The following notes contain usable material for the story arc involving the resurrection of the demon in the ring.

The demon assumed the boy’s identity and tracked down his father. The girl follows, a fugitive on the run thanks to the demon’s interference. This material can be complimented with other versions of the demon’s and dragon’s showdown.

Their summers together, in addition to their initiation together at the academy, kept them involved with each other, and a growing number of friends, but those years of young adolescence were tense and fractious. Ember, with her sensual and open nature provoked a strange combination of responses in her friends and rivals. A violent confusion of love, lust and hate.

Ember recognized that her lover had strong and conflicted male and female sides and that she was attracted to both. The underlying fact that she was so deeply attracted to Ash was confounding. There were others who attracted her, but it felt disloyal to pursue them. She had decided to give up her virginity years earlier, but the one she had wanted to give it up to was forbidden to her. She could not overcome that desire, and it drove her to keep to herself.

It was with relief that they finally embraced their feelings for each other and began making plans for the future. Ember inherited two new properties when she turned seventeen. One was a town house in the city. The other was an estate with a mansion where Ember had lived until the massacre.

Ember had been sharing her identity with Ash; to conceal Ash’s ordeal and so Ash could cover for her while she was pursuing her investigation in the underworld.

Ash’s ordeal opened her to the discovery of her primary identity, the girl who became a goddess as the demon of the realm’s focus. To him, the awakening of his feminine side struck him as more of a reawakening, as if he had always known he was repressing it. Referring to times Ember had encouraged him to pose as a girl; it had been almost second nature to act like one. More times than he could remember, he had been the one Ember turned to for feminine advice. At the time, he’d always explained his knowledge and insight into feminine things as a consequence of having two older sisters and a muse for a mother. As Ash became conscious of having a female predisposition, Ember was starting to remember dreams in which she relived the gender conflict of her previous incarnation. For her, waking up a thousand times in desperate relief to find herself back in her own body, or feeling inexpressible freedom and joy expressing herself through it, there was no doubt in her mind she would prefer for Ash to be a happy girl than a miserable boy. Her memories of a reality that denied her very existence made her sympathetic toward Ash’s plight.

When confronted with the nature of the ring’s ordeal, Ember had the immediate and unquestionable feeling that she could be a man for Ash even if she had no desire to be a man on her own. It was not difficult to imagine Ash feeling the same. It was a bit more difficult to make Ash understand that even if she wanted to be a man for her, she might need to be a woman for her own sake.

The people who knew of Ash’s transformation included his friends, Rain and Shale, who witnessed it, his father, who she went to for help, his mother, sisters and Ember, Finch, a master from the academy, and Thorn, Ember’s athletics master. Although Finch confirmed that Ash could be restored to permanent manhood by completing the ring’s ordeal, he had also proposed looking for a way to change her back without the risks of using the ring. When they learned of it, Rain and Shale volunteered to help Finch.

It started with Shale, who was too intimate a friend not to notice his best friend’s transformation. Being an incorrigible prankster, he infected two of their friends with the same desire after playing a practical joke on them.

Unknown to Ember, her unrevealed nemesis had been intimate with both of them, while pretending to be her. Discovering Ember’s secret compelled them to find out which one of them their lover had been. It provoked the first waking swap between her and her nemesis. It startled her, because it was like waking up from an intense dream. Her nemesis had kept her from discovering what she had done, which forced her to examine why she had felt she had to.

Ash had always thought of himself as having evolved from Ember. That the ability to be either male and female had matured into a need and ability to be both. He had always thought of himself as her other half. Succumbing to Ember’s nemesis, however, had changed that. The mind which had been Ember’s original nemesis had been obsessed with becoming Ember and had gone well past the point where he would destroy her to take her place. When Ember created her own nemesis, that motivation had been incorporated into her. Patterned on Ember, her new nemesis had a female identity which saw the division into male and female as an unconscious attempt by Ember to confound her by transforming her desire to be her into a masculine desire to possess her as a mate. This twisted form of reasoning took the form of a sickening realization that Ember had warped her into something she could never be, condemning her to be a man. It was only made worse because she did possess a male side and it was in love with Ember. That love was an unbearable threat to her own identity, and she realized that the only way to destroy that side of her was to destroy the center of her universe. It was an agonizing realization. The male side of her acknowledged the female side as the root but could not bear the thought of killing Ember. The root of her could not bear to betray her by allowing such a threat to her identity to exist. Particularly when both the male Ash and the female Ember both seemed to exist with the purpose of denying the existence of the part of Ember which Ash—she clipped the name to give her a separate sphere of identity within Ember—represented.

On their birthday, Ash made a startling announcement. She told her friends that Rain’s struggle had struck a powerful chord in her, forcing her to reexamine herself. For the same reason that Rain had elected to reintroduce himself to his friends as a girl, Ash confessed she must too. She was not happy as a guy and did not believe she ever would be. Their experience with Rain had opened their minds, and they accepted Ash, and the version of her name she used was one that had been reserved for her use as a guy, so not even that presented any difficulty. Vacation started after Ember’s birthday. They invited their friends to come along.

Ash had lain awake nights trying to figure out how to kill Ember. She was Ember. She did not stay dead. The clothes that her friends brought along suggested a possibility. Finch and Thorn were still trying to learn the ability to change sexes. Something about that struck her as useful, so she kept it in mind and continued to study the problem. Another piece of the puzzle snapped into place when instinct compelled her to snatch Ember out of her body and swap places. Ember had been very close to having sex with Thorn and Ash had known it without being conscious of it. Out of pure, simple jealousy, she had prevented it. That did not matter, and she did not bother to examine it too deeply. The thing that mattered was that Ash could swap bodies with her twin at will, and no one else knew it. If she did it too often, Ember might figure it out, but Ash did not plan to lose such an advantage. She had one other advantage no one knew about. An ability Ash had discovered shortly after her reawakening. Ash had been staring deeply into Ember’s eyes one evening and found that she had entranced her. It was as if her twin was dreaming with her eyes open and had left her mind completely defenseless. Ash had felt a strange instinct and acted on it. It was something like sucking Ember’s mind out of her body, and swallowing it, while jumping into the vacant flesh. At the same time, it was like teleporting across the room. Ash had explored a bit to confirm that she really could jump into other people’s bodies but eventually filed the new ability away and forgotten about it. She had liked the body she had, which gave her a choice of sexes, and felt no real desire to take other people’s bodies for joyrides. But, if she combined that ability with her most recently discovered one, it might just be possible to kill Ember.

Ember had whole-heartedly accepted Ash’s switch to being a girl, a fact that occasionally caused Ash a pang of guilt over plotting to kill her. Nothing like the agony she felt over having to sacrifice one of her friends to make it possible. It hurt, but it would not stop her. The really vexing question she admitted to herself, was—how could she do it without being caught, and if she could get away with it, how far would her friends go to explain the deaths and disappearances of her victims?

Ember and her friends arrived at the island itself via chartered sea plane. They were all surprised to find that the island was dominated by a form of architecture which Ember had dreamed up as a child and later applied to the construction of her private retreat. Their father did not explain the coincidence, and it was accepted as part of the gift. The little slice of paradise was uninhabited. They brought their own staff and retainers with them from Ember’s retreat, a working vacation for them. It was a large island, the second largest in the archipelago, with tall, jagged mountains, deep valleys, and seductive rain forest. The larger island was just as impressive but was off limits. It was property of the Avatar Project, like the rest of the isles.

Like the others, Ash set off to explore almost immediately. Unlike the others, she was looking for places where a person might come to a tragic end. Of course, this interest in treacherous ground was in character for the boy she used to be. Ember and the others searched out the swimming holes, and waterfalls, and caves. The caves were interesting to Ash, people died in caving accidents all the time, so she joined the others when they went back to explore them.

The large estate where they nominally were staying was designated as The Sanctuary. For Ember it was just like being home. Her friends enjoyed exploring it as much as the wilderness. They gathered to talk shop, make out, share meals, and socialize when they were not off on their own exploring or playing.

Ash and Ember both made startling discoveries at the end of that first week. Ash stumbled into the lair of a dragon and Ember stumbled on a ruin in which she found a living statue, a perfect replica of herself. At first, she took it for one of her father’s little surprises, but fact that the young woman was alive, despite being as frozen as stone made her suspicious. She inspected it more closely and something strange happened to her. Her mind somehow captured the soul of that woman, and Ember conceived of the goddess. At the same time, the dragon awoke. Ash fled from it in terrified delight. She had found the perfect answer to her question. She had no need to explain the existence of the dragon; the fact of its existence was enough. It was bound to be discovered, and the disappearance of a couple of her friends could be easily attributed to it. She returned and began to execute her plan.

Finch had reached the point where he felt he could change the sex of another, though he still was not sure if he could change himself. It really did not matter. Ash had heard him discuss it with Thorn, and Thorn had volunteered to be his guinea pig. All she had to do was be ready for it. The next day, Finch and Thorn went ahead with their experiment. Thorn became Dani and set out to make an experience of it. Some of the others went along. Ash haunted the group as Dani, Finch, Rain and Ember set off for one of the more spectacular swimming holes. Ash got the drop on Dani when she made a trip to the bushes and possessed her. The dragon’s lair was not too far away, so Ash took Dani off to find it. The dragon met her half-way. She turned and ran for all she was worth. The dragon obliged by taking pursuit. At one point she was afraid she had lost it. She reached the waterfall and shouted the alarm—who would not?—before jumping down to join the others. The dragon exploded out from behind the waterfall. Ash barely had time to swap places with Ember before those jaws snapped closed on Dani. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind what they had just seen. Everyone ran, but the dragon leapt back through the waterfall and disappeared.

The group was still in shock when they reached the Sanctuary. Ash expected the shock of their shared death to echo in her mind, but for some time nothing happened. When they finally died, a part of Ash died with them. The male in her could not survive what she had done. She felt Ember’s resurrection, drawing the ghost of Ash into her, as well as hauling the mind and spirit of Dani out of the abyss (completing Dani’s double awakening). Realizing that she had failed, Ash had to think fast. If she acted fast enough, Ember would likely believe that it had been a dream, but if she were left as she was, then she would discover Dani within her, and begin to ask questions. Ash swapped bodies the instant Ember tried to open her eyes. It startled her to find herself under the intense scrutiny of the dragon she’d baited. It stared at her transfixed, as if the very sight of her was awesome. Very cautiously, Ash removed herself from its presence, striving not to bait him again. It simply looked thoughtful, and that was perhaps what scared her.

Ember woke up as if from a nightmare. None of her friends saw anything odd when she confessed that she had dreamed she had been Dani, snatched out of the air and eaten by a dragon. Her surprise when they told her that she had described essentially what had happened to Dani, her grief kept her from asking any questions. Ash’s return from the other side of the island—where she had allegedly gone to explore on her own—was met with mixed feelings. They were relieved that nothing had happened to her and dismayed to have to tell her the terrible and unbelievable news. Her uncertainty over how to react to the news was interpreted as understandable disbelief. Shale had thought it was a bad practical joke, until the weight of their grief challenged his own disbelief. It was up to Shale and Ash to assess the situation, as the others were so deeply shocked, they seemed unable to think. The question was, if there was a dragon, was it even safe to remain on the island? If they remained, how could they deal with it. Ash was shocked when Ember announced that she, being the only one who could, would go out to beard the dragon in its lair, or whatever it took, to get the information they would need to formulate answers. It was of course the only logical course, and everyone turned to Ash to see if she was going to make the same offer, and back her twin up.

Ash nodded, wondering if there was any chance of salvaging her plot. If she stuck close to Ember, she would be in a position to try whatever she could think of. The prospects did not look good. In the meantime, she was stuck with Dani wandering through her head, living in a dream world, largely unaware of her death. There was one hitch, however. The staff that waited on them were also a security detail, special agents of the Avatar Project, charged with keeping the psionics under surveillance and under control. The death of one of them was not a matter they could take lightly. They were forced to make a complete report, and the Avatar Project dispatched an armed special infantry unit trained to deal with rogue psionics to verify the report. The death of an Avatar was a painful loss to the Project, but they were more concerned with ensuring that the unbelievable story was not some ruse to enable one of them to escape the Project’s control. They arrived overnight and went into the wilderness in pursuit of Ash and Ember. Their first objective was to confirm the existence of the reported dragon, but they also had orders to round up all the psionics on the island and sit on them while a thorough search was conducted to ensure that Thorn was not holed up somewhere on the island attempting to evade recapture.

One of the Project’s most stringent policies was never to confront Avatars with the fact that they were essentially slaves—resources developed by the government and suffered to exist only at the pleasure of the board of directors. This was the first time in the experience of that group of psionics that an exception was made. A security cordon, in place before any of them arrived on the island, had made it impossible for any of them to leave the island undetected. It was quickly stepped up to make it impossible for any of them to leave the island at all. The soldiers were armed with equipment designed specifically to negate the powers of that group of psionics, but when Ash and Ember were confronted by a belligerent squad, there was one power they were not able to negate. Ash, convinced that the two of them were about to be raped, jumped into the skull of her assailant to stop him. Two things became immediately clear to her. One, her body had not discorporated during the jump, and two, Dani would now have sole possession of it. The sudden awakening from Ash’s dream world provoked an immediate response from Dani. What little she said before the soldiers silenced her was enough for Ember to recognize her friend. If Ash acted now, she would succeed only in revealing the nature of her new power to her twin, who might then figure out what had really happened. Also, if she jumped out of the soldier, he would know that she had done something to him. So, she was stuck, with her hands completely tied. She wondered if the role she had thrown herself into would demand that she rape herself—or Dani, as the case might be. fortunately, before anyone could be raped, the dragon made its appearance. As the squadron opened fire, and began to retreat, Ash had enough time to notice that this was not the same dragon she had seen before. Naturally, she could not say anything.

Ember provided them with a place to retreat to. She led them all to the ruins she had discovered in her own wanderings, which proved to have depths which the dragon could not hope to penetrate. A few of the soldiers did not survive to reach shelter, and Ember lost an arm keeping the dragon from snapping the leader’s head off. Ash drew one of the watch patrols and used the opportunity to escape. She snuck out from under cover, waited for the dragon to appear and make its lunge for her, and then jumped out of the stolen body. It was the second time she had used her power to send someone helplessly to their death. It did not leave her feeling very good about herself, but after holding that man’s mind in hers, she could not say she had not wanted to kill him. His dream had been a fantasy of raping her, and as the very substance of that world, he technically had. Repeatedly, and with unspeakable imagination. It reminded her of something she did not want to dwell on. She set out to warn her friends, not knowing that they had all already been captured and locked up.

Ember’s wound spared her from unwanted attention, and the squad leader honored her request to be left alone with her twin to tend to her. He had, of course, ignored her request to be unleashed long enough to repair the damage to her arm. Even with the leash, her body would regenerate, but only slowly and painfully. As she gritted her teeth and sweated it out, she confirmed that it was in fact Dani in her twin’s body, and all Dani had to explain it was a strange series of dreams. Dani’s dreams bore some resemblance to a couple of her own, Ember thought, but no explanation offered itself. She had certainly reached out to her friend at the moment of her death, and it was theoretically possible to grasp a mind as a matrix and move it. Had she somehow imposed her friend’s mind on her twin? If so, what had happened to Ash? It worried her to think that she might have accidentally destroyed Ash.

The dragon kept them pinned down over the next few days. After a day or so, it was joined by another dragon, much bigger, and more intent. It seemed to pick Ember out and focus on her. It occurred to her by the following day that it was psionic, and that it was worming its way into her mind. Ember’s—and Dani’s—virginity proved to be their only protection from being raped. It changed the way the men looked at them for some reason, perhaps reminding them that they were still girls, or perhaps reminding them that they were men and not animals. For saving their leader, Ember was rewarded with an explanation of the men’s mission. Ember had already informed Dani of her death, and neither of them explained who she really was to the soldiers after hearing their explanation. During their flight from the dragon, the soldiers had lost their communication equipment, but they expected someone to come looking for them as soon as they failed to report in and were content to wait for reinforcements to arrive. The scouts that *did* find them barely survived the discovery. The dragons were on them as soon as they appeared, working them over and stripping them of weapons and equipment as they fled for cover. The scouts had managed only to report that they were under attack and the nature of their attacker before they too lost communication. The rest of their unit had a location, and confirmation of the dragons’ existence. Heavier weapons were called in to mount a rescue of the stranded squadron and their prisoners.

Before the mission could be mounted, however, the big dragon found a way to breach their defenses. The ruins were complex and apparently riddled with underground passages which were big enough for the dragon to penetrate the heart of the overgrown complex. Ember could have guessed that, since it bore such a strong resemblance to her own architectural designs. The people scattered and fled. The dragon had gotten so deep into her head, she felt as if she were hunting herself. It always knew what she was thinking, and she always knew where it was. The leash around her neck limited her to sharing its perceptions, as opposed to being directly aware of its location, in an absolute sense. Hence, when it was pursuing her by way of underground passages, she had no idea where it was in relation to her, only that it had her fixed in its mind, and as she jumped across an open shaft, it rose up and snatched her out of the air. Its excitement infected her, and she imagined for a moment that she was the dragon, savoring its little human morsel, hungering to taste her death in its mind. But, in that moment of dragon-mindedness, she felt her attention shift to a brilliant mote of awareness buried in the body of her prey. That, she felt it thinking, was the one it wanted. She felt it release her mind and then its teeth slashed through her to impale that speck of life. She died in shock at the discovery of her pregnancy.

Her death was witnessed by several of the soldiers, who assumed that the leash would have prevented her from resurrecting. They resigned themselves to being thoroughly reamed for allowing an Avatar to die and then fled back to their base camp across the island, dragging Dani with them. They arrived, and reunited Dani with Ash—who had been captured—and the rest of their friends. The announcement of Ember’s death shocked everyone, but the time of her death when compared to the time of Ember’s capture, made the obvious conclusion inescapable. Ash had kept her mouth shut since her capture that morning, so the assumption held. When pressed she simply stated that she did not wish to talk about it. She simply pointed out that the soldiers had achieved their mission objective of verifying the cause and nature of Thorn’s demise and demanded that they remove their leashes and leave them in peace to enjoy the remainder of their vacation. The threat of the dragons was brought up, which she put down by stating that with their powers, and with the knowledge that the creatures existed, they were more than capable of protecting themselves. The dragons were unique and mysterious and as the owner of the island, she granted them protection. The soldiers were forced to bow out. Ash then confronted the others with the truth about Dani.

Dani responded by challenging Ash, was she Ember or Ash? Ash identified herself, and Dani presented them with the possibility that Ember might be the one who had died. At the time of their death, she had been leashed. They needed to search the island and confirm, for better or worse, what her fate had been. She also discussed with Ash the possibility of having to have her trade identities—for Ash to become Ember, and Dani to assume the identity of Ash which was still officially a male identity. Ash understood and agreed, pending the outcome of the search for Ember.

Ember had indeed resurrected. She woke up in the dragon’s lair and confronted herself. She also confronted the two dragons. One of them changed before her eyes into the female form of the original Thorn. She explained, as Ember and Andrea listened, what had happened to her. Ember and Andrea considered the story and were forced to conclude that what had happened to them was not the same. Both had awakened from the trauma of death, side by side in their natural form. Neither had been stranded in the body of a dragon. Neither had digested her own body and awakened days later with the ability to change back and forth between it and dragon form. At this point, the big dragon spat out two strange objects. One was a psionic leash. The other was a blood red pearl. Ash had picked up on the split resurrection and led their friends to the dragon’s lair. There, out of sight of the soldiers who were still on the island, preparing to ship out, they discussed the problem facing them. Dani’s resurrection as a dragon, which was just as bizarre as Ember’s transformation, meant that it was possible for that Dani to resume the identity of Thorn—she could now perform the sex shift. He could simply show up before the soldiers left and claim to have escaped from the jaws of death once the dragon disappeared from view that first encounter. There was simply no explaining his transformation. The major problem was that there were now too many Ashes. There was no way to explain that either.

Thorn accompanied Dani, Ash and the others, leaving Ember and Andrea behind, and returned to the Sanctuary. The soldiers were given the story of Thorn’s escape, with time spent hiding underground from the dragon, and they grudgingly accepted this, made their report and departed. Ember and Andrea left the underground lair, after establishing that the dragon seemed to have no interest in eating them again, and made their way to the ruins where, as a single person, they had been held under siege.

Ember and Andrea made a startling discovery. They remembered each other. They had been twin sisters before their abduction. It was the first time either could remember anything prior to their seventh year. The memories had come back. They could remember up to a day when the two of them had been shoved into the same body. Something had happened right after that. Something very bad, which they had turned to each other to deal with. Their minds had become woven so tightly together that they had believed that they were the same person. Now that they were separate again, they could remember the beginning of their lives, each other, and their mother, who had been named Athena, and who had died just before their lives had been torn apart and squished together. They shared this story with the others and volunteered to remain behind on the island, allowing Ash and Dani to return, and take the identities they had agreed on. Ash was able to confirm, once she searched her own memory, that what her sisters claimed was true. It made her wonder how to explain herself, but she suggested that she was an expression of the gestalt mind they had developed to deal with their confinement together as one person. Her separation and reversion to her true gender, combined with the trauma of being devoured by a dragon, had finally set them free from each other.

Thus, to prevent the staff from catching on, Ember and Andrea remained in the ruins together for the rest of the vacation, waiting for the others to leave. Ember retrieved her original nickname from Ash. Ash embraced the full name which combined the original twin’s identities, and Dani elected to adopt the name of Ash and Andrea’s mother, Athena. It could be made official when the identity of Ash was changed. The presence of Thorn compelled her to retain the female identity Ash had asserted. She told the others that, since she was still technically a guy, in the person of Thorn, she wanted to devote herself to exploring this side of her potential. It was obvious that she was exploring that potential with the help of her male incarnation, but no one really knew what to say or think about that. Ash’s self-identification as female had been picked out as the reason why Ember had never investigated her own potential in the same manner. Given the opportunity, the others all stated right out that they would do the same thing. Ash and Andrea, on their own, and without consulting anyone, had discovered that they were just as comfortable with their male bodies as their female ones. The male identity which Ash’s actions had destroyed had resurrected within them. As two halves, they had become more whole, embracing the male side of their psyches, rather than projecting it independently of themselves the way Ash had been projected. They turned to each other to fulfill the ambition they had shared. Ash’s ambition to become Ember had been fulfilled in a way she could not have dreamed of, and which she could not bring herself to object to. The demon within her seemed to rest. Her relief at feeling no need to kill her other half was immense. The memory of what she had done had scarred her enough. It would join her other nightmares, to keep her company on long, cold nights.

Unrevised & Contributing Notes

During a short vacation, immediately prior to entering the Academy, Ember had an encounter with something not of Earth—and discovered a possible clue to her origins. Her strange adventure split her into a dual existence. She had barely realized the implications of it before she was forced to leave her other half behind on that forbidden island, for her vacation had come to an end.

Predator & Prey sets up the following book, Damned & Divine. Ember returns to the island during her convalescence from being augmented and joins herself under the wing of Kzeisza’s mentorship. Kzeisza confronts her with the story of Av, the Goddess, who he claims created Ember in order to escape her prison. He reminds her of her first encounter with the Goddess and explains her strange ecstatic moment as the conception of the Goddess within her. Guiding her inner sight, he reveals the seed within her. He then instructs her to conceive another child to quicken that seed, with the help of her male incarnation. That being the purpose for which she possessed and manifested her own sexual compliment. He explains that it is not a normal conception, but a self-conception using her other Goddess-given gift. Created in the Goddess’s image, she could not bear the Goddess without first confronting the naked truth about herself. It was necessary for her own survival, which the Goddess would not dare threaten, hence the quiescent seed.

Imminent divinity: the theme explored throughout the works associated with Ember have to do with discovering and exploring the divine nature of being. I have taken inspiration from many sources and genres. The whole resolved from these pieces is reinvention, by necessity. Ember is invested in expressions of her divine nature across many incarnations and reincarnations. The roles and manifestations of these incarnations are symbolic representations disguised in apparently literal mantles. Past incarnations entered death’s door and became gods to what she is reborn as. Present incarnations are transformed and transcend into various roles within the divine hierarchy elaborated through many lives. The mystique, illuminated and dissipated at once, is the truth of this elaborate majesty. This adventure is not concerned with rationalizing or accommodating a one true god or gods of any known faith. Language may imply, but only because the limitation of language is itself a piece of the puzzle. Theology and mythology are explored according to the character of Phoenix’s mind and her own application the collusions built up as conditions of her world. The strange paradox of divine intercourse, where individuals share a common world and yet that world is divinely tailored specifically for the individual in question. In a sense, everyone is in on it, a conspiracy to aid Ember in her ultimate revelation. Before every crucial step, she is given the opportunity to embrace the comforts of either ignorance or oblivion, but her will to know the truth, to understand the meaning drives her on.

Second Graduation.

Following graduation, her father presented her with a present she could not possibly refuse. The Avatar Project owned a number of islands in the South Pacific, one of which was a private resort for the Directors. Artemis had reserved the entire island for her and a group of her friends to share and explore for the summer. Because it was property controlled by the Project, there were no restrictions on the use of their powers on the island itself or in, or on, the surrounding water. The other islands in the chain were of course off limits, but their little paradise was the largest and prettiest island in the group, so it did not bother them at all. Ember and her friends arrived and delighted in stretching their minds and exploring the island.

It was a time to savor, for they all knew that once they returned, they would be split up by the demands of their new careers. Unfortunately, there was something about the islands they had not been warned about. It became clear within the first week that they were not alone on their island. After one startling, and panicked close encounter, they knew that there was a large predator on their island—which seemed to be some sort of dinosaur, for all they saw of it. After that close brush, they scoured the island and turned up nothing to support what they had seen. Still on guard, they resumed their peaceful playing and exploration. They eventually concluded, individually, that what they had seen had been a prank perpetrated by one of them and they forgot the matter.

One evening, the following week, Ember was attacked while swimming in the ocean. At first, she assumed it was a shark and struggled against shock and blood loss to reach the nearest shore—that of one of the restricted islands. On the beach she studied the damage to her legs and realized that the deep, regular punctures did not conform to a shark’s ravaging bite. As she finished repairing the damage, she saw her assailant emerging from the waves. What she saw could not be called either shark or dinosaur. Without question, the only possible description was dragon. To her horror, it reached out and licked at her thoughts, alerting her to the fact that it was not only a massive and fierce predator, it was psionic.

There was no time to analyze, she simply fled. Out in the open, she hardly stood a chance. She cut as devious a course as possible through the thick rainforest and stumbled across what seemed to be some sort of ruin. The dragon could not pursue her through the tight, winding, stone structure. She discovered that there were more than enough larger passages through the strange ruin for it to harass her and keep her pinned down within the convoluted edifice. Upon retreating to its very heart, she made a startling discovery. There, suspended in a shaft of light, was a naked woman—a woman who could easily have been her twin—or mother. For three days and three nights, the dragon held her under siege. Her attempts to call for help seemed to go no further than her own skull. From the moment it had bit into her, it had somehow weeded its way into her mind, frustrating her efforts to marshal her own psionic abilities to aid her in her crisis.

On the fourth day, her predator was strangely absent. She did not trust this, but her need for food and water drove her out of cover. Water was easy, being pooled in the larger, open areas of the ruins in a complex and beautiful water course. Food lay far beyond her shelter. As she ventured out, she managed to seize and assemble the kind of defenses such a profound threat called for. As a result, she called down on herself the human wardens of this restricted isle. They descended upon her armed with the technological leashes and restraints which the government used to control and limit psionic actives. As soon as she was helpless, the dragon reappeared. The humans were helpless, their weapons too weak to scratch its armored hide, their technological devices too poorly designed to deal with its alien form of psionics. Ember was helpless as her captors were slain, and the dragon turned its attention to her.

It scooped her up into its mouth and scrambled deeper into the island wilderness. She could feel, through the strange rapport, how much it hungered, how much it wanted to devour her, and she could not understand why it restrained itself. When it spat her out on the bank of a mountain stream, she stared at it in shock. She could see quite clearly that it fully intended to eat her, but first, she realized with sickening horror, it wanted to savor the chase. Collared as she was, she could barely utilize her psionic abilities, and did not know if her special ability, the one for which she was named, would work if she died wearing it. As she fled, she realized that one way of the other, she was about to find out. As she fled, she began to realize what was going on, the dragon was using the chase to get inside her head, to feel what she was feeling, to share with her what it was feeling. Her fate was inevitable, for her predator knew what she was going to do as quickly as she did, and she knew it. By the time the chase had ended, she was no longer sure if she was the predator or the prey. So caught up was she that she did not even realize that the dragon had pulled back and allowed her to deliver the killing bite, allowed her to savor the kill and drink the dying thoughts with the blood running down her dragon throat, and yet, she never ceased to be herself.

She felt the restraint collar melt into sudden slag as her panic triggered a last, desperate surge of power. She had a split instant to focus her mind as teeth slashed through her body. She died with the thought of rebirth singing in her mind, that horrible and ecstatic agony that loved, and avoided at any cost. She woke in a synaptic explosion, her mind weaving her violently into the body she had dreamed up with her last thought. It took her a couple of days to escape from that prohibited island, once she recovered from the shock, and made her way back to the island. When she arrived, she was astonished to enter her room and confront herself, laying there in her bed. The conversation that followed tested her sanity more thoroughly than her first resurrection. It was clear that they were the same person. It was also clear that they had to keep this a secret. Neither of them could explain what had happened, but it was not hard to guess what had provoked it. One of them opted to return to the other island, and remain hidden there while attempting to discover, if possible, the reason behind this strange manifestation—if necessary, allow the adventure to be repeated in an effort to expose the cause and mechanism of this bizarre occurrence. The worst that could possibly happen was that she, the one who remained behind, would die. That was a certainty if she were to appear anywhere in public with her twin—certain death for both of them. Their gentle masters would gladly kill them to discover the secret of their duplication. Before the others could catch them together, one of them departed. For her part, Ember explained her days of absence by claiming to have been attacked by a shark, and accidentally stranded in a secluded cove, half out of her head, while struggling to knit herself back together. It was an easy lie, the truth still escaped comprehension.

Graduation. At the end of her second graduation ceremony in two years, Ember was more than ready for a night on the town, a celebration. Even if she had to steal the chance. After accepting her father’s congratulations, she broke away to mingle, made some arrangements with her friends, and then used the press of bodies to ditch her unobtrusive escort. A few days shy of eighteen, she was more than willing to take such a dangerous risk for an evening of fun. After a year under constant observation, she desperately needed it. If she was careful, she could even get away with it. She willed herself to become male. Her wardens did not know she had learned to alter her hair color and length—no point telling them she had learned that before they had ever gotten their hands on her in the first place. Ember Virginia Dawn, aka Ember, was a full spectrum, active-volitional class III psionic. She had appeared out of nowhere at the age of seven wielding that frightening and untrained level of power. She was apprehended and placed on a psionic reservation, where she was adopted by (Kevin Zhan) Artemis Victor Dawn, a director of the Avatar Project.

The Avatar Project was a covert operation, as the existence of true psionic actives was still a closely held world-wide government secret. Avatars were recruited and trained from an early age to serve as special operatives in terrestrial and extraterrestrial ventures. The development of psionic assets was carefully managed in such a way that indirect influences and subtle provocations encouraged candidates to pursue the path chosen for them by their supervisors almost entirely on their own. When Ember was only nine years old, a string of bizarre encounters in the deep caused a panic on Earth. A number of long-range reconnaissance missions were lost in a series of blind encounters with what experts very reservedly identified as alien—potentially intelligent and hostile—entities. Ember was put on a short list of psionic assets who could be risked in an encounter with this unknown contact and switched from her initial development track to a space exploration track. It had been easy to encourage the little girl to become fixated on space exploration and thus apply herself to pursuing her ambition through the available channels. She enlisted in a prep school and took advanced courses at a neighboring university, graduating at the top of her class with enough academy credit to earn her degree in the following year, enabling her to apply and enter the Academy for Officer Training at the age of eighteen.

Among the more notable aspects of her power was her absolute control over her physical form, and a tendency to switch at will—or under the slightest provocation—between the female and male sexes. She found a package she had left in preparation for this night and slipped into the bathroom. When she left, she was an attractive young man with short brown hair, faded blue jeans, t-shirt, jacket and bulging backpack slung over one shoulder. The bus arrived on schedule, and she rode it into town. In a restaurant, she made another change, back to her normal appearance and dressed for a night on the town. Her friends picked her up and they went to dinner, followed by dancing and somewhat later a private party. At around four in the morning, she was trying to figure out how to get back to where she normally belonged—much harder than slipping out—when she was assaulted. The device on the chain around her neck never interfered with her special abilities but did deprive her of the other abilities that could have saved her from rape and murder. True, she could fight, and fight well, but this assailant was not alone. The best she could manage was to ensure that they killed her first. In light of her other natural ability, the one for which she was named, her ambisexuality was regarded as little more than an oddity. Her ability to resurrect herself using a unique association of psionic abilities was as alarming as it was intriguing. While her attackers took turns violating her corpse, she pulled herself back together and—naked as the day she was born, uninhibited by the hated leash—retaliated. She dared not kill them, no matter how they deserved it, but she could ensure that none of them ever raped again. The gang of young thugs staggered in shock as they suddenly discovered that they had all suddenly become attractive young women. As the last of them fled from the sight of her, she sensed the approach of her wardens. She sighed. She was far from done paying for her one night of freedom. At least they would arrive too late to figure out what she had done.

The Leash. A simple field device, keyed to an individual’s psionic profile, the leash can generate feedback or interference in the mind of the psionic utilizing an active psionic ability. Certain abilities, known as instinctive internal manipulations, are not affected, such as natural regeneration, natural polymorphism, and in Ember’s case, the innate ability to resurrect. The mechanics of psionic ability are not understood well enough for this kind of device to interfere with. The leash is capable of disarming the six major psionic disciplines. The device resembles an amulet or in some cases dog tags. Under normal circumstances, the psionic can remove the device at will, however, the device can be keyed to emit a signal the wearer is conditioned to obey. It is a simple, obsessive compulsion that forces the psionic to be in physical contact with the device, generally reinforced by a powerful “null-pulse” generated in response to a significantly high or low reading on the temperature-controlled trigger. The chain upon which the device depends is part of a closed circuit. If it is broken, the compulsion signal is immediately triggered, and the null-pulse is armed. A leash is limited to a specific psionic, but a similar device, called a collar, is capable of identifying the resonance characteristics of any psionic and imposing similar—if somewhat more stringent—limitations on her. Unfortunately, these devices are only capable of causing psychic pain. With sufficient motivation, a psionic can adapt to or ignore the pain such devices can cause and still manifest and control their power.

The nice thing about psi cops was that they were psionics too. When they arrived, as quickly as only they could, she put up no resistance and explained exactly what had happened, omitting only how she had retaliated. They collected her abandoned body and took her in.

Ember together with her vacant and violated body, presented the psi cops and the doctors at the secure facility they were delivered to a difficult and disturbing problem. For some reason, Ember could not stand the thought of being separated from her body. For another, there was some confusion about the order in which she had been raped and murdered, and thus how to conduct the investigation. When she understood what they were trying to do, as they were trying to separate her from her corpse to examine her, she tersely corrected them and then insisted on conducting the examination herself. It was difficult to explain to them, but past experience had taught her that she would be ill at ease—at best—until the body was destroyed, in part because her awareness was still tied to it. The examination, or worse, the autopsy to follow, would be etched into her memory as surely as if she was trapped wide awake in that cold body. If the body had to be handled, then it was best—at least tolerable—if she alone attended to it.

Having to explain this—since she was presently under arrest—was both agonizing and necessary. It was unavoidable, since she needed to be released from her leash to fulfill this self-imposed obligation. She lifted the procedures out of the minds of the police, doctors and coroners who had vied for the grisly duties and was left to tend to it alone. Almost alone, as one of the doctors, young and female out of respect for Ember, remained to assist and supervise. Ember was able to conduct the examination without using tools or physically touching the body. After demonstrating why she felt it was necessary, the doctor honored her request that the body not be touched. Before she was finished, she had confessed to a kind of trauma. Ember had been a virgin. Technically, she still was. Her first experience with sex, however, she had been a corpse, and the doctor understood that Ember had both the right and misfortune to be able to use the word “experience” in its fullest sense. When she destroyed the body, she confided that the sensation was more akin to being washed—scoured—clean than to being cremated.

She was detained for three days, with repeated interrogations, but finally her father intervened. Her sole defense was a kind of temporary insanity, the constant monitoring and observation, coupled with how hard she had been working the past six years, had made her stir crazy. She had needed a break and had even asked for one. Being turned down had not lessened her need, so she had taken care of it herself. She had died for a night of freedom, so what more could they do to punish her for it?

Fully expecting to be punished further, Ember was surprised when she was released and her father presented her with a present she could not possibly refuse. The Avatar Project owned a number of islands in the South Pacific, one of which was a private resort for the Directors. The fact that Ember had taken such great risks, and literally died for a single night of freedom, and the fact that they did need her, finally convinced her superiors that further disciplinary action was uncalled for. In fact, her little misadventure convinced several of the directors that some measure of reward was indicated for her as well as a few of her special classmates. Her father made the suggestion that the board of directors finally voted into policy. Artemis had reserved the entire island for her and a group of her friends to share and explore for the summer.

Ember had only a few days to contact her friends and spread the news. She had graduated with six of her friends, all of whom were invited to go. A few of them were older, and a few her own age. Finch and Kim were two years older than her, Dani one year older, and Shale, Rain and Angel the same age. Realizing that they would want to hear the whole story, she decided it would be easiest to track them down and then invite them all to dinner or lunch.

Dragon, Finch Damon Drake, had appointed himself as Ember’s mentor and honorary big brother when she appeared on the university campus, barely fifteen years old, and quite wet behind the ears. Finch Drake was a genius who understood the true potential of the mind and the need for a science of psionics. He hailed from the same reservation as Rain and Shale, and which Ember had moved from a couple of years before. Unknown to Ember, Rain and Shale were also enrolled for that first summer session and enjoyed the same status with Dragon. Rain and Shale were her oldest friends in the group, but the day Dragon’s study group met for the first time that semester might as well have been the first time Ember, Rain and Shale had met.

As a child, Ember had possessed less control over her ability to switch sexes. As a result, she had always appeared as a boy to her two best friends. She maintained that pose for them, even after she gained full control, but when Rain saw her in her natural form he recognized her. It was a turning point in the quiet but unhappy boy’s life. Rain confided a deep and terrible secret to Ember and appealed to her for help.

Rain had been born a boy and learned how to be a girl courtesy of Ember. Her struggle with transsexualism ultimately helped Ember resolve her own hidden questions about gender and identity. Having fallen in love with Rain, she had been tempted to commit to her male form, but Rain had forced her to figure out who she was, which gender fit her natural identity, and saved her from making a terrible mistake. She liked Shale, Shale Patrick Cooper, or Lion, almost as much, but Rain and Shale had been in love without knowing it since they were boyhood friends. That summer, during which Rain underwent her transformation, Shale was inspired to new creative heights. Rain’s transformation had startled him, while fascinating him at the same time. With his exquisite curiosity and mischievous nature, he pursued the unusual art, eventually winning Ember over to his devious little pranks. It made them closer and gave her the insight into his character she needed to understand his feelings for Rain. In turn, she helped him express those feelings to her other childhood friend.

Shale used the trick to play a practical joke on their friend and mentor, and Dragon was hooked by the idea at once. A keen observer, he quickly picked up on how to do it, but his approach, second person, caused him to figure out how to change other people long before he mastered the ability to change himself. His efforts inspired Ember to learn how to do unto others as she could instinctively do unto herself. Which made it easier to teach the trick to others than it had been to teach Rain and Shale.

Sphinx, Dani or Thorn\Dani Kinkade, as Dragon’s unwitting lab rat, had been forced to figure it out in a hurry, or miss an important test, and was now as comfortable as Ember in either form. Thorn was an intuitive soul who understood how things worked and knew how to have fun.

Angel, Angelica Lynn Thompson, had learned the trick from Dani and taught it to Kim, and met Dragon through both Kim and Dani. Raven, Kim or Kimberly Jean DeMer. Dragon and Raven had met for the first time in inverted roles and fallen in love, and that love had survived discovering the truth about each other.

Ember had met both Kim and Angel through Dragon as well and realized that Dani had fallen for Angel in time to avoid an embarrassing scene. How ironic that, save for the starring role in a bit of necrophilia, the person responsible for this little sexual revolution was still a virgin. She expected to have a lot of time to herself on their vacation.

Because of Ember, all of the people in this group had at least experimented with sexual polymorphism, trying to learn the trick that had come so naturally to her. Shale was the one to blame for that—him and his sense of humor—and Ember had taken the rap.

Everyone showed up for her dinner party, lured by her promise to tell them about her big night out. After sharing the tale of her misadventure, she told them about the vacation they had been granted.

Ember and her friends arrived and delighted in stretching their minds and exploring the island. Because it was property controlled by the Project, there were no restrictions on the use of their powers on the island itself or in or on the surrounding water. It was the kind of freedom a psionic could only dream of, which is why many of them opted to become psi cops. It was their only way to obtain some semblance of it. It was not absolute freedom. The other islands in the chain were of course off limits, but their little paradise was the largest and prettiest island in the group, so it did not bother them at all. It was a time to savor, for they all knew that once they returned, they would be split up by the demands of their new careers. Unfortunately, there was something about the islands they had not been warned about.

It became clear within the first week that they were not alone on their island. After one startling, and panicked close encounter, they knew that there was a large predator on their island—which seemed to be some sort of dinosaur, for all they saw of it.

After that close brush, they scoured the island and turned up nothing to support what they had seen. Still on guard, they resumed their peaceful playing and exploration. They eventually concluded, individually, that what they had seen had been a prank perpetrated by one of them and they forgot the matter.

One evening, the following week, Ember was attacked while swimming in the ocean. At first, she assumed it was a shark and struggled against shock and blood loss to reach the nearest shore—that of one of the restricted islands.

On the beach she studied the damage to her legs and realized that the deep, regular punctures did not conform to a shark’s ravaging bite. As she finished repairing the damage, she saw her assailant emerging from the waves. What she saw could not be called either shark or dinosaur. Without question, the only possible description was a dragon. To her horror, it reached out and licked at her thoughts, alerting her to the fact that it was not only a massive and fierce predator, it was psionic.

There was no time to analyze, she simply fled. Out in the open, she hardly stood a chance. She cut as devious a course as possible through the thick rainforest and stumbled across what seemed to be some sort of ruin. The dragon could not pursue her through the tight, winding, stone structure.

She discovered that there were more than enough larger passages through the strange ruin for it to harass her and keep her pinned down within the convoluted edifice. Upon retreating to its very heart, she made a startling discovery. There, suspended in a shaft of light, was a naked woman—a woman who could easily have been her twin—or mother.

As she studied the woman intently, she felt a part of herself awaken and reach out to her. Quickened by her concern for the woman, obviously alive and aware, but frozen both in mind and body, motivated by her instinctive wish to somehow set her free, this unnamed ability reached in and captured the spark that burned in the prisoner’s mind. As her thoughts wrapped around the woman’s soul (it was the only way to describe the experience) her body responded in a manner she could never have anticipated. An instant and overwhelming orgasm seized her. It seemed to go on forever, and dawn had come and gone before the afterglow fully subsided. When she examined the woman again, she was merely a statue, perfect in every organic detail, but no longer filled with awareness. She had no idea what to make of it.

For three days and three nights, the dragon held her under siege. Her attempts to call for help seemed to go no further than her own skull. From the moment it had bit into her, it had somehow weeded its way into her mind, frustrating her efforts to marshal her own psionic abilities to aid her in her crisis.

On the fourth day, her predator was strangely absent. She did not trust this, but her need for food and water drove her out of cover. Water was easy, being pooled in the larger, open areas of the ruins in a complex and beautiful water course. Food lay far beyond her shelter. As she ventured out, she managed to seize and assemble the kind of defenses such a profound threat called for. As a result, she called down on herself the wardens of the restricted isles. They descended upon her armed with the technological weapons and restraints which the government used to control and limit psionic actives.

At their base camp, around their flier, they discovered that the people left to guard camp had vanished. Their departure was delayed as men were dispatched to locate the missing team members. While they debriefed her, they confided that even they were not supposed to be on the island, demanding to know what could possibly have motivated her to violate the restrictions the directors had imposed on her group. She told them her story and was not believed. Still, they were returning her to her friends, and from there they would all be sent back home where she could be properly disciplined. After the dragon, that really did not scare her. Ember was secured and put to bed under guard while the team leader made his report to their base on one of the other islands.

As soon as she was virtually helpless, and asleep, the dragon reappeared. The men were even more helpless, their weapons too weak to scratch its armored hide, their technological devices too poorly designed to deal with its alien form of psionics. Ember was helpless as her captors were slain, and the dragon turned its attention to her. She ran.

It scooped her up into its mouth and scrambled deeper into the island wilderness. She could feel, through the strange rapport, how much it hungered, how much it wanted to devour her, and she could not understand why it restrained itself. When it spat her out on the bank of a mountain stream, she stared at it in shock. She could see quite clearly that it fully intended to eat her, but first, she realized with sickening horror, it wanted to savor the chase.

Collared as she was, she could barely utilize her psionic abilities, and did not know if her special ability, the one for which she was named, would work if she died wearing it. As she fled, she realized that one way of the other, she was about to find out.

As she fled, she began to realize what was going on, the dragon was using the chase to get inside her head, to feel what she was feeling, to share with her what it was feeling. Her fate was inevitable, for her predator knew what she was going to do as quickly as she did, and she knew it. By the time the chase had ended, she was no longer sure if she was the predator or the prey.

So caught up was she that she did not even realize that the dragon had pulled back and allowed her to deliver the killing bite, allowed her to savor the kill and drink the dying thoughts with the blood running down her dragon throat, and yet, she never ceased to be herself.

She felt the restraint collar melt into sudden slag as her panic triggered a last, desperate surge of power. She had a split instant to focus her mind as teeth slashed through her body. She died with the thought of rebirth singing in her mind, that horrible and ecstatic agony that she loved, and avoided at any cost. She woke in a synaptic explosion, her mind weaving her violently into the body she had dreamed up with her last thought.

It took her a couple of days to escape from that prohibited island, once she recovered from the shock, and made her way back to the island. None of her friends were present when she got back to the estate.

When she arrived, she was astonished to enter her room and confront herself, laying there in her bed. The conversation that followed tested her sanity more thoroughly than her first resurrection. Her twin, as sure of being Ember as Ember was, confessed her own experience of awakening and fleeing the island. She had arrived the night before and had not yet seen her—their friends.

It was clear that they were the same person. It was also clear that they had to keep this a secret. They were careful to keep the others from catching them together. In spite of that, both of them were seen by, and interacted with, the others. For her part, Ember explained her days of absence by claiming to have been attacked by a shark, and accidentally stranded in a secluded cove, half out of her head, while struggling to knit herself back together. Her twin adopted and maintained the same story. It was an easy lie, the truth still escaped comprehension. Neither of them could explain what had happened, but it was not hard to guess what had provoked it.

Soon enough, their vacation came to an end. One of them opted to return to the other island, and remain hidden there while attempting to discover, if possible, the reason behind this strange manifestation—if necessary, allow the adventure to be repeated in an effort to expose the cause and mechanism of this bizarre occurrence. The worst that could possibly happen was that she, the one who remained behind, would die. That was a certainty if she were to appear anywhere in public with her twin—certain death for both of them. Their gentle masters would gladly kill them to discover the secret of their duplication.

Closing the matter proved to be more difficult than she had hoped. Instead of returning home, they were all taken to one of the restricted islands. Not, thankfully, the one where she had endured her ordeal. Unfortunately, her ordeal had not gone entirely unnoticed.

The men who had captured her had reported her capture, and relayed sufficient information to identify her before the dragon killed them. What little the islands’ authorities knew was more than enough to damn her. Realizing how much trouble she was in, she knew she would have to explain, but the truth was simply unbelievable. The best she could do was hint at the truth and beg them not to investigate.

She was able to confide in her friends when they were left alone in their cell. Even with them, she left out a significant detail, her duplication, but they were ready to take her word that there was a dragon on the other isle. After all, they had seen it—part of it, in passing.

Her friends supported her when she demanded to go along with the investigation team. She promised them that they would not survive the investigation if they went without the full support of psionic backup. The captain studied them and then agreed to allow them to come along, leashed. If the threat Ember described turned out to be something other than herself, then and only then would they be unleashed to provide support.

The investigation was mounted quickly and by the middle of the morning they were on the island, examining the ruined flier. At first, they did not find any bodies, but there was enough blood to make the soldiers turn hateful looks at Ember. When they finally did come across the bodies, some of those looks turned murderous, even after the medic announced that there was no doubt the men had been mauled to death by a very large and toothsome predator. The captain had Ember’s friends unleashed but still did not trust Ember enough to turn her loose. Her advice, to retreat to the ruins, was heeded quickly enough. Particularly when a dragon did finally oblige them with an appearance. It rose up right among them as they were crossing a river, and confronted Ember nose to nose before the other psionics could drive it away. The encounter was more than proof enough of the uselessness of the weapons the soldiers carried. At the end of the terrified flight for the ruins, Ember managed to gasp out her report. That was not the same dragon she had encountered before. Taking a wild guess, she assumed it must have been the mate of the one she had seen, and in her mind, there was little doubt that this bigger, fiercer looking one was male.

The medic confirmed Ember’s guess after treating some of the wounds the big dragon had administered. The bites and claw marks were consistent with what he had observed on the other corpses, but on a larger scale. When the captain asked Ember why none of the men had been eaten, Ember shared her own experience. They had been killed by a dragon in pursuit of her chosen prey. When a dragon was committed to eating you, it wormed its way into your mind so that you could taste its triumph and it could taste your death. Her guess was that dragons’ tastes favored high levels of psionic potential. Her friends were not thrilled to hear that.

Cut off from their transport and effectively unarmed and defenseless in the face of this threat, the group sat down to work out a means of escape. As the sole survivor—if one could really say that—of the first scenario, Ember was closely consulted. She warned the other psionics of the dragon’s ability to get into her head and sabotage her psionic abilities. If that could be prevented, then any one of them was more than equal to the threat. Even a class II psi was an awesome force to contend with. The simplest way to test if their minds were compromised was to simply attempt to teleport the group to the resort island. When none of them proved able to do it, it was clear that the dragon was sitting in on their strategy meeting.

Ember answered their skepticism by standing up and going out to the edge of the ruin. As soon as she was vulnerable, the dragon erupted from the dense foliage and rushed her. She retreated enough to effectively dodge out of reach of a strike or lunge and regarded him carefully. He stared back with an air of amused anticipation. While he was looking at her, she could tell that his attention was focused on one of her friends, a girl every bit as powerful as she was, and likely just as doomed.

Ember warned her friend that the dragon had her in his sights. That troubled her, but not as much as the very fact of the dragon’s existence. She was a bit more widely educated than Ember, most of her friends were, since she was the youngest and she had concentrated on Field- and Astro-Physics in school, and devoted her free time to gymnastics and martial arts. Pinned down in the ruins, her friends debated over the mystery of dragons, their origins, capabilities and behavior, concluding that they simply could not have evolved on Earth, and were most likely someone’s science project than a highly improbable alien lifeform. The debate was interesting, but Ember agreed with the soldiers in that it did not get them anywhere to speculate on it. The senior officers were able to contribute to the discussion by explaining that this island had always been off limits to all but one of the directors, who had acquired the islands for the Project in the first place. None of them knew which director, and no one bothered to ask. They had discovered that the dragon had managed to disable or destroy all their communications gear in that initial encounter on the river.

The level of intelligence suggested by that fact disturbed everyone. Ember was surprised that no one had mentioned it earlier. Particularly since she, or one of the other psionics, could have repaired the equipment, which she immediately volunteered to do. Once she was done, the captain called in to base, made a brief, concise report and requested heavy back up. They were told that a response would come as soon as the resources were released for use.

Ember slipped away from the group and made her way to the far side of the ruins, where the frozen woman still hovered. Her twin was waiting for her.

Ember listened to her twin and allowed herself to be convinced to go with her. Her twin had been met by that big dragon upon returning to the island, and instead of chasing her, he had spoken to her. Ember could not believe it. Her twin led her into the forest and introduced Ember to the dragon, and while no words were spoken, he certainly could communicate. To begin with, he thanked her for setting his mate free, which Ember simply did not understand, since it also addressed her as its mate. She assumed that her own mind picked the words for his communication, which was telepathic in nature. He also asked her for her friend, clearly meaning that she should assist him by convincing her to participate in the hunt. She found it impossible to argue his request, so she simple set the matter aside and informed him that the people she was with were desperate to escape and probably determined to kill him to eliminate the threat he represented. She tried to negotiate a truce which would make it unnecessary for anyone to die. When he argued that the hunt had not ended her existence, she argued that it certainly had killed her and she was the only person she knew of who was able to recover from that. He argued that it was irrelevant, since one who had not been hunted had not fully lived, the prospect of dying was no reason not to face death. When she reminded him that hunting people was a sure way to become hunted himself, he smiled that terrifying dragon smile and declared that it had been too long since he was, himself, the hunted. At which point, she could see only one way to save her friends. She offered herself.

He declared that she was worthy of her name, but declined her offer, saying that she herself was now a hunter. It would be proper for her to claim this hunt for herself. One could always choose to be the predator, one never chose to be prey. One who made herself prey was in fact a hunter of hunters, and her willingness to leap into the jaws of death the surest warning to any predator to shy away. Her offer was simply evidence that she had learned the lesson of the hunt, if not yet the keenest way to profit by it.

Before returning to the group, she warned the dragon that she would do everything in her power to thwart his objective. He only grinned in amused anticipation, delighted that she would strive to make his hunt more interesting. On the way back, her twin confessed to a similar failure. Her attempts to lure the dragon away from the party had achieved nothing more than the invitation for Ember to parlay. Back in the ruin, they embraced and said goodbye.

Ember returned to the others and told them she had figured out a way for some of them to escape, possibly all of them. It depended entirely on the individuals themselves, but if they were willing to risk it, they should be able to leave at will; leave the ruins, leave the island, and this nightmare behind. All they needed was something worth dying for.

Following Ember’s advice, they called off the reinforcements in favor of a munitions drop. Ember, armed with a heavy caliber side arm, was the one to go into the clearing to collect the special weapons she had requested. As she expected, the dragon came out to meet her. It was a test, as much as a calculated risk. As she expected, the dragon had messed with her mind, but not as intensely as his mate. She could not teleport, but she was far from defenseless. She defended herself with a storm of whirling boulders wrenched from the ground. The dragon learned quickly to respect that hurricane of rock and turned its attention to disarming her mind. As she suspected, he tended to focus in on a selected target, and since she was not his chosen prey, he was only able to force her to drop a few boulders at a time. She was able to reach the weapons, and levitate them into the shelter, keeping one of the vest shaped bombs. Once the rest of the munitions were safely tucked inside the ruin, she relaxed her defenses enough to provoke a charge. The dragon lunged at her, mouth open. She drew and fired her gun into his open mouth and was satisfied as the beast recoiled in pain. That fit her memory of a soft, silky and unprotected mouth. As she turned to run back into the ruin, she armed the explosive and tossed it toward him. Like the boulders, the explosion was merely a nuisance to his armored hide, but he did recoil to protect his face. He was smart enough to understand what that same device could do if detonated in his mouth. A successful demonstration.

Ember and the others donned the explosive vests, rigged for dead-man switches. The soldiers distributed the heavy weapons, loaded with armor piercing explosive heads, amongst themselves. Ember had warned them that the dragon would kill anyone who got in his way, and their only chance to escape lay in every one of them being willing to die—and hopefully take the dragon out with him or her—to protect the others. for the soldiers, it was a fair deal, one they knew well. For her friends it was more difficult. They were far better armed than the soldiers and used to the threat of death—the final solution for a psionic who proved to be uncontrollable—if not the notion of dying for a cause. Only the fact that the dragon’s identified prey was a young woman near and dear to them made it possible for them to truly step willingly into the jaws of death. For her part, she was twice as willing to die for the others, if not for one hidden detail which made her own survival imperative. The child within her certainly had no wish to die. The secret she had guarded the past couple of months she now guarded twice as hard. She did not want her friends and allies to become reckless in defending her. She simply accepted, and donned her final friend, setting the dead-man switch with grim resolve. If it came down to it, her last act would be to avenge her daughter.

As soon as everyone was ready, they formed up and walked out of the ruin. To their shock, the dragon dropped into the middle of their formation, pinning them together where they dared not detonate their charges, and loomed over his chosen prey. As the dragon carefully examined her, studying her belly intently, Ember realized that the dragon had heard the girls closely guarded thoughts as well as she had. After staring into the girl’s eyes for a long moment, it turned its head and singled out the next most powerful psionic in the group—to everyone’s surprise, one of the soldiers, who indeed possessed frightening psi potential, which was stubbornly latent. Ember intercepted the dragon’s lunge. He snapped his jaws shut and turned his head just shy of scooping her up, sparing them both that gruesome event. The girl who was suddenly no longer prey, seized the dragon in her mind’s grip, whipping his sinuous body into the air only to come slamming down onto the jagged teeth of tumbled boulders.

It seemed that the dragon’s new choice of prey had given the active psionics enough of an edge to mount an effective rotating defense, as the boy who could have been her boyfriend followed up her attack, driving the dragon into retreat with a massive boulder meant to crush him upon those rocks. Everyone scrambled to their feet, and back into formation. Keeping the boulders aloft, orbiting their slow march across the island, provided a ready means of defense as well as a way to warn them if the dragon was worming its way too deeply into their minds. By evening they had reached the shore. As they paused to consider how to get them all safely off the island—bearing in mind Ember’s account of how she had ended up on the island in the first place—a flier appeared and settled on the beach. To Ember’s amazement, her father stepped out and approached them. Before they could give warning, the dragon erupted from the dense forest and pounced on him. To their shock, as they rushed to assist him, he was laughing and petting the massive beast, talking to the dragon the way a man might talk to a horse or a dog. Ember could hardly speak as her father called her over to be “introduced” to his “pet”. Her dismay only increased when, after retelling their ordeal, he replied that Kzeisza, the dragon’s name, got to play in his own yard, and after all, they had all been trespassing where they did not belong. While the others loaded onto the flier, Ember remained where she was, confronting her father and his pet dragon.

Before she could demand explanations, he stated that everyone had secrets and perhaps their own were better left undisturbed on this island. If she would respect his, he would respect hers. It was safe to assume they each knew more than a little about what secrets the other had to keep. Looking back into the forest, where a redheaded form crouched in the shadows, she realized she could not agree more.