Avatars Initiation - 8

comments

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“Welcome, Ara,” Amaeo greeted her patron—and Ashana’s mother—with a warm hug. Her eyes focused on the dragon train. Obviously, the preparations for the wedding were finally taken care of. Ara explained the arrangements she had been making, while the two of them stood on the grand steps of the East Gate. Below them the train of riders that had escorted Ara to *Ao’Dahn* were turning scores of packages over to the servants and cinching up to continue their journey. One of the dragons blocked his rider when she went to remount. The two stared at each other for a moment before the rider started to remove her saddle from his shoulders. The pair watched this until the dragon and the rider went their separate ways into the *Dahn.*

“I wonder what Dzeyrzo wants in the city of the star gate?” Ara mused aloud. The dragon stopped and looked back at her. Ara’s eyebrow rose, but she kept the dragon’s unexpected response to herself.

Amaeo smiled. “I guess he heard you.”

Ara nodded, suddenly lost in thought. Shaking it off, she turned to Amaeo, “Were the two of them tested already?” she asked.

Amaeo shook her head. “No, the terran delegation arrived that evening. Their presence kept us too busy to set it up before the beginning of the wend. I might have gone against tradition and tested them anyway, but my hands got tied up in another problem.”

Ara glanced up at her, “So, there *was* some sort of disturbance out here while I was gone.”

Amaeo met her look, “You could sense her even in Teal?”

“Her?”

“Hmmm. It is easier to explain if I just show you.”

They encountered Ashana and Ashara making their way to the East Gate, as they were headed to the residence. Ashara greeted Ara warmly. With Amaeo as her mentor, Ara was like a second Patron to her. Ashara announced that breakfast was waiting for her at the residence. Feeling the affectionate touch of Ashara, Ara regretted what coming events were going to do to her. “Thank you, Ashara,” she responded, giving the champion of her House and Court a squeeze. She stepped out of Ashara's embrace and into Ashana's.

“It is good to see you again,” her daughter sighed into Ara’s ear.

She grinned and drew back enough to include both of them in her gaze, “I was only gone a couple of days.” She patted her on the shoulders and then extended her right arm to encircle Ashara's shoulders as well. Together, they finished ascending the steps and passed through the entry to *Tear’ni’hayr.* Ara continued in her friendly musing, “Granted, I was only here for a day, and I was gone for almost a month before that. Fortunately, I have been able to turn affairs at *Teal’ni’hayr* over to Annea. So, I am here through the end of the season.”

“So, you talked her out of being an Ideal,” Ashara commented.

“For the moment,” Ara qualified.

“Thank you,” her daughter sighed with relief.

Ara concealed a sudden disquiet. Her arm drew away from Ashara’s shoulder as her fingers toyed with the ends of her bleached mane. If she were to let it grow in its natural color, she would be as close to the Ideal as her second daughter—on first glance. Unfortunately, she was a descendant of Arden Eve Sinclair. Like her one human ancestor, she was female. Arden was the only human in her House’s bloodline. In spite of her Earthly origin, the first contact colonist had borne the mark of the Goddess. In fact, she had resembled Ashara as closely as Ashana did. Like Ara, her sex had counted against her. Far worse, seeing how she was murdered for being a ‘false’ Ideal.

Nine centuries had passed since, but Ara had learned that the intolerance remained. The daughter she had conceived of herself, as part of her *lyn* heritage—still divorced from her parent identity—had refused to believe her mother’s, or younger sister’s warnings. Not even Anneo, her male half, had seemed able to discourage her from seeking the worship of the Goddess for herself. Finally, nature did most of the arguing. “I don’t deserve any thanks, most of the convincing was accomplished by her twins.”

Ashana looked up in surprise. “They’ve been born?” she piped. Her mother nodded. Ashana whistled softly. “Now you are into your third generation. How do you stay focused?”

Ara smiled. “How do any of us stay focused? I know, I have twice as many separate attentions as a *lyn* of my generation, but you have to remember, each body maintains it’s own sphere of attention, the part of me that controls all of us operates pretty much entirely in the background without getting any of us confused,” she explained, sensing the reason for her daughter’s inquiry. Dropping her hand over Ashana’s belly, she added, “Don’t worry, you’ll understand soon enough.”

Av stood as the four of them approached. They seemed to be caught up in some argument, for none of them noticed her at first. She smiled as it appeared that all of them were simply going to walk right past her. At that moment, the woman in their midst turned to address Ashara on her left. Toward Av. Ara gasped in amazement. The others paused, eyes on the woman as she stopped, her mouth open to speak and staring past them. They gazed at her in wonder for a moment, then turned to see what had astonished her.

There, advancing with catlike steps, was Avon. Noticing their attention, she smiled shyly and greeted them in a self possessed tone, “Hello.”

Ara stood silent in momentary mental turmoil. When ever her gaze fell upon an Ideal, her eyes looked for subtle cues she used to distinguish one from another. With that reflex, she picked out the fine details, and came to the conclusion that she was looking at Ashana—except the same instinct told her she was looking at Ashara. She dismissed the obvious assumption for the simple reason that her seventeen year old daughter could not possible have a seventeen year old daughter. In a flash, she realized that Amaeo’s hints had been correct—words could not have prepared her to confront this. Not that she found this mystery wholly disturbing. Rather, it conspired to fascinate her.

Ara shook herself. Rationally, there must be some explanation. She was just glad she had seen her for the first time with both Ashara and Ashana present. Their presence was sufficient to displace the notion that they had become the same person. The union that could combine the features of two in the body of one would earn them a quick and permanent death. But confronted with all of them at once, clearly this was not them in full *av’va*. The object of her confusion was viewing her calmly. Ara met that steady gaze, a challenge in her eye.

While Ashara studied Ara's reaction carefully, Ashana was caught up in subduing the relief that had surged forth on spying her troubled—friend. She managed to present a casual smile and a smooth salutation, “Hi, Av.” Avon returned a small wave. Ashana, still gazing at Av, commented aside, “Ara, I don’t believe you’ve met Av.”

This prompted a dazed response, “No, I don't think I've had that pleasure.” She straightened and inclined her head, “Av.” Avon returned the slight bow and Ara murmured suspiciously, “Is that a diminutive?”

Her smile growing impishly, Avon replied, “I’m not sure. It is a fragment, not really a proper name. If it is part a longer form, I don’t remember it. I am Avon’Nai, but I prefer for my friends to call me Av,” she emphasized, extending her friendship.

“I thought it sounded unusual,” Ara commented. “Modern names derive from words in the form of authorities, but your preference derives from an abstract. In the old style of naming, I believe it would mean ‘Phoenix’,” she quickly analyzed.

“Really? I guess that’s appropriate,” Av allowed. She sensed Ara’s lingering uncertainty. Av realized that she had presented herself rather awkwardly, and her comment was hardly self explanatory. “How do I address you?” she inquired, distracting the woman from her suspicious contemplation. Amaeo, and the two Ideals found seats for themselves while Ara responded to her question.

“Well, the formal mode is, Ara’Daioni. But seeing as you appear to be my guest, Aranathne—or Ara—is fine as well,” she grinned. As Av had intended, completing the exchange of names had nudged her back into familiar territory. The spell was beginning to wear off. “I have to confess, you are the perfect image of the Ideal,” she added.

Av was forced to look away.

Ara raised an eyebrow. She could see that she was missing something. She glanced around her, and saw the silent, blank expressions. “You know,” she started after the pause had begun to stretch, “with such a resemblance, it seems odd that I have never even heard of you—” It was out of her mouth before she could cut herself off. She made a quick adjustment, and realized that there was more than a little truth to it. How did ‘Av’ ever manage to reach her apparent age without even a rumor of her existence preceding her? It raised an interesting question. “Where are you from, exactly?” she asked with an air of professional curiosity.

“Originally?” Av returned with wide eyed innocence. “I couldn’t say, I mean I honestly don’t remember,” she evaded.

“Well,” Ara sighed, detecting her reluctance. “I did not mean to pry,” *at least not so clumsily*, she confessed to herself. She was openly intrigued now. “You have to understand, my House has been closely involved with the preservation of the Ideal for millennia. I couldn’t help but wonder—who prepared you?”

Av laughed, in spite of herself. “Oh, I was far from prepared,” she confessed, partially disturbed to deduce that a lack of prior reputation did not bode well for figuring out who she really was.

“Surely you know what is expected of you,” Ara challenged sensing that her words meant more than they implied. Ara frowned, she could not possibly mean she had not been prepared for her role at all!

“Av, Ara, please sit down,” Ashana interrupted, beginning to get a crick in her neck looking up and back at them. “Both of you. Get comfortable.”

Av and Ara gave a mild start. Realizing that they had squared off almost like opponents, they visibly relaxed at this suggestion. Av came around and answered, while she and Ara sat down, “I have been learning.”

Seeing her settled, Ashana offered politely, “Would you care for a drink, Ara? Av? There is tea, and coffee—I think we still have some juice, too.”

Av took note of the vessels on the dais in front of the lounge. “Oh, yes. Tea will be fine,” she accepted. While Ashana poured her a glass, Av turned back to Ara, “Are you related to Ashana?”

“Her mother,” she gave, accepting her own glass from Amaeo. She looked at Av carefully. Av wondered what she was looking for, but whatever it was she seemed to find it, giving herself a slight nod. Neither of them noticed as Ashana and Ashara paled. “If I didn’t know better, I might have asked you the same,” Ara commented. “Most people don’t catch the difference between our line and Ashara’s. Do you see it Ana?”

“Mmmm,” was her inscrutable reply, sipping her tea.

“And you?” she queried, taxing Ashara with the same question. The Ideal forced herself to nod. Ara nodded as well, her eyes narrowing. Ashara and Ashana both choked on their tea with her next words. “I would say that answers where you come from.”

Av’s eyes got big. “Where?”

“You have the points of both Ava and Ara bloodlines. You are sort of a combination of Ashana and Ashara,” Ara replied, waving her hand in the direction of the two she named. Her daughter rested a hand on her lover’s arm, warning her. Ara was already explaining, “An Avara cross has not been attempted in thousands of years. Everyone knows that, but that assumption is limited to planned breeding to fulfill the Ideal. Enough individuals from both bloodlines have gone wild that it is conceivable that you could have been conceived without anyone knowing it.” Ara leaned back and concluded, “Intentional or no, you were bred to be Ideal. It just happened out of sight in the wilderness. I could not guess you exact origins, but you are probably my niece.”

“Me?” Av started, pointing to herself. Her eyes took on a distance. She had wondered about the resemblance herself, particularly when she had believed that she might have been Ashara. The idea she might be their cousin had not occurred to her. “I guess that could be true,” she quickly amended. “And it supports Amaeo’s theory of how I got killed.”

“What?”

“Amaeo, thought I came from the wild too,” she continued, ignoring Ara’s startled expression. She looked at the mentor. “It makes sense. As far as I was concerned, I was no one special, right? And where else would I have felt safe enough to drop my guard? I mean I should have been safe, that is where the unpromised go for sanctuary—“ Av’s voice cut off at the sight of Ara recoiling, anger roiling behind her eyes. Everyone turned at her growl of surprise.

“I see,” she grated dangerously.

Av's eyes widened, as she realized the social blunder she had unwittingly made. “I did not mean to say I was *unpromised*—” That was like the next best thing to saying she was a criminal. “—it is just that after what happened I have no way of knowing if I was ever named. It was the wrong word,” she hurriedly interjected. Naming and promising were conjoined rituals, and a person who had not been promised was unnamed, while a person who had been stripped of their name was unpromised. “It is possible I never had a name, technically speaking. I can only remember a fragment,” she explained. She gave it a little thought, and wondered what it was that made Ara take it as such an insult. She quickly reviewed the conversation in her mind.

“I get the impression no one told you anything about me,” Av observed, after a moment. If Ara was forming her impression of her from observation and by listening to her, than perhaps her reaction was not so strange. A guest—that her daughter had invited into her residence—who she introduced, or at least presented as a civilized *avon*—who suddenly admitted to being a criminal could expect to anger a house lord. “I’m sorry, I assumed they told you,” she said. “I don’t know who I am. My memory was lost after someone tried to kill me in the public baths. I have been sort of obsessed with trying to figure out who I could have been, and your suggestion is the most practical one I have heard yet. I was not paying attention to what I was saying,” she stated.

“That is all right. I grant you that, if you just came out of the wild you would probably be unnamed. I didn’t know about your memory. I was operating on the assumption that you had been brought in out of the wild and trained,” she admitted. “In fact, you probably were not named, officially. If you had been promised I would have heard of you before now.” It was a prospect that begged for an explanation Av could not offer. Still the wheels were turning in her head, and she was keeping her thoughts well to herself. “I understand,” she breathed. Av waited patiently. “So, then you have just assumed this fragment name of yours? And I noticed you were in seal. Even for the unnamed it is presumptuous of you to wear that,” she pointed out. “If you were unpromised, and had the audacity to appear in that—do you realize what I could do to you for that insult?”

Av caught the dangerous edge in her voice, and frowned. “I didn’t—“ She bit her lip, and started over, “I wasn’t thinking. I just put it on out of habit,” she protested, glancing sidewise at Ashana.

“The main concern for us has been her amnesia,” Ana interjected, responding to Av’s unspoken plea. “Her past is gone, but she *has* habits that keep surfacing, and she appears to have had sophisticated training. She knows a lot more than she knows,” she put forward. She dared not reveal any more. “We have let her follow her instincts. It seemed the best way for her to recover. If we imposed limitations, not knowing her true station, it would compromise that,” she said, hoping that her mother would let it rest at that, and hoping that she had not already said too much.

But Ara was no longer glaring at Av. On the contrary, she was beaming with amusement as Ashara persisted, “We already know she is worthy of a title of *Nai.* It seemed less presumptuous of her to wear a seal after killing Ciar in the circle.”

Av was astonished. “He’s dead!? I thought he was able to heal himself.” She looked stricken.

“He did,” Ashara corrected. “It does not change the fact that you would have killed him otherwise. In the Circle or in the Arena, that is a valid kill and it remains on your public record.” Av absorbed this and adjusted with a shrug. Ara witnessed this exchange with accelerating curiosity.

Amaeo finally decided to cut in. “I’m surprised you didn’t already know that. Ashara was supposed to talk to you about Ciar, and his offer, after the three of you dealt with that misunderstanding,” she observed.

Ashara grinned wryly. “Sort of like how you were supposed to tell Ara’Daioni about her guest?,” she laughed. “Well, we were just getting around to it, when she popped out on us.” She turned to Av, “We were just about to tell you that Amaeo had explained what you were afraid of, when you teleported. Heh, I didn’t even know you could do that.”

“Me either,” Av confessed, feeling the heat enter her face.

Ara reasserted herself, “Well, since the explanations didn’t get done before, lets just start from the beginning now, and maybe the bunch of you will start making some sense to me.” Amaeo looked at Av, offering to tell the story, since she knew it about as well as Av. Avon considered this for a moment and finally shrugged permission. She would have tried to hide certain things, and she had learned how much of a mess obscuring those crucial details could cause. In the private vaults of her mind, she prayed that no terrible repercussions would fall on Dane and his people.

After Amaeo had outlined the relevant sequence of events, Ara pressed each of them for specific details. Av had the most difficulty with her cross examination. Her confusion was evident, and her inability to respond to parts of her gentle interrogation was troubling to her captors. Individually, the details fit Amaeo and Ara’s assumption. The harder they tried to fit them into a whole, however, the more inconsistent the picture became when applied to Av. It was too much as if she had simply appeared out of nowhere. Nothing she tried would allow her to admit that she had a past beyond emerging from the baths of the *Ao’Dahn’etanu*. Nevertheless, Ara pressed her to remember.

“The first thing I can actually remember was realizing that I was dreaming,” she declared with a piercing look. “In the dream I thought someone was trying to kill me—or something equally terrible. Maybe in the dream I had some sense of past experience, because I knew where I was. I mean, in the dream I was in the real world. I was here in the *dahn.* Even though I can’t remember ever setting foot in the city of the star gate, I still know this place like the back of my hand. I just can’t tell you how or when I could have learned my way around.” Ara sat silent. Av went on.

“There is so little difference between what I saw in that dream, and what I’ve seen since that at times I think I’m still dreaming.” She shrugged, “I keep trying to wake up only to find that I am awake. It is just too surreal. I try to keep a grip on reality, but it is exhausting paying attention to everything constantly. I find myself starting to remember things only when I am asleep. I keep dreaming I had a life. All these answers are staring me in the face, but if I try to grab them I wake up and it’s gone.” She shook her head.

Ara was not arguing, but she projected her dissatisfaction at Av’s response. She really believed that Av remembered far more than what than she was willing to admit. Her look turned to suspicion as Av continued, “I can’t tell you where I learned to fight, I can’t guess how I happened to learn *uman.* For all I know, I have been picking everything up by osmosis.” She took a deep breath, trying to settle her frustration. Followed immediately by another one before adding, “Until Amaeo fixed me, I couldn’t even sit in the same space with you without having to wonder if I was you or if I was really myself.”

“But what made you think you once might have been Ashara?” Ara challenged impatiently. “From what you said, all you really knew about her was that she was the Ideal. It seems to me that you were inclined to identify with that. I agree that it is preposterous that you and Ashara could possibly be the same person, but look at the information you were working with.”

Av did her best to explain, again, “I really didn’t have any information to work with. I didn’t even know what the Ideal was until Amaeo explained it to me.”

“Then why did you find it so easy, so compelling to accept that identity—as if you recognized it on a subconscious level? Can you really argue with that?” she countered, with a look that suggested that she could not.

She responded to the challenge behind the words, “I needed something to focus on, I was going out of my mind.”

“But that’s just my point. From all accounts, you have an exquisite set of instincts. Doesn’t it mean something to you that, even without consciously grasping it, you were trying to reassert a stabilizing influence from your past. An aspect of your lost identity,” she relented, giving her a hint.

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “Sure, for the sake of argument, why not?” she sighed, starting to get curious about where Ara was headed. “Where does that leave us? In my former life I was—if I am following your reasoning here—an Ideal, who, for some reason, managed to be raised and trained entirely without anyone otherwise associated with the role ever having heard of me,” she elaborated. Then she turned the focus back on Ara, “Do you actually think that is likely? If my existence was kept such a secret, what was I doing in the public baths at the same time Ashara was—more or less—getting myself killed?”

Ara smiled, “That depends on who had the privilege of killing you,” she obscured. She was beginning to enjoy fencing words with her guest.

“Ah,” her young opponent observed, in a tone of wisdom, “Isn’t that a matter of even greater supposition? Amaeo tells me that it is far from inconceivable that what happened to me was intended for Ashara.”

“Perhaps. In fact that is very likely,” she allowed. “However, it does not address the question you put to me. The whole matter changes if we assume that your making was some secret project. The simplest answer to your question, then, would be *coming out*. There are several arts that reach culmination in a test of death. As we can tell you, the training of an Ideal can only be conducted by those who are *ideal* among ideals.” She paused for a moment to let that sink in, noticing that even Amaeo was impressed with her logic. When Av appeared to have digested that thought, she added, “It is relatively easy to assume that the loss of your memories was the result of some accident, but the level of your ingrained training suggests that such an accident would be less likely with you. However, it would not be that difficult for your mentor to wipe out everything you had ever experienced—especially if he required you to submit.

“Yes,” she amended, seeing their responses forming, “the whole idea sounds elaborate, but Nineveh herself did the same thing to Avael ten thousand years ago. The only difference was that Nineveh neglected to really test her creation before letting her loose.”

Ashara remained carefully silent and still.

Ara shrugged as Av staggered under that mental blow. “It is a possibility. I admit it is a difficult one to corroborate, since it shares the main characteristic of Dane’s assumption. There is no feasible way to prove or disprove it through argument. But that was not my intent. I just think you let yourself be turned away from your own instinctive course.” She waved it off and looked back to Amaeo. “There was another thing I was particularly curious about. I bring this up, because it was of specific concern to Dzeyrzo.”

Amaeo raised her eyebrow.

“According to Dzeyrzo, the dragons were all greatly disturbed a few days ago by a psychic event that was amplified and broadcast out of the star gate. If I understand their reckoning of time, that should have been the morning that you and Ashara ambushed her in the *osi j’caoi.*”

More eyebrows rose, and thoughtful expressions shared time with thinking scowls. Amaeo and Ashara took turns explaining themselves, and told her their reasons for—as she had put it—*ambushing* Av. They confessed that they had confronted more in Av than they had expected. Fortunately she had not lashed out with her full potential, and it had been possible to subdue her.

What they had confronted in the *osi*, Amaeo had confirmed during her first two days alone with Av. She was a full spectrum psionic, with potential that measured off the scale, but her inability to focus her ability left her almost effectively latent. That was why she had been defenseless before the onslaught of alien thoughts and emotions. They pointed out that she was so powerful that almost no one could train her. That was where Amaeo came in. Particularly in light of the observation that, even untrained, the power of her mind over her body was virtually absolute.

Avon’jeAra’Nai, who named herself Av, made her way to the baths of *Tear’ni’hayr* in a daze. They had not made any more progress toward finding out who she really was, but as of the end of her meeting with the head of House Ara she was now *someone.* A dependent, to be sure, but not of the same sort as Shan’jeAra and his ilk. Ara had given the matter full consideration, and concluded that there was nothing to do but take her into protective custody. Ara had confirmed Amaeo as her mentor. She instructed Amaeo to introduce her into the company of the jen tempas. The jen tempas was a school under the patronage of House Ara, which gave Ciar license to make good on his offer. From having nothing to do and no where to go, Av now had a warrior’s title under House Patronage, and two arts to master—*Vai* and *Mnai*.

It was not said, but clearly, confirming Av as an Ideal was their first priority. Amaeo had expressed total confidence in her ability to stand equal to Ashara in the space of a year—if Ara’s guess about her background was accurate. If Av had been prepared as an Ideal, she would be less learning those arts as reminding herself what she already knew.

It occurred to her now that these decisions had been made for her. No one had actually asked her if she agreed to the arrangements they proposed before they were imposed on her. She had been too distracted, thinking about a possible past, wondering what it would take to willingly—or obediently—erase her own existence. It was difficult to imagine. She had been brought back to the present when Ara announced that she was finished with her interrogation.

Still, there was one additional matter to be addressed. A matter of formality. Ara, like any *Dai* was required to present new additions to her household to the ruling member of her court for recognition. In specific, a house lord was compelled to advertise her new claim to the lord of the court, giving her lord the opportunity to exercise her privilege to overrule the lesser lord’s claim. That was how her Ashara had become a ward of the *Ashara’Daiyr,* and how her second daughter had been adopted by the *Avon’Dai,* Ash’Di Atephanket*.* Her abrupt claim on Av invoked the same imperative. As a member of the *Ashara’Daiyr,* Ara was also required to host or attend dinners of state during the wending nights of the week. The traditional gathering of leaders kept the establishment running during the four days when work was suspended for travel, recreation and matters of ceremony. In *Ao’Dahn,* the city at the center of the circle, the *Avon’Dai* took precedence as host. Since Ara’s presence was required at the *Dai’s* table, and since tradition compelled a house lord to present a new claim at the earliest convenience, Av had a command invitation to dinner with Ara.

That said, Ara sent her off to make herself presentable. As Av left, she had heard them turn to the discussion of a wedding. Ashara and Ashana, who had risen to accompany her to the baths, were forced to resume their seats and so Av had departed alone. Ara’s words had given her much to think about, stripping away the scabs of acceptance she had developed.

Her instincts guided her feet with unerring accuracy, an unnerving but useful quirk of memory. Of course, it raised the question of origins again. How did she ‘remember’ the layout of the private residence of *Tear’ni’hayr*? The one manor where she was certain to have been remembered had she ever been seen there before. Did she somehow steal the knowledge out of the minds of people around her? Had she, in her previous incarnation, scouted the territory in some sort of disguise? She had a lot of things to figure out about how she functioned and what sort of person she had been before that bloodbath.

Av cringed. That was the last image she needed to summon to mind. The private bath of *Tear’ni’hayr* suddenly presented something of a challenge to her. Unlike the simple wash stall and hot water basin she had used while in Ashara’s rooms, the residence had fully appointed, imperial style bath chambers directly off the main foyer. There were always at least three servants on hand to wash and groom guests and residents on their way through water garden. They took one look at her, and set their teeth to give her their professional best. She started at first, as they grabbed hold of her and stripped her out of her clothes, but then she found herself relaxing. It was strange to discover that she had reflexes for this, but her instincts said to abandon control of her body to them while they set about their trade. Without question they did their job in intimate detail, but with such discipline that even the most invasive contact was sexually neutral. In their hands, she, as a person was divorced from her animal self—the object of their administrations.

If not for Amaeo’s tinkering with her mind, the endless caress of massaging, scrubbing, and grooming hands would have been torturously invasive. Discovering, to her amusement, that she could actually enjoy the exquisite attention, she had to admit that there could be benefits to assuming the role of Ideal. When she was clean, trimmed and polished, they collected the debris and left her alone in the pool. Like the public baths, *Tear’ni’hayr’s* was dominated by a huge, clear body of water. Sliding through it’s silken embrace, marveling at the soft sensuality evoked by her recent depilitation, she swam seven laps and levered herself over the rim.

As she pulled back the curtain to an alcove bath basin, a thrill of terror darted down her spine. The sensual distraction of grooming and swimming had not diverted her thoughts from that one ill considered flash of memory. Av somehow nerved herself to enter the near boiling water long enough to open her pores, and bit her tongue as strange hands fell on her head and shoulders. Fight reflex propelled her to her feet, but firm hands shoved her back down into the water, as the servants completed the tending of her hair.

The mood of easy relaxation was beyond recapture, but she willed herself to let go of her tension at least by the time the servants were done. They led her out of the water, and toweled her off. With deft efficiency, their nimble fingers soon had her dressed and her long mane plaited into a formal braid. She noted with distant curiosity the way the state garments impacted her appearance. Her androgyny lent her the quality of a blank sheet. She took on the character of the accouterments she wore. On one hand this could have been a rare elegance of form, on the other the epitome of plainness.

With a courtly bow, she excused herself from the trio of attendants and made her way deeper into the residence. She did not know where she was going until she found herself in a waiting room outside Ara’s personal chambers. The lord of the house came out as she was announced and looked her over strictly. She too noticed the effect of the clothes. The slender youth who had surprised her up on the main terrace, with her wild hair and predatory grace had clearly fit her assessment of a child born to the wilderness. In house robes, she seemed as cultured and formal as Ashana, Ara’s promised daughter.

Avon’jeAra’Nai, posed erect in her chair, and concentrated on keeping her thoughts off her face, and behind an inner shield. After the first hour of patient, idle reflection, she had come to the conclusion that she had been sent to the baths more to get her out of Ara’s way than because of any urgency in the matter of presenting her to the court. Ara had come out to pass inspection on her appearance, and a moment later returned to her closeted debate with Amaeo and the other Ideals. In fact she had not even spoken to Av, she had simply given the majordomo instructions to escort her to the great parlor to wait. At first, she had sat quietly under the *lyn’s* hawk like eye, but after a couple of hours, she had given in to the temptation to examine the richly appointed audience hall. She did not think she had disturbed anything, but the aggrieved air emanating from the senior servant had chased her back to her chair repentantly. She had been sitting there still when Ashara stepped in to announce that Av should wait there for a closed reception to take place as soon as the four of them—Ara, Amaeo, Ashana and herself—were finished with their bathing. She explained that Ara had summoned the household for private introductions. After that reception, the five of them would head over to the residence of the *Avon’Dai.*

Av had nodded graciously, and watched her depart. She was trying to be patient, but her back was starting to hurt, and the only one there to witness her prim demeanor was the majordomo. If the senior servant was going to report back to Ara, then it was certain that three hours of perfect posture would be disqualified the instant she allowed herself to slouch. Rising to her feet, and turning to the servant, she asked her to come find her when it was time, and calmly walked out of the room. The majordomo looked after her wearing a startled frown, and then slipped over to the vacant chair to flop down with a grunt of relief. Av suppressed her smile at the servant’s reaction and edged back from the door. She did not even laugh until she was out in the open air.

Every level of the residence was built into its own colonnaded terrace, most with balconies overlooking a subordinate terrace. She wandered casually about, estimating that she had at least an hour before the others were through in the baths. She let that sink to the back of her mind and returned to the line of thought Ashara’s sudden appearance had interrupted. She had noticed herself taking a keen, almost proprietary interest in Ashana and Ashara. At first glance that morning, she had realized they were hopelessly in love, and cursed by polar natures. She was not sure how she had figured out that they were a complementary pair, but she knew what that meant. It was the classic tragic relationship, the impossible dragon:phoenix love affair. Av had been thinking about it hard, while she waited. In some things life was worse than unfair. It was calculatingly cruel. It did not take a genius to see, however illogically, that they belonged together.

Folding her arms on a balcony ledge, she wondered if there was anything that could be done for them. Some way to cheat the curse of the father race. Unfortunately, they seemed more interested in her problem than they were in their own. Her thoughts turned a shadowy corner in her mind. Today had done much to appease her doubts concerning Ashara. They had seemed so open and helpful, and yet she had sensed something held in reserve. Something of deadly importance to them. She could not explain it, but there was something about Ashana and her compliment Ashara that both attracted and repelled her. It did not need to be said that the feeling was mutual.

Commander Meggan India Alt leaned against the guardrail of the grand terrace and sighed. Adjusting to the twenty-seven hour day had been easier than she had expected. Her eyes danced over the crimson and gold, violet and blue tapestry of evening. On this world one really did have time to appreciate the sunset. Ajea was a very beautiful world, admittedly, but there were a million and one things she needed to be doing on the ship. “It’s been three days already. When are they going to be about it?” she complained as her captain caught up with her. He laughed good-naturedly, and looked back the way they had come. His people were circulating, and staying out of trouble. They were still somewhat in shock over what had happened the previous evening. The members of their party that were not intimately involved with each other had been assigned dancers to keep them company during the festivities. Everyone had been delighted, more or less, but then, at the end of the evening, the dancers accompanied them to bed.

*Avon* hospitality concerned itself with *all* the creature comforts, not stopping short of providing a very comfortable creature on occasion. He chuckled again, and turned back to his executive officer. “At least now we know what we are doing here. Why they wanted us to be a part of this.”

“We do?”

“Well,” he gave her a half shrug, “the invitation to the heir’s wedding was a courtesy. By their laws, they had to extend it to us as their allies. The reason *we* are here is to witness the first major changes in the treaty since the second contact.”

“How do you get that?” she clasped her hands in front of her. Dane was momentarily distracted at the effect the formal robes they were both wearing had on her. Funny, he saw her every day aboard the *Raven* in a skin tight body glove without really batting an eye, but in the loose concealing *avon* garments she was wearing now, he was uncomfortably aware of her body.

He forced his eyes up. “Do you recall that the *Dai* has appointed his heir to represent him in negotiations with the Senate?” he asked, by way of answering her. She nodded, so he went on, “I found out today what those negotiations are about.”

“I assume they are about their application for world membership in the aegis,” she commented nonchalantly. She turned back to look out from the elevated terrace on the people arriving in a steady stream below.

“Ah, yes. But,” he held up his fore finger, “in the past, similar negotiations have always broken off over restrictions on the exchange of technology which have made it impossible for them to meet the membership qualifications.” The essence of human-avon relations was the careful regulation of technological trade. The psionic technology possessed by avon could make them appear as gods, but the mastery of that technology, and the innate gifts that their methods depend on, assured that such power resided only in the hands of the most responsible members of the avon race. However, that expertise was not the limit of their technology. *Avon* could engineer general application weapons, tools and devices as portable as any human engineered product. While a significant part of the technology restrictions existed to protect *avon* from the fruits of applied physics, tools and weapons which humans had devised, that could have a devastating effect on avon culture if unchecked, but the artifacts, locks and keys of avon applied psionics would be no less dangerous to humans.

“You know as well as I,” he went on, “that the treaty restrictions on the exchange of technology have already been stretched past the point of safety, so the bulk of *avon* wealth remains inapplicable for meeting the membership requirements. Instead of fighting that battle with the senate again, they have come to the conclusion that they have something we want more than technology.”

“Really? What could that possibly be?” she asked.

“Sex,” he smiled. She turned to respond, and then hesitated. Whatever she was about to say was abruptly shoved to the back of her mind. Wondering if she had even heard him, he opened his mouth to repeat himself when she suddenly narrowed her eyes and asked, “Captain? Isn’t that your young friend—the one you were all worried about?”

He could guess what had prompted that question, and he was responding before he even turned to look for himself. “No, there are two more that look just li— Oh. Well. One of them is, I suppose,” he admitted as he saw the three identical redheads in the arriving party. He squinted for a better look, but from this distance, he could not make out any clues to tell them apart.

Alt’s brow furrowed as she specified, “I was talking about the one on the right.” He looked at her. She was leaning over the guardrail, eyes fully open. He wondered what she could see that he was missing.

“Hmmm. From here, they all look the same to me.”

“I am pretty sure it’s her. Let’s go down for a closer look,” she suggested, leading the way to the stairs. He took one last look, as they disappeared from view, then turned to follow her downstairs. They dodged through the complex tide of bodies in the dance of social intercourse, and arrived in the main hall at the same time as Avon and her companions. As they approached, Amaeo stepped forward in greeting. She took note of their specific interest, and spoke directly to the point.

“Dane’Captain,” she opened, the minimal greeting. “As you see, she is fine. We apologize for any inconvenience she may have caused you.” The captain exchanged nods, but his eyes were on the young *lyn*. She was dressed sharp, but he could recognize her now. It was the guarded way she held herself, more than anything.

“Avon?” Dane addressed her. She glanced at the blond woman at her side before approaching him. When she was in front of him, he asked in a soft voice, “Is everything okay now?”

Again, she glanced at the stately woman. She drew a breath and responded in equally subdued tones, “We don’t know anything yet, but we have some ideas about what happened to me, and why.”

“Were you able to find out who you are?”

“Not yet,” she offered a hopeful smile, offering him her hand. “I don’t think you need to be worried about me though.” She was trying very hard to convey sincerity. He could see the apology in her eyes for the way she had wandered off and gotten herself apprehended. Something in her attitude warned him that everything she had heard and done in his company had been discovered by the people who had taken her in. She examined his face, and gave a small nod. Certain that he understood her warning, she squeezed his hand and said louder, “This is not the best time to talk. We don’t want to be late for the reception.”

“I understand. We’ll talk later.” He let go of her hand. She stepped back, but as she turned to rejoin her group, she looked back and grinned.

“Oh, and you can call me Av. If you need to look me up it’s Avon’jeAra’Nai, and I am at *Tear’ni’hayr.*”

Amaeo stepped to her side, and put her arm around her shoulder, urging her gently, “Come along.” The four natives gathered around her and moved her down to the inner doors. She hesitated before going through, looking back over her shoulder. She was at least a hundred feet away, but he heard her gentle parting words as clearly as if she had been right next to him.

“I will see you later, Dane. Thank you.” She smiled at him, and vanished into the audience hall. Dane stood for a long moment in thoughtful silence. He wished she could have told him more, but what she had managed to convey might be enough. He could have been reading too much into her meaningful looks, but he suspected that if she felt he was in any danger she would have telegraphed it simply by ignoring him. As it was, she had let him know that some of them now had an idea about the way he thought. His XO finally broke into his thoughts, reminding him where they were.

“Nice kid. So, you were saying—what? They plan to fuck us into submission?” her voice sounded teasing.

“Hmmm?”

“Sex,” she reminded him. “Isn’t that what you said they were offering us?” She hid a giggle as he switched mental gears, and recovered the line of their interrupted conversation. He took her by the arm and they started back up to the grand terrace.

“Oh, that. Not like that. Not what we went through last night,” he joked, laughing as she blushed at the memory of the delicious young man who had vastly complicated her last night’s sleep. She knew he had endured the same stubborn politeness. She pinched him, and he got serious. “They plan to offer us the third sex.”

Her eyes widened. That *would* involve a major change in the treaty, from their point of view. But by itself, how could it pay for the world’s membership? “I doubt that would be enough. I mean, sure, the Senate might be interested in the genetics, but one *lyn* citizen would give them that.”

“True,” he admitted with a half shrug, “but *we* can’t turn a person *into* a *lyn*. They can. And if they can make us something we have never been, think of what they can do with what we are. What they are really offering us is a way for individuals to choose their own sex.”

Alt went mute at the implications.