Avatars-24

comments

pages ∙ words

It was not sharing. Athena was allowing Eric to take whatever he wanted; she did not have a choice. She wanted nothing in return and hoped he would not offer. Not that she could really think about at the time it was happening. It was a return to Athena’s childhood. Her mind retreated from sex. It had calved like an iceberg, and now the other half shut her down to protect her from it as if she was still the child of those memories. It was a painful sacrifice, even if she could not understand the pain because of it, but it protected her secrets.

While the day was a long chain of blackouts for her, for Eric it was a feast of the mind and senses. Every metaphorical bite changed him, so much of her personality was unburdened with secrets that he could believe he was consuming her whole. It took him all day and much of the night to get down to the bone, the hard core untouched by her sexuality, the stone at the heart of the fruit. It was only then that he realized she had somehow held out on him. Her total submission had almost tricked him into believing there could be no more, but he had slowly started to become her, and with the last bite he could see the hole in the pattern which was her.

He left her to tend to her twin and considered the matter. There was no question he had been changed by her. She had given him an ideal, a too perfect expression of herself untainted by mysteries, secrets and apprehensions. He could see how becoming her could heal him, because he could now see how he had been incomplete. The very thought of taking her place would have revolted him if not for the fact that her twin was already destroyed and had left a place for her to fill. He had been clumsy and killed one of them, perhaps the one he had loved best, but he would not have to kill her. He would actually recreate her as the one he loved best.

He agonized over the remaining problem. She had hidden her secrets, and in order to become her, he had to make those secrets his own. He had been careful and loving in prying her open and feasting on her, taking without doing harm. He had been the only one affected by his actions. He knew there was no way he could crack open her last reserve, no way to avoid hurting her, no way to kid himself that he would not change the core of her. He had to remove her from her secrets to change her into Athena, or she would remember herself, and figure out someone else had taken her twin’s place.

It tortured him to think of it, it would be agony to do it, but he had gone too far to back out now. He needed to finish becoming Artemis. It was like surgery; one did not transplant the heart and neglect to sew the patient back up. Pain was a part of healing, he told himself. It had to be done; it would make the final steps possible. He got a grip on himself and went back in to confront her. He told her that she had held out on him and jeopardized her sister’s recovery. He would not allow that. Since he was forcing her to, he was going to break her open the hard way.

She swallowed her heart as she realized that he was going to torture her after all. There was no way to hide behind sex; she was vulnerable again. Perhaps more vulnerable than she would have been when she was whole. Once again she tried to stall him. She did not believe she could hold out against the kind of torture a psionic was capable of. He could pull her apart and put her back together, he could keep her alive totally dismembered; the possibilities were horrifyingly infinite. She had to tell him the truth. He might kill her, but that was better than torture. A person had to know when to quit, and do so while they had the dignity to face death.

She told him the whole story. What the hell, he thought she was Artemis already, might as well tell him what he could believe. She told him she had the ability to twin herself, and used it to cover for Athena while she confessed to Ares about her past, the past Keith had reminded her of. The other body, she pointed out, was not Athena’s but her double’s. She had not teleported in to the cell, so much as she had teleported out of her other’s mind. Athena was still out there in the world, looking for her, she was certain. When he asked her to open up and prove it, she protested.

She could not. She did not want her mind married to his. Her refusal was an instinct for self-preservation, the same instinct, she suggested, that had caused her other’s mind to self-destruct. To go any further, in a fruitless effort to restore her other’s mind, would only succeed in destroying her. The easiest way to test her was to go find Athena, see for himself that she was out there and not in here with him. Whatever he had wanted, she asserted, he had apparently not intended to destroy her, why make such an effort to rebuild her if he had. She begged him to stop, to check her claim. She even explained that her twin would be calling herself Artemis because she had been pretending to be Athena when she was abducted.

Eric was stunned. Her story was not impossible; he could have done much the same—jumping out of him self into a separate body. He could have doubled himself at will, but he only used the ability to ride others. If he had been possessed and was desperate enough, he might figure out how to jump out past his rider. The thing that really caught him was that her story, if it proved true, changed his entire plan. He could hardly go back as Artemis with “Athena” at his side and confront the real twin and her family. He had simply assumed, without checking, that he had both of them under his control. He had to do as she suggested. He left at once.

After Hunter left, the previous evening, the Morgans had decided that they had to report Athena as missing. There was no way they were gong to allow Artemis to go back to school with Hunter there on campus. A missing twin sister was all the excuse a person needed to cut classes. Her parents went home to take care of it, after calling the San Francisco Police Department and filing the report. Artemis remained at the town house so she could continue her search with her friends around to help protect her. Chris and Jean had slept with her and tried to comfort her—and distract her from her fears.

In the morning, the three of them went out together. A man watched them putting up a poster for Athena, and asked them for details. They told the official version of the story, and gave him a poster so he could contact them if he discovered anything. Artemis could not help but wonder if Hunter would stick to his own routine after that big confrontation. Joining the search for Athena would have been an excellent way to get the drop on others, so it had been safer to assume he was guilty than putting a noose around their own necks and giving him the other end of the rope. Just thinking about him was enough to keep her on her toes though. She had learned the hard way that he was bigger, faster, stronger and more experienced than she was. A dangerous enemy.

Artemis came a hair’s breadth from falling prey to him totally unaware. Artemis, Chris and Jon had stopped for lunch. She went to the bathroom and he attacked while she was sitting on the toilet. He came on mercilessly, attacking physically and mentally. She literally jumped out of her panties to escape him. She was a more powerful psionic, so she was able to negate his invisible assault, but he nearly pounded her into unconsciousness before she managed to summon Chris and Jean to her side. The three of them, being adept martial artists, were able to tie him up and force him to retreat.

They helped her clean herself up a bit, and looked for her panties. Hunter had apparently swiped them during the fight, so she straightened her skirt and wrote them off. Chris and Jean could not believe that both Artemis and Hunter had covered the commotion. If Artemis had not managed a telepathic cry they would never have known anything was going on. Even to the extent of locking the door, to prevent anyone from walking in on them, they had observed the first rule. Artemis tried to explain. Keeping normals out of it was the first concern of any psionic who was sane. Even when they tried to kill each other, psionics paid attention to details, covering their tracks, obscuring their struggle, presenting normal people with no mysteries to explore or paradoxes to ponder.

She urged them not to forget that. The most dangerous psionic was the one who could use his abilities freely in a crowd without anyone being any the wiser. The first rule did not forbid the use of powers on normal people, in some cases it actually required it, it was only forbidden to confront people with the truth. As long as they did not know the truth, they would not notice when someone who did know the truth manipulated them. The big grey area was knowing the difference between maintaining the masquerade and exploiting helpless victims. The latter was not very well tolerated.

The next encounter was a shocking lesson in how a skilled psionic could use his power in a crowd. Artemis and Chris were following Jean through a door when Jean disappeared and they saw Hunter in the doorway, calmly and naturally walking out. He held the door for them, a perfect gentleman and dared them to make a scene. Artemis stopped and asked under her breath what he had done with her friend. He smiled and told her it was not their problem anymore. She needed to think carefully about how she endangered her friends, he suggested. She slipped past him and grabbed Chris by the hand.

Chris was in a stone cold panic. Artemis gave her a hard mental shake and silently warned her to keep her wits together. She went to the nearest phone and called for back up. She explained that Hunter was after her, and she needed someone to come take Chris, before she got hurt too. Her sister had been about to ask about Jean, and realized what had happened. She asked, but all Artemis could say was that Hunter sent her somewhere. She was either going to call and tell someone to come get her, or she was in someone’s clutches unable to do anything. She doubted she was dead, or likely to become so soon.

Artemis then concentrated hard on piercing the veil of invisibility Hunter kept around himself. He was obviously keeping close tabs on her, and jumping ahead of her to spring his traps. Jean and Chris had too little experience to defend themselves from the use of psionics; they could barely control their own abilities. Using chi, Jean could make a psionic’s day pure hell, but she had no idea if that would be any help where she was now. Vincent showed up with a group from the town house to collect Chris and asked her what she was going to do. She was not sure. She could go with them, but she was afraid she would just bring him down on everyone else.

Her suspicion was rewarded. A large group of men entered the building and took up stations. A handful of them broke off and approached their own group. Artemis was startled when they presented their ID; they were FBI agents. One of the men introduced him self, and spoke directly to Vincent. He stated that the agency had received a tip informing them that one of Vincent’s daughters had been kidnapped. Due to the sensitive nature of his work for the government—Artemis gasped—they had been instructed to contact him. They assured him that they were devoting every resource to helping to retrieve his daughter, but were also there to ensure that he was not pressured to betray classified information for her ransom.

Vincent managed to signal to Artemis to lose herself as they were all escorted to waiting vans. She took the hint and faded out of everyone’s attention and retreated swiftly. He had passed a few other things along, among them the interpretation of the facts. He was being placed under house arrest as a security precaution, and someone who knew more than they should know had set this in motion. She was standing alone, when she realized that her father’s order had been a test. Would they notice her as she slipped away, would they allow her to slip away, was she the real target or had it been intended to simply entangle her allies?

She realized that she had been noticed. A pair of agents stepped up to her and suggested she return with them to her residence. She was not being required to go with them, and when she said she had an errand to run, they allowed her to go. She had felt one of them probing her mind for ulterior motive, and she had done her best to think nothing suspicious. Psionics working in the government, it was a miracle her thoughts did not make him suspicious. But, they were clearly not interested in her; she did not have any government secrets to spill. The only question that remained was whether or not they had been used simply to cut her off from her family and allies.

She was afraid to test the theory. She made a quick call home, leaving a message for her father with her mother. He would understand the brief note. She returned to her errand, meeting up with Lauren, Morgan and Kim. She was half afraid to go near them, but she was not sure she wanted to be on her own with Hunter after her. The problem with being hunted was that it only ended in the closing confrontation. There was going to be a fight. No matter how long she ran, Hunter would pursue. She needed to pick the ground she wanted to fight on.

She needed to draw him to a place that favored her. Her only true advantage was she was more powerful than he was. She needed to go somewhere where the full expression of her power would offset his advantage in experience. She could compensate for his other advantages, being smaller, lighter, more agile and quicker. He could outrun her, but she could three times as fast as him if she tried. Even if she fought him as a boy, she was quicker than him, and in fact, she would be stronger than him too. She smiled. It was time to hunt the hunter.

She stopped and shed all her clothing. She was still obscuring her self from view, and attracted no notice. A psionic learned that clothing was worse than useless. It was social camouflage, but it limited and constricted and bound. If she was going to fight for her life, she needed to be capable of uninhibited movement. Besides, if she were going to use her ability to shift in the fight, the clothes she had been wearing would have tied her in knots. She started stretching and warming her body up as she built a pattern of energy in her mind. Her power was the best clothing and armor there was.

She found her focus and started weaving her thoughts into the world. In the place of clothes she built up a sheath, a layer of intense psionic activity covering her entire body, armor no thicker than an extra layer of skin. Once that was fixed in her mind, and manifested as a sheer white body stocking that covered her from the neck down, she built up a second layer, a domain of attention and will focused on her and expanding as a sphere as broad as the horizon. Her mind could keep unfolding until it encompassed the Earth, but this was sufficient for the threat she faced. She began to look for a dueling ground.

As she tapped into and harnessed more of her power, it had become easier to manage the crowds around her. To become perfectly invisible to the naked eye. She moved the way she had been born to move, in a way that a psionic dreamed of being able to move. There were of course people who did see her, people who heard her silent command to ignore her and used their own power to resist. To other psionics she was a blinding beacon, an angel. It was so rare that a psionic felt compelled to use so much power, and it usually meant a fight. She smiled. This was her response to Hunter’s attacks. She would not allow him to sneak around in the shadows; she challenged him to fight her in the open, where their peers would see it all.

Hunter did not disappoint her. She had been forced to call on some of the things he had taught her to deal with his relentless stalking without exposing herself, and all psionics, while still being able to use her powers to fight him. She had trumped him though, calling on things Victor had taught her soul mate. She had realized she had twice as much experience as she claimed, and his advantage had narrowed significantly. He pulled himself together, drawing on the potential within him, while cloaking it as carefully as she. Once his song of obfuscation was as strong and compelling as hers, he started to move.