Avatars-18

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Confronting Conflicting Interests

The Wild-Psi’d reviewed the tape the next day. The thing that surprised them was not that she had used her power so openly, but that she had managed to avoid all contact with normal observers. Several times, she had moved suddenly and arbitrarily to avoid encountering the people that wandered the trails, taggers from the forestry service, surveyors, rangers and game wardens, even a few hikers and adventurous kids were narrowly, but gracefully dodged. The only person she had not seemed to spot was the one person who was actively being invisible.

They concluded that this was not a girl who had only recently come into her power. She had a skill and presence of mind that suggested a long history of psionic activity, combined with tremendous devotion to athletic, gymnastic and martial disciplines of the body. She was the perfect fit for Hunter’s ideal prey. Once again, Dragon was not at the assembly, but a report was composed and one of them dispatched to give him the news. He would be at school, watching the girl and her sister.

Keith had met the girls and settled on a date that morning. He had suggested a trip to Yosemite for the weekend, but Athena had begged off, she had spent the day before hiking and gotten it out of her system. Instead, they voted for a trip to an amusement park. Great America in San Jose had been overhauled two or three times in the past decade and was practically a new theme park. Keith agreed, and bumped the date up to that Thursday, the day following, a day out in addition to the promised date, he suggested.

With that qualification, they told him they would be bringing some friends along to enjoy a day out as well. He agreed amiably. He even showed up for their practice, and met Ares at last. Keith looked a bit pale at hearing that he was Athena’s fiancée, but got a grip on himself. He listened to the story and silently contemplated how to break the two of them up. Artemis was every bit as fascinating as her twin, but it was Athena he had so long been obsessed, Athena who had touched him so profoundly.

After practice he was found by Wolf, who gave him the report about Athena. He could not say which of the twins had been observed, but Athena’s own words had informed Keith. Keith sent Wolf back to the others with his assurance that he would start thinking of a plan. A fiancée, and now proof that she was active. He cursed. He had been getting closer to her each day, now there was no prospect of waking her up, and two very real threats to ever getting his hands on her and keeping her. If fate denied him that chance of winning her, he would have to start thinking about stealing her.

The trip to Great America became the event of the week. Everyone wanted to go. Kim and the older boys they had taken into their circle could act as chaperones for the motley bunch, leaving the adults with a day to themselves. Kelly, Allen, Robert and Mark were contacted and agreed heartily to go. Lauren and Morgan also. Naturally, Chris, Jean, Naomi, Erin, and Ares were in on it. The girls went out to get bathing suits, to wear under t-shirts and shorts or summer skirts, while the boys decided to tough it out in cut off jeans.

In the morning they all met and sorted themselves into car pools. Athena and Artemis rode over with Kevin, accompanied by Chris and Jean, as a boy. Out of respect for Keith, Ares had agreed to entertain Lauren and Morgan so that Keith’s day was not ruined with jealousy. For the most part, they ignored each other, but it was impossible for them to stay away from each other the entire day. The occasional shared glance or confidence gave Keith something to brood over, and he did not try to hide it. He brought it out in the open, making a game of actually competing with Ares for Athena’s attention.

Lauren, Morgan and Artemis or course kept it playful by competing a bit on their own. The only remotely violent outburst was when Ares ended up as Keith’s prime target in bumper cars. Artemis cornered a brooding Keith when Athena and Ares jumped back in line for a second go at one of the rides. The way Keith watched Athena urged her to address it. She pointed out that, in spite of his expressed interest in both of them he sure focused a lot of his attention on Athena. He opened up a bit, explaining his long infatuation with Athena.

He told her about the date, which of course she remembered, having been the one he had actually been out with, and how he had come right out and told her he had fallen in love. This time she pressed, because she personally, had been the cause of a great deal of trouble when she had been nine years old. He only said it was impossible to explain. What he could say was that he had decided that he would win her love, and there she was engaged to a stranger, who was stealing her away as he watched.

Artemis had gotten to like Keith, and knew he was correct. He did not have a chance with Athena, or herself, for that matter. Things had changed and there was no explaining it fully. Still, an obsession could turn dangerous and he needed to get over his infatuation. She tried to break it to him gently, explaining that Athena and Ares seemed like strangers to each other, but they knew each other far better than anyone might expect. They were deeply in love, and trying to break it to their friends and admirers gently.

She also counseled him. If he did not make a menace of himself, there was a good chance he would still have a place in Athena’s and her own heart. Ares was not jealous or closed-minded. He believed that variety was the spice of life, and that love could only be increased, not diminished, by spreading it around. A girl could only marry one boy, but she could have many lovers if all concerned kept their wits about them. His interest had never offended them, she assured him; he could still realize some of his dreams. He simply had to understand that one of them was off limits.

He did not reply, and Artemis left him to think about it. She had other problems to deal with. Jean’s decision to go out as a boy had seemed reasonable at first. It was wonderful of him to treat Chris to a real date, chaperonage aside, and the two were so obviously a couple that they would have attracted strange looks if they both were female. That would hardly stop them, and in hindsight would have been safer. Jean still did not have full control of his shifting. Whenever he resisted the female role, he had to be very careful or change unexpectedly in public.

An amusement park provided more than enough shocks and distractions to keep him flipping back and forth. More than once he had to think and move fast to cover for a slip, dealing with the annoying fact that he could not always switch back quickly or easily. The fact that no one could account for exactly who had ended up in which car made it plausible that Jean and Jon were both present, and circumstances forced him-her to present just that deception. The identity Jean had been given made him-her brother and sister to himself, and thus best friend and boy friend of Chris.

Keith proved how observant he was when he confided to Jon that his sister apparently had a thing going with his girlfriend behind his back. Because of Keith, many others had to cooperate to keep him from twigging to the fact that something decidedly odd was going on. It was also the first time that Lauren and Morgan had really noticed his strange curse, and they took delight in provoking his changes when they determined that no one was watching directly. Only the weight of the crowds kept anyone else from noticing, to many certainly did see a sudden change. While they were blinking to figure out what they were seeing, the crowds shifted enough to make verification impossible.

It was a long, fun and expensive day and by the end, they had companionable settled into their original triads. Ares had pulled Keith aside and said there was no getting around the marriage thing, but he was open-minded, and did not plan to keep Athena on a short leash. What happened between him and the twins was up to the twins, as far as he was concerned. Artemis heard that, and announced to Lauren and Morgan that Ares had just pimped his fiancée. As Athena’s twin, she was duly empowered to talk stud fees with them.

Eventually the crowds thinned, and Jon officially left with a raging headache. Chris and Jean were set upon by Mark and Allen, while Kim made do with the attentions of Kelly and Robert. Naomi and Erin were a happy and shameless couple, and Ares and Keith made out with redheads on each arm. The final event was a concert in the park, following which they set out for an all night diner to unwind and talk over coffee. Keith set a date, an exclusive affair with Athena and Artemis, for a trip out to San Francisco for that Friday night.

Instead of going home afterwards, Lauren and Morgan declared that they should go to Xanadu, and have their own private party. It was the first time Keith had been out to the new house, and he added his vote, which meant that it would be a restrained affair. The group had spent the day reminding themselves that Keith was a normal for all they knew, and enough new people had been abruptly exposed to psi for one month. Ares, Athena and Artemis decided silently that it might be a good idea to indulge the desires of their obsessed dates, to take a bit of the edge off of them.

In spite of the fact that the girls all had their bathing suits on, the house rule prevailed and everyone striped down. It had been a hot day and it was a warm night, so the cool pool seduced them all. Following a bit of mischief and play they began to focus on seducing each other. Morgan and Lauren stopped competing with each other to take advantage of the offer Artemis had made at the amusement park. They either shared or they went without. As Ares was led to a private nook, Keith confronted the twins.

Artemis asked him if he had given what she had said any thought. He asserted that he had given it a lot of thought. He had remained a gentleman and stopped brooding so much right afterwards. Together, Athena and Artemis asked him if he could be satisfied to be just a friend and a lover. They assured him that Ares would consent if he never failed to treat the girls right. Keith could not say no, even if deep down he felt otherwise. He had worked so hard to get to just this stage in the relationship with them.

Besides, he told himself, justifying an act he as yet only toyed with, all was not lost. Ares seemed like the kind of guy who would understand if a girl changed her mind. And girls did change their minds. He relaxed, accepting what was offered on the terms he was given, and resolved silently to simply see to it that the girls changed their minds. He began his campaign by communicating the full depth of his worship in the very way he touched them. He stirred something deep within them, something he was surprise to learn they shared—but they were twins—awakening as the personification of sexuality.

Artemis could hardly believe it. He did know. He had known her. He knew exactly what to do and did it as if by habit, and she still could not remember having been touched by him. Having entrapped him. As she looked into Athena’s eyes, she finally saw what had been born in her own eyes, and realized that her secrets had become a part of her love. Things she had hidden from herself, she had given to her soul mate in marriage. As Athena looked back at her, the memories churned inside her. Artemis looked away, only now able to feel shame. Now, only Ares was ignorant of the truth. Athena reached out, turning her face to meet hers, and she communicated her love and acceptance. She silently begged Artemis to not be ashamed. She had been a child. She had not known better, nor had she been given any choice.