Avatars-19

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Confronting Conflict

The demons which Keith had awakened in Artemis—and Athena—had long been buried memories. Now they were stirred up to the front of her mind. They haunted every thought as she struggled to get through the next day at school. She had made her peace with them a long time ago, but it was gnawing at her. Had Keith been one of her victims? It was the self-imposed torture of trying to fish a forgotten name out of the depths of her memory, and this one dark corner of her soul was where she had to look. Again and again Athena tried to tell her to drop it. Or at least talk to someone about it.

Athena had not meant to talk to her about it. It was all there in her head, plain to see, and there was not much she could add to it. But that meant she could also see how the problem had been resolved. That she knew the truth about Artemis and Jack Hunter. Artemis had only ever had one person she could talk to about this, and Athena was suggesting that it was time to talk to him about it again. At gymnastics, Artemis bit the bullet and asked to speak to Hunter in private. She made it clear that she needed to speak as a protégée to her mentor, and he took her into a private office and sat her down to talk. She told him quickly about a boy who touched her as if he knew her intimately, and who had tapped directly into what had evolved in her at nine years of age. She told him that she had wracked her brain, but for the life of her could not remember having even known him, let alone having entangled him in her web.

Hunter considered the problem. Many men could say that their lives had been changed by a girl. In his case the girl had been the original Athena, and she had been such a little girl. She had so much power, and in turn so much stimulation, that her sexuality had matured before her personality. She had developed a strange condition, as if she had gone into heat, in which her identity had become submerged by her sex drive. She had only been nine years old, but her condition had an impact on her body, triggering early menses and unbelievable pheromone production. She was completely unconscious of it, actually shifting into an altered state of awareness where she was totally un*self*conscious. She had no effect on females beyond eliciting affection, but it could make a man into a slave to her desires.

She had possessed no shame, no fear, and yet managed to cope with practical matters, such as avoiding pregnancy. The same could not be said of the men and boys who fell prey to her nymphomania. His brother had been shattered by guilt as he flew again and again into the heart of her flame. Hunter himself had been instructed to deal with her. Technically, in spite of her age, she was the type of threat he was occasionally employed to eliminate—a psi who had no control over her powers. He was supposed to have killed her. He had been a fool to assume he could resist her primal attraction. Instead of killing her, he had fed himself to her insatiable appetite. In the process he discovered the girl behind it.

After quenching her insatiable thirst, she emerged from her altered state, innocent and immature. She was a bright, gifted child. He realized that her potential was so great her mind was almost detached from her body. She lived in a world of omniscience, aware of everything and intrigued with it all. Her control over her power was absolute, but as she approached the point of severance, some instinct for self-preservation would reign her back in by kicking her into sexual over drive.

She understood what was happening; she knew exactly what she was doing and what it meant. She sensed, from the men she snared, that there was something wrong—at least from an outside perspective—and that such activities were inappropriate for children. Unable to endure without it, though, she compromised by keeping those episodes a secret from herself. Hunter confronted her parents with this discovery, revealing him self to them in full confidence. He informed them he had been contracted to kill her, but in his opinion the contract was not justified. She needed a mentor, not an assassin. Her parents, confronted with the facts—a choice between sex or death for their daughter—enlisted him to be that mentor.

Over time, her personality had matured into her sexuality, and her sexuality had evolved into a personality of its own. Her other self. He knew her so well, both sides, he noticed at once when her other took her place at school, in gymnastics and martial arts. And sex, how could he ever forget the sex? Hunter had struggled to avoid his brother’s fate, tearing himself apart for allowing him self to have sex with a child. It was difficult to remember some times that the girl was using him, and not the other way around—and that she really had no choice. Until she could embrace her power without discarding her body, she needed sex to survive. He managed to limit the episodes by teasing her to invest more attention in her body, into mastering her body through athletics, and embracing the world through her physical senses.

Hunter had thought that the problem had finally been put to rest. Now Artemis approached Hunter to discuss her dark history, how her mating had revealed it to Athena, and the boy who had pushed their buttons. It concerned her that she still possessed buttons that could turn her into a willing sex slave, but it still bothered her more that she could not place a boy so close to her own age she would have to have known him, anywhere in those memories. Hunter did not recall that Keith had been one of her victims, but he promised he would look into it. He reminded her that she had gone into a dream state with most of her earliest victims, and also that circumstances could force a person’s identity to change.

Artemis knew that only too well. She did not know enough about Keith’s past to be certain that he had not been orphaned or adopted. The fact that his name was not remembered meant little more than the fact that his face was not remembered. Boys’ faces changed a lot through puberty, and she had no idea what he might have looked like as a ten-year-old boy. She did know that the signals her body had produced back then had been more than sufficient to stiffen the resolve of such a young boy. Hunter assured her that it had. She told him she would still be working on it in the back of her mind. She had another date with him that night.

Hunter surprised her by telling her not to go. She asserted that she had to, she had promised. Hunter reminded her that she had confided the truth about herself and her mate. Athena and Alt could keep the boy entertained, but Artemis had something more important to do. He strongly suggested it was time for Artemis to let her other half in on the secret. When the girls left after practice, Hunter returned to his office and composed a report. He had suspected that something big had changed in the girls, but now he had the whole story, and it was time to update their profiles. In spite of their young age, they were ready. The report was coded and sealed between hard stock layers of a greeting card, which he then sealed in an envelope and dropped off for pick up by Fed Ex.

A normal could never have even read the reports Hunter made. Another psionic could, if he could break the code. Eric could. He routinely intercepted Hunter’s status reports. He watched unobtrusively as Keith, and then simply stretched his mind once Hunter left, and scanned the buried messages without physically approaching the drop box, or handling the material. Keith walked down the hall of the main office in Hunter’s wake and discovered that Hunter knew about Athena’s power, and was about to investigate Keith. He managed not to react, just kept walking out of the building and on to his car.

He got in and drove off on autopilot. His head was churning. Hunter was a real threat to him. The reason he had learned how to take over other people’s bodies. An anonymous body was a perfect hiding place, but if Hunter investigated his host, it would not take him long to figure out who currently owned it. Its real owner had been kicked out into his old body and killed by Hunter. Just because Hunter currently thought of him as dead did not mean he would not believe he had dodged the bullet. It was time to switch to Plan B. He did not know exactly what that plan was yet, but it started with scrapping his investment in Keith.

If he had to abandon the identity of Keith, he lost his carefully built interface with Athena and her twin. That was the agonizing part. The feud that existed between Jack and Eric made his interest in her lethal. He would end up dong the same thing over and over, striving to get close to her and then getting spotted by Hunter, who would just try to kill him again. He had toyed with the idea of taking Ares’ place, it was the perfect solution, but Hunter would see that too. It frustrated him so much he could hardly think. There had to be some body he could use to remain close to her that Hunter would not guess at. He simply had to spot the obvious, which of course eluded him at the moment.

What he did know was, if he jumped before Hunter exposed him, he would probably be safe in that next body, as long as Hunter could not figure out later which way he had jumped. He needed to either convince his brother that he had been flushed out and contrive some way to provoke his intent to kill him in a way that would convince him he was really dead, without accomplishing it in fact. It would be much more practical to figure out a way to neutralize Hunter instead. he had been working on that for a while. No one was a match for him toe to toe, but enough of these young psionics might be able to take him out. It was a direction he had been working toward for some time, with the Wild-Psi’d but he was not sure if they were ready. They would need allies. Like Athena’s friends, and quite possible her family.

A long shot, he granted. He set these thoughts on the back burner and returned to the line of thought he had been following before spotting Hunter making a drop. He had a date with the twins that night. It might be his last time to spend with them for a while, depending on how his plans evolved. He would focus on that, enjoy it to the hilt, and pray for inspiration. Aside from that, he had a little time before he really had to start worrying. He headed to his host’s home, and got ready to go out.

Cougar had called another meeting. Once again, their mentor and overlord begged off, claiming other responsibilities. naturally that became the first topic of discussion. The Wild-Psi’d were concerned that Eric’s judgment was unsound in regard to his twin obsession. In spite of that fact that he had been warned, he had only gotten closer to them. He was simply begging Hunter to catch him, and they all knew how much he feared Hunter. They just hoped that meant he had some respect for him, and would not get wiped out.

With the topic shifting to Hunter, they got down to the real business. From their surveillance, they had concluded that most of Athena’s friends were high potentials, and most likely as active as she. They were too damn careful for normal people, confounding surveillance effortlessly, with the exception of the one who could not seem to settle on whether she was a boy or a girl. Their actions at the amusement park had at least proved that they knew about psi, which was the most important thing they needed to know. They concluded that it was time to approach their targets and warn them about Hunter.

They picked Erin, as their first contact in the group, on the grounds that a private investigator had been asking questions about Aaron, and informing her served as an introduction. He had visited the Wild Side Private Entertainment Company and interviewed half of the organizational staff and the party security staff trying to track down the missing boy. They had given him a false lead, stating that the boy had ditched the party, and returned the next morning for his car. They lied and said he had made some comment about going out of town, and the car parked at the airport was waiting to lead him off on a wild goose chase.

Erin was a classic case. Most of their group had been runaways, fleeing from parents who did not understand them or their powers. She had been luckier than them, in that she had fallen in with a group that could create an identity to keep her on the inside. It had come as a shock to discover after a week of trying to identify her, and the one with her at the party, that the girls had suddenly had acquired legal identities. The group voted unanimously to approach her that night, if possible. They could then confront her with their own power and give her their warning

Artemis asked Athena if Alt could take her place on the date, she had things to discuss with Ares in private. She agreed, confessing that she had hoped Artemis would resolve that matter. She took herself by the hand and Athena and Alt bathed and dressed together. They were ready for Keith when he arrived to pick them up. Athena had resolved to avoid making guys wait for her to get ready, and made up for it by keeping him waiting on purpose just long enough for her rapid emergence to ensure that he appreciated it. On the way out, she picked up her key to the town house. Part of her duties that night lay in keeping Keith fully entertained and assured of his place in her life.

Athena and Alt went out to the city with Keith, to a nightclub concert. Afterwards, she would take him back to the townhouse. Officially, they were staying over night so that they could spend the following day in the city, but Keith understood that it was primarily to give them a safe, private place to have sex. As always, he was a perfect gentleman and charming date throughout the evening, enjoying the sexual tension by pretending that the outcome was entirely uncertain, and dependant on his successful, subtle, seduction. Athena confided to herself, through Alt, that she really was falling in love with him, she just had to get used to his bridled intensity.

Ares and Artemis had slipped out for a private date at Xanadu, asking to be left alone for the night. That left the girls looking for somewhere else to go for entertainment. Erin and Naomi went out with Chris and Jean, also to the city, to visit the dance club the other girls had been talking about all week, expecting to use a couple of extra bedrooms in the townhouse for the night. The three girls argued with Jean, begging her to just be one of the girls for the night, and spare them all from having to cover for her slips. Erin’s decision to remain female all the time, in spite of the fact she proved right away—to Naomi—that she had been awakened and could shift back, protected her from giving herself away in the same fashion as Jean could, but in her case there were people actively looking for her.

As sometimes happened, an exciting night suddenly seemed uneventful in contrast to the strange encounter that took place on the dance floor in the middle of the evening. Erin was approached during the night and warned by Cougar and Lynx about Jack Hunter. Cougar caught her on the dance floor, taking her hand and dancing her while speaking to mind to mind. He urged her not to react but just to listen. He told her that she and her friends were in great danger, and where to go for help. Lynx confronted her in the bathroom to repeat the warning and assure her that it was real and deadly serious.

Erin called her friends aside and told them what had happened. They all agreed that something was up, and cut their evening short to discuss it in safety back at the town house. They would have gone home, but they wanted to tell Athena as soon as possible. They made a quick call home and then waited for Athena, Alt and Keith to arrive. She had talked to Artemis for a few minutes, Lauren and Morgan had invited themselves over to Xanadu, forcing her to bug out or reveal Alt’s secret. So she was sleeping alone that night while Ares entertained them. If he was not too distracted by her revelation.

Keith had been very sweet all night, and naughty. He seemed to know her body so well, he could reach out and push Athena and Alt’s buttons without the casual observer realizing he had touched them at all. The dark and noise of the concert gave him every excuse to touch them, to get their attention, or lean close to speak through the noise. Fully dressed, and in public, he was making love to them the entire evening, arousing, teasing and toying with her. The struggle to keep her passion locked beneath a calm surface substituted for the passionate embrace so central to the act of sex. Alt asked her, how could a girl not fall for a man who could do that to her simply by escorting her through the world at large?

He had them both so worked up by the end of the concert, they had turned to each other on the drive to the apartment—taunting him in return by going at it shamelessly in the back seat, while he could only listen and glimpse them occasionally in the mirror. To further taunt him, they did not even bother to dress for the short walk up from the garage to the penthouse. Erin passed the warning on to Athena when they arrived inside, who could hardly believe it. Naomi also told Alt she had to become scarce before morning, since Artemis needed to be able to be seen in public tomorrow to investigate the strange story.

Considering the fact that they had Keith among them, the other girls told her to stick to her plans with him, keep him distracted, and let them worry about the problem for the moment. Athena promised she would keep her eye out for Hunter, and be careful when she went out the next day, and went back into deal with Keith. Unfortunately, Athena was a different predator’s target. Keith had been brooding all night, and his inspiration had finally come. Hunter knew about his obsession with her. He would never guess that he would dare to take over her body. Yet it was the ideal solution.

He had discovered that twins were identical to the roots of their very being, like one person in two bodies. The closest he could possible get to the one he loved so desperately was to become her twin. Knowing Hunter had been as much in love with Athena as he, he knew that she was probably the one person his brother would hesitate to slay to kill him. If he acted quickly, he would never even suspect it had happened. He thought about it all night, reminding himself that he had to get one of her alone to do it, and that he would need time to study her before he could convince anyone he was she.

He thought he loved her, and he acted as if his emotion was love. The fact that he could contemplate stealing her life, and even ditching her mind to make the body his own, did not strike him as evil or selfish. After all there were two of her, surely she could spare one for the one who loved her do dearly. Athena, ignorant of this darkness within him, was falling in love, opening herself to the one who would destroy her. After several hours of the most intense sex she had experienced, she slept soundly in his arms, confident in her safety.

Athena rose before Keith, and pulled herself together, tucking Alt away within her. She checked on the others and then slipped in the shower. She was happy. She had worried that her feelings for Ares and Artemis had spoiled her for any other. Keith rose shortly after and joined her in the shower, asking where her twin had gone. Athena told him she had to go home but that she was still free for the day. As his hands began to explore her body, she smiled at him and whispered encouragingly. None of the other girls were awake yet, she told him; they could have some fun before breakfast.

He smiled in delight. It was the perfect opportunity, and it had come so soon. He caught her face and stared deeply into her eyes. Athena gazed up at him, expecting a kiss when she realized she was being attacked by Keith. She was completely off guard, opening herself, willing him to enter her—if in a different way than he intended—and he was a powerful and unsuspected psi. She had been given no warning. The world swam in her vision and then all went black.

Eric gasped as her body unfolded in his mind. Her senses were now his, and there was a heavy limp form pressing against her. She pushed it off, and then reached out quickly to grab Keith’s vacant body before it crashed to the tile and woke people up. She turned the shower off—Athena had been finishing when he entered—and gathered her old host body in her thoughts. Without wasting time, she teleported the water away from them, and hauled the body telekinetically over to the bed.

There was no Keith, had not been for a long time, but there was a mind, the strange trap of biology which seized consciousness would capture raw awareness as long as the brain was intact. There was not much in him to build on, sort of like the world’s worst case of amnesia or autism, but he would live. The very emptiness of his mind would convince any psionic that a psionic had been responsible and he had already set up a psionic to take the blame. A psionic who was a known abductor.

She slipped into the clothes Athena had laid out to wear and checked the town house for signs of waking. No one had stirred. There was a lot still up in the air, but all the options were open. Athena could always reappear and claim to have fled from Hunter, or some other agent, when he had fully digested her. The body of Keith made up for the absence of any sign of struggle, while convincing any who investigated that Athena had been forced to flee on her own, or had never had a chance to defend herself from abduction. In full possession of her new body, she simply walked out of the apartment without a hint of trouble.