Avatars Initiation - 10

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The waxing light of Ajeo muted the brilliant glitter of the stars. She drew in a slow deep breath and savored the silence, both internal and external. Once again, Amaeo had worked her magic in her mind. A clean wind, roaring over the headlands, cut through the folds of her clothing, teasing the fabric and shocking her skin. To get her blood flowing, she set off at a brisk pace. The memory of long stroking caresses, evoked by the familliar consequence of movement, provoked an unbearable response. She wondered fleetingly if all *avon* experience the world with such deep, carnal passion? Did the weight of experience make them more immune to the sensuality that was swallowing her again? The kindling of unwanted passion spurred her even further from the comforts of her bed. That stung. Between the taming of her mind and the gentle intimacy with which the *aeo’mni* had tried to sooth away the biting edges of her nightmare, Av thought she should have been able to return to sleep.

Instead, she had lain in false slumber. Waiting for the chance to slip out of Amaeo’s unconscious arms. Her reaction to her awakened sexuality was certainly unnatural.

Her unsettled nerves drove her away from the stately arcades and galleries, across the shoulders of the plateau, and down the craggy face of the sea cliffs. Her exertion somehow fusing the weave of sensuality, allowing her to surface from the seductive assault on her senses. In spite of herself, her mind began to churn with troubling thoughts. Now that memory—a memory—had surfaced, she found herself gripped by the anticipation of further revelation. The disturbing content of her dream drew her thoughts into focus.

She did not know if she should trust it. She was afraid—hoped—it was a false memory. She replayed it in her head, over and over, trying to make sense out of it. The strange dual perspective, the encompassing embrace, the sexual transformation—there was a logic to it, but she could not figure out what it was. What she did know, was that she had been there with Ashara and Ashana. They had been a part of what had happened. But what had happened? And why had they professed not to have known her?

As the stars faded, she felt a pang of guilt. After what had happened to her before, Amaeo would strip a layer off her hide for wandering alone into the night. Turning about, she looked for the shortest way back to the Ara Residence from this remote stretch of beach. Making her way into a cove, her instincts guided her to a narrow foot path. The twisting climb topped off under massive foot of the *Dai’s* own mansion. She allowed herself a sly smile as she realized that her spatial awareness could map out even this elite residence. Slinking on cat’s feet, she edged into the shadow of the stone architecture. The thrill of exploration eclipsed the last glimmer of apprehension in her mind.

Without warning, a tickle of conversation teased her ear.

Curious, she investigated, being careful to remain unnoticed. Following her uncanny inner map, she was able to stalk the voices down to their source. They originated in an upper room of the abandoned part of the palatial estate. She wriggled up an air shaft and found a perch where she could hear their voices clear and undistorted. “—and I thought this mess couldn’t get any worse!” She recognized the voice of Ashana at once. A private arguement between Ashara and Ashana, she gathered. The entertainment must have continued many hours past the point her endurance had run out. More likely, the two of them had *been* the entertainment, caught in the obligations of their role. The quick impressions flickered by. She started to edge away, conscious that she did enough involuntary eavesdropping. She did not need to start invading people’s privacy on purpose.

Before she could move, a sentence caught her attention. “When it was just Ara and Amaeo trying to make an Ideal out of her, it seemed like we would have time—” Av froze and caught her breath. They were talking about her— she suddenly could not pry herself away. Moving even more cautiously, with her senses expanded to their utmost, she was able to keep herself from being noticed. “—nothing we can do about it!?”

“Shhh,” that was Ashara’s voice counselling quiet. “This may not going the way we planned, but all is not lost. We just have to move a little faster, that’s all,” Ashara continued softly. Av frowned. Carefully, she levered herself a little closer, straining to peer through a crack in the shutter. Light fell on her face like a lash.

“Aren’t things moving a little too fast already?” Ashana was retorting. She stood directly across from Av, looking slightly off to Av’s left. Av raised an eyebrow almost in synch with her. “This thing is going to ruin us. If we try to move now, we only expose our own part in this,” Ashana sat down hard on a stone table, and folded her arms around her knees. “We missed our best chance the first night when we had her alone. We should have gotten Amaeo’s help and taken care of her right then before it got out of our hands.”

“What do you mean? It was out of our hands before we could do anything about it. As for Amaeo, do you really trust her that much?” Ashara retorted, getting up and stepping into the center of the room. “Not that it matters. Too many people had already taken an interest in her. Even if Amaeo would have been willing to help us, she would have gone about it the same way. It would have had the same outcome once Ara got involved“

“I can’t believe Ara did that!” Ana cried, brushing away Ashara’s hands as they tried to caress her face. Av’s eyes were peeled wide. She had felt that!

An echo of her nightmare sank its teeth into her. The metaphoric imagery of dreams blotted out her senses. Dragging her to a moment when her being hovered on the caressing currents that flowed between two suns. She experienced something of their complimentary qualities, understanding that it was this polarity that allowed them penetrate and possess each other. Apprehension gripped her as the racing currents sucked her in with growing violence. As she dove through the strangely familiar shadows, she noted that the lights were twining together, as if trying to share a common center.

As she approached them, the turbulence of their contact redoubled with furious passion. It astonished her when the feeble sleeping shadow that had cloaked her unfurled and the worst of the chaos wrapped itself calmly around her. At once, the warring tides twisted and centered on her. She had a moment of absolute terror as the totality of two souls launched themselves at her, diving through her eye of calm to consumate their union. Her mind recoiled, turning from the unbearable light. She fought against the images, rejecting the vision of her moment of duality. The terrible choice and its severing conclusion. But the path of memory still led to oblivion. Her mind opened once more to the darkness. Reaching for the boundaries of herself, a half formed memory of who and what she was, she reached for the spark within herself. As she pried at the edges of her understanding, a flare of darkness awakened in her burning heart. Freed from the confines of her understanding, it leapt and devoured the brilliant star that was her self. Caught in the teeth of her own dragon—her own dreaming—she finally let go. The dragon swallowed her, only to be devoured by the light of her awakening. A mote of consciousness stirred from the ashes of its own oblivion.

What had they done to her?

Her descent into the timeless state of rememberance was so distracting, she almost missed Ashana’s soft amendment. “When Ara talked herself into a lie so close to the truth it seemed like there was nothing to be afraid of. But now that Ara has forced the *Dai* to recognize her as your heir, they have to *test* her. How much time do you think that gives us?”

“We have until Amaeo thinks she’s ready.”

The softness vanished from her voice and look. The younger Ideal turned her shoulder to her lover, “You know what she is capible of. That won’t take very much time. We’re going to have to do something. We absolutely cannot have anyone figure out who she is. Not only will they try to destroy her, they will have to destroy us as well”

Ashara turned her head slightly, giving Av a faint glimpse of her profile. “I understand, but how do you propose we get rid of her?”

“That depends on how badly we want her to be hurt. The only thing in our favor is that they stumbled on a plausible explanation. If you think it is worth the risk, we can let it unfold. If not, at least there is leverage we can use to help us get rid of her. Our best chance at this point is for her to fail to become an Ideal.”

Av’s mind churned rapidly during the long pause. She could not believe that they were plotting against her. Finally the older Ideal sighed. “So that she becomes unpromised?” Ashara challenged. “I never thought we would have to go so far as to condemn her to slavery.”

Av’s blood ran cold at that.

“She already is a slave,” Ashana protested. “Just because we use nice words like patronage and worship of the Ideal, it doesn’t change the fact that the *Dai* owns her, body and soul. Just like us. The only difference, really, is in perception.” Ashana hardened her gaze, “Besides, the alternative is condemning her, and ourselves, to death.”

“If we get her damned openly as a slave, she’s as good as dead. She would be safer in exile out in the wild. Except they would still be able to hunt her down, and as long as they can get their hands on her, and test her, none of us will ever be safe,” Ashara argued. She did not want to believe what she was hearing, especially not the notion that her ‘friends’ could engineer her enslavement. But there was one thing she could not argue with. It came as a shock to realize that without a name, she legally did not possess herself, and therefor she could be possessed. Her only status within society was as a slave or a pet. As long as her mind remained naked, she could have no other fate. Whoever could protect or entrap her mind would own her—as Ashana said—body and soul. She grated her teeth on a dispairing moan. Before she could pursue the thought further, Ashara was speaking again. “Actually, the only way any of us will ever be safe is if she *is* dead.”

Ashana’s voice was ice, “And how do you propose we accomplish it without anyone being the wiser?”

Av was in flight before the sentence was complete. She had heard enough. Combined with her memories, their words had shattered the fragile trust she had placed in them.

Dane awoke to the sound of fingernails scratching on glass. Sitting up and reaching for his pants, he looked around for the *lyn* who had kept him company through the previous evening. She was still there. She roused half from sleep as he slid from under the covers. In a gentle voice he excused himself, claiming a full bladder. She nodded absently and went back to dreaming. As Dane gave up searching for a uniform that had been tucked away in the downstairs washroom, he padded over to retrieve the kimono like robe from the back of a chair, and slipped over to the window.

The anxious face on the other side of the glass was not totally unexpected. Cracking the widow open carefully, he poked a hand through, pointing his finger toward the garden and whispering, “I am not alone. Meet me in the arbor.”

Her lithe body withdrew from the ledge, and disappeared into the early morning shadows. Dane checked on the figure in the bed one last time as he eased out of his room. Shaking his head, he was forced to detour through the lavatory, realizing that his excuse had been all too appropriate. A few moments later, he was standing among the fruit trees, peering into the darkness. Avon manifested like a ghost, congealing out of the pre-dawn mist.

He had seen her nervous, and tense, and insecure, but not all at once, and not with this atmosphere of fear. He wasted no words, “So, things are not all fine.” She looked over her shoulders, and dragged him deeper into the garden before answering.

“I was too trusting,” she murmured. “Can you get me out of here? I mean,” she blushed, ammending, “can you do what you were talking about with Linda? Can you find out who I am? Is there any chance I belong in your world?”

Dane frowned. “We already did. That is, we used the samples we got at the bath and ran them through our records. I am sorry to say that we could find no confirmation of your identity in any of the databases we could access. If there is a legitimate reason, we won’t be able to determine it until we can get back home. We won’t be able to do you much good from there,” he confessed. His thoughts turned. “Can you tell me what the trouble is?”

She looked away, chewing on her lip. He could guess the cause of her uncertainty. From just what he knew, she was in way over her head. He had been running an internal translation program during the audience the evening before. Someone was planning some big moves, and she was the perfect cat’s paw. Considering the position she was in, he also understood her reluctance to speak. She had to trust someone, but she had no way of judging who was worthy of her trust. “I was listening to what people were saying about you last night,” he began, filling the silence, and coaxing her to talk to him. “No one seems to know anything about you, but it sounded like they were pretty sure what you were, if not who. You don’t think they are correct, though, do you?”

She looked back at him and shook her head cautiously.

“Why did you ask if I could get you out of here—are you in danger? Does it have anything to do with who you think you are?”

She struggled to manage a shake and a nod, and settled for a shrug. Finally she had to explain. “I don’t know who I am *now* any more than I did at first. But I finally remembered something. Then I heard something that tells me it was more than just another nightmare,” she said. Avon grabbed his arm and looked at him sharply. “You were not exactly right, but you were not exactly wrong. I found out that *they* know who I am, and I remember them from before. Something happened between us, and I was torn to peices. I don’t know how to describe it, but I know that it almost killed me.”

Dane sucked in a breath. “*They?* You don’t mean those two—“

“Who look like me?” she cut him off. She nodded. “I head them talking a little while ago. I did not catch all of it, but I clearly heard them say they can’t let anyone find out who I am, and that they had to kill me—no,” she corrected, not wanting to make any mistakes, “their exact words were—*the only way any of us will ever be safe is if she* is *dead.”*

She relaxed her grip on his sleeve. Stepping away in a drifting arc, she came to rest against a tree. The light confused his vision, but he saw the shudder in her elegant frame. He realized she was crying. “I am such a fool. I *wanted* to trust them. I even wanted to *help* them,” she laughed bitterly through her sudden tears. “I didn’t know what it was they were so upset about, but I sensed it, and it was the first thing I have honestly wanted to do since I woke up. Imagine,” she added sarcastically, “how thrilled they would have been at my offer to solve their problem for them. *All I would have to do is die!”* she sobbed, “and they’d be *so happy!”*

Dane could not let her go on like that. He stepped over, and pulled her to his side. They way her arms locked around him reminded him of his little girl back home. “Dane,” she mewed, “please get me away from them. All of them. I can’t let them make these decisions for me, and I am in no position to make them for myself. I don’t want to be a slave.” Dane felt his body go rigid. Did *avon* practice slavery? Why had that not been in the reports?

He pushed her back to look in her face. “Is that possible?” he asked seriously. “Do you mean you could literally be enslaved?”

She looked at him in confusion, wiping the back of her hand up the side of a tear stained eye. Her brow furrowed, and she commented, “I already am. All Ideals are.” Not admittedly. Not in name—at least not until one realized that the title itself made them an object. Dane had retreated in frantic thought. Deep and dangerous waters were opening up beneath their feet, and he was positive it was not safe to go there, but he followed the line of thought through.

“Can you prove that?” he asked in a remote voice.

“Sure. It’s so obvious that it blinds people. Why?”

“Have you ever studied the treaty, or the contract of aegis?” he asked, and waved it off before she could give the obvious answer. “No. Even if you had, how would you know? Nevermind. Let me just cut to the point—both of them severly denounce and strictly forbid the practice of slavery. Our entire society operates too close to it for our people to be able to condone it. We won’t tolerate it in a member world.”

“So?”

“So, half the reason my people and I are here is to facilitate your world’s application for membership. If what you say is true, then your world risks losing any hope of recognition, or it risks losing its Ideals. I don’t know how important the Ideals are to your people, but I do know that your people have been doing everything possible for the past two hundred years to join the aegis,” Dane told her emphatically. Av’s face paled with realization. Without warning, she jerked out of his embrace, stalking angrily a few feet away. Before he could even ask, she was accusing.

“You are just like all the rest!” she scowled fiercely. “I know what you are thinking! What kind of help is it if I let you use me against my own people?” she demanded. “Why do you all only see how you can use me for your own ends? What do I have to do to just find help!?”

Dane crossed his arms, and stared her down. “What do you want? What do you expect me to do, wish and make it all better? Do you think if you just avoid all these annoying little complications then everything will be all right?” he demanded sharply. “You are in a terrible situation. I recognize that. But you are not the only one. I am an officer in a foreign military, and there is virtually nothing I can do for you without starting an incident that could become an excuse for war. I am an outsider here, and short of abducting you, there is nothing I can do to protect you from your own kind.

“I’ll tell you exactly what would happen if I did. Your government would protest to my government demanding that you be returned and that I be punished for my offense. I would probabably be cashiered, you would be sent back and your situation would only be worse,” he detailed harshly. “If, on the other hand, we use the facts of the situation to our advantage, it becomes possible for me to interceed in you behalf. The only leverage we have between us in this is whatever evidence or testimony of slavery you can provide to threaten their main objective. If it comes down to a choice between you and membership, it is possible that I can at least get them to give you up.” Av had shrunk under his angry rebuttal. Her arms wrapped around each other, and she turned away head bowed low. Dane shook his head, and pursued, “I am not the one who wants you dead here! Think about it.”

Over her shoulder she apologised, “I’m sorry. It’s just so—” her voice caught. Avon cleared her throat and started again, “It’s hard for me to know what I can trust. I am suspicious of the taste ambition. I forgot that hope is an ambitious feeling.”

Dane relented. Moving closer, holding out his hand, he proposed, “Try to think of how *you* can take advantage of this. I am willing, if there is a way to pull it off, to help you escape from this. In order to help you, I need you to help me make it possible.”

She nodded. “Okay. How do I start?”

Avon’jeAshara sat in the middle of the gathered navy officers. She was as stunned as they, for entirely different reasons. The humans were reacting to the shock of her account of instutitional slavery which not only encompassed the treatment of Ideals, but by extrapolation, the majority of the population. The full consequences of *avon* naming practices had never been explained to humans before. Her own lack of name had aggrivated the situation, denying her even the illusion of self possession that marked both Ashana and Ashara. Her description of what was expected of an Ideal, and how the individual, being subordinate to the Image, was literally the property—part of the estate—of a house or court lord, was entirely factual. The reason that *avon* slavery had never translated over into *uman* was simply due to the fact that *avon* regarded it as a default condition. A person was an object, a tool or resource that had value only in terms of its use. In *avon* the concepts of freedom and liberty were contrary to those of independance and opportunity. An animal had tremendous freedom—from responsability and obligation—because nothing was really expected of it. Independance could be obtained only at the cost of freedom and liberty.

Autonomy required the sacrifice of one’s animal simplicity.

Humans had grasped they way *avon* regarded themselves as animals—or rather how they made no distinction between themselves and animals—until they imposed the symbolic distinction of the body seal. They recognized the social distinction, the division into wild and domestic populations. It had been explained to them in evolutionary terms, a method of preserving the vitality of their species through exposure to its natural environment. Humans had not grasped the nuance of the *avon* philosophy of self possession.

They had likened it to the concept of being true to one’s self, and as far as that went, it was accurate enough. However, the practical reality of *avon* psychology dictated that the only way for an individual to escape possession by another was to take possession of herself. Humans had assumed that the uniform culture and authority of the race meant that *avon* maintained one global nation. In truth, each individual who attained a name of authority embodied in herself a soverign power. She was actually obligated to take ‘ownership’ of the souls that came to inhabit her house. Higher authorities were responsible for deciding how much in the way of resources and territory a house lord would receive to meet the obligations of her dependant population. Her responsability was to maintain her house and provide the means for individuals to pursue the path of self possession.

“It all comes down to how your obligations are defined,” Av had explained. “For every rank and title, there is an established precedent. A person is always measured by her responsability. If you know her obligation, you can call her on it. You can press her obligation for your own benefit. If you know the codes, there is very little you cannot force someone else to do. In essence, that is what they did to me. Because there is a need for the Image of the Goddess, they can force me to assume a position in society more demanding than the *Avon’Dai’s* and with less intrinsic authority than a common *avon’s*,” Av concluded.

The humans met her explanation with disbelief, but when she directed them to examine the Avon Codes, the intricate, convoluted document suddenly stood revealed in its stark elegance. They were still examining the massive text, while she sat there and struggled with her own disbelief. Dane had suggested, and his officers confirmed, a strangely unsettling solution to her dilemma. Her false friends had declared that the only acceptible solution to their problems would be for Av to die. It just happened that the most effective way for Dane to ensure her protection within the aegis would be to kill her.

At least, that was what it sounded like.

She was not entirely sure if she understood Dane’s explanation of what he wanted her to do. Or, what he wanted to have done to her. Unfortunately, she did not have time for understanding. The sun would be up soon, and her keepers would be awakening. When they realized that she was nowhere in the residence, they would look for her, and Dane would be one of the first people they would visit asking about her. Who else did she know, or have cause to approach? Since Dane would be hard pressed to lie about having seen her, he too would have to be elsewhere when her mentor came for her.

Taking a deep breath, she looked up finally and answered Dane’s question. “Okay. Let’s do it,” she breathed. Taking a firmer grip on herself, she added, “I am only going to get one chance to run away from them. Let’s make this count. I just wish I understood how this is supposed to keep the lot of you out of trouble when they figure out what you helped me do.”

Alt spoke for the group, “The *Avon’Dai* already promised to remove the restriction on *lyn* citizenship drafts. We can hardly be blamed if one of you acts on the opportunity so quickly. After all, *we* knew of no reason why you would not be free as an individual to apply. You are of *Nai* rank, and that was the only other restriction.” She shrugged. Another thought occurred to her. “At least we finally found out why we couldn’t identify you through the augmentation records,” she said. Avon’s gene profile had tripped some alarms during the search they had made of their open databases—alerting someone very high up—and produced a rapid response. She had arrived that morning with the report from naval intelligence.

Av looked at her in surprise. “So, this means you know who I am?”

Alt held up a wavering hand. “Not entirely, but we do know who your mother was. And, more importantly, what she was. Those two things explained exactly why the information was restricted. It also gave us indirect approval for this stunt we are about to pull,” Alt announced.

“So,” Av asked in a voice of heart deep yearning, “Who was my mother?” The past tense of Alt’s announcement had not escaped her.

Alt looked up at Dane. “I will have to explain that when we get to the enclave. Right now, we have to move,” she responded.

Ashara and Ashana, both weary from lack of sleep, made their way through the Ara Residence. They were looking for Av, having come to the agreement that Av would have to be brought into their confidence. It had been hard keeping the truth of her identity from her, especially since it placed her as much at risk as it did them. As far as they knew, Av was the first child ever conceived in *av’va*. They still did not understand how it had happened, but the Covenant of Exile damned the fruits of that union regardless of how they were expressed. Neither of them knew if they would be able to pass the examination that they faced. This was the last day of the wend. It would confront them at the first opportunity that presented itself during the four days of work that followed. This day might be the only chance they had to come up with a plan to save all of their lives.

They were surprised by Amaeo, emerging fully dressed from Av’s room. Before they could ask if Av was awake, Amaeo inquired, “Have either of you seen Av this morning?”

They exchanged looks. Ashana answered, “No. We were just coming to invite her to breakfast. when did she get up?”

“I don’t know. She was gone when I woke up,” the mentor told them, before voicing her concerns aloud. “She had a nightmare last night. I am worried that she might have gone wandering in the middle of the night.”

Ashara raised an eyebrow. She remembered the condition Av had been in when she had left the party. “Was she still naked?” she asked.

Amaeo shook her head.

“Well,” Ashana offered, “we were looking for her anyway. Is there anything you want us to tell her when we catch up to her?” Amaeo thought about it for a moment. She had planned to spend the day testing Av, but it was the last day of wend, and she needed to become more comfortable with her peers. Amaeo simply told them to remind Av to check in with her when she returned, and asked them to bring Av up to date on the wedding plans. Giving Ashana to the heirs of the *Dai* involved a number of ceremonies, it would be best if Av were warned of the chaos that was about to descend on the residence. Amaeo left them, and the two debated for a moment.

When the arrived in the fallow garden, and did not find Av there, they concluded that the next most likely place to find her would be the Annex. They had heard her tell the human captain that she would speak to him again. As they set out, they wondered what Av had to tell him that was so urgent she had slipped out before dawn to accomplish it.

Alt regarded her captain’s exotic young friend. Av was sitting on an examination table in the enclave medical facilities. She was dressed in a thin white gown listening to Dane, as he explained to her how he intended to present her application for aegis citizenship to the *Dai.* Alt was concentrating half her attention on the virtual reality program she was writing to revise their memories of the morning to corraborate the story Dane was giving Av. She wondered about the consequences they would face, as Dane continued to distract the *lyn* from the specter of augmentation.

She had grown extremely nervous when they had explained what they were going to do to her. Augmentation involved the use of medical nanotechnology to alter a person’s body on a genetic level. It could be used to restructure the body on many levels but the most sensitive had to do with the creation of the neural interface.

An artificial sixth sense, the likes of which nature had never provided, that was essential for surviving in the technological world of the aegis. The augmentee was subjected to catalytic transformation—or a long course of vector treatments—designed to adapt portions of the individual’s nervous system to a new role. The process created special neural paths between the sensorial centers of the brain and key contact sites through out the body; most notably paired points along the neck and spine and at key points inside the arms, legs and pelvis. These neural interface nodes were designed to receive and emit electromagnetic impulses and channel them directly to and from the governing areas of the brain. The neural paths were similar to the optical nerve in design, having a phenominal bandwith even in the redundant node sites. Information flow across the nodes was bi-directional at every site with local processing capability to facilitate the interface. The nodes situated at the base of the skull along the neck were the most responsive and could be used for direct links between two augmentees.

“I don’t understand why this is necessary,” Av objected. She had listened to his words in dismay, arguing that since she already had an interface, surely she did not have to be subjected to the ordeal Dane had suggested. Her reluctance was understandable. Germ line genetic adaptation was the favored method for adapting aegis citizens to the techno-cultural matrix of their society. Designed to be employed at the earliest biological stage of physical development, in vivo or in utero, it was quite painless.

Dane sighed and started over. “As I was trying to tell you, most of our native citizens are altered before birth. Advances developed after an individual had been born can be introduced via vector adaptation, with the proviso that his offspring be conceived in the lab and altered in vitro,” he explained. Vector reconstructive genetic adaptation was the standard field and hospital method of genetic manipulation. Unfortunately, vector adaptations normally were not heritable into the next generation, as vector borne germ line adaptations resulted in sterility in better than fifty percent of the first generation, and more than ninety percent of the second generation. Modifications and upgrades to existing augmented architecture were usually introduced by vector. For the best chance of success, that option had to be acted on during adolescence while the citizen’s body was still developing and responsive to augmentation. “If you were simply a citizen coming in for an upgrade, you are just under the limit for safe vector adaptation.

“However,” he went on, “you are not a citizen. The interface you inherited was not provided by our technology. Your mother somehow made the alterations to herself, as a way of proving to us how easy it would be for *avon* to infiltrate our society. Unfortunately that was also almost two hundred years ago, so what you have is far behind the current standard of interface technology. So far behind the standard, in fact, that it makes what we are proposing less of an extreme and unusual risk. It is about on par for what normal applicants for AEA citizenship, and native AEA citizens enlisting in the AEA armed forces, are subjected to. Individuals in those two groups are typically offered catalytic reconstructive genetic adaptation by preference,” he said. He acknowledged that, by comparison to vector augmentation, it was more painful in the short term transition phases. On the other hand it allowed them to have children naturally, without the inconveniences imposed by germ line adaptation for their children. “But that is beside the point. You are not a normal applicant for citizenship. As far as the people who will perform the operation are concerned, you are simply a test case to see if a *lyn* can be augmented with our existing techniques. That much was authorized by the *Avon’Dai* when I brought it up last night. Using that excuse, and this method we can accomplish three things. First, we disguise the fact that you had an interface prior to this point. Second, we make you a citizen of the aegis with a military service contract. We can get into that once we get you out of here. Third, the process itself imposed a legal declaration of death, and by coincidence, birth in aegis controlled territory.”

“Umm, that’s the part I object to,” Av interjected. “Somehow the idea of jumping into the arms of death was not what I had in mind when I asked you for help. I have been listening to you, and the technicians who examined me, and I am still not convinced.”

Avon was still unconvinced as her naked body was submerged in the catalyst matrix. The hyper oxygenated fluid was only the first challenge, forcing her to suffer the bodily panic of drownding for several minutes, and a devestating flashback to her struggle in the bath four days ago. The weight of the fluid atmosphere forced her to gasp for each breath, and the tingling that began to assult her nerves was reminescent of oxygen deprivation. With nervous apprehension, she reviewed the facts she had been given, and realized that the sensation was the first assault on her body. The medical nanonic instruments were finding and disabling the nerve endings in her skin prepatory to the rapid consumption of her flesh.

It was too late to back out, her transformation was already beginning. Without question, the process was excruciatingly painful. In fact it was arguably fatal since it involved the complete disintegration of her corporeal body. But it was also the most sophisticated process ever devised by human minds. Through the thick walls of the tank, she could see the massive machines that served exclusively to support the operation she was subject to.

When she had forced the issue, demanding to know how she was supposed to ‘survive’ the deadly transformation the technicians had finally explained. Their answer had been unsettling. The live-subject CRGA technique had been modified, at tremendous expense, to give the most assurance that the person who emerged from the process was the same person that went into it. The ‘safe’ method required a dedicated Autonomous Machine Intelligence to control the entire process. It encompassed the FEM that controlled the nanite remotes. The AMI field architecture was beefed up with psionic shielding, a massive Virtual Reality generator and the extremely expensive psionic field interface, to isolate, capture, and preserve the mind—the actual consciousness of the subject—during the process.

Her mind could feel the invisible hands that guided the molecular machines that were attacking her body. That was surprising, since she had been told that the system would totally absorb her psionic output, displacing her consciousness into a psychic cage for later retrieval. Instead of rendering her mind-blind, it gave her a clarity that was astounding. She could actually perceive the little monsters that were tearing her apart. Not that she could do anything about it, that much of the warning had been correct. Whatever psychokinetic reserves she had were vainly employed in trying to maintain her body’s integrity, but the microscopic devices were taking her apart faster than she could knit herself back together. She would be surprised if she didn’t die from shock at the relentless agony. They were controlled by a focused encryption matrix with such delicacy that memory RNA—the very substance of her identity—could be extracted and maintained intact while her DNA was being radically altered. From what she understood, based on what they said, and what she had gleaned from the technician’s minds, this same technique could be—and at many times in the past had been—used to literally resurrect the dead. At least as long as most of the remains had been provided to the technicians. Whatever chemical memory was present in the debris would be restored to the regenerated body exactly the same way the memory of a live subject would have been. What no one could say was whether the soul of the individual could be restored as well. Apparently no one had wanted to confront that issue too closely.

As her thoughts wandered further afield, she discovered that she was not capible of comprehending the level of agony she was experiencing. She crossed the threshold into ecstasy. *This is the point where the body knows it’s dying,* she thought. *No longer any point in fighting it, so it prepares you for death instead. Building up for the great climax.*

She tried to avoid thinking about it. As more of her physicality was consumed, she could actually feel her mind shifting into the cage they had provided for her. She did not realize—as her mind sensed, and demanded access to the means to continue observing her own disolution—that she was violating the integrity of the AMI. As she instinctively integrated herself into it’s neural network, she inadvertantly gave the machine intelligence access to resources that no AMI had ever had before.

Extending her reach, Av found access to other means of perception. The eyes that she found herself commandeering were cameras trained throughout the lab keeping a constant record of the delicate operation and any local activities which could in anyway impact the outcome of the genetic surgery. While that obviously concerned her as well, she was more interested in the scene that was unfolding on the other side of her glass coffin.

Although the mind of the patient was maintained in rapport through the devestating procedure, laws were still passed that regarded the individual who entered the catalyst matrix as dead, and the individual who emerged as new born, in direct descent from the deceased. As a byproduct, the process created a fixed slip matrix from which a virtually endless number of ‘slip twins’ could be drafted.

Field technology had finally came full circle. Originally developed from—and with the assistance of—psionic research, field technology had taken humanity to the stars. Aside from security applications, the technology had long departed from its biological model, the human mind.

they had decided on as the only practical solution. For one thing, her interface was almost two hundred years out of date, having been clandestinely administered to Avael’jeAshara during the second contact. Catalytic reconstructive genetic adaptation was the only comprehensive method of post embryonic adaptation.

Avon was not what anyone would call normal. In fact, so many people find her mysterious, enigmatic, or just plain odd, that chances were few people could actually know what to call her. To understand her, one really had to get to know her. Unfortunately, she was not very easy to get to know. She seems to take special pains to reveal as little as possible about herself to anyone. Why? That was part of the mystery. She was a very enticing and alluring creature, so naturally whether as an adversary or admirer once entranced in her it was easy to become obsessed with penetrating the mystery surrounding her.

Of all of her class, Avon was hit the hardest by the upgrades. She undergoes a full gamut of paralysis, catatonia and seizures as her system fights the nano-viral editing of her genes. Unfortunately, once administered, there was no choice but to let the program run its course. An augmentation could be removed, but it cannot be aborted in midstream without inevitably killing the subject.

Special training was required for the augmentee to fully utilize the capability of the interface which began soon after the neural net stabilized. Further augmentation to retard or negate the aging process began as the augmentee reached adolescence. Other courses of augmentation were phased in over the first year of academy training until the entire process was finalized by a round of military grade refinements to the entire augmentation process. The whole process was non invasive, and nano-biological in nature. The augmentations became a part of the individual and would breed true except in individuals treated post pubescently. The ones lucky enough to survive the process. Inherited augmentation posed no other difficulty than the need to train the inheritor in the utilization of the neural net, and the need for a course of antigathic suppressants to permit the child to reach maturity.

Avon was pronounced stable after her ordeal. The first priority was to run a full evaluation on her interface to see if it survived the process, and to determine if her upgrades were having the proper effect on her now altered biology. In both cases it was discovered that her body’s adaptation to the upgrades manifested exceptional characteristics. Metabolically her body ceased growing in favor of a constant regenerative cycle, and her interface was maximized to a previously unheard of bandwidth and transmission efficiency. Even initial analysis pointed to the way the total augmentation interlaced and complemented traits in her own DNA.

AEA contract economy. The AEA supported itself very well through franchise-system revenues, excises on trade, and through it’s contract economy. The AEA had a virtual monopoly on operations in space due to the inability of planetary organizations to mount individually effective space based programs.

AEA citizenship—the draft. The AEA had a crushing responsibility to its member systems. The present tensions only increases the endemic pressure on AEA researchers to constantly improve the technical base the operation of the fleet depends on. The AEA had access to staggering resources, but the most vital resource of all was personnel. The AEA’S need for the best people it could get was endless. The AEA came up with a solution to the twin problems of the quality and the quantity of its human resources. The citizenship draft. To become an AEA citizen, an individual had but to submit to and be accepted for the genetic draft instituted near the beginning of the AEA’S constitution. AEA citizenship was offered on an individual basis and was a mandatory requirement to any extra-terrestrial interest or occupation. In the growing interstellar community establishment, national, or colonial citizenship without alliance citizenship was essentially a second-class citizenship, entitling the individual to no particular rights in space or the AEA.

Avon agreed to suspend her pregnancy in order to submit to the aegis citizenship draft. A draft citizen, like Avon, was exposed to the a greater risk to gain the interface capability of all aegis citizens. However, with interface capability came access to the abyss—and freedom.

Nanotechnology made it possible for the alliance to design personnel who were better, tougher and longer lived than their donor parents. Most of the human resources supporting the AEA were slips genetically reengineered and cultivated from citizens’ genetic material, as indentures. Some, many would say the best, become military conscripts and the reward for their service was citizenship at the end of their tour. In spite of the fact that slips were psychologically and existentially unique individuals, in most cases they had no other recourse for attaining independence. A small percentage of natural human population elected serve in the armed forces. Usually in the upper ranks since a healthy amount of personal excellence was the only justification for risking citizens’ lives and subjecting them to torturous augmentation upgrades, not to mention placing them on the frontier. The fact that the majority of humans in space were bioroids and not people—in the eyes of the inhabitants of the member worlds—was a strain.

Nanotechnology had become the primary engineering tool of the alliance. Everything that was needed could be grown from the abundant raw materials of the solar system at large; ships, fighters, stations, equipment, and most importantly, field interface systems. Nanotechnology, developed expressly for the purpose of assembling hardware capable of the interface requirements of practical field technology and founded in genetic and viral engineering research, had been advanced radically by psionics. Many of the advances achieved without psionic assistance were mechanically sound, but the products of the penumbric technology most vital to conquering space could not had been developed without psionics. Field technology and nanotechnology developed hand in hand with psionics.

Most exotics were admitted to the psionic corps, where they were trained to use their abilities to adapt to the harsh environment of space, and fulfill specialized combat and service roles utilizing their abilities. Thus, she was one of the rare exotics who was entering naval service.

The augmentation processes required to upgrade her neural interface and other genetic modifications and refinements, was originally intended to be introduced to a subject before the onset of puberty. For Avon, in the later years of adolescence, the process was excruciating. It also threatens to break her latency. Avon, given medical leave, was expected to spend a year in convalescent treatment for exposure syndrome on Ajea where her wild talent must to be reigned in and capped if she were to had a hope of being able to brush under the control acts restrictions, Avon returns to her obligations, where she had abandoned them to enter the academy.

Among the advances pending licensing was augmented retrogression, a risky course of augmentations designed to reverse the aging process to make individuals grow younger. A feat accidentally achieved with a few adolescent and post adolescent augmentees.