Avatars-22

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In the split second of alarm, as she lurched awake and acted, Eric assumed that Athena’s twin, Artemis, had teleported in by instinct. It was not quite a blind teleport, when the nature of a twin’s bond was considered, but damn close. She gave the intruder no chance to orient herself. She had sufficient power, especially when it was controlled by her instincts or desires, to overpower her, and of course she had the means to leash her power—once imposed on Eric by his brother. Jack had believed that the leash could not be slipped, but Eric had been motivated. Once Jack had realized he could not chain Eric, he had tried to kill him.

Just another detail leading to the present situation, but one Eric had learned from. The underground had developed new technology based on the understanding of psi, and designed to possess, modify, enhance, or inhibit psi potential. Once she placed the collar around Athena’s neck, and closed it, it activated and arrested the girl’s psi. Eric slipped the collar off over her head and stashed it outside the cell she had slept in. Eric had anticipated the possibility of an uninvited guest, and been prepared.

The room she had left Athena in was a steel reinforced concrete cell, with no doors or windows, and all the fixtures—electric, plumbing and ventilation—sealed off by plates and paneling anchored by inaccessible screws and bolts that could only be turned telekinetically. With her powers leashed, it was an inescapable prison which Eric could teleport into and out of freely without any fear of Athena trying to escape. Now that she was secured, Eric could pop back in to examine her at leisure. Since she was awake, her first concern was digesting her sister’s mind.

Eric could not believe it. She was not there. Her mind had vanished. The body she was in was now hers and hers alone, and the mind containing the memories she needed to portray her host had escaped her grasp. Her plan seemed to be unraveling, but she caught herself and forced herself to think. All was not lost. The other one had come to her. She could not have told anyone what she was doing or else a whole crowd would have come in with her. She had probably been experimenting to see if it was possible to jump to her sister’s side.

Eric let out her breath. The situation had become more complicated, but the basic plan might still work. Artemis, she still assumed it was Artemis, had not had a chance to see anything when she emerged. Eric wished she knew what had happened to Athena’s mind. It was conceivable that she had died of shock, simply blew right out like a candle in a high wind. A strong mind could prove the most fragile under certain pressures. She would have to keep that in mind with Artemis.

Eric went back into the cell, and saw that the girl was still unconscious. Eric would have to break her mind from without, and the body of Athena would hardly do for that sort of thing. Since it was now mindless, Eric could set it aside for later. It was time to call up a resource he had never expected to need again. His original body had died, but Eric had translated it to and from thought enough times to have memorized it. It was easy to jump out of a host into his own flesh, hardly any different from simply teleporting from one place to another. Athena’s body crumpled to the floor, but lay there awake and empty, as innocent as a baby.

Eric picked the body up and moved it to the bed. Artemis would awake and find her twin in the same condition Keith had been in and her own mind crippled. Eric, who looked so much like his older brother, could go in and start working her over. It would take more time this way, but the bright side of it was that he would not have to dispose of her afterwards. She would be easy to manipulate into believing she was Athena, shattered by the horrible experience, and Eric could take over the role of Artemis. Their friends and family would be so glad to have them back alive they would not question that assumption.

He was waiting for her to wake up. When he did, he welcomed her to the party, calling her Artemis and tipping her off. She tried to fight, but quickly figured out she was powerless. She considered attempting to harness chi, but he was guarding her too closely with his mind. She had to be able to move to direct and apply chi-enhanced techniques, but he held her body in his mind and clamped down on her if she even twitched the wrong way. The most she could do with chi was soak it in and wait for the chance to focus it, wield it. She made a show of defeat and asked for an explanation.

Athena believed for a moment that it really was Hunter, and he too went along with it. He explained “Athena’s” condition, saying that her mind had been destroyed resisting him and he advised her not to let it happen to her. He made her responsible for the empty vessel, saying it would be a shame to have to dispose of her twin. Knowing that Alt’s mind was safe and wholly intact, she had her own reasons for keeping that body alive for her. She challenged him, however, stating that she could not guess his intentions, but she would fight. He promised to enjoy it, there were, after all, so many ways to break a person.

It had been almost impossible to sleep through the night. Artemis finally gave up and went out into the main room where Vincent and Virginia were still talking with the leader of the Wild-Psi’d, Cougar. Artemis and her parents had been shocked when their new allies in the Wild Psi’d identified Hunter as one of the people who had abducted and then inducted them into the underground. Artemis’s experience partly confirmed that, Hunter had often lectured her about such dangers when he was her mentor. Artemis had helped confirm the facts, but remembered what Hunter had been trying to do with her somewhat fondly.

Her parents quickly shared what they had learned about the Wild-Psi’d. They had escaped from induction into the psionic underground, following a warning from an outsider, Keith, she was surprised to learn. They called him Dragon, and struggled to explain the story of Eric, Jack Hunter’s brother, who had left an impression of himself in Keith before Hunter killed him, and Keith had acted in Eric’s name to protect other kids from the dangerous man. He had helped create the Wild-Psi'd and suggested the practice of scouting potentials and trying to beat underground agents to them when they went active.

They explained that Keith had fallen in love with Athena and had constantly argued for the group to take her in, but they had never been able to prove that she was an active until recently. They feared that Keith had gotten himself wiped out trying to stop Hunter from moving on Athena; he had left a message for the group saying that Hunter had finally confirmed that he knew she was active. They mourned his loss, and a couple of them haunted the hospital where he had been taken, protecting him and waiting to see if he would recover. Artemis listened to this and still found it hard to swallow.

Artemis did not know what to do. According to her new allies, Hunter was as ruthless without the excuse of being psychotic. The kids really did fear and hate Hunter, but there were flaws in their arguments. Hunter had not just recently found out about her ability. He had been one of the people who had trained her. He was her mentor, for crying out loud. As Athena, she had been under the wing of Hunter—the man who had been contracted to kill her as a child, according to her parents—for a lot longer than she had indicated when she first met the original Artemis.

A lot longer than she had even admitted to her self until recently. A consequence of keeping secrets from herself. Only recently had she confronted those secrets. The reason Hunter had approached her as a young girl, in the guise of a gymnastics trainer. The first time she had encountered him, he had obviously had power of his own and had tried to encourage her to reveal her own. She had identified him to her parents, and they had interviewed him and approved him as a mentor for their daughter. He was a major influence in her life.

The fact that he was her secret mentor in the most intimate sort of gymnastics—thanks to an ability to pick and assume any age he wished—as well as psi, only added to her uncertainty. Of course she had always been uncertain about that. Her parents had given that a lot of thought before arranging it and proposing it to her. How could they know they had proposed it to Athena as her other, or that she had kept it secret from her self? In her mind, Athena, as Artemis, was still her first, but in Artemis’s memory, as Athena, she had given herself away as a child. Once again her mind had wandered back to her love, she forced herself back to the point.

Artemis could not answer these new doubts. The stories her new friends told her about Hunter just did not sound like him, but they did remind Artemis painfully of his brother. She had not thought about him in almost seven years. Mention of Eric had opened the door to a whole new bag of worms. Now she finally knew where Keith had learned to touch her so perfectly. Eric had only been about fourteen when he was sucked into her thrall, but he had already possessed a disturbing and dangerous mind.

Many of the boys and young men she had been with had felt shame, but only after the fact, they had not been able to control themselves. Eric had been able to resist her; he had kept his wits about himself, screaming to himself how wrong it was, and yet choosing to do it. He would seek her out to do it. He had actually kidnapped her, after she had turned to his older brother. He had hated her as much as he had loved her, and he had always wanted to own her. When Hunter had come to her and promised her that he would never be a threat to her again, she had gratefully forgotten him. She could not write off Hunter so easily. She wanted to see him in person. She had to ask him if these stories were true.

Artemis called her parents aside. She pointed out that they were all in a fix. She had school tomorrow, and saw two immediate problems. One was the consequence of Athena’s disappearance, people were going to ask her why she was not at school, and she did not know what to tell them. They could say she was sick, but they had no idea how long that story would have to last, and Athena’s dead body could turn up at any time to catch them in a horrible lie. Family was always at the top of any list of suspects, so they dared do nothing suspicious. Until they knew what had happened to her, hiding what they did know would only damn them.

The other thing was of course Hunter. She was in his class, she could hardly avoid him, and considering how important gymnastics was to her, and Athena, they would be expected to make heroic attempts to be there as opposed to actively avoiding it. Listening to accusations about Hunter was only going to get them into trouble. Such accusations had to be confirmed, and there was only one person who could confirm or deny Hunter’s actions. Hunter himself. She was not asking them to agree, she was simply telling them what she was going to do. She was asking them not to interfere.

Artemis promised to be on guard, but asserted that she was going alone. If she did not return, everyone would have their answer and she would at least be in the same boat with Athena. The truth was, she would rather be someone’s prisoner with Athena than be perfectly safe without her. As long as Athena was in unknown danger, Artemis herself was no good to anyone trying to help her. She was just a hair shy of absolute panic already. She was ready to tear down the mountains looking for her soul mate. Masquerade be damned. Her parents loaned her the car and let her go.

Artemis knew where to find Hunter on a Sunday. She did not hesitate to confront him and demand he tell her where Artemis was. She had to explain that Athena had vanished. She had learned about Hunter and his past, and out of respect for his past with her, she came directly to him to find out if he had abducted her, like he had so many others. Hunter denied it, but could not convince her. He *had* fooled Athena and her parents, keeping his ties to the underground a secret. Hunter had reportedly abducted, beaten, abused, raped and murdered kids like Athena for the mysterious psionic underground.

Artemis realized that there was no way he could convince her of his innocence, only of his guilt. They argued for a couple of hours, but Hunter did not do anything more aggressive. He refused to take her to his superiors for confirmation of their innocence in the matter as well. He reminded her that she had been warned that there were those who knew about psi, or who possessed psi who were ruthless and deadly. There were reasons why his organization operated the way it did, and if she did not belong to it, she would never be allowed to confront them on a matter of policy.

That only pissed her off. In spite of what she had said to her own parents, she announced that she was quitting. She told him that, under the circumstances, she could not trust him. She was dropping his class, and would not associate with him until her twin was found and his innocence in the matter established. He told her that would be a mistake, he was willing to help her, and pointed out that she would be placing him in a situation where he would be forced to move against her. Because as soon as she forfeited his protection, others would start to move against her. She agonized over the decision, but ultimately she cut him off.