Avatars Initiation - 4

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She opened her mouth to give her name, and realized that she didn’t have one. She could not believe it. She was almost literally floored by her disbelief. Dane caught her on the way down, easing her up against the wall in confusion. She wracked her brain for words, and stammered in her own language, “*O emon… emon… Avon.*” Her heart hammered in sudden panic, and her words wailed in rapid despair, “*O neiaizo. Ya ama ne—aje non, no aje emon Avon. Av onu eyrn syn.”* Her eyes widened, dilating open even as a film of tears washed the world away. Shaking her head, she recoiled from the couple. Staggering away from the wall, she had to turn and walk away to keep her balance. The unbearable words were echoing through her mind like blows beating her back from the revelation. Her lungs heaved and sucked but she seemed unable to draw a sustaining breath. Her mind reeled as she shoved her way through the curtains. She entered the hall running and did not stop as she exploded through bath foyer. Her desperate motion carried her out of the receiving area and across the crowded *osi j’caoi.* Her flight was spurred on by the lash of wayward thoughts. The crush of people drove her all the way up to the upper concourse. She had no idea where she was going until her body was checked by the guardrail. Her momentum almost sufficed to pitch her over the edge, but her hands locked on the wrought stone and arrested her flight.

Ahead of her the open core of the *dahn* dropped away in layers, tiers and tiers of an artificial world. That was her life, a vast gaping chasm tearing through all the layers of her identity. She jerked back from the rail when she recognized where she was. It was the place from her dream. The very spot from which she had thrown herself to her death to escape it.

Light stabbed through the veil of blood red hair, glowing orange and gold as the wind whipped it about her like a miniature inferno. It also teased the fabric of her blouse. Typical of her choice of dress, it was a loose fitting, oversized shirt, hanging to the tips of her fingers and brushing at her knees. Her opalescent grey eyes gazed out over the waves. The water was losing its glimmer beneath a towering thunderhead riding the wind in from the sea. In almost no time the mounting clouds blotted out the setting sun. «*I wonder which falls first*,» she thought to Ashara.

Her lover, once more struggling into her seal, sent back, «*The rain.*»

A second glance at the cloud hazed sun told her that they were late. Having already missed their appointment, she found herself wishing they had not finished in such haste. After all that tension—and their needless fears—it would now be four days until they could be summoned. The wend had begun. Which was well. Their experiment had given them much to think about. «*It’s strange,*» she thought. «*There was no temptation. I mean, it was like the first time, when we were both in heat. Hesitance at first, unsure where the boundaries were or what was safe. There was polarity, though. It felt like it did the last time, and for a moment I was really frightened. There were no boundaries. I didn’t know where I stopped and you started, but I never felt any danger. How do you explain it?*» She turned to look at Ashara.

«*I don’t know. It felt like sun dancing. It seemed to take everything I had to touch the surface without being sucked into the heart. When I let go, we just clicked. I was pretty sure that was it. I don’t know how we ever pulled apart. But we did. It doesn’t make sense,*» Ashara returned. Clasping her knees, and burying her chin, she tried to figure it out.

She knew the curse inside and out. Literally.

When her first lover had taken her in *av’va*, it had seemed like the two of them had become one whole. A perfect marriage. They had thought, dreamed, and felt as one, but they had lived—for a while—as two. Together, they had been a god. She had learned, in horror, that their unity was a lie. Azael deceived her. Tricked her into a gruesome game, by tempting one of her darkest desires. Her lover had dominated their union. She had submitted to her lover’s force. Believing it was what she wanted, she abandoned herself to her lover’s care; giving herself up even as her body was devoured. A dark fantasy that only a god could descend to and hope to survive. A fool, she had assumed that the terrible experiment could be undone. But, when she had nothing else to cling to, her lover, her other self, had declared that they did not need two bodies. Azael had planned this. Her lover had feared that Avael would be tempted by the existence of her own body to free herself from the embrace. To prevent her from ever escaping, her lover had devoured her soul.

To this day, she had no idea how she had ever escaped from that living hell. Just as she had no idea how she and Ashana had managed to break off when they found themselves on the verge of *av’va* a few days ago. It was possible that she had somehow developed an immunity to the curse, but if such a thing was possible, why had it not come up in the past nine thousand eight hundred and fifty-two years?

Curiosity had lured her back to the edge. Her only memory of the settings around her were from a dream, but they were astonishingly accurate. She wondered if it meant she had stood on this spot before. She flinched as a hand tentatively brushed her shoulder. She spun, her back to the rail, and found herself staring at Dane. “Don’t touch me,” she growled under her breath. She crossed her arms over her chest, slid down a pace and turned her shoulder toward him. She frowned at having missed any sign of his approach. As he slipped over beside her she looked at him. Since he had chased her from the bath without hesitation, nothing was left to the imagination. He was an attractive man with a hard, lean body. He had short, dark hair, and a strong, but intelligent face. As she looked him over, his steel grey eyes were watching the storm clouds warily. “Why did you follow me?”

His face took on a measuring look as the clouds rolled menacingly closer. In spite of the hour the wind was warm and charged by the impending storm. He shrugged. “I don’t understand your language, but what you said didn’t sound much like a name to me.” He shrugged again. She did not answer during the pause.

Behind them, they heard Linda arriving in Dane’s wake. “I hate to say it, but I think we are going to have a damp and unpleasant walk back,” she observed grimly. In the light she could see Linda was a slender, androgynous woman, graced with an elegance of form anyone might envy. Her short hair was a chalk-white blond, and her eyes were a complex hazel. The last time she had seen the woman, her body was still coated in blood up to her armpits. Before following them, she had washed off most of it, and she had even brought robes. As she approached, extending one set of them to Dane, he held up his hand for Linda to keep her distance. His eyes still pressed her for a response. For added emphasis, he cocked an ear slightly toward her.

“I don’t know my name,” the *lyn* forced herself to say. “I might not have one. In the absence of that, it is proper to address me as Avon. I don’t know if I have a house or patronage, so it is just Avon. No claim to be addressed.”

Linda interjected, “What was it you said to us back there?”

Avon glared at her. “When your name is Avon, you are no one.” That was not all she had said, but then she did not understand what she had been thinking when she implied she might be both a toy and a slave.

“Oh,” she responded flatly.

Avon sighed. Dane considered her words as he stepped over to his intern to accept the robes she was still thrusting towards him. Her gaze was drawn back over the water. The sun shone vainly through the clouds, conspiring to make an ugly prospect disturbingly beautiful. She did not want to think about what could have happened to her, but where was she supposed to go if she had no idea where she was coming from? After a short silence, she returned to the subject. “If that answers your question, then I would like to ask you a question.”

Dane gestured for her to continue, as he pulled his robes on.

“What was it you were so interested in about my neck?” she asked, unconsciously raising a hand to her nape. Her fingertips grazed the paired receivers. She felt a number of raised circles of flesh as sensitive as her nipples that covered hard structures embedded in her vertebrae.

Sensing her curiosity, and guessing correctly that she had no idea what she was feeling, he turned his back to her so she could see his own interface nodes. Pointing to one, he explained, “It is a direct interface neural linkage. I am not surprised if you have never heard of it. I could tell you it is used to access and manipulate data within a computer architecture, but I would be even less surprised if you didn’t understand what I am talking about. What I can tell you, that will matter to you, is this. Because you have that, you are—or your mother before you was—a citizen of the aegis, and an officer in the military.”

“And what does that mean?” she asked hesitantly.

“Well, that depends on who you are,” he pointed out. The sight of her hair, whipping about in the breeze, forced him to add, “And what you are.” He had to admit that there were a lot of things he did not know about *avon*, but one of the few things about every citizen of the aegis knew was that the blood red hair unique to *avon* genetic heritage was a sign of exclusive breeding. It appeared in only three bloodlines, one of which was allegedly extinct—with the exception of the Ideal. “I get the impression you are not too sure about the first one. As for the second, you are an enigma. You are fluent in human standard, and you have obviously been extensively trained in some form of martial arts, which suggests that you did not grow up in the wild. But, if you will pardon my saying so, you also seem to have no control over you psionic ability—which is unheard of in an *avon* who was raised domestic, and illegal for any active psionic within the aegis.

“Add to that, that you were found drowning in a pool of blood—according to my doctor here, your own blood, mind you—in the public baths,” he went on, taking a deep breath as he went out on a limb, “and it looks like a recipe for world class trouble.” Well off to the side, Linda Mathias put a hand to her mouth. She could see where the captain was going. From her expression, Linda could see that Avon was not following them.

“I don’t think it is safe for us to continue this discussion here,” she said to both of them. Dane nodded agreement, and Avon looked at her in startled confusion.

“Why not?”

“Avon, can you think of any reason why anyone would want to kill you?” she asked carefully. Not that she expected she would. A very skilled and talented psionic might be able to survive wounds so terrible she bled a river of blood in the process of healing herself, but if such a psionic stood before them, she had not survived intact.

“Is it possible that it is a result of my pregnancy?” Ashana asked, interrupting Ashara’s brooding silence. Ashara looked up, and her answer died on her lips. Ashana turned to see what had caught her lover’s eye, and gasped at the orgasm of dying light. Ashara gazed at her lover, framed in a halo of glory. The clouds beyond Ashana were angry, blood black mountains laced with silver and gold. Her nerves tingled for flight. It had been too long since she had storm danced. Opening the wings of her spirit, Ashara unfolded her body, and stepped into the air.

“The sky is threatening,” she grinned, “what do you think we should do?”

Ashana glanced up at her and smiled devilishly, “Strip,” she laughed, “we are about to get very wet.” She barely got it out before the first fat drop slapped the stone railing between them. The smell of rain had been seeping up on them and Ashana suddenly realized how strong it had become. A second drop struck nearby as Ashana continued, “Too late.” With a crack of thunder, the sky opened up. They cringed under the assault, laughing, but Ashana grew serious for a moment. She laid a hand flat on her belly and closed her eyes for a long breath. Catching Ashara’s hand, and meeting her eyes, she said, “We will talk about this. Later.” With that, they dismissed all thought of the covenant, challenges, and wedding engagements, and rode their thoughts into the maelstrom.

Avon’s stunned silence was interrupted by the sudden onslaught of rain. Linda ducked for cover, followed shortly by Dane, and still she stood there, mouth open in shock. She turned to where they huddled under an overhang. “Why would anyone want to kill me?” she uttered in amazement.

The captain urged her under cover with a vigorous wave of his hand. She shuffled over, and he had to grab her and drag her under cover when she came to a stop in front of him. She was still looking at them in disbelief, oblivious of the water trickling over her face. He glanced at Linda, who simply shrugged, and responded at last, “Because of what you are?” His hand ran through his hair, and he sighed. Again the uncanny resemblance between her and the young *lyn* they had seen on their way into the baths suggested itself. There was little doubt in his mind that the *lyn* had been the Ideal. It was not a pretty implication, and admitting it only complicated the problem she presented—but it had to be considered. So he added, “Or what you appear to be?” Her confused look told him she did not follow.

“You really don’t know who you are, do you?” asked Linda.

Avon turned slightly toward the young intern. Her head dropped as she answered, “I don’t know.” She finally seemed to notice how wet she was, wiping the moisture from her face and running her hand back through her tangled hair. When she spoke again, she looked away from both of them, back toward the edge of the balcony. “It is so strange. Everything I have done today—this evening?—I just… I never seem to know what I can do until I do something.”

“Amnesia.” Dane muttered.

Linda nodded.

Dane regarded the *lyn* for a moment, and then glanced around. They were in the mouth of an entry way. After checking the door, and finding it unlocked, he sent them into the hall beyond with a gentle push. It was not the way they had come, but he felt he could trust his intuition to get them back through what appeared to be a residential area. To his surprise, Avon took the lead, making each turning without hesitation. It was possible she had no more idea than he where they were and how to get back to the annex, but by the same measure, her guess was probably as good. He lagged a few steps behind to hear his crew member’s thoughts on the situation.

From the look on her face when he paused, letting her catch up to him, he guessed she had a lot to say. Linda frowned, and walked in silence for a moment before going into it.

“If someone really did try to kill her,” she began, giving him an entreating look, “what do we do with her? My guess is she was very good before this—whatever—happened. We don’t want to meet up with some one who can destroy a person as powerful as she must have been.” He kept his eyes on Avon, wondering if the things he had learned about mental discipline, and simple discretion, could keep her from knowing everything they had to say. He crossed his arms and his own brow furrowed as he confided his own take on the situation.

“It gets more tricky than that,” he said. “We don’t know who she really is—finding out could be very risky—and we don’t know she is the person they were actually after.” He had to give it to the young doctor, she was not slow. She locked her face down, but that in itself only showed she had followed the implication. Linda thought it over, and realized that it was a lack of information that really hurt them.

“We have to find out who she is,” she agreed. “I assume that you don’t want to check her out through local channels, do you?”

“And announce to the world, and a killer at large, that she is alive and significantly weakened? No,” he stated firmly. If someone had wanted her dead, there was a good chance he—or whatever—thought the deed done. The smart thing would be to simply sneak her off planet, before rumors started to circulate, and therefor keep her safe from a repeated attempt. Of course, abducting her was a brilliant way to start off an interstellar incident. “We have to get her to the enclave and check her out internally. Even if she isn’t one of ours, medical records should be able to track her.” Avon might not have DNA on record, but whoever she had inherited her interface from certainly did. Linda nodded, and he continued. “If we don’t have any record on her, then there are clear treaty violations. That would give us grounds to take her into protective custody.”

“That should do a lot to improve tensions,” she interjected sarcastically. “However, that still leaves a serious loose end,” she added. Given her resemblance to the Ideal, it was entirely possible the killer had savaged her by mistake. The two of them had been in the same location within the same window of time, in which case it was vital that the Ideal be warned. But, the only evidence they had to back up any threat report was Avon herself, and it was not entirely impossible that the killer might have been the Ideal herself. Or contrariwise, the killer might have taken the Ideal’s place. That possibility upped the stakes considerably. The same window of opportunity applied to both potential victims and potential suspects. It sounded paranoid, but then it would take an individual as powerful as the Ideal to survive the wounds which Linda suspected that Avon had sustained.

Having such suspicions on a world full of telepaths did not do much to settle her stomach. In spite of that she had to point out, “If she is who I think she is, we’re looking at a whole range of secondary targets or motivations.”

Dane grabbed her arm and growled, “I don’t like the way you think, but I can’t argue with it either. If either of us is right…” He cut himself off. His eyes darted towards Avon’s back, and he started over, “I’ll tell you something else I don’t like. The location was good to take down a powerful opponent with her guard down, but the whole equation is still off. This is pure supposition, mind you, but if you were—if you had the power to pull it off the assassination of a high profile class three active and assume her identity, would you leave any evidence at the scene of the crime? Would you leave anything at all?”

“If you don’t like the way I think, why are you better at it?” she fired at him. Linda Mathias glanced forward as well, and mused to herself for a moment. Even with her training as a military medical scientist, she could only guess at the full capabilities of psionics. From all the rumors and stories she had heard, imagination was the only limit. If that was all she had to go with, then there was the ideal solution. “Since this is devolving into supposition, let’s look at the extreme. If I wanted to take her place, and I had what I needed to do it, I would want to literally become her. I would want her body, her memories, and I would want them to be perfect. Ideally, I would walk away from the scene of the crime *in* the only evidence. The question is, is that an actual possibility, and if so,” she challenged, with a wave in Avon’s general direction, “what could possibly go wrong with that plan that would explain her?”

Dane opened his mouth to reply, but decided it wiser to keep his own counsel for the moment. Linda was a loyal officer, but he was too professional to divulge omega classified material. Unlike the majority of humans, he knew that *avon* had the ability to transfer their minds into other bodies. It was a step beyond cloning that aegis scientists had devoted several fortunes to replicating. As a class three latent, he had been one of a small number of test subjects recruited for the experiment. Instead he said, “We really don’t know the limits of psionics, but these people have been studying and developing psionic technology for millennia. It goes without saying that we’ve only seen a fraction of what they are truly capable of. This is one of those circumstances where the book says to exercise extreme paranoia.” With that, he indicated that the conversation was over for the moment.

She indicated that she was not quite finished with their discussion.

Dane looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

She smiled. “Well, at least there is an easy answer to what to do with her for the moment,” she announced beaming.

“Really?” Dane inquired, raising the other eyebrow. She slipped into a grin as she rubbed the hem of her robe between her fingers. Dane caught her smile, as she pulled the cowl over her wet hair. He had not thought of that. “It might work.” With a few quick steps he was back at Avon’s side.

She glanced over as he appeared at her shoulder. Her face held no expression, but the careful way her eyes held his betrayed that she had been listening in. Her eyes dropped as the realization flickered in the depth of his mind. He wished he had the ability to probe her thoughts. But from what he could read, the content of their discussion had impacted her deeply.

“I have put you in danger,” she murmured.

It was a statement, but there was a faint undertone of embarrassed apology. He made her pause, with a hand on her arm. “No. Responsibility lies with the person who initiates action, not with the people that get caught in the cross fire,” he said with a stern look. Grabbing the edges of her cowl, he pulled it up over her head, hiding her distinctive mane. As he tucked in a wild strand of hair, he remarked, “I don’t know how you hold yourself together. Just how deep do you see?”

She blushed. “I can’t help it. I did not mean to spy.”

He shrugged. “It saves time explaining. As long as you understand that there is a chance of danger, and you keep your head down, we should make it through this. Aside from us, I doubt anyone even knows you are alive at the moment. Until we think of a way to get some answers, it is best to just keep it this way for now. Do you understand?”

She nodded, nervously. When they started walking again, she asked, “What am I supposed to do? I do not know where to go from here.”

Deliberately misunderstanding her, he answered, “Back to the annex.”

A *dahn* was a massive piece of architecture, but it did not even approach the hundred plus stories of a terran arcology. It’s nine vaulting levels, and loosely woven structure allowed rain to penetrate to ground level in front of the annex. Thanks to Avon’s unerring instinct, the three of them had reached the public baths unnoticed. Dane cursed under his breath when he saw his officers gathered in the foyer talking to native authorities. He had forgotten that a native physician had been summoned during the confusion. On arriving, confronted with a bath full of blood, she had no doubt immediately summoned what passed here for the police. He gave Linda orders to sneak Avon into their group and watch over her, while he approached the man in charge.

Naturally, the native did not speak *uman.*

Another native, a *lyn* appeared and interpreted for them. The conversation was short, and Dane got the impression that they were less interested in questioning them than they were in convincing him and his people that they had stumbled across some kind of prank, with assurances that the juvenile responsible would be caught and reprimanded. He kept his surprised realization off his face as he went along with it, saying only that some of his officers had been surprised by an adolescent covered in blood, who eluded them and ran away.

Clearly, this was part of a cover-up, on their part, but he wondered about the motive behind it. *Avon* had always been close mouthed about themselves. Relationships between human and *avon* had long had a classic cold war taste. Humans collectively pretended to have no clue as to the full potential of psionics. Human literature spoke for itself, convincing *avon* that humans would literally kill for the secrets of immortality. However, aegis intelligence agencies had known for a long time that *avon* had mastered techniques that allowed them become virtually immortal—through various combinations of parthenogenic reincarnation, and instantaneous regeneration—but maintained the pretense of having only unsupported suspicions. Obviously, they hoped that Dane and his staff had not understood what they had witnessed, and for their own protection it was essential to convince them that the case was so.

Unfortunately, that did not tell him what they themselves knew about what had happened, nor what their intentions toward Avon might be. Fortunately, it was dark, and their group was large enough that one more body in identical robes huddling in the rain did not stand out. He explained that he had gone in pursuit, but the alleged prankster had lost him in the *dahn.* After the interview concluded, he went over and joined his people. They were all robed and hooded, waiting under the eye of an escort.

In poor *uman*, he announced that he would take them to their rooms, which brought a subdued cheer from the naval officers. After several years in a shipboard environment, none of them was used to the assault of raw weather. Dane ushered his people on, and spared a glance at Avon. She was not looking well. She seemed to be in shock, or autistic withdrawal. At least she responded to Linda’s hand on her elbow, guiding her along. With a gesture to his executive officer, to take his place and distract their guide, he slipped back to check on Avon, and see what he could do to cushion her from the impact of human minds. When he reached her, she simply looked up and said:

“They don’t know anything. All they are concerned with is keeping you from asking questions. The evidence has already been removed, or disposed of.” She grabbed his hand, and leaned into him. He could feel a constant shudder in the rhythm of her walk. He squeezed her hand.

After a moment, he asked, “What sort of questions are they asking themselves?” When he got no answer, he bent around to see her face. Her lips were moving, but there was no sound. He put an arm around her shoulder and whispered, “Never mind. We’ll talk about it in private later. Just hold it together until then, okay?” He gave her a reassuring hug, trying to project mental silence around them.

Matters became more complicated as they arrived at the suite of apartments that had been prepared for them. The facilities provided to house the guests of the *Dai* were small and starkly elegant. The suite had twenty small rooms on the upper floor. Five faced in, bordered by a balcony looking over the main sitting room, and five faced out, looking over the small arbor garden they had crossed through to reach the entrance. Dane escorted Avon to one of the back rooms, while the others explored the downstairs. He picked out a corner room and walked her in. He stayed with her for a few moments to help her regain her equilibrium. He was there with her when his executive officer found him and delivered the news.

“Captain, we just received a summons to dinner,” Commander Alt told him softly, when he answered her gentle knock. “They have already laid out clothes for us. There are a number of servants waiting to get us dressed. Can you believe they think we need help to get dressed?”

Dane smiled, “Actually, I hear that *avon* formal dress, while it looks simple and elegant, is rather complicated. Try not to be offended.”

Alt nodded and cocked her head so she could see the shivering red head curled up on the bed. Dane put a hand on her shoulder and moved them both out into the hall. Alt had to inquire, “I heard you tell them she got away. Is there something I should know about?”

“Meggan,” he sighed, “I really think it is best if you pretend you haven’t noticed anything unusual. I know you have been working on your mental discipline, but right now it is safest if you don’t know anything.”

Commander Meggan India Alt raised her eyebrows at that, and offered a little shrug. Realizing that this had to be nipped in the bud, he quickly added that it would be in the best interest of the officers if they also did not become too curious, and told her to have as many of them as she could double up, so the rooms near Avon’s could be left unoccupied. He promised that as soon as they were all protected by the mind locks they were supposed to receive at dinner, and back in the privacy of their own rooms, he would explain everything.

Together, they went back down stairs and allowed the servants to dress them in seal and formal attire. Before their escort arrived to take them to dinner he went back up and checked on Avon a final time. As he entered, he saw her sitting on the window seat, gazing out the open window. She looked over as he approached. In a soft voice she greeted him.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked, kneeling beside her.

“I think, if I can keep from being touched, I can avoid the worst of it, but it is very hard to concentrate around so many people. I just start to get lost. It gets overwhelming, and I don’t have any where to turn to escape it,” she looked back out the window. “When I can no longer hear myself think, I just suddenly tune out. I feel like I’ve fallen asleep. When I come to, I find myself some place familiar, but I have no idea how I got there. It happened with Linda, on the way to the annex, and for a moment no one was paying attention to me and I noticed we were there already. It happened coming here.” She shook her head. Taking a deep breath, she turned again to search his face. “You have to go,” she stated, somewhat resigned.

He nodded. “I’ll be back. You’ll be safe here. I’m sure you’ll be happy to be left alone for a bit. We’ll probably be back late. Are you all right with that?”

She nodded.

He admonished her to get some sleep, and excused himself from the room. The rest of the officers were waiting downstairs in the entry, most of them had been spoken to in private, and he was sure of their discretion. Fortunately, few of them really had a clear idea what had happened in the bath. Together, they slipped into the storm cloaks their assigned servants offered , and filed out into the night. By the time they got back, Avon was deep asleep. Rounding up Linda, Rick, Kyle and Alt, and leading them into what seemed to be a drawing room, he laid out the problem before them. They were up late into the waning hours of night discussing the implications of Avon’s existence, and the situation it placed all of them in.

Caressed by the moon, her body writhed and arched; her arm rising as if to fend off attack. The taunting images were different from her last nightmare. It was disjointed, tearing and fragmenting. There was no sense of place or time. Or rather there was, but only in snatches. A wild array of moments and scenes that seemed to have no continuity. It reminded her painfully of the moments of chaos when her mind had been ripped open by brushing fingertips. The worst of it was a sense of physical disruption, chased by the feeling that there was a sane thread, a continuity of self that mocked her absence of memory.

A part of her danced under the surface of sleep’s paralysis, desperately aware of how near the haven of waking lay. Her mind—in embracing sleep—revisited an eternal moment, where memories tore at her heart and tried to rend her soul as they had in the instant the experience first seared her. In eye of chaos, she was a child—huddled in a womb of soothing serenity. Her eyes were shut tight, and her fists clenched tight over her breast, but the howling chaos pierced her inner vision subjecting her to an endless stream of torment.

Her throat struggled to give voice to inarticulate pleas for help, but her vocal chords were frozen with terror and confusion. Her body wrenched itself around the desperate need to scream and break the spell, but only a faint rasp escaped.

Her mouth framed the strongest word of denial known to a child—over and over—as her spirit toured a hell within. Her mind stabbed desperately at the barriers between consciousness and sleep. Only a simple shift of mental state and her wounded soul would be safe. Rescued, from the ghosts of memories painful enough to shatter her. Saved, from a horror so harsh it cracked the discipline of a mind strong enough to pry between dimensions.

Her eyes flew open.

She regretted it instantly. Her sight was assailed by an impossible vision of two here’s, two now’s and her brain struggled to superimpose them on each other. She was awake, but she was still dreaming. With a tearing mental effort, she focused on the image she had reason to expect. An image of the room etched in moonlight slowly resolved before her eyes in response to the shift in her attention. She sat up hesitantly in bed and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

A fragment of a dream—or was it a memory?—imposed itself on her vision. A lover responding to her caresses, her face engraved in memory with love and passion. That face. Her face. The face of her killer. Without warning, her whole being recoiled. She was looking at a mirror.

It was as if her mind plummeted through an abyss. A violent, eternal instant with her very flesh twisting through her thoughts. Her wits returned—badly frayed—what she hoped was only an instant later. She closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. And then the panic hit. After the spasm of animal terror passed, she realized that she sat, as surely as if she were still in bed, suspended high over the Emerald Coast.

Looking around her, she unconsciously got to her feet and pivoted around for a better view. Noticing, she took a couple experimental steps. *I’m walking on air!* She thought with delight. She whirled about in a mad dance and suddenly swallowed her heart as she fell!

Precisely one meter, she found, as she painfully crashed in a heap on the floor. Something pulled at her scattered senses, forcing her to collect her thoughts and remember herself. *Just a dream. I’m just dreaming. Everything is fine. All I have to do is wake up.* Her eyes snapped open, and the image of the room reappeared. This time there was no double vision. After that quick check to make sure, she looked down. She could not see her hands. What she could see was a vision of land and sea far below, *through* her hands. For an eternal moment, it felt like a naked truth. As if somehow, she was some kind of dream let loose in reality. *No! Wake up!* With all the energy she could summon, she focused on where she was supposed to be, and even more fiercely, who she was supposed to be.

The timeless instant ended with a violent clarity. “Goddess!!!” She gasped, her body trembling with fear, and the floor properly under her body, she closed her eyes and began pulling her attention back together.

When she was satisfied that reality once again safely conformed to the proper guidelines, she collapsed in a heap and panted from an exertion she did not even know how to define. When her heart stopped crashing around within her chest, she opened her eyes and glanced around for the clock. Tracking up the wall, she focused on the inset display glowing through the darkness. “Almost third of one. Goddess,” she exhaled.

She pushed herself up from the floor, where she had ended up after sliding off of the bed. Wrestling her night shirt back down, she stood up and took stock. The sheets and comforter had all been thrown off the bed in her convulsions. She bent over to grab them but when she returned upright, she simply tossed them down again, shaking her head.

*Not worth it. I’ll never get back to sleep.* She ran her hands through her disheveled hair, sorting out her thoughts in a still awakening mind. *Dane and the others won’t be up until fifth of four,* she realized. With a grimace, she dropped her hands to her hips. She looked upon the bed and its invitation to renewed dreaming. *I’d rather wait it out.* She toed the comforter, but she was hot enough from her fit to forgo the added insulation. Approaching the door, she reflected, *Don’t lie. I can get back to sleep. I’m just afraid to.*

*Afraid of what I might remember.*

In the hall, a back lit silhouette of herself, she turned and punched the wall. The shock passed through her, but the impulse to rage and destroy was harder to ground out. “Stupid!” Feeling no pain, and not bothering to examine the result of her impact on the wall, she glared inwardly at herself. She composed herself against further outbursts and smoothed her hair back. It did not serve to loose her temper, it would only reverse and end up hurting her. Like everything else it seemed.

She continued on through the connecting hallway and came out on the balcony overlooking the common room below, and the majesty of the coastal highlands beyond the glass walls. She slunk through the dark, gliding down the stairs into room that was once the heart of a home.

*Now where did that thought come from?*

It was like the feeling she had while leading Dane and Linda through the *dahn*. That nagging sense of familiarity that gripped her, but explained nothing. It seemed strange to be here alone. *I’m not alone though. There are twenty humans sleeping all around me,* she thought with a shudder. Still the string of feelings persisted, irrationally. An apartment like this should belong to a family, but there was not enough of the house of Ara left to occupy the many accommodations reserved for the extended kin of the *Dai*. It was strange, this insight of hers. Making observations without any context to draw from was slightly spooky. It implied memory, but for now, it was too much. Turning from the room, she went to the washroom adjoining the workshop and dressed to go walking.

Slithering out of her nightshirt, she squirmed into a body seal, blouse, tunic and leggings. She found herself a pair of tall boots and an overcoat in the entry and with economic haste soon found herself sealing the door behind her, safely out in the night. She was mildly surprised to note that the evening storm had started its second advance during her brief distraction, and the moonlight had become diffuse and weak. She toyed with the notion going back in for her storm cloak, but resigned herself to the whim of the weather.

Avon was mildly afraid that she would retreat back to the lonely comfort of her apartment if she opened the door. She was severely afraid that if she gave it a chance, sleep would trap her again. So, setting her teeth, she stalked out into the darkened estate.

She did not have anywhere to go really. Her only thought was the need for action. She did not want to dwell on the nightmares—both sleeping and waking—that she had struggled with. She wanted to feed her ever hungry senses. She needed to fix on the moment.

There was a music in the motion. The fast beat of her heart and the slower rhythm of her echoing footsteps set a complex tempo. The wind whistled and moaned along the broad arcades, underscored by the rattling hiss of the rain. The crack and grumble of thunder dominated, reaching inside her chest and abdomen to caress her vulnerable parts. In the silences between, she heard even the endless passion of the sea, stroking the beaches, and thrusting among crevices and fissures of the rocks.

The sharp bite of ozone, and the spice of new rain, laced by the primal life-scent of the ocean, were taunting and arousing. Her nostrils flared as she drank in the heady mix. It sharpened her perceptions, opening her mind to her body, transforming flesh into some sensual flame. Her muscles moved beneath her skin like tongues of heat and light. Every motion created friction, her own clothes gripping and sliding around her in a binding caress. It was maddening. It was wonderful. It was unbearable. Her senses were overloaded and her whole being craved for release.

She wondered if making love would be as wonderful as opening herself to the sensuousness of the world as she moved through it. She could not remember. She smiled to herself. Amnesia might not be all bad, thinking of all the things she had to rediscover. In spite of herself, she wondered if that was just madness. The smile fled, as she remembered her reaction to her one fleeting glimpse of memory. If that was an example of what she had to remember, maybe it was better that she simply start over. Maybe she had experienced so much pain in her short life, that any moment without pain was pure pleasure. If that was true, she forced herself to smile, than ecstasy would probably be overwhelming!

She realized her mistake in the early dawn. She did not catch it right away, but the fourth or fifth time she came to her senses in some remote location she figured out what was happening to her. People had started waking up, and thinking out their plans for the day. Their impulses drifted into her thoughts and drove her from location to location without her realizing it was happening. Gritting her teeth, she tried to return to the annex, but she couldn’t avoid the *osi j’caoi.* Even at this early hour on the first day of wend, there were simply too much traffic for her unguarded mind to deal with.

She could not believe she had been so stupid.

All she had been thinking of was getting away from the pressure of their human minds. Actually, thought had not really entered into it. If it had, she might have considered the danger any mind posed to her, and one in specific promised. Instead, she had blithely cut herself off from the only safe haven she knew.