Avatars Initiation - 9

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Avon’jeAra’Nai shuddered as the crush of ambient thought assaulted the defenses Amaeo had built in her mind. It was a frightening mix of disciplined, directed mental intercourse spiced with the stray pulses of human impetuousness escaping the confines of a ward-lock. The past three days spent mostly in isolation had not prepared her for the sheer mass of attention attendant to a large social gathering. The endless dance of bodies was overwhelming even to the physical senses. Looking around, she was forced to tell herself that, despite her initial impression, only the tiniest fraction of the world’s population was actually crammed into the palatial residence of the *Dai.* On the other hand, that fraction included the majority of the most powerful and exalted personages on Ajea. These were the people who would challenge her most as an Ideal. Her eyes examined the members of the ruling class as her patron and mentor guided her to the foot of the main dais. Unlike her, each of these people had earned the right to be in this room. In a sense, she was the exception that proved the rule. *Avon* civilization was built on the willing and productive participation of individuals. *Avon* custom allowed individuals to choose their own level of participation in, and benefit from, society. Those who did not choose to participate were regarded and treated the same as animals. Those who did participate were named—in a system of rank-titles representing status and proven ability.

None of them had been coerced.

Av felt a keen envy as she found herself standing in the presence of her people’s de facto ruler. Av stood formally silent as Ara approached the *Dai.* Ara came to a stop in the middle of the audience chamber, her back mostly to Av. Av could not even see the *Dai*. Ara looked like the polished version of her daughter. Tall, proud. Her hair, bleached clean of the Goddess’s red, was a rich gold. Reminiscent of her daughter’s highlights.

“With your indulgence, Unique, I appear tonight with a suit for claim,” she said tightly. Everything about her was tight. Her lips, her stance—even the glare in her eyes—hinted that fury, and not fealty had stirred in her heart. Av held her breath, watching her patron’s eyes. Ara had mentioned the risk involved in getting her adoption confirmed. Ara was a powerful individual. The head of one of the three oldest households on Ajea. But she was still only a House Lord, and a Peer of the Court.

*Avon* acknowledged three spheres of authority, which corresponded with the three spheres, or domains of existence, the physical, the mental and the spiritual. These domains of authority were centered in three key cultural institutions; house, school and court. Each institution was defined largely by the activities—and thus the individual aptitudes and abilities—required to maintain or uphold that institution. An individual who had adeptly mastered a devotion—the training of her body, mind, or spirit, or the essential disciplines of a domain—was called an ideal, and could act as an independent authority in that sphere of civilization. An individual was not limited to one devotion, nor was an individual required to attain full mastery of a devotion. However, as social status was directly dependent on an individual’s achievements, those who were able usually pursued all three devotions throughout life. The highest authority was three times an ideal, a “perfect” or “unique” expression of the racial potential in body, mind, and spirit. In proper translation, such a person was called an inspiration. In terran languages she would be called an emperor.

“I expected this, Ara.” Atephanket, the *Avon’Dai,* appeared suddenly, moving out of the crowd from the left of Av’s vision. She advanced toward Ara’Daioni, as a dragon would its prey. The crowds fell silent as they noticed the confrontation taking place. “So,” Atephanket murmured, turning to regard Avon’jeAra, “This is the one I have been hearing about. I can see why you are eager to make her your claim. I would hope not to hear you claim her as a child of your house. We can see it is far too late for that. So, tell me, how does your claim exceed mine?”

“She is not an heir of my body, but she is of the blood of my house,” Ara said crisply. “I do not claim her for myself or for my house, but in the interests of restoring the Court,” Ara proclaimed. Av quirked an eyebrow as a ripple of consternation swept the room. What was this about? Ara shifted her weight and crossed her arms. “The House of Ava will no longer end with Avon’jeAshara Avael. A child of Avael’s line has returned from exile, and my suit is to prepare her as Ashara’s heir,” Another, louder disturbance filled her pause. Av was suddenly very afraid. Ara had mentioned nothing of this!

The lord of the court turned her back to them and slowly paced away. Av’s brows creased, her mind raced in search of a context for what was happening. Av struggled to recall ever having heard mention of a house in exile, but she came up dry. When the *Avon’Dai* reached the far wall, she turned back and began speaking.

“Do you think if I exercise my privilege the court will object? Do you honestly believe I could not be trusted to prepare her to challenge my own position? I know we have not always seen eye to eye, Ara, but you do me great disrespect to imply that I would sabotage the heritage of the Founding House simply to protect my authority,” the lord considered the two of them carefully. Av was startled to see a gleam of amusement in the Unique’s eye. Atephanket, shook her head and pinned Ara with a discerning glare. “No, you would not do that. I think you are actually *daring* me to take another Ideal away from you, *neh?*” She raised a hand inquisitively.

Av felt her eyebrows creep up her forehead. She was missing most of the back ground to understand exactly, but she had the feeling of watching a performance. Av returned her eyes to the circling lords and saw her patron cocking her head to the left. Av wished she could see Atephanket’s face. Ara smiled sarcastically and took a few steps back into the center of the room. “You took Ashara from her dying mother, then turned around and stole my own daughter. No sooner did I come to terms with this terrible wound, you send them both back to me for their training as Ideals. You know as well as I do that regardless of who claims this young avatar, I am going to have to do the dirty work, and you are going to find a way to bask in the glory,” she accused, with apparent irony.

“Ah, you have seen through my strategy,” the Lord of the Court declared, laughing. “Now you have made it difficult indeed. I know for certain that if I leave everything up to you, you are going to make a demon out of her just to make me sweat to hold onto my name. If I claim her now, everyone will know I am protecting myself from your devious plot. Of course, there is that little matter about naming an Ideal to a Domain’s seat,” Atephanket challenged thoughtfully.

“That's not the point.”

“Maybe not, but it is not up to me, now is it?” She countered. The lord grinned at Ara, having found the hole in her offense.

“No, it is not. But not the way you think,” Ara said with an added edge to her voice. Av glared in the darkness, she could feel the angry thoughts of the crowd demanding—*who did she think she was to speak that way to the* Avon’Dai?But Ara was not done. “I always suspected you were a conservative, Ash. However, I had not intended to bring up that point. Now I have to challenge that abominable code.

“Ava was an Ideal,” she reminded Ash, “I give you that, but she was not abusing her legal authority when she severed the Spheres. The idea that combined her authority with the Image of the Goddess to usurp power was ridiculous, she already had the most powerful position. What happened was an accident, and her House paid dearly for it. When we exiled her, we condemned ourselves. We reduced her to an Ideal without authority, and left her no home but the wilderness. We could have restored her authority when she stopped the war with the humans when they first appeared nine hundred years ago, but we didn’t. We could have absolved her House two hundred years ago, when she negotiated the treaty with the second wave of humans, but we didn’t. You could have done all of this when you adopted her last incarnation, but still you have not,” she listed accusingly. “When are we going to admit that she was not the problem? She did not betray her obligations. She did not abuse her authority. It was this Court, our predecessors, which compounded the error of one hasty decision with nine thousand years of wallowing and indecision.

“The Codes say an Ideal was meant to hold authority only in her person. I disagree,” she declared. “We have demanded that the Ideal be better than any of us, but we deny her the chance to live up to that charge. We look up to her, whoever she happens to be as a person, but we can not bring ourselves to trust her?” her voice rang accusingly in the hall. Atephanket regarded her in silence. With a formal nod, she picked up the gauntlet Ara had dropped.

“I can not refute or ignore this challenge. Nor can I shirk responsibility for answering it. I can not at this time recognize this addition to your household. By your suit, she is rightfully the heir of Avon’jeAshara’iDaiomni. Like Ashara, this *avon* is properly a ward of the Court. I, as the Lord of the Court, am required to act as her patron. As a member of a House in Exile, she is unpromised, but presumed innocent of the charges against her House. As an Image of the Goddess, she is further immune to the limitations of the unpromised and unnamed, so I charge you to see she is prepared for the full obligations of her role.” The *Avon’Dai* smiled at both of them sadly. Ara had maneuvered her too well. She turned to Av and addressed her carefully, “Avon’jeAshara, you are not obliged to meet this suit. Understand, I am required to recognize your claim to House Ava and offer you the chance to challenge its exile status. I warn you, however, that the obligations of Ava will require you to also challenge for the restoration of the *Avashara’Daiyr* and the mantle of my own office as the *Avon’Dai.* Until such time as you or Ashara take up Ara’s suit, you will be an affiliate of my own household. Do you understand?”

“I think drowning was fun, by comparison,” she answered without thinking. Her thoughts were turned inward, trying to figure out how things kept getting more and more complicated without any special effort on her part. Discovering what she was expected to be and do as an Ideal had been hard enough. This sounded like Ara was setting her up to be the ruler of the whole damn world, and that was simply too much. «*Pawn takes Queen. Check,*» The strange thought penetrated her mind, and she turned to look for its source. Dane held a level stare on her from the edge of the crowd. She did not even notice the Unique’s perplexed question until she grabbed her arm. She turned her eyes back to her ruler, flushing hot. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

Atephanket stared at her for a second and then burst out laughing. Av’s eyes widened in alarm as the *avon* emperor struggled to speak. “Word… for… word… exactly,” she managed to control herself and added, “What did you mean by that, um, answer?”

Avon pulled herself together, and tried to respond intelligently. “I was thinking aloud, but I may as well say it. To my understanding, this situation is abnormal. For all I want to find my own place in the world, I find positions opening up to me that are exceptionally demanding. I would be content to do my personal best, but instead I am being asked to be better than everyone else. At least when I was fighting for my life I knew what I was fighting for.”

The people around her realized she had a point.

*Avon* society encouraged each individual to rise to her personal level of excellence in a system where an individual was judged only on the grounds of her ability to fulfill the obligations inherent to the responsibility she assumed. Each individual was motivated by the pursuit and cultivation of her own identity through the roles she chose for her participation in society. Free pursuit had shaped the entire development of their society. Opportunities were initially limited to strict devotion to three schools of thought, but past that rigid formalism, there were countless real as well as ideal objectives for a person to pursue. Atephanket suddenly saw the game Ara had played in another light.

It was not unusual for a peer to sue the *Dai* to make a point, but in this instance, it had put all of the obligation on the slender shoulders a young *lyn* just out of her first heat. “I know it sounds like you are being asked to do the impossible, but you have to consider,” she pointed out, “that unlike most people, you have a legitimate claim for precedence. You are not required to be the *Dai,* but if it comes down to a choice between you and another, and both of you are qualified to assume that obligation, they have to step down. Avael did that, at a time when drastic measures were called for.” The *Dai* sighed. Placing her hands on Av’s shoulders, and looking into her eyes, she concluded, “Ara has guaranteed that if you ever need it, you will be able to unite our people and lead them. You don’t have to take this opportunity. Not today. Not even in this lifetime, perhaps, but the possibility will always be there. You don’t get it for free, you have to earn it just as much as I earned it.”

Av stood deep in thought as the emperor excused herself to grant another audience. It was too much to believe. Three days ago, she had been nothing. Now she was potentially the highest authority on the planet. There had to be a mistake. Then she reminded herself that Ara’s claim had been based on an assumption. She might very well still be no one. She looked up and met the eyes of the people who still lingered around her. She frowned. She might be no one, but to the world she was at least an Ideal, she amended. Somehow that thought did not seem reassuring.

Ashana and Ashara caught her brooding, and took it into their hands to keep her distracted. They steered her away from the high nobility and introduced her to people like herself, affiliates of House Avon. Most of them looked past her image seeking an individual they could connect with. She soon found herself laughing and drinking as they cheerfully received her into their household. Most of these individuals had established themselves in society through devotion to a career. She found it fascinating to talk to them, and learn about their sphere of influence. Professionals of specialized trades or arts, they were not cut off from high society, as she had imagined. They usually had patrons or relatives with house, school or court affiliations willing to represent them. The most common affiliations between houses were through professionals like these. Patronage was the backbone of a dynamic economy in *avon* society.

It was not really said, but Ashara and Ashana were really introducing her to her new family. A large, robust, and eccentric family to be sure, but held together by strong ties of affection. This was what Avael had created before she had been damned for her disastrous miscalculation. She had created a house for those individuals who were named but who had no blood ties to house affiliation. She had started the custom that regarded them as members of the house of the unique, House Avon. This house, representing the entire species, was by its nature both large and central to *avon* life.

It was one of the few things that distinguished *avon* civilization from its cultural primogenitor. Most of the traditional *avon* customs had become deeply ingrained before the emerging *avon* race split from the exclusively *lyn* father race. The organization of *avon* into a multitude of houses, representing various heredities and bloodlines, was an ancient characteristic of *lyn* civilization. The majority of the *lyn* and *àlyn* populations lived in the wild—naked and free from obligation. That primal environment nurtured survival traits in nature’s own harsh way, and it was a life with raw beauty and unexpected physical, mental and spiritual depth. Like their ancestors, *avon* existed predominantly in animal simplicity, in a world created and maintained by civilized *avon.* Civilization was not a privilege, *avon* had to learn the principles of responsibility, obligation and authority governing the entrance and participation in civilization as they grew up, passing through the rites of naming and promise to become a part of the domestic base of the governing society.

The undemanding attention of her new contemporaries gave way to the intense scrutiny of the nobility when Ara caught up to her. A place of honor had been picked out for her at the *Dai’s* high table. It was a traditional feast, a long drawn out affair with matters of state conducted between widely spaced courses. She was seated in a deliberately exposed position to give people a chance to see Av for themselves.

After the impressive spectacle of she had made of herself during the course of her first day, in particular the incident with Ashara on the training grounds, the rumors had ripped through the community like a hurricane. They all wanted to see her. If she had felt uncomfortable at the pressure of so much attention in one place before, now that it was all focused on her, it seemed delightful by comparison. The minds of *avon* nobles while several orders of magnitude more disciplined than those of her human acquaintances—whose contact had wreaked such havoc with her senses—were also more powerful. In addition, her humans did not have the ability to initiate mental contact the way so many of the *Avon’Dai’s* guests were trying to do. However less audible *avon* conversation might be, compared to what might be heard in a human gathering this size, it proved nothing less in volume.

Before the meal ended, the issue of what to do with Av was raised. Av was at her limit trying to follow the exchange. Amaeo reminded the *Dai* that she had instructed Ara to see to Av’s preparation as an Ideal, and went on to explain the arrangements she had already made in that regard. This required that they explain the trauma she had experienced, as well as their conclusions about where she had come from, how she had been raised, and why she had been left dying in the public baths. Logic supported their assumptions, and the emperor put up no resistance to their arguments. She seemed encouraged by the thought that Av required less training than comprehensive testing, and Amaeo’s confidence at her probable capabilities pleased her.

Somehow, the evening passed without further comment on the matter. Her new patron had something in mind but said nothing, even in her thoughts, save to comment on the request made by Amaeo, “You have leave to offer her your full hospitality. I trust your expertise in handling a raw Ideal. And, Avon, do be cooperative. The worst they can ask of you will be as child’s play compared to the demands your position will make.”

Av took that to mean that she would face a stringent and explicit examination upon reverting to the *Dai’s* custody. It was an unsettling thought. Having no conscious experience of sex, it was disturbing to imagine a career largely devoted to it. She already understood why a portion of every generation was trained extensively in the sexual arts. In a society as liberal as hers, there had to be experts and professionals able to accommodate the extremes of sexuality, or else repression of sexuality would be unavoidable. Perversity would have its way with people no matter how it was dealt with, but it was safer to allow it openly and be able to manage it than it was to drive it into the shadows where no one would be able to do anything about it until a trail of bodies led back to perversion’s lair.

Amaeo gave her a startled look as that image leaked from her thoughts. Av shook herself violently. The crush of attention was really starting to overwhelm her. Amaeo could see that too. She stepped up to envelope Avon’s mind within her defenses. The relief was so intense that she literally clung to her side throughout the remainder of the evening.

Amaeo closed the door as Av threw herself full length on the bed. She moaned in audible relief at having the long ordeal over with. Amaeo paced softly over to the side of the bed and looked down at her. She stretched luxuriously and rolled onto her back to unfasten her belt. Amaeo brushed her fingers aside and bent to the task herself, feeling her young charge go still with uncertain anticipation. Something about the feel of other hands undressing her without comment held off the birth of protests. Her eyes fixed themselves on the dark haired *lyn.*

The tug of her fingers on the bindings and layers of her formal dress telegraphed through Av’s skin, extending her sense of touch. She felt like a flower being gently forced open under a strong hand, as Amaeo peeled away the layers of clothes, exposing her naked front but unable to shift the cloth under the weight of Av’s body. The *aeo’mni* carefully avoided touching her bare skin. When Amaeo stepped back, Av was nude only from her neck, through her chest and shoulders, down the length of her abdomen, hips, thighs and legs. Her arms were trapped in the tangle of fabric her mentor had forced away from her body. Amaeo sat down beside her, a hand hovering hungrily over unprotected flesh.

“How can you let me do this to you?” Amaeo asked in wonder.

Av sat up in surprise. Unprepared, Amaeo’s hand fell into the valley of her hips. Before she could recoil from the accidental contact, Av’s hand fell on top of it, holding it firm over her womb. In equal wonder, she challenged, “How can you be concerned with this after all the other things you are doing to me?” Amaeo looked up startled. Av forced Amaeo’s hand down between her legs without letting go of her mentor’s eyes. “How can I protest when this is nothing compared to the way you are trying to take advantage of me? At least if you fuck me I know what is happening to me, and why,” she accused.

Amaeo closed her fingers into a fist as they encountered the damp warmth. She understood that the accusation included Ara, Ashana and Ashara as well as her. Av let go of her hand and turned her back to Amaeo. Her fingers appeared at her shoulders pushing the open garment off of the back of her neck. As her hands dropped back into her lap, the cloth dropped away from her shoulders, exposing her back to the waist, and her arms to the elbows. Amaeo watched Av continuing what she had started. “Why is it that when you start to feel vulnerable you make yourself even more vulnerable?” Amaeo asked, instead of trying to respond to her challenge.

She turned on Amaeo with a dangerous smile. “Just trying to be helpful!” she declared with exaggerated cheerfulness. The aggressive shift caught Amaeo off guard, as the young *lyn* grabbed her elder by her shirt and threw her down on her back. Amaeo felt her weight come down on her abdomen as Av’s legs straddled her. The hands she had brought up to free her shirt had been expertly captured and forced up over her head. Av’s face was close to hers, and the light of hunger shone in her predatory features. “Tell me,” she begged with eerie forcefulness, “what made you decide that tonight was the night you would have sex with me if I asked?” Amaeo felt her face freeze. How did she know? Av laughed at her. “Goddess, *aeo,* after what I just went through, what makes you think I can tell the difference between what you are thinking and what I am thinking? Did you forget why you were wrapping your mind around mine?

“How am I supposed to know if I want to have sex when all I can hear is you thinking, ‘I’ll let her have me if she asks.’ I *don’t* know if I want to ask. All I know is that after listening to you think about all the things you can do to me, for the past three hours, I *have* to have sex. If I don’t I’m going to go insane!” she cried, her lips so close to Amaeo’s that each word was a kiss. “Why are you wasting time with your word games—playing teacher—when all you can think is, ‘I do hope she asks’?” Av demanded.

Amaeo blushed at the depth of her miscalculation. Av, unable to understand the game Ara had been playing, must have worked herself deep into Amaeo’s mind, slipping past her guard and shadowing her thoughts. Of course she had known that the pressure had overwhelmed the blocks in Av’s mind, and naturally that was why she had shielded her so closely for the remainder of the evening. She could hardly believe that Av’s mind could be open so far as to pick up on thoughts Amaeo herself had found barely audible. She was forced to confess, despite knowing that she would hear it as it formed, that Av’s total vulnerability had been deeply arousing.

That arousal now confronted her, magnified by Av’s resonant desire. Even more than her vulnerability, this demanding lust was irresistible. She wanted to play, but the path that her student had chosen was too dangerous. For one thing, both of them knew that her mind was the more powerful. Amaeo was simply the more skilled psionic. Aside from her personal reason for wanting to mate, she had to remember the logical reason that had justified her decision. “I want you,” Amaeo finally said. “But not like this.”

Av’s face went rigid with pain, and she flung herself off of Amaeo’s body. She hit the other side of the bed and curled up into a fetal ball. Her body vibrated with the force it took to contain her frustration, and more importantly, the power to do something about it.

Amaeo put her hands on Av’s naked shoulders and continued to speak, “I thought I could just give myself to you, and enjoy your passion, but you don’t even know your boundaries. Out of respect for you, I have to impose limits. I have to play teacher. I’m sorry,” Amaeo completed her answer.

Avon’jeAshara did not intend to sleep that night. If the only way to have her appetite sated was to let Amaeo play teacher, then that was fine by her. She even lay quiescently under Amaeo’s massaging fingers, listening to her explain the origins and basis of *avon* sexual protocol. Amaeo’s voice was hypnotic, “It is impossible to divorce a person from her sexuality, but every culture attempts to do it at one time or another. The reason it can never work is that sex is integral to who and what we are. None of us would be here without it. Instead of trying to deny it, or the impact it has on our lives, we have to face it.” Amaeo, paused to hammer on a knot in her protégé’s back, and then she went on, “If we had not understood this originally, we were forced to learn it when we married ourselves to a bisexual race.

“Because we regarded them as animals, many of our ancestors refused to admit that primitive humans could be our equals, even when they adapted to our civilization and demonstrated a keen intelligence and the capacity for sophistication. Even those of our ancestors who recognized their potential retained a prejudice based on their alien sexuality. That prejudice became an excuse to discriminate against them when they entered into full partnership with us, in founding the *avon* race,” Amaeo confessed. But something that *àlyn* had brought to *avon* civilization on their own was the concept of sexual integrity. “It was easy to discriminate against them when they discriminated between themselves. They applied a dual standard to themselves before we did. Some of that has remained with us to this day—the idea that an individual who offers sex is somehow less respectable than one who simply accepts the offer.”

Avon rolled to the side to look up at that. “That doesn’t make any sense,” she said. “That’s like saying sex itself is bad.”

Amaeo chucked, “In fact, that was exactly what people once thought. Unfortunately, it did not mean anyone stopped doing it, they just didn’t want to admit it. It took a long time for everyone to come to their senses and bring sex back into the open.” It had been necessary for everyone to understand that a person’s integrity was not dependent on her sex, or sexual status. Sex, and sexuality were a natural, and unavoidably intimate, part of life. “Once they admitted that, they recognized it as a powerful resource for self expression, and a valuable commodity in the dance of life,” Amaeo described. The essence of sexual integrity remained, divorced from concern over what a person had, but still confronting what an individual choose to do with it. Sex was an intimate part of life, and thus an intimate part of a person. To possess and protect her own sexual integrity, an *avon* did not impose qualifications or restrictions on sex, but on intimacy. Sex was kept in the open, and every effort was made to focus on the issues of intimacy. In confronting intimacy, *avon* invoked the full weight of their beliefs in honor, responsibility and obligation. Children were trained to understand and respect boundaries of intimacy.

“Open sexuality offered us incredible freedom to be ourselves, but it also presented some dangers. The more intimate a person becomes, the more vulnerable that person is to abuse, and translated to a cultural level, that was dangerous. Boundaries were essential to protecting our sexual independence. So we were forced once more to face sex responsibly,” her mentor explained. She illustrated her point in detail. Life presented a multitude of circumstances that imposed intimacy or intimate activities on individuals. It was a simple fact, and *avon* dealt with it openly. Since nudity and open sexuality was declared socially acceptable, clear lines of social and sexual intercourse were universally defined, and civilized people observed the boundaries of intimacy very strictly. These limits were taught in the discipline of *ma*, the discipline of touch under the devotion of *na*, the mastery of the body, or the art of self possession.

Av smiled in delight as she realized that Amaeo’s illustration was tactile. Part of her mind absorbed the context and meaning of her words, while for the most part she listened through her body. Amaeo’s fingers painted the regions of socially neutral, or unprovocative, contact starting with Av’s hand, meshing their fingers together, and caressing its back and palm. The fingers then slid up, circling around and tickling her forearm, over her elbow, and up the outer curve of her arm. Her hand pulled away short of her shoulder, and teleported to the broad surface of her back. Her mentor shifted her body as her hand jumped to the outer curve of her thigh, over her knee, and down her shin. With a lingering caress to the backs and soles of her feet, she pointed out that a person was safest limiting contact to the outer extremities.

Her weight shifted again, and she said, “A position like this is socially acceptable between familiars. That is, most people find it appropriate contact between friends and family but mildly provocative or presumptuous contact between strangers,” She had settled straddling her flanks, and with her hands resumed massaging her shoulders. The area of contact included her hips, buttocks, and lower back, the loin area, and she emphasized the contact with the back of her neck, down along her spine, up her flanks painting the sides of her body from her waist to her underarms, then back down along the inner curve of her upper limbs. “For *lyn* and men, the broad area of the chest is also limited to social familiars. In public, an individual receiving this kind of attention, and obviously not wanting it, will be assisted by a responsible citizen making a mild inquiry. This is called witnessing, and at this level of play it is only a social courtesy, to remind an impertinent individual that people are watching.” She didn’t bother to say that this level of contact was unavoidable for a person trying to arrest, restrain or assist an individual during, or as a result of, an incident.

Av smiled even deeper when Amaeo’s strong hands turned her over onto her back, touching her face in a stroking caress that traveled along her throat, over her breasts and down her abdomen, saying, “The most vulnerable region of the body is the face, from the brow to the pubic arch. In social intimacy, it is only appropriate for intimate friends, close family members or examining physicians to touch the face. It would be highly provocative or outright presumptuous for a stranger to initiate this level of contact. Unwanted contact of this nature, when witnessed, can be regarded as assault even if no force was used.

“And we haven’t even really touched on truly intimate contact,” Amaeo teased. Her fingers traveled down, stroking along her inner thigh. As her hand moved back up, fingertips tracing the hairline seam of her mons, her lips fell on the lobes of her ears, the closed lids of her eyes and her lips. Her other hand slid over her ribs to cup her breast and tease the hardening points of her nipples. Her mouth opened as a finger gently probed inside her. With nimble fingers and lips, Amaeo captured the tongues of her flesh and tormented them gently. After a moment, she relented halfway, freeing herself to speak. “But this is only intimate contact. This level of contact you limit to yourself or an intimate partner. This is only petting, so we are talking about a platonic lover, or intimate family member. This is even acceptable contact for a close examining physician, but without question, this is extremely provocative contact between strangers.” Amaeo’s hands slowed their tempo as she addressed the more serious invasive touch. “A witness to this level of contact, when it is unwanted, will regard the event as attempted rape and all responsible citizens present are expected to assist, and detain the perpetrator. The discipline of *ma* deals with intimate personal contact, educating individuals in sensuality and introducing sexuality through masturbation. *Avon* are encouraged in this for a very specific reason. Premature sexual copulation, for no reason we know, inexplicably negates the onset of heat, which is vital to an individual’s longevity and potential immortality. Non-coital intimate contact does not interfere with the onset of heat but petting has a strong tendency to lead unwittingly to premature sex.

“And sex, after all, is what we are building up to,” Amaeo promised, making a joke out of it. “Intimate contact is not the upper limit of a person’s boundaries. In fact the reason the boundaries were established was to give people more control of mutually intimate contact, or contact initiated with an intimate part of the body. That is the only time that a touch qualifies as sexual contact. The common *avon* is instructed to permit this level of intimacy to occur between herself and acknowledged intimate partners. People she is mated or married to. Unwanted mutually intimate contact is regarded as capital rape. Premeditated or cold rape, is a crime equal to murder. Passionate or hot rape carries the lesser charge equal to manslaughter.” AT this point, Amaeo stopped wasting words. She had caught up to where she had started. True intercourse was introduced through the discipline of *mna*, the art of sex, which was typically begun at the onset of heat. Sexual initiation was a social institution, a rite of passage firmly rooted in the Avon Codes. Each individual was required to participate twice, once as an initiate, and once as a mentor, to complete *mna*.

Because Av had no memory of herself, Amaeo was essentially re-initiating her in the art of sex. However, in light of the demands of an Ideal, Av would be trained not merely in *mna* but in full mastery. Ideally, she wanted to become her equal, a *mni*. If she was anything at all like Ashara, she would go even further and master the esoteric arts of the *aeo’mni.* While Amaeo finally indulged her hunger, Av felt a part of her mind detach itself, reviewing the lesson that had prefaced their erotic dance.

At the same time *avon* had set up boundaries for casual intimacy, they also established a set of protocols for when, how and why those boundaries were to be crossed. The two main protocols were mating and bonding, but as an Ideal, it was the practice of mating that was her primary concern. Mating was a way to define and exert control on the intimacies of life. One of the most common forms of mating was coupling, and it applied to situations where two people engaged in a form of personal intercourse, whether it was dancing, fighting, making love, teaching, working or living together. When imposed, the ritual of a mating defined a limited state of intimacy. A temporary state for the mated parties to exist in where they were free engage in intimate activity. The degree of intimacy allowed between mated individuals depended on the boundaries defined by their activity, and the intimate privilege dissolved with the violation or termination of the mating agreement. No party could claim *rights* to intimacy outside of the mating bond. No one could *presume* on intimacy, without some form of mating bond, without fear of penalty.

In general, a mating was casual in form. Any one could propose a mating, and a person could propose the mating of other parties even if the parties in question were unacquainted. All that was necessary was that a proposal was expressed, and that the parties to be mated accepted the proposal. There were legal terms. The party with which the proposal, or suit, originated was referred to as the suitor. The party or parties that accepted the proposal were referred to as the claim. Dissolution of any form of mating was permitted at the conclusion of the proposed mating act, the fulfillment of the suit, or the retraction of the proposal. Disengaging from a mating was also allowed, but a disengaged mate was subject to further suit, and arbitration.

In any situation, the act of sexual intercourse was always a singular mating. No situation entitled a person to presume to sexual intimacy, not even marriage. Intimate relationships usually involved an open mating—each party was required to propose it, and each party had to confirm it, and any party could thus dissolve it. An explicitly sexual suit was the only mating bond where the parties were entirely free of constraints. The boundaries of touch and intimacy were mutually suspended. Parties of an open mating were permitted to engage in intimate contact through tacit proposal of mutual intimate contact.

The road leading to intimacy was not exclusive or one way, and breach of intimacy was a mar on one's honor. Presumption was a dangerous thing in the lyn psychology. The crime of rape was that of making an assumption on another's intimacy and thus an insult to another's honor. Since dueling was a traditional method of resolving grievances, a raped woman or *lyn* would often call her antagonist out and duel him to the death. A victim of rape who was not trained could still sue for a death match and be represented by one of her acknowledged intimates.

That was why Amaeo had pressed her to reconsider the matter of her own ‘rape’. It was not because she—he at the time—had not taken the matter seriously, but because he knew that Shan’je’s life was at stake. Amaeo’s greater concern, however, stemmed from that encounter.

Just as a part of her mind reflected on her lesson, a part of Amaeo’s mind brooded over the impact that combined events would have on his new charge. Like Av, she returned to the incident with Shan’je. Av could not help but pick up on her thoughts, and the rub of salt put an edge to their intercourse. They both knew that the crucial element of Av’s rehabilitation was the discrepancy between her overwhelming power and her natural discipline. If everyone she met could overwhelm her with the force of their desire, she would never be able to deal with the demands made of an Ideal. To Av’s dismay, Amaeo’s thoughts pointed out an even greater risk. By pronouncing her unpromised, the *Avon’Dai* had made succeeding as an Ideal her only social protection. Despite what Amaeo taught, and tried to believe, the protections of mating, bonding, and the boundaries of intimacy did not apply to slaves, criminals or animals.

The taint of the house in exile could cut both ways, however. Her awesome potential, and her irreverent genius promised to win her swift friendship and enmity, and in some instances both. Her status as an animal—even with the benefit of the doubt, and her special exemption as an Ideal working in her favor—would essentially make Av her patron’s pet, but it also just might make competition with her seem beneath anyone. Amaeo felt her shiver at the intercepted thought. Frustrated at having forgotten—again—how deeply she saw, Amaeo called up her strongest defenses, blocking her disciple firmly from the vaults of her consciousness.

Av accepted the slap with aplomb. There were lines of intimacy Amaeo had not detailed, and she had clearly crossed them. Alone in her mind, she looked at the problem Amaeo’s thoughts had presented to her. The task before her would not be easy. Arching in bitter sweet pleasure under the caress of an artist, rather than a lover, she accepted it. Amaeo had not told her, but thanks to her, she now knew who and what she had to overcome to succeed. Her passionate sensuality, fierce loyalty, and fearless inquisitiveness was all she had to carry her through whatever adventures in survival and discovery lay ahead of her. There would be many people she would have to face before she was free, but the only one she absolutely had to overcome was herself.

A taste of lingering pleasure followed her into dreams. In the formless deeps of sleep memory stirred once again. Oddly enough, the memory was of a dream—or a state of dreaming—a timeless instant spent in darkness. Her thoughts, unbounded and formless, became wrapped within the coils of an endless caress. A nest of dragons, dreaming in a sea of shadows, she saw—felt them streaming in and over and through each other. Selfless in their one and many shades of oblivion. Each possessing, and yet unable to possess, that glittering truth about which she coiled. They were drawn to her, as she was drawn to them—into them. As she dove through the strangely familiar waters, she was sucked into a current that flowed in an exclusive orbit around two shadow-bound suns. She closed her eyes, trying to bring the image into focus. At once, the warring tides twisted and centered on her eye of calm. She had a moment of absolute terror as the totality of two souls launched themselves at her, diving through the eye of calm to consummate their union. Her senses were expanded with a rush of passion. Without question, she was experiencing a sexual embrace, but she could not isolate herself in it.

«*What is this?*»

With a start, she opened her eyes, and realized she was not in the embrace—she *was* the embrace. A whole expressed in matching halves. Neither, and yet she was both of these physical reflections. This was what she had been reminded of before. Her body, still twisting in her thoughts, flinched. Brief and brutal, the vision might have been the closest her mind could come to finding a word to express...

«*I understand…*»

Another shade of dreaming opened its mouth to swallow her, and she made a desperate thrust for the surface. Her muscles snapped into motion, catapulting her from the warmth of her bed. She resisted the urge to moan. An edge of danger remained in the air as she struggled vainly to assert here and now. For a moment she could not remember the revelation. She had become distracted—lost between points. This time she could not escape the memory. She tried to pull away from the image, and wailed in agony. She was trapped in the memory, and there was no way out that did not involve pain. As she focused back on the moment of ecstasy she struggled to comprehend what she was seeing, what she was feeling. And then it hit her, she did not want to remember. In a panic, she fought. She did not want to remember this! But there was no way out. In the midst of passion, her eyes met the eyes of her reflection, and a piercing recognition rang through her. There had been love between them. An accusation.

Her sanity wanted to abdicate, but it was all that was holding her nightmares at bay. Somehow, she retained consciousness. As before, a mirror was waiting to confront her with a shocking glimpse of herself. Taking a deep breath, she tried to understand what she was seeing. An image in the mirror, *avon* in outline, but an open window to somewhere—or maybe somewhen?—else in substance. Though she had not seen it fully, she suddenly remembered that it had happened once before.

It was fantastic. She lifted her hands before her and appraised the state of her body. To herself she groaned, “This is a bad sign.” Her hands felt like they ought to, and yet if she let her concentration slip, she could feel, as well as see, that her body touched the world twice at once. It was as if her... No. Not as if. Her body had become a gate. As with any other gate, light primed the passage, that was why she could see—through her own hand!—a distant curve of shore, with rocky headlands, and night lit rain forest.

Risking the fragile calm that wonder had brought her, she allowed her attention to shift to the opposite end of the link. The simple thought evolved into a new species of agony. The blindness of pain gave way to a moonlight coastline. She blinked with recognition. As quick as that she realized how little she understood of her present state of being. Only an instinct saved her from making an even worse mistake. Her thought had been to undo this strange miracle, and close the gate before she did something irrevocably stupid. She grabbed the notion and smothered it at once. There was no reason to believe it, but she knew, by whatever that excruciating sensation had been, she had shifted herself, not just her attention, here. If she closed the gate, she would end up on the unsupported side and plummet to her death.

She closed her eyes and focused on the wings of her mind. Step by step. Turning her focus back to the haven of her room, she embraced the dismembering sensation of thought that had marked her previous transition. It struck her that she could see, and understand what was happening as though every intricacy, every mechanism, made its function obvious, but the only words she could think of to harness this passing revelation were pathetic. Where had she ever experienced this duality of being?

She searched her memory, and to her surprise found something. Something rather strange. Her wandering mind was captured again in the dream of a memory. She flinched yet again. There seemed no way around it. Like fingers, fearfully probing the extent of a terrible wound, it forced her mind open to the naked truth behind what she had sought to avoid. She could hear herself whimpering as she resisted. *Don’t do this! Don’t ask me to—* She struggled to complete the thought. Strained against the memory of how she had become damaged. Sweated to accept that from the moment she had seen the better part of her self turn away from everything she was, there was nothing she could do. Against her will, she started to tear herself apart. The perfect reflection danced in the swell of tears, and she felt her bodies shift. Her twinned *lyn* flesh flowed under thoughts she could not control.

*Why wake up to die like this?*

Her vision cleared. A man and a woman filled her eyes. Each claimed her attention, claimed to be her. The contrast was too seductive, it was tearing her apart. *How could I conceive of this?*

Her teeth clenched and she tasted blood. The memory held her tight now. She remembered making the choice. She remembered giving herself up. Her own love, her own passion, conspiring to strip away everything. Her identity, her memory, her terrible crimes and ignorant lives. Every piece he—she took away, restored a part of herself. Brought to life what had only dreamed before. The love never wavered, yet it caressed her into oblivion.

*Why do I understand it all now?* she wondered, as the answer continued to unravel in profound complexity. It was tempting to simply let it go. She had no idea what it was for. It did not make any difference, that she could tell, but it felt right to hold on to it.

*What was point, anyway?* she mused. How did one honestly know that what she experienced was real? From where she was, it all just looked like patterns. She could not see any reason why she simply could not choose the one she wanted. But she had chosen this. In a sense, she was holding the answer, but she had somehow forgotten the question.

*What was the question?* The words were different, but the question was the same. Inevitably, she relaxed, and gave in to the temptation to look at it. A formless purity marred only by her awareness of it. The fine line between her—the awareness of nothing—and true nothingness challenged her understanding. She recognized it. She could remember that much. She was curious why she was holding onto the awareness of nothing so tightly. She began to unfold her understanding, and her formless mind recoiled. Recognition had almost caused her to lose her grip on it—that something about which she had been concentrating herself. It was suddenly so obvious that she could not help understanding it.

An idea—a sense of self. It was a revelation so profound she wanted to cry and sing, aching—from a depth she had only just apprehended—with a need to express her discovery. It absorbed her. The idea of herself was suddenly its own explanation, and yet it still threatened to escape her comprehension. confusion knotted into a kind of pain. The magnitude of it frightened her. She didn’t even know how to begin, and fell back into the embrace of emptiness in despair. The abyss filled her awareness—an infinite and unbounded mind dreaming without conception, in which the angels and demons of thought flared without birth or passage. in a language that needed no expressing she focused herself—a single naked thought. *Alone*.

«You are *not alone.*»

The intrusion of thought startled her. The numb touch of oblivion gave way to the warm circle of Amaeo’s arms. The gentle rocking motion coaxed her back to her self. Her teeth were chattering to the rhythm of her shivering bones. Her own hands, pressed to her withers, were icy cold. With fierce determination she pried her mind free of the nightmare, but this time, she could remember what it had shown her.