Avatars-20

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Ares dozed lightly in the arms of Lauren and Morgan. None of them had really slept; they had been at it all night, talking between bouts of intense physical activity. Most of it had been the girls discussing the kind of relationship they could build with him without openly challenging the marriage of Ares and Athena. Arguing with him to consent to their desire for children by him, a license for which their parents had given them as soon as they were old enough to breed. He argued that a child needed more than the best genes, and he would not be able to be their father.

Ares had to wonder what he had really meant, as he hovered near sleep. He loved them and did not want to deny them, but he was lying to them. Part of the lie was the fact that he was really the childhood girl friend with whom they had schemed to win the best man. There had been a moment when he had wished this were a Heinleinian world, where group marriages were accepted and embraced. A moment, but then he had been honest with himself. He also wished he could tell them the truth. At the same time, the truth only complicated things. It was not that he was not the person they thought he was, but he had not gotten there by the route they assumed.

But that was just distracting himself from Artemis’s confession. As a boy who had once been Athena, he was having great difficulty dealing with the truth about her childhood. The memories had come to him though another mating of the minds, a strange one considering that this mate was his other self. The truth about her self had shattered the two assumptions on which her current idea of herself rested. As a child, she had made the decision to be female, and embraced it so deeply that *being* female had been the only thing that saved her from losing her mind. As a person with two expressions of herself, she had embraced masculinity in the assurance that she was still female—that she was not denying herself her true expression.

Now she was not so sure. Artemis had proved, past and present, that she was her, but a separate and complete expression of her—a reiteration of her individual self. On mating, their minds had finally recognized each other as fully autonomous, fully developed people—as the same person living two entirely different, but associated lives. She was not the male side of herself. She was the entirety of herself restricted to just being male. In another life, she was doing the exact opposite. She was like a timer traveler looped on herself.

The path she was on was the path leading away from her self. She could see that, now that she had confronted herself. She was forced to ask herself what she needed to do, to be healthy, whole and sane. She was not sure at that moment if she was going to be able to be anyone’s father in more than an act. There was an obvious decision for her, but it was complicated by another truth. Athena. Her soul mate, her completion, Athena was a different person. She had come from an entirely different place, met her half way and then become her—by embracing her to become her equal. What was true for Ares and Artemis was true for her.

Athena was meant to be what she had become, and Ares—as Ares or Artemis, since they were the same person walking two different paths—was her soul mate. Born a boy, and raised as a male, she would tell herself it was her responsibility to assume that male role if Ares balked at it. Because Ares did balk at it. But the thing about a soul mate was not that she had to be the opposite, a perfect compliment, but that she had the potential to make her soul mate whole, and be made whole in turn. That was what they had done.

Ares had seen that. Finding the missing piece of her life had given her no choice. If she remained Ares, she would be an exile from herself. If Athena became Ares, the same would be true for her. They had to be true to who they were. What they might happen to be was nothing more than how they chose to express that. They could never lock themselves into a specialized role, for purely social reasons, and be happy. What they had become did not fit into the world they lived in. They had to understand that, and take steps to keep from stifling themselves and each other to meet the expectations of others.

Artemis showed up to collect Ares and give the two girls a lift home. While they were waking up, with a few laps in the pool, she told them about the warning Erin had received. They dried off and dressed, and on the way to their own homes, Artemis suggested that the two watch each other’s backs. There was no saying if the warning was legitimate, but an outside group of psionics had taken an interest in them. They had to have observed the group before introducing themselves. Jean had been the only one who they knew had revealed her powers in public, but they had approached Erin, which meant they were certain about her.

If they could be certain of Erin, they had to have been watching her before she even knew about psi to catch her in a slip, and even then they would have to have been very sharp. Lauren and Morgan agreed to stick together, even as far as getting out at the same house and going in together just to catch up on their sleep. Artemis promised to keep them informed and focused her attention on Ares. She told him that she needed to figure out some way to check on Hunter. He had been her mentor, did she dare confront him directly, or was there some other way to verify his past?

Ares could hardly think. Instead of responding, he told Artemis that he could not be Ares any more. He explained about the one person walking two paths, and confessed that there was only one path he wanted to be walking, and she was on it. She was silent for a moment, then told him she had been waiting for that to happen. There were no more secrets between them. No more division. Just a question and that question had been answered. Just because there were two sexes, and she could be two people, did not mean she had to divide herself up along those lines.

She told him that once they merged, there would be no going back. This time, they were deciding to walk the same path, and merging would absolve them of all differences. The ability would still be there, but the fault that facilitated it was gone. Another one might never form. Ares understood, and asked anyway. Artemis pulled over to the side of the road and took him in. It seemed strange that she should cry, but then again, it was the first time in years that she had truly been alone. She could not divide. There was no other within her to take the option, though she could still form the second attention as easily as ever.

She got a hold of herself and drove home. She was in no condition to face Hunter, or make suspicious accusations. She needed to explain to her family that there would be no fiancée, there would be no wedding, and think hard about how to explain this to Athena—how to keep her from making the mistake she had almost made. As she walked in the door, she was greeted by worried and anxious faces. Cold fingers raked up her spine. The way they looked at her told her more than she wanted to hear.

Keith had been found in the town house with a mind as naked as his body. Athena had disappeared. Not one of them suspected that she had destroyed her friend’s mind and run away. All they knew was that they had received a warning and suddenly it was too late. They were all headed out to the city; they were just waiting for her to get back with Ares. It was a bad time to tell them that there no longer was an Ares, and she struggled to tell it in a way that did not cause them to suspect foul play. Victor was stricken. Just as his daughter went missing, he realized that he had lost his son forever. Victoria caught him and told the others to just go. She would stay with him and together they would hold down the fort.

Artemis had spoken to Erin and Naomi on the phone the night before. The warning they had described receiving was still fresh in her mind, as well as the alarm it had caused. Erin, Chris and Jean, struggling with awakened minds and switched sexes, had been startled to learn that they had drawn the attention of a gang of psionic kids and some kind of psionic underground that they had broken away from. She kept thinking the scene over and over in her mind.

She had wanted to run straight out there, to be with Athena, but Alt had been there and it had seemed too complicated. She could not just show up when she was already there, and was afraid to risk teleporting in, for fear of being seen by Keith. Again, because of Keith, but by no fault of his own, they could not teleport over now. An ambulance had been called to pick him up and the EMT’s were taking their time getting him out. They could have waited, but they got in the car and started driving just to have something to do.

They debated about whether they kept Athena’s disappearance a secret, or whether they should report her missing when they could. The girls who had found Keith had told the EMT’s that Keith had spent the night, with plans to go out with Athena. They said that Athena had slipped out while everyone was sleeping and had not come back yet. The EMT’s had wanted to know if Keith had taken any drugs, and her absence had to have stuck in their minds. The best thing seemed to be to say nothing, since there was little police could do if she had been abducted by a psionic, and only a powerful psionic could have managed it without Athena waking the entire neighborhood.

They had agreed to keep Athena’s disappearance to themselves, by the time they arrived in San Francisco. The older, and more experienced psionics combed the entire town house, searching for clues to what happened to her. The younger psionics hit the halls and streets asking neighbors if they had seen Artemis’s twin at any point that morning. Most of them assured that if they had seen a girl like her they would not only remember it, they would have pointed her out to others, and thought about it afterward. So the short answer was no.

Artemis, her sisters and her friends started searching further out for Athena, venturing deeper into San Francisco, using the town house as a base of operations. The few hits they did get, they were suspicious of, as the witness asserted that the girl they had seen had walked alone. That was not impossible, it only meant that the abductor was a telepath powerful enough to abduct people without coming anywhere near them. A telepath powerful enough to abduct Athena like that boggled the mind, and they found themselves disbelieving it simply because they hated to think about confronting that kind of power.

Erin had brought up contacting the people from the party much earlier, but as the day wore on, the rest of the group started to think it might be necessary. Turning to an unknown was not easy, but in the face of the unknown, it might be the best step they could take. Before deciding, they returned to base and conferred with Vincent and Virginia. It was now safe to assume that Athena had not somehow fled from the attack and found some place to hide. If she had been able, she would have attempted to contact them, rather than resist every attempt by them to contact her. If there was a group of rogue psionics who were keeping tabs on them, they just might have a real lead for them to follow.

Before they could go to the place that Erin had been instructed to ask for them at, a group of them showed up at the town house. Word of Athena disappearance and her friend’s search had reached the Wild-Psi’d by that late in the day. It finally caused them to approach them. They revealed themselves, with dire stories of the abduction of psionic kids. Their stories, for the most part, but also stories of kids who had not lived to tell their own. Artemis discovered that her parents had known her gymnastics trainer was an agent of the psionic underground, a very dangerous psionic. He was the embodiment of evil as far as the Wild-Psi'ders were concerned

Her parents had resisted believing that the man they had entrusted their daughter to—who they had actually given a license to have sex with her to keep her alive, who had refused to carry out a contract against her that they might have endorsed, and which many psionics would have carried out, because he had bothered to understand her problem and realize it could be solved without bloodshed—was a menace or a monster. The stories about him those kids told shook that belief.