Avatars Initiation - 6

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Ashara paused in her approach as the fang of steel glinted in the morning light. Very carefully she appraised her reflection. What else did she call this *lyn?* She stood there facing Ashara in a four thousand year old fighting stance. Aside from herself, Ashara had met no one in this life time who knew the style that went with it. *Who are you?* she asked herself, guarding her thoughts carefully. The important question, however, was why the stranger’s first reaction to seeing her was to draw and present a naked blade. What did she do? If she met her with a sword, one of them would end up dead. Possibly beyond recovery, and then there would be no answers.

Ciar’s class had gathered behind her, and Ciar himself was regaining his feet. Ashara took a cautious step forward as Ciar shouted.

“No, Avon!” he interposed himself between the nameless *lyn* and Ashara. “This is not in the Circle. Put it away, or you will lose.”

Avon glanced at him. A flash, and then her eyes were once more riveted to Ashara. Her mouth set in a firm line. There was a glint of terror in her eye, quickly leashed. All she could think was that if Dane were right, she faced the person responsible for what had happened to her. Certain this was her enemy, she lashed out. A wave of crushing force spiraled out of her thoughts, striking at Ashara.

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

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

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

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

Rising to her feet, Ashara wiped the blood from her mouth and staggered over to her unconscious twin. Dropping beside her, she checked her injuries, none of which were mortal, and sighed. Who ever she was, she had done her best to kill her. There had to be a reason for it, but she was in no condition now to answer questions. As Ciar stepped up beside her, she turned to him. “Who is she?” she demanded, as she snapped each joint mercilessly into place. He did not answer her until she pinned him with a glare.

“I don’t know,” he confessed. Gathering her limp form into his arms.

Before he could take her away, however, Ashara grabbed his arm. He looked at her in surprise. “I’m sorry *Vai,* but I can’t leave her to you. Not after this,” she said, holding out her arms. Ciar protested, Avon had accepted his claim, but Ashara interrupted. “Is she promised, Ciar? I don’t think so. And without a patron, what weight is there to a mentor’s claim? Besides, just look at her, you know what mentor any patron would have to choose for her. I am truly sorry Ciar, bring your suit to Amaeo, but don’t cross me here,” she warned. Ciar was obviously reluctant to hand her over, but Ashara did not relent. He gently shifted Avon’s body into Ashara’s arms. The class, and a number of other onlookers who had appeared during the short fight, parted before her. Among them, she spotted a number of the human guests. As she passed through the growing crowd, a small commotion ensued. Ashara frowned. The sight of her with Avon’s limp, identical body in hand could not go unremarked. Word of this would sweep the *dahn* in less than an hour. What would it mean to them to see two embodied Ideals try so hard, and so publicly, to kill each other? Amaeo would not be amused.

Avon was refining her definition of “overwhelmed”. Her mind had been seized by the senses of her own, and Ashara’s flesh. The differences between their bodies were so minimal, that fact alone presented a serious challenge to her sense of identity. Added to that, a large part of her attention had become entangled with her enemy’s thoughts. A fear—that had not even occurred to her to entertain before this—reared over her. The touch of their naked limbs had plunged Avon’s pathetic, one night old existence into an ocean of memory seven million times her own depth. Her only salvation was Ashara’s unshakable confidence in herself.

“I can tell you’re awake,” Ashara suddenly said to her. “Do you think you can walk on your own?” From the tension in her shivering arms, Avon assumed appropriately that Ashara did not relish the idea of carrying her all the way back to her residence. Avon somehow managed to nod her head, and without further comment, Ashara shifted Avon’s weight onto her own feet.

She tried to use the opportunity to escape, but the power of Ashara’s mind had unhinged her. She barely managed a few shaky steps, before she was forced to collapse against a stone column. Ashara grunted, and seized her by the arm, leaving Avon no option but to stumble along in her grasp. All semblance of control had left her by the time they reached the *osi j’caoi*.

It all finally caught up to her. The hours of wandering—mentally, if not physically—naked, on an empty stomach, chose that moment to exact their price. Starving and captive, she was having a hard time simply processing the cues of her environment. The crowds of people, the *avon* escorting her, the city she found herself in, were too much to deal with. Everything was disorientingly alien and painfully familiar to her. Control over her psionic potential she had not even realized she was exercising finally escaped her. As her mind dived for the abyss, she felt Ashara’s frantic psychic cry.

«*Amaeo, iDai, I need you! Now!*»

Avon could not tell if the hands gripping her face were hers or not, but the white hot nail screaming into her skull had to have been Ashara. It chased her retreating consciousness into oblivion, refusing her the abdication of her senses. Amaeo was swift to answer Ashara’s summons. When she arrived, she confronted an unprecedented sight. Avon and Ashara—who she could not tell apart—leaned together in a heap in the center of the *osi,* at the eye of a psychic storm. One of them held the other, hands cupped around her face, and waves of St. Elmo’s fire rippled away from them, etching the columns and flagstones in eerie brilliance. The air itself was thick and heavy. Without the power of her own mind, she could not have penetrated the sphere of domination. Amaeo had to wrest control of the molecules in the air away from the grip of Avon’s mind with every step of her approach.

What she struggled through to reach Ashara and her unnamed twin was a pale reflection of the chaos in Avon’s mind. Recovering from the shock of her initial thought-touch, Amaeo plunged into Avon’s mind. Desperately seizing the threads of the *lyn’s* wild potential, she traced the paths of power and erected blocks, forcing the outer shells of her mind into dormancy. With the sudden disengagement of her heightened awareness, Avon began to recover her wits. Wasting no words, Ashara and Amaeo gathered her up between them. They moved quickly to escape the crowds to study the enigma in their hands in private.

Avon was past resistance. It was all she could do to follow her own disjointed thoughts as they jumped from one minute observation to the other. The reaction of the crowds to the presence of her captors gave a disoriented Avon clues, establishing them both as powerful local figures. For once, not absorbing her conclusions directly from the minds of those around her, she was amused to discover she could form her own conclusions based on the evidence of her senses. She took note of the subtleties of the onlookers’ behavior. She took assurance in noticing that they were revered and deferred to on an almost instinctive level. It made her apprehension a much less frightening prospect.

Once she accepted that she was far from knowing what to do with herself, she resigned herself to being an honored captive. She merely hoped she would have a chance to stop, and figure out what was really going on, without the influence of other’s fears to contend with. Not after the mistakes she already made. Avon could not comprehend her enemy’s actions. If enemy she was, Ashara had given up the best opportunity to kill her, and make up her own explanation. It would take her some time to reevaluate her situation. With her thoughts turned inward, she did not notice when they entered the *Ara* Residence. Ashara and her mentor brought her to Ashara’s room and laid her out. They spoke to each other for a moment, but Avon was all too delighted to not have to hear what they said. Amaeo paused at her side and looked into her eyes before departing. Avon was unconscious before he could even say anything to her.

A deep blue sky glowed through the open windows. The pale wash of evening caressed the folds and edges of the bed and the furnishings about the room. The soft light rested gently on the sleeping form of the stranger. Her hair was a dark formless mass in the dim ambiance. Her pale features were luminous, her flesh drinking in the weak moon light. On close examination, her striking resemblance to the pair of *lyn* who sat on the edge of the bed was frightening. One of them stood, trailing a hand over the other’s shoulder, and walked softly out of the room. The other hesitated, lightly brushing stray threads of the stranger’s mane back from her peaceful face. While virtually no one on this world had ever seen her before this day, Ashana was intimately familiar with this reflection of hers.

It would be difficult, to say the least, to explain her sudden appearance among the household when the rest of *Tear’ni’hayr* found out. But strangers had appeared in the *dahn* without warning before. Ana, tightened her other hand on the sheet she wore draped around her and rose silently from the bed. With deft movements she drew the drapes tight over the windows to block out Ajeo’s light. On whispering feet she withdrew from the room, meeting her friend and lover at the door. Ashara looked at Ana carefully before escorting her to an alcove to discuss what was to be done.

“She does not look like either of us as much as she looks like both of us,” Ashana observed. Biting her lip, she ran a hand through her hair. They had discussed this all day, but this was the first chance they had found for her to see for herself. “Still, she could easily be your clone.”

“The resemblance is unmistakable, but she is *aelyn*. How do you think they’ll explain that away?” her shadow, asked. Her face was a careful mask over her emotions. Ashara, standing nude, could not hide from the symmetry between her own slender and athletic body and that of the *lyn* they had left in her bed. Ana frowned and turned away in silence. Ashara watched her friend’s profile for several minutes, waiting, before raising her hand to the *lyn’s* arm. “If there were no differences, we could claim the Terrans made her, like they make copies of their own people. People would believe that. It would hurt relations between us, but *avon* would believe them capable of it.”

“They won’t,” Ashana shrugged her off. “Some one will notice. Some one will check. I just don’t understand how it could have happened,” she confessed.

“It couldn’t have happened. Even in *av’va* we could not conceive together,” Ashara protested. “Her existence simply defies explanation…”

“So, what? Did we just dream her into existence?” Ashana hissed at her lover, cutting Ashara off. She turned back and apologized to her friend with her eyes. She spoke with a sad, wry smile, “I don’t think we should try to explain anything, Asha. There are no words that will make a difference in people’s minds. We broke the Covenant, and now suddenly this happens. But no one in this House will dare speak it. Even if they cannot help but think it. We will have a little time, at least,” Ana sighed and looked back at the closed door down the hallway. She laid a hand over Ashara’s heart. “We have to get rid of her. It’s the only hope we have. Maybe among the terrans she will have a chance,” she mused.

Ashara folded her own hands over the Ana’s. The terrans were *àlyn*, male and female. Their child—assuming Ashana’s suspicions were right— would stand out among humans, much as she had stood out. But if they could get Amaeo’s help, Ashara could give her an advantage *she* never had among humans. Ashara drew a steady breath and turned her thoughts away from that with painful determination. Ashara focused back on what immediately needed to be done about their ill-conceived child.

The words struck deep into her unconscious. An epiphany. Ashara had stumbled across a strange reference connected with the original cause of *av’va* that suddenly clicked in her mind. Connected with a very old memory. “There is a chance,” the shadow began thoughtfully, “we could have conceived in *av’va.* If so, we can’t escape the consequences of what we have done, but we might be able to salvage *her* at least.”

“What are you talking about?”

Ashara turned on her, a fevered light of understanding in her eye. “You are right. We have to get rid of her. We have to keep people from talking, and without exception, we have to keep them from testing her genes. They cannot know exactly what she is, no matter what they will suspect. It might not even be possible to determine what she is until she herself fully realizes it, and from what I saw this morning, she is a long way from that. That first moment was too great a shock for her.”

“But if we turn her over to the humans, the first thing they will do is gene print her. Won’t that… no, wait,” Ashana suddenly caught herself. “Do we really need to deny that she might be related? After all, there is no real account of your affairs during your time among the humans...”

Ashara did not need much encouragement to follow where her lover was leading, “…and it is common knowledge that gene pirates have made attempts to acquire *lyn* DNA. In the past thirty years, the only *lyn avon* to enter the aegis has been me. Yes, there might be no harm in recognizing her at least until her mind is trained well enough to function in the aegis.” Ashana leaned into her and draped the sheet around them both. They held each other in silence as light filtered in through narrow windows. As of yet, they had avoided thinking of the price they must inevitably pay for exceeding the bounds of their intimate working relationship. If the *Dai* ever suspected what they suspected, they would die for their love. They accepted that. What they might do to protect the embodiment of that love did not bear thinking on.

Her dreams struggled between chaos and oblivion. She was absently aware that she was dreaming. Her mind was a riot of unclaimed memories and emotions, many conflicting and disjointing each other. Most of it did not really register as she drifted helplessly through alien landscapes of the mind warped together from bits and pieces of familiar places. The background whirled while the center of her focus remained dauntingly normal. She tried to remember what made her wake up in the dream. It was not easy to concentrate on the question and it had eluded her several times already.

Clenching her teeth, she narrowed her focus, pulling her attention away from the distracting images. The dreamscape misted and grayed about her as she struggled with the evasive memory of dreaming. As her mind gathered around her query she closed her eyes and pretended that she didn't know what would happen next. She remembered being tired and a weight had settled on her like a lover. She wanted to cry because this was how it always started. An inescapable pressure plunged her body into the paths of sleep but cast her mind adrift.

Merciful oblivion floated beyond her reach, an impenetrable sea. She twisted, she writhed, but every move only loosened the contours of her private universe. Every sensation became cleaner, sharper. A laser shearing through dissipating smoke as her mind flowed beyond it into the cold abyss. Searing and electric. Endless*. I know this and I know I can't escape this.* She tried to scream. Anything. Wake up. But the sound shivered across the threads of her soul—horrifying how it eclipsed the sphere of her mind—and then the brilliant sound exploded in the light of understanding, piercing her inner eye. An instant glimpse of the meaning of her scream; terror, agony, ecstasy—*Av*—a word, a concept of beginning and ending and change, but the thought seemed inexpressible. Unbearable. She coiled around another scream but the echoes reached her before she could start. The echoes swallowed her. The shadows twisted and coiled about her, piercing and penetrating her.

Awakening brought it’s own confusion. Listless thoughts drifted toward the last echo, and it threatened to escape her comprehension. It struck her suddenly, a sense of identity. It had been her name that had caught her attention in the dream. Then she frowned. Oddly, while it felt right, she could not remember actually ever having been called by that name. This uncertainty knotted into a kind of pain; a vain struggle to find a memory, a sense of past to attach her present awareness to. While a part of her still panicked at the absence of continuity, the rest of her harkened to explore, and thus connect with world that sensation described. So she opened her eyes. Muted light seeped through the draped windows. The heavy down comforter pressed her body’s heat back on her. Av sat up and the cover slid from her shoulder to bunch up in her lap. She smiled at the warm familiarity of the room around her. She had never seen it before.

A glint sparked in her eye, and she slid powerfully from the bed, dragging away the comforter—the only covering she had needed apparently. It slid fluidly off of her and pooled on the hardwood floor unnoticed. Turning triumphantly, to see what else she recognized, she happened to catch a glimpse of herself in the picture mirror on the wall. The extra reflection in the glass startled her.

Turning around, she saw—which one? She knew there were two of them. Two who wore her face. The Ideal measured her from head to toe. Avon—no, Av, she asserted consciously for the first time—evaded her gaze, slipping into a robe that was draped over a chair. While she belted the silk, her twin found and lit a candle.

When she turned around, Ashara was still looking at her.

“Who are you?” Av asked suddenly, as if seeing her for the first time.

The candlelight gave her eye a distracting glint, transforming the shock and uncertainty in Av’s expression into a look that was indefinably alluring. Ashara regarded her in the dim light with calculated quiet. The candle light transformed her mane of red hair into a blaze. The golden highlights she would have found in Ashana’s were more sparingly applied on Av. The flame reflected in opalescent grey eyes—she knew they would shift to green or blue according to her moods. Her face had Ashana’s feline cast and her own mother of pearl complexion. The robe suggested a lithe frame, but she remembered seeing a body sculpted by athletic and acrobatic activity. She had felt its perfect balance between strength and suppleness. Muscles she had seen sharply defined in motion now lay smooth and unobtrusive, at rest.

Disturbed by the weight of Ashara’s attention, Av slipped over to the bed stand, and poured a glass from the pitcher that had been set out. The weight of her question went unrelieved for several tense moments. Finally, Ashara spoke.

“The question, really, is who are *you?*”

Av’s looked up in surprise. Ashara’s gaze caught and held hers. She just watched, as confusion and alarm flickered in Av’s thoughts. She tried to frame an answer, but words suddenly failed her. She lifted her glass to her lips and sipped, carefully maintaining eye contact. Darkness devoured the ring of grey as her eyes dilated. The wine was cold and sour as she swallowed. *Who am I?* she pondered. How could she seriously answer that? She was tempted to respond with the question: *Who do you think I am?* But she really wasn't sure if she wanted to hear her answer.

Ashara cocked her head and gave a faint shrug, acknowledging the difficulty she had imposed on her and demurred, “I'm sorry. That was an unfair question.”

Av could not look away. A ghost smile touched her lips as she responded, “Perhaps. Perhaps not. In any case, it is not an easy question to answer. The name I have is short but sweet. I don’t know where I got it, but I know it is mine.”

Ashara raised an eyebrow, and gestured for her to go on.

“Av. Of course, that does not answer your question anymore than you have answered mine,” she smiled, more confidently. She settled back onto the bed, leaned back into the head cushion, and collected herself casually. Given the hour, and the topic of conversation, she felt rather out of place with reality. No doubt her host did too.

“It is so easy to put together a name and a face and think that we can know the person behind them. And what do you really know?” Ashara challenged. “I should think you would understand that. It’s not the question either one of us was asking,” she elaborated. Flowing into motion, she stalked up on Av, pressing close with examining eyes. “It is scary to look at the face of a friend or lover and suddenly *realize* you don't really know who you are dealing with. To suddenly find yourself alone with a stranger. But, this,” she said brushing her fingers from Av’s temple to her chin, “is simply frightening. Surely you can understand what I was really asking?”

Av turned her face, freeing her chin. She shifted and glanced away uncomfortably. “Maybe that happens sometimes. I would not know. That's certainly not the way I felt, though,” she murmured. A gentle hand forced her head back, Ashara seeking out her eyes again. There was something challenging and dangerous in the look. She probed her guest for a moment and then looked down, her eyes shadowed by dark eyelashes.

“I was afraid of that,” she breathed.

The sudden change in her tone, provoked Av’s curiosity. “Why?” she pried. Sliding down on the bed, she was able to lean in and look up into the Avatar’s eyes. Ashara shifted. Av could suddenly feel the weight of her body on her legs. Ashara boldly matched her gaze.

“You asked me who I was. Not because I suddenly seemed alien to you. Rather, you suddenly felt that you knew me too well, no?”

Av maintained an even gaze and felt that strange feeling again—something like a subsonic reverberating within her; unmooring her sense of balance. Or stranger still, an ominous plummeting within her like the onset of panic. It came up suddenly. More menacingly. Stronger. She fought inwardly to maintain her grip on herself.

She nodded timidly.

Ashara’s expression became more resigned. She smiled; it felt ironic and bitter, but not ugly. She extended one of her long fingers to her lips and her look became a touch worried. “I was afraid of that; because I think... maybe... I know why you would,” she declared softly. She frowned. Allowing herself to consider more completely what she had only intuitively gathered. Gradually, yet all at once, it fell together. While it made an incontestable amount of sense, it did—for a fleeting eternity—frighten her out of her mind. «*You tried to kill me...*» the thought escaped her, arising without warning.

Av cringed back at the silent accusation. However, she was also reacting to the implication of Ashara’s words. A desperate ring of terror resounded in her blood, and an electric whip snapped in her neurons. A wave of force exploded out of Amaeo’s crumbling restraints, flinging Ashara’s body across the room. A matching pulse of telekinetic force belled out of Ashara’s startled thoughts, cushioning her body, as it hurtled toward the wall, absorbing the impact. Her guard snapped up, but there was no following blow.

The force of Av’s mind held half the room, enough to keep Ashara at bay, but not enough to present a threat. Her angry eyes demanded an explanation, but she swallowed her rage at the fear so obvious on Av’s face. Without any doubt, Av was a bomb with an unstable fuse.

Ashara advanced until the force of Av’s thoughts arrested her. Taking a deep breath, she began in a calming voice, “I understand you are afraid. Obviously, you are afraid of me, Av. Please believe me, I mean you no harm. All I want to do is help you. I promise you, I will not hurt you.”

Av shuddered, her arms locked around each other. “I want to believe you. I just don’t know how. Nothing makes sense. Not by itself. I just…” she swallowed. “Nothing good is happening to me. I can hardly trust myself. How do I know if it is safe to trust any one else?” She found, and held Ashara’s eyes. Her look was desperate, “How do I know if I can trust you?”

Ashara looked at her sadly, and shook her head. “I don’t know. I can’t give you the power to trust,” she was forced to admit. “But we have to start some where. At least tell me why you wanted to kill me. Why are you so afraid of me?”

Av curled up tighter. Her thoughts raced. Part of her implored her not to say anything more. Not to be caught up in Ashara’s game, but another part of her held out. What difference did it make if she told her what she feared? If her fears were true it would not change the ultimate outcome. Then she asked herself what Ashara could possibly say to convince her she was not what she suspected. She set her shoulders and looked back up. “I can not answer that question. Not from you.”

The sun had made its advance in the wake of Ashara’s departure. Hours had passed, while Av sat curled around herself. Most of her mind was occupied with reigning in the power her mind had unleashed in her moment of panic. For all the effort she had put into it, she had come no where near to restoring the peace of mind Amaeo had given her with a moment’s effort the morning before. In truth, she did not know if she had done anything more than put herself into a trance. Like a mistress calling to her servants, she called together her thoughts and restored that elusive perspective that humans were fond of calling consciousness. So it happened that she faced the memory of the morning and evening before. Now, in light of a new day, she felt foolish for the suspicions she had entertained against Ashara. Dashing the frightful and unspoken fear before it could take root again, she took possession of her body and slipped out of the bed. It was like her, she mused, to turn an offer of truce into something dark and deceiving. That innocence that Shan’je had not taken from her with his abuse of her had been raped by a moment in the company of the Ideal. In the place of that loss, she had condemned herself to becoming a creature that acted with the weight of thought.

Responsible.

She strode across the room and into the bath. The bath was a room that adjoined Ashara’s bedroom. Her host’s fondness for mirrors forced her to confront her nude reflection. Uncomfortably familiar with what she saw in the glass, she looked for something beyond the surface of her form and features. It was not easy to find, but it was there. Something she could call herself, a kind of strength inside her vulnerability that would be alien to Ashara. She turned away from herself and quickly washed under the shower. Then she stepped into the bath and simmered while collecting her mind for the day. Ashara, she hoped, would have responsibilities to attend to. Unless she stumbled across her before she left the residence this morning, Av would probably not have to see her again until evening—if she still happened to be in Ashara’s room. That, she would only know after braving whatever unknowns lay beyond Ashara’s door. As she soaked in the heat, she wondered what kind of assassin would bring in a target she had failed to knock off, and set her up in her own room.

In spite of the near boiling water, an icy chill raced down her spine.

A while later, she lifted her scalded flesh out of the pool, and scrubbed herself dry. Upon finishing the rest of her toilet, she returned to the bedroom to dress—where she discovered she had a visitor. On first glance, she saw a *lyn* clad in a loosely gathered sheet. On second glance the person's androgyny seemed suspect. The intruder stood with the strength and assurance of a man and appraised Av's own naked body with a hungry male appetite. Something about the width of the shoulders, and the general mass of his presence gave weight to her suspicion. He had a pleasant face. He regarded her with a slightly amused and intriguing expression. He looked innocent and young, in a dark cascade of unbound hair. But the youth was like a perfect mask over ancient features. The sheet suddenly slipped free, the silk shimmered and reflected colors and hues, and details around him distracting her vision. All at once, Av's vision cohered and she confronted a man as naked she.

She confronted a fear she would never have admitted to.

Before she could flip out, a reassuring touch soothed her thoughts. It startled her into calm. Confusion brought her eyes back up to his. Like the touch of his thoughts, the light in his eyes was as familiar to her as everything else about him was not. Recognition made Av's mind whirl.

This was the person who had reigned in her mind..

“Amaeo,” she breathed in astonishment.

The man—who was a *lyn* the last time she saw him—smiled in answer and approached her. Av bowed her head and seized her will. She did not know what he wanted, but she knew that she would oblige. He was a person she could not fear, and whose power she knew she could take shelter in. If there was a chance he could help her, in any way, she would do, or be, anything he asked of her. Amaeo had drawn close. With a light touch, he clasped Av's chin and raised her bowed head. Forcing her to make eye contact. Gazing deep into the soul of a Greater Avatar, Av was utterly mesmerized.

“I was told,” the *aeo* murmured. “that you were raped.”

Unable to break away, and compelled to respond, all Av could manage was a single tear—racing down over her wide cheekbone and turning at the line of her jaw to run to her chin where it met and was drunk by Amaeo's hand.

The *aeo*'s smile turned wry, “And yet it was Ashara you did you best to kill,” he purred.

Av, feeling confused and ashamed, felt the same overpowering sense of awe she had when Amaeo had first subdued her. Her will bridled. An insubstantial part of her grabbed hold of the awe, the mesmerism and pulled them deep into her—swallowed them and abased herself in them so that her will could rise and slip out against the tide. Becoming the iron in her voice as she spoke, “I was not afraid of Shan’je. Not until it was too late,” Av spoke true, and the *aeo* stared at her inexplicably, so she went on, “Should I be afraid of you?”

The *aeo* pulled back a pace and regarded her sadly. “Ah, my child, you have so much to learn. I am not here to take advantage of you,” he explained plainly. “I am here to help you if I can. To find out what has happened to you, and heal the damage that has been done.” Av looked at him, unable to comprehend. Unwilling to comprehend. Amaeo was not surprised. In a gentle voice he explained, “A wound to the spirit that festers with fear cannot heal. A fear can not be banished until it is confronted. Some fears cannot be confronted alone.”

Av flushed darkly, glancing down his torso in apprehension. “I wasn’t even there,” she denied hotly, “How can I be afraid, when I don’t even remember what happened?”

He did not say anything, he simply pulled into his embrace. With deft hands, he pressed them together, holding them as her body shivered and jumped violently. When she stopped struggling, he smoothed her hair back in long caressing strokes. “Tell me the truth,” he commanded softly.

“Don’t do this to me,” she whimpered.

“Don’t fool yourself,” he returned sternly. “What do you want me to believe? I saw your mind. I know how open you were. I understand you could not differentiate. I am not surprised you disassociated yourself,” he pulled back and looked her in the face. “But, can you honestly say you were raped?”

She stared back at him incredulously.

Before she could manage an angry retort, he covered her mouth. Walking them over to the bed, he elaborated, “I understand how you feel, but do you understand how the mind works? A naked mind is subject to overwhelming input, but at worst is only suggestible. The power of suggestion is not powerful enough to compel an individual to take an action she is opposed to.”

She planted her feet before they reached the bed, “What are you trying to say? Do you think I wanted to be raped?” Av did not sound amused.

“I did not say that. What I am saying is that you wanted to have sex,” he clarified. “Is there anything wrong with that? Is it wrong to want to have sex?” he asked seriously.

“No. No, That’s not what I meant,” she shook her head. “What I meant was...”

“What you meant,” he interrupted, “was, when you came to your senses, and realized that you had been seduced into having sex with a man you knew nothing about, for no justifiable or explainable reason, you felt used and ashamed. Because *you were taken advantage of*.”

“Yes!”

“But,” Amaeo went on, his hands starting to caress her flanks, “the anger and hate you started to feel were not over sex. They were not turned against your sexuality.” He felt the resistance go out of her legs, and gently started easing them back toward the bed. He was still talking, “You looked at what had happened, and started placing blame. It was his fault for being a man—for being highly aroused and sexually attractive—because his lust made it easy for him to take advantage of you. It was your fault, for being naked and defenseless—for being easy to take advantage of. But, most of all, it was someone else’s fault for leaving you naked; after all, you certainly wouldn’t do something so ridiculously stupid as cripple your own defenses, would you?”

Av, already responding to his gentle caresses, already reaching back for the bed, suddenly froze—a look of realization on her face. He saw it. Taking her head in his hands, he kissed her long and deeply. When he let her go, he stepped back and asked her, “Who’s fault is it that you got raped, Av?”

Without even thinking, she said, “Ashara’s”

He gave her a fatherly look, and restated the question, “Who’s fault is it that you got raped Av?”

She started to repeat, and then the second realization hit her. In a small voice, she said, “No one’s. No one got raped.” She looked up at his magnificent male body, and blushed from head to toe. He was not even aroused. She sat there, waiting for him to say something else. When nothing happened, she looked up. Her body ached with yearning, and she asked, “Aren’t you going to finish what you started?”

He smiled, and said, “Why, I’ve already finished what I was doing.” She looked at him dumbfounded. Before she could form a question, he raised an eyebrow, and posed the question himself, “So, what was all this about?” he asked, reaching foreword and caressing her again. He shrugged, “A lot can be done with words, but more can be done with words *and* actions. I told you from the beginning I was not here to take advantage of you.”

She got control of her voice and declared hotly, “You had better start taking advantage of me, or I am going to lose my mind!” Amaeo looked her over long and hard, and sighed deeply. Crossing the floor, he gathered up the sheet he had been wearing and wrapped it around his body.

Turning back to her, he said, “I might be willing to let you take advantage of me. In which case it would be up to you to convince me, but as it stands, I have something else I must do first. There is,” he indicated the door to the bathroom, “a shower available, and I am certain it provides all the cold water you could desire. Failing that, I am sure you could find something to do with yourself to sate your appetite.” She gave him another disbelieving stare, so he added, “self control starts with yourself.”

Realizing he was dead serious, she let out an aggravated sigh, and rushed for the shower.

“Avon.”

The voice was very far away. She stirred, but her body felt leaden. Sluggish.

“Av, come on. Wake up.”

She moaned. The world was tumbling around her. She realized that someone was shaking her. Opening her eyes, she saw mostly darkness. “It was a dream,” she heard herself say, the sound deep and distant even to her.

A female voice responded with something born of a huff and a short laugh and said, “If so, look around, the dream is still going on.”

She sat up and saw Amaeo silhouetted by the candle light. She was taller than Av, she sensed, but kneeling beside her like that, it was hard to tell. In spite of herself, her eyes riveted to Amaeo’s new form. At least she assumed it was Amaeo. He—she had pulled this trick on her once already that day. She had a slim and supple body. Her features were elegant—feminine, but conveying strength. Her features made her recognizable, being closer to what she had seen originally when Amaeo had appeared as a *lyn*. Like before, the apparent youth was deceptive, she had no idea how old she really was. “Amaeo?”

“As good a name as any other,” she answered. “Are you all right? What do you remember?”

“You changed on me again,” she mumbled, trying to coordinate her limbs. “How do you do that?” She glanced around. The room was familiar, in fact it was all too real. Amaeo’s question sank in and she returned her eyes to her. What did she remember? She concentrated, but a wash of images engulfed her. Too much. She shook her head, to clear it, and very distinctly heard her sigh. “What?” she asked her a bit sharply.

“Nothing,” she replied, gathering up the wine glasses and getting up. Why did she sound so relieved? Av wondered, as Amaeo held out a hand to help her to her feet. All at once, she did remember. She remembered why she passed out. To both their surprise, she flinched away from her rather violently. Amaeo was instantly alarmed.

“You do remember.”

“Yes,” she barked, her voice unsteady. Her memory of a large part of the day was highly subjective. She had spent hours disoriented by Amaeo’s telepathic examination. Under probing, her mind had displayed remarkable integrity. Amaeo had not been able to help commenting on what she found in Av. Contrary to Av’s fears, her identity was profoundly stable, as if she held an eternal awareness of herself. Beyond that, however, her mind was was void of particulars. No fragments of a defined past or determined position in the world would come to light. Her sense of self, while coherent, was ungrounded by common or coincidental details.

Amaeo had spent the bulk of her time examining the architecture of her psionic potential. She had mostly reserved comment, but Av had felt how deeply concerned Amaeo was about her perpetually heightened state of awareness. As Amaeo had once again blocked her channels of power, she had explained why. It was not her apparant lack of mental discipline that presented the problem, but the degree of power available to her untrained mind that could be dangerous. Amaeo had noted that Av’s mind was remarkably instinctive and intuitive, which contrributed immensely to her innate control, but the lack of true discipline made her vulnerable to dangerous episodes. Even when she lost control in the plaza, she had not tapped even a fraction of her full potential. Like Ciar, Av sensed an ambitious current, a propriatary interest that glimpsing he potential evoked in even the noblest minds she encountered. Amaeo had felt clearly justified in making a claim on her and training her. When Av had challenged the fugitive impulse, Amaeo had aptly defended her interest. Confessing that Av was perhaps the most gifted individual she had ever confronted. Her raw potential exceeded that of the most exceptional and enlightened individuals Amaeo had ever confronted.

Having done everything she could to probe for Av’s missing past, Amaeo turned to untangling the memories she had acquired recently. Av had submitted, when Amaeo pointed out that her exposed mind had subjected her to stolen memories every minute since she had first awakened. Amaeo was only offering to recover whatever personal memories she had lost to the overwhelming impact of those alien experiences. Everything had been fine until Amaeo found her suspicions against Ashana. She was such a fool. Av had been thrown into turmoil, struggling to preserve the virginity of those dangerous moments. Amaeo had hurt her, forcing her to give up those memories. When she blacked out, Amaeo was sure to have pried them free.

Careless stupidity, now she had put Dane in danger.

Amaeo lunged quickly, catching her by the arm, and hauled her to her feet. Av had not even realized she was about to bolt. She writhed to break Amaeo’s grip, and Amaeo had to shake her and growl, “Stop it. Don't be foolish.” She felt her body turn to water in the joints and fire in her gut. Tensing in Amaeo’s grip, her mind fought for equilibrium. Amaeo caught her eye, “I'm not going to hurt you. Okay?”

«*Trust me.*»

With some effort, she relaxed and nodded.

Amaeo noted this and finally let go of her. “I think we have a lot to talk about.”

Again she nodded.

Leading the way, Amaeo passed through a curtain, stopping to drop off the glasses, and together they stepped out onto the balcony. The midnight air was sharp and cool and helped clear her head. Her fright passed into an odd bewilderment. They stood near the railing and gazed over the skyline of the *dahn* for several long, quiet moments. Like all cities, this one did not sleep. Rather, it fitfully emulated its daily business. A fading echo of itself, dressed in jewels of light. The sight should have absorbed her attention. Instead it reminded her of her first night, when she woke up from a dream so frightening in its implications that she had to call it a nightmare. A nightmare that did not deign to remain her sleeping companion, but which caught her in the grip of her untamed power. The power that Amaeo had sent the entire day probing and measuring. She closed her eyes and hugged herself tight, trying to force this turn of thought out of her mind.

Eventually, Amaeo began to speak again.

“We were both a bit distracted, when we first met. I noticed that you were desperately afraid of Ashara while I was blocking you. It is a shame we didn't talk about it then. Things might have started out better, perhaps,” she mused. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Av turn to face her.

“How do you suppose?” she issued, sort of skeptically.

She shrugged. “You remember what we did talk about, don't you?” she returned.

Av tilted her head, and her eyes narrowed. She fixed on the memory of the morning of her capture. Amaeo had been there when she recovered from her black out. Waiting with a tray of food, and patiently engaging the subdued “guest” in conversation. They had talked mostly about her appearance, she recalled. That was what they had talked about this morning, after her second shower, as well. On the surface, it was a rather narrow topic. She frowned. It was not a comfortable topic, either. Then she caught herself. No. They had not just talked about her appearance, specifically. They had talked a bit about the expectations held of the Ideal that she resembled. Amaeo had been trying to explain to her why Av had been brought to her, and put in her care. Amaeo had described how she herself was indirectly involved with the fulfillment of those expectations and, through association, several of the Ideal’s obligations. Now that she had an idea where this was going, she nodded, “I think I know what you mean.”

Amaeo smiled, “I do not understand the logic of your intuition. Sometimes you understand the strangest things with the most unnatural certainty, and other times you can't even see what's right in front of your face.”

Av gave her a disparaging look.

“Well, what was it we talked about that night? Seriously talked about?” she prodded. Av set her shoulders. Looking at Amaeo hard, she could see the *aeo’mni* really meant to tackle this issue. Well, if she was going to touch it, she intended to take it by the throat.

“The Goddess,” she answered edgily.