Well, on account of being a perfect Ideal,” Dusk reminded, “I expect anyone who comes into contact with her to deliver her to us here. There are a billion people out there who will do anything to protect her until she can be turned over to the Phoenix House. I’d say that gives an advantage in finding her. Maybe our best chance. Unfortunately, for the same reason we dare not reveal the murder, we cannot actively pursue her without calling attention to ourselves.”

“Sounds like the odds are a billion to one that she will run into her assassin before we find her,” Dawn murmured, “and yet I don’t find that entirely reassuring.”

A lone figure moved through the lush depths of the towering silk grass. Licked by the dew damp tendrils, she prowled towards a massive and meandering structure of sculpted stone and vaulting columns. A sense of homecoming and love-of-place filled her as she approached the ancient establishment. It was the one place above all others to which she had belonged in her young life. A place of learning and discipline. A place in which she had had a name and an identity, where she had found her voice and her individuality. A place from which she had been chased into the wild as any unwanted animal is run out of the sphere of civilization.

For all the pain of her exile—not just from her world, but from herself—it had been the greatest thing that had ever happened to her. A true test of the spirit. She could remember a day when she ran for her life bent with shame and agony, mewing and crying in a voice cut off from the source of words within her. The darkest weeks of her life were those in which she had fought to hold on to some scrap of identity, of self reflection. Inevitably, after countless days incapable of trapping her thoughts with words, she finally lost the idea of herself. Fortunately she had managed one painfully articulated cry for help. It had been so difficult to tell the man how desperate she was to be able to simply think. As a person, she might not be able to forgive herself for how she had paid for his services, but he had come through for her. He had led her to the one place in the world where she had once more found the capacity to think. Thanks to him, she finally found herself. In the days since she had regained her identity, since she left the Eye of Paradox, she had returned to the simple animal elegance of *her.* A self without name or honor or obligation, but she knew now where to start looking for what she had lost.

A cat-smile pursed her lips as she glided on soundless feet toward the open embrace of Dream Gate. It remained difficult to think, but she understood what had happened, and what could yet happen. Her condition was less overwhelming than it had been. Her confident stride carried her through the early morning throngs of people. Golden light rained over her distinctive blood-red mane. Many stopped and stared at her. Instant recognition flashed in their eyes and then became clouded by uncertainty.

The startled looks made perfect sense to her. Once, she had been one of them, and as one of them subject to the pride of name, the privilege of person. Even for the descendants of the great houses, only one out of a thousand children might distinguish herself with a name and leave behind her life as an animal—either domestic or wild. What had happened to her was usually reserved as a punishment and a form of absolution, but for a person to deliberately, publicly strip herself was obscene. Nudity was hardly uncommon, but a name was hard to come by. They were searching for some token, some device about her person that assured them that, though she might not be clothed, she did not reject or deny her name. A simple thing, perhaps a ring, or pendant—maybe even a bracelet or piercing—should have born her inscription. The lack of such a device had allowed people to run her out of many of the cities she had visited.

She could feel their thoughts, and knew they had realized she was just an animal, but to her surprise they did not turn on her as they had in the past. As a former person, recognizable as a friend, or a relative, or a prospective mate, her appearance back among them would trigger that instant sense of obscenity. They would recognize her, see that she truly was stripped and that would provoke them. The reactions were not the same now. She felt the impulse. Only at a first glimpse though, for a full glance or even a hard stare read at once the absence of shame in her. In all of the little subtle cues a body betrayed, she projected only the unself-consciousness of an animal. A sight both common and unremarkable. As they turned, one after the other, and ignored her, she became confused.

She was operating on instinct. This was her home. She had been prepared for antipathy, and there was none. People were not behaving the way they were supposed to, and it was throwing her instincts off. For a moment her confidence wavered and she did not really know why she had come back. She had been so sure of a negative reaction she had not expected to approach unmolested. She had wanted to get close, needed to get close, but the lack of animosity had sucked her in farther than she had intended. She was aware of what coming in so far would commit her to. Even now she did not believe she would dare take the irrevocable step. She only knew that she had felt the urge to see something loved and familiar. Awaken some memory of her old life. Before she could retreat, however, something once loved and intimately familiar manifested in person. Struggling so hard to think, she had stopped paying attention to her surroundings. She had not even sensed him until he was blocking her path.

She glanced up as she came in sight of the grand mall. She stopped. A powerful surge of emotion leapt up within her. Hesitantly she resumed her approach, eyeing him carefully. He turned in surprise and watched her advance. She was painfully aware how like some wild animal she regarded him. When he met her eyes, she could not help but look down. It took all her will to bring herself within a body’s length of him, part of her hungry for him to touch her and bring her into his still loving arms, part of her afraid that if she looked in his eyes she would see his sorrow at what she had become, the grief that had made him turn away when the person he had loved had been erased. What she most feared to see, if she looked into his eyes, was hope.

Before she could gather the courage to look up, however, he turned away and resumed walking. Something within her ached at the realization that he had not recognized her. When he met her eyes there had been no hint of ever having seen her as a person. Even operating solely on instinct, she could not escape the implication. His reaction had forced her to understand that no one *did* recognize her as a person. They reacted as if they had no memory of her, as an individual. It finally dawned on her that she *was* no longer remembered. Her history had been erased from their minds as surely as her own memory had been expunged. It was a difficult realization for a mind without words. Her one discovery had brought her here in search of her past. Now she sensed it was no longer here to reclaim.

Her mind spun. The inspiration that had driven her, the wordless plan that had guided her back home, was evaporating in the light of this understanding. The howling chaos of thoughts she could not translate began to threaten. She was helpless as the world shifted around her, and her unconscious mind struggled to place these new ideas into perspective. She stood there staring out towards the coast, in the direction of her home. She feared that hope no longer lay in that direction, only the terrible confirmation of this dread suspicion. It was horrible to have that hope erased by the only other thing she had hoped for in her benighted state. How she had envied those lost souls who thrived in the shadow of society—nameless but not abhorred. Animals, but tame and beloved like pets or amiable strays. Those individuals had no history to overcome, and they had every opportunity to create a civilized life. As she pictured what could not be put into words, she gasped. Focusing intently on the notion, she suddenly saw a new hope. A pale shadow of what she had come here for, but perhaps a way to lift herself out of this blighted condition. The inspiration was so simple, all she had to do was recognize one relevant fact.

She had become one of those lucky strays that people tolerated.

Swallowing her heart, she held up her chin and pushed on into the interior of the city, aiming for a slightly different destination on its elite fringe. More eyes followed her, wondering what she had come here to do. No one attempted to rebuke her or bar her way. Law and custom were actually on her side. With the shift in her own perspective, she could recognize the essence of the thoughts that had greeted her arrival. What they assumed she had come for, any nameless soul could seek. Anyone could assume personal responsibility. Every day some soul would come in out of the wild to struggle with the duties she could assume knowing she would be judged solely on the basis of how she performed. A test of obligation went with each of the tasks a person assumed. It was a natural part of an ancient social contract. Civilization could not exist without responsible participants, but merely existing did not make individuals willing or able to take part in something so complicated. Avon did not impose civilization on people, but left it to the individual to take it upon herself. Civilization provided the bare essentials of life, health, and the protection of the species—but anything more individuals had to earn. Once a person proved herself, and earned a name, she could reap the benefits of a cultured and civilized society.

If her past were truly gone, then so were the obstacles to making a new life.

Ash met Ember in the bath. She slipped out of her robe and sunk gladly into the water’s warm embrace. Ember opened her eyes and smiled in empathy. She had tasted her share of the bitter morning cold that lurked on the great terrace. For the past week, they had taken turns keeping an eye on Dusk and Dawn. Through the days and nights that followed, the absence of Eve and Twilight had been extremely hard on them. In public they were their normal, upbeat selves. Even in private they strove to moderate their grief with good humor and smiles. It stung the girls’ conscience, when they added spying to the injustice of the silence they maintained about the true fate of Dusk and Dawn’s compliments.

The insight they were reborn with had enabled them to shadow the pair closely. Abilities they had inherited—many of which they were still working out how to employ—enabled them to mask their presence, so they could eavesdrop more successfully. The only salve to Ash and Ember’s conscience was the knowledge that, though neither avon knew it, the girls were ensuring that the two of them were not going through this alone. Ash and Ember had put themselves in a position to observe and intervene.

Already, they had discovered something their former alter egos had not. The sum of their other selves—the memories and personalities of Eve and Twilight—had transferred to their compliments unnoticed. It simply did not occur to them to look inward for what had always been externally manifest. When added to the fact that the individuality and essence—the nature which Eve and Twilight embodied—was gone, they were particularly blind to their own transformation. For each, it was like a part of her soul had been amputated. What Ash and Ember had most feared, was that the injury they had already suffered made them numb to the risk of destroying all that remained of themselves. Watching in secret, the girls saw how hiding their grief had forced them together. Therein lay the danger.

Each having lost her compliment, they remained complimentary aspects to each other, so it was almost inevitable that the two would turn to each other from the moment of separation. They had maintained the minimal separation fairly well, until last night. Ember allowed her eyes to drift closed as she returned to the matter she had been brooding on while Ash was on her errand. A tiny smile curled her lips as she reflected. It must have been a shock to them, to be pulled back from the brink of mutual annihilation by Ash and Ember’s sudden intrusion last night. At that point, the twins had only one way to separate the dragon and phoenix—and coming from humans, the request was audacious. Neither Dusk nor Dawn could refuse to take a soul into the arms of the Goddess—especially not when the soul in question was the image herself, and almost certain to perform that function in her stead a thousand times over.

They used their humanity as their excuse. Walking in on the couple as they were preparing to engage beneath the sheets. Radiating their distress, they had stopped and made to excuse themselves. As hoped, the couple stopped and shifted their attention to the girls. They settled down on the bed and explained their concern. They were aware of what was expected of an Ideal. They had already assumed that obligation had been imposed on them when the goddess gave them sanctuary. The problem was, they had never experienced intimacy with an avon. An all too human insecurity. Having no idea what the reality of their new obligation was, they confessed it had been impossible to consider the prospect seriously.

The avon pair had invited them into their bed and obliged them thoroughly. With their attention focused on Ash and Ember, instead of each other, Dusk and Dawn had become conscious of the disaster they had been courting.

Hopefully, they would keep that in mind from now on. Ember was delighted with the irony of saving lives through sex, but that trick would only work once. If it came up again, their intervention would be more obvious. If the pair actually started looking out for them, then they probably would not be able to continue observing them as closely.

After a while, the water started to cool. Ash sighed and pulled their minds to business. “Something new has come up,” she began. Calling Ember’s attention to her recent memory, Ash transferred the whole of the scene she had witnessed that morning. Ember shivered. Even the cold and damp of the ocean cliff passed through the exchange. By comparison the water in the bath suddenly verged on boiling. She gave an involuntary gasp, and then eased back down to digest the conversation between Dusk and Dawn. After a long moment, she frowned.

“Well,” she quipped, “that’s awfully convenient—and it makes no sense at all!”

“I know,” Ash replied thoughtfully. “It neatly shifts any suspicion from us, but we both know that what they suspect has to be untrue.”

“So?”

“We’ll just have to keep our eyes open. See what develops.”

“In other words, we maintain our silence.”

“There are some things that you simply can’t tell people. They have to figure it out for themselves or they’ll never understand it.”

“This is going to affect a lot of people, Ash”

“Life always does,” Ember’s twin replied sagely. The sound of approaching footsteps brought their conversation to a close. They could think about it together, but no decisions would be made. They had already learned that arguing or debating in close rapport produced fierce headaches.

An Ideal walked the streets of Dream Gate. Aside from her name, one could not have distinguished her from the Goddess. She was a true rarity, an actual child of the Goddess. A different breed from Dawn, to be sure. Passion was an ideal who traced her lineage back through Dusk. She descended from an avon Dusk once reincarnated in her own image. That avon had been a phoenix named Pleasure—a friend and confident of the Goddess.

As she moved through the city, she stopped to observe the many callings of her station. In the public sphere, that meant the simple benedictions and comfortings of a priest. In the privacy of secluded gardens, pools and bedrooms, the grace of the Goddess extended more to the intimate embraces of a courtesan. She exuded a sweet serenity, but within the privacy of her thoughts she was in the grip of chaos. She abandoned her self to her duties, all the while wrestling with destiny.

As far as anyone knew, Passion was the daughter of Pleasure. Until a few years ago, she had been unnamed, living in the wild. When she finally ventured into civilization, she was immediately identified. They had been so relieved to find her. Several years had passed since Pleasure and a dragon named Pain had succumbed to the fatal eclipse. The trauma of their deaths had been blamed for the disturbed state her mind had been in when they examined her. When she was introduced to the Phoenix House, she had been blessed with the benefits of being a friend and a perceived favorite of the Goddess, as well as an Ideal. That blessing had been her curse. It had resulted in her becoming the unwilling weapon of hidden adversaries. Because of that relationship, Passion had accompanied her mentor to Oasis. Her appearance and her apprenticeship under Dusk had made her the perfect tool to accomplish her patron’s aims. Her mission had been to seduce Twilight, who, as the dragon of Phoenix Dawn, had joined her compliment in her self imposed exile. The mission had been remarkably simple. She had been required to use her appearance to maneuver the dragon into a liaison with Phoenix Eve. Her patrons had intended for their fatal eclipse to awaken the dark aspect of the Goddess. Already in place in Dawn’s household, the assassin had simply waited for the perfect opportunity to execute her mission objective.

Already she regretted going through with it. What good did it do her to succeed in her mission, and find that her mission had failed to achieve its objective. After seeing what had resulted from that unfortunate liaison, she had known something was wrong. The transformation of Eve and Twilight defied everything she knew about the eclipse. Dawn was certainly not suffering the same madness Passion had suffered after her brutal awakening. The appearance of those human girls simply baffled her. There was no way she could return to her masters and report what had happened. First of all, she had no idea. Second of all, the Eye had been closed. She had found that out for herself the morning after the job had been done. It was the only thing keeping her in place where she was now.

The days since had been spent trying to figure out how she had gotten in so far over her head. No matter how she figured it, the moment she appeared in the civilized world, it had been bound to happen. Pleasure’s name and position had ensured that. It had drawn a great deal of attention to her role in her mother’s tragedy, for she appeared to have demonstrated that the terrible union could be survived. As she had understood it, a great deal of what Pleasure had been did survive in her. At the time she had not recognized exactly what the difference between herself and her mother was. So, she openly attributed her survival to the terrible sacrifice of Pain, who seemed to have paid the price for her salvation—never once hinting that was anything less than a terrible price to pay to escape that fatal fusion. Nothing she could have said could have made the deadly union more attractive, because without question she had emerged with some strange immunity to eclipse. She never advertised this invulnerability, but the word got out. She had proved that the eclipse could be beaten, and she had indirectly shown everyone how to do it.

No one listened to what Passion was not saying. Nor had she been faulted, exactly, for not saying it. It was perceived that if a dragon was willing to sacrifice herself, a phoenix could transcend the one death that would have surely destroyed her before. More than one phoenix, normally immune to death, had actually been encouraged to risk this new salvation—even though the Goddess warned them that it was a false salvation, a rape without equal.

Passion had even endorsed this claim.

It had not been until fairly recently that she had discovered what had really happened that terrifying day. She had possessed tremendous potential as a youth. Natural ability that promised to make her a power in the central courts. Her prospects became unlimited the day she proved to have the power of choice over heat, which was what singled out the greatest avon for membership in the imperial court. A lord of the court had taken her under her wing, immediately. Her dreams had been shattered one day, when her patron came out and asked her if she was aware of what she was. Her innocence did not survive that question.

From her patron, she had learned that the fatal eclipse was actually the spiritual conception of a new soul. She was a unique entity conceived from the death of Pain and Pleasure. That power of that conception had consumed their bodies and minds. Her story had been a catalyst. It had brought others who had survived together, and prompted them to study and understand what they were. Their assertions had forced her to confront a long buried nightmare. She remembered the terrifying moment of creation. In a panic, Passion had transferred her own mind from Pleasure’s dying body into her unnamed daughter’s. The poor child had been taken unaware. Her mind accepted Passion’s descent without question, unwittingly surrendering her body to the soul that had destroyed her mother.

Her body had been very young when she took it. Ignorant of what she was, Passion had automatically assumed the role and identity of Pleasure reborn. In spite of the fact that she was not who her friends believed her to be, it had been easy to deceive them. Everything Pleasure had been was in Passion, and much more. Her mind had devoured the minds of both Pleasure and Pain, and her understanding of herself was the understanding of the two souls she had swallowed. She had strengths she had never even imagined. She had the nature of both a phoenix and a dragon, manifesting the full potential of an avon without the incredible effort that normal avon had to invest in realizing that potential. This was the untold truth of the dragon-phoenix eclipse. She was a dark phoenix, a soul conceived of death and destruction.

From her patrons, she had learned that there was no way her secret could have been discovered. There was no way to distinguish a dark phoenix from a phoenix—nor the dark aspect of the Goddess from the enlightened aspect Eve embodied—for in both cases the perceived aspect was a manifestation of the same truth.

That did not mean her secret was safe.

The truth was only one weapon in her patron’s arsenal. When all was said and done, it had been too easy to pervert her to their ends. In her heart, she wanted to belong to the world she had first encountered, and instead she had been drafted into its dark shadow. Now that their influence was barred by the ‘Goddess’ in the Eye of Paradox—a confounding and inexplicable circumstance, given what she personally knew—she had the chance to free herself from their control, but it was already too late to undo her most heinous deed.

There had been one slim hope for her going in to this. She had been in a position to be the one who greeted the dark phoenix Goddess, and introduced her to her new existence, to hopefully warn her of the cabal that had been forming in the imperial court and arm her with their secrets. Unfortunately, that hope had depended on her success. The sight of Ash and Eve had dashed that hope, and her assessment of Dawn had washed away its residue. Not even a hint of it had surfaced until that first brief encounter in the mall. She had met talk of an animal that had appeared that morning—an avon that all agreed must be this generation’s Child of the Goddess. The instant she heard it, she had an epiphany. What if Dawn was not truly the Daughter of the Goddess? The possibility that the true daughter was a stray like herself had never occurred to her before, but she could think of no reason why it could not be. As quick as that, she suspected her mission may have been a success after all. In that case, her only hope lay in finding that wayward child and testing her. If she found a kindred spirit, a true dark phoenix, she would have the perfect opportunity to lead her through the madness and awaken her to what she was. If she was lucky, she would emerge more like herself than those demons who haunted the imperial court.

As her station provided, she began to ask questions, officially recognizing the appearance of a candidate. It was simplicity itself to find out which way she had gone, and track her down wherever she might go within the city.

Direct contact between the two interstellar nations was restricted to the Oasis System—specifically the moons, Ash and Ember, where the first contact had been established twice by exploration ships from Earth.

Some event of native importance was in the wind, and they wanted their human allies to recognize it officially. The request had come in the absence of the aegis appointed ambassador. As the senior officer on post, the duty fell to him. Custom required an envoy to appear with an entourage. They had been briefed before they had been posted to the Oasis System.

The essence of human-avon relations was the careful regulation of technological trade. The psionic technology possessed by avon could make them appear as gods, but the mastery of that technology, and the innate gifts that their methods depend on, assured that such power resided only in the hands of the most responsible members of the avon race. The genius of human applied physics, the tools and weapons which humans possessed would have a devastating effect on avon culture if unchecked, but the artifacts, locks and keys of avon applied psionics would be no less dangerous to humans.

As soon as Phoenix had withdrawn to the privacy of an auxiliary chamber, the assassin struck. In one lightening stroke, she decapitated Phoenix. The killing stroke was witnessed by a couple who were just arriving at that moment, as they stepped through the curtain. The two acted with a speed, and deadly efficiency that only the best split twins achieved. In the moment while they were dispatching the assassin, the mind of Phoenix took full possession of itself, and—rather than submitting to the absolution of resurrection—she reached for her divine power and restored her body instantly to perfect condition. It was exactly what a dragon would have done, the ultimate use of her shape-changing ability. Of course, at the same time, her divine self-possession triggered the self-conception her body had primed itself for an entire decade ago. As she dragged herself to her feet and approached the split twins to express her gratitude, she realized that they were both her. Immediately following that thought, she realized that neither of them knew it.