Avatars-21

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Athena woke up in a different world. At first she thought she might have been drugged, and the shifting landscape was due to the disruption of her normal perceptions. Then she realized that it was not her, but the world itself that was a bit unstable. She wandered through the strange landscape for several hours, before passing through a door into a strange reflection of the real world. From the moment she noticed other people, the world around her had become stable. She wandered the streets watching the people, drinking in the awesome detail, and confirmed with all her senses that it was a real, true and subtly alien universe.

As the day dwindled toward evening, she looked for a place to sit down and think. What was she doing in another universe, and how had she gotten there? She struggled to remember the events leading up to her first suspicion of displacement. There had been that timeless disorientation, some sort of dreamscape, and before that only darkness—oblivion. What could she remember before that? It was difficult to remember the recent past, so she tried to reach further back. That proved equally frustrating, since there seemed to be two, and in places three, different pasts which she recognized as her own.

She studied the paths leading back, and saw that two were knit closely together along their entire lengths, and merged into one past if she followed them back far enough. The other path converged on those two from some remote origin. On one hand, she had been born and raised a boy, and on the other hand she had been born and raised a girl, but in both cases she had broken form, reached some middle ground, become who she really was. As she sat there thinking about it, it all came back to her.

She had been attacked by the last person she would have suspected. He had torn her mind right out of her body and swallowed it, and she had been too shocked to do anything about it. He had banished her to the depths of his subconscious, and she had struggled to escape. He had been guarding the way she had come, so she had gone the other direction. Deeper. She had emerged in a world within his mind. Her father had told her stories about such things. She had never believed him, how could people have entire worlds—universes—inside them?

She believed him now. It terrified her. It raised the question of what had happened to her body. Had she lost it forever, along with the world she had been born to? Had she banished herself beyond the pale? It was then that she realized that she was not with her other. She studied the facts, and realized that what she had done was possible only because she had possessed a free mind, a free will and attention. Her other was his prisoner—a prisoner in her own body. He had not even realized she had possessed a second attention, and she had avoided confronting his consciousness. She had escaped from him by hiding in his own unconscious mind.

Alt had been stunned for the first part of the day. She had been helpless as her own body made its way through the city, using public transportation to reach a neighborhood she was utterly unfamiliar with. She experienced everything, but could affect nothing. Even thought had been beyond her command. In many ways, what had happened to her was not different from when she stowed away in Athena’s mind. Except this was not Athena’s mind, her birth mind. She had been trapped among his thoughts, his fears, his hopes, his memories, a captive audience.

After several hours of total immersion in him, she regained the ability to think, but already knew all the answers to any question she might ask of him. She need not wonder how Keith had become so powerful a psionic and kept it hidden. He was not Keith at all. He was Jack Hunter’s brother. The two had a couple other things in common. They both possessed dragon potential and both had been inducted into and trained as assassins for the psionic underground. They both had tremendous psionic potential, but only Eric had been scarred by his experiences with young Athena.

Eric was unstable, driven by dark urges, and forbidden passions. His motives for pursuing and abducting her were complex and convoluted. He knew that, while his brother killed for the organization he belonged to, he primarily located and “recruited” psionics for the underground. Stealing the girl of his dreams from under his brother’s nose and destroying her, if he could not keep her for himself, was simply a way of striking at the brother who he felt rejected him. It would also be a way to punish her for abandoning him for Jack all those years ago.

It left her afraid to think. She had never been this vulnerable, and only the experience passed on to her from Artemis—the original Athena’s other—gave her any hope of saving herself. The ability to keep secrets from her other served just as well when the other in question was an altogether alien mind engulfing hers. Their minds were otherwise naked to each other, and it would take only a curious thought to trip off full mental intercourse, which would mate them as surely as Athena had been mated to Ares and Artemis. That might be a good thing, since he could hardly dispose of her mind if he welded his own to it.

Then again, he had done just that at least once before to the young boy who had been Keith. When his brother had begun to hunt him, he had sought refuge in the mind of a little boy. When it became clear that Hunter would never quit until he was dead, he had shoved that boy’s mind into his own body to take the fall. Keith-Eric had been a redundancy to him, an unnecessary copy he had not hesitated to sacrifice for his own purposes. Since he had been motivated by fear and desperation to survive, Eric-Keith had not even flinched to do it.

If she provoked him, there was every reason to believe he would do it again. It was almost unavoidable. A forced mating of her mind with his was already at the top of his list, all she could do was hold out for as long as she could and pray for either inspiration or opportunity. If she could just squeeze past him, she could jump out of his shadow and manifest herself. It would put her at physical risk, but her mind and soul would be safe. It was fortunate that she had responded to Keith more so than Athena, being herself unattached.

Athena would never have considered jumping out of her own body to escape his grasp. If Athena had turned her head up to receive his kiss, he would have seized her mind, and she would not have even considered the option Alt was silently thinking of. She had no idea precisely where Athena had gotten off to, but she was safe wherever she now was. At least her mind was safe, no telling what sort of nightmare she was enduring in the darkest depths of her assailant’s mind. She was certainly not in a position to fall into Eric’s grasp the instant Alt slipped free of it.

If Alt jumped free, Eric would have sole possession of Athena’s body. It seemed like a terrible thing to do to Athena, but Athena would hardly forgive her for selling their soul to a man who would use it like toilet paper. Alt told herself not to beat herself up. There was no time; she would be lucky to get one chance to prevent that. She was going to pay a steep price just for that much. She was learning him; digesting him from the moment he engulfed her. Taking him into her was half of the mating process, if he caught her and took her, she would have no secrets. She could only prevent that by doing what she was doing.

She was tainting herself, poisoning herself, adopting his traits and characteristics to camouflage her own, to hide from him in plain sight. To enable her to slip her mind free of his grasp and squirt her self back out into the world. The more of him she absorbed, the more she loved him, while knowing that she would certainly be destroyed by him if she was foolish enough to offer him that love. By the end of the day, she had completed her task. Now all she could do was wait for the opportunity to apply what she had learned. She still allowed him to feel her, a stunned and helpless mind, as a shell concealing the manner in which she had changed.

Eric had taken a long time to reach her lair. She had traveled all over the Bay Area to confuse any attempt Athena’s friends and family could mount to track her. It was a wonderful body, young and strong, but she was tired after the long day. She needed to crack open the mind within her and digest it, if her plan was going to work, but she longed for sleep. It would have to wait for the morning. Athena had a mind as strong as her body, and she would fight, so Eric would need the rest. If Athena tried to throw Eric off while she was asleep, she would sense it and wake up to deal with it, but she had not come out of her shock all day.

Alt waited until Eric was asleep, and then poked a tiny hole in her shell and reached out. Her own thoughts blended perfectly with his, and pushed with the irresistible strength and patience of root tendrils. It took time, perhaps most of the night, but she gradually infiltrated the weave of his mind, opening a channel through which she could rapidly emerge. He would feel it when she did, but he would not be able to snare her as she bolted through. As she gazed out through the tunnel she had made, she spared one last thought for Athena, praying that she would be safe.

Athena had spent the day thinking. She did not have access to the things Alt had learned, but there was a lot of experience in the two lives that were her foundation, guided by men who wanted to arm her against any possibility. She had deduced that Alt was in greater danger than she was. Alt had no defense against a forced marriage, but as a married mind, Athena could stand off such an assault forever. A trick which the original Athena could do with her other had been a cold swap, for those times when both were expressed, but one needed to address something the other knew nothing about.

Athena had established that she retained all her skills and abilities in this strange new world. She ought to be able to trade places with Alt and thus save her from a rape to horrible to contemplate. She took a step back to consider the situation she was going to be thrusting her other self into. It was roughly the same world she had known before, but there were differences. All of the major landmarks were the same, but a few familiar ones had been missing. She had not had time to check everything, but she knew that her family—or families—did not exist in this universe.

There might not be any active psionics in the world, for all she knew. She had made every call she could think of and found no one who had ties to the Avatar Families, but one of two normal friends had actually answered, and claimed not to know her. She had expected to end up on the street when it got dark, but a gallant gentleman had come to her rescue. He had accepted her story of having been mugged and losing all of her money and identification. He had been very attracted to her, but did not put any pressure on her to have sex. He had simply wanted her to do some modeling in exchange for food and a place to sleep, and a little bit of money.

She was in his bed, and he was sleeping on a couch in the next room. Given the fact that she was not going to be able to replace her “lost” identification, dropping Alt into the situation with no memory of how she got into it would perhaps convince her good Samaritan that she had been thumped harder than she had said, and was suffering from amnesia. Alt was smart enough to play that angle. If worse came to worse, and she ended up trapped in that world, at least she had some natural advantages. It was better than the alternative.

Alt gathered her nerve and pushed through. At the same time Athena committed herself to doing what she had planned. Alt cleared the hurdle of Eric’s mind without even bumping the rail. She was out, in the clear in her own body as Eric twitched and woke up. Athena took a deep breath and reached in through herself. Alt was getting ready to defend herself from Eric’s instant, all out assault, when she felt a strange tug and the world spun around her. Athena opened her eyes, surprised to find herself in her birth world, in full command of her faculties, and then she was slammed against the wall behind her. She impacted so hard she blacked out.