Avatars Initiation - 7

comments

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“Yes. The Goddess,” Amaeo answered. Her voice had an unusual weight. A resonance that broke into Av's sudden reverie.

Av turned and looked at her more carefully, trying to pierce the surface of the intense yet casual attitude she maintained. “You were telling me that no one in their right mind would want to hurt me. Because, quote, ‘I am the image of the Goddess’,” she reflected. During one of her panics, Amaeo had calmed her down by telling her a story. Ancient beliefs held that the universe started as a dream in the mind of a sleeping goddess. Over the ages, the Dream of the Goddess had become the home, the reality, of countless mortal races. During the height of *lyn* civilization, the Dreamer had awakened within her dream. Av was intimately familiar with the Amaeo’s description of the Goddess. Unable to cope with the reality of a waking dream, she had sought the Absolute, offering herself, *her dream*, for a taste of objective reality. According to legend, her offer was taken. After a generation, the Absolute had sought to give the dream, and the embodiment of the dreamer, the Goddess, back. The actually Absolute returned what it had taken, restoring the Goddess to herself, but before she could awaken, she was devoured in *av’va* by her own chosen, and lost forever. But the *lyn* who went into exile remembered her image, and committed themselves to preserving the memory of her face and form in the hopes that one day she would again embody herself in the Dream. For that reason, *avon* revered the Ideal.

Av sighed, and then her thoughts jumped back to where Amaeo’s question had originated. She had reminded her of the story of the Goddess after expressing regret that they had not talked about her fear of Ashara. “I remember the story, but I don’t see what it has to do with what you were saying,” she stated calmly, glancing off into the night.

“When Ashara found you, you were desperately afraid of her. That was obvious, but we were so busy trying to subdue you and get you somewhere private that neither of us really confronted it. We did not really ask *why* you were so afraid of her. Actually, I understand that Ashara did ask, but you couldn’t bring yourself to answer, could you?” she argued. “When I confronted you over the incident with Shan’je, I already suspected that you had some personal grievance with Ashara, but I neglected to address it specifically. I was able to deduce that you held Ashara responsible for your condition, but I could not imagine why,” she confessed.

Av shifted uneasily while Amaeo paused. She looked at Av, tilting her head a bit. “I understand now. While I admit that what your Dane’Captain suggested is technically possible, I do not think it very likely to have occurred. Do you think you can tell me why?” she suggested challengingly.

She shuddered, “I have no idea.”

“Actually, you do,” she argued. “I described to you what is expected of an Ideal. While there is a lot of status associated with the face of the Goddess, there is not a lot of power. I don’t think Dane understood this when he made his assumptions.”

“I don’t understand,” Av protested.

“Let me explain,” Amaeo offered. Av hopped up, and perched on the wide stone casing of the balcony. With her full attention focused on Amaeo, she encouraged her to do so. Amaeo went into detail. In *avon* culture, one of the highest social ranks was that of Ideal. A person who embodied one or more of a number of attributes or proficiencies revered in *avon* culture. Every path had its Ideal, and a title that reflected the Ideal in its form. But these were paths, these were things that anyone could attain. What Ashara and Ashana, and now Av, were, was different. The Image of the Goddess was not an attainment, it was an endowment—an embodiment. There was no path, no Ideal name to aspire to. Conversely, because of what they were—or what they were regarded as—Avatars of the Goddess—they were the only ones specifically called *Ideal*.

The significance of their role in society was one which required explanation. An Avatar of the Goddess was an exception. “An Ideal, as opposed to a *Nai* or a *Vai*, or even a *Dai*, is the only *avon* confronted with expectations. Other Ideals are revered for their exceptional achievements, but an Avatar must be nothing less than exceptional,” Amaeo stressed. “Furthermore, no other Ideal is as much the property of their title as those of your likeness. In the minds of the people, who you are is incidental to what you are. They are not interested in you. To them, you are the Goddess. Their interest is solely to commune with the Goddess through you.

“I could not begin to tell you the possible benefits of being the Ideal,” Amaeo declared. “But I can assure you that it is an endlessly demanding role to fill. You are tested in every proficiency, challenged by the Ideals of every path, and more so than any other Ideal, sought on an intimate level.” Amaeo fell silent for a moment, and Av reflected on the deeper meaning of her words. She could not quite apprehend the point that Amaeo was trying to make, but she finally understood what she had been trying to tell her that first day of captivity.

What she was describing did not sound like anything Av would go out of her way to become. Amaeo had yet to say it, but this was not about her becoming anything, this was about her realizing what she already was. An Avatar of the Goddess. As the perfect image of the Ideal, she had little choice about it. Society had a place all staked out for her, and her function was at once priest, paladin, and prostitute of the Goddess.

“The irony of the whole thing,” Amaeo suddenly continued, “is how the demands and expectations guarantee their own fulfillment.”

“How is that?” she asked.

Amaeo let out a shuddering sigh. “It is a common misunderstanding that the blood red hair of the Goddess is the rarest of *avon* features. In fact, it is a dominant trait. The reason it appears so rarely is because it is without exception the determining factor in naming a child a candidate for Avatarhood. In my life, I have trained thousands in the hopes of finding even a handful who can live up to the expectations they will face. I cannot tell you how many have killed themselves for failing—in their own eyes—to be equal to the demands placed on them. Or for falling short of the Ideal in other aspects of their appearance. It is too much to ask of children to be so selfless and still be self possessed.”

Av was shocked. “Isn’t there an alternative?” she asked.

“There are a few,” Amaeo admitted. “Most of them go wild. Some of them breed together, seeking to perfect the Image in their offspring. Ashana is the product of that recourse. Some of them choose to be altered, to give up the likeness. And that is how the expectations of the Ideal come to be fulfilled. Those who remain truly are exceptional.” Amaeo turned and gave her a hard stare. “All of which tells me that what Dane suspected is implausible. If someone wanted to assume the place of an Ideal, and had what it took to do it, they would only need to go so far as assume the likeness of the Goddess. It makes a poor motive for murder.”

“Assuming that such a person merely wanted the position. The prestige or the power of the Ideal,” Av commented. “But what of an assassin? Is it inconceivable that an assassin would want to assume, not just the role, but the identity of the specific individual in order to get close to an exclusive target?” she challenged. That had been Dane’s specific fear.

Amaeo frowned in thought. After a moment she shook her head. “I wonder. Who does Ashara have access to that no other Ideal could get close to? I can think of no one, not even the *Dai*. Except maybe Ashana. Still, I have to admit,” she finally confessed, “it is plausible. In fact it is too plausible. Once suggested, that kind of idea is almost impossible to refute. However, you have to ask yourself, what is more likely?

“An assassin sneaks into the *dahn*, catching Ashara off guard in the bath. She manages to seize, not only her mind, but also her body—because anything less would risk discovery. However, in spite of this coup, she somehow manages to leave enough of her victim intact to regenerate a new, but virtually mindless body. Then, when she discovers her mistake—and is literally attacked in broad daylight with a deadly weapon—she merely subdues the ‘real’ Ashara and delivers her into the care of her own mentor. Risking certain discovery and the failure of her mission?

“Or,” Amaeo emphasized with a telling look, “an innocent guest, a stranger to this *dahn,* is mistaken for Ashara—who I can assure you has many enemies. She finds herself the target of an unprovoked attack and gets virtually slaughtered. In her desperate attempt to stay alive, she reaches for her untapped potential, experiences a profound catalytic shift in her power and blows out a large part of her own mind by accident. Fortunately, she regenerates, and while still in the umbra of her trauma, she encounters an alien from a paranoid culture who, having read too much fiction puts two and two together, and coming up with five, puts the fear of the Goddess into her defenseless mind—and then lets her wander off alone in the middle of the night?

“I’m not questioning that something terrible has happened to you, but I don’t find it likely that the author of your misery is Ashara,” she concluded. She regarded Av carefully, taking in the scowl of thought on her face. Laying a hand on the youth’s knee, she elaborated, “I have two reasons for stating that opinion. The scenario that Dane suggested, the extreme interpretation which has you so frightened, implies that, before your trauma, *you* were Ashara.” She gave her a wry smile, “The only problem with that idea, is that you are too tall. You are about an inch taller than she is, and Ashara has been the same height, full grown, for forty lifetimes.”

Av considered that for a second and replied, “Can this be confirmed? I mean, you are right, the thing that scared me the most was that—” She struggled for a word. “I felt like something was stolen from me. I could not deal with the idea that someone could steal your life from you and start living it without anyone noticing,” she explained with a shiver.

Amaeo rubbed her thighs reassuringly and smiled, “I am sure it would have helped if we had talked about this earlier.” Av pulled her legs up, out of Amaeo’s gentle grip, and wrapped her arms around her knees. Amaeo grinned and turned to go back inside. Just at the door she said over her shoulder, “I’m sorry I had to force you like that. I was just trying to help. Does it make a difference, now that we have talked about it?”

She blushed and looked down, demurely murmuring, “I... I don’t know.” Amaeo had forced Av to confront her fear of Ashara intelligently—confronting her suspicions with the reality of the Ideal. Disarming the notion that Av and Ashara were ever the same person, while admitting that Av’s trauma might be related to her reflection of the Ideal. Av looked up as the dark haired woman went in. The drape flapped down behind her, leaving her alone on the balcony. It was a place to start, she decided. The mystery remained, but now Av could at least give Ashara the benefit of the doubt.

She shivered and followed Amaeo inside.

Amaeo was no where in sight when she entered the room. She wandered back to the low table where the candles languished in their last moments beside the wine in its bed of ice. Gazing into the flames, systematically hunting down each one and extinguishing it with long breath, she waited for Amaeo to show herself. Her keen ears picked up the crunch of woven fibers as she stepped onto the carpet. She turned and casually looked up at her. Amaeo could disguise it, but she could see that she had been enraptured watching her killing the flames.

Amaeo was naked. She smiled as Av seemed to consider what to say for a moment. Her eyes read the tension in Av’s young body. “Come,” she implored, gesturing her over to the bed. Av ran a hand through her hair, sighing. Quietly, she moved over and stood next to her by the bed. Amaeo turned back the comforter and slid in between the sheets. Av gave a little start as Amaeo caught her loose robe and started to slide it off of her. In a soft voice, she murmured, “Relax.”

“What are we doing?” Av asked in trepidation.

“We are gong to bed,” she answered gently. The silk garment whispered down the length of her body. Amaeo caught one of her hands and tugged her lightly toward her, holding out her other hand for Av to clasp.

She hesitated before taking her free hand, “I... can’t… I don’t think I want to have sex tonight. It’s just...” she stammered.

“Shhh. It’s all right. I know. I wasn’t going to ask,” she soothed, pulling both of them under the covers. “Now is not a good time for you to be alone. I don’t want you to sleep with your fears tonight.”

The moon cast questing fingers of light through the water, tracing esoteric patterns on the bottom of the pool. Dane’s athletic form plunged powerfully through its depths. Hitting the opposite wall, he flipped end over end, and kicked off. He managed to complete his third crossing underwater, in spite of the fact that the *avon* pool exceeded the Olympic proportions he was accustomed to. Breaking the surface, he drew in a sweet, deep breath. With strong even strokes, he attacked his final laps, and then propelled his body out of the water in one smooth motion. As he shifted his weight from his hands to his haunches, a woman’s hands draped a towel over his shoulders. He glanced up and acknowledged Linda’s presence with a nod. She waited patiently as he rose to his feet and toweled himself off. He noticed that she was in her uniform, and tied the towel around his naked flanks.

“Does this mean you were able to find anything?” he asked.

She handed him a data pad and replied, “Something, but it raises more questions than it answers. We were fortunate in one regard at least. We had the blood and tissue samples we took when we first found her to work with. Not that it will matter much now that she is in their hands. If the one they call Ashara had anything to do with what happened to her there’s probably nothing we can do for her.”

Dane read through the analysis in the report. When he was finished he looked back up at her. “That was a worst case scenario. Even so, she was taken very publicly, if she is in hostile hands, it would be difficult for them to simply make her disappear,” he commented. He rubbed his lip thoughtfully for a moment and handed the data pad back to the intern. “So, her DNA is not on file. This at least tells us at least that she is not a registered citizen. I did not expect she would be, given her sex. So far as I know they have only allowed their men and women to opt for aegis citizenship. The fact that you could not find a sequence match for her augmentation heritage tells us more. A civilian augmentation could be pirated—and therefor not be recorded—but the fact that her interface is military grade means that she, or her mother before her, was a covert operative or an intelligence resource,” he concluded. He did not mention the other option. Officially, the aegis did not condone assassination.

Linda clasped the pad in her hands and considered the question that had been itching at her for last two days. Dane raised an eyebrow at her. She shrugged, “I have to wonder, is it possible we’ve been reading this situation wrong?” Dane looked at her very carefully, his expression thoughtful. Linda took his cue to continue, “I mean, we really don’t know enough about these people. I think that sort of skewed our perception of events. What do we really know? What facts do we really have?”

“We never really had a specific read on the situation,” he reminded her. “What we had was one very frightened adolescent who was the victim of a serious trauma. We don’t know what happened to her anymore that she does. What we needed were answers, but we were not in the best position to acquire them. I am not ashamed to admit that we took a rather paranoid stance, but if you don’t know what you are dealing with, it is safer to suspect everything and be disappointed than it is to suspect nothing and be surprised.” He clapped her on the shoulder and started them off for the wash room. “I would not be surprised if our hosts suspect *us* of some kind of wrong-doing to or through her now that Avon is in their hands. From what I have put together the past couple of days, an Ideal would be in a great position to act as a spy for us, and I am sure some of them will think the same thing.”

Linda looked at him oddly, “You must be kidding.”

He laughed, “Not at all. If it turns out that they can’t positively identify her, we might find them dumping her back on us with a choice selection of nasty accusations before they send the lot of us packing.” He sobered and added, “And if they simply kill her, then, well, there really wasn’t much we could have done about it anyway.”

Av wandered through the lower corridors again in the silence of dawn. She had a head of ire built up. She had woken up to find the sheets warm, but herself alone. For the first time she could remember—which was not saying much—she had not been wracked by fits or nightmares. That more than anything had brushed away the impulse to lie and bask in the twilight of sleep. Or, rather, she had been tempted, but as her eyes had closed, she had remembered the promise she had made to Amaeo before she had fallen asleep. It had been easy, so late at night in the company of someone who had felt so damn safe, to let go of her doubts.

She had not lost them very well, for they had turned up while she was in the bath. By the time she was dressed, her apprehension had already reached a peak. Unfortunately, she saw no way to avoid the confrontation waiting for her. She had forced herself to admit it, but she had given in to an unconscious urge to at least delay it a little. Her unthinking path had not been chosen any more wisely.

Her steps faltered as she neared the fallow garden. To her eyes, it was simply one of many open areas—a subtle transition from indoor to outdoor space erratically defined by columns—that had been relieved from cultivation to grow wild. To her heart, her fragile spirit, it was a monument to her frightening vulnerability.

Avon slipped between the columns of the expansive arcade, and for a moment she completely forgot her agreement to meet Ashana and Ashara for breakfast. More seriously, she did not notice her shadow creep up in her wake. Shan’je had been keeping an eye out for her, and his vigilance had finally paid off. His pulse had quickened as the intrepid guest had wandered back to where he had left her before. He prowled even closer as she delved curiously deeper into the undergrowth. When she found the nest they had made, his smile broadened with delight. The young *lyn* seemed completely oblivious to him, but without warning she turned to face him. Her expression was distant but bemused. His heart resumed beating as she continued to turn.

She had not seen him.

Amaeo had left them to make arrangements for their breakfast. Ashana and Ashara sat together in silence and considered what their mentor had told them. He had arrived, waking them before dawn, with answers to the questions neither of them could have pried out of their likeness. They were still stunned over the logic behind Av’s attack on Ashara. It was an insidious accusation, especially when they forced themselves to consider the possibility. It had given Ashana pause, but Ashara had to struggle much harder to come to grips with it. Ashana saw this and expressed her concern.

She shrugged, “It is hard to be asked to question my own existence, but once there is a question posed it is that much more important to get an answer. We both know better than to take what is happening to us for granted, and this is a possibility that had not occurred to us. If I am not who I think I am, we could all be in danger. Since I know from experience that what Av and the human suggested is possible, I cannot afford to deny that.”

She realized that Ana was staring at her in bewilderment. “Surely you don’t doubt who you are?” she asked softly, almost with awe.

“What?” she challenged, “Why are you looking at me like that?”

She grinned and turned to leave her room. Just at the door she said over her shoulder, “I just can’t imagine how you could possibly doubt yourself. I have known you all my life. Sometimes I feel like I have always known you, watched you and followed you—always from a distance. I have never been more sure of you than I have been these past three days.” She shook her head in thought, then stared her suddenly, “Why do you have this power over me?”

Ashara blushed and looked down, demurely murmuring, “I... I don't know.” Her lover gestured for her to follow her from the room. Ashara hesitated. To herself she wondered, *Why is it that whenever I am near you... whenever I even think of you, I can feel your touch around me? Why do you have this hold on me?* She shivered and followed Ana through the door.

She was not in the hall, so she continued on to the main room of Ashana’s apartment. The room was unusually large for one person's comfort. Ashana lived alone, but her home was quite expansive. Ashara wandered back to the low sitting table where a bottle of wine was already chilling in its bed of ice. Sitting down among the cushions she waited for Ashana to show herself. While waiting, she tried to determine what the exact nature of their relationship was. They were unusual for Ideals. They were far from the only, but she herself had been the first. The basis for the legend. Ashana was the first who had come so close to the standard she had set, in spite of her youth.

They had been chosen as companions, with the hope that they would become complements, while they had both been children. They had known that Ashara would remain a dragon in spirit, but there was only half a chance Ashana would become a phoenix. They had been expected to make love, and yet they not allowed to make any claims to each other. No engagements. No commitments. In some ways, they maintained a great deal of separation. Ashara was a master of several physical and spiritual arts and practices Ashana was studying, but which Ana would not allow her to teach her. Ashara eagerly listened to her lover’s discoveries and inspirations and critiqued her work, but she would not participate directly in Ashana’s academic studies. They made extraordinary confidences in each other, yet they were not exactly friends. They fought and tested each other so often they seemed more like fond enemies. In spite of that they had come to possess each other.

A relationship between them had always been impossible, but it had so natural for them to become intimate. In spite of their better judgment, they had fallen in love, but it had not really been their love that had led them to cross the line. It was a shocking realization. She turned her attention inward to identify what had, and blanched. Fascination. Not love. Obsessed fascination. But, then, that simply did not make any sense. Maybe she was just confusing the memory with something else. With a start, she realized Ashana was standing there watching her. Her face had clouded as she watched Ashara's pale.

The question was in her eyes.

“It's nothing,” Ashara sighed, waving her thoughts aside. “I’m just tired. A lot has happened recently, and I don't know for sure what is bothering me anymore. Don't take it personally,” she implored, gesturing for her to come to her. Quietly, she moved over and kneeled down next to her. Ashara ran a hand through her lover’s hair, sighing.

“Are you ready to go get her?” Ana asked gently.

Ashara took a deep breath, and squared her shoulders. “Lets go.”

She was lost in the memory—a novel experience—of Amaeo’s revision of what actually happened to her here. Av mulled his words over in her head as she aimlessly wandered the tangled green. As fast as she had been adjusting to her new life, she really hadn’t had much time to deal with the implications of her image. In a way, her first lesson had been right here. What had happened here would inevitably happen again. She had not wanted to face that. She suddenly confronted it now.

He came up behind her and caught her up in his arms. One hand slipped over her hip to hug her belly and the other snaked under her arm to cup firmly over her boyish left breast. She caught sight of sandy hair out of the corner of her eye as he bent to kiss her on the side of her neck. She stiffened reflexively and he whispered thickly, “Are you in the mood?”

Her body remembered his touch. Thunder suddenly pounded in her ears. She slid her hand over his where it rested over her heart, gripped it and turned about to face him. Her motion forced him to turn as well, presenting her his back as the joints of his arm locked up in the painful bind. Her right hand locked on his shoulder as she carried through and drove him down, hard, into the ground. Something black churned in her heart, and she was suddenly fighting for an even tighter grip on herself.

He winced in pain at the bind she had on his arm. Her eyes weighed her available targets, but her hand hesitated before striking. Even as she feared to look at what she wanted to do, she really looked at him for the first time. He was good to look at, and she hastily reconsidered her next move. She let go and stepped back. He rolled over, looking at her as he massaged his wrist. She measured him thoughtfully. Before he could speak, she smiled. “I don’t believe *I* ever was,” she answered, finally. “If I remember correctly, what happened here was all you. Your wants, your needs, your assumptions—and you were certainly aroused enough for both of us. Amaeo was right,” she confided, meeting his eyes. “What happened here was not rape. It was masturbation.”

Shan’je stared at her uncomprehendingly for a moment. Then the word ‘rape’ registered. His sun kissed complexion turned to ash. Shan’je suddenly remembered what had happened to the last wretch who had raped an Ideal. Av, in spite of Amaeo’s blocks, could actually see the powerful images that flashed in his thoughts. He could tell the story better than anyone. He was far from the first servant to be tempted by the constant presence of the Ideals—or to assume that what they were obliged to give could as easily be taken. He once had a friend in his lust for them who had fallen prey to thoughts of possession. As a servant he had gradually succumbed to the prevailing attitude that the Ideals were property not people. It had not been a difficult attitude to adopt. As far as the lords of the establishment were concerned, Ashana and Ashara *belonged* to the establishment. Bluntly put, they were the property of the *Dai.* A priceless and living resource which increased the prestige and authority of the *Ashara’Daiyr*. But it had been a mistake to assume that they were dependent on the protection of the *avon* emperor’s unique authority.

The night before the boy had died he had joked with Shan’je, citing an old maxim: *Chiryn aneyzo do shi omenna; ànchiryn aneyzo do shi omenxa. /Willingly given, it is the embrace of life; unwillingly given, it is the embrace of death/.* Shan’je had been amused by his friend mocking the ancient warning until the next morning, when Ashana had dragged his friend’s body before the majordomo. She had repeated his friend's words to the servants, and then stepped into a fountain to wash off the blood of the unexplained encounter.

Ashara had stepped into the water with Ashana and washed her back. They stared coolly at the gathered servants who all averted their eyes. Shan’je was the last to look away, but not before their predatorial gaze had pierced him. The message had been clear enough. All at once he had understood their true power.

Fortunately, the majordomo had seen the light of defiance in his downcast eye. She had confronted him and her words had been cold and to the point. She had not challenged his assumption. Common belief might have held that they were destined to inherit the power of the Goddess, but among the servants it was decreed that they were no more than an essential part of the estate’s resources. Prisoners who must never know that they were imprisoned. His friend had been a fool for crossing the line. Shan’je, had been forbidden, then and there, to seek the favors of the Ideal. Not that he had been convinced until it became apparent that the Ideal would not face any repercussions for his friend’s death. They were as bold as brass and they knew it. They could do what they wanted because they damn well knew how to take care of themselves. Only a great fool could forget, even in lust, that an Ideal was as much *vai* as she was *mnai*; and knew twice as many ways to kill as she did to pleasure.

Without uttering a word, he had fled from her presence.

Ashana’s eyebrow quirked up as she noticed Shan’je charging down the arcade toward them. *There is a boy who could learn a little restraint,* she mused. She indicated his approach to Ashara, who was still lost in thought. He looked up at the same time she did. They were not surprised in the least when he literally gaped at them as he stumbled to a halt. But when he spoke, it was a shock.

“Goddess! Not you! I didn’t…” he cut himself off in distress. He looked from one to the other, and finally settled his eyes on Ana. “I… you surprised me. Is… is… um, the two of you—have you been with each other until now?” he asked almost desperately.

Their minds combined in a whirl of amazement. «*He couldn’t have—*»Ashana turned a hard eye on him. His face was a pallid mask, and he clearly came to the sudden realization of how much he had just said. In a flash his guard was back up, and his face unreadable. Looking Ashana straight in the eye, he genuflected and apologized for interrupting their thoughts. This immediately intrigued her. Despite his recovery, she could tell that something had shaken him to the core. The last time he had *mistaken* their identities, he had—*Amaeo says it was not rape, but the bastard did not give her a chance to say no—*just encountered Av. Probing gently she explored his surface memories. She was surprised at his potential, and felt him resisting her. She stepped closer and cupped his face in her hands. But as soon as her flesh contacted his, his spirit recoiled.

*What the…?*

He broke into a cold sweat, drenching her hands. *My God, he's terrified! What did he do?* She secured her grip on his arm, feeling him go rigid. Ashara pulled him away from her and examined him closely as well. Between them, they exposed his encounter with Av. “He didn’t do anything,” Ashana murmured, and he seemed to relax a bit. But the fear didn't go away.

*“*Shan’je,” Ashara caught his eye and held it. “What are you afraid of? What did you think we were going to do to you?*”* she paused to collect her wits. He knew he had been read. He knew why. Technically, because of what Av had given him before, he had not crossed the line of intimacy, even though his touch had been uninvited by Av. And yet his thoughts tasted guilty. So she challenged him, “If your memory is true, you have nothing to fear. Or do your memories lie?” It was a leading question.

He remembered the scene in the fallow garden and thought very carefully. There was a difference between what Av had said, and what he had heard, but he had not picked up on it yet. If they had not found his memory of her accusation of rape, he dared not convict himself. He shook his head to himself. “Have I ever been able to deceive you?” he asked carefully.

She looked at him inscrutably. He was staring at Ashana’s naked body, his thoughts fairly shouting his desire at her. Ashana looked away. He had them there, in a way. His obsession shaped his thoughts and emotions, and while they might not be noble, his feelings were at least honest. Smiling radiantly she answered Shan’je, “To deceive the world is to deceive yourself, Shan’je. Somehow, I don’t believe that to be beyond you.”

Shan’je looked confused.

“You have a guilty conscience, but I don’t think that is our concern,” Ashara contributed, watching him try to figure out if Ashana’s reply had been an insult or not. “I am sure we can make more sense of this if we find our guest and see what she has to say, yes?”

Shan’je could not say no to that suggestion, so he quickly composed himself, escorting Ashana and Ashara in the direction from which he had come. Feeling that they had resolved the matter, they allowed the incident to drop from their minds. Unfortunately, it was all Shan’je could think about. Apart from marveling at the nerve of Ashana and Ashara walking beside him. It neither crossed their minds, nor did it much matter to them, that they were going to confront their guest in the nude.

Her stomach growled at her, stirring her out of her reverie. Since she honestly could not fathom how long it had been since her last meal, she was happy to be reminded of her appointment with the Ideals. Unfortunately, that thought was accompanied by the doubts that had lead her to avoid them. It was not possible to approach Ashara without an awareness of what had already passed between them. Nor without dwelling on the terrible severing of her past and its obligations. Behind a placid face seethed an anguish at her fear of confronting either. It did not salve her conscience any to admit that the individual she persisted in viewing as an enemy had given up her own rooms so that she could face her fears in privacy. Ashana herself had delivered her into the care of a person she did not doubt would do everything in her power to help her.

Deep inside, she knew that in order for anyone to be able to heal her, they would no doubt have to learn of what had happened to her and what she had consequently done. She felt it, but she didn’t understand it, and so she was miserable. Miserable with that anticipation—even though she was delighted beyond words to be here. Ironic.

With a sigh, she accepted the armor of her sense of humor, and quietly laughed at herself. Her hosts arrived to this laughter, and were not too dull to recognize the bitter self mocking ring it carried.

Ashana raised an eyebrow, and set her teeth with the intent to unearth the cause for such a black mar in the heart of her—. She grabbed the impulse and buried it. Her suspicion of Av’s true identity was the last thought she dared to let escape her. Av noticed them, and looked up. Her eyes bounced off of the servant who stood between them, refusing to acknowledge his presence. Taking in Ashana and Ashara's state of undress, Avon tilted her head to the side and opened in *uman*, “Are we not having breakfast then?” Her voice was a few notes deeper than Ashana's and had a strong timbre.

“Not at all,” Ashara replied, nonchalantly and to the contrary. “We were just on our way to meet you. It’s just,” she indicated her self with a gesture, “we didn’t think this should be a formal occasion.”

“We have been looking forward to talking to you. It’s nice to finally meet you,” Ashana asserted warmly. Ashana wondered why Av had chosen to speak in the foreign tongue. *For that matter how did she know we would understand her?* Ashana happened to glance at Shan’je and suddenly smiled conspiratorially. He wore a strange expression, unable to comprehend the metallic sounds of the alien language. She stepped into the garden and quickly found a perch on a stone table dividing the more internal from the more external space. “I am really looking forward to getting to know you, Av,” she confessed, with unexpected feeling.

A shadow passed through Avon's expression, and in a strange voice, she replied, “Yeah, me too.” The way she said it made Ashana wonder it she had been replying in kind or speaking about herself. Av smiled self consciously, dismissing the enigmatic comment, “I would have been up there earlier, I suppose, but I had a few things to think about.” She glanced into the undergrowth.

None of them looked specifically at Shan’je, but he felt attention shift unquestionably to him. In fact, he realized that Av—he still did not know her name even though Ashana had just said it—had deliberately avoided even looking in his direction since he had appeared with the Ideals in tow. Shifting uneasily, he excused himself, and fled from her presence once again. “Did he… do anything to you?” asked Ashara. Av gave her a startled look, and Ashara quickly amended, “I’m sorry, it was not my place to ask.”

“No,” Av waved her off, “It’s all right. He is no threat with Amaeo’s wards protecting me. In fact, I’m glad he found me. I think he understands now that he is unwanted,” she explained, a little sheepishly.

Ashana looked at her counterpart inscrutably. Ashara nodded, “Well, if you are sure. I guess we can let the matter rest. Breakfast should be ready for us. Do you still want to join us?” Ashara asked encouragingly.

Avon ran one hand through her hair, pulling it back from her face. It had a darker, more lustrous hue to it. Thick and perhaps a bit wild. “Want to? I don’t know, I don’t think I’m ready to look as that I want,” Av said, after a few seconds. “Not that I am opposed, it’s just—” she cut herself off before she could finish explaining. She looked Ashana in the eye, and Ashana could see that there was a lot meant in that look. There was something hurt and angry in Av's eyes. It suddenly occurred to Ashana that Av was here because she didn't really have anywhere else to go.

Av took a deep breath and started over, “I am being awkward. I would be delighted to join you.” With the grace of unexplained familiarity, the trio conducted themselves to the residence’s main terrace for a light breakfast of new bread and various fresh fruits.

Their conversation started light; much lighter for Avon's polite reluctance to participate. After a bit, they were at least able to draw her out on her experience with Shan’je. Av found herself expressing her uncertainty about knowingly being used in that fashion. Both of them sympathized with her. As Ideals, they had known where they stood in the world. They served a living, provocative function that was as political as it was religious. But it was not exclusively either. They were there to challenge the best. They were a goad for the advancement of their race. In most cases, simply by being what they were, they could not help but be an inspiration to others. Sometimes all they needed to reveal were ideas. Deep, illuminating thought had been Ashara’s stock and trade for ages. Often enough they had been bared to the soul. Pressed to embrace the guests of their House or Court.

There was an inescapable desire in any soul to touch divinity.

That was simply the way of it, and Ashara had dealt with it for scores of lifetimes. The only difficulty it presented for them now was that they were so young. Ashara had never been responsible for the duties of the Ideal at such a young age. The fact that there were, practically speaking, only two of them—until the appearance of Av—merely increased the level of interest and expectation invested in them. Ashana and Ashara had been prepared for this, of course. Even if they had not been pressed, even if the authorities in their House and Court had not allowed them to be courted, they would have know what was expected of them.

How could they not when the eyes of every servant they saw was a silent reminder of it. Especially Shan’je, who watched more openly than the rest. Neither of them had ever done what Av had done with Shan’je. Their position gave them no power over the stress brought on them by those who sought inspiration through them. They were left to their own devices to guard their sanity, which forced them to impose limits. To open up unreservedly, sparing nothing in themselves, and allow someone to take everything they could give was simply too much to ask.

Unfortunately, their sympathetic explanations only confirmed her unspoken fears. Ashana and Ashara pretended ignorance of her lingering moodiness long enough to ensure a pleasant end to the meal, but as they relaxed over a cup of *avon* coffee, Ashana pinned down her new friend with a severe look. Av considered herself well warned and resigned herself to an interrogation.

“It must be pretty bad,” was all she said.

The remark so subtly cut through her defenses, that Av responded without the slightest consideration. Her response revealed what direction her thoughts had gone with what they had discussed. “Who cares about Shan’je, he wasn’t the one that killed me,” she mewed. The voice was her pain, and the words were an immediate fact, though they had not found utterance in the days she had borne that wound. Despite the incongruity of Av's words, their ring of truth had impressed the pair. It was an admission that raised very interesting questions. Questions too difficult to ask bluntly.

Ashara graced her with a conspiratorial grin. “Well. It could be worse. At least you survived it,” she averred.

Av returned a stricken look, “I'm not so sure I have.”

“Can you tell us about it?”

Av's face drained as she sought the words to express what she had endured. She struggled so hard with it she began to tremble. Ashara gazed into her eyes and for an instant glimpsed beyond the veil of consciousness. *A dragon in the infinite coil. The star of day flying above. Even as the dragon watched, the brilliant sun slipped into the embrace of shadow. A shadow stretching across the vast to fall upon the dragon. A caress and the dragon's flesh began to unravel and slough off. Devouring darkness feasted on the proud beast, tearing asunder that noble coil. A fleshy mantle blown away as easily as flame from a wick. And with the quenching of the sun itself, in all that darkness only one spark remained. The gleam in the slain dragon's eye. And in the brilliance cast from that infinitesimal point stretched a shadow that encompassed the entire dragon sea. One great dragon in which the others dwelt.*

Ashara jerked spasmodically, drawing an alarmed glance from Ashana.

“What?” she begged. But Ashara now wore the same mute stare as Av. “Well then, *who?”* Ashana cried, turning to her other twin.

Av met her eye and said in a distant voice, “I don’t know. I thought it was Ashara.” A chorus of silence rose up. Ashana and Ashara looked at each other. Should they admit that Amaeo had already told them? A small cough, beyond the capacity of a human throat, caught their attention. Snapping around their eyes fell on the vacancy of Avon's chair. The memory brought up by this sudden exchange had proven too much for the *lyn* to bear. Ashara leapt from her seat only to be caught by Ashana's hand.

“No. She'll be back. Let her find her composure,” she advised. “Besides, we have another matter to attend to soon.”

Ashara stared at her, and then wondered how she could have forgotten.