Avatars Initiation - 3

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She was dying.

Dusk was waiting for the Ideal when she stepped into the foyer. Passion’s body was still slick from the baths, her hair plastered to her shoulders and back. The slanting sunlight caressed her naked body—as did the eyes of the people accompanying Dusk. Passion was impervious to the stares that locked on her. It was expected, they were human after all. There were virtually no differences between her race and theirs. The only way she could tell the difference was that a human always stared, because her sex was the one obvious exception. She ignored the humans and raised an eyebrow at her mentor. Her state of undress proclaimed her as free of civil obligations. In human terms, she was off duty.

Dusk’s lips betrayed a hint of a frown. «*A question only, then,*» she thought to Passion. With a slight gesture of her hand, Passion urged her on. Dusk looked over Passion’s shoulder.

Passion caught the reference. «*I was the last,*» Passion thought back.

In *uman*, Dusk informed the terran delegation that they would have the baths of the public annex to themselves. Passion confined her gaze to Dusk’s face as the aliens slipped past her. She dared not hold their undisciplined minds against them, but even the slightest glance molested as it licked over her. The attention was so bold, the thoughts so intent, that they stabbed deep into her sensitive mind. When the last of them had disappeared down the hallway, she sighed.

“They’re naked,” Passion observed pointedly.

“They are early,” Dusk replied with a shrug.

Passion nodded in understanding. An untrained mind generated a lot of psychic noise. Typically, those who had not been trained were given a shield, an artifact of psionic technology that would sharpen their thought processes and filter most of that noise out, but such a device had to be keyed to its owner. Keying one took time. Looking back into the hallway after them, she asked, “Will I be pressed?” Dusk waited until her eyes had returned to her before answering.

“No. Others will see to their needs.”

Passion nodded again. As Dusk’s protégé, Passion’s duties to her house included sating guests, but her mentor was aware of her reluctance to mate with terrans. Especially since she had been given to the Goddess. A thought itched in the back of her mind. Dusk had been uncommonly careful of her sensibilities the last few days, and it suddenly sparked a worry in Passion’s mind. She searched her mentor’s face as she asked:

“Have I disappointed you?”

Dusk noticed her student’s careful scrutiny. She avoided a direct answer. “I was worried about you. You have not been yourself lately,” Dusk pointed out. “But you seem to be coming out of it now. Do not be concerned, this group is from their military. I do not expect them to make any unusual demands. However,” she placed her hands on Passion’s shoulders, “I do expect you to be less troubled by human minds. You still hold yourself too open.”

Passion shrugged, “That’s what it takes to survive in the wild.”

Dusk brushed her face with her fingertips. “That was another life. When are you going to wake up to this one?” Passion turned her face away. Her face burned with a peculiar embarrassment.

“It’s already too late to make any difference,” she said cryptically. Dusk withdrew her hand and regarded her prize pupil sadly. That was as close as Passion had ever come to admitting the inadmissible. Passion did not wait for her mentor to comment on the slip. Turning abruptly, and walking away, Passion headed for the great terrace to bask in the last rays of the sun. Troubled, Dusk left instructions for the bath tenders to arrange an escort for the human guests, and then she too left the annex. Her own duties forced her to take a different turn. With the sudden arrival of the guests, she did not have time to spare chasing Passion down.

The little convulsions of death had already started. Trembling fingers and shivering limbs attested to her desperate efforts to wake up. But the dream would not let her go. It was not a nightmare. It was too real; a taunting dream of life. A taste of what lay just out of reach—above the surface of dreams and drowning.

They entered the annex uncertainly. It looked empty, as promised. The native culture was rich in subtle amenities such as bathing. They knew enough to know they would have to wash before bathing. Washing, as the orientation program had put it, was simply cleaning the body. Bathing was a social and recreational activity *avon* took very seriously. A typical bath consisted of one or more open air pools, for swimming and play, with a number of secluded alcoves containing heated bathing pools. The baths were intimate affairs, the perfect size for a couple to engage in a different realm of play. Most of the naval officers exchanged game looks and stripped down. Swimming was a passion human and *avon* had in common. Being human, however, they took fiendish delight in the thought of skinny dipping.

They were not afflicted with the body consciousness their hosts expected in people of their origins. They were navy, after all, and most of the reservations any of them might have had with members of the opposite sex had long been drilled out of them. As far as nudity was concerned, well, that was a spacer’s uniform by default. Skin was a practical form of dress in a controlled environment where survival depended on one’s ability to slither into a pressure suit at the drop of a hat. Clothes had evolved for the environment which were barely more than a second skin, or that could otherwise be removed and disposed of in less time than it took to blurt out one’s favorite expletive. Even with all of that, public displays of nudity retained a quality of adventurousness and defiance in the human psyche, to which they were no exception.

A man and a woman remained behind in the washroom as the rest fled from the wash stalls to hit the pool. The captain and executive officer exchanged a look and stepped into a pair of vacant stalls. Shon Dane composed his thoughts before responding to his subordinate’s unspoken question. “I get the impression we responded to the invitation somewhat faster than the ambassador would have,” he opened. “I think that caught them by surprise. Otherwise, why would they have dropped us off to entertain ourselves like this?”

“I have been wondering what it was they asked us down here for,” Meggan Alt responded dryly. Access to the planet was not forbidden, but the natives had restricted the privilege to aliens who were willing to adopt their culture and live by their codes and traditions. “I mean, we told them we were empowered to represent the aegis in the absence of our appointed ambassador, but are not exactly acclimated to the culture,” she grinned.

Captain Dane nodded. They had been invited to the surface on a long standing ‘privilege’ clause in the treaty which allowed the natives to waive their own requirement for ‘official guests’. “I assume it has to do with the status of their application to the senate. They want full membership in the aegis.”

Most of his senior staff had memorized the Avon Codes before they had reached orbit. But none of that had been sufficient preparation. The information had been there, but none of them had really put it together. So here they were, a group of virgins getting their first taste of exotic culture in the sophisticated heart of *avon* society. As he watched his people at play, he prayed they were not in over their heads.

She sensed danger, but its nature eluded her. All she could see was her vision of paradise. A place she seemed to know, but did not honestly remember. It was called *Ao’Dahn,* and it was a vast, sprawling city-estate. An arcology in its own right. A large part of it was devoted to the housing of transients and visitors, as well as the ruling Houses of Ajea. A city within a city, it was a place of learning, enlightenment and bureaucracy. Its layered and tiered structure encompassed the facilities of House, School and Court. Like any *dahn*, it served as the social and cultural center of an *avon* community. The only possible threat posed by the maze of lush gardens and exquisitely dressed stone was that it might lure her away from her ambiguous terror. A nameless dread she could neither confront nor escape. It was driving her into a flying panic. She raced down corridors, through arbors and fountains, hunting for hidden enemies. Death was breathing down her neck, and she could not face it. She had no way to fight. Terrified and helpless, she struck out at the world. The fingers of her mind closed on empty whimsy, and she staggered at the taste of formlessness.

*I’m dreaming.*

It was suddenly obvious, though she could remember screaming it a thousand times in unconscious denial. The realization stopped her. Her body relaxed. Her thoughts were cold and clear, still honed by panic. Her dream was not threatening—there was nothing in it to fear. Then what was she afraid of? That made her pause. She couldn’t remember ever being afraid of anything except…

Lieutenant Intern Linda Mathias blushed at the question. They had believed the reports that described *lyn,* what they called a member of the third sex, as “virtually indistinguishable from standard female”. Well, in general appearance, that was accurate enough. They had certainly assumed the she was a girl on first glance. It was the second glance that had shocked them. She smiled. It must have shaken the men’s nerves to look down in anticipation and confront that boyish chest—and then the follow up blow—every other curve and point was perfect. It certainly explained why a race with three sexes had only two gender specific pronouns in their colloquial vocabulary. She had been ragging on her man about the way he had stared at that androgynous native, only to have her own lingering examination thrown up in her face. “Professional interest,” she defended, taking cover behind her medical background. “I was trying to figure out the reproductive mechanism. I just don’t see how an internal male reproductive system is feasible. How can it produce compatible germ plasm at internal body temperature?”

Lieutenant Intern Richard Harrah laughed. “What I can’t understand is how a person with male, *and* female reproductive systems inside them *ever* gets out of the house. Besides, we both know you’ve studied the anatomy, so you’re not getting out of it that way. You were interested. Admit it,” he challenged.

She lifted her chin. “Not a chance Rick. The minute I do you are going to start trying to talk me into a *ménage’a’trio* with one of them. Thank you, no. My hands are full enough with just you,” she declared archly. He laughed again, then launched into a tickling attack. When they came up for air, they noticed that a few of the other established couples had decided to take up the invitation of the curtained alcoves.

*I’m dying.*

Dusk felt the presence of the one she loved approaching behind her. Her head turned as she glanced over her shoulder. The dying light slanted sideways through her pupils and the world was suddenly washed in blood. Dawn stopped in shock as her chosen exploded to her feet, body rigid with combat tension. Dusk gulped in deep lungfulls of air, surprised at her own reaction. With the sun at her back, and her perceptions sharpened with adrenaline, she could see her hand—fingers rigid with killing intent—hovering a hair’s breadth from Dawn’s exposed throat. She hid the tremor of horror by shaking the tension out of her entire body.

Dawn made light of it. “You always were faster than me.”

Dusk’s vision expanded enough to take in her lover’s face. As the final product of a thousand generations of breeding, she was as close to the Ideal—to Dusk herself—as it was possible to get without using Dusk’s genes. A living reflection, and like a reflection opposite to her in nature. At least that was what she feared; and what everyone else wanted. Not because everyone wanted her to be damned by their love—they were not supposed to have fallen in love in the first place. They wanted it because Dawn was in her first life, and she—Dusk—was in her last.

It hurt to admit that, but there had been others who had lived as long—for as many lives—as she had. So far, none had lived longer. Even immortality had its limits. When she considered that half of those born in a given generation never conceived of themselves—never lived more than a single life—she despised her moments of self-pity. When she thought how much she wished that the love of her life could be one of them, there were no words harsh enough to do justice to her selfishness.

Enough of her vision had been restored to realize that Dawn had not made the slightest effort to defend herself from the unprovoked attack. Dusk broke the long pause with a reply.

“No,” she sighed, meeting her love’s eyes again, “just more paranoid.”

…dying in her sleep.

The pieces clicked together with instant clarity. An instinct kicked inside her skull. Coupled with lingering desperation it drove her to act. She did not have time to figure out how to wake up. There was only one sure way out. She charged up several flights of stairs, and flung herself over the edge of the highest balcony. Her body bucked as the dream ended in crash of pain. Her ribs groaned under an unfelt blow and her mind sank into the embrace of darkness.

Linda paused, fingers on the heavy fabric. She cocked an ear and then grinned to her friend. Rick raised an eyebrow. She contained her laughter and mouthed the word. *Occupied*. Helaughed, and grabbed the curtain. She slapped his hand away from the cloth before he could peek, and dragged him down the row to the next alcove.

Awakening was violent—agonizing ecstasy. Her body revealed itself to her with brutal dispatch. Lightening flashes pierced her skull, an unnerving sensation exploding across her nerves. The searing strands of silk stretched and multiplied into gossamer sheets of tangled cobwebs that settled and clung to trap her attention. The growing weight of weave warping into solid sensation. Muscles and tendons prying at her bones, organs aching and convulsing within her chest and belly, each fiber of her flesh announced itself with torturous complaints. Every synapse in her body fired in sequence, over and over, mercilessly imprinting her consciousness with the keys to her own control.

She was exhausted by this seizure before her mind surfaced from the flood of sensation. She lay sprawled over the lip of the bath, shivering in reaction. Her legs were still submerged in its warm, fluid grip. With a moan, she pulled her feet under her. She shivered again in response to a grim observation. If her wild convulsions had not thrown her clear, if her wracking coughs had not cleared her lungs, she would certainly have drowned. As she rose to step out of the bath her feet lost purchase on the tiles and she slid under with one desperate gasp of shock. A loud splash echoed from the curtained enclosure.

Dawn reached out a hand. Her fingertips brushed a damp strand away from the avatar’s face. “Well, I see you have already had your bath.” Her hand lingered by her cheek.

Dusk’s eyes dropped. Her fingers rose to catch the silk of her lover’s blouse.

“You’re dressed,” she pointed out. The question was in her eyes when she looked up again. Dawn caught Dusk’s hand and shifted the bundle from her other hand into it. Dusk accepted her clothes, with the realization that something had come up. A matter of business, or her lover would not have met her in this fashion. There were two modes of *avon* dress. The difference was one article of clothing. The seal. A binding of the body that was demanded of those who served or represented authority. It was central to every formal garment. To don it was to don the responsibility associated with one’s name and set oneself above one’s animal nature. Picking up the silk-suede body sleeve she urged her lover to explain the change in plans.

Dawn hesitated while her friend sorted out the deceptively simple garment. She struggled with the best way to present it, but it was bad news, one way or the other, so she just cut to the point. “You were right.” Dusk with only one leg in properly, tripped in the process of threading the other. Her friend caught her, supporting her while Dusk sorted herself out. Her thoughts spun. Her friend, her lover, was pregnant. Not as the result of any sexual union, but a conception of her own mind and body.

At one time, all *lyn* self impregnated after physical maturation. *Lyn* parthenogenesis was a built in evolutionary test. In fact, the name *lyn* meant self testing. An evolutionary strategy that required a successful design to reproduce itself as a prerequisite for sexual reproduction. It was not enough to survive childhood in the wild, a body also had to be able to survive pregnancy—carry a child to term and survive parturition—before an opportunity for sexual reproduction presented itself. The awakening of their psionic potential had only added to the severity of their reproductive limitations.

A limit imposed on a *lyn’s* ability to self impregnate. Some mechanism of self conception that had been taken for granted was responsible for triggering the schism of their race. It had forced their race to acknowledge, and pursue the study of a spiritual universe. Not as a remote abstraction, but as an integrated component of reality. Because, instead of auto-impregnation, a *lyn* suddenly found herself tested on her ability to conceive of herself—to somehow invest herself, her mind, her intrinsic self into a new life. In spite of every effort made, it was something that could not be taught. It either happened, and the lucky soul became her own daughter, or it did not happen, and the poor thing spent the rest of her life in heat—and thus infertile.

An individual like Dusk was a rare exception. A normal *aelyn* would conceive of herself at the climax of adolescence every time she was reborn. Given the length of life a *lyn* could expect in a domestic setting, a single individual could be represented in scores of generations. Dusk, on the other hand, had experienced a lag in each conception. She would remain in heat until they day of her own self conception, and until that day, she would be barren. In her last life, it had taken a thousand years to conceive of herself. Her mother-self had died barely seven years after her birth.

It was the longest life she had ever lived. It did not need to be said that it was about—experience told her—a hundred years shorter than she would need to conceive of herself again. If it bothered her, it was only because it had taken her ten thousand years to fall in love. As she finished the last fold and tuck on her body seal, she forced herself to accept it. It would be stupid to grieve over it. She could still expect to have a thousand years with Dawn.

The blow to her temple had stunned her. She cursed herself for the fall. The ache in her chest suggested that she had blown out most of her air when she bashed her head. Her equilibrium was shot too. *A little light might help,* she complained, being disoriented and drowning in a darkened alcove. There was a flash of illumination as the curtain parted for a moment. A body slipped into the water, and something brushed her arm.

The touch sent a shock through her. «*I don’t see anyone… Did they go under?*» The intruding thought rode into her consciousness on a whip-crack pulse of sensation. Her thoughts were invaded by sound and vision, twisting and skewing her attention. The touch was fleeting, but the rapport diminished only marginally.

“God, it is dark in here.”

Her confused senses told her she had just spoken. *Am I still dreaming?* She felt the motion of limbs, and realized that they were not her own as the woman’s body slipped off the ledge into the deeper part of the pool. She could taste the blood on lips that were not her lips. “What the…? This can’t be… blood?” Again, she felt the words forming. “Rick! I need some help here!” Again they rang in what felt like her own ears. The eyes could not penetrate the murky depths of the pool. She did not need eyes—her own, or the ones she had somehow borrowed—to realize the woman was only a hand’s width away from her. She could feel it as if she was standing beside herself. She tried to force the hands into pulling her up, and discovered that whatever sort of bond they had was receptive, and only on her side. Turning her attention to her own limbs, she found them weak, as if paralyzed with sleep.

*What is happening to me!?*

A new voice intruded. “Linda?” Someone pulled back the curtain, illuminating the alcove again. “What are you …” the new voice cut off, at the sight of the blood bath. “Holy Christ!” There was a moment of loud splashing.

“I think there’s somebody in here,” the woman explained as her companion immersed himself in gore. And then she recoiled in renewed shock at the distinct feel of hands on her shoulders. A wave of new sensations exploded through her. The grip of oblivion tugged at the corner of her mind. She did not notice passing out.

The world jumped. Hands that were not her own grabbed at her body. Her world warped as her mind tried to align itself to three different bodies of sensation. Three different perspectives. She caught a glimpse of herself as she was lifted out of the bath, feeling herself through the hands supporting her head and neck. She lost her self in a flood of memories she had never experienced. She reeled at the depth and continuity of the lives she had never lived. Realizing that the memories were not her own, she reached for her past, desperate for a shred of self to cling to, and turned up only disturbing fragments. The ache in her ribs brought back the impact with the rim of the bath. A sharper pain from her right eyebrow, across her temple and stabbed into her skull.

Other doors opened in her mind. New hands gripped her, at her feet, hips and shoulders stretching her body out on the flagstones, at her throat pressing into an artery.

She heard herself take a ragged gasp and scream as the fear and the agony and the astonishment overcame her paralysis. Instantly, the touch multiplied with other hands checking her body for damage. Every touch opened up a doorway into another mind. The onslaught of sensation forced her to retreat deeper and deeper inside herself. A clatter of objects hit the flagstone. A gentle touch, something tugged at her eyelid. The open eye was speared by light.

“We were lucky,” Dawn added after a moment. “I don’t know when it happened, but we must have come awfully close to breaking the covenant,” Dawn commented as Dusk slipped into blouse and leggings. She had stood there watching her chosen come to terms with the idea that their fear had been confirmed. It made them—spiritually and psychically—polar opposites. It also made what she said next unspeakable, “But would that be so terrible? I can’t help but wonder what it is like to be *av’va*—to be as one.”

Dusk’s head snapped up. Fear and hunger etched her face. With a tortured voice she cried, “*Never!*” Her eyes pierced Dawn’s, her thoughts stabbing her lover to the core, underscoring her words, “*Never say that again!*” Dawn recoiled from her. “Do not even *think* it where I can hear,” she added, bringing her voice back under control. Behind her haunted eyes, she relived a memory of being devoured alive, body and soul, by her first lover, her first protector—and *enjoying* it. That had been two score lifetimes ago, but it was still fresh in her mind.

“Pupillary response is negative.” The voices chased after her into the depths of her retreat. Theshocks kept coming. Redoubling and gutting her with their relentlessness. She had no control of it. “Pulse, fast and irregular.” Her mind was as naked as her body. “She’s in shock, but I don’t see any signs of injury.” Something stabbed into her arm. Her helplessness fueled her panic, and her panic was making her even more helpless. “From all of this blood you’d think somebody’d been torn apart. Rick?”

“A nasty scrape on the head. No other obvious signs of physical trauma,” the other voice concurred, “but, with the way she reacted to being moved, I suspect spinal injury. She’s lucky she wasn’t drowning. Check that kit, let’s get a collar on her—and would somebody get a native physician, she is definitely a local.”

A hand raked her hair backand wiped the blood off of her forehead. “Where Rick? I don’t see any laceration.”

“That’s not possible, it was the first thing I saw.”

A third voice commented, “This is a hell of a way to spend shore leave.” A moment later it repeated. “Here’s the blood work. Massive endorphin and adrenal counts. No toxins, no drugs.”

“Kyle, get me a read on the pool too,” the first voice said while wrapping something about her neck. “That’s what I thought too, but that’s the second time I checked and there isn’t even a scratch.”

“You saw it. I saw it,” he described the wound, and she nodded.

“What are you thinking, Linda?” the other voice inquired.

“Get me that reading and maybe then I’ll know.”

They stood like that, gazes locked, for a long moment. Dawn’s face hardened. “It wasn’t a proposition,” she growled. “Even if you approved, others would not. As it happens, I can resist the temptation. Can you?” she challenged.

“I’m not playing games!”

“Can you?” she repeated.

“This isn’t funny, Ana.”

“Do you see me laughing?” her lover retorted hotly. “Do I hold you in such poor regard that I don’t feel your pain, regardless of whether I can understand it?” She turned and walked over to the railing. Staring out over the edge of the balcony, she could peer down on the heart of the *Ao’Dahn*. Without turning she added, “I need to know the answer to that question.”

Dusk’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t know,” she was forced to admit.

Dawn sighed. With resignation, she started undressing. Dusk’s eyebrow rose as Dawn released the catch on her belt.

“What are you doing?”

She paused. “We have to know before we are summoned.”

Dusk dropped bonelessly to the bench. She should have been prepared for this shock. They already knew what she was, so it followed that they would challenge them as soon as they knew Dawn’s spirit had polarized. As soon as they knew. “You told them,” she breathed in understanding.

“I had to. Do you think I figured it out on my own? I had to be tested. I went to my mother, and she, naturally, went to the *Dai*.” Dawn turned back to face her counterpart. Her hands resumed their task, dropping the belt and pulling out the ties on her blouse. “I don’t want to lose you, but they can force us apart if there is even a hint of doubt,” she stated softly.

“I thought you said it wasn’t a proposition,” Dusk countered.

“No. I do not want *av’va.* I refuse to be tempted.” Dawn looked down, her eyes troubled. “It would kill me to lose you,” she murmured. Shifting her mantle from her shoulders to an empty bench she added, “It will kill me to learn that you cannot resist the temptation. But then I came to you prepared for the possibility that my life might end here.”

“You mean that,” Dusk uttered numbly. “I didn’t realize…” she cut herself off. She bit her lip. Forty lifetimes did not change the fact that in this life she was only seventeen years old, and at moments like this it showed. Swallowing her own fear, she looked up. “If it comes down to that, don’t you think you might have said something before urging me to get dressed?” she complained, dropping the tunic she had been about to slide into. They looked at each other for a moment, one half dressed, the other half undressed, and started laughing. Before Dawn’s hands could continue their task, Dusk caught them. It took a moment for the laughter to die, but when it did, she spoke.

“This explains it.”

“Explains what?” Dawn wondered.

“The group of Terrans that suddenly appeared,” Dusk answered. “Now that the *Avon’Dai* knows you are *avaelyn* he can proceed with the wedding rites.” It was a sobering thought for both of them. It was the reason Dusk had feared Dawn’s self conception. In her own way, it was her fear of losing Dawn. In that light Dusk suddenly understood her lover’s desperation. Without a word, they both swiftly shed their clothing.

She cringed and clawed at the brace as it inflated. She was taking in the fast exchange, but her mind was not tracking. Their thoughts washed over hers, flooding her with redundant sensory input. It felt as if her dream had not ended, but simply become disjointed and chaotic. She heard one of the four individuals running away, and other feet rushing to the scene. She tried to speak, but her throat would not respond. Gentle hands pulled her arm down.

“You’re not going to believe this,” claimed the one she had heard called Kyle. There was a pause. “It’s her blood.”

“All of it!?”

“I don’t know. Jesus, its a whole fucking bathtub, you want me to check all of it?”

She lost track of the crash of voices, and forced her eyes to focus on the two crouching over her at her left. The man was looking at the woman with a trace of suspicion and disbelief. “Why don’t you look surprised?”

She shrugged and said, “It was in the catalogue.” There was a long pause. The woman’s eyes grew wide with disbelief and she added, “You did read the catalogue, didn’t you?”

“Lin, I pulled double shifts all last week, when was I supposed to have time to read every damn report? So, are you going to explain this, or do I have to wait until we go back to the ship to find out what the *hell* is going on?”

“What the hell *is* going on?” a new voice intruded. Everyone fell silent at the intrusion. When their attention shifted to their captain, her mind was suddenly free of their alien thoughts. The many hands affixed to her body still conducted a host of unwanted sensations, though.

The woman twisted around and stood up. “Sir.”

“At ease, Doctor. Tell me the situation.”

Something about the presence of their superior brought order to their thoughts. One by one, other hands withdrew, and she found it possible to close the windows in her mind. In one action, she reached up and ripped off the constricting neck brace, shoving everyone away from her with an invisible hand, and darted out of the alcove. In one leap, she cleared the blood bath, and entered the light. The weight of many eyes hit her like a slap in the face. Others behind her were shifting into gear, discordant thoughts clawing at her heels. *How do I shut this off!?*, she wailed in thought as the doors at the back of her mind screamed white hot nails in her brain.

Even without physical contact, she was being overwhelmed by the raw information flooding through her. Momentum had carried her to the edge of the pool, and she could sense them closing in on all sides. Without breaking stride, she launched herself over the heads of the bathers that had been summoned from the pool. As she hit the water, a cloud of blood swirled from her skin. Her bid for flight almost failed as the unbearable contact of alien hands shattered her rhythm. The closing fingers slipped off her slickened skin, stripping off her coat of blood in a streak. Other hands snaked across her as she darted across the pool, swimming for the nearest exit.

Twisting and squirming, she eeled her way past them and hauled herself out of the water. With a thought, she sluiced the water from her skin, stripping off the last residue of blood. Poppingthrough a heavy curtain, she found herself in the wash room. Rows of stalls and benches broke up the space. Directly across from her hung a mass of house robes. Information that had not been there when she desperately searched herself for memories reared up with perfect clarity. A bathed body was wrapped in house robes—never did one put on previously worn clothes after bathing. The agony she could experience from even casual contact with strangers forced her to pause and throw on some robes in mid flight.

A hand fell on her shoulder as she stepped up to the curtain leading out into the hall. Her body acted faster than she could follow, whipping around, arms flashing, and her eyes caught up in time to see a man flying away from her into a wardrobe. The bruises on her arms told her he had reacted with a trained killer’s reflexes, and the look in his eyes as they reached up for hers reflected her surprise. She looked up and saw the others who had accompanied him standing well clear of her.

“Captain?” someone said, approaching the man carefully.

He waved a hand, and pushed back to his feet. She took a step back and clutched the curtain, ready to make a fast break. He held up his hands in a calming gesture. Still holding her eyes, he said, “You were listening to us, weren’t you? Do you understand *uman*?”

Hesitantly, she spoke, “*Uman*?”

He nodded, “Our language. We did not mean to frighten you. We thought you were hurt.” She couldn’t help raising an eyebrow. It was taking a lot out of her to linger in their presence. The pressure of their massed attention was making it difficult to breathe. “We were just trying to help, do you understand?”

Her brow wrinkled with the effort it took to respond. “I… I can’t… Please, I can’t think,” she stammered, making a gesture, as if to push them all away. The woman—Linda, she recalled—suddenly looked up in understanding. The expression on the captain’s face suggested that he had beaten the young doctor to the realization. A look passed between them.

The captain nodded.

“Everyone, out!” Linda exclaimed, shoving people back the way them came. “She can’t shield her mind. It’s driving her insane just being in the same room with us.” They watched her sag in relief as the room cleared. The woman placed her hand on the captain’s arm and tried to pull him away with her. “Skipper? Let her go, we can’t help her. She’s not our problem.” He shook her off and stepped closer.

She shied back, as his fingers closed on her. To her astonishment, his thoughts did not invade her, and she relaxed.

“Captain Dane, what are you doing?”

The captain pulled her away from the curtain and turned her around. She hadno idea what he was doing, but the peace of his mind was a balm to her shattered nerves. She felt his fingers shift her long hair off the back of her neck. His voice came from behind her, talking to Linda, “Do you see? She might be our problem after all.”

Lieutenant Intern Linda Mathias looked at the *lyn’s* exposed neck in surprise. “I didn’t even notice them,” she murmured, as she examined the female receivers of a neural interface. The arrangement was the standard military configuration, rather than those of an aegis civilian. She voiced her consternation, “You may be right. It doesn’t matter if they are viral augments, or inherited architecture. With this kind of enhancement, it is inconceivable that she would go this long untrained. Why would they do this to one of their own?”

“I don’t know. The question is, what do we do about it?” the captain returned. Human and *avon* civilizations had wildly different technological bases. *Avon* had attained their psionic potential when the human race was still experimenting with stone tools and fire. The power of the gods had haunted mankind throughout history, but by the time they had accepted it, they had already walked among the stars by the power of their hands alone. Psionics and Physics were both very powerful tools, but each had a way of bypassing the laws of the other. There had been a bloody chapter in the early days of contact, which had taught them that an individual on either side, armed with the weapons of his own culture, could devastate or destroy whole communities defended only by their native technology.

“I find it hard to believe they would have ignored the articles of the treaty,” he went on, when she did not venture to offer an answer. During the uneasy days of the second contact, strict rules had been laid down regulating the exchange of technology between human and *avon* societies. He shook his head. “It’s just possible she came out of the wild.” He realized they had been talking as though she was not there, and stepped around to where he could look her in the face. “I should have asked this already. I am Dane’Captain Shon,” he identified himself in the *avon* fashion, “How do I address you?”

Dusk welcomed her lover into her body. It was a moment to savor, for in a handful of weeks her pregnancy would not allow Dawn to extend herself. That was the price of a sex that was at once male and female. Unlike human hermaphrodites, *lyn,* evolved with one sexual organ. For the most part, the organ was a muscular throat—or *coi*. It opened into her body from her crotch, like a human vagina, except the *coi* enveloped—and attached itself to the back of—her *koi*—the head of the organ, which was analogous to both human uterus and penis. It rested in her body almost precisely where a uterus would be located in a human female. The *koi* contained a cavity into which an embryo would be released—and if fertilized, where the fetus could gestate—it could also elongate itself, and thrust itself out of the *coi* to penetrate another *lyn.* The eager tongue of flesh met the tip of Dusk’s own second tongue and licked around it inside her. Her mouth searched for Dawn’s, teasing open her lips.

Dawn’s mouth received her true tongue, allowing it to curl behind her teeth and tickle the edge of her palette. They were more shy about entering each other’s minds. That was where the danger lay. Her thoughts brushed the surface of Ana’s mind, testing for the powerful force of attraction that had always been there. It was a hesitant touch.

The feather-tip tickle of thought whispered in Dawn’s mind. It penetrated to the depths of her soul, an irresistible force of attraction that threatened to draw them out of their selves and into each other. It evoked a stuttered gasp from her lover. A moan escaped her own lips. Nerve endings could not hope to convey the sensation of this touch. If this moment, this experiment, did not destroy them both, she would ask for nothing more. A life-time together—and a generous one by human standards, she admitted—was nothing to complain about. She slid her fingers over Ana’s ribs, and raked them back up from her flanks, feeling her body jump at the pleasant sting. The urge to hold on and never let go sparked half the tension of their embrace. She could not explain to herself why it was she loved this magnificent creature, with her vibrant young soul. She did not even try. But, she knew how deeply Ana loved her.

If it hurt, it was because her successor could expect to live as many lives as she had. Each life potentially as long as Dusk’s previous life. That meant the more they made of their time together, the harder it would be for Dawn to face nine thousand years alone, after her death. That was all that needed to be said, to understand why Ana had been willing to risk everything she was to find out if the one life they could share could be taken away from them as well. And if so, if this one moment was all they had, why not make the most of it? Swallowing a fear ten thousand years old, she carefully began to unfold the wings of her mind, inviting her lover to enter her fully.

No two individuals could form a rapport as close as an *aelyn-aeslyn* pair. Their natures were so completely opposite that the normal barriers of their minds generated no repulsion. Quite the contrary, their mental defenses forced them to snap together like a pair of magnets. With the focus of their thoughts wedded in alignment, their very identities shared in the same understanding, the boundaries between their souls became almost non-existent.

The intercourse of body and mind posed very specific risks. During heat or pregnancy, a body became infertile. Those would be times when Dusk and Dawn could risk a great deal of intimacy with out fear. But, now that Dawn was no longer in heat, she was fertile. Her fertility would have a narrow window. Her body was bouncing through some rapid changes trying to accommodate her sudden pregnancy.

One minor detail. It made all the difference.

Physically and spiritually, Ana was programmed to impregnate or be impregnated. Spiritually, Dusk could contribute what was needed to spark a new life, but physically, she was barren. There was no where for that spark to go. No new life to kindle. Or so a foolish pair of lovers like themselves once believed. For them, two souls inspired as perfect complements, so perfectly matched as to work seamlessly as one, that spark could make them one in fact—two souls trapped in one identity. Holding their minds apart defeated the very purpose for which they had been trained. Holding their bodies apart—ineither the physical or spiritual sense—only promised to make the temptation increasingly irresistible, and inevitably fatal.