Avatars-23

comments

pages ∙ words

Athena studied the man before her, wondering what in the hell was going on. He was pretending to be Hunter, but she was certain now that he was not. His deception was as necessary for him, for whatever scheme he was pursuing, as her own deception was critical to her. Who ever he was, it made sense to stall him for as long as possible. She asked him about Keith. He pounced on her inquiry, asking her why she was asking. Since he believed that she was Artemis, she lied and said that the last impression she had received from Athena had been of the two of them in the shower. The real Artemis probably knew where he was, but might well need an explanation of what had happened to him and why.

He knew what condition Keith was in expected that she had seen it. He assumed she was asking about Keith to learn about Athena’s condition. He explained that Keith’s mind had crumbled under his attack and evaporated. With therapy a new mind could be raised on whatever foundation remained, but he had not been interested in Keith. He was concerned about Athena. Her mind was gone, shattered in a useless conflict with him. Still, he needed her, and intended to rebuild her, with Artemis’s help, using her mind as a template. She replied coldly that after telling her that he had destroyed two minds already, she was hardly inclined to let him touch her mind.

To distract him, she pointed out that he had changed; he was not like the Hunter she knew. He laughed and told her it had of course been an act. He returned to the main topic. Before he started in on her, Eric tried to explain himself. He gave her the whole lecture, probably exactly what Hunter would have said to her if he were the man Eric was trying to portray. He actually was appealing to her, while at the same time assuring her that he would take what he needed if she would not help him by giving it. Athena was caught in a bind. If she were Artemis, in this situation and she had believed him for a minute, she would of course have risked anything to restore Athena’s mind.

Still, she would have asked to do it herself, she would have objected to being picked apart by another who would actually go in and recreate her twin. She set her teeth and played hardball. She told him that he could instruct her in how and even oversee the process of restoring her sister’s mind, but she would not let him touch her own. She really had not reason to trust him, since all he had ever done was lie to her. He could beat her to death, torture her, and she would still maintain her defenses. He laughed. He did not need to torture her; he already knew how to get past her defenses. He simply reached out and touched her; touching her the way Keith had touched her.

She could hardly believe it. Having threatened to break her, she had expected to be raped. She had considered the fact that she was an adept martial artist, but against a psionic, with her own mind leashed, she would not stand a chance. She had simply resolved to withdraw. He could literally do whatever he wanted with her, and there was nothing she could do about it but get hurt. But, if he touched her like Keith, there was no chance she could withdraw and refuse to participate. On the physical level, it would not even be rape. It did not have to be. He was not interested in her body except as a way to get to her mind.

She had been prepared for rape, but he was telling her that he could rape her mind. Her own body gave him an opening he could force his way in through, a passage she could not defend, and which she could not fight. It was horrifying to think that she could be seduced into opening her mind, so that he could pick it apart at his leisure without bruising or crushing a single delicate fold of her inner being. Cold recognition of the threat caused her to recoil violently from her own sexuality.

Her eyes filled with a desperate horror. If he teased her open, he would spot her lie, realize that she was not Artemis and learn about Alt. Realize that she was still buried somewhere in his mind. If she was vulnerable to him there confronting the man, poor Alt, in his mind, was confronting a god. Avoiding sex was simply impossible. He could pin her into any position he wanted and then work her over until she was a willing participant. She did not kid herself that the mortal circumstances would leave her cold. Just the thought of her own vulnerability had keyed her up. Forcing her to a cold realization.

She had to give it up. All that she valued and cherished in herself, all her secrets, her hopes and dreams, even her love for her soul mate, needed to be divorced from her sexuality. He already owned her sex; he just had not exercised his claim. He owned everything else in her that she left connected to it. It was a strange mental adjustment, but she accomplished it with a startled bat of her eyes. She looked up at the man with the mind of a child, unable to comprehend his desire. As he touched her, she understood he was not playing with her. It was like he was building a fire with his fingers, making her feel warm and happy, making her squirm and fuss.

He remembered this, the perfect sexuality, the absolute abandon, and the cool, light heart of innocence that basked in the center of a sensual storm. It thrilled him so completely that he did not even try to take what had opened so instantly, so willingly to him. He controlled himself, pouring over her, searching carefully for the first piece of her to consume. She did not react at all; she simply lay open to him and waited for him to take a bite. The fear he had sensed flash through her had completely vanished. She was the amaranth, the immortal flower of the gods, replacing the part of herself he took even as he swallowed it. That first morsel was now a part of both of them. A common thread. The first step to becoming her twin.

Hunter brooded after Artemis left. He had to respect her decision; she had the right to leave him. The problem was he did not feel she was ready. What had happened to Athena had forced her to the decision too soon. It was his duty to report her split to his superiors, and once he did, they would dispatch an agent to vet her. He knew the program well, she would be hunted, and if she exposed herself, revealed her power to protect herself, they would kill her. He would not accept that. This was the worst possible time for her to be tested. She was already being tested by life, and additional pressure would only ensure that she would crack.

He took a personal risk; instead of reporting her refusal, he went after her. It was easy to follow her back to her family. He had been to the town house before, shadowing his charge on her occasional night out. The entire household was startled when he invited himself in. He explained to all that Artemis had come to him to ask him if he had been responsible for Athena’s disappearance. He protested his innocence. It was then that he was confronted with the possibility that Eric might still be alive. They told him that Eric had warned them about him, and had attempted to keep Athena and Artemis away from the underground. He tried to pursue the matter, tried to force them to explain.

Hunter listened to the accusations his brother had made against him and confronted Artemis. he told her again that he could not deny those accusations. But, he asserted, those accusations did not address the facts. There had been reasons; in most cases he had been following orders. He had abducted or inducted many of the kids who had broken away from the underground, and killed a few that had tried. He could hardly explain further, as the entire group rose to their feet as Artemis asked him to leave. They threatened him, when he did not move to obey. He asked one more time for her to listen, he had much more to say.

Artemis told him flatly that she was not interested in anything he had to say. Standing him off, with the help of her friends, she finally made him mad. He turned to confront her family, revealing to all of them Athena’s childhood secrets as he demanded her parents confirm that the man they accused, about whom such terrible stories were told, was her mentor. Her parents only wanted to hear one thing from him, were the kids telling the truth. Hunter had already admitted to his actions, and said that from their side of it, they were telling the truth. Her parents did not give him a chance to make further excuses. They just sent him away.

Hunter grinned in restrained anger. Teleporting him to Antarctica was going a bit far to make a point. There were days when he really hated his job. The truth of it was, it took burned hands to understand fire. Hunter was a professional bad guy. An evil psionic was an unspeakable threat. To teach good kids why they had to master themselves, and to weed out bad kids who were too much in love with being bad, he had to embody the worst. Confronting naïve kids with true evil, and evil kids with greater evil was his job, and one he was good at. In Artemis, he feared the worst disease, self-righteousness. She was in danger of catching it from her parents.

The underground had had dealings with the parents of the current generation of young avatars. The core members of the organization were themselves products of the Avatar Families. Vincent had essentially told him to get on with the test, since he assumed that was what was really going on. They had not given him a chance to tell them otherwise. He returned to his home and admitted to himself that he could not protect his charges anymore, unless he took the responsibility of testing them himself. Well, really he could only test her at this point. Her new friends were not on his watch list and her old friends were on someone else’s.

Testing Artemis—and by extension, Athena—was his prerogative, and it would not save them from the real test later, but he could call it the final examination, and use the exercise to shake some sense into the kids while he could. Her family and their friends firmly believed Artemis—and Athena—were his current targets. If such had been the case when he confronted Artemis, neither her parents, nor their new Wild-Psi'd friends could have protected her from him. It was time to teach her—and the rest of those kids—not to play with fire, show them what they were so afraid of. Particularly Artemis. So, he moved her to the top of his list of targets, giving the poor kid he had been about to put through the wringer a temporary stay of excruciation, and submitted his intentions to his superiors.

That did not resolve the real problem. The fact was, he was genuinely concerned about Athena and he needed to investigate on his own. Hunter, from the moment he heard from Artemis about Athena’s disappearance, already knew who had not abducted her. As far as he knew, the underground had her officially listed as his responsibility, and he would have been informed if any contract had been signed against her. That left the opposition, the Psionic Authority, and of course the Wild-Psi’d, but only one of them was a true danger to her. His brother. He realized the minute they told that farce that Eric had survived their last encounter.

There was not a chance in the world that Eric would have imprinted a little boy to carry the warning when he could simply trade places with him and let him die in his place. His little brother had always been a problem. He had trouble believing that other people were entirely real. His obsession with the girl Athena had ruined him. Jack had leashed him, before Eric convinced the underground that he was a loose cannon. He had never lost control of his powers, as some in the organization had suggested, he simply had redefined his priorities, and refused to observe the imposed discipline of the underground. When he slipped his leash, Hunter had been given no choice but to terminate him. They boy had been too powerful, and too wild.

The problem with his brother was, he was a demonic. He had what the families called dragon potential. He had an understanding for other minds, and could enter them at will, dismissing his own body to a notion and seizing control of the body of anyone he wished. It was one of the reasons he was still alive, but Hunter could always find him if he had to. He started by visiting a number of his brother’s cronies. The Wild-Psi'd had given away far too much in their little confrontation. Skimming carefully, he had figured out how they were organized and the way they operated.

He had been impressed at the things he had learned. They had developed into something remarkably sound and stable considering they had gotten their start from Eric. Then again, Eric had not been stupid; he just liked to call the shots himself. As Hunter suspected, Eric had been able to make the gang serve his interests. There were members who seemed to have spent a great deal of their time keeping an eye on his main obsession, supplying him with pictures and information on the girl of his dreams. That girl, he sighed, what had happened to her? A girl with Athena’s potential simply could not be lost. He promised to devote his superior resources to solving the mystery of her abduction.

In the mean time, he was going to have to convince Artemis that he was out to get her, and once he got her teach her a lesson she would never forget. The entire exercise depended on control. The same principle was used by the government and military to train agents and soldiers for the worst possibilities, capture and interrogation. There was no personal malice in it, but he had to embody all of the worst aspects of a man to do his job properly. It was a test only in the sense that he was not his target’s enemy. He did not want to destroy her, but he had to take his best shot at it. He was licensed to do every bad thing in the book, and a few that no one had the stomach to write down.

He was licensed to kill, if necessary, but that was not the object of the exercise. It was normally the only thing he was licensed to do which was irreparable, irrevocable. He would only do it if they violated the first rule, and exposed their power to normals, or used it at the expense of a normal to escape, evade or retaliate against him. Eric had failed that test, in a big way. He was the wrong person for Artemis—or Athena, poor girl—to confront in this sort of scenario. There were no rules with him, no guidelines, no licenses for acts that violated the first rule.