Avatars Initiation - 5

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Ashara was already smiling when she realized she was awake. Her smile broadened as she recognized the weight on top of her—from dreams she had been delivered into the embrace of her dream. The heat of Ashana’s body captured her imagination. Her eyes still closed, Ashara could make out every line and curve of her through that tacit perception. She was really there; of that there could be no question. Lying cheek to cheek, Ashara stretched her full length and gently shifted Ashana onto her side. Her body was pleasantly solid; her skin was taut and healthy, its texture silken. Her temperature was almost feverish. Her muscles firm and richly toned. The body of an active individual. Ashara cuddled up against her, nose to nose. Ashana remained still. Reaching beyond the limits of her own mind she brushed the thread of Ashana's submerged awareness. Images came into her mind—disjointed, fleeting. Alluring. Their pull drawing her under.

So Ashara opened her eyes.

Muted light seeped through the draped windows. The heavy down comforter pressed her and Ashana's heat back down on them. Ashara sat up and the cover slid from her shoulder to bunch up in her lap. A mischievous glint sparked in her eye, and she slid powerfully from the bed, dragging away the comforter—the only covering they had needed, in spite of the storm. It slid fluidly off of her and pooled on the hardwood floor unnoticed. Turning triumphantly, to see if this maneuver had been enough to stir Ashana, she happened to catch a glimpse of herself in the picture mirror on the wall.

Ashara confronted the Ideal of her race.

Her hair, long and sheer, a red so dark it almost bled from her scalp. Her complexion was smooth and flawless. The translucent flesh was like mother-of-pearl, haunted by phantom colors. Her face was strong and yet delicate. Accented by sculptured cheekbones and jaw line, a slender neck, sharp nose, and full mouth. Her eyes were stunning; a dove grey under boyish eyebrows. Her frame was quite distinctively female—slender torso, tapered waist, and wide hips. And as flat-chested as any male. Her flesh, firm and unexpectedly resilient. To all casual appearances, a young woman; perhaps a bit on the athletic side. Only five foot eight, and slender—not unusually tall for a woman, and yet not unusually short for a man.

But while her loins spoke not of manhood, neither did they prove a woman's. She could understand why humans stared. Her time among them had taught her much in her previous life. She still did not know why she had chosen to be born among them. As with any *avon*, she had been reborn innocent of experience, and developed in light of her exposure and personal experiences. She had not come into her full memory until her mother-self had died. By the time that had happened, she had been alienated against her own gender. She had demanded to learn the *aeo’mna.*

It was disturbing to have come so unexpectedly back to this trial of her childhood. As she stared into the mirror, she recalled little moments which had impressed her difference upon her. The day she discovered that no human daughter shared the secret of her hidden sex. The embarrassing attempts to hide her uniqueness lest others know her for a freak. Or worse, seek to remove that which made a lie of her girlhood. Though she knew that such a thing might end her exile, it would make her less than what she truly was. For, having persevered until adolescence, she found herself able to take—yet despaired of ever finding—a lover. So why now, when that fear had proved a phantom, should this old malady take hold?

Remembering herself, she returned her attention to Ashana, who seemed to be happily oblivious to the prank. Ashara sighed pleasantly and shrugged. Slinking back over to the bed, Ashara gazed lovingly at Ashana. And remembered how very much she preferred to call her Ana. She pronounced it very specifically with a denounced—almost swallowed “n”. Saying that name made Ashara feel the way Ashana herself made her feel. Ashara devoured her with her eyes.

Others claimed they were identical, but Ashara always saw someone different, original. An ageless young *lyn*. Long of limb and fair complected. Her face was framed, and her pillow draped, by a flow of carnal red, but she was amazed at its golden tints. Her face suggested and eclipsed a simple heart shaped frame of her own face—achieving that slight difference between demure and predatorial beauty. Which was Ashana, in a word. This was not a voluptuous woman. She was whole-heartedly *lyn.* Her beauty was that of elegant simplicity. An animal beauty. Unable to resist, Ashara began to explore with other senses as well. With a caress, confirming the sculpture of her face—strong, high cheekbones. A well turned jaw. Tracing the delicate line to the rounded point of her chin. Fingers descending along her slender neck—and lips faintly brushed under her chin. She arched under Ashara and Ashara pulled back to regard her.

Her face was still vacant with dreams.

Emotions rose in Ashara as her eyes slid down her lover's body. Desire and fascination feeding each other. She could spend the rest of her life exploring the most common or intimate details that Ashana embodied. Even now, she could not stop her hands from caressing; even as she noticed that Ashana's mouth had opened seductively—her breathing become fast and shallow. She could not help but note familiar details as her attention was drawn to Ashana's mouth. Her teeth were white, sharp and straight, with pronounced canines.

A peculiar ache was eating at Ashara. Slipping very close, she caressed Ashana with her full body—ending with her nose under Ashana's ear and fully embracing her. Because she could not help it, Ashara slid on top of Ashana. Her body read the softness of the flesh and the hardness of the bones within it under her weight. Very gently, she held open Ashana's mouth with hers and sucked the air out of her lungs. Then exhaling, gave their breath back to Ashana. Ashara controlled their breathing—feeling Ashana's body raise and fall in complement to hers—until she began to get dizzy. Increasing the rhythm until she had Ashana breathing at a waking pace. Ashana rose from the depths of sleep starved for air and drunk on the breath they had shared. Opening her eyes, she found herself gazing deeply into Ashara's. With the caresses, the weight upon her and the kiss of breath, Ashana awoke fully aroused. Her arms clasped Ashara's body and she responded fully to the kiss.

Desperate for air, they parted—gasping hungrily for breath as they passionately continued to steal each other's mouths for kisses. The taste of sleep was sour in their mouths, but rush of breath as they gasped with their mouths open and close was sweet. Ashara pulled her legs up and braced her knees on either side of Ashana's waist—pulling herself up on all fours over Ashana. Ashana's arms slid down Ashara's back, her hands stroking their way down to Ashara's thighs—hooking her thumbs in the bend of hip and thigh and then gripping Ashara there hungrily. Trying to pull Ashara back down on her.

Ashara held Ashana's head possessively, pulling it up to her and exploring Ashana's face with her lips. Forehead, cheekbones, eyes, jaw, and down to her neck, where she bit and licked provocatively. Ashana arched under her and pressed her belly against Ashara's—driven by that nameless hunger that consumes the flesh. Akin to lust, but selfless. The appetite that Ashara's use of her was meant to evoke.

Grabbing her by the neck and forcing her head down into the pillow, Ashara pinned her and turned her attention to tormenting the sensitive spots at the base of her neck, her collarbones, and immature breasts. They would develop during her pregnancy, rounding out, until she looked truly female. Depending on her level of activity after the birth of her daughter-self, they might wane again. Her lips fell between the shallow mounds. Tantalizing the aureoles, but denying them her lips’ attention. Ashara wanted her to moan, but Ashana swallowed her torment. Ashara shifted herself to one side. She planted her other hand in Ashana's midsection, pushing Ashana down into the mattress. Ashana struggled just enough to keep Ashara's hold intense—while Ashara virtually savaged her breast and ribs. Grazing the skin stretched over her ribs; enough to bruise, enough to be felt in the bones—but not enough to break the skin.

Ashana began to break. Gasping and moaning. Her voice begging and crying of its own accord. Ashara's hand slid down to her groin, pressing down. She needed a grip on the delicate flesh to control her, knowing Ashana to rely more on the use of leverage over strength. Transfixing her with the hold on her pubic arch. The hand around her throat holding her firmly, but carefully. Her grip did not threaten to cut off her breath. And it would not unless she tried to pull away.

Ashana felt like she was being devoured. Images streamed into her mind, still vividly close to dreaming. Her hands were running up and down Ashara's body. One hand going behind Ashara's neck; trying to pull, trying to push, but never deciding between encouraging and discouraging the *lyn*’s attention. The other hand found its way to Ashara's crotch.

Under the skin, Ashana felt the muscles of Ashara's abdomen tighten. The heel of her hand braced on the her pubic arch. The down tickled her palms and the heat seemed intoxicating. Pinned down, Ashana was at the extent of her reach, keeping her hand up between Ashara's legs. Exploring. In her way, taunting the sensitive flesh. Lightly applying pressure along the seam, tickling. Sliding her finger along and slightly parting the coital lips. Dipping toward the opening of her *coi*.

A secret smile ghosted across Ashana lips. Pushing into her lover's body with a finger, she succeeded in distracting her. Ashana's finger was probing and stroking. Deceiving her body. Arousing that which lay within her to assume its female aspect. In a flash she was desperate for an embrace which Ashana was in no position to provide. Ashara’s grip slackened, and Ashana thrust herself upright. Wrestling Ashara to her back, Ashana turned her attention to her assault. The sensation impaled Ashara. Within her abdomen a pulling thrill began, as Ashana’s fingers started drawing her out.

Ana had tricked her again. Writhing with frustration, but unable to find release under the taunting seduction of Ashana's fingers. When she had Ashara begging, she finally stopped and leaned back away from her. Smiling deviously.

Wound up around whetted lust, they locked in a frenzied glare for a minute before Ashara smiled, saying reverberantly, “Good morning Ashana.”

Ashana laughed pleasantly. Leaning forward, and rising to hands and knees, she bent over Ashara’s body to give her a kiss on her stomach. In a husky voice queried, “Now that you have my undivided attention, was there something you wanted from me, or do you just get off disturbing my dreams?” The mock severity in her voice was belied by the amorous glint in her eye.

Ashara lay back, smiling. Ashana prowled forward, dropping nipping kisses until her face was above Ashara’s. «*What do you want?*» Ashana asked, silently.

«*Open up to me. Let's step up,*» Came the eerie reply.

Ashana hunched down and tasted Ashara's mouth. In a part of her mind, the walls between them came down. Like two hands coming together, they both shared the sensation of mouth on mouth, two tongues seeking for each other. From the coil in Ashana's abdomen, another tongue emerged, assuming the male aspect of her gender. Their psychic embrace eclipsed the embrace of their flesh. Awareness of their own bodies became only an attribute of their personalities, aware of each other's realm of sensation. Between them, the world was redefined. Each caress an accent in both minds. Each ache and pleasure read and each gesture executed with total conviction. No doubts. No searching. Playing the elusive senses of their bodies like an instrument. And their music—intimately private—was indescribable.

Their intercourse embedded in an intercourse of thought, they fenced ideas and impressions. Their rapport teaching them how to fit together in ways a lifetime of searching could not. In ways two bodies can never quite fit together. The object, not sex, was pure sensation. A song for the sense of touch.

The penetration of each other's minds realized as a penetration of the unknowable depths of each other's bodies. The friction between them a thought that, alone, neither could hope to know. Sharing this, they found the patience to stretch the envelope of sensation. The deliberation to build up wave upon wave of devastating erotic pulses—each a brush with the knife of orgasm. Tempted. Then recoiling. Returning to the hunger. Then resumed. Reaching repeatedly a higher intensity until it became too much. Too fast. Losing themselves as with one mind seeking that final stab beyond endurance. And even when their bodies were spent and vibrating with the echoes of orgasm, they held each other tight. Even as they became able to sort out who was who—even as the passion died—they remained open to one another.

They spoke no words, nor thought no thoughts of love.

Their possession of one another spoke far more than they, themselves, ever could. This was the third time, and it was awesome. Nothing they had ever shared before compared to this, and this was what they had been so afraid of. Only one question remained, what was there to be afraid of in this?

Quietly, they explored each other and their common self. They were a polarized mind bereft of boundaries. A shared consciousness bound between two distinct wills. Seamlessly mated together in the most perfect embrace, they were for the moment a single being torn between a pair of bodies woefully unable to express what they had become. Anashara. Union. As they had always been, but for the moment awake. Aware. And Anashara was fascinated at the structure of her bodies, and moved by the passion evoked from them. Removed from the notion of a physical self, Anashara regarded her bodies as incomprehensibly rare objects. A pair of lenses through which her diune will refracted; split by the immortal sparks that were the ultimate selves of Ashana and Ashara. Each realizing that they were seeing each other—seeing themselves through the other's eyes. Each other's feelings.

They lay together until they had managed to overcome being enraptured with one another. They swapped a secret smile. It was for rapture of the moment of reunion that they had suffered the agony of severing their bond the last time. But they would not sever it again so soon. They turned their attention to dealing with the world. The demands of nature their love making had postponed. A task requiring them to keep the functions of each body distinct in the unity of mind they held. Fortunately, they had taken pains to master this from the start. They showered together. Another sensual experience, but one they chose not to succumb to. Returning to their bed, they considered the day ahead.

It was still early. Perhaps an hour remained until the time they usually broke fast. Together, they left the room and wandered sculpted stone corridors until they found a sunny terrace where they could bathe in the warm morning sun and let the wind dry their hair.

Conversation was absent in favor of sharing their impressions of the morning's details. They sat facing one another, and thus shared between them a full three hundred and sixty degree view of the world. It came as second nature for them to make themselves part of each other's scenery—unconsciously making their bodies into objects for each other's scenic composition. Here, as in most parts of the estate, the distinction of indoors and outdoors was utterly obscure. The area’s specifically incorporating a residence were the only true indoors—nestled within the embrace of terraces like this one, and gardens and waterways. Even within a sheltered residence, however, there were exceptions. Atriums, balconies and alcoves open to the sky or the wilderness accented many of the rooms and corridors.

They took it all in. Every detail adding a dimension to their vision. The morning light cut sideways through branches, leaves and vines; high lighting marble columns and their selves. Red and gold glints struck from Ashana's hair. Her flesh glowing semi-translucently like moonstone and Ashara's like mother of pearl. Blue sky lured their eyes through gold and pink tinted banners and banks of clouds. The world seemed an enrapturing art to which they added the finishing touch—a focus—with their own presence. Beholders and the beheld.

They drank deeply of a sense of peace that could be described as transcendental. So beautiful that it actually hurt. And that, they relished too.

«*It's almost too incredible to be real,*» thought Ashana poignantly.

“But, it is too perfect to be unreal,” replied Ashara in a soft voice. Neither the content, nor the detail of what they were looking at was incongruous. The scenery was exactly what it always was. It was the mood that was so unique—though a completely natural mood for the limits of weather and climate. Ashara added objectively, “And yet, what we are really seeing that is so sublime is what we are bringing out of ourselves to *see* it.” They both realized how true that was, and held the realization with awe and sudden sobriety. They continued to watch the clouds roll by for a while. Casually, one or the other would stretch languorously. Knowing the pangs of attraction these innocent movements caused, neither could say if they were not particularly deliberate. In wordless agreement, they stood up and walked out of the courtyard.

Avon knew his name even before he came around the corner. She wanted to curse, and barely managed to check her fist as it snapped out in frustration. Once again, her path had been crossed, and she had to stop and compose her wits. Her hand opened and came gently to rest on the cold stone as she focused her thoughts with grim determination. She had made it this far, sticking to remote passages. She did not intend to be driven off again. But it was hard. The young man who approached was in emotional turmoil. *Just let it wash over you, don’t fight it,* she told herself.

Fortunately, his attention was reflected inward. *Just walk by. Don’t look at me,* she prayed, standing her ground. Then the flavor of his thoughts hit her. Aroused and warm, savoring an image of two *lyn* basking provocatively in the glory of dawn. She turned her face to the wall, trying not to be sucked in, but the image absorbed her, reflections of each other and reflections of herself, naked in the morning sun.

Avon gritted her teeth. The hunger in his mind took root in hers. She could not wrench herself from his fantasies. Her blood ran hot as her body responded to the boy’s naked desire. Sympathetic response, simple psychic resonance aroused her against her will. Anger churned inside her, at her defenselessness. That it had trapped her in a secluded corridor with a young man full of lust. His imagination seized her, guilty of desire. It burned him so strongly he had to stop walking for a moment as the memory of a close courted disaster came. Shan’je had drifted from his amorous fantasies into a memory of past longing. The memory of himself chased itself into her, a younger man, unnamed and hoping to be claimed. A time when he had first seen them. Not knowing who they were, he had made his own assumptions; based on what he observed in passing. Quiet, solicitous beauties who moved with the most sensual grace, exuding the mind-body harmony only possible in a trained *mnai*.

He had wanted them. Confronted by the bond of intimacy between them, he only became more determined to impose himself on them. Any young man had the right to press a *mnai*. Fortunately for him, his interest was noticed by his sponsor. Just as he was about to approach them the senior servant had pulled him aside and explained who they were. As deadly as they were Ideal. No matter how much his hormones might boil at such a sight, he was a servant. They were there to be used but not by the likes of him. Shan’je fumed at the turn in his musing. He had understood the implications of their unwitting role and had found it little to his liking. In any other circumstances an Ideal was not untouchable. If he had not become a servant, if he had pursued a name of status he could have freely sought their favors for as long as his motives were honest. But there was no denying his lust. He dared not approach them. He had cursed himself.

Avon was shaking, clinging to the raveling shreds of her will. She could see too much. He was a decent soul, frustrated by obsession. The guilty undertone told her he was aware of his folly. He argued with himself as he thought about his actions. His hunger. He had fostered a special blindness to the objects of his desire, the only protection he had against their animal magnetism, and it had failed him this morning. In spite of his fear, he had welcomed for once the opportunity to appreciate and savor. Now that he had admitted his personal demon, he was at a loss over what to do about it.

Absorbed by this inner conflict, he crouched down and snagged a weed out of the flagstones without consciously taking note of the young woman who stood turned away from him. His self absorption was the only thing that allowed her to keep her chin above water. She wanted to escape, but instead she found herself looking at him.

He was a sandy haired young man, on whom the suggestion of a smile was almost enough to balance the features of a much too serious face. His skin was flushed, and he nearly grinned at the turn of his thoughts. It was not a crime to admire. Not even an insult. But desire—desire was dangerous. Desire could lead to disastrous actions. The serious turn in his thoughts had cooled him somewhat, but a shock of cold startled her. She realized he had spotted her. Shan’je took in her white clad legs with their dancer's feet, and scanned up her body as his eyes rose with the rest of him. And finally locked on those all too familiar opalescent grey eyes. A red eyebrow quirked up as he stammered. His own sense of guilt took rule of his thoughts. All at once he knew that she had seen him watching her.

With the full weight of his attention on her, her fragile grip on herself crumbled. She watched his eyes drink in the signs of her arousal, his reflected lust. Her presence of mind, her fear for herself, abandoned her, replaced with his hunger, his need. Losing her grasp on herself, she lost her grasp on reality.

Her body was shaking violently when she came to her senses. Looking around, she discovered she was in a fallow garden. She could not help crying out in relief when she realized she was alone. With trembling fingers, she attempted to make herself presentable. Her mind was as tangled as her garments, but her state of undress suggested things she desperately did not want to remember. She did not need to subject herself to the details to know what had happened. As she savagely brushed the tears off her cheek, she told herself there was nothing she could have done. She wanted to hate herself, wanted to hate him, for what had happened. But, what was the point? Crying was not changing anything. *Just let go of it,* she told herself. *Sometimes you get beat up in life.*

All that mattered was that she had survived.

*My own stupid fault for going out*, she accused. This, or worse, had been bound to happen. A person needed defenses to deal with the world, a person like her was a fool to neglect her own protection. Her fingers smoothed the folds of her seal. *Besides*, she thought sarcastically, *it’s not as if I was capable of saying no.* Very rational thoughts, unfortunately she was shouting into a storm of emotions. Snapping to her feet, she thrust her arms into her blouse so violently its seams cried out in pain. Fire crackled along the nerves under her skin, a tide of rage that fed off each gesture.

A heat very different from the sensual flame that had tantalized her at the start of her walk. Her head dropped in anguish, as she remembered her thoughts then of sex. *This is what you want,* her mind held the image of her innocent arousal, *and this,* she touched her bruised lips, *this is what you get!*

The fire in her heart turned to ice. Stomping her feet into her boots, and belting her tunic, she swore to herself she would not let her weakness be taken advantage of again. There had to be a way to guard her will. There must be something she could do to keep people away from her. Gathering up her overcoat, she set her feet back on the path leading to the cliffs. The guest suite she had spent the night at had looked out over the sea. She was so close. All she had to do was make it to, and cross the training ground separating the annex from the *dahn,* and she would be safe.

With new determination, she set out. Crossing the garden, she was not surprised to find herself not far from where her rape had started. Entering the corridor, she oriented herself, and started walking. If she thought about it, she might have realized where her skirting course had brought her. She might have known she was directly under the Residence of House Ara. If she had made a different turn at the end of the passage way, she could have found the stairs that led up to the patio courtyard where Shen’je’s passion had been sparked. She could have pursued the young man who had used her, and left her in a heap.

Ashana and Ashara strolled unhurriedly in the shadow of the residence. The local seat of Ashana’s House. Like the annex, the residence was a large block in the outer ring of concentric shells nested about the heart of the *dahn.* Like the annex, it was a formidable mansion in itself. As they walked they had untangled their minds. Even though it was the first day of wend, Ashana intended to devote part of her morning to research. Like Ashara, the lords and nobles of *avon* society had little confidence in Ashara’s rebirth. In some of their eyes, she was already dead. They looked to her successor, Ashana, to fulfill the needs of the Avatar. Because Ashana would not inherit the vast experience Ashara had accrued over her many incarnations, she was forced to spend hours of her own time studying the vast store of knowledge maintained by her House. Before they reached the entrance to the House Archives, Ashana’s stomach started to grumble. “Do you want to eat first,” Ashana asked.

Ashara paused. “No. I’ll be fine. You go ahead. I will wait for you to get back, though,” she said, with a glance at the archive entrance. She usually accompanied Ashana into the labyrinth of books. Of late, she had been doing her own research, paying particular attention to the Covenant of Exile and the practice of *av’va.* What they had discovered in each other had not been described in any text on *av’va* she had read so far. Ashana nodded, and slipped away. Ashara blew her a kiss, and went looking for a good place to wait.

A few moments later, she was stretched out on a bench, eyes closed and lost in thought. She had become so used to the servants of the House haunting every shadow, she really did not pay much attention when she felt one approach. When he spoke it caught her off guard. “Well, I’m sorry I had to leave you like that. How did you get up here so quickly?” his hand slid up inside her thigh, and his mouth seized hers. Sheer disbelief delayed her reaction. A violent instant later, she was on her feet towering over his cringing body. Before she could break any more of his bones, Ashana’s hands appeared and locked themselves under her jaw.

Her lover had been summoned in haste by the pulse of rage accompanying Ashara’s lightening attack. Her blood was still boiling as she heard Ana’s voice, speaking to her victim with incredulity, “Do you have some kind of death wish, Shan’je?”

The servant cradled his shattered arm to his chest and whimpered in shock, “I’m so sorry. I must have gotten the two of you confused.”

“Confused!?” Ana exploded, “And what insanity makes you think you could take such liberties with me?” she demanded.

Shan’je stared at her aghast. “But I thought… we just… didn’t you just give yourself to me?” he stammered in disbelief. Four frigid orbs of grey locked on him. Ana let her love go, and stalked over to the servant. Her hand dropped to his shirt, and bunched the fabric in her fist. Dragging him to his feet, she brought their eyes level.

“I’m sorry, I must have misunderstood you. Would you care to restate yourself?” she said in a menacing tone.

Shan’je held his fingers before her face, and very carefully said, “If that is not your scent, then it has to be hers,” he pointed at Ashara, “because there isn’t anyone else in the world that looks like you do. Do you really think I would dare to touch either of you if you had not touched me first? I may be a servant, but I’m not stupid!”

Ana released her grip and stumbled back. “That’s not possible. The two of us have been together all morning. The first time we have been out of each other’s sight was just now. You must be mistaken,” she protested. What he implied was unbelievable. Unfortunately, she had recognized the scent. She looked at Ashara.

Ashara had approached the two of them, but instead of meeting Ana’s eyes, hers were fixed on the servant’s blouse. Following her gaze, Ana saw Ashara pull a couple strands of blood red hair away from the silk shirt. “Where did you last see this person?” Ashara asked in a commanding voice.

Realization crossed his face. “It wasn’t you. It wasn’t either of you,” he gasped. “but, then, who else could it be?”

“That’s what I have to know!” Ashara shouted, holding the strands in her fist. “Now tell me, where did you last see this person!?”

Avon stood at the edge of the cliff and stared out over the land slashed ocean. After all her efforts to negotiate the increasingly crowded corridors of the *dahn,* she had entered the training ground. In order to get this far, she had been forced to literally shove people out of her path with her telekinetic gift. It had been rude, and excessive, but it had worked. Between that, and the fact that she had not stopped running, she had escaped the weight of unwanted attention. Not a terribly long sprint, but it could not hurt to catch her breath, she decided. Of course, with such a view, it was hard not to soak it in.

A froth of fog danced across the waves of warm tropical water before her. The Emerald Coast stretched its wing over the north-west hemisphere. Its majestic mountains extended on in archipelago chains, their steep flanks sunk sedately into the ocean’s embrace. Cold arctic air, flowing along the feathered highlands, endlessly combed the tropical winds, bathing the rain forests—both tropical and temperate—from which the coast got its name. The forests had adapted an age ago, blending away climate borders. *Dangerous*, she thought, *no way to distinguish where you really are.* Something told her it was like that along most of the coast and deep into the interior. Only far to the east did the tropics become a dominating blanket over ancient slopes. *No way for people, or beasts to be entirely sure of the perimeter of their habitats.*

She took a deep breath, savoring a moment free of conflict. Before she could release it, though, conflict found her. They appeared without warning. A group of boys ringing the circle in the dirt. The weight of attention was her only warning. Whipping around, she deflected the first blow.

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

As the last of them completed his initial assault, she slid to a stop, pivoted and raised her guard. They simply stood there, breathing heavily. One of them stepped forward, and pointed at her. “That is too much to fight in. You can take it off,” he said. Without asking any questions, she stripped down to her seal, seeing that was all her assailants wore. One of them gathered her clothes, and walked away. Another tossed a sheathed blade to her. She caught it, and slid into the harness.

The one who had spoken took up his guard, and the others faded back to the edge of the circle. He had a disciplined mind. All of them did. She could find no explanation for this strange engagement, and it took a great deal of effort to pry even a name from his guarded thoughts.

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

Skirting the edge of the terrace, she got out into the open. Ciar was still pressing her, so she fell back to the center of the circle. Half of the huge circle nestled into the side of the *dahn*, the other half of the circle was an unbounded drop to the rocky tops of the sea cliffs. Looking back over the way she had come, she could see ocean and sky. Ciar kept his distance, flexing an injured leg. She did not want to draw her blade yet. She would not even know if she could use it effectively until she did. At least she already knew she could use her body and her mind for attack and defense. She kept a sharp eye on him as he started to close again. Ciar still limped from her combined kicks to knee and hip. A bit too cocky, that. It had cost her a pint of blood, *took the slash on the way out*, she guessed. Still, soft tissue healed faster than bones. Much, much faster than joints. But now he knew what she could do.

Her fingers flexed on the hilt of the blade. She knew she could hit him. Hurt him. But, could she end the fight without a weapon? A successful strike with her blade might have more lethal effect, but against one as good as Ciar, would be much more difficult to achieve.

The tickle touch of alien thoughts scurried along the edges of her mind. She readied herself for his attack. She could feel Ciar trying to break her concentration, but to her surprise her mind was wholly shielded against telepathic attack. Against another telepath, or a person with a sufficiently disciplined mind, telepathy was not enough of an advantage. It just opened one’s guard. Case in point. Stabbing into his mind with the edge of her thoughts, she punched through his defenses. Almost as quickly, her sword leapt from it’s scabbard and darted through a flashing series of strikes that crippled his defenses. In the space of a breath she landed three crippling and two killing blows. Ciar slumped to the ground, almost too shocked to hold his body together. Avon stepped back from him, flicking the blood from her sword, and looked up at the ring of men who had already attacked her once. Several of them broke the circle rushing to Ciar’s side.

Their discipline cracked, and suddenly she realized what had happened. The man laying bleeding on the ground was *Vai.* A champion of the Court *Ashara*. The others, the ones who had been watching, were his students. When they found her in the circle, they had assumed she was challenging the school. The information was just suddenly there, and if it was correct then—she went rigid. Carefully, she turned around. There he was. She had not even noticed the mediator, a younger *Vai* instructor. Looking into his eyes, she probed for his identity. Ciar’s assistant, Kynh. He had been standing behind her, blade ready. She nodded and moved aside. Kynh stepped into the opening between Avon and Ciar.

Avon held on to her discipline with a firm grip. It had happened so fast. She could hardly believe she had killed him. To her shock, Ciar pulled himself together, shoving his students off, and rose to his feet. Very formally he bowed, eyes never leaving hers. She quickly wiped down her blade and sheathed it, then returned his bow and the gesture of respect.

“Cleanly done, *Nai*,” he said, as he cleaned and ran his blade home in it’s scabbard, “You have my respect.” Kynh received their final bows, and sheathed his sword. He had been prepared to strike down either one of them from the moment the fight ended, had either one attempted to re-engage the other. With the close of duel formalities, Kynh moved away from them to reprimand the students who broke the Circle. In the moment of privacy, Ciar bent close to her and challenged, “You are not Ashara. Nor are you Ashana. I apologize for this. I assumed, you understand, but I was clearly wrong. Who are you, and where did you get your training?”

She glanced over at the class before answering, “I am no one. I have no past. I cannot answer these questions. I am sorry.”

“*Avon’Nai*,” he replied softly, bestowing a warrior’s title. “You are worthy. I could make you *Vai,* you have the skill for the arena. Do you have the substance?” Her surprise showed on her face. He had offered to train her, to give her mind the discipline to shake off death. Her eyes darted toward the annex. She had to reach safe haven, she had made such a sacrifice to get there. But then she remembered. Dane had denied it, but if his suspicions were right, she was a danger to him and his. They were better off if she did not return to them. She looked into Ciar’s eyes. She could see he was a man of honor. He was a teacher. And he was offering to give her what she really needed to survive long enough to find answers to Dane’s questions.

“I am willing,” she replied.

He smiled mysteriously. “I would expect a bit more apprehension, *Vao*. Dying is not as easy as it looks, and it has a tendency to be permanent. You are a fast healer, I’ll give you that, but you are not immortal,” he pointed out. As they moved out of the circle, he asked in a loud voice, “Now, tell me, why did you wait so long to draw your sword?”

Avon retrieved her shirt from one of the students and cocked her head. It seemed a non sequitur. Then she realized he was speaking for the class’s benefit. With slight shrug she replied, “I drew it as soon as I knew I would win. If I had drawn before I was ready I would have lost.”

“Indeed, you would have,” Ciar nodded, and addressed the crowd. “The mind is the sword of the soul—it’s best weapon and it’s best defense. The body is but a sheath to protect the edge of that sword, and veil it’s lethal potential when the soul is at peace or in harmony with the dream. If she had relied foremost on the sword, she would have dulled her effectiveness. Using her mind as her weapon, she won the fight before even drawing her blade. It’s only purpose was bring the contest to a definitive end.” He retrieved his outer garments and handed his sword to Kynh. Casting a wary eye up at the sun, he joked, “A good thing, as it happens. It is much too hot this morning for fighting. What say we adjourn to the gym for the remainder of class?”

As one, the class moved out of the sun and in among the columns of the *dahn*. Looking back over the cliff top terrace, Avon ran her fingers along the split fabric of her seal. Ciar had recognized her skill, but the challenge that came with it troubled her. *What am I doing? I just keep going along with what other people want of me.* Even with his disciplined mind, she had sensed what he was thinking—recognized his ambition for her. *Is this what I want? Is this any different than going for a walk in the middle of the night?* The wind stirred around her, rising up the cliffs from the ocean below. The chill she felt came from within.

Ciar glanced back and saw her standing lost in thought. She was a promising individual. Almost too promising. He ran his hands along his torn body seal. Turning to follow his students, he noticed a commotion ahead.

Ashara shoved her way through the crowd of students. After Shan’je had told her where to start looking, she had left him in Ana’s care and sprinted down to the fallow garden below the residence. From there, she had wandered around until she found someone who admitted to having seen her—or rather someone who looked like her—that morning. The way she stumbled over the question had earned her a few strange looks, but the answers they gave were firm and decisive. Whoever she was, she had left a path of disgruntled individuals, and all of them pointed they way toward the annex. When she reached the annex, however, there was no sign of her. Then she had heard the commotion on the training ground. Ashara cursed herself. She should have thought of looking there first. Taking shortest route from the fallow garden to the annex, the Circle could not be avoided, and where but the annex would a stranger try to go?

She recognized Ciar at once, and beyond him, she saw *her*.

She came to a stop, breathing heavy, and demanded, “Who is she?”

Ciar saw how excited she was, and could not imagine what she was thinking or what she might do. He stepped into her path and tried to cut her off. Ashara rolled within his grasp, and suddenly Ciar was flying away.

Avon looked up, and—impossible as it was for her complexion—her face paled perceptibly. She had never seen the Avatar with her own eyes, but she had encountered her image in countless minds before this. She was magnificent. Without a doubt, she was perfectly naked, but she was so well dressed in her attitude that the people around her did not even notice. For a long moment, their eyes were locked together. If Dane had been right, Avon mused, she was now most likely going to die. She had been too stupid, and her chance had come too late. Watching her alleged enemy fling Ciar out of her way, like some helpless rag doll, Avon bared her teeth and drew the sword that was still in her hands.